



The Trunk

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

Summer 2006

www.mtsu.edu/theloft

Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

College of Continuing Education and Distance Learning



Committed to Service, Quality, and Excellence
**College of Continuing Education
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Middle Tennessee State University • Murfreesboro, Tennessee
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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 2006

Middle Tennessee State University
College of Continuing Education and Distance Learning

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The *Trunk* is published each summer

General Address for The Writer's Loft

College of Continuing Education and
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Middle Tennessee State University
Box X109, 1301 E. Main Street
Murfreesboro, TN 37132
ATTN: The Writer's Loft

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The Program

The Writer's Loft:

MTSU's Low-Residency Certificate in Creative Writing

The Writer's Loft is an intensive, 12-month program that is the focal point of a certificate in creative writing offered through MTSU's College of Continuing Education and Distance Learning. It is a unique program consisting of a mixture of lectures, one-on-one mentoring, public readings, and panel discussions. The 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 may become the best writer possible at this point in his or her development. Additional 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 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 session, 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 a day of orientation, students and mentors return home, and the students submit three packets to their mentors, delivered by mail. Students mail packets at approximately four-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. Mentors and administrative staff are available by e-mail if students have questions or guidance is needed, and at the end of the session, mentors and students submit evaluations of the session's progress and their overall experiences 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, nonfiction 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.)

Publication Opportunities:

Literary Journal and Creative Writing/Poetry Contests

The Writer’s Loft produces this literary journal, *The Trunk: A Creative Companion to the Writer’s Loft*. The journal gives students and mentors a forum in which to spotlight and showcase their work. It is published once a year in late summer and made available during the fall. In addition, the Writer’s Loft sponsors a creative writing and poetry contest each session for students in the program. Winners from all three sessions are published in the center section of this journal, and the Writer’s Loft’s Web site presents the winning entries online.

The Writer’s Loft: The Application Process

Applicants interested in the Writer’s Loft are asked to submit the following material:

- Standard cover letter
- Two (2) pages of sample writing (if available), double-spaced (any combination of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, memoir, writing for children, songwriting samples, and/or personal narrative)
- A resume listing education, applicable experience, and publications, if any (if available)
- One (1) typed single-spaced page on why the applicant feels that this is the right program for him or her.

Application Fee

A fee of \$200 is required with the application for admission. This fee will be applied toward tuition. Please make check or money order to MTSU. For security reasons, our offices CANNOT accept cash payments.

Application Deadlines and Mailing Address

We ask that students submit applications for the Writer’s Loft as soon as possible, allowing our staff time to evaluate the student’s application package. Any applicant submitting an application after September 15 risks not being accepted for the fall session because of lack of space; we strive for a low student-to-teacher ratio! Please submit the application package and the application fee to

MTSU College of Continuing Education & Distance Learning
Box X109
1301 E. Main Street
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, TN. 37132
Attn: Writer’s Loft

Tuition and Payment Information

The total cost (covering all three sessions) for the Writer’s Loft is \$3,000. For administrative purposes, the preference is for the student to pay \$1,000 for the current session versus paying for the entire program up front. Payment for the session is due upon acceptance to the program. All accounts MUST be settled BEFORE a student will be authorized to attend the session orientation.

From the Director:

Lance Ikard

Roy warned me when I assumed the administrative duties in January 2005 that the Writer's Loft was a program in transition, constantly changing and trying new approaches, a program evolving into something new each session. Roy, for those of you who do not know, is Roy Burkhead, the conceptual founder of the Loft and shepherd of the program for the first two years. Roy is still involved deeply in all things creative with the program—including editing this journal—and my constant crutch and ear whenever change is stirring about.

So what is it with all this change anyway? Isn't the Writer's Loft a simple little creative writing program? What needs to be changed?

The Loft's one commitment to its writers is that the program will accept them at whatever writing skill level they possess currently and, over the course of three writing sessions, attempt to make them better writers. What was underestimated in the formation of the program was the extent to which everyone participating would want and need something different and uniquely specific to them from the program. It is from this perspective of trying to meet all those unique wants and needs that the Loft changes from session to session. I have come to appreciate during this past year that this change and the flexibility that Roy designed into the program at its conception are the true strengths of the Writer's Loft and the central characteristics that will keep the program progressing and prospering for many years to come.

As word of the Writer's Loft spreads, interest from beyond middle Tennessee grows. We have writers in the program this year from Memphis and North Carolina, and we had four inquiries about the program from the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, area this fall. Although none of the Pennsylvania folks enrolled, it is interesting that our name has spread that far. We now have a group of 15 alumni. We have mentors from North Carolina, Oregon, and Alabama as well as Tennessee. We have an e-mail list of about 200 persons who have expressed an interest in the Loft and so far have not asked to have their names removed from our mailing list. And we will be on display this summer in Texas at a writing conference where, last year, our brochures "flew off the table."

It is apparent that we will need to develop alternate delivery strategies over time for offering our program to "distance" writers. The first area that we are investigating is increasing online and e-mail access to the Writer's Loft. Online capability is the trend in higher education now and one that is growing in popularity as more and more students are nontraditional, distance learners. These learners place increasing importance on managing their own pace and time and will not sit through traditional lectures in university classrooms. We will make these transitions slowly and deliberately. And we will view these changes as progress. It is gratifying to know that our little program has the freedom and flexibility to live up to its commitment to help make you a better writer and now not just regardless of skill level when you enter the program but also regardless of geographic location and available time.

Thank you to all who support the Writer's Loft. The mentors, alumni, and especially the student writers are a unique and treasured group and the reason for our success. Please spread the word about the Writer's Loft wherever you go and remember that change is good. As always, your comments and thoughts are heard and appreciated.

Browsing the Web: Tracy Barrett

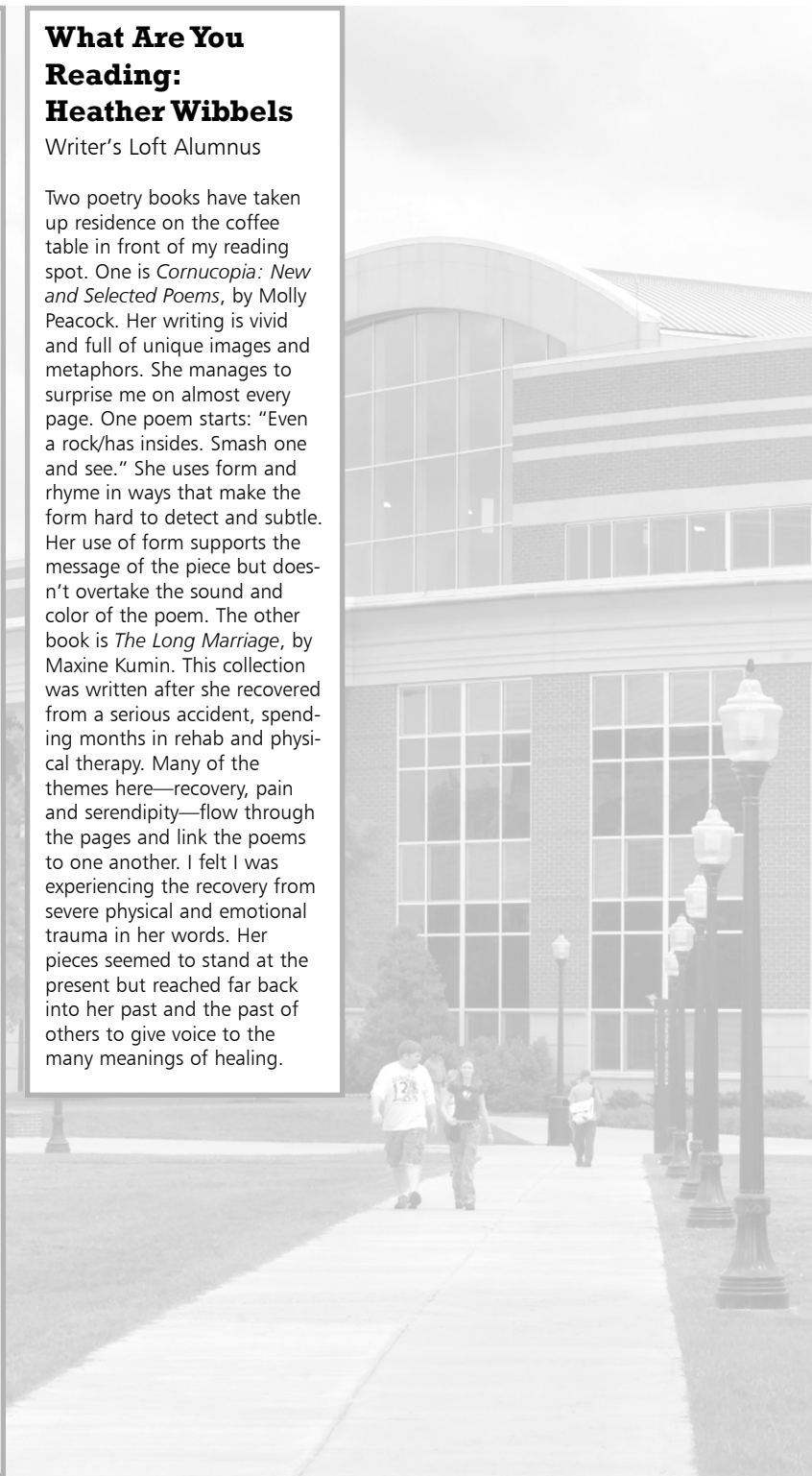
Midsouth regional advisor,
Society of Children's Book
Writers and Illustrators
<http://tracybarrett.com/>

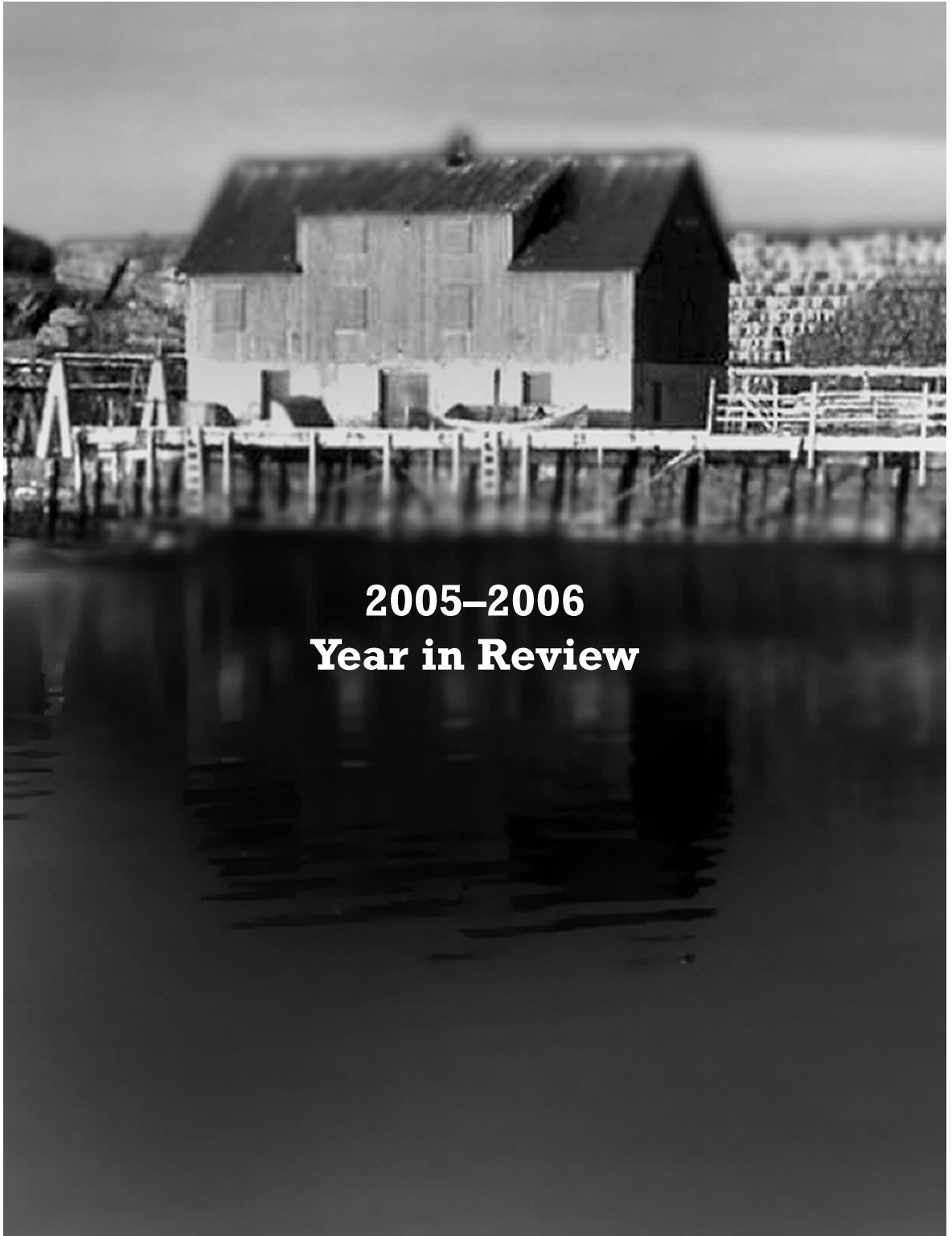
Although I prefer to buy books from an independent bookstore, I use www.amazon.com as a resource all the time. You can find out what house is publishing books like the one you're writing, if there's currently a book on a topic you'd like to pursue, and ISBN numbers of books you'd like to order. I'm currently writing a book set in Bronze Age Greece and finding the right name for each character is crucial. A good source for ancient Greek male names is at www.gaminggeeks.org/Resources/KateMonk/Ancient-World/Greece/Male.htm. Its counterpart with ancient Greek female names is also essential. Writing for magazines is an excellent way to hone your craft (especially in the area of keeping your word count low) and to get your name out there. Most of these magazines have themed issues and you have to know well in advance what a particular issue will focus on. Visiting <http://kidmagwriters.com> is a good way to keep up with magazines' changing needs. The Encyclopedia Britannica at <http://search.eb.com> isn't infallible, but it's pretty close. I find it an excellent resource for information I need for both fiction and nonfiction. Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me, my favorite radio show, is at www.npr.org/programs/waitwait/index.html. All work and no play is no good. If I miss Wait! Wait!, I can listen to it online while doing busy-work on my computer. The panelists are so smart and witty that they're an inspiration.

What Are You Reading: Heather Wibbels

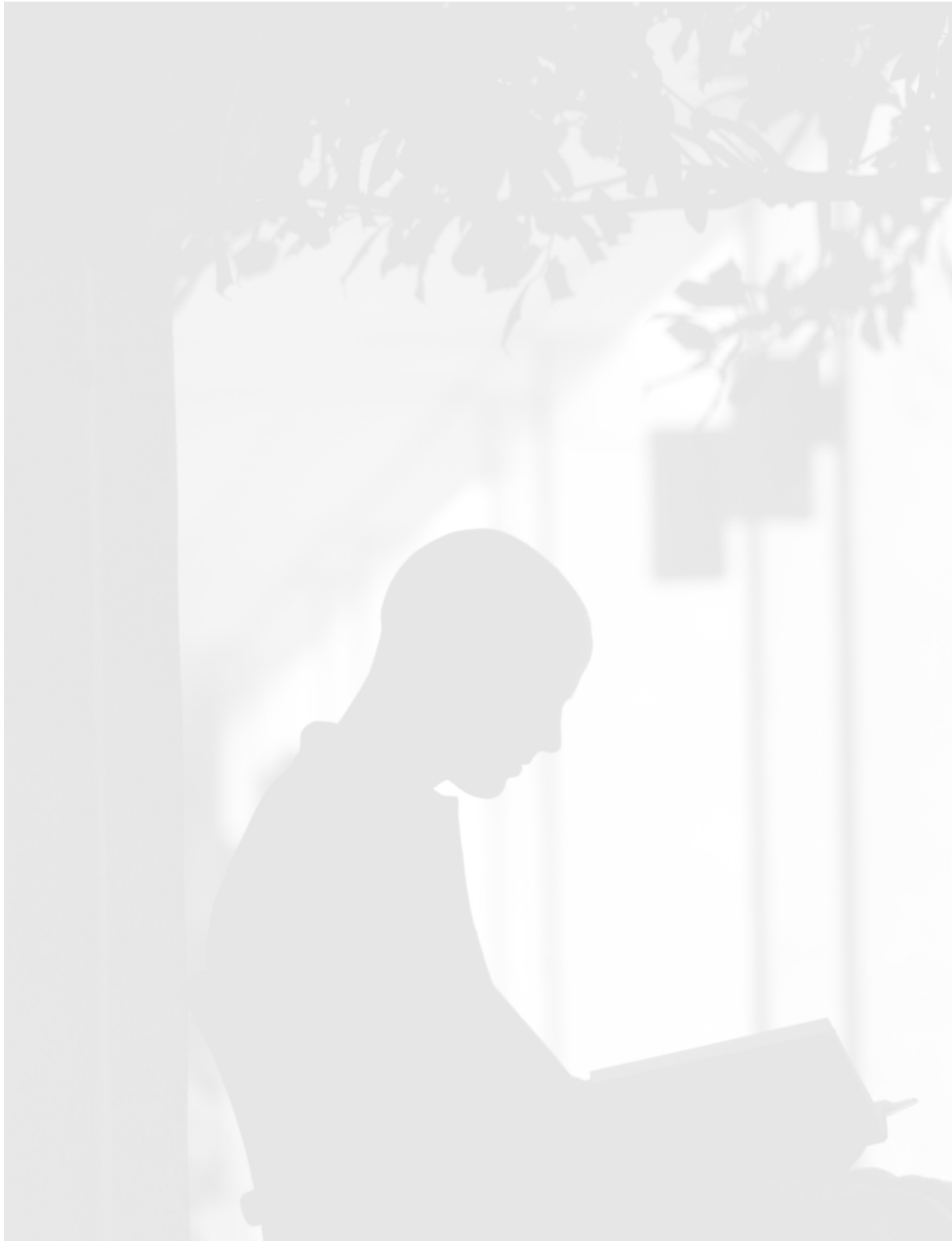
Writer's Loft Alumnus

Two poetry books have taken up residence on the coffee table in front of my reading spot. One is *Cornucopia: New and Selected Poems*, by Molly Peacock. Her writing is vivid and full of unique images and metaphors. She manages to surprise me on almost every page. One poem starts: "Even a rock/has insides. Smash one and see." She uses form and rhyme in ways that make the form hard to detect and subtle. Her use of form supports the message of the piece but doesn't overtake the sound and color of the poem. The other book is *The Long Marriage*, by Maxine Kumin. This collection was written after she recovered from a serious accident, spending months in rehab and physical therapy. Many of the themes here—recovery, pain and serendipity—flow through the pages and link the poems to one another. I felt I was experiencing the recovery from severe physical and emotional trauma in her words. Her pieces seemed to stand at the present but reached far back into her past and the past of others to give voice to the many meanings of healing.





**2005–2006
Year in Review**



Graduation Remarks from the Spring 2005 Semester

Alvin Knox, M.F.A., mentor

Modern Musing: The Writer's Loft Commencement Address

Kaliope
Melpomene
Thalia
Klio
Urania

Euterpe
Erato
Polyhymnia
Terpsichore
Mnemosyne

These are the names of the nine muses and their mother. I invite them to sit among us, to honor us with their presence in this room and in our lives.

Tonight we celebrate the commencement of five individuals who have spent the better part of the last two years practicing the craft of writing. While in the Writer's Loft program, these five people—Matt Baggett, Carole Griffin, Greg Plemmons, Suzanne Craig Robertson, and, in absentia, Rebecca Catherine Tate—have enjoyed not only the benefit of their mentors' feedback but also the stimulation of workshops, discussions, and deadlines. All these give impetus and direction to writers and their work, and one of the challenges these people face as they leave the program is to continue their writing without the structure the Loft has offered. Though much of what we do as writers is the hard work of craft, the initial ideas for poems and stories—whether they come to us in windshield-blinding flashes or as subtle, sidelong glimpses of images or characters that linger in our thoughts—are nothing less than inspiration.

In Greek mythology, the Muses were the sources of inspiration. Collectively, the Muses represent all that raises man above base survival and warfare, all the things that bring us true civilization. Though once called upon directly by artistic practitioners, that seems presumptuous in our modern lives, where the Muses are generally neglected; instead, they exist of their own accord, occupying the crevices in time and space, and it's only when we slow down enough to appreciate their playful individuality that they are truly revealed. The word Muses means "the reminders."

I have named Kaliope first in my catalog of the Muses. She was considered the chief of the Muses, and when she appears in art as their representative she is typically seated, holding a tablet and stylus. Kaliope is the Muse of heroic poetry, and though only a few of us here are proclaimed poets, our own dogged persistence may prove us all heroes before the end. As George Oppen wrote, "Great artists are those, in the end, who do not have a failure of nerve; afraid, yes, but there they are, having locked themselves away in a room, alone with fear."

And will we be tragic heroes? Let's hope not, but let's not let ourselves be blind to its value either, for tragedy is one of the great shapers of life and character. Melpomene is the Muse of tragedy, and when you're exploring the past, present, and future of your characters and words it might be well to look for the marks of her presence: the afternoon's long shadows, the bumps and bruises, the bunny-shaped scar, and the nervous giggle. Who says tragedy can't be funny?

Thalia is the Muse of comedy, and she has a way of showing up at even the most tragic, the most humbling, of moments. Okay, maybe not to the victim, at least not right away, and often in an ironic sense, but there, nonetheless, in a most pervasive manner. Even Titus Andronicus must have been snickering as he served Titania the heads of her sons baked in a pie. Oh, Shakespeare, what an amusing fellow! And of course it's humor that allows us to laugh at ourselves—perhaps Thalia's greatest gift, the one that lets us examine our mistakes from a distanced perspective, one that lets us heal and learn from our own history.

The Muse of history is Klio. Whether personal, cultural, or anthropological; ancient, recent, or future; true or false; real or imagined; everything has a history, and the writer's awareness of history is part of what gives our work weight and resonance. If your work centers on character, personal history may be all important. For instance, though we seldom think consciously about George Herbert Bush's encounter with the blowfish, it has shaped how we think and feel about him. Perhaps that's not the best example; the former president's public personality may, after all, transcend merely personal history, but really, isn't all history the intertwining of billions of personal histories across the span of thousands of years? If the Homeric hymn *To the Muses and Apollo* had not begun "With the Muses, let me begin," would we be sitting here today? It's pointless to speculate, for what has happened has happened—and that's the kind of solid reality we need to present our readers, even when the threads of connection are as invisible as the wind beneath the wings of chaos theory's butterfly.

Theories are typically generated by the branch of knowledge we call science, and though the Greeks were somewhat limited in their scientific knowledge, they had Urania, the Muse of astronomy, as its representative. Today, science encompasses many different fields of study, and is perhaps as responsible for modern cultural history as the individuals who explore it, but tonight I ask you, as writers, to hearken back to the simplicity of the Greeks and consider Urania as the force that implores us to reach beyond the surface, the surface of the Earth, of our lives, and of our words, to create something new and meaningful.

And how are we, individuals sequestered with fear, supposed to manage this? Well, if I can stretch this mythological, metaphorical discussion through a potential semantic shattering with a discussion of the last four Muses maybe we'll find a vague theory, a clue, if not an answer. Let's begin with Euterpe, Muse of music, for music is sound, and sound is the basis of language, our medium. Sound has no inherent meaning, yet it has the ability to evoke feeling, and when arranged with craft and artistry can orchestrate a symphony of emotion. Listen to the music of your language, and feel how its tones and rhythms affect you. Erato is the Muse of love and marriage songs. Her title suggests a union, in many ways, that we are bound to fulfill. A song is an interaction of words and music, a marriage, therefore, of meaning and emotion. Whether we choose to employ harmony or dissonance, the lilting of laughter or the crashing of tragedy, we need to be aware of and control this union in our writing. The word for this, *syzygy*, comes to us from the Greeks as well, from *syn*, meaning "together," and *zeugnymi*, "to yoke."

Next in this last group of Muses is Polyhymnia, the Muse of song and oratory. Her name and title suggest a furthering for our theoretical musing. Her name translates as "rich in song," and with the connection to oratory in her title, there comes an idea of mastery, a conviction of voice. I urge each of you to find your own voice, and by this I do not mean "style," for voice is something greater, something connected to who we are: our lives, truths, and beliefs. That is associated with another aspect of oratory, the idea of language directed with purpose. The last of the nine Muses is Terpsichore, the Muse of dance. Dance is the physical interpretation of music and song, and it embodies for me the idea of audience not as mere spectators to our creations but as participants. Our purpose is to move our audience, at least to thought, sometimes to action, to stir the chemispelectual soup (chemical-spiritual-electrical-intellectual). "That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone. "When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra." —*Through the Looking Glass*.

So a simple quest for inspiration has come full circle and become an appeal to craft after all. But though I've delineated the role I feel the ancient Muses still play in our lives as writers, there was another

name on my initial list: Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses of inspiration, the Titanic figure whom today we would call “memory.” It was the union of Mnemosyne with Zeus, the god of the broad light of day, that generated inspiration, and therein lies perhaps our greatest lesson; memory—personal, intellectual, emotional, historical, cultural, genetic—interacting with sensory images and truth forms inspiration. We cannot just huddle over our keyboards cloaked in fear and be successful writers; we must go out into our world and experience some of what it has to offer, feel it and think about it, before we can successfully transform it into language and present it purposefully to an audience. Tonight, a learning experience that, through its commitments and requirements and deadlines, has possibly kept Matt, Carole, Greg, Suzanne, and Rebecca a little too close to their computers is officially over, and to them specifically goes this last word: commence!

Gregory Plemmons, student

As a physician and writer, I hope I can speak with some medical authority, as William Carlos Williams did, when he said that *all writing is a disease. You can't stop it*. Styles and habits may vary, but all writers still bear the same mark of affliction. For some it's congenital, for some it's acquired. But for all of us, it's hopelessly, incurably chronic. It isolates us as only a rare disease can. We quarantine ourselves in solitude for treatment and stare the blank page down, soon find ourselves in empty rooms conversing with more imaginary people than we'd ever dreamed, sometimes spending more time with our characters than our own spouses or partners or children. We lose ourselves in thought in the oddest of places (at least I do): composing a sentence while on the loo or just before falling asleep. We find ourselves reading novels at red lights and getting honked at more than once. There are any number of bona fide psychiatric conditions that might be applied to us at various stages: obsessive-compulsive disorder; schizophrenia; or my personal favorite, depressive disorder not otherwise specified. If we're incredibly lucky, perhaps we'll experience a brief phase of true mania when something actually gets published or the words all fall into place without effort for once.

When you ponder the sheer nonviability of writing as a *career*, we're all just plain crazy (to put it in the vernacular). Or, as we like to say in the South, a bit *touched*. Touched by the smell of old bookstores, the smell of fresh graphite, the feel of our fingerpads on the keyboard. Touched by the sound of the written and spoken word, from benedictions to bedtime stories. Touched in the head, and touched in the heart.

Few of us have the luxury to be full-time writers. We're all hybrid subspecies of a particular breed of folk I like to call slashpeople. You know the type: the actor/waiter, the actress/model. Tennessee has had the actor/senator, lawyer/vice president/inventor-of-Internet. And of course every Nashvillian has run into the ubiquitous singer/songwriter or bartender/musician subspecies at least once.

The nature of a low-residency program like the Loft is precisely tailored to accommodate these various mutations we've produced of ourselves. We may be lawyers, real estate agents, teachers; we may be spouses or parents or siblings. But most of us who have enrolled in this program have that unattractive writer-slash thingamabob hanging from the end of our other profession, flapping in the wind or dangling like a booger from our nose. We can't hide it, we can't get rid of it, no matter how hard we blow. It's no wonder we need each other. Everyone already looks at us funny when we tell them what we like to do in our spare time. We read. We write. We read some more.

Writing cannot be done in a vacuum. Writers need community, and writers need mentorship. Rick Moody tells us a good mentor “wants us to think about language and structure, wants us to delight in these things when done well.” A good mentor “wants us to believe in literature.” The packets and guidance I got from my mentors during this program were as often eagerly anticipated as Christmas, and occasionally as stupefying and mystifying as Halloween: criticizing a sentence we might have spent hours

on, perhaps, while praising the section we thought was the absolute worst. But in all of the process, getting us to trust the wobbly voice of our training wheels.

Writing *is* an affliction, but it can also be a source of absolute comfort and grace, a holy salve to rub in the wound, a scent to inhale like the Vicks VapoRub our mothers rubbed on our chests when we were children, bedridden with flu. There's not a shred of scientific evidence that the mentholated pomade makes the flu or a cold go away any faster than time. There's not a shred of scientific evidence that writing will make us richer, or famous, or published. Or cure us. But good writing, and literature, tells us we're breathing. It cuts through the fog of everyday living. Words open our lungs and our minds and relieve us, if just for a moment. There is no difference between poetry and medicine, as our friend William Carlos so eloquently puts it. *They amount to nearly the same thing.*

We are not on a path to a cure. The path is the cure. I invite you to take a powder and breathe.

Fall 2005 Lecture:

I Bet You Didn't Know You Were Saving the World

(adapted from a lecture delivered at Writer's Loft orientation)

by

Charlotte Rains Dixon, M.F.A.

In my work as a creative writing teacher, I often find students intimidated at the thought of writing a novel. Having now written two novels myself, I can confirm the task is not for the faint of heart and also not a project to be undertaken lightly. But what if a student is eager to expand a story yet still not ready for a novel? A possible solution is the linked story collection, which is a cross between a novel and a short story collection and is an excellent way for writers to start thinking about a book-length project without committing to writing a novel.

My original intent was to discuss the linked story collection as a potential route for students leery of a book-length project. It's a subject dear to my heart, as I wrote my graduating lecture for my M.F.A. on the topic. I dug that old lecture out and started doing some research to update the material. But as I was researching and pondering, new questions arose.

Such as, what exactly is a short story? If I was going to talk about linking them, shouldn't I give you a definition of one? So I went in search of a definition of a short story, because in truth I'm a bit confused about the precise definition myself. But then, pondering the definition of the short story (and by extension, the novel, the novelette, and the novella) I started thinking about the nature of story itself. What are the principles that underlie story in its broadest, most general use? And furthermore, does story matter?

Which leads us to what happens to be one of my favorite topics, because I am a firm believer that stories can save your life. I think they may even be capable of saving the world.

Stories shape our lives. If you are involved in writing a story about something that happened to you, you give it a beginning, middle, and end. You make sense of that event and that gives your life meaning. It also gives you knowledge, the ability to take the next step instead of floundering in the dark, the way people who don't make up stories are doomed to do.

Here's one of my favorite quotes on writing. It's from Christopher Vogler's book, *The Writer's Journey*, which also is one of my favorites on writing. "But take hope for writing is magic. Even the simplest act of writing is almost supernatural, on the borderline with telepathy. Just think: We can make a few abstract marks on a piece of paper in a certain order and someone a world away and a thousand years from now can know our deepest thoughts. The boundaries of space and time and even the limitations of death can

be transcended . . . As writers we travel to other worlds not as mere daydreamers, but as shamans with the magic power to bottle up those worlds and bring them back in the form of stories for other to share. Our stories have the power to heal, to make the world new again, to give people metaphors by which they can better understand their own lives.”

Bear this quote in mind the next time you stop to ponder if story—if what you create every time you sit down at the computer—matters. It’s so important for us to tell our stories, to be the chroniclers of what we see. Remember that someone must shape events to give them meaning, and that task falls to us as writers. After September 11, I, like so many others despaired. And that despair encompassed my writing. What value could writing possibly have in the face of such evil? What use was it to create something so intangible as a story, when firemen and police officers risked their lives to save others? I thought and thought about this and finally remembered what my charge as a writer is: to chronicle what I see and feel and hope that I can touch, and possibly help, someone who is thinking the same thing. Validation for this came from the fact that the essay I wrote out of this despair was consequently published in a national magazine.

One of my other favorite authors on writing is Robert McKee, whose book called simply *Story*, was immortalized in the movie *Adaptation*. I have to admit I’ve never gotten all the way through his book—it’s nearly 500 pages long, full of dense prose, but I’ve read excerpts of it and I’ve gone back to what he says in the first chapter over and over again when my own inspiration flags. Here’s what McKee has to say on story:

Day after day we seek an answer to the ageless question Aristotle posed in *Ethics*: How should a human being lead his life? But the answer eludes us, hiding behind a blur of racing hours as we struggle to fit our means to our dreams, fuse idea with passion, turn desire into reality. We’re swept along on a risk-ridden shuttle through time. If we pull back to grasp pattern and meaning, life, like a Gestalt, does flips: first serious, then comic; static, frantic; meaningful, meaningless. Momentous world events are beyond our control, while personal events, despite all effort to keep our hands on the wheel, more often than not control us.

