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Letter from the Editor

We have three dogs. Two of them are cocker spaniels, who we got when they were puppies. One is a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, inherited when my mother died. Both cockers are mostly deaf now, at 12 and 14. The dogs follow me around the house and settle where I do, napping. Before I leave a room, I wake the cockers by touching them. They blearily open their eyes and then jump up, wiggling their stump tails. The younger Cavvy follows, wagging hers.

If I don't wake the two older dogs with a touch, they wake on their own after I have left the room. They run through the house, looking for me, their claws clicking on the laminate floor. When they see me, their ears lower from anxiety to relief, and I feel the worry I have caused them like a hard pinch.

I only know this because very occasionally, I am so deep into my thoughts that I forget to wake them.

The hard pinch feeling often leads to the beginnings of tears, so I rarely forget.

Why is it that we love animals, are fascinated by them, compare ourselves to them, take care of them, depend on them, fear for them, fear them? Perhaps they exist in a purer emotional state than we ever can. Perhaps it is their physicality, the sense that they are not souls trapped in bodies but soul-and-body together.

After I put together the poems for this issue of *Sweet*, I realized that every poet includes a significant animal image.

How remarkable, to have animals and insects leading us to poetry like muses. How inevitable and miraculous, that muses come into our lives at all.

Under my desk right now, three of them are snoring.

—Katie Riegel, poetry editor

L.J. Sysko**Razor Cut**

I'm fomenting suburban rebellion starting
with my hair. It began last May with a
Brazilian straightening that crackled into
brunette milli-shards, then the cut, careful

with a razor to save what could be
saved from atop my tentacular Medusa's
head. And so it was, a kind of a punk do,
a disarray only undone by pillows. Each morning,

the back was fallen, then resuscitated.
Hopeful fingers and elixirs coaxing
the tortoise from its shell. This must be
what that hermit crab felt like in 1988,

when my dad, wanting to verify
what the boardwalk sales-kid described
as a sick E.T. transitioning from a tight shell
to a roomier one, took pliers from the garage

and splintered, then cracked it—
as though it were nothing more than nutmeat
to be turned over in our hands.

Let's see, he said. *It has to come out now*. And it did.

And it looked like E.T., hypothermic, translucent,
when it scooted forward once and died. A diminutive
Mercutio—a plague, a plague, he might've eked out

if he'd not been voiceless, boxed within glass in my
suburban bedroom. It's tough to say what the plague is,
in the case of my hair. Is it my vanity—that drove me
to straighten already straight hair? Is it incompetence
in the fuschia-mohawked stylist

who backcombed what should've been left slack?
Or maybe it's this house, this life, so lucky
that leads me to create difficulty for myself,
to tiptoe onto the cold garage slab at night,

sweeping spiderwebs and WD-40 aside,
looking for tools to crack it open.

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sweet

5.2

Listen to the reading:

Ode to Botox

Go ahead and lay your thumb across
your forehead. Can you feel the calm?
Like a cool compress for the afflicted?
How far away we've gotten
from the beginning—

when the vial thrums
next to the needle on that square, steel tray,

humming for the coming alchemy,
it's the Big Bang in the doctor's office,
lightning and bacteria in a bottle,

cc's of creation piercing the skin,
planets colliding, ether parting,
and the bands swaddling the Cosmos together
relax and soften. Sigh—can you feel it?
See the world where it started.

Liquidy and hot, temperate, tropical,
a Paleolithic sauna; it's tough to be angry
when it's so comfortable.
And that's how the fighting would stop,
justice return to water.

90% water at birth, they say,
and you've acknowledged it, letting the primordial
pools swell, collecting what's poison and plenty
swirling behind your countenance.
I am a woman underwater so let me be

buffeted by its peace, its ruinous tides,
its indecorous currents. Take my hands
and let them do the work—but my face—
veil my eyes with moss-cold laurel.
Grant me medically assisted paralysis.

There is a return, a womb
that will carry us again: *Clostridium botulinum*.
So walk in vanity because it's not vanity at all,
not in the way it sounds, but in the way that it looks—
like truth restored, like Eve when she was just Eve—no apple,

no snake, no man, no kids, no minivan. Go ahead,
don't let them make you feel bad about it. You are
water and toxin, balm and danger, modern and very, very old.

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L.J. SYSKO holds an MFA from New England College. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Ploughshares*, *Rattle*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Terrain.org*, and *The Dirty Napkin.com*. She has won several prizes from the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Foundation and was a 2010 Delaware State Emerging Artist Fellow. L.J. lives in Wilmington, Delaware, where she is a high school English teacher. She can be found online at ljsysko.com ... and at home on certain evenings with a carton of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk in hand.

Sara Henning

Listen to the reading:

How to Pray Like a Girl

The road is a trustless disciple this winter,
so I drive like I learned to pray—with piston loose

and mouthing oil, tires bruxing cardinal bones,
where I've been that still won't let me go.

I never tried the psalms my mother
whispered just to know how she tasted them.

The summer I left home, she waited for night
to pour gasoline on a nest of wasps,

take her lighter to the canopy's underbelly,
force me to watch.

It could have been a paper lantern gluttoned
with lightning bugs, for the flood

of bodies surging past the closure of pulp
toward a heaven sugared by her lesson

or cruelty. The next morning I stuttered
over each like a fledgling lexicon,

not knowing which lived and which,
smoke-fragile, lay waiting, by instinct's pull

or my own wordlessness, for how I
too might forsake them.

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SARA HENNING's poetry, fiction, interviews and book reviews have appeared in such journals as *Verse*, *So To Speak*, *Weave*, and *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. Her chapbook, *To Speak of Dahlias*, is forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press*. Currently a doctoral student in English and Creative Writing at the University of South Dakota, she serves as Circulations Manager of *The South Dakota Review*. Her favorite confectionary pleasure is a large, just baked brownie.

Some links to work/interviews online: [Words Chosen Out of Desires](#), [Without an Aperture & Girls Like Us](#), [Four Stories](#)

Joel Long

Listen to the reading:

Be Careful and Watch

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them— Deuteronomy 4:9

The body is a grave, you said,
but a grave for light, I knew
then—light becomes the flesh,
slips beneath the skin. The scene
by the sprinkler box with valves,
mushrooms beneath the broken lid,
comes to me. I touch the webs,
turn water on, touch heads
of mushrooms, plush moss in dark.

I go inside to peonies, pillows
of scent and petals, clouds on stems,
their buds, sticky spheres, peeling,
sap the ants love, hardened fruit.
They hoped their way in brilliance
like those billowed around them.
It is a grave the body remembers.
The light is alive, and time opens
the screen above the peonies,
grandmother alive in the kitchen,
dimmed, no lights on, too hot for light.

Mary there as I look for centipedes
in the sprinkler box, pill bugs, spiders,
there, when I touch the peony that
gives shivers back and scent on skin.
What will I say to the child who looks
at light? What can I teach? Bury it deep
in your cells, I'll say. Bury the light.
Mark it well and safe. Unravel it like a bud,
chant it to the new light, tell the light
what it has been and where it is going.

