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The Things We Leave Behind by Laura Egan

“I want that when you die,” I told my mom when I was about ten. We were in her room searching for craft supplies, when I found a little wooden baseball bat that measured no more than one and a half feet long. After I asked whose it was and where it had come from, my mom told me that her father had gotten it for her. Some no-name player had signed it, but I liked it because it had been given to my mom by my grandfather.

She laughed at me and said, “Why?”

I wasn't sure exactly, and I knew it was morbid to ask. I meant that there are a few little things that I want to have to remember her. As I consider my mom's room today, I realize that it has never shown many signs of Ann Duffy as anything but a mother and grandmother.

Like most of our house, my mom's room was cramped. Beside her double bed she kept a pile of library books (she is always reading at least two at a time), magazines, crossword puzzles, and a journal. Plastic containers filled with craft books and supplies were stacked around the room; some were my mom's, but most she stored for my Girl Scout or 4-H projects. The crib, which my siblings and I had long outgrown, was still set up for her grandchildren and other children that

she cared for. A small, ugly wall hanging with the word “Mom,” which I had made in second or third grade, hung at the head of her bed. My sister, Sharon’s, high school painting of an odd looking cowboy decorated another wall. Instead of her own makeup or perfume, my family’s holey socks and pants sat atop my mom’s dresser waiting to be patched. Her room was functional, not a place where she kept mementos, or at least I hadn’t seen many things, such as the baseball bat.

Unlike my mom, I think I will be eager to show my children the things from my younger years. Yet, I somewhat understand her hesitation. Like me, she is an emotional woman and doesn’t like to show it. I hate upsetting her, so I never ask her about her past because it seems too painful.

As my nephews were eating their lunch at our house one day, I was quizzing Mason about his relationship with everyone in our family. As a five year old, it’s hard for him to imagine that his mom is my sister, and I like to watch his puzzled expressions. Mason sat at the head of the table with me on one side and Nolan, his brother, on the other. They had their normal meal of chicken nuggets, ketchup, and macaroni and cheese. Their yellow, plastic plates rested on their special cartoon placemats, which my mom had gotten for each of them. In place of day care, Mason, Nolan, and their sister, Mia, spend their days at my mom’s, while their parents work.

“So who are your brother and sister?” I asked Mason.

“Nolan.” He thought for a moment, since he knew I was testing him. “And Mia.”

“Okay. Who are my brothers and sisters?”

I could almost see his mind working, as he rolled his eyes back in his head. “Mommy (Sharon), Aunt Jenny, Aunt Chuck (this is my sister Stephanie’s odd nickname), Aunt Kelly, Uncle Matt, and Uncle David?”

“Way to go Mas. You’re pretty smart.”

“So who’s your mom?” he asked in the same teacher-like tone that I’d taken with him.

“You know who my mom is,” I said. She stood at the other end of the table listening to Mason’s thoughtful little voice.

“Grandma Ann!”

“See, I knew you knew.” I rubbed his head to mess up his hair a little.

“Who is Grandma Ann’s mom?” Mason was so attached to his mom that he was always concerned about other people’s mothers.

I looked to my mom for an answer, and she said, “You don’t know her, honey. She died when I was a little girl.” I could hear the emotion in my mom’s voice, which she usually controlled. She never called anyone honey.

“How did she die?” Mason is one of the most empathetic children I know, and he truly sounded concerned.

“She was sick.” I knew that my mom wanted to leave it at that, but Mason was too interested.

“And the doctors couldn’t fix her?” For a five year old, a doctor can fix anything.

“No, they gave her medicine, but she died.” Tears formed in my own eyes as I watched my mom’s eyes grow wet. I turned away from her to look at Mason. Though my mom rarely cries, I always end up joining her when she does. I can’t stand to watch her cry.

“Her medicine didn’t work?” Mason was desperate for a comforting answer, since his mom convinced him daily that his illness would subside if he just swallowed his yucky medicine.

“Some medicines don’t work like yours does, Mason, and people die.” I think my mom knew that she had to stand there and answer Mason’s questions, or he would just remember them for later.

“Just eat your chicken,” I finally whispered to Mason.

I had been a curious child myself, and I wondered how many questions I had asked my mom over the years that had made her cry. The past is not something my mom talks about easily, so once I was old enough to understand, unlike Mason, I learned my own ways of finding out about it.

One Saturday when I was around eleven or twelve years old, I entertained myself by looking through our family’s photo albums. I’ve always loved pictures, and there was a wealth of memories in the twenty or so albums that sat on the lower shelf of an end table beside our couch. The photographs started around 1980, the year that I was born, and continued to about 1989. My mom kept more current pictures, which she was eventually going to label, in a shoebox in her room (or so she said since that one shoebox has grown to three). Each album was labeled with a range of months and years on a small piece of yellowing masking tape on the inside cover. But I

didn't need to look at the years; I could tell the books apart by their scenic jackets. I knew that the year, names, and ages of everyone in the pictures had all been written on the back of each photo because the indentation of my mom's heavy handwriting rose through the front of the four pictures that were secured under an aging, plastic sheet on each page.

My favorite pictures were ones of me as a baby. My dad is in a couple of shots with me – in one I am “smoking” a round building block while he smokes a cigar, and in another he is throwing me up above his head while he stands outside in our yard, the sun setting behind him. But since my parents had divorced when I was very young, most of the pictures were of my older siblings giving me rides on our Appaloosa horse or styling my hair so I looked like Alfalfa from *Our Gang*. My mom wasn't in many pictures, and she still tells me that most mothers are absent from photo albums because they're the ones who want to capture all of the memories.

After looking at the photo albums dozens of times, I knew what page every one was on. And I knew there were more albums from my older siblings' childhoods, who ranged in age from eight to twelve years older than me. First there had been Matt, in October of 1968; October 1969 brought Kelly; David came in October of 1970; Sharon arrived in December of 1971; and Jenny was born 11 months later. To Stephanie, my younger sister by two years, and me, they were “the big kids,” and we've always been told that we'll never be anything but “the little girls.”

The big kids' childhood pictures were hilarious to me. I knew which pictures of their bell-bottoms embarrassed them, and I showed their boyfriends or girlfriends whenever they came over. Usually my mom got the old (at least they were old to me) photo albums down for me, but she had gone to town for the morning, so I reached the built-in cupboard in our living room from atop another end table. Behind the glass door of the cabinet, my mom kept pictures and statues of the Virgin Mary, a picture of my dad's brother and his wife, and candles that filled the room with a mix of sweet scents. I carefully removed all of the decorations, set them on the table by my feet, and reached to the back of the top shelf for the fifteen or so more photo albums. Then, I had to step off the table and onto a rocking chair to reach the floor. By the number of things that I could have broken in my search, I realized one reason that my mom always huffed and said, “Oh, just let me do it,” every time I wanted to look at the old pictures. When I laid the flowered, seventies-looking books out and found one that was cream-colored and fancier, I realized a second reason that my mom didn't let me into that cupboard. I had found my parents' wedding album.

I'd heard many funny stories about the way that my friends' parents had met or how great their wedding days were. Until I found their wedding album, I hadn't even known when my parents had met or gotten married, let alone the intimate details of either day. Amazingly, I don't remember many of the pictures. I know that my mom's slender face and figure pleasantly surprised me. She looked much taller than her 5 foot 2 inch frame had when she'd left that

morning. As a bride, she had none of the weight, wrinkles, or graying brown hair that her seven children had helped bring about. Instead her hair was a rich auburn, and I understood where I had gotten my own red hair. The bridesmaids had green dresses, my mom's favorite. I don't remember what my dad looked like, who the attendants were, or even the exact date of the wedding. But I will never forget the month and the year – May 1968. Math had never been my strong subject, so I checked the figures in my head again and again. Then, I yelled for my little sister.

Stephanie plodded down the stairs with a whiny “What?” She'd probably been deeply involved in creating a storyline for our Barbie dolls, which I had recently stopped playing with because my friends had all done the same. I told her to look at the album, to look at the date. When she just stared, I explained that from May of 1968 to October of 1968 was well under 9 months. She seemed far too young to say the words that came out of her tiny mouth.

“Matt's a bastard,” she said in an even, matter-of-fact tone.

I was horrified. “Stephanie, don't say that! You can't say that!”

She just shrugged and said, “Well, he is.”

The thought of my brother being a bastard shocked me. If Stephanie hadn't used the word, then it never would have entered my mind. That word was too horrible for *my* brother. Now I know the term is not technically correct, but the information is still as shocking.

However, the difference of only a few months between my parents' wedding and my brother's birthday did not drastically change my opinion of my parents. It did make me consider how little I knew about everything. I hadn't expected my mom to sit me down one day and blurt the date of Matt's conception. But, somehow, I should have known long before I stumbled upon my parents' wedding album. Since they had eventually divorced, I wondered if my parents ever should have gotten married, if they would have married if my mom hadn't been pregnant.

A few weeks after my conversation with Stephanie, I mentioned my findings to my sister, Sharon. She laughed at me and said in a sarcastic tone, “Didn't you notice how *happy* Grandpa Duffy looked in the pictures?”

I tried to consider my grandpa's feelings, but I knew very little about him or his relationship with my mom. Didn't I have a right to know about my family? I thought I did, so when the chance presented itself, I dug around more deeply.

Our storage shed had always been filled with a bunch of dusty old boxes, but I knew little

about their contents until I returned home for the summer before my senior year of college. Every May, my mom and I made room in the shed for the extras I had accumulated since I'd left home. And when I packed up to leave at the end of the summer, I had to search for everything.

Each year I tried to convince my mom to get rid of a few things. I was frustrated by the amount of useless crap she had tucked away in a shed. She told me that she'd forgotten what was in most of the boxes, so she would have to go through *each* of them before throwing *anything* out.

My mom and I went to the shed one August day when I was starting to pack for my trip back to college. We left the overhead garage door open to let in light and hot but fresh air. Trying to be practical, I started opening boxes to determine their contents and whether they could be thrown away. My mom huffed around while she moved boxes in search of some of my winter clothes. I was making her mad, but I didn't care. I just needed to find my stuff.

I was ranting and raving the whole time about throwing everything out right that moment, saying things like "Look at this junk! Why would you keep things like this?" I found broken dishes and old receipts that I wanted to burn on the spot; my mom didn't know who they belonged to, and I didn't care. Of course I didn't throw anything out, though, because I valued my life. I just kept moving from box to box to prove that everything could be thrown out. But when I came to a shoebox of my mom's things, I didn't say anything. I made sure my back was to her so she couldn't see what I had. A bunch of cards and short notes were tied together with a ribbon. I knew I couldn't read with her there, so I put them back. In the same box there was a picture of my mom in a nurse's uniform.

I turned around and demanded to know what it was.

"Oh, it's just my graduation picture." She sounded annoyed that I'd made her look up from what she was doing.

"But you always told me you never went to college."

"It wasn't really a college. Just a training program."

"Like a technical school. That's college. On all my college applications and stuff they asked me if my parents went to college, and I always put 'no.' You always told me 'no.'"

"Oh be quiet. It doesn't matter. It wasn't really a college."

College or no college, my mom had gone somewhere for education after high school. I knew about the few years that she had worked as an assistant for a dentist in town. She'd told me that

the training had been much more basic back then, and to her it obviously didn't count as higher education. When she got pregnant with my brother, she stopped working and has been raising children ever since. I was about thirteen years old when she began providing day care from our home. My nieces and nephews had soon come along, and it seemed like children were constantly toddling around our house.

I went back to the shoebox and found a bunch of political buttons. One sounded rather hippie-ish to me, so I held it up for my mom to see and asked if she had been a hippie.

“Not with five kids I wasn't a hippie. Pins used to be big.” She said it as if I should have known. I did remember a bulletin board in our kitchen had once been covered with buttons for everything from the county fair to St. Patrick's Day. My mom wasn't the hippie type. I knew she was far too practical to be caught up in a movement, but I wanted to hear a story about her younger years.

“But you wore bell-bottoms and stuff. I've seen them,” I said, as if I could prove her wrong.

“That was in then. Everyone wore them.”

I put the buttons back, making a point to remember the placement of the small dusty, cream-colored shoebox without a top. I dug through more boxes, hoping to find some of my mom's undiscovered personality. After sorting through a lot of junk, I found one with some children's clothes. I pulled out a small blue and green plaid, pleated skirt with buttons on the front and back for matching suspenders to be attached.

“Whose is this?” I held it up for her to see.

“Marilyn's or mine. I don't know. We wore them in Dubuque.” She and her sister had moved to a Catholic boarding school there during their childhood years after their mother's death. My grandpa would get up early almost every Sunday to milk his cows, go to church, and make the two-hour trip to Dubuque to see them. I immediately pictured my mom in the skirt with a white shirt on and blue socks pulled up to her knees, her now brown hair in a shade of red. I made some comment about how cute the skirt was. When my mom didn't respond, I knew I was bothering her. I decided to snoop another time, alone.

Later that week, while my mom was busy watching my nephews, I returned to the storage shed. After fiddling with the lock for a minute, I hurried into the shed and headed right for the lidless shoebox. I admit it; I felt a little underhanded, but my curiosity overpowered any guilt about sneaking around. I was careful with the ribbon and the cards, remembering how they had been put together so I could replace them exactly. The cards were notes of congratulations on my

parents' wedding. I knew a few of the names, and their comments were nice, but I had hoped to find some love letters from my dad.

I sorted through more boxes. Eventually I came across a stack of black and white photos. The faces were all stern, their clothes buttoned up to their chins. I assumed they were some of my ancestors, but neither years nor names had been written anywhere. With my mom's parents, aunts, and uncles deceased, neither of us would ever match the names of our relatives to the faces in the pictures.

After a little more searching, I took my Rubbermaid container and went home.

I mentioned the pictures to my mom, telling her she should do something with them. She didn't say much or seem as impressed as I was with the unknown history gathering dust. But sometime in the week or two before I went back to college, my mom must have cleaned or at least rearranged at the storage shed, because a pile of old pictures appeared on our kitchen table.

My mom was reading the paper or doing a crossword puzzle, when I sat down to look through the pictures of her, her sister, and their dad. In one, my grandfather is holding my mom when she is only a few weeks old. On the back of the photo, my grandmother had written about what a good baby my mom had been. In another picture, my mom is a few months old and sitting in a steel bushel basket set outside on a sunny day, her bare little head and shoulders peeking over the rim. I said something about how cute she had been. She shrugged.

My nephews were at our house that day too, and I called them to the kitchen.

"Look at these, guys. Do you know who this is?" I asked Mason and Nolan, without letting their grubby little fingers touch the photograph.

"Mia?" Mason asked, thinking his new baby sister could be the only one in any pictures.

"Nope. This is Grandma Ann when she was a little baby like Mia."

"Grandma Ann? Did her mom used to hold her?" Mason asked.

"Yeah. Just like your mom holds Mia," I said.

Mason and Nolan giggled at the thought of Grandma Ann as a baby. "Did I use to hold her too?" Mason had no sense of time or growing up.

I laughed. "You weren't born yet, Mas." I could tell as I looked at him that Mason looked

like his mom, Sharon, and Sharon looked like our mom.

“Mas looks just like you in this picture, Mother.” I turned to show her.

“Well, he looks like Sharon, yes.” I knew my mom’s emotions, even when she tried to hide them. By being short with me, she was covering her pride in the resemblance that I’d noticed.

With my mom, communication is a puzzle of hidden feelings. My sisters and I theorize that she has trouble expressing emotions because she was raised by strict, no-nonsense nuns. Finding out about her past is much more than a search for my genealogy; my mom’s past will help me decode her emotions, her life, and my history.

My mom will leave a house-full of things behind when she dies, and hopefully, I’ll get the little bat, some of her baby pictures, and some of the “junk” from the storage shed to show my future children. But since I am so much like my mom, I now wonder if I’ll eventually keep her things tucked away, only looking at them when no one can see me cry. Maybe then I’ll truly understand why my mom is so guarded.

Until then, I’ll continue my search.

Doppelgänger by Jenni McCarthy

in the middle of lecture

I sit,

quietly alive inside

the static smoke you vent.

in need of an escape

I turn,
and stare at the window.

I stare back at me.

the black matte glass
reflects every angle
of a face full of everyday detail,
backwards.

mindlessly misplaced strands of hair
tumble around deafened ears.

our apathetic fists prop
equally limp cheeks.

translucent glass flattens
our vitality, leaving wraiths.

we sigh,
and wish it was a scream.

in the middle of lecture

you stand,

hollow and reverberating

in flat dissonance.

holding us captive

you neglect to turn,

or acknowledge the glass man

who mimics you.

framed in a twin pane,

your reflection blurs into hazy shadings;

a doubly exposed image,

mirror of your inner self.

mindless monologues of academic jargon

tumble from a slack jaw.

the podium struggles to balance

the weight of your monotone elbows.

in that segregated window world
your facial features smudge and overlap.
you drone on,
dwindling into whispers.

I frown.
my alter ego commiserates.
our mouths are gagged
by your lecture.

America's Bleeding Pilgrim by Peggy Lucas

The stout, snaggle-toothed Santa Claus

stands before me,
white bearded, red cheeked
with a Guinness-soaked tongue,

flailing his arms, he shouts, “Integration!”

as American students mingle

with the Spaniards and French

on the creaky wooden floor

of Dublin’s Bleeding Horse.

This is the same man, who weeks before,

his tongue against his gums

and reeking of Irish mythology

hopped a fence, and scaled a mountain

magically like a leprechaun,

sheep’s wool tight against his beer-belly

while young American pilgrims follow

in search of a glimpse of St. Kevin’s bed—

which I still could not see.

I wonder if I pricked my finger,
blood oozing and settling into a perfect dewdrop,
falling from my pallid skin,
soaking into Ireland's emerald earth

deep into the plush soil
where my ancestors once grew potatoes
and loved their land before
sailing the Atlantic—

if I could then find my roots.

In the Land of Blue and Red Doors by Peggy Lucas

In the land of blue and red doors

black boots clickity-clack
down the brick streets
while words are tangled

and scarves choke the Irish women

with thin legs striding

past me—leaving me alone

in a foreign world,

an ocean away,

and wearing vibrant colors,

that match the Georgian doors

but shout “American Girl!”

against the contrast

of the dark wool coats

where European sizes

hug my bottom

and “The State’s” cleavage

attracts Irish boys,

but seems to repel

womanly conversation

in the dark pubs
where the women are scarce
and seem to appear only in the daylight
hurrying down Grafton Street.

And sometimes when
I walk behind
another hugging trouser
walking slow,

cheeks full of cheeseburgers and fries,
hands full of sacks of food from the market—
I wonder if she too
is a hungry American.

The Mingling of Pagan and Christian Imagery in *Beowulf* by Cressant Swarts

A long-standing debate in the history of *Beowulf* scholarship concerns the poem's divergent elements of paganism and Christianity. Two of the causes of this debate are the uncertainty surrounding the date of composition of the piece and the audience for which it was composed. Assuming that the text as we have received it is the original, the *Beowulf* poet most likely wrote in the late eighth or ninth century for an audience of Anglo-Saxons midway through the conversion process, as shown by evidence in the poem itself.

Though most critics seem to be concerned with determining whether the story is solely pagan or solely Christian, many of the characteristics of the poem can be interpreted either way, showing the blend of traditions and beliefs that occurred in the early phase of the Anglo-Saxon Christianization. While in the eighth century most Anglo-Saxons would have been at least nominally Christian, the actual integration of Christian values and customs into their lifestyles would have taken much longer. The poem demonstrates this trend in the apparent state of partial conversion in some of the characters of *Beowulf*, in ways that can be compared with Anglo-Saxons in other sources such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In this transitional phase of conversion, pagan and Christian beliefs, such as the Anglo-Saxon definitions of Fate and God, often seem to exist simultaneously.

As well as considering the unconscious influences of the poet's culture on his work, it is also important to consider the poet's understanding of the spiritual state of his characters. Does the poet realize that his characters, living in the time period of his ancestors, would not have yet encountered Christianity? If so, how does he reconcile the laudable exploits of Beowulf and the other heroes with the damned state of their souls? Fred C. Robinson suggests that the poet had a clear concept of his ancestors' history and religion. By the use of generic references to God, the poet conveys the impression that Beowulf and other heroes nevertheless fought for the Christian God, in spite of their ignorance.¹ The

poet's tolerance for this ambiguity also suggests his own position midway between paganism and Christianity.

One of the most controversial scenes in the debate over pagan and Christian content in *Beowulf* is the Danes' reputed "reversion" to paganism when they are unable to deal with Grendel:

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed

offerings to idols, swore oaths

that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace.²

The words “sometimes” and “remembered” in the above passage seem to indicate that the Danes were also “sometimes” Christian, forgetting their ancestral pagan gods. However, the poet also says that the “the Lord God,/Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,/was unknown to them.” This casts doubt on the idea of reversion, suggesting that the Danes were still pagan. Additionally, the poet says, “That was their way,/their heathenish hope.” The next lines ambiguously refuse to support either position. While the apostate would certainly be cursed, even if the Danes only knew pagan gods and had no other options, as the line “he who in time of trouble *has* to thrust his soul/in the fire's embrace” seems to indicate, they would still be damned.

Although the Danish people may not have converted to Christianity within the time frame of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar speaks the largest percentage of Christian references in the poem.³ This paradox can be explained, however, by the matching patterns the poet may have seen in his own culture with Bede's accounts of newly Christian kings and their peoples. For instance, Bede

relates King Æthelbeht's reluctance to give up his traditional beliefs, especially his suspicions of the priests' magical abilities.⁴ Another king, Raedwald, attempted to practice paganism and Christianity simultaneously.⁵ Though Bede always emphasizes the great quantities of people that convert along with their king, as when King Edwin finally converted after long deliberation,⁶ he also refers to inconsistencies in Christianity which kings' conversions often failed to remedy.⁷ Perhaps the "they" who seem to revert in the above passage refers only to Hrothgar's subjects, not the king himself.

The poet's heavily Christian tone influences the meaning of this section, suggesting the Danes' fully knowledgeable conversion to Christianity despite the evidence of their possibly unswerving paganism. The Christian poet, however, naturally adopts a tone both scornful and dismayed when discussing his heroic but spiritually naive ancestors. He simultaneously condemns them for "[swearing] oaths/that the killer of souls might come to their aid" and excuses them, saying they had "nowhere to turn," having not yet been introduced to Christianity.

The characterization of Beowulf himself ranges from the apparently Christian piety he expresses in Hrothgar's court to the secular retelling of his exploits to the Geats.⁸ This difference may represent what would logically be a common practice in the gradually converting Anglo-Saxon world: using politically correct Christian language in the court of a king who placed emphasis on his piety and neglecting Christian terminology when speaking to a king who didn't require it. This facile use of Christian and non-Christian language obscures Beowulf's true characterization. Because he doesn't speak as a Christian in his homeland, however, the poet seems to suggest that Beowulf is not culturally Christian. Though the poet damns the Danes for their pagan practices, Beowulf, while not always clearly Christian, is also never clearly pagan. Whatever his religion in the poet's mind, however, Beowulf is certainly beloved of God. During the attack of Grendel's mother, the poet comments that "Beowulf was mindful of his mighty strength,/the wondrous gifts God had showered on him:/He relied for help on the Lord of All,/on His care and favour."⁹ Beowulf owes his success to God's grace.

Beowulf's heroic status in the eyes of the poet's audience also requires that he die nobly and ascend to heaven. To set a precedent for the salvation of pagan heroes, the poet first relates that Shield Sheafson "[crosses] over into the Lord's keeping."¹⁰ Similarly, when Beowulf dies the poet says he will "lodge/for a long time in the care of the Almighty."¹¹

If Beowulf could not ascend to heaven, he must descend to hell. But this would not be acceptable to the poet's audience. Grendel and his mother are repeatedly dismissed with

descriptions such as “hell-brute” and “hell-bride,”¹² a sharp contrast to the hero’s favorable portrayal. To further reinforce the Christian tone of his descriptions of Beowulf and his other heroes, the poet also contrasts them to Grendel by plainly naming the monster a “heathen.”¹³ Clearly, Beowulf is not like Grendel; therefore he must be Christian, at least at heart.

