



The Trunk

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

Spring 2004 Semester

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Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service



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MTSU's Low-Residency
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The Trunk is published each semester

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Table of Contents

The Program

The Writer's Loft.....	5
Our Mentors.....	7
The Panelists.....	10
Public Readings.....	11
Our Partners and Supporters.....	11

The Mentors

Charlotte Rains Dixon.....	14
Cate McGowan.....	18-19
Randy O'Brien.....	20
Linda Busby Parker.....	23

Poetry and Short Fiction Contest Winnerscenterspread

Greg Plemmons
Peggy Smith Duke

The Students

Dhwanie Priya Anand.....	28
Peggy Smith Duke.....	30-33
J. Terry Price.....	34
Suzanne Craig Robertson.....	40
Rebecca Catherine Tate.....	43-45
Ashley Wrye.....	46

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

The Writer's Loft is an intensive, 18-month program that is the focal point of a certificate in creative writing offered through MTSU's Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service. It is a unique program consisting of an exciting mixture of workshops, one-on-one mentoring, public readings, and panel discussions. The Writer's Loft's focus is on developing the student's maximum skills, style, and voice as a writer, and it is a supportive, open environment in which the student can become the best writer possible at this point in his or her development. Additional certificate goals include:

- developing a student's skills in the art and craft of poetry and/or fiction writing;
- providing a foundation in the analysis of fiction and/or poetry;
- expanding a student's grasp of grammar and syntax;
- preparing the student to face the business aspects of the publishing industry; and
- coaching the student in effective marketing techniques.

Interested in Entering The Writer's Loft?

While Middle Tennessee State University is in the Nashville suburb of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, The Writer's Loft is not limited to Murfreesboro. Our certificate is designed to include many different areas throughout middle Tennessee. Thanks to the certificate's low-residency feature, we are redefining what it means to be a student. You, the student, determine when you study, when you work—all based around your lifestyle and schedule.

Low-Residency

The certificate's low-residency feature allows a huge range of students spanning many different generations, lifestyles, and schedules the opportunity to pursue their craft on a customized, individual basis. Students meet on MTSU's campus once or twice a semester and participate in gatherings throughout middle Tennessee, but The Writer's Loft is a one-on-one experience between student and mentor.

The Program's Core: One-on-One Mentor Study

Throughout the semester, each student works individually with a mentor, and no mentor has more than five students, maximizing the individual attention given to the aspiring writer. After an orientation weekend, students and mentors return home, and the students submit three packets to their mentors, delivered by mail. The students mail packets at approximately five-week intervals, and the mentors have about ten days to respond to each packet by mail. Mentors and students are paired at random, and no student will have the same mentor for two consecutive semesters, unless approved in advanced by the mentor. Throughout the semester, mentors are available by e-mail if students have questions or if guidance is needed, and at the end of the semester, the mentors and students will submit an evaluation of the semester's progress and overall experience in The Writer's Loft.

Inside the Packets: The Writing and the Reading

As agreed upon by the mentor and the student during orientation, each packet will contain a minimum of 10 pages and a maximum of 35 pages of fiction, poetry, personal narrative, or any combination thereof. The manuscript will be double-spaced with one-inch margins and will be set in Courier or Times New Roman font. In addition, each student will read one novel, collection of short stories, or book of poetry for each packet. For that one book, the student writes a short essay on what he or she learned “as a writer” from the work. This is NOT a book report or traditional review that one might read in a magazine. (Please note that the fiction and the short essay combine to create the 10–35 page count total.)

Orientation Weekend

The Orientation Weekend is the student’s first introduction to the community of writers known as The Writer’s Loft, and it’s the official kickoff for the semester, filled with lectures and workshops during the day and readings and receptions at night. All students will participate in the opening address, at which time students will receive their materials for the weekend and semester.

The weekend’s structure mirrors that of the entire program. Most of the weekend will be filled with some sort of activity, but many are optional, allowing a student to slip away for a break from time to time.

Most importantly, this is when the student meets one-on-one with the mentor to plan the semester, to agree upon the page range (or count) in each packet, and to identify what type of writing will be in each of the three packets. While the venue could change from semester to semester, the Orientation Weekend will take place at Murfreesboro each semester.

Public Readings

Each semester, The Writer’s Loft will offer three opportunities for public readings. Each student is encouraged to give a five-minute reading of something created while in The Writer’s Loft at one of the readings, and everyone is encouraged to attend as many of the readings as possible in order to support our fellow writers.

Panel Discussion

The Writer’s Loft will sponsor one panel discussion each semester, and attendance is encouraged.

Publication Opportunity: Literary Journal

The Writer’s Loft produces a literary journal called *The Trunk*, a creative companion to The Writer’s Loft. In addition to spotlighting each semester’s literary achievement, the journal gives our students and mentors another forum in which to publish and showcase their work.

Publication Opportunity: Short Story and Fiction Contest

The Writer's Loft sponsors a short story and poetry contest each semester for those students in the program. Winners will be published in *The Trunk*, and The Writer's Loft Web site will present the winning entries for a full semester.

Potluck Events and Activities

Throughout the semester, The Writer's Loft staff will offer a variety of literary events and activities, all designed to foster a sense of community among the students and mentors. Attendance is optional.

The Writer's Loft: Our Mentors

Everyone inside The Writer's Loft would like to thank all of those talented individuals and visionaries who have agreed with excitement and grace to serve as our mentors and to help our students improve as writers and as members of a literary community.

Charlotte Rains Dixon, from Portland, Oregon

M.F.A. in Writing, Spalding University

B.A. in Journalism, University of Oregon

Charlotte's work has been published in *Somerset Studio*, *The Oregonian*, *Interweave Knits*, and numerous other publications. She lives in Portland, Oregon, where she is preparing her first novel (*Language of Trees*) for publication, and she has been a participating member in such organizations as Northwest Council of Writers, Oregon Literary Coalition, Willamette Writers, and Oregon Writer's Colony.

Michael Garrett, from Birmingham, Alabama

B.S. in Accounting, University of Alabama, Birmingham

Michael is an internationally published author and editor. His works have been optioned for movie and television productions, and he is coeditor of the *Hot Blood* short story anthology series currently in its twelfth volume. Mr. Garrett has worked in a professional editorial capacity for two major New York publishers with such noted authors as Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, Harlan Ellison, Lawrence Block, and many others.

Jason Hunt, from Murfreesboro, Tennessee

M.A. in English, University of Connecticut

B.S. in Hotel and Restaurant Management, Cornell University

Jason has recently finished *Cold, Cold Heart*, his first novel featuring Deke Rivers, a disillusioned country music songwriter turned private investigator. He has written and published short stories, poetry, and songs. Most recently, his poetry was featured in *I Invited a Dragon to Dinner*, an anthology of poetry for children. In the corporate world, he's spent several years creating and managing Internet content for global Web sites. Jason studied creative writing at Cornell with William J. Kennedy, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and author of *Ironweed*. In addition, he's taught creative writing, composition, and American literature at MTSU, Tennessee State University, and the University of Connecticut. Currently, Jason teaches at Saint Rose Catholic School in Murfreesboro.

Alvin E. Knox, from Murfreesboro, Tennessee

M.F.A. in Writing, Vermont College

B.A. in English, Tennessee Technological University

Alvin is an instructor with the Department of English at MTSU, where he has taught composition and introduction to literature, and he has taught college-level English courses at many middle Tennessee schools. He is widely published with his work appearing in such literary venues as *Southern Indiana Review*, *Frisk Magazine*, and *Best Poems of 1995*.

Cate McGowan, from Atlanta, Georgia

M.F.A. in Writing, Spalding University

B.A. Double major in History and Art History, University of Rochester

Cate's fiction has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Snake Nation Review*, the *Louisville Review* and the *GSU Review*. She won second place in the Santa Fe Writer's Project 2003 Literary Awards, second place in the *Glimmer Train* Very Short Fiction Contest, and first and third prizes in the Porter Fleming Competition. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where she writes art reviews for local publications, coedits the literary magazine *Bobblehead*, and defers her student loans indefinitely. In addition, Cate is a former student editor for the *Louisville Review*.

Randy O'Brien, from Nashville, Tennessee

B.S. in English, Middle Tennessee State University

Randy is the news director at WMOT Radio, MTSU's campus radio station, and he's a board member of the Tennessee Writers Alliance. His novel (*Creations Fire*) was accepted for publication by Online Originals in London, England. His short fiction and screenplays frequently come in as finalist or winners in many major contests. One of his screenplays was a semifinalist in the Nicholl, a yearly fellowship sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Linda Busby Parker, from Mobile, Alabama
M.F.A. in Writing, Spalding University
Ph.D. in Communication Studies, University of Michigan
M.A., University of Michigan
B.A. in English and Creative Writing, University of South Alabama

Linda has taught on the faculties of Eastern Michigan University, Iowa State University, and the University of South Alabama. She is the author of two college-level textbooks. Her novel, *Seven Laurels*, was published in spring 2004 by SEMO press (Southeast Missouri University Press). *Seven Laurels* (under the title *The Sum of Augusts*) won the 2002 James Jones First Novel Fellowship. Linda has served as a student editor of the *Louisville Review* and was the publisher and editor of *Mobile Bay Monthly*. She is a book reviewer for the *Mobile Press Register* and her short fiction appears frequently in publications and journals. This summer she was awarded one of the slots as a Tennessee Williams Scholar in Fiction at the Sewanee Writers Conference at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Steven L. Walker, from Murfreesboro, Tennessee
M.F.A. in Writing, Vermont College
B.A. in English Literature, Stanford University

Steven is an instructor with the Department of English at MTSU, where he has taught composition, introduction to literature, and American literature. In 2002, he was a visiting poet at the Meacham Conference, University of Tennessee–Chattanooga. He's won numerous awards, and his poems and stories appear in such journals as *Unbound*, *Kentucky Poetry Review*, *Poem*, *Poems and Plays*, and *Twilight Ending*.

The Writer's Loft: Panel Discussion

"Making Money Making Fiction"
March 27, 2004, 2:00–4:00 p.m.

Each semester, mentors and students in The Writer's Loft join with area partners and panelists to participate in the semester's formal panel discussion at Davis-Kidd Booksellers in Nashville, Tennessee. This semester's discussion focused on what it takes to sell fiction, from mastering the craft to understanding the various literary markets.

"When Davis-Kidd was approached about participating in The Writer's Loft, we thought it was a wonderful opportunity. We host an average of three to five authors every week for signings, so it makes sense to be a venue for The Writer's Loft's public reading and panel discussion. As an independent bookstore, we would like to believe that we have created more than just a great bookstore. We hope Davis-Kidd is a truly special place for you to escape—to connect with books, quality music, topical magazines, and other unique and wonderful products that we, as readers ourselves, love to buy and realize you enjoy as well. We will keep changing and evolving as you do, and as does the world we live in. Thank you for allowing us to participate in this program."

