

Impost

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Impost

Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work

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Submission Guidelines

Impost: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work, a peer-reviewed journal published by the English Association of Pennsylvania State Universities, welcomes submissions of scholarly essays in all fields of English studies. In addition, we welcome creative writing, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and literary journalism. Current and previous editions of the journal, which in the spring of 2016 changed its name from *EAPSU Online*, can be found on this page.

Please submit critical essays via email to timothy.ruppert@sru.edu and creative work via email to astuart@bloomu.edu, with your name and the title of the work in the subject line. Attach the submission as one file in .doc or .docx format. In the body of the message, include a brief bio: your name, address, phone number, email address, institutional affiliation (if you have one), the genre and title(s) of your work, and any other relevant information. In the attached document, please do not include any identifying information. Scholarly work should follow current MLA guidelines. Creative prose should be double-spaced, and poems should be single-spaced.

Creative work can be simultaneously submitted; however, we expect to be notified immediately when a work must be withdrawn from consideration. Scholarly work should not be simultaneously submitted.

Contributors will be notified of acceptance status via email at the completion of the review process. Usually, the review process is completed six months after submissions are received. You may contact the editors if you haven't received notification of the status of your manuscript within six months.

While our submission deadline is rolling, submissions received by August 31 will be guaranteed consideration for the upcoming issue of *Impost*. Submissions

received after this date will be considered for the following year. By submitting your work, you agree that *Impost* acquires first serial rights. In addition, *Impost* may reserve non-exclusive rights to reprint a piece.

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Introduction **Anne-Dyer Stuart** 7

Creative Nonfiction **Poetic Attributes** **Kristin Crawford** 14
Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone **Betina Entzminger** 19
Our Lungs Have Branches Like Trees **Claire Lawrence** 26
Nessie **Claire Lawrence** 28
Hoosier's Who: Boyd and Cutters **Sheng-mei Ma** 29
Skeletons in the Closet, Buns in the Oven **Cassandra Sachar** 37
How To Have A Throwing Away Party **Laura Sweeney** 42

Criticism **Rewriting Vivienne, Steampunk Style** **Christina Francis** 44

Poetry **Fall Break** **CJ Farnsworth** 52
[Bliss is the mistake we make] **CJ Farnsworth** 53
Ghost **Mary Ann Honaker** 54
In the sunroom, watching snow **Mary Ann Honaker** 55
Tollund Man **Mary Ann Honaker** 56
Lost. or Nearly So **Randy Koch** 58
Studies in Suspicion **Randy Koch** 59
The Aviary **Randy Koch** 60
Bath in the Tears of Rachel Carson **Jessica Manack** 61
The Directress **Jessica Manack** 63
The Things I Thought I Loved **Jessica Manack** 65
Election Cycle **Matt Perakovich** 66
Children's Book **Matt Perakovich** 68
Horoscope **Matt Perakovich** 69
The Odyssey **Matt Perakovich** 71
"To Live Life is Not to Cross a Field" **Matt Perakovich** 72
Value Pack **Matt Perakovich** 74
Fishing on the Conemaugh, May 30, 1889 **Barbara Sabol** 75
Keeping an Eye on the River **Barbara Sabol** 76
The Unfinished Childhood Cros Stitch **Ellen Stockstill** 78
Smash: Cans **Jerry Wemple** 80
Fisherman **Jerry Wemple** 82
Florida **Jerry Wemple** 84
Ohio, Indiana, and the Lower Part of Michigan **Jerry Wemple** 86
Year **Jerry Wemple** 88

Book Review **The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women** **Anne-Dyer Stuart** 92

Introduction

Anne-Dyer Stuart

Editor

This year found me editing *Impost* alone, I'm sad to say, following the departure of my awesome co-editor, Timothy Ruppert, who has moved onto other endeavors. Nevertheless, I had a great batch of writing submissions from which to choose, more creative submissions than critical this year (perhaps folks needed to imagine worlds beyond the one we've found ourselves in), and it has been a lot of fun putting this issue together. In it you'll find a mix of outstanding nonfiction and poetry, as well as a book reviews section featuring work from Betina Entzminger.

Nonfiction ranges from more traditional personal narratives to flash to literary criticism: Sheng-mei Ma's humorous, insightful "Hoosier's Who: Boyd and Cutters" recounts his journey as a Taiwanese immigrant entering American academe, showing us that "bonding occurs even when two people may not be able to relate to each other at every turn"; Kirstin Crawford helps us understand what it's like to tackle creative nonfiction as a poet ("my mental breaths, rejecting the rigid structure of clause and purpose") in her heartbreaking essay, "Poetic Attributes"; Cassandra Sachar explores what it means to "fall" pregnant in her engaging essay, "Skeletons in the Closet, Buns in the Oven," discovering that she isn't the first in her family to "fall"; Claire Lawrence's stunning flash nonfiction includes "Our Lungs Have

Branches Like Trees," which explores her relationship with her mother through the spaces they've inhabited, and "Nessie," a tribute to her first car and "a 16-year-old nerd girl marooned in the suburbs of Salt Lake by a mother who never learned to drive"; Laura Sweeney learns more than she ever wanted to about meth heads who steal cars in her flash nonfiction, "How to Have a Throwing Away Party"; finally, on the literary criticism end, Christina Francis, a medievalist, investigates the riveting YA subgenre of Arthurian steampunk in Kathryn Rose's trilogy *Camelot Burning* in her essay, "Rewriting Vivienne, Steampunk Style."

Our mix of glorious poems includes: a series of Harry Crews-inspired prose poems from Jerry Wemple ("Back in those days your stepfather drank beers like a challenge..."); CJ Farnsworth's "Fall Break" and "[bliss is the mistake we make]" ("Bliss has a deep kiss/hypnotic teeth/a freshly scented tongue"); Mary Ann Honaker's "Ghost," "Tollund Man," and "In the Sunroom Watching Snow" ("...crests of waves meet/and flakes leap upward like foam"); Randy Koch's "Lost, or Nearly So," "Studies in Suspicion," and "The Aviary" ("...catbirds, understated in/dark caps and slate-gray coats"); Jessica Manack's "The Directress," "The Things I Thought I Loved," and "Bath in the Tears of Rachel Carson" ("Pittsburgh is rich with rivers we don't know how to love"); Matt Perakovich's

“Election Cycle,” “Children’s Book,” “Horoscope,” “The Odyssey,” “To Live Life is Not to Cross a Field,” and Value Pack” (“I pledge allegiance/to this wreck/ and to the algorithms/that keep it burning”); Barbara Sabol’s “Fishing on the Conemaugh, May 30, 1889” and “Keeping an Eye on the River” (“Not one of us mentions the dam, its flaws, the likelihood/of a breach...”); and Ellen Stockstill’s “The Unfinished Childhood Cross Stitch” (“...Without the clear lines of backstitches,/the bodies are a collection/of hovering bubbles...”). Get excited!

Save some excitement for our review section as well, which features Betina Entzminger’s excellent new collection of essays, *The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women*. We are lucky to include one of them in this issue, “Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone” (“When I was fourteen, I made the mistake of confiding in her about my boyfriend, Kevin, whom I loved with all the passion of a thwarted teenage romance”), which Entzminger was kind enough to edit slightly so that it would stand alone.

Many thanks to the *Impost* team of readers and editors, especially Spencer Norman, and a shoutout to two invisible peer reviewers, Cassandra Sachar and Ted Roggenbuck, who have been invaluable.

Onward!

Anne-Dyer Stuart

Biographies

Kirstin Crawford

was born in an unflattering suburb of Pittsburgh, in 1998. Her early life was distinguished by trauma and her methods of surviving it. She found consolation in the arms of her hippie grandmother, in the realms of mathematics, and in the worlds of written word. Kirstin began writing poetry at an early age as a lens for understanding and expression. She enjoys being the eldest to nine siblings, exploring the natural world around her, and learning all she can along the way. Kirstin graduated from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania in the fall semester of 2021, with dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in Mathematics and Philosophy. During her education, she explored many other disciplines- law, the German language, computer sciences, and, of course, creative writing. Moving forward, she will continue to pursue her passions of writing, of mathematics, and of seeking adventure.

Betina Entzminger

was born and raised in Columbia, SC. She holds a Ph.D. in English and is a professor at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, where she has worked for the past 22 years. She is the author of *The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women* (Rivercliff Books, 2021) and two books of literary criticism, *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women and the Dark Seductress* (LSU Press, 2002) and *Contemporary Reconfigurations of American Literary Classics* (Routledge, 2012).

CJ Farnsworth

is a poet residing in WV and a graduate of the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA Program; her poems have appeared in print and online publications, including *Rattle*, *Kenning*, *Kestrel*, *Women Speak*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Mountain Scribes*, *the Community College Humanities Review Journal*,

and others. She is also a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Christina Francis

is a Professor of English for Bloomsburg University. She specializes in medieval Arthurian narratives and their modern adaptations and retellings. She is the area chair coordinator for Medievalism Popular Culture at the National Popular Culture Association's annual conference. She also directs the Gender Studies Minor at BU. She is currently researching young adult retellings of Arthurian narratives. She also chairs the planning committee for the regional High School Diversity Conference about to celebrate its 20th year.

Mary Ann Honaker

is the author of *Becoming Persephone* (Third Lung Press, 2019). Her poems have appeared in *Bear Review*, *JMWW*, *Juked*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Rattle.com*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and elsewhere. Mary Ann holds an MFA from Lesley University. She currently lives in Beaver, West Virginia.

Randy Koch

is the author of two collections of poems, *Composing Ourselves* (Fithian Press, 2002) and *This Splintered Horse* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), and a longtime columnist for *LareDOS: A Journal of the Borderlands*. His poems and reviews have appeared in *The Caribbean Writer*, *Chiricú Journal*, *The Texas Observer*, *Revista Interamericana*, *Sundial Magazine*, and many others. He earned an MFA at the University of Wyoming, taught at Bloomsburg University from 2009-2020, and is currently working on a family history and a memoir about indecision, infatuation, and incarceration.

Claire Lawrence

is a Professor of Creative Writing at Bloomsburg University. She has a PhD in Creative Writing: Fiction from the University of Houston and has published fiction, poetry, and memoir in numerous magazines including *Crab Orchard Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Event Magazine*, *Terra Nova*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Lunch Ticket* and *Juked*. She lives in the forest with her husband, children, and two Pekingeses named Mushu and Kung Pao.

Sheng-mei Ma

is Professor of English at Michigan State University in Michigan, USA, specializing in Asian Diaspora culture and East-West comparative studies. He is the author of over a dozen books, including *The Tao of S* (2022); *Off-White* (2020); *Sinophone-Anglophone Cultural Duet* (2017); *The Last Isle* (2015); *Alienglish* (2014); *Asian Diaspora and East-West Modernity* (2012); *Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture* (2011); *East-West Montage* (2007); *The Deathly Embrace* (2000); *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998); and memoir *Immigrant Horse's Mouth* (2023). Co-editor of five books and special issues, *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile* (2018) among them, he also published a collection of poetry in Chinese, *Thirty Left and Right*.

Jessica Manack

holds degrees from Hollins University and lives with her family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her writing has recently appeared in *San Pedro River Review*, *Black Fork Review*, and *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Matt Perakovich

is a writer, teacher, and artist living in Bloomsburg, PA.

Barbara Sabol

Barbara Sabol's fourth poetry collection, *Imagine a Town*, was published by Sheila-Na-Gig Editions in 2020. Her work has appeared most recently in *Escape Into Life*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Evening Street Review*, and *The Copperfield Review*. Barbara earned an M.A. in Communication Disorders from the University of Massachusetts and an MFA from Spalding University. Her awards include an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council. Barbara directs poetry workshops through Literary Cleveland. She travels between Ohio and Pennsylvania to visit family and conduct research for her poetry collection on the Johnstown flood of 1889. Barbara calls both the rolling hills of Ohio and the Allegheny's hogback ridges home. She lives in Akron, OH with her husband and wonder dogs.

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar

is a writer and associate English professor in Pennsylvania. Her creative nonfiction, short stories, flash fiction, microfiction, and poetry have appeared in publications including *The Dillydown Review*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*, *The Centifictionist*, and *The Pine Cone Review*. Additionally, she has published research and practitioner pieces in diverse educational periodicals. She holds a Doctorate of Education with a Literacy Specialization from the University of Delaware and is working toward an MFA in Creative Writing at Wilkes University.

Ellen Stockstill

is Assistant Professor of English at Penn State Harrisburg where she teaches courses on British literature and critical theory. Her scholarship focuses on Victorian literature and culture, and she is co-author of *A Research Guide to Gothic Literature in English* (2018). Publications include essays

in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women Writers*, *Thomas Hardy Journal*, *Wilkie Collins Journal*, and *Nineteenth-Century Prose*. Prior to joining the faculty at Penn State Harrisburg, she was a Marion L. Brittain Fellow at Georgia Tech and a scholarship athlete at the University of Texas at Arlington. She earned her graduate degrees from Georgia State University (M.A. and Ph.D.).

Anne Dyer Stuart

Anne Dyer Stuart's publications include *AGNI*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Raleigh Review*, *Third Coast*, *Cherry Tree*, *Sugar House Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *New World Writing*, and *The Louisville Review*. Her work won a Henfield Prize, New South Journal's Prose Contest, was anthologized in Best of the Web, and nominated for Best New Poets. *What Girls Learn*, a finalist for Comstock Review's 2020 Chapbook Contest, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2021. She is editor of *IMPOST: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work* and associate professor of English at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.

Laura Sweeney

Laura Sweeney facilitates Writers for Life in Iowa and Illinois. She represented the Iowa Arts Council at the First International Teaching Artist's Conference in Oslo, Norway. Her poems and prose appear in sixty plus journals and ten anthologies in the States, Canada, Britain, and China. Her recent awards include a scholarship to the Sewanee Writer's Conference. In 2021, she received an Editor's Prize in Flash Discourse from *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*; Poetry Society of Michigan's Barbara Sykes Memorial Humor Award; and two of her poems appear in the anthology *Impact: Personal Portraits of Activism*, an Indie Book Awards finalist. She is a PhD

candidate, English/Creative Writing, at Illinois State University.

Jerry Wemple

published three full-length poetry collections. His first, *You Can See It from Here*, was selected by Pulitzer Prize-winner Yusef Komunyakaa for the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award. He has also published two poetry chapbooks, co-edited a poetry anthology, and has creative nonfiction and poetry in numerous journals and anthologies. Among his awards are a Fellowship in Literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a Vermont Studio Center Residency Fellowship, the Jack and Helen Evans Endowed Faculty Fellowship, and the *Word Journal* Chapbook Prize. He grew up in central Pennsylvania and southwest Florida. He is a Professor of English at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.

Creation
ve Non
Fiction

Poetic attributes

it's hard to write
creative non-fiction

i.
as a poet,
i prefer the soft edges of lowercase letters-
over the forced annunciation capitalization brings
to the page, like a watercolor artist rejects the firm
texture of acrylic on her canvas. for commas and
hyphens- they fit best in the spaces inbetween- my
mental breaths, rejecting the rigid structure of clause
and purpose.

as a poet,
my parents knew something was wrong
with me

when they found a piece of paper, with my
handwriting relating me to the likes of a butterfly with
her wings torn off.

my father asked me, "do you want to die?"

his curls only glistened specks of silver,
under the dull, yellow kitchen light. the fixture of
his unibrow was not yet distinguished by the involun-
tary wrinkles in his knowledge. my muscles clenched
their teeth around my bones

and i shook when fear imprinted

and he couldn't understand
my answer. it was locked inside my lips.
the tip of my tongue wrote the words-

*these wings cannot carry
the weight of this body and this pain.*

*i have no use
for weak appendages or this blood
in my veins.*

on the wet inside of my jawline. the scripture
melted into my saliva

and i told him, "i'm fine."

i went to sleep that night. with my red curls
tangled in my pillowcase, i had night terrors. i froze in
my hell. my body moved through molasses and i ran
in slow motion.

i ran from shadows that spawned in my
mother's home- on the landing at the bottom of the
steps, at the end of the upstairs hall, and filling the
space above my bed. every time, i stayed tied down
with belt/meaty hand/
*fear. i woke alone
sweating, frozen.*

i didn't learn that i shook and seized in my
sleep until much later. in college, a partner woke me
with more fear in their eyes than mine.

*and there's no way to convey
shadows with heavy breath
like slime, leaving heavy
purple kisses on young skin*

*(to the person who loves you, seven
years later).*

emotions don't fit into thin margins

ii.
as a poet.
*paragraphs occupy space that could be
better spent
setting the scene with swift similes, a little
alliteration, and double-meanings
decided by atypical lines'*

break.

the writing rules displayed on my english
teacher's wall
in 9th grade:

"Know your cause and purpose."

"Organize your thoughts."

"Introduction - Body - Conclusion"

"Stay away from cliché."

"Write neatly, in black and blue ink."

so i wrote in red about flowers with glass
straws for stems and rain clouds with heavy hearts of
wildfire. in the back pages of every subject's note-
book- paradoxical verbiage, image, and shape hung

onto each-other like lifeline, like line-ending comma
hangs from his blue line on spiral-bound page.

clichés chowed down on contradictions and
contradictions chewed them up from the inside-out.

anxieties hatched from the rotted corpses,
crawled under the skin on my skull, and now i have
scars from the scabs of writers' doubt.

iii.
*as a poet,
things don't make sense
when you think they do*

*and when you want them to.
love letters come in black,
suicide notes in pink,
and poems can be written in white ink.*

but i learned the meaning of concrete

in sloppy patches sewn onto ripped knees
in kindergarten. i couldn't keep my feet planted,
my roots could not break through. i could walk in a
straight line as well as i can write one now. rigid back-
grounds do not complement bodies with feet bigger
than the things they run from.

and my elastic body bounced back no matter
how many stitches i'd torn.

but i was the toughest girl i knew, until i
was eight; until my grandmother read me Katherina's
monologue from *The Taming of the Shrew*; until my
feelings knocked more wind out of me than the thud
of my frame on the landing of my mother's steps;
until i could only hear my mother's tears as my vision
blackened for the hand around my throat; until my
rubberband spine snapped beneath the swelled gut of

a man, five times my age and weight.

but i learned the meaning of concrete
and i was the toughest i knew,

so i fell in love with math-
where something is odd when two times
something else, plus one, equals that something, and
we only use the word irrational when something can't
be expressed as the division of two other somethings.
my existence is proofed by outlining the someones
who brought me into this world, and uniqueness by
how i've distinctly explored it.