Contrasting with the Christian concept of fighting solely for God, another recurring theme throughout the story, loyalty to kin, is expressed by Beowulf in his battles. The betrayal of this primary loyalty is also condemned throughout the story as the greatest possible wrong, which Beowulf can honestly deny as he lies dying: “the Ruler of mankind/need never blame me when the breath leaves my body/for murder of kinsmen.”¹⁴ Retribution for the death of kinsmen, however, also creates an overlap between the secular value of kinship and Christian mythology. For example, the poet emphasizes retribution as the cause for the Biblical flood.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, Grendel is presented as a descendent of the kinslayer Cain to increase his evilness in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf*.¹⁶

As well as the references to Cain as the source of evil, most of the other Biblical references are to the Old Testament, rather than the New,¹⁷ blending Christianity with the fatalistic Anglo-Saxon worldview expressed throughout the story. Edward B. Irving observes that God is portrayed as the King of Heaven, at war with evil, who uses Beowulf as his instrument of divine justice.¹⁸ Beowulf’s status as a warrior of God can be seen in passages such as: “It was easy for the Lord,/the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance/once Beowulf got back up on his feet.”¹⁹ Additionally, the poet shows Beowulf attributing his success directly to God when describing his battle to the Danes: “if God had not helped me,/the outcome would have been quick and fatal.”²⁰ Morton W. Bloomfield also suggests that the battle with Grendel demonstrates some of the characteristics of a trial by combat, which relies ultimately on God’s judgment.²¹

In Beowulf’s death scene, the poet reaffirms God’s concern for Beowulf, as well as God’s possible tolerance for all heathens that the poet introduced in the scene of the Danes’ possible reversion. After Beowulf’s last words, the poet tells the reader that “his soul fled from his breast/to its destined place among the steadfast ones.”²² This line remains ambiguous, possibly referring to a pagan afterlife for the best warriors or everlasting fame among the Geats for his great deeds, or to the heaven prepared for the righteous by the warlike Old Testament God portrayed earlier. However, when Wiglaf speaks later, it seems clear that Beowulf is going to the Christian heaven, “where he will lodge/for a long time in the care of the Almighty.”²³ Since Beowulf never definitely identifies himself as a Christian, the poet seems to assume that such a great hero must go to heaven, whether Christian or not, just as the Danes should be forgiven their

weakness if they accepted God at their death.

Perhaps the most clear and significant blending of pagan and Christian cultures in *Beowulf* is the similarity of the poet's approaches to Fate and God. One way in which Beowulf equates God and Fate is the way he recounts the two stories of his triumphs against Grendel and his mother. In Hrothgar's hall, he finds it natural to say "if God had not helped me,/the outcome would have been quick and fatal."²⁴ However, in front of the Geats, he claims his "time had not yet come."²⁵ Also, the poet equates Fate and God with such passages as "Whichever one death fells/ must deem it a just judgment by God" a few lines away from "Fate goes ever as fate must."²⁶

In another passage, Fate is personified in Beowulf's death scene when he speaks to Wiglaf, saying, "Fate swept us away,/sent my whole brave high-born clan to their final doom."²⁷ Here, the poet represents Fate as a vindictive god, though one unlike the Old Testament God in the lack of a necessary sin as the direct reason for the Geats' downfall. Even the hero of the poem is subject to the arbitrariness of Fate, while God is presented as opposing Fate by favoring Beowulf and receiving him into heaven.

Though Fate is often personified in the text, the poet also often describes the Christian God using pre-Christian imagery. For instance, when the Geats are waiting for Grendel, the poet claims that "the Lord was weaving/a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats."²⁸ Also, God is portrayed as directly controlling the weather in imagery foreign to Christian tradition:

it all melted as ice melts

when the Father eases the fetters off the frost

and unravels the water-ropes. He who wields power

over time and tide: He is the true Lord.²⁹

Though the Christian God often performs miracles such as influencing the course of a battle or controlling the elements, they are expressed in very different imagery and language. The pre-Christian language used here does not necessarily indicate the poet or other Anglo-Saxons

characterized the Christian God as equal to any pagan god, but rather demonstrates how they adapted their old concepts of deity to their new religion.

In addition to the many ambiguous references to God and Fate, the poet also occasionally uses typical Christian terminology to refer to God. He is often the Almighty Father and Heavenly Shepherd,³⁰ and when the dragon destroys his hall, Beowulf believes, for the first time, that “he must have thwarted/ancient ordinance of the eternal Lord,/broken His commandment.”³¹ At Beowulf’s deathbed, Wiglaf expresses the helplessness usually associated with Fate, mixed with trust in God’s judgment and both expressed in Christian terminology,

Much as he wanted to, there was no way

he could preserve his lord’s life on earth

or alter in the least the Almighty’s will.

What God judged right would rule what happened

to every man, as it does to this day.³²

This mixture of terms and ideas represents a people adapting their old customs and beliefs to a newly learned religious atmosphere. While the *Beowulf* poet’s audience may still have been using the word “fate” to represent a power similar to God, as well as mixing the other attributes discussed above, he probably sums up the basic understanding of his Anglo-Saxon audience, however they might express it, with the lines quoted above: “What God judged right would rule what happened/to every man, as it does to this day.”

Added to other evidence concerning the dating and probable audience of the poem, its mixed pagan and Christian content indicates that *Beowulf*’s audience were a people midway in their conversion, still expressing their merged beliefs in dualistic terminology. They seem to have assimilated some basic Christian values such as the supremacy of God, while also retaining such ancient values as close kinship ties. As Seamus Heaney writes in his introduction to this edition of *Beowulf*, the book demonstrates the struggle of a people in the process of conversion to take “conflicting realities” and “find accommodation within a new order.”³³

¹Fred C. Robinson, "Apposed Word Meanings and Religious Perspectives," *Beowulf: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1987) 82, 86, 91.

²*Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) 13-15.

³Edward B. Irving, Jr., "Christian and Pagan Elements," *A Beowulf Handbook*, eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 185.

⁴Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 39-40.

⁵Bede 98.

⁶Bede 86.

⁷Bede 76, 79.

⁸Irving 185.

⁹*Beowulf* 89.

¹⁰*Beowulf* 5.

¹¹*Beowulf* 209.

¹²*Beowulf* 89.

¹³*Beowulf* 57, 65.

¹⁴*Beowulf* 185.

15*Beowulf* 117.

16*Beowulf* 9, 89.

17Seamus Heaney, "Introduction," *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) xix.

18Irving 186.

19*Beowulf* 107.

20*Beowulf* 115.

21Morton W. Bloomfield, "Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgment of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 44:4 (October 1969): 546.

22*Beowulf* 191.

23*Beowulf* 209.

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30*Beowulf* 63.

31*Beowulf* 159.

32*Beowulf* 193.

33Heaney xvii.

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The Janitor by Ryan Lubben

At 4:59 a.m George Mendelson arrived at work in his usual manner, driving his rust-and-primer Skylark with its four balding tires and rattling tailpipe that clung to the chassis by a single obstinate bolt. On that rainy autumn morning the parking lot of The Company Building was an asphalt wasteland, completely vacant except for one maroon minivan with fogged-over windows. In the pre-dawn pallor everything was still shrouded in hues of blue and gray. There was a low-lying cumulus blanket that concealed the upper levels of the high-rise, enveloping the angular mass of concrete, steel and glass as it stretched up above the horizon. But to George, who had seen it everyday for the last seventeen years, the building's appearance was permanently etched into the visual cortex of his brain; he could close his eyes and see every parapet and pilaster with photographic clarity. He circled around to the rear of the building and situated his ailing automobile near the very outer rim of the parking lot, in a spot that had been pre-assigned to him, then opened the creaking car door and began his routine morning trek. It was a good half-mile walk before he reached the front of the building.

George entered the lobby through the rotating doors, and despite the thousands of times that he had made the transition he couldn't help being intimidated by its sheer immensity. The lobby, unlike the building's aesthetically unassuming exterior, was designed to awe visitors and company vice presidents alike with its vaulted ceilings, arched entryways, chandeliers that hung down like giant silver spiders, and sculpted marble walls. George was a tall man, although his back was slightly hunched over from the years of hard labor, and he felt no bigger than two-inches tall walking across the lobby toward the stairwell, with his wet, rubber-soled sneakers squeaking discordantly the entire time. Dead center in the middle of the lobby floor was a giant mosaic of The Company's logo: an enormous C wrapped around an O that was a globe. At the far end of the lobby he could see Stan, the night security guard sitting behind his desk, which was about as long as a Cadillac and almost as tall as a judge's bench, reading a copy of *The Wall Street Journal*. The guard glanced up as George approached, giving George an accusing look that always made him feel completely culpable of some anonymous crime, and then, as if his impartial verdict had already been rendered, the guard returned his bespectacled eyes to his paper. The guard was the only person that George knew of who had worked in the building

longer than himself. The funny thing was that George couldn't remember the guard ever looking any different. Stan, with his black-rimmed glasses, perfectly pressed uniform and paternal face seemed as immutable as the marble walls that surrounded him.

"Morning," Stan said evenly, reflexively, without ever averting his constricted pupils from his newspaper.

"Morning Stan," George said effusively, then paused for a second, waiting for a reply. George brushed the beads of water from his half-saturated olive green coat. "It's going to be another wet one today," he said, feeling obligated to say something. In the seventeen years not once had he succeeded in initiating a conversation with the guard and just as he expected there was no response, only an awkward silence, awkward for George anyway. After a minute of playing with his large, ungainly hands he resumed his course toward the stairwell.

"Says here they're predicting our stock values are gonna go up another three percent next quarter," the guard said, still looking down at his newspaper.

George stopped, looked around to see if maybe the guard was talking to someone else, but after realizing that they were still the only two people in the entire building said, "Great! Wonder when we'll be able to see the official figures." There was another moment of clumsy abatement as George stood there amiably. And again there was nothing in the form of a response, just the rustling of his newspaper as the guard turned a page. George dismissed the guard's monologue as just that, turned, and traversed the remaining distance to the stairwell, reproaching himself along the way for being so naïve.

One flight of stairs closer to the center of the earth George pulled out his giant ring of keys and opened the basement door marked *Employees Only* in big black-stenciled letters. As soon as he opened the door he was blasted by a gust of hot, smothering air. The wanly lit basement contained the building's heating and ventilation system and no matter what time of year, it was always 90° and smelled heavily of machine oil. He barely made it from the door to his locker before his raised forehead was covered in little glistening beads of perspiration. George opened his locker, put his brown-bag lunch on the top shelf, hung up his coat, and retrieved his coffee cup and a can of ground coffee. He always made it a point to arrive at work half an hour early so that he could brew himself a pot, read the morning paper and relax a little before his shift started. While he was waiting for the gurgling coffee maker to finish he went ahead and donned his tangerine jumpsuit. His uniform bore an uncanny resemblance to those worn by prison inmates; only instead of a serial number emblazoned across his left breast, his had a name patch.

5:30 a.m.: George looked up at the clock hanging on the exposed concrete wall, folded his paper neatly, placing it back on the table in case someone else wanted to read it later on, and finished the last swig of his coffee. He walked over and retrieved his timecard from the slotted holder on the wall then slid it carefully in between the two thin metal lips of the timeclock. The machine emitted a loud “thunk, thunk” and George’s shift was officially underway. George placed his timecard back in the slotted holder where he had found it, and was just about to leave the basement and head upstairs when James, the other custodian on shift erupted through the door, late as usual and smelling of cigarettes and tequila. James just gave George a cagey smile, said, “Better never than late, eh,” winked, and kept on walking. George watched the tall, sturdily built man for a second as he proceeded straight to the timeclock and punched-in.

George’s next stop was his supply closet on the third floor where he stowed his cart and trusty tools—mop, bucket, dustpan and broom. Only the closet wasn’t really a closet, it was more of a small room filled with metal shelves, on top of which were every cleaning solvent, degreaser and disinfectant known to man; toilet paper galore; an eclectic array of trash bags; and hundreds of bundles of cleaning rags. George started grabbing from the arsenal of cleaning materials and loaded his cart with whatever he thought might be needed throughout the 8-hour shift.

While George was cramming his cart with cleaning provisions he glanced over at the poster hanging on the inside of the closet door. The poster, held on by peeling, yellowing tape, was faded and tattered around the edges with a picture of an open textbook. Beneath the book in big block letters it read: *College is the road to enlightenment!* George couldn’t even begin to count how many times his eyes had rolled across those provocative words. Originally he hung the poster up as stinging reminder of what he had been deprived of. There had been a short time in his life when George’s adolescent aspirations of attending college seemed almost tangible; he had been accepted to a local state college and was prepared to start that fall, right after graduating from high school. Then, during that interim summer his girlfriend Alison announced that she was pregnant. It would have been difficult, although feasible for George to afford the “modestly priced” college before, while he was still single, but not while trying to support a fledgling family. So he put his education on hold, temporarily he told himself, and started working for The Company full-time. Then, a year after their daughter Clair was born Alison abandoned them both to fully devote herself to her heroin addiction. She left because he confronted her after finding a used syringe under the mattress. It was only later George learned that the nightclub where she worked nights was only a front for its official function as the local opiate emporium. As a single father George had no choice but to accept his menial position as janitor-for-life, but rather than lament over his own predetermined fate he decided to focus on a brighter future for Clair.

And today, instead of a pound of salt poured over an old festering wound that dog-eared poster held a new significance. It was a symbol of revived optimism. Today was Clair’s sixteenth birthday, the day that he was going to reveal her surprise birthday present. From the

time Clair was three years old, he had been setting aside what little he could and invested it in employee owned shares of The Company. Now after all that patience and scrimping, what a payoff! Over that time the company had grown faster than anyone could have imagined—when George was first hired it was only a regional company dealing in radio and television broadcasting, but had quickly grown into a global entity that now manipulated a vast media empire—and his shares were worth well over \$250,000.00! More than enough to send his precocious Clair to whichever college she wanted: Stanford, Yale, Princeton... Harvard even! She was certainly intelligent enough to attend any one of them, but because she was no politician or plastic surgeon's daughter she had decided to settle for an affordable technical college rather than drown in student loans. But now she would have a choice—a chance! She would be afforded the opportunity to pull herself up out of the poverty and predestination. He had it all planned out; all he had to do was quit, sit on his hands for sixty days and then cash out his retirement account. And tonight he would tell Clair as her sweet-sixteen birthday present. Right after his shift.

7:22 a.m.: The legions of businessmen and women were beginning to arrive. Stan was still at his station, sitting there statically, scrutinizing the flow of business suits going in and out of the rotating doors. George was just finishing-up mopping the lobby, using his long arms to cut huge swaths across the floor with his mop, swinging and stepping, swinging and stepping rhythmically as if he and his metal-handled mop were engaged in some kind of absurd waltz. He looked up to see Mr. Atkins, the building's Facilities Manager walking intently toward him, blazing a trail across George's newly mopped floor. He was always amazed at how quickly the man's short little legs were able to transport him from point A to point B. George continued with his mopping and didn't look up again until Mr. Atkins was standing three feet from him.

“George,” Mr. Atkins said in his nagging, supervisory voice, with his hands perched on his hips, “do you realize that it's already 7:30 and you're still mopping the lobby? Let's pick up the pace a little, all right.” George looked at the man again who was at least two heads shorter, but somehow had the ability to make him feel like a microscopic bug. Today Mr. Atkins happened to be wearing his charcoal suit and maroon tie and a contemptuous scowl, permanently affixed to his round face. “Are the public restrooms stocked and mopped?”

“Yes sir,” George said, having resumed his mopping.

“Toilet paper and paper towels?”

“Yes sir.”

“And what about the—” but Mr. Atkins was cut off by a female voice on his radio shouting something about burnt out light bulbs on the tenth floor. “I’ll be right there,” he answered into the radio and started to storm off, then spun back around. “Oh, by the way, here’s your radio. Make absolutely sure that you keep it on you at all times. And don’t turn it off! It needs to be kept on even during your breaks. *Understand?*” George nodded in accord. Mr. Atkins handed the radio over to George, performed another about face and marched off hastily toward the elevators, his little legs trying frantically to keep pace with his bulbous, semi-balding head.

George finished mopping the lobby and collected his cart. He took the service elevator up to the second floor, then the third and continued his slow ascent, emptying trashcans and attending to toilets one floor at a time. The second through eighth floors were virtually identical; consisting of a handful of offices and the rest was a maze of office cubicles where computer programmers hacked away at keyboards for hours on end, only leaving their tiny work stations to replenish their coffee reserves or to drain the previous eight cups. The only noise that was ever heard on the networking floors was the ubiquitous tick-tick-tick-ticking of thousands of fervently typing fingers. George didn’t mind working on those floors because he was virtually invisible. The programmers’ eyes seldom deviated from their monitors and the only time that George was ever observed was if the restroom was being cleaned and someone desperately needed to use it, and then it was only: “Hurry up!” and “Hey, this stall’s outta paper.”

11:15 a.m.: George decided to patrol the 1st floor lobby once more before taking his break. The flow of business suits had diminished and Stan was back to reading his paper. George made several more abortive attempts at dialogue, but finally gave up and fully devoted himself to his cleaning. With his dustpan in hand George skillfully swooped and scooped forsaken gum wrappers and crumpled up napkins. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed an orphaned fry that had been trampled on, squished flat. It was only when he was satisfied with the main lobby area that he headed back to assess the restrooms. Toilet paper—check. Paper towels—check. He grabbed the blue spray bottle of glass cleaner that hung by its trigger from his back pocket and gave the mirrors a once over, clearing away the water spots that had accumulated since his last inspection. Then with discarded paper towels that someone had used and left where they fell, he wiped up the excess water from the sink tops. When he was finished he glanced around at the immaculate restroom with its pristine porcelain and iridescent chrome, then shrugged his work-withered shoulders contentedly. As universally unfulfilling as his job was, there was something strangely gratifying about a spic-and-span restroom, where the street bum and the businessman alike would be proud to attend to nature’s universal affairs. It didn’t really matter that by the time he got back from his break he would have to repeat the entire process all over again.

When his break finally rolled around, the first thing George decided to do was phone home

and make sure that Clair would be there after he got off work. George walked over to the payphone mounted on the lobby wall, retrieved a handful of loose change from his pocket and dropped a dime and a quarter into the skinny slot. The phone rang three times and right before George was about to hang up—fearing that the answering machine might pick up and his 35 cents wasted—Clair answered the phone. She sounded happy to hear him; the warmth of her familiar voice could be felt even through the cold, plastic receiver.

“Daddy!”

“Hi honey, how’s my birthday girl?”

“I’m okay,” she said, feigning displeasure the way that only a daddy’s girl can. “But I’d be a whole lot better if I knew what you were getting me.”

“What, who said anything about a birthday present?”

“Daddy! Cmon, just give me a little hint. Please!”

“You’ll just have to wait,” he said mockingly, barely able to conceal his own excitement. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Yeah, but that’s in like”—she paused; George guessed that she was glancing at a clock—“four and a half hours. Just tell me, is it that green sweater? You know, the one I pointed out when we were at the mall the other day.”

“I don’t know. I seem to remember you pointing out about a million different things.”

“You’re no fun. A girl only turns sixteen once you know.”

George smiled, said goodbye and hung up the phone. “I think that I can do a little better than a sweater,” he thought to himself as he walked down the stairs toward the basement. He was anxious to eat his lunch; his stomach felt like a deflated inner tube and was rumbling in protest. When George opened the door to the basement he expected it to be abandoned, but instead encountered James, who was sitting with his feet propped up on the table, reading the latest copy of *Biker* magazine. James smiled slyly at George and set his periodical down on the table, eyeing George as he retrieved his lunch from his locker and sat down at the table across from James. George knew very little about the man other than the fact that he was habitually late and practiced absenteeism as though it were a religion. James was relatively new to The Company, he had only worked there for a little over three months, and George had never actually had a conversation with him. For several minutes the large, sturdily built man just sat there staring intently at

George. James' sleeves were rolled up and one particular tattoo on the inside of his granite-carved forearm caught George's attention: an eagle with outstretched wings, carrying a trident and musket. George tried to ignore the man's trenchant stares by pulling a small, paperback book—a tattered copy of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*—from out of his left breast pocket, opened it and picked up in the middle of the page where he had last left off.

“Hey man,” James finally said in a respectful tone that seemed almost out of character for all his largeness and tattoos. “What's your story?”

“Excuse me.” George said, somewhat hesitantly.

“Well I've been wachin' you for a while now. And I always see you workin' your ass off. And when you're not doing that you're walkin' around with your face planted in some book. I just can't figure out why someone like you would care enough to work so hard, let alone stick around for—How long you been workin' here?”

“Seventeen years,” George replied, averting his eyes.

“*Seventeen years!* Jesus man, it's worse that I thought. What in God's name could possibly make you stick around cleaning toilets for that long? It sure as hell ain't the pay, and you don't seem like no retard to me.”

George paused for a second, caught off guard by the unexpected direction the conversation was taking. George had an aversion to conversations with strangers to begin with, and he became particularly reticent when the main topic of discussion shifted to something personal. The muscles in his neck tensed and his tone became guarded. “Probably for the same reason you are—to earn a living.”

James smiled a charismatic grin that managed to diffuse some of George's defensiveness. “Naw man, you've got me pegged all wrong. I'm here cause at least here I can tell my boss off without being thrown in the brig for insubordination. I'm free to come and go as I please. I can show up late and hung over and the worst they can do is fire me. No skin off my nose, right. I'm here because it fits my lifestyle.” He grinned again at George and winked, “and it pays for beer.” George responded with a somewhat uncertain grin. “But seriously—why are you here?”

“I have a daughter to support. And I have to work someplace.”

“C'mon George, I had you figured as someone smarter. You could work any of a million other places. Why here? Why scrubbing toilets for people who'd just as soon flush you down one?”

George hesitated again; no one—other than Clair—had ever asked him those questions before. No one had ever cared enough to ask. George looked into the other man's face and saw something he believed to be genuine concern, unlike the apathy or contempt that he was so accustomed to. "When I ... when I was seven I moved here from East Germany to live with an uncle. It took all of their—my parent's—money to get me to the United States. . . . Well, I didn't speak English very well at first. I was already pretty timid, but the other kids ridiculed me, like kids do, and my teachers. . . . They put me into special classes for the learning disabled because, "I wasn't adapting well enough to my environment."

"So what—that's it?" James started laughing. "Everybody thinks you're dense and you just go right on obliging them?"

"Why is that funny?"

James' face grew rigid as he leaned over the table, moving his hulking upper torso in closer toward George. "*When I was seven* my father beat me with a belt whenever I did anything wrong. He'd make me lean over a chair and whip the back of my legs until they were both raw and swollen, and I could barely stand. This started when I was five, *five years-old*, and went on 'til I was fifteen." James' forlorn eyes met George's. "And if I was really bad, he'd take his bottle of Ouzo, that he was always drinkin' from, and pour it over the cuts; "to show me how painful life can really be."

"I'm sorry." George felt even smaller saying those words and shrunk down in his chair as far as he physically could, and then some.

"Don't be sorry. When I was eighteen I beat the bastard within an inch of his worthless life and left home for the Navy. I waited 'til I was strong enough to knock him down with my own two fists. James looked down at the opposing mountain ranges of scarred, bony knuckles, and then back up at George. "But what I don't understand is how you let other people's words keep you anchored in one spot. You don't even try to fight back. Man, if I was you I'd reevaluate my SOPs." George just gave him a look of sullen confusion. "Standard Operating Procedures—that's what we called 'em in the military anyway."

"What would you expect me to do? What good is knowledge without the paper receipt?"

"I don't know man. Write a book or something. You've read enough of 'em; you should be able to write one by now." James belayed whatever he was about to say, glanced up at the clock and said, "Well hey, would you look at the time," as if noticing for the first time that he had inadvertently extended his lunch break by an extra twenty minutes. He picked his radio up off

the table, turned the knob back to the ON position and headed for the door. “Catchya later George.”

George watched James walk out the door, heard his size-eleven footsteps echoing in the stairwell, and for several minutes just sat frozen, staring at the stairwell door. Nothing that James had said was anything groundbreaking. Clair had given him similar lectures: “Daddy when are you going to quit that wretched job. You’re too smart to be emptying trash for those people.” But for some reason what James said had struck a chord. A deep chord, down in the very visceral recesses of his repressed psyche. Maybe it was because the man was nothing short of a complete stranger and truth seems to penetrate further when it comes from an unanticipated source. In only a matter of minutes James had managed to ignite a flame of indignation that George couldn’t account for. Why hadn’t he ever felt this way before? But he knew why: for some reason, maybe it was the childhood taunts or his own self-deprecating nature, he had never learned how to generate his own internal flame—Prometheus had recanted on his promise—and all he ever got for his effort was choking smoke and blinding ashes.