Traditionally humankind has sought the answer to Aristotle’s question from the four wisdoms—philosophy, science, religion, art—taking insight from each to blot together a livable meaning. But today who reads Hegel or Kant without an exam to pass? Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in the traditional ideology diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story.

McKee goes on to talk about our enormous appetite for story in all its forms—TV, movies, novels, memoirs, advertising—and says that because of this vast appetite the story arts have become the world’s primary source of inspiration. His comments then degenerate into a rant on dishonest storytelling and say that when society is awash in shallow, untrue stories, it degenerates. He quotes Yeats, saying, “The center cannot hold.”

I didn’t really set out to depress you and McKee’s comments shouldn’t depress you, they should energize you, especially when I tell you about another book I read recently in which the author avows: “The M.F.A. is the new M.B.A.” A friend got me to read the book just by uttering that sentence from it. Daniel Pink devotes a whole chapter to the importance of story in his book titled *A Whole New Mind*. His thesis is that it’s a whole new world and this world will be dominated by right-brainers instead of left-brainers, as has traditionally been the case. He cites the three “As” as harbingers for this shift: Abundance, Asia, and Automation. In a world where we have abundant choices, it’s no longer enough to offer a serviceable product. That serviceable product will compete with many others and, as such, it must either feature a better design or be marketed via a story. Pink says it’s useless to wring our hands over outsourcing to Asia and replacing of jobs with automation. Instead, he says, “We must perform

work that overseas knowledge workers can't do cheaper, that computers can't perform faster, and that satisfies the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual demands of a prosperous time." Pink presents six aptitudes that will be essential in this new era: Design, symphony, empathy, play, meaning, and . . . story.

Pink has a whole section titled "The Story Business" in which he not only profiles Robert McKee but calculates that story is worth about a trillion dollars a year to the U.S. economy. (This is based on his calculation that persuasion in the forms of advertising, counseling, consulting, etc., accounts for 25 percent of the gross national product. If story is an element of at least half those efforts, then you get the one trillion figure.) He talks about how organizations are now hiring people to chart the storytelling culture of their businesses and cites other examples to buttress his argument that storytellers are the new M.B.A.'ers.

Of course, all of us know the value of story or we wouldn't be sitting here trying to figure out how to write them. So now that we've taken a look at the overall theory of story and its importance in our modern world, let's get down to defining them. Which, like all things related to story, is more difficult than it would seem.

We can start by defining them by word count. The science fiction and mystery writer Kate Wilhelm, who has written a fine book on writing titled *Storyteller*, says that in the genres, short stories can't top out any longer than 7,500 words, but I've read others who say stories can go as high as 10,000 words (which greatly relieves me as my stories tend to be long, which is why I prefer writing novels). Wilhelm also says that a novelette is between 7,500 words to 15,000, a novella from 15,000 to 40,000, and a novel is 40,000 words and up. The standard word per page count has always been 250 words per page. These days, with different fonts and typefaces, it's all over, but if we use that standard we can get some approximate page counts. Assuming the short story is in the 7,500 to 10,000 word range, that puts us at the 30 to 40 page range for the maximum length of a short story and that sounds about right to me.

But beyond length are there any other qualities that define a story? You could write a character sketch 30 pages long or an extended anecdote and it still wouldn't be a story. The definition of story may ultimately be similar to the famous old saw about art: I don't exactly know what it is but I know it when I see it. You know it in your gut, right?

We could actually sit around and debate this all afternoon, so here's a couple definitions for you to chew on while we move on. Research on the Internet netted me this one from someone named Alex Keegan: "It is something that can be read in one sitting and brings a singular illumination to the reader, sudden and golden like sunlight cracking through heavy cloud."

Katrina Kenison, who has edited the *Best American Short Story* series for years, says the guiding light by which she did her work was the following, defined by an editor named Martha Foley many years ago: "A good story is a story which is not too long and which gives the reader the feeling he has undergone a memorable experience."

Wilhelm defines a short story thusly: "A successful short story is a marvel of compression, nuance, inference, and suggestion. If a novel invites one to enter another world, the short story invites one to peer through a peephole into the world, and yet the world has to have the same reality as in a novel. It is truly the universe in a grain of sand."

Perhaps we can start to come up with some elements of a short story. Keegan says a story illuminates one facet of human nature. A character undergoes some event and experiences something which offers him change. I think "offers" the chance to change is a key word here—because in a short story, your character might not change, but he must be given the opportunity to do so. Rust Hills, who was the fiction editor at *Esquire* for years and has written a book on short story writing, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, talks of "the loss of the last chance to change" and whether or not a character accepts that chance or declines it. Hills says a character must change in some way over the course of a story, even if that change is subtle. A character can be presented with an opportunity to change and not take it—and the reader understands that this will be his last chance. By not choosing, he is choosing.

No redundancies, no flashbacks, no applying novelistic techniques to the short story. A story must have a moment of truth—or what Rust Hills calls the last chance to change. Something important must be at stake for the characters, there must be moment of truth, and someone has to react to it. This is the difference between an anecdote or a character sketch and short story—it has that moment of truth.

Of course, whether you are going to write a short story or a novel, you have to know how to tell a story, which is the underlying theme of this essay. And whether you are creating a big world for a novel or a little world for a short story, there are some basic tools you can use to help you create those worlds.

First is the story question, the all-important question that guides the entire story or novel or screenplay. What is it that the protagonist wants so badly that she will risk everything to get?

This is your north star. After writing my first novel, which I'm still writing and struggling with issues of structure and an unclear story question, I vowed never, ever to write a novel or a short story without a clear and compelling story question. My most recent novel had one, and any time I got lost in the plotting or the storytelling all I had to do was return to it and I could easily get myself back on track.

Here's a simple way to design a story question: A LIKEABLE CHARACTER overcomes INSUPERABLE ODDS and BY HIS OR HER OWN EFFORTS achieves a WORTHWHILE GOAL.

Another way to think about it is: Will (protagonist) (verb) despite the efforts of the antagonist?

Note the simple idea that this means the character must want something. We all know what the most important element of a story is, right? Conflict. There's no story without conflict. How do you create conflict? By having your character want something and not allowing him to get it. That simple, that complicated. It's at the heart of every great story and the more conflict you can give a character, the better. Kurt Vonnegut said, "Have your characters want something, even if it's just a glass of water."

Now that we have defined all the underlying questions about story that occurred to me as I started this essay, I'll briefly touch on my original topic—linked stories.

What exactly is a linked story collection? Should it be considered a form discrete from its two literary cousins, the novel and the short story collection? Is the linked story collection simply another marketing ploy dreamed up by agents to sell the work? Do writers consciously set out to compose linked story collections, or is it something that happens as an afterthought?

Linked stories have a surprisingly long history and are now enjoying a surge in popularity. In such a collection, each story stands alone, but taken with others in the book, the whole forms a narrative linked by character, theme, geography, or subject matter. Librarian Iva Freeman says of the genre, "For novel lovers, such a collection comes close to having the depth and expansiveness of a full-length work. Each story can be read independently, yet together they add up to more than the sum of the individual parts." Thus the linked story collection can be considered more than grouped stories and perhaps less than a fully fleshed-out novel.

And I will add that they are an excellent way for beginning writers (or any writer, for that matter) to expand on a story and get over the fear of committing to a novel. You can take the characters you already have in a story and imagine them at different times in their lives, or imagine how they interact with others within in a limited geographical area, or take the defining theme of the story and use that as a guide. The point is, you're writing a novel in stories, one story at a time.

I'd like to close by asking a question: How many of you have had the experience of being deeply touched by a piece of writing? I'd venture to guess all of you, or you wouldn't desire to be a writer yourself. Think of how that emotional moment changed you, if even for a minute. What a powerful, wonderful thing the written word is and how damned lucky we are to worship at its gates. Next time you are sitting at your computer and the words refuse to come, remember this and be grateful that you are a writer. And furthermore, remember that the act of writing is not only saving a life (perhaps your very own!) but it is also actively saving the world.

2005-2006 Photo Gallery



"Young Writer's Loft students work on the program's publication, titled **TABLOID**"
See story on page 24.

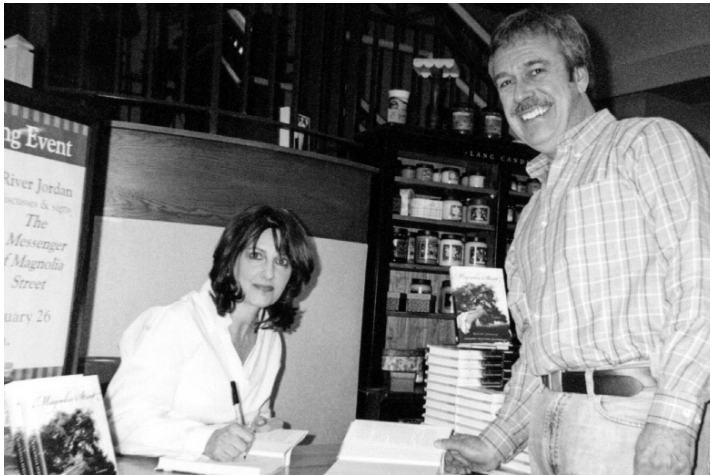
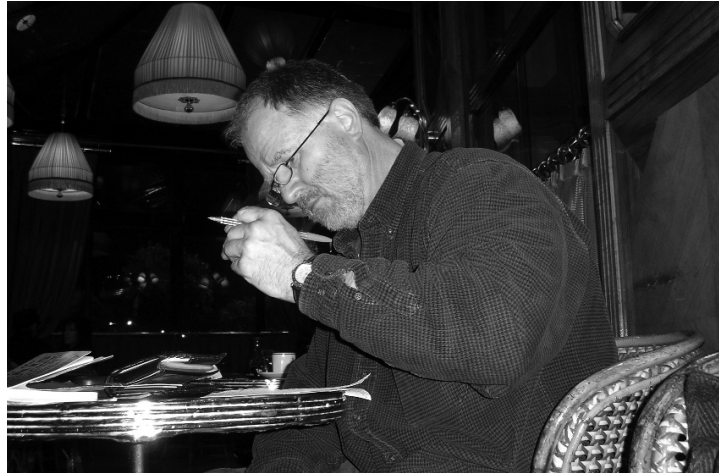
"A student unveils the summer project **TABLOID** at a public reading."



"Mentor Darnell Arnoult reads and signs from her new novel, *Sufficient Grace*.
Book review on page 34.

2005-2006 Photo Gallery

"Writer John Emerson writes a column for the *Trunk* while sitting in Café Le Dome in Paris, France. See page 44 for his piece.



"Alumnus Terry Price joins mentor River Jordan at the reading of her new novel, *The Messenger of Magnolia Street*. Story on page 25.

"Loft mentors and alumni enjoy a night out at the Loft's orientation weekend."



**What Are You Reading:
Peggy Smith Duke**

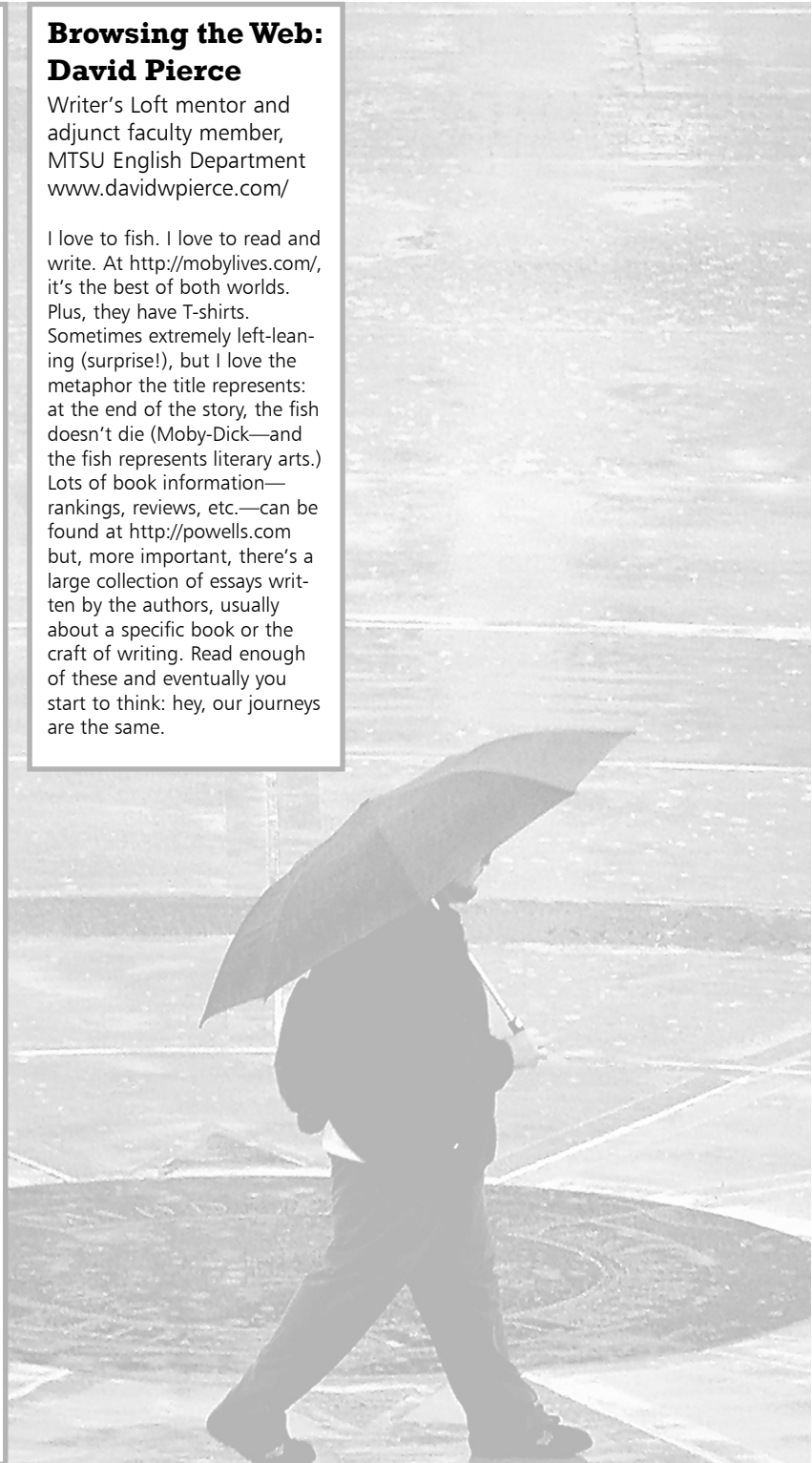
Writer's Loft Alumnus

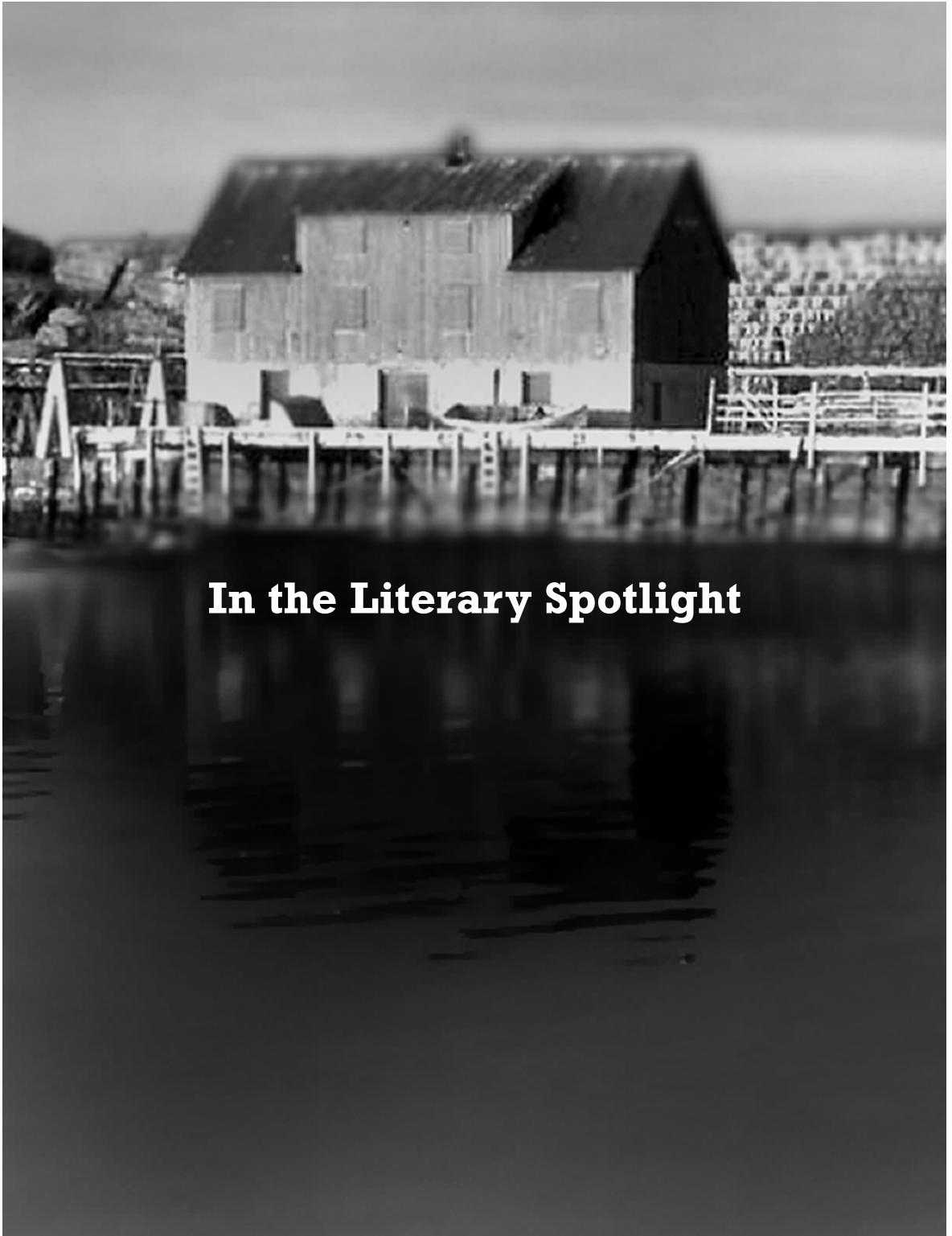
"Writing poetry requires reading poetry—lots of it," said Sidney Wade, poetry workshop leader at the 2005 Southern Women Writers Conference. My writing space has layers of journals, collections, magazines, anthologies, and translations. I check out the online journals *New Verse News* and *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal* occasionally. One of my recently discovered jewels was not in written form at all. The movie *Il Postino* is a fictionalized story of a poor Italian postman who becomes interested in the romance of poetry from Chilean exile Pablo Neruda, the 1971 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Spread out on the coffee table with dog-eared pages and Post-its is a collection of poetry by Sidney Wade titled *Green*. She recommended *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations* chosen by Robert Bly. Always at hand is *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (fifth edition). Darnell Arnoult's collection of poems, *What Travels with Us*, is on a third read-through and several issues of *Poetry* and *Writer's Digest* are straining their spines splayed open, face down, waiting for me to get back to them. *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke waits for a rainy day. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is in the mail from an after-seller as this month's book club choice. *The Odd Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton sits marked at page 17 waiting for me to feel smart enough to finish it.

**Browsing the Web:
David Pierce**

Writer's Loft mentor and adjunct faculty member, MTSU English Department
www.davidwpierce.com/

I love to fish. I love to read and write. At <http://mobylikes.com/>, it's the best of both worlds. Plus, they have T-shirts. Sometimes extremely left-leaning (surprise!), but I love the metaphor the title represents: at the end of the story, the fish doesn't die (*Moby-Dick*—and the fish represents literary arts.) Lots of book information—rankings, reviews, etc.—can be found at <http://powells.com> but, more important, there's a large collection of essays written by the authors, usually about a specific book or the craft of writing. Read enough of these and eventually you start to think: hey, our journeys are the same.





In the Literary Spotlight

The Writer's Loft: The Writing Life

Loft mentors, students, and alumni have enjoyed another year of literary home runs. Please join us in saluting these writers and their accomplishments:

Charlotte Rains Dixon (mentor) attended the inaugural Mayborne Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest in Dallas in July 2005. She will be returning to the conference this year to lead a book manuscript workshop. In addition, her short story, "It Goes By So Fast," was a finalist in the Salem College of Women creative writing contest. Ellen Gilchrist judged. The same story, along with the first chapter of her novel, *Language of Trees*, won her a fellowship for the Summer Literary Seminars contest. Margaret Atwood was that contest's final judge.

Peggy Smith Duke (alumnus) is a staff writer for the Tennessee Writers Alliance quarterly newsletter, with articles appearing in the summer and winter 2005 issues. In fall 2005, Peggy attended the Southern Women Writers Conference at Berry College, where she attended a workshop conducted by poet Sidney Wade and participated in a public reading at a Rome, Georgia, downtown restaurant. In addition, her work is enjoying success in contests and appearing in both online and traditional paper journals. In July, she received a Citation Award for "Shirt Factory" from the Montgomery Branch of the National League of American Pen Women in their 2005 Poetry Contest, and one month later, her poem "Calibration" received Honorable Mention in the Writer's Workshop 2005 Poetry Contest. Online, three of her poems were accepted by the online journal *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal*, and *New Verse News* (a journal of poetry on current issues and events) published her poems in July and September of 2005. Sidney Wade has accepted one of Peggy's poems, "Hen Party," for inclusion in the new journal *Subtropics*, published in May 2006 out of the University of Florida, and she has two more poems under contract for publication: "Jet Cars" for *Southern Arts Journal* (May 2006) and "Executive Privilege" for *Main Street Rag* (March 2007).

River Jordan (mentor) announced the publication of her novel *The Messenger of Magnolia Street* in January of 2006 with HarperSanFrancisco Publishers. On Thursday, January 26, at Davis-Kidd Booksellers in Nashville, she read from her novel in front of a large crowd of supporters, including Loft mentors, alumni, students, and administrators Lance Ikard, R. L. Burkhead, Terry Price, Charlotte Rains Dixon, Denise Mitchell, Melinda Medlin, and Janelle Lipscomb Rodgers. In addition to Nashville, River is touring and supporting her novel throughout 2006 in Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Georgia.

Alvin Knox (mentor) is currently acting as the judge in the annual poetry contest for *Explore Monthly*, an upper-Cumberland arts magazine, and in late March he attended the Meacham Writers' Conference.

Amelia (6), daughter of **Denise Mitchell (alumnus)**, won an honorable mention in the NPT Reading Rainbow Young Writers and Illustrators contest for her story *The Mouse and the Moose*. More than 550 children entered the contest. Reading Rainbow is an award-winning half-hour PBS series starring LeVar Burton.

Randy O'Brien (mentor) is an award-winning journalist and world-class reader. He has a dozen completed screenplays and two novels. He continues to do reviews for *AudioFile*, the only magazine devoted to audiobooks. One of his most recent highlights was an interview with novelist John Irving. For the third year in a row, he acted as a judge for the Audies competition. Each year, the Audio Publishers Association (APA) honors the best titles in audio publishing. A former MTSU student recently optioned one of Randy's scripts, *Night Train to Nashville*, for his USC thesis in the Peter Stark Producers program. (This is probably the hardest program to get into, and it usually leads to jobs in the industry. The script will be developed . . . from marketing to production.)

Linda Busby Parker and Charlotte Rains Dixon (mentors) traveled to MTSU in March to network and attend a viewing of the photographs of Margaretta (Gretta) K. Mitchell. Titled *The Face of Poetry*, the exhibit was sponsored by National Women's History Month and appeared in the Baldwin Photographic Gallery.

The novel *Seven Laurels*, by **Linda Busby Parker (mentor)** has been adopted by Spartanburg, South Carolina, as part of their required high school summer reading program. The students will read the book this summer, and Linda will travel there for the first few school days to visit with the students and discuss the book. In addition, Linda taught a writing workshop for the Baldwin County Writers (in Alabama) in April.

David Pierce (mentor) has been in touch with his feminine side this year. He has written a foreword to his wife's (Christian comedian Chonda Pierce) new book, *Road Kill on the Highway to Heaven*. In addition, the women's magazine *Connection* asked David to write an article for the May/June issue on what it's like to be married to a comedian.

The fiction of **Gregory Plemmons (alumnus)** appears in the anthology *Best New American Voices* (2006), edited by Jane Smiley, John Kulka, and Natalie Danford. It features outstanding fiction by participants in the country's 370-plus college and university writing programs. Gregory is currently an M.F.A. candidate in writing and literature at Bennington College, Vermont.

Michael Potts (student) announced that his poem "Dying" was published in the June 8, 2005, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In addition, he won the Mary Belle Campbell Poetry Book Award of the North Carolina Writers' Network for his chapbook *From Field to Thicket*, which is scheduled for publication in August 2006. And he won the Rose Post Creative Nonfiction Award of the North Carolina Writers' Network for his essay "Haunted," which appeared in an issue of *Writers' Network News*. Michael's poem "Chambers of the Heart" was a finalist for the Poet Laureate Award of the North Carolina

Poetry Society, and his poem "Watching Death" won an honorable mention in competition for the society's Thomas H. McDill Award. "Watching Death" was published in *Pinesong: Awards 2006*.

Terry Price (alumnus and mentor) completed his M.F.A. in writing (fiction genre) at Spalding University in May 2006. In addition to being an alumnus of the Writer's Loft, Terry became a mentor in January 2006. He is a staff writer for the Tennessee Writers Alliance quarterly newsletter, and he published a nonfiction piece, "Jazz Saxophonist Rahsaan Barber: Speaking the Language of Music," at newsoutherner.com. The piece will also be included in the print anthology *Best of the New Southerner*, set to be released in summer 2006.

Rebecca Rutledge (student) announced that she has a book contract with Kensington Publishers. Her book, *Using Southern Belle Charm to Win the Man of Your Dreams*, is scheduled to be published in the spring or summer of 2007.

Nashville writers **Walt and Sue Schaefer** sponsored a literary night in their home in April 2006 in celebration of the arrival of Writer's Loft mentor Charlotte Rains Dixon. (Charlotte came to Nashville for a weeklong writing sabbatical.) Loft mentors, students, and alumni present were Charlotte Rains Dixon, Melinda Medlin, R. L. Burkhead, Terry Price, and Susie Brown.

R. L. Burkhead (editor, the Trunk) produced this issue of the *Trunk* and helped the Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Company promote their Summer 2006 Travel Writing Festival by writing a press release, publicizing the event in U.S. Internet and media outlets, and working with participants to write a feature story about the festival, which he is shopping around to American magazines. On June 9 and 10 at Cumberland University, Roy attended the Tennessee Writers Alliance's inaugural Writers' Conference. And finally, Roy attended a photography exhibit at MTSU's Baldwin Photographic Gallery called *The Face of Poetry*. Starting July 5, Roy will leave MTSU and return to a corporate writing career as a technical writer with American Standard/Trane in Clarksville, Tenn.

Young Writer's Loft: Seeing Is Believing

For the past four summers, area middle schoolers have used MTSU's Summer Youth University (SYU) to create a mock television news program; participate in a mini-law and mini-medical school; and experience the worlds of technology, economics, dramatic arts, sign language, and foreign language.

"The sessions gave young students the opportunity to learn more about various broad subject areas that should help them succeed in school, with a bit of fun mixed in," said Maureen Young, one of the coordinators of the program.

Beginning in summer 2005, students were given the opportunity to explore the creative writing profession with the addition of the Young Writer's Loft. (The Young Writer's Loft returned to SYU again this summer, based on its success in 2005.)

"About a dozen students participated in the 2005 session, creating a newspaper and ending their week of writing with a reception and public reading at MTSU's Honor College," said R. L. Burkhead, founder of the Writer's Loft. "When we created the Loft, we had no idea how that program would influence our world; the creation of Young Writer's Loft is exciting stuff, and it's something to be proud of."

The Young Writer's Loft is a five-day workshop in creative writing, and it is open to students who have completed the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. This program provided an opportunity for serious young writers to spend concentrated time writing and revising with committed peer writers under the guidance of an experienced professional writer and teacher. Students spent each day of the workshop reading, writing, revising, and sharing their work with peers. And the writers received daily feedback from the teacher.

SYU and the Young Writer's Loft take place each summer on MTSU's 500+ acre campus. Visit the program online at www.mtsu.edu/~learn/noncredit/syu.htm to learn more and view photo galleries of previous sessions. To learn how to register your child in the next session, please call our offices at (615) 898-2462.



Nashville Book Launch:

The Messenger of Magnolia Street, by River Jordan

In front of a packed audience at Davis-Kidd Bookstore in Green Hills, local author and writer River Jordan launched her new novel, *The Messenger of Magnolia Street*, on January 26. Less than two months later, *Southern Living* magazine picked the book to appear in its "Books about the South" portion of its March 2006 issue and highlighted it as their Southern Living Selects book.

Published this year by HarperSanFrancisco, *Messenger* was described in *Booklist* this way: "In the best tradition of Stephen King and Peter Straub, Jordan creates an eerily sinister landscape in which the age-old struggle of Good versus Evil is played out within the subtle context of family, faith, and friendship."

River is a novelist and a playwright, and she has a long history with the Writer's Loft, where she has served as a panelist, guest speaker, and mentor. She is the founder of W.O.R.D. (Writing for Ourselves and Reading for Discovery), a writing and reading program designed to introduce and inspire a new generation to the power of story, and she teaches writing workshops and promotes literacy around the country. As of this writing, she is completing a new work of fiction.

At Davis-Kidd, River read from her novel in front of a large crowd of supporters, including Loft mentors, alumni, students, and administrators Lance Ikard, R. L. Burkhead, Terry Price, Charlotte Rains Dixon, Denise Mitchell, Melinda Medlin, and Janelle Lipscomb Rodgers, many of whom traveled from across Tennessee and from as far away as Oregon to be at the event.

"I'm thrilled to see that so many people from the community and from the Writer's Loft came here this evening after a day's work to support River," said Loft director Lance Ikard. "She helped the program a great deal in its early days and even today works as a mentor with the program when her schedule allows."

In a review of River's book appearing in this issue, Loft mentor Charlotte Rains Dixon wrote, "River Jordan's new novel is a deeply allegorical and symbolic book. But don't let the import of that statement keep you away from the novel, because it is a cracking good story, too; a story that deals with the most important of all human themes—the battle between good and evil."

While in line to get his book signed, Loft founder R. L. Burkhead said that middle Tennessee is lucky to put River on an ever-growing list of writers dedicated to reading, writing, and the spirit of community.

"I dig the public service aspect of writing," Burkhead said, "and River is a perfect example of how to carve out a writing career while making your community all the better for it."

In addition to Nashville, River continues to tour and support her novel throughout 2006 in Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Georgia. After leaving Nashville, River participated in such literary events as the Virginia Festival of the Book, the Southern Kentucky Book Festival, and the Arkansas Literary Festival.

Those interested in hearing River read from her book and speak on the craft of writing will have a chance to do so at the Southern Festival of the Book in Memphis on October 6, 2006.

Aspiring Writers Smash Glass at Inaugural TWA Conference

R. L. Burkhead, M.F.A.

June 10, noon. Novelist Ann Patchett sat back in a chair and listened as each of the budding writers around the oval table responded to her soft “. . . and who are you?” inquiry. With a thin frame that suggested more of an association with geometry than with creative writing, she sipped from a glass of cool water while the inspired and unpublished talked about their day jobs, their families, and their love of the written word.

A few moments later, she approached the lectern across the long banquet room of Cumberland University’s Memorial Hall, leaned into the microphone, and said, “You are a glass blower. You make your glass, and you smash it. You make your glass, and you smash it. You make the work, and you break it. Do not wait for the muse: *the muse is a lie.*”

Patchett gave the keynote address at the Tennessee Writers Alliance (TWA) inaugural Writers Conference held on the university’s 50-acre campus in Lebanon.

“This career, this job, is about discipline; the discipline is there before the payoff,” said the author of such award-winning novels as *The Patron Saint of Liars*, *Taft*, *The Magician’s Assistant*, and *Bel Canto*. “This is about sitting down and working when you don’t feel like it. It is about punching the clock. It is something you come to because you love it not because you want to publish a book.

