

# sweet : 2.1

September 2009

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## Letter from the Editor

The first day of workshop for my undergraduate poetry classes was last Friday. I selected the student who would have his poem discussed first; he had shown himself to be sassy enough that a little criticism wouldn't throw him. After a workshop that started out positive and moved hesitantly and respectfully into critique, I gave him, as I always do, a brief moment to respond. He said, "Thanks. I mean, thanks for taking my poem seriously enough to talk about it like this. You all probably want to be poets or writers, and I'm just doing this major to keep my grades up for law school."

Yes, a small part of me cringed at the overtly expressed idea that creative writing is "easy" compared to other college disciplines, but I had to laugh. I said, "Just watch out. I tried law school, too, and found myself writing poems during Civil Procedure. You might get hooked on this stuff."

It's true. I did go to law school for a semester, and I did find myself writing poems during Civil Procedure, especially after I suggested in class that I would actually disclose what I was supposed to disclose to the opposing side in a lawsuit and so became an ongoing example of lawyerly naiveté.

I dropped out after a classmate confessed to me that his only happiness for the day was choosing what music he'd listen to in the shower each morning. There were other reasons, but I wanted more chances at happiness than that.

I was young. Happiness isn't the right way to say it, what I wanted. I wanted to have to think about how to live with loss, how to tell the hard things, how to imagine death. I wanted words to give me some direction and images to carry some of the weight of my emotions. I wanted to try to understand the world, and the way I understood best was through words.

I don't think all lawyers should be killed. But maybe they should be forced to tithesome of their income to those other guardians of society, the writers and the poets. Maybe I should suggest that to my student. Who knows? He may even come to agree.

—Katherine Riegel

## *Penelope Scambly Schott*

### **Here's How I Used to Make Myself Cry**

The little white ceramic horse  
who came in a tea box and didn't whinny.

The way the tape measure snapped  
its yellow tongue back into its square shell.

Not to mention the giant pinking shears  
shutting those zigzag crocodile teeth.

I hid like a spy in the high attic dormer  
as the neighbor opened her dollhouse door.

How nobody in the world knew I was there,  
how the warm inner crook of my elbow

tasted like honeysuckle,  
how I held myself in my own arms.

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### **There Once Was a Horse who Loved his Bells**

The dark cortege of carriages careens to the dump,  
dashing forth to hold cold court among rats and rot.

From which cruel window will a curtained face  
curse the little cart horse as he canters the cobbled lane?

But the dear little horse just lifts his hoof and twitches  
his coarse hairiness. Hear his bells ring. Nothing,

not even the bare brassiness of his unpolished buckles,  
the ochre brown of blindered eyes, can ever disguise

his own mute gladness.

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PENELOPE SCAMBLY SCHOTT'S most recent books are *May the Generations Die in the Right Order* and a verse biography *A is for Anne: Mistress Hutchinson Disturbs the Commonwealth* which won the Oregon Book Award for Poetry. She lives in Portland, Oregon where she writes, hikes, grades papers, and spoils her husband, dog, and grandson. Although she is old enough to know better, she is considering getting a tattoo. (a very discreet dragonfly?)

You can find some of Penelope's work online [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

## *Megan Gannon*

### **History**

Our most persistent nightmare  
is of aftermath and a child  
patrolling the silent shells  
of buildings, the city a kingdom  
of loose curtains, eyeless high-rises,  
and nowhere a home for smoke.  
Understand, it's not as if  
we left him there. His shoes  
are sturdy and he has no need  
for food. If I gave him a curfew  
and nothing else, not even a pack  
of matches, you wouldn't worry.  
You'd watch him lay hands  
against the flanks of buildings,  
watch him turn to the white-eyed  
shapes of statues and give comfort  
with his permanence-- the way  
the living watch the grieving  
and weigh them down with fingerprints,  
with a blood contract for more  
stories and blankets of wild breath.



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### **Vows**

In the dream  
worth keeping  
we're watching  
both windows,  
view of constant  
tenuousness, branches  
quivering with just-  
landing or the push  
preceding flight, who  
can say. We're told  
they mate for life;

we would too, if  
we had wings.  
But how, when so much  
surrounding us  
is ground, meaning  
once even this  
stillness we walk on  
was grinding, skin,  
saliva, bone,  
and leaf and the chaff  
is older than any  
standing.

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MEGAN GANNON'S poems have appeared in publications such as *Ploughshares*, *Pleiades*, *Third Coast*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Best American Poetry 2006*. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Nebraska where she is revising a novel entitled, *Cumberland*. She lives in Omaha with her husband, poet Miles Waggener, and her son, Manny.

Some of Megan's work can be found online [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

## *Kelle Groom*

### **Hôtel Dieu**

It was a medieval hall of four hundred beds  
for the sick poor between the cathedral  
and river in a green city where the people

disrobed, lying down like bridges.  
One king washed their feet, though in those  
days, disease was said to be a punishment

for sin—the hospital a city block that's still  
invisible as if the stone had turned to sky.  
In the hospital, a woman counted my ribs

beginning just below my throat:  
numbered the bones that saved my heart.  
Another woman wears a pink shirt that says,

*Another Boyfriend Please*, opening her daughter's  
koolaid drink with her teeth, having a potato  
chip picnic in the corner. A freckle-faced man

turns my palm up, says *I like the freckles  
on your arm*, tells me to put my arm around  
his neck when I begin to fall, makes me a red

velvet pillow bed under white paper,  
and brings me cup after cup of water, tells me  
I can go days without food, but my blood

won't circulate without water,  
though I'd thought it ran on  
its own race track, the chain mail

of my ribs facing out so I could glide  
into the ocean, seagulls carrying stars  
in their mouths, dropping them from the sky

to crack open on the sea round rocks, the path  
of rocks leading into the horizon not here,  
invisible, but I can feel it saying, *come along*.

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KELLE GROOM'S third poetry collection, *Five Kingdoms*, will be published by Anhinga Press in December 2009. Her previous collections are *Luckily*, a 2006 Florida Book Award winner (Anhinga), and *Underwater City* (University of Florida, 2004).

Her poems and essays have appeared in *AGNI*, *DoubleTake*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, and *Witness*, among others. Groom's awards include fellowships and scholarships from Atlantic Center for the Arts, Millay Colony for the Arts, Sewanee Writers' Conference, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and grants from the State of Florida, Division of Cultural Affairs, Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, United Arts of Central Florida, Volusia County Cultural Council, and New Forms Florida.

A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her work was recognized as notable in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2007*. Groom is a contributing editor for *The Florida Review* and lives in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. She loves blueberries and granola.

## *Alison Luterman*

### **Earthquakes**

So many so small go on day and night  
under your feet you barely notice.

A big bang sounds like the neighbors upstairs  
knocking over their refrigerator, and you ask,

*Why knock over your refrigerator?*  
while friends turn pale and head for the doorjambs.

*No, no, it's just some guy*  
*accidentally upending his refrigerator, you insist.*

*Maybe he's drunk.* You're so good at making up explanations,  
you miss the moments things shift

for real, red tulips beginning to wilt in their vase,  
their hot lipstick mouths puckering like dowagers,

or the way a marriage curdles;  
milk left out too long.