*yet i wonder why
the requirement of infinity
is so integral
(to sound theories).*

*and now i yearn for the absolute
solace
of iterating expressions of chaos
which still converge
to a limit.*

but some symbols can't be captured by
expression. they evaporate between our ears as if
they weren't on the page to begin with. they
transform in translation.

*(a poet and Haskell Curry would agree-
some things are better left unsaid)*

iv.

but as a poet,
maybe it's personal-

because words aren't just on the page. they

live in your father's nightmares and give your
teachers a headache. they crawl up and down your
bones. and you decide when to let them out.
others decide when to let them in.

*and some words burn
at the pyre, smoke and ash
staining the clouds for miles-*

***there's something worth dying
for here.***

because i fucked consensually for the first
time only two years after the last time he touched me.
i lost my virginity to a boy my age, at thirteen. he read
my poetry about handprints that fossilized beneath
freckled skin, but cried more than i did when i told
him, "it still hurts."

a year and a half later, we found ourselves
packed in the backseat of my mother's car. It sat three
rows: my mother and my little sisters' bags; Brianna
and Elizabeth, four and three; and Lukas and i. my
mother's voice shredded effortlessly through the air,
dense from not only the cigarettes she smoked with
windows-up in cold weather.

"he's a racist- but 'Len' is a spineless piece of
shit, he won't say anything to you Lukas."

i cringed at my mother's ignorance and
clenched my fingers tighter around my partner's. i
raised my voice just enough to cover the distance to
the driver's seat, "i already warned him. he knows
everything."

*Lukas shared a half-dimpled grin
before chiming in, "i don't give a fuck anyway.
i'm here for her."*

i sunk my head into his lap as his words
settled warmly inside me. i ignored the seatbelt
buckle digging into my back as i crunched my legs in
a variety of positions to find the one best-fitting. my
breathing settled and i fell asleep to the heartbeats
pounding in my ear.

i don't remember seeing 'Len' that night- or
on any of the others like it. my memory is empty and
my stomach turns at attempts to fill it. my mother
finally left him, but their children saw him every other
weekend. i accompanied them for the ride, to and from
'hand-offs', when i wasn't with my father.

i didn't come clean until he got emergency
custody. on a weekend i couldn't go with, my mother
installed a car seat improperly. he seized the opportu-
nity and held onto it for two months.

i still use the best deep-cleansing body wash
i can find.

*two of anything is far too much
for that beast-
daughters, months,
and breaths included.*

*i took the stand, with my terrors
festering in the room,*

*i thought of my father
three months prior,
when it only took
two minutes with the truth
for him to shatter.*

*to be butterfly with no need
for wings.*

and 'Len' stayed on Megan's Law until 2018, because
he pled guilty to the lesser crimes assured
(to me) to lock him up.

now he lives with his mother, in the same
city as my father.

the last time my father cried, he was drunk.
so was i.
he used to share words that no one else
heard.

as he gets older, his drinks get stronger to
help.

i sat on the couch, my face warm from too
much wine, when he asked, "can i tell you a secret?"

he sat on the floor. with his elbow propped
on the cushion beside me, his bellybutton peeked
out from below his t-shirt. his cheeks were as red
as my hair.

"of course, you know that," my eyes rolled
with the tone of my voice.

his brown eyes darkened and he looked
down before shaking his head. his curls, mostly
silver, shook with him. he pulled them taut between
his fingers.

"you can't tell anyone."

i set myself aside and saw my father,
falling apart as he put together his words.

*"i saw 'Len'
in the grocery store.*

*i knew it was him
when i saw him.*

*i know it was him.
and i almost put a bullet
in his brain."*

v.

*i'm still learning
which words are better
on my tongue,
in my margins, and in the minds*

*of my loved ones. commas and hyphens
hold them gently, give them time
to breathe and to grieve.*

*it's easier
to read about your trauma
with room to stretch your arms*

*across the page. your scars
hide like words
written in white ink.*

*and you can get to the end
without breaking
someone in the audience
or on the stage.*

vi.

as a poet, you can say the word rape without saying rape.

*(so i took a class
in creative non-fiction
and spent the full semester
waiting to break form.)*

**Kirstin
Crawford**
Poetic
attributes

Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone

I had learned from other female relatives that grief doesn't kill, at least not quickly, but when it lasts for thirty years, its cumulative power can certainly be deadly. My cousin Tammy suffered a fatal heart attack in 2018, at the age of fifty-two. Her adult life was plagued by anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and unending mourning. Although she was once my closest friend, throughout adulthood, I barely knew her.

Tammy was my best friend from the time I started making friends until the end of middle school. She had a swimming pool in her backyard, not a cheap above-ground pool that you can buy for \$499 at Wal-Mart, but a beautiful in-ground pool with a diving board and a slide. For this reason, I believed as a child that her family was better than mine. Her father, my mother's brother, was a middle manager at the phone company, and her mother worked, too. They had more money than we did, even though my father claimed to have gotten my uncle his first real job.

I loved swimming in Tammy's pool. When our siblings were there, we all played Marco Polo or had chicken fights, but when Tammy and I swam alone, we often had underwater tea parties. Tammy's

mother, Aunt Eva, sat in her modest one-piece bathing suit in a lounge chair by the pool, cigarette in one hand and a cold drink, which I always thought was spiked, in the other. Her short black hair had a few strands of grey, and her skin was tanned and leathery. Since Tammy swam expertly, but I had mastered only a floundering dog paddle, I'm sure my aunt was there mainly to keep an eye on me.

Our underwater tea parties began with a surface dive. Tammy looked like a seal doing this maneuver. She bent gracefully at the waist, ducked her head below the water—her long, dark hair floating behind her—and flipped her feet up into the air as she dove for the bottom of the pool. After trying and failing at this, I usually reached the bottom by simply sitting, aiding gravity by paddling my hands. Although both of us were chubby and frequently awkward at nine and ten, Tammy achieved a grace in the water that eluded me.

Resting on the bottom of the pool, we pantomimed serving and drinking tea, pouring from an invisible pot into dainty, invisible cups, from which we drank like ladies. The necessity of holding our breath added an element of competition to this game, and once again, Tammy was much better than I.

**Betina
Entzminger**

With the chlorine burning my eyes and the lack of oxygen burning my lungs, I burst to the surface after one brief fake sip from my cup, gulping air while Tammy lounged below. Finally appearing above water, Tammy gloated silently and said we should play again, but after a few rounds of the tea party game, Aunt Eva told us to play something else, probably fearing I would drown.

To my child's eyes, Tammy's family was better than mine for other reasons as well. She and I frequently slept over at each other's houses on weekends, and her parents were more indulgent and permissive than mine. They bought Tammy a moped when she was twelve, and we rode it, her driving and me holding on behind, to the nearby shopping center and all around her neighborhood. On one of these excursions, I borrowed Tammy's lip gloss, applied it using a drug store mirror, and then glanced at the surveillance camera in the ceiling as Tammy placed the lip gloss back in her purse. We were able to explain the situation—we had not in fact been shoplifting—to the stocky, uniformed black woman with a gold-edged tooth who appeared seconds later, but she warned us to “be cool” in the future.

Another favorite pastime was prank phone calls, always from Tammy's house, because I feared being caught at mine.

“I'm from the power company and I'm conducting a survey. Is your refrigerator running?” Tammy would ask. “Then you'd better catch it before it gets away!”

We both burst into laughter, and Tammy hung up the phone.

Once I asked Tammy which house she preferred for sleepovers.

“Mine,” she replied.
 “Me, too,” I agreed. “There's more to do at your house.”
 “Plus, it's too hot at your house.”

While Tammy's house had central air conditioning, mine was cooled by window units that my father would turn on only if the forecast predicted a high of ninety-five degrees or more. On summer nights, the heat stifled us and thwarted sleep. An attic fan drew in warm air from the outside, but we were only permitted to open the windows two inches because my father believed this narrow gap led to more forceful airflow and a cooler house.

“It's physics,” he explained. I think he also feared that wide-open windows would invite intruders to slit the screens and climb inside.

One particularly hot night when Tammy slept over, after she believed everyone else was asleep, she rose from bed and tiptoed to the window. Just as she tried to lift the stiff sash, my father appeared in the bedroom doorway.

“Don't touch that,” he ordered.

Tammy, about twelve then, replied, “But it's hot as hell in here! I'm just trying to open the window.”

“Leave it alone and get back to bed. The fan is on.”

“Well, it's not doing a very good job,” she sulked.

“You're a spoiled brat. Get to bed and stay there!” I was hot too, and I had been rooting for Tammy as she challenged my father. But I also inwardly balked at the way she thought she could defy the rules so easily. If it were that simple, I would already

have done it.

Tammy and I used to talk on the phone for an hour or more, several afternoons a week, but just recently, I learned that one time, shortly after the window incident, she called my father.

“I've talked it over with Mama and Daddy, and we think that Tina should come live here with us,” she said. “You keep it too hot over there, and she'd be better off here.”

When my father asked to speak to Tammy's parents, she hung up. He promptly called back and got them, but they, of course, knew nothing about this proposed change to my living arrangements. She was grounded, and we didn't see each other for a few weeks, but my father never mentioned the phone call to me or, surprisingly, to my mother. Tammy's older sister, Erin, told me about it after her funeral.

I saw my first concert—Sean Cassidy—with Tammy and Aunt Eva. Another time, my aunt treated my cousin and me to a weeklong vacation at Myrtle Beach. She booked an efficiency motel room near the boardwalk and gave us far more independence than my parents would have, reading novels and tanning while we swam and giggled at boys. I remember standing in the second floor, open-air motel corridor one night while Aunt Eva watched TV in the room. Tammy dared me to talk to two older boys on the sidewalk below, so I yelled “Hey guys!” over the railing.

To our surprise and horror, they turned and walked toward the motel's stairway.

“You're not coming up here, are you?” I asked.

“We're just coming up to say hello.”

We had both matured early and used too much makeup; that night I wore a black tank top and white shorts, and Tammy wore a tight t-shirt. Evidently these boys in their late teens or early twenties thought we were older than our actual ages of twelve and thirteen. When they reached the second floor and saw us up close, they chatted a few minutes and left. Tammy and I bought sodas from the vending machine and returned to our room, chastened.

As we grew into our teen years, though, Tammy and I drifted apart. We lived on opposite ends of town and went to different schools. Tammy's school friends, upper-middle-class preppies, wore Izod shirts, Ralph Lauren jeans, and Sperry Top-Sider shoes, while my friends were an eclectic mix of freaks and geeks. She listened to Donna Summer or Earth, Wind & Fire, but I preferred Led Zeppelin or Lynyrd Skynyrd. When she spoke of my clothes, my music, or my friends, I sometimes heard her sneer.

When I was fourteen, I made the mistake of confiding in her about my boyfriend, Kevin, whom I loved with all the passion of a thwarted teenage romance. On the phone with Tammy, I tearfully declared my love for him and bemoaned that he hadn't called in a week. Because he told me so, I knew he wanted a girlfriend he could have sex with, and I fantasized aloud about running away from home to do this.

“Gross! You're fourteen!” Tammy said. “You shouldn't do that until you're married.”

I was in no mood to listen to this type of reasoning, and Tammy soon ended our one-sided conversation. A few weeks later, when I actually did consummate my relationship with Kevin, I told Tammy all about

it in a furtive phone call when my parents weren't around. Her voice revealed scornful amusement and disapproval; I could hear it even then. But because the action had symbolized in part my bid at self-definition, the act of telling it made it more real and enduring.

Days later, after school, the phone rang and, as always, I ran to answer before anyone else had the chance.

"Hello, Tina. This is Kevin." It was my cousin's voice, unconvincingly deepened to sound like a boy.

"Tammy, I know it's you," I said. A room full of her friends burst into laughter before she hung up.

Tammy's betrayal compounded Kevin's (by this time, he had broken up with me for good) and deepened my humiliation. She made a similar call a few days later, and that ended our friendship. After this, I saw Tammy at infrequent family gatherings, and we never talked about her prank calls. We were polite to each other but guarded. We swam in different circles now.

Late in my high school years, my mother told me one spring day that Aunt Eva had been hospitalized. Her kidneys were failing and she began regular dialysis.

I should have called Tammy then, but I didn't. I had a part-time job, a new boyfriend, and I had become a serious student. All of these things absorbed my time, but, more importantly, resentment still dominated my emotions.

I saw Tammy and Aunt Eva once a year now, at the family Christmas Eve party they hosted for near and distant relatives and their family's close friends. A

few months after Eva's hospitalization, they held the party as usual.

"I need a cigarette," said Tammy. "Do you want to come to my room and have one with me?"

"Okay," I said. But in the bedroom, I asked, "Won't your parents get mad at you for smoking?"

"Mama doesn't care. She bums cigarettes from me when she runs out." Neither of us spoke about Aunt Eva's illness, but behind Tammy's eyes I saw fragility and sadness, as if the failure to forbid smoking were a symptom of her mother's physical decline.

By the next Christmas Eve, we had both started college, and Tammy's family had moved to a new, more impressive lake house. I attended that year's gathering with my fiancé, and the year after that, we attended as husband and wife. I spoke to Tammy only briefly, but her close friends were there to keep her company. Each year, Aunt Eva grew thinner and frailer, chatting cheerfully from a chair instead of bustling among the guests.

In my third year of college, Tammy's fourth, Aunt Eva called my mother to say they wouldn't be having their Christmas Eve gathering. She'd just had another stint in the hospital and was too weak to pull it all together. My mother decided to have a more intimate version of the party at our house, inviting her four siblings and their families. But despite the decorations, the Christmas music, and half a dozen different desserts, our party was not as festive as Aunt Eva's.

The subdued atmosphere was due partly to the smaller number of guests and partly to the limited drink selection. Whereas Aunt Eva's parties featured

a fully stocked bar, ours offered only lime punch or sweet, pink wine, the kind favored by high school girls who pool their money and cajole an older sibling into buying them alcohol. More importantly, though, everyone's mood suffered because we feared Aunt Eva's parties were forever lost.

Tammy's family arrived a little late, and my uncle helped Aunt Eva to a chair in the living room, where most of the older relatives sat. She was thinner and paler than before and stooped at the shoulders as if she were too weak to stand up straight. Mother brought her a plate, while my uncle and cousins helped themselves.

The younger family members congregated in the den, where the conversation was a little freer.

"How is your mom doing?" my older sister asked.

"She's okay. She's getting around better today," Erin replied. "They gave her a colostomy bag in the hospital," she added. "It's the funniest thing. Sometimes she'll be talking, or watching TV, or just sitting there quiet, and pppfftttt! You can hear it across the room!" Erin laughed, coping with her worry through humor. The rest of us laughed, too, uncomfortably, and I saw fear in Tammy's eyes.

Today, I can still picture those eyes: deep brown, large, and furtive, refusing to hold my gaze. And I can hear her tentative laughter that came with a shaky, brief smile. Tammy was tall, about six feet, and at this point in her life she was thinner than she ever would be again, although still big-boned and fleshy. Her long black hair waved gently around her winter-pale, attractive face. She always dressed in expensive, fashionable clothes, but she seemed uneasy in them, as if she wished she could shrink three

sizes. Because I kept that memory, I must have still cared deeply for her, or at least for the memory of the two of us as children. I've always been guarded about exposing my feelings, and at that time, I was still wary of Tammy. She and Erin were too quick to laugh at others' flaws, and even if they intended it affectionately, I disliked being vulnerable. I don't recall saying much that night, but the anxiety I glimpsed in Tammy became a recurring theme in her life.

Aunt Eva couldn't smoke in our house, and she needed her rest, so they only stayed about ninety minutes. Her parties usually lasted until after midnight, but ours broke up much earlier, leaving me, and probably our guests, feeling let down.

Months later, as the azaleas and dogwoods bloomed, Aunt Eva died. She was in her mid-fifties. I cried when my mother told me, but not until after I'd hung up the phone. The pain took a few minutes to surface, like when a child skins her knee and only cries when the sight of blood confirms she's hurt. I didn't go to the funeral, though, having the true but inadequate justification of having classes to attend, papers to write, and my part-time job at the mall lingerie store. "You don't need to go," mother said on the phone. "We'll be there." But today, far too late to rectify or apologize, guilt stalks me for failing to pay my respects.

My mother and her sisters helped Erin and Tammy sort through their mother's belongings a few months after the funeral. The girls kept what they wanted, but most of her clothes were given away.

"Do you want to come look at some of these things?" my mother asked. "She had some nice pieces that were barely worn, and they look like they're about

Betina Entzminger
Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone

Betina Entzminger
Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone

your size.”

My husband and I were newly separated, and I had refused to move back home. I was an impoverished student, living on my college scholarship and minimum wage from the lingerie store, and my mother knew I couldn’t afford to buy clothes.

I ended up keeping several of the pieces my mother brought home with her, and there’s one that I can still visualize today. The matching full skirt and boat-necked, three-quarter sleeved blouse looked like a dress when you wore them together. Horizontal pinstripes of orange, white, green, and yellow crossed the black, synthetic fabric. I needed to dress up for my job, so this outfit became a part of my regular fall rotation.

As it turned out, I was wearing it the next time I saw Tammy. It was near Christmas, school was out, and I was working extra hours at the lingerie store. Walking through the mall before work, I saw Tammy a few yards away, in the midst of her Christmas shopping. Carols played on the sound system, and a Salvation Army Santa rang a bell. Garland, holly, poinsettia, and fake snow decorated the mall planters and shop windows. For a second I froze, wishing I had worn something different that day and wondering if I could flee in the other direction without being seen.

At that moment, Tammy looked up, said hello, and closed the distance between us.

“Are you Christmas shopping?”

“Heading to work,” I replied, pointing to the store.

“I love that store. They have such pretty things.”

“Yeah, I love to look at it, but I can’t really buy any of it,” I said.

As we stood in the tiled mall corridor, chatting politely, I hoped Tammy wouldn’t recognize her mother’s dress. I kept my face neutral and my gaze steady, willing myself not to look down at my clothes.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Doing okay. I’m finishing up school this year. I’m on the five-year plan,” she said breezily.