George looked up at the clock. He still had nine minutes left in his break so he rapidly consumed his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, leftover potato salad and banana.

2:15 p.m.: “George,” Mr. Atkins’ staticky voice came over the radio. “I need you to head up to the men’s restroom on Twenty-one West. There’s a clogged toilet....and James isn’t answering his radio.”

On every other occasion George had been petrified at the mere thought of going up to the Executive Floor, but for some reason this time he wasn’t. Maybe it was his conversation with James, but he wasn’t entirely convinced that was it either. George returned his cart to its home on the 3rd floor. Instead of pushing it the entire way he decided to travel light and grabbed only a plunger, then entered the service elevator and pressed 21. The doors closed, then moments later parted to reveal a modern Baroque masterpiece of pillars, oil paintings, and massive skylights, allowing for a glorious view of the early afternoon sky. The blue panorama was unimpeded by even a single lingering cloud, which gave George a light and airy feeling that was aberrant from the graveness he normally felt when on the uppermost level.

When George reached door marked, *Executive Washroom* in gold leaf lettering, he whipped out his ring of keys and found the right one. He opened the wood paneled door, turning the brass handle ever so slowly, and was instantly jolted by a wave of olfactory assaulting gasses—George had decided early on in his janitorial career that the only thing worse than the smell of human

fecal matter was the caustic smell of feces combined with the pseudo-floral scent, doled out by bathrooms automated dispensers. The flamboyantly decorated bathroom was an absolute atrocity; the normal timid creature that acted as a bathroom attendant must have called in sick or taken a vacation day. The floors were covered in paper towels and toilet paper. Two out of the four stalls were clogged and had overflowed a brown, syrupy mess onto the floor.

After almost half an hour of tedious labor George had almost finished cleaning the bathroom; all that was left was to unclog one more toilet. He was already late getting home, but George didn't like to leave others with his unfinished work so he decided to keep on plunging. He was in the process of plunging the toilet's thick soupy contents when he heard a key turning, a latch releasing, and the bathroom door opening. From his stall at the far end of the bathroom George could make out two voices engaged in conversation. George looked over his shoulder and saw two gray-haired men dressed in dark suits, who from the back looked virtually indistinguishable. One of them stood at a urinal while the other stood grooming himself in one of the washroom's countless full-length mirrors.

"George, we need to have an answer before we go back." the man at the urinal said, and at first George thought the man was addressing him, but neither one of them so much as looked in his direction. "We'll all have to acquiesce if this is going to work. In two weeks, once the word gets out, our stock is going to be worth less than toilet paper." George's ears instantly perked up and a wave of panic overcame him. He just stood there, concealed by the stall, holding the soiled plunger in his left hand. What stocks? He had to know what stocks they were talking about.

"We're going to do the only thing we can do," the man in the mirror said. "Sell our shares while they're still worth something."

"What about the other shareholders? People are going to lose millions once we file for Chapter 11."

"You think I don't already know that?" the mirror man questioned sternly. "Look Rawling, we took a gamble with their money and unfortunately it didn't pay off. But who has more to lose, some Medicare geriatrics that have managed to put away a few thousand dollars for a rainy day, or us? Their lifestyles will hardly change; they're used to poverty. We, on the other hand have assets to protect."

"You're one heartless old bastard, George," the one at the urinal said and then let out a terse laugh.

"No, I'm just a pragmatist. I have to go with what works best for me."

George's tried to remain still, but suddenly felt nauseous and dizzy, his legs started to give out and his flaccid body slumped down onto the floor next to the clogged toilet. He was unable, unwilling to believe what he had just heard. How could this be? It had to be a mistake! His head was spinning, so much so that he barely noticed the two men standing over him. George closed his eyes and rested his cheek against the cool, ivory-white toilet seat. When he opened his eyes, after what might have been a few seconds or days, the two men were still standing above him and for the first time his frantic mind registered their presence.

"George," one of them said, and this time George thought the man was referring to his colleague, but both were staring directly at him. "Your name is George right?"

"How do you know my name?" George asked in a half-whisper.

"That's what your nametag says," the second man said. "Are you all right?" The man held his manicured hand out to George and he accepted it timidly. He helped George to his still unstable feet with much more vigor than George would have assumed possible from someone his age. Up close both men still looked very similar, both appeared confident, the way that they held their heads and squared their shoulders, but the one speaking had obviously assumed control of the situation. George decided that he was the other George, the one in the mirror, the mirror man. "I assume that you heard our conversation."

"Yes," George said grimly.

"And judging by your adverse reaction you stand to lose something if The Company goes under," the mirror man said. "I'm guessing that you have a vested interest in The Company's well being, say a certain amount of employee owned shares." George just nodded his head; barely able to make his neck muscles escalate his head, it felt so heavy. "How much?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"What!" the other man chided in. "How the hell did a janitor manage to amass two hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of shares? I didn't think we paid you guys that much."

"Shut up," the mirror man said reproachfully. "It doesn't matter. Look," he said turning back toward George, "here is my card and I am writing my broker's number on it." He pulled a gold pen out of a pocket hidden on the inside of his suit jacket and started writing on the card. "Give him a call. Tell him you are a friend of mine and that you want to cash out your shares immediately." He handed George the card, capped the gold pen and put it back in his pocket. George took the card and looked at it. "I'll even make sure that there's a little extra in there for you. Provided you are willing to remain silent. Do you understand?" Again George nodded.

“Good.” The mirror man gave George a reassuring smile and patted him firmly on the shoulder. “It was nice doing business with you George—”

“Mendelson.”

“George Mendelson. Well good luck, I’m sure that your future will be a much brighter one now. No more cleaning toilets for you.” Both men turned and strolled out of the executive bathroom, leaving George alone with his disheartened disbelief. What just happened? He must have stood there for ten minutes without moving even his little finger, fearing that the two men would return with a security envoy. But the bathroom was completely silent and finally George decided to move. He dropped the plunger—he had been clinging on to it the whole time—next to the still stopped-up toilet, put the card in his right pants pocket, walked to the wood-paneled door, turned the brass handle, and opened the door, just far enough that he could get a good look out into the sky-lit hallway.

When he was certain that there was no one around he made his way furtively toward the elevator. Once the metal doors closed behind him he breathed a sigh of relief. His legs were still feeble and he propped himself up against the side of the elevator, then raised his shaking hand, extended his limp index finger and pressed the L button that would take him directly to the lobby. The button yielded grudgingly under the pressure of his weak finger, then lit up. The elevator began its arduous descent and George, unable to stand any longer slumped down in the corner of the elevator and closed his eyes. For a minute and a half, while the cables lowered the metal box containing George, he was able to sever the cables that bound him to reality. In his head he could hear their voices ricocheting around.

He could hear the mirror man’s voice saying, “No more cleaning toilets for you.”

And Mr. Atkins saying, “Let’s pick up the pace a little, all right.”

And James saying, “Man if I was you I’d reevaluate my SOPs.”

And Rawlings saying, “I didn’t think we paid you guys that much.”

And Clair’s voice saying, “A girl only turns sixteen once you know.”

The last voice that he heard, drowning out the other voices, was the voice of Alison. It was the last thing she said to George, right before she left Clair and him for good. “But baby, heroin’s gonna be the cocaine of the 90s’. It’s easy money. And we could finally get out from under this crap heap.”

The elevator doors parted slowly to reveal the lobby, slower than George had ever seen them open, as if they were fighting against some unseen force trying to keep them closed. He grabbed the handrail that ran along the sides of the metal box and pulled himself up, then walked into the bustling flow of suits and ties and white collars. He walked slowly at first, staggering slightly, but eventually regained his strength of leg and began striding through the masses. He didn't have to say anything or physically brush anyone aside, they just moved out of his way. When he reached the payphone he looked down at his hand and realized that the card was already there waiting for him. He stared for a second at the number written in black ink, then fished a dime and a quarter from out of his pocket and dropped them into the skinny slot. "Chink, chink." He pushed the numbered buttons, slowly at first and then in rapid-fire succession. As the phone rang once, then twice, then three times, his heart began beating so fiercely that he thought it might break through his sternum.

"Hello."

"Hi honey, it's me."

"Oh, hey daddy. I thought you'd be home by now."

"I'm sorry. I had a little extra work to finish up."

"Are you okay daddy? You sound upset."

"Clair, I need to ask you a question. And I need you to be completely honest."

"What's the matter?"

"Please, I need to ask you this—if there was a way for me to send you to any college you wanted, would you go?"

"Daddy, we've already talked about this. I don't want to be in debt 'til I'm eighty. Junior college is fine for now, and maybe later I'll transfer somewhere else."

"But if we could afford it?"

"—Sure I suppose. But why are you asking me this? I've never heard you like this before."

"What if there was a way, but it meant taking away from someone else?"

There was a long pause and George was about to say something just to fill the void, when

Clair finally spoke up, very quietly at first and then with a growing with a sense of fortitude: “No daddy ... Not if it meant hurting or depriving someone else. Now please, tell me what’s going on!”

“I’m sorry baby, I can’t. You’ve made something much easier for me though. Thank you.”

George hung up the phone; it made a loud hollow sound that echoed inside of his skull. He headed into the lobby again, making a straight line toward the revolving door that seemed to spin in front of him like a combine, sucking people in and then spitting them outside. He walked to the center of the lobby and looked around one last time, mentally absorbing the lobby in its entirety for what seemed like the very first time. Suddenly it didn’t seem so intimidating and the walls looked more like sandstone than marble. He looked over at Stan’s desk, his big judiciary desk, and saw Stan watching him, cautiously, never averting his gaze. George looked down at the business card still in his big work-riddled hand, flipping it over and over then looked down at the floor below his sneakered feet to see massive mosaic of The Company logo, that big C engulfing the world. George looked at the card again and then began ripping it in half, then quarters, then eighths, letting the little insignificant flecks descend almost weightlessly to the ground, directly on top of the logo. George looked up, stood up straight, all of his vertebra popping and grinding during the realignment, and he slowly headed for the door. And as he was passing through the huge rotating door he heard Stan’s stony voice transcend the lobby:

“Goodbye George.”

Weekly Feeding by Cressant Swarts

I

Sometimes she feels she’s banging at life

like a blind fly hammering

against a lightbulb, or a bird flying
into a window of reflected sky, or a child beating
on a lobster tank to demand
her food's beady-eyed awareness.

But sometimes she wakes suddenly,
scrambling for a pencil, then for her dream
of reality, that glimpse of herself
that shudders back into shadow
at the touch of lead.

She sleeps again, to dream that the hand of God
has snipped open her plastic bag and dropped
her into the aquarium. He always insists she break out
of her mind into meaning, but for now she must feed
off tiny flakes of words and thoughts—
or eat her own soul.

At first, she flips her fins and explores,
but the tank holds only five gallons of discovery.

And the water trembles
when she bumps her nose against the glass.

She sucks on a plastic plant, chokes
on the scum, and sighs. Through the murky
water, sound oozes, light refracts
and shatters.

She huddles in a dim, apathetic
corner of the world: when the sun sets,
all light dies.

On Monday mornings, her malnourished
brain always thrashes
against dim glass that won't shatter
down to meaning, rarely cracking
at the level of the senses.

After the agony of that first craving, she wakes

again in bloody-minded dizziness

to see the words still swimming past

out of reach like bright, living

fish in a mirror frozen

and broken into chunks of ecstasy.

Monday is the hungriest day.

Desperate by Tuesday, she stretches

into a shark, bursts her tank, and staggers

out into the world to inhale

the red-fish blood-trail.

But other fish are never alone.

They swarm in guarded floods

of blue and red, gold and green.

Even a wide-mouthed, starving

shark can't snatch a single scale.

And other colors, easy prey, waver

through the water,

tantalizing her out of herself.

By Wednesday she's crawled onto land
to sniff for details. An unsatisfied
hound now, her brain ranges in the dark and dirt
and howls for an invisible scent.
But through the eyes of smell, the grass melts to fog.

Her nose is exhausted by Thursday,
so she licks everything she sees.

The sky tastes like flowers,
the water like a star.

III

But on Friday mornings, after a long dream
of distorted lives, she wakes
before the sun to stand naked
in the open door and inhale the rising light
by the cups and pints till her skin is bursting

with escaping rays, and her lips
melt with the sweet hell
of swallowing desire.

All day Saturday she melts the frozen rapture
with a kaleidoscopic fire of colors
and life. The mirror births
white, naked words which cling
to her body in a frenzy of being
and meaning. They soak
into her brain and burn
outward like small suns.

Saturday droops
to dusk and she fumbles
for a pencil, a record of the ecstasy,
and she chokes,
drowning in colors which collide like dyes
until they distill down
again into a greedy black hole

which swallows and freezes all thought.

IV

Sunday is the day of grace.

But Sunday spirals into Monday's

threat of bottled light and frozen

words, with no guarantee of salvation.

God holds up a mirror,

saying, "Seek and ye shall find,"

but the mirror only reflects

endless empty

glass. She closes

her eyes and daydreams her recurring desire

to cock a mechanical pencil against her throat

and fire the lead slug through her skull.

The explosion

of words pours thick blood

into the rising water, congealing life

so she can taste

her own soul once,

before the senses spill away.

The tide of Monday floods the aquarium, sealing

her words behind glass, freezing

all meaning, drowning her

in the blank mirror.

Pushed by Lisa Kieffer

Characters:

Lauren Miller a woman in her mid- to late twenties

Randal Miller Lauren's husband, a wealthy lawyer

Katherine Duvall Lauren's best friend since childhood

Nellie the Miller's housekeeper

Act One, Scene One

The setting is the Miller's kitchen¹ in Jackson, Mississippi.² The audience first encounters Lauren sitting at the table. She is gorging herself with a box of cookies, making it seem as if she cannot get them into her mouth fast enough. Crumbs fall to the oak table and stick to her pink cashmere sweater. Suddenly, she looks at her watch as a horrified look crosses her face. She jumps from the table, hides the empty cookie box, and heads for the bathroom that is off of the kitchen. The audience hears her cough once or twice, and a moment later, the toilet flushes. Lauren scurries back into the room, running her fingers over her hair and patting her face. She sits down at the table just as the doorbell rings.

Ding Dong.

Enter Nellie, the maid. **Nellie:** It's Miss Duvall, Ma'am. Shall I show her in?

Lauren: Yes, Nellie, that would be fine. Thank you.

Enter Katherine, a robust young woman fashionably dressed and smiling. She rushes for Lauren, kissing her on the cheek and embracing her gently.

Katherine: Lauren! How wonderful to see you! *Pulling back.* I almost did not want to hug you for fear that I might smush you! Have you been feeling all right? What's that on your sweater, dear?

Lauren *very embarrassed and quickly brushing the crumbs away:* I feel marvelous! *Ignoring the statement and trying quickly to change the subject.* Now enough about me ... sit. Tell me about your exciting book tour and your stay in New York. I see the Big Apple certainly had its influence on your fashion style.

Katherine: My book tour went well, and New York was fabulous. Although I do have a confession to make ... I just could not wait to get back and enjoy the Southern hospitality. Things are just so different up there. I like our slow pace and genteel ways, if you know what I mean.

Lauren *laughing:* I know what you mean! Remember I spent a year at the University of Illinois³, that was far enough north for me!

Katherine: So really, Lauren, how are you? You've lost weight again, and every time I called you from New York you sounded so tired. Are you having problems again?

Lauren *trying to make light of the situation:* I've been so busy! I've just been a little overwhelmed lately, that's all. Being president of the Women's High Society League has really kept me going; our annual induction luncheon is next week, and I have had so much to do to prepare. Plus, I have started jazzercise, and taking care of Randal is a job in itself!

Katherine: How is the old boar anyway? I take it he is still dictating your life, thinking for you, and making all of your decisions.

Lauren: That's not fair! I love Randal. I know that you two don't see eye to eye, but you're my best friend, and I won't tolerate you bad mouthing my husband.

Katherine: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. It's just ... well, before you married Randal I thought you had your problem under control. I've been starting to worry about you the last few years. I think you are falling back onto hard times and ...

Lauren *cutting her off:* I can't believe your nerve. You don't see me for seven months, you march into my house, disrespect my husband, and then tell me that I look awful and you think I have an eating disorder again! I went through that in college, I got help, I'm cured. End of conversation.

Katherine: I don't want to offend you, that's not what I came here to do! I just don't think that the environment Randal creates for you is exactly beneficial to your health. Open your eyes, Lauren! He expects you to be his trophy wife. He sends you to get manicures, he signs you up for exercise classes you don't need, and he supervises your wardrobe. He controls every aspect of your life, and he's forcing you to be perfect, which is making you sick.

Lauren *very upset and almost to the point of screaming:* Randal is a very hardworking and successful man. He deserves the best, and I want to provide a home for him where he feels comfortable and at ease. He has a very stressful office life, and I want him to be happy when he comes home at night. I don't see anything wrong with keeping my husband happy!

Katherine *taking a deep breath:* Hon, I'm just worried about you. I almost lost you in college, and I refuse to go through this again. Randal probably doesn't even realize what is going on with you—he's so wrapped up in the perfect appearance of his life. He should be coming home soon shouldn't he? I think that I may just have to have words ...

Lauren: I don't believe this! Will you just mind your own business! I AM FINE! Thank you for your concern, but I don't need it. Now if you will excuse me, I have some business to finish. Nellie! *Enter the maid.* Will you please show Miss Duvall to the door?

Katherine *very angry now*: You can't shut me out, Lauren! Your problem will not just go away! Just let me help you ...

Lauren *jumping up from the table*: Help! Help? You are the one that needs help! I thought you were supposed to be my friend, and then you barge in here, badger me, and make false claims! Until you can be civil I don't want you in my house. Good day! *She exits the room.*

Nellie: Please, Miss, this way.

Katherine: Nellie, you know that something is wrong don't you? You have to see it.

Nellie *with a meaningful look*: Sometimes things work them own selves out, honey.

The set darkens.

Act One, Scene Two

Randal *entering the kitchen*: Honey, I'm home! Honey? Lauren, where are you?

Lauren *hurrying into the kitchen*: I'm sorry, I'm right here, dear. *She kisses him on the cheek.*

How was your day? *She is obviously upset, but Randal, too caught up in himself, fails to notice.*

Randal *very boastfully*: You are looking at the most successful lawyer in town! With the case I just won today, I have an official record of 186-0! Aren't you lucky to be married to such a brilliant man!

Lauren: That's wonderful! Congratulations! I also had a good day. I booked this wonderful artist from Atlanta to be the guest speaker at our luncheon. Her work is absolutely wonderful and ...

Randal: That's nice, dear. Here I bought you something in celebration of my victory! Open it!

Lauren *taking the bag from his outstretched arm*: Randal ... what is it? You shouldn't have.

Randal *before she can even open the box*: It's a gown. I saw it in the window on my way home and knew it would look perfect on you. *Lifting it out of the box for her*. See, isn't it great?

Lauren *taking the dress and holding it so the light catches the sequins making the whole gown shimmer*. It's so beautiful. *Glancing quickly at the size on the tag*. *She looks worried*. You have wonderful taste, but I think that a size two may be just a little too small.

Randal: **Oh, nonsense! I figured you could wear it to the party my firm is throwing in honor of our successful year. It's three weeks away. Those extra**

jazzercise classes in combination with your tennis lessons will help. You've lost all of that weight you gained since we have gotten married. You look great! You're back to the same size as when I met you in college.

Nellie *entering the room*: Chicken and potatoes are waitin' in the oven. I can serve you when you're ready.

Randal: That sounds lovely, Nellie. We, I mean I, will take my seat at the table now. I think that Mrs. Miller will just have a half of a grapefruit and five saltine crackers for dinner tonight. *Lauren turns to look at him.* You want to fit into that dress, don't you, honey?

Lauren *a little downtrodden*: Yes, dear. I'm not that hungry anyhow.

The stage darkens.

Act One, Scene Three

2 o'clock a.m. Lauren sits by herself at the table eating a plate full of mashed potatoes and fried chicken.⁴ Being afraid of being discovered, she eats quickly and quietly, stuffing her mouth until it can hold no more. She begins to cry, runs to the bathroom, and purges all that she just consumed. Lauren comes back to the table, places her head in her hands, and begins to cry softly. She thinks of the times when Randal let her be her own person and was not so critical of

her. She was happy then and weeps for the situation that she is in now. Nellie enters without Lauren hearing her and places her hands gently on Lauren's shoulders. Lauren looks up, terrified, as the empty plate still sits in front of her.

Nellie: It's okay, Ma'am. It's only me. You all right?

Lauren: Yes, Nellie, I'm fine, thank you. I just ... I just ... stubbed my toe. Yes, that's it. I caught my toe on this stupid table leg and ...

Nellie: Ma'am, it's all right. I know what's going on. I hear you in the bathroom, and I find the empty hidden boxes of food. I see how Mr. Miller behaves and what he does to you. I want to help you, because you used to be happy, Ma'am. You used to be so lively and carefree. You're just not the same anymore.

Lauren: Nellie! I am appalled. I have no idea what you are talking about. Have you gone mad?

Nellie: It's all right. We don't have to talk about it. I just want to tell you of my plan. You can get back at ole Mr. Miller and beat him at his own game. He uses food to control you, so why don't you use the same on him? You're the one that plans the meals, so why don't we just add a little strychnine? It's

Lauren taken by surprise of Nellie's plot to attempt to kill her husband: Nellie! I never would have thought you were capable of this! Why ... I just don't know what to say!

Nellie: I just want you to be happy, Ma'am. I was your mama's maid, and when she passed on, I

promised her that I'd look out for ya. I know that you'd never leave that pompous old Mr. Randal, and divorce would shame your family name. Now, what would you like to serve him for breakfast?

Lauren *smiling*: I think we should serve him some "special" French toast!

Act Two, Scene One

It is now four months later. Lauren is sitting in the kitchen. She has a healthy glow and is eating a lunch of a sandwich and salad. Nellie comes into the room pushing Randal in a wheel chair. He has a weak and sickly appearance. He is wearing a bathrobe and has had to take a leave of absence from his firm due to his health. He just can't seem to shake his "flu bug."

Lauren: Well, good afternoon, Randal. And how are we feeling today? It's glorious outside! I think that I'm going to walk to the library later. It's a pity that you can't join me.

Randal: I just don't understand it, Lauren. How I could I have gone from being so healthy and in control to a meek invalid who has to be taken care of in every aspect by his wife? It's humiliating that I have no control over my life!

Lauren: Yes, it is a shame, dear. I guess rest and time are the only things that can make you better. I am just thankful that I found Mama's old wheelchair in the basement so you can save your strength instead of walking. *Taking a package of Oreo's.* Would you like a cookie, Randal? I'm going to have some for dessert.

Randal *still not having lost all of his old ways:* Do you really think you should be eating that? They're full of fat, and they'll just ruin your figure. You should probably stay at the gym for an extra half hour just for thinking about eating that. *He seems totally disgusted.*

Lauren *standing up from the table and walking over to Randal's wheelchair. She leans over, supporting her weight by placing her hands on the arms of the chair.:* Listen here, you bastard! I'm finally going to stand up for myself. I'm tired of your abuse. In the last few months I have stopped taking your stupid jazzercise classes and tennis lessons. I have started seeing a psychologist and am eating from a healthy meal plan. I have taken back control of my life. I buy my own clothes in sizes that I can actually wear, and I set my own schedule instead of making sure that I'm waiting by the door when you get home!

Randal *looking quite shocked and confused:* What on earth has gotten into you? It's that damn friend of yours isn't it? Katherine and all of her self-righteous, women's lib bull shit! I told you not to associate with her; she will ruin our image and tarnish our good name!

Lauren *taking a bite out of the Oreo right in front of Randal's face to spite him:* Ohhh! This tastes good! And it wasn't Katherine who influenced me, she just made me open my eyes. I'm sorry; I'm being rude. Randal, would you like a cookie? Here. *She begins to shove the cookie into his mouth. He tries to resist, but she grabs more cookies and continually shoves them into his mouth. He begins to cough and suddenly seems as if he is choking. He motions for Lauren to help him, but she stands there staring at him.*

Nellie: Is he all right, Ma'am? *Randal has now started to turn blue. He is gasping for air, but unsuccessful is able to draw a breath. In his already weakened condition, he struggles, makes one last attempt to breath, and then collapses in his chair.*

Lauren *feeling his nonexistent pulse:* I think Randal has just lost all control of his situation.⁵

The set darkens.

