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Featured Article

The Dependable Density of Water

Laura White Schuett

It's been twelve months and two days since my son waved down the police and begged for help. Now we have a room in the ER at Thunderbird Hospital. Outside the room, there's music, the clang and clatter of beds being unfolded. The thick wood door can't muffle it. I watch Emory's face, afraid he'll be jarred from his shallow sleep. It's so close to the surface that when I move against the hard, plastic chair, his eyelids flicker, ripple, and the fingers on his right hand stiffen as if he's trying to grab hold of something.

He wants to be fixed. "Anything, anything," he said nearly seven hours ago. "I'm going to bang my brains out if someone doesn't help me."

It's nearly midnight now.

My husband winces at every bang of metal. He whispers hoarsely, "They don't care people are trying to sleep. They don't care people are suffering."

I don't tell him again that they're just doing their jobs. It's a shift to them. It's not the tech's fault that nothing's happening for Emory. I nod instead, attention fixed on the reflection in the curved bulb of the examination light above Emory's bed. No matter what angle, no matter how far I dip my head past the chair, I see a face. It's not ordinary. I'm surprised by its clarity, its exactness. When I first discovered it, I made my husband look at it. I told him to bend forward and tilt. I needed to know that he saw it, too. He did. "It's a face all right," he said, straightening in his chair again. "That happens."

On the smooth and reflective curve of glass, a person screams, mouth wide with horror and eyes lost in shadow.

"Those bulbs are made to diffuse light in an even way. They're special. You can't just climb up there and change them," he explained further, a scientist in everything he considers, as if that's enough. I wanted to know what it was in the room that had been distorted, bent and reflected into such a disturbing and constant image. I scanned the objects, the cabinets. There were no answers.

He told me that it didn't matter. I wasn't going to be able to find the source—it'd been changed so significantly.

"It's not Jesus. I can tell you that," I say now, still looking at the bulb and the metal hood.

He chews on a nacho chip, the sound loud, frightening. I shoot him looks as if he's deliberately hurting our son, and then say, "I'm sorry." I'm not sure if he knows why I'm asking for forgiveness. I'm not even sure he sees my expression. "Eat," I whisper. "I think he's down for a while."

I say this to make up for the thoughts I have. They're not okay. I sling blame in every direction and then return to myself. After all, I'm the one who gave Emory this. I house madness, and I carried him in my womb, within my walls.

My husband and I don't speak much. We can't risk waking Emory and the long hours that might follow. I study him as he takes in another chip, moves it in his mouth as if tasting fine wine. In this moment, I want to tell him that I love him. I'm afraid to say it, but I'm not sure why. We're both hanging on as if the hospital bed our son sleeps on is a raft. I am imagining over and over again that someone will swoop in and pluck us from these dark and dangerous currents.

No one does.

Earlier, we both tried to suck our food silently, my peanut butter crackers, orange, dry and pasty, almost not surrendering when I put the money in the machine, his sour cream and onion chips, light and feathery, the bag mostly air. We missed lunch and dinner. I'm not sure about breakfast. I'm never sure about it. Most of the time eating before eleven makes me nauseous, a morning sickness that began long before menses, long before the potential of carrying a child.

My husband can eat the second he wakes. And now that Emory has so few pleasures and the pills he's on make him ravenous, food is something to look forward to, to savor, or to chew as a distraction from the voices, the commands in his head.

Even though every light is off except for the x-ray box on the wall, the soft, white glow pulls everything out from shadows, including us.

It's obvious my husband is done with hearing about the figure fixed in the bulb. He's done with waiting and furious because he can't do anything. He's staring straight ahead at the laminated pain chart, a series of rudimentary faces expressing degrees of suffering. Perfect circles with eyes, brows, a nose, and a mouth, all drawn with simple lines, transform from left to right, from no pain to the maximum—0 to 10 even though there are only six drawings, and I wonder if anyone ever accomplishes the zero. Perhaps they do when comparing a stubbed toe to moments where they have been all the way to the other side of the continuum. Pain is relative. It would help if it were quantitative.

Emory has been a "ten" twice, or so he reported—the first time when he had migraines that caused his left side to go limp and the second when he needed an appendectomy. Pneumonia was a nine. No one has him look at the chart when he's in the hospital for *this*.

My husband has been a "ten" more times than I can count. When he paced for fourteen hours, crazy with the pain of multiple sclerosis and begging to be knocked out, he was as far to the right of the chart a person can be. He was also a ten when he dropped to the floor and his blood pressure plunged from the impact of a copperhead's venom. With each jerk of his body, he yanked farther away from our living room and from us. I screamed at him to stay steady, as if my shrill voice could buoy him from the pull. Our boys, terrified, clung to his arm. Three days later we took him home from the hospital. We had him back.

No one asked him, however, to look at a pain chart after his father locked himself in the garage and sealed up the windows with plastic. No one asked what level my husband's agony was when he learned that a rag soaked in gasoline was found in his father's mouth and the car was still running. No one asked why a twelve-year-old boy hated Sundays and church even though his father died while he wore his best clothes and sat in a pew.

Whenever I catch a fierce distance in his eyes, I know he hurts. Sometimes he's still that young boy, and I want to undo the damage.

The first drawing on the chart has an upturned smile and perky eyes. The single mouth line drops a little in the second, more in the third, and is drooping, dangling down nearly to the chin in the fifth and sixth drawings. The arcs of the brows fall with the mouth until they bow over the eyes. Eyelids appear, heavy with strain, and tears spring into perfectly formed droplets on cheeks with no definition—a ten.

I study these drawings, scrutinize them with the same attention given to the image in the light above my second born.

Our firstborn, a son that had a tenacious tumor that had to be cut away three times, knows pain also. He has been changed. Before this, before the night Emory waved down the police and begged to be put away, our oldest had a light step. The day he lost his brother, he also lost his girlfriend. Hours before Emory bolted from the house, chased by his own mind, our first son's girlfriend broke up with him after three years together. We didn't know. They both smiled and joked in front of us, deciding that she would stay the night in his room while he, like he always did, slept on the living-room couch because she lived nearly an hour away. They were going to tell us the news in the morning. We all ate dinner together until everything unraveled, the three of them, my sons and her, bickering like they always did.

My husband's on his third bag of chips. The first was salt and vinegar. I've been *doing* the coffee from the Emergency Room lobby. If I could have a beer, I would, but I need to be alert. Lately, a deep sleep is not good. Night is when Emory's most afraid and even the smallest amount of alcohol can slow the firing in my brain. The last round of coffee is black because they've run out of non-dairy creamer. I tried to ask about getting more, but the line to the front desk was long, and people were vomiting into pink kidney-shaped bowls. The flu season can't be here yet.

Flu seasons have meant a lot of visits to the hospital for him.

Those were easier visits, though. He was on the medical side of pain. The doctors always said with certainty that they were going to rehydrate him and get him on a quick path to recovery. With a temperature above 104 degrees for days and vomiting, he would be scratchy red and delirious. The fever carried him. He'd drift and say how far away he was. I'd try to tug him back in with talk, but once the doctors gave him medicine for his cough, he would be gone again, floating toward the horizon, merely a speck to focus on at times. In every room at Thunderbird, the abstract patterns in the wallpaper border became stick figures doing a jig. They tilted their top hats and tapped their canes. Emory would laugh, and I could relax during those moments. I didn't see what he saw, but I was happy that he was smiling again.

They'd put an IV in him to pump him up with liquids and to stop his vomiting. Miraculously, three hours later we'd go home confident that he'd be able to keep the liquids down and sleep at last.

I turned away from those flushed faces in the ER lobby and hurried back to the room with my black coffee, hoping that none of the illnesses hitched a ride.

Viruses always bloom into something more serious in Emory. A snuffle becomes a sinus infection, colds become asthmatic bronchitis, and asthmatic bronchitis becomes pneumonia.

None of us can afford it.

I have to keep my job for the insurance, and I can't give in to my own illness. This is what I chant silently against the backdrop of my husband eating another chip.