“You just keep working: work, work, work!”

The night before, with the campus clock showing 45 minutes before the start of the Friday reception, TWA board members used whatever action verbs they could scrounge to prepare.

They taped plastic signs to brick walls.

They attached microphones to stands.

(A bookseller with several large crates of hardback and softbound books navigated a flight of stairs.)

They moved tables, assembled name badges, and someone positioned a podium.

They prepared packets of folders and agendas and number 2 pencils.

And from the pages of the schedule, TWA board member Karen Alea wrote, “With this new endeavor, our grandest offering yet, we hope to fulfill our promise in one fantastic and inspiring weekend.”

Inside, in Labry Hall, TWA president Nancy Fletcher-Blume said, “It has taken many hands and many long hours of dedicated writers to bring this together. We are delighted to be able to offer an opportunity for writers of several genres and at all levels to learn more about the art of writing. This is a part of TWA’s ongoing mission, to support writers and literature across Tennessee.”

But she had not yet said that. She said those words a little later, after the writers appeared—nearly a hundred of them.

Attached long after the construction of Labry Hall, the structure’s new wing left weathered, red-brick walls exposed inside, and the floor tiles helped create a makeshift Italian piazza, a place where people could mix and mingle as well as drink and laugh and read. And it was a place where writers could sit alone. Stand in groups. Lean on columns and hide behind registration desks. Give an e-mail address or write a phone number on the back of a business card.

It was a place for introverts to be extroverts, if only for a while.

Behind it all, the sounds of an acoustic guitar came from an amp with a wire that led to Jim Phiffer. The guitarist learned from such blues greats as Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, and he plays guitar with the Boomers, a band of middle-aged bluesmen.

Across the room, poet Peggy Smith Duke and new M.F.A. in writing graduate Terry Price shared stories of their literary home runs, and TWA member Diana McQuady asked Terry where he earned his M.F.A., and he told her.

The co-chair of the Kentucky Writers Conference and a leader with the Southern Kentucky BookFest, McQuady said that she “finds authors and writers, and gets them to the festivals,” and after looking around the room, she admitted that she was a repeat offender: “I joined TWA for the first time in 1998; then I joined again in 2005. I was excited to learn about this conference.”

After Nancy Fletcher-Blume said what she said and thanked who she thanked, local author Michael Lee West told the story of attending a writer’s conference in 1982 while working as a nurse. The author of such books as *She Flew the Coop*, *American Pie*, and *Crazy Ladies*, she said that eight years after that conference, her first novel was published.

“It was a very long road for me,” West said. “I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t gone to that conference. It was life changing. Never know, this may be life changing for you.”

The morning of the keynote address, writers prepared for a day packed with workshops on songwriting (Bob Bradley), fiction (Tony Earley), poetry (David Daniel), nonfiction (Ray Waddle), memoir (Joyce Dyer), and children’s literature (Helen Hemphill), as well as a panel discussion, a book signing, and a book fair/marketplace.

“Emotionally loaded situations do not need emotionally loaded language,” said fiction workshop leader Tony Earley to a crowded room. “Tone it down.”

Earley was one of many leaders from the local and national literary community who traveled to middle Tennessee to be a part of this inaugural TWA event. Their publishing credits—the novels and short stories, columns and albums, poetry and articles—all combined to lend credibility to the conference and to TWA’s commitment to providing its membership with the best instruction available; these events sent membership to the keynote address energized.

“You must read,” Patchett said. “You must love to read. It must come before your love to write.”

Moments later, TWA surprised her with the organization’s first Tennessee Writer of the Year Award. (The Tennessee Literary Legend Award went to Ms. Wilma Dykeman.)

“I think it was a success, and we were pleased to be a part of it,” said Joel Tomlin of Landmark Booksellers. The Franklin, Tennessee, bookshop sponsored the Friday night reception, providing the food and refreshments as well as making sure that the participants’ books were on site for purchase throughout the two-day conference.

According to Tomlin, promoting events like TWA’s conference is just one of the ways in which his East Main Street shop promotes the arts. In addition, he said that Landmark Booksellers’s shop offers the community such events as children story time, a free place to meet for local groups, writing workshops, and other monthly activities.



**What Are You Reading:
Matt Baggett**

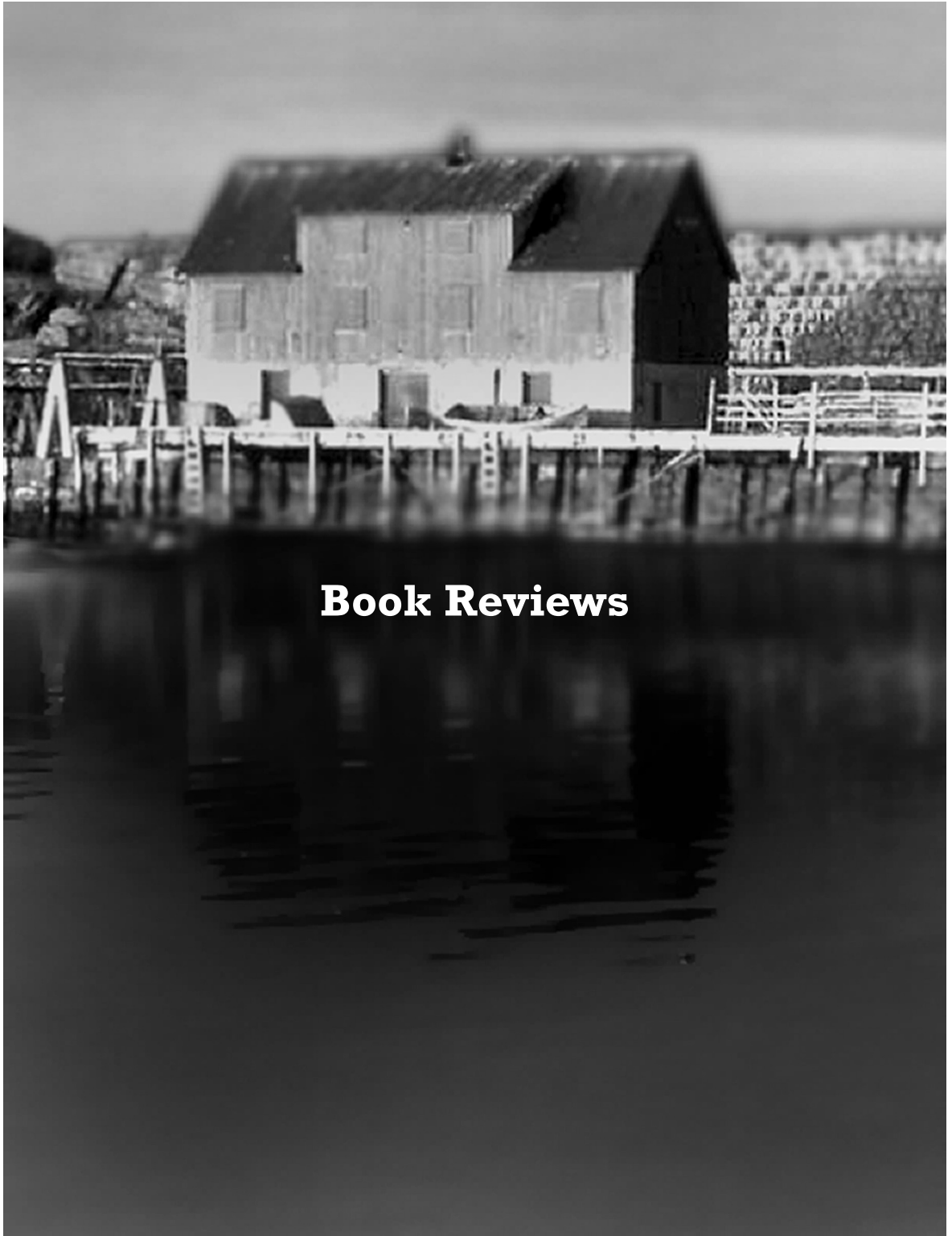
Writer's Loft Alumnus

I'm reading Larry McMurtry's Berrybender Narratives (*Sin Killer*, *The Wandering Hill*, *By Sorrow's River* and *Folly and Glory*). William Gay's short story collection, *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down*, was great. Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*: this book's language is so lyrical and the imagery so gorgeous that you want to cry. Can't wait to read *Blood Meridian*, which I just bought. Raymond Carver's collection of short stories (*Where I'm Calling From*) gets me excited about writing. Ha Jin's *War Trash*, about Chinese POWs held by the Americans during the Korean War. Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. Nashville native Sarahbeth Purcell's novel, *Love Is the Drug*.

**What Are You Reading:
Terry Price**

Writer's Loft Alumnus

If you visit my house, you will find bits and pieces of reading material throughout. On my bedside table is a book of poems by Elizabeth Bishop. I know little about poetry but I hope to incorporate the rhythms and efficient usage of language of poetry into my fiction. I've just begun an incredible novel, *The Girl from Charnelle* by K. L. Cook, and am enjoying it a great deal. On my desk are copies of *From Blues to Bop*, edited by Richard N. Albert, and *Fascinating Rhythm: Jazz in American Writing* by David Yaffe, and I'm using both as references for a lecture I'm preparing on jazz and its use in short stories. I'm also reading and enjoying two short story collections, *Life Studies* by Susan Vreeland, and *Blackberries*, *Blackberries* by Crystal Wilkinson. And I always have the latest issues of *Poets and Writers* and the *Writer's Chronicle* close at hand.



Book Reviews

Robert F. Burgess, *Hemingway's Paris and Pamplona, Then and Now: A Personal Memoir*. New York: Writers Club Press, 2001. 408 pages. Paperback. \$19.95.

Part biography and part autobiography with the flavor of a travelogue, *Hemingway's Paris and Pamplona, Then and Now: A Personal Memoir* by Robert F. Burgess is the sort of tale one would expect from an author whose 22 published book covers contain images of sharks and submarines, deep sea divers and treasure, and, oh yes, Ernest Hemingway.

Many writers could have written a book similar to this one, but only Burgess could have written this particular one.

In July 1959 as a young freelance writer based in Spain, Burgess had returned to Madrid from Tunisia, where he had been on assignment to find and climb Hill 609, a honeycombed mountain fortress held by the Germans during the World War II. When he learned that Hemingway had just left Madrid for the running of the bulls, Burgess took off—on a Lambretta motor scooter no less—to do a photo story on the event for a Madrid magazine. Hemingway was at the Fiesta de San Fermin in Pamplona as a working journalist for *Life* magazine, reporting on the series of *mano a mano* bull-fights being fought that summer across Spain by the two top matadors, Antonio Ordóñez and Luis Miguel Dominguín.

The intersection of these two writers is what makes this book unique, setting it apart from others and securing its place as a valuable addition to the Hemingway canon.

And that intersection—that first meeting—is the foundation of the book's authenticity, so much so that Burgess structures the book in such a way as to present that encounter twice, artfully and without repetition. Strengthening the book is the fact that Burgess does not embellish his time and interaction with Hemingway. As the following sample of their meeting reveals, Burgess did not need to do so.

"My wife and I come here to enjoy ourselves, and everyone pesters us."

As he speaks he turns toward me and suddenly throws an arcing clenched right fist punch at my stomach, stopping it just short of my shirt.

Being fake punched by Hemingway is so unexpected I don't flinch but instinctively tense my stomach muscles. Hemingway must approve; he doesn't even break stride in his sentence. "But I don't mind," he says with a grin.

The author's easygoing writing style allows this book to read like a novel rather than what it is: a structured and organized approach to answering a question the author asks in the first paragraph of the first page: How fictionalized were Hemingway's novels? To explore this question, Burgess injects himself into the characters and topography of Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, and this question is the catalyst that propels the reader into and throughout this book.

After beginning with the author's insights and memories of his encounter with Hemingway, Burgess takes the reader back to Hemingway's earliest years in France and Spain, the locales that provided the background noises and influences as Hemingway wrote and polished *The Sun Also Rises*. Next, the author flashes forward to the present and backtracks that novel's literary landscape (or what remains of it today), following Hemingway and his characters from the Paris cafes to the Pyrenees fishing holes and beyond, rediscovering factual details of the things fictionalized in the novel.

To his credit, Burgess is not the all-powerful, all-knowing biographer. His casual, creative-writing approach to the subject matter makes this book an excellent beginning for someone searching for an introduction to Hemingway's work or for one who may be familiar with the novelist but in need of a little literary hand-holding. This is not to say that this is not a well-researched book. It is. This tale has the accuracy of a serious biography without all of the intrusive footnotes. Burgess develops this story through the use of his own primary, on-site research done throughout Europe as well as through historical facts, literary history and documentation, and the statements of those who knew Hemingway: sons and wives, friends and foes alike, biographers and historians, and even a bartender have put their version of how it was on paper, and Burgess pulls from that source material.

Adding to the power of Burgess's research and words are his photographs. He writes,

After drinking several rounds of red wine with the group around the table, I ask Hemingway if he minds me taking photographs of him.

"Sure, I guess it's okay," he says with a tough guy growl. "Just don't ask me to pose."

The images reveal a type of truth present in black and white film, and they are not the haphazard snapshots of an awe-struck fan. In addition to being a writer who graduated from the Michigan State University journalism department, Burgess is a professional photographer (both above and below the water). The photographs are thoughtful and revealing, capturing Hemingway being Hemingway with his mob of friends and fans at the Fiesta de San Fermin in Pamplona.

With *The Sun Also Rises* in mind, the reader can almost see the author in his archive of negatives from that early visit to Pamplona, searching for those shots that would conjure up Hemingway and the lore of that novel. The result is a series of pictures that seem to come with their own action verbs: (1) pushing, chanting crowds at the bullfight; (2) shouting, clamoring amateurs running with the bulls and in the ring; and (3) a montage of a bullfight: matador and bull in action, shots taken for maximum contrast and slow shutter speeds to capture the basic movement in stark black and white.

The camera continues as Burgess enters the world of Hemingway's novel with photos of the cafes, the bookstores, the gardens, and the hotels as they survive today, all combining with the earlier images to form a sort of adhesive to bind the text throughout the book.

Hemingway's Paris and Pamplona, Then and Now: A Personal Memoir is a well-crafted book, consistent in pacing and tone with a strong, reliable narrator and point of view.

Navigating through this book, it is easy to believe that one is sitting at a table with Burgess at one of Hemingway's favorite European cafes. And from time to time, Burgess leans over and whispers something like:

Only one man in that entire drunken town (Pamplona) is one whit faster than the enraged Hemingway. It's the (U.S.) sailor. His black-shoed white legs almost seem to windmill him through the crowd before the rest of him catches up. And a heartbeat behind him is Hemingway looking for all the world like an old silver-tip grizzly, back arched and bristling, powerful legs driving, forepaws reaching, fingers claw-curved for the kill, all moving at full charge in a blur through the astonished crowd.

Who is the sailor? What so enraged Hemingway? How does it end for the sailor? Well, you'll have to read this book to find out. And don't bother looking in any other biography. You won't find this story and so many more like it anywhere but here. I know; I've read them all.

R. L. Burkhead, M.F.A.

River Jordan, *The Messenger of Magnolia Street*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006. 256 pages. Hardcover. \$22.95.

"In the best tradition of Stephen King and Peter Straub, Jordan creates an eerily sinister landscape in which the age-old struggle of Good versus Evil is played out within the subtle context of family, faith, and friendship."

—*Booklist*

River Jordan's new novel, *The Messenger of Magnolia Street*, is a deeply allegorical and symbolic book. But don't let the import of that statement keep you away from the novel, because it is a crackling good story, too; a story that deals with the most important of all human themes—the battle between good and evil. Trice is the darling of the town of Shibboleth, the miracle baby found in a bucket at the well. Upon awakening from a dream she barely remembers, she rousts her best friend Billy and the two of them set off for Washington, D.C., to shanghai Billy's brother, Nehemiah, and bring him back home. Something is amiss in Shibboleth and Trice's dream has convinced her the only way to set things to rights is for her and Billy and Nehemiah to confront the evil that has sucked dry the town springs, gradually, so gradually the townspeople have barely noticed. Their souls have suffered a similar desiccating process. It is up to Billy and Nehemiah and Trice to battle the evil and save the town from certain destruction.

The book is told through the viewpoint of a character named the Recording Angel, who can see several possible futures but not affect the choices people make in the present. "What I know that Billy doesn't is that there is space now for a small pause from their battle. For the moment, Nehemiah has remembered who he is. And with that knowing, his soul can sigh with satisfaction. Tonight the smell in the air is pure spring." The Recording Angel can guide and pray that his charges make the right choice, but otherwise his job is simply to record. This device means the novel is actually written in first person omniscient, a gutsy choice which Jordan manipulates skillfully, with the Angel dipping into the heads of the various characters. Utilizing the voice of the Recording Angel allows the author to dramatize weighty themes of spirituality and religion, thoughts on God and the nature of faith, and the importance of love itself.

The use of the Recording Angel as narrator is an inherent part of the structure of the book, and a huge part of its uniqueness, a vital and unforgettable aspect of this novel. This alone would set the novel apart, but the story also has the advantage of big themes—evil and death are pretty much as big as you can get—and it has River Jordan's beautiful prose style to propel us along. Consider the following passage: "From a low-flying hawk's eye, depending on the season, you can see fields of cotton and of corn, rows of beans, or rows of collards, mustard greens, and potatoes. But regardless of the season, what will strike you most is the sleepy patchwork pattern fashioned from the living essence of these kindred souls. You will hear people's voices rising on the air, their hands clapping with excitement at the telling of their stories, or the softhearted music of their listening to the stories of each another." In such eloquent words, Jordan evokes the mysticism of the South, the succor of small towns, and the sturdiness of our American character.

A memorable read.

Charlotte Rains Dixon, M.F.A.
Portland, Oregon

Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1981. 186 pages. Paperback. \$9.95.

Dorothea Brande's technical book, *Becoming a Writer*, reaches the experienced and the unexperienced writer in a variety of ways. She provides writing exercises and suggestions, so the reader can learn to tame the unconscious, restrain the conscious, and let the genius work. Brande emphasizes that it is these two components of the brain, the conscious and unconscious, that enable a writer to work effectively. Together, they create effective writing; however, Brande suggests that writers have to learn to control these components as separates before their effectiveness can take place.

First, Brande discusses "the dual writer," as an unconscious and conscious being. The unconscious side of a writer is the artistic side, the one that daydreams, sees possibilities in every circumstance, and generates ideas. Brande refers to it as "emotional and childlike." It can be sensitive and shy, taking criticism personally; however, Brande adds ". . . it is possible to tap it [the unconscious] at will, and even to direct it." Writing morning pages, rising to write first thing in the morning, even before a cup of coffee, allows the unconscious to flow onto the page. Then the writer can take these pages after a few weeks and discover trends, thus learning more about his or her own style and principles, even tapping into ideas.

The conscious side is the opposite. "It is the side of the artisan, the workman, and the critic rather than the artist," Brande says. She adds that the writer should face the world's "suggestions, criticisms, and rejections" with the conscious side because that side will not take it personally, as the artistic, unconscious side would. The conscious side of the writer is also the part that hints at the artistic side in the writing process, interrupting the flow with such reminders as a wrong use of grammar or a wrong spelling, tedious details that can be fixed in a later draft.

These two sides, the unconscious and the conscious, can create art or destroy it. Brande suggests it is possible to train these two components to work together for the better. However, the writer should understand that these are dual personalities, it seems, residing in one body. Therefore, the writer's conscious side should remain silent while the unconscious flow finishes page after page. When the craftsman has finished working, then the critic can come forth, picking apart and analyzing what has taken place. Brande calls this system "Best Friend and Severest Critic" because they are two sides of the same person. She also writes:

When each has found its place, when each is performing the functions which are proper to it, they play endlessly back and forth into each other's hands, strengthening, inciting, relieving each other in such a way that the resulting personality, the integral character, is made more balanced, mellow, energetic, and profound.

Therefore, as Brande suggests in this book, it is highly effective for the beginning writer especially to understand that there is a creative side and a business side. One must be quiet while the other works, and vice versa. Working in a partnership this way, the conscious and the unconscious maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of a piece of work.

Janelle Rodgers
Spalding University

Janelle Rodgers lives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. She graduated from Clemson University with a B.A. in communications, and she is a graduate of the Writer's Loft. Currently, she is working on her M.F.A. from Spalding University. When she is not running on a treadmill, watching the neighbor's kids, or working at a bagel shop, she is reading nonstop. Her work has been published in *AOPA's Flight Training* magazine and in the *Trunk*.

**Darnell Arnoult, *Sufficient Grace*. New York: Free Press, 2006.
320 pages. Hardcover. \$23.00.**

"In brisk scenes, Arnoult's rhythmic prose beautifully reveals the human potential for unconditional love and faith, and wholly convinces us—despite the heartache her mental illness causes—of Gracie's essential wisdom and worthiness."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"A transcendent exploration of the unrestrained vagaries of faith and the unexpected roads to redemption . . . With astute sensitivity, Arnoult bravely and generously endows her formidable characters with charming candor and perceptive humanity in an elegiac yet hopeful tale of elegant strength, serene love, and infectious desire."

—*Booklist*

"Draw the body of Jesus," the voices instruct Gracie Hollaman one quiet spring day. "Draw it larger than life." So begins Gracie's break with reality in the spellbinding debut novel *Sufficient Grace* by Darnell Arnoult. When we meet Gracie, she is drawing life-size portraits of Jesus on the walls of her house, certain that they will watch over the family she is about to leave behind. She wanders off and is discovered miles away—mute and incapacitated—by two women who hope to save her, unaware that Gracie will manage to save them as well.

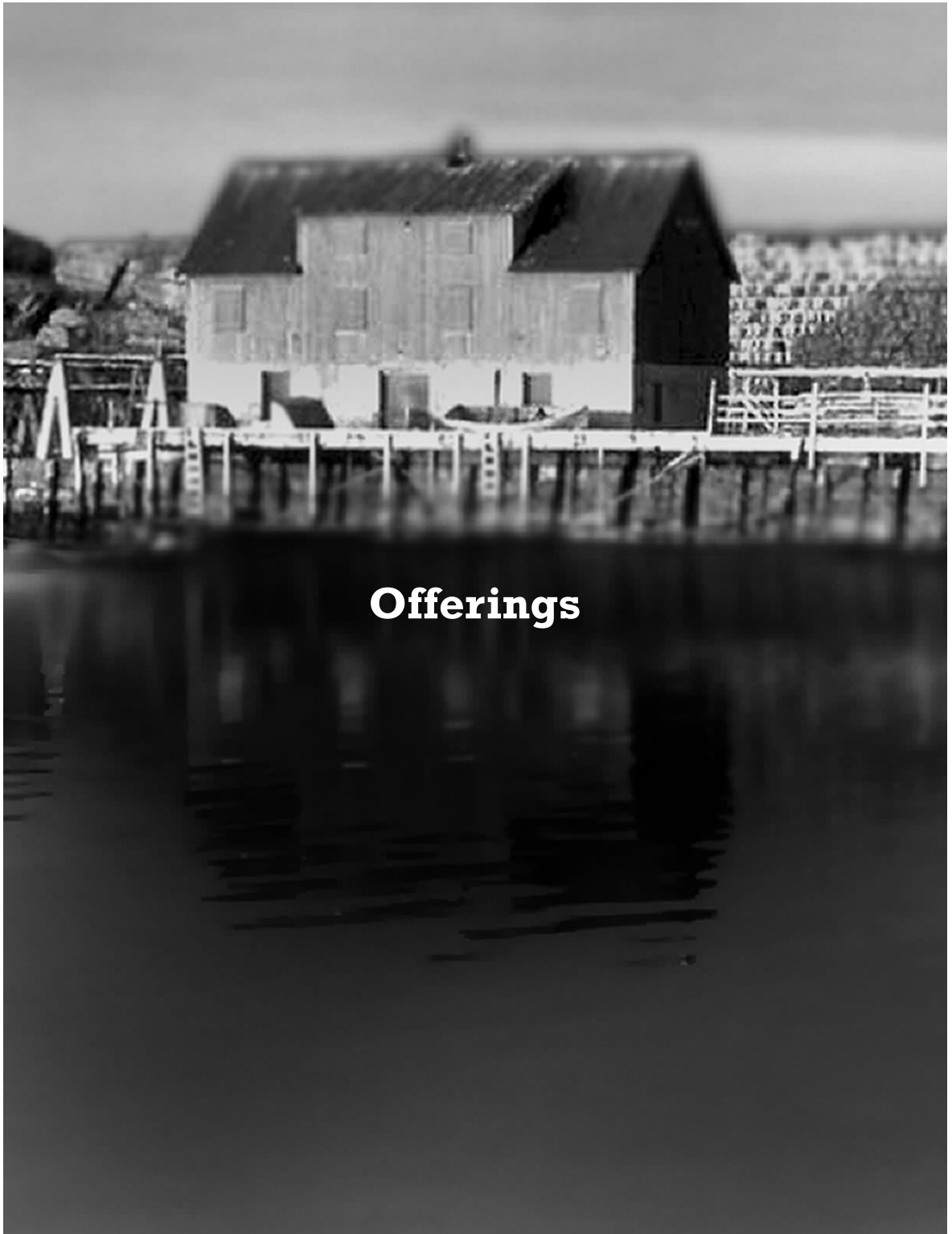
Mamma Toot, a strong and determined woman who has recently lost her son, and Mattie, her daughter-in-law, a widow overcome with grief, feel strangely drawn to Gracie. Despite the protests of Mattie's son, who warns them against taking in a white woman without alerting the police, they christen her "Rachel" and begin to care for her. As the bonds between these women grow stronger, the family Gracie left behind comes to terms with their loss. Her grown daughter, Ginger, initially furious with Gracie, devotes her energy to a new business venture that helps her cope with her anger. Gracie's husband, Ed, bewildered by his wife's disappearance, distracts himself by learning to cook, and in the process, discovers a new passion for life.

Meanwhile, Gracie creates something beautiful out of her mental illness—both physically, as she paints breathtaking murals and other images on found objects, and figuratively, as she begins to change the lives of those around her. As a result of Gracie's presence in their lives, Mattie's heartache begins to ease and Mamma Toot finds her tough exterior softening, allowing her to make room in her heart for an adopted grandson who longs for her love.

Inevitably, Gracie's two worlds collide, revealing a long-buried secret that ties the two families together. As Gracie's family attempts to convince her to return home, "Rachel" stubbornly clings to her new identity. Ginger's frustration with Gracie's condition begins to give way as she learns to accept and love her mother in spite of her flaws. Ed, who has fallen in love with another woman, finds himself torn between his sense of duty and his heart, until Gracie helps him see that their story is finished and it is time to begin anew.

With sensitivity, humor, and Southern sensibility, Darnell Arnoult captures the aspects of the human condition that hold the power to both sustain and redeem us—faith, family, art, food, and, above all, love.

Carleigh Brower
Simon and Schuster, Inc.



Offerings

A Theory on Why Emily Dickinson Never Left her House

by Karen Alea

If you have been writing for more than a few months, you know that the picture of a writer's life—the parties, the admiration, the inspiration that befalls you when sipping cognac while overlooking the misty lake from your mahogany paneled office—is not reality. Now the hard work—relentless, lonely, but oddly satisfying—has probably replaced your fantasies and you are integrating this writing life into the one you used to live. Remember that one? Where you did as you pleased? Had hobbies that brought you into the light of day?

There are many changes that occur in our lifestyle when we embark on this vocation with a serious intent to improve and become published. One that is regularly overlooked is the impact the writing life has on friendships.

There are two kinds of friends who are detrimental to us now that we are writers. I would love to write an article on the antithesis of these friends, one about the friends who cherish and support us, let us be our eccentric selves, and understand deadlines and rejection slips. But, alas, I want to talk about “the others” (to borrow a phrase from the television show *Lost*).

“The others” consist of two groups. The first are “the toxins.” These are those who drain our energy and time. Though we have been brought up to have empathy for others and never break friendships, there are people who look past what we do, think it is a mere hobby, maybe even call it “cute.” They make us feel as though we are not contributing to life in a tangible way. They want us to do bake sales, chair charity clubs, scrapbook our lives away. They also demean that inner part of us that has fought so hard to free up our minds so that we can write without barriers. These “others” are always there to remind us of those barriers. You're going to write that? What would the church say, your mother, my bridge club?

I find that there is an easy test to figure out if a friendship is toxic. Do I find myself arguing with that person in my own mind, whipping out insults and clever ripostes? There are plenty of great individuals who have nothing to do with the life of letters we pursue, but these toxic few who bring out the ire in us, or the rejection, are the ones eating through our souls like worms. We cannot keep up the strength to have these in-our-head arguments all day nor can we harbor that desperate feeling that we wish they understood us, for they never will.

Unfortunately the second group of “the others” are fellow writers. When we begin this quest, we wrap ourselves in the comfy enclosure of writing friends. We talk about our obsessions and ambitions and feel we have found a home with other writers—somewhere to put our feet up and relax. We must realize that we have surrounded ourselves with the most sensitive people on the face of the earth. They do not all want to hear of our successes nor do they want us to comment on something we have learned. It is the rule of the writers' playground. Most of those who find success in publishing are usually the lonely ones on the swings humming to themselves.

Finding those who have the same writing sensibilities as ourselves, and who are willing to hear of our successes and tell us when we are getting big-headed, are the ones to cherish. However, it may take half a lifetime to find them.

As this life brings us into intimate relationship with words, not breathing humans, our time with people becomes that much more important. We should not use our relationships as fodder for future stories nor should we stay inside our minds, comparing a conversation to one we just read in a book. Like athletes who must take days off to rest, we too must step out of our heads and walk with a friend, talk of everything that has nothing to do with books, and fill our lives with tasks that bring us into society. Though it may seem obvious, I can vouch that as you get more engrossed in this addictive life of writing,

you will put more importance and find more solace in those neat, ordered relationships that you write on paper than in having to deal with the messy life of emotional, walking human beings.

Taking up this life forces us to spring clean. Old thoughts, old fears, childhood demons—they all come to the surface. Friendships are no different. They will change, they will die, they will leave us hurt. However, though many writers have used solitude as an excuse, the rewards of close friendship, of trusting another person with your dreams and insecurities, is tantamount to figuring out that perfect ending to a story in progress.

Karen Alea's stories have been published in *Out of Line*, *Riverwalk Journal*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Stickman Review*, and others. Her story "The Next Guy" won the *Nashville Scene* Fiction Contest. Her manuscript *Spic* has found representation with the Howard Morhaim Agency. She is rounding the middle off an M.F.A. at Bennington College. You can send your sympathies to her at www.karenalea.com.

This Writing Life

by Matt Baggett

This writing life is hard. It requires diligence, patience, and confidence in your ability to say something. A space must be carved into your life where only writing resides. Writers are constantly told by friends and acquaintances that they wish they could write or that they have always thought of writing a book. Why don't they then? They are all dreaming about it. For one reason, writing is terribly out of fashion. Hear me out. The habits that one must have to write are diametrically opposed to the world we increasingly co-create. Now we have Ipods to fill those pesky free moments when we may have daydreamed or worked out a plot before. To facilitate free and easy communication, we have e-mails to write (of all things) and respond to every day. This may be a good thing, as people may write more than they used to in the old economy world. However, I rarely put the thought and consideration into a quick business e-mail that I would put into a poem. We have the Internet to lose ourselves in. Hours can slide by as we search for information to steal our time. As a people we are fidgety. It takes some amount of guts to sit still and stare at a blank screen when there are two thousand other "things" pulling at you. So for you writers, as you nod and maybe even recognize what I'm saying, I applaud you and the world thanks you for writing for it. I paraphrase from *The Big Lebowski* and equate you, the writer, to the protagonist of the film, the Dude—"In this big ol' crazy world we feel good knowing you're out there, the Dude, takin' 'er easy for all us sinners."

So what does it take in this writing life? One must take the time. You must be able to slip into your own inner space and listen. Listening is as large a part of writing as writing. Sometimes the rhythmic click of the keyboard enables the synapses to pop and crackle, and the ideas come forward and manifest themselves on the page with little volition on the part of the one doing the writing. That is when it is best. A secret that writers keep to themselves is that one must not have foreknowledge of what is to go on the page. This alone keeps many would-be writers stymied. When you feel that way, write anyway. You have a block of ice inside you that can only be melted by the clickety-clack of the keyboard. For me, I almost never know exactly what I want to say. The process of doing defines it for me, though. It is like Julia Cameron says in *The Artist's Way*: you must pour the glass out to have more poured in. So pour it out. You can always cut out the stuff that is no good. Sometimes you have to write, as Anne Lamott says, a "shitty first draft." We forget about the power of revision. When Spielberg makes a brilliant movie, he doesn't do it all in sequence and it doesn't come out all in a nice piece the first time. Ninety-eight percent of the film is lying on the cutting room floor. The same is true of *Moby-Dick*. That book didn't just pop into the world; it was birthed and lots of afterbirth was washed away, and the final "baby" may be quite different than what it looked like in its initial bloody mess. (Although with Melville, he may have channeled it straight from God, but, hey, he is Melville).

