



The Trunk

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

Summer 2005

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Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service



Committed to Service, Quality, and Excellence

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A Creative Companion to
the Writer's Loft**

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

Summer 2005

Middle Tennessee State University
Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service

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The Trunk is published each summer

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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 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 creative work 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. 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 opportunities for public readings. Each student is encouraged to give a short 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 at least 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*. The journal gives students and mentors another forum in which to spotlight and showcase their work. It is published once a year in the late summer and made available during the fall orientation weekend. The journal contains work from both of the previous semesters.

Creative Writing and Poetry Contest

The Writer’s Loft sponsors a creative writing and poetry contest each semester for students in the program. Winners from both semesters are published in this journal, and the Writer’s Loft Web site presents the winning entries online.

From the Editor: R. L. Burkhead, M.F.A

July 2005, Tennessee

Summers on MTSU's campus appear lazy. Huge blocks of students vanished into the countryside for the break. A lingering sun on the horizon until 8:00 p.m. And soul-smashing temperatures that suck the action verbs from the air and reduce compound-complex sentences to short, struggling, declarative grunts.

But the perceived laziness is a deception.

University staffers and faculty members remain and push through the humidity, hurrying along the zigzag sidewalks between offices in efforts to deconstruct the previous semester and brace for the onslaught of the fall rush. I join them in my daily pinball maneuvers from MTSU's Belle Aire location to and throughout campus, behavior that has tagged me as *the reading guy*, or so I have been informed.

My daily walk—the rounds, as I call it—allows for a great many things . . . as long as I keep moving. And I cannot deny the reader charge (not that I wish to), especially since I fell deep into a large hole by the side of the road two weeks ago while reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In addition to reading, the rounds allow me to think through problems, to remember things I have forgotten, and to observe the summer's fury of to-dos.

Often, I think about these to-dos at my favorite summer spot on campus: an empty, gray bicycle rack bolted just under a large shade tree missing a mammoth lower branch. Trees remind me of writers and writing. From a distance, as many writers may prefer to be observed, trees appear motionless and photographed. Spend any length of time with a tree, and the frenzy will reveal itself.

On this afternoon's pause at the sacred tree, I thought about the frenzy of literary activity humming at this moment, during this summer.

I look across campus and see the Loft's own Suzanne Craig Robertson participating in the program's first summer writing sabbatical. She's here all week in a dorm, enjoying our concrete walls and indoor/outdoor



carpeting while working on her fiction, some of which can be found in this issue of the *Trunk*. Two buildings in the opposite direction, there's the start of the Young Writer's Loft, a five-day writing workshop for rising seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. And in the current issue of the *Tennessee Writer* (the official Tennessee Writers Alliance newsletter), I see a book review by Loft alumnus J. Terry Price, as well as many other pieces by so many of our supporters.

Beyond campus, many are doing great things to support the craft of writing. New magazines and journals, one paper (*Illiterati: Nashville's New Creative Publication*) and one online writer's site (asouthernjournal.com) have appeared. In addition, new literary programs and events are bringing more and more writers together. It is in this spirit that we opened a portion of this issue to the public. Columns and how-to pieces from writers in and out of the Writer's Loft share the joys and frustrations of this profession.

As anyone inside the Writer's Loft knows, the program is in constant change, which is why we encourage our students and mentors to complete their semester evaluations. To improve, we need to keep doing what we do well, as well as change where we need to change.

The latest evolution of the program involves this publication.

Look to the cover, and you will see "Summer 2005" instead of "Spring 2005." Starting with this issue of the *Trunk*, we will produce one double issue each summer instead of two separate issues during the year. There are many reasons for the change, the most important of which is our desire to create the best possible journal. The yearly page count will not shrink, and contest winners from *both* semesters will appear in the center section, as always. But a single issue will provide more time to plan and create a journal that not only showcases our students' creative work but also serves them as they continue to write and improve.

Newspaper stands linger at the boundaries of campus—some five hundred plus acres—as well as loiter within, and thanks to this summer's continual one hundred and ten degree heat index, these boxes appear like lava lamps when viewed from a distance. *The rounds* remove me from the sacred tree and plunge me toward the buildings, bringing these boxes into focus. While July succumbs to August, the date of the paper has not changed in over a month: Wednesday, June 29, 2005.

And there he is, on the front page above the fold: the recently departed Southern storyteller, Shelby Foote. Blue shirt and brown blazer, head tilted to his right and a hand extended up as if pointing toward the camera and out as progress cuts down the trees and pours concrete. The historian and novelist passed away two nights before this issue arrived on campus, and he has spent all summer here on the sidewalks, at the entrance of the student center, behind Cope, and at other select locales.

But the summer has not yet ended and much remains to do before classes begin. I look away from Mr. Foote and continue across campus: reading, dodging holes, and feeding the *to-dos*.

Handwritten signature or initials in black ink, consisting of two stylized, overlapping shapes.



The Much-Repeated, Overly Simple Secrets to Getting Published: Perseverance and Odd Coincidence

Karen Alea

I have heard these two adages too many times, the *Little Engine That Could* stuff (perseverance) plus the galling stories of people running into agents on the street who happen to ask them if they can represent them (odd coincidence).

I actually got quite sick of these stories and hit my lowest three years ago when a friend told me he just got a phone call from his friend who was applying for an entry-level job at a literary firm in New York. They didn't have any positions, but they LOVED his cover letter and asked the twenty-two year old if he had any novel ideas and signed him right then and there. In what cosmos does this stuff happen?

Well, three years later, I have found out. Mine. And yours.

Of course, the perseverance comes first. Sit down and do the work. Glue your bottom to the seat, as they say, and fight through the boredom and fear. Get some horrible stuff down one day and then the next and soon you will have a wonderfully long horrible manuscript. A few vacations and a breakdown later, you revisit and improve it little by little until it becomes palatable. You are well on your way.

The second part of the perseverance comes with taking bullets. Bullets in the shape of small scraps of paper with "thank you, but no thank you," on them. This is where most people I know stop. Something about someone saying that their work is not for them crushes all the dreams they had for themselves. Can it really be crushed that easily? Not if you believe in the art and the enjoyment of this volunteer livelihood. Sending out and getting rejected are the fabric that make the writer's coat. We wrap ourselves in it and continue to plod through the wet and cold on our way to someone who will provide shelter. It only takes one person to let us inside and then we can hang up that coat. But, of course, not if we don't keep walking.

Then what happens? You unknowingly trip into that weird vortex where all the "odd coincidence" stories you have heard originated. For me it was finding an agent who happened to date a Cuban-American girl years ago in college, a girl similar to the main character of my novel. He enjoyed reminiscing about her and could identify with the family I wrote about because, as he said, he "met them." The bottom line, I got an agent due to the "old flame" factor. Who knew?

I have also been asked to write a personal essay column purely on the basis of giddy and inane e-mails with an editor.

So are you disappointed? Were you hoping that the path to publication was more astute and reputable? I hate to disappoint you. In fact, it is the "build it and they will come" *Field of Dreams*-type philosophy, except without the boring baseball and annoyingly self-absorbed Kevin Costner.

Say it with me: sit, sit, sit, send. Sit, sit, sit, send. If you are true to the craft, read well,

and work diligently, these are the only words you need to know. The coincidences and the odd way you will end up in print will be your own story to tell. Everyone has one and the fun is in not knowing when and how it will happen.

I am not the best writer out there. I am not the hardest working. But I try to be both, and I know that it is the combination that creates the action. Just like when a harmless match is struck against the side of a matchbox—it combusts.

Happy combusting.

Karen Alea's stories have been published in *Out of Line*, *Riverwalk Journal*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *spitfirepress*, and elsewhere. Her story "The Next Guy" won the *Nashville Scene* fiction contest. Her manuscript *Spic* has found representation with the Howard Morhaim Agency. She plunged into the abyss of an M.F.A. at Bennington College in January of this year. You can send your sympathies to her at www.karenalea.com.

The Practice of Poetry in Fiction

Darnell Arnoult

I heard an editor say recently that the first thing he looks for in a story is character. The next thing he looks for is language. Plot is the last thing he thinks about when reading a short fiction submission. I like that guy.

Don't misunderstand me. I like plot too. But I think of it as organic to the character and the origin of character. So when I write, I don't think too much about plot or structure until I have at least two hundred pages of a book or a draft of a story. And then, when I take the time to see what I have, the plot is always there, peeking out between the lines. That's why I don't refer to a "first draft." I prefer the term "learning draft." I'm learning through character and character action. Then I further shape what I have with careful attention to language.

The next best part of writing, other than living vicariously through my characters' adventures and slumps, is immersing myself in language. I do this in two ways.

I prime my pump. I read, read, read, fiction before I begin a short story or novel. I read until I feel satiated with good words, good sentences, good paragraphs, good stories. I go for the gold, reading the best fiction writers I can find: Larry Brown, Lee Smith, Jill McCorkle, Lewis Nordan, Clyde Edgerton, Michael Cunningham, Edward Jones, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Ha Jin, Harry Crews, Janice Daugherty, Michael Parker, Doris Betts, Eudora Welty, Wendell Berry, and Mary Hood, to name a few.

I feel the pace of fiction, the shape of good sentences, the breath of good words, the way my mouth moves when I say a good sentence aloud. Then I begin developing my own pace, my own rhythm. I keep my favorite books within reach so I can grab one and read a random paragraph, in the same way my grandmother used to "crack the Bible" and read for spiritual guidance. If I'm stuck, I read a few lines of someone else's good work

and use it as a prayer, a key, and window into well-told story.

When I start to revise, I read for poetry. Yes, I'm writing and rewriting fiction, but language is my tool, and the best place to find thoughtful, powerful, intense use of language married to image is in poetry. Image is the fork that serves up good fiction.

I refer to some fabulous contemporary poets' work, language that appeals to me—sounds familiar, resonant, compelling. I'm not looking for the purple prose often associated with verse. I'm immersing myself in the rich voice of a solid poem, void of cliché, rife with metaphor, filled with the bricks of good nouns and verbs, phrases sharp as knives. Sometimes the poetry finds its way into the prose, and my sentences are all the better for it.

As writers who use sentences and paragraphs rather than lines and stanzas, fiction writers tend to let words flow like a river across the page. Poets, in part, attend to detail by the use of stops and starts, alliteration, a host of subtleties. The nature of the work makes the author more contemplative of his choices. This is crucial when rewriting or revising fiction. Reading and writing poetry while I write and rewrite keeps me mindful of my tool, mindful of the language I use to paint my characters, their lives, the images that give their exposed existence, their exposed hearts, to my readers.

At this stage, I reach for the poems of Joe Enzweiler, Robert Morgan, Wendell Berry, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Dana Wildsmith, Michael Chitwood, Ron Rash, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, Rita Dove, Fred Chappell, Pablo Neruda, and others. Mary Oliver's *A Handbook of Poetry* can teach a writer more about writing a sentence than any English teacher, because she eloquently reminds us how well words can work, how words build language, and how language builds narrative.

There is no better marriage than language to story, and no better calisthenic for a fiction writer than the act of reading and writing poetry. After all, writing a life from your imagination is poetry. Every life, real or imagined, is, at its heart, poetics in process.

Darnell Arnoult is the author *What Travels With Us*, a collection of poems published by LSU Press (fall 2005), and the novel *Sufficient Grace*, forthcoming from Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster (summer 2006). Her poetry and fiction has appeared in a variety of literary journals, and she has taught creative writing for fifteen years, occasionally teaching workshops affiliated with the Writer's Loft.

Every Word a World: Metaphor and Poetic Gravity

Betsy Woods Atkinson, M.F.A.

Valuable ideas tend to shun verbosity. A word with power is one that emerges from silent space. Stories emerging from this discipline of listening tap the threshold of the

creative spirit. As writers we have an obligation; it becomes one of our foremost tasks to faithfully care for the inward fires of creativity, to practice active inner listening through stillness and disciplined time. Our practiced efforts toward tending the creative hearth will maintain that space of stillness in our lives and the writer is able to nurture a direct connection to creative, intuitive thought.

Moving into silent space is a first step into the word. All aspects of stillness deepen and strengthen the central concept that inner listening is an invitation into the imagination. Practiced stillness is the guardian of the creative fires within the artist. It teaches us to write by allowing us to become the tools of creative expression.

Poetic gravity in a narrative is a marriage of craft, inspiration, intuition, and intellect. The portal that invites the writer into metaphorical thought is the language of poetic gravity, and the birth mother of poetic gravity is inner listening. I want to suggest that practiced stillness is a sacred discipline for the writer.

Thus, the writer's task is the opposite of distraction. Inner listening becomes a state of being that elevates consciousness into charity and empathy. Charity and empathy are portals to developing character. Character and thematic metaphor offer writers poetic gravity in their work, be it humor or pathos.

The practice of stillness, by whatever name we may choose to claim it, enters the marrow of the writer's soul and leaves nothing untouched. It demands honesty and revelation and discipline. Ultimately, beauty is recognized in the undeniable vulnerability of the human experience. Because our essence has cultivated this practice of inner listening, has learned to live emphatically, the artist is able to descend into the heart of character.

This capacity for inner listening can be considered a basic precondition for creativity. How else can inspiration be offered unless it is trusted and received? Give the creative access to your skill, your craft, and your own unique translation of art. Befriend your stillness: your words will carry power, become worlds unto themselves.

Strenuous discipline is required. The writer must show up. Be willing to open up, empty. The writer's work is to point beyond words to the creative mystery: metaphor is the vehicle for this translation. It arrives from a region beyond our flesh and bone, beyond the conscious editor mind and the unconscious artist mind. This component is transpersonal by nature. The writer's task is to learn to liberate it, to clear obstruction from its path so that it may flow freely and unimpeded in the work. Our job as writers, artists, is simply to vessel this creative momentum, mobilize our attention and resources, offer them to story, then, get out of the way of its expression.

Intuitions, creativity, aesthetic enjoyment, the feeling of unity with nature and the cosmos, illuminations, and all the experiences we have inside the writing life suggest the numinous power of the creative act. Inspiration comes of its own accord, thus it must be anchored in grace and discipline and utter humility. This creative space is metaphorical by nature. It is the brick and mortar of poetic gravity in any work of fiction. Metaphor's mystique can be discovered in the very nature of the word.

Technically, the metaphor is a literary construct, inherent in our basic understanding of language. Metaphor shapes our speech, our writing, our thought. Children learn to speak through metaphor. The simple name of an object is metaphor. Name implies symbol, creat-

ed in our minds, fusing symbol and word together as comparable things. Each expands the understanding of the other. Our thought processes are governed by metaphors. Common definition includes a comparison between two things, based on resemblance or similarity, without using "like" or "as."