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sweet

5.2

Fly in my Dream

I'll feed the fly that came out of my dream.
Find the apricot I cut three days ago,
and let the fly linger over the drooping
half, the juices absorbed or departed.
I will let it grow to the size of the smaller dog
no bigger, just big enough to carry away
the melon slice, the tuna lid with its sharp edge.
I will tell it what I remember, the backyard
where the cat died, the ice cream maker,
the girl with the braid like a fishing lure.
I was big as a toy soldier the boy hid
in his pocket and took to school, which
he would take out at spare moments
when the teacher was taking apple slices

from a paper bag. I would tell him,
I don't remember when I was that small,
I don't remember when the world got smaller
around me, when a fly of certain size could
carry the world that was mine with its feet
and the sun with all its heat and the day
with the willow bowing with bees and the weight
of the blue sky that could not contain so much wind.

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JOEL LONG's book *Lessons in Disappearance* is forthcoming this November. *Knowing Time by Light* was published by Blaine Creek Press in 2010. His book *Winged Insects* won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize and was published in 1999. His chapbooks, *Chopin's Preludes* and *Saffron Beneath Every Frost* were published from Elik Press. His poems have appeared in *Quarterly West*, *Gulf Coast*, *Rhino*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Willow Springs*, *Poems and Plays*, and *Seattle Review* and anthologized in *American Poetry: the Next Generation*, *Essential Love*, *Fresh Water*, and *I Go to the Ruined Place*. He received the Mayor's Artist Award for Literary Arts at the Utah Arts Festival and the Writers Advocate Award from Writers at Work. Favorite sweets: pumpkin custard profiteroles with maple caramel sauce that my wife makes and, of course, eating them with my wife.

Stephen Longfellow

Listen to the reading:

Interlude

The shadow on the fence
is my love's. It's a clear day
and she is working
in our garden. I like watching
her shadow, happy
to be picking tomatoes this late
in September, yellow leaves
falling, black walnut and silver
maple. The fence I built a year ago
still looks new. The burning
bush is heating up. The air
has no right to be this clear,
her shadow singing,
I am here.

sweet

5.2

Hagia Sophia, Venice Florida

Church Of The Holy Wisdom' . . . cathedral built at Constantinople under the direction of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. It is a unique building and one of the world's great monuments, despite time's ravages.

—Encyclopedia Britannica

An American lady who paid ten cents to visit St. Sophia was so disappointed that she wanted her money back.

—Herbert J. Mueller, *The Uses of the Past*

In the morning, I emerge from absence, and in the lull
before I grasp exactly who and where I am,
she touches the tip of my tongue—

What was I about to say?

—Now, on the way to the dentist,
the weatherman tells me what I already know.

And, I see her standing patiently
in a bus-stop kiosk, waiting out the rain,
her backdrop an old fresco
of swastikas and names separated
by hearts. The flotsam of food wrappers
awash at her feet are the remnants of offerings.

And, she is the cement-cast Virgin close by
the highway, in an up-ended bathtub, half-buried,
her gaze lowered modestly, arms open

in acceptance, the windows of the nearby
trailer as clouded as the broken eyes
of yesterday's catch. The cars swim
by, old and new and all the same to her.
My little dashboard doggy nods in agreement.

And, she lays me down in her chair, hygienist
with the sad eyes. She sees my every sin, time's
wear on the bone of me: fillings glinting
like veins among a year's worth of slag
heaps and tailings, the pumps working hard,
and the little miners sweating away night
and day. Clearing the debris, she touches
a nerve, but whispers softly in my ear
forgiving me. Later, she offers me
a box of dental floss as I rinse.

After the storm, I walk along the shore
and collect the fossil shark teeth washed up
from the Gulf, glossy and perfect, among the gaping
mouths of empty seashells. A tour boat ruffles by
and, masquerading as its figurehead, she looks
resignedly foolish with her jutting breasts and fishtail.

Away, on the horizon, beyond the shifting mosaic
of light on nervous water, porphyry columns of rain
rise to the shadowed dome of a thunderhead.

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STEPHEN LONGFELLOW currently lives above a junk shop in
Wabasha, Minnesota, where he spends much too much time
watching the Mississippi go by his window. His poetry has
appeared recently or will be out soon in *Rhino*, *Underground*

Voices, The Pedestal, Review, Prick of the Spindle, The Literary Review, Prism, and the Word Riot tenth anniversary anthology. Steve loves war cake, a holiday family tradition that requires no ingredients not easily available during WW II—His dear sisters, Liz and Barbara, sends them to him beginning in November—Recipe available upon request. Steve may be reached at slongfellow@gmx.com.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

The Shark

Happy happy happy you are cranking out poems, cooking new dishes using produce from your garden, teaching, laughing, busy busy busy then you feel it coming like a hive after a new queen, a faraway train you feel before you see, the dark walk toward the principal's office, the shark music from Jaws at first just to frighten but then what makes the music wants to kill you, but wait, the shark wants you to do it yourself and it's full of suggestions: drive into that abutment, jump off the parking structure, slit your wrists and the shark suggests the best way is not across but parallel to the bone. The shark tells you you're ugly, stupid, untalented. It's amazing people can stand to look at you without retching. You smell the affliction on yourself. Your pilot light is low and now it's flickering and it flickers for days. You never cry and you can't stop crying. Your sunglasses don't protect you. And then something, some little something, happens. You drop a glass and it doesn't break or your bamboo grows an inch overnight or your cowlick is tamed and then maybe there is hope, there is a sliver of hope in your hand and it hurts but at least you can feel it, and being able to feel again means you're not quite dead, and there could be a thunderstorm with a power outage. That's wonderful because with candles and silence, the living room becomes a church and your husband is there to welcome you back, although he's been there all along. And you build a fire and watch it burn without wanting to jump in and the shark migrates to someone else's waters and the garden is calling and life dear dear life begins again.

ELIZABETH KERLIKOWSKE lives in the north and layers. She teaches at Kellogg Community College and is president of Friends of Poetry (check us out on facebook), an organization devoted to poetry which sponsors a reading series and a contest for kids. Her most recent local publications are in *Encore*, *Hear Here*, and *Asylum Lake Review*. Despite loving to live locally, she has managed to garner four Pushcart nominations. She doesn't like sweets but did used to tell her children that Milk Duds were poisonous at Halloween and to give them all to her.

Suellen Wedmore

When I Haven't Been Kissed

for a long time, I go to the mall
in the morning, when retired men
in sweats & run-down sneakers

squeak through the halls, pausing
in front of Victoria's Secret
to scrutinize the lingerie, racing

past the mannequins in suits & ties
as if that part of their lives had
never existed,

& when I drop my handbag
in front of the man with hair
tinted a young brown & he stoops

to pick it up, I imagine him at my
high school prom, carnation
in his buttonhole, & I reach for his hand,

callused but warm & inhale
his Starbucks' breath until my lungs
expand with Italian Roast

gratitude. I think a male
tarantula is one of the most romantic
creatures, risking his life

crossing roads & fields in broad
daylight in search of a mate.
Dancing amorously at her burrow.