The End.

1 A kitchen is the same setting used in Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*. Henley won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Tony Award nomination for this play in 1981 (Modern Women Writers 326).

2 This is where Elizabeth Becker Henley was born on May 8, 1952. She was born to her proud parents, Charles Boyce, an attorney, and Elizabeth Josephine (whose maiden name was Becker), an actress. Henley set her works in the South and is said to be a "member of the new breed of American playwrights dedicated to preserving regional voices on stage" (Contemporary Authors 205).

3 Henley taught beginning acting and the Lessac voice technique there from 1975-76 after she had attained her B.F.A. from Southern Methodist University (Contemporary Authors NR 223).

4 Food is also a connection with *Crimes of the Heart*. Characters consume food to numb the pain of loneliness, familial disintegration, and spiritual emptiness. The dominance of food is an opiate. Food is devoured not for sustenance, but as compensation for grievances of the heart (Modern Women Writers, 328).

tasteless. He'll never know. We'll add a little in every meal. Over time he'll get sick. We can pass it off as the flu or somethin'.

5 Like Babe in *Crimes of the Heart*, Lauren also kills her husband.

Works Cited

“Beth Henley.” Modern Women Writers 2: 325-329.

This work provided me with a lot of information on “Crimes of the Heart.” It gave good background information on the play and also provided me with a critical analysis of the play. It gave some feminist views of Henley and helped me to understand her thoughts on femininity.

“Elizabeth Becker Henley.” Contemporary Authors 107: 205-206.

This article gave a great overview of Henley, her life, and her accomplishments. It was a short biography hitting the main and most important aspects of her life thus far.

“Elizabeth Becker Henley.” Contemporary Authors New Revision Series 73: 222-225.

This article provided me with a complete listing of all of Henley’s accomplishments and awards. It summarized her style and talked about the depth of her work.

Works Consulted

“Beth Henley.” Contemporary Literary Criticism 23: 214-218.

This article gave me many different critiques of Henley’s work. It was a good objective source, because it not only sang her praises but also pointed out her faults.

Brater, Enoch, ed. Feminine Focus. London: Oxford University Press, 1989.

I enjoyed reading this because it gave me a chance to get to know Henley on more of a personal level and to discover what her attitude was like. She said, “I write to get at the part of

people's emotional lives that they don't have control over, the part that can and will respond."

Demastes, William W. Beyond Naturalism. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. 136-144.

This article gave a good explanation of Henley's style and showed how she has taken "domestic comedy and infused it with an absurdist perspective." It heightened my awareness to many of the underlying themes of "Crimes of the Heart."

"Elizabeth Becker Henley." Contemporary Authors 32: 199-200.

This was a reference guide that gave me great insight into Miss Henley and her work. I not only learned biographical data, but I learned a lot about her technique.

Hart, Lynda, ed. Making a Spectacle. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992. 118-130.

This discussed the way the Henley incorporates families and family problems into her plays. It talked about mother-daughter relationships, and how they are portrayed. The issue of "Crimes of the Heart" being a feminist play was also addressed.

Hatlen, Theodore W., ed. Drama: Principles and Plays. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967. Chapter 3: 39-58.

This chapter explained comedy, giving the definition and the elements that are contained by this device. It enlightened me about different kinds of comedy and the purpose of it. It also discussed comedic devices, character, and plot.

Henley, Elizabeth. Crimes of the Heart. New York: The Viking Press, 1982.

This was Henley's most prized play. I really enjoyed reading this and decided to base the style of my play on this. It is a great piece of work that deals with many issues. It made me laugh, feel sympathetic, and get angry. It showed the power of women and their ability to prevail.

Henley, Elizabeth. Debutante Ball. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Reading this play and comparing and contrasting it with "Crimes of the Heart" really gave me a feel for Henley's style and technique. I enjoyed reading both of the plays and really got a sense of where she was coming from and what she was trying to project.

Schlueter, June, ed. Modern American Drama: The Female Canon. Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1990. Chapter 15.

This chapter described Henley's characters as they find God and emerge into their self-discoveries. It also talked about the abuse that Henley's characters suffer through.

Haiku by Jenni McCarthy

at the bar

we buy each other

pints of apathy

Ode to an Opened Pack of Gum by Patrick McManus

On the battered desk,
in a tattered case
lay five
pieces of old Dentyne.

The pale moon casts
a shadow through
The multi-cracked
window

Making it look
like ten.

My teeth
sever iridescent
gumlets.

Oh sweet
chew-toy!

Oh happy
tree sap!

You leak

out of
the maple
and onto
my pancakes
and into
my gum.
That which
whitens my
tea-stained
ivories;
portable toothbrush,
dentists'
best friend,
you make my life
and their job,
so much easier.
Freshened breath
makes flirting
double the fun,
and succeeding

a veritable

possibility.

You hold together

both my hygiene

and my social life

like a

pack of gum

lying on a

desktop

underneath a

cracked window.

Ways People Translate by Brianna M. Wolbers

***A Critical Analysis on the Irish Reaction to Colonization by the British in Brian Friel's
Translations***

A classroom held inside a barn by an absent-minded schoolmaster is the setting disrupted by the appearance of the British Ordinance Survey in Ireland in 1833. A unified postal service and national schools resulted from this event. Other outcomes were the disappearance of the Gaelic language and the loss of Irish traditions. Irish customs declined because the Irish allowed them to decline. True, the

British entered Ireland to colonize, but they were mainly successful because of how the Irish reacted to the British presence. No one can control another's actions. Threats and violence can occur; however, the decision to act ultimately remains with the actor. The characters in Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) each react differently to the existence of the British soldiers in Ireland. Some want to embrace the Anglicized ways, some hold tight to their own traditions, and others become so overwhelmed they want to run away. Friel's objective is those who have already experienced their familiar world becoming unfamiliar, while staying true to themselves, will be more likely to handle this change a second time. Those who are open minded to change will benefit more from the Irish to English transition.

Naming is a strong theme throughout the play. Changing place names is one purpose of the British presence in Ireland. "The struggle for the power to name oneself and one's state is enacted fundamentally within words, most especially in colonial situations" (Kiberd 615). Captain Lancey, the leader of the British soldiers who enter Ireland, does not like ambiguity. He wants the place names changed to something he understands (Genet 102). The purpose of the British Ordnance Survey of Ireland is to process maps, rename, and anglicize Ireland. In short, it is a military operation. By changing place names, the English soldiers gain control over the land.

Lancey willingly follows orders to instigate change because he is too concerned with himself and his present situation to be involved with the Irish. He believes British rule is superior and wants the Irish to conform to his way of life. The military is not translating Irish values into English; rather, English values are interpreted to Irish terms. The National schools that develop only allow English, supporting the notion that British values and customs are being pushed upon the Irish. The British force the unfamiliar school systems and place names on the Irish to become familiar British versions.

While the soldiers' occupations are to colonize the country, the decision to be colonized and what that ultimately leads to, comes from the Irish people. Owen, the hedge-master's son who left home to work in a big city, returns with the soldiers and announces that he is working for them. His position involves changing the Irish names "as accurately and as sensitively" as possible either to their approximate English sound or to a direct translation (Friel 420). As a result of his work, the Irish are confused whether their home that was called Machaire Ban is now known by Whiteplains or King's Head.

When the British Ordnance Survey appeared in Ireland, they cause the Irish to feel a loss of self. The Irish no longer belong to a region. Owen represents this confusion by being an Irish man who returns with the British soldiers; he becomes an outsider to both cultures. Owen acts to change the Irish ways to British. The Irish interpret him as more of a threat than the soldiers, because he should share their beliefs; instead, he has brought the British to town. He says that it is good to be home among civilized people, yet he can no longer relate to the Irish characters. On the opposing side, Owen may work for the British army, but they still view him as Irish and loyal

to his country. Owen does not belong with either society; instead, he is caught between the two cultures (Genet 102).

When Owen first enters on stage, he comments, "Nothing has changed" (393). His initial mind frame is that the happenings of the town are not important enough to notice. He is thrilled to be around "civilized" people again, yet does not care about the changes that have occurred since his absence and those that are about to happen. His indifference shows when he allows the soldiers to call him by the wrong name. Lancey continually refers to him as "Roland," and Owen never thinks the issue is worth correcting. When Manus, Owen's brother, comments on this Owen simply replies, "It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it?" (408). Towards the middle of the play, Owen realizes that helping the British rename places is helping them stake a claim on Irish land. Those who are unfamiliar with the Irish language have altered the names of towns, rivers, and other landforms to be familiar words they can pronounce, but native speakers cannot (O'Brien 105). Owen demonstrates his recognition of being able to own what you name when he finally corrects one of the soldiers about his real name.

As the play progresses, Owen notices what changes have happened and the part that he has played in causing them. Although Owen enthusiastically began his job of changing place names, by the end of the play his actions have caused confusion. He claims to Yolland that he "got out in time" (420). Owen had left his small town for life in the big city and in doing so, left his old self behind and developed a new personality that he thought superior. Now he appears to prefer the familiarity of his home. Owen's disgust with his job leads to feelings of displacement. He abandons the book he had been recording the new names in, calling it his mistake. He feels responsible for the appearance of the British soldiers and their destruction of his home, as well as for whatever happened to Lieutenant Yolland. Trying to gain some control over the situation, Owen says he does not need the name book, because he knows where he lives (445). His eagerness to conform ends in his rebelling against the authorities he brought home. When Captain Lancey gives his final orders, Owen translates his own version. His last scene involves making plans to meet with another character, suggesting a confrontation with the soldiers.

While the presence of the soldiers is viewed negatively by most of the Irish characters, Lieutenant Yolland forms positive relationships with some of the community. He is the one soldier who makes an effort to relate to the Irish. Although he truly wants to belong, he is still unwelcome by some and sensitive to the way the Irish handle his presence. The beautiful land and customs of Ireland make him feel at home. He feels lucky that his life led him there instead of Bombay, where he would have been had everything gone according to plan and he had not missed the boat for joining the India exchange. When he reached the unfamiliar place of Baile Beag, he had a strange sensation of the future and familiarity. Yet he thinks he will never be accepted, even if he learns the language that sounds "enormously rich and ornate" (418).

Yolland realizes that major altering will be the result of the British soldiers in Ireland. The results are unknown, but he is wary of playing a part in it. He believes that there is something wrong with the map making, but does not know why. Yolland insists that Owen knows something is being disturbed and will soon recognize the outcome. But Owen, "like everyone else in Baile Beag, cannot connect change to its consequences." (O'Brien 105) Adjusting to a new way of life when he joined the army has prepared Yolland to recognize the transformation that is now taking place in Ireland.

Arguments still remain supporting that changing the language will cause the decline of Irish culture. Yolland believes that standardizing places is eroding something (420). Even when Owen translates Lancey's words, he simplifies them so they are to the point; however, the seriousness and formality that defines Lancey is lost. The appreciation for the old language has been lost. Yolland likes the Gaelic language, it sounds pretty and he continually repeats the traditional place names. Hugh, the hedge-master, explains that the Irish were impoverished for so long that their language is the only thing that could liven up their otherwise dull lives (418). Yolland is extremely eager to learn Irish, just as some Irish are eager to learn English. He wants to grasp the language so he can interact with the pupils who only speak Irish. Yolland believes that he can learn the language but feels the key to being Irish and fitting in will always elude him, because he will always be viewed an outsider (416).

Yolland may have befriended Owen with his devotion to the Irish language, but he appears to make a rival out of Manus. Owen's brother is not excited about the British soldiers. Manus is cautious of the actions of Owen and the army. Because Manus can speak English, he does not have to rely on Owen's interpretation of the soldiers' objectives. He knows the presence of the military is not entirely friendly.

Manus chooses not to conform to the English language forced upon him. Purposely, he speaks Gaelic in front of the British soldiers. His own tongue is what is familiar to Manus, and he will not speak the unfamiliar language unless urged by his brother. Speaking Gaelic is how Manus rebels against the soldiers. The appearance of the British majorly disrupted Manus's life plans. He was going to teach at his father's school and marry Maire, a local girl. The British brought with them the idea of a national school system that will soon replace the traditional hedge-schools. Hedge-schools were so named because they were usually built along the side of a hedge or bank to hide them from view of the roads. These "informal places of learning the Irish peasantry attended, being disqualified on the grounds of religion and property from attending more formal establishments" (O'Brien 103). Manus does not eagerly accept the newly introduced way of teaching. At first, he was going to apply for the position at the new school, but out of respect for his father, he decided against it. He is elated with the prospect of a job offer at a new hedge-school because he will be able to continue his familiar way of teaching. After learning that Maire wants to leave Ireland, he secures this job teaching the old ways, mistakenly

thinking she will be thrilled with the plan and stay with him.

Besides a new school system, the British also brought Yolland, who falls in love with Maire. Yolland puzzles Manus, because he cannot figure out Yolland's intentions. Manus can "understand the Lanceys" who want to make the Irish conform to the British map (412). Yolland is confusing, because he wants to understand the Irish and create a map that fits them. After Yolland is discovered missing, Manus sets out for a different town. He does not want to be implicated for whatever happened to Yolland. Manus reacts to unwanted change by running away. He witnessed the exchange between Maire and Yolland and "just shouted something stupid – something like, 'You're a bastard, Yolland'" (432). Manus's childish reaction shows he does not know how to handle difficult situations in a constructive manner; his answer is to simply avoid confrontation. It seems fitting that in trying to escape all of the modifications, the town he chooses is out of reach of the soldiers who are trying to change the Irish ways.

Maire views the changes in Ireland differently than Manus and the other male characters. She comes across as a powerful female by embracing challenges. She wants to seek adventure and change by moving to America. Many Irish citizens at this time emigrated out of Ireland to America where English was the dominant language. Maire and other pupils refer to the "sweet smell" of the potato blight that caused many people to leave (389). Daniel O'Connell, a political leader mentioned in the play, campaigned for better civil rights and social conditions for the Irish people at the time the play is set. Their treatment by the British was another reason some Irish thought life in America would be better. Maire reports that O'Connell said, "We should all be learning to speak English" (399). O'Connell believed the English language necessary for Ireland to progress in a quickly modernizing Western world. O'Connell and Maire both assumed the use of English would allow progress towards their respective national and personal dreams. In her willingness to learn English, Maire aids in the extinction of the Irish language. Her finding the British language superior supports the fact that the Irish decided to be colonized (Kiberd 616). Maire is anxious to set aside Irish ways to embrace those of the English. She is especially bored with lessons at the hedge-school and wants desperately to learn English for her emigration to the United States. While she will gain from speaking English, Ireland will lose because many of its citizens will likewise emigrate to America.

Not only is Maire willing to abandon her native language for a new one, but she is also replacing an old relationship with a new one. Manus has intended to marry Maire, and her news of moving to America surprises him. When he asks her for an explanation, she says he is stuck on doing things the old way. Later, Maire is seen leaving a dance with Yolland. Perhaps, because he is taking a risk by being in a foreign land, Maire finds Yolland more appealing than Manus. The couple tries to communicate with the little words that they know in each other's language. This is a very touching scene, as they are desperate for the other to know their romantic feelings. An understanding is finally reached, not through words, but expressions.

A sad turn of events occurs when Maire, being so set to conform, becomes lost between the life she once knew and the one she is embarking on. She was firm in her belief that English ways were better than Irish. Yolland, through his idealism, is able to show her the Irish culture is not entirely bad. After relaying the message of Yolland's mysterious disappearance, she goes off stage, only to return saying, "I am back again. I set out for somewhere but I couldn't remember where. So I came back here" (446). She started out eager for change; unfortunately things happened that she did not anticipate. Falling in love with Yolland was a happy product of change, but with his disappearance, the soldiers' attitudes towards the Irish turn hostile. Maire, now lost, is not sure why she wanted change or if she wants it to continue. She returns to a place that is familiar to seek guidance from the hedge-master.

Hugh, the hedge-school master, is advanced in linguistics yet unable to communicate with others. Continually drunk and forgetful, he becomes the subject of jokes by his students and town's people (380). Hugh makes certain his students have a grasp on the "dead languages" of Latin and Greek. He denies them the English they desire, because the Irish "culture and the classical tongues (make) a happier conjugation" (399). Hugh looks down upon the British soldiers who only speak English. He believes that their language is only suited for commerce.

Ironically, Hugh seems to be searching for approval from the British soldiers by demonstrating his grasp of languages. Although Hugh acts eager to impress the officers, he is not truly happy with their presence or their purpose. In a scene between Hugh, Owen, and Yolland, Hugh comments that he knows what effect the soldiers' presence will have on Ireland's future. He does not rebel against the change; merely notes that it is happening and what will result. Hugh seems to be the only character to realize that, although the two cultures will clash violently at first, with time they will melt into each other. He has gone through a dramatic change once in his life, setting out for battle one spring morning in 1798, only to grow timid "in the face of revolutionary French modernity. Hugh has learned enough by now to know that a culture which refuses to make some adjustments will eventually find itself mummified" (Kiberd 621). He understands what is being lost in his life with his belief that the English language "couldn't really express" the Irish (418). He realizes that using Gaelic to remain true to their traditions is a method of resisting colonialism, "our only method of replying to ... inevitabilities" (418).

In the last scene of the play, a drunken Hugh is trying to learn all of the new place names to conform to the new way he will have to live. The soldiers, with Owen's help, documented all of the familiar place names into things that are unfamiliar. Now Hugh wants to make the unfamiliar familiar. "It seems a common human failing to prefer the authority of a text to ... direct encounters with humans" (Kiberd 620). Hugh may realize that the time is approaching when what language you speak promotes a political stand and is preparing himself for both sides. He accepts that change is unavoidable and the life he once knew of being a teacher of different languages to many students has changed to him teaching only English to Maire.

Hugh represents Friel and his thoughts on the colonization of Ireland most accurately. As a nationalist, Friel wants to remain faithful to the Irish culture, but he does not want to force his opinions on others. Instead, he offers his advice and his actions as examples. Born a Catholic minority in Northern Ireland in 1929, provided Friel with much experience to base his politically-biased writing on. Unlike those in the southern part of the country, speaking the Irish language was a political statement for citizens in his home of Omagh, County Tyrone. Hugh, like Friel, realizes that change is inevitable and allows it to happen. Contrasting the other characters, Hugh chooses a solution somewhere in the middle of the typical Irish reactions. He stays in Baile Beag, not letting the British scare him from his home, and tries to help others, like Maire, cope with change. Friel and Hugh “neither accept a futile allegiance to the old Gaelic traditions ... nor ... approve of converting to the culture of the colonial power ... nor ... choose the route of exile or emigration” (McGrath 194-195).

Brian Friel and other modern Irish authors have written on the popular concern of Ireland losing her identity and how it continues today. In *Translations*, Friel used the vehicle of a changing language to represent this loss. He wrote a play about the conflicts that arise when the familiar language the characters speak becomes unfamiliar and how they react to the change. Some may interpret this as a play about failure, linguistic and political, but the fact that it was written gives hope for the success of the Irish people because their continued existence overcame opposing factors. Friel shows that change can have positive and negative effects, and in the end, only those who are willing to accommodate to change will survive.

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Haiku by Robin Slaght

alone at dinner—

his plate

steaming

Pennies by Emily Griskavich

When I was your age, Kaitlin,
one of my father's cronies
gave me a bracelet
welded out of a round dozen
brand mint new 1988
pennies, so shiny
they cast a coppery-red glow
On the whole room.

I brought it to Mrs. Battista's room
and became a superstar;
the girls declared they'd
never seen anything so beautiful.
The boys dubbed it cool,
which of course was something
they had never ever said about jewelry.

After a week, my classmates forgot it,
but after school
I played with it secretly
when I was supposed to be studying.
I would run my sweating thumb
over Abe's smooth faces, one after another,
or I would take it to the window
and let the sun glare redly into my eyes.

Until the day it broke
into nine pennies and three.
I whimpered into my mother's room.
Her glare was cold; and
her word "careless" rung tinny in my ears.

Fabliau versus Fable: Literary Complexities within "The Miller's Tale" by Jenni McCarthy

Fabliau, the literary genre described variously as “usually scurrilous,” “often obscene” and “delightfully subversive,” is epitomized in “The Miller’s Tale,” second of the offerings in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (7, 8). Indeed, it is rare for a discussion of fabliaux not to mention “The Miller’s Tale” as an example of this style. In the *Encyclopedia of Fable*, Mary Ellen Snodgrass describes fabliaux as a subset of the fable (xv). However, neither in her own entry on Chaucer nor in any other consulted definition of fable is “The Miller’s Tale” referred to as such (although “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” is frequently mentioned). How is it that a work, declared descriptive of a literary subset, can fail to describe the term that the subset falls under?

Scott Vaszily explains that while the elements of fabliau “may together distinguish fabliau from other medieval genres, they are insufficiently distinctive features to be used separately to allude to fabliau in non-fabliau context” (524). Along this line of argument, a possible explanation of this discrepancy is that while “The Miller’s Tale” does have certain elements of the fable style, its lack of crucial characteristics, coupled with the possession of nearly every fabliau element, keeps the story from attaining true fable status. The following pages will attempt to clarify the criteria of each genre using supporting material from the text, as well as highlight the aspects of the tale that defy the definition of fable. To be examined first is the genre that most fully describes the tale, that of fabliau.

The Encarta Online Encyclopedia describes “fabliau” as a “short, ribald tale” (Paragraph 1). Simple as this definition may seem, there are a multitude of elements that fall under this literary style, most notably humor, concision and verse (Vaszily 524). One does not even have to read the tale in order to take note of the last two elements, as the iambic pentameter couplets are plain to see, as is the brevity of the piece (a mere 667 lines, as compared to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* of 8,235 lines). Humor is a constant facet throughout the events of “The Miller’s Tale,” from Absolon’s unfortunate kiss to his retribution with the fiery poker to John’s plummeting from the rafters in his makeshift “ark.” Indeed, it would doubtless be easier to count the scenes without humor than the other way around.

Other elements of fabliau—often referred to as stereotypical motifs—include the use of obscenity, stock characters and situations, as well as characters who play the roles of “dupe” and “duper” (Vaszily 526). Obscenity in “The Miller’s Tale” is nearly as prevalent as humor, as one of the major events of the story is dependent upon crude physical comedy: “And Absolon, him fil no bet ne wers, / But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers / Ful savourly, er he were war of this” (3733-35). The tale’s bawdy nature is also evident in the language of the story’s narrator, the Miller, as well as his own characters. While the Miller’s invocation of God and Jesus Christ might be explained by his drunkenness, the same certainly does not apply to Alison, who uses equally foul language when speaking to Absolon (“Miller” 3125, 3132, 3709, 3711).

Stock characters refer to personas used frequently in fabliaux whose characteristics remain constant and recognizable by audiences. Examples of such characters would be the stereotypical unchaste wife or the poverty-stricken student (Chaucer 8). Stock situations operate along similar lines, and include such circumstances as that inherent in *Troilus and Criseyde*, “deception in the service of seduction” (Vaszily 524). Another situation frequently used in fabliaux is the reversal of roles, where the heroes are played by the scorned members of society and their victims by society’s respectful citizens (Chaucer 8). As such, the scenario and characters of “The Miller’s Tale” fall easily into these definitions, with John as the jealous husband, Alison as the unfaithful wife, Nicholas as the clever student and Absolon as the lecherous parish clerk. The situation in which the tale occurs is a familiar one, a device that continues to be used even in modern tales—the love triangle. The role reversal is clear as Nicholas the poor (the “duper”) triumphs over the wealth carpenter (the “duped”). Chaucer takes this motif even further by allowing the duper to become the duped, as Nicholas finds his fortunes reversed by Absolon’s red-hot revenge (Vaszily 526).

The last of the necessary elements of fabliaux are the emphasis on plot and climax as well as the quickly and neatly summarized ending (“Fabliau” Paragraph 2, Chaucer 848). Because of the brevity of the style, adherence to a tight plot structure becomes essential. The climax also takes on an added importance, due partially to the story’s concision and partially to the speed of events, which quickly carries the action to its dramatic peak. In the structure of “The Miller’s Tale,” everything has a specific meaning; even the admission that Absolon is “squaymous / Of fartyng” comes around to bear upon the plot in a later scene (3337-38). The best way to visualize the rapidity of the climax is in terms of actual dramatization: were this a real performance, it would be of the situation comedy variety, with event piling upon event until the final scene, where all is resolved (until next week). Indeed, fabliau endings occur at nearly sitcom speed, with “The Miller’s Tale” being wrapped up in a scant five lines:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,

For al his kepyng and his jalousye,

And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,

And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.