You're standing on sand,  
(you're always standing on sand,)

but it's not the same sand as a wave ago,  
everything has swept in and out,

regardless of whether you believe in death

who says, *Alright, fine, don't believe in me,*

or who doesn't say anything at all,  
just goes about his death business,

loosening lover's arms from their embraces,  
liberating teeth from their gums.

The yellow and brown crumpled gloves  
of last year's fig leaves

lie abandoned in front of your house,  
summer mittens someone has to sweep up

and touch, someone has to notice and mourn,  
while the garbage trucks roll on, implacable.

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ALISON LUTERMAN'S first book of poems is *The Largest Possible Life*, published by Cleveland State University Press. Her second book of poems, *See How We Almost Fly* is available from Pearl Editions ([www.pearlmag.com](http://www.pearlmag.com))

Her website is [www.alisonluterma.com](http://www.alisonluterma.com) and her blog is [seehowwealmostfly.blogspot.com](http://seehowwealmostfly.blogspot.com). She teaches Personal Essay and poetry in the San Francisco bay Area through the Writing Salon ([www.writingsalons.com](http://www.writingsalons.com)) and performs with the improvisational dance troupe Wing It!

## *Diane Lockward*

### **Learning to Live Alone**

Soft as powdered sugar, snow sifted down,  
its dire promise unfulfilled.  
Wind rustled, and the light shifted.

A pile of bricks caught the light and shadows.  
I felt an inexplicable desire  
to count those bricks, to make them mine.

I had the same acquisitive urge for the birdfeeders  
and sparse shrubs stripped by deer.  
Something stirred inside me, like a spurt of heat.

Each of the four birdbaths suddenly seemed special,  
and dozens of sweetgum balls, with their potential  
for pain, strewn across the patio's reliable stones.

The rock garden where grass would not grow,  
pushing up its pachysandra and yellow daylilies  
that will bloom in summer.

Fallen branches, each stick and twig,  
the rough bark on my pine trees—yes, *my* pine trees—  
trees that capitulate to nothing,

and speckled sparrows that light on the lawn  
and peck for food, heads bobbing in assent,  
feathered executives reaching consensus,

then lifting in unison as if on signal,  
up, up into the pines to perch on branches.  
Though winter lingers, they do not abandon me.

Even the chain link fence endures, no matter what  
has happened here, it grows rusty but endures.

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DIANE LOCKWARD'S second collection, *What Feeds Us* (Wind Publications), received the 2006 Quentin R. Howard Poetry Prize. She is also the author of *Eve's Red Dress* (Wind Publications, 2003) and a chapbook, *Against Perfection* (Poets Forum Press, 1998).

Her poetry has been included in anthologies such as *Poetry Daily: 360 Poems from the World's Most Popular Poetry Website* and Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems for Hard Times*, and in such journals as *Harvard Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her poems have also been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. A former high school English teacher, Diane now works as a poet-in-the-schools.

Her favorite dessert is Bocconi Dolci. Diane blogs at Blogalicious: [www.dianelockward.blogspot.com](http://www.dianelockward.blogspot.com) and maintains a website at [www.dianelockward.com](http://www.dianelockward.com).

She can be contacted at [dslockward@gmail.com](mailto:dslockward@gmail.com).

## *Helle Slutz*

### **Yellow**

At ten I stood at the top of a wheat-  
field in Oregon and saw the sunlight saturate  
the wheat and the sky into a tangible color—  
it was the color of the bee, crushed  
under my naked foot, its sting its only claim  
to afterlife. It was the color of honey and  
    I wanted to walk through those bee-swarm hills  
    into the sun.

Into the swoop of summer brilliance,  
Into the color of emperors and of earth,  
of gooseberries bursting  
between the teeth,  
the color of singing and sitars, the color of diving  
into endless warmth that smells of afternoon,  
that smells of grass, slowly bleaching in the heat,  
that smells of certainty and saffron.

    Into that color of paper-cut pain and  
    of a violin played to its highest pitch. Into  
    the color of madness.

I know now that when I die  
I want to burst in safflower streaks  
    across an unraveling sky.

**HELLE SLUTZ** (pronounced “heh-leh sloots”) graduated from Kenyon College with a degree in English and an emphasis on creative writing. She recently moved from Columbus, Ohio to Washington, D.C. to work as a paralegal, and has happily discovered an ice cream shop near her apartment that makes decent pistachio ice cream. She is also passionate about cheese danishes and candied ginger covered with dark chocolate, as well as mango sticky rice and desserts made with mung bean and coconut. Her other publications include three poems published in *Persimmons*, a literary magazine at Kenyon College.

## *Joe Wilkins*

### **Near the End of It, or Six Little Revolutions**

*And children chasing each other for a game  
Through the hills of fresh graves. - James Wright*

#### *One*

Near the end of it he woke in the night on the leather sofa in the front room. There was the light of the moon, and it was hot, and the backs of his naked legs stuck to the couch. Suddenly lucid, he blinked his blue-silver eyes and said, calmly, Sweetheart. Sweetheart, I think I'm dying here.

#### *Two*

Near the end of it she finally understood the clear force and intelligence of the term "with child," for she was with this insistent stranger, this little ice-cream tyrant, as she had been no one else. She knew her husband, the lawyer, was jealous. For he dealt with split decisions and percentage of rewards and things of that nature every day. And now he could only watch and catalogue (but never know) this gap-mouthed dreaminess, their blood mumble of love.

#### *Three*

Near the end of it he headed west on Highway 12 and jacked the truck up to a hundred. Years later he would forget nearly everything that seemed so important at the time—the sunrise of her hair and its smell of earth and apples, the cruel words he said, her astonished and broken eyes—but remember with knee-buckling clarity coming over the last hill into town, when, for a moment, his old truck left the

highway, and he flew.

#### *Four*

Near the end of it she often had to blink the world back into being a dozen times throughout the day. When this quit working, she began throwing whole plates of good food away, speeding for no reason, swearing at her children. She broke things just to feel the give and scatter of them: sticks, plastic cups and dishes, a glass bottle of vinegar. She felt terrible about it all. And she couldn't explain herself beyond the fact that her young husband was dying.

#### *Five*

Near the end of it he opened his eyes and for a moment could not believe the awful softness of the light on her breasts as she moved above him.

#### *Six*

Near the end of it there is the hill of a fresh grave. Near the end of it there is as well that next wet-lipped, lung-hungry breath: After my father's funeral, while the adults ate potato salad and did adult things, I ran in circles and wrestled in the church lawn with all the other boys—our clip-on ties askew, our shirttails flapping in the February breeze. When my turn came, I pinned Cotton Pinkerton to the cold earth in seconds. He said I was lucky. I was so happy.

## Spiritual

Call this day necessary: No, call it sacrament—  
the slow walk to Beards Hollow,  
wind that cools our sun-washed faces,  
spray of river and the river running out  
to sea. Those birds, I know, were sent by God,  
even though by *God* I don't know  
what I mean. I mean, maybe we can blame  
this blessing on right choices, lives lived mostly  
well—the dog who loves us, those few good  
friends, our happy tragedy of ordinary  
lovers. But even in this joy, I know enough of pain  
and shame to say that's all wrong: No one  
deserves this world. The old degraded  
fisherman—his good nets eaten by the turtles,  
the fish always flat and stinking, that one  
mean as spit to children—he may beat us yet  
to heaven. So I call it spiritual when seabirds  
fill the sky with wings, and you claim  
beach grass dances with the water but water  
chooses sky. The hollow smells of wood  
and tar, the rocks a shrine of barnacles and salt—  
no matter the reason, it is given: This wind,  
the way you laugh your dark eyes closed.