Where does this material come from that pours out? Experience! Good writing comes from good living. I encourage anyone who wants to captivate the reader to captivate themselves first. Writing is about adventure. Sure, an interior life can be a brave, valid life as well, but when tempered with an outrageous outer life, it becomes all the more interesting. The inner life helps to temper this wilder outer life. Don't create messes in your life, but move out of your skin or comfort zone and see what life offers. Then you have even better material to draw from in your stories or poems. If you are questioning this—imagine how boring Hemingway may have been if he had not thrown his cushy Chicago life away and joined the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in WWI. Would he have been able to grab the zeitgeist of the Lost Generation without that experience? Would he have gone to the Spanish Civil War? Would he have written *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or *Old Man and the Sea* if he had not lived in Cuba or Key West? We may not live as drastically as that (and hopefully not commit suicide either) but when in doubt, dare and take it up a notch. If you are worried what your kids may think . . . I know my parents would have impressed me if they had taken a six-week sabbatical to study Buddhism with Tibetan lamas.

What is stopping you from writing that story that only you know how to tell? What is it that you want to say? You don't know? Well, you will never know unless you attempt to say it (by writing it). Live that big life you dream about—it will make your written word come from a place of authority. However, most important, have confidence and sit down with your voice and call it forth to say it in only the way you can say it.

Matt Baggett is a Nashville-based writer, realtor, and entrepreneur. His poetry has been published in *Stories from the Blue Moon Cafe, Vol. 3*. As an amateur photographer, his work was published in the *Brooklyn Review*. Matt writes in the thin cracks of time between selling and buying real estate, being a single dad, and getting to the whitewater streams of east Tennessee and western North Carolina. When life slows down in a few years, he plans to obtain an M.F.A. in creative writing and get his stories told. You may reach Matt at matt@mattbaggett.com.

How to Get Your Work Published

by Bobbi Buchanan, M.F.A.

When I started an online magazine last year, a trusted mentor advised me, “Only publish the work you fall in love with.” It's good advice, but following that standard carries the same burden as euthanizing the family pet. With fifty submissions for three open slots, I'm forced to repeat the cruel but necessary process of elimination every other month.

As a writer, I've had my share of rejection letters. I'm familiar with the crash-and-burn cycle. The minute I drop a submission in the mailbox, I start fantasizing about being on Oprah and getting a book contract. I wait patiently for a week or two, then rush madly to the mailbox every day, despite the submission guidelines that plainly state the publication's average response time of three months. By the time the rejection arrives in the mail, I've already practiced my Pulitzer Prize acceptance speech in the bathroom mirror a dozen times. No matter how gently worded, a rejection letter flogs the muse.

Rejecting work isn't the only reason I feel guilty as an editor. The lovestruck model for accepting work has meant turning away well-written poetry and prose. Rejecting excellent work causes guilt on another level. Such is the life of an editor.

The natural segue here is for me to tell you how to write something an editor will fall in love with. There are too many variables to consider for me to offer any valuable advice on writing. The best way to do that, in my opinion, is to join a writers' group, faithfully attend meetings, circulate your work among its members, and take note of the critiques you get—find the commonalities in those critiques so you know what needs to be fixed.

Once you have this clearinghouse for your writing, start putting some thought and preparation into your submissions. Figuring out what to submit should be your first step. Submit your finest work, a piece

that your writers' group has critiqued at least once, a piece you've revised a dozen times or more. Read it aloud to someone or to a group of people. While you're reading, watch their body language. Are they a rapt audience or are they fidgeting and avoiding eye contact? If the former is true, you're ready to move on to the next step: researching the market.

Probably the biggest obstacle in the publishing industry is finding the right place for your work. Your favorite literary magazine may not be the place to start. Take a look at your subject matter, your style, your voice. Read as many publications as possible. If you think you've found the right magazine, sit down with a copy and read it cover to cover. Study the content. Think about those rejection notices. What's the usual reason for rejecting your work? "It doesn't suit our editorial needs." If the publication doesn't have a mission statement or some other explanation for its existence, you might want to take a look at several issues to figure it out. Don't make the mistake of submitting an erotic poem to a Christian literary magazine

In searching for venues, you also might want to ask people who have read or critiqued your work for advice. Keep in mind that your search for the right publication has to be done on a case-by-case basis. Because one of your short stories was accepted by a publication doesn't mean that publication will be appropriate for another short story you write.

Take note of the magazine's deadlines, the frequency of publication, and potential themes. For example, you might pitch an essay relating to Mother's Day in December or a holiday story in June.

Another way to discover venues is by networking in literary circles. Go to a writers' conference. Attend readings. Mingle with published writers and seek their advice.

Above all, don't give up when your work is rejected. Reexamine it, maybe revise it a bit, then start the marketplace research again. Somewhere out there is an editor waiting to fall in love.

Bobbi Buchanan is editor-publisher of the online journal *New Southerner* (www.newsoutherner.com), which focuses on helping people live more self-sufficient, earth-friendly lives in local economies. Her work has been published in the *New York Times*, *GreenPrints*, *Arable*, *Kentuckiana Parent*, the *Louisville Review*, and other publications and online journals.

Carriage Return; Indent

by R. L. Burkhead, M.F.A.

Several weeks ago, our own Lance Ikard slipped into my office after looking over this session's contest entries and asked me to write something up for this issue of the *Trunk* regarding manuscript preparation.

Seeing the strain in his eyes, I smiled and agreed.

Including this issue, I have received, edited, and published 79 manuscripts in five issues of the *Trunk*, and despite the fact that we have had manuscript guidelines posted on the Loft's Web site, many of those 79 manuscripts have had . . . issues. I have spent a lot of time thinking about Lance's request, and I have decided to expand it to include other aspects of the writer/editor relationship. I encourage everyone who wishes to have something put in print in any form in America to consider the following when preparing a manuscript and interacting with a publication's staff:

1. Everything you do, say, write, and certainly mail needs to say the following about you and your work: I am a professional. Or it should at a minimum say, I am aspiring to become a professional. Throughout the process of submitting work and communicating with a publication's staff, run your work and behavior through your own internal professional buffer and adjust as needed!

2. A publication's submission guidelines are not helpful hints or suggestions. They are the rules you follow, allowing your work to be considered for publication. Period. Follow them and compete. Do not follow them, and your work will probably be shredded instead of published. Most publications and publishers have guidelines posted on their Web sites. Please seek them out!
3. Reading and knowing a publication before submitting your work is an essential ingredient to success. For example, the winter 2006 issue of *Tin House* was a special theme issue titled, "All Apologies." So your science fiction thriller may not have had a great chance of appearing in that particular issue. Also, some publications are regional while the content of others may reflect the taste and sensibilities of a parent institution. (In keeping with this point, please see the inside back cover of this issue for editorial, content, and publication notices for the *Trunk*.)
4. There is only one editor, and it is not you. He or she has the power to publish or not publish the work you spent hours trying to perfect. Do not hurt your chances of being published because you treated an editor as if he or she was your copy-editing assistant. Since the *Trunk* publishes the creative work of our students (i.e., writers in training), I have taken a collaborative approach to editing, often communicating in detail with a student and allowing that person to rework material. This is not always the case. When communicating with editors who are considering your work, I urge you to return to Rule One on this list.
5. Buy *The Elements of Style*, (fourth edition) by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. Read it. Read it again. Refer to it often. Follow these three rules, and your manuscript will improve, I guarantee it.
6. Technology. I have thought about this point a lot over the years, and while I may burn for it, I have decided to say to you the following: Ultimately, technology will do more harm than good to both you as a writer and to your manuscript, as well as to your chances of placing your work. As a technical writer and editor for over a decade, technology has helped me a great deal, and I have used it often. I will continue to do so. But as a creative writer, technology has let me down, and I know that it has failed some of the students sending in their manuscripts to our contest and journal. In keeping with the technical theme of this point, I offer the following subpoints:
 - 6.1. Do not use technology in any form to deliver your manuscript to a publication. Do not e-mail an attached file. Most companies have virus programs in place that will strip the file off the e-mail, anyway. And few editors will accept digital copies of unsolicited manuscripts. Don't ever paste the text of your manuscript inside an e-mail message and submit it, not even to your mother.
 - 6.2. Again, I have pondered this point for many moons, and I must say the following, while twitching: Never use the spell- or grammar-check feature on your computer. If possible, uninstall this feature (right now) to remove any temptation. It will become a crutch that will fail you repeatedly as a writer on a continual journey of improvement. As writers, we all need to know how to spell. We need to know how to use a thesaurus, and we need to know how to apply the rules of the English language to our manuscripts. That is how we all improve, and I am including myself here! And worse, using these electronic checkers can (and has) hurt the quality of a good manuscript by presenting the writer with bad and inappropriate choices, by ripping out much-needed punctuation, and on and on and on.

6.3. Make backups of your work and store them far away from your computer on CDs, DVDs, floppy disks, stone tablets, or whatever else you prefer. Printing off hard copies and storing them in your desk is not a bad idea. Losing hundreds of pages because of a computer crash will make you cry like a little girl. Trust me. I know from experience.

6.4. Your e-mail address, the message on your home answering machine, and the message on your cell phone MUST be created with Rule One fully and completely in the front of your mind. If your e-mail is musclecar@whatever.com, I urge you to change it right now, unless all you intend to write about is muscle cars for muscle car magazines. If that is the case, then you are okay. Otherwise, please see Rule One.

Okay, enough on technology...

7. Do not send a resume, a glossy photo of your best side, or any other extra information to the editor of a journal or magazine. The manuscript and the query letter will do.
8. The query letter should be short. Key phrases to include in it are "I have read your journal . . . ," "I have bought your magazine . . . ," "My publications include" And if you have a personal contact at the publication SAY IT! Say it loud. Say it proud.
9. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE). And be sure your e-mail address is on your cover letter and/or manuscript.
10. Use standard U.S. postage stamps when mailing your manuscript and on your SASE. Unless you are actually in love with the editor, do not use "love" stamps. The same is true for cartoon characters, automobiles, historical figures, and, yes, even stamps of your favorite writers. Again, I refer you to Rule One on this list.
11. Paying Money to Enter a Contest: In addition to submitting your prose and poetry as unsolicited manuscripts, you may want to consider contests. And more and more contests require a fee (\$15 to \$30). In return, nearly all of the fees include a yearly subscription to the publication in question. To Pay or Not to Pay (and participate!) is the question that you must answer. I never entered these particular contests before this past year, since we creative writers have limited disposable income. This year, I identified 15 contests, charging about \$20 each in fees. I chose the most appropriate seven contests for my short story, reducing the cost. While I did not win those contests, literary journals have started arriving at my somewhat-rural Tennessee doorstep. The experience was okay for me, but you will need to approach this topic with caution, unless you are wealthy or happen to be married to someone working within the health profession.
12. Never send your unsolicited manuscript by certified mail. Certified mail is held for signature at the post office, requiring someone from the editor's office to go on a time-consuming, round-trip journey.
13. Word Count: Never send more than the maximum word count. If a journal's maximum word count for a short story is 6,000 words and your story has 6,005 words, take out five words BEFORE printing and mailing it to the editor.

14. I believe deep in my heart that you will obey Rule Two, so we do not need to talk about other aspects of the manuscript like margins, spacing, and so on. Right? Well, not really. I have seen some well-known journals that do not include these things in their guidelines. As a result, there are some universal rules that you should use if none are specifically identified. And these hold true for submitting anything to the Writer's Loft contest and journal. When in doubt, use the following:

- 8½x11 paper (white, of course).
- As high a cotton content in the paper that you are willing to purchase.
- Typed. Typed. Typed.
- Double-spaced for prose. Single-spaced for poetry.
- 12-point type (the size of the letters).
- Times New Roman font style/type. Courier or New Courier is okay as well.
- A one-inch margin at the top, bottom, left, and right.
- Your name and contact info at the top left of the first page of the manuscript.
- At the top right of the first page, put the word count and the rights you are offering. Normally, it will be first North American serial rights.
- Starting with page two, either in the header or footer, number the pages consecutively along with the work's title. Instead of the title, many writers include their last name. Your choice.
- Use paper clips, not staples.
- Do not include an electronic copy of your piece on a floppy disk or CD.

So the curtain has been pulled back, and you now possess the not-so-secret rules to improving your publishing odds. A bad submission will kill a great piece of writing, and you had better believe it. One of the largest values to being in the Loft is the ability to test-drive your writing career in an environment that will hold your hand through the process and teach you how to appropriately submit your work to contests and journals. These rules are presented in this spirit. Use them as you go forth into the world's literary community. And certainly, please use them with the Loft, as well.

R. L. Burkhead is a writer and editor in Nashville, Tenn. After earning an M.F.A. in writing from Spalding University in Louisville, Ky., he created the Writer's Loft at MTSU. R. L. spends his days writing for the corporate world while trying to stay awake long enough at night to write fiction.

The Only Way Out Is Through: How to Deal with Rejection

by Charlotte Rains Dixon, M.F.A.

1. First, you cry. As the tears roll down your cheeks, you feel like a wimp. So you wipe away the tears and tell yourself to buck up.
2. You curse the stupidity of everyone in the publishing world. Anger is much better than wimphood, you realize.
3. Because everyone is blind to your brilliance, you decide you will show them. You return to your computer to write lucid, muscular prose.
4. At the computer, you stare off into space, realizing the awful truth. Your work isn't brilliant, it's awful.
5. Maybe caffeine will staunch the doubt. But if you go to the coffee shop, someone might ask you about your writing. Civilians don't understand about rejection. At the moment, you don't either.
6. You settle for coffee from your home pot, avoiding eye contact with your spouse. You especially don't want to have to tell him/her the details of your failure.
7. Skulk back to the computer. Skulk is such a good writerly word that thinking of it cheers you. It proves you are a writer.
8. But writing is what really makes you a writer. And the words still won't flow.
9. You sit at the computer until you again feel the tears come. This time you let it all out. You cry, you scream, you pace, you curse. After a good long bout of this behavior you take a deep breath.
10. And you begin again to write.

Charlotte Rains Dixon is a writer from Portland, Oregon, whose fiction and nonfiction has been published in a variety of print and online publications. She is in the process of rewriting two novels, *Language of Trees* and *Emma Jean's Bad Behavior*, and she has written numerous short stories. Her fiction is imbued with a strong sense of place, in particular her beloved Northwest. However, she also has fallen in love with the South and considers Nashville her adopted home. She has been a mentor in the Writer's Loft creative writing program since its beginning and also teaches and critiques privately. Her most recent area of specialization is ghostwriting, and she is currently writing a book for a Los Angeles entrepreneur titled *Coaching the Millionaire Within*.

Stalking the Ghosts of Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre

by John Emerson

PARIS. A cold day in early February. HE is sitting in Café Le Dome, on Boulevard Montparnasse, having flown in only the day before from that faraway and over the rainbow city called New York. HE is a writer (well, time will tell, won't it). See, HE is scribbling in a black Moleskine notebook, the same as Hemingway once used. Come to think of it, did not ol' Hem also sit and scribble here, in Le Dome? Or did ol' Hem do his scribbling at Café Rotonde, over there, directly across Boulevard Montparnasse? (Ah yes, we can imagine little Café Rotonde looking over at the much larger Le Dome, sticking out its tongue, and blowing two rasping raspberries.)

Now look, HE is sipping a whiskey neat that a waiter has just set before him. No longer scribbling, HE stares out of the cityview window at the blur and noise of to-and-fro pedestrians, cars, trucks, and motor scooters crisscrossing (zoom-zoom-zoom) Boulevards Montparnasse and Raspail. Counterpoised to this *mise en scene*, a gentleman in a long black overcoat stands looking at a large street map posted in a large wood frame behind an equally large sheet of plastic. With the forefinger of his right hand he traces a path on this map: north on Raspail, past Notre-Dame Des Champs, past rue de Fleurus (where Gertrude Stein once lived, at number 27), then right and across on rue de Vaugirard as far as the Palais du Luxembourg. The gentleman's concentration is focused on his finger, on the map, and he does not appear to notice when a young woman walks up and stands beside him. She is not pretty (but would do to keep a body warm on such a cold day as this). Like a ballerina taking her bows, the woman squats, and, opening her right hand (which, until that moment had been a fist), she drops what appears to be a gold wedding band on the sidewalk. Though we cannot hear her, it is apparent that she has spoken, for the gentleman has quite suddenly taken notice of her. Picking up the gold wedding band, the woman stands and shows it, very deliberately, to the gentleman. He smiles, and shakes his head. Now the woman starts to walk away, admiring the ring as though seeing it for the very first time. The gentleman returns his attention (and finger) to the large street map. Suddenly, the woman turns about. Taking hold of the gentleman's left hand, she places the ring on one of his fingers. The ring fits. (Princess Charming meets her Cinderfella?) The gentleman and the woman converse. She wears an imploring look on her face. He looks as though he is trying to be agreeable. Now he puts a hand into a trouser pocket, pulls out a few coins. It is the woman's turn to shake her head. The gentleman repockets his coins, then points across the street at Café Rotonde. The woman beams, and together, when the lights have changed, they cross the street.

(Here, inside Le Dome, chattering choruses of unrehearsed voices rise and fall like the strands of haphazard orchestration in a symphony by Dutilleux.)

Anyway.

Perhaps it would please him if we took a peek at what HE has been scribbling. Let us see . . . Cimetiere du Montparnasse. Visited and drank graveside toasts to Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre. So it is a journal. Only that. He also has written: Will meet Marie tomorrow at 1600, in front of the Saint Michel fountain . . . if she shows. Except for a crude sketch that could be the Eiffel Tower (or a penis), the rest of the page is blank.

What's that you say? What is HE, this middle-aged, bearded, balding (oh, he won't like that remark), presumably American from New York City doing in Paris? Ah, who does not know this question? How utterly pedestrian. Oh well, I suppose we are obliged to answer: HE has come to Paris to . . . to what? To stalk the ghosts of Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre. HE has come to Paris because HE believes that no one can truly say they have lived until they have experienced Paris. HE has come to Paris to live at the Left

Bank bookstore Shakespeare and Company (where each night HE sleeps and dreams of Isabel Huppert, Juliette Binoche, Audrey Tautou, and Bridget Bardot, the French Marilyn Monroe). HE has come to Paris to be, even for a little while, Parisian.

We resume.

Three and a half hours have now passed. HE drinks the last of a café au lait. Puts away his notebook and pen. A moment later HE is standing out on the street. The sun is setting over the Basilique Sacre-Coeur, and the Eiffel Tower sparkles like a starbound rocket ship in this pale Parisian night of midwinter. As HE pulls his black wool cap down over his ears, a young woman suddenly pops up before him. Monsieur, she says, presenting what appears to be a gold wedding band. At first, HE gives this young woman hardly a glance. But then . . . shrugging his shoulders as if to say, Ah, what the hell . . . HE turns and reenters le Dome, beckoning the young woman to follow.

The door bangs shut behind them.

John Emerson is an Andes, New York, native who recently spent three months as the official writer in residence at the Shakespeare and Company bookshop in Paris, France. After working for nine years in Hollywood as a freelance studio engineer on such popular American television shows as *Jeopardy*, *The Arsenio Hall Show*, and *Who's the Boss*, Emerson focused on a successful writing career. His stories and articles have appeared in *Critical Quarterly* (England), *The Long Story*, and the *East Hampton Star*. One of his stories won first prize in a contest sponsored by the Pomona Valley Writer's Association of Claremont College, in southern California. And an essay he wrote on guitarist/composer John McLaughlin (Miles Davis, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Shakti) was accepted by Pig Iron Press for inclusion in *Jazz Traditions*. John may be reached at jemersonus2002@yahoo.com.

The American Title Contest

by Janice Lynn

Entering a contest in a magazine and then begging friends, family, and strangers to go online to vote for your manuscript is a highly unusual way to make your first sale, but that's exactly what I did.

I'd been pursuing publication for three years when I entered the first 50 pages of my manuscript *Jane Millionaire* in RTBOOKclub Magazine's American Title Contest in June 2004. I'd been a finalist in several prestigious writing contests and won a few with small cash prizes. I'd signed with a New York agent who believed in my writing and her ability to sell my novels. I'd made it to senior editor's desks only to be told something didn't quite fit what they were looking for or that the line I targeted was being killed. And, most importantly, despite the fact that friends and family didn't understand the passion for writing that burned within me, I'd been writing consistently day after day and refused to let anyone steal my dream. I knew that getting a book published by a major New York publishing company wasn't an easy feat, but let's face it, what thing that we dream of for years and years is attained with ease?

Honestly, I never thought I'd make the finalist cut, but I had to try. I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting myself out there. After all, we were talking a one in ten shot of being published and a guaranteed sale if I won. In July, I received a request for the full manuscript from the publishing company offering the publishing contract grand prize (Dorchester Publishing). After Dorchester chose the ten finalists from the complete manuscripts, they turned the contest over to RTBOOKclub magazine. In August, I was notified that I would compete American Idol style for a publishing contract.

In September, ten nervous finalists turned in bios, photos, and all five rounds of competition, and then the wait started. Voting lasted two weeks and was done online via RT's Web site. The first round began October 18 and consisted of the first line of our manuscripts. Round two consisted of a hero

and heroine description. Round three consisted of a story summary. Round four was a dialogue scene, and round five was a romantic scene. Each round eliminated the two finalists with the lowest number of votes. Anyone could vote, but only once per e-mail address.

There was one Canadian finalist, one Californian, and myself, from a small Tennessee town. The other seven finalists all hailed from the northeast, and several lived in large cities. At the beginning, my goal was not to be the first one cut. As I made it from one round to the next, I began to believe I had a real chance. The three judges (stand-ins for Paula, Randy, and Simon) liked *Jane Millionaire* and my first negative comment didn't come until round four. When round five was announced in February 2005, I was one of the last two finalists and had a fifty-percent chance of my dream of publishing a book coming true.

RTBOOKclub sponsors a conference for authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers each year. In 2005, the conference was in St. Louis. On Thursday, April 28, *Jane Millionaire* was announced the winner of the first-ever American Title Contest. As the winner, my cover was unveiled on stage in front of more than nine hundred people.

My cover is fabulous and actually has "National Winner of the American Title Contest" beneath the title.

In hopes of keeping the contest momentum going, *Jane Millionaire* was given an official release date of November 29, 2005. It's a paperback and was released mass market. It's been released in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia as of this moment.

I won't know how my debut novel has done for quite a few months, but being featured in a magazine for a total of nine months has given me name recognition within the industry, and I learned a great deal about promotion prior to making the sale. Being a part of the contest taught me invaluable lessons about myself, the writing industry, the value of persistence, and how much time promotion can consume.

Holding one's dream in one's hands is a heady sensation, and I still can't believe I won. Guess it just goes to show that one should always believe in dreams and pursue all routes to making them into realities, even the most impossible seeming routes.

I don't know of anyone else who's sold in quite the way I did, but soon that'll change: the contest was such a success the magazine and publishing company are sponsoring an American Title Two contest that'll be announced during May 2006 in Daytona, Florida.

Janice Lynn knows a lot about affairs of the heart. Not only is she a nurse practitioner in a rural area of Tennessee but she's also the winner of multiple awards as a romance author. *Jane Millionaire* was released mass market by Dorchester Publishing and hit the shelves in December 2005. When not working on affairs of the heart, Janice is living her very own affair of the heart with her husband, children, and Trouble, her Jack Russell who is appropriately named. To learn more about Janice and her new novel, visit her online at <http://janicelynn.net>.

Degrees of Passion

by Terry Price, M.F.A.

So you're thinking about getting a master of fine arts in writing degree.

As I write this, I'm in my last semester toward my M.F.A. from Spalding University in Louisville and will graduate in May of 2006. Recently someone asked if the M.F.A. would guarantee I'd get published or get a better job, and I had to honestly answer, no. Naturally, the follow-up question was, then why are you doing it?

I repeated the best answer I'd heard, that the M.F.A. is a degree of passion. I've been writing for years but still didn't have a good grasp of the craft of writing. The M.F.A. program immersed me into a community of writers where I could learn and use the language of craft on a regular basis.

There is passion in the relationships formed during the M.F.A. experience both with students and faculty. During my four residencies, I've encountered an incredible diversity of people and writers and now belong to a strong writing community. At Spalding, I have experienced a unique opportunity to enjoy, play, work, and learn in a place with other people who share my passion for writing and my desire to be a better writer. This passion bleeds into my work and my desire to create.

Tuition and expenses to earn an M.F.A. will generally range from \$8,000 to \$30,000 depending upon the type of program and school you select. You can pay as you go or use student loans, scholarships, and teaching assistantships to help offset the costs. The programs generally take two years to complete, and you should expect to commit to approximately 25 hours a week on your reading and writing.

How do you find a program? In *The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs*, you'll find important information about different programs—the teacher-to-student ratio, current faculty, and program philosophy. In addition, the *Poets & Writers* Web site maintains a list of writing programs with links directly to each department.

How do you then choose a program? First you'll have to decide between a full residency program where you attend classes much like undergraduate school and a low-residency program, like Spalding, where each semester begins with a ten-day residency on campus. During the residency you are matched up with a faculty member (mentor) who you'll be sending packets of writing to about every three weeks, each consisting of about 40 pages of new work and revisions. The mentor will review the packets, sending them back with comments and suggestions. Part of the beauty of the program is that writing that much under those deadlines stretches the limits of your talent and skill.

Call programs and tell them you're interested in applying, and generally they'll be happy to let you sit in on an M.F.A. workshop. You'll get to see interaction among students and between students and faculty. Talk to students after classes and get their impressions about the program and their experiences.

I want to be able to write to my potential and so pursuing the M.F.A. was one of the best decisions I've ever made. The experience has taught me that I am a writer and that I can justify making the time in my life to write. Finally, there is no doubt it would have taken a lot longer to improve my writing if I hadn't spent the last two years at Spalding. The M.F.A. continues to be a passionate pursuit, a source of pride and an invaluable experience.

Terry Price is a Nashville-based writer and a graduate of and mentor in the Writer's Loft creative writing program at MTSU. He graduated with a master of fine arts in writing degree at Spalding University in Louisville in May 2006. Terry writes short stories and is working on a novel based in Nashville. You can reach Terry at t.price@comcast.net.

The Joy of Letter Writing

by Diana M. Raab, M.F.A.

According to mystery writer P. D. James, "No other literary form is more revealing, more spontaneous or more individual than the letter." Personally, I view letter writing as akin to having a conversation with someone but with the added dimension of interjecting our reflections on our thoughts.

In general, the purpose of the letter is to inform, instruct, entertain, amuse, explore psychological problems, keep in touch, and to offer love. Women in Victorian times wrote love letters as a way of intimately expressing themselves. Their letters were rarely taken seriously because they didn't pose a threat to the male-based literary community. The advent of the telephone was seen as a replacement for letter writing, but now with the birth of e-mail, there seems to be a resurgence of the age-old art of letter writing.

Five decades ago I wrote my first letter to my parents from sleep-away summer camp. Although that letter only had five words in it, "I hate camp, Love, Diana," those days around the age of six marked the

beginning of my life long fascination with the written word.

During adolescence, my letters to my parents were filled with emotion and angst about society's expectations and frustrations about my future. Many of those letters to my parents remained unsent, but the cathartic exercise made them worth writing. Today, perhaps less letters remain unsent, particularly e-mail letters, because the "click, send" is far too easy.

My passion for letter writing took a more intense leap at the age of nineteen during the courtship between my husband and me. For more than two years, we wrote letters to maintain our long-distance love affair while living at distant points of North America—he in Canada and me in New York. Phone calls were also nice, but letters allowed us to dig deeper into our emotions. Now I have boxes of those letters stored away in our hall closet. One day, I hope, they will be cherished heirlooms to our three kids.

Over the years, I've also used letter writing to release pent-up emotions. I've done this through complaint letters or letters to the editor. When confronting someone on an issue, it's easier (and healthier) to blow up on the page than to the person. It's also a good way to gather your thoughts first and then segue into having a discussion.

I continued the practice of letter writing a great deal when my kids were adolescents. Basically, it was easier for me to write to them than to talk to them. Somehow looking in one another's eyes is more intimidating, in the same way that it's often easier to converse during a long car ride. My kids seemed to pay more attention to my written word. As a matter of fact, back in 2001, one of my correspondences with my eldest daughter, Rachel, was published in Cheryl Dellesaga's book, *Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Their Wisdom in Navigating the Tumultuous Teenage Years*.

When Rachel was in fifth grade, I chaperoned a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia. During our visit to Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, the tour guide discussed Jefferson's passion for letter writing. Jefferson ingeniously crafted a device to make copies of all his written letters. He attached two pencils to either end of a two-foot wire. He used one of the pencils to write with, and the other was suspended above a piece of paper to copy his words.

My grandmother died when I was ten and I frequently write her in absentia, effectively a form of journaling. I like keeping her abreast of my current goings-on. Since my father passed away fifteen years ago, I also enjoy periodically writing to him. It makes me feel good to link him into my life, plus it gives me a chance to say those things I never got to tell him when he was alive.

Most writers are good letter writers. Authors such as Pam Houston, Fenton Johnson, and Shawn Wong frequently write letters. Whether they're mailed or not is really irrelevant. Some people even write to their pets. Writing to whomever or about whatever inspires you to pour your heart out; remember, by all means, to date those letters and make yourself a copy. In the future, it will be amusing to look back at them, and you never know how their contents may be used in one of your future literary works.

Some writers use the letter form to warm up their writing. It helps them get into the swing of their stories. Others write letters in their journals, particularly if they're having difficulty developing a character.

Writers, such as Shawn Wong view letter writing as practice for their craft. Wong says,

When I was eighteen I started thinking about becoming a writer but as an undergraduate student and later as a graduate student in creative writing, I didn't really have a career as a writer so I wrote letters, sometimes as many as five or six letters a day. In looking back at the thousands of pages of letters, I realize those letters were how I practiced my writing.

Author John McPhee once said that every book he wrote began with the words, "Dear Mother." Sometimes it doesn't end up in his final version, but it gets him writing. In her journal volumes, Anais Nin wrote to her deranged father.

One of the biggest challenges of letter writing is how to write them. The best advice is to start the letter with saying exactly what you want to say and then use the body of the letter to elaborate. Let the words flow. You'll know when you're finished. You can use the circular path and finish the letter with the same thought you began with.

The letters we most enjoy receiving are those which carry the writer's personality. When reading well-written letters we feel as if the person is sitting beside us, looking at us and speaking. This illustrates how the act of letter writing helps to develop our most authentic and unique voice.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of letter writing is the opportunity to communicate exactly what's on your mind, and what's more, you can **choose** your audience! What more could a writer ask for than a specific, hand-picked, captivated reader? So, if you could say anything you wanted to, to anyone in the world, who would you address? What would you say? Choose a pen pal, explore, and enjoy the journey!

Diana M. Raab teaches personal writing at the University of Santa Barbara Extension. She also writes a column called *Your Muse* for the online writer's newsletter *Ink Byte*. Her book *Getting Pregnant and Staying Pregnant* won the Benjamin Franklin Book Award and was translated into French and Spanish. It has been in print since 1985. Her essays have appeared or will appear in *Survivor Stories*, the *Louisville Review*, *Surviving Ophelia*, *Frostproof Review*, and *Palo Alto Review*. Her poetry has or will appear in the *Aardvark* and the *League of American Poets*, *Rosebud*, and the *Writer's Journal*. Her works in progress include a memoir, *Regina's Closet*, based on her grandmother's life in World War I. She is also collaborating with her daughter Rachel Raab, a digital artist, on *Warped*, an inspirational book for teenagers.

Watch and Stalk

by Kathy Rhodes

"I watch and stalk," Annie Dillard says in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She walks about the creekbanks, contemplating the natural world beyond its commonplace surfaces, recording raw details.

If I could write like Annie Dillard, I'd win a Pulitzer Prize. But I don't have her lush surroundings, her sense of wonder and way with words, or her interpretation of those wild, breathtaking moments.