This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (3850-54)

The literary genre of the fable, while possessing elements similar to those in fabliau, is at the same time a distinctly different style. Encarta describes a “fable” as a “short literary composition in prose or verse, conveying a universal cautionary or moral truth” (Paragraph 1). Present in

Babylonian literature as early as 2300 B.C.E., fables have been used by such writers as Aesop and Boccaccio, Voltaire and Mark Twain (Snodgrass xiii-xiv). The *Encyclopedia of Fable* characterizes the genre as presenting “in digestible form the bad news that people behave and misbehave in predictable fashion,” through stories of human foible intended for moral and ethical instruction (Snodgrass xiii).

Nearly all of the elements of fables can be found in “The Miller’s Tale.” As earlier stated, the tale is plainly short as well as written in verse form. Nearly as manifest is the prevalence of human shortcomings as an integral part of the plot. Were John not jealous, or Alison and Nicholas not lecherous, this story might have proceeded along exceedingly different lines. In fact, had the Miller not been intoxicated, we might never have heard it at all. The location of the moral truth in a fable depends on its age. Modern fables usually encapsulate the moral at the end of the tale (in a style similar to the rapid plot summary of fabliaux), while those from the Aesopic tradition couches the message within the action of the story (Snodgrass 115, 116).¹

1 Aesop also made use of stock characters in his fables (Snodgrass 115).

It is here that the division between fabliau and fable becomes clear, in the inability to discern a single universal cautionary. It might be argued that “The Miller’s Tale” follows the Aesopic style of weaving the moral into the scenes, and it is true that admonitions do seem to appear with the actions of nearly every character. However, there is no single warning that can be applied to the foibles of the characters as a body. Absolon’s punishment is a reprimand against the pursuance of married women. Yet Nicholas commits the same sin that Absolon had desired to, but without repercussions (his particular punishment derives from his decision to imitate Alison’s window trick) (Mosher 491).

The absence of a single unifying moral is compounded by the fact that no character receives full retribution for their sins, or complete justice for the wrongs inflicted upon them. Harold Mosher explains that “the only frank character is the ultimate victim,” since when John offers his unadulterated version of the story, he is ridiculed by the crowd and declared mad (490). Although Absolon does impart his burning vengeance, it not only fails to brand the intended victim, but most likely also does little to cure the bad taste left in his mouth by the encounter (both literally and figuratively). As described in the preceding paragraph, Nicholas’ penance stems more from a mistake than the appropriate retribution that would have been present in a fable setting (i.e., discovery by the cuckolded husband). But perhaps the event that deviates most noticeably from the fable focus on morality is Alison’s complete (while undeserved) avoidance of any sort of punishment (Mosher 490). Her situation may even have improved in the aftermath of

the tale, as she will undoubtedly find it even easier to get away with cheating on her husband now that everyone believes him to be mad.

The lack of a universal moral (and at some points morality in general) is what classifies “The Miller’s Tale” as fabliau, but not fable. While Mosher believes the tale “seems to overvalue deception,” the introduction to *The Canterbury Tales* describes the situation in a different light (490). According to the editor, fabliau justice “does not always coincide with conventional morality: greed, hypocrisy, and pride are invariably punished, but so too are old age, mere slow-wittedness, and, most frequently, the presumption of a husband, especially an old one, who attempts to guard his wife’s chastity” (Chaucer 8). Viewed from this perspective, it seems that “The Miller’s Tale” cannot meet the final criteria for the fable simply because it does meet them for the fabliau. This may also be an indication that fabliau is not, as previously hypothesized, a subset of the fable genre. Nevertheless, although in the end “The Miller’s Tale” might not be a fable, that conclusion fails to detract from its status as a riotous and entirely entertaining story.

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Haiku by Robin Slaght

after their midnight ride

the tailpipe

dripping

Whispers Over the Waves by Andrea Toale

The night was slightly chilly as I walked down the beach, the moist sand cooling my feet. The waves lapped at my toes, like hungry puppies; the moon shone brightly, turning all below silver in her image. My ears were filled with the roar of the plummeting crests, my eyelashes crusted with salt from their spray. I picked a spot near the water to lay my blanket down, and sat to relax and enjoy the beautiful full moon. My eyes were drawn to the playful water, rising and falling, pulling me into their dance. In a trance, I sat there, the wool that was beneath me now felt like the cool, refreshing seawater.

While I sat, enthralled with the glory of it, a slight mist rose above the water. Taking the form of a human, transparent, yet fully visible, absorbing the moonlight into its permeable skin. It glided over the water, rising up and falling in rhythm, gracefully floating on air. Close enough now that I could see it was a female figure, I noticed that if she continued on her current path, she would soon be right in front of me. Trying to conceal the fear that boiled inside me, I waited for her, chills permeating my veins the closer she got.

“Hello, Andrea,” she said, a whisper coming through nonexistent lips. Shocked, I stared at her, trying to discern how she knew who I was. What I thought was a chuckle rushed out of her frail form, “You are reading my poetry. I keep close tabs on those whom I have influenced.” I

felt a freezing grasp on my arm, icicles through my body.

Teeth chattering, I stammered, “Sylvia? How ... what ... wow, it’s really you.” The ghost’s face broke into a smile, reminiscent of the Sylvia Plath in all the pictures. “How is this possible? Where did you come from?”

“Andrea, you don’t want to know the place I come from. It is not a place for the living,” she murmured, floating over the sand to sit next to me on the blanket. “So, how have your studies been going? I understand that you have been working on some of my poetry?”

Still shocked with the situation before me, I just stared at the ghost beside me. A faint movement, a smile, creased the gentle face, and I blushed. Stammering, “I ... I umm..yeah, right. I’ve been reading some biographies and some of your poetry. You are such a fascinating writer. Your poetry speaks volumes; it really makes you dig into your own self and decide what you would do in that situation.”

Hearing her anxious giggles, I stopped, perplexed. “Oh, Andrea. I appreciate your thoughts on my poetry. Never would I have imagined that I would be able to reach such people as I have, or that my life would have become such a mystery.”

“Sylvia, you have. I have found so many books on your life. People are so confused as to why you would want to end your life when you were writing such beautiful and deep poetry.”

“Things happened. I just couldn’t handle all of the stress. Ted and I had just separated. Andrea, I’ve never been alone like that my entire life! That woman ... that *whore* that stole him from me.¹ He was my husband. *MINE!*” her agitated voice rose with the memories of what had happened. “She had a husband of her own, what could have possessed her to take Ted? And he just went with her! I loved him so much, but I just couldn’t make him stay.” Her ghostly hands turned white as she wrung them tightly in anger. Sighing, she continued, “He would come around still afterwards, but only to see Freida, for he didn’t even notice Nicholas. Why, he even told me that he had never wanted children in the first place, but didn’t want to upset me by telling me that.”² Her voice died off with her last words; the misty form seemed to hunch over with the pain of the loss. My heart went out to this woman. No one deserved to go through what she had. Glancing at her, I attempted to wrap my arm around her frail shoulders, but I just passed through the iciness of her body.

“Sylvia, it’s ok,” I said, pulling my arm back to my side and searching for the right words. “You still had your babies and your writing. You wrote so wonderfully, with emotions pouring out with each word. I envy your ability. ‘Daddy,’ ‘Ariel,’ and ‘Edge’ are by far three of the best

poems I have ever read.”

Her eyes raised to the waves, and she looked out, as if searching. “ ‘Daddy,’ yes. That poem was the beginning of it all. After the separation, I had never felt so free. I was writing poems so quickly; they just poured out of me. I even wrote Mother and told her that I was writing the best poetry of my life. They would make my name like no other poems had been able to.”³

She seemed caught up in the motions of the sea; entranced by their rolling fingers. Trying to get her back on track, I spoke up, “Were you writing ‘Daddy’ to your father, as in an apostrophe, or were you being more general?”

My voice startling her back to awareness, she replied, “‘Daddy’ was one of the first poems I wrote after Ted left. Yes, it is an apostrophe poem, considering I was writing to him.” Looking downward at her tangled fingers, she lamented on, “I loved my father. He too was taken from me, though by God, instead of a sniveling woman.”⁴ I was eight when he died from diabetes. I missed him so much. I hardly knew the man, except for how gentle and kind and devoted he was as a father. My entire life I never got over his death. I was so angry, so *enraged* by his too-early death that I just couldn’t fathom. So, I wrote poetry as a vent for my anger and suffering. ‘Daddy’ is the embodiment of all my bitterness and pain. ‘You do not do, you do not do/Any more, black shoe/In which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years, poor and white,/Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.’⁵

“Was the black shoe a metaphor of your father’s death, and how you no longer wanted to deal with the grief?” I ventured, caught up in her emotion.

“How very perceptive of you Andrea. Yes, that black shoe weighed on my heart for too long.” Looking back out to the waves, she quoted, “‘Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time—.’⁶ The situation itself was ironic. I wanted to be rid of all of my feelings for him and my love and resentment that had ruled me for the first 30 years of my life, and yet he was already dead to the rest of the world. I was the one that kept him alive, not letting go of him, refusing him rest. ‘At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you./I thought even the bones would do.’⁷ My entire life I was plagued by men that wanted to rule me, that wanted to subdue me; make me their slave. I let them. I let them abuse me, use me, and leave me, just like Daddy. I was sick of it, and I wanted out.”⁸

‘There’s a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always *knew* it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.⁹,

Allusions were rife in this poem; to the above, vampires and blood sucking, and earlier in the poem allusions to the Holocaust and the German invasions.¹⁰ I wasn’t going to let men rule my life anymore; I was through.”

Looking over her shoulder towards me, she smiled. Weakly, I smiled back, trying to take in all that she had said. My thoughts rolled like the waves, in my head. “So, you just forgot about him? You just forgot about your father and your grief?”

Laughing bitterly, she looked back over the waves, “If only things were that easy. I didn’t forget, I just moved on. After ‘Daddy’, I felt so wonderful, so free. I was writing at a pace that I had never imagined possible. I got an *au pair* for the children, and worked in a flourish. Then it all came crashing back down around my ears. I got pneumonia. I didn’t leave my bed for days, too weak to even pick up a pen. I struggled, fighting through it; and soon I started to improve. Eventually, I was back to writing, though I was still sick. *Ariel* was one of the next poems that poured out of my soul.”

Sylvia’s slight form floated up, walking over the moist sand, the lapping waves playing under her shadow. Jumping up to follow, I caught her words again. “The day of my birthday came and I was again in my study writing, not yet fully recovered from the illness that had struck earlier. Let me tell you the connotations surrounding the name Ariel,” she said, in a tone that meant she was ready to teach. “In *The Tempest*, Prospero is the master of an otherworldly creature of the air that encompasses extraordinary powers. That creature is Ariel. He is indebted to Prospero, because Prospero freed him from the witch, Sycorax’s curse, which bound Ariel inside of a pine tree for twelve years.¹¹ I knew of this story, but in my poem, Ariel is my horse, carrying me, towards my goal, carrying me East. ‘God’s lioness,/How we grow,/Pivot of heels and knees!’¹² We become one, running as one being, searching for our rebirth.”

I break in, questioning, “So, when you say, ‘White/Godiva, I unpeel—/Dead hands, dead stringencies.’¹³ Are you ‘Godiva?’ I thought that you were, and that it was a metaphor of you releasing and getting away from all of the pain and loss and anger that had plagued you. Is that right?” I asked tentatively.

Sylvia’s eyes lingered on my face, a small smile appearing on her phantom lips. “I was Godiva, and yes, I was leaving all the bad things behind, preparing myself for a new life.

‘The child’s cry

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.’¹⁴

The similes tell the tale, of me diving into the beauty of rebirth, suicide. No longer would I be restricted to this flimsy life that has held nothing but pain and suffering. I could start over in the afterlife. In the poem I had achieved freedom. A freedom that I wanted for myself. A freedom that I needed, for myself.”

Impassioned by her words, I tried to grasp her arm, but my hands just clasped air. Frustrated I screeched, “But Sylvia, you *had freedom*. Ted left; all that could tie you down was your children, whom you loved dearly. So, what freedom didn’t you have?” I asked, confused by her statements. The mist beside me lifted, floated before me.

“*Freedom?* You call that life freedom? No, that’s not freedom. I was a prisoner in my own body. The only way I found release was inside that oven.¹⁵ Inhaling the sweet air that set me free,” she sighed, turning towards the waves. She always turned towards the waves, I thought, standing up from my spot on the blanket.

“Sylvia, you didn’t have to kill yourself. Suicide was not the way. Look at me; I was in much the same situation, depressed beyond redemption. But did I kill myself? *No*. I worked through it; I got help from those who love me most. They helped me through my pain, and made me stronger because of it,” I said fervently. Walking around her body to look into her face, I pleaded, “You didn’t have to do that! You had two children who loved you dearly, and a mother who would do anything for you.” She looked back towards the water, avoiding my eyes. She didn’t want to listen; she couldn’t listen.

“I only have a short time left. Please, I want to answer your questions, but I can’t talk to you of my reasoning. I did what I did, because I had to. Now, please, what else can I help you with?” her words tumbled through my ears. I didn’t want to let the subject drop, but I had to. I had to know about “Edge.”

“Alright, fine. What about ‘Edge’? Was it the last poem you ever wrote?”

“Yes, it was, and by your interest in it, I suppose you know the meaning. At least parts of it,” she replied, moving back to the blanket, and sinking down upon it, not even a grain of sand stirred in her movements. Patting the space next to her, she looked up towards me. I sighed and reclaimed my seat, playing the part of the attentive student.

“‘Edge’ was my own little dramatic irony. Perfection can never be achieved in life. No, you must look towards death for that. ‘The woman is perfected./Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment,/The illusion of a Greek necessity.’¹⁶ Can you guess what has happened?” Sensing my nod, more than seeing it, she continues, “Of course you can. She has committed a sin that parallels to mine. Death has seduced her, and she welcomed it with open arms. ‘Her bare/Feet seem to be saying:/We have come so far, it is over.’¹⁷ I planned the tone perfectly, using such words throughout as serpent, close, odors, bleed, hood of bone. Its darkness descends

upon the reader; pulls them into my thoughts. ‘The moon has nothing to be sad about,/Staring from her hood of bone./She is used to this sort of thing./Her blacks crackle and drag.’¹⁸ The moon is personified, brought to life to watch down upon the earth. She sees life flicker out everyday, and is undaunted by the loss of another admirer.”

“Were you writing of your own intentions? Of your own death?” I asked, almost afraid to know the answer, which was strange considering I was here talking to a ghost.

Again, her nervous laughter drifted on the air, and she replied, “You have all the questions to reveal my deep dark self. Yes, I guess in some way I was predicting my actions. I had entered a downward spiral once I started writing again. I hallucinated; I struck out at those I loved. I didn’t want help, I just wanted out. I kept seeing him and her together¹⁹, and the anger burned deep into my soul. I deteriorated slowly, dwelling in my own world. Father and husband were one in my mind, confused interchangeably. I was there at times, but most often not. My children, the bearers of my life, they were the only thing keeping me grounded, but even they were not enough.”²⁰ Her eyes rose to mine, and she tried at a smile. “Does that help you Andrea?” She asked, searching my face for more questions.

Nodding my head yes, I still wondered at the glory of all that had happened in the day. “No, Sylvia, that is all that I have. Thank you for your help.”

“It was my pleasure. Returning to the world of the living was something I’ve needed to do for sometime,” she murmured, her form dissipating slowly, becoming less substantial. “Andrea, don’t succumb to the weakness. It is a drug, and your life is precious. Don’t follow in my haunted footsteps, follow your dreams.” And with that she was gone.

I looked around me, searching for some trace of the visit that just occurred. On the air lingered the sent of honeysuckle and roses, and I knew that it was true. Shaking my head in amazement, I got up and folded the blanket. My mind was whirling with all the information, searching through the images that she set in motion. I wandered back up to the sidewalk leading to the parking lot. I stopped, wanting just one more look at the ocean’s beauty, hoping for a glimpse of the being that had sat with me. There, on the waves I saw her, and I smiled.

1 Sylvia Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes was confessed to have been cheating on her with a woman

by the name of Assia Gutmann, a fellow poet, who was married to David Wevill. They came as houseguests in May, 1961, and Sylvia noted the glances and subtleties between Assia and Ted. Alexander 276-277.

2 During the separation, Ted would often come to their house, under the guise of visiting Freida, their daughter. Ted cared very little for Nicholas, their son, and on one occasion, when Nicholas fell out of his pram, Ted just left him there to cry, until Sylvia came to comfort the child. Ted later, admitted to never having wanted children, but to not having the courage to tell her. Alexander 295.

3 Plath was seemingly resigned to Ted leaving her, and began to write again. She was turning out three to four, and sometimes even five poems a day. In a letter to her mother that was written in October, she was speculated as saying that she “was a genius of a writer,” and she was writing the poems that would “make my name.” Alexander 298-299.

4 On November 5, 1940 Otto Plath died from complications of his diabetes. He had been suffering from symptoms for at least ten years, but had refused to go to the doctor. After stubbing his toe one day in August, 1940, and suffering from a severe infection from it, he finally went to a doctor and was diagnosed. He had been having symptoms of lightheadedness, chronic fatigue, and a very low immune system for the past ten years, all part of the diabetes. Aurelia, Plath’s mother, kept her and her brother Warren away from Otto, hoping that maybe then Otto would have a chance to recover. They were allowed only 30 minutes with their father a night. After being diagnosed, he tried to drastically change his life, but it was too late. He died 3 months later, an event which shook Sylvia’s life to the core. Alexander 27-33.

5 Plath. “Daddy.” 223-225 (ll. 1-5).

6 —. (ll. 6-7).

7 —. (ll. 57-59).

8 In Plath’s life she had many relationships with men, often with men who would abuse her. In one case she even admitted to have been raped. In her marriage with Ted, things were different, and yet the same. She saw him as her “master” of sorts, and allowed him free reign with her life, thinking he knew what was best. In her mind she thought of the men as father’s, figures who could rule her life. Alexander 145-147, 299.

9 —. (ll. 86-90).

10 —. “In the German tongue, in the Polish town/Scraped flat by the roller/Of wars, wars, wars./

But the name of the town is common./My Polack friend.” (ll. 16-20).

11 Paul Alexander explains the meaning behind the poem. Alexander 302.

12 Plath. “Aerial.” (ll. 4-6).

13 —. (ll. 19-21)

14 —. (ll. 24-31).

15 February 11, 1963 Sylvia Plath locked the doors to her house, went into the kitchen, turned the gas on in the oven, and stuck her head in. She killed herself with carbon monoxide poisoning. Her two children Frieda and Nicholas, and her husband, Ted Hughes, survived her. Alexander 330-333.

16 Plath. “Edge.” (ll. 1-4).

17 —. (ll. 6-8).

18 —. (ll. 17-20).

19 Sylvia once knocked on the door of Trevor Thomas, one of the tenants below her, ranting and crying hysterically about Ted and Assia’s relationship, and how much she hated the woman. Alexander 323.

20 Plath’s condition worsened as the months went by after Ted’s leaving. Her letters to her mother became more sporadic, more confusing and unknown. She never fully recovered from the pneumonia that plagued her, so her immune system was low, and her behavior become quite disturbing at times. Alexander 320-323.

Haiku by Robin Slaght

goodwill dropoff—

a box marked

“our wedding”

writer’s block—

the poet’s pen

bleeding on his lips

watching from her wheelchair—

the tire swing

still swinging

officially off-limits to hikers by Jenni McCarthy

it was cool when we arrived at the rocks' ankles,

so we wore long sleeves with our sneakers.

it struck our collective fancy for oddity

to see toppled-over towers of red stone.

central Iowa doesn't sport

brick skyscrapers growing from the grass

at acute angles,

or juxtaposed planes

sprinkled among the shoulders of giants.

looking back,

we could have been more considerate.

paid our respect in dimes and nickels of quiet wonder

on that pious gravel path

rather than neglected pennies of hurrying

dropped and forgotten in our footprints.

but we had only a morning

to claim a sprawling mountainside.

so we played the part of brazen children,

and we ran.

our laughter

that ricocheted off the curves and outcroppings

absolved that impertinence.

in return for unrestrained vitality,

we were offered dew-beaded spiderwebs

encased in pebbled palms,

a gift from cliffs that held us when we tired

of clambering up their cheeks

and over their jaws.

higher than we normally would dare to venture

were this a morning of everyday reality

waited that little hollow,

the one the wind molded

for forearms and hips.

why is climbing down always harder

than climbing up?

they don't want you to leave.

boulders can't emulate

the warmth of skin.

the knees of the mountains

that we scaled

were *officially off-limits to hikers.*

but we didn't notice that

until we left.

My Tank 7 by Angela Murphy

Hand-me-downs, a concept with which I am all too familiar. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. Just stating the facts. As a little girl, I was not the type you'd see at school modeling the latest trends from the mall. I wore whatever my mom picked out for me and nine times out of ten, she chose something that once belonged to my older sister, Maria. And it gets worse. As soon as my little sister went through "the change," she gained and retained at least three inches on me. Needless to say I became the first in our family to receive hand-me-ups.

This lovely tradition of “keeping things in the family” did not stop there. Oh no, we’re talking vehicles here. You see, my dad, God love him, is quite the economist, and would do just about anything to save a buck on a car. Dad is a firm believer that every car possesses deep potential. His definition of “reliable vehicle” is that it starts back up after it dies in the middle of a busy intersection.

My older sister’s first car was an ’85 Chevy Caprice Classic, already eight years old when she began driving it. Measuring out at a monstrous twenty feet long, her midnight blue boat was a strong and sturdy vessel. It sported license plates that read “My Tank 7.” Cute isn’t it? If you blur the sounds together really fast it reads “My Tank’s Heaven.” (Perhaps it was a heavenly vehicle eight years ago, when it actually worked). She went off to college and bought herself a new car. My Tank 7 was passed on to my older brother, Dan.

After a few years of his ever-so-graceful driving, the tank became quite ill and Dan asked my dad to take it to the junkyard where it could receive a proper burial. Well, what do you know, the same car that had left my brother stranded on numerous occasions just days before, purred like a kitten when my dad got behind its wheel. He drove it for ninety miles, from my brother’s college all the way home, without any trouble. (Our cars always made liars out of us in the presence of our father).

I, at the time, had been sharing a car with my little sister, Diana, which we named Rusty for obvious reasons. Rusty’s passenger’s side window has remained permanently stuck shut, never lowering even a fraction of an inch (at least not since it’s been in our family). All four of Rusty’s doors squeak loudly upon each and every opening and closing. Once, Rusty and I pulled out of the driveway with half a tank of gas. Forty-five minutes and thirty miles later, he left me stranded on “Empty” due to a poorly patched leak in the gas line. (That was a fun experience). Although Rusty wasn’t a looker, and despite that whole gas leak incident (the leak was soon re-patched), he was usually very reliable and I became quite content sharing him with Diana.

The night my dad returned with my brother’s “miraculously healed” tank, I had a queasy hunch of what was soon to come.

He’s gonna make me drive that thing.

I dreaded the thought. I knew he would make somebody drive it, and I’d have bet my right arm and leg he wasn’t going to pick Princess (Diana). Rest assured, I didn’t lose any limbs on that bet. Diana kept Rusty and I was given two options: drive My Tank 7 or walk.

I chose option A. Fortunately, it seemed that Dad was right; it was as if the car had truly been

healed. After driving the tank for the entire summer without any problems, I actually grew comfortable behind its wheel; perhaps I even began to trust it. About mid-August, I tipped my hat to the tank and left home to begin my second year at Loras College. Bringing the tank with me to school was inevitably out of the question. (That car would never last on the monstrous hills of Dubuque, Iowa). At school, my two feet were my only mode of transportation. In the meantime, the tank sat patiently in the driveway at home, waiting for my return.

Upon arriving home to spend Christmas break with my family, I was happy to at least have the option of driving once again. The excitement didn't last for too long, however. I would soon learn the hard way that My Tank 7 was a "seasonal car." To put it mildly, winter was not its season of preference.