—after Jeffrey McDaniel

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Poet Laureate *emerita* for the small seaside town of Rockport, Massachusetts, SUELLEN WEDMORE retired from working as a speech and language therapist to enter the M.F.A. program in poetry at New England College, graduating in 2004. Her work has appeared in *Apalachee Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *Eclipse*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Harvard Review*, *The Ledge*, *The MacGuffin*, *Manorborn*, *Oyez Review*, *Phoebe*, *Poem*, and many others. Her chapbook *Deployed* won first place in the Grayson Books annual contest, and her chapbook *On Marriage and Other Parallel Universes* was published by Finishing Line Press. She won first place in the *Writer's Digest* rhyming poetry contest, was an international winner in the 2006 *Atlanta Review* poetry contest, and recently two of her poems were nominated for a Pushcart Prize. (suellenwedmore@comcast.net)

Ruth Foley

Listen to the reading:

This Girl Believes in the Possibility of Ruin

Shara McCallum

Believes in the mildew's silent creep from the cellar.
Believes in the hole in the roof.

Believes in the slow and steady rumble from below.
Believes in the crumbling of plaster.

Believes in the growing clusters, the sharp abdomen.
Believes in the curling floorboards.

Believes in the derelict rattle and in the blood.
Believes in the powdering brick, smoldering creosote.

Believes in the elbow through the window.
Believes in the headache. Believes in the faint.

Believes in the rising waters, the drenching.
Believes in the scorpion and the spider.

Believes in the viper curled around the drainpipe.
Believes in the sea and the sinking.

RUTH FOLEY lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches English for Wheaton College. Her recent work is appearing or forthcoming in *Adanna*, *The Bellingham Review*, *Yemassee*, and *Weave*, among others, and her chapbook *Dear Turquoise* is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. Her poetry has been nominated for the Best New Poets, Best of the Net, and Pushcart anthologies. She also serves as Managing Editor for [Cider Press Review](#). She believes that choosing a favorite dessert is like choosing a favorite child, but since she has no children, she's gonna have to go with chocolate covered caramels. Feel free to disagree with her at ruthfoley@gmail.com.

Carolyn Park Elementary

Louis E. Bourgeois

Being in a public school for the first time is like being at the bottom of a lake; no nuns and priests, no Holy Water or Catechism, or Crucifixion—just a herd of confused children, everywhere, and not a single person knows your name on this first day, or wants to know your name; there are black kids twice as tall as you who lick their lips as you walk by and teachers as petrified as the solid green concrete walls, and there are rows and rows of yellow buses sitting idle like so many train cars shuffling you off to an inane destiny. You've never been on a school bus before but now you've been assigned one and even told to sit in a certain seat for the rest of the school year. Styx blares away through the scratchy sounding speakers at both extremes of the bus. You still can hear the song as if you'd just heard it yesterday,

Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with me
Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with me
Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with me

and the music makes you feel quite unlike you've ever felt before, some ultra identification with some schoolgirl's face you've never quite known before and you are somehow made sad by the morning rays that penetrate the thick school bus windows and the strange whispers of the other elementary school children cover your mind with darkness you've never experienced before.

At the school, which is a brand new school, just opened by the State of Louisiana for mostly working class children, you try to piece the puzzle together in your little 2nd grade mind. You can't but help to wonder why Mother took you out of Catholic school in the middle of the year; there was talk of debt and bills that you remember hearing vaguely at the kitchen table this morning. Already you're being persecuted for some unnamable reason. It is X-mas time and you are enjoying a small fold-out box lined with various flavored Life Savers. The cherry ones nearly take your feet off the ground, but on the degrading minimalist state-made playground which has no character at all and only a lone swing set and a set of monkey bars to play on, you become frightened because something is not right here, your child/animal intuition tells you so; you run away from the other children who seem to appear all at once as cardboard figures and you try to escape the school ground by opening the latch on the aluminum gate, but some ugly teacher sees you and catches you before you can make your escape and grabs you at the back of the neck and punishes you by making you sit

on one of the new metal benches that are too cold to sit on this time of year. Everyone stares at you with their vacant un-human eyes because you are the only one who is alone.

Frightened by your own loneliness, you somehow gather the courage to ask the teacher if you can play with the other children and after a rather severe admonishment she concedes, but as soon as you try to kick the ball around like everyone else a tall 4th grader, Lisa, you'll never forget her dreadful personage and the name that was attached to it, tells the other children not to play with you because you're new and your hair is too long and somehow she found out you're parents are getting divorced and all at once you become as rancid to them as rotten meat.

In utter confusion, you enter the cafeteria and the first person you see is your future step-grandmother who stands suspiciously behind a pane of plastic glass where she works serving food—a deep embarrassment nestles down in the pit of your stomach although you're not sure why. Is it because she's practically a stranger yet knows you so well and already expects you to call her grandma? Are you embarrassed because she works in the cafeteria where she has to serve everyone, no matter who? Is it already that class-consciousness is sweeping its evilness across your brain, destroying you by degrees?

You have the strength to cry in your disarray and you sort of circle the cafeteria hoping no one will notice you, but at the same time hoping someone will tell you what to do with yourself, and then, as if awakening from one nightmare to another, a long line of Down's Syndrome children from the special school down the road are all lined up to eat in the cafeteria. Your step-grandmother-to-be glances at you pensively as if she knew this was doing you great harm, and then she anxiously prepares her place in the line where she administers the mash potatoes and gravy. You've never seen such expressions of idiocy before, you've never seen such strange and pure fear and blissfulness before, but even at this age you know it's wrong to be embarrassed by their presence, but you can't help it, you stand in the cafeteria with your back against the wall where you now are suspected by the authorities of wrongdoing undoubtedly. You dare not get in line with the retarded children nor can you bring yourself to be served by quasi-grandmother and you are impossibly hungry, so very hungry that you faint, and before long strange faces above you tell you to get off the floor and get into line and you do, and you sit with the Down's Syndrome children and eat in the worst silence you have ever known in your too young life.

By day's end, you're nearly insane, and you want to go home to momma-daddy, which can't ever happen again, or to be quite dead, but they're loading up the buses and to your internal horror, you can't at all remember which bus you came in on. You panic deep inside and you know quite well there's a perfectly good chance you'll never get home again, wherever home may be for you now. With momma you just moved to a strange part of town near a bayou, but you don't know how to tell anyone which bayou and even if you did you wouldn't know how to pronounce St. Genevieve, even though your very life depends on it. You pant and pant because not only do you not remember where you live but you can't at all remember the number of your bus, because you didn't know you had to remember the number of the bus because momma-daddy always did everything for you and wanted to do everything for you, but now there is no more momma-daddy, just momma and daddy

in separate horrible intervals. Some enormous adult catches sight of you finally seeing your real tears flowing from your immaculate eyes where you are half-pacing under the bus alcove and she asks you what is the problem, but what the adult doesn't understand and what you couldn't possibly tell her, is that for the first time you know what death is and death is not knowing what to do next. You think you will disappear forever, you would like to tell her this, to describe it, but you have no words, to describe it, you open your mouth but nothing at all comes out.