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of eastern Montana. He teaches writing at Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa, and has new work forthcoming from or in recent issues of the *Georgia Review*, *the Southern Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Sun*, *Orion*, and *Best New Poets 2009*. Though he appreciates all kinds of sweets, his favorite at the moment is the peach and lavender cobbler his wife made last night. You can find him online at [Ragged Point Road](#).

## What Kind of Father Am I?

*Tim Elhadj*

Twenty-some years ago, I took my son to a Pennsylvania amusement park named for a chocolate bar and discovered I had a lot to learn about being a father. He was a chipper boy of about three-and-a-half. It was a bright summer's day and we were having a good time. He insisted we ride a wild roller coaster that included a loop-the-loop. It seemed like a bad idea to me, but he was relentless: He tugged at my pant leg, screwed up his little sun-baked face and whined. I would have stood a better chance of denying him, had I felt a little more secure in my ability to father him. Or, perhaps, if I had a better sense of the kind of father I wanted to be. As it was, I had neither. Shortly after he was born, his mother had taken him and left me, and my father was dead and gone, leaving me with only the vague notion that I ought to be able to do a better job than he had done with me. It seemed simple enough. But I only had the boy for the afternoon. And more than anything else, I wanted to make him happy.

"You want to ride the SooperDooperLooper?" I asked.

He literally leapt into the air and bounced in a ring around me. His blond crew cut shone, his blue eyes glittered with anticipation.

Part of the SooperDooperLooper's popularity is its low height requirement. Even so, I had to grab Timmy by his armpit and nudge him half an inch skyward to meet the bar. I nodded to the timid teenager collecting tickets and said, "He's good."

Timmy and I snuggled into our seats and drew the security bar across our laps. My boy grinned with palpable excitement. I grinned back. As the car glided away from the platform, my son grew still. Locked into our seats, we started the long, slow pull up that first hill.

"Dad," Timmy said. His voice had a tremble I had never heard before. "I'm not sure I want to do this anymore."

"Well, son," I told him. "It's too late now."

We reached the top of the hill, made a shallow left turn, and then plummeted into the loop. I felt the earth give up its hold on me as we lurched into our ride. Timmy screamed. I wanted to put my arm around him, offer him some small bit of comfort, but forces I didn't quite understand held me firmly in my seat. The best I could muster was a smile through gritted teeth.

Wikipedia tells me this ride lasted for exactly one minute and thirty seconds. When it came to a stop,

Timmy was a mess. He was crying so hard his entire head had turned bright red, like an enormous radish, balanced between bony shoulders.

Taking his hand, I helped him from the car. He leaned away from me, gulping for air between loud, pitiful sobs. We stood like that on the exit platform, me holding onto his hand, him straining to keep his distance, as if he were a small pet dog, pulling at its leash.

A sturdy woman with gay yellow shorts strode up to me from the crowd and looked me right in the eye. "You're a terrible father," she said.

"I know," I sighed.

I certainly felt terrible. I had zero experience with children, no partner with which to weigh-out options and strategies, and just enough animosity for my own father to negate any helpful lessons I might have learned from him. In short, I was a new father. And if these limitations were the type many new fathers face, my greatest drawback hasn't even been listed: I was using heroin on a daily basis. This was why Timmy's mother had left me.

By the time Timmy turned four, I stopped using drugs for good. The circumstances of exactly how this happened aren't all that important, except to say that I then had to really struggle to find a place in Timmy's life beside his stepfather. Whatever other limitations I possess, being a father has always been important to me, something necessary and good, a much-needed piece of who I am, and who I want to be. Eventually I met a new partner, Holly, and started a family with her. Twenty years later, I find myself with ten-year-old twins, a son, Aaron, and a daughter, Kennedy.

Sometimes I think that because I'm not using heroin anymore, I'm automatically a good father. Obviously this isn't true, but it's a tempting idea with evident allure, and I find myself falling into this kind of thinking without even realizing it.

Just as the school year began, a teacher's strike in our Pacific Northwest community caused my children to get an extended vacation before the fifth grade. Summer vacations may seem like lazy days in the shade with frosty glasses of lemonade piled high with ice, but they are actually carefully orchestrated multi-month events that include an extended vacation, the occasional day trip, sport camps, community plays, and a requisite number of ad hoc sleepovers and cookouts. The school year offers a much needed break, but the strike had caught us all off-guard. We struggled to come up with ways to keep the kids entertained.

Holly decided we ought to go to Seattle and rent canoes for a trip through the local arboretum. Although I have never been much of an outdoorsman, it was a crisp, clear day and I wanted to be helpful, especially with the crisis at hand.

Holly sat in the back of the canoe. Aaron was in the bow and one of his little friends was in the middle. They boys were giggling behind dark sunglasses, using their paddles to flick water on one another. Holly shielded her eyes from the glare on the water and shouted directions at me.

"Watch," she shouted. "Careful."

My daughter and I were on the dock, trying to get our canoe into the water. Holly had once owned a sailboat and now, like anyone who has once owned a sailboat, she felt compelled to get all nautical,

barking out commands every chance she got.

I held the boat to the dock for my daughter, then clambered in behind her myself.

To get to the peaceful arboretum waterways, we had to first navigate a narrow shipping lane and then go under a busy overpass. From the dock, it didn't seem like that big a deal. I could see Mount Rainier's snow-covered summit looming beyond the Route 520 overpass. To my left, the glassy expanse of Lake Washington stretched out in the distance. To the right was the Lake Washington Ship Canal, a narrow channel that is the last link in a longer water passage that ultimately connects the Puget Sound with Lake Washington.

Navigating the shipping lane turned into a challenge. I didn't even realize it was a shipping lane until Kennedy and I were well into the middle of it and a large sightseeing boat came bearing down on us. "Holy shit," I thought. I still hadn't quite figured out how to make the canoe go straight.

Holly hollered, "Hurry."

Kennedy and I were paddling against one another, so I asked her to stop. I paddled hard, remembering to stroke the water on alternate sides of the boat. Years earlier at a company picnic, I had taken Kennedy in a canoe and she had been terrified by Jet Skis roaring past and sending us bobbing in their wake. I didn't want to appear scared, but wasn't sure how well I was pulling off my stoic veneer. Kennedy tried to offer me paddling guidance, but in all the excitement, I didn't hear much of what she said.

When I caught up with Holly under the overpass, I gave her a look, like, "Jesus. That was scary." But she just grinned and waved to a few passengers on the deck of the sightseeing boat. She reminded me that the small boats always have the right of way. This observation gave me little comfort.

Kennedy wanted badly to be with her brother and his friend, a boy from her class, for whom she may have entertained a small crush. The three of them were too young to go by themselves and the canoes weren't big enough for four. I tried to entertain her by pointing out turtles and birds, and interesting shapes that appeared in lichen and branch. Kennedy just sighed.

