

Bear River Review

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Mary Kathleen Angel
arwulf arwulf
Norma Bishop
Mira Bowman
Lee Warner Brooks
Elaine Burr
Jacqueline Carney
Richard H. Coupe
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In Memoriam

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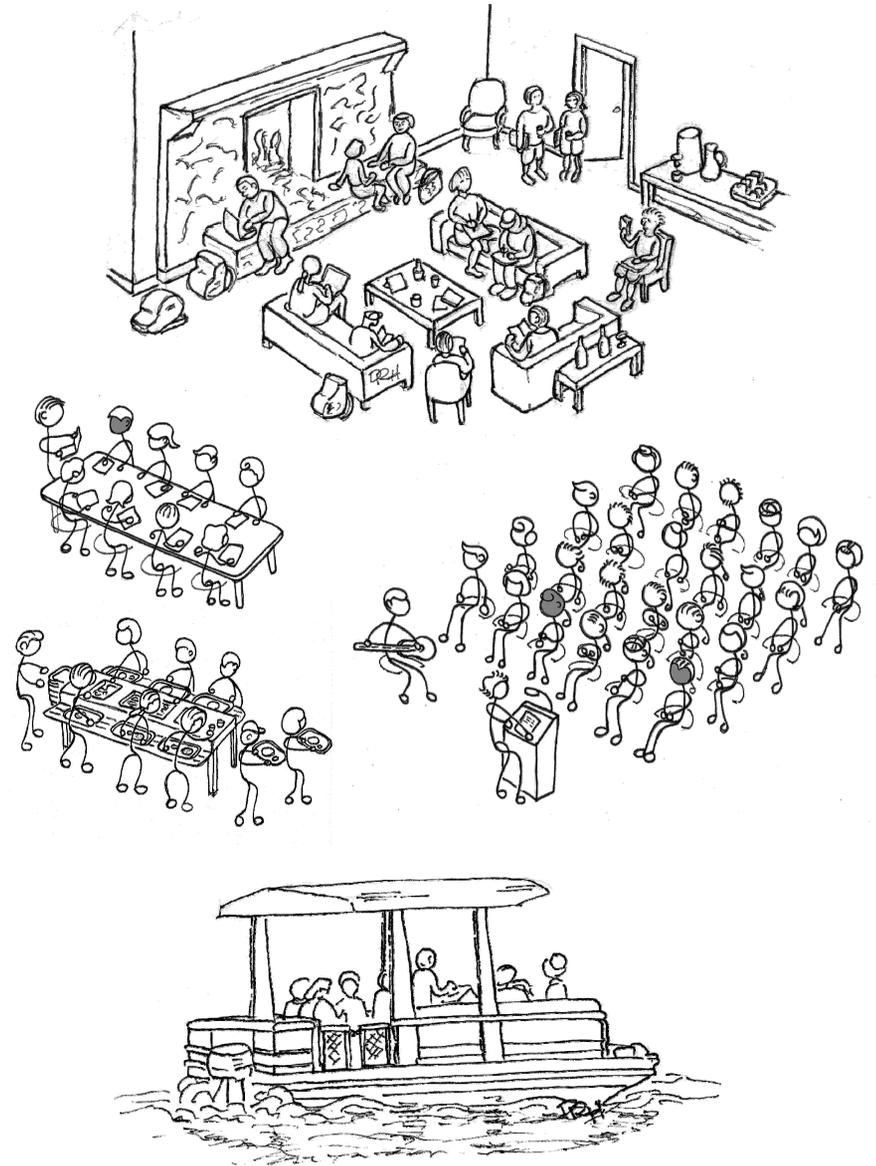
Bear River Review

Bear River Writers 2008-2009

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An Anthology of Poetry and Prose
by Bear River Writers 2008-2009



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on-line issues of the Bear River Review, please go to
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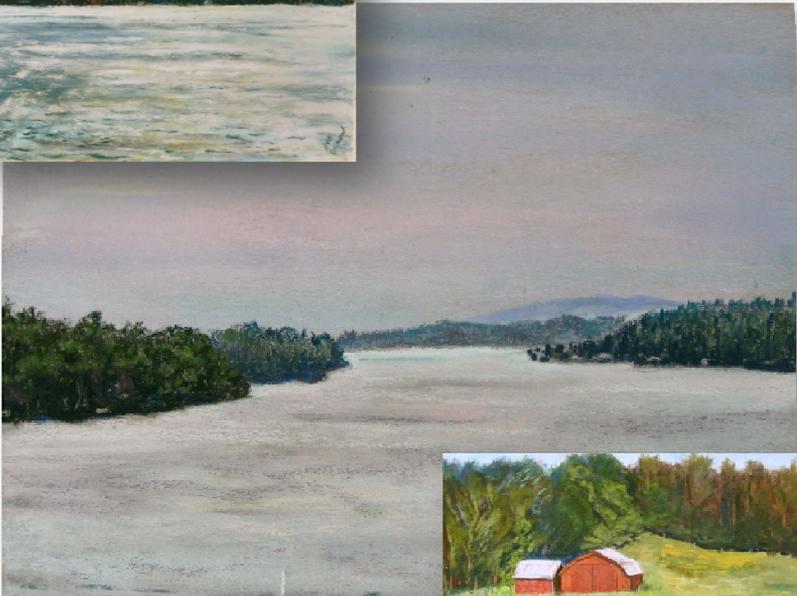
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Introduction

The reason the Bear River Writers' Conference exists is to encourage new writing. It only makes sense that we do what we can to help some of that work find an audience. Luckily, we've been given some financial support to implement that idea, and also the important support of donated time. These incredible gifts have allowed us to create a space for people to share their writing with their Conference colleagues and with any other reader who may stumble across it. We hope people enjoy the work and find it helpful with their own projects.

~Keith Taylor, Director



Paintings on this page
by Ava Gilzow

As one of Bear River's founding fathers, I am proud to assert, a full decade on, that we have stayed true to our original intention. To paraphrase William Faulkner, we have not only endured, we have prevailed. Through a healthy connection with the University of Michigan, supported by good and generous people in our state, we have brought to our participants the best writers and teachers in the world. At the same time we have never stopped being an "up north" outfit. We have seen the green heron in flight, have spotted the indigo bunting on the finial of a jack pine, and have sat around a campfire by the lake listening to the wild pack-music of coyotes in full cry.

~Richard Tillinghast, Founder

We thank our anonymous donor for supporting the publication of this issue of the Bear River Review. And as we celebrate our ten-year anniversary, we thank the founders of the Bear River Writers' Conference, James McCullough and Richard Tillinghast, for charting and captaining us on this literary voyage, and we thank Keith Taylor for his excellent direction as he continues to keep our poetic pontoon on course. The writers in this issue began their work at the Conference, workshopped it there, were inspired there. Welcome to the words that flowed from the clarity of Walloon Lake onto these pages.

~Chris Lord, Editor

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Keith Taylor

Keith Taylor's most recent book, *If the World Becomes So Bright*, was published by Wayne State University Press in 2009. He has published ten earlier books, collections of poems and stories, chapbooks, edited and translated volumes. Over the years his work has appeared in a couple of hundred places, ranging from *Story* to the *Los Angeles Times*, from *Bird Watcher's Digest* to the *Chicago Tribune* to *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Ireland*, and *The Southern Review*. He has won awards for his work here and in Europe. He works as the coordinator of undergraduate creative writing at the University of Michigan.

Canines

The coyote on Temperance Island
off Waugoshaunce (which might mean "Small Fox")
seems young. Perhaps he's desperately
hungry, leaping above tall grasses
after red-winged blackbirds and robins
or tearing across sand under gulls,
but he looks playful, a dog bounding
on the beach, filled with innocent joy.

A State-threatened Species

for Sara Alderstein-Gonzalez

The wavy-rayed lampmussel, yellow
or almost green, needs the small-mouthed bass
to host its young. Females siphon sperm
floating randomly in the river
then lure the fish with a fake minnow,
squirting fertilized eggs into gills.
In a month the juveniles fall off
into sand. They try to start again.

If You Want to Find a Hummingbird Nest

for Dave Ewert

lie down on a long abandoned road
in a northern forest—a warm day
with just a few insects—and look up.
With luck you might see a hummingbird
stopping between dead twigs of red pine
collecting shimmering gossamer
from spiders. With more luck you might see
her carry it off to line her nest.

Our Matinicus Island Seal Bone

for the Owens

I'd love to say we discovered it
while walking the south beach, opposite
Crihaven, out in the Atlantic
spray and wind, buried between cobbles.

But we found it bleached on your back porch,
this white, wing-like shoulder blade of seal.
You let us take it for our window
ledge, safe now, shaded by our humid oaks.

Richard Tillinghast

Richard Tillinghast co-founded Bear River and was director through 2005. Richard writes and publishes poetry, essays, travel writing, and translation. He is the author of ten books of poems and three books of essays. In 2008 a collection of poems, *The New Life*, came out from Copper Beech, along with a collection of essays, *Finding Ireland*, from the University of Notre Dame Press. In 2009 he published *Sewanee Poems* and *Selected Poems*, which collected his work from a forty-year career and, with Julia Clare Tillinghast, he published a book of translations from the Turkish poet Edip Cansever called *Dirty August*.

Two Blues

Two blues — one called serenity,
one looks like the gathering storm.
I had a tube of each in my paint box in art school.
Colors spoke.

Two blues,
the bland and the profound.
The ho-hum of a sky over Southern California —
you could call it *bleu celeste* or Egyptian blue.
Canaletto ground it out of lapis lazuli
for his Venetian skies.

That other blue might
paint the scary ocean depths
off the Cape of Storms,
the color of the sea in Winslow Homer's "Gulf Stream,"
terror in the black castaway's eyes
almost blanked out with titanium white —

perhaps the same pigment
Homer daubed on as turbulence
atop the cobalt blue waves
running battleship grey through the comfortless Gulf Stream.
Sharks circle, knowing they will eat red meat
when night falls.

Those two colors tutor us in disaster,
at first as we have no hint of anything gone amiss,
anything to threaten our obliviousness,
our sense that life sparkles,
that there is such a thing as a career,
goals to be set and achieved.

Sometimes existence becomes a substance so depleted
one says to oneself:
If I can just make it across while the green walking light
stays illuminated,
then I'll walk halfway down the block
one step at a time,
watch the footing,
then back to the apartment,
make tea and, grasping the tray firmly with both hands,
inch back upstairs.

Though surely existence is limitless —
the spirit's measureless reach,
all the mind does,
memory's scope and inside-outness.
All that one understands now
which one previously had not.

To look out at traffic,
hear a taxi honk its horn,
and not have to venture out into otherness.

Recovering from an accident where one is obliged to
get both feet onto a step before moving
down to the next,
how enlivening it is on such a morning
to sit by the radiator and read sentences like these:

*Drake had him beheaded alongside the gibbet from which
Magellan hung his mutineers, Quesada and Mendoza,
fifty-eight winters before. Wood preserves well in Patagonia.
The coopers of the Pelican sawed the post and made tankards
as souvenirs for the crew.*

Two blues open the world.
I'm almost glad I fell.
How else would I be made aware
of those realities the staff in the emergency room
see nightly
and gladly try to hide
behind their talk of Valentine's Day?

And these bruises on my face –
purple of the two black eyes
rainbowing to the mood indigo Duke Ellington wrote about.
Next an unsavory yellow
like the rind of a gone-off Persian melon
scattered among coffee grounds and empty *raki* bottles
outside a waterside restaurant in Istanbul
on the last day of August.

Burgundy blooms under my eyes
like the velvet of a sultan's caftan,
and then they glow with that
red in the morning
where sailors take warning.

Mary Kathleen Angel

Mary Kathleen Angel recently completed a bachelor's degree in English at Oakland University. She is new to fiction writing, and is grateful to the OU donor whose scholarship award allowed her to attend the 2009 Bear River Writers' Conference. The lessons she learned in Eileen Pollack's fiction workshop at Bear River will remain invaluable guides. Her short story, "A Map of the Universe," had its origin in a character-driven writing exercise from that workshop.

A Map of the Universe

Walt crouched down on the floor in the spare room and lifted the dust ruffle on the bed. He pulled out a clear plastic box of Christmas wrapping paper and a long, cardboard box with some of Phyllis's sweaters in it. Then he extracted a small, powder-blue suitcase and popped the silver lock. When he lifted the lid, he saw that it was full of long-forgotten, black-and-white photos. On top was a picture of Phyllis standing in front of the house with their son, Michael, in her arms. The date on the back was 1954, the year they'd moved into this house. Walt shut the suitcase and struggled to his feet. It was an interesting find.

Most Sundays, Walt's daughter, Barbara, visited with her husband and kids. Last Sunday, she had made dinner at his house. While it was cooking, she went into the hall closet to look for a tablecloth and discovered Phyllis's coats still hanging there.

"Why do you still have these, Dad?"

"I don't know. They've just always been there."

"Maybe you should start going through the house," Barbara suggested. "I'll bet there are a lot of things you could get rid of."

"What, you think I'm gonna die soon? Are you planning to put me in a nursing home?"

"No, Dad. But why wait until the last minute? Look what happened to Mom."

Neither he nor Phyllis had expected the heart attack that left her dead in front of the stove that night nearly two years ago. Not that either of them were at an age where death was unexpected. It's just that you never really think it's going to happen that day.

Barbara was right. He should be the one to clean up his own mess. So he had begun looking into closets and cupboards and places he had never bothered with before. Phyllis had always been the one to locate things, and now he realized that much of his own home was a mystery to him. That was how he discovered the secret of under-bed storage.

Walt carried the newfound suitcase downstairs to his den and set it next to his comfortable chair. He groaned as he sat down, sighing once he was fully lowered. A weak, winter sun slanted in through the window.

The den was Walt's haven. When he was a commercial illustrator, he had spent nights and weekends working in this room overlooking the backyard. Now long retired, Walt painted for his own pleasure. His latest creation took up most of the wall opposite his chair. Its subject was big—the entire universe, as he conceived it—a collage of knowledge, inspiration and imagination. He had painted all of the major galaxies and some important stars and black holes. When he worked on this project, nearly every day adding little points of interest or embellishments, he felt as if he were putting together the pieces of a puzzle. Of course, things were distorted. His own solar system was much larger than any of the others, and if a particular quasar or red giant interested him and he wanted to paint it intricately, he would illustrate it on some art board, cut it out and fasten it by a stiff wire that protruded from the canvas. The evolving three-dimensional painting fascinated his grandchildren who, whenever they came to visit, would run in to see if anything new had appeared.

At the very edge of the canvas was the most distant object in known space, A1689-zD1, a galaxy about 13 billion light years from earth. Tacked onto the painting, just outside the edge of that furthest boundary, was a picture of Phyllis that Walt had taken when they were in Florida the winter before she died. Her smile was as broad as the comfortable body she had built around herself over the years, and she looked like a sun shining over creation.

Settled into his chair, Walt popped open the suitcase and put a pile of photos in his lap, just beyond the perimeter of his abundant belly. He shuffled through the photos: Phyllis riding a bike in Bermuda, on their honeymoon; a picture of himself on the island of Guam during the war in the South Pacific, the palm trees behind him swaying in the hot wind; his brother, Pete, who had

died in the war; his whole family when he was about eight years old, standing on the porch of the house on Belmont. He was the youngest-born and the only one left. He stood up and pasted the family photo along the border of his painting. As the afternoon went on and Walt continued going through the suitcase, he added more photos of the deceased until the painting was wreathed by people.

Near the bottom of the suitcase, Walt came across a picture of a young woman kneeling in the sand. It was a photo that he had taken of Edna Beauchamp at Jefferson Beach, back when it was still an amusement park. It must have been about 1946. The old wooden roller coaster loomed in the background. Walt could almost hear the far-off screams of the people on the ride as they hung at the top of the big hill for an eternal second, the tracks below dropping out of view as they rounded the top and then fell, slowly at first, until the pull of gravity made them race toward the earth.

Walt had nearly forgotten about the photo. He hadn't seen Edna since not long after that and for that reason, she looked the same in his mind as she did in that picture—slightly sunburned, fresh and healthily young. She was smiling the Marilyn Monroe smile that all the blondes were copying back then—head slightly back, eyes half-shut, lips parted just a little. Pieces of her wavy blonde hair were upset in the nicest way by the wind.

Walt left the photo on his lap for a long time, remembering a few things about the day—the bus ride and the walk down the dusty road to the beach, the picnic basket full of lunch, dancing at the pavilion after dark. It was as if Edna had stepped out of the fog, just inside that area where things were visible again. She had surprised him that way once before, when she had sent him a consolation card after Phyllis's death. At that point, she'd been out of his life for nearly 60 years. He wasn't sure how she'd heard about Phyllis's passing or how she'd found him. His guess was that she was a diligent obituary reader. He had read the card and put it in the drawer of his desk, keeping the envelope with her return address. About a year ago, he had dialed information and penciled her phone number onto the envelope, but for some reason, he had never called her.

There were a few other photos of Edna in the suitcase—in front of the lighthouse on the island, leaning against his sage green

Pontiac Torpedo, wearing a New Year's hat and blowing a horn. Phyllis must have gone through these photos at one time or another. She must not have minded them, and she shouldn't have, of course. They were just pieces of his past.

Walt went to his desk drawer and pulled out Edna's card. He did this quietly, as if trying to avoid observation, and then he went back to his chair to read it again. In it, Edna gave a short synopsis of her entire life. She had moved back to Windsor in 1951, married, had one child, a son. She listed the events without revealing the emotions that accompanied them. "My husband killed himself when Jack was nine years old." She had never remarried. At the end, she apologized for running off in 1948. "A twenty year old girl can't know what it is she wants in life," she explained. There were a lot of details missing.

When Walt's stomach began to rumble, he took the photo of Edna to the kitchen with him. On the little table by the window was the vase of flowers that he refilled each week in honor of Phyllis. While he ate his dinner, he leaned the photo of Edna against the vase and looked cautiously over at the space that Phyllis had always occupied at meals. "There isn't anything wrong with wanting to know how she is. It's hard to be alone, you know."

After Walt rinsed his plate, he went back to the den. As Phyllis watched from her perch at the top edge of the painting, he dialed the number on the envelope. A generic answering machine message told him that he had the correct number. His voice shook a little. "Yes, this is Walt Wiczorek, calling for Edna Beauchamp. If you're there, I'm just wondering ... just wondering how you're doing." He left his number and hung up, thinking he should have said more. That was his problem, he thought, suddenly. He always said less than he felt.

After all these years without a sound from Edna, Walt was impatient for the phone to ring. He read the paper, watched the news and went through the mail. There were a million reasons why she might not call back right away. Perhaps she was out or staying with her son. She could be sleeping or sick in the hospital or...

At 7:30, Walt put on his boots and coat, slipped the photo into his pocket and trudged through the slushy snow to the bar on the corner where he met Herb Goetzke on Fridays for a beer. The bar

was one of those dark places that have little use for windows or atmosphere, built into the neighborhood over half a century ago as a place for auto workers to drop in on the way home from work and spend some of their paycheck.

Herb was sitting at the bar, hunched over, his eyes on the television behind it. Walt sat down next to him and ordered a beer. Then he pulled out the photo of Edna and set it on the bar in front of Herb.

"Marilyn Monroe?" Herb asked, pulling out his reading glasses.

"No, a girlfriend from long ago."

"You know she doesn't look like that anymore, don't ya?"

He told Herb the story – how he'd met Edna at the dance pavilion on Boblo Island just after he'd come back from the war; how he'd been crazy about her, but for some reason he had never gotten around to asking her to marry him. It was too long ago to remember why. He had been busy in art school and working as an usher at the United Artists movie theatre. Then she had left, suddenly.

"Did she run off with a guy?"

"I don't know. I only know she went to California. She called me when she got out there, crying I remember, saying she was sorry. We never spoke again."

"California, huh? Maybe she had dreams of becoming an actress."

Walt agreed that was possible, but it didn't really matter. "If my heart was broken, I hardly remember that now. I suppose I just got busy doing other things."

After Walt finished his beer, he went home. Without removing his coat, he went to the phone to see if there was a message waiting. Strangely impatient, he dialed the number again. The same generic voice greeted him.

He was restless. He didn't know what had come over him. After all the time that had passed, he suddenly wanted to waste no more of it. He went back out onto the front porch, not sure what to do with himself. He thought he must look foolish to anyone watching, but there was nobody around. The neighborhood was quiet except for a dog barking somewhere behind one of the houses across the street. He walked out to his car and stood

next to it. Then he got in and just sat inside it for awhile. Not sure what he was doing, he started it up.

Twenty minutes later, he was on the bridge that linked Detroit to Windsor. Far below, stray sheets of ice floated lazily on the surface of the slick, black water streaked with bright lights from the city. When the bridge began its descent, he saw a sea of snow-covered rooftops beneath him. One of them belonged to Edna.

At customs, the officer asked the purpose of his visit. He stammered, feeling as if he were hiding something. "Going to visit an old friend," he said. The officer was kind enough to give him directions to Rosedale Avenue.

Edna's neighborhood lay in the shadow of the bridge, beneath its dark undersides and the ever-present sound of cars passing overhead. Her house was a brown-brick bungalow with a large porch and a small yard. Walt parked in the street and looked at the dark windows of her house. Was she really still living there? If so, was there anything left of that girl with the spark of life in her? He thought about knocking on the door, but it didn't feel right. She might be sleeping.

He decided to write a note, but he searched his car for paper and found nothing. The only thing he had to write on was the photo from 1946. He hoped that seeing the picture again would bring good memories rather than a sense of loss. He turned it over and wrote, "For everything there is a season." Then he put his name and phone number on it. He felt poetic, romantic, not quite himself, and he sat there for a long time before he gathered the nerve to approach her house. His steps rang out on the old wood floor of the porch, and the mailbox creaked as he lifted the lid to drop in the photo. He lingered there a moment, feeling the warmth of proximity. After that, he drove north along the river toward the heart of the city, thinking about everything that had changed since he was a young man.

Walt kept busy the next day, but he was careful to stay near the phone. In the late afternoon, after the house had been silent all day, he called the number again, and a man answered. Walt told him he was looking for Edna Beauchamp. The man said he didn't know an Edna Beauchamp. The man almost hung up, but Walt said, "Wait!" and asked if he had called the address on Rosedale Avenue. No, he had called a house on Wyandotte. He had been given that number when he moved to Windsor last year.

Just before dinnertime, the phone rang. The young woman on the other end asked Walt if he had left the photo in her mailbox. She said the woman was very beautiful. She did not know an Edna Beauchamp, but she suspected they had bought their house from her son, Jack Beauchamp.

Walt asked if she knew what had happened to Edna Beauchamp – was she still alive? The woman didn't know. He asked if she had Jack Beauchamp's phone number, and she hesitated. "Yes, I do. I suppose it's all right if I give it to you. I can see you're just an old friend."

As soon as she hung up, Walt dialed the number. A woman answered the phone and he asked for Jack. A moment later, Edna's son was on the phone. Walt got right to the point, telling him he had known Edna years ago and wanted to get in touch with her.

"I'm so sorry, Walt. My mother passed away almost a year ago."

Walt sat down. It wasn't that he hadn't thought it was possible, but he had hoped there was still a little time.

"Was it a peaceful death?" he asked.

Jack said it was. She had been sick but comfortable, and it seemed as if she had just fallen asleep.

After Walt hung up, he sat in his chair in the corner of the den, watching day turn to evening. As the sky became a pink backdrop to the bare, dark branches of trees, the snow turned a soft blue. Walt could see the dried remains of his garden peeking up through the snow. As the room dimmed, the angles of the furniture softened and Walt melted into the shadows. He could barely see his painting now. Its flat patterns and protruding shapes were indistinguishable; its dark areas, absorbing what little light remained, became that unfathomable space they represented.

Walt reached up to turn on the lamp. The yellow light shone on the dome of his head, shadowing its furrows and liver spots that might look like the ridges and craters of a barren planet to some small insect circling him. The canvas leaning against the opposite wall came back to life, the crowd of people along its edges looking at Walt.

The photo of Edna in front of the lighthouse lay on top of the suitcase. She was squinting in the sunlight, smiling an eternally youthful smile. It was spring when he took that photo, still a nip

in the air. He remembered riding home on the old riverboat that night, leaning against the railing and watching the homes of Amherstburg pass by while people danced to big band music on the wooden floor in the center of the boat.

Walt rose slowly from his chair and brought the photo of Edna to his desk. He smeared some glue onto the back of the photo and then walked over to the painting, looking for an open space along its edge. He pasted Edna just beyond the Boötes Supercluster. He hoped Phyllis wouldn't mind. After all, she still had the highest position on the painting.

Then, he stood back to look at the state of his universe. There was hardly an empty space in it.

arwulf arwulf

arwulf arwulf was involved in performance poetics at the original Performance Network and at public readings in Ann Arbor, Chicago and Detroit. Poetics are an essential element in his radio programs on WCBN, WEMU and WFMU. arwulf attended the Bear River Writers' Conference in 2007, 2008, and 2009, participating in workshops led by Bob Hicok, Keith Taylor, and Richard Tillinghast. The effects of each of these workshops are in evidence whenever he writes shopping lists, poems, essays or musicological schemata. The Conferences taught him to consult with the natural history of Michigan to discover deeper meaning and relevance in this life.

bach

not far at all from the trailhead
near where you been sleeping every night
a brook is undulating through the forest
what has stopped me here for awhile
as i near the end of this particular
peregrination, is the perfectly
balanced polyphony of the
bach chorale made by the same water
as it tumbles over roots, rocks
and fallen branches
upstream of here
the basso continuo
while the gentlest altos

and sopranos imaginable

sing from each bend of this

baby rattlesnake brook

the place where it ultimately

passes under the forest path

to continue through fern

loam and swamp grass

generates a complementary

bass line so that the full length

of the segment of the brook

that is visible & audible to me

from where i stand

becomes one ensemble

or, given the fact that the same water

plays the entire brook, one instrument

the brook, as a chorale, is scored for

soprano, alto, tenor, bass and continuo

may it continue

um mitternacht

*from eduard mörike & hugo wolf
through sviatoslav richter & dietrich fischer-dieskau*

Alkman, who lived in Sparta during the seventh century Before the Common Era, wrote hymns, preludes and songs to be sung by choirs of young women. One fragment describes a world where everything is asleep. Mountains and ravines, worms, moles and centipedes; mammals that live in the hills and entire societies of bees; behemoths, krakens, leviathans, deep sea creatures that never see the light of day; birds of every size and feather, all are fast asleep.

In nineteen hundred and twenty nine Federico Garcia Lorca came to New York City, just in time, as he put it in so many words, to see a great sheaf of dead money go sliding off into the ocean. The big city seemed altogether too big for this Andalusian, who said that back home everything was tiny by comparison. Here the buildings were impossibly tall, and people were jumping out of them because of the money.

At four o'clock in the morning, Federico stood in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge staring out at the countless lights burning just everywhere as far as the eye could see, and there and then he wrote: everyone everywhere is wide awake. Nobody anywhere is asleep. The iguanas will come to bite the unsleeping men who do not dream. Everything is awake, said Federico Garcia Lorca to the Brooklyn Bridge at four A.M. in the jet black dawn of the age of insomnia.

Norma Bishop

Norma Bishop, a native of the Great Lakes region, spent 20 years in California, where she was a feature editor for the magazine *Coastal Woman* and a feature contributor to the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. She returned to the Great Lakes in 2005, where she is a museum director, writing poetry and working on a novel set in Wisconsin. Bear River in 2009 was Norma's first writing conference. Sharing tribulations, inspiration, and insight in a community of writers and being nourished by the serene setting gave her a charge of energy. Norma thanks Laura Kasischke and those who attended her workshop.

Sifting

Tracing your name
on steam-scrimmed, silvered glass,
I watch each letter weep.

And I become ribs
caught in sand and sifting time
from a sea opaque with silent grief,

lungs filling with brackish breath
of rivers,
of mudflats of oysters
sucking silted time.

Corridors pearled
in nacreous light reflect
your shadow bent by tides.

Glistening crescents,
scales refract a thousand moons:
a mosaic of light in drifts of silt.

Time, falling as sun on sand,
fills harbors
near headlands, there sheltered
from rock and frothing seas —

where you wait for me.

Seed Stitch

She holds the yarn in fingers
slim and white as birches lining the shore.

The yarn, a twist of colored strands, forest duff –
green spruce,
brown, scaled cones,
russet lichens,
gray, water-worn granite,
bitter-yellow beech leaves,
and silvered blue of the lake's wind-swept mosaic.

She knits the colors into a forest fabric,
soft purlled hills like ever-traveling swales that ripple inland from
lakeshore,
knit stitch vees, crotches of forked aspen and elderberry where
orioles nest.

She shapes sinuous sleeves
and a windbreak collar deep as the cedar copse.

A dandelion seed, piloting the wind,
lights on her wrist.

Deftly she grasps it between moon-white nails of forefinger and
thumb
and plants it in the next stitch, one furrow from the finishing.

She'll wait for the first rain and,
in the meadow, slip it over branch-boned arms.

Mira Bowman

Mira Bowman has recently graduated from the University of Michigan with a BA in English and creative writing. She was privileged to participate in the 2009 Bear River workshop with Jerry Dennis where she learned to hone her skills in using the surrounding wilderness as a source of inspiration. This is Mira's first published work.

The only way to have an organic death these days is to be eaten by wolves

Imagine it. At first only the vague inkling
of danger followed by your usual skepticism:
"Relax. You're fine. Nothing bad
is going to happen."
But then it does happen,
as bad things tend to do.

There will probably be snarling.
You'll probably do something futile:
pick up a stick, throw rocks, maybe
try to climb a tree.
Adrenaline will show up too,
only it'll be different from previous experiences.
It won't stop when you get off the roller coaster.
You won't be able to soothe it with a corn dog.
And soon you'll stop thinking
"Fuck, I'm being eaten by wolves!"
stop comparing it to novels about the wild
because, fuck, you're being eaten by wolves.
Pouncing. Biting. Slurping.
And bam, you're dead.

But think about it:
better than a nursing home or another car crash,
you get to feed some creatures, which,
face it, you're probably part of the reason
they're hungry now anyway.

Then whatever's left will decay
and flowers will feed there,
popping up in your skull holes,
and your soul, or whatever,
doesn't have to worry about escaping
heavy coffin lids, and maybe,
way out there away from all of that
ghastly make-up and embalming fluid,
you'll have enough space and peace
to turn into a caterpillar,
which wouldn't be so bad.

Lee Warner Brooks

Lee Warner Brooks has been at Bear River every year except for one since 2003. He has published sonnets in journals like *The Iowa Review*, *Light*, and *Passager*. In 2009, his book *Novlets: 67 Sonnets* was published by the Legal Studies Forum, and later that year an excerpt from the Journal he has kept since 1977 was published as part of a book called *Keeping Time: 150 Years of Journal Writing*, by Passager Books. At Bear River in 2009, Dorianne Laux challenged Lee to write poems that were not sonnets; hence, the three free-verse poems in this issue.

Matrimony

You asked me
How did we end up married back then?
There was no license no church no ceremony
But there we were
living the same life
owning the same car

And then there was a long twilight time
It was as if
we both married other people
We did
We both married other people

You gave me jazz
Eric Dolphy on flute
playing "You Don't Know What Love Is"
But we knew
We both knew
Didn't we?

And I'm asking you
How did we ever end up divorced?
Where's the decree?
Dammit – I married you first

Flash Fiction

I can't resist you, she said. So I must go back to my husband.
He doesn't exactly love me, but he needs me.

But — *I* need you, he said.

I know, she said, but you know how to cook.

This Was Us

Two beetles coupling
on the last flat surface
of a mostly eaten rose leaf
while the hummingbird kisses
into the orange flowers
behind the red barn —
inserting himself
and sucking in
one quick
hunger.

Elaine Burr

Elaine Burr received a Hopwood for a collection of short stories when she was a student at the University of Michigan, has had stories published in many magazines, and four novels published under her married name, Elaine Stienon. She was in Richard McCann's workshop at the 2009 Conference, and revised "Aunt Lucky" after she returned home. Elaine learned to consider the actual writing and the act of publication as two separate activities, and not to give up on a work until it has been submitted to various places at least thirty-five times, maybe more.

Aunt Lucky

Talk about weird childhoods. You try growing up in a dinky little Midwestern town when you're half-Chinese and half-British, and see how you like it. What with the hassles at school, the scuffles on the bus, and my being chased home from the bus stop half the time, my parents must've wondered if they could even raise Eurasian kids to adolescence in that place.

Most of the persecution took aim at me. My brother George was quiet, a good student, and my little sister Beth was sweet and pretty. Me, I was the fighter, the feisty one, scrappy, always in trouble.

How did three Sino-British hybrids end up in southern Michigan? Man, I really wondered. The way it happened, my father managed to make it out of China just ahead of whatever civil disturbance was going on at the time. It was a big deal, according to him—a harrowing journey, but I bet it took him twice as long to tell it as it probably did to happen. He did time at the University of Michigan, a graduate student in philosophy, and started on a different journey—marriage to an undergraduate from London.

But I wanted to tell you about Michigan. We had this small plot of land just outside Ann Arbor, a sprawling frame house in a little farming community. We raised vegetables—beans, tomatoes, lettuce, squash. George and I would've liked some chickens too, but we were all vegetarians and had no use for chicken meat.

George, being the oldest, was sent every week to buy eggs from the Luckners down the hill.