She catches on and says without shame, and you think she should feel shame because you feel shame, she asks you with the utmost confidence and certainty in her words, and it's like an echo in an empty school hallway deep in the afternoon, she says, Where do you live? In a hopeless manner, you mutter something, words falling out of your mouth not even in fragments, and suddenly the expression on her face changes and then you are brought to even a greater level of horror because you realize this teacher feels your shame of not knowing where home is, at least for the moment, and she is stunned that you could affect her this way, yet you do, you are falling, in a state of collapse, and death now seems kind to you, so very kind. She asks, regaining her composure, somewhat, What's the number of your bus? This of course is the same thing as asking you where you live, which for you, no longer exists. You don't even have a good concept of what numbers are and only a vague comprehension of words, and even if you knew numbers one through ten, that still wouldn't help you much as the bus's number was two numbers set side by side, it was a double digit number which for you might as well be the Quadratic Equation.

The teacher presses on and asks you again, What is the number of your bus? You couldn't possibly say, nor would you want to say because you do not like numbers neither thinking of them nor saying them out loud, but somewhere in the farthest reaches of your mind, something like God is issuing forth two numbers side by side, He is working out a miracle of sorts, numbers you've never seen before begin to form themselves in your mouth, against your will even, and the teacher asks you once more, What is the number of your bus? and the numbers are going through you like blood; this is an act of God and finally the numbers appear to be piercing your skin, as if your body was still fighting the numbers off yet considering to accept them for your survival, because it's your body, not your mind that wants to be saved on this afternoon. Without the least bit of difficulty, you hear yourself; the number 52 leaves your tongue. Suddenly, everything stops and just a few minutes later you're on the same bus that brought you to this place so very long ago, some seven hours ago, and indeed the bus takes you right up to the front steps of that rented warehouse of a house on Bayou St. Genevieve where you do not live and will never live with momma-daddy ever again.

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LOUIS BOURGEOIS is the Executive Director of VOX PRESS, a 501 (c) 3 arts organization based in Oxford, Mississippi.

Giving Birth

Kathleen Tryon

I can see my husband Benny's stubble covered face through the streaky window of the backdoor. He is waving me out, the skin crinkled between his thick brows, and his chocolate bloodshot eyes serious. His ruffled loose blonde hair and bronze tone skin leave him resembling a California beach bum gone bad. "I have a situation to settle," he tells me.

I am in our upstairs flat leaning my tired body into the doorframe between the kitchen and back porch. Hesitantly, I toss my worn leather purse over my shoulder, the weight throwing me off balance. It is full of everything I could possibly need but probably won't: pads of paper bearing old orders from customers, twelve or so dried out pens, a wallet thick with photos and thin on cash, the ever important make-up bag (I can't go anywhere without it), a half pack of Parliaments, wrinkled Band Aids, tissues (new and used), and a couple of mummified tampons snapped into their plastic case. I grasp the rail leading me down the metal staircase a few feet behind him. It is 10 am and a muggy 90 degrees. I manage my way into the passenger side of the '72 Satellite my mother had given me, my belly swollen, and roll down the window. I can't believe he's asking me to go anywhere and I am cursing him under my breath. The driver's side door slams. He slips on his sun glasses. I have no clue where we are going.

We travel east on Route 31. It is Labor Day weekend and traffic is confining. He's in a hurry and tailgating; swaying over the center line trying to pass. I grit my teeth and hold the door handle. "Can you please slow down?" I say, trapping the tone of the truth to the roof of my mouth. I am learning not to start trouble. He would never hit me, I'm pretty sure; my greatest fear is he could leave me.

We go by lawns strewn with colorful items for rummage and vehicles parked haphazardly loading their new found stash; we go by Flo's Diner (home of the 10 cent coffee); by lines of leather vested bikers on Harleys whipping by us in the opposite direction; by the rusted green exit sign for Sylvan Beach leading packs of families to hot dogs and swings-sets and water. We speed past their turn.

At our destination, a man about his age stands waiting, arms crossed in his yard, and saunters closer to our car. I can smell the fish in the lake and feel the gravel crackle under the tires as we coast down his driveway. The crickets are singing soprano. There is a small group of people in shorts, tie-dyes and flip-flops already here, milling around. They turn to look our way.

*

I was fifteen when I met Benny and dating one of his friends. He and Tony lived on the same block of McKinley Road near the Pepsi plant and graduated from the same high school, four years ahead of me. A bunch of us met nightly in another friend's driveway usually around dusk, while the two of them and some others guys from the street, took apart car engines and drank Old Vienna splits inside the garage. Extension cords bandaged in black electrical tape trailed from the house to a sticky AM/FM radio positioned at the edge of the cluttered work bench, tuned into the classic rock station. The other girls and I, sat on folding lawn chairs slapping mosquitos from our ankles, singing along to Leonard Skynard, sipping our OVs and blowing smoke rings into the dark. I stole glances of Benny's body bent under the hood, his hands mixed into the engine with others loosening and tightening parts, until he caught me looking his way.

Tony was my first "technical" boyfriend, but he loved me too easily. I suffered from a lack of confidence. Taller than my cohorts, I hated my frizzy unmanageable hair, pale skin, slew of freckles, and oversized ears. My father had been missing since I was seven, and I was used to being left not pursued. Anyone who liked me as much as Tony did must have something wrong with them, I rationalized. His love was like a medal for a race I didn't run; a sham.

I worked hard for the attention of the couldn't-possibly-care-about-me type. Wanting to trust in their feigned interest, I repeatedly allowed their bodies into mine, waking the next day hung over and shamed. I felt like the items left lying in lint at the bottom of my purse, used up and disgarded.

Benny was different. No matter where he saw me he would turn to me and smile, "Hey Kate." He was the only one to ever call me Kate and when he said my name I swear I left the planet, heat flushing every inch of my skin. His interest seemed genuine and he never tried to seduce me sexually. I was enraptured, but he had a girlfriend and they had a daughter, and of course there was Tony, so I held onto my crush secretly, like a winning lottery ticket—hoping to someday cash in.

I would see Benny at parties mostly, like the one where our friend Mike, who lived in an apartment behind the local fish fry, often hosted. Fifteen to 20 kids would jam into his one room flat, music blaring and the smoke so thick, you would have to squint to see who was across the room. One night Mike was high on heroin. He tripped and his 350 pound body toppled down the hallway stairs, the music in rhythm with the thumps of his fall. Benny and I were at the bottom of the stairwell smoking our respective smokes. Grabbing both sides of my jacket near my waist, he pulled me toward him and out of the way. The curve of my back fit to his belly. Mike lay motionless. We stood in shock. Benny's arms were still around me. Then Mike's body began to shake. He rolled to all fours and got back up rebalancing his black rimmed glasses on the wide bridge of his nose; eyes dilated through thick lenses, and waddled back up the stairs for more.

Benny's girlfriend eventually left him and my relationship with Tony fizzled, so I began to pursue him. I stopped by Sears Automotive where he worked as a mechanic. He greeted me at the counter in his gray greasy overalls, a lug nut and wrench in hand, his blonde hair messy and wild. As much

as I wanted to touch him, I was afraid to look at him and averted his eyes. I made up reasons to be there and asked random questions like, “You okay, I didn’t see you out this weekend?” Or, “You going to that party Friday night?” Or, “You know where I could score some weed?” He met me in the parking lot time and again, where I would fidget and paw through my purse looking for nothing, grateful the desk was no longer between us.

