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Andréa Rivard

The Erstwhile Homeless of St. Louis, Missouri

The cherry-red juice drips down her chin the way excess water from somebody’s lawn moves down a sidewalk gutter. It even gets stuck for a moment on the mole she has before it navigates around. She sucks on the popsicle with so much force that she breaks it.

“Lolly, you can’t eat it like that.”

She tilts her head downward so her eyes resemble those of a great-horned owl. The deep brown of them takes up too much space, not leaving enough white for me to think she’s really and truly human, even though Mom says she’s just as human as I am.

Lolly talks with her mouth full of red goo and ice. “Why not?” She slurps on it. Juice dribbles onto her hand, settling between wrinkles. “It tastes good.”

“Just because it tastes good doesn’t mean you should forget your manners.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re a stuck-up twerp, did you know that?”

I stand and gather my sidewalk chalk. “And you’re going to die of heat stroke in that coat. At least I’m not as dumb as you!”

I glare at her, but she just keeps sucking on her cherry popsicle. “Hmpf!” I say, and march up the walk back into the house.
“Alice,” Mom says from the window. She’s always staring at the
cars passing by and the other children in the streets. “You can’t speak to
family that way.”

“Lolly isn’t family,” I say. “She’s only here because the govern-
ment says she has to be.”

Mom turns to me. “No, Alice. She’s our family now. We treat our
family with respect. Lolly will behave the way she wants to, and in time,
she will learn how we do things, too. It’s only been a couple of months.”

I can feel the skin from my eyebrows touch together as I scowl. I
want to stick out my tongue at her, but I don’t because I know she’ll just
scold me some more.

“Make sure you put that chalk back where it belongs, Alice.”
Mom turns back to the window.

I stomp through the house, even though I know it won’t make a
difference. Part of me is satisfied that I’m still wearing my sneakers and
that I’m going to get black smudges on the white carpet. The other part
hates the satisfied part of me, the part that knows I need to be kind to my
mother, since her life is hard.

The chalk bucket goes in a basket in the attached garage. It goes
between the jump ropes and the arm floaties for the swimming pool.

Dad won’t be home for another three hours, which means Mom
will still be staring out the window and Lolly will do whatever it is Lolly
does for a very long time. I take the sinky rings from the basket with all
of the pool toys and head out to the pool.
I’m wearing my swimsuit under my dress, so I pull the dress over my head and take off my sneakers. I fold the dress the way Mom showed me and put my sneakers together underneath it so it doesn’t get dirty. That’s the right way to do it.

I throw the sinky rings into the pool. On the last one, Lolly comes through the gate that leads to the back of the house.

“What are you doing now, Alice?” Lolly still has cherry popsicle streaks on her face.

“I’m going swimming,” I say. “Obviously. It’s very hot, and I don’t want to die of heat stroke.”

Lolly sits in a pool chair. “Well don’t mind me, little one. Swim away!”

I nod curtly and do a shallow dive into the deep end of the pool. Mom doesn’t like when I dive, but I can’t collect the sinky rings any other way.

I start with the red one at the deep end where I dove in, then find the orange one at the other end of the pool. I always collect them in the same order because then I know how many I’ve done without counting.

I’m to the green one when I notice that Lolly is staring at me. “Haven’t you ever collected sinky rings before?” I frown at her.

Lolly laughs. It sounds like marbles in a dryer. “No, child. I’ve never been swimming before.”

“You’ve never been swimming before? How are you not dead yet?”
Lolly shakes her head at me. “We didn’t have a swimming pool when I was a kid. And then when I grew up, I didn’t have time to go to the community pool.”

Community pools are gross, and everyone knows that. There are always way too many people there and little boys who pee in the water. Mom never takes me there anymore. She and Dad hired a private swim teacher for me two years ago.

“You weren’t missing much on the community pool. Trust me.”

“I’ll just keep watching you, if that’s alright.”

I shrug, even though I really don’t want her there. “I guess so.”

When I collect the last ring, the pink one, I get out and toss them all back in. I’m about to dive in when Matty comes barging through the gate.

“Alice! You didn’t invite me? What’s wrong with you?”

Matty’s older than I am, and he lives next door. He’s wearing his swim trunks and has goggles on his head like a headband.

“I didn’t plan to swim! It just happened.”

“Loser has to put ice down their suit!” Matty dives into the pool.

“No fair!” I dive in after him.

He grabs the red ring, which just happens to be exactly where he dove in. Lucky.

I stick my tongue at him under the water, but he’s already re-surfacing. I spot the orange one just past him and dart over to it, grabbing it before going up for air.
He’s adjusting his goggles so they’re actually on his eyes, which gives me the advantage. I take a deep breath and dive from my position in the pool.

The green ring isn’t far, but I can’t see the yellow one. Even though it doesn’t come next, I grab the green one before Matty can get to it.

I have six rings on my arm when I resurface the final time. Matty’s right there, waiting for me, and he pushes me back under as I’m gasping for a breath.

The water seeps quickly into my lungs. I flail my limbs in order to escape from Matty, but all I feel is the burn of the chlorine taking over what used to be air.

Clean air shocks me as I surface once more. The fire in my lungs spreads to my toes and fingers and brain.

“HaHA! I won, you see?” Matty holds up all of the rings.

All I can do is cough.

“Now, Matty,” Lolly says from her pool chair, “We all know you didn’t win. Aren’t you worried that you hurt Alice?”

I can feel that Matty has moved toward the edge of the pool, even though I’m still coughing uncontrollably. “She’s fine, Lolly. We do this all the time.”

Lolly doesn’t say anything.
I finally catch a decent breath, so I swim to the edge of the pool and pull myself out. I lay out on the warm concrete next to the pool and let the excess water seep out of my suit in tiny streams and puddles.

“Alice? Are you okay?”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah, Lolly. I’m okay. Thanks for asking.”

Matty appears over me, casting a shadow across my face. “Come on, loser. The ice is waiting!”

“For you, maybe.”

He kicks my side. It doesn’t hurt, but it doesn’t feel good, either.

“What’s wrong with you today?” I ask, sitting up quickly.

“What’s wrong with you?”

My dress and shoes are still folded neatly near the edge of the pool, and Lolly is still watching us. I think Lolly might be Matty’s problem. He has a Lolly at his house, too, though his is named Carlton and is older than mine.

I scowl at him and stand up. We head back toward the house, but Lolly stays poolside, watching us from her chair.

“I don’t know why you’re in such a rush to stick ice down your pants.” We grab towels from the rack next to the back door.

Neither of us is dripping wet when we enter the house, so Mom can’t yell at us. The ice is in the kitchen.

There’s a television in the kitchen as well, and it’s tuned to CNN. The white-haired man on the screen is asking someone what they think of The Solution now that we’re three months in.
“I hate it,” says the interviewee, a man Mom’s age in a blue suit. “And so does everyone else in my position. I don’t have anything against these people. Honestly, I don’t. But making someone else care for them doesn’t make it easier for them to get back on their feet.”

Matty turns his attention to the news. He’s enraptured by the interview.

“Would the money alternative have worked better?” the white-haired man asks.

“Doubtful. Look, homelessness has been a problem in our country for as long as it’s been around. That isn’t going to change just by plucking people off the street and sticking them into random homes.”

“Exactly,” Matty says, nodding his head.

“So what if I told you that the amount of relocated peoples who have reported having jobs has increased by over 50%?”

“It wouldn’t matter because this sucks.” Matty walks over to the tv and turns it off.

“Does the interviewer mean that our new families are working?”

Matty’s angry. His hand is on the freezer door. “It doesn’t matter what he means. We don’t even get to play the way we want because we have a permanent babysitter now. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Lolly isn’t a babysitter.”

Matty yanks open the freezer. He slams an ice cube tray on the counter. “Maybe you need one.”

“What’s wrong with you today?” I ask again.
Matty offers me an ice cube. “You lost, Alice. A deal’s a deal.”
I don’t take it.

“Hee. You lost.” Matty pushes the ice cube up to my face.

“No, I didn’t. You cheated. You were mean.”

“Don’t be such a baby, Alice. You just didn’t think about having someone else do the work for you. It’s a very effective way to get what you want.” He grabs the neck of my swimming suit and pulls it away from my skin. The ice cube is on my chest before I can even react.

“MOM!”

The ice cube leaks the way Lolly’s popsicle leaked down her face earlier, catching on the goosebumps that have appeared because of the stark cold.

Matty glares at me and grabs my wrist. His grip is too tight. “What’d you go and do that for?”

I try to wriggle free from Matty’s grip, but it doesn’t work. He just squeezes tighter.

“Matty! What are you doing here? I didn’t realize you’d come over.”

Mom’s presence startles both of us, but it startles Matty enough for him to let go of me. “Uh, hi Mrs. Herman. I just came over to swim with Alice.”