But the inherent beauty and brilliance of metaphor is its power to evoke complex waves of emotion. Metaphorical writing elicits poignant response. The metaphorical grows in complexity, grows and layers and enfolds symbol and meaning, thus creating poetic gravity in a work of fiction.

Metaphor lends power and trust and momentum and grace to the written word. Here worlds of meaning are discovered with the simplicity of words placed in relationship to express a greater whole. The art in metaphor is the invitation it offers its audience: to uncover the depths that their own consciousness is prepared to receive. Thus, story becomes a layered bastion of meaning, a benediction of graceful proportions.

The most substantial and applicable theory for the writer today is *the Experiential or Cognitive* theory of metaphor. It grounds metaphor in our human experience and claims metaphor as mankind's way of knowing the world. This theory suggests that "the language of the imagination, especially metaphor is the most significant" aspect of our experience as it "transcends rationality and objectivity." (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:186–189). This theory supports metaphor as a pervasive momentum in everyday life, "not just in language but in thought and action," and that our "ordinary conceptual system . . . is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff and Johanson (1980:3).

This suggests that the human is an active originator of experience rather than a passive recipient of perception. It also suggests an individualization of perception that relates to emotion, experience, evolution, spirituality, and a privy of intelligences.

Imagination is at the origin of emerging meanings in language. It can convert almost any combination of words into a meaningful expression. Thus, the role of imagination in metaphorical thought is central, undeniable. It is the creative act itself that offers and projects itself into language, making metaphorizing a possibility.

Metaphor is an instance of language that expresses spiritual, emotional, experiential, and intellectual force. Metaphor is, for this reason, beyond compare for the battery of disciplines it brings into action, the images it calls from the bowels of soul of human evolution and experience, the associations it compels us to enter into, the amount of shared knowledge it presupposes, and the meanings it conjures.

The metaphor is a nonassertive, active "imaginative reactivity" that seeks to change the world by influencing the beliefs of its interactants. Thus, metaphor breathes life into ordinary language. Creative writers have the power to reinvent vision and perception through metaphor. The metaphor honors its audience and encourages emotional interpretation by inviting readers to engage with their own personal histories. This offers the reader the pleasure of interpretation and self-recognition.

Metaphor offers a maximum meaning with a minimum use of words. Metaphor creates new meanings and allows you to write about feelings, thoughts, things experienced, etc., for which there are no easy words. This enlivens the sensual reality and the dogma of rationality and exposes the feeling underneath the rational within the written narration.

A mentor with the Writer's Loft, Betsy Woods Atkinson lives in Slidell, Louisiana. She has an M.F.A. in writing from Spalding University and a B.A. in English, history, and education from the University of New Orleans. Betsy lives on the edge of the Honey Island Swamp, just outside of New Orleans. Her fiction has appeared in the *Louisville Review*, and one of her latest short stories ("Volume of Monk") appears in the Vol. 30, No. 2 issue of the *New Orleans Review*. She is a past columnist and feature writer for the *Times-Picayune*, the greater New Orleans newspaper. She served as the assistant editor for the organic farming magazine *Acres USA*. Betsy is preparing her young adult novel *Strong Moon Tonight* for publication and is reveling in the unfolding of her novel-in-progress *The Alfalfa and the Omega*.

Colonial Life: Tips for Making the Most of a Writers' Colony

Tracy Barrett

I'm listening to classical music, and outside a deer crashes past my window to catch up with her companions. They dash off together, spooked by the horse-drawn carriage clop-clopping up the steep hill. The driver's terrier, wearing a plaid coat, stares after them from its perch on the buckboard.

Two walls of my writing room are made up entirely of windows. The trees filter out the direct sun and turn the light a soft green. There is no radio (my music is coming off the Internet—headphones required), no television, no phone except my cell, which, as ordered, has its ringer turned off. In a few minutes I'll stroll to the kitchen and see if any of last night's dinner is left for lunch. If not, I'm sure Cindy has gotten everything I wrote on the grocery list. After that, I might go to town—a fifteen-minute walk past brilliantly painted Victorian mansions with blazing gardens—and buy a newspaper. Or maybe some of that fudge I saw the candy lady pouring into a pan yesterday.

Am I in writer's heaven? Well, yes and no. I'm at the Writers Colony at Dairy Hollow, in Eureka Springs, Arkansas (www.writerscolony.org). This is my second two-week stay here (their minimum residency, with a maximum of three months). Last spring was productive, not only in number of pages written but also in energizing and recharging my writing, and for a year I've been looking forward to returning.

Last year, the writers in residence formed an instant and unlikely bond—unlikely because of our different personalities, backgrounds, interests, and writing. We generally stayed apart during the day, occasionally meeting for lunch or an expedition. We'd meet for dinner and then spend part of the evening together—reading each others' work, talking, going to a concert.

This year, although the five writers are congenial and friendly, we see each other only at dinner and afterward return to our separate suites. Although I miss the companionship of Lydia, Kristen, and Rhoda, I'm finding that this way works too. And that's my first tip:

go with the flow. Respect the other writers and their personalities. If they want to talk and you do too, fine—go for it. But don't take it personally if they don't get excited about the plot twist that occurred to you or if they don't want to find a yoga class. This doesn't mean that you need to put up with anything that interferes with your writing or your comfort. If someone wants to spend more time chatting about writers' block than you care to, excuse yourself politely.

Tip number two: check out the setting. Most colonies are rural. Do you want deep country, or do you prefer being near a town? Is proximity to an airport important? Is there someplace to go if you need a break—or would that make it too easy for you to take too-frequent breaks? If you can't find what you need on the Web site, ask the contact person. They're usually local people who will be able to give you a feel for the area.

Tip number three: don't expect miracles. You think, "If I could get away from the kids, the laundry, the phone, the bills, I would write all day and finally finish that novel/anthology/proposal." You might, but probably not right away. Allow yourself some time to shift gears. Don't get angry at yourself if you spend a while puttering around, doing busy work on an old manuscript, rearranging the items on your writing desk. The gears will catch—you're a writer, aren't you? But don't allow too many distractions, which leads to . . .

Tip number four: give yourself limits. I know I can't sit and write for four hours. So I allow myself some breaks. But I've limited my breaks: they have to be in some way writing- or creativity-related. I admit it: I love computer games. But I allow myself only word games (I recommend Text Twist at addictinggames.com). Last year, I decided to expand my creativity into a new area, so I purchased a how-to book on drawing. Every day, I decided, I would do a lesson. This worked great for about four days. Then I hit a lesson where the author chirpily insisted, "I guarantee you'll be thrilled with the result!" Well, I hope that guarantee includes money back, because I wasn't thrilled. I tried again and again to master negative space, and finally gave up. This year, I'm sticking with a form of creativity that I know I'm good at, and brought two knitting projects (and the wrong needles, but that's a different story). I also have two DVDs set in the historical period I'm writing about.

Tip number five (the most important): do your homework. Does the colony take only published writers, only poets, only women—and how many? Do they supply meals? Can you have a car? Will you do a reading? Is there a library nearby? Will you have an Internet connection, and what kind? Are there personnel on site? How long have they been in operation? Can you see a list of alumni? How much social interaction is expected/permitted?

Don't expect miracles, but do expect to break through a difficult plot point or recharge your creative batteries or maybe even finish that novel. The colonial experience isn't for everyone, but if it is for you, you'll find yourself returning again and again.

Tracy Barrett is the midsouth regional advisor for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (www.scbwi.org). Her most recent books are *The Ancient Chinese World* (with Terry Kleeman, Oxford University Press) and *On Etruscan Time* (Henry Holt Books for Young Readers). You can visit her at www.tracybarrett.com.

Writing While You Sleep: Harnessing Your Unconscious

Charlotte Rains Dixon, M.F.A.

Nearly every writer I know (myself included) prefers the aftermath of writing—having written—to the actual act of writing itself. And every writer I know would pay dearly to find a way to make the tyranny of facing the blank screen more bearable. Well, there is a way, and it's as simple as falling asleep.

Yes, falling asleep. When someone is trying to make a decision, we tell them to “sleep on it” for a reason—because the subconscious works on ideas and orders them for you while you are asleep. But not only can you help your brain to do this while slumbering, you can harness your subconscious during waking hours, too.

“Each of us possesses a brilliantly creative subconscious mind,” says screenwriter Cynthia Whitcomb. “Most of the time we don't give it credit for its creativity.”

The trick is to feed your subconscious mind the direction it craves. I learned this when I was faced with writing two big projects at once. My natural inclination was to wring my hands and moan and groan about my inability to write two things at the same time. While deeply absorbed in one project, nagging voices about the other one would pop up. *You should be working on the memoir*, the voice would say. *How are you going to get it done on time when you are focusing on the novel?*

Out of desperation, I learned a way to subvert the negative voice. *My subconscious is working on it*, I would reply. While I initially started saying this only to shut up the cacophony of voices, to my surprise, my subconscious really did follow my direction, and when I switched to working on my novel, all sorts of ideas were at the ready.

So I decided it would be to my benefit to learn how to coddle my “second brain.” The most important thing is to get in the habit of telling your subconscious what you need. Be specific. For example, *how can I show Carrie's unhappiness with Bart in chapter eight?* Every time you think about your project, repeat the problem: *I'm working on Carrie's unhappiness*. Now you've imprinted your subconscious with your writing need. How to encourage it to provide an answer? There are several ways:

1. **Sleep on it.** Write down your problem and review it before you climb into bed. Or read a few pages of your manuscript and tell your subconscious, *Tomorrow I want to finish this scene*.
2. **Take power naps.** Follow the above procedure during the day, and give yourself ten or fifteen minutes to close your eyes and doze. Often I lean my head back against my chair for a snooze and have to keep sitting up to write as the ideas flow.
3. **Exercise.** Review your problem before taking a walk or starting your daily yoga session. Sometimes just getting up from your computer and changing location is enough to jog the brain.
4. **Engage in repetitive activity.** Sew, knit, weed, plant flowers, dust, vacuum. Something about the repetition allows ideas to come up in the spaces between.

5. **Drive.** Nothing like a mini-road trip to free the brain.
6. **Concentrate on something else.** How many times have you sat down to pay bills only to have the best idea for your screenplay yet? (Which means, of course, you get to delay paying the bills for a while while you run to your computer.)

With all of these activities it is vital for you to carry pen and paper with you. No, you won't remember the idea you had while rounding the curve on the tenth lap of the track. You'll forget the brilliant snippet of dialogue you invented while gardening if you don't write it down. Carrying pen and paper is a signal you're ready. When you start stoking the subconscious it will respond, and if you are not ready and receptive, believe me, it will shut back down. Like a muscle, the more you use your subconscious, the stronger it gets.

Finally, returning to the topic of sleep, let us not forget about dreams, which are a powerful source of story ideas, symbolism and imagery. The best way to remember dreams echoes the technique for stoking your subconscious—get in the habit of writing them down as soon as you awake. Since you are carrying paper and pen with you everywhere, this won't be a problem, right?

Respect and revere your "second brain" with these simple steps and you'll be amazed at how hard it will work for you. Before you know it, you'll even be writing in your sleep.

A mentor with the Writer's Loft, Charlotte Rains Dixon lives in Portland, Oregon. She earned an M.F.A. in writing from Spalding University and a bachelor of arts in journalism at the University of Oregon. Charlotte's work has been published in *Somerset Studio*, the *Oregonian*, *Interweave Knits*, and numerous other publications. She is preparing her first novel, *Language of Trees*, for publication, and she has been a participating member in such organizations as the Northwest Council of Writers, the Oregon Literary Coalition, Willamette Writers, and the Oregon Writer's Colony.

The Discipline of Daily Deadlines, or How I Wrote My First Bestseller

Jason Hunt

Okay, so my latest novel, *So Lonesome I Could Die*, is not a bestseller—yet. But mark my words: it will be. And if not, the next one will. Or the next. What matters is that I actually finished the book. I finished it despite having ADD (with, regrettably, no trace of the hyperactive H). I finished it despite moving an entire household twice for a combined distance of 3,000 miles. I finished it despite spending nearly every waking moment trying in vain to beat back the wolves from the door. Somehow, despite all this, I finished it.

And how, you may ask, did I manage to do this? It was simple—not easy, just simple. I wrote and kept writing until it was done.

So much of what I read as a young, impressionable writer was meant to intimidate me, to make me feel unworthy of the great vocation of crafting timeless fiction. My early education reverberated with Hemingway's diatribes on the difficulty of writing or Thoreau's grand, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live." Those words haunted me at night and drove me from the typewriter in the daylight.

Well, with all due respect to the heavyweight champions of literature, I have adopted a different creed:

"If you want to write, sit the hell down and get to it."

To complete the novel I am now shopping to agents, I devised a ritual that I adhered to religiously, without question or doubt. It involved three nonnegotiable elements:

- Unchanging daily writing time and place
- Daily word and page tracking
- A big thermometer

Unchanging Daily Writing Time and Place

I live in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, and Monday through Friday I take the commuter rail and subway to and from Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the morning, I have one hour of peace on the train, followed by 30 minutes of racing up and down escalators, through turnstiles, into crowded subway cars, and along city sidewalks. In the evening, the order is reversed: chaos, then tranquility.

What I wanted to do with my hour of peaceful tranquility was to sleep. Or to read. Or to eat Bavarian cream-filled doughnuts and talk to the blonde MIT co-ed sitting across from me. What I did, however, every morning and evening without exception, was write. If I was exhausted, I drank Earl Grey and wrote. If I was sick, I took Tylenol and Alka-Seltzer and wrote. All the way to the train, I'd argue with myself that one day of rest couldn't hurt—but as soon as I sat down, I'd fire up the laptop and get busy. Beautiful women would try to flirt with me, but I kept my eyes on the screen.

(If I kept my eyes on the screen, how did I know the women who were trying to flirt with me were beautiful? I'm a fiction writer.)

Before long, my body craved the routine, the ritual. On the weekends, I missed my time in the train—cruising up and down the disillusioning streets of Nashville with my protagonist, country music songwriter turned detective Deke Rivers. And I'd be a little uneasy until Monday morning came along and I could rejoin him.

Daily Page and Word Tracking

That, for most writers, would have been enough, writing for two hours a day, five days a week, but I needed something more. So when I'd get to the office every morning, I'd go to Tools on the File menu and select Word Count. I'd subtract yesterday's from today's to determine how much I'd written. Then I'd post the figures on a large, erasable year-long calendar hanging on the wall of my cubicle. I'd record how many words I'd written and how many pages I'd added to the book.