We went to Thunderbird this evening despite being told by Crisis Intake that there was nothing they could do except stuff Emory in a crowded room for up to 72 hours until a bed was available at downtown Phoenix or Scottsdale. There are only two hospital wings in the metropolitan area for adolescents. And numbers are up by 150% across the city. The emergency rooms are packed with behavioral health patients. It's overflowing—a crisis.

This is what I had warned Emory about as we got into the car to make the short drive to the hospital. I reminded him that the intake room was the packed, glassed in cage he was forced to stay in that one night not long ago. It has two short couches, a row of tired and stained recliners, bright fluorescent lights, a blaring television, and a guard.

I reminded him of how his father took him from there, the guard with his hand on his gun as the intake nurse insisted Emory stay because he was a danger to himself and others. He was

voluntarily participating in an intensive outpatient program for adolescents at the hospital when it happened. The program was supposed to be an opportunity to talk with a therapist and other struggling teenagers. It was supposed to be a safe and supportive environment. Instead, he sat in a large circle waiting for a turn to speak that rarely came, if at all, while twenty addicts fought for a chance to brag that they'd downed thirty beers in a night, scammed their parents over and over, and slept with older men for the money and the booze. The stories went on and on.

The closed room, the tension, the lights, the chaos, the late hour pulled him under.

When the therapist wouldn't let him step outside to call us, he panicked. He said he'd cut himself if she didn't release him. She walked him to the glassed room, telling him that he couldn't go home. Once inside Crisis Intake, he phoned us, terrified that he'd be left there to suffer alone.

My husband rushed over and plucked him from that room. He snatched Emory in the face of threats and brought him home where he belonged. The therapist called that night at well past eleven to advise us to bring him back immediately and have him admitted. She told us what he said. I wasn't surprised or shocked, nor did I believe he'd act on it. If I did, we'd spend every waking hour in that room, sitting and waiting in one of those stained recliners only to be sent home without relief.

I let her know that and arranged a meeting with her and the program director for the next day to come up with a plan. During that discussion, it was decided he could stay as long as he could handle it, and he would wait in the intake room for us to pick him up when he needed to leave. We felt better.

We didn't know that we would hear from CPS that afternoon. Personnel at Thunderbird reported us for neglect. *Us*.

He was no more a danger that day than the eleven months of days that came before. All of the mental health specialists in contact with him or us know that.

All of his doctors know he has psychosis. They've known this for twelve months and nearly three days. Psychosis is a scary word, and the reality is even more frightening. It means that he hears and sees things that aren't real, terrifying things that make his senses bristle under their assault. Sometimes towering strangers stand in the corner of his room and tell him what he should do. They barrage him with descriptions of how to kill himself, how to kill me, to kill my husband, to kill my other son, to kill everyone. He's told to chop us up and put us in black garbage bags and haul us out to the curb.

He feels like a killer even though he's committed no crime.

Fiction

Ditchboy

Norman German

The first time I saw him, he ducked his head below ground and I wasn't sure I had really seen him. Then he popped up on the other side of the street. Even from a distance he looked peculiar.

In our subdivision, there were open ditches before some houses and covered drainpipes before others. I reached him just in time to see him back into the culvert in front of Randall's house. I hung my head over the cement lip of the pipe, then looked into the blackness until I was dizzy.

No matter how serious I tried to be, my brother would not believe me. In the bedroom dark before sleep, I tried again.

"Really, Karsen. Cross my heart and hope to die, I think it was an elf."

After a long silence, he said, "Eat a crushed up grasshopper?"

"With spinach and liver," I swore.

"Don't be an idiot," he said. "If there's no such thing as Santa Claus, there can't be elves, either."

* * *

Three days later Karsen, Randall, Darnell, and I were playing flies-and-grounders in the street with a lopsided softball. I kept score in my old math notebook. When we missed the ball, it would bounce and roll in crazy curves, and Randall's dog, Mocha, an Australian shepherd, would speed after it. Off balance at a deranged hop of the ball, he would leap and snatch it in midair.

Mocha's problems started after Randall tried to keep him warm one night by giving him antifreeze. They were just about to bury him when he came back alive, but he was never his old self again. If you clapped your hands close to his ears, he would fall down unconscious, so if things got boring, Randall would do it on purpose and laugh and say Mocha was having an "ekpalectic" seizure.

That particular day Randall hit a long fly and ran around some imaginary bases yelling "Mark McGwire cracks the ball out of the park to win the World Series!" Darnell, a black kid spending the summer with his grandmother, was pitching, I was behind him, and Karsen was playing deep. Mocha was playing deepest, and the ball even went over *his* head.

We watched it roll next to the curb like a gutted bowling ball until it dropped into the mouth of a metal drain. When Randall caught up with Mocha, he clapped his hands and Mocha fell over in a dead faint.

After we took turns peering into the drain, Randall looked up the street. "I guess one of us could go into the pipe by old man Bickham's house and army-crawl till we reach the ball."

"Not me," Karsen said.

"Darnell?"

"Not me, uh-uhn, no way, no siree, not old Darnell, he smarter than that—"

"Alright, put a lid on it. Dale, what about you?"

I looked at the distance between Mr. Bickham's and the drain, trying to imagine myself crawling in the muddy dark.

"Dale?" He pushed me. "Come on, don't be such a sissy."

"No," I said. "Get it yourself. You hit it."

We started walking sullenly toward Mr. Bickham's; knowing none of us would go into the pipe. We had heard about the kid going into a drainpipe after a rabbit and getting caught in a squirming nest of water moccasins. Halfway to Bickham's, I heard a whistle behind me.

When we looked back, a tiny hand snaked out of the drain. It held the softball up and twisted it around like a doorknob.

I pushed Karsen's arm. "Told you."

He glared at me. "It ain't an elf." I didn't look convinced. "It ain't an elf. It's just a, you know, like—." He glanced at the hand teasing us with the softball. "—a ditchboy. It's just a kid who hangs out in the ditch."

I shook my head. "Whatever," I said and ran toward the drain with everybody falling in behind me. Just as we arrived, the ball spit out of the drain and bumpy-rolled towards us.

We tried to see the ditchboy through the narrow opening, but he kept his distance and his secret. When Dad turned the corner coming from work, we ran for the house. Picking up my score book, I got an idea. I left a note in front of the drain: "What's Your NAME?"

*

The next day, an orange card had replaced my note. I picked it up expecting to discover the ditchboy's name. "Get Out of Jail Free!" It was the Monopoly card with the smiling man getting booted out of jail.

Talking through the iron grate, Karsen and I tried to coax Ditchboy out of the drain. We told him we wouldn't hurt him, said he could ride our bikes. Finally Karsen said he was heading for Mr. Grant's to help him knock out a wall.

After Karsen had gone, I whispered, "Okay, you can come out now. We'll go down to the snowball stand and I'll treat you to a big blue snow cone." I waited for a while. "All right," I said, digging in my pocket, "here's a dollar to get one by yourself." I placed it under a rock. "I'm going to Darnell's to play in his tree house."

I ran down the street slapping my bare feet extra hard, then tiptoed back on the sidewalk and squatted over the drain, waiting for the tiny hand to reach for the bill. I waited and waited. Then I had to pee, so I tiptoed away and didn't think about returning until late that afternoon.

There was a Payday candy bar where the dollar had been. We didn't see the ditchboy for a week, but every time we returned to the drain, he had left us something. We put a pink Mardi Gras doubloon down one day and came back to find an old skateboard wheel. We left two acorns and a nickel, and he dealt us a Jack of Diamonds. We decided the ditchboy wasn't able to talk and was telling us something in code.

Finally, while Darnell, Randall, and I were playing Reckless in front of my house, the ditchboy ran across the street. The object of Reckless was to keep your bike inside a street square without touching the cement with your foot. We were yelling and taunting one another when I saw the ditchboy waddle across the street three houses down.

"There he is!"

"Ha!" Darnell said. "You might fool Randall with that stuff, but you can't fool old Darnell."

"No, really!" I put my foot down and pointed, and they looked up just in time to see Ditchboy duck into the culvert in front of old lady Snipes' house. We biked down as quick as we could, then Darnell crawled a little ways into the pipe before chickening out.

