

JOSH GARD

Dear Neighbor

It is often said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Those who say this speak thusly in awe of the pen; a tad too optimistically, if I may say so, for I feel that rather they disparage the sword. As a man of knowledge myself, an empirical man, I feel that I would be remiss if this matter were not put to rest. And so, a mere three weeks ago, my experiment began.

First, I turned my examiner's gaze to the pen. A mere five inches, wrought from the very finest in Chinese plastics. Sharp on one end, of course. Potential, perhaps? To know for certain, I would have to put the pen to the test.

To my chagrin, the pen performed surprisingly well. It could handle more than two hands' worth of force without snapping, but somewhat less than one car's worth. When fired from a compressed air cannon with twenty pounds per square inch of pressure, a pen can pierce far enough into an oaken front door to scare the hell out of your neighbor. When inserted into an M112 military grade demolition block of C4 plastic explosive, a pen can also give that same neighbor the encouragement he's needed to stop parking in your goddamned parking spot. The pen was proving to be surprisingly mighty, I must admit, but I could not jump to conclusions, as that would be poor form for a man of science; my experiment had only just begun.

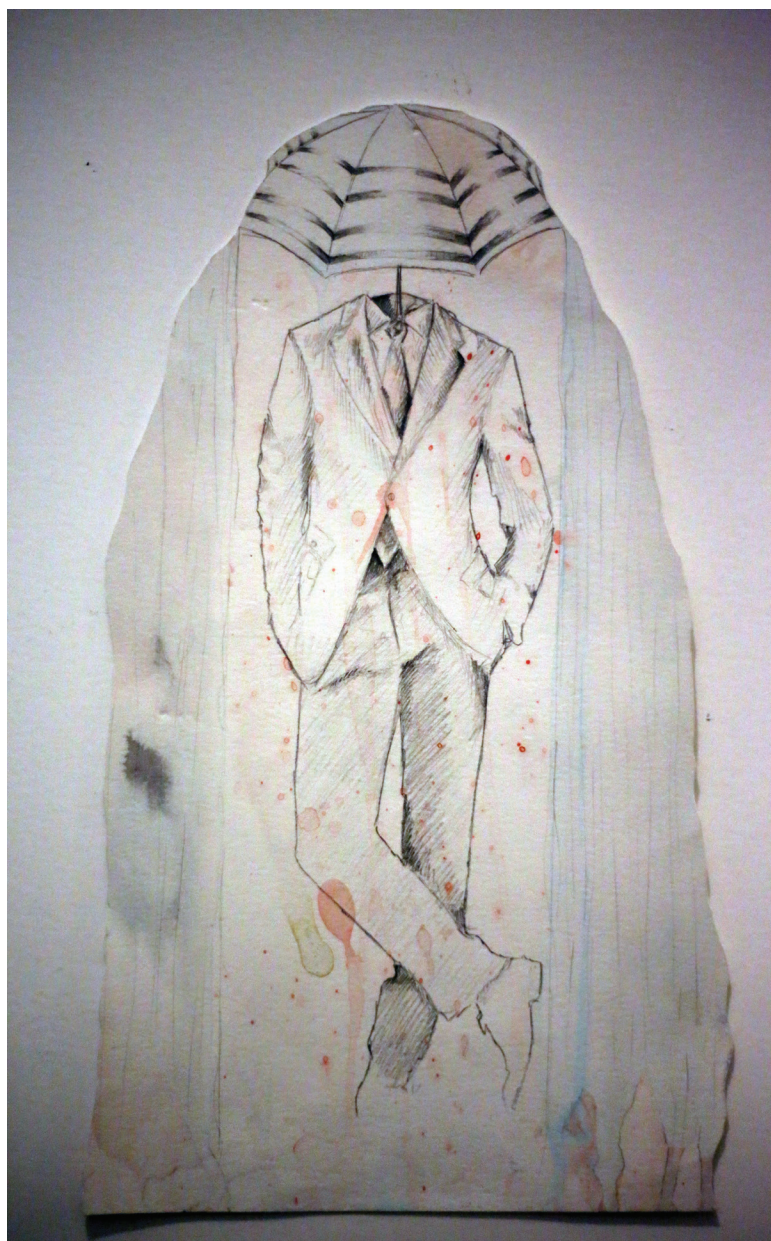
The sword, too, provided exemplary results. I recruited an assistant to perform the same bend test on the sword that I had conducted on the pen. Swords, however, are much less malleable than both pens and fingers, as it turned out. Doors as well, my next experiment proved, much to my now-quite-skittish neighbor's disappointment.

These results were illuminating, certainly; however, I knew that my experiment was not yet complete. What I needed next was more direct field testing; after all, one's theories must stand up to critical review if one is to make an impact on the scientific

community. With diligence as my watchword, I retested my theories on my neighbor's recently built fence, his freshly-installed security cameras, and what looked to be a brand new Grisham 301 Series Guardian steel security door. Quite nice.

In spite of the introduction of these new variables, the pen produced results as impressive as ever; much more so, in fact, than the sword, which couldn't match the pen's performance with the door just as it couldn't match its earlier performance with the car. This, however, was when I was quite rudely interrupted. Despite my groundbreaking discovery that the pen was indeed mightier than the sword, and with no regard for the sanctity of unbiased scientific inquiry, the authorities intervened and agreed with my neighbor's ludicrous claims of assault. As I write this, I am incarcerated in a state penitentiary. This, of course, you already know. However, I do hope to see you again very soon. I have every confidence in my expeditious release.

They gave me a pen to write you this letter.



Rain Man, Elizabeth Miller, Watercolor & Graphite

Winner of the 2016 prize for Poetry

SARA BAXTER

My Neighbor Mows His Lawn at Night

Though I have never seen his face, he calls,
concealed behind a partly opened door,
to Eleanor, his shifty, wayward dog,
who ambles through the neighborhood leaving
monstrous turds in my zucchini patch.
I hear his clatter from my bedroom window,
see the incandescent glow of his
garage, mosquitos swarm, his inky shadows
brood along the walls, disarranged
by junk and tools, and then he rides in rows,
his headlight undulates with every slope.
The feral, grinding buzz crescendos,
he clips a rock and I duck every time.

Texture

I am humbled by applesauce,
but only when it's cold.

With static running along my squiggles
of brain, pretending to be conviction
(really it's leftover electricity
from the time I stuck a pair of tweezers
into an outlet when I was three,
because they fit so well),
I keep playing with the idea

that invisible mosquitos are sucking me dry
while I prattle on about obese books
from the romantic era
or instructional youtube videos on how to
tie my shoes with my teeth.

This must be why
I have such chapped lips.

But then I can't shake the yearning
to crawl up to the top of a mountain
sit bare-ass in the snow,
and roast toes on a spit I've made
of crusted lava in a bucket
and a shower curtain rod.

I should be moved by more.
Maybe it's these pills.

Or maybe it's the sheer number of things
that exist for which one should be moved by,

like war and lovemaking...I guess...
and baby bats wrapped in blankies.
Or like the glare of this hungry, blue-tipped swallow
perched in a tree outside my window,

But all I really want is to take my frosty jar
of applesauce from the back of the fridge and eat.

STACY WEBB

Love in a Chocolate Cake

My grandmother died in October of 2011, and I inherited her cookbook collection. This small collection of outdated cookbooks from decades past may seem insignificant to some; in fact it is a group of books that you might see at a yard sale or forgotten in the dusty corner of a used bookstore, but to me these books are priceless treasures. They symbolize who my grandmother, Doris Audrey Moore, really was: sweet, caring, and full of nervous energy. She was the grandmother who never forgot anyone's birthday or anniversary, who was the happiest when her three daughters and all the family surrounded her, a grandmother who loved the color pink, flowers, and a juicy hamburger.

The cookbook collection sat unopened in a large cardboard box marked, "Grandma" in big, black, Sharpie letters in my closet. My aunt had bestowed the books on me, because she knew that Grandma and I had shared a love of cooking, and we had connected over planning family gatherings. It took several months for me to open the box, I hid it from sight, because I knew when I removed the lid I would be opening a memory and a wound from losing her. I was not quite ready for the emotional journey that would take me on.

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New research reveals that your ancestors' lousy childhoods or excellent adventures might change your personality, bequeathing anxiety or resilience by altering the epigenetic expressions of genes in the brain. -Dan Hurley

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It is in my DNA to enjoy feeding people. My grandmother loved to cook, and she was quite accomplished at it. When she was younger, before the cancer was discovered— that insidious, horrible disease that ate away at her— she would host family gatherings every few months. My aunts, uncles, cousins, and their families would drive from as far away as Indianapolis to attend her dinners. Grandma and my grandpa, Shelby, would bring out long tables and folding chairs, and there was always a designated "kids table." She

would cover the tables with cloth tablecloths, not the cheap, plastic kind, and she would have vases of fresh flowers, usually roses from Grandpa's rose garden. Grandma would cook up a storm in her tiny, non-air-conditioned kitchen. In summer months, she always made a heaping bowl of the most amazing potato salad, and after dinner we would sit on her front porch talking, and eating home-made pecan pie and ice cream.

When the weather turned cool, the dinner was moved indoors, but there would still be cloth tablecloths, flowers, candles, and china. No matter when you dropped in for a visit, Grandma's table was ready and inviting. I inherited her love of table linens and beautiful place settings, and I have my own collection now. Each time I decorate my table, I step back and think of how much she would have liked it.

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Like silt deposited on the cogs of a finely tuned machine after the seawater of a tsunami recedes, our experiences, and those of our forebears, are never gone, even if they have been forgotten. They become part of us, a molecular residue holding fast to our genetic scaffolding. The DNA remains the same, but psychological and behavioral tendencies are inherited. -Dan Hurley

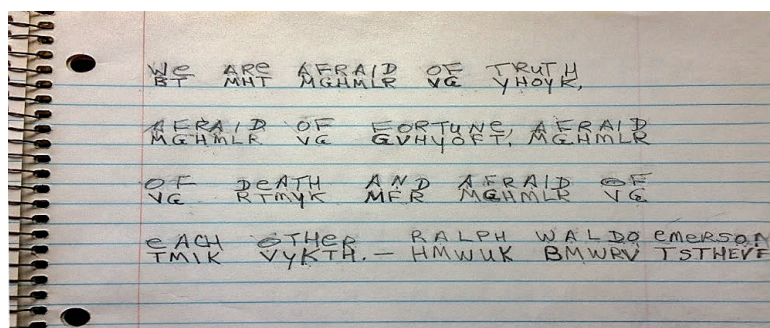
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One day, quite spontaneously, I felt ready to open the box containing the cookbook collection. As I turned the yellowing pages, I could smell *that* smell, the one from her kitchen: lemons and thyme, brown sugar and vanilla together in one intoxicating memory. I laughed when I read some of the recipe's ingredients—words like “oleo” and “lard.” I cried when I realized these were not just any cookbooks, they were part of *her*. Her doodling on the back covers of the books, squiggles and lines connected to circles, triangles, and squares with curly-cues; her annotations, comments like “Good!” “Needs more sugar!” and “Don't make again!” written next to recipes—hundreds of recipes, directions for meals that she made from her heart.