Neither of us spoke about Aunt Eva, even though this was her time of year—the annual party, the only time I saw Tammy. Grief for her mother had hit Tammy especially hard, I’d heard, and it was the first Christmas since her death. She had liked to party at college, but coping with her mother’s final illness prompted her to drink even more. Her drinking and depression led her to fail several classes. All of this ran through my mind, but I kept it submerged.

In the almost thirty years that followed this day, Tammy continued to self-medicate with alcohol, eventually in combination with her prescription Paxil. I kept up with her on social media, where she frequently shared posts about mental health awareness and suicide prevention, as well as nostalgic remembrances of her mother. She eventually married and had a son, about the same age as my son. I stopped by their house one summer when I visited Columbia and found them all in the backyard by the pool. While her husband and son played in the water, Tammy sat on the steps in the shallow end with a bottle of wine. She offered me a glass and cheerily announced that this was her second bottle of the afternoon. At occasional family gatherings where

I saw them, Erin chided Tammy for her love of wine, at first good-naturedly and then, when Tammy developed diabetes, with more fervor. She and I always chatted pleasantly, but we had grown too far apart by this time for intimate conversations.

But why wasn’t I able to offer her some comfort that day in the mall? I’m still not sure. At the time, it happened so fast, but with the luxury of decades to look back on that moment, I see Tammy as a sad, motherless girl whom I long to embrace.

But again, it’s far too late for that.

That day in the mall, the air felt thick with all we didn’t say. For a minute, I thought maybe it was just me; maybe Tammy hadn’t noticed the dress, maybe she didn’t suffer this awkwardness. But then I saw tears gathering in her eyes, and I realized we were both pretending.

“This is your last year, too, right?” Tammy asked casually.

“Yeah. Just one semester to go.”

I thought of the underwater tea parties from long ago, as if we were politely holding our breaths again, each of us refusing to acknowledge that I wore her dead mother’s hand-me-down clothes. I wanted to say, “I’m sorry.”

But this time, it was Tammy who burst to the surface first.

“Well, Merry Christmas,” she said, turning her face just as the first tears slipped down her cheeks and hurrying past the mall’s artificial cheer.

Betina Entzminger
Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone

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Our Lungs Have Branches Like Trees

1.

In the first picture of me that exists, perhaps the first one ever taken, I am sitting on the floor in an intense square of light falling from a small high window, oblong and bright like a laser. My guess is that I am around eight months old. My wispy ponytails stick straight out and I am looking away from whoever is taking the picture. My head is back lit so I glow, wearing an irradiated crown. The photographer is far away from me so I am tiny and most of the picture is room, just blank beige walls with no art and the one window. The only thing my mom will say about that time in our lives is, I wish I'd picked you up more when you cried.

2.

My room in the Citizen M hotel in New York is basically a bed pod and a bathroom. But flush with the bed is a huge floor to ceiling window so when I lie down at night, I feel like I am flying over the city, a middle-aged Faith Ringgold. I mean, the window is an entire wall. Lights everywhere. I rest for whole afternoons in that bed and watch the clouds. Some sort of hurricane is brewing off the coast so they race across the sky in great gray swirls. I can see the rain coming in for miles, watch it march across the city to my window. I know I should go out and walk around as I am only there for a week but everything is

rooted in the sky, happening there, not on earth. I am in New York because I have run away from my mother.

3.

My mother's cottage, or so it is called in the brochure for her retirement community, is actually quite lovely and spacious but only feels claustrophobic because she is there. She keeps everything dark so the fancy furniture in the useless and unused front room doesn't get too much sunlight. There are lovely windows but she keeps them shuttered; the air in there is gray. My childhood home has been reconstituted, with very little change even in furniture placement, 2000 miles away from where she used to live. Don't get me wrong, her furniture is lovely. Inherited from my grandparents it is full of pristine pieces antique dealers would recognize and drool over: cherry wood tables and brocade chairs. It's a far cry from our first little apartment. But no one is allowed to sit in the good room and my mom has crowded her entire life into a tiny back room with a big TV and only one chair so no one can watch with her. She never leaves her little house except to come to my house for dinner or brunch or to go to the doctor. Her world at the end of her life is the same as it was at the beginning of my life, when what she thought was a sin cut her

off from everyone and everything she knew. She is almost completely dependent on me.

4.

For those first eight months in the basement apartment did my neurons fire in concert with hers or in concert with nothing? Did I look out the tiny widow and see the sky or maybe the branches of a tree? Did I spend the day watching dust motes and smoke? Did we ever go outside? Because she will not talk about that time, I can only imagine a woman and a baby in the blank room from the photograph. The woman is smoking and staring at the child who is crying on a blanket on the floor. The woman wishes she had a TV, anything to do but be with the crying baby. The baby hungers not even for her touch but her face so she can learn how to feel.

5.

My body echoes my mother's body, despite my best efforts to separate us. I have asthma. She has COPD. In New York I am 200 miles away from her. And yet in the hotel hall on the way to my pod my chest tightens. And in her cottage her chest tightens. Both of our bodies lurch to barometric pressure, and the summer hurricane havoocs the air as it lands. The world moves and heaves, the forms of trees echoed

in our lungs. Closing bronchi divide into smaller and smaller branches until they become microscopic. There is so much silence between us and yet here we are, connected to each other and to everything else. From my window I watch whole trunks snap in the wind, trash cans whip down the street. I suck my inhaler. She falls to the floor but I am too far away to pick her up.

Claire
Lawrence

Claire
Lawrence
*Our Lungs
Have Branches
Like Trees*

Nessie

A 1977 Ford Granada is a beautiful machine, especially if you are a 16-year-old nerd girl marooned in the suburbs of Salt Lake by a mother who never learned to drive. Maybe you have aspirations of being a punk. Maybe it's because it's 1983 and a very handsome boy with a foot high mohawk sits next to you in class. He embodies everything you have ever dreamed of, especially rebellion against your mother, who is fond of telling you to sit like a lady. Every day you breathe him in like a bass line: the army coat festooned with a billion carefully placed safety pins, the earrings in his ear, his doc martins, perfectly scuffed, tucked under his desk. How he pulls it all off while technically still meeting private school uniform guidelines is a miracle that impresses you more than the Virgin birth. You let your legs fall apart, never to be crossed at the ankles again.

Claire Lawrence

A 1977 Ford Granada has a huge front end with an 8-cylinder engine. It can go from zero to 60 mph in 10 seconds. It can zoom you away from the boys in trench coats and fedoras that think they are oh so cool. They tell you you are ugly so often that you believe it. They trip you in the halls. But really they are just nerds like you and jealous of the girls, you included, whose GPAs are higher. You know this but you also know surviving them is awful. You also know if you could just wear the

punk clothes your mother will not allow you to wear you could be scary or sexy and either way both subsets of boys would either love you or leave you alone.

But your mother is unmoved by your dreams of Docs and high hemmed plaid skirts, buttons and green hair. She irons your pastel button-down uniform shirts until the collars are so stiff they hurt your neck. Dress like a lady she says and gives you a demure string of pearls to wear to school. You want the skull ring you saw at the head shop that you and your best friend were able to drive to in your 1977 Ford Granada, Nessie.

Nessie, green and groaning, thus Loch Ness monster named. Nessie of the wood paneled dashboard and the AM radio knobs that shone with the light of a thousand suns from your polishing. Nessie of the long free afternoons driving through town. Nessie of the trips to thrift stores for all the punk clothes your heart desired. Nessie of the first clove cigarette, of the first sip of beer, of the Taco bell runs, of the rated R movies with friends. Nessie of the long front bench seat that you slid across one afternoon to unlock the door and let the punk boy in to give him a ride, leaving the bully boys gaping at the bus stop. Oh Nessie when that boy got in he winked, and smiled out of the side of his mouth.

Hoosier's Who: Boyd and Cutters

The opening to my piece "Asian Immigrant: Confessions of a 'Yellow Man'" goes: "I came to the Unites States in 1982 and spent the next eight years at a midwestern university learning when and how to use the definite article *THE*" (*English Studies/Culture Studies: Institutionalizing Dissent* 1994). That midwestern university happens to be Indiana University, Bloomington (IU), where my hazing upon entrance into the American academe is captured by that one word untranslatable into and that concept of articles non-existent in my native tongue Chinese. Hyperbole, you said? But there is nothing definite about the definite article, the English language's omnipresent amoebas that mutate into viruses breaching a non-English speaker's discourse. The absence of THE in the Chinese linguistic and conceptual landscape rots the very foundation of acquisition of this new language, a theoretical, academic one to boot: its strange vocabulary, expression, mindset, and behavior. As if fashioning a new I through a pair of new eyes, the tongue's constant fumble and the hands' hesitation—to *the* or not to *the*—remain deeply embarrassing after all these years. Americans seemed bemused by what I said; journal reviewers of my scholarly submissions wondered, patronizingly, about the command of English. Even the studied ease with which I write these words veils the self-

doubt over whether I could have omitted the indefinite article in "a non-English speaker's discourse" four sentences ago.

The academic English I acquired in graduate school involves a Who's Who in Anglo-American high culture: William Blake, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Henry David Thoreau, Philip Roth, and more. Concurrently, however, Indiana known as the Hoosier state had inflected that learning with a Hoosier's Who, Boyd in particular with his thick southern accent and local culture. To put it in regional dialect, Boyd "learned" me or taught me about southern Indiana, even pointing me to the Oscar-winning film *Breaking Away* (1979), the Little 500 bicycle race pitting townies, "the cutters," against IU's gownies, privileged college students. The film features a classic case of underdogs versus top dogs. Boyd was an IU school bus driver on the E route, ferrying me from Evermann apartment in the northeastern corner of the campus to Ballantine Hall at the center for classes. Unlike the silent Charon, Boyd talked to me in his distinct southern drawl as we crossed the River Styx where I began to trade the mother tongue for the stepmother tongue. Incidentally, the Jordan River did "meander across the campus," as the IU brochure sent to me in Taiwan alleged, except it was a small

Sheng-mei Ma

creek overgrown with weeds. The constellation of Anglo-American canon the international graduate student reached for at Ballantine (a boy's Valentine with his own dreams?) was tied to the earth-bound, working-class Hoosier's Who I came to know en route through Boyd—his large family and friends, not to mention pontoons, gazebos, cars, which were, in his words, “shurr's purty,” “shurr's a dandy.”

Boyd's numerous step-grandchildren bore an eerie resemblance to *Breaking Away's* cutters named after limestone-cutters at local quarries, cutting short their higher education at IU and its branch campuses as though rejecting gawnies and their elitist culture of entitlement. A double entendre, cutters had not only built New York City's Empire State Building, as any local Hoosier would boast, but had also quit the race of life like losers, as any non-Hoosier would quip. The paradox aside, IU's parallel universe of Hoosier's Who opened with the sesame of Boyd, a typical Hoosier who was unique in his openness and worldliness, but whose words in heavy accent reflecting local culture eluded me for years. Now that Boyd has gone “over yonder,” to the other side of the River Styx, I tarry awhile to look back (forward to?) at him and fellow cutters. To rephrase Matthew 21:42, “the stone[cutter] the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” of Hoosier's Who.

The Arrival

My better half and I arrived at IU through some shenanigans to circumvent Taiwan's policies of forbidding couples to travel overseas together. One must wait at least one full year before applying to join the spouse, an application which was in and of itself uncertain amidst Taiwan's martial law. How did separating couples contribute to the island-nation's security? Given the tension across the Taiwan Strait, the logic of paranoia dictated holding one's

spouse as a collateral, if not a hostage, to prevent the overseas student from defecting to communist China. Of course, Taiwan implemented this draconian policy in the name of its young citizens' welfare away from home. Even before our marriage, my partner handled all matters pertaining to US graduate school applications because I was serving my military compulsory service after college graduation and could not receive overseas mail. A brash young man believing himself to be a poet-cum-scholar on the verge of stardom, I applied to quite a few preeminent schools, including Harvard, but had regretfully given up on Oxford and Cambridge. There was no typewriter at the military post, so I had to write out the essay to Harvard in longhand, which was returned because the professor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found my handwriting illegible. I also learned some vocabularies from him, in particular “herculean.” With the wisdom of hindsight, I realize now my youthful folly, pathetic grandiosity. The adjective captures my Sisyphean climbs in futility rather than the prowess of an Oriental Hercules. I did receive admissions from University of Chicago and other distinguished schools, but I could not afford the tuition. We decided to attend IU because of a scholarship offered by the International Student Services. My dropping names like Chicago resembles Hoosiers gesturing to Empire State Building, or *Breaking Away's* cyclist, an Italian opera aficionado, singing “Libiamo” from Verdi's *La Traviata* to turn Little 500 Big and *magnifico*!

At Taiwan's airport, our two families came together to see us off. Before entering the security check, I waved good-bye to those on the other side of the cordon and lifted a heavy white China Airline bag by the shoulder strap. The thin strap broke just as I was shouldering it. The sudden loss of weight pulled my back and shoulder muscles so badly that I could

hardly raise my right arm. Struggling to carry the bag, trying to turn the grimace into a broad smile across the lobby to assure them, this accident foreshadowed the pain that is to come from biting more than I could chew, lifting more than I could bear. My right arm failed to lift above my shoulder for about six months. Even now, I subconsciously pushed my right elbow up with my left hand when I buckle the seat belt. That we did not have a car until years later suggested that habitual push long after the incident resulted from chronic pain, even though the disabled right shoulder appeared to have healed. Four decades hence, the body memory remains, in this sclerotic remainder of that flexible yet fragile body.

After an excruciatingly long journey of transoceanic and transcontinental flights, compounded by ground transportations and layovers at labyrinthine airports, we finally arrived at Evermann Apt. #429. Imagine our shock when we unlocked what was to be our “home, sweet home,” only to find it cluttered with stuff, still occupied! With that injured right arm, we carried our heavy luggage back down the four flights of stairs to the apartment office. Apartment 429 had long been assigned to us on the housing contract. Boxes of our books had been shipped from Taiwan to that address. A very kind Kathy Hoyt, to whom the Evermann resident assistant turned for help, put us up for a night at an unfurnished second floor room at the International House. It was a narrow room with a narrow single bed. My wife and I looked at each other in the cold and helped ourselves to some cheese, the only thing available in the wee hours at the market. Dairy products promptly gave me diarrhea. After a sleepless night, I was furious when I managed to find the Housing Office on campus to demand its bureaucratic snafu be straightened out. The clerk's indifference set me off and I uttered a four-letter word that I picked up from my service as

Taiwan's military policeman for foreign affairs. The clerk told me to move away from the counter. Would I behave more courteously, more avuncularly, today? Probably, given that unbeknownst to my younger self, the Indiana University Police Department occupied the other half of the Housing Office. Some trigger-happy police officers may have been itching to get their hands on this foul-mouthed little Asian.

Having settled in, we came to befriend the Evermann staff, the gallery of characters that included a very tall and feminine Bob, who never failed to greet me with an elongated “Hi, Ma!” that sounded like “Mom.” Evermann was famous for its pests, particularly large reddish Asian cockroaches that made us feel quite at home. The exterminator was a white male with a body builder's physique and few words. When we asked him why he never wore a mask, he simply shrugged. One cash-strapped summer, I joined the apartment cleaning crew at the height of move-out period. I teamed up with a Devin Barnett, a Kentuckian who punctuated his southern drawl with “Mercy! Mercy!” As we cleaned toilets and kitchen countertops, we swapped life stories. Devin married a Filipino woman during a tour of duty to the Philippines on a navy ship; she ran off with another man, leaving him to raise a daughter single-handedly. A kind father, a gentle soul. Last time I heard, he started at yet another school in Florida and dated yet another woman. I wish him well, and Bob, and the exterminator.

I wound up at IU's English graduate program through a fluke. I applied to IU, but to Folklore, because my beloved Professor Patricia Haseltine at Taiwan's Tamkang University received her doctorate during the glorious days of the Folklore Institute under the stewardship of Stith Thompson and Richard Dorson. Of all the graduate programs I applied, IU

Sheng-mei
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*Hoosier's Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

Sheng-mei
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*Hoosier's Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

was the only one that was not English. Someone in Folklore, however, transferred my dossier to English. Decades after leaving IU, I contacted the English graduate director at the time to seek information on who exactly in Folklore channeled my application to English. The director no longer recalled, probably just a trivial detail to him, but one of the mysteries that altered an entire course of life.

Presenting this paper on “Hoosier’s Who” at IU’s Maxwell Hall, albeit remotely due to Covid-19, in a conference on “Indiana Style” had filled me with fond memories. The International Student Services that offered me a one-year scholarship was located in this building. I remember visiting Dean Kenneth to thank him and Mrs. Burkhardt for visa extensions and other matters. They belonged to the older generation, whose counterpart in the English Department were professors in tweed jackets and ties, a dress code they inherited from Oxford and the Ivy League. That old world is gone; only those old trees still stand outside of Maxwell, Ballantine, and across campus. We used to gather hazelnuts dropped by one of the back entrances to International Center. Two towering ginkgoes not far from Maxwell yielded smelly fruits on the lawn, the cores believed to carry medicinal properties.

As the scholarship ran out, I was anxious to seek funding to continue my study. Knowing the odds of a traditional graduate program granting teaching assistantship (TA) to international students from non-English speaking countries, I put in a request, nevertheless. I was turned down. In the meeting with the TA committee chair, a Shakespearean from UC, Berkeley, he mentioned in passing that I did not graduate from the top Taiwanese university, National Taiwan University (NTU). I should have replied neither did he receive his Ph.D. from

Harvard or Yale. Had he taken Taiwan’s entrance examination to universities that encompassed such subjects as Chinese, English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Science (Physics and Chemistry), and Dr. Sun Yat-sen Thought, he might have scored just enough to squeeze into Berklee rather than Berkeley. He also indicated that I made a glaring mistake in my application: it should have been my service as “a military policeman” rather than “military police,” a case of classic linguistic interference from my native tongue without articles and without the suffix “man” in “policeman.” I would have quit graduate school altogether had it not been my better half’s adamant support. My family, in fact, advised switching to more useful pursuits, such as computer science or business. My father even counseled my wife to take up peddling fried fritter, Chinese flat bread, and *baozi* (meat- and vegetable-stuffed dumplings) to support my study. In the following year, I applied again and was once again rejected. In the ensuing meeting, the Shakespearean commended me for working his remarks on NTU and military policeman into the application. Sweet vengeance, but it did not improve my financial straits.