Karsen came out of Mr. Grant's house to see what all the commotion was about. A fine white powder covered his clothes. Karsen liked to get dirty and talk about the *work* he and Mr. Grant were doing. "What's up, guys?"

We all talked at once 'bout Ditchboy running across the road. Darnell challenged him: "Betcha don't know *why* he crossed the road." He slapped Karsen's shirt at "why," popping a cloud of dust in his face.

Karsen looked down the street. "I give up. Why?"

Darnell pushed Karsen. "To get to the other side, you dope!" Then he ran. That's when Karsen decided to capture the ditchboy. It might never have happened if Darnell hadn't made him feel stupid.

He went into Mr. Grant's house and came out with a five-foot strand of fishing line. "Monofilament," Karsen announced, "twenty-pound test," like that meant the ditchboy was as good as caught. Karsen ran to our kitchen, came out with a Butterfinger tied to the line, and walked straight for the drain.

All through the afternoon, we checked on him after skateboard races or returning from the park on our bikes. And there he sat, holding the line and watching the candy bar.

When Karsen finally hollered, we were at the dead-end of the street searching for four-leaf-clovers in front of Toi's house. Toi was a Japanese girl who hardly ever got to play because her parents made her attend special schools. Perched in a mimosa tree in Jennifer-the-rich-girl's yard, Randall and Nathan were bickering over a Game Boy.

"I got him!" Karsen yelled. We jumped on our bikes, watching him wrestle with Ditchboy's arm.

When we skidded to a stop, Karsen was holding a torn piece of blue cloth, the look on his face balanced between fear and wonder.

"Man, you're not gonna believe this," he started.

"It really *is* an elf?" Randall asked.

"No," Karsen said. "It's not a ditch**boy**. I think it's a little old *man*, 'cause his skin's all scaly."

"Ha!" Darnell said, clapping his hands. "I bet it's one-a them lizard boys my grammaw told me about."

"I don't know what he is," Karsen said, "but this is freaky. I mean like *Twilight Zone* freaky."

*

At supper that night, we mentioned it for the first time to our parents. They laughed, saying it was probably a boy with psoriasis and he was too embarrassed to play with us.

This made Karsen furious. The next morning, he stayed away from everybody and sulked up in the front-yard tallow tree.

That afternoon, Karsen got Randall to knock on the Bickham's door and ask if Suzie could come out and play with Mocha. Suzie was Mrs. Bickham's little terrier. Karsen didn't like her because she always had a pink bow between her ears and a tuft of hair covering her eyes.

Karsen and Randall threw sticks for Mocha and Suzie to fetch. When they started throwing them into the drainpipes, I knew what Karsen was up to. What I didn't know was whether the ditchboy saw any of this. I always had the feeling he was watching us.

Then—I remember it was the Fourth of July because Karsen was trying to flush the ditchboy out by pitching firecrackers into the culverts—Ditchboy finally made a mistake. Toi and I were sitting on her lawn making clover-blossom necklaces. Darnell had borrowed Randall's Spider Bike and was popping wheelies.

I looked up to see Mocha flash past Darnell, the ditchboy disappearing into Mr. Grant's culvert just as Mocha reached him. When we arrived at the end of the street, Mocha was growling into one end of the pipe while Karsen egged on Suzie at the other.

Then Karsen signaled to Randall, and Randall sent Mocha in like they had planned. Karsen was ready to catch the ditchboy when he flushed from his side of the pipe, but Mocha emerged alone.

We thought the long pipe in front of Mr. Grant's and old lady Snipes's house was a single pipe, but Randall said maybe it crossed to the other side of the road. Just as we looked down the street, the ditchboy popped out of the pipe in front of our house and ran limping across the road to freedom. Mocha blasted off in a growling frenzy.

When the ditchboy saw that he wasn't going to reach the next pipe before Mocha, he twirled, then grabbed a whistle hanging around his neck and blew it. Running full blast, Mocha fell right at Ditchboy's feet in a tumbling splash of yellow and white fur. I was actually hoping the ditchboy would escape, but Suzie blocked his way to the culvert in front of Darnell's house and latched onto one of his pant legs, jerking back and forth like a demon-possessed dog trying to rattle its own brains out.

We formed a loose circle around the ditchboy, then closed in. No one wanted to touch him, he was that scary looking. Darnell pulled Suzie off Ditchboy's cuff and calmed her down.

Then we just stared at the ditchboy as he crouched down, making strange animal-like noises. He had almond-shaped eyes like Toi and a scalp populated by a few malnourished patches of gray hair.

We all felt sorry that we had cornered the ditchboy. He was not looking at us but was trying to peer around our legs, so we swiveled to see Mocha lying on the cement with his tongue hanging out. Karsen was the first to understand.

"Oh," he said to the ditchboy, "don't worry about him. He dies all the time."

The ditchboy slowly stood up. His nose was dented on both sides, like someone had pinched it hard. And he was shorter than Toi. We speculated as if the ditchboy couldn't understand us.

"See," I said, tugging on Karsen's shirt, "it's an elf."

"No," Randall argued, "it's a UFO alien, like Yoda."

Karsen turned on Randall with utter contempt. "Are you an idiot? Yoda's not even real. He's from the *movies*, you moron."

"Well," Darnell interrupted, trying to save Randall, "what *chew* think he is, smart boy?"

Karsen squinted at Ditchboy. After a long pause, he announced confidently, "He's a leprechaun."

Darnell raised his eyebrows. We looked at the ditchboy. Darnell said, "How you figure that?"

"Because, look." Karsen pointed at Ditchboy's wrinkled arms. "He's got leprosy."

"No!" the ditchboy cried out. Our mouths opened and we stopped to look at this marvelous creature that could suddenly talk. "I have an old-age disease." He folded his arms to hide them. His voice was musical but sad, and he sounded like a child trying to talk like an adult.

"I'm only ten years old, but I have a disease that ages me real fast." He paused to let us think about this. "It's called progeria, and you're born with it. Some doctors say we age seven years for every year and others say eight." He held out the backs of his hands for us to inspect. "That makes me either seventy or eighty, but as you can see, it doesn't make much difference. When you're seventy or eighty, you're just old."

After a while I took a step forward and reached out my hand. "What's your name?"

The ditchboy gazed at me through the most unusual eyes I was ever to see—young and bright, sad and old. "My name is Hayley, what's yours?" We all stared at each other.

The ditchboy was a girl.

Poetry

Marie Blanchard's Mother

Diane Kendig

Her husband forgot her name, forgot his horse
in the woods of Santander, and, most often, forgot
their daughter, kyphotic from birth from her mother's fall.
The beautiful wife, forgotten, ignored her daughter, too.
Marie grew smaller and smaller, her head,
sinking into her shoulders like a buoy pulled through water,
away from the taunts of the townsmen who thought
touching lottery tickets to a cripple would bring them luck.

"Only in Spain!" she cried, and left for Paris.
She returned with cubism, and turned it in later
for her own vision: the lost, sick, and lonely
in searing colors laid on with a knife,
so stylized her mother even got the point.
Then came the famous, *The First Communion*, then
her last scenes, all mothers and children. A dry search
for God, Lorca said, "no angels, no miracles."

Her refined mother, the legerdemainist
charmed the neighborhood children at her own sickbed.
From under her pillow she'd pull fruit and sparrows.
And keys! How she'd lose them to find them
for the children's amusement: on the armoire,
behind Jaime's ear, in the mouth of the dog.
Over and over, she'd lose, then reproduce them,
trying to prove she hadn't forgotten or lost.