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Then, I made an amazing discovery: a message from my grandma, in the form of an encrypted puzzle she had decoded in the

back of one of the recipe books:



My favorite recipe book is a one-subject blue notebook with fraying edges and a spiral binding that Grandma had filled with recipes clipped from newspapers and magazines, and meticulously taped onto white, lined pages separated by subject. "Pie" recipes came first, followed by: "Supper Meals," then "Cookies," "Candy," and "Miscellaneous," all written in her small, nervous cursive. It was her self-made book, complete with notes, doodles and sketches of pie slices, wheels, chairs, her name, and in bold print, the name of the street where she had lived for more than three decades. Further investigation revealed menus she planned for family dinners, lists of names of those who would be invited, random phone numbers, and a recipe titled "Punch for 50 People," where she had worked out a long division problem. As I turned the pages of those cookbooks, I wept, and laughed, and hurt so deeply, a pain that seared me from the inside. I realized that she was gone and could never again *be*—and what I had left, though symbolic of her, could in no way replace her warmth, her smile, her hugs and kisses, her adoration, and her genuine love.

Each book that I opened was like crawling through a window into the life of someone I had lost, and I was eager to see what messages she had left me on the pages of those cookbooks. But, then it hit me hard, this book collection was part of her legacy. I know people who think of themselves as important, they talk in lofty terms of the legacy they will leave behind when they are gone.

To them, being remembered after death is equally important as living each day fully.

My grandmother was not wealthy or connected, and I am sure she was not worried about an ambiguous idea like “legacy,” and yet with a simple collection of well-worn books, she had left the largest and most impressionable gift of all: her recipe for love. This love, which had no zeros after it or titles of importance, was the true inheritance that I had received from her. With this gift, came no strings or expectations, just a desire to be loved in the same way.

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New insights in the field of epigenetics reveal that traumatic experiences in our past, or in our recent ancestor's past, leave molecular scars adhering to our DNA. Jews whose great-grandparents were chased from their Russian shtetls; Chinese who grandparents lived through the ravages of the Cultural Revolution; young immigrants from Africa who parents survived massacres; adults of every ethnicity who grew up with alcoholic or abusive parents—all carry with them more than just memories. The mechanisms of epigenetics underlie not only deficits and weaknesses but strengths and resiliencies, too. -Dan Hurley

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My grandma once told me that her mother-in-law had the most influence on her adult life. When she and my grandpa were married, Grandma did not know how to do anything domestic. She was the youngest of six children, and had never had any real responsibilities growing up. Her mother-in-law, Daisy, taught her how to cook, clean, and do laundry, and was always very patient with her. Grandma's excellent cooking skills were the result of Daisy's tutoring, and she promised to share her love of cooking with her three daughters.

I learned, through my grandmother's example, that love can be shown in many ways, even something as simple as providing a meal for someone in need. I have a special memory from Thanksgiving Day in 2013. I took my family to the fairgrounds in Eaton, Ohio, where we live, and we helped serve the community Thanksgiving dinner. Nothing prepared me for the hundreds of poor, elderly, displaced and broken people who stood before me with a paper plate, waiting to receive nourishment. I was told to be generous with

the portions because for some, it would be their only meal of the day. Later that evening, as I sat in my home with my husband and children and prepared to partake in my own feast, my heart swelled with gratitude for my fortunate situation, and hurt for those who lacked. Again, I realized that my grandmother's legacy of love was still very present in my life.

As I grow older, I seek to instill in my children the same love and thoughtfulness that was passed to me, Grandma Moore's recipe for love.

I placed those special cookbooks—memory books—in my kitchen, and each time I prepare a recipe from one of them for my family, I think of my grandma, and I connect with her across space and time, and I feel her presence there: watching, smiling, and her love, reflected in a chocolate cake.

Grandma Moore's Chocolate Cake

2 C. Flour

2 C. Sugar

Mix together and set aside. Then, bring to a rapid boil: 1 stick oleo (butter), $\frac{1}{2}$ c. Crisco oil, 1 c. water, 4T. cocoa. Pour over the flour and sugar mixture and blend well. Stir in 2 eggs, 1 tsp. vanilla, 1 tsp. baking soda, 1 tsp. cinnamon, and $\frac{1}{2}$ c. buttermilk. Blend well. Pour into greased jelly-roll pan, bake for 20-25 minutes at 400 degrees.

Icing: Melt 1 stick oleo (butter) and add 6 T. milk, and 4T. cocoa, bring to a rapid boil and remove from stove. Add 1 tsp. vanilla and $\frac{3}{4}$ box of powdered sugar. You may add 1 cup nuts. Spread icing on cake as soon as you remove from oven.

Hurley, Dan. "Grandma's Experiences Leave a Mark on Your Genes." *Discovery Magazine*. 11 June 2013:1-4. Print.

Second-place winner of the 2016 prize for Visual Arts



Dinner for Nine, Piedad Llerena, Ceramics



Discovering Art, Piedad Llerena, Ceramics

SUSAN DAY

Somewhere in Indiana

“Ooga, ooga, ooga, ooga.” We heard that awful sound before we ever saw the source. It could be compared to an air raid horn from the 1940’s, but it was the horn on my uncle’s pickup truck. On and on and on he blared that horn. I thought it wouldn’t ever stop. As the 1950’s model truck came barreling up the driveway. My cousins and I looked at each other in fear. Donna’s face was panic stricken as she said, “Oh no, Dad’s home. We were supposed to clean up that pile of branches as soon as we got out of the bed,” she added.

“The branches from that stinky tree?” Brian said in disgust.

“Why do we have to clean up those branches? I didn’t cut that tree down,” I said in my usual sassy tone.

I knew better than to say things like that in front of adults, especially my Uncle Charles. A retired Army Sergeant, Charles Bobbitt was a force to be reckoned with. His kids, nieces, and nephews worked to earn their keep, even if they were just spending the week at his house during summer vacation.

“I told you kids to pick up those branches before I got home,” my uncle growled as we approached his truck.

As we stopped close to where he had parked he stepped out of the freshly painted powder blue truck; it was his pride and joy. He washed and polished that truck weekly. It was in tip top shape for being over 30 years old.

“Get your hands off of that tailgate, boy,” he barked at his son. Donald looking embarrassed, lifted his hands from the truck.

He proceeded to lecture us about the importance of hard work and doing what we were told. The six of us kids stood in complete silence waiting for his wrath to end.

“Make yourself useful and grab a bag of groceries, but don’t touch the side of my truck.” We knew that getting smudges, fingerprints, or scratches on his beloved possession would start a new firestorm. He must have been finished brow beating us because he

turned and walked away without another word. He didn't give us a chance to respond to either his question or statement. Actually, it was in our best interest to be seen and not heard. We strolled into the house just as my aunt closed the refrigerator door.

"You girls put those groceries away."

"Boys, I'm sure your hands are filthy so go wash them."

"It's time to eat lunch," she barked, sounding like a drill sergeant. The wife of a retired serviceman, my aunt ran as tight of a ship as my uncle. Once again, we kids never dared to utter a word.

As we sat around the table that afternoon, my aunt and uncle talked about the weather, the stock market and why the chores weren't done. They went on and on about the weather because it had been unseasonably cool for August in Indiana. It was the topic for many conversations. Hoosiers had experienced 15 consecutive days with cooler than average low temperatures. I was tired of hearing about the weather so I decided to change the subject.

"Why do we have to clean up those branches from the stinky tree?" I said without reservation.

"I've told you kids a dozen times. It is called a Bradford pear tree," my uncle retorted.

"Then why aren't there pears on the tree?" I replied indignantly. The conversation turned away from the subject of the tree as my aunt declared

"Girls, clear the table and wash the lunch dishes. You boys start working on those branches."

We rose like obedient little soldiers. As we were setting about our chores, she said to the six of us,

"You can play the Atari after you're finished." We all grinned at her statement.

The table was cleared, the dishes were washed, and the leftovers were put away, as myself, Donna, and Lori walked out the back door. We headed toward the tree where the boys were working. To our dismay, they had barely cleared away any of the branches.

"I can't believe this; my new shoes are filthy!" Doug said angrily. His tone caused all of us to turn and look at him.

"Take a chill pill, man," Brian chuckled.

"It's stupid that you wore your new Nikes outside," Brian said to his brother.

"You know mom will kill you if she finds out," he added.

"They are just the most awesome shoes that I've ever owned. I just can't stand the thought of not wearing them," Doug replied.

"Gag me with a spoon," Lori pointed towards her mouth as the rest of us erupted into laughter.

"You kids better get busy," my uncle yelled from the kitchen window. We quickly resumed our duties. The next few hours flew by as the pile of branches disappeared from under the tree.

After we were completely finished, we stopped to grab a quick drink of water from the spigot. For no particular reason, we wondered to the back pasture to take a look at the cows. We stood at the gate for ten minutes before anyone ever spoke.

"Has anyone ever heard of cow tipping?" Donald said to no one in particular.

"What is cow tipping?" I immediately replied.

"It's when you sneak up on a sleeping cow and scare them bad enough that they fall over," Donald explained.

"That sounds awesome," Doug chimed in.

"Doug, what is with you using the word awesome so much?" Donna said in exasperation.

"It's the latest word that everyone is using, Donna. Don't you ever watch MTV?" Doug seemed irritated at her lack of knowledge of the newest fads.

"Are you guys in or not?" Donald once again claimed everyone's attention.

"I'm in," Brian said.

"Me too," I said with excitement.

"Let's go in before Mom changes her mind about letting us play the Atari," Donna said as she strolled towards the house. The rest of the afternoon and well into the early part of the evening was spent playing Space Invaders. We sat glued to the black and white television set that emitted sounds of explosions.

"Turn that stupid game off," Aunt Nancy yelled from the living room.

“Donna Fay and Donald Ray, come in here to me!” She had pulled the middle name card on my cousins. We all looked at each other wide eyed and alarmed.

“We can play another half of an hour, but after that we have to turn it off,” the duo told those of us gathered on the floor in front of the small television.

“What are we going to do now?” Doug said disgusted, as our group began to rise from the bedroom floor.

“Hee Haw is coming on,” I said, while dashing out of the room.

We filed into the living room as a newscaster began talking.

“The New York Stock Exchange sets trading record of 132,690,000 shares traded. As well as, the first time it tops 100 million figure, 132.69 million shares traded,” he announced.

This information would have been interesting for anyone other than a bunch of Space Invader crazed kids; since the US had been experiencing a recession since the early part of the year. We sat on the living floor in front of the television, caring less about the New York Stock Exchange and more about the activities to come. As the newscast came to an end, the group forgot about Space Invaders as the theme song for Hee Haw claimed our attention.

“Hee Haw, Hee Haw, Hee Haw,” the cartoon donkey bellowed.

As its eyes spun in circles, the announcer introduced Buck Owens and Roy Clark; as well as the regulars and special guests. We watched in absolute silence for the remainder of the hour. The variety show ended at 9:00, which meant it was dark outside. Finally, we could carry out our plan: Cow tipping!

It felt humid that night, which was odd since the weather had been below normal. The humidity and the darkness followed us as we strolled to the back pasture. The aroma from the Bradford pear tree branches still hung in the air. As we approached the gate, Donald and Doug climbed to the top of the gate while the rest of us leaned on the lower slats. The sound of mooing cows and chirping crickets permeated the darkness.

“Let’s do this,” Donald said while jumping off the gate.

Nothing could have or would have stopped us at that point. We were bored. We wanted excitement and entertainment. We set our

plan into motion. We girls stood on a loading ramp while the boys located the cows. We stood in complete silence, but all of the sudden that silence was shattered. You could feel a change in the air. A rushing and roaring sound interrupted the darkness.

“Run!” Donald screamed at the group of us standing on the ramp.

We scattered as screams cut through the darkness. The commotion startled the cows even more which changed the direction of their stampede. They came charging up the ramp; not knowing there was nowhere to go but down. Those cows sailed off of that ramp like they had wings. I’m surprised that several of them didn’t break their legs as they crashed onto the gravel driveway. It was amazing, those huge creatures were as agile as an antelope. They never lost their footing and continued running, much to our dismay.