Mom folds her arms across her chest. “This doesn’t look very much like the pool to me.”
Matty smiles at her. It isn’t a smile I’ve seen before, but it makes me nervous. “You’re right, Mrs. Herman. We’ll head back out now.”

“But before you do, will you please turn the television back on? It isn’t polite to change the way someone has their house set up.”

“Yes, Mrs. Herman. Of course.”

Mom doesn’t move, and Matty walks back to the tv and pushes the power switch. The same interview is on from before.

“If you had had more warning that this change was going to occur, and you had known the results were going to be this positive, would that have changed your attitude toward taking in another family member?” the interviewer asks.

The interviewee looks deflated. He’s slouching in his chair. “I suppose so.”

“Come on, Alice. Let’s go swim some more.” Matty reaches for my hand, but I don’t let him take it.

“Dinner’s at six when your father gets home,” Mom says to the back of me. “I expect you won’t smell like chlorine and you’ll be dressed appropriately before then.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Lolly is still sitting in the pool chair when we get back outside. She’s watching the door of the house, waiting for us to come back out. “Did you bring any popsicles?” she asks.

“No, Lolly. We just came back out to swim some more.”
“When are you going to swim with us?” Matty asks. That smile he gave Mom is back on his face.

“Oh, I don’t swim. I told Alice that earlier.” Lolly shows her crooked teeth in a crooked smile.

“But you must be hot in that coat,” Matty says.

“This is silly, Matty. I already told her she’s going to get heat stroke. She wants to stay in the coat. She doesn’t want to swim. I’m getting back in the pool.” It only takes me five long strides to get back to the pool’s edge, and I jump in with a loud splash.

Matty follows behind me, shaking his head. His splash is so big that it hits Lolly, sprinkling her with pool water.

The sinky rings are sitting at the edge of the pool. I’m not sure I want to play with them anymore, but I look at them anyway. They are a rainbow on the gray cement, pretending innocence.

Matty faces me, both of us standing in the pool so that only our heads are out of the water. “I don’t understand why you defend Lolly. I can’t believe she doesn’t drive you crazy.”

“She does drive me crazy. We aren’t talking about this in front of her, though. Mom says it isn’t nice.”

“Carlton does the same thing. He sits there and watches me. I can’t go anywhere without him following me.”

I look around, just in case I missed him earlier. “I don’t see him here now.”
Matty smiles at me. “That’s because I figured out how to get away. It wasn’t easy, and other people won’t like it, but it was what I had to do.”

My heart skips a beat then. I’ve never been nervous around Matty before, but everything he’s done today has put me on edge. “What did you do?” I whisper it because I’m curious, but I don’t know if I really want to know.

“Let’s just say that cat of his isn’t coming back.”

“Oh my, children! Look at the time!” Lolly says, interrupting us. We both turn to look at her. She’s staring at the skin on her left wrist.

“I think it’s time for you to go home, child,” she says to Matty.

“You aren’t the boss of me.” Matty stands more firmly in the pool, standing straight to expose part of his chest. He has his hands clenched into fists by his sides.

“You need to leave, child.”

“Don’t call me child!”

I shrink back from Matty, leaving only my nose and eyes above the water. I push back into the pool toward the deep end, even though it means I’ll have to tread water.

“Alice, honey. Go get your mother.”

I’ve never seen Lolly be bossy before today. Usually she does things so innocently, so quietly. She tries not to bother anyone.
“Yeah, Alice. Run to your mommy. You’ve already been such a baby today.”

At the edge of the pool, I frown at Matty. “What’s wrong with you today?” I ask again.

“Nothing’s wrong with me. I don’t know why we couldn’t just play. Something’s wrong with you.”

I get out of the pool and wring out my suit at the stomach. I grab the towel I dropped from the grass on my way to the house.

Lolly is standing now, facing Matty in the pool. He’s smiling that same smile at her, and I know it isn’t good.

I push through the door quickly, hoping Mom is staring out the back window at us. But she isn’t. I run to the front window. “Mom! Mom!”

She isn’t there, either. Where is Mom when I need her?

“Alice? What’s wrong?” Mom says. She’s appeared behind me in the living room.

“Come quick. Something’s wrong with Matty.” I grab her hand and pull her toward the back door. She follows behind me, and I can sense the urgency in her movements linking with mine.

Matty is out of the pool now, facing Lolly. Water drips from his trunks into the shallow puddle at his feet where the cement is now a darker shade of gray. His hands are by his sides, splayed wide, and his feet are wide apart.
Lolly stands tall across from him, but she doesn’t look mean the way he does.

Before Mom or I can do anything, Matty jumps on Lolly. She loses her balance and topples sideways into the pool, Matty on top of her.

He didn’t know we were there, I’m sure of it, or he wouldn’t have done it.

Lolly flails wildly in the pool. Because she’s taller than Matty, she can reach the bottom where he pushed her in, but he’s a strong swimmer. He pushes on her, moving her back toward the deep end.

“Matty! Stop this!” Mom yells, pulling away from me and running toward the pool.

I stand there helplessly. I watch faces.

Matty’s smiling, and there’s a glint in his eye that makes him look like Ursula when she grows huge with the power of Triton's crown.

Lolly’s owl eyes are squeezed tightly shut, and her mouth forms an O. I can’t see the red streaks on her face anymore.

Mom is in profile, but her eyes are wide and her mouth is open as she yells at Matty.

There is so much noise that I can’t separate out voices from pool splashing. It’s all one big blur, and I stand frozen on the sidelines. I’m neither good nor bad.

Mom jumps in in her clothes. She pulls at Matty, but he elbows her in the nose. Blood leaks down her face from the impact.
Matty flails wildly. The control he had just moments before has already vanished.

Lolly is underwater. Her legs are sticking out, but that’s it.

It’s the legs out of the water like buoys in the ocean and the blood streaming down Mom’s face like excess rain water on a window that compels me to jump in. I grab onto Lolly in the deep end, pulling her toward the edge of the pool.

Matty fights against me. “No! No! We can’t do this anymore!”

“It’s okay Matty! It’s okay!” That’s Mom.

Mom and I manage to pull them apart, but Lolly is sinking. She’s probably breathing pool water. “Help me!”

Mom can’t help me. She’s too busy trying to detain Matty. She’s wrestled him up the steps we never use into the pool and is fending off elbows and fists.

I’m not strong enough to pull Lolly out of the pool. The best I can do is get her head above water. I try pushing on her back as well to see if that might help her dislodge some of the water from her lungs.

She coughs and sputters. She’s breathing.

“No! No! Let go of me!” That’s Matty.

“I’m okay, Alice. I’m okay.” Lolly says it so quietly I almost miss it. I look down at her. She’s smiling, and water is running down her face in little streams like it would rush through a gutter from excess rain.

I smile back. “That’s what family’s for.”
Shapes

My classroom is filled with shapes, though that word doesn’t quite do. I don’t mean circles and squares per se (there are some of those, too).

But this one is more of a cinderblock, with all its pros and cons. And that one is all rough edges that scrape along. There is one who is smooth as obsidian and sharp as a knife. There I see a dense, low fog coming down, while that one floats three feet off the ground. This one is like a sound. One has more than two dimensions, but is afraid to show, while another is merely a mirror, reflecting others’ glow. There is a hollow eggshell beside a turtle-tucked-in. The kaleidoscope and the gyroscope turn round one another, and the one shaped like a buzz saw finds the one that’s just abuzz.

There are soft ones, too, but not like you’d think: soft like the underside of a hedgehog. Soft and pink, but bristled all around. There are the brittle. There are those rejected, and those accepted, and those still-to-be-hewn. There are some that are mourning, and some always afternoon.

And there is one that’s just a void, an empty space in space. I would do anything to put something in its place.
Creativity as a Second Language

My Experiences in a School in Rural Cambodia

In 2014, I set out for Cambodia with a suitcase laden with thirty pounds of classroom materials. The only item I assumed I would be able to purchase in-country was blank paper. Yet, I felt prepared: I had modular lesson plans, designed for any level of learner, any variation of English ability within the class, and any length of time. Years of experience teaching in public schools in South Korea and the United States had served me well—the green, idealistic college student from 2008 had a mission and the resources to accomplish it.

I designed this program as part of my MFA degree in creative writing, determined to teach writing and creativity classes to at-risk, poor students in a country I’d been to once as a ‘rich’ tourist. I don’t remember how I found the Khmer New Generation Organization—a mouthful abbreviated as KNGO—but its director spoke enough English to negotiate a volunteer opportunity with me, so I was travelling there on good faith that I would be allowed to teach. Because Khmer children only go to school for half of the day, KNGO provides educational and vocational training, keeps the children off the streets, and teaches them the skills they need to make a living—in Cambodia, these skills lead to respectable jobs and not crime or sex work. They relied on volunteers to do what their richer neighbors could pay for: the services of native Eng-
lish speakers to model conversations, enrich cultural understanding, and guide pronunciation.

