
COO
WEE
SCO
WEE
2019

Managing Editor — Sally Emmons
Fiction Editor — Emily Dial-Driver
Poetry Editor — Mary Mackie
Student Editor — Jake Brillhart
ISSN 1541-0846

We would like to give special thanks to everyone at the RSU Print Shop and Kara White, without whom this commando publication would not exist.

Disclaimer: We are not responsible for the potty language herein, nor the seedy characters who seem to be like someone you know, nor the offensive art that is certain to shock your sensibilities.
If you are considering legal action, what do you say we avoid the lawyers and just settle the whole thing with a game of high stakes poker?

COO WEE SCOO WEE 2019

Contents

PROSE

ACCIDENT

Rod Martinez

When I finally opened my eyes, the blue hue across the Tampa Bay horizon was gone. There were dull purple and orange flashes of light and a soothing fog that covered the distance.

How did I notice that so quickly?

Accidents on this bridge were common; it was only a matter of time until I'd end up a statistic.

I felt the quick surge of pain that shot up my right leg, but I was more worried about the lady in the Escalade that hit me. Just before impact, I noticed in my rearview mirror that she'd turned to her baby in the back seat. She was either talking to it or scolding, I couldn't tell. But that brief visual brought a quick flashback to me of my last accident just two weeks ago. It was only a fender bender, but my son sat in the back seat. I thought I had lost him that day, so I knew the fear that had to be consuming her right now.

The pain registered in my right leg first, a shooting sensation that moved quickly to my lower back, then crisscrossed all over my body. Any chance of getting out of my Prius without assistance was moot.

"Sir, are you OK?"

I turned; the teenager was standing at my window with his iPhone at the ready. I didn't know where my phone went after the impact; it could have flown out of the window for all I knew.

"The lady that hit me, check on her baby." I groaned.

"But, sir…"

"Go!" I pointed.

He dashed off after a quick nod of the head, and I saw him approach her window through my mirror. Closing my eyes, I fought off the discomfort. I heard sirens approaching far in the distance.

I rested my head back; I wasn't going to budge until someone came for me. Then I heard the rapping on my window.

"Uh, sir?"

In agony I shifted to my left to see if it was a police officer or paramedics,

but it was the teenager from just moments ago, still holding his phone out; the warm Florida wind blew his long curly hair away from his eyes. That's when I noticed his piercing baby blues staring right at me.

"She has no baby in the car. It's just her. She's not hurt though, but she's crying, like really bad. Anyway the ambulance is on its way; do you need to call someone?" he handed me his phone.

"Are you sure?" I asked, "…I saw her reach in the back like she was talking to a baby."

"No sir, I was just at her car, she's the only one in there. Maybe she was moving her purse around? My mom does it all the time."

I stared at the ceiling of my car and exhaled a long one. It ached to do that.

"Was there a car seat in the back?" I asked. I handed him back his phone.

"Well come to think of it; yes there was."

I looked in my rear view mirror again; she was exiting her huge tank of a vehicle. Why people drive those monstrosities has always bewildered me. She left the driver's door open, then stepped to the passenger door behind hers and opened it cautiously, pushing back her long dark hair in a nervous wave of her left hand. I could see she was crying.

Weird.

The thin lady reached in for something but her driver's door was blocking view of anything I could possibly witness. From afar she resembled an older Angelina Jolie.

The closer the siren came, the faster she was moving around back there.

"Son, go see what she's doing. She has to have had another passenger in that car."

"Yes, sir." He sprinted off again.

I twisted in my car, glanced behind me. My son's car seat was still intact, though it was pushed into the back of my passenger seat. I had just dropped him off at swim class. Thinking back, I guess I should have stayed, but I had to rush back over the bridge to grab my work laptop since we were heading into a three-day weekend. I could finish off stuff at home tonight, and then my two-year-old son and I could spend the weekend at the beach or something. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with him since his mom finally relented and agreed to let me have him for the whole weekend. My ex-wife. The only good thing that came out of that three year marriage was my son born to us almost exactly on our first wedding anniversary. After

that fender bender two weeks ago, I thought she'd never let me have him again.

"Oh!"

Another sharp spasm, that one was uncalled for. They say you don't feel pain after a car accident till a few days later. They lied. I opened my eyes again after that excruciating lightning bolt of nerve endings colliding. The purple glare was there again.

Am I losing my vision?

No, I saw the ambulance driver rushing up to my side of the car, and in the rear view mirror, the teen and the lady were approaching. She was probably going to contest the fact that it was her fault, drag me through legal battles with slimy lawyers and arrogant judges. It happens all the time.

I don't need this.

"Sir, are you feeling any pain?" was the paramedic's first question.

"You might say that, son."

"OK, we're going to open the door and get you out and on a stretcher, OK?"

"Sure." I faked a smile.

He ran back and whistled at his co-worker while I noticed the teen and the lady come up on either side; he was at my driver's side window. The woman was crying uncontrollably on the other side. The look on the teen's face was nowhere near how I remembered it just seconds ago.

"I'm sorry Mr. Ambrose; I'm so, so sorry." She sobbed.

I raised an inquisitive eyebrow while fighting spasms up my back.

"Ma'am, how do you know my name? And I'm sure a body shop will have my Prius looking brand new again." I offered a half smile, she didn't return it.

The teen stared at her, then at me, then back at her massive vehicle. I was amazed that she didn't even have a scratch at all and my whole back end was sitting in my rear seat. My hybrid was toast for sure, but I was trying to be optimistic with her.

"Uh, sir…" the teen started.

"Mr. Ambrose, I'm from Baby Strokes…" she said.

"The swim school for toddlers?"

"Yes…"

"I just dropped my son off there, I was…"

"I know sir," she interrupted between sobs, "your son had a fit after you

left and to keep him from disrupting the rest of the class, I chose to bring him back to you. Since you left in such a rush, I quickly hustled him into my car and…."

She froze. The teen froze. I froze. The lump in my throat almost forbade me from speaking again. The tears in her eyes and now on the face of the teen that I didn't even know were screaming words at me that I didn't want to hear.

Then another sharp pain kicked, this one longer than the rest. It was like someone had gotten an icepick and a hammer and decided to stipple the alphabet on my skull – the sensation shot through my whole body. Even my fingernails were stinging. Her frozen statement caused me to suppress the bloody scream that was building up from my gut. Instead of a yelp of pain, what came out was "Where… where is my son? *Where is David?*"

She said nothing. My eyes concentrated through tears at the teen, and he glared back at the SUV. I shot a frantic glance in my rear view mirror to find the paramedics struggling with her back seat and working cautiously to remove something that seemed stuck underneath it. My vision blurred from the welling of tears that ensued.

"No! Nooooo!"

My body went limp; the pain didn't even matter anymore. I was struggling with the door latch trying to get out.

"Sir you have to stay in the car," the teen said.

The moment my fist hit his face was the last jolt of surging pain I remembered—it was the paralyzing kind. The type that even minutes after it came and went, you still felt spasms in parts of your body that had nothing to do with your legs.

I called out my son's name one more time…and all vision went black.

The Black Box

Kara White

Eric

A chorus of metallic banging rumbles behind him.

"It's for her own good," the Sergeant had told him. He swallows hard, trying to ignore the clanging of her fists on the walls of the box. Chills swept through him, even though he knows it is impossible for her to break free.

But if she did… If she found a way…

"It's impossible," Sergeant had said, "Besides, if she somehow miraculously freed herself, you have this," the Sergeant shoved his assault rifle on his chest, "to stop her."

"Serge," he began, "Why do I have to guard her--Sir?" Nervous apprehension sparked in his voice so strongly that there was no way to hide it.

"Listen here, rookie. You've got the easiest job on the block. You get to stand around and wait for something that isn't going to happen. It doesn't matter who is in that box because they're not going to get out. Understood?" Humor gleamed in his eyes and in his half drawn smirk, but his voice was powerfully commanding.

"Sir, yes sir."

"I'll let you off the hook because of the outstanding… circumstances, but don't question my authority again. You're not the red-headed step child anymore."

"Sir, yes sir."

With that memory, embarrassment warms his cheeks. This was his first major assignment. He couldn't let the Serge down. He had to prove himself. He had to redeem himself. After the last fiasco, he wasn't sure he would ever get a true assignment. Here he is, and he isn't thankful for the opportunity one bit.

He turns to glance at the box. It stands nearly as tall as he is, encased in black steel. He could not see the danger inside because there were no windows. There were no openings other than the small vent on the top. Six inches of thick steel separated her from the outside world.

It isn't thick enough if you ask him.

Eerie silence fills the room, holding every second at a standstill.

"Are you the new guy?" A small voice seeps through the vents. He turns, his heart pounding in his ears and behind his eyes, to look at the box. His breath caught short.

"If she says anything, do not engage. Do not say your name. Do not tell her a cheery good morning. Do not make a peep."

"Does she talk often?"

"Nah, she mostly screams."

"Heeelllloooo, Mr. Soldier Man!" Her sing-song voice curls barbed fingers down his ears. Forcefully, he makes no reaction to her strangely childlike voice. If she knew he had any reaction, he would be done for. He would have no more chance to redeem himself.

"So, what have they told you about me?" He doesn't respond. No one can respond to something that can turn the country upside down.

"I hope they haven't been saying anything bad. I hate when people form impressions before they even meet me."

He let the silence tell her all she needed to know. That he wasn't going to cooperate. That he isn't stupid. That he doesn't care what she had to say. The only thing the silence didn't make her do was shut up.

"Have you ever seen a rainbow? All the pretty colors… Why do they separate them?"

After an hour, his jaw ached from grinding his teeth. If only he had some earplugs to deafen her random banter. From what she said to him, he was amazed that she was locked up in the first place. She sounded like a child, speaking about rainbows and unicorns and everything light and happy about this world. She's not a threat to the country, but she was a threat to his health and patience.

Quiet muttering. Did he hear something about love? "What did you say?"

"I have dreams about someone talking to me."

"Really?"

"It only seems that my dreams come true in the dark."

Do not engage! The Serge's voice rang in his head. What is he doing? His job is to guard her box, and make sure no one comes in or out. That does not involve conversation. No negotiations with security threats.

"Will you talk to me?"

She is just a lonely little girl, could she really be capable of that kind of destruction? There are rumors that she killed three men while in the lower-security end of the facility. Everyone assumes that is why Serge moved her here, but are the rumors true?

"Yeah."

"What do you think about when you're bored?" She laughs nervously as his words falter.

"Oh, well. I usually think of things I need to do… what I need to do in order to get those things done… I plan, so to speak. Other than that, I try to refrain from thinking at all."

"Why?" Her curiosity chirped.

His thoughts stumble for an explanation. Because my superiors tell me not to, he thinks bitterly. "Thinking distracts me from what I should be doing and where I should be going. And I…"

"What?"

"Nothing,"

"If you were nothing, you wouldn't be breathing. What do you think about?"

"I told you, most of the time I keep my mind blank and tidy."

"Why?"

"Because I… I tend to have inappropriate ideas. Crazy ideas. The ones that I could never do." Too much information. If someone outside this room overhears…

"I have those, too."

"I should not be discussing this."

"What? No one else is here; you can trust me not to say anything."

"Well, I think that I do not belong." The words whip out from his lungs. He had never realized he felt that way before.

The walls of the black box shudder, and she erupts in laughter. Embarrassment warms his cheeks again. Serge will find out and have his head. Someone must hear their conversation and be running to his office right now.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't appropriate. I don't think we should talk anymore."

"The truth never is." She pauses, "What's your name, Mr. Soldier Man?" Her voice is sweet and sad, like a soft lullaby.

"Eric."

There is a moment of silence, and a slipping noise from inside the box. "I don't know my name. They've had me locked away for so long I must have forgotten it."

"They call you 14067."

She is quiet a moment, probably taking in the fact that she is no more than a number to the facility. Eric has never heard anyone speak a name for her before.

"Will you let me out, Eric?"

"Uh, no, I can't do that."

"Maybe I could have a name on the outside."

"You've done bad things. That's why you're in there. People are afraid for their security."

She laughs lightly, "Do you really think I'm threatening? Do you think I'm capable of doing whatever it is they tell you?"

He imagined her as a small child, with her arms wrapped around a teddy bear. She couldn't overpower three military men.

"Then why are you in there?"

"Because of the way I think, like you do. They are afraid of that. Are you afraid of me?"

"No, I'm not."

"Is it wrong for us to think this way?"

Everything that he has been through tells him yes. As a teenager, difference made him an outcast, so he learned to be like everyone else. In training, he was a part of a collective effort. One mistake could cost men their lives, so he learned to fight, eat, and piss like everyone else. But training did not come easy for him like it did the others. He never liked what they wanted him to learn.

"I don't think so," He says.

He turns around, facing the black box for the first time since beginning his shift. The smooth surface did not have any indication of a door. He reaches for the box, tracing his hands across the wall.

"I'm sorry," he says, "There's no way to open it. I wish I could."

The side of the box shudders. Cracks ripple across the surface, revealing a jagged door as it slid open.

Something slammed into his back. Echoes of slapping feet fill the room as men rush through the entrance. Shouts and guns directed toward Eric startles him, and he cowers on the ground as dozens of hands jerk his arms

behind him.

The men hushed as the sound of large, unforgiving boots entered the room. The Sergeant stood before him, a look of disgust sneering on his face.

"Take him away."

14067

The floor was cold. The walls were cold. The deep chill seeped into her skin and settled there. Light sifted through the slits in the ceiling, the only bars in the small space. The light never changed out there. It always funneled through the roof of her cage, but it didn't help much. How long has she been here?

She sat against one of the identical walls of the space. The metal behind her back was smooth. She rested her head at an angle against the wall. Her body ached. She was never able to fully stretch out, always finding new and complicated ways to contort her body into an empty comfort.

Time passed, racing its fingers through her hair, pulling her breath from her throat.

A door frame shutters in the outside room.

"Remember the rules, Private." It was the bark of the dog. The Sergeant. She flinched into the corner of her cage, covering her ears. She hated that voice. She hated the voices and the lies and the tongue ties.

"Yessir." The mutter of a nervous man.

There wasn't anything new about this. She remembered every man that the dog sent inside. She remembered the torment, and the bitter taste of their silence. It was her fault that she was here now.

No. It was theirs. Theirs, theirs, theirs. Don't think what they want you to think. They're the reason she's in here, locked away like a little white little bite mouse who is supposed to push a lever. Where's the lever? There is no lever inside the box. There's only a lever outside, but she wasn't going to press it. Don't do what they want.

Feet shuffle outside of her room. Then they stop. The door slams again.

Bored, she drummed her fingers on the floor as she hummed an old tune in her head. The worst thing about being in here is the devastating boredom. And the fear. And the hope. Some of the men had been nice enough before, but they were all taken away now. Dragged by their bootstraps and strapped sleeves down the hallway.

But that's just talk swept under the rug now. No one knows what hap-

pened for sure anymore. Except her. She was there, she saw everything. She made it happen. That was a bad thing, and she had been locked in here after the second one. This was a bad place, no space, cold face.

"Hey," she whispers, "Are you the new guy?" She laughed, but then she fell quiet. At least in the silence she could live in her thoughts. They were much happier than the smooth stone and the black bars of the vent. She could do anything and say anything she wanted in her thoughts.

"Have you ever seen a rainbow?" She asked the silence, "Did you know that the colors, the red, yellow, blue, are all split by the tiniest white lines?"

"You're like the white line, di'ya know that? You all are." A red light blinks inside the box, and she automatically flinches. Shocks of electricity buzz through her body. What she said had been wrong, and the box punished her for it.

Still silence. She looked at her rainbow, with the hardly noticeable white lines separating the blasts of lively color. They kept each color separated, never letting the colors mingle or mix in the sky. Rainbows were a lot like the world, a lot like her prison. They wanted her to say one color, to be, see one color. Just one, the one they chose. She wasn't supposed to mix them. They would be so much prettier if they mixed.

She didn't like that at all.

She heard their lies in her dreams, what they said about her. She was bad, bad, bad, and she was dangerous, so they tied her hands and threw her away like trash in a dumpster. They only forgot that, after a while, the trash started to smell and attracted flies and rats.

But she was their rat, and they probably wanted more. They probably had more. Hidden away and starving on scraps of cheese. But at least we all had big smiles on the outside. Whatever happens to them on the inside oozes and melts out of their consideration. They only want you to look the part, live the part. But no one can buzz around when they're trying to be a bee.

"Honey, if you loved me, would you smile?" She asked the silence outside of the box.

"What did you say?" Her body whipped into motion. The silence has spoken! The great beyond, the unknown, is able to answer for its own sins.

"Did you just, are you really? Oh this is a dream come true!"

"Really?"

"Only dreams come true in the dark when you're asleep."

Silence.

"Oh, come on. We were having a such a good conversation."

Silence again. What could he be thinking about?

"Yeah."

"When you're all alone, and no one is there, what do you think about?" The light buzzed, and she whimpered as electricity jolted through her body again.

"Oh, well. I usually think of things I need to do… what I need to do in order to get those things done… I plan, so to speak. Other than that, I try to refrain from thinking at all."

"God, that must be boring, why?" Blink. Buzz.

"Thinking distracts me from what I should be doing and where I should be going. And I…"

Her legs swivel out from under her, invested in what he had to say. "What?"

"Nothing,"

"If you were nothing, you wouldn't be breathing. What do you think about?"

"I told you, most of the time I keep my mind blank and tidy."

"Why?"

"Because I… I tend to have inappropriate ideas. Crazy ideas. The ones that I could never do."

"I have those, too."

"I should not be discussing this."

"What? It's just me, only one and one and only. The three musketeers are not here."

Blink. Buzz.

"I think that I do not belong." He says.

She erupts in relieving laughter. He understands. The others didn't. Could he be the one? The prophecy she spun in her head? She tries to find a way to spin yarn out of him. This tilt-a-whirl had her sick in the head. She tries to count the weeks, months, years it has been since she has had a conversation with another living person. She could speak her mind.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't appropriate. I don't think we should talk anymore." He says.

