LIFE
In Gratitude: A Letter to My Peers

I always sign my emails with “In gratitude.” (That’s In—space—gratitude). I have so much for which to be grateful. This feeling has taken on a more profound and significant meaning for me this past year. I began my college career like many new college students: full of hope, anticipation, eagerness, and a healthy dose of anxiety and fear. As a student, I have received a much-unanticipated education: the painful lesson of lacking cohesiveness and acceptance I once expected as I began to write this chapter of my life. Entrance to an institution that prides itself on diversity and inclusion promised to be an experience that would culminate in the forging of lasting friendships with those like-minded. I guess my expectations were a little a lofty.

Many times, in the past two semesters, I have felt more like a spectator than a participant. On several occasions, I felt the spark of a genuine connection with a classmate, the recognition of a kindred spirit. I was excited, thinking I was making a new friend. Only to find, for whatever reason, the spark is never given a chance to ignite into the flame of friendship. Instead, it was snuffed-out, not even a trace of the initial recognition left behind. On more than one instance, I have been politely rejected when I asked if I could join someone at the lunch table. I find quietly dining alone in a room bubbling over with life and full of loud conversations and laughter less than appealing. I have stopped going to the dining hall. Now, I buy a bottle of kombucha and a pack of trail mix at the campus store and find a quiet, unoccupied place to read. I bury my nose in a book, while the rest of the campus talks and laughs with each other over a shared meal. While walking across campus, instead of being met with eye contact, acknowledging my presence and possibly inviting conversation, I receive averted glances. I am learning to do the same.
It’s much more difficult to bridge three decades than I had hoped. I am sure most of my peers did not expect to share a classroom with someone who’s between the ages of their parents and grandparents. I understand the discomfort this must cause for some. Going to college is supposed to be a liberation from an authority figure at home, a chance to be free. I only wish my peers would realize I am not here to be authoritative, only to share in the experience of education.

Though I can say that I have been able to cultivate a couple of meaningful relationships, I now realize a different opportunity for personal growth was being offered to me here: witnessing the despair of many of my youthful peers has increased my awareness of the human struggle. I went through a phase where I became riddled with guilt for being loved, respected, and encouraged by my family. It saddens me to see how many of my peers have not received this gift. Daily, I am aware of the effort required by some of my peers to acquire resiliency in life. So many are searching for a way to become elastic in the face of adversity, trying to learn the skill of snapping back, instead of breaking like a taut rubber band. I have always felt like the passing away of my father and grandparents left gaping holes in my life; I now realize their love more than filled my holes and left me with me a core of stability. More than ever, I am in gratitude.

I see the vacant stares. I feel the energy of apprehension in the classrooms, and on the walkways. I hear about the drunken, drug-filled, and sleepless nights. I do not know what it feels like to fear for my safety with someone who I should be able to trust inherently. I cannot begin to imagine how it feels to answer to a name which matches who I am in one atmosphere, yet in the presence of family and people I have known my entire life, find myself forced to endure the pain of being called by a name that feels foreign. I cannot imagine how it must feel not to have parents who understand, support, and encourage you to live in authenticity; to chase your dreams, to live with passion. However, I DO remember looking at my reflection in the mirror and hating the looks of the person looking back at me. Thankfully, the years have taught me to be
kinder to myself, although there are times, I am taken aback by the stark reality of how the years have changed me, yet, I remain grateful.

I have had my whole life—fifty years—to grow into the person I am now: a person who can see the far-reaching consequences of a single decision. My heart goes out to my peers, who are just beginning to embark on their journey of personal growth and self-discovery.

I wanted to take this opportunity to express how incredibly grateful, in gratitude, I am to each of you in this room. I am thankful for every kind word and every seemingly insignificant conversation. You will never know how much I needed to feel like a part of the group. I am grateful for every exhibition of courage; the courage expressed through the writing and sharing of your life stories. I am grateful for your dedication and passion for improving your craft as a writer. I am grateful for every word of feedback offered to me so that I may do the same. The talent which surrounds me is impressive and inspiring, dare I say, brilliant.

My hope for each of you is to know your worth: your intrinsic value as a human being—regardless of how someone may have made you feel. Their bullshit is theirs; you do not have to own it. I encourage each of you, in those darkest of hours, in those moments of self-doubt and feelings of powerlessness, to realize your power. I implore you—before you seek solace in the bottom of a bottle, by the flame of some substance, in a chemical that has been compressed into pill form so it will go down a little easier, or in the comfort of another person’s body—go within. Give that tiny voice a chance to become stronger and louder. Nothing is more empowering than to say “No.” and to mean it. Each one of you has an extraordinary and unique gift to offer this world, a world that desperately needs that gift. Please do not ever consider extinguishing your flame. You are here to set this world on fire.

In gratitude,
Windy Gail
Joshua J. Brunetti

On *Saturn Devouring His Son* by Francisco de Goya

Two cataclysmic eyes leer upward like defied clauses,
Pupils polarized as if pensive Saturn pauses
To grope vainly along his mind’s cracked basin,
A blithe old man wading through frustration
To recall about which task he’s had to make a fuss;
Opposing the torso he holds--its head a husk,
Its absent hands waving to the abyss--his eyes
Feign retreat, deceive the onlooker whose eyes
In turn repel further yet,
As if to see where Saturn’s eyes are set.

But as Father inherits Son, between rotting tooth
And yammering tongue, there is a wretched truth
In those two tepid pools pointing heavenward;
A truer abyss they seem to look toward!
A sky of eternal and unforgiving
Fresh futures blooming and at once wilting,
Promising the rule of a race of pygmy titans,
A prospect that excites yet frightens
The onlooker whose eyes are yours and mine,
And so we see finally the terrible timeline:

Through dominance our progenitors earned distinction
Yet their top-heavy minds toppled, and through extinction
The Titans’ power filtered into the Olympians,
Olympic might then funneled into a single god-champion,
Whose messianic avatar chose defeat as his impetus,
And finally bestowed his gift of guilt to us,
An oath embedded in every cell,
Every nucleus a horrible choir
Pulsing in olm-octaves a death-knell;
A clamoring chorus of cacophonic desire.

And so at the end of several millennia it is we
Who eat the gods, partaking in eternal sup,
‘And when you eat of this bread and drink of this cup
We ask that you do so in remembrance of Thee.’

With our prodigious ancestry we seem at odds;
Atop skyscrapers, behind nuclear codes and screens
We squander Saturn’s madness beyond our means,
Unaware that we are but little gods.
Telemachus Takes Charge Around The Campfire

Odysseus, get me a beer and don’t pump quirky Trojan War stories into the air. Sexy Circe, that’s who you’re thinking about. Uzis. Dad, we need uzis, not those Molotov wicked cocktails. You’re not the badass fox you once were, all spritz and glitz. Athena is not going to flick her magic thumb, cut down Antinous with her wings while crippled Eumaeus gets his goats to baa and we knock off gobs of the suitors. It’s not a 1-2 punch-Ithaca-is-mine kind of thing. First we find a raj, kick his ass, get his money, hire a Navy SEAL, make him bloody up the place. Then we take the town.
Finding It

Who’s to tell me God isn’t a badass biker-chick who reads my fortune in her chrome earrings. She might take beer for payment or gas—that’s Super-unleaded gas, not that cheap foam called Regular. That’s my dirty Monday view of religion at the truck stop in Rawlins. I’m wearing jeans so old they’re brand new in the fashion world of torn jeans for villains. God is guiding me down the Interstate, wild hair whipping in the wind, the sand and sagebrush endless like a figure 8. This is where the sinner finds the holy land and I’m feeling at home kicking flat rocks across the cement cracks shaped like a cross.
Diagraming Sentences

Trees ruler-straight
compound subjects
and compound predicates
aimed like bullets
joined by a straight cross

We exacted, slanted,
boxed-in nouns and verbs,
dropped predicate nominatives
and predicate adjectives
into their proper slots

removed the rhythm of language
until a sentence was squared
and the articles, adjectives
and indirect objects hung
like heretics

We diagramed at night
through our dreams
A red pen graded our trees
and our teacher said Now
you know how to write
Wayne Mennecke

Pica

The many forms of the eating disorder pica are categorized by ingesting various non-nutritive substances.

Do not consume anything

in lab ever.