Things progressed and I stalked him at bars. Strategically I changed the birthdate on my school ID and it worked to get me past burly bouncers for a while. With the recipe of strobe lights and rock music and White Russians, I transformed to determined seductress. I never saw myself as thin, but I was, and my long legs were likely my most alluring feature. Donning skin-tight Guess jeans and knee-high boots, I laid on my drunken charm then followed him home to his basement apartment where we met in the folds of his sheets.

*

A sharp pain erupts in my belly and I groan. He pops the car into park, throws the door open, vaults out and charges this guy, shoving him hard with both hands square on his shoulders. I and the others circle round them as audience on the tinged-brown terrain. This stranger and my husband, wired and rancorous, raise fists to save face in a dance of fancy foot work choreographed to avoid the next punch. The other guy is taller and lanky, red-skinned, tattooed, with thinning strawberry hair, and has to slouch as he bops to stay eye to eye with his rival. Slurs rifle back and forth between the two of them like grenades and their faces growl. There are eight or ten of us witnessing this spectacle. Benny’s allies root for him shouting, “You got him man! Give it to him! Don’t take his shit!”

It feels as if I’m drowning in a dream. I’ve been up all night with labor pains. My second-hand maternity tee shirt is glued to my skin with sweat, accentuating my protruding belly. To my left a scowling, young woman from my neighborhood is full into this fight. She gave birth to her first child a few months ago. “I didn’t cry,” she brags to me, “not even once.” Her waist-length wavy hair blows across my face and stings my eyes. Across the way, a guy with a mustache and scraggly beard leans forward as if readying to dive into the mix. One of Benny’s out-all-night companions, John, is in the circle too. He removes his faded Red Sox cap waving it like a pennant for his favorite team, and switches it from forward to backward to forward again. Every five or so minutes, what feels like a giant fist clenching my uterus causes my knees to fold. I say nothing as the onlookers egg them on. Benny and this guy yelp and swear as they duke it out, fists smacking each other’s scrawny bodies. The hollow thumps reverberate in my ears. I wait for someone to fall or to bleed, for this fight to be over.

*

“We’ve got something we want to tell you,” I said, picking at my cuticles and staring at the circular pattern in the rug, the button of my Levi jeans pressed into my belly. I was trembling inside of myself. Benny sat next to me on the sofa, as my silent support, one hand resting on my knee, and one of his booted feet bobbing.

My mom sat erect on the edge of her chair and glared at me with a dog's snarl. "Then get an abortion."

"No way, Mom, I want this baby." I squeezed Benny's flannel shirt into my fist.

"Kathy! Jesus Christ...you're only eighteen! You've got your whole life ahead of you! Do you want to ruin your god damned life? What the hell are the two of you going to do?"

By this time, my mother was standing, pacing, and shaking her finger at me. "I knew this was coming!"

When I was in seventh grade, I got my first lesson in sexuality from my mother. I remember standing in front of my house at the edge of the road, wearing my favorite green and white sweatshirt, trying to keep my hands warm in the pockets, looking at her waving a packaged condom at me from behind the screen door, her other hand on her hip. Her voice was fraught with disdain. "What are you, some kind of whore?"

I was still a virgin at that point, and really had no idea what to do with the rubber she found in my dresser drawer. But a picture was being painted, with she and I at opposite sides of the frame, my back turned, the hues surrounding her dark.

"We are keeping this baby, Mom."

*

By my sixth month of pregnancy, I pretty much prayed and wailed daily. I shuffled nervously through the apartment from couch to kitchen table to bed to couch again to wait out Benny's latest binge, which came just about every four weeks. I lived fifteen miles from a store. I had no money. My head boomed relentlessly. My eyes were permanently puffy. I couldn't sit still. I couldn't stop pacing. I couldn't sleep.

He would disappear for three-day stretches, saying he'd be right back. During those days, I hovered in the living room watching Princess Di's proper image on our old 19 inch RCA, distorted and undulating from a worn out picture tube. I was sharing my pregnancy with royalty--the white-blond-blue-eyed-sort. Swept off her feet in a spectacle of entourage a year or so earlier, she, in perfect order, became incepted with child within months of me. Clean-cut, big eared, Charles, the proud prince and father-to-be, stood by her side. Wasn't this how it was supposed to be, swept off your feet in a royal fashion, jeweled crowns to pass on to the next generation, the world holding you up? The heir to the throne, the legacy of aristocrats, the next generation of Windsor, held in her belly. But she and Charles didn't look at each other either, her eyes cast down to her left. I could see in her shy, twisted, smile she wished what I was wishing, for this to be over.

By nightfall I began frantically scanning the highway outside for his return. The picture window was dusty and dirty from tractor-trailers whizzing by, and webs of black spiders hung outside the glass. My brain was a whir, but I tried lying down. I started to doze, yet the sound of each passing car jump-started my heart into a panicky rhythm, and I was wide awake again. On day four he stumbled up the metal stairs wearing a black, blank stare, empty of words, and reeking of left over booze.

*

The fight putters then stalls. The contenders have out of gas, and stand in mutual surrender, catching their breath, dirt streaking their sweaty faces. Benny wipes his palms on his shorts then turns to me pointing toward the car. Maybe he can finally see the distress on my face, the way I'm bent over, the urgency of the situation. I get in and stay to my side, my body pressed into the door. The crowd is dispersing as we back out slowly, but at the top of the drive, Benny hits the gas and the back tires fishtail, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

On the highway, he cranks the volume on the radio and turns up the bass. My face catches the relief of the wind shifting through the windows, and I'm thankful to be moving. He is driving over the limit, reclining back in his seat. Grabbing his Winston's in the center console, he taps the pack over his wrist and pulls out a smoke with his teeth.

"Give me a light, Kate." The gruffness is gone from his voice.

The back of my legs grab the seat as I try to slide his way. Sprinkles of rain slap the windshield and everything seems to darken.

"They're less than five minutes apart." I say cupping my hand around the lighter trying to capture a flame. I still have no idea where we are going.

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KATHLEEN TRYON is a clinical social worker and second year Pro student with the Syracuse Downtown Writer's Center. She believes all possibilities, and sees her work as setting people free. .

Ten Declarations Concerning the Superiority of Roots

Kathleen Rooney

Declaration 1: The Baby Bunnies Under the Rosebush

Omaha, Nebraska, 1985: The large backyard of the house on Farnum Circle, our home of four years, West Virginia behind us, Louisiana and Illinois still to come, though we don't know it yet. The magic hours of latest spring, heavenly light falling all around. Early dinner done, Dad home from work at the VA Hospital, and me, five years old, the oldest daughter, holding a spade to help him dig. Dad, a gardener in gardener's gloves, prepping the ground to plant an American Beauty, blood-red, the front beds already too crowded with roses to fit another. Dad with the real shovel, then the dip in the dirt, and a gasp from beneath his mustache. "Kathy! Do you see these little guys?"