"The truth never is." She pauses, "What's your name, Mr. Soldier Man?"

"Eric."

Eric. E-ric. Er-ic. Air we breathe, and the ick we see, we live. She slides

down the wall, trying to remember the words her mother called her. Mostly Bitch came to mind. "I don't know my name. They've had me locked away for so long I must have forgotten it."

"They call you 14067."

14067. The number rang in her mind. It was specific, powerful, ominous for a name. Anonymous. Did anyone know her name? Would anyone remember her, or notice her, if she left? Her mother had left, and she barely remembered her mother's quick hands.

"Will you let me out, Eric?"

"Uh, no, I can't do that."

"Maybe I could have a name on the outside." Blink. Buzz.

She could be something, anything on the outside. No one would have to know her past, her thoughts. As long as she could be outside of this cage, as long as she could be a field mouse instead of a lab rat. Push the level and she'll receive the reinforcement.

"You've done bad things. That's why you're in there. People are afraid for their security," he says.

"I am their mouse running their maze. Could a mouse kill a cat?"

"Then why are you in there?"

Because she ran the maze, she had to be coming close to the end.

"Rules are hard to follow. What I thought isn't appropriate, and they were afraid that what I said would offend people. It scared them. You're not afraid of me, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"Is it wrong for us to think this way?"

"I don't think so."

Feet shuffle outside of the box, and something metallic clattered against the ground. She hears his hands sliding on the other side of the wall. Her hands rub against the inside, trying to find his through the metal. Warmth, sunny days, nights and frights will be her own soon. She won't have to imagine them anymore. She won't be alone anymore.

"I'm sorry. There's no way to open it. I wish I could."

No, no, no, no. The abyss of her box reaches for her again, hopelessness grasping her breath. Suddenly, the walls of the box shudder. Light cracked through the walls of the box. Sunshine! She sees it! Eric is freeing her!

She steps out into the open, but hears footsteps rushing through the door. More men than she has even seen ran into the room, attacking Eric.

She runs against the wall of the black box, cowering from guns, strong arms, boot straps and strapped sleeves.

A giant in green enters the door, and glances at her. She flinches away.

"Take him away." The dog barks, and men drag Eric out of the door.

"Thank you, Eric," she whispers.

The Sergeant shoves a bag into her face. "Get changed. You're training starts in two hours."

Confusion clouds her thoughts, "Training?"

"Yes, private. Training. You're gonna learn how to shoot a gun and guard a security threat to this country. Am I understood?"

She pauses a moment. Her freedom waves at her from inches away, but the rainbow surrounds her. All the colors in perfect rows, never mixing. She doesn't like that. But what were her options? Risk her life by running out the doors from a dozen armed men? Or will she be able to play their game in order to have some small liberties?

"Sir, yes, sir."

Little Ships

Sandra Scofield

Karin had been ill late last summer and into the fall—it was March now—and her mother, Johanna, had thought she would lose her then. Karin had been bitten by a bat, going out to the trash in the dark, and then she had stumbled and hit her head on the edge of the porch and been concussed. She had had rabies shots (the bat wasn't found, so no one knew if the shots were necessary) and then a series of seizures that the doctors said had nothing to do with the bat, and a few weeks later, she had a cough that turned out to be pneumonia.

That was when Johanna went and stayed at the house in Salem for two weeks, sleeping on a rented rollaway bed, until Nick told her it was all right for her to go home. He said he had taken time off from work and he could handle things. He delayed his return to work, hardly leaving the house, and, after several calls of sympathy from his supervisor, and one of warning from a senior manager, he was fired. In retrospect, it seemed foolish for Johanna not to have stayed on, but none of them were comfortable with the arrangement, not even the girls.

As she traveled with Eleanor, her daughter's mother-in-law, Johanna remembered Karin's pallor and the wracking cough and the vacant look in her eyes; she remembered how, when Karin took the codeine syrup prescribed for the cough at night, she slept without moving, even when Johanna washed her face and spoke to her. She wondered if the infection that killed Karin had been in her body all this time, lying in wait, or if it was something new and unfair, like an errant arrow through a window. It was terrible that it had been such a quick dying, that there had been no time for goodbyes, but Henry, Johanna's husband and Karin's father, had had a long dying, and there had been no comfort in being beside him while he suffered.

Johanna didn't think about Nick, whom she had never learned to love, because he had his own mother, and, besides, he was alive. She could not imagine how he would care for his daughters alone; suddenly she realized that she and Eleanor would have to find a way to set aside their mutual jealousy and resentment, for the sake of the girls. Karin and the girls had

always spent a week at Christmas with Johanna, and weeks in the summer, and she was sure that Eleanor minded, because they spent much less time with her; but Johanna would have little standing now. Nick would need his mother, and where he went, of course, the girls would go too.

She pressed her head against the window and groaned. Eleanor touched her arm lightly and said nothing.

-

When they reached the apartment, everyone was asleep. The door was unlocked; there were dirty dishes and pizza cartons on the counter, clothes in heaps, the television was on, and the blinds were up. There was a fetid, ashy smell. Nick was in bed, and the girls lay on the couch in pajamas and sweatshirts, feet to feet, their legs tangled. Johanna fell to her knees a yard inside the door. Eleanor went down beside her and put her arms around her, and they wept. The girls woke and came and stood and watched them, neither curious nor upset, only witnessing the end of life as they knew it.

Johanna sat on the couch, and the girls tumbled down beside her and bent their heads onto her thighs. She laid her hands softly on their crowns. They whispered, "Mormor, Mormor."

Eleanor opened the door to Nick's bedroom and felt breathless with fury. He lay asleep on his back in his undershorts and a faded black tee shirt. He hadn't shaved in days. He smelled of sweat and the closed room. She couldn't think that he was her boy, who had always made straight A's; who had been so kind and gentle to everyone; who as a teenager read about topics from brain science to deep-water marine life to biographies of spies; who loved to play cards and chess, to water-ski; who was a ranked high school golfer; who had excelled in pharmacy school and could have been a doctor; who had been always loved by his family, by his friends, by a beautiful, athletic, lively young woman he didn't have the sense to marry. And somewhere, sometime, after he started working and married, he became this sad slug of a man. Oh, what would he do without Karin, without her emptiness to fill his own? They had been happy! And then, in a wave of pity for her grieving son, Eleanor knew Johanna would find a way to blame him for Karin's death, and Eleanor resented her for it.

She put her hand to her mouth and shut her eyes. God help us all, she prayed. Nothing makes sense, we are so weak, all of us. Make us strong, for these children. Let me live as long as I must to see them grown. Maker,

Healer, Father, hold me up.

She thought of Catholics and their obsession with Jesus's mother. That was what she needed: a holy mother.

She went to the bathroom and rinsed a frayed washrag in warm water and wrung it out. She looked in the mirror and scrubbed her face. She was only sixty-four years old, hardly gray, hardly wrinkled; she had planned to work a long while yet, and maybe travel—a cruise or two on little ships. Blue water, the pleasure of other people's company. Now she would have two girls to raise, and she had to think about Nick; there was no possibility that he would do more than scrape through his days like a prisoner at hard labor. He would work, though; it would save him: the tedium, the driving, the responsibility. And she would have him close, there was that.

She wondered if she had enough sheets.

She rinsed the rag again and took it to Nick. She wanted to sit down and take him in her arms. She wanted to shake him.

She stood at the side of the bed. "Wipe your face and get dressed, Nick. You have to talk to the girls."

He rubbed his eyes and sat up slightly. "Huh?"

"You have to tell Mia and Annika that their mother is dead."

"They know, Mom. Jesus."

"They think they know. They suppose. Things happened away from them. They are children. They need for their father to tell them: 'Your mother is dead, but I'm here, and we will make it.' Do you hear me?" She thrust the washrag at him.

"I'll be there in a minute."

Eleanor found a pitcher and a few cloudy ice cubes left in a tray and ran water and set glasses on the counter. She wondered if anyone had had a drink all day. Next, they would all fall over from dehydration.

Nick came out of his room in jeans and a worn denim shirt and perched on the coffee table in front of the couch, buttoning the shirt. His daughters raised their heads from their grandmother's lap. Johanna's skirt was damp where their tears had leaked.

Nick said, "Your mother was asleep when the ambulance came, you remember that. She never woke up again. It was all something strange, but it happens to other people, too. It's bad luck, like lightning." He paused and swallowed; his Adam's apple bobbed. The girls were bent over slightly, rapt, their eyes wide, their expressions blank. Their arms hung down past their

knees. They had drawn on their knees with ballpoint pens: little flowers and hearts and their mother's name.

Nick said, "The doctors and nurses tried really hard to make the infection stop but they couldn't, and she never woke up. I said that. She—" He began sobbing. "I don't think she hurt, just that little bit of time before she went to sleep here." His girls started sobbing, too. "I love her so much."

"Nick," Eleanor said.

"Your mother died yesterday." Nick wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Your mother is dead." He spoke weakly, coldly, and closed his eyes.

The girls rose up and threw their arms around his neck and shoulders.

Eleanor was pouring water into glasses. She gave each girl a glass.

She took over. "We have to get through the next few days. Your dad and Grandmother Johanna will go see about the casket and the transportation, while we get your things together here. You will go with your grandmother to Frost Valley in the morning; your dad and I will come later in the day; Saturday morning you will go to a funeral home in Parker to see your mother, and, from there, the funeral home will take her to the grave site where Papa Henry is buried, and we will go there too and say goodbye."

Eleanor gave water to Nick, who drank it greedily, and to Johanna, who thanked her. Eleanor saw gray streaks in Johanna's thick blond braid and blue black smudges under her eyes.

Annika said, "You can have my bed. One of you."

"And mine," Mia said. "We like the couch."

"Oh no, dear, we'll go to a motel," Johanna said.

Mia said, "I don't want to stay here, then. I don't want to."

Johanna said, "Just tonight, to be with your father."

"I don't want to," Mia said, and Annika said, "I don't want to, either, then."

Nick said, "You don't have to stay." He looked at his mother. "It's okay, Mom."

Johanna sighed. "We'll have adjoining rooms at a motel, Eleanor and I. You'll stay with us. We'll be together." She had known generations of dying and burying, and not one time had it been like this. She had had history, ritual, memory; these girls were like cats at a gate. Their father was weak.

"What about Daddy?" Annika said.

Johanna said, "I think he wants to be here one more night." She looked at him and knew she was cold, but her daughter was gone and she wondered

what he might have done to protect her.

"You must find something for your mother to wear," she said in a moment. "Something you remember her wearing." She glanced at Nick, who didn't notice.

The girls went into their parents' bedroom and came back with a pair of flannel pajamas. They were midnight blue, with yellow stars and crescent moons scattered on them. They appeared to be almost new, though they were crumpled. "They were her birthday present," Annika said. Karin had turned thirty-six on December 29th. Johanna took them and held them against her chest. She folded them tightly and gave them back to Annika. "Put them by the door, angel, by my purse."

No one wanted to go out to eat, so Eleanor went to get supplies for sandwiches. As soon as she got back, Nick and Johanna left for the funeral home.

Eleanor had brought two empty suitcases. She gave one to each girl and said, "Don't take anything you don't think you'll wear. Don't take anything old or too small or too little-girlish. Take some pajamas and underwear and a few things you like. We won't save the old things, unless there's something special to you; put that in. We will shop for new clothes for school. What will you wear to the burial? It's not a funeral, in a church, just us at the plot. You don't have to dress up. But you might not want to wear it again, the dress you choose."

It struck her that both of them had grown three inches since she had last seen them.

The girls looked sick and dazed. Eleanor helped them sort their things. They didn't have anything nice, but it didn't matter. They didn't have much of anything at all, and they didn't seem attached to any of it. They laid out jeans and T-shirts and tennis shoes. There wasn't a single dress. They stuffed clothes into one of the suitcases, and they filled the other with their mother's jewelry boxes from QVC. Then Eleanor took them to a Dairy Queen and they ate fries and chocolate sundaes.

At the motel, they discussed who would sleep where. The girls wanted to sleep together. They stripped to their panties and shirts and got in the second bed in Johanna's room. They hadn't washed, and Eleanor hoped Johanna wouldn't say anything about it.

While Johanna was in the bathroom, Eleanor sat on the bed and tried to talk to them.

"It must feel like a storm blowing around you."

They had a blank, patient look. They were obviously exhausted.

"Please don't worry about what is going to happen. Your daddy will be with you. You'll be with us—with Grandmother Johanna, or in my house. You'll have your Aunt Alison. We all love you. You'll get in school and catch up. Everything takes time. You'll make friends. Don't worry about anything, let your daddy work it all out for you. He's very sad, but he is still your daddy."

They fell asleep while she was talking and slept through the night soundly. Eleanor slept little. She woke up, over and over, afraid for Nick alone in his apartment.

In the morning the girls ate waffles and peanut butter at the motel buffet. Eleanor made a mental note that they seemed to like them.

In his apartment, Nick smoked and lay on the couch for hours, listening to Bob Dylan and Gillian Welch. He thought about the time he and Karin had gone to Brookings on the coast and stayed in a damp cabin for two nights. The second night, there was a brief but fierce squall in from the ocean, and the wind blew their door open. Karin jumped out of bed and ran outside long enough to get soaked, laughing and calling for Nick, who didn't get up. She took off her pajamas and Nick dried her slowly, and then they talked about having children. She might have been pregnant then, they would know she was, in a month or so. She wanted girls; Nick didn't care whether they had girls or boys. She said she wanted them to play naked in the back yard in the hot days of summer, as she had when she was small.

Then she laughed and she said, “Imagine if, when the door flew open, it wasn't a storm after all. Imagine that people were crying out and there was a great commotion. A UFO had landed on the beach, and people were gathering to see, but not going close. And then our door flew open and this thing, this stem of light, spoke, and it said, ‘We have chosen you to come with us.’”

Oooh!

“Would you go?” she said. “Would we take such a leap, to a life utterly unknown to us?”

He woke when his mother came in, and for the moment before she spoke, he held his breath, thinking that he had forgotten something important; then he thought of his daughters, and got up.

Miller Redbird Is Going to Hell

Autumn Fourkiller

Miller Redbird was born during a summer storm. Her godfather, Bluejay, ran the only three stoplights in town to get her mother to the hospital, and they still barely made it.

Miller's mother was white. She was also beautiful. She had green eyes and small bones. She took the time to shave her arms and legs before labor began as if the doctor would mention her being hairy as she was pushing a baby out.

Miller's father was not beautiful. He had a scar near his eye from Miller's dead paternal grandfather and a cracked tooth from a bar fight. He was gorgeously tanned and tall, but there was something inside him that was off-kilter. He would make up cultural traditions on the spot and would spit tobacco juice on the ground every time Bluejay mentioned the baby, or God, or that it was maybe time to stop drinking. He saw faces in the wood paneling of their home and felt his father's ghost choking him in the night. And yet, Miller's mother loved him. She loved his singing voice and his pancake recipe. His poetry and his carpentry. His high moods and his hands. Her love only cracked when, as Bluejay was starting the car and screaming and the wind was whipping and the rain coming down in stinging sheets, that he screamed at the sky and at his wife and at his best friend, "That baby is a curse! I'll fucking burn down this house myself before I let her in here!"

Miller's mother, in response, slowly raised the hand not clutching her lower stomach, and gave him the finger. The one that says, fuck you, fuck off, fuck you for being a crazy Native bastard who hated his father so much that now you can't be one.

Miller Redbird is going to hell. The real hell. She can't help what she is, she really can't. This might be the worst thing she has ever done. Her mother, who has always acted like Miller is exactly what she always wanted, even though that isn't true, can't be true, will be livid. She might not survive this. Miller doesn't want to be selfish, she really doesn't, but she is. Especially because of this.

Jane came out of nowhere, she hit Miller like a meteor. Like one of those huge fucking space rocks that decimates entire acres of countryside. Exactly like that. Jane was beautiful AND kind in a way that real people just weren't. Okay, well maybe she wasn't beautiful, but she was interesting, and that meant more. She was tall and wide, she had blonde, blonde hair, and a long, hooked nose, she slicked down her very apparent arm hair after every shower, and when she looked at Miller, Miller got this spike in her stomach. If the spike had a color, the color would be gold, shimmering: it would be hot to look at.

They met like this: Miller was reading, Jane was playing a game that involved more roughhousing than strictly necessary. Jane accidentally tumbles into Miller, she apologizes. Miller doesn't say anything. Well, she does stick out her hand, arm straighter than she'll ever be, and says. "Redbird, uh, Miller. Miller Redbird. I'm Miller Redbird." Jane smiles, sticks out her hand, too, and says, "Of course you are."

Miller Redbird, as a child, rarely wore shoes. Miller's grandmother, Carolyn, would say -- now Miller, you don't want dew poisoning, do you? And Miller would say no. Miller's teacher would say, now Miller, speak up, don't you want people to hear you? And Miller would say no. Miller's mother's ghost would say, now Miller you don't want to look like some queer do you? And Miller would say no. Jane would say, Miller, don't you want to be happy?

And Miller would say...

Miller's not sure that she can call the first time they fucked, fucking.

Miller's not sure she knows how to name anything they're doing. Miller's never had her chin gently grabbed or her stomach touched or her name whispered. Sure, it's quick and a little dirty, but there is something else unnameable in the room. Miller bites on her own hand to keep from shouting.

Miller's father will cut off his own hair with garden shears and bury it in their front yard. He will blame Miller and his father and the ancestors for his own created misfortune. His father and Miller, though, are the ones at fault. Miller's mother will drive in with Miller in the backseat and see her husband crazed and weeping near the pile of his own hair and one, cracked tooth. This will be the last time that Miller's mother will see her husband.

This is the last Miller's mother will see Miller.

This will be the last Miller's mother will see anything at all.

Miller Redbird will atone for her family's sins in many ways:

Miller Redbird will cut off her hair once a year in a cornfield and make an offering for those dead and alive and alive but dead in all the ways that count and -

Miller Redbird will paint her skin ashen white like she did once as a toddler and lie in the river for forty days and forty nights and will fill her pockets with rocks and look at the pond.