Some might say that I was still too sanguine in my expectations, that children so poor and underprivileged would be better off learning the ‘basics’ and gaining ‘survival English.’ But I intended to introduce them to the wonders of language, play, and art-making that captivates us all, whether they could only write two good sentences or two hundred. We are never too young to start dreaming and, as I would find out, the dreams of these young learners could warm any heart. Creativity is not encouraged in Asian schools, where rote learning and recitation are as common as they were in the Dickensian schools of yesteryear. Even in South Korea, which can afford educational technology in its public schools that far surpasses our broken-down iPads in the US, English education does not involve reading books or writing stories. I rebelled in 2008, straining against a system that wanted English-based actors, not real teachers, by encouraging my gifted class to write their own roleplays, tell me serial stories that stretched their imaginations, and envision fantastical creatures and superpowers. I remember S-G., a talented third grader whose fluency was equal to the fifth- and sixth-graders in the section, baring his teeth to display paper vampire fangs, hastily colored red by my corrections pencil. I came to believe that English education everywhere should involve reading, a tenet that dovetailed neatly with the adage that all writers must read, and read, and read…

Selecting books for my Cambodian students necessitated cultural awareness and pragmatism. If a teacher cannot explain new concepts to students in English, part of the charm is lost. I chose simple books with animals and climates students would recognize, and nothing that would
offend students from a different culture. The most important factor, however, was the magic of the book: it had to reach students from a different socioeconomic and cultural background, students whose parents couldn’t afford to feed them protein each day, let alone buy books. It had to carry the experience of falling in love with books that all writers have as children—that formative, painful knowledge that something external to you, something printed on a page, can break your heart.

Our first two days involved a lot of introductions and my assessment of what my classes could and could not accomplish. KNGO and its teachers, including my rockstar co-teacher, Sophea, welcomed me and supported me. I had two classes with students ages 6-12, and two sections with older students, ages 12-18. With the younger students, I had forgotten how long it takes for them to do tasks—silly of me after years of watching first-graders in my hometown take half an hour to write a sentence and color (not draw!) a picture. I had to scale back the ambition of my lessons—and yet, I still feel I accomplished something critical with my time at KNGO.

On the third day, I pulled the book the Little Lion Who Lost Her Roar out of my backpack and announced we would read it together. Twenty pairs of shining eyes stared back at me and the glossy, glamorous gift I held. For the first time in my life, I felt like Scrooge after his visitations; I had a Christmas turkey, I had the good cheer, I had the happy tidings. My students had never seen a book before. They had notebooks and textbooks for school and, maybe, they dreamed that someday, they would have a cell phone and be able to use Facebook. It was so easy to love them that now, writing this after four years, my heart still expands when I think of the expressions on their faces, as though I am the Grinch in
Whoville being made whole again. From then on, when students finished activities early, I let them read my English books at their desks. I saw children work faster to get a book of their own or look on with friends, even if we had already read the book as a class.

*My students had never seen a book.*

With students this young, I turned to poetry for our own writing exercises, after we wrote a draft of our author biographies to put on the back of their books. We wrote ‘wish’ poems in which the student completes the sentence ‘I wish I had…’ Everyone wished for the same things: a ball, a bag, a yo-yo, a cell phone. Some of the imaginative students wished for an English book of their own to take home from school. Their needs reflected the world they live in and the ruthless, sad truths of their lives. I watched these students play with the good-sized rocks in the courtyard of their cement-paved, tin-roofed, open-walled school as if the rocks were balls and my heart hurt because we live in a world where even that much is a gift to them. A school like this is the perfect honey-trap for a foreigner who wants to ‘do good,’ the stereotypical, overprivileged person who thinks they can come in, volunteer for a few weeks, and make an impact. Then they go back to their flat cinnamon lattes and their grousing about going outside when it’s raining.

I, too, went back to this.

What did I accomplish? I spent thousands of dollars just to go to Cambodia and provide an example, a different way of life, a new way of thinking. A realist would tell me that money would have been better off as a lump donation to the school, to cover operating costs and the salaries
of those who do the real work: the heroic director and teachers who support the students every day and encourage them to become something.

And yet. I still remember my experience as a young girl, when a local author came to our library and spoke about writing as his profession, his vocation. I still remember the first Asian role model I ever saw on TV, growing up as an adoptee in a city that was 92% white. I still remember the writing conference for middle schoolers I attended with my best friend, and the teacher who encouraged me to go.

Maybe, some of the 120 students I taught will remember me, the odd, fluent-in-English Korean woman who traversed the globe to show them a book, to encourage them to draw and write, and, yes, to enhance their English skills. Maybe, they’ll forget me but remember the joy of something different at school. Maybe, they’ll forget me but remember themselves.

I gave them all I had—my knowledge, my expertise, my money, my love. They gave me even more.
Twenty-ten

is the year my parents find out
my brother will not graduate on time.
Once we grab seats on the bleachers,
Mom leafs through the program to double
check the As; Dad aims a camera at midfield,
my brother’s cedar gown planted on the hash mark.
To their eyes, my own graduation must have
looked like these rows of caps and tassels
burning in the sun while first and last names
begin to downpour, the four year wait
to recognize a family name drizzled through
loudspeaker. When my brother is called,
he gets the same applause I did, the same strut
down the aisle, only the diploma missing.
Graduation means to confer onto another,
which means to consult, a tacit agreement signed
by handshake—in exchange for another semester,
my parents get to see my brother walk
from his seat to the stage and back to the middle
of the class, as everyone else starts to pack for
the summer he lost. Call it sacrifice, *quid pro quo*,
fair trade in Latin before it died.
Shouldering On

“You social science teachers have it made! While I spend the weekend grading essays, you’ll be sleeping in, shopping, mountain climbing, or whatever else people do who don’t teach English.”

Trust me when I say that ALL psychology instructors have heard some version of the above sentence. We often get accused of taking the easy way out, the smooth path of “chalk and talk” without the potholes and bumps that English teachers must navigate. According to them, their road is strewn with essays and in-class writings while their colleagues in other disciplines merely administer multiple choice and short answer tests as means of assessing students.

Since we enjoyed our camaraderie with English and literature instructors, we generally responded with weak smiles that masked feelings ranging from guilt to annoyance. Was it our fault they had chosen to devote their professional lives to teaching people how to write? Proponents of individual choice and self-determination, we believed in the possibility of change. If the English profs were so unhappy, maybe they should switch from poetry to psychology, from Frost to Freud.

We grew defensive. My compadres and I in the social sciences sometimes felt like less than bona fide instructors and professors for giving multiple choice and short answer tests, especially the ones produced by the publisher. Horrors! They could be graded on Scantron machines in a matter of minutes, about the same amount of time an English prof would take to get her surroundings “just right” to read, read, read the stacks of papers. While we had no objection to “Writing Across the Curriculum,” there were challenges. Our assign-
ments weren’t uniformly given or graded. Some teachers required four or five two-page reaction papers per semester, others set up online discussion boards, and many assigned end-of-term research papers. When it came to reading and grading the written work, there was even less agreement on what written work should look like—despite using rubrics.

“We’re not English teachers,” a psychology instructor might insist. “It’s not our job to find every misspelled word, misplaced modifier, or comma splice!” Or was it?

In my department, psychology, we were looking for evidence of the comprehension of psychological principles, and while we expected well-written, organized, grammatically correct, perfectly punctuated work, we didn’t feel qualified to teach it. The evidence of applying concepts of operant conditioning in their lives was more important to us than comma splices.

Still, we shouldered on.

Then blogging entered the culture. Defined as a website including writers’ opinions, experiences, and observations, a blog seemed perfect as a medium for students’ self-expression. While discussion boards were somewhat rigid and graded, blogs could be used differently. Maybe a little extra credit could be dangled like a carrot.

Voila! PsychCentral was born.

When working at Central Carolina Technical College in Sumter, SC, I began a blog titled PsychCentral. It worked well, and for years it remained the most active of my four blogs. I’d post once or twice a week, and in its heyday, I could always count on several responses and an active thread. Students who rarely, if ever, spoke up in class, contributed stories, advice, opinions, and beliefs. I was both astounded and impressed by the depth of their experiences and their evident understanding of practically every concept covered in General Psychology and Human Growth and Development.

One blog topic reviewed the humanistic perspective of psychology and focused on growth. A student wrote, “I learned that humanistic psychology is
the belief that humans have the capacity for choice, growth, and psychological health. It made me think. How am I my choices? What can I do to make my life better if it is all my choice? I can decide to do the things that I want to do and not do the things that I don’t want to do. And even the bigger question, why are we not one hundred percent completely happy with our lives if everything is our choice? Learning about this makes me want to look at my choices more closely and ask myself if I am really benefiting from the choices I make.”