I could feel a strong wind building, but we were mostly sheltered by the trees in the park and the overpass behind us. Once, though, as we navigated through a small clearing, a strong gust of wind howled through the trees and in seconds turned our boat 180 degrees from the direction in which we were headed. I marveled at how easily our course had changed. As the gust slowed, I quickly got us back on course.

We decided to head back.

Coming out from the overpass, we found ourselves exiting the arboretum much farther from the dock than where we entered. There was a strong wind at our backs. Holly suggested we cross the shipping lane immediately, pointing with her head to a wide gap in the number of small yachts and motorboats navigating the lane. She had enough seafaring acumen to suggest our guest hold onto the hull of my canoe, creating a sort of homemade-pontoon boat, which enabled us to stay together as we crossed the shipping lane.

On the other side of the lane, though, the wind changed direction and grew more intense, making it more difficult to reach the dock. With the wind blowing against us, only Holly and Aaron could row. We were making little progress and decided our best bet was to split up. Holly gave the order to let go the hull.

Almost immediately Kennedy and I started to drift with the wind. I put my head down and paddled as hard as I could. Kennedy paddled too. I could feel a slick sheen of sweat growing under my shirt and on my brow. I knew we were not going in the right direction. I paddled harder. I felt certain I could bully my way over to the dock. Splitting up had sent a rift of competitive fever through all the children, but now Kennedy grew still in the bow. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Holly and the boys were still heading in the right direction. The life vest was chaffing my neck, but I dug my oar into the dark water. I was getting winded, my arms and chest were beginning to throb. I now had to turn fully in my seat to get a glimpse of the other canoe. All my hard work was getting us absolutely nowhere. Kennedy and I were heading God knows where—out to sea I imagined.

"Daddy," Kennedy said. Her voice was tight, but not panicked.

"I got it, sweetie. I got it."

I didn't want her to get alarmed but was close to panic myself. We were at least 1000 yards from the nearest shore and perhaps half that distance from the shipping lane where we separated from Holly only minutes ago. Although the lane had lots of boats coming and going, our current position was deserted. I tried to use the paddle as a rudder, but that was hopeless. And without me paddling against the wind, we raced toward... what? I had no idea, the wilderness. More desolation. I twisted my trunk and threw up my hands to signal Holly. Her canoe was now only a speck in the distance. Fuck. It was all I could do not to toss the paddle into the water. All I could think was, Fuck. This is fucked. We're fucked. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Kennedy twisted in her seat. She could tell I was falling apart. I tried to put a good face on it, but the best I could do was smile at her through gritted teeth.

She said, "Don't let a little wind spoil your day."

I totally lost it. Instead of thinking fuck, I started to say it. Over and over in a quiet hiss, like a demented chicken clucking. I clenched my paddle and twisted my eyes shut. When I opened my eyes, Kennedy was a mess. Her lip was pouted and she was close to tears. I apologized immediately but felt utter shame. I wanted to hold her, offer her some small comfort, but moving toward the front of the canoe only made us pitch wildly in the water.

"Daddy, Daddy!" she said. She wasn't calling for comfort, but chastising me for jiggling the boat.

Holly and the boys had changed direction and were now heading toward us. I couldn't console Kennedy, so I started paddling again, if only to slow our progress against the wind and allow the others to catch up. I cooed something encouraging to Kennedy, but she was already taking care of herself. She sat quietly in the bow with a neutral expression, her hands in her lap.

Holly and the boys quickly caught up with us. We held the hulls together and paddled to the nearest shore, ending up far north of the dock but close enough to land and trees to receive shelter from the wind. Now that we were safe, I felt awful.

I *was* a terrible father.

As we waited in line to return our paddles and vests, I tried to talk to Kennedy about what had happened on the water, but she quickly changed the subject. She wasn't angry but completely uninterested in processing what had happened. On the walk to the car, I tried to talk to Holly, but she also seemed cool, even a little defensive of our entire canoe adventure.

Here I was, twenty years later, utterly sober, the father of three, yet still buffeted by my own inexperience and limitations, trying to figure out on my own where I had gone wrong and how to do better. You get an idea of the kind of father you think you ought to be. You realize there are some things you can do—you can stop using drugs, for example. You can go to work and you can come home for dinner every night. But what you don't count on are all of the intangibles, the invisible forces that conspire to keep you from fulfilling your dream: your own inexperience, the fears and needs that can suddenly come howling down on you like a summer squall, or the centrifugal force from the relationship you had with your own father, pinning you to your seat, when clearly it's time to act. Being a father is the most satisfying and fulfilling experience of a lifetime, but it feels terrible when you fail, and failure seems almost a guarantee.

The next day, we took my son to a soccer tournament, which lasted all day. Between games, Kennedy and I explored the grounds. I felt like I needed to say something, so I apologized for my language on the lake, my lack of composure. I didn't think Kennedy was going to acknowledge me and that would have been okay. I had said my piece, cleaned up my side of the street. I was ready to let it go. She tucked her hair behind her ear, as she studied the ground at her feet.

"I could have done it differently," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I could have explained how to row a canoe," she said. "They taught us in Girl Scouts. I actually did try to explain a couple of times, but you didn't listen to me." She looked at me pointedly. I remembered her trying to explain something as we first crossed the shipping lane. "Next time," she said, "I'll just bang my paddle on the side of the boat until you listen to me."

She was grinning.

I had no idea Kennedy had known how to row a canoe, but I had to admit that having her pulling alongside me couldn't have hurt. I assumed that the extra boy in Holly's canoe had made all the difference: He added extra weight and another paddle in the water. But even if Kennedy and I hadn't been able to overcome the wind and current, we might have been able to share the burden of getting to shore. No small weight, indeed.

Perhaps the greatest progress I can make as a father also comes from the intangibles, the invisible forces that work on my child despite my mistakes. Maybe all I have to do is show up, bringing all my inadequacies, fears, and limitations with me. Just show up. What kind of father does that? The kind of father I want to be.

TIM ELHAJ is a writer in the Pacific Northwest. He lives near Phantom Lake with his wife, kids, a dog and some chickens. Tim's creative non-fiction has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Brevity* and other fine venues. You can find out more about him on his blog: Present Tense (past imperfect), at [telhajj.com](http://telhajj.com). Past indulgences have been legendary and degenerate, but these days Tim is content with a (small) scoop of vanilla.

## Hard Love Nasty Mag

*Joe Oestreich*

We found *Hard Love* magazine in the woods behind Rich's house, riding out the winter in a pile of wet leaves. The melting snow had swollen it to three times its original size; it was fat as the yellow pages of a medium-sized city. The cover, once glossy and crisp as an invitation, was faded and green with mildew. The big blonde centerfold gave no hint of being anything but pleased with the arrangement.

Sections stuck together in twenty page clumps. With gloves squeezed under our armpits, we breathed warmth and dexterity into our cupped hands and carefully peeled pages apart like backings from bumper stickers—an electric suction sizzled as each page released from the next. The ink had transferred from page to page, leaving half-paragraphs of trashy letters tattooed to glorious thighs and backsides, leaving hourglass silhouettes of chests/waists/hips to wind their way through penile-enhancement ads. The pin-up on page forty-two was the ghost of page forty-three.

*Hard Love* must have belonged to one of the seminary students from the Pontifical College across the woods, evidence of man's lustful nature, shamefully but strategically expelled from the garden some autumn afternoon, hidden in a spot easily found come spring when thoughts turn.