Two hours would usually yield 1,500 words and six pages. Some days were more or

less fruitful than others. When my way was misty and I had to chop through the jungle of possibilities, I might do as little as 750 words, or three pages. When the characters were talkative or the action heated, I might go as high as 3,000 words, 12 pages. But the numbers didn't faze me, so long as they were going up.

The Thermometer

The final element of my ritual I got from watching agonizing hours of telethons and public television fundraisers: the thermometer.

I drew two thermometers side by side. One represented word count and went up to 75,000 in increments of 2,500. The other represented pages and went up to 300 in increments of 10. As I reached each little milestone, I'd color it in. The first third of the segments (up to 25,000 and 100) I colored with a red marker, the second third (to 50,000 and 200) with yellow, and the final third with green. Perhaps the overt symbolism of the colors was a bit much, but they really brightened up my otherwise drab cube.

And so every day I watched the mercury rise. And then one morning, somewhere between Woonsocket and Boston, Deke put his last bullet in the last bad guy (psychopath Alan Bergman), made up with his love interest (Boston homicide detective Athena Demitrius), and sang the song that will one day play over the closing credits (Hank Williams's "Lost Highway").

And it was done.

And that, my friends, is how I wrote my first bestseller.

Jason Hunt lives in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. He earned an M.A. in English from the University of Connecticut and a B.S. in hotel and restaurant management at Cornell University. His poetry was featured in *I Invited a Dragon to Dinner*, an anthology of poetry for children, and he has studied with William J. Kennedy, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and author of *Ironweed*.

How One Simple Four-word Joke Can Best Explain Plot Structure

Randy O'Brien

The goal of every writer is to illicit either of two emotional responses; pleasure or pain . . . laughter or tears.

The perfect joke to illustrate the three act structure of evoking laughter is "Take my wife . . . please."

The evocation of emotion involves the element of surprise. The elements of this joke, told in this order, fulfill the premise put forth by Aristotle's *Poetics* by providing an ending that is both obvious and surprising.

Rearrange these elements and while the idea is the same—my wife . . . take her, please/ please, take my wife—the effectiveness of the joke is lost. It is the order of the first, second, and third acts of the story that evokes the emotional response.

Three acts in four words? How could that be?

“Take my wife . . .” is the setup or first act of the story. The goal of the first act is to introduce the reader/listener to an imaginative universe. In this case, a marriage. The teller of the joke, the husband, is the protagonist while the wife is the antagonist. A question is asked and answered involving the struggle of these two opposing characters.

“Please . . .” is both the second and third acts because the second act illustrates the conflict of the marital situation. The third act brings resolution and the essential emotional response . . . pleasure or laughter.

“Take my wife . . . please” is an old joke, but it’s a good joke and a solid illustration of what makes a plot work for readers.

A mentor with the Writer’s Loft, Randy O’Brien lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Randy is the news director at WMOT Radio, MTSU’s campus radio station, and he’s a board member of the Tennessee Writers Alliance. His novel *Creations Fire* was accepted for publication by Online Originals in London, England. His short fiction and screenplays frequently come in as finalists or winners in many major contests. One of his screenplays was a semifinalist in the Nicholl, a yearly fellowship sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The Itsy-Bitsy Spider Theory

David Pierce

I heard an older fellow on TV one night talking about the upcoming weather outlook while a giant, fuzzy caterpillar wriggled on his open palm. “Nature can teach you about most anything,” he said.

My mind began to turn. So what can nature teach us about the writing process? Writing’s a pen and paper job—no trees or dirt or sun or wind or rain or fuzzy critters can help with the writing process. At least that’s what I thought until one day I ran into a spider web that instantly connected my ears to my nose to my chin. “Oh what a tangled web we weave,” I heard Sir Walter Scott say in my head, who sounded remarkably like Peter Ustinov.

We’ve heard the sayings before: we’re all connected; every living thing is related; the seven degrees of Kevin Bacon, etc. In café conversations someone will toss out a couple of items for discussion—say, a dumbwaiter and a house of ill repute. All will fall silent, lean in over the table and wait to see how these two seemingly unrelated topics are connected. The fact is, we know all things are related, we know we’re all connected, we know we’re

all caught in this big web of life. What we don't know is *how*. Part of the writer's job is to trace these threadlike connections, to show the line going all the way back, like one of those complicated mazes in a children's puzzle book that you trace with a crayon. If you can successfully point out this connection (this path) to the audience, most likely they will settle back into their chairs, nodding and saying something like, "Yeah, I can see that."

Robert McKee is the author of *Story*. He's on a mission traveling the world and teaching the art of story to thousands of aspiring and established writers. He says good writers must recognize the myriad connections in life. There are those relations easy enough to see, like who is related to whom at the family reunion (or should be easy to see anyway). And then there are those connections that are a bit more subtle. These are the sort of connections McKee lauds. From the fusing of two seemingly unrelated ideas or elements, something that no one else has ever seen before is created, something that is crucial to the writing process: **insight** (perhaps even a flood of it)—about life, love, human nature, our motivations, or even weather patterns.

Recently, I wrote an article that begins with the world's first dumbwaiter located in Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and ended with a house of ill repute in Richmond, Virginia. In the end all the connections were there, each fibrous web moving in the pattern of shattered glass to meet up with the next. The take-away of the article was something like "Love conquers all." No fooling. Truthfully, I never saw the connections before I began to write the article. Never had reason to contemplate such connections before. And I certainly had no idea what this article would mean when I began it. But a writer must be able to trace that zigzag pattern between two given points. How do you get from here to there? (Unless you're writing fiction, of course. Then you must spin your own web. But in either case—fiction or nonfiction—be aware that a web exists.)

A successful fusing will produce insight, which is what every writer should desire to produce (say something!) and what every audience craves (what does this mean?). We go about life like little PacMans gobbling up insights and happily growing fatter with them. So find the connections. Create the insights. Feed your audience.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go buy a snow shovel. Seems the caterpillar's coat is extra fuzzy this year.

A mentor with the Writer's Loft, David Pierce lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He has a B.S. in communication/journalism and an M.A. in English. David is a novelist and writer, with published short stories, magazine articles, journal articles, two children's books (Zondervan), and more to his credit. He is signed with Literary and Creative Artists, Inc., a literary agency based in Washington, D.C., for the placement of three novels: *John Jones Was Here*, *Out There in the Woods*, and *Slew*. In addition, he is an adjunct professor in MTSU's English Department. His short fiction has appeared in such publications as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*.

Degrees of Consanguinity

J. Terry Price

A dear friend recently sent an e-mail from a different part of the country, describing how the full moon and fireflies reminded her of childhood summers. Upon looking out my window, I sensed our connection in the tiny yellow lights, floating and winking, earthly vanguards of the larger empyrean light. I grew up in a different time and place than she and yet we were connected through common experiences. In that moment, because of her words, any differences we might have had disappeared.

Words have the power to connect.

When divining fiction, writers create characters to live in stories. The lifeblood of fiction courses through their veins and their viability can decide the success or failure of stories. Complex, layered characters are more than two-dimensional villains and heroes—they have hearts driven by universal human needs; they have cracks in their façades. Their souls are battlefields over which wars between the divine and mortal are fought, each winning their share. None are perpetually sinner or saint but at any given moment they can be either or both, just like us.

Conversely, stereotypes render flat and lifeless characters that create distance between reader and story, a disconnection with larger implications. A flat, stereotyped characterization also reinforces prejudices and exacerbates the divisions growing among us. Our culture increasingly breeds instant judgments, instant categorizations, instant divisions. Governments have historically painted opponents with a different brush designed to dehumanize them, thus making it easier to rally citizenry to war, after which little, if any, remedial work is done. Closer to home, we form neighborhoods and build fences to create comfort zones, disconnecting ourselves from all who certainly don't look like us and perhaps don't think like us either.

Words also have the power to disconnect.

In good fiction, we may learn who the character is and what she is capable of. But it is through great fiction that we discover who we are and what we are capable of. Great fiction reveals us, all of us, as saints and sinners, all of us as divine and flawed, each unique and yet all alike, all of us. Humanity. Connected.

Words have the amazing power to reveal.

Historically and universally, there is a fundamental need to tell and hear stories, something in our collective DNA that makes it as important to us as eating and breathing. All cultures, regardless of how advanced or how primitive, regardless of how recent their appearance or how ancient, have their stories and myths. As writers, when we create full, deep, real characters, the resulting humanity resonates across cultural boundaries and across religious differences, regardless of age and sex. Well-crafted characters provide us the opportunity to look over fences, across oceans, around propaganda, into the eyes of one another and still see ourselves, to feel the connection of humanity.

We write not to educate or to preach; rather, we write to discover. And the more we discover, the more we understand; the more we understand, the better we can be under-

stood. Through our stories, we begin to recognize the commonality, the humanity that connects all of our disparate, desperate lives. We all gaze up at the same moon, are warmed by the same sun, marvel at fireflies.

As writers, we craft stories using words, words that have power and impact sometimes beyond the worlds of our stories. Our words can build bridges, break down walls, and help us to recognize and reconnect as people, real people, not caricatures. Our words can help us recognize and embrace the divinity and flaws within each of us; then, maybe, we can begin to accept it in others.

Ultimately, we might grasp the commonality essential for our global survival.

Because, as writers, we ultimately choose the words that have the power.

J. Terry Price is a writer based in Springfield, Tennessee, and is a graduate of the Writer's Loft program at Middle Tennessee State University. He is working on his M.F.A. in writing at Spalding University in Louisville. Terry has completed a number of short stories and is working on his first novel as well as an extended critical essay on spiritual isolation in the epistolary works of Alice Walker, Lee Smith, and Marilynne Robinson. You can contact Terry at t.price@comcast.net

The First Well-Adjusted Writer

Claire Suddath

I am not tortured. I am not pained. I do not write because it's the only thing that I can do. If I wanted, I could probably be a lawyer or a dentist or someone who sits in a cubicle and has a job title that barely sounds like English. My parents never forgot my birthday. I didn't hate high school. At least, no more than anyone else. I have always had a lot of friends. I grew up in the suburbs and I shop at the Gap. And still, I am a writer.

Writing doesn't come naturally to me. I don't create beautiful e-mails or eloquent grocery lists. I am not disciplined enough to wake up before the sun and write a novel before going to work. I write when I can, when I make myself turn off the TV or leave a party early. Sometimes that's every day, and sometimes that's once a week. I know what's good for me, but sometimes I just want to drink that extra beer or watch one more episode of *Bewitched*. I gave up poetry when I was fifteen.

I read before I could write. I read picture books, then books with pictures, then books that formed pictures in my mind. Roald Dahl was the first author I ever loved. I never knew how to pronounce his name, so to me he will always be Ronald. At age nine, I wrote my first book, a twenty-five-page novel about a small Russian orphan named Katrina who travels to America to become an Olympic gymnast and finds a box of newborn kittens along the way. I drew upon my extensive knowledge of Russian history, incorporating the word "babushka" into every major scene. This novel is one of the great, undiscovered master-

pieces of our time. I have no idea why it was never published.

At ten, I wrote a short story about a girl who bakes brownies for the first time. The recipe says to add basil, so the girl throws her baby brother Basil in the oven instead. When I read “Ashley and the Magic Brownies” to my mother, I thought she would recognize my basil pun as literary genius. Instead, she told me that brownies weren’t made with basil. Mom never did appreciate great art.

At twelve, I became a playwright. *Lifestyles of the Dead and Famous* begins with the opening lines: “We don’t know how these things start. We don’t know how the pyramids were built, or what Einstein was really talking about, or even where all those missing socks go when you wash your clothes. But it happens. Somehow, Adolf Hitler, Alexander Graham Bell, Michael Jackson, Lisa Marie Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Winston Churchill, O.J. Simpson, Nancy Kerrigan, Tonya Harding, Beavis and Butthead, Sherlock Holmes, Elvis, and the Brady Bunch got stuck in an old, rundown Victorian hotel in the middle of Oklahoma.” The five-act play opened to rave reviews from the neighborhood children. Ice Capades Barbie received much acclaim for her role as Tonya Harding, but Strawberry Shortcake as Sherlock Holmes stole the show.

I have noticed a pattern in my writing. First, my work impresses and excites me. It is so brilliant, so wonderful; it’s sure to be published. Later, when I revisit the piece, it embarrasses me—did I really write a play with Tonya Harding as a main character? What was I thinking? And then, years later, it amuses me again. I am no longer the seventh grader who wrote that play. I grew up and got a job, and when Tonya Harding runs around the mansion chasing Malibu Beach Skipper (Nancy Kerrigan) with a knife, I know I can laugh again.

I will write until I am dead. And even then, I might not stop. I will devour advice from successful authors, dissecting their stories for any inspirational content. For three years, John Grisham awoke at five a.m., wrote until nine, and then worked as a lawyer for 60 or 70 hours a week. Hemingway pecked away at a typewriter from six until noon. I am not Grisham and I will definitely never be Hemingway—for one thing, I hate bullfights—but I will accept their guidance until I can form my own. I am not a genius. I am not a prodigy. But I do what I love, and that is enough.

Claire Suddath grew up in Chicago and graduated from Vanderbilt University in 2004 with a degree in creative writing and economics. Somehow, she convinced the *Nashville Scene* newspaper to give her a regular humor column, in which she writes about important topics such as her apartment’s mold problem and whether the correct term for a carbonated beverage is “pop” or “soda.” She cofounded *Illiterati Magazine* and also writes for the *DC Examiner* and *Vanderbilt Magazine*. Her fiction has been published in the *Vanderbilt Review*. She lives in Nashville with her boyfriend, Paul, and overly pampered dog, Molly.

The Spring 2005 Creative Writing and Poetry Contests Winners

Poetry Selection

Heather Wibbels, for "Summer Job"

Short Story Selection

Denise Mitchell, for "Other People's Closets"



The Spring 2005 Poetry Winner

Heather Wibbels, for “Summer Job”

Heather Wibbels received her B.A. in philosophy and religion from Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, then moved to Nashville, where she received an M.A. from Vanderbilt University in history and critical theories of religion. She went on to work as a software testing manager for several years before deciding to forgo Dilbert-land and start a private practice in massage therapy. She has always enjoyed writing and publishes monthly newsletters for her clients. She joined the Writer’s Loft in order to explore creative writing apart from the educational and informational writing she does for her practice. Heather spends her days working with clients and reading and writing with the available time in her daily schedule. She agrees with Mark Doty’s remark, “One of poetry’s great powers is its preservative ability to take a moment in time and make an attempt to hold it,” and strives to repeat it in her own writing.



Summer Job

by
Heather Wibbels

Creation starts anew every twenty inches,
the loom's warp advanced again.
Sweating under summer's black sun
we weave a hundred hotmats this week.