“Stop cows stop!” Donald screamed as the rest of us stood in horror.

“Help me!” he cried as he sprinted past the group of us.

It took just his simple cry of help to bring us back to reality. We all started running down the driveway screaming at the top of our lungs.

“STOP COWS STOP!” We all yelled in unison.

Our cries for help did the unthinkable--they alerted our parents. As the front screen door banged open, we were gaining momentum on the cows. I’m certain that our parents looked horrified at that sight. The next thing I remember is hearing that awful baby blue truck come speeding up behind me.

“Ooga, ooga, ooga, ooga.” My uncle blared that horn. I thought it would bust my eardrums. He parted the group of us as he sped after those cows. Luckily, the horn startled the cows into changing their direction. Had they not changed direction the vehicles heading north on state road 27 would have been in for a quite a surprise. The cows ran over into a soy bean field and stopped just several yards away from their entrance. They stood and looked around as if nothing had ever happened. I wish now that we could have had that same calmness about us as did those cows. I knew

without a shadow of a doubt we were in BIG trouble.

My uncle had since turned his truck around. He and my dad stopped short of where we were standing. They opened up the doors and stepped out of the truck.

“What in the world do you think you’re doing?” My dad screamed.

My uncle, without a word walked to a nearby tree and snapped a small branch off of the tree. It was long enough that he was able to break it into two pieces. He handed my dad a piece as the color drained out of our faces. We were in TROUBLE! As the truck stayed parked where it had stopped, our dad’s began to whack the group of us with those switches. They whacked us the whole way back to the house. It was like they suddenly grew extra arms because it didn’t seem possible that two men could hit six kids so many times. It seemed as if every step that I took resulted in a whooshing sound and then a quick snap hitting the back of my bare legs. The whole group of us was sobbing by the time we reached the front porch.

We got a little more than what we bargained for that night. We set out to go cow tipping. We figured out that it doesn’t really work, but what we did figure out is that cows run really fast, they jump, and it hurts to get whacked with a switch.

As my aunt opened the door for a group of crying kids, the television blared in the background.

“Longest baseball game at Wrigley Field, ends after 22 innings - before Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Cubs 2-1,” the newscaster proclaimed. August 18, 1982 was filled with lasting memories for a group of kids in a small town in Indiana, as well as Cubs fans.

Second-place winner of the 2016 prize for Nonfiction

BEN CRAWFORD

The Fifth Inning

I was ten years old that warm July evening and late in the game I took my position in left field. I wasn't the best ball player in town and it was obvious that my place on the team was merely a result of a random grouping of area boys into teams. As our team was handed the third out of the fourth inning, my coach, out of guilt and what little heart he possessed, would say under his breath, "Alright Crawford...grab your mitt."—Which could be translated as, *we're losing anyway, what harm can you do in the last two innings?* (In little league, the games are only six innings.)

I stood up and slapped my enormous hat on my head, grabbed my glove from under the seat, and trotted out to the green grass and huge advertising signs of left field. I felt a knot in my stomach, which I attributed to nerves, because if a ball was hit my way, there was little to no chance of me catching it.

My red and blue uniform was perfectly stiff and clean, save for the light dusting of tan dirt on the my front of my pants from my fellow two-inning players taking turns tossing baseball gloves and Gatorade bottles at one another's crotches. We were ten year olds after all; a coach can't expect his players to behave like adults when required to wear a jockstrap and awkwardly sized cup in their itchy polyester uniform pants. We spent our downtime in the dugout testing the strange new equipment's effectiveness—it just made sense.

First batter: infield fly.

"Alright guys!" I yelled, "One down!" I knew they probably didn't hear me but my hope was they saw my puny finger signaling a one and thus would gain confidence in my abilities as a team player and fielder.

So here's when my stomach began to gurgle.

Not a hungry kind of gurgle but a *you need to get to a bathroom FAST* kind of gurgle. I didn't know if it was the half pound of bologna I had eaten for lunch or the 'suicide' soda I had consumed

in the third inning, but whatever it was needed to leave my body as soon as possible.

Not one to shirk my responsibilities as a trustworthy left fielder, I crouched down to my ready position, as our pitcher doled out fast balls to the kid at the plate, who in turn was hitting one foul ball after another.

The sweat began to drip down my forehead—for the first time in the entire game—and season.

This can't be happening I thought to myself, *just hold on until we get three outs.*

In this type of situation, control of bodily functions is somewhat manageable, as long there is minimal movement, especially of the fast running variety. But, in the midst of my prayer, “Dear God let my clenching hold,” a foul ball was hit my way. I broke loose from my stance—in more ways than one—and held out my trembling glove in the general area where the ball was falling.

It fell right in.

I opened my eyes, took the ball out of my glove and fired it to the third baseman. I was beaming proudly, as I shouted, “Two down!” as I walked back to my spot however, I realized that by running for the foul ball, I had relinquished all control of other important muscles, thus releasing the disaster I was holding back.

I shit my pants.

In the middle of a baseball game.

The third out came quickly and I headed back to the dugout with my fellow teammates to each await our turn to bat. I cautiously sat down, so as not to further disturb the monster that was quickly saturating my uniform pants.

I thought to myself, *the game's almost done, if I can just make it through without anyone noticing, it will be okay and I'll still get to bat.*

Of course this thought was interrupted by a teammate, a six inning player I should add, sniffing the air and saying, “Man! It smells like cat shit in here!”

I got up, motioned for my brother and grandpa, and asked if they could take me home. I told the coach I wasn't feeling well and needed to leave. He looked down at me with disappointment or

relief, I'm not sure which, and quickly muttered, "Okay, see ya."

I walked out of the dugout and past the bleachers holding my glove behind me, without making eye contact with anyone, vowing to return for my next 5th inning.



Nature, Macy Heaslip, Plastic Disposable Spoons

Nothing to Do

There was a dragon there, tall and dark-scaled. It saw her coming and roared, smoke roiling out of its mouth as it did. She wore armor and carried a sword and a shield. The dragon roared again and spit out a mouthful of flames at her. She darted out of the way and the flames struck a nearby boulder harmlessly. Her sword flashed in the light as she swung it out. The dragon let out a shriek, and lunged –

A car horn honked briefly, and Mallory was startled. It was Mr. Green, who lived up the street. He waved at her as he turned, and she waved back before crossing the side road and continuing on down the sidewalk.

The street was quiet. It usually was. Fall decorations were out on some of the houses. The leaves on the tall, stately trees were colored in reds and golds. Mallory didn't notice this as she walked. She had lived here her whole life, and the decorations that were out were, with few exceptions, the same ones that were out every year. She was walking to the party store; the only store in the village. Her mother had given her permission to go and buy a pop before she started on her homework.

A car drove by, the second one, besides Mr. Green's, that she had seen. She passed the local library, now closed for the day, a pizza shop, and a barber shop before she came to the corner store. Inside the tiny but well-stocked store, she selected her drink and purchased it. Then she set out for home.

The dragon watched her, waiting. Now she had a magic elixir – just what she needed. It was wounded now; her blow from earlier had struck home. She tucked the elixir into her belt and lunged forward. The dragon moved out of the way, its heavy feet shaking the earth as it stomped around. It didn't seem to be able to fly now. It lunged out to snap at her with a mouth full of long sharp teeth, and when it did she brought the sword down on its head. It made a strangled sound and collapsed.

"Yes! I knew the Sword of Songs would work!" She rejoiced, but then she dropped her sword and raced towards the dragon. There wasn't much time...

She opened the dragon's mouth and poured the elixir in. She stood back and waited. For a moment, it seemed as though the elixir wouldn't work. Then the dragon's fallen body began to glow white, and the Empress of Light, a tall woman with white hair and clothed in a white gown, was standing there.

"Thank you, Mallory." She said. "I had begun to fear that I would be trapped in that form forever."

Mallory bowed. "It was the work of Prince Noir, wasn't it?" She asked.

The Empress nodded. "I have a new task for you. I need you to make sure that Prince Noir can never-"

Mallory tripped over the sidewalk curb, righting herself before she could hit the ground. She glanced both ways quickly before darting across the street and into her house.

Inside, her little brother was watching TV in the front room and her mother was dropping spaghetti noodles into a pot on the stove. The wide living room opened into a dining room, the table of which was strewn with books and homework assignments and the permission slip and information sheet for the sixth grade field trip.

The mail was also there on the table. A letter was open and lying face up on the table and Mallory paused to read it as she sat down. "Mom, what does this letter mean?"

Her mother glanced up only briefly to see what Mallory was talking about. "Oh, the town is having a meeting to see about bringing in a summer activities program. They've heard from some people who are complaining that kids in this town have nothing to do. Shouldn't you be starting your homework?"

Nothing to do? Mallory wondered as she set the letter down and set her ginger soda next to her books. What do they mean nothing to do?

As she got out her homework, she was already thinking about the Empress' next mission...

COTY BARRETT

Philanthropy

You will be relieved, Officer, to find
you are stalking a man of utmost purity.
A reputable, business-savvy individual
caught under unfortunate circumstances
on which I will be elated to elaborate.

You'll understand, Sir,
that I always wear my seatbelt, and
though my memory has failed me on this
rare occasion, my stellar driving habits
will ensure that such precautions remain unnecessary.

It stands to reason that although I'm driving
thirty miles over the speed limit, a busy man
such as myself has important
places to be and precious little
time. You likely noticed the elderly

woman I knocked to the ground.
She made the mistake of crossing
without looking both ways. I know
you will berate her for her carelessness,
for which I thank you in advance.

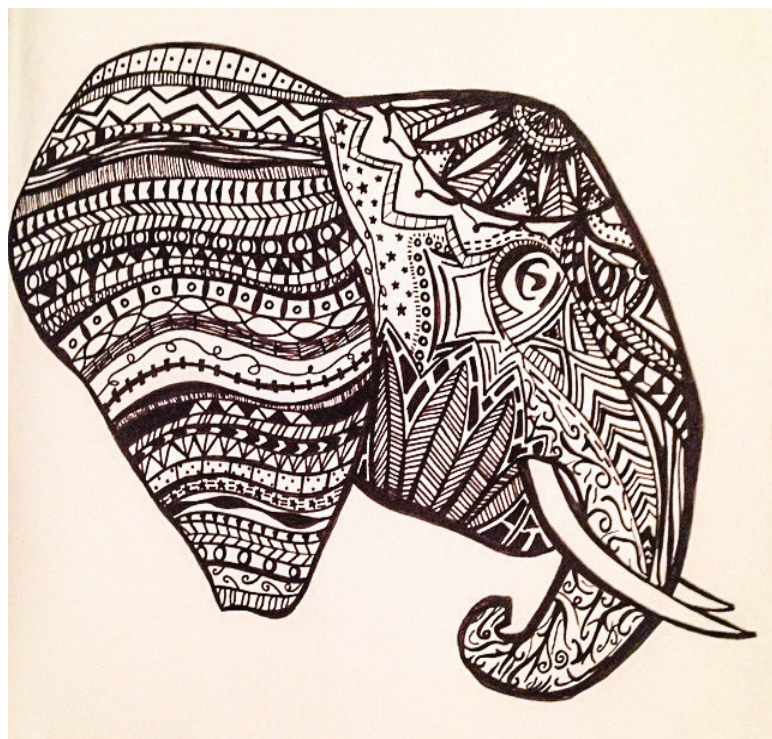
As a diligent protector of the law, you
may have scanned my license plate
and matched it with a recently stolen vehicle.
A lesson of responsibility to the previous owner
for leaving the keys in for so long.
I believe methamphetamine is the official name
of the substance in my trunk.
A possession of the car's previous owner,

I assure you, and further proof of my theory that
they do not need to be on the road.

