Saw palm florida literature and art





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Anderson's Light:

An Address to the Quotidian Lightning Strike Society

Allie Mariano

When it storms, I stay inside. I twist the blinds closed, pull the cheap black curtains too. I shut out the storm with blasting music, something with big brass. Trumpets bleat and trombones boom. I turn on all the lights, push the furniture to the walls, and dance like I'm Gene Kelly. Anything to keep out the storm. Even then a thunderclap will sometimes break my Faraday shield, and I shudder. But I cannot see the lightning. I shuffle ball step, ball step, and I am safe.

Today I address you, fellow lightning strike survivors and supporters. I'm here to tell you my family history. When the storms press too close, when a strike from the heavens seems inevitable, I want you to remember my story, think of Anderson and Guy, and blast some big brass. I'm not here to

frighten you. There is comfort in resignation.

I rarely leave my home in Gulf City, have no reason to. You never know where you might end up, out in the open, without the protection of four walls and a roof. My house is on stilts, and I'm two stories high. I can look out over the ocean or turn to the back and see who is coming down the road. Though half the year brings hurricanes and more lightning than you could imagine, those storm-driven afternoons, gray and sheet-like over the beach, are my home.

My father was the second generation in my family to be killed by lightning. My grandfather was the first. You can see why I must be cautious. I am destined to tiptoe through life, to avoid the casual dangers of existence. I cannot believe in the powers of guileless caution, nor in the persuasion of statistics. Quick and simple, Zeus has chosen, has sought us out

and struck us down.

It may seem strange, the abode I've chosen with its proximity to water and vulnerability to storm. But it is my homeland, the place of my ancestors, where I grew up, and where,

I'm sure, I'll die. I don't go out much summer, fall, winter, or spring. The next storm is closer than you'd think. The sky turns, and you're dead before you've even thought, *storm's brewing*.

Maybe you've heard of me, or saw my name in the paper when my father died, all those years ago. Maybe I'm a perfect stranger, but you've something to gain from hearing my tale. My life is a strange story, tied up in my family's sad saga of fate. Perhaps you'd better understand if I lay out the facts, fill in the blanks. Though I, this late in life, still try to make sense of it all. Anderson and Guy met their destiny in bright flashes. Moments I have envisioned and replayed till I'm positively shaking with anticipation and fear. Even in those moments, I pull out the old tunes and stomp my feet until I break a sweat.

My grandfather was a company man. Anderson Blitz worked twenty-two years for Gulf City Light, Gas, and Water. Never once was he late. Never once complained. Never once misfired on his switchboard. I gleaned these facts from my mother who admired her father-in-law a great deal. I was not even a thought, not even a glimmer on the day he died. My father called him "that unlucky sonuva" and was embittered that Anderson's beloved company wasn't a bit of financial help to the bereaved—but my father can wait.

Anderson was a power dispatcher. He ran the power switchboard for our small city and recorded readings at the map board. He was also fascinated by electricity of its own accord, loved tinkering with little fixtures, finding new ways to light things up. He presided over an Inquisitive Minds group at the junior high when my father was a boy. A sort of scouts for the science-minded. My mother met him and my father in that club. She was twelve, and she was brilliant. Anderson would teach them the intricacies of electrical current, would enlist them into the construction of devices of his own design.

I once found a box full of wires and gears and screws and bolts all thrown every which way; leather straps, bulbs of assorted size with their dead fuses rattling in their glass shells. His contraptions. I was thirteen, my father, too, was gone, and the items were covered in dust. Silverfish darted into Lichtenberg patterns. I smelled the must and the cracked leather and savored the slight tinkle of the fuses. So delicate and cheerful in the sad dead of the box.

Anderson's contraptions would mostly house light bulbs. Anderson's lights, he'd call them. My mother said they hung in every room, graced every tabletop. "They were odd," she said, "but so inviting. The light was warm and welcoming." With a wistful smile, she would tell me about his half-dreamed structures formed of piping and spare cogs, wires woven into glorious shapes. None of these remain. After Anderson's death, my father got rid of them, forbade them. My mother mourned and stuffed what she could into the hidden-away box. He must have been her personal hero, taught her to be analytic and cautious, but even that didn't protect her from my dad. Photos of Anderson show a spectacled grandfather archetype. A thin, beardless St. Nick, a kind generous professor, though there's not even the slightest hint of whimsy, not an upturned corner of a smile.

I inherited my grandfather's caution, his perfunctory prudence. He lauded safety and kept a tight ship of a home. My father must have learned to double-knot his laces so as not to trip, to always carry minor tools in anticipation of a broken watch, a broken cap or carburetor. Caution was key and requisite. My mother mentioned this too, that her father-in-law always knew the forecast, would remind visitors to keep their raincoats handy and their umbrellas near.

His caution may have run much deeper; surely he unplugged every outlet before leaving, so as not to cause a fire. Only showered when someone else was home, so if he fell they would hear him. I'm filling in here, making assumptions. I'm a little like my father, and Anderson's essence seems to always be hovering just above me. I understand his caution. My mother didn't have to tell me about it. I've known it since the day I shot out into this perilous world.

Now that I have invoked Anderson's aura, you can understand. The day he died was gusty, but the humidity had not broken. His eyes opened with the first hint of sunlight, and

he patted the long vacant spot beside him. He got out of bed, pulled the chain of his bedside lamp—mostly coiled copper pipe with a stretched canvas shade. He strode to the bathroom, performed his morning toilet. All perfunctory and precise, with the exception of his slow, contemplative shave, during which he dragged the razor down in even, straight strokes. In the kitchen, he began the coffee, then went to turn the switch on the tin can lamp in my father's room, waking him up. (He was eighteen—my grandfather's dying wish would have been to have him finish high school.)

Anderson returned to the kitchen, made breakfast, left a plate for my father, cleaned up, grabbed his umbrella, his raincoat, called to my father a final time, and strode out the door. He was a clock, the clatter of each maneuver a perfectly coordinated routine. On the walk to work he whistled, thought about his latest construction: where to place the bulb on the multifaceted Slinky chandelier. His umbrella clicked the pavement. He had one mile to work.

With the first crack of thunder, he spun his umbrella, popping out the black fabric. With the next clap of thunder, he had crumpled on the sidewalk.

The coroner reported that the lightning struck his wristwatch; he had a perfect singed ring around his wrist. After that, the story is mostly standard. My mother, in school to be a nurse, reconnected with my father at the funeral. Months later she was pregnant, and they were married.

I flew here yesterday in the gusts of Tropical Storm Wyndham. Wyndham has been slowly building, accumulating strength and victims. Just thinking of the ordeal makes me want to hum some Cab Calloway. Back in Gulf City, I sat at the gate. I started whistling a Satchmo tune, a trumpet solo, tried to avoid seeing the whirlwind outdoors. I had to tap my toes to keep focused, a three-count waltz pattern. I tried to keep my arm gestures to a minimum, being outside the comfort of my living room. I couldn't push the furniture and passengers aside. Those passengers on either side of me graciously got up and moved.

When boarding began, I was humming as loud as I could

with my eyes clenched shut, blinking now and then to make sure I was headed in the right direction. I began the arm movements, channeling old Kelly. I'm sure the other passengers didn't appreciate it, but otherwise what would happen? I would shake and shake and cry and explode.

On the runway, a flight attendant touched my shoulder, asked if I was all right. I nodded, investigating each of her wrinkles, in awe of the black runny lines around her saggy eyes.

"You've got to keep it down," she told me. "You're making

the other passengers uncomfortable."

I nodded and kept humming.

"Really, you're scaring people," she said and looked up and down the aisle. "We will escort you off this plane."

I stopped for a breath. "Earplugs? A blanket?" I had missed a full eight counts of music, and resumed humming up the crescendo.

She raised one of her old penciled-in eyebrows and walked away.

When she came back, I was whistling the second trumpet solo: she handed me both items and stared me down. Quick as a terrible lightning strike, I rolled the plugs in my palms and stuffed them in, threw that ugly navy blue blanket over my head.

In the quiet dark, I could stop.

I didn't emerge until I felt the clunk of touchdown. I tell you this to paint a portrait of my life, to show you how the truly enlightened live. Caution is key. The trip back home looms closer every second.

There are those who have survived lightning strike and those who know lightning strike is inevitable. I am, of course, of the second group. Old Zeus is just waiting to catch me, and I live in fear. The society wants me to paint a portrait of the lives and deaths of Anderson and Guy, and I will explicate how inevitable it is, how I too am en route to the same end.

I have to tell you about my father now. He is never easy to talk about, though he seems to crop up often and without apology. I know my eccentricities are his fault; I was a nervous child in the hands of a madman.

My mother, I would love to elucidate, but she is among the living. Her ghost doesn't force itself out of my mouth. The early years I don't recall. She finished her nursing degree, went to work, supported my father. The first pregnancy was a miscarriage, and that was the beginning of the end for Guy.

He thought himself invincible. "Lightning never strikes the same family twice," he would exclaim, running out into a storm wearing extra jewelry, my mother's thimbles, and carrying small electronics: a radio, a dust buster, waving these things about, dancing in the downpour. He liked his drink, was prone to bacchanalian soliloquies.

"Perfectly safe was what your grandfather said, said precaution and planning would keep him safe, and I guess they did until they didn't.

"That is why," he would conclude in a whiskeyed stupor. "That is why. Safety. Doesn't. Matter." He would draw out each word, pronounce each consonant as if he was giving directions to the fountain of youth. He knew he would live a long time. He saw no import to insurance; he had invested in the assurance that lightning would never strike him.

He would give these speeches with bloodshot eyes, standing on the one kitchen chair with three legs. The chair would

wobble, he would sway. Every second precipitous.

Point made, he hopped down into a drunken arabesque, swept the bottle off the counter, and poured the liquid delicately into his glass, pinky raised. This final drink would be gone in a flash and, with a pat and a "night, son," he would walk lightly to the bedroom. I would remain in the kitchen, fix a tuna sandwich for my mother who worked the night shift in triage. I would slop mayonaisey fish onto white bread, wondering at what point he had jumped up on the chair and why that chair never collapsed.

My father was only a passionate drunk, never violent or depressed. I'm sure he had been fearless since childhood, in constant defiance of his own father's careful safety, but my grandfather's sudden, random death had most likely awakened a sense of mortality coupled with a love of his own brand of statistics. And by his count, statistically, there was no way he could drop dead so randomly. He was guaranteed to live long and somehow that guarantee never inspired him to work hard. It was as if life would be his constant, joyous revel.

He was never happier than when he was four drinks deep, driving in the pouring rain without headlights on, straddling the double yellow line, or when, on a family vacation, he had finished a few beers at lunch and was leading my mother and an eight-year-old me down a precarious hiking trail into the Grand Canyon.

As a young man, I moved to the desert, lived in an adobe box apartment. I thought I would be safe from the storms; I remembered the constant dry heat of that childhood trip to the canyon, thought I would find some peace among the red rocks and vast desert. I had to move back to the water though, I felt dried up without the humidity and the ocean. It's like that albatross, and I'd rather have water water everywhere, than be surrounded by that bone-dry and scorched dust. I'd take the lightning any day over suffocation by tiny burning particles. The rain was an enemy I knew; all I needed was my stomp stamp stomp shuffle ball change ball change to protect me.

I am avoiding my father, perhaps like Guy loathed the memory of Anderson, who left him without a cent. My body shakes with anger, quivers with resentment at the uncertainty he left. For some reason, though, those wild memories of my father and his daring make me feel the most alive. But they don't make me feel more sane. It's an uncomfortable yearning, to remember when all of the control was in someone else's hands. When the only thing keeping me safe wasn't a flimsy song and dance.

The dancing started after his death, I was eleven and as nervous as a boy who witnessed his father's death could be. My mother signed me up for tap lessons, said I shook like the jitterbug, should put that energy to use. I picked up the basics quick, but I never lost the nervousness. How could I? Maybe you will understand:

My father and I walked together in the pouring rain. Everything was white, must have been early afternoon. The rain fell in white sheets; all things around us were muted smudges in

the blur. I inhaled that warm clean smell of rain as I balanced on the curb, one foot in front of the other. My dad's step was more of a swerve, a careen to one side then the other. He leaned away from me, and I let go, not wanting to be pulled off my path.

These walks in the rain were a constant of my childhood. It's a veritable surprise I didn't die from pneumonia. It's a surprise I didn't die from any number of afflictions and tribulations. Guy was more Greek god than father, not all loving, but

always all-powerful.

The thunder and lightning were simultaneous, and I found myself lying in patchy crab grass. I was a child, but I knew I was alive. I stood up, looked down at the felled hero. He was in the grass too, on his back, one arm extended up and out toward the road. He had a smile on his face, and I sat down next to him, just sat. We stayed there until my mom pulled up in her car, wondering why we had been gone so long. The rain had abated; I sat and shook.

After his death, I developed more of Anderson's quirks. My mother grew quiet and distant and sad, and all of the things that follow a death. When I found that box in the closet, I kept it from her, though now I know she must have been the one to cache it.

I have one more thing to share with you, then I have all night to dread my flight home. The invitation, the one that brought you here, did you notice the image? The man riding a bicycle, wearing a foolish helmet. The light bulb atop his headgear. How he peddles toward a distant hill where lightning is striking? That man is my father and my grandfather fused into one. The fascination and innovation of my grandfather inserted into the foolhardy arrogance of my father. Together they are an unstoppable force, willing me into my destiny. But those men may have had something going. They did keep going. They weren't holed up with brass as their only company. I can see this now, now that I'm forced to reflect and share that reflection with you.

I'd like to thank you all for giving me your time, for hearing my story. You people, of all people, know that lightning

is coming, that resigning to fate is natural, if not downright sensible. Roy Sullivan knew that best. Perhaps we should rejoice in our knowledge. There is nothing more honorable than being chosen by the gods, whether they're Greek or simply our fathers. When I head back to Gulf City, Wyndham will still be raging, and I'll sit at the gate and watch it pour down. When they call us to board, we'll have to walk across the tarmac in this rain. I'll be the first out the door. I'll stop before I reach the stairs and stomp stamp stomp. I'll shuffle stomp, ball step. Stamp kick ball change, ball change. I'll howl like a trombone and lightning will strike just beside my toe.

Thank you.

Flood Subject

Gianna Russo

If all the frogs are gone now, what is this hysterical glee club beyond the window forecasting dawn and downed power lines?

Winds lashing the unmown grass, thrashing Spanish moss out of the oaks so that swaths strew the yard like dirty grey tee shirts.

Nature throwing it down, and rain flogging the laurel oaks so they shake like drenched dogs while light commits a drive by at morning.

Winds galloping down the empty avenue, rasping the sidewalks, sandbagged and abandoned as the day flips inside out like a cheap umbrella.

New band of surges, and for godsakes what is the true subject toppling the sunflowers, the one that won't recede no matter how clear the outlook?

Same old report: loss, loss, a station I can't seem to change.

A Florida Education

Dianna Calareso

"The cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears, or the sea." -Isak Dinesen

The first two things I ever learned were how to swim and how to run away from an alligator. I haven't yet had to run away from an alligator, but I know to run in a zigzag pattern, since alligators' tails are disproportionately heavy compared with their torsos. They are fast, but it slows them down to change directions and swing that massive tail around. Never, never run in a straight line.

Learning to swim as a very young child was useful. Before fighting an undertow current in the Atlantic Ocean and swimming out of a white water river in North Carolina, I fished my little sister out of the pool when I was four and she was three. She had been floating on the water, and then began to sink. I thought she was sleeping, and figured she'd be more comfortable on the top step of the pool, so I dove down to the bottom, dragged her up by her arms, and floated her over to the step. I went inside to tell my mother, who was folding laundry near the sliding glass doors, that Julie was sleeping on the water. As it turned out, she was drowning. My panicked mother called 411, then 911, and when the medics showed up she screamed and cried while they pumped on my sister's chest and tried to get her to breathe. Eventually her blue face spit up water. She survived, and I was a hero, though I didn't know it for many years. I really just wanted to make her more comfortable.

Sometime later I learned that the giant grouper fish is hermaphroditic, and that you have to wear jeans in the Everglades because the sawgrass will cut your legs, and also that you should not, under any circumstances, step on a jellyfish. I grew up thinking everyone had learned these things as a kid, and was shocked to find out that there were adults who couldn't

swim, and tourists who thought the Everglades were some sort of tropical paradise.

I learned that when you are very young and still take baths with your sister to wash the sand out of your hair and the smell of chlorine off your skin, there is a right way and a wrong way to take a bath. The right way is to sit calmly in the water and clean your arms and legs while you wait for your mother to return to wash your hair. The wrong way is to turn the water back on and let it run while you splash each other and slap the water with your hands in a game called "ocean." The water will spill out all over the floor and your mother will come in and yell very loudly because the bathroom is a mess and you haven't even cleaned your arms and legs yet.

In first grade I learned about the difference between cold and really cold. My school uniform was a green polyester jumper with a white button-up shirt underneath, penny loafers or saddle shoes, and a white polyester blazer to wear over my jumper every Wednesday, which was "Dress Day." The blazer was intended to make our tiny selves look sharp, but it was really insulation, trapping the Florida heat and humidity under all that polyester. We also had special sweatshirts with our school logo to wear anytime it got cold, which by our standards was anything under 70 degrees. However, if it got really cold—50 degrees or lower—we could wear our own sweatshirts and jackets to school, as if the children of South Florida even owned heavy winter coats and jackets. I don't remember wearing anything warmer than the school-issued sweatshirt, but even if I had, I'm sure by the middle of the day I would have taken it off, my body already too warm under the heavy cotton and fleece.

In fourth grade I learned to wear deodorant, but I didn't think I was allowed to so I snuck it in my backpack and put it on at school. I didn't know anything about puberty and why hormones suddenly make kids smell like a filthy locker room. I

just knew that I lived in Florida and I was always sweating. The deodorant was a solid white stick, a travel size that I must have stolen from my mother's bathroom. Even though I applied it in the morning, I was sweaty. I'd reapply at lunch, sneaking into a bathroom to roll fresh deodorant over the dried crumbs of the morning's application. Then I'd sweat through the rest of the day.

After Hurricane Andrew blew away the big architectural screen enclosing our patio, I learned about pool safety and weather. It's okay, even delightful, to swim in the rain. The cold rain shocks your skin when you've been in warm water under a warm sun, and you shriek with the chill and the freedom of getting caught in the rain when you're already soaking wet. Nobody makes a fuss, griping about the umbrella at home, crouching helplessly under a newspaper or plastic bag. A few minutes later, the rain will probably stop and the sun will come back out to blaze at 90+ degrees. You hold your breath and squint your eyes and stay underwater for as long as you can while the sun flickers over you.

I learned to water ski at the lake house, with a pair of Snoopy water skis that were tied together at the nose to make sure I learned to keep the skis straight. The first few times I tried, I fell forward, water rushing up to burn my nose and sting my eyes. I learned to use my arms to guide my body back into position, keeping the skis in front of me and my legs crouched as I held on to the rope behind the boat. Finally, I learned to press the skis forward, trampling the water underneath, sliding in and out of the wake as I skimmed the water side to side. I learned to hold on with one hand so I could wave to my dad as he drove the boat, and I learned how to let go as the boat slowed down so I could bend my knees and sink back into the lake. My sister and I learned important hand signals for communicating with the driver of the boat when you are being pulled behind in a giant tube. We would lie side by side on our stomachs, holding

on to the rope handles on either side. Once my dad started the boat, we were flying, the water spraying up into our faces as we laughed and screamed. To make the boat go faster, we would give my dad a thumbs up. To go slower, thumbs down. To stop the boat, a thumb across the neck. I learned to give this signal before it was too late, before we hit a patch of waves that sent us flying from the tube, cartwheeling in the air before smacking the water below. There would be a moment of panic, our bodies stinging from the shock, and then laughter as we swam back to the boat and climbed up the ladder, collapsing on the seats with a beach towel wrapped around our shoulders.

I learned that my cousins up North had never had a "hurricane day" off from school. They had snow days, which they usually had to make up in the summer, but they never stayed home on the day before a major hurricane hit, the sky a clear, cloudless blue and the air clean and quiet. Hurricane days were a mix of chaos and peace, the palm trees swaying gently in a soft, cool breeze while my parents loaded up the minivan with jugs of water, miniature cans of Sterno cooking fuel, and batteries for the flashlights. We'd fill up the bathtubs with water, just in case the bottled water ran out, and then we'd make giant X's across all the windows with masking tape to keep the glass from shattering into the house. When the work was done, we could spend the day outside, playing by the pool or watching the neighbors secure their hurricane shutters, because everyone in Florida knows the day before the storm is the most beautiful, quiet, perfect day you'll have all year.

The day after the storm, my dad would let me go with him on a drive through the neighborhood, going very slowly through the flooded streets, pointing out trees that had fallen onto soggy yards and branches that littered the roofs of houses and cars. It would be another quiet day, until everyone came out to clear away the mess, slogging through the puddles on the grass and encouraging each other that it could have been so much worse.

*

Our school was an "outdoor school," meaning we entered classrooms from the outside, instead of from inside one main building. This was common for schools in Florida, where it was temperate enough to do so, but the constant in and out left us sweaty, then chilled, then sticky, then frozen, then sweaty again. One day in high school my little sister sweat all the way through her purple button-down shirt, and I met her in the hallway outside the front office. She pursed her lips and blinked very fast but the tears came anyway. "It's okay," I told her. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You probably have a fever." "I'm so sweaty," she said. "Don't worry," I said. "Call Dad and see if he can pick you up." My father worked for himself in those days, so he left his office and picked her up. They went back to the house so she could take a shower and change her clothes, and then she came back because we had volleyball practice. Sometimes we got to practice in the big gym with air conditioning; sometimes we practiced in the small gym with a big fan blowing the hot air around while we wiped salty sweat out of our eyes and sopped up sweat from the floor with our kneepads. I drove us home with the air conditioning on, chilling us through our drenched t-shirts, and my sister was happy.

When I began working at summer day camp as a swim teacher, I learned it is not okay to swim if there is thunder or lightning. The part of me that calculated my hourly rate and hoped for tips from the parents knew that I should be disappointed when afternoon thunderstorms threatened the kids' swim time. But as a languid teenager just killing time until I could finish high school and get to college, I couldn't care less about making a little less money that week. I began getting dressed for work—swimsuit, shorts, tank top, flip-flops—while praying for rain. I'd walk outside, keys and lunch in hand, look up at the sky, and sulk to my car, straining my ears for the slightest boom. At work, while I helped the preschoolers float around the pool with their diapers bulging behind, I'd stare up at the sky, begging it to open up and send these kids inside so I could go home. If I got my wish, within twenty minutes I'd

be at home on the couch, dozing to daytime TV while the rain splashed on the patio outside.