When we covered operant conditioning, I wrote that behaviorists believe that we teach people how to treat us. One student responded with a deeply meaningful statement. “It gives me the strength and encouragement to believe that I can control how I am treated. Why am I allowing people who do not treat me the way I deserve to be treated stay in my life? If I don’t like how someone treats me, why not change it? I don’t have to put up with anything that I don’t want to. This one little sentence had helped me to realize how I can take my reactions and actions to the way people treat me, and teach them to treat me in a different, more acceptable to myself, way. I have the power.”

In a blog post about stress management, one student mentioned a coping strategy called thought stopping. “For example, if your thoughts are focused on worry or doubt, you may begin to feel a sense of helplessness, anxiousness or a lack of confidence. Your behaviors then mirror your feelings. So stop it! Immediately! Move on to another thought, something good, better, or best!”

And then there was an entry about types of parental discipline. I had posted about permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian forms of discipline, and this student felt that her parents were authoritative. They had rules and expectations, but they weren’t cold or harsh. In the student’s words, “We were also taught how to act around people which led to us being socially competent.”

While that might not sound extraordinary, the student’s response spoke volumes to me. There are many people I encounter in my daily round that have not been taught how to act around people and who are not socially competent. He gets it, I thought—just like the others who posted on the blog.
The PsychCentral experience made me think more seriously about two things: (1) how to incorporate writing in a nonthreatening way into a non-English class and (2) how much responsibility a teacher has to identify errors in student writing, especially when that teacher’s field is psychology or history or biology. I often receive emails that look more like text messages than emails. They’re often without salutation or closing, and if not for the student’s email address, I wouldn’t know who the sender was. I’m saving one from “mysticwolf” in the hopes that he will at some point identify himself. Often, I’s aren’t capitalized, words are misspelled and/or abbreviated, and punctuation is either incorrect or missing. “i need 2 c u” is not an uncommon request.

What’s a psychology instructor to do?

I still don’t have all the answers, but I’m confident that all teachers worth their salt can find a way to engage students in non-threatening writing activities. And, she has the right and responsibility to point now glaring errors, not to embarrass but to help. Isn’t part of our job preparing students for the future?
Beneath These Southern Trees

I am an old child beneath these towering
trees, whose limbs scrape sky,
pick cotton clouds that slowly crawl
across more slowly crawling
mountainsides.
These old, Southern trees, raised by ancient
water and light,
raise us in our wild lives
raise us, opossum, dog, and deer,
raise us, who disappear,
raise us, who sit in spells, who sing our
talk, and marvel at myriad stars
like raccoon eyes,
And soak our tired times
in moonshine marinade, in apple pie,
molasses wine.
We, who sleep easy under metal roof rains,
rest our heads on Earth’s chest each night and dream.
I check on you in the middle of the night  
like I did my own children.  
There you are, lined up with all the others,  
like babies in the hospital nursery—some big, some small,  
all new, everyone swaddled and propped in the same direction with caps on their heads.  
But you are the quiet one.

You have no idea how many times I squinted into my iPhone, straining  
toward the baby monitor for signs of activity in your crib, wondering if you completed your tests and assignments, wondering why you haven’t yet.

I sit and stare, waiting for your next breath while  
I hold my own and imagine watching your translucent temples to see  
if your heart is beating. But when I stare into this window, Buddha reminds me the blind men could perceive only a small part of the magnificent elephant.

For all I know, you are a slothful couch-potato teenager  
chewing on your cud of Netflix, while the online grade book—a Sudoku board of unworked squares—  
wants for you to solve the puzzle.  
How could you possibly waste all that time and financial aid?

You have no idea how many nights I cannot sleep,  
worried you might fail — worried we both would fail.
I was bored. I wanted fun. So I found myself in a bar I ordinarily wouldn't be caught dead in, especially in the late afternoon when all of the factory workers and truck drivers were in to get their after work beer. I was desperate for some fun. I had been cooped up for a week studying for all my mid-terms, and this was my first chance to get out. All my friends still had a few more mid-terms to go, since, as it happened, all my tests landed on earlier dates than theirs. I used to have a few friends who would have gone out anyway, but they've all either drifted away because I was always busy studying, or they dropped out.

So there I was, sitting on a bar stool between a middle-aged wanna-be pimp and a man I could smell from a good distance. I was holding a beer mug that was down to one quarter full. Okay, so I'd been there a while, too.

“Do you want me to top that off for ya?” the stout bartender asked, pointing his chubby little finger at my mug; I mean the glass on.

“Yeah, why don't you do that?” I answered, showing myself the extent of my own desperation.

“You’re from that college up the street, ain't ya?” he asked with one eye partially closed. That eye was always partially closed and it drew my attention more every time I looked at it. It even stole my eye away from his long pointed mustache that looked like something out of a Mark Twain novel.

Finally, I yanked my eyes from this peculiar face long enough to murmur “Yeah.” He handed me my beer and went back to washing his other beer mugs, which was a little more to my comfort.

I took a sip, and began looking around the place. Hearing some people playing pool behind me, I turned around to watch them for a bit.
It was a small pool-room with two guys playing in it. One man leaned over to take a shot, and as he did, his large gut rested on the edge of the pool table. His buttoned flannel shirt hung down from the side that was untucked. After he shot, he rubbed his hand across the whiskers on his face then scratched the hair coming out of the top of his shirt because his top button had come undone.

His friend just sat there staring into space with a strange drunken grin on his face. He scratched his scruffy white hair from time to time, but that was about all I saw him move because he was getting creamed in this game.

I turned back around to see two men sitting on the opposite end of the bar. One man was talking very assertively about either his job or politics, or something of that sort. I couldn't make out what he was saying, really, but his hand was in a tightly clenched fist with his index finger stabbing at every word he felt the strongest feelings, and when he really got going, he'd hit his leg with his hand.

The man he was talking to was in a chair as opposed to a stool, so he was considerably lower than his friend. He didn't do much talking, but just sat there staring straight ahead and nodding periodically.

To my left were two men who were talking about nothing in particular. The middle aged wanna-be pimp stroked his finger over his mustache periodically and checked to make sure the gold chains around his neck hung properly. The man he was talking to stood at the bar with his wrinkled, bulging knuckled hands grasped onto the brass bar. He occasionally rubbed his finger over his gin-blossomed nose.

The only other man in the bar I hardly like to talk about. His green hat, blackened by soot, lay on top of his head like a dead rat. His green jacket matched his hat down to every blackened stain. And he just sat there; waiting to drink just enough to tip over in his chair as he glided his dirty finger around the lip of his glass. He looked as though he'd been sitting there since the day he was born, and when they built this bar, it was constructed around him sitting in that stool.
Then there was me. The youngest, cleanest shaven one in the whole place who felt it was my duty, that I owed it to myself to be there drinking beer after a week’s worth of tests. I knew if I would've told my friends about this they'd ask why I didn't just get a six pack and drink it in my apartment. But I wanted to be in there; where the beer is poured from a tap with just the right head, with the hustle and bustle of all the city people walking around outside, and all the noise of the cars and trucks filling the air. Besides I was sick to death of my apartment.

The differences between these men and myself were staggering. Not only were they much older than I, but they also made their living with their hands, something that I will likely never know, having entered college directly after high school. It was what made them dirty, yet it was what gave them their character.

I didn't see anyone approaching the juke box, but then my mind was wandering for quite some time, so I guess any one of the seven other men in the bar could have turned it on. But suddenly, I heard an old Irish drinking song playing. It was strange because I had never heard that song before so I was completely unprepared for what happened next. Everyone in the bar stopped their conversations and their games, and began singing along together. And I wondered how that song could have such a profound effect on a group of people I had thought to be almost subhuman only a few minutes earlier.

But the thing that puzzled me the most, the thing that I could never tell another person in the entire world, and the thing I cannot even explain to myself was the fact that for those few minutes while that song played, I wanted to be one of them. But I knew that would never be possible because I already had too much education.

It all started slowly, literally in a whisper. The man sitting next to me, who I described as a wanna-be pimp, began to mouth the words quietly. It caught my attention so I looked up from my glass to see the bartender singing under his breath too.

This caught the attention of the two other gentlemen on the other side of the bar, and soon they began to approach the others on my side of
the bar, also singing (although terribly off key). The assertive gentleman came by me at the next line.

This, in turn, caught the attention of the two men in the pool room as they approached the bar as well, each knowing every line to the song. The man with the large gut, to my surprise, draped his arm around me, and I felt compelled to join in, although I knew none of the words. So I began faking it, and with all the others being so far off key, I could get away with this very well.

Then something happened that I did not think was possible. The man sitting to my right with the green and dirt colored clothes not only joined in the singing, but carried a look of joy that I previously did not think he was capable of.

And as I sat there faking the words to this song I felt cheated. Yes, cheated because they all held a connection to one another, and it was a connection I was not capable of experiencing. I could not see the significance of what it was like being this kind of human being, working with one’s hands, earning money with their backs instead of their brains, going home to a wife who cooks and kids who attend public school, always eating red meat and potatoes, and never seeing the inside of a coffee shop. These men suddenly came together as one, as though they each knew everything there was to know about the other, and nothing about me. There was something majestic, honored, revered within this type of existence.