\*

Each of us had a hiding place for his ill-gotten porno mags. Under the bed was the choice of amateurs—kids who didn't know better or had parents that didn't give a damn. The more sophisticated seventh grader went the "Princess and the Pea" route, sliding his stash between the mattress and box spring. This maintained the advantage of easy accessibility, but still left him prone to discovery by bed-making moms or nosy sisters.

I hid *Hard Love* in the heating vent under my desk. After unscrewing the vent cover from the base of the wall, I found a perfect, magazine-sized platform set slightly below floor level. Safe, secure, brilliant. Of course, what this spot gained in security, it lost in convenience. I had to bother with the screws every time I wanted access, meaning I had to find a place to stash the screwdriver. I hid the screwdriver under my mattress.

\*

Screw. Nail. Drill. Pound. Four of us broke ground on a fort in Colin's backyard, using the same

materials as the new condos that were going up behind the hedges. After school we'd pillage the construction site, sneaking through the bushes with armloads of plywood, two by fours, linoleum flooring, and Pink Panther insulation. Our fort was a ramshackle version of the luxury units that were taking shape behind us.

We spray painted the exterior of the fort with stars, lightning bolts, and the KISS logo. Inside was a collage of sports posters: Archie Griffin and Johnny Bench and Fran Tarkenton, a nod to the heroes of the day and safe cover should curious dads come knocking. An observant dad might notice that the posters were hung by two tacks, not four. An especially observant dad, were he to lift the bottom edge of any random poster would have found the spoils of a carefully executed raid of Kevin's older brother's *Playboy* collection. He would have found Miss May under Mr. Griffin, Bo Derek under Johnny Bench, and The Girls of the PacTen under Fran Tarkenton. The neighbors called the fort an eyesore. Our parents made us tear it down.

\*

Undoing is contagious, and wrecking the fort gave us a taste for blood. In the skeleton corners of half-built condos, sharing the seven or eight cans of Rolling Rock we'd stolen from the crisper of Tom's Mom's rumpus-room refrigerator, we became masters of the deconstructive arts. We stuffed parka pockets with baseball-sized rocks. Threw newly minted curve balls through virginal windows. Tore up flooring and insulation with carelessly abandoned claw hammers. Ramrodded two by fours into cheap drywall. *I dare you to try to punch a hole in that wall. Come on, pussy, I dare you.* So we threw fists with wrinkled nosed determination, and skinny legged force. We licked scraped knuckles with candy-coated tongues.

\*

Blow Pops. Bazooka Joe. Sugar Babies. Welcome to 7-Eleven. No stealing. This Means YOU.

Ever-teased by the magazine rack behind the counter. *Playboy. Penthouse. Hustler. Oui.* An all-star team of unattainability, gift-wrapped in cellophane. Cover girls with business ends airbrushed to mere suggestion. No matter how long I stared, not a nipple in sight. Not one hint of precious, goose-bumped areola. Like my sister's Barbie.

We heard that every Thursday the 7-Eleven employees tossed the old magazines in the dumpster. We also heard that our hometown, Columbus, was number one on the Russian bomb list. We were optimists.

\*

Feet first into the dumpster. Chest deep in soggy cardboard and acrid muck. Surfing a rusty cage of polyurethane waves. Riding the slippery swells of sanitation. *Danger of suffocation. Keep away from Children.* Treading. Bobbing. Going under. Over. Under. Drowning in the quicksand of spent coffee grounds. *Do not play on or around.* Surfacing. Scrambling. Can't touch bottom. Can't reach ledge. Wet. Wet. Everything wet. Stained. Stale. Sour. Everything rotten. Everything. Hard, moldy hot dog buns. The algae-slicked stones of this sea. But what of the orphaned hot dogs? *Three for 99*

*cents. Bait for the rats? No. No rats. Absolutely no rats. Maggots? Expected. Mice? Maybe. But no rats. Please, God. No rats.*

\*

Bust:

Hips:

Waist:

Height:

Weight:

Birthplace:

Turn-offs: Impatience, being teased, early alarms, and cruelty.

Turn-ons: Sensual music, satin sheets, black and white movies, and Thai curry

\*

I'd never whacked off. I'd heard lots of beat-off braggadocio, of course. I'd even joined in with war stories of my own. Lies. This was my first real attempt.

My mom was dropping off my sister at swimming lessons, so I was home alone, up in my bedroom. The screwdriver, heating vent cover, and four loose screws were scattered on the carpet. On my dresser, between the Kleenex box and the Vaseline jar, *Hard Love* lay spread open to the staples. Puberty in still life. I popped the lid on the Vaseline and slid two fingers through the cool gel. It smelled of diapers and sickness and industry. It smelled like Gary, Indiana. I wiggled my Levi's down around my ankles and reached through the strange hole in the front of my Fruit of the Looms.

I couldn't do it. First came the fear: *Oh, Jesus. They're gonna come home early and catch me pants-down and Vaseline-handed.* Then came the guilt: *I'm going to hell. Or blind.* Then came the shame: *This is disgusting. I'm disgusting. A sick, petroleum-jellied pervert.*

Whacking off wasn't worth the hassle. I cleaned up and went downstairs to watch re-runs of *The Jeffersons*.

\*

My first orgasm came during an algebra test.

Chewing my pencil, I stared impotently at those equations, at those sets and subsets, at those mysterious X's and Y's for 15, 20, 30 minutes. I couldn't make sense of that alphabet soup. *How much time is left? Shit. Think. Okay.  $y = mx + b$ . So if the slope is two, and the Y-intercept is three, then X must be...X must be...Nothing. I got nothing. Shit. Shit. Ten questions left. Ten questions in ten minutes. Just focus. Focus.*

A throbbing ball of anxiety radiated from my innermost core, from depths I was unaware of, sending

panicked charges to nerve endings in the most remote provinces of my world. Heat. Magma. Surging. Through the lower mantle, through the upper mantle. Erupting toward the surface. Somebody call the emergency squad. My heart is about to explode. My heart...about to...about to... and then letting go. Just letting go. Letting go.

I smelled something sick and sweet, and I was certain everyone in the class knew. They'd felt the earth move. They were knocked sideways by the jarring shift in the continental and oceanic plates. They saw my hot, red face. Twenty-five classmates watched me die my little death.

Covering my crotch with my test sheets, I took the long way around to the front of the class. I slid the papers face down across the teacher's desk and excused myself to the bathroom. Then I stashed my underpants in the garbage can. I buried them deep, under three feet of crumpled paper towels.

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JOE OESTREICH'S work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Ninth Letter*, *Fourth Genre*, and other magazines. A three-time Pushcart nominee, he has been awarded a fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, honored by The Atlantic Monthly, and noted in *The Best American Essays 2008* and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2007*. He teaches creative writing at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, SC, where he is nonfiction editor of the online journal, *Waccamaw*. He likes dark chocolate with red pepper flakes. Email Joe at [joeo@coastal.edu](mailto:joeo@coastal.edu).

## Drowning

*Hauquan Chau*

*"A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—nicht wahr? . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up." -- Lord Jim, Joseph Conrad*

The first time I nearly drowned occurred just off the southern coast of Malaysia, east of Melaka, a popular seaside city for tourists who want to retreat from the congestion of Kuala Lumpur. Somewhere along that coast with its crystal blue waterfront was where I landed, not as a tourist but as a refugee of war.

