

Agnes Scott

Writers' Festival Magazine 2004



Works by finalists
in the annual statewide
literary competition
sponsored by the
English Department

Laura Black
Christopher Bundy
Laura Carter
Travis Wayne Denton
Katherine Elkins
Kerin Flatley
Michael Fournier
Patti Ghezzi
Kimberly Giles
Mary Jerzak
Kristin Hall
Megan Morris
Amber Prentiss
Chad Prevost
Kathryn Schroder

Prizes in poetry,
short fiction,
personal essay,
and one-act play
will be awarded
during the Festival
by distinguished
guest writers
Chitra Divakaruni
and Bo Ball.

Agnes Scott College

33rd Annual Writers' Festival

March 25-26, 2004

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Chitra Divakaruni and Bo Ball.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Festival, and a prize of \$250 is given to the winner in each contest category.

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March, 2004

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Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Poetry: Greg Williamson

Short Fiction: Ronder Thomas Young

Personal Essay: Beth Blaney

One-Act Play: Linda Hubert

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Poems by Laura Black

First Memory of Being a Girl

to my brother

We begin in the bathtub, together,
slippery like fish, barely steadied
by the strong arms intruding.
We're tipping our cheeks, our chins
in the water, then - eyes locked and on three -
we gulp air and slide under, become
dark bobbing shapes, silent and murky,
our long hair wavering like seaweed
in our soap-thickened secret world.

Then suddenly I find myself standing
by the tub, distant and different
in pink nightgown and slippers,
my seaweed detangled and combed.
I watch, startled, as you prance
naked, bowlegged, trailing water
and mayhem, just beyond reach
of the strong arms and towel.

So, Mother and I, we lock eyes
and close the bathroom window
to forget that we can't hold you,
that you've whooped out of reach
and left us together, clutching air.

Sneaking Out

I hear it again, the scattershot
of pebbles at my window.
Something's out there still,
hiding from the street light,
fidgeting in the shadows,
slipping between the bicycles
and the charcoal grill.

I used to tap back softly,
wave down to someone waiting -
a moon-pie in lipstick,
her black raincoat belted over pajamas,
her mother's scarf knotted under her chin,
her father's Falcon, a dark hump,
humming in *park* down the street.

There was a time
I'd have been ready -
my mother's scarf, my raincoat,
a few snatched Camels waiting under the bed.
Lying here now, listening, I try
to rouse my old knack for disguise,
for slipping out the side door, into the night.

A Young Girl's Dream

All the doors are locked, but
something is coming. The house
is old and rotting. The bolts
won't hold. I run to the kitchen.

Two stout and ancient cooks
drape the gaping windows
with dishtowels. We move
in flour-sifted air. They wring

their hands in aprons, "oh, missy,"
look at me and whisper.
We shove the kitchen table
up against the door. I hand

them rolling pins and cleavers. Something
dark and sure is out there, coming.
High on the wall, the kitchen clock
ticks. I grab a knife. We crouch

armed and hidden, silent
against the wall; wait
for the battering, the smashing,
the splintering of the indifferent door.

Inheritance

My diapered, blabbering, curled-in-a-ball Aunt
 Laura has died. She's bequeathed me some heirlooms,
 her portrait, "Miss Hamilton and her cat, Minou."
 I'd always heard she was lovely, as a young lady.
 She's lovely still, captivating, in oil.
 She's having tea in her rose and boxwood garden.
 I notice my newly-acquired Derbyshire pot.
 Aunt Laura has artfully tossed her gloves
 and shawl on the Chippendale table, prettily covered
 with my newly-inherited Belgian lace cloth.
 She's wearing my ring, emerald surrounded by diamonds,
 on a hand that's caressing Minou, smug in her lap.
 Her garden is rendered timeless, gold dappled green.
 Aunt Laura gazes serenely. Her clear blue eyes
 meet mine. To me, she raises her Derbyshire teacup,
 and wry black eyebrows from under her ostrich-plumed hat.

Poems by Laura Carter

First Song for the Singer

A moment when the body is sore
 reminds me of hermitage.
 I cannot see past the curve of gondola hanging
 over moon. When I am dead, I will remember you—
 I will remember the hip and thigh,
 broken voicebox and cracked lips—
 someone will open the vault and pour
 you down my throat, into the crevice
 of light behind the teeth, and I will take
 you in, beyond the place where men can go,
 my cold corpse warming, the gag of drowning mantis,
 the rush of mucus to the glands,
 the empty shell shed, all of this
 when you are in pieces.
 When I can feel the quiver of capstones
 in the Spanish throat-light, the dancing heels moving
 like tire tread, I will remove my clothes, the worn bra
 and scraggly tights thrown into fire, the smoothness
 of my skin asking only to burn
 along with it, pinching at the waist and wrists,
 tapping through the warm air with bent toes,
 the Slavic toes, the toes that resemble
 worn-out film canisters, the knobby toes,
 pressing themselves to the floor like they
 could keep on going forever, like there is nothing to stop them,
 the big toe longer than the second toe,
 the small nail on each painted with fire.

First

The body cries out in its sleep
 against wind
 and modulation, the turning of north to east,
 three low spheres moving west,
 the rhythm of heat and aspiration,
 slow breathing.
 No one can hear these cries
 but moons in vacant skies.
 No one can open these vaults
 but men with fire
 in their undergarments, men who leave
 women at home to mourn, to raise the flag,
 to hang it inside the place
 of penance. No one can teach the ones
 who cannot learn; the ones who will learn cannot
 be taught. The body cries for a good
 man after seven, the one it touched
 long ago, in the parking lot
 behind the church, the one who has nothing
 to bring but the peace
 of a moving hand, crossing itself over the chest
 of a grave, the grass blowing away after it is mowed.

When I Am Taken

When I am taken by an
 argument, my hands close over each other
 in seriousness, I mark the finer points
 in allusional neon, dog-ear the pages
 three and four times, smear margins
 with thumbnail sketches of lipstick, coffee rings.
 My teething kitten punches the cover
 with marks of carnivory,
 perhaps the feline version of YES-THAT'S RIGHT!,
 the animal's way of trying
 to get to the meat of it, to overlook
 the snapshots in the Audubon
 Guide to Eastern Songbirds, inked-in red-throated
 needle-like hummers, the sharp-shinned
 wit of slick photographs,
 the colored-in map that tells where
 and when to find the winged creature, how
 to know if it is in heat, how to recognize
 its cool flutey call (male to female,
 female to male), the preen of the uncollected alms.
 My eyes close,
 I pull my dress over my knees,
 pull my knees close up to my chest,
 the pleated skirt falls like a bell, the shape
 of a white-iron bird cage my mother
 set on a table in our front hall,
 the feathery synthetic finch
 alone inside. I used to wonder why she tried
 to fool us, his wire claws slipped around the white wooden perch,
 he hung upside down.
 I dream of him flying,
 his felt eyes drinking in crests of air,
 his egg-shaped styrofoam body moving in circles
 like a pilot who is touching down over his
 own house, coming dangerously close to the roof he
 just repaired, the shingles shaking
 the chandeliers inside, his wife putting
 down her book to come to the window,
 to marvel up into the humming
 air, her hair falling around
 her face in waves.

Poems by Katherine Elkins

fifth grade, 1989

friday morning we learned about the birds and the bees
the snicker of ten-year-old boys when the teacher over-enunciated vagina
and we girls mastered the theoretical method of getting pregnant

saturday night we laid in my bed in nothing but pink flower underwear
your penny-shaped butt pressed against the alcove of my stomach
we listened to debbie gibson songs
and rehearsed our solo parts for church choir at nine am

our father

 you rolled over and kissed my cheek
who art in heaven
 you straddled me giggling and kissed my mouth

monday afternoon i flirted with scott as tag football became tackle and tickle
while you played show and tell with murphy in the tunnels on the playground
you would be the violin prodigy with the sunburnt hair
who every boy wanted to ask to be his girlfriend

who taught me about the innocence of little girls in love
eleven years before i would feel such freedom again.

meeting the fiancé

the funny thing is i have no unrequited love issues
that is not why i am against this marriage

girl i am not in love with you
anymore

you've lost those six piercings
and i miss the lanky holes from filthy garages
the sleepovers when being friends wasn't enough
the clash of restaurant signs in shotgun towns
the orange taste of high school coffee
the backseat of your mom's stationwagon
and your girlfriend without the dick to destroy you
she was a phase you said

girl i am not in love with you
anymore

now the man with the tiedyed shirt and the ponytail
wonders at me in those same small town diner booths
with my hot tea dripping and my accent revisited
an odd twist in his grin when he catches me staring

boy i am not in love with your girl
anymore

so don't tell her that you're nervous about a meeting
how on the way to the airport she shouldn't come over
how a hug makes you a-hem and check your manhood
i don't keep pot in my cabinets
i don't do my girls high

boy
don't you worry
i am not in love with your girl
anymore.

mourning

the best thing to do in these situations is write couplets
 i have gone through fifteen exercises
 what to do when death is on the apple door

he likes to lie under the pear tree black coat now the color of chocolate
 hairy tan now the skin of less than fifty pounds
 we decided that would be the place
 under the orange leaves the hole where the armadillo began
 the shovel will resume

i think instead of a needle we'll go down to the pasture
 you like to chase cats in manure fields like cotton
 i'll slap the ass of the pony you can swirl around
 under the hooves of persimmons and burnt locks of oniongrass
 come back with squirrels in your mouth and drop bunnies at my feet as gifts.

Poems by Michael Fournier

postcard

When Mina sang of the Frim-Fram Sauce,
 The sun was going down over Lake Fairfax
 As the Chataqua rolled into town.
 After a late breakfast with destiny,
 The lonesome accountant ambled into the Belle and Clapper,
 Toting a few simple words and an empty gun.
 The sun continued going down as Mina sang.

Holding a lantern aloft in the brand-new church,
 The pastor spit-shined the sheriff's pew,
 Dreaming of bootleg hootch, fast cars, a girl,
 The blessed example of Lord Jesus Christ.
 An angry wind put cottonblossoms on Lake Fairfax,
 The sun winked, a trigger clicked, lightning struck,
 And Mina sang like nobody's business.

Triple Play

for Ken Norris

The pitcher was daydreaming about Ste.
 Therese of Lisieux when he unleashed
 the knuckleball which connected with
 the opposing shortstop's bat: a clean
 and leisurely parabola skying
 fair into left, where the fielder---
 remembering forsythias near a pond,
 growing from the hood of a rusted
 jalopy---snagged it for the easy out
 and made the snap to the second
 baseman, who imagined his life
 in the context of certain rivers.
 The runner on first tagged up,
 and almost made the slide
 while the man on third stumbled
 and fell halfway to the plate,
 caught between the third baseman (envisioning
 rainslick pavement at night)
 and the catcher (white
 leopards).

Corona

1.
 You win again: you made the same mistake
 You made before, just after I made mine.
 Late summer sun dolled up the parlor where
 We lost ourselves in one another's stare.
 The satin and the oak, the untouched wine,
 The color that I doubt your eyes could fake:

I saw these once, and felt them, but the rain
 Was all I heard, and rain was all I knew:
 The rain was in the corners of my kiss
 And all that followed to arrive at this
 Concession to the deep and guileless blue
 That rises over everything again.

I think about you, and you disappear:
 The sea is polished calm. The sky is clear.

2.
 The sea is polished calm. The sky is clear.
 A diorama of a summer day,
 And here are memories of vanishings:
 Your eyes wink out, and slowly reappear,
 You move toward me as you fade away
 Into the shadows where you banish things.

You spoke another name, a name you knew
 From long ago--before you found your song—
 And then you bent your head and winced a smile.
 Some phony words and accusations flew
 For milliseconds; fell, but not for long.
 They rose again to blind me for a while.

You kissed me in unreined confusion, drifted
 Into mist that since has never lifted.

3.
 Into mist that since has never lifted,
 I sought a past that wavered, strobed, and shifted.
 I thought I used my last breath calling you,
 And lost myself in breath I never drew.

The sun was melting deep into the sky
 For all I knew. I calculated my
 Best instincts, trusting they would see me through
 This patch of fog I wandered in for you.
 And here is all the reason I have sifted:
 A pint could never do me like a fifth did.
 and two dice thrown are better than to die,
 and why learn how to dance when I can fly?
 I played things badly, but I had my reasons,
 Lost to us now in bygone seasons.

4.
 Lost to us now in bygone seasons,
 I drifted into eyes I could not shake,
 And added up the sum of all my treasons
 To make one promise I could never break.

Did we wake up one day and it was fall:
 The little chill, the scent of earth in air,
 The crunch of grass, the foggy breath, and all
 The questions as to summer: when and where

Did summer find its place in palaces
 We built on rocks to serve us for a past?
 Why did we wear our days like necklaces
 Until we sank beneath their weight at last?

What was the promise I spoke in the rain
 To prove my promises broken in vain?

5.
 To prove my promises broken in vain,
 I dove beneath a backward rain of wax
 That fell to bob against concentric skies.
 The dive I took for you that day was deep.
 I cloaked the sun beneath me, and I fell:
 I rose against my beckoning descent.

I swallowed up your sighs, drowned in your scent,
 And sang in you what songs can never tell.
 I gave you one last image you could keep
 And dove through countless days into your eyes.
 I fell for you, and here are all the facts:
 The heavens shook, and I became the rain,

But though I acted with the sky's intent
 I never understood the message sent.

6.
 I never understood the message sent,
 Nor ever opened what was never shut.
 I strove to find the distances you sought
 And never knew the enemy I fought:
 I hoped to settle in forever, but
 My woven atoms never would relent.

I plunged into you, broken, torn, and bent—
 I bled for you, and not from any cut:
 I bled for all the scars that you forgot.
 I bled clear glass in tears no goblet caught,
 And wept for whom I don't remember what
 And wondered what (or if) you might have meant.

Oh, these were our unconscionable foes:
 These peerless eyes we never learned to close.

7.
 These peerless eyes we never learned to close
 Blue water tarnished, mirroring the day
 I rose into the sun and fell away
 To tumble through the day in which I rose.

Your eyes were clear, and all they saw they chose,
 And seeing me, they took my past away.
 I tore through water, carved it into day
 In moments, each a perfect cutglass rose.
 I shimmered in your future, and at last
 Your eyes embodied what they could not fake
 In skies they wagered as the dice were cast:

I gave you what you asked if you could take,
 I give it to you now, and so, at last,
 You win again: you made the same mistake.

Poems by Mary Jerzak

De-Militarized Zone

for the people of North and South Korea

A hot day in August
and the Japanese have agreed
to leave.

This month is like a burn,
thin and long on the inside
of my arm, scabbing.

I've put all the bombs
away, waiting for the not-quite-full
moon.

No more leather
to chew on. I've been rehearsing
this sleep nightly.

6:50 A.M. I tell myself to
wake up. Almost 50 years
and we're still at war.

Fossil

The animal's mouth stretched open,
teeth bared and half-lit. I see
her breathing like thin smoke.

His hand is already there,
cupping my breast, and
the other one is moving down.

I am busy turning the air inside
my body into helium, something
light, something that floats.

He is trying so hard to be gentle,
undoing all the buttons,
until everything is loose.

Even her growl has cooled, her
jaw gone slack. I hear the rattle
of her chain in the grass.

I am reminded so often
of those vapor-like bones, buried
for years in my grandmother's garden.

So deep the dirt around them was like solid rock.

No More Play-Acting

In this light, your fingers
look longer. Dirty

is a hole in the ground

you keep walking around. Human
sponge, accordion. Pile of

razor blades and sore arms.

Put this on your plate. Slap your-
self in rhythm. And keep still.

Above all, the moon

moving over the house.
You are so quiet on the

stage. Half your wishes blown away

and you feel like this love
is going to crack you open.

Poems by Chad Prevost

The Still, Sad Music of Humanity

Don't let anyone tell you music is timeless.
Every song is wrapped in a moment
& you can't escape those feelings
any more than you can the year you listened
sometimes desperate for a particular melody,
sometimes aloof—either way, the music absorbed
into the pores of your unconscious life.
Maybe those radios are too small for you now;
a single transistor warbling a flapper's favorite,
a twist, or exaggerated Charleston kicks,
distorted on the AM waves' 40-watt blare.
Maybe you're singing with Sinatra,
swinging with Annie Lou, or leaning against
your Chevy on private property
with only the frogs & crickets & moon as witnesses.
It could be that you're bound by music
that thumped into your lower back
& vibrated your sternum, & the dance
was a free-for-all, as you hammered at the air,
banging your head, gyrating your liquid hips.
Any way it happened, the music meant something
vital before it stopped, & now it remains
with those memories & that time. Those songs,
like out-of-touch friends, bring back a time
all the sweeter, because, condensed as they were,
you can go back whenever a feeling hits—
the tunes, like you, that much older,
but the recordings don't mean the same thing
to the self that listened to them all those years ago.

The Lost Art of Memory

He inferred that persons desiring to train this faculty must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves...

—Cicero, on Simonides

1—

My science teacher stands over me, telling us that the body is mostly water. I am twelve, the kid from the West Coast, & I remember I wanted to become the rain. In California it could rain an entire spring, one long breath of reassurance—sawgrass, icicle flowers, eucalyptus sleeping in the drizzle and mist. Virginia's fall was the same, as if the rain had followed me, helping me hope I could leave my fragile cage of bone & sinew, melt among dark clouds that looked like the bruise swelling above my left eye where a boy headlocked me in a bathroom, drove my head against green tile while others clapped, spread the news, then went on ignoring me. O how I wanted to be like them, a drop falling among thousands of fellow friends, losing myself in Piedmont soil & become a shining coat to a once-dry seed, create a Chrysanthemum, scarlet from the earth, then be summoned to the palm of God, timeless as rain.