My Tinker Creek is a postage stamp inside a cedar fence—old pasture trees; new oak, birch, and sycamore; squirrels skittering, burying acorns in pots of thyme; chickadees constructing nests from the dog's shed hair; and a goldfish pond with a waterfall, where mourning doves sip and a black cat dips his paw.

"I walk out; I see something," Dillard says, "some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell."

It's not enough for me, as a writer, to pass through life scratching at the surface. The natural world comes at me in layers, and I peel each one back to see what's there. I train myself to be aware of my surroundings. I study an interesting thing going on. I let my senses run rampant. I discipline myself to be still, empty, to block anything that would impede full interaction with the object of my attention. I consume it as it consumes me. Then I dramatize the intimate details by laying them out in a line of words across the page, resounding to the rhythm of that beaten bell.

My breakfast table in the bay window is the gateway. I sit and partake. I watch and stalk. Last Saturday morning, it was a bird that staged a coup and captured my day.

I slid a knife inside the steaming oatmeal muffin, spread a glob of butter, and watched it melt. The bay window offered a view of the winter-empty oak, birch, and sycamore. It was about eight.

I spotted something big on the fence above the white birdhouse with tin roof and WELCOME sign. It scooted clumsily to a sunny spot and stopped beside the SEE ROCK CITY birdhouse. I ran to get the camera and binoculars; my husband grabbed an Audubon guide.

"I think it's a hawk," he said.

I flipped to the section on hawks. Sharp-shinned, red-tailed, Cooper's.

The bird's front was white, pure and gleaming in the sun, with rusty stripes. His back of gray-feathered layers was fluorescent, shiny, like river rocks with water flowing over them, and his long tail had patterned bars of white, black, gray, black, gray, black. He had a flat head, a curved beak, and a mad scowl. His amber eye looked at me.

He was watching me . . . like a hawk. He drew me in, and my ordered day shifted to an engagement between him and me.

He was fixed on the fencetop, a flat rail like a stage. Beneath his feathered trousers, a yellow talon gripped something small. I strained, squinted, and stared, but couldn't tell what it was. He kept a grip, his amber eye on me.

The yard was eerily quiet. Sparrows and chickadees weren't flitting about, settling in birch branches, lingering at feeders. Squirrels weren't trailing tree limbs, racing and chasing, hopping from limb to limb to fence to fieldstones around the pond.

About nine-thirty the hawk started picking feathers furiously, slinging them to the wind, scattering them. White fluff caught the sun and swirled to the ground. He kept up a pattern of plucking, looking at me, plucking, looking.

I grabbed the binoculars and moved to the couch, rested on my knees, propped my elbows on the back cushions to steady my view, and spied out the window. I was hunched, hiding, stalking. I slunk from window to window to see better.

It was bloody red where the hawk plucked. A little yellow leg fell to the side. It was a bird. The predator bit at the body, ripped it apart, ate it. The hawk was having breakfast on my fence.

I'd just eaten three muffins and was witnessing this carnage. My stomach swelled, shrank, swelled again. I shivered, swallowed, and spied some more.

The hawk stopped and rested. At eleven-thirty he started again. He bit, nibbled, and glared, then stilled himself. At one-thirty he finished his meal. I'd watched his prey dwindle from a black-feathered ball to bloody-red tissue to nothing. He cleaned his beak on the fence, scraped it with his talons, then spread his wings and sailed away.

I went to look at his spoils. Dots of red-jellied guts and fluffs of down stuck to the wood on the fencetop. A gizzard lay on a landscaping timber nearby. Feathers were flung about on brown crisps of leaves—long feathers with mockingbird markings.

He got my mockingbird. It was a curious thing, coming to my window every morning, showing up when I mowed grass, always first at the feeder.

A hopeless feeling washed over me. Yesterday, the mockingbird was whole and majestic. Now, he was gone, only a few unwanted traces left.

I watch and stalk, gather and present. My best writing comes from a passion for knowledge, absorbed and reflected. My best writing comes after immersion in my subject, like a river baptism, water washing over me, words flowing from head to paper.

Kathy Rhodes is the author of *Pink Butterbeans: Stories from the Heart of a Southern Woman*, a collection of 50 personal essays. (See www.pinkbutterbeans.com.) Her works have appeared in magazines, newspapers, and literary anthologies including Simon & Schuster's *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul II*. She is editor of *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal*, an online place for emerging and established writers to publish their works, which can be found at www.asouthernjournal.com. Kathy is also online at www.kathyhardyrhodes.com.

Writer's Loft Sabbatical Well Worth Hurdles: You'll Need a Laptop, Coffeepot, and Shower Shoes

by Suzanne Craig Robertson

If your standards are not high and you're desperate for time alone to write, have I got a deal for you. Last summer I was the recipient of the Writer's Loft's first Writing Sabbatical—an all-expenses-paid, seven-day trip back in time to your freshman dorm. It comes complete with money for meals and lots of time to write. Sadly, there is no clothing or entertainment allowance.

When they say sabbatical, they don't mean "We'll talk to your boss, arrange interesting full-time activities for your kids, and plop you in the lap of luxury." They really mean, "Here's a week we'll pay for you to eat, sleep and write, and good luck with the rest." But it's a start and no one else had offered that to me since way back in . . . well, no one had ever offered that to me before, so I jumped at it.

As I drove away that Sunday headed for my writing week, I left my supportive parents and unquestioning husband clutching my daughters' detailed schedules with determination. I had a decidedly slacker-runaway-mom feeling about it. I can't deny it: I was giddy. I was to be alone for a whole week. I am a certified extrovert—having taken the test administered by a professional and everything—so one might think that after a time I would not relish solitude, that I might go in search of crowds, laughter, the limelight, perhaps. But no, I found that—if I scheduled regular visits with my kids—I could've gone a month or more soaking in the unregulated silence. I didn't even connect to the Internet or check the messages at my office. (Okay! I did meet my brother and sister-in-law for lunch . . . and went to their house for a clean shower once . . . and went shopping just a teeny bit, but don't tell Lance and Roy.)

As part of the sabbatical, I received a \$50 gift certificate to the school bookstore, which surprisingly took me two hours to spend. It is not a large store, but with free money and nobody yanking on me to hurry me up I pondered every single item in there except the math textbooks. What fun! I ended up with a pin drive for my computer, lots of cool pencils and pens, some books, paper, and junk food. I skipped, after some lament, the shorts with MTSU Go Raiders across the butt.

Before you scoff at the idea of staying in a summer dorm for a week, you should acknowledge the inverse relationship between the level of desperation to write and the willingness to accept adverse conditions. As I write this column now, for instance, I am three seasons past the sabbatical, sitting in a very comfy chair, feet up, air conditioning just right. I have a clean, private bath in my immediate future. But since I sat down to write this short piece, I have been summoned to grill cheese sandwiches, vacuum a ground pretzel mess, start an emergency load of laundry starring tomorrow's soccer uniform, and snuggle two girls to bed. These are, with the possible exception of the pretzels, part of my job description around here. I signed on for them but that doesn't stop me from wistfully recalling my sabbatical's cinderblock dorm room with glaring overhead light and straight-back chair. Geez, it's either La-Z-Boy, soft lighting, and writing in frantic spurts between domestic crises or rock-mattress; community hairball-drain; and relaxed, uninterrupted writing. I myself have seen no middle ground.

Honestly, if you live alone and are in charge of your own time, this sabbatical is not for you.

If you win the sabbatical, in addition to writing materials you will need shower shoes, your own coffeepot and a bedside lamp—and I can't stress the shoes enough. The shower stalls were such that dropping the soap meant it was dead to me and I would need to buy a new one. No tax dollars have been wasted on cleanser in that dorm; you can feel good about that.

The dorm experience also included a third-floor room (elevator, are you kidding?) and know-it-all teenagers manning the desk, eyeing the old lady suspiciously. A curiosity, I was, after I stood there nearly two hours upon arrival because, for one, I didn't fit into any of their summer school categories. I could've

gotten in a little sooner had I been a schoolteacher there for a conference, but alas, I was not. At issue was that I have a roommate; it is not regulation to stay alone (even though the Writer's Loft had specifically arranged for a private room). The desk guy had to track down his supervisor (age 19) who located her supervisor (20, maybe) who dispatched a near-adult who finally authorized a key—with very dire warnings about me having to go see the dean of student housing the next morning (and boy was I going to be in trouble). The Writer's Loft was news to the dorm workers. And that a grown-up would come stay there apparently without force baffled them. But you will not have this problem. I have paved your way.

The best part of the dorm is leaving it: going out the front door and taking a right will put you only steps away from Walker Library. This is the type of library they should all be, inspiring and open. For readers like us it is breathtaking. The four stories are set up like the lobby of a Hilton Hotel, exposed all around the inside. Every floor has tables with Internet access and comfortable chairs; this is where I spent most of my time. I was at a point working on a novel where I needed to rearrange scenes, which couldn't be done in short spurts of time. I would go there in the cool quiet, the day stretched in front of me like fresh inspiration, with no drop-dead end time when dinner had to be ready. Each scene of my novel was described on a color-coded index card and I spread them out on a large table and played a literary version of 52-card pickup. I'd see how that flowed and do it again. Then, important to the process, I'd go take a nap.

Which brings me to a major benefit of this sabbatical. I have known for some time that my natural body clock was not anything similar to what the world requires; fitting writing into this anti-me, daylight timeframe—and working and mothering—is taxing. But during the week of the sabbatical, I wrote late into the creepy night zipping crazily through formerly blocked thoughts, then slept like a dead person until I missed breakfast over at the student center. I'd roll over and start writing again, my ideas unfrazzled by an alarm clock or snarled downtown traffic.

The quiet, unscheduled writing time continued to seep into my soul the next Sunday even as I packed up to leave my third-floor dorm penthouse, barreling straight for my littered calendar and four-foot piles of laundry. The novel still unfinished, I am a solid week closer than I would've been and grateful for that.

Suzanne Craig Robertson is editor of a statewide monthly magazine based in Nashville. She is a 2005 graduate of the Writer's Loft and holds a B.S. in communications from UT Knoxville, where, amazingly, the dorms were not that dirty. During the Loft sabbatical, she completed one of many revisions of her first novel and has since written about seven sentences.

Unclog With a Blog

by Ashley Wrye

Every morning I wake up with diarrhea. Not the kind that sends you racing to the bathroom but the kind that sends you racing to the keyboard for relief. We've all been there; we've all lain awake at night with thoughts rushing through our heads; we've all bought a small notebook to set next to our alarm clocks in case inspiration hits us.

But how much of what we think are we putting down on paper? How much of it is worth putting on paper? The answer to both questions is not much. So what do you do with the hundreds of thousands of miscellaneous thoughts that roll around and won't leave you alone? You unclog with a blog. Most writers I know have two feelings on blogs:

- 1) they love them and write in them all the time, or they like the idea of them, wrote in them once, and then started reading other people's; or

2) they don't understand how rambling on about breakfast, your commute, or last night's episode of some crappy TV show can possibly help you with your craft.

For those who fall into the latter category, you're wrong and here's why: writing anything is better than writing nothing. It's not what you write about but how you approach it that matters most.

I started a blog more than a year ago with hopes that writing online would be a way for me to release the frivolous thoughts that kept me from writing anything of "substance." I found a free site, came up with a title, picked some pretty colors, and was on my way. After a couple of entries, I e-mailed my friends and some family members and let them know of my big unveiling.

While this was a good idea for my friends, I didn't quite think it through when dealing with my family members. In fact, for a long time I didn't think my family read my blog. My friends left comments so when they read it, I knew. But it wasn't until my 80-plus-year-old grandmother started spewing facts about a drinking binge I'd written about that I realized my private corner of the Internet was not as private as I'd been thinking.

With a journal, you can write about whomever you'd like and not be concerned with their feelings. In fact, when I'm writing in my journal the only times I feel anything about what I've written is when I imagine one of my kids reading it after I'm dead. I don't even have kids yet, but I'm still that paranoid. Think about looking back on an old picture, looking at a crazy fashion, and saying "What was I thinking!" Now imagine doing that and having what you were thinking scribbled on the next page. It's an uglier scene than those bellbottoms or hot pants could ever be.

What makes a blog different from a journal? Technically, blogs are a person's online rants about current events, a common theme, or something that everyone knows or can relate to. An online journal details things that are a little more personal: a work situation, a relationship, things you'd normally put in a journal. Most "blogs" out there are actually combinations between blogs and journals.

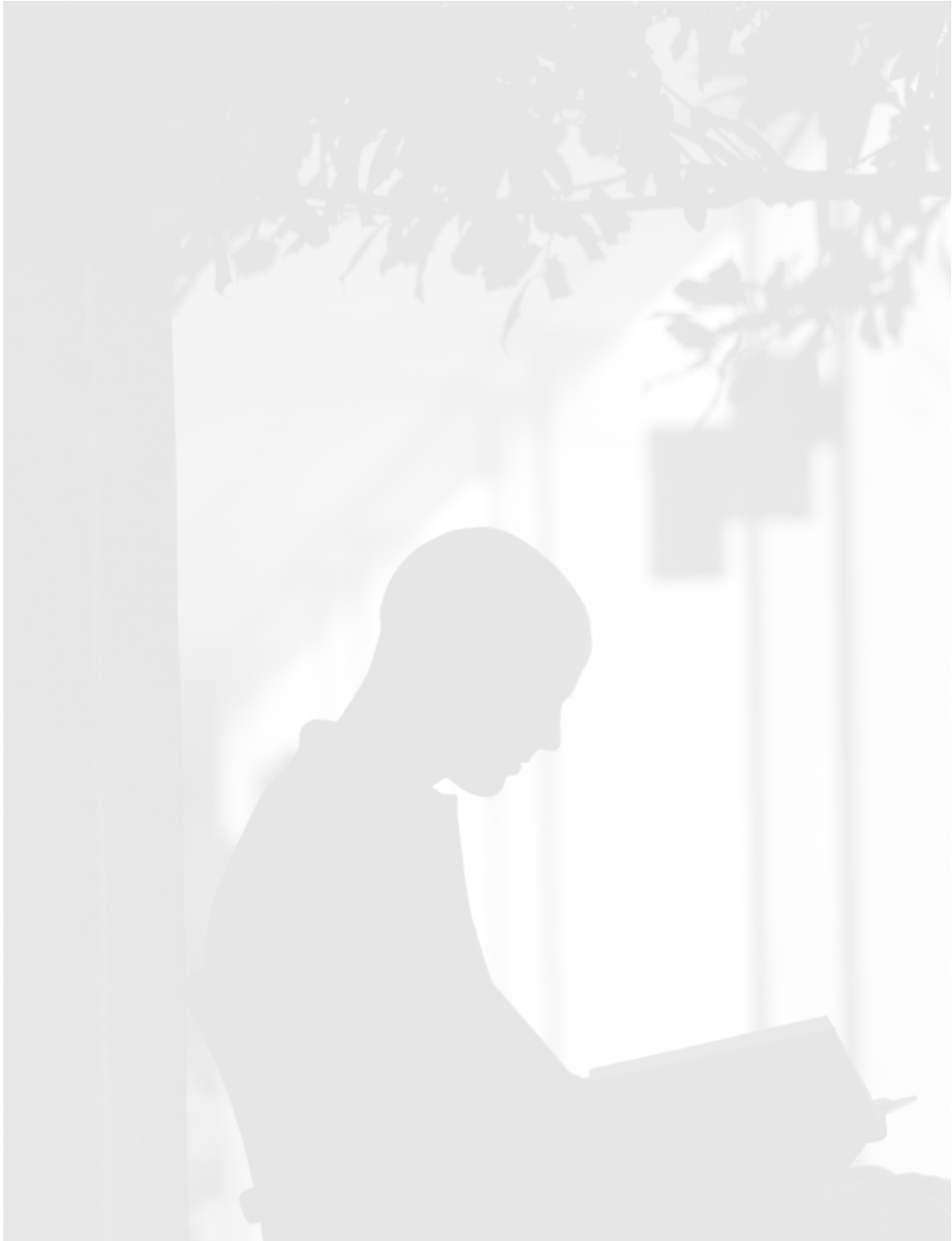
I like writing equally about crazy things people say in my real life and debating what Paris Hilton wears when she's trying to be slutty. Both are entertaining to me, and my own amusement is why I continue to blog. Well, my own amusement and the fact that I've been able to go through old blog entries and use things.

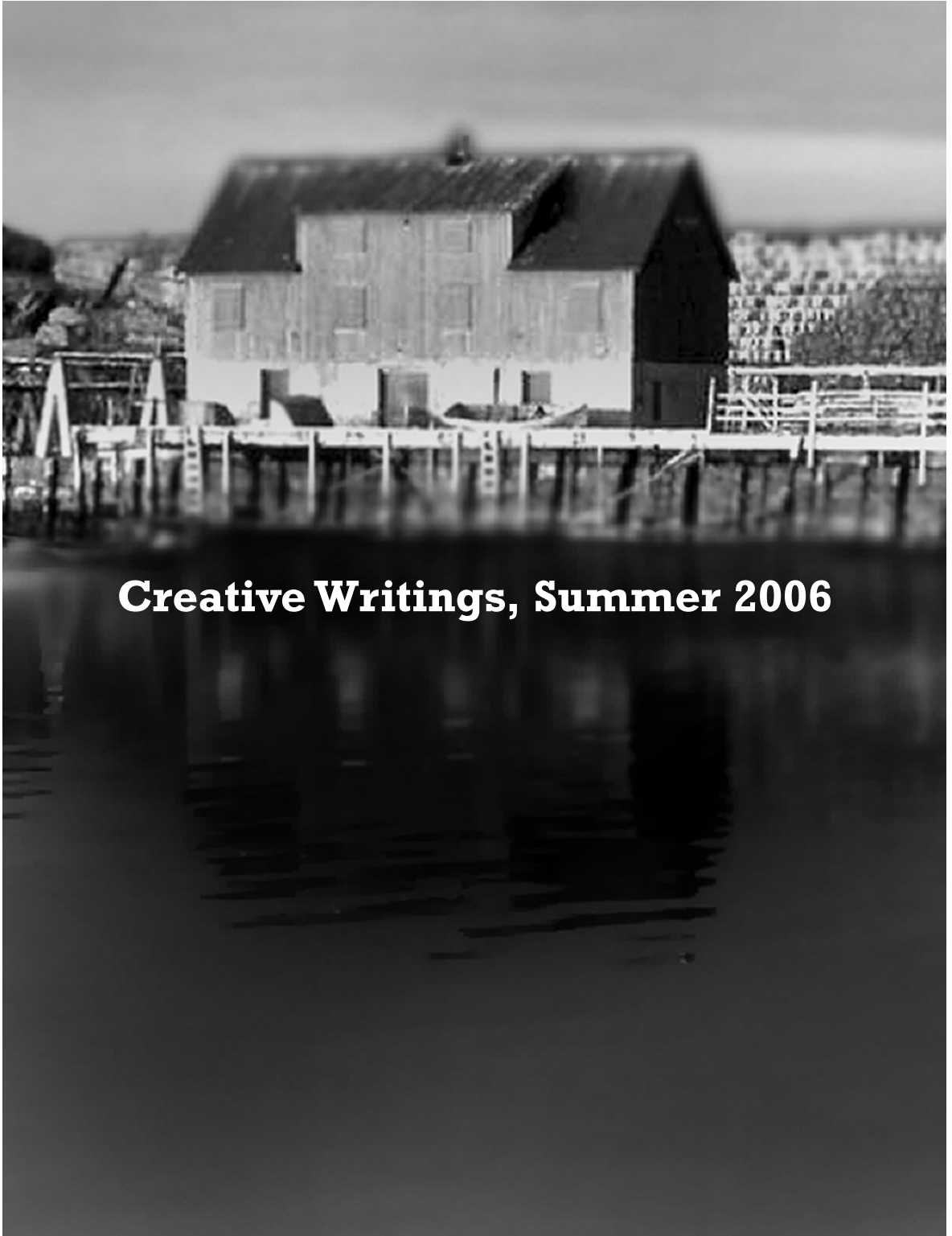
Every month, I print out that month's blog entries and put them in a binder. Then I go back through the entries and circle phrases or paragraphs that would not only relate to my business trip to Birmingham, but also to how a road-weary character might feel:

"Oh the joys of the business trip, where the place you stay is determined by the free breakfast offerings and the days stretch deep into the night with free dinners that aren't actually free, because they steal your soul."

What was once a phrase stemming from exhaustion and frustration is now something that sums up an overdramatic character's state of mind. I'm amazed at how much I've blogged that I've been able to reuse. Mostly because I'm not concentrating too hard on sentence structure or plot or worrying about what a character might say. It's just me, my computer, and my daily diarrhea.

Ashley Wrye writes at least weekly in her blog, brilliantmediocrity.blogspot.com, which has been linked to AOL's Hollywood Blogspot Web page twice in the last year. When not writing online, she's been published in *Generation X Journal* and the *Literary Trunk*. With a B.A. in journalism from Indiana University, Ashley hopes to eventually move over from the dark side of public relations to writing full-time before the Hoosiers win another NCAA championship in basketball.





Creative Writings, Summer 2006

The Highway

by
Susie Brown

Sparks flare, embers gleam—
four hundred miles of silence.
The car weaves casually, in and out;
hands clasp hard, knuckles white.
I hope we crash
in a fiery mass; you are
thrown to a bloody death—
I see the blotched red pavement,
pieces of the car strewn over there—
slowing gawkers stop to see the mess.

Freedom Tango

by
Susie Brown

He moves to prove
 his freedom;
she must not take that
 away from him . . .
The drip drip drone
 of betrayal erodes;
she does not ask
 where have you been?
One whirls away, then caught,
 comes back -
push and pull of circumstance,
 whim or will, who knows?
tango sway of back and forth,
 in and out . . .
He moves away;
 she moves in -
he turns to see her;
 she is gone.

August Twenty-One

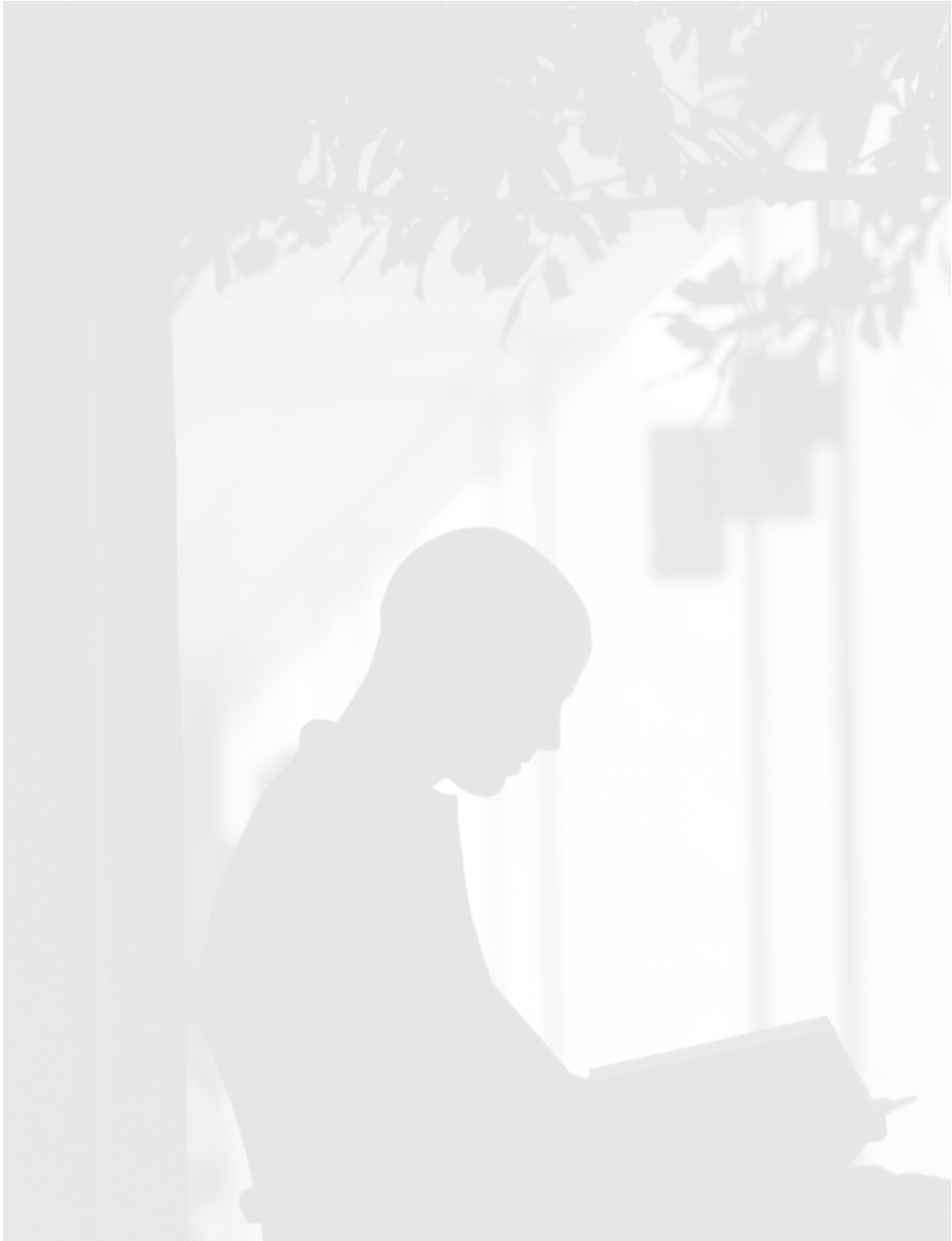
by
Susie Brown

This day my aunt is ninety-five;
she lies in narrowed bed,
a home of ancient strangers.
At her window frills of curtains move,
still photos of unknown children smile.
I try to wake her,
lovely in her flawless skin;
her eyes are closed
she may hear me.

Surprise

by
Susie Brown

Last night at dusk, walking in the garden,
suddenly we saw two huge owls land on a tree limb,
calling to each other.
Barely seeing them, we froze to hear
as they began to talk,
it was not hoo-hoo, as you might expect,
but more of a chat,
short words and phrases
I can't even imitate –
we hardly dared to breathe.



Chestnut

by
Ray Mathes

"April's going on a trip," Peter said out loud to nobody, "and I've got to drop everything and run out to the farm." It wasn't the half-hour drive into the Tennessee hills that was so frustrating. The drive was the nice part of it. He always enjoyed visiting Uncle Gus's farm. No, it was April's insistence that he was the only one that could care for her animals while she was away.

Taking the time off work wasn't a problem either. He owned Smoky Mountain Engineering and that made him the boss. Like the poster said: "Rule #1: The boss is always right." Why couldn't it work that way with April? What was it about her that kept him wrapped around her finger?

It certainly wasn't the animals. April had been living on his farm for almost two years. She'd decided it was the perfect place for rescued animals. Not a reasoned decision, it was spur of the moment when she rescued a mangy, starving, three-legged dog that somebody had tossed out of the car in front of the farm. Now the farm was home to many lame, sick animals: dogs, cats, goats, and two horses. Many of them wouldn't last two weeks. Some of them should have been put down to relieve their suffering. After the first couple, Peter had refused to pay the outrageous veterinary bills, so all she did was clean, feed, and comfort them.

It was still early enough in the morning that he could talk to April and then get back for his lunch with Steve. Lunch with Steve on the first Tuesday of each month had been a ritual every since they had started their businesses. The two had grown up in the same town, become drinking buddies in the Army, and then had gone their separate ways—Peter to college, Steve to learn a trade. They had come together later when they started related businesses in their hometown. He enjoyed Steve's company, and he profited from his dealings with Steve's Company. He could drop any pretensions around Steve; his old army buddy called 'em as he saw 'em. Steve could be rude and crude at times: "When you're dealing with IQs smaller than a piss-ant, you've gotta get their attention," he once counseled Peter.

"April's going on a trip," he said, gritting his teeth to bring his focus back to the situation at hand. The farm wasn't large, only 34 acres, but it was big enough to handle April's animals. Still, he wished she hadn't taken on the horses. A good, gentle horse when he was young, Chestnut was now old, feeble, his teeth were rotting, and he could barely walk. The Kinneys had told April they were going to put him down. They were farmers. A horse was an asset, not a pet. If it wasn't producing, it must be replaced. But to April, Chestnut was a noble creature, friendly, and even charming. If they would just let her have him, she would tend to him until nature took him. Peter wasn't sure that April realized how much effort an elderly horse required.

Diablo was young, jet black, and had a white sock on one foot. Pretty, muscular, and spirited, young Sam Kinney had bought him cheap, ignoring warnings that this was a difficult horse to handle. Unsuccessful, he had decided to sell Diablo. Again, April intervened. Love and compassion would tame Diablo's spirit. She promised Sam that Peter would give him what he had paid.

Peter turned onto Welton Road. The farm wasn't much farther. It was too small to really be called a farm, but it had all the essentials. Visible from the road, the farmhouse was small. Uncle Gus had never married and hadn't needed a big house. The driveway continued on down past the house to a big barn. Uncle Gus had built it big to hold all his equipment. A rickety old building behind the barn once held a still. Peter had that dismantled and removed when he inherited the farm. The land wasn't flat. On a rise was an ancient oak tree. The tire swing Uncle Gus had put up for Peter was still there, rotten and full of wasp nests by now. Several dips hid nothing. When you came up on them, there was only grass. Not blessed with a stream or pond, there were watering troughs scattered among the pastures.

Coming around a blind turn, the farm came quickly into view. April was waiting for him on the front porch. Not a young girl anymore, a little worldly, pretty, smiling, she glowed like a daffodil in her yellow print sundress. "Easy to look at" was how one old wag had described her. Peter couldn't help but smile.

"What's this about a trip? How long are you going to be gone?"

"Nice to see you, too." She met him on the walk with a smile and a hug. "My sister finally had her baby, a girl. She wants me to come out and help. I'll only be gone a couple of days."

"Where'd you get the money? I thought you were broke."

"I put it on the credit card."

He stepped back. "Dammit, I wish you'd be careful with that. It's a company account."

"Oh, don't worry so much. You'll figure it out, you always do."

"Hmmp." He wanted to frown, but couldn't. Her smile was too radiant, her presence too warming. The best he could manage was a straight face, tightening his lips up a little to show displeasure.

Still grinning, she grabbed his hand and pulled him down the walk. "Let's go to the barn. I want to show you how I've set up the food and where I'm keeping Sparky."

As they walked to the barn, Peter thought back on her animal project, how much it had been costing him, and how ill-conceived it was. He didn't particularly like the animals she rescued. After all, they had already been discarded once. He was disgusted that their irresponsible owners took the coward's way out and dumped them in the country. To save themselves the inconvenience of a visit to the vet, they opted to let the animals starve, or worse, get attacked and killed by a pack of wild dogs.

Then there was April's motivation. So full of love, she couldn't stand the idea of the animals suffering, so each one was taken in on a whim, no reasoned thought involved. All well and good for the soul, but it wasn't costing her any money, it was all coming out of his pocket. Even though he had managed to stop the veterinary bills, the feed, medicines, and salves were still running up unnecessary spending.

But the worst of it was that she dragged him into it. It made for times like this, when he would have to stop what he was doing and take time to care for these worthless animals. That he should have to care for abandoned animals and take time from his business to do it was unreasonable. It wasn't his idea, they weren't his pets, it was a drain on his finances, and it took time away from other things.

They looked in the door of one of the stalls in the barn. Sparky, it turned out, was another mutt. Looked like he'd been chasing cars and caught one. A front leg was in a splint and she'd wrapped his chest like it had broken ribs. Where the tape didn't cover his ribs, they showed. The dog was lying on scattered straw. It made no attempt to move but looked up at them with blank, tired eyes.

"You've got to feed him daily, change his water, and scoop up his waste."

"He's a dog, why can't he stay outside like all the other dogs?"

"You don't mean that. He's hurting, we've got to keep him warm and comfortable."

"What about the horses? I don't know a damn thing about caring for horses."

Peter knew April had never been trained in the care of any animals, much less horses. Her approach was to provide plenty of love and attention. The Kinneys told her that she needed a salt lick to keep the horse healthy, and she thought if wild horses could survive on prairie grass, they could certainly live on the farm's bountiful crop.

"Oh, they're easy. There's plenty of grass and a salt lick. All you need to do is make sure they have fresh water to drink. The goats can fend for themselves. The bins for the dog and cat food are right over there, close to the door. I'm sure you can handle it."

"Of course I can. I just shouldn't have to."

"Well, I'll be back in two days; that's not so long."

And April went on her trip.

So here he was, visiting the farm in the middle of his workday to make sure all the animals were alive, fed, and watered. Never mind, though. He enjoyed the trip, enjoyed the hills. There were lots

of good memories out there. None of them included horses. Uncle Gus preferred his old army jeep. "Doesn't get sick, doesn't need grooming, and goes when and where I tell it to," he'd say. The jeep died the same day Uncle Gus did. It still sat next to the barn where he last left it, a rusting memorial. Peter's wife, Susan, had been to the farm only once, got her shoes muddy, and left. None of his memories out here included her.

The farm came into view. Diablo was out. Seemed like there wasn't a fence built that could keep him in. Worse yet, the horse was skittish; how was he supposed to herd it into the barn? Peter opened the gate and pulled in. As he was getting out to chase Diablo down, the horse trotted by him and on into the barn. Go figure. Peter closed the gate and pulled on in.

On the way in, Peter noticed Chestnut lying in the field. This couldn't be good. Horses weren't supposed to lie down, were they? He thought they slept standing up.

He called Ann, his secretary. She lived on a farm in the next county and would know. She confirmed. The horse should not lie there. It could die. He should do all he could to get it back on its feet. Peter asked her to call the vet and get him out there.

He walked up to the horse. Its eyes followed him as he circled around. Peter tried prodding Chestnut in his flanks. All that got was a swish of the tail. He tried pushing on the horse—God, it was heavy. Tried lifting its head . . . no go. Nothing he could do would stir the horse. He called Ann back, "Nope, can't get the horse to budge."

"I called Doctor Carver's office," Ann said. "He doesn't do house calls. But there's a vet near our place who'll come out to your farm. Do you want me to call her?"

"Please," Peter said. "We've got to do something, and I don't have any way to get a horse into town."

"OK, I'll call you back and let you know when she'll be there."

Two hours later, after introductions and a vitamin (and stimulant) shot, Chestnut was on his feet again. After many thanks, and a sixty-dollar fee, the vet was on her way. Peter was both glad and mad. Glad that Chestnut was OK, mad that the veterinarian April had been using charged five times as much and wouldn't make house calls. Glad that Ann could help, mad that April had put him in this situation.

Peter was sure the following evening would be a quick trip. He had managed to handle all the animals' needs while waiting for the vet the previous day. This would be little more than checking up on them. Feed and water the dogs and cats, look over the goats, check on the horses. As expected, Diablo was restless in his stall. Too bad. He cleaned out the stall, gave him fresh hay and water, and went to check on Chestnut. He was looking forward to some serious rocking and whittling on the front porch.

Nope, Chestnut was down again. No amount of pushing, pulling, prodding, or swearing could get him to budge. In frustration, he called Steve. Steve was a master at solving practical problems; maybe he knew something about horses.

"Hey, bud," Peter said, "you remember that horse I told you about this morning?"

"Yeah," Steve said, "he get out again?"

"No, the other one, the one that was down. He's down again. I don't want to pay another vet bill for a vitamin shot. I'm spending enough money on these animals as it is. You got any ideas?"

"Yeah, I saw a movie last week where they strung a race horse from a barn's rafters while its leg healed. Let me get some stuff and I'll be right out."

"You saw a movie?"

"Yeah, and I wondered how I'd do it. Never figured I'd have the chance."

"Whatever. Thanks." Peter closed and pocketed his phone.

Peter looked around him. Chestnut was lying in one of the dips in the field, visible from the farmhouse but not from the road or the barn. He walked back up to the farmhouse and waited in a rocking chair on the porch.

A half-hour later, Steve showed up with all kinds of gear in the back of his truck. There were straps, come-alongs, chains, tarps, ropes and pulleys. The most curious item was a cargo net, the kind you see GIs using to climb down the side of a ship in the movies.

"Where's the horse?" Steve asked a curious Peter.

"Over beyond that rise," Peter said. "What is all that crap?"

"The solution to your problem," Steve said. "We're going to string that horse up until he's better. The cargo net was a brilliant idea. The holes in the net are big enough to slip his legs through, the netting will hold his weight, and we can use that two-by-six to transfer the load to the ropes. It'll let us distribute the load evenly so the horse is comfortable. I figured it all out on the drive over."

The effort to get the net around the horse was like the Keystone Kops fitting a girdle on a rhinoceros. If Mack Sennett had been watching, he'd have shouted, "Cut! Print!" Somehow they managed, with no help from Chestnut, to get the net around the horse in what looked like a comfortable fit.

"Now what?" Peter said. "How do we get him to the barn? We can't just drag him across the field."

"I hadn't thought that far," Steve said. "Let's go see what you've got in the barn that might help."

An hour later, using two plywood panels held together with an old oak beam, roped to a tractor, they managed to drag the horse across the field into the barn without hurting it too much. The horse complained a little when they dragged it up onto the plywood panels but was quiet for the rest of the trip.

The skid, however, was an elegant piece of engineering compared to the rigging they used to support the horse. There were ropes and pulleys everywhere. Steve brought nearly a thousand feet of rope, intending to use every foot. They attached pulleys to the two-by-six and to what looked like a sturdy beam in the barn. They strung the rope through pulley after pulley. As they tightened up the rope, Steve's idea of using the two-by-six to distribute the load proved to be as brilliant as he thought it would be.

Hanging there, the horse looked like it was being loaded onto a pirate ship. Ropes and pulleys were everywhere. All that was missing were rope ladders, a pirate captain with a hook for a hand, and a parrot.

The horse was hanging where its feet could just touch the ground. It wasn't complaining. They scattered straw on the ground underneath it. Peter pulled up an old wire reel and placed a bucket of water on it where the horse could reach it. He set a tray of oats and feed alongside the water. With that, all the horse's needs were met.

Relaxing against the wall, admiring their handiwork, Peter chuckled.

"What a life," Steve said, "all he's gotta do is eat, drink, pee, and crap."

"The things I do to keep April happy," Peter said.

"Why do you put up with her?" Steve asked. "Susan's a hell of a catch. Good looking, knows a lot of important people, and rich to boot. Why would you risk a marriage like that on a bimbo like April?"

"I've heard that question before," Peter said. "I get that lecture from my dad all the time. He doesn't get it either."

Steve walked over to the horse and tugged on one of the ropes. Satisfied that it was well secured, he turned back to Peter. "Think about it. The privileged life you lead is something I can only dream about. Hell, it's something most of us can only dream about. Anybody can find a bimbo. I've seen plenty of them out there. Dingy, good-looking, they live to latch onto a rich guy and take him for the ride of his life. You gotta have breeding to land a classy dame like Susan."

Peter looked over at his lifelong friend. "That's a big part of it, the 'breeding' and all the bullshit that goes with it. Dress like this, act like this, everything scripted, big expectations, tiptoeing around big egos worried that you're going to hurt some feelings. When I'm with April, that's all pretense, and it doesn't belong. I don't show off for her, and she doesn't pretend with me."

"Oh, c'mon. Admit it. You like the attention and power that comes with your marriage. The money don't hurt, either."

"Yeah, when I start thinking about chucking it all, I look at how useful some contacts can be. That cell phone tower wouldn't have covered the farm until I talked Sam into putting it on Dead Crow Hill.

'Course it helped that Uncle Gus had saved old man Crower's life in Korea. Crower was happy to pay back that favor."

"Susan," Steve said. "What's she going to do if she finds out about April?"

"She knows," Peter said. "She doesn't like it, but in her society a mistress is not a reason to end a marriage. Her family likes the connections our marriage brings to theirs."

"So she's OK with it?"

"I didn't say that. She gets mad as hell. I've been kicked out of the house more than once."

"So you spend the night with April. What a deal."

"Well, April's pretty spirited. There've been times she's gotten mad at me and kicked me out of the farmhouse. Like when she found out I was responsible for the cell phone tower spoiling her pristine view from the kitchen window."

"So what'd you do then?"

"Had to get an apartment. It took a couple of weeks for both of them to calm down. Susan's mother stepped in and made her take me to the charity ball. 'Wouldn't look right if he wasn't with you,' she said. Practical woman, my mother-in-law."

"Just to get it right," Steve said, "you're staying with Susan because you like the power and prestige that marriage to one of the oldest families in town brings. But you're going to keep messing around with April because she's a free spirit, you're her sugar daddy, and the rebel in you likes thumbing your nose at the establishment."

"Chestnut looks okay, let's get out of here. I've got plans with Susan."

Steve turned and looked him directly in the eyes. "Someday you're going to have to choose."

* * *

The next afternoon, Peter drove out to the farm. April was due back that morning and he was anxious to see her. He wanted to talk about the doings with Chestnut and discuss the need to put him down. He also wanted her to get rid of Diablo. That horse was too much to handle. Nearing the farm, he saw Diablo out by the road again. As before, when Peter opened the gate, Diablo dashed by him and ran into the barn. At least the horse followed a pattern. After closing the gate, Peter drove down to the barn and lured Diablo into the stall with some oats and molasses.

Peter walked up to the house. He could see Chestnut lying down in the field again. Same place as yesterday. April must have let him down figuring it was the right thing to do. About that time, Steve pulled in the gate.

"Just wanted to see how our handiwork was holding up," Steve said.

"I guess it worked just fine," Peter said. "Looks like April let him down this morning. At least he was strong enough to walk back over there." He pointed over to Chestnut lying in the field.

"Oh, great," Steve said. "Now what?"

April came out of the house, wearing a light blue sundress and wide brimmed floppy hat. Peter smiled. She looked good in anything, but the way the breeze caught that dress was . . .

"Hi, everybody." April walked up, gave Peter a hug, and smiled and winked at Steve. "Thanks for taking care of the gang," she said, "but it wasn't necessary to put Diablo in jail and string Chestnut from the rafters. They're happier outside in the grass."

"We had Chestnut strung up for a reason," Peter said. "Have you seen him? He's down."

"Oh, he's just resting," April said. "He's an old, old horse you know. Probably just a nap."

"Horses sleep standing up," Steve said. "They're not built for lying down. You may see them lie down for a few minutes, but it can twist their insides up bad."

They started walking over to Chestnut. "That's right," Peter said. "You're supposed to get them back up or call for a vet. He's been down quite a bit. I couldn't get him to stand back up. Had to call the vet. The vet had to give him a shot before he would get back up."

"What are you saying?" April said, a worried tone in her voice. She was picking up her pace, almost running over to the horse. "What's wrong, old friend?" she said to the horse. Chestnut lay there looking at her, no movement. Peter noticed the horse looked only at April; it was ignoring him and Steve.

"We may need to put him down," Peter said, avoiding April's look. "Put him out of his misery."

"Yeah," Steve said. "It's never an easy thing to do, but you can't let the horse suffer."

"No, it's not right," April said. She was sitting down by the horse now, stroking its neck, looking into its eye. "He's not hurting anything lying here. Maybe the vet can give him another shot."

"The vet had to drive an hour and a half to get here," Peter said. "She saw how old he is and said it's probably just time. You're going to have to make your peace with him. Besides, I can't see throwing bushels of money at a veterinarian to fight a losing cause."

Peter and Steve walked back to the barn, leaving April sitting in the field with Chestnut.

"I'll go back to my place and get my rifle," Peter told Steve. "I'll take care of it."

"Good luck," Steve said. "I've got to get going. Joe just called and my backhoe's on the fritz up at Deadhorse Creek. Gotta go see what I can do."

The round trip took an hour. Peter pulled his truck up next to the house. He got out, picked two cartridges from the box on the seat, pulled his 30-06 Weatherby off the rifle rack behind the seat, and chambered one round into the bolt action. He pocketed the second round. God, a second round, he thought. Imagine a bad shot causing an animal to suffer and then having to plug it a second time. Just where were you supposed to shoot a horse anyway?

Safety on, muzzle down, he walked around the front of the truck to the house. April was waiting. They'd agreed to walk out together. She wanted to say goodbye to Chestnut, but wanted to be in the house, out of sight, when he pulled the trigger.

They left the gate open, no worry about anything wandering off today, and started into the pasture toward the horse. Nary a word between them, what could you say?

Chestnut got up and walked over to greet them.

Peter froze, jaw dropped. April smiled and moved forward. She reached into her apron and offered up a sugar cube that Chestnut took, too quickly. Peter could have sworn he saw the horse wink at her. "Welcome back, old friend," she said as she stroked his neck.

He was amazed. The horse had been playing him for a sucker. He'd heard horses were smart, but this was rich. All that hoo-haw yesterday, and the horse had been taking them for a ride. The damn horse wasn't sick, just lazy . . . or smart.

Peter walked back to the truck, unchambered the round, put both cartridges back in the box and put his 30-06 back up on the rifle rack. Chestnut and April had followed him back. The smile on her face and the twinkle in her eye would melt the heart of even the hardest cynic. It was going to be a good night.

The next evening, as Peter came up to the farm, he saw Diablo out by the road. Why couldn't April understand that that horse couldn't be penned in? As he pulled in the gate, this time Diablo walked by him, not the brisk trot as before. Following him down the drive, Peter saw Chestnut lying in the pasture. Not the same place as before. April wasn't outside.

Diablo didn't go into the barn, but it was easy to shoo him into the corral. Peter closed the gate and headed up to the house.

April was inside. Eyes red, shoulders sagging, the pile of tissues on the floor bore witness to her crying.

"Chestnut's dead," she said, still looking down at the floor. "Not only that, he's bloodied. Could Diablo be so evil as to kill an old, friendly horse?"

April looked up at Peter. "After lunch, Diablo was running all over the place. I tried to get him to come to me, to calm him down, but he was too excited. He wouldn't come near me. I saw Chestnut lying down again, so I was going to give him some more sugar cubes. When I got to him, he wasn't moving and his head was bloody. He was dead."

So that's it, Peter thought. Diablo's defeated the competition. Now he's the alpha male. No need for shows of threat or superiority, there's no one to challenge him.

April had established a pet cemetery on the farm. It wasn't a planned thing, it just happened as her animals died. For each one, she had carved a wooden marker and placed it at the head of the gravesite. There were currently thirty-four markers out there. She asked Peter to bury Chestnut there, on the north side, closer to his favorite lay-down place. Not really wanting to, but seeing no alternative, he reluctantly agreed.

Peter had a construction project underway in town. He called the job boss. "Need a hole dug," Peter said into the phone, "big enough for a horse." A pause. "Yeah, change order, I know, can you get to it now?" Another pause. "I'm at my Uncle Gus's farm. Send them here. I'll show them what to do."

Three hours, an expensive change order for "overtime for unexpected foundation excavation," and a plate of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies later, Peter had his hole, the backhoe was loaded, and the crew left, their stomachs full of cookies. April stayed in the house the whole time, unusual for her as she thrived on contact with people but understandable given her mood. The crew probably hadn't tasted the salt from her tears that had fallen into the cookie dough.

As the truck pulled out, Steve pulled in. "Came to get my gear." He said, then pointed at the truck and backhoe. "What's that about? What's the hole for?"

"Diablo killed Chestnut," Peter replied. "I should have seen it coming, crazy as he is, but I'm no horseman."

"Yeah, we're both learning more about horses than we need," Steve said. "So, how're you gonna get the horse in the hole? You just let the only piece of equipment that could lift it go."

"Damn, I didn't think of that. I guess we'll have to drag him over. Go load up your gear, and I'll hook him up to the tractor. I'll need your rope."

A little later, Peter was pulling Chestnut by the hind legs across the field. He was glad April was staying in the house. A sight like this would horrify her. He wasn't too happy about it himself. Chestnut had been a good horse, deserving better treatment than a slab of dead meat. He circled the tractor around the hole. Chestnut dropped into the hole like a sack of wet feed. He climbed down a ladder into the hole, untied the rope, then moved the tractor, rope and ladder back to the barn out of sight. The unpleasant chore was done.

Peter dreaded what was to come next. April was a joy to be around when she was up. She brought an energy to life that radiated out and energized those around her. But when she was down, all life was sucked out of the air around her. You wanted to console her, but you knew you couldn't reach down deep enough. She had to pull herself out of it. But it had to be done. He found her on the sofa in the living room paging through a book on horses.

"Chestnut's in the grave," Peter said. "We're ready to cover him up. Don't you want to say a few words over him first?"

At that, April jumped up from the couch and dashed out the back door. Peter watched her run down to the barn. "Now what?" he said out loud, Chestnut's grave was the other way.

April emerged from the barn with an armload of riding gear. Saddle, blanket, halter and reins. Peter was surprised she could carry that much. She hurried up to Chestnut's gravesite, tossed the gear down the hole, and jumped in.

"Damn," said Peter.

Steve was hiding behind his truck, laughing. He was trying not to laugh, but the sight of April jumping down that hole was so silly and unexpected he couldn't help himself. Peter saw the humor in it too, half-smiled, and grunted. He wandered over to Steve.

"Now what?" asked Steve.

"We wait," said Peter.

"How long?"

"Let's go see what she's doing down there."

Peering down the hole, Peter and Steve saw a strange sight. April was lying prone on top of Chestnut sobbing her heart out. After ten minutes of this, and still crying, she began mounting the gear onto the horse.

"That's gotta be a thousand dollars worth of gear," Steve said.

"Well, it's hers to do with as she pleases," Peter said.

"Hers? You paid for it, buddy."

April took her time. Gradually, as she got the gear mounted as best she could, she calmed down. After a while, she just sat by Chestnut, stroking his neck and talking to him.

Steve began to lose patience. "This is taking too long. Any rational person would have tossed some dirt on the horse, said a few words and left."

Peter felt a need to explain. "It's just her. She loves life so much, death takes a long time to deal with. Can you imagine Susan being so sentimental?"

"From what I hear, she'd be more worried about the mud on her shoes than the horse," Steve said. "But at least we'd get out of here sometime tonight."

Steve walked over to his truck, picked up a shovel, came back and tossed a shovel of dirt down the hole.

"Stop that," Peter said.

"Maybe it'll bring her to her senses," Steve said.

"I'll get her out."

Peter brought the ladder up from the barn on the tractor. The front-end loader would do a good job of filling in the hole. Down the hole the ladder went, and he climbed in with April. He hugged her and got her to stand up. A few minutes of quiet hugs later, he guided her to the ladder and she climbed out. She ran into the house and bolted the door behind her. Peter followed and went around to the back door. Steve busied himself filling in the hole.

About the time Steve finished, Peter came back out. "It'll take her a while to calm down," Peter said.

"I've gotta go," said Steve. "Gotta go up to the job at Deadhorse Creek tomorrow morning and make sure they're not screwing it up."

They both turned at the sound of tires squealing, a horn honking, crash and thud.

"What in the hell was that?" said Steve.

Peter glanced over at the corral. "Damn . . . Diablo. He's not in the corral. I totally forgot about him."

They ran down to the road. Just outside the gate, a car was in the ditch, one headlight pointing up into the air, steam rising from the hood. A man inside the car was trying to lift the door up to get out. It wasn't working. Diablo was lying in the road, not moving. Peter dialed 911 on his cell phone. "We've got an accident out here on Welton Road. Car hit a horse. The driver's OK but he can't get out. Horse is dead." A momentary pause, "Yes, 314 Welton Road. We might need the rescue squad."

Steve was by Diablo. "Dead. Looks like the car hit him dead on and flipped him up in the air. Look at the hood of that car. It's totaled. How's the driver?"

Peter was trying to open the door. "I can't get the door open. He's hollering and pounding on it, so I think he's OK, just can't get out."

The accident, on a quiet road in the country, invited many onlookers. Rather than rubberneck as they drove by, cars that came upon the scene pulled over; their drivers got out and offered help. Steve and Peter tried to guide those cars that wanted to pass around the horse. It took almost forty minutes for the county deputy to show up.

The deputy took in the scene, prodded the horse's flank, and tried the car's door. The driver seemed to recognize the deputy and settled down. The deputy went back to his car and called for the rescue squad and a wrecker. Peter and Steve approached his car.

"Hi, Glen," Peter said.

"Hey, Pete, Steve," the deputy responded. "What you doing way out here? Any idea what happened?"
"That's my place. Couldn't keep the horse in. We only heard it and rushed over as soon as it happened."

"Crowder," Glen said. "We just hauled him in for DUI last week. Looks like he's at it again. He's going to jail."

"Too bad," Steve said. "Wasn't his fault the horse was in the road."

"Yeah," Glen said. "You want me to call county to pick up the horse?"

"No, I don't think so," Peter said. "I'm sure April will have some last wishes for him."

"Hmmpf," Steve grunted.

"Well, you've got to get the horse out of the road," Glen said.

Peter went to get the tractor and the same rope he'd used for Chestnut earlier that day. There was plenty of help, and in no time they had pulled Diablo into the field just inside the gate.

Damn horse, Peter thought.

April came out of the house just as the tow truck left with the car. She'd been watching through the living room windows. Glen was pulling off with Crowder in the back seat. Peter and Steve walked over to Diablo's corpse. April met up with them there and stood staring at the dead horse.

"He's caused a lot of trouble, hasn't he?" she said.

"That's an understatement," Steve said.

"We could bury him right next to Chestnut," April said. "I think they'd both like that."

Steve laughed.

Peter gritted his teeth. "No," he said, slowly and calmly, "I'm not paying for another damn hole."

April looked at him, her shoulders curving down in absolute defeat, hands out. "We can't just leave him here."

Peter looked at Steve. "Oh no, not me," Steve said.

"Yeah." Peter said. "You've got that project going up at Deadhorse Creek. You've got a backhoe up there. There's a really nice cemetery close to there. We could bury the horse there and nobody'd be the wiser."

"Way out there?" April said. "That's so far."

"Yeah," Steve said, "so far."

"No problem," Peter said. "You're going up there anyway tomorrow morning. We could load Diablo on your flatbed trailer tonight and you could carry him up with you tomorrow. That backhoe of yours would make short work of it." Turning to April, he said, "The cemetery's a beautiful spot. It's on the side of a hill. Diablo'd have a view of the valley and hills beyond. It's really a pretty place."

"You're nuts," Steve said.

"Oh yes," April said, "it's perfect. Diablo would be master of all he could see. Just like in the movies, the horse standing on top of the hill with the wind blowing his mane to the side. You've got to do it, Steve."

"I'll go get the trailer."

And later that night, Diablo lay diagonally across the floor of Steve's trailer. They'd used the plywood panels to form a ramp, and pulled the horse up on the trailer using the rope and tractor. Any pretense of caring about the horse was gone. They were just dragging a slab of meat around. Neither of them had any feelings for it. It had been nothing but trouble, expensive trouble at that. Steve didn't bother to cover the horse. It wouldn't rot overnight.

"Were you serious about burying him at the cemetery?" Steve asked Peter.

"Of course not," Peter said. "You've got to have permission to bury someone at a cemetery. Just dig a hole anywhere and dump the damn horse in it. She'll never know the difference."

"Right."

The drive to Deadhorse Creek the next morning was a ball. It was an hour and a half trip, thirty minutes of it on the freeway. Overnight, rigor mortis had set in and the horse's legs were sticking up in the air. Steve laughed out loud every time a carload of rubbernecks passed him, staring with their mouths wide open or jaws flapping a hundred miles an hour. The teenagers in one car were jumping all over the place laughing at the sight.

Steve pulled up to the job site. His crew was installing water lines for a new subdivision on the south side of the hill. It was out in the middle of nowhere, but it did have a great view.

"What in the hell is that?" Alex asked, pointing to the dead horse.

"A horse, stupid," Steve answered.

"And just what in the hell is it for? You plan to make a statue or something?"

"No, we're gonna bury it, and right now."

"Where, f'christ's sake? You want me to pull Greg off the job and start digging a grave?"

"No, he's good where he is right now. Tell him to widen the ditch a little bit, dig it a little deeper, and I'll pull the trailer over next to him. Shouldn't take too long."

It took Greg all of five minutes to dig out a hole big enough to hold Diablo. He used the bucket of the backhoe to unceremoniously slide the horse off the trailer. It landed in the bottom of the hole with a soft thump.

"Good riddance," Steve said, and then turned to Alex. "Cover it up. After we've laid the pipe and filled it in, nobody'll be any wiser."

Alex motioned to Greg who quickly covered the horse up with dirt. When he was done it looked like he had cleared a rock or stump out of the way.

Steve made a call on his cell phone. "Hey, bud. Job's done." A momentary pause, then "You don't wanna know. By the way, yer welcome. See ya later."

Steve was pulling the truck and trailer out of the way when his cell phone rang. Peter was calling back.

"Hello." Steve said. A long pause, then "She wants what? I just planted the damn horse in a field. She can't come up here and put a damn marker out in the middle of a field. Apart from being ridiculous, it'll bring construction to a grinding halt."

Steve listened to Peter's idea, then laughed out loud. "You're kidding, right? I'm supposed to shut down my job, drive the backhoe around the mountain, and scrape up some dirt in a graveyard to fake a horse grave. Man, you're gonna owe me big time after this. By the way, you'd better talk her out of the grave marker. Somebody might get upset that we're planting bodies without asking."

And he had it done. It took Greg an hour and a half, but he did a good job. Looked like a horse grave. He didn't know how, but Greg had even managed to mound the dirt up some. It really looked like a recent grave.

* * *

Peter waited until Steve was able to join them for the drive up to the cemetery. Steve had insisted. Not that he was sentimental. No, he wanted to watch the action for himself.

The drive up was quiet. April was understandably subdued. After all, a friend had died and she had to show respect.

"I hope you were able to find a spot high up," April said to Steve.

"Oh, yeah, he's got a really good view of the valley," Steve said. "He can see clear across to the hill-tops beyond."

"Good, he wouldn't be happy if he were below anybody else."

Peter and Steve exchanged a wary glance.

Peter pulled into the graveyard and parked the car. Steve pointed out the front window to the left. "It's over there, I think I'll wait in the car."

"Me too," said Peter.

April gathered up the flower spray and wooden marker and hurried over to the grave. With tears dampening her cheeks, she placed the flowers at one end, pounded the marker into the soft dirt with a rock, and then laid face down, spread eagle, over the mounded up dirt.

The spectacle caused thoughts that had been forming in Peter's head for a while to come together. Just how silly was this woman? Why was he spending so much time and emotion on her? Was Steve right, was she nothing more than a bimbo, a good roll in the hay? Nobody prostrates themselves on a horse's grave. Was it all an act to make him feel sorry for her, to sympathize with her? Was she playing him?

Steve laughed out loud. Embarrassed, Peter looked down and half-smiled. "Man, this is rich," Steve said. "Your girlfriend's got some serious issues with graves. I sure hope she cleans up well."

Peter countered, "Okay, enough. We've had this talk. So she's got her quirks. You'd never see Susan this emotional over an animal."

"Yeah," Steve replied, "and you'll never see April balancing a checkbook."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You've got to grow up sometime. Susan's not gonna put up with this crap forever, and April's going to want some kind of security when she grows old. All of 'em do."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," was the best Peter could come up with. They sat in silence, waiting for April to finish her burial rite. Fortunately, this one didn't take long.

April walked back to the car, brushing the dirt off the front of her dress. There was a little of the usual spring back in her step and the hint of a smile graced her face. Peter rolled the window down as she approached the car.

"Are we done here?" Peter asked.

April lowered her head and raised her eyes up to Peter. The effect was one of little-girl innocence. "Can we get Chestnut moved up here to be alongside his friend?"

Steve snorted and stifled a laugh.

Peter started at her for a moment, blinked, started up the car and drove off, leaving April standing there.

"Damn," Steve said. "She's gonna be mad!"

Peter looked at April in the rearview mirror. She was standing with her hands up in a questioning gesture, head tilted to the side. The sun was at her back causing her hair to glow, almost forming an aura around her head. She was the embodiment of a siren: beautiful, innocent, and appealing. But for ages sirens had been luring sailors into shipwrecks.

"You're right, old bud, maybe it's time to choose and move on. Susan's got an important lunch and I wouldn't want to let her down."

Dissecting the Heart

by
Michael Potts

The student's hands hold
the woman's heart, lift it
from the unribbed chest,
and lay it down to dissect,
knife hovering like steel wings.
It pierces the pericardial sac,
slitting tissue away, exposing
naked myocardium,
formaldehyde brown,
decay delayed for science's sake.

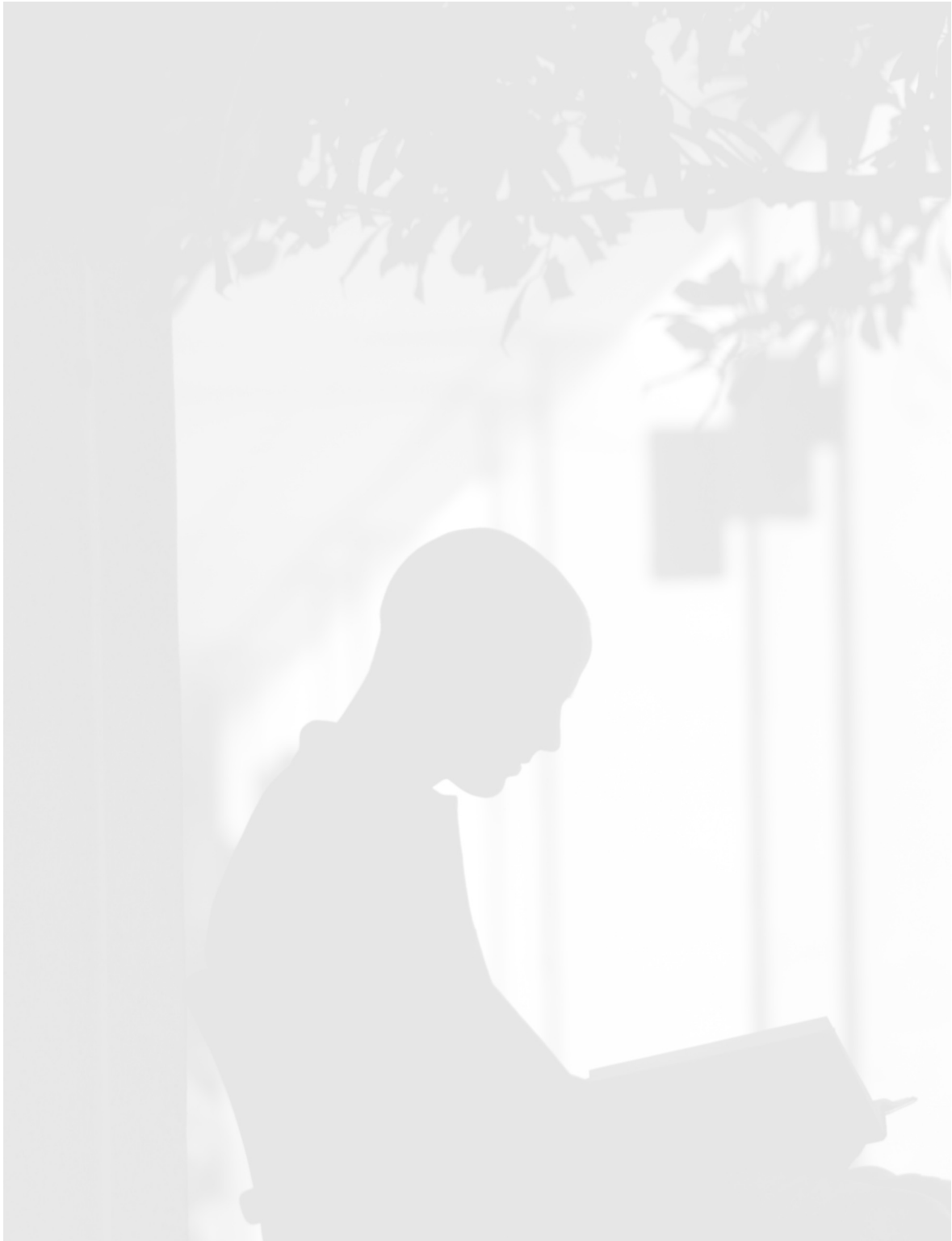
Slicing through the septum, he splits
the heart in half, exposing atria,
ventricles, cordae tendinae, cusps
of valves: tricuspid, mitral
pulmonary, aortic. Inserting
a gloved finger, he divides the bishop's
mitre, forcing bloodless cusps apart,
finger flicking flaps, out-in, out-in.

Studying the specimen, he finds
the scar of an old infarction,
"heart attack" written on the apex,
spilled ink splattered on a clean
page. He looks down at the woman's
legs, gangrenous black, and remembers
his grandmother, gasping for air.

Round Midnight

by
Michael Potts

I can take it
in the day:
play tenor sax
while drunk,
but it's okay—
music floods
the sun-bright
room. And at
night, at Kool
Club, crowd
cheers in smoke-
clogged air,
sax wails,
bass booms,
drumsticks dance,
piano plays—
but then,
round midnight,
time for bed:
dreams invade
my head. Music
must expand:
I play fourths, fifths,
thirteenth—
but music
demands more: like
a dying man
who gasps for air,
can't catch his breath.
Notes and scales
dance lightning streaks
of sound and sense
that tinge my ears:
I can't play
those bars.
I wake, take wine,
drink again,
stare outside,
gulp humid air,
place the mouthpiece
on my lips.



Calling the Shots

by
Terry Price, M.F.A.

Max yanked big, black rubber boots up stumpy legs and tucked his jeans down inside. He pulled the faded red ballcap down into its notch around the short-cropped salt and pepper hair and walked out through the yard and down the driveway to get the morning paper. His boots sank into the ground then came up with a suck each time his heel rose from the muck.

Low endless clouds, gray and thick like the lint Max pulled from the basket of his dryer that morning, moved across the sky. The hard winter rain revealed the earth for what it *really* was, he thought, dull and muddy. Beer cans, whiskey bottles, and fast food wrappers thrown from passing cars lined the ditches along the road frontage to Max's hundred-acre farm. Water had run across the saturated ground and puddled into the farm's pockmarks. It wasn't quite cold enough to snow and blanket the trash and scars. It was too early for spring when the green growth would cover and hide the ugliness.

He looked across his neighbor Henry's fence and watched a brown bull named Bob and a black one named Dozier facing each other, their heads pressed flat together. They strained and pushed against each other, one gaining ground at the expense of the other, then losing it. At the end of the struggle, the bulls were in the same place they'd started.

He stopped and watched them and felt a kinship. He was fifty-seven now and worn out from pushing. He woke up sore just about every morning from the work, which he couldn't take a day off from. And he was tired. From battling the bills, from juggling finances from year to year so that he could hold on to just enough to continue for another year. He'd never had any kids, like other farmers, that could help out. He was tired of battling with Andrea. Although they'd never married, they'd been together for close to seven years. It wasn't so much that he was getting an itch. She was more like a full-blown rash he couldn't get rid of.

He looked around and saw the sorry state of it all. The barn, the farm, the ground, the community, the sky, and yet knew he should be grateful. It was only during this time of year, in this sorry kind of weather, that he didn't have to go out and work the farm. He still had to feed the animals, mind you. But it was too early to plant, too messy to patch or repair. Max returned to the house, flung open the storm door, then let it fly behind him so that the spring strained until it snapped back, slapping the door hard against the wood frame.

Andrea was still laid up in bed, and he hoped it shook the old clapboard house and woke her up. Andrea never took to farm life, or getting up early. He still wondered how they ended up together. He'd already had two farm wives, both as plain and strong as this old house, neither much for show. His first wife, Lois, couldn't get pregnant and although he'd told her they'd be all right, she wasn't all right. At the end of a January Monday, Max came in from the fields and she had supper waiting, as usual. They sat down to eat and, as he reached for a hot roll, she said she was getting a divorce. Said it as if she'd said, "I'm going to milk the cows," or "The clothesline broke again today." Said it as if she was turning in her resignation to a job that just didn't work out. He tried to argue with her but her mind was made up. By her way of thinking, it was a farm wife's duty to have children and so if she couldn't deliver the goods, she needed to leave. She didn't want anything and would go back to her family in Indiana.

The divorce went through in April, and he met Mavis in June, which Max always thought somewhat poetic. Mavis in June, he'd say to her and she'd smile, lips together, and return to her crocheting. They married and honeymooned in the mountains of Gatlinburg that October, and ten weeks later Mavis was pregnant. But other than the growing lump beneath her apron, no one would suspect. She worked hard on the farm and wouldn't let up. In fact, Max thought she worked harder just to make sure no one thought she was using pregnancy to get out of her chores. She went full term, and one Thursday morning, the pains began. Thursday was plowing day and Max was out on the tractor, so she left him a note by

the lunch she'd prepared and put on the table. She fired up the old Ford F-150 pickup and drove to the hospital. When Max came in and found the note, he took off and got to the waiting room just as the doctor was coming out. Mavis had died during childbirth and the baby boy had been dead inside her for some time. She'd been hemorrhaging internally, the doctor said.

Max thought she'd looked tired but assumed she'd just been overworking herself. The funeral was on a Sunday. Mavis would've liked that, he thought, because it was her day to rest. After he went home, he changed clothes and climbed on the blue Ford tractor and harvested corn.

About six years after Mavis died, he met Andrea. She was young and pretty, and he needed pretty in his life. He courted her heavy, bought things he'd never bought before like red lingerie and financed her new Buick convertible. He guessed she thought that's the way things always were around there. With the debts and expenses of a farm, the gifts became fewer and further apart. Over the years, Max learned that pretty was pretty useless on a farm and not all that high a priority in a relationship. And besides, she was a hell of a lot prettier when he was in love with her. Which he wasn't anymore. But that was okay. He was convinced that after the new of the presents wore off, she didn't love him either. And she sure as hell didn't love the farm. Andrea didn't want kids, wasn't going to have kids, that was all she wrote, dear John. Max never talked to her about children before they moved in. His mind was on other things. And since they weren't married, he wasn't going to push her about it, figuring the whole situation was his mistake. Besides he was getting to be a little long in the tooth to be a father anyway.

Max pulled off his boots and hung up his coat and cap in the mudroom. He walked sock-footed across the cold linoleum kitchen floor and got a cup of coffee from the brown-stained glass pot. He spread the paper out across the kitchen table and sat down to look at the news, comforted by the fact that the world was in an even sorer condition than his life. If he was going to hell in a hand-basket, he was glad that it was a damn big hand-basket and they were all going together. He read about global warming and the cost of gas and the government listening in to your telephone calls and wanting to know what you looked at on the Internet. He was none too thrilled with government on any level. He didn't like the way they took care of their own business and sure didn't want them meddling in his, even if he rarely talked on the phone and didn't have anything to do with the Internet. Supposedly there was stuff out there people could look at about him and his farm and goings on. He didn't understand it, but that didn't mean he couldn't resent it.

There was a tap on the frame of the screen door and Max looked up to see Henry already heading inside. Henry took off his yellow Co-op ball cap that left a sweatband ring around his head. Below the ring was Henry's ruddy face, aged by sun and work and strain. Above it was pale with a little hair mashed flat, the crown of his head bald and white, a two-tone. Henry nodded at Max and went straight over to the coffeepot. He opened up the knotty pine cabinet and pulled out one of the assorted mismatched mugs, poured himself a cup, and leaned back against the kitchen sink.

Max scratched the side of his unshaved face just below a scraggly sideburn and leaned back in his chair. "What you got up for today?"

Henry blew across his cup. "Not much. I oughta be repairing fence down on the other side of my pond. But the barbwire's still holding, and the cows haven't found it yet."

"Yeah, I oughta be replacing the carburetor on the tractor, too."

"At least you can do that in the barn, out of this mess. Where's the woman?" Henry knew damn well where she was, but Max appreciated the free pass to bitch about his wife.

"Where do you think?" Max nodded his head back down the hall. "She's laid up in bed."

Henry smirked and gave a snort that caused his shoulders to bob. "Yeah, buddyroe, you got yourself a good one there. You know, you always said you wanted a woman who was good in bed. She oughta be as much time as she spends there."

The two men laughed quietly. Max tilted back in his chair and looked down toward the hall to make sure she wasn't close enough to hear them. He put the chair legs squarely back onto the floor and hun-

kered down onto the table. The two men drank their coffee with the sound of the rain on the roof. Occasionally the wind shifted and spattered rain against the kitchen windows.

Henry looked up from his coffee. "You want to ride into town?" Henry didn't relish the idea of fencing in the cold rain and felt mildly guilty at the suggestion of playing hooky.

"Why the hell not?" Max knocked back the last of his cold coffee and pushed away from the table.

"You going to leave her a note?" Henry asked.

"She don't care where I go anyway," Max replied.

The two men put on their caps and, sharing a conspiratorial smile, left with Max locking the door behind him.

They made their usual first stop down at the Tractor Supply store and wandered up and down the aisles to see if there was anything new they needed. They looked at some of the equipment. Max was always wanting something new.

He looked at and touched mowers and tools, generators and salt blocks, each at least twice. "Let's get out of here, what say?"

Henry shrugged his bony shoulders. "Suit yourself. Where're we going?"

Max looked lost. "I don't know. Let's just go."

They rode up Main Street then back down again. Springfield was just a cold town on a cold morning. The kind of town where the color of the pavement, the sidewalk, and the storefronts didn't vary all that much. Max looked at all of it and knew there had been days when things were a lot prettier, but he sure couldn't remember a single one right at that moment. He'd never been much farther from home than the stockyards up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, about an hour and a half away. He'd never flown on a plane or sailed on a ship. He was as rooted to the ground as the five oaks that surrounded his farmhouse. And although overall he'd had a pretty decent life, at that moment it just didn't seem to be enough. Next birthday he'd be fifty-eight. After that, you're looking at sixty. Then seventy. If you're lucky.

They'd just passed the Furniture Center when Max saw the blue and red neon glowing from beer signs in the window of the Stumble Inn, a little joint right on Main. A lot of places had their watering holes out away from town, but not Springfield. The Stumble Inn sat just three blocks from the courthouse and was just as much an institution.

"Hey, let's pull over there," he said.

"Where?"

"Over there." He pointed to an open spot along the sidewalk. "Two-hour parking. Let's go in and shoot us a game of pool."

Henry smiled. "I haven't shot pool in ten years."

Max got out of the truck and slammed the door. "Me neither, but we're going to this morning."

The two sauntered down the sidewalk and pushed open the door. The darkness and heavy air almost stopped them. It was warm and saturated with leftover cigarette smoke, the smell of second-hand whiskey, and cheap beer drunk by patrons and filtered back out through skin pores and breath. But Max didn't find it unpleasant at all. In fact it took him back to when he was nineteen and worked on Bill Snead's farm down in Milldale. After putting up the tractor and feeding the livestock, they'd hang out at the Piggy Pit, a bar-b-que and beer joint that closed up ten years ago. About the only thing different was the shape of the jukebox, if they even called it that anymore.

There were five drinkers at the bar and no one at the pool table. Four of the drinkers looked up at Max and Henry, along with the bartender. One fellow, somewhere in his thirties stared at the television mounted in the corner over the bar. Max was surprised that he knew a couple of them: Jenkins, who'd been thrown out of work a few years ago when the Wilson golf bag plant closed up, and Smitty, who lost his farm in a tax sale last year. The young guy was familiar but he couldn't quite place him. Max gave a quick nod of his head, which they returned and went back to their drinks. The Stumble Inn wasn't a place guys went to for conversation.

"What are you having, Henry? I'm buying," Max said, reaching for his wallet.

"Naw, don't do that."

"I got it. What do you want?"

"I don't care. Whatever you're having."

Max stepped up to the end of the bar and put his hand on the wood rail. The bartender looked over.

"Two Buds."

The bartender turned around and pulled a couple of bottles from the cooler and popped the tops.

"In a glass?" he asked.

"Yeah. Yeah. In a glass. Why the hell not?" It'd been ten years at least since he'd had a beer in a glass. Why not live a little. Max looked along the row of barflies. No one was paying him any attention now.

The bartender poured them up, the glass angled so that he drained the entire bottle into each without spilling a drop. The perfect pour, Max thought admiringly.

The bartender said, "Six bucks."

Max slapped down a ten. "Keep the change."

Everyone but the television watcher turned and glared at him. He hadn't thought that he might be making the regulars look bad with a big tip. He took the two beers over to the table where Henry had the balls racked.

"I'll break," said Max, setting his beer down on an errant stool. The cue stick was cool and smooth in his thick, rough hands. He held it up to his right eye like a rifle and looked down the shaft, rotating it to see if it was warped. It wasn't. He chalked up the tip and leaned over, placing the off-white cue ball slightly right of center of the table. Max leaned the stick against the table and put a little talcum in his hand and rubbed them together.

"We gonna play or what?" Henry laughed.

"Drink your beer," Max shot back.

Max moved the cue ball a half-inch to the right and, satisfied, bent over and lined up the break. He slid the end of the stick back and forth across his left hand, like a piston picking up speed. After the fourth backstroke, he slammed the stick into the cue that cracked into the yellow one ball. The pyramid of colors exploded like atoms, each into its own orbit across the green felt. Ricocheting. Colliding. A striped ball shot straight into the back right pocket. The rest scattered and slowed until each came to rest.

"Nice," said Henry, visibly impressed. He pulled the yellow-striped ball from the pocket. "You got stripes."

Max was already studying the table as he circled to his right to get to the spent cue ball. Again, he chalked the tip. His eyes never left the table. Henry took another sip of his beer.

"Twelve ball in the side pocket," said Max, already leaning over, satisfied with his selection.

"We're not calling shots till the eight ball, right?" Henry asked.

"Side pocket," Max replied.

He aimed and slid the varnished cue through the talcum-covered ring of his forefinger and thumb, back and forth, and eased the tip into the ball. It hit the side rail, then caromed off the end railing and dropped into the side pocket. Henry stood with his arms propped across the top of his cue, leaned his head forward, and shook it, smiling.

"Glad we're not playing for money."

Max laughed but didn't take his eyes off the table. "How about putting something on the jukebox, Henry? You feel like some music?"

"You're the man running the table. Whatever you want," Henry replied.

"You choose." Max calculated the angle of his next shot. He leaned over and closed one eye.

"Fourteen in the back corner pocket."

Henry went over and fed the jukebox and picked out a couple of songs, then came back and took a

place on a stool.

Max struck the cue ball hard, nipping the upper right corner to put enough English to keep it from following the fourteen into the pocket. The cue ball slammed into the fourteen, launching it deep into the pocket with the cue ball skittering off to the right, kissing the rail and resting, ready for the next shot.

Henry whooped. "Where did you learn to play like that?"

Max stopped and cocked an ear. "Is that Patsy Cline? Shit, I haven't heard that in a hundred years." He started singing with the song, a voice that wasn't used to singing.

*I go out walking
After midnight,
Out in the moonlight,
Just like we used to do.
I'm always walkin'
After midnight
Searching for you.*

He held his stick like a partner and danced around it. A bridge in the song allowed a pause just long enough to shout out to Henry, "Get us a couple more beers and tell him to start a tab."

Henry hopped up from the stool and headed to the bar, and out of the corner of his eye, Max saw his friend and neighbor of nearly twenty years look back over his shoulder. Men didn't dance in these parts with real women, let alone cue sticks. But right then, Max didn't care and went back to dancing with his like it was Ginger Rogers.

The men at the bar looked over and poked each other, at first discreetly and then not so discreetly while laughing in their beers. Sniggering. Jenkins looked up at Henry. "What's the matter with him?"

Henry shrugged, "Don't know. Why's anyone at a bar on a Tuesday morning?"

Jenkins laughed and nodded.

The younger guy piped up, "What's that supposed to mean?" His hair was a beer-blond color and he wore a gray t-shirt that hadn't seen a washing machine or an iron in awhile. The bags beneath his blue eyes sagged like that of a man twice his age.

Max shouted, "Henry, where're those beers?"

Henry looked at the man. "No offense." Then back at the bartender. "Two, just in the bottle this time, and run us a tab." The bartender nodded and twisted off the caps and slid them over to Henry.

The younger man said, "I'll have another, too."

"I don't know about that, Steve," said the bartender.

The younger man looked up at him. "It's not your job to think. Just give me another one."

Max, from the pool table, watched all this, slightly amused. He should have known this guy but couldn't place him to save his life. It'd come to him in a bit, he reckoned.

Henry returned to the table where Max was lining up the next shot. The younger man got up off his stool and followed Henry over. About six-foot, Max thought, but he was soft around the middle, in his arms, like an overgrown child. The younger man stood at the end of the table with his arms folded against his chest, a beer in his right hand, steadied on his left bicep.

Max looked up from his shot to the man, then back down to the end of his stick. "Eleven in the corner pocket." He shot and the eleven glanced off the edge of the pocket and rolled benignly a few inches away. "Damn."

The younger man laughed. Max examined the cue stick, then went over and exchanged it for another one. The younger man laughed harder. Max called back over his shoulder, "What's your problem?"

"I ain't got no problems." The younger man downed a good bit of the new beer.

Henry eased up to the table as if he had as much business being there as a chicken. He held the cue

stick awkwardly and shook as he tried to line up a shot. Everyone was watching now.

The younger man got downright tickled and didn't hold it back. Henry jabbed the stick at the ball, just nipping the edge, and the cue ball moved only a few inches to the left.

The younger man guffawed, causing him to spill a sip of beer onto the floor and on himself. Henry scooted back to his stool and sat down, holding his cue stick in both hands.

"Well," the guy said, taking another gulp. "We got Tiny Dancer and Minnesota Fats with us this morning, boys." He haw-hawed at his own joke.

"Leave 'em alone, Steve. They ain't bothering you," said the bartender.

Steve didn't seem to hear the advice.

Max walked up to him. "Listen to the man, son."

Steve moved close enough for Max to share his beer-soaked breath. "Get out of my face, old man."

Max looked up closely into his eyes and saw something familiar. "I know you. You're the Tompkins boy. Damn, Steve. I didn't put it together, Steve Tompkins."

Max remembered Steve as one of those kids who always needed to be stirring something up. He recalled the time Steve and some boys got liquored up and opened fire hydrants onto Main one sub-zero January night. It took a good three days for the city to chip through the three inches of ice enough for traffic to pass again. It was Steve who sold a couple of his old man's rifles and got caught when they were reported stolen and the new owner came forward. His old man always bailed him out, damn him. By the looks of things, Steve hadn't changed too much. But knowing Steve made Max feel a little better.

"Who you calling boy, old man? Get back to your farm before you get in trouble." Steve was spitting through clenched teeth now. He got down close and by the time he finished his sentence, he'd leaned over and head-butted Max.

Disrespect was one thing, yelling was another, but he wasn't about to let this idiot put a skull into his. Max fought the urge to punch him out and instead slapped Steve upside the side of his face like an impudent child, stunning him.

It was Max's teeth that were clenched now. "Are you Steve Tompkins?" He saw tears in Steve's eyes and wondered just how hard he'd hit him. "Answer me, boy."

Steve blinked and cleared his head. He looked at the guys at the bar and, seeing no one coming to help him, looked back at Max. "Yeah. What's it to you?"

Max took him by the shoulders. "I'm sorry about what happened to your daddy. He was a friend of mine."

Steve just stood there. Didn't say anything. He looked back over at the bar again and Max noticed that the guys had all turned back to their drinks.

"How's your mamma?" Max asked in a soft tone. Max hadn't thought about Celia Tompkins in years and remembered her when she was still Celia Mitchell, one of the prettiest girls in town. There was an unofficial day of mourning among the men, young and old, in Springfield when Celia got engaged to James Tompkins. Like most, he wished he'd gotten up the nerve to ask her to marry him.

Steve's face twisted as if to cry, and he leaned forward. Max pulled him closer. Then Steve drove his left fist hard into Max's stomach. Max hadn't been hit like that since he was kicked by a horse. He grabbed himself and doubled over. Henry yelled and came running. The men at the bar jumped down off their stools. Steve swung the mostly full beer bottle against the side of Max's face. Though the glass didn't break, the force of it knocked Max against the pool table, and beer spewed over him. Max wrapped his arms around Steve's waist and squeezed to keep from falling down. He sucked in some air and shoved Steve back against the table. Max was grateful for short legs and a low center of gravity but mostly glad that the younger man was drunk. The tussling reminded him of the times years ago when he thought he was big enough to whip his father. He'd always thought wrong.

Steve put both hands together as one fist and came down hard into Max's back and drove what little breath Max had pulled in right back out. Max knew he was done for, and he'd always believed in fighting

fair. Unless you were done for. So he reached his hand between Steve's legs and grabbed a fistful. And squeezed. Steve screamed and jerked his head back.

"Godda...!"

When Steve's head popped up, Henry swung and cracked a cue stick across his temple, breaking it in two, sending the larger end across the bar, like a missile, where it crashed through the front window. Steve collapsed on the floor, in a pool of beer. Max hung on to the side of the table.

Henry knelt down and put his arm around Max and held on to his waist. "Are you okay. Can you hear me?"

Max shook his head, trying to make things quit moving. "It's all right. Come on, let's get you to the doctor. Can you stand?" Henry couldn't lift him.

The other men gathered around Steve, trying to rouse him. But no luck.

"What's his problem?" Henry yelled. "Is he trying to kill somebody?"

Jenkins looked up. "Naw, Steve's losing their farm. When his father had that heart attack and died, Steve took out a mortgage on the land and now he can't pay it. So the bank's going to foreclose. His mother doesn't know it yet. He doesn't know where they'll go or what they'll do. He just screwed up and can't fix it. And the farm's all they got."

"He still ain't got a right to go homicidal, the damn fool." Henry got Max to his feet and his head began to clear.

Max stared down at Steve who looked for all the world like a twelve-year-old taking a nap. "His daddy was a good man." Max steadied himself against the table. "Is he going to be all right?"

The bartender continued to feel his pulse and pat his face. "He's out, but he's got a pulse. Somebody call an ambulance." He looked up at the guys standing around in broken glass, half of a broken cue stick at their feet. A January wind blew in through the front window and filled the place. It smelled clean and cold and revived Max and made him homesick for his farm.

"And who's gonna pay for this?" the bartender asked, shaking his head. "I ain't filing it with my insurance."

Henry said, "I got a tarp in my truck. If you all cover up that window, I'll get my buddy to the doctor.

Max tried to straighten up. "I got the damages." Everyone looked at Max, amazed. "Call me when you figure out how much and I'll come back and settle up." The bartender hesitated.

"He's good for it," Smitty threw in.

"Okay," the bartender said, turning back to Steve who was starting to move around a bit.

Henry helped Max toward the door, but Max stopped and turned around and stared at Steve on the floor. He'd had an idea hit him just as suddenly, just as hard as Steve's punch. He tried to make sense of it. It was nuts, that's what it was. Maybe the punch had cut off the oxygen to his brain. He spoke to no one in particular. "Tell the boy that if he loses that farm, he and Celia've got a place to stay. You tell them that. Got it?" He pulled away and went to the bar and took a napkin. He wrote down his address and telephone number. "Tell him to call me."

He held out the limp paper, but no one moved. Max shook it as a signal, and Jenkins took it and nodded.

"Let's go, Henry." Max walked twenty years older than he was, and felt thirty years older with Henry holding on to his arm.

"Let's get you to the doctor."

Max stopped and straightened up. Henry let go. "No, I want to go home. I've got some business I've got to take care of first."

"Business?"

"Yeah, I'm going to start clearing out some things to make room."

Henry looked puzzled. "What things?"

"I'm going to start with the bedroom. Let's go."

The two men walked, Henry within catching distance of Max, to the truck. The temperature had dropped a bit since they'd gone inside, and cold rain had changed to snow. The big flakes melted against Max's hot neck and, looking up, his face. He surveyed the street, the way the half-inch or so of snow had dusted everything. All the cars, new and old, trucks too, looked the same, looked pretty. Everything old had been covered with a blanket of new.



Macrophylla

by
Ernie Reynolds

It seemed like a long stop light.

Jane looked across each oncoming lane, no cars. She considered it, just zipping right across the red light. What was the harm? While she pondered, the opposite lights turned to amber, and before she even noticed, her own lamp flickered, red to green. Good to go. Government approved.

Richard did not notice the long light, not with the utility bills taking so much of his attention. "How did we spend \$195.53 on water? That's three times our normal! *They* screwed this up, now Richard has to kill his own time to get it right."

This was not a good conversation on the way to the mall. Jane hated that nasally tone Richard took when he whined and the way he mentioned every penny "—and fifty-three cents" while referring to himself in the third person. Reading the mail usually made him hypersensitive about spending, at least that first few days of the month when all the debt envelopes seemed to arrive simultaneously. She should not have let him pick the week's stack of bills off the kitchen counter this afternoon.

"Hon, the water bill is higher because of the new irrigation system. Remember John said it would be, but only for a few months a year. Greener shrubs, bigger trees, no more hoses—it'll be worth it. John said that, heaven forbid we ever have to, the house will sell for more with the system, remember?"

He shifted in the seat some, a little restless already with the conversation. Now he had to pay for the plants to grow. This was coastal Carolina, by God, not Tucson. Richard measured the circumstances, finally deciding the moment was not a good one to argue. Two days from now would have been a year. A date she didn't think he remembered; one neither would bring up. If he couldn't make her a mommy, he could at least suffer this landscape jones she was under. He would, at least, like to ask her why she was taking her real estate advice from the lawn guy.

John Evans made a few pencil changes on the plan. Hydrangeas would be better. Big and floppy—let 'em sprawl. He liked to quote one of the dead generals, something about planning being essential but plans obsolete. Maybe a little dramatic for a garden plan. Evans slid the vellum back around so Jane and Richard could have a better look. Glancing down, Jane imagined masses of dark green leaves and fragrant needles, spheres of pink and blue blooms, protected and sunny spots. She sniffed of the spicy viburnum, rubbed the smooth, silky crepe myrtle bark, tasted the mint in her tea. Richard feigned interest and comprehension, noticing only the graphics, noting the pencil line of a circle on the top left quadrant that did not meet. He could tell Jane was ready to go on this, had taken the hook.

"And how are we going to take care of all this?" he wanted to ask, never did. It looked like a Saturday of pruning and maintenance every week. Too much for a man whose only mechanical toys were a collection of Pez dispensers. Richard figured a different question, one addressing some detail of the plan, would be appropriate, show Jane he was listening and involved—a nice, supportive white lie.

"And what color will the hydrangeas be?" he spoke, looking to Evans then Jane before returning his eyes to the plan.

Evans never lifted his pencil hand from the tracing paper now covering the vellum and marked with a few changes. He glanced over to Richard, more annoyed by this intrusion into the design process than interested in giving a helpful answer. His brain and Jane's had been a synchronized engine and transmission pushing high speeds, gaining elevation, and suddenly, a red light. Evans wanted to run it, come back later to the details, after the energy was burned off, knew he should not.

"The color will be decided as we get further along; interestingly, macrophylla—the large-leafed types we're discussing here—can actually change bloom colors based on soil pH so some variance may occur based on fertilization practices." The clinical answer spoken, Evans wanted to add "So shut up, dumbass." He refrained.

Richard thought Jane distant this Saturday morning; the word “disconnected” crossed his mind. “Of course, you can do what you want with the garden.” He ran an open hand from the top of Jane’s head to her back. His left hand was smooth, clean and soft. She did not lay her head back or arch her back to follow the stroke of his hand; Richard did not notice. He wanted to leave, get back to the office. A metro job off-island was bidding tomorrow—three new schools, dozens of collated sets. Richard felt like his company had a good shot. The reprographic industry was dependent on new construction; these were pretty good times. He felt confident. Word was a VP job was opening in the Cleveland headquarters, and he was being mentioned. No need to discuss this with Jane until it becomes a definite possibility, he’d told himself.

“I like it, I want to do it right” he lied, figuring to himself how much expense his wife was about to sign them up for. “It’ll be our Christmas gifts to each other.”

Jane sat in the kitchen, landscape plan spread on the table, a couple of fat plant encyclopedias alongside. Evans was due in a few minutes, a “layout” meeting he’d called it. Richard had been called up to Cleveland and would miss the get-together. Both he and Jane were privately grateful. Evans arrived fifteen minutes late, loaded with a couple of cans of spray paint and a bundle of survey flags.

He was unlacing hiking boots of some sort when she opened the door and invited him in. Jane could smell him, sitting there over a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Two parts humus, one part dried sweat, blended and stirred on broadcloth khakis and a white oxford shirt. It was a pleasant fragrance, something just the other side of organized—a scent not splashed out of a container but taken from the places he had been and the things he had done.

They looked out each window together and discussed the sun, soil, lighting and water features, garden paths, ornaments, an outdoor fireplace and kitchen, a deck addition. Evans made several changes on the plan, black Sharpie freely negotiating over the blue lines. Jane enjoyed watching his weathered hand—its quick, fluent movements, the disrespect for boundaries.

“Where will the grass be?” she asked. It was beginning to feel less strange to ask someone else what her own place was looking like.

“No kids, no dogs—no turf grass,” Evans was quick to the answer.

Jane wanted to ask why, but she pulled up just short, afraid she should already know.

Not a bit of ground broken, not a single seed cast, but possibilities for flowers, for soft green shade, and supple beauty lay as clear in the air as a bud off vernal wood. A bud of promise, though not of bloom.

“Cleveland?” In a moment, Jane wanted to curse, cry, throw the coffee cup in her right hand and pound Richard on the chest. He had been promoted, almost doubled their income; they’d be set for life—and his wife was angry for this? Richard just never knew what he was going to get.

“It’ll be okay, hon. I’ll move up early March—you stay here with the house until it sells. I’ll be in weekends. It’ll work—you know this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting on.”

It was brisk for early May. Bored of box-packing, Jane slipped her favorite sweater on, reflexively reaching back to untuck her low pony. She pushed open both French doors and held the pose, arms extended, palms facing the garden. The cool, moist air had pushed down the eastern seaboard from Canada, the weatherman had said. She imagined for a moment the flared nostrils of a roaming elk inhaling the very same breath as her but a few days ago. Jane walked alone, touching the smooth crepe myrtles, their leafless wood dense and strong, erect to the sky. The roses in early leaf, sweet and green, their summer bloom another broken promise she’d endure. She halted in front of the hydrangeas, they in full bloom, almost phosphorescent in the waning sun’s last rays. Blue and pink, floppy new stems encroaching the path, pushing into the viburnum. There was so much more to come here, so much she imagined but would not taste. John had been right; the new backyard had increased the home’s value and decreased its days on the market. The latter now was a bittersweet fact for her.

Glancing up in disgust at the puffy vapor trails, Evans shivered while taking the last of his long strides onto shore. Though the Atlantic coast spring Sunday was a little cooler than he preferred, the half hour swim had been brisk and, as usual, invigorating. Drying down, he didn't notice the lone sandpiper working the beach just to his side. Her tiny legs pursued each descending wave until, catching it, she retreated or ran along foam's edge then turned, face to beach, and retreated again to the safety of dry sand as a new wave of sea surged forward. Evans pulled the windbreaker's drawstring taut and leaned into the chilly northern gusts, lowering his eyes from the blowing sand.

Jane fidgeted in her aisle chair. "We have been cleared for take off, please return all seats and tray tables to their upright position and . . ." Red no-smoking lights flashed and the great craft taxied and rose, its silver body glistening in the sun's westbound rays. Richard slipped off his loafers and reclined the first class window seat. Reaching with a clumsy, open left hand, he stroked Jane's hair. Deliberately. Kindly. Jane restlessly flipped pages of the in-flight shopper, her lower back pressed to the seat's vinyl. For a moment the huge vessel dipped to starboard, offering a brief glance, one she caught by accident then held onto, of the petite island that had been home.

"It looks so arranged, so organized – there's no floppy" she muttered, a tiny tear sliding from her left eye.

Richard glanced at her, puzzled by this wife of his.

The Way of a Lover

by

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels

Listen and the ancestors will tell you what you need to know.

"To love, beloved, is like walking in a rainstorm. You may want to run, but you will still get wet, mwana. Be resolved to feel, from the beginning. A great soaking can be satisfying.

It will not help to think about capturing your love in a round about way—attack with immediacy. Once you have spotted the one you desire, swoop down on him like a hawk—grasping its most precious prey. Swiftly seize your love with glorious passion and delicious intent.

One thing should not become two, binti. Faithfulness is the way of a true lover. Yes, death will shake and traumatize your heart—but even as a soul unfolds and breathes the last bits of this hidden place, love will not perish. Eternally, love will embrace."

This poem was inspired by my ancestors, Jim Jarmusch's film Ghost Dog, and the book Hagakure, a compilation of Yamamoto Tsunetomo's philosophies.

Yoruba Cries

by

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels

She sang
Like coffee tastes—
Deep, dark, rich, and magic.
Coffee makes you high and so did
Nina Simone with her
Yoruba cries.
She moved
Your soul,
Not from side to
Side, but from grey to blue
Then to purple, red, orange and sex.
My, oh my, how she shook
The ground and made
You feel.

How to Make a Baby

(A Guide for Women)

by

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels

Every day, for a week, wash your face with aloe vera and myrrh.

At the start of the second week, conjure up a picture of your lover.

Write your name and your lover's name on an envelope. (Use any color, except black or white. Red has proven to be very effective.) Draw a circle, heart or another shape that you prefer around you and your lover's names. Kiss the envelope.