I was five years old then, drifting for days at the bottom of a wooden boat with my mother, father and older sister. We were all crouching around the porthole –there wasn't enough room to lie down or stand up-looking out at the water and the sky merging as one in South China Sea, as if we were floating in space, looking for a friendly place to land, to find a new home. We pissed into the clear plastic bags, tied at the top with rubber bands and hurled them out of the portholes. I remember the sound it made as it hit the sea and the way it bobbed up and down as our boat moved forward, barely making a ripple. I still recall the human smell of sweaty bodies amidst the heat and humidity and the smell of soggy wood.

It's night and the sea is calm. Someone yells out and points to the horizon, to a distant light. It's another vessel.

"It's American," someone yells. "We're saved."

A murmuring of voices runs through the boat, as the hopeful news gets passed along.

"No, turn off the lights," an older voice warns. "Pirates, they're looking for a boat to rob and kill. Put out all the lights. We mustn't be seen."

More voices, louder ones this time, protests that this would be our last chance to be saved. No, they'll kill all the men and take the women and children as slaves.

In the end, we put out the lights, protected by the vastness of the sea around us, waiting silently for the other distant light to disappear altogether. Even the people who thought of calling for help cannot deny that there is some comfort in the known. The water around us, the stars eerily reflecting off the water's surface, our small group of 200 odd people crammed into a wooden boat and wanting to live. That is what we know.

\*

Thirty years later, I am standing on the balcony of a Mahkota Resort Hotel, on the eastern edge of central Melaka, overlooking the sea and the strip of white beach stretching out in front. To the east, numerous high rises are being built, skeletons with steel beams sticking out on all sides. As a tourist, I am pampered by the hotel staff like royalty. My travel companion complains about the poor air conditioning, the size of the bathroom, and the stain in the corner of the carpet. I open the glass doors that lead into the balcony and strain to see as far as I can to the east, but the buildings under construction are blocking my view. It's there though. I still see it in my mind and try to visualize what the scenery would look like from the sea looking in towards the land.

My mother lost two of her brothers somewhere in these waters. Although there was no official confirmation regarding their disappearance, the story my mother tell us fills in the void of not knowing.

The story goes like this: The boat, not very different from ours, was poorly built in haste as the Viet Cong tightened their grip over Saigon. It soon floundered against the unforgiving sea and started taking in water. My two uncles, both younger than I am now, are in their early twenties, doing whatever they can to keep the boat from sinking, comforting the wailing woman with the babe in her arms, while their young daughter clings to her father who is crying in agony; he knows that they will all die. A storm descends and the vessel capsizes and sinks taking over a hundred men, women and children to their watery graves. The circumstances of their deaths will never be known to their families except in a story, retold again and again.

\*

But I survived, as people would say, as if I had anything to do with it. I was just carried along from one event to another, swept along the tide of history.

We see land. A white sandy beach. Did we all die after all and end up in a tropical Eden? Palm trees line the shores, so permanent and still, as our boat is taken up and down by the rough tide. Soon, a military truck arrives, spoiling the scene with camouflaged soldiers pouring out of the back with automatic rifles over their shoulders. It seems we ran away from war to find another war.

I hear a splash just outside. A brave young man from our boat is swimming to shore to make contact with the soldiers on the beach. He wades up to one of them, a twitchy new recruit who panics as he sees a strange figure crawling out of the sea, gesturing wildly with his arms and speaking in an unknown tongue. The soldier, like a reflex, swiftly brings his rifle up and fires a cluster of three shots into the young man's chest.

No, it couldn't have happened like that. Why would the soldier shoot at someone, almost naked and

dripping wet from head to foot? Didn't the soldier know that this man had already seen death in the face? But why then is that image of that brave young man falling backwards into the fine white sand so vivid? Perhaps this was an early lesson of how transient life really was, how easily peace can turn to war. How life is nothing more than a struggle to run away from death, like a game of cat and mouse, only to find yourself crouching and powerless in a sinking boat, sick with a high fever, just waiting for the next ordeal to come upon you. It made sense that someone had died, someone had to be sacrificed, a little death to save the rest of us. Fate then would be pleased and we could all go on living. So, yes, that Brave Young Man had to die so that the soldiers' anger could be appeased. We were no invaders, just worthless war refugees with nothing of value except the clothes on our back and our little tin containers, empty of food. Why waste your precious bullets? If you want to kill us, just let us float away, back into the sea so that nature can take care of us once and for all.

The soldiers, knowing the senselessness of killing unarmed civilians, or abhorring the idea of having to clean up putrid bodies filled with holes, unwillingly accept the whole lot of us stinking boat people and motion for us to come onto shore.

Another story goes like this: The soldiers, very aware of the exodus from Vietnam, the coming of the boat people, accept that Brave Young Man into their country, shaking his hand and slapping his back, congratulating him on his bravery. They welcome us all in their beautiful country and accept us as one of their brethren. Come, come, they say, tell the others to come on land, a land of beauty and peace.

There is no dock here, just a stretch of sand from one horizon to another. The boat can't get close enough to the shore. We all have to swim for it. It doesn't matter if you can't swim, just kick your legs until you feel the ground underneath you. You've been sitting there on the boat, waiting for death, but now that freedom is just a hundred yards away, you're just going to freeze up? Even a rat in his right mind would know to abandon a sinking ship.

So I jumped overboard.

Or was I thrown?

There's a moment, seconds of the free fall, infinitesimally broken into epic proportions. I notice every movement of my body as it falls through the air, each limb and finger accurately choreographed, each frame of motion zoomed to see the details that I had missed entirely in my former life. A life on firm ground, a sense of controlling the world around me. The sky, the vast sky, frightening, pushing down on me. And as my body twists in the air, I get a glimpse of a woman holding tightly to the gunwale about to make her jump. Head first, I plunge into the sheet of water.

\*

I felt the same sensation years later. I was twelve then at a birthday party, looking at a pool, blue and clear, familiar and enticing. There was Shawn, the birthday boy, over there doing a cannon ball off the side of the pool. A few others were already in the water, splashing about, laughing and smiling in their innocence and youth. There was a line up by the water slide on the other end of the pool. I waited for my turn, anxious to get into the water with the rest of the boys so that I too could laugh and smile like the rest of them. There was no fear as I went down the slide and into the water. It was

only when I touched the surface of the water that the memories of Malaysia flooded my mind, as I began to sink in the water. Kick like you've never kicked before, son. While one part of my mind was frantic and horrified by the water entering my mouth, nose and ears, another part of me, a calmer part, got a strange sense of déjà vu. This was it for me, I thought, the pull of the sea too strong to resist. Fate had followed me from the coast of Melaka, all the way to Canada, desalinated itself and transformed into a pool of chlorinated water. I'd escaped once but no, actually, I should have drowned there thirty years ago.

The birthday boy's father yells for everyone to empty the pool and throws me a life buoy. Grab on to it, he shouts. My arms thrash wildly for it and finally get hold of it. I clutch it to my chest, fingers white with tension. But now, the laughing and the smiling are gone. Everyone's doing the best they can to put on a smile and flippantly brush off the incident. Nothing to worry about, he's fine now, aren't you son? But no, I knew then that I wasn't fine at all. I knew I was different. I couldn't just jump into the water, splashing carefree with the others, to enjoy the summer of youth and innocence. It had already been taken from me all those years ago as I struggled against the tide off the coast of Melaka.