Note: *Maria Blanchard, contemporary of Picasso, Rivera, and other famous artists, died in near-penury in Paris in 1932. Today three of her paintings hang in the Sofia Reina Museum in Madrid, Spain.*

Poetry

Baptism

Linda A. Cronin

Three times a week, I come to the pool
at Children's Specialized Hospital to exercise.
Even in the middle of winter, the warm, moist air
reminds me of the humid days of summer. Since
I'm unable to descend the ladder or to walk on land,
when I am ready Pam transfers me to a stretcher
which is lifted out over the pool then lowered gently
into the water where Sue stands ready to release me.
I sink into the pool, warm as a bath, until only
my head remains above the surface, bobbing.
I relax, taking a deep breath. My arms rise,
levitate like a leaf in a pond,
lift from my sides where they hang,
waiting. My legs awaken, bend and straighten
with a freedom absent on land. Here,
in the water, gravity melts, releases
its pull on my limbs, no longer wrestling me
to the ground. The arthritis that greets me each day
frees me from its grip. Here, for thirty
minutes, I'm free to play with the other kids,
damaged like I am. Free to walk and swim.
To wave my arms and kick my legs without
the start and stop of pain, without the stutters
of bone catching on bone. The ghost of my past self
rediscovers motion, a sensation slipping farther
into the mist of yesterday. When the therapist
signals the session's end, I take a deep breath
then arch my back and dive under
the water, skim across the checkered tiles
of the pool floor, drinking in the freedom,
a balloon drifting in the breeze. I store
the sensation of floating where motion
does not equal pain. I want to drink
in this feeling, knowing it must last
until I am baptized again.

Personal Essay

The Geese on Lyman Pond

Marie Lawson Fiala

I did not know what it was about geese that moved me so, on the shore of a small lake in Minnesota, deep into October, under a wide northern sky washed milky-blue and stippled with bright puffs of cloud. The air was clear and keen as a crystal knife, the trees burned like torches with cold autumn fire. I was adrift at the center of all that brightness and clean light, iced with sadness before winter even came on.

I was new to the Midwest, had come here with my teenage son to visit a college campus. For the past six months, Jamie, a high school senior, and I had been searching for the right school, the place that would be his next home. Just that morning we had flown east from San Francisco, across the high western basin and mountain ranges, and then the Great Plains. Which are just that—great and plain, a low ocean of land without relief. I rested my forehead against the airplane window and looked for landmarks but found no clues to our direction, only a vast mosaic of alternating patterns, light and dark, dark and light.

Most of the people waiting for luggage at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport were blond and fair, unlike the Bay Area's polychromatic population. Standing at the baggage carousel, Jamie fit right in. At eighteen, he is tall, with fine, broad shoulders and the light hair and high cheekbones of his Viking forbearers. His eyes, deep gray-blue, are the color of a northern sea. Most people would not notice the slight asymmetry in his face. The right side is less animated, weighing down his smile.

We rented a car and drove south, talking about Jamie's college choices. He hadn't liked the last few schools he had seen, and was worried that he might not like this one either. "I don't know what it is, Mom, but you can tell right away when you walk onto a campus whether you're going to fit in at the school or not." I did know; that sense of belonging, so discomfiting when it is missing. I drove on, suburbs melting into miles of featureless cornfields, the bare stalks still standing, bleached to a pale, papery bronze beneath an anemic sun that scarcely managed to warm the mid-day above freezing.

An hour later, we turned onto the main street of a small mill town and parked the car, eager to explore. "Ohmigosh, it's *cold*," Jamie exclaimed as he opened the car door. Breathless in the sudden chill, we found gloves and mufflers in our suitcases and pulled zippers up to our chins. The downtown district was three blocks long, with a river at its back. We strolled past an old-fashioned coffee shop, a real estate office listing farm acreage for sale, clothing stores displaying matronly women's dresses and sensible shoes, a hardware store with hay bales and jack-o'-lanterns in the window, and one tiny bookstore. It was Sunday, and only the coffee shop was open. Everything else was closed up tightly, and the sidewalks were empty. The coffee shop, overheated and smelling of stale fried onions, was furnished with Formica-topped tables, chrome chairs with cracked red leatherette seats, and drifts of abandoned newspapers. Although the menu offered a California-style selection of cappuccino and latte drinks, the pretty blonde girl behind the counter didn't know how to operate the espresso machine, so we ordered sodas and turkey sandwiches instead. She smiled invitingly at my son, but when he awkwardly picked up his tray with only one hand and walked haltingly to our table, she looked away. I noticed, of course. I always notice, but Jamie's face did not alter, and I hoped that he had not.

The college grounds began a few blocks from the town center, in a residential neighborhood with wide streets and spacious two-storied gabled houses wrapped on three sides by comfortable porches. Jamie liked the look of the campus. The late 19th century brick-and-limestone dormitories and classroom buildings were neatly spaced around a Norman-style stone chapel with a crenellated tower. Everywhere tall graceful trees dropped autumn leaves like copper coins onto the still-emerald lawn beneath, and neon Frisbees were airborne on the central green.

We checked in at the student center, and Jamie went off eagerly for an overnight stay in one of the dormitories and a class visit the next morning. "Bye, Mom. See you tomorrow!" he called over his shoulder as he walked away, turning back to the conversation with his student guide too quickly to catch my return wave. I was left suddenly with half a day and a night of empty time to fill, unprepared for how sundered I felt.

Unmoored, I walked, shivering under my long-sleeved shirt and fleece vest. Gusts of wind swept gold, cerise, and pumpkin-orange leaves from the trees into tiny whirlwinds, then released them to join the drifts of leaf mould accumulating underfoot. I circled the central classroom buildings and then moved toward the campus perimeter, beyond the library and dormitories. Topping a small rise, I looked out over the school lake, a pond really, set in a gentle depression bordered by drying grasses and flame-fingered maples. The sun glanced off the water's surface like spears of gold, filling the little hollow with numinous light. The water was densely covered with small dark bodies. I squinted. Ducks, I wondered? I walked closer. The dots resolved into Canada geese, hundreds of them, so thick that a third of the lake was a gray-feathered island floating in indigo blue. Their harsh arrhythmic honking pierced the silence. This pond must be a stopping point on the North American flyway, the migratory path from Canada to southern wintering grounds. I sat down, hunched over my bent knees for warmth. Soon a new flight of geese approached from the north, sleek black-tipped arrows winging low over the hillside opposite mine. As they neared the pond's surface, each goose reared its head and neck, backbeat with its wings to slow its forward momentum, and extended its legs to meet the water with a small splash and murmuring ripple. Then each long flexible black neck, with its white chin strap, curved down into an elegant arc and the gray-brown body glided seamlessly through the water. Each time the identical dance between goose and gravity, seconds apart, a perfectly synchronized water ballet.

I had never seen so many geese in one place before. In our part of California, we see migrating flights only rarely, reminders of an earlier world that has been erased, replaced by the urban sprawl that covers the Bay Area's hills and valleys. Geese, the harbingers of spring and fall, are easy to miss. Amid the noise and traffic and crowded sidewalks, most people look down, do not search the skies for signs and portents, and there are few who speak the language of geese anymore, who can read the messages told by their passing.

I know something of wild things, having lived in a remote rural area in my youth. When I was in grade school, my parents uprooted and moved our family as they had many times before. This time we moved from a Southern California suburb to Northern Idaho, a narrow chimney of land touching on Canada. We went from sidewalks and stoplights and strip malls to one-hundred-sixty acres of forest and cleared fields, on a dirt road three miles from the nearest paved highway, twenty miles from the closest town. It was the latest in a long series of places that did not feel like home. The large and small cruelties that I knew as family life followed us even there.

Life in the country was granted on different terms than in the city, driven by the imperatives of weather, seasons, and crops. Rural people pay close attention to the natural forces that can change their fortunes on turn of chance. A late frost after the grain has sprouted turns a field into a killing ground. An unseasonable summer rain during haying season dooms a farmer's entire crop to mildewed failure. Those whose lives depend on the land look outward for signs that tell their future: migrations, foliations, hibernations.

In these northern latitudes, the passage of geese overhead foretold a change of season. Their southbound flights filled me with foreboding, for I hated winters, when arctic storms surged south across the Canadian prairies and broke against the Bitterroot Mountains, dropping their burden of snow on the Idaho Panhandle. Eight, ten, fifteen feet of snow a month, six months of winter a year. Driveways and pathways that connected the house and outbuildings had to be shoveled by hand, roads were impassable until plowed. Sometimes we were snowed in for days, trapped with each others' unhappy company, the air inside the house as heavy and lowering as the weather.