I remember my mother Margaret, slender, taller than my father, moving briskly around the kitchen as she prepared the mid-morning meal – whole grain rice and cooked vegetables flavored with soy sauce. She would scold in her clipped accent: “Jeffrey, now try to behave. Get your fingers out of the bean cake. And stop tormenting the cat. Go wash your hands, right this minute.”

She really worked up a sweat, chewing me out (not that I didn’t deserve it). She would threaten to send me down to Aunt Lucky: “She knows how to deal with you.” I tried to make noises about what a drag *that* was, but I was secretly hoping she’d do it.

Her real name was Emma Luckner. A retired school teacher, she lived with her brother the poultry farmer. She was not Chinese or British, but about as American as you can get. For one thing, she had Native American ancestry – Ojibwa, she told us once. She had one of those full faces, dark eyes that crinkled at the corners when she smiled, and short, grayish hair, not kinky, but full; it seemed to frame her face like a wreath. She was stocky, not too tall – about the same height as my father – although I remember the time when she seemed about as tall as anyone I’d ever seen. The main thing I recall was this look of expectancy, as if she was waiting for something. If it was marriage, she was still waiting.

My sister is whimpering, clutching the towel to her chest with both hands. I hold on to her shoulder as I ring the doorbell.

“Come on, Beth. Try to stop now. How can we tell her if you keep crying like that?” Thinking *please be home Aunt Lucky. Please let it be you coming to the door and not your brother.*

When she opens the door, I try to think how to tell her. Finally I say, “Beth won’t stop crying.”

By this time Lucky is stooping down, taking the towel gently from Beth. She turns back the corner of it, and there is the tabby kitten in a pool of blood, its head smashed in. I avert my eyes, not wanting to see again, feeling the sickness spreading in my stomach like the first time.

Lucky quickly closes the towel, looks at me. “When did it happen?”

“Right after school. Out in front of the house – this truck –”
Beth speaks, the first time since the accident. “Please make him well.”

“I can’t, honey.” Again looking at me. “Did she see it happen?”

“No. Just after. But I saw it. The truck never even slowed down.”

“Beth, listen.” Lucky’s voice is soft like faint music. “Your kitten is no longer here. He’s gone to another place, and he’s not hurting anymore. This body is all that is left, and we’ll take care of that right now. Come with me. I’ll just get the shovel.”

I marvel at the way she takes us through the burial process. I marvel in the first place that Beth is no longer crying – I thought nothing would make her stop.

“We’ll put him right here, under this big pine. Now, Jeffrey, you dig us a grave.”

When it is deep enough, Lucky stoops to put the kitten in, towel and all. We take turns filling the hole, Lucky with the shovel, Beth and I with our hands. I feel bad, disgusted at the weakness that makes my legs feel like giving way.

“How can someone see a little cat crossing the road and not even slow down?”

“Well, Jeffrey, maybe they didn’t see him. It was an accident – something that shouldn’t have happened. I’m sorry. Now...”

Lucky leaves the shovel, straightens up, invites us to take her hands. “I’m going to say something – it’s like a prayer. We’re going to put him into the hands of the One who takes care of all creatures – the Great Spirit. I’ll speak in a language you don’t know – it’s my first language.”

It is a language of woods and meadows; the tone is calming, cleansing, like a fresh breeze blowing over us. Then her voice dies away, becomes part of the rustling of trees, of wind in the tall grass. We sit together at the edge of the woods, and she shows us things – the light falling in bright pools among the tree-shadows, shining on a strand of spider’s web, moving in patterns on the pine tree trunks.

“When you see the light dancing on the tree trunks, you will remember your kitten and the good times you had with him – you will think of life and how good it is to be alive now, and how we should treasure every good moment while it is happening.”

A few days later Aunt Lucky is at our door.

"Now, Jeff...listen, Beth. I've spoken with your parents about this. This kitty stays indoors – she'll never go near the road." From under her coat she produces a kitten the color of wheat, of straw with sunlight on it, the face tinged with dark brown.

"It's a special breed of cat – it's Siamese. I have a former student – an old friend now – and her cat had a litter. See how little? She was the runt, the smallest one, and my friend just gave her to me."

So we had a cat from the Orient, thanks to Aunt Lucky. We named it after her. And that cat stayed with us all the years we were growing up – even moved to Seattle with us.

Just as the war started, our aunt and two cousins came over from England as refugees. My cousin Stanley had eyes as blue as our Lucky cat, and hair so blond it was white. He was six months older than me, sort of in between George and me, and he was still upset about leaving England and all his friends.

"In a convoy, Jeff. With a battleship at the front – a big one. And one at the back."

War makes people crazy; I begin to sense it then. My cousin, sharing my bed with me, wakes me up every night that first week.

"The Germans are coming. Hear the planes?"

Rushing to the window. "It's got a Nazi insignia. Look."

"Stanley, there're no German planes here. This is America."

"No – look! Can't you see it?"

"Those are just planes. Hitler can't get this far."

Sunday afternoon. The grown-ups are having tea in Aunt Lucky's front room – my mother, my aunt and my English girl-cousin, who is older than George and wants to stay with the big people. She is kind of stuffy anyway, so we don't mind. I am out in back with my sister, my cousin Stanley, and George. I am just noticing that both Stanley and I are taller than George.

Stanley looks around. "There's no bomb shelter."

"We don't need one," George says.

"What do you do when the planes come over?"

"There're no bombs, Stanley," George explains.

"But in case –"

George looks at me, raising his eyebrows. I say, "Maybe Stanley's right. You never know. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to have a bomb shelter or two."

George shrugs. Stanley gets Aunt Lucky's shovel. I get the pick-ax. He and I spend the next hour and a half digging holes in her back yard. George does not help.

"You guys are gonna get it."

I am curious to see what a bomb shelter looks like. We don't get that far. But I do get to see what my aunt and mother look like when they discover the holes. My aunt has a proper fit.

"Stanley, how could you *do* such a thing?"

While he is explaining about the shelter, my mother gets after George and me.

"You know better than that. Why did you let him dig up her garden?"

"Just a moment," Aunt Lucky says. "Let me speak with him."

My female relatives are fuming, tearing into George, of all people; his face is red behind his roundish glasses. I chew at a hangnail, watching as Lucky takes Stanley by the hand, leads him over to the end of the yard. She is leaning over, listening to him, then speaking earnestly, looking into his eyes. She talks a long time. Finally he smiles.

When they come back, Lucky says, "He's apologized, and now the children will fill in the holes."

They make George do it too. He is so pissed he can't even speak. I wonder what Lucky said to Stanley; he will not tell us. But he no longer talks about the Germans coming, and the sighting of Nazi planes stops for good.

They stayed with us for a little while and then my aunt found a place in town. We saw them on weekends and holidays. When we went to a movie theater in Ann Arbor and heard the audience sing "Deutschland Deutschland über Alles" during the newsreel, I thought Stanley was going to barf popcorn all over the row in front of us. My mother explained.

"There's a strong German community here. A colony of immigrants."

But the big trouble didn't start till America entered the war. A kid at school called me a Jap, and I knocked out one of his front

teeth. My mother cried; she thought I was already on the path to juvenile delinquency.

Aunt Lucky's voice: "Now, Jeffrey. Do you know what a Jap is?"

"Well, sure."

"It's an epithet. A nasty name. It really doesn't mean anything."

"Well, I didn't like the look on his face when he said it."

My mother was afraid; I could sense it. When they thought I wasn't listening, I heard Lucky tell her, "I think he'll be all right."

"Yes," she replied. "But will we?"

On the night they have the meeting, my father comes home early. We have our meal of rice and vegetables, and my favorite—deviled eggs with yeast extract. A little later, around eight o'clock, Aunt Lucky walks up the hill to our house.

"Margaret," she says as she comes in. "I just got wind of something. There's a bunch of the neighbors coming by. I want to be here when they do."

My mother glances at me. "What about the children?"

"They can go into the back bedroom. They don't need to hear this."

So George takes Beth and the cat and heads down the hallway. I refuse to move from the table.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Before they can argue with me, someone pounds on the front door. Then we hear the sounds outside, voices, feet crunching in the gravel. My father gets up, and I see suddenly that he is stooped, his head bent, like an old man. He goes to the door and turns the knob. My mother is just behind him, and Aunt Lucky moves so that she is standing to his left when he opens the door. I move too—I go to the front window so I can see what is happening.

Neighbors are standing in a half-circle, their flashlights shining in the semi-darkness. Some are strangers, but others my father has worked for, repaired houses, built sheds and shelves.

A man named Nathan Richards steps forward out of the group; all I know about him is he has this snotty daughter, Angela, and they live in this fancy house up the hill. He is of medium height, taller than my father, and the extra fat sort of

hangs on his jowls and around his neck. You can tell he hasn't missed too many meals in his life. He goes into this throat-clearing routine and looks around. The rest of them fall silent.

"'Evenin', Chang."

"Good evening," my father says.

Richards gives this nervous little cough, then says, "We've been having sort of a little meeting, yes, a meeting down in the church—just the local people, and we—"

"We know all about your meeting, Nate Richards," Aunt Lucky says from the doorway.

"Now, Emma, you stay out of this." He harrumphs again.

"Now, what we're trying to say—"

"Well, say what you have to say, then," Lucky says. "Get it out into the open."

Mr. Richards grips his flashlight with both hands. "Well, you see, we're all patriotic Americans around here, and we've just decided we don't want anyone living here who isn't one hundred percent united with us, now that war's been declared, and, well, you see—"

"Just what makes you think this family isn't patriotic?" Lucky demands.

"Oh, hang it all, Emma, you know as well as I do they're Asians. And we just don't want any Japanese around here."

By this time Lucky is out the door, standing on the steps beside my father. "All right. Listen, everyone. Especially you, Nate. Clean the cow dung out of your ears so you can hear."

There is hooting from the circle. Lucky is using her school-teacher voice, which really projects.

"In the first place, Chang is a Chinese name. He is Chinese, in spite of what you thought. There is a difference. But even if he *were* from Japan, he would have as much right to this piece of ground as you or anyone else."

She explains how my father is an American citizen now and pays taxes the same as they do. She even puts in how he was a refugee from the revolution in his old country, and had come to seek safety in America. She asks what kind of example they are setting for him and his children. By this time they're looking uncomfortable, glancing around, stepping backward so the circle doesn't seem as tight.

Then she really tears into them. Says stuff about how the land first belonged to the Chippewa anyway (“That’s ‘Indian’ to you, Nate Richards,”) and how maybe the Chippewa should just kick the whole lot of them off. How would they feel then?

Mr. Richards’ face is turning a deep pink; he is breathing fast, as if he has just lost a game of tennis. But Aunt Lucky is relentless. She goes into this song and dance about how each person is equal and of worth, even if he comes from a part of the earth most of them haven’t bothered to learn much about.

Oh, she is magnificent, my Aunt Lucky. There is fire in her voice, and passion. Not easily impressed, I stand with my mouth open, thinking I would not like to be in that circle of men with them looking less tall, less sure of themselves and more ashamed every minute. And then I see something. My father is no longer stooped; his head is high, and he is even smiling a little, admiration and amazement on his face as he looks at her. And that’s what I meant when I said I’d seen her stand as tall as anyone you care to mention.

“I suggest you go and leave these good people alone. But maybe you should apologize first.”

Richards turns then; I sense he is ready to get out of there. Probably more than ready. Another neighbor, Mr. Judson, steps up with his hat in hand.

“It looks like we’ve made a mistake. Mr. Chang, I’d be pleased to have you for a neighbor for as long as you care to stay. Sorry to trouble you, ma’am.” He nodded to my mother.

One by one they come to stand before my father and mumble their apologies, some shuffling their feet in the gravel. The circle disperses; they leave, disappearing into the darkness. Only Aunt Lucky is left. She turns as if nothing has happened.

“How about some tea, Margaret? I can’t take this much excitement every night.”

Years later. George and I are walking on the beach just at sunset. To our right stretches the Pacific Ocean, hazy, with a bluish sheen on the water. Just up the hill to the southeast are straggly stunted trees, then a stand of evergreens.

I am still taller than George by a head and he is as mild-mannered as ever, a professor of math at the city university. Ahead of us are our families. George’s wife is Chinese, from San

Francisco; mine is Anglo-American. The children, four girl cousins kicking sand at each other, all look similar – black-haired Eurasian kids. Beautiful girls. George wants to visit China someday and try to find more family, but I have no desire to go.

“I probably wouldn’t fit in there either.”

George and I speak freely of what happened. Since he was in the back room with Beth and the cat, he had to rely on me to tell him.

“I almost didn’t believe you,” he said once. “Until she got sick.”

You see, when Aunt Lucky’s brother died and she lost their farm, my parents took her into their home. She was old then, old suddenly, it seemed, and crippled with arthritis. They cared for her, and she was part of our family until she died.

“You know what she said once?” I say to George. “She said something about how good it is to be alive, and how we should treasure things while they’re happening.”

“She was quite a gal,” George says.

“You don’t know the half of it.”

They’re all gone now, my mother and father, and Aunt Lucky. My British cousins, now American, are scattered in various parts of the country, and my little sister Beth became a veterinarian. I’m the only one without a real profession. I work as a substitute teacher, just enough to support my family and keep on with the freelance writing. Summers I crew on a sailing vessel that takes tourists on midnight cruises. I don’t make tons of money, but somehow I think Aunt Lucky would have approved.

We leave the water’s edge and head up toward the trees and the parking lot, our bare feet making hollows in the sand. As we enter the stretch of woods, I feel the breeze at my back. I smell the pines and the sea-scent, a faint whiff of fish and gasoline from the harbor.

Both George and I pause for a last look at the water, the reflected sunset still sparkling on it in tiny points of light. He calls out to the family, “All right! Let’s go!”

The girls scurry to get into the car, the mothers fumble with the seat belts. The children are laughing. I am suddenly seized with affection for them, for daughters and nieces, wife, sister-in-law, even George – although it would embarrass him no end if I were to acknowledge it. Strange thoughts – as if the old ones are still

with us, my parents, Aunt Lucky, ancestors I never even knew, all hovering unseen in the hazy air of dusk. I turn, wishing the moment would go on and on, this brief walk through woods, and then I marvel that I have come across half a continent to see the light dancing on the tree trunks.

Jacqueline Carney

Jacqueline Carney has been an independent bookstore owner, reported for and edited newspapers, and written for *Women's Day* and other national magazines. She wrote mostly non-fiction before attending Elizabeth Kostova's workshop at the 2008 Bear River conference. Elizabeth's workshop revolved around writing as influenced by art. One of the assignments was to begin a story that had a particular painting at its core. Klimt's *The Kiss* was the painting Jacqueline selected and "Close Your Eyes" is the story she wrote. Since the workshop Jacqueline has completed a novel and sent it to several "beta" readers.

Close Your Eyes

Ellen stood just inside the tiny bookshop. It was exactly as she remembered—the tomes of literary fiction, poetry, philosophy and art consuming her like goldfish that in a feeding frenzy tore off bits of her then darted away. It was such delightful agony and she laughed out loud. A teenager—a boy with spiked hair and leather pants—flashed her a pained look as he passed.

"That's one odd old lady," was what Ellen could almost hear him say.

She didn't care. Already she'd exhumed herself from the place where recent nightmares held her sleep hostage.

A wood deck, worn but welcoming, surrounded The Bookworm's rear entrance and overlooked a steep, sharp-stoned gully and its creek. Ellen loved that creek—its sounds that changed with the seasons. In the fall, the thinned waters clinked over stones like change in a vendor's money belt. Ellen would sit and listen as she flipped the pages of the latest art book. She'd be reminded that a slower season was at hand—one that offered time to reflect on what life had offered.

A different creek flowed in the spring. It was deep and full from the rains—its rush disconcerting but swollen with the promise that life will again renew itself, that change is always possible.

Along the deck's rails, tables and chairs fashioned from pine branches still clustered, a bit grainier and more stained by the weather. They bustled, as they always had, with coffee-sipping bookaholics. Reminded of her mission, Ellen straightened and hastened to "Religion and Philosophy."

She never intended to browse, much less stop in the aisle of oversized art books, but one cover in particular – a plated print of “The Kiss” – thwarted her resolve and lured Ellen back.

It was during her high school art history class that Ellen first viewed Klimt’s masterpiece – a poster on a wall of this very shop. Her teacher, Miss Saunders, was a young woman so full of facts, dates, timelines and plate titles she could have taught advanced computer science except that, back then, there were no computers.

“You can learn something here,” Miss Saunders had railed to her students at the end of one class, “about the difference between the artist who merely hones a skill and one who masters true art. Klimt’s designs are pretty, yes. And so are his women. But they are also pathetic sex objects – especially his dear Emilie.”

From behind her black-rimmed glasses the teacher’s face had reddened and her voice had elevated as she said the muse’s name.

As Ellen took a seat with the Klimt biography in hand, she could still hear Saunders’ distinctive cackle.

Saunders went on. “Klimt and his Secessionist pals had little use for anything beyond chauvinist eroticism – totally ignored the fact that industry was the golden egg of progress – that it ensured the world a prosperous future and women their fair share.”

An angular woman with short-cropped hair – a grackle’s iridescent black – she had cut a sharp thin silhouette against her shelves of art books. She’d removed her glasses as if to highlight the gravity of her message.

“It is the artist’s task,” Saunders had droned on, “to reflect such remarkable times, not mire in sentimental opiates. Klimt’s rampant sexual symbolism was at best a waste of paint. His paisleys of rich colors were lovely, yes, but what universal truth did their application impart?”

Since fifth grade, Ellen had harbored hopes of making art her career. Sketching was how she filled her time because girly friendships intimidated her. Ellen went home that night and studied Klimt further and a much different painter emerged. One who, like herself, craved the soft, sinuous sexuality of the human form and the transcendence it offered the soul. She’d read of artists that paired off with their models – their muses – not just Klimt and Emilie Flöge but Rodin and Camille, Siddal and Rossetti; and Picasso with his endless cortège. Ellen wondered whether these muses saw themselves as enslaved sex objects or as complicit lovers. Were Emilie’s downcast eyes in “The Kiss” full of

submission or of dreams? Did it matter when she was such an inspiration to him?

When it came time to write her year-end thesis, it was Klimt that Ellen selected as her subject.

“And now, in the Sixties, his eroticism has re-emerged,” she noted in her conclusion, “nurtured by my generation’s free-love festivals, hallucinogenic euphorias and folk-come-electric music. We’ve even rediscovered the same magnificent hues, equally delicious florals and star-studded skies. Who can say if Klimt chose to ignore untouchable truths? Who cares? Give me the unbridled passion that swam beneath his brush any day. Give me Emilie’s dreams.”

Evidently appalled and with a mocking caw, Saunders said, “What liberated mind – what modern woman would ever acquiesce to that – would see value in being an object?”

How surprised Ellen was when the woman gave Ellen an ‘A.’ She knew Miss Saunders would never get it – Klimt’s passion. Would probably never get it either – sex, that is. Actually, Ellen wasn’t sure if she’d ever get it, given her nervousness with her peers.

That summer Ellen took a modeling job at the university and met James, one of the graduate students.

“I’ve never seen such curves,” he said to her the first day. He was smiling as his strokes wisped across his canvas. “And that hair. My god girl – don’t ever cut it.”

As perfect as Michelangelo’s David and six years Ellen’s senior, James brought something out of her she’d never felt before. He laid claim to her curves and her blond tresses and hailed her as his inspiration. Within weeks Ellen surrendered herself to the same selfless rapture that she saw entrancing Emilie.

By fall, Ellen was brave enough to try her hand at sketching in public. Mostly she drew James’ perfect body and face while he sketched other models. Many critics commented that her pieces were even superior to his – something about the emotions they imparted. As she sketched, Ellen often thought about Miss Saunders – wondered if she ever found love because now Ellen had. A year later, James and Ellen married and she ignored his jabs that she’d lost her brush’s gifted touch.

“You might try your hand at something else,” he said.

She wasn’t sure if the darkness in his eyes was jealousy or some other secret. When Ellen became pregnant James turned to younger models, tonier ones with more energy and wit.

“Don’t be angry, darling,” he said. “You’ll always be my muse.”

Ellen turned her feelings back inside her heart.

“It hurts to live like this,” she told Abby, their little girl, though she was too young to understand. “But I will always love him. If Klimt’s Emilie can brave a precipice, so can I.”

Abby just gurgled and Ellen tried to lose herself in her art but it was no use.

Soon it wasn’t enough that Ellen stay away from James’ attic studio where, she was certain, he often took his newer models to bed. She needed, he told her, to find a job. The family needed money because he hadn’t sold enough paintings. She hired in as a secretary with a large accounting firm and found a nanny for Abby and, with a great deal of pain, shut her eyes to what went on in the attic.

These were very long days for Ellen—meetings and filing and accounting—and at day’s end she was unable to offer precious embraces to Abby, didn’t even have the time, and James was often either on the West Coast hawking his art or deep into some new creative binge.

The morning of her fifth birthday Abby plucked a dandelion full of fluff from the back yard. It was early spring and Abby raced back to her mother on the driveway, her eyes full of delight.

“Close your eyes, Mommy. I have a surprise.”

Ellen was late for work but held the car door open and, stepping on the hem of her silk skirt, knelt to Abby’s height. It almost seemed as if in the moment Ellen closed her eyes and stretched out her palm for Abby, twenty years flew by. When Ellen re-opened her eyes, Abby was walking the aisle of St. Stephen’s Church on the arm of her new husband, Jake.

For Ellen and James, when it was just the two of them again, there seemed to be a bit of a turn-around in their relationship.

“They’ve started serving breakfast at The Bookworm,” he said one Sunday morning. “What do you say we go?”

Though it had once been a weekly routine, they hadn’t gone out for breakfast in years. Hope flickered in Ellen’s chest and she agreed. They ordered their coffee—black for him, skim milk latte for her—and James said, “What do you think is happening to this world of ours? 9/11, AIG, Shearson Lehman, Madoff—it’s crazy, don’t you think? All the greed. Where is the love, the social conscience we used to dream about?”

There was a time when this – real conversation – would not have surprised Ellen. But for years their mornings had disintegrated into mindless babble over this gallery, that show, the week’s audits and yesterday’s tax seminar – the disconnect between them so huge a mountain could grow there – and it had. Hearing him now, Ellen wondered what she’d missed. Had James changed back his stripes?

“Maybe you and I should chuck it all,” he said. “Move to a cabin in the woods. Remember when passion was more important to us than god?”

More than he’d ever know, Ellen thought.

“Are you suggesting we sell the gallery and our home?” she said to him over the rim of her mug.

“And our furniture,” he said. The lumbering tone in his voice excited her and the deep, rich brown of his eyes reminded her of the love they once had. From its perch in her chest, her heart fluttered to her throat.

James said, “Why are we putting ourselves through this hell anyway? We’re not getting any younger, Ellen. What do you say?”

“It is very tempting.”

She rationalized the divide that had separated them. Perhaps he’d been humbled by the stress of the downturn. Galleries were starving, auction sales had plummeted. Perhaps he knew Ellen missed the simple life of their courtship. Perhaps she was equally guilty – tossing love aside like an old felt hat. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her – not a twenty-something fraud!

“Then you put in for your retirement and I’ll work on the rest.”

She was certain that’s what he’d said. Maybe she took too long to gather up the loose ends at work. Maybe he was toying with her all along. Weeks later when she asked him how it was all working out, he gave her a puzzled look and laughed.

“How’s what working out?” he said.

“Selling your gallery.”

“Why would I do that?” he said.

Ellen went on with her plans to retire anyway, assuring herself that halving the stress in their lives would bridge the widening abyss. She’d have time to tone her body to its former firmness and tempt James with candlelit evenings, gourmet meals and sexy innuendos. She’d even try to soften the acrid distance between herself and Abby with intimate lunches and frivolous shopping trips.

Two weeks after Ellen stopped working, James and Abby found a night to quietly celebrate, though Ellen's retirement hadn't yet taken her back to the dreams she sought.

"We need to talk, Ellen," James said when Abby left the table to take a phone call from Jake.

"About?" Ellen said as she sliced into the grey flesh of her swordfish.

"About us," he said, his voice nearly a whisper.

She looked up for clues in his eyes but he'd turned them away. "What about us?"

"I'm getting my own place."

She swallowed the mass in her throat and waited for his explanation.

"I'm leaving you. You're still as sexy as hell and I'm sure you'll find someone else. It's just that we seem to have lost what we once had. You'll be fine, darling. Your portfolio is twice the size of mine."

When she thought back now, his words still tasted bitter. "But why?"

"I can't explain why. It's just that I want something more and I don't see it here. I'm probably just blind."

She watched his eyes, how they flitted like fireflies on crack. Then they stopped.

"Actually, I can explain. I have fallen in love with someone else."

"Who?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I think I'll learn eventually." She tried to take a bite of her fish but her hands trembled.

"Well then, it's Sara Gladwell. The girl I've been painting."

It was in her kitchen a week later that Ellen dug up the nerve to tell Abby. Miracle of miracles, she did not find fault with her mother. Despite Ellen's maternal shortcomings, her sixty-hour weeks and endless carryout dinners, Abby had simply said, "I'm sorry." For the first time ever, Ellen cried in front of her daughter, and it was then that Abby recommended the book that had brought Ellen to The Bookworm.

"The author's more an advocate for improving personal relationships than practicing a particular religion," Abby said at Ellen's kitchen counter, waving a brownie in her hand. "He says

relationships don't have to hamper your happiness if you channel them in the right direction."

Abby, who'd matured into a beautiful woman, bit into the confection. "These are delicious."

They were waiting for the coffee to finish brewing before they set in earnest to find Ellen a smaller place to live.

Almost embarrassed, Ellen laughed. "Really. I've never made brownies before."

"Tell me about it, Take-out Queen," Abby quipped with a smile. It was the kind of smile Ellen used to get when Abby was a toddler – innocent and sincere.

"You can take the rest back with you. I mean – I'm alone now. Right? Who else..."

Ellen's words almost staggered. Abby turned away and busied herself in her purse but her punctured movements gave her away and they peeled from Ellen a latent maternity.

She stroked her daughter's forearm. "I'm going to be fine, Abby."

Ellen then took a box of Saran Wrap from the drawer and tore off a piece. It immediately crumpled and she tried two more times and the vile material kept sticking to itself and finally Abby patted her mother's hand, took the box, pulled a fresh swath and laid it over the brownies before making the tear.

Now Ellen was here at The Bookworm on this bright May afternoon, stalled on her way to find that book. Some white-robed guru (Ellen couldn't remember his name) offering metaphysical answers to relationships that had lost their luster. The title gave Ellen a headache but she sought it out because she hoped doing so would solidify her reconnection with Abby. They'd had their differences – maybe more than most mothers had with daughters.

Ellen replaced the Klimt biography on its table and the spike-haired teenager walked by again. What she was wearing seemed stupid – her red wool suit that hugged her softening curves and the deep V of her jacket that exposed a white lace triangle from her camisole. A far cry from the denim skirts and Monet t-shirts she used to wear. An elderly woman, thin and hunched with osteoporosis, leafed through the very book that had stopped Ellen earlier. The woman's white hair was cut short at her nape, which she fondled with long milky-blue fingers.

"Are you finding everything?" a young clerk asked her.

"Dearie," she replied, "I found everything so long ago I'm starting over."

What snatched Ellen's attention and held it was this ancient woman's laugh. A distinctive caw.

"Miss Saunders?"

Craning her wrinkled neck like a tortoise, the older woman said, "Yes?"

"It's me, Ellen Peters. You taught my senior year art history class." Ellen stopped. "1967. I was a bit of a handful."

"I remember you, Ellen. Yes." She paused to gather strength, which Ellen could see was in short supply. "Actually you were one of my favorites." She ran her thin fingers across the book's cover. "What a coincidence that we meet with this piece once again between us." She lifted the book and smiled. "You were so young and full of passion and I envied you for it. I wished I had had half your verve. How has it been for you – your life?"

Ellen struggled to recollect those feminist covenants of her youth, the spirituality she'd pursued and the tempestuous desires she'd craved. She wondered why they all couldn't share the same garden of selfless harmony. The euphoric oneness of her early marriage tugged her heart as a toddler would a coat-sleeve, she entrusting everything to James, he radiating promise like a sun rising over the horizon. The night had darkened and stars had filled the sky and, for the first time in her life, Ellen feared the edge of that precipice.

She was about to say that lately her life had disappointed her – that her dreams, like old photos, had faded to blank pages – when the teenager opened the door to the deck. Ellen heard the creek's roar and remembered the words her teacher had just spoken.

"Miss Saunders, let's just say you're not the only one starting over. Care to join me on the deck? They'll be closing soon."

"Thank you, yes," Miss Saunders said. "But please call me Samantha."

Ellen found a spot on a bench next to the deck railing large enough for her and Miss Saunders. She thought about how her life had, after all, taken the path Miss Saunders promoted. Ellen had given up too easily. Now, the spring rush of the ravine's melted snow sounded like a hurricane and Ellen worried she'd been mistaken about its promise – that nothing could change the past and its abandoned roads. She stuffed her hands into her coat pocket to warm them from the evening's first chill.

“Do you think it’s too late?” Miss Saunders said as if reading Ellen’s mind. “For me, that is.”

Ellen had rolled her head back and closed her eyes. She saw a similar ravine behind her house – indeed the same creek – where she and James had often walked as lovers. She’d take off her clothes and lay on the grass and he’d sketch her for hours, caressing her first with his eyes and then, when he could no longer resist, his hands and his heated body swallowed hers on the damp, mossy carpet. She could taste him now, sweet and green and complex like the fragrance along a woodland path. She relished what the half-frozen ground could never cool.

“I certainly hope not,” Ellen said, her eyes still closed.

Then she opened her eyes and lost it – the exhilaration – and in its place was a shadow so close to her she lurched back. The spongy fibers of the worm-holed wood rail gave way and Ellen lost her balance and fell towards the roar of the waters below. She was floating and a quieting relief gathered and filled her. She could hear the rush of the icy spring waters in the creek and a number of memories danced in her head and she understood Emilie’s trust.

“Close your eyes,” Ellen thought as she slowed her breath. “Dream once more.”

Richard H. Coupe, Ph.D.

Richard is a supervisory hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and is currently located in Jackson, Mississippi. He has been with the Survey for over 30 years and has worked on water-quality issues in Virginia and Illinois before moving to Mississippi in 1993. He has an undergraduate degree in Mathematics from George Mason University, a Master's and a doctorate from Mississippi State University. Richard's area of research for the past 20 years has been the study of the movement of agricultural chemicals into ground and surface water and the effects of agriculture on water quality.

Elvis and a Wedding in Mississippi

I groaned as my wife asked, "Will you go to a wedding with me?" Now usually weddings are my favorite rite to attend. They bring out the best in people, and the air is magical with promise and beauty; the emotional lift from attending one can continue for many days. People still tell us that our wedding, some 25 years ago in Virginia, was the most enjoyable wedding that they have ever attended. But since moving to Mississippi, I have attended some weddings that have left me emotionally drained and despairing for the future of the bride and groom. Mississippi has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the country, and most of these weddings were young people, pregnant and much too young to get married and obviously headed for disaster. "Who is getting married?" I asked.

"The son of one of my coworkers; the bride is 35 weeks pregnant. It is this Friday night at a small country church and they are serving pizza at the reception," she said.

"Who gets married on a Friday night, serves pizza at the reception, and who gets married 35 weeks pregnant?" I asked, thinking there goes Friday night.

The church was one of those nondescript metal buildings on a lonely country road that you find so often in Mississippi. It was fairly small, and the congregation was dressed rather casually. Many looked as if they had come straight from work, as had I. The mothers of the groom and bride both wore pant suits. Just before the wedding began there was a slide show of the bride and groom depicting their lives transitioning from newborn to adult and then their lives together, finishing with stills from a sonogram of a very

developed little girl in utero. I thought to myself, well I suppose you can't hide being 35 weeks pregnant, and why not celebrate the issue. It gave me hope.

The mother of the bride entered on the arm of a skinny teenage boy with long blond hair covering half of his face and wearing a florescent blue shirt untucked in the back, with no jacket or tie. He escorted the mother (his mother?) of the bride to her seat, left with obvious relief, and beat a hasty retreat to the other end of the front row. The pastor, dressed in a black cassock, and the groom in a tuxedo (chewing gum like he was creating electricity) walked in from the front without a groomsman. Huh, I thought, they are doing this their way; good. Preceding the bride was a beautiful young woman wearing a knee length peach colored spaghetti-strap dress, which would not be out of place at any high school homecoming dance. She was chewing gum and dropping flower petals as she sashayed in, obviously unused to heels. Following her was the bride in a sleeveless white gown which reminded me of the outfits worn by Cleopatra in the movies, very pregnant, and escorted by another teenage boy in a tuxedo.

Uncharitably, I thought to myself that no wonder this pastor was in some forsaken country church as he spoke rather haltingly and with a voice pitched a little too high for a public speaker. After the usual pleasantries and prayers, the pastor spoke to the congregation and told us that he knew that the bride and groom had wanted to get married in Las Vegas and that he had a surprise for them. He then exited the dais saying that he would return in a moment. That was pretty weird I thought, as I had never before seen a pastor/priest/minister leave *during* the ceremony. And the reference to Las Vegas was odd for a religious ceremony.