I came home for fall break, a confident college freshman with new jeans and much shorter hair. At lunch time I drove to my old high school and picked up my sister so we could walk on the cool, wet sand dividing the dry hot sand and the warm lapping waves. Our feet pressed into the sand, leaving impressions that were quickly washed away by the water slowly climbing up the shore before slipping back to the ocean. We had brought along a disposable camera and took pictures of ourselves against the blue sky as we jumped in and out of the smallest waves. My sister had to get back to school for a math test that afternoon, and I knew my parents would kill me if she missed her test. But I had learned that everything you think is a huge deal in high school doesn't really matter. So we threw our shoes and the camera onto the dry sand and ran, fast and yelling and waving our arms, straight into the water. We came up for air, rubbing the stinging salt out of our eyes and spitting it out of our mouths. The gentle waves carried us as we stretched out our arms and legs to float on the surface, and they pulled us along as we swam underwater, squinting our eyes tightly shut. Everything was warm, and free, and much later I would find the picture she had taken of me as I jumped in the air, looking back and laughing. When I drove her back to school, dripping wet with only ten minutes before her test, she rushed to the bathroom to change into the spare clothes she had brought for volleyball practice. They wouldn't be in line with the dress code, but they would be dry.

I learned about outgrowing a place during the summers I was home from college. My sister and I would finish our work for the day, she as a sandwich maker at Subway and me as a summer school writing instructor, and go for long walks through the neighborhood to pass the rest of the day away. I learned that if you walk the same route enough times in one summer

you will see baby ducklings grow into small ducks, and you will see the same kids playing basketball in the driveway, and you will sometimes be able to walk the entire way without noticing anything.

When I'd been gone for more than ten years, my body acclimated to the snow and ice and wind of New England, I still couldn't learn how to dress properly for the cold, my closet full of sun dresses and sleeveless shirts that I simply topped with a heavy coat instead of replacing with wool sweaters and thermal underwear. I learned that there are some things you simply can't unlearn, and I learned to be thankful for that, in case I ever do need to run away from an alligator, and in case I have a daughter who wants nothing more than to float on her back in the waves of the ocean, learning that no place will ever feel as safe.

At The Key West Boat Races

Ft. Zachary Taylor

Danielle Sellers

Here where two oceans smack together, the heart-palp of engines send the lambent, windward outboards skipping like stones below the crumbling bluff. Men die each year, their boats' strange underbellies floating up like fish giving up their ghosts. Still, how wonderful to be that close to it, the sea, the speed of light.

Obsolescence

Raul Palma

My mother was born a thousand feet above Hiroshima. She remembers being in the womb, sleeping with her ear against the cold carbide case and listening to Enola Gay's propellers. She remembers falling. Even now she parts her hair to show me the keloid scars on her head and explains she was merely crowning when the mandorla burned at four-thousand degrees. "It was a cruel way to enter this world," she says.

Everyone that carried my mother in Shima hospital died of radiation poisoning. Allegedly, she was named Akako, "red child," by a nurse who eventually lost all her hair and her wits and surrendered to a river of corpses. All the rivers were bubbling up with corpses on the day the bomb fell, although I'm not sure how she knows this.

My mother was rescued by the Russian's Alliance Investigation Division. They found her at the site of the demolished Shima hospital. She was bundled in stone and iron. Unaware that she had a name, the Russians named her Helga, "holy," after the battleship that transported her to Havana. Seven crew members died of radiation poisoning on that voyage.

Cuban officials knew there was something different about Helga. When Fidel Castro took power he personally ran top secret experiments on her. He wanted to harness the power of the atomic bomb. With his beard, he zapped all her powers into dreams and shoved them into a tiny golden box he still keeps under his pillow. "Now I'm just an older mom, and I'm okay with that," she says. "Because I can spend time with you."

"But what about Fidel Castro?"

"Don't worry," she says. "He doesn't know how to use the powers."

"What if he learns?"

"He cannot learn, mi amor. People like him never learn."

We lived west of Miami. For a long time, our home was on a rural prairie near the Miccosukee Indian Tribe. Our front yard

faced a field of sparse dead trees. The backyard was an oasis—a two-acre mango grove cultivated by my father. The grove was fenced in by giant night-blooming cereus hedges, which protected the delicate mango flowers from the gusts. There was a shed at the heart of the grove where my father raised red lories. Sometimes other birds visited the lories—herons, anhingas, ibises. A statue of Michael slaying Lucifer protected the shed. Its base was sealed with candle wax and rose petals. During the Christmas season, my mother would wrap the statue in multicolored lights.

The Indians used to ride through these prairies at night. On those hot summer nights, when the air-conditioner would freeze over, my parents and I sat out on the front porch and watched the outlines of horses and Indians cross us at dusk—the glowing embers of their cigars were like the beacons of air-

planes flying overhead.

My father sat with his dentures on his lap beside a carton of mangos, just in case the opportunity to trade arose. What he wanted was turtle meat. He'd heard the Indians were bountiful in it. He'd never tasted it before, and had heard the flaps of its flesh were an aphrodisiac. Although he'd caught many turtles before, something about ripping the turtle out of its shell didn't agree with him.

"You're a selfish old man, sitting there with just enough

mangos to save your own life," my mother said.

"Stop that, Helga. Do we have to pick at each other all the time?"

And she'd form her hand into the shape of a bird's beak and pick at his side. Then she'd laugh and tell me stories—her adventures fighting Indians in Cuba. "That's what you don't know. Those Cuban Injuns are good for nothing—the worst kinds of pigs: pigs that steal pigs. They'll steal your pigs before you even know it. Those pigs used to steal our pigs all the time. They'd come down from the mountains and take everything but the pig heads, so all we'd find were a bunch of pig heads in the morning. So you know what I did? I killed them. I tied a red stocking around my head and hid in the mud. When they climbed into that pen I launched up out of the mud and scared

the pigs out of them. Some of them cried for mercy. Others knelt in defeat with their hands clasped behind their heads. I shot them. Then I chopped them up with a machete and fed them to the pigs. All I left were those pig's heads, and I left their heads along the pig pen enclosure, as a warning to the rest of those pigs. That year the pigs were nice and fat and we ate well. Pigs will eat anything if you let them, you know? They'd even eat you, mi amor."

"You're scaring the poor child," my father would say. He'd slice open a mango and offer, but I didn't eat mango then—I never wanted to. I'd look at the dentures on his lap. For a long time I was convinced there was some sort of release latch in my mouth that would allow me to remove my teeth also.

When I was a child I didn't have an appetite. My mother had to be clever in order to feed me. She'd take me on lizard hunting expeditions in the grove to distract me. Every time I'd catch a lizard, she'd sneak a spoonful of rice into my mouth. Then she'd take the lizard from my hands, snap its neck and toss it over the cereus hedges.

"Do we have to kill them?" I'd say, my mouth full of rice.

"What? You feel bad for a lizard?"

"Yes, I do."

"Don't be like your father, mi amor. Let's find another one now."

Eventually, we weren't so much concerned with brown and green anoles. Those were clumsy lizards. They were quick to defecate and had a tendency to lose their tails when we'd catch them. It was the Cuban Knights we searched for—the noble, vicious and venomous lizards. We'd shake them off the mango trees. Then my mother would let me beat them with a broom until I'd broken their legs, or paralyzed them. When they could hardly move, she'd snap their necks and toss them over the hedges also. Then she'd force a spoonful of rice into my mouth and say, "You'll need your strength for the next battle, mi amor."

After I'd grown accustomed to eating rice, she tried to get me hooked on meat, so she'd mince flank steak and hide the bits under a plate of rice and diced mango. She'd feed me as we hunted for Knights, but I'd sift the meat and the mango out with my tongue, and I'd form these giant flavorless balls of meat between my teeth and cheeks. She'd reach into my mouth and fling those fibrous masses over the hedges. "Here you are throwing away perfectly good food," she'd say. "Meanwhile, Fidel Castro is drinking horse milk. He's getting closer to the secret of my powers, you know?"

"I thought you said..."

And she'd interrupt me by shoving another spoonful into my mouth.

That one month in the summer when storms knock all the mangos to the ground and the sun turns the pulp to yellow jelly so that the yard is buzzing with horseflies, my mother and I would clean the yard, shoveling mangos into a wheelbarrow. We'd push the wheelbarrow over to the cereus hedges and spend the afternoon flinging them over. Occasionally, she'd cup a handful of jelly and try to shove it in my mouth. I'd have to bite her fingers to make her stop.

Concerned I might spill over due to heatstroke, she'd pour cups of ice-water over my head. In retaliation, I'd hose her down. By the end of the day we'd be soaked and covered in mango pulp and she'd curse at my father for all his planting. "Your trees are going to be the death of me."

When I was eleven, my father raised birds for a living. He spoke bird. All it took was a few whistles and caws and he'd have any bird eating mango out of his hand. He started out with love birds, but upgraded to lories. One Easter he seduced a peacock into the yard and trapped it in his toolshed. Convinced trapping a peacock was bad luck, my mother snuck into the toolshed with me. She handed me a broom.

"Why don't we let it go?" I said.

"Because if we let it go, he will whistle and hold out some mango and catch it again. He always catches them again."

"We can blindfold it and take it far away and release it in a nice place it will never want to leave."

"It will return," she said. "All birds end up here."

She poked at the broom and asked, "Are you going to do it?" Before I could answer, she grabbed the peacock by its neck. The lories went nuts—cawing and beating their wings against the cages. I had to cover my ears to bear with their high-pitched shrieks. They sounded like sirens. Their shrieks were ringing and digging into my skull, so I thought I might cry their cries. I was going to step out of the shed, but my mother slammed the door shut. She looked at me. The curls of her hair were plastered against her face with sweat. She lifted that peacock over her head. Then she twisted its neck as if it were dough. She was spinning the bird over her head, slamming it into the spades and shovels and pickaxes affixed to the ceiling. It rained red and green feathers. When she dropped the bird on the ground, it lay grey and limp and she laughed. It was an embarrassed laugh. She'd gotten carried away and made a mess and she knew it. Stuck to the blood splotched shed walls were the peacocks feathers, which made it seem like we were being watched by a thousand blue eyes.

We spent the afternoon cleaning the shed, careful to remove all the feathers. She threw the peacock over the hedge. The following day, when my father asked what had happened to the peacock, my mother shrugged and said, "It must have escaped."

"Helga," he said. "Leave my birds alone."

"Be quiet, old man."

The red lories were known to attract pests so my father purchased a cat named Kitty. There was an open lanai and sometimes Kitty would leave snakes or birds as offerings on the welcome mat by the screen door in exchange for a can of tuna. Occasionally, I'd poke Kitty's offerings with a stick, which my mother could not tolerate. She'd curse, "Coño. Carajo," and fling the dead animals over the hedge. Then she'd beat Kitty with a broom, and my parents would argue about the proper ways to treat animals.

When Kitty vanished, it seemed natural then that every-

thing should end up flung over the hedge at one point or another.

Sometimes at dusk I'd climb over the hedge, careful not to prick myself, and I'd play in the prairie. I'd pretend I was an archeologist looking for dinosaurs and I'd dig up the bones of all the lizards and snakes they'd thrown over the hedges for all those years. There were many. Kitty was there, and so was the peacock. Sometimes I'd poke at Kitty's bones. However, I'd leave the bird bones alone. Something about the way birds decompose, whirled about their feathers, reminded me of angels.

It was lonely on the other side of the hedge. How I wished there was someone to help me unearth all these bones.

The excavators arrived the summer I finished middle school. The sparse trees were removed. Pits were dug all over the prairie and filled with water. Roads that led to nowhere were laid. At night we'd sleep to the rumbling of distant dynamite, and I'd imagine Florida's limestone crust ripping open, revealing it's primordial pulp.

I remember when the famous community developer, Escalado, knocked on our door. My father generously offered him a bucket of complimentary mangos. Escalado had come to place an offer on our home—half-a-million dollars. My parent's declined. Perhaps if he'd included turtle meat in his offer, he'd have received a warmer reception.

Escalado named the prairie Mango Lakes. Even though he was rich, for a long time he lived in a trailer surrounded by excavators and limestone rubble. In the trailer there were three miniature model homes and water-colored sketches of what he imagined Mango Lakes would eventually look like—there would always be a sunset. Our home was not part of Escalado's dream. "He'd have to choke on it," my mother said.

I started choking the chicken, or pulling the weasel, tugging the turtle, snapping the lizard's neck, doing the five knuckle shuffle—whatever it is people call it these days—at around the time my parent's unofficial dumpsite was purchased. The new owners, Indians, converted that section of their land into a pri-

vate pool, the kind that has those petrified cherubs pissing into it. Townhomes were erected around the yard and before long the rats and the snakes were gone. My mother, however, continued to fling. Neighbors sitting on their second-story balconies watched her litter their yards with rotten fruit, or the severed heads of holiday pigs. Seldom was there a knock at the door or a complaint. Sometimes neighbors simply threw the heads back, but mostly the neighbors quietly dealt with the inconvenience.

On those long afternoons, which should have been dedicated to catching up on high school summer reading lists, I'd sit by my bedroom window and watch Jen Longbody swim—she was the daughter of the Indians who'd moved in next door—and watching her swim would make me stiff as a diving board. She had this long dark hair that would trail behind her breast-strokes like the train of a wedding dress.

The only reason I knew her name was because I'd heard her parents yell it when they'd call her in. I'd watch Jen Longbody climb out of the pool dripping wet while my mother watered the trees below. When my mother would catch me peeking through the curtains and glancing over the hedge, she'd aim up and hose down my window so all I'd see were the refractions of light in her blasts of water.

That one month before school goes back into session, when it rains every afternoon, and the hurricanes dance off Florida's coast, I'd help my mother tape giant "X's" onto the major windows—even if there wasn't a storm coming. "Better to be prepared," she'd say, although I wasn't sure how tape would protect glass from a hurricane.

"How about hurricane shutters?" I asked.

"Tape is fine."

I'd help her carry the statue of Michael slaying Lucifer into the shed. Then we'd carry in all the aluminum yard furniture, and all the crap my father had accumulated over the years. The lories would shriek when we'd enter the shed and she'd slam her palm against their cages, verbally reminding them about the Peacock.

In 1992, the summer before my senior year, it rained terribly and we had one hurricane, Andrew, which might have killed us all had it not veered south toward Homestead. Winds blew against our home at over two-hundred miles per hour for nearly a day. It sounded like a train was ratcheting by the house, scraping against the walls. When the hurricane had passed, we learned Andrew had taken the shed. It was raining red feathers. We also learned he'd smashed one of our "X's" in the guest bedroom. Part of the roof lifted off, and it seemed the ceiling had oozed its guts like a rotten mango—orange foam, soaked and dripping onto the carpet. The carpet was infested with flies. The door to this room was shut and sealed off for weeks.

The entire neighborhood lost electricity, which made nights difficult. With no A/C we slept in our underwear on the hall tiles with all the windows open. My mother would leave one candle on, and if I needed to use the bathroom I'd have to take the candle with me. I'd never examined our home under candlelight. The simplest objects, a hand carved turtle my father bought in the Dominican Republic, a photo of him playing guitar and smoking a cigar, vibrated under its light. Shadows ran from my field of vision, so wherever I placed the candle changed my perception of things.

During the days my father walked to the general stores on Tamiami Trail and waited for shipments of ice, which wouldn't come for a long time. My mother and I cleared debris from the yards: part of a satellite dish, shingles from the neighbors roof, panels of plywood and branches. We'd pile this all up by the side of the road. Then we'd sit at the kitchen counter and I'd watch my mother eat the only thing available, mangos.

Helping my mother fling bunches of mango skin over the hedge, I wondered how the Longbodys were faring after the storm. From my bedroom window, I could see their pool had been drained. The cherubs were gone. There was a golden box powered up on the side of their house, and under careful examination I realized their windows were closed. Their air-conditioner was working.

That night I told my parents about the Longbodys. My father brought out his mango buckets. My mother helped him fill

them. We walked around the block and to their house. It was the only house that had its lights on. Something about having the porch light on seemed gluttonous in our hurricane aftermath.

My parents were afraid to ring the doorbell, so I did. Jen Longbody answered. She was dressed in a Dolphin's football jersey and matching sweatpants. She had a blue beeper clipped on her waistband. Her hair was wet and braided. She was holding a Nintendo controller in her hand. "Hi," I said. She smiled.

"Get your father. We would like to trade," my mother said.

She plopped down the bucket of mangos.

"There's nothing to trade except electricity," Jen said. She reached into the bucket and took a mango. Her father came to the door and invited us in. My parents followed him into the living room with their buckets, to count mangos I imagine. I sat on the floor next to Jen, facing the television and feeling the cool A/C blowing over me.

"Do you play a lot of Nintendo?" I asked.
"Not really. Now it's the only thing to do."

"What do you do then?"

"When the pool isn't drained, I swim," she said, though she was more inclined to play Mario Brothers than talk.

After a moment of awkward silence I asked, "You swim

professionally?"

She didn't answer. She'd just gotten a star. She was glowing and radiating and running through the dessert, killing every turtle in sight. When she reached the end of the level, she jumped up on the flag pole and as she slid to its base, the points were counted off until she received a free man.

"One up," she said and she laughed. "What do you think of that? Bet you can't do better." So she handed me the control and we played Mario Brother's through the night, dying more than winning.

Around midnight, Jen took another mango, sliced a piece of it for herself and another for me. I nodded my head and said, "I really don't eat mango."

"Who doesn't eat mango? Try it."

"Maybe another time."

"But this one is really good," she said. "You have to try this one." She held the mango in front of my face. My mother walked into the room, saving me from the mango. Instead, Jen ate the slice. Then my mother sat next to us because it was time to go. She said, "You two would make wonderful babies."

"Mom," I said.

Jen laughed and scooted away from me. "Your mom is crazy." $\,$

That night as I lay on the hall tile under the glow of the Longbody's home listening to the breeze in the mango trees, I wished the electricity would never come on again. Feeling the breeze blow on my parts, I wanted to pleasure myself while thinking of Jen. I went to the kitchen and sliced a piece of mango into the shape of her lips. Then I returned to the tile floor and set those cold lips on my own. Mango juice dripped

down my face. Some of it dripped into my mouth.

I thought of Jen's wet hair braided, its knobs dragging along my skin. I bit into the mango, sucked on its pulp. I thought of her laughter every time she'd run into a koopa troopa, or fall in a hole. I imagined going for a swim with her sometime and being so stiff it would hurt, and I swallowed the fruit, and reached for her, but something wasn't working, because then I'd think of the peacock choking, and its bones poking us in the pool. I'd hear the red lories shriek and peacock feathers would bubble to the surface. Dynamite would rumble in the distance. She'd be swimming away, trying to get away from the excavators, her dark hair following her like the train of a wedding dress, and I'd see my mother standing over us holding a bowl of rice and conjuring up a grandson.

Señorita

Bianca Diaz

In the hearts of men,
The arms of mothers,
The parts we play to convince others.
—First Aid Kit

In your tribe—Nordic wife and daughter pedestaled, blonde, almost made of cotton—there was little room for desire. The river

behind your house ran cold and clear. Damselflies pausing on logs, red wings' liquid trills announcing morning. The occasional fawn, even,

across the shore. My talismans were anoles, saw palmettos, espresso, gold hoops. Here is the truth: won over by your beer-lit drawl,

your years in BDUs, your actual use of hoosegow in a raucous tale at a wine tasting, I played exotic. Yes, I speak Spanish. Yes, we all bare

our shoulders, even on Sundays. I'll allow you to sleep on my bed, watch me dress. Soon, I was convinced every young mother

noticed the length of my skirts and tsk-tsked to their toddlers as I walked by. You proclaimed you liked the tension between us, like a taut cord

that hums from a slim breeze. What you didn't know yet: I was watercolor, diluted, a fleshy triptych of ancient saltwater, fugitive beauty and a yielding

to the other women tucked inside of me like Russian nesting dolls.

Perfectly Windy Sky

Bianca Diaz

Gray waves exhale onto shore rocks—dumb and silent stones. Mothers and daughters

sigh too. Our pillowy throats conduits for expelling the profound wattage within us.

In the museum of you, beached jellyfish recline against seaweed, bulbous, inelegant. Clasps of heavy cameos oxidize. Paint brushes soak in Ball jars, redblueyellow eddy in the water like ribbons of lithium.

Air is isotonic with the body. I am like you.

The wind in this sky performs a kind of scuttle over the earth. We breathe and watch, interested, but exilic.

Our Dog, Pancakes

Michael Cuglietta

We moved into the pink house. In New Jersey, there were no pink houses. The color, more so than my father's signature on the mortgage, made it official. We were Floridians.

My mother had always been obsessed with cleanliness. But, it wasn't until we moved into the pink house that I realized the

depths of her obsession.

The day we moved in, our Old English sheepdog, Pancakes, took a shit on the living room carpet. She was a well-trained dog. She hadn't had an accident since she was a puppy. The excitement of the move must've gotten to her.

"What have you done?" My mother grabbed Pancakes by her collar, buried her nose in the dog shit. "Look at this," she said. "Look at what you've done." She yanked her collar so hard her front paws lifted clear off the ground. Pancakes let out a small cry. She dragged her out to the back porch, ordered her to stay, and slammed the sliding glass door so hard the house shook.

"Jerry," she called to my father as she frantically opened boxes, "what box did you put the cleaning supplies in?" He was assembling a set of drawers in the master bedroom. He pretended not to hear.

"Do you kids know where the cleaning supplies are?" From the couch, we shook our heads. Defeated, she took a seat next

to us, wiping her brow with the back of her hand.

My little sister, Nicole, walked over to the sliding glass door, pressed her palm to it. Pancakes licked at it from the other side.

"Nicole," my mother said. "Get away from that door. Pancakes is a bad dog."

Nicole turned her back to the door. Pancakes laid on the

concrete, her chin flat, her big black eyes looking up.

I ran into the kitchen to check under the sink. Just as I suspected, the previous owners had left a bottle of liquid cleaner, a small bucket and an unopened pack of sponges. I filled the bucket with warm water from the tap.

"Look what I found, Mom."

She jumped up, reaching for the bucket. "Nice job, Mike." She went right to work, spraying the carpet, wetting the sponge.

"Do you think it'd be all right if I got Pancakes a bowl of

water?" I asked.

She looked up at me. She hadn't put on any make-up that day. Her face was tired. There were lines around her eyes. "Do you see all these boxes?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Let's not worry so much about the dog. Let's focus on getting these boxes unpacked." She looked over at my sisters.

"That goes for all of you. Everyone grab a box. If we work

together we'll finish in no time."