Our short feet rest on blank wooden treadles,
the loom's boxy frame an endless progression
of supports, heddles, and reeds. The warp crawls
from back to front with the tip of our shuttles.

Shuttles run empty and we dress our fingers
in rough-edged fabric, wind ripped remainders
of cloth over palm, over fingers, over palm,
rolling a ball as a cloth tether trails the ground.

I pull the beater to my chest, the hundredth
smash of fabric into close-fitting weft.
Feet switch places, alternating harnesses.
The loom yawns open one wide shed, then another.

Creation starts anew every twenty inches,
the loom's warp advanced again.
Sweating under summer's black sun
we weave a hundred hotmats this week.

The Spring 2005 Creative Writing Winner

Denise Mitchell, for her short story “Other People’s Closets”

Denise and her husband, Brad, relocated to Nashville last June along with their two children, Amelia, five, and Wesley, four. They moved from the Atlanta area, where Denise received her B.S. in chemistry from Georgia Tech and M.S. in chemistry from Georgia State University. Mostly, she’s used all that education to be a stay-at-home mom, although this year, she taught a high school biology class at Montessori Academy in Brentwood, Tennessee. Amelia, also an aspiring author, encourages her mom with statements such as, “Mommy, I don’t know why it takes you so long to write a book, I write four or five a day and mine have pictures.”



Other People's Closets

by
Denise Mitchell

I put the code into the MLS box wrong twice, though I know the numbers better than an anorexic teenager knows her weight. I'd spent the whole weekend colating packets for my husband Ian's seminars and haven't looked at houses in two days.

Losing a whole weekend in real estate is like a personal trainer taking vacation for the entire month of January. It just shouldn't happen. Ian doesn't even like for me to communicate with my clients by phone when we're working on his seminars. He says dividing our attention is disrespectful to the process.

It'll take me all week to catch up on previewing new listings. I never show a house to a client until I've seen it myself first.

Finally, the metal box slides out to release the key. I shut the door behind me and breathe deeply, trying to replace the choking, powdery scent of the Bradford pears with some scent that won't encourage the migraine to continue snaking up my neck to the top of my head. The fake fresh scent of fabric softener leads me to the laundry room first.

I open the washing machine. It's a load of odds and ends, thrown in at the last minute to tidy up before the homeowners left for work. A pair of red panties, a couple of towels, some black socks and dust rags. My heart rate slows and the tension starts to drain from the back of my neck.

I close the lid of the washing machine carefully so I don't disturb the evidence frozen to the sides of the tub by exquisitely directional centrifugal force and head up the stairs. Next weekend, I'll be busy with the banquet Ian gives every quarter for his clients. Another lost weekend. Ian says it's my problem that I allow myself to be constrained by the artificial limitations of the calendar.

I find some candy bar wrappers in the woman's underwear drawer, three Almond Joy and two Snickers. The homeowner has flattened the wrappers out, folded them neatly and hid them under a jumbled mess of bras. I understand why she tries to hide her candy consumption, but why does she just let the wrappers lie here? Is she afraid to be caught throwing them away? I want to do this woman a favor, to take the wrappers with me and throw them away for her. Ian would think the best thing to do for her would be to put them out on the dresser, to force her to face them. But of course I can't do that. I cover them back up with the bras and close the drawer gently.

I kneel down beside the bed, hoping none of the carpet fuzz will stick to my black velvet slacks. Lifting up the dust ruffle, I find a cornucopia of clutter: old newspapers, a pair of running shoes and an empty orange juice carton. I feel the muscles of my jaw relax, savoring the sweet relief of pain I hadn't even noticed until it disappeared. This job is so good for me; the best thing Ian has ever done for me is suggest I become a real estate agent.

I head to the master bath, intending to check out the medicine cabinet, but on my way I catch sight of myself in the mirror above the woman's vanity.

The lighting is too kind. I stand staring at myself, back lit in frosted incandescence. I look natural and perfect, much younger than thirty-five. The effort spent on my make-up is not obvious. The lines that have begun to form at the corners of my lips fade into the soft light, which instead picks up the golden flecks in the brown of my eyes and the blond highlights of my hair, which looks honey-colored instead of its usual flat brown. I look presentable, attractive, even happy.

I wonder what the woman who owns this house thinks when she catches sight of herself in restroom mirrors under harsh fluorescent lights. Does she try to avoid looking at herself, the way I used to? Ian would say that she's suffering from willful self-ignorance, a term he invented. Ian would love to get this lady into one of his seminars.

Ian bought me an optically perfect mirror for our third anniversary. It cost a fortune, but it gives the most accurate reflection possible. He taught me to stare into it without flinching, facing every imperfection. After I'd taken inventory of every blemish, every pore, the slight asymmetry of my nose, Ian would tell me to imagine how someone I admired would react to this exercise. When I couldn't immediately come up with a person (he said it had to be someone I knew, not a historical figure or a celebrity), he suggested Bethany Lewis.

Bethany is one of Ian's clients, she attended the very first seminar he gave. Ian is always telling me how I should visualize what it would feel like to realize my own potential as fully as Bethany has. Bethany volunteers at the library and the women's crisis center and is on the boards of some non-profits. Her husband travels for his job, so she is raising their three children virtually alone. Well, she and the nanny, but still she has a lot on her plate.

Though I try, it's difficult to visualize myself as Bethany. She's so different from me. All I do, it seems like, is work on Ian's seminars and sell houses. Actually, I need to head back to the office right now to meet some clients. In fact, today is the day I'm going to sell Bethany's house.

I'd scoured Bethany's house the day after it went on the market. I hadn't found one messy closet, not a speck of dust, nothing out of place. Even the children's rooms were perfect. I'd stayed in the nursery a long time, imagining a hand-carved crib and the light scent of baby lotion in my own home.

Ian doesn't think it would be fair for us to have children until I've reached a level of self-awareness that could reasonably be expected to lead me on a path toward "fulfillment realization," another term he has coined.

At least there will be some redemption in being the person to sell Bethany's house. The commission will be substantial too. I make a lot of money selling houses, but things are still tight since Ian's seminars aren't yet profitable. But he does need to project an image of success since he's trying to convince people he can teach them to be successful. It's an image that doesn't come cheaply. Last month, we replaced his small Lexus SUV with the larger model so he can shuttle his clients more comfortably. Of course, he has to maintain a perfect, sunless tan and manicured nails and a fashionable wardrobe. Sometimes I feel like I'll never sell enough

houses to even pay off the credit cards for all the Armani suits and Bruno Magli shoes he has in his closet.

When I get stressed about money, I try to do what Ian says and visualize how Bethany would handle the situation, but I just picture her helping elderly people sign up for cards at the library or organizing the food bank at the women's center. I just can't make it work. She volunteers; I can hardly keep our finances afloat with a lucrative career.

To be fair, Ian doesn't just demand things for himself. He does insist that I wear nice clothes, too; it's not as if he expects me to go around in rags. But then, I'm part of the image, too. For some reason, the image of a bronzed statue of Bethany pops in my head. Maybe because I can't picture myself as a trophy.

At the office, Sandy, the receptionist greets me with her usual enthusiasm as soon as I walk through the door. "Hi, Victoria. Guess what? You were the top agent again last month!"

This is not an achievement so much as insurance against this month, which will be slow with the two weekends I'm losing. Sandy would congratulate someone on breathing, on having a beating heart if she thought of it. Ian says that people like Sandy, who seem so sweet-natured, who always find the best in others, do so because they're afraid to look inward. Afraid that if they do, they won't find anything to like in themselves.

Sandy reminds me of a girl who lived next to my family when I was in third grade. Her name was Amy. Our moms were friends so we ended up spending a lot of time together. I dreaded when report cards came out because of Amy. Back then, I'd thought there was something wrong with her mentally. Now I realize she was just average. Anyway, she'd come home with Bs and Cs, and her mom couldn't wait to see the report card. If she'd brought a grade up since the last grading period, it was like she'd won a Nobel Prize. Grades that slipped were met with promises of extra help. Once, she made an A in math and her mom hugged her and took us both to get ice cream cones.

My mom hugged me for my A's too, and usually took me somewhere special or gave me a five dollar bill, but she didn't look forward to report cards. There wasn't any reason to, no anticipation.

I lived in fear of making a B. No where to go but down.

From the window of my office, I see my clients' silver BMW pull into the parking lot. They are young and newly married, around twenty-four, I think. Too young too be married and too young to be buying the house I'm going to sell them. Of course, I was only twenty-two when I married Ian, but that's different because he was forty-five.

Too young or not, they are already married, and they will fall in love with the house I'm going to sell them. One of their sets of parents will add another fifty grand or so to the down payment they've already given as a wedding or graduation or Christmas gift so they can afford it. Of course, I didn't ask about any of these particulars, but if their thoughts scrolled across their foreheads I wouldn't be able to read them any better.

It's ironic that I can infer all of this (and I'm right about my clients at least ninety percent of the time) given that I'm a real estate agent only because I don't have what it takes to be a psychologist.

Ian had been one of my professors in graduate school. He asked me to come to his office at the end of my third semester. Finals were over and I was feeling confident. I'd assumed he wanted to talk to me about a fellowship or a research assistantship. I hoped so; I loathed being a teaching assistant. It didn't feel right, being on the marking side of the red pen.

"Hi, Victoria, I'm glad you could come by, have a seat" he'd said, without standing, gesturing toward the leather armchair in front of his desk. The whole tiny office smelled like that chair. It's in our den now.

I sat down, eager to hear good news.

Ian cleared his throat and announced, "Victoria, you're a good student; I just don't think you're cut out for clinical work."

I felt the blood drain from my face and fill the pit of my stomach. I kept waiting for the punch line, for him to laugh at me for falling for his little joke. But Ian just sat there, staring at me. The meager sunlight filtering through the grimy windows somehow managed to highlight the silver streaks at his temples.

"I have a 4.0."

"I know, but that's not the point. Textbooks are different from the real thing. To do this, you have to understand people." He leaned forward. "You have to really get them."

"I can do that!"

"Victoria, it's a matter of insight, insight into human behavior, emotions. You're too, well, clinical."

"I'm too clinical? To be a clinical psychologist?"

Ian just stared. I don't remember our first kiss specifically or the date of our engagement, but I remember exactly how he looked at that moment. His brown eyes with just the faintest beginning of crow's feet seemed to hold the knowledge of every decision I would ever make.

"Are you telling me to drop out?"

"No, I wouldn't do that, I'd just hate to see you waste your time here."

As I was getting up to leave, he'd asked me out for the first time.

I said yes. I was still expecting a revelation about how he wasn't serious. Maybe it was research, to see my reaction. But wasn't it unethical to experiment on people without their consent?

It wasn't research and we were married three months later. I was a month into the course I was taking to prepare for the real estate licensing exam by then and working as a receptionist at the same company I work for now. A year later, he quit his professorship to develop his seminars.

My clients, Brent and Kristi, and I head toward the first house I'm going to show them right away. Brent is sitting in the front passenger seat, his right arm draped across his door, his fingers tapping the bottom of the window. It annoys me, thinking of the fingerprints. I can see Kristi looking at herself in the rearview mirror, adjusting her perfect pony tail, inspecting the clear, bare skin of her face.

It's easy to visualize her as Bethany. That's how I know they will buy Bethany's house.

The first house I show them is what they think they want, in the price range they'd asked to see. The dining room is too small for the heirloom table and hand-carved chairs Kristi had just inherited from a great aunt. She'd talked about it incessantly when we met the first time. It seemed to be the whole reason she'd become discontent with apartment life.

I always choose the first house to show clients with great care. It has to be very close to what the clients think they want, while having a flaw large enough to convince them to move up some in price range.

The first house I show Brent and Kristi is in a cute neighborhood, but a few of the yards are sprouting fast-growing weeds in the middle of neat Bermuda sod. A couple of the houses need a fresh coat of paint. Subtle things that will make it seem just a bit off.

As expected, Kristi is disappointed by the small dining room and seems demoralized when we start over to the second house. I'm saving Bethany's house to show third. I always show the house I plan on selling third.

Brent's fingers are still tapping, clearly not yet understanding how his future will be shaped by the dimensions of an old piece of furniture.

Kristi emits a predictable squeal when I pull up in front of the second house, "It's beautiful, Brent, look at it."

"It's a little more expensive than you wanted, but I thought of you two the moment I saw it." It'd been on the market for six months and I'd met Kristi and Brent last week.

Inside, I lead Kristi first to the dining room. "Look, Brent, it's huge!"

From the dining room, I go into the kitchen, where I know the floral wallpaper and pickled cabinets will offend Kristi.

"Of course, the decor is a bit dated, but you could always redo it." Planting the seed was as easy as growing mildew on cracked shower grout.

As I show Kristi the rest of the house, I open every closet door to reveal spaces cluttered with clothes from every season. I follow her gaze as it shifts from scuff marks in the hallway to a patch of worn carpet near the back door. She never notices the large back yard with flowering fruit trees because of the overbearing aqua drapes on the windows.

I can read on Kristi's face exactly what I expected to be there; she is alternately drawn by the large dining room and repulsed by the knowledge of how different the people who live here now are from her. Ian says that people who are on the path to fulfillment realization naturally gravitate toward others heading in the same direction. Perfection loves company, I guess.

Brent makes only positive comments. He likes the den with oak paneling and the bonus room with enough room for a big screen TV. He has an almost heart-breaking need to be liked which would have been pathetic on someone less capable or attractive. This probably makes him good at his job, which is pharmaceutical sales. It comforts me to think that he will be able to make enough to cover the payments on Bethany's house. Kristi is working on a master's in art education, so

she won't be helping with the mortgage just yet.

I usher Kristi and Brent out of the house toward my SUV. I don't talk much. I want Kristi to be going over the pros and cons of this house in her head so she'll be ripe for Bethany's.

Bethany's house is in a subdivision full of "estates," large houses on one-acre lots. The homeowners association is militant enough to attack and fine anyone impertinent enough to allow a single stray weed to invade this planned suburban paradise. Still, Bethany's house with its stately white columns and upgraded landscaping manages to impose an air of superiority. A splendid rose among merely beautiful ones.

Kristi and Brent react to Bethany's house exactly as I'd expected. They are so dependable, I can almost forgive their youth.

"It's perfect," Kristi says once we're inside the cavernous dining room. She's running her hand lovingly along the chair rail.

"It's a good bit more than we'd planned on spending . . ." Brent is looking out of the French doors at the deck and doesn't see the icy look Kristi shoots him.

"It's not that much more than the last house we looked at and we won't have to put any money into redecorating." Kristi was defensive, a good sign.

