Charles River Review

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Neil Angis • Toby Bersak

Amy Clay • Christine Colacino

Marisa Coppage De Mirelle • Sarah Desai

Katie Ferrari • Valerie Gunderson

Suzanne B. Hopkins • George Eyre Masters

DeAnne Musolf • Allison White Ohlinger

Ruth Ann Polleys • Laurie Rosenblatt

Sallie Sharp • Claire Alexis Ward

Wendy Wood

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Director of the Writing Program
Pat Bellanca

Editor
Kimberly Ann Parke

Managing Editor
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Stab Wound

By Christine Colacino

For a woman in her forties, I still have amazingly perky breasts. From the time I was a teenager until I hit forty I was a full B-cup. Then some peri-menopausal hormonal shift occurred and I'm suddenly a full C-cup. It would appear Mother Nature has given me a free boob job. It wasn't until I started going to the gym and seeing other women in the locker room that I even had a point of comparison. A lot of the women at the gym are younger than I am. Yet, some of them have these sad, droopy little golf-ball-in-a-sock breasts. Still others have flat little pancake boobies. Me, I have a world-class pair of tits.

The Monday after Thanksgiving I go to the Shapiro Building at Beth Israel for my yearly mammogram. But I never just breeze in and out of there like most women. No, they always send me to the diagnostic room because I have fibrocystic breasts. Each and every lump terrifies me until I know for sure it's just another harmless liquid-filled cyst. The ultrasound will tell me if I have ten cysts or nine cysts and a tumor.

When the radiologist confirms the mammogram looks okay, I figure the worst of it is over, and I can breathe again. Sometimes I can watch what the ultrasound tech is doing and I'm relieved to see all the clean round black circles on the small screen. Black means sound can pass through—liquid. Gray means you've got a solid mass. You don't ever want to see gray.

Often they aspirate a cyst simply because it's large. It can hurt like hell, especially right before your period, and if the cyst is big enough it could theoretically hide a small tumor that's lurking behind it.

They numb me with Lidocane and then insert a very long needle into my breast until they poke through the membrane of the cyst in order to draw out the fluid, which is usually the color of beer. If the fluid is transparent, it's harmless. If it's cloudy, they send it for biopsy and you worry for a week.

Over the years, I've had so many aspirations that I've lost count. Once, I was on the table for nearly three hours. They stuck me with so many needles that I started to get shocky. Then, sore and bruised, I go home and put a frozen bag of peas on my chest. Best ice pack ever.

I may sound a little cavalier about all this, but the truth is that I get scared to death. Several days before the mammogram, I literally get sick to my stomach. I can't eat or sleep. I'm a real mess. You'd think I'd be used to it by now. But no. Year after year, I drag my mother with me because I'm afraid to go alone. It's ridiculously superstitious to think if someone is with you that you won't get any bad news—I know that. Of course my mother operates on the assumption that everything is going to be just fine while I worry if this is the year my luck finally runs out.

So on the Monday after Thanksgiving when the Doogie Howser look-alike resident comes into the ultrasound room and I ask if the mammo is okay, he doesn't answer me directly. It's a simple yes or no question, but he says, *Well, we're going to look at a few things.* The next thing I know, a senior radiologist has joined him. Then another resident enters the room, along with the tech.

"Four people in such a small room—you're scaring me," I joke. But nobody laughs.

Now I see what they're all looking at. It's gray and it's not a perfect circle. In fact, it looks like a flower, the kind a five-year-old would draw that has scalloped edges.

"What the hell is that?" I blurt out.

"We're not sure," the senior radiologist answers. "It could be a cyst that burst. Or it might be a tumor."

I panic. Imagine the pang you have when you think your wallet's been lifted or you can't find your car in a parking lot. Now multiply that by about one hundred.

"If it's a tumor, what are the chances it's benign?"

"It's irregularly shaped," is all he says.

"I'm the kind of person who needs to know what's going on. So give me the percentages of benign versus malignant."

He looks me right in the eye. "Oh, if it's tumor, it's probably malignant."

This is it. Just like Job: *The thing that I feared has come upon me…*

"But it might be a cyst that burst?" I know how desperate I sound.

"Yes."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, your history of cysts. And if it did burst, the fluid from the cyst would seep into the surrounding tissue and appear as an irregular shape."

"How big is it?"

"Not that big."

"What's your gut feeling?"

"Given your history, a cyst."

The next thirty minutes are a blur with me getting dressed and going out to the waiting room to tell my mother. Then a lot of confusion about how quickly they can schedule a core needle biopsy. I get lucky and they squeeze me in that same afternoon.

The procedure is more painful than I expect. First off, they don't give me enough Lidocane and when they insert the biopsy needle, which is much thicker than an aspiration needle, I can feel everything. They quickly give me more Lidocane, but the tears are already streaming down my cheeks, partly from pain, partly from fear.

The end of the needle has a tweezerlike gripper that takes tiny bites of tissue for sampling. Each time the gripper bites at my flesh it sounds like a heavy duty staple gun. I feel tremendous pressure, but I'm too numb to feel any actual pain. With each punch, I tense up. He repeats this procedure seven times to be sure to get an adequate sample. He tells me the results will be in on Thursday.

Then they send me back to the mammogram room for another picture. At first I don't understand why. So the tech explains. The mass—that's what they're calling it—has not changed shape. If it had been a cyst or the remnants of a cyst, it would have changed shape after being poked at. This thing is solid.

My mother can't even look at me. She thinks I have cancer and if she looks at me she'll lose it. When I call her on it, she tells me I'm being ridiculous, but I know how she is.

When I *make* her look at me, all I see is fear in her eyes. Then my eyes well up.

Back at my apartment, I take to the couch with a bag of peas on my left breast. That's where the mass is located: in my left breast between one and two o'clock.

My parents and I discuss what's going to happen on Thursday when I will most likely be told that I have cancer. They promise to come back to be with me when I get the news. Then they leave to go back to New York. I know that the minute they get in the car my mother's already started making deals with God—*Let it be me instead of her*—the kind of stuff a good mother would say and really mean.

Cancer. I think about what it would mean to have my breast taken. What it would mean to need chemo. To have my hair fall out. To be puking all the time and have to go into work anyway. To worry for the rest of my life that it's going to come back. I think about what this would do to my family. But mostly I think about losing my breast.

No way I'm going to be one of those pink ribbon chicks. No pink baseball cap or pink beaded bracelets. I'll wear my NY Mets baseball cap, and that's it. And I want the kind of wig Catherine Zeta-Jones wore in *Chicago.*

I'm not ready to tell a lot of people about this, but some people need to know what's going on. My mother calls my brother and sister-in-law for me. I call Alicia, my best friend in Boston, who's getting married in a few months. She gives me her usual *Chin up* spiel which I ordinarily don't mind. But when she peppers it with *You're stronger than you think*, I know she's expecting the news will not be good for me on Thursday. Even worse, she e-mails me a picture of the dress she thinks I should wear to her wedding: It's practically strapless, with only a thin pair of tulip straps to hold it up. I realize she doesn't get the fact that I might not be able to wear a dress like this ever again.

It sounds like they caught it early is the comment from Joanne, my best friend in college. It's not lost on me: She thinks it's cancer, too. Then she goes on a rant about how I have health insurance, a family, a support system, and a full-time job—all the things she doesn't have. *You'll be fine!*

she snaps angrily. *If it happened to me, I'd be screwed. But you, you'll be fine.*

My childhood friend, Renee, who's been named one of the best internal medicine docs two years in a row by *Boston Magazine* confirms that *the waiting is agony* in a tone that can only come from a woman who's gone through her own biopsy hell.

Linda, my upstairs neighbor, immediately steps up to the plate. *You shouldn't be alone. We're going out to dinner—Stephanie's or Papa Razzi—you pick.*

My boss has a good feeling about it. *You're going to be okay, you'll see*, she tells me and steps out from behind her desk to give me a hug.

And, finally, my brother, who knows what a superstitious coward I really am, and loves me anyway, tells me, *You're facing your worst fear here. Whatever the outcome, this experience is going to change you.* Change me how? I want him to elaborate, but my brother never says much, so why would now be any different?

That first night I don't sleep at all. In the morning I can't eat breakfast. The dread and fear has settled in my stomach. As I lay awake the second night, I try to pray the Rosary. Unable to concentrate, I instead repeat *Hail Mary, full of grace* over and over like a mantra. And, finally, on Wednesday night, knowing that in the morning I will learn the results of the biopsy, I cry and cry because this could be the very last night that my life is anything resembling normal.

I've taken the day off from work because a woman I know made the mistake of getting her biopsy results while she was still at the office. When they told her she had cancer, she silently sat at her desk for an hour. Then she got up, took her purse and coat and went home. How she got on the train and then the commuter line at that point is beyond me. I know this about myself: I need to be at home to hear that kind of news.

I place a call to the surgeon's office to check in with Joyce, the office manager. Her computer clicking away in the background, she explains that my pathology report is "in draft" and once it's been finalized, the surgeon will have access to it. My heart's beating fast, my mouth is dry, and I feel queasy.

Less than a half hour later, but before my parents arrive, the phone rings. The caller ID tells me it's the doctor's office. I didn't want to be alone when this happened.

"Well, the tissue looks fine," the surgeon begins.

"So it's not cancer!" I feel instant relief.

"We don't know that."

Anxiety starts to rise up again. "But if the tissue looks fine…I don't understand."

"The tissue in the sample looked clean but it does not explain what the mass is. We need to have correlation between what the radiologist sees and the pathologist finds. Right now we don't have that," she explains dispassionately. Then, in a forceful tone she informs me, "It has to come out."

"You mean surgery?"

"Yes."

Although I'm standing right next to my bed, I sit down on the cold hardwood floor instead. "Like a lumpectomy?"

"No. A surgical biopsy. We remove the mass to analyze it."

"How quickly can we do it?"

"Joyce will call you once we've gone over my schedule."

"Is this a day procedure?"

"Yes."

"What about anesthesia?"

"Joyce will line up the anesthesiologist, too."

"Can you tell me anything? I mean, since the sample is clean, doesn't that increase my chances that it's benign?"

"We don't know anything. The sample was insufficient. We have to remove it."

"I thought I would know today and now this is going to drag on. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I'm a wreck. Can you give me a prescription for some kind of tranquilizer?"

"You can call your PCP for that…"

After a quick call to my mother, who is just as confused as I am, I dial Renee.

"This is good news," she tells me.

"Are you saying this as my friend or as a doctor? Because right now I need you to wear your doctor hat."

"Seven samples and they were all clean. That's definitely tipping the scale in your favor. And yes, I'm saying this as a doctor."

I take a deep breathe. Let myself hope.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Renee asks.

"I'm actually more afraid of the anesthesia than I am of being cut. Since I've never had it, I'm afraid I'll have a bad reaction. Plus, have you seen the commercials for this movie called *Awake*? It's about a guy who doesn't go under and he feels everything. Of course they run the ads every night during the eleven o'clock news just to scare the bejesus out of you right before you go to bed."

"Don't worry. Mark's best friend from residency is at B.I. now. Randy. I'll e-mail him right away."

"He's really good?"

"He's the guy I'd want to put me under," the anesthesiologist's wife assures me. "Call me back as soon as they give you a date and time."

My parents arrive, and spending the afternoon with them is a comfort to me. With Christmas less than a month away, my mother suggests we take out my decorations. I don't much feel like it, but she forces me into it and together we decorate my living room. After work, my brother comes over and stays for dinner. I start to feel a little bit hopeful. Until I learn the surgery won't take place for another two weeks. Then I backslide. I call the PCP but she wants to see me before dispensing any drugs.

When I relay to her what's happened so far, she disputes Renee's opinion. *What if the samples were not actually taken from the spot where the mass is located*, she says, more as a statement than as a question. Then she writes me a prescription for Lorazepam, one of the drugs that helped take out Heath Ledger.

A shopping bag full of half-off Christmas cards that I purchased last year sits next to my desk. I even bought the stamps. I am cursed with super-human organizational skills. But I can't bring myself to write out the cards. What am I supposed to say? *Wishing you and yours a very Merry Christmas. The white coats think I have the big C—surgery's on December 11. Happy New Year!*

Every night when I come home from work, I sit down at my kitchen table, admire my Advent wreath, light the candles, and say the prayer. It takes only five minutes. And for those

five minutes, I feel peace, and I have faith. The other twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes? That's what the Lorazapam is for. The pills look like little white baby aspirins. My happy pills. They help me fall asleep. They stave off my nausea. They get me through the day.

During the initial pre-op appointment, they take my blood pressure and I fill out many, many forms. A kindly middle-aged nurse with a South Shore accent gently places her hand on top of mine promising they are going to make me well. What I want to hear is that everything is going to be all right, but what she says implies that she thinks I have cancer, too. Everybody thinks I have cancer. The water works start up again and she hands me a box of tissues.

My mother comes with me to the second pre-op appointment, this time to see the surgeon, because I need someone else to hear what I'm surely going to miss. She surprises me with the news that after the radiologist took into account the pathologist's report and re-examined the pictures, he's recommending a watch-and-see approach. For a split second I think, *No doctor is going to risk his reputation or my life unless he thinks this mass inside my left breast is actually benign, right?* A moment later, I think, *What if he's wrong, and by the time they finally get around to operating on me, it's spread all over the place?*

The surgeon recommends we stick with our plan and go ahead with the surgery, and, in a strange way, I am relieved.

I finally ask her the big question. "If it does turn out to be cancer, am I a good candidate for a lumpectomy or would I have to have a mastectomy?"

"The mass is small. You'd have a lumpectomy."

"I can keep my breast?" I whimper.

"Yes."

"So it would be an early stage?"

She nods her head. "It would be very manageable."

We leave the surgeon's office with my mother convinced that her only daughter does not have cancer after all. Me? I'm more hopeful than before. But with the surgery a couple of days away, I am also more anxious than ever.

This is what was described to me during the pre-op appointments: I would start out with an ultrasound so the radiologist could locate the mass and then insert a long wire into my breast to serve as a guide for the surgeon. I would receive enough anesthesia to remain aware yet feel no pain. The room would be cold and very brightly lit. Although I would not be able to see what she was doing, the surgeon would talk to me throughout the procedure.

After the mass was removed, the surgical nurse would run the specimen back to radiology so it could be photographed and compared to the earlier picture, as a way to insure they got everything they were looking for. They would then call the surgeon to let her know, and I would hear the phone ring in the operating room. Once the surgeon was sure the entire mass was removed, she would then do her best to reposition the breast tissue, but I might be left with a divot or depression where the tissue was removed.

Finally, she would close the incision by what she described as a *cosmetically acceptable method*. I would have steri-strips and a bandage over my breast. The bandage could be removed after a few days, and the steri-strips would come off in about a week when I met with the surgeon for the post-op appointment. If the pathology report confirmed a cancer diagnosis, I would then meet with an oncologist. The surgery, I was told, would take one hour.

This is what actually happened: After I've changed into the hospital gown, robe, and socks, a nurse inserts an I.V. tube into the top of my right hand. Then I sit for a long time before they wheel me down the hall to radiology. Instead of using ultrasound, they take me into the mammogram room.

Soon, my breast is being compressed in the mammogram machine, but instead of it taking only a minute like it usually does, they leave me in this contraption. A female radiologist is running the show, and she apologizes because she knows how painful this is for me. She pierces my skin with a thin translucent wire, explaining that she can't go in at the angle she would have liked because there's a cyst in the way and she doesn't want to make matters worse by puncturing it. She attempts to position the wire but misses the spot. I start to bleed all over the mammogram plate. She pulls out the wire and I bleed some more. When she asks how I'm holding up,

I admit that I am surprised by the pain. So she shoots me up with some Lidocane and we try again. This time she gets the wire exactly where she wants it, and lets me know by giving me an air high-five. I am, of course, unable to raise my hand to meet hers. A nurse cleans up all the blood, tapes the wire flat against my chest, and covers it with a bandage.

Back in the pre-op room, I am lying on a cot and my mother is sitting next to me knitting or crocheting, I can't remember which. We talk for nearly an hour but I have no recollection of what we talk about. Then the anesthesiologist arrives. Randy—I only know him as Randy—is a fit and youthful fifty-year-old with a warm smile and I think I'd like this guy even if he weren't Renee and Mark's friend. He tells me he's going to give me I.V. antibiotics as a precaution and then enough medication so that I'll be heavily sedated. My mother is asked to leave, and I notice the large clock on the wall reads 3:30. The surgery is supposed to commence sometime between 3:45 and 4:00. Randy asks me if I went to Renee and Mark's wedding, and we realize we were seated at the same table at a wedding reception that took place over twenty years ago. As he wheels me down the hall—the cot has wheels—Randy says, *I think it's time to give you some more medicine…*

When I wake up in the pre-op room I am stunned by the pain I feel. Everything's blurry and I don't know where my glasses are. There's a crumbled tissue in my right hand and I have no idea how it got there. I'm crying and I remember something my mother told me: *You usually wake up the same way you went under.*

I try to focus on that large clock on the wall. The time is 5:35. The surgery took longer than an hour. The pain is profound, and I think: *This is what stab victims must feel like.* A nurse asks if she can lift the blanket so she can check on my bandage and make sure I'm not bleeding through it. I look down and see the bandage partially covering my left breast and I think: *Nothing crazy happened in the operating room. I still have my breast.* Then I doze back off.

When I wake up next, the surgeon is checking on me. I ask her if she could tell anything by the way the tumor looked. She repeats what she's said all along: We won't know anything

until we get the pathologist's report. Then I think she adds, *I think you're going to be just fine*, but I later wonder if maybe I only imagine she said it.

I'm too exhausted to move, and some time passes before I become aware that my parents are with me. They never let patients leave the hospital until they've peed, so my mother helps me walk to the bathroom. Then she helps me get dressed. I cannot lift my arm at all. I'm no wimp when it comes to pain—my dentist can confirm this claim—but I wasn't prepared for this kind of sharp, searing, unrelenting pain. So, armed with a prescription for Vicodin, we leave the hospital.

Back at my apartment, we try to settle in for the night, but the phone keeps ringing. My mother fields the calls while my father sets up their air mattress on the living room floor. I really need to sleep, and as I take my first dose of Vicodin, I imagine the painkillers will soon knock me out but good.

The worst of it's over, baby, my father says as he kisses me goodnight, and I want to believe him. But I've been warned that this kind of pathology report takes a full week to come back. Besides, as a Catholic, I believe that God answers your prayers, but sometimes the answer is no.

My apartment's one flaw, besides being small, is that you have to walk through my bedroom to get to the bathroom. And so the parade commences. Every half-hour or so, one of my parents wakes me just as I'm dozing off. Sometime around four in the morning, I hear a loud noise. The air mattress has sprung a leak.

Despite my ordinarily comfortable bed, I am completely miserable. The Vicodin is not working at all and even the slightest movement is agony. So I'm doomed to lie on my back, as still as is humanly possible, and feel guilty because my parents are literally on the floor in the next room. How the three of us will be able to get through the next few days when it's obvious than no one's getting any sleep is beyond me.

Around dawn, I realize the smart thing to do is to pack up and drive back to New York. The idea of convalescing in my little girl bedroom is worth the five-hour car ride, all during which I must hug a pillow to cushion and protect my aching breast.

Four days after my surgery, I travel back to Boston vowing to resume my normal activities. I'm no longer in constant pain. Now my breast throbs only intermittently. I wear a bra at all times, something I will continue to do for a whole month. And every day I put on my brave face at work, only to fall apart when I get home at night. I still have one last hurdle—the pathology report. Since we don't know when the report will come, it seems unlikely my parents will be with me when I hear the news.

The ever-patient Joyce has agreed to keep in close contact with me. Once she tells me the report is in, I'll leave work and go home to wait for the surgeon's call. If the news is bad, my brother can drive over in less than one hour.

Day eight is coming to a close and I am officially frantic. My follow up appointment with the surgeon is supposed to take place the following day, so I call Joyce to ask if I should keep the appointment even though the report still hasn't come in. Joyce promises she'll check and get back to me. But I miss her call.