That’s the first rule of science class taught to students since middle school yet you ordinarily diligent gentlemanly even in your pre-lab preparations this time question the edibility of every chemical indicator and solution in my laboratory wonder aloud why your mother’s estrogen pills shouldn’t be swallowed by teenage boys press me on the effects of ingesting blue biological stain could it discolor your urine might it lead to bladder irritation headache confusion?

Now you’re worried?
Even in a fit of exasperation
I could never concede to these requests
revoke your signed safety contract
ignore the warnings
    reminders          precautions          procedures
or excuse you from universal common sense.

I do not authorize you to Jekyll and Hyde
yourself into a corner
where you can transmogrify

from curious scholar
of strenuous biological methods

into a seductive chemist
unhinged by the fuel
of wicked        wicked freedoms.
Circumstantiality

Circumstantial speech occurs when the focus of a discussion digresses off-topic but eventually returns to the original point.

I’m not really sure how we arrived at this subject.

One minute I’m teaching about kidneys

their importance in excretion and preventing dehydration,

the next minute you’re asking me about “sleep water” how you purchase it at the airport before a long vacation flight;

your classmates wonder: what just happened here?

Airports sell “sleep water?” Are we talking about tranquilizers?
Now you’re compelled
to Google it for me, prove the realness

of Dream Water-
how it eases sleep, relieves flight anxiety

induces melatonin torpor
delivered by a flavor called Snoozeberry-

all of this so unsettling to Nick
seated behind you,

he (who would rather just fly wakeful)
raises his hand

asks, “Can I go
to the bathroom?”
Bill Nye Tho

Safety goggles on.

I was never promised a teaching career
set in a John Hughes movie.
Students don’t cut school (nine times)
like Ferris Bueller, 24 hours-worth of hijinks
crammed into his 8-hour school day.
No one’s as invested in discipline
as principal Rooney was.

My job isn’t magical. It’s (weird)
science, biology conjured in classrooms bepimpled with teenagers
who ask questions even The Science Guy can’t answer:
*Will eating 48 bananas in a row kill a person?*
*Does natural selection pick favorable traits for offspring then hope for the best?*
*Will a fetus suck on its own umbilical cord?*
*Are mitochondria really the powerhouse of the cell?*

Students charge me with behaving like Bill,
expect his brand of humor and enthusiasm in every lesson.
Sometimes I wear a powder blue lab coat but skip the bowtie superpowers.
They confuse him for an actual research scientist, hunkered over a black lab
bench
colored fluid flasks a-bubble over Bunsen burners
boiling vapors away.

Everyone wants to be a scientist until it’s time to write the lab report.

The real Bill Nye though?
He’ll pledge allegiance to the lab,
Unite the States of Matter
and to his lab partners
with whom he stands
one theory, ride or die
unbiased
with liberty and STEM
for all.

Homeroom period’s over,
time to type that lab report.

Safety goggles off.
Flies Swarming

In this cafeteria flies swarm the recruiter’s cropped hair.
“One thing I hate—” he spits out—“flies!”
His dominant hand swipes the air. Pure reflex.

In this same room girls carry plastic babies, lifeless until
internal mechanisms inspire crying when they haven’t been *fed*,
haven’t *slept*, are jarred in some other way.

The recruiter cozies up to one boy’s lowered eyes. I should whisper,
“Son, you’re fully armed. Listen only to amputees
who would hand you the pen with bone-white teeth.”

Instead, I ask the recruiter, “You served over there?” “No, sir.”
“You got boys over there you recruited?” “Yes, sir.”
“Any been killed?” “No, sir. Some close calls. I try to—”

he fills the brief silence with a half-hearted fly slap
“—to stay in touch.” So. Maybe the man does flip and flail
some nights. Maybe he is not the enemy. Maybe.

For seventy-two hours our daughters parent *Baby Think-It-Over*
to glimpse that responsibility; for three days our unfortunate sons
should carry AK-47s and clips of rubber bullets.

A mechanized baby begins to bawl. More boys’ downcast eyes huddle
around the recruiter’s uniform. I do not, from this safe taxpayer distance,
spill my coffee on his pail enlistment forms.

I write this worthless dispatch none of them will read
and formulate empty threats: tomorrow, I swear, I will invite in
the neighborhood pimp and the local crackhead...

What’s that—
the administration claims those are dangerous characters? O yes—
they do deal in the *stuff from which aborted dreams are made*. 
Holding Our Breath

Say a guy writes a few words worth reading after he is gone. Say the guy’s son or daughter has a son or daughter who finds grandpa’s notebooks and—while parsing out the drunken, juicy dirt—stumbles upon those few words, lifts them for his or her INTRO TO EXPOSITION class, and cinches them to an adolescent essay on *Three Kinds of Love*—saving it from bursting with clichés as exhausted as sunken Greeks.

Say his or her teacher—propped with stale popcorn perched in his crotch and a warm beer forgotten at his elbow—arrives at this paper early in the stack, sees the presence behind the words, and suggests his student change “In his ode *To Boysenberry Jam* my grandfather wrote” to “my grandfather writes” and *Voila!* resurrects the old guy—his hand moving undead, lines flowing from his dry pen, suddenly, his voice present, leaving us *What will he whisper next?* in anticipation.

All of this could happen: the grandfather, given one last chance to revise, freshens his whole dusty oeuvre; the grand-son or –daughter meets the wits of a man he or she only knew as lame; the stale, perched, flat teacher—starting to moves on—graduates from a five-paragraph life. So what that such possibilities are slim. So what that someone likely tosses gramp’s notebooks, the teacher ignores his student’s faux pas, or the kid disregards the teacher’s two cents.

So what that you likely never read these words; I likely never show them to you. Still—dormant, sleeping, holding our breath—some words may live on to fill our lungs as, within our bones, we balance their crushing gravity and fragile intimations.
1. Literary Heist Cross Winds Magic
Guise of loyal beggar, Odysseus returned to Ithaca to gather kindling. During Trojan Wars, matter referred to a maker of mats. Under earthen lamp light, tailors stitched royal clothes from bolts of silk. Mythical journeys celebrate finding places in ourselves that represent home. Cleave is the Janus verb which means both to stick tight and to fall away.

2. Back When Stevorino’s No Longer Live-In-A-Cave Augustinian Missionary Position
While flying high in The White House, heavyset revanchist Minister of Rituals who’d assassinated five of six of his chief rival’s pallbearers, sitting under a Banyon tree, the non-Platonic philosopher-kingmaker worked it all up so that throughout our land, mimicking Kim Jong-un, each home or hovel had a ham radio occupants can't turn off (under threat of death) tuned 24/7/365 to Breitbart newscasts once he has left.

3. Christmas Eve at the Zoo: No Answers for a Grandson
Gibbons swing erections chain to chain, doing their damndest to engage the next cage’s nativity where orang newborns are busy picking lice from mommies’ stringy nipples before crunching the critters like sesame seeds; while in the much graciouser villa next door, gorilla babes originally hiding in a tire fort crèche, tipped off by familiar Griffith Park gray-bereted trainers, knuckle front and center, scrambling to grab whatever’s tossed. The troop gives lots of space to the spooked mangy silverback hoarding carrots and broccoli off in a corner, ass facing down gawkers gobbling kettle corn; nearby favored infants are allowed to nibble leftovers or forgottens or lost or rotten,
as pre-occupied pre-pubertals rub ‘gainst each other, 
wiggle wangs, mimic mounting ‘cross from a creekbed of platypi 
-- which titillates the rest of us mostly platitudinous apes 
oohing and aahing, waiting for our snow cones and churros.
A very pregnant alpha chimp in the manger ‘cross the way 
teases lettuce from poop ribbons once hung commas 
now plopped from trees, then scoops bits, monkeys around, 
lobs chips through the bars at the sparse twilight crowd 
as we mortified chumps flee whooping ‘n hollering – 
‘cept for bunches of untouching fundo Jewish/ Muslim couples, 
Noah zoo dates ‘rranged two by two, chaperones lurking in mandrills, 
who stand ground ‘tween touching fictions of denial and transfixion, 
Augustinian monks gobbling kosher dogs, halal burgers, shrimp falafel.
The Meeting

I had not seen her or heard from her for a very long time. I did not know where she was or how she was. Then one cool, rainy day, just after dusk, my phone rang. I answered it, and immediately I recognized her voice. I was greatly surprised, and I didn’t know how she got my number, as I had changed to a private number long since. She requested to see me, and I was even more surprised. She wanted me to meet her at midnight at the beach house where we once spent many wonderful, happy hours. I prepared for my trip with anxiety and impatience, wanting very much to see her but wondering why after all this time she wanted to see me. The clock slowly ticked the time by, and I finally started on my journey. I put in some music that we both loved and had often listened to. All along the way, I kept wondering what all of this meant, why she had contacted me and wanted to see me after all this time. Finally, I arrived at the beach house; it and the beach were as lovely as I remembered. I walked down to the beach. The rain had stopped, but a fog had settled in, giving the entire area an eerie look and feel.