Once in a while, the temperature rose above freezing. Melting snow and mud was churned into a heavy slurry underfoot, only to freeze again a few days later, making life dangerously slippery. And then more snow, falling from dead gray skies. The sun disappeared, and winter became one long, unbroken night, leached of color, heat, and light.

I left Idaho for good to attend college in California and never returned, taking with me a few lessons, like stones in the wake of the plow at planting time. And, although I have lived my whole adult life in a city and work in an office, I still pay close attention to the bits and pieces of the natural world that survive here. So that a year before this trip, when a distant honking presaged a flight of geese, I unthinkingly shaded my eyes, looking for the wedge formation, in the way of country people. I found them. Instead of the long, trailing ribbons that I expected, they were only four, winging valiantly southward over a wasteland of pavement, industrial parks, and condominiums. A leader, two more flanking him, and a lonely outrider in the back, together forming a truncated "V," with one leg shorter than the other. I found their brave persistence immeasurably sad.

Here in the Minnesota countryside, the geese still belong to the landscape, and the land still belongs to the geese. Although I sat only yards away, they were unperturbed. Caught and held, I stayed on, touched by their rightness and grace, their trust that the place would harbor them safely. The distraction of geese was a kindness. I missed my son, ached with knowing that soon he would leave home to live here or on another campus at least as far away, and that my husband and I and his brother and sister would be left, a truncated family lacking the symmetry of our previous five-member formation. The lesson that children leave home and do not return weighed as heavily as a stone in my pocket.

Sending a firstborn child to college is hard for most parents, but letting go of Jamie is especially difficult. He survived a near-fatal injury five years ago. On a warm late-summer afternoon, an artery ruptured deep in his brain, filling his skull with blood. He walked into the kitchen, leaned against the doorframe for just a moment looking surprised, and slid gently to the floor. "Mom," he said. "Mommy. What's happening to me?" Within minutes, he lay unconscious and then stopped breathing. The wound was too deep to repair. He bled for two weeks before the artery finally clotted closed. I sat at his bedside, watching his blood drain drop by drop, through holes cut in his skull, into tubes connected to plastic bags hanging on either side of his bed. Drop after drop, hour after hour. Four bags filled and emptied every day.

Jamie awoke from a coma as helpless as an infant. While most boys his age were immersed in sports, computers, awkward first courtships, he was relearning to speak, to stand, to walk. When he was discharged after three months in the hospital, caring for Jamie became the only part of my life that still had any meaning. I took a leave from work; drove him to countless rehab and doctors' appointments; researched treatments and therapies; pushed his wheelchair down sidewalks and ignored the stares of passersby. I was unfailingly upbeat, and if I wept late at night at what had befallen him, no one knew it but me.

The five years since Jamie's bleed were measured out in minutes and inches: bending and flexing his frozen limbs, exercising his atrophied muscles, teaching him to chew and swallow, coaxing inarticulate sounds from his vocal cords until he could speak. Helping him to bathe and dress. "Thank you, thank you." Cutting up his food, tying his shoes. "Thank you, Mommy." Buttoning buttons, zipping zippers. "Thank you for helping me." Jamie accepted it all with grace and never looked back. Now, he has made as much progress as he can make. His body is permanently damaged on one side, his right arm nonfunctional and his right leg weak and lame. If he were a bird he would not be able to fly.

We have always been a close family, and Jamie's injury pulled the two of us even more tightly together at a time when most teenagers are separating from their parents. During the first few years after his bleed, our relationship was as intimate as mother and baby again. He needed caring and I needed to care; he needed protection; and I needed to be strong; he needed safety

and I needed to make the world safe again. He said once, soon after coming home from the hospital, that he could not imagine ever feeling alienated from his parents, and I believed that would always be true, because we were bound together by forces more powerful than any adolescent need for independence.

Things changed this past year. Jamie caught up with his peers in an accelerated rush toward leaving home. He was less deferential, and more aloof, sometimes unapproachable. I was less careful, sometimes hurt, and angry. Five years ago, I promised myself never to take the future for granted again: "I will cherish every moment. I will always be kind, I will never speak a cross word, I will not criticize." But then life began to feel almost safe, and we became able to argue about stupid things.

"Jamie, this room is a pigsty! Would you PLEASE pick up your clothes and put your papers away?"

"Mom, it's MY ROOM. Would you please GET OUT and let me have some privacy?"

Or, "Jamie, you said you'd be home by ten. Where were you?"

"I'm seventeen years old! I don't have to account to you for every minute anymore."

So there have been arguments and distances and a few chilly silences, and Jamie's bedroom door sometimes closed instead of always open. The pace of change has left me breathless. My son has gone from virtual infancy to near independence in the space of twelve months, but my emotions haven't kept pace. I still feel the fierce need to hold him close, maintain my vigilance, protect him, and keep him safe. He needs other things. It is time for Jamie to make his own way, but I am not ready to let him go.

Poetry

At the Rim

Bob Johnston

When you were here the summer fruit was ripe
And love could stay without a robe or tent.
The morning sun fell softly on our sleep,
A yellow wash for pleasures still undreamt.

But then you passed all boundaries of light
Into a darkness that you call your own.
The autumn leaves have faded while I wait
And winds are blowing cold against the sun.

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Poetry

Baby 81

Lisa Rosen

A 3 mo. old child became known as "Baby 81" because he was the 81st person to be admitted to the Kalmunai hospital on Dec. 26, the day the tsunami swept across southern Asia and killed tens of thousands of people.

Outside the Kalmunai hospital
nine mothers pace, hysterical Demeters
without a season to withhold.

Their names begin
dropping away.

Each clutches an invisible
umbilicus bound to a single
infant behind the door.

A limp baby, his black hair
stiff with grit, his nostrils stoppered
with sea cinders.

Sweet body, scurfy
with splinters darker
than candlenut wood.

The sting of salt clings
to every rawness. A woman
whose hair hangs over her bindi
wails, *I'll kill myself without
him*. A husband screams
that he will kill the doctor.

Which of the inconsolable
would you touch at the shoulder,
saying: *Yes, I believe you,
this is your baby
opening his eyes.*

Fiction

Lost Laughter

Lee Waldman

No matter what anyone tells you, it's no picnic being a twin. Most everyone thinks that it's cute. They think that twins have some kind of special connection. People have done studies and published books about it. My mom and dad read them when my mom was pregnant. She said, "We knew we were having twins, even though we didn't know it would be you and Gabe. We wanted to know everything about having twins." Then she told me that they never expected to have to learn all the things that they've learned in the last twelve years.

Being a twin never seemed like a big deal to me. It was just a normal part of life. I never noticed any special connection or secret communication, not because I'm not a twin, but because my twin brother is kind of a special case. I'm normal, whatever that means. I go to a regular school, take regular classes, basically do all of the things that kids do. I have friends, we play, we argue, we make up. I do homework, when I have to. I argue with my mom and dad over just about anything. It's my job!

But next to Gabe, my brother, I'm almost like his big sister even though we're both the same age. Well, at least we were born on the same day. We're totally different though. Gabe is retarded. I have a hard time saying it, and I wish there were an easier way to say it. It hurts me every time I use the word. I hate it. It makes people think of someone sitting in a corner drooling on themselves. There is so much more to Gabe. He's calm, patient, and happy almost all of the time. He never complains about being hot, cold, wet, hungry, or bored like a normal kid would. He's tough too. He broke his leg once after having a seizure. He never even cried! He whimpered once when they had to lift him up to move him, but that was the only time. I've heard Dad say that Gabe is his hero.

It's hard to have a brother that's different. It would be hard even if we weren't twins, but since we are, that makes it even harder. I wish I had someone to talk to, to play with, someone to be a special friend. It would be so awesome if Gabe and I had a connection like in the books, that we were tuned into what each other were thinking. Just think how frustrating that would be for the adults. How cool! Instead, I have a brother who doesn't do anything! He can't talk, he can't walk, he can't feed himself, he can't even control when he goes to the bathroom.