Miller Redbird will be Miller Redbird, which is perhaps the greatest punishment of all.

Jane will sleep on her back and Miller will sleep on her side. Miller often can't sleep at all, so she will walk up the stairs and into the room where the ghosts live. The ghosts never speak, but it is comforting to know they are there, the cold space they inhabit the only way Miller ever knows she is really there.

Play the Ball, Don't Let It Play You

Carl Winderl

I did not set out to win, to earn, a scholarship to play hoop in college, to be awarded one. It just turned out that way. I first started out playing hoops to gain approval. That I now know.

My earliest basketball memory dates back to my fifth or sixth Christmas, when my favorite uncle, dubbed "Unkie Bob" by my 2 younger sisters and me, gave me a basketball as a present. After I ripped through the wrapping paper, I discovered a red square cardboard box. And nestled inside it swaddled with white tissue paper lay a bright orange basketball, emblazoned with one word: "Voit."

What I next remember about that singular momentous event is Unkie Bob regaling family members with how he discovered upon returning home from the store that someone had switched basketballs, replacing some cheap-ass outdoor rubber playground ball with a $10 Voit. He beamed as he told and retold the discovery around the Lucky Strike dangling from the side of his mouth, while he exhaled huge lungfuls of smoke through his nostrils, for emphasis: his trademark smirk.

Now that I know what I know about Robert Clifford Winderl, that someone was probably him.

Nonetheless, that basketball travelled well with me, to six different elementary schools and three different junior highs, back and forth between Canton and Cleveland, Ohio, and between Florida and Ohio, until I ended up for good, no, once and for all in Pompano Beach, Florida, where I attended for the first time ever the same school—all year long from the first day of classes in September until the last one in June. For three years in a row. Until I graduated from that school: Pompano Beach Senior High School (PBSHS).

That final long-distance move to Florida was occasioned by my father fleeing the long arm of the law in Cleveland to parts unknown while we skulked out of town days later with all our earthly possessions crammed into the nooks and crannies of a 1954 Ford station wagon. Which included my basketball, of course. He rejoined us in Florida some few weeks later,

after having successfully hidden out along the East Coast, then hop-scotched his way to Florida, and finally landed on home base, Pompano Beach, and us. For a short while anyway he stayed with us.

I and my basketball though bounced into town first, and foremost.

Of all the toys, clothes, and books that came and went and were left behind, discarded, outgrown, cast off or cast away, during the many many moves of my childhood, brought about by the need, usually, for a cheaper, smaller apartment; a better-paying, more manager-friendly waitress job for mom; or a mess to flee from which my alcoholic, robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul father had made yet again, that basketball was a constant.

Not because I played daily with it.

Sometimes it would lie untouched and fallow between moves, kept in its slowly disintegrating faded red square cardboard box, until it became too dilapidated to move, and so that box also became just another something to cast off, as if some shed skin from the molting of second to third grade or from Ohio to Florida.

But not ever was the basketball left behind.

Gathering oil stains and asphalt grime, even though the nubs started to wear smooth, it stayed with me.

In seventh grade, toward the beginning of school, during early October, my birth month, I first remember realizing that ball would, could, provide the approval I've lifelong sought.

We were living in Cleveland with my dad's mother, then Marie Ryjowski (she passed as Marie Myslenski, following her fourth husband in turn to her grave) but known simply as Grandma Ry by me and my sisters; she had taken in my mom, me, and my sisters because her second of four sons had abandoned us to gallivant around the country in search of wine, women, and song. Mostly after alcohol, though, and the never-quite-elusive-enough easy lays.

But he had just returned to Cleveland after his most recent guilt trip only a couple weeks after I'd started at yet another new school, as usual weeks after the official first day of school so that I could enact my annual role as new-kid in the already established classroom cliques. And we were all living with Grandma Ry on the first-floor walk-up of the up-and-down duplex she rented from some old couple in her parish church. My afternoons and evenings were spent there, with my sisters, while at night I shared a bedroom with them.

By day I was manfully trying to fit in at my second junior high in two months: Albert Bushnell Hart Junior High School. Known more simply as A.B. Hart. Or simpler yet just A.B.

On some mid-October Sunday afternoon, after a massive traditional Polish meal, following mass at Grandma's Church, the Polish National Trinity Catholic Church, which we all dutifully attended, including my dad, and his baby brother Bobby, our Unkie Bob, the three "men" of the family, and the well-travelled basketball, went for a walk, in search of a hoop court.

Unkie Bob had arrived for the weekend, to stay over for only a couple or three days because he just happened to be between jobs, and wives. But not women. He actually stayed a few weekends, and the weekdays in between, which my sisters and I really liked, because he was far and away our favorite uncle.

The three of us walked in the direction of a nearby court I thought I knew of, on a blacktop playground just a couple blocks past Miles Standish Elementary School, where my sisters were in fourth and first grades. They were in the formative stages of learning to adjust to being the perennial new-kid in the classroom, and they were adjusting about as well I was in those days, which wasn't very well at all. And not because they were girls.

My father and uncle each had a few shots and a couple of beer chasers or so in them from the massive meal: "over the lips and over the gums, look out stomach here it comes!" toasted my dad.

How could I not be a poet after hearing toasts like that during my formative years? Whenever my dad happened to be living with us, that is.

Or as I came to later realize, that little ditty my father rhymed before meals and drinking, was actually an alcoholic's way of saying "Grace."

All that drink was on top of what they'd already downed before and right after mass. So they were feeling no pain, as they often proclaimed in those days, and chain-smoked in the crisp Cleveland autumn open air. They cajoled and jostled each other, waving their lit smokes grandly as they eloquently joked and joshed each other, and dribbled back and forth between themselves and me. Mostly, I recall, they double-dribbled. And travelled a lot.

Occasionally they let me touch the ball.

Now that I reflect upon it, more or less four years from retirement as a writing professor, back then: they were just babies. Really. My dad was 33, and my uncle 26; and they shared the same birth day, December 5.

Seven years separated them in time, but only in time were they separated. When in space, together they were inseparable, and couldn't have been more like twins unless they'd been born seven minutes apart, not seven years.

Plus, my uncle always acted older than his age, I've been told, while my father never acted his.

At the gravel and ground-down broken glass asphalt court with rusty scalloped backboards and tattered nylon nets, three seventh graders from my school shot around. Two I recognized as toughs little more skilled at hoops than than I was, but I didn't know them by name; the third kid I did know by name, Mike Rushnok, who was in Mr. Lewanowitz' history class with me.

Mr. Lewanowitz was known throughout A.B. as the "geography Nazi," for his unstinting demands that all of his students know all of the countries of the world and their capitals. I actually enjoyed his class and found satisfaction filling in over and over his mimeographed world, hemispherical, continental, and regional maps with the absolutely correctly spelled names of countries and their capitals and the precisely placed "stars" locating each capital. He taught us to be junior cartographers, certain those boundaries and names would stand the test of time.

I hope he died well before the end of the 20th century; I'm sure his heart couldn't have taken the nearly annual shifting boundaries and renaming of the world's countries hastened by the millennium's demise.

I wonder if he ever read "Ozymandias"; that could have eased his passing.

Even as a transfer student in Mr. Lewanowitz' class I was starting to achieve star status, but not Mike, not that I think he really cared about that. He chose to shine elsewhere.

On that old blacktop court on that Sunday afternoon, the six of us agreed to choose up sides for some 3-on-3; I was on Unkie Bob's team along with nameless tough #1, while nameless tough #2 was the third on Dad's team with Mike.

I forget how long we played those half-court games on that idyllic fall Sunday afternoon, sunsplashed under clear blue cloudless skies infiltrated by the occasional waft of smoke from burned leaves, causing an ache in the lungs from a too deeply in-drawn breath of air; but I do remember two other things.

First, I mostly ran around that half-court perimeter trying to stay out of the way when we had the ball, occasionally being given the ball for a pity shot, usually a lay-up. Never a really wide-open one. And when we didn't have the ball, I ran around trying to get in the way, usually forgetting about my man, nameless tough #2, leaving him wide open for lay-ups. Which he almost always made.

I was so small, scrawny, and weak-skilled in those days, I barely knew which side of the ball was up.

At least by then I knew that I didn't have to always jiggle the ball in my hands when I first received it, so that the word "Voit" was on the top of the ball, and facing me so that I could easily read it, before I started to dribble, pass it, or even take a shot.

So, in my brain I was making progress in learning to hone my hoop skills. Almost entirely self-taught in those days.

And secondly this too I remember from that day: on the walk back home to Grandma's my dad and Unkie Bob went on and on about what a good player Mike was, especially for his age and size.

He'd more than held his own with them, especially Unkie Bob, who was the widely-regarded family athlete of his generation, having been good enough as a football player in high school for the Canton Mckinley Bulldogs to be personally scouted by the esteemed Woody Hayes from the Ohio State University. But Unkie Bob nixed all that when he and his friend Charlie Zander got themselves kicked off the team before the end of the season for disciplinary reasons.

As I found out years later during a drunken bout of one-down-man-ship between my father and Unkie Bob, their favorite remorse-filled drinking game, those disciplinary reasons resulted from a victory party into the wee hours of a Sunday morning that concluded just in time for mass. The post-game celebration had included lots of beer and several cheerleaders, including the daughters of a prominent teacher and the head guidance counselor, whom my uncle and his best friend Zander had deflowered after their cozy swittcheroo foursome had drained every last brown neck down to the dregs.

For some reason, as the gist of the story went, even in the many re-tellings and versions I'd hear over the years, the four of them had the "brass balls" to attend that Sunday's earliest first mass, still in their party clothes. Unfortunately, the parents, school officials, the coaching staff, and the

parish itself were not as forgiving as apparently God had been on that early Sunday morning. And so to that, for years on end, my Uncle Bob attributed the downward spiral of his life.

Which included him playing switcheroo once upon a time with a basketball, for me.

I didn't know all or any of that then on that Sunday as we retraced our way back to Grandma's house. But I did learn loud and clear what my dad and uncle thought of Mike's hoop skills, and mine, by what they said about him, and didn't about me.

Even though it was my ball, not his old under-inflated almost worn smooth nameless one, that we'd played with.

When they talked as we walked, I knew my dad and uncle spoke truly, for the cool fresh air and invigorating exercise had sobered them up some. Their heads were probably clearer than they had been all day, and would be, since I knew that back at Grandma's they'd start knockin' 'em back again—"bendin' & flexin'" their elbows, as they liked to call it. Why Grandma always supplied them so readily with bottles of the really hard stuff and cases of the brown necks still escapes me.

But it never has escaped me how all my dad and Unkie Bob said about me on the way home was how glad they were that I had such a nice basketball to play with. Oh, and that I was lucky to have a friend like Mike, who was such a good basketball player already. They wondered too if he'd grow up to play high school ball at Holy Name High, at some other parochial school, or just play at some public school with a bunch of non-Catholics.

My only other hoop memory of seventh grade involved not me but my really good friend Robert McCormick, who had been chosen a "Gym Leader" second term by Mr. Kirschner, our P.E. teacher, and whose eye I never successfully attracted in class by my puerile efforts at just about any gymnastics activity, except that I ever strove to excel with hustle and verve.

Coordinated and skilled I was not, yet, but I'd manage to figure out a way to manufacture those two attributes, along with tenacity. Or maybe it was just plain fool Polish doggedness.

Because I was smarter than the average kid in P.E., I realized that my below average athletic skills and experience could be incrementally made up for with hustle, verve, derring-do, and just plain old determination—not to quit nor flat out give up when beaten or knocked down, especially when losing and particularly when losing was inevitable. Even when losing was

long and drawn out, which I had plenty of opportunities to practice at and gain experience from. From losing, that is.

But what I now know I didn't know I was learning then was, even if winning was out of the question, to at least, struggle not to lose any more than necessary.

So as a gym leader, Robert got to play in the-end-of-the-school-year teacher-student basketball game. It was played on a Friday afternoon right after the last lunch period, so we were exempt from classes if we went to the game, billed as a "fund raiser." Which of course every student in the school attended, even the proto-nerds, the unofficial local chapter of Future Geeks of America, of which I was probably only a dis-honorary member in those gawky-awful seventh-grade days.

Needless to say the Student Council made a killing, at 25¢ per student, for "charity."

The teams were any teacher, male or female, game enough to play against the students: the ninth-, eighth-, and seventh-grade gym leaders. Robert was one of only two seventh-graders on the team.

Mr. Kirschner officiated, more or less ably assisted by Mr. Lewanowitz. Although no girls played on the student team, several female teachers played, the younger ones, who all of a sudden looked very cute. Especially Miss Majewski, the second-year German teacher.

What I distinctly remember was late in the game, Robert dashed after a loose ball near the sidelines right in front of me and collided with Miss Majewski. He stumbled to the floor while she merely ended up losing her balance but caught herself, astraddle Robert, lying on the floor looking up at her.

And here's what got me, what's imprinted, indelibly on my memory tapes: as he scrambled to his feet she reached out and cradled his face in both of her hands, and apologized. I could read her lips ever so clearly behind five or six rows of students: "Oh, I'm so sorry—are you all right? I'm sorry: I didn't mean to knock you down."

"Knock him down"? Are you kidding me? She could have walloped me with an ugly stick, ten times over, for just one concerned look like that from her, and to be holding my face in her hands so close to her face while she apologized so sincerely and sweetly. Oh, my, the look in her eyes and the shape of her lips is indelibly printed on my retinas. Obviously.

That was the kind of approval I sought, longed for, all from the crazy

bounce of a basketball.

So, thus inspired, I determined to be a "real" basketball player. Not a "pretender."

Still under five feet as a skinny seventh grader, for me, shooting seemed such an iffy thing, given that I wasn't even halfway yet to the rim as I stood flat-flooted gazing up into its rarefied stratosphere. I felt that if maybe I squinted my eyes I could make out slightly beyond the rim Mount Everest, or at least Mount McKinley.

That seemed to me like that was too far to loft a shot heavenward; there was way too much room for an increased margin of error with my unpracticed shooting eye. I was too proud to shoot two-handed, but my one-handed shot left some onlookers believing my motion would be better served out on the track where smaller, denser nine-pound balls were more suited to that throwing motion.

Thus, on the court my shooting motion looked more like I was heaving the ball at the hoop.

Plus, since there was so much airspace for the ball to go through just to reach rim level, let alone add to that an arc to get it above the rim so it could drop through the net, I was sure that added flight time was ample enough for some gangly six-footer or taller, even at the junior high level, to amble on over and stuff my shot, with or without leaving the floor.

If I wanted playing time with the older and bigger boys, I would have to possess some other skill set within my control: so I chose to be the best ball-handler—dribbler and passer--that money could buy. The dividends didn't pay off initially. But what eventually punched my ticket to college: I grew to be a 6'3"+ guard who could dribble and pass like someone a foot shorter, which I had been for a very long time. Plus I could dunk. Was a 90% free-throw shooter. Was fearless driving to the hoop. And made it a point to go after every loose ball as if my life depended on it. Or as if my spot on the team did. Even if it was just at the end of the bench.

My strategy was not to hesitate even a second to hit the floor, diving and scrambling for any loose ball rolling around there, just for the taking.

Like it was found money.

That was "how" I started out in 7th grade, and "when" I started. I had to start somewhere, and I had to start somehow.

And mostly it was just me on some outdoor court all by myself. Or whenever I could, I'd glom onto Robert and some of the older gym leaders

before or after school or right before or right after p.e. class when I could hang around for a while, even for just a few minutes, grabbing rebounds from missed and made shots by the older gym leaders, and so I got to work on perfecting my bounce and chest passes to them, especially when they motioned for me pass it to them on the move for their shot, which gave me the chance to practice leading them perfectly so that they could catch it in stride, to make it easy for them to gather themselves, squared to the hoop, on the balls of their feet, and their feet shoulder-width, ready for the smooth jump and easy release of the ball at the top of their jump. Nobody had to tell me to notice those things and record them; I just absorbed it all, happy to be hanging with older hoop guys who let me hang with them, even if I was only their hoop caddy.

And then in ninth grade I found myself in Florida, for good, well, once and for all, until, that is, I'd leave for my freshman year in college to go play hoop on a basketball scholarship in Illinois.

Before all that could happen though, I'd have to be one of the last three guys cut from the boys' ninth-grade basketball team at Deerfield Beach Junior High School (DBJHS). I'd obviously gotten enough better from those woeful seventh-grade quasi-skills to at least not be among the first guys cut from that team. Some 30 hopefuls showed up for that ninth-grade team, and I lasted until 15, 14, or 13. I wasn't good enough to be 12th on the 12-man team. Or bad enough to be just a scrub, riding the end of the pine, as we called it in those days.

In fact, that'd have to wait until my junior year at PBSHS when and where I was bad enough to be the last guy sitting on the bench. In such a weird sort of way, I was getting really good at being bad enough of a player to be the super-scrub on the varsity of what was traditionally one of the powerhouse boys' high school basketball teams in South Florida.

And to think, it all started, more or less, with being cut in ninth grade. In essence, when I wasn't good enough to be a scrub then.

I didn't let that deter me though.

I worked even harder during that year for not making the ninth-grade team, so that in tenth grade I actually made the junior varsity team at PBSHS. Of course, I was the last guy to make the team, to not be cut. So, for me it was a huge moral victory.

I mean I finally got to say I was on a real team, "had" to go to practice after school, was issued my very first official uniform with a real warm-up

jacket, about two sizes too big, and got to wear school-bought white high-top Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars: two pair of them even--one for practice and one for games only. I prized those shoes so much. And I hated to get them too dirty or worn out, but didn't have to worry much about my game shoes taking a beating. At the end of the season they looked like they'd just come out of the box.

That was okay. Because after the season, they were mine to keep, and so I took them home, where I still had the box they came in, but put them on a shelf in my bedroom. I didn't have any trophies of any kind to show for any of my athletic endeavors, and wouldn't have for a long long time, but those two shoes were trophies to me. Sitting on that shelf they were a positive tangible reminder of what could happen if I worked hard, didn't give up or quit, especially when it looked like I was going to lose anyway.

Or even be little more than just a scrub.

In my mind, though, I was improving; in my mind I had scored a moral victory. I was showing progress. And I was not particularly ashamed or embarrassed to be the twelfth man on that 12-man jayvee team.

Four junior high schools fed into PBSHS. That meant that four ninth-grade boys' basketball teams sent 48 players to that high school, and most of them would try out for the jayvee team. So, in my mind I had not just beaten the odds to barely make that team – I trashed em'.

Plus this: of the 12 guys who made the DBJHS 9th-grade boys' basketball team that I got cut from, only three of them were still lacing them up to play with me my senior year at PBSHS. Nine of them got left by the wayside, for one reason or another. Only two of those three would be in the starting line-up with me for our senior season, while the other 1 assumed my old role of scrub, riding the pine.

And this too: I was the second-leading scorer on the team our senior year. The leading scorer was a kid from one of those four feeder junior high teams our sophomore year. And the other two guys who started with us didn't even average in double figures.

As might be expected, I have lots of memories of that senior season playing hoop, especially after all those non-playing years when I just sat the bench and dreamed and prayed and longed and coveted some playing time. Any playing time.

Many of those memories are wildly positive, some just positive, others so-so, a lot of just running up and down the court, a few negative memories,

but really only a couple of klunker ones. I'd gotten pretty good at not making mistakes on the court, neither the mental mind-numbing ones nor the just stupid physical couldn't-be-helped careless errors. I guess the record could speak for itself in these departments: I was a starter, second-leading scorer, and had the pick of a half-dozen full rides after the season was over.

I'd gotten some better over the years.

Not all of the memories happened during games, sometimes before or just after them. Sometimes I remember something that happened during a clock stop.

During one of the 30+ games that year, somewhere in the middle of the season, somewhere in the middle of a game, one of the officials for the game was the same coach who had cut me from that ninth-grade team, Bob Bidwell. I don't think that I ever had any real animosity for him cutting me. Really.

In my mind during those tryouts, I knew I was a scrub. I knew I was far behind most of the players, but I also knew I knew how to operate as a less-skilled player, one who possessed the intangibles that couldn't be measured on any stat sheet.

I believed, like I told a reporter after a game in college, after we'd beaten a team we had no business beating, whose starting line-up to a man was taller, faster, more experienced than any of us, "You can measure height and weight. But you can't measure heart. You won't ever find that stat in the program."

I'm pretty sure I didn't originate that quote. But I got quoted nonetheless for it in the *Kankakee Journal*. After all, that was our college's hometown newspaper, and Jerry Hertenstein was the beat reporter for our team. Maybe it helped sell a few newspapers.

So, in ninth-grade I was hoping that Mr. Bidwell, or Coach Bidwell, as he preferred we call him in those days, would see that in me. Because as was the case with any basketball team I ever played on, in high school or college, I was about the smartest guy on the team, although I didn't start to regularly show up on the Dean's List until the second semester of my sophomore year. Which is mostly why, I think, and I was told too, I ended up first at the University of Chicago for graduate school and then in a Ph.D. program at New York University.

But it didn't matter in ninth-grade, because Coach Bidwell saw me as a scrub, and knew me as one.

He had also been the head coach for the ninth-grade boys' football team at DBJHS. And I was definitely a scrub and a sight to behold on that team.

I maybe could have been measured up at 5'6" and at some point during the beginning of that season topped out at 105 pounds, soaking wet: good enough to be the fourth-string fullback; bad enough to be a certifiable scrub, in the eyes of just about everybody, including Coach Bidwell.

No fifth-string fullback position existed. I couldn't go any lower.

All I could do was maybe hope-against-hope to move up on the depth chart.

And I did, eventually.

I was only on the team because we'd just moved to Florida, for good, etc. Dad had finally caught up to us after his circuitous escape route down the Eastern Seaboard, and I'd been enrolled a week or so after classes had begun, as usual, and, since I'd been a late-registrant I was given special dispensation to join the football team even though I'd missed all the grueling two-a-day practices in the last two-and-a-half weeks of those brutal Florida August dog days. All of which endeared me even more to my new teammates. So, I had that to deal with on top of my perennial new kid in class act.

Oh, and this too was a constant reminder: every guy who went out for the team made it. But only the top 55 players had game uniforms.

I didn't dress for the first two games of the season. So I had the further distinction of being a scrub sitting up in the stands, not even good enough at being bad enough to sit on the very end of the bench. I would move up on the roster though, to third-string fullback, thanks to injuries and a few "quitters," so that I could then be a certifiable scrub in a uniform at the end of the bench.

I learned there to perfect the surreptitious arts of the scrub, falling down unnecessarily during warm-ups, and on the sly rubbing dirt on my uniform while sitting on the bench, but never ever quite caught on to mastering the finer points of applying grass stains to my white game pants, over my placebo brand knee- and thigh-pads.

I'd only been cajoled into trying out for the team to please my dad, who had clearly announced while in some kind of stupor that someone in the Winderl family had to step up and pick up the athletic torch dropped by his baby brother Bobby. Amazingly, his eloquence improved the more the more he drank. Or so he seemed to assume in his clouded and addled brain.

I had two elder cousins who should have preceded me into the Winderl

Athletic Hall of Fame, or Shame, as the case might be, both sons of Ed Winderl, the eldest of the four Winderl brothers. But the older of my two cousins set his sights on Vet School at the Ohio State University, where he would eventually graduate Number One from their school of Veterinary Sciences, and his younger brother, a year older than me, actually won a golf scholarship to the Ohio State University and was all set to be that Winderl to enter the Hall of Fame. But he got his girlfriend pregnant around Christmas of his freshman year, and my Uncle Eddie insisted he drop out of school, be a man, marry the girl, and be an example to the world: that a Winderl could do the right thing.

And so he of course entered the other Winderl Hall. Enshrined next to Unkie Bob.

That all happened years after I struggled mightily through a nightmare season of freshman football, mostly holding tackling and blocking dummies for the first string offenses and defenses, and I got to be the dummy fullback on the scout team who let the first and second string defenses pummel me to the turf Monday through Thursday all season.

As was to be expected, in that typical best of all possible junior high worlds, the first string fullback was John Hoffman, 6' even and every bit of 165 pounds, not soaking wet. To be sure, nobody pummeled him to the ground.

Funny thing. When John was a senior in high school, he was still 6' tall and maybe 175 or 180, but he wasn't lean and mean in twelfth grade like he was in ninth. In fact, ninth grade was the last year he played football.

But to Coach Bidwell, I was a scrub on his ninth-grade football team.

So when I tried out for his ninth-grade basketball team, I was still a scrub, perhaps even more one because I didn't have all that football gear to camouflage my scrawniness; I had to stand on those outdoor basketball courts in just gym shorts and a thin little p.e. shirt. No wonder he cut me. I was a scrub.

But maybe I wouldn't have been so scrubby to him if I hadn't already been seen and known as a football scrub.

Plus, I kind of knew back then that all these other guys trying out for the team were going to make the team because he'd known all of them since they were seventh-graders.

I tried out anyway, hoping against hope I wouldn't get cut, disappointed when I was, but not crestfallen, the blow itself softened because Dad had

once again left us for parts and women unknown. Which meant we'd be free for a time from his drinking and arguing and fighting with zmom and throwing things and smashing up stuff in the house.

Which also meant I didn't have to incur his looks and remarks that I'd let him down and was turning out to be such a loser for a son. His firstborn. And his only son.

But I had a year to play hoop and practice and hang out on my own on local public courts and get better and improve at my own speed; at the end of that year I'd muster enough courage and hutzpah, not to mention the temerity, to try out again for another hoop team, the jayvee squad at PBSHS.

I was not so easily deterred.

And it all paid off, so that, three years later, during my senior year when Coach Bidwell was officiating one of our games for the second or third time that season, I wasn't too surprised when he called me by name in the middle of the game.

The other team had squandered an easy scoring opportunity on a three-on-one fast break by making a bad pass that I forced, sending the ball careening wildly out of bounds. I had played really smart defense with my feet and hands, cutting down the angles of the passing lanes.

I'd proved, simply enough, that I was smarter, not more athletic, than those three to my one on the fastbreak, by simply increasing the degree of difficulty for the bounce pass by decreasing the angle of success. All I'd done was to jump the passing lane. It was a basic math problem that I'd "solved "on the spot." Physics, actually, with maybe a little bit of geometry figured in, just for good measure.

And so the ball had bounced harmlessly out of bounds, behind and beyond the backward outstretched reach of the sprinting player, who'd overrun the pass and the play.

We played our home games in a stadium style, horseshoe-shaped gymnasium with fixed seats for about 2,000 fans above the playing court and with pull-out bleachers on the sidelines that sat another 800 on the floor level of the gym. That bad pass caromed off the base of the stage at the far end of the gym and bounced back under the bleachers and then rolled back under them another 12 or 15 feet, where it came to rest there among the supports and roll-out sliders. I was the nearest of our players to the action, naturally, and so trotted after the ball. But when I saw it sitting back

under the bleachers in that rat's nest of metal grillework, I paused, hands on hips. And Coach Bidwell jogged over to join me, to see where the ball was.

He looked at the ball, then he looked at me.

I looked back at him, then back at the ball, then back to him, to look down at him, not in an unfriendly way, I was just looking at him, and catching my breath. Then I realized I was probably, at 6'1", a good two or three inches taller than he then, considerably taller than when I had tried out for him so long ago. When I'd been a measly 5'6" scrub on his football team.

He shook his head at the ball, put his whistle back in his mouth, and then with both hands guiding him crawled in under the bleachers after the ball. When he re-emerged with the ball, he took the whistle out of his mouth and holding the ball under his other arm, looked up at me to say, "Thanks, Carl – for getting the ball for me."

I think I was pretty much expressionless because I crystal clearly remember thinking, "Gosh, Mr. Bidwell, thanks for not cutting me from the ninth-grade basketball team."

Of course I was way too smart to ever say that to him, which is why I know I was expressionless, because to have been that smartalecky with him—with any game official—would only come back to bite me in the butt.

So, we just walked back to the out of bounds line where the ball had approximately gone out of bounds because of the errant pass my smart defense had forced. We stopped. He looked to make sure everybody on both teams was ready to resume play, then he handed me the ball and dropped his right hand to let me know he was counting out the five seconds I had to put the ball into play. Which I did. And we got on with our jobs, he to his, and me to mine.

I passed the ball inbounds to Bill Brooks, the other starting guard with me that night, but who had been, coincidentally, one of the starting guards for Coach Bidwell back in ninth-grade.

And who on that night passed me the ball so that he could get the occasional assist while I was racking up the points to be our team's second-leading scorer.

To my recollection, of the five or six games he probably refed that I played in my senior year Coach Bidwell never homered or bonered a call against me. And I remember thinking too after that game, that after almost four years how cool it was he remembered my first name and called me by it,

and I wondered then and wonder now if he ever thought about how he'd cut me and what a difference it might have made if he hadn't cut me from that ninth-grade team.

But I wonder if maybe I weren't a better player for being cut, having to learn to deal with the disappointment, and to overcome it. And maybe too for having to deal with bouncing back. Not giving up. Not quitting. Especially when the future looked even bleaker than the past.

My scrub days were far from over though when I started at PBSHS, finally beginning the school year on the very first day of class new, just like everybody else. And new to a sophomore class that included students from four different junior high schools. To nearly all those students it must have been a shock having to adjust to so many new faces, all at once, all in one place, and feeling so left out and wondering if or how they would ever fit in.

But to me, heck, it was just business as usual. For nine years every year prior I'd always been at least once a school year the new kid in school.

Fortunately, none of the 3 PBSHS basketball coaches really knew me from boo. Oh, yeah, I'm sure they knew the hot shots from the starting line-ups of the four junior high teams. But as I soon realized not all 12 players of all four of those teams tried out for the jayvee team, either because they'd decided to focus more on football, track, or baseball at the high school level, or they just weren't interested in high school athletics, like John Hoffman, who'd decided to give it up.

Except there were a bunch of guys like me, who'd gotten cut and were giving it a second go-around, guys who hadn't gone out for some reason or other in ninth grade but were giving it a shot, and some guys who hadn't attended any of the four junior highs and were new too but reasonably talented and wanted to give it a go.

But in that pool, I somehow stood out enough, hung around long enough during tryouts, impressed just enough with my hustle, verve, or smarts often enough to be the last man on the team. And then the next year as a junior during varsity tryouts I managed somehow a repeat performance making the 12-man squad, evenly divided between seniors and juniors, so in a sense I had moved up, skill-wise, but I was still the team scrub, twelfth-man on a 12-man team.

And yet, I did have a varsity uniform, two actually, white for home and midnight blue, almost black, for away. Both trimmed in brilliant gold. So gold it seemed to shimmer. And I got a really cool warm-up that fit. With

my name on the back. Practice shoes and two pair of game shoes. A pair of white high-top Converse All-Stars. And a pair of genuine black high-top Chuck Taylor Converse All-Stars. Just like the Celtics wore. And in those days, we were the only team that ever walked on a court wearing them. Of course, to anyone else, those were just shoes.

But to me, I knew, they were trophies you wore on your feet—more than that, they were little lace-ups of Heaven to tie on your soles.

I ended that season as I'd started it, as a scrub, on the end of the bench, the twelfth-man on a 12-man team, but I'd picked up a few things, here and there.

And I had two new very nearly pristine pairs of game shoes to display on my shelf at home, alongside my jayvee game shoes. And three cardboard boxes for them on the floor of my bedroom closet.

Then the summer before my senior year I somehow had the wild-eyed perspicacity to find a way to attend a two-week basketball camp at Stetson University in Deland, Florida. I'd worked extra shifts at my part-time 15-20 hour a week job bagging groceries at Kwik-Chek to pay my way.

After a half-day's Greyhound Bus ride, I arrived on a Sunday evening at Glenn Wilkes' Camp. I didn't know what I was in for, but playing nothing but hoop for two weeks sounded like I'd be doing the next best thing to hanging around God's court in heaven.

But what really sealed the deal for me and for the most part kissed my scrub-ass status good-bye happened at the end of the first day's general workouts, all-day Monday—morning, afternoon, and evening—to find out the first thing Tuesday morning that I'd been selected by Coach Joe Cervallo to be on his 15-player roster for the rest of the two weeks

Coach Cervallo was the high-powered head coach of the high-powered Gainesville High School Basketball team, located in the same city as the University of Florida.

He'd had to choose ninth-, tenth-, eleventh-, and twlefth-graders-to-be to fill out his roster, but there were only two senior guards, me, and his son Joey Cervallo, Jr., who'd been honorable mention all-state as a junior. I am reasonably sure I gulped when I realized who I'd be playing next to, who I'd be starting with, on Coach Cervallo's team. But as the week wore on, and then during the next week I realized I'd not been chosen as a scrub; Coach Cervallo didn't think that of me at all.

In fact, he told me before the weeks were over that he picked me on

purpose because he was impressed that I was a 6-footer who could handle the ball so well, with either hand, and was an outstanding passer. I was stunned. And then I realized, well, yeah, shoot, Joey Jr. could do all those things. But he was only 5'8". And that would be his adult height, I later found out. While mine would be a little over 6'3".

Coach Cervallo had chosen me, I know now, to help get his son used to playing with a bigger guard, who could pretty much do what he could do handling the ball but was fearless at going to the hoop, because my height and longer arms would let me get away with stuff inside that Joey couldn't dream of. So Joey and I played a lot of one-on-one and two-on-two during those two weeks, and that was cool because I realized for the first time in my hoop life that I was getting all kinds of approval from Joey's dad.

For once a coach saw me not for who I was but for who I could be.

Joey Jr. would also go on to get a scholarship, but to some junior college across the state line in southern Georgia. And after that I don't know what happened to him. He was still only 5'8". An inch shorter than his dad.

And with that confidence and with the new set of skills I had picked up in such a densely concentrated space and time, I started my senior season ready to crack the starting line-up for the first time in my life.

And I did. As it was, I didn't start the first game of my senior season but did come off the middle of the bench to score 14 very meaningful and timely points in a low-scoring game (we didn't even score 50 points as a team—but won anyway), in a tooth-and-nail scrum narrowly defeating the Conchs from Key West High School, a state-ranked 3A basketball program. From that game on though I started for the rest of our 30+ game season.

All I needed—all I felt I ever needed—was just a chance. And that game proved to be it.

But the highlight of my senior year, what would have been the highlight of my highlight reel, had there been such a thing back in The Day, was actually the third game of the season, when I scored 34 points, what would be my personal best in high school.

Well, the most points I'd score in a high school game.

Not such a big deal today, but that was before the three-point line, and the quarters were only eight minutes long.

And in that game which we won 64 to 33, over Northeast High, 1 of our cross-county rivals, 34 points by one player was quite the accomplishment.

In fact, a couple of days or so after that game, the beat reporter for our

team at *The Fort Lauderdale News*, Jon Madden, who'd written the story on our victory over Northeast, stopped by before practice. It wasn't 3:30 yet, Coach Morris had not given his one-whistle imperious blast, so we were just jacking around the court practicing our horse shots, not our game shots like we were supposed to be perfecting.

So Mr. Madden walked over to the side basket where I was semi-seriously shooting around, probably working on my left-handed horse shots, as I liked to do in those days, when he told me of a conversation he'd had with his sports editor on the story he wrote on the Northeast game. He said he'd tried to convince him to run the following headline with the story: "Tornadoes Roll: Winderl 34, Northeast 33." Of course, he'd been told that head would be considered bad taste.

Yeah, Mr. Madden said he admitted, it would be in bad taste. Because he suggested the sub-head could be: Winderl 34, the rest of the Tornadoes 30. And he figured that would be in even worse taste, he thought, so he didn't really suggest it. But he said, he really wanted to emphasize to all his readers that I'd outscored everybody that night, including my teammates.

Bad taste or not, that game was a watershed event in my hoop career.

My days as a scrub were officially over.

That game got lots of people's attention, at my high school, and at other high schools in South Florida. I'd never score 30 points again in high school, but had several games in the 20's, because I rarely played a game the rest of the season that I wasn't for much, most, or all of the game double-teamed every time I got the ball or had to navigate my way around the key while the defense played a box-and-one against me.