"I'll go out into the garage and give you two some privacy to discuss your decision," I excused myself. I knew as soon as I was out of earshot, they'd be on their cells to parents or grandparents, diplomatically asking for advice while fervently hoping for more down payment funds.

I pressed the buttons to operate both automatic garage door openers. The noise would assure Kristi and Brent that I was legitimately checking things out for them and that I couldn't hear their conversation.

I'm not surprised to see that even Bethany's garage is neat. Other than a tricycle, a bike and stroller lined up along one wall, it's almost empty. There isn't a cobweb or even a drop of motor oil anywhere.

In a recessed space at the front, I spot a deep freezer. The crack of the seal breaking as I open it seems very loud. When the cloud of cold steam clears, I'm staring into big brown eyes. Eyes? Why are cold, dead eyes looking up at me from Bethany's freezer? I look away, trying to convince myself that I'm mistaken. But what other explanation can there be for eyes in a freezer?

Suddenly, now I can visualize being Bethany. Ironically, Ian is the person I see myself stuffing into a freezer. But that's not right, Bethany adores Ian.

I try to think logically and force myself to look back into the freezer. It has to be a child, an adult wouldn't fit. I'm focused again on the eyes, shrouded in plastic wrap, transparent enough to reveal frost adhering to long eyelashes.

My racing mind finally takes in the shape of the package. It's not a child, but a medium-sized dog. Perfectly spherical drops of blood have congealed and settled in the creases of the plastic. The dog's tongue is hanging out, making it appear as if it is trying to lick something off the inside of the plastic wrap.

My heart rate slows, with relief, but maybe disappointment too. Absurdly, I think about freezer burn. The frost on the inside of the plastic means Bethany didn't wrap the dog well.

The dog is lying on a bier of neatly stacked disposable aluminum pans, the same kind that Bethany used to bring a casserole over to our house when Ian's mother died. I try hard to remember if I ate any of that casserole and what kind of meat it had in it.

Each of the aluminum pans has the contents and the date written in black marker on white freezer tape. Right over the dog's stomach, where the white fur is stained red with blood, there is the same freezer tape with "Duchess" written in the same handwriting. Does Bethany freeze enough dead dogs that she needs to label them?

I'm transfixed by the stiff dog, swaddled so carefully in food wrapping. I want to pick Duchess up and cradle her in my arms, warm her back to life.

The garage doors are still open, so I hear Bethany when she pulls into the driveway. It feels rude to close the freezer and turn my back on Duchess, but this is what I do. I know Bethany couldn't have seen me from the driveway, but my heart is racing when I step out of the garage to greet her.

* * *

It is a week later, after all the contracts have been signed and Brent and Kristi are set to close on the house in a month, when Ian mentions he and Bethany had lunch together. I had specifically asked him not to have any contact with her until after the house closed since I was representing the buyers. But as usual, he'd just waved off my concerns as if anything to do with my job was completely trivial compared to the serious work he did with his clients.

He is sitting in that brown leather armchair that had been in his office when he was a professor. Perfect sunlight from the high palladium windows in our den bounces off his silver hair.

"Let me tell you something about Bethany, something you might find useful." He sounds exactly the way he had when he'd lectured. "Her dog died, but her oldest child was away on a school trip. This child loved the dog, Duchess, so Bethany froze the animal so the child could be there to bury it. Don't you find that to be a wonderful example of applying my principles to parenting?"

That was the exact moment I decided to leave him.



**CREATIVE WRITING
SUMMER 2005**

Glass Doors

by
Susan Brown

Tiny bird
so bright
so light
your body like a feather.
When I lift you up
your eye opens.
You may not die.
I hide you in the grass
to keep you from the cat,
but later on
you are not gone,
your tiny body
there still.

Look Around

by
Susan Brown

A baby, serious and intent
on studying where he is
and who you are, gazes at every part of your face.
A black and white puzzle, the newest thing,
quickly calms him down;
he stares at it and looks at every part,
not just a glance, as an adult would give,
but a true study, as if he knows
there is much to see.

My Friend

by
Susan Brown

Tonight we sat on the porch
in the spring, so new and green,

the wind moving the baby leaves
of the trees, their branches waving like hands
then calming - so still.

Hearing the owls call
we thought of you,

we felt your breath and heard your sigh
in the softness of the wind.

At Bat

by
Peggy Smith Duke

mosquitoes linger
under the lights
drawing him into view
flutter-metered wing beats
brand him not a swift
his mysteries propel him
surely as gravity moves the moon
in orbit, ellipses clockwise,
counter, figure eights
arcing the garden slope

alter nocturnes
stretch from shadowed perches
knock the dust
from their raptor feet
push up their sleeves
and wait for enough dark
to spirit their prey
from the dugout

Bucking Rivets

by

Peggy Smith Duke

Ripping the earth
makes no more
a foul sound
than a rivet gun
hammering
a perfectly aged rivet
against a bucking bar

Ribbons of rivets the length
of an airplane wing
grab stringers
tight against the panels—
bones of airplanes.

Earline's been bucking rivets
forty years, screaming "Hey!"
waving like a stranded sailor
when she hasn't seen you
in a day or two. Sometimes
her hair flames
to match her moods. In spring
she brings collard greens
tomatoes in the fall
coming and going
down the endless hangar aisle
her walk more breadth
than length. Forty years.

There's no mistaking
the sound of a rivet gun.

Whistler

by
Peggy Smith Duke

A single rip
of a whistle
commanded
the snorting head
suspended
the bond
between them.
Muscles cocked.

Pounding
four points
into dry ground
half a ton
of wet breath
slid
inches from
whispering
love notes
into his nose.

Gathered mane.
A swing up.

Warm
quivering flesh
silken hair
sweat
barn dust

flush against thighs
too young
to understand
the sensuality
and why it was
so important to her.

Small Plane

by

Peggy Smith Duke

Hurling, humming
jumping into still air
thick and turbid
he calls to the sun
and takes her with him

to dance on air
in silvered shoes
with basso music
droning in the bandstand

until the sun announces dusk
where ashes wait for her.
The music stills to
make room for silence
and she glides

toward
the great
broad
earth

nestled in the cradle
of his arms. He
sets her down
and disappears.

Dorothy at Menopause

by
Gregory Plemmons

She gets a card each year from Tin Man. He always was a sucker for Hallmark. Lion died a few years back while on the job, a high school shooting. The doctor found a lump last week and Scarecrow read her mammogram. She thought he'd moved to Lawrence to be closer to the grandkid. But his voice was still so good to hear, the way it rustled underneath those years like tinder as they caught up on the hometown news. "Fibrocystic changes, Dot, that's all I see," he told her bluntly and she took a breath and sighed. She thought she spied him once in the Wichita Walmart Lawn and Garden section with the missus, but it wasn't. Pantliners two for one this week but now she may not need that second box, the place where she is headed.

My own father died at 39. The hushful grace of forty falls around me like fresh fairy snow, the same that laced that poppy field outside the Wizard's city: *Step out of the woods, step into the sun, step into the light.* Half-drugged mammals, we rise from brick and waken to the chorus of a thousand ruby-slippered angels. We stumble out of childhood into thickets braced with IRAs and lavish antihistamines. We feel our way through age with tongues as numb as popsicles and try to find our way again along the emerald outskirts of a town we once called Youth and a sky we still call Trouble.

My Last Fight with Nate

by
Gregory Plemmons

Spending the holidays with my father and my new stepmother, Lila, loomed over my fall semester like a giant Macy's balloon. Thanksgiving and Christmas slowly approached with the faint menace of some scarily oversized cartoon character, obscuring everything else, including my final exams. Our holiday with Mama last year before she died had been bad enough. In and out of the hospital, she had been unable to stomach more than a few sips of eggnog and a few pieces of peanut butter fudge my brother Nate and I had whipped up in the kitchen. He and I had ended up eating the whole batch in one helping and had both immediately come down with a bad case of fudge sickness on Christmas Eve. When your body feels leaden and your mouth throbs with sweetness, you can only be cured by something tart or savory. There's no other antidote. So Nate and I went out after midnight to go look for pizza. But really it was just an excuse to get out of the house for a while.

Nate looked at his watch. "It's 12:17, girlfriend. Christmas Day." We got in my car and headed toward town. Everything in Mt. Pleasant was already closed. It had started to drizzle. The Lil' Cricket convenience mart was the only thing open, and Nate made me stop for a six-pack of Moosehead. Then we crossed over the bridge and drove in to Charleston, careful to sip our beers between red lights as we ranked all the light displays. I drove while Nate looked out the window.

"Why do people feel the need to outline their houses like that?" Nate pointed to a whole row of houses detailed with lights.

"So Santa Claus can see where to land, Goofus." Decorations grew more irreverent and lopsided the farther we drove out of Charleston. The prim and symmetrical white lights and fresh greenery of Meeting Street soon lapsed into plastic lit-up Josephs and Marys and snowmen. All the pizza places were closed but we finally found a Waffle House open in Goose Creek. We sat in the parking lot for a few minutes and finished our beers and listened to the radio. A string of lights unevenly hung across the eaves of the diner. They blinked on and off, tinting the splotches of spray snow applied on the windows. I turned down the radio.

"Mama wants to get hospice involved," I said. "Dr. Eddy says maybe it's time."

Nate ran his fingers over his head, which he'd shaved when Mama had started her treatments. His scalp was now already fuzzy with new inch-long growth, already starting to cowlick.

"I wish they could find a better word. Hospice." He downed the last of his beer. "It sounds like some friggin' midwestern motel chain. We'll leave the light on for you."

"Well, where would you rather she die?" I exclaimed. "Up in University Hospital? Hooked up to a bunch of tubes and machines?"

"Why can't she just die at home?" Nate twisted open another bottle of beer and chugged a few swallows down then wiped the slight foam from his lips. Something

danced in his eyes, refusing to settle. "How come nobody dies at home anymore? Mama said when Pop Ledbetter died they had the wake and the funeral right in the living room."

"That's just peachy, Nate." I picked at the edge of my bottle label with my fingernails, whittled away at the edges. "Where do you think we should position her casket? Right by the bay window so people can pay their respects with a driveby if they don't feel like coming inside? Just like that funeral home up in Columbia?"

Nate glared at me. "Piss off." He stormed out of the car, spilling his beer all over the seat. I watched from the car as he headed inside and slid into a booth. A waitress came over and gave him a menu. The place was surprisingly full for Christmas Eve. I studied the people inside. I tried to imagine their stories, why they weren't having holiday ham somewhere with their families. I dabbed at the spilled beer with a Kleenex. It was already starting to grow cold in the car. I was still queasy and couldn't decide if it was still fudge sickness, the beer smell, or the talk about Mama. A syrup-drenched waffle was the last thing I needed. But some hashbrowns with ketchup might help. I got out of the car and ambled inside.

Nate was playing with the packets of sugar and sweetener, trying to build a small house of cards. He didn't look up as I sat down from across him. The waitress handed me a menu and brought him a Coke. I silently watched as he performed one of his diner tricks. He scrunched down the paper wrapper from his straw into a ball then sucked up some Coke and carefully applied a few drops to the ball from the end of straw like a medicine dropper. The wrapper magically writhed on the table, re-expanding itself like a phantom accordion. Then he pulled the straw out of his mouth and spoke to me.

"There's not going to be any funeral."

"Nate. You heard Dr. Eddy. I want to believe she'll get better too but we need to prepare."

"Listen to me. There's not going to be any funeral. At least not a real one." He stabbed at the ice in his tumbler. "She's donating her body to science. To the medical school."

I froze. Fudge sickness departed in one swoop and a new anxious nausea suddenly poured into my body.

"You're joking," I said. "Mama can't even sign the organ donor line on her driver's license." Mama had refused organ donation ever since reading about that woman artist in *Reader's Digest* who had gotten a cornea transplant and soon started drawing riddled with cancer. Our mother was actually donating her body to science?

"I'm dead serious," Nate said. "No pun intended."

"Did Daddy put her up to this?"

"No. That's the first thing I asked," Nate said. "She hasn't told him." He took a sip of his Coke. "She's afraid he won't let her go through with it. He's Mr. Biology Professor and all, but I guess when it's your wife on a slab things are different."

I couldn't believe it. Here I was, sitting in a Waffle House on Christmas Day at two in the morning and now our mother was going to be a *cadaver*. The only things I'd ever seen dissected were earthworms and frogs, their skins splayed back and tethered with straight pins, exposing all innards. I couldn't stop picturing Mama's body the same way, squirreled

away in the medical school, all formaldehyde-glossy and pallid on a stainless steel table somewhere, underneath the glare of fluorescent white lights and a gaggle of white-coats. Mama had not mentioned a word to me. I'd come home almost every weekend the past semester, at least for a day, to check on Daddy and her. We had shared plenty of moments alone, even talked about funeral stuff, but she had not mentioned a word of this to me. Not even a hint. Maybe she was afraid I'd tell Daddy. I wasn't sure. My face began to grow warm and my cheeks prickled with heat.

"When did she tell you this?" I asked Nate.

"Over Thanksgiving," he shrugged. I couldn't decide if he was smirking or not, the way he sometimes did when he revealed secrets. Anger rose up inside me now, unbuoyed by the third beer I'd downed in the parking lot.

"Well aren't you special?" My voice grew louder. Two men in Santa Claus hats and surgical scrubs hunched at the counter glanced over their shoulders at me. "How about the will, little brother? Any coming attractions there?"

"What's gotten into you? Jesus!" Nate said. "Did you OD on your thyroid medicine?"

"My thyroid is fine!" I stammered. Even the sole Waffle House waitress stared at me now, her skin a deep tanning-booth bronze, her eyeshadow the work of a crazed palette knife artist. "God, sometimes you sound just like her!" I said. "It's not always my thyroid." Mama was always blaming my peevishness on my dysfunctional thyroid or ovaries. In addition to my hormone shots, I had to take a pill for my thyroid too.

"Just get me some hashbrowns," I managed to say as I tried to hold back my tears. But they came anyway, oozed down my cheeks. My eyeballs stung raw like burst lemons. Everyone in the Waffle House was looking at us now. Nate rose and sat down beside me and I felt his arm slide over my shoulder. "With ketchup," I sobbed, pressing my face into his flannel. He smelled like bacon and waffles, like Saturday mornings, and I swallowed my mucus and couldn't stop crying.

"Whatever you want," Nate said, stroking my hair and rubbing my shoulder.

"Scattered, smothered, and covered. Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours," he began to sing to me gently. "Baby, I'm yours."

Strandings

by

J. Terry Price

Do they leave the water or does it leave them?

Salt water washes the soft bellies of the whales, washes layer after layer of sand away. Motionless in the tide, their eyes are open to midsummer stars appearing as bright and plentiful as squid sparkling, swimming in the Atlantic. The seagulls' song joins with the high-pitched cries of these pilot whales on the beach, cries that grow louder when the water comes in and surrounds them, fainter as the waning tide drains into the sea.