It was a long few moments with us all looking at each other in the silence wondering what was going on. We were on the right of the sanctuary, and he had exited on the left through a door that we could not see from where we were sitting. After a few minutes there was a collective gasp from the congregation on the left and Elvis's "You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog" started to play on the sound system. The mother of the bride reflexively put her hand to her mouth, and yes, believe it or not, there was the pastor, walking up to the bride and groom in a one-piece jumpsuit bedecked as Elvis, complete with dark wig and sunglasses. I thought, "what in the hell" as he shook his leg to the boisterous

laughter and cheers of the congregation. I was stunned. Never would I have ever believed such a thing.

The pastor, still dressed as Elvis, continued with the service, explaining that he would have to lift his sunglasses occasionally to read from the book as the light wasn't that good up front. He delivered his homily and pronounced the vows, telling the bride to give the King a kiss, and he would be the last man she was to kiss other than her husband. As I watched the spectacle I found myself listening to the pastor/Elvis and it occurred to me that the dignity and earnestness of the pastor was carrying the day. Who would have thought that one of the most important rites of passage in a person's life could be carried off by a middle-aged man wearing an Elvis costume? This had not turned into a spectacle but rather was a teaching moment for all of us, as this man connected with these young people (and the congregation), making himself vulnerable to derision as he did so. It was something that everyone in that church that night would never forget.

At this point, the newly minted couple walked over to the Unity candle to the right of the dais. Plucking the candles (that had been lit by their parents) from their holders, they jointly lit the Unity candle. Then the groom picked up a wireless microphone and, as Rascal Flatts' "Bless the Broken Road" began playing on the sound system, he took out his gum, placing it on the pedestal holding the Unity candle; he began to sing along with Rascal Flatts. He could hardly be heard. His voice cracked with emotion and what could be heard indicated that he was not trained, but the atmosphere was electrified and magical and no one dared breathe. Here was this swaggering, gum-popping, grinning young man trying to express his devotion to his bride in front of his friends and in a very public and personal way. It almost seemed wrong that we were there to watch.

"Every long lost dream led me to where you are
Others who broke my heart they were like Northern stars
Pointing me on my way into your loving arms
This much I know is true
That God blessed the broken road
That led me straight to you"

As he sang the chorus with Rascal Flatts, the bride with her left arm propped on her very pregnant belly reached out unsteadily with her right hand as if she were reaching for air. Their hands met and clasped together, fingers intertwined, as the tears ran down her face and he finished the song. It was the most touching thing I have ever seen. The young woman in front of me wiped her eyes and I had to do the same (several times); it was as real as it gets.

As we left the church that night (skipping out on the pizza), it occurred to me that Mississippi had surprised me again. An evening that I had dreaded had turned into pure magic, in a way not possible elsewhere, and allowed me the pleasure of being part of the sweetest thing that I had ever witnessed.

Kaye Curren

Kaye Curren has been the University of Michigan coordinator for Bear River Writers' Conference since 2006. She has a degree in English and has taken every writing course she could get her hands on from California to New York—in an effort to avoid actually writing. Kaye used to write computer manuals and has had some success being published in children's and adult nonfiction.

Zilka and Me

Zilka means resilient. And that you are. We are.
We are a pair, we are.
Melting of East and West.
Calcutta and California.
Michigan and Mumbai.
My gimpy Western left knee, your painful Eastern right leg.
We appear to be limping to our destinations, but they don't see
the rock inside.
I from near, you from far.
Still not fitting in.
Assimilate they say. "We have," we say. "Can't you see it?"
"No," they say, "you are different."

That Blank Page

Oh that blank page
How can I get around it?
Wash my hair, walk the dog
Scream and have a fit?

Oh that blank page
How can I avoid it?
Sew a dress, make a mess
Rearrange my closet?

Oh that everlasting blank page
How can I escape it?
See a movie, call a friend
Let my cat abscond with it?

Jim Daniels

Jim Daniels' next books, *Having a Little Talk with Capital P Poetry*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, and *From Milltown to Malltown*, a collaborative book with photographer Charlee Brodsky and writer Jane McCafferty, Marick Press, will both be published in 2010. He has received the Brittingham Prize, the Tillie Olsen Prize, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and two from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. His poems have appeared in the *Pushcart Prize* and *Best American Poetry* anthologies. Daniels is the Baker Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University. He led workshops at Bear River in 2008.

Packing My Own

Three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches layered daily
like sticky sheets in the bed of my black-hooded lunch box.
I washed them down daily with a gallon of red koolaid

in the communion rite of the UAW and Ford
where no haloes were tolerated. Wonder bread
of three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches finger-

printed with grease and grit and the salt of my sweat.
The sameness, a comfort — like our gray coveralls,
like the face of Jesus. I gulped koolaid till it stained my mouth

with a lurid moustache, a crazy lover's lipstick,
the kiss of the bargain, evidence of daily betrayal.
Trinity triplets: peanut butter (plain) and jelly (grape).

The paycheck, my weekly napkin, the cleansing
certificate of baptism — for the money was good
washed down with a gallon of red koolaid

and, later, beer at the Mustang bar. Even that, named for a car.
Summer factory heat spoiled meat, liquified cheese. Bummer.
Thus: Three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Ice rattled
like snakes in the gallon of red koolaid, then melted into blood.

Pyramids, Mexico

(for Ben and Hilary)

A teacher and two students.
Gray dusk, soft rain. We climbed
the Pyramid of the Sun, our toes
tentative on wet narrow steps.
Ben's voice, calm as stone,
gave us history. Two years later,
his nameplate lingered on an office door,
an artifact of a gentle life.

The other student, Hilary, his daughter,
practiced Spanish with me on the bus
as we sweated silhouettes into our seats.
I stumbled over English
when our shoulders touched.

A stranded dog circled on top, wagged
greeting, pushed his paws into my chest
till I led him down. You climb all that way,
expecting something. We create our own
views, I know now. And sacrifices
for the altar. I know now, I know now.
It could be my animal cry.

*

On top of the Pyramid of the Moon,
the rain stopped. Behind haze
we saw the sun diffused. Down
the long road between pyramids
the dog ran. I stood forever
in the silence of that small, flat space
with Hilary, Ben. We watched the dog
turn into a black spot and the spot disappear.

I wanted to hug them both, to press
our wet skin together. A little embarrassing,
love just welling up on that great height

where nothing could stop it. Maybe it hovers
there still. Maybe I was dreaming,
am dreaming still.

*

Our deaths pile up inside a pyramid.
The first one lands with a thud
on the dry, packed earth.
I know now, I know now.

A black spot disappearing, gone.
If he were alive, he would still be
disappearing, like Hilary, alive
and disappearing from memory.

I was nineteen – the wild roar
of love washed over me like the pure wind
of that great height.

*

What must we have looked like
from up there, walking back to the bus,
contrast hazy in that gray light
on those gray stones?

Dear Love, Dear Grief –
Dear Sun, Dear Moon –
Dear Ben, Dear Hilary –
wasn't there an altar for human sacrifice?
Didn't I put my neck down on the slab?

I kept a diary in Spanish for the class.
I can't even read it now, black dogs,
black dogs running across the pages.

Delivery Room

The long sigh of the bald man initiates
the awkward silence in the church basement
full of addicts in various stages of undress
and recovery. In various stages of address
and telephone number and next of kin
and don't call me I'll call you. Kin
redefined, refined, abstracted, expanded,
dripped from a big urn and called coffee.
Delivery, a dream that's born here
and dies here. Hand-stamp us gently.
Deliver us from the metal chairs, metallic stares.
Silent, bloodless drilling. The bald man
constructs his name, letter by letter.

Jerry Dennis

Jerry Dennis has lived in northern Michigan most of his life and has earned his living as a freelance writer since 1986. His essays and short fiction have appeared in dozens of publications, from *Smithsonian* to *River Teeth* to *The New York Times*, and are frequently anthologized and reprinted. His ten books, most recently *The Living Great Lakes*, have been translated into a half-dozen languages and have received many honors. Two new books are forthcoming: *Winter in the Bones: A Season in Attendance*; and a collection of essays titled *The World at Hand*, in which "An April Shower" will appear.

An April Shower

We had the season's first thunderstorm the other day, and it couldn't have come at a better time. I was in my canoe, on the river, drifting with the current, when a belly-rumble sounded over the hills to the west. It was a pristine day in late April—a little too pristine if you asked me—and I was in the mood for some uproar. A good, rollicking storm was just the ticket for launching us into summer.

I'm old enough now to be grateful for spring, and young enough still to be a little giddy with it. Though I can still get dewy-eyed about autumn—those crisp nights, the frosty mornings, the brassy afternoons tinted with the knowledge that winter is coming and can't be stopped—it's increasingly impressed upon me that only the young can afford to romanticize decline. Once you get some gray in your hair, spring starts looking better every year.

I like it for all the usual reasons. Because of the rebirth and renewal without which we'd be screwed. Because it's optimistic. Because it fills me with some of the leap-in-the-air enthusiasms of my youth and makes me want to grab my pretty wife and a backpack and a fly rod and set off for the mountains. A sort of caffeine energy surges through my veins, until I can't sit inside another moment. The first warmish day in March I always climb the south-facing hill behind our house and try to catch sight of spring. It's been marching north for weeks by then, making sixteen miles a day, according to the authorities, and taking its damned

sweet time about it. It smells sweet, too. And clean. And temporary.

Rivers also are temporary. I keep forgetting. This first trip of the season I was two bends below Brown Bridge before I realized that it was not the same river I had known in October. The Boardman is quick and spirited, a classic northern-Michigan trout stream: spring-fed, clear as air, its bright riffles sun-drenched and its pools shaded green by the leaning cedars we call “sweepers.” I’ve known this river intimately for forty years, yet it is always both familiar and unfamiliar, which is why, of course, I keep coming back. The poet Ted Kooser, that proud homebody, insists that if we can discover the new in the familiar, there’s no reason to leave home. The trick, of course, is finding the new.

On a shallow gravel bend where I have often stood to watch for trout, a hemlock had fallen in the winter, its roots torn from the bank and its black trunk deep in the flow of the river. The current, diverted, had gone to work dredging a new channel through the gravel, creating a dark running pool where the water was previously ankle deep. At the next bend downstream I found a new logjam of smaller windfalls that will serve as sustenance and shelter for generations of micro- and macro- river dwellers. And on one of the last undeveloped sections of the river below Garfield, someone had finally broken ground for a house. That spot is within sight of an artesian well that spouts a fountain of sweet cold water as if from an opened hydrant, where I have refreshed myself every time I’ve been on the river for five decades. It’s a nice piece of property. I’d always secretly planned to someday own it myself.

After the sensory deprivations of winter, spring bursts upon us with an overwhelming bounty of color, scent, and music. On my way down the river I saw wonders: Mayflies riding the surface with their wings upright and canted like tiny sloops. Small trout breaking the surface with tentative bulges and rings erased almost instantly by the current. On the banks were tender green fiddleheads and white trilliums and vibernums sprouting their mauve mouse-ears. With the breeze came mixed odors of fertility and decay and the cut-grass scent of approaching rain. Again, beyond the hills but closer now, came rumbling. Then it rolled across the sky with the sound the upstairs neighbors make when they’re moving their furniture around.

I paddled into slack water and took shelter under a cedar. A few raindrops fell. Then a few more. A rushing came through the woods, and raindrops as heavy as nickels plummeted around me and struck the river with percussive notes and raised a thousand spouts an inch above the surface. Soon the cedars were saturated and began to drip on me. The air grew fragrant. It smelled like a greenhouse.

As abruptly as the storm arrived, it passed. I pushed into the current, dug deep with my paddle, and pulled the river toward me. The canoe jumped as if it had been spurred. The sun came out and lit the riffles with spangles and glitters of light and warmed my wet clothes until they steamed. I wanted to stand in the canoe and shout. All around, birds sang insanely. Along the banks, swollen buds burst into leaf. The trees, the river, the birds, even by god the middle-aged guy yodeling in his canoe—the whole world was growing younger by the moment.

Susan L. Denny

Susan L. Denny received her undergraduate degree from Kent State University, did graduate study at Ohio State University, and coursework at Lourdes College and The Toledo Museum of Art, where she read one of her poems after it was awarded honorable mention in the National Poetry Contest of the NW Ohio Branch of the National League of American Pen Women. Artful presentations of her poems have been carried by Toledo, Ohio galleries. In 2008 she completed a collection of poems, *Yesterday. 8 AM*. Susan worked with Keith Taylor at the 2009 Conference and benefited from the experience of faculty and staff.

Graduation Day

June 2009. Years have passed.
I recall the day's stillness, its sunshine.
The vacant seats. The National Guard.
I recall former classmates, students no longer,
In line once more, the grasses bright with spring.
In silence.

The distressed campus had been cleared of people
Since May the 4th.
Cleared by decree. Cleared by fear.
To homes. To satellites.

The Class of 1970 called back for graduation.
Some came. I was there. My friend was there.
We do not remember one another
On that distraught Saturday morning.

The media watched.
No Campus Day this.
No ROTC buildings.
No Blanket Hill.
The Commons now the place memory
Of tragedy already made.

Spoken words followed. Distilled images.
None adequate to heal the broken. The changed.

An Audience of One

He could peel an orange
Leaving its skin in a single piece.
He started with his teeth
At the stem, then nudged his thumb
Underneath the membrane.
Round around all the way.
I watched this quiet work
And waited for the treasure
To be mine. Once received,
I held the vacant and fragile
Whole like a fallen baby bird.

Marti Dodge

Marti Dodge's first serious writing experience came in the eighties when, as an English teacher, she attended The New Jersey Writing Project; her essay "Lugging Heavy Buckets," written at the conference, was published in a Texas English journal, TJCTE, which also published her poem about writing. She has had three nonfiction pieces published in *Dressage* and *CT*, and has been intermittently working on an autobiographical young adult book—the first 20 pages placed second in the Woodlands Writer's Guild Contest. Her workshop leader at Bear River was Eileen Pollack, who answered Marti's key question, "Where should a story start?"

House Cat Rules

"Get outa my chair, Minnesota Fats!" Ted shouted again at my gray and white tabby cat.

Every Sunday for six months since my wedding, I'd cooked a good traditional farmer-wife breakfast, and every Sunday morning, Minnesota had plopped onto his pre-nuptial place at my table. There he sat, his nose quivering inches away from a plate of bacon, well-done but not burned, and scrambled eggs, firm but not dry. As ever, Minnesota remained calm, cool, and visibly pondering a grab and dash. I admired him as a survivor. Even after being torn up by a fan belt, left at the vet's, then sent to the shelter with his surgery scars, he could stay focused on an immediate goal. And right now, it was Ted's breakfast, especially the bacon.

Ted liked to subtly point out how much I had spoiled my cat. Like most farmers, he thought that cats belonged in the barn, whereas his suburban wife wanted at least one house cat sitting in that sunny spot by her purple African violets. As far as I was concerned, there was to be no compromise. This was a non-negotiable point.

Still, he shouted at Minnesota, and even though it was in good humor, it unnerved me; lately, not much escaped my nerves. Six months of marriage had worn on my good humor. After all, at 24 I was more accustomed by the six-month anniversary to visualize and rehearse the break-up scene where I would salvage enough

remnants of dignity to allow me to lose and love again. But here I was married, and I came to realize Minnesota and I shared something. We both liked to remain cool and at the same time get our own way. Minnesota never budged; in fact, he habitually closed his eyes whenever Ted hollered, as if this intruder might just disappear. The cat maintained command and position until Ted tilted the chair to a perpendicular angle, forcing Minnesota to plop to the floor then trot off to wait to be let out through the sliding glass door. Ted accommodated.

“I hope he doesn’t jump my barn cats. He rolled Willy right over yesterday just by his weight alone.” Then Ted went back to digging into his breakfast, not waiting for me to sit down first.

I can still remember the number – 17. I had 17 grievances secretly lodged against my husband who used to be my lover and friend. For starters: Instead of having my handsome husband join me on Friday to enjoy a drink with friends, I had to go right home; he was too tired; instead of relaxing and riding my horse on Saturdays, I was cleaning while he taught lessons. And if I tried to take a nap between work and dinner, he’d show up. He was showing up when I didn’t need him and gone when I did.

And over and over, he’d throw my easy suburban childhood against his: “I had to carry water to 40 ponies when I was seven...” And the list went on: staring at a slab of meatloaf (his grandmother’s recipe) getting cold while he tried to close a horse deal on the phone; his be-right-backs-just-checking-the-horses only to wait hours because one was sick. My cowboy prince and city-girl princess union was having a rough ride.

Lucky for him, I had already accepted that the burden of an ideal marriage belonged to me. All the woman’s magazines said so. That’s why I had kept those red Valentine panties after reading “Keeping your Underwear Drawer Lively.” Ted was really pretty good when his underwear came out pink after I tried “Saving Those Marital Pennies” with one wash load. I knew I needed to keep trying and remembered how Dad had taken us to the Fisher Theatre. We got to sit in the fourth row to see *Camelot*. During *Carousel*, the heroine sang out to the audience to the unseen hero. When the spotlight came up, he was standing next to my elbow. With these fond girlhood memories, I bought tickets in advance to get good seats to *Chorus Line*, coming to Detroit in August. Ted didn’t resist; I took that for agreement.

By August, the farm sizzled into the 90s, cooking crops, beasts, and man. I hated this heat, which was so unlike that of my parents' lakeside home, where I could sunbathe, swinging my toes into the cool water whenever necessary. I looked forward to this romantic evening of theater, daydreaming about an exquisite dinner before the play at a downtown Detroit restaurant. Then on to those deep scarlet seats of the Fisher Theatre, where I'd sit beside my handsome husband, who would be out of his farmer bib overalls and into best his jacket and tie.

Dressed and made up, I waited and waited. Where was Ted? I remembered I needed to feed my cat early. When Minnesota didn't come sauntering at the sound of his dish's first rattle, I looked for him in one of his spots. I found him on top of the sofa, transfixed on some outdoor entertainment. I looked to see if it were his favorite pair of cardinals flitting in the shrubs. Instead, I discovered why Ted wasn't in the house showering and shaving. Like a huge Tonka toy, the tractor linked to the bailer linked to the hay wagon rolled off over the horizon.

I had forgotten the hay. All week, Ted had listened to the weather forecast. "Making hay while the sun shines" wasn't a cliché for him. All week, every time the weatherman mentioned more heat, Ted had grinned, slapped his hat on and headed out with no word as to when he'd be back. Now, my romantic evening was dissolving.

I calculated that we could still make the play if we left within an hour. Giving up on dinner, I set out to salvage those theater tickets or else. Locating massive machinery and men was not as easy as I thought. Each swell of the acreage hid them, though I could hear the rumbling and the thumping of the hay baler. My dress pumps sank into the mowed rows, causing me to wobble more than walk. The stalks and burrs destroyed my stockings; my big toe punched through with the nylon, strangling its circulation. The sun liquefied my face; I knew I'd have raccoon eyes before I found him. My mood grew darker against the blazing setting sun in front of me.

I spotted him. He rode high on his tractor, smiling back at his "help," who were sitting high on rows upon rows of square bales rocking behind the baler. As the baler pushed out yet another rectangular wad of grass for one man to grab with his hay hook, he looked like a country pirate as he swung this magic square to

another man to hoist to the top. I hadn't seen Ted this happy in so long, and I had nothing to do with it. As soon as he saw me, I hid my disappointment as usual.

He didn't even stop the tractor. I walked by its side. Ted proudly pointed to the counter. "Two thousand bales," he shouted over the crashing machinery with a huge self-satisfied smile.

"We're late." I said, hoping my dress might be self-explanatory.

"Late? For what?"

"The play." I tried not to whine.

"OK. Be there in a half hour."

We made the play, even though we couldn't be seated until the second act. We had more than enough time to appreciate the Fisher building's towering ornate, gold cathedral ceiling like two abandoned tourists. Ted didn't snore, though he might as well have for all his enthusiasm. I didn't say anything, but I was disappointed in the show. Maybe being raised on Rodgers and Hammerstein had spoiled me. I drove home. He went straight to bed and to sleep. I was married and alone. Minnesota and I shared a sandwich. I had to admit his big cat eyes did look beady staring over the table's edge from Ted's chair. I set a piece of chicken for him on the floor. He plopped and gobbled. I guess he was a little short on manners.

Nevertheless, the injustices still totaled 17. Of course, I didn't tell Ted that. He was supposed to guess. The next evening, I began my cooking ordeal with my burden jostling around inside me. While I politely restrained myself verbally, I couldn't keep from slapping down silverware, banging pots, and slamming cupboards.

The enemy approached and came behind me at my sink. He put a hand on each of my shoulders. He snuggled my ear. I froze. Then he whispered, "Wanna fight?"

The invitation I longed for. I blurted out my first ten grievances then the next five. Minnesota hit the floor running to the slider. Except for letting the cat out, Ted didn't move, didn't argue, just stood there as if I were a strange creature brought home from an auction sale, and now he wondered if he could do something with it. But I knew I had him dead. I had rehearsed over every soapy dish, over every wet floor and every dusty carpet. I had been wronged and neglected. Like a climactic scene on stage, all the

lights shone on me, and I was ready. Each cherished grievance rolled forth, all 17.

"And look at these breakfasts, talk about spoiled. Look who's spoiled now?" I stopped. I was tired. I had planned well. But I hadn't planned for,

"I'm sorry. I don't remember," he said like a schoolboy not knowing an answer.

"What do you mean, you don't remember. You have to remember."

"I mean, if you're upset, you need to tell me sooner. And if you don't want to cook me breakfast, just sleep in."

And that was that. How could I get even with someone who didn't play my grudge game? I couldn't think of a thing, not one snappy comeback came to mind. I looked at him in a blue and plaid shirt I had picked out for him. It brought out his rosy coloring and blue eyes. He stood so still, fixed to his spot, strong like he'd stand waiting for a young frantic horse to settle and decide to get along.

I was deciding when he spoke the magic words.

"Where would you like to go for dinner?"

The next morning, I slept in. Ted did chores.

I cooked breakfast.

Minnesota watched from the floor.

Eric Ederer

Eric Ederer edits translations of short stories and poetry from Bulgaria, and is on the board of directors of *Absinthe: New European Literature*. Eric led Great Books discussions of Western classical writing and respected modern writing for six years. At Bear River 2008, he participated in Anne-Marie Ooman's workshop on Creative Non-Fiction, learning to use all the human senses to create living writing. His creative non-fiction piece, *Coffee and Cauliflower Soup*, was cooked-up in her class. At Bear River 2009, he participated in Keith Taylor's Short-Short Story workshop and learned how to cut his writing down to the bone marrow.

Coffee and Cauliflower Soup

As I enter under the "Restaurant Mediteran" sign, the smells of butter and cream greet me. The tables are blanketed by maroon and green cloths. On the left wall, brown penciled sketches of chefs and caricatured customers line the top. On the right wall, brown penciled sketches of a hand holding different cafe objects line the top. Large, green artificial plants are in every nook and cranny. On my left side is a dining bar. At the far right corner of the bar, there are more plastic green plants. Below them is a huge, brown, woven basket filled with shellacked white, wheat, and rye rolls. Ornate white and chocolate frosted cakes and light-golden fruit pies fill a glass display refrigerator. Staccato accordion music plays in the background.

A skinny, brown-haired, middle-aged man, dressed as a European café waiter, greets me in a thick Balkan accent: "Welcome, Eric, sit where you like." He is Mirko. Mirko, his wife, and two sons fled the blood and barbed wire of the Bosnian civil war. First they went to Germany, and then they came to Lansing, Michigan. When he arrived, he knew so little English that the only place he could find a job was on an assembly line. When his English and finances improved, he and his family opened Restaurant Mediteran. He is always there, and his wife cooks. His two sons, now in college, wait lunchtime tables. They are now living a very small American dream.

When they lived in Bosnia, they were living the Bosnian dream. Mirko graduated from a top-notch culinary and hospitality institute. He ran a highly-rated restaurant and hotel. Mirko had a radio show where he talked about the culinary arts. Then, there came ethnic cleansing; the Srebrenica concentration camp was nearby. If you ask him, Mirko will show you a postcard of his old hotel. When asked about the open guts and bodies of the war, he responds in a gentle voice, "You have to accept that life can be unfair."

I sit down and order a Bosnian coffee and cauliflower soup. Bosnian coffee is a special, very fine grind. The coffee is stirred directly into a cup of hot water. Some of the grounds almost mix into the water, some sink into the bottom, and a few grounds (easy to drink) float to the top. The strong, rich, coffee smells are matched by the strong caffeine content. The stuff has a real kick. It is a far cry from carbon coffee crystals.

The cauliflower soup is filled with white cream. Pieces of cauliflower gently float throughout the soup. Some chives are sprinkled on top. Mediteran's creamy soups are famous. Restaurant Mediteran is often bursting at the seams with customers eager for its Central European food. Mirko maintains a strict recipe code of silence.

When the order arrives, creamy cauliflower and rich coffee smells fill me and surround me. Sipping the soup and coffee, I taste Bosnia's richness.

Jeremy Efroymsen

Jeremy Efroymsen is a University of Michigan graduate and received an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia College Chicago. He is a reformed lawyer and is trying to teach others so that they do not repeat his mistakes. He is also a photographer and sculptor. Jeremy attended Bear River in 2009 and took part in Richard McCann's workshop, where he learned to have confidence in his own voice, and to approach his writing from different points of view and perspectives. Jeremy was impressed by Richard's ability in his writing to interest people from different backgrounds in what he was saying.

Excerpts from "Shall We Accept this Pizza?"

Dad

My dad did this information-withholding thing with all sorts of trips. If we were flying somewhere, flight information would be withheld, as would hotel information, rental car information, and schedule information. He was in control, and he wanted us to know that.

There was also the matter of the little notebook which always rested in the glove compartment of each car that we owned. This had been going on since before I was born, I think. There was a small spiral notebook in each car and every time you filled up your car with gas you had to write down the number of gallons you purchased, the amount you paid and the mileage of the car. There was another column to the right where you would plug in the average miles per gallon for the car which you calculated using the miles you had driven divided by the number of gallons of gas you had purchased. Dad would always check your notebook to make sure you were keeping up with your record keeping. You were also supposed to list on a separate page all of the oil changes for the car.

I asked about the reason for this and, surprisingly, got an answer. If you kept track of the miles per gallon on your car you could head off serious trouble if for some reason your car suffered a precipitous drop in miles per gallon. So, for instance, if you went from 21.2 miles per gallon to 10.8 miles per gallon, you would know that something was definitely wrong and you could immediately take the car in to the dealer. This doesn't quite

explain why we needed to keep track of the price of the gas or why you could have these hidden problems that would go completely unnoticed except for miles per gallon, but . . . Despite our intense record-keeping in this area, I do not remember a single time when the small gas mileage notebook saved one of our cars, nor did I ever hear Dad tell a story about when this had saved him from disaster in the past. It actually took me until I was in my late twenties before I could break myself of this habit. Even then, I felt really bad about it. It was like I was cheating or something when I fled a gas station without writing in my notebook.

My father, never the sentimentalist, did have one small chink in his armor. It was something kind of small, but for him maybe not so. He carried in his wallet, I believe until the day he died, a photo of his childhood dog, Brownie. Brownie was an average-looking, beaglish kind of dog. Brownie is for me similar to Rosebud in the movie *Citizen Kane*. Was this the secret to my dad's lost emotion? Did it all rest with that one little beaten-up photo of Brownie which he would reluctantly pull out the two or three times we asked about it directly?

Whenever we would get a bill at a restaurant, my father was quick to check the math. This was not a one-way street. If the bill was in his favor, even for twenty-three cents, he would be the first to alert the waitress. He just couldn't leave a restaurant with the discord of a bill being added up incorrectly. I'm not so sure he thought he was doing anyone a favor, it was just that the bill had to be added up correctly, or he couldn't rest. Often, the waitress would actually be annoyed at my dad for pointing out these minor discrepancies because it meant she had to go back and refigure the bill. This never fazed my dad.

When I was younger, my dad would fly Cessnas and take me with him. He would go through the pre-flight checklist, checking the fuel in the wing to make sure there was no water in it. We would walk around the plane, doing a visual inspection. Once again, though, my dad didn't seem to understand the highlights of these trips for a child. What I really loved about these trips was stopping in strange new airports for hot chocolate and candy. I kept asking my dad to land and he really didn't understand me. He actually started to do touch and gos. This meant we barely had our wheels on the ground before he put in the power and we were back up in the air. Obviously, there was no hot chocolate or candy.

Grandpa

My grandpa used to take me fishing all the time. I remember digging up worms with him in the backyard of my grandparents' house in Silver Spring, Maryland. He would shovel the dirt and I would pull the worms out of the soil he had overturned. My grandpa was a pretty serious smoker of unfiltered Pall Mall Reds, and I remember him often standing in the entrance of his basement shop smoking a cigarette. He was also a serious sports fan, something that I inherited from him. We would sit in the basement watching the Washington Redskins on TV. The Redskins still hold a place in my heart.

When we moved to Indiana, my grandfather took a liking to Indiana basketball. He did not like Notre Dame, and thus I did not like Notre Dame. This dislike of Notre Dame carried through into my thirties. I finally realized that I had been hating Notre Dame all of my life because they played zone defense in basketball. I have only recently been able to begin talking myself out of this dislike for the Fightin' Irish.

We would go fishing, the two us, in Maryland and in Indiana. In Maryland we usually had a much greater chance of actually catching something. In Indiana, no matter where you went, it was more of a Zen exercise in patience and silent meditation, though obviously my grandpa was too old-school to think of it that way. For Grandpa, fishing had an honor code to it. You released fish quickly that you weren't going to eat and you always shared bait if you had some left over.

I remember one time when another fisherman offered us some minnows he had left over.

"Sure," Grandpa said.

"I'll give 'em to you for three dollars," the guy said.

"No thanks," said Grandpa.

"I'd rather throw them in the water than give them away for free," the guy said.

After the guy left, my grandpa said that that was no way for a fisherman to act. You always gave away your leftover bait. For my grandpa, fishing was an experience that came with an honor code. If he had luck catching fish somewhere, he wasn't possessive—he would share the information with other fisherman. I'm sure he would have liked to catch fish, but that just wasn't going to

happen in Indiana. He wouldn't have that opportunity until he moved to Florida later in his life. After my grandpa moved to Florida, I never saw him or spoke to him again. He died when I was in high school. He had gone out fishing and not come home for dinner. I guess he had been fishing and they just found him slumped over with the pole still in his hands. He had had a massive heart attack and probably never knew what hit him. I'm guessing if he could have chosen a way to die, fishing would probably have been his choice.

George

We used to play war a lot. This involved playing with our toy guns and a helmet, if we were fortunate enough to have one. We would hide behind trees and ambush each other.

It was about this time that I saw *Tora, Tora, Tora*. I forget what that means in Japanese, but I was mesmerized by the movie. It was about the Japanese attack in World War II on the Midway Islands. I must have gone with George, who was way more fascinated with the military than even me. There were real Japanese actors speaking Japanese (with English subtitles), lots of planes, aircraft carriers and lots of dogfights. Unfortunately, the USS Yorktown was lost in this battle, suffering from many bombs, torpedoes, and even a kamikaze attack.

After viewing this movie, I got my mom to buy me a model of an aircraft carrier. I'm sure she thought I wanted to build an aircraft carrier, but what I really wanted was all the little plastic planes which fit on the deck of the carrier. This was because I felt I was ready to take on George's older brother in a battle. George could never beat his brother in a battle. Battles consisted of lining up your planes in a couple of rows against his planes and yelling things like:

"Machine gun fire, took out those two."

"You missed, counterattack with missiles. I got those three."

"Whoosh, I dropped three bombs on you."

"Rat-a-tat. Your plane is down."

So we lined up our planes, and I have to say that I was optimistic. I realized it was my first battle, but Pete, George's older brother, looked beatable. After lining up our planes, we began, or rather Pete began. It was a bloodbath. Because of his expertise in

battle and also the fact that he was three years older than me, he just seemed to be able to talk way faster than I could. He took out seven or eight of my planes right off the bat with a frontal machine gun attack, then when I counterattacked he moved his planes up into the air and bombed me before I could get going. As I became more frustrated, he bore down with all his resources and finished me off. This all took about twenty-three seconds. I was crushed. I asked for a rematch but he told me it would be pointless (he was right) and that I should go practice for a few weeks or a few years and come back later. I never actually re-challenged him. It felt kind of hopeless.

My mom used to make us snacks, George and me. One of my favorites was cucumbers or carrots with special seasoning salt. My mom also used to roll up salami, summer sausage, and cheese and serve it to us like appetizers. It wasn't until much later that my mom told me that George would actually come to visit her and watch TV and eat snacks at our house while I wasn't there. Compared to my house, George's house was rather cold and unwelcoming. His parents were stern disciplinarians. It just didn't seem like much fun over there, despite our airplane battles. I remember that George went to bed every night at seven. During the summer, it wasn't even dark at seven. The reason George was over at our house watching TV was that TV wasn't allowed at his house. Also, I never remember getting a snack at George's house.

One thing that will let you know just how tough George's house was that one day, George had gotten a sliver of glass in the end of his finger. He told his mom about it and was told to wait until his dad got home. Despite George's mother not being the warmest person in the world, his dad was even harsher. It wasn't a fun time when George's dad got home. George was called upstairs, and I proceeded to hear a blood-curdling scream, followed by uncontrollable sobbing. Pete, George's brother came down with a smirk on his face.

"My dad couldn't get it out," he said, "so he just cut off the tip of George's finger."

George came down later, a bloody bandage covering the end of his finger. I was told it was time for me to go home.