That taught me a lot too, and readied me, little did I know at the time, for playing college ball.

Glenn Wilkes himself and Joe Cervallo weren't the only mentors who reached out to me and gave me the encouragement I'd lacked but needed and finally found in them; Steve Strein was a very, very unlikely force in my life that summer and during a handful of games my senior year.

Sometime during August right before the start of my senior year, not long after my two-week stint at the Glenn Wilkes Camp, a guy began showing up at the lighted outdoor courts in fashionable and trendy Lighthouse Point, situated east of Federal Highway but west of the Intracoastal, where nearly all of the students in the Cool Kids Club at PBSHS lived, while the students in the Ultra-Cool Kids Club lived between the

Intracoastal and A1A or, better yet, along the beach itself.

The courts though were just a five-minute bike ride from where I lived, on the wrong side of Federal Highway, the Intracoastal, A1A, and the beach. I lived on the wrong side of everywhere, west, wester, wester more, and westernmost of any pretensions to coolness.

Even so, my bike got me over the westerly boundary line, maybe because there was something about me that didn't like a wall, real or imagined, and so those courts continued to be my proving ground, where and when I learned that real players, athletes, in any sport, are made in the off-season. Not during the season.

And that guy who started showing up, Steve Strein, would be my new unofficial coach at the Lighthouse Point Courts where I played nearly every night of the week, if I could. Barring rain. Or some special evening service thing at church.

All I knew of Steve that late summer and into the fall before the season started was that he was in his late 20's, was single, had just moved to South Florida, from somewhere up north, like so many of us in those days, and was a junior high civics teacher at some private school up in Boca Raton, probably St. Andrews, now that I think about it, but lived in Deerfield Beach with his folks, until he could find a place of his own.

And he had played some hoop in college, somewhere up in the Mid-Atlantic region, as I recall, had been a guard, but had gradually put on some serious weight after he graduated. He was maybe 5'10" but weighed-in easily around 220, not fat, but stocky, on the thick side, especially through the middle. Even so, he still had some good moves, could still handle the ball, hit the open jump shot, if left alone too long, but rarely went to the basket. He just couldn't jump anymore, too much weight, and a knee injury after college, slowed him down. But he still played solid defense; he was a smart defender.

When not on my team, when playing against me, he liked to guard me, was always hand-checking me, grabbing at my jersey, or if we were skins trying to hold me by the arm, would give me a hip to keep me off-balance, tried to shoulder me away from the hoop every time I crossed the time-line, boxed me out hard but only with the mildest of roughness, and, if he couldn't physically, he would vocally hound and harass me. He never hurt me, but he never let up on me. Even if he was sitting out, watching, waiting to play "winners" on those pick-up game nights.

And he was a fun guy. Always talking, yammering, making jokes, not talking trash. And coaching, unofficially. Especially me, I soon realized. Whether or not we were on the same team during those many, many pick-up games. Giving me little tips, encouraging me, not just back-patting.

Often, very often, he berated me, not so much for what I did. But for what I didn't do.

Like he would constantly yell at me to quit passing up shots. To go ahead and force a shot once in a while.

To always be a threat to score, he'd admonish. Make the defense always think your first move was to score. To take it right to the hoop.

Things my high school coach had never said to me. But before my senior year was over, he too would make similar "suggestions." Once I'd proved myself, especially after my 34-point outing against Northeast, just the third game of our 30+ game season.

Also during that summer I learned, self-taught of course, perfected a sure-fire move to the basket that I'd use in the lane throughout my senior season and well into my first year in college. I eventually would use it less and less in college once I'd attained my full adult height and had reached "jumping jack" status, as one sports writer wrote of me early in my college career.

The move was simple, to a fault probably, because it was so unexpected and unusual when I put it into practice during a frenetic fast-paced game, especially during our hectic fast-break, full-court pressure up-tempo style of play in high school.

Coach Morris' philosophy was to create controlled chaos. Or to generate pandemonium in a box.

Back at Glenn Wilkes Camp we had drummed into our little heads, which suited me just fine, the principles and practices of the Pivot Foot. Easy, basic, simple, yet so often overlooked, and under-used.

Tangential, subsequent to that principle, was the Rocker Step.

But I took all the drilling a step farther. Or took it a step back, actually. Then a step forward, or sideways too.

Drilled into our heads was the basic principle that our pivot foot was always the last foot put down after we picked up our dribble.

But I figured out, reasoned, that if I put down both feet at once, at the same time, simultaneously, like by taking a little hop, as I was picking up my dribble, then I could decide which of my two feet would be my pivot foot.

And it was ever so true, according to the rule book, Dr. Naismith's Bible.

I even checked it with Coach Cervallo, and Glenn Wilkes himself. But I didn't really work on it and perfect it until after basketball camp. There it was just a theory; back home, during the rest of the summer, I made that theory practical.

Where I honed it and refined it was under Steve Strein's tutelage.

The twist I gave to the move was that instead of landing from my little hop to face my defender face on, face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder, I'd land sideways, with my side or back to him, protecting the ball, a la pivot-foot style, elbows out, ball tucked safely near my mid-section. Ideally I'd land enough to one side or the other of the defender so that I already had a half-step on him. I always tried to use this move solely inside the key, where defenders tended to play tighter "man-up" defense, not at arm's length, like outside the key.

So, after landing from the short hop, sideways, I'd give a little head fake, to freeze the defender, maybe get him to lean even closer toward me, thinking I was going up for a shot, that's when I'd use the step-and-a-half allowed me by Dr. Naismith's rule book after I'd picked up my dribble. Then I'd cruise usually pretty much untouched and unguarded past the shocked and surprised defender, to the hoop for often an uncontested layup.

I was Kevin McHale before Kevin McHale was insuring his NBA Hall of Fame career with his signature moves in his own private torture chamber around the hoop as a Celtic tormenting big men with his elasticity, fully utilizing his pivot foot, and extending to the max that extra step-and-a-half. I was doing that before he was even born. Except I wasn't 6'11.

I was only all of almost 6'1'' when I started using it.

I got so good at it that I moved almost in one fluid motion from full dribble, jump stop, head fake, then glide to the hoop or drop off the ball to a wide-open teammate, if some defender jump-switched to pick me up, leaving his man all alone.

It was a nearly flawless move. And it had little or nothing to do with physical gifts. I just worked the rule book to my advantage, because I "figured out the rules," by using reason. And I put it into smooth practice and execution after thousands of repetitions, on both sides of the hoop, and down the middle of the lane, and with either hand, left or right.

So that I could do it in my sleep. Which I did.

I dreamed of that move. And it came ever so true.

I worked on that move during countless hours by myself and even more numberless hours at the Lighthouse Point Courts. Against very live players, of all ages, sizes, and playing levels. With Steve so very often in attendance, sometimes as the recipient of the moves I put on him.

Then the season started. During warm-ups for a home game, five or six games into my senior season, I looked over to the scorers' table to see that one of the referees for the game was Steve.

Totally unbeknownst to me Steve was a certified State of Florida High School Basketball Referee, having transferred his certification from somewhere up north.

My Steve Strein.

I had to force back a smile when our eyes briefly met; he stood arms crossed, leaning back on the scorers' table, and I waited in the lay-up line for my turn to drop in a right-handed lay-up.

He gave me an expressionless professional nod of acknowledgment, and I gave him an almost equally expressionless response, except for maybe a slight lift of my left eyebrow.

Early in the game, I put my move on some hapless defender for the first time and scored an easy bucket, despite all the traffic in the lane.

My coach, Tucker Morris, sanctioned my move but warned me that to the untrained, careless, unwary eye it could look like travelling. So he coached me, no advised, no—admonished me, that if an official whistled me for travelling after the "move"—even once—I was to cease using it for the rest of the game.

But if I heard no whistle, I was to use it, judiciously. My word, even then, not his.

And so I did.

In that first game Steve officiated, the opposing coach who'd obviously heard of me and scouted me, because of the special defensive treatment I received, just about came unglued the first two times I made that move, for easy easy baskets. Ridiculously easy baskets. Or, as Coach Morris really liked to say, left the defenders lookin' for their jocks.

The third time, just before the half, I used it again for an outrageously easy reverse lay-up, a la Kevin McHale, so long before Kevin was a twinkle in his daddy's eyes, the opposing coach was apoplectic. Even hysterical at the non-call. Or as Coach Morris liked to say, he went "apeshit."

I recall the coach screaming to the officials that they might as well give

me a suitcase for my travels. Some referees might have called him for a technical foul after that sideline tantrum. I know I probably would have.

But not Steve.

He took the whistle out of his mouth from where he'd stood at the time-line, his position as the backcourt ref on that supposed non-call on my successful move to the hoop, and decreased the distance by half between himself and the opposing head coach still seething and foaming at the mouth just inches inside the out-of-bounds line in front of the visitors' bench.

I circuitously strolled around them to go back to my end of the court, to get ready to play defense, but I passed them slowly enough and close enough to be party to their exchange, the coach's over-the-top rant and Steve's calm, measured response.

I could see Steve was going to talk him down off the ledge. If anyone could do that, Steve was the man.

Steve began, "Read the rule book at halftime, Coach, on the use of the pivot foot. Page 37, Section C, Paragraph 5. Then sit down and shut-up in the second half or I'll whistle you for a T." He paused, as if for effect, and then began anew. "Or I could blow it right now," replacing his whistle at the side of his mouth.

At about that time I paralleled them as near as I could tactfully get, just to the side of Steve, but on the side away from the visiting coach.

Steve half turned to me, dropped the whistle back into his hand, and barked, "Whatta you lookin' at 23?!!!"

Only I, who knew him, would recognize the merest beginning of a smile in the corner of his eye, that just as suddenly vanished. He glared at me, full-on, hands on hips. Gun-fighter style. Just like I'd learn from him and would use in college whenever I was really unhappy with an official's call and wanted to make my point, silently. Wordlessly. As Steve also instructed me, no official'll ever whistle you for a T with that kinda body language.

Oh, and then he squinted at me, and I knew—conversation over.

Next he wheeled away from the coach, who had been suitably dismissed. Steve had style.

I continued on my roundabout path, but remained expressionless at Steve's reference to my uniform number, except to look down at it, as if to confirm its correctness. But mostly I recall, to hide any smile that might have crept out of my eyes.

Then Coach Morris screamed and stamped at me Rumplestiltskin-style, "Dammit! Winnerdrall! Get back and play defense!! And don't be a damned coke bottle when you get there!"

His imperative returned me to reality and the matter at hand, alerting me to confidently know all was right and restored in the hoop world, on that night, for that game.

Coach Morris never pronounced my name correctly the whole time he knew me, even after I graduated, went away to college, and returned to the gym occasionally, for old times' sake; sometimes he didn't even mispronounce it the same way two times in a row.

But I didn't mind. Didn't much care. What I heard when he mispronounced it was "Winner All."

And that did not rhyme with "scrub"….

The Plot

Murali Kamma

On the day Neel returned to his apartment, he discovered that Sai had stopped talking—and eating. Moreover, having retreated to the little shed behind the apartment building, Sai was refusing to leave what had been his home for several months. Summer hadn't arrived, so it probably wasn't sweltering in the tin-roofed shed; still, as Neel remembered from his only look inside, it was a dingy, barely furnished room that felt like a prison cell. Apart from the weak glow of a single bare bulb, the only illumination in the cramped space came from the sunlight trickling in through a small barred window. Sai was the day watchman, hired after a couple of burglaries nearby had rattled the building's residents. There was already a night watchman for the neighborhood, so Sai's job was to stay vigilant during the day and be a handyman who could run errands.

Neel had just returned from a trip to the country he'd migrated to with his family as a teenager. Now, odd though it seemed, he was an expat in the land of his birth. While waiting to catch his connecting flight, he'd texted Murti to inform him that Sai could resume delivering the newspaper and milk to his apartment. "Sai fried will do," read Murti's response, baffling Neel momentarily. Then, boarding the plane, he wondered why Sai had been fired. But instead of texting again, Neel switched off his phone, letting the thought hang in the air. Not unlike an airport announcement that sounds garbled initially, the text's meaning would become clear in due course.

It was early morning, the city still unburdened by heavy traffic or pollution, when a taxi deposited Neel at the front gate of the apartment building. The tawny sky was just beginning to brighten when Neel got out and saw that the gate was already unlocked. The man from the dairy would have brought the milk packets by now. Neel paid the driver and started rolling his suitcase on the gravelly lane, setting off a grating sound. A stray dog skulking by the compound wall approached cautiously and barked in displeasure, though the protest seemed half-hearted more than threatening. Earlier, such encounters used to unsettle him—but he'd realized that the best way to deal with it was to look away and keep walking nonchalantly.

Neel's attitude of disregarding anything upsetting, he discovered, had the curious effect of making him indifferent to his surroundings. "Desensitized" was the word in vogue. In this sprawling metropolis, you became desensitized after a while.

Neel recalled how, on his first visit to the area where his apartment was located, it had been jarring to see a long row of flimsy, primitive-looking tents crowded together near a busy intersection, barely a stone's throw from a swanky mall. These makeshift tents were homes for construction workers, whose scruffy children played on the abutting road while their mothers cooked on the sidewalks. The building craze had converted what used to be uninhabited land into a bustling township, pockmarked by big ditches that sent up clouds of dust. Many high-rises had sprung up, seemingly overnight, to house the hordes of technology workers drawn like moths to the many new jobs in the gleaming Info Tech City close by. And the boom had also attracted migrant laborers from the countryside.

The words "Sixten Tower" appeared on the gate. A typo, he'd thought at first, but it actually stood for 610, the number of the building, which was five stories high and had ten apartments. Going up in the small elevator, Neel heard sounds—running water, voices, footsteps—that announced the start of another day. Stepping out on the fourth floor, he was cheered by the sight of a milk packet near his apartment door. Yes, he could make coffee now! In the kitchen, Neel took a few refreshing sips of his hot brew and, walking up to the window, glanced down at the little shed in the back. The door was closed and the light didn't appear to be on. Surrounded by weeds and overgrown grass, the ramshackle shed looked abandoned. He found it hard to believe that the usually voluble and cheerful Sai was in there, observing a silent fast and refusing to move out. But why had he been fired? People liked him, as far as Neel could tell, and he seemed capable. Sure, he had a few quirks—such as his tendency to ask for "phoren" T-shirts, or bang rather than knock on the door—but then again, who wasn't quirky? To Sai's credit, he'd been eager to be helpful around the building.

The doorbell rang, surprising Neel. It was early for visitors. When he opened the door, Murti greeted him but didn't smile. "May I speak to you?"

"Of course. Please come in, Murti. Would you like some coffee?"

Short and slender, his thinning hair generously streaked with grey, and wearing glasses that were a little big for his face, the middle-aged visitor appeared mild-mannered—but Neel knew that Murti, as the resident

manager, controlled Sixten Tower's affairs with an iron fist. Declining Neel's offer, he sat upright on the sofa and, adjusting his checked bush shirt, said, "I just wanted to update you on what happened."

"Appreciate it. I was surprised by the turn of events, because I thought Sai was a good worker and well liked by people in the building. Is he fasting to protest?"

Murti pursed his lips, looking peeved. He didn't look at Neel. "I don't know who you've been talking to, but he's a troublemaker. He's like an illegal migrant who's crossed the border and refuses to leave. The shed is not his territory."

Neel thought he was being unnecessarily dramatic, and the analogy didn't make sense—but there was no point in arguing and riling him up even more. Better to keep the tone neutral. "So what happened, Murti?" he said casually.

"What happened was he thought he was a big shot. Instead of being grateful, he became bold and arrogant. He began plotting against me. The shed was a temporary place for him to stay until he found his own accommodation. When I found out that he was making improvements, I told him to move out. He refused, so I fired him. And now we have a problem on our hands. You know how these people are—you give them an inch, they take a mile!"

Neel shifted uncomfortably, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He didn't like Murti's tone and the direction in which this was going, dragging him into an unpleasant swamp. Neel was about to speak, but he didn't get a chance.

"Think he can blackmail us?" Murti said, his voice rising. "Rascal! It's outrageous. Tomorrow I'm having a meeting for everybody in the building. I'd like for us to find a way to get rid of him."

Murti appeared so agitated by now, with a trembling hand and flushed face, that Neel thought it best to end the visit. Saying that he'd be glad to attend the meeting and help in any way he could, Neel quickly ushered him out. Walking back to the kitchen, Neel looked down again at the ground extending to the compound wall. A lone guava tree, bent and swaying gently in the breeze, stood like a weathered old sentinel next to the shed. A couple of trees on the property had been knocked down in recent months, and Neel wondered if this remaining guava tree—which had no fruit, as if it had already given up hope—was next.

Was it true, then, that Murti & Co. were planning to erect another building? Would there really be enough space, even after tearing down the shed and perhaps the compound wall, to build anything here, adding to the congestion and putting a further strain on the water supply, which was running low and being rationed? What if the rains failed again? That wasn't going to stop them, according to Rahman, Neel's neighbor in the building. They'd be willing to dig deeper to reach the aquifer, just as they'd be willing to encroach on the neighboring land to accommodate their building. "They'll do anything to get their way," Rahman had said. "It's all about the money, my friend. Greed is great, not God."

That seemed the most likely explanation for why Sai was being forced out. A jet-lagged Neel sat up for a long time that night, reading. Feeling restless, he rose from the sofa a few times and walked up to the kitchen window. No light came on in the shed even after darkness fell, and it was hard to believe that Sai was in there. How did he manage? Maybe Neel should have tried to contact him. But what about the others—why hadn't anybody else been able to reach out to Sai? He should have made inquiries earlier.

Rahman hadn't been in when he got back from his trip, and now everybody in the building except Neel was asleep. Perhaps Sai was sleeping, too, despite his fast. Well, Neel would have to wait till the next day. Something was bound to happen soon. The meeting, he hoped, would end the impasse. How long had it been going on, anyway?

Around three or four o'clock, he fell into a deep slumber and had a dream. A stray dog began barking loudly. It was joined by another dog, then two more, and soon the noise reached a crescendo. Neel wasn't scared because, though he was standing nearby, the dogs were not threatening him. Instead, they were barking—on and on—at the little shed, as if a burglar lurked inside. But the door remained closed and there was no response even after the dogs began scratching on it furiously.

When Neel opened his eyes, sunlight poured in through the window, warming his face, and he found himself slouching in the sofa, his book still resting on his chest. He had barely fifteen minutes for the meeting on the terrace. Getting ready quickly and swallowing his coffee, he took a quick peek at the shed. It still looked unoccupied, but in the daylight he noticed a few covered bowls—had he missed them yesterday?—near the door. Food, perhaps? They seemed untouched. And then, with a shock, he noticed a lock

on the door. How could that be? Tearing himself away from the window, he hurried to the meeting, with questions swirling in his mind.

For a Saturday morning, the building was strangely quiet—which meant that all the residents were on the terrace, waiting for the meeting to start. The canvas-covered section of the terrace, carpeted and sparely furnished with metal chairs, acted as the building's gathering place for events. Almost everybody was there. Neel found an unoccupied chair next to Rahman, who greeted him brightly. The meeting proved to be short.

Clearing his throat, Murti said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have an unexpected announcement." He appeared uncharacteristically nervous and was perspiring, although it was pleasant at this hour. "Sai is not in the shed," he continued. "It's empty…I don't know when he left. As far as I'm concerned, this is over and we can move on."

There was a stunned silence, followed by a flurry of questions. Any idea where he went? Did he leave a note or contact anybody? Is he okay? What happened?

Murti's terse answers were "No" or "I don't know." There were no immediate plans to build another apartment building, he added, but the shed would be demolished soon. When the meeting moved on to other matters involving the residents, Neel and Rahman drifted away, as did a few others.

"So what do you think?" Rahman said when they reached their floor.

"Puzzling. I don't know what to make of it."

"Fishy is what I'd say." Opening his door, Rahman invited Neel in for a cup of tea.

Widowed and solitary, Rahman was always friendly, often giving him news about his children and grandchildren, who had settled abroad and didn't visit him much.

"What do you mean?" Neel said, entering the modestly furnished living room.

"I'll be back," Rahman replied mysteriously, heading to the kitchen, while Neel sat on a chair by the window and looked around. A small, ancient-looking television set was perched on a cardboard box, and Neel wondered if it still worked.

Emerging from the kitchen, Rahman handed him a steaming cup. "Didn't you hear the dogs barking last night?" he said. "They were loud, and it didn't stop for a while. Unusual…don't you think?"

Neel's heart began racing, as if a treadmill he was walking on had

skipped to a higher speed. Taking a sip to calm himself, he said, "The dogs around here bark, don't they?"

"Yes, but not like this, especially at night. Nobody investigated because it was not their problem and they didn't want to be bothered. Look, I don't mean to sound paranoid, but how did the lock appear on the door? I didn't see it before. Let's just say that force can be used to get rid of unwanted people. It happens, I've heard, more often than we realize."

His face flushing as he swallowed some hot tea, Neel tried to absorb all this. "What can we do about it?" he said.

"Nothing much, I'm afraid," Rahman said. "But I'm going to call a reporter I know at the local Daily News & Views. Whether he's interested or not, we should let him know."

"Good idea. You know, I still cannot figure out what happened, why Sai was fired. He was pleasant and a good worker, available at all hours. Wasn't he entitled to sleep on the property? Murti's reasoning was ridiculous. So what if Sai was making some minor improvements? The shed is dilapidated…"

"I think I know what could have happened." Rahman paused and there was a pinched look on his face, as if he was reluctant to proceed. "Sai once confided to me that his real name was Syed. Syed Ibrahim."

"Really? So he changed it? He must have had a reason." This curious case was getting curiouser and a discomfiting thought occurred to Neel.

"Indeed, he did," Rahman said. "In his hometown, his people are tanners. Not wanting to do that kind of work, he left. In the city, he said, decent jobs were scarce for somebody like him. So he changed his name. Maybe Murti found out."

Neel was appalled. "Are you saying that he got fired because…?"

"Well, I don't know for sure. That's my hunch."

A clatter outside Rahman's apartment stopped him from saying more. The meeting having ended, some people were coming down the stairs instead of waiting for the building's only elevator, which could be temperamental.

Neel soon got busy at work with a new project. Later that week, returning late to his apartment, he saw that the shed was no longer there. Murti hadn't wasted any time in tearing it down. Neel didn't speak to Rahman that night, and the following morning he left fairly early to catch a flight—although this time he was making a domestic trip to see his client.

Work kept him away, and it was another week before he saw Rahman again. Neel was opening his door, after a trip to the local supermarket for groceries, when he appeared next to him, smiling.

"Hello, Neel, I see that you were gone for a few days," he said. "Well, I have some news." Though nobody else was around, Rahman seemed skittish. Dropping his voice, he added: "I called the reporter. He said something interesting. They're investigating the building."

"Because of Sai…?"

"No, not because of him. There wasn't enough information, he said. There have been other such cases, with people vanishing or leaving abruptly. But unless there's solid evidence, it's hard to prove anything. He said that we should file a Missing Person report with the police if we suspected anything. I said that we didn't have anything concrete."

"Then why is the building being investigated?"

"Aha." There was a gleam in Rahman's eyes, and Neel could see that he was enjoying the drama, the telling of the story. "There's a corruption scandal involving properties in this area," Rahman continued. "It's the Wild West, my friend. Bribes were paid to acquire land and illegal boundaries were drawn to increase the size of plots."

"Shocking! So, perhaps, the shed was on somebody else's property? How ironic—because it was Sai who was accused of being an illegal occupant."

"Exactly, Neel. Maybe that's why I haven't seen Murti lately. He's hunkering down, I'm sure, and busy talking to his lawyers. I can't wait to see how all this unfolds."

"Indeed, Rahman. It'll be very interesting. Would you like some tea?"

Shutting the door once Rahman entered the apartment, Neel began to tell him what he'd seen on his last trip to the airport. He hadn't stopped thinking about it. Neel was in a taxi, approaching a shantytown crowded with the kind of tents he'd noticed on his first visit, when there was a sudden diversion in the traffic. People holding placards were protesting loudly, but Neel couldn't get a closer look because the taxi had to take a detour. He asked the driver what was going on.

"Agitation, sir," the driver said, as the taxi slowed and took a sharp turn. "Labor people asking for better living conditions."

Craning his neck, Neel looked past the policemen at the demonstrators behind the barricade—and turned around only when they were out of

sight. For a moment, though it was a long moment, one protester looked like Sai. He was shouting and waving a sign. Then the moment passed, and Neel wondered if he'd just imagined it. Maybe he wanted him to be Sai. Getting off to check wasn't an option. Besides, he had a plane to catch.

———

Singing Bird

Kendra Clark

As a young girl, my family always tried to cultivate celebration in regard to our heritage. We are of Cherokee and Chickasaw descent; in our veins is the same blood that was spilled on the Trail of Tears. Oklahoma has been our relocated homeland since our family was forcibly removed from the Eastern region of North America. When I was about six years old, I was given my Cherokee name via ceremony. With my burgundy shawl wrapped around me and the sweet smell of fire wafting gently toward me, the elder named me "Singing Bird" for my musical tendencies. I was always bouncing, singing, and laughing that sweet little girl laugh. I loved my new name. Singing Bird was so insightful, so blissfully true, and still is today. Music and other arts have shaped who I am. I am Singing Bird.

I had a musical father who played the blues, sang rock and roll, and danced like a pixie. The pixie dance was usually just to make me laugh, but nevertheless he inspired me. I quickly decided I wanted to play piano when I saw my father's giant hands clumsily play "Georgia, on My Mind." Piano lost its luster once I heard my father play guitar; it was his shining talent. Learning songs on my painted guitar was the moment I went from an audience member to an artist. I recall special memories of listening to classic rock and head-banging against the vinyl seats of our family car. Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* was my inspiration for a talent show I entered at the tender age of seven. There are still sepia-toned photos of me carrying around a toy microphone, hardly giving it the personal space it deserved. Though many forms of art deeply influence me, music was the first. Before the books, before performing arts, before cinema, music was the universal language my heart was immediately drawn to. Music would be the kindling for my love of art.

Later in elementary school, around fourth grade, I discovered a whole new world between the pages of books. Life began to get more and more complicated as I reached this age. My family had never been perfect, but I was finally beginning to notice. My mother was single for most of my upbringing. She was raising two daughters and dealing with depression and

anxiety. My father was never quite there. He was like a fantasy dad. When he was there, he was too good to be true: patient and wise, silly and loving. Then he'd be missing in action. After too few letters, phone calls, or visits, I grew tired of playing guitar. I found a new muse to replace it though: books. I began reaching for chapter books and fell in love with stories. I had a teacher in fifth grade named Ms. Nichols, who smelled like coffee and cigarettes. She had stretched, bronzed, leathery skin, pale blue eyes, and wore a fake ponytail clip-in every day. She always wore cheap-looking pink lipstick on her wrinkled lips, often reminding me of a dinosaur who'd gotten into mommy's makeup. She ate pork rinds and cherry tomatoes, had us sit in a circle on the ground, and then read to us. She read us books we weren't even supposed to read yet! *Where the Red Fern Grows, Frindle, How to Eat Fried Worms,* and *A Wrinkle in Time* were just a few among my favorites. God bless that beautiful dinosaur woman, as she helped me fall in love with books.

As I entered into that beautiful time of blossoming that is puberty, life continued to get more complex. Our family was finally and completely torn apart, and I was one confused girl. Though everyone seems to struggle to find identity at this stage, a bout of deep depression washed over me. Like a tide sweeping away sediment, any sense of myself seemed to get whisked away in salty, foamy swirls of despair. My outlet for such sadness became writing. The tragedies became poems, lyrics, and even a book titled *Girl in La La Land*. I recall often comparing my life to a merciless Oklahoma tornado, but writing seemed to ground me even on my worst days. I also began discovering music on my own, which is quite a journey for a young person. Every once in a while, I'd pick up my guitar and play, but it was mostly still too fresh a wound to pour salt into. Music, movies, books, and writing was quite literally saving my life, as my mental illness was much to bear at such a young age.

Becoming a high-schooler slowly shifted my focus outward. Suddenly, friendships and performing took over my alone time. I had always been outgoing, but the few years of introverted darkness was like starvation to my soul. My social life thrived, and I began learning more about myself. I was active in the drama team at school and found that I loved being on stage, despite my anxieties. My friends were the loud weirdos, and we felt like our small town's *Saturday Night Live* cast. I'd found connection, something I'd lacked for too long, with other people through drama club, I

had a niche, a home away from home, and a creative outlet. I saw my first few stage shows and musicals at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center, igniting a further love for performing arts. When experiencing theater, I often would find myself in happy tears as soon as the curtains rose at the start of a show. By some miracle, my own tiny, rural high school gained a musical theater program during my junior year. My starring roles, "Snoopy" in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* and "The Wicked Witch of the West" in The *Wizard of Oz*, are some of my most cherished moments. Not only did I manage my anxiety with art, but at the end of each show for curtain call, the people I got to bow with were my dearest friends.

Though things in my life weren't perfect, I'd healed enough to play my guitar again. More friendships came along as I began playing and singing with other young artists. Little did I know the arts would soon bring me further joy in the form of a person. The local music scene was much more prominent than it is now, as it seemed everyone was either in a band, or asking you to start one with them. I sang in every talent show and variety show I could, while continuing my passion for reading and writing. My senior year, I hit another roadblock in life, landing me in yet another depression. My mother lamented over me, as she was almost always sick with worry. My mother often reminds me of Mrs. Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. She is a highly alert ball of nerves whose concern over her children is almost crippling. Though my mother was always high-strung, when depression or anxiety struck me down, she usually grew strangely calm. When I stopped doing the things I loved, she grew more worried. I had plans to sing with a friend in my school's upcoming talent show, which were plans I wished to keep despite my own personal problems. Once the show was over, I met the man who would become my husband. He was in a recently split band and asked me to start another one with him. We bonded over our mutual love for music and began playing and singing together. Our first memories consist of a lot of late nights playing music, usually until dawn. Music brought me into a relationship with my future husband and, then, with God.

I had some brief moments of belief in God throughout my young life, but nothing seemed to stick with me for long. During the last few years of high school, I'd become completely unbelieving, turning to spirituality for comfort instead. As my heart became more embittered and peace became harder to find, my soul longed for something. After much thought

and transformation, the music of a church brought me to a decision that has since changed my life. Life seemed to move much quicker after that moment. I graduated high school a month later, got engaged and married before the end of the year, and had our two children in the few years that followed. Both of our daughters, Lola and Bernadette, have names based on songs. My husband and I have never stopped playing music together, whether it be in the occasional open mic night, the worship set every Sunday, or jam sessions in our living room.

My daughters, though are very young, have already began expressing a love for music. My eldest, Lola, is five, and is watching her mom lead worship on a stage almost every week. They both get to hear Daddy's guitar reverberate throughout our house. Our daughters have been exposed to not only music, but to the love that has blossomed from it. They see both of their parents working hard in college. They see Mommy reading her books and watch her cry at almost every movie. They know when she is working on her writing. Their sweet, tiny lives have already been touched by the arts that saved mine. They grab the microphones and imitate their mom, while they pluck guitar strings, or bang on drums, claiming to be Daddy. They sing their precious hearts out almost constantly, just like Singing Bird. Lola has already been to the theater with me, enthralled by the music, the lights, and the colors. How my heart longs for the future but cries out to stay here! My love for art has prepared me for one of the most important tasks of motherhood: passing it on. I can't wait to show my children more: to stay back and watch them pick their own music, to see them learn about themselves through books.

The arts are expressions that are meant to be shared, and the significance of them on the human condition is not to be undervalued. They gave me new worlds to explore when I didn't want to be part of my own and gave me a voice when I did. So, Singing Bird has taken shape; and, with legs and wings stretched wide, I am ready to know more.

The Slate

Dr. Irving A. Greenfield

ACT I

SCENE 1

SETTING: A windowless room with eight chairs set in a circle.

AT THE RISE: Elderly men enter the room either singly or in twos and take their accustomed places. Two of them use canes. A young man and a younger woman and also take their usual places.

STEVEN

I have two announcements: I won't be here next week and ADDIE will take over the session; and, secondly, there's a good chance that we might be moved to a conference room on the first floor.

JERRY

Does it have windows?

STEVEN

I think so.

IRA

Think doesn't count. You can think a window, but if it's not there, it's not there.

STEVEN

I'll find out about the windows.

(pause)

Any other comments?

(pause)
Let's get started.
(the men are silent)
No one?

MARIO
There's something in the newspaper about a guy pretending he's someone else.

STEVEN
How does that make you feel?

MARIO
(pause)
I don't know. It's a newspaper article. Why would a guy do something like that? I mean he wasn't in NAM. So why should claim—

PAUL
He needs a life.

STEVEN
How do you guys feel about that?

Jerry
I don't feel anything. If the guy wants to be Napoleon, that's his problem. Besides, don't all of us play-act now and then?

PAUL
This is different.

STEVEN
What you mean different?

PAUL
By claiming he was there, he taking something that isn't his to take.

SETH
He's wearing "borrowed robes," to quote Shakespeare.

ADDIE
What do you think those "borrowed robes" give him?

JERRY
(with a laugh)
His jollies.

PAUL
It's a weird way of getting them.

JERRY
There are jollies and then there are jollies.

PAUL
Status. He wants to be part of—

IRA
What happened in Nam; what the guys experienced there.

JERRY
That's just fuckin' sick. The same with us. Who'd want to claim he was in Korea?
(pause)
The guy would have to be off his rocker.
(general agreement)

SETH
(moves nervously on his chair)
I was never in KOREA.
(absolute silence)
That's the truth.

STEVEN
Do you want to talk about it?

SETH
(clears his throat)
I lied.

JERRY
(continued)
Not good enough.

RALPH
(pointing his cane at SETH)
You're trying something, aren't you?
(pause)
You want to test us.

STEVEN
(looking at SETH)
Are you joking?

SETH
Sadly, I was never more serious.

JERRY
Then all of your stories about—

SETH
Lies.

PAUL
(nervously rubbing his hands on his knees)
I don't like this.
(pause)
I'm upset. I'm really very upset.

SETH
So am I.
(pause)
I'm trying desperately hard to control myself. It's taken me years to come to this moment.

JERRY
(angrily)
You conned us.

STEVEN
What's the group's feelings about being conned?

RALPH
Fuck the group's feelings. I know what my feelings are.

STEVEN
(nodding)
Tell us.

RALPH
(with intense anger)
All the time, he was laughing at us.

SETH
(softly)
Never.

RALPH
(with extreme disgust)
I believe you like I believe pigs have wings.

SETH
(Shrugs, and takes a few moments to look at each of the men)
I'll leave if you want me to.

STEVEN
(to the group)
Do want him to leave?
(none of the men answer him)
Then he stays, and maybe we can find out—

RALPH
Who the fuck he really is? Yeah, that's what I want to know. Who he is? The guy with the fancy college degrees. A Ph.D. to bamboozle us, to cheat us. Yeah, I want him to stay; and like they say in movies, I want him to sing like fuckin' canary.

STEVEN
You're really very angry, aren't you?

RALPH
I trusted him. All of us trusted him. There was something special about him.
(beat)
Special, shit!

MARIO
(softly, while looking at SETH)
Why?

PAUL
Borrowed Robes.

MARIO
Let him tell us.

SETH

(with a long drawn out sigh)

At first it was "Borrowed Robes." It helped me get my first job. The guy as me if I was Korean Vet. I said I was. Then he asked, "See any action?" I knew the answer he wanted to hear and I gave it to him, "Yeah, with the Marines up at the Frozen Chosen." I got the job. It was in the EDWARD'S EMPLOYMENT AGENCY on Warren Street.

IRA

But you weren't even Marine; you were in the army.