There are 46 in this stranding, males and females, calves with closed eyes, wriggling in sand to find and nestle closer to their mothers. Unsupported by water, they will die from their own weight pressing inward, crushing the heart, the lungs. Without the ocean to cool them, their body temperatures rise until they suffer a stroke or a seizure. They are still. All the while the ocean moves, slapping and splashing, cresting and falling, never ending.

Abby lies awake, uncovered, staring at a ceiling she cannot see, trying to remember the last time she slept through the night. A ceiling fan rocks as it turns, a steady creak, the blades sending blankets of salt-infused air down upon her face, heavy. Her stomach smolders, radiating anxiety to her electric skin.

Instinctively, her arm fans out, seeking Burton across the cooled sheets. Her chest still quickens at his absence, her heart pulses up through her neck and into temples. Burton left in April. After two weeks of sitting around her apartment, alone and rudderless, she took the last of her severance pay and left, unnoticed, for the beach. She lies now, motionless in the darkness.

Unable to breathe, she goes to the deck and listens to the waves wash, watches the moon high above. All beyond her, without her. She looks at the sky merging into sea. The twin-spiked beam from the Corolla Lighthouse circles around, steadily overhead. She looks out into the dark waters, blackness rolling into shore. Tides break, reform, recede. Never left the same.

A taut coastal breeze carries urgent sounds up the dunes, through waving sea oats. Shriill, short cries, voices, all washed in surf. Flashlights and torches glow below on the beach, moving quickly along the wide, sandy strip, past the pier to the north, around the boat rental hut to the south. Barefoot, Abby feels her way down the weathered wooden steps, down to the sands below, where as far as she can see, whales are lying on sand, on foreign earth. A man, passing, shoves a bucket into her hands and yells to go to the first whale and take care of it. She has no idea what that means, but she runs, her feet slapping against wet sand, to the first one she comes upon. There are so many.

Abby looks down at the rounded, glistening head of the coal gray émigré. She knows little about the creatures and certainly has never been this close to one before. During her summer visits to Corolla, she had seen the whales offshore many times, distinctive dorsal fins undulating, light and graceful. There is no movement now, only slow, labored breath-

ing and rattling, impatient sighs, dry and measured. She stares down and wonders what it is thinking. So many questions. So unnatural.

What is either of them doing here? Three weeks ago she still had a job. She had gone into work on a Thursday just like she'd done every weekday for over fourteen years. Put her Lean Cuisine in the breakroom fridge, grabbed a coffee, then found the unsealed envelope with her termination notice on the desk. "Downsized"—corporate-speak for unwanted, unnecessary. Nothing she had done. Fired from a job she hated anyway. And now she has no prospects for any work, let alone something tolerable. Fourteen damn years, gone.

A woman shouting from down the beach startles her. "Keep them cool and wet until high tide comes. Then the biologists are going to try and get them back out to sea." Realizing what the bucket is for, she runs to the dark water that moves toward her, cools her ankles, then recedes back into the ocean. She follows until the water deepens and sloshes into the bucket and up her arms. Carefully she approaches the whale and slowly pours a stream around its head, careful to miss the glassy onyx eye. It is such a small amount of water and she carries up another, then another until she gets into a routine.

"Hey. How're we doing?"

In the fullness of the moon, Abby makes out the figure of a woman, in shorts and t-shirt, moving quickly, holding a radio.

"Not sure."

The woman leans down, touches and examines the whale.

"Yeah, there's some life here. She's still hanging in. Keep her wet."

"You said 'she.' Is this a female or do you just generally say 'she'?"

"No, definitely a female. Look at the rounded head. The male pilot whale's head protrudes a little more over the jaw. You can also tell by the size. Females only get about 15 feet long and weigh about half as much. This one's maybe a ton, at best."

Salt water rolls beneath them, reaches and stretches inland and then arcs back toward the sea. The cries of the animals rise at the crest and fall.

"Why? Why are they here? I mean, it makes no sense for whales to just beach themselves."

"We don't know for sure. Could have something to do with the higher tide and the full moon. Maybe the lead animal was sick and beached itself and the others followed."

"You mean . . . if one of the whales runs aground, they all go with it?"

"Sometimes. Pilots travel in pods. Groups. They have tight social cohesion. So, the leader could have just made a navigational error. We're just guessing. Anyway, I've got to check on some of the others, but I needed to mark this one first. I'm Maureen," she said, sticking out her left hand, keeping the right on the whale's head. "I'm a biologist with the Stranding Network. Thanks for helping out."

"Yeah. What do you mean 'mark them'?"

"Just punch a number tag in the dorsal fin so we can tell them apart and track them. This one's seventeen." Maureen clamps the hand punch down hard until the plastic tag pierces the flesh and she snaps the ends together.

"The others okay?"

"Some more so than others. I've had to euthanize twelve, so far. We'll just have to see

how it goes." Maureen exhales a long sigh and stares down at Seventeen. Surf swirls between them and Abby feels the weight of water against her ankles. An ocean breeze carries high-pitched squeals and whistles down the beach.

"Hear that?" Maureen closes her eyes, keeps them closed, and leans her right ear slightly upward. "Best we can tell, they're calling to each other, kind of a roll call. They figure out which ones aren't calling back."

"They know?"

"Yeah."

Abby closes her eyes and listens, tries to distinguish cries of joy from those of pain, of loss. She knows there are a dozen voices missing and wonders what Seventeen is hearing, wonders if she knows too.

Maureen puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes. "I'll check back as quick as I can. Thanks again. High tide's at 6:07 and we'll start digging around them and bringing stretchers about five. Hang in there."

"What time is it now?"

"Mmm, about 4:50."

"Okay."

Maureen walks down the beach calling into the radio. Abby scoops another bucket of salt water, kneels and carefully pours it over the head, the fins, down to the tail. Water glistens in the moonlight as it fingers up toward the head of the whale, then recedes.

"Seventeen. That's a good number. You're gonna be okay, you hear me? Okay." Abby puts her hand against the whale's head, like she would a puppy. Finding a towel, she soaks it in water and swabs around the upturned mouth, then upward between the eyes, to the fin and around the tag pierced into it. A bucket of water, then another. Keep it cool and wet is her mantra. She leans down close.

"Live. You hear me. Live."

Abby lays her head just behind the eye, hears breathing and feels a heartbeat, a slow, jazz backbeat, the walking bass line to the improvisations of the tide. The ocean needs this heartbeat just as much as this whale needs the ocean.

She runs her fingers along the shiny skin and recalls wet inner tubes from her childhood, days floating down the Medina and Guadalupe rivers of south Texas. Her hand spreads flush and she feels the life through the slick skin, warm and urgent. A beam from the Currituck Light wheels deliberately above her, slicing the heavens from the earth and she looks back at the lighthouse as she has done from this beach umpteen times over the years. The full moon hovers over the brick tower, not painted like the other lights along the Outer Banks. Natural, plain, always her favorite. Light cones outward, passing over the beach like a prison search light, over the whales, over volunteers and gawkers, reducing all to black and white, before arcing back toward shore. The setting of the lighthouse reminds her of one of Burton's photographs, come to life.

He left in the middle of a night while she slept, taking clothes, cameras, and his photographs. She woke up the next morning and first noticed his photos missing from the walls, noticed how the paint remained bright where the photos had hung, how the rest of the wall had faded. Without calling his name, she knew he was gone. She looks up at the

lighthouse and wonders about the photos Burton took of her, against the red brick. Wonders if he's hung them in special places on his walls, if she keeps his paint bright, beneath. Sometimes there's just no reason to leave, he said in his note, just no reason to stay either. Abby makes another trip to the water, to keep Seventeen cool and wet.

"It won't be long now. No, sir." She pours the water and touches her whale along its midside.

A guy yells from up the beach, and Maureen runs past, radio chattering, feet thudding in the sand.

"What is it?" Abby shouts. "What's going on?"

Her whale jerks spastically as if attempting escape from something. It squeals, high pitched and painful, like a child realizing she is hurt. The force and the sound of the animal throw Abby backward in the sand, and she catches herself, palms and wrists buried deep.

"Whoa girl. Whoa." Abby regains her balance but maintains a distance. The power of the enormous mammal surprises her. She hears the yells, partly discernable, break through the crashing surf.

". . . kill himself."

". . . about the others . . ."

". . . dying anyway . . ."

In a fury, her whale twists itself deeper into the sand, tail thrashing, splashing Abby with sand-laced surf. The tide smashes and spreads out onto the beach reaching up and washing the head of her whale, then pulls back leaving it wallowing in thickened sand.

As the cries fade, Seventeen calms and Abby approaches her with palms open, softly. She wonders how she can make her understand that she is there to help. She wonders how she can make her understand that movement will kill her, that patience is the only out. Wait until the water returns, until the tide is high. Then they can return her to the ocean, where she can live again.

Abby puts her right hand on the gray side and her left on the creamy white belly. She shushes Seventeen like a baby, and then looks out on the Atlantic, thinks about how immense it is, how deep and strong the currents are. She knows that a few hundred feet out in the ocean her whale will live, but here, out of its element, she is dead weight. If Abby went out into the waves that same distance, she would be tossed about, thrashing until swallowed up by the ocean, but here, on the shore, she is safe and dry. How would she react knowing that others all around her were dying? Would she fight against the waves, against the currents to get to them? Would she hear the whales say to her, *be still. Relax. Be patient and the tide will eventually wash you in, wash you to shore?*

She looks back down at Seventeen and notices that the eye is dull, the shine is leaving. The number punched into the fin suddenly reminds her of the toe tag on a corpse in a morgue, causing her to shiver in the muggy summer dawn. Maureen returns.

"Any change?"

"Yeah. She thrashed about with all of the noise up there. What's going on?"

"A male, about three tons I'd say, began to die. Sometimes they go quietly but not that one. He launched into frenzy and was whipping his tail uncontrollably. We think it

broke a volunteer's leg and knocked another one down. I had to put it down with a shot of sodium pentathol. Let me take a look at Miss Seventeen here."

Maureen kneels down and flashes a pen light into the whale's eye and touches the rubbery flesh surrounding it. "Not good."

"What? What's the matter? Did I do anything wrong?"

"No, it's not you. The eye reflex is slowing. When we get to the point where there's no real eye reflex, they're about ready to go. Seventeen's slowing down."

"But she's not gone yet."

"No, honey, but you've got to understand that we can't let a sick or dying animal back into the ocean. We'll do everything we can, but sometimes that's still not enough."

"When is enough? When? Is it ever enough?"

Maureen pauses.

"I don't know. Over the years I've seen dolphins and whales that had little chance somehow recover and I've seen others just suddenly die. No explanation that we know of. All creatures have the capacity to just give up. Some choose not to fight it out until the end."

They both look down at the helpless pilot.

"I'll be back in a few minutes to check on you. Here. Take this radio and call me if anything changes. Just tell them your number and we'll come as fast as we can. Take it."

Abby did not raise her arms from her whale. "Keep it. We're good for now."

"Honey, I'd feel better if..."

"Keep it. You'll know if something happens."

Maureen clips the radio back onto her belt and moves down the beach.

Abby refills the bucket and pours the saltwater halfway down the length of the whale. A second bucket gets her the rest of the way down. She soaks towels and covers the whale again, careful to leave a spot next to the eye where she rests her head. The heart-beat is there but diminished, flat. Her mind struggles to find something comforting to say, and in little more than a whisper she begins to sing.

. . . she was just 17,

You know what I mean,

And the way she looked was way beyond compare.

So how could I dance with another

When I saw her standing there.

Abby lays the other side of her head against the whale hoping to hear better with the left ear and strokes down the side of the whale, then pats at the end. Looking down the length of the whale out onto the Atlantic, she sees the sky along the eastern horizon begin to lighten, to soften, to distinguish itself from the dark waters below. Waves foam, forming a great distance away, arcing and falling, rising and flowing toward them, gracefully dancing their way toward the shore. In their midst, she sees a spot of black rise and disappear, rise and disappear, then two others, dorsal fins! Other whales, or perhaps dolphins, swimming silhouetted against the bluing sky, light and quick and fluid, in perfect rhythm with the living ocean, perhaps even with the moon itself.

Seventeen lies motionless on the beach. Are there times when rhythms of life change to something beyond which the living can grasp, can understand? Perhaps the whales come to shore because of different rhythms, acts deemed illogical because we spend all our time trying to figure out the rhythms of life, she thinks, not of dying. Perhaps it is those who do not find and understand the rhythms of dying who are ultimately stranded.

The whale feels different beneath her hands. The tension in the skin is gone and the tail is limber and melds into the sand and the tide, now high enough to cover it. There is no thrashing, only a last, soft exhalation from the upturned, almost smiling mouth. The eye, once glassy as the ocean itself, is now dull and dark as coal.

Someone walks up and stands silently at the head of the whale until Abby looks up, hands still holding on to the lifeless mammal, and sees Maureen.

"You did all you could."

"I know."

Maureen kneels and pulls out a large marker.

"What's that for?"

"I've got to mark her so we know which ones we can stop working on."

"What do you write?"

"Usually I just put 'dead' on its side."

"Let me do it, okay?"

"Okay honey, if you're sure. Here. Just get it back to me when you finish."

"Thanks."

"Yeah. Well. I gotta keep moving."

"I understand."

Abby pops the cap off the marker. A sweet pungent scent mixes with salt air, as she studies Seventeen. She looks beyond the darkened lighthouse to the moon, then across the ocean to the sun. Saltwater surrounds her legs, tugging her as it rolls back to the ocean. Life coming in, going out, neither event less important than the other. The marker stutters and squeaks against the drying whale skin, her hand vibrating as she draws a bright red circle on the still, gray flank.

The eponymous tag dangles and Abby, holding the fin in one hand, twists and pulls until plastic snaps, slicing deeply into her thumb. Blood pulses, streams down her palm, down the white belly of the whale. The saltwater washes into the cut, a cleansing burn, deep and welcome. Abby rises and moves into rising and falling waters, currents swirling strong against her, pushing then pulling, eroding the remnants of her resistance. Her heart beating into her hand, she yields to the rhythms, feels the gravity of the moon release and Abby gives herself fully to the sea, to the arriving sun.

Changing Horses

(excerpt from a novel-in-progress)

by

Suzanne Craig Robertson

"Maybe if you could just clear a path? We've been here a month, Cory, and we still can't find the toaster oven," my husband Art was saying. "And I need some clean underwear."