I listen to her voice mail message, and while the words are simple, the subtext scares the hell out of me. Instead of saying something like, *You should keep tomorrow's appointment* or *We have to reschedule tomorrow's appointment*, she says, *Please call me back. It's four and I'll only be here for another half hour.*

There's not enough time to travel home first, so I find an empty office and close the door. I dial the number, my heart beating wildly. I don't want to hear the results of the report while I'm at work.

"Joyce, it's me again. I got your message." My voice is shaking. "Is this about tomorrow's appointment?"

"The doctor's in surgery. She feels badly that you've had to wait so long and doesn't want you to have to wait until your appointment tomorrow. She told me I can tell you that the report came in. It's totally benign."

I manage to get out a very sincere thank you and we hang up. But I can no longer hold in what I have been swallowing down for the last twenty-four days and I cry in a way I have never cried before. This kind of release comes from deep in your gut. I imagine half the office can hear my wailing from behind this closed door and they probably think the news is bad.

When I call home, my mother answers the phone. I realize if I ask her to put my father on the phone she may get the wrong idea. So instead I blurt out, *I'm okay! I'm okay!* Now we're both crying and she's calling out to my dad to pick up the phone. It may be December 19, but it feels like Christmas morning to us.

The next day, when the surgeon removes the steri-strips, I am relieved when I look down at my left breast. The incision is less than two inches in length and can't be seen even if I wear the skimpiest bathing suit, or the dress Alicia imagines me wearing to her wedding. When I compare my left breast to my right one, there is no divot, no depression. The surgeon did an amazing job. I still have a world class pair of tits.

It's been several months since my breast cancer scare, and I continue to feel immensely grateful. Eventually all that will remain is a thin white line—hardly noticeable—and not the thick, jagged pink and purple scar I rub with vitamin E oil every night.

I'm okay. I'm okay…

Still, I wonder how I'd be doing right now if things had gone the other way. Everyone kept telling me I was stronger than I thought. But they were wrong. I did not handle this well at all, which may be why I am plagued with these questions: Why did it happen? And what am I supposed to learn from it? Looking for closure, I go see a highly regarded shrink in Newton Centre. After six sessions she offers no silver bullet, no pearls of wisdom.

I realize that what I could really use is some spiritual guidance. So I make an appointment with this cute priest that Alicia and I refer to as Father What-a-Waste. We sit in his parlor at the rectory at the end of a long work day, for the both of us I surmise, as I recount my story to him.

"I don't know what to tell you, Chris," he finally says, shaking his head. "Sometimes it's just like that saying on the bumper sticker: *Shit happens.*"

Apology

By Amy Clay

I am painting a canvas of second chances
mostly titanium white with a few exceptions
timid vertical lines in ecru and yellow some black
mistakes peeping out of the white reminding me
one flesh and green shape perhaps a belly
perhaps it is mine it is very fat and round
like it is carrying a lot a child no
children are not possible I am sorry
for the blue the blue clenched fist I threw that morning
words words words that should not be placed together
unlike the paint vocabulary I speak better
colors and shapes form a better tongue
when yellow sorry so sorry fails me.

Bone China

By Amy Clay

Resting for a while before he comes home
my thoughts drift far away and
I can't reign them back surprisingly
I am thinking about smashing all our china
into a million tiny pieces some
just blowing up in my hands like magic
I do not have to throw it at anything
the more satisfying being the throwing bit though
after all the china is broken
I will do a little dance be a scandal ballerina
pirouetting on the remnants of foreign plates
do a grand jeté across a teacup I must have missed
invite it to a pas de deux with the only music
the crushing sound the beautiful gratifying melody
of meaningless things being broken in frolicsome glory.

Desafinado

By Katie Ferrari

Rodrigo was startled out of sleep by the drawn out crash of the front door as it swung back on its rusty hinges. His roommate would be off to work, it being Monday morning. Rodrigo knew the routine: On Mondays, his roommate forsook his weekend wear—tight, faded jeans tucked into his black All-Stars Hi-Tops with scuffed rubber nubs—and assumed the standard slacks-shirt-and-tie getup that made Rodrigo want to weep.

Rodrigo had wept for many things since moving to Boston. Those shoes, for one, abandoned and in disrepair. This morning, in bed, he lay a while and wept quietly for himself.

Rodrigo was not, however, without a sense of humor. This comforted him as he contemplated his plan down to the last detail. What do you do, he wondered, on the day on which you are to die? You can do anything, he decided, and a facetious smile spread across his face. Complete and utter freedom, wipe the slate, return all things to zero.

"If you can dream it, you can do it!" he said aloud, clenching his fist in a mocking gesture. He snickered and got himself out of bed.

How to take your own life, Rodrigo narrated to himself as he went through the motions. Step One: Take a final, hot shower and scrub yourself clean, down to the private bits. He found the idea of a stranger discovering him in a slovenly state wholly repulsive. Step Two: One should also take the time to shave and dress in appealing clothes. Rodrigo had picked out his suicide suit over the weekend: the pair of jeans that showed off the contours of his muscular backside, the red shirt that accentuated the warm, chocolate color of his hair and lashes. Step Three: Don't leave your loved ones in the lurch. You may feel like it is time to end it, but chances are, they probably disagree. Rodrigo had penned two succinct letters: one to his mother and the other to his sister in Brazil, both with the same message.

Perdoa-me pelo que sinto. Perdoa-me pelo tudo.

Forgive me for what I feel. Forgive me for everything.

Step Four: Burn your bridges to the outside world. Rodrigo took his black-and-silver cell phone into the bathroom. He hovered over the toilet for a few seconds and then let it drop into the toilet. He knew it wouldn't make a difference, but he flushed anyway and watched the phone dance and swirl, suspended in a downward spiral. Behind the toilet, a bottle of bleach caught his eye. Rodrigo paused for a moment to consider how it would feel to down the entire bottle right then and there. The bleach would scour his insides and wash away his pain and embarrassment. It would cauterize a new path, clean and white. Perhaps. But death by bleach struck him as unnecessarily painful. He didn't want to feel any more pain. He didn't want to feel anything at all. He reached into the cabinet above the sink and grabbed the half-empty bottle of pills.

Step Five: Eat. The Last Supper, so to speak. Rodrigo poured himself a bowl of Heart Healthy cereal and sat down at the kitchen table with a spoon in his hand. Before plunging the spoon into the bowl, he popped open the bottle and laid out a neat pile of blue tablets. He looked up, forced a smile, and crossed himself irreverently. *Pra você, meu pãe.* For you, my father.

Bjorn Washington Woodbury stands at the head of a long table in a windowless conference room. He is an imposing man, tall and densely built, with a craggy face that recalls the fjords of his ancestral land. Arctic blue eyes peer out of his hard skull as he surveys the people below him, the staff of the Americas Research Institute. He is the descendant of Viking leaders and fancies himself a tenacious leader in his own right. The people below him are his charge. He knows the Institute is not like any other workplace. It is a special place, a family, even, for the expatriate employees who comprise it. He is a compassionate man, and he knows his strength will provide a backbone for his wounded flock. They will look to him for leadership, and he will hold fast. He will heal them.

"Welcome to all," he booms. "I am sorry to interrupt your afternoon, but I have been obliged to call an emergency staff meeting." He sits down heavily in his chair and folds his

hands. "I need your help. Rodrigo needs your help. We need to work together, people."

Rodrigo scooped one last mouthful of cereal into his mouth and looked at the kitchen clock. Ten o'clock, on the nose. He took his bowl to the sink and washed it in soapy water. He stared ahead, absently, and allowed his gaze to wander about the world map on the wall before him. Funny how you can go south by way of north, he thought to himself. You could drive north through day and night, push onward steadily, and wind up at the South Pole. Come back out on the other end of the world, the other end of things. Could even be the right end, for once.

He brightened. He could go north. Grab a few requisite items, a sweater, a warm jacket, hat, gloves, some toiletries, and be gone. Drive through cities and towns and picturesque farmhouses and dairies, past New England, past Canada, past all of it. He could escape. Hibernate in the cold and become frozen. Freeze his feelings. He would come out on the other side, new and whole. The snow and ice would heal him, make him clean again. He blinked and felt ice pumping through his veins, delivering its cooling salve to every part of his body.

Bjorn looks sternly at the group assembled before him.

"Well, people. Let's do it. Time to really put our minds and hearts together. Anything you know, anything you can remember, anything at all." He scrutinizes the faces of his employees, looking for signs of awareness or recognition. "What to you may seem unimportant might well be the missing link that will help us figure out what he's done with himself."

Bjorn sits back and waits for anything to dawn on the staff. But he doesn't reveal what he knows. He knows a few things. For instance, Bjorn knows that Rodrigo doesn't have a green card. Bjorn knows that his entire life is in the United States. And Bjorn knows that his work visa expires in exactly one month.

"I can't go back to Minas Gerais, Bjorn," Rodrigo had told him weeks ago. "What kind of life can I have there? Everything, my research, my friends, my life, it is all here." He slumped back in a chair opposite Bjorn, tears visible at

the corners of his luminous brown eyes. Bjorn generously faked a coughing fit to allow Rodrigo a moment to regain his composure.

"Ahem." Bjorn cleared his throat. "I know. I've tried." He sighed audibly. "But there's nothing I can do. The Institute can't sponsor you for a green card. It's not on our side, if it's any comfort. The government isn't exactly handing out green cards at the moment."

"There has to be something," Rodrigo pleaded.

"My hands are tied. I can't fix this."

Bjorn cringes, now, at his word choice. Since Rodrigo's roommate called the Center at noon, Bjorn has been reliving the conversation over and over, arriving each time at the same conclusion: He had been *too harsh.* Rodrigo's unhappy face haunts him as he looks out at the sea of colleagues. Bjorn must redeem himself. He won't fail him again.

Rodrigo stood in front of the map and traced his fingers north on Route 95. He thought about the South Pole and its inhabitants. Not too long ago he had watched a documentary on Emperor penguins, which, as he remembered, are indigenous to Antarctica. They are social creatures, surviving their severe environment by huddling together for warmth and protection. Penguins live and die by the clan, he thought. Maybe he would come out the other side as a penguin and they would adopt him. Not a bad life when you think about it. He would glide around on his tuxedo-shirt belly and dive blissfully under the sea ice to hunt for food. At the end of the day, he'd toboggan down the ice and join the huddle, warm and safe, under the protection of the clan. They would never evict him. Never force him out against his will.

Bjorn has not failed to notice that Ana is quietly sobbing toward the back of the table. Ana is in shock. She can't hold back the torrent of tears that has collected beneath her pale eyelids since the meeting began. This is not happening, she intones to herself. Not to Rodrigo. Not to her friend and brother at the Institute.

"Look out! Spicy Mexican taco coming by!" Rodrigo would whoop at her in the cramped office kitchen.

She always replied the same way.

"Look out yourself, *mineiro*!"

Rodrigo laughed and laughed, tossing his head back.

"How many tacos do you have to eat to get a *culo* like yours?"

"About as many as you need to eat to shut it. *Cállate!*"

"Ana, *gatinha*! When will you pine for me the way I pine for you?"

"When will you get your big Brazilian butt out of the way so I can have some coffee?" Ana frowned and frowned, but could never keep it up long enough to convince him of her feigned displeasure.

"So it's coffee you're after? *Então.* Allow me the pleasure of pouring you a cup!"

At this point, Ana would crack a smile. It was hard not to appreciate Rodrigo's antics as he poured the coffee with a flamboyant gesture, bowing down to kiss the air by her boots before pressing the cup into her hand. He then stood back and admired his handiwork.

"One of these days, I'm going to make you my wife, Ana," he said, his eyes twinkling. He grabbed his coffee mug with one hand and reached into his pants pocket with the other. Ana knew he was fishing for the pills he kept in his pants at all times. For headaches, she had always assumed, probably induced by the massive amounts of caffeine the man consumed.

"My crazy pills," he always joked. "Want to do some with me?"

Might it not have been a joke? Ana wonders now if she was hasty with her assumption. She realizes she might possess an important detail. She blinks back tears and promises herself that as soon as she can gain some control over her outburst, she will raise her trembling hand and share what she knows.

Rodrigo ran his fingers onward, past Topsfield and Boxford, through to New Hampshire, past Hampton Falls, Hampton, then North Hampton, pushing northward into Maine, past Kennebunk. Always north. He thought about how his body might respond in the absence of his medication. He was sick, he knew it. But he wanted to leave behind the most recently prescribed batch of little pink and white pills. He would see clearly without them. His senses would remain

pure and untainted. This way, he would really be clean. And whatever ailed him, the ice would cure.

Martin rolls his eyes at Bjorn and the rest of the staff. He is as swarthy as Bjorn is towheaded, and the scowling expression on his face strikes an unpleasant counterpoint to the grief-stricken demeanors of his colleagues. Emergency staff meeting. What an idea, he scoffs. Unbelievable, that he would be party to such a gross invasion of Rodrigo's privacy. Martin sure as shit wouldn't want his personal business exposed like this. The nerve of Bjorn, that smarmy bastard, calling them in and broadcasting the poor kid's mental problems to the Center! We've all got corpses in our closets. To disembowel them and splatter the messy remains at work for all to see, well it's just in poor taste, Martin thinks. Besides, Rodrigo's all right. Sure, he's seen him crumpled up over his desk a few times. But who doesn't have an off day?

"You hanging in there, kid?" Martin had barked.

Rodrigo raised his head from his desk and exhaled loudly.

"Yeah, you?"

"Sound as a pound, buddy," Martin replied gruffly.

"Yeah. It's my girlfriend, you know?"

"Love is a bitch, my man. You gotta take her by the reins and beat her into submission."

"Thanks for the tip, Martin."

No problem, Martin had answered. It's not like most guys don't have old lady troubles. And after all, troubles with your old lady aren't a good enough reason to go off the deep end. Martin knows everyone's got problems, and it's tough shit. But no good can come of taking a man's personal business and dedicating an entire staff meeting to it. It's nothing but a damn violation, he thinks, shaking his head in anger.

Rodrigo paused his hand at Portland. He closed his eyes and inhaled the cold air, watching it freeze as he breathed out. Janice would probably raise hell. Rodrigo's roommate would find the letters and alert her to his disappearance. Janice was his girlfriend. She was a pretty girl, American. She had claimed to love him, had even promised to marry him. Janice

was sweet and docile. She had soft, freckled skin and a cute button nose. There was a lot she didn't know.

The conference room is shrouded in apprehension. José avoids eye contact with everyone in the room, trying hard to stare at nothing. He reaches up and tugs at his ear with his fingertips, feeling for the familiar opening along the ridge. He rubs it gently, and thinks back to what he knows. He knows, for instance, that wearing the shiny earring that matches the crest of ear currently between his fingers would be tantamount to career suicide. He knows the boundary between his work life and personal life, knows that while the two might eye each other hungrily at the margins, they must never cross over. José knows he must live his life cloaked in deception, because to be gay and Latin, both at the same time, is an abomination to some and unacceptable to most.

José knows more than he lets on, but he is a seasoned con artist. He smiles sadly at Ana with great sympathy. He doesn't reveal that Rodrigo is a frequent flier at Buck 15. José has spotted him before, deep in the cave crawling with smooth, shirtless boys and sweaty drag queens in killer sequin dresses. Rodrigo danced and twirled, driven by the same heavy house beat that drove them all. Watching him dance, the heavy music seemed lighter than air, light enough to take flight.

"Don't you have a girlfriend?" José had asked him at the bar after the apprehensive moment of recognition between the two of them. Rodrigo had brushed the sweat away from his face with the back of his hand and replied.

"I tell her it's my *Capoeira* night." The lie was good, the equivalent of a poker night with the guys. The girl, Janice, would never think to doubt it. Not that she was all that clever to begin with.

José fixes his eyes on the blank spot of table before him, appearing emotionless. He is churning on the inside, bubbling over with fear and hope. Rodrigo might be dead. He wouldn't be the first. But perhaps he is simply trying to find a better place for himself, one where he doesn't have to pretend and live the life of an outcast.

Ana is shaking, and the tears have left glistening patches down the side of her face. She raises a tentative hand, and Bjorn nods. But before she can part her lips to speak, a cell

phone rings. Years later, Ana, Martin, and José will remember how Bjorn plunged a desperate hand into his pocket. They will recall how they each willed the call to be good news, or any news. An explanation. A resolution. And they will try in vain to forget Bjorn's hanging head, his crushed look, and the unfathomable abyss as he announced that Rodrigo had been found in his car, still parked around the corner from his apartment. His roommate had found him, Bjorn's voice cracked, and he was no longer with us.

Rodrigo floated northward, past names of towns he had memorized: Augusta, Waterville, and Bangor, until he pressed up against the border with Canada. Eventually, there would be no more road to traverse, and then he would navigate the sea ice until reaching his new home. Rodrigo smiled and opened his eyes. To his surprise, he discovered a steering wheel underneath his hands. With a steady grip, he steeled himself and crossed over.

What I Have Learned: A Stream of (Feature Writing) Consciousness

By Toby Bersak

I signed up for a Feature Writing course with anticipation, expectation, and fear. I had never taken a writing class. This is what I learned:

Why should I care?
Who is my audience?
What are people's motives?
No opinions, no I, no me.
Just the facts ma'am.
Make every word count.
Ask follow-up questions.
It's the interviewee's interview, not mine.
Be fair.
Think about my biases.
Writers are never truly objective.
Ethics.
Truth.
Nuance.
Observation.
Plagiarism. Don't even.
Fraud. Ditto.
Have a good lede.
Tell the readers in the first few paragraphs why they are going to read the story.
Don't use titles.
Interview/observe/describe/narrate/use direct quotes.
Google/YouTube the person before an interview.
Don't use a list of questions.
Don't start an interview with difficult questions—use those toward the end.
The most important aspect of interviewing? LISTENING.
Let them talk.
Record.
Always change the batteries.
Use quotes that advance the story.

Observational power = detail.
Detail is what makes a story good. Little telling details make it come alive.
Capote/Didion/Kidder—All their writing is straightforward and DETAILED.
Get religion. Your Bible = AP Style Book.
Do not quote Wikipedia.
Read (good) newspapers every day.
SOW (Story of the Week)—read lots of them.
Constantly look for story ideas.
Become the expert on a subject and get more articles that way.
Don't miss deadlines—everyone has "stuff."
Read: *The New Journalism* by Tim Wolf (out of print), *And the Band Played On* by Randy Shilts, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir* by Bill Bryson, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, anything written by B.D. Colen.
Watch: *Easy Rider, My Favorite Year, The Wire* (on TV), anything photographed by B.D. Colen.

For September's first class assignment, I wrote, "The last few years have brought tremendous changes in my life, both wonderful and devastating. This year, I decided, is my year of "Why not?" So, why not finally take that class in journalism, why not at Harvard instead of community college, and why not from B.D. Colen, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer? Why not, indeed."

I am so glad I did.

My year of "Why not?" continues. Stay tuned.

On Frying Fish

By George Eyre Masters

It is the middle of March in Maine. Snowed yesterday, raining today. The afternoon sky is the color of dirty socks. Waiting for a telephone call from a woman, I do push-ups. I make cornbread. I want to thank her for the two pounds of San Francisco coffee that arrived yesterday. More push-ups. I drink a cup of her coffee and try to read. I try to write. The house is quiet. I go out to the kitchen and make a pot of rice and peas. She usually calls twice a day. It's been two days since I heard from her. I'm not leaving any more messages on her machine. The last five were just to hear her voice.

I know what's missing.

First thing I need is good fish. The half-mile walk up Ocean Avenue is salt air and seagulls. I pass a big gray hotel closed for the winter. Across the street, fishing boats at anchor strain against the inbound tide, their bows pointing to the mouth of the Kennebunk River and the open ocean beyond.

Inside the fish store three men wearing bloody aprons fillet cod with blades I could shave with. Wet red hands, tough and sure—smooth the way they work. They themselves haven't shaved in a few days. The old chocolate lab that belongs to the store sleeps on his blanket near the wall. When I go to him and kneel he opens his one good eye. I stroke his sweet broad head; he gives me a tail flap of recognition.

I walk home with a pound and a third of cod so fresh it doesn't smell. No messages on my answering machine. I build a fire in the living room, watch how the flames work into the logs, and warm my hands.