He brushes back the longish grass where he'd been about to dig in, like brushing the hair from a fevered face, and there: a heaving pile of baby bunnies, so many, I can't even tell how many. He has upturned, but not fatally, a bunny nest.

The mom, he says, is out and gone, probably for food, leaving the baby bunnies in a warm, weird heap: fluffy fur from the parents, the babies still pretty naked, and leafy tufts and parchment-thin skin and ribs and pulsing hearts I can actually see underneath, a drum line of hearts among the newborn siblings, and my hand reaching without thinking and Dad saying, "Wait a sec, Kath-a-Roo. If you touch them, the mother-bunny won't come back."

Omaha, Nebraska, 1985. The point being: hidden things are better. Better than obvious ones.

Declaration 2: The French Philosopher and Christian Mystic Simone Weil Was a Genius

In his preface to Simone Weil's book *The Need for Roots*, T.S. Eliot says, "We must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of the saints."

Simone Weil didn't write a book called *The Need for Branches*. She worked on and off as an agricultural laborer; she knew from roots.

"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul," she says

in her chapter on “Uprootedness.” “A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future.”

The uprooted, she argues, cannot resist attempting to uproot others, but whoever is rooted does not attempt to uproot anyone.

Declaration 3: The Baby Bunnies Under the Rosebush

Omaha, Nebraska, 1985: I go out to the yard the next day and look at the baby bunnies and think “Peter Rabbit” and think “Beatrix Potter” like the stories my mother reads us sometimes before bed. I look at the spot where the nest is and think, These, these are the Flopsy Bunnies. I want so badly to touch them, but I won’t, because to do so might make me like the villain in the books, murderous Mr. McGregor. That man was like a serial killer. No, I will not hurt the bunnies, down there where the roots of the rosebush were to go. I will let them stay rooted, covered up and growing.

Declaration 4: The Etymology of “Root” Is Itself a Study of Roots

Root (noun) meaning “underground part of a plant,” late Old English rot. The verb meaning “fixed or firmly attached by roots,” often figurative, is attested from the late 14th century.

Root (verb one) meaning “dig with the snout,” 1530s from Middle English wroten. The phrase root hog or die meaning “work or fail” is first attested from 1834, American English, in the works of Davey Crockett who noted it as being “an old saying.”

Root (verb two) meaning “cheer, support,” 1889, American English, probably from root (verb one) via the intermediate sense of “study, work hard” dating from 1856.

Declaration 5: A List of Things Roots and Branches Will Say to You, If You Listen

“You will miss me so badly when I am finally gone,” say the roots in a way that makes you know that they are right.

“Must I live my whole life through not knowing what to do?” Roots never ask that.

“There are so few mysteries,” say the roots. “Let’s let people have their secrets.”

“This is your chance! Don’t blow it!” say the branches, urging you to fleeting and embarrassing action.

“Also, your hair is shiny like molasses,” the branches say, full of false flattery.

The branches cry, “Cease your sport with us, infernal wind!”

But the roots say, quietly, “We won’t let you get hurt, not with any permanence.”

“I think this is going to be a long romance,” whisper the roots.

The roots tell you to think about your name when you heard it for the first time.

Declaration 6: The Baby Bunnies Under the Rosebush

Omaha, Nebraska, 1985: My little-middle sister, Elizabeth, nickname: Bethy-Rabbit. Mine? Kathy-Mouse. Lesson: it is better to be a little guy, better to be close to, in, or under the ground, where you cannot be easily found, or can be found, perhaps, only by the right kind of like-minded person, who will respect and protect you.

Declaration 7: A List of the Things Roots Will Do That Branches Won’t and Vice Versa

Branches stand up in public forums, make a spectacle of themselves, and ask questions longer than any possible answer.

Roots are master self-effacers in an era of celebrity. Branches post on Facebook, “Goodnight everyone. I promise to ‘like’ your statuses in my sleep.” Roots are not on Facebook.

Branches shake and drop snow in your coffee. A root would never do that.

Branches are frankly promiscuous, designed to give things away.

Roots are designed for keeping.

Roots stay around after the prairie gets burnt down and make the prairie come back.

Branches scratch at the windows like hideous receptionists wearing Lee Press-On Nails.

Roots are like dance charts, maps on the floor that show your feet where to go.

Branches, with their leaves and flowers, are merely using ostentation to mask feelings of discomfort. Roots, being hidden, don’t have to try to hide.

Branches come to an end, an absence of further continuation; roots go on forever and ever.

Declaration 8: The Baby Bunnies Under the Rosebush

Like all of Nebraska, the baby bunny nest is probably in part a dream. But I recall going back and back and back to their spot until they grew up and were gone. I recall them getting bigger, their eyes

going from sealed shut to beady and open and looking at me, their noses twitching, cute, at first, then distant, already almost-taxidermied. I think of them and then think of my relationship with my dad as being like the bunnies, branching out too, eventually, and away from where it began, getting pulled apart, getting worse. But the possibility with roots is one of return, however unlikely.

Declaration 9: Roots and the Nature of Truth

Martin Heidegger, while a Nazi, was not wrong about everything. The Greek word for “truth,” he points out, ἀλήθεια, literally means not “coherence” or “correspondence to fact” but “unhiddenness.” Not “obviousness,” either, but “unhiddenness,” like a thing that was hidden but is no longer. Notice the loss implicit in this. Notice the lack. This is not to say that roots are “untruth,” or that branches are “dishonest,” but rather to ask: can’t there be some mystery? Can’t we have some roots?

Declaration 10: A List of Names for Roots and Branches

And this root is called “Glory heretofore unknown by man or beast.”

And this root is the old icebreaker question: would you rather be able to fly or to be invisible, and the answer is clearly invisible because then you can reappear.

This root is called “A tough, sad song.”

We call this root metaphysical, like a mandrake or a vegetable love.

Seamus Heaney says, “poets are finders and keepers,” and the same is true of roots, finding water every time.

But this branch is called “We don’t use that word here.”

And this branch is called “One listens to branches as one might listen to birdsongs: nice to hear but nothing to think about.”

We call this branch the three branches of government.

I call this branch the branch of a bank.

You call this branch self-forgetful toward the world.

You branch for this branch? No, you root for this branch. And that is why roots are better than branches.

KATHLEEN ROONEY is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press, a nonprofit publisher of literary work in hybrid genres, and a founding member of Poems While You Wait, a team of poets and their typewriters who compose commissioned poetry on demand. She is the author of six books of poetry and nonfiction including, most recently, the novel in poems *Robinson Alone* (Gold Wake Press 2012). Her novel, *O Democracy!*, is forthcoming from Fifth Star Press in 2014..

Briefly: Three Short, Rough Drafts and a Review of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*

William Bradley

Much has already been written about *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, edited by Dinty W. Moore. The general consensus is that the book is terrific, that Moore has assembled some great writers of flash nonfiction (including Jenny Bouilly, Robin Hemley, Brenda Miller, and Lee Martin) to write about this form, provide writing exercises to inspire the reader, and to present example essays. I wish, for the sake of being a contrarian essayist, that I could say I disagree with the popular assessment, but I'm afraid I don't. Rose Metal Press, Dinty W. Moore, and all of the contributors to this relatively (and appropriately) slim volume have put together an invaluable book. I've read it twice now since getting my copy a month ago, and I've been going back to some of my favorite chapters to try my hand at those writing exercises.