It used to bother me even more when I was in elementary school. I grew out of that phase. For a long time, Gabe was a big embarrassment. I ignored him at home. I ignored him when we went out. Parties were hard! Don't forget, he's my twin, so we celebrated our birthday together. People would buy presents for both of us, but all Gabe would do was sit there. He couldn't even open his own presents. Someone always had to do it for him. I felt happy about the things I got, but really guilty about Gabe. He didn't even know what was going on. As far as he was concerned, he could be sitting in the middle of the grocery store.

That was hard for me and harder for my mom and dad. I know they tried to understand my feelings, but they had to be protective of Gabe too, even though he really had no idea what was going on. You see, as I grew older, Gabe stayed the same. He stopped changing when we were about six months old. Basically, he's just a very big infant.

At home, he was just part of our family. He probably didn't get as much attention as he should have, he never asked for it. He was just so quiet; sometimes we would almost forget he was there. He was like one of those "dead animals" that adults talk about that sit in the middle of the table. Everyone sees it, but no one wants to talk about it.

Then Gabe started to lose his laugh. It was the one thing he had that was definitely his. He'd had it since he was a baby. He lit up rooms with it. His laugh made sad and sorry people smile. It didn't matter that he couldn't walk by himself, that he was in a wheelchair, that he didn't talk or do much of anything else. He could smile and laugh. That seemed to be enough.

Everyone in the world has a different laugh. Some people have belly laughs. Those start from deep inside shaking their whole bodies. Some people chuckle, some giggle, some guffaw. Gabe had an entirely different laugh, one that was just his. It was a kind of joyful shriek, bigger than a chuckle. It was a whole body laugh. It was joyous, and it brought smiles to everyone who heard it.

A couple of years ago, it started to disappear, then one day, it just wasn't there. Just gone completely. I think Mom and Dad noticed that something was missing. They weren't sure what; they just knew something was different. There we'd be, sitting at the dinner table or driving to the grocery store, and they would stop whatever they were doing and look at each other. I could tell that they both thought something was wrong but just couldn't put a finger on it. I don't know, maybe they were afraid to know. Maybe they thought that if they didn't talk about it, it wouldn't be real. Everything would be okay, or as okay as it was ever going to be.

Gabe was still happy. He was always happy. He was the happiest person that I knew. He would still smile. His smile still made others smile, just like his laugh had made people around him laugh. But that gift that Gabe gave the world was gone.

I watched Mom and Dad as they gradually recognized what was missing. They would start a sentence, then say nothing. I could hear it in their silence. They knew, but something always made them stop. The look on their faces combined knowing, sadness, and pretending that it wasn't really there, even though it was.

Featured Art

Blind Vision

Sandy Palmer

"In the way that lyrics and poetry can help us understand one concept by comparing it to another, our senses can lend themselves to one another, giving us a fuller perception of the world around us. The wind blowing through the leaves has the most wonderful rich colors that melt together like paint running on a palette. The color of the sound of a butterfly's wings is brighter than you might think. Life is rich and unexpected. Just when we think we understand it, something new comes by and opens our eyes."

--John Bramblitt

He touches her face with his hands, fingers moving deliberately, detecting every shape, line, and nuance—seeing her more clearly than someone who is able to look at her. This face is different than others he has felt. She is cold, hard, lifeless. Her likeness now imprinted in his mind, but she is pallid. No colors emanate into his fingertips because she is made of plaster. He listens to the Dutch National Anthem and the sounds elicit hues that breathe life and color into her. John Bramblitt is blind. He was given the plaster cast of a well-known woman's face so he could paint her portrait on canvas and present it to her at an awards ceremony in Holland, where the prime minister recognizes the accomplishments of people with disabilities. When it comes to accomplishments, Bramblitt has a few of his own, although this easy-going, soft-spoken man isn't likely to boast about them.

Before losing his sight, his greatest fear was that he might one day be blind. "I could not imagine what it would be like to live in a world without sight. . . . My greatest fear having been fulfilled, I have been liberated of that fear." He now describes sight as, "such a passive way of gaining information." He receives so much more through the physical interaction of touching someone's face, feeling their skin, listening to a voice—all providing him with a wealth of information that intimately communicates what vision cannot. Remarkably, he only needs to feel a person's face once in order to complete a portrait. And, unlike people who use photos for reference when drawing a portrait, limited to the view in the photograph, he can paint the person from any angle because he has the three-dimensional image in his mind. Although he didn't start painting until after he became blind, he did a significant amount of doodling and drawing when he was younger.



John Bramblitt, *Pops Carter*, oil painting, 2004, 30" x 20"



John Bramblitt, *Busking*, oil painting, 2008, 22" x 16"

Fiction

For the Light That Inheres Within Them

Seana Graham

Mama has always had a love for other people's possessions. Now, by "love," I don't mean covet, and I certainly don't mean pilfer. She may love their possessions, but that's never been the same thing as wanting to possess them herself.

So for twenty-five years, she has been loving, which is to say, looking after the possessions of our neighbors. "The ladies," she calls them. The matrons, as once were, of this fine community. Though, frankly, they aren't so much to look at now. Miss Irma, for instance, who used to own the beauty shop, but sold it off to her daughters-in-law and now only goes down there to get her rinse done once a week. Mama tells me she has the most outstanding collection of poodles. Figurines, I mean—not the live kind. Mama says Miss Irma used to look a little like a poodle herself in her day, right down to the rhinestone collar and the little ribbons in her hair. She's been to Paris, so we give her the benefit of the doubt that they once took to the same odd look she's partial to, over there. And maybe they did—still doesn't mean it looked exactly right in a backwater town like ours.

But, Mama came home after cleaning Miss Irma's one day and said, "You know, I don't believe that woman's ever *been* to Paris!" She was exasperated, but I couldn't tell if it was because she'd caught Miss Irma in a lie, or because she was annoyed with her for some other reason and was just trying to think the meanest she could about her. I'm sure she would never have said it to Miss Irma's face. And I know she felt guilty afterward for saying it to me, because one time I made some flip remark about Miss Irma's so-called "Parisian" ways, and Mama gave me one of those looks that only she can give and said, "You leave it out now, Violet," and that was that—in her book, and so in mine, Miss Irma had her Paris bona fides back.

I never have gotten to go along and see any of the houses, not even when I was small. I asked Mama as I got older if I could come and help, and though she can be harsh with me, I have to give her credit on this one: she never did say, now, girl, just what kind of help do you think you're going to give? But she got her point across, all the same. And she was probably right. Because what with the wheelchair and all, well, I get around okay, but there is no denying that it makes things cumbersome. *Damn* cumbersome sometimes, I say aloud right now, but only because she's not around to hear. Still, I look over my shoulder. Mama was never one to set comfortable with profanity.

My brother Charlie, now, he was the kind to test her, and especially when he had some of his pals around. They'd be sitting around on the back porch letting fly with words you aren't ever going to hear in church, and sometimes he'd grow so bold in their company that he just didn't seem to care *what* Mama overheard. She and I would be sitting in the kitchen just the other side of the screen door, shelling peas or whatnot, and gradually the look on her face would grow dark. It was like watching a thunderstorm brew out on the horizon and head in closer. I always thought I should say something, remind Charlie that we were *right there*, but I never did somehow. I talked to our pastor, Reverend Briggs, about it once—how I would see trouble coming but somehow couldn't say a word to prevent it—or could have, maybe, but didn't. He called it a "fascination," said how we all like a good drama and want to see a crisis play out to its natural conclusion. It didn't exactly make me feel better about it, but it did make me feel human, and as if probably a lot of people—well, not *Jesus* maybe—but ordinary people, and not just the ones confined to the house day after livelong day, might succumb to temptation and let a bad situation go on just to see how much worse it would get.

She never did say a word till his buddies had up and gone, I'll give her that. Why he wouldn't cotton on to her mood and light out with them until the storm had a chance to pass, I don't know.