In the kitchen I make the preparations. Skillet, flour, bread crumbs, cornmeal, cornstarch, seasonings, eggs, milk, Tabasco sauce, cooking oil, rice, and peas. Outside it's beginning to get dark. I open a bottle of red wine.

When frying fish, it's best to be mostly sober. I put on a Chieftains album. Irish music is how I'm feeling. I take a drink of wine and give a long look at the photograph on the window sill of Jack, my dog. Jack died last June. I buried his ashes in the flower bed outside my bedroom. Jack loved fried

fish. Don Williams is singing "Wild Mountain Thyme." The song starts at my feet and travels straight up my middle.

I cut the cod into serving-sized pieces. For oil I use one part olive to three parts canola. I break a couple eggs in a bowl, add some milk and four or five dashes of Tabasco—more for flavor than heat—and then beat it with a fork.

In a separate bowl I mix the flour, corn meal, bread crumbs, and a bit of corn starch. The corn starch will help make the fried fish crispy. For seasonings I add sea salt, black pepper, onion powder, garlic powder, dry dill weed, oregano, dry mustard, and a pinch of chili powder. I glance up and see that Jack is watching all of this.

John Prine and the Chieftains are playing "The Girl I Left Behind." I dip the pieces of fish into the egg mix and then dredge them in the seasoned flour. Waiting for the damned phone to ring, I hope she is safe and wish to hell she'd call.

I smell the oil getting hot. I do a test by lowering a corner of a piece of fish into the oil. It starts to bubble and fry. I'm good to go. Two pieces at a time and very carefully. Too much at once and the temperature will lower and screw up the process. I'm most careful when I turn the fish. During this part I never leave the stove, I don't dance around. Involved in the process I have stopped listening for the telephone.

Lost in the primitive satisfaction of a wood fire, of fish frying, and the haunting Irish music behind it all, I pause. With the fish fried and the stove off, "Danny Boy" comes to me achingly clear.

Time to eat, I say aloud. I put a couple small logs on the hungry fire and treasure its warmth and light. In the kitchen I pour another glass of wine. Lifting Jack's picture off the windowsill, I bring him with me into the living room. My co-pilot won't allow me to fly alone. On this March night, Jack and I share the fire. I eat, he watches, and together we wait for the phone to ring.

Stonework

By Neil Angis

The floor of Mango's pickup truck was the last place Jake wanted to look for anything, let alone a flyer for another one of Mango's radio contests. They were on their way back to work from a lunch break, the ocean air gusting through the open windows, the salty taste and slight cool of it making up for the fact that it was ninety-seven degrees outside and Mango's truck had no air conditioning. Complaining about it would only get Mango more worked up than he already was, Jake thought, so he decided to keep his opinions to himself. Besides, at six-foot-seven, three hundred and forty pounds, Mango was best kept unaware of any gripes most people had with him.

They'd spent most of the summer at Hutchins, a budding mansion just off the coast with enough stonework left to keep them going for the rest of the summer. Since Jake had came on at Lambert Masonry in the spring, they'd done, among other things, bluestone walkways around the front, a brick patio surrounding the pool, a field-rock wine cellar in the basement, and granite edging in the master shower. Their latest project was the limestone flooring in the kitchen, a difficult task on its own without the constant traffic of long-haired painters and scrawny finish carpenters. The limestone, which was packed tightly in several large pallets at the edge of the property, had been excavated from some medieval church in France and cost three hundred bucks per square foot, according to Frank, the boss. "Don't drop any," he'd mumbled through his coarse, white beard, "unless you want to work for free this week." Jake always got put with Mango, perhaps in part because Jake was the new guy and Mango was the most experienced of the crew, but mostly, he suspected, because none of the other guys could stand Mango for more than a few minutes at a time.

Mango was still obsessing over the flyer when they came to a dusty halt in the Hutchins' driveway, a crumb of sandwich bread still clinging to the corner of his mouth. As massive as

he was, he sometimes had the look of a baby with his shaved head and cream-white skin.

"Keep digging, Fontaine," he said. "I know it's down there somewhere. I can *feel it.*" Mango always got feelings—about the weather, Giants games, or even what you wanted for lunch before you ordered. The annoying thing about it was that he was almost always wrong.

Jake found the crumpled slip under a pile of fast food trash and gas receipts. "Why do you need this again?"

Mango snapped it from Jake's hand. "Because it says when I'm supposed to call in to win those Death Warrant tickets, that's why." His lime green eyes scanned the paper. "I have to win those tickets."

"Why don't you just buy them?"

"Hello? Death Warrant? You don't just buy Death Warrant tickets. You have to *acquire* them." He popped in a CD, like someone who all of a sudden gets hungry after talking about food. "Besides, it's backstage passes, limos, party with the band after the show, the whole fucking deal. Might even be some free titties thrown into the mix."

"Sure." Jake winced as the lead singer on the tape howled, "*Blood is in the air, blood is in my hair!*" over a chainsaw guitar chord. "So, what time do you have to call in?"

"Four o'clock. They're having a Death Warrant trivia game or something. Might have to duck out early so I can go home and kick some ass." Mango didn't trust cell phones, and on the rare occasion that he had to use one for work, he'd hold it as far away from his head as possible while still being able to hear. The rest of the guys always gave him a hard time about it, so Mango would tell them, "Laugh it up, fuckers, 'cause in twenty years you'll be running around with a friggin' grapefruit coming out of your head." At least he stuck to his guns, Jake thought, a trait he admired in anyone.

Mango turned off the truck and the whole thing shook violently. The music cut out right before what Jake suspected was going to be a bone-crushing drum solo. Heavy metal was so predictable, he thought.

"I have to win those tickets," Mango said again, staring straight ahead. "If I can get through, look out motherfuckers."

After they had each gone to the port-o-john, they went back to work on the kitchen. While Mango shaped and set the stones, Jake was outside boiling in the sun, mixing batch after batch of mud. He didn't mind it as much as hauling rocks; he liked coming home flecked all over with cement. It made him feel tough in a way, even though he was still the same skinny little kid he'd been all his life.

Around 3:15, Mango put away his tools and cut out, leaving Jake with a gruff *Later dude* and the responsibility of cleaning up the wheelbarrows and the mixer. As he sprayed everything down and chipped off the crusted-on pieces, Jake wondered what he would do next, when the summer was over and the masonry company was forced to lay off all the unskilled laborers like him.

He couldn't go back to school; his father had cut him off when he flunked out sophomore year. He couldn't get back with Molly, either. The last time he screwed up she had left for good, saying she'd rather spend the rest of her life alone than another minute with him. That was just over a year ago, last July. She hadn't spoken to him since, leaving him to wonder where she was, if she was with anyone, if she had landed a job as a nurse practitioner yet. He wouldn't have minded doing grunt work for a living if he still had her. Without her, he felt like he was running in place.

On the way home, Jake sat in traffic on Route 101 in his faded blue Honda Civic, which coughed out a puff of charcoal-colored smoke every time he hit the gas pedal. He cursed at himself for not using the back roads. A wall of dark clouds lurked on the horizon, and he hoped they would open up and wash out the heat so he could fall asleep that night without having to get semi-drunk first. The box fan in his bedroom window only cooled him down if he was already sweating.

Scanning through the stations on the radio, he realized it was just past 4:00, so he stopped on 100.3 to see what was happening with that Death Warrant contest. Sure enough, the second it came on he heard the distinct nasal pinch of Mango's voice.

"Their first album," he was saying, "was called *Hide My Genocide* back in eighty-four, but it was never released because they accidentally burned the studio down during a

post-production party." A bell rang, followed by the raspy voice of a DJ.

"Right again! Only one more correct answer and you'll have backstage passes for you and a friend to Death Warrant, live in concert, with transportation to and from the show courtesy of Sun-Style Limousine—*Always ride in style with the Sun!*"

"Hit me," Mango said.

"Here we go," said the DJ. "Despite the band's bad-ass reputation, the only member of Death Warrant who has ever served a prison sentence is drummer Thrash Jackson. The question is: What was he arrested for? Ten seconds."

"That's easy. He got so loaded after a show they did with the Spit Lickers in ninety-two that he drove Ricky Nolan's Ferrari right through the front of a bakery. I think he only served a few days, though."

"Congratulations, Jake!" said the DJ over a clapping sound effect. "You're going to Fresno to party with Death Warrant!" Jake stared at the radio. As far as he knew, Mango's real name was Brad.

"Unbelievable, man! I can't wait!" Mango hollered into the phone.

As if to confirm what Jake thought he had heard the first time, the DJ said, "Again, congratulations goes out to Jake Fontaine of San Mateo. Who's the only station in the Bay Area bringing you today's hardest rock?"

Like a pro, Mango replied, "One hundred point three, The Lizard."

Jake didn't have Mango's number in his phone, but he knew where he lived because he'd picked him up for work one time. He pulled a quick U-turn and took his next right down Industrial Road, which would take him all the way to Four Corners. Mango lived just off that road in a small brown house that looked like it was caving in at the sides.

As Jake parked in front, he could see the curve of Mango's head in the window, facing toward a flashing television at the other end of the room. The last time Jake was there he'd just sat in the driveway; this time he was a little more anxious about having to see Mango's world firsthand.

He got out and went up the plywood ramp that took the place of steps. The door opened before he could knock.

"What's up, dude?" Mango asked, a bottle of Budweiser in one hand and a television remote in the other. "Did you happen to catch that ass-whooping I just dished out on the radio?"

"Yeah, sure did. Anyway, why'd you use my name? When I heard that I got a little freaked out."

"Oh, right. You want a brew?"

"Why not."

As they sat at the kitchen table, which was littered with empty bottles and music magazines, Mango told him how he'd won a cash drawing from that same station two weeks before, and how it occurred to him as he was waiting on the line that the same person couldn't win twice within thirty days. That was their policy.

"And just as I went on, I thought to myself, I better use someone else's name, because I'm not hanging up for some stupid technicality. And you were the first person that popped into my head." He polished off his beer and slammed the bottle down. "I had to give them your address and phone number."

"What? Why?" Jake said, wondering how Mango even knew that information.

"I don't know, in case they have to contact you or something."

Jake put the cold glass of the beer bottle to his forehead. It felt hotter inside Mango's place than it did outside. "So what do you want me to do?"

"Well, since you're officially the winner of the contest," Mango paused to get another beer from his fridge. "You have to come with me."

Jake downed the rest of his beer and told him he'd think about it, but it might be tough on such short notice. The concert was the next night, and maybe he had already promised to help his parents move their piano, or maybe his sister was flying in from Texas and he was supposed to go down to L.A. and pick her up. Whatever his excuse turned out to be, spending a night with Mango on a death metal date was out of the question, especially since he would have already spent the entire day taking orders from him at work.

Back in the Civic, the clouds growing darker but still no raindrops on the windshield, Jake curled down Blackberry

Road, a squiggly line carved into the woods. He had seen it from above several times when he was a kid: His father used to take him up in the Cessna from time to time. The plane was so loud they had to wear headphones and talk over a radio frequency. "Look at all those toy cars," his father used to say into the headset. When they banked to Jake's side, he would look down and pinch the cars between his fingers.

Turning into the parking lot for his apartment building, he stopped at the mailboxes and pulled out the stack of junk mail he'd let accumulate for several days. He flipped through it just in case, and after about six offers for a new credit card he came across a plain white envelope addressed to him in cursive, with no return. He only knew two people who wrote in cursive: his aunt Shirley, who sent him ten bucks for his birthday every year, and Molly. He put the letter on top of the pile and parked the car in the first available spot.

Two hours later, as he was pouring himself a fourth whiskey and Coke to go with his microwave chicken fajitas, the letter remained unopened. It sat on the coffee table underneath his keys and wallet. It couldn't be good news, Jake decided, if she had felt the need to write him instead of calling. In his experience, only bad news came through the mail. The longer he sat in front of it, though, the harder it became not to want tear it open and get it over with.

"Fuck it," he said, and picked it up. He shoved his finger underneath the flap and pulled. Unfolding the letter, he looked immediately at the bottom. It wasn't from Molly; it was from her brother.

Jake,

I hope this letter finds you well. I'm still tugging lines down at the shipyard, but I just got a raise so I can't complain. Never did quite get out of Dodge, I guess, not yet anyway.

I'm actually writing to tell you something that Molly should have told you a while ago, but has refused to. I promised her I wouldn't tell you either, but lately it's been eating me up inside. I just feel like it's something you should know, regardless of the circumstances.

Okay, whether you're ready for it or not, here it is. You have a son.

Jake stopped reading for a moment to catch his breath. As he held the letter, a block of daylight swept through the room and over the paper, making the words seem to float in mid-air. Jake's hands began to tremble slightly, and he couldn't tell if it was from the booze or the letter. He focused his eyes back on the page and read on.

His name is Benjamin, and I think he is about three months old by now. They are both healthy and staying in Madera with some guy she's been dating. I wouldn't call her or try to go see them, but if you want to write her, the address is 104 Redwood Terrace, Madera, CA 93636. She still refuses to use the Internet for some reason. Anyway, I just thought that as the father, you had the right to know. For what it's worth, despite what happened between you and her, I always thought you were a good guy.

Take care,
Ted

Jake refolded the letter and carefully slipped it back into the envelope. He took a swig of his whiskey and Coke, keeping the glass tilted and letting the ice cubes sit on his lips long after the drink was gone. He set the glass down and looked at his dinner, which he could tell was beginning to harden. Microwave dinners only last so long, he thought. You really have to scarf them down. The sun went back behind the clouds and darkness fell over the room. He took out the letter, held it closer to his face this time, and read it again.

His first impulse was to get in his car and drive the three hours to Madera right then, but he knew the Civic would never make it all the way there—the old heap barely got him to and from work every day. The next thing he wanted to do was scribble the words *How could you do this to me, bitch?* a thousand times on a piece of paper and send it to her, but that

didn't seem like a good idea either. Why didn't she tell him he was a father? How long was she planning to keep it from him? He started to feel dizzy, even though he'd been sitting in the same position for almost an hour.

The rain finally came later that night, drumming steadily on the windowsill next to Jake's bed, but he still couldn't sleep. More questions pecked at him as he lay sprawled on top of his sheets in his gym shorts, back to the ceiling. Did the baby look like him at all? Could you even tell with babies that young? Who was this guy she was with? Did he make her happy? Jake used to, he remembered, before he got restless and starting wondering what else was out there.

One night, when he had a wallet full of overtime cash to burn through, he took her to a place called The Concord, an upscale restaurant down on the water. They both dressed up, and he got all the doors for her, and she couldn't stop smiling and saying how no one had ever made a reservation for her before. He told her to get anything she wanted, and she said she would, but when the waiter came she ordered one of the cheapest dishes on the menu. When he asked her why she did that, she laughed and said, "You said I could get whatever I want. I want the chicken." She'd always had that easy way about her, and as Jake lie sleepless in the turquoise glow of his clock radio, he wondered how he ever could have forgotten that.

The next morning, before Jake could even get his cooler out of the backseat, Mango was on him about the concert. Jake had more or less forgotten about it, and was slow to come up with an excuse.

"I don't know, man," he stammered. "I'm supposed to pick up my sister at the airport tonight."

"That's horseshit. You're coming to Death Warrant. Did I mention the titties?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Well?"

"I'm sorry, man. I just can't go, all right? You shouldn't have used my fucking name in the first place. You must have other friends who are actually into that shit, don't you?" As he said that, it occurred to him that Mango probably didn't have any other friends, but he brushed past him anyway, not

caring, just wanting to get the mixer started up so he could take his mind off everything.

As the morning went on, Jake worked furiously, turning out batches of cement faster than Mango could use them. Usually it was the other way around, but Jake felt like driving himself into the ground, his sweat pouring into the sand pile as he hurled shovelful after shovelful into the churning belly of the mixer, counting them under his breath with each heave.

By 10:30 his shirt was soaked through. By noon his hair was matted against his forehead as though he'd just been blasted in the face with a fire hose. When Mango decided they should break for lunch, Jake wanted to keep going, but he couldn't mix any mud if no one was there to use it up. Reluctantly, he grabbed his cooler and followed Mango to the truck, and they drove to the beach and ate in the parking lot as they always did.

"Hey, man," Jake said over the radio as they ate their sandwiches. "I'm sorry about before. I'm sorry about tonight."

Mango was about to say something when the song on the radio faded out and the DJ from the previous day came on.

"That was Busted Nuns with *Fifty Caliber* on your Lizard Lunch Hour. Just a quick reminder: Tonight. Death Warrant. Live in concert. Selland Arena in Fresno. Should be an awesome show…"

Without a second thought, Jake turned to Mango. "You know what? I changed my mind. I don't want to screw you on those tickets."

"For real?" Mango's eyes widened. "What about your sister?"

"Oh, right. I'll just tell her to take the bus or something."

"Man, what a relief! I thought I was gonna have to go down to the station and beg them to let me go." He wiped the sweat from his big forehead and laughed. "I'm telling you, bro, these guys? They'll change your fucking life."

Jake had to hustle home after work so he could clean himself up, grab a bite to eat, and get to the radio station by 5:00. He didn't know quite what he was in for, but he did know that Madera was right on the way to Fresno and that if he didn't see Molly and the baby soon, he was going to snap.

All he had to do was somehow convince the limo driver to make a pit stop after the concert. On his way out the door, he swiped Ted's letter from the kitchen table and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Mango was waiting for him in the radio station parking lot, leaning against the hood of his truck, grinning. He was wearing a black, stretched-out Death Warrant T-shirt and frayed blue jeans.

"Nice Polo shirt, fucker," Mango said, chomping on a long blade of grass. "You look like a real hardcore fan. A total friggin' maniac."

Jake stopped in his tracks. "Watch yourself. I'm doing you a favor here."

"Just messing with you, man."

They went inside and met the station manager, a sturdy woman in her mid-forties. Instead of shaking her hand, Mango gave her a high five. She led them into an empty conference room where she examined their driver's licenses, made them sign forms, and gave them their credentials for the evening.

"Okay, gentlemen," she said, handing them each a sheet of paper. "Here are your itineraries." Mango frowned at her, but she continued with her routine. "As you can see, you'll depart from here in about five minutes. You should arrive in Fresno by eight, at which point you'll be met by the head of our promotions department, Fred Everett, who will take you backstage and introduce you to the band. Then he will lead you to your seats. When the concert is over, you will be allowed to hang out backstage until midnight, but no later, because we only have the limousine until three. Are we good?"

Mango slammed his fist on the table. "Goddamn right we are."

The whole limo ride Jake just let Mango talk. He only heard bits and pieces—*Look it, there's a friggin' TV back here!*—and spent most of the ride wondering if he could patch things up with Molly, convince her to leave the guy she was with so they could work it out and raise the baby together.

He used to think he could never settle down, even when things with Molly were good, but now it seemed easier to imagine for some reason: him working days while she took care of the kid, and her part-timing nights at a hospital so she could get her career going. He could even go back to school

eventually so he could figure himself out, too. Before they knew it, Benjamin would be doing his own thing at school, and they would go to his baseball games and track meets, or if he wasn't athletic, his science fairs and piano recitals. Not everything would be perfect, of course. There would be fights, meetings with teachers, frantic holidays, financial problems. But, at least he'd be on his way to normal. At least, he told himself, he'd be in motion.

Just as the woman at the radio station had promised, they pulled into a special parking lot around eight o'clock. When they got out, Fred Everett greeted them. He wore black jeans and a plum-colored sport coat, and had silver hair that was spiked up in an apparent attempt to make him look twenty years younger. "Welcome to the show, gentlemen. Are you guys ready to rock?" he said with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Mango raised his hand up for another high-five, but Fred had already turned toward the gate. They followed him out of the lot to a white door at the side of the arena, past a security guard, and down a well-lit, air-conditioned hallway. Echoes of the opening band seeped through the walls. Jake could tell Mango was about to burst; he hadn't said a word since they got out of the limo.

Fred halted them in front of an unmarked door. "Okay, guys. This is the green room. The band is in there hanging out. We'll go in, I'll introduce you. Keep it short. No stupid questions or jokes. No awkward silences, either. Just be cool."

He knocked. A few voices behind the door yelled, "Come in!" Even Jake felt his nerves jump a little, despite the fact that he had no idea who these guys were. The only other famous person he'd ever met was a guy his father used to fly with, but he couldn't remember who the guy was or why he was famous.