Suddenly, I heard someone call my name. I turned around, and there she was, coming toward me, and wearing the most beautiful white dress, long and flowing. How unusual, I thought, for a meeting at the beach. As she came near to me, the years, sadness, and loneliness melted away. We spent the next
few hours walking along the beach, talking, reminiscing, remembering and forgetting. We held each other close, again and again, and I told her how much I had missed her, and how I didn't understand her leaving. She cried, said she had her reasons, some even she herself didn't understand. About an hour before sunrise, she said she had to go. I told her I wanted to see her again, and she told me she would see me soon. She said she needed some time alone, so I left her there, walked back to my car, and started to drive away. I looked back, and the last time I saw her, she was standing on the beach looking out over the dark water, she in her long, white, flowing dress, shrouded by the fog.

As I drove home filled with happiness and sadness, I wondered about our meeting and what it meant. When I got home, I turned on the television, fixed a cup of hot cocoa, and sat down to relax a few minutes before trying to get some sleep. I took a few sips, leaned back, and closed my eyes. Suddenly, a voice from the television caused me to sit up straight in my chair. This is what the voice said: "Shortly before dusk today, the internationally known artist Ariel's plane went down in a wooded area a few miles from the coast. She was killed instantly." I dropped my cup and stared at the television in disbelief. My Ariel, with whom I had just spent hours at our beach house and walking on the beach, had come to see me one last time. I was never the same after she left the first time. I would never be the same after she left for the last time. Changed forever -- both of us. But I remembered her last words to me: "I’ll see you soon." And I have held on to that, even though I could not hold on to her.
Winter Portrait

Four o’clock in the afternoon,
I sit at my kitchen window
and watch the sunlight
glistening off the ice-laden
gnarled limbs of the naked winter trees.
The birds to our back yard come
to peck the scattered crumbs
that we threw on the ground
as a gift to help them through
the chill of a winter day.
The sun is glowing, and the sky is blue.
A light breeze rustles the needles
of the scantily clad old pines,
and the hills and hollows
sparkle in white snow mixed with ice –
a portrait that only God could draw.
And the hour and the scene,
though it will vanish soon,
for this moment stands suspended in time,
and the movement of the birds
and the wind on their wings
and in the trees
is the only hint of time in passing,
the only clue that this picture is a fading thing,
that it is only one stroke of a brush
in the steadily turning pages of eternity.
LOSS
This Teacher Will Know Who You Were

in memory of Tim Longman, 1976-1995

I could never keep you and a smart-ass named Jim straight. When I did remember, you were the one who built with words.

My first day here, he wrote, was my first day.
Cardboard boxes flew from the moving van...

Too late I know which one you are.

Your face smiles from page one.
To our small-town paper, you are news:
the headline, your name above “killed in France,” as though you were a World War III infantryman, instead of a student summer breaking.

...boxes flew from the moving van
to the house. Every room echoed. Boxes emptied. I cut and taped for hours!

Even now your words rework themselves toward something more. A true artist,
everything you touched grows—
bearing your early signature—priceless.

Do you remember Le Cammon?—
a quiet village barely breathing,
an easy town in which to find peace,
a peaceful place to die young.
Are many future American architects slaughtered
on its narrow, meandering cobblestone?

By next school year, this teacher would have forgotten
you, who deserved the time to forget me
and to forget my fuddling with words
you left to speak for you.

*Ultimately a driveway fortress stood*
*invincible to everything but rain.*
Katie Winkler

Best Laid Plans
For Lee

These best of times
Feed my work
They hinder it

These worst of times
Hinder my work
They feed it

It is NOT a balance
It IS something else

Altogether

A body
A mind
A spirit

Altogether corrupt
Infinitely holy

Intertwined
Inseparable

CRAZY!

What do I mean
I don’t really know
what life is
but
I love it

I just wish YOU had
Too
Good Mourning
In Loving Memory of Virginia Torres

Good mourning?
Filled with doubt—
What’s good about
Losing you in
The midnight hour
Never more
To hear your voice?

Good mourning?
Wracked with sobs—
What good can
Come of these
Empty rooms
Without music?

Good mourning.
Let tears flow—
What good was
There in just
Lying still
In silent dark?

Good mourning.
See me now—
What good in
This bright new day—
Music surrounds
Me—forever!

good mourning
Good Mourning.

GOOD MORNING!

It’s time to rise and shine.
Wil Michael Wrenn

Ice Man

To touch
but not be touched
except inside
where no one can see,
wanting to get close
from a distance,
shy of being seen
and known...

Wanting to touch
and be touched,
wanting to love
and be loved,
but afraid that knowing
means not loving...

So, the Ice Man
reaches out,
touches from a distance,
loves from a distance,
and remains alone
in the cold.
House

The house stands
silent and alone,
empty of the family sounds
that once echoed there...
Nothing remains.
The house stands
forsaken, forlorn,
cold in the moonlight
as the wind speaks
and no one answers.
The house stands
in the shadows,
cold, silent, and empty –
a monument to Trust.
Survival

The seas of time
flood in on you
late at night,
dark of the morning,
a tide that sweeps over you
and into your soul.
Drowning,
you can’t come up for air;
the pressure holds you down,
plunges you into the depths
of the ocean.
So, what can you do? –
Die...
or learn to live
underwater.
Silence

How can I define a loss
that goes too deep
for words to reach?
How can I describe a loss
that has taken each one
I love so much
so far away from me?
Nothing can fill the void.
No voice can call
from an emptied room;
no tears can flow
from an emptied heart.
To such a loss as this,
to such a loneliness and emptiness,
to such a deep and lasting sorrow,
the only response I can hear
is silence –
silence for an ending
that will never end.
Metamorphosis

Confined to earth,
bound by invisible chains,
wanting so to be free,
to glide
high above the tide
of misery,
but this body I’m in
won’t let me
for it’s just not equipped
for flying.

So blind at birth,
lost in an alien world,
floundering foolishly,
I feel
this is all unreal;
I am yet to be,
but this body I’m in
won’t let me
for it’s just not equipped
for flying.

I’m kind of like a caterpillar
trapped
in mid-metamorphosis,
unable to flee,
unable to break free,
but I’m hoping
someone will soon come by,
open my cocoon,
and release a butterfly,
set free this butterfly.
STORIES

BY

KATIE WINKLER
I Have Not Yet Returned*
In Memory of My Dad, The Bravest Man I’ve Ever Known

Sam, Jr. took the biggest, most wicked looking blade out of the butcher’s block and tested it against his finger. He knew the blade wouldn’t draw blood, but it emphasized his point. Sam made most of his points in the kitchen. He grabbed the hunk of smoked Boston Butt firmly in his hands. The sharp blade came down with a firm “whoomph” against the stained, wooden chopping block. “Admit it, Sis,” he said between chops, “you don’t want to go visit him.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to go see him,” I said. Sam paused in his work and smirked. “It’s just that I don’t think he wants to see me right now. He seems to respond better to you.”

Sam started back chopping. “He won’t even know you’re there.”

I flung my hand toward him. “There you go,” I said, defining the matter.

“There you go?” He waved the knife, painting the air with it. “So because he won’t recognize you, won’t see you, you shouldn’t bother to go see him?” He brought the knife down hard on the meat. Whoomph. “The truth is it makes you feel uncomfortable.”

“And it doesn’t make you uncomfortable?”

Whoomph. “No, it doesn’t.”

“When did this big change come about?”

Whoomph. “It’s never made me uncomfortable.

“Right.”

Whoomph. “Because I admitted it from the get go.”

“Admitted what?”

Whoomph. “That Dad is, you know, crazy.”