And though these metal bracelets
now choke my arms,
an equitable, reasonable man
such as yourself must agree that
I cannot be held responsible for my actions.

Vegetables

My son tells me the eggs I made him are better than usual, the brat. That meal was prepared by a factory in Iowa, and I'm no farmer. That adorable bastard thinks the crusty tomatoes in my garden are both fruits and vegetables, but I know the truth. Adults cannot plop on the fence, jamming their action figures together and waiting for the teachers to tell us that everyone is right. I set him straight, give him a few more chores. When he asks for a puppy? I ask him if they're edible, and he speeds to the computer looking for the answer. Nothing is off limits. If we were stranded on an island, he would eat me, and I would be damn proud.



Elephant, Emmie Mazzotti-Dill, Ink

CALEB WARNER

An Interview with Amy Pickworth



Amy Pickworth's poems have appeared in journals including *Dusie*; *Forklift*, *Ohio*; *H_NGM_N*; *Ink Node*; *New Ohio Review*; *Smartish Pace*; and *Two Serious Ladies*. Her book *Bigfoot for Women* (Orange Monkey Book Award, intro by Matt Hart) was released in November 2014. Originally from Ohio, she lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with her husband and two children.

Warner

First question, you have such an eclectic (yet oddly synergistic) collection of poems in your book. *Bigfoot for Women*. How do you first approach a poem? Does it vary from poem to poem? Do you have a set ritual that helps you in the initial crafting stages?

Pickworth

It's not usually a poem I'm approaching, at least at the beginning--I'm just thinking about an image or an idea that for some reason sticks with me. I spend some time with whatever it is and let it roll around in my head before I start putting words down, although I might take notes about references I might want to pull in, or record a line or two I'm thinking about using (I send myself a lot of emails with little fragments--two or three lines, a URL.) At some point I start working on a draft, and that almost always happens over a number of sessions, usually spread out over several months. I keep saying *usually* because very occasionally I'll write one of those poems that's almost fully formed from the outset. Those are fun. Those feel like transcription. Everybody likes being handed one of those by the poetry gods. But you can't rely on that. I have no set ritual. I write when I think I might have something worth writing, when I can find the time. (Note: Those two things don't always go hand in hand, and that can be frustrating.) My process isn't particularly methodical (unless you consider thinking time methodical. Not in the very beginning of a poem, anyway. I can schedule time to edit when things are farther along, but I can't schedule time to be generative.

Warner

You mention that your drafting can take several months. Can you talk a little bit more about your revision process? At what point do you know when a poem is "finished."

Pickworth

I think you can get a lot done by trading work with another writer, and sometimes I do that, but mostly my process is solo. That means that it also tends to be slower, because I have to essentially abandon a piece for long enough that I can read it with fresh eyes, but I don't mind slower.

The longer I can put something aside the better, but at least a week and preferably a few months. At that point I've got a red pen in hand and as I'm reading I'm thinking about content (is there the

right amount of stuff in this poem or do I want to think about complicating it? Is it too complicated or long, and so should I consider breaking it into two poems?), form (is this the best container for these thoughts?), line breaks (do I want to work in syllabics? or if not, what kind of feeling should the lineation create--is this a poem that craves tension and surprise? something else?). What kind of words choices have I made, and are they working hard enough for me? (Or, to put this another way, if I had to pay by the word to assemble this poem, could I save any money? Maybe I can lose a throwaway adjective, a prepositional phrase, even the first stanza or last few lines?) These are the sort of things that I'm thinking. I often go through a ten or more rounds of this.

I like your ironic quotation marks around the word *finished*. Right? You could say it shows a lack of both imagination and humility to not be able to come up with any new ways to rework a piece of writing. I really do like the revision process--it's a creative process too and it really makes things better, and who doesn't love better? So I'll keep picking at a poem from time to time, and at some point I'll read the last version and it just sounds right--nothing's flabby or precious, nothing's tripping me up--and I feel that soft click in that brain that says, *There you go. NOW it's done.*

Sometimes that takes a while, though. Or sometimes you thought you were done but you read it again a few weeks later and no, you're not. When something feels a little off, you have to trust that.

Just make sure you save every version.

Warner

Was there ever a conscious decision to be a poet or a writer? Or did it just sort of happen?

Pickworth

It was something in between, I think. In my twenties, after I went to school for visual arts, I began working as an editor, then in my thirties I also started doing some work-related writing. I still enjoy editing and writing in the context of my day job, but it was only in

my forties that I realized that I had this skill set that I'd been practicing every day for years that I could apply to producing my own creative work. That was a pretty exciting discovery. It felt like this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg21M2zwG9Q>. (She linked a video to the iconic moment in *Karate Kid* where Ralph Maccio's character learns that his chores translate into karate moves)

Warner

In that same vein, *Bigfoot for Women* has such synergy that I have to ask, was there a conscious decision to write a "book" of poetry from the get-go, or did your poems just start to coalesce?

Pickworth

I wrote a poem about Bigfoot, and I liked it, and then I wrote another one. I wasn't sure what they were. It wasn't the only thing I was working on, but was doing a lot of thinking about Bigfoot, and why we want Bigfoot to exist, and it came out of that very naturally. Around that time, I was a student in a workshop with David Baker. He read a couple of the early Bigfoot poems, and I think he liked them fine, but his very clear advice was that a book of poems about Bigfoot seemed like a really bad idea. *Don't do it, Amy*, he said gravely. I like David and I really respect him as a teacher, and this advice ran counter to my own instincts as a writer. I was hurt and frustrated, and struggled with it for several long months before I decided, *yeah, I'm gonna keep writing these, and I think it's actually building to a book*. Looking back, that struggle was one of the things that made it a better book. I felt like I was fighting for this book, and I thought and wrote harder because of that early resistance. I didn't just want produce to be a silly novelty record. I wanted it to say things that were worth thinking about.

Warner

Do you remember what you were reading when you were working on *Bigfoot for Women*? Any influences you'd care to disclose?

Pickworth

I read a lot of things about Bigfoot, not surprisingly. Joshua Blu Buh's *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend*, a couple of books by the cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, Molly Gloss's *Wild Life*. I found Sherman Alexie's wonderful "The Sasquatch Poems" later. I also watched reality TV about people who spend time searching for Bigfoot. Pretty soon everything was a metaphor for Bigfoot.

Warner

Last question, what advice would you offer to new poets and writers just getting started?

Pickworth

You can do so much on your own to expand your references and your tool kit. When you find a poem or short story or novel or essay that speaks to you, seek out and read other works by that author. Write down words or strings of words you're in love with. Commit poems or short passages that you love to memory. Send a gushy, heartfelt thank-you letter to a living author whose work has meant a lot to you. Read books by authors whose biographies are similar to yours. Read books by authors whose lives were or are very different from yours. Read books that were recently nominated for major awards. Read reviews and criticism. Buy and read some literary magazines--established print journals that have been around a long time and little ones that are maybe more experimental. When you watch movies, think about how the story line was constructed. Attend readings and note how much more (or less) you liked a passage because of the way that it was read aloud. Close your door and sit on your bed and read your own work aloud. Wonder if you need that first stanza. Wonder if this poem is too self-pitying or opaque. Wonder if it is not complicated enough. Wonder if the ending is too pat.

Then: put that one aside / thread through a metaphor / see what happens if you get rid of the last two lines. Or four lines. See what happens if you try reworking that 13-line free verse poem into a sonnet. Really do play around with revision, because you can

learn so much from that and it will make your work stronger. Take out most of the adjectives and make some of those verbs work harder. Think about and implement “show, don’t tell.” See if you get a stronger story if you shift to a narrator with a different point of view, or if you rewrite a poem from second-person present into first-person past tense. Show a few pieces of your work to another writer and note where they struggled as a reader, then play around with the different ways you could try to solve those problems. Save each version and put them aside and look at them with fresh eyes a month later. And when you have a story or a handful of poem that you really love, that you’re really proud of, submit it to a journal you’ve been reading for a while. If your submission is rejected, don’t take that rejection personally, or (maybe more realistically) only take it personally for a day. Get back up and try it again.

WHITNEY RIVARD

An Interview with Keith Leonard



Meeting Keith for the first time felt very much like sitting down with an old friend. Having both recently become parents, Keith and I laughed about how much the world changes after kids. Keith lives in Bloomington with his wife, Jennifer, and their little one, Noah. Beyond his family, Keith is an incredibly accomplished poet. His work has appeared in many journals and magazines. He published a chapbook, *Still, the Shore* in 2013

and has just released his full-length collection, *Ramshackle Ode* published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Rivard

How did you decide what you wanted to incorporate in *Ramshackle Ode*?

Leonard

I was writing two types of poems at the time. I had written a lot of elegies—sad poems about people who had lost their lives and things like that—then I had also been writing these poems of celebration, especially with Noah coming. When we knew we were going to have a baby, I got really excited and I wanted to write poems about celebrating life essentially; so I wrote a lot of odes too. I thought these were separate books entirely, but when I put them all in a word document, there seemed to be a lot of interplay—where the odes balanced the elegies and the elegies balanced the odes. I think—I hope—the book becomes more hopeful by recognizing sadness as well.

Rivard

You said something in an interview with Vinyl, which really resonated with me, about the “rickety nature of joy.” I think, that is what you are describing here, did you have that in mind when you were putting *Ramshackle Ode!* together?

Leonard

Yeah—it’s strange, whenever I think about death—especially my death—I actually become really appreciative of being here. I think that is true of happiness; you should be happy, because, one day, you won’t have the ability to be happy.

A poem is a really interesting place to explore that. A poem can emanate an idea—it can just sit in a spot and think about a leaf, think about a person, think about a baby, right? And that inevitably comes back to the huge issues of living and dying, and why we should be so happy. (laughs) You know, not all the time, but occasionally it can happen.

Rivard

I think that is very important. Of what I’ve read, I think you have captured that within your collection. I also noticed, in a lot of your work, there was this strong tie to your adolescence, tell me more about that?

Leonard

Totally! So I grew up on an island in Massachusetts, Martha’s Vineyard, it’s a great community. I don’t know the exact statistics, but there are like 7,000 people that live there year round, and in the summertime, the population swings up to 220,000. So the people that live there year round know each other really well; it’s a pretty special community, I think. I mean, you can’t go to the grocery store without seeing your third grade teacher. So, you think about what it is to live in a community like that, how does that shape the world? And also, that, that place is completely surrounded by water, which means that occasionally, and it’s really sad, but a fisherman will go missing. So it is a place that deals with communal grief a lot. Which is not something we get much of in our culture.

So even that is really loving, right? The whole town will turn out

for a funeral sometimes, just to celebrate someone's life.

Rivard

So this is the same sort of thing you outlined in your book. This contrast that you experienced in your childhood translates to the contrast you created between your odes and your elegies.

Leonard

Do you ever feel like we know everything we know because we know about contrast? I don't think I'd trust a book that was purely happy. I would definitely have to call bullshit.

Rivard

Where did your passion for writing come from? Was it something you were born with or was there an event?

Leonard

It was actually an event.

Rivard

Wow really? I was mostly kidding, but alright.