Law School

I remember my granddad telling me that law school was a great foundation for anything you wanted to do in life. He may be right, but I'm not sure it was worth three years of my life. I oftentimes think I was a little too overcome with respect for Granddad. He deserved respect, but I was and am such a different person, I should have gone my own way. I am a third-generation lawyer – Granddad did his undergrad and law degrees at Harvard. My dad did his undergraduate at Harvard and his law degree at George Washington. My Aunt Mary Ann and Uncle Rob were lawyers, as was my cousin Robert.

Strangely, while coming from an educated family, I never knew there were any other kinds of graduate schools. Or at least I didn't know you could have a career other than a professor if you got a graduate degree in something else.

I think that I thought a JD was just a rite of passage I had to go through. Law school in general is not fun. There isn't the camaraderie and friendship of undergrad. It's definitely a school for people who want to get a job in a big firm and make lots of money.

The purpose of law school is to break down all the concepts you have of right and wrong. You then learn the arguments to win in a legal sense. That replaces your morals and ethics. You are filled up with a new set of rules that allow you to argue on either side of a case with equal ease. You can hardly remember the sense of right and wrong you started out with.

An example: In my criminal law class, the professor asked how many of us would rescue a small child drowning in a pool. Only a third of us raised our hands. This may seem puzzling, but we had been taught in torts class that if you negligently rescued a child you could be sued. So at least in the context of law school, we were not sure whether you should rescue a drowning child.

It took me years after law school to regain my moral compass. I would always think of the opposing argument for every cause I'd once believed in.

I quickly figured out that in my family going to get another degree was always the right answer. No one questioned me as long as I was still in school. So I ended up with a BA, a JD, an MFA, and an MBA. Who knows? I may not be finished.

Reno

So I decided to go to the pet store at the mall. That's where I first saw Reno. He was a puppy. He was really cute. He couldn't even stand up on the vinyl floor; his legs kept giving out on him. I really just fell for the whole pet store thing. They know that once you get to playing with a puppy, there is a good chance you're going to take him home no matter how unwise the decision and how unprepared you really are. This was before I knew anything about Amish puppy mills or dog overbreeding, though I did know at some level that it was not a great idea to buy a dog from a pet store.

So I shelled out my five hundred dollars and I took Reno home. Those people were so much nicer than the Animal Control people. I have since learned a little about the Irish Setter breed. They were obviously developed in Ireland as a bird dog. The problem with most modern purebred dogs is that they are bred for looks as opposed to temperament. With Irish Setters, they were bred to have longer snouts, which were considered more beautiful. Unfortunately, in the process, they accidentally shrank the brain case and thus the brain. So Irish Setters are the not the smartest dogs.

Reno did come with an impressive certificate from his breeder. He hailed from Missouri and a fine line of Irish Setters. I often thought of travelling to his home in Missouri to ask those people just what they were thinking when they created a dog like Reno. If I wasn't the most patient person in the world, Reno wouldn't have made it more than a few months. He just really had no brains. It wasn't his fault. He just wasn't born with any. The best decision I ever made for Reno was to have him neutered. This assured that the line ended with him.

Don't get me wrong, Reno was my favorite dog ever. He was my "life dog." He was my best friend a lot of times. This is sometimes hard to reconcile when you come home and your brand-new couch has been emptied of all its stuffing or several pairs of your shoes suddenly are torn to shreds, but he was a good friend.

Among the things Reno ate were a 64-ounce bucket of Country Crock, two pounds of sugar cookies, and an entire Entenmann's apple pie. The last was extremely impressive, since the apple pie

was in a cardboard container on top of a microwave on top of the counter. I would never have thought a dog could even be interested in apple pie. Reno managed to pull down the container, rip it open and devour the entire pie. When I came home, all I found was a completely licked clean, shiny pie tin and a few scraps of paper, meaning he must have eaten most of the paper and plastic container.

I bought a crate when I got Reno, but that proved to be a waste of time. The first night Reno was in the crate, he barked all night. I got no sleep. He then barked all day long when he was in the crate while I was at class (so my neighbor informed me). I tried to put him and the crate in the basement, but I could still hear him barking. I tried putting him in the crate in the bedroom, but he still barked. I tried shaking pop cans filled with coins, which was supposed to annoy him so much he'd stop barking. None of it worked. Finally, Reno got what he wanted, which was to sleep in bed with me. My legs were cramped every night for the next thirteen years, as Reno's favorite place to sleep was directly on top of my feet. Despite the dog book that says Irish Setters range from 40-55 pounds, Reno weighed in at a solid 75 pounds. Reno still thought that he was a lap dog.

Kelly Fordon

Kelly Fordon credits Bear River with saving her writing life. A manuscript of hers had landed in the hands of an agent and Kelly never saw it again. At Bear River, Kelly met other writers who had not only survived this experience but had gone on to publish. A piece Kelly wrote that was critiqued at the Conference was accepted by *Flashquake*. Kelly's other stories have appeared in various journals including *The Windsor Review* and *Red Wheelbarrow*. She is working on a second novel.

Go-Go Boots

In 1952, my grandmother was bitten by a fly. She was standing in the back yard talking to the neighbor across the fence when it happened. The neighbor noticed that she was bleeding. My grandmother went inside to clean off her forehead. After that, everything changed. She got into bed and stayed there. Up until then, my mother said, she had been perfectly normal. She wrote poetry and long impassioned letters to various politicians. She was concerned about communism.

The doctors could not find anything wrong; perhaps it was a virus, a touch of encephalitis, African sleeping sickness. When it was clear she wasn't going to recover, they moved her to the couch in the living room. They set her up there in the middle of the room like a planet. She was very good at listening, according to my mom. Neighbors would come in, sit down, talk. When I was older and hammered into the ground by my own children, I envied my grandmother prone on the couch, a book of poetry opened on her chest, planning meals but not making them, pointing out dust bunnies but never having to crawl underneath the settee to pry them out.

Things went along like that for thirty years.

By the time I met her she'd moved up in the world. By that I mean that she was sitting up instead of reclining. She was sitting up in a red velvet armchair, a rosary coiled around her gnarled fingers. We visited her every week in her apartment for about ten minutes. My mother was busy and she penciled these visits in. They took place on Saturdays. My grandmother wore cardigan twin sets and knee-length skirts. Her white ruffled shirts were buttoned to the neck, a gold brooch pinned to her collar. She had

no teeth; her beaked nose was punctuated by a sizeable iridescent drip which she never seemed to notice or wipe away. Her iron-gray wig perched on her head like a downturned bird's nest.

She lived with her son — my mother's brother — the compulsive gambler. He was a failed professional golfer who'd embezzled money from a golf course where'd he'd been head pro out in Pennsylvania. My parents and aunt and uncle had bailed him out. That hadn't stopped him from stealing from my grandmother until my mother cut her credit cards up. They slept in the same room in twin beds. As far as I could tell he didn't speak. He was tall and brown-haired, had supposedly once been quite dashing.

In the bathroom there was mold seeping up through the grout. Several of the ceiling tiles had crashed down into the tub and lay there broken on the floor of it. It wasn't clear how or if either of them ever bathed. I don't remember a smell except the one emanating from the refrigerator. My grandmother — because of the tooth issue — only ate canned peaches. She put whatever she couldn't suck down in the refrigerator, where it promptly sprouted white fuzz. Every week my mother had me clean them out.

In those days my mother wore go-go boots and mini-skirts. Years later, when she became religious, I caught her coloring in old photos of her exposed legs with black permanent marker. But in those days she liked to preen. Coming and going from my grandmother's apartment, she'd hum "These Boots Were Made for Walking" by Nancy Sinatra. She made it seem like she was just a woman who had happened on a horrific car accident, one who had peeked in to see if she could be of assistance before continuing merrily on her way. Later, when she was old, when her own house grew choked with mold, when she sucked on her lips and her nose developed the persistent ever-present drip, when she cautioned me not to touch her for the germs and spent hours, then mornings, then whole days praying, it became clear that those boots had not been able to take her far enough, that at some point when I wasn't looking she'd pitched them instead of handing them down to me. Perhaps she realized I needed a better form of transportation, something that would take me farther, faster, something that would propel me far enough that I'd never have a chance to turn back.

Joy Gaines-Friedler

Joy Gaines-Friedler made her living as a professional photographer in the Detroit area for twenty years. Currently Joy works for Springfed Arts—Metro Detroit Writers as a teacher for the Oakwood Creative Writing Workshops, and at the Farmington Hills Public Library. Her writing is widely published and has earned numerous awards. She is the author of *Like Vapor*, a book of poetry published by Mayapple Press in 2008. In addition, Joy works in the Academic Literacy Program at Oakland Community College, tutors privately, and runs creative writing seminars throughout the Detroit area.

A Pheasant is Crossing I-75 North of Grayling

where the highway is a line penciled between trees.
I am changing lanes to avoid it.
It is the last day in the month of expansion;

purple iris, peony fleshy and plump as Mae West.
Today marks one year like pollen stain,
that my father began his lousy check marks

on a schedule of medications he cursed,
then swallowed. Behind me now that bird,
has become a sparrow.

My father told me how he almost drowned
three different times - someone always saved him.

I put Bruce Springsteen into the CD player
O thunder road, O thunder road,
and imagine myself dancing on the porch

in a summer dress, barefoot. I would have left
with Bruce if he would have asked me.
Last year, on this day, I asked my father

if I could call Hospice. Get him some relief.
I'm thinking of that god-forsaken bird.
I hate it for not knowing it could have died.

Assisted Living

A woman downstairs is speaking Spanish on a cell phone.
She hasn't taken a breath in forty minutes. Her task is to guard

the rice pale women that sit beside her in wheelchairs asleep
in the shade. They are like the shredded skin of exotic insects,

exquisite. They are feathers and cotton. They are kites.
They once had New Year's Eve to think about. They had lovers.

They had many shoes. Today my mother showed me pictures of
herself.

It was 1944. She was black and white gorgeous, her eyes dark
pillows

among the uniformed men all devilish and legible, the tenements
and
walk-ups plump with community. There were no shopping malls,

no endless rows of freeway lights. There was no *sorry* in her eyes.
One frameless night while my father was dying

I heard a hum of voices through the wall. It was very late.
I loved the sound of them talking – the rise of question,

the pause, the rise of answer.
They spoke in the language of walls.
As they faded from black and white to color
my father died. Now my mother curses the near deaf,

the spoor of sparrows, the blossoms that slip from the dogwood,
the memory of kisses, the thing that lifts the wind.

Christopher Giroux

Christopher Giroux is a lifelong resident of Michigan and an instructor of English at Saginaw Valley State University. He considers himself fortunate to have taken workshops at Bear River with Laura Kasischke, Thomas Lynch, and Jerry Dennis. The poems "Garden" and "Uprooted" were done in Jerry Dennis's workshop in 2008.

Garden

Collecting dandelions that glow white, globe-like,
the spiked crowns of chives,
violets with purple tongues wagging,
my daughter flits about the yard, my peripheral vision.

She finds joy in the straight lines of borders, dreams
of being big enough to drive
the spade's dull edge downward.
For now, I alone commit this silent act of violence;

still she tries: her feet between mine,
we balance, tilt, topple to our tasks –
I divide and conquer (sod, soil, weeds, grubs);
she executes the search-and-rescue of worms.

She exults in night crawlers' raised ridges,
these black bands that cross her palm,
ends that point back to themselves.
I imagine their weight, like rain, on her hand.

To them she whispers secrets
(something else that dies in my clay soil),
shares them with our neighbor,
urges them back below ground.

Uprooted

Chatting over chain link,
I laugh at my neighbor's praise,
knowing our yard thrives on laziness, limitations,
recognition of five things I *can* grow;

we talk over rusting diamonds
and mottled lamium that
lives low to the ground,
mixes with mothballs.

Ardelle shuffles closer, in white socks,
her bottom dental plate missing;
her wedding ring floats
between knuckle and finger joint

as she stoops to dig out, pull up, hand over
the bleeding heart I've coveted for years.
She chuckles at my ignorance —
no seeds are involved,

just a severing of stalks, roots —
and as the plant moves between homes,
blooms swing in pink unison;
petals, like wings, pulse under green arcs.

Her husband watches behind patio doors,
veiled by glass, reflections, shadows.
I imagine the steady hiss, the cadenced hiccup
of his oxygen tank,

inquire whether he's agreed to the surgery.
She blinks, once, twice, again,
smiles at the five-year-old clinging to my leg,
the garish orange tulips

that will yield to Indian paintbrush,
fingers the blackened seedheads,
a series of swords, of our coneflowers
that have trespassed among her silver-tinged salvia,

that tower over her white-tipped bishop's weed.
She nods her goodbye in silence,
moves away through patches of sunlight,
leaves us to our weeding, to our work.

Leigh C. Grant

Leigh C. Grant teaches writing at Macomb Community College. She has received Wayne State University's John Clare Prize for Poetry, endowed by the Academy of American Poets, and an honorable mention from the Springfed Arts—Metro Detroit Writers for prose. Her poetry and fiction have been published in *The Bear River Review*, *Controlled Burn*, *The Paradidomi Review*, and *Cardinal Sins*. She credits a great deal of her inspiration to Laura Kasischke and her fiction workshops at Bear River in 2002, 2005, 2007, and 2009.

A Cradle for Small Things

My brother called today, and a cardinal's song made its way through the tangled phone lines and digital signals. He told me someone had stolen his guitar, that it had happened overnight, snatched from the passenger side of his truck. When we were teenagers he showed me how he could play, one hand moving up and down its neck. He said you had to whisper to it, lean in close, let it know you wanted to play *for real*. He would whisper, his breath cool and moist and smelling like our grandmother's cough drops, like eucalyptus. He'd said that every song there was to sing came from the same place and could be played with the same three chords, that you only had to tell her three things: A7, B7, E7. Mostly he told me that sleep is overrated. I'm not sure whether he was talking about a girl or a guitar, but I was sure I was proud of him, the way he closed his eyes and moved his fingers and played "Hotel California."

Chris swore he'd died that day, the day someone stole his guitar. Restless in bed he awoke in a cool sweat, a ghost looking much like our grandfather whispering things like "hope" and "song" by the closet doors. The cat had been spooked, he said, digging claws into his boxer shorts, and then in one great leap, stirring hair and particles of dust in its wake. Polly, the cat, had always known, had always believed: Chris had the gift of song.

At ten years old we decided we'd become writers. One afternoon I'd been sure I saw something worth writing about, a white dove darting in and out of trees, branch to branch, glowing

almost, so white as to seem unnatural, a white stain against a blue sky, bright white light flickering on pine boughs, almost an illusion, a ghost. I'm sure my mother, the artist, could have captured the movement; I am sure I could find its outline in black ink, separating his existence from the blank paper, his flight flowing from my pen, felt-tipped, permanent, each arch a commitment to the page. But the bigger question was why – why was he there, flying with all the others? Why not safe in a pavilion at a wedding, a bronze cage, a magician's hat?

When I told Chris about his flight he hardly believed me – but he should have. All manner of mystical birds had found their way to the pond by our house – white cranes, blue herons, tiny baby ducks, whole families of goldfinches. That's why it was no surprise to find a strange man making his way to our doorstep one day. We watched him walk up the stone path, one arm full of something, boxes maybe, the kind roses came in, long and white with crisp edges – in the other hand: a cage. Chris grabbed a clothespin to pin back the edges of the kitchen curtains, ugly things, moth-eaten, things our mother refused to replace since “they still worked,” still shut out the Southern sun, still shielded her tomatoes when they sat on the sill to ripen, freshly picked from our father's garden.

We stared out the window; this man walked slowly, deliberately, locking his car and going back to run his fingers along the windows. The man was nearing us, stepping carefully around our father's marigolds. I loved the smell of them – strong, potent – like the earth.

We did not know yet whether or not we should fear him. He couldn't see us, I was sure – but I still ducked down below those curtains, pulling lightly on Chris's sleeve. I held my breath, willing the sound of our father's car into existence. My brother was huddled into a tight ball, hugging knees to chest, yellow t-shirt too cheery for a moment like this. I reached for his hand and closed my fingers tight. The man came up to the kitchen window and placed his hands on the glass, blinking furiously, peering in.

Years later the only thing I remember clearly is the light – a clean, white brightness travelling through our mother's kitchen curtains. I remember the way it lit up Chris's hair, hair as golden and bright as the light once it touched upon him. We didn't scream until he reached the window, his breath steaming the

glass, his large hands framing his face. I squeezed my brother's hand in mine, causing him to cry out. The man craned his neck downward – he'd heard. With a step backward he turned and ran away, past the marigolds, past his car, arms free of whatever he'd been holding. We stood: on the ground below the window was a rusted, empty cage and a box spilling forth the brilliant blue and green feathers of a peacock.

Our mother never really gave a good explanation for the events of that day. In my mind a million possibilities flashed before me: a childhood friend's smuggled canary, a vase of faux peacock feathers in my piano teacher's house, an eagle soaring on a poster in a psychiatrist's office, my cat's mouth full of down from a baby bird's flesh. These flying things took up residence in my mind – clear, perfectly formed memories – but that man's face was all but mist and shadow.

I wish he'd been invited in – a story to go along with his lost things, a houseguest like in Carver's "Cathedral" – someone mysterious, wise. Instead, my father's car had finally pulled in, his shiny shoes stepping out, smashing a few marigolds, walking up to the window, standing a moment, and then walking those things to the roadside trash.

That night, after dark, Chris and I stole away and rescued that cage from the trash bin, taking it with us up into the woods, down the ravine, and into a tangled mass of midsummer briars, a place safe enough for the time being. Days later, in the woods, a blanket of sparrows fled our footsteps as we searched, in vain, for the birdcage. Their bodies darkened what remained of the evening's light, their cries a frenzied mass of sound. As an adult I like to think that something took up rest there, lying still in a bed of undergrowth, creeping vines of wild grape binding to the top of the cage, sheltering some small and breathing thing.

It wasn't until we were adults that we learned of our mother's secret – that she hadn't always been an artist, that she once held a job we knew nothing about. She'd been a nurse in Vietnam, something dangerous for women, something my father wished to forget. As a child I'd found the evidence resting in our garage: a plastic crate full of things I did not understand, things that conjured up all sorts of stories in my mind. It was up high and beyond her easels, pallets, heavy boxes, and quarts of acrylic

paint. The crate was bright yellow, something we should've noticed sooner, or could have, perhaps, if it'd ever seen daylight. In it was a bag full of bandages, pills, and iodine, smelling pungent, metallic. The bandages were yellowed, old, stale themselves, suggesting years of disuse, the iodine thick and dried and useless. I imagined our mother hovering over a cot, a man coiled up from pain and anger, our mother's soothing voice in deeper registers, arms carrying trays of sweet, dark, hot tea and those bandages. The man, moaning, with skin covered in welts.

It was my mother who'd taught me to cradle the small things.

*

I said goodbye to my brother and hung up the phone. Stepping onto the porch, I thought about an unseen sparrow that might be nestled in those woods, about the men my mother had helped through the ravages of war, about my father's fears of her secret life, of those men. How one might return years later to thank her and leave a trail of mystery in the form of rusted metal and soft jewel-toned feathers for two children to find, two children who had not yet spread their own wings, learned their own songs. And I said thank you for those flying things, the kind of hope that alights every now and again, dancing in the wind, calling us home.

Penny Hackett-Evans

Penny Hackett-Evans wrote the poem "Computer Love" in a workshop with Dorianne Laux at the 2009 Bear River Writer's Conference. In this workshop, the group worked often with a list of random words that needed to be included in the poem. Though resistant at first, all came to enjoy this challenge. Penny has written poetry for her own amusement for many years and has had two poems published in small online journals.

Computer Love

In the center of our house
stands neither a hearth nor a stove,
but a mighty Dell computer.
The one thing I would wrestle
out of the house in case of fire.
It is my electronic heart,
the ground of my being,
the deep well of words that sustain.
It hosts the messages that fly
in daily like migratory birds.
It is the alluring lover I turn to
first thing in the morning –
give my last kiss before bed
every night.
It is the boat taking me to far shores,
my widest window. It's blue ember
always glowing, turned on
so easily by the flick of my finger.
Orgasmic in its full response to my
lightest touch. It ejaculates words
into my lap – all spelled correctly.
No awkward moments, no
hesitation to do any weird thing I ask.
It remembers my every word, my birthday,
loves all my poems equally.
It is devoted,
 available,
 responsive.
in its lush gray case
just waiting for me.

Don Hewlett

Don Hewlett is a retired design engineer. He began writing in 1997, took classes at Schoolcraft College, and had private tutoring. From 1999-2005 he monitored "Your Poetry Group" at the Plymouth library. His poems appear in the *Wayne Literary Review*, *Poetry in Performance* and *Poetry Tribe Anthology*. In 2002 he attended the Heartlande Playwright Retreat; in 2004 had a play performed at Oakland University and a staged reading at "Village Players Theater." Don's visual art is in *The MacGuffin*, *Bear River Writers Respond to War*, and *Writers Reading at Sweetwaters*, and on the cover of this issue. He has attended and enjoyed six Bear River conferences.

North of Dublin, Michigan, 2001

With Christine, Returning from Bear River

Except for us
with fingers entwining
on the beach, then at the table,
Sand Lake is alone.
Only for that single crow,
on the far side,
birds and fish are silent.
You say you could write
all day in this place.

And my mobile home still stands,
anchored to the cement pad
surviving heavy winter snows.
Even the mice haven't entered.
Though new chains are needed
to fix my name sign downed in front.

Then smells of ozone from the dam's
humming electric transformers and
musty loam from the damp woods
follow us down the fisherman's walk.
One hundred seventy-seven steps down
to Tippy Dam's roaring white water
cascading over the rock weir
where anchored fisherman cast.

But you, Christine, are absorbed
in the trickle of water gently
oozing out of the rock strata.
Sliding down to the river
on stone it has worn smooth.
We take pictures.

Back seventy-seven steps up
an almost newborn opossum
no bigger than a hand,
tries to climb high stairs.
It stretches
we don't interfere.

The old Oak Grove Tavern
has cold beer
and still on the ceiling is paper
money with dated names.
A tack piercing the president
weighted with a silver dollar,
is thrown at the ceiling.
Only the silver returns.
And we take a chance
on the Flea Roast Ox Market raffle.

Esther L. Hurwitz

Esther L. Hurwitz has appeared on public radio, and she was once voted “Ms. Under Appreciated” at a regional poetry slam. Her poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Huron River Review*, *Ann Arbor (W)rites*, *Poetry in Performance*, and *The Recession Nation Project*. *Soft as a Beagle's Ears* is her first collection of poems. Esther co-hosts the popular downtown Ann Arbor “Writers Reading at Sweetwaters” poetry series. Esther has attended two Bear River conferences. “Olive Branch Gold” and “Donna Rocks (for Donna White)” were inspired by workshop leader Jim Daniels’ prompts in 2008.

Olive Branch Gold

Most of us aren't on the short list
for the Nobel Peace Prize.
But we who harvest
the fruits of our labor
with our own hands
must cure the olives
and ferment the grapes
before the end of the day.
Only then do we
put up our feet
and look each other in the eye.

Donna Rocks (for Donna White)

It's easy to build a dream
on a steady foundation of bedrock,
but to raise a community from
the shifting stones of a gravel pit
is another matter.

A balancing act of prudence and nerve.
So many questions:
How high can you climb without
awakening an avalanche?
How do you soothe the sand
so it accepts topsoil?
Sometimes you don't wait for answers,
just start moving
things around, rolling boulders
aside, staking plots, sowing seeds,
building trellises in anticipation
of vines.
Eventually, things take on
their own lives with a flourish.

And at the end of the day
you harvest the fruits of labor
with your own hands,
then sit down with your loved ones,
looking deep into each other's eyes
over glasses of champagne,
golden bubbles rising
toward the evening light.

Jeff Kass

Jeff Kass teaches creative writing at Pioneer High School, Ann Arbor, and at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, and directs the Literary Arts Programs at the Neutral Zone. He is widely published, and his new chapbook of poems, *Invisible Staircase*, was released by Winged City Press in January, 2010. Jeff has attended the Bear River Writers' Conference for several years. In 2008, he workshopped with Jerry Dennis and began "I Don't Know Much About You," which became part of his one-man show, *Wrestle the Great Fear*. In 2009, Jeff workshopped with Laura Kasischke and learned a new approach toward both how to teach writing workshops and his own writing, which generated the story "The Long-jumper."

I Don't Know Much About You

but I know this — before
the bell sounded its anxious
cackle — you just trudged
through a muck no human
being should ever be
forced to experience

seven times a day

to slog through Pioneer High's
swollen hallways is to navigate

kids who attempt to send a text
while simultaneously munching french
fries, flipping off a former Facebook friend,
grooving to an iPod bootleg and holding
a conversation with three other people
a face-length away — none of whom
they really like

is to slither past hundreds who huddle
and clog the corridors, blocking clusters
of surgers, heads bent and determined,
spines and necks burdened by backpacks
bigger than my bedroom

there are shouts too of *fuck you, ho*
and *no way, bro*; and the bruising
shoulder-bump of low-throated man-hugs
and boys who stand arms crossed, chests pumped
and teachers pulling rolling suitcases stuffed
with vocab quizzes; and kids like gangsters toting
violins; and the constant commentary of toilets flushing
and hand-dryers shwooshing; and the murmur and slap
and skitter of sneakers and sandals and high heels and bodies
and bodies and bodies at rest and bodies in motion and bodies
as art and bodies as function – bodies, bodies, bodies; freshmen
with acne; sophomores hiding bulges (or not) behind notebooks;
girls tugging at hems and straps of skirts and shirts; boys wishing
they could; juniors quick-copying homework; seniors plotting
the next caper and hall monitors – those beleaguered souls we call
community assistants – assisting the community the only way
they know how, pushing, prodding, urging along
the churning horde until –

here you are
bag on the floor
beside you
bells quiet

you peer at me, or with the seething tense
of a cornered leopard, do not peer at me

you might be pregnant, or maybe you
just discovered your dad's new wife is
or maybe there's a burn on your neck
where your mother lashed you
with a cigarette or maybe last night
you didn't eat or get heat or you worked
'til 3 delivering take-out, or maybe you
just failed a math test or an HIV one or saw
your boyfriend's tongue exploring the gully
of another lover, or maybe you just
got propositioned for homecoming by
that huh-huh-huh, ho-oh my, hockey hottie,
and maybe the chaos in the hallway is nothing
compared to the tempest roiling inside your torso

and maybe I stayed up till dawn arguing with Karen
or soothing the terrors of my children, and maybe I
think I'm a failure – why isn't my novel already
a bestseller – and our basement's a quagmire
and it's about time for the calamity
when the pipes back up and that'll be
another four hundred bucks and I got
two hundred essays to mark and a
principal hassling about paperwork
and a parent cursing in a text message,
and maybe I worry I can't do this

but here we are

whether you're looking at me or not
we are a collision, and we can retreat
to our corners of cowardice and comfort

or we can investigate the crash

The Long-jumper

Apparently, she hit her head on the sand, got brain-dead and married a bozo. Now she refuses to change the light bulb in the hallway adjacent to our bedroom, which makes sense, actually, because it's a bitch-and-a-half to fix. It would be easier for me to handle the task if I were not the bozo she married, or at least if I were tall and had the long-jumper's muscular legs, like twin pillars with pistons. But I'm shorter than she is and don't have those legs so when I stand on the chair I dragged upstairs from the dining room, I need to balance on my wobbly tip-toes and stretch one arm upward like I'm dunking a basketball – which, as I've already mentioned, I'm short so I don't have any experience doing.

It's not actually the light bulb that's the bitch, but the glass globe around it. The globe is attached to the fixture through an incomprehensible, perhaps-utilizing-fairy-magic system. Your outstretched fingers have to rotate rusted hand screws that don't have any desire to move and also don't have any grooves notched into their heads, and you have to twist and tug and somehow simultaneously exert enough pressure against the rim of the globe's mouth to keep it from falling and shattering on your head. Or my head, actually, because I'm the moron messing with it, which I'm only doing because the long-jumper and I both know it serves as penance.

I should not have slept with the shot-putter. I understand this.

But the shot-putter has thicker, meatier thighs than the long-jumper and hips that feel more solid, more grounded. She grunts when she spins and lets that weighty ball soar and, listen, it's pretty cool what the long-jumper does – I'm not questioning that, her springy flight – but there's no release, no letting go of something, no grunts, just this enormous violent feet-first thrust, and there was a lot of tension at the Trials – who was going to make the Olympic team and who was going to hang-dog it back to Sacramento and work at the home improvement franchise – so, yeah, that's a really bad time to cheat on your wife when she's trying to jump far enough to merit government-sponsored health insurance, but that was stressful for me too because face it, she's mega-vitamin healthy and I'm the one with the adult-onset

diabetes, and so that release, that shot-putter's earthy grunt and the pushing up from those campground hips as she lets the cannonball fly, I'm sorry, that was extremely difficult to resist and, okay, I can change light bulbs with some measure of competence, but difficult resistance, no, not my strength.

So I must pay for my sins.

There's some argument there too because I slept with the shot-putter more than once, eleven times actually over a three-day span, but it was still the same person, so I maintain it's just a single sin, a single affair, but the long-jumper, who calibrates every step so she can time her leap to commence only centimeters before the great white line that says foul or no foul, insists each instance of intercourse is its own separate sin, so I expect – if I'm lucky enough to have each light bulb count as canceling out one sin – that I can look forward to ten more light bulbs.

If there could be a public accounting, a closed-door meeting where the shot-putter and I apologize to the whole team, maybe there'd be a release, some clemency, but the long-jumper prefers to keep secrets. It's for my sake, she says. She doesn't even care so much that I cheated. She expects idiot men like me with no jobs to be rotten. *But with the shot-putter, really? That troll?* she says. *That's embarrassing.*

She thinks if other people knew about the affair, all eleven of my sins would shroud me forever, stain me with the kind of spatter that explodes from the pit when she lands after her springy flights. *The shot-putter? That's humiliating for you.*

Humiliating for her, too, I suspect. Maybe that's the bigger secret. That she'd be embarrassed to be married to an unemployed fool who risks the best thing about his life, his relationship with a potential – let's say, silver – medalist in order to sleep with a shorter, squatter, pug-faced woman who's actually not even – unless she throws the miracle shot of her life – anywhere near medal contention. So I'm stuck trailing the long-jumper from practice to practice and video-taping her flights from multiple angles so she can analyze them later, and unscrewing unscrewable screws with my outstretched fingers, balancing the awkward glass globe as dead moths and dead, crispy larvae bequeathed by dead moths fall from inside the globe into my prematurely white hair and remnants of the wings of dead moths and shards of skins of dead larvae flicker into the nostrils of my too big and sharp-

angled nose and at this point it might be appropriate to ask – aside from his obvious light-bulb-changing skills – why would not one, but two Olympic-caliber athletes be willing to accommodate the desires of a short dude with a big nose, prematurely white hair, no job, adult-onset diabetes and bad judgment?

A cogent question.

Fuck me if I can figure it out.

Other than to say these athletes are busy and don't have time to explore the marketplace. Which on some level, I think, should absolve me of blame for my infidelity. A guy who generally can't expect to have a lot of success with women should be permitted to follow through whenever he can sniff some. The long-jumper, oddly enough, doesn't buy this logic, so she stands there critiquing as dead bug-parts fall into my hair and nostrils. *Use your other hand to hold the globe*, she says, as if that's an option that never occurred to me. *Unscrew it in the other direction*, she suggests, even though both of us know there's only way to screw, one way to unscrew. *Why are you wearing those ridiculous shorts?* she says, even though she doesn't know, I think, that the shorts are the shot-putter's shorts because our hips and thighs are roughly the same size and I like her smell on me.

Listen, I tell the long-jumper, I'm sorry I messed up our lives, but you need to let me fix this light-bulb without being the peanut gallery over there. You need to let me screw and unscrew all by myself.

No, you listen, she says, and her voice is a high squeak. *You don't even know how to screw. I bet the shot-putter hated it. I bet all eleven times she was wishing she were somewhere else. I bet she was wishing she could use those troll hips and those troll shoulders and shove you off her.*

That's not how I remember it, I want to say. But I don't say that. I just keep unscrewing and stretching and teetering and swatting at wafers of bug-parts floating toward my nostrils and when the globe slips and falls and I duck, it splits against the chair-back into two perfect halves, like somebody cleaved Humpty-Dumpty with a laser. I stare at the broken globe for a moment and the long-jumper does too. We're quiet. Then I turn and snap at her, *Is that what you want to happen to us? Because that's where we're headed.*

Don't you dare, she says, *don't you even dare.*

But I do dare, because daring, at least, is something I'm good at.

It wasn't just the shot-putter, I say, climbing down from the chair and facing her, trying to establish my crime as huge, as monstrous and abysmal, like the yawning pits she's obsessed with plunging into. It was the javelin-thrower, too.

This, we both know, is a lie. The javelin-thrower will barely look at me. Same with the 5000-meter runner. She, with the long loping strides, has the best chance for gold and, I'm betting, the most stamina on the futon, so I've attempted to hit on her many times. *Nice laps, I'll say, divine laps*, as she circles the track while I'm filming. She never acknowledges my praise, keeps on running, chasing her medal.

You're pathetic, the long-jumper says. The look on her face is the same look she gets when she readies to spring, when she juts out her lower jaw, and flexes her calf muscles, then counts silently to herself 1-2...and then she's off, headed for the launch, for the great white line, the journey through the air, the explosion of dirt in the pit. She's astoundingly beautiful when she readies herself to spring, and I'm immediately sorry I cast aspersions upon the javelin-thrower, that I slept with the shot-putter, that I have no job, that the glass globe split.