Moore has put together a much-needed history of the brief essay in his introduction. Succinct yet thorough, I think that this history is going to be tremendously useful for those of us who teach nonfiction forms for quite some time—as useful as Philip Lopate's introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, perhaps (another piece I go back to every so often). Beginning with Thackeray in the late 19th century and ending in the 21st century with online literary magazines such as this one, Moore has provided us with a valuable resource.

As glad as I am to have read the history, though, I found myself appreciating the craft essays in this book even more. For quite some time, I think our genre has had several excellent craft books designed to help the beginning writer. There's Bill Roorbach's *Writing Life Stories*, Kristen Iversen's *Shadow Boxing*, Moore's own *The Truth of the Matter*, and countless others. These are all great books to help students who are just getting started in nonfiction, but there's been a dearth of books for the more advanced student or practitioner of the craft. This book acts as a nice corrective for this—in fact, the first exercise in the book is a revision exercise from Lia Purpura. The assumption in many of the craft essays is that the reader has already started writing nonfiction, and doesn't need a lot of guidance as she struggles to come up with ideas.

So what of the exercises themselves? I found some more useful than others, though you might very

well find that some of the exercises I couldn't use are exactly what you need. For purposes of this review, I've completed three of these exercises over the past three days. What follows is not exactly polished writing—the pieces are not revised, and they've been written quickly. Think of them as something of a cross between craft exercise and essay.

(A note about the exercises—in the book itself, the exercises aren't given clear titles, so I've identified them by their author's name and a description of what the exercise asks for).

Mrs. Thompson (inspired by Carol Guess's "Capture Someone Who Raised You" exercise)

She told us that Twisted Sister was a group of homosexual predators who would probably molest us if we ever went to one of their concerts. She told us that the song "Only the Good Die Young" proved that Billy Joel worshipped the devil. She told us that Bob Geldof and Michael Jackson could stage all the concerts and write all the songs they wanted—famine in Africa would not be ended until American children got serious about learning to pray the Rosary.

It was this last claim that finally led my father to tell me that I could no longer attend Catechism, even though it had been important to him that I receive my religious instruction. Dad attended a Catholic school when he was a kid, and still had a respectful fondness for the nuns who taught him and, stereotypically, attacked his knuckles with rulers. But Mrs. Thompson, he said, took things too far. "It's not your fault—or any other kid's fault—that people are starving in Africa," he said.

I didn't exactly mind being forbidden to attend Catechism for the rest of the year—the school year was almost over anyway, and I could stay home and play Nintendo while my siblings had to go to their own classes. But sometimes, while playing *Metroid* or *Duck Hunt*, I would feel a little anxious. This wasn't what a Sunday morning was supposed to be. And though I trusted my dad would never knowingly put my immortal soul in jeopardy, I felt like I was in danger all the same. I was pretty sure he was right, but if he wasn't, and she was, then I knew that God would certainly punish me for this transgression. She had been very clear on that sort of thing.

Our House (inspired by Bret Lott's "A Place You Know Well" exercise)

I don't currently live at home, in the house my wife and I bought together three years ago, after we were both hired in tenure-track positions at a small, Southern, Baptist college that, it turns out, was not exactly the best fit for me—a liberal from the north who writes self-indicting works of creative nonfiction. Actually, "not exactly the best fit" is putting it mildly—I wound up hating the job, and hating some of the people who worked there. In my defense, they hated me first, saw me as an outsider who didn't belong, and worked very hard to make me feel unappreciated and unwelcome. But I had never really hated anybody in my life, and found the sensation unpleasant enough that I knew I would have to leave.

So I have taken another job—a job at my alma mater in upstate New York (which, I guess, is also home, in a way, but not the way I usually think of the word). Emily, my wife, has remained in North

Carolina with the cats. We see each other as often as possible—at our house, at my apartment, and often in small Pennsylvania towns with names like “Frackville” that lie somewhere between our two residences.

But today I am back in my house—this place that we bought when the jobs were new and the future seemed to hold tremendous promise. A porch swing perfect for wine-sipping. A hallway to display all of our framed albums by the likes of Elvis Costello and John Cale. Upstairs bedrooms that could be turned into offices that we could decorate however we wanted—Emily’s tastefully minimalist, mine stuffed with the old lunch boxes, comic books, and Atari games that I’ve been hoarding for years.

And then there’s this room. The dining room. We rarely eat in here, but when we do, it’s usually because one of us has made a dinner that requires more preparation than throwing hot dogs on a grill or tossing a frozen pizza in the oven. Emily’s sausage and sundried tomato pasta. My quiche lorraine. These are the dinners that would be eaten by candlelight, if we didn’t have two cats who like to stand wherever we put down our plates.

There’s an elegant simplicity to this room, which is decorated mostly with things we took from her grandfather’s house when he died in 2008. Small bookshelves stuffed with old books. A heavy clock adorned with a statue of Frances Bacon. The roll-top secretary that held most of Emily’s grandmother’s important papers, and which now displays, within its glass casing, more old books as well as family photographs—my paternal grandfather as a boy with his own grandmother, a woman whose name I don’t know. A photo of my mom and her siblings when they were children. Pictures of Emily’s great aunts.

In our old apartment, we had what we called our Wall of Dead Relatives. Now, we have accumulated enough dead relative photos to cover three walls in our dining room. My grandparents on their wedding day. Emily’s great-grandparents on their wedding day. Emily’s grandparents outside their house in Nashville. My grandfather in his Army uniform.

I don’t mean to give you the impression that the dining room is some sort of mausoleum, or a dreary place. It’s not. These are photos of happy people enjoying themselves, much like the people in the collage frame on the wall to my left, the only people in this room who are still alive (aside from me, typing away). These photos are of family and close friends, mostly taken at the rehearsal dinner for our wedding. There’s Emily’s mom, uncle, and brother. My brother and sister leaning in together, his arm thrown around her shoulders. Our friends Mike and Katie, a year before they got married themselves, many years before the birth of their son or the publication of their first books. Emily’s dad, years before the chemotherapy made his beard fall out—the beard that he has only recently been able to grow back.

I frequently find myself anxious for Emily and the cats to join me somewhere else, away from the school I can’t work for and the town that I no longer like. But then, just as frequently, I’ll find myself sitting in my apartment in upstate New York, decorated only with posters from Stanley

Kubrick movies and one framed photo of Emily on the nightstand, and I realize that I very desperately wish to go home, where I eat better food, drink better wine, and find myself surrounded by those who care about me the most.

Presence (inspired by Patrick Madden's "Brief Contrary Essay" exercise)

My college girlfriend cheated on me a couple of times, although it's perhaps inaccurate to call it cheating, as she was always very careful to call me shortly before the hook-up—which for purposes of this essay we'll define as any romantic contact that involves either participant revealing a body part normally covered by a bathing suit, and not just intercourse—to break up with me. These indiscretions occurred while we were away from campus and each other—once over Christmas break, and once towards the end of a summer. We would usually get back together because, I'd found, abstinence tended to make the heart grow fonder. Or at least forgiving.