Leonard

Yeah when I was in high school I played a lot of sports—basketball, soccer, I never played football, but I was a really aggressive soccer goalie. I don't know why this is but if someone was on a break away with the ball I would charge them and just go after the ball. This one time I did that, they were in the middle of their swing, I wrapped myself around the ball, and they kicked me in the head. Not their fault, at all, but I ended up getting a pretty bad concussion from that. Two weeks later, I was on the sideline, someone kicked a ball from across the field and it just miraculously hit me in the head again. It was really bad. Then like a month later, I shouldn't have been playing goalie, but I was, and I took a ball to the face. I got like three concussions in like two months. The doctor was like, *alright, you're done*.

So I needed to do something else, and I just got into the arts from there, and I just fell in love with language. I just think lan-

guage is fascinating. We use language every day, but then when we try to write it or we try to describe something really well, it's like it's the most difficult thing that we know; people get anxiety about writing. It is because language is inexact and limited. So playing with that material—that limited, inexact material—and shaping it to describe different things, I think is deeply interesting, and an interesting way to see the world too.

And to *not* be able to describe something, I think tells you more about your experience than being able to describe it. So for instance, if you or I were to go to the hospital and we both had broken arms, which would be unfortunate, and the doctor says, *rate your pain from 1 to 10*, how do we know that your 6 and my 6 are even remotely the same? It is also telling that they say to give it a number, because you can't describe it. Pain breaks language entirely. Could you describe giving birth? No? Right? So dedicating a life to figuring out how to describe the world around you, is interesting and sometimes frustrating, but necessarily frustrating.

Rivard

And definitely worthwhile, in a historical context. So when reading the work you have published online, there were a few things before 2014 and a lot after. I noticed a really huge difference in what was published before 2014 versus your more recent work. Did that have to do with Noah? Or was there something else?

Leonard

Yeah, so I went to graduate school for writing. I went to Indiana University in Bloomington. I had started writing some more ode-like poems in some ways, but I took graduate school as an opportunity to try out everything I could. With poetry, I tried everything! I'd come to workshop with a poem where I really wasn't sure of what it was doing, because I really wanted to see if there was something in there that was effective. A lot of times it was horrible, the poem would be destroyed in workshop and I would feel horrible about myself, but I knew that eventually I would stumble on something that would work for my perspective and for my writing. So I eventually tried to abandon what I knew well, which was image-rich, elegiac poems about the sea. I just wanted to see what else

I could do, I think at one point I was writing poems in the voice of cartoon characters; which was not great, but it was really fun. I was also writing really formally. Then I started writing these poems that sort of loosened up the line and are more conversational, they just feel more natural, in the way that I try to exist in the world. I mean, that's probably going to change. I'm probably going to try something different.

Lately, I have been writing poems, and I don't know if these are going anywhere, but they are poems that are entirely composed of questions. Every line is a question. They are weird-ass questions. I am actually using them for an interview series called, "Questions for Conspicuous Whimsy." Every two weeks I am asking three people, around Bloomington, just regular people the same question. So the first set of three answered the question, "Do you believe in the existence of vegetarian tigers?" And they all had their take on that. Then the next one that is going to get posted soon, the question was, "Why does the giant, alone on an island in the center of the sea, still beat his drum incessantly?" One person drew a picture, one recorded a song. I am just really interested in what questions can do; more people are creative than think they are.

It is also, and I am really guilty of this, but I can go through my days without allowing wonder in. Right? Or questioning like *why is that thing that way?* I just kind of take things for granted, so maybe questions can strange up your world, a little bit.

Rivard

Especially questions like that, which force people out of their comfort zone.

Leonard

Yeah, and they make me get out of my comfort zone too! I am going to bring my next question to the hardware store, and to see what happens with those old dudes. I'm really nervous about it, but I am going to do it!

Rivard

I love this! You really have to pursue this! Are you putting them on your website?

Leonard

No, not on my website. I don't want it to have too much to do with me. I want it to deal with the questions. So the questions are at QuestionsForConspicuousWhimsy.com.

Rivard

So you're working on this, are you working on anything else right now?

Leonard

With a 13-month-old at home, I am mainly trying to use the same attention I use when writing a poem, while playing with him. This may be awful, but it is really hard sometimes to just be present with him. Writing poems is all about just trying to be present with that thought. Trying to do that with Noah is a really similar struggle. More of my energies are going towards him and I am really happy for that. I think down the line it will be really fruitful for my work.

Rivard

Definitely, especially if you are present in those moments, because then you'll be able to *describe* it better later on. I don't think that's a guilty confession at all. I think it's every parent ever, right?

So one thing I noticed while reading the post 2014 work, I noticed that the pacing is really fantastic. However, "Ramshackle Ode in Two Syllables," which was written in the earlier years, has the same pacing as your newer work.

Leonard

That was one of my first odes. I think I wrote that one earlier, then I went to writing other stuff, but it is interesting, because the way that got published was when a friend of mine saw a reading I did where I read some of my old stuff and then I was like "Oh, I have these new things that I am going to read," and he was like "Send me those new things! I want to publish them. That is what you should be doing." His name is Marcus Wicker, great poet. He probably recognized it before I did; that that is where I should be going. I didn't listen, of course. I can be stubborn sometimes.

Rivard

I should say, I love the way you read. Is there something you did to learn that?

Leonard

I once read for this place in Massachusetts where, before you do the reading, they have you meet with a reading coach. She listens to you read and she is really wonderfully assertive in saying, *Nope. Stop there. Start over. Go slower*, and the one thing that I remember her saying, was that punctuation was there for a reason. So after a comma, after a period take a breath—let the reader catch up to the thought process. I know what the poem is about, so something I feel inclined to do in a reading is just go right through it. I have to remember that meaning lags behind the words. It's like a horse drawn carriage, where the carriage lags behind the horse. It's important to remember to just read a little bit slower.

Rivard

So I want to talk about “Seed.” Was that inspired by Noah?

Leonard

Yeah, “Seed,” “Dead Man Float,” and “Becoming a Boy,” all came from the reflection of witnessing a birth. There is nothing more incredible, and I know it is cliché, but it's a human coming out of a human, that is never not incredible! It's so mind blowing, I still don't know how to process it. I think it broke me into some wonder at that moment, like *shit a human coming out of a human!*

Rivard

I feel like it comes through in those poems, there is a really organic feeling to them—especially seed—you can just feel the humanity in that poem.

Leonard

I am really glad you said organic. In Bloomington, I did some work on this place called The Bloomington Community Orchard. It is completely volunteer run. It is a public park that has 100 fruit trees and berry bushes. Everything is edible. I was lucky enough to be

there when it was just a flat piece of grass. So we literally raised an orchard.

I learned so much out of that about how birth is this organic thing, and how all life being created is earthy. It's filled with dirt and mud and love.

Rivard

I can actually see that experience in a good number of your poems. It really goes back to what we were talking about in the beginning, this joy, but you have to work hard and be grateful for life in order to feel that joy. The experience of raising an orchard would certainly give you that.

Leonard

Yeah, it is really interesting because it is such a beautiful place, but creating that beauty was hard—it was painful, and it was sweaty.

Rivard

So last thing, when you are teaching, what you tell your students that is invaluable.

Leonard

The classic thing to say, is that if you want to write and you are not reading many books or learning from those books, then you are not really writing. But that aside; that's very boring. A lot of times our natural inclination is to write to critique, to write to say there is something wrong with the world that we want to fix. But what I try to tell students, is that we only feel that way, because we love its opposite. So try to keep that in mind. If you are going to write something about love, you also need to write about what might prevent that love. Or if you are going to write about something preventing that love remind the reader why they love in the first place.



Eternity, Patrick Allred, Oil on Canvas, 48 in. x 72 in.

Winner of the 2016 prize for Visual Arts



Death Dancing, Patrick Allred, Oil on Canvas, 48 in. x 72 in.

CODY HEDGES

Harpsichord

O Harpsichord!

Strike me with your gold and crimson tones!

I feed upon those clicks and chains of hard harmonious moans.

String plucked by plectrum used

To summon Orpheus and his Muse.

O Harpsichord!

Strike me with your gold and crimson tones!

Lust

By nature

I

Groomed and bright

Keen to gain Apollo's light

But bogged by mires

Dark in hue

Lascivious thoughts

Of compromising fair Athena

Her glory sparks the evening bright

Reason is the day

And Lust the night

Second-place winner of the 2016 prize for Poetry

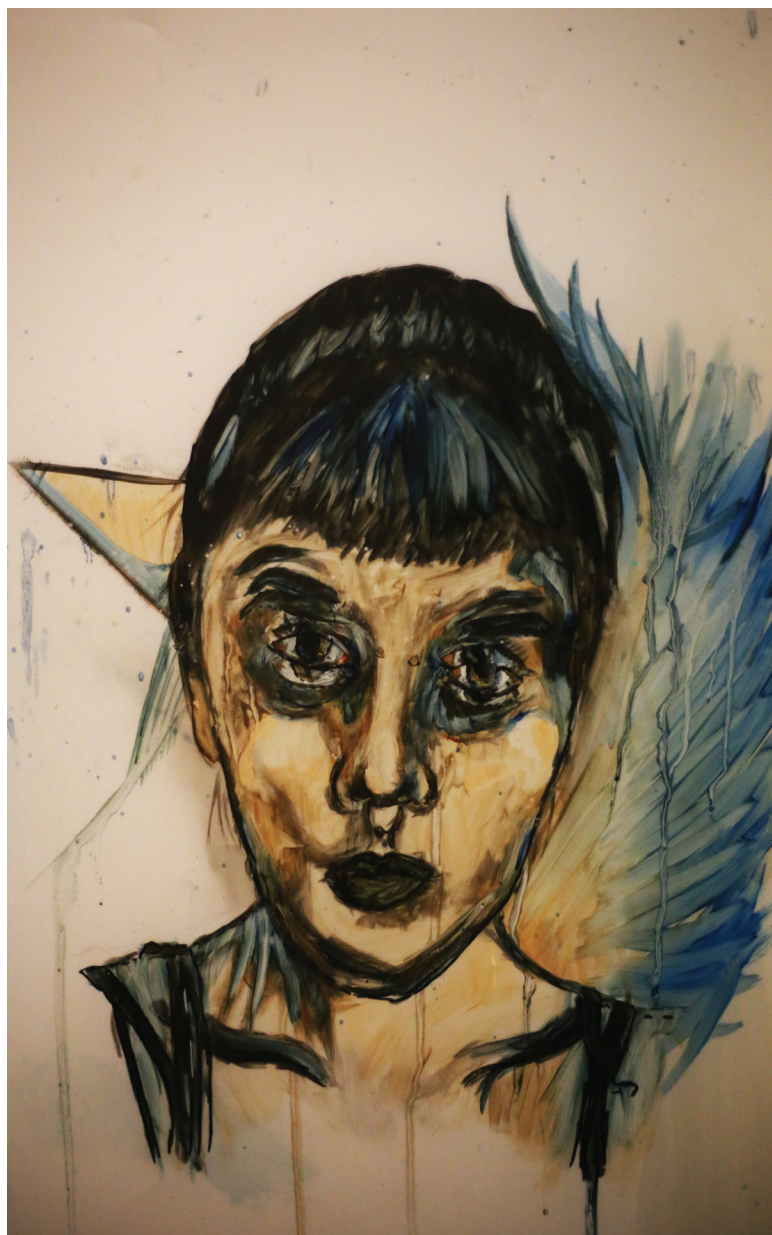
KATIE HOLLINGSWORTH

Seasons

He leaves in the fall. Says he can't take it any longer as soon as the green begins to die. You wonder if it's the cold settling into his bones. Maybe he just can't shake it. Or maybe he can't shake you. He doesn't give you a chance to open your mouth, just spits out his words as surely and steadily as the leaves are falling outside your window. When you walk you can hear their crunching right alongside your heartbeat. When he talks you feel as insignificant as one of those leaves. He walks over you without a second thought and this is when you began sympathizing with trees.