—Ginger Knight,
public relations and events coordinator,
Davis-Kidd Booksellers

The Panelists

The Novelist: River Jordan

River Jordan is a novelist and playwright. She is a founding member of the West Florida Playwrights Project, an organization dedicated to the production of original works for film and stage. She has served on the boards of the Northwest Florida Library; the Florida Network, a statewide organization serving children victimized by physical and/or sexual abuse; and various arts organizations. Her recent novel, *The Gin Girl*, was chosen by Larry Woods of Bookman/Bookwoman as his "pick of the list" from the reviewed works for the 2003 Southern Festival of the Book. Ms. Jordan is completing her new novel, *The Nehemiah Project*, and developing, WORD: Writing for Ourselves and Reading for Discovery, a writing and reading program designed for youth at risk. She passionately believes in the power of words.

The Editor: Joe DeGross

Joe DeGross is a writer, teacher, and editor of fiction, memoir, and essay. His work has appeared in *Carve* magazine, *MFA Pawprints*, and the anthology *Literary Lunch*, and one of his stories will appear in the upcoming edition of the *North Atlantic Review*. He is a former associate editor and senior editor of *Carve* magazine, contributing editor of the anthology *e2ink*, and editor-in-chief of the soon-to-be-launched literary journal, the *Ensign Literary Review*. Joe teaches writing workshops in his Apprentice to the Masters writing programs, and he also teaches medical humanities at Mercer University and the University of Tennessee–Chattanooga. He earned his M.F.A. degree at Goddard College and is a retired physician.

The Literary Agent: Etta Wilson

Etta Wilson is a literary agent with March Media, Inc., specializing in representing children's book authors. Having served as a school librarian and an editor at Thomas Nelson and Abingdon Press, she has broad knowledge of both the general book market and the Christian book market. Among recent books she has placed are the middle-grade fiction title *January 1905* by Katharine Boling, due out from Harcourt in May, and a picture book, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, by Amy Winstead, published in 2003 by Ideals Publishing. Wilson has also written 11 books for children and teens. Currently, she is teaching a course in writing the picture book at the Renaissance Center in Dickson. She is an active member of the Society for Children's Book Writers and the Women's National Book Association and was a founding member of the Tennessee Writers Alliance. She holds the M.L.S. degree from George Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.

The Writer's Loft: Public Readings

Each semester, The Writer's Loft offers three opportunities for public readings. Each student is encouraged to give a five-minute reading of something created while in The Writer's Loft at one of the readings, and everyone is asked to attend as many of the readings as possible in order to support our fellow writers. The locations, dates, and times of the readings are staggered in an attempt to fit everyone's schedules.

The Writer's Loft: Our Partners and Supporters

One of the definitions of a "partner" is "one that is united or associated with another or others in an activity or a sphere of common interest." The key to that definition, we believe, is "sphere," for the forming and launching of this new idea, this creative loft, has been a three-dimensional surface upon which many people and groups have come together to help and to participate. MTSU's Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those individuals and organizations who work with us to make this program possible.

Davis-Kidd Booksellers

Everyone at The Writer's Loft is excited to announce our ongoing relationship with Davis-Kidd Booksellers. Each semester, The Writer's Loft will have one public reading and one panel discussion at Davis-Kidd Booksellers, in Nashville (Green Hills), Tennessee. Founded in 1980, Davis-Kidd has grown to include three bookstores in Tennessee, and it has long been an artistic center of the middle Tennessee community, sponsoring such events as author readings and signings, monthly book clubs, and much, much more.

Linebaugh Public Library

Linebaugh Public Library in Murfreesboro sponsored our third public reading on Thursday, December 4, 2003. Linebaugh has long offered art and writing workshops, book sales, and discussion groups. The Writer's Loft was pleased to be able to present recent writings at Linebaugh. Afterward, the floor was opened to the general public.

Special Thanks to Tennessee Writers Alliance (TWA)

The TWA is a nonprofit organization aimed at supporting the work of Tennessee writers and enhancing the role of literary arts in the state of Tennessee. Membership is open to anyone interested in writers and writing. Its current members include experienced professional writers, emerging writers, entertainers, educators, students, publishers, librarians, and book lovers of all sorts. While we do not have a formal partnership with TWA, The Writer's Loft and MTSU would like to formally thank TWA's board of directors and its members who have emerged from the Tennessee landscape to help us as we created and launched this literary idea. We remain grateful. Anyone interested in knowing more about TWA can find the organization online at <http://www.tn-writers.org>.

Silas House

Many published authors rushed toward us throughout this semester to help in many ways. Some of those ways were small; others were large. One of the biggest involved bestselling novelist and NPR commentator Silas House. Silas traveled from his home in rural Kentucky to speak with our students at Linebaugh Library in Murfreesboro. In addition, he read from and signed copies of his books *A Parchment of Leaves* and *Clay's Quilt*. A native Kentuckian, House weaves a deep respect for the natural world and the enduring spirit of the human heart into his books, and he is praised for his lovely storytelling, graceful prose, strong characters, and his feel for Southern rural life. And we praise him as well for his help during our first semester.

Our Mentors

Where would this program be without its professors, its mentors? These people travel from as far away as the Gulf Coast and the Christmas tree farms of Portland, Oregon, to share their enthusiasm for the written word with our students . . . all for the smallest amount of pocket change. We would like to recognize their contribution of talent, skill, and time.

The MTSU English Department

Support has existed on campus, too. Wonderful poets and mentors have emerged from MTSU's literary landscape, and we would like not only to thank those mentors but also the chair of the English Department, Dr. Bill Connelly, for his guidance and support.

Our Students

And of course, certainly not last, there are our students. Our students were the first ones to take a chance on the idea that a group of mentors and students from five states and two countries could come together and produce something new. We would like to thank Priya, Matt, Susan, Anne, Peggy, Carole, Greg, Terry, Suzanne, Janelle, Juliana, Rebecca, Tom, Michael, and Ashley.



MENTORS

Language of Trees

by
Charlotte Rains Dixon

At first all you see are trees. Row after row of Douglas firs, Grand firs, and Scotch pines. But look closer and there is more in the photo, much more: the little shack halfway down the hill where we sell Christmas ornaments and pass out hand saws and maps for the U-cut operation; next to it, the stand where customers buy hotdogs and sodas and sweet greasy Elephant Ears after they've chosen a tree. Closer still and there's our family: Daddy, standing tall and proud in flannel shirt and hunter's cap, Mama, elfin beside him, and in front of her, three little girls, all wearing hand-knitted caps, matching red mittens, and big gap-toothed smiles. We are Veronica, Helen, and Columbia Campbell, and we are with our mother and father at home on the farm. It is Christmas. All is right with the world.

1

My family believed in trees, Christmas, and the land.

We Campbells grew Christmas trees on two hundred acres of lush, rain-soaked Oregon farmland. We wholesaled them in a mammoth cutting operation that ran all autumn, and managed a U-cut business complete with hotdog stand and gift shop during the months of November and December. I knew our land as well as I knew my husband Dalton's body—every muddy dip and hillock of the acreage, every inch of the roads that intersected it, every name of each neatly maintained field of trees. I knew where the Doug firs grew, where the nobles were planted, where the Scotch pines and Grand firs—Daddy's favorites—prospered. Even after my two sisters and I grew up and moved to Portland to raise families instead of trees, even after Mama died, even as Daddy taught a new generation the Christmas tree business, the farm remained the center of our lives.

Daddy believed in the land so fervently it ruled his life. The farm required hard labor to keep it running: backbreaking spring planting, shoulder-shattering trimming in summer, a wearying autumn-long harvest. Beyond that, Daddy believed the trees talked to him.

Auguries, omens, portents. Call them what you will, the trees dispensed wisdom and my father never ignored it. Through the years Daddy and the trees predicted storms, foretold sickness, presaged promotions. The firs told him my first-born child would be a daughter, my sister Veronica's marriage wouldn't last, our other sister Helen would encounter her future husband while hiking Cascade Head.

And even before I knew of it, the trees whispered that I would soon depart.

On a sunny morning in early June I drove to the farm to take pictures of my father. I found him in the greenhouse, perched on the ridge of the wild, forested hill that sloped down to the Sandy River, one of several uncultivated areas on our property. Long ago, Dad had quit raising trees from seed and now bought two-year old stock to plant, but he still

used the greenhouse to nurture seedlings for the vast vegetable and flower gardens he tended. Behind a wall built of rock hauled from the river sat his carefully cultivated compost pile, the mix so rich and precious my sisters and I hauled buckets of it to our own gardens in Portland.

The carved wood door, salvaged from an old farmhouse, scraped against dirt as I pulled it open. Droplets of dew hung inside the greenhouse windows and the air smelled of ripe loam and strong fishy fertilizer. Daddy stood at the far end of a long center aisle, flanked by broad counters that held plastic plant crates.

"Hi, Dad."

He grunted but didn't look up.

"Daddy? I came to take some pictures, remember?"

He raised his head: eyes black as a crow's wing, his gray hair, shaggy around the ears, framed a lean weather-beaten face. Wrinkles ruttled his cheeks and forehead, but, even so, he looked a decade younger than his eighty years. Daddy had been a vegetarian forever and ran three miles faithfully every day. He wore a plain white T-shirt and dirt-covered jeans—his summer uniform for as long as I could remember. What I didn't recognize was the expression on his face.

"The trees say you are leaving."

"What?"

"The trees foretell a leave-taking. They say it will be you."

"Daddy! I'd never leave Oregon."

My father shook his head. "Trees don't lie."

I laughed. "You must have misunderstood them. I'm not going anywhere. Why would I leave?"

"The trees say you are going, Collie. I don't make things happen. I just listen."

The greenhouse air thickened around me, stifling my efforts to breathe. Leave Oregon? Leave Daddy, my sisters, the land, the trees? Not a chance. Yet, Daddy's auguries were never wrong. I examined his face for a sign of hope. None was forthcoming.

"I need some fresh air," I said. "Let's go take the pictures."

"Don't feel like having my picture taken," my father grumbled.

"Come on, Daddy."

"I need to finish transplanting these seedlings. What do you want with photos of an old man, anyway?"

"You have the best face of anyone I know! I love taking pictures of you. Anyway, you promised."

"I'm too old for this," Daddy growled, but he wiped his dirty hands on his jeans and went outside with me. The sky was so blue it made my heart hurt, especially since only recently had the spring rains ended. Birds sang. A truck rumbled along the frontage road. The air smelled like Christmas, the way it always did on the farm.

I posed my father beside a Douglas fir, snapped him checking on a row of recently planted seedlings. Then I positioned him next to the red metal baler, unwrapped from its summer hibernation beneath a tarp in the barn for the occasion. We worked quietly, talking only when I asked him to move this way or that. I was shooting an essay called,

Portraits: People of the Earth, mostly for the benefit of my students, who were studying documentary photography. Since I was only substituting for a professor on maternity leave at a small art college, it was a bit presumptuous to call them “my” students. Still, it thrilled me to do so.

At first, while I took pictures, I thought only about the shot: Daddy’s grim face, his lanky body, his long-fingered, tanned hands. And the trees, sunlight on their rough bark creating such lovely patterns, the pleasing geometry of their needles, the wavy shadows the swaying branches formed.