On Christmas night 2001, I received a phone call from Eli, my boyfriend of four years, at about 9:30.

"Hello."

"Hi Chaparrita! Merry Christmas!" (Eli, who was born and raised in Mexico, moved to Rockford, IL, my hometown, at the age of sixteen. Within a year of his arrival, we had both learned each other's languages, and had already started dating. He has affectionately called me Chaparrita, Spanish for "shorty," ever since. Not that he's got much room to talk at his towering stature of 5'5").

"Did you just get back from celebrating at your aunt's house?"

"Yeah, it was a pretty long drive. Can you come over now?"

"Will you please come pick me up, Eli? I really don't want to drive the tank tonight."

"Come on, Chaparra, I've been driving all day."

Always putting his concerns before my own, I gave in.

"Fine. I'll be there in 15 minutes."

After taking a push broom (ice scrapers just don't do the trick) to the snow-covered hood and trunk of My Tank 7, I started her up. Wrapped up tight like an Eskimo, fur hood and all, the tank and I were on our way to Eli's house. As I drove down that recently snowplowed country road, the corner of my eye caught a flash of orange. Service Engine Soon.

There's a shocker! Well, I suppose I could just turn around and go back home. No, if I go back, Dad'll make me stay there...I'll keep driving.

Brilliant idea. I searched with my right hand for the cell phone I had placed on the passenger's seat. I would call Eli, the love of my life, my knight in shining armor (who sat warmly on his cushioned throne as I steered this freezing piece of metal to his castle.)

Booop.

I waited for him to pick up.

My frosty breath danced wildly before my eyes in a circular motion.

Booop.

My numb little fingers fiddled with the heat controls to my right. Nothing. I turned the knob from LOW to MAX. Still nothing.

Well, isn't that special, no heat on the coldest night of the season.

Booop.

"Hello."

"Eli, it's me. I'm on my way but the stupid car is acting up. Keep the phone next to you, I'll call if I have trouble."

Phone wedged tightly between my right thigh and the dark blue cushioned seat, I proceeded down the road at a steady 55. Yet another flash of light grabbed my eyes' attention. This one was red.

Great. Pretty soon I'll have a whole frickin' rainbow on my dashboard. Red, red...what does red mean...I knew I should have paid closer attention in Driver's Ed.

(I would later be informed that a red light on the dashboard means the car is overheating. Overheating can lead to explosions which lead to ... let's just say I should have pulled over).

Oh well, can't stop now.

I merged onto the highway, which insisted that I speed up to about 65 miles per hour. The moisture in my nose was at this point beginning to crystallize due to the lack of heat in the car. Glancing down periodically at my colorful dashboard in hopes that the warning lights would just magically turn off, nervous knots began to tie themselves hastily within the pit of my stomach.

Palpitation after palpitation, the rhythm of my heartbeat quickened with every rotation of the wheels beneath me. Something just didn't feel right. It was as if all the car's energy was being sucked slowly out from underneath it.

You've got to be kidding me.

The speedometer must have been lying. It said 55, but my foot, which was flooring the gas pedal, told me otherwise. I glanced quickly in my rear-view mirror to ensure that there were no cars behind me. Bright orange and white reflections bounced off the mirror practically blinding me. A huge semi truck had just merged onto the highway and was approaching My Tank 7 at full speed. My eyes darted back to the highway in front of me only to find yet another semi truck passing from the left lane into the right, conveniently in front of my now-less-than-stable vehicle.

Well, this is just great.

I'd driven enough clunkers to know, *this car is gonna die*. Still gliding at about 30, I covered the break and veered quickly to the right just in time to lose all power in one abrupt jerking motion. Through its dead silence, I could almost hear the ol' boat laughing as it scolded me. "Should have stopped sooner," it teased.

"No. I should've just stayed home and made that jerk drive his car to my house. (I had become just a tad bitter by this point). And who asked you anyway?" I retorted. Attempt after unsuccessful attempt, I pumped the gas pedal two times, turned the key...(a thief could never steal My Tank 7 because they'd never figure out how to get it started. There was a certain routine that must be followed: pump the gas twice, hold it to the floor after the second pump, and turn the ignition until it roared to life). Pump, pump, turn. Pump, pump, turn. *Dead as a doornail.*

My eyes rolled annoyingly around and around as I shook my head in disbelief at what this car was putting me through. My already frozen fingers reluctantly pulled themselves out from under the "warmth" of my beige, woolen gloves. They shook vigorously as I grabbed my cell phone.

I steadied my shaking hand so that I could press each of the little glowing buttons on that lifesaving device.

Booop.

Booop.

Come on, Eli...

Booop. "Hello."

"C-Come and pick m-me up"

"What's wrong?"

Uuuhg! Men! Did I or did I not just call and forewarn him?

Tears of frustration burned my eyes and drowned my throat. In that girly high-pitched I'm-getting-ready-to-cry voice I whimpered, "j-just come and get me."

"Where are you?" I could hear the concern growing in his voice.

"On th-the h-highway just p-past M-Montague."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

I snapped the phone shut hastily and recovered my purpling hands with my gloves. I checked and re-checked each lock in the car. (I've watched enough *Unsolved Mysteries* to know what can happen to a girl stranded on a highway). I apprehensively slouched down in the seat lest any potentially criminal passersby see me and turn me into their next victim. An occasional truck sped by giving my sturdy, steel boat a run for its money. I peered from my lowered position through the foggy windshield into the vastly black night. I was like a shipwrecked sailor stranded in the middle of a dark, and very cold ocean.

My sudden realization of the utter blackness of the night reminded me to turn on my flashers. When I pressed my iced thumb to the little knob on the right hand side of the wheel, I realized that the heat wasn't the only function of my car on strike this Christmas. There were no lights on the highway, and my "emergency lights" would fail to fulfill their one purpose in life.

Damn! He's never going to find me on this pitch-black God-forsaken highway.

As I pondered whether or not climbing onto the hood of that monstrous vehicle and screaming Eli's name was a plausible plan, I clicked the turn-signal stick just for the hell of it. Well, praise God, it worked. I almost kissed that little green arrow as it flashed on and off before my eyes. Unsure of how long the battery would last, I turned off the blinker in an attempt to conserve energy until my ride was closer.

As I shivered there on the shoulder of the road, I closed my eyes and began to reminisce. I remembered Betsy, my first car, a 1983 Buick LaSabre. Filling the tires with air was a daily routine with her. The mechanics at Lube Pros knew me by my first name. They'd see ol' Betsy roundin' the corner and I could hear them call out "top off on three." (Since they provided free oil to their customers, my dad figured it more logical to "top off" the oil every week rather than patch the ever-expanding leak). Oh yeah, Dad. Makes perfect sense. Betsy could be cruising at a steady 55 and just die, mid-traffic. She bit the dust about a year ago and quite honestly, I'm less than heartbroken over the loss.

The tiny green monitor of my cell phone brought me exciting news. "9:57." Five freezing minutes had come and gone.

He should be here any minute now.

With a quick prayer, I re-ignited my flashing savior and waited for another bone-chilling minute and a half.

Beep beep bee-beeeep.

Alas! My prince had come! His horn sounded from the other side of the median to ensure me that help was indeed on the way. Like a squirrel in its last few moments of winter, I grabbed all of my belongings cassette tapes, Kleenex box, proof of insurance, and stuffed them in my old red handbag.

As if that white Chevrolet contained anyone other than my boyfriend, I remained encased in My Tank 7, refusing to unlock the door until I had a visual confirmation. (You can never be too safe this day in age). I heard the slamming of a car door. Moments later, a pair of dark brown eyes, one nose, and two big lips were pressed against my window.

Yup! That's him!

I unlocked and thrust the door wide open, nearly pushing him into the street. Phone in one hand, keys and Christmas gifts in the other, red handbag swung loosely over my right arm, I kicked the door shut and scurried like a frozen fool to my awaiting chariot.

Mr. Hero inspected the tank as I snuggled into my new environment and pressed my hands to the heat vents like cold slabs of steak. Inspection complete, Eli jumped back into his eighty-degree car and stared at me with that silly grin on his face. The words “thank you” were tempted to jump right off of my tongue, but “NOW are you happy you made me drive?” came out instead.

“I’m sorry, Chaparrita,” his tone soft and genuine, “I should’ve just picked you up.”

Satisfied with his apology, I kissed Prince Charming’s warm cheek as he pulled back onto the highway. Little did I know, as we rode off to his castle, that would be the last I’d see of the ol’ tank. It was recently sold to some very stupid man for five hundred dollars. My dad, of course, was responsible for that transaction. Somehow, Dad managed to convince that innocent, gullible stranger of his every-car-has-potential theory. (As far as I’m concerned, anyone who can pull off such a sale has definitely missed his call to be a salesman!)

And who knows what the future has in store for me. Perhaps when my older siblings’ cars fall apart, I’ll get to drive those! Or maybe Dad will buy Princess a brand new car so that I can reacquaint myself with Rusty. In the meantime, however, as I wait around for the next hand-me-down or up, I am learning anew to appreciate a nice brisk walk!

Black and White with Red All Over by Laura Egan

The early October weather is cool but pleasant in Iowa. It’s been over a year since he’s been back and he can’t remember how long since he’s been in a church. He works up a sweat hurrying towards the church, his black jacket absorbing the sun. At the large stained-glass doors he pauses. Warm shades of orange, red, purple, and blue form crosses on the door and the sun pushes the colors onto the people inside.

“Just in time,” he mumbles to himself, pulling against the heavy doors. Men in black tuxedos and women in black dresses mingle in the entryway. The colors of the glass bounce around between the white walls and the black clothes. Bridesmaids are attaching flowers to groomsmen’s lapels. The men are slapping each other on the back and making jokes. No one even notices him.

He sees the bride, his daughter. “She’s beautiful. Beautiful and just like her mother,” he whispers. He can’t believe it’s been twenty-five years since her birth. If only he could hold her now like he did that day.

“Dad. Oh, you’re here! We’re just about to start. I didn’t think you were coming.” Emma fights with her full-skirted white gown as she weaves through the wedding party. A long train and veil flow behind her. She wears no veil over her face like her mother had. Her face is tense but of course she’s happy to see him, isn’t she? “You completely missed pictures. I guess we’ll get some later. At least you made it.”

“You look wonderful. I had to figure out these cuff things and get a haircut and shave. Traffic was crazy. Things are a lot more complicated than they used to be. I tell you, for your mom and my wedding-”

Stepping between Emma and Dad, Mary, his younger daughter, faces her sister. “Dad, please,” Mary cuts him off and hurriedly applies makeup for Emma. “So, what are you going to do about *him*?” Mary asks her sister, nodding towards their dad. He notices that Mary’s once dark hair looks light against her black bridesmaid’s dress.

Dad sighs. “Now, Mary, today is your sister’s wedding. Let’s just cool it.” Mary continues applying her sister’s makeup.

“Dad, I don’t want you to be upset, but the wedding isn’t going to be exactly . . . traditional. I wish you would’ve come earlier or called,” Emma says. She looks at Mary. “I told him we’d get together. I wanted to tell him in person. To prepare him. You know how he is.”

“Don’t worry, Emma. Every wedding starts late and has its own charm. Like your mother’s and mine. On our wedding day I can’t tell you how many things we thought people would find odd. But Ann and I understood. That’s how it should be.” He smiles just remembering his wedding day. If only wedding days lasted forever.

Mary swings around to face him. She waves a makeup brush about with a disgusted look on her face. “Great, Dad. Thanks for the sweet little story but after the wedding day there was a divorce and-”

“Not now, Mary. Go check on the rest of the wedding party,” Emma directs. “Go!”

Mary cocks her head to the side and smirks at Dad. “Thanks for coming, *Daddy*. But, I’ve got to tell you, we were all just *so* sure that you would show up, on time and in just the right

shape to walk her down the aisle, that we asked Bill to do it. Thanks again for coming.” She nods for emphasis, widens her grin, and struts away.

Dad just stares at Emma. She’s always been his favorite anyway. So he had forgotten to pick them up at school a couple of times. Emma always understood. But not Mary. Maybe it’s because Emma was so much older at the time of the divorce. At twelve she had known he couldn’t always be perfect, and she had memories of fun times. In Mary’s seven years with him, she had seen only the troubles.

Dad tries to explain. “There was a lot of fog in Chicago. Everyone was running behind. I had my cell phone but wasn’t sure where to call. I knew you were all busy.”

Although all are in perfect order, Emma straightens her veil, adjusts her dress, and rearranges her flowers. “Oh, look at the time. Here, let me fix your tie. It’s crooked.” With shaky hands, she fixes his tie, wets her fingers, and runs her hand over a stray piece of his graying, dark hair. “There. Now, about the wedding. I think that, a, Bill is going to walk me down the aisle, Dad.”

“Bill? Who’s Bill?” It doesn’t matter who he is, Dad isn’t about to stand for this Bill guy doing his job. Sure he’s a little late, but all he needs to do is hook arms with Emma and walk her down the aisle. He missed practice, but does he really need to practice that?

“Bill’s been my best friend since grade school, Dad. He’s like a brother to me. Dad, you know I want you or Mom to do it, but if I have you, Mom will be upset. If I have her, you’ll be. I thought this would be best. Dad?” She’s waiting for his response. What does she expect? His reassurance that some Bill guy has the right to walk her down the aisle? Well, he isn’t going to do it. How can he willingly agree to just sit in the crowd, to let them all admire another man with his daughter and wonder why this Bill is there instead of him?

“Dad?” He can tell she’s about to cry. He can’t make her cry, not on her wedding day. Dad sees her chin begin to quiver. He should have called. That’s always been one of his faults, not calling.

“You were supposed to call if you were running late.” As soon as he walked in the door, Ann was after him. “We need to leave in ten minutes. Tops.” Ann’s red and green Christmas dress was only halfway zipped up the back, and she had an oven mitt on her hands. The smell of her famous snicker doodle cookies mingled with the pine and sap odor of the Christmas tree. She made the house the perfect picture of the holiday season.

“I-”

“I know, I know. Christmas is a busy time at the bar. All the lonely people drinking and pouring their hearts out to you. I understand. Now get dressed. And *please* hurry.” She scurried about the house. All he saw was her exposed back. “We can’t be late. If you’re not ready, I’ll have to take the car and go.”

He went to the kitchen for a cookie and then to get ready. He never went to church anymore, but he had promised the girls he would go to their Christmas play that year. Emma was in the choir of angels, and Mary was one of the wise men. They had been at church practicing all day.

“Are you ready? We need to get going,” Ann yelled from the living room.

He found her standing by the door with her red coat and high heels on. Evidentially she had zipped up the dress herself. “I guess I’m ready.”

“Here.” She motioned him over. “Your tie’s crooked.”

He grabbed her soft hand and kissed it. “We’ll get there right in time, honey.”

“Hopefully. It’s snowing, and I will probably kill myself in these heels and, oh-” she let out a screech as he hoisted her into his arms.

“I wouldn’t want you to fall.” He smiled.

She put up some protest but eventually resigned to laughter. They made it to the play a little late.

He always ran late for any number of reasons. He figured most things could wait. But Emma’s wedding day couldn’t and didn’t.

“Now, Emma, don’t cry.” Dad awkwardly reaches out and pats her shoulder. He shoves both hands into his pockets and digs around for his handkerchief. “I don’t have my handkerchief. Stupid tux.” He just stands there with his hands in his pockets.

A young man in a tuxedo comes up and slips his arm around Emma. “Honey, what’s wrong? I know we’re all wearing black, but that’s what you wanted,” he jokes. He looks about Emma’s

age and has an earring in each ear. “It only looks like a funeral. Don’t cry. Well, maybe cry for me if you really go through with it and marry this joker because he gave you a real carat.” Emma snickers in between tears. “We were only in the first grade.” This comedian is now waving his hands about and yelling his humorous story in Dad’s direction. “If she would’ve let me figure out she didn’t mean *a carrot*, we could’ve been married on the playground. If only I’d known it was *one carat*, not *a carrot* . . . she would’ve been mine.” His hands finally come to rest over his chest. He sighs. Dad doesn’t like this showy guy already.

“Oh, Bill.” Emma smiles.

“So, this is Bill.” It’s just his luck. He’s the father of the bride, and he has to watch a theatrical jerk walk his daughter down the aisle. It would’ve been bad enough to watch anyone else give her away, even her mother, but this guy just shouts moron. He doesn’t deserve to have her on his arm.

“Bill, this is my dad.” Emma’s eyes move back and forth between the two men.

“Bill.” Dad nods.

“Sir, I just want you to know that I feel like Emma is the closest person in the world to me, and it’s an honor to walk her down the aisle. Thank you, sir, for letting me walk my honorary sister down the aisle.” He’s about to cry. Bill and Emma wrap their arms around each other. No one watches for his response this time, as if it’s all okay with him now that this Bill considers himself part of the family. Dad is sure that this guy doesn’t like beer or football. What a wimp. Dad can’t believe she picked this guy over him.

“Alright then.” Bill’s still latched onto Emma. Dad averts his eyes. He glances over the other members of the wedding party. Their black attire is striking against the simple white entry to the church, and the sun adds swirls of colors to the room

“Emma, quit hugging your boyfriend. It’s almost time for you to get married.” Mary emerges from the sea of black to straighten the train on her sister’s dress. “And you, *Daddy*, need to be seated.” She walks over to him. “Your tie’s crooked.”

He looks down at her as she fixes his tie. “Thanks, Mary Quite Contrary.” It has been years since he’s called her that. It fit her when she was a stubborn child who would never eat, and he was glad to see it still fit.

“Why, Dad, thank you.” She smiles at the nickname. “Bill, take him in. The pew BEHIND my mom’s, please! There won’t be a wedding if you put him in with her. Follow Bill, Dad.”

Everything will turn out just fine, Dad knows. At least the wedding day will. That one day somehow worked for Ann and him. “Don’t worry, Emma. It will all turn out just fine. You’ll see. Just enjoy your day.” He’ll just go along with the Bill situation. It’s her wedding. Maybe he doesn’t deserve to walk her down the aisle either. He and his girls have always had an unusual relationship.

Right after the divorce he moved to Chicago. His interest in bars and stocks had better markets there. He visited his girls almost every weekend, at first. They even came to visit him a couple of times. Ann stayed in a hotel. It wasn’t the same without Ann.

After a couple of years the visits grew less and less. The girls got busier in school activities, and it got harder to find weekends for them to spend with Dad. The girls lived with their mother and he lived alone – he called a few times a day. They got caller identification and only answered his calls once a day. He was alone, and he was lonely. Now, Ann rarely answers the phone, and he catches the girls by chance. If he’d only started calling sooner, things might be different.

Instead, he’s here, simply an observer at his own daughter’s wedding. “Right this way.” Bill motions towards another set of doors. All eyes are on them as they walk down the center aisle between the black and white bows on the pews. At least three hundred people are seated in the large old church.

Not traditional is right. The father is supposed to walk the bride down the aisle, not have her “brother” escort him to the spectators spot. Dad knows these people are looking at him like he’s an idiot. He feels like one as he gawks around the church. It is just a simple peaked structure with an altar in front and endless rows of pews on both sides of him. After years away from the church, he is amazed that it is still the same, right down to the faded red carpet.

On his left he notices familiar faces. Emma’s godparents give him a flashing smile. He worked with the Millers for a good ten years before they were named Emma’s guardians. It has been at least that long since he’s seen them.

All of Emma’s relatives from her mother’s side gawk. Even a few of his relatives dot the crowd.

The right side of the church seats the groom’s family. Rick is his name. Dad finds it so odd that he’s seeing the faces of Rick’s aunts, uncles, and friends before he’s even glimpsed his son-in-law’s face. His in-laws are just blurs of similar faces with big noses. He hopes his grandchildren have his nose not Rick’s.

Bill stops three pews from the front and whispers to a pregnant woman and the man beside her to scoot over. He waves Dad into the pew, hands him a program, and flashes a cheesy smile. The pregnant woman regards him politely and readjusts her position. The man rests his right arm on the back of the pew as he drapes it around the woman. He holds her left hand with his and Dad notices that the man has a wedding band, but the woman doesn't. Her hands must be swollen. That happened to Ann when she was pregnant with both of the girls. It was the first time either of them had ever considered taking off their rings.

Kneeling directly ahead of him is Ann. He can see from the back that she is perfectly dressed, as usual. A curvy line down the center of her back separates the half white, half black dress. A bold red hat rests on her graying blond hair and pearls drape around the wrinkles in her neck. She has no idea he's there watching her as she adjusts her hat every now and then. Ann has always been completely oblivious to her surroundings when she's at prayer. With her head bowed, her hands folded, and her mind focused, she has survived. More than that, she has thrived. Ann, Emma, and Mary made it together after he left them.

He wonders what Ann's hands look like now under her long red gloves. They were so soft when they first meet. She was always putting lotion on them. Then, the girls came along, and she was too busy for frivolous things like sweet smelling lotion. He especially remembers how dirty her hands were the day he moved out.

She was weeding the garden on her hands and knees when he came home from work. A red handkerchief covered her hair and she wore one of his old flannel shirts. He loved it when she wore his shirts.

"Looks good, honey. I think I'm going to plant more flowers in that corner. What do you think?" He stood by the garden, his coat in his hand.

"I think before you plant anything else you should help me with some weeding for a change." She didn't look up but kept systematically pulling the weeds and throwing them into a bucket.

"Honey, you know how much my back hurts after I stand all day. Besides you're almost done. I'll just go get the new flowers. You'll be done by the time I get back."

"Exactly. I'll have done all the weeding, again." She yanked the weeds faster, randomly throwing them towards the bucket.

He got down on all fours next to her.

“Go get the flowers if you’re going to plant them. I wouldn’t want you to hurt your back doing something more than sticking some seeds in the ground and waiting for a chef’s salad.” She waved him away with her filthy hand. “Go, get your flowers.”

He went, but not to get his flowers. She brushed him away with her hand, and he finally left. It wasn’t truly about the flowers and neither was the rest of the talk about the garden that day or any day before. But that day he did leave just because of the stupid flowers. Stupid. There was never a chance for him to go back.

He watches Ann make the sign of the cross and sit down. She straightens her dress, her hat, and her back. He sits up in his spot and attempts to flatten some wrinkles from his pants. The pregnant couple is still holding hands.

That was the first thing that he and Ann ever did, they held hands at a prayer group in college. They always held hands after that. Once, after she had gotten the caller identification, she answered the phone. She knew it was him but still answered. He asked her if they could ever hold hands again. After a long pause she said, “If I can ever believe that you would weed the garden.”

She will hold his hand today during the “Our Father.” Everyone will be doing it, but they will be holding hands because he came and stayed even though he didn’t get to walk Emma down the aisle.

He just watches Ann sit there until the music starts. At the deep sounds of the organ, the congregation stands. Everyone but Dad turns towards the back of the church. Ann slowly turns. The front of her dress is half black and half white, split by the same curvy line as the back. Her red hat frames her face perfectly. She rests one gloved hand on the front of his pew. Her cheeks are flushed, she’s about to cry, and she bites her bottom lip when she sees him. He turns to the back of the church.

Mary is the fourth girl in a black dress escorted down the aisle. She wears a real smile now, and Dad feels it in his heart. It aches. Mary glides by him, turning to smile at her mother.

He sees the white gown first, then Emma’s face. It hurts, his heart actually hurts. He turns to his wife, reaching for her red, gloved hand. It hurts. He can’t reach her. His arm won’t move. He slumps into the pew.

Everything goes black.

My Father's Weekend by Peggy Lucas

Her hands are like iron this morning. Cold, stiff and tarnished. They push my clothes into the small red duffel bag, which isn't big enough to hold the extra sweatshirt and jeans my mother is stuffing inside. I watch her, afraid to blink, afraid to move, and afraid to say anything this morning that might set her off.

I stare at a crack in the pink wall of my bedroom. I remember when we moved into this house. It was so big, I even had my own room. In our house before I slept in a tiny room off of my parent's bedroom, only separated by a beach towel, which hung in the doorway. I loved my new room because it was my own. I picked out the pink paint for my mother to color the walls with. Now, I hate the color.