If he asked me one more time when I would get these boxes unpacked, I would go directly to one marked "kitchen," rifle around for an iron skillet, and bean him. You see cartoon characters do that all the time as a means of communication. I didn't want to *kill* him, just *adjust* him a little.

Art and I had weathered 14 years of marriage, one childbirth where the epidural didn't kick in before the baby came, a forced unemployment that had lasted six weeks past our savings, three broken bones, the divorce of our best friends, shingles, and two surgeries. One of those surgeries was outpatient and when I drove him home Art was still whacked out from the anesthesia. It was as if I were transporting a corpse, leaned over with his face smashed into the window, his lip pulled up. As I drove down that dark road, getting the creeps with a sleeping Herman Munster by my side, I wanted that drive to be over. Taking that last curve too sharp, his dead weight tumped over on me, and the next thing I know I'm coming to with a paramedic in my face. Then I heard from nearby, "This other one's dead, sir."

That snapped me out of it. I knew he wasn't dead, just out cold from sedation. I yelled, "He was already like that when I took him from the hospital!" Well, that didn't help matters, and then the police had to get involved, taking a couple of hours to straighten it all out until they were convinced that I hadn't stolen him, either before or after I killed him. Which I did not do. They eventually admitted that he wasn't completely dead, anyway. I think what convinced them I wasn't a criminal was the common sense of it. I heard one of them saying "But why would somebody *want* to take him?"

"My point exactly!" I yelled over my shoulder to that guy.

I know I can't blame that trauma on Art or even call it a marriage low-point, since he was unaware of the whole incident until long after it was over. In fact, he didn't believe me that it had happened until the copy of the police report came in the mail. But that night does come to mind when I'm itemizing the list and weighing again if these 14 years have been worth it.

This, our first house renovation, had quickly gone to the con side of the list, weighing heavier than past events. The slow jumbled process of renovating while living our same, preconstruction frantic lives was wearing us down and apart. That the old house was the one I grew up in intensified the need to get everything just right. Instead of hurrying the process, my love for the old place made me more methodical, slower, unsure of how to arrange things.

Wisps of memories encircled the unpacked boxes like campfire smoke, uninvited from

between where the shoe molding and the wood plank floors touched, in and out of the wavy panes of glass by the front door, and even whining through the old pipes as they moaned out in pain when the hot water was turned on. Cartoon word balloons—only visible to me—hung from the ceilings, telling the punch lines of family stories. So, for every room to be moved into, I required myself to undergo an invisible shakedown.

For instance, making my parents' bedroom my own that I now shared with a *man*, made me feel like a 15-year-old with a motorcycle boyfriend who should've gone home hours ago, and what were we doing in there anyway? I willed that image out of the room after it sat empty for five or six days. Painting it lavender helped.

Now Art and I were having a bowl of cereal before jumping back on the day's treadmill.

"I'm working at unpacking, Arthur, but with that and keeping our *life* going, I've barely had time to go to the bathroom," I said, cool as ever. "And the unpacking would go faster if we had actual flooring in every room, you know." I gritted my teeth and didn't look up from my bowl. I only called him Arthur when I was really put out, same as when my mother used to call me my whole name—Kathryn Corynne Purdy!—when I was in trouble.

This cereal got soggy 20 seconds after the milk hit and I didn't have time to talk. My tactic was to blame the slow unpacking on the renovation—and that was a little bit true—but I hadn't mentioned the cartoon balloons to him. This house was all empty, wordless air to him, and I was too tired to explain it.

"I just don't see how it could take so long," he half-mumbled. "Just open the lid and take stuff out."

I scanned the edge of the dining room as I took a bite of cereal. It wouldn't have to be a skillet. That brass horse-head bookend maybe. Any heavy, blunt object would do. This room was lined in brown boxes, blocking the window that opened onto the front porch, which closed it in like there was no connection to the outside. The walls were dirty from the last renter who smoked against the rules, and the room was next on the list for a scrub down and paint. The hardwood flooring in here was in pretty good shape and wouldn't need much, once the boxes were unpacked.

I looked over the cereal box at my husband, counting the ways I wanted to harm him, not liking what I saw.

Art was handsome, with sandy brown hair tousled over his forehead, but he was slumped over his bowl like a teenager with a hangover. He slurped. He crunched too loud. He never used a napkin and his elbows were on the table. Where did this Neanderthal come from, anyway? His green flannel work shirt was ripped at the pocket and there was crust still in his eyes. What was I thinking when I married him? Had to be hormones because at that moment I could see no reason I could put on paper.

"Art," I said, making the decision to call it quits on the cereal, "thanks for giving me direction—I *do* appreciate it—because otherwise I might just sit around aimlessly eating bonbons all day. I hadn't *realized* we were not completely moved in, that there was work still to be done, and most especially that you were in need of immediate laundry." I stood up. "I was also unaware that I *alone* held the secret knowledge of the Tide and Maytag." I

lifted my bowl and dropped the spoon in it for emphasis.

Art looked up from his cereal, his eyebrows raised and knitted into a tic-tac-toe design. He had chosen the granola, which held up longer. He didn't appear at all concerned about rushing to beat its soggy breakdown point.

"What?" The disgust lay on the outside edges of his face so thick I thought it might drip into the bowl. I knew that feeling but not giving in to understanding, I iced my eyes over and glared right back at him.

"I just require the basics, Cory. And the repairs to this house go a lot deeper than just flooring. You know that." He sighed, then gave the cereal his full attention.

"Mommmmmmmmm!" my daughter Annie yelled from upstairs. "Where are my boots? Gran is picking me up soon."

I paused before calling up with Standard Answer #5: "LOOK UNDER YOUR BED." My mother was going to take Annie over to her house, where they could putter around with our two horses. This would let Annie do her favorite thing, plus it got her out from underfoot, too. Nashville weather in November could be anything from 28 to 78 degrees so it wasn't to be counted on, but this day, although crisp, was blue and clear. A good day to ride.

I took my bowl to the sink and surveyed the kitchen while my husband, out of eyesight but not earshot, prattled on about finishing what you start, the loss of the American work ethic in today's society, and that we needed more milk. I stood gazing out the sink window toward the old rusted basketball goal and the scraggly forsythia. I'd be glad to see those old friends next spring. Beyond them were a row of evergreens, a tilted birdbath, and a remnant of my tire swing. Only a frayed rope remained there now.

I stood there as long as I could take hearing Art's self-righteous thoughts, then stomped loud enough to be heard two rooms away, up the stairs to unpack some boxes. "I'll do it 'cuz I want to, not because you tell me to," I sang under my breath all the way to Annie's room.

The problem with unpacking a box was that it wasn't always a connect-dot-A-to-dot-B proposition. For instance, a bedroom box might contain a stray glass that in the last house had been used as a pencil cup, but now it seemed more appropriate for it to head back to the kitchen. So I'd take it to the kitchen and while there would be accosted by our perpetually hungry cat, so I'd go to the pantry to feed her to discover we were out of cat food, which sent me to find a scrap of paper to start a grocery list on, which led to not finding a scrap but a small stack of unopened bills that apparently had come in three weeks earlier and gotten covered up by more counter debris. The bills inevitably would be due either the next day or last week and would be screaming to be paid under threat of massive late fees. You can follow it through to the search for my checkbook, a pen that actually worked and—good grief — stamps?

Anyway, it was like that only with different players with every box. This day, I unfurled a roll of "Good Reader" certificates that needed to be displayed in Annie's room, so I headed up to the attic to look for a picture frame, maybe one with a worn-out piece of art in it I could rip out and reuse. I'd been up here one other time since we moved in, had already seen the old storage boxes stacked to the roof in some places, lower in others.

My parents moved us out of this house when I was a kid 25 years earlier but had left an attic full of items that would be treasure or trash, depending on where you stood on the whole pack-rat/collector vs. clutter-free zones/own-nothing-older-than-your-most-recent-manicure debate. With every new renter, Mom and Dad would explain how the house had four bedrooms, one and half baths, living room, dining room, den, eat-in kitchen, utility room, window unit air conditioning and radiant heat, city water, all-electric appliances, septic tank, finicky neighbors to one side and an elderly cranky woman on the other—all on one acre in a good neighborhood. It was zoned for good schools. But storage was limited; the attic was already full and off-limits to renters.

Grown up, married with a child, and desperate to leave the confines of our condominium, my husband and I decided to move into the old place. Unlike common renters, we were granted attic rights. Not that there was any room for more stuff anyway, but it was a nice gesture.

It was cold so I knew I'd need to look fast through the paisley sheets, Nancy Drew books, a papier-maché Santa Claus who'd lost his right leg and part of his beard, a yellowed toy box covered with faded circus animals. Then I spotted an old mover's box from years before, marked "den bookshelf items." That would have a picture frame.

I had to step gingerly over the torso and head of a mannequin in between a lampshade with a rick-rack edge and a wooden reindeer with a place in his back for pine cones, and I was wishing I had put on real shoes instead of house slippers. I was worried about my head, staying bent and not wanting to crack it on the low A-framed rafters. To place my foot again I looked down to the floor to find a spot and there—could it be?—was MaryLou and her cat.

MaryLou was a queen-sized quilt that my mother had made for me when I was seven or eight. Sticking up from the top was a head and two arms and two legs were sewn on around the edges, dangling. The front of her body was made up of squares of material, each from something my mother had made for me—Easter dresses, Christmas pajamas, baby blankets, the dress I wore the first day of kindergarten, the flower girl dress from my aunt's wedding. It was a map of my life in fabric.

The cat was a discarded, dusty stuffed animal, and the two were inseparable. The three of us were there for a while. One spring when I was old enough to reach the pull-cord on the attic stairs, I pulled it down and gently tipped the steps down until they unfolded clear to the floor. I made a hide-out up there. I set MaryLou and her cat up with a world of their own, and I would visit when I could.

They lived in an area to the right of the hole where the stairs came up, where the ceiling was headed in a beeline down to the floor. But we weren't too far back, because the splintery wooden floor only went partway to the edge. I had gotten permission to go up there but had endured a lecture regarding the unfloored portion of the attic where the pink insulation was visible—a standard parental lecture much like the two-hour sales presentation one must sit through to receive the free weekend at a timeshare. Apparently if one stepped on that fluffy area one's entire person might crash down through the ceiling of the dining room and land right on the dining room table, causing who knew what kind of damage to a person's body, not to mention the expense of replacing the drywall below.

Depending on what time of year it was, there might even be a large turkey and a vat of mashed potatoes involved, one never knew.

I never went near the pink, but I couldn't speak for MaryLou and we all know a cat is going to walk wherever she wants, especially if it's treacherous.

In the hideout we had books, paper, pencils, and a little wooden stool painted red years before. MaryLou didn't need the stool—she was more of a leaner—so I sat on it to orchestrate things. She'd read most of the books that were up there, but I had read them aloud to her again and she didn't seem to mind. We liked the funny ones best, the mysteries being too scary for two girls sitting up in an attic by themselves.

We got a lot of books read and a lot of problems worked out up there. But when the temperature rose, my mother wouldn't let me keep the ladder down, and it was too hot to be up there without the breeze from below coming up through the hole. She said we couldn't afford to cool the attic and the great outdoors with it. In the winter, I could see my breath up there and it was cozy enough that I liked it almost as much as in the springtime. But my parents still said no. So it was only a seasonal escape.

I had last seen MaryLou and her cat sometime before I was 12. Although I stopped the attic visits, over the years many used-up but saved things were shoved up the stairs and pushed across the floor until they bumped into something to find their eternal resting places. This system was good in that we could generally find things by what decade they might have been stored.

The den had been redone in 1978, and following this Dewey Decimal System for Attics, I could see that the "den bookcase" box was in the late '70s section of the attic. Picking my way to the box and balancing on one foot as I leaned toward it, I yanked a panel of the brown box that had been folded in such a way to make it stay without tape.

My head cast a large, frizzy-edged balloon-shadow over the box, since the one hanging bulb was behind me, closer to mid-'80s. I peered in the box, doing a balancing thing with my one leg so the light could get past my head. If I hadn't been so intent on the box I would've been very proud of my agility right then. Down in the box were not picture frames or even books, but trophies. Lots of them. Marble bases, metal shafts up to other smaller marble slabs, topped by horses. They were each unique—many colors on the metal parts and the horses were slightly different, sometimes carrying a rider, sometimes not. I picked one up and read the plaque at the bottom: 1st Place, Youth Western Pleasure, Hunter River Saddle Club. Written in ink on the underside was a notation, "wore green silk shirt; Stardust was perfect; Price didn't place!" I remembered that one.

Ribbons were stuffed at the bottom and I reached down in the dark. I pulled out a pink. Fifth place, Western Pleasure Class, HillDale Farms. Scrawled on the back: "missed left lead RIGHT in front of the judge; only five in class." I remembered that one, too. I stared into that pink ribbon, seeing Price exit the ring on her horse Saffire, as she held that first place trophy. She was last to leave since they had announced the winners in reverse order, and her nose was so high in the air she looked like an Arabian princess being carried by minions. She cut her eyes to me as she passed, headed toward her public, looking from my face to the ribbon wadded in my hand and gave the slightest smirk. She and I had an understanding by then, and it didn't take much to convey the whole meaning. My mother,

who was standing on the other side of Stardust, squeezed my leg until I grunted, "Good job, Price. Congratulations."

"Oh, why thank you, Cory! What did you get again? Oh, that's right," she said as she floated by. I shot a dagger to her back and then down at my mom. "She never congratulates me and I almost *always* beat her," I growled.

"Class is not something that you automatically acquire by having old family money, Corynne. Price has just demonstrated that beautifully for us," Mom said. "Good sportsmanship is more important than winning, and if that ever isn't true for you, that will be the end of your horse showing career."

I threw the ribbon back in the box, forgetting about the picture frame search for the time, and reached deep into the cavern again.

Gramps used to say that most horses he'd known were a lot smarter and loyal than nearly every person he'd run across. He was my great-grandfather, an old cowboy from way back. I had seen what he meant earlier this year, the day after Stardust—my beautiful strong, feisty and defiant quarter horse—was buried up the hill behind the barn. We'd turned the other horses out as usual—they were mild-mannered horses and would loll their way out of the barn, sniff around for some hay that might have been dropped, and then amble up the hill—but this cool spring morning, Crackerjack had raced out of the big barn doors into the sunshine and slammed to a halt. The new leaves on the trees were just peeking through, making a bright green halo around him. His head was up, nostrils flared, as he whinnied as loud as I'd ever heard him. More like a scream, really. Starlita came right behind him, looking nervous. Crackerjack wheeled and raced down to the gate, toward the house. Another mournful holler and he was off again, tearing up to the pasture, through the gates and stopping again, head up, listening. Lita was right with him, echoing his every cry.