Fred opened the door. The room reminded Jake of his high school guidance counselor's office, minus the motivational posters and the aging hippie sitting Indian-style on a beanbag chair. Instead, a mix of hairy-chested rockers and lipsticked girls were lounging on leather sofas, eating hors d'oeuvres and drinking beer. Behind them, a couple of roadies were leaning against the back wall smoking a joint.

Fred spoke first. "Everyone, this is Jake and Brad. Jake won our Gods of Rock Trivia Contest, and they're just here to meet you and wish you well before the show."

"Hello, Jake and Brad," one of them said sarcastically. A few of the others giggled.

Walking over to them, Mango said, "You guys gonna kick some serious ass tonight or what?" As he stepped forward to shake hands with one of them, he accidentally kicked over a half-full beer.

"Watch it, Frankenstein," said a stoned-looking blond girl with a streak of mascara running down the side of her face. Everyone laughed. Mango scrambled to pick up the bottle, but by the time he'd turned it upright it was empty.

"Sorry about that," he stammered. "Can I get you another one?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "You can get out of my fuckin' grill."

Mango backed away. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean –"

"So," began a mustached band member in a tight silver suit. "Which one of you sardines is the big contest-winner?"

Judging by the drumsticks stuffed down the front of his pants, Jake figured he was the notorious Thrash Jackson. Jake quickly pointed at Mango, not caring if it blew their cover.

"All right, Frankenstein. Here's a real trivia question for you. You ready, mate?"

Mango perked up. "You bet, Thrash. Ask me anything."

"Okay, here it is," Thrash said, hushing his voice to sound like a game show host. "How many faggots does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

Mango thought about it for a moment, as if he actually had the answer buried somewhere in his brain. Finally, he said, "Two?"

"Christ," Thrash snarled. He stood up to face Mango and sniffed at him. "Are you really there, mate? Are you a bloody hologram or something?" He poked Mango in the belly with a drumstick. "You're supposed to say, *I don't know.* That's how it works."

"Oh, sorry. I don't know."

A smile grew on Thrash's face, revealing brilliantly white teeth. "Me either. That's why I'm asking you, you fuckin' faggot!"

The room erupted with laughter. Even the roadies in the back cracked smiles. Mango stuffed his hands in his pockets and lowered his head. Jake thought he saw Mango's right cheek twitching.

Fred cleared his throat. "Well, that about does it for us, I think. Thanks for your time, guys. Good luck tonight. I'll get somebody in here to clean that up." He glared at Mango, who offered the band a limp wave as he lurched toward the door. Once they were out in the hallway again, Fred let him have it.

"I told you to be cool, and the first thing you do is kick over a beer and make an ass out of yourself. Now they're all pissed off. Rock stars don't like to be pissed off before a show –"

"Whoa, hold on," Jake said. "First of all, they were the ones treating us like shit. Second of all, it was an accident. So don't be a dick and start yelling at him for trying to be nice about it."

"All right, you little prick," Fred cut in, but before he could get his mouth around another word, Jake reached back and cocked him square on the jaw with a right hook, sending him first on his ass with a scrunched-up, bewildered look on his face, then flat on to the floor, expressionless.

Jake suddenly felt the blood rushing to his knuckles. He'd shoved a guy at a party once, but he'd never hit anyone before. Mango knelt down and lightly slapped Fred's face.

"He's out cold," Mango said. "Jesus, Jake. What the fuck should we do?"

"Let's get the hell out of here."

"But what about the concert? I haven't seen these guys live in over two years!"

Jake grabbed him by the shirt and stood him up. "Are you kidding me? After what just happened in there? Fuck the concert, man."

For a moment, Jake wasn't sure whether Mango was going to attack him or start crying. But before he could do either, a low groan came out of Fred Everett's mouth, and suddenly it was Mango leading the way back down the hall, past

the security guard, out the white door, through the parking lot to the limousine. The driver was still inside, passed out in a cloud of cigar smoke to a Tony Bennett album. Mango rapped on the window. "Change of plans," he said as it came down, the smoke rolling over his bald head like fog. "Can we get in?"

"It's your night," the driver coughed, stepping out to open the door for them. Jake ducked and climbed in; Mango followed and sat opposite. The door closed behind him. They looked up at each other, but said nothing.

"Where to, fellas?" the driver said over the intercom. "You got me until three."

Jake felt for the letter in his back pocket and pulled it out. "Mind if we make a quick stop somewhere?"

The driver found Molly's address without a problem, and by the time they got there Jake had told Mango as much as he cared to about their relationship, subsequent breakup, and the letter. He even admitted the real reason he'd agreed to go to the concert with him, which Mango said he understood. "I knew something crazy was gonna happen tonight," he said. "I could *feel* it."

Redwood Terrace was one of those complexes where all the houses looked exactly the same—beige stucco, one story, two squares of front yard separated by a weed-infested cement walkway. Molly's unit had no vehicles in the driveway, but a few lights were on inside. Jake was careful not to brush his hand on anything as he got out of the limo—it had swollen up so much since they fled the concert that his knuckles had lost all definition. He crossed the road and eased himself up the steps, which were flanked on either side by large, potted plants. As he reached out to ring the bell, he noticed that his watch had stopped at 8:37, right around the time he decked Fred Everett.

Molly opened the door in gym shorts and a tank top, a cigarette between her fingers. Jake figured she would look a bit older and heavier after going through a pregnancy, but she seemed pretty much the same. Her breasts were bigger and more bottom-heavy than he remembered, but that was about the only difference. She stood there for a moment, squinting through the screen, before she recognized him.

"Jesus," she said.

Pulling out one of his old jokes, Jake replied, "No, it's just me."

She didn't laugh. "What are you doing here, Jake?"

"Can I just come in for a minute?"

She hesitated, pressing her forehead to the screen. "Only for a minute." She opened the door, explaining that her boyfriend, David, would be getting back from the grocery store pretty soon. Jake pretended he wasn't listening when she said the guy's name.

He stepped inside. The place was small, but tidy, with a few of Molly's old watercolors on the walls. A bookshelf filled with magazines and CDs stood next to the television. Jake recognized the brown pleather couch from her old apartment back in San Francisco. He couldn't help smiling to himself—how many times had he been naked on that couch? A lot more than what's-his-face, that's for sure. He tried to stop thinking about it. "Since when did you start smoking?" he blurted out. "Not during the pregnancy, I hope."

She put out her cigarette but didn't answer the question. "It was my brother, wasn't it?"

Yeah, Jake wanted to say, it was your brother who actually had the decency to tell me about my son. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he nodded and held out the letter. She took it from him and glanced at it, then handed it back. "I didn't tell you because I didn't think you'd care. You were such a child when we were together. You were so wrapped up in your own thing. I honestly didn't think you'd care."

"Well, I obviously do."

"Do you? Or do you just think you're supposed to?"

Jake thought for a moment. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"I guess. But it doesn't change anything. So if you have some speech made up in your head, save it."

"I don't. I just came by to see him. You'll at least give me that, won't you?"

Her eyes moved to the floor. "All right. But be quiet. He's asleep."

Jake followed her past the kitchen to a dark hallway. When they got to the last door on the left she put her ear up to it, then pushed it open. "Okay," she whispered. They crept in. Pastel-colored lights from a cheap electronic mobile swirled

on the ceiling. They looked over the edge of the crib together. Benjamin was on his stomach, but Jake could just make out contours of his face. His head was covered in brown fuzz; his hands were the size of skipping stones. Jake reached in and his touched neck. It was delicate and smooth, like wax paper.

"Does he cry a lot?" Jake whispered. He turned to face her, keeping his hand on the baby. For a split second, he wondered what Molly would do if he grabbed the baby and ran for the door.

"No." A strip of light from the hallway bisected Molly's face. For the first time since he arrived, she looked him right in the eyes. "He's a quiet one."

"Huh. Imagine that." He felt around in the dark for her hand. When he found it, she didn't pull away, just kept it there, limp. He remembered a similar encounter on their first date, except back then there was no tension between them, no bastard child, no Redwood Terrace, no stonework. There was only fascination—with their bodies, with the things they didn't know about each other, with their millions of possible futures together. Yet somehow, this was where they ended up.

"He's actually been pretty easy so far," she said. "Comparatively, I mean."

He pulled her into him. "You have other kids I don't know about?"

"You have the worst jokes. You know that, right?"

"No," he said. He closed his eyes and kissed her. Her mouth was laced with nicotine, but still tasted like her. They stood frozen at first, as if out of consideration for the baby, but really because it felt more strange than familiar. Then, as they used to do, they pressed together and began rocking back and forth, their own private slow dance, her standing on his feet, him running his hands up her back, pushing on her shoulder blades. He wanted to feel her breasts, to see how much bigger they really were, and he wondered what would happen if he sucked on her nipples, if anything would come out.

"This doesn't change anything," she said again, mid-kiss.

He didn't answer, just kissed her harder. He wanted to see her, so he opened his eyes for a moment. To his surprise, she was already watching him, the lights from the mobile

swirling slowly across her face. And though she didn't stop, Jake could tell from her expression that she hated herself right then—for getting pregnant, for not telling him about the baby, for shacking up so quickly with another guy, but most of all, for what they were doing in the presence of their infant child, who was sound asleep until a loud, high-pitched voice from outside came pouring through the open window.

"*I got him, Jake!*" the voice was yelling. "*I got the little fucker!*"

Benjamin immediately wriggled awake and started crying. Molly pulled away. "Who the hell was that?" she said.

"That," Jake sighed, "is my ride." He ran his fingers through his hair, took another look at Benjamin, and rushed out of the room. Molly scooped the baby up and followed, cursing under her breath. When they got outside they found Mango standing in the driveway, at his feet a jackknifed bicycle, two bags of spilled groceries, and a lifeless goateed man in a shimmering white tracksuit. Mango was shaking his left hand at his side, grinning like he'd just found a hundred dollar bill.

"I got him pretty good," he said in a way that seemed both an offering to Jake and an apology to Molly. "You about ready?"

Jake jumped the steps. He turned around to say something to Molly, but couldn't think of anything that fit the moment. Instead, he gave her an awkward, salute-style wave. She didn't wave back, just stood there with the baby on her shoulder, her mouth hanging slightly open. Jake pivoted and ran after Mango, who was already lumbering toward the limo. As they drove away, Jake watched Molly through the tinted window as she tried to help what's-his-face stand up.

"I hope I didn't screw you up back there," Mango said as they hit the freeway. He and Jake were sitting opposite each other, their respective punching hands buried in the icebox underneath the mini-bar. "I was just trying to help."

Jake wasn't really sure whether Mango had screwed him up or saved him. "Don't worry about it," he said. "It's probably for the best." He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on where his hand hurt the most, but by then he couldn't even feel his wrist, the ice having numbed it to the bone.

"The guy was a total clown anyway," Mango said. "Did you see those clothes he was wearing? And that lame-ass goatee? He looked like he was in some friggin' washed-up boy band or something. Didn't he look like one of those faggot pop singers?"

"I guess," Jake groaned. "But he's still banging my girlfriend. He's still raising my son."

Mango put an ice cube in his mouth and started munching on it. "Well, I wouldn't sweat it too much. When Molly realizes how much of a tool that guy is, she'll come running back your way. Trust me, dude. I can *feel* it."

Jake wanted to tell Mango to just shut up, that he was full of shit and didn't have the slightest clue what he was talking about, but he didn't have the heart. Besides, the poor guy was just trying to cheer him up. And at least he was able to see his son. He hadn't quite believed Benjamin existed until he touched him, felt his skin.

With Mango hypothesizing about how *totally kick-ass* the Death Warrant show must have been, Jake put his head back against the soft leather seat and slowly pulled his hand out of the ice. It was even more swollen and discolored than it was before, making it almost look like a rubber glove filled with air. He figured something in there was broken or cracked, but doubted he would ever make it to the doctor. On Monday, they'd probably finish up the kitchen floor and get started on the Hutchins' outdoor fireplace, and if Jake wasn't there to shovel the sand and mix the mud, Mango would have to do the whole thing by himself.

The Skinny on Private Parts and Privacy

By Marisa Coppage De Mirelle

My mother never tired of telling me to wear clean underwear "in case of emergency." At the ripe age of twenty-one, I was in my first car accident, and it wasn't my life that flashed before my eyes. It was my mother, wagging a finger and saying, "I told you so" as emergency workers cut the jeans off of my broken right leg. My first thought was relief, not that I was alive, but that my panties were fresh and I had chosen plain white cotton over the Hello Kitties with the big pink hearts.

Mom was right about a lot of things she said when I was growing up, especially about privacy. She promoted not only clean underwear but also the fact that strangers had no business seeing the parts of me coverable by a bikini—she had no idea about thongs and I wasn't going to tell her. My mother was also fond of saying, "Never say or doing anything you don't want to see on the front page of the *New York Times*"—she had no idea about the Internet, and I wasn't about to tell her that, either.

Even so, the chances of my private parts appearing in the media are about nil. I refrain from going braless, topless, commando, or outright nekkid in public, and I can't understand why anyone would. Moreover, I can't understand the outrage of any person, civilian or celebrity, over media exposure of their public exposure. When a person chooses to behave in ways that make a scandal possible, they have no one to blame but themselves.

On January 11, 2008, Kelly McBride, writing for the esteemed journalist and media organization Poynter, mourned Britney Spears's victimization by a media that splashed photos of her with a hiked up dress and uncrossed legs. She wasn't wearing embarrassing panties —she wasn't wearing any at all. McBride wants her readers to remember a different Britney, a sweet sixteen-year-old exploited like Lolita. Her point is noteworthy: Britney was young when stardom swept her up and served her to the public. But she was an adult when she

chose to violate the golden rule about going out with clean and present panties. She was well into her twenties, married and divorced, with two small children. She was as experienced with life as with the paparazzi. What was Britney thinking when she chose her outfit that night? I can hear my mother's answer: "She wasn't."

Not everyone caught flashing on the front page are famous, of course. McBride posts another piece on Poynter-Online on December 13, 2007, one year prior to her piece on Britney. She tells about an annual Tufts event, the Naked Quad Run, which involves a throng of students, many under the influence of alcohol, running bare around the grounds. A story, accompanied by video footage of the event, appeared on the Somerville, Massachusetts, Wicked Local website, to the shock of many who considered this an invasion of privacy. Ironically, the students participating in this event had done so risking charges of both public intoxication and indecency and tacitly agreeing to expose themselves to anyone who cared to watch. What is the difference then between showing one's backside to live onlookers and to those who watch from home? You already know what my mother would say.

There is a vast difference between those captured behaving badly and those who are publicly humiliated by others. Consider the case of a twenty-six-year-old woman—close in age to both Britney and the Tufts students—who died after running her SUV into a tree. Neither her name nor her university was mentioned in the article that appeared on WKMG's Local6.com website, but her bare breast was. The title of the piece called her "Topless Crash Victim." She may or may not have been at fault for her fatal crash, but she had nothing to do with the graphic and revealing photo on the website. The story was about a fire chief from Umatilla, Florida, who resigned following discovery of his having emailed photos of her, chest exposed, while emergency crews fought to keep her alive. The distribution of the photos was horrific enough, but the ultimate insult to the woman's privacy was the posting of the photos on the WKMG site. The images were blurred, but they were there.

Britney Spears and the Tufts students understood—or should have—the risks involved in their choices. The woman in the crash, dead or dying when her photos were snapped, was

denied that choice. She was unable to give consent, explicit or otherwise, for the photo opportunity taken. Her body had been stripped by paramedics, rightfully so, but her dignity was stripped, wrongfully so, first by a public official and then by the media.

Who is to blame when extremely personal images appear in print or online? My mother taught me well, so I can give you that answer. In the cases above, it's Britney, the Tufts students, the fire chief, and WKMG. In every case, it's whoever makes a *conscious* decision to expose, or to risk exposing, what strangers have no business seeing.

Keeping Time

By Sarah Desai

I used to wear a digital watch because I liked to know what time things happened. Like, on Tuesday, January 6, 2005, at 2:10:47 p.m., my best friend Judy called to tell me that her brother liked me. We had met at her housewarming party in Brooklyn and he thought I was spunky and a great conversationalist. Did he say I was hot, too? Yeah, yeah, Judy affirmed, of course. And on Friday, January 9, 2005, at 7:55:03 p.m., he showed up at our first non-official date and handed me a cardboard box full of pink and yellow rose petals. He said he thought the petals were the best part of the roses and didn't want to waste my time with the stems and thorns. He wore a brown velvet coat. He smelled of white soap and clean soil. I liked his eyes and I liked the look of him. And so, on Sunday, February 18, 2005, at 10:45:36 a.m., sitting up in my bed of rumpled white sheets, watching him dance across the old floorboards to some melody in his head, I fell in love with him.

I was counting apples for a pie when he came home. A quick glance at my wrist showed 3:44:02 p.m. He was never home before 5:14 p.m. I watched him, placing my eighth apple into the bowl. He put his keys in the dish by the door and slowly angled out of his jacket. He kicked his shoes off, letting them hit the sideboard and leave little brown dirt scuffs.

"Did I forget something? Is today a—"

"No," he cut me off, stepping into the kitchen.

"Well, then why are you—"

"Are you making a pie?" He stepped in beside me, touching a kiss to my forehead before snatching up one of my counted apples, leaning against the counter and crunching a bite.

"Well, yes, I am, but you—"

"I have cancer, Sophie."

The time. The time. 3:47:10 p.m.

Judy said he'd known for a while. She said that he didn't want to worry me until it was something to worry about. It

was in his brain. A small tumor. They'd found it six months ago when he'd gotten an MRI for those headaches. Those migraines, you remember. Yes, of course. The migraines. He'd said they were nothing. Just stress from work. No biggie. No problem. I should have gone to the doctor with him. I should have known. No, no, Judy said, he wanted it this way.

I never made the pie, and the apples slowly rotted in their bowl next to the sink. At night I watched him sleep. Each breath made my own catch—keep breathing, I'd pray. Keep breathing. In the mornings he always seemed paler to me. But he smiled just as big and he hugged me in his strong arms, smelling like white soap and clean soil. I closed my eyes and breathed him in. On December 5, 2007, at 8:10:11 a.m., love began rising in my throat, choking me with every swallow.

I was in the hospital cafeteria on December 14, 2007, at 1:21:02 a.m. It was closed, so I was examining the vending machines for anything that would settle my stomach a little. I had been practically living in the hospital since his episode. Since we made love for the last time and he laughed at me, because I cried. Like in the movies, he said. Like those pretty little dramas you like so much. I laughed, too, but it hurt. Laughing and smiling hurt now, all the time, but I did it for him. I kissed his thin chest. I could see his sternum so clearly. It alarmed me just then. Just how thin he was. So pale. He felt hungry, he wanted a sandwich. Weren't sandwiches great? It was only a few minutes later, as I toweled off my wet face in the bathroom, that I heard the crash. Something shattered. A thud.

He didn't wake up again. The doctors said things that I couldn't hear past the rush in my head, a rush like speeding down the highway. I just kept holding his hand. It was warm. Thin and warm. Squeeze it, I'd whisper to him when we were alone.

Judy appeared at my side. She stared into the vending machine with me. Bright colors of Chips Ahoy! and Doritos. She wrapped her arm around my waist, pushing her tired face into my shoulder.

"It's time," she said.

I glanced down at my watch. "It's 1:26:36 a.m.," I told her.

"I wish you'd stop. I don't care what time it is."

He thought it was funny. Everyone has a little crazy in them, he'd say. Maybe you have a lot of crazy. He thought it was funny that I timed things. He bought me a new digital watch, with an Indi-Glo face. The note attached read: *I saw this at 6:44:01 p.m. and thought of you.* I asked him what his crazy was. He said it was me.

His chest moved up and down, like he was breathing, but the doctor shook his head silently. He'd told me already. He had done his doctor's duty. All he could do. All breathing was being done by a machine. This made no sense, really. How can a machine breathe for a person? I asked the doctor if he was still alive. He only nodded. No one in the hospital liked to speak to me. They avoided me as if I smelled bad. Maybe I did. Maybe when you love someone that much it makes you stink.