\*

Kick, boy, kick! As soon as I hit the clear tropical waters, I scream for help. I am going down. The water's too deep. I try to keep my head up. A strong arm grabs on to me. It's my father and he tells me to get up on his back. If I were any older and bigger, I would've probably pulled him down with me. The beach looks so close now and many of our people -our people - are already struggling up to the shore. Once my feet touched the bottom, I knew that everything had changed. Out the waters like a babe out of its mother's womb, I was reborn. That frail five year old boy that I once knew had died shivering with malaria on the boat or sinking into the warm coastal waters off Malaysia. He had to die so that I may live.

We're all herded onto convoy trucks and taken to a refugee camp. It is here that my memory fades. I don't remember much about living in the camp, nor much about flying halfway around the world to Canada. Without suffering the trauma of drowning, I don't know if I would've remembered being on the boat or the desperate fight for life, floating in the sea or struggling against the tide as it tried to pull me down. It would take another drowning thirty years later in quiet, tranquil suburbia to finally cement the first experience.

\*

The afternoon sun burns my arm and face as I look out to the sea from the hotel balcony. There is no one around outside at this time of the day. Before I make my way back into the hotel room, I take one more look. Somewhere along this edge of beach, further out east from Melaka, was where we landed. A place perhaps where development has not yet reached its pristine shores, where those same palm trees who witnessed the whole event are still bearing fruit and dropping it onto that silky white sand. Where that Brave Young Man died or did not die. Where my uncles' bones and a hundred others may have found their way up on shore. Where their sacrifice is told and retold.

HAUQUAN CHAU, after spending ten years overseas, is now back home teaching English in Kingston, Canada. His essay, *“Teaching the F-word,”* was published in the *Best of Creative Nonfiction Vol. 2*. He enjoys the subtle sweetness of an egg tart once in a while.

## In the Skin

*Ruth Awad*

### 1.

In the kitchen of her two-bedroom apartment in Nashville, Tennessee—four hundred and forty five miles away from my father—my mother set up her tattoo equipment. She taught me to tattoo when I was eighteen the same way she taught me to sew when I was three: methodically threading the needle into the tube into the machine, looking up sharply over her work to catch my eyes and keep them on her. Only the stakes were higher now. This was my inheritance, a trade to keep me afloat should I ever need it. I listened to her every word.

“Tattoos are permanent, Ruth,” she said while she stepped on the pedal and cranked up the power supply, adjusting the speed of the gun by the sound of its angry buzz. “Once you tattoo someone, you’ll change them forever. Course they can get it removed, but your mark is still there under all that fresh scar tissue. And that’s not something you take lightly.” She watched the needle shoot in and out.

I wanted to learn how to tattoo from my mother so I could know her, who she’d become since she left my father. Because in the eleven years they’d been apart, I didn’t realize how much I needed her.

### 2.

A blowout is a shadow around the tattoo where ink has entered the spongy subcutaneous, the result of the needle going in too deep. I learn to keep my hand even, take small dips into the skin, keeping the needle an eighth of an inch in.

### 3.

I was seven when she left. She wanted to finish nursing school and live out the life she abandoned when she married at nineteen and had three kids by twenty-four. She said, “Being married to your father is no picnic.”

We’d visit her in Nashville during breaks from our

school in Indiana. She'd say the same thing every time, over and over and into her glass of merlot, eyes fluttering the way they do when she's drunk, "Babies, one day you'll live with me and things will be better." Same as she wrote in the letters for the birthdays she missed.

A couple years after the divorce, I sat in the bathroom and watched my mother's reflection smooth dark red lipstick over her mouth. I was slowly getting used to this new version of her. She went out almost every night or had her friends over when she was home. She blotted her lips then fussed with her hair, brushing black-dyed strands behind her shoulders. Her bohemian-print top lifted just enough to show the swirls of ink on her stomach, stretching across her skin like fingers spread apart.

"Is that a real tattoo?" I asked, pulling at her shirt.

"Of course it's a real tattoo." She swatted me away at first, then pulled the shirt up to her bra. A rose vine encircled her entire stomach, each rose a different color. Three roses crept up the middle of the vine toward her belly button, the focal point of the piece. She pointed to them. "These three are for you girls."

I didn't want it to be for me. I felt put-off by the thing, intimidated. "Dad said tattoos are bad. He said it's a sin to have them."

"Your dad's a fool, honey. He's just saying that because that's what Muslims believe."

"Dad says I'm a Muslim."

"The hell you are!" She shook her head then looked back to the mirror.

What I knew then was the mother who danced with my father in the kitchen on Sunday mornings, who handmade clothes for her daughters, who never drank or smoked or wore high heels and heavy black eyeliner, that mother was gone for good.

#### 4.

My mother said, "Treat everyone like they have AIDS when you're getting ready to ink them." Universal precaution. I learn to see blood borne pathogens everywhere.

#### 5.



I wanted to become my mother. I dyed my hair black. I painted my lips red. And with each new tattoo she gave me, I never felt more her daughter.

“You sure you’re not going to regret this?” She looks up from my forearm where she’s putting a cedar tree, a tattoo for my father who was born in Lebanon. He later came to the States for grad school where he met my mother. “Your dad’s gonna freak.”

“He won’t. I think this will be the piece that finally wins him over.” I didn’t believe the words as they left my mouth. I wanted to merge my two worlds together, my mother and my father. My throat felt dry. I thought about my father, how he had raised three daughters alone. How even though he worked all day at an engineering firm he never forgot to pick us up from school or take us to a dentist appointment when we were kids. My mother’s lifestyle was a relief at times from my father’s strict home and his overprotective nature. Every inclination I had toward my mother’s parenting style my father would view as a slight to him, ingratitude. I had to choose a side. And in seeking out my mother’s approval, I knew I’d betrayed my father.

## 6.

The outline is the most important part of a tattoo, the skeleton. Everything else is just meat. I learn to steady my hand. I learn the complexity of following a straight line.

## 7.

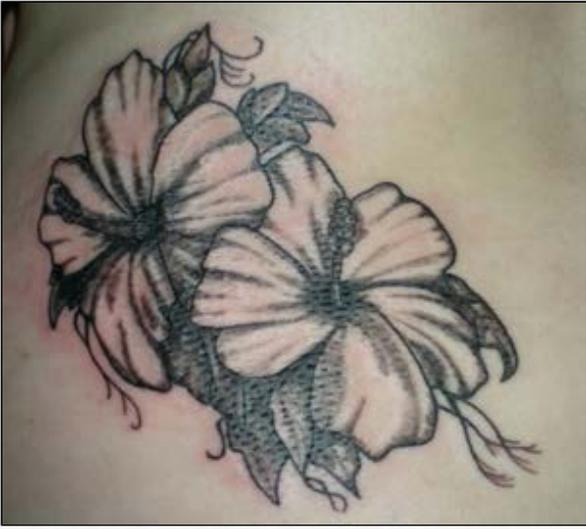
I become my mother in stages. At ten I adopt her ankle bracelets that jingled wherever I walked. When I’m fifteen, I begin to circle my eyes with dark liner the way she does. By eighteen, my hair is the same charcoal-black as hers. My father doesn’t like my dyed hair. My father hates my makeup. He mourns my metamorphosis into his ex-wife. He feels that he has lost me to her. And in this way he has lost us both.