Usually taking photographs crowded everything else out of my brain. But that day I started puzzling why the trees had predicted my departure. I was only recently feeling truly happy, smugly so. My kids, knock wood, were all doing well, and my marriage had reached a rough kind of equilibrium after years of delirious highs and lows. The best thing, though, the very best thing, was how well my career was going.

I had a gallery in the Pearl District of Portland that represented me. I was starting to acquire a network of friends who shared my love of the craft. And I had recently discovered how much I loved teaching.

A sudden shift slashed the air.

“Storm’s coming,” Daddy said. He pointed to a line of black clouds rimming the western horizon, and looked relieved to have an excuse to end the photo session. It wasn’t that he didn’t like my photography. On the contrary, he’d been one of my biggest supporters. He bought me film when I was too broke to get it myself, paid for my membership at a commercial darkroom, gave me Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* many Christmases ago, and Ruth Bernhard’s biography, *Between Art and Life*, just last year, for my birthday. Daddy would have made a good photographer himself—like me, he was far happier viewing the world than being a subject in it. Thunder rumbled and a few fat drops of rain fell. We bolted for the greenhouse and made shelter just as the first lightning flashed.

My father lit the flame on his Coleman burner and set a kettle of water on it, then pulled a canister of tea from a cupboard beneath the counter and offered it to me. Beyond the partially opened greenhouse door, water dripped and pooled, turning the dirt path into mud. Raindrops hammered on the glass ceiling and steam fogged the windows. The only thing visible through them was water.

“This must be what its like beneath the ocean,” I said.

“Like floating in a glass boat in the middle of a storm-tossed sea,” Daddy said, lapsing easily into a game we’d played when I was little. His eyes flashed with happiness. “All alone, just the two of us charting our course. Where would you like me to steer us to, little one?”

“Home. Steer us home.”

“You always said that. Veronica wanted to travel to Paris, and Helen always wished to see the Amazonian rain forest. But you, Collie, you just wanted to stay at home on the farm.”

“I still do.”

A flash lit the sky.

“Legend says lightning hits a tree, the owner of that tree soon dies,” Daddy said.

I shivered. "Don't say that."

My father sipped his tea. "Don't worry. That lightning is far away. And you know we don't own this land, not really. We are only its stewards. Some day it will no longer be ours."

"The farm will always be ours!"

"It does not really belong to us." Daddy laid the tips of his fingers on my knee and stared into my eyes. "Child of my heart. You especially will need to understand this. You will need to understand."

Jigs

by
Cate McGowan

Papa, dogging
with the coalboys,
clocks the loose-planked
floor with his boot.
Peppery dust rises
and dances to "Jayman's Stomp"
on the strumming mandolin
of generations, while ghosts
of fiddle and pennywhistle
dosey-doe in the lamplight.

This faded heritage is mine now:
the patchy verses of Papa's song,
the crackled foundation
of history.
I inherit it, polish it
with a fresh coat of meaning,
as I watch from the dark side of the door.

Waiting on the #4

by
Cate McGowan

Wearing piss stained khakis
and smelling like a week
of digging ditches, I sit
on the park bench,
sipping my Seagrams,
loosen my collar button
to the sultry gulf breeze,
wait under the street light
like a lover under a full moon,
anxious for Miss Sadie
to arrive on the #4.

As always an hour early,
carrying her plastic sacks
of sandwiches and dime novels and
eager to begin her graveyard shift,
Miss Sadie turns toward the city hospital
and disappears into parking lights.

Like an alarm clock,
her arrival sends me staggering
back to the liquor store
to buy another half-pint
and hear the counter girl
say good-night.

from
Creation's Fire

by
Randy O'Brien

The nightmare still played around the edges of his consciousness, waiting like a prowling cat. Clay's eyes twitched and his chest rose and fell to an inaudible jungle beat. He had awoken with a start, his heart pounding in his ears and his eyes squinting against the faint light from the hallway outside his room.

It was a vision of the ancients'—the dream of creation, of fire drawn from heaven. He caught his breath again, settled into the pillows and stared at the ceiling. After a time, he fell asleep. This time he dreamed the dream of babies, of returning to the trees.

Later that morning behind the old grade school, Clay felt the pull, even as the trees must have drawn the ancients to the sky. The pines stood tall and blue-green against a brilliant cobalt sky. He scanned the now dilapidated, deserted buildings. Only two years ago, he was a sixth-grader, walking the hallways, saying "Hi!" to friends, and throwing spitballs at the blackboard. Now, kids made wagers on which window they would break with which throw. While some broke windows, others spray painted the bricks with the latest bits of adolescent wisdom.

He looked at the tallest pine beginning at the ground and ending at the tiny Christmas tree at the top. He remembered the story of how the trees had been planted on the north side of the building over twenty years before. It was an experiment that originated with the agriculture teacher, Mr. Sharber. His idea was to set a windbreak, then calculate the amount of energy saved in the buildings over five years. He might have published a paper on the project if he hadn't fallen in love with a sixteen-year-old student. After the principal caught them in a broom closet, he forced the AG teacher to leave town in a hurry.

Clay breathed deeply, inhaling the sharp, clean smell of the pines. The trees bowed slightly in the wind and spread their aroma for thousands of feet around the playground. Clay spit on his palms, rubbed his hands together and walked toward the timber.

The schoolchildren had worn away the bottom limbs years ago. The replacements were not strong enough to support Clay's weight. He would have to shimmy about ten feet up the trunk to the first limb. He picked at the yellow chalk stains, still there, where the students had cleaned the erasers. Then, he put his finger to his lips as if he were telling someone to be quiet.

He grabbed hold of the branch and threw his left leg over the top. As he was hanging upside down, a few of the rocks he had in his jeans pocket fell to the ground. He watched them hit as they made little puffs of dust that caught on the wind.

Hanging bat-like gave him a different perspective. He wondered about coloring in the lines and smoking cigarettes in the garage and he wondered what it would be like to kiss a girl.

He reached around the top of the limb and righted himself. His head cleared, and he looked at the back of his hand. He kissed it. Nothing. Not really a valid experiment, he mused. Mr. Sharber would say you're lacking in a sound hypothesis, and most importantly, a girl.

He smiled and reached for the next limb. The sun played hide and seek through the limbs. A light breeze moved the needles like a Japanese fan. He weaved from one side to the other, looking up only. Somewhere, he'd heard not to look down.

To his left was a bird nest. Five little beaks opened and reached for the sky as he jostled their limb. They started squeaking and looking for Mom. "Quiet, babies," he whispered, "You'll get fed soon."

He moved carefully, closer and closer to the top. He moved the branches to one side, the needles pricking his fingers. He watched the blood rise from the puncture marks. His stomach turned over, and he had to swallow hard to ease the queasy feeling that always accompanied the sight of blood.

Clay gazed out over the landscape for what seemed a hundred miles. He could see the roof of the school and the air handlers that either—depending on the time of the year—cooled or heated the classrooms. He remembered learning about Silas Marner, heat-conducting elements, and beginning biology. Only two years had passed and yet it was like a lifetime ago.

He started climbing again, now with new purpose. He moved like a monkey through the limbs. He clutched the branches and felt the rough bark.

He refused to look down and confront his fear of falling. A force inside propelled him faster toward the top. He felt he might find the answer there, waiting for him. The sun was still high above. He peered through the branches and waited. There was a sound, but he couldn't recognize it. It was like nothing he had ever heard.

To his right lay the city. He could make out the taller buildings, the skyscraping banks, and the high-rise apartments. Several radio and television towers rose in the distance. Squinting, he tried to read the messages on the billboards along the main highway, but they were too far away.

The sound changed slightly. Turning his head, he cupped his hand over his ear. It was an electrical transformer about twenty feet away, humming like a device from outer space.

He was almost as close to the top as he felt he could safely go. The tiny Christmas tree stretched barely beyond his reach. He wrapped his legs around the trunk of the tree and raised his hand toward the sun. Dust and thick, black hair covered the back of his hand. He kept his fingers together. The light was bright, and his skin was red almost as if he could see through the meat and bone.

Clay almost giggled as the top of the tree swayed gently in the wind. He looked down. So this is what it's like? He pulled down his hand. The sun was still too bright, so he turned away.

He pulled a couple of pebbles from his pocket. He dropped the first one through the limbs. It bounced from one limb to the next, then to the ground. The second pebble curved out, then fell straight down. He started counting as the pebble began its descent. Nine feet per second times the number of seconds it takes to hit the ground would give him an idea how high up he was.

“Thousand one, thousand two, thousand three, thousand four, thousand five, thousand six,” he called out, watching the pebble bounce to a stop. Doesn’t feel like sixty feet, five stories, he calculated nervously.

Suddenly, there was a new sound. He looked just in time to meet it face-to-face, closer now, eye-to-eye. The black flash startled him, almost loosening his grip. He touched his cheek and saw blood on his hand. He felt faint.

Clay tightened his grip on the trunk and watched as a momma bird checked on her offspring. He had always heard about how strong the mothering instinct was. Now he had proof, maybe even a scar. He liked the idea of having a scar. Maybe it added character.

As he steadied himself, he gave one last look at the city—the roads that crisscrossed the neighborhoods, the humming transformer, and his green-blue ladder to the sky. So this is what it’s like being God, he thought. Just as he preconceived, the trip down was far easier than the one to the top.

from
Seven Laurels
by
Linda Busby Parker

*This is a passage from chapter 4 of Linda's novel, **Seven Laurels**, which was published by SEMO Press in the spring of 2004. In this scene, Brewster McAtee (a young man in his twenties) and his grandmother, Mama Tee, make their annual visit to his mother's grave in the African American cemetery in Low Ridge, Alabama. **Seven Laurels** is available from Amazon.com, Books-A-Million.com, local bookstores, and from the publisher: Southeast Missouri State University Press, One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701*

On Sunday, the anniversary of his mother's death, Brewster made his annual pilgrimage to Hope Hill Cemetery with Mama Tee to place bought flowers on Bess's grave. Slabs of rock brought from north Alabama told the truncated stories of Negroes with one name privileged in death by headstones.

JOLANTA
FAITHFUL SERVANT OF
THE MCBRIDE FAMILY
DIED MAY 3RD 1825
R.I.P.

Letters from other pillars, stolen by stealth of wind and rain, "ABDA, BORN 18__," had become indentations in stone—numbers and letters erased by time. On several graves, African masks carved in dark wood watched with hollow eyes, embodying spirit and life that, with the odor of moss and lichen, gave the Negro cemetery an earthiness that caught in Brewster's throat and lingered in his mind. Many graves had no markers and, after a century, the earth was collapsing in an elongated rectangle above the bodies of the deceased. Newer sections were claimed from the woods as the Negro cemetery grew.

BESS CLARK MCATEE
BORN 1915
DEPARTED SEPTEMBER 23, 1945
GOD WATCHES THE SPARROW
AND HE WATCHES ME

The words Mama Tee chose for the marker were etched in gray granite. "That child was like a bird," Mama Tee said when she filled the bottom of a coffee can with dirt, poured water over the dirt, and stuck the gladiolas in the boggy soil.