Judy was staring at me with his eyes. How come I'd never noticed that before? Just looked straight at me, large and round, dark brown, so honest and clear. My jaw suddenly felt tight, all the muscles clamping down in an involuntary response to keep myself from sobbing out loud.

"Do you see his hands, Jude?" I ran the pad of my thumb tenderly over the bumpy blue veins on the back of his white hand. "They're so clean."

"Yes. Yes, they are."

"And soft."

"Yes."

I leaned over his face, which really didn't look like him at all—more like those wax representations you see in museums. He was too perfect. Too still. I squeezed his hand hard, pressing my cheek against his, the wetness of my tears making our skin stick together, if only for a moment.

I was still holding his hand at 2:12:04 a.m., when suddenly the room was silent. His chest still. I squeezed his hand again. And again. In the distance, I heard Judy. Crying, perhaps. Hard to tell. Other voices, quiet, authoritative.

I placed the digital watch he gave me in a small box and put it away safely, in a drawer. The skin on my wrist where the face of the watch had always lain so confidently was tender and pale.

I used to wear a digital watch because I liked to know what time things happened.

Beyond Civilization: Travels in the Middle Kingdom

By Suzanne B. Hopkins

I first traveled to the People's Republic of China in early 1977, just a few months after Mao died. Life was harsh then. Perennial political upheaval had created a nation in chaos and saw millions starve and many more millions brutalized all in the name of building a great socialist country. Visiting there was like walking back in time, like in the late 1960s TV show *Time Tunnel*, where two scientists working on time travel would walk into a swirling tunnel and get hurled into a century past.

When we—my parents and I—flew to Beijing that January night, the dull light cast an eerie pall over the city—an outpost, really, where crudely primitive dwellings were lit by only single twenty-five-watt bulbs. There was no neon lighting up the night, no flashing billboards, no streetlights or headlights glaring. As I gazed out the plane window, I thought about a high school paper I had written comparing the Chinese and Russian Communist Parties a couple of years earlier. The People's Republic was a closed country, isolated from the world, not recognized by the United Nations. Mao had demonized the United States for decades and the Soviet Union since Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956. I never imagined I would be flying into China.

The plane slowed to a stop and the door of the Pakistan Air Boeing 737 opened to three stern officials wearing heavy, padded, green cotton overcoats and fur-lined green caps adorned with red stars. A sharp-tongued woman, with long, black braids tied together at the ends and tucked under the back of her cap, questioned the Pakistani passenger—the only other passenger on the plane—while the two men hung back behind her. After letting the man disembark, she checked our documents and allowed us to walk off the plane, down the metal stairs, and toward a large warehouse, which served as a terminal. Mao's portrait, larger than life, hung above the entry to the building. He towered over us. I could almost hear his thundering, voluminous voice, but his body was

embalmed by then and stored away for good keeping. Years later, I would read his doctor's riveting account of preserving his body.

Inside the dark, cold building, women milled around in army uniforms flinging and hauling bags and stamping documents. A van picked us up and we drove away from the airport. It was against the law to turn on the headlights; the glare blinded the people on bicycles. So we drove up the road in the dark, occasionally passing a truck coming straight at us playing chicken with our van as we both proceeded up the middle of the road, avoiding the two million bicyclists in Beijing with right of way. In some stretches, dimly lit streetlights hung on one side of the road; otherwise, it was as dark as the black night. A green and yellow light signaled our van to turn left, and we drove up a street to the embassy district.

Formal diplomatic relations would not be established for two more years, but the United States had maintained a liaison office in the People's Republic for several years. We received visas because the United States Chief Liaison Officer to China then, Thomas S. Gates, Jr., was an old family friend. He and my grandparents were friends. My father and his siblings grew up with his kids, and my siblings and I grew up with his grandchildren.

Before dinner that night we arrived, we gathered in a sitting room and were given a two-hour political briefing. No one really knew that much then, but everyone speculated. The Gang of Four, Mao's wife and the three others who had spearheaded the tumultuous and ruthless decade-long Cultural Revolution—Mao's attempt to purify the party against anti-socialist tendencies—had just been arrested. Mao was thought to be the fifth, we were told. Mao's designated successor, Lin Piao, who edited Mao's *Little Red Book*, had been accused of undermining the revolution. He plotted a coup and fled with his family when Mao found out. He was killed when his plane crashed over Mongolia, but people suspected it was shot down. There were even speculations about Deng Xiaoping, who had been rehabilitated and arrested again. Later that year, Deng was rehabilitated a second time and emerged the victor in the power struggle unleashed by Mao's death.

We also were told about Taiwan-China relations, so touchy that officials at the airport almost prohibited Mr.

Gates's daughter and her children from entering the country simply because the jackets to their plane tickets had the flags of the world printed on them, including Taiwan's. Mr. Gates told his family to rip up the offending flags; the official relented. As we headed to bed that night, I could hear the shrill whistle of an old steam engine in the distance. I thought about a photograph taken at Mao's funeral in September; hundreds of thousands of soldiers stood at attention in Tiananmen Square in perfect uniformity, not a shirtsleeve or rifle or cap out of place. I wondered how he had controlled so many millions for so long.

Before driving out to the Great Wall our first morning, I had to buy a pair of warm boots. As we drove to a department store, the driver glared at us through the rear view mirror of our black limousine. He looked evil. Mr. Gates said the man was a spy and that he pretended not to understand English.

We passed crowds of people lining the streets. Some read newspapers fixed to window-framed bulletin boards; others paused to look at us. The car, with a small American flag fluttering on the right front, slowed to a stop and a crowd gathered around us. None of them spoke to each other; they only stared with vacant, hollow eyes. I remember thinking they must view us as those "foreign devils" or "American running dogs" that Mao had railed about.

I was handed a slip of paper with the Chinese characters for *boots* inked on it. Apprehensively, I opened the car door and stepped out in front of a drab Soviet-style department store. I walked up the stone stairs and into the building, a great body of people impeding my movement. I showed the piece of paper to an old woman toting a small boy dressed like a puffed-up doll. She pointed to a counter. It was bare glass over shelves stacked with Mao slippers—crude, black, cotton shoes without any support, sewed onto soles carved from rubber. I saw nothing resembling warm shoes and retreated unsuccessfully.

The driver got out of the car to take me to a different store. I followed the man as he led me through narrow streets turning at corners and making his way through alleys strewn with old, Soviet-made bicycles, black with old-fashioned, hard leather seats. People parted as we approached, stood in groups watching, each one in blue, button-down, cotton

Mao suits. When we got to our destination, I found a pair of cotton-padded black boots and handed over the Chinese currency Mr. Gates had given me. It was not enough. The driver laughed and paid the money for the boots. I thought he wasn't so bad.

We spent almost a week going to old imperial sites: the Ming Tombs, where Mr. Gates told my father he ought to begin building himself some tombs so he could take his antiques down there with him when he goes; the Temple of Heaven; the Forbidden City, where we wandered alone as soldiers watched us and old women swept walkways with twigs tied into makeshift brooms; and the Summer Palace, where the Dowager Empress Cixi had embezzled Imperial Navy funds to rebuild a large marble boat that sits in Kunming Lake.

As we drove through the city, the only vehicles we saw on the few boulevards wide enough to fit car or truck ferried foreign embassy staff, Chinese Communist Party cadres, or army soldiers standing tightly packed and solemn-looking. The masses peddled up the barely paved roads on bicycles, faces twisted in pain against the cruel, bitter cold. Instead of billboards advertising the Marlboro Man, Pepsi, or Coca Cola, we saw occasional *dazibao*—big-character posters pasted to buildings and city walls to communicate political dissent—attacking the "ultra-leftism" of the Gang of Four. We passed tractors or horses pulling carts packed with stone or brick or other goods; one teetered, dangerously close to toppling over, ready to spill its load of woven baskets and with it the man lying asleep on top. Mr. Gates commented that the man ought to be running the State Department.

There was something about both the political intrigue and complete isolation from the rest of the world that captivated me, and when finally the country was open to foreign travel, I returned again and again, just as in the TV show, walking back into moments of time to see the country as it transformed from a pre-industrial backwater land to a modernized giant.

When I traveled to China the second time, almost a decade later, in early June of 1986, the Middle Kingdom was slowly opening up. Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations—

dismantling state-owned enterprises, allowing foreign businesses into China, eliminating collective agriculture, and guaranteeing lifetime employment for all citizens in state enterprises—had set the stage for the economic superpower that China has become today. But those who pushed for political opening continued to face enormous persecution. The legacy of mistrust, like a shadow, lay heavy in the air.

I flew into Beijing that summer as a team member on a mountaineering expedition. We—eight other women and I—had a permit to climb 25,325-foot Mount Kongur in China's northwest province of Xinjiang, very close to the borders of what was then the Soviet Union as well as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and northern Tibet—one of the remotest places on earth and an area the government had just opened to foreigners.

When we arrived in China, with twenty-something pieces of luggage, Yang Shitao, Director of the Exchange Department of the Chinese Mountaineering Association, tried to convince us we should just go trekking. This was more appropriate for women, he told us. We were the first all-women's team ever granted a permit to climb in China, and after all the dreaming, organizing, and planning, we were more than annoyed at Mr. Yang. Nancey had done the first ascent of a peak in India, in 1980, as well as a new route up Mt. Foraker in Alaska and was arguably the most capable and experienced woman climber in the United States. Kath and Kathy had also climbed in the Himalayas, and everyone else had strong mountaineering backgrounds. After a full year of preparation—for Kath, three years of planning and picking a compatible team—and raising sixty-five thousand dollars from sponsors, Bristol Myers and AT&T among them, we were not about to go on a stroll.

Mr. Yang also wanted more money, which further aggravated us. We had already paid the association a hefty amount to fly our equipment and supplies, everything from ice axes and crampons to freeze-dried Creole shrimp and white gas, from Beijing to Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, and then to truck the gear across the Taklamakan Desert to Kashgar, an ancient trading stop on the Old Silk Road linking China to the West. From there, it would be another day drive to the base of the Kongur massif. But Mr. Yang said they would not fly our gear;

it would have to go the whole way by truck, which would significantly cut into our time on the mountain. He finally relented, but only after much haggling. I snapped at least one photograph of Mr. Yang's finger pointing an inch from Kath's face. But she was tough and wasn't going to back down.

We spent a few days in Beijing before flying across the country to Urumqi, visiting some of the very places I had seen on my first trip. China was beginning to show signs of commercialism. The intrusion of western culture, the culture of capitalism, was hinted in advertisements for consumer goods—Fuji Film, Coca Cola, and other products. It felt like a different world than the one I had been to before. Construction and road crews worked feverishly; opulent hotels were being built. The older people and peasants still wore Mao suits, but younger people began to dress in Western clothes. If you saw two Chinese men in those days, one from China and one from Hong Kong or Taiwan, you could always tell the one from the People's Republic. The men wore high-waisted pants curved inward over the hips, around a narrow, scrawny stomach, and cinched up by thick, wide belts with an eight- to ten-inch extra length of leather tucked back through belt loops. The women sported new polyester dresses, which they often wore with knee socks of the same color. They were more than skinny; they were ghostly, malnourished fatalities of their sycophantic leaders. The people no longer stared with those naïve, hollow, unblinking eyes that I remembered. The men or women, each one dressed in a Mao suit, who walked behind me trying to touch my long, blond braid ten years before, seemed a thing of the past.

When the team drove out to the countryside northwest of Beijing that summer, I thought of our trip that bleak winter day when my parents and I were the only people, save for a few soldiers, at the Great Wall. But almost ten years later, a few tourists climbed the stone ramparts of a restored section of wall, built to fit five or six horses abreast, and peasants squatted along the roadside selling oranges and other fruits and vegetables, shouting and gesturing and thrusting their goods in our faces. On the way to the Ming Tombs, a sign for a fast food restaurant with a gaudy picture of Mickey Mouse jumped out at us—an incongruous sight among the giant stone statues

of elephant, horse, and camel towering over the sacred way, the Avenue of the Animals, leading up to the Tombs.

After a few days in Beijing, the team flew to Urumqi. The changes, so apparent in Beijing, had not yet reached Xinjiang. Once again, I found myself in a remote world. Donkey carts transported people up dusty roads. Blacksmiths hammered out crude farm tools. Open-air barbers shaved the faces of men on the sides of streets.

The feeling of being an anomaly struck me just as it had during my visit ten years earlier. I remembered going to buy boots that day—I had never felt so alone in my life, not lonely or abandoned, but alone in a different and abnormal sense, as if I were a single person on another planet teeming with alien creatures. That I found cotton-padded boots that day or got a laugh out of the spy is not what I remember the most. What sticks in my mind is that solitary pursuit of the driver whom I couldn't distinguish by dress from any other man or woman in a sea of people.

In Xinjiang, just as in Beijing ten years earlier, crowds gathered, staring at us. We would look down at goods in the open-air markets—spices, snake skins, colorful inlaid knives, pelts of the rare and endangered snow leopard—and, by the time we looked up, close to fifty people would be gazing at us. We would sit to wait for each other, and look up to the faces of a throng of curious onlookers.

That summer hooked me on China again, but this time, unlike the last, much of the country was open to foreign travel, so after the expedition, the team flew home, and I traveled around China and Tibet, also recently opened, for another month. Traveling alone then, without a tour group, guide, or even a guidebook, was an experience that demanded patience.

I would ask for train tickets. They would say *meiyou*, meaning "not have." One time trying to get a ticket from the coast to Beijing, I was told no tickets.

"No tickets at all?" I asked.

"No soft seats," the agent replied.

"What about hard seats?" I said.

He shuffled papers for ten minutes.

"No seats at all," he finally repeated.

When pressed, he shuffled more papers, disappeared for ten or fifteen minutes and returned.

"Okay, in the morning," he conceded.

"Are there seats?" I asked.

"Maybe," the man replied.

Getting a meal was a similarly frustrating ordeal. I would go to restaurants and watch waiters linger, file their fingernails, talk to each other. And I would wait.

"We are short handed today," they would say.

I would order meals and receive only parts of them. After long delays, I would ask, "Where is the rest?"

"*Meiyou*," they would answer.

I once received chicken so rotten I could smell the stench before it was even placed on the table in front of me. When I protested, the waiter said, "It is not rotten; we just got it today."

It went on like this, every step of the way. I would wait in lines with hot breath on the back of my neck only to find that the person in front of me would be told no more plane seats, while I was granted a ticket. I would ask for a hotel room, and the person behind me would get a room after I had been told they had none. I would ask for a roll and be told they didn't have any. I would see a stack of them lying on a kitchen counter and, eventually, my exasperation would lead me to stomp in to get one myself.

It wasn't that I was a foreigner—Chinese men and women received the same rude, disinterested treatment. It seemed to be part of the culture of Communism: No one would get promoted for doing a good job or fired if they performed badly. They held back a certain number of plane or train seats and hotel rooms in case Party cadres showed up. It was random and indiscriminate. You never knew what might happen.

Sometimes I wondered why I couldn't be fascinated with a country a little less forbidding, where what little food available wasn't rotten, and standing in lines wasn't a free-for-all, and air or train tickets and hotel rooms were purchased on a first-come, first-served basis, but I was compelled.

Difficult though it was, my obsession with this strange country compelled me to return the following year, to study the language, to see more of the countryside, and to learn

more about China's culture and politics. I went back to the United States, but once I got home, I made plans to return.

In addition to having signed up for coursework at the Beijing Language Institute, when I landed in Beijing for my third visit to China, in 1987, I wanted to check on Keren Su, who had become a good friend on the expedition the summer before, a man whose resourcefulness in the face of exceedingly severe life circumstances made him one of the more admirable people I have known. Keren worked for the Chinese Mountaineering Association and had been the assigned interpreter for our team that summer. We had met him in Urumqi, from where he escorted us to Kashgar, and then to our drop off point at Karakol Lakes, a day drive over a rugged, unpaved stretch of road, which wound its way across dry, parched desert, and up into the foothills of the Pamir mountains.

From Karakol Lakes, Keren was an invaluable go-between in our two-day trek with four camel drivers and twelve camels hauling our 3,000 pounds of gear up to a 15,000-foot base camp. We were on the mountain for forty days, and, in that time, Keren and I had many conversations about his life, his two years rampaging the country as a Red Guard, seven years doing hard labor in the countryside of Heilingjong, his parents' struggles during the Anti-Rightist Movement in the late 1950s, and his years of trying to get the necessary papers to flee China. He wanted a better life.

I had been worried about Keren's political situation; I had not heard from him in months. When I made plans to go back to Urumqi to see him, I had to lie and say I was seeking another permit to climb. For a foreigner to be friends with a Chinese person in that time was difficult; the Public Security Bureau monitored contact. I had already seen one man disappear the first few days back in 1987. He worked in the Beijing office of the mountaineering association and met my flight when it arrived. I had developed film for him in the United States and brought it back to China. He came with me from the airport to my hotel, and we had plans to meet again, but he never showed up, and I could not contact him. I worried about what happened to him. Years later, I saw him play a red guard in the film *The Last Emperor*, but I never found him again.

I also wanted to see Mehmeti, the man who had been our liaison officer on the expedition. He spoke no English and little Chinese—he was a Uighur, the minority descendents of East Turkestan who populate the region—but through his kindness, he had shown tremendous concern and respect for each of the women on our team.

I spent a couple of days in Beijing, and then flew on to Urumqi, where Keren and his friend Li, whom I remembered from the year before, met me. After dropping me at the hotel, Keren said he would come back to get me the next morning. I was glad to be back.

It was at least midnight in Western China, but it was still light. Even though China's vast territory spans four or five time zones, only one time operates throughout the country. I organized my photography gear, wrote in my journal, reminisced about the year before, thought about our four days stuck in Urumqi because of dust storms, and remembered Kathy, one of our team members, inside the baggage compartment of the Boeing 737 throwing our bags down onto the tarmac. I thought about our trip to the mountain, the bazaar in Kashgar, the nomadic people living in felt-lined yurts outside of the cities, the Kirgiz settlement at Karakol Lakes and the village boy coming to base camp following his yaks, and the remarkably different culture of the local Muslim minorities.

I looked forward to the adventures, the cultural immersion, the photography adventures Keren and I would have. Keren was an avid and talented photographer whose work had appeared in *China Pictorial* in some years earlier. He was also, and is still, the consummate adventurer, having been the first person to ride a bicycle around China, a country with very few roads, virtually none paved, on a Soviet-made bike, with no gears, and no panniers to carry food, water, or other supplies. "Where there are people," he said, "one will not go hungry."

When we met up the next day, we walked to a part of the city off limits to foreigners. People still stared. We ate brick-oven baked bread. I didn't dare eat the things he put in his mouth: the yoghurt, which later he said gave him "a revolution in his stomach" or the meat, which my Typhoid inoculation would most likely do nothing to protect me from.

We wandered the streets and alleyways, smoke from coal fires permeating the air. He told me he had spent months confined to his room writing self-criticism; he was a bourgeois liberal forced to correct his thinking by pointing out his faults. Just as during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956 and 1957, when the Communist Party invited intellectuals to speak out only to persecute those who did so, once again people were asked to open up. The government then cracked down, terrorizing and denouncing those who dared make criticism. Keren had spoken out. The mountaineering association could run more smoothly, he said. There are too many officials. Everyone clapped for his speech. Then the head official spoke, and no one clapped. He lost face, so Keren was punished, confined to the room in his unit in a drab Soviet-style complex for months.

He was condemned, and forced to write self-criticism, hour after hour, day after day. I had unwittingly contributed to his harsh fate. I had sent him a letter and article from the *New York Times* in December that year about Chinese students demonstrating for democracy. The Party's Public Security Bureau confiscated it and informed the mountaineering association to watch out for Keren.

We meandered through the Muslim area as we talked. People sat in front of communal water spigots washing their feet. A magician held a crowd captive. We passed a letter writer sitting on a box, peering through ancient, round, wire-rimmed glasses. Across the alley, a torn piece of white sheet painted with teeth and the Chinese characters for tooth extraction hung from a pole. Behind the sheet, "dentists" pried rotten teeth out of people's mouths without anesthetic or sterile tools. A similar sheet hung with different characters included a red cross. It was a medical station, and, again, behind the sheet a doctor tended to patients. I headed down the alley into the communal latrines, unsuccessfully trying to step over feces scattered on the path. Chinese bathrooms had no toilets or stalls, just openings in the concrete floor filled with waste. The stench was unbearable, and I had to wash the shit off the soles of my sneakers when I returned to the hotel later that evening.