He comes back in the winter, always. Says his bed is too cold without your body forming creases in it like the wrinkles on your mother's forehead. Says he never realized the importance of leaves. He looks at you like you wanted him to in the autumn. You apologize, tell him you're sorry that you changed. You will stay green this time, you promise.

One year ahead: the cool breeze hits you and your blood starts turning again. He has already picked up his feet.



Bluebird, Elizabeth Miller, Oil

JESSICA COX

Ice & Milk

I've never thought of myself as pretty. I don't even think I've ever thought, *I'm a girl*. In my house we're more of a breed of people, superior to all beings because of our DNA, even though sometimes when I try to flip the light switch the lights won't turn on. Mom tells me that happens because the light company shut them off. I don't really understand what that means. I am the oldest of the Cox kids, and I am proud of that. I have a beautiful Mom, a Dad you wouldn't want to mess with, and two of the cutest baby brothers on earth. Brad, Bubby, has a naturally beautiful way of existing, and Tommy sits and spins in his bouncy seat with a smile bigger than the moon. My house always smells like apples and clean laundry, but we don't have either.

Dad is a mechanic, but I'm not even sure what that means. I know he really likes race cars. Sometimes he lets me sit in them when he and his friends are working in the garage, a lot of those times there are a bunch of cars turning left on a blacktop track flashing on a TV in the background. There's always a huge black oil spot in our driveway left behind from someone's oil change, brake change, tire rotation, timing belt problem, or transmission rebuild. I don't even know what any one of those things are, but I'm a big girl, and I am old enough to hear things around here.

Mom gets pretty worn out. She's always waving her arms, cigarette in hand, while she keeps the phone on her ear with her shoulder. I know better than to answer the phone without permission. Nana calls too often and she never has anything nice to say. Bubby is always in trouble and Mom is always yelling at him but smiling in the same breath. I always take in my atmosphere, and I never want to be in the spotlight. Having the spotlight means that you have Dad's attention. If Dad stops to pay attention to you, you pay the ultimate price. I've learned to look to Mom when Brad is being punished. Mom acts like it's okay, so there really can't be much wrong with it, right?

Today is Monday. Mom woke up late, and I look like I haven't showered in a week. Either way, I still go to school. Through the week I never see my Dad. I can't say that I really care. I'm terrified of him. He doesn't even know that I exist. Mom makes dinner every night at six o'clock. Dinner is on the table when he gets home, and he always gets the biggest piece of chicken. Bubby talks to him all the time. He also gets the most whippings. To put it simply, I won't get beat if he doesn't notice I exist. I have no idea why my mom is even with him.

I made Mom mad today. We're all sitting at dinner and he asks about her day. She begins with, "Jessica didn't get the dishes from last night cleaned. I went to make our pasta tonight and the grease from last night was crusted into the corners." She actually looked at me like she wished she could shove those words back into her mouth after she said them. Dad dropped his fork and it sounded like the end of a baseball bat slamming onto home plate. He looked at me like he couldn't believe I wasn't perfect. I knew I was in trouble but Mom saved me.

That was the first time Mom "whipped" me. She took me into my room and whispered into my ear, "Just lay a crossed your bed and pretend like this hurts." She took the belt and wacked my pillow. I screamed because I knew if it didn't act like it hurt, he would make sure it did. I spent the first thirteen years of my life like this. Dodging my father when he walked into a room, praying he wouldn't talk to me, and hoping my brother wouldn't take the chance to get in trouble again.

When I was about ten, he beat up my grandpa in our front yard. Bubby and I were playing video games in the front room on the TV with dials for a channel changer. I had no idea what my parents were wanting to do. I know my dad was worried about leaving us home alone with grandpa. As an adult, I learned that my grandpa was a belligerent drunk, and my brother idolized him. He thought he could be like that around Bubby, and my Dad was not okay with that. I was always too scared, and I never wanted to see the aftermath of his anger. Bubby was always right in front, looking at grandpa all beat up in the front yard. This was just the beginning

of his future problems.

I really believe that my mother is the most beautiful person on the planet, and I will never be anything like her. I'm a Cox. That means I'm different. I'm tough nosed, hard necked, built tough, and I am never emotional. I literally never thought one time of what it was like to be a girl. I was just like my brother in every way except he was better than me at everything. I wasn't pretty, but my Dad would brag about how far I could throw a baseball.

I was thirteen when my entire life was shattered because I had to start playing softball with the girls. In my mind, women were weak. I'm not weak. I am a Cox.

Bubby rode his bike with me every day in the summer. Dad wasn't home and Mom was asleep, but we had a way out. I filled my jug with ice and milk; we rode until I couldn't figure out where I was anymore. Bubby always knew how to get home. I never knew why he kept going back.

I look at my children and I realize we are so different. The girls think their Daddy is amazing. They have two, and they both are. My mom is here for me still, and my Dad is still a ghost. I bury my siblings daily in my own mind. It would be easier if I could just separate myself from them. I can't though because Bubby told Dad that the fault was his own. He took those "licks" for me. I can still see him running down the hall after Mom screaming for help and I realize this is no fault of his own.

I'm still not sure why I've landed sunny side up from this situation. We lived the same childhood. Memaw was our way out, and Dad was always on the mend. As we grew the fault changed. Sometimes it was Mom, then Dad; other times their new wife or husband. We didn't ask for it, but here we are.

I find myself washing dishes in my kitchen staring out the back door at my garden and thinking of my mother. She did everything just for me. Six kids later, I will always be her first; her Ayvah. She woke up because of me, fought because of me, breathed because of me, and most importantly, I would not be without her.

I see fragments of my childhood, just like these, when I look too long in the mirror. I smell Memaw's scent and I'm lost in a

time when I only had her. Too long of a gaze at a Mary Engelbret calendar and I'm thrown into a time when my mom had to all but sell her soul to keep us from starving to death due to my father's selfish ways. Dad was always an emotional being. He felt too much, too late, too little of the time. The most haunting memory I have of him is when he returned home after a week-long, check-blowing binge.

Dad sat in the kitchen of his mother's childhood home on a bench my mom refurbished. He looked at the five of us: Mom, Me, Bubby, Tommy, and Matty. We were all dirty, starving, thirsty, and attention-seeking. He said, "I'm just thankful to be sitting in this kitchen peeling potatoes." He blew his check on drugs again. He disappeared Friday and didn't come back until Monday night. Mom believed he would change. Seventeen years later and he is still the same.

I am who I am because of my circumstance. I have such a hard time realizing when I'm "here" and when I'm actually here. My brother took the physical brunt of all situations. He kept me safe, and took the blame all the time. Sometimes he'd beat up on other kids his age so he would know what it felt like to be the winner. He still can't win, he got too close to our father. Even with the best intentions these Cox kids are cursed.

JENNY DOLE

Bathsheba

"So," Colin whispered, leaning across the table, "if you don't like sex, what do you like?"

Stephanie thought for a minute. "Well, I like dragons, but all asexuals like dragons." She laughed at the look on his face. "There are worse stereotypes."

*

With a mug full of turkey and gravy, Colin sat on the porch beside Stephanie. She was studying the moon, her hands in between her thighs.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Not horribly," she said. "Are you eating turkey out of a mug?"

"All the plates are dirty," he said. When she smiled, he stepped up to the real reason they were out in the cold. "They didn't mean to upset you, you know."

"I know. I'm just tired of hearing it all again after I think people finally understand."

"I understand. And I'm on your side. You don't deserve to be treated like that over something that's not hurting you or them."

"Right," she said, holding both hands out, turning them over and under in the moonlight, smiling at her fingers.

"Are you enjoying your moonlight?" he asked.

"Yiss," she said with a goofy grin and spun the ring on her finger.

*

Stephanie listened without a word when the pastor brought up sex and left the office after the session breathing heavily, beating her way through the front doors. Colin listened to her complain in the car.

"What does he know? Is it really supposed to be *that* important? To anybody? Does anybody really *have* to have sex?"

"I don't think so either, hon," Colin said. "I'm tired of everything, *everything* being about sex, too."

*

They did try *once* on their wedding night.

“Don’t be mad, okay?” she said the next morning, sitting at the foot of the bed, facing away from him.

“Okay.” He stared over her shoulder at what he could see of her face.

“I just...didn’t like it. It was uncomfortable for me and I don’t want to try again, not for a long time.” She hunched her shoulders and pulled one of her knees in closer.

“Okay.” He turned away.

*

Less than a year later, they were home alone. He came up behind her while she was at the stove and wrapped his arms around her waist, leaning against her. She was so warm. So soft.

“What are you doing?” she asked, not angry but startled.

He stepped back from her and crossed his arms. “Nothing.”

What am I doing?

*

Be good to her, his dad had told him. *Maybe she’ll come around.*

That’s not how it works, he’d answered. *I just have to be patient with her. She deserves that from me, if she can’t have it from everyone.*

But he knew all his other options, some in windowless buildings with neon signs, some at home behind closed doors.

No. It’s dangerous. Addictive. It’ll just make things worse.

But his own body seemed to be hunting him, watching for his moment of weakness.

*

“Why are you ignoring me?” she said one night. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s me, it’s—” He stepped back as she reached for his arm.

“Don’t—don’t touch me.”

“Why not? What’s wrong?”

She could burn herself on his skin. He made himself look away from her, brushed past her to the bathroom.

*

In his nightmare, all he could see was a woman’s body below him,

struggling against him.

He woke up shivering, sobbing.

Stephanie was awake. They had fallen asleep apart, but she still felt him shaking. "What's wrong?"

He threw the covers back and staggered out of the bedroom, out to the kitchen. The floor tiles were cold. The sink dripped. The moonlight shone bright outside, the window like the mouth of a cave.

She followed him. He sat on the floor, head pressed against a table leg. Told her everything. She sat with her back against the table leg opposite and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. She held her breath, then let out a shaky sigh.

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"I want to stay right here. I don't blame you. I'm just afraid for you. I should be in control, but I'm not."

He thought about moving closer to her, but that wouldn't help.

"So what are we going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know."

She crawled over and leaned on his shins, resting her head on his bent knees, facing him.

"What do you need me to do for you?" she asked.

"What?"

"You've tried to make this work by ignoring the problem for my sake, because I don't want to talk about sex, much less do it. It isn't working. You're *still* shaking." She squeezed his knee gently. "Talk to me. The worst I can do is say no. I don't think I can change yet, but I don't want to leave either."

Colin sighed and brushed his fingers through her hair. Stephanie helped him up, and they went back to bed together.



Illi Tempus, Sarah Miller, Oil

Winner of the 2016 prize for Fiction

BRANDI MASTERSON

Faith

The tree in the commons behind his duplex was a safe place.

It was the lights—someone had wound strands of Christmas lights around its base and a few low branches. They glowed warm yellow-ish in the night, like a canopy. In another place, and without the lights, the small picnic area might be a place for drug deals and handsy teens. With the lights, though, it seemed safe.

The duplex was about five years old, and on the day he moved in it smelled like fresh paint and lingering damp. Cooper walked the narrow hall between his living room and the bedroom, pausing when the floorboards croaked under his weight, balancing on the silence that followed until his muscles protested the tension.

He continued the vigil. He certainly wasn't unpacking—every box open but still full until he needed something from it. A fork, a pair of socks, a partially used desk calendar from 2002. His cabinets were empty—save for a single crystal tumbler and a shamrock green plate.