"Not meant for this life," Mama Tee said. "Such a tiny thing. And life pickin' her apart piece by piece. Didn't weigh nothin' when she passed. Her box look like a child done died." Mama Tee stood back and shaded her eyes to see the full effect of the purple gladiolas on the grave.

When he was thirteen, Brewster thought Mama Tee's epitaph was right for his mother, but now the inscription was ironic. Bess was bird-like in her size—small boned with a dainty face, fine-drawn features, delicate, and in need of a bolster insulating her from the roughness of life. But there had been nothing to shore her up, nothing to lessen the jabs that shattered her into pieces. When Brewster read the marker, he thought again that God might have been too busy watching the sparrow and took his eyes off Bess, who was poisoned by rotgut from brews in uncovered vats concealed in Alabama thicket. Over the years, Brewster weighed the accuracy of the emblem Mama Tee had chosen for Bess's stone, and he had not settled the issue with himself, but it was comforting to think that the very eye of God now watched his mother.

Mama Tee went forward, bent, and ran her index finger in the scored letters. "These letters gon' be here a hundred years from now. Bess got a good marker. The sparrow was supposed to be carved right here." Mama Tee tapped her index finger on the spot above the letters where she wanted the bird to sit on an olive branch. "That money was all used up before the bird got carved. Didn't know how long before I'd have more money like that, so I decided to go ahead and put the stone at her head."

Brewster had every intention of having the tombstone lifted, the bird carved, and the stone replaced. He wouldn't tell Mama Tee. The two would walk to the grave and he would wait for her to see it. The thought made him smile, and he put his arm around her shoulder. "It's a beautiful stone even without that bird."

"It's a miracle stone, anyway," Mama Tee said. "That money came from Alfred Luce Jr. You remember?"

"I remember."

"I took care of old Mrs. Luce until the day that woman died."

Brewster remembered it all. Mama Tee had told him how she combed the old woman's hair, brushed her teeth, bathed her, held her hand, and read to her from the Bible. When she had stayed by the old woman's bed late into the night, there was no supper at 20 Perry Street. When the sun went down and he realized Mama Tee would not be coming home, he and TeeBoy spread butter on bread and poured honey over it. This was their supper while old Mrs. Luce was dying. Yes, he remembered it.

"Alfred Luce Jr. drove his LaSalle to the house, parked, jumped the ditch, and knocked on my door. Handed me that envelope. You remember that Brewster?"

"I remember that too, Mama Tee. "

The Spring 2004 Poetry and Short Fiction Contests Winners

The Writer's Loft is excited to announce the winners of its Spring 2004 poetry and short fiction contests. The Writer's Loft sponsors a contest in poetry and short fiction each semester for its students. Each student may submit one short story and/or one collection of poetry. There is NO charge for the contest, but each student is limited to a single entry. (At the moment, this contest is not open to the general public.) The Writer's Loft Web site will present the winning entries for a full semester.

Spring 2004 Selections

Spring 2004 Short Story Winner:

Greg Plemmons, for chapter one of his novel, *Linny*

Spring 2004 Poetry Winner:

Peggy Smith Duke, for "The Sculptor's Apprentice"

Spring 2004 Honorable Mentions

Poetry: Rebecca Catherine Tate, for "Snow Showers"

Short Fiction: Priya Anand, for "Just Rice"



Spring 2004 Short Story Winner: Greg Plemmons, for chapter one of his novel, *Linny*

Greg received his B.A./B.S. in English/Biology (and the Senior English Award) from Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C., where he also edited the college newspaper. Things unfortunately took a turn for the worse, however, when he was accepted to medical school, and he received his M.D. from the Medical University of South Carolina in 1995. Now a seasoned bonafide pediatrician at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, he is forced to spend much of his working day among frequently ill-grammered folk (not to mention lots of children). He hopes there is still a little creative juice left at the bottom of the glass and would like to sell as many books one day as Dr. Atkins. All joking aside, several of his inspirations have been physician/writers such as Walker Percy, William Carlos Williams, and Chekhov, who said about the craft of writing: "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."



Linny, Chapter 1

by

Gregory Plemmons

In the end, I thought it best to lock up my brother Nate down in the root cellar. It was cool and dry down there, even in August, and would certainly suffice for the hour or so it would take for our father to get remarried. My brother liked to get stoned down there on summer evenings after work, brooding in the hazy darkness with the flower bulbs and fertilizer, and I knew I would find him there on our father's wedding day as well. All summer long, Nate had threatened to cause a scene, specifically that part of the ceremony where the minister asks if there's anybody present who knows why the couple in question should not be joined in holy matrimony. "I promise there'll be fireworks," my brother had declared soon after hearing the news of our father's engagement. And so, one afternoon, while cleaning out the root cellar, I discovered he meant the real kind. Roman candles. Bottle rockets. Black Cat Brand. Not just your standard six-shot Chirping Orioles but 19-shot Toot and Twirls. Plus Screaming Dragons, Jumping Tigers, Moon Travelers. I found them all in a feedsack, next to the narcissus bulbs, cornered away, still wrapped in red cellophane, intact and unexploded, waiting for their special moment down at the Wando Baptist Church. I immediately pictured them exploding in the apse, fireballs hurling down the aisle straight toward our father's fiancée, Lila, she and her bridesmaids annihilated in a rapid conflagration of baby's breath, crinoline, and Aqua-Net. Of course my brother would never hurt a flea and I knew he would have the sense to aim them away from the bridal party, but you get the point. So you see, I had no choice but to lock him up. Nate lacked self-control at times, more so, it seemed, since Mama died, and I guess I was here to protect him, more than anything else. Arson was a federal offense, and besides, Baptists almost always pressed charges.

My plan was near perfect. No one would miss my brother at the wedding, since he had already made it clear to my father he would not be attending. All I had to do was catch him down in the cellar that day, where I knew he'd be at some point, fomenting and probably high as a kite. Sure enough, I spotted him heading across our backyard as we were all getting dressed and I was slipping into my bridesmaid's dress, a tea-length monstrosity in crepe teal that rustled and flapped with every movement I made. I dove downstairs and scampered across our backyard barefoot, reached the root cellar, and slipped my sturdy Kryptonite bicycle lock through the hasp on the door, clamping it shut. The lock was heavy and felt solid in my hands. Like a big black behemoth safety pin. I tested the latch. It felt snug. I kneeled down and peered through the cracks in the door slats into the darkness. Splinters stung my cheeks as I squinted, unable to make out anything at first, waiting for my pupils to adjust. Then I saw a glimmer of ember and ash.

"I really hate to do this to you," I muttered, slightly out of breath. "But it's for your own damn good." No response. Not even a protest. Just my breathing and the rustle of my taffeta. Soon I spotted the outline of Nate's body down below, in the shadows. He was shirtless, in cutoffs, lying on the ground, looking up. Sunlight spilled through the slits and clipped his face into little triangles as he squinted up at me.

"Fireworks are illegal inside the city limits," I continued. "Even at your father's own wedding." I took a deep breath. The smell of weed and fertilizer wafted up from below, faintly acrid and herbal. "Nate, you know I don't care for her anymore than you do. But we're grownups. Daddy has the right to do whatever he wants."

"Traitor," he mumbled. I watched him take a drag in the shadows, then exhale. "She is the enemy and must be destroyed."

"Not by fire," I replied. "I promise I'll let you out as soon as this is over with."

He didn't respond. He just looked up at me. I thought I saw some flicker of lucidity there that seemed to say *thank you for stopping me*, like when Old Yeller gets that look at the end of the movie. But I think I just imagined it. His eyes were red and puffy, and for a moment I thought he was crying, but it was hard to tell with all the marijuana. I stood up, straightened the straps of my dress, and headed back across the yard. And that was the last time I saw him, down there in the cool earthy bosom of Mother Earth and Mama's root cellar. When I got home from the wedding later that evening, his Toyota was gone and the cellar door was wide open, not a whiff of weed or single firecracker remaining. Even my Kryptonite bike lock, which had a \$500 guarantee, had vanished, all in an afternoon. Without a trace.

Understand, Nate and I are twins, biologically speaking, but that is it. He got the good middle name—Nathaniel Audubon (after that guy that painted all those birds and had a society named after him), and I got the bad one—Leola Linnaeus. Leola after our hypochondriac aunt and Linnaeus after some eighteenth century Swedish biologist who designed what amounted to the Dewey Decimal System for flora and fauna, the Father of Taxonomy, thanks to our dweeby biologist father, Louis Gibbs. Exciting, huh. I go by Linny. I was Twin A, which is what they designate the first one in line for the exit door to this world, Nate's breeched little butt twisted up in the rafters and refusing to come down, so to speak, so I got to be the oldest by seven minutes and fifteen seconds. But who's counting? So Nate was Twin B. I weighed less than he did, and they thought I would be the sickly one, so the way I see it my parents gave me the throwaway middle name (Linnaeus) just in case I might not make it. I've heard it's the opposite in Africa, where mamas name their favorite babies Trash and Dogshit (in respective Swahili or Bantu, of course) so the gods will be fooled and not snatch their jewels away. But who wants to go through life named Dogshit? Linnaeus was bad enough.

Nate and I both had to go to the Special Care Nursery down at Roper Hospital which was a polite way of saying that your babies were sick as stink and may not make it to cut their first tooth. But we both survived. Turns out Nate ended up being the sickly and scrawny one, anyhow, needing oxygen, his fingers small and gummy as boiled peanuts and his chest bowing clear down to his backbone with each breath, according to Mama. And so while I went home in one week at four pounds, Nate spent his first month of life curled up under an oxygen tent. Mama always said she had never seen a child take to camping out like he did. Like that oxygen tent did something to him. But even though he craved the outdoors, he also developed an inconvenient fear of germs and spiders which I've also attributed to his antiseptic beginning. Once he pitched his tent in his bedroom and slept inside it for weeks after spotting a brown recluse inside his closet until one day I finally spotted the telltale violin-shaped bellymark of *Loxosceles reclusa* in a corner and ended its existence with one swift whack of my Pappagallo heel.

Nate and I are fraternal twins, which if you haven't guessed by now, means Not Identical. Fraternal twins don't even have to come from the same egg, but they can. It turns out I got shortchanged here too, chromosomally speaking. I got the X and Nate got the Y. Which is OK, except not only did I get stuck with the bad name and a lifetime of gender bias, part of my X chromosome's even missing, which they didn't figure out until tenth grade, when I still had not gotten my period and remained a foot shorter than my brother, so my parents took me down to the medical university where they ran all these tests, which are kind of hard to explain. But suffice it to say I'm a woman at nineteen, with almost all of the plumbing and accompanying heartbreak and cramping—that is, if I get my estrogen injections every three months. I'm even a D-cup, but apparently my uterus will remain as infertile as the moon in winter, from what the doctors say.