SETH

I'd switch from one to the other, depending on who I was speaking to

(pause)

SETH (continued)

When I was younger, I had a photographic memory. I read every thing I could get my hands on about the Korean War, even the Government Battle Reports. Chapter and verse. I knew where the units were and who commanded them.

RALPH

Yeah, he did. I remember I was on the bus with him going crosstown and there was this guy sitting across from us with a cap that said KOREA on it.

(pause)

And Seth and the guy have this conversation about where they were. I swear anyone who heard them would have believed every word.

STEVEN

(looking at SETH)

You didn't have to do it. You weren't trying to get a job?

SETH
It became a kind of a game. I was telling a story that someone wanted to hear.

MARIO
But you were lying.

SETH
No. I was telling a story, and the story was real to me.

IRA
But it wasn't real.

SETH
It became real over time, so real that sometimes I'd get choked up and actually cry.

RALPH
You were acting. It wasn't fuckin' real.

SETH
(with emotion)
It was very real to me. It was my story, and I felt and lived every part of it in my head.

JERRY
That's sick.

SETH
All of us have stories. We hear them here. How much of those stories are real, and how much is made up to—

RALPH
It's not the same.

SETH
You're right; it's not the same.

RALPH
Yours was a game, and you held all of the cards. You always won, had a full house. We have nothing, nada. Only the heartache that we barely can speak about.

SETH
(brushing away tears with the back of his hand)
You're right.
(in a choked voice)
But I never really had anything. Deep down I knew what I was doing.

ADDIE
What I'm hearing is that once you started, you couldn't stop because the story took on a life of its own.

SETH
Something like that.

ADDIE
But you knew you were lying.

SETH
It was a story.
(pause)
I almost believed it. The line between truth and fiction became very thin, and sometimes didn't exist at all.

JERRY
You said you had a dark side. Is this part of it?

SETH
I guess so. I've kept it hidden for sixty years.

SETH (continued)
(pause)
I couldn't do that anymore, especially here with you guys. I couldn't continue to take what was yours.
(weeping)
I'm sorry.

RALPH
Why now?

SETH
MARIO mentioned the article in the newspaper.
(pause)
I knew the time had come for me to—

RALPH
To tell the truth.

SETH
(nods)
Something like that.

RALPH
I'm not buying it. A guy doesn't fold that easily, not after sixty years of spilling out bullshit.

STEVEN
Does anyone else feel the same way as RALPH?

JERRY
He spilled his guts out. What more—

RALPH
Lots more. Sure, he's hurting. I'm not deaf and blind. But I'm not fuckin' soft hearted either. There's more. I know that and so does he.

STEVEN
Is there more SETH?

SETH
(nodding)
There's more. But it's not what RALPH thinks it is.

RALPH
(angrily)
How the fuck would you know what I'm thinking?

SETH
(ignoring him)
It's getting toward that time when the slate has to be cleaned when certain things have to be jettisoned.
(pause)
Not for religious purposes. All of you know I'm an atheist. But when my time comes, I want to die a clean death, a good death with nothing that I have wanted to say left unsaid, and nothing that I wanted to do left undone. So, I began here to clean my slate.
(lights go to black)

TURBULENCE

Marlene Olin

The flight attendant watched the guy in B3 pound his rollaway. Jamming it. Stuffing it. Calling it every swearword in the book. Still it wouldn't fit in the overhead bin.

Flight 1538 from LaGuardia is scheduled to leave in twenty minutes!

His face puffed up and bloomed red. Jesus, thought the attendant. It was hot on the plane. Hotter still, she imagined, in pleated jeans and a flannel shirt. His wife—blond, trim, fortyish—was already in her seat and had buckled her belt. The guy huffed and puffed like he was having a coronary, yet still the wife sat.

The attendant knew the drill. One of them had over-packed the suitcase. Words would fly, *I told you not to pack your jacket,* and then a minute or two later, the suitcase would be unzipped on the floor, its contests subjected to public perusal. The attendant glanced at her watch. She could hard-boil an egg in the time it would take this scene to play out.

"Elmore," said the wife, "the nice lady will hang up your coat. Take out your coat, Elmore. It's no big deal."

The wife spoke with flat, drawn out vowels, practically adding an extra syllable. The attendant could always spot the travelers from upstate. While their fingernails would be manicured and their shoes impeccably clean, their faces would be as lined and weathered as old gloves. The woman pulled her mouth tight, glaring at the husband with less patience now, the telltale grooves radiating from her upper lip.

"I know it'll fit, Charlotte. I'm sure it'll fit."

We're just finishing some last-minute paperwork!

Finally, the attendant cleared her throat and glanced at her watch. The bag wouldn't fit in a million years. She knew these people. Their words had a veneer of politeness. Yes, sir. Thank you very much. But underneath, molten lava slogged through their veins.

It would be a matter of principle. A matter of manhood. She watched the guy turn toward the entrance door. A line of people had barged their way in, the people pushing now, their voices getting louder. B3 stepped back and

reconsidered the bin. Then he grabbed the suitcase, flipped it around, and nearly clocked the man behind him in the head.

The attendant winced. Lawsuits were filed for less. She glanced at her clipboard. "Mr. Leftkowitz, are you all right?"

Leftkowitz, C3, glanced in her direction. Another husband and wife. Fortyish, along with their child. The man was busy sorting through a huge tote of baby paraphernalia, his arms whirling like a tornado. He hadn't heard or seen a thing.

Prepare to stow all personal belongings!

"Jolene, I know the pacifier is in here somewhere."

The airline permitted children under the age of two to sit on their parents' laps. This kid was clearing pushing the boundaries. The toddler was huge, his feet making dinosaur-sized depressions in his mother's thighs, his chubby hands kneading her cheeks.

"Hurry up, Wendell. Little Mikie needs his paacee, don't you, Buddy? Who's a good boy! Such a good boy!"

While her hands held his torso, her knees bounced. But no amount of jostling would wrestle this child into submission. Instead he took his little fist, looked his mother in the eye, and walloped her.

The attendant counted to ten and imagined herself in the lotus position. Her thumbs were touching her forefingers. The crazies in her life were swept up with a broom, dumped in a dumpster, and locked and sequestered very, very far away.

***

Three rows back, two elderly women observed the ruckus. Blossom sat on the aisle. She wore a dark wool jacket and matching skirt. Pearls roped her neck. Her long silver hair was pinned neatly in a bun. She seemed like a remnant from an older time, a time when airline stewardesses looked like calendar models and people dressed for travel like they were heading to church.

"That child is a handful," she said apropos of nothing.

The woman seated next to her was about the same age. Miriam's hair was teased and lacquered in a tight helmet, her shoes sensible, her clothes a polyester pantsuit with an elastic waist. Her cheeks were orange, her mouth red, her nails pink.

"That boy's my grandson," she replied. She scrutinized the elegant woman at her side and sat up a little straighter. Miriam had always wanted

to be a commanding person, statuesque. Someone people looked up to. Instead, she had turned into a little old lady with a ridiculous wardrobe. She glanced at her arthritic hands. Gnarled knuckles. Blue veins. They hadn't managed buttons in decades.

Please turn off all electronic devices.

"Mikie!" the mother screamed. By now the child was pummeling her face like whack-a-mole. The elderly women craned their necks to get a better look.

"He's usually well-behaved," said Miriam, patting down the front of her blouse. "An angel really."

"The problem," said Blossom, " is that parents have forgotten to be parents. They want to be liked. They want to be everyone's best friend." She pulled a novel out of her purse, licked her index finger, and proceeded to read.

"Will the lead attendant please report to the flight deck immediately!

Miriam couldn't seem to slide the metal into its clasp. She yanked the belt all the way out, shifted her angle in the seat, and took aim once more. Nervousness always made her talkative.

"You see, we're just getting back from a vacation. A cousin got married at the Waldorf. Seven courses. Adam and Eve were carved in ice, and wouldn't you know—sitting on a log of chopped liver. The child's been in a strange crib in a strange hotel. His routine has been upended," said Miriam. "Children need routine."

Blossom lay her book in her lap. "The only routine that child needs to get used to is three squares a day, a jumpsuit, and bright lights." She glanced at the woman over the top of her glasses. "I suppose they asked you to babysit?"

Miriam felt like she was shrinking. Her spine seemed to be collapsing one vertebra at a time. "I'm the grandmother," she said. "They ask. I come."

"For over fifty years I taught high school English," said Blossom. "Women nowadays have no idea what they want. You notice how they don't hire strangers anymore? The young mothers want to work, but they're terrified of leaving their children. There's a kidnapper lurking in every shadow, a pedophile hiding in every bathroom."

Miriam had watched little Mikie for three days straight. Her knees were stiff, and her hip was throbbing. She never knew a headache could last for thirty-six hours. And now Wendell and Jolene were already talking

up their next vacation! She slid two fingers on her wrist and felt her pulse thump.

"And the way they bring them to the nicest restaurants!" Blossom rolled her eyes theatrically. "I've had more than one meal ruined!"

In a flash, the toddler broke loose of his mother, darted past his father, and ran up and down the aisle. Laughing. The flight attendant chased him. The elderly women watched as Mikie knocked over three drinks and grabbed another's kid's toy.

Miriam had never been so embarrassed. People were whispering, for crying out loud! Why bother with television and free liquor while little Mikie Leftkowitz provided the in-flight entertainment!

Prepare for take-off!

Suddenly Miriam found it hard to breathe. She grabbed the armrests and mumbled a little prayer. She hated flying. God, she hated flying. But the more anxious Miriam became, the more she rambled. The words seemed to tumble out on their own volition. She lifted herself in the seat to give the pilot some help.

"Did you enjoy your visit to New York?"

Blossom put her book back on her lap. "We live upstate. In Hornell. Ninety minutes outside of Rochester."

Winds buffeted the plane as it crawled upwards. Miriam leaned back. She had forgotten how terrifying a take-off could be. Her heart hammered. Her thoughts flew like birds, one minute here and one minute there. "Upstate New York. That's nice. Very nice."

Blossom hesitated. It was her turn to smooth down the front of her blouse. "We're heading to Miami for a vacation," she said. "A sort of...beach vacation."

Ladies and gentlemen, our ascent may be slightly rougher than usual.

Miriam started bargaining with God, *Lord, if I survive this flight, I promise to be kinder!* Nicer! Wiser! She smiled so wide she thought her skin would crack. Again, she spoke.

"Have you been before? The ocean! The breeze! The beautiful people! And everyone looks like a model!"

Blossom's chin began to quiver. Up down. Right left. "Do you live in one of those senior communities?"

The corners of Miriam's mouth slowly receded. "When my husband died, my son bought me a condo in Boca. There's a clubhouse, pool, tennis,

the whole shebang. It's wonderful. Really wonderful. " It was a good half hour from her old neighborhood. She missed her friends. She missed her deli. She missed the corner grocery store with the nice fresh melon.

"My son Elmore is proposing a tour of every adult living facility from Palm Beach to Key Largo," said Blossom. "He says it's like checking into a hotel."

Miriam knew these places. Half of her friends have been moved into them, pickled and shelved by their children. She glanced at her feet and took a quick toe to head inventory. All of her parts were in working order. She mumbled another prayer and reminded herself to thank Wendell. The condo was lovely. Really lovely. She was living on her own, Thank God. Again she pasted on a smile.

"I'm sure you'll find the right one. They're like resorts, really. Like staying at the Ritz."

Blossom glanced towards the front of the cabin. Elmore had his nose in one of his engineering magazines. Charlotte was filing her nails. "You see, I'm becoming forgetful. And rude. Downright rude." She rubbed her temples. "Sometimes my head seems filled with cotton. I've become an embarrassment to my son and his wife, and, when my former students see me in the street, they turn the other way."

Miriam didn't know what to say. At their age, heartache was doled out in measured and regular allotments, like the little cups of nuts on the attendant's tray. She looked out the airplane window. They were climbing through the clouds. It was dark in the cabin. Not a lick of blue was anywhere to be seen.

Please keep your seatbelts fastened!

When, thought Miriam, *does the ride get any easier?*

Then just as she let down her guard, the moment her shoulders finally relaxed, the aircraft dipped. Glasses of water toppled on the floor. A woman screamed. A man cursed.

"I hate turbulence," said Miriam. "Don't you hate turbulence?"

Blossom unfolded her fingers and laid them over Miriam's. The sentences in her head were surging and dimming like a grayed light bulb. "A few bumps are nothing, my dear. We still have a ways to go."

Little Mikie was asleep in his mother's arms. Wendell was snoring. Elmore and his wife leaned into each other, their heads finding a familiar fit. Meanwhile Miriam and Blossom waited for the turbulence to end. They

closed their eyes and held each other's hands knowing that any moment the plane would stabilize. The clouds would be beneath them. Light would reappear, and the air would be stilled.

Poetry

Autumn

Ivanov Reyez

It is quiet
in the light of my obscurity,
my words unwilling to come.
They crouch like roaches
in the darkness of their choosing,
observing me hollow with day.

The autumn breeze,
the autumn chill always promises—
or maybe not—a new vocabulary
from the same bruised sky.

I get up to sit down,
the strewn leaves like discarded ballerina shoes,
a tangle of smudgy pink laces
too heavy for the spider breeze.

I imagine
on my mother's grave a mourning dove,
a bird slow to rise
when a car approaches,
a bird quickly dead when it passes.

Can't Stop

Jack Cooper

I love living on a planet
with so many ways to exist
whales that only have to
open their mouths to eat
ants that run an alternative civilization
little kittens that make dead things come alive
a world where orchids live in the elbows of trees
sponges as big as recliners
get fat kicking back at the bottom of the sea
and ptarmigan that grow their own snowshoes
how I can't spell anything
correctly in French
and you can never get the word squirrel
to play on your tongue right
I love the earth the way
I can't stop looking at its moon
and never tire of your lips

Dead Heat

Ivanov Reyez

When at the end of day you chose we meet,
The afternoon still citrine, still in heat,
It was to abort what had never really begun:
Our love a child fed and starved by turns,
Tossed aloft into an armless wind it dropped
Into your car where not immediately we wept.

On the drive home with the setting sun I wept
For the night and cold that would rob our heat,
For the ensuing days without a reason to meet,
Without the talk of Prague that had once begun
So passionately in my office where we took turns
Imagining, and after a rainfall later we dropped

Innocently our arms to kiss; not more we dropped
Though easily in your eyes and agitation the heat
Was of such enormity we could have gasping wept
The joy of having found each other, how to meet
Since we both had spouses who would take turns
Wondering about us and how at work we had begun.

You remember that June we had seriously begun
Talking about ourselves, our heat golden in the heat
Of distant church bells, and a sudden rain dropped
To asperse our giddy heads whose twists and turns
Foretold nights of loneliness where in arms we wept,
Arms that held us, bodies we raged should not meet.

Dead Heat Cont.

Ivanov Reyez

"I would like a child by an artist, one I can meet
From time to time in the cafés of Paris in the heat
Of philosophy and art, in the poetry of walks and turns
In a bed sweaty with us, all inhibitions dropped,"
You confessed in your office and secretly I wept,
For the artist was not the man with whom you'd begun

Supposedly a marriage: a life stillborn had begun.
And when I questioned why feeling this artistic heat
You had chosen to marry, you wanted the matter dropped
After saying, "Now I regret it," and you almost wept
As we left the building and made the necessary turns
To our cars. In time you insisted your husband I meet.

We should meet, I felt you wanted, to legitimize our heat
Which musky had begun in your office, and our unstable turns
Over which he had wept would finally be calm and dropped.

Greener Grass

Jim Peterson

Would that all the grass
were greener
in fact
on the other side
and that fenced-in
space between
were more watered
and not so wide;
or at least there were
some treed or rocky stations
where an uncertain traveler
could rest or, even, hide;
but it is not so
or at least we don't know
and the trampled grass
and that not walked
both seem ignored,
if not denied.

The Secret to Perfect Contentment

Gaylord Brewer

A bench all your own in the parque central,
the rough bowl of the pipa heavy and cool
in your palm, coconut water sipped by straw

succulent in your mouth. No weekend
worshippers from the parish church, no families
strolling, just a typical mid-day business

of policia and teens, mothers and infants
and weathered men at work. You are all waiting
for nothing in particular. It is a Tuesday.

You're alive. You're here. The cold
drink is almost unbearably good. What a lark
to still be witnessing this world, be part of it.

Overhead, the parrots run their drills,
squawking out tight, angular formations,
then disappear into lushness of the loritos trees

named for them. Oh los loritos, the powerful, twisted
trunks, so lovely in their white skirts of paint.
The delicate fern-like leaves. The fiery red

jewelry of their abundant pods. There,
a black-faced squirrel gnaws the flesh
from a single seed. And then the last sip.

Tornado

George Longenecker

We'd crossed a corner of Texas into the Oklahoma Panhandle
with constant weather warnings on the radio:
thunderstorms, hail and possible tornadoes.
The sun set as long bolts of lightning jumped
from grey-green clouds building to the west,
land straight and flat, mile after mile,
cattle hunkered down in barbed wire pastures.
A long driveway to a white farmhouse
made us think of possible escape,
we could pull up and ask to share their tornado shelter,
we had a child after all, surely they'd let us in.
Still we kept going, hoping to ride out the storm,
slept that night in a Boise City motel,
while winds rattled the walls
and rain pounded the roof,
but no tornado sirens sounded.
Next morning was clear and bright,
warm already at dawn,
we had breakfast at the only café
on the highway through town,
our daughter asked where the tornado went,
we couldn't say, though everyone in the café
was talking about how it had passed.
A few miles up the highway in Kansas,
we came upon half a mile of power poles,
splintered and snapped by wind,
a row of railroad cars lifted off the tracks,
sun bright on devastation,
cars lined up as people watched cranes and utility trucks.

Tornado Cont.

George Longenecker

We asked each other what would have happened,
if we'd been here when the tornado hit—
we could have been swept away, car shattered,
clothes, books and playing cards scattered across wheat fields.
Salvation seems more about chance than good works,
it's really about luck and making the right guesses
about whether to ride out the storm
and where to take shelter.