## 8.

Dad looked like he could burn the cedar tree off my arm with just his glare. His cheeks puffed out, the way they do when he’s mad. I had just come back from a trip to Nashville. I shouldn’t have showed him. I should have kept it secret under my sleeves, a silent devotion to him.

“If this is for me, you wouldn’t have done it.” His nostrils flared. “You’re a disgrace to me. You’ve disgraced my country.” He kept his eyes somewhere past my ear. His every word stung.

“I thought...I got it for you. I wanted to show you...” but the sentence floundered in my constricted throat. My chest felt hollowed out.



“No daughter of mine would do this to me. Not your sisters! You want your mother’s love so much, you would do anything to get it. Where was she, Ruth?” He folded his arms across his broad chest. “Where was she for your band concerts? For your school plays? Now she waltzes in when the hard part is over

and she can be your friend!” His dark eyes smoldered behind the thin frame of his glasses.

I wanted to slip out of my skin the way snakes do, leave it in a pile in front of him, a sort of atonement.

## 9.

“The best way to learn how to tattoo is to watch. Watch me,” mom said.

## 10.

My mother made infrequent trips to visit us in Indiana when we were still in grade school. She’d stay at the Budget Inn down the road from my father’s house. She’d drive all night from Nashville, chain-smoking the whole way. During those times we were allowed to stay with her in the motel for the weekend. Dad dreaded whenever we saw Mom, fearing all his work of stabilizing our lives would come undone.

My younger sister Sarah and I jumped from bed to bed. “Mommy, mommy, can we go out to eat?” Something my father only let us do occasionally.

“Whatever you want, babies.” Her voice was deep as the bottom of a well. I remember looking at her like she wasn’t real. It was too good a thing, her being there. I leapt off the bed and wrapped my small arms around her. I thought maybe this time she’d stay for good.

But at the end of the weekend, after all the fast food we ate and MTV we watched, she’d leave again. My sisters and I watched from the driveway as she backed out and into the night, back to her life without us, with just her fading taillights as a reminder that she was ever there at all.

## 11.

I tell my clients now, “A tattoo marks a point in your life. Even if down the road you no longer identify with it, it’ll always be meaningful.”

## 12.

My mother said, “It’s a sad thing to look back on your life and find it’s a mess.” She looked up at the ceiling to keep the tears in her eyes. “I hope you know I’ve always loved you girls. I never meant to hurt you.”

From across the room I watched her sadness contort her beautiful face, the corners of her mouth pulled down toward her chin, mascara trailing her cheeks. I tried to keep my eyes on her feet, her long skinny feet that look just like mine. I hated talking about the divorce. About her leaving us. Nothing she said seemed to be enough, but I couldn’t stand to see her cry like that. I said nothing, letting our hurt hang in the room like smoke over us.

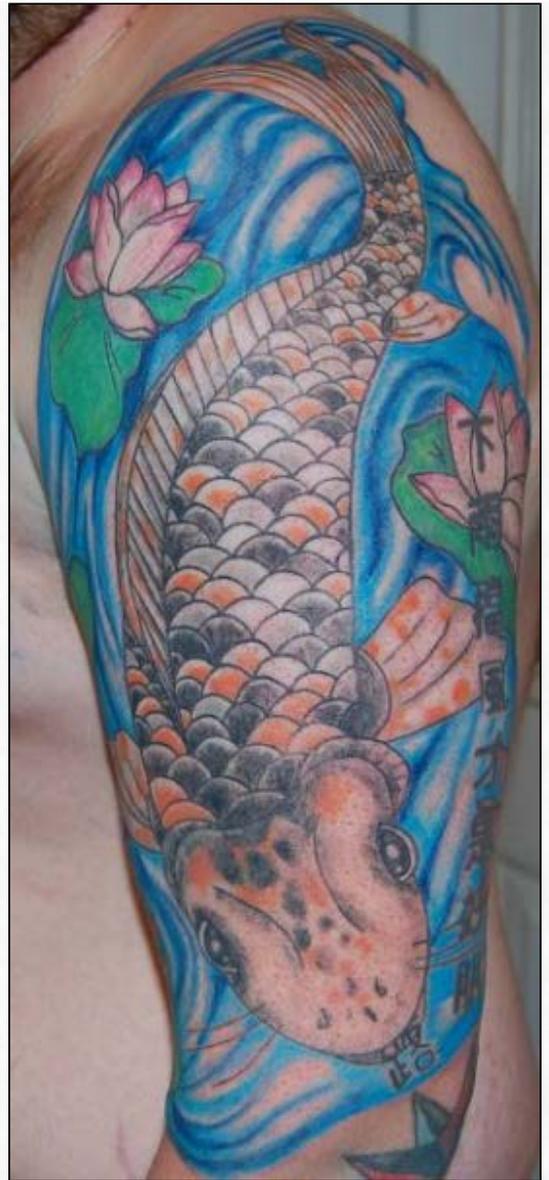
“Who knows what you would’ve grown up to be if I had raised you? I don’t think I could have raised you as well as your father did. I am too weak to say no to you guys.” She drew a rattled breath, her voice shaking, “How was I supposed to know then that I had just made the one choice that would ruin the rest of my life?”

## 13.

My mother wouldn’t hold still while I tattooed her. She twisted her arm away whenever I paused to dip the needle in the inkwell. “I’m too old for this,” she said, taking a swig from her beer. She knows she’s not supposed to drink while getting tattooed because it makes the job of the artist that much harder, having to wade through all the blood. “I used to get tattooed for hours on end and now look at me. I can hardly sit in the chair for even a little while.”

“Come on, Mom, or we’ll be here all night.” I wiped away a smear of ink on her forearm where I was putting lavender orchids, her favorite flowers. Vines scrolled and spilled over the sides of her arm, the leaves curling at their ends. I put the needle back to her skin. “Unless you want blobs instead of flowers.”

She rolled her eyes like she’d heard or said it all before and then wrinkled her forehead. “Honey, you’re meat-grinding me. Don’t keep going over the same spot.” She examined the place I’d been working, the topmost petal toward her elbow and said, “Remember: more than three,



you're cutting down a tree.”

“I didn't realize I'd already gone over it.” I felt my face burn. Such a basic rule.

Tattooing her was intimidating, the definitive test of my skill. I tried to will myself some of the swagger I'd had with clients before, but nothing worked. My mother shifted in the chair and hollered for another beer.

I put the machine down and looked at my mother. She seemed so beat down, so sad. I wanted this piece to prove something to her, to say that after all the years she'd been away, I was still here with my resentment and my love. I wasn't going anywhere.

## 14.

With each stitch of ink, each permanent mark I get or give, I'm finding my way back to my mother. I'm taking years of grief and pouring them into my skin where the lines make sense. They form patterns. They form maps. I'm getting closer.

RUTH AWAD is a poet, essayist, and tattoo artist who is currently in Southern Illinois University's MFA program for poetry. She lives in Carbondale, IL with her two Pomeranians for company. Her favorite dessert is vegan red velvet cake and a diet coke.