I stared at the meat. It was hacked to bits, just the way I liked it. I looked up at Sam. His handsome face, so much like his father’s, was flushed with heat. “I don’t think you should talk that way about Dad,” I said.
He dropped the knife on the counter and wiped his meaty hands on his once white linen apron with its faded “Hug the Chef,” across the chest. He scraped the meat onto the big porcelain platter embossed with a chicken. “If the shoe fits,” he said, carrying the meat to the table.

I was angry, yet I followed him into the dining room, sat down and ate. There’s not much, even a father who might have diabetes-related dementia, that could stop me from eating my brother’s barbecue. After we were through, Sam brought out the lemon ice box pie, the kind Dad liked so much and still ate some of, despite the diabetes.

Sweet enough to make your teeth hurt.

My mother had made the best lemon pie I’d ever eaten. She made it with real lemons, plus the rind, sweetened condensed milk, fluffy meringue and those little vanilla wafers lining the bottom and circling around the sides. No other crust. Back when she was alive, I’d seen Dad eat a big slice of that pie, but now he says, “I’ll just have a little sliver, just a sliver. I can’t have too much sugar now, you know.” And he eats it with little enthusiasm. They don’t serve him anything remotely like that at the hospital my brother tells me. Strict diabetic diet, they say. I twirled my fork around the last piece of pie, mixing the soggy sweet wafers with the pie and meringue. It wasn’t Mother’s, but it wasn’t bad.

Not looking at my brother, I said, “I think Dad’s problems are related to his diabetes,” then adding as I popped a glob into my mouth, “and Vietnam, of course.”

He just looked at me.

I looked at him. “They’ve got to be related.”

“What does it matter what it’s related to?”

“But he always has an episode when his diabetes gets out of control.”

I jumped when Sam’s fork clattered on my grandmother’s china plate. “An episode?” He stared at me, his hands on his hips. “He thinks he’s Jesus Christ! You call that an episode?”

“He only said that once.” I paused, pushing my fork once again into the soft goo. “Besides, I think Dad could have been speaking metaphorically.”

“I think you’re as loony as he is,” Sam said, bringing his elbows to the table and folded his arms across his chest. He looked like some sort of, I don’t know, Buddha—a Bubba Buddha.

My fork clattered this time. “You should show more respect for your father than that. And for me.”
He pushed his chair back, picked his plate up and started to pass me by. Then he leaned down and whispered, “Yeah, well, I go to visit him, don’t I?”

I didn’t tell Sam where I was going that next day. I just went.

Dad’s room was on a geriatric ward on the top floor. They put the older psych patients there, and I wondered how the old people who were just old felt about that. I wouldn’t have liked it. No, I didn’t like it. Did not like it at all. Just because a person’s old doesn’t make him crazy, does it? Just because Dad’s body was giving way and affecting his mind while it was doing it, didn’t make him insane. I had read that it was even common for veterans, people trained to kill, to think of themselves as a Christ, a Healer. It’s not even crazy when you think of it. It certainly didn’t make Dad…what Sam said. It didn’t. Did not.

I waited for a while at the nurses’ station, longer than I needed to, but I had forgotten how to buzz into the rooms, had forgotten the procedure for getting through the security. Alzheimer’s patients, you know, try to run away. Dad wasn’t an Alzheimer’s patient. His blood sugars had gotten out of control and affected his mind, and he was there on the ward to get things straightened out.

That’s all.

Dad ended up here because he hadn’t been sleeping well when my brother insisted on taking him to the hospital. Sleep deprivation does funny things to a person’s body, they had said. Does funny things to the mind, especially the mind of a veteran. It’s all linked, I thought, waiting for them to come back to the station and help me to get in and visit my father because I couldn’t just go back there, walk back there, walk into his room and visit him. I had to be let in.

The body, the mind, and the spirit—all one. I had heard that and believed it. When the body is affected, so is the mind. Dad’s body was betraying him, and it had affected his mind. Everything that affects the body, affects the mind. Body, mind and spirit. We are a trinity, we are. That’s what Dad always said.

I sat down in an uncomfortable chair in the small waiting room. It was stiff and narrow. I sat hunched and awkward. A magazine, several years old, lay open on the side table beside the chair, and I picked it up to flip through it, gazing at predictions that hadn’t come true.

When a nurse finally came back to the station, I waited, finishing the article, even though I knew how it would end. Finally, I rose and walked over to
the window, resting my fists on the ledge. Her back was to me. I waited patiently. She turned and seemed startled to see me there, giving a little jump.

“I didn’t know anyone was here,” she said, placing her hand lightly over her heart. She was jumpy. I supposed from working in a place like that.

“I’ve come to see my father.”

“Oh, you must be Mr. Krone’s daughter, Kim.”

The place was getting creepier all the time.

“How do you know that?” I said, sounding rude, I’m sure. My mother had taught me better.

She cleared her throat, and I dared her to say that there was a strong family resemblance. “Your brother said you’d be visiting soon,” she said.

“Oh, he did?”

“Yes, he added your name to the list.”

“Oh, yeah, he did. He did. I knew that,” I said, nodding my head too vigorously. She stared at me, and I tapped my fingers on the table. “Could I see my father now?”

She smiled. “Did you sign our book, here? We do need to keep good records of visitors, you know.”

I pushed my palm against my forehead. “Silly me.”

“Perfectly all right. No one expects you to remember all these little procedures.”

In my mind, I dared her to say, “Especially when you’ve only visited one time before,” but I didn’t really say it. I signed the paper and pushed hard on the door. It wouldn’t give. Then, I remembered. She had to let me in. I waited until I heard that irritating buzz and pushed the door hard. It came open easily. The nurse popped her head around the door. “Room 505, remember?” I hadn’t but nodded my head nevertheless.

Walking down the hallway was my least favorite part. Walking in and walking out were equally as bad because in the hallway there were patients who were not quite right, and I so much wanted to be in the room with my dad and not have to confront those people.

Halfway down the hall, I saw him.

He was dressed in the dark blue silk pajamas I’d spent an hour in the mall finding. I sent them by my brother, and now I wondered why Sam hadn’t said anything about the size. The pajamas were way too big, so they hung loosely over Dad’s gaunt frame. If I had known, I could have taken them back, traded them for a smaller size because I always keep the receipts. I don’t
know, I always thought Dad was bigger than that. He had been bigger in his younger days. A football player.

For some reason I looked at Dad’s feet and saw he had on cotton twill loafers. Then, I looked up. He was hunched over like an old man, but his shoulders were wide. He looked down at the floor and shuffled along, holding onto the wooden rail that lined the hallway. He reached up a bony hand to run his hands through his head of thick white hair. His hair had been white as long as I remembered knowing him.

“Dad?” I asked, suddenly overjoyed to see him.

He looked up and stared at me a moment. I wasn’t sure he knew me. Then he smiled, showing the strong white teeth I did remember. “Kimmy,” he said, his voice strong, not a bit shaky at all. “Kimmy, come here and give your daddy a hug.” He held out his arms, and I came to him, like a five-year-old girl, practically running down the hall. Glittering white.

He hugged me then pushed me back. “Where’s your brother?”

I looked at him, annoyed. “I came on my own, Dad. Sam’s at work.”

“Work, work, work,” Dad chanted. “He works for me now; did he tell you?” He turned from me and grabbed hold of the railing with both hands, leaning back.

I didn’t say anything.

I was afraid to.

I hoped he would go back to his room.

I hoped he wouldn’t mention Sam again.

“Let’s go back to your room, Dad,” I said gently and tried to steer him back down the hall.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, jerking his arm from mine. “No one should touch me... for I have not yet returned.”

“Dad,” I said firmly, “I won’t touch you, but you need to go back to the room.”

He nodded and turned to go, shuffling slowly like before, his hand on the rail, lightly on the rail. I passed him so I wouldn’t have to watch him shuffle. I heard him behind me. “Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam,” he muttered, and I closed my eyes as he started to giggle.

Gratefully, we reached the room; the muttering and giggling stopped. Dad plopped down in his stiff, hospital issued recliner and gave a deep sigh. I sat primly on the edge of the only other chair in the room, not knowing what to say.
He gazed at me a few moments and started giggling again. I wished I could go leave and get something to eat. I’d had no appetite before I came; now I was voracious. I thought of Sam’s country barbecue. It had tasted so good.