Instead of a TA, the graduate program retained me as a “movie man,” the unofficial title for “media assistant.” I have long suspected that it had been reserved for students from non-English-speaking Asian countries, as my immediate successor was a Korean. In the following, I quote an excerpt from my contribution to the forum on “The Personal in Scholarship” in the *Journal of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* from October 1996:

Working as a movie man entailed, nonetheless, strength, patience, and technical know-how. First, I would receive “orders” from professors and TAs, orders

which specified the places and the times, mostly in the evening, of film showings for their classes. I would accordingly push a seven-foot, fully-enclosed, black metal rack installed with a TV monitor and a reel-to-reel projector from the office where it was located to the elevator and then to the room on the designated floor. However, the four wheels often went separate ways and a great deal of brute force was required to maneuver it. The two- or three-inch space between the elevator and each floor was the real killer. One time the front wheels got stuck, and the doors kept jamming into the rack and then opening. People waited around me, pretending to look away from this Chaplinesque farce. The chairwoman of the department chanced by and joined me in the attempt to jolt the machine out of its deadlock. While frantically trying to get a grip on the immobile rack, I accidentally thrust my hand into her blouse, tearing it. She withdrew. I withdrew. Both froze, like Gogo and Didi, in front of the elevator doors shutting and banging.

The technology of the English Department was so antiquated that I was using a reel-to-reel projector rather than a VCR even in the mid-eighties. This antique broke down constantly, and, at times, I had to manually turn the two spools to keep it going, while spoiled college students lounged back in their seats, eating popcorn, waiting impatiently for the film to resume its normal speed. I was too Asian to say, “Due to technical difficulties beyond our control . . .” I remained for years stranded

in this job, while the majority of graduate students, American and European alike, moved on to better teaching positions in the department. One year I included a short poem of mine, “Sisyphus,” in the annual ritual of TA application. The opening of the poem went like this:

Tied to a big black box
Rolling it up, only to roll it down
again . . .

When I was one of the program’s lucky graduate students who received a tenure-track job offer in 1990, a female colleague commented that “Oh, because you’re a minority,” an identity I had rarely taken seriously until that point. It is ironic, however, that the “technician” who showed films for her classes because he was *Asian* turned immediately into a *U.S. minority* benefiting from Affirmative Action when landing a job. Since this woman is now at a state university in New York, I can safely assume that she got the position “because she’s a woman.”

I must admit that in the desperate months of job-hunting, I did toy with the idea of *becoming* an Asian American minority. In my original c.v. prepared for interviews at the 1989 MLA conference in Washington, D.C., I in fact anglicized my name as “Sean” Ma. But Professor Wallace Williams, whom I only came to know then because he was in charge of graduate students’ mock job interviews, set me straight. I still recall the scene when he stood outside the English Department office and saw me at the other

Sheng-mei
Ma
*Hoosier’s Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

Sheng-mei
Ma
*Hoosier’s Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

end of a long hallway. He lifted the draft of my resume, which I just left in his mail box, high in the air and hollered, across a long corridor that echoed down to this very moment: “Sheng-mei, you MIS-spelled your name!” I was thoroughly crushed. As I explained my motive, he looked at me and gently said: “You shouldn’t do that.” An accident took his life months later; I never had the chance to thank him for teaching me one of the most valuable lessons in graduate school—my name.

Professor Williams’s urn of ashes was deposited at the memorial wall of Trinity Episcopal Church, a few blocks from Maxwell Hall. His bereaved husband, Professor Jim Justus, sat stoically in the front row during the ceremony. For the (melo)dramatic bang in closing that evoked John Proctor-style martyrdom over his good name, I sacrificed human psychology in the *PMLA* piece. Not to speak ill of the dead, Professor Williams could have objected to my “passing” in private rather than through the long corridor of Ballantine Hall shaped like a bullhorn of my shame. For a gay person long before same-sex marriages were legal, he should have been familiar with the torturous psychology of an immigrant passing for a minority passing for white!

Boyd and Cutters

If I had felt compelled to dissemble in academe, did I really take off my mask with Boyd and cutters? Unlikely, since the gap between one from a subtropical Chinese-speaking island nation and the other from the Midwest speaking Hoosier was wide indeed. On occasion, my pretense was nakedly exposed. Taking the E bus from Evermann to Ballantine Hall one summer day, Boyd appeared eager to share some story. Out of habit, I kept nodding my head and

murmuring “OK,” “good” to the stream of sounds I could hardly decipher, until Boyd stopped and turned to cast me a strange look—not too long, though, as he had to negotiate the traffic. I sensed something was terribly wrong. It turned out he had shared the same story with my wife earlier and received more or less the same response. We pieced together the story later that day, with the help of another bus driver: Boyd’s stepdaughter Rita had been taken ill from inhaling toxic chemicals at her workplace at Poplar Building. Rita’s lungs had been damaged so severely that she was incapacitated for months. She never quite recovered from that trauma. We became more discreet in nodding and “gooding” at anything Boyd said ever since. But I guess bonding occurs even when two people may not be able to relate to each other at every turn.

In the driver’s seat, Boyd had a certain hand gesture greeting fellow bus drivers going in the opposite direction. He would wait until the last minute and lift, just so slightly, his right palm from the wheel. His plump palm would move only once and stay immobile in the air until the bus passed. It was a manly body language, a minimalist performance that he reprised a dozen times per ride, unvaryingly. On his days off, Boyd favored Western string tie and boots, country music, of course. In fact, Boyd once commented: “If it ain’t country, it ain’t music.” Driving us from a neighboring state back to Indiana one time, Ruth, Boyd’s second wife, blurted out after a long sigh that we were finally “back in God’s Country,” followed by Boyd’s bad habit of a chauvinistic taunt: “Wha’ je say tha’ fer?” They were, however, quite protective of us, warning us not to stop for gas at Martinsville between Bloomington and Indianapolis, where we had to catch flights over the years. Martinsville used to be the headquarters of the state’s Ku Klux Klan and had exactly one black

resident at the time as a token mascot against any charge of racism. The rebellious streak in Boyd, however, made sure he would take us under his wings to frequent Martinsville’s restaurant to flout the town’s historic bigotry.

Every time we drove with Boyd to Martinsville, Bedford, or elsewhere, he seemed to be in a different car. One of his hobbies was to go to weekend auctions of cars and boats, where he bargained to get a good deal. Trading in cars, buying and selling, gave him great satisfaction, perhaps profit, too. His love of cars was so great that it extended to his amateur woodworking. One of his masterpieces, a miniature Ford vintage car, is parked on my bookshelf even as I write this. After my used car broke down, Boyd helped us pick out a rear-wheel drive Mustang muscle car. He took it to Gene, a part-time automobile mechanic living in the country, a de facto junkyard of auto parts and building materials. On this trip, Boyd shared Gene’s story. Gene’s father was alcoholic and violent. In the last bout he had, he got thoroughly intoxicated and loaded his shotgun. Before venturing out to the adjacent house to kill Gene, he warned his wife: “Get your coffin ready, Woman! I’m gonna get him, come back ‘n’ get you!” Gene’s mom called Gene; Gene shot and killed his dad before he could have taken aim. These “rural” legends were all related schematically, in a barebone fashion, as loaded with connotations as biblical tales. Gene was kind and gentle, working on the Mustang for a small fee.

Boyd repeatedly cautioned before the Mustang’s transaction at the auction: “If you ain’t careful, it’ll kill yer.” His prophecy almost came true as I lost control of the muscle car over a bridge of black ice near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, en route to the 1993 MLA (Modern Language Association) meeting in

Toronto. The Mustang skid and rolled over a few times. When it finally stopped, we were upside down and I struggled to unbuckle myself amid shattered glass to help my wife. When I got out, she was already standing right beside the driver’s seat. Until this day, she has no memory as to how she got out from a jammed car door on her own. All our things were strewn across the highway. Most eye-catching were the oranges, tomatoes, and fruits we were ferrying to Toronto for a week-long stay, a colorful tableau of yellows and reds against the white snow right out of the theater of the absurd. She was in the second trimester; we were blessed that not only we survived largely unscathed but also our then unborn daughter.

Years before that accident, Boyd and Ruth were kind enough to drive our U-Haul truck hundreds of miles, following us to my first job at a teaching college in the temperate, beautiful Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Seeing that university’s buildings from afar, Boyd mulled over quite a while before deciding they were made of sandstone, far more brittle than limestone. With that first impression of Boyd’s, I almost felt that I had failed, having been demoted from the polished crystalline limestone country to the greyish granular sandstone valley. The fall continued to the bottom of the valley, my subsequent relocation to the Rust Belt of the Upper Midwest. The high latitude and lake effect of Michigan produced long overcast winters with stretches of days without much sunlight. Winters there had incredibly short daylight hours anyway. Atmospheric factors periodically yielded a strange phenomenon, though. Right before the sun set, it peeked through from the West under dense clouds, the horizontal rays flashing like an ephemeral light show of bright orange and blood red before being swallowed by darkness. *Wanqing* it is called in Chinese, meaning late clearing and sun,

Sheng-mei
Ma
*Hoosier’s Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

Sheng-mei
Ma
*Hoosier’s Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

a nice closure to a bad day or any life with its fair share of pain and disillusionment.

No quarry elsewhere in the US would hold a candle to Bloomington's limestone, just as another Boyd would not exist anywhere else. A strange combination of manliness and feminine sensitivity, Boyd's body was extremely sensitive, allergic to most medication, suffering from skin rashes and swelling if he took the wrong pills or was exposed to certain elements. He died in 2009 of breast cancer, more common among women. In this regard, we are similar. I also suffered from a chronic illness more prone to females. Because of his sensibility, he drove us one day to the T. C. Steele State Historic Site near Brown Country State Park, where he showed us a pond of wild lotuses in blossom. He might not have known the full significance of water lilies to islanders accustomed to such summer flowers rarely seen in the Midwest. Rather than a Buddhist symbol, Boyd might have simply taken us there because I had told him my wife's first name meant lotus in Chinese.

Lotus blooms and fades, in Taiwan and in Indiana, in the summer water and in the wintry mind. If Hoosier's Who deign to include me, it would be a great honor for someone who had passed through long ago, leaving but faint traces in a few words, like a bird's reedy footprints in the light snow at the bus stop by Ballantine—the very first time I witnessed snow and what was written on it.

Sheng-mei
Ma
*Hoosier's Who:
Boyd and
Cutters*

Skeletons in the Closet, Buns in the Oven

Sitting on the edge of the decrepit claw-footed tub, I stared at those two solid lines.

At that moment, I knew everything would change. My face, young and haggard, looked back at me from the mirror.

Shortly after my twenty-first birthday, in the fall semester of my junior year of college, I discovered I was pregnant. Though madly in love, I was not in a serious relationship; the baby's father, who had come to the United States as a student, was leaving the country the following spring when his work visa expired. My pregnancy announcement was less than joyous all around.

Chaos ensued, to say the least, with my pseudo-boyfriend wanting to extricate himself from the responsibility and my strict Catholic parents not disowning me—nothing so drastic—but expressing their disappointment in my entanglement.

An English major, I should have been warier of missed punctuation. In generations past, when a young, unmarried woman found herself in the family

way, a phrase often used was that she “fell” pregnant, like she tripped and... well, that's quite an image.

As my waistline grew, so did my knowledge of the women who came before me. I learned none of this from my mother, of course—unplanned pregnancies and other taboo topics were swept under rugs and hidden from company. But other women in my family started to talk, and I soon learned I hadn't been the first to “fall.”

Florence, my great grandmother, “fell” back in the 1920s. A piano player in a speakeasy during the height of the Jazz Age, I imagine she had already raised the eyebrows of her rural Wisconsin parents. When my grandmother, Dorothy, arrived with her light brown hair and blue eyes, many were quick to question the circumstances of her birth, considering that Florence's brand-new husband was a Chinese immigrant who likely had his own reasons for marrying a pregnant woman. While the couple stayed together long enough to produce a child of their own, my raven-haired, dark eyed great aunt, they split company soon after that. Dorothy and her sister were raised by their grandparents while Florence sent earnings home for their care. Despite the way she looked, my grandmother simply stated, “My mother told me that he was my father.” And that was that.

Cassandra
Sachar

She bore no brunt of any shame, living a happy life, not caring if anyone had condemnatory thoughts about her existence.

My grandmother, this illicit love child of a flapper and never-named suitor, ended up “falling” herself. At eighteen years old and fresh out of high school, she married my grandfather, her sweetheart since age fourteen. If his Catholic parents disapproved of the bouncing baby girl who showed up fewer than six months later, I never heard about it. My grandfather went off to World War II so soon after my aunt’s birth that they must have been glad he left something of himself behind.

My mother’s older sister “fell” next. Like her father before her, she joined the Navy. And, just like her dad, she became a young parent. My cousin was probably the size of a cantaloupe before the marriage certificate was signed in the early 1960s, but somehow no one ever mentioned this fact to me. At least, no one said a word before the late ’90s, when it was my turn to “fall,” as if this was a legacy the women on my mother’s side carried rather than a failure to utilize proper precautions.

Those women in my family grew up in times far more judgmental about unwed pregnancy than my own. Even in 1998, though, long after the sexual revolution, I felt scrutinized as a young, pregnant woman, forced to bear the weight of a thousand eyes seeing the lack of a ring on my finger after noticing the dewy youthfulness of my face. By the time I traded my tight jeans for elastic-waisted pants, by the time my own secret was out on display as a basketball-sized lump attached to my middle for all to see and gossip about, the skeletons in the closet crept out, one by one.

The first truths emerged from my grandmother. Visiting my family from Tucson, Arizona, she traveled from Kutztown to my college town with my mother and two youngest siblings to help me move back home for the summer. Grandma was too old to assist and I was too pregnant, so we sat and rested while the others hauled out my piles of clothes that no longer fit and cases of VHS tapes and CDs from my hot, stuffy, third floor bedroom. My replacement, the girl who was taking over my room, had already moved in some of her belongings, so Grandma and I pretended to avert our eyes from the poster of a nearly naked man tacked on the wall. And if Grandma knew the purpose of the tubular glass structure on the windowsill from which a skunk-like odor emanated, she didn’t breathe a word.

I sat with my grandmother not knowing what to say. Ripe with my unwanted child, I was no longer the little girl who always remembered to mail thank you cards—unlike my other siblings—for the birthday and Christmas money she sent. Yet, I was also detached from the young woman who moved into the sorority house the past summer.

How had so much changed in such a short time? And how did I, out of all of my siblings, end up being the one to disappoint my parents?

I led a pretty sheltered existence pre-college. Raised by my religious, non-drinking parents, I was a rule follower who never even got assigned detention. Free from parental oppression, I was ready to let my hair down a little during my freshman year. I went to keg parties and endured a few wicked hangovers, but I kept the partying under control and hung out with people who did the same, more or less.

By the time sophomore year rolled around, I yearned to belong somewhere. My friends from freshman year had dispersed, falling into various cliques formed by sororities or sports teams. Why not pledge a sorority that just wanted to have fun? I was up for it, having been that repressed Catholic girl too long.

335 West Jackson, the sorority house, was my go-to for those six or so weeks of pledging. I slept on the cold, damp concrete floor without a blanket in October. I watched my pledge sisters throw up after drinking to oblivion. We sat cowering in the dark while the sisters yelled at us and demanded we perform various physical feats I’ve done since then in expensive workout classes. We memorized facts about birthdays and pledge classes, mottos and sayings for hours. At *least* no one circled anyone else’s fat.

Somehow, all this seemed perfectly normal, a price to pay to earn my place in the tribe. I used to write my sorority’s Greek letters in my notebook during class, obsessed with earning the right to call them my own.

But when I was finally initiated into the sorority, it was all worth it! I knew that someday soon, pledges would deliver breakfast to *my* apartment door. And the best part? The mixers with fraternities and men’s sports teams.

Even the sisters who were in relationships often participated. Harmless fun, right? Themes of these social events included Seven Minutes in Heaven, where two people were randomly placed together in a closet for seven minutes “just to see what happened,” and the memorable, thinly-veiled double entendre Eat Me, Lick Me, Suck Me, where we all wore candy necklaces, ring pops, and bracelets,

most of us at least *acting* single and ready to mingle.

Names were thrown in a hat and people paired off. Sometimes, this entailed simple comradery and fun with a guy you might know from class. Other times, one might get matched with a handsome stranger.

Needless to say, debauchery ensued. It was accepted, even normalized, to take part in these shenanigans. We were *required* to attend these events as active members. Joining in was just part of the sisterhood, right?

The alcohol kept flowing, sparking all these bad decisions like a flame in a trail of gasoline, readying for the inevitable explosion.

When I was asked if I wanted to move into the sorority house for my junior year, I jumped at that front seat ticket to the action. Sure, it was a decrepit row home with crumbling bricks and peeling wallpaper, but it was also party central, the place everyone—at least everyone in my sorority plus a revolving door of frat guys, athletes, and various other friends, many of whom were male and attractive—went for happy hours every Thursday night. All you can drink crappy beer for the cost-effective price of \$3, with grain punch for just \$1 more. What a deal!

Keg parties on the porch, girls making out with townies inside the house while their main squeezes, oblivious, stayed outside, *everyone* was up for a good time at 335 West Jackson.

But, inevitably, a toll must be paid. The evil troll under the bridge will collect his tax.

When life finally delivered my comeuppance, when I found out that year that I’d be welcoming a very

unwelcome addition, the whole party scene dried up for me faster than my roommate Patty could chug a beer, which was pretty damn fast.

And then I was stuck in a house with a bunch of hoelligans who partied all night and kept smoking inside since it “wasn’t [their] fault [I was] pregnant.”

True, but shitty.

As my belly grew out, I grew up, my thirst for that hedonistic lifestyle quenched. I was still throwing up an awful lot, but it was from morning sickness rather than alcohol.

I finished that academic year with my highest GPA yet, a disdain for many of my friends, and the need to hightail it out of that party house lickety-split.