It was just the shot-putter, I say. Only the eleven times. It won't happen again. I don't say, you're right, the shot-putter hated it, because that's not how it was.

Just fix the light, she says. *Just fix the goddamn light.*

The question is how egregious is my foul.

Am I worthy of disqualification?

The answer is, I will be forgiven.

Because I am always forgiven.

Because my hair is prematurely white.

Because I am short.

Because I have flakes of dead larvae in my nose.

Because I know how to use the zoom feature on the video-camera to great effect. Because it's too much of a time commitment for the long-jumper to find someone else.

Just fix the damn light, she says again. *Just get back up there and fix the goddamn light.*

Dorianne Laux

Dorianne Laux's fourth book of poems, *Facts about the Moon* (W.W. Norton), is the recipient of the Oregon Book Award. Laux is also author of *Awake, What We Carry*, and *Smoke* from BOA Editions, as well as *Superman: The Chapbook* and *Dark Charms*, both from Red Dragonfly Press. Recent poems appear in *Cimarron Review*, *Cerise Press*, *Margie*, *The Seattle Review*, *Tin House* and *The Valparaiso Review*. Her fifth collection of poetry, *The Book of Men*, will be published by W.W. Norton in 2011. Laux teaches poetry in the MFA Program at North Carolina State University.

Elegy

We were children nobody knew
or wanted to know,
our hands and faces
pressed to the glass octagons
of the greenhouse
where rare columbines
were being invaded
by the heavy bodies of bees.
This is for the weeds
we ripped from the beds
bordering the park, throwing
their bruise-colored petals
as we roamed among the ancient
picnic tables, the names
of lovers carved
into the bleached wood.
This is for the way
we exhausted our bodies
with laughter then fell asleep
in the crotch of a tree,
for the leaves
we hid behind, the birds
we displaced, the few hours
we left our mother
in the car, her head pressed
against the steering wheel,

the raised letters
of his Studebaker imprinted
in the delicate flesh of her brow,
a strange Braille
we touched with our fingertips
the day we returned from the chilled dusk
without being called.

Mardi Link

Mardi Link attended Bear River from 2005-2009 and is the author of two non-fiction books, *When Evil Came to Good Hart* and *Isadore's Secret*, both published by The University of Michigan Press. *Isadore's Secret* is a "Michigan Notable Book" for 2010 and a GLIBA "Great Lakes, Great Read." A former crime reporter and former editor of *ForeWord Magazine*, Mardi is at work on a third true-crime book. "Chicken Trilogy" is from the essay she read at the 2009 conference and was published in the Spring 2009 *Bellingham Review* as a finalist for the Annie Dillard Creative Nonfiction Award.

Chicken Trilogy

I

Tractor Supply, the farm store south of town, is an unexpected place to experience a revelation, but I have been looking so hard for spiritual moments in my everyday life that I go with it.

It is early spring and I am here to order chickens. I walk past the pallets stacked with 50lb bags of goat chow and the rows of John Deere lawnmowers. I glance at the bargain bin of tools and then move quickly past the rack of vegetable seeds. The Holy Grail I'm seeking is the Help Desk in the back of the store where Larry presides like the Pope. The Pope of Farming.

I don't know Larry's last name and he doesn't know mine, but from him I have learned any number of useful skills: how to estimate the amount of electric fence needed for a two-acre pasture, what the secret is to growing mammoth pumpkins, a sure-fire repellent for Japanese beetles. I follow each of these suggestions like the good little agricultural acolyte that I am. They all work. Larry is a real farmer, not a suburban wannabe like me. He is the son of a farmer, the grandson of a farmer, and the great-grandson of a farmer. I am the daughter of schoolteachers. He has hundreds of acres and hundreds of head of cattle to match. He butchers his own pigs. He is a judge for the 4H. I have a farmhouse that is a century older than all the houses around it, and I'm hanging on to its last six acres by my dirty fingernails.

With warmer weather coming, I need a project. I am ready to try something small. Something practical. Something weak and docile and inexpensive. Like chickens. My kids like the idea, too. It will be something to tell their friends. "Rule over all the livestock on the earth," God said to man in the first chapter of Genesis. I am so new to thinking about God that Genesis feels like a good place to start.

I don't know about ruling over all livestock, but I think I can handle chickens. Of course, I don't tell any of this to Larry. What I do say is, "I want to buy some chickens. How do I do it?"

He reaches under the counter, pulls out a thick four-color catalog, opens it up in front of me and right then it feels like the whole earth just downshifted. The chicken-and-egg question becomes immaterial: chickens and, if you want them, fertilized eggs, too, come from the post office. The way to buy chickens is through mail order.

"Good thing you came in today. It's the last week for orders and the hatchery is closed tomorrow, but I called and they're open Saturdays."

I look up at him, his scratched eyeglasses, his pocked and bluish nose, and at that moment I think to myself that he must be the most enlightened being on earth. Chickens from a catalog. On a Saturday. You can order them up on the sixth day of the week, just like God ordered up all the animals on the sixth day. The closer I get to a real farm, the closer I feel to my purpose, my reason for being here. I would not have expected the way to my purpose to wind through Tractor Supply, but I am trying to let go of expectations. I am getting back to basics – what could be more basic than an egg?

I look back at the catalog. There are light-brown chickens and black-and-white-striped chickens. There are chickens with fancy feathers cresting the tops of their heads and chickens so small they look like quail. There are celebrity chickens, too. Foghorn Leghorn, the Kellogg's Corn Flake rooster, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Chanticleer. In each vivid rendering, a rooster and hen is shown, the rooster erect and proud, throwing out his chest, the hen calm and plain and friendly looking.

"Meat or egg?" Larry asks.

"What?"

“What d’you want, meat chickens or egg chickens?” He says this quietly, and with the patience of a kindergarten teacher.

Which came first, chicken stir-fry or egg foo young? Barbequed chicken or deviled eggs? I don’t even have the birds yet and I already feel inadequate. I had no idea meat chickens and egg chickens were two different birds. How could I not know whether I was going to raise chickens for their meat or for their eggs? Everything, I learn later, depended on that decision. What kind of feed you bought, what kind of coop you built, how long you planned on keeping them, and how they would get from coop to stove. Under the watchful eyes of Larry, I decide not to decide and tell him I want both. He nods. This is called a “mixed run.” A straight run is all hens, also called pullets. The hens, the girls, are more expensive. I’m not sure why that is, but I like it.

“Ok, now you gotta pick your breed.”

“Hmmm,” is all I can muster.

Larry suggests Leghorns for my meat chickens and Ida Browns and Araucanas for my egg chickens. All three breeds can tolerate the cold northern Michigan winters. Before he closes the catalog and puts it back under the counter, he tells me there’s something else.

“Them Araucanas are called the Easter Egg chicken, because their eggs are light blue and light green. Isn’t that something?”

Can it get any more spiritual, I wonder, here amongst the galvanized toolboxes and salt blocks and rolls of chicken wire? I place a minimum order – ten egg and fifteen meat. They are \$2 each for the mixed run, \$2.75 each for the straight run of hens. I write a check for \$57.50 plus tax and shipping. Not a bad deal for a Saturday-morning revelation.

II

Six weeks later, I get a call on my cell phone from a clerk at the post office. “Your chickens are here!” she shrieks. “I’ve got them on my counter and they’re peeping like crazy!” I picture the chickens from the catalog hopping and clucking around the post office. In this imaginary scene I have just conjured, they are pecking the stamp machine and the packages. They are scratching at the linoleum floor, looking for food. I’ve got to get over there.

I call Cherry Knoll Elementary School, where my youngest son is in the third grade. I tell the school secretary that I will be coming to pick him up and will be taking him out of school for a couple hours.

"Everything's ok, I hope?" she asks, probing. She is like a cross between Inspector Gadget and White Fang—goofy and smart, with a nasty bite.

"Everything's fine," I tell her, and leave it at that. I don't want her to know that I think he will learn more with me in the next two hours than he will in school, memorizing times tables.

When I get there, Will is sitting on a chair in the office, his face a chubby question mark. I smile but say nothing, sign him out, and we walk silently out to the van. Once inside, the doors safely closed, and all authority figures out of earshot, he asks me what I'm doing at his school in the middle of the day.

Right now, I am not an authority figure. I am an accomplice. I turn around and look at his small frame dwarfed by the big back seat. He is expectant. Innocent still, thank God. Surprises for him are always good ones. So much of childhood fades; I want this to be a day he'll remember as an adult. I want this moment to be the way he remembers the whole of his growing up with me — unconventional, earthy, fun.

"The chickens are here," I whisper, as if we could still be overheard. "Cool," he whispers back.

The post office looks normal enough. A line of people waiting to mail a package or a letter. Three clerks at their windows helping customers. There is no evidence of a chicken infestation. Everything smells clean. Industrial. We get in line and soon are up at the counter.

"We're here to pick up our chickens," I say, as if this were the most common thing in the world. "Right," the clerk says, and heads to the back room. A minute later she returns with a box that is making tiny cheep, cheep, cheeping sounds. The box is small, because they are baby chicks, not full-grown chickens. "Be careful when you open the box, it says the directions are under the shipping label."

Directions? She pushes the box toward me, our business concluded. I take it and we walk out the door and get into the van. I can't believe that they just let me leave. I'm being trusted with twenty-five innocent lives. I felt the same way when I left the

hospital after my first son was born. Are they really going to let me just take a newborn baby? What are they thinking? Don't they know I have no idea what I'm doing? Will holds the box on his lap and gently pushes his pinky through one of the air holes. He giggles. "They're pecking me, Mom! They think my finger is a worm."

Once home, we take the box into the kitchen and open it up. Inside is a pile of yellow cotton balls with eyes. They look up at us in unison, then scatter into a corner. They're terrified. "Eww!" Will says. They stink. This doesn't deter him from petting their fluff.

The directions are titled, "Basic and Emergency Care for Baby Chicks." I do not want to consider any emergencies. The basics are this: keep the temperature between 90 and 95 degrees for the first week, five degrees less per week down to 70 degrees; keep chick starter—special food—available at all times; provide water with three tablespoons of sugar per gallon mixed in for the first three days, dip the chick's beak in the water because they may not know how to drink yet; pray. This last bit of advice does not appear in the written directions, but I think it should. They are so fragile, and my barn is so drafty and big.

We put the lid back on the box, leave them on the kitchen counter and drive back to the source, Tractor Supply. Larry is nowhere in sight. We buy a bag of chick starter, a heat lamp, a clip-on thermometer, a chick watering pan, and a chick feed trough. Grand total, \$46. Are chicken accessories tax-deductible? I make a mental note to check with my accountant. Behind the store by the dumpster, I find an empty cardboard box with the words "Farm Play Set" printed on the side. Perfect. I rip the top flaps off as cleanly as I can and shove it into the back of the van.

Back home, we assemble a chicken condo that would make even Chicken Little feel secure. Our work finally done, we kneel down in silence, place our hands in our laps and watch as the chicks get their bearings. They hop around, peck at their food, peck at the newspaper, peck each other, and peck the cardboard. Their seed-sized hearts are beating fast and the only sound is their cheeping. The barn is dimly lit, and I can feel the cold sneaking up under the back of my sweater. Warmth and light radiate from the heat lamp. The light reflects on Will's face, and with his freckles, his blond hair, his oversize hooded sweatshirt, he looks like a

modern-day cherub. For a moment, in the filtered light, with the hay dust glistening, he has grown wings.

He looks up at me and his iridescent eyes smile. "Safe and sound," he says.

III

It is September now, and after a summer of doing nothing but eating and scratching and clucking and fertilizing, the hens are finally laying eggs. Larry was right – their eggshells are blue and green. The yolks, though, are bright orange, and I am feeding the kids scrambled eggs every morning. They taste the way fresh grass smells and are better than any supermarket egg ever. And the hens seem content. They cluck softly during the day and sleep in the coop at night. They stick together, and the same one is always sitting on top of the water trough. The alpha hen, I suppose. Together, they are sisters, and with the kids back in school, I spend a lot of time just watching them. It's nice to have some girls on the place.

The meat chickens are another species. An unsuspecting visitor might think they dropped into the set of a horror film starring a cast of zombified birds. The meat chickens will not be contained by the coop and have taken over the yard. Their bodies are the size of steamer trunks and bulge as if unmentionables were hidden inside. They weigh as much as bowling balls and their skinny legs wobble under the strain. There are piles of chicken crap everywhere you step, and if you bend over to wipe off your shoe, expect an attack from the rear. They are evil cartoon chickens brought to life. These, I am convinced, are the fowl descendents of the rooster whose crowing in triplicate signaled Jesus' impending betrayal. They have to die.

I begin making arrangements. I cut recipes for chicken pot-pie out of the newspaper and plan on a stuffed chicken instead of a turkey for Thanksgiving. I know exactly which chicken I want to invite for the holiday. I sit down with the Yellow Pages and look up "butchers."

There are none listed. The accepted listing is, "Meat-retail." There are fourteen listings here, and I start by calling Anderson's Market in Glen Arbor and work my way through every last one

until I get Sonny of Sonny's Torch Lake Market on the line. He takes the time to explain to me why no one will butcher my chickens. In the past year my state outlawed farm calls. Now, you either have to kill your livestock yourself, or take it to a U.S.D.A.-inspected meat processing plant. The closest one to me is in Grand Rapids, 150 miles south.

I've got to talk to Larry. That night I pay another visit to Tractor Supply. The Help Desk is open for business. "Land sakes, girl! You can kill a chicken! Get a funnel, stick the heads in, chop 'em off, let 'em drain, par boil the feathers off, gut 'em, bag 'em, and toss 'em in the freezer for the winter!" Now, I might be able to kill a chicken if it had on a black balaclava and was coming at me in my bedroom in the dark with a knife, but I know myself, and I know I cannot kill twenty-five chickens. Not without years of therapy, anyway, and I don't have that kind of time. Instead, I buy another 40lb bag of chicken feed.

The next day, I try the Cooperative Extension. I get a woman named Carol on the phone and she says she knows exactly what I need and that she'll send me some information to look over. A week later a large envelope arrives in the mail. It contains a flyer with safety tips for Thanksgiving Day food preparation, a caution notice about the Ash Borer infestation, and an invitation to a diabetes support group meeting in my area. Now I'm frustrated. My children are being attacked in their own yard, our entire wardrobe of footwear is ruined, and, at \$11 a bag for feed, the costs are mounting.

I call the 4H, the local food co-op, an organic rabbit farm, and the commune in the next county. Will anyone butcher my chickens? "Too late," "Don't do it," "Too messy," and, "Dude, we're vegans," are my answers. I'm getting desperate. The Meats, as I have come to call them, stray to the neighbor's yard and scratch up her brand-new mulch. She no longer waves when she sees me at my mailbox. Their drumsticks, I am convinced, are getting tougher by the day, and they have pecked all the grapes off my grapevine. They drink the water out of my landscape pond and terrify the goldfish. Even the cats fear them. Then, on the day I shoo the Meats out of the road where they have stopped traffic, my brother arrives for an impromptu visit.

"Those are pit bull chickens!" he says when he walks in. I hug him. "Please kill them," I say.

Finally, a solution. Why didn't I think of it earlier? My brother is the consummate hunter. If you go to his house for dinner, you will be served wild game. Might be squirrel, might be lake trout, might be venison, but it will be something he shot or hooked or trapped or snared. He is not a working man whose hobby is hunting, he is a hunting man whose hobby is working. Butchering chickens should be like swatting mosquitoes for him. "No problem," he says.

Three days later, the Meats are still roaming the countryside like a gang of Nazi youth. While I'm running errands, my brother packs up and leaves for bigger game. All the beer in my refrigerator is gone. That is the way of the hunter.

I have now been betrayed by my government, local merchants, the 4H, the hippies, Larry, and even by my own family. "God," I pray before I go to sleep that night, "please smite the Meats. Smite them hard and smite them now."

The next morning when I open the front door, they are on the threshold. I call the newspaper and pay for a one-day ad to run on Saturday in the classifieds. It reads:

Free.
Live Meat Chickens.
You Pick Up.

On Saturday morning at 6:30 the phone rings.

"You still have chickens?" a man asks me.

"Yes, I still have chickens. Please, in the name of all that is holy, come and get them."

"I will," he replies.

After dark, just as I have given up hope, a small pick-up truck pulls into the driveway. My dogs bark as if signaling the apocalypse, and there is a knock on the door. I open it and see a muscular and handsome middle-aged man in jeans and a trucker hat. He has black hair and black eyes. He is my savior.

"I am here," he says.

I grab a flashlight. The door to the pick-up truck opens and two young men, an old woman, and a little girl get out. The apostles, I think. We walk to the coop where the Meats are sleeping. They have taken over the nesting boxes and the floor. My poor hens are huddling together just outside. The two

younger men look like they are in their twenties and are dressed as if they are about to appear in a hip-hop music video. Oversized leather jackets and baggy jeans, chain wallets, baseball caps turned to the side. They cross their arms over their chests. They so do not want to be here, boxing up free chickens. One look from the savior, though, and that is what they do.

The old woman is expressionless, but she nods to me and I nod back. I smile at the little girl and she turns her face into the fuzzy hood of her jacket. They speak to each other in Spanish. The man, my savior, is the only one who speaks to me. "My family eats well tomorrow," he says, and shakes my hand.

All spring, all summer, all fall, I was raising meat for them and I didn't even know it. I thought I was doing something for myself and for my family. I wasn't. I was doing it for him and for his family. My savior, the apostles, and the Meats all get back in the pick-up and drive away. I watch until their taillights disappear at the end of my driveway. I shine the flashlight into the coop. The hens have moved back in and snuggle together in the nesting boxes. I think back to when they were baby chicks, those yellow cotton balls with eyes. I wonder if God thinks of me and my sons this way.

"Safe and sound," I say to myself. "We are all safe and sound."

Chris Lord

Chris Lord's poetry has appeared in numerous publications and won places in several competitions. She founded Word'n Woman Press in March of 2007 and edited and published the *Bear River Writers Respond to War* print edition, and the *Writers Reading at Sweetwaters* anthology. Chris was also editor of the four online issues of *Bear River Review* and is honored to be editor and publisher of this *Bear River Review*. Chris's chapbook *Field Guide to Luck* was published by Pudding House Publications (2007). Chris is co-host of the monthly series, "Writers Reading at Sweetwaters," and has recorded poetry readings for internet radio.

The River Is Yours

She, dark deceptive woman, is yours —
and you, black-crowned night-heron,
forage her old world moon snails
as dusk preens her bruised purple plumes.

She, backwoods bay woman, is yours —
and you, red-shouldered hawk, wheel
over her undulating treasures, pierce
ballooning bullfrogs with shrill screams.

*You want to go with her where salmon spawn,
follow her upstream into the nest of night —
you want to lie in her riverbed of rain,
enter her feathered first light.*

She, fluid flower-child woman, is yours —
and you, sandhill crane, leap in the air,
bow and call, admire her tie-dyed ribbon
of hair, sing to her of fate and free love.

She, royal refined woman, is yours —
and you, gyrfalcon, pursue as one used to war,
fly the long distance of her noble body,
chain yourself to her arm as sun drops its spear.

*You want to bend her echoing sound waves,
follow her upstream into the nest of night –
you want to lie in her riverbed of rain,
enter her feathered first light.*

She, elusive elegant woman, is yours –
and you, earless great gray owl, turn her
head toward day's dignified voice,
woo her from a low perch in a wintered tree.

She, rapid running woman, is yours –
and you, rough-legged hawk, chase her
downhill, tear apart her surging fears
with your hooked bill and dissecting claws.

*You want to drum her bony fish rhythms,
follow her upstream into the nest of night –
you want to lie in her riverbed of rain,
enter her feathered first light.*

She, narrow-necked woman, is yours –
and you, mute swan, entice her wanderlust
with your s-curve into a swirling basin,
cull serpents from her snaking tributaries.

She, distressed disappearing woman, is yours –
and you, bald eagle, skim her surface,
snatch your prey from her choking mouth,
lift what is left of time with your talons.

*You want to embrace her time-like direction,
follow her upstream into the nest of night –
you want to lie in her riverbed of rain,
enter her feathered first light.*

Diane Marty

Diane Marty is a retired English teacher whose career included teaching in New Hampshire, California, Wyoming, and Michigan. Diane has attended several writing conferences in her pursuit of a new career as a writer. At the Bear River Writers' Conference in 2008 and 2009, she attended Laura Kasischke's Poetry and Fiction workshop and received inspiration and unconditional support for her writing. Diane is attending the Conference and Laura's workshop again in 2010. Her piece "Doomsday" was written after she returned home in 2008.

Doomsday

I bolt upright from a sound sleep in our king-sized bed. What has awakened me? My sleepy brain notes the digital clock on the nightstand says that it's 5 o'clock in the morning. Immediately, all my senses go on high alert. It's not my natural pattern to awaken spontaneously at five o'clock in the morning.

The dark room is deadly silent, so silent I can almost smell the stillness. Too quiet, too quiet, my brain says. What night sounds am I wanting to hear? The shudder of the water pipes? The purr of the humidifier fan? The night wind of April in the trees outside our bedroom? Seconds tick by as I sit there in the silence, expecting some sound to cut through the black curtain of night, assuring me I can lie down again and go back to sleep. But then my brain commands me to act, to find the missing sound I am waiting to hear. Almost reflexively, my right arm and right hand shoot out to reach and touch my husband who is lying, still as a statue, on his right side, his back to me. I touch his motionless, warm back with my open palm, letting it rest there a few seconds, anxious to feel my hand rise and fall, but there is no movement. I hear nothing but my own accelerated breath. Fear lodges in my dry throat, and I swallow repeatedly as I realize the missing sound is that familiar noise and movement of my husband's customary, irregular breathing. It's then, too, that my brain registers another component to the deadly silence in the room. I can't feel the rhythm of his breathing on the mattress. The sudden lack of that small vibration catapults me out of bed. I race around the end of

the bed, flipping on the wall switch for the ceiling light on my way to his side.

In the now-lighted room, I see that my husband looks very much as if he were asleep with his mouth slightly opened, his eyes closed, his skin smooth and warm to my touch. I kneel beside the bed, clasp his slack but still-warm hands, saying, "Harold, Harold," and there is no answer and he doesn't stir on his own. Panicked, I pass my forefinger under his nose and there is no air coming from his nostrils. I then feel his right wrist for a pulse...I feel nothing. I cradle his face in my hands, kiss his closed eyes, his forehead, call his name, repeat, "No, no, not yet, you can't leave me yet," and I cry as I bend over him at the edge of the bed, knowing I need to call 911. I stand up, pace around the room in my nightgown, talk to myself and cry: "Dear God, what will I do without you?" Then in my head, I hear him: "Someday the day will come when I will have to leave you, probably before you want me to....I knew this the day we married with the ten-year age difference and all....but you're a strong woman....and that strength that I have always loved will carry you on." I force myself to slow my breathing, swallow the fear that threatens to stifle me, order my brain to take charge and let me think clearly. A calming thought surfaces in my mind, followed immediately by a compulsion to act. I think: as long as I have my memory, I can summon him to me at any time. But right now, I have to call 911 and the kids.

I head for the wall phone in the kitchen, grab a Kleenex from the kitchen counter, blow my nose, mentally order myself to stop my crying; I need to be able to speak clearly. Brain in control now, as I reach for the phone, I tell myself he is as near as my forty years of memories and I know what he would say at this very minute: he'd say, "Buck up, girl, you've got a job to do!"

John Mauk

John Mauk teaches Communications at Northwestern Michigan College. He attended the Bear River conference in 2009 and worked with Laura Kasischke. The experience prompted him to attend the 2009 Interlochen Writers' Retreat and the Ludington Writers Conference. In the fall, he made his first short story submission. It was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* contest for new writers. Most recently, he was named one of the winners in the Michigan Writers Cooperative Press chapbook contest. His collection, *The Rest of Us*, will be published this spring.

No Offense (Chapter 31 from 2004)

I'm trying to decide if I've ruined everything. Holly is freaked out. If I'd thrown up or sneezed on the cheese ball, at least it would have been involuntary. But you can't say *Gesundheit* to a political tantrum. Maybe tantrum is a strong word, but from their perspective, probably not. And the thing is, Holly's Uncle Walt doesn't seem like a bad guy—just one of those normal uneducated plebes through the ages who buys the national narrative about the Normans or the Indians or the Samaritans. For people like Walt, this is victory week—the pictures of Saddam in court, stripped of his army fatigues, ushered around in an overly nice Western-looking suit. For Walts everywhere, it's the culmination of logical Neo-con policy. Their president has vindicated the country, taught us liberals that Evil can be brought to justice. "They caught the head tarisch, and put'm on trial." That's what he said before shoving a plastic spoon of potato salad in the word hole. Aunt Shirley said something about 9/11, and then Holly's mom said, "Thank God." That's when I popped. That's when the good old Bettendorf genetic reflex kicked in. "Yeah, except Saddam's not a terrorist and never has been." That's what I said. No one said anything back, but Walt harrumphed into his chicken, which is something I could never tolerate. It's an old guy thing. If you think someone's full of shit, you don't even look up or muster the politeness to utter a real word, much less a whole sentence. Instead, you just gas out some air and snap your neck a little. In my family, coming from my dad or one of my uncles, that sound

means something like “I can’t believe we let you out of the house without a helmet,” so I couldn’t help but respond. A crowd of good little meta-Simons were running in slow motion for the brain lever. Behind my eyeballs, I could see them making the last desperate Bruce Willis lunge for the red emergency shutdown, but I was too fast, or maybe all the pot I’ve smoked has made my metas more reflective—and really, really slow. “But people who’ve been brainwashed probably don’t realize it.” That was my response to Walt’s noise. And now for the giant cymbal crash: “No offense.” I actually said, “No offense.” You can’t beat that. It’s the worst thing you can say in any situation. It indicts everything you’ve said prior. It makes something perfectly innocent sound creepy and it makes something stupid or mean sound stupider or meaner. *Man, I sure like those pants, no offense. I hate idiots, no offense.*

After that, the barbecue went silent. Outside of chewing sounds and calls for seconds, it was pretty mute. I sat there trying to conjure up something nice to ask Uncle Walt or Holly’s mom, but I imagined it was too late, that I’d made my first impression, that anything more would be interpreted as a veiled attack. No one’s going to play fetch with Spot if he just bit Dick.

For the rest of the time, and it was probably a full hour of tension, they all kept dodging me. I’d look up over the rim of my little plastic Dixie cup and catch a cheek turning away, part of one eyeball headed in the other direction. I was Medusa. Evil liberalism with snaky hair. I think the only other full-throated sentence I offered was, “Wow, that’s good chicken.” So let’s review: *Saddam’s not a terrorist and never has been. But people who’ve been brainwashed don’t realize it. No offense. Wow, that’s good chicken.* That was my debut for the Matthews family. Thank you, good night.

I don’t know if I’ve ever been the party pooper—the guy who ruins everything. Sure, I’ve said some stupid shit in my life—probably mountains more than I can admit to, and I’m willing to admit plenty. But I don’t think I’ve ever dropped the big bomb. There was that one time with Debbie’s mom when I said “Why I oughtta” á la Jackie Gleason, like I was gearing up to sock Debbie in the head. Her mom was clearly put off, and there was nothing I could do to erase it. She didn’t know that it was a one-liner between Debbie and me—that it was fun and games, that the last thing in the world I’m capable of is voting Republican, and then the last thing after that is punching a girl. If I’m honest, and this

seems pretty unmanly, I've never punched a guy either. Sure, I've had my share of shoving matches, and in junior high, I had a few hugging scuffles. And one time, I got Greg Hancock in a headlock and then threw him on the ground. But I've never balled up my fist and pounded someone in the cheek. My knuckles have never busted flesh. I couldn't really say all that to Debbie's mom. It would have been creepier yet — her daughter's boyfriend giving a resumé of bellicose behavior.

But this was way worse. I basically impugned Holly's whole family and their worldview. No offense. I knew she was leveled by it. She got blotchy and ate fast. I thought she was going to break her plastic fork trying to pull meat off the leg, and I was a little freaked at how hard she stabbed the potato salad. I almost said, "Easy, Ahab, it's just a potato" or something like that, but I guess I'd run out of gas. I just buttoned up, chewed my own chicken, and watched the emotional effects of my dipshit explosion. When I felt like we'd all endured enough of me, that it was appropriate to remove my carcass from the premises, I got up. I made one last attempt by offering to take Holly's and then Aunt Shirley's plates, but Holly's mom sat up straight and shooed my hand away like a fly. At least I tried. I said something about getting home — even though it made no sense because everyone knew that I had nowhere to be, unless it was a Conservative Haters Club meeting. But maybe they understood that I was leaving with my tail between my legs — that I was a bad dog.

In the driveway, with the house between us and them, Holly kept saying it was all right. But I could tell it wasn't. She kept clasping her hands and rubbing her thumbs, which I'd never seen her do. And she stood about forty yards away from me. I apologized a bunch, but what's an apology going to do? How's that going to help her go back and deflect the family vitriol — the disappointment that she's running around with a liberal grill cook, not a nice athletic patriot who wears button-down shirts with white collars? I created a little political shit storm and then drove off into the sunset.

I couldn't really go home. I'd just sit there and stew. So I'm here instead — at the ol' drinkin' hole. Lana says it'll be fine. "Holly's her own woman." "It's not about her family." "She doesn't care what her crazy Uncle Mort thinks." She kept calling him Mort, which kills me. Lana's probably right in some ways, but

she wasn't there. She didn't see all the heads turning toward me—even the little brothers who hear one-tenth of everything outside the roar of hormones.

Now I'm into Guinness number three. I've got four open seats on either side of me. CNN is on. The evening brunette is giving us her best post-nasal vowels about Cassini finally making it to Saturn. Seven years after blasting the hell out of here, it's locked into orbit and sending back images of the rings—those things that have been drawn a million times on colored school paper. Now, we're seeing them for real. The glowing soft halo is a giant field of ice, gas, and space rock—mountains somersaulting in a perpetual circle. They just showed an interview with a NASA engineer who sounded like she'd seen God. "I have no idea what it is!" she said—talking about some formation in the rings, some gaseous blob waving at us through all that emptiness. We're probing space. We're shooting robots into the final frontier. Meanwhile, interest rates are going back up and Saddam's in a suit.

Kathleen V. McKevitt

Kathleen V. McKevitt was an editor and PR writer at Michigan State University for 25 years, finishing her career there as director of University Publications. Afterwards, she launched IDIOM, a writing and publication service. Upon retirement, she decided to try her hand at fiction. She attended Bear River for the first time in 2008, where she studied with Elizabeth Kostova, began a work of historical fiction, and now has four chapters more or less complete. At the 2009 conference, Kathleen worked with Eileen Pollack and applied the nuts and bolts of writing Eileen taught to her short story "The Ice House."

The Ice House

After Father died, we could finally give the party we'd been planning for years. We've given lots of parties—the 1920s flapper ball, the 1930s hard times party, the 1950s New Orleans barbecue, annual apple-pie Independence Day picnics, just to name a few. We never got enough of hearing Father's friends say, "Why this is just like it used to be" when they entered the old-fashioned worlds we created. For an afternoon or evening, we could live there ourselves.

But the worlds were never big enough. We wanted to expand them into our entire acre yard, but Father would hear none of it. His bellowing still rings in my ears.

"I hafta get my own breakfast and go down to Clifford's for a beer and brat pretty near every night 'cause you girls won't fix me a decent meal, while you sit with them old-fashioned magazines nearly passin' out over frills and fixins from your gramma's time. Well, you ain't diggin' up the backyard while I'm still livin' here under my own roof. And them cats of yours ain't never comin' inside neither."

In March, we found Father dead on the kitchen floor of a stroke when we came home from work. He was 98. We decided right then and there to retire, since we hated the department-store-basement mailroom jobs we'd had since our twenties. Our parties were our only way to escape that suffocation and Father's day-in-day-out complaining. We could be queens for a day, or at least a few hours.

It was right that Eithne and I got to keep the house after all we'd done for Father since Mother died almost 20 years before. But he surely did hate our cooking. Eithne and I don't eat food that comes from animals, and Father didn't much like our canned-pea-and-cottage-cheese breakfasts or late-night broccoli linguini suppers.

Eithne's my identical twin—identical in all but the way we wear our long, gray, frizzed hair—but, let me tell you, we don't always do everything identical. Once, for instance, Eithne ate a slice of smoked salmon that Ed brought over. Ed's our neighbor as we look out the west window. He and his wife Jezzann live in a house the same age as ours, built over one hundred years ago in 1900, but brought up to date.

Before Father died, Ed often came over to borrow some unusual tool from Father's collection of antique equipment in the loft above the garage. He'd wave at us as we worked in the garden and shout, "Hey, girls." For heavens sakes, we're not girls, but Ed always called us girls. I guess because he'd heard Father call us *the* girls. "Hey girls, don't work too hard. And don't hide your light under a bushel." Then he'd make a funny laugh, almost a boyish giggle, and suck in his breath.

Eithne and I had been belly dancers in our twenties, but now we wear only loose farmer's coveralls most of the time, no matter if we are sweeping the driveway, watering Mother's old perennial garden next to the house, or going to church. I suppose that's what Ed meant about hiding our light under a bushel.

Ed's the kinda man that fills all the space around him, bigger than life, as Mother would say. But he's not fat. Far from it. He's more than six feet—taller than Father. Maybe that's why Father didn't take to him. He looks a little like Clark Gable without the moustache. We don't know his exact age, but his son's in college, so 55 might be a good guess.