But he was still giggling. “What’s so funny, Dad?” I said, exasperated. “BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM,” he said and I got up to leave. “You know what BAM stands for, girl?”

“What?” I said, turning towards him, not really wanting to know. “It means Broad Assed Marine.” Dad stamped his feet on the floor, just like when I was little and he’d tease my mother. He’d tell his corny jokes, slap his thigh—stamp his feet. “You’re getting to be a BAM, honey. Just like your Mama.”

“Dad! How can you say that about Mother?” I tried to be mad, but couldn’t because I knew the old Dad. He only teased people he loved. I looked up with that fake, firm smile I’d seen Mama use with him a thousand times. “I hope I inherited more than just a fat ass from her.”

He looked at me the way he used to, the way he did when he told me mother had died, passing out of the pain of the cancer that had eaten up her body—the way he did the day I left for college. “Oh, honey,” he said, his voice quavering, “You sure did get her pretty eyes and her big heart. Besides, I always loved…”

I smiled and reached to put my hand on his, but he pulled back, looking at me, eyes wild and big. “Don’t touch me.” I jerked my hand away and stood. “Stay away. It will burn. I’ll burn you. Burn you.” He pushed back hard in his chair, pushing against the pillows behind his head.


“Dad?”

“Samuel Maybin Krone.”

“Dad.”

“My name is Samuel Maybin Krone the First.” He turned to me and pointed, his finger hovering in the air, shaking. “You are…you are…Oh, … I’m Samuel Maybin Krone.”
“Dad, It’s Kimmy.” I was crying now because I was alone—because he was. I got up to meet him, my arms outstretched, needing to touch him, to hold him close, so he would know me. “It’s Kim.” I grabbed at his arms.

He shrieked and turned his back to me, hunching over and hugging himself. “No one should touch me!” Now it was a cry. “Not yet!”

I came to him from behind and wrapped my arms around his waist, leaning my body to fold over his. He didn’t shriek but whimpered and shivered. “Oh, Daddy,” I said. “Oh, Daddy.”

“Jesus!” he said, but it wasn’t a curse. “Jesus Christ! I’m the Christ! No one should hold me…” He breathed heavily but didn’t fight anymore. “For I have not yet…have not yet returned to…my father.”

“I know, Dad,” I said, resting my head on his bony back, filling full and satisfied. “This world is enough to make anybody crazy, isn’t it?” I smiled. Just felt like smiling. “It’s going to be okay.”

I stayed with him a long time, right through lunch. The nurse came in with a tray, so I stopped hugging him and helped him to sit in his reclining chair. He kept rocking. I couldn’t make him eat, not even the sugar free vanilla pudding. He kept rocking.

Leaning down to wipe some drool from his chin, I said. “It’s okay, Dad,” He didn’t look at me but somewhere off in the distance and kept rocking. “Okay,” I said. Then, I sat beside him, picked up an old magazine and began to read, as my broken, beautiful father rocked back and forth, searching for himself in the darkness.

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Grieved and Glad*

Septimus brushed his hand, tanned or red or black or brown, across the heads, silken heads, of the tall grass. Walking along, bending now and then, stooping to gather the fruits of the earth, the bitter fruits, healing roots and herbs he had, once upon a time, brought to his mother.

She had been gone for two months now, and in his grief he had wandered the fields of clay, gathering up and storing as before, but now there was no mother, yet the harvest grew.

He stopped to sniff the air. He could smell Horsemint and Sassafras, Wormwood and Red Root--Red Root, the medicine of the ages, red man's, black man's, white man's, poor man's--for their time of need.

What would be the healing root for him? He reached down and touched a plant's jagged leaves and fingered the bright red berry. The ginseng?

After the digging, Septimus moved on and topped the hill. He looked over the field before him, once barren, wiped out by man's desire and greed, the southern pines and poplars slowly making their way to their former place, their former glory. He could feel them reaching.

His hair was graying now.

Mother had noticed, even in the long, quick days before she was gone. "She had reached up and touched his sideburns and said, quavering, "I like that little touch of gray Septimus. Yes, I like it very much, looks quite distinguished."

She had smiled and let her hand fall back onto her quilted lap. The quilt was old; it was so old, ragged with age and use, made before his time, before hers. He followed her hand as it dropped to her lap. He stared at it.

"How old are you?" she asked.
"What?"
"How old are you?"
"You don't remember when I was born?"
She smiled, wrinkling. "Of course I do, son. I just don't remember when it happened."
"I'm sixty, sixty years old in December, Mother."

"Yes, that's right." She smacked her lips and nodded her head, touching the gray sideburns. "I like that little touch of gray."

Soon, she was gone.

He grieved and was glad.

*first published in Phoenix Photo & Fiction*
An Offering of Violets*
In Memory of My Grandmother—Mary Thelma Slaughter Whitlock

Pearl was back to her usual mail for the first time since the flood of sympathy cards that had arrived after Zach's death. For fifty years, if you count the two when Zach ran off to Florida and lived with that other woman, she had been tied to him, but now he was gone, and her mail was back to normal—advertisements for book clubs and magazines, credit card applications, letters from charities and her family, plus catalogs galore—catalogs for clothes and furnishings, knick knacks and flowers, lots of flowers.

Then there were the sweepstakes letters.

Pearl turned the first letter over in her hand. She knew it was another sweepstakes; she recognized the return address, but it looked different somehow. On the manila envelope, written in bold red print was: Dated Material. Open Immediately!

Every time she held a sweepstakes letter in her hand, she felt like she could win. It had happened before. Rose Ann, right down the street, won $10 in the Winn Dixie Give Away just a few years ago and Betsy won $100 answering a trivia question on the radio. Why couldn’t Pearl win? Why couldn’t she? Pearl knew that if she won, she’d do good with the money. Only good.

Despite that same old flutter in her belly, Pearl didn’t open the sweepstakes envelope yet. She’d open the family mail first.

Pearl glanced over at her son Joey’s picture sitting on top of the table runner that draped over her washing machine. She liked it there along with the portraits of Joey and Martha’s wedding and her grandchildren, Kyle, Deborah and Susie. She had to take off every picture, the basket of artificial flowers and the table runner to do the wash and then put everything back again when she was finished, but no matter.

Joey was the reason she’d taken Zach back, the only reason. Pearl had done pretty well alone, hadn’t needed Zach for most things. But Pearl felt in her heart that the boy needed a father. Every boy needs a father, they
say. So, when Zach called and begged to come back, she took him, although things were never the same.

Pearl picked up the photo and ran her finger along the peeling frame. Taken during his senior year in high school, it showed Joey in his football uniform, a stern expression furrowing his brow. His hair, that she'd kept long and curly as a child, was in a crew cut. His deep-set eyes stared fiercely into the camera, reminding her of Zach. But Joey wasn't at all like Zach.

Joey had spent his time in the army the year after the picture was taken; his father had approved. Now, though, Joey was a preacher. The fierceness was gone and Pearl was glad. She had always wanted a preacher boy, no matter what Zach had said.

No letter from Joey. She'd get one soon, she knew, but there was one from her grandson, Kyle, a missionary in Mexico. She read the letter. He was doing fine, he wrote, planning on putting a new roof on the school if things worked out, hoping that he'd be home on furlough in the summer, thanking her for her prayers, asking her to write again soon. Pearl placed the letter in her "keep" file, her collection of letters carefully pasted into her scrapbooks, along with birthday, Christmas and Easter cards, photographs, and a pressed rose from the blanket of flowers that had covered Zach's coffin.

One Christmas Pearl's oldest granddaughter, Deborah, had bought her some special paste, just for scrapbooks, and a whole stack of brand-new books. Debbie was a thoughtful person and seemed to like the books as much as Pearl did. She made a mental note to leave the books to Debbie when she passed.

Pearl had dozens of scrapbooks. Some were in the closet and some were in the old wardrobe. Some were stuffed between quilts and blankets in her cedar chest. When Zach was alive, she'd take the books out and look at them only after he was safely seated in front of the TV and before he'd yell, "Pearl, get me my ice cream cone!"

Zach was so regular about things that Pearl knew she had about an hour between when he'd first sit down and when he'd yell for the fudge swirl ice cream cone or the glass of iced tea, extra sweet. Pearl had just enough time to look at one of her scrapbooks and maybe add something to it before she got back to work. But now she could take her time with the scrapbooks, and with her mail.