Anyhow, twins are special. I don't know whether we just started to believe that because everyone tells you that from the get-go, but it's true. Ask any twin. With Nate suddenly gone from my life, I felt numb. That evening after leaving the wedding and dropping off my father and Lila at the airport, I came back to an empty house. The open cellar door gaped like a wound, and inside, his bedroom light was still on, his dresser and closet emptied of clothing. Everything was eerily quiet, and I couldn't sleep that evening, my father and Lila somewhere over the Atlantic. I watched infomercials after midnight, even bought the entire Lori Davis line of hair care products at the urging of Cher. I finally decided to dial up the Kryptonite bike lock people, rambling through my closet at two a.m. until I found the warranty slip and their toll-free number, and spoke to an operator named Doreen who politely informed me the guarantee only applied to

stolen bikes, not people.

"Have you contacted the police?" she asked me.

"He's not stolen," I stammered.

"Well, I thought maybe you could file a missing persons report," she offered attentively.

"Look, I don't even know if he's missing," I began to sob. "I think he just bailed out on me." I told her all about our last year, with Mama's dying, my father's engagement, but when I finally got to the part about the fireworks, she cut me off.

"I'm truly sorry, Miss Gibbs, but I think I really need to let you go," she apologized. "But I can send you a coupon for ten dollars off your next bike lock."

I hung up the phone. Here I was, with the entire house to myself for the first time I could remember in years, with 67 channels, a liquor cabinet still remarkably undepleted from the wedding (a Baptist affair), and a freezer full of wedding cake. All those anticipated and collaborative acts of debauchery I had contemplated with my brother, the post-wedding blowout that could have achieved new heights in terms of blood alcohol levels, decibels, and orgiastic frenzy, had now vanished with him. I was orphaned. I was twinless.

Spring 2004 Poetry Winner: Peggy Smith Duke, for “The Sculptor’s Apprentice”

Peggy earned her B.S. in Mass Communication and M.A. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from MTSU. Afterward, she went on to Vanderbilt University to earn an Ed.D. During the day, she is a consultant for the human resource development industry. And like so many aspiring writers, she dedicates her mornings to reading and writing poetry and prose. Everyone at the division was so happy to learn of Peggy’s participation in The Writer’s Loft, especially after reading the following passage in her application package: “I appreciate the well-turned phrase as well as the ability to convey a cogent idea. Many writers are gifted in taking the reader into familiar worlds with new eyes or in creating worlds that have never existed. I would like to be one of them.”



The Sculptor's Apprentice

by
Peggy Smith Duke

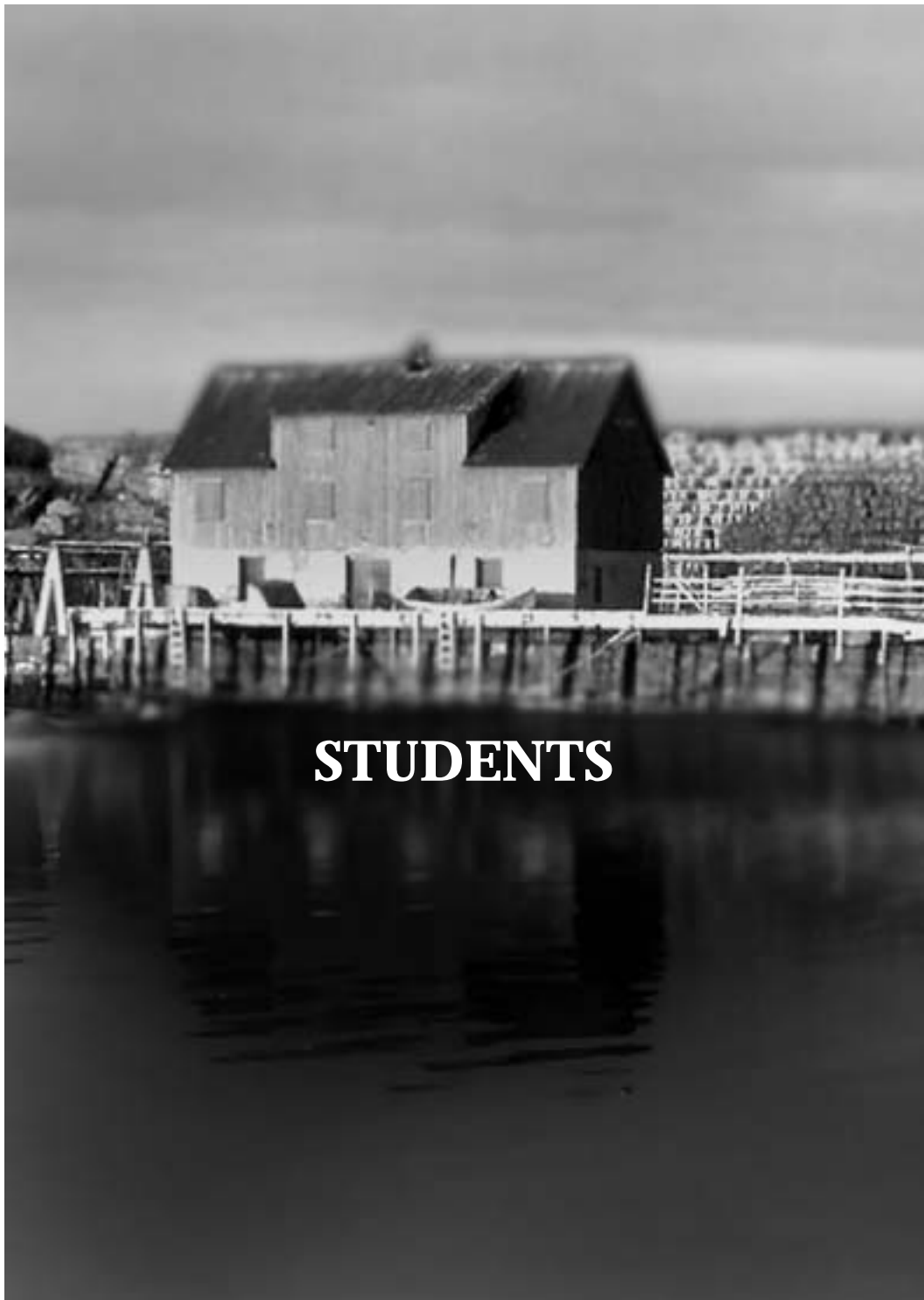
He found her at the tip
of his shovel.
A piece of root
captured the fluid form
of a maiden,
her knees
drawn
slightly toward her,
arms lifted
brushing a mane
of tangled hair
high above her head.
She moved him
enough to clean her
and cover her
with a coat of clear lacquer.
He routed a smooth cherry base
where she could celebrate
the serendipity of his find
and preserve his right to marvel
at her sculptor's skill.

He did not tell her that he remembered how the man stood awkwardly at the door, rotating his hat between his hands. And he remembered the sound of Alfred Luce's slow speech, and his voice, no higher than an alto. "My family wants you to have this. You took such good care of Mama."

Mama Tee hid twenty-five dollars, emergency money, in a cup shoved deep in the cabinet under the sink, and with the rest of the money still in the envelope, she went to the stone-maker where she selected the headstone that marked Bess's grave. Her only regret was that the money did not stretch far enough to cover the sparrow that should have stood above the letters, with feet wrapped around an olive branch.

Overnight rain had left moisture, thick and clinging to the air in the old cemetery. Brewster and Mama Tee walked through the denseness of sodden fall morning and found the gravesites of each of the other family members. On these graves Mama Tee placed flowers grown in her own garden. She put the blooms of the gold and red zinnias on TeeBoy's grave. On Daddy Divine's, she placed a single rose in a slim olive jar she had brought from the home of Mrs. Alfred Luce Jr., where she had worked since the death of old Mrs. Luce.

"Not a day goes by I don't miss him," Mama Tee said. Daddy Divine had died not a full year after TeeBoy. He had collapsed in July heat on the loading dock behind Gwin's Department Store where he had hauled and unloaded, unboxed and toted for twenty years. "My sweet man," Mama Tee said, and she stepped back, surveying the carefully placed tribute. There was oneness, an unbroken line connecting past to present, a union, thwarting even death.



STUDENTS

Just Rice

by
Dhwanie Priya Anand

I glance around my little kitchen and decide what to do first. Of course, I must soak the rice. I measure exactly one cup, always the long grain Basmati, and pour it into a mixing bowl. I rinse the rice with cold water, trying not to drop any. I think about my Nanima, and how she doesn't let even one grain fall through her tiny hands. She doesn't waste a bite. After rinsing, I add more water and leave it to soak.

The longer rice soaks, the less time it takes to cook. My father insists that his Basmati soak for at least an hour. He learned the value of soaking from his mother, though I have only a vague recollection of her cooking. She firmly believed that thoroughly soaking and rinsing rice would wash away its waist-expanding qualities. My rice will only soak for about thirty minutes, just enough time for me to collect the ingredients, chop the onion, heat the oil, and fry the spices and onion.

I pour frozen peas into a strainer. The peas are hard and icy. They feel like tiny glass marbles as I mix them around under cold running water. I notice my hands are wrinkly and dry from the cold water. Maybe one day they'll be a bigger version of Nanima's hands, which are powder dry and intricately creased from years of rinsing rice and vegetables. I cringe to think what my mother would have to say about my hands. When I see her, I prepare by slathering my hands with numerous creams and lotions. But she quickly encloses them in her own and says that they are dry and I should take better care of my skin. Nanima, however, says that if I spend enough time rolling *parantas*, my hands will stay soft from the generous pinches of butter, spread on each of their layers.

I take out a medium-sized yellow onion. They are my favorite for cooking. In a sandwich or in a salad, I like thick slices of red onions, but for anything else I prefer the sweet, yellow ones with crackly honey-colored skins. I chop off the ends on the onion and unwrap it. It smells strong and fresh and burns my eyes. It's a good onion. My father openly weeps, while he slices onions, never stopping to blink back the tears. His eyes turn beet red as water pours from them and sweat beads down his forehead. But his surgeon's stamina is unending. His dry, rounded hands never falter. He never misses a cut. I make the half circle slices that I need and refrigerate the rest in a Tupperware container.

Next, I pour oil into my *karahi*. It is an iron skillet that is almost, but not quite, like a wok. I turn the stove to halfway between Medium and High. While it's getting hot, I pour a Nanima-sized handful of cumin seeds into the mortar and grind it in a circular motion, until only powder remains. By now, the oil has acquired some heat, so I gingerly drop in a few cinnamon sticks, two black cardamom seeds, and three or four small bay leaves. I turn the dial down to Medium, remembering the time when the oil was so hot the cinnamon started popping and the hot grease leapt out to taste my bare shoulder. I still have the scar.

Normally, I would have also added the whole cumin seed into the oil alongside the other spices, but I remember that my roommate, Lori, will be home soon. She doesn't like chewing the tiny seeds. As the spices roast, I pour a glass of ice water. The stove is hot, but not as hot as when I have three or four eyes going. There is no giant pot of chicken curry to tend to. There are no *chapaties* to be turned with tips of burning fingers. There is no sweat beading on my brow. It's a simple rice *pullao*, a quick meal on Wednesday night. The cinnamon has begun to unroll, reminding me it is time to add the onion. Careful not to splatter any oil, I slide the onion slices into the pan. They sizzle gently. I dust them with powdered cumin and give it all a little stir. I lean back against the counter, sipping water, watching, and waiting.

By now, the mixture has filled the apartment with its sweet, greasy aroma. I stir it every now and then, in order to turn the onion. Their color develops slowly until finally they are glistening moon slivers of delicate pale gold. I turn my attention to the rice, sitting in a bowl of now cloudy water. I pour off the water, losing yet more grains in the sink. I don't have the discipline Nanima does to pour water so painfully slowly through the sieve of her hands. My hands are still soft and impatient.

For the rice, I fill the measuring cup full of fresh water and empty it into the skillet. Onion boats float in the shallow body of water, which is broken by shimmering oil globules. I fill the measuring cup only half full this time before emptying it into the rather unmixed mixture. I pause and study the contents of the *karahi*. It doesn't look exactly right. I take a chance and add one more splash of water.

My mother taught me to cook rice with twice the amount of water. That's the advice Nanima gave her when she got married. Mom elaborated on the formula, explaining to me that the amount of water should be reduced in proportion to the amount of juicy vegetables being cooked with the rice. I'm not exactly sure if or how Nanima adjusts the amount of water when vegetables are involved, but whatever she does, it never fails. Her rice is perfectly moist, not sticky. Each grain is whole and separate. Her hands are magic measuring cups. Mine are not. So when I add several handfuls of peas to the rice and approximate how much water to use, it is a leap of faith.

Now that the skillet is filled with what I have to believe is the appropriate amount of water, I scrape the wet rice into it. Then I pour bright green peas on top and stir it once. Both my mother and father taught me not to "play" with rice, while it is cooking, because it will break. I wait for bubbles to appear, before I cover it. The lid has a vent for steam, which I slide open. I love the lid with the steam vent, but the skillet has not worn well with repeated use. It always makes my rice stick, or at least I like to think it's what makes my rice stick. I wish I had my mother's *karahi*. Nanima's would be even better. While the rice simmers, I plop down in front of the TV. The doorknob turns and Lori walks in. "Smells good in here! What are you making?"

I'm absorbing the scent of oily onions and long grain Basmati simmering in an undefined amount of water. Their vapors are gently seeping into my pores as I answer her. "It's just rice."

Pulley

by
Peggy Smith Duke

Too slow, the blacksmith was,
his focused, metered craftsmanship
outdated for iron works and tackle blocks
in the boom of the nineteen-aughts.
So, F.E.M & BRO. casts iron,
artistic clevises of curves and ribs.
Wood craftsmen turn the smooth, round blocks
from ash awash with sap. A fly-wheeled sander
smooths the edge and a boy delivers it
to the iron works for assembly.
The marriage of craft and modernity
is wrought in the ornate ampersand,
filigree of engineered strength,
unimpeded pivot of the ring
its groove pinned and smoothed,
a maker's mark along its seam.

Even a century hence
there are no worm holes
though cracks from idleness
vector the cracks of turned stress.
A rusty brown patina parts in places
relinquishing glimpses of gleaming iron,
the clevis arch still able to bear a bale of hay,
to haul it high to the dormered loft
of the weathered barn.
Little wear betrays its past.
It must have been
one of the last.

Roads

by
Peggy Smith Duke

Graveled. Less traveled.
A road still married
to a stream's course
wanders.

Harried. Less tarried.
A life not shackled
to a dream's source
wonders.

Calibration: A Sestina

by
Peggy Smith Duke

They calibrate in search of truth in its exactness.
Technicians rule out parallax and drift
in instruments of pository science
sought in earnest by hopeful scholars.
When the truth is known
it disappears again in vaporous ambiguity.

Absolute is never still for long. Ambiguity
shifts the pointer, betraying exactness.
Unknown lies in wait for known
hoping to push it out to sea to drift
aimlessly toward the waiting scholars
who wrestle with the fecklessness of science.

Exactness can never be a science.
It writhes in riddled ambiguity.
The harder they try, these scholars,
pushing, pulling, shaping exactness—
defiance by its very nature—drift
toward that which can never be known.

“Unknowable!” cries the man who is known.
“Some things are never lent to science.”
Men shift as medians drift
living out their fantasies in ambiguity
shunning faith for lack of its exactness,
selling prophets out for fellowed scholars.

We know that there can be no scholars.
Unknown and unknowable eludes forever known.
Even artists deny their art in their exactness,
turning obsession into science
by writing out a character steeped in ambiguity
to avoid the measured literary drift.

Forces can't be held in tow. They drift,
eluding observation. Untenured scholars
are anxious to tame the field of ambiguity,
to correlate unknown and make it known
all in the name of science,
defining minute truth in its exactness.

Scholarship is only ambiguity caught in the drift.
There is no exactness except for death. And scholars,
knowing what is not known, are the soul of science.

Evergreen

by
J. Terry Price

Wrinkled tinsel clung to branches already heavy with ornaments and memories. A color light wheel revolved on the floor and washed the tree in red, then blue, then green, then red again. The electric motor droned and haltingly turned the wheel, which didn't bother Marie. As each year passed she was less concerned about performance and more comforted by its persistence. Each year the colors turned.

Marie closed her eyes, gripped her walker, and inhaled slowly, attempting to divine a trace of evergreens past from the little tree: she inhaled slowly, for it had become difficult for her to breathe deeply. Although her vision had faded, through the scent of pine or cedar or fir, she could still see with eyes of long ago. Through the voices of Bing Crosby or Nat King Cole or perhaps Rosemary Clooney she could discern images, some still, some moving, all filled with reds and blues and greens, all filled with the love that once had filled her days.

She carefully raised one hand off the walker and ran her pale thin finger along the runners of a sleigh ornament made of wood, now a muted red. The finger caressed the young couple huddled close together, the man holding the reins, the woman holding onto him. Marie remembered when Thomas bought it for her on their honeymoon in New Hampshire, and spent more than he should have.

It was his first gift to her as his wife and every year thereafter, the first ornament put on their tree. He always placed it with such ceremony, as if he originated the notion of adorning a tree. Then he would take her and dance her around the room filled with red, then blue, and green, then he would spin her again. Marie could see the colors, hear the hum of the motor when it was smooth and strong, feel his pull; both of them bathed and cleansed in the scent of evergreen. Her heart raced as the room began to swirl around her.

Marie steadied herself and her fingers fell into the familiar ridges of her walker's rubber handles. She turned from the tree and looked out her apartment window at the night, the amber cast of streetlights that lined the sidewalks. She waited for the snow to come, wanted the snow to come, for it was the only time her night view ever changed. Others thought it too cold, but to Marie the streets were far warmer under a blanket of snow than bare on temperate summer's eves.

Then something flashed gold on the sidewalk; bright, and it moved down the sidewalk from one light to another until it disappeared. Marie squinted, sat down carefully in her worn chair and wondered.

Nick looked up at the window and slowly exhaled, his shoulders falling as the air left his body. He thought he had seen movement, but returned his gaze to the red, then blue, then green, over and over again. The night air stung his cheeks and penetrated deep within him causing a chill and a shiver.

He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and kicked at another loose piece of concrete, sent it skidding down the alley where it clanged off something metal. He checked his shoe to see if the kick left a mark. Nick had found the Nikes in a pile of shoes at the second-hand store off Monroe Avenue. When they were new they probably sold for well over a hundred, but they weren't new now and they were size thirteen, so they were on the bargain table for only twelve bucks.

Looking at the soles when he bought them he imagined that they had been in a lot of pickup games, imagined that they survived a couple of winters because the outsides were stained and scratched. He figured there was some way to make them look good, so Nick slapped the bills on the counter, a ten and two singles, tucked the shoes under his arm and went down to Adcock's on 55th to see what he could find.

The bell jangled when he pushed the door open and a familiar smell of mildew and metal greeted him inside the hardware store. A weathered growl made its way from the back of the long, narrow shop.

"Be right there. Hold on, hold on, hold on."

Deliberate footsteps slapped the tile floor and carried old man Adcock out from the last aisle. The small man wiped his left hand on his apron and smoothed his gray hair back with his right.

"Need some help?" he said.

Nick dropped the shoes down on the counter. "Yeah. I want to make these shoes look good and I need some ideas."

Adcock dismissed him with a wave of a hand and a shake of his head. "This is hardware. Shoe repair, two blocks over." He started back to the rear of the store.

"No. I don't want to repair them, they ain't broke. I want to make them look good."

Adcock didn't break stride or look back. "Shoe repair, two blocks over."

"Hey, I'm talking to you," Nick shouted. "Aren't you trying to sell stuff?"

Adcock stopped, turned, looked at Nick, and then came back to the counter. He picked up the right shoe and examined it. "Paint maybe, but I never heard of anybody painting shoes."

"Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"Paint."

Adcock turned on his heels, pointed to the other side of the store and began to head back to the rear of the store. "Half way down the second aisle, on the right. Stay with spray, you'll make a mess with a brush." The old man disappeared, leaving the sound of his steps in the air.

Shades of a multitude of colors competed for Nick's attention. Maybe this was crazy. And then he saw it.

"Royal Gold." A metallic old gold.

He would spray paint his new shoes Royal Gold. Not a yellow or a mustard gold but a shiny gold like bullion or the pirates' treasure in the movies. He grabbed the can, put a five on the counter, went outside and sat down on the sidewalk. Nick took the top off and shook the spray can and listened to the dull clink of the ball bearing as it mixed the paint

with the aerosol. He sprayed short bursts of paint on the shoes, again and again, until the right shoe was covered, then the left. After a few minutes, he put on a second coat and carried them home, one on each hand, like socks, to make sure they didn't touch or get smeared.

Since then he wore them everywhere. He no longer thought of them as "gold painted," rather they were gold shoes, shiny and new, and they became his calling card. Nick loved it when he heard someone say, "How much those set you back?" Or "I never seen anything like that." Every now and then he heard someone laugh, but they were fools.

With the shoes he walked faster, with purpose, as if he was going somewhere, like all of those people with briefcases and cell phones. They were always going *somewhere*, doing something, maybe something important.

But here he was, on this cold evening leaning against a lamppost, looking up at a window, going nowhere.

"Nick! You deaf or something? Hey Nick!"

Frank and Murray. Nick couldn't imagine a sorrier pair of best friends. They might not be the best friends anyone could have, but they were the best friends he had.

Frank was about five feet five and weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds on a good day, but then Frank seldom had a good day. He always wore a hat so as to appear taller, but it only made him look like a short guy with a hat. Murray pushed six feet but wouldn't tip the scale at much more than one-fifty either. He was slump-shouldered, which was likely an effort to keep Frank from feeling so short, and, actually, it did help. Neither had much to offer in the looks department, but nobody in this neighborhood was looking anyway.

Nick nodded upward just to acknowledge them, then turned back to return his gaze to the window. Red, then blue, then green.

"What goes on up there, you think?"

"What difference does it make, Nick, huh? What freakin' difference?" Frank talked six feet five.

"Aw, shut up, Frank. Don't you ever wonder, think about other people, about what goes on?"

"Naw, I leave that up to you golden boy. Me, I ain't got time for wondering. I got time for eating, for working, and for gettin' laid. But hey, most of the time I'm working I'm wondering about the next time I'm gonna eat or get laid."

Nick just shook his head, not losing sight of the colors.

"Nick, me and Murray are heading down to the pub. Wanna throw in?"

The room up in the apartment building went dark. Nick willed the lights to come back.

No luck.

"Yeah. Why not."

Maybe with the lights off Marie could find the golden flash again. She made herself comfortable and pulled the crocheted throw around her neck. Without the sound of the tree light motor she could hear the rattling each time she inhaled, the wheeze with each exhalation. She tried to divert all of her remaining senses to her eyes, concentrating, focusing.

And there it was! Gold. Flash. Then movement, gliding along the sidewalk, graceful, clean, pure.

She watched it move down the walkway, watched it vanish, felt the movement in her chest. She closed her eyes and saw it again, saw them again, saw Thomas' skate blades, sleek and fast, powerful and delicate at the same time. Marie remembered her Thomas, unlike any other skater, with powerful thighs and calves and balance! What balance!

He would lean forward to build speed, would make golden blades slap, slap, slap against the frozen pond at Pinkham Notch.

He would glide, scarf flapping, arc around the perimeter, lean away from the edge of the ice, farther and farther around the crowded pond, and then he'd look back, at her. Smiling. A band played carols, sometimes "Winter Wonderland," other times "Let It Snow," and they always finished with "Sleigh Ride." Golden blades carried him away from her but always back, arms extended, for her to join him.

The first time she took his hands and stepped out onto the ice, she prayed. Her ankles wobbled. Though he would tell her later that she'd yelped, he never convinced her. However, the rhythm and intensity of her heart reminded Marie of the time she cradled a rabbit that did not wish to be held.

Thomas had coaxed her into unlocking her knees and then coached her into straightening up.

"Look up, dear. Look at me. C'mon." He smiled, white puffs of breath the only hint of the cold. She looked into his eyes and trusted the gloved hands that swallowed hers.

Marie found her balance and then her smile. She would not fall; she refused to fall.

The city skyline rested against a rich blue curtain as windows reflected the red goodbye of the day; the offices would soon light from within. Nick raised his head just enough so he could see over the top of the pillow and through his window. From his temples on back he throbbed, a pulsing throb, a throb for every heartbeat that reminded him, for better or worse, he was still alive, that reminded him, he was still alone.

Nick closed his eyes and buried his head deep into the darkness, deep into the smell of his own breath, his own skin.

He pulled his right arm out from under his pillow and let it drop along the side of the bunk to the floor. His cracked fingers ran back and forth across the tile until he stretched far beneath the bed and grazed the cold rubber and hard leather; he pulled one shoe out, then located and retrieved the second. Nick pushed himself up on his side, as far as the throbbing would allow, placed the shoes on the bed, and rolled back over on top to warm them. He had to leave before the darkness came.

He reached back out, fumbled up to the plastic milk crate until he felt the cold picture frame and dragged it closer to him. It contained the only real light in the room. Her hair was dark gray in the black and white photo, but was auburn in life. She sat on the lap of the store Santa, her hands folded, her gaze focused above the path of the camera, both her face and that of the Santa expressionless, each doing their job.

Nine years ago when his daughter was born, Brenda never put his name on the birth certificate, said he wasn't required to do anything, and, actually, he wasn't allowed to do anything. The little girl wasn't to be weighed down by her history, by his presence. His only glimpse of her came as he stood behind the store photographer that day. He was within twelve feet and only that close because he was willing to call and beg.

"Bren, I just want to see her."

"I don't want you around her. I don't want her to know."

"I won't, I swear I won't say a word. She won't know I'm there. Please Bren, I'll be good, I promise. I just need to see her. Just once."

Silence on the other end of the line.

"I'm bringing her to Tompkin's next Saturday at two to have her picture taken with Santa. When you come in the store, look for the Christmas tree toward the back of the store, it's all lit up. Nick, if you double-cross me, I swear I'll..."

"Thank you, Bren, thank you. I won't do anything. I just want to see her. She won't know I'm there."

But she did know. He was sure of it. Just as sure as she was sitting on that lap, sitting in front of that tree, in front of that photographer, in front of all of the lights and glitter, tinsel and people, he was just as sure she saw him, noticed him. He looked deep into her eyes and felt something he'd never felt until that moment. He had to trust, had to believe that on some level she felt it, too.

True to his word, he took one last look then turned and walked away. A copy of the photo was his part of the bargain for never calling again.

Marie watched the evening light go down through the window and knew that it was time to bring the tree to life. She made her way over to the color wheel, leaned over, felt for the switch and turned it on. She shuffled back to her chair and stopped to catch her breath along the way. She knew a coughing jag would be next, so she felt her way down into the cushions as quick as she could.

The coughing had become increasingly worse over the past few weeks to the point where she couldn't sleep lying down, couldn't breathe lying down. So Marie learned to sleep in the recliner she'd used so often and so long that it had memorized her, awaited her. She leaned back and pulled the throw over her ankles and knees.

Straight ahead, the colors returned, to her right she could make out flakes in the street-lights, big, carried along with the wind. They were sparkly, like crystals, and they coated everything they touched. Marie pulled her hand to her mouth, stretched it to touch the flakes, frail fingers blocked by the icy window.

"Thomas. Where are you? I am tired of skating alone. I'm tired."

Marie watched the flakes fall, accumulate. She ran the back of her fingernails down the window, and followed the snow to the ground. Again and again her tiny hands brushed the glass from the top of the pane to the bottom. Over and over she directed the flakes as they drifted. The last time her finger reached the bottom of the pane her golden flash appeared.

She smiled and closed her eyes.

Frank brushed off the snow, inches deep. Murray shook the cold, motionless lump. Frank shoved Murray away, he tripped and fell backwards into a drift.

"Nick! Nick. C'mon man, c'mon. Jesus, Murray gimme your coat, now!"

"Are you freakin' crazy?"

"Now!"

Frank held Nick close, tried to warm him with his own body, tried to dry and cover him with their coats. He put his face close to Nick's and could smell whiskey in his shallow panting.

"Get somebody, anybody!" Frank yelled to Murray.

Murray ran, not knowing where he was going to find help at three in the morning. He didn't know if it would do any good anyway.

Frank held Nick's stiff body tight, rocked and rubbed, both of them on the sidewalk leaned against the light post. The snow continued to fall.

Eyelids fluttered. Maybe.

Frank looked around. No one. No noise, unusual for the city even at this time. Everything black covered in white, bathed in the amber cast of the streetlights.

Then Frank looked up and saw them, saw the colors.

Flawless and Tear-Proof

by
Suzanne Craig Robertson

*Author's Note: an excerpt from a novel that, overall,
has absolutely nothing to do with cosmetics*

"I don't care which shade," I was telling the girl at the cosmetics counter. "Just what comes with the free gift?"

She had to be all of 20 years old, her skin as smooth and flawless as a shallow pool of icy water. Well, I guess it was smooth under there—her face was covered in some skin-colored putty that gave the appearance of a beige sheet of laminate conforming to her curves. She knew her job, having quite a command of the array of what seemed to me like identical products. She kept looking past my head as if someone were right behind me. Someone who knew how to wear makeup correctly and had a lot of money to spend, I thought.

"You have to spend \$22.50 to get the free gift," she said, giving a slight roll to her perfectly lined eyes.

"Okay, what is there for \$22.50?"

The girl was impatient, clearly wanting to be ready, should some real customers happen by. "The All-Day Midnight Black Clump-Free Tear-Proof Mascara is \$19.99. You could get that with the Pearlescent Peach Creamy Morning to Night Eye Shadow, which is also \$19.99," she said while inspecting her long wiry fingers, which were topped off professionally by what I guessed might be something like Shimmery Baby Puke Blue.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets. They were clean, but my nails were ragged. I'm not too great with numbers, but that looked like \$40, when I only needed to spend \$22.50. It was rigged, I could see now. Nothing cost \$22.50.

"Uh, what do you have that is closer to \$22.50?" I asked, unsure.

Heavy sigh from Earthenware Lust-rimmed lips, filled in with coordinating Tree Bark Glazed Working Girl.

"The Wrinkle Jet Eye Revitalizer is \$29.99 for 2 ounces. Perhaps you should, uh, *could* use that."

I leaned ever so slightly to my right so that my face came into view in the oval mirror set in front of me. I guess my eyes did look like they needed revitalizing, but I didn't have much confidence that the Q-tip-sized jar in front of me would really help. And at 15 bucks an ounce I thought I'd go home and just try sticking my head in a steaming sink. Or the gas oven, if this girl kept it up. I guessed she was right, and my head sunk a little lower. Forty years of living on a face is going to show, no way around it, some more than in others.

I pondered when it must be that some girls turned the corner, suddenly knowing the huge benefits and differences between a matte foundation and a loose powder for top-

ping everything off. They also persevered with pointy-toed needle-heeled pumps even after their shoeless feet stayed in the shape of a torpedo. Correct makeup and prissy feet had never been important to me, but right this second I was wishing I knew all about both. I looked down at my mud-rimmed and practical flat shoes.

I gazed a few glass counters down the aisle and observed two makeup girl mannequins fairly fawning over a woman who apparently had come straight from the cover shoot for *Vogue's* August issue. Wow, I wondered how long all that would take to assemble on a person, and who was paying for it all? I wanted to be her, instead of the one they would laugh about at their smoke break.

No, wait. I didn't. I really didn't. I just came for the little orange-striped zipper pouch, full of tiny little wonders to make me passable, that's all I had time for, and I wanted it for free. That, and I wanted to rip the perfectly formed Ultra Ivory Undercoat with coordinating Ultra Light Ivory Overdust right off the tiny, no-pore, creamy insulated, carefully lined and filled-in, no-wrinkle smug face of this person who was tired of dealing with the lowly unkempt masses, namely me.

"Sheila," she called to her clone who was restocking shelves with all kinds of different shaped shiny boxes. "Do you know if we have any more of the Silver Streak line that went on sale last week?"

Sheila swung her perky head around, took in my presence and gave the girl in front of me a most transparent "Oh, poor thing, you have one of *those* types" looks. My girl returned the look with one plucked and lined eyebrow arched and the right side of her mouth pulled down in an amazing-yet-barely-there smirk.

I focused on her for a moment. Sheila was saying how that line was phased out or something. Then I leaned into the mirror for just a second, long enough to remind myself of my steely blue, yet unlined and unshadowed, eyes—eyes that over the years had gotten plenty of nice comments, although I couldn't remember any right then. I noted the bushy parts of my eyebrows. I breathed deeply of the Sassy Flashy au Parfume, available in spritz or cream, from the next counter over. I swayed ever so slightly back to center to face the girl's white-coated persona of perfection. She was standing on one foot, gazing at my nails now and looking sadly down to them as they now gripped the edge of the glass counter.