As for Jezzann, she was never friendly. In the long daylight of summer nights, we'd holler "hellos" towards the screen above her open kitchen window as we went out to work in the garden, but she would just scowl and continue doing the dishes. It seemed like she clanked the silverware even louder afterwards.

We were shocked to find boxes of Fat Boy condoms in the back of Father's dresser drawer after he died. We recognized them because of the bodice rippers we read aloud to each other before

going to bed, but we couldn't imagine what Father needed them for, since he and Mother slept in separate bedrooms and never even kissed. As we examined the foiled packages, giggling uncontrollably, we finally decided they probably belonged not to Father but to our long-dead alcoholic brother, who had never married either, but who always seemed to have a woman on his arm. Anyway, it's a good thing we didn't throw them out because they came in handy later.

We've lived in this house since we were born more-or-less 62 years ago. Not a single thing here has changed in that time, except the colors of the garden. We listened to Father's rants as the city limits spread to within a mile of our front door, finally imprisoning us not two weeks after Mother's passing. And, let me tell you, when the school wanted two feet of our land for a new building where you look out our south window, and the subdivision developer wanted us to take a wrecker to the garage Father built for his first automobile in 1920 and the roofless stone ice house and sagging chicken coop next to it because they were eyesores, Father used his favorite expression on them: "Go stick it where the sun don't shine." He hated change, even if it meant changing backwards.

The day after we buried Father in the churchyard where he had been the sexton for fifty years, we called our contractor friend Joe. Our Victorian Christmas in July wasn't going to be just one of those parties with a pink-ribboned fir tree, chilled wassail, and the plum pudding Aunt Doris put up six years ago. We wanted what the magazines called Victorian infrastructure. And, let me tell you, Father left us the money to pay for it, although you wouldn't know he had any from the looks of this place.

The first summer, Joe rebuilt the roof of the crumbling stone ice house at the rear of our property, reglazed its diamond-shaped windows, and from the rafters hung four rusty iron chandeliers that Eithne found at a garage sale. He rehung the chicken coop doors and added a porch and trellis at one end, where we hoped to host sherry and tea parties one day. We spent eight-thousand of Father's money to have Joe lay a winding path of large flat stones leading from the ice house to a small concrete pool that had stood empty outside our back door for two decades, complete with a broken waterwheel. Eithne and I spent every non-rain day trimming overgrown bushes, sawing limbs off trees, weeding old

garden beds and digging new ones to create what we called garden neighborhoods: the medieval garden, the romantic garden, the bishop's garden, the water garden, and, of course, the Victorian garden.

One sweltering August evening, Eithne went to the ice house to light the fat beeswax chandelier candles so we could see what they looked like after dark. I stayed behind on the back porch to get the long view. Eithne was surprised to find the ice house door ajar and Ed sitting on a bench in the cool dimness smoking a cigar.

"Hope ya don't mind my trying out your new folly. Had to get out of the house. Jezzann won't let me smoke inside or out. Can't even keep my cigars in the house. This is delightful. Kinda castle-like. Care to join me?"

Let me tell you, while Eithne and I don't do everything identical, we never do anything separate, not even drive to the store for a quart of milk. Without so much as acknowledging Ed, Eithne hollered in my direction. "Enya, come here this minute. Bring the brandy and three glasses. And some cheese."

We thought we knew men. When we were young, we had charmed them with our belly dancing in the speakeasy Father recreated in our basement. They were Father's old married friends of course, and it was always look-don't-touch, although sometimes I would sit on George or Andy's lap afterwards so I could feel the strangeness of rough hands on the skin of my belly. The only human touch Eithne and I are well acquainted with is that of each other as we snuggle in bed on subzero winter nights. Eithne wanted no contact with these men, but grinned and blew kisses around the room when we finished a number. The men would cheer as they sucked on cans of Schlitz. We loved their attention, but once we were dressed in street clothes and came back downstairs to join them for drinks, their talk turned to the price of corn or the crooks in city hall, and we felt invisible again. That's what we figured male companionship amounted to.

Sometimes Father would say, "Why don't you girls go in to the city to the dance at the pier tonight?" We went once. A brave fellow came up to the table where we were drinking Old Fashioneds, looked from one of us to the other at least twice, and finally asked me to dance. At that, the handbag Eithne was anxiously stroking fell out of her lap. When she reached to pick it up, I saw tears in her eyes. Maybe it was because she wished he

had asked her instead, but I like to think it was because if I accepted, it would be a hole I could never stitch up again. So I said no to the shy young man.

When I arrived in the ice house with the brandy and glasses, Eithne introduced me to Ed as if I'd never laid eyes on him. "Why Enya, this is Mr. Edwin Quentin Wallace," she said in an affected southern drawl like Scarlett O'Hara's, "the owner of the fine property to the west of us. He is admiring our improvements to the ice house. Isn't this quite grand?"

A man had entered our world and was appreciating it.

Eithne, I, and Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace, as we took to calling him from then on, drank the rest of the evening hours away, entranced by the overhead mating of his cigar smoke tendrils with those of the candles. Sometimes he would purse his open lips as he exhaled, forming smoke donuts that we tried to catch on our fingers. Father had smoked cigars for decades, often with the windows tightly shut when he took us and Mother on Sunday drives in his Model A Ford. For us, the smell of cigars is soothing and nostalgic.

We learned a few things about Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace that night: he was bored with his job as a computer programmer; Jezzann was a part-time bank teller addicted to reality shows on TV; he wanted to research his family's roots in England, but didn't know where to start. He did most of the talking and didn't learn much about us except that we were transfixed by him, I suppose. When he confessed that he had never been able to tell us apart, we explained almost in one voice that I usually wear my hair piled on top of my head, and Eithne lets hers hang loose. But not always.

"You're sort of the lord of the manor, aren't you," I asked him, surprised at my own boldness, "wandering right over here unasked to our ice house and making yourself at home?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. I can fantasize, can't I? It's peaceful here, no television. I can enjoy a cigar and pretend I'm far away. Your Dad smoked cigars, so I figured you wouldn't mind."

By the time Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace said he must get home because Jezzann's TV shows were over, he had talked us into being his cigar keepers. That way he wouldn't have to store them in the garage, out of Jezzann's sight.

The fall and winter passed, and Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace became a regular visitor to the ice house, even on snowy nights as long as

the temperature was above 20 degrees or so. We didn't often join him, but when we did, we took to wearing Grandmother's fancy dresses with their leg-o-mutton sleeves, cinched waists, and tall collars. Let me tell you, he laughed mightily every time we presented him with a choice of cigars on Grandmother's silver tea tray: an Arturo Fuente, a Padron, an Ashton, a Romeo Y Julieta, and sometimes a lowly Dutch Masters. Eithne went out of her way to bring him articles on genealogy and British lineage she cut out of our Victorian magazines. I felt a twinge of something when he got caught up silently studying these additional tidbits—something I now see was jealousy.

Spring came, and with it our more serious undertakings for the Victorian Christmas in July. In the ice house, we strung the chandeliers with fir garlands, stood a Norway spruce in one corner, and clipped 100 miniature candles on its branches. For the chicken coop, we pricked eggs with a pin, blew out the innards, and put them in nests we had woven under rubber chickens we bought at the Halloween store. We finished off the coop with strands of twinkling lights from the Chinese market. We lined the path and filled the gardens with luminaria. We spent four days preparing a British Twelfth Night supper: cold spiced beef; watercress, beet, and orange salad; candied fruit peels; Jordan almonds; and the King's Cake, in which we hid a small china figurine for some lucky guest to find.

At last, on a humid July twenty-fifth, sweating in our heavy, cinched dresses, we received our guests: some of Father's remaining friends, most using walkers; many cousins, nieces, and nephews, complaining about the weight and heat of their attire when not chatting on their cell phones; and Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace, who was among the last to arrive, dressed in a fancy, tailed tuxedo. He bowed when he greeted us, took our gloved hands in his, and declared us "lovely indeed." But it was Eithne's arm he wound into his own as we stood in our receiving line.

At seven o'clock, Eithne lit the candles in the ice house. I rounded up our guests and led them down the stone pathway toward the ice house, encouraging them to sing "O Tannenbaum." The gloved and tuxedoed servers we had hired followed behind, carrying platters of sherry in small crystal goblets, snifters of eggnog, and that Victorian prune delicacy "devils on horseback."

I could see Jezzann scowling at her post over the sink, probably Brilloing a pan over and over until it would have blinded her if she had bothered to look down. How long had she been watching? Jezzann had never come to any of our parties, but Ed said she didn't mind his coming. This time turned out to be different.

As the last guests and newest mosquitoes squeezed into the icehouse, Jezzann, her hands covered in blue Brillo scum, came running across the yard, waving a dripping fry pan high in one hand and two unrolled Fat Boy condoms in the other. When she burst in the doorway, let me tell you, everyone got real quiet.

"I've had it," she screamed at the whole lot of us. Then she pointed at Ed, standing open mouthed next to the Christmas tree.

"You...you...you." She could find no words to describe him, despite her reality TV shows. "You're over here all the time. And now I know what you're doing over here with your girls." She almost spit the word *girls*. "I have evidence. Hard evidence." She shook the condoms in the air. "I found these on your closet floor. If you people think this is some kind of innocent parlor game, you're dead wrong. These girls are sluts. The genuine article. Sluts." With that, she heaved the fry pan at the Christmas tree, missing her mark, turned smartly, and marched out.

Our guests, still hushed, began to file out, too embarrassed to look at us. We three were silent as we listened to car doors slam and engines start, a cacophony of disappointment all around. Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace had collapsed on a bench in the corner, his legs outstretched, and was thumping his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Girls, I'm so sorry. I've never seen Jezzann behave like this. I can't imagine what got into her. I'm afraid I must go home and sort this out."

We stared at him for a moment and then, in one breath, said, "This party is over."

"You'd better not come here any more, Ed," Eithne added. "We'll get the rest of your cigars."

We picked up our skirts, shoved back our bonnets, and walked down the stone path to the house in silence, our ache and disbelief felt in unison, our make-believe world made real, our innocent flirtation snuffed out.

In the kitchen, we opened the drawer where we kept Mr. Edwin Q. Wallace's cigars, now each encased and rubber-banded in a Fat Boy. Let me tell you, Fat Boys make perfect humidors.

"Should we return them to Ed like this?" I wondered.

"Yes, let's," Eithne said, the corner of her mouth turning up in the start of a devilish smirk. "Maybe it will help him sort things out with Jezzann if he shows her what we used them for." And then I knew, surely, that Eithne and I would never be parted, at least not by a man.

Vicki McMillan

Vicki McMillan is an Assistant Professor of English at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Western Michigan University. Her work has appeared in *Sky*, *Controlled Burn*, *Voices*, *The Kalamazoo Reader*, *Fourth Genre* and *Grand Rapids Cosmopolitan Home*. She has attended Bear River Writers' Conferences in 2007, 2008 and 2009. In 2007, she was fortunate to work with Elizabeth Kostova. The past two years she has worked with Laura Kasischke.

Thunder Mug

Fifth grade was the best year of my life. My teacher, Mrs. Mulligan, cared more about science than fractions, and when she saw how much I loved biology, she let me read whatever I liked about animals and plants when math was getting to me. I passed to year six unencumbered by mathematics but fairly well prepared to deal with Old Lady Babcock, the sixth grade terror of Porter Street School. I had summer to enjoy first: three months Babcock-free. I was still Mrs. Mulligan's pet. She lived a block away from us, and I spent afternoons at her house keeping an eye on her son, Melvin. She paid me fifty cents, all the ice cream I could eat and the right to read any book on the living room shelves. All I had to do was keep Melvin out of her hair while she worked on her Master's.

Melvin didn't really bother me. He was a six-year-old who spent all afternoon turning over rocks and fallen wood looking for salamanders while I tried reading a book I'd found with the tantalizing title *Sons and Lovers*. On the last Friday afternoon in June, I'd just finished a confusing chapter where a guy's mom was upset with him for buying his girlfriend new underwear. I was trying to figure that one out when Mrs. Mulligan came and took the book away.

"I forgot that one was on the shelf," she said. "Maybe your mother wouldn't want you reading it. Why don't you and Melvin bike down to the library?"

She gave us each a quarter so that we could stop at the corner store for popsicles. It was a wonderful trip. We each picked up enough books to fill our bike baskets and headed back, careful not to drip popsicle juice on them.

In mid-July, just before my birthday, my parents embarked on their Great Utopian Experiment. It was time, they decided, to leave the leafy suburbs filled with friends, excellent schools and public facilities within biking distance—"time," they said in unison, "to move to the country before city life turns all you kids into drug addicts."

The quest for farmland began. We visited the first place on Saturday, a palatial estate with white board fences, modern stable, even a tiny guesthouse that I pictured commandeering for my own. Unfortunately, it was over-budget. Mr. Collins, the realtor, was undeterred. He cheerfully showed us new properties every weekend: the dairy farm with an antiquated milk parlor, a dog kennel where a lady was raising squashed-nosed Pekingese, and, my brother Ralph's favorite, an ancient property with a leaning farmhouse complete with an open well in the yard and a wall full of bees.

Mr. Collins finally found the farm they wanted in mid-August, a charming property with an old white house and an unpainted barn out back complete with a rope swing in the hay loft. There was a little granary between the two, constructed of painted cement blocks and covered with pink, climbing roses. Sixty acres of paradise complete with raspberry canes, an asparagus patch and a pre-planted garden. "This is perfect," my mother said, pulling up a baby carrot to sample the produce. My parents made an offer. It was cheerfully accepted. The owners, the Johanssons, were ready to move on.

We made three tours of the house before my mother's attention moved beyond the lovely wainscoting in the dining room, the cistern to collect rainwater for use in the wringer bound washer and the beveled oval of glass in the front door. She finally noticed that something was missing.

"I just kept thinking that I hadn't seen something," she'd said, laughing over rum and Cokes with her friend, Val. "And I kept trying to figure out what it was. It was the middle of the night when it struck me. They'd never shown us the bathroom."

Somehow, miraculously for the Johansson's resale benefit, our entire family had visited three times without one of us ever needing to pee. On visit four, my mother inquired as to its location.

"Out back," Mrs. Johansson said. "Behind the granary."

I'd seen it before, but had thought it was a tool shed, not a two-holer. There was no toilet paper. The Johanssons were early recyclers. Last year's Sears catalogue lay between the two holes. A rat lived below. He popped his head out to greet me. I named him Templeton after the rat from *Charlotte's Web* and prayed that he'd never bite my butt when I made a visit. My dad promised a new bathroom ASAP.

"But not this year," he said. "We're moving in just before winter. We can't dig a drain field now."

"Great," I said, thinking Old Lady Babcock's class was looking better and better. "What are we supposed to do in the middle of the night?" My mind was very much on Templeton.

"We'll have to use a bucket as a chamber pot," my mother said. "We'll put it on the landing mid-stairs. You'll have to take turns emptying it. It'll be fun—an adventure, like going back in time. In olden days it was called a thunder mug."

We moved in early November, just before the first big blizzard of the year. The wind sent the curtains standing straight out in every room. If it hadn't been a mid-storm occurrence, I would have thought the house haunted. That's when my mother noticed some other missing things: storm windows, insulation and a proper furnace. My sister, Darlene, a resourceful seven-year-old, believed in dealing with one problem at a time. She made up the bucket-emptying schedule and taped it to the stairwell wall. I had Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Ralph had Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Darlene had Sundays.

"That's not fair," I said.

"You should have made the schedule," she answered.

Brenda Meisels

Brenda Meisels retired in 2009 as a psychotherapist and published her first novel, *Family at Booknook*. She is working on a second book, and also journals on familyatbooknook.blogspot.com about writing, publishing and marketing. "Push, Pull, or Get Out of the Way" was motivated by Richard McCann. In 2008 she was in a workshop facilitated by Anne Marie Oomen, who skillfully focused on detail. Brenda has attended the Bear River Writers' Conference the past four years.

Push, Pull, or Get Out of the Way

The year I turned thirteen, three years before Dr. Jonas Salk's polio vaccine became available, I contracted poliomyelitis, a highly infectious viral disease that can cause paralysis in a matter of hours. That year there were 58,000 cases in the United States. Two thousand people died.

Parents lived in fear. Since the virus was thought to breed in air and water, children were kept home and away from swimming pools. Later, we were to learn that polio was spread by contact with contaminated feces. But in the summer of 1952, people were ignorant of the cause. I was not allowed to swim, which was then and still is my favorite sport. Bored, I frittered away time in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing what I thought of as a Doris Day movie-star smile. Taken as I was with my face, I was not pleased with my plump, pre-pubescent body. My girlfriends had slimmed, blossomed and started their menses. Dissatisfied, I declared to my friend Myrth, "I want to have a very light case of polio and lose weight." That fall, to my dismay, my "wish" was granted.

The day of the eighth-grade square dance I am not feeling well and know I should stay home. But I go and twirl up and down the gymnasium, from boy to boy, in glorious delirium. For three days afterwards, I am feverish in my parents' bed, with my heroine Nancy Drew, the can-do girl, unopened beside me. My mother battles the fever with cold wet washrags and aspirin. She brings me water and juice and offers me soup that I cannot eat.

Then there is blood on the sheets – the menstrual period that I have longed for. I am scarcely aware and too weak to secure the gauze ends of the Kotex in the sanitary belt. Mother ministers to me. She helps me out of the bed, guides me into the bathroom and supports me while I ease into the soothing water. Gently, she sponges my smelly, sweaty body.

When I try to get out of the bathtub, my body will not cooperate. I think, *Grip the side of the tub. Stand up.* I lift my left arm onto the rim of the tub; it flops back into the water. Mom puts her hands under my arms, hoists me to my feet and steadies me as I step out of the tub. She wraps me in a towel. Then, as though I am a reluctant toddler, she coaxes me to lift one leg and then another, until I am dressed in clean pajamas.

The next morning she bundles me in a housecoat and leads me to the car. At the hospital, I sit swaying on a cold hard steel table while an inexperienced intern taps my knees with a rubber mallet. When my reflexes are normal, he shakes his head, uncertain as to the diagnosis. But my mother is not. She lifts my left arm, releases it and it drops to my side.

Within hours I lie, pajama-clad, on the backseat of a borrowed Packard, my parents driving me two hundred miles through the Nebraska and Colorado prairies to Children's Hospital in Denver. With my parents' muted voices comforting me, I doze. When I open my eyes and gaze out the window, I cannot see the road or the small towns we pass through. I do see cotton candy puffs drifting in a gray sky. Then I sleep again. I am barely conscious when we stop midway and my mother helps me into the gas-station restroom.

The hospital emergency room is a blur. "We're going to do a spinal tap," the man in white says. "We'll take fluid out of your spine, and it will determine if you have polio. You *must* lie still. It will hurt, but if you move, you could be paralyzed." He takes the largest needle that I've ever seen and thrusts it into my back. The pain is piercing. But I do not move, and I do not cry out.

In the isolation unit, green-clad robots with white masks speak little, but deliver meals and bedpans at regular intervals. There is no cure for polio. Muscles atrophy and shrivel. In an attempt to slow this process, there are hot packs. Twice daily a steaming wool blanket is thrown onto my bare body and covered with a plastic sheet and another wool blanket. I am firmly tucked in and

left to smart and sweat until my skin is angry crimson and the wrappings cool.

The first day I lie unthinking, immobile on the hard bed. Then I begin to fantasize about a certain blond-haired boy. I'm holding his hand, feeling the tingle. With my right hand, I touch my lips, pretend a kiss. I while away the hours imagining he is my boyfriend, that we go to the movies, swim in the lake, and finally marry. I do not miss my parents. It is the boy, this dream that I long for.

Each day there is mail – get-well cards. Hundreds. All burned eight days later, when I roll out of isolation on a gurney and through the long damp tunnel connecting the isolation ward to the hospital. With wheels clattering on cement, voices echoing around me, we whiz through the underground. At the end, we ride up in an elevator and enter the children's ward, where the virus germs have been vanquished. There are unmasked nurses who talk, and kids, lots of kids. There are books, toys and a TV.

But all is not well on the ward. The nurse refuses to give me a pillow. "The doctor must write an order," she says. I wail, "I cannot sleep without a pillow." I ask other nurses, who also refuse. They do not explain that for some polio patients it is contraindicated to have a raised head. I am at war with the nurses; I shun them, ask them for nothing. The next day I prevail upon the doctor and get my pillow.

I am homesick. Mom makes the long drive to see me. She comes with her oldest sister, Genevieve, who lives in Denver. My mother wears her church clothes, a homemade suit: black skirt and checkered jacket, jaunty hat to one side. Her face is lined with worry. I plead for her to take me home. She holds my hand. Finally, she can bear it no longer and leaves the room. Genevieve, the formidable matriarch of our family, rises from her chair and towers over me, her voice a whip. "You are okay. You are not to bother your mother! She cannot bear it!" My aunt does not say, and I do not remember that, when my eldest sister was thirteen, she died.

My mother makes her bi-weekly visits. I no longer cry.

In physical therapy, canvas curtains separate tables. Children scream as therapists try to straighten shriveled arms and legs. My classmate Lloyd Hill has contracted polio and arrives at the hospital two weeks after me. We become best friends. Our limbs

are not contorted. For us, physical therapy is not particularly painful, and we love the warm exercise pool. He with his crutches and I with my sling run errands, fetch bedpans and ride the forbidden elevator, exploring the hospital.

On our floor there is a circular, glassed-in room. Pale-faced kids lie in iron lungs. Accordions without music, swishing compressors forcing oxygen into emaciated bodies, keep these children alive. By turning the pages with a cylindrical tool held in their mouths, they read books, held open by brackets above their heads. They also hold pencils in their mouths and draw on paper bracketed above their heads – upside-down drawing. I do not know that most of them will spend their lives in iron lungs, but I do know that I am one of the lucky ones.

Two months later, my sling a badge of victory over the dread disease, I return home and am permitted to attend school half-days. Despite my protests, every evening Mom lays a blanket on the kitchen table and pulls and stretches my arm. She counts to ten as I attempt to lift the softball-sized beanbag that she has made for this purpose. The nerve endings in my upper arm are dead, *kaput*, killed off. Without them to trigger the muscles, I cannot lift my arm above my waist. I hate the sling, the exercises *and* my mother.

The doctors indicate that surgery would increase range of motion. So in the summer before my sophomore year, we return to Children's Hospital, where a team of doctors connect the shoulder muscle to the forearm muscle. I sport a cast that wraps around my body and rests on my hips. The encased arm is bent at the elbow, the forearm crossing my body in front of my chest. It is supported by a thin board, connecting arm to torso. The cast binds my left breast but does not fully cover the right one. Later, my mother will wonder if the tight wrapping at a time when I was developing may have contributed to my pear-shaped figure.

Mom sews gigantic blouses, making openings for the board and putting snaps down the sides. I wear the tops with my older sister Monna's maternity skirts. To cut down on body odor and remove dead skin, Mom pours alcohol into a saucer-sized aeration hole in the cast just over my stomach and swabs as best she can with a rag and an immense Q-tip. The alcohol smells pungent, is cool and soothing, but the Q-tip never reaches the worst of the itching. I'm hot and cranky, and I miss swimming.

I am certain no boy will date me—a girl in a barrel! But Stan does—a giant, ruddy-faced, floppy-eared, big-hearted farm boy. With Stan and the steering wheel on his side of the front seat and me and my armor on the other, we find ways to touch. Stan is my boyfriend. This in spite of the fact that, before my first date, Mom rolls my hair in giant metal page-boy curlers, but winds the hair around the clasp instead of the roller. I am a frizz-head and have the klutziest mother in town.

The doctor promises that I will be cast-free before school begins in the fall, but when we return in August, the x-rays show that the muscles have not yet healed. The doctor indicates that I will need to remain in the cast for another three months. This will not do. I explain that I play first cornet in the marching band. I can do this with one hand. But to be in the band, I must wear a uniform. I'm certain that the director will never allow my mother to dissect a band jacket. Still, the doctor refuses to remove the cast. And I refuse to leave.

I plead, I scream. I cry. We compromise. Without the board, I could wear an unaltered man's-size jacket that would cover me and my coat of armor. The doctor cautions that without the weight-bearing board, the cast is fragile, susceptible to breaking. I say that I will take the risk. The technician revs up a screeching saw and whips the board away, leaving my encased arm, extended at a right angle, with no additional support.

That fall, marching and tooting with the rest of them, I hold and play my cornet with my right hand. I discover that the brick-hard cast is useful in crowded hallways. With this weapon I am invincible; I race through the school, plowing into anyone in my path.

One wintery day, I bang into my locker; my suit of armor cracks, splinters at the shoulder. Shivering with cold and fear, steadying the disintegrating plaster cast with my right hand, I wait for my mother in front of the school. At the emergency room, the doctor reinforces the shoulder with wet plaster strips, ever increasing its size. I look like a lopsided football player in a padded jersey.

Six months after surgery, when the muscle has finally healed, the tech takes his mighty saw, slices the armor in two, and pries it off. I grasp my reeking, quivering stick of an arm and hold it as though it were still in the cast. I'm terrified that if I let it fall, it too

will separate from the shoulder. As we drive the few miles to my aunt's Denver home, a sweater cloaks but does not quite cover the stench.

I lock the bathroom door, fill the tub to the brim, soak in steaming water and peel strips of gray dead skin from my arm. After three tubfuls of water, my arm is cleansed — red and raw. I dry off and dress carefully, grateful for the security of the cloth sling.

The surgery is not a panacea. My arm is further weakened from disuse and trembles uncontrollably. I have a huge, quarter-moon scar across my emaciated shoulder. My shoulder blade protrudes, similar to a bird's broken wing. Atrophied muscles are connected to functioning muscles, and I must work to strengthen them. Evening exercises are reinstated, Mother diligent in seeing that I perform them. But I must continue to hold and play my cornet right-handed. I learn to finagle the books from the top shelf of my locker with one hand. At a square dance, when it's time to form the Texas star, my boyfriend takes my hand and attempts to lift my arm. It is an immovable weight. He stares at me in puzzlement. I am ashamed and have no words to explain.

I was a typical adolescent, preoccupied with myself — my body. Yet I denied my limitations and, when confronted with something I could not do, was frustrated and wallowed in self-pity. I did not appreciate or even recognize what my mother did for me. I distanced myself from those who struggled with the ravages of polio, pulling themselves around on crutches, confined to wheelchairs, or worse, iron lungs.

At my fiftieth high-school reunion, fourteen of us, scrubbed and dolled-up, gathered in the Imperial, Nebraska, Senior Center, drinking cold coffee, eating cholesterol-filled triple-treat-chocolate brownies and reminiscing. My polio buddy, Lloyd Hill, and I chatted about how little polio had affected our lives. We laughed about the cast, my suit of armor, which for years afterwards had lain in two pieces on the top closet shelf.

Myrth joined in; she said she had been puzzled by my attitude. "When you were in your cast, you seemed pleased, proud even to be wearing it and showing off your sister's maternity skirts." Then she laughed, "But that cast! It really hurt when you hit us."

Yes, I thought. It must have hurt. Oblivious, I was in an adolescent frenzy, denying pain, theirs and mine. I had rammed through the halls, determined to appear normal. It was I who had chosen our class motto, "Push, Pull, or Get Out of the Way." I had raced through life, never looking back.

I was one of the fortunate ones. My impairment was small. I was able to live a "normal" life. With consistent exercise, my arm has grown stronger. Although I cannot move it above my waist, I have full use of the forearm. The tremors have faded. I have no pain. I swim regularly, a one-finned fish. Although I could not become a physical therapist, my first choice of vocation, I am a psychotherapist, a profession that does not require me to do physical labor. I have given birth to and raised four children, including twins.

There are small adjustments that I must make. When confronted with a heavy object to place on a tall shelf, I do have to think, how can I do this? At times I ask my husband, my children, even strangers, for assistance. On the plane on the way to visit my grandchildren, I cannot lift my suitcase to the overhead compartment. I smile and say, "I have a bum arm. Can you help me?"

Author's note:

Mass polio immunizations became available in the United States in 1955; by 1995, polio had been eradicated in North and South America. An estimated 440,000 survivors remain in the United States, with twenty-five to fifty percent suffering from post-polio syndrome, a condition mainly characterized by new muscle weakness. Approximately thirty people remain in iron lungs, dependent on compressors for each breath they take. Polio is still endemic in the third world countries of India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As of December 2009, 1,517 new cases of polio were reported worldwide. Global immunization would wipe out this disease.

Jennifer Metsker

Jennifer Metsker began these poems in Keith Taylor's prose poem workshop at Bear River in 2003 and this year turned them into the series she titled "Backyardsy." She said to Keith after that horribly rainy cold weekend at rustic Camp Daggett, "I now realize I'm not so much outdoorsy as I am backyardsy," thus the title. She received her MFA in poetry from the University of Michigan in 2006. She has been published in *Gulf Coast*, the *Southern Review*, and many other journals. She currently teaches writing at the University of Michigan.

Excerpts from "Backyardsy"

Rainwater & Gin

It was a backyard wedding. Thunder played bass beneath the wedding march, and by the "I do's" the sky let loose. A veil of rain opaque as kleenex moved the party inside. Out by the pool, the drink cart went unmanned, which left us children free to try our hands at the chemistry of mixed drinks: this green one will make you grow stronger, this golden one will make you grow smarter, drink this clear one and you'll never cry again.

That last one was for me, the flower girl to her mother's second wedding. I started crying that morning watching my grandmother pin silk flowers in my mother's hair. I cried in the bathroom watching my mother blush her cheeks, blotting my tears into the velvet flesh of a make-up sponge. I cried going down the aisle, believing the rain was my fault even though it was spring. And I didn't stop crying until I slipped on the patio and fell into the pool, drunk on rainwater and gin.

Bird Bath Lyric

Naked to the bone, with nakedness my shield. – Theodore Roethke

When the birdbath is brimming with house wrens and blue jays that don't break into song even when you remove your bikini top, it's enough to make you feel invisible. On your backside, you see the world from their perspective—endless naked blue, clear aside from some jet trail stretch marks; the sky exceeds its horizons faster than you can handle.

Such is life off the pedestal. Gods didn't raise you. You don't bathe in the pearly white shallows of an oversized shell. You can't glance in a mirror of water without a care for self reflection. Instead, you sunbathe reading about Roethke. Roethke bathed as he was prescribed in the lithium soaks of hydrotherapy. Were those the moments he became invisible?

You remove the rest of your swim suit. Wishing he could see you, you climb upon the diving board, but instead of jumping off, you sing.

Peg Padnos

Peg Padnos is a registered nurse and writer of poetry and essays. Her work has appeared in *The American Journal of Nursing*, *Mediphors*, *Poetry in Performance* and *Bear River Review*. Last year "Apgar" (begun at Bear River, 2008) won first place in the *LitLife Chapbook* competition. "Mayday," written with Colette DeNooyer, was also published by *LitLife*. Thanks to an excellent prompt, "Shipwreck" began in Dorianne Laux's 2009 workshop. "Zig-Zag" and "Trekking LGA" got their start in 2008, thanks to Richard ("Brooks Brothers") Tillinghast. Currently, Peg studies with Jack Ridl, who offered helpful suggestions for revision.

Shipwreck

*"The pity and the terror of babies born too soon."
— a parent*

"Pretty sick cookies," the doctor says.

"Were we crazy or careless?"

This from snarky friends when we announced we were having twins. No casual choice. No oops! Planned as in Parenthood. One

April afternoon—a gripping and tightening from inside out. Freighter on the shoals, hardening contractions, arching waves.

The babies come out mewling—kittens in stereo. And in respiratory distress, the old hyaline membrane disease that years ago killed the Kennedy son. Like him, our boys

in plastic boxes, doctors fixing holes in walnut hearts, dripping in elixirs, battling infections, reinflating collapsed lungs, resetting respirators—this much pressure, that much gas. I see only stick figures, scrawny frogs. Their pity, my terror.

And the heart-lung-sat monitors beeping ice-cream-truck anthems if the pulse dips or the breath stops or the blood oxygen sinks.

My C-sectioned belly swells like a blowfish,
and I roll the clumsy post-partum roll,
as if stepping on a coral reef or shattered shells.
Just out of childbirth, my mother would say.
Or just off the boat? As if that explains
the kelp of things.

Here's what I want to do: grab those oysters
from their beds, escape the pirate's den, push
aside the gawking strangers – "Oh, what tiny, tiny
things" – shove past the pity and the terror. Push
those babies back into the kiln: Refire breath
and blood flow, heartbeat, O-
two. Hot-pink the dusky, blue-black bellies –
the dusky, blue-black *dying* babies – and ship
out in a coracle to Waukazoo, where Indians
summered years ago –

putting distance between this day and the next

childhood that lies ahead.

Zig-Zag

*...and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky."
– William Wordsworth*

*"into the road just – oh, I mean just, in front of my car."
– Mary Oliver*

Midnight. A quiet Friday. Near summer.
Tulips turned to stems. Manure carried
on wind from nearby fields. From faraway
the hum of distant cars. We swung off

the Interstate past the Zeeland grain elevators,
past the Burger King that shares its driveway
with a funeral home. Past Island Express
and the carpool parking lot. Almost to the Oil

Can and Craig's Cruisers. Another ten minutes
till home. And we were

happy, driving from the neonatal unit
where our born-too-soon twin sons
had been living all that spring. Time's tincture
proves the point: Babies growing,
breathing better, eating, keeping warm.
So along the miles dotting Grand Rapids
and Holland, our voices eased, and we told
the dashboard, the windshield, each other,
the nurses' words: "Don't forget car seats."
And "Better paint the nursery." And "They'll be home
before you know it." And two

deer straight ahead, pinned to our sight lines,
one in profile, the other face front,
inches behind the first.

We were close enough to touch them,
take in their close-cropped velvet,
caramel-colored fur. Close enough
to spot car lights in their sea-
glass eyes. Close enough to glimpse
pricked ears picking up the sounds
of distant stars. And then I'm clutching

the sides of the seat as we slalom first right
then left, then back into the lane.

Did I catch in an instant
the balletic kick of the legs,
the lifted haunches, the white-
striped tails streaming across
a median of grass?

I still ponder the message of this
encounter with — glyph, cipher, running
script? Just what were the planets telegraphing
that night?

Trekking LGA

*"And the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Katmandu."
– Rudyard Kipling*

*"New York. Old school, gritty, real."
– Michael Wilson*

We climbers gather our carry-ons, crampons, ice-axes, slide down the wobbly wire stairs to the tarmac, enter the terminal basement, ascend to where the flights take off. No matter this up-go, down-go. Mid-morning light sneaks through the throng, along with riffs of jet fuel, bazaar of boarding calls, CNN's gabbling heads. Who cares about the news?

Past Express Books where you can take a title on your way out, return it on your way in for half-price. Past the frozen yogurt stand where three bucks will buy a cardboard bowl of cement fluff the size of your cupped palm. Past Brooks Brothers, where I want to ask, "Did your really forget to pack your boxers or button-down collars?" Aren't BB types anal to a fault? I shouldn't judge: maybe they spilled a spot of curry on their ties, or – gracious! – a dab of chutney on their flies. Never mind.

Through the handprint-smudged security doors where grey-suited, sour-faced TSA guards, by turns, glare or ignore us mountaineers. Then down the escalator with its worn metal ridges. (Hey, you with the stiletto heels – Don't get stuck!) No problem for us with our sensible shoes, wheelies lashed to our hands, Sherpas coming up the rear as we descend. Perhaps a brief stop at the circus carousel for steamer trunks. Then the gauntlet of gypsy cab wallahs and snaky town car charmers who'll bring you in for a premium. Whatevah!

Finally, *en plein air*, perhaps raw as Everest,
perhaps soft as saris or cashmere shawls
warm enough to boil an egg, the caravanserai
of yellow cabs is there, honest rates painted
on their doors, medallions gleaming, on-duty
lights aglow, that look for all the world
like the crisp, sharp-angled nurses caps of old.

Sue Marie Papajesk

Sue Marie Papajesk writes poetry and short stories, and has participated in the Bear River Writers' Conference since it began in 2001, coordinating the Beaver Island Lighthouse School Scholarship program, working with Barry Wallenstein, Thomas Lynch, and Jerry Dennis. Sue works with youth at risk, using the arts as a vehicle to open up their hearts and minds. She appreciates the support given to the gifted youth who have participated in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity at the Conference to learn from the greatest authors and poets of our time.

Two Hearts

It was in the springtime of my first love. Dogwood flowers stretching like arms of a crucifix just before the blood berries appear and six months after she sheds her dress in late November. Creeks and rivers were swollen and still recovering from the unusual heavy snowfall that swept down from Southern Ontario and the Alberta Clippers that pounded us with over 300 inches of snowfall that year.

My grandpa used to say, "Ontario is the province that takes its name from Lake Ontario, which is thought to be derived from *Ontarí:io*, a Huron-Wyondot word meaning 'great lake,' or possibly 'skanadario' which means 'beautiful water' in Iroquoian; both languages are these days extinct," and I would marvel at how he could know so much about extinct ancient languages.

It took me seven hours to find my way up and around about the spine of the mitten, the lower peninsula of Michigan where you can see God's left handprint from outer space as a promise with steel blue water shaped like a horseshoe at the top for luck, pointing the way to his most secret of secret places: the Upper Peninsula. "Saving the best of creation for the last day," Grandpa used to say.

I stopped in small towns to buy homemade apple cider donuts and \$1.50 bottles of Orange Crush and Coca-Cola served in small green glass bottles sweating with humidity. They were sold out of ice chests that sat for decades on ends of warped porches of old general stores in towns with funny names like Horton Bay, Elk Rapids, and Walloon Lake.

As I drove further north, the strong scent of pine left me breathless. It seemed to sink into every pore, and you could taste it even when your mouth was closed, musty and cooling at the same time. I looked for roadside signs that would show me the way to the Hiawatha trail that Grandpa talked about and recited Longfellow just like Grandpa used to do when we were kids.

By the shore of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
At the doorway of his wigwam,
In the pleasant Summer morning,
Hiawatha stood and waited.

Even though I had never been on the trail – and never did find road signs – I knew my way by the lay of the land and small sites along the way. I was on my way to a secret place.

I recognized the small creeks, lakes, hills and old-growth trees Grandpa used to describe when he and I stole away fishing, away from the family throng and my five tormenting big brothers. For some reason no one knows, he took a liking to me the day I was born. He whooped, hollered and grabbed Grandma and danced a jig. All eighteen cousins and my brothers were instantly jealous.

Over the years, my brothers eventually grew to love me, but never did understand me. I was the only girl they knew who loved to fish, hunt, gather bark and stones, then collect plump nightcrawlers the size of hot dogs from Grandma's garden in the event that Grandpa would say, "Let's go fishing partner," leaving the family sitting mid-meal, jaws dropping, not believing he was doing it again.

Grandma tolerated this disappearing act because I was the only female and last grandchild in our entire family – "The best bookends a family could have. Grandpa on one end and you on the other." All the boys would groan and roll their eyes.

She'd say fish was the only food God created entirely for our brain, and the human brain needed it daily, or we would all go off and kill each other. If all the generals and presidents would only learn to take their enemies fishing, then there would be – just maybe – one less war in this world. She was the kind of person who could catch and eat fish three square meals a day if she had

to—just like during the Depression while waiting for Grandpa to come home.

She swore eating fish made her heart strong enough to bear all nine of her children, then knit the strong bones of her grandchildren through her own children. She thanked God at every meal for the abundant fish in our lakes and rivers, even though we knew she was thanking God for us with all her children, eighteen cousins, my five brothers, aunts and uncles, squared up to the oak table Grandpa built for her the week he came back from the war. The story goes he whisked out the front door and disappeared into the woods, only to appear one week later, strolling through the front door with the table on his back.

It fit all of us around it no matter how big we got. We would witness the two of them gazing at each other quite intently, each brother down the line elbowing the other to take notice they were at it again. One eyebrow on Grandpa's strong square forehead rising up so slightly, just after Grandma's saying grace, and Grandpa adding and "thank you for the Hiawatha trail" as we all lip-synced those same words. Grandpa would wink through misty eyes at her about their secret knowing of a time and place as all in unison said Amen.

Grandma and Grandpa had traveled this trail to their special place—the day before their wedding, two days before Grandpa left for the war. The day of their wedding ceremony, the Methodist church sponsored a pot luck-dinner where they prayed for the boys of their community who were leaving for the war—97 couples recited their wedding vows.

That day, the families were saying goodbye to their boys, sons, brothers and fathers, all 800 of them. With a wing and a prayer, the train whisked them all away before dawn to Normandy. Only 108 returned, Grandpa the last.

(On their wedding night, they held each other all night long wide awake without speaking—in the same bed they shared for 71 years, in the same house Grandpa was born in, the same bed his parents slept in for 52 years, the same bed every grandchild in the family was born in. The same bed that wrapped its arms around Grandma as she sighed her last breath. The same bed waiting for me to return to tell it the secrets of the Hiawatha trail.)

I was the one who could not get enough of the stories Grandpa told. I memorized every detail, and every word of the ancient

languages Grandpa spoke. My secret. Even the wives of my uncles shook their heads, waved him off, and said if even half his adventures were true he would be long-dead.

Grandpa was a hardened stump of a man—emotionally petrified—to everyone but me and Grandma. All of my aunts talked in hushed tones in whispered shadows about the harshness of his demeanor and the unwillingness to do anything with the boys. He never took any of them to this figmented secret place up north, and God forbid he ever put that f-ing bottle of JD away, his constant companion.

Some say he was this way because of the war. At night, if you slept in the spare bedroom under the stairs, you could hear soft whimpering and floorboards creaking as he paced until after midnight, trying to calm his spirit. Grandma would sit quietly, waiting for the storm to pass, and when it did, she would rock him like a baby. He would fall asleep, but you could still hear him calling out in a strange language, warning of imminent danger.

On any given day, Grandpa would whistle, like calling in the hounds, and this was my sign to grab my crawlers and meet him at the end of the drive, jumping into his pride and joy, a 1969 candy-apple-red Cadillac convertible. We would cruise away the afternoon from one favorite fishing hole to another, his stainless steel Coleman cooler clunking in the back seat, fishing poles sticking out everywhere, open minnow bucket sloshing fish whiff and silver minnows on soft white leather seats.

He would tell me about secret places where birch trees grew over 100 feet tall, each with seven branches coming out of the trunk, each arm five feet around. “Untouched by man,” he’d say, “that’s how it got to grow so big.” Rock formations and boulders bigger than a VW Bug out of place right in the middle of the forest; geologists still can’t figure out how they got there. Each with engravings of stick figures with eagle heads, hats and shafts of light coming from their heads, placed in some sort of circle.

He always whispered when he talked about the oldest triple junction rift zone known to exist on the earth’s surface—where seismic evidence indicates to this day that there are sediments filling a crack in the earth’s crust that extends more than 30,000 feet below Lake Gitchie Gumees.

I imagined Grandma and Grandpa used the same trail I was now on. Repeating history, stealing away less than 48 hours before

my very own wedding, to everyone's dismay but Grandpa's. Winding through dusty little burgs, open convertible, music blaring from my iPod and old scratchy speakers on the dash. Stopping for water and thirsting for adventure, fearing the unknown, reveling in love.

Along the way on stream banks and beaches I looked for rocks and shells so I could form my own kind of wampum, to signify a treaty or to codify my upcoming marriage covenant or as a keepsake for making peace after an argument—never to let the sun set on a marital fight, as Grandpa used to say and made me promise I would do—when I became a grown-up.

There were pipes on the sides of dusty roads sticking out of the ground with signs placed there by the locals: "Free Healing Water" or "The cleanest water in the world." Some built elaborate agate shrines and put engraved plaques on them to remember some special local hero or those who served in the war.

I used Grandpa's graying tissue-thin maps, barely readable, the ones with stars next to his favorite places I made sure to visit—creeks, waterfalls and natural springs where I filled up old milk jugs from Grandpa's garage and a green canteen war relic and family heirloom.

Freckled along the margins of my prized maps, I found unusual abbreviations; TRLM-Trillium, ASP-Asparagus, MM-Morel Mushrooms, SH-steelhead, C for Carp, STGN-sturgeon, MSKY-BTRT, W-EYE-SMLT, WF, PCH, JD-Jack Daniels, and a few others I am still trying to decipher: TTS, ASS, JAIL.

These cracked and worn-thin maps are the ones he gave me as we cleaned out his garage just prior to his moving into a home for the elderly and two years after Grandma passed away. The "pool," Grandpa called it, the place where all the good ones are tossed back when they are too old to chase the fly. A place where every fishing story is real and everyone has time to listen.

Grandpa knew he would not be traveling again—handed my dad the keys to his prized possession—and, with a wink and nod in my direction, he reached out to me and handed over those sacred beloved maps, holding onto them so intently, pulling back ever so slightly as I eased them from his fragile, shaking hands, his piercing eyes never leaving mine as he whispered, "Hiawatha is waiting."

Kerry Rutherford

Kerry Rutherford earned a degree in anthropology from the University of Washington. After many moves and jobs (crab-pot webber, public school teacher, grant writer, mother, musician, waitress) she moved to Indiana and worked for an arts nonprofit. Since 2002, she has produced and published two CDs of original music and one poetry book. After nine years away from the Pacific Northwest, Kerry is moving to Portland, Oregon, to be closer to her family. Kerry attended Bear River 2008. In her workshop with Keith Taylor, she created "Toe the Line," which will eventually be incorporated into her memoir in progress.

Toe the Line

It wasn't just the fact that Shelley owned a Doberman named Lucifer and a tarantula that periodically escaped from its glass case, which totally freaked me out. And it wasn't just that she had the cab driver bang on the door at three a.m. to wake me so I could carry her drunk ass into the house along with her blue wheelchair. It was not the fact that she started borrowing money from me halfway through each of the three months I lived in her house, even though I made \$1.25 an hour, plus tips, as a waitress and she'd gotten a \$300,000 settlement from the city (plus \$1000 a month living expenses) because the cannon went off during the Bastille Day parade in downtown Seattle and the wad of confetti (which was supposed to be dry and festive) had become a heavy lump of damp paper and hit Shelley in the abdomen so that she had to have one of her legs amputated.

It wasn't only the stream of colorful and sometimes dangerous people I met who frequented *Shelley's Leg*, the gay bar she started with part of her settlement, or being introduced to my first drag queen show as a guest of the most infamous Shelley Bauman. Nor was I consciously alarmed by riding in the altered push-button car, with a wild, unpredictable, one-legged, red-haired driver at the wheel who would occasionally pull over and empty her urine bag onto the side of the road.

It was not any of these things taken alone that defined that time and place in my life. But taken all together, the intersection of my life with Shelley's is telling for its statement about how life just

seemed to *happen* to me. I had no idea of the potential for disaster that hovered so close to my aura. I was living in a sort of fog, just going along with everyone else's life instead of creating my own. Only recently have I discovered a clue of sorts – that a piece of my personal puzzle ricocheted off a segment of my childhood, embedded itself subliminally in my life, sending out beacons of magnetic energy which then attracted danger and chaos, the causes of which I could not decipher until that very clue was revealed to me.

“The shaman did a journey and saw an incident when I was about two years old,” I said to my eighty-five-year-old mother. “It had to do with Daddy and a message that I had to *toe the line*. Did anything happen back then? I remember the house we lived in with all the woods, but didn't we live in a different house before that? I can't remember anything from that time.”

“Well there was this one little thing that happened,” she said, tentatively, like it was really no big deal. “The house we were in when you were born didn't have a fenced yard. The landlord owned a Doberman and your father never liked that dog. When you and your sister were toddlers, and played in the yard, he always complained to the landlord about the dog coming too close, and he wanted to build a fence. The landlord said no. One day you were sitting in the yard in front of our house with your sister and that Doberman started to come too close. Your father went inside and got his shotgun and killed it with one shot, right over your head.”

I was stunned. That same day I called my friend, Houston, and told him about it and how it seemed to me that I may have received an unconscious message that I better *toe the line*, and subsequently held my true self in check, which created a sort of black-hole-type vacuum, sucking chaos into my life. I was trying to put into words the complex picture I was seeing of my wounded psyche, since he was one of the few people I could talk to about these things. His first comment was, “That's just like that short story Sam Shepard wrote in the book you gave me, about his grandfather throwing a wrench and decapitating a rooster that was headed toward Sam's dad when he was just a baby in diapers in the farmyard and the blood spattered all over him.” I had no idea what he was talking about and was sure he was mistaken. I read Sam all the time, his books of short pieces being my favorites

and being the books I most often purchase for friends. But I could not remember that story. So I went to the bookshelf and paged through the book. And there it was: plain and powerful as day.

It isn't just the fact that I blocked out a traumatic childhood memory, and that the message I received lived in my subconscious, sabotaging my life for so many years. And it's not the fact that I may have totally misinterpreted my father's fierce protection of his daughters and instead, on some level, internalized a warning that something bad would happen if I did not *toe the line*. I guess what blows my mind is realizing that the ability to protect myself from pain could translate into the erasure of a short story from one of my favorite books, as if Obi-Wan Kenobi said: *you will not see this story, young Jedi*. And that, years later, life could just randomly reveal the truth, unlocking a door that lets me walk out into the brilliant sunlight where everything is finally clear.

Barbara Saunier

Barbara Saunier's poems have appeared in *Briar Cliff Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Dogwood*, and *Iconoclast*; and *Big Scream*. Her poems have received two Pushcart nominations, and in the '80s she received a Hopwood minor award for short fiction. At the 2009 Conference, she worked with Thomas Lynch, and was encouraged to ... "well, uh ... steal stuff." She "stole" from R. Tillinghast's *Six Mile Mountain* "Ever" to use as a template for "Displaced," and produced "Add to This Such Comfort" after incorporating a line from someone else.

Displaced

And though day arrives,
the curb holds no dewy promise;
the brick straight-edges light;
the grate grids dank air.

The apron hem
she lifts to her cheek to lean on
tells the story of brown hens spangling the road dust,
tells the secret of asparagus wild in the orchard
and bees frowzy with honeysuckle,
and none of it better now than lies.

Melissa Seitz

Melissa Seitz is a lecturer at Saginaw Valley State University. Her husband and son are an inspiration to her. She enjoys sitting with her dog on her dock at Higgins Lake and thinking about writing. Her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have been published in the *Bear River Review*, *Greenhouse: The First 5 Years of the Rustbelt Roethke Writers' Workshop*, and various other journals. She is currently completing her first book of nonfiction. At Bear River 2009, Melissa attended the Phillip Lopate workshop in essay and memoir. Lopate taught the importance of "thinking against oneself" and "readers must find [us] amusing."

Apple Orchard

August days in Michigan are typically beautiful. The heat of July has waned; flowers and fields bloom with rich blankets of reds and gold. I have decided to take my mother for a drive, and to visit a local apple orchard. My father needs a break, because my mother is living with him again, and he needs some time to himself. Even though he does not tell me, I am well aware that he will be grateful and will find the time alone restful. He smiles at me as I guide my mother towards the door.

My mother shuffles along on feet once strong enough to dance ballet, her white walking shoes barely lifting above the carpet. She turns at the last moment and says: "Is he going with us?" She points at my father as if there is another "he" in the room.

"No," I answer, not sure if she wants him to go, or if she is concerned about being with me. For a moment I wonder if she has forgotten who I am. I push the thought out of my mind. I say: "It will be just the two of us. We are going to an apple orchard to buy some apples and some very special cookies."

She smiles at me, a child's smile of happiness, and we begin our slow trip to the elevator. Although the elevator is approximately thirty feet from my parents' apartment door, and a route my mother has been walking for several years now, the walk brings unexpected discoveries. A painting on the wall catches her eye. A woman passes us in the hallway, and my mother gives her an uncertain smile, even though the woman sings out a cheery "Hello, Margaret."

In the elevator, we ride down quietly. My mother smiles as she feels the rhythm and vibration of the elevator. We reach the first floor of the building, wind through a maze of chairs and people, and make our way outside. I guide her to my car and open the door for her.

My car, an Audi TT, rides low to the ground, so my mother lowers herself gently, as I hold her and help her bend down. In the past, she has called my car “jazzy,” but she does not say this word today. Instead she says: “Is the car new?”

“No, I’ve had it for awhile,” I say, smiling at her, now past the need to remind her of what she has forgotten. When she first started forgetting, I felt the need to remind her if I had told her something ten times or a hundred times. Now I no longer care about being right. Time no longer matters. How long I have owned something is no longer important. Five years could be five minutes.

My mother’s language skills have declined, and as we ride along, I realize I am happy to hear her say anything. I ask: “Would you like me to put the top down?” I point towards the roof of the car. I can tell by the look on her face that I have made a bad suggestion. In the past, I have taken her for rides with the top down, but she always worried that her wig would fly off. At least then she understood the complexity of putting the top down.

The trip to Bayne’s Apple Orchard takes about twenty minutes. As I drive along M-47 towards Freeland, Michigan, she comments on the fields, the trees, the houses, simple sentences, but descriptive.

“Beautiful. Look at those fields. The sky is so pretty. I’m having so much fun.” She smiles at me, nodding, happy. I almost believe everything is normal.

I keep up a running commentary, feel as if I am on a first date and have to impress some young boy I have just recently met. I babble on about this house or that farm or the river, anything to keep our conversation going. I say: “Isn’t this a beautiful day?” She nods her head, and it is almost like we are floating away from her disease and into the past.

We arrive at the apple orchard, and I help her get out of the car. She stands for a few minutes, admiring the store, the trees, the building where they crush the apples, the tables. She makes little statements. “Beautiful.” “Look, apples.”

“Are you ready to go inside?” I ask.

“Sure,” she answers. She hesitates, wondering which way she should go. I grab hold of her arm and guide her towards the store’s main entrance.

My mother wobbles and shuffles her way in. The women working in the store immediately notice her, and offer to help us in any way they can. I love these women instantly. My mother wants to pick up everything and look at it, inspect it, turn it over, around and around. It is as if she has never been in a store like this, or she is a child, seeing things for the first time. I believe I have learned patience, finally, and I have learned it by spending time with my mother. This is not really true. I have selective patience with anyone outside my family. I think of the term “short fuse” and realize it applies to me.

We start picking up things we want to buy. We admire the goat’s milk lotion, one of my mother’s favorite things. When I ask her if she would like some, she smiles, and I pick up a bottle for her and one for myself. One of the women working at the store tells me that we can put everything we want on the counter until we are ready to check out. My mom gives them a wry smile as if she has just been told a secret.

We work our way to the cookie and pie section. Cookies and pies behind the glass of a large white display case overwhelm her. She is confused, uncertain as to where she should focus. A nice young woman behind the counter, a girl, really, begins to explain every single kind of cookie and pie to us. We are in kindergarten, and here is our teacher. We pay close attention.

The girl asks us what we would like. I repeat the question to my mother.

“I don’t know.” She seems to be upset, ready to move on. She looks at the cookies again. She smiles. “That fellow will want one.”

I am amazed. She has remembered my father, that fellow, and he will want a cookie. I buy a dozen cookies, trying to cover all of the bases, and I also buy my father a cherry pie to make him smile. I would buy everything in the store if I could – as if it would make a difference, make the ugly disease go away.

As we walk away from the display cases, my mother spots a caramel apple wrapped in cellophane.

“What’s this?”

“A caramel apple,” I say.

“Really,” she says.

I show an apple to her, to show its beginning. She watches me closely as I begin my explanation of the process. Strangely, I had practice making caramel apples with my son’s hockey team when he was sixteen. The parents of one of his teammates had an apple orchard, and we helped make pies and caramel apples as a fundraiser. I know what I am talking about for a change.

Explaining the caramel apple process to my mother takes five minutes. The woman behind the counter, where all of our purchases-to-be are now, watches us with a smile on her face. I finish the tale of the caramel apple, and I ask her if she would like to buy one.

She looks at me, looks at the caramel apple in my hand. “I don’t think so.”

I wonder if my explanation has failed, or if it seems that eating it would be as much trouble as making it. We walk to the checkout area.

My mother stands next to me with her hands on the counter. “What are we doing?” she asks, a look of uncertainty on her face. It has been years since she has purchased something at a store. She does not seem to remember how it works.

“I have to pay for our things,” I say. I hand the clerk my charge card, and my mother watches with great interest. She does not ask about the charge card. I wonder if she remembers money. She loses interest at this point and walks off to pick up a hat she has found. She runs her fingers over the material, turns it over and over. I wait to see if she tries it on, but she does not.

“You are a wonderful daughter,” the woman behind the counter tells me.

I burst into tears, and for a wild moment I almost believe her. I can never shake the feeling that I am not doing enough. I mumble a simple “thank you,” and try to pick up our purchases, realizing I am going to have to get my mother into the car first.

“I will help you out,” the woman says. She carries the pies, cookies, lotion, and other odd things we have picked up outside. She talks about what beautiful weather we are having, and we chat as I guide my mother along.

My mother slides into her seat with little trouble, and the woman helps me load our purchases into the trunk of the car. I thank the woman and tell her how wonderful she has been.

My mother and I travel back the way we came.

"Did you enjoy the apple orchard?" I ask.

"Oh, yes, honey," she says, reaches over and pats my knee. We ride in silence for a few minutes, until a field catches her eye.

"Isn't that beautiful?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. I try to focus on the road in front of me, but I realize I want to focus on everything around me, everything that is alive. The field of grass slopes downward towards a row of trees. They edge up against the riverbank like red and gold guardians. The river below flows, vibrant and alive.

I want to believe that the world is beautiful and I am a good daughter. I want every day to be this day.

Susannah Sheffer

Susannah Sheffer is the author of three books and is at work now on a book about the emotional experience of capital defense attorneys. Her essays and poems have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and she works regularly with teenaged writers, both individually and in workshops. She worked with Dorianne Laux at Bear River 2009.

Deciding

Summer evenings when the opera singer
practiced and practiced her aria
I lay at the window listening

until the notes sounded like they came
not from any one body
but from the world itself

doing what it had to do: splitting open
into lament, the vowels
that would go on and on

if no one stopped them. By themselves
they would never resolve
into form; they would stay

in the open mouth,
the melody that cannot help itself,
scaling and continuous.

So what I had to do, lying there
on the bed, humid with wanting
and not wanting to listen, was

hold out my hands and
make myself into the shape
that something needs

in order to be
caught and cradled,
able to bear being told.

A Knowledge Like Glass

Afterward you reach for it
like a marble in the pocket,
a private certainty
that only your hand knows.
This is what you hold,
what you tell yourself,
what people cannot tell
by looking at you,
what the moon would be
if you took it into your mouth
and sucked it smooth,
what the fire has cooled and become.

How He Chose It

Because I came too early,
because I had had enough and wanted more,
they weren't ready, they were caught,
they would have held me back,
said give us a little more time.
This was not how they'd pictured it,
but then who's to say they pictured anything,
who's to say they understood the longings
this third person would satisfy, or create.
So he left the hospital to stand in the park,
stepping out of the scene
in order to see it more clearly.
He thought it might come to him there
the way things sometimes come
if we stand in the right place,
hold ourselves the right way.
He thought he might learn to recognize
what he had been given,
what had burst into his life,
breathing and actual,
not an idea but something that had entered
in its own way and own time,
something that needed a name.

Ken Shelton

Ken Shelton is a singer-songwriter, an educator and pastor. He has written two books, *Covenant Talk*, and *Understanding Your Spiritual Intelligence*. In addition, several of his songs and musical narratives have been published and recorded. Ken is a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers and he resides in Brighton, Michigan. His first year at Bear River was 2009, where he was honored to work with poet and author Thomas Lynch.

Baptism at Bear River

I waded in
to weeds, waist high
and thick, heavy with
morning dew.

Came brushing up
against thistle,
milkweed, cattail, fern,
lacy webs.

Then stepping out
beyond them, I
found the river, chest
deep with words.

Heroin in the Heartland

Bryan was a clean, almost preppy kind-of-guy who decided (for reasons we'll never know) to give heroin a try. He was already dead when his friend, Matt, dropped him off at the hospital. Matt told the lady at the registration desk that he decided to drive Bryan himself, rather than call 911 or wake up family members — asleep in the next room — because he panicked. The detective told us that it was the third time in as many months that Matt had dropped someone off at the E.R.

Apparently, heroin is migrating — moving from its former urban digs and invading the otherwise pastoral setting of suburbia and rural America — the heartland. I know this is true, in part because of Randall Archibald's *New York Times* article that proclaimed, "WAR WITHOUT BORDERS - In Heartland Death, Traces of Heroin's Spread" (May 31, 2009). But I knew it anyway — because Bryan OD'd. Call it what you like: dragon, hero, Big H, China white, black tar, black pearl, brown sugar, Mexican mud or plain old smack, it's a big deal these days, and it's more lethal than it used to be.

As soon as I arrived at the hospital to be with Bryan's parents, we were escorted to the emergency room, where all five feet ten inches and one hundred seventy pounds of Bryan's lifeless body lay — his collar-length, medium brown hair falling in strands over his unshaven face. The detective said that a sample of his hair would be tested to try and determine if he had been a long-time user or if he was new to the drug.

To force myself to stay in the moment, I blocked out the hospital surroundings and made believe that Bryan was a wax figure in a museum — a coping mechanism I've taught myself over the years as a local church pastor in a small Michigan town. It doesn't work. It's the smell.

His father slumped in a heap on the backless physician's stool, then, dropped his head and folded arms on the dead boy and sobbed like a baby. His mother and stepfather turned my way. I was trying to comfort them when his older sister came in the room and started yelling and calling him a *stupid f'r*, because he was only thinking of himself, and he was the fourth *f'n friend* to die in six weeks. She pressed her fists together in front of her bowed head, sobbed and drew her shoulders around in a standing fetal

position. She didn't budge when I put my arm around her. *Stupid fr*, she whispered again.

Mr. Archibald's article is about families in Grove City, Ohio, who have been stunned by the drug's arrival. It's in small towns all across Michigan as well. He reports that human smugglers called *coyotes* bring the stuff into the States from Mexico. Then it's delivered to *cells* that move around every few weeks to avoid detection. These days, the heroin is often laced with fentanyl, which is cheaper than heroin, but a hundred times more powerful. That way, the dealers make more money and the drug is more addictive – and deadly – often on the first hit. *Stupid frs!*

When Bryan was still alive, he enjoyed acting and playing practical jokes. Fittingly, to ease the tension and anger for a brief moment, his mother instructed the undertaker to bury him in a pair of red sparkly tights she found in his room. Truth is, the entire week of Bryan's funeral was totally cheerless – until his sister stepped to the podium during the service to say a few words. I think we all expected more anger, but she didn't go there. Instead, she recalled good times, like when Bryan and some friends trespassed at a local ski hill for a midnight *butt race*, and the Halloween he decided to dress like a tampon. In spite of the awkwardness of the moment, nearly everyone in the church responded with belly laughs at the memory of this otherwise happy boy. It was the first deep breath any of us had taken, but laughter won't push heroin out of the heartland. We may have all laughed, but we didn't mean it.

Robert E. Smith

Robert E. Smith attended the 2009 Bear River workshop led by Laura Kaschiske. He has been writing for many years but has never been published. He says if he continues at his present pace he'll break the rejection record of F. X. Toole (author of *Million Dollar Baby*). What he learned in Laura Kaschiske's workshop is to trust his writing instincts.

The Sacred Mounds

Out of the hazy halo created by early morning sun and fog, a white-tailed deer bounded across the freeway, clearing the front of Mitch Canfield's car by an eyelid, but then colliding with a metallic blue Honda, the impact throwing the golden-brown deer to the side of the freeway. The Honda veered into the viaduct railing at high speed, the collision decapitating the driver.

Mitch braked, swinging onto the left shoulder. He stopped, thankful he hadn't been rear-ended. Trembling violently, he stared into the rearview mirror and was astonished to see the bloodied deer lurch to its feet, shake its head as if clearing it of pain, and continue on, entering the southbound lane right in the path of a semi-trailer.

The truck driver veered his John Deere rig with two attached trailers onto the median grass, overturning in his attempt to avoid the deer. The long line of vehicles behind hurled themselves at each other as if in anger. Twisted metal, cracked plastic, and shattered pieces of glass were tossed into the air and pelted down upon the freeway like oversized hailstones.

Mitch sat there in a daze, the engine running and audio-tape playing the soundtrack from the Best of Bach. He turned off the engine, unbuckled his seatbelt, and opened the door. Smoke spewed forth from the long tangle of metal and broken glass as dazed drivers and passengers began to emerge from their vehicles. He leaned against his Bronco and felt numbed, but at the same time all his senses became acutely keen. He saw the deer through the haze of smoke as it bounded in the distance and disappeared in fog over the Indian mounds. A stillness fell upon the freeway, as if it were waiting for that first faint knock to awaken this stunned mass of humanity.

The misty halo melted overhead as the rising sun lifted the morning fog. Mitch walked back to the crash of the blue Honda with the guardrail. The beheaded body lay sprawled over the twisted hood. Mitch's stomach heaved as he gasped for air. Averting his eyes, he turned toward the median gully, only to be confronted by the stare of her blond head lying on top of a pile of discarded black tires. She glared at him, as if begging him to return her to her body. Hypnotized by her fierce look, Mitch descended the gully in a trance-like stupor. He bent down and grasped a tangle of blond hair and raised the head off to his side to avoid the warm blood which spilled out and steamed as it splattered onto the cold, dewy grass, and he began to ascend the gully. Halfway up, Mitch hesitated as the faint whisper of a distant humming broke the quiet. He continued up the gully cautiously and then quickly crossed the pavement and placed the head on the mangled body, which was protruding from the windshield of the metallic blue Honda. Mitch took off his maroon mountain parka and tossed it over the united corpse.

A foreboding, mechanical, rhythmic chopping stormed onto the cataclysm; Mitch glanced up and saw the med-evac helicopter slowly descending onto a grassy knoll adjacent to the southbound lane. He was now in the rice paddies of his eighteen-year-old youth, among ghosts that would never cease haunting him. For two eternal minutes he suffered, anticipating a helicopter's rescue from Vietnam's jungles. He was frightened and yet exalted, knowing that the helicopter like a descending angel would save and deliver him, and he began to pray: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us..."

"Do I have any cuts or bruises on my face?" A gray-haired man shouted as he thrust himself upon Mitch's stare and stunned Mitch into reality.

"No, no!" Mitch stuttered as he backed away. "You appear fine. There's a scratch on your forehead."

"How did all this happen?"

"Didn't you see the deer?"

"No. I didn't."

"The deer ran in front of this blue Honda," Mitch said as they began to descend the median gully and walk up the south bound lane. "Miraculously, it picked itself up after it was thrown off to

the side and then ran in front of that semi. I watched it disappear over the Indian mounds next to the river.”