Mom and I jumped out of the way, toward the safety of a tree trunk, as they blew past not seeing us. I don't know why I was surprised they would have a reaction; after all, they had been in the barn the whole time Stardust was dying, watching the vet near where she lay in the dirt, squirming, as he brought his long syringe to her neck, patting her and stopping her pain for good.

"I'm so sorry, girl. It'll be okay now," they heard him whisper, but they didn't understand.

They'd seen the whole thing. Those two horses had lived with her their whole lives, and her absence was as jarring to them as it was to us.

Gramps might've pointed out that morning that horses are herd animals and they do get used to each other being around—and miss each other when they're gone.

The horses crashed through the overgrown pasture from one end to the other, manes flying, tails erect, running up the hill and back down again, for nearly an hour, each time more frantic. Smart as they were, they probably didn't realize they were passing her rock-edged grave with every sweep.

My mother and I could not look at each other.

Diet at Nine

by
Heather Wibbels

(for jj)

in your dreams, you are empty air,
a suggestion of frame, femininity,
perfection achieved in Plato's shadowed caves.

at nine you renounced water.
a sip, three swishes and a spit.
another sip, three swishes and a spit.

at night, wishes woke you with fantasies
of lithe, long-limbed, gutsy girls,
rescued from the subtle fat covering
doe eyes, your little-girl nose.
you dreamt of water snares trapping you,
skin inflated, bloated like a hot-air balloon
tied to struggling handlers.

water wrapped your full frame like a challenge,
vilified flesh reduced needs to wants.
cells washed away—mind over matter—
until even untamed bones were an affront,
more refuse to discard.

Autistic Translations

by
Heather Wibbels

"I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head."

—Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*

I have an animal's seeing soul wild
color fills my eyes pictures ready
at the mind words sluggish trailing
behind in translation ease eludes me I
am crowded by words cowed by loud
shouts I turn to burrow to recede from
the thicket of discordant words into
vision to save my ears from the open
recess of your wild-worded world

my thoughts play on a wide screen projector humming and clicking behind
me listening or reading words melt into montages of objects actions and
sounds to feed me meaning a rush of cool salty water at three feet shoed
in sand the rough surface digging knives into my skin all from hearing *ocean*
or at *cat* my fingers in the silky soft belly of my tortoise-shell kitty boneless on
the lacy rose bedspread with a hole in its top left-hand corner

my wide eyes seek
sanctuary in shape not
the jungled lines curves slashes
and dots of your alphabet
soup scraps of chaotic
words multilayered scribbles
and syllables litter everything
about me your subtle
thinking seams meaning into
an abstract crazy quilt

but I live eyes open to the world all around me even details blind to your
word-hooded eyes thirty-one pens in the pencil jar the cool glitter of two
dimes on glass and three frames crooked by two degrees on the east wall

I have an animal's seeing soul but I live
in a worded land I walk through this world
with my skin made of glass I have nowhere to go

Listening with Skin

by
Heather Wibbels

I warm my hands
with thought,
feel rhythms parsed beneath the skin
pulse along beneath capillaries.

I hear echoes of
contentment and pain.
I know the code of breath.
Its sounds speak to me
quietly
in pauses
stutter-
ing a
cool thought
like the
spaces
between
words.

I hear the body's signals made
without thought.
I penetrate the map of the skin
and navigate the wrecks beneath
that slow, covering tide.

You cannot hide from me.
I know the skin. I hear it.
It speaks to me in waves.

Laurel Hell

by
Carroll Young

“To leave the fixed right-of-way at a random point and enter trackless woods is a superb rotation.”

—Walker Percy

They call them laurel hells, those impenetrable, evergreen thickets of rhododendron or mountain laurel that grow up and down the rough mountainsides of the southern Appalachians. When people try to go through laurel hells or take livestock through them, they always get caught in a web of tangled, twisted, grasping limbs of the dense-leaved shrubs that can be taller than the tallest man. I’ve walked through laurel hells on paths, looking up into the deep shade cast by intertwined limbs above my head. The earth beneath is a foot deep in peat, laid down by thousands of years of decomposing leaves and limbs and roots. It is springy and soft underfoot, and sometimes your foot sinks suddenly ankle deep into the peat that loosely fills the spaces between roots and rocks and fallen limbs.

Laurel hells are beautiful from the outside. The leaves of rhododendrons and mountain laurels shine dark green, summer and winter. The laurels bloom in June in showers of white and pink pentagonal flowers, followed by the rhododendrons, first the bright lavender then the pale pink ones. Laurel hells are also beautiful from the inside—if you can keep your composure while trapped—all damp and dim with grayish brown limbs curling and twisting over the brown, spongy earth.

I thought I understood why they call them hells, but that was when I knew them from the outside only, seen from a mountain ridge or walking along a trail somebody else had tramped through the chaos of shrubs. Yesterday I tried, boldfaced and arrogant, to cut across a growth of rhododendrons without benefit of a path, and I learned something about them from the inside.

My intention was to investigate what was growing deep in the draw below our cabin. There, two creeks that bubble separately out of mountainside springs converge to become the headwaters of Black Rock Creek. Joined together, they gather water and energy tumbling down three thousand feet into the valley below. Eight hundred feet above where the creeks converge, a trail climbs up and down along a ridge that is close to six thousand feet high in places, from Water Rock Knob on the Blue Ridge Parkway to Black Rock Mountain. Standing on the bald rock outcropping at the crest of Black Rock, you can see mountains upon mountains folded away across North Carolina into Georgia and Tennessee, 360 degrees around you.

The high ridge, the one with the trail, runs east and west. It is like a monstrous shoulder, from which two more ridges stretch out and down like massive arms from south to north. Between these huge arms, out of the breast of the mountain, the two springs of water pour together into the narrow draw. On the sides of the ridges, rhododendrons grow in the dense masses called, by those who have been inside them, hells.

I had walked and slid and clambered down into the draw, making my way from the ridge above, where our cabin is. There are no paths here, neither down into the draw nor up and down the ridges it divides. Undergrowth is thick; you cannot walk without pushing life aside underfoot. In May, the forest floor is an embroidered carpet of freckled green trout lily leaves spread beneath their nodding yellow blossoms and punctuated by a mosaic of deep red trilliums. Today, I carried a trowel and plastic sack, in case I found plants I could rob for our garden without damaging the precious ecology of this place. On the east side of the creek is an immense pile of old tin cans, now rusted wafer-thin and hidden beneath inches-thick mounds of bright green moss until your foot crunches them apart. The cans mark the site of an old still where moonshiners used the sweet water pouring out of the mountain to make white lightning.

I sat beside the creek a while, catching my breath and trying to memorize what plants grow here, all of them lusher and larger in the constant moisture and rich soil than up on the dryer hillsides. Around me lay opened buckeye shells fallen from the trees above, their smooth, protectively curved inner wombs pale in contrast with the puckered outer skin. The shiny brown buckeyes themselves, said to bring good fortune to the finder, are missing, already eaten up by hungry squirrels. A tiny dark bird, white striped, flits across my field of vision into its hiding place in the under story, then speaks softly in sharp, short notes.

Then, for no good reason except for an impulse I've known all my life, some sort of inner demand to climb, an obligatory thrust to reach the top, I started climbing through the underbrush up the western arm of the mountain. I didn't plan to climb to the top; I thought I would just go a little higher and then a little higher still, until reaching the top of the ridge became a goal I didn't resist. Halfway up, I plunged into a growth of rhododendron bushes that turned into a hell.

It is good I am wearing glasses, I thought. I put my head down, closed my eyes, and pushed through, hunching low. The thicker branches snared my legs. My shins took the brunt. This time it wasn't so bad; I was able to wriggle and shove my way through, still climbing more or less up toward the crest. I stumbled out of the thicket and fell knees first onto a patch of tall wood ferns, ten feet across, and lay there a while feeling the power of making it through a difficulty.

Once on a hike with some people who were novices in the woods and new to off-trail hiking, a woman asked me, "How do you know when you've reached the top of the ridge?"

Ever since, when I come out on a ridge top, I think of her question. I suppose there are several answers. The one I gave her was, "You know you're on top when you can feel the wind blow."

I stayed on top of the west ridge for a while, observing rhododendron thickets from the outside, looking through breeze-shaken beech leaves toward the distant mountain range, thankful the remaining hemlocks were still hanging on, and feeling the wind blow. Then down again into the watery draw where, carefully but with a pang of conscience, I stole a few plants—two Christmas ferns and a tall yellow flower, name unknown to me, that was mostly long, thick, beige-colored roots. Embedded in the brown humus clinging

to the roots were small pale corms, trout lilies, I hoped, an added bonus for the wildflower garden.

I was tired now, ready to return home, plant my booty of ferns and flower, eat lunch, and rest. I had brought no food and had drunk all of my quart of water. Struggling up the steep east arm of the mountain, craning my neck upward, I looked for where my sliding, mashing feet had marked my descent. I found no signs of where I came down. No signs of a path, ancient or modern. I thought I must be higher than where I came down from the dirt road. Or lower down. It didn't matter, I knew the way was up, east, over the steep crest of the mountain ridge that faced me.

You would think after the taste I had gotten earlier that day, I might have learned to stay clear of laurel hells. But instead, I supposed that if I could force my way through one, I could force my way through another. I wouldn't be like those old pioneers crossing the mountains, getting themselves and their sheep and cattle caught in unfamiliar obstacles. I was used to shoving my way through.

A little way up the mountain, I pushed myself into a vertical thicket of rhododendron, struggling always up but with a bit of a tack to the left because my legs didn't like the constant straight upward pull. This time it was the real thing; this one deserved the name hell.

I was caught in there for over an hour, never staying still, always struggling up, sideways, and back again where I had been, now crouching and crawling, now pulling my body upright to look out, trying to figure the expanse of this trap and how to find an opening. The way I had entered had closed in behind me. I lowered my head and tried butting through. My body was too large to slither between the branches, and they would not break nor yield to my weight. I tried stepping on top of the branches a foot above the ground, walking for a little way like an Australian sheep dog on the backs of the sheep in herds. But the sheep share consciousness with their shepherd dog; the laurels, mindless, bounce back, tackle me, throw me down. I sink, sit, resting one buttock on a jagged limb, the other buttock sagging into a narrow space between branches. I have begun to think of needing rescue, the humiliation of admitting vulnerability.

I imagine breaking an ankle or a leg. An arm wouldn't be so bad; I could still walk. I continue to sit lopsided in the rhododendrons and try to think.

"Go down. Rhododendrons don't grow along the creek."

"But I've climbed up so high—home is high on the mountain. How can I go down when I want to go up?"

I am tired. I have nothing to rely on now but logic. To get free I must go down and start searching for a trail up, all over again. Water gone, no food, I begin to see myself as an old woman and foolish to boot, to have struck out all alone cross-country in the woods.

Going down through the hell is difficult but not impossible. I slide and tumble through and emerge on damp rocks that protrude out of the hillside over the creek. I take out my compass and stare at it. It has no new information to offer. Home is east and up. I am not lost, just hemmed in.

The creek is broader here. The way must be up-water, not down. I am too tired to pick my way along the rough, rocky, pathless creek side and so forget trying to keep my boots

dry. I am already slick with mud and loam from inside the laurel hell. I slush up-stream, taking care on the slick, mossy stones, hoping to make it home with my limbs intact.

A single buckeye stares up at me through the clear water. I pick it up and slide my thumb over its shiny, large-eyed surface. Sometimes, when I'm in a tight spot, I find myself looking for signs of grace. I slip the buckeye into my pocket.

Slouching on in icy water, I imagine drinking it. They say, don't drink untreated water, anywhere. When I'm thirsty enough, I know, I'll drink. Who wouldn't?

Then an orange ribbon appears, tied around a thick tree trunk on the east side of the creek. Squinting uphill I see another and another. Surveyor's tapes leading upward. I heave myself out of the water, pulling my now-heavy body up, crawling mostly, finding a few upright footholds. The line of tapes leads straight up, and I dare not alter my course with switchbacks this time. Humans put these orange tapes there, so humans have walked this steep line before. If they could, I can, or so I want to believe.

When at last the road comes in sight, flagged by the final tape, I see my access to it is blocked by a huge pile of cut-down trees, tree limbs, and brush. Like a laurel hell, it makes a safe warren for small animals but a formidable obstacle for me. The way around is blocked by rhododendrons. There is no way out but up and through. A tree trunk lies at near vertical, its end pointing into the road. I straddle it and hoist myself up its back using the strength of my arms, and, at last, crawl out into the road.

I am surprised to see I still clutch my digging tool and the plastic bag of ferns and flowers, now ragged and torn. I will plant them carefully—later.

I walk slowly down the half mile stretch of road to the cabin, glad no one else will be at home to greet me. I'm not yet ready to explain to husband and grown sons where I've been. After the laurel, the house feels almost too simple, too easy to move around in. I walk through the house to the deck and sit, looking out toward the far-away purple outline of Mt. Le Conte and the main ridge of the Smokies.

I drink three glasses of water and sit in the sun eating handfuls of bread and ham. I can feel the wind blow.



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Fall 2005 Semester Finalized

We are now accepting applications for the Fall 2005 semester. Once again, the semester's kickoff Orientation Weekend will be held in Nashville on August 26 & 27. Please use this Web site to learn all about the Fall 2005 semester with The Writer's Loft. Please [email](#) or call us at 898-5651 to receive a Fall 2005 brochure.

Shakespeare & Company & The Trunk

The *Trunk* is now available to the Paris literary crowd via the famed Shakespeare and Company booksellers. Sylvia Beach opened the original Shakespeare and Company at 12 rue de L'Odeon, Paris, in 1919, and she fostered the arts and the writings of such artists as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Shaw, Pound, Stein, Joyce and so many more. All students are encouraged to publish their work in this popular journal and share their words with the world.



Our First-Ever Mid-Semester Literary Day!

Starting with the Fall 2005 semester, we are excited to announce the creation of The Writer's Loft's first mid-semester Literary Day. This day combines some of most popular features (a panel, workshop, and reading) and packages them into this single event. The day's events will be held on Saturday, October 15, 2005 at MTSU's campus in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Fall 2005 Semester Book in Common Selected!



In the Fall of 2005, Sena Jeter Naslund's novel *Four Spirits* will be our book in common. "[Sena Jeter Naslund](#) is a native of Birmingham and winner of the Harper Lee Award. She is Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Louisville; program director of the [Spalding University](#) brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing; and 2003 Vacca Professor, along with her husband, physicist John C. Morrison, at the University of Montevallo, Alabama."--HarperCollins.com

Monday, Aug. 1



Welcome to the Spring 2005 Semester of The Writer's Loft!

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