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## Introduction

Thirteen (Deviant) Ways of Looking at a Teacher (*adapted from* Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird")

*Jason Courtmanche*

I

Among a dozen studious teachers  
The only moving thing  
Was the salty mouth of the union steward.

II

Angela knew countless profanities,  
Like a sailor  
Who happens to be on shore leave.

III

The former commander watched in silent awe.  
His voice like that of a radio talk show host was the only one not embarrassing itself.

IV

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
But at this rate Regan's husband is going to hope  
They remain two.

V

I do not know which I prefer,  
The beauty of a short skirt  
Or the shape of the legs beneath.  
Amanda walking  
Or my marriage.

VI

Confusion filled the empty seminar room  
With tortured rhetoric.  
The shadow of comprehension  
Eluded her, day and night.  
The traffic  
Pressed upon Ann each day  
As she wondered, Why the hell am I doing this?

VII

O blonde girl of Killingly,  
Why do you talk of tables?  
Do you not know how much we men  
Like a firm bottom  
On the women around us?

VIII

She knows grammar mechanics  
And five paragraph essays;  
But I know, too,  
That when Kim gives us the thumbs up  
She's really flipping us off.

IX

When Mona wrote about mice,  
She made me nervous  
To check under the hood of my car.

X

At the sound of men's hands  
Resting on the thighs of mature women,  
Even my bawdy nature  
Turned red at the sound of Lynda's stories!

XI

She rode across Connecticut  
With a glass in her hand.  
Then, a fear pierced her,  
In that some snotty parent  
From Pam's school saw her,  
And would surely complain to the board.

XII

A nipple is appearing.  
Michelle must be writing.

XIII

They were talking all afternoon.  
They talked and they continued to talk  
About the most inappropriate things  
Even though they knew Jane was videotaping them  
And I have in my possession signed release forms.

## Trapped in the Chrysalis

*Joe Anastasio*

Sixteen years ago, I was faced with a group of second graders one crisp fall morning. Before me lay two pages of carefully scripted substitute lesson plans, a regiment's marching orders of forty minutes of language arts, math from ten to eleven, etc. I was plowing through the directions, moving from lesson to lesson when suddenly an excited gasp burst out of a little girl. "Mr. A, it's happening!"

Adrenalin pumped through my body.

Had I missed something vital to the teacher's plan?

"What's happening?" I cautiously asked.

"The butterfly," she announced.

We crowded around the ten gallon tank. A fragile Monarch butterfly began emerging from a chrysalis. Seconds passed to minutes, and the plans that lay on the teacher's desk faded away from the room. We soon found ourselves on the back playground, sun playing down upon us, wind gently teasing all around. I opened my hand and their friend flew away, amid cheers and goodbyes.

At the end of the day I found myself writing the teacher an apology note. *I'm sorry that I deviated from your plans. I didn't get to everything because of the butterfly. I'm not sure if it was the right thing to do, but it just seemed right.* About a week later I ran into the teacher whose class I had filled in. She stopped me and said, "Thank you for what you did. The kids couldn't stop talking about it the next day. You didn't let the moment pass. There's nothing to apologize for, you did the right thing."

Educational researcher and writer Ted Sizer states that teachers must seize upon teachable moments, to not let them rush by. To ignore them, he argues, is an educational sin.

He's right.

The inability to expand upon teachable moments, to be trusted as professionals with free autonomy in our classrooms, only adds to our dissatisfaction and low morale. Inevitably, there comes a time during the course of the school year when we find ourselves gazing out the window (those of you with windows) asking the age old question: Why am I here?

It is a curious happening, universal among all involved with some aspect in the field of education, be it administrator, teacher, department head, custodian, food service worker, or student. Perhaps this question was spurred by an action or occurrence in our day. An index card in our mailbox with the words: See me. A food fight on meatball grinder day. The dreaded parent phone call. The full bag of ungraded student work we heft to the car in the afternoon and

the still full bag of ungraded student work we unload from the car in the faculty parking lot the following morning.

Why am I here?

Whatever the impetus for the question to cross our lips ... it happens, has happened, will happen.

The timing of the question is as variable as New England weather. Perhaps it will occur on an unusually warm day in May. Or earlier in the year ... amid the threat of an early dismissal snow day or the scattered remnants of holiday wrapping and Christmas candy ... students and colleagues running the treadmill half-day schedule before winter break. Or maybe, just maybe, for the rare few of you reading this, the question was uttered this morning as you eased into a parking spot.

Why am I here?

I have a friend, a colleague in our department, who has a favorite expression. The members of the English department wait for it every year, and it comes like a harbinger of a great cathartic sigh.

What does he say, you ask?

It is simple.

He says three words: I am done.

And when he announces it, be it the doldrums of March, or field trip-filled May, we find ourselves smiling, slight smiles, knowing smiles and nods in the hallway, brief acknowledgements ... It is done. He is done. We are done. Everyone is done.

Why am I here?

Usually we speak this question quietly in our minds. But occasionally we slip, and our question, now audible to the world, is met with a strange stare, a confused and uncomfortable look, or merely whispers from student to student. "He's lost it ... again."

At times the spoken question borders on career disaster.