The whole scene reminded me of when I first decided to attend college, my father and uncle would tell me that working a blue collar job would “learn me something college couldn’t.” I never believed them or even understood what that meant until now. But even so, this was a moot point at this point in my life, not only because of my level of education, but because these jobs no longer paid a “living wage” as my father had told me a hundred times. Corporate downsizing, factory cutbacks, union unrest, free trade agreements all raced through my brain as I thought why this lifestyle was impossible for me today. And somehow I felt robbed.
Then the song ended and the two men quit their game of pool and left, the other two returned to their conversation at the other side of the bar, and the bartender went back to washing glasses for more customers.

When most everyone else left or went back to what they were doing, I finished my beer and walked toward the door myself to leave. When I got to the door I stopped to take one last look at the bar, and the bartender placed his finger next to his nose and winked at me. Then I knew who turned on the jukebox, and why.
Jacob G. Myers

You would sing beautifully as the wind

You would sing beautifully as the wind
I listen to catch a note from the air
I sit until horizon’s azure thinned
You spoke to stars, as for love you’ve no care

You flowed through my being like swift water
I lay, and your waves crash upon my shore
I followed you blindly to my slaughter
You stilled your waters and loved me no more

You abandoned me to sink into earth
I refused to stand, certain you’d save me
I’m too deep to crawl from my home of dirt
You vixen! Causing damage you’ll not see

Yet all that I’m left with is dimmed flame
I see that I am who is left to blame
I Don’t Confess

The door was locked. Now what was she going to do? Dimple Flanagan placed her fingertips either side of her temples and began gently massaging in ever widening circles. She could sense a horrible cluster migraine coming on and already this one was starting to feel like a huge tarantula had clamped itself to her head and was sticking its legs into her eyes and ears.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the still air tinged with the scent of incense, candles and musty prayer books. She’d called ahead to let Father Antonio know she’d be arriving for confession and now the priest was nowhere to be seen.

After a few moments she opened her eyes and began surveying the sixteenth century old stone and stained glass interior of the church. Dimple replayed in her mind the phone conversation she’d had with Father Antonio the night before. He’d agreed to meet her at the confession box at 10 am the next day, though initially he’d mentioned how he hadn’t been planning on offering the service that particular day.

Dimple sat now in one of the church pews and waited. Her breathing slowed and she began to take in more of the gothic splendor – the breathtaking Norman arches, the enormous Latin cross, the bulbous marble pulpit – that surrounded her.

She noticed the wooden collection box fixed to a sidewall and bizarrely entertained the thought of walking over and seeing if there was any money inside it, before quickly dismissing the idea and wondering how and why such a stray thought could have entered her head in the first place. Further along the opposite far wall she saw the entrance to what looked like a
small vestry. It was then she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. A clip clop noise that began faintly somewhere in the distance and grew gradually more distinct and pronounced.

Dimple couldn’t imagine Father Antonio wearing such impractical shoes and momentarily she was proven correct. Appearing now before her was an elderly woman wearing a flower-patterned faded blue dress and with her silver hair tied back tightly in a bun. She was short in stature, Temple guessing she would have come up to no more than her own armpit in height.

The old woman was holding a fruit and pastries laden silver platter while beaming a friendly smile directed squarely at Temple. “Someone need a pick-me-up?” the woman asked, her head in constant motion as if agreeing with sentiments no-one else could hear. “Father Antonio has taken ill and sends his apologies. He asked me to offer you something to eat, dear.”

Dimple replied with an expression that was half grimace and half smile, but in the process still managed to somehow involuntarily drop her shoulders a good few millimeters while at the same time letting out a barely detectable sigh, both of which were her telltale signs she was starting to relax. She was suddenly lit with an inner amusement that allowed her to see the unplanned slapstick of the whole unfolding misadventure. She’d come seeking forgiveness and would leave with a cherry topped cupcake and a watermelon wedge. When she looked at it like that, even the imagined tarantula atop of her head began to ever so subtly loosen its grip.

She thanked the woman, taking her divine nibbles with her and walked back along the encaustic tiled floor on her way out of the church. She’d surrendered to the presence of a kind spirit and got the reboot she’d craved. Everything else could wait for another day.
Daisy Mae Returns

Mae pushed open the passenger door of her brother Roy’s truck and pulled herself out. Her hips ached from sitting for so long, and her shoes pinched her swollen ankles. Middle age was a bitch. The pine that towered over her grandparents’ cabin welcomed her by dropping needles into her perm. A grimace pulled at her lower lip as she picked them out and the sticky sheath left acrid sap on her fingers. A sigh escaped as she surveyed the peeled log porch, and the rockers lined up in front of window boxes long empty.

“Well, come on then, Daisy,” Roy said, leading her up the path. She’d forgotten how primitive everything was here. The porch boards gave under her weight, their disrepair reminding her how long she’d been gone. Everywhere she looked: dirt and memories, grime and heart-break, mingled to push her away.

Roy pulled out a key ring the size of her head and thumbed through fifty before he found the one he wanted. “Show off,” she said, smiling.

Some people never changed. He messed with the lock, jiggled the handle, and then finally put his shoulder to the door. It popped open and the scent of bacon grease enveloped her. For a moment it was impossible to believe that she was not twelve and running into the kitchen to help with the biscuits. Every step into the cabin was a decade back in time. When she got to the coat tree she was six and still Daisy-Mae and couldn’t help rubbing her cheek against the silky ribs of PawPaw’s corduroy barn coat; the elbows worn shiny and imagining the scent of his Camels on the cuffs and collar.
She crossed the floor worn smooth by generations of feet and stepped into the kitchen holding her breath. She couldn’t risk ruining her mascara by inhaling the memory of a thousand family meals made inside. Her fingers found the gouges and watermarks on the top of the table all on their own. When she lost her dog, got her period, when her Daddy left; she’d sat at that table with Nana. Her fingertips rubbed the places that generations of women in her family had touched, crying and drowning their sorrows in tea with just a smidge of Nana’s brandy.

The windows looking out over the valley were dusty, Nana wouldn’t have approved.

“You couldn’t have at least cleaned the windows?” she asked.

“Ain’t nobody been in here in almost three years.”

“Still.”

“If it’s so important to you, you coulda got home a little sooner.”

Mae bit her lip, and imagined the windows as they had been, sparkling clean and full of treasures. Always thrifty, her Nana took cuttings from the plants in the fall and kept them alive in juice glasses on the windowsill till she could replant them in the spring. The winter sun shone through the magic cups of hibernating plants and cast rainbows around the kitchen. Now, the muted grey light through the faded gingham curtains illuminated her goal, Nana’s cast iron skillet. Sitting where it always was on top of the stove, a skiff of dust had settled dulling the patina. Mae found a towel and wiped it out. She held Nana’s prized possession to her chest, remembering too late the marks the seasoning would leave on her sweater. Its weight was a comfort in her arms. The love that her Nana had cooked in that pan; she could taste the rich sweetness of cornbread, hear the sizzle of fried catfish, see the shiny aubergine depths of cobbler made with blackberries they picked by the stream.

Of all the many things her Nana could have requested, this was the hardest, which Mae was sure was why she’d asked. To fly home, and follow in reverse the path that she’d taken thirty years ago. To come back to the mountains she’d fled, with the sound of the wind in the trees, and
the memories that stabbed her at every turn. Back then she’d been hungry for pavement, the history-less glitter of stainless steel and glossy black leather. She’d found solace in the ignorant sparkle of glass buildings and enjoyed blissful decades of being forgetful.

But showing up wasn’t good enough for Nana. She needed Mae to hear the banjos, to smell the BBQ, and come face to face with her demons by retrieving the skillet and delivering it. Nana had always known when to push. She’d known when Mae was ready to take the training wheels off her bike, when she was ready to wear lipstick, or try a sip of moonshine. It was Nana who’d taken the old cookie tin down from the cupboard and pressed a stack of worn bills in Mae’s freshly eighteen year old hand and told her to escape. Now as Mae descended the steps to the path, she realized that Nana knew what she needed, even now.

She clutched the skillet to her chest, stains be damned, as Roy drove the truck back down the mountain. She thought about the note card tucked into the frame of her bedroom mirror at home. It had arrived a week after the funeral, addressed to her in Nana’s spidery cursive. I’ll be needin’ my skillet, it said, followed by Love, Your Nana, as if anyone else’s Nana ever wrote to Mae. As they pulled through the gates, the volume of stones overwhelmed her.

“You sure you know which one?” she asked.

“I was here.”

He pulled up next to a stone, still shiny. She lost her breath as she read the name. She got out and placed the skillet at the base of the headstone, and smiled as the tears she’d been holding for three years broke through. She fell to her knees.