Do her justice, she never hit him for it, but I'll bet there were times when he wished her wrath took a form that elemental, something he could just bear and get over with. Well, she did wash his mouth out for him once or twice, long after another boy would have felt too grown to put up with it. But most times it was just a tongue-lashing she gave him, which, for a woman who'd forsworn profanity, could still be something mighty fierce. *Oh, my.* Try as I might, I never could understand what played out between those two, though I shared a house with them for seventeen years. And would have longer, too, if Charlie hadn't left.

But I wasn't going to think on that today. Mama is off to Miss Totty's funeral, and I should have gone—would have liked to, I mean, but someone would have had to come out and help her with me, and, well, we don't like to ask. Not because someone wouldn't have done it, of course. No, it's because it reminds us of the time we never *had* to ask, when Charlie was still here. He would just grab the handles of my chair and bump it down the front steps, not even bothering with the ramp Mama had gone to so much trouble to have built, and there I'd go, clunk, clunk, clunk, shrieking and holding on for dear life, but laughing, too, and then he'd pick me up like I weighed no more to him than some old bag of groceries—toss me in the backseat like one, too, half the time, but I never minded, because to me it was as if he were saying, this ain't a chore, you ain't a burden, or maybe just one of the very slightest kind that everyone has to put up with and not one of the big old ball-and-chain variety.

Oh, Lord, now I've done it. I meant to honor Miss Totty by remembering all those old stories about "the ladies" while Mama was gone. But just as they say, "All roads lead to Rome," in this house, all roads—all highways, byways, and thoroughfares—lead straight to Charles Wayne Bruckner. Or, more specifically, to his absence.

Poetry

For a Daughter at Thirty

Judie Rae

We named you Brooke
and like your name
for years you brought the outdoors
in,
rough years when the experts attached
electrodes to your tiny
head, administered tests
to figure out
why you didn't speak
why you shut your eyes
clasped wee hands
on ears to erase the clatter,
the noise of a world
too much with you.

You,
my mystery child who shed clothes
and painted herself
multi-colored.
I looked for clues
in those scribbles
hoped for a way in—
a road map
to your elfin heart.

I learned your gibberish,
the syntax of your compressed
life and refused
the pills the doctor
said would make you more like us
because you were *you*, a four-year-old
tattoo artist whose chirps
over time became
distinguishable as you gave up
rocking, rocking
and left behind
your safe, paper-shredded
nest.

How brave that pixie
child who joined us,
who bore the taunts,
whose tears
tore me.

How brave that
young girl
confused
by a world
that spun too fast.

How radiant
the young woman
who transformed
her pain into gifts
she shares
with the silent, the frightened,
reassures them
with warm touch, clear eyes
and untold truth:
I have been like you.

Art

Painting with Her Heart

Sandy Palmer

“Seize the second. If you reflect on your life, you will note that you have survived many crises! How did you manage? You simply live your life moment by moment. Look at yourself today as a stunning success!”

--Peggy Chun

Look into the eyes of Peggy Chun and you're bound to see determination. Look further and you'll see mischief, fun, charisma, life, projects, and always, a party, according to friends and family. An insidious disease has stolen her beaming smile and silenced her infectious, whole-hearted laughter. It has left her face expressionless and her body paralyzed. Only limited eye movements are possible now. Yet, her exuberant zest for life is immutable. Friend, Shelly Mecum, says, "She has used her life to make the greatest masterpiece, which is the art of living. The artist is teaching us how to live an extraordinary life."

She didn't pick up a paintbrush until she was 42 years old, but Peggy Chun has become one of Hawaii's most widely-recognized, beloved artists. Well-known for her vibrant watercolors depicting lush island landscapes, seascapes, and a touch of whimsy here and there, she didn't set out to become an artist yet it became her passion. It became her life. When she was first diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, she was asked, "How much is art like life?" Her reply: "About one hundred percent."

Her story as an artist began when her twin sister's story came to an end. Bobbie Richard Segler, was a nationally recognized Colorado artist, known for her Southwestern-style works in pastel. In 1987, shortly after celebrating their fortieth birthday, her twin died. Bobbie had ALS. The progressive disease had already taken the lives of their mother and grandfather. Chun had been a school teacher, jazz pianist, entrepreneur, saleswoman and many other things but, an artist? Never. Then, Bobbie came to her in a dream telling her to paint. "I woke up one morning in January, 1988, and said, 'I have to take an art class.'" In 1990, at her first show, she sold every single watercolor on display. Chun was an artist.

Editor's Note: *Sadly, Peggy Chun passed away on Wednesday, November 19, surrounded by family and friends. Daughter-in-law, Kimi Morton Chun, reflects, "I used to fear the loss and the change that Peggy's death would bring, but I now know that though we have lost Peggy, we have not lost ourselves, our identity, our purpose. We are still a family, still an ohana*, still Peg's Legs. We did not die with Peggy, but rather, Peggy lives on within us."*—SP



Peggy Chun, *Banana Patch Heaven*, watercolors, 2001, 30" x 40"



Peggy Chun, *Boo and Plumeria*, watercolor with left hand, 2003, 22" x 30"

Personal Essay

The Sincerest Form of Flattery

Adrienne Pilon

My youngest son, Gabriel, is a natural performer. Everywhere he goes, he puts on an act. He'll trip on a rug and turn it into an intricate pratfall; he clutches his chest or drops to his knee to make a point. If there's music playing, he'll try to break dance, no matter his audience. He also does great imitations of family members, teachers, classmates, and friends.

It isn't a talent I've always appreciated.

Before Gabriel started elementary school, we dealt with the difficulty all working parents have: trying to find decent daycare. Gabriel's day thus far was three hours of preschool, followed by a patchwork of different babysitters: Ashley on Mondays and Wednesdays, Leslie on Tuesdays and Fridays, and someone else (what was her name?) on Thursdays. That is, unless there were school holidays, someone got sick, or it snowed.

We were looking for something a bit more stable, when an acquaintance, Sandra, mentioned an opening at a place called The Children's Center. Though it was less than two miles from our house, The Children's Center had never made it on our list of possible sites. This was a public school for children with physical disabilities; our son did not have a disability. Sandra explained that in each class there were a certain number of slots for "typical" children—that is, children with no physical challenges or health issues. Sandra was enthusiastic about the place, and assured me that one of her own children had happily attended the school some years before.

I was interested, but not because the place came highly recommended by Sandra. I was interested because I was desperate.

I went and visited the school. Less than two miles from our house, I had passed it a thousand times without really seeing it. There were three playgrounds surrounding the buildings. The front door was open and I was whisked into an office with a program coordinator, who took down information and answered some of my questions, which went along the lines of "how much?" and "after hours care?" I learned that Gabriel would be in a classroom with a low teacher-student ratio. Added bonuses were swimming, horseback riding, and for my boy who loved performing, music was offered several times a week. I learned, too, that as a "typical child," Gabriel would provide modeling for children who were in different therapies. That is, Gabriel's running, walking, and speaking—most of his quotidian activities—would serve as examples to classmates who were working on mastering various psychomotor skills. This was also an effort to integrate the school environment, with my "typical" son, a clear minority.

I went on a tour of the school. I noticed the thick metal rails that extended all the way up the wide, wide hallway that formed the main artery of the school. Walking up the hallway, I noticed that its width served as a parking lot for wheelchairs, oxygen tanks, feeding chairs, braces, and other hardware that I couldn't identify. The floors were polished to a high sheen and everything was clean and bright. The classrooms—I peeked in each one—were well-organized and cheery, with wide passageways and equipped for a variety of physical abilities. It looked unfamiliar in many ways, but it also looked like a great place at first sight.

And so it was. Gabriel started school there the next week and he couldn't have been happier. After an initial adjustment, he began enjoying his teachers, his classroom, and his new classmates.

In very little time, Gabriel took the particulars of each of his classmates' situations—prosthetic legs, wheelchairs, feeding tubes—all in stride. Gabriel spoke admiringly of his friend Brandon,

who had two prosthetic legs which he took off for naps and swimming pool days. Gabriel thought this was kind of cool; he noted that Brandon could outrun him on the playground. And to our surprise, Gabriel would talk at day's end about how he played with Antonio, a child who used a wheelchair and seemed to us unable to speak or interact much.