"Then can Pancakes come back in?" Nicole asked.

"Nicole, what did I just say to your brother? Stop worrying about the dog."

Nicole's eyes swelled as she picked up a small box marked Pots and Pans, and carried it into our new kitchen.

The pink house meant everything to my mother. After we moved in, she bought all new furniture, exchanging the worn out couches that were older than me, for some brand-new, expensive ones. There were strict rules involved with the new furniture.

"We can finally afford nice things," she told us. "Nice things have to be taken care of."

When she found Danielle eating a turkey sandwich on the new couch, she grounded her for two weeks. After leaving a can of Coke on the new coffee table without a coaster, I was ordered to clean all the toilets in the house for a month straight.

We were assigned chores and then criticized for not completing them to her satisfaction. "You call this a clean dish?" she'd yell. "If you're not going to do something right, why even bother?"

Our bedrooms were closely inspected. "You're telling me you're done cleaning your room?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Are you sure you didn't just shove everything under the bed?"

"Ummm..." I'd stutter.

"Let me ask you again. And this time, think before you answer," she'd say. "Are you done cleaning your bedroom?"

"No, Mom." I'd turn and walk away, defeated.

"How are you ever going to make it in the world?" she'd call after me.

Filthy animals, like Pancakes, were not welcome in our home anymore.

"She'll be fine out on the back porch," my mother told us. "Can we at least get her a doggy bed?" The concrete irritated her paws. The fur on her legs had been scraped away. I worried about infection.

"She doesn't need a doggy bed. She's fine."

The back porch looked into the living room. At night, when the family gathered around the television, Pancakes sat with her body against the sliding glass door, looking in on us.

In the old house, she used to lay on the floor, in-between my sisters and me. She never made any noise or bothered anyone. She was just happy to be a part of the family. We'd rub her belly. She liked that best. She'd roll onto her back, her paws bent, her tongue hanging out.

We tried everything we could think of to get my mother to allow Pancakes to come back inside. It was useless. There was nothing we could do or say to change her mind. Eventually, she put an ad in the paper:

Sheepdog needs good home. Housebroken. Good with kids. Free

to anyone willing to come pick her up.

The ad ran for a just over a month. It wasn't easy getting rid of an old dog like Pancakes. There are a lot of dogs that need homes. Puppies are in full demand. Tired old sheepdogs are not, even when offered free of charge.

My father went to work early each morning, before I got out of bed. He always left the paper unfolded on the kitchen table. The first thing I did each morning, before brushing my teeth or using the bathroom, was check the want ads. I'd turn to the Pets and Livestock section. I'd scroll through with my finger, my heart beating fast with fear and hope. Fear that the ad would still be there. Hope that my mother had finally come

to her senses, called the paper, had them remove it.

One evening, I overheard a conversation between my parents:

"We gotta do something with that dog," my mother said. "I hate to say it, but if we don't find a home for her soon I'm going to have to take her to the pound."

"Someone will call," my father spoke with little confidence. "We'll find her a good home." I couldn't decide whom I was angrier with, my mother for trying to give away the dog or my father for not stopping her.

Eventually, my mother found a new home for Pancakes, a young couple, who owned a cabin on a few acres of land. They had a horse, a goat, and two dogs, one a mutt, the other a golden retriever.

A few weeks after they took her, the woman called the house. I answered the phone. When I heard her voice, my heart sunk. I thought for sure she was calling to give us back our dog. I handed the phone to my mother then ran into the dining room to listen in on the other line.

She wasn't calling to give the dog back. She was calling to yell at my mother. She wanted to know how someone could be so cruel to such a sweet dog. She had taken Pancakes to the vet. Her skin was badly infected. The pain was intense. When the vet touched the infected parts Pancakes jumped off the exam table.

"I'd never heard a dog cry like that," the woman told my mother. "I don't understand. How could you treat her so terribly? People like you make me sick."

When my mother hung up the phone she was in tears. She ran to her bedroom, locked the door behind her. She stayed in there the rest of the night.

When my father came home he sat in the bedroom with her for a long time. I pressed my ear to the door. I could hear my mother. She was crying.

"I just want to be alone," she said. "Please, just leave me alone." My father took us out for pizza that night. We went to Mama's Pizzeria. It was our favorite place. We had a large pie with pepperoni and onions and an order of garlic knots. The

garlic knots were the best at Mama's. They were crispy on the outside and soft and steamy on the inside. They were covered in a thick pool of butter and sprinkled with Parmesan cheese and fresh herbs.

"What's wrong, Mike?" my father said as he eyed the untouched slice on my plate. "You're not hungry?"
"I guess not." I shrugged my shoulders and pushed the

plate to the center of the table.

That afternoon I had come across an old home video, shot on the day we took Pancakes home from the breeder. She was so tiny back then. It's hard to believe she was ever that small. Her coloring was different too. In her old age her black fur had gone gray.

In the video my mother was throwing a chew toy for Pancakes on the front lawn. She was so small she almost got lost running through the uncut grass. She was a dumb dog. It'd take her a while to find the toy. When she did, she'd be so proud. She'd race back to my mother, drop the toy in front of her.

"That's a good girl," my mother spoke in a baby voice. Pancakes rolled onto her back for a belly rub. "Look how cute she is

Jerry," she spoke to my father.

He turned the camera on me. "Mike," he said. "What do

you think about the new puppy?"

I started to answer but was cut off by Pancakes. She came out of nowhere, knocked me onto my back. She got on top of me and started licking my face. I was in hysterics, laughing so hard it looked as if I might suffocate. The more I laughed the more excited Pancakes got.

Finally, my mother came over and pulled the dog off of me. "She was giving you kisses," she explained. "That's a good girl." She held Pancakes up to her face, let her lick her check. She had a big, sloppy tongue. "Say hello to the camera." She took Pancakes' little paw in her hand and made her wave.

"We're running low on battery, Diane," my father said.

"Say bye to the camera," my mother said to my sisters and me.

Together, we spoke into the lens. "Bye, Bye. Thank you for the new puppy. We love her very, very much and are very happy to have her in the family."

"Say bye, bye, Pancakes." The last shot is of my mother making the dog wave bye to the camera. Then, my father switched it off. The screen went dark.

I'd never seen the video before. But, that afternoon, I must've sat through it a few dozen times. I couldn't stop myself. Each time the screen went black I'd hit the rewind button and Pancakes would reappear.

You'll Be Beautiful, Sonny Boy

James Schlatter

Sonny sat on the edge of the canal bouncing stones off an alligator's snout. It was August, evening, and the setting sun left a golden sheen on the canal's skin, broken only by bulging eyes and a long, scaly mouth. From the size of its head, Sonny guessed the thing to be twelve, possibly fifteen feet. He searched in the crabgrass for another stone, but seemed to have exhausted his supply. If he were to take it to the next level, he would have to rise from his wicker chair and scout the backyard. But he remained seated, contemplating houses backed up along the canal-one-story stucco structures, some with swimming pools, most with lawns sloping toward the canal, which didn't even lead to the sea. A canal to nowhere. The amazing thing was that people paid extra to live in this alligator den. Even now, all up and down the banks, children were running about, jumping through sprinklers, tossing footballs. At any moment, an alligator could leap out and snatch one of their legs, drag them under and store them beneath a sunken log until feeding time.

Sonny slapped at his calves, felt the grit of a dead mosquito between his fingertips. After wiping his hands in the grass, he walked up toward his house, observing his mother through the sliding glass door as he went. She was seated on the sofa, an old, unbelted dress loose on her rangy frame. She'd recently lost weight—her face looked as though the skin were being sucked inward, sharpening her jawbone, the hollows of her temples. It seemed unlikely anyone would love her again—not because of her looks, but because of her habit of talking about the dead.

He slid the glass door open into chilled air. His mother kept her gaze on a news program she watched every evening before dragging herself to the tub. Sonny slouched next to her, spreading his legs and draping his arms over the sofa's back. The television sat on a rollaway cart that Sonny's father had put together from a box.

Different versions of Sonny hung from the walls, peaking at age twelve, just before the growth spurt that left him stumbling down halls, his cheeks fissured by acne. He was better now, but socially, the damage had been done. His parents hung there too, though their smiles seemed put on, his father's especially.

"You need anything for school?" his mother asked during a

commercial break.

"Some new sneakers."

"I mean supplies. Pencils? Folders? Books?"

"I haven't even used the ones from last year."

"That's because you didn't study."

She reached for her Winstons and lit one, her bony fingers trembling so that she had to keep the flame a beat longer at the cigarette before it caught. As she inhaled, she flicked the spent match into what had once been a ceramic soup bowl but was now littered with squashed cigarettes and fingernail pairings. She turned away from Sonny and blew the smoke out in one long jet. The few times he'd tried her cigarettes, he'd gotten sick. "I'll do better this year," he said.

"Just as long as you graduate, I don't care what you do."

"I'm not joining the army."

"I always pictured you as a salesman of some type. Something where you can show off your height."

"Not my looks?"

"You'll be beautiful, Sonny boy," she said. "When you get a chest."

Sonny went into his bedroom. He switched off the bedside lamp. Black light etched the faces of guitar-playing demons glowing from posters tacked to the wall. He sat on his bed and picked up the telephone. He kept the door shut and the stereo turned low so that his mother wouldn't hear his voice.

"Hey."

"How's it going, Sonny?"

Sonny didn't answer right away, instead holding the receiver away from his ear and squeezing it. When he brought it back to his mouth, his voice was a whisper.

"I want her again."

His father drew breath through his teeth. "About that—"

"Mom still talks about you like you were dead," Sonny said. "Friends. Strangers. Anyone she meets."

"All right, Sonny. But you've got to find your own girlfriend soon. Sharing like this just isn't right."

"And leaving us was?"

"I couldn't stay another second in that house."

"Thanks."

"Not you, Sonny. You're number one."

"I wonder how you'll really die."

"Look, you can come over tomorrow morning? When does school start?"

"Next week."

"You need anything?"

"We're pretty broke."

"Stop by the office before school starts."

"Sure."

"I'll call your mom in a few weeks," his father said. "At some point she has to acknowledge what's happened."

"Don't count on it."

After he hung up, Sonny buried his face in the pillow and screamed until his throat was scraped out. He'd known his parents were in trouble because they were so silent. During the good years, they fought tooth and nail, loved so loudly the hanging spoons shook in the kitchen. It was crazy, sure, but Sonny loved the power of their feeling. When the house grew quiet, Sonny became nervous. He waited for the shouts, the slaps, the recoveries. After awhile, it became a question of who was leaving. When it turned out to be his father, Sonny wanted to hurt him. That first visit, when he met Maxine, he'd found his way.

Maxine's place was in northern Cocoa Beach, along a stretch of A1A that hadn't been developed because of dangerous tides. Sonny pulled his VW Rabbit into the lot of the Space Coast Apartments and stepped out into the fierce sun. At nine o'clock, it was already ninety degrees. Sonny pulled the shirt from his back. His legs were sweaty. He tucked his long, sunbleached hair behind his ears as he walked around the side of the building.

He knocked on the door a long time before Maxine answered. Her breasts pushed out one of his father's t-shirts. A scribble of flaming-red hair stood up on her head. She yawned, rubbing last night's grit from her eyes. She smelled of the old man—tobacco and stale air conditioning. It made him think of sick people.

"Sonny," she said, holding the door closed except a crack.

"It's early."

"Not too early."

"Shit." She scratched at her navel, lifting the shirt as she did, showing the horizontal scar of a c-section above rust-colored curls. "Did Oscar send you over here?"

"He said this morning."

Maxine yawned. With the heel of her hand, she rammed herself in the forehead a few times. She opened the door. Sonny followed her in, the stale, cigarette smell increasing.

"Didn't say a word to me," she said.

Dirty clothes were piled up on the living room floor. The windows were smeary with crushed insects. Wine bottles everywhere. The place was as cold as a meat locker.

"You eat yet?" she said, in the kitchen.

"I'm fine."

"You drink, don't you?"

"I prefer nighttime."

"That's the amateur talking. I never drink at night. Go to bed full of that stuff and you'll feel like hell the next day."

She reached in the fridge and got out a bottle of sparkling wine and filled a juice glass halfway up. No fizz left, but she added in a little Sprite and it bubbled up nicely. She swallowed it in a shot.

"There we are," she said, her eyes bright. "You sure you don't want a drink?"

Sonny threw off a few towels from the sofa and sat. "I'm sure."

Maxine filled up another glass the same way, but only sipped at this one. She set the glass on the counter and walked over to Sonny. She straddled his legs and pushed her breasts into his face. "Like this, Sonny?"

"Take off your shirt."

She lifted it over her breasts. Shirt off, her hair sprang back to shape. He took hold of her breasts. They were translucently white below the tan line. He sucked on each nipple, holding the rubbery ends between his teeth.

"Gentle," Maxine said.

"I want to take off my clothes."

Maxine got off and Sonny pushed his shorts down and took off his t-shirt. His body was still sweaty from the drive over.

"Nervous?" Maxine said, holding his penis.

"I'm fucking freezing," Sonny said. "And you smell like my dad."

"Forget him," Maxine said, straddling him again.

They bruised each other's mouths and then Sonny was hard and she moved it in for him. She bounced around, her breath sweet. He gripped the flesh over her hips, tried not to get hit with her breasts. He couldn't tell real from fake, but she was grunting and sighing. He didn't move too much, afraid of falling out or doing something stupid. When she started chanting, he pressed her hips into him and shot semen into her. She drove her teeth into his neck.

Afterwards, she stood naked in the kitchen frying ham, cigarette between her lips. Her face was bright in the sunlight coming through the window, breasts flushed. Sonny put on his damp underwear and tee-shirt, not wanting her to see his soft penis, the chest everyone made fun of. He went into the bathroom and washed his face. He recognized his father's silver razor, the cream he liked.

"Fried okay?" Maxine said, when he walked out of the bathroom.

"No eggs," Sonny said, and sat on a stool. "Just ham and toast."

"No wonder you're so skinny," she said, sliding the fried ham onto toasted white bread.

"What are you eating?"

"Just my drink," she said, setting the plate in front of him. "Sounds healthy."

"I don't eat until five o'clock. After this, I'll lie down awhile, then I'll have me a pot of coffee. Mind if I keep smoking?"

"I'm used to it," Sonny said, and bit into his sandwich.

"I like cigarettes first thing."

"Not much up this way," Sonny said, looking out the window.

"No. Funny having your dad here though. Almost three months now and not a damn cent. Not even the groceries."

Sonny put the half-eaten sandwich on the plate. "So you

have a job?"

"I have a dead husband. Boat accident a few years ago. All of them drowned."

"What did you do before?"

"Before I was married?"

Sonny picked the sandwich back up. "You could do something part-time. I bus tables."

"Government gets me through all right. I like my freedom."

After he finished the sandwich, Sonny put his shorts back on. He went out on the porch overlooking the parking lot. Heat fumes rose off the blacktop. Beyond the chain link fence, bright green weeds grew through the gravel of an abandoned lot, the house cleared away except crumbling bricks. Maxine joined him, his father's t-shirt wrinkled where it had been wadded up.

"Nice view, eh?"

"Why do you live here?"

"If Oscar would help we could get a nicer place—I've always liked Melbourne. Better restaurants. Here all you have is hamburgers and shrimp shacks."

"What about me?"

"I don't mind," she said. "But aren't you starting school soon?" $\,$

"Next week."

"Maybe you'll meet someone."

"I meet lots of people. How long are you going to stay with him?"

"He's staying with me."

Sonny gripped the railing. When he pulled his hands away, green paint chips stuck to his palms. He wiped them on the

front of his shorts.

"Do you love him?"

"I loved my husband."

A gull swooped over the lot, its feet inches from the tiny, white flowers tipping the weeds. Its body rose once it reached the road and banked toward the ocean.

"My dad's still married, you know?"

"I'm sorry, Sonny." She touched his shoulder. "This must be hard for you."

His father's office was along A1A just before the bridge. Two stories, mirrored windows, parking lot in front. Inside he was hit with another blast of chilled air. He shivered talking to the receptionist.

"Go right in," she said.

He was still smelling her perfume as he walked down the hall. Photographs of astronauts in orange jumpsuits stared from the walls. They were sixties' men—brush cuts, sideburns, glasses with thick, black frames. Just before the stairwell, a lunar lander pushed its way onto the second floor, steel legs buried in cement. Sea-colored light reflected off its metal surface.

His father's door was the first on the right. He knocked once, and then heard his father's voice beckoning.

"Sonny," he said, putting his sandwich down.

"Hi, Dad."

It had been a few years since he'd been in his father's office. His degree from San Diego State University hung over a bookshelf filled with bound manuals. Sonny sat in the padded folding chair across from his father's desk. Between them, there were stacks of papers, cups with dried coffee slopped over the sides, a glass ashtray, and an assortment of pens and pencils. Sonny sneezed a few times, his nostrils filled with ash and dust.

"What brings you by?"
"I was just at Maxine's."

His father bit into his ham sandwich. "How was that?"

"I think I woke her up."

His father chewed up the ham, jaws clicking. He wore a short-sleeve button-up with a black tie loosened at his neck.

Just above the collar, scabbed teeth marks showed the outline of Maxine's bite. Sonny fingered his own, still raw, though Maxine's teeth had never broken the skin. He doubted his father could make them out.

"I'm working through lunch today," his father said, and wiped mustard from his fingers with a paper napkin. "We have a proposal due Monday."

"What's it about?"

"A new space station. We're supposed to supply the food. My idea is to create a big tank up there. An underwater ecosystem. Plankton and minnows. All the way up to sharks. Imagine living in space and eating fresh fish everyday."

"I thought you were supposed to just write the thing."

His father peered in each of the coffee cups. He picked up the telephone. "Ms. Hazlitt? Is there any coffee left? Fine. I'll be down in a few minutes." He set the receiver on the hook. "You know I found Maxine lying on the side of the road. I pulled over because I thought she was dead. Middle of the goddamn day. I shook her and right away I could see she was just drunk. I found out where she lived and drove her there. I took her into this pigsty and instead of tucking her in bed, I took off her clothes and we went at it on a pile of stinking goddamn laundry."

Sonny pulled the damp shirt from his chest. He wondered if his father could smell Maxine's sex on him. "She said you should pay a little rent."

"I'm surprised she would say that."

"She doesn't have a job."

"She's got some kind of pension. Besides, I'm helping her in other ways. No more liquor. She's eating again. We've even talked about getting her a fish or bird. Something she can care for."

"You shouldn't be so stingy, Dad."

"Divorce, Sonny. Do you know how much lawyers cost?"

"Mom's trying to collect life insurance. She's started going to Mass again. It's pathetic."

"I'll call her soon."

"Why don't you just come home? You can have my room."

His father rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"It's too late for that."

"You don't even have to talk to her. Just let her see you once in awhile."

"I'll see her. You're still our son." He stood. "Come on. I'll walk you out."

"I'll walk myself out," Sonny said, and got up so quickly he knocked his chair down.

"Hold on," his father said, just as Sonny reached for the door. "Let me give you some money."

Sonny went back to the desk, kicking aside the tipped chair so that he could stand directly across his father, who remained seated. His father took the wallet out of the desk drawer and searched through a stack of bills. He selected three of them and held them across the desk. Sonny took them without touching his father's fingers. He counted them: Two tens and a five.

"Fuck you," he said, flinging them back at his father.

His father stood, banging his chair against the wall. He was shorter than Sonny, but probably fifty pounds heavier. Sonny prepared his face to get hit, loosening his neck muscles and his eyes already closing. But his father abruptly sat back down.

"Stay away from Maxine," he said. "She doesn't want you."

That night Sonny sat across from his mother eating chicken casserole. He'd made it himself—a package of cheesy noodles, canned chicken and frozen peas. He'd boiled the noodles too long and they came apart in his mouth like wet paper. His mother, still in her nursing uniform, pushed back the hair from her eyes and sipped at her rum and soda.

"I think I'll get a haircut," she said.

"I like your hair, Mom."

"It's too hot. This whole state is too hot."

"What are you thinking?"

She scooped up a few noodles, but then set the fork against the side of the bowl. She broke off a carrot stick with her teeth. "California," she said, chewing. "I miss it."

"I barely remember it."

"You loved it there. So many boys your age in that neigh-

borhood. This town has never been right for you—for any of us. It cursed your father."

"Stop it."

"Well, it's true. If we'd stayed in California none of this would have happened. He'd still be here and we'd all be happy. I never understood his wanting to move to Florida anyway."

"His career."

"Do you remember that eucalyptus tree in the front yard? It was as big as a hill. Tim Whalen lived next door with those twins—Greg and Jeff. Jeff was your friend, but Greg was touched."

"I saw Dad today."

His mother picked up the fork and put it in her mouth. She swallowed the noodles with obvious distaste.

"West coast beaches are so much nicer," she said. "Here it's just a few dunes. You can't even camp on the beach. Do you remember that first summer here when we lit that big fire? The whole town came down on us and there was your father trying to pay everyone off. Must have been twenty police."

"I went to his office," Sonny said. "He's talking about get-

ting a lawyer."

His mother bit into another carrot stick. She looked toward

Sonny, but her gaze fell somewhere off his left shoulder.

"I'll call that old agency," she said. "The house is probably just sitting there. It wasn't much anyway. That curved driveway that was such a pain to back out of. Why did we ever paint it that ugly shade of yellow?" She laughed, showing bits of carrot on her tongue. "God, your father out there with his shirt off."

Sonny got out of his chair and walked around the table and put his arms around his mother's shoulders and squeezed her. She smelled of the disinfectant soap they used at the hospital.

"What is it, Sonny?"

"He's alive."

"God rest his soul. I still feel him too. Get my cigarettes, will you?"

"He's living with some woman in Cocoa Beach. He's going

to divorce you."

"Divorce in heaven. He was a brave man in his own way. I'm not that religious, but God will reward him. Anyone that dies by fire shouldn't have to burn in the hereafter."

Sonny went into the living room and retrieved her Winstons. When he came back in the kitchen, his mother was sipping her rum drink.

"Here," he said, setting the packet next to her bowl.

"These noodles are overcooked, Sonny."

"They're disgusting."

"I'll make us some sandwiches. A little girl died today."