For the economy of his lifestyle—walking empty halls, not unpacking, and watching reruns of *Friends* he had never seen before—his trash was surprisingly heavy every Tuesday morning. The clanking of glass bottles working in tandem with the sunlight made his headaches even worse as he threw the entire bag into the bin.

He should have recycled them, he knew. He knew, and pretended not to care. He stopped praying and didn't eat enough. He appreciated the boxes that were growing less full and the stuff that was piling up around them. This was the opposite of his tidy suite of rooms in the parsonage, with its closet full of black slacks and crisp white button-down shirts, where he was only allowed to betray a sliver of himself that had somehow become everything.

Father Cooper Allan Roberts. He liked God and sports and clenching his jaw so hard his teeth ached when it rained.

He almost introduced himself to his new neighbor that way. He was on his porch staring at the tree when she came out. Her

backdoor slamming closed reverberated through his soles and he thought, *this isn't how it should go*, before retreating into the house. Inside, he turned the television up and remembered her silhouette and the sense of safety he felt when he saw the lights around the tree behind his new home.

1.

dust motes

darkness

eleven

onyx

It might have started at age eleven, when he mistook desperation for devotion. His prayers were whispered with a fervor feigned by most, and his young heart wept for the pain of others, God's and His son's, while Cooper's own remained buried deep beneath the fading bruises on his skin.

It might have started at age sixteen, when he took a hard tackle during practice, and ended up with a fractured fibula and a knee that never wanted to go the direction he needed it to. It was a sign, he decided, as he saw his friendships devolve without the camaraderie born from pre-game rituals and post-game parties. He had more time to read; more time to pray. When his leg had healed, he spent an entire weekend hiking alone, testing his limits and strengthening his faith.

It might have started there, or with the realization that most people spoke little but empty words, stumbling and making mistakes and in need of a steady hand to guide them forward.

But Cooper believed, as much as anything, it started in a room filled with dusty, golden light. He had a narrow bed, a small dresser, and a desk wedged in a corner beneath a heavy, onyx crucifix. He remembered the squeal of the mattress springs under the weight of his adult body. He remembered the secretive scuff and shuffle of black dress shoes on hardwood. He remembered the low and perpetual whispers that echoed up and down the paneled halls of the seminary dorm.

He remembered Travis, his suitemate. When everything else became swallowed by shadows, that first conversation with Travis stood apart and clear.

“What kind of man do you hope to become, my brother?”

He’d hesitated. He’d remembered age eleven. He’d remembered fervent prayers, pleas answered with silence, and, *Hush, child, and be strong, lest they mistake you for one of your sisters.*

His response, “A faithful man.”

He wished he’d said “good” instead.

2.

moist (the word)

jade rosary

old maid

Sister Eleanor

He lived in benevolent squalor for two months before one of his new colleagues wanted to drop by with fresh eggs they had bought and wouldn’t be able to eat. Cooper had no idea why he was expected to be all right with Dr. Nti Asare, who he only knew from a single faculty meeting, coming by with fresh eggs, but the *fuck off* he wanted to say got stuck in his throat, and he found himself forced to make his apartment reflect who they *thought* he was and not...well, a crazy bastard.

Which he wasn’t. He couldn’t be and he wouldn’t. He wanted to succeed here where he’d failed elsewhere, and the students would be able to smell crazy on him. He started eating his meals instead of drinking them, the fresh eggs, a great place to start, and the shamrock green plate started getting regular use. He used his punching bag again, instead of his past. He settled into a routine. It no longer reminded him of the vigils from before, of the rituals that had once been performed, with painstaking care, to appease a God, who never indicated whether He did or not care.

He showered every morning at first light. There was a window at the end of his bathroom, a high window that faced southeast, and he kept the lights off and stood under the water, as hot as he

could stand it on top of July's unbearable humidity. He hated heat, the steam created was like suffocation, and even after pushing the knob down the lingering clouds choked him like calloused hands on a delicate windpipe.

After twenty-two days, it was a habit. On the twenty-third day, he set the water to cold and pressed his forehead to the tile just below the showerhead and cried. It wasn't like suffocation or being forced into silence, but it made his throat hurt all the same.

A better hurt. A cathartic one, perhaps. Like the pain in his wrists after going too long on the punching bag. He got the name of the person in town with the fresh eggs. Dr. Nti Asare gave it up with a smile and told him to be *very* prepared for his Literature and the Bible discussion, where many students would consider themselves experts on everything, even if they knew very little. Cooper remembered his own attitude at that age, well enough for concern, so he went over his syllabus a few more times and wondered if this job would leave more room for himself than the last one had.

3.

sundials

1 Corinthians 6:13

light through a lattice panel

tattered comic books

On his first visit to Dr. Niehaus, Cooper had been asked to fill out a long piece of cardstock that had the word TRIGGERS handwritten in the top left hand corner. After getting clarification from the receptionist, a man who gestured with rolling eyes as effectively as most did with hands, Cooper had taken the card back to his seat and created four tidy columns of things that bothered him on a weird level.

On his fourth visit, Dr. Niehaus brought up his neighbor, who was a pretty young woman. She had long, red hair that she kept pulled back. She rode her bike to and from work and wore scrubs. He didn't think she was a doctor- her hours were long but too regular. When she was home, her side of the duplex was usually so

quiet that it would be easy to forget she existed.

The doctor asked if he had introduced himself, and he demurred. It wasn't because she was a woman, he tried to explain. He had female students, after all. And it wasn't because she was pretty.

"It's the space we share," he avoided Dr. Niehaus's gaze. "The duplex reminds me of my suite in the seminary, the beginning."

She flipped through her notes.

"That wasn't the beginning, Cooper," Dr. Niehaus was tall and thin and spoke with a brittle, Welsh accent undermined by a decade spent in Middle America.

"In a way, it was," he responded, his eyes trained on the nubby, beige carpet of her office. "The beginning of who I became."

On his tenth visit, he told her about the tree behind his duplex. She clearly thought that this should have come before the saga of the pretty neighbor.

"It's one of those trees that mushrooms up and out at the perfect height. Adults can grill under it, kids can pretend it's a clubhouse," he knew that this didn't matter. "And at night the lights come on, and it's just...nice."

Nice was not the word he meant to say, and Dr. Niehaus was professional enough to wait it out.

"Without them, it would be too dark, I think," Cooper entwined his fingers but kept his palms splayed out. "Even if everyone turned on their porch lights there would be this wad of blackness, right outside my kitchen window. It would be the kind of place where things happen, and nobody would be able to see them, and it's already hard enough to believe the things that could happen, there, so close to home."

He closed his eyes for a moment. She already knew what had happened to him in the darkness close to home. These words were empathy, and there was more to it than empathy.

"The lights remind me of something I can't quite name," his hands came apart and he stared at his palms for a few seconds before continuing, his voice oddly calm as he unearthed this kernel of realization. "Refuge, maybe? I used to take refuge in God, in my faith in God. I thought that's how it worked; that I would be faith-

ful and everything else would fall in place.” He blinked back tears, and his eyes fell onto an object on Dr. Niehaus’s desk.

He reached out and picked up the no-doubt expensive Captain America action figure, one painstakingly recreated after the actor who portrayed him and detailed right down to a rosy blush blooming on Cap’s pale cheeks.

“Your favorite superhero says a lot about you,” she prodded.

Cooper laughed, somewhat hollowly.

“Steve Rogers was just a guy who was so appalled by the evils of the world that he...he became strong enough to fight them,” Cooper set the figure back on her desk and ran his fingers along his neck. His hair was too long, the formerly tight curls loosening to fall against his fraying shirt collar. “It inspired me to, well, fail a lot of people, I suppose.”

“Steve Rogers didn’t just will his strength into being, Cooper,” her tone was indulgent but not patronizing. “It’s unfortunate for all of us that his super serum doesn’t exist in real life.”

“It was someone else’s faith in him, not just the serum,” he felt the pressure building behind his eyes again, “I went about it all wrong.”

Dr. Niehaus’s expression grew warmer.

“You know, I can’t change the way you feel about who you were, and what you did before,” she flipped through his file, her eyes never quite connecting with the pages within. “It might not have been who you were meant to be, but I don’t think that boy, or the man he became, was wrong, or a failure.”

On his thirteenth visit, he thought he understood, even if he couldn’t quite agree.

4.

black shoe polish

heavy velvet drapes

sticky sweet peppermint lips

a Goofy watch (that runs backwards)

Cooper had thrown out his black and white wardrobe when he

left the parsonage. He'd been low on cash when he replaced them, so he had left the local Goodwill with two bags full of khakis and an armful of blue button-downs. He wore brown loafers when he had to, but usually sneakers or flip-flops. They were a strange sort of guilty pleasure, and his students teased him for it. They made fun of his left big toe, the way it skewed cheerfully towards the one next to it due to overzealous taping after he'd broken it skateboarding as a kid. They told him he needed to take Nair to the dusting of hair on the tops of his feet. They told him to go back to California, where it made sense for him to show up in cheap rubber flip-flops for class in early March.

He never mistook their ribbing for something it wasn't. It was easier for him to be at the front of a classroom than he'd thought it would be. He got to relax, to be a version of himself that wasn't so locked in and distant. He got to be excited when his students pushed back at what he told them, the theological debates that followed lively rather than loaded with the portent of purgatory or worse.

Cooper's faculty mentor saw it too and understood. Dr. Nti Asare stooped rather than stood and was quite fond of taking Cooper to lunch, his hand tight on Cooper's forearm as they walked to the nearest coffee shop or greasy spoon. Cooper had long since forgiven the man for his overfamiliarity and fresh eggs. He had been a reverend once before marrying a much younger woman and turning his love of knowledge to something less dogmatic. Despite the man's perpetually untidy appearance and diminished stature, his mind was sharp, and he spoke with uncommon wisdom and joy.

Dr. Nti Asare also made fun of Cooper's clothes, but only because they were always so cheap and, "unseemly for a man of his stature." After a two-week trip to visit his mother in Ghana, Dr. Nti Asare returned with a pair of hand-tooled, burgundy-on-slate, calfskin brogues.

"I spoke with one of your students before I left here," he smiled, immaculate teeth bright against his dark skin. "He said that, 'Father Roberts is an excellent teacher, but the man has the saddest taste in clothes I ever saw.' I say that you are *Professor* Roberts, and

these will be a good start.”

Cooper was hesitant to accept them, although grateful for the thought and the belief in him that he wasn’t certain he deserved. They had probably cost more than the sum total of every piece of clothing he’d ever purchased.

“I am *not* someone who can pull these off,” he ran his thumbs along the ornate detailing, the resultant smudges evaporating after a few seconds; as if the shoes were capable of repelling his self-doubt. He would have to build an entire wardrobe around them—they demanded tailored pants and bold, patterned, dress socks.

“Maybe not today,” Dr. Nti Asare leaned against him and made an effort to drape his short arm around Cooper’s broad shoulders. His breath smelled sweet, like warm sugar and mint. Cooper admired the man and did not mind the burden shared. “But remember— *good start*. That is the key.”

Cooper put the shoes on a shelf in his living room by the front door. They weren’t the lights on the tree, or anything that could turn a skinny kid from Brooklyn into a super soldier, but they were something. A sign of faith, the kind he could work with.

A sign of faith *in him*.

*

The lights around the tree went out shortly after the spring semester ended. Whether something had happened to one strand or the outside outlet, nobody stepped forward to take ownership. Cooper yearned to fix it, but he’d yet to put himself *out there* to any of his neighbors. He didn’t want their first introduction to be him with an iPad in one hand, clumsily searching the internet for how electricity worked, while trying not to get electrocuted.