Turn

Jack Cooper

As I shuffle down for tea
November's cold fingers find my skin
under folds of doughy cloth
like some leftover croissant
and I suddenly wish for spring
with ginger rising in the garden
birds scattering light in their copper bath
and green places beyond to toss my sorrows

I sit and watch the narrow fruit of day
open outside the window
foiling the possibility of comfort
as the earth abandons its softer creations
and allows death to take liberties

There is much to admire
in this turn toward darkness
the scribbles of hoarfrost at first light
the wool sweater that smells of cedar
the cedar tree itself
a trustworthy presence in the shifting sky

Still I'm already riding the wind
to bright leaves and noisy fields
to the smell of dirt and flash of wings
to the promise we made to try again
when we don't need each other
just to stay warm

Walnut Hulls

Mark Tulin

My Mexican Granny peeled the walnut hulls
that blackened her hands,
that awoke the ghosts of superstition,
that tamed the sun devil of the fields
and brought eternity to her harvested soul

Wisdom spoke in broken English
Hanging brown bosoms in muddy waters
Old bulging veins of common sense
The queen of Aztec ancestry
The mystery of Latin romance

Pleading to the Tortilla Flat bouncer
not to block her from the dancefloor:
Look at my hands young man
Are these not black from walnut hulls
I worked in the fields all day
I broke my hump, scraped my pride,
transformed a mountain lion into a goat
Made the white man enough money to buy a vineyard in the hills

Walnut Hulls Cont.

Mark Tulin

Trying to make her way out of the bigotry,
acting like a rabid dog in her shiny, little outfit
she broke down doors not allowing the Mexicans in
and freed the migrant workers of the Central Coast

While her husband was shooting Nazis in the trenches,
she did the boogie-woogie in her party dress
to a Benny Goodman raging clarinet,
swinging to the King of Swing,
doing a Texas two-step in her alligator heels,
my Mexican Granny managed to get into the dancehall,
jitterbugging under the Ventura moonlight.


ART

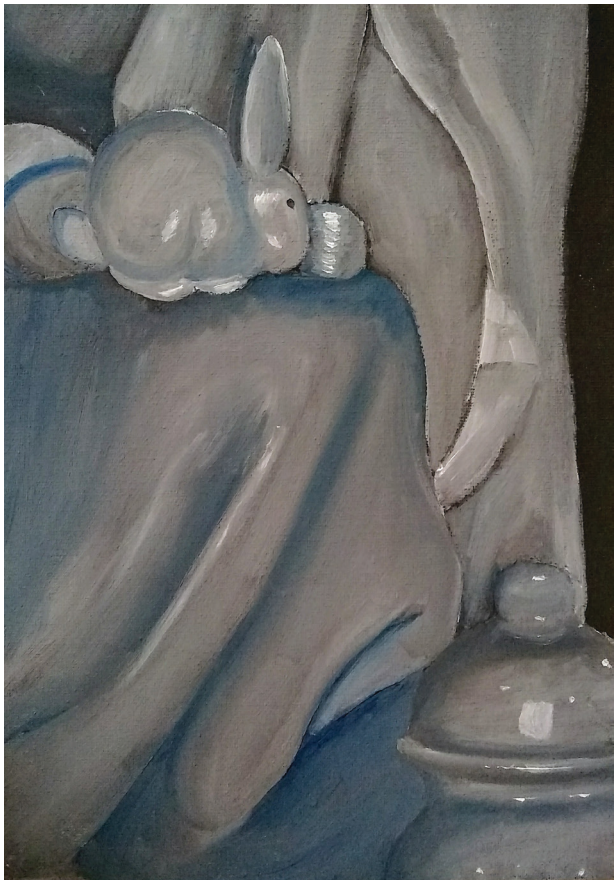
Darion Grant

Recently starting to paint with oil, it was difficult at first at the beginning but got easier along the way. *The Sitting Angel* was the first painted, focusing on the wings and the skin tone. Adding the ring of dark violet around the figure makes it stand out more.

The second painting is a still life using white, blue, mixed black, and a neutral brown.The method of painting goes from the background to the closest pieces to the viewer. The layers of white paint give it a look of sculpted with paint

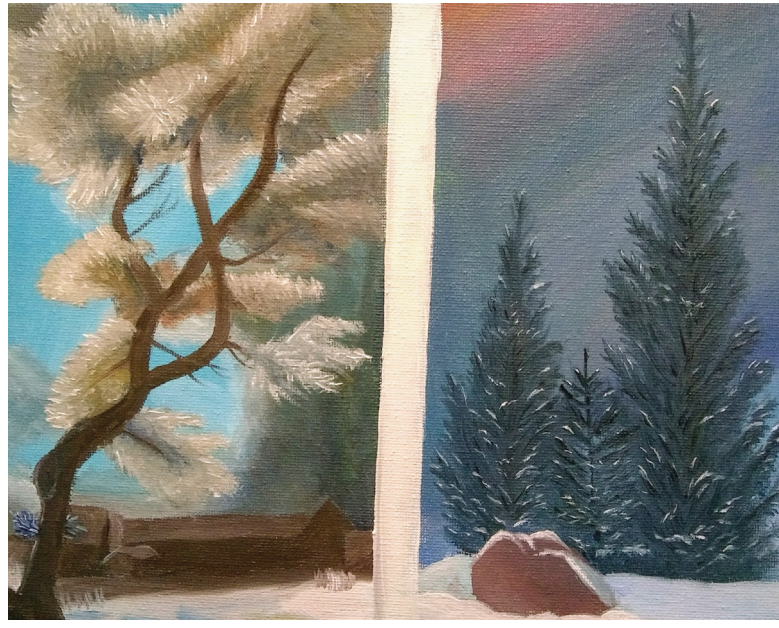
The third painting started off as a basic plant study but ended up becoming a whole piece in itself. Just like the second painting, it started off with the background and then working on the trees. The needles on the pine trees were individually painted and added white as snow.

Sitting Angel
Oil on canvas.



Still Life
Oil on canvas.

Unnamed Work
Oil on canvas.



Spencer Plumlee

My work creates and displays deeply personal and intricate environments that explore various approaches to portraiture. I use my artwork to explore and concentrate on the idea of creating portraiture through the subject's environment and the objects that share the same space. The use of invented narrative through objects and settings in my pieces allows me to represent the subject of my portraiture with the intention of making the line between invented visual narrative and observational reality indistinguishable. I use my pieces as a medium for storytelling, allowing my art to act as and become a visual embodiment of a time capsule. My art acts as a yearbook photo for casual settings that highlight palpable and intimate moments between my subjects and the viewer, allowing me to preserve that moment in time within my work. I thrive on the mundane and intimate moments between my subjects and their occupied spaces that work to incorporate their personal contemporary fashion and interior design settings to depict their specific style and individual taste.

Unnamed Work

Unnamed Work

Unnamed Work

Milly & Morgan

Sean Tyler

As a studio artist I focus on forming new combinations of traditional fine arts and fiber craft media. My aim is to create work that has a distinctive presence in the space where it is hung, allowing it walk the line between two and three dimensions as well as the line between fine art and craft. I explore how traditional media can intersect and create new textures and three dimensional forms within a painted format. In terms of subject I approach the female form and traditionally dainty subjects, such as floral paintings, with a fresh and modern perspective that is intended to combat the misogynistic implications of many classical paintings of women and subjects dismissed as "feminine". Ideologically my goal is to reclaim the female form from the traditional conflict between woman as subject and woman as creator.

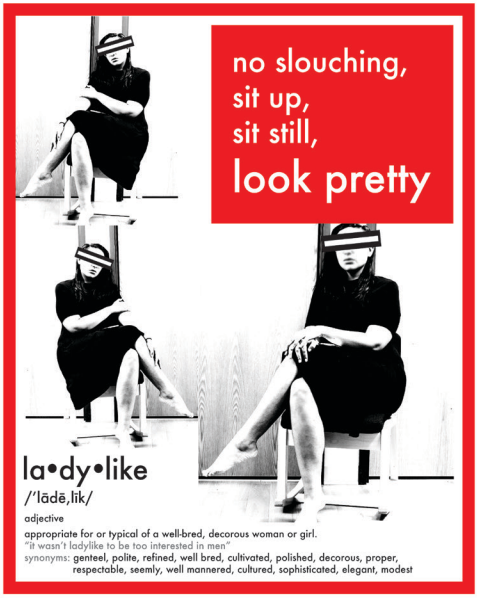
Mary Queen of Heaven

Hallucinogens

Bridget Williams

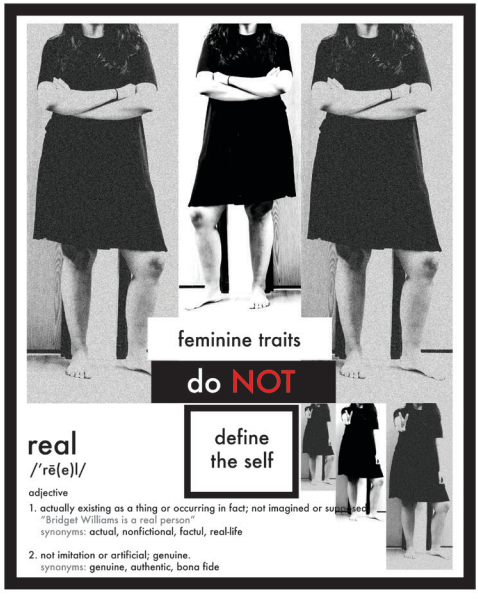
As a graphic designer and photographer, communication between people plays a major role in my work. I approach each body of work in a narrative style with a twist of manipulation of imagery. I combine elements of typography, photography, and illustration to express my ideas the way I envision them inside my mind.

Self-Portrait
Digital Illustration
11"X17"
2018



Redefining Women's Sexuality: Femininity vs. Conformity, Diptych

Inkjet Print
8.5"X11"
2018



Contributors' Notes

Rod Martinez

Rod Martinez, a Florida native, was attracted to words at an early age. Influenced by comic books, the library and *The Twilight Zone*, becoming a writer was inevitable. Challenged by his sixth-grade son to write a story about him and his friends "like the Goonies," that story became his first published book. The rest, as they say, is history.

Kara White

Kara White is at the beginning of her career, but she is taking steps to conquer the world. She uses her writing as a method to pinpoint misgivings and, often, oppression she sees in the world. Her writing is an expression of the darker, edgier parts of her personality, but in daily life she works to promote positivity and compassion. She tries to be the voice for those unable to speak, and the eyes for those unable to see.

Sandra Scofield

Sandra Scofield is the author of seven novels, a memoir, a book of essays, two craft books, and, most recently, a book of stories, *Swim: Stories of the Sixties*.

Autumn Fourkiller

Autumn Fourkiller is an MFA Candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. She is a McNair Fellow, podcast enthusiast, and sad, sad girl. Her work has appeared in ONLY THIS PUBLICATION but stay tuned. She grew up in Oklahoma and was considered the best person in the world by her grandfather, Pop.

Carl Winderl

Carl Winderl is a Professor of Writing in the Literature, Journalism, Writing, & Languages Dept. at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, CA. He earned an M.A. from the University of Chicago in American Lit. and a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from New York University.

Murali Kamma

Murali Kamma is the managing editor of Atlanta-based *Khabar* magazine. He has interviewed, among many other authors, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, William Dalrymple, and Pico Iyer. His fiction has appeared in *The Apple Valley Review, Rosebud, Lakeview International Journal of Literature and Arts, Asian Pacific American Journal, South Asian Review, AIM, The Missing Slate, Eastlit, Setu, The Wagon Magazine,* and elsewhere. T*he Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *India Abroad* have published his opinion columns, and he received a Gamma Gold Award from the Magazine Association of the Southeast (MAGS).

Kendra Clark

Kendra Clark A.K.A. Singingbird is a bold Oklahoma native who grew up singing to the trees and exploring the outdoors. She is passionate, caring, and hopes to change her corner of the world someday. She has a husband named Steve to whom she has been married for eight years, and two brilliant daughters, Lola and Bernadette. Singingbird still doesn't know what she wants to be when she grows up, but she figures it will be something impactful. She is an ENTP, Enneagram 8w7, nerdy, fun ball of energy. She supports causes like mental health advocacy, justice reform, adoption (human and fur), and generally wishes to see her state rise through the ranks.

Irving Greenfield

Irving Greenfield is 90 years old, and lives with his wife in an independent living facility on Staten Island, one the New York's five boroughs. His novels have been published by St. Martin's Press, Arbor House, Avon, and several other publishers. His short stories appear in *Amarillo Bay, Runaway Parade, Writing Tomorrow, eFictionMag, Contrapositions,* and the *Stone Hobo*; and in *Prime Mincer*, *The Note* and *Cooweescoowee* (4X) and *The Stone Canoe*, electronic edition and *Hippocampus* magazine. He has been a sailor, soldier, and college professor, playwright, and novelist.

Marlene Olin

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. She is the author of a short story collection as well as a recently completed novel. Her short stories have been published or are forthcoming in journals such as *The Massachusetts Review, Prime Number,Upstreet Magazine, The American Literary Review,* and *Arts and Letters*. She is the winner of the 2015 Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Award and has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Best American Short Stories.

Ivanov Reyes

Formerly an English professor at Odessa College, Ivanov Reyez is the author of *Poems*, *Not Poetry* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). He is the winner of the *riverSedge* Poetry Prize in 2015. His poetry has appeared in *The Cafe Review, Paris Lit Up, The Mayo Review, Pinyon, Taos Journal of International Poetry & Art*, and other journals.

Jack Cooper

Jack Cooper is author of the poetry collection Across My Silence (World Audience, Inc., 2007). His poetry, flash fiction, and mini-plays have appeared in *Rattle, Slant, Slab, Bryant Literary Review, The Main Street Rag, North American Review, Cooweescoowee,* and others. His poetry has also been selected for Ted Kooser's "American Life in Poetry" and Tweetspeak's "Every Day Poems." His poem "Of Longing" was chosen Grand Prize Winner in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*'s 2016 Poetry Contest. He is co-editor of www.KYSOflash.com .

Jim Peterson

Jim Peterson is a poet, essayist, and short story writer who is writing his first novel about a sabotage attempt of the fledgling U.S. rocket program at Cape Canaveral in 1951. Jim's work has appeared in various publications including *Lamar Magazine*, *Pointer View*, *Revelry*, and *Florida Writers Magazine*. A former U.S. Army officer, international business executive, and college and high school English instructor, Jim resources his diverse background to creatively present readers with poignant relatable experiences about the human condition. Jim lives with his wife Maria in Melbourne, on Florida's Space Coast.

Gaylord Brewer

Gaylord Brewer is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he founded and for more than 20 years edited the journal *Poems & Plays*. His most recent books are the cookbook- memoir The Poet's *Guide to Food, Drink, & Desire* (Stephen F. Austin, 2015) and a tenth collection of poetry, *The Feral Condition* (Negative Capability, 2018).

George Longenecker

George Longenecker's poems have been published in *Bryant Literary Review, Evening Street Review, Santa Fe Literary Review and America*. He's had book reviews in *Rain Taxi*, and a short story in *Main Street Rag*. His book *Star Route* was published by Main Street Rag in 2018. He's president of The Poetry Society of Vermont.

Mark Tulin

In 2012, Mark Tulin left an excellent job in Philadelphia (a senior psychotherapist) and packed a few things in his Prius and headed to Santa Barbara to be with his future wife. Once in Southern California, he found his muse and has been writing poetry and stories ever since. He has published in the *Santa Barbara Independent*, *Family Therapy Magazine*, Smokebox.net , Fiction on the Web, *Elephant Journal*, *Page and Spine*, and *Friday Flash Fiction*. His poetry chapbook is called, Magical Yogis, and his website is Crow on the Wire (www.crowonthewire.wordpress.com).

Darion Grant

Darion Grant is a Studio Art Major who enjoys painting and creating character designs. He hopes to expand his boundaries in the art world and try to make a name for himself.

Spencer Plumlee

Spencer Plumlee is an artist currently working and located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her practice is centered around figure dominated spaces and intimate moments from her contemporary surroundings in paintings. She received her Bachelor's in Fine Art with focus in Studio Art from Rogers State University.

Sean Tyler

Sean Tyler is a painter and mixed media artist from Tulsa, OK. Tyler graduated from Rogers State University in 2019 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Tyler works with mixed media formats and specializes in painting on canvas and fiber arts. While at RSU she showed multiple times in the yearly Juried Exhibition and received the Best in Show award of the 2017 exhibition and the 2019 Exhibition. Tyler has also shown at the Hardesty Arts Center, Guthrie Green, and the Tulsa Artists Coalition Gallery. Tyler is focused on maintaining ties to the community and fostering art involvement and education.

Bridget Williams

Bridget Williams is a student at Rogers State University majoring in Graphic Design and Photography. Her main medium is photography, and she approachs it in a narrative style to express her ideas in a fun and engaging way. For her, communication between people plays a major role in her work. She uses this as a tool to explore and experiment with her current ideas.

Call for Submissions

Cooweescoowee, a journal of arts and humanities, is seeking submissions for its 2020 edition. Submissions for publication are accepted in the following categories:

- Poetry
- Fiction
- Creative Non-Fiction
- Artwork
- Plays
- Graphic Stories

Send an electronic copy of written submissions saved in Word to Sally Emmons, Managing Editor, at sallyemmons@rsu.edu, by May 1, 2020. Your submission should include a short (50 word) bio, as well as all contact information.

Send images of artwork to Steve Rosser at srosser@rsu.edu. All art submissions must be digital. Photos of 2D or 3D work must be in sharp focus. Art should be 300 dpi, and approximately 8" x 10". Your submission should include a short (50 word) bio, medium, dimensions and all contact information.

Art entries may also be mailed on CD to:
Steve Rosser
Dept. of Fine Arts
Rogers State University
1701 W. Will Rogers Blvd.
Claremore, OK 74017-3252

Though images will remain the property of the photographer, actual submissions that are e-mailed or mailed on CD or other storage device will not be returned.

If your work is selected, you will be notified. Please direct all inquiries to Sally Emmons at (918) 343-7976.