Absence, though, does not make the heart grow fonder, despite what conventional wisdom tells us. My college girlfriend found her own affections for me tended to fade when I was not in her immediate line of sight. And to be honest, though I never actually cheated on her, I was frequently tempted to do so while we were apart, and likely would have if I weren't so inept when it comes to talking to women.

I'm married now—not to my college girlfriend, thankfully, but to a woman I met in graduate school. I have been faithful to her, and I feel as certain as one can about such things that she has been faithful to me. I can honestly say I love her more now than I did on the day I married her, and the available evidence suggests that she feels the same way. This, in spite of the fact that we don't currently live together—not because of it.

Our hearts are sometimes made fonder, but not by distance. When I'm at my apartment in upstate New York and she's at our house in North Carolina, we both tend to work. I have written four new essays and one short story since we began our long distance relationship three months ago; she has finished a book proposal and written a series of poems. We teach. She has started running every morning. I have taken to watching movies she has no interest in, like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*. Solitary life is a bit lonely, but we're rather introverted anyway, and quickly get used to being alone with our thoughts. There have been days when I have realized, at four in the afternoon, that I have neither left my house nor seen another human being all day. And I don't miss the contact. I don't tend to spend much time pining away for my beloved. It would be romantic to say that I do—perhaps it would make you like me a bit—but it wouldn't be true. I read. I write. I work. I sleep. And that's pretty much what she does too.

Our hearts are made fonder, though, when we see each other again. Between eight and nine every night, we each grab a beer and log onto Skype so that we can talk about our days, bitch about work not going well, laugh about the political absurdity du jour—and look at each other while we do so. And then when we see each other in person—at the Syracuse airport when she comes to see me, or in our own house when I travel to her—we tend, I think, to stand a little closer to each other. Hold

hands a little bit tighter. Laugh, as if surprised, as we say “I love you” to each other—like we had forgotten how good it feels to be with the one you love. Like we had just remembered how happy life can be.

No, absence does not make my heart grow fonder. That’s a lovely sentiment, and if being physically apart from the one you love improves your relationship, then I’m happy for you. But for me, it’s the presence after the absence that makes my love grow, that overwhelms me with the power of my own affection for this woman I’ve been with for ten years. We are almost halfway through this year-long experiment in living apart, and I promise—myself, my wife, and you, gentle reader—that, once we are again living under one roof, I will do everything I can to remember how powerfully and positively her very presence in my life affects me.

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Dear Li-Young Lee,

I knew from the first read that I was (am) in love with your first volume of poetry *Rose*.

If, after that first read, you asked me *why* I loved your book I would've listed off the brilliant use of metaphor in poems like "Rain Diary" "Dreaming of Hair," and "Visions and Interpretations," or how your terse sentences create space for the words to swell and ache the same way your speaker aches. I may have also mentioned how you always seem to pick the most thematically relevant moments to render, such as in the final stanza of "Persimmons."

Now, a year after that first read through, I know that those are fine reasons to be enamored with *Rose*, but to love it for those reasons is like loving someone for their beautiful hair. Real love comes from loving not only the hair self, but how it is worn.

Throughout the poems in *Rose*, you don't simply write *about* your speaker's family, you conjure them, you render their essence, and the essence of what surrounds you, for the world to see and understand, you dig until you reveal the very elemental core of their being.

In "Water" for instance, we learn your speaker's father is a "son of water who'll die by water." You show us not only the literal manifestation of this, his "bloated/ liver" and "bloated legs," but also point out that when the speaker puts his ear to his father's face he hears "the sound of water/ returning" as if the prophecy of the wise man in Shantung—that his father will die by water—is true not because of coincidence, or even because the speaker believes the seer's fortune telling, but somehow he can sense every part of father's being, spiritual and physical, is tethered to water.

In "Always a Rose," in you describe your family by telling us how they interact with the rose:

"Of my brothers
one would have ignored it,
another ravished it, the third
would have pinned it to his chest...
My sister would rival its beauty,
my mother bow before it, then bear it
to my father's grave, where
he would grant it seven days,
then return to claim it forever."

A more conventional author might use similes or metaphor to compare the rose to the speaker's family members. A comparison would be sufficient, but would take away from joy of the process of getting to know your family through their interactions with the rose. Your willingness to allow what is not said to be heard, or if it is too quiet felt, inspires me to write every time I read your work.

And of your speaker's clouded vision mentioned in your final poem: it takes strength to admit that too. Yet you use unanswered questions as deftly as you use metaphor, and you dare to leave them that way. At the end of "Ash, Snow, or Moonlight" your speaker asks "Is this the first half of the century or the last?/ Is this my father's life or mine?" In "Dreaming of Hair" your speaker asks if his lover's black hair is death or beauty. Both questions go unanswered. A lesser author may have stopped there, at the dual implication that both could be true, but your incredible sensitivity to the dual nature of your family members: their yin and yang, life and imminent death, kindness and coldness—we as readers believe that you may have transcended yourself, that all possibilities are true, and that each answer is equally profound. And that dedication to the truth in between the evidence is why I love your book, and why it continues to inspire me to this day, years (and many rereads) after I first read it.

Sincerely,

Ryan Bollenbach

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To Ms. Lauren Slater,

I am late to the party. I mean way late. To be fair, I was only nine when *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* came out, only started writing four years ago, only started questioning my memory two years ago.

My boyfriend gave me your book for my birthday/Christmas and I read it on the plane ride from St. Petersburg, FL to Columbus, OH. I sat in business class watching a woman pour a tiny bottle of vodka into her orange juice and swallow it all in 8.3 seconds at 10:55 in the morning.

You see, my mother left me when I was four. She moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil with a man. She was beautiful and glamorous. *This* is the truth.

“I wanted to make my mother happy, that should come as no surprise...She was a woman of grand gestures and high standards and she rarely spoke the truth.”

I want you to know that I don't care what was true or false, or false or true, or truefalsefalsetruefalsefalse, an irregular heartbeat trying to grasp at memories you've reimagined.

“...I did grow up with a mother so wedded to denial, so inclined to twist and even outright lie, that I became confused about reality and also fell in love with tall tales.”

My father sometimes says I was five, my mother says six. But I distinctly remember four. It was 1995. I can't get a straight answer out of her as to why she left, and so, I began to imagine why and how. This is the truth.

“From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are.”

I don't know how long it took that woman to drink her screwdriver. It seemed like 8.3 seconds, but it could have been two minutes. Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. They all blend together. They're all the same.

I want to pass my dog-eared copy of *Lying* around to everyone, to shout out “Here! Here is my story, too. Don't you understand?” I want them to know that maybe, when mothers leave or are absent, disconnected, daughters fabricate.

So, thank you. Thank you for lying through your teeth and telling the truth in one single breath. For reminding us that memory is malleable, that being honest and truthful are different from telling the truth. For writing lines that make me shudder.

You say, “[I]live in the place I am, where the view is murky, where the connecting bridges and orienting maps have been surgically stripped away.” And I am. Lauren, I am.

Regards,

Christina Lutz

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