As we reached the main boulevard, we passed hordes of people riding dilapidated bicycles in every direction, like

giant schools of fish in a frozen pond, straining to go from here to there. Live ducks and chickens, legs tied together with twine, hung upside down from bicycle racks or handle bars. An old woman painfully padded up the street with bound feet, like walking on stumps the size of a hand. She had a pained expression, grimacing against the dull gray environment and her sorrowful plight.

Propaganda music praising Mao blared on loudspeakers at the train station, just to make sure the people didn't forget: "Right opportunism is a bourgeois trend of thought…" or "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts…" This no longer happened in Beijing, or the eastern cities, but the countryside was slow to catch on that Mao had been dead almost ten years and the Party line was now "Economic development with socialist characteristics," meaning some people would soon get really rich, but the masses would still suffer. All over China, most statues of the Great Helmsman had been ripped down, but in the remote countryside, some stood, always with a wave to his minions, and just like the music, reminding people of their tortured past.

Though I was wary of being discovered by authorities, we decided to go to Keren's unit—a staff dormitory for the Chinese Mountaineering Association. I sat in the cement-walled room he had lived in for years and looked around at the exquisite watercolor scrolls he had painted of ancient Chinese scenes: towering blue green, karst limestone mountains with streams and waterfalls trickling from cliffs, flowers in reds and oranges dotting the valleys below—these all tacked to dingy, concrete walls. He showed me a picture of his girlfriend, a slight, pretty woman named Xiao Hua, meaning "little flower" in Chinese. She had just been to visit him. I thought about all the married people who never saw their spouses or families, separated over the years and forced to work in locations very far from each other. She, too, was trying to get out of China.

A guitar leaned against a stack of papers. He built it, he said, when he was in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. I looked at him and shook my head. He had spent hours telling me about his years in the countryside during that tragic time in China's recent past. I knew he had taught himself English then. In between slave labor and trying to

survive by stealing diseased pigs from farmers to supplement meager food supplies—rotting vegetables and a few kernels of rice—I wondered where he got the tools and materials to make a guitar. As I thought about the persecution during the Mao years and the waste of a nation's talent and creativity, Keren showed me some of his self-criticism.

"I am a bourgeois liberal; I am a revisionist and have capitalist tendencies," he had written.

It continued like this, page after page.

"I am sorry for what I said, and I hope my thinking will be corrected. I believe in the Party," he wrote.

The thing is, Keren did not believe in the Party. He wanted nothing to do with it; he had no interest in being a Party official, and therefore, in the Party's estimation, he was not helping the people. As much as things were opening up in China, in the hinterlands, Maoism still lingered.

The next day, Mehmeti invited Keren and me to a banquet in his home, a spartan apartment in the staff building of the mountaineering association. His wife cooked up a veritable feast for me—mutton, dumplings, the thick, round noodles that are the trademark food of the area, and a few vegetables.

As we ate the mutton, Mehmeti pointed to the meat and made a motion of cutting his throat. He referred to the poor old sheep that the camel driver brought up to him at base camp near the end of our climb the summer before, tied by its legs on the back of the horse, bleating in fear just as its throat was slit. I had sat with Mehmeti as the poor animal was killed, taking photos of the sheep's slaughter and skinning. The gnarly Kirghiz camel driver, with thick, weathered cheeks, donned in an embroidered Muslim *doppa* or skull cap, blue cotton trousers and coat, separated the skin from the innards with such skill he could have been filleting a cooked rib-roast. He did this by inflating, with raspy lungs, the sheep's body, and when he finished, his leathery face was stained with the fresh blood of the sacrificed beast. Mehmeti then made mutton dumplings for the team, all the while, Kathy, our medical police, warning us not to eat it or we'd be sorry.

If that was what made me sick for over a year or if it was the dirty dishes in Lhasa's "restaurants" dunked in a bucket and then placed back on the shelf for the next customer, I will

never know, but I savored the taste after weeks and weeks of freeze dried food. And I don't even like lamb.

Eating in China then was not only a frustrating experience, but also a frightening one. The worry of contracting disease or parasites hovered over me. And, if the food wasn't rotten, it was cooked in rancid oil. In large part, this was because Mao drove the chefs underground after the revolution; the art of cuisine was deemed counter-revolutionary, one of his fanatical ideas, like the post-revolutionary idea that dogs were too bourgeois, so they were exterminated. I counted only a few mangy, cur mongrels in my four months of travel in the mid-80s, and they were the eating kind; the dogs were wiped out along with the chefs who cooked them.

The most ridiculous of Mao's absurd campaigns, however, was the one to eliminate the four pests, aimed to get rid of rats, mosquitoes, flies, and swallows. The entire country was mobilized against the pests, but in the case of swallows, the campaign backfired. Peasants would run around in the fields waving sheets or banging pots and pans to scare away the birds, which, it was thought, would increase the harvest. The decimation of the sparrows, however, meant no hungry mouths to eat insects or to scatter the seed, and the harvest failed miserably.

Meanwhile, Mao thought the country had produced bumper crops. In his paranoia that someone would assassinate him, he compulsively traveled on his train from one place to another. From the train windows, he saw fields and fields of rice, deceptively planted along the tracks by lower level Party officials who wanted him to believe the harvest had been bountiful. But tens of millions starved to death. Still, they would say, "Chairman Mao, our Great Saving Star."

Now, decades later, Mao is again a cult figure, with flocks of Chinese tourists leaving flowers outside his mausoleum in Tiananmen Square across from the Great Hall of the People, where he had a room specially built so he could retreat from Party meetings to pursue his sexual exploits with young peasant girls.

Back in my hotel after my meanderings with Keren, the head of the mountaineering association and his entourage gathered in my musty room. We had an initial meeting in which I enquired about a permit for another peak. We dis-

cussed options—a joint Chinese-American expedition to Hotan Mustag interested them; a Japanese-Chinese team had attempted it in 1985, but failed. I wrote down notes in my journal. After some more discussion, I said that as long as I was in Urumqi, I would like a driver and interpreter to take me to Turfan for a few days, an area south of Urumqi, with Buddha caves, ancient tombs, and ruins to explore. They said Keren would escort me, which I showed no response to even though it delighted me. We agreed to prices—way too much money, but I would have to pay if I wanted to spend more time with Keren. They said our meeting would continue tomorrow morning, then filed out.

The next day, the entourage marched in. But a new face was among them.

"This is Mr. Du, he will accompany you to Turfan," said Keren.

I seized up inside, but I knew that if I showed disappointment, worry, or protest, or if I asked why Keren was not accompanying me as planned, he would be further punished. I didn't want to go to Turfan with Mr. Du. I didn't really care about going to Turfan at all. I just wanted an adventure with my friend. Furtive glances in his direction showed distressed eyes, a face worn by struggle. I strained to finish my meeting, wishing I could just say, sorry, I have changed my mind, I am not going to Turfan, I am leaving today. But instead, I suffered through the meeting, worrying about Keren, powerless to do anything.

I hurried to meet Mr. Du outside the hotel, where he loaded my bag into a Toyota Land Cruiser, and we left Urumqi with a man named Liu behind the wheel. We passed through the industrial outskirts of the city and entered the scorching desert toward Turfan, a small town about 100 miles south, located in the Turfan Depression—some five hundred feet below sea level—an area so parched that dead animals on the side of the road didn't rot, they simply dried out; the hair fell off and the skin became leathery. We spent the afternoon at the Jiaohe ruins, built on an island in the middle of a river over a five hundred-year period beginning about 100 BC, and then came back to Turfan. We roamed around the bazaar, with horsemen trading and selling embroidered leather saddles, merchants offering fruit, inlaid knives, and

doppa, beautifully embroidered, each tribe's—the Uighur, Kazak, Kirgiz, Tajic—sewn in different patterns and colors.

After a fitful sleep that night, I awoke with rumbling in my stomach. Weak and dizzy, I noticed my bones sticking out. I had been in China for only one week and already I was losing weight. I thought to myself that I would waste away into nothing or die from the coal dust choking my lungs.

We drove out of Turfan that morning passing mud-brick houses with melons drying on the roofs and camels and donkeys hitched to carts transporting people or goods. We arrived at the ancient Gaochang ruins and walked through the crumbling old Uighur capital, with no one around except a few kids dressed in rags trying to sell us Chinese coins they wanted us to believe came from nearby tombs. We visited the Flaming Mountains and the Thousand Buddha Caves carved out of a cliff in Bezeklik, with its murals and statues almost destroyed by Muslims in the 10th century.

Before calling it a day, we went to the Astana Tombs, which contained the mummified remains of the Gaochang inhabitants. Some corpses had been removed for research. The skin on one had been desiccated and preserved by the dry, penetrating heat; instead of shrouds wrapped tightly around bones, the whole corpse was visible: the hollows of the eyes, the vacant mouth, the high cheek bones—it looked like darkened rawhide, and I wondered who the person was behind the taut-skinned relic. We might as well have stumbled across those tombs while trekking through the desert. The lone watchman paid no attention as we descended into the bowels of the earth and roamed through the underground caverns.

My mind, however, was not on the ancient tombs or ruins those two days; I thought only about Keren's situation. I couldn't pepper Mr. Du with questions about what had happened; I couldn't trust him. I was eager to get back to Urumqi to see if I could find out any information about Keren.

As we retraced our route across the northern edge of the Taklimakan, the vast pebble desert stretching like an ocean before us, I wondered how anyone had ever built this southern route of the Old Silk Road. Lone camels ran in the distance, and we passed another vehicle only rarely. We traversed the edges of an enormous salt mine, which had carved up the

landscape with giant pits and shafts. A short time later, we saw a truck lying on its side in the middle of the dusty, dirt road. It had overturned, and its cargo of bees was strewn around the road in wooden crates; the driver sat indolently on the side of the road, making no attempt to collect his goods. We sped past him without stopping to offer help.

Back in Urumqi, I sat alone in the dining room of the hotel, stabbing at a plate of food. I had seen no foreigners for a week except a European oil worker. I was agitated and distressed. I wished I could talk to someone about what had happened to Keren when I noticed Li, who had met me at the airport days before, entering the dining room. I knew him to be a real friend of Keren's, though "friend" was not a word that we knew in the same way. No one had friends during the Cultural Revolution. I remember naively asking Keren once if he ever saw anyone from his years of doing hard labor in Heilingjong. In seven years, I figured, someone must have meant something to him. He gazed at me with surprise that I would ask such a stupid question. No one could trust anyone. Students turned against teachers; children turned against parents. That brutal time ended years before, but political tension and mistrust still lingered.

Li told me Keren had to go through a struggle session, a Maoist method of dealing with counter-revolutionary thinking by humiliating the victim. The offender sat in the middle of a room and those around him or her shouted insults and broke down the offender. During the Cultural Revolution, it was particularly brutal and often led to death. I felt sick hearing it. As Li spoke, I looked over and saw Mr. Du walking towards us. Li changed the subject. No one was to hear what he told me. We exchanged greetings and Li left. When he was out of earshot, Mr. Du confirmed what Li had said about Keren.

"Very bad," Mr. Du said. "Very, very bad." He sat down in a chair next to me. A bowl of thick, round noodles and a plate of vegetables with cilantro sat on the table. He poured himself a cup of tea.

"They criticized Keren, called him a capitalist," he said, shaking his head in disgust, or pity. "They called him dirty names, criticized him for not being married."

I listened without responding.

"Interpreters and guides work for expeditions and then repeat foreigners' ideas about how things could be better. Then he is considered capitalist," he said.

It made no sense; the whole thing felt so petty, childish, and archaic.

Mr. Du left and said he would take me to the airport. Keren, he said, was not allowed out of his room. The next morning a driver arrived. Mr. Du sat in the front passenger seat. Li sat in the back. They got out and loaded my luggage, and we drove to the airport, past drab buildings, the poplar-lined streets with mule- and horse-pulled carts, army trucks, the occasional Toyota Jeep, the minions in their Mao suits riding bicycles. I noticed that the driver kept looking in the rear view mirror at Li in the back seat. Mr. Du stared at the road ahead. I sensed Li putting his hand on the seat next to me when he stealthily slipped something into my book lying next to me on the seat. I looked over at him in surprise, and saw him glance up at the rear view mirror to make sure the driver or Mr. Du did not see him. Looking straight ahead, he raised the index finger of his right hand to his lips, motioning me to be quiet. I understood. It was something from Keren.

We arrived at the airport. The head of the mountaineering association was waiting for me. I could see when he flashed a wily grin at me that he had a few missing teeth; those remaining were broken, brown-stained, and crooked. In a dirty, wrinkled Mao suit, he looked like a peasant who had just come from picking cabbage in the fields. I froze when I said hello and held my bag, with the book inside, over my shoulder and close to my torso. I was worried about the note, knowing that when I passed through security, the Chinese would search all my belongings and possibly confiscate my book. I feigned having to use the restroom, and, once inside, pulled an envelope out of the book. It was thick and I wanted to read it, but quickly hid it in my bag, under a zipper that makes the bottom of my bag smaller, and returned to the waiting area. The toothless man kept grinning at me; it was an evil grin and gave me a rumbling in my stomach.

Finally, I boarded the Boeing 737, relieved that I was safe, but wondering what further hell awaited Keren. I buckled my seat belt, waited to take off, and opened the envelope. It contained a letter and a painting of three camels and a camel

driver sitting with an urn. Ancient Chinese letters were brushed in calligraphy at the top. The painting hangs on the wall above my desk today. The letter said:

Suzanne,

I hardly believe I would meet such poor situation today's meeting. I really feel sad. I cried it's not good for a strong man. So. Now. It's four o'clock in the morning. I forced myself to write a letter to you. Since it's hopeless for me to get permission from my leader, in two days, I will go rafting on Talimu River. I hope I can come back living, so in that time, I try to go on this plan.

I put my hand, holding the letter, in my lap, and stared out the window, feeling helpless. I also knew, if anyone would persevere, it would be him.

The letter held his girlfriend's father's address in Washington, DC, where she was hoping to emigrate. He asked me not to tell her about his situation. He also asked me to call Art Wolfe, a photographer in Seattle who had the necessary documents for Keren to come to the United States, and tell him he would still try to get out. Attached to the top of the letter was a small piece of white paper with the imprint of a red seal, or chop, with my name that he had carved for me. He said he would give it to me later.

In December of 1987, I was in Seattle. I received a message from my parents in New York telling me I must call Art Wolfe as soon as possible. I called Art. He put Keren on the phone. He had fled China.

Fifteen years later, in 2002, I once again flew to Beijing. I had been desperate to get back all that time, but had not been physically able to travel. Years of regret that I couldn't live or even visit there coupled with reading about the changes made me anxious about possible disappointment. Nevertheless, I was compelled to go.

We pulled up to a shiny new terminal, a far cry from the old warehouse with Mao's portrait looming over the entrance to the tarmac. This time, I looked out the windows of the plane, and instead of seeing trees and an occasional army sol-

dier riding a bicycle on the runway, I saw tall buildings and rows of 747s from Saudi Arabia, Europe, Japan, and other parts of the globe. I had entered a new world.

My childhood friend, John, who had lived in China for years now, greeted me and led me out of the arrivals building to his Jeep Cherokee, parked in a multi-story garage. We traveled into Beijing on a bustling highway, which once was a single lane road. He told me this was the fourth ring road built around Beijing; they were working on a fifth. On my first trip, there wasn't a single ring road, I thought, mesmerized by the frenzy. We passed the old airport, and on the way to town, I thought about the first time I had landed in China. Bicyclists ruled the primitive road then, and now, with John, we sped along a multi-lane highway as he told me that there were one thousand new cars and drivers on the roads in China every day.

Decades after Deng Xiaoping had made his famous comment alluding to the primacy of economic growth over ideology—"It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice"—China would be close to the third largest economy in the world, with wild and unfettered growth, thousands of new cars per year driving on many more thousands of miles of newly constructed highways. My mind filled with images of highways I once traveled: dirt roads laid by box graters hinged to camel's backs, armies of workers, or *Lao Gai*, from the Chinese gulags.

I thought about Keren, in the United States for fifteen years now. After the river trip he had mentioned in his letter—on a makeshift raft made of boards lashed onto eight tires—he went to the Public Security Bureau to try to get papers to leave China. He had been smart enough to know that he would be seen as a hero for navigating a river that had never before been rafted, so he arranged for television crews to meet him along the way. The official at the Public Security Bureau said he saw him on TV and stamped his papers. Keren got on a train to Beijing and was out of China in twenty four hours.

Several years later, the head of the mountaineering association, who had persecuted him, left the organization. This opened the way for Keren to bring tourists into China. I remembered the nonplussed expression on his face back in 1986 when he took me to the Bank of China in Urumqi to

get money from American Express, how dumfounded he was that a piece of green plastic could deliver cash. Now, I thought, he has a thriving photography and travel business guiding people all over China and other parts of the world. I thought of all those persecuted during the Cultural Revolution or other campaigns against revisionists, or even in the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, and thought he was a lucky one. Now, money is the ticket, and the country is loaded with the problems of economic expansion without political freedom, free press, or the rule of law. People who can afford it are buying apartments in high-rise buildings, and purchasing spanking new cars. United States jobs are exported to China, and we are buying products with tags branded *Made in China*. And the Communist Party still persecutes those who speak the truth, whether about degradation of the environment or principles of democratic rule.

I felt culture shock and wanted to get away, go to the hinterlands. John drove me to the countryside. It took a long time to reach the outskirts of the city. We passed huge new housing developments and suburbs that could have been in California. John pointed out the international school, for the children of rich Chinese, foreign diplomats, and corporate executives. As I looked at the scenery, the new houses, the paved roads and sidewalks, I thought of the expedition, the round felt Kirgiz yurts at the base of the mountain. I wondered what each of us would think now about our failure to reach the summit. We all came back alive: That was a success, I thought.

When we began to reach the country, we passed an old village, where life was probably much the same as it was 2,000 years ago. It made me remember the old China—the *hutongs*, alleyways not wide enough to fit cars, with tile-roofed, stone houses around courtyards, the people dressed in simple Mao suits carrying buckets, sweeping the stone walkways, pushing bicycles, the children chasing crickets. We got to a village near a lake, parked the car, and scrambled up an old, crumbling section of the Great Wall. We sat alone eating sandwiches and deviled eggs dashed with paprika, gazing down at the hordes of foreign and Chinese tourists. We both knew Mr. Gates, the man who had been the United States Liaison Officer back when I first visited China. We grew up with his grandchildren. I told John what he had said when we arrived there in 1977.

"Welcome to China," he had said, "The other side of Mars. All the rules you ever learned are out."

John laughed, and we contemplated a transformed society.

Revision

By Valerie Gunderson

Let us praise Penelope's needlework—her
textile prophylactic endured revision
night to night, poetics Penelopean
written in stitches.

Laughingly she dangled her future favors,
wove a tale the supplicant posse swallowed.
Day by day her tapestry filled the tambour,
nightly unraveled.

White cows and clouds, armadillos and myrtle
disappeared. She secretly picked the stitches,
kept her vigil, edited her own epic—
nothing was sacred.

SHILL

By Ruth Ann Polleys

SETTING: STREET CORNER WITH A BLINKING YELLOW STREETLIGHT. EARLY EVENING. FALL.

CAST:

DIANE.....IN HER 20s

LAURA.....IN HER 40s

ACT 1: DIANE AND LAURA PACE AT THE CORNER.

LAURA, DRESSED IN EVENINGWEAR, INCLUDING LONG COAT, HEELS, JEWELRY, AND HANDBAG, LOOKS NERVOUSLY IN ONE DIRECTION. DIANE, DRESSED IN CASUAL CLOTHES, INCLUDING A SHORT JACKET WITH HOOD AND POCKETS, LOOKS NERVOUSLY IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. THEY BUMP INTO EACH OTHER.

LAURA

Terribly sorry.

DIANE

No. Sorry. My fault.

(PAUSE)

LAURA

(LOOKING AT HER WATCH)

Does he always have to be so late?