"How do you play with Antonio, honey? Doesn't he stay in his chair?"

"He can play in his chair. And he goes on the floor. And we play with the saw."

"The saw?"

"I pretend to cut him in half with the little toy saw. I like sawing Antonio in half."

"You do *what*?"

"Mama!" he sighed.

When I asked the teacher for clarification, she confirmed Gabriel's story. Antonio had floor therapy for a portion of each day, and the boys delighted in a game in which Gabriel would use the toy saw to cut off and reattach Antonio's limbs. I don't know if Gabriel had imparted any larger meaning to this—Antonio was unable to walk at all and was being fitted for new braces on his legs—but the point, in the present, was that the boys thought it was incredibly funny.

Until this point, neither my husband nor I quite knew what to do when seeing Antonio at the morning drop-off. We couldn't quite tell how responsive Antonio was. So it was left to our four-year-old to show us the way. Gabriel would enter the room, walk directly over to Antonio and say good morning, stroking his arm. And Antonio responded to Gabriel by smiling and moving his head, though we might have missed it if we hadn't been looking. After that, it was easy for us to greet Antonio as well.

Gabriel, meanwhile, had started to display some strange behaviors. He had suddenly decided to run everywhere. But it wasn't just a regular "little kid" run. He ran with a stiff-legged gallop, no bending at the knees, with his arms swinging madly across his body with every step. He made good time, too. Sometimes he would walk with a pronounced limp instead, or drop where he was and sit with his head hanging to one side, mouth open and tongue hanging out. He also started speaking with his tongue hanging limply in his mouth or sticking part way out. Articulate and clear-speaking from babyhood, Gabriel was launching into sentences that I couldn't decipher without work. "Ma-a," he'd say, "Ah wa ah drah of wa-tah," all in a high-pitched whine.

I couldn't figure out what was going on until the day I heard that voice behind me. It was pickup time at school, and the voice belonged to another boy in his class who was in speech therapy. I looked around with new eyes: there was Brandon, galloping across the room, arms swinging across his body; there was Antonio, leaning his head to one side, his mouth hanging open. I suddenly realized what Gabriel had been doing the past few weeks. His gift for imitation had taken a rather interesting turn.

Poetry

Autism Poem: The Grid

Barbara Crooker

A black and yellow spider hangs motionless in its web,
and my son, who is eleven and doesn't talk, sits
on a patch of grass by the perennial border, watching.
What does he see in his world, where geometry
is more beautiful than a human face?
Given chalk, he draws shapes on the driveway:
pentagons, hexagons, rectangles, squares.
The spider's web is a grid,
transecting the garden in equal parts.

Sometimes he stares through the mesh on a screen.
He loves things that are perforated:
toilet paper, graham crackers, coupons
in magazines, loves the order of the tiny holes,
the way the boundaries are defined. And real life
is messy and vague. He shrinks back to a stare,
switches off his hearing. And my heart,
not cleanly cut like a valentine, but irregular
and many-chambered, expands and contracts,
contracts and expands.

Formerly published in The Comstock Literary Review.

Fiction

A Signing of Names

Hays Traylor

Johnny Rainhill was a twelve-year-old fourth grader who chewed Redman tobacco and ate possum. He wasn't a fourth-grader long because he quit school his first day after Mrs. Lilly Foster sent him to the principal's office for sassin' her. It wasn't unusual for him to quit school; in fact he quit every year soon as squirrel season started in late September.

Johnny lived up on County Farm Hill next to the Arkansas Game Reserve, which was 10,000 acres of heavily wooded bottomland full of sweet gum, locust, oak, elm, and cottonwood trees swarming with deer, raccoon, squirrel, and other wild creatures. The game warden had quit arresting Johnny long ago for hunting out of season. That was because Judge Elmer Holland always let Johnny go with a warning and a stern talking-to.

"Sometimes that's all them folks got to eat up there," the judge told the game warden. "I think the state of Arkansas can spare a few deer for those people."

But in the fall of 1959, Johnny Rainhill didn't even last until squirrel season.

Cholly Birdwell was there and had seen it all. Cholly was Johnny's only friend, if you could call their relationship friendly.

Most folks in Crowley, Arkansas chose one of two courses of action when dealing with Johnny Rainhill. They either avoided him or ridiculed him. Cholly felt that anyone who didn't know that the Baltimore Colts had defeated the New York Giants in the 1958 "sudden death" game or didn't know what Sputnik was, deserved some scorn. But Cholly often sought out Johnny during lunch recess to explain the intricacies of a drop-back pass and to share half of his peanut butter sandwich.

Johnny always ate his lunch by himself under the crabapple tree. Unless you had a bad cold, it was not wise to come near him, because Johnny Rainhill smelled.

The odor surrounding him was not the familiar, offensive smell of hogs that Cholly noticed whenever Lenord Littlefield brought his Chester Whites to the sale barn on Saturday. It was something different. Something wild and malignant—like the smell of a newly-gutted rabbit on a cold, February morning.

Johnny leaned against the tree and chewed on a malodorous piece of gray meat as Cholly sat down near him. Wrapped in foil, a sweet potato lay by Johnny's thigh. Taking a huge bite from the meat, Johnny threw the bone away, wiped the grease from his fingers onto his pants and retrieved a green and red package of tobacco from his back pocket.

"You can have that tater if you want," Johnny said.

"That's all right, I've already ate," Cholly said.

The fact that Cholly was hungry didn't matter. Being around Johnny Rainhill did something to an appetite. And Cholly still remembered what his mother had said about the Rainhills after she and Sister Louise Golden from the Church of God, had taken some food out to County Farm Hill to Johnny's ailing grandmother.

"Those Rainhills have got to be the trashiest white folks I've ever seen," she had said. "Why, when Sister Louise and I got there, Mrs. Rainhill was sick as a dog and almost too weak to get

outta bed. Their outhouse had fallen down and the old woman was having to use a slop jar. Nobody had emptied it in days and it was full of maggots.”

Cholly watched in amazement as Johnny stuck a wad of tobacco into his mouth with his grimy fingers.

“You could plant a cotton crop in the dirt under that boy’s fingernails,” Cholly’s mother had said. “Don’t know when he last had a bath. He was rusty as a lizard.”

Cholly studied the large hands of the boy beside him. The knuckles were raw and pink and dirty. The dirt was not on his hands, but in them, as if a strong wind had embedded the grit into the flesh. Johnny retrieved a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket; it was yellowed with age and had several holes in it.

“What’s that?” Cholly asked.

“Some writin’,” Johnny said as he studied the paper.

“Can I see it?”

Johnny looked at Cholly. His eyes said that the aging paper was a secret of some sort.

“I reckon you can.” Johnny handed the paper to Cholly.

Cholly studied the paper and recognized it as a copy of the Declaration of Independence. “Where’d you get this?”

“I tore it from a magazine at school,” Johnny said. He spit a wad of tobacco juice near his foot.

“You know what this is?”

“Naw.”

“This is the Declaration of Independence,” Cholly said. “Just like the one on the wall by Mrs. Turner’s room.”

Johnny smiled, showing a mouthful of yellow, tobacco-stained teeth.

“You don’t say.”

“All them fellas that signed this got themselves hung,” Cholly said. “Some fella named Ben Franklin said it was better to hang together than one at a time.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Johnny asked.

“We’ve learned about the American Revolution in history class last year.”

Johnny took the paper from Cholly and looked at it very closely. He took a grimy finger and pointed.

“Why do you think this fella signed his name so big?”

“That’s John Hancock’s signature,” Cholly said. “He said he wanted the king to be sure to see he had signed.”

Johnny folded the paper and put it back into his pocket. "Do you think those fellas were proud of what they done?"

Cholly giggled, amazed at Johnny's ignorance. "Sure they was. They was willing to get hung for signing it, weren't they?"

"Signing something you're proud of makes you somebody, don't it?" Johnny asked.

"I reckon so," Cholly said. "You been fishing lately?" Johnny spit another dark brown glob of tobacco juice on the ground then resettled the green John Deere baseball cap on his head. "I go fishin' near about every day."