When I sat there on that May afternoon of move-out day with my grandmother, this woman I thought to be so prim and proper, all I could think was how disappointed she must be in me. I yearned to be the good girl again. I was ashamed—not only for my protruding belly and the child that grew inside of it, but for everything: my trashy surroundings, my wild roommates. I didn’t want my grandmother to see me this way. But here I was, the black sheep, dragging my family’s name into the dirt.

Or so I thought. I was raised to believe that the only acceptable way to have a child was after you married your husband, the one for whom you were saving yourself. Like Abigail Williams in *The Crucible*, I felt soiled, sullied, unclean.

Even though I only saw Grandma for her two-week visit every year, I had known her my whole life, and she knew me. She saw the pain etched on my face.

“You know, I was pregnant with your aunt before your grandfather and I were married,” she said, this matriarch of my family, this woman with exquisite manners, this stickler for rules. I had always thought of my grandmother as old, but, as she told me their love story, I could picture her, even younger than I was then, working through the problem, not being a true grownup but preparing for motherhood.

“It’s going to be okay,” she told me. “You’re going to be okay.”

We’re not huggers on my mother’s side of the family, but those words embraced me and buoyed my spirits. That summer, before I gave birth, I heard more stories like my grandmother’s. I wasn’t the first woman in my family to go through this situation. No, I was just one in a long line of women who “fell.”

And what I learned is that I *would* be okay, that I still had worth and could make my family proud, just like those women before me. My journey had taken a turn, but I wasn’t down for the count. I “fell” pregnant but didn’t have to be forever labeled a fallen woman. I was no Hester Prynne, confined to a puritanical existence of ignominy. It was time to move on and prepare for what really mattered: the life that was growing inside me, plus my own future, as well. I began to look forward to what was to come, a long and winding road rather than a dead end. I’d just have a small person by my side as I figured it all out.

Growing up, I always tried to please everyone: my parents, my teachers, society. I didn’t color outside the lines: I never had an overdue library book, skipped class, or missed a single assignment. In college, I went down, if not the opposite path, a somewhat self-destructive one where I threw good sense and caution to the wind. During my pregnan-

cy, I achieved some balance, some freedom to be myself versus what someone else told me to be while making decisions that focused on my future.

When I moved into an apartment with the baby the next semester, I felt so damn happy to be away from that toxic partying lifestyle. Late night feedings, diaper changes, and teething tantrums replaced all night keggers, and that was fine by me. From a distance, sucking Life Savers off a stranger’s stubbly neck wasn’t all that enticing.

My mother’s strict judgments have relaxed in her older age. After my “scandalous” unplanned pregnancy gave my parents the grandchild they never knew they wanted, my mother’s attitude toward my younger siblings lightened. When my sister moved in with her boyfriend before they were even engaged, and later when my brother knocked up his girlfriend, my mom took it all in stride. Now that time has separated me from the situation, I have to wonder: How much of that shame truly came from her, and how much did I manufacture on my own?

Recently, I mentioned the string of unplanned pregnancies in our family history and commented, “You broke the tradition.”

My mom laughed and said, “I never really follow trends.”

Will the legacy continue? My daughter, now almost twenty-four years old, doesn’t want kids. She’s also smart enough to avoid messing around when it comes to pregnancy prevention. But if she *does* end up “falling,” like many of the women in her family before her, at least I’ll be there to catch her.

Cassandra
Sacha
*Skeletons in
the Closet,
Buns in
the Oven*

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How To Have A Throwing Away Party

At first the detective said, “Drive your car off the lot, take it home, clean it out, everything in it is yours.” The perp was found driving, so the cops didn’t need it for evidence.

From the west side I walked downtown in 90-degree heat to the station, filled out the paperwork, then braved that heat several more blocks to the auto salvage, where the attendant offered a pair of gloves.

I opened my car, slid into the driver’s seat, ripped off the tiger lilies the perp in her meth frenzy wrapped around the keys, then drove back to the station and parked in back by the dumpsters.

Together we detoxed my Camry, the detective in the backseat, me in front. He pulled out photos, shards of credit cards, a wicker basket, a suitcase. “She always hoards tampons,” he said, then added, “be glad I found the needle under the seat.” I hauled out loose change that in retrospect I should have kept due to the coin shortage.

Gone were all my ID, credit cards, SS card, voting card, a card from Mom congratulating me on my MFA graduation. Gone my vehicle registration and title. But not my *Jesus Calling* devotional, still in the console, or my rosary, hanging on the rearview mirror.

In the glove compartment I placed remnants of personal significance, like the pin from a writer’s conference long forgotten.

To be honest, my Camry needed a cleaning. And, the perp had taste in books: Deepak Chopra, travel guides, art history. “They’re not hers,” the detective reminded me about the perp’s modus operandi to clear out a victim’s belongings then fill the car with ‘her things,’ stolen goods from previous victims.

When we opened the trunk neither of us recognized the paintings. Thousands of dollars of books were missing: craft books, qual methods, women’s studies, poetry. “They’ll show up in another vehicle,” the detective said about the perp’s rash of robberies. Then he asked about the discard pile, “Do you want any of it?”

I shook my head and watched as he tossed that junk into the dumpster, though I thought about taking the stuff to Goodwill...one never knows where those goods come from anyway.

Laura
Sweeney



Rewriting Vivienne, Steampunk Style

In 2014, Kathryn Rose published the first book of her “Metal and Lace” Arthurian trilogy, *Camelot Burning*, with the next two books following in the next two years, *Avalon Rising* and *Excalibur Reigning*, respectively. The novels follow the trajectory of their main character, Vivienne, as she works to help the Knights of the Round Table defeat their enemies and claim the Grail. Like many other adaptations of Arthurian stories, this one puts a different spin on familiar elements. More specifically, Rose creates an Arthurian world with steampunk flair. Within this world of airships, magic and science play tug of war with the titular hero, as she tries to determine how best to help her kingdom and save the man she loves. Like many recent authors of reimagined Arthurian narratives, Rose reinvents Vivienne in ways designed to appeal to modern sensibilities about the capabilities of female characters, drawing a hero both destined and determined to save everyone.

wearing crinolines that double as body armor while discharging gunfire from their parasols. According to Miller and Taddeo, editors of the anthology, *Steaming into a Victorian Future*,

Nineteenth-century science and technology were often characterized by this ongoing conflict of wonder versus horror—the balance between the irrational and the rational, fantasy and realism—the two existing side by side in continual tension as the world around them grappled with notions of progress. And while the continued advancement of technology pushed back the boundaries of the magical, the era’s highly advanced technology often seemed—as science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke famously observed—indistinguishable from magic. The fantastic machines it created stood for our ability to tame the most fearsome creations, with the Victorian inventor playing a role that was half scientist, half magus. (13-14)

This characterization of steampunk begins to explain the ways in which Rose’s steampunk Arthurian world manifests. To write a steampunk narrative suggests nostalgia for the Victorian age, but Rose

takes this a step further and layers that nostalgia on top of the already existent love by the Victorians for Arthurian narratives, creating a doubly nostalgic view of the world by melding Victorian gadgetry and scientific invention onto the chivalric structures of an Arthurian society. Rose’s narrative could be classified as a “remix” which according to David Gunkel is “the practice of recombining pre-existing media content—popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web data—to fabricate a new work” (18). In this case, instead of a Victorian inventor, Rose inserts Merlin, a practitioner of forbidden magic and a teacher of the mechanical arts to the eager young Vivienne. The tension between magic and science unfolds as the old world magic of the gods, recognizable in characters like the Lady of the Lake, begins to fade away in the face of the mechanical arts: the creation of machines made of copper and powered by steam or other alchemical concoctions. Hence, Arthurian steampunk.

Rose’s work is not the first novel to claim this label. In 1979, K.W. Jeter published *Morlock Night*, about a time traveler who comes to 19th century England looking for a reincarnated Arthur in a time of need, developing themes from HG Wells’s *The Time Machine*. Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* also engages in a bit of time travel to King Arthur’s court, but the text does not treat the Arthurian world with nostalgia. In the world of newer fiction which leans into the idea of “remixing,” you might take a gander at E.L. Ridsen’s “Marie de France Dreams of Steampunk” from 2017 in which Ridsen imagines Marie becoming absorbed by a tapestry belonging to Henry II, which works as a portal, inviting her to visit a 19th century steampunk landscape. Even more recently, in 2018, Barbara Russell’s *A Knight in Distress* features a clockwork knight. Digging into the corners of the internet reveals a

few other crumbs of medieval steampunk. Fans of steampunk have certainly discussed it on sites such as Brass Goggles and Reddit, exploring the idea of what an industrial Middle Ages might have looked like. Illustrator and artist, Will Beck has developed a “Steampunk King Arthur” series featuring drawings of characters like Queen Morgana La Fay, Merlin, Nimue, and others. Widening the search to medieval steampunk generates even more, such as a role-playing game called *Acaratus* available on Steam in which players occupy a medieval landscape wearing mechanized battle suits. It seems that Arthurian steampunk is catching on.

In taking a closer look at Rose’s book series, steampunk elements appear immediately. In the first line of the first novel, *Camelot Burning*, Vivienne describes: “When a mechanical falcon takes flight from Merlin’s tower, it means the sorcerer is bored or drunk on absinthe” (1). Vivienne is in a position to know Merlin’s moods well because she secretly works as his apprentice, learning how to construct mechanical devices such as Caldor, the copper falcon referenced in this quote. (*Side note confession*: Every time Caldor appears, I can’t help but think of either Archimedes from Disney’s *Sword in the Stone*, or Athena’s mechanical bird Bobo from the 1970s *Clash of the Titans*.) Publicly, Vivienne occupies the position of lady-in-waiting to Guinevere, hiding inventor’s toys like metal viewers (binoculars) in the pockets of her gowns (3). Caldor’s flight is fueled by an engineered substance called *jaseemat*, a powder with the capability of breathing life into an automaton (19), and derived through alchemical processes. Again, Miller and Taddeo’s characterization of steampunk echoes in that this feat seems “indistinguishable from magic” (13); however, according to Merlin, the alchemical processes are merely instructions to the elements, rather than spells, which

Christina Francis

Christina Francis
Rewriting Vivienne, Steampunk Style

conversely draw upon the spirit. The best example of mastering this alchemical process appears at the end of the first novel when Vivienne and Merlin let loose a steam-powered mechanical dragon to help defend Camelot from an attack by Morgan le Fay. The value of mechanical arts to this Arthurian world is reinforced by the notion that magic has been outlawed, and its practice pronounced dangerous. Readers learn that its usage costs a high price, being highly addictive and capable of staining the soul, indicative of that “wonder and horror” referenced by Miller and Taddeo in their definitions of steampunk (13). For Merlin, drinking absinthe, another 19th century affectation, offers a diversion from the craving to use magic that he experiences. The idea of magic as dangerously addictive has appeared in other modern adaptations; the STARZ series *Camelot* comes to mind. According to Helene Dunbar’s “An Interview with Author Kathryn Rose,” Rose imagined Joseph Fiennes’s Merlin from that show when concocting her own Merlin with a dash more punk.

Identifying alchemy as a science is just one of the ways that Rose paints her Arthurian world with a steampunk brush. In this story, the knights use fire lances, fusionahs, and pistolniks, all weapons of varying sizes that seem to draw upon the tradition of swords and lances, but also incorporate the mechanics of guns and flamethrowers, more common in the steampunk world. Gas lanterns light the walkways of Camelot, and viewfinders search the skies for approaching aeroships powered by steam engines. One of the more curious Arthurian items to receive a steampunk update is Excalibur. Kept in a room only accessible to a few who know the combination to its lock, Excalibur still retains its identity as a sword that can only be wielded by a chosen individual, most often Arthur. However, the Excalibur of these novels has a gauntlet attached to the hilt. Any

person who tries to handle Excalibur by using the gauntlet and has not been chosen risks the severing of their arm by the “seven whirring blades inside” (120). This added feature to Excalibur and the other kinds of weapons mentioned in Rose’s novels help to create an image of steampunk knights.

Shifting to the story itself, Rose includes many familiar faces in her adapted Arthurian world. Lancelot is still Arthur’s right hand man, and he and Guinevere still engage in a forbidden love affair; although the novel hints that a witch’s curse, or Morgan le Fay’s meddling, has something to do with their behavior. This affair is not the only recognizable element of medieval Arthurian storytelling. Arthur and Morgan (not Morgause), brother and sister, have also created Mordred, who makes an appearance at his mother’s side to try to destroy Camelot. The details of that story are not developed, as this is all history to the events of the first novel. Characters like Kay, Gawain, Percival, and Galahad also play parts, but it is Vivienne’s grail quest that takes center stage. Within the trilogy, Rose calls upon some familiar grail legend motifs, such as tests of character, a cursed Fisher King, the grail as an object that brings or gives life, and the notion that its discovery can only be achieved by a chosen person. Knights who pursue the grail quest like Vivienne’s brother, Owen, falter through demonstrations of corrupt character, or they lose combat trials against the Black Knight, such as what happens to Gawain. To throw in another hint of where steampunk emerges, in his combat with the Black Knight, Gawain loses an arm, which is replaced with a mechanical arm fueled by *jaseemat* to be fully articulated. These are just a few of the various familiar Arthurian elements.

For the rest of this essay, I’d like to focus more specifically on Vivienne. So, what’s her story? Over

the course of the three novels, readers follow what is essentially a grail quest. In *Camelot Burning*, Vivienne learns that she holds the key to the location of the grail within her, and by the end of this novel, the grail’s discovery is necessary to heal and repair Camelot after Morgan le Fay attacks and Arthur dies in the fray. The first book also initiates the romance between Marcus, a reluctant Knight of the Round Table and former squire to Lancelot, and Vivienne, lady-in-waiting to Guinevere by day, secret apprentice to Merlin by night. It should be noted that these Round Table Knights take vows of chastity upon membership in the brotherhood, a complication for Vivienne and Marcus’s budding love affair to say the least. In medieval grail quests, chastity in knights signals worthiness, and only those who demonstrate it can achieve the grail. In the second book, *Avalon Rising*, Merlin urges Vivienne to build her own aership and set off into the Northern Lands to find a key piece of the grail puzzle from the cursed Fisher King so that she can deliver this information to the Round Table Knights who have headed to Greece, the fabled location of the lost Grail. These knights, led by Galahad and Percival, also fight to defend Jerusalem from attacking raiders led by the Black Knight, who is later revealed to be Meleagant. In the final novel, *Excalibur Reigning*, Vivienne, with Marcus by her side, works with the warriors of Jerusalem in a race of aeroships to retrieve the grail from Avalon, a hidden floating island in the sky, before Meleagant can gain access to it. They prove successful and return to Camelot to help reestablish its prominence.

According to the Dunbar interview with Rose mentioned earlier, Vivienne and Marcus are wholly her characters; however, this rings a bit false for informed readers of the Arthurian canon, especially in stories related to Merlin. For example, in the *Suite du Merlin*, Vivian the Huntress encourages an

infatuated Merlin to teach her magic, before imprisoning him. Once she achieves this knowledge, Vivian returns to Camelot to help Arthur or other knights. Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* from the 19th century specifically retells this story of Merlin’s seduction by Vivian. Rose admits to having studied *Morte Darthur* in school, as well as loving *Mists of Avalon* and the STARZ’s *Camelot* (Dunbar), so she’s clearly absorbed a fair amount of Arthurian content from different sources. It seems fairly likely that she encountered stories of Merlin and Vivienne in her studies. The role of apprentice to Merlin is just too close to medieval narratives to be wholly original. Marcus’s character is another story; he does not readily correspond to any medieval Arthurian characters.

In placing Vivienne as the central protagonist of her Arthurian triad, Rose follows many other contemporary authors who rewrite these stories in order to provide a more prominent place for female characters. Recent offerings include Tracey Deonn’s *Legendborn* (2020) and graphic novel *Cursed* by Thomas Wheeler and illustrator Frank Miller (2019). Often these adaptations work to highlight female capability and deemphasize problematic sexual representations. In this case, the image of an innocent young girl, studiously attempting to learn anything Merlin is willing to teach her, replaces the image of a seductive Vivian out to destroy Merlin from Tennyson’s *Idylls*. From the first pages, readers meet a Vivienne working with her hands to fix Caldor’s wing and practicing the deadly accuracy of her archery. She is curious and industrious, able to problem solve in the midst of attacking enemies. Unlike her mother who gave up an apprenticeship to marry, Vivienne wants to travel to Jerusalem to study under Merlin’s colleague, Azur, not marry and remain obediently following the commands of men in her

world. When Lancelot and Guinevere are charged with treason, Vivienne willingly steps forward to proclaim them innocent and a victim of Morgan's curse (192). When Morgan attacks Camelot with an army of drones, Vivienne helps ready the mechanical dragon mentioned earlier as a counter measure and fires cross bolts of her own against the invaders. By the end of the first novel, Vivienne steps out of the shadow of Merlin and her apprenticeship.

The second novel, *Avalon Rising* features Vivienne's quest for the coordinates of the grail. After crafting her own aeroship, she makes for the castle of the Fisher King, north of the recently ravaged Camelot. Rose maintains some of the traditional elements of a grail narrative, such as the wasteland. Upon arrival at the castle, Vivienne describes what she sees: "Endless infertile land. Not even desert, but muck and dirt and dead trees with no hope of ever a spring" (99). The wasteland motif draws upon the medieval notion of the King's Two Bodies: if the king's spiritual self is damaged, then it manifests in a dying landscape. In Chretien de Troyes's grail narrative *Perceval*, the Fisher King "has suffered a wound in the thigh or genitals, and his kingdom had at the time been transformed into a wasteland" (Lacy and Ashe 77). Readers learn that the Fisher King is a magic thief, who has been cursed to never die but slowly disintegrate along with the surrounding countryside, denied a Christian afterlife. To save the Fisher King and find the key she's looking for, Vivienne must demonstrate three characteristics—valor, ingenuity, and right judgment—by passing three tests. Each of the tests is designed to tempt Vivienne into stealing magic to achieve a successful outcome. If she succumbs, her soul will be tainted and she too will be denied an afterlife. In the first challenge, Vivienne battles a wraith knight by firing her fusionah straight into its empty helmet, demon-

strating valor through her physicality. In the second challenge, Vivienne displays ingenuity through applied mechanics, a pulley and crank system, to transport herself across a treacherous space, showing her intellect. Before completing the third challenge, Vivienne learns that she shares a name with the Lady of the Lake who cursed the Fisher King for this magic thievery. This reinforces the notion that Vivienne is destined to complete these challenges, much in the same way that Galahad is the right numerological descendant of Joseph of Arimathea in the Vulgate *Quest for the Holy Grail*. It is also possible to imagine that Rose is expanding on the role of the grail maiden, or Percival's sister for this story, but there aren't enough correlating elements to make that connection. For the final challenge, Vivienne must choose to sacrifice a loved one in order to save Camelot. The Fisher King taunts her with a lifelike apparition of Marcus and the suggestion that this replica's fate will match the real Marcus. Despite this heart-wrenching threat, she chooses the grail for Camelot over the safety of fake Marcus and passes the final test. Her reward: a key to be used when she follows the newly unlocked coordinates in her mind to the real grail. As readers might also expect, the Perilous Lands begin to return to a natural cycle with lush vegetation and the Fisher King is released from his curse, healed as it were.

In the third novel, *Excalibur Reigning*, Vivienne, with the help of various other Arthurian characters, must beat the Black Knight to Avalon and retrieve the grail. In this work, Rose presents readers with two more reimagined female characters from the Arthurian canon, Elaine of Astolat and Isolde. Both women join Vivienne on the front lines of their battle against the Black Knight, Isolde as the leader of her Irish troops, and Lena (Elaine of Astolat) as a swash-buckling swordswoman, who has left home

and the expectations of making a good marriage for her family in order to pursue adventure. Like Vivienne, these characters have been redrawn to escape the strictures of their medieval origins, moving away from women who suffer for love. Instead, they take charge of their own destinies, contributing to the fight like any other male knight. In preparing for the final encounter, Vivienne learns that achieving the grail requires the theft and execution of three magic spells. Once this theft is accomplished, it would lead to "the forthcoming of the Holy Grail. That it would eventually lead to a balance of the scales between magic and the mechanical arts. The mechanical arts to get to the Grail, magic to secure it. A new world once it was done. One that would lead to the reclaiming of Excalibur. A future ruler to see Camelot reign" (190-91). Thus, like Galahad of some medieval grail quests, Vivienne needs to be willing to sacrifice her soul to save the kingdom. She already possesses the skills of the mechanical arts and demonstrates them by refitting an aeroship to reach Avalon. In the second novel, after achieving the key from the grail castle, she willingly steals magic on two occasions to further her quest, signaling her ability to wield magic when necessary. Thus her success in the final leg of the grail quest is really determined by her willingness to leave Marcus behind as she steals even more magic to secure the grail before the Black Knight can do so. Perhaps not surprisingly, she achieves this goal, and the acquisition of the goal itself then heals her soul of the corrupting magic she used in the process. Vivienne and Marcus return to Camelot and help to redirect its course. Marcus renounces his role as a Knight of the Round Table, in favor of living a more adventurous life with Vivienne, studying more alchemy in Jerusalem with Azur.

If I'm being honest, I wasn't personally compelled by Kathryn Rose's Vivienne, perhaps because I

found the romance with Marcus too dominant in her identity as the story progresses, and I would have wished for a heroine not so caught up in saving the man she loves. Admittedly, I am not the young adult audience for whom this novel was written, so it makes sense that romance remains a dominant part of Vivienne's story. Being in love does not make her any less industrious and determined to save the day. Ultimately, Kathryn Rose's steampunk trilogy provides its readers with one more new way to "remix" the Arthurian Middle Ages. As long as they do, the Once and Future King will never run out of steam.

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**Christina
Francis**
*Rewriting
Vivienne,
Steampunk
Style*

Poetry

Fall Break

My son is leaving
constantly
and I am sad.

Certainly I know sadness—it is
the dust in every house
of the living, but this sadness

is strange. It does not settle
on surfaces
or collect along the floor
boards. I continue

to be religious
about boiling lemons
and drinking, once tepid,
the water almost every
night because don't

they say it keeps
the stomach taut and I cannot leave
behind vanity any more
than coronary veins.

I cannot leave behind
the girl who danced
to *Oh What a Night* with a silver ring
in her navel,

the girl who considered her body
philharmonic, the girl who snuck
away before
the sun rose,
before the dust had a chance,

the girl who exhaled
smoky sadness, the girl
who gifted it with a smoky
wink, the girl

who forgot to eat
just to see how many boys
she could leave behind.
Now my son rarely eats

at home, even if I say
please eat,
even if I ask
will you stay,
because his appetite
is for a sweet
greedy sadness
I cannot
prepare.

CJ
Farnsworth

[Bliss is the mistake we make]

Bliss is the mistake we make
because we follow it
into all manner of alleys.

Who can blame us?
Bliss has a deep kiss
hypnotic teeth
a freshly scented tongue.

Who can blame us
for clinging to naked brick
and wailing like sirens
in the light of street lamps?

We can't be blamed
for desire which is nothing
more than a knotweed
with heart-shaped leaves
and tiny white flowers
dropped blooming.

These are my feet down
to say take off your shoes
and stand in your own hoary
deadheads.

Even a flockless goose can fly
free of an alley
toward something warmer.

Each flake inside a souvenir
globe flurries everytime
it's turned upside down.

Walk backwards to follow
bliss lockstep.

CJ
Farnsworth

Ghost

after Mollie Chandler

Ghost rarely remembers what day, what week,
what month she inhabits. Thick walls, a door.
She eases into silence, doesn't speak.

Ghost likes Netflix binges. The old house creaks
and settles like she's settled: dust on floors.
Ghost rarely remembers to shower or eat.

Ghost can flip pages. The novel complete,
she grows uneasy with being, wants not more
but less, greater silence. She doesn't speak

except to herself in a mumble so weak,
so faint that no one replies anymore.
Ghost rarely remembers what's in, what's chic.

She eddies in the silence, doesn't see
years ebbing distant. Being noticed a bore,
she eases into No One : unrouged cheek,

hair uncombed. Her brittle body creaks
and crackles over the same worn floor.
Ghost rarely remembers to laugh or weep.
She eases into silence, doesn't speak.

Mary Ann
Honaker

Mary Ann
Honaker

In the sunroom, watching snow

The snow is as fine as flour
sifted many times over. When
the wind lifts it I can see
the body of breeze, not in lines
precise as ruled paper, but more like
water, a billowing around
the house's crown, ripples
like the ocean's surface
before it breaks ashore, but quicker.
When the wind slows the snow
still doesn't fall straight down,
it toggles, it weaves, it bobs
along the air's undulating stream.
Sometimes crests of waves meet
and flakes leap upward like foam.

Tollund Man

You can see Tollund Man at Silkeborg Museum.
 He was nicked with a spade when cut from the peat.
 His skin is like dried hide, like tanned leather, thick
 but rumpled like a raisin, the color of muck
 that sucks at your feet as you stroll at high tide.
 He is far too old to smell like anything.

His eyes close gently, his mouth smiles at something
 pleasant; he seems too alive for a museum.
 He should be napping in a beach chair while the tide
 laps clean his long toes. Yet he was found gummed in peat,
 hung by leather thong, buried in smelly muck
 better than brine for pickling a thing, and molasses thick.

Yet he smiles at death, at the time he's traversed, pressed thick.
 His smile is the kind saved for grandchildren, something
 indulgent, adoring. As if he is wiping off the muck
 from a teary, clumsy, fallen child. Folks come to the museum
 to visit him regularly, as if this man from the peat
 were an aging relative, being worn away by time's tide.

They stand in his ageless acceptance, while the fierce tide
 of modern life strips their egos clean. Bog man is thick
 with wisdom on the inside, maple syrup-filled, for peat
 has acids which have leached away his bones. Nothing
 to say, he smiles placid as the Dalai Lama in his museum.
 He left the light of an Iron Age day, descending into muck

Mary Ann
 Honaker

and darkness, awoke to the slice of spade through muck
 in 1950. It was late winter when he died, the fruitful tide
 of spring close, wind a hint of strawberries, but stomach a museum
 of winter: barley, oily linseed, knotweed, coiled thick
 within. Did he know his fate: weedy stretch, where something
 made of light hovers and vanishes between knotty trees, peat

between his fingers, peat between his clever toes, peat
 encrusting his eyes? His smile is not one resigned to muck.
 I have a nephew named Asher, "happy" in Hebrew, and if anything
 in this middling plain can compare to that smile, it is the tide
 of his energetic joy, his bouquet of giggles, unaware how thick
 the peat of life can be to travel through, how silent as a museum

the mind can go, unsure of anything. So simple this glad man of peat,
 a man dyed and tanned in a museum, his ears full of muck,
 his brain inside his skull still fat and thick, impervious to time.

Mary Ann
 Honaker

Lost, or Nearly So

Check the map, the one in the glove compartment, the old one that comes unhinged at the folds. I know: the panhandle seceding from the southern counties. The peninsula suddenly an island. A great canyon torn through the rolling grasslands. The toll way obliterated in its north-south corridor. The broken river pouring into your lap and sweeping the bits of stem, those from the grapes you bought at the roadside stand, onto the floor where your bare feet, brown and calloused, tattooed with the certain red earth from this morning's stop in that unbroken state, hours ago, one we can't return to though something might guide us there, back across the ruined country.

Randy Koch

Studies in Suspicion

There are no saints in her theology,
no broken codes in her biology.
She reassures you when in doubt
but turns your visions inside out.

Direct a light at her dreamt history;
untie the threads stitched through her mystery.
She whispers something warm and sweet
while stacking kindling 'round your feet.

Her past she masks with faint conjecture,
her sweet façade, her architecture.
But when the ground shifts underfoot,
the fractured sky rains brick and soot.

Uncertain roots in her morphology
and syntax strange twist her apologies.
Her voice evolves like feathered flight
and scales the filamented light.

She twists her hair with flair dramatic.
Her every curve she graphs mathematic.
Why fear that lines tangential to her ex bisect those meant for you?

Proof has no place in her geometry.
She's blind to hues found by spectrometry.
She bends the truth like light through lake,
like hairpin turns, like dream through wake.

Strange forces rule in her cosmology
and finite matters in her theology.
Beware her missives, false or true,
and all her canon aimed at you.

Randy Koch

The Aviary

An arbor hides a secret wren
that warbles, full in throat,
and catbirds, understated in
dark caps and slate-gray coats.

Bathing in a track of dust,
boisterous sparrows scrum
while robins, breasts aglow with rust,
hop 'cross a dewy lawn.

Two blushing finches keep a nest
in the neighbor's sculptured shrub,
and blackbirds' luminescent chests
glisten as if rubbed.

A strand of geese play crack-the-whip
and gab up Fishing Creek.
Mitered cardinals cheer and chip.
Obnoxious blue jays shriek.

A cloud of stubby starlings, shrill
as gossips at a fence,
bank 'round the roofs of doubles
and apartments signed "for rent."

On thermals, vultures wheel above,
their ugly out of sight.
And necking on a limb, two doves,
content cosmopolites.

A pair of mallards find retreat
on a shaded, oxbow pond,
where inverted black-capped chickadees
and nuthatches correspond.

I heard the yellow hammer knock,
the red-tailed hawk's steel cry,
the heron's convoluted croak,
the crow's stark alibi.

There's comfort in a catalog
of neighbors' names and dress,
of postures, lines of flight, and songs,
of steady homeliness.

But mornings when I turn the lock,
I meet the wild appeal:
the instigation of the flock,
the migratory zeal.

Randy
Koch

Bath in the Tears of Rachel Carson

Pittsburgh is rich with rivers we don't know how to love,
names taken from the people we vanquished,

the Allegheny and Monongahela braiding together
to form the sparkling Ohio. But don't get too close:

shit flows regularly into the waterways,
yours, ours, theirs, a murky stew of effluvia.

I try to keep mine out, skip flushing,
let the dishes sit, save the laundry for another day,

when the sky grays and the system's burdened,
the water treatment plant unable to keep up.

Still, it's better than the old system, the lack of system,
waste flowing unimpeded into the rivers until 1959.

When it rains, when the parking-lot snow mountains melt,
the drains can't cope with the overflow, everyone knows.

But nobody cares: the trash tells the secret of how little
most ponder what's downwind. If you walk the riverside,

you'll see the muddy grey banks interrupted by rainbow.
Not the oily sheen of gasoline, but a stream of discard —

Jessica
Manack

The Directress

for Harriet Louise Aul. 1899-1982

tampon applicators, the peppy fluorescent swords
with which womb-bearers address the mess of the bodies

too terrible to touch, flotsam of the disgust they're taught to feel.
You could mistake them for flowers at first,

this wreckage left on the shores: pinks, purples and greens
so far beyond nature they sparkle even in December,

little garden blooming through the winter.
America is rich with daughters we don't know how to love

and our shame flows downstream. We arm them
with the wrong things. Mirrors and scales. Tweezers and razors.

We teach them to ruin the world they inherit, so it feels familiar,
so busy battling themselves they miss what's coming around the bend.

Jessica
Manack

Someone had to be the man when the
Massillon Woman's Club gave their play each year,
and Harriet was always there, stepping up as needed,
happy to wear whatever hat, happy to pretend.

But the world never let her forget she wasn't a man –
she couldn't become the doctor she dreamed of being.
Born when she was, they let her become a nurse.
It takes time to understand why we're put where we're put.

Her work a circle rippling beyond her life, she set up schools,
trained nurses by the thousands, trained civilians on nursing
at home. During the war she set up a 100-bed emergency hospital
in an hour, "not the least bit boastful," it was reported.

"The only complete nurse is a psychiatrically trained nurse,"
she insisted, addressing the needs of the combat veterans
returning from war, shaping the profession. And she broke
the barrier never broken for her, training her first male nurse in '48.

The state hospital in Massillon was the country's first,
called by some "the most beautiful institution in the world,"
an expanse of land so beautiful people'd picnic there.
She rose to fourth in command, Directress of Nursing,

Jessica
Manack

The Things I Thought I Loved

and was recognized for her work, invited to the White House – but this wasn't enough. She retired at 55, no reason given, perhaps no longer able to function in the overcrowded facilities, asked over and over to ensure dignity in suboptimal conditions.

Yet she never rested, giving herself freely to each need, from her suffragette youth to the Massillon Shriners, the Federated Democratic Women of Ohio, the D. A. R., always ready with the tea, always there for her community.

She blamed it on this busyness, the lack of spouse and children, telling the doctor who, for years, sent her letter after letter, there was no time for courting, too many new students to train, too many Bingo games to call, too many luncheons,

but it was her blood that went rogue. Carriers of hemophilia, she and her siblings vowed they wouldn't pass it on. The eldest, she still outlived the rest. And when it was time, she pulled the tubes out herself, no better nurse for the job, and closed her eyes.

The photos she left behind, so carefully notated, were saved by a neighbor. For whom? For me, the cousin from the future who found them decades later? It may take time to understand why we're put where we're put. I was put here to remember.

Jessica
Manack

I can still picture my dad putting a beer bottle full of dead batteries into the trash compactor. The horror! No such sprees for me. I want to be guilt-free, choose the bamboo toothbrush: quicker to biodegrade. I scrape off the jam jar's paper label. Turn the can opener so precisely that a sliver keeps the top affixed to the body (no rogue metal discs flying through the air). I care, rip the plastic windows from junk mail envelopes, strip the oval code from each piece of produce, peel the paper label from plastic magazine sleeves. Scrape each diaper clean before it goes in the machine. Keep the compost free of the staple in each tea bag. Squint to read PET or PETE, or an undecipherable character it breaks my heart to discard. I wash my trash before putting it in the trash. Oh, my grandmother would laugh. This was what we'd invented landfills for. My great-grandmother would understand – there was nowhere else for anything to go. Our scrap of land was our country. I want to believe the future is ours to pity, not something pitying us. A series of bins holds my detritus: the paper, the glass, soft plastic, the cardboard, the 1s, the 2s through 7s, the reminders of all the ways we were there, I drive them around like a chauffeur. Why can't I not care? I found a place to send my hair. I found a place to send my thorn-ruined pantyhose, both turned into mats to soak up oil spills in the ocean. Will there be enough of me to clean up all the messes of men?

Jessica
Manack

Election Cycle

Just do it, just kill me god,
let the old sword fall, or do you only use guns
now, waste not, want not, the blessed economy,
it's just that I'm a little gone & the freedom
to roam in some void & not in this country
sounds like the new American dream,

or perhaps I shouldn't squander my dream,
not when the gut-punched world needs every god-
forsaken one of them, this long hard country
road, tarred, chipped, dying daisies, growing guns,
all the wild cats & dogs barking freedom
& who wants to sing about the economy

when what even is the economy
when grand pianos & smart bombs share a dream
& we're left to spelunk the freedom
of the marketplace, & whatever god
provides, slip n slides, trampolines, guns
out, puns out, the gospel of the country

star who sings of parking lot country,
twitchy kids, the soft-core porn of the economy-
sized, & all I got were some stupid guns
& wound up, revved-up, so who needs to dream

Matt
Perakovich

or to sleep perchance when we can pray to god,
Hallelujah, Hooters, Gucci, sushi, freedom

for all my brothers & sisters, freedom
& a glass of that stuff from the old country,
that greased us up, carried us off, swear to god,
until alone in the collapsed economy
of 3 a.m., I fell into that dream
of my father, coming home, trunk full of guns,

Dad, I said, what's with all the goddamn guns,
& his eyes flashed rubies in taillight, freedom
rock, candy apples, all the world a dream,
borrowed, rip-roaring, a day in the country,
wasted in the shimmering economy,
all those silver lies, every plastic god

with eyes like guns, bored, immigrant, country
strong, the freedom born of an economy
of song, our dream of stars the last god.

Matt
Perakovich

Children's Book

These days, I feel
like an angry cloud
in a children's book
raining down
on one solitary figure.

Or really: I am the cloud
and the figure,
trudging uphill,
wearing a bowler hat,
having the worst day.

I, too, am the figure's
dank pilly overcoat,
the plaid trousers,
the water pooling at my feet
and flowing downhill.

I am the street itself
with all its gray consistency.
Mostly, I am cloud
and figure
and cracked sidewalk.

How I long to be the old tree
rearranging the sidewalk's face
with its dragon-tail roots
or the otherwise
impossibly blue sky

or that gust of starlings
in the distance that moves
as though part of the mystery.
But it's enough these days
to be the dripping briefcase,

or the newspaper inside
soggy with its headline:
Today's Forecast:
Clear skies.

Matt
Perakovich

Horoscope

Aries (March 21-April 19)
For the next two weeks, you'll go about your business
with a certainty that some will find off-putting. You
will suddenly interrupt small talk with karate chops.
You'll smile all spooky when some jack-ass cuts you
off in traffic. While you will keep appointments with
your close friends, you will forget your family entirely.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
You will place a wager on a hockey game. You don't
even like sports. What the hell are you doing? Your
ship will come in but it will bear the marks of battle.
The disembarking crew will stare past you, hungry
for the placid strength of solid ground.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)
Now is the time for winking. Become your secrets.
Let the dark water nights swallow you as you feel
about for a limb, a hand. Don't be afraid of pleasure,
you goon.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
Mercury is playing roulette with a pharmaceutical
salesman from Dover. She's swept up in the whirl
and the clickety-clack, the red and black, the felt, the

seemingly cosmic significance of numbers on the
wheel. You will try in vain to lure Mercury away from
the table. Buy her a drink. Let her live a little.

Leo (July 23-August 22)
Your recent interest in French New Wave will have
you buying tighter shirts. You are suddenly one who
goes dancing. When you lose power for three days,
you will relish how time slows to a crawl, how the
bubbles in your drink are always this close to rioting.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
Because of some recent bad advice, you start to
question the strength of your own convictions. Why
do you believe what you believe? Is your undergirding
but shadow and light? How much of your personality
is just intellectual, emotional laziness? Spin around
thirty-three times.

Libra (September 23-October 22)
Every sip of wine tastes like poison. You are con-
vinced that all the worst reports are true and that hu-
man civilization will be dangerously close to collapse
in less than thirty years. You dream of mountains of

Matt
Perakovich

The Odyssey

junk mail, of cars dissolving in ocean water, of swells of birdsong loud as rockets.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

The song of the summer ten years ago will come on, causing you to shimmy and shake and spill your Dr. Pepper on the book you are reading, leaving the pages sticky and sweet-smelling, a little warped and brown, but it's okay: the book is good, not great, and you enjoy how mishaps mark our lives.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

You will inadvertently swipe right and instead of taking it back, some swell of "Oh, what the hell" overcomes you and you agree to a night out with the man who drives the Actions News van. He arrives wearing a T-shirt that reads "Suplex City" but he's sweet, opening the door to the pizza shop for you and the old couple who were coming in right behind you. When he kisses you goodnight, you feel more than you expect to feel.

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

Today, an exchange with someone half your age will reveal to you the key to unlocking your potential. You will soon thereafter hear the sound of breaking glass. Move towards the sound. Investigate.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You will join a chorus of boos, but your slow clap will reverse the course, and soon, everyone will be clapping, uncertain of joy but willing to give it a try. Never breathe a word of our secret.

Right out of college, I start teaching, ninth and tenth grade English in a coal town high school,

where, despite passing grades, parents hold boys back to grow a year bigger and stronger

for football, that blaze of days each fall that fought to redeem the broken, rusted bodies

that raised them, held them, closer to the flame. Five state titles hung as proof of virtue.

The freshmen boys that return to ninth grade, their boredom is epic, with yawns like sink holes,

where my instructions disappear. They thwack each other with pencils until blooms grow,

and a couple first stringers snore in class. The future o-line munches with school consent.

But even in tedium, they don't read— not the Odyssey, either year. Sparknotes

flashes highlights—the sirens, the cyclops, to call yourself Nobody and dance away—

and their world bricklays the rest, those heroes born in battle who take years to return,

the betrayal of names spray-painted in hearts on the water tower out Reservoir Road,

worn-out gods playing cards and blowing dry winds to put them in the way of another season.

They mostly know the hero's story as forged into dreams they steal when they sleep.

Loop-tired as a bus route, their fixed world provides the body's grace and its violence.

I know they sleep too in Algebra 1, USA until 1865.

(Mrs Annan's classroom is next to mine and all of the teachers sing the same line.) When they wake again in 10th, dazed, hungry, and chained to immortality's sunk cost,

they read Gatsby because a rapper reps it, love it for a million different reasons,

and they write of dreams and long nights and sometimes cry in class but they can't say why.

Matt Perakovich

Matt Perakovich

“To Live Life is Not to Cross a Field”

-a misunderstanding of a Russian Proverb

Matt
Perakovich

Because then where would I be? And where I am going?
Hunters in the trees watch through scopes, breathing in,
the ticks, the ticking and ticking of summer’s abundance
burdocks, dogbane, goosefoot, cornspurry
the shifting skies, each break and boom, scuttling, always new,
sparrow skies, vultures, starlings, crows,
chirrup, buzzes, mimicked cries, but mostly the wind,
occasional flash of neon daffodil, periwinkle, shadows
of warrens beneath, galleries of the world, systems (root and otherwise)
the ten thousand organisms in each handful of soil
how is the field different now that I’m here?

And to think of those clearings brief as a patch of grass between sidewalk and street
or those people whose fields are only snow or fire or cultivated
or those who sprint from one edge to the next
or those who think crossing a field is easy
or those who believe it rarely sweet.

Matt
Perakovich

Value Pack

I pledge allegiance
to this wreck
and to the algorithms
that keep it burning
and to the pub we kick
for damnation, long sod,
invisibility, wisteria,
and rust et cetera.

I confess uneasiness
at this slog of loonies,
flakes and dairy cows,
a bathtub drip of
bitchy and bland,
a nation of robots,
imbeciles, for whom
poverty's an honorable
long haul.

Matt
Perakovich

I kvetch my grievances
and drag the twilight waste
of sprawl everywhere,
whose destruction we
withstand, leaving us
fraying with plausible
deniability, like so much
dust and oil.

I edge away from reason,
not to brag, but to choke
the snake that eats us all,
and my trudge uphill to
a blue horizon,
that last station,
brings delivery and kisses
and nightfall.

Fishing on the Conemaugh, May 30, 1889

-after the painting, *Fishing on the Conemaugh* by George Hetzel

Hip-high in this cold mountain creek, alone
with my own good company. That's all I require.
Nothing but the current ripple, chickadees calling
back and forth from the hemlocks. My casting rod
and a pocket-full of spinners and craw jigs.

Here, I'm delivered from the never-ending drone
of the saw blade cutting through the pine. White pine,
tall and straight as any man could hope
to carry himself.

Sun's high, glittering the water and baking the nip
out of my bones. Nothing but damn chill rain here lately.
Let everyone and their uncle crowd into town
for the parade, and cheer for their reed bands
and wagons full of old Union soldiers.

Give me solitude and smallmouth bass swirling
in the bug bait. Water's high as ever I've seen it.
After all these days of rain the current's swift, whipped up
with eddies. My read is to cast out long to the cobbled bank,
then walk it down the shoal.

I could plant myself in this creek for hours, breathing in
that sweet mineral water and pine sap, the sun warm
on my neck. Easy enough to hold still and wait. In time,
the bass will leap. There! A gold dorsal fin rising
to the surface. A quick snap on the line and now
it's just that fish and me and this mountain stream.

Barbara
Sabol

Keeping an Eye on the River

Emma Ehrenfeld, Telegrapher, South Fork Depot, May 31, 1889

1.
The river's already swollen at 7 A.M.
when I climb the depot tower stairs, drenched
as a river rat.

The same showers that soothed me to sleep
turned fierce, a downpour the railroad men
said they'd never seen the likes of.

Engine 1165 idles on the south siding;
no going on with washouts on the tracks
east and west of South Fork.

Conductor and his engineer pace in and out of my office,
awaiting dispatch orders, watching the weather,
the rising river. Nearly out of its banks by noon.

I tend to my sounder, anxious for a clear circuit,
the familiar clicks, and keep the brewer on the flame—
strong black coffee, by the pot-full.

Not one of us mentions the dam, its flaws, the likelihood
of a breach. Discourse enough, the drumming rain,
the back-and-forth thumping of gum boots.

2.
Any operator worth her salt can read a train whistle
by ear—the pitch, the tune, the duration declares
which conductor, what message, the urgency.

At the first of Hess's five sharp whistle blasts
we know in our very bodies that danger
is upon us.

The conductor and I spring in unison
from our chairs, me without even grabbing my hat,
and fly at the great lick down the tower's stairs.

One glance up the hillside reveals
a rickrack wall of timber, rooftops, Lord knows
what else, gathering up everything in its path.

I bolt across four sets of tracks and up the stairs
of the coal tipple. The water's roar joined with that
mournful whistle shriek—my ears still ring with it.

The dam that threatened year after year has failed
in spectacular fashion. Four more blasts before Hess
ties down his whistle—

a scream anyone within earshot can decipher.
Within minutes the wave sweeps away the entire tower.
(I look away when it goes under.)

Among the debris I find my telegraph key,
that old vacuum brewer, and the faithful depot clock,
once affixed atop the tower like a full moon.
Its hands stopped cold at 3:08.

Barbara
Sabol

Barbara
Sabol

The Unfinished Childhood Cross Stitch

The unfinished childhood cross stitch
has made four moves, one spanning nearly 1000 miles across
that stretch of America known as “The Deep South.”
I don’t remember
intentionally packing it—picking it from a pile
of old wares, unworn shoes, and ill-fitting tank tops—
placing it in a box set aside to make the trip in a car
inefficiently engineered for the task.

Ellen
Stockstill

But here it is, in view of my marriage bed, leaning
in a corner in a bag that hides
its fragmentary form, the girls in the scene
with rosy cheeks but no eyes, arms
but no fingers. Without the clear lines of backstitches,
the bodies are a collection
of hovering bubbles—two blurry figures leaning
from a window underneath a partially-stitched valance.

While the Annabelle fabric has yellowed, the threads remain
vivid “Christmas Red,” “Dark Bittersweet,” and “Electric Blue.”
As a child I organized each skein of embroidery floss
in small, labeled Ziplocs in case a bundle
lost its tag and became an unknown
shade of yellow—no longer “Light Straw”
but some tangle of cotton left adrift.

Once it took my mother ten years
to finish a cross stitch. It was a gift for her mother:
a street scene with lovely houses, black fences, and
pristine yards—a tribute to the small town where she lived
on the Jersey Shore. My years of idleness near twenty
as I consider whether to return to this work, wondering
how it would feel with larger hands to cut
and separate the floss, to squint with weary eyes
at a pattern of colored boxes, to complete
a piece entitled “Be Happy Sampler.”

Ellen
Stockstill

Smash: Cans

At first you line them up in squares: five-by-five, then ten-by-ten. You hold the eight-pound sledgehammer upright, two hands, one over the other, gripping the hickory handle. You center the rusty hammerhead over a can, let it hover a second, then move it down quickly and precisely, smash the four and three-quarter inch high can to a half or three-quarter inch thick aluminum billet. Its thickness depends on your accuracy, velocity. You try to get through an entire square, but never do. An off-center hit sends one can into others. Topples them. You reset. Some of the stale, sticky liquid from the cans gets on your hands, spills onto the concrete floor of the carport. Spatters land on your legs and you smell like a drunk. You nearly always wear shorts because this is south Florida so at the end of this ritual you head to back of the house, rinse off with water from the garden hose. The cans have names like Falstaff and Budweiser, Busch and Milwaukee's Best. A portion of the cans come from your stepfather. Each Friday on the way home from work, he stops to buy a case of whatever is on special. He finishes it in a near stupor by Sunday evening, just in time for supper and bed. But those cans are only a small portion. His work buddies from the construction company bring him malodorous black garbage bags full of rattling cans. Every Saturday you must devote a few hours to this mindless smashing task. Sometimes you create long parallel lines of cans, penguin-walk between rows smashing. Sometimes

Jerry
Wemple

you make a large circle, and sometimes a circle within a circle. Try as you might, you never complete a whole configuration because although it initially does not seem like much weight the sledgehammer grows heavy after a while. Your drops get sloppy; your mind wanders into carelessness. You do this when you are ten and eleven. You do this when you are twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. Mindful of the sharp edges and the sticky liquid, you wear worn work gloves to load the flattened cans into heavy-gauge clear plastic bags that your stepfather takes from work. The bags pile up in the carport. Every few months your stepfather loads them into the back of the Oldsmobile station wagon and sells them at a recycling center for ten cents a pound. He never offers you any of the money. As you get older, while still in Florida and later back in Pennsylvania, you always refuse when your friends offer a can of beer. You'll drink green pony bottles of Rolling Rock and Blatz beer pounders in oversized brown bottles. And when you can, you pitch the empties against rocks or brick walls just to watch them smash.

Jerry
Wemple

Fisherman

Your black dress shoes crunch cinders into the blacktop as you cross the schoolyard. It is ten after eight. It is still early in September. The morning air already warming. A few minutes before, Sister summoned you to the front of the classroom, said to go see Father in the rectory for the interview. You look up and down the alley, cross it, and step onto the gray wooden back porch. You peer through the screen door, focus a few seconds on what you see: the old priest, sitting in a kitchen chair, his back to you, a filter-less Lucky Strike in hand, an open can Budweiser on the Formica of the table. Now devoid of his vestments, he wears a sleeveless t-shirt revealing pale and sagging arms. Like you, he wears black pants and dress shoes. You knock on the door and he turns, looks at you, and says to come in, asks what you want. It is clear he has forgotten about your interview to be an altar boy. After a few minutes you retrace your steps across the schoolyard, reenter the school and your classroom, take your place in the reading circle because it is your group's turn there. You never mention this episode to anyone. No one ever asks; no one ever mentions it to you. There is no word from the rectory on your selection or not, but some weeks later you notice two boys in the grade above now sometimes help with Mass. In fourth grade the next year, you move to Florida and while you no longer attend Catholic school, you become an altar boy in your new parish. You like the heavy cloth of the black cassock, holding the bronzed paten

Jerry
Wemple

at communion. You like being part of the ritual more than observing it. You become a favorite, often requested for funeral Masses because of your look of piety while holding the tall crucifix at the head of the coffin. You never make faces as the priest swings the censer to and fro and the acrid smell fills sanctuary, or when stray sprinkles of holy water from the aspergillum hit you on the forehead and hands. Most times an elderly member of the Knights of Columbus will slip you a few bucks after the Mass, tell you that you did a good job. When you turn fourteen, just beginning ninth grade, Father Christopher Gallagher approaches you in the church parking lot, takes you aside as you are on your way to a Saturday morning CCD class in the parish hall. He asks if you have ever thought about a vocation, of becoming a priest someday. You talk with him a few minutes, acknowledge him politely, then go inside to class. You know that path is not for you. You can only think of an old priest sitting in the kitchen rectory in a Pennsylvania river town, drinking a can of beer at eight in the morning like some derelict fisherman.

Jerry
Wemple

Florida

Back in those days your stepfather drank beers like a challenge, like there was a reward at the end of every case he pounded each weekend. But there wasn't, just another Monday and another week of work. He ran the tool shed for the construction company. That tool shed job was boring as hell. Hand out grease guns and wrenches in the morning, check them back in at quitting time. Hope somebody came by to shoot the shit in between. Most of the time just stand around in a walled-off section of a Quonset hut, sweating Florida sweat, listening to the deejay, Harry the Hog Man, play Merle Haggard and George Jones in between commercials on a radio with a half broken-off antenna and a loose tuning knob. He never got near the big equipment: dump trucks, front end loaders, excavators, graders. He never got the big money either. No overtime, a buck or two past minimum wage. On the way home every Friday he'd stop at the liquor store, buy a case of cans of whatever was on special. Drink his dream. It took decades but those big machines chopped a large swath of west Florida coast, cut and filled brackish streams full of alligator gar and bald cypress trees with osprey nests. Replaced it all with straight-line canals and straight-line roads. It seems nearly unbelievable now: one hundred and twenty square miles stripped of vegetation, made into homesites for those from New York or Ohio who'd grown sick of sleet and heavy wool coats in the winter, wanting to buy a quarter acre of a fool's paradise. By area, they built the second largest city in the state, with grids of paved streets, machine-dug waterways leading to inland lakes. But

Jerry
Wemple

for years much of it was a void, thousands and thousands of barren acres. Speculators developed homes at the south end first, closer to the river and the beaches, naming the streets with numbers, the boulevards with Spanish names: El Dorado, Del Prado. Landscapers planted Royal Palms and Norfolk Island Pines, installed sprinklers systems under sodded lawns. There were outliers, here and there small subdivisions farther north. You lived on the edge, a border neighborhood, a few streets of old-school Florida cement block homes painted pale colors, smaller and squarer than those of paradise. Your neighbors were old-school Floridians who knew this new Florida wasn't meant for them. Or a few northerners, people like your mother and stepfather, who too slowly realized the illusion, but kept believing anyway because that was better than the idea of a return, admitting that the glitter of Florida was just the sun reflecting off empty beer cans tossed by the side of the road. At fifteen, you learned to drive on those vacant streets north of Pine Island Road, laughing at the ridiculousness driving on Mars, nothing but sand and canals as far as the eye could see. Of course, happenstance led you away a short time later. Circumstance drew you to return years and years later. And again, you drove those streets. Now faux Spanish villas with screen-enclosed swimming pools lined the canals. And you laughed at all this too, and thought about your stepfather, dead now for years, wondered what he'd think. But you figured he'd just reach for another beer, still buying whatever was on special.

Jerry
Wemple

Ohio, Indiana, and the Lower Part of Michigan

Though he possessed the start of a lunch-bucket gut, Lamar Hunsicker was an otherwise gangling fellow with arms of unnatural length. He had a balding pate, wore old-fashioned shoes, plain and fatigued at the heels and toes, and t-shirts, blue sometimes, but more often dingy white. He looked like a joe who would store an unlit cigar in the corner of his mouth, though he never did. You moved next door to him abruptly just before Christmas in the year of the tumult. Though generally reticent, Lamar would nod hello, once asked you were you were from. There was a sorrowful number of other kids in the neighborhood: a few too old to be interested in you; a few too young to warrant your attention. Thus, you kept to yourself, and intrigued by the novelty of warm winter weather, tinkered outside, here and there, doing this and that. You waived to Lamar as you placed your new used bike upside-down, its seat and handles on the patchy grass, to clean and oil the chain. He saw you in the cement carport hosing off and then stripping down your Mitchell Garcia 300 reel after a day fishing in the saltwater at Matlacha Pass. He slow-walked over and proffered the remnants of a spray can of WD-40, said it was good for the gears inside, would slow down rust on the outside. Soon from October to April you'd rise Saturday mornings at five, walk from your yard to Lamar's, help him finish loading the truck and trailer, then ride with him over the Edison Bridge to the big flea market in Tice. The first season, when you were ten and then eleven, he mostly had you run errands. But after a while he let you spell him at the stand, take in money and make change for kids and rubes who'd buy cheap jewelry and digital watches that would stop running after a month. Later, he'd bring

Jerry
Wemple

along the Moon Bounce. It was heavy as sin on the soul to load, but really nothing to set up once you got the blower going. You'd run it all by yourself, taking in cash, a wad of crinkled musty bills riding low in your pocket till quitting time. Your ride lengths were capricious, running fast when there was a line, letting it go a while when it was mostly little kids somersaulting and stumbling like drunks. Some afternoons you'd work a school fair. Lamar would tow a game trailer there in advance and bring along the cotton candy machine. You learned that machine was easy money: a couple of bucks worth of floss sugar kept the line going for the better part of a day. Lamar had a mobile home he lived in, and another out back that no one lived in. And another just up the street, that someone lived in once, but just for a little while. He had a workshop building behind his trailer. Sometimes after school you'd go over there and help him make prizes for the carnie game. You'd spray paint fake plaques with stupid sayings formed from plaster of Paris molds or use a silver box contraption to heat glass soda bottles, stretch out their necks, and after they cooled fill them with colored water capped by a cork. In mid-April, Lamar would call you over, ask you to look after his properties during the long Florida summer - mow the grass, pick up branches after a storm - tell you he'd settle with you in the fall. Somehow his wife would already be in the truck, nearly invisible and silent as a tomb. Lamar would put the trailer on the hitch, double check the safety chains, then fade away into the rising damp heat of the day. Things went on like that, season after season. Then one summer you too left Florida, but you didn't come back.

Jerry
Wemple

Year

On Easter Sunday morning you told yourself you were dressed to the nines and laughed like hell at your joke because you just turned nine. Those days everyone dressed fancy for church, especially at Easter. You finished getting ready: a dark suit you got at Christmas, white shirt, striped tie and a brass clasp, black dress shoes. You lived in a blue and white trailer then, off Route 890, five minutes out of town along Plum Creek. Your mother was taking a long time. Your stepfather wasn't going at all. A restless kid, you asked to go outside and wait. You knew how the day would go: a long Mass at Saint Joseph's the Archangel Roman Catholic Church, then over to your grandmother's where you'd pose for pictures with your cousins, grimace at aunts who would fawn over you, touch your face. The kids would get baskets but be forced to abandon them while everyone ate a big meal with ham and roast beef, a couple kinds of potatoes, pickled beets and deviled eggs. The men talked about trout fishing coming up, last fall's deer season, and the women about relatives from Reading and down that way. But for the moment you were glad to be outside. It was off and on sunny and the early April air was damp and chilled. You were riding the Sears Spyder bike you got for your birthday. You knew it was a copy of the more expensive Schwinn that Tommy Jenks had. He lived up on the hill in town in a big house and had the best-looking pinewood derby car in Cub Scouts with paint that shined like a new dime. You rode your bike around the crushed-stone semi-circle driveway and then down the blacktop side road that went past the trailer. You were

Jerry
Wemple

careful not to get chain grease on your suit pants or to scuff your shoes. You'd probably made the circuit seven or eight times when your butterfly handlebars clipped the extended side mirror on your stepfather's fat-ass truck. You swung right, caught the downslope of the creek bank, rode the shifting shale for fifteen feet, hit a rock and fell into the cold, rushing water. You chased your right shoe as it floated downstream. A couple of times you used the Lord's name in vain. A couple of times you used words that would have gotten you a beating if your mother heard. Then you made the lonely trek, shoe in hand, pushing your bike back up the embankment.

That summer you went to a Catholic boys' camp up outside of Tunkhannock. Markie Scholl went there the summer before and said it was fun. Only once you got there you hated the weedy lake, how the rowboat would never go straight or fast, that you had to get up early and go to Mass each day, just like school. On Sunday before lunch, the cabin counselor huddled all the boys together. He said some kids from Baltimore would arrive that afternoon. He said these kids were poor and from a city and might not be used to the same things we were. He never used the words "colored" or "black," but his point was made. By the end of his speech, half the cabin boys were looking at you like maybe you too weren't used to the same things they were. You don't remember much about the Baltimore kids. They had their own cabin and always seemed off in the distance. Rain started around dinner time cancelling the promised

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campfire and marshmallows. Monday afternoon you went to the canteen, bought a picture postcard of the camp chapel and a stamp. You sent it to your grandmother, asking her to come get you. She didn't get it until the Friday afternoon mail, and since she was coming Saturday morning anyway, she waited to fetch you until then. You couldn't write your mother because she and your stepfather were on a trip to Florida. The winter before, they went to a seminar in a windowless chain hotel conference room about a development called Lehigh Acres, and now they were on an expenses-paid trip to check it out. That winter, only a few days before Christmas, you moved to Florida. It wasn't the kind of Florida with new houses on new streets, houses with fancy screened porches called lanais, sodded lawns, and stunted palms. Your house was small: a bit run down like the neighborhood of other squat houses and trailers with added-on rooms fashioned from scrap lumber and plywood, some painted and some not. On Christmas day afternoon, your mother, and your stepfather, and you drove a few miles to a county park. They sat in webbed fold-out chairs and drank beers from a Styrofoam cooler while you waded in the warm, shallow water of Matlacha Bay. Over the next few years, you'd become adept at catching fish in these waters: snook, red snapper, small grouper. You'd use a seine net to corral bait shrimp in the inlets, wade waist high near the channel to cast your luck. But that Christmas, the year coming to an end, you were just beginning to cipher how fully tides and worlds can shift.

Book R eviews

The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women

By Betina Entzminger
Rivercliff Books & Media. 2021. 159 pp. \$14.95 (paperback)

“I am an unreliable narrator in part because memory itself is unreliable, and in the Southern vernacular, telling stories is the same as lying,” Entzminger tells us at the end of her prologue to her riveting essay collection, *The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women* (13). These are the hard hitting, fully embodied tales of women whose stories largely go unsung. Entzminger’s ancestors “are not the Southern ladies who were hoisted, willingly or not, onto pedestals by Southern gentlemen. These were the women who grew and cooked those ladies’ food, cleaned their clothes, and milled the cloth for their dresses; or they did this work for their own families while their husbands labored at low-paying jobs” (12). This reviewer comes from a long line of “hoisted” Southern ladies of the Mississippi Delta, queens of debutante balls, though Mama got fed up and eventually took off for Texas, but these are the stories we don’t usually get to hear, and they’re the ones we need the most.

The opening essay, “Victoria’s Mark,” finds Entzminger trying to solve the mystery of cousin Henry, most likely descended from a slave-owning ancestor and one of his slaves, Victoria, a woman who “inhabited my dreams like a Fury” (21). Entzminger travels to her hometown, Columbia, South Carolina, to meet a distantly related genealogist, “Rosa,” who has kept meticulous family records over forty years, stemming

from a high school project. She describes this woman and her own arduous journey for details so well that I can picture Rosa precisely, how she purports to offer keys to the mystery Entzminger is hellbent on solving, and yet, changes her tune in person, becoming defensive and evasive, even telling Entzminger, “I think you’ve jumped to the wrong conclusion,” followed by a “frosty warning” not to print her name or she “will haunt you to your dying day” (16; 18). The stakes are high from the start, and Entzminger’s storytelling lets us feel them.

In “Correspondence,” which I had the pleasure of hearing Entzminger read at the 2022 Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) conference in Baltimore, her father gives her a treasure trove of letters written to her great grandfather, William Warren Whitman (1875-1949), a modest farmer who struggled financially, and his second wife Kitty (1875-1944). Lizzie, Kitty’s oldest daughter, who disapproved of the marriage and longed for her mother’s company, authored most of the letters. As Entzminger reads the letters, the most important stories lie between the lines, causing her to make compelling connections between Kitty’s relationship with her husband and her own mother’s relationship with Entzminger’s father. Like Kitty, Entzminger’s mother “learned to pacify my father through selective silence and acquiescence”

(45). As Entzminger tells us in her prologue, “[r]estoring their voices is my attempt to pay homage to them, acknowledge my spiritual kinship to them, and draw from their stubborn strength” (13). Entzminger’s reading at NeMLA prompted a profound discussion about silence in families and how those unspoken conversations are the ones that can do the most damage. In this collection Entzminger unearths those buried voices and brings them to us.

Sometimes those voices harmonize surprisingly well with our own, delivering to us both discovery and even a warning of things to come. In Entzminger’s “The Cup” she deftly braids stories from her own troubled adolescence with those of her great-aunt Ella, a woman beset by just about every kind of loss, the respect of her family, her great love, a second chance at love, her sister, her son, her home, and even, after many years, both of her legs from diabetes. Yet, it is Ella’s misfit status inside her own family, her need to carve out a life for herself in spite of the limitations of her time and gender that links Entzminger spiritually to her. And, in that bond, Entzminger finds a kind of strength, “[D]eeper down, I learned a lesson I wouldn’t appreciate until much later: that grief did not kill, at least not quickly” (30).

The essay with my favorite title, “Handling Shit and Finding Love,” opens, after a wonderful epigraph from Elizabeth Gilbert’s “Wisdom & Age & Women,” with, “I respect people who handle ‘shit’” (83). Great-aunt Ella’s sister Louise is betrayed by a closeted husband, estranged for years and unable to divorce until 1952 when South Carolina finally legalizes it. Nevertheless, she *handles her shit*, getting a job in the mill immediately and saving money by sharing rent with her niece. Entzminger can handle shit, too, a trait she’s inherited from tough, brave women and passed down to her children, one of whom we learn is non-gender

conforming and preparing themselves for a world that may have to get out of the way, if it won’t make room for them. They will handle their shit, too. We know this.

Yet, for another ancestor, great aunt Rosalee’s family wouldn’t give her much opportunity to handle her shit, as they committed her to the State Hospital after her husband’s death in the 1950s. “Rosalee’s Commitment” opens with the visit Entzminger remembers making to that asylum with her mother and grandmother when she was a girl, about thirty years after her great aunt’s institutionalization. At that point Rosalee lived at the asylum with her middle-aged son. “Now I wonder,” Entzminger writes, “how much a woman had to drink, how many men she had to bed, how violently and frequently she had to swear, before a mental institution seemed the answer” (101). She tasks herself with uncovering Rosalee’s story and discovers that “Rosalee lacked the ability to sit with herself, to face all the fragments of feeling that teemed within her, and to shape them into a coherent self she could accept the burden of,” which resonates with me deeply (103). Yes, I whispered as soon as I read this wisdom, for it is such an apt description of what we all must learn to do: accept the burden of ourselves somehow. Because, let’s be honest, it can be a burden, the self, and at times it’s hard to accept.

What’s also hard to accept are the limited bounds of Southern Womanhood, as Entzminger dissects them in her essay, “Not about My Mother,” which isn’t about her mother, because her mother followed the ideal characteristics of “[c]are-taking, self-sacrifice, and domesticity,” but also, and this made me laugh out loud in recognition, “the southern woman’s secret weapon of expressing herself through indirection” (114-115). Largely, these indirect remarks centered on Entzminger’s weight, something my mama was also

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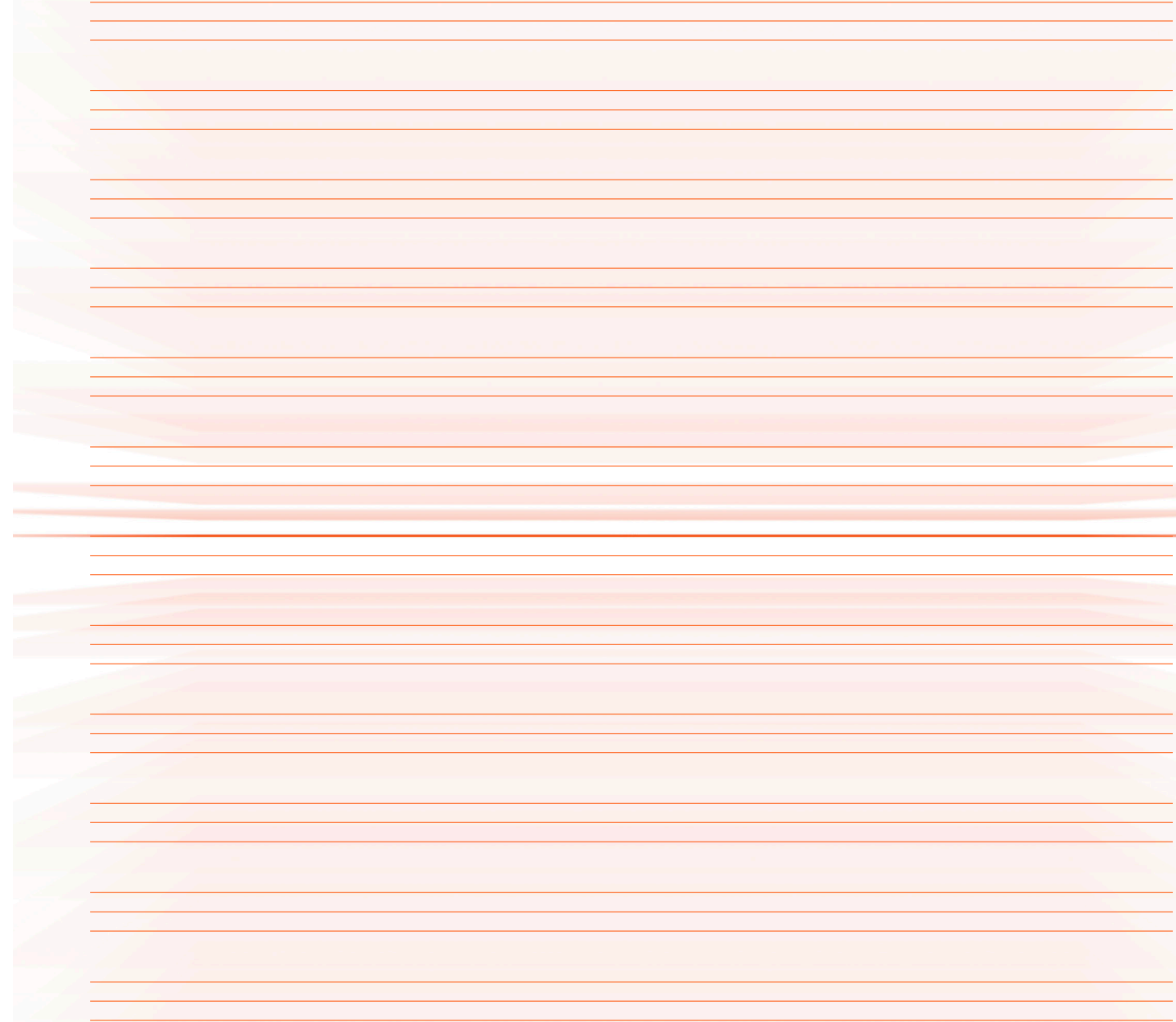
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particularly good at, a trait inherited from her own mother and hopefully not passed down to me, bless her heart. Yet “Not about My Mother” isn’t about Entzminger’s mother after all, but about her mother’s sister, Entzminger’s Aunt Carrie, whose body broke the rules of Southern womanhood after an early hysterectomy, which ushered her into spinsterhood and later, disability. Her other sister, Aunt Mae, was also disabled and both lived outside the bounds of Southern womanhood with their mother, eventually dying in a nursing home. Growing up Entzminger fights against the “lessons” she’s supposed to learn from the women in her family, that girls cannot be alone, because they require protection. These lessons, unlike her mother’s art of indirection, are often direct. Entzminger understands that her father, like so many men of his time, “believed I was incapable of taking care of myself,” something she is determined to prove wrong (122). This was ultimately the message to Southern women: yes, you must be a caretaker, but really, it is you who must be taken care of after all.

In her essay, “Tammy, Tea Parties, and the Telephone,” Entzminger writes about another rule breaker, Tammy, a cousin just a year older who was her best friend until they drifted apart in middle school. Tragically, Tammy’s rule breaking, which included substance abuse, led to her early death at age fifty-two. This essay is a heartbreaking study of the things we don’t say because we can’t until it’s too late, all the guilt that comes from not knowing enough at the time, not knowing ourselves enough at the time, and the desperation to avoid those same mistakes. Yet, it’s about more than that, too, it’s about the weight of family expectations, their gravitational pull, our need to move beyond them even when large chunks of us long for that connection.

The essay that ends this powerful collection, “Flood House,” links together the devastation of a flood with the end of a marriage: “Living through a major flood and living through the end of a marriage have much in common. A gradual accumulation of bad decisions, neglect, and uncontrollable external forces make each disaster possible.... In both cases, the aftermath, the cleanup, is the hardest part” (143). This metaphor is almost uncanny, for Entzminger moves into a 100-year old house across from Fishing Creek with the assurance of the previous owner who only saw “an inch or two [of water] in the basement during Hurricane Agnes in 1972, a flood still legendary among the older residents of the region,” and Entzminger moves in with her new husband, her fourth, “with the somehow-still-naïve belief that this house, this marriage would be different than the ones before” (143-144). The previous marriage was also housed in a literal flood zone, though this flood in her fourth marriage was of the record-breaking kind.

In the South though “telling stories is the same as lying,” these aren’t the kind of stories Entzminger tells. In *The Beak in the Heart: True Tales of Misfit Southern Women*, she pulls us into her ancestors’ voices, lets us live there and peer at the world through their eyes, so that our perspective of humanity enlarges. Entzminger makes it a little easier for us to “accept the burden” of ourselves, at least while we read this collection. That’s my definition of a reliable narrator.



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