Sonny pushed the Rabbit into the street, letting it coast to the stop sign before starting it so that his mother wouldn't awake. No one was on the road, though as he ascended the Indian River Bridge, he noticed a few kids out in the water with flashlights digging up oysters. The river smelled of rotting leaves. Along the banks, pines bent in the wind. He coasted down the bridge remembering the drive east the summer he turned twelve. They'd stayed in motels just off the highway, the kind with broken ice machines and couples arguing violently in the parking lot late into the night. They ran the air conditioner on high, as though they could store the coldness inside them for the long days of driving across I-10, through Phoenix and Houston and New Orleans, scorching cities that had nothing to do with the warm, crisp afternoons of Santa Maria. Just into Mississippi, they'd taken one such motel. Sonny was awoken early that morning by a car crash. He looked out the window, beyond the parking lot, where a car was burning, the flames green and blue, beautiful and icy-looking, like photographs he'd seen of the Northern Lights. His mother was at his side, her hand gripping his shoulder and breathing excitedly. A burning figure emerged from the wreck. Even above the rattle of the air conditioner, Sonny thought he heard its screams. The figure staggered about the highway; then, as if recognizing Sonny and his mother in the window of the motel, swayed around the wreck and fell toward the guardrail, somehow managing to scale it and continue into the parking lot before collapsing in a heap of fire. As Sonny turned onto A1A, heading north, he thought how his father had slept through the entire episode, even disbelieving them the next day, while his mother sat curled in the passenger seat rocking and moaning his father's name. The bastard was probably with Maxine now. Still sleeping. If Sonny knocked lightly on her door, she might answer and then he could hold her, convince her to come outside with him. He could still save her.

Hanging with Harry Crews: July 2011 (or, I Hope I'm Still This Feisty When I'm 76)

Ron Hefner

In March 2012, eight months after I had spent a memorable day with my friend Harry Crews in Gainesville, a comrade of mine in the Florida Gulf Coast University English Department came by my office and said, "Did you hear about Harry?" He didn't have to elaborate. I knew Harry was gone.

I shut my office door and cried.

I'm grateful that I had an opportunity to chronicle his thoughts and feelings in the last year of his life. Here's to you, Harry.

On a blaring hot July day, we're cruising down a shaded street in Gainesville, Florida, en route to Harry Crews' house. His invitation a few weeks ago had been typically succinct: "Come on by, son. And bring that good-looking woman with you." He's referring to my partner, Lisa. I'm hoping he'll also notice me.

At first, we can't find his house. There's no mailbox. We finally spot a narrow dirt track leading back into deep woods.

We're in the right place. The mailbox is next to the front door. I find out later that the mailman makes a special trip to the front porch of Gainesville's resident celebrity.

The house has brown wooden siding and is surrounded by massive old live oaks and pine trees. The roof is covered with pine needles. A five-year-old white Ford Taurus is parked outside the garage.

We ring the doorbell. Harry's live-in caregiver, a pleasant-looking lady named Darlene, opens the door and smiles. "Hi," she says. "Come on in." She jerks a thumb toward what looks like a bedroom. "He's in there."

Harry sits on the edge of his bed, seventy-six years old, wearing a pair of sweatpants and an old t-shirt. His legs don't work, and he has neurological problems in his lower body. A tube runs from his pant leg to a clear plastic bag. "It's a cath-

eter. I never heard of such a thing before," he says. "When they first put it in, the nurse said it would go into the end of my penis. I told her, 'I don't have a penis; I have a dick. I'll bet you stand on the sidewalk with one of those things, waiting for the first dick that comes by.""

Harry talks about his leg problem. "I was out walking my dog, and all of a sudden, I went down. The doctors can't figure out why, but I think it's from the polio I had when I was a kid." Harry's numerous motorcycle accidents haven't helped, either.

He's getting physical therapy daily. "I'll be walking a hell of a lot faster than the doctors think," he says. "They can't

even tell a good lie."

We admire Harry's tattoos. The most notorious one features a skull and a line from E.E. Cummings' poem "Buffalo Bill": "How do you like your blue eyed boy, Mister Death?" The one inside his arm—a cabinet hinge—was acquired while he was on assignment for *Playboy* magazine, writing about the workers on the Alaskan oil pipeline.

Then there are the battle scars.

"Look at this one," he says, pulling up his shirt. "It's a nice-looking scar. It runs from my sternum to below my pubic hair. I got in a fight with a guy at a fish camp, and he tried to gut me with a filet knife. When I got to Shands Hospital, I was holding my guts in my hand. The nurse at the ER asked me if I needed a stretcher. I said, 'No, lady. I walked here on my own. Why would I need a stretcher?" He pulls down his shirt. "I was in an induced coma for, I believe, seventeen days. I've been to Shands so many times, the doctors always joke that there ought to be a Harry Crews suite."

Harry still writes five hundred words a day. The novel he's working on now, like much of his work, is based on his own experience. "I was living in an apartment in Jacksonville with my mom and brother when I was twelve," he says. "There was this beautiful lady upstairs, about twenty-seven, twenty-eight-years-old—just prime. She never left her apartment. I was her connection with the world. She gave me money and sent me out to buy things like nylons and groceries. Turns out she was a whore. At the time, most of her clients were plainclothes cops.

After that, she only saw Greyhound bus drivers."

The new novel will be written from the viewpoint of a twelve-year-old boy. "I'm writing it in first person, which is easy to get into and hard to get out of," says Harry. "I have to account for the way he walks and talks. And I have to capture the 'grit' thing—you know, the redneck thing."

Harry sends Lisa into his office to get part of the new manuscript. "It's on the floor next to the desk," he says. While she's gone, he talks about seeing a deer in his backyard, how proud he is of his recently remodeled bathroom, which he insists I go take a look at. "You know how I got that?" he says. "Seventeen books."

Lighting a cigarette, Harry says, "I use a computer like a typewriter. I don't know anything about email and all that bullshit. I start about four in the morning. Right now, my work day is done."

Lisa returns with part of the manuscript that she finally found, not on the floor, but on Harry's desk. I scan the first few pages, noticing that Harry's young narrator, upon first meeting the attractive older woman, has a "semi." Harry Crews would never use the term "partial erection."

Harry seldom uses first person in his novels. But he had no choice in A Childhood: The Biography of a Place, a moving, even sentimental, account of the hardships of growing up on a tenant farm in Depression-era south Georgia—and probably the only Crews book you could give to your mother.

In that book, Harry writes about returning to his rural home after being discharged from the Marine Corps. His Uncle Alton took him to a country store to meet some old friends of his father, who died when he was twenty-one months old:

Even as I was gladdened listening to the stories of my daddy, an almost nauseous sadness settled over me, knowing I would leave no such life intact. Among the men with whom I spent most of my working life, university professors, there is not one friend of the sort I was listening to speak of my daddy there that day in the back of the store in Bacon County. Acquaintances, but no friends. For half of my life, I have been in the university, but never of it. Never of

anywhere, really. Except the place I left, and that of necessity only in memory. It was in that moment and in that knowledge that I first had the notion that I would someday have to write about it all, but not in the convenient and comfortable metaphors of fiction, which I had been doing for years. It would have to be done naked, without the disguising distance of the third person pronoun. Only the use of "I," lovely and terrifying word, would get me to the place where I needed to go.

Harry's relationship with the University of Florida is the stuff of legend. As a graduate student in the early 1960's, he applied for entrance in the school's creative writing program and was turned down. One professor advised him to burn his work. He kept writing anyway. When his first novel, *The Gospel Singer*, was published in 1968, the same school that had rejected him as a writer now wanted him to join its faculty. Harry laughs at the irony: "All of a sudden, I became somebody else. Then I published two more books, and everybody at UF was shitting all over themselves. They wanted to make me president."

Harry was given a full professorship. He taught at UF until 1997—nearly thirty years. "You can't teach writing. I taught books," he says. "I had a few students who were serious. Some of the best ones weren't in class. They came to my house."

In 2006, the year Harry published his seventeenth book, An American Family, the University of Georgia purchased all of his old letters, notes, and memorabilia. I wonder why UF didn't buy it, or if there was a bidding war. Harry doesn't know, and he doesn't care. "They paid me \$186,000 for my garbage," he says.

We discuss writers.

Hemingway's suicide: "When I read the headline, I burst into tears." Faulkner: "Faulkner said all serious writers find it difficult to go to the short story. A novel has room for mistakes." Graham Greene: "He always told you a story. Some of these new writers are too hoitsy-toitsy."

As for Florida writers, Harry claims he has never heard of James Hall, which I doubt, but he likes the work of Geoffrey Norman—who, not coincidentally, edited his columns for *Esquire*.

There's a knock on the door. A nurse comes in to check Harry's vital signs. He waves her away, but he does it kindly. "I'll sign the form saying you were here. That way, I'm the one breaking the law." She hesitates, gives him a brief examination, and takes the signed form. "She comes every day," says Harry. "She works hard. She needs to get paid."

Darlene has to run some errands and check on her children. We assure her that we will take care of Harry. Once she's gone, he complains that he's tired of sitting on the bed. "Y'all see if you can help me into my wheelchair and get me into the living room," he says. Lisa and I look at each other, not sure what medical or ethical protocol we may be violating if we try to move him. And what if we drop him?

He insists. We each grab an arm and a thigh. I notice that Harry's muscles are strong and sinewy. We load him into his wheelchair, tuck in his catheter bag, and roll him to the end of the hall—where we suddenly realize that the living room is three steps down. "I can't go down the steps in this thing," Harry says. "Just wrestle me out of it and help me down to that easy chair."

We struggle for a few minutes, to no avail. Harry's legs aren't working well enough to support him. As he plops back into the wheelchair, his face clouds over. "I hate not having my legs," he says.

We roll him back into the bedroom and arrange some pillows so Harry can lie back against the headboard. He lights another cigarette. The unspoken topic that's hanging in the air—mortality—is on Harry's mind. "When I die, I want a cigarette in one hand and a shot of whiskey in the other," he says. "Dying is your last great jolt—probably the most memorable thing you've ever done."

His eyes brighten as he launches into an improvised account of the afterlife according to Harry Crews: "I nudge the guy next to me and say, 'Who's that guy with the white robe and the hat?' He says, 'That's not a hat; that's a halo. That's God. I think he's got a bone to pick with you.""

Harry chuckles. "I hope he's glad to see me."

Harry decides we should all have some yogurt, which Lisa fetches from the kitchen. He also has some Georgia peaches which, he claims, will "make you holler for the calf rope."

We have three of Harry's novels with us. Lisa reads a passage aloud from All We Need of Hell:

He had been hurt doing everything he had ever done. He expected it, even wanted it. Nothing drove the irrelevant bullshit out of your mind like the taste of your own blood. Duffy always wanted to tell people who were worried about the future of their children, or about God and the order of the universe, to go out and break a rib or two. A few broken ribs threw all thoughts of children, God, and the order of the universe right out the window. Nobody with broken ribs ever had free-floating anxiety, or so Duffy was convinced. It was cheaper than a psychiatrist, and never so humiliating.

Harry grins like a proud father as he listens to his words. "Let me see what you got there," he says. We also have copies of Scar Lover and Celebration.

He holds up the copy of Celebration. "I wrote that one strictly for the money," he says.

Harry has "written for money" before. For him, journalism was a lucrative relief from the grind of novel writing. In the 70's, after publishing seven books in seven years, he took a break, writing a column called "Grits" for Esquire and taking writing assignments for Playboy. "That was one of the great things that happened to me," he says. "The pieces were short, and they paid good. If I needed money, I'd call Hefner and say, 'I need a job.'"

On a nearby table is a collection of Schopenhauer essays. I can't imagine Harry reading pessimistic philosophy, and I ask him about it. He shrugs. "My agent gave it to me." He says nothing more on the subject, but he asks us to read a handwritten fan letter he has received from someone in Brazil. "My eyesight isn't so good," he says.

Lisa reads it. It says, among other things, "Your work has

changed my life repeatedly."

Harry smiles.

Darlene is on her way back to the house. Harry is getting tired. He inscribes our copy of *Celebration*: "Be at peace, you two darlings. Stick around for the second show."

The writer's job is to get naked. To hide nothing. To look away from nothing. To look at it. To not blink. To not be embarrassed by it, not be ashamed of it. Strip it down, and let's get down to where the blood is, the bone is.

—Harry Crews, from the film Survival is Triumph Enough

Natural Education

John Davis Jr.

Nine-year-old boy, I've taught you mating season calls for squirrels: thumb pressed over curled index finger, mouth on that hard line between them – sharp chirps, quick chatter to lure flourishes of brown-grey bush-tails.

Twelve-year-old boy, I've caught you lying on your bedroom rug, girls' imaginary lips made with bigger digits in that same formation, but tilted like you've seen movie couples do. Saturday night is your first dance.

What we old men sometimes forget, you young men always figure out.



After Walden

by Alexander Diaz



After Walden

by Alexander Diaz



After Walden

by Alexander Diaz



Mysterio de los Espejos

by Vassiliki Daskalakis



Blue Heaven by Scott F. Hall



Main Street by Jennifer Wells



Honor by Jessie Barnes



Media by Austin Moule



I Remember by Daniel Kraus



Aqua Hopper

by Brad Blair

From Rollerblading to Collaboration: The Right Way to Write. An Interview with Neil de la Flor

Peter LaBerge

Neil de la Flor is a writer, photographer, teacher, and former fashion designer based in Miami, Florida. He has written one book, Almost Dorothy, winner of the 2010 Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize, and has three collaborative books: Sinead O'Connor and her Coat of a Thousand Bluebirds (Firewheel Editions, 2011; co-authored with Maureen Seaton, and winner of the Sentence Book Award), Facial Geometry (NeoPepper Press, 2006; co-authored with Maureen Seaton and Kristine Snodgrass), and Two Thieves and a Liar (forthcoming, Jackleg Press, 2012; also co-authored with Maureen Seaton and Kristine Snodgrass).

Neil's individual and collaborate works of poetry and fiction have appeared in Hayden's Ferry Review, Barrow Street, Prairie Schooner, Indiana Review, Court Green, Best American Poetry Blog, and other journals. Neil also contributes to The Miami Herald, The Miami New Times, The SunPost, and the Miami-based arts bureau ArtBurstMiami. His work has been praised as original and playful by many, including Forrest Gander and Sarah Burghauser of Lambda Literary. He earned an MFA as a Michener Fellow at the University of Miami, and now teaches at Miami Dade College, Nova Southeastern University, and Barry University. His latest book, An Elephant's Memory of Blizzards, will be published by Marsh Hawk Press in February of 2013. More information is available on his website at: http://neildelaflor.com.

Peter LaBerge: How do you begin writing a new work? When you come up with an idea, do you know what form it will take?

Neil de la Flor: I realize this probably sounds cliché, but I rarely make a plan. I'm a liar, so whatever. Faithful, yes, but I'm not perfect. I know that somewhere I've made a subconscious or barely conscious choice to write about 'something,' or myself. My personal work tends to be personal, so I can't escape what happens to me no matter how fast I rollerblade. In fact, I tend to rollerblade off bridges and into burning homes to sit on a sofa, rummage through the cabinets and take a bath. No matter what Adele says, you can't set fire to water. I'm reactionary, so what I write usually reacts to and/or deals with something that impacts me in a significant way. Even when I write an ekphrastic poem, the idea is connected to an experience—new or old, past, present or future—where time collapses and there's nothing else to do but write to save me. I'm also a drama queen.

When I write solo work, the writing begins in uncontrolled jolts that sometimes wakes me up or keeps me from falling asleep. Sometimes it begins in the car and I have to jot the idea or sentence or two down on my iPhone note pad. Sometimes I begin on Facebook where immediate responses push and pull the process of developing new work in unexpected ways. All I know is that it is very difficult to begin new work, or any work, at home. I love my home—it's my sanctuary—but often it's a place for rest and non-thinking, non-writing, just being, or the place where I get sucked into my sofa and stare at endless loops of Battlestar Gallactica. I usually go to Panther Coffee in Wynwood to write. Otherwise I wouldn't write a word.

Form? Well, that usually emerges out of mood or the weather. I like numbering poems and subtitling sections of prose pieces so that I don't forget where I am or where I am going. I'm probably more anti-form than Christ-like.

PL: Many of your recent works, including Facial Geometry, Sinead O'Conner and her Coat of a Thousand Bluebirds, and Two Thieves and a Liar involve collaboration among various other authors. In what sense do you find this collaboration beneficial to the writing process?

ND: I would be dead (metaphorically) without my collaborators. Humans are social beings. We need connection. I'm human. I need to connect and one way I do this is through writing. There's nothing more intimate than working alongside another writer or writers and getting in their heads, their beds (metaphorically) and eating their guacamole and corn chips. It's the closest thing I'll ever get to a fraternity. In many ways, working with others builds self-confidence. Sounds egocentric but the ego can be a good thing if it's tamed and tuned for creation rather than self-replication. In other words, I like to write with other people.

PL: What are a few of the things your various collaborators have taught you?

ND: That life, no matter how difficult, is better than French fries.

PL: Have you ever been unsatisfied with a final product? Is collaborating ever frustrating?

ND: Of course, but the final product isn't the most important thing. It's the fun of creation, the energy put into something new, that's most valuable to me. Collaborating isn't so frustrating because when you get tired of writing you can take a nap.

PL: That's true. Often writers have a strange quirk or two throughout the process of outlining, executing, and revising. Do you have any of these quirks?

ND: I don't outline, execute or revise. Is that a quirk?

PL: I guess so! How have you found writing alongside teaching and photographing? Do you find that one or two inspire the other, or vice versa?

ND: Teaching poses the biggest challenge because I'm an adjunct and I have to teach between 9–12 courses per semester

to pay my bills. This significantly impacts my motivation and energy to write. On the other hand, teaching saves me, gives me motivation, empowers me when I least expect it. I love teaching, and it empowers me in incalculable ways—at least until I have to grade two hundred essays.

Photography empowers me, too. It gives me comfort. It's like the Holy Spirit without guilt and shame. When I snap a picture, I smile—inside and out. Sounds like a cheese puff, but it's true. I'm glad that I can recognize this joy.

PL: Was there ever a point when you had second thoughts about writing?

ND: Never.

PL: Good for you! In what ways do you feel your writing (both collaboratively and individually, fiction and poetry) has developed as your have furthered your study of writing?

ND: The impact is enormous, incalculable, and deeply personal.

PL: What purpose do you believe your latest writing serves? How did it reach this point?

ND: My guardian angel once said: "Why don't you write something useful?" After giving him the finger, I promised myself that I'd never let him down.

PL: Do you have a favorite work of yours?

ND: Yes. I love the work in my new book, An Elephant's Memory of Blizzards. It's radically different—a little softer and more coherent than my first book.

PL: Has living in a diverse, vibrant city like Miami allowed your work to expand in terms of variety or distribution?

ND: People get in my bones, not cities, cities provide the living space and landscape for these people to roam. These beings brush up against me and I brush up against them and friction occurs and stories are born or burned. I'm attracted to people, to their stories, and to the unsaid things in their solemn prayers.

PL: Any regrets?

ND: To be honest, yes, but I'm supposed to say "no regrets," so I'm going to say I have so many regrets and move on. I've made mistakes, but they're what make life a trip.

PL: Do you have a place, a time period, or a subject that you've been itching to write about?

ND: The in-between. The luminous and fragile space between what is and what will be.

PL: What's next? More collaborations in the foreseeable future?

ND: Till the end of the world. Maybe novel and a memoir. Maybe more hot air.

The Burning of Halos

Neil de la Flor

II

Baby elephants kiss wearing red penis hats. Their elephant trunks join to create the image of the Temple of Brihadesvara. They are happy kissing. Without regret. Without fear of rejection. White lions loot the temple of Buddha of whatever ancient treasures reside within. The white bird spreads its stealthy wings between the bodies of the two baby elephants. It is not blood on their bodies. It is the logic of blood on an ordinary scale. Infants preclude the disaster of premeditated love inside a hosepipe full of eternal tap shoes and tango.

IX

The possible image of a bull is not a bull. The sexual organs of history block the road to psychotherapy. Between the nostrils, the bull finds a slender knife blade splitting his skull in two. His nose twitches at the last possible moment before the crucible. The giant crimson crab launches an attack against nostrils. Its laser guided bombs launch a battalion of histories into the bull's eye. The stealth monster waddles down crummy wood stairs wearing a pale green cape made of peacock feathers as the flamenco dancer surrenders to the burning of halos.

Ī

The angels were born with one wing and each wing casts a shadow across the sheltering sky. The friar man raises his hands above the pot smokey madness. Mad nests and birds. Parrots and opossums emerge from Jupiter's magic verbs. He is a gramophone communicating with Tuesday and Wednesday. In his eyes, Jupiter rises up and reclaims the hellish sky from the balding lucifer, an orange-nosed clown—a crown of rocks on the event horizon. Pinkish and blueish and violet and hellish. The dogs are tethered to furry pathologies. A pedagogy of flying bat wings. Elephants make possible fractals out of numerology and train signals. We emerge from this inkblot into the physical world.

Body at Rest

Neil de la Flor

He divides himself in two. Divides his body between what is and what will be his destiny when he lands upon the red red surface of the world.

He is divided by a white cross and his hands hold back the demands of demons and devils clamoring for a ride on his human back as he holds them back with the force inherent in wings and breath.

He is breathing through the lungs of Atlas and tempts the sky with its heavy drunken logs. He is sad for red. Sad for sadness. Sad for the colorization of fear and the process of elimination.

He is almost consumed by red or is in the process of being consumed, yet he faces the camera with the fierce focus of a free-floating angel in situ. Frozen. In silence. Aware of the inner workings of the cosmos.

Instead of saying yea yea, he smiles through the red blob of light into the stage lights.

Between the world of red on the left and the world of red on the right, he is mightier than sin and sometimes.

Between the frozen boy and the floating boy, red is patient for winter for sadness is a coat of red film coating the surface of the self and the anti self.

He detaches from the walls and the floor and positions his two selves into the space between above and below. Between now and when. Between man and woman. The ultraviolet spectrum of light walks in and surrounds the red red world with its ultraviolet light. It shadows the shadows of red consuming the brighter lights and bluebirds of the world.

Confident in his ability to fly or float or land or whatever it is that happy humans do when they defy gravity, ultraviolet waits for him to decide his fate.

His body is a neologism for faith. His cross is a cross.

The Jump Tree

Nathan Holic

We never should have been there, out in the buzzing Central Florida woods behind the abandoned Citgo, at a place called the Jump Tree, but Cameron had insisted for two weeks that we join him. "Grills, beer, girls," he said again and again, every time he stopped by the fraternity house. "It's the place to be."

We knew the gas station he was talking about, but nothing of the world beyond.

Most of the area at the university's entryway had been developed by the time we started school in the early '90s: there were fast-food restaurants, book shops, office supply stores, bars, towering McDonalds billboards, streetlights, and gigantic green signs indicating the way to nearby I-4 or the 408 East-West expressway, the two roads we'd use to drive out of this rural patch of northeast Orange County once the semester ended. Behind the university, though, was a two-lane road that led into a thick stretch of forest and swampland. Were there towns back there, hidden in Florida's interior between Orlando and the Atlantic Coast? Probably. Shrinking towns composed entirely of double-wides and moldy shacks, towns with names taken from forgotten Indian tribes, or names so outdated they seemed sitcom-silly...Pine Tree City, perhaps, or Cracker Settlement.