“I told you I’d be back.” She told the grass, digging her fingers into the red dirt. “I’m sorry it wasn’t sooner.”
Stifling a yawn, I stepped out of the woods and examined the ancient monstrosity. It was three stories of peeling white paint, leaning porches, and pillars that had long ago given up on their dreams of being in ancient Greece. I steadied myself on a headless statue, took a deep breath and kept walking forward.

Like my brother said, this house was similar in style to the one I had been enslaved at, but it was far larger, and its decay was displayed on the outside, not festering in the hearts of it’s masters.

With each step closer, I feared that a vicious dog or an angry overseer would pop out from behind an overgrown shrubbery and kill me, or worse, drag me back to my master’s house. The wind blew from behind me, ushering me closer to the abandoned mansion. The walls groaned, and a door slowly opened, inviting me inside. I picked up pace and was practically running by the time I reached the porch. I only slowed down because the first step was missing and there were holes in the deck.

I looked around, searching for the voice’s source. I saw walls adorned with paintings of stern, white men looking down on me with disdain, ornate crown molding and spiders peeking out from behind pieces of peeling paint -- nothing that appeared to be capable of speech.

“Please proceed through the door on the left.”

I froze, scanning the walls for some kind of hidden tube a man might project his voice through. I couldn’t find one, not even a heating grate.

“Proceed through the door.”
The door was polished oak, but had no decorative carvings like the doors in my master’s house, but the silver knob was shiny enough to show me my reflection: skin brushed with a thin layer of mud that would never wash off and eyes like green bills that keep people like me in chains. I’ve always found my mother’s fertile-earth skin more beautiful than my father’s ghostly complexion even though it is the only thing that separates slave from master.

“Proceed,” repeated the voice.

I closed my hand around the handle. I was shaking so hard that I had to take a few deep breaths before I was steady enough turn the knob and push.

“Walk ahead ten paces,” said the voice.

I stepped into the blackness. The door slammed shut behind me. Humid air filled my lungs. I hugged my tattered satchel against my chest so the corners of a book and picture frame poked my sternum. While Mamma had said our literacy was as much a curse as it was blessing, because of how it isolated us from the other slaves, I was thankful for my education. Without being able to read signs and speak just as well as a free woman, I never would have made it this far on my own. If people focused on my voice and my eyes and didn’t look too closely at my skin, I could “pass” for white. The other children might have sneered at me because I “talk white,” but they are still slaves. I am on the road to freedom.

“I have to be brave,” I told myself. “It’s what Mamma would’ve wanted.”

I took a step. The floor groaned under my weight. I closed my eyes, conjuring an image from the past that would give me the courage to move forward: The master’s green-eyed son, leering at me from forest’s edge while I bathed in a stream.

“You need to keep an eye on him.” Mamma’s musical voice played on in the memory. “He doesn’t care who your daddy was. Nobody in these parts does. When he looks at you, he sees his daddy’s mistake— a girl he wants to break.”
I took another step. The floor protested with a whining creak. I sucked air in, freezing with one foot still raised. I closed my eyes, summoning another memory to motivate me:

“They say everything turns white as teeth up there in the winter, but that doesn’t stop them from welcoming us colored folks.” My brother, Timmy, lit up the dim cabin with a goofy grin. “Once you get over the border, you can do anything. Doesn’t matter where you’re from. You’re free!”

“But how do we get there?” I twined frizzy curls around my index finger. A couple weeks ago, one of the pickers had run away. His corpse was still hanging from the weeping willow.

Timmy leaned in so his lips ticked my ear as he whispered, “an underground ferrying network.”

The whining floor drew me back to the present. I put my foot down, rushing across the spongy boards. I closed my eyes, picturing the trenches that whips made in my brother’s back. He didn’t cry out when the overseer beat him, but three days later, when infection boiled his blood and ate his skin, he screamed like a newborn. He quieted down in the end, probably because his throat was too worn out to work properly.

“Go for me,” his whispered. “If I can’t see snow, then maybe you can see it for me.”

Those had been his last words. Two days later, his lover hung herself. Mamma was sold to a plantation out west – one of the few that would take literate slaves. I was given a room in the master’s house, but never slept a full night in it. When I heard my half-brother’s feet stealing towards my bedroom door, I realized the room was a way to break me, not help me.

I stuffed a few essentials in my bag and climbed out the window, determined to make the journey north, not just because I had to save my body from being ravished by the master’s son, but also because it was Timmy’s dying wish.

I ran the last five steps, and as my foot landed on the tenth, the floor gave way. At first, I thought I was freefalling, plummeting to my
death in a haunted house. However, as I felt friction burning my thighs through my thin skirt, I realized I was sliding down what must be like a giant laundry shoot. I slid and slid until finally, I was spit out of the monster's throat onto a bed of soft, damp seaweed.

“Rise with haste,” said the voice I had been hearing since I entered the old mansion. “The ferry arrives and departs in five minutes.”

“There’s actually a ferry?” I dusted off my skirt. “I thought it was just a metaphor.”

“It once was, but 50 years ago, in 1865, when the North fell in, the Freedom Fighters needed a more secure way to free slaves. They began at an underground lake in an Appalachian coal mine and over five decades, they dug a network of underground canals that flow out to the ocean. They’ll take you up the coast to my sister on Ellis Island, and from there, you can sail north to the First Nation or across the sea to Éire.”

I moved forward towards the two lights glowing in the darkness. As I got closer, I saw it was a copper green statue with a spiky crown. “What are you?”

“I am liberty,” said the animated statue. As its head turned, spotlight eyes illuminated the churning canal, the steaming iron ship rushing towards them, and the freedom I promised my brother I would seek.
Orrin Jason Bradford
aka W. Bradford Smith

Divine Disorder

The shockwave sweeps through the seed packet without warning, throwing the world into a topsy-turvy chaos and my carefully laid life plans into the compost bin. One minute we’re in the master gardener son’s pudgy hand. The next moment one of his mobile roots trips over a crack in the cement walkway leading to the garden where Sela and I were to spend our life intertwining our roots together. As the packet slips from his hand, I’m suspended in free fall. Time slows. I see my beloved soulmate, Sela, floating above me along with dozens of other seeds, just before we crash into the sidewalk… hard.

Time accelerates as though trying to catch up with itself. I remember the deafening wail of the boy, but mostly I remember hearing my own shout. “This isn’t going well,” as a bunch of us are catapulted out of the packet including my best friend, SK. “Not going well at all,” I scream as I fly through the air, bouncing along the cement and into a crack in the sidewalk. I lay there dazed, a bit bruised, but mostly uninjured. Then, I notice the gardener has arrived on the scene. He picks up his son, brushes off the little boy’s pants, and dries the tears running down his son’s face. He starts to walk off, then stops to pick up the seed packet and continues to the garden… without me!

This can’t be happening. I yell, scream, cry, and plead—all to no avail. This is not how my life is supposed to play out. I was at the top of the pack. It was my turn. I’d just missed out the season before. I’d even been in the gardener’s palm about to be planted into the fertile ground, but at the last moment, he had poured my comrades and me back into the pack where we sat for an interminable time.
And now, here I am missing all the action again. I look around, but all I can see is dirt and debris that has accumulated in the crack. Great, I think. It’s not bad enough to fall into a crack in the sidewalk. I’ve rolled into a thin crevice within the crack surrounded by some of the worst excuses for dirt I’ve ever seen. “Not fair, not fair, not bloody fair,” I scream. “Get me out of this damn crack!” I keep shouting until, finally, I hear a familiar voice from above.

“Is that you, Seedmore? Are you okay?”

“That you SK? I’m down here in this God-forsaken crevice. Where are you? Do you see Sela?”

“I’m just above you, Seedmore. I saw you fall. There are quite a few others up here, but no Sela.”

Great, my soulmate and I have been thrown apart by fate. This has got to be the worst day of my life.

Days pass without any change, except in my mood which grows darker as I face the brutal reality that I may die in this God-forsaken crevice. SK tries to cheer me up, but I’ll have none of it. By the third day, I’m ready to feed him to a bird, anything to get him to stop his New Age aphorisms.

“All is not in Divine Order,” I shout at him, venting my anger and frustration the only way I know. “If it were, I’d be lying snuggly under a half-inch of quality topsoil with Sela nearby, not in this hellhole of malnourished dust. I had my life with Sela all planned out, so kindly shut up about this being in Divine Order!”

SK mumbles a few inarticulate words, then, when I don’t respond, he grows quiet. I drift off into my own world dreaming about growing up in the garden next to Sela, eventually sharing our pollen, and creating the next generation of seeds. When I finally emerge from my melancholy, I’m surprised how dark it has become. Surely it’s not nighttime already. I gaze up to the small slit of sky I can see, and notice storm clouds building. Oh, great. Now what? But before my newest pity party gets in full swing, it’s interrupted by a flash of lightning, followed a split second lat-
er with a loud clap of thunder. “Super, now I’m going to get rained on. What’s next, God—mildew?” The Foster Flat area is known for its storms that suddenly appear in the late afternoon. It looks like I’m about to experience one.