Now that Zach was gone.
Pearl searched through her pile of mail. No more letters from family, but she was excited even about the "junk mail." That's what Susie, her other granddaughter, called it---"junk mail." Once Susie said, "You know, Mama Pearl, I know how you can stop all that junk mail from being delivered to your house."

Pearl wanted to shout, "No! I need that mail. I like it. I want it." But she knew that's not what Susie wanted to hear. "That's all right, dear. I don't really get that much. It'll be okay."

Luckily, Susie let it die.

Pearl picked up the sweepstakes envelope. She turned it over in her hand, placed her finger under the sealed flap and gently tore it open. Inside was advertising, on separate pieces of glossy paper, for polyester pant suits, house dresses with bright flower prints, and sensible shoes with all-leather uppers, cookware, linens, stationery, checks, mailing labels and more.

Next, Pearl looked through the sweepstakes letter like she always did. This time she could win a boat or a cruise, a dream house or even ten million dollars if she was blessed enough to be the grand prize winner.

Pearl sat back and sighed, staring down at the photos of previous winners, who smiled while holding giant checks in their hands. Ten million dollars. She could put up a proper marker on Zach's grave. She always wanted to put an angel on his grave and be able to afford fresh flowers. Not that he'd care, but she sure did.

Or she could help Susie through college. Joey didn't make much money and Susie, even with her scholarships, had to work full-time and go to school. With that much money Pearl could help Kyle with that roof.

If she won, that is.

But although Pearl had as much faith as the next person, at least as much as Rose Ann anyway, she'd entered enough sweepstakes over the years to know that the chances of her winning that money were almost as great as, well, Zach coming back from the dead and saying, "Please."

She shivered and asked a prayer of forgiveness.

Pearl took a pen from her ceramic cat pencil holder and, like a hundred times before, filled in the sweepstakes entry form. Although she felt that her chances of winning would greatly increase if she could buy something, her meager earnings wouldn't let her. When Zach was alive and working, she'd buy a pair of slacks or some house shoes or Christmas presents for the kids from
the sweepstakes’ catalogs. But now…Well, the letter said, “No purchase neces-
sary.” She’d just have to take their word for it.

After she filled in the information and pasted the special prize sticker in its proper place, she put it all in the envelope and sealed it. Sitting back, she closed her eyes, seeing herself standing at the door of her little mill house.

“Mrs. Johnson, you’ve just won ten million dollars!” the man would say.

Pearl would say “Thank you, Jesus.” Kind of quiet like. She wouldn’t jump up and down, like some of them do on TV. She wouldn’t say, “Oh, God!” because that was blasphemous.

But she would be grateful.

Then Pearl saw herself standing in front of Joey and Martha, Debbie, Kyle and Susie. She heard herself say, “Joey, here’s the check. Lord knows my family needs this money more than I do. Here take it." Pearl saw herself handing that check to Joey. Giving. Giving.

Pearl opened her eyes and sighed. She put her hand on the sealed sweepstakes letter. She’d never win the money. She’d never be able to give, not like she longed to. She’d be lucky to care for herself. Ah, well, she thought. It's only a stamp. One more stamp for one more chance. One more.

Pearl opened her wicker basket with the silk African Violets on the top. At one time she had raised real violets. She ordered some pretty pots in different bright colors—green and red and yellow. One day, Rose Ann saw the pots newly planted sitting in the window and said, “You’re not going to try to grow them violets are you?”

“Why not,” said Pearl lifting the leaves so as not to get water on them.

“They’re so hard to grow,” said Rose Ann, folding her arms.

“But I’d like to try.”

And try she did. She bought a special fertilizer for the soil and gave them plenty of light. They grew and grew and grew. Pretty soon she had to separate the plants. She gave some to Rose Ann, and Betsy, too.

One day Zach had to open the window over the pots. Pushing on the window, he knocked over the bright yellow flower pot. It fell with a crash.

He turned to her, his face red with anger. “Flowers belong in the yard, Pearl, not the house,” he said. So that was that.

They were kind of hard to grow anyway, Pearl thought.
Though she missed the real flowers, Pearl found in the mail one day a catalog for beautiful silk flowers. Swiftly scanning the pages, she found, yes, violets and ordered them for the basket she now opened. In the basket Pearl kept all the things for her letters--return address labels, good writing pens, a mini.sponge, rubber bands, paper clips and, stamps. She had postcard stamps, Christmas stamps, stamps with hearts for Valentine’s Day and flower stamps for spring, plus the standard stamps with the American Flag on the front for bills and sweepstakes entry forms.

Pearl had used the basket so many times before that she’d stopped looking at the flowers and the wicker and the little gold clasp. But today she saw that the flowers had faded, the wicker had broken in places and the paint on the clasp was chipped. No matter, she thought, fingering the violets. The basket was still pretty.

Then, something strange happened, something she could never explain, not even to Joey. Her heart began to flutter. She closed the lid without getting the little sponge or her flag stamps out. She reached for the sweepstakes envelope and held it in her hands, thinking and praying.

Then, with one quick movement, Pearl dumped the contents of the little wicker basket on the table. The paper clips and pens clattered on the Formica-topped table. The labels and stamps spread out in a shuffled heap, some fluttering to the faded tile floor. Pearl smiled and laughed out loud.

Pushing herself up from her chair, she reached for her change purse on the counter. She counted out one quarter, a dime, a nickel and one shiny penny. Then, she opened the basket and dropped the coins inside. One sweepstakes. The cost of one stamp. Her first offering of many.

Pearl shuffled through the remaining mail, clutching another sweepstakes letter in her frail hand. As she dropped more change into the basket, she wondered how many entry forms she’d get tomorrow and the next. She wondered how much a shingle for a school roof would cost or a college textbook. She’d have to ask Kyle and Susie when she wrote them.

But later. Right now, she’d order some violets, some real African violets for her windowsill, from that brand-new catalog she got today.

*First published in Long Story Short*
Lying there waiting for the sleeplessness, yet yearning for sleep, she turns on her side and then her stomach with her arm nestled between her stomach and breasts. She listens as her lover, her husband, falls into the rhythm of sleep--he who has such trouble sleeping, sleeping before her.

She hears the little kitten, black and white kitten, with a patch of black under its mouth. They can't keep it because they've got two cats already. She didn't know that her husband didn't like cats anymore. His sister said he would lose interest in them after he had a child. His sister did--lost interest in the cats.

She can hear her moving, the child. The monitor picks up every little sound, rustle of the sheet, tap-tap of perfect feet against the crib. The baby girl sighs. The mother does too and turns on her back, arms folded across her chest, like a dead thing.

She hasn't lost interest in cats, like this little one that's hanging around. She heard it and went out to see. It came to her, crying. She thought it might be hungry, might need some help. She helped it. She fed it. Then, it was out there, mewling relentlessly. She couldn't bring it in the house because their other cats might fight with it.

She helped it. She fed it. Then, it wouldn't leave her alone.

Why should I care, anyway, she thinks. It's just a little black and white
cat with a black patch on its chin. So many more important things going on. I've got so much to think about. So much to do. I've got to think about going out there to see him, my friend. But when? It might be too late.

It is too late to be up. She should have been asleep hours ago, but the kitten is still crying, and their cats are angry, growling and leaping at the shad-owy lump by the door, hitting their heads against the long window's glass. Still, she thinks that if they could keep the kitten, they could call it "Goatee."

She turns onto her side. Her friend had a cat, she remembers. A black cat. But it's dead now, she remembers.

The kitten is crying again. Earlier, she put it on the stoop, fed it, wa-tered it. *What does it want from me, now? To come in and sleep in my bed or on my lap, to crawl in and sleep with the baby? To smother her while it seeks warmth? To suck out her breath?* She turns onto her back. Her lover pulls the sheet up and sighs.

The baby. She hears her, whimpering in her sleep. She wishes she could whimper. Then, she knows she's not made for this. She's not good at handling these types of things. *Stop crying!*

*Stop crying, cat! You'll wake the baby up and she's sleeping. Dreaming. What does she dream about? Of warmth? Of the womb? Of darkness enveloping her like a blanket? And her friend? He must dream, too, or lie awake, won-dering.*

She throws the sheet back and moves through the shadows, bumping into the play pen, stepping on a doll. It squeaks. The cats run around her. She almost trips. She screams at them in her head and mutters a harsh whisper. They settle on their haunches, switching their tails. They prepare for battle, green eyes and gold, focused on the door.