In the space between the university and these endless roads-to-nowhere was an old gas station, a boarded-up-and-shut-down Citgo overrun by weeds, its parking lot pavement cracking apart, sloppy graffiti slashed across its front. Behind the Citgo were tall pines, low palmetto scrubs, and leafy tarp-like vegetation covering the smaller trees...and in the woods, there was a deep darkness that didn't seem possible in a state so sunny. This place marked the end of campus, the end of civilization, and a constant reminder of how little we knew about this city outside the bubble of "campus." Why had the Citgo closed, we wondered? Why did no one buy it, gut it, and open a

new gas station? Surely it would do well, close to so many students? We had no idea, but we also didn't care...we hated our school, thought we deserved better...back then, there were only two Florida public universities worth anything, Florida State and Florida, and this place—with that unwanted direction of "Central" tucked into the school name—would only ever be a temporary stop for us. Outside of town, people called it "Mickey Mouse U," but here on campus the nicknames were less flattering: "Mosquito U," "Sandspur U," and "U Can't Finish."

"The Jump Tree," Cameron told us at the end of Spring semester. He smelled like old Maxwell House cans in the morning, and like tuna and bowtie pasta in the afternoons. For his workouts, he claimed. Protein. Gotta bulk up. But no one ever saw him at the campus gym, or using the weights in the fraternity house's first-floor rec room. And he never did bulk up. "Come on

guys," he said. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"You've been out behind that Citgo?" Westin asked. He was the son of a cop, tight buzz-cut, the undisputed leader of our pledge class. Always the first to speak, always the one we trusted to make final decisions.

"Of course," Cameron said.

"Bullshit," Westin said. "There's nothing back there. You never been there."

"I haven't?" Cameron asked, eyebrow raised.

The rest of us waited; we were interested—the Citgo Station, the wilderness, a touch of danger and a splash of alcohol, a recipe perfect for a group of nineteen-year-olds whose Finals Week had just ended—but we didn't want to acknowledge that Cameron had piqued our interest. We didn't want to fall for one of his phony stories.

"There's a trail behind the Citgo," Cameron said. "And a

river."

"A river?" Westin said. "How come nobody knows about this?"

Cameron shrugged. "There's a clearing, too, and it's crowded this time of year. Lot of fun. People bring beer, grills, that sort of thing."

"Every day?" Jeff asked. "Even weekdays?"

"Sure. School's out."

Silence.

"Why haven't any of us heard about this till now?" Westin asked.

"You didn't grow up around here. This place has been big for years."

"I don't know," we all replied, in one way or another. "It sounds a little..."

"A little what? Come on," Cameron said. "You guys always make fun of me. Just trust me for once."

Really, then, it was Cameron's own fault that he wound up where he did.

First, of course, we should say this: we didn't *really* believe that any spot called the "Jump Tree" could be a "place to be." We didn't believe in *any* of Cameron's bullshit, in fact. Late at night, drinking Miller Lite and lounging in a circle of lawn chairs in the fraternity house backyard while Cameron was back home at his parents' house, we guessed at what he might have in store for us if we followed him. "Inviting us out to the middle of nowhere," Westin said. "I saw that shit in *Texas Chainsaw*."

"Cameron isn't that bad," Jeff said. "Just a little cooky."

"A little crazy is crazy enough," Westin said.

"Maybe it's just another one of his stupid grunge bands," Dale said, triceps fleshing out as he leaned forward to grab another beer. (We sometimes wondered if Dale flexed purposely when all eyes were on him, if—when he was alone in his room—he experimented with interesting ways to bend his arms. No matter the occasion, Dale was the type who always stood like a spotter behind a bench press, muscles tensed.)

The problem wasn't that we knew nothing about Cameron, but that, if we did know something, we didn't know whether it was real. Months before, Cameron had asked several of us if we wanted to go to Citrus Fest, an early Spring festival held on abandoned fairgrounds twenty minutes from campus, in a town we'd never heard of and have since forgotten. "Two stages, twenty bands," he'd said as if promoting the event, but because he asked each of us individually, it was easy for us to

conjure different excuses. The thought of spending an entire day with Cameron, alone, just one of us—and him. Occasionally, we'd see Cameron walking campus with some stranger we didn't know, each person a freakshow. One of these strangers wore paint-spattered jeans and had black hair pasted across his forehead in a slash (Dale thought this guy wore eyeliner, too, but we never confirmed it). Another didn't wear shoes, and carried a bow and arrow, no joke. Another guy was heavyset, Wisconsin stocky, young but balding, and seemed to always be wearing Beetle Baily t-shirts.

All of us at the fraternity house, gathered from Miami and Atlanta and Jacksonville, had never expected to wind up at Sandspur U, and now we had only the fraternity to keep us going. But with Cameron, the only townie in our pledge class (he came from nearby Bithlo), there was another world whose bizarre outer rings we glimpsed too often.

He'd attempt to play his mixtapes in our stereos as we drank and played poker on Friday nights, claiming that he knew the bands and they were already signed to Universal or Columbia. Orlando's gonna be the next Seattle! he said. He claimed to have a girlfriend whose father was (in some conversations) a bartender or (in other conversations) a doctor or (in still other conversations) a Florida Mafioso. Sometimes she was Asian. Sometimes she was Jewish. It depended on whatever any of us had just said, and whether he needed to one-up our stories. He claimed to be restoring a '68 Corvette that he'd bought super-cheap, claimed that his parents owned property all across Florida, claimed to have lost his virginity at age thirteen to a hot high school teacher (we didn't touch that one), claimed to own an actual AK-47. He'd participated in a schoolbus race and demolition derby at the Bithlo fairgrounds. He said he'd been to France, to Madagascar, to China. But we also heard him mutter that he'd never been allowed to leave town, that his parents didn't even want him coming to school to begin with.

But what did we really know? He used the closed-door stalls instead of the urinals, and took the longest of any of us to pee. Often, he came out with speckles of piss-stain on his shoes. Sometimes we saw bruises on his arms, saw him jump at loud noises, saw his expression darken when we asked about whether he could borrow his father's car to come to an event this weekend.

What else? Cameron's torso was bird-cage skinny but his hips were broad, and it sometimes looked like he wore thicker jeans and shorts than any of us, or maybe just thick boxers, or multiple pairs of boxers. No one was sure. But the older brothers all joked that he was wearing diapers. "Listen for the swish!" the brothers said, and we knew what they were talking about, but Cameron never caught on. Whenever he said that he had to go to the bathroom, someone could be heard laughing.

The brothers said worse things, too, in his company and in private. Flicked his forehead and called him "Dent" because he'd stumbled and hit his head during our "swearing in" ritual, almost knocking over a table full of candles and setting the house living room on fire. Made him carry a brick around campus for a week when he lost his pledge pin ("This symbolizes the weight of your responsibility. Are you going to lose it again, pledge? Are you going to lose it again?"). Tripped him when he was carrying sodas. Jumped out and tried to scare him, just to see if he really did have bladder problems and would piss himself.

What made it worse, though, was that Cameron was barely one of us. He was our pledge brother, sure, and when we came back to campus in the fall, we were all supposed to be bonded together through a centuries-old ritual. He'd hold the Nu Kappa Epsilon candle, melting wax hardening over his hands as he recited the oath...and if the rumors were true, he'd lay in the coffin during initiation and would emerge as a brother. But what was his role in our group? We had no idea. We didn't know whether Cameron was the kind of guy-like Westinwho loved adventure sports: tubing, snowboarding, surfing, mudding. Or maybe Cameron was just like Eddie in room 308, a little boy in a grown-up body, a guy who'd round up large contingents of brothers from around the house to play drunken ski ball at Chuck E. Cheese. Or Dale, who spent his days making protein shakes and drinking from water jugs. Or Phil, or Mike, or Tyler.

We didn't know. Sure, he could've been like any of us. But we didn't think so.

Cameron had lived in this tucked-away corner of Central Florida his entire life, knew a "great Italian place" on the other side of town while we knew only the Pizza Hut on the corner. He'd earned the special university exemption to bypass campus housing and live with his parents, so he was easy to avoid all freshman year. During the fall semester, he snuck away from our pledge rituals because his parents enforced a strict curfew; and throughout his second semester, he seemed overwhelmed by the lower-level engineering pre-requisites that would determine his access into his major, so we saw him even less.

Really, then, can we be blamed for never getting to know him? We freshmen were a school of fish that first year, rushing this direction and that, all together, a silver flash of fifteen young men, and whenever Cameron attempted to assert himself into our conversation, we just nodded and then changed conversational direction as soon as he finished speaking. We didn't wish him any particular harm; he just wasn't one of us. And in our defense: we even tried to stick up for him when the brothers made fun of him, but too often that meant that we'd be sentenced to push-ups or air-chairs, so it was safer to just join in, everyone laughing together.

Later, we'd learn that the university—the entire country—was in a "Rush Recession" inspired by the slacker Grunge Era. Fraternities were experiencing the worst membership recruitment numbers since the late '60s, when a similar sentiment prevailed (social upheaval, Vietnam protests, all that) and increasing numbers of students viewed fraternities as the "establishment." In the early '90s, students shunned the polos and khaki shorts of Nu Kappa Epsilon; they wanted to wear ratty old flannel shirts, even in Florida, the life sweating out of them just so they could look like extras from a Nirvana video.

Later, we were told that Cameron was a "Numbers Bid," that our fraternity's National Headquarters had imposed a quota, that there would be sanctions if we didn't meet the numbers. The brothers never liked Cameron, but fraternities were

fighting for survival, and his money was as good as any of ours.

This is how it happened, the Jump Tree: two days after spring semester ended, Cameron came back to the fraternity house while all of us were supposed to be packing our rooms. He wore board shorts and twirled a twelve-pack of Natural Light, smiling his Vincent Price smile, repeating his spiel about the coolest party that none of us knew about, just trust him, trust him.

We were sitting in Westin's room, six of us on a Wednesday afternoon, playing Mario Kart and drinking fountain sodas and knowing that, days later, we'd return to Mom's house rules and we'd be forced to find summer jobs. Periodically, we stared out the bedroom window to see if anyone had yet dragged couches onto the front lawn or had lit the coals of the backyard grill pit. But we knew that it was all over for the year. Final exams were finished and summer had started. Downstairs, the seniors packed their rooms slowly and thoughtfully. They took down old composite photos from the walls, arranged them gently in boxes between intramural trophies and "Brother of the Year" plagues; they filled boxes with Nu Kappa Epsilon t-shirts in the hopes that their mothers might someday make gigantic quilts of them all. For the seniors, the fraternity experience had concluded, and their feelings drifted between sweet nostalgia and the newly realized dread of having to search for apartments on their own, real apartments, real jobs in other cities, real wardrobes of suits and ties and wing-tipped shoes and no more summer vacations or Spring Breaks or Wednesday night parties in the living room.

But here, upstairs on the third floor of the fraternity house where all the freshmen were tossed together in cramped rooms with creaking bunk beds, shallow closets, and particle-board desks, we felt entirely different. Frequently, we told people that we hated school but loved our fraternity, that it was the only thing keeping us around here. We had three more years of this lifestyle and we resented summer's interruption; it didn't feel right that we should have to go home to live with our parents again. The last nine months had been the first we'd ever expe-

rienced as independent young men, and all that we knew—all our strength—came from one another. When Eddie saw another freshman fumbling at the controls to the washing machine, he assisted. When Dale Petersen, the only New Yorker in the house, needed to buy flip-flops and board shorts, we went with. We fixed broken doors and toilets together. We walked together to the cafeteria, sat together in class. To be surrounded by one another was to feel as safe as we had when we were gradeschoolers and our tall fathers shielded us from life's dangers.

Anyway. Into the bedroom walks Cameron, UCF hat on his tiny head, year-old high school graduation shirt on his tiny chest (we'd all agreed to never wear ours again because nothing said "freshman" like high school shirts, but Cameron apparently hadn't heard). He stood in the doorway with his twelvepack for a full minute before Eddie finally invited him inside, and then he crept in and leaned against the wall, close to us all but somehow still distant, fidgeting and glancing around like a visitor. Then urging us, let's go, let's go, the Jump Tree!

"I even brought beer!" Cameron said. "Stole it from my

dad."

"I thought you had a fake ID?" Eddie asked.

"Huh?"

"You told us you had a fake ID."

"When did I say that?"

"Never mind," Eddie said. "I must have...I don't know, misheard."

"The fuck you doing in our house anyway, pledge?" asked Randall. He was the only brother in the room, a Junior who seemed to invade the pledge bedrooms on a daily basis to steal food from our mini-fridges, to steal beer, to make us do pushups for being dirty, dirty pledges.
"It's my house, too," Cameron said.

"Cameron," Westin said quietly. "Don't."

"Bullshit," Randall said. "You don't live here, pledge."

"I pay the same dues as you," Cameron said.

"Only reason we let you in the fraternity to begin with," Randall said.

Cameron swallowed, shook his head. Despite the cruelty, he

never seemed to wilt. In fact, he seemed always to absorb the attacks, pushing them deep into himself, as if this sort of thing had been happening his entire life.

"That hurt your feelings?" Randall said. "Poor baby. Swish,

swish, bitch."

"Fuck off, Randall," Westin said, and Randall stared back incredulously.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" Randall asked.

"The Jump Tree," Westin said and stood. "Place to be. We trust you, Cameron. We'll go with you." And everyone stood up and followed Westin out of the room, and there was much back-patting, much bro-hugging, much talk about how pledge brothers stick together, even as Randall seethed and muttered something about how we were all fucking dead, little dirt-bag pledges, air-chairs till the sun came up, every one of us a walking dead man; as we left him behind in the living room, Randall tried to pretend that we hadn't stood up to him, just blew a mocking air-kiss in our direction and told us to have fun with the baby. "Don't listen to him," Dale said to Cameron. "My brother was in a fraternity, too. There's one of those guys in every house."

The Jump Tree. We were going, spur-of-the-moment decision, and Cameron was suddenly happier than we'd ever seen him.

We piled into two cars, Dale's Jeep and Westin's pick-up, stopped for a case of Miller Lite purchased with Eddie's fake ID, and headed to the abandoned Citgo, each of us cracking jokes about how we felt like Scooby Doo and the teenagers of the Mystery Machine, out to solve the case of the haunted old gas station.

"This feels good," Eddie said while we drove.

"What feels good?" Westin asked.

"This is an effort. A moment we'll look back on and say, yeah, that's when we became brothers with Cam."

"Nobody calls him Cam," Westin said.

"Maybe we could start," Eddie said. "That could be our thing. Our bond."

"We needed to get him out of there." Westin shook his

head. "But we just took a big chance. Shit, can you even imagine what's going to happen during Hell Week when we get back from summer? And for what? That kid's got to fucking earn this."

When we got to the Citgo, we were surprised to see not only a smattering of bicycles chained to trees and posts, but also five other vehicles in the tree-shaded dirt parking lot behind the building, hidden from view of the road.

"A lot of people here," Dale said. "Guess Cameron's not as

full of shit as we thought."

"Jury's still out," Westin said, and we watched Cameron peer into another car's driver-side window as if confirming it to be the property of someone he knew. Then he motioned for us to follow him.

Westin hopped from his truck, brushing himself like bugs were already landing on him. He looked around hesitantly; he'd sky-dived, bungee-jumped, played offensive lineman, but he kept telling us that there was something about the Citgo that seemed dirty and illegal. Drugs, he said. A crack house. Something...not right. We were forty minutes from the beach; why would anyone party out here? "This better be worth it," he said.

We followed a dirt trail through a thick bunching of trees, Cameron leading the way like some expedition guide in the South American rainforests. With a casual brush of his hand, he moved aside sharp entwined vines and lengths of briar; he gripped the thick trunk of a tree on the far left side of the trail, looked back at us, tip-toed and said, "Snake hole," pointing to a mound of otherwise-ordinary leaves in the middle of the trail.

We followed his every direction: when he hopped, we hopped; when he walked all the way around a felled tree instead

of simply stepping over it, we took the same route.

After only a five-minute walk, sunlight poked through the dense treetops again, and from a distance we heard the sounds of laughing, splashing, name-calling, Pearl Jam crackling from second-rate speakers. We'd arrived at the clearing.

As we'd walked, we'd all formed our own imagined views of the river itself—white-capped and furious? slow, and filled with boats?—and of the daily party that Cameron told us swelled on its banks throughout the summer. Truthfully, despite Westin's anxiety, we did want Cameron to be right, and we *did* want this to work. We wanted kegs and bikinis, a scene from a Bud Lite commercial.

"Here we are," Cameron said when we rounded the last cluster of trees and found ourselves suddenly smacked by midday sunlight. We stood atop a muddy hill bordered by live oaks, the trail opening just past our feet into a massive clearing of stomped-down dirt and puddles and people, ending finally at a gigantic, perfect-circle pool of water, still as bathwater, a thin river plugging into one end and draining out the other.

Our first thought was excitement. This was real! Way to go,

Cameron!

But that was short-lived.

"Break out the beer," Cameron said and, his twelve-pack in hand, hurried forward to a group of guys mingling with girls in cut-off jean shorts and bikini tops. Altogether, there were perhaps twenty-five people scattered throughout this clearing, some wading in the water and some standing on the dirt, and it was almost as Cameron had described. They stood in clusters, four or five kids close together for comfort's sake, just the same as kids on spring break at some unfamiliar beach. But, after a few minutes, we saw a problem: they drank Mountain Dew and ate Sun Chips, and all of them bummed cigarettes off one older guy in a Seminoles hat. There were no grills, no kegs, no coolers. No beer funnels, no shots. No Miller Lite, no Budweiser.

"No burgers," Westin said.

"Good thing we brought beer," Dale said.

"I guess I understand," Eddie said. "That's a long way to drag a grill, through those trees. My arm's already sore from lugging this case." He walked forward, set the Miller Lite down, and we all joined him, standing together in our own cluster.

Far from us, Cameron handed out his beers to the friends, seemed more interested in showing us that he had friends than in us. It was standard practice to take care of one's fraternity brothers at parties, after all, especially where girls were involved. At Hem-Haw's, the local country-music bar, we made

sure that the doorman knew all of us so that we got "Over 21" wristbands, and we made sure that the clusters of sorority girls knew our names, knew we were fraternity brothers. But Cameron was never around. He hadn't learned how to move with our silver flash.

Westin popped open a Miller Lite can, and a quick burst of froth bubbled out the top. He blew it away, took a gulp, slapped his neck. "Anyone else worried about mosquitoes out here?"

"Did I hear right, Westin?" Cameron asked from afar.

Westin slapped his neck again, made a "what are you talk-

ing about" face.

"You skydive, but you're afraid of some little insects?" Cameron was now walking back to re-join us, skinny limbs flopping as he climbed the mound of dirt where we stood. He had four friends in tow, three guys and one girl. All three of the guys wore nondescript Old Navy clothing—solid-colored t-shirts and dark swimming trunks—and the girl wore a white t-shirt over a bright bikini top, the shirt water-pasted over barely noticeable breasts. "I want you to meet Justin, Blair, Bobby, and Jenn," Cameron said.

We all shook hands, mumbled, "Hrmm," or "'Sup," or (if we were trying to keep things amiable) "How ya doin'?" We hadn't come all the way out here to make new male friends, so we stood in an awkward circle for a minute, these guys in their red, yellow, and green shirts looking as if they were about to maybe force a conversation, but they only stared at us anxiously, like kids waiting to see if their fake IDs had worked. And it was at this point that we noticed the bigger problem: they were several inches shorter than Cameron, than any of us; one of them seemed intent on growing out his facial hair, but it only looked like a few pencil-drawn lines; beyond them, there were kids even shorter, girls who'd seemed hot from a distance but who now looked too young to earn driver's licenses.

"So Cameron," Dale asked finally, awkwardly. "Why do they, um, call this the 'jump tree'?"

"This is your first time?" one of the kids asked.

"Oh my God," the girl said. She tried a laugh, but it came out a squeak. She tried to reach out and touch Dale's bicep, but he took a step back from her.

"See those kids swimming?" Cameron asked us. "Just beyond that? The other bank? They're in the deep part of the pool—that's what we call it, the pool. See the tree trunk over there?" One tree towered over its neighbors, boards the size of textbooks nailed to its trunk, ascending higher and higher, probably forty-five feet up the tree. Where the haphazard steps ended, there was a long piece of particle board nailed atop a branch like a plank. "That's the Jump Tree." Cameron pointed to the plank: "And that's where you jump from."

"You're kidding me," Dale said. "People do this?"

"I do this. From the top of the tree."

"I've done it seventy-eight times from the plank," the kid in the red shirt said. "I carved a tally into the wood. I'm trying to hit one hundred."

"That time I pushed you doesn't count," another kid said.

"The plank is for starters," Cameron said. "You got balls, you go higher."

"Bullshit," Westin said. "That's fifty feet in the air, jumping down into that shallow river. You go higher, you kill yourself."

"You're the adventurous one," Cameron said. "Mr. Extreme

Sports. I thought you'd appreciate this."

Westin took a sip of his beer, looked the tree up and down. We all did the same, following the rickety step-boards from the ground to the plank; every board looked cracked in at least one spot, unsteady, and we pictured someone climbing thirty feet, grabbing a loose plank, slipping, wrapping his arms around the trunk to save himself, and then the board under his feet giving way, and plummeting...plummeting...If you fell straight from the trunk, you wouldn't even land in the water...you'd hit the rocky bank. We always had problems at our fraternity house—sinks stopping, A/C freezing over, doors creaking—but these were things that we worked together to fix. The Jump Tree asked only for individuals.

"You telling me you're afraid?" Cameron asked.

Westin just rubbed his neck, made a pained wince, then examined his hand. He'd smashed a mosquito, and bits of blood

and grit and mosquito limbs were mixed together on his fingers.

"Everybody jumps," the kid in the red shirt said.

"Everybody," Cameron said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I jumped," the girl said. "Not my first time here, I was scared. But I did it. It's a rush." She stuck her chest out and smiled and we all looked away.

And then it was Westin's turn to step away from her wandering hands. "No, a rush is standing in an airplane, staring down at a quilt of farmland," Westin said. "Seeing dots that are houses, specks that are cars. Jumping out of the plane, falling, but trusting the equipment and the training, knowing you'll come out alive."

"That's what makes this exciting, don't you see?" Cameron said. "You don't hit the deep water, you're a goner. That jump, those seconds in mid-air...you're thinking, this could be my last few seconds alive. What if I'm off by two feet? My foot hits a rock? Beat that."