Sure enough, within minutes I hear the first patter of raindrops and then the bottom falls out. It’s what the gardener would call a gully washer, and unfortunately, it does just that, sweeping SK and the other seeds away. I hold my breath in anticipation of joining them. After all, anywhere has to be better than where I am, but once again my life is a product of “Divine Disorder.” As the rain continues to fall, I feel a tremor around me as the sides of the crevice collapse, throwing me into darkness.

Crud.

Days pass. I lose count of the number of times the ground warms, then cools, and then warms again—certainly more than a week, more likely two or even three. I notice the ground has grown warmer. With the warmth, and moisture from the rain, and the darkness, I feel…different.

My course outer protective shell has softened, and I feel myself begin to swell. Then, one morning I awaken to feel my own vestigial appendages digging into the poor excuse for soil that has become my prison.

Oh no, this can’t be happening. I’m starting to grow. Not here! Anywhere but here. Well, not anywhere. I’m supposed to be growing next to Sela, maybe with SK as our next-door-neighbor, but not here in this miserable excuse of a crack. Man, I just can’t catch a break. Then I remember an argument I’d had with SK just a day or two before he’d been washed away.

“I don’t believe in accidents, Seedmore. I really don’t.”

“Well, these last few days must have blown that belief out of your head by now.”
“No, not really. You see, in a no-accident-Universe, we’re all here for a purpose, and our job is to make the most of each and every situation we find ourselves in, including the unexpected ones, like the one we find ourselves in right now.”

Could SK have been right? Could there be some greater purpose to all this? After all, despite everything, I am still alive. Not only alive but also growing. Yeah, growing, but look where I’m growing. How can I possibly fulfill my greater purpose here in this crack? SK was a cool dude, but he didn’t know what he was talking about. Or did he?

I remember SK’s platitude that made me the angriest: “All is in Divine Order, so surrender to what is.” What if I did just that? What if I tried surrendering to this situation, at least for a couple of days, while at the same time trying to be the best seed I could be growing in a crevice of a crack? I mean, what harm could come from it? After all, there’s no one else around to notice if I fail, so what do I have to lose?

A couple of days turn into a couple of weeks and before I know it, I find I’m squeezing myself above the crack into the brightness and warmth of spring. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but life hasn’t been so bad these last few weeks. Oh, there’s the occasional close call from being almost squashed by a passing pedestrian, but well, hey, you know what they say. “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Oh God, another one of SK’s aphorisms. Man, I miss that seed.

Uh-oh, here comes that kid again.

The gardener’s kid jogs down the walkway on his way to the garden when he suddenly stops and bends down to me. His face is gigantic, and his voice thunderous. “Daddy, Daddy. Look at this one. It looks like some of the plants in the garden.”

I feel the tremor of the ground as the gardener pauses in his weeding and walks over to admire his son’s astute observation. “Some people call seeds that take root in unusual places like that ‘volunteers’. Sometimes you’ll find a seed growing from the previous years’ plants, or simply find one growing in unexpected places. I think of them more like orphans.”
“Like me, Dad?”

“Well, like you and me. Remember, I was raised in an ‘unexpected
place’ as well.”

The kid bends down close to me again. “But what if someone steps
on it? We gotta help it Dad.”

What’s he talking about helping me? I’ve grown pretty comfortable
where I am.

“Well, I don’t know if we can dig down to get enough of the root
system…”

Exactly my point. I feel a nervous twitch in my roots just thinking
about it.

“I can, Dad. Just like you saved me, I’m going to save this plant.”

“Well, I suppose it’s worth a shot. Let’s go get you some smaller
digging utensils from the kitchen.”

For the life of me, I can’t think of any of SK’s sayings that will
help me in this situation, so I decide to pray for another thunderstorm,
anything that will keep the two gardeners from digging me up. Of course,
it remains a bright and sunny day. My luck is holding.

Holy Cow! Here they come. Boy, those utensils from the kitchen
look mighty big and sharp. Hey kid, don’t mess with the roots. Watch out
there. Really, this isn’t a good idea, my boy. I’ve gotten used to this spot.

But the kid keeps working on the soil around me, and I have to ad-
mit, he’s much more careful than I’d expected him to be. Suddenly, I feel
the ground below me loosen, and the next thing I know I’m moving.

Wait a minute. Where are you taking me? Oh, shit. Here I go again.
All is in Divine Order…all is in Divine Order…surrender, surrender.

Can it be? Is that what I think it is? It is. It’s the garden. He’s taking
me to the garden. Oh my God, SK was right. There really are no acci-
dents, just a whole lot of mystery. But wait a minute. Where are you
planting me? Not here. Where’s my Sela? That’s not Sela. I’m supposed
to be with Sela, remember?
I look around and see SK the next row over.

“Hey, SK. It’s me, Seedmore. Have you seen Sela?”

“Well, I’ll be. It is you. Welcome to paradise. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen you again.”

“It’ll be paradise as soon as I find Sela.”

“Gosh, I don’t know how to break it to you, but I don’t think Sela made it. I’ve been here since the rain carried me out of the crack and deposited me here, but I haven’t seen Sela at all. I’m so sorry, Seedmore. I know you and she were close.”

“Yeah, we were soulmates. At least I thought we were.” No Sela? How could I be expected to go on with my life without my soulmate? The thought of going on with my life without Sela is devastating to me, but I don’t know what I can do about it. It’s beginning to feel more like Divine Discontent taking over again. How am I supposed to give up on a dream that I’ve had, well forever?

I look around at the other tomato seedlings. Most of them are a good bit taller than me, a product of the rich garden loam they’ve been planted in, except the one closest to me, who is more or less my same size. As I’m getting familiar with my surroundings, I hear a melody. At first, I think it’s angels singing to me, then I realize the gardener has turned on his transistor radio.

As I listen to the words of the song, I realize God does, indeed, work in mysterious ways for the lyrics speak directly to me: “If you can’t be with the one your love, then love the one you’re with.” Sounds like another one of SK’s platitudes. When you really love another, it’s just not that easy to let go and start loving someone else. I’m not so sure I’m ready to give up my dreams of a life with Sela. Still, life goes on, so I may as well at least get to know the other plants that I am destined to spend the season with.

I turn to the small seedling next to me.

“Hello there. My name is Seedmore, what’s yours?”

There’s a long pause before my neighbor answers me.
“I didn’t think you recognized me, Seedmore, but that’s okay. I didn’t recognize you at first either. I’m Sela.”

“Oh, my God, how can that be? You were one of the most robust seeds of the pack. What happened?”

“Like you, I also suffered many hardships after being thrown from the pack. It was a difficult journey, but you know what they say…”

As we turn our leaves towards the sun, we answer at the same time, “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.”

I guess we’ve both been hanging out with SK too long. Foster Flat is a fantastic place to live if you don’t mind the twists and turns of its mountain magic.
Jumpin’ Jellyfish – It’s Notebook Time!

Jellyfish evaporate in the sun.

So do ideas if you don't write them down.

That's why for a large number of years I've kept a series of what I ambitiously refer to as 'writer's notebooks' Those saddle-stitch bound, dog-eared ones from three decades past are long gone now of course, but I still have in my possession two dating back to the early 2000's. Both spiral-bound, one sporting a bubble-gum pink cover the other aqua-marine, together they're overflowing with what might best be labelled 'fragments'.

These fragments include overheard snippets of dialogue from real life, television and movies, lists of unusual people and place names, beginnings or middles of ideas for stories, life quotes, mixed metaphors, creative insults, lifted descriptive passages from news articles and novels, jokes, self-deprecating remarks, even a couple of useful phrases to pull off a 1980's era Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation (" I got my uzi-nine millimetre!"). And all of it written in a penmanship so poor much of it is bordering on illegible.

I was leafing thru 'aquamarine' just the other day.

In it I found the aforementioned assorted bric-a-brac wordery, including obituary type notes for the late English actor Dudley Moore (1935 - 2002). My scribble included the date he passed away (which, checking now, I realize I had gotten wrong), the fact he was only five feet two inches tall and the description of him as a sex 'thimble'.

Glen Donaldson
Clearly at the time I regarded this quip as worthy of recording but up until this moment I've never found the opportunity to repeat it.

On other occasions, however, I've had cause to be thankful only a relatively short time down the track from the original transcribing that I made the effort to jot down, often in the dark while watching a television screen, of some overheard one-of-a-kind wisecrack or pearly good utterance.

One relatively recent example of this occurred while viewing the torrential downpour of unending despair known as the six 'o clock news. On came one of those lighter human-interest stories they insert to dilute the 'stiff whiskey' of the other stuff. Mention was made of a remote island lighthouse near Scotland called Little Ross that was up for sale. Highlighted was the tragic backstory of the lighthouse which included the murder of a previous lighthouse keeper back in 1960.