Struggling a little, my mother zips the bulging bag shut. Now it is my turn. She comes at me with a brush clasped in her pale hand. She swings me around by the shoulders in front of my dresser mirror, so that my backside is facing her. She begins to pull through the tangles of my long blonde hair, placing one hand at the base of my hairline to stabilize my head while she tugs downward with the brush. I stare at my mother's reflection in the mirror. Her hair is brown, and this morning it is disheveled, curls springing up in frizzy clumps. The skin under her eyes sags, and for the first time I notice how ashen and gray her skin looks. She takes a break from torturing me to take a long drag off her cigarette, then exhaling the smoke from her pursed lips. My eyes still fixated on the mirror, the cloud of smoke fogs our reflection. When the haze lifts, unfortunately we are still there, together. I see a girl with long blonde hair, about twelve-years-old, fair and blue eyed with stranger standing behind her. My mother has changed from the woman who painted my room pink with a wide smile and warm hands less than two years ago.

"My children do not look like how I had always imagined them to look," my mother says, frowning, seeing the same image in the mirror as I.

Hastily, she sweeps my hair up in a ponytail and slaps me on the butt to let me know she is done with me. Sleepily, my younger brother Jacob wanders in, sucking his thumb with his left

hand and dragging his own little duffle bag behind him with his right. He also looks like me with blue eyes and blonde hair, but he does have curly hair like my mother's. Overall, we look like my father.

My mother grabs his bag, refolds his clothes and zips it up.

“Jennifer, keep track of Jacob's clothes this weekend. He never seems to come back with what I send him with. I can't afford to keep buying him new underwear and socks.”

It's my father's weekend. My parents have been separated four months and preparing to go visit has not gotten any easier. Each Saturday morning, Jacob and I sit in front of the large bay window, watching each car drive by, anxiously anticipating our father's arrival, grasping our bags and trying not to look at our mother. I hate leaving my mother alone. She is broken, shattered pieces of the woman she used to be. She used to make pot roast on Sunday nights, and would put chocolate candies in our popcorn. She used to take me shopping and to dance lessons, but now there is no money for those things. I know my dad makes a lot of money, but my mom doesn't work because she has stayed at home with us since Jacob was born. She lets our dad do the fun stuff with us now.

Just then my father's shiny black Cadillac turns the corner and pulls into the driveway next to my mother's rusted white mini van. The sun is shining and robins are hopping around our overgrown yard, singing a summer song to the suburban neighborhood. The elderly neighbors from across the street, Harold and Anne, are gardening but stop to watch my father pull in.

Jacob springs to his feet and rushes to the door. He forgets his duffle bag so I pick it up. My mom is sitting at the kitchen table, smoking another cigarette. She slowly extinguishes the burning stick into the ashtray before standing up and joining us at the door.

“Be good,” is all she says before kissing Jacob on the forehead and opening the door to let him out like an anxious puppy. My mom does not kiss me, nor hug me, just looks at me with eyes that sting with either sadness or anger. Maybe both.

“Bye,” I say as I step out the door.

“Make sure you are ready at five o'clock on Sunday. Don't make me wait again. Five o'clock. Tell your father you are to be ready at five o'clock.”

My dad is tall and looks thinner than normal, his strong forearms brown and peeling from days at the golf course. His dark blonde hair is a little overgrown and the wind lifts it, revealing his slowly receding hairline. He is strapping Jacob into the car seat. Turning around, he takes the

bags from me and drops them in the trunk. I notice there is a woman in the front seat that I don't know.

"Hi, honey," my father says as he places his hand on top of my head, "How are you?"

"Fine," I say, staring at the woman through the window. "Who's that?"

"Oh, that's my friend Maggie. You're gonna like her. She's a lot of fun. We're going to go out on the boat tomorrow."

The woman smiles a wide, red, toothy grin through the car window. She has long blonde hair, blue eyes and a tan face. She wiggles her fingers, waving at me.

I look up at him.

"Well, c'mon. Let's go."

In the shiny black reflection of the Cadillac I see my mother's figure, standing alone on the deck. I walk around the car and climb in the other side. Just before my dad gets into the driver's side, Harold crosses the street and shakes my father's hand. I roll down the window and rest my head on my propped up arm, trying to look uninterested.

"So, Jack, how ya been?" Harold asks my dad.

"Ah, y'know. Hanging in there."

"Anne and I was just saying how we haven't seen you around much this summer. We heard about the separation, and we would like to tell you how sorry we are. You know, Jack, you have the nicest looking family on the block. Great kids."

"You don't have to tell me, Harold."

My dad's chest gets a little bigger and he smiles as he opens the car door.

"Well, see you around," my dad says as he goes to slide into the car. Then, Harold closes in, his aged, wise eyes staring into my father's cool, blue eyes. He is face to face with my father.

"Don't throw it all away. Jack, you've got it all."

I look at the woman in the front seat, her eyes narrowing, looking as if they could cut glass.

“Yeah, Harold, I know,” my dad says uneasily as he shrinks into the car. “See ya later,” my dad says through the rolled down window as he backs away, leaving Harold standing in our driveway.

As my father pulls away from our big white house, I wave to my mom, who is leaning on the deck rail, smoking. Her left arm is wrapped around her body, and she looks old and frail. Her dark eyes are like onyx slivers on her pale face. I wave to her through the tinted windows. She turns around, and goes back inside. She does not wave back.

My dad puts his sun-kissed hand on his friend’s knee as we drive down our street, and away from home.

I can’t water-ski. No matter how long I am in the water, I just can’t get up. Maggie doesn’t help. She keeps giggling and saying, “That’s okay, honey. Maybe next time.” Then she giggles some more. I think I might drown.

My dad pulls me out of the murky lake and wraps a large red towel around me. Jacob is sitting in the back of the boat, enveloped in his life jacket and playing with a tiny boat Maggie bought him at the marina. It must be getting late because the sun is no longer scorching. Actually, it is kind of cold.

“What do you say, Kid-o? Call it a day?” my dad asks.

“No!” Jacob wails.

“Yes!” I hiss, giving my brother a threatening look. “Mom is going to be waiting,” I remind him. A knowing look comes across his young face, and his bottom lip quivers.

Now we are heading back full speed in the silver jet boat, with a hot pink racing stripe. My father is driving the boat, and Maggie subtly puts her hand on his knee. Her red nails look as if they are drawing blood from the flesh of my dad’s leg. Waving in the wind, her stringy blonde hair brushes over her halter top straps around her neck. She is giggling again. I notice her shoulders are perfectly pink.

Her big eyes look back at me. I am shivering under the towel from the crisp, cool wind. “Here, hun,” she yells over the roaring motor and the crashing water as she pulls a green sweater

out of her transparent beach bag. “Put this on!”

She tosses the sweater to me, and hesitantly, I put it on. Maggie crinkles her nose, giving me another toothy grin. My dad looks back at me, smiles at the fact I am swimming under Maggie’s oversized green sweater, then gives her a kiss on the cheek.

“Some friend,” I mutter under my breath and Jacob looks up at me, still innocent to all that is happening before our eyes. I wish that I could tell this leggy blonde about the time my dad threw the vacuum through the patio window, shattering the glass into shreds. I wish she could have seen my mother screaming and crying, tearing out of the driveway in the shiny, new minivan, screeching through the singing robins, on a day much like today.

I wish she could know about the time I walked into the bathroom the morning of church pictures, when my dad had my mom by the wrists with one hand, and by her throat with his other, while she cried, “Jack, you’re better than this!”

I stood still, unable to breathe and paralyzed to the newly laid linoleum floor splattered with tiny, flat pink roses in the center of each square, as I shrunk to the size of a glass marble and rolled away until the crying and the bruising was over. Then, only hours later, my mother slipped on her blue turtleneck and a tight, pink smile for the picture that is forever frozen in the church bulletin. I could show Maggie the picture.

But most of all, I wish Maggie could see how easy it could be for her to become like my mother. Maybe if she saw my mother on Saturday mornings, hardly able to get out of bed, and knowing that the once beautiful woman, who I watched put on fake eyelashes before going out to dinner on Saturday nights with my dad only a half a year ago, is now in pieces like the broken patio window. Now, I watch to see if she can put herself back together.

I keep looking at the car radio to check the time. Five-ten. My dad’s friend is leaning halfway over in the front seat, talking low in his ear. I can’t hear what she is saying, but it must be delightfully evil judging from my dad’s smile.

“Dad, what time is it?”

“Don’t worry about it. Why are you always so worried about the time?”

“Mom is probably waiting for us.”

Maggie looks back at me, her stringy hair falling in her eyes, windblown from the day on the lake. “You, know, Jen, that sweater looks adorable on you. You can keep it if you like.”

“No, that’s okay. It’s too big.” I really don’t want the sweater. I want to tear it off and throw it out the window.

“You sure? I don’t mind. I have entirely too many sweaters. You’ll have to go through my clothes sometime.”

“It’s too big,” I said again.

She looks at me for a second through the strands of hair in her sun-kissed face and bounces back around in a huffy sort of way.

Five-twenty-seven. We roll into the driveway of my father’s house. My mother’s rusted mini van is there, waiting. Jacob has been sleeping the whole ride home, and I nudge him to get him up.

“C’mon, Jake, wake up. It’s time to go.”

As soon as the car is in park, I jump out and race up to the door to get my stuff. At the door, I hear Maggie.

“I’m so sorry we’re late! We were boating all day and just lost track of the time!”

I turn in amazement. This sun-bleached blonde, my father’s friend, is talking to my mother. Through the clear window of the mini van my mother’s eyes are blazing and her lips form a crooked sneer.

“Don’t talk to me,” I hear my mother snap though the window to this woman in crisp white pants and striped boat-neck blouse.

Unaffected, Maggie skips around the back of the car and lifts Jacob out of his seat, kissing him on the forehead. Still half sleeping, Jacob nuzzles his head into her collarbone. She hands him off to my dad who puts him into the car seat in the back of my mother’s old van.

“Jack, what do you think you are doing? Why are you doing this? What do you think you are doing to Jacob and Jennifer?”

I can see my mother's glassy eyes from the house. She is crying, and I rush in to get our bags.

"Goodbye!" I yell to my dad as I make my way towards my mom's van.

"Wait, Jennifer. Give me a hug," my father responds. I turn back around and let my father hug me and kiss me on the cheek. "Love you," he says.

"Me too."

I crawl into the mini-van's front seat. My mother stares at me, seemingly tracing over every detail of my face through red, strained eyes. I can almost see the face of the woman who bakes Christmas cookies and lets me lick the spatula from the cake mix hidden under the stress and baggage of the last four months—of the last thirteen years.

"Have a good time?"

"Umhmm."

"I suppose that's *her* sweater, huh. I suppose you like her so much that you want to wear *her* clothes now. Maybe you want to be a trashy slut like her too?"

Her angry tone is overwhelming. I forgot to give Maggie back the stupid sweater. This stupid, ugly sweater.

"No, mom. I just forgot ... uh, I'll take it off. I'll go give it back to her."

But before I can exit the van, my mother, backs out of the driveway and peels out down the road. Out the window, I see Maggie and my dad unhinging the boat from the Cadillac. Maggie turns, wiggling her pink fingers, waving at me.

I imagine that my body is attached to the seat, for if I don't move, don't breath, and don't speak, maybe I will disappear. Maybe my mother would love me again.

I look in the visor mirror at Jacob sleeping in his car seat in the back, his soft curls radiating from his flushed face. He looks like a little angel, wind-blown and roughed up by the lake. His new jeans are torn in the knee and white t-shirt smudged with mud from the fishing worms.

"Make sure Jacob has all of his socks and underwear in his bag," my mother instructs me.

I pick up Jacobs bag, resting at my feet and pull it onto my lap. I carefully unzip the bag, scared to even make the slightest sound. Wishing not to be enclosed in this box with this woman who is my mother, I peer inside the bag. No socks. No underwear. Not even his pajamas.

“Mom, I think Maggie washed our dirty clothes this morning, and I forgot to get them out of the dryer.”

Her eyes turn back into onyx slivers and her ashen skin turns into a shade of red that could compete with the color of Maggie’s lipstick. Her right hand, returning to cold iron, leaves the steering wheel and strikes my warm face in a solid sweep.

My mother’s eyes return to the road as she says, “Next time don’t forget.”

Then suddenly, as if finally awakening from her crazed daze, she realizes what she has just done. Swerving to the side of the road, she screeches to a halt. She looks at me with a horrific expression. Wide, red eyes are brimming with acidic tears as her skin seems to fuse with the bones in her face. Unable to make a coherent word, she lets out an earth-quaking sob, as she looks at her hand, pink and throbbing.

I look down at my brother’s practically empty bag. The small souvenir boat Maggie bought Jacob at the marina has somehow managed to find it’s way to the front, resting at my feet. I tear the green sweater off my body, and hurl it out the window into a ditch, where it lifelessly lies, blanketing a wild patch of tiny, pink roses.

affection and pine needles by Jenni McCarthy

sandwiches and champagne in hand,
we discovered a place ripe for picnicking.
the breeze through the grass reminded me
of how I ruffle your hair.

curled beneath a spreading pine,
we lounged, and laughed, exchanging looks,
examining patterns pressed by fallen needles
into each other's palms.

beckoning branches presented a challenge,
so you gave me the boost my height required.
our ascent was encouraged
through the benefit of bare feet.

suitably high, we chose our niches,
comfortable in the rough embrace.
you tickled my feet with pine needles;
I rained them in retaliation upon your head.

talking in meaningful airy phrases,
we took refuge in eyes, and limbs.
I ran my fingers through living needles
and looked at your hair.

climbing down, the pine offered farewell kisses

of scratches on skin, and sap.

we shook the needles from our shoes,

satisfied with our matching scrapes.

breezes whispered around the wine glasses

when we left our picnic place.

walking away, my fingers were laced

with pine needles, and yours.

The Night of the Falling Skies by Rosette Golpashin

In the breeze of sea blue skies, fly the doves in shimmering light. At the dawn of gentle night, shine the stars and moon so bright. But, the daunting human minds cause the falling of the skies... Red moon, black clouds, shed tears on down, to heed the cries of those gone by.

Kapoom! The bombs were pouring vehemently on the deadly and dark city. It was 1984 and I was eight years old. By this time, the Iran-Iraq war had been going on since 1980 and would not end till 1988. My grandparents and I lived in the Iranian capital city of Tehran. I vividly recall one of the many deadly nights that tossed me into adulthood faster than the sizzling bomb scraps that shattered our shivering windows. A single night in 1984 taught me about the pains of a ruthless war and the awakening of an invisible inner strength.

This single night of war carried with it the sizzling pains of shrapnel dissecting my family and life into chaos. My grandmother and I were sleeping together on the first floor of our three-story house. On the third floor slept my ninety-year-old hearing-impaired grandfather. And then it happened. I was shaken awake leaning on my grandmother's broken hip as the city's monstrous sirens hollered for our lives' sake. I clung to my grandma as she reached for the light switch. But, as usual, the city officials

had turned electricity off to keep the enemy planes from bombing populated areas. My grandmother reached in the bed and held me in her wrinkled arms. She knew about my fears of darkness.

Terror and pain seized my soul as we heard the thundering showers of the enemy bombs. I saw nothing but red and orange blasts of explosions in the skies. I told myself the skies were falling. Then the ground shook and a piece of the falling skies hit our neighbor's house. Their gas pipe burst and we heard the fires and screams of thousands of people as they hit the streets. My grandma told me that she could not walk and was too old. She told me to get out and run out of the house with the rest of the people because the house would collapse any minute. I looked at her and remember feeling something like the breakings of glass occur within me. I was scared but no longer afraid.

That was the moment that I lost my childhood and gained the strength to utter words that awakened the adult world of reality. Three more devastating bombs hit us, and fire, gas, and screams mingled everywhere. I grabbed my grandma's hand and told her that I would never leave without her. I was ready to die. We grabbed each other and looked at the cracked ceiling and started praying together. "*O God of Heaven and Earth...*" I suddenly kissed her and told her that I was going to see if grandpa was still all right. My grandma begged me not to but I could not die without knowing how he was doing.

I climbed eighty-three steps in total darkness and held my breath each time I felt the stairs giving out on me. *Seventy-nine, eighty...* As I got to the top another explosion rattled our house. I fell on top of debris and wanted to run back down to the safety of my grandma's arms. But I did not. I continued and found his bedroom. The door was locked. I panicked because I could see nothing. Then I felt the doormat on the floor and pushed it right between the floor and under the door. I stuck my finger in the keyhole and tried to make the key fall on the other side. It worked. I pulled the doormat to my side and grabbed the key. As I opened the door, I looked across and could see the whole city in a black and orange dance of fire and cries. Half the house had collapsed and my grandfather's bed lay hanging halfway between the room and the hollow darkness outside. I searched for him. The ceiling was gone and I climbed through debris to find him. I could barely see the bed. Underneath the rubble and bricks. I stood there; I knew. "*I love you grandpa, sleep well in God's arms.*" I saw the heavens full of red lights that occasionally burst into orange flames in mid air. I felt my heart turn into a stony numbness. I turned to go back down and saw my father's room. I picked up his blue bathrobe that still hung on his door. I sat on the ground and clutched the bathrobe, crying and rocking back and forth. His smell was still on the bathrobe. I recalled all that had happened six months earlier.

As I rocked, I saw the military breaking our front door, trashing our house and taking my father and me away. For three days they tortured my dad in front of me. On one of those days I remember how they lined him up with four other men. They were all blindfolded. Then they put the gun to my dad's head and fired the gun. They shot the two people around him, each time making him think it was him dying. They released us and it was not long after that that my father killed himself. All that was done because we were of a different back ground. I was suddenly shaken again by a loud explosion and dropped the bathrobe and ran downstairs.

I found my grandma almost unconscious from the choking gas. I couldn't breathe and felt light-headed. Then, I grabbed my grandma, put her on a blanket and dragged her across the room to the bathroom. I locked the door and grabbed all the bath towels and placed them under the door. Then I broke the window to the outside with a soap dish. We could breathe again. I sat next to my grandma who started feeling better. I told her grandpa was sleeping *safely*. We cuddled and she prayed.

I watched the feet of men and women running past our window. Some fell. Others did not stop to

help. The skies continued falling and fires burst somewhere near by because I heard the slow trembling sounds of our house and the cracking noises of the walls I used to get yelled at for drawing on with crayons. We just sat there—tired, numb, praying till the sun showed its glimmering face and the skies stopped falling.

I climbed on the edge of the white bathtub and crawled through the window against my grandma's wishes. As I looked around, there was nothing left. Smoke, fires, sirens, and cries were all that surrounded me. I wanted to find my friend and neighbors. I stepped through the broken bricks, over half burned pictures, and then I noticed "*Tuti*." She was the doll that my friend had when we played house together. I grabbed the doll. Her leg was burned charcoal. Then I fell trying to walk across all the debris. As I got up, I saw a hand. I touched it, but it did not respond. Again, sadness came over me. There were crushed cribs, burning sofas, and scattered albums that were burning. I looked to my left and saw bodies so dismantled, as if tractors had crushed them. Then what caught my attention across the street was a gigantic gash in the hollow land.

I went there and saw the falling sky. It was longer and bigger than anything I had ever seen in my life. On its end, it had four wings. I climbed down the trench and touched it. It was sizzling hot. This creature was in perfect shape. I stood by the wings and remember telling it in tears, "*You are evil, you are evil. I hate you. Look, look at me! I am not afraid of you! I have conquered you because I can touch your ugly hot wings. I can breathe. I am not afraid of death. You can't hold me down by death. I love my grandmother. I stayed with her. Don't you feel, you ugly thing? You haven't broken me; I can still love and breathe. I...*" tears came rolling. Then I was suddenly grabbed by military personnel and told that I was crazy to be next to a live bomb. They had arrived to dismantle it. One of the soldiers took me back across the street, and a stranger took my hand, crying, "*My babies are all gone! All of them ... oh God, why? Why? What am I to do?*" I let her hug me and we both sat crying among the smoke, fires, and bodies all over.

All in all, I had learned of the devastating pains of war. The nauseating smoke had covered me with gray. I could not understand why. I asked *Tuti*, "*Why can't this all stop...why?*" One single night in war caused unbelievable pain and destruction. My grandma and I survived and lived through that and many more war torn nights.

Yet the inner strength to make decisions about life and death helped to make me a changed little girl. That night in 1984 took with it close to 10,000 innocent civilians. Yet I survived those falling skies and still live on.

Today is the year 2001. The story does not end happily ever after. I cannot say that life is any easier. Each moment of my life is a struggle to survive. When thunderstorms and lightning bring on that melancholy rain, the sounds are those of the bombings. Memories strike me numb with each lightning. I battle. It seems like my whole life has been affected because I am different.

In September 2001, Horrific attacks shatter and kill thousands of lives in New York City. And so I battle again. Right after the plane crashes, someone from the college campus walks to me and says, "Why don't you all Muslims go back to where you came from!" I say nothing. Sometimes silence speaks louder than a thousand words. During the next few days, I hear a few more comments. There are times I just want to tell them, "Look, I am not Muslim. But I am from Iran." Yet my moral conscience tells me that by saying those words, nothing changes. What if I was Muslim? I would rather let them think that I am and stay in solidarity with the innocent victims being targeted than make myself look better.

I have fought a rough battle to make it to college and will stay till I finish. That has been my toughest fight. Pain, depression, and flashbacks and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder have made each day at school difficult. In order to go on, I tell myself every morning that I have an obligation to help make a better world because of what I have learned through suffering.

I have come to realize that the most difficult dilemmas or ethical obligations come from within our souls. When I was eight, I did not sit and think whether I should run or stay. As a child, it was a given. My love was stronger than my fear of death. Even if I were to die, I would have died with my grandmother. I would have never left her there to die alone. As a child, my decisions in the dilemma came without even really considering other options. Love was the key that conquered evil.

I did not buy love at a supermarket. I was innately born with the capability to love. We all have that capacity, even animals do. I had never known the stranger that came to me crying. Yet I let her hug me and tell me her pain of losing five children. I could have run away from her. She was full of dirt and blood. Yet I knew that we were not strangers. None of us are strangers, even if we look different, pray differently, or act differently.

Moral decisions would be so easy if we were not afraid to let go of our comfort zones, positions, titles, and the personal lives we bury ourselves in. Why is it that we keep our distance from strangers or those who ask for our help? Why are we afraid to open our doors and hearts to those who suffer? Why should it take terrible devastation and the loss of one million lives in an eight-year battle to realize that war is wrong and meaningless? Why did ninety thousand soldiers in Iran under the age of fifteen have to die? I believe the answers lie in our fears of letting go of personal boundaries, control and comfort.

When we are stripped of all materials, clothes, titles, and degrees, we see how similar we are. I think about the gas in the room that was slowly choking us. I remember the physical feeling and pain while we thought we were dying. I remember and feel my panic as the air was sucked out of my chest. And then I think about the gas chambers in World War II. I feel and see in my mind's eye, the pain, tears, fears, and the bond of strangers coming together. When the mothers and children were stripped and lined to enter death, there no longer existed titles, degrees, nor did they matter. Love and comfort of the fellow beings around them was all that mattered.

I am convinced we are born with an innate understanding of right and wrong. It is called our conscience. But it is the personal choices that we make that alter the road of what should be ethically sound. We tell ourselves, "It's not my place or problem to say, do, or open my heart's door to strangers." That is when pain, suffering and evil grow and become stronger, overshadowing our love and sameness. As a child, I saw the falling skies. As an adult I struggle frequently seeing the same devastations occurring in our world now.

This very minute that I am writing, there are children and families dying because of war and its aftermaths. Had I the power within me, I would help all my fellow strangers. But that is not possible. What is possible is using my moral obligations to love, care, help, and open my heart to anyone that needs it within my own small world. Even if we begin small, change will take place for the better. I trust we live in order to learn to love and then to pass on that love until we breathe our last.

Caring and seeing the word *love* on a broader perspective where it covers all of humanity is how I have learned to meet my moral obligations. I *can* write. By writing of my experiences, maybe I can make a small difference and awaken hearts that are so absorbed in their jobs, careers, their own families or material successes. Overall, it is not what we do that counts. It is how we do it, all this because of the meaning of pain and life I experienced at a young age.

As I persist with my college education as a future teacher of young children, I want to reach and teach the young minds that will someday enter my classroom. My hope is to look at children and let them know how special each one of them is. No matter what struggles, disabilities, or circumstances they come from, when they are in my room, they are equal and loved. They will study about all children their age that live in other countries. I want them to learn about diversity, tolerance, and other societies. My life has made me a very strong advocate of tolerance.