2—

Because the body is mostly water we wade knee-deep within ourselves, & force a love that has no language, that the stilted body, spilling forth its dark roots of hair, has just begun to know. The boy is Simonides of Ceos, who before he was known for inventing hallways of storage for memory that would last for millennium, before he recited praise

to Scopas & the divine twins at the banquet in Thessaly & saved himself, before he'd fall into record as the first poet paid for poems, he desires young Eleutheria. Like summer rain

after drought, like a trail of bats scattering skyward from a season's dormancy to feed on the insects of dusk, he believes in her with the absolute love of one who doesn't know another. Years go by. He yearns for her, wants to eat the wildness of her sweet body, to reach the body of water within that body.

3—

I wade mouth-deep in love. I have won the first prize that meant anything, she was among the thunder of hundreds that washes over me like rain, my heart pounding in my ears like surf. To celebrate we drive to a triassic basin. My professor took the class here on a fieldtrip, showing how we stood where once the ocean cut across the continent—a thousand miles wide. He showed us layers of lime, each foot or two a swath of centuries, time measured by this remaining pool of a sea, each square foot of crumbling stone full of shark bones and teeth, shells of snails. Wind moves across the rivers of our skin, reminding us of our bodies, we breathe beneath the lull of ragged pines. I recognize the body's greed, its pull for more than the mouth can hold, but I am cut off—not deep in my body's heart like her. Her eyes yield like waves repeating I want, I want, I want...

4—

He wanders the earth for years, observing flora & fauna, extravagant cities, each stained-glass symbol in temple corridors. As he walks he hammers out rhythms, & having nothing to write on stores lines beside a row of candles—a stanza on top of a camel's hump, an epic on the Byzantium Coast between two seas. Ethiopia brings metaphors for goats. Jerusalem, a wall in ruins, wise sayings for safekeeping. The sun has turned his skin dark olive. When he's given refuge he stands before the hearth, a traveler with a distant stare, tense body, sipping exotic tea, leaving only a sandal print & dust, but keeping with him his memory-places.

He returns to her. She does not recognize him.
 His stories of remote lands sound beautiful
 like lyre music, but she doesn't understand them
 like she doesn't understand the star's arrangement,

knows only Thessaly and her husband's body.
 Simonides now is free from that kind of love.
 He stares no longer stares at her like one burning
 a retina in the sun. Yet, in his blindness
 he has composed his most wonderful sad poem
 that lived through the memory of Cicero & his pupils.

5—

We learn love by its particular odor, knowing it
 as distinct from the burning of other arbors.
 This is where we begin, our origins, in woods,
 seeking love, learning that not even love lasts.
 Instead, it keeps us repeating into replenishment,
 again & again raining down, cloud-strewn
 into the other though we are cloud-dark
 from love's bruising. Paul says it is better to marry
 than to burn. Isaiah says each man walks in the fire
 of his sins. Love allows us to walk in the dawn
 of one another, permits us passage to its hard truth;
 the way I lose myself studying a sand dollar's thin shell
 with all my heart, taken away, however briefly,
 like some mad prophet into a second existence,
 old & unchanging in the face of the tireless waves.

Chaos Theory

We walked outside with our flashlights
 & flicked them on & off
 at the night sky. Our minister fathers
 were on call—prayer meetings, hospital visitations.
 We'd learned in science that a beam of light
 travels forever unless it breaks up
 against an object. We stared at the stars for hours,
 wondering if God would call us
 to something as divine as our fathers'.
 Next morning, we wandered the seminary campus
 where Matthew's family lived, the cheap rent
 the only way they could afford Life by the Bay.

We found a junkyard across a busy road
 & stood on the hood of a rusted Datsun,
 smashed our skateboards against the windshield.
 A student cursed us from his window,
 said he'd called the cops.
 We thumbed our front teeth at him,
 & kicked out the last pieces.

I came back years later to that old car still collecting
 the debris of greased gears, small motors,
 Matthew's parents long since divorced,
 & he having fallen from a precipice
 in the Mount Lassen wilderness.
 Sitting behind the steering wheel, I watched my breath
 float through the open windshield
 into the washed-out stars.

How did it come to this? Slow-wheeled defeat,
 inert & useless rusted shell of a body
 that once hurtled forward in a harmony
 of grease & steel, only to end up parked here, forgotten
 by those who smashed you wide open, gaping
 at stars, those measureless bodies
 as perfect as anything from this unreachable distance.

Short Fiction by Christopher Bundy

When the Water Rose in Azuma

When the water rose in Azuma, Hatsue heard its rush-knee-high by now, she guessed, to make so much noise. Another shinbone and it will reach the windowsill and surge, covering her in muddy water and cemetery silt. The rain had fallen, these plum rains on the heels of the season's second typhoon, for a week, until the Tone River leapt its banks and washed over the cemetery behind her house. With a shiver of understanding, Hatsue watched from behind the hedge that kept the dead on their side as a swirling muddy river covered the cemetery, carrying away candles, flowers, bottles, photos, fruit and tobacco, idle offerings from the living to the dead. So little between them and me, Hatsue thought, and held on to little hope for the remains of her husband, Masaki.

There was no longer anyone about. Hatsue had not seen another person, not a neighbor, schoolgirl or storeowner since early morning. Cars sat in water all along the block, a litter of them as far as she could see before the road bent. One of them, a tiny two-door, she watched as it disappeared into a concrete ditch beside the Sugimoto's rice fields, pushed in by increasing floodwaters. A bicycle still chained to its stand clanged silently, for the rush of water buried all other sounds except for the faint cry of a siren somewhere north or east, Hatsue couldn't tell. Though she couldn't hear its sound, Hatsue knew the bicycle was clanging out there as it would and this thought added to her loneliness; yet she refused to cry. Black smoke mixed with the gray clouds, and Hatsue startled herself uneasy again wondering if the end of the world was so gray and troublesome.

Hatsue reasoned the rain would stop soon enough and went to the kitchen to make tea. But the rain didn't stop and the trouble, she recalled from the kitchen as she scooped sencha from a ceramic canister, had begun with a charge of water from the street in front of her house. The water came so fast and fierce through the narrow street she thought it would surely take her away with it; but the river went straight for the gated entrance to the cemetery, turning sharply towards the walled patch of land as if it had a mind of its own. In minutes, water had covered the small plot of headstones. Squat cedars stood firm at first against the wall of water, reeds bent with the flow, and o-haka that spoke so well of the dead bounced swiftly against the current of water like signposts in cyclone winds. And as the water rose, it grew more violent, swifter and stronger, pulling up the shallow roots of cedar trees. Now there was great unrest where there had existed only order. All this Hatsue watched from her bedroom window, wondering what whim of the dead had so far spared her and her cheap house.

Still Hatsue worried about the simple concrete foundation, her flimsy house on a slab, made of plywood, tarpaper and a pinch of insulation. Summer and winter she suffered the elements so that mold and kerosene heaters had ruined her lungs.

"My son is cheap," Hatsue complained to her best friend Yukio.

"He bought you a house," Yukio always countered.

Still Hatsue complained. "No room for me, he says. No room for his mother. Says Kimiko needs the guest room for her study. What does she study but her makeup?"

Who was she to complain? Yukio wanted to know. Hatsue had her own house. She should be happy. "You're just angry," Yukio concluded.

But Hatsue had made up her mind: Junichiro was cheap. Her daughter-in-law, Kimiko, was not. Before the rains came last week, Hatsue found a perfectly good television with Kimiko's bundles of trash by the road for pick-up. In its place was a brand new one the size of her kitchen table. Plasma TV, Kimiko had bragged, as if it meant anything to Hatsue. But now Hatsue could watch

TV in her bedroom. She felt foolish for the two TVs, the other one she had had for more than ten years in the main room, and considered giving the other back to the street. But Hatsue had already grown accustomed to watching the evening variety shows in bed.

If not for the breeze from the river and through the street and over the cemetery to her window Hatsue would have suffocated in her son's cheap house. Last summer, her first in the house, had been unusually hot and sticky so that everything inside went moldy. Her son had bought circular fans for each room, but no air conditioner to keep her cool and the house dry. Now this: an endless downpour over her tiny plot of dirt beside a cemetery where no one wanted to live, low to the ground like a cockroach.

"Look... you're next to pop," Junichiro told her. "I thought you would like it."

San-chome: a narrow road lined with local shops of clapboard and tin, dozens of brightly-colored vending machines, and tall, tight houses. Fields of rice formed a patchwork of green northwest into the foothills. One hundred meters to the east the Tone River flowed south and a national highway rumbled overhead. The land where Hatsue's house stood had belonged to the Sugimoto's rice fields and it had always felt swampy underneath. Town and traffic had closed in leaving the plot of farmland to stick out into the street like a patch of overgrown grass, though there was no grass here, only mud and gravel. The Sugimotos had leased the small plot next to her house to cigarette and drink distributors, so that a row of eight vending machines glowed night and day. It should have been weeded this blight on the block, not encouraged to stay, Hatsue decided. Still her son had found it enough to build his mother a house upon a swamp. When Junichiro called to check on her, Hatsue was already in a bad mood.

"This house is gonna float away. Then what? Your mother is gonna float away too. Maybe wind up in the river with your father."

"Ma, it's okay. You're not gonna float away, okay. And I'm sure pop hasn't been disturbed. It's just a little water. Don't worry, I'll come get you in the 4WD. Just don't go anywhere okay..."

"Where am I gonna go?"

But when Hatsue spotted water in the genkan, enough that her fuzzy guest slippers floated like dead birds, she feared the house was finally sinking, soon to break free from the ground and sail away like a giant paper boat.

"I told you," she said out loud.

And with the whistle of her teakettle, Hatsue remembered and panicked. Ignoring the boiling water, she ran to her bedroom where she hastily tossed her bedding into the corner, got down on her knees and began clawing at the tatami mat in the center of the room.

When the first ten-thousand yen note floated into the wide pond that was the parking lot of the 7-11, eighteen year-old Kazuo thought how lucky he was that on this dull, shitty day of nothing but rain and no customers, he was there to find this small, wet treasure. Outside under the store awning to smoke a cigarette, Kazuo had spotted the bill among a lake of Styrofoam cups, empty cigarette packs and soda cans. He had tied a shoestring across the checkout counter and hung the note there to dry, making a list of ways to spend his unexpected windfall. But with the first appearance of water under the door Kazuo had forgotten about the note and begun to worry, calling the store manager.

"Stay there whatever you do. You'll be okay. Make sure you get everything off the floor. It's up to you, Kazuo." His manager had told him.

But his sneakers had become soaked and the mop wasn't working anymore. Kazuo felt stupid standing there in a shallow pond of river water. He tried bailing with his mop bucket but quickly recognized the futility of his efforts as more water came in the opened door than he tossed

out. What a shitty, shitty job, he thought. He had moved as much of the merchandise from the floor as he could manage, but finally had run out of room for it all. Pork buns and cream cakes, cheap rubber slippers, curry and shrimp-flavored chips, plastic children's toys and newspapers all drifted like boats in the harbor, a miniature world of commerce afloat on the seas of the 7-11.

When Kazuo called his manager for a second time, his boss warned the boy that if he left, he would be fired. "I'll take it out of your paycheck, you hear."

When Kazuo let the fear in his voice sound through, his manager softened and offered encouragement instead. "Don't worry so much. It can't rain forever. Typhoon's already passed. Just don't forget: the store is your responsibility. You are like the captain of a ship, Kazuo."

Hatsue was too late. Water had risen up under the house and begun to wash away her life's savings: stacks of ten-thousand yen notes she and Masaki had saved from years in their small produce shop. Masaki had never trusted banks, and after his death, Hatsue had seen no reason to start. Hatsue kept her money in a cardboard box in a shallow space beneath the floorboards of her new house, never suspecting that such a catastrophe would occur. Not even Junichiro knew of her savings. He believed his mother had no money, and Hatsue saw no reason to tell him, assuming he would want to "manage" it for her. If anyone had known Hatsue well enough to ask her what she was saving all of her money for, she would have answered an emergency. Now she watched as hundreds of ten-thousand yen notes swirled away with the current of typhoon waters. Desperate, she began to grab at the notes before they were swept away from her forever. It was everything she had. Everything. What would she do? Masaki would be so disappointed with her.

Everything we worked for, she could hear her husband scold, always, she thought, disappointed in her.

But there were too many bills floating away from the disintegrating cardboard box, and once she removed them from the water-handfuls of the drenched, brown notes—they stuck together and tore, quickly becoming unmanageable in such soggy bulk. Hatsue scooped what she could into Masaki's old leather briefcase, following the rest of her savings out of the house and into the flooded streets.

Kazuo lit a cigarette, his hands shaking as he temporarily considered going back outside to smoke. But with the first settling draw of smoke in his lungs, he surveyed the small convenience store and realized with some relief that there was little he could do to stop the water that now lapped at his ankles.

Screw it, he thought.

And as he opened the door to toss out his last bucket of water, Kazuo found his second ten-thousand yen note afloat on typhoon waters.

When Hatsue entered the street, the water was not so high, barely half a shinbone, but the current was strong. She found she could inch along the sides of the each home or shop, one after another the length of the usually busy street where car engines and bicycle bells and barking dogs kept her awake at night and the smell of cigarette smoke from the small tobacco stand irritated her eyes, Mr. Inoue so lonely and bored with minding the shop his own cheap son set up for him that he did nothing but smoke all day long, watching only samurai dramas and traffic. He smoked so much Hatsue's bed cover had begun to stink when she aired it from the clothesline beside her house. Hatsue didn't think he sold five packs of cigarettes all day. Vending machines lined much of the street already. Who needed a stand anymore?

But Inoue's shop window was shuttered and he would be no help in recovering the money

that floated away from her. Not a whiff of cigarette smoke from his shop window. An ashtray out front on a wobbly pole said Smokin' Clean!

What a ridiculous claim, Hatsue thought, all she could think about as she chased another ten-thousand yen note in the water.

When she called out to Mr. Inoue again for help, she could hardly hear her own voice.

It seemed impossible to him, this run of good luck on an otherwise shitty afternoon. Kazuo had already found more money than he would make in a day at the 7-11. He dreamed bigger dreams of the things he might buy: a carton of Marlboro reds, the new Pharcyde reissue, and ticket fare, both concert and train, to see Weezer in Tokyo.

Water seeped into Hatsue's galoshes and her wool socks felt soggy. When she reached the bicycle shop, she expected to find the man with thick, wavy hair like an American movie star in his doorway, his hair so neat and tidy though he wore greasy overalls and the doubtful shadow of a moustache. Men were so much boys and they never knew it. Mr. Yoshida had fixed Hatsue's bicycle after she ran into the young lady's car just before the 7-11, crumpling the rim of her front tire. The young girl, her hair like rust, and a skirt with no mystery to what was underneath, had gotten so mad at Hatsue, pointing to her little red car with a stripe on its side like it might have been her child. Why did she yell at me? Hatsue wondered. Shouldn't she be apologizing? She should have looked before she pulled out of her driveway. Talked less on her little phone. When she stopped yelling, the girl spent the rest of the time on her cell phone in a shrill, squeaky voice surely meant to drive Hatsue mad. A shirt so tight everybody could see her lacy little brassiere, her little chickpeas poking through. Young girls had no understanding of mystery, Hatsue decided. They were skilled only with the obvious. Every man knew what was underneath. Even Masaki had known, and he was a shy, quiet man, like the schoolteacher, Mr. Fujino. It was up to a woman to make him think he didn't.

Kazuo nearly dove into the waters of the parking lot when he saw the third and fourth ten-thousand yen notes. Had he left the cash drawer open? It was unbelievable, and Kazuo stepped back inside to consider the bad luck he felt was lurking nearby, a ripple of it somewhere that led him to this money. Would it find him too?

But he would have enough now for Harumi too. He would have enough for a love hotel after the concert. He had only to ask her. Kazuo peered out the window that sheltered him from the heavy rain and wind. Power lines bounced in the air like jump ropes ready to whip away in a spark. But Kazuo no longer felt afraid as he pinned the fourth note to the shoestring.

Hatsue released her grip on the darkened entrance of the small liquor store and waded towards Mr. Fujino's, home to the tall shy man who kept his mother very comfortable in his cozy two-story. How he ever taught a class with such a low, timid voice she didn't know, but his heart was good. The poor man could hardly get a word out to her when she passed by, though he was polite and even sweet at times, often carrying her groceries home. But today his house was shuttered and dark. She banged again on his door and then stumbled as she bent to pick up another soggy note. A lump of weedy debris caught behind her right leg, the weight of it pulling her away from Mr. Fujino's. Falling with nothing to catch her, Hatsue lost her grip on Masaki's old briefcase and threw her hands forward into the water. When she felt the cold muddy water of the Tone River on her face and up her dress, all Hatsue could think about was the bad luck that had poured down around her since Masaki had died. She blamed him for leaving her. She blamed her son for not taking better care of her. She blamed Japan for the sad state of its society that left an old

woman alone and awash in typhoon waters. And with the sour taste of anger and panic rising in her throat, she called out to the figure of a boy in a yellow rain slicker.

Kazuo took a poncho from isle three. He was suddenly surprised by how much water had come into the store since he had stopped mopping. But he didn't care. From isle two he picked up a magazine of naked girls, voyeur shots and photos of girls lifting their skirts for the camera. From isle one he chose four rice balls and two tall bottles of Kirin beer. From the counter he pulled two packs of Marlboros, stuffing the lot into his backpack. Who would notice in this mess? And as the telephone rang without pause, he plucked each drying ten-thousand yen note from the shoestring. Kazuo counted the money again, ¥70,000 in all, and folded the small bundle into the front pocket of his jeans dyed red. Kicking aside his mop, Kazuo pulled the poncho over his head and shoulders, pushed open the front doors to the 7-11, and ducked into the storm, the water suddenly up to his knees, the sounds of an old lady crying for help lost to rain and wind.

Short Fiction by Kerin Flatley

Driving Ed

Girls. Six days a week, nine hours a day, in and out of his car: pushing keys in, taking keys out, pushing keys in again. "Look, don't touch," wasn't rule enough. Ed lived by, "Don't even look."

But when they sat next to him in their plaid skirts, he couldn't help marveling at their knees. They were so small that, if he dared to reach over, he could have covered them with the palm of his hand. There were other things he noticed, too: the way they parted their lips when they looked into the rear-view mirror, the way they left tiny damp spots on the steering wheel when they moved their fingers, and the way, when they had passed their license test and the state trooper had left his car, they'd turn in their seats and ask, Do I look all right for the picture?

They always looked all right. And Ed always told them so, even when there was a trace of jelly at the edge of a mouth, or a black glob of mascara in the corner of an eye. But he never, ever, reached over and tucked a stray hair behind an ear, and he never gave in to a congratulatory hug or pat, and he never, ever, pointed out the missing buttons on the cheap white shirts Sister Geraldine had ordered that year. (Each homeroom teacher had a threaded needle ready on her desk in case the problem reached chronic proportions, but there was no needle and no thread on Ed Zweil's dashboard or in Ed Zweil's glove compartment.)

If you took the whole thing apart - simplified it - he spent his days getting chauffeured around Waverly by what were, on the average, extremely attractive young women. And he was part of a community, part of their lives: a part of tradition. For example, this being Spirit Weekend (the Catholic school answer to Homecoming), he had been waiting for his annual prank call. It happened at the start of October, usually on Friday night, or into the wee hours of Saturday morning, and Ed had slept with the phone by his ear and had woken up in the exact same position. So he wasn't surprised, when, just as he sat down at the table with his coffee, the phone rang. He was relieved.

"This is Ed," he answered. "Driver's Ed. This has been done before, girls, by the graduating class last year, and the year before that, and the year before that, all the way back 'till before you were even born. It's all very clever, but if you don't mind, I'll be getting back to my breakfast." He paused. Did they pass on his number year after year? Did they look it up every September, tracing their way down the Z's in the phone book?

"I know who you are. This is Marcia McNerney. I'm calling about my daughter."

"Of course," Ed said. "Let me apologize. The seniors, concerning my name - it's actually rather funny."

Mrs. McNerney did not laugh, and Ed's vision of three or four girls around a telephone at the tail end of a slumber party vanished. In its place was Trina McNerney sidling down the halls in her St. Brigid's uniform. Big Red, they called her, but not just because she had very large breasts and not just because she had red hair. There were girls with bigger breasts at St. Brigid's who managed to go undetected, and certainly girls with redder hair (the school was predominately Irish Catholic). Trina McNerney was called Big Red because she was big and because she insisted on wearing a bright, tomato-red windbreaker over her uniform every single day.

"I'm calling on behalf of Sister Geraldine," her mother said. Immediately Ed wanted to hang up - Sister Geraldine, the principal of St. Brigid's, treated Ed as if he were not a teacher (which he most definitely was), but her only male student. "She and I have been discussing Trina, and we've

decided that it would be best for her to do her driving hours alone. Quite frankly, I don't think she's ever going to pass her license exam. We've already renewed her permit twice. The last thing she needs in your car is peer pressure."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. McNerney," Ed said. "But I'm surprised Sister didn't tell you. I'm quite overbooked this semester."

"She told me you would say that," Marcia McNerney said. "And she told me to go ahead and tell you to give Trina eight o'clock on Saturdays. You're available then. She also mentioned that perhaps, with her test date fast approaching, you might like to start this morning?"

At eight, Ed parked his Chevy Malibu in front of Trina McNerney's house and stretched over the steering wheel. As was usual for this time of year, his arms were two different colors: the left bone-white, the right tanned and healthy looking from his riding passenger in the passenger seat all summer, his elbow bent out of the window. He ran his fingers over the dashboard, then took out his handkerchief and wiped down the vinyl.

In the 20 years he'd been teaching Driver's Ed, not once had any of the girls signed up for the early, 8 a.m. slot on Saturday mornings. Ed had, in fact, forgotten that he had an early 8 a.m. slot. He'd hoped Trina would be waiting outside, and now, after all that he had gone through to squeeze her in - including not being able to read his paper that morning - the girl was late.

Ed stepped out onto the curb and pressed his hip against the door until it gently clicked. The Malibu - turquoise exterior, tan interior, theft deterrent system, theatre dimming lights, power windows, rear defogger, cup holders in the center console - was new to St. Brigid's this year. Ed had wanted it for the summer, and then he had had to wait for his special passenger-side brake to be installed, which had been aggravating, since he hardly ever used it. Sure, he tapped it a few times, here and there - he had to make sure the girls knew who was in control. But Ed knew that the other teachers were right when they complained about his getting the same salary and benefits that they did: there wasn't a whole lot for him to do as the Driver's Ed teacher at a school like St. Brigid's. Most of the girls had cars at home that practically drove themselves, and most of them had parents who were willing to hand over their vehicles to practice on (what was one more Land Rover?). The hours with him had become a practicality, really, and increasingly, he used the time to get errands done. His route included specific stops around the town of Waverly: the bank, the gas station, the car wash, the Donut Chalet for a medium coffee, two sugars.

Ed checked that the REMEMBER WHEN? PLEASE BE PATIENT - ST. BRIGID'S STUDENT DRIVER sign was secured to the roof, and then ran his fingers over the chrome body. He peeled off a leaf that had fallen from Trina McNerney's crabapple tree. It was amazing, he thought, holding it on the tips of his fingers, how much more beautiful a machine could be next to a thing of nature.

Trina must have snuck up while he was switching into the passenger seat, because there she was, suddenly, at the other door, in her red windbreaker. Her hair, more auburn than red, was cut short, to her chin, and her bangs were cut long, to her eyebrows, creating the freckled box of a face that peered at Ed through the window.

Ed Zweil stared back and then circled his hand dramatically - once, twice, then three times.

"Mr. Zweil?" she said. She cupped her hands over her eyes.

"Trina will you please get in the car?" Ed said.

She let out a little grunt from the effort. Ed watched her reflection in the windshield as she settled into the seat. No matter what kind of driver she was, he thought, it was going to be a long hour. She was not a pretty thing. Not even close.

"Trina?" he said. He pinched the spot where his nose met his forehead.

"Mr. Zweil?" she said. She lost hold of her seatbelt from where she had drawn it across her

stomach.

"Trina, do you ever show up to your Math classroom five minutes late?"

"No, Mr. Zweil."

"Not ever?"

"Never."

"I want you to look around you," he said. He waved at the radio, the sun visors, the mats on the floor. "I want you to take this all in." Trina's eyes followed his hands. She pulled at the silver ring on her thumb.

"Do you see this windshield wiper knob?" Ed asked. He snapped it down. Trina jumped.

"Yes," she said. Ed sent the wipers back and forth on high speed. "I want you to think of this as a textbook."

He touched the steering wheel. "Do you see this wheel?" he asked. He swiveled it. "And those pedals on the floor?"

"Yes."

"I want you to think of those as the two most important textbooks in this car, the dictionary and encyclopedia of textbooks. And do you know what you get when you put all of these textbooks together with me in the seat next to you?"

Trina looked at her lap.

"You get a classroom. Remember that next Saturday morning. This is a traveling classroom. The hour you spend with me is just as important, Trina, as any other hour of class at St. Brigid's. And the number one rule in this classroom is safety. And I don't see your seatbelt on."

Trina fumbled with the buckle and then wrapped her hands at 10 and two. She stared straight ahead.

Ed watched her. He waited for the minute to change on the digital dashboard clock.

"Perhaps," he said at last, "you should start the car?" He dangled the keys from his fingers.

Trina giggled nervously and took them from him. Then, with sudden gusto, she stabbed at the ignition and slammed her left foot on the brake.

"Your right foot, Trina, your RIGHT FOOT!" Ed said. "You don't ever drive with your left foot. You see that nice resting spot down there? You think of that as a little bed, because your left foot's not doing any work on this trip you're taking - it's riding sleeper car, comfort class. Do you understand?"

She nodded. But despite his protestation, the car had started. It hummed. It seemed happy to have Trina in the car. Quite pleased, even.

"Okay," Ed said. "I want you to -- very slowly -- check your mirrors and pull away from the curb."

The car bucked forward. And then it bucked again. Ed grabbed the dashboard.

"Easy Trina," he shouted.

"What was that you said?" Trina asked. She pressed the full weight of her leg on the gas.

"Brake, goddamit! Brake!"

Trina took her eyes off the road and looked down, searching for the pedal. Ed found his first and sent her into the steering wheel. The horn began to bleat; a car swerved; "What the," the car's driver yelled out his window. Trina pressed herself back into her seat. Mr. Zweil?" she said. "Are you all right?"

Ed wiped one hand down his face. He wanted to say a great many things to Trina McNerney, but the wind had been knocked out of him. When he could speak, his only words for her were, "Get out."

Trina went around the front of the car; Ed went around the back.

A green jeep passed them. "Hey Mr. Zweil!" shouted Emmaline Riley, one of Ed's former

students. She had passed her test in April, and except for occasional glimpses in the hallways, Ed had not seen her in six months. He thought about her often. To this day, watching Emmaline Riley eat a nectarine while they were stopped at the Donut Chalet remained the most difficult moment of Ed's "Try Not to Look, Don't Touch" policy, because she had not been eating the nectarine, she had been full-mouth kissing it, turning it round and round in her hands and pulling off the flesh with her teeth and her lips. Juice, mixed with pulp, had dribbled over her chin and down her neck and landed on her plaid skirt as if it were landing in a net. Caught. Trapped. Ed wanted to stop Emmaline's car and switch her into his, putting Trina in the jeep and coasting her off down the hill. He lifted his hand to wave but was too late. Emmaline's brake lights glowed as she hit the bend in the road.

He got into the driver's seat. "Well then," he said. "I guess we're not quite ready to head out into traffic, are we?"

Trina pulled the remnants of a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her nose. Like her mother, Ed thought, she had no sense of humor.

The Waverly Town Dump was only open for trash disposal on Sundays. It was empty, except for a few seagulls perched on the bulldozer and the tree stumps. Ed circled a few times, demonstrating for Trina the ease with which the Malibu could be handled, when handled correctly. He stopped by the recycling bins.

They switched seats and Trina put on her seatbelt and checked the mirrors. She breathed in deeply before starting the car again, and this time, eased her foot down on the gas and pulled out slowly. After a few stops and starts, she got traveling forward down pat. Ed, wary about starting turns, decided to get her to try moving in the opposite direction.

"It's just like going in a straight line," he told her. "Only the other way."

Trina nodded, seriously.

"Put the car in reverse," Ed said.

Trina looked at her feet and then slid the orange marker from "D" to "R."

"I remembered this time." She smiled at Ed. "You know, to use my right foot."

You're not supposed to look down ever, Ed thought to himself. One more move like that out there and you'll be a goner, honey.

"Great," Ed said. "Put your left hand at the top of the wheel. No, not there: at 12 o'clock. That's right. Now, you're going to turn your body towards the back of the car. Can you do that? Can you see out of the back window?"

Trina turned so that her breasts, beneath her windbreaker, were positioned directly in front of Ed's face.

"Right," Ed said. Normally, this was his favorite part of the lesson.

Ed looked into his side mirror. "Do you see that tree?" he asked.

"I think so."

"Green thing, brown trunk."

"I got it."

"Keep it in the center; that way you'll know you're going straight. To steady yourself, put your right hand behind my headrest."

Trina slid her hand down Ed's back.

Ed watched everything in the windshield recede as they moved: the bulldozer, the blue recycling bins, the red Salvation Army trailer with the trash bag stuck in the door, and felt himself growing hard. He could smell her deodorant, flowery and cut with the sharp scent of her sweat. Her jacket had fallen from her shoulder and he could see the white strip of flesh leading to her armpit and the small patch of dark stubble rubbing against the underside of her sleeve. She

stopped the car.

"Oh, I thought," she said, pulling her hand away. Her watch got caught on Ed's sweater. She yanked her wrist and then, when that didn't work, reached over with her other hand to unravel the yarn. Ed bent forward and swallowed the coffee that rose in the back of his throat.

He adjusted himself when she moved away. Then he looked at Trina. She was staring straight ahead, through the windshield, only her face wasn't red like he thought it would be. She didn't look embarrassed at all. Her right hand was in her lap, and she was wiping at it, disgusted, as if something on Ed's sweater had transferred to her fingers.

Short Fiction by Patti Ghezzi

Where Girls Find Out What They're Capable Of

The struggle for control of Troop #642 started early on, but nothing was said out loud until the fight. Actually, it was more an intense exchange of words, a dispute between grown women - co-troop leaders - over what message the Brownies should display on the green felt banner they would carry at the council festival.

The finished banner read: "Girls Do Everything Better."

It's not that Janine had a problem with the sign or the slogan. The girls would never have settled on that message without coaching from their hyper-feminist co-leader, Marjorie. That violated one of the tenets of scouting. Girls make decisions together, as a team. The adults were not supposed to interfere.

"Our job is to guide, Marjorie, not do for them or tell them what to say or think."

Marjorie usually brushed off Janine's criticism by telling her to lighten up. But this time Marjorie was tired, and she snapped back. "Janine, honestly, we have these girls for two hours a week. I threw out a few suggestions to get things moving. If I hadn't, that banner wouldn't have a message on it at all."

"I think we should have them tackle this project again from scratch at the next meeting," Janine said, as she picked up scraps of felt that didn't make it onto the banner and stuffed them into a plastic bag. "God, you are a hypocrite," Marjorie said, her hands on her hips. "Look at you cleaning up after them while they run around acting silly. If you're so concerned about them doing for themselves, why don't you call them over to clean up this mess?"

Janine could not think of a comeback. She rarely instigated a confrontation of any sort, and the stress made her too nervous to think straight. So she kept picking up felt scraps, muttering to herself and shaking her head, wondering how something as wholesome as Brownies could get so out of control.

Marjorie and Janine were tossed together as co-troop leaders having never met. Janine assumed she would lead the troop by herself, as none of the other mothers had expressed interest in joining her. Then, just days before the activity sign-up fair at school, she got a call from Marie at the regional office.

"Great news! A co-leader has stepped forward to help you. She just moved here from California and already got her training there."

Janine had signed up for training months in advance so she would be prepared when her only child could finally start Brownies. In training, she learned that the institution she loved as a child was not as she remembered. Brownie uniforms had expanded to include leggings, oversize t-shirts and other less formal outfits. Most girls just wore the t-shirt with jeans, if they wore any scout-wear at all. Themes once alluded to, like embracing girls of other races, were now explicitly taught under the heading, "Diversity." And badges! There were dozens of new badges, including one about how to manage stress through yoga and journal-writing.

With little time to plan for the coming year, Janine called Marjorie and invited her over to her house, a super-sized brick Colonial that looked exactly like every other house on the treeless cul-de-sac.

"Sure thing," Marjorie said.

Marjorie arrived half an hour late and pulled from her minivan two kids more than Janine prepared for. In addition to Maddie, who was Lily's age, Marjorie had two grimy boys, four-year-

old Jake and two-year-old Jeffrey.

"Maybe I should have arranged for a babysitter," Janine said.

"I figured we could pop in a video," Marjorie said, reaching down to pick up a pacifier that fell from Jeffrey's mouth. "My other two kids never had one of these, but nothing I learned with my first two seems to apply with this one. Good thing your floor is clean."

To Janine's horror, Marjorie stuck the pacifier back in Jeffrey's mouth.

Once the kids settled in front of the television, Janine led Marjorie, large and suntanned with straight, unstyled brown hair, into the kitchen.

"Oh my God, we're not going to use that stuffy how-to manual," Marjorie said, pointing to the yellow and green Troop Leader Handbook on the kitchen table. "I threw mine out the day my training class ended."

Janine picked up a sponge and ran it across the already clean table. She had read through the training manual at least four times, pausing to reflect on her own memories of crossing the bridge between Brownies and Junior scouts and other milestones. She did not mention this. "Marjorie, can I get you something to drink? I just made some raspberry lemonade."

The first meeting was on a Tuesday night in early September, inside an anonymous room at a United Methodist church. The church people called the room Fellowship Hall. Janine arrived early and with Lily's help set up six long folding tables. Marjorie sauntered in just as most of the girls were getting dropped off. The sound of slamming doors and shrill laughter made Janine suddenly nervous. All these girls were her responsibility.

She looked Marjorie over. She wore a yellow sundress that exposed many large moles on her shoulders and back. Janine wore crisp blue jeans with a Girl Scout t-shirt neatly tucked in. Lily was one of just three girls who wore the full Brownie uniform, replete with brown beanie and jumper. More than half the girls at least had a Girl Scout t-shirt. Maddie wore a mismatched outfit of yellow shorts and a red and blue striped top.

Janine sighed.

First order of business, everyone filled out a nametag. Janine wrote in neat penmanship: "Mrs. Hunter, Troop Leader." Marjorie's said: "Marjorie!" with stars instead of dots over the j and the i.

"Okay everybody," Janine said, trying not to let her nerves show. "Let's all gather around in a circle and learn some new songs and the Girls Scout Promise."

Janine had never commanded a group of girls before. She was surprised they did what she said.

"Who can tell me what our troop number is?"

Almost every hand shot into the air, and some girls grunted to get Janine's attention so she would call their name

"Let's say it together!"

"Six-Forty-Two!"

Janine demonstrated how to hold their right hand, palm facing outward, the middle three fingers raised and recite the Girl Scout Promise: On my honor, I will try, to serve God, my country and mankind...

Marjorie piped up, cutting Janine off mid-breath. "I have an idea...Does anyone see any men in here?"

The girls looked around, shaking their heads.

"Well, neither do I. So how about we say... 'to serve my country and all humankind?'"

The girls nodded gamely, and Janine said nothing as Marjorie taught them the rest of the Promise, even though she got several lines completely wrong. After the pledge, Janine taught them her favorite Girl Scout song:

Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other gold.

She remembered singing that song in the round when she was a Brownie in Troop #12. Janine was a top seller of cookies, a premier earner of badges. She spent her summers at Girl Scout camp and rose through the ranks to head counselor by the time she was sixteen.

When Lily was born, Janine was thrilled to have a girl. Strangers often commented how much she and Lily looked alike, and when they did, she beamed. Janine was room mother when Lily was in kindergarten, and in first grade she was elected PTA vice-president. By the time Janine finally took her oath alongside thirteen other hopeful Girl Scout troop leaders, she had mapped out the first two years of meetings.

She only wished Lily was as excited as she was. When Janine told Lily it was time to go shopping for her Brownie uniform, Lily looked up at her mother and said. "Why can't I do gymnastics?"

That comment stuck in Janine's mind for days. What would she do if Lily didn't take to Girl Scouts? She decided not to worry about that until the end of the year, after Lily had a chance to see how much fun Brownies could be.

For Janine, tension over the heated exchange about the banner marred the council festival, a huge annual event sprawled across acres of muddy soccer fields. But the girls knew nothing of the controversy and were happy just to race around and eat cupcakes baked in ice cream cones. When Troop #642 marched in the parade holding their banner, it didn't seem to matter that it said, "Girls Do Everything Better." There were dozens of troops, dozens of banners, all bearing rather innocuous sayings such as, "Friendship is Color Blind" and "Kindness Matters Most."

Marjorie and Maddie had a blast. They sang every song as loud as they could, holding hands, their arms swinging back and forth. When they didn't know the words to a song, they made up their own silly lyrics. They loved to dance and would spontaneously break into a jig even if there weren't any music. Lily loved to dance and joined in. Janine noticed how quick Marjorie was to include Lily in their kickline.

After the festival, Maddie invited Lily to spend the night at her house. Lily looked at Janine, her eyes pleading for a yes.

Lily had never spent the night with anyone except her cousins and her grandparents. Janine hated being on the spot, but she couldn't think of a reason to say no. Just because she didn't like Marjorie, she didn't think she was an irresponsible parent. And she lived less than a mile away.

"That would be fine, as long as I can pick her up at nine tomorrow. We have to go to church."

Lily shrieked and grasped both Maddie's hands.

"Thanks, Janine," Marjorie said as they walked toward their cars. "This will mean a lot to Maddie. She hasn't had a chance to make a lot of new friends. And, Janine, I'm sorry I snapped at you the other day over the banner. It seems so petty now."

"I'm sorry, too," Janine said. "We need to set a good example for the girls and work together."

Janine waved goodbye as Marjorie helped Lily put on her seat belt.

That night, Janine's husband, John, took her out for seafood and she told him all about Marjorie, casting her in a favorable light. She's really just a free-spirited hippie, Janine said, who somehow ended up in the wrong decade, married to a suit and living in the suburbs.

"What does her husband do?" John asked.

"Insurance," Janine said. "State Farm."

The next morning, Janine rose early and vacuumed the downstairs before putting on a navy silk dress for church. At exactly nine o'clock, John turned their Subaru onto Marjorie's street. The subdivision was alive with purposeful activity. Dads in white undershirts seeded their unnaturally green, flowerless lawns, while women in Bermuda shorts pushed babies in strollers. Marjorie's

property showed no sign that someone so unlike the rest of the neighbors lived there. Janine had imagined Big Wheels and headless Barbies strewn about an overgrown lawn, but that was not the case. Must be the husband's influence, Janine thought.

Lily darted out of Marjorie's house wearing a hot pink skirt with little white hearts on it and a blue cardigan. Her blonde hair was pulled into ponytail on the top of her head, secured with a lime green ribbon. She thought she looked gorgeous. Janine had brought a dress for her to change into, but she didn't see any harm in letting her go to church that way just this once. She promised Marjorie she would return the clothes cleaned and ironed.

"Don't worry about it, Janine. Just return them whenever."

Lily gave Maddie a bear hug and then hugged Marjorie. "Thank you Miss Marjorie. I enjoyed everything."

Janine cringed at the way Marjorie insisted the kids call her by her first name, but she was proud of Lily's good manners.

"Come back anytime, girlfriend."

On the way to church, Janine tried to grill Lily about life at Marjorie's, but Lily wasn't forthcoming. She was too busy admiring her hairdo in the rear view mirror. The car turned into the church parking lot.

"Mommy?"

"What honey?"

"What's a lay?"

"A what?"

"Miss Marjorie said you need to get one."

Janine turned around and looked at her daughter.

"She said what?"

"She said to Maddie's daddy, 'That's Janine's little girl. Janine's the one I told you about. The one who needs to get laid.'"

John slammed on the brakes, sending Lily forward until her seatbelt reined her in. John stared at the steering wheel for a second. "Everybody okay?"

"I'm okay," Lily said. "Mommy, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's go to church."

Janine spent the sermon rehearsing what she would tell the Girl Scout office in making her case that Marjorie be banned from ever being a part of the organization again. The woman had no respect for Girl Scouts, no regard for tradition. Not to mention no class whatsoever. Janine would be passionate in her love of scouting, but she would keep emotion out when speaking of Marjorie. Stick to the facts.

She knew her most significant card to play was Marjorie's contempt for the cookie sale, which she railed against for instilling in girls a "bake sale mentality." The regional office would frown mightily on that. They might not care that the girls had yet to sing "Make New Friends" in a round or that Marjorie had scratched from the curriculum anything about learning to sew or to cook. But the cookies, that's where the money came from. That would be Marjorie's misstep.

Janine and John shook the minister's hand and commended him on a powerful sermon. Lily showed him a picture she drew on the back of the bulletin. "Is that a picture of you and your mommy?" he asked.

"No, it's me and my best friend, Maddie. We're dancing!"

Janine fixed grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for lunch. While she watched the soup spinning in the microwave, she thought about enlisting the other mothers in supporting Marjorie's ouster before going to the regional office. Perhaps Janine could arm-twist a mother into stepping up as co-leader just as Marjorie's inevitable downfall picked up speed. Janine was sure

that would happen in time. But she was also realistic in knowing she would get no takers from the other mothers. Most were only marginally involved in their kids' activities.

Marjorie's earthy qualities set her apart from the other girls' moms, but Janine also stood on the outside, like the new girl at junior high who by the end of the year still doesn't fit in. Janine knew the other mothers regarded her as a goody-two-shoes, overly concerned with whether the PTA followed parliamentary procedure. Janine had seen them roll their eyes and remark that she had "too much time on her hands." When the mothers got together for margaritas at one's house, Janine wasn't invited. Marjorie was an outsider by choice, Janine by design.

Yet these women seemed all too happy to have Janine and Marjorie look after their children during the Tuesday scout meetings. Janine often heard them making plans to gather at Starbucks for the duration of the meeting. No one ever ask Janine if they could stick around and help.

For now, she would have to carry on a charade of camaraderie with Marjorie, and she couldn't do that without confronting her first.

Confrontation. The thought made her stomach churn.

She asked John to watch Lily while she ran an errand. Marjorie's minivan wasn't in the driveway when Janine got there, and there was no answer when she knocked on the door. So she waited, running over various scenarios and what retort she might give. After about an hour, the minivan appeared, and all three kids spilled out the side door.

"Janine!"

Marjorie smiled as she walked toward Janine. "What brings you here?"

Janine pressed her lips together and inhaled through her nose as if she were about to dive into a swimming pool.

"Marjorie, I'd like to speak with you privately, please."

Marjorie's smile contorted into a look of confusion. "Sure, Janine. What is it?"

Janine smiled at Marjorie's lanky husband and watched him usher the kids inside. Then, she faced her co-troop leader.

"Lily learned a new expression while she was at your house, Marjorie. She had to ask me what it meant, though, because we don't talk like that at our house."

Marjorie cocked her head.

"While we were on our way to church, my seven-year-old asked me what it meant when you told your husband I needed to get laid."

The color evaporated from Marjorie's fat cheeks. "She said I said that? She must have misunderstood, Janine."

"Why are you a Brownie leader? You obviously hate everything it stands for?"

"Janine, I love Girl Scouts. Girls deserve to have a place where they can learn how to find their place in the world, where they learn what girls are capable of. They get such mixed messages at school."

"Then why won't you let me run the troop the way Brownie troops are supposed to be run? The way they have been run for nearly a hundred years?"

"I think we have different ideas of what's the best way to teach the girls. But we both want the girls to learn the same positive message. Sorry if I happen to think the Girl Scout Handbook loses the message under a bunch of pledges and promises."

Like always, all thoughts fled from Janine's brain, leaving her without anything to say. Finally, she remembered why she was there. She hadn't come to argue over the philosophy of scouting.

"Just remember Marjorie, if you're talking to adults in the company of children, the children are hearing every word. You should you watch what you say."

"I'm sorry about that, Janine. Really. I'm mortified and sorry."

Again, Janine couldn't think of anything to say. But the awkward silence was this time to her benefit. She watched Marjorie squirm in discomfort.

"I hope we can find some middle ground on the Brownie troop..."

Janine cut Marjorie off.

"I'm going to lead this troop. You can be my assistant, but I'm going to be in charge. We're going to sing the songs, even the ones you think are corny. We're going to sew aprons and make Frito chili pie over a bunson burner. We're going camping, and we're going to make flower arrangements to take to a senior citizen's home for Valentine's Day. If you don't like it, find another troop, or start your own organization. But don't screw with me Marjorie. And if you're going to be involved, at least learn the Promise."

Marjorie waited to make sure Janine was finished. Then, she smiled.

"I'll take you up on that, Janine. I'll be your assistant. I didn't think you were capable of managing a bunch of second-graders, but you've managed to change my mind."

As Janine exhaled she spied Maddie peeking out the kitchen window. "Okay then. I'll see you Tuesday."

Marjorie raised her right hand to her forehead in a mock salute. "Yep, Tuesday."

Janine slid behind the wheel of her Volvo. She turned the ignition and backed out of the driveway, the rush of unexpected victory running through her. It didn't bother her that nothing she knew about Marjorie fit with her surrendering so easily. Janine figured Marjorie had her fingers crossed. This was not over.

Consumed with anticipation of Tuesday, Janine put the car in drive pressed on the gas.

Short Fiction by Kristin Hall

Bad Karma Sounds like Joni Mitchell

Baby's accumulated quite a few dents over the years.

As the early morning sunshine falls across her body, it illuminates the many small nicks in her glossy red finish. I don't mind. I love Baby for all her imperfections. Come to think of it, I muse in a groggy half-asleep state, I have a feeling that if my soul were to be exposed to world it would show just as many dents and scratches as Baby does.

We are one, Baby and I. That guitar and I have been through a lot together over the years.

At this point the memories of those years come flooding back, and I fear that I'll be lost as always in a pointless reverie. The snooze alarm on my bedside clock comes to my rescue, however, with its insistent beeping to remind me that, just in case I've been lucky enough to back to sleep, I now have ten minutes less to get to work.

Work. With a groan I roll, literally roll, out of bed. I pat Baby as I pass her. She rests so proudly in her stand by the window. "I've been through all the same shit you have, honey," she seems to chide me, "and hey-I'm still standing."

"Yeah, but that's probably because you don't also work as a waitress," I reply out loud.

At the sound of my voice, Lance stirs. I finally woke him up. "Morning, mutt," I grumble affectionately as I grope my way to the bathroom. I emerge, feeling barely refreshed, ten minutes later to find him still lounging across the bed, head cocked and tongue lolling. I stand there no more than two seconds before he's on me, knocking me back against the wall. I laugh in spite of myself.

Lance is, I believe in all seriousness, the laziest dog on the planet. Labs are supposed to be active dogs, and I suppose to a certain extent he is, since he enjoys our daily walk. But I've also known him to be just as content to lie in bed all day or sit on the sofa staring blankly at the TV. Must be a male thing.

On the contrary, Lance is the only male that has remained a constant in my life. Well, unless of course you count thoughts about a male, in which case.....but the handy dandy wall in my brain shoots up again, and I am thankful. Don't need that this morning.

I'm running late as usual. I feed Lance and tear out the door, glancing behind me. Lance digs into his food and Baby sits proudly as ever by the window, waiting patiently for tonight. My two best friends, a dog and a guitar. What a world.

The poster on the wall screams, "Our Very Own...Jainy Morgan! Tuesdays and Thursdays!" I stare at my picture. Just me in a chair, leaning on Baby. I love that picture. It's the only one that's ever managed to capture that particular smile of mine.

The picture's misleading, though. I look so happy.

My face says, "I love to play my music. You will love listening to it. I love being a songwriter because it's romantic and wonderful and everything you see in the movies is true."

The truth is, I love to play my music. That's about the only part that's true.

The bottom of the poster, which I usually try to ignore, says, "BEER 1/2 OFF!"

The truth hurts sometimes.

Never, under any circumstances, become a waitress. I don't care who you are, where you come from, how good the tips are or how good you are with people. Don't ever become a waitress.

While we're on the subject, don't ever become a songwriter either. Because that's the quickest way to ensure that you will also have to become a waitress.

I used to dream big. Dreams about Nashville, or Los Angeles, or New York, somewhere big where I could make it big and live in a big house that I bought with my big amount of money and where I lived the big life of a famous musician. I always knew that someday a big record executive would appear out of nowhere, fall in love with my music and offer me a big record deal with a big record label. This record executive would also conveniently happen to be in his mid-thirties, bear striking resemblance to Brad Pitt, and would fall madly in love with me at the same time that he was falling madly in love with my songwriting genius.

The guy screaming in my face swears up and down that he didn't order eggs. The old woman at the next table is motioning that she wants more coffee. I definitely don't get big enough tips to put up with this.

I don't dream big anymore. Instead I play crowded, smoke-filled rooms and work at Denny's. It's really hard to dream big when you work at Denny's.

I take the guy's plate and promise to bring him another one. The old woman scowls as I pass her table, insulted that her empty cup of coffee is not my top priority. On my way to the kitchen I notice a figure sitting alone at a corner table. I've seen him before, he's a frequent customer, but I've never spoken to him. He never makes any efforts to speak to me. As far as I know the man cannot speak at all. He seems to communicate solely by grinning. Which is rather disconcerting, because the most noticeable thing about his smile is the gold tooth right in front.

Aside from the whole gold tooth thing, he's actually fairly good looking. At least, I suppose he's good looking. I'm not nearly as interested in that sort of thing as I used to be. After years of ignoring lewd comments from stale inebriated fathers at the bar...let's just say that interest in the opposite sex, or really interest in sex at all, eventually begins to wane. But I have to admit that he's fairly good looking, if you go for the whole messy hair, wrinkled shirt, I-just-got-out-of-bed-don't-you-wish-you'd-gotten-out-with-me appeal. Which I don't think I go for, but who knows what I go for anymore. I guess you could say I still carry an awful lot of baggage in that area. The mental wall shoots up again. Comes in handy sometimes.

He grins as I pass his table, of course. And winks. I wonder if the added wink means he's reaching out.

I wonder sometimes about Mitch. Where he is, what he's doing.

Whether he even remembers me.

Whether he's ever heard my songs.

Okay. So I think about Mitch all the time. Still. After all these years.

And why not? I owe him everything. Well, not my skills as a waitress. But my inspiration, my songs, and my so-called emotional isolation are all his. Every lyric and each melody (or rather, each melody that I haven't "altered" from someone else) drips with all the frustration and melodramatic heartbreak and all-around bad karma that is the entity of Mitch. No Mitch, no songs. I wouldn't be a songwriter if he hadn't been such an asshole. I could have had a real job.

I'm so glad this set is almost over. I'm sweating like a pig in the lights, my feet hurt from standing in heels, I'm sure my mascara's running, and if I hear one more drunken voice yell "Freebird!" I'm going to scream.

"Freebird!"

That does it. I hit the closing note with a screech, take a bow amid hoots and hollers, pack Baby safely into her case, and get the hell off the stage.

Three men offer to buy me a beer, and I try not to look too disgusted as I politely decline. I

cannot reasonably expect these smelly oafs to understand that I do not need a beer. What I need is a big bowl of chocolate ice cream, a leisurely bath surrounded by candles, and a 12-hour sleep between satin sheets.

"Hey..."

The voice sounds sober, so I decide to turn around. And almost fall over. It's the guy from Denny's. Gold Tooth Man.

I'm speechless. My mouth drops. I stand there looking like some kind of fish. He grins, of course. The gold tooth winks at me.

It's the most rewarding feeling in the world, knowing that one of my songs has touched someone. It almost makes the downsides of the job seem worthwhile.

Until you become a songwriter, until you've poured your heart and soul into these little works of personal art, you can never understand the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that comes from playing in a bar. Or even the bar side of a restaurant, for that matter. Sometimes I feel like screaming at them all, with their nasty cigarettes and their loud voices and their egocentric helpless depression.

"Shut up!" I want to rage at the top of my lungs. "Don't you have any respect? Don't you get that I'm telling my life story here!?"

But they don't shut up, and they don't know that I'm telling my life story. I'm just background noise, the soundtrack to their endless chatter and exaggerated laughter.

Then, through the thick smoke that someone has just blown in my face, sometimes if I'm lucky I'll catch sight of a man, more often a woman, who isn't laughing at all. She'll be looking at me intently, hanging on to every lyric.

She doesn't know I'm telling my life story either. But she feels, somewhere in the bottom of her soul, that I'm telling hers.

I've dedicated my life to people like her.

I'm standing, mouth open, basking in the unnatural glow of Gold Tooth Man's grin. It takes me a second to realize that he just said something.

"Huh? Sorry..."

"No problem. I was just wondering if I could get..." the grin widens, "...an autograph."

I'm intrigued. "That depends."

"On...?"

"On whether or not you have a name."

The gold tooth glistens. "I see. Well, I can probably work that out. How does the name Saul suit you?"

Saul. Isn't that biblical? "I suppose it'll have to do," I try to return the grin as best as I can.

"And your name...?"

A wave of nervousness hits me out of nowhere. "Oh...yeah. Uh...it's Jainy."

"Jainy."

"Yup. Jainy. That's me." My cutesy laugh sounds fake.

"It's a nice name."

"I guess. Sometimes I joke that I need to change it to Joni, you know, because everybody says I sound like Joni Mitchell. But it's not Joni...or Joan, like Baez, or even Judy, like Collins, or anything....I'm just Jainy." Oh shit, I'm rambling and I look really stupid.

"Just Jainy."

"Yyyyeah." I wince. I sound like a moron. His momentary silence confirms my worst fears.

"Well, Just Jainy..."

"Yes?" Don't know what I'm hoping for here.

"Can I get you a beer?"

Suddenly, a beer sounds really good.

Since Mitch I've been with a few guys. Never seems to work out, though.

It's okay. In this business you find that hardening yourself is a major plus. You don't care about failure, you don't care that no one's listening, you don't care that sometimes you feel like you're only playing for yourself and you're not even listening either, you don't care that your best friends are a dog and a guitar, you don't care about...much of anything. Or anybody.

It was easier than I expected, becoming insensitive. The mental wall is a valuable tool. Find a subject you don't like and up goes the wall, leaving you free to tactfully not think about that particular subject as often as you like.

This process of desensitization can easily become a very safe lifestyle. I've only found it to be a problem on those rare occasions when I actually want to care about something. Or somebody. And then I can't, it doesn't work out and I drive them away, because the mental wall has become a reflex.

Only then do you notice that something, something golden and pure and vitally important that you used to have, has gotten lost somewhere. And you realize how much trouble it would be to get that something back, and decide that ruining your current relationship would take less effort.

The most obvious solution to this problem, of course, is to cut back even further on the number of things and people that you want to care about.

I knew all along, of course. I knew from the moment the gold tooth winked at me that sooner or later we'd be right here, me driving, Saul in the passenger seat fiddling with my broken radio.

It's late, the kind of late that seeps through your skin and resonates in your bones. We climb the steps to my apartment quietly, so as not to wake the neighbors. Inside, we don't even waste time with formalities.

The night is beautiful. It is explosive, cathartic, melodious, harmonic, breathtaking, comforting, fire and ice and spring rain and sunshine through dark clouds, and all those other clichés that could never do it justice.

The mental wall crumbles for a moment. And I think, I could try this over again. I could give this another chance, or be given another chance, whichever it is. I could be happy. I could write a new song, a happy song.

Somewhere, in some metaphysical realm of impossible outcomes, Mitch is searching for me. And in that place he loves me still and I forgive him all his wrongs and we both sprout fluffy wings and fly off into the sunset. Somewhere out there, in the ether, our laughter is still ringing and those sweet days last eternity, and I know that all my waiting wasn't a waste of time.

I believe that with all my heart. I have to.

Without the dream, there are no songs.

I cannot let go of my songs.

In the morning we both roll out of bed. He looks so endearing, with his tousled hair and lop-sided grin, that for a moment something about his expression reminds me of Lance.

He doesn't ask to stay for breakfast. I don't invite him to.

We don't speak much. What is there to say? At the door we mumble goodbyes.

"I'll call you." He grins. I don't know whether or not to read hope into that grin.

"Definitely." I shut the door after he turns and waves. He won't call. I know that I won't see him again. There will be no happy songs.

Lance is sprawled on the couch. I scratch his ear as I pass. Behind my eyes I feel the burn of resistant tears that will never be shed.

I go back to the bedroom and instinctively glance at Baby.

"Go back to bed," she coos in a motherly tone. "We've got a show tonight."

And God knows, the show must go on.

Personal Essay by Travis Wayne Denton

Marbles

I was straddling the crossbar of my Schwinn ten-speed in mid-June 1981 under the live oak in my front yard. We always met there, Justin, Mark and me, under the huge black, wrinkled knot that looked like Spiderman's face. With no school we'd talk about Atari video games, Star Wars and of course, girls. I was nine at the time, too young to really care about the fairer sex, but since Justin and Mark were almost teenagers themselves, they'd sparked my interest and awakened in me a new emotion, one more solid than hunger and more powerful than grief: Lust, most assuredly one of the seven deadly sins. Up to that point in my life, I knew very well about the wages of sin-but just enough about religion to know that all nine-year-olds went to heaven.

I had a single marble in my mouth, chasing it from cheek to cheek with my tongue. It was light green. Clear, except for a red ribbon on the inside. Earlier that morning I'd lifted it from my brother's clenched fist after he'd fallen asleep watching cartoons on the couch. But I told the others, as I gargled the marble, I'd won it from him in an arm wrestling match the night before, thinking they'd be more impressed with my strength for slamming a sixteen-year-old's wrist into the table than with a cunning that most kids my age were born with, but seemed to lose the knack for at puberty.

I was just about to take the marble out of my mouth and show the guys my trophy when Wendy Griggs walked up wearing a gray Georgia Bulldog t-shirt. She was older than all of us-fourteen and her body was beginning to show what Justin always said were "the first signs of womanhood." We got quiet. No one spoke at all for at least a full minute until Mark began, "So, ah Wendy, you thought about it?"

"Yeah, Mark." She paused before going any further. "I have."

"So?" Justin broke in with his crackly voice.

I felt like I needed to say something-to chime in with some bit of wisdom, but it never came to me. I just pulled my hands from my pockets and folded my arms, raising one just high enough to rest my chin on my knuckles.

"Okay," she said with a red face, and grabbed her shirttail with both hands and began to raise her arms. I held my breath as she pulled harder to lift her flower print bra. We all stood speechless-amazed at the grace and glory God had poured on us that morning on Golden Rod Way in the Garden Hills subdivision in Rome, Georgia.

But in those few seconds of awe, I gasped and almost instinctively sucked the marble down my throat. I tried to stay upright as she stood there for a few seconds more with her shirt in her hands. Gulping for air, I pulled the marble further down my throat. It was then I lost my composure-no more playing it cool. No more of this acting "bad" shit. I was back to being a nine-year-old and I was in trouble. I stood choking-swinging both arms, but still trying to keep focused on Wendy until the world got blurry and my hands and feet got so heavy all I could do was hit the ground. The last thing I saw was the three of them standing over me as the sky went dark.

I woke to my Dad shaking my shoulders like I was a pair of dice, my brother thumping me in the head, and my Mom on the phone with my aunt. "Oh he's awake now. Yeah he'll be alright. No, he was never choking. Yeah, he just passed out. Oh the marble? The doctor says it's coming-probably tomorrow. He says to eat plenty of fiber, lots of greens, you know. Love you too, Hun. Bye now."

When my parents finally left the room to get coffee in the hospital snack bar, I felt like it was time to talk to my brother alone. "Hey, uh Bro," I tried to speak, but in a weak voice to get an extra

helping of sympathy. "Sorry about the marble, I know it was your favorite. I'll make it up to you man."

"Just keep it dip shit," he said half-laughing. "Yeah just keep the damn thing and uh, when you get it back in hand in the morning, try to keep the shitty thing out of your mouth."

That day comes back to me as I sit here under the flashing colored lights with friends. Not Justin or Mark. I don't know where they are these days. They moved away not long after the marble incident and we didn't keep in touch. The music seems to get louder as the bass thumps my inner ear. No, I don't put marbles in my mouth anymore; don't even own any for that matter. I've traded marbles for Marlboro Lights and a double shot of Grand Mariner.

As I slide a twenty across the table to the brunette fastening her top, I raise a cigarette to my lips and take a deep drag, pulling the nicotine into my lungs and feeling the slow rush to my head. I can't help but think of Wendy and how we pooled our money and my brother's favorite marble on a Wednesday in Mid-June 1981, offering her a handful of coins to make us feel like men. Some things never change.

Personal Essay by Kim Giles

On Anything But Writing

The cursor taunts me. I stare blankly at it winking endlessly and sniggering at my furrowed brow. The pristine page stretches below the empty first line into an infinity of brilliant prose that I have never written. I blink at the brightness of the computer screen, willing my hands to fill the space of blinding light. Perhaps my words are hidden behind it; the keyboard is a chisel with which I should carve my soul into stories, articles, and essays. The writing I wish to create presses upon me, flattening my hands and preventing my fingers from dancing loftily along the keys.

Tearing my eyes from the agonizing proof of my block, I gaze out the window along my hushed neighborhood. The sun prances on the nearly clean glass, revealing the swirls of a window washing rag; the soft beams leap from the waxy green leaves of a pear tree. The tree's arms sway in the breeze, beckoning me from my diligent post. I consider Annie Dillard, who writes in flawless prose that a windowful of beauty is a damning thing for a writer; I covet her insights. I consider the Romantic poets, who strolled along in nature, composing poetry to the beat of their footsteps and plucking brilliance from a tree like ripened fruit; I covet their muses. I consider the Victorians, who composed verbose masterpieces with skill and no computer; I covet their abundance of words. They, too, press upon me; cowering to their notoriety, I am exhausted by the past.

Why write? Why bother, the world already having its wealth of poets—those writers, those artists, those artisans that whittle words into the core of readers and generations? Has my writing anything new to reveal? Hasn't anything remarkable been remarked upon already? According to my courses, according to my editor, no. I must battle the greats that wrote before me. Suddenly, my writing is a noble knight. Pondering this, I tilt my head toward a shaft of light and imagine my writing, wielding a pen, crusading against the words Wordsworth, Yeats, Poe, Woolf. It fights valiantly, proclaiming itself off to find a writing holy grail. It is surrounded, stabbed through the heart, and, finally, staggers off to die alone, shamed.

I am the inchworm in Dillard's imagination. I climb to the tip of a bending blade of grass, reaching blindly for my next idea, groping the air for my muse. I, the worm, curl my body into a soft "U" along the keyboard, my tiny, nearly useless legs groping for footing along the buttons. They scramble for the next set of keys on which they will fasten. They find a letter; my weight is unable to stamp out the character. I heave myself upon the key, impressing it, burning its image into my screen. Finding something of inspiration, I stretch out again, edging my way through a word, a phrase, a sentence, dare I say...a paragraph? Momentarily celebrating my minute victory, I widen my eyes in horror. What follows a paragraph but another? I drop my head onto my lax arm, groaning.

Another soft whine draws my attention to the floor. Twisting my head slightly, one curious eye peeks toward the space at my feet. Hambone perks his soft, floppy ears and cocks his head.

"Pet me," he seems to will. "No writing in the world is more important than rubbing my tummy this very moment." And I comply.

"After all," I concede wryly, "someday you'll be gone. Like my inspiration." I stroke his downy ears, understanding that I leapt at the diversion. The basset duly satisfied, the computer screen begs for my attention.

Hark! A mail truck is creeping, creeping outside my chamber window! Letters to read, bills to pay, junk mail to crumple into tiny balls, spheres of my frustration. I leap from the computer and gallop down the stairs. I am a ballerina, elated by my freedom, free from the tyranny and

mockery of the blinking cursor. I pirouette, pull a muscle in my writer's leg, whimper, and decide to walk. Walking reminds me of those Romantics, so I slap my feet against the concrete in no rhythm at all. Padding along the pavement, the driveway warm under my feet, I blink toward the wispy clouds of the sky and barricade the empty writing screen from flashing before my eyes.

Once inside, dust barracudas jeer at me from beneath my coffee table, snapping at my bare toes ambling by. Snarling, the balls attempt to make me sneeze, and I valiantly wield a Swiffer mop. I conquer. Dishes scream for assistance from their lonely towers inside the dishwasher. I free them. Windows beg me to relinquish their blindness. I give them sight once again. And the house is free of dust, grime, and excuses.

Soon I return to the room of my own. The screen saver has activated now, and I chuckle dryly. The screen has saved itself from my idle hands and elusive pool of prose. Afraid of the emptiness burning itself into a permanent image on its screen, the computer has withdrawn, leaving me to find the enchanted word that will jolt it from its sleep. The retreat horn of the traitorous computer sounds, and fleeing phrases charge backward in thunderous compliance as my shoulders slump and I drop heavily into my desk chair. A soft "poof" erupts around me as the padding, too, gives way to my dead weight of uninspiration. I have no recourse; I fall on my sword of self pity.

Narrowing my eyes in determination, I picture my words, darting in schools at the bottom of my mind's pond and wriggling from my grasp. These are no fish in a barrel. I am the fly fisher on the raging Northwestern rivers, confident I can land a new, immense catch. I cast my line, silent, waiting. It alights on the water, pulling me and my rod into the furious, untamed froth about the rocks. The words are in scattered sections, never whole. All at once, the waters whisper a writer's truth: I have no muse in this battle. No great work waits patiently for me at the end of frustration. My heels dig into the grit of the river's bottom. I will fight for my writing; I will seek each portion, each fitting puzzle piece. I embrace the wild, free river and spy my phrase just before me. Raising one perfunctory brow, I set my jaw and dive my arms into the waters. Setting the silvery, gyrating word in front of me, I place my hands atop the keys and begin slowly to chip away at my own masterpiece.

Personal Essay by Megan Morris

On Giving Way

"6:53, 6:54, 6:55 . . ."

"Come on, Megan, I think we should try to do negative splits on the next one."

My head swims, but I can hear both my coach's voice calling the mile splits and my teammate's proposal well enough. Entirely too well, in fact, for I'm in trouble and I know it. The sun beats down on my purple race uniform, now soaked with sweat, as if to attack it and me. The heat has already leached any desire to move from my muscles. This isn't the kind of running challenge I most enjoy. Two miles to go.

Why is Phyllis staying back with me? Even on a good day, she can run so much faster than I can. And this isn't a good day. If I don't slow down, I'll never make it. I thought that races, you were supposed to run as fast as you could and not wait for your teammates . . . Maybe if I told her that I can't do this, she'd go ahead? No, I know better than that.

I remember. Two weeks ago, Phyllis and my coach stood beside me on hill repeat day. I squint up at the summit, invisible in the darkness. It hadn't gotten any smaller in the last four repeats. Phyllis sends me off with her usual admonition: "Don't let me catch you!" She will give me a few seconds grace. As I pick up speed, I can see my other teammates moving on the hill. My quads scream at me, but I have to take advantage of this headstart. By the midpoint of the hill, I hear two sets of feet hammering the concrete close behind me. Ouch! She's never caught me before. I try to put some extra power into my sprint, but I'm too tired to care much. Coach John passes me, and Phyllis is close on my shoulder. As she blows by me, I slump, giving up. Except . . . she's grabbed my arm. She's enormously strong, strong enough to force me to keep stride with her for a few steps. All right, FINE! As she releases me, I concentrate: one step at a time. Gasping, I keep pace with her, then, as the road levels out, I throw myself into a full-out sprint, passing her just before the mailbox that marks the end of the hill.

Phyllis is special; you know that after talking to her for only a few minutes. She's a return to college student, balancing her kids, her husband, and her crazy commute every day. And now she's running cross-country with us. She ran for three years in college the first time, then went on to do other things, including become a world-class cyclist. She has just one year of NCAA eligibility left, and she's giving it to us, Agnes Scott's building team. She's amazing, and she's always pushing us to do our best, too.

What makes me think that today's going to be any different? She believes in me, believes that I can do it, and she's not going to let me die in peace. The chills that make me shiver in the 90 degree weather tell me that I have heat exhaustion and hint that the negative splits aren't going to happen. They don't. But I can do this. I've got to, for my team. One mile to go.

"Phyllis, please go ahead. You could run so much faster than this."

"Why?"

Drat it. That LaGrange runner who's been lingering a couple hundred yards behind Phyllis and me isn't going away, and on a hairpin turn, I see that she's increased her pace, using the rare downhill to narrow the gap between us. If I don't speed up, she will catch me.

I pick up my pace - why not? If I don't get some water soon, I'm going to collapse in any case. Might as well hasten the process. We're almost done, and now I keep expecting Phyllis to push ahead of me on this last great hill. The pace we're running at is very easy for her, I know,

and if she's stayed with me because she's worried about my heat exhaustion, she'll likely realize that I can make it now.

Why is it that this is so easy for her and so hard for me? It's not fair!

That's wrong, especially since I do know why she's staying with me - have from the beginning. We hit the track for the final stretch to the finish line. There are people cheering, and I lengthen my stride. It wasn't a pretty race, but I might be able to make it look like it was, for the benefit of my family and the others who have come to watch us today. Plus, there's still a LaGrange runner back there.

"Don't worry about her. She's not even on the track yet."

Oh. O.K. - good. But Phyllis has come this far with me, so I might as well return the favor and give her a little bit of a push to the finish line. I can maybe beat her from 50 meters out - I have very little fast twitch muscle, but she doesn't have much more - so why isn't she going for it NOW?

I seem to have lost conscious control of the running process; without my command, my muscles propel my bones into an all-out sprint for the last 100 meters. Phyllis stays on my shoulder, I think, but I am first to cross the line. I run a few paces past it, automatically, then turn to look at the older woman behind me. I reach out to meet her hand.

"Thanks. For staying with me. I wouldn't have been able to make it without you."

It's true, and I know it. I wanted to give up - not the race itself, but the goal that I'd set for myself in it. I needed her help.

"Hey, we're a team. And we still got first and second; it doesn't make a difference."

She's right, if you put it that way. It doesn't. But it made a difference to me. She gave way, to help me; she didn't need the accolade she would have gotten from winning by three minutes, or from setting a new course record. Her focus is on the team, not her own achievement; when questioned, she says that we ran together the whole way, and I just happened to cross the line first. It's something I admire so much, this grace, but would I ever be able to do the same? For sure, I'll always remember, and maybe one day, I'll be there.

Personal Essay by Kathryn Schroder

Hat People for B.S.O.

I wear a lot of hats.

Following this, I could launch into a wistful tale about being a daughter and a sister and a niece. A student, and an employee. A writer. A friend.

I wear identity hats of the clichéd, metaphorical variety. But I also don a lot of berets. A lot of wide-brimmed straw numbers and head-hugging knits and logo-emblazoned baseball caps.

I'm not at all certain which came first for me: a falling in love with hats, or a falling in love with the notion of being "a hat person." It's a most bizarre identity, being a hat person. Shoe people are only shoe people because they take a certain extra step of pride in their footwear-but even people who aren't shoe people must still wear shoes. Not so with hat people. Only on days of most extreme weather-heat stroke-producing sun or howling blizzards-are people not wearing hats considered foolish.

The origin of the term may never truly be known, but perhaps that mystery is what makes it a romantic title to embrace. What does it mean to be a hat person? To (quite literally) nod toward a more fashionable or proper time? To have the "right" facial shape to pull off an attention-grabbing accessory? Or perhaps to be told in a most tactful way that one's odd head would be better off undercover?

With a hopeful inclination toward the two former theories, I affirm that I've been identified as a hat person for as long as I can remember. My first baby pictures show a plump face peeking from inside a cotton candy tinted beach hat or Granddaddy's fluorescent hunting cap. I've always loved to poke through musty boutiques with my mother who insists I try on vintage flapper styles with satiny ribbons and silk hydrangeas.

She could never wear them, she says-she's not a hat person.

Almost every year from my grandmother, I receive a new winter hat for my December birthday. The gift choice could be a force of habit, but I'd rather think it more than that.

Grandmother's eyes shine when she watches me try on a new chapeau. When she looks at me, I imagine her looking at herself in the mirror some six or seven decades ago. She is getting ready for a Saturday night on the town or Sunday services. With her dress neatly pressed and pearls gleaming across her collarbone, she retrieves a feather-trimmed bowler or a floppy sun-hat and takes one last look at herself on the way out the door.

Her hats are a personal statement. But how personal? In her teenage years and into her twenties, a respectable woman wouldn't think of leaving the foyer without a hat. Part of the joy of finding the perfect dancing dress was finding the hat to compliment its swirling skirt. On the Sabbath day, it was understood that God Himself could strike dead the woman who entered his stained-glass-walled home with an uncovered head. Out of decorum or fashion or reverence, Grandmother followed suit. It was the women who didn't wear hats who stood out-brazen hussies best left unmentioned.

So what has changed? When over the course of Grandmother's lifetime did hats go from necessary finishing touches to flashy accessories for fashion-forward women? It seems a most curious irony: something used to cover up becoming something perceived to draw attention. Hats seem to have become a near casualty in our increasingly casual society. Heads aren't the only things left uncovered in Saturday night hotspots. Many houses of worship now shelter blue-

jeaned congregations. As our dress codes are redefined, hats are often missing from the definitions.

In *You've Got Mail*, Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) emails her mysterious NY152 to tell him of an experience the previous day on the subway. A butterfly got on the train with her at 34th Street and got off at 5th Avenue where she assumed it was going to Bloomingdale's to buy a new spring bonnet which would most likely turn out to be a mistake "as most all hats do." How sad.

Loving hats puts me in rare company. As I top off my blue jeans with a ten-gallon Stetson, or my church dress with the most perfect chapeau (Easter Sunday or not), I should be prepared for the looks. The looks come from those who just don't get it. They're the ones who can't see past the potential flashiness of my highest accessory. They may not realize that beyond just their feminine charm, hats can disguise bad hair days...and even bad hair ideas. Maybe they really do think hats are mistakes because they're different; sometimes we're too afraid of different.

On my own, I've conducted a little research. Standing in the dustiest and most neglected corner of the accessories department in JC Penney or Saks, you can spot hat people. They wander off the beaten paths through the middle of the store, lined with practical cardigans and wool slacks. Winding through the racks of handbags and costume jewelry, and dodging the display of cashmere scarves, their eyes fix not on an entire shelf of a display, but on one crowning jewel of a thing. It's the hat: the one that seems to actually coo, "Darling, won't you be a dear and fetch me another martini?"

I watched a girl my age pick up the hat. She perched it atop her head: plush glittery velvet with matching black plumes, and a price tag just as glittering. She cocked it to one side and, with just a bit more attitude, waltzed over to show her mother. When she returned the trophy to its rack, I approached and less than accidentally happened upon the same hat, waiting for the reaction of a kindred spirit.

"Isn't it just luscious?" she drawled. "My mother says we could buy that hat or feed a small country." I nodded; despite our youthful, humanitarian hearts, it's still a tempting question.

How glorious to gaze on the stacks of hatboxes in the corner of Grandmother's Victorian guestroom. Bedazzled with filigree and batten burg lace, they serve as decoration and as a reminder of the history of the accessory we share.

But what really makes me smile is to know that Grandmother's hatboxes are empty of hats and instead discreetly hold all sorts of other clutter. She rarely goes out anymore, so she doesn't have to worry too much about being a proper lady. Still, the hats that tell her history are not shielded beneath the lids of those boxes. I imagine many are displayed in vintage clothing stores somewhere, but some have not been lost. They rest on the corners of mirrors, sit atop doilies on her dresser, and grace the heads of privileged dolls and teddy bears. Hats are for show and tell; they show her stunning taste and tell of the glamorous days of her past.

I don't yet have vanities upon which to lay my hats, or full-length mirrors whose corners need adorning. But I do have cardboard boxes at home that hold the headwear of my as of yet brief history: puff-painted plastic visors, Brownie beanies, and souvenir Minnie Mouse ears. Perhaps someday I will retire them to hat racks in corners of my rooms, inviting my grandchildren to try on a piece of the past.

As for now, I'll hold my head a little higher when it's topped with felt, straw, or wool, feathers or jewels. And I'll nod only to the appreciative audience.

They're not hard to pick out of the crowd.

One-Act-Play by Kristin Hall

Brief Candle

SETTING: A restaurant--a table for two at center stage, simply set with a candle in the center.

AT RISE: The stage is dark. A match is struck and the candle on the table is lit by a figure we cannot see in the darkness. HIM and HER appear at opposite ends of the stage in their own separate spotlights. When they speak their lines flow together like one thought, but they do not look at one another.

HIM: It begins as a flicker, a tiny little shred of...

HER: ...hope. It's just a silly dream, really. Just a brief moment of inspiration.

HIM: I see you....

HER: ...and I see you....

HIM: And that's it! That's the point of it, right? That one little moment...

HER: ...that one little moment might...

HIM: ...no, does...

HER: ...make it all worthwhile. And yet...

HIM: ...on the other hand...

BOTH

What happens then?

(they both think)

HIM: Well, why should we worry about it?

After all, we have ourselves this little thing called a...

HER: Relationship.

HIM: Right. A relationship. And after all...

HER: ...in the end...

HIM: All relationships are a little absurd, right?

HER: Right. They start absurd...stay absurd, as time moves on...and I suppose they even end that way.

HIM: Right. Nothing to worry about.

HER: Right.

(Blackout. Lights up to reveal HIM and HER sitting at the table. HIM is drinking a glass of

water; HER is looking out the window.)

HIM: Stop that.

HER: Stop what?

HIM: Stop looking out the window.

HER: Why?

HIM: Because it makes me nervous.

HER: Sorry.

HIM: No, you're not.

HER: *(shrugs)*

Okay.

HIM: *(silence as she continues to avoid his gaze)*

Stop! You always pick a window seat when we eat somewhere, and then when you get uncomfortable with a subject you just stare out the window.

HER: I have no idea what you're talking about.

HIM: And stop playing stupid! It's infuriating.

HER: Sorry.

HIM: No, you're not.

HER: *(shrugs)*

Okay.

HIM:

(after a silence)

See? This is what I was talking about.

HER: What?

HIM: You're so...distant...now.

HER: I'm not being distant.

HIM: Oh really? What do you call it then?

HER: I have a lot on my mind.

HIM: Like what?

HER: It doesn't matter.

HIM: Yes it does!

HER: No, it doesn't!

(Awkward silence. The waitress enters with menus. She begins to speak, then sees their expressions and thinks better of it. She puts the menus on the table and hurries away. They stare after her, then pick up their menus and resume their conversation.)

HIM: Why won't you tell me?
HER: Tell you what?
HIM: You see, you're doing it again!
HER: What?
HIM: Playing stupid.
HER: Sorry.
HIM: Please stop apologizing. I just want you to tell me.
HER: Tell you what's wrong with me?
HIM: (*frustrated nearly to tears*)
 Yes!
HER: (*thinks for a moment*)
 Maybe I don't know exactly.
HIM: I don't buy that.
HER: (*frustrated herself now*)
 Well, I'm sorry you don't buy it! You asked me to tell you and I just told you! And now you're still not satisfied.
HIM: That's not fair! You didn't tell me.
HER: Oh, dear God...
HIM: Well?
HER: (*slowly, trying to control herself*)
 I told you...I. Don't. Know. What's. Wrong. It's just a mood.
HIM: (*after a silence*)
 Okay, fine.
HER: What?
HIM: Well, if you're going to be that way, fine. I can't force you to tell me.
HER: Oh, okay.
 (*She laughs, but there's no humor in it.*)
 So what? So you're just giving up? You wanted something so badly and suddenly you just don't care. That sounds awfully familiar...
 (*They glare at each other for a moment.*)
HIM: (*calmly, new tone of voice*)
 You said you didn't want to talk about it. You said you didn't want to tell me. So I'm not going to ask anymore.
HER: Oh, stop it!
HIM: I'm just trying to be pleasant.
HER: You're full of it.
HIM: Kind of like the answer you just gave me.
HER: (*confused*)
 What?
HIM: Your answer.
 (*She looks at him blankly.*)

That there's nothing wrong. You're full of it too.
 (*She stares him down. He doesn't flinch, sneering.*)
 If you can be full of it, so can I. Eye for an eye. Tit for tat. Quid pro quo.
HER: I don't believe this.
HIM: (*mockingly innocent tone*)
 Is there a problem?
HER: (*viciously*)
 Yes, there's a problem! We are the problem!
HIM: What do you mean?
HER: Listen to us! Just listen to us! We've done nothing but argue since the moment we sat down!
HIM: (*after a beat*)
 So?
HER: So!...that's not...healthy.
HIM: I don't see anything wrong with it.
HER: (*standing and shouting*)
 We never agree on anything anymore!
HIM: All right, all right! Please sit down, people are staring.
HER: I'll stand if I want to! I...
 (*She looks around and becomes embarrassed.*)
 I...I have to use the restroom.
 (*She exits. He digests what she has just said for a moment, then steps into a spotlight with a bit of uncertainty.*)
HIM: So...guess this is my chance to spill my guts, huh? Put my heart on my sleeve, and all those other clichés. Well all right then.
 (*looks toward where HER just exited*)
 Can I speak now? Can I speak without you interrupting, or pretending that you don't know what's going on? Come to think of it, why do you always have to do that?! Why can't we just talk? I ask you what's wrong. It means I care. It means I'm genuinely concerned. And all I get in return is evasive answers and a look that plainly tells me that I couldn't possibly understand whatever it is that you're going through. Well, try me!! Tell me!! Please tell me!!!
 (*pause*)
 You never tell me anything, anymore. You used to tell me everything. When I first met you I thought, "Wow. Here's a girl I can talk to

about everything under the sun"...and we did. Don't you remember? What happened to that?
 (*quietly*)
 I fell in love with you because I could talk to you. And now we never talk anymore. Something's wrong. With me, with us, with you....with you. Oh sure, we talk, but you're so...distant. I feel like I'm holding a stranger in my arms and conversing with a stone wall. And I have no idea why! Is it me? Did I do something wrong? God, I've tried so hard to make this work, but...but how can I when I have no idea what you want because you won't tell me? I act the way I always have—you know, us, the fun, the playfulness, remember?—and now suddenly I can't shake the feeling that you want something more than that. You always want more, always have.
 (*vehemently*)
 You're so...needy, so demanding, how can I love you if I can't even breathe?! What more do you want?! I'm giving you all I have! I love you, the one who's always been there, the one I can talk to...used to talk to. And I've never asked for more than that.
 (*pleading, defeated*)
 This is me. I'm giving it to you. I thought that would be enough. Guess I was wrong.
 (*change in tone and attitude*)
 But I'm probably completely wrong about all of this. Overreacting, you know? But even if I'm right...I'll try, I'll do everything I can, but...what can I do? How could I possibly tell you everything I just said? You wouldn't even hear me. I doubt you'd want to.
 (*He takes his seat and lights return to normal. HER comes back from bathroom and he looks up at her, cheered.*)
 Okay then, what would you like to agree on?
HER: What?
HIM: You said you'd like to agree on something. What would you like to agree on?
HER: Oh, um...I don't know. I don't think an agreement is supposed to work quite like this...
 (*They both think for a moment.*)
HIM: Fine then, I've got it. I agree...that we should agree on something.
HER: (*laughing in spite of herself*)

That doesn't count.
HIM: Sure it does.
 (*They study their menus for a minute.*)
HER: No. No, it doesn't! Don't you understand what I'm trying to say?!
HIM: I think I want the salmon.
HER: Please listen to me!
HIM: Do you want the salmon too?
HER: Please! Look, what I'm trying to say is, something's...off.
HIM: (*after a beat*)
 I have no idea what you're talking about.
HER: But you have to! I can't be the only one who's noticed this! Something's just... off, somehow. I mean...I love you. Still. Very much. But I just...I don't know why anymore.
 (*He stares at her. Long silence.*)
HIM: (*quietly*)
 So?
HER: (*quietly also*)
 So...?
HIM: Do you need a reason why?
 (*She doesn't have an answer to this and looks away. He turns to the waitress, who has entered timidly.*)
 We need just a little more time, miss.
 (*The waitress nods and exits. His cell phone rings. He looks at it.*)
 Damn. I'll be right back.
 (*gestures to the menu*)
 Be thinking about what you want.
 (*HIM exits. HER steps into the spotlight.*)
HER: What I want....you know what I want?
 (*turns to where HIM just exited*)
 I want to take you for granted, treat you the way you've always treated me. I want to have the security of knowing you will be there whenever I need a good time, the way I've always been there for you. I want you to need me...I want you to love me...I want you to try to love me with a fraction, just a fraction, of the intensity that I have loved you with for so long. I want...I want to start all over...and this time I want to do it right, I promise I'll do it right and maybe things won't turn out the way they are now. I want to stop thinking "maybe" this, and "what if" that, and what if and what if and if I keep asking what if's everything will

fix itself and I'll get to ride off into that sunset at last. And most of all, I want to forget everything I just said because I know it makes no difference. It never makes a difference! It's all falling apart, and I can't stop it! I keep thinking that I'm holding you, but there's nothing there, keep thinking that I'm speaking to you, but there's only silence...can't you hear me? *That's what I want! I want you to hear me! But you know what? It's not going to happen. And you know why? Because we don't always get what we want. My mother used to tell me that, every time she took me into a toy store and I asked for something.... and she was right. We don't always get what we want, because- -here's another one of my mother's favorites- -life's not fair. It's not fair! I will never get to ride off into the sunset because life's not fair!!!!*

(She breaks down for a moment, takes a shaky breath, then begins to whimper.)

It's not fair....it's not fair....

(She turns angrily to HIM, who has returned and is illuminated in his spotlight at the other end of the stage.)

It's not fair.

(They continue in the same manner as at the play's opening.)

HIM: It begins as just a flicker...

HER: ...but flickers become fires...

HIM: ...and fires can keep you warm...

HER: ...and fires can burn you.

HIM: So the lesson here is, I guess, you should just be cautious...

HER: ...yes, you should be cautious when playing with fire, unless...

HIM: Unless?

HER: ...unless you know exactly what you're doing.

HIM: And yet...

HER: ...and yet...

HIM: If I love you...

HER: ...and I love you...

BOTH

...isn't that enough?

HIM: Where is the...

BOTH

...fine line...

HIM: ...between giving too little...

HER: ...and giving too much?

HIM: How do you know you're getting through...

HER: How do you know you're getting through...

HIM: ...to tell them that you love them?

HER: ...to tell them they're not loving you enough? To tell them that you love them...

HIM: ...to tell them they're not loving you the right way?

HER: What's the difference between wanting too much...

HIM: ...and expecting too little? Because after all...

HER: in the end...

BOTH

...aren't those two the same thing?

HIM: After all...

HER: in the end...

HIM: If I love you...

HER: ...and I love you....

BOTH

Isn't that enough?

HIM: Isn't that enough?

HER: *(after a pause)*

Is that enough?

HIM: It is enough.

HER: It isn't enough.

(She looks shocked at herself for a moment, then says with more conviction.)

It isn't enough. It isn't enough.

(She continues to repeat this softly to herself as the lights return to normal, and they return to their seats. HIM picks up the menu and looks at HER.)

HIM: So, do you want the salmon?

HER: *(very quietly, but resolved)*

No. I want a reason.

HIM: Why? You love me. You just said so a few minutes ago.

(She stares at him helplessly. His tone softens)

And I love you too, you know.

HER: *(after a long silence)*

I know. But that's not enough.

(She hesitates for a moment, then gathers her things and leaves the table. He grabs her hand as she passes. She turns, they stare at each

other for a second, then she calmly removes her hand from his and exits. He stands, temporarily stunned, then calmly sits back down and picks up the menu. The waitress enters and starts to pass the table.)

HIM: Miss!

(the waitress turns)

We're ready to order. We're both going to have the salmon.

WAITRESS: Excuse me sir, but... you and the lady?

HIM: That's right. We're having the salmon.

WAITRESS: *(gesturing towards the door)*

But....

HIM: *(shakes his head and smiles)*

She'll be back.

(The waitress gives him a puzzled look, then sighs and leaves to fill his order. He folds his hands behind his head and leans back in his chair. He says to himself, chuckling.)

She'll be back.

(The lights slowly fade to a blackout until all we see is the candle burning. It waivers for a minute, then goes out.)

CURTAIN

One-Act Play by Amber Prentiss

When Hell Freezes Over

SETTING: A very pink parlor in JANICE's house. There should be a sofa, a Barbie dollhouse, a Barbie collection, and a window.

AT RISE: JANICE ushers GLADYS into the parlor while trying to put on a pair of shoes with her hair half done. GLADYS carries a purse, holds a large, sturdy box, and seems bemused at the whole procedure.

JANICE: You're here--today.

GLADYS: I had some extra time this morning. I thought I would surprise you.

JANICE: *(tossing shoes into corner)*

I give up. Come on in.

(JANICE shows GLADYS further into the room.)

GLADYS: Oh. This is nice. Very themed.

JANICE: Like the pink?

GLADYS: It fits into this scheme.

JANICE: I mixed it myself. Did everything myself.

GLADYS: That's--amazing.

(looking out the window)

A Barbie topiary. That's so precious.

(They cross to the sofa. JANICE runs her fingers over the dollhouse.)

JANICE: I even bought a Barbie Playhouse, just like the old one we got that Christmas.

(GLADYS sits down on the sofa and places the box on her lap. JANICE sits next to her.)

JANICE: We used to play and play until Mom locked them away. That was so damn much fun!

GLADYS: Barbie at her wedding, Barbie on the moon, Barbie in Saks--

JANICE: If there ever was a rainy day, Mom knew where to find us.

GLADYS: In the den, making a mess with our dolls.

JANICE:

Looks like I'm still carrying on the tradition. I

still play with them, sometimes.

GLADYS: At your age?

JANICE: Why not? I paid for them. Eunice won't do anything with them. She's such a tomboy.

GLADYS: Barbie is quite the modern woman now. I'm sure she'd like at least one.

JANICE: She doesn't care. I gave her Wheel-chair Barbie last year, WNBA Barbie this year. She gave them away.

GLADYS: No.

JANICE: Oh, yes. So I play with some of mine. I hate watching them get lonely.

GLADYS: They hardly get lonely.

JANICE: Wouldn't you get lonely if you were stuck in a box every day? Everyone needs fresh air.

GLADYS: This may be news to you, Janice, but dolls don't care. Appraisers do. I rarely debox.

JANICE: You should try it sometime. Toys are made to be loved.

(There is an awkward pause.)

JANICE: You'd like it if you tried it.

(taking Malibu Barbie from her collection)

I won't take Malibu Barbie from you this time.

GLADYS: I'm still mad at you for the time you gave her a makeover. Her nose melted!

JANICE: I thought she could use a tan.

(JANICE crosses to dollhouse.)

JANICE: Oh, come on. You'll enjoy it.

(GLADYS crosses to dollhouse. JANICE divvies up the dolls: one Barbie and Ken for GLADYS, one set for herself.)

JANICE: *(placing her Barbie and Ken in the living room)*

You only have to try. "Ken? Ken?" "What? I'm reading the paper!" "We're supposed to go to the Kennedys' tonight." "Well, I don't have anything to wear." "Yes, you do. I put it on the bed." "I don't like that suit." "It's your only

suit." "It makes me look old." "You are old." **GLADYS:** He's not old. Ken's forever twenty-three.

JANICE: Everything gets old, Gladdy.

GLADYS: Well, we never used to play like that.

JANICE: Just try it. It's aggression therapy.

GLADYS: Aren't single mothers just supposed to beat their kids?

JANICE: *(less cheerfully)*

You are such an ass, Gladys. Just try it, okay?

GLADYS: I can't believe you still play with the dolls.

(halfheartedly making Barbie and Ken kiss)

That was toe-curling.

JANICE: You just don't have an imagination.

GLADYS: I don't need an imagination. I've got the real thing.

JANICE: The real thing? Do you live in a commercial? Marriage should come with a receipt and a lifetime guarantee. "If unsatisfied, return to the court for a full refund of the last twelve years of your life."

GLADYS: Bitter divorcée does not look good on you, Jan.

JANICE: I should have poisoned him and become a happy widow. Tonight on Lifetime: "Murder in the Suburbs." Wouldn't you like to have a famous sister?

GLADYS: You are damned morbid sometimes, Janice. Got anything else to talk about?

JANICE: You brought it up.

GLADYS: All I said was, "I've got the real thing."

JANICE: Always flaunting what you've--

GLADYS: What I've what?

JANICE: Never mind.

GLADYS: What?

JANICE: Never mind.

GLADYS: Well, what are we going to talk about? You're supposed to be the one with the interesting news.

JANICE: I'm the one with interesting news? Only I and half the women in the country are divorced. You're the only one with your grinning mug on the cover of American Collecting.

GLADYS: There is that.

JANICE: "Gladys West inherits the largest

and most complete Barbie collection in the Western Hemisphere, including the crown jewel of any Mattel collector, the second Barbie ever produced." But that's not noteworthy at all. Let's just talk about the weather.

GLADYS: I take it that you want to see it.

JANICE: Of course I do!

GLADYS: At least let me get off this floor. It's uncomfortable.

(GLADYS and JANICE cross back to the couch and sit. GLADYS opens the box and pulls out two pairs of gray linen gloves. She pulls on one pair and gives the other pair to JANICE, who tugs hers on and scratches at them.)

JANICE: These are a little itchy.

GLADYS: Just ignore it. The best collectors and appraisers all use these. I won't have any-one handle it any other way.

(GLADYS takes the Barbie box out of its container and hands it delicately to JANICE.)

JANICE: Wow. She's beautiful. Gorgeous. She looks like she could walk right into the sea, shoes and all, without a drop of water touching her.

(making the boxed doll "speak")

"I'm Barbie. Look upon me and be amazed."

GLADYS: I'm glad you like it.

JANICE: You don't?

GLADYS: It's okay.

JANICE: Okay?

GLADYS: She looks funny.

(demonstrating with her own hair)

Like she pulled her ponytail so tight that she pulled her eyes, too.

JANICE: Gladys--

GLADYS: And what godforsaken bottle did she get that hair color from? That's not blond. That's orange.

JANICE: That's so mean!

GLADYS: She can't hear me! There's no brain in there.

JANICE: If you don't want it, I'll buy it off you.

GLADYS: I couldn't. I really couldn't.

JANICE: Why?

GLADYS: It was mother-in-law's favorite. The second ever produced. She tracked it over three continents.

JANICE: But you don't like it.
GLADYS: I think she really wanted me to keep it in the family.
JANICE: But you don't have any kids.
GLADYS: I would really rather not disappoint her.
JANICE: She's dead.
GLADYS: You know what I mean.
JANICE: No, not really. You don't like it.
GLADYS: It's okay--
JANICE: Well, you're hardly excited about it. You inherit the biggest Barbie collection on the West Coast which includes one of the most beloved and sought-after dolls on this green planet, and all you can muster is "it's okay"?
GLADYS: There's no rule saying I have to like it.
JANICE: But she's a masterpiece. She's the ur-Barbie from which the entire pink universe descends! She should be appreciated. Barbie's about imagining the woman you were going to be, about play and good times. She's important. You didn't even have to buy her, Gladys. She's all yours, and you don't even love her.
GLADYS: She's not my girlfriend. It's not like it's the first one ever.
JANICE: It's close enough! You don't deserve her.
GLADYS: Janice, please! I'm not selling it. It's too valuable. Why are you being so insistent?
JANICE: She deserves a good home.
GLADYS: Oh, I'm not good enough for Barbie?
JANICE: No.
GLADYS: Quit acting like a child, Jan. I have it. I want it. I'm going to keep it. Can we talk about something else?
JANICE: You just want it because I want it.
GLADYS: Oh, you just want everything. You always have.
JANICE: And you always get everything.
GLADYS: You aren't too shabby yourself, Mrs.--Ms. Big-Time Lawyer.
JANICE: It would be just fascinating to sit on my ass all day and watch cooking shows.
GLADYS: Any woman, any person in this world, would love to sit all day and do nothing.

JANICE: Don't give me that "it's very fulfilling to be a millionaire's housewife" crap. (*GLADYS and JANICE glare at each other. JANICE begins to chuckle.*)
JANICE: It's been five minutes, and already we're fighting. Just like old times.
GLADYS: Old times.
JANICE: I'm sorry about all that. It's really nice to see you. It's just--I get a little passionate about the dolls.
GLADYS: I noticed.
JANICE: They give me something fun to do. I have my kid, but she's practically taking care of herself. Hal's gone. I have time on my hands. I don't know how my life got so damn slow.
GLADYS: The usual route, I guess.
JANICE: Twelve years ago, I was living in a commune milking cows. Cows!
GLADYS: With a master's degree, as I recall.
JANICE: I was finding myself.
GLADYS: Mom stepped in a cow pie when she tried to visit you and the baby.
JANICE: If we had just figured out how that whole sustainable agriculture thing worked, maybe everything would have been okay.
GLADYS: Until a flood came.
JANICE: You are such an optimist.
GLADYS: Some of us just were never made for the 4-H club. You and Hal were two of those people.
JANICE: (*smiling*)
 Well, he did manage to drown my pet rock.
GLADYS: You guys were misfit peas in a pod! What the hell happened between you two?
JANICE: Oh--that's old news.
GLADYS: Well, I haven't heard a thing about it.
JANICE: He left.
GLADYS: I already know that.
JANICE: Then you know enough. I'd rather not talk about it.
GLADYS: I bet I can make you talk about it.
JANICE: In true Gladys fashion.
GLADYS: I'll make you a deal. You tell me what really happened between you and Hal, and I'll take you to an ultra-swank restaurant.
JANICE: I know how to cook. I want the doll.

GLADYS: A shopping spree?
JANICE: I have more than enough clothes. I want the doll.
GLADYS: Vegas?
JANICE: Been there. The doll.
GLADYS: I can't give you the doll.
JANICE: Then I won't tell you.
GLADYS: Fine. Tell me the story, and maybe you can have the doll.
JANICE: Really?
GLADYS: Sure.
JANICE: Oh--okay. (*There is a long pause.*)
GLADYS: Well, does it have a beginning?
JANICE: Of course it has a beginning.
GLADYS: Can I hear it?
JANICE: Once upon a time, there was a married couple, and they were reasonably happy. But Old Man Time was their enemy. Their marriage got older. Everything got older.
GLADYS: Please, don't remind me of that.
JANICE: And the husband got sick and tired of everything. He just slumped around the house like a rag doll most of the time, looking and feeling like a particularly sorry basset hound. Well, that's how he spent the part of the time he wasn't complaining. "We've done this too long, Jan," he said. The wife didn't take him very seriously.
GLADYS: Don't tell me he had a mistress.
JANICE: The husband was also a miser. He was too cheap and lazy for a mistress. If he wanted to spend that kind of money, he would probably just go to ye olde town lawyer and sue for divorce. Which he did. The end.
GLADYS: That's it?
JANICE: What? Of course that's it.
GLADYS: That's not a good story.
JANICE: You wanted me to tell you a good story? Would you have liked for me to tuck you in, too?
GLADYS: There has to be more. Did he run off to join a band? Become a Hare Krishna? Get struck by lightning?
JANICE: Nothing much happened at all.
GLADYS: That is hardly a Barbie-worthy story. You used to tell better stories.
JANICE: But you said!

GLADYS: I said maybe.
JANICE: Mind-changing is not allowed in this house. You said you'd give it to me!
GLADYS: Well, I'm not giving it to you. And besides, you pushed me into it.
JANICE: I did not!
GLADYS: You wouldn't talk about it unless I promised you the doll! That's not fair.
JANICE: You little snot!
GLADYS: It was a horrible story!
JANICE: I'm not going to rearrange my life so I can tell good stories! If you wanted a good story, you could have asked about the time I lived in Venice Beach or the year I spent at the University of Paris--
GLADYS: Precisely why I thought you'd have a good story.
JANICE: I don't. This is my house, not a carnival, and I'm not a freak.
GLADYS: You make a pretty good clown.
JANICE: Always with the comments, Gladys. Why I have ever cared about you, I have no idea.
GLADYS: It's part of my charm.
JANICE: You and the Wicked Witch of the West have a charm for everything.
GLADYS: (*smiling*)
 Oh, come on. You know I was just playing.
JANICE: You're always "just playing" with that idiot smile. You're not five.
GLADYS: You're not exactly being mature with this "I want, I want" act you're putting on.
JANICE: I've never asked you for anything. Not even to send a birthday present for Eunice, which would be nice every once in a while.
GLADYS: I'm forgetful. You know that.
JANICE: You never had anything to forget because you never bothered to find out! And the only reason you came here was to gloat about how good you have it tramping off to Miami or the Hills or wherever it is that you go.
GLADYS: I just wanted to see how my favorite sister was doing.
JANICE: Only sister. Hardly an Olympic competition in that category.
GLADYS: And I only travel so much because Steven's never home. You have no idea how that feels.

JANICE: You have the dumbest problems.

GLADYS: They may not be important to you, but they are to me. I only have so much in my life.

JANICE: You only have so much of everything in your life. "I only travel so much because my husband's so busy bringing home the bacon, and I hate being alone." I used to wish for just a pinch of time alone.

GLADYS: Looks like you got what you asked for and more.

JANICE: What your man sees in you, I could never tell. You are a petty, childish, insolent, improper, presumptuous--

GLADYS: Don't say it.

JANICE: Bitch.

GLADYS: At least I don't sit around whining about how my husband left me and how my life is so boring and how the only thing I can think to do is to collect plastic dolls. Neo-hippie cum career woman cum whimpering pup.

JANICE: You take that back!

GLADYS: I won't.

JANICE: Take it back!

GLADYS: No.

JANICE: *(wagging her finger)*

I insist that you recant that last statement--

GLADYS: Little tax lawyer Janice.

JANICE: I'm not a tax lawyer. I work for a large consulting firm as a corporate lawyer, and I deal with many sorts of issues like negotiating contracts that you could not possibly understand and--

GLADYS: Tax laws?

JANICE: A little bit of that, but--

GLADYS: Corporate lawyer, whatever. I remember you tried to convince our parents to let you immigrate to China to write your book--what was that title? Oh. Practical Communism.

JANICE: I don't really remember that.

GLADYS: Maybe you don't remember, but I do. You wanted to fly a jumbo jet to China and bask in the glory the revolution had wrought. *(imitating a doe-eyed JANICE)*

"I want to live among the common people, eat their food, drink from their wells, farm with them--"

(as herself)

That would have been a laugh riot. If only you knew would become a class-A sellout--

JANICE: I am not a sellout!

GLADYS: When you went back to college, you said you were going into criminal law to save the underprivileged as a public defender. The money you would have made from that wouldn't cover a business dinner.

JANICE: I was pregnant and was living on a failed farm. I needed to provide for my family--

GLADYS: Which your husband was incredibly incapable of doing--

JANICE: *(ignoring GLADYS)*

It costs a lot to take care of a child! Food, college, school supplies, camp--

GLADYS: So you flushed all your ideals down the toilet.

JANICE: At least I had some ideals! All you ever wanted was an MRS degree and a thick prenuptial agreement--I don't know why I said you could come over. I should have just said I wouldn't be home.

GLADYS: Don't go changing the subject.

Whatever you don't want to remember, you try to avoid. You've become so afraid--

JANICE: Oh, I am not scared of you or anything else! And if I ever see you crossing the street late at night, I'll--

(There are three very loud knocks. JANICE and GLADYS stare at each other. They sit down and attempt to cool off while EUNICE enters tentatively with dirty pants, a stained shirt, and mussed hair.)

EUNICE: *(while entering)*

Mom, somebody's car is blocking the driveway.

(noticing GLADYS)

Oh, hi, Aunt Gl--Aunt G.

(GLADYS takes one look at the rough-and-tumble EUNICE and puts the doll back in the wooden box.)

GLADYS: It's Gladys, dear.

EUNICE: Aunt Gladys. I would've gotten it in a minute.

(EUNICE and GLADYS pause.)

GLADYS: It's nice to see you.

EUNICE: I thought you were coming Tuesday.

GLADYS: It was a surprise visit. You like surprises?

EUNICE: Not a whole lot. Did you park in front of the driveway? I was going to play basketball, but I didn't want to hit the car.

(JANICE nudges EUNICE.)

JANICE: *(whispering)*

Eunice, go hug your aunt.

(EUNICE and GLADYS tentatively hug.)

JANICE: *(whispering)*

Now tell her that it's nice to see her.

EUNICE: It's nice to see you.

GLADYS: *(beat)*

Well, your mother tells me that you're quite the tomboy.

EUNICE: I'm not a tomboy.

GLADYS: Hm?

EUNICE: I'm not. I don't know why she calls me a tomboy. Dad says I'm not a tomboy.

That's kartergorically incorrect 'cause I'm no sort of boy at all. I am a sports enthusiast.

GLADYS: I'm sorry for being, ah--kartergorically incorrect.

EUNICE: It's okay. Everyone does it. Mom, can I have a cookie?

JANICE: Yes, but just one, and bring some for your aunt and me.

EUNICE: One for me and some for you? I'm a growing girl!

JANICE: Just get them, okay?

(EUNICE exits.)

GLADYS: She's an interesting kid.

JANICE: What are you implying now?

GLADYS: Nothing! She's just an interesting kid, reminds me of you.

JANICE: You don't like my kid?

GLADYS: I didn't say I didn't like your kid.

JANICE: But you don't like me, and you claim that my child reminds you of me. Ergo, you don't like my child.

GLADYS: I did not say that I disliked your child!

JANICE: Well, you didn't say that you did like her! And you certainly didn't act like it. That was the worst aunt hug I've seen in my life.

GLADYS: Well, she was just so awkward, I didn't know--

JANICE: My child is not awkward! Perhaps if someone knew that parking in front of others' driveways is rude--

(EUNICE enters, finishing one cookie in her mouth and holding a plate. She sets the plate down on the coffee table and squeezes in between JANICE and GLADYS. Only munching can be heard.)

JANICE: *(offering the plate to GLADYS)* Cookie?

GLADYS: I don't know--

EUNICE: Soothes the mouth and the ear!

GLADYS: What?

EUNICE: Soothes the mouth and the ear!

Dad told me that one a lot. Soothes the mouth because it tastes good and soothes the ear because polite people shut up when they eat.

JANICE: Eunice!

EUNICE: What? It's what he says.

JANICE: Not so much what he says, but what he implies.

EUNICE: He doesn't imply anything.

JANICE: Oh, just have a cookie. Both of you.

GLADYS: I'd really rather not.

(EUNICE helps herself to another cookie and takes a bite.)

EUNICE: *(chewing)*

Thanks, Mom.

JANICE: What did I tell you about talking with your mouth full?

EUNICE: It isn't polite.

GLADYS: Didn't you just say that your father told you that talking while eating wasn't polite?

JANICE: Stay out of this.

(to EUNICE)

Now just eat quietly!

(to GLADYS, smiling tightly)

Maybe you could move the car so Eunice can go play.

EUNICE: Yay--

(EUNICE covers her own mouth.)

GLADYS: *(picking her purse up)*

That's a good idea. I'll be right back.

(GLADYS exits.)

EUNICE: I don't like her.

JANICE: Don't say that about my sister.

EUNICE: But it's the truth!

JANICE: Some things you just lie about. She's my sister. Only I am allowed to really dislike her. You should back off.

EUNICE: That makes no sense.

JANICE: You're an only child.

EUNICE: So?

JANICE: So you wouldn't understand.

(JANICE has an idea.)

JANICE: And she's not a bad person.

(pointing to the wooden box containing the Barbie)

See that box? She brought that for you. Open it.

(EUNICE opens the box and pulls out the Barbie box.)

JANICE: Isn't she beautiful?

EUNICE: She looks like she's mad 'cause she got a wedgie in her bathing suit.

JANICE: Why don't you take that to your hiding place? It's a collectible.

EUNICE: Always with the collectibles! I don't want it.

JANICE: You have baseball cards. They're collectibles.

EUNICE: They don't want to be next to Barbie. They like their hiding place just fine by themselves.

JANICE: But your Aunt Gladys wants you to have it.

EUNICE: You sure? She didn't look like she even wanted me around when I came in.

JANICE: She's your aunt, and she loves you. She wanted me to surprise you with it. Surprise.

EUNICE: Can I give it to you? You like collectibles.

JANICE: But it's your gift, and she wants you to have it, so just take it to the hiding place.

You can give it to me later. If she knows, she might get her feelings hurt. After you do this, you can play basketball.

EUNICE: O-kay.

(EUNICE exits. JANICE taps her fingernails.)

EUNICE: *(offstage)*

Hi, Aunt Gladys! Bye, Aunt Gladys!

GLADYS: *(offstage)*

Hi, Niece Eunice. Bye, Niece Eunice.

(GLADYS enters the room.)

GLADYS: Well, that's a feisty one you have there. Now am I allowed to say that? That she's feisty? Or would I be implying something again?

JANICE: That's enough, Gladys.

GLADYS: Must be some of Dad in you. It can't just be what people say, no. Too simple. It's what they say behind what they say. Between the lines. Or that's the bullshit he charged his patients by the hour for.

JANICE: Don't talk like that about Dad's work. Psychotherapy helps a lot of people.

GLADYS: I see it's helped you.

JANICE: Huh?

GLADYS: Well, at least pharmacology.

JANICE: You snooped in my medicine cabinet!

GLADYS: *(shrugging)*

I was looking for a hairbrush.

JANICE: You're a cheap little liar.

GLADYS: *(offering the cookie plate to JANICE)*

Cookie?

JANICE: You are not funny.

(GLADYS shrugs again.)

GLADYS: Xanax? Isn't that for panicky people?

JANICE: It's for people with generalized anxiety disorder.

GLADYS: Guess I was being kartergorically incorrect again. Let me know if I make you anxious.

JANICE: I don't think you will.

GLADYS: Well, I guess that's what the medication's for.

JANICE: I guess they don't make medication for the Pathologicus Assholicus bacteria, or I would have slipped some into that cookie.

(There is a short silence.)

JANICE: I need some fresh air.

GLADYS: Oh, you can go for a walk. I'll hold down the fort here in this glamorous den.

JANICE: You said you thought this place was nice!

GLADYS: I said: "This is nice." Not: "This is gorgeous. I'll get my designer to come down here so he can copy the look."

JANICE: It's a Barbie room. It's supposed to

be pink.

GLADYS: The theme isn't obvious at all.

JANICE: Barbie's allure hinges on pink.

GLADYS: Your walls don't have to.

JANICE: You know what? You can get out.

GLADYS: But we were having such a good time--

JANICE: No, it's okay. You really can go. Let me help you.

(JANICE goes to pick up the wooden box the Barbie used to be in and hands it to GLADYS.)

GLADYS

Last call to see it!

JANICE: I don't want to.

GLADYS: The Pink Wonder, the ur-Barbie from which your life humbly descends--

JANICE: Just go. I'm sure you have a plane to charter.

GLADYS: No goodbyes before she goes to her cruel, climate-controlled home? How about a peek?

JANICE: I'm over it. I can't change the weather, and I can't change your mind.

(GLADYS opens the box toward JANICE.)

GLADYS: Not a little peeky-weeky--

(She slowly turns the box toward herself, looks in it, turns it back toward JANICE accusingly, and glares at her sister. JANICE does not respond.)

GLADYS: What did you do with it?

JANICE: I don't know.

GLADYS: What did you do?

JANICE: It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest she goes to than she has ever known.

GLADYS: I don't have time for your riddles, Jan.

JANICE: I don't have time for your bullshit, Gladys.

GLADYS: Just give it back, and I'll be on my way.

JANICE: Give what back?

GLADYS: It's been a very funny joke, but I know you, and my good sister Janice would never steal.

JANICE: I haven't taken anything--

GLADYS: I don't trust you, and I don't trust that imp of yours.

(GLADYS crosses to the window.)

GLADYS: *(out the window)*

Little girl? Yes, you. I see you. Come in here. Now!

(EUNICE stomps in, the picture of insolence.)

EUNICE: What?

GLADYS: Did you take my doll?

EUNICE: Take it? Yeah.

GLADYS: You stole my doll?

EUNICE: You gave it to me!

GLADYS: I most certainly did not.

EUNICE: I didn't want that raggedy old doll anyway, but Mom said you wanted me to have it.

GLADYS: I said no such thing, Janice, and you know it.

JANICE: You said she would be a nice gift. You just changed your mind because of our argument.

EUNICE: That was a bad argument, too.

GLADYS: You couldn't hear.

EUNICE: Yes, I could, Miss Indian Giver.

JANICE: Don't say that, Eunice, it's not nice to Native Americans. Gladys is more than sufficient.

EUNICE: She thinks we stole her doll!

GLADYS: You did steal my doll!

EUNICE: You gave it to me!

JANICE: Sure did.

GLADYS: Don't lie to her.

JANICE: I'm not the liar here. I didn't take anything.

(GLADYS begins to storm around the room. JANICE and EUNICE run behind her to undo any damage. GLADYS starts by pulling the cushions out of the sofa.)

JANICE: *(putting the cushions back into the sofa)*

Be nice to my room. Just because you think I stole something from you doesn't give you the right to--

(GLADYS unceremoniously examines Barbies from JANICE's collection and tosses them away when she is assured they aren't her own.)

JANICE: You put her down!

GLADYS: You give me my doll back!

JANICE: I told you. You promised her to me, and now you want her back, but it's too late for

you, Gladys.

GLADYS: You're just hiding it in here to play with me. I see you two behind me, trying to make sure I don't find it.

(GLADYS overturns the table, magazines, cookies, and all. EUNICE gets on the floor, picks up the cookies, stuffs a couple in her pocket, and then stacks the magazines together.)

JANICE: This is completely uncalled for!

GLADYS: You stole it! I never would have thought it of you. Aren't you better than that, Jan? Aren't you smarter than that?

(JANICE says nothing. In response, GLADYS picks up Malibu Barbie and holds her by the hair and feet.)

GLADYS: Tell me where it is or Malibu Barbie gets it!

(JANICE is stricken.)

EUNICE: Who cares? The heads pop right back on!

GLADYS: You don't even like Barbies, little girl. So just give it back, and I'll be on my way.

EUNICE: Nuh-uh, bitch.

JANICE: Eunice! Where did you learn that?

EUNICE: She is one.

JANICE: Don't speak to an adult that way.

EUNICE: You called her that.

JANICE: How do you know that?

EUNICE: You guys are loud.

GLADYS: *(out the window)*

Police! Police! Robbery! Robbery!

EUNICE: Be quiet, you'll disturb the neighbors. They're kind of old.

GLADYS: Oh, I want everyone to know. Police!

JANICE: *(out the window)*

You know you gave that doll to my daughter, and just because we argued, you want to take it back? You're bringing the police into this now? You are just so selfish!

(GLADYS retreats from the window.)

GLADYS: They'll never get here with me screaming like this. I've got to phone them. Do you have a--

(She realizes what she was about to say, digs in her purse, finds a cell phone, and dials 911.)

GLADYS: *(as the phone rings)*

Some hospitality setup you've got here. Hi, how've you been, haven't seen you in five years, let me relieve you of your prized personal possessions-- Hello? Yes, I would like to report a robbery. Gladys West. 42 Riverdale Lane. No, it's not my residence. I live in Las Vegas. Barbie. No, not a person, a doll. Well, it was a very expensive one! Yes, I know who took it! My sister, Janice Neu. N-e-u, pronounced noy. Don't hang up on me--

(GLADYS, infuriated, hangs up.)

GLADYS: They hung up on me!

JANICE: You just don't have a very trustworthy phone voice.

GLADYS: You just aren't trustworthy! Give it back!

JANICE: No.

GLADYS: Fine, get arrested, go to court. I don't care. Maybe you could even defend yourself. That'd be a laugh. I'd get great pleasure for knowing that you have to check "Yes" to "Have you ever committed a felony?" on your job applications. After you get out of jail.

EUNICE: Grandma won't like it if you put Mom in jail.

GLADYS: Grandma will get over it.

JANICE: I'm not going to jail.

GLADYS: We'll see about that.

(fishing into her purse for her keys)

They don't want to talk to me? Fine. I'll go to them. When the cops come, Janice, when they come--well, you know what you're in for.

JANICE: Bring them by. I'll make some lemonade.

GLADYS: Don't go thinking you're going to get away with this so easily, sister mine. You never were very good at deceiving anyone. You're the novice. I'm the master, and don't you forget it!

JANICE: Any more words of wisdom?

GLADYS: And I've had it up to here with your smart mouth--

JANICE: Take your problems to the police.

I'm sure that between your feminine wiles and winsome smile, you could have a SWAT squad down here in fifteen minutes.

GLADYS: *(glaring at JANICE)*

Just tell me where it is, and I won't go down there.

EUNICE: It's in the trash compactor.

JANICE and GLADYS: What?

EUNICE: I told you I didn't want it!

GLADYS: It was--that was worth--hundreds of thousands--all gone--

JANICE: What did you go and do a thing like that for?

EUNICE: It looked like a cheap little doll! I didn't want it.

(JANICE and GLADYS slump onto the couch. GLADYS stares blankly at EUNICE.)

JANICE: Did you turn it on?

EUNICE: After I put it in, it was full, so--

JANICE: Oh my God.

GLADYS: You stupid little girl!

EUNICE: You leave me alone!

GLADYS: *(laughing)*

You would take a treasured collectible worth God knows how much and put it in the god-damn trash compactor? That's a smart thing to do?

JANICE: It's time for you to get out of here, Gladys.

GLADYS: Congratulations, Janice, this one's going to MENSA!

JANICE: I said, get out.

GLADYS: Brilliant! Just brilliant, just like her mother--

JANICE: Gladys. It's gone. Just go. Do whatever you want, get the police, call your husband, call Interpol, but don't come back here!

(JANICE picks up GLADYS' purse and the box and places them in her sister's lap. JANICE leads her sister from the couch.)

GLADYS: The fucking trash compactor! You know you're never going to live this one down. I'm going to call every magazine from here to New York--

JANICE: It's quite the believable story you've got.

GLADYS: Maybe I'm just never going to call you again. And you can forget about this twerp's graduation--

JANICE: *(getting closer to offstage)* Okay.

GLADYS: Nothing for Christmas or Easter, and don't bother pestering me into going to Mom's for Thanksgiving--

JANICE: The fewer, the merrier--

GLADYS: I'll get you back for this.

JANICE: That's nice. Got your keys?

GLADYS: Well, yes, but--

JANICE: Then why stick around?

GLADYS: I can't believe you did this to me.

JANICE: Me, either, but I feel better. Good-bye, Gladys.

(JANICE gives GLADYS a good shove offstage, then returns to the couch where EUNICE sits patiently.)

JANICE: You really put it in the trash compactor, didn't you?

EUNICE: Maybe.

JANICE: Maybe?

EUNICE: Well, I might not've.

JANICE: Might not've?

EUNICE: I could have.

JANICE: Well, let's just say you might not have. If you didn't, where might it be right now?

EUNICE: Somewhere.

JANICE: Don't get smart with me.

EUNICE: You're the one who stole it!

JANICE: I did not--it was rightfully mine!

EUNICE: Uh-huh.

JANICE: Eunice, this is your mother. Tell me where you put it.

(EUNICE does not reply.)

JANICE: Oh, don't play with me right now.

Out with it, or I'll have to tickle you.

(JANICE lunges to her daughter and begins to tickle her.)

EUNICE: Okay! Stop! I give!

(JANICE stops.)

EUNICE: Maybe I'll give it to you.

JANICE: Maybe?

EUNICE: *(grinning)*

But I gotta know something. How much is it worth to you?

(JANICE rolls her eyes and sighs exaggeratedly. Blackout.)

WRITERS' FESTIVAL GUESTS

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garret
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne Rivers Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylas Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Curtis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman, Sharon Olds, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders
2003 Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum
2004 Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball



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