DIANE

Waiting for someone?

LAURA

Yes. My perpetually late husband.

DIANE

Me too. Perpetually late.

(PAUSE)

LAURA

You can't live with them…

DIANE

You don't live with your husband?

LAURA

Sorry. No, we live together. I was just saying, can't live with them—that saying. You know.

DIANE

Sorry. I'm not from around here.

LAURA

It's a common saying—Oh, forget it. Sorry. Forgive me. Curtain's at eight, and I had such a time getting these tickets. My name's Laura.

DIANE

I'm Diane.

LAURA

It's nice to meet you. Where did you say you were from?

DIANE

I didn't say.

LAURA

Sorry. Again. I guess you said you weren't local. (PAUSE) Where are you from?

DIANE

Oh, outside the city.

LAURA

Me, too. I grew up in Saugus, actually. Most people know it as Route One. Hilltop Steak House. The Prince leaning tower of pizza. The mini-golf with the huge orange dinosaur.

DIANE

I'm afraid I don't know it.

LAURA

How surprising. As soon as I say "dinosaur" and "Route One" most people know exactly what I mean. But how could everyone know Route One. South Shore?

DIANE

Excuse me?

LAURA

You must be from south of Boston. Or the Cape. Sometimes the North Shore and the South Shore can be completely different worlds.

DIANE

I'll bet your right.

LAURA

Oh, where is he? I hope I didn't turn off my cell by mistake.

(LOOKS IN PURSE)

DIANE

So what do you do in Saugus?

LAURA

Oh, I don't live there now. Tim and I have a house in Andover. Big backyard for the boys.

DIANE

So you have kids?

LAURA

Oh, yes. Wait. What on earth did I do with the phone?

DIANE

Boys?

LAURA

Oh, yes. Don't get me started. I could talk about them all day. T.J., that's Tim Junior, he's lead on his lacrosse team and Connor's a star on the swim team. But he's also an equestrian. Well- rounded boys. They're athletic and smart. Nothing like their father.

DIANE

Tim, right?

LAURA

Yes. Tim. Oh, he's all brains, no body. Wouldn't know a home run from a touchdown. He's lovable though. Just late, late, late. I should call him. Where's that phone?

DIANE

Is he with the kids?

LAURA

Oh, goodness no. This is our date night. Once a month. The boys stay with their grandmother in Saugus. Gives her a chance to spoil them. Gives us a break. I can't believe I can't find my phone. Maybe I left it in Saks?

DIANE

Want to use mine?

LAURA

Do you mind? Mine seems to be missing. I thought it was in my purse. Or my pocket. No? I'd lose my head if it wasn't attached.

DIANE

I have unlimited minutes.

(DIANE HANDS LAURA THE PHONE.)

LAURA

That's a very good plan. If you don't mind…

DIANE

Does Tim work downtown?

LAURA

(FINAGLING THE UNKNOWN PHONE)

Yes. On Congress Street. Now what's that number?

DIANE

Is he a lawyer? High finance?

LAURA

How did you know? (DIALING) Financial consultant. He works with big firms and their retirement plans. So many changes these days. Interest rates. Downsizing.

DIANE

But you're doing okay.

LAURA

We can't complain. Sometimes I think it's a financial waste to open that pool every summer, but the boys like to invite their friends. Blast—voice mail.

DIANE

Tell him to call back, but tell him it's a friend's phone.

LAURA

Right. Otherwise he'll wonder about this strange number. Honey—it's me. I borrowed a phone since I can't find mine. Call me on this number—what is it—oh, crap, just call the

number that shows up. I've been waiting on this blasted corner for fifteen minutes. We'll miss the first act. You know how they sometimes don't let you in. Love you. Muh!

(SHE RETURNS THE PHONE TO DIANE.)

DIANE

Held up at work?

LAURA

Probably. He works all hours.

DIANE

Where did you say he worked? 'Cuz I…I work downtown, too.

LAURA

Oh, really. How nice for you. State Street. He's worked there for years. They treat you right, you treat them right, you know. And you?

DIANE

Oh, not State Street. A small firm. Two person operation. (PAUSE) Tim and Laura. Sounds like soap opera names.

LAURA

That's us. A regular romance.

DIANE

Met each other at Saugus High?

LAURA

College actually. We both went to BC.

DIANE

College sweethearts. I'll be you were homecoming queen.

LAURA

Me? Oh, definitely not.

DIANE

Why, would they not crown an Italian girl?

LAURA

I'm not Italian. Whatever gave you that idea? Laura O'Brien. Irish through and through.

DIANE

Is Tim O'Brien Irish, too?

LAURA

O'Brien's my maiden name. Sullivan now. As Irish as you can get.

DIANE

Luck of the Irish.

LAURA

That's right. Are you sure you have your phone on? I thought he might have called by now.

DIANE

Yup. Phone's on. No calls.

(A CAR HORN BEEPS.)

LAURA

There he is. Thank goodness. If he speeds through the yellow lights, we might just make it. We'll need a big tip for the valet.

DIANE

Enjoy the show. What are you seeing?

LAURA
(DEPARTING)

Sweeney Todd.

DIANE

Is that a long one?

LAURA

One of the longest. Thank you. For the phone. I hope your ride arrives soon. Have a good night.

(EXITING LEFT)

Jeez, Tim…

DIANE

Have fun!

(SHE PULLS A CELL PHONE FROM HER POCKET AND HITS ONE BUTTON TO MAKE A CALL.)

Andover. Sullivan. Timothy…Um, can I have the address, too? (PAUSE) Thank you.

(A CELL PHONE RINGS. DIANE PULLS A PHONE FROM HER OTHER POCKET AND LOOKS AT THE PHONE IN EACH HAND. SHE ANSWERS THE FIRST ONE, HERS.)

DIANE

Jeez. Gimme a second. Yes, she just left…No, no wallet, but just as good—her cell phone. And I have a name, the husband's name, the town, where he works. The whole shebang. Christ, I even have her maiden name…And God love her, the number's listed…I'm not kidding. This one was way too easy. Almost too easy, you know…Very chatty. Really nice, actually. And get this…fucking Andover. Jackpot, baby. Unless they have an alarm. I'll bet anything she keeps the alarm code in the phone…Wait. I'm scrolling, scrolling...Fucking Irish luck. There it is: "House alarm." Way too helpful…They're seeing Sweeney Todd or some shit downtown. We have hours…I said I'll be around the corner in five seconds. Do me a favor—can we take Route One? I want to see this god-awful dinosaur she went on about…Well, you can show it to me then, honey…She called him honey. I love it...Regular character from All My Children. Christ, they couldn't make this stuff up. I almost don't want to interrupt their perfect lives. She reminds me of my mother, you know. Maybe she has some cool coat in her walk-in closet. I'm friggin' freezin' my ass off. And it's only October. I'm walking. I'm walking.

(DIANE POCKETS THE PHONES, PUTS ON HER HOOD AND WALKS OFF RIGHT. SEVERAL SECONDS, THEN LAURA ENTERS LEFT, SPEAKING INTO A CELL PHONE.)

LAURA

Jeez. Gimme a second…(UNBUTTONING HER COAT.) She just left…No, I don't see anything, nothing that could be considered evidence…No wallet, but just as good—the cell phone. And she has a name, husband's name, the town. Whole nine yards. Christ, I even gave her a maiden name…Yes…She called for the address, found the alarm code. Just as planned… No, not a problem. Of course we made sure it was listed…I'm not kidding, she picked up every crumb. If she tries to call the "husband's" cell phone, she'll get the Crime Stoppers tip-line. I love irony...This one was way too easy. Almost too easy, you know…Very chatty. Nice, actually. Way too cooperative…I wish I were seeing Sweeney Todd or some shit downtown… No, no, we have time…They're taking Route One. She's somehow never seen the infamous dinosaur.

(HOLDING PHONE WITH HER SHOULDER, SHE TAKES OFF EARRINGS, PUTS THEM IN HER HANDBAG.)

It's still there, right? After it was vandalized? Best to catch them in the act, in the house, cash and valuables in their hands…

(AGAIN, SHOULDERING PHONE, SHE TAKES OFF HER COAT.)

How friggin' hot is it for October?...No, I'm doing a double. The kids are with their father this weekend. All football, all the time…Better them than me. You know, I feel bad for this kid. She was perfectly nice. Reminds me of my girls…She could probably use a strict mother. Okay, okay… I'm walking. I'm walking…Do me a favor and meet me at the next block? I can't wait to get out of these shoes.

(LAURA FOLDS UP PHONE. WITH HER COAT ON HER ARM, SHE EXITS.)

(BLACKOUT)

A Glut of Intrusion into Celebrity Privacy Reveals Press Needs a Diet

By DeAnne Musolf

News about a celebrity's private life is the junk food of journalism. It is obscenely profitable, satiates the masses, and appeals to the worst in people. The problem has become super-sized, and unless we as journalists self-impose some control, it may be forced upon us.

Coverage of Britney Spears's meltdown demonstrates that some press members—dubbed the "stalkarazzi"—will stop at nothing, not even the ambulance door. Despite police and helicopters shielding Spears, a swarm of journalists pressed in, determined to get that million-dollar story.

But the deep-fried Twinkie of reportage had to be when Dr. Phil met with Spears in the hospital, then reported his diagnosis on his show, *The Insider*, and *Entertainment Tonight*, alongside Spears's lawyer, the editor-in-chief of *US Weekly*, Janice Min, and *Entertainment Tonight*'s Mark Steines.

This level of indelicacy toward a celebrity's private life, violating even doctor-patient and attorney-client privileges for the sake of the story, was taken in stride by the media and simply deemed news. (The segment was, in fact, titled "Breaking News.")

The press once had a stronger inner compass regarding celebrity privacy. When the *New York Times* named the woman who accused William Kennedy Smith of rape, this breach of long-standing ethics caused a furor within the paper's own newsroom.

That sensibility changed after the late 1980s when Brit Hume, in a story in *MORE*, dared the press to cover, well, *more* of public figures' private lives. Hume, who was talking exclusively about politicians, felt even activities unrelated to their performance were open game. The gauntlet was thrown.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am no stranger to agonizing over privacy issues. When stringing for *Life* magazine, I bent under the blistering pressure *to get the story*, speaking in

consoling tones to people who had experienced disaster, just like all the other media scavengers jostling for a nibble.

Then I was assigned an undercover story on a superstar's son, a son the star had never claimed. He had moved to the area and opened a martial arts studio, anonymously.

I was hungry then, very hungry, and the magazine was big. I accepted. I unearthed his studio (the lineage of that laser gaze was unmistakable) and started working with him. When the deadline approached, however, I was paralyzed; I could not file the story without his knowledge. I pulled him aside.

"You'll ruin my life if you print this," he said. "I left L.A. to avoid all of that. No one here knows—not my business partner…" he paused and I winced when his voice cracked, "…not my wife."

I looked to the traditional taboos for guidance: He was not a rape victim or a juvenile. I had not recorded his calls or shot him nude using a telescopic lens. I had not broken any laws, invaded his home, or endangered him physically (well, except for a few errant kicks). I had obtained information surreptitiously, however, and—more important—what value did the story serve? Did fans' right to know the superstar was a schmuck outweigh whipping the veil off this young man's identity and relegating his privacy to infringement forevermore?

I pondered what my editor would do and what my grandmother would do. I never felt more the awful weight of the careless, bloated celebrity press.

I called my editor. There were no further assignments, no heraldic choruses, not even a salute from Superstar Junior. I just quietly hit delete.

I still get hungry, even today, but will never again accept the empty satisfaction of junk, journalistically or nutritionally.

We would all do well to examine what we are feeding the public, and what we are feeding on. We have gone from ethical questions that now seem quaint (Is it an invasion of privacy to photograph Jackie Onassis walking in New York?) to super-sized issues, crossing the line to endanger celebrities in car chases and tossing aside doctor-patient privilege to join the lucrative fray unraveling the misdeeds of a mentally ill young woman.

But there is hope. Recently the media turned the lens on itself to examine press intrusions into privacy in a program called "Targeting the Paparazzi" (CBS, March 11, 2008). The host? Dr. Phil himself.

It's about time. If journalists do not self-impose standards, lawmakers will.

Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine has proposed granting a personal safety bubble around public figure "targets," dubbed the Britney Law. This would not end car chases, breaching client privilege, or protect those not considered "targets," but it is a start. Next, perhaps a universal media ethics oath? Many argue against it, but no one can argue the power of colleague disapproval. There are things worth more than money, even to members of the stalkerazzi, and that is the respect of peers. We can begin to change the tenor of this debate simply by vocalizing where we stand the next time we are stuck laying out the entertainment page.

We may find the whole newsroom firmly behind ethics once more. Spears's too-well-documented and sad spiral and the reaction to it reveal that the press has feasted too long at this trough. We have gorged, and I think we all feel a little sick now.

Safe as Stone

By Laurie Rosenblatt

Equal to the cat's death: I am not equal
to my husband's. I spend the hours to dusk
as if painted from below—
face, brush-blurred; body, depth-blued;
shadowed. A woman under water.
My head floods the flat undersurface
in fluid arcs.

A gull chuckles then croons.
The dune stands pocked at noon
as if the wind gathered mass to riff
a few staggered steps, then, as a swan tiptoes
on water taking flight, ran across the sand.
Motion into matter: matter
back into spirit (even bladder wrack
left stranded in sun holds fast
to half a bivalve, or a granite bit.)

> Remember when night meant to toss, to settle,
> to turn? To find the impression left
> on this hospital cot by other wives
> who lay down to bargain toward sleep;
>
> then to see him rise. Wild
> and bleeding he sways naked by his bed,
> sees the city lights struck dead, and cries,
> "Get the conductor! Where's my black suit?"
>
> He said I smelled of death,
> asked my love to promise him release.
> But I am selfish, shamed by my surviving
> appetite.

Skipping a flat shard over brown water,
I follow its irregular rhythm. Each hit
slows skim. Each day's lost

momentum takes on weight. To sink,
subsumed by heedless oscillation, to hide
where the ocean gives then gains land, to keep

time in seasons by the moon's phases
to a tectonic clock would be to be
safe as stone.

Lucretius suggests a gift
of wild strawberries, the choicest pears,
a handful of nuts. I bring these flats
where stones reveal not
the wind-carved dune's harsh light and shade,
not the hawk's wing's dark bars, not
the turtle's nested diamonds—
the slant of light on quartz, on schist,
on limonite reveals at last no secret pattern.

Winter's Way

By Laurie Rosenblatt

Sometimes it comes
on roughening winds that lift
the season's lingering leaves;
the mind caught by angled brilliance bends
mid-step to snatch seconds in a net
in thrall to latticed shade in motion,
then it's gone.

Or turning marsh grass gold
it drags through the pines
where the cabbage whites tumble
in weakened sun, tumble,
the migrations done, tumble down
to the withered heather shrugging red
in chill air.

Carl and Babe: A Love Story

By Sallie Sharp

From their first day together in late December 2001 until Carl's unexpected death in 2007, Carl and Babe spent every night together, Babe curled against Carl's barrel chest. Twitching and sighing, they seemed to have the same dreams and plans for the days ahead.

They played together, napped in unison, shared food, and developed games that were tailor-made for two active friends. Carl's life had been a happy one before Babe came into it, but with Babe came friendship unlike any Carl had known.

"We had gotten Carl as a puppy, when I was in kindergarten. He was a birthday present when I turned six," said John McKetta, 20. McKetta and his older sister had selected Carl from the ten black, half-lab and half-Newfoundland puppies in the litter because Carl was the largest and calmest.

"Carl looked exactly like a black lab, except that he weighed twice as much as most male labs," McKetta said. During his early years, Carl carried a stuffed dog toy around with him throughout the day, sleeping with it at night. The McKetta children immediately dubbed it "Carl's baby."

When the family adopted a Pembroke Welsh Corgi in 1998, they introduced the puppy to the older dog by saying, "Carl, we've gotten you a baby!" McKetta said. "*Carl's Baby Brother*, shortened to *Babe*, became the puppy's name."

Dog trainer Jennifer Phillips said she saw the two dogs together after Babe had been under Carl's tutelage for about four weeks. "Get in there fast, I told the McKettas, or you will have very little formative influence on this puppy. Carl will train him."

McKetta said Phillips's comments were good news. "If Carl trained Babe, we knew the Corgi would be a good dog."

Good dogs and good friends they were. "They created their own games. In one, Carl would throw himself into our swimming pool while Babe ran in circles around the perimeter, barking ecstatically, tongue hanging out, smiling a dog smile. When Carl dragged himself out at the steps, Babe

would hurl himself into the water while Carl would mimic the barking and circling that had been going on while he was in the water."

"Carl rushed out the door to greet all visitors, stopping at the end of the driveway," McKetta said. Babe followed Carl's example. While still a puppy, short Babe would clamp onto a six-inch piece of nylon hanging from Carl's collar and skip or be dragged along the ground at Carl's loping pace. "Carl greeted visitors with a Corgi hanging from his collar.

When faced with anything new or different, Babe looked not to McKetta's face for reassurance, but to Carl's. "From Carl, Babe learned to swim, to retrieve, and to love people, cats, visitors, the UPS man, the mail carrier, and other dogs," McKetta said.

The unlikely friends, 125-pound Carl and twenty-five-pound Babe, shared a joyful camaraderie that was marred by a single rough patch.

When Babe was three and Carl was eleven, McKetta's oldest sister returned home from college, bringing with her a two-year-old female Corgi named Goblin.

"My sister had hoped Babe and Goblin would have a litter of puppies together," McKetta said. On Goblin's first visit, she swept into the room, assessed the field, bit Babe hard on the nose, and rolled over submissively at Carl's feet.

By the time McKetta's sister and Goblin moved out six weeks later, Babe had been to the emergency vet clinic three times for stitching up bites on his face and ears.

Goblin would attack Babe over a toy or a stick or a leaf on the ground, and the Corgis would go at it tooth and claw.

McKetta said Carl always intervened, putting his huge, cinderblock-sized head between the Corgis to break up the fight. At that point Goblin would bite Carl on the ear or face, and then she would withdraw from the fracas she had started.

In the frenzy, Carl and Babe would then end up snapping at each other while Goblin complacently watched. In these brawls, Babe always lost.

When Goblin left, the boys returned to their habits of peace and play. The only reminders of the disturbances Goblin wrought in their lives were the fading scars on Babe's nose.

As in many May-December couples, inevitable separation loomed. Carl was mature when the dogs became friends and he was old by the time Babe was mature.

In March of 2007, Carl flung himself into the swimming pool one last time. He ruptured an asymptomatic tumor waiting lethally in his spleen. Carl was rushed to the emergency clinic, but the "best boy ever" went into shock and died that evening, McKetta recalled.

"We drove back home, stunned and grieving." We had thought about bringing Babe over to say goodbye, but Carl was so exhausted and ill, we thought the better thing for Carl was not to do so."

When the McKettas returned home that evening, Babe rushed into the garage and jumped into the car, bouncing quickly from front to back seat. Carl had left that morning in the vehicle. Where was he now? "Babe looked at my face, confused," McKetta said. "For days, he would hop into the car at every opportunity, looking for Carl."

"Maybe Babe would have understood had he been there when Carl died. I know he still misses his friend. Babe doesn't swim anymore."

The Word and the Epic

By Claire Alexis Ward

Good books, old books, have pages like skin and covers like faces. They respond to your fingertips with a messy thumbprint, or they refuse to acknowledge you, glossy sheen reflecting the light bulb overhead, and their spines crack when you force them. Like a lover they react to your touch. They have been touched before, both with covetous and destructive intents. Like a disillusioned dater they have seen a good portion of what the world has to offer, and now, in their dog-eared state, they are no longer surprised by the array of pleasantries and abuses. The books that I prefer bear tattoos of past owners on their nameplates. They come from boxes on the street, wooden shelves in musty basements, collectors' hordes and entrepreneurs' bulk-buys. They are reliable; they have known others before me, who kept them ensconced in living rooms and studies like an illicit mistress. I touch an 1864 volume of Keats, the spine disintegrating just where the brain stem would sit, that ache in your neck which you cannot rub quite enough.

I found this volume in the crowded aisles of my favorite bookstore, a secret gem tucked down a quiet street in a busy part of town. I know where to find the things I look for here. Latin and Greek are on the second floor by the stairs, the dictionaries two rows behind them. Poetry and fiction are on the first floor, the collectors' items arranged in glass cases. The third floor, the floor I've only ever been to once, is where the rare books and manuscripts are kept. You must ask one of the booksellers, stepping church-soft on dirty tennis shoes, to take you there so you may browse. They watch you closely. Every few years the papers report some priceless volume stolen. They watch you while you handle what appeals to you.

I would like to spend my days like the gray mice do, shuffling between musty rows, but I can't shake the feeling that they have given too much to their many lovers and are inexorably lost in the valleys and caverns of words. Some of them must not even exist at all, evaporating into dust or at the doormat every evening and reconstituting from the air when

the bells in the church next door chime for morning mass. Unlike the many tomes inside, they are untouchable, out of touch, becoming only spirit as their bodies disintegrate with old age far before their treasured wards.

Bibliophiles still shop at physical bookstores because there is an inestimable quality to selecting good books. The weight, the paper, the smell of dust makes their experience rich with sensuality. The tactility is important. It is sensual, and sexual. What we lose by reading off the computer screen is not only our eyesight (a terror which might wake me some night not long from now), but also the physicality of reading. There is no substitute for balancing a heavy volume on your stomach as you recline in bed, or easily holding a nineteenth century pocket edition perched in one hand. I have fantasized that I should die buried by thousands of pounds of books. I never feel safer, enwombed, than in a room full of books.

My parents' home is a haven not because they live there but because my father's books live there, thousands of them, books in every room, on every surface, quietly aging like Enoch. Family lore describes my father, young and well employed, with few expenses and ample free time. He compiled each volume individually, choosing not just the volumes which seemed interesting at that moment, but books he thought he should have, should read, should aspire to love. They were not merely comfortable bedfellows but challenging relationships. At twenty-eight, with barely two years of college education, he fell headfirst into his first formative relationships with the written word. The books he thought he should read challenged him, eliciting an unknown love for history, which prompted him to go on to receive a doctorate at the youthful age of fifty-five. For me it was taught, then, that every relationship is subsumed into this one, my mother and father, my lover and child, collapsed and bound into volume upon volume containing mountains of words. A reading life is contained in books, past, present, and future.

One summer at home, recuperating from a long illness, I watched the film version of *Fahrenheit 451*. I was disturbed in the way only a child, recovering from a brush with mortality, can suddenly understand what it means to lose something forever. I had heard, of course, of mass book burnings in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, but never before had it

frightened and saddened me. In as much as a book is a human effort, a document of human learning, hope, imagination and fear, to burn and destroy a book is to attempt to wipe out our very humanness. It's as if you were to say, these feelings are right and these are wrong (which is of course exactly what the Soviets were trying to say). Only you will have your singular experience with the written word. What you glean from its pages is different than every other reading, at every other reading. Spoken stories are, by their very nature, an interpretation of the speaker. Every time the story is told it will change. There may be commentary or asides. A written story remains intact, in its intended form, for all who pick it up, and so the experience of one reader begins with the same input and only their mind's intercession makes the one different from another.

My obsession with words can probably be traced to a single phrase. Sometime in adolescence I learned the phrase *la petite mort*, a little death, an orgasm. Something as intangible as the emotions bound up in intimate relations had been captured in this French idiom. From there it was a natural assertion that similar revelations awaited me in literature. Gems of truth with insight into our human lives lie trapped, untranslatable, in other languages. I like people who enjoy spending a Friday night with *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots.* I think the classical world and the lost languages of our cultural forebears largely shape our world. What sort of society would we have without Latin and the Roman Empire? And then the tree begins to unfold, and at its root we find the original language progenitor and our original cultural forebears with it—both now lost to us.

To revere words a person must be patient with people. Most do not know the palimpsest they see on the page. As readers, we have the tendency to assume that what we see on the page is the direct product of the author. Translation, redaction, and the shifting winds of time work their will upon a piece and then present it to us as the verbatim truth. Nuance, the most delightful of literary beasts, is also the first to go. In the Book of John, most of us are familiar with the opening lines, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was God, and the word was with God." When the first scribes translated the text of John out of Greek, they simply made a

grammatical choice. The nuance of the original language was lost, and we were left with a distortion. But it was the Word who was god, and the Word rules every moment, in private and public life. The book is the sanctuary of god, the temple for worshippers of the Word.

Words are powerful, for only within them can we reach each other here, today, and many years from now in some other place and time. Ideas are powerless without a vehicle for expression, and oral and written language is our only meaningful form of complex communication. Noam Chomsky proposes that this is so because our minds are made for language, and that language acquisition changes the very structure of our brains. As a culture which has acquired language, how could we think this is not so?

We use all of our senses in our enjoyment of reading, and we experience books not just because we can read, but because we have our entire range of human sensitivity attuned to the task of assembling and reassembling our lives and our world. The magic is palpable. Wonders eke out of the lines, from the rhythmic dance of the last two feet of a dactylic hexameter to the spousal closeness of a rhyming couplet, the playfulness of free verse and the ever-dependable ictus. Our world is conceived of, was founded on, began with, and ends in words, and any person who seeks to unlock their numberless nuances seeks something fundamental to our species. No doubt what we really want is to understand one another, and ourselves.

A Return to Paradise

By Wendy Wood

The Galapagos Islands are not beautiful. There are no waving palm trees against a backdrop of lush green hills, no dripping bougainvillea over trellised balconies. In a dry season the stunted trees are nearly leafless, the ground dusty with loose dirt and volcanic dust. Cacti flourish in the arid conditions and scrub sage abounds. Walking over the black, porous lava rock that flows to the ocean is like stepping on a mammoth English muffin, its surface burnt by the relentless heat of an equatorial sun, the craggy, uneven indentations home to unseen microorganisms flourishing in the few tablespoons of water within. And everywhere there is life. Sea lions stretch out on the warm rocks, their attitude relaxed and unconcerned by the constant din of cameras and human chatter as tourists move to within an arms length. Iridescent blue and red sally light-foot crabs scatter sideways to seek shelter from the black frigate birds which soar ominously above. And nearby, always facing the sun, as if worshipping its warmth, the ubiquitous marine iguanas conserve body heat by stacking one on top of another.

After more than a decade's absence, I decided to return to Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. Filled with high expectations but wary of disappointments inherent in repeat visits, I wondered whether this remote archipelago could capture my heart and imagination as it once had. In the back of my mind lay my grandmother's cautionary words about returning to places with special meaning and memories. "Progress and profit can lead to change," she said, "and change can lead to disappointment." Nevertheless, the images of the islands still vivid in my memory lured me back: The harsh landscapes and rugged shores on which hundreds of thousands of birds, reptiles, and amphibians coexist was a primordial paradise for me. If those images had actually tarnished, I needed to see for myself.

Early each morning, before the sun's rays begin to burn, before the ubiquitous zodiacs transporting tourists from other boats descend upon the beaches, we leave our ninety-three-foot sailing Trimaran and join the inhabitants ashore. Except perhaps for the marine iguanas, which posture and spit streams of salt water, no other creatures take the slightest interest in the human parade that continually marches past them. Blue-footed boobies dance an intricate mating ritual as we pass within a few feet, while another pair mates shamelessly nearby. A newborn chick emerges from beneath its parent. Pink and featherless, head flopped to one side, he looks pathetically vulnerable. An adjacent nest contains two chicks, a week or so old, covered in soft, fluffy white down. Only one of them will be nurtured by the parent and that one will survive; even now the weaker sibling, pushed outside the parent's protective warmth, its body shrinking, is barely breathing. Darwin's lesson is a harsh one.

We discover fifteen or so turtle nests lying protected on a spit of sand known as Flour Beach. Thousands of years in the making, its powdery sand, pulverized from coral and shells, provides a soft bed for the green sea turtle to lay her eggs. As we enjoy the sensation of bare feet on soft sand, the smallest of turtles emerges from a mounded nest. Soon there are more, and very shortly hundreds of three-inch-long hatchlings with tiny flippers scramble to make headway across fifty feet of sand to the limited safety of the ocean. Frigate birds hone in as if equipped with radar, plunging in steep dives to snatch the newborns in their beaks. One turtle separates from the pack and forges ahead, exposed and alone.

"Go, go, go!" we all scream. We beg our guide to help save this one turtle but she says she cannot interfere. Even if he makes it to the water, she explains, the odds of survival are slim.

Out of tens of thousands hatched yearly, only a miniscule few make it to adulthood. We are devastated. We cajole, plead, and appeal to her sense of fairness, and, in the end, bowing to pressure from the group or perhaps from her heart, she scoops him up in gentle hands and delivers him to the sea.

A day or two later, we take time to travel to the uplands of Santa Cruz Island in search of the great Galapagos tortoises. Hot and weary from the hike, I rest for a moment on

a nearby rock to study the map. A long hollow groan alerts me to something amiss. An enormous head leading a neck of substantial length emerges and my rock begins to move. I roll to the side, fall to the ground, and watch stupidly as my seat lumbers off into the underbrush.

Non-interference is the law of the islands, and although feeding or touching is prohibited, there are no rules against swimming with the most playful island creatures. From the boat, we don wetsuits and snorkel gear and ease into the cold clear water. I hold my breath and sink a few feet below the surface. At once I am surrounded by five or six female sea lions. The water swirls and I feel giddy as I watch them roll, swim upside down, and roll again. They come straight at me with frightening speed until they are so close I feel the bubbles of their exhaling breath kiss my face. Then they arch upwards, around and away. It is a game that is repeated until I am blue with cold.

As we sail from island to island, the natural world changes. Reptiles or birds or iguanas which are native to one island are not seen on the next. Vegetation present on one particular hillside may not grow elsewhere. Each plant and animal is uniquely suited to its own environment and together they have adapted over time. But change in the form of human intervention has found its way into this timeless world. Over-fishing by local Ecuadorians has depleted the sea floor of sea cucumbers; feral goats, originally released by fishermen for food, vie with the giant land tortoise for its moist grassy feeding grounds; and oil spills have and will again damage the fragile ecosystem which sustains and balances all marine life.

And yet, there is an extraordinary resiliency to these islands which seems to defy change; discovering this is what holds me in their spell. Creeping quietly into my soul, they have taken a seat among my best of memories and there they will remain. When I leave the Galapagos this time I know that I will return. If change comes slowly then I, like the island inhabitants have done for centuries, will adapt, and continue to appreciate this marvelous world for its ability to absorb that change. If, on the other hand, destiny calls for cataclysmic change, one which irreparably damages these islands and their near-perfect ecosystems, then I shall mourn that loss and feel fortunate to have experienced it as I did.

Ivan

By Allison White Ohlinger

This is a love story.

My brother's dog was called Ivan. He was Alsatian and Chow—black with ginger eyebrows and chest—a big German shepherd with a Chow's blunt head and black tongue. He did not love me because I was not my brother, but we knew each other. When I came to the gate he would smile and let me scratch his ears, his tail thump was my safe-conduct reward.

If he did not know you, you could not get past the gate. This was a problem when my sister-in-law started a daycare in their home. Parents could not collect their children, or even touch them, if they gained access to the yard. Diane would hear the shouts and the growling and run to hold his collar while they hurried their kids to the car. Regular clients were introduced and inspected, permitted to pass with a quirk of an eyebrow and resigned snort. Ivan eventually recognized territories, and custodial parents.

No children were allowed to escape from the yard, either. The kids crawled all over him. Pulled his tail, rode him like a pony, smeared him with finger paint. They fed him anything that smelled—bananas, bologna, Play-doh—kissed his heavy muzzle, teethed on his ears. If they got too rough or too silly, he'd sigh and pretend to be asleep.

I never knew him to bite a person. He did not bound or jump up on people, didn't hump legs. He did not grovel, was not fixed, and rode in the cab.

Ivan and my brother had grown up together. They were fry cooks in Phoenix, then plumber's assistants. They lived in a cabin in Ketchum that was thirty-seven degrees inside; when you pissed out the door, it froze. Ivan had waited in the truck through Karl's first marriage: She drank. One day, Karl hit her. She took the TV and what was left of the china. No one blamed her. Karl and Ivan hitchhiked all over the West Coast, slept in campgrounds, city parks. They kept each other warm. When Karl was broke, they ate out of dumpsters. Ivan ate roadkill.

Diane's three girls called him "Daddy," but it was the baby boy's blue eyes that made Karl stay, settle down, leave the dog at home when he went to work. He took a job with the state, got insurance, tried to quit smoking. Now that he was a married dog, well past ten and in charge of the small town's crop of toddlers, Ivan's muzzle grayed, and sometimes when he pretended to be asleep, he was.

The family kitten romped over the black dog as if he were a fur hill. She stalked him, fought elaborate one-sided battles with his tail, swiped bits of his dinner. Ivan sat, a sphinx. He let her groom his ears when he wasn't looking. When he wanted her away, he would rumble a warning—low and liquid. If she still didn't stop, he would put out a heavy paw and squash her, ever so gently, to the floor. He'd hold her there for a few beats, then lift his foot, and she would ricochet away, just long and far enough. He would sigh and drop his head on the rug.

One day she went too far, ignored the growl once too often, or ate his food one time too many. He picked her up by the scruff like a mother and shook her once. There was no blood. That was all. Ivan banished himself to the porch for a few days. The kids were sad, but no one was surprised. We knew he was not tame. He did not ask to be forgiven.

I have a picture of him. My brother's son is almost four and mine is almost walking. They play in the harbor of his legs on the white tile of my grandma's kitchen in Coeur d'Alene. Ivan's muzzle is nearly white. He watches the boys. They drive little cars up his belly and along his back. A minute past my camera's memory, he will stand up and, smiling, walk slowly across the floor, nails clicking as the baby staggers along upright, pink fists full of fur, walking and crowing.

After that summer, Ivan lost his veneer of domesticity. He stopped eating store-bought food, or even table scraps, and went out hunting—rabbits, chickens, cats. He decided that the whole town of Kendrick was his territory and fought the dogs that defended their yards. He killed two of them, I think.

They liked my brother in town. They told him to chain up his dog.

Karl and Ivan got in the Jeep and drove into the pinewoods. He put a bullet in his friend's brain and buried him

there in the hills where there were deer. He drove home, backed over the dog dish twice, hurled it deep down the ravine. He swept the toys and milk-logged Fruit Loops from the table, and wept into big, scarred hands. The sobs came out breech—hoarse and hacking. His face was still wet when he gave her his keys and walked down to the bar.

Contributors

Neil Angis holds a master of arts degree from Boston University's Creative Writing Program and currently works in the development office at Harvard. His story "Stonework," written in Paul Harding's *Advanced Fiction*, is the result of one year of mixing cement and many years of fronting imaginary rock bands.

Toby Bersak wrote "What I Have Learned..." in B.D. Colen's *Feature Writing.* She holds a (dusty) bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Colorado, and has previously worked for Procter & Gamble. She is currently considering the next stage of her career and figuring out what she wants to be when (and if) she grows up.

Mississippi native **Amy Clay** wrote her first poem at age five about butterflies. Since then, poetry has always been an accompaniment to the doodles in her sketchbooks and journals. Formerly a dancer, she is a multimedia artist and musician. "Bone China" and "Apology" merge all of her artistic interests. Peter Richard's *Introduction to Poetry* helped her out of Plato's cave.

Christine Colacino wrote "Stab Wound" in Susan Carlisle's *Introduction to Memoir.* She remains enormously grateful that it has a happy ending. She previously studied fiction at Emerson College, where she earned a master's degree. The author of two as-yet-unpublished novels, she is currently at work on a memoir.

Marisa Coppage De Mirelle wrote "The Skinny on Private Parts and Privacy" for Allan Ryan's *Constitution and the Press,* one of several writing courses she has taken at Extension to sharpen skills and knowledge. A therapist by trade and dog trainer by hobby, Marisa publishes the occasional piece of "dog writing," and is currently writing about her experiences raising and training a psychiatric service dog with special needs of her own. Marisa appreciated the challenge of writing

this op-ed piece, which allowed her to combine "non-fiction with the impact of memoir."

Sarah Desai wrote "Keeping Time" in Christopher Gleason's *Introduction to Fiction*. Though she has been writing since high school, she wanted to take a course that would stimulate her writing and give her a fresh lesson on the basics. "Writing weekly assignments and getting peer feedback was a great motivator," Sarah said of her semester in Professor Gleason's class. Sarah is currently a degree candidate in the Extension School and looks forward to one day teaching a writing class of her own. She lives south of Boston with her supportive partner and their two dogs.

Katie Ferrari wrote "Desafinado" in Debbie Danielpour Chapel's *Intermediate Fiction* at Extension. She wrote the piece in a personal effort to honor two friends, both beloved by everyone whose life they touched. She recognizes how cheesy this sounds, but it is the truth. Katie received her A.B. in Romance Languages and Literatures from Harvard College in 2005.

Valerie Gunderson is Budget Director at WGBH in Boston and has had poems published in the *Manhattan Poetry Review* and the *Cape Codder*. She wrote "Revision" for Stephen Larson's *Intermediate Poetry* in response to a prompt to "write a poem in the voice of a fellow workshop member." The voice she was emulating was that of Laurie Rosenblatt, who was working with sapphics at the time. Two of Laurie's poems also appear in this issue of the *Charles River Review*.

Suzanne B. Hopkins wrote "Beyond Civilization: Travels in the Middle Kingdom" in Eric Weinberger's *Travel Writing*. She received a bachelor's degree in history from Evergreen State College and a Masters in International Affairs from Columbia University. But she has never wanted to do anything more than travel the world and write. Eric's insight and support—and that of her classmates—pushed her along that path.

George Eyre Masters wrote "On Frying Fish" in Chris Mooney's *Writing Suspense Fiction*. His pieces have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Boston Globe*, and *Chicago Tribune*. He is currently living in Maine awaiting the sale and subsequent publication of his novel Trouble Breathing. Any and all publishers are welcome to contact him via his website www.GeorgeEyreMasters.com.

DeAnne Musolf is a writer and editor who focuses on unraveling the biological underpinnings of things, such as exercise (in *Faster, Better, Stronger*, HarperCollins, 2008) and in her upcoming book, "The Dumbo Effect." For Allan A. Ryan's *Constitution and the Press*, she took an editorial-style stab at putting the latest misdeeds of her own profession under the microscope with "The Junk Food of Journalism."

Allison White Ohlinger grew up in Idaho, calls Seattle, WA, home and moved cats, kid, and caboodle cross-country to pursue an ALM at Harvard. "Ivan" was written during Karen Heath's *Advanced Fiction*. It began as a thank-you for a friend who likes Hemingway and dogs and is dedicated to Charlie D'Ambrosio, in memory of Kayla.

Ruth Ann Polleys developed "Shill" in Ken Urban's *Playwriting*, a course she took with a goal to instill more drama into her poetry. A stage manager in a previous life, she currently manages the calendar for Harvard's Sanders Theatre. She earned an ALB in 2008 and now muses on options for graduate study.

Laurie Rosenblatt wrote "Safe as Stone" and "Winter's Way" in Stephen Larsen's *Intermediate Poetry*. Both poems take place in the landscape of Cape Cod and represent an attempt to accommodate to her husband's diagnosis with cancer. She is a physician at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

Sallie Sharp wrote "Carl and Babe, A Love Story" for B.D. Colen's *Feature Writing*. Ms. Sharp has a JD from Georgetown University and is a candidate in the ALM in Journalism program at Harvard Extension School. She is

currently writing her thesis and plans to graduate from Extension in June, 2009.

Claire Alexis Ward wrote "The Word and the Epic" in Emily Miller's *Essay*. Her love of words has led her to study four foreign languages and to bore unwilling companions with obscure etymologies. She is completing her ALB with a concentration in Classical Civilizations at Extension and expects to graduate in 2010.

Wendy Wood has two long-standing goals in life. One is to finally get her Bachelor's degree, and the other is to write. Eric Weinberger's *Travel Writing* was her first step towards accomplishing both. The fragile beauty of the Galapagos Islands made writing "A Return to Paradise" easy. The encouragement from her classmates made submitting even easier. She has one more year until she gets her degree and hopefully many more years of travel and writing.