I am a strong believer that if we want a society which does not devalue human life, we have to begin with the young children. They are the next generation and need to learn to reflect on themselves and others in the world. It is my job to speak against violence, prejudice, child abuse, and discrimination of children who have needs. I believe this is where it all begins. As an advocate and future teacher of children, I will start with the small classroom of young minds. Change begins small. Tolerance requires a single seed. I will do my part by placing the good seed. No matter what wars, pains, or sufferings life brings forth, we need to pass the good seed and help it reach high. The skies might fall, but light remains and doves still *fly* above the daunting human flaws.

Unethical Interpretations by an (otherwise) Ethical Postman by Donna R. Bormann

The sky was gorgeous that fall evening when I turned onto my country road, driving the last mile home slowly so I could savor a few moments of solitude before facing evening chores. Staring at the surreal shape of the clouds as they spread across the orange, red horizon, I was lost in thought, “What would I make for dinner and how will I get the kitchen cleaned, sort the laundry, iron those shirts, help my daughter with her history project and still finish my English paper. . .whoa, what in heaven’s name?!” My foot slammed the brake to the floor as the car skidded over loose gravel, before coming to a stop, mere inches short of the little man standing at the edge of my driveway, next to the mailbox.

He appeared to be agitated, wringing his hands and pacing around the mailbox talking to himself, seemingly oblivious of the car that nearly took him out. I, on the other hand, was shaking like a leaf and my legs felt like gelatin! As the adrenaline began to subside, I jumped out of the car, “I am so sorry, I wasn’t expecting anyone to be around here and, and, well, just who are you, and what are you doing in our driveway anyway?” I asked, now getting just a little nervous and angry. ¹

He began to ramble, though I couldn’t be sure at first if it was to me or to himself, “This is terrible, just terrible, terrible, terrible! How someone like *me* could be doing this, or even had

considered to have started, is so beyond comprehension that it seems a spell has been cast upon me! It's just that, well, well, her poetry is so strange and different, yet so very intriguing – why, it adds a whole other dimension to thought! I mean, one must use every bit of one's intellect and focus to even begin to grasp her verse. Oh, it's just useless! I have been drawn in, seduced by Ms. Dickinson, or the 'cracked poetess,'² as she is sometimes referred to by those who do not understand the command that she possesses of the English language. There seems to be no turning back for me, I need my Emily 'fix.'”

“Alright, now you have me completely confused!” I interjected, as I reached into my car to grab my cell phone. “I know who Emily Dickinson is – as a matter of fact, I've been studying her and her poetry, and to be truthful with you, I'm one of those people who struggle to understand her. But if you don't tell me very soon who *you* are and what you are doing *here*, I am going to have to call for help!”

Finally looking at me as though my words had sunk into his awareness, he began to explain, “Oh dear, how rude of me, please allow me to start from the beginning so you will understand. You see, I am but a lowly mail carrier. Most do not know, nor do they care to know, about my interest in poetry and prose. I carry mail for many in Amherst, Pennsylvania, including, no less, the household of Mr. Edward Dickinson. Now, there could be one explanation for Ms. Dickinson's reclusive behavior,³ but that's for another time and another conversation. As I was saying, I carry mail for the Dickinson household, and let me tell you, Ms. Emily keeps my bag fairly full – she is quite definitely job security for me!” he chuckled. “Well, one day as I was sorting the daily post, one of the letters must have slipped from an unsealed envelope, for it was loose within the other mail. Please, please understand that I am a person of the utmost integrity in all matters and an honest and ethical citizen. I would normally never dream of intruding on another's private correspondence – especially being a mail carrier and protecting the sanctity of my daily post. However, in this particular instance it was as if some mysterious force (perhaps Ms. Dickinson herself planned it?) compelled me to unfold the thin piece of paper. Once I began, I could not stop! Of course, I am certainly confessing to much greater crimes to this date, because since then I have had to resort to deviousness to be able to partake of Ms. Dickinson's poetry, as she seems to refuse publication.⁴ I cannot even believe today that I am telling you this story!”

I stared at him not knowing what to say – is this man crazy or am I dreaming? After a few speechless moments, I asked him, “So, I am to believe that you are Emily Dickinson's mail carrier and what . . . you've traveled over 100 years into the future to tell me about her?”

“You must certainly find this very peculiar,” he responded, “but it seems I have done just that – ‘traveled’ from 1883 to, ah, what year is it exactly?”

“2001,” I replied.

A look of surprise crossed his face for just a moment and then quiet calm seemed to settle in, “If forced to speculate, I would have to say that this must be some sort of penance for my misdeeds.

Certainly, Ms. Emily’s prose and poetry can be very difficult to understand – as you have said, you are struggling. For some reason, though, her poetry works for me and I enjoy it immensely.”

“When my crime first began,” he continued, “the mysterious and passionate writings of this otherwise seemingly demure lady, consisted mostly of beautiful poetry and prose concerning the creatures of nature and nature itself, as observed in her garden, I am sure. One particular poem holds fast in my mind and causes me to think of her each year at the first snowfall. The poem is about “jolly snowflakes”⁵ and how observing them, she was actually inspired to dance! I can imagine her dancing in circles in her garden as the snow falls softly, swirling around her skirts,” he said, as he began to recite, “I counted till they danced so/Their slippers leaped the town,/And then I took a pencil/To note the rebels down,/And then they grew so jolly/I did resign the prig,/And ten of my once stately toes/Are marshaled for a jig!”

“That really is a beautiful verse,” I agreed, “but it seems to me that she also often expressed some very deep thoughts about God and eternity, a subject that is of special interest to me.”

Now he looked me straight in the eye as he replied, “I cannot be sure exactly how Ms. Emily feels about *Him*. As you have observed, many of her poems do express beautiful thoughts about heaven and some are even based on biblical stories, as I am sure you have noticed, if you indeed read much of her poetry. Contrary to these loving thoughts, though, Ms. Dickinson has always stood in firm opposition to the revival meetings often held in Amherst and as well, she has never become a member of any church.⁶ There have been many rumors tossed about regarding her faith, especially with a father so strict. In reality, it is quite impossible to judge Ms. Dickinson either way at this time, which is, I believe to her great delight. Perhaps she wishes not to share her faith anymore than she is willing to share her company with others.”

The little mailman seemed to have drifted back to the 19th century in thought, for his eyes stared at the now starry sky, not really noticing his surroundings. Despite the fact that this whole situation was very strange, I was beginning to feel a measure of comfort with him. Suddenly, he spoke, “Does it bother you, having a cemetery just down the road from your home?”

I thought for a moment before responding, “Well, not really. I can’t see it from here, and though I pass it often, my mind is usually on other things and I scarcely notice the place. But now that you mention the cemetery, it makes me think to ask you if you know anything about why Emily focused so much on death in her verse, sometimes with a positive slant, but many times in a dread-filled fashion. Some say that she must have been obsessed with death, using it so often in her poetry. Have you noticed this as well?”

“Aha,” He responded, “you too have observed Ms. Dickinson’s seeming preoccupation! I myself have pondered whether the cemetery just beyond *her* kitchen window,⁷ when the family lived on North Pleasant Street, was a daily reminder to her of the pain and suffering and the great anguish she seems to take upon herself at the loss of those very close to her heart. For it seems, through the years, Ms. Emily has been touched very deeply by the deaths she has been forced to endure among family and friends. How understandable such a thing is really, as death sometimes seems so common in our world, yet so unexpected.”

“Well,” I said, “to be honest, while I enjoy reading her poetry more and more all the time, I am somewhat bothered by some of her verse. After reading too many of the more negative poems, like ‘’Twas warm – at first – like Us,’ or ‘I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,’ I could easily begin to feel depressed. Then too there are poems like, ‘One dignity delays for all,’ which has a completely different tone than the first two. By the way, we refer to her untitled poems by the first line, since she usually didn’t title them.”

“Oh,” he responded, “that is an irritating habit of hers – I truly wish she would title them! Now, that last poem you mentioned was one I came across in about 1859, and I agree with your observation that the poem obviously addresses death, but in a different tone. This poem truly touched my heart in such a way that I could imagine death to be an almost regal – or at the very least dignified – event. Her skill in using metaphor, naming death ‘dignity,’ is really quite clever. We are all going to die, but it is not often that death is referred to in such a positive term. Then, the deceased person is carried in a coach, by footmen no less, with chamber, and state and throng coming out to pay their respects. Why, it all sounds more like a celebration, don’t you think?”

“I agree,” I replied, “and she uses good images too, of bells ringing in the village as they ride along grandly, everyone pausing to raise their hat. I can just see the crowd as I read the verse. Those lines certainly do add to the dignified tone of this piece and the feeling of a noble celebration taking place, rather than the somber connotation one would normally associate with a funeral.”

“Quite right,” he added, “and we have not even discussed Ms. Emily’s use of exclamation

marks throughout this poem. These cause me to feel as though I must read it with more energy or intensity, adding a robust tone to the piece. But the last line – that is the cream on the milk for me. Don't you think that saying 'and claim the rank to die!' alludes to a battle won, a victory, adding another tone – one of serenity? One should always be sure to read her poems several times over, allowing the images to sink into consciousness. After doing so myself, I have come to the conclusion that she is trying to tell me that, though I will die, just as you and everyone else will, it is all right, we need not fear."

"So," he continued, "just as I had this verse memorized – I recite them to myself while I walk my post each day – and I was feeling pretty good about my unavoidable and inescapable death, along comes that other poem you mentioned, 'Twas warm – at first – like Us.' Talk about opposites! The tone of that one is certainly not dignified! If you remember, the first verse of that one begins:

'Twas warm – at first – like Us –

Until there crept upon

A Chill – like frost upon a Glass –

Till all the scene – be gone.

Oh! I get a chill myself just reciting it again! The tone Ms. Emily used in this poem is downright dreadful. Why, just recite a few of the terms she used to create such a dismal image for the reader: crept, chill, stone, cold, ache, congealed, indifference, dropped and adamant. Her very use of such negative language causes the heart to drop in my chest as I read it, much like the dead body at the end of the poem being lowered into the earth!

The second verse is even worse than the first!

The Forehead copied Stone –

The Fingers grew too cold

To ache – and like a Skater's Brook –

The busy eyes – congealed –

Her use of simile in describing the dead, causes the reader to easily imagine the blue-gray face, like stone, the cold rigid fingers, the unseeing eyes, like a frozen pond, as though the person

had died with the eyes open – staring ahead – void of life. Ms. Dickinson has truly written a horror-filled account of death in this poem.”

“Wow, you really hit that one right on!” I replied, “The tone is definitely dread-filled and when I read the poem, it actually makes me afraid of death – even though I have claimed that I am not, because of my faith. But irregardless of the tone, and whether or not you or I like this particular poem, one has to admit that she has done such a marvelous job of both the use of imagery and chilling language – putting the reader right there, watching the body grow cold, ready for the grave – we cannot help but admire her for such talent.”

“Now, the other depressing poem I mentioned,” I continued, “‘I felt a Funeral,’ actually makes me feel sad for Emily. It seems to me like she must have been depressed herself to have written this poem. Her strong use of imagery and almost what I would consider synesthesia causes me to feel like I can actually see the dark dress of the mourners and feel the heaviness of their hearts and then hear all the Heavens as a bell, loud and oppressive. Also, her repetition of the words, beating – beating and treading – treading, drags down the tone of the verse. Then, the ‘boots of lead,’ symbolizing death again as a heavy weight that we cannot escape and once again the dropping down – plunging, brings about a lot of the same dread feelings. Are you familiar with this poem?”

“Sure,” he replied, “I have read it. It is interesting that you should observe the idea of depression. Many in our little village feel that Ms. Emily has indeed suffered from depression and that is why she secludes herself from the rest of the world so completely. The stories going ’round are, as far as I know, rumors only, but number many. I suppose this is because of her peculiar choice in life and the fact that people need something, or someone, to talk about in passing the time – a pity. Years ago, before she secluded herself strictly to her father’s home, I would often see her going into or coming out of the bookshop near the post office⁸ and she certainly appeared a very happy young lady. The little postman thought for a few more moments and then continued, “I do not claim to understand how Ms. Dickinson could write poems so obviously different in tone, each dealing with the same matter. But then, who could claim to understand this mysterious poetess at all? Perhaps we should spend less time trying to understand her and more time enjoying her blessed talent of managing the English language!”

“Well said,” I agreed, “but now I really need to get in the house! My children must be wondering what is going on – I just saw them peek out the window. If I hurry, I may be able to get some of our thoughts on paper before they escape me. What will you do now?”

“Oh, don’t you give too much care to worrying about me,” he suggested, “I have a feeling I will be home soon and one thing is sure – I must put a halt to this terrible, unethical habit of

mine! I thank you for this most delightful conversation – it is refreshing to know that folks will come to appreciate Ms. Dickinson’s verse. She has certainly lured, if not seduced me, into wanting more of it – even as I say this, I feel the need to read on!” With those words he turned and headed down the dark and silent country road and I turned to get back in my car.

As I started the engine and turned on the headlights, expecting to see the outline of his small, dark figure, I was quite surprised to see nothing. I pulled ahead and strained to see him, but he was gone. How very providential of him to show up at my mailbox on this lovely fall evening. But then, it certainly was not just by chance – don’t you agree?

How pomp surpassing ermine

When simple You, and I,

Present our meek escutcheon

And claim the rank to die!

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum –

Kept beating – beating – till I thought

My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box

And creak across my Soul

With those same Boots of Lead, again,

Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race

Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,

And I dropped down, and down –

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing – then –

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

1 My children were in the house alone, so naturally a strange man in the driveway was disturbing.

2 From a letter written by T.W. Higginson to his sister in 1876.

3 Edward Dickinson was deeply devoted to his duties as a responsible citizen of Amherst and was a strict Puritan. He was a central figure in almost every civic project during his time, besides his position as a local lawyer. Emily once said, “I am not well acquainted with father.” Mr. Dickinson held absolute authority in the Dickinson household. A story once related by Lavinia, Emily’s sister, to Mrs. Aurelia Davis, who told it to Mary Lee Hall, reported that “Miss Vinnie told me many times that she and Emily feared their father as long as he lived, and loved him after his death.”

4 In reading The World of Emily Dickinson, by Polly Longworth, I learned that many of Emily’s friends wished to help her get her poetry published, but Emily refused – she was not seeking fame in her works.

5 “Snow flakes,” written about 1858, was one of the few poems Emily Dickinson titled.

6 When Emily Dickinson was growing up in Pennsylvania, there were many religious “revival meetings” held throughout Amherst and the surrounding area, which were very well attended.

7 I first learned of the cemetery from the video biography, *Emily Dickinson A Certain Slant of Light*. Later in reading a book by Polly Langsworth on the world of Emily Dickinson (primarily pictorial), I found that the cemetery was near their home on Mt. Pleasant.

8 The post office in Amherst was in a white brick building at the end of the street referred to as Merchant's Row. The J.S. and C. Adams bookshop, considered the literary center of the village, where many volumes in the Dickinson library were purchased, was only two doors to the left of the post office.

One dignity delays for all

One dignity delays for all –

One mitred Afternoon –

None can avoid this purple –
Crown!

None evade this

Coach, it insures, and footmen – 5

Chamber, and state, and throng –

Bells, also, in the village

As we ride grand along!

What dignified Attendants! 10

What service when we pause!

How loyally at parting
raise!

Their hundred hats they

How pomp surpassing ermine

When simple You, and I,

Present our meek escutcheon

And claim the rank to die! 15

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

20

'Twas warm – at first – like Us

'Twas warm – at first – like Us –

Until there crept upon

A chill – like frost upon a Glass –

Till all the scene – be gone.

The Forehead copied Stone – 5

The Fingers grew too cold

To ache – and like a Skater's Brook –

The busy eyes – congealed –

It straightened – that was all – 10

It crowded Cold to Cold –

It multiplied indifference –

As Pride were all it could –

And even when with Cords –

'Twas lowered, like a Weight –

It made no Signal, nor demurred,

But dropped like Adamant. 15

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,

And Mourners to and fro

Kept treading – treading – till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,

A Service, like a Drum –

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And I dropped down, and down –

And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing – then –

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Works Cited

Dickinson, Emily. The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson.
Vol 1. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955.

I have read many poems from this collection to better acquaint myself with Emily Dickinson's poetry. I wanted to get a better overview of what she wrote about most commonly, since my focus in this paper was on the subject of death and it is very well known that she used this subject often.

Higgins, David. Portrait of Emily Dickinson The Poet and Her Prose. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967.

The introduction to this book gave me an excellent insight into Ms. Dickinson's prose letters. She wrote hundreds of letters, including poetry in most and, in fact, eventually kept her friendships through letters exclusively. Learning this fact about her life was what gave me the idea of using her "postman" to discuss her poetry.

Longworth, Polly. The World of Emily Dickinson. W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1990.

This primarily pictorial view of Emily Dickinson's world, focusing on Amherst and how it changed throughout Ms. Dickinson's lifetime, was a great book for me, being a very visually oriented person. I was able to glean some interesting facts, as well, to enrich my story of the "postman," making it a little more believable.

Sewall, Richard B. The Life of Emily Dickinson. 2 vols. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974.

This biography starts with a chronology, which is quite useful in that it gave me a good overview of Emily Dickinson's life from birth to death and how all of the life events I have already learned of fit together. I was able to learn more about certain events in her life that may have effected her poetry, i.e. the death of so many close family and friends over a relatively short span of time. This book also devotes a chapter to each of Emily's family members and major events in her life, helping me to easily find information about little facts picked up from other sources and study them further.

Emily Dickinson A Certain Slant of Light. Dir. Bayley Silleck. Perf. Julie Harris. Videocassette. M/S Productions, 1977.

I watched this video twice completely through. It reinforced some of the information I had picked up from reading previously. I was also interested to learn that there was a cemetery outside of Emily's kitchen window, which fit perfectly into my paper. Again, being a very visual person, the film was of special interest to me in that I could see her actual home, the room in which she spent hours at her little writing table and other little things, like the basket on her windowsill that she used to lower her baked treats (she loved to bake) to the neighbor children. All of these things, to me, make Emily Dickinson a very real person, just like anyone else and helped to erase the "legend" that some authors first sought to give to her in their depictions of her life.

Works Consulted

Cotter, Holland. "Sights Trained Yet Again on Amherst's Elusive Belle." New York Times 14 Oct. 1999: E2.

This article was of interest in my research of Emily Dickinson because it offered me a view of what people today are thinking and saying about Emily and her work. The last paragraph of this article said something that I have come to learn as I have researched Ms. Dickinson to be truth, *"Dickinson filtered her life through her art, which is one of indirection. 'The truth must dazzle gradually,' she cautioned. So it does. That's why we endlessly recopy and reread her words, why we revisit relics like those at Harvard, and why, reversing the ordinary physics of fame, she seems to grow more luminous the further she retreats in time."*

Miller, Ruth. Emily Dickinson. Dictionary of literary Biography. Ed. Joel Myerson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978. 34-45

This brief biography was my first introduction to the life of Emily Dickinson, so I read it in it's entirety and have reread some parts over again to refresh my memory while researching. The facts opened my eyes to many things about her life and poetry – and the many myths surrounding them. This biography also steered my to other good sources to continue research.

The Seed Took Root by Francis C. Lehner, Ph.D.

In October 1938, Rev. E. A. Fitzgerald, then Dean of Studies at Loras, prepared the soil for a national Catholic academic honor society when he sent a questionnaire on the issue to one

hundred and twenty Catholic colleges and universities. Encouraged by the strongly favorable response to his poll, Father Fitzgerald was ready to plant the seed; in April 1939, in an address to the National Catholic Education Association, he reported the results of his probe and talked up the idea of an honor society. The seed took root quickly. A Committee of Founders, consisting of thirty-two prominent educators, was formed, and Father Fitzgerald, elected chairman, appointed three committees: one on constitution, one on name and motto, and one on insignia. In March 1940, a constitutional convention convened in Kansas City. There a provisional one-year constitution was adopted, to be followed by a permanent one, and chapters were granted to thirty-two schools that had previously applied for membership. Delta Epsilon Sigma had blossomed into being. In recognition of Father Fitzgerald's generative efforts, Loras College was designated Alpha Chapter.

In the half century since that time, Alpha Chapter has been a vital unit in the society. Over the years several Loras educators have filled national offices. Rev. E. A. Fitzgerald, Rev. F. J. Houlahan, Rev. Norbert C. Barrett, Rev. Clarence W. Friedman, Rev. Robert L. Ferring and Rev. Neil W. Tobin all served as National Secretary-Treasurer. Father Friedman, after he had left Loras to take a position with the NCEA, served as a member of the Executive Committee. After he had left Loras to become pastor of Sacred Heart parish in Dubuque, Rev. Neil Tobin was elected National Vice President in 1982 and President in 1984. From 1963 to 1978 Dr. Frank Lehner edited the *DES Bulletin*. Dr. Donna Bauerly was a member of the Executive Committee from 1995 to 2000.

On the local level, the record is equally impressive. There can be no doubt that over the years members of Alpha Chapter have contributed considerable intellectual and cultural leaven to life at Loras. More specifically, one can point to the annual DES seminars and to the tutoring service provided by the chapter for students needing academic assistance. In 1985, under the leadership of moderator Dr. Donna Bauerly, the chapter preceded (one would like to say anticipated) the national officers by some five years when it launched a college-wide writing competition in four areas—fiction, essay, non-fiction, and poetry. Each year winners' works are printed in a journal. Last year, 2001, was another great year for *Alpha* Chapter. Students again won three prizes in this National Undergraduate Writing Contest: second place went to Katherine Leventhal for her non-fiction "Saturday" and to Cressant Swarts for her poem "Grass Fires." Honorable Mention was awarded to Melanie Mausser for her fiction "The Crate." Last year's winner for the DES Fellowship went to Celia Venhuizen and Elizabeth Rogers received the Delta Epsilon Sigma National Student Award. This year, 2002, *Alpha* Chapter continues its winning ways: second place in fiction went to Erich Haught for his piece "Pressures" and another second place for poetry went to Celia Venhuizen for her poems "'Mute" and Erosion." An Honorable Mention was awarded to Lacie Schmitt for her non-fiction piece "Climbing Out." The Delta Epsilon Sigma National Student Award went to Karen Kuhle. Only one award is given per Chapter, based on an overall grade point average of 3.9-4.0. Alpha Chapter recipient for the DES scholarship of

2002 is Maria Alarcon. The annual chapter dinner, long a tradition here, not only serves as a function for the induction of new members but in a sense honors all chapter members who attend. Father Fitzgerald's idea of an honor society to foster intellectual and academic achievement is alive and well at Loras College.

In a composition class many years ago, during a digression on, as I recall, overemphasis on high school sports, a student remarked on the great thrill of winning an important football or basketball game. I asked if it had ever occurred to him that other people might get a similar thrill of achievement from composing a sonnet or writing a short story. He just looked at me. But the entrants in this year's writing competition, and especially the winners whose work appears in this publication, surely know whereof I speak. Samuel Johnson was wrong when he said, in what must have been a cynical moment, that only a blockhead ever wrote for anything but money. For writers, seeing one's work in print ranks high among the pleasures of life.

(Alpha will continue to include Dr. Lehner's ever-timely article as a tribute to this dedicated DES member who was Editor of the Society's Journal for fifteen years.)

Contributors

Bormann, Donna LaMotte, IA English: Writing

Egan, Laura Sumner, IA English: Writing

Golpashin, Rosette Dubuque, IA Unified Early

Childhood Education

Griskavich, Emily Madison, WI English: Literature
Secondary Education

Kieffer, Lisa Galena, IL English: Literature
Teacher Education

Lubben, Ryan Redlands, CA English: Literature

Lucas, Peggy Waterloo, IA English: Literature
English: Writing

McCarthy, Jenni Mason City, IA Business: Marketing

McManus, Patrick Des Moines, IA English: Literature
English: Writing
Philosophy

Murphy, Angela Rockford, IL MFL: Spanish

Slaght, Robin	Dubuque, IA	English: Literature
		English: Writing
		MFL: Spanish

Swarts, Cressant	Independence, IA	English: Literature
		English: Writing

Toale, Andrea	Independence, IA	English: Writing
		Business: Marketing

Wolbers, Brianna	Dubuque, IA	English: Literature
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Delta Epsilon Sigma “It is the mission of a wise person to put things in order.”