"I busted my head last summer," one kid said. "Hit my head on a branch or something. Had stitches. I busted my head last summer."

"No way," Westin said. "This is fucking reckless."

"This is fraternity," Cameron said. "Brotherhood, right? We're all brothers here. This takes courage. Trust. Balls."

"Balls? What the fuck you know about balls?"

"I know that I've got a pair," Cameron said, clutching his crotch and looking back at his friends to make sure they smiled. "I know that my friends out here have done it. We've all got balls. Don't know about you, though."

Westin laughed humorlessly. "Are you fucking retarded, Cameron?" he said. "This is the dumbest shit ever. How old are you?"

Cameron shook his head. "What's it matter?"

"You been to the top of that tree?" Westin asked. "With all your high school friends you hang out with when you're not at the house?" And until Westin said this, none of us had vocalized that Cameron's other-world might consist entirely of high school kids. Only local high school kids would know about this

place...this is where they gathered, drank, smoked, unleashed suburban tension by doing something dangerous. Hell, these kids still wore letterman jackets and looked forward to next year's prom; their mothers still washed their laundry. One instant, we were revved for a party and for hard-core boozing, rowdy frat boys on the war path. Give me girls to fuck! But the next instant, we'd morphed into protective parents.

We must stress this fact: we were collectively ashamed that—moments ago—we had been excited to see a cluster of girls that looked identical to our fourteen-year-old sisters back

home.

"You wouldn't do it," Cameron said. "You're chickenshit." "All this talk," Westin said. "With you, it's always talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cameron was standing tall now, fists clenched as if he was ready to fight, but one had only to look from Westin—who stood heavy and calm—to Cameron—whose long bony limbs looked more amusing than menacing—to know who would win a physical match.

"Okay, guys," one of us said. "Let's calm down."

"All brothers here," said another.

"Everybody's tells me I need to make a better effort in the fraternity," Cameron said. "But what about you all? What have you ever done for me?"

"Fuck that. You've never even jumped," Westin said. "None of these kids has seen you do it, I bet. You tell them you've jumped, and they believe you 'cause you're the big bad college kid. But nobody's seen you jump, have they? You come out here to impress these high schoolers 'cause they're the only ones who'll buy your bullshit?"

"You don't know," Cameron said. "You don't know any-

thing about me."

"I know you're a fucking liar. And I know we—all of us—don't believe a word you say. Why don't you climb your ass up that tree, big guy? Prove it."

"Fine. I will," Cameron said, and he tore off his shirt. His bare chest had a concave quality, as if it was collapsing between his pectorals and he was on the verge of implosion. He gave one last angry look at Westin, at each of us, and ran to the river, kicking up dirt and mud, flailing with forced certainty as he moved. Those big hips and too-thick shorts, disproportional to the rest of his body. His high school friends looked on with a combination of hope and disappointment, the same look I would imagine from football fans whose team is getting blown out in the Super Bowl: maybe they wanted to believe in Cameron in a way we never had.

"There he goes," Dale said. "You sure you want to do this,

Cameron?"

Cameron jumped into the water, swam through the still pool, across the river.

"He wants to be an idiot. Let him," Westin said.

Cameron climbed the other bank, climbed from step to step on the tree trunk, each cracked board wobbling under his weight.

"You'll hurt yourself," Jeff said. "You don't have to do

this."

"Cameron, bro, we believe you," someone said.

"I don't," Westin said. "Don't wet your diaper up there, bitch."

And we laughed, all of us, and by the time we'd stopped laughing we realized that this was the first time Cameron had heard the insult so clearly articulated, the first time—as he looked down his bare torso to his massive shorts—that he understood the jokes from the entire year. The swish-swish from the brothers. Nine months' worth of insults overcoming him, and now, the first time that we were a part of it, also, that it wasn't just the brothers.

"Fuck you," Cameron said. "Fuck you all." He climbed higher. One step seemed ready to fall away, but somehow it held to the tree's trunk, and Cameron continued his climb up to the plank. When he got there, he stopped a moment, stood on the plank and looked down at his high school friends and pledge brothers alike.

He steadied himself against the tree, catching his breath, then pointed to the very top of the tree, another twenty feet of unsure trunk reaching into the sky. "The top," he said, and he gripped a branch above his head.

We didn't think he'd actually go higher, not for a second, but Cameron dug his toes into the bark and slowly pulled himself up, gripped another branch, gripped a piece of smooth-looking trunk, shook and swore, lost his grip and looked ready to fall, and even Westin said, "Oh shit," but then Cameron was climbing again, climbing to the point the wooden steps looked faraway and past-tense, and Cameron continued, climbing, clawing, until he was sixty or seventy feet above ground, clinging to the thin tree trunk quivering beneath his body, the thin trunk which he'd need to shake in order to position himself over the water.

"This is going to be ridiculous," Dale said. "I probably shouldn't be so excited for this."

"I'm jumping," Cameron said, voice distant. "I'm jumping."

"You're not jumping," Westin said. "You're sitting. Come on."

"I'm admiring the view. I'll jump when I'm ready."
The tree trembled.

"You can't even stand up to jump," Dale said.

Cameron didn't answer, just maneuvered himself higher, and we all waited.

He'd meant it to be courageous, this climb. He'd meant to prove something, but from the distance of the dirty clearing we saw only a smudgy pink figure surrounded by green leaves and long, poking branches. Every time the treetop shook, he held tighter and groaned. Instead of looking like a daredevil, he looked like a suicide jumper on the ledge of an office building's eighth floor, a faceless shape who, facing the reality of the jump, had now reconsidered.

We waited, the clearing going dark under a patch of clouds. Every few minutes, Cameron re-positioned himself, swore, and reasserted that he'd jump. We pictured what it would look like. A solitary pink flash shooting downward, speeding toward the river where it would crash and pepper us all with the river's water-shrapnel. And what would Cameron look like if he surfaced? Would he splash out of the water, holding his belly and complaining of the impact, but still okay? Would he float slow-

ly up like a piece of driftwood, lifeless, waiting there in the center of the settling pool until one of us gathered the courage to wade out there ourselves and pull the dead body out? And who would grab him, in that case? His high school friends, or his fraternity brothers? Neither?

Eventually Westin said "Come on. Let's go."

"You guys are going?" Cameron asked from the top of the Jump Tree. And we'll never forget the sharp crack of his voice in that moment. After everything we'd all said, he still believed in us, still wanted us to do or be something.

But this was the end of our day at the Jump Tree: we glanced at his body up on top of the tree, so far away, and then we turned and walked into the woods, traversed the trail back ourselves, jumping over logs and snake holes and ducking under spiderwebs, carrying our mostly-full case of Miller Lite. We stuffed into Westin's pick-up, leaving Cameron, leaving the high school kids to start their laughter and their name-calling now that we'd forsaken him. We didn't hear a splash as we walked

away, not even the plop of a branch into the water.

In the days that followed, the fraternity house grew increasingly quiet and fragmented. Westin and Dale left the next morning, and the rest of us the following afternoon. We'd expected Cameron to stop by the house again that evening, angry and annoyed, but eager to let us know how angry and annoyed he was. Eager, also, to let us know that he'd jumped after we'd left...that he'd stood up tall on the tree, had flung himself into the center of the river and had dropped so far into the water that his feet had touched the rocky bottom and he was this close to breaking his neck! And oh, the things we'd missed, and weren't we sorry we'd misjudged him?

But we didn't see Cameron at the fraternity house again. Not that week, certainly. And not in the fall semester, either, though one of the incoming freshmen claimed to have talked in class to a guy named "Cam" who said that he'd quit the fraternity.

That night, we hoped that Cameron had slid down the trunk, embarrassed and wanting nothing more to do with us,

but alive. Three years later we graduated together, leaving behind the university and our temporary and oft-abused Central Florida home and the Citgo at the edge of campus and the dark trails that the locals followed to their clearing, and we left behind the Jump Tree, and Cameron—the anonymous smudge, about whom we never cared to truly learn anything—with his arms wrapped around the highest tip.

But had something terrible happened?

We tried not to think about it. It wasn't our fault, we told ourselves. Whether he jumped or climbed down. Whether he lived or died, whether he broke his neck or emerged from the water a hero. Not our fault. And if he'd died, we would've heard, right? There would've been a newspaper report, a campus memorial for the kid who died over summer, something. The fraternity: we would've heard from his family, right? He cared enough about Nu Kappa Epsilon that his parents would contact the house to tell us why Cameron was not returning?

But it's years later now, the university expanded to more than 50,000 students, the once-rural chunk of Orange County now so developed that it's almost its own large city, and we are frequently invited back for football games to sit with tens of thousands of alumni in a stadium that didn't exist while we were students. The Rush Recession is long past, fraternity memberships robust again. The house still stands, and we are invited there also, but most of us don't go back because it isn't our school anymore, and because we have children of our own, and we don't want to see them in the spaces we polluted.

Years later, and we no longer spend our time picturing what Cameron's jump might have looked like, the gory details of

body impact.

These days, we're cursed to instead picture what it was that he saw from atop that tree as he looked down at us. Maybe he hadn't jumped because he'd seen this: on the banks of the river, a cluster of nameless smudges...packed together...urging him to disregard himself, urging him to let gravity take hold of his body and smash it against the water. With this view before him, Cameron must have understood that he was no different than the college, that his own life away from the fraternity house

(all that he cloaked in his lies) was never real to us anyway, and that, no matter what we told him about brotherhood, we would never truly defend him when he needed us. In fact, we were always waiting for just the right moment to leave him behind, weren't we? With this reality before you, who wouldn't stay at the top of the tree forever, where the world could always be possibility, where the hurt would always seem so far away?

History of Missing Parents

Yve Miller

Yesterday a boy was set on fire. Yesterday a boy was set.

Fire, as in flames.

Boy as in yesterday, a pre-teen boy was doused and flamed.

filmed as fire, as in heat, climbed around his bony shoulder, swam across his swipe

of blonde bangs, raged into his wide eyes,

flames flowed up his sharp nostrils flash of singe, flying

orange lion rising around him,

boys holding him in, holding the flames like a camp-circle his kindlewood thighs etched.

He ran to the pool.

His crumpled news of shirt, doused lips peeling backward, teeth growing prominent, cheekbones shining through.

Shining, as in orange fury as Florida heard boy burning, birds vibrating limbs of trees, water screaming through apartment pipes, the sun screaming down on Florida.

80 percent burned, this boy.

Three degrees of flames across 80 percent of this body,

four fifths of his body.

80 percent of his burning life ahead,

20 percent a pluming memory.

80 percent on a test, 80 percent heart rate, three degrees of separation, 80 degrees of Florida sun, three boys pouring flames, 20 percent of the country reading,

80 percent sleeping, swimming, sauteing,

80 percent shopping, searching, social networking, surfing, settling for less.

80 days of skin grafts, 80 years of long sleeves, 40 bucks for a video game,

Florida in flames, boys in endless orange.

Florida in Reverse

Greg Bowers

10. Darkness fell awkwardly—like a pelican.

Below the plane, the Florida state line was somewhere in

the gloom.

Spring Break was over. I spent the week helping my mother clean out the house, getting it ready for sale. Now I was headed back to Missouri for the rest of the term.

I was looking out the window when the flight attendant interrupted me, asked if I wanted anything to drink.

"Orange juice."

A few minutes later, he brought me some in a plastic cup. And I drank it like it was expensive, rare and delicious.

9. We drove down to the Salvation Army store. The car was jammed with bedding and towels, a ceramic dog and cat, some tiny tables that were never designed to hold real things, some baskets, a magazine rack, a mirror, some of my father's tools, a couple paintings, and a few dusty artificial plants.

My mother didn't get out of the car while the Salvation

Army guy and I unloaded it all, bit by bit.

In fact, she didn't say anything until the guy grabbed a box of plastic coat hangers. "I thought you could always use coat hangers," she said. "And those are plastic ones."

"We sure could, ma'am."

She smiled.

Later, my mom and I went down to the water and wandered through some shops. I bought an alligator head that I could take back to Missouri, where I teach, to set on a shelf in my office.

Then we went back to the house.

There were three categories, we decided: stuff to be moved back home to Pennsylvania, stuff to be donated to charity, and trash. My mom did not put things in that last category easily.

She found a copy of the Miami Herald with headlines about

the Challenger explosion in a back closet.

"What do you think that's worth?" she asked, spreading it on the table in front of me.

I didn't know how to answer her question.

The next day, I made the second trip to the Salvation Army store by myself.

On the way back, I stopped off at the memorial garden where my father's ashes are buried.

It is a quiet place with a cement fountain and some granite benches.

I rubbed my fingers over the letters of his name on the bronze plaque and thought about how his fingerprints were all over my life.

I thought about how much he loved living in Florida and how much it had worn on my mom since he was gone.

I thought about how we collect things that we eventually lose. And about how we collect things that we can't ever lose and how those things are the rubber bands that hold our lives together.

I left when the gardener turned on the sprinklers.

8. I'm flying from St. Louis to Ft. Myers. The state line is somewhere down there below me, who knows?

The Gulf is brilliant. I am looking out the window and listening to old rock and roll on my iPod.

My head is swimming because I am headed to Florida to help my mom clean out the house.

I don't like this, but I knew it was coming. My father died five years ago and spending winters in Florida, almost instantly,

became less interesting for my mom.

Florida was always my father's joy, anyway. He loved telling people how warm the Florida days were when they were cold and shivering on the other end of the phone. He loved playing golf in January. He loved eating stone crabs. He loved having drinks out by the pool.

Then he died.

By the time my mother decided that she wanted to sell their house, the economy had gone bad.

So it took some time. And my mom felt every tug. Every real estate agent who left a light on made her angry. An unlocked door sent her into fits. A too-low offer would insult her.

It was too much for her.

But now, it was sold. And she needed help closing it down.

7. My father was dead.

Earlier that day, he called me and we talked on the telephone. He said he was doing okay, that he was feeling surprisingly good. We talked about sports at the University of Missouri, where I was teaching journalism. He said he probably wouldn't watch the basketball game on television that night.

Later, my mom called me with the news that he had died.

I stayed up all night thinking. Before dawn, I drove to St. Louis and took the earliest flight to Florida.

And I looked out of the plane's window and cried.

When I got to the house, I hugged my mother. There wasn't much else I could do.

My dad was dead. Cancel his cell phone? Return some theater tickets he wouldn't use?

We all flew back to Pennsylvania in a snowstorm and held the funeral there.

And then my mom took his ashes back to Florida to be buried.

"He hated being cold," she said.

6. The man said he'd seen a six-foot alligator earlier that morning. I couldn't decide whether that was a real warning or just an attempt to ratchet up the drama.

We weren't shaken. My daughter was about fifteen and she

and I had come to this brackish river to see manatees.

A power plant was nearby and the warm water it pumped out attracted the slow, lumbering creatures.

But the brown water also made it hard to see anything.

We rented a canoe anyway.

Was that swirl in the water a manatee? Was it that alligator?

My daughter moved her butt, twitched on the front seat

of the canoe. I tried to balance out her motions from the back seat.

She'd wiggle right, I'd move left.

Left. Right.

"Sit still."

She twitched again. The canoe wiggled.

"Sit still."

I could only see her from behind, but I had no doubt that she was smiling.

Were there manatees here?

A snout appeared just above the surface and snorted. A nose-blowing kind of sound. A your-uncle-blowing-his-nose-kind-of-sound. It sounded like a horse.

Was that a manatee?

She moved. The canoe wiggled. Was that a manatee's nose? Every muscle in my body was tense.

"Did you see that?" she said.

Another snout appeared above the water.

I'd read about manatees. They were sometimes called sea cows. Big fat lazy creatures—so slow that they were often injured because they couldn't get out of the way of passing motorboats.

We were in a canoe. And I figured that we were not in real danger, unless one of these cow-sized manatees decided to absent-mindedly surface under us.

I explained that to my daughter. She wiggled her butt at the thought.

"Sit still."

I tried to wiggle the opposite way.

Worst-case scenario. We were ten, maybe fifteen yards from shore. If we went overboard, I decided, we could easily swim to the shore. That is if there wasn't something under the brackish water trying to stop us.

It was a strange time. We sat there, in our canoe, paddling quietly, listening to the occasional sounds of manatees blowing their noses.

We drove back to the house.

It was hours before my shoulders relaxed.

5. I'd read that at the Hemingway House Museum in Key West, the staff continued to care for Ernest Hemingway's cats, giving away some kittens from time to time to keep the numbers down. So I wrote to the Museum and asked for a kitten.

And they wrote back.

Now I was driving to Key West.

My Hemingway kitten turned out to be a frightened creature that stayed quietly in a cardboard box for the ride back. Some of the Hemingway's cats, I read, were descendants of a particular cat that was given to him by a ship's captain. That cat, named Snowball, was a polydactyl (six-toed) cat.

That trait was passed down through the generations, though my new kitten seemed to have just the normal number.

She also had a little mew that sounded like a squeeze toy.

I named her "Molly" because, on the way home, the radio played the Beatles singing "Ob-la-Di, Ob-la-Da"

"Molly is the singer in the band."

And from the box on the floor of the back seat, Molly kept up with her little mew.

4. They are called green anoles, though I didn't know it at the time.

I thought they were chameleons because they looked like the chameleons we used to buy at the fair in Pennsylvania. For a couple of bucks you could buy a chameleon on the midway. Each one came with a string leash attached to a safety pin. You were supposed to pin the little guy to your shirt and watch him change to the color of whatever shirt you were wearing—provided that you were wearing a shirt that was brown or green.

Pennsylvania's chilly fall nights quickly ended the experiment.

Now, in Florida, they were everywhere. In the gardens, bushes. On the fences. Climbing the window screens.

And they were fast.

And here's the really weird part. Even if you were fast enough to grab one, the anole's tail would actually break off, stunningly, in your hand.

The stubby lizard would run for cover while you were left

with his tail in your hand.

He would grow a new tail in a couple of weeks.

But you would never forget the feeling of that still-twitching tail in your hand.

3. In 1968, my father and I went to Florida for spring training. I was sixteen and it was one of the coolest things I had ever done. We went to a game each day. The Beatles' "Lady Madonna" was just released and my dad let me turn up the radio on our rental car when it came on.

Later, in 1975, we rented an apartment near the beach and I watched the sunsets and played Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" over and over on my Walkman until the tape stretched.

In the evenings my parents would have drinks out by the pool with their temporary neighbors.

Later, they bought their own condo with a walled patio. My

father would sit out there and smoke cigars.

He even bought a pelican fountain made of cement. He would sit out there in his bathrobe drinking coffee, reading the paper and listening to the sound of that fountain.

2. In those early days, we were wide-eyed tourists, noticing the warmth of the sun on our arms. Checking it all out. Taking it all in.

We wrote reports about orange groves so our teachers wouldn't mind releasing us from school.

We sucked juice through our Citrus Sippers, plastic spouts that you jammed into oranges. They were supposed to allow you to suck the juice out, like a bottle. But they only gave me a headache.

We watched pelicans drop awkwardly into the water to catch fish. We watched alligators, still as death, lying next to the road.

I even bought a stuffed baby alligator that I took back to Pennsylvania to use in a school show-and-tell. I kept it on a bookshelf in my bedroom.

1. Thinking back, it should have been corny and embarrass-

ing. Because we would all absolutely clap our hands when we passed the "Welcome to Florida" sign on the highway.

My father would announce it from his driver's seat, making

it sound important.

"Welcome to Florida. The Sunshine State," he boomed.

And the "O" in Florida was an orange. Or maybe it was a golden sun setting over the Gulf of Mexico. I only got a glimpse.

It didn't matter. Applause.

And this wasn't irony. We weren't cool enough for irony. My sister and I were Pennsylvania kids with skin as pale as January snow. And this was a magical place where there was always sunshine, even in the dead of winter.

A minute or two later we were all at the Florida Welcome Station, drinking free samples of orange juice from paper cups and feeling the sun on our white arms.

And I remember that my father sipped his juice slowly, like

he was drinking something expensive, rare and delicious.

So I acted like I was drinking something expensive, rare and delicious too.

The Morning After

Flower Conroy

How the sun elbowed into the room. Unrecognizable morningwashed wallpaper, the scrolled furniture buttery with day. Breakfast's aroma unshackled me from sleep's fantasies. Applewood, eggs benedict, roasted beans. Gardenia blooms in a clear bowl. Fast. As in, does not eat. As in happens quickly. As in you unfastened my mouth with your mouth. Cologne of last night, neon summer, cigars, your thick & orchid hair. So close leaning to me, I thought you'd singe me with the coffee press. You pushed bangs from my eyes, put cup in my hand & commanded, sip.

Flashover

Chris Wiewiora

In the corner of the doublewide trailer, you watch an ignited pine barrel crackle and overflow with fire. The flames cascade onto the floor and then flood the corner's carpet and climb the walls. You sit cross-legged on the ground, squeezed between other firemen. Your tinfoil-covered helmets catch and reflect the glimmer of the blaze.

"This is it boys," your chief says, walking up and down the rows with his gloved hands behind his back. He's the biggest guy and the only one with a mustache. A dank smell of rubbery warmth of the flame retardant jackets mashes together as you

tug your oxygen masks on, covering your mouth.

"Check your breathing," the chief says, his voice muffles through his own mask. You remember how your high school track coach gave the team the same order before your meets. Bursts of compressed air fill the doublewide with a thick chorus

as each of you—breathing deeply—gives thumbs-up.

Before the chief lit the pine barrel, he gave a speech about how back-in-the-day—when they didn't have these fancy hoods that wrapped around their necks—they relied on the slow cook of their ears' cartilage and they waited for the sudden singe like sunburn on their shoulders to let them know that it was too hot to go any deeper into a burning building. The chief said you can't feel the fire anymore, that's why you needed to see it. Then he shut the doublewide's door and the room turned a bruised color. A wick-thin flicker appeared, and the chief continued. He said in new buildings where the walls, floors, and ceilings are all made of synthetic materials the insulation locks in the heat and it seems like the entire room spontaneously combusts.

You squint at the bright corner where the pine barrel ignited—now a pillar of braiding yellow, orange, and red flame. You think that Ashley would love this. When you go on your rescue shifts together, she always asks you to tell her all about the fires

you put out, because in addition to her paramedic degree she's trained how to fight fires, too, but the chief is just fine with her sticking to medical calls.

A sudden explosion, and the ceiling is on fire. There's a lavalike seep to it all. The heat presses down against your face as you look up. The air boils. Even with your mask on, you believe you can taste the smoke on your molars' enamel. Sweat shellacs the inside of your fire suit. You feel you could slide out of your suit as easily as shedding skin.