The little cat mews. She's there, so close, but moves away.

In the child's room she can't hear the kitten. She searches for baby's
breath. She's alive. Of course, she's alive, but it has happened. Women just like her have gone in to check, to watch them breathe and found they weren't.

Oh God, not breathing.

She slips her hand beneath the soft blanket and feels the child’s warm body; it moves. Perhaps on a night like this, it will happen. Her friend's wife will turn to him, to watch him breathe, to reach a hand out and feel his chest rising and falling, rhythmically. She won’t feel the warmth, the movement.

Only stillness.

Then his wife will be like so many women, left alone after years of companionship, graying. But she'll be different because she is young, and he will have died from this horrible thing that's ripped him of all his defenses, left him a fighter unable to fight.

But he's so brave, she thinks, as she brushes her child's soft cheek with her finger. Braver than I ever knew. Braver than any of us have known. Braver than me. Because I thought I was able to sleep through anything. And here I am in her room feeling her breathe, unable to sleep through the cries, the pitiful, haunting cries, of a little black and white kitten.

*first published in A&U Magazine*
Freckle Butt's Missing*

To my sister Ronda--the inspiration for this story and so much more.

You lived well and were well-loved.

Sandy and me heard about old Freckle Butt when we went into Sam's Feed and Seed. The door stood wide open, it not being hot enough in late September for air conditioning, but it was certainly still too warm for closing doors. The smell of rich feed and musty hay mingled with that of new leather; our boots made a hollow sound on the wooden floors.

Ms. Louisa, Sam's wife, was shelling pecans with a bunch of kids she always hired especially for the job. They all looked happy despite the tedium, sitting on a bench in front of an old door set up on sawhorses, swinging their feet and telling stories.

Ms. Louisa got up when she saw us. "How you doing there, Sandy, Sara," she said, nodding at each of us as she said our names. "I'd expect y'all want some sweet feed for them horses y'all got."

"That's right, Ms. Louisa," Sandy said. She, being the older sister, always did the talking. I went over to see if Sam had gotten any new halters and picked up the curry brushes, rubbing my hands over the stiff bristles. I figured one day pretty soon I'd be buying some new equipment with the money I'd been saving in my special "horse fund."

As usual, Ms. Louisa told Mr. Paul to go get a couple of bags of sweet feed for the Thompson sisters.

"Did you hear about Rose McMillan losing Freckle Butt?"

"Lost him?" Sandy asked, wondering, no doubt, how anybody could lose a big, fat horse that weighed near about a ton and had spots all over his behind.

"That's right. She come in here this morning all upset. Said she went out to feed him early and he weren't nowhere to be seen. And you know old Freckle Butt wouldn't miss a meal if his life depended on it."
"Well, that's terrible," said Sandy. "Did she look in Garrison's pasture? That old horse sometimes gets in there."

"She's looked everywhere," said Ms. Louisa, ringing up our sale. "I tell you she was in a terrible state. But still, I don't think she ought to take things too far."

"What do you mean, too far?" Sandy asked.

Ms. Louisa leaned forward, and glancing at the children, said in a low voice, "I hear she's consulting that palm reader on Highway 280. Thinks she might be able to read where Freckle Butt is. Now, I don't think that's right. Why, I've always thought that palm readers was of the devil, didn't you?"

Sandy just tightened her lip up and didn't say nothing. Since it seemed liked somebody ought to say something, I did. "Consulting a palm reader, eh? Well, ain't that silly?"

Ms. Louisa just looked at me like she'd never seen me before. Then, she went on about how the Bible condemned those that would use sorcery and that type of thing. I wasn't too interested because I'd heard all of that stuff before and wasn't too sure Madam Mona on Highway 280 could be classified as a sorceress anyway.

Besides, I was too interested in looking at my sister. With her eyebrows furrowed and her lips drawn up tight, it looked like her whole face was frowning. I knew we wouldn't be taking the horses out in the pasture or riding down the road like I was looking forward to doing.

When we paid for our feed and were heading back home, Sandy was quiet and biting her lower lip. Then, a few miles before home, she said, "I think I can read that horse's mind ten times better than Madam Mona. I say he's near Rose's place, right under her nose."

I looked up at her. "Where do you think he is, then?"

"Garrison's pasture or maybe......," Sandy stopped and started biting her lip again. I knew how her mind worked and I didn't care too much for what she was probably thinking. She knew how much old man Garrison hated Freckle Butt because the horse was always getting into his pasture and, he says, chasing his cows. I say Freckle Butt is too fat and lazy to chase any old cows, but you couldn't ever convince Mr. Garrison who thinks horses aren't worth nothing except to grind up for dog food.

I knew Sandy expected me to ask, so I did. "You don't think maybe old man Garrison got mad about Freckle Butt being in his pasture, so he's got him shut up in his barn, do you?"
"I wouldn't put it past him. Why, he might even be planning to sell Freckle Butt for dog food and get rid of him once and for all. You know how he hates that horse."

I knew, but I didn't want to get messed up in the thing. I never liked the looks of Mr. Garrison. I didn't care that he used to haul our horses to shows for us before we got our own trailer. He sure didn't do it out of the kindness of his heart. We'd had to pay a lot to have our horses go to shows in his run-down stock trailer. Plus, we had to listen to the old geezer tell us how horses weren't worth nothing, all the while spitting his tobacco juice into a Styrofoam cup.

All of that didn't seem to bother Sandy, though. She looked at me and smiled. "Let's go visit Ms. Violet."

"Why?"

"Cause we haven't gone by to see her in a long time." She paused. "Besides, I think we can just about see his barn from her front porch, can't we?"

"I imagine so. You don't really think Freckle Butt's in that barn do you?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what I think."

"Well, we might as well go by my gut feeling then. After all, I've got just about as good a chance at being right as Madam Mona."

I had to admit she did, probably a better chance, and I told her so. I also told her wasn't really any of our business, being as how Freckle Butt was Rose's horse, not ours. But, next thing I knew, we were driving into Ms. Violet's azalea-lined driveway. She was sitting on the front porch shelling peas. When she saw us getting out of the truck, she practically dropped her pan and started waving. "Hi there, Sandy, Sara. It's been ages since I've seen y'all. How you doing?"

"We're doing just fine, Ms. Violet," said Sandy. I wondered how she was going to broach the subject of Freckle Butt and how we wanted to spy out Mr. Garrison's place from her front porch. I reckoned Ms. Violet wouldn't think we were being too neighborly. I should've known Sandy had thought of a way we could check things out without getting Ms. Violet involved.

Sure enough, as soon as we sat down on Ms. Violet's swing she said, "I bet you girls are parched. It sure is a hot September day. Want some sweet tea?"
My sister said, "Yes, ma'am, if it's no trouble. You're right, it sure is a hot day."

"It's no trouble at all. Two teas, coming up." With that, she went in the house. Since she probably was going to fix us a piece of pie or cake (I smelled something freshly baked when we first walked onto the porch.), I figured we had five or six minutes to check out Garrison's place before she got back. I twisted around in the swing and looked toward the barn. I could see it between two tall pines, a dilapidated barn with chipped red paint. I didn't see anyone.

Sandy had turned around as soon as Ms. Violet left, too. She looked toward the small green frame house and gasped. She pointed to the house. Looking that direction, I saw old man Garrison, a tall man with steel gray hair and ruddy skin, walking quickly toward the barn.

Sandy and I looked at each other, and if the situation hadn't been so serious, we would have smiled, being that we'd been smart enough to figure things out. We didn't have any proof that Freckle Butt was in that barn, but now I had the same gut feeling Sandy did.

Our feelings were justified when we heard a deep, throaty whinny coming from the barn. It just sounded like a big, fat horse. I looked over to Sandy to say so and realized she wasn't there. She was walking with determination towards the Garrison's barn.

Now, I don't know much, but I know my sister, and I could tell by the way she was striding over to the barn that she wasn't going over there to say, "Howdy!" I was scared to death, but I followed Sandy into the Lion's Den because I figured sisters had to stick together no matter what.