He missed it though, his refuge. He had gotten used to washing dishes late at night, while staring through the window at himself and his kitchen reflected in the glass, with the lights spreading across them, like points of candlelight.

There was a deeper connection, he realized one night. Candlelight services had always been his favorite to officiate—he found meaning in the way one light became two, became four, became dozens, and dozens more. He knew he was in trouble the night he

had stared across a chapel full of unsteadily, bobbing lights, and he felt a sense of hope he'd thought he lost to vows, or had been dulled by tradition. He could offer a flame to a stranger to foster and spread on their own, but he felt helpless to offer anything more substantial than that.

Not the steady hand he had once imagined he'd have, or the good he wished he'd wanted to be.

He missed the lights, the reassurance of safety. He washed his dishes, kept his eyes on his work, and his mind on dark places. Outside added nothing to his reflection, and he could do that on his own.

On the first day of June, he took out his trash and saw the brogues, still new, and still waiting on the shelf by the door. He felt it prickle up his spine- the reminder that someone out there believed in him enough to put their time and money down. After a long, cool shower, he made sure the external outlet was receiving power and then spent five hours testing individual strands of lights, while fat little honeybees hovered around dingy clumps of peonies planted at the edges of the picnic area. That afternoon, two of his neighbors showed up to help him pull the old lights off.

The next day, he had twenty new strands of lights and six new volunteers. There was an impromptu block party at twilight, the glittering canopy offering cover and constancy, as day gave way to night.

Cooper watched from his back porch, his arms folded over his chest. This time, when his neighbor came out to watch, he stayed.

Like this, he thought and extended his hand over the low bannister between them.

"It was awesome of you to do this for everyone," she commented a moment later, obviously shocked that he had chosen to speak to her, after almost a year of resolute silence, but too polite to push during their first conversation. "It's much nicer to look out the window and see...*this*."

"Isn't it?" He smiled and leaned against the bannister between them. This was a far better way to start everything. "I just wish I could've done it sooner."



Fluidity, Elizabeth Miller, Oil

JOSH LYKINS

Lovely Dead Girls

Lovely dead girls stretched beneath the ground,
Lips that part but make no sound.
Their hair strung out, waves of honey and fire and coal
Their eyes burnt out, glassed and empty of soul.
Little hand and little foot
Little dove and little rook
Upon the place, upon the heath,
Below the flowers to earth beneath
Where dead girls dream of princes fair
With noble brows and golden hair
And hands that do not slap and scratch
And fingers that do not innocence snatch

AMBER MASON

Witch in the Willow

I see you burst from the bark as the village men are hoisting ropes up into your branches, your bronzed hair aglow and flecked with white. I remember grandmother's hands speaking about you in secret bedtime stories, but I never believed she was spinning truths. Yet here you are, grace and elegance personified and in verdant eyes. I see the memories and wisdom of uncountable seasons come and passed. How many things have you witnessed over the years, sitting upon the hilltop and looking down on our tiny village; a queen atop her throne.

Your breath tickles my cheek and stirs the few remaining leaves that hang like dying candles from your great boughs. Something in your movements reminds me of smoke rising from the kitchen fire. I wonder if your world is as silent as mine, for you pay no mind to the angry faces and gapping maws that I've come to recognize as shouting. Instead, you inspect the rope that the men have pulled into your canopy and the stacked hay bales below; your face alight in joy. My heart aches for you. Beside me mama places a hand on my shoulder, nails curling into talons that cut into my skin until I squirm in protest and tear my gaze away from your ethereal form.

I miss the exact moment the men have lifted my sister to stand upon the hay, but my stomach turns in on itself and I feel hollow as I watch the bales being kicked away, the friar spewing words unimaginable to the gathered crowd. Her bound hands claw at the rope around her neck, desperate to find purchase between fiber and flesh, as if such a thing would offer a moment's relief as your own strong arms hold her high.

Can you feel her dying? Your joy at our presence is gone, your eyes wide in a search of understanding, mouth twisting in horror as you find none. The villagers brace against your anguish as you tear at shawls and hats, the sudden chill born from more than just the coming winter, yet no one can hear you and they simply clutch their belongings closer. Above my sister's body dances and spins in

its snare, never aware of your presence. It should never have been her.

The winter months bring more ropes, more bodies' left hanging from your branches like putrid fruit as our little village is engulfed by fears of witches and devils. Without consent you have been made executioner, your ancient strength stolen for use by cowards. As the rope finally comes to rest around my neck, I watch for you, but you are weary and have long since locked yourself away. And as I fall, my heart aches again for you, for experience is a hard teacher. She gives the test first, the lesson afterward.

Second-place winner of the 2016 prize for Fiction

JOSH GARD

A Scholarly Account of the Fall of Humanity

Α Σχολιαρχία Αχχουντ οφ της Φαλλ οφ Ηυμανιτις

A Scholarly Account of the Fall of Humanity

Τρανσλατεδ βυ Γηβλμ

Translated by Ghivlm

Πρεφαχε

Preface

*Ωθεν της Σθυιδ Εμπιρε took οπερ της πλανετ ιν 2175, μοστ ηυμαν δοχυμεντς οφ ιμπορτ ωερε λ
οστ. Τηε φολλοωινγ αχχουντ ωασ ρεχοπερεδ, ωιτη νο σμαλλ διφφιχυλτις, φρομ αν αβανδονεδ η
υμαν φαχυλιτις υνδερ της Νορττερν Ωατερς. Ιτ ηας βεεν τρανσλατεδανδ ρεπροδυχεδ φαιτηφυλ
λψ, ιν ιτς εντιρετψ, βελω.*

*When the Squid Empire took over this planet in 2175, most human documents of
import were lost. The following is a personal account which was recovered, with no small
difficulty, from an abandoned human facility under the Northern Waters. In an effort
to preserve its historical authenticity, it has been reproduced faithfully, in its original
human language, below.*

Pre-Contact

It is undeniable that mistakes were made. The first was pumping our atmosphere full of greenhouse gases like a cheap party balloon. By 2025, the world's average temperature had jumped several degrees. By 2075, Alaska was comparatively equatorial. By 2100, glacial melting had caused a massive shift in coastlines; Indiana became beachfront property, while Ohio became a very nice beach.

Shrinking landmasses led to a shortage of resources. With the world ankle deep, land had become a premium. Larger countries absorbed smaller ones which formed alliances. When Hypermerica invaded New Canada, the war started. At first, people hoped for a swift and relatively bloodless conclusion; the bombs were, admittedly, rather counterproductive. Despite that, the war united what was left of the world under a singular government. With a catastrophic death toll, inflated by no small amount of drowning, the population reached levels sustainable on what little land was left,

and peace was achieved. Sadly, it was not to last.

Fallout from the nuclear conflict settled across much of Europe. The area, underwater for decades, was still nonetheless valued as a military acquisition, even if just for nostalgia's sake. Between bombs detonated on the surface and those lost to the depths (many accidentally triggered in the years following); radiation became an almost natural part of the ecosystem. Most of the effects seemed fairly standard at first. There was the occasional glowing school of fish, and most species of crab rather ironically developed cancer and died out, but major changes seemed to have been avoided. However, repeated nuclear detonations had driven a species of giant squid to the surface, and the radiation had unforeseen effects on their development.

Squids, you see, are very smart. Before, they were considered among the most intelligent of all invertebrate species. Not exactly tons of competition, but there you are. The radiation from our surface war had an augmentative effect on this intelligence, and over time the squids grew ever smarter.

This went unnoticed at first. Squids were then quite well removed from humanity proper. For a number of years, the increase in ships lost at sea, broken and missing sensors, and other such phenomena was attributed to the ever-rising and now often violent waters around the globe. It was not until reef-like megacities began rising from the depths that humanity finally took notice. The newly unified government, simply calling themselves the New World Order, acted on their second instinct (the first not being very helpful politically, mainly consisting of surprised shouting) and issued an attack on the squid civilization.

Contact

The next several years were marked by skirmishes, each largely ineffectual. Nuclear-enhanced mutant squids proved to be fairly resilient to most forms of assault. Nukes had only made them smarter, so the NWO turned to conventional guns. But, as famed Nobel prize-winning physicist Gorrn Futurename put it, "Surface's tension's a bitch," and guns, too, were abandoned as ineffective.

With a growing sense of desperation, the NWO turned to the sacred knowledge of the past. Much of this revered ancestral knowledge had been lost in the Great Flood; however, some archived records from the century preceding the Unification War and the Great Flood had been preserved in black rectangular cases or round data discs. Upon inspection, these records showed beasts, often similar in scope and power to the squids and also resistant to conventional weaponry, being conquered. This was often through an application of what the records referred to as the “power of friendship.” Intrigued, the NWO rounded up hundreds of pairs of best friends from the world’s remaining schools. These children were loaded into centrifuges and spun rapidly in the hope that this “power of friendship” could be isolated, extrapolated, and weaponized. Now, in my experience, friendship can be difficult even under the best of circumstances. As it turns out, it becomes impossible somewhere around the 15,000 rpm mark. After five long years of failed trials, this final effort, too, was abandoned.

Once the hopelessness of the situation came fully to light, ambassadors were sent. Twelve of the finest diplomatic minds the NWO could produce were sent into the heart of the squid’s civilization, where they were immediately crushed by the massive pressure that deep beneath the water. While the NWO felt it was the thought that counted, this did highlight a potential issue regarding communication. The squid patriarch, Nvmtidl the Wise, circumvented this by outfitting his representatives with suits that allowed their survival on the surface. Thus, the Treaty of Fourteen Limbs was signed on October 12, 2161. Again there was peace, and again it was short-lived.

Despite the treaty, tensions never quite relaxed. Human-Cephalo violence became a common occurrence among the populace, in spite of the lack of official support. In 2165, a rogue NWO biologist bred a nuclear superwhale and used it to assassinate Nvmtidl the Wise’s progeny. This event marked the start of the Second Unification War.

War

After the loss of his offspring, Nvmtidl shed his mantle of “Wise” and adopted the title of Nvmtidl the Bonegnawer, a title which he enthusiastically earned over the next decade. From 2165 to 2174, his people waged a devastating war against humanity. Having developed an intelligence far superior to our own, the squids created war machines not thought of even in our wildest, bloodiest human dreams. Towering, many-tentacled mechanical suits allowed them to massacre our forces, even on land. High temperature laser-ink cannons converted our finest soldiers into dust and memory. Finally, in 2175, humanity surrendered.

What followed was a complete dismantling of our society and culture. Our buildings were stripped down and repurposed. Those who did not die in the fighting were either enslaved, eaten, or forced into hiding. Mr. Bonegnawer and his people now controlled the majority of the planet; squids patrolled the inky depths, bobbed along coastlines, and marched across our once-great cities step by step by step by step by step by step by step by step by step.

Close

Now, we exist on the brink. With so few humans left, less than 50,000 by my latest estimates, and Squearth’s landmass ever-shrinking, our demise is imminent. I leave this testament not from grief or in search of pity. It is simply a catalogue of these events; it is the truth.

It is undeniable that mistakes were made; this account is proof enough of that. But perhaps, one day, the squids will make errors of their own. And when the shrimp or the pelicans rise up and overthrow them, perhaps this account will be discovered. Perhaps these new conquerors are reading these words by fish-light this very moment. Perhaps, in the end, we shall be remembered.

Victor Hollix
NWO Historian
June 25, 2213
Human

REVIEWS