With a nod from the chief, a pair of guys near the barrel open up vents. The flames feed on the air. The same pair starts to spray the fire in short bursts. The flames sizzle, and steam vacuums through the vents.

The chief opens the doublewide's door and white sunlight flares inside. He walks along the rows of cross-legged firemen tapping shoulders twice. When it's your turn, you set your hands on the floor, puff hard like blowing out a candle, and then stand up.

Outside, the clear and clean blue sky flushes a bucket of coolness in your face. You consider the flashover simulation like a ceremony, a crossing over. You remember that you became a fireman to become a hero. Firemen are trained to look below their waist, at the floor, for victims to rescue, to pull out of burning buildings and save. But inside the doublewide everyone had allowed a fire, fire that you were trained to put out, to keep growing. Some of the guys say how you never get to see that. You turn around, to take one last look, but clouds of smoke below out of the extinguished trailer like a white flag.

You remember it was the middle of class, high school, and you had to pee, bad. You power-walked, stiff-legged, down the open-aired hallway. The stucco walls of the school were a peach-color, meant to sooth, but the spin-combination lockers rusted it all ugly. A cast ruffled under your unzipped fleece track jacket. You had fractured your forearm at practice, when you snared yourself on the bridge of a hurdle. At the first practice after your fall, you had lined up at the starting line on the track with your cast hidden under long sleeves and had even run one

warm-up lap before the coach remembered your arm was broken and made you sit out. You still drank a gallon of water each day. And so, by second period with the half-empty jug wedged between your backpack and sneakers in class, just before lunch, you always had to go.

"Don't," a voice echoed from the boy's bathroom just as

you turned inside.

Underneath the partition of the handicap stall you saw two sets of hightops and a pair of khaki pants that knelt between the sneakers on the ground like grout. Your sneakers squeaked on the bathroom's mildew-slick tile. One of the hightops shuffled toward the opening of the stall. A Hispanic boy appeared. He was wearing what the other guys on the track team called ghetto gowns—a tall and long t-shirt that draped down to the boy's knees where a pair of jeans slung low.

"Yo, holmes," the boy said. "You don't wanna be here."

"What's going on?" you asked, moving toward the boy who blocked the door to the handicap stall.

"They're—" the same voice again started but was silenced with a slap. You were sure that that was a girl kneeling on the ground of the stall.

You considered how your father had always told you, "Sometimes you're the only person who can save someone." You moved forward, shoving the ghetto-gowned Hispanic boy out of the way. You pushed the bathroom stall's door inward

and open.

You glanced at a pair of breasts. You looked up at the girl's pale shoulders sprinkled with freckles. Her button-up shirt flapped open. You noticed scattered buttons around the toilet. There was another Hispanic boy, but with a gold chain and a crucifix, standing next to the kneeling girl, who tried to cover her breasts.

Your tongue dried like before a race. You knew of this kneeling girl. Once at lunch, you had double-taked when you saw her, with a crew cut and dressed like a guy in a polo tucked into slacks, walk into the girl's bathroom. You kept staring at the girl's bathroom until she came out of the bathroom again and then you noticed her soft face with firm lips. You figured

she didn't get a chance to smile much. You had asked one of the girl's from the track team sitting next to you about her. Her name was Ashley and in the girls' bathrooms scratchitti covered the mirrors with stuff like *Ashley is a dyke*.

In the boys' bathroom, Ashley's face reddened.

"Get out," you said. The Hispanic boy slapped your castcovered arm. You grabbed the boy's shirt, pulling him out of the handicap stall.

"Whoa," the boy with the crucifix said, putting up his

hands. "We was just messin'."

You pushed him toward the exit. The crucifix-wearing boy gave a V with his fingers, then curled his forefinger into his fist and flicked you off. The boy laughed as he followed his ghettogowned friend out of the bathroom.

You went back to the handicapped stall. Ashley had pulled up her bra and was clutching her shirt together. You reached

out your hand.

"Come on," you said.

Ashley scooted into the corner of the stall.

"No," you said, shaking your head, ashamed she would think that. You shrugged off your track jacket. You squatted down in front of Ashley.

"Here," you said, offering her your jacket. "Put this on."

Back at the firehouse, you line up with the other guys and spoon some noodles of spaghetti from the mess hall onto a plate. Ashley comes up, asking you what happened. You joke that you now know how an arsonist feels. The other guys slap you on your back and joke that they'll have to keep their eyes on you.

At a table, Ashley scoots next to you.

"Really," Ashley says, her thigh brushes yours. "Tell me what it was like."

You twirl your fork into the noodles, considering what you could say. You know you could put what had happened into words, but that wouldn't be enough. Still, you think you can at least try and so you say, "It was intense. The ceiling exploded like a volcano. And the flames weren't right in front of us, or

anything, but everywhere. Around us. Surrounding me."

Ashley nods, like she understands, but you think she would have to experience it to really know it.

After lunch, you run down the dirt path next to the fire station. Your gray t-shirt soaks in your sweat. Your back looks like someone splashed a bucket of water onto a cement sidewalk. You tongue grits of garlic powder chalking up your molars as you think about the flashover. On the path, you wish you could escape the consuming beautiful destruction of the flashover's full-on flames. In these woods where the trees evenly space out like fence posts and pine needles carpet the dirt and tufts of spongy St. Augustine grass stretches out along the way you try to focus on the open quiet, but you can't help imagining it all ablaze. You consider what it would take to put out a raging forest fire. Even with all the guys at the station it wouldn't be possible. You aren't trained like those smokejumpers out West. The guys are just Florida boys. They're all mostly married, or on their way, and have kids. You know they're heroes to their families.

Glancing above the hedges of the finger-like green palmetto fronds, you can see clear to the road that parallels the path. Occasionally, a car blurs by and again you think about the flashover, how you witnessed what a fire could do when it is allowed to go out-of-control. And even though it was an exercise—the fact that the flames had exploded made the simulation real—you think that the other guys had probably felt a deep panic of danger. But for you, at the flashover you accepted the possibility of damage, you understood you could make it through any fire. Surrendering to the risk was what captivated you, but you try not to think about that. When you stumble on a snaking cypress root across the path, you realize that you're thinking too much. You laugh out loud and remind yourself to lift up your legs and continue.

You run to your halfway point: a retention pond that holds overflow of rain that the sandy earth can't soak up. The sun's reflection oscillates on the water's waving surface. The yellow-white light shimmers in your eyes. With the back of your hand you wipe the crust of spittle off your lips. Before you start to

round the pond, you breathe in through your nose from deep down—the air filling and compressing in your lungs—and then you exhale through your mouth. You compare the flashover to sprinting. Gulping air and rushing forward—an all out push, taking everything in and then emptying all the way out.

You remember running that fast in high school at the track: your fingers as flat as blades and your swinging hands cut off your peripheral vision, making your lane into a tunnel vision. The PE coach had invited you to line up with the rest of the class, even though you wore a pair of jean shorts and Converse hightop sneakers. The coach said you wouldn't be marked off for not dressing out if you ran the mile.

Since your father had been shot and killed on patrol you had come home to an empty house and didn't want to linger with the dusty photo of your father in uniform set on the center of the mantle like some kind of altar. Instead, you would run around and around the block until you saw your mother's car parked in the driveway. Then you would come in, shower, eat, and go to sleep; not wanting to think about anything at all.

Throughout the rest of high school the track guys at lunch talked about that mile you had run in that PE class. You only remember that you had thrown up as the coach slapped your back and shoved the digital stopwatch in your face. It blinked 05' 22" 97. You were the first freshman to be put on varsity.

The sirens blare at the fire station and you break from your daydreaming. You know you need to get back. You're going to be on emergency rescue with Ashley. Before you go on your shifts together you always play rock, paper, scissors. Best two-out-of-three. Winner gets to drive. Whenever Ashley gets behind the wheel, she says she thinks that you lose on purpose because you like being a passenger. You turn around and sprint on your toes, digging into the ground, pushing forward to go back.

The day after those boys tried to mess with Ashley in high school she walked up to where you had lunch with the other guys on the track team under a tree in the school's courtyard. While you ate a microwaved beef and cheddar burrito, your

teammates talked about how the coach wanted you to start running as the anchor in the mile relay as soon as your arm healed. As you listened, you had to be careful not to drip the cheesy meat goo of your burrito onto your cast or else the stain would smudge over your teammates' signatures.

The guys stopped talking about who could run the relay with you and stared at Ashley wearing your varsity jacket. You remember that they looked at her as if they were thinking,

You're in the wrong place.

"Here," Ashley said, shrugging the jacket off her shoul-

ders. She held it in her outstretched hand to you.

"Well," you said with your hands on the bench seat and you considered standing up to take the jacket from her. "You know what?" You settled back down in place. "You can still wear it," you said.

One of the guys elbowed your ribs. You shook your head at the rest of the guys who were ooo-ing. They soon turned back to talking about running and changed the subject from the mile relay to their personal records and how they were trying to shave seconds off of their time. Each of the track guys had a gallon of water like yours at their feet that they curled up to their mouths and took a swig from, as natural as breathing.

Ashley stood there with your jacket in her hand. You looked at her firm lips. You smiled at her and patted the empty space on the bench next to you and then turned to listen to one of the guys talking about running laps backward. You felt Ashley's thigh scoot against yours as she sat down.

You and Ashley are the first response to the 911 call from a man who said his wife was about to have their baby on the side of the road. When you pulled up, the man introduced himself as Mark and his wife as Monica. Her glossy pupil's were as black as a deer's eyes. Mark looked just as lost. He said he didn't know what to do.

On the passenger side, Monica has her legs splayed against the dashboard as Mark kneels beside her on the gritty road. Monica's sundress hikes up to her knees and Mark strokes her pale legs prickled with stubble. Monica huffs through clenched teeth.

Ashley glances at the heavy pulsing vein in Monica's forehead and says, "I need you to breathe. Slowly."

Ashley takes in a purposeful breath in through her nose, holds it for a second, and then exhales out of her mouth. You catch yourself breathing along with her. Ashley kneels next to the passenger side door and continues until Monica matches her rhythm. The vein in Monica's forehead submerges.

"Just keep breathing now," Ashley says. "Let's have a

look." Ashley lifts up the hem of Monica's dress.

"Well, it's coming." Ashley turns around to you. You get the delivery kit from the truck and set it beside Ashley's boots. You back up to give her room and pull Mark up and away from the car. Ashley, still squatting next to Monica by the passenger seat, takes out the car's floor mat and flings it behind her. You move Mark out of the way before the mat sails onto the weedy grass growing along the shoulder.

Ashley spreads a plastic pad on the floor of the car. She snaps on a pair of latex gloves. Just before reaching toward Monica, Ashley asks, "You're not allergic, right?"

Monica shakes her head.

"Let's have a baby," Ashley says.

Ashley is in-the-zone. You watch, along with Mark. His arms flexed and his legs taut, he's just waiting for Ashley to ask for anything. Monica is in the moment, too. Ashley doesn't ask for any help. You think that this—delivery—only women can fully experience.

"Push," Ashley says, her hands cupped underneath Moni-

ca's pelvis like a safety net.

Monica grips her knees with her hands, the knuckles bonewhite as a gush of blood splashes into Ashley's palms. The baby's face comes first, then shoulder. Monica gives one last push and the baby plops into Ashley's slick hands. The umbilical cord leads back to the still-attached placenta like a tethered bungee cable.

Monica has her palms open, the color rushing back, ready to receive her child. You give Ashley a sanitized cloth. Ashley takes it, she wipes the baby's face and it cries.

"Oh," Monica says.

"That's good," Ashley says.

You notice that the baby is a boy and say so out loud. Mark begins to cry. You pat him on the shoulder and then nudge him toward the car, to his wife, to his son. Mark goes.

"You have a beautiful son," Ashley says, supporting the

baby's neck to lift and place onto Monica's chest.

Ashley turns her gloves inside out as she takes them off. She places a small cap from the kit on the baby's head and covers the baby in a blanket. Ashley gets up and lets Mark kneel where she just was. Mark looks back and forth from Monica to his son, smiling and shaking his head.

Ashley comes up beside you and hugs you around your back. You watch the baby's skin ebb from blue to a healthy

pink, like a sunrise.

In the garage of your townhouse, you stand behind the workout bench that Ashley lies on. You keep your thumbs hooked in the elastic of your gym shorts, because you know that Ashley feels insulted if you hover your hands underneath the bar as you spot for her.

You keep an eye on Ashley's breathing, while trying not to stare at her sports bra-wrapped chest. Her breasts cinch with each rep. Ashley huffs into your face. You can smell the tangy sweat from Ashley's slick underarms.

"How many?" Ashley asks, locking her elbows.

"What?" you ask.

"Reps," Ashley says with her eyebrows crinkled.

You notice her arms shaking, slightly.

"Two," you say, even though you're not sure. Then you absentmindedly take your hands away from your waist to help Ashley and the elastic band of your shorts snaps.

"Ugh," Ashley says.

You know she doesn't like when you lose count because

you're daydreaming.

Ashley draws in a breath and pushes up another rep. You think she'd rather struggle than ask for help. You let Ashley finish her set, huffing.

You remember Monica's breathing and how she pushed her

baby out right there in the car. You wonder if Mark, the new father, will tell his son on his birthdays how he was delivered on the side of the road. Then you remember how afterward Ashley had wrapped her arms around you and how that felt.

"I was just thinking about getting a girlfriend," you say.

The bar sinks down. The metal presses into Ashley's breasts. You begin to put your hands underneath the bar to help her with the weight, but Ashley shakes her head, and clinches her jaw like Monica, and pushes, emptying her lungs. She racks the bar back in its stand, the metal frame rattling.

"Getting a girlfriend isn't like getting a sandwich," Ashley

says, standing up.

"I know, I know," you say. You towel off Ashley's sweat from the bench. "It's just that it gets lonely sometimes."

"You've got me," Ashley says, swinging her hips.

You want to tell Ashley that her flirting doesn't help.

"It's not the same," you say, adding weight to the bar. You lie into Ashley's leftover heat. The bench had sponged up her warmth and now your body squeezes it out. You grip the bar, breathe in, and let the bar sink down to your chest.

"I know how you feel," Ashley says. She crosses her arms under her sports bra, pushing up her cleavage.

"What?" you ask pressing the weight up.

"About being lonely," Ashley says.

Your arms quiver. You attempt to press up against the

plummeting weight.

"Spot," you say. Your wrists roll back. Ashley snatches the bar, and with you, together you curl it up to reset in its place. You pinch the edges of your eyes at the bridge of your nose.

"Do you remember that couple and the baby?" you ask.

"The baby was beautiful," Ashley says, smiling. "They were a family," you say, smiling back.

"A baby..." Ashley says, looking away from you.

"I wish I could have something like that," you say.

"Yeah," Ashley says. She looks at you and nods.

You think maybe Ashley feels exactly how you feel.

"It'll happen," you say, lying back down on the bench.
"No it won't," Ashley says.

"You'll probably be first," you say. You grip the bar and lift it off the frame again. The bar dips down to your chest.

Ashley snorts. "Ha. Yeah, I guess," she says.

You feel the weights stretch your muscles as you start your reps.

"You know...." Ashley says.

"What?" you ask. You tilt your head trying to lock eyes with Ashley.

"Oh, nothing," Ashley says, shaking her head.

You flex and then press up. The bar clanks back into place. You still hold on.

"Come on," you say. "Tell me."

"I don't really want to talk about it," Ashley says. She walks out of the garage and shuts the door behind her.

You sit up on the bench. You don't follow Ashley inside. You stay until the remainder of Ashley's heat dissipates.

It had been 3AM when you came home from an evening shift. All you wanted to do was take a shower and collapse in bed. All the lights were off in the townhouse and Ashley's blinds were shut. You hadn't done emergency rescue that day. Since Ashley was a paramedic, she didn't go on your fire-only shifts, but she always asked you about them, because it was something she didn't get to experience.

At the front door, you tried your key, but it was already unlocked. You shook your head and opened the unlocked door, closing it behind you, quietly.

Your hand was on the deadbolt when you heard quick breathing from the living room. You knew it couldn't be a break-in, but you were charged still high-strung from your shift. You had been on a call for an apartment fire where you saved an unconscious child from an upper floor. After, you had given the child oxygen for smoke-inhalation.

In your townhouse, you snuck forward in the dark. You spotted two shadows in the living room, close together. You reached for the switch to turn on the overhead.

"Hey!" you said at the same time as you flicked on the light. First, you saw a head with a jutting jaw line turn over a

pair of wide shoulders. Then, a woman's thick naked breasts swayed. You saw that this woman's open mouth was ready to gasp for air or about to scream. That's when you saw Ashley, standing naked, her hands holding onto the edge of the dining room table, taking it all in. The open-mouth woman's hands were on Ashley's hips. You noticed black leather straps and a belt harnessing the open-mouth woman's pock-marked bottom.

"Ohmygod," Ashley said looking at you. She blinked and you turned around, placing one hand over both of your eyes.

You heard a slick, sliding withdraw. Then quick footsteps slapping on the kitchen tile and the open and close of the door to the garage. You could smell something similar to the petroleum jelly you put on your burns. You tried to squeeze your already closed eyes tighter.

"I didn't-" you started, then stopped. You thought it

would probably be best if you just shut up.

A soft hand tapped your shoulder, but you kept your eyes shut. You thought if you didn't see this, then it wasn't happening. The hand pulled you around by your shoulder.

"Hey."

You heard Ashley's voice. You opened your eyes.

Ashley stood in front of you wearing the kitchen apron with the floral print like wallpaper. You could see the freckles cupped in the basin of Ashley's clavicles. You buffed a laugh through your nose at how ridiculous it all was. Ashley leaned in and hugged you.

Ashley talked into your armpit, "You smell like smoke."

"There was a fire," you said.

"Yeah," Ashley said, still holding you.

You thought Ashley wanted to know more, but you didn't want to tell her anything. You realized your hands were on her skin. You felt yourself twitch in your groin. You pulled yourself away from Ashley.

"I need to take a shower," you said.

Ashley shrugged.

As you climbed the steps you looked down at Ashley. She had turned away from you to walk toward the garage. Above her bottom the apron's strings were tied in a bow, like a gift.

You stand in the shower and masturbate. After Ashley left in the middle of your workout, you went to her room, but her door was shut and you didn't knock. Under the water, you can't finish. You keep imagining Monica's glossy eyes on Ashley's face.

You turn off the water and dry off. You wrap your towel around your waist and go to your room.

Ashley sits on the edge of your bed. Sweat beads into her sports bra. She hasn't showered since the workout. Her hair is damp and her cheeks are red.

"Sit with me for a bit," Ashley says. She smoothes some wrinkles in the bed spread, making a smooth space next to her.

You walk over to Ashley. You're scared, but you don't think you should be. Ashley pats the spot next to her. You know if you sit down, then everything will change. But if you leave, then it'll just be the same.

You remember the last time you were this close to Ashley. You took her to prom, because you both didn't have dates. You didn't say it was "just friends." You didn't know what to do other than dance with her and let her nuzzle against your tuxedo and feel safe, and tell yourself not to kiss her, even though you wanted to the whole night.

"You just don't get it," Ashley says, flattening out wrinkles in the sheets.

"Then tell me about it," you say, realizing the knot in your towel is loose.

Ashley reaches out her arm and grabs your hand. You sit down next to her.

"I like when you smell like smoke," Ashley says, she squeezes your hand.

"I don't now, do I?" you ask, pulling your hand out of hers and taking a sniff of your skin.

Ashley puts her hands to your face

"That baby was beautiful," Ashley says.

"Yeah—"

Ashley kisses you. You keep your hands flat on the bed.

"I'm sorry," Ashley says.

"No-"

"—Please," Ashley says.

You think this is crazy, but you want to know what Ashley thinks, so you ask, "What is this all about?"

"I want to try," Ashley says. She pulls off her sports bra.

You aren't sure if Ashley means she wants to have sex with a man, or have a baby, or to be with you, her best friend. You don't care. Years ago when you saved her you fell in love with her needing you, being the only person who could do anything. Since then, she's always, always been there, but never with you. And now, you know you're about to abandon how you are now for something that could be better. And you think that that risk is worth it.

As you undo the knot of the towel around your waist, you think of the one and only time you ran a sub four-minute mile at the high school state championship. You started sprinting at the pistol, your cleats clawing forward and creating a space between you and the other guys. The first lap you thought of saving Ashley from the boys. You felt your toe-strikes flicking so fast on the surface of the rubber track that you became a skipping stone across water. You wanted to pull Ashley along with you, away from the other girls. In the second lap, you kept your elongated stride. You gulped air. On the third lap, you knew you would be the closest to Ashley when you slow-danced the last song at midnight with her at prom. Your arms pendulumed through the air. Your lungs were twin volcanoes on the last lap's end dash. Ashley was at the finish line, her arms up, cheering you on. You crossed and then Ashley jumped up onto you, vicing her legs around you.

Pain Perdu

MJ Fievre

Abigail Esmeralda Aimé, 27, died on Monday, April 6, 2009 in Miami, Florida. She leaves behind confused husband Charles Aimé, 47, acupuncturist, and her beloved dog Gigi. The husband reports that when Abigail was 9 years old, her grammaire teacher in Port-au-Prince said, "If you don't stop frowning, by the time you're thirty, you'll get all wrinkly." Abigail never did turn 30 or get these wrinkles, but friends say that all her life she worried. She worried about her figure—too bony, too plump, too lanky, too gawky. Her nose-gigantic or crooked or misplaced—made her eyebrows knit together in front of the mirror. She worried about karma and intellect, about the spelling of the word hippocampe and the missing ingredient in her pain perdu recipe. She feared she was losing grasp on her Creole after she moved to South Miami from Haiti, and grew self-conscious of her accented speech-alternately please-slow-down-goddamnit fast, and stutterly. "At night she cried," Charles says, because the aspiring writer felt illiterate not knowing who Tennessee Williams and Ernest Hemingway were, and at the same time Coriolan Ardouin, Massillon Coicou and Oswald Durand seem to belong to a past she didn't want to hold on to. At night she always sat on the porch, her husband recalls. A rite. She told him she began to feel rooted looking at patches of grass, brilliant beneath moon glow, and mud pools of rainwater that reflected the stars. While Gigi ran carefree and healthy among the begonias and desert roses, Abigail shed tears over the dog's unavoidable death, saying she couldn't help imagining herself holding the lifeless body of the boxer. She mostly let herself worry while in the tub, fumbling with paper-thin bars of Ivory on a steel dish, the water plunging from silver faucets. The morning of her death, the husband recalls, she was taking a bath in the deep, old tub—a creamy yellowed porcelain, cracks in its Victorian skin—when birds on the roof seemed to distract her, the click of their feet across the shingles she described like her mother's old treadle sewing machine. The soap slipped between her legs. She felt for it, and it squirted through her fingers. She turned toward Charles and said, "I saw Mother gasp for breath." Her eyes were blazing, her mouth stretched wide in a way Charles had learned to be wary of. "Too many bodies on the boat to Miami—Somebody had to go." The same morning, Abigail jumped from the roof. The night before, the husband says she had been drinking Prestige beers while listening to Haitian Compas, dangling her skinny legs over the balcony and singing to the moon with a mélodie haïtienne scratching on the eight track. That night, the couple had laughed, twirled, spun—and never missed a beat.