I caught up with her as she was half-way across Ms. Violet's lawn, "Are you crazy, Sandy? What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to tell that old geezer to give Freckle Butt back to Rose McMillan. I can't just sit on Ms. Violet's porch sipping tea when I know any minute Mr. Garrison could load up Freckle Butt in that old trailer and haul him off for dog food. I just can't!"

Before I could do any thinking, Sandy was walking into the barn, her head up and chin jutting out. It was probably cowardly, but I walked a little behind Sandy, waiting to see what was going to happen. I could see Mr. Garrison at the back of the barn, and sure enough there was a horse in the last stall. I could see it swishing its tail and hear it munching on hay.
Sandy didn't waste any time. She walked smack dab up to Mr. Garrison and began her speech. My, it was a grand one. "Mr. Garrison, I couldn't help but notice that you have on your premises a horse that doesn't rightly belong to you but to Rose McMillian. I feel that you should immediately hand that horse over to me, and I shall find some way of getting him back to his owner. Rose McMillian would simply die, die I tell you, if anything happened to her horse. She's owned that horse for thirteen years at least. How would you feel if somebody took something that you cherished away from you? Pretty bad I expect. I know deep down in your heart you want to do the right thing, Mr. Garrison, and the right thing is to give that horse back!"

I was proud of that speech. Sandy barely took a breath while she was saying it. But Mr. Garrison didn't seem impressed. He just stood there, leaning against the stall and chewing. Finally, he leaned over and spat his tobacco juice in the stall, looked at us and smiled. "Well, Sandy, I sure do appreciate you barging into my barn and telling me you're going to take my pony. That's stealing, you know."

Sandy was only taken aback for a moment. "I see. You must think that because Freckle Butt's gotten out into your pasture that he belongs to you, but I assure you he does not. I myself plan to help Rose reinforce the fence so that her horse can no longer get on your property. You'll see...."

"Well, I don't know about all that," interrupted Mr. Garrison. "But I don't think I own him. I know I do." The old man moved from beside the stall and gestured inside. "What's more," he chuckled. "That pony ain't Freckle Butt!"

Sandy and I stepped forward, looking through the door of the old stall. A skinny little pony with brown and white spots stood contentedly chewing on his hay.

"Yeah, my grandkids kept bugging me about getting them a pony to ride. Now, you know me, I'd just as well sell a horse for dog food as look at it, but . . . Well, you know how it is with kids." He laughed and slapped the pony on the rump. "Trouble is, my son's up and moving to Huntsville next month, so the grandkids won't be able to ride. Guess I'll have to sell this little feller after all. I ain't got no use for horses."

Sandy and I just looked at each other. I was glad that we hadn't found Freckle Butt in that barn, that Mr. Garrison hadn't stolen him, that the old horse wouldn't end up as dog food.
Then again, looking at my sister, I wasn't.

For once, I figured I should do the talking. I cleared my throat. "We're sorry, Mr. Garrison. We wronged you. Both of us thought. . ." I glanced over to Sandy who had reached over and started petting the pony. "Well, it doesn't really matter what we thought. We were wrong and we're sorry to bother you. We'll be going now." I took Sandy by the arm and started walking away, heading back across the lawn to Ms. Violet and her tea and cake or pie or whatever it was I smelled when I walked onto the porch.

When Sandy and I were next in Sam's Feed and Seed, Ms. Louisa once again had the little kids peeling apples. There must have been half a dozen of them lined up on that bench in front of the old door, smiling and waving their legs.

Sandy asked for four bags of sweet feed, and I went to look at the halters and brushes, just look. I could still hear Ms. Louisa though. "I heard about what happened with Freckle Butt. Can you believe that Madam Mona was right? I just might go and ask her about my lumbago."

I leaned around the corner and said, "I thought you said palm reading was of the devil." All the children stopped their peeling and looked at me, eyes wide.

Ms. Louisa looked real uncomfortable, which I liked, and, she said, "Did I say that? Why I don't know what I was thinking. I have heard that some people say that." I could tell she wanted to change the subject. "Well, Sandy what are you up to these days?"

Sandy said, "Just the usual, working with my horses. I've got a new one now, you know."

"Oh really? You didn't have enough horses, so you went and bought another?"

"I didn't buy him. Sara did. With her horse fund money."

"Oh," she said, not looking up from the register. "What's his name?"

Sandy hesitated and I leaned around the corner again to see her looking straight at me, grinning. "We haven't named him yet," she said. "But he's the cutest little brown and white pony you ever did see."

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Contributors

**Windy Boatright** found healing and personal growth through writing. Realizing her ability to help others by sharing her writings, she returned to school to hone her craft. Windy began college at Blue Ridge Community College, then transferred to Warren Wilson College in pursuit of a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing. Starting school later in life resulted in her celebrating her 50th birthday as a sophomore. That semester, her non-fiction class’s final exam required a five-minute reading of the student’s non-fiction writing. Moved by her struggles as a student, and those of her peers, she decided to write them a letter, now published here.

**Joshua Brunetti** has been teaching English and public speaking courses as a college adjunct for almost six years. For English, he teaches mostly English Composition/Rhetoric and Introduction to Literature. He views teaching, and even his "day job" as a clerk in the probate court system, as not just a job but a service. In the past, Joshua has also formed and led local writing workshops, and as a student, was the leader of his campus's writing club.

**John Davis** is the author of *Gigs* (Sol Books) and a chapbook, *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review, Harpur Palate, Iron Horse Literary Review, One* and *Terrain.org*. He moonlights in a local blues band. He taught high school English for forty years.

**Wayne Mennecke** is a high school science teacher who, by regularly writing and performing his poetry about his experiences in the classroom, believes all teachers are teachers of English Language Arts. He volunteers his time conducting research at dinosaur and mammal fossil dig sites with paleontological research groups in North Dakota and Tennessee during the summer months. His poetry has appeared in the anthology *Fracture: Essays, Poems and Stories on Fracking in America*, as well as numerous print and online publications. His first chapbook, *Pencils Down*, chronicled his experiences teaching science at Islip High School on Long Island, New York. He belongs to two Long Island writer’s groups: “The Sunday Grind” and “Seatuck Writer’s Group.”
Bill Rudolph earned his MFA in Poetry Writing from Vermont College and has published poetry in many literary journals including Barrow Street, The English Journal, The Nebraska Review, The North American Review, Quarterly West, Rattle, Rosebud, Slant, The South Dakota Review, and Steam Ticket. Bill enjoys good jazz, good poetry, good tennis, good libations, good conversation, and that never-ending quest for an adjective more apt than “good.” For over twenty years, Bill taught secondary writing and literature; now, he coaches student writers at Grinnell College and in GC’s Liberal Arts in Prison Program.

Gerry Sarnat, MD won the Poetry in Arts First Place Award/Dorfman Prizes; has been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards; authored HOMELESS CHRONICLES (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014) and Melting the Ice King (2016). He’s widely published in academic and literary journals, such as Main Street Rag, American Journal of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, New Delta Review, and Brooklyn Review, as well as the New York Times. Mount Analogue Press selected “KADDISH” for distribution during nationwide Inauguration Day. His poetry was also chosen for a 50th Harvard reunion Dylan symposium. www.gerardsarnat.com.

Katie Winkler’s short fiction has appeared in numerous online and print publications, including Unbroken Circle: Stories of Cultural Diversity in the South, Saturday Evening Post, Mulberry Fork Review, fabula argentea, and A&U Magazine among others. She teaches English composition as well as literature at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina. In April, 2019, the theater department at Blue Ridge produced her third full-length play, Battered: A Play about Domestic Violence Inspired by Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book. In addition, she maintains a blog about higher education in the South called Hey, Mrs. Winkler and edits the bi-annual literary magazine, Teach. Write. The work she has contributed here is in memory of loved ones lost.

Wil Michael Wrenn is a poet and songwriter living in rural north Mississippi. He has an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a songwriter/publisher member of ASCAP. His work has appeared in numerous publications, and he has published two books of poems. Wil Michael’s experience with the writing instruction he received in courses at Lindenwood University was, in his words, transformational and inspiring -- it helped him to be a better writer and to write in other genres in addition to poetry and songs. His website can be found at: http://www.michaelwrenn.com/
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Pellinni  39
Alvimann  48
lisaleo  50