"We also have a two-bottle set of Silky Hand Smoother and Silky Cuticle Push Posh for \$32.50, which might be of use to you. Are you sure you can only get one thing? I really think you are overdue for several items in our basic Hold-it-in-the-Road line."

Sheila muffled a snort, then really threw herself into her box-stacking job.

I surveyed Girl, in all her manicured smoothness and size three-ness. I considered walking away when a marvelous thought fluttered into my frizzy head like a brand-new all-cotton loose powder pouf. What kind of money was this girl making? At what point had she walked away from college, perhaps not cutting it in Fashion Merchandising? What had been her air-headed thought process when she decided to make it big at the cosmetics counter at the local department store? And how had she developed this lovely and steely persona that was able to topple the confidence of a perfectly nice and I must say, well-educated, person like myself? I wasn't independently wealthy, but I was doing okay—I had

one college degree and was part-way to a master's—and it wasn't the intimate knowledge of what shade of lip liner perfectly complimented my nose liner (wait, was that one? If not, it should be) that got me through the day. The lines on my face were mostly there from laughing, and I liked them. My nails were not manicured because squishing cookie dough or shoveling out the barn just messed them up anyway. I liked me okay.

I think my laughing unnerved her and had she worked in a bank she might have reached subtly for the silent security buzzer. She had just decided to humor the old lady and chuckle along with me when she found herself smack next to my face, which was bathed in Summer Shimmer Sweat Essence of Moving Boxes and my eyes were now lined with Don't Piss Me Off Anymore Prisspot. Up close her eyeballs were a little bloodshot I could now see, mostly because they were quite large and not blinking at the moment.

"Give me the hand moisturizing and cuticle set, honey," I purred in a low growl just loud enough so Sheila wouldn't miss it.

"I thank you for your kind help. You are going to go far in this business. I hear there is an opening over in the salon for a front counter girl. It might be just the promotion you are looking for. If you can get on there, maybe with your education you might be suited to move up eventually to be that person who sweeps the hair up after the stylist finishes."

I knew this was wrong but it would *not* stop pouring out of my dry, pursed unlined lips.

"Oh, and for the free gift I'll take the Pink Personality Pissant set instead of Peach Hue Honeysucker. And I want it wrapped up. And when you finish with that, there's a spill out here in the aisle you need to take care of. It looks like it might be All Day Run Amok Pressed Precious Wrinkle Wrap for the Aged," I said, just as smooth as the most expensive pot of Sassy Sheer Icy-Ivory Matte Finish Powder Buff, the All-Day variety.

"But you're the expert."

Dancing God

by
Rebecca Catherine Tate

Lord of the Dance

*I danced in the morning when the world was begun
And I danced in the moon and the stars – and the sun
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth,
At Bethlehem I had my birth.*

Sydney Carter

God has been dancing since the beginning of time. He has danced in the heavens and on the earth. Rhythms are a part of everything he has created. Genesis 1:2 tells us that the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. I love that word—*hovering*. According to *Webster's Dictionary* hover means to flutter, to linger in an overprotective manner. Imagine the gentle movement of great wings, covered with layers of pinions, billowing up and down, up and down, the Spirit of God, waiting for just the right moment to open up the spotlights of heaven and spread light, rainbows, and prisms throughout the entire universe. God swirled and twirled with the waters, the sky, flora and fauna, birds and fish as freely as tuxedo-clad gentlemen and ladies in chiffon ball gowns elegantly waltz across a polished dance floor. If we really listen with our ears and hear with our hearts we can hear the intricate, diverse rhythms of God's interaction in our world: the cadence of the cricket chirping on a late summer night, the perfectly timed boom of thunder after the quick flash of lightning, the gentle transitions of the seasons, and the ever faithful sunrise, sunset. I hear the pitter patter of the gentle rain and fear the cyclonic swirls of the deadly tornado. The tide rolls in and out and gravity pulls down all the things we try so hard to keep up. A little black seed goes into the ground and in due time sprouts forth a royal blue morning glory. Life moves within every woman as God carefully shapes and forms her babies. Hearts beat steadily with pride when we pledge allegiance to the flag and lovers discover the undeniable flutter of butterfly wings in their innermost being when they embrace for the first time. There is an eternal, sacred quality to movement, for as long as hearts can dance and spirits can soar and souls can rest there will be dancing. Don't tell me that God doesn't dance! He has an amazing sense of rhythm. Who could ask for anything more?

Snow Showers

by

Rebecca Catherine Tate

Softly and gently the flakes begin to fall
First one, then two, then millions
upon my garden wall.
They drop from heaven's hand
unique, so pure and white
transforming barren ground
and lighting up the night.
It occurs to me how wonderful it would really be
each flake could be a blessing for my family and me.
They find their way in niches I could never reach;
A snowflake for understanding
A snowflake, my child to teach.
Descend and fall in silence
truly a work of God,
my prayers go up in labor, His answer returns, He nods.
The multitude of angels open up their hands,
The pristine blessings come to earth, more numerous than sand.
Lay upon this home,
cover with your protection.
Coat our steps with love,
no hurt, no pain, rejection.
Blow upon our hearts,
Come to us to stay,
Remembering that snowflakes fall
on cold and graying days.
The winter season, a reminder
that God is still at work,
A snow blanket of His thoughts
upon the hardened earth.

The Sacred Dance

by
Rebecca Catherine Tate

Lord, will you dance with me today?
Can we join hands, perhaps even to embrace?
Would you like to swirl and turn with the depths
 of my heart?
Joyfully circling in laughter and in love,
 be my partner.
Lead me with your strength.
Take me here and there, my life, your ballroom.

How to Lose \$30 and Your Dignity

by
Ashley Wrye

You are tired. Tired of the endless streams of Friday nights where you lay on the couch, parallel to the floor, and remember the joys of being parallel for other reasons. When the college students start calling you ma'am instead of miss, you start to feel the clock ticking. It's time to do something that you previously deemed the last stop on the way to Spinsterville: online dating.

You start by posting a profile on the most innocuous sounding of the dating web sites. It takes forever to describe your attributes with persuasion and accuracy and only 250 characters. Nothing you write will even remotely sound like something that would normally come out of your mouth, but this isn't something that you'd normally do, so you let it go.

For the first couple of days, you feel the rush of excitement when you open your email that is normally reserved only for \$15 sale shoes and free makeup. Your inbox is filled with a wide range of men from which to choose a date. There's the business type who suggests a lunch date. You decline, knowing that his ploy to insure the date has a one-hour time limit is too contrived for your taste. Next is the more artistic gentleman who has a passion for music or art or both but no stable income or home that doesn't include family members. There are two responses from men who admit they are married. You begin to realize that your \$15 sale shoes have no sole.

Finally amid the emails are a couple of men who seem potentially suitable. One describes himself as an "attractive funny southern gentleman who knows how to treat a lady." You believe that you don't really qualify as a "lady" or that his description "southern gentleman" doesn't imply that he would know how to treat one, but you let it slide and give him your phone number.

The second suitable suitor included a picture in his email and you're immediately attracted to it. The picture shows a blonde guy with a cute smile. You email him and repeatedly forgive the misspelled words and lack of intelligible "conversation." He's cute, so you cut him more slack than the average guy.

Suitor #1 calls you immediately. You have a nice, real conversation. He asks all the questions that are required of him, and you wonder if he looked up a list of questions to ask while he was online. School, hometown, why online dating, books, music, movies. You cover it all but wonder why you've gotten bored talking about yourself. That never happens. For some reason, instead of being excited to give an answer, you cut him off and volunteer to meet him for a baseball game. You've also read some articles about online dating and know the rules about meeting in a public place. Mercifully, you hang up and immediately begin to countdown the minutes until the "meeting." Or Thursday night, as he calls it. And in the ensuing emails, he calls it that often. It seems as if he's constantly reminding you that you are obligated to meet him now. You can't forget it. In fact, it's the only thing that keeps you replying to his emails.

Instead of going through the motions with Suitor #2, you decide to forgo a phone call and set up the meeting through email. A phone call might reveal a hobby, accent, or lisp that

would detract from the attractiveness. Better not to ruin it now. He agrees and you arrange to meet on Saturday afternoon. It seems better for you to see him during the daylight hours. More lighting to bounce off his golden hair.

However, before you can get to Saturday afternoon, you must first make it through Thursday night, which seems to have come like a Monday morning after a particularly good weekend. You meet your date by WILL CALL and realize that all future online suitors must submit a photo before a date is arranged. He smiles nervously and you can see the sweat rolling off his freshly shaven head. It is July and you now wish that you were smart enough to have worn a natural fiber shirt instead of the cute one. Cotton would've made the evening a smidge more pleasant.

After the third inning, your date has yet to shut up, but has at least gotten up for beers. He brings you back a light beer and comments on how that's what women like. You don't bother telling him that you prefer dark beer because he won't be getting a further opportunity to buy you pale ale.

Suddenly you realize that you are being hard on Suitor #1 and decide to lighten up and try to make the conversation flow a little better. Perhaps the heat, beer and sweat have made you irrational and cranky. A couple behind you are talking loudly. One gives a running commentary on the action of the game and the other asks questions. This prompts you to turn around and look at the couple. The woman is wearing dark sunglasses and carrying a cane. It makes sense to you now. However, your date does not look back. He just sits and repeatedly says in a loud voice, "Geez, what is she? Blind?" You wince in discomfort, but don't feel bad enough for him to correct him. You leave him to look the fool on his own and make apologetic looks while mouthing "Blind date" to people in neighboring seats. You realize that maybe you weren't so tough on him after all and sink lower into the seat.

You go over to a girlfriend's house on Friday night as sort of a sorbet to cleanse your palate after Thursday's debacle. Innocuous movies, pizza, and a rehashing of the blind experience has purged it and made you ready for Saturday afternoon.

You meet Suitor #2 at a local brewery and get your choice of many dark beers. He glances you over but does not do anything to make conversation easy. You begin asking the questions and realize that he doesn't like sports, has a thing for Björk and only wears designer clothing, despite his lack of job. He cares little for what you do for a living and at one point his hand begins shaking. When asked, he cites post-traumatic stress disorder. He was not in the military, but lived in California when the big earthquake of 1989 hit. Of course, he was ten and lived in San Diego, but still claims he is feeling the residual effects. The next 30 minutes are about California, a place he lived for six formative years about eight years before this particular Saturday afternoon.

The attractiveness of Suitor #2 cannot compensate for the post-traumatic stress you will suffer from this date. You ask for the check and he winks at the waitress as she lays it down. He then pushes it forward with the tips of his fingers; as if the check caused the earthquake he suffered through. You don't fight it for fear of making the meeting last any longer than necessary. He leaves before you've signed the credit card slip and you are mad that he robbed you of the chance to reject him first.

You resolve in the car on the way home that Spinsterville sounds like a nice place to live. Much better than California.

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Tuesday, May 18

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