The med-evac helicopter crew disentangled the body of the driver from the overturned semi with cool military precision, placed his mangled remains on the pavement, and covered him with a blanket. The team continued to search along the succession of rear-ended vehicles that appeared like a loosely thrown chain lying on the entire south-bound lane.

The med-evac team carried two litters past Mitch, who was now directly in front of the helicopter. A grassy knoll allowed space for its ascent as its whirling blades sucked up discarded Styrofoam cups and leaves. Another National Guard camouflaged helicopter landed on the periphery of the grassy knoll and its crew set up a med station to care for the injured.

“This reminds me of my Vietnam days,” Mitch said as he escorted a woman with facial scratches. “I was a medic and seriously considered medicine, but after all the heartbreaking trauma I saw, I couldn’t see myself as a doctor.”

“Who will pick up that body over there? I vowed that when I left Vietnam that I would never allow a body bag to just sit there and lie around.”

“It looks like only two are dead – the blue Honda driver and the truck driver,” a guardsman replied. “How did this happen?”

“A deer ran in front of both the Honda and truck. They veered to avoid it,” Mitch said. “I saw the whole thing. I even saw the deer disappear over the Indian mounds over there.” Mitch pointed at the mounds.

“There he is again. Probably browsing on acorns.”

“Where?” The guardsman asked as he looked over the hill.

“Right there on that mound between the two oaks.”

“Nothing there as far as I can see.”

The deer, its golden-brown coat radiant and antlers glistening in the early morning sun, froze and peered fixedly at Mitch and began to stomp the ground with its front hoof, as if it were taunting Mitch.

“He’s probably in his full rut,” Mitch said, “completely unaware of the accident.”

“What did you say?” interrupted the guardsman.

“Oh, I guess the deer would be at the peak of his mating. The rut or the mating season reaches its peak the middle of October,” Mitch said as the deer melted into the trees.

“Two cultures, two thousand years apart,” Mitch mumbled as he turned toward the east side of the freeway and its rail yard with long lines of rusty brown boxcars. On the opposite side, the west side, was the Grand River Valley, a wilderness dominated by giant oaks, maples, and basswood trees, which hid the river when they were in full leaf. Adjacent to the river, and dating from Christ’s time, were also the ancient Indian burial mounds—rounded swellings of earth about the size of a two-stall garage.

The grassy knoll was alive this morning, as it might have been two thousand years ago during some ancient ceremony to honor the deceased, but blaring sirens, crackling police and ambulance radios, and flashing red and blue lights were the High Mass now being offered to appease the gods who had been disturbed on that cool autumn morning. All the accident victims were drawn to this enclave, a sanctuary of grief. They sat on the grass, now dry from the sun, some lying down, turning their eyes from the accident and staring blankly at the river in the distance. The Indian mounds lay there peacefully in the shadows, the leaves from the giant oaks and maples gently falling on the mounds and the lazily flowing river. The sun from a cloudless blue sky beat down on the grassy hill with its assembled congregation.

Mitch, drawn and exhausted, stood there, hypnotized by all the natural rhythms.

“Look! There it is again,” Mitch said as an object emerged from the mist and long morning shadows. But the deer didn’t appear. Crawling out of the burial mounds, their hands clawing at the dirt and grass, were the brightly painted bodies of woodland Indians, arising in the beaded splendor of their burial garments.

Mitch shielded his eyes from the blinding glow radiating from the tribe that was surfacing after 2,000 years of silence. He could see the red terror in their eyes as they began to advance up the hill toward the freeway. Chanting loudly, they were suddenly upon him. A hand reached out and grasped Mitch’s hair. As the hatchet swished though the air, Mitch lunged backward and ran toward the freeway. Tripping and stumbling down the grassy knoll, Mitch fell and lay upon the grass.

The surrounding throng, however, was unaware of Mitch's presence or his vision. This congregation, anesthetized by their morning trauma, sat there entranced, waiting for their sacrifice to consummate, spellbound by the softly falling leaves and the mist arising from the Indian mounds and the river. An eerie, faint, inhuman sound began to echo into the morning air, at first faintly registering upon their consciousnesses – a pleasant, natural, rhythmic beating which was unlike the sharpness crackling from the accident. The sound was drawing closer, along with a rush of gentle wind. The crowd of accident victims began to huddle closely together like a herd of sheep preparing to fend off another threat. A shadow darkened the ground, its blackness slowly spreading, as if a rug were being unrolled over a blue sky. Everyone turned their eyes toward the heavens and saw the immense flock of Canadian geese blocking the sun.

"They probably rested in the gravel pits next to the gypsum mines. They aren't in their V-formation yet," Mitch said.

All eyes were fixed on the flock of geese, now directly above and gaining altitude as they flew south over the trees and along the path of the river. They gazed upon their flight until the distance swallowed up their image.

Mitch reached into his pocket and felt the smooth, planed surface of his flint arrowhead – his good luck charm. He continued to stare at the mounds and the river, but slowly awakened from his reverie as the departing congregation quietly dispersed. The Mass had ended.

"Mitch, is that you?" Joyce asked. "And why are you home so early? You forgot to put the garbage out again this morning."

Mitch closed the garage door and walked into the kitchen.

"My God, Mitch, what happened? You're a mess! What have you been doing? And ah! You smell like some dead animal run over along the road!"

"Didn't you hear about the accident? I've been there all day," Mitch said. "There was a multiple rear-end collision on the Ford freeway next to the Indian mounds. A hundred and twenty-seven vehicles were involved. The worst rear-end collision ever in Michigan."

"Well, thank God you seem to be fine. You weren't hurt, were you?"

“No.”

“And don’t come any further, and take off those muddy shoes. You’re tracking mud all over our new carpet. Take that shirt off, too. It’s caked with gunk.”

Mitch tracked back to the garage, sat down on the concrete step, removed his shoes and socks, took off his red chamois shirt and t-shirt and tossed them onto the plastic garbage container. Naked to the waist, he returned to the kitchen, only to be halted by his wife’s frown.

“You seem to be fine. Maybe that Indian arrowhead...what do you call it—a Norton-Corner notched point—was good luck this time. You always carry it in your pocket. And it seems right, being in that accident. You’re always taking the boys down there and lecturing them on the merits of this wonderful lost civilization. You love it. Well, let me tell you about my day, my day of teaching, if you will. One of my little monsters vomited this morning and then this afternoon another one, you know the Michael boy, was having a drink at the water fountain and another monster hit his head and pushed his teeth into the faucet. He broke off two front teeth. Now we’re having violence among eight-year-olds.”

“He’s a nice kid. I had him in boy scouts.”

Joyce stood in front of the hall tree mirror, adjusting her Mikimoto pearl necklace. “This isn’t too much jewelry for my parents? I’m wearing your gift from Vietnam, Mitch. Remember this from long...”

“No, no, no. Joyce, you appear fine.”

“My parent-teacher conferences won’t be over until about ten. Todd and Ray are at band practice, so they won’t be home until later. You’ll have to take care of yourself,” Joyce said, and left in her always-hurried manner.

Mitch lingered in the kitchen, absorbing the quietness around him. He stared out the bay window at the stakes that were standing from last summer’s garden, then picked up the pint bottle of murky Grand River water that stood on the sill and reread the label: *To Mitch Canfield, District Director of the Department of Natural Resources, Fresh Grand River Water, Bottled and Unaltered by your colleagues, Enjoy.* He smiled and rubbed the bottle in both hands as his memory filled with the pleasantries of his fifty-fifth birthday party last Saturday. He gently placed the bottle back on the sill

and staggered reluctantly down the hall, his bare feet absorbing the soft carpet. He grabbed the railing at the bottom of the stairs, ascended slowly, walked down the hall past Ray's and Todd's rooms, and entered the bedroom where all this was conceived.

Mitch tripped on the carpet in front of the mantle mirror. Raising himself, he was stunned by his reflection. He ran his hands through his hair and squinted at the gray creeping into the black mass. He moved closer to the mirror and looked down at the assortment of his wife's cosmetics scattered on the counter, picked up Joyce's plastic cosmetic bag, dumped the contents, and read the labels on the lipsticks: "Smoky, Alana's Apricot, Mitchell's Mirage, Maryanne's Mist, Purple Passion, Vamp Red." He picked up the Smoky, removed the cap, unscrewed the base to raise the lipstick, painted a line from the corner of his mouth to each ear and joined these two lines above and below his lips. He picked up the Vamp Red and painted a thick line on the bridge of his nose. On each side of his forehead, he made two circles with Maryanne's Mist. He removed the cap from the charcoal black eyeliner pencil and, starting at his right ear, drew a line to the corner of his eye, extending the line above his eyelashes, across the bridge of his nose, above his other eye lash and then to his left ear. He picked up Joyce's mascara, unscrewed the mascara brush, and attempted to blacken his eyelashes. On his bare chest, he drew a circle around each nipple with Purple Passion.

Remaining in front of the mirror, he smiled at his painted image, but the smile abruptly disappeared. The trauma of the accident, the deer, the Indians, the ghosts from Vietnam, his whole life were now battling inside of his mind. Tears began to well up uncontrollably in the corners of his eyes and roll down his cheeks, smearing his painted image. Flowing freely, his tears became like a river of red drops spilling onto his bare chest. His image faded and then rose upon the glass; at first faintly were the rounded heaps of mounds, and as he focused more intently, the deer appeared. The first sob pierced the stillness, and then, crying and trembling violently, he attempted to brace himself in front of the mirror. The room was spinning, spinning like a top. Then the wild, dreadful screaming began and the final breaking.

Holly Wren Spaulding

Holly Wren Spaulding won five undergraduate Hopwood Awards (poetry and essay) while at U of M and earned her Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Her work has appeared in *The Nation*, *The Ecologist*, *The Dunes Review* and other places. She won the 2008 Michigan Writers Cooperative Press chapbook competition for her first collection of poems, *The Grass Impossibly*. At Bear River, she wrote "Not Having the Affair" in Richard Tillinghast's workshop in 2008. She worked with Dorianne Laux in 2009. Holly teaches creative writing / composition at Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City.

Not Having the Affair

This is the story version, the one in which both are characters. His body isn't hesitant and hers doesn't strive to be modest. They can avoid certain topics – the wife, the unborn baby – and they begin to live more easily. As a character, as someone other than himself, he calls her Kind Visitor and Most Magnificent. She is tenuous and tender. She is still cautious. They look away as often as they don't. He stands close enough to smell her: June and the last of the peonies. Words are still extravagant. She leans into every word, not wanting to miss anything. Rooms are day-lit when his white shirt flashes in the periphery. His long body lopes over the property; it disappears down two-tracks. Sometimes they hear loons in the evening. Sometimes they go night swimming. They marvel at the surroundings, the coldness of the water. Acute and silent at the end of the summer dock,
they wonder at the thin air between them. They swell even in austerity.
Even in the fiction, she doesn't have to seduce him to know that it would be brilliant. She calls it calm submission. She calls it beautiful. This is new to her, this ardor even in abstention. In the story version, they slow at this part to linger over the details. It rains until supper. There is a mountain lake, acres of wildflowers. There are phones ringing and no one wants to answer them.

Maybe the Hemlock

Two loons on a lake
in the evening fog,
the air thick with it,
pale water barely moving.

I'm like a days-old fawn
setting out for the grasses —
I'm nimble again;
I smell like the hollows.

Once, I wanted only sounds
and scents of another human —
I founded islands with my body
and we lived there, expectant.

Now, I want to take the whole
world in, bear it all back to brightness.
I linger in the sumac,
bury notes in the branches.

I want this suddenly —
like fire in high summer
or lightning. Like ferns unfurling
in time-lapse photography.

Maybe the hemlock will know me,
or the turtle in his shell of solitude.
Maybe the one brown fish
feeding in the shallows

will signal that we are relations.

Jennifer Sperry Steinorth

Jennifer Sperry Steinorth studied dance for many years with the Houston Ballet and is graduate of Interlochen Arts Academy where she majored in dance. She is a builder and designer for a small, green-building company in Traverse City, Michigan, and the mother of two boys averaging about half a dozen adult teeth each. Poems by Jennifer Sperry and Jennifer Sperry Steinorth have previously appeared in the Dunes Review, and she is a frequent contributor to *Foreword Magazine*. In 2010 her poetry manuscript *Forking the Swift*, was awarded publication through Michigan Writers Cooperative Press.

Late Day, Traverse Bay – Sun, Acutely

for Mark

Starboard – light refracts off the water –

that pewter platter –
sun casts a watery sliver
of incandescent pie.

Portside – light is swallowed –

by the blue, that berry –
it sinks into the deep, round sweep
of dusk.

We cut through well keeled –

children aslant in the hull,
walking on walls,
on water –

like a knife through hot pastry –

a generous slice,
the first, fruit
not yet set.

We heap our helpings into shallow bowls
and the whole fills in behind us.

My Girl, Lay Down Your Burden

—*pour tout les sylphides Bournonvilles*

My girl Christie says, "what if *we* was as small as these ants?
Those rocks ain't much bigger than my double D's, and *they'd* be
like mountains." Oh yeah, those days never wore panties,
trumped up cowboy boots or nothing at all – leant back on the hood
of the truck and napped for days. Those days had ways.
The steep slide from the shoulder where we parked
the pick-up. The gravel passage down deep in the ravine.
Everything green. August. Wednesday. Doubled over Elm
across the tread where I cracked my head. Christie says
maybe I got a concussion. Got a summit cross my brow.
Christie says I'm a goddess. *She's* a goddess. Or a queen.
Or a sylph. Yeah, we're sylphish.
Watch us climb the boulders naked and dance for our man.
Watch us swim the quick aqua like black water snakes,
lie on the hot stone, wet and shimmering. See her cups
of summer slick, moss and soft along the creek, my knees
like stony islands forking the swift – we set the world adrift.
We skim the tall, gorge wall like goats, skirt the mountains
with the creek. Christie's a siren singing down the sun.
I'm casting the moon to its moody blue. We hewn of silver,
amber, plum. We joy and glum. Christie pinch an ant out
the stones of rubble bed, says "what if *we* was as small as this?"
Awh, sweet girl, don't you know, *we is*.

Ellen Stone

Ellen Stone lives her academic life teaching at Community High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but her poetry life begins each June in Laura Kasischke's Bear River workshops. There, Ellen is the student and works feverishly to keep up with Laura's prompts and assignments. It is the highlight of Ellen's writing year. "A Maple Leaf Life" was written late one night in June of 2008 at Bear River. She heard Amy Hempel tell a story about Richard Howard during her lecture and was inspired. Ellen's poems have appeared in several magazines.

Maple Leaf Life

*– in honor of Amy Hempel, Richard Howard
and the writers of Bear River*

I have lived a maple leaf life.
Sugar sap rise and fall
through harsh springs
with full frosts after they're due
and too much heat in a rush
of sudden sun in chill March
that sends my thin blood pooling
into the hard small core inside.

The green of June has saved me,
kept me strong and able
to open out and fly to the
corners that constrain me.
A square proximity of logic
has kept me in my own yard.
Still, I look beyond from a height
that is contained, and shimmer
in the summer wind, burnished
into something soft and supple.

I have come to look for autumn
gladly, a last mad dash
of gathering all I find so sweet
and golden. Infused in me,

the songs of laden grasses,
swoop and cry of cooper hawk,
the deepest red berry edge.
September dawning so ripe
and full. Delirious.

Come November I have rested
flat on my back in gullies
under the rich yellow of the late
harvest moon. What more do
you want of me? Is it not enough
to filter down into soft piles of heft,
and fill the ditches and gashes
of the endless, cruel world?

Even in death, I will smell like a beginning,
the crumbled, rich scent of hubris, cider
brown and cinnamon. Layered, moist,
a subtle plume, skein of spidery breath
alive and dying. Warm. Pulsed. Ready.

Pia Taavila

Pia Taavila is a Professor of English at Gallaudet University, the nation's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. She lives in Fredericksburg, VA, and has a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. Pia's book, *Moon on the Meadow* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2008), is a collection of 126 poems published across thirty years' time. Pia was a recipient of an Artist's Award as a writer in residence at the Vermont Studio Center. She is at work revising her next collection of poems, *Two Winters*. Pia attends Bear River as often as her schedule will allow.

Memorial Day

Against the window, a cold rain spits,
relentless as boredom. Beachside gulls
collect and stand, hunch-shouldered
against grey waves that pound.
Sailboats and skiffs rock; the ropes pull
from pilings at the pier while a lighthouse
beacon wheels its charted course.

Fishermen slump at the bar, watch
hockey on the flickering screen. As coins
jingle in their apron pockets, barmaids
with pencils in their hair make change
and small talk. I sip a beer at a sticky table.
The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald crackles
from the jukebox. Young couples erupt

in raucous laughter. My fingers find and trace
your initials, cut in block letters,
then mine, below the arrowed heart.
A veteran of the foreign wars wipes
dry the legions of dripping mugs.
The barkeep asks if I want another.
No, I say softly. No.

Service Call

A chip in the windshield now forms
a star, its end points indeterminate,
so a man named Tiny carefully paints
with clear polymer, dipping and wiping
the brush as if he were polishing
his grandmother's gnarled toes.

I watch him work, his belly draped
across the hood of my vehicle like so much
sack meal bulging from burlap. It's a small
car, but he's up on his tiptoes, reaching,
wiping sweat on the back of his sleeve.
He hums a soft tune, which I recognize,

an Irish lull-a-bye, transplanted tune
here in the Tennessee hills. Tiny wraps
up his work, sets the bottle among its fellows.
He checks my roadside membership card,
has me sign smeared papers, ambles
back to the truck and waves goodbye.

As he puttters away, a sign below the winch
reads: Murphy's Service: We Tow To and Fro.
Murphy. My great-grandparents' last name.
On my mother's side. I stand and watch long
after the wrecker dips below the road's horizon,
my glued star crystallized in mid-day sun.

Laurence W. Thomas

Laurence W. Thomas is the editor of *Third Wednesday*, a literary arts journal (thirdwednesday.org). He has published ten books of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, humor, and essays. For the last 18 years, he has lectured on poetry and conducted workshops at the Lucidity Poets Retreat in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Thomas worked with Jim Daniels at Bear River and says it was an experience of unfoldment, a time of exploring old forms, experimenting with new ways of expressing ideas, finding unexplored ideas and capturing them in words.

Ghazal for a Dull Day

I fill my coffee cup, butter a muffin, turn on the news
and watch as the sun readies my garden for another day.

After morning news and commercials seen *ad nauseam*,
television wafts me off to places I'd as lief not go.

Wandering through pages of the nearest book,
I find escape to anonymity from the world I know.

The hush of pages veils the noises from outdoors,
a distant plane, the thrum of traffic miles away.

I check the Internet to see what messages have been sent.
My friends, at occupations elsewhere, have better things to do.

My indefatigable cat nuzzles my hand, his hours as long as mine:
a tummy rub to vary the regimen of his day, at odds with ennui.

Scanning the channels for something to while away the time,
all I find are judges, preachers, Martha Stewart, Oprah.

I wait, but the telephone remains as quiet as my needs.
Even the crows have removed themselves to the tallest tree.

Bill Trevarthen

Bill Trevarthen attended the 2009 Bear River Writers Conference, working with Keith Taylor. For over 20 years, he worked as assistant publisher and managing editor at Baker Publishing. As executive director of Michigan Government Television, a statewide cable network, Bill wrote and produced two documentaries: *Defining Moments: Frank Murphy, Fred Korematsu, and the Internment of Japanese Americans During World War II*, and *Oh, Could They But Speak: The History and Importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags*. He has been writing poetry and short fiction for much of his life.

The Effort of Flying

My father always dreamed that he could fly. He used to tell us this when we were kids, and I envied him. I'd wished that, like him, I could go out the window of my room at night, stand for a moment on the sill, take off, and soar. Several times I did dream I could fly, but I had to will it so. I never flew too high.

The mists of earlier in the day lifted; the sky over the lake cleared. A fine light replaced the fog. We stood and watched the birds swoop in the spring gift of late evening sun. Surely this must be sport for them at this point in the day; their work was done. I've always hoped that birds would have at least this compensation for their labor of surviving and raising young: that their lives, though brief, would sometimes be ecstatic.

When I was nearly 40, I confessed to my father, finally, how much I envied him his dreams. "How thrilling it must be," I said, "for you to open up the window, step out on the porch roof, and just take off, a Chagall figure rising in the gray night of dreams."

"No," he said. "It isn't like that. I hate it when this dream comes on. It's hard, it's such a labor. It takes more effort than you can know."

When he was dying and the end got near, my older brother called me several times to say, "You've got to come home now. He's waiting for you to come home so he can die."

"I don't think that's true," I said. "We said our goodbyes in October when I was home. We'll be there for the funeral."

But I did go. They moved him to a nursing home the day my wife and I arrived. Hospice at home was not working in the end. He was alone in a room, a little sign from staff above his bed: "Welcome, Bob," it said. There was so little of him left that Munch could have sketched him with just a few dark strokes. We held his hand and spoke to him, not sure he heard a thing. After a while what little breath there was just seemed to stop.

I hoped this letting go, this taking off, was as it seemed. No effort at all.

Angela Williams

Angela Williams studied creative writing and theatre at Western Michigan University. Her work has been in *Mississippi Review*, *GSU Review*, *Driftwood*, *Dunes Review*, *Writer's Voice* and other journals. Her first book, an industrial memoir about her work in the cherry industry, *With a Cherry on Top*, was released in 2006 by Mayapple Press. Her first book of poems, *Live from the Tiki Lounge*, was released in 2008. Attending Jim Daniels' workshop in 2008 and Thomas Lynch's in 2009 gave her new perspectives and inspired a series of poems influenced by Edward Hopper's paintings.

What Can Save Us

For Timothy

Your name is the soft grasses
for deer to bed down on that grows
between tree rows of apples
in orchards this side of the hill
from the big lake. These are
the grasses in which dogs prefer
to roll, rocking their blessed hips
and graced limbs in time to the wind.

The whippoorwills sing from
the shadowed phalanx of locust trees,
twilight blue and square-shouldered
as we wait for some answer,
for the moon to show its
upturned face, for the stars to
appear and call us to lie in the
grass to watch them dance.

For Hard Cider in January

The wind kept the sweat from streaking my sternum.
I loosened my shirt. It was almost November.
I gathered four bushels of grounders for pressing

before resting on the fieldstone fence, the same stone
as the farmhouse fireplace, the chimney climbing the clapboard
whose porch held no anger for the muddy-stepped children

tracing its boards off to chores, nor for the quiet feet of
those who knew it was better to raise up things, touch glasses,
finger a razor strop of hope this next harvest will be better.

Saturday at 4:00 p.m.

It's become a precise dance of arms and legs;
the tea ceremony we learned so long ago, now part of us,
our muscles, our hearts.

It is your brow, your eyes now closed to me, I see
when I try to breathe properly.

I understand now why Chagall's lovers floated, why I know the
scent of his flowers, how something can be enough if
we choose for it to be.

Anthony Zick

Anthony Zick was in Jerry Dennis's class at the 2008 Bear River Writers' Conference. He is a second-year student at Washtenaw Community College. He plans to major in either Philosophy or English. He has poems published in a couple of anthologies and literary magazines, most notably *Poetry in Performance*, *Decibels*, and *The Huron River Review*.

On the Way Back from Bear River

1.

We pass fire pits.
We pass pine trees.
We pass Walloon Lake,
flashes shift over the surface,
shop stoops, street lamps, fill up spots.
We pass an entire field of yellow flowers.

2.

Jaime,
You stopped partway through
your poem, said you were dizzy,
head tilted up, squinting, sunstruck.
Some say there was a moment
the muscles in your face gave way.
The light shone hard through windows.

People jostled up to your side.
Forgive me, I did not. I'd never spoken with you before.

3.

This Saturday — you passed,
during my graduation open house.
We were celebrating.

The sun was everywhere, I was wearing slacks
and a button-down shirt.
My Godfather came, brought me sunflowers and a card.
He has cancer, that's all I know about it.
The past week, he's bought me five books,
none of which I've heard of.
He's always had a hand for gifts.
We both know
we don't see each other much.
I'm unassertive,
he loves to work.
It's all right. When I see him
it's always a gift
and here he comes with a vase of sunflowers
and I give him a hug.
Later I tell him, "Thank you for everything you've done."
I should have realized that this might sound insincere
because he chuckled,
said, "That almost sounds insincere."
But I meant it.

4.

Jaime.
Age 71.
You had a brain aneurysm
and a microphone
and a poem for the reading
in reverse order.
I tried to write it down as you read.
Part of it went like this:

"a party! ladies laughed at the sound of violins
I hear'em laughing and dancing down there."

A man needs help easing you down
to your seat, to the ground,
says "Get the young men over here."
Young men,
young man.
I got up but there was no room for my hands.

I thought of the way that faith heals,
I don't always know what that means.
I couldn't even manage to kneel in public.
Instead I descended the steps to the basement,
found a spot in the farthest corner.

5.

On the way back from Bear River,
Mr. Kass is driving,
Ben's up front, Marshall to my right,
Kate sleeping in the backseat.
It's strange;
Ben playfully thwaps Mr. Kass on the head.
It sounds a little too loud for bones.
I see Marshall next to me, he's napping I think.
I think of how he is next to me and
has been for a little while and will be for a little while
and how, though we're both sitting,
we're moving
past hills, past lake, past the streetlights.
We pass an entire field of yellow flowers.
And I'm starting to feel like a flower, God.
I see them everywhere; I kiss them on the cheek,
let them do the same,
and I don't feel like we die.
I feel like we move and we move
with you,
like a flower,
like a gift.

In Memoriam

Jaime Courtney
2008 Conference Participant

and

Judy Reid
2005-2009 Conference Participant



Painting by H. Anne Thurston

Jaime Courtney

Jaime Courtney attended the 2008 Bear River Writers' Conference. While reading her poem "The Fiddler of Kumsong" for the assembled writers, she was stricken by a brain aneurysm and passed away six days later. She passed doing what she loved most: sharing her writing. Jaime was a veteran of the U.S. Army and a retired newspaper journalist. However, her first love was writing poetry and short fiction. She won the "Jorge and Sonya Just Award" for poetry at the 2006 Cranbrook Writers' Conference. We are honored to publish one of the poems she was perfecting at the Bear River conference.

The Fiddler of Kumsong

On cold, still Korean nights
on a hill above Kumsong
when the dark comes down and the rising moon
throws shadows bleak and long,
strains of merriment flood the air.
That's Ching and his violin;

ladies dance through the moon-washed night
with Ching and his violin.

We'd set up a forward recon post
above the shattered wall
that circled the bombed-out, cratered ruin
of Kumsong, abandoned by all
but rocks and rats and the scraps of war
and snow that whipped in the wind,

rocks and rats and combat scars
and snow in the winter wind.

It was cushy duty this far from Kimpo;
the battle was miles to the rear.
We were the scouts for the brigade's push;
We were their eyes and ears.
The snow stung down with a shrapnel bite
while the sentries walked their watch,

snowflakes as sharp as bayonets;
they shivered and walked their watch.

Then the dark came down and the moon rose up
and the wind quit firing the snow.
A fiddle played and a party began
in the war-scoured valley below.
Glasses clinked and ladies laughed
to the sound of a violin;

people danced and ladies laughed
to the sound of a violin.

"There's a party down there," the sentry said,
"and I'm freezin' my ass off here on this hill.
I hear 'em laughin' and dancin' down there
and fiddlin' fit to kill."

"There's wimmin down there," the sentry said,
"So what're we doin' up here?"

"I miss my *moose*," the sentry whined,
"So what're we doin' up here?"

The Lieutenant asked two men to check it out
but Top led three of us down
through the rocks and ice and battered scrub
to the ravaged empty town.
When we reached the wall the fiddle stopped
as if it had never been;

only rats and rocks and the music gone
as if it had never been.

The next night the fiddle again scraped on
like an echo that couldn't fade,
like a record stuck in a damaged groove,
like a mem'ry the mind replayed.
We'd searched that village and found no trace
of Ching and his violin.

We'd searched all day but we found no trace
of Ching and his violin.

The Old Man thought we were pulling his leg
when the Topkick made his report.
He thought we were spooked by the quiet and cold
but he was a helluva sport,
so he sighed and put on his cold-weather gear
and waited with us for the dance;

with long johns under his snow-colored gear
he waited with us for the dance.

When the dark came down and the moon rose up
the fiddle began to play.
Glasses clinked and ladies laughed
till a new sound blew our way.
The music stopped, but a stealthy beat
was carried on the wind;

a clank of treads and a trudge of feet
came to us on the wind.

The swarm of Reds through the northwest pass
was swelled by the Chinese host.
We had to warn the troops at the rear
or the mission would be lost.
We were right in the path of their muffled march;
we had nowhere to go.

Soft duty had put us right in their path
with nowhere else to go.

But our M-1s locked and the clocks all stopped
and the comms went from static to dead.
We huddled and hunkered and watched our fate
roll at us from straight ahead.
We kissed our medals and whispered prayers;
Kumsong was where we'd die.

We kissed our medals and made our peace;
we got ourselves ready to die.

But God or Ching heard prayers that night
and over the village slope
a miracle shaped like a dome of mist
spread out like a cloak of hope.
The column passed by on the left and right
and we were wrapped in the mist;

We heard them pass on the left and right
while we sheltered in the mist.

When the sun came up the mist was gone
and so was the enemy line.
The clocks ticked on from a midnight gone
and the radios worked just fine.
We called in a guess about numbers and speed
and HQ called in a strike.

We made a good guess on the numbers and speed
and the Mustangs made a good strike.

When the dark came down and the moon rose up
and the fiddle sang in the wind,
we sat on the hill and shared the fun
of a party we couldn't attend.
We listened all night to the lilting saw
of Ching and his violin,

and phantom ladies who laughed and danced
with Ching and his violin.

Judy Reid

Judy Reid was an inspiration at each Bear River Writers' Conference with her ready smile, bright attitude, and creative spirit. Judy had a Master's in Education and had always considered herself a visual artist, with painting, photography and hand crafts, until she retired from Detroit Public Schools. Then she started studying the craft of words, and became a self-proclaimed "poetry writing retreat junkie." Judy Reid came year after year with her husband William to Bear River, and her poems were published in three issues of the *Bear River Review*. The memory of Judy Reid's smile will sustain us at the Bear River Writers' Conference for years to come. The poem "Cause and Effect" that follows was written by Judy in January of 2005. We are honored to publish it.

Cause and Effect

many flowers I've longed for
have hidden thorns of pain
many rough and stormy paths
have led to seeds of grain

clouds that cover the sunshine
cannot banish the sun
earth shines out its brightest
when the washing rains are done

must stand in the deepest sorrow
to see the clearest light
from the darkness of wrongs
comes the strengths of right

live through the weary winters
to value the spring
the woods must be cold and silent
before the robins can sing

flowers must be buried
before they can bud and bloom
some of the kindest rewards
come after storms of gloom

hearts that learn from the hardest trials
gain the purest joy of all
lips that have tasted sadness
some of the sweetest words can fall

peace comes after suffering
love is the reward of pain
so after earth comes heaven
out of our losses the gain

Painters

H. Anne Thurston

H. Anne Thurston studied at the Ohio State University and the University of Southern California at Fresno where she graduated summa cum laude in Fine Arts in 1945 at age twenty-two. Following her fourth Bear River Writers' Conference (2009), she painted the acrylic sketch that appears on page 177 of the shore of Walloon Lake at Camp Michigania, site of the conferences. Anne has authored *The Book of Anne* (2008) and *L O L - Seniors Online* (2010).

Ava Gilzow

Ava Gilzow is pursuing her lifelong interest in art after retiring from a teaching career. She discovered a love for pastels that quickly grew into a passion. Her intent is to interpret a sense of wonder in ordinary landscapes, skies, and water. She is interested in enticing the viewer to feel a longing for reconnection to the natural world. Ava has won three awards in AAWA juried shows, participates in exhibits with the Ann Arbor Area Pastelists, and was accepted into the Great Lakes Pastel Society 2009 juried show. Ava had a solo show at two Saline locations in 2009.

Acknowledgments

arwulf arwulf: "um mitternacht" was published in *Poetry in Performance* 36 in 2008, edited by Barry Wallenstein.

Jerry Dennis: "An April Shower" will appear in his forthcoming collection of essays titled *The World at Hand*.

Kelly Fordon: "Go-go Boots" was published previously in *Flashquake*.

Joy Gaines-Friedler: "Assisted Living" first published in another version in *RATTLE, Winter-2008*. "A Pheasant is Crossing I-75 North of Grayling" was first published in *MARGIE, The American Journal of Poetry, Volume Seven/2008*; and was a Semi-Finalist for the 2008 Paumanok Poetry Award. Both poems also published in Joy's book *Like Vapor*, Mayapple Press, 2008.

Esther Hurwitz: "Olive Branch Gold" appeared in *Poetry in Performance* #36, edited by Barry Wallenstein and published by the City College of New York.

Jeff Kass: "I Don't Know Much About You" is part of the one-man show *Wrestle the Great Fear* and "The Long-jumper" is set to appear in *Knuckleheads*, a short story collection forthcoming from Dzanc Books.

Jennifer Sperry Steinorth: "My Girl, Lay Down Your Burden" and "Late Day, Traverse Bay – Sun, Acutely" have recently been published in her chapbook *Forking the Swift* published by Michigan Writers Cooperative Press in 2010.

Anthony Zick: "On the Way Back From Bear River" was first published in *The Huron River Review, 2009*, published by Washtenaw Community College.