The third week, collect the following:

- * Chamomile/Dong Quai/Red Raspberry Leaves/
Chaste berry/False Unicorn Root/Black Cohosh
- * Your favorite pot
- * Your favorite herbal tea (bags or loose tea)
- * Pure spring water

Use the items above to make enough hot tea to last for two weeks. Use whatever method you're most comfortable with. Hum a lullaby as you stir the tea. Keep unused portions in the refrigerator.

Drink your lovely baby/lover tea three times a day for two weeks, before your menstrual flow. As you drink the tea, whisper softly, "Little spirit, come to me."

After your cycle, drink this tea again for two weeks. As you sip, whisper softly, "There you are."

Also, wait until the quiet evenings to approach your lover. Make love while humming your favorite tune. Or—if you'd prefer—humming "Brown Baby" by Oscar Brown Jr. has proven to be very fruitful for women in the past.

*"Lie away sleeping, lie away safe in my arms/
till your daddy and your mama protect you/
And keep you safe from harm"*

(Diana Ross's version of "Brown Baby" on her Touch Me in the Morning recording is especially powerful.)

Every Seven Years I Get Another Body

by
Heather Wibbels

Self-replication painted
on the strands of each cell,
version four of me rolls
off the assembly line at 28,
every cell replaced by the whirl and
buzz of organic copy machines
pushing back against
age's advance.

Mistakes accumulate, misprints
collect in the shadows of my wrinkles as
time passes a dusty finger
over images burned by wear.
A slow Warhol degradation
creeps across my skin, colors displaced,
images faded, caricature flesh
decaying as toner blurs. My body fails
one cell at a time until my final inhalation.

In those last few seconds of version 14 –
as the breath balloons and eyes pool –
a hundred thousand red blood cells
bloom, life's last fireworks
rushing into the dark, futile sparks
struggling to challenge the body's surrender.

Just

by
Heather Wibbels

—a recitative for Aunt Joyce

This is just a little something I picked up.
It's no big deal; I just saw it and thought
of you. It's not expensive and I know
you'll use it. It's just a little thing, now.
Nothing to make a fuss over. Last time
I dropped by, you were working with some
and I saw them in a sale bin as I
left the drugstore. I dug through
to find those last three marked half price.
They were practically free. Just a thought,
a little thing. Nothing big, you know,
just a tiny thing, not even a gift, really,
just a thought. Just a little something I
thought maybe you could use. You know,
I just picked it up because it reminded
me of you. Nothing really.

Pens

by
Heather Wibbels

As I write this line, my pen
expires, dry. Shaking fails to
loosen those lonely specks of ink
clinging the tube. A handful of pens
have remained loyal to the end.
Most lie forgotten in doctor's offices,
on sales counters, under grimy floor mats,
life still left in them, more words to shape.
Resisting desiccation in shoebox hospices
they wander off on some walkabout to find
their own end. I join them, overlooked as my calls
go ignored, emails unread, plans cancelled:
the last gasp of a splintered friendship.
Spent, unused, alone while a new Sharpie
stains her hands with black blots,
I meander off to settle into my own self,
to spend those last grams of ink in worthy hands.

Futility

by
Heather Wibbels

an echo chases
chases itself into absence

tastes the wind
the wind with an open mouth

tickles its tail
its tail with its fingers

slipping through capture
capture to rebound

born hard against rock
rock, meaning fades: a vast

breath reduced
reduced

to stillness

stillness



**The Fall 2005
Creative Writing and Poetry
Contests Winners**

Poetry

Heather Wibbels, for “The Farmer’s Grandson”

Short Story

Melinda Medlin, for “The Irony of Mercy”

The Fall 2005 Poetry Winner

Heather Wibbels, for “The Farmer’s Grandson”

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.

The Farmer’s Grandson

by

Heather Wibbels

He was perched on a John Deere
lawnmower singing to himself as
he steered straight lines across
the grain of the lawn’s last cut.
Still in his spotless dress shirt
that gleamed against the lawn’s trimmed hue,
his brown slacks rolled loosely
at the ankle, revealing pasty
white feet that peeked out
of dress loafers, the socks missing –
perhaps he meant to pull on boots,
but forgot as the sun rushed into dusk.
He mowed toward the country-road-
turned-urban-thoroughfare,
tempered progress on the green tractor
exaggerated as shiny cars rushed
past on their way home.
He jostled over his bumpy acre,
head tilted back a bit as
he reached his chorus,
singing from his belly as if it were
the first warm afternoon of spring,
and the fields were ripe for seed.

The Fall 2005 Creative Writing Winner

Melinda Medlin, for her short story “The Irony of Mercy”

Melinda Medlin received her B.S. degree in psychology from Peabody College in Nashville. Later she earned her M.A. in communications from Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. After writing for numerous small newspapers in the Wheaton area, she decided to pursue more education in the field of psychology and received an M.S. and Ed.S. in counselor education at Northern Illinois University. While living in Illinois, she opened a private practice in psychotherapy and served on the counseling faculty at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. After twelve years of surviving frigid winter temperatures, Melinda returned to Nashville and became family services director at the Nashville Area Habitat for Humanity. During this time, her mother was diagnosed with vascular dementia, and she resigned from her position to become a full-time caregiver. Since then she has worked in various fields and is now devoting the majority of her time to writing. According to Melinda, her involvement with the Writer’s Loft has “provided the structure and discipline I needed to move forward as a writer. The mentors guide in a way that builds confidence and highlights the truth that chasing your dream is a worthy venture.”

The Irony of Mercy

by

Melinda Medlin

The familiar stories no longer sustained her. Being special because she’d been chosen made little sense. With age came understanding, knowledge that her selection came from her relinquishment. As a child, the special status never matched her treatment. Her friends knew her as different. She’d told them she was adopted, not her parents “real” daughter. Their mothers, fearing what unknown characteristics she may have inherited, watched her behavior cautiously and with curiosity. She wasn’t really one of them. No one knew her background, her genetic pool, or her temperament. Of course, neither did she. Now at age 35, Madison realized discovering the truth was due her.

Driving to her birthmother’s home she felt she safe inside her SUV. There were no bells or whistles on this vehicle, just lots of miles and a special familiarity. She needed this now before meeting Vivian, the woman she’d never known except in her imagination: the woman whose body nurtured hers for those pivotal nine months before she’d been expelled. After two years of searching, this journey forward created a rebirth of sorts, facing the facts and fictions surrounding her original birth.

The high-rise senior citizen home looked worn from the outside as she imagined its inhabitants within. Balconies cluttered the building’s face, pocking it like acne with its assortment of fake and real flowers, patio and kitchen chairs. The cement structure stood fifteen stories high with ten apartments across. Outside the entrance, a man clutched an armful of newspapers similar to the way a drowning person grasps a life raft. A woman was attempting to make him let go.

Madison parked her truck wondering if she’d made the right decision. She could turn around now and explain to Vivian later. Her hands, slippery from perspiration, turned off the car and took the key out of the ignition. Stepping onto the pavement she reminded herself this was about moving forward.

“Mr. Ward, you don’t want me to call your daughter do you? Now give me the papers. Mr. Ward, listen to me.”

Madison nodded at the woman as she headed for the door, instinctually avoiding looking at Mr. Ward. The smell of new paint and fried something overwhelmed her as she entered the building, causing a moment of nausea. The pale green, newly painted walls reminded her of institutions she’d previously visited. There

were flowers cut out of construction paper dotting the walls with pictures of residents glued inside along with their birth dates. Madison looked down at the letter Vivian had written and saw the number 444. She tucked the letter back into the photo album she'd brought and searched for the elevator. The dinging sound alerted her it was nearby.

Once she located the apartment door, she pushed her hand through her straight brown hair hoping to add volume. She'd chosen her clothes carefully the night before in an attempt to make a good second impression. She figured the first one didn't count. She imagined they'd not had the opportunity to look into each other's eyes or touch the other's skin or even smell each other's breath. She assumed once she'd been born, they'd hastily taken her away, ignoring her cries for connection. "I look good," she thought with her neatly pressed white blouse and black slacks sustaining few wrinkles from the ride over. She knocked on the door quickly and with confidence. When it opened, a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman greeted her with an enthusiastic, "Hello!" Madison's heart skipped beats. She'd rehearsed for this moment many times in her life, convincing herself it wouldn't be difficult. Now with an opening of the door, she confronted her truth. Her throat constricted as it pushed down the sobs that were yearning for release from so many years of repression. She'd promised herself she would control her emotions, determined not to reveal any weaknesses to this person who was really a stranger.

She realized Vivian reminded her of someone she'd seen on television years before. With her broad face and sad eyes she almost looked like a clown when she smiled. The smile and eyes didn't match the emotions portrayed. Her body was approximately the same size as Madison's with a little extra poundage around her hips. At 5-feet 6-inches, Madison stood a bit taller but was comforted seeing Vivian didn't hunch over as her age progressed. Apparently, Vivian too was hoping to make a good impression with her tailored, double-breasted navy blue pant suit still sporting 1980s-style shoulder pads and a white blouse with a flaring collar. Suddenly it came to her who her birth mother looked like. It was J.R.'s mother on the television show *Dallas*, Miss Ellie. And thankfully, Vivian's face yielded as few wrinkles as the television character's when she was in her sixties.

Madison embraced Vivian and noticed the strong peppery smell of the perfume Chantilly. It was an inexpensive brand she'd used herself many years earlier. It smelled good on Vivian, mixing well with her body's chemistry. Madison remembered it had smelled good on her too and wondered now if it was because of their shared genes.

Vivian's grasp on her torso was strong and unyielding. It was as if she'd collapsed into Madison's arms, refusing to separate. Madison felt awkward with Vivian's body so snug against hers. It wasn't the soft, fleshy skin or the smoker's breath vaguely disguised with mouthwash that caused her discomfort. It was simply the closeness she wasn't sure Vivian deserved.

"It's nice to finally meet you," she said pulling away from Vivian's grip.

"You too, Madison. Won't you please come in," Vivian said while focusing her gaze on Madison. She swung the apartment door open and gently grabbed Madison's hand leading her inside.

Vivian's hand felt small and soft like babies' skin. Madison thought of her adoptive mother, Sarah, and how her skin felt the same way from years of using Jergen's hand lotion and those ugly rubber gloves when washing the dishes. Evidently, Vivian had succumbed to similar advertisements.

"Let me take a good look at you, girl." Vivian pulled Madison toward her slightly then spun her around like a man with his dance partner. "Oh my, you're so lovely," she said, "just as I expected."

Madison remained silent though her mind was absorbing all of the incoming data. "This is her," she thought, "It's my mother, my real mother. I'm actually seeing her. We're seeing each other, finally looking into each other's eyes."

"Is something wrong?" Vivian asked.

"No, no. I'm sorry. I just can't believe we're finally together."

"I know, darling. It's a dream come true for me too, Madison. I'm still in shock from it all. Listen, why don't you sit down and I'll get us a bite to eat. My stomach needs something in it. I just couldn't eat earlier from the excitement. I'll only be a minute." Vivian headed for the kitchen wearing a distinct smile across her face.

Madison found a place on the 1970s-style sofa with floral patterns so worn they looked like large ignored stains. There was a dark brown recliner with a peach afghan draped over its back and a small side table separating the two pieces of furniture. The dimly lit den had two lamps, one by the recliner and another beside the sofa. In front of Madison was the door to the bedroom. Behind the couch was another room that came off from the kitchen. A mahogany dining room table with four chairs tucked tightly under it stood in front of a matching hutch, which held an antique china set and four glass goblets. Glancing around the room, she noticed a wall filled with neatly hung pictures of people from generations before. Madison longed to look in their faces to see if her traits resembled any of theirs. At this point she wasn't hungry for food, but answers to questions she had wondered about for all of these years, like "Why did you do it?" Since she'd been raised in a family where being polite was valued as much as attending church three times a week, she decided to squelch her questioning for the moment.

When Vivian returned, she had two plates with what looked like chicken salad sandwiches and potato chips balanced perfectly on a tray along with two glasses of iced tea, two cloth napkins, and a couple of chocolate chip cookies stacked on top of each other next to the drinks. "My Lord, girl, you look just like him," Vivian said while handing Madison a plate.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm just saying you look so much like your father with those big brown eyes."

She'd heard this statement before in regard to her adoptive father. It was a common story for adopted children in the '50 s. In an attempt to extend the "special" myth further, they were told they'd been selected from a room filled with babies for the simple fact they looked most like one or both of the parents. Madison's features resembled her adoptive father's the most. Knowing now it was true of her birth father gave her a true sense of belonging.

"My father? You said I looked like him?"

"You know we're German?" Vivian posed the question quickly changing the direction of the conversation.

"I had no idea," Madison replied.

"Your grandfather, my father, came over from Germany when he was a young boy. He didn't know any English. Can you imagine?"

Madison's imagination scrambled. Vivian's blond hair and blue eyes were now explained by this revelation. She had not considered a German heritage before. She was brunette with a tinge of red mixed in; brown-eyed and freckled since childhood. When Vivian opened the door, she hoped she would see a spitting image of herself. This didn't happen, but at least now she had something to fill in the gaping hole of identity adoption had left. Her birth father carried the genes that gave her her own distinct characteristics. "He must be Irish," she thought to herself.

"I honestly believe the hardships he faced made him the man he was," Vivian continued. "His family was poor when they arrived over here. They had little to eat and Papa went to work in a steel mill when he was young to help support his family. My grandfather drank up most of the money. They said he was a mean drunk and beat up Papa for no good reason. Papa just took it and worked hard so his mama and three sisters could survive. If it hadn't been for him, I suppose they would have all died."

Madison listened attentively yearning for as much information about her birth family as possible.

"He had a rough time alright, but I just wish he didn't take it all out on me. He didn't have to hit me so much."

This information struck Madison as hard as the fist she imagined her grandfather wielded. "He hit you? How often?" she asked with shock in her voice.

"More times than I care to remember. You know, Madison, I was just a child, an innocent little girl just wanting some love from her father. That's all." Tears hung on Vivian's lashes. "I'm so sorry, dear, I didn't mean to cry."

"It's okay," Madison said reaching for a Kleenex on the side table and handing it to Vivian. "My God, that's a horrible thing to remember. Of course you'd be emotional." Madison rubbed Vivian's shoulder gently. "I don't know how you stood it. You must have been strong, really strong to deal with all of that pain."

"I thought of you all the time," Vivian blurted, "Whenever I saw a baby in a stroller I wondered if it was you."

Madison pulled herself back in a jerking motion. A chill climbed up her spine pushing tiny bumps across her skin. It never occurred to her that the woman who gave her up would be interested in her once they were separated. "I never knew anything much about you. They only told me you'd prayed I'd find a good family. That was it. It's odd thinking you really cared about me after that. I just didn't . . ."

"I loved him, you know?" Vivian injected.

Madison found herself shifting her thinking again to keep up with Vivian's revelations. "You did? Why didn't you marry?"

"Oh, I wanted to, but he didn't. Once he found out I was pregnant with you he vanished. He came from a strict Catholic family and couldn't handle the scandal of my being pregnant out of wedlock."

"What, did he forget he had something to do with your being that way? Damn Vivian, how did you deal with all of that?"

"I lived with my parents at the time and of course the news made them none too happy. My father called me every name in the book. Mother just looked at me in shame. Thankfully, I was thin and didn't show much. I just told people I put on a little weight. Besides, I smoked which helped me stay small. We didn't know it hurt babies back then."

Madison thought of her baby pictures and how she was so tiny. They said her hands were like bird's claws and she barely weighed five pounds the day she was born.

Now she was angry: angry at her birth father's treatment of Vivian, angry at his rejection of her. She was angry at her grandfather's brutality and her grandmother's silent scorn.

"He was a good man, Madison."

"How can you say that?"

"Because he was. He'd just come back from the war. He was doing the best he could do."

Madison stared at Vivian with her mouth open. How could she think this? Had she really bought his excuse this was the best he could do? "You're a better person than I am, Vivian. I'm feeling bitter, not kind and certainly not understanding."

"That's because you didn't know him dear. He had the sweetest face and said the most endearing things. He just couldn't accept the pregnancy. That was more common in those days, you know?"

Madison's thoughts shifted to her adoptive father, John. When she was young, he nicknamed her "horse-fly," which she eventually determined was a kind reference to her being a pest. She wanted to comb his hair each night when he arrived home from work and hoped for a piggyback ride from him each morning for breakfast. He often succumbed. Then there were those faces. Those silly faces he'd make in his rearview mirror as they drove down the street. They were contorted and ridiculous but he didn't care. It seemed like all he wanted was to catch his little girl's eye just to hear her laugh. He always succeeded.

"What was his name?" Madison asked as she shifted back to the present, sorting through the images of these two separate men.

"I promised I'd never tell. He made me sign a paper saying just that. He gave me cash, lots of cash, and paid my doctor's bills. I promised I'd leave him alone and would never tell."

Madison wondered who the hell this coward was, this pitiful excuse of a man. What kind of a man would do this to a woman out of fear? She felt the surge of her blood rush to her face, giving her a sense of an immediate fever. "You never heard from him again? Nothing?"

"No nothing, not one thing. Now show me those pictures you brought in," Vivian inserted as she moved to the couch to be next to Madison.

Madison had almost forgotten she'd brought in a photo album to assure Vivian the decision she'd made thirty-five years earlier had provided a good life for her child. There were pictures of homes and schools, friends, and family all chosen to portray the good parts of her life. She found herself liking Vivian. Vivian seemed eager and excited like a child gets when they make a new friend.

"This is my mother, Sarah," she said handing Vivian a picture of her at their Florida condominium.

"Oh, she's so pretty, Madison."

The picture revealed Sarah's long legs and slender shape that resembled the tall pines of her native Georgia.

"Yes she was," Madison said, "She was beautiful and loved to dress to match her looks."

"You keep saying was. Is she dead?"

"Yes, last year from a stroke."

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I know you must miss her. What about your father? How is he?"

"I'm afraid he's gone too, ten years ago from cancer."

"How awful for you. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No, it's just me."

"Well, baby, now you have me, so you're not alone."

Madison didn't know how to react to this statement. She didn't like Vivian calling her baby or laying any claim to her this late in life.

"Are you okay?" Vivian asked after noticing Madison's harsh expression and the awkward silence that filled the room.

"Sure," was all Madison could say.

"Do you mind if we continue looking at your photos? I'd like to see a picture of your father."

"Of course," Madison said while flipping through the pages of the album. She finally found the one she liked best. It was a picture taken during a family trip to Mexico. Each of their smiles beamed as their white teeth peeked out from their tan skin. Madison remembered the time fondly when health and happiness weren't in question. She lingered looking intently at each face wishing the past were the present.

"If you're not comfortable showing me these now it's fine," Vivian said.

"I'm sorry, I just got lost in my own thoughts. Of course I want you to see them." She gingerly removed the picture from the album and handed it to Vivian.

"I'm afraid I need my glasses. I just can't see this clearly." Vivian reached into the side table drawer and pulled out the reading glasses she hated wearing. She placed them so close to the end of her nose Madison thought they'd fall off. "Okay, now let me see this family of yours." Vivian pulled the photo close then pushed it back so many times it looked as if she was playing a slide trombone. She drew it close one more time then quickly threw the picture to the floor like she'd encountered hazardous material. Gasping, she stood up and started pacing from one side of the room to the other. Her head was bowed as she rubbed her forehead over and over with her right hand. "What is this, some kind of joke?" she said.

Madison jumped up. "What are you talking about, Vivian? What is it?"

Vivian moved away from Madison and stood by the door. Her face whitened as if someone had dusted it with flour. She stood there with her jaw clenched and her hands and arms draped around her stomach like she was trying to keep its contents held in. "Why are you doing this? Why are you playing with me?" she whispered. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she placed her right hand over her mouth to capture the sobs.

Madison didn't understand or know what to do. She moved towards Vivian, but as she did Vivian turned away. "Doing to you? I don't know what I've done. Please, please tell me what it is I've done. I don't understand."

Vivian turned around and pointed to the picture. "That's him!" she yelled, picking up the picture and pointing to John.

"That's my father, Vivian. That's John, my dad."

"I know who he is. He's your father all right. He's the one who made you, the one I loved."

"What? What did you say? He's who?"

"It's him, Madison. The man who left me when I got pregnant with you. He's your father, your biological father."

Madison's pulse quickened. She gasped for breath. With her knees buckling, she fell to the floor. As her body turned on its side, she slowly curled up, drawing her knees to her chest. Words wouldn't form, nor would her thoughts.

"What have I done? What have I done?" Vivian screamed as she kneeled next to Madison. No movement occurred. Only sounds: just the sobs of a mother and the cries of her daughter, once again torn apart just as they'd been, by the same man, thirty-five years earlier.





**The Spring 2006
Creative Writing and Poetry
Contests Winners**

Poetry

Heather Wibbels, for “Necessities”

(Note: The Writer’s Loft would like to award an honorable mention
to the poem “Yoruba Cries,” by Alicia Benjamin-Samuels.)

Creative Writing

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels, for her essay “Listening to Nina Simone”

The Spring 2006 Poetry Winner

Heather Wibbels, for “Necessities”

Necessities

by
Heather Wibbels

Poetry is necessary only for the poet.
The rest of us can live with irony,
inconsistency, the subtle discord
of life. We can ignore the boredom’s
wounds, the callouses scraped
on rough floors. We capture life
in tiny doses of single meaning.
This simplicity, this blessing,
this precision of the reluctant
mind incapable of self-reflection
protects our skin, leaves our dreams
quiet—keeps the present at bay.

The Spring 2006 Creative Writing Winner

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels, for her essay “Listening to Nina Simone”

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels lives in Nashville with her husband and daughter. She received her B.S. in journalism from the University of Maryland at College Park then studied theater as a graduate student at Hunter College in New York City. She has worked as a writer and editor for a few newspapers and the Freedom Forum/First Amendment Center and currently works as an editor for United Methodist Publishing House. She has performed her poetry in several cities and has also acted in many plays. Whenever she can, she performs in Nashville and dreams of one day directing a film. When contemplating her future, she likes to quote Carl Sandburg: “I am an idealist. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m on my way.”

Listening to Nina Simone

by

Alicia Benjamin-Samuels

“To be young, gifted, and black/Oh, what a lovely, precious dream.”

—Nina Simone and Weldon Irvine

Nina Simone’s words still ring true for me—“*To be young, gifted, and black is where it’s at.*” My mother played this tune in our home for years, almost daily, when I was a child. Of course, I know she was singing about me. I was the quintessential young, gifted, and black child. It became my theme song, and I so wish that black children of today would adopt the same anthem.

Like the work of Nina Simone, the books, films, music and plays of other artists have traveled with me as I grew up, left my Delaware home, and lived in various places like Milwaukee, D.C., Baltimore, New Jersey, Connecticut, New York City, and Nashville. I have cried as Billie Holiday sang about love and pain with her husky, melancholy voice; rejoiced as I performed words by Ntozake Shange; and cried while reading love stories by James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. These artists and others have given me enough inspiration and material to last a lifetime. I hope they will give other souls—adults and children—the flame and passion that they’ve passed on to me. Here’s a light—catch the fire.

Billie Holiday

“Mama may have, papa may have,
but God bless the child that’s got his own”

—“God Bless the Child”

My dad had an amazing collection of books and albums around the house when I was a child. I remember seeing an album cover showing a white woman with a flower in her hair and thinking, “Why do we have this?” It took several years for me to realize that Billie Holiday was a black woman. When I discovered this, I played the album out of curiosity and have been taken with the Lady’s voice ever since. The pain and sensuality that Billie carries in her voice prevents me from listening to Lady Day in large doses. I’ve tried listening to whole recordings, but find it too depressing. Subconsciously, her singing made me want to affect people with my art the way she does with her voice. As an artist, I want to make people cry or to at least feel something when they read my work. Billie taught me that.

Claude Brown

“Little ghetto boy, playing in the ghetto street, whatcha’ gonna do
when you grow up and have to face responsibility?”

—“Little Ghetto Boy”

I grew up in one of Delaware’s little ghettos. (Yes, Delaware has them too.) Claude Brown’s novels, *Manchild in the Promised Land* and *Children of Ham*, captured the spirit of family, danger, and coming-of-age wisdom that existed in my own neighborhood. These two novels described perfectly the desire to create surrogate families outside the home when great dysfunction exists within. *Manchild in the Promised Land* was a thinly veiled retelling of Claude Brown’s childhood on the harsh streets of Harlem in the 1940s and ‘50s. After growing up around various killers, drug addicts, and prostitutes, the main character in the story emerges as a triumphant young man who attends Columbia University’s law school. Brown’s other ode to young people, *The Children of Ham*, is a story about young outcasts who live together in an abandoned apartment building in Harlem. All of them are affected in some way by the heroin epidemic of the 1970s. Here again, Brown explores the need for children to create family ties when the traditional bonds are broken. I’m sure these two novels helped me to navigate my own stressful childhood experiences.

Gloria Naylor

“And all the night’s magic seems to whisper and hush
And all the soft moonlight seems to shine in your blush . . .
Can I just have one more moondance with you my love?”

—“Moondance”

Mama Day, Naylor’s novel set in New York City and on an island off the coast of Georgia, was a sort of blueprint of my life, though I didn’t know this the first time I read it. The book captured the rich heritage of my southern roots and my experience in the northeast, particularly New York City. She made me aware of my own connection to African religious traditions. Cocoa’s journey of self-discovery about her ancestors and love parallel much of what I’ve discovered about my own life. Several years ago, I spent an afternoon with Gloria Naylor and found her to be warm and very honest. I actually felt like a little sister in her presence.

James Baldwin

“I’m goin’ to the river, maybe by and by
Yes, I’m goin’ to the river, maybe by and by,
Because the river’s wet, and Beale Street’s done gone dry!”

—“Beale Street Blues”

For me, James Baldwin is the male counterpoint to Toni Morrison. He is my literary father. One of the first novels I read as a child was a James Baldwin book that I had no business reading. It was *Giovanni’s Room* and it scared me to death. Not so much because of the subject matter—homosexuality—but because Baldwin made me feel all of the emotions that the main character felt—passion, love, depression, loneliness, and despair. That’s quite an array of feelings for such a little girl.

In my opinion, no writer explores so deeply a character’s thoughts, emotions, and desires as James Baldwin. His novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* is my favorite book. It’s a love story but it’s also filled with terror, loss, racism, and a surplus of family dysfunction. The book describes America (Harlem, to be exact), in the late 1960s and now. Baldwin’s work is timeless.

Mariama Ba

"You don't know what love is . . .
Until you've loved a love you've had to lose"

—"You Don't Know What Love Is"

Senegalese writer Mariama Ba wrote a novel called *So Long a Letter* that has never left my heart since I read it 14 years ago. After her husband dies, the main character of the book, Ramatoulaye, writes letters to her friend Aissatou to help sort out her feelings of loss and abandonment. Ramatoulaye's husband, Moudou, had done what he promised never to do—he had taken another wife after 25 years of marriage. Through correspondence with her longtime friend, Ramatoulaye lets go of the anger that this betrayal causes and finds her worth as a woman on her own. The book begins beautifully:

. . . I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. My long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.

How true I have found those words to be for myself. I didn't know it then, *but So Long a Letter* was preparing me for my divorce that was soon to come. I feel a great kinship and sisterhood with Mariama Ba. I'm grateful for her gift.

Ntozake Shange

"i found god in myself
& I loved her/i loved her fiercely"

—*For Colored Girls . . .*

This playwright, poet, dancer, novelist, and homegirl from the mid-Atlantic area (New Jersey) helped me find my way as a thespian and a poet. Ntozake (she who comes with her own things) Shange (one who walks like a lion), with her play/choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* broke something loose in my own creative mind. I was able to hit notes on stage as I performed poems from *For Colored Girls* that I've yet to tap into again.

Shange is a master storyteller and, like Gloria Naylor, she's able to call up the wanja magic of her Geechee/African ancestry. From Shange I learned the true symmetry between poetry and the theater. Like Shakespeare, she's a master at her craft.

Oscar Brown Jr.

"Brown baby . . . I want you to drink from the plenty cup"

—"Brown Baby"

A playwright, director, actor, singer, poet and community activist, Oscar Brown Jr. did all of the things I've dreamed of doing. He was passionate about both his art and his politics, which makes him a rarity among entertainers.

All black and brown couples trying to have a child should be required to listen to "Brown Baby," one of Brown's masterpieces.

Brown baby, I want you to live by . . . the justice code/
I want you to walk down . . . the freedom road

Pam Grier

"I'm not sayin' what I did was alright
Tryin' to break out of the ghetto was a day-to-day fight"

—"Across 110th Street"

She was smart, beautiful, black, sexy, tough, and her 'fro was tight! We all wanted to be like Pam Grier growing up. We wanted to kick some butt and be sexy at the same time. It also didn't hurt knowing that she was accepted into medical school—instead she chose to keep making big money as an actress. And she came back strong in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*. You can't keep a good woman down!

Ruby Dee

"I've acted out my life on stages
With ten thousand people watching
But we're alone now and I'm singin' this song for you"

—"A Song for You"

I took a solo performance class with Ruby Dee at Hunter College in New York City. From her I learned to always have a purpose when performing or creating any type of artistic project. Ms. Dee screamed at me when I was rehearsing a piece for an upcoming show. "Speak the words!" she said. She was telling me to give it all I had. I've been trying to do that ever since. And I've got nothin' but love for her husband, the late Ossie Davis, who would lovingly fill in for his wife and teach her class when she had other engagements. His advice about performing and the arts was always as solid as hers.

Toni Morrison

". . . until you know about me, you don't know nothin' about yourself. And you don't know anything . . .
. about your children . . . and your mama and papa.

—*Tar Baby*

I think of Toni Morrison as my literary mother. She not only taught me the importance of working on my craft as a writer but also showed me how true wisdom—when written on the page—can change people's lives. Morrison helped me to find the magic and power that was dormant in my life. She also taught me lessons about love and loss in *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. I don't think I'll ever get the chance to read *Tar Baby* as many times as I feel I need to. The story continues to haunt me.

Zora Neale Hurston

"Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember,
and remember everything they don't want to forget.
The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."

—*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

It was years between the time I had heard about Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the time I actually opened the book. My Lord! After the first paragraph, I started to feel like I had cheated myself out of years of phenomenal wisdom and music on paper. This is also one of the greatest love stories of all time.

As a timid young woman, Janie, the main character, marries first for convenience and again later for love.

In the end, she's empowered by her ability to survive through painful and passionate relationships with men.

Hurston's literary revival is common knowledge by now. But it's still hard to fathom how the work of such a gifted and eloquent storyteller could have been lost for decades. I'm grateful to Alice Walker for bringing Zora's books, stories, and anthropological works back to life.

Nina Simone

"I'll stay if you can see me through,
Explain why. Please read me."

—"Please Read Me"

She sang like coffee tastes—deep, dark, rich, and magic. Coffee makes you high and so did Nina Simone with her Yoruba cries. She moved your soul—not from side to side but from gray to blue then to purple, red, orange, and sex. My oh my, how she shook the ground and made you feel.

Nina weaved magic with her voice. Listen to her as she sings her sultry lullabies to us all. She'll put a spell on you.

In the whole world you know
There are a billion boys and girls
Who are young, gifted, and black,
And that's a fact!

—Nina Simone and Weldon Irvine

Songs and Works Cited

1. "God Bless the Child," by Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog Jr.
2. "Little Ghetto Boy," by Donny Hathaway
3. "Moondance," by Van Morrison, as sung by Bobby McFerrin
4. "Beale Street Blues," by W. C. Handy
5. "You Don't Know What Love Is," by Don Raye and Gene De Paul, as performed by Billie Holiday
6. "A Song for You," by Leon Russell, as performed by the Temptations
7. *Tar Baby*, by Toni Morrison
8. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston
9. "Please Read Me," by Robin and Barry Gibb, as performed by Nina Simone





Each summer, the Writer's Loft publishes the *Trunk*, a creative companion to the Writer's Loft. The *Trunk* is a compilation of essays, poems, short stories, and novel excerpts written by the program's students, mentors, alumni, and invited guest writers. Student submissions for the session writing contests will be considered for inclusion in the *Trunk*, as well as any other submitted work. This is an excellent opportunity to have work printed, and students are strongly encouraged to participate. You do not need to wait until the official deadline. Submit entries at any time throughout the year. To read previous issues online and learn more about the *Trunk*, visit the journal online at www.mtsu.edu/~learn/noncredit/thelofttrunk.htm.

2007 *Trunk* Entry Deadline: April 30, 2007

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