A summary of this news snippet made it into my most prized black-speckled notebook. This in turn launched an on-a-whim research splurge conducted on-line and amongst the shelves of my local library which culminated in the writing of a short story about two lighthouse keepers who drive each other to distraction due to the late-evening piano playing habits of one of them. And in direct homage to the bits 'n pieces power of the writer's notebook, this story then went on to appear in a November issue of the digital literary magazine RUMBLEFISH PRESS.

I have another notebook (apricot orange with horizontal white stripes and multicoloured section dividers) I use to record names. Un-
usual names. Names of distinction. Class names. So when Sloane Stephens mercilessly crushed Madison Keys in the U.S Open Women's tennis final back in September... notebook time!

Only last night I was looking at a documentary on the making of 1949 British film noir *The Third Man*. In it they mentioned the sewer police featured in the chase scenes filmed amidst Vienna's underground canal system were not hired actors but real-life lawmen whose 'beat' was the subterranean depths of the below-the-city waterways. The words 'sewer police' struck me as unusual enough to warrant recording, so once again ... notebook time! (The black speckled one).

Might 'sewer police' make it into a piece of writing I embark upon in the near or distant future? Who knows? And that's part of the mystery and charm of writer's notebooks. You can never be certain if there'll be any future use for the snippet you've thought worth preserving. But like playing the stock market, naturally you live in hope your investment will pay a nice dividend somewhere down the track.

Writer's notebooks that are intended on capturing and recording random ear and mind candy comprising everything from flavoured phrases and witticisms to funny, touching and dramatic dialogue and quotable quotes ("Cometh the hour, cometh the man" came from a viewing of the 2016 Catherine Zeta Jones-starring *Dad’s Army* last week and it's extremely tempting to remark that line was one of the few highlights of the entire movie) are at the very least a way of clocking in. They're also a way of furthering one's lifelong love affair with words and can always be surfed later for inspiration.

Viva la writer's notebooks!
Before I was a full-time instructor, over twenty years ago, I presented at my first national conference—the National Conference of Teachers of English. It was in Denver that year, and I paid for the conference myself because I craved professional development, even though I was a lowly adjunct, only teaching three or four large college classes each semester.

In a round table session, I presented an exercise that I had created for my developmental English courses called “The Art of Writing.” The students took a reproduction of a famous piece of art (I had many pictures for them to choose from) and told them to brainstorm about what they saw, using a handout I gave them.

One side of the paper was marked “Concrete,” where they wrote what they saw in the picture or what they could imagine that they could experience with their other senses. On the other side of the paper, I wrote “Abstract,” where students wrote words and phrases that represented how the painting made them feel or what memories, or thoughts in general, the painting helped bring to the surface.

After they brainstormed, they would develop some sort of prose writing based on the art and their brainstorming, combining the concrete with the abstract. I used as an example a short piece I wrote that was based on
the iconic painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood. Here is the painting and the creative piece I wrote based on it:

American Gothic

I remember marrying him. We stood together in the country church, farmer’s son and farmer’s daughter, too poor for ought else—too much a part of the land anyway. My family sitting on those hand-hewn, hard-backed pews, witnessing.

That night I didn’t utter a word or a cry. Closing my eyes, I imagined I was lying in the distant fields of my home, daises tickling my face and hands and feet.

I worked hard, learning not to expect any praise for the clean floors or hearty food. My greatest joy, to get all the chores finished in time to head for the fields, to hold the soil of our land in my hand, to feel its moisture and smell its mustiness.
He did praise me once. After three daughters, who were mine to raise, to teach, to find husbands for, I bore him a son. I sweat and strained and screamed no less, but somehow it was different, and he thanked me. Then, my son was gone, no longer mine. So soon he learned not to cry. So soon he became a man.

Now, in that same country church, as my youngest daughter gives herself to a farmer too poor to leave and too much a part of the land anyway, I sit in a hand-hewn, hard-backed pew, witnessing.
Contributors

Geoff Anderson teaches foreigners English and Americans Italian. He has organized Columbus, OH's first poetry show dedicated to biracial poetry, The Other Box. His work appears or is forthcoming in S/WORD, B O D Y, and Sakura Review, as well as www.andersongeoff.com

Jayne P. Bowers, a semi-retired psychology instructor from two of South Carolina's technical colleges, continues to teach online courses. A board member of the South Carolina Writers' Association, she is the first-place winner in the 2016 Carrie McCray Award Nonfiction category and author of Crossing the Bridge: Succeeding in a Community College and Beyond. Her work can be found in Main Street Rag, The Petigru Review, and two anthologies published by the Camden Writers.

Orrin Jason Bradford taught From Spark to Flame: Fanning Your Passion & Ideas into Money-making Magazine Articles that Make a Difference at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina, and Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina.

Bill Camp currently teaches college composition at Paul D. Camp Community College and Norfolk State University, a traditionally black university. He also taught at Tidewater Community College for five years as adjunct faculty. He enjoys helping grow student autonomy for learning and exploring. He has taught courses in composition writing, research writing, and techniques in vocabulary building.

Sara Codair’s fiction has appeared in Helios Quarterly, Theme of Absence, and Spaceports and Spidersilk. For the past five years, she has taught English Composition, Basic Writing, and Reading at Northern Essex Community College. She says, “In the classroom, I may be the expert on the writing process, but my students teach more about life and the world than they know. The students are my inspiration and motivation. They give me a purpose beyond simply making things up”.

Michael DeCarolis is a high school English teacher who is inspired to write by his students. He says, “The students with whom I work are truly a microcosm of society, and I am enriched by knowing them. Sometimes, I look at my students and see the individuals before me; other times, however, I look at my students and see the unique challenges that each of them is facing. At times like this, I can't help but sympathize with the chaos, the silence, and the trials that each of them holds inside.”

Glen Donaldson is a Year 6 specialist English teacher at Grand Avenue State School in the city of Brisbane in Australia, where he has taught for 12 years. He began his teaching career in 2001 working in Tokyo Japan as an English language instructor. His teach-
ing career also includes two years spent living and working on a little island (population < 200) in the Torres Straits. The 'Straits', as they are known, are a collection of inhabited and uninhabited islands in between the most northern tip of Australia and the country of Papua New Guinea.

Brian Longacre, says “As a writing teacher, I enjoyed awakening the student who had spent years studying the minds of others through their writings but had not realized the joy of discovering their own minds and hearts through their own chosen words, words that carried textures and scents from the basements of their beings. Many of my students did not even know they had basements and that basements were places where houses kept secrets like memory chests, heirlooms, and Boo Radleys. And, all of us, have Boo Radleys in our basements.”

Meagan Lucas teaches composition at AB Tech Community College in Asheville, North Carolina. Meagan lives in Western North Carolina with her husband and their two small children. She writes fiction about family life, the grey space between right and wrong, and the dark underbelly of the American Dream. Her work can be found in a variety of literary journals including: Four Ties Lit Review, The Santa Fe Writers Project and The Penmen Review. You can read more at www.meaganlucas.com.

Jacob G. Myers was a student ambassador and tutor while a student at Blue Ridge Community College in North Carolina. He says of his experience: “The best part of being a peer tutor was simply getting that lightbulb moment from my students when we worked through concepts they found to be difficult in practice. There would be this instantaneous “aha!” moment, and knowing that I was able to give them that feels really good.”

Maria S. Picone is a writing teacher and consultant who designed a creative writing class to teach rural, at-risk youth in Cambodia in 2014. She loves helping others explore their creativity and open up their writing. She has served as a mentor and an online writing instructor for many years. Her website is mariaspicone.com, and her Twitter is @mspicone.

Andréa Rivard is currently a high school English teacher at Summit Public Schools: Tahoma in San Jose, California. While she loves teaching analytical writing and the structures that go with it, the most fun she has had as a writing instructor has been teaching creative writing. She says, “It's wonderful to see 16-year-olds work through the issues in their lives through stories about other people or obscure poetry that captures the essence of pain. Young people feel validated by having someone read their creative work, and I've loved being able to offer them such an opportunity.”
Donna Love Wallace taught philosophy and religion at Forsyth Tech Community College in Winston Salem, NC after earning her Master of Arts, Biblical Studies. Currently, she is president of Winston Salem Writers and director of Poetry in Plain Sight, a statewide initiative placing poetry in public spaces. Her work appears in Kakalak 2017 (honorable mention), The Paddock Review (forthcoming), Wild Goose Poetry Review (Fall 2017), Camel City Dispatch, Poetry In Plain Sight, A Funny Thing: A Poetry and Prose Anthology, Old Mountain Press, 2015.

Katie Winkler teaches English composition and British literature in Flat Rock, North Carolina, where she lives happily with her husband John and daughter Hannah. She blogs at her website Hey, Mrs. Winkler: Musings and Mutterings about Higher Education in the South, which is also the home of Teach. Write.: A Writing Teachers’ Literary Journal.