After Trayvon

Brad Johnson

Being black in Florida doesn't make you guilty but it's enough to get you shot.

My white friends and I thank God George Zimmerman's Puerto Rican, not Caucasian.

A month after Trayvon was killed in a suburb three hours from my suburb, two black juveniles are arrested in Boca Raton driving an Infiniti stolen from Miami, the back seat littered with iPads, Xboxes, iPhones and a Caviler King Charles lifted from local houses with unlocked porches.

I lived next to a black family growing up in Towson, outside Baltimore.
The parents were both attorneys and parked their matching Mercedes with personalized plates in their two car garage. My brother and I played touch football and rode skateboards with the two brothers. We fought over out of bounds lines and the older brother would use spin kicks he learned in karate classes which would end the fights since I only used my fists.

The older brother now fights Muay Thai professionally in the Philippines. His online biography suggests he grew up on the Baltimore streets: gang murders, drug dens, crack addiction, incarceration. The tattoos across his pectorals pretend to tell a story but he's whiter than he claims.

If some guy followed me in his SUV when I was Trayvon's age and got out to confront me I would have slammed his face against the sidewalk and split his head. The more he screamed for help the more force I'd use to shut him up. I'm blacker than I appear.

Elder members of my Homeowners Association eye the black kids that carry fishing rods through my neighborhood and sit along the lakes.

Being from Baltimore, I'm uncomfortable around this many white people; this many guns; this many kids just walking around, some stealing, some fishing.

Most are innocent. Not that it matters.

A Table, An Ugly One

Ryan Meany

That we sometimes become sentimental about personal artifacts may be the vestige of some evolutionary purpose, but the trait, when it manifests now, when we cannot bring ourselves to donate an old t-shirt or are saddened to imagine the fate of our first car, should be embarrassing. One of the objects I begged my mother for was a table at a garage sale when I was ten or so. Its two shelves were roughly two and a half by two feet. They rested three feet apart on thin square metal legs. The lower shelf hovered a few inches above the floor. The shelves, I would take time to regard some twenty-six years later, were particle board covered by a veneer sticker mimicking dark planks of wood, perhaps oak, each of those false planks about four inches wide. I haven't thought this much about the table until now that the trash men have carried it away.

The one aspect of the table I repeatedly noticed over the years was its awkward shape and size. It wasn't quite a TV stand. Wasn't quite an end table. It was neither tall nor long enough to be a coffee table and was too unstable and veneered to be a work table. Because of the lower shelf it could never be used in tandem with a chair, never be anything like a desk or TV tray. I still don't know, having lived with the thing for over two decades, when it ever would have been fashionable, even if its dimensions had been right for knickknacks or flowers or pictures of Mee Maw. For the most marketable uses it was too big or too little or too weak.

At ten I saw the table only as perfect for my GI Joes, and since it was probably priced somewhere near \$3, I might have reasoned that if Mom bought it, which she was likely to do because of its price, I had a two-story fortress worthy of my military. If she didn't buy it, it was ugly and pathetic anyway (and who knew what those strange people had been doing with it or, worse, what they'd been doing before they'd touched it), and I would now have undepreciable stock. On a trip to the mall

in the future—the farther the future, the higher the stock—I would have reminded her how I was still a little surprised that \$3 was more important to her than the great satisfaction I would have felt giving my troops some dignity, rescuing them from their hymilisting man pile in my toy how

from their humiliating man pile in my toy box.

I don't recall the degree of my satisfaction the first time I arranged my GI Joes on the table. I'm mostly sure that by the time I was thirteen or fourteen the Joes and the Tomahawk Helicopter, which I had had to have for Christmas—well over a hundred dollars worth of toys—had been sold in our own garage sale, all the money from which I probably used to invest in one and a half model cars.

Such model hotrods and racecars would be displayed on the table until, sometime before I was sixteen, my best friend Chris and I were burning them next to a storm sewer in our subdivision and, when a vehicle approached, kicking the flaming molten plastic into the sewer. Most likely reasons: lack of imagination, boredom, thrill of fire and destruction. But I was showing off for Chris, too. He was always more self-reliant, independent, and unmaterialistic than I, and always quick to point this out. Had my parents not been able regularly to buy me new shoes for the first day of school, neurotic as I was, I very likely could have become, over the years, a dangerous person. Not Chris. He'd wear the same shoes for two or three years without complaint, with confidence. As early as eighth grade, he was warning me that I was emotionally weak, that I cared too much what people thought.

He knew things before I did, like what a dildo was, who the Violent Femmes were, why women were so important. He was the first to French kiss, the first to get laid, of course: "It is the warmest, wettest place your dick ever wants to be." He shunned the popularity game of high school, isolating himself, associating with rejects. I hadn't the courage to join him, so he, my best friend and neighbor of four hard years, through early adolescence and desegregation, stopped talking to me. Before all of that, though, before my cowardice in high school and my haste to have my heart broken by romance, I did not say to Chris, "You're right. I'm scared, terrified, in fact, and so I am

a needy conformist, a failure in the eyes of any decent artist or founding father. I'm also thirteen. Go fuck yourself." Instead, I burned the model cars I'd spent countless hours painting and gluing, even more hours watching, waiting for the paint and glue to dry. To afford them, I'd mown several lawns countless times. And the paint kits and the sand paper and the various sized brushes and the airbrush—my prized possession for at least a year. Almost all of the models, in less than an hour, we turned into a milky black smoke. I could tell by his smile Chris was, for now, impressed.

I don't know what purpose that table served while I was in high school. Probably concert ticket stubs, a place for old cassettes and new CDs. Back then I would have told you the only reason I wasn't throwing the table away was I didn't want to carry it downstairs or I didn't think the trash men would take it unless it were disassembled and put into a trash bag, and my time was valuable. The truth would have been I knew my childhood was very old and very sick and not going to recover. Objects from it I could push into the four corners of my room, the closet, the spare bedroom, but I couldn't throw anything away. I couldn't sell or burn anything else.

The next time I would have noticed the table was in graduate school. I had moved into a storage unit with a window. My daybed was also my easy chair, a TV tray my dining room. My entertainment center: the table. On the top self, the old TV from my parents' bedroom. On the bottom, a VCR the size of a dictionary, procured by my father from a wrecked van, no doubt, on the back lot of the car dealership where he worked.

Charles, Brenda and Lauren I had known for less than a year, and, almost as soon, in the desperation and loneliness of graduate school, fallen into respective forms of love. One night we crammed ourselves into that apartment to watch *Blue Velvet*. This followed a day the likes of which many of us experience probably only six or seven times in life. Because it was a Saturday or Sunday, when all of us should have been either grading, revising, reading a book for this class or suffering through a paper on another book for another class, we got into my '93 Mercury Mystique, powder blue, and drove to The Quarry. Brenda

had gotten word of this place. She had a taste for local exotica. They all did. I'd never been to a quarry, didn't—still don't, really—know what a quarry was. We jumped a fence and walked a dirt road until we found a crane that looked several decades old. It had tracks like a tank. If I wasn't drunk I had drank. I climbed the tracks, then into the cab and probably tried to start it.

Behind two-story mounds of dirt was a rectangular body of water, an opaque unnatural blue, about the size of a city block. There was no shore. The soft mounds of dirt sloped straight to the water's edge, and near it, below me, Brenda and Lauren were stripping down to their underwear, then their underwear were coming off, and they were encouraging Charles and I to do the same. At the time Brenda wanted Charles and I wanted Lauren. If any want existed between Lauren and Charles they politely suppressed it. While none of these wants, that I know of, went satisfied on that day or later, I felt at that moment quite hopeful. To hell with hope, Brenda seemed to be communicating as she descended the bank, naked, paper white, a true redhead, and jumped into the eerie water. I wanted Lauren badly enough to look away from her naked body as she followed Brenda.

The girls urged us in. I was less afraid of whatever chemicals or hand was in the water than stripping in such an open space in so much light, so I would have said something like, "Enjoy your tumors. And I don't know how you're getting home." Charles, sitting lower on the mound, looked up at me, waiting for my move, which was none. I thought I would regret this forever.

Because we hadn't known one another long enough, no negative tension existed between any us. No inferred promises had been broken. No demands had been implied. We were all only hopeful that we might mean something to one another, and now half of us were naked and swimming in some huge symmetrical hole dug out of the earth while the other half were excited just to watch.

While each of our reasons was different none of us wanted the day to end. Talk led to *Blue Velvet*. None of them had seen it. This could not continue, I insisted. We probably watched it at my small place because I was the only one with a VCR. I'd seen the movie several times. I must have been thinking about that table. There it was holding up the movie, captivating my new friends, my new better life. I must have realized for the first time how long that table had been with me, what it had done for me, phases of my life it had, by its association with them and its having outlasted them, solidified.

Although a natural mercy is we can never know that which we will never recall, we do remember enough to know we're not recalling much. Maybe this is partly why old friends are so hard to let go. They can, if they will, remember moments of our lives that we will not and they can, if they will, remember us in ways we cannot remember ourselves. When time or geography or worse separates us, these people become the sole owners of these non-memories, these pieces of us, this lost evidence of ourselves. We can only hope they, the people we succeeded in getting close to but failed to keep close, will treat us as well as they do the floors of their home.

Keeping the table was easy, but of all the things I thought during all of my moves over the past decade, how I each time came to decide to keep it is the last thing I'd remember. When I left graduate school with my girlfriend, Tanya, and we rented a house in Tampa, the table, I believe, was used for the telephone, telephone book, not urgent but perhaps not negligible mail to be opened sometime in the future, unretrieved student papers, found photographs of people we didn't necessarily dislike and so couldn't throw away, etc. When my relationship with Tanya collapsed a year and a half later I, depressed and unwilling to shop long for an apartment, moved into what I hope will be the worst neighborhood in which I will ever live.

Leaving this apartment one morning, I found in the parking space on the other side of my bathroom wall a radio station's SUV, the kind they paint up and load with an arena sound system, on cinderblocks, all doors open, wires hanging from the dash, not a cop in sight. Another morning, returning home from some late night at someone's house, I was questioned by three detectives about my neighbor upstairs. Appar-

ently he was wanted for armed robbery and attempted murder. Indistinct is my memory of the table's purpose while I lived there.

When my lease was up, I was seeing a young lady, Jessica, who coincidentally needed a roommate in the house she was renting. Still unwilling to shop long for a place to live, I chose to read the coincidence as a blessing, a sign. Because her house was already furnished, and because, had I tried to bring it into her house, she would have said, "You're out of your goddamned mind," I know the table ended up stored in her garage with the rest of my stuff for the next seven months, the duration of the relationship. Then I moved into another apartment, a roomy nice place with a large geometrically complex pool. I put the table on the patio where it held my ashtray. On good nights, me and some woman set our beers on it while we talked and smoked. This was the table's function for the next four years.

Eventually I met Audrey. When we were moving into a house we found together, she looked at the table concerned. I said, "We'll put it out back. It's a good ashtray table." The difference now was the table would be exposed to the elements of Florida. The patio of my apartment had been covered and screened. Clean, domestic and spacious as this house was, its patio was a slab of concrete. I put a small cheap grill on the table. The height was perfect. One day after a storm I saw the top shelf of the table was bowing slightly and collecting water. Each time it rained the table bowed a little more. I would remove the ashtray and grill and tilt the table, draining the water. How long could it last? It was wobbly but, if not bumped, and if the grill was centered, it still held while I cooked steaks, shrimp, potatoes, corn. This was about the time I began to take vague notice of the materials from which the table had been made, the dimensions, the veneer, which on the top shelf had been burned black by the sun.

One morning the table had collapsed into the rosebush. I was concerned for the rosebush but not enough to pick the table up. I'd seen the table upside down and on its side, but seeing it flattened was strange, all four legs lying on the ground together for the first time, the shelves touching now as if all along this

is what they'd been meaning to do. It looked like a dead thing. I left it there untouched for days, carried on tending to life. How long until Audrey insisted it be thrown away? Would I argue? How could I? How long until the table would rot, be nothing but legs and screws and curled veneer? What about the poor rosebush? And hadn't I first used the table for my Smurf figurines when I was in elementary school? Had I even gone to the garage sale with Mom or had she gone alone and brought it home as a meager surprise? This was stupid. I put one large trash bag into another. Wood particles separated in my hands as I packed the table into the bags. The day was bright and hot. I wondered whether the trash men would think I was trying to be sneaky with something that required a special pick-up. I put it on the curb, half expecting it would be there next to the empty garbage can when I got home, but it wasn't. It was where it belonged, on the way to the dump with all the other stuff that had served the living. I'd be damned if I shed a tear.

Contributors

Jessie Barnes is currently a senior at the University of North Florida, majoring in Fine Arts with an emphasis in painting, drawing and printmaking, and minoring in Art History. Outside of UNF, she has participated in painting and printmaking summer programs at both Jacksonville University and the Maryland Institute College of Art. Throughout her college career, Barnes's work has been accepted to over ten exhibitions, including a recent solo exhibition entitled "Collectivity" at the Ponte Vedra Cultural Center and two juried exhibitions at the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens. Barnes will receive a BFA in the spring of 2013 and intends to earn an MFA. For more information about Jessie Barnes and her work, please visit www. jessiekbarnes.tumblr.com.

Brad Blair is an artist born and raised in northern Maryland. He has had an interest in the natural world since childhood. He received a B.S. in 2009 from Towson University in Maryland and is currently pursuing an MFA at Florida State University. Visit his website at www.bradblairceramics.com.

Greg Bowers teaches journalism at the University of Missouri and is sports editor of the *Columbia Missourian*, a daily newspaper and website produced by students and managed by professionals. He lives in Columbia, MO.

Dianna Calareso earned her MFA from Lesley University in 2007. Her work has been published online and in print in such journals as Evergreen Review, MARY: A Journal of New Writing, and Paradigm. A native of southern Florida, she currently lives in Boston where she works as a copywriter and writes two blogs, one for creative nonfiction and one for food and photography. A full list of publications is available at diannacalareso. com.

Flower Conroy's poetry has appeared in American Literary Review, Blaze Vox, Emry's Journal, and other publications. Her chapbook, Escape to Nowhere was published by Rain Mountain Press. She lives in Key West, Florida.

Michael Cuglietta is a Florida writer and University of South Florida alumnus. While at USF, he met Tom Abrams, a teacher, writer, and storyteller of the highest regard. Michael's work has appeared or is slated to appear in *The Gettysburg Review, Echo Ink Review, The Hawaii Review* and *Skive Magazine*.

Vassiliki Daskalakis is a freshman attending the University of Florida. She is interested in the surrealist movement and the architectural decay of abandoned houses and buildings. Most of her work is site specific.

John Davis Jr. is a sixth-generation Floridian and serves as the English Department Chair and Communications Coordinator for the Vanguard School of Lake Wales. His poetic work has been published in venues internationally, with recent appearances in *Deep South Magazine*, *The Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature*, and other fine literary outlets. In April 2012, he was among the winners of the Robert Frost Poetry and Haiku Contest, sponsored by the Studios of Key West. Davis is currently enrolled as a student in the University of Tampa's MFA in Creative Writing program. He will graduate in December 2013.

Alexander Diaz received an MFA from the University of Florida. His work is a marriage of documentary photography and conceptual art. He uses photography to express concerns and comment on environmental issues, consumption, identity, and the particulars of place. Diaz currently lives in St. Augustine and teaches photography at the University of North Florida. His work has been exhibited at institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, the Norton Museum of Art, and the Mobile Museum of Art.

Bianca Diaz's chapbook, No One Says Kin Anymore, was published by Spring Garden Press in 2009. Her poems have recently been published in Sundog Lit, The Boiler Journal, Ellipsis, Crab Orchard Review, Prairie Schooner, and other journals. She lives in North Carolina.

MJ Fievre is a graduate of Florida International University's creative writing program and is the author of several novels in French. Her short stories and poems in English have appeared in The Southeast Review, The Caribbean Writer, The Mom Egg, The Beautiful Anthology (TNB Books 2012), and Haiti Noir (Akashic Books, 2011). She is the founding editor of Sliver of Stone Magagine, the secretary of Women Writers of Haitian Descent, and a regular contributor to The Nervous Breakdown. M.J. loves coconut shrimp, piña coladas, her dog Wiskee, and a good story. Anton Chekhov is one of her favorite writers.

Scott F. Hall is an artist working in sound, music, instrument design, still images, video, and sculpture. He has invented instruments such as the microtonal power ambient bass, harmonitar, arpegguitar, and the duoquadramonotar. Hall has also created several original sound practices that range from the capture of field recordings, to composition within the harmonious confines of twelve-tone music, to creating sound in ways that are free from the shackles of tuning and time.

Ron Hefner teaches literature, creative writing, and composition at Florida Gulf Coast University in Ft. Myers and is an alumnus of the University of South Florida. He has worked as a jazz drummer, journalist, and newspaper editor and currently, in addition to writing and teaching, performs jazz in Southwest Florida. His music journalism has been published internationally and he was a winner of the 1994 Bayboro Fiction Contest. His short stories and poems have previously appeared in the Mangrove Review. His literary interests include Southern fiction and Florida noir writers.

Nathan Holic teaches writing at the University of Central Florida and serves as the Graphic Narrative Editor at *The Florida Review*. He is also the editor of the anthology *15 Views of Orlando* (Burrow Press), a literary portrait of the city featuring short fiction from fifteen Orlando authors young and old, local and far-removed, established, and aspiring. His fiction has appeared in print at *Iron Horse* and *The Apalachee Review*, and online at *Hobart* and *Necessary Fiction*, and his serialized graphic novel "Clutter" (a story structured as a home décor catalogue) is available monthly at Smalldoggies Magazine.

Brad Johnson is the winner of the 2012 Longleaf Press Chapbook Contest and has published four chapbooks of poetry. His work has appeared in Nimrod, Permafrost, Poet Lore, The South Carolina Review, The Southeast Review, Southern Indiana Review, Willow Springs and others. He is an associate professor at Palm Beach State College, Florida.

Daniel Kraus was born in Washington State but he calls Jacksonville home. He is currently pursuing a BFA in photography and a BA in history at the University of North Florida and relies upon science fiction movies as well as The Bible for inspiration.

Peter LaBerge is a high school senior from Connecticut. A 2013 YoungArts Finalist for Writing, Peter has received a numerous awards for his poetry, as well as gold and silver medals from the 2012 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and commendation from the 2012 Foyle Young Poets of the Year Awards. His written work has been published in *The Apprentice Writer, Prick of the Spindle, Polyphony H.S., The Blue Pencil Online, The Claremont Review*, and *Gargoyle Magazine*. Currently, Peter serves as the editor of his high school's literary magazine, and the founder/editor-in-chief of *The Adroit Journal* (www.adroit.co.nr).

Allie Mariano is from Memphis, Tennessee, and currently lives in Lake Charles, Louisiana. While growing up she spent almost every spring vacation on the Gulf Coast. She was recently a finalist in *Glimmer Train*'s Fiction Open. This is her first publication.

Ryan Meany's short stories have appeared in Story Quarterly, Crazyhorse, Confrontation, and the inaugural issue of Saw Palm. They can be found online at Prime Number Magazine, Otis Nebula and Unlikely 2.0.

Yve Miller has worked with horses, book manuscripts, and barbecue. She is a reviewer of books and teaches students how to form counter-arguments and write from their heart. She lives in Florida and her first manuscript of poetry is in the works.

Austin Moule was born in Charleston, South Carolina. At the age of four, his family moved to Fernandina Beach, Florida so his father could work at Kings Bay Naval Base. Moule recently obtained his BFA from the University of North Florida and was honored as their distinguished graduate in Printmaking. Moule has shown work in numerous exhibitions, including two international print shows, one at Barbara Archer Gallery in Atlanta Georgia, and one in the Islander Gallery in Texas A&M, Corpus Christi, Texas. National shows include, Hudson Gallery in Sylvania, Ohio, Howard Gallery in the University of Nebraska. Moule plans on attending graduate school for printmaking, with the goal of teaching and working as a producing artist. More of his work can be found at austinmoule.tumblr.com.

Raul Palma was born and raised in Miami. He studied creative writing at Florida International University and later at Columbia College in Chicago. Presently, he is a graduate student in DePaul University's Writing and Publishing Program. Before graduate school, Raul worked in sales, peddling Italian shoes, yellow page ad space, mail machines, nuts, bolts, hydraulic oil, and glue. He was a road warrior, prospecting through Florida's industrial backcountry, and wrote stories in the evenings.

Gianna Russo has won the Florida Book Awards bronze medal, Florida Publishers Association Presidents' Award silver medal, and an Eric Hofer First Horizons finalist award. She is author of the poetry collection *Moonflower* (Kitsune Books, 2011) and the founding editor of Yellow Jacket Press, currently Florida's only publisher of poetry chapbooks. She has published poems in the *Tampa Review*, Ekphrasis, Crab Orchard Review, Apalachee Review, Florida Review, Florida Humanities Council Forum, Karamu, The Bloomsbury Review, The Sun, Poet Lore, Saw Palm, The MacGuffin, and Calyx, among others. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in the St. Petersburg Times. She teaches at St. Leo University, where she is also managing editor of Sandhill Review. A poet's "flood subject" is the one to which the poet returns again and again in her work.

James Schlatter was raised in Merritt Island, Florida, but now calls Connecticut home. His work has been published in *Pank*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Gargoyle* and others. After spending several years traveling and living abroad, he returned to the U.S. to earn an MFA at UMass-Amherst and now teaches English as a second language at Tunxis Community College. He is married with two young sons.

Danielle Sellers is a native of Key West. She has an MA from The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and an MFA from the University of Mississippi where she held the Grisham Poetry Fellowship. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in River Styx, Subtropics, Smartish Pace, The Cimarron Review, Poet Lore, Prairie Schooner, Hopkins Review, 32 Poems, and elsewhere. Her first book, Bone Key Elegies, was published in 2009 by Main Street Rag. Last summer, she was awarded a Walter E. Dakin Poetry fellowship to attend the Sewanee Writers' Conference. She edits The Country Dog Review and teaches at the University of Mississippi.

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