"Excuse me?" asks the principal.

"What?" you answer.

"Did you just say your school goal is to *survive the year*?"

"What? Yeah, c'mon, Jeff," you repeat exasperated. "I even included a school-wide rubric."

There are also many oddities in education that lend to the question: Why am I here?

Young children, the ones who are awake on Saturday morning at 6:30 AM ... they go to school the latest, while the teenagers, who in the morning hours are like slugs on a cold sidewalk

... who may not crawl from their hibernation chambers until noon on a Saturday ... they go to school the earliest.

The schedule, seven periods a day, no rotation, is based upon the factory model, preparing children for the working world of 1908.

In a pure classical education, a lesson is not complete until the teacher has finished instructing or the students have exhausted all questions. The modern approach, however, compartmentalizes our lessons, like fast food happy meals compressed into lesson plan units, planned out like a television mini-series. Our lessons must fit time, commercial breaks and all, yet the message of the lessons imparted to our students is asked to be timeless.

It's Pavlov's dog. The bell controls us. If you don't believe me, think about the times when the bell has struck at the wrong time. There is that millisecond of adrenalin that rushes through the room. Students instinctively grab their books or move to the door, we start a bit, and give a befuddled look at the clock, then the posted schedule, then the clock. We sigh in realization of the mistake, awaiting the announcement from the office ... Please disregard the bell.

In our odd educational world, time dictates the lesson; the lesson does not dictate time.

It is easy to dwell on the negative, and to point at what doesn't work in education. But it is draining and unproductive. Instead, we must focus on what works and make it better. Accentuate the positive. Close the classroom door and focus on our kids. Find our own inspiration to make a difference, despite what might seem to impede our efforts.

Teaching is not a science.

It is an art.

And it begins and ends with human connection.

Without that connection ... the act of teaching is meaningless ... easily demonstrated yet quickly forgotten.

There has to be heart and soul.

Laughter and tears.

You have to keep it real.

It is funny how often I find myself thinking back to that day of substitute teaching in that second grade class. It is almost surreal, and yet, in my heart, I know that simple moment sums up what teaching is all about. My educational philosophy, if you will. It comes down to one word: freedom.

There are times when I find myself imagining teachers like Mel Gibson's character William Wallace in one of the closing scenes of the film *Braveheart*. We are strapped down to

the inquisitor's table, on public display, while the inquisitor, maliciously choosing instruments of torture, picks away at our mind. "Give in," he whispers. "Measure, quantify, record. Stick to the safe and narrow road. Don't deviate from the plan."

We, as teachers, as true artists of the craft, of course, do not. We save our strength, and in our last teaching breath shout out to the gathered throng, FREEDOM! As life ebbs away, we see former students drift like ghosts through the crowd. Our hand falls open, and a small Monarch butterfly is released to the world.

## Telltale Hands

*Lynda Barrow*

Hands are a sure give-away. They tell true stories of trades, hobbies, gender, and age. No matter how many times a woman may submit her face to the beauty knife or the promising botox needle, her hands reveal the truth about her age.

As she held my hand in her own two, I was struck by their tenderness. The bluish mottled skin was softened with age, and they boasted a fresh pale pink manicure. The elderly woman wore a wide-brimmed straw hat. She smiled at me soothingly, as a beloved grandmother might, and she called me by name. I couldn't tell exactly why, but something about this woman sent chills up my spine.

We were in the lobby of an old hotel in Santa Fe. I had just come on for the evening shift as bartender in the lounge when the cocktail waitress told me there was a woman waiting to see me. My dismissive manner was met by the waitress's steady gaze.

"I'll tend bar for a while. Just go see her. This is important."

Jill and I went back and forth until curiosity got the better of me and I gave in to the argument.

"Okay. I'll go see this woman. What's her name?"

"Janice."

"I don't know any Janice. She must have the wrong person. Go tell her that she's mistaken."

"Just go see her." The waitress was resolute.

As I removed my apron and ducked under the bar, I gave a few last minute instructions to Jill. Two customers were running a tab, and the man at the end of the bar should be cut off after this drink. She waved me on with a confident smile.

The lobby was filled with guests. This was an upscale hotel in Santa Fe and was often frequented by wealthy and famous clientele. Expensive Stetson cowboy hats and Frye boots were worn with high-end designer jeans and chunks of turquoise, or trendy prairie skirts with Indian silver Concho belts. Our hotel staff was used to entertaining Hollywood movie stars and renowned personalities from abroad, and we learned to be discreet about things we might see in the lounge or guest rooms.

The employees collected stories about our encounters with the famous, and we would often share our tales after work or during a break. Kurt Vonnegut and I had the beginnings of a great conversation at the back bar until he was discovered, and the lounge filled up with writer wannabes who demanded his attention and barked their drink orders at me. Goldie Hawn once

jumped up from her table in the dining room, marched into the kitchen, and grabbed a clean bar towel. She dabbed at the fresh wine stain on her skirt while the kitchen staff simply watched, transfixed.

The woman in the straw hat stood out as being unfashionably attired, yet she had a tidy appearance. Her clothes were clean, neatly pressed, and clearly from another era. She clutched a 1940's style purse perched on her lap, until she saw me. Beneath the hem of the navy blue skirt, her stockings and legs were crossed at the ankles and her leather pumps were polished and clean. When I spoke her name, she immediately turned to me, gave a broad smile of recognition, and asked me to sit on the sofa beside her.

"Excuse me? There must be some mistake. Perhaps you wanted to see Linda in housekeeping?"

"No. You're who I wanted to see." She gestured for me to take a seat and scooted over to make room. I hesitated and then softened, sitting next to her but keeping a respectable distance.

"Would you like me to help you find the person you're looking for?" I inquired in the professional tone often used to assist guests.

"No. You're the person I'm looking for."

"I'm afraid I don't know you."

"Look ... closely. Take your time. Are you sure you don't know me now?"

Clearly, I did not know this woman. Why did she seem to know me? There was no reason to fear for my safety. There were plenty of people around, and she appeared to be quite harmless. Still, there was something eerie about this situation. When she took my hand in hers, I blushed, and I didn't know why.

Janice gazed into my eyes, smiling elfishly. I was reminded of the ghost stories shared at the bar. The hotel was a restored mansion that once belonged to a woman who had died a tragic death. Our guests and staff had multiple stories about her apparitions and odd occurrences. *Could this woman be a manifestation of Julia Staab?* I quickly dismissed the silly notion, and other thoughts raced through my mind. *Was she a long lost relative? Did she have something for me in her purse? Had my mind totally blanked out on some forgotten but dear friend?* She held my hand with kindness and affection. *Why the hell does this woman know me so well and I don't know her?* She must have seen the agitation in my face, for she compassionately leaned in and whispered.

"I'm Robert."

"Oh my god!" I recognized the voice instantly. Robert was a favorite customer of mine, a man who enjoyed worldwide fame and recognition in his field. He was a retired engineer who

would often bring dignitaries to my bar. We'd often engage in stimulating conversations and clever repartee.

"You look so ... feminine!" I blurted out, and we both laughed. "I mean, you're beautiful!"

"I would hardly think beautiful is the word to describe me," he joked.

"No, you are," I countered. "You look so ... healthy and ... happy."

Robert had been suffering from diabetes and regularly received kidney dialysis. He often appeared in the dining room looking weak and drawn, and older than his eighty years. Those were the times he would bring a book, order oatmeal and tea, and invite me to join him for conversation when I got a break. These were some of my favorite times: stolen moments of shared philosophies and poignant questions about the mysteries of human behavior. Robert was dear to me as a favored customer, and I considered him a friend, although I knew little of his life outside his visits to the hotel.

"I feel happy as Janice," he answered.

"Your make-up, the hair, the jewelry ... your hands!" I gushed. "Your hands are a woman's hands. They're so soft, so refined."

"When my wife died several years back, I began to try on some of her clothes. Soon Janice emerged, and I really enjoyed her. Since that time, I become Janice more and more frequently. Look, I know you have to get back to the bar. I just wanted to know if you'd like to have lunch or tea with Janice some day soon.

"Yes. Of course," I answered, and we kissed each others cheeks before I returned to work.

I never got to have lunch with Janice. Robert died soon after. His funeral was attended by hundreds of people from countries around the world. Most knew him only as Robert, but a few of us at the funeral inquired of one another slyly, "Did you know Janice?" Those who answered in the affirmative agreed with enthusiasm that Janice was a charming woman who was very, very happy.

I was honored that Robert chose to share Janice with me, and would often wonder why he did. The whole experience seems to have left an imprint on me. Robert's transformation into a feminine personality was complete. His clothing, hair, gestures, and voice were all those of an elderly woman. He had not missed a single detail. Most striking to me were the hands. They had been lotioned and manicured, and they gestured with a feminine grace. They were clearly the hands of a woman, no longer a man's.

## Black-Eyed Susan

*Regan Bertollette*

If Amber was five the night that Jimmy Irwin's girlfriend tried to kill him, that would make me eight. Not that age is necessarily important, but it does become a relative point when you figure that we were firsthand witnesses to the entire affair. One of the many parties that our mother would drag us to when a babysitter fell through. We would regard such events as this one with impassivity, oblivious to the manners of the adults our mother socialized with. Jimmy's girlfriend was unsuccessful in her attempt at murder that night, but the imprint of that experience still resonates within me, especially as I have begun to consider becoming a mother myself.

Our mother was gorgeous. Tall, slender, long black hair, she could own a room with her contagious smile and naiveté. All sex appeal. Men loved her and she loved them back. There was an energy about her that drew people in, particularly her own children. Having just divorced our father, she had put an end to a loveless marriage that had also given her three kids before she turned twenty-two. Her newfound liberation allowed her to make up for lost time, and she attacked single life with a passion. It seemed as though she was on a quest for making up lost time, and she pursued her freedom with a vigor uncommon to her. She had found new meaning in her life: motorcycles, drugs, alcohol, men; all became items on her agenda.

The parties seemed to be endless, and we could always tell when our mother was hell-bent on going to one. She would put forth the effort of finding us a sitter, but, after a while, she tired of creating explanations for her whereabouts, so she just brought us along. Mom would bathe us and dress us in our pajamas so that she would not have to bother with the hassle of drunkenly changing us later while we were in our catatonic slumber, a mixture of spindly legs and arms and lolling heads. The protocol for us to follow was simple: she would load us into the car, head to the bash, and then park us in front of the television in a quiet part of whatever house we were in. In a way, I think she thought of herself as a good mother by taking the placement of us into consideration. She would wipe her conscience on the fact that her girls would be safe in some isolated corner of the house while she drank herself into oblivion or experimented with whatever drug cocktail was pushed her way.

The night that Jimmy Irwin almost died was a night no different from any other. It started as every other party did. Mom would burst into the party with us shyly hanging on her, trying to hide behind her legs. She meanwhile was inhaling the attention being tossed her way because of us. Amber and I were always overwhelmed, two kids in a forest of adults, staring up at the strangers who seemed to fawn all over us. The attention was always intimidating at first; everyone wanted to ensure that we were all set. The faces coming in and out of focus and the

noise making it all incomprehensible. Did we want soda? Chips? Ice cream? Shit, what DO we have for kids? There was always laughter at the latter, some joke that I never got. As our mother shuttled us to some remote part of the house, always where there was a television, she would remind us to be good, to not move, to take care of each other, that we were her girls, and that of course she would come and get us when it was time to go. Her parting words, over her shoulder, were always the same, “Regan, look after your sister.”

Ironically, *Oliver* was the movie that we watched that night. I remember singing along with the orphan when he sang that duet with Nancy, “I’ll do anything for you, dear, anything,” and trying to block out the noise from down below. I was always tempted to follow the din and investigate, but Amber always pulled me back. After all, she was my responsibility. She has always had this astounding knack for measuring her observations without any emotion. Even that night, amidst all of the chaos that ensued, she remained coolly aware but not outwardly responsive. We were deep into the musical, and no sooner had I finished my trill than the room erupted.

“You mother-fucker! I am going to kill you!” this thing screamed. We could hear the racing of feet upon wood floors as someone raced up the stairs.

Amber and I looked at each other and squirmed closer together with our backs to the TV, prepared to take it all in.

Jimmy Irwin, a normally child-friendly guy, burst into the room, saw us and simultaneously screamed, “Barb, there are fucking kids in here!”

He edged towards us, facing the open doorway. *Oliver* played on, as did the rest of the party downstairs. Of course our mother was nowhere to be found.

The thing entered the room, clearly out of her mind. I recognized her from a far less traumatic time. In fact, they had been at one of the last parties my parents threw before they divorced. I can remember how taken we kids were with her youth and her beauty. She had actually played with us at that party, and that stood against all of the other adults who would obligatorily acknowledge us for a moment but then move on to the good stuff. Now she was nothing like that beautiful blonde lady that we clung to that day. Instead she was a dirty mess, raccoon-like eyes with a yellowed tint to her sweaty flesh. Oh. And she also had a knife. I remember smelling the Johnson’s baby shampoo and powder on Amber and how it played against a grosser smell, a rotten odor that we had smelled before but could not place. Amber moved even closer to me, but we had nowhere to hide, nowhere to go.

I would like to say that I remember how that moment ended, but I can’t say that I do. I just can remember the yellow glow of the lightbulb swaying back and forth in that room and the

movie playing in the background, an almost mockery of the showdown that had transpired. I do know that Jimmy Irwin did not die that night, and I do know that neither of us was harmed in any other way than a further developed detachment from our childhood. I am sure that word got downstairs to our mother as someone excitedly proclaimed our close demise. And I am sure my mother, loving histrionics as she still does, ran upstairs when she heard about what happened and turned the melodrama into something about her as she swept up Amber and me in her drunken embrace. In true form, she would have run us out of there and into the car, all the while encouraging the man of the evening to follow her because, “How could she feel safe? How could she feel safe? Who does that around kids?” The whole time eluding the point that had we simply been home in our beds where we belonged there would be no issue.

Jimmy Irwin died three months after my father passed away, the winter that I was sixteen. In some regard I always link the two deaths together. Both men were in their prime and they both died tragically. What separated them though was that my dad died in a tragic accident and Irwin was a victim of the lifestyle he had always pursued. From what I understand, he had gone out in the middle of a snowstorm to buy formula for his newborn daughter. It happens, those moments of forgetfulness that send you out to get something when you are better off at home. When he didn't return, Barb called the police. It was three days later that his body was discovered by a hunter. Irwin's body was left in a ravine with two perfectly executed bullet holes to his head. Apparently it was a drug deal gone bad, and he had paid the ultimate price. Our mother wailed for days on end over the injustice of a life taken so young. She worried about the impact that this would have on his only child. “Who could do that to a child? I mean, think of that baby growing up without her father. Where is the justice in that?” she would cry. And pour herself another drink.

## Brick by Brick

*Ann Marie Cleary*

There had been a wall growing brick by brick for some time around her, but she did not know the wall was being constructed; therefore it just continued to grow higher and higher. The wall was not seen by the naked eye; it was invisible to all, even to her.

She did not know about the wall because her life went on in so many other ways; she went out, talked to people, traveled multiple times a year, and had plenty of wonderful experiences and adventures. She was happy, enjoyed her career, her friends and family, but something was missing: she yearned for that final conversation before closing her eyes at night, the phone call that asked about her day, the call that wished her a good night and a great day to come.

In an unplanned encounter, she met her potential final conversation. She had always heard that when you are not looking for it or thinking about it you find it; she never truly believed that until that July. She had come to Connecticut from Long Island to visit her sister and brother-in-law for his birthday. They were having a bunch of college friends over to celebrate. Most of the friends she had never met before, but she had heard about them many times in the past ten years. She figured a decade of stories constituted meeting them since she felt like she knew them all personally, one friend in particular. The stories made him out to be the male version of herself: fun to be around, lover of fine things, a spender, and the one who saw the brighter side of life. In her sister's words, they were both "high maintenance, busy and complicated." In the past she had joked about wanting to date him, but her sister's response was always the same: "No, he's like my brother. He can't date you." Her brother-in-law agreed and chimed in each time with some smartass comment. "Yeah, there wouldn't be enough room in your bathroom cabinet for both of your hair products."

After a long day in the sun, meeting everyone and just hanging out, they somehow ended up alone on the front lawn for hours just talking. It was nothing more than idle chit-chat, but nonetheless they were talking a lot. They began to grow closer and closer till their lips met in simple kisses, nothing too serious, as they were on her sister's front lawn. Before they knew it, the clock had reached nearly four AM. Time that usually passed slowly somehow raced by that buggy July night. Realizing the time, they knew it was time to say goodnight. Not wanting that to be the case, she considered going with him but reconsidered, hearing her sister's words echo in her head—*Eww, he's like my brother*. She informed him, "Come on, you know my sister. She'll flip if she wakes up and I am not in this house." Awkwardly and in a shy, school-boyish manner,

he asked her if she had a pen to write down her number. She teased, “Guess you do not do this often—just put it in your phone.” His awkwardness rested well with her. It made her think—if he does not do this often, maybe that is a good thing. Just maybe, he really will call.

Much to her surprise, he called the next day. *What happened to the three day rule*, she thought. Once again, she found herself talking to him for over an hour on the front lawn, until her brother-in-law came out with the suggestion that they all grab pizza. She did not say much while they were eating, as she did not know what he, her sister, or brother-in-law were thinking in regards to the night before. When they parted that day it was nothing more than a “see ya.” She questioned if she would ever hear from him again. That question was answered. As she drove the two hours back to Long Island, he called, offering to help her pass the time. Once again more basic conversation about nothing major. It was as if they were just speaking about the weather, but it lasted for her whole ride home.

For the rest of the summer, they spent hours on the phone, chatting, texting and emailing. You see, he traveled a lot for work, and she spent the summer at the beach and traveling for pleasure. Finally, summer was over and life was slowing down for the both of them. Knowing she was coming to Connecticut for the weekend, he took a risk and asked her to dinner. Excited, nervous, anxious, and thrilled all wrapped up into one, she gladly accepted the invitation. The forty minute drive up the Merritt from Stamford to Wolcott unexpectedly turned into hours; then again, she should have known since it was Friday of Labor Day weekend. The extra time in the car gave her time to think. Her excitement quickly disappeared and was replaced with more anxiety than she had ever experienced before.

When she arrived at his house, she felt a major case of the butterflies. She did not know what to say or do. Not knowing her thoughts, he offered to introduce her to his family; they were just in the other room. Her response was, “Oh, no, after all that time in the car, if I do not eat now I might chew my arm off.” At dinner, surprisingly, there was very little to talk about in comparison to the hours they spent on the phone. She felt uncomfortable. He, seeing that she was uncomfortable, did the best he could considering the construction crew was working overtime during dinner, building upon the invisible wall around her. The night ended, not the way either one of them envisioned, but they tried again the next day at the outlets. After all, shopping was a passion they both shared. She figured that this time it would be much better; it just had to be. It was better than dinner but still not what she had expected after a summer of talking, texting, and emailing as if they were friends for life. She was very frustrated with herself; she had expected and desired more from the weekend. After all, she had all summer to fantasize what it would have been like. In her fantasies she never saw herself feeling nervous or

jumpy around him, but for some reason she was uncomfortable in her own skin when she was with him.

He, persistent and stubborn in a good way, did not give up on her and a possible relationship. He continued to supply her with the final call of the day, wishing her well for the next day and letting her know he would talk to her later. She loved the time she spent with him on the phone and smiled like a school girl when she received an email from him. Throughout the fall and winter, he asked if she planned on coming to Connecticut for the weekend, and most of the time she found a reason to. She knew a relationship was what she wanted when they talked on the phone, but something happened to her thoughts when they were together. It was if she were being controlled by two different people. To others, it seemed like they were dating, just without the romance, the I love you's, and the commitment. To her, things were just fine. She referred to it as fake dating, but he thought differently, and gradually the nightly calls disappeared and he did not seem so interested in her visits to Connecticut any longer. As the calls dissipated, she did not seem to mind, as she realized she was stringing him along and knew she could not do that forever. Then all at once, on a trip with friends to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, she walked into it—the wall. It was no longer invisible to her; she realized what she had been doing and why she had allowed the construction crew to build a wall so high. This realization changed her life, and she could not wait to return to the states to call him. Now, she knew that the missing calls were a big deal; not seeing him at her sister's bothered her more now than ever before. She was determined to change what she had allowed to happen.

First, she knew the wall needed to come down, but she was unsure how to fire the construction crew that had been working so hard for so long. Then it came to her; it was not going to be an easy task. She knew he was the key to delivering their pink slips. His smile, his joking manner, his easy to look at eyes, and most of all his soothing words were going to have to be the tools used to demolish the wall once the crew was gone. That summer, a year after meeting, his words acted like a chisel, slowly over time chipping away at the wall, the wall that she had unknowingly allowed to be built up around her for so long. Once again, that summer, he traveled a great deal for work, and after his sixteen hour days, he would spend the late hours of the night talking to her, but this time their conversations grew deeper and more serious.

That fall and winter, they spent as much time as they could together and even began discussing the possibility of her moving closer, finding a job near him, and planning a committed future together. She could not believe it took her so long to see the writing that was on the wall that now crumbled to the ground. That spring, they traveled to Disney together, where he arranged a magical evening that included a special viewing area for the fireworks in front of

Cinderella's castle, complete with champagne, telling her it was a way to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. She was impressed and excited by his loving effort and thought. Overjoyed by the beauty of the night, she was shocked by his statement when the firework show, entitled "Dreams," began. "Speaking of dreams, will you marry me?"

## Mouse Tales: Part Two

*Mona Gardiner*

“Sam’s Tire and Auto Service Center. How can I help you?”

“Yes, good morning. Um, I have a question for you. Could you possibly remove a mouse nest from my Kia Spectra?”

“Yes, Ma’am, we can. It would require us removing the dash panel from your auto and cleaning it all out. But we can handle that. Are all of the mice gone?”

“I really don’t know ...”

“YOU are going to have to get rid of them.”

That’s right, me. The one who can’t even stand looking at them, let alone touching them. Okay. “Sir? How do you think they got in there?”

“My guess is they probably came through your vent. If you leave your vent open, the mice sort of think of it as an invitation. They come up through the vent, and once there, your car is like a hotel to them.”

Great. The Hotel Kia. “So, what should I do to get rid of them?” I already knew what was coming next.

“Well, I would advise getting yourself some traps. Get the spring-type traps. Put a little piece of cheese and some peanut butter on it. You’ll get them in no time.”

“Thanks,” I responded with all the enthusiasm I could muster.

It was hard to keep my mind on teaching that day. I was going to have to trap the mice, possibly killing them. That wasn’t the worst part. I might have to touch them. Looked like a trip to Walmart after school today!

As I drove to the store, I thought about all the suggestions my colleagues and my children had given me.

“Those spring traps really work well. You’ll catch them in no time!”

“Why don’t you try using those humane-type traps? You know, the ones where you catch them alive and then just release them?”

“Get the poisoned cookie bait. You just set it out and forget it. They eat the cookie and, if you are lucky (Lucky?), they will carry some of it back to the nest.”

The nest. Suddenly I was taken back to the present. I don’t know what made me think of it at that moment, but my attention turned to the glove compartment. Is that where they were hiding? Remember, the pellets were on the floor just beneath it. My registration and insurance information were in there, too. Should I open it?

What I did next was completely insane, especially while driving. But I had to know. I wouldn't be able to wait until I got to Walmart. The time was now. Carefully reaching over yet keeping my eyes on the road, I pulled the lever to release the compartment. "OH, MY GOD!!!"

Inside the glove compartment was an array of shredded paper, just like the piles in my trunk. It made my stomach turn to know just how close the little suckers had actually been to me. I mean, knowing they had been in the trunk was bad enough. But to think they were within an arm's length made me want to vomit. I slammed it shut. I figured it could all wait until I got to Walmart.

After parking the car, I began the unenviable task of cleaning and sorting the items in the compartment. Sifting through bits of paper, I wished I had had a pair of rubber gloves. The item I was most worried about was my registration. I didn't want to have to go to the DMV and explain this one. I'm not sure the clerk could find a form for replacing a registration destroyed by a car-jacking mouse! Luckily, they hadn't touched the registration one bit. After removing all the contents, there were those damn pellets! Using a tissue, I swept them all out into the plastic bag I used to carry my sneakers. I secured the bag, placed the salvaged items into a Ziploc storage bag, and tossed that onto the seat of the car. Thank God I carry hand sanitizer in my purse!

Dumping the items into the garbage as I entered the store, I made my way to the shelves that carried mouse traps and poisons. Do you know how many different types of products are available for mouse removal? Too many! I finally made my choices and proceeded to the registers: a package of spring-type traps, two products known as "Mice Cubes," which were for the humane removal of the rodents, and some poisoned cookie baits.

After arriving home, I knew I had to take care of business right away. But the decision was not an easy one. Should I poison them? Right, and then what? They carry the poison back to the nest and rot inside the walls of my car? The stench of a rotting carcass is one that stays ingrained in your olfactory memories. Back on the farm, we once had an occasion where that very thing happened. We had come home after a week's vacation at the Cape, and upon entering the house, we were overcome by this unfamiliar aroma. Searching the house for the source, we had narrowed it down to the living room, specifically the wall near the fireplace. Since there were renovations being done in that room anyway, another hole wouldn't make any difference. After removing the dead mouse, it had taken nearly another week to totally rid the house of this putrid odor. No thanks! You would think this was a no-brainer anyway. After all, who really cares how they go, as long as they just go. My conscience got the best of me and I opted for the mice cubes.

Mice Cubes are smoky-colored rectangular prisms, with a swinging door. The object of the trap is to attract the mice, and, once in, because of gravity preventing their escape, you “NEVER have to touch the mice.” You simply take the cube, turn it upside down, the door opens, and the mouse runs out. Sounds simple enough to me!

I carefully placed the little pieces of cheese smeared with peanut butter into the cubes. Where should I put them? I decided to place one on the floor beneath the steering wheel and one on the floor beneath the glove compartment. My work was done for the evening. Whatever was going to happen next wouldn't be my concern until morning.

I awoke the next morning and went about my daily routine: put the coffee on, turned the news on, and jumped into the shower. After going through my morning ritual, my thoughts quickly turned to the mice. I decided I had better check things out right away. I was a little nervous walking towards the car. Did I actually hope I had caught something? It's one of those things you truly have mixed feelings about. Peering into the passenger side window, I looked across towards the cube on the floor beneath the steering wheel: Empty! Yes !! Okay, so, one down and one to go.

There was something a little different about that second trap. It didn't look as clear as the other one. And what were those drips I noticed? Condensation? Or steam? STEAM????? That could only mean one thing. There was something in that trap.

Cautiously opening the car door, I got down for a closer look. As I did, my mind instantly flashed back to the instructions on the back of the Mice Cube box: “If the mouse has expired in the trap, you may dispose of it in a refuse container without ever handling the mouse.” Okay, so maybe it wouldn't be too bad.

All of a sudden, there was movement in the trap, and you know what that meant. Examining it further, I discovered this was no little mouse. This mother-of-a-mouse took up the entire cube, which was going to make it a little difficult to just turn it over and let the damn thing run out. Simple, effective, and humane, huh! What could I do?

I did the only thing I could think of. Running into the house, I grabbed a dishtowel. I covered the cube with the towel so the mouse couldn't get a good look at me. I felt like a medieval executioner who wears a hood to hide the expression of pleasure he gets as the ax tears into the victim's neck! Who was I kidding? I just didn't want the mouse to see enough of my face to identify me. What if he got away and we met up again in some darkened alley somewhere?

With the towel-covered cube in hand, I ran towards the far end of my property and flung

the entire thing, towel and all, into the woods. I figured the mouse had a 50/50 chance: either the cube would land in just the right position to allow somehow for its escape, or, it would die a slow death. Either way, callous as it seems, I really didn't care. The only thing I cared about at that moment was that if it did survive the crash and manage to get out, I still had a head start back to the house.

I washed my hands and then got ready for school. After loading the car with my lunch and my book bag, I slipped in behind the wheel and immediately locked the door. I quickly drove away, you know, just in case the mouse was chasing me down the road.

My thoughts then drifted to all those babies she had with her when she scurried across the trunk. What was going to happen to them? My motherly concern got the best of me. I actually felt a little sympathy for them. Then I felt a little sympathy for myself. What was I going to do about the babies? The man at the garage said all the mice had to be gone. Was I going to have to set more traps in order to catch them? Would the baby mice come looking for their mother while I was driving to school? Just how many of them had there been anyway?

I thought about these questions during the day, especially after having shared my previous mouse tales with my class. The topic came up when we were discussing our Word of the Day: Condensation. So, what was going on in my car at that moment? Were the baby mice looking for food? Worse yet, looking for their mother? I was thinking this whole mouse thing might soon be over, but I think the mice had other ideas.

## Crying Is What We Do Here

*Michelle Hacker*

A few months ago, a thought like a shadow growing with the fading sun was creeping into my mind. I think I knew it was coming ever since first meeting Melissa in San Diego. I needed my own therapist. I used to think that if divorce didn't break me, nothing would. I felt strong and independent. Most of the time. Yet something just below the surface of my skin was crawling. I've ignored it for many years, not recognizing it for what it was. On the way home from dinner with my parents the other night, I had a pounding headache. Thinking back on the evening, I realized that I was angry with my parents, my father in particular. He fed the dog from the table; he chewed too loudly. He argued with my mother over the doneness of the meat. Everything he did made me angry. Why?

Do I look in the yellow pages under dysfunctional families? How do you ask friends for a reference? "You look like you have a therapist. Who do you recommend?" I can't fly out to San Diego and see Melissa every month. How often does one see a therapist. Once a month? Once a week? Sometimes I think once a day would work for me. I decided to call the marriage counselor David and I saw prior to the divorce and ask her if she had any recommendations.

"What do you think is your biggest concern?" she asked. "Therapists have strengths in certain areas so I want to give you a few names that would meet your needs."

What were my issues? If I knew that I wouldn't need a therapist. "I'm not sure," was all I could say.

"Has anything happened recently that has precipitated this phone call?" she probed.

"How much time do you have?" After I gave her a brief summary, I felt my heart rate increase and my face get flushed. "Oh, and I'm not sleeping," I added.

"Well, you have been busy, Katherine, since we last met. Don't forget you are recently divorced and are now a single parent."

"Oh yeah, that too. So do you know of someone that specializes in homosexual cancer surviving sibling relations with parental dysfunction on the side?"

"Dr. James Neil, 674-1500. Hartford."

Does he have that specialty listed on his business card? I wondered. "How does this work? What do I do? Do I need a referral from someone? Does insurance cover it? How much does it cost?"

"Katherine, take a breath. Call the number and say you would like to make an appointment. No referral is necessary, and insurance will cover it. You are not the first person to

seek mental health. It's quite the norm these days," she said before asking how Brian was and hanging up.

Mental health. Those words frightened me. Tina did it though. I could do this.

I called and made an appointment. Cancelled twice and rescheduled before actually showing up.

Dr. Neil looked like a middle aged college professor from the 1980's. He wore dark brown pants, a plaid shirt, and a not quite matching plaid tie. His tweed suit jacket had leather elbow patches. Although he wasn't very old, his hair line was receding and he had the beginnings of a comb over. The only thing missing was a pipe. He had kind brown eyes that looked like melted chocolate and a warm smile that barely showed his slightly crooked teeth. I liked him immediately.

I was surprised to see a couch in his office. Seeing my eyes survey the furniture, he smiled and said the couch was for him, not me.

"I take power naps after lunch," he said. "You can take this chair," he said as he sat in the chair across from me. There was no desk in between. "I'll start," he said right away. "I am James Neil. I've been doing this for eighteen years, and by 'this' I mean shrink stuff, you know, mental health." The emphasis on the word mental combined with the look on his face when he said it made me smile and relax a little. A sense of humor. Good. He reminded me of my sister; she too, used humor in her work to help people at their most vulnerable. It was then I started to cry.

"Am I that bad?" he asked.

"Oh my god. I told myself I wouldn't do this."

"Do what?"

"Cry."

"You're kidding, right?" he asked.

"What? Kidding about what?"

"Crying. Count how many tissue boxes I have in my office." He waited a few seconds before he prompted, "Really Katherine. Count them."

I looked around the room and counted. "Seven," I said.

"You missed one."

"Okay, eight then."

"Crying is what we do here. And when we're done, if I've done my job right, you will know why you're crying and even be able to enjoy it."

"Enjoy it?" Was this guy whacked? I thought to myself.

“Sure. Crying is very healthy. I do it as often as I can. You do however understand that whatever is said in this room is strictly confidential, right? I can’t have my tough guy reputation marred by that piece of knowledge. So please don’t go blabbing that I’m a cry baby.” His whole face smiled.

“Okay, okay. I get it. I can cry here,” I said as I grabbed one of the eight boxes of tissues. No matter where you sat in his office, a tissue box was never out of arm’s reach.

“Why don’t you begin with an overview of why *you* think you are here?”

“Oh God. I don’t know where to begin.”

“Begin in the middle. That’s usually where things get good.”

“Are all therapists like you?” I asked.

“I hope not.”

“Umm. Well ... a year ago my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a radical mastectomy. When I was out visiting her for the surgery, I found out she was gay, a fact my parents knew but never told me. My once strong relationship with my parents is strained and uncomfortable. I’m mad all the time when I’m around them. I have been divorced for almost two years and I have a five year old son.” I finished, took a deep breath, and wiped my eyes.

“Well,” he said after a few seconds. “I’m glad you’re here. I think I can help,” he said as his face became a little more serious and professor-like.

I could feel my shoulders relax a little as the tears streamed down my face again.

We talked a little more about what it was like growing up in our house, how the distance grew between my sister and I, and a few minutes about my son. When the hour was up, I was relieved, disappointed, and surprised.

“How do you feel about once a week?” he asked.

“Okay, I guess. Is that normal?”

“There is no normal. There is only what is right for you.”

“Once a week then. Do I schedule with your secretary?”

“You’re lookin’ at him. How are Mondays at three?”

“Perfect.”

As I walked out to the car, I felt so many emotions, I didn’t know where to put them. For once I was glad Brian was with his father for the afternoon. I don’t remember the drive home, but I found myself in the driveway, too drained to move. After what could have been five minutes or five hours, I unwrapped my fingers from the steering wheel and went into the house. The sun had set and the house was dark. I went into the living room without turning on a light and lay down on the couch. I sobbed so hard my body ached. I woke to the phone ringing.

“Are you coming?”

Disoriented, I asked, “Who is this?”

“It’s David. Aren’t you coming to pick up Brian?”

“What time is it?” I said fumbling for a light switch. It was 7:15 pm. “Shit, I must have fallen asleep. Can you drop him off? I’m not feeling all that well.”

“Why don’t I keep him overnight? You can take a break,” he offered.

Momentarily speechless, I replied, “Really?”

“Sure. He’s fine here and I’ll bring him to school in the morning.”

“Okay. Sure. Really?” I said again, confused by his generosity.

“Really, Katherine, you sound like shit. Get some rest.”

“Thanks.” I hung up and cried again.

The next day I called my sister. “Hey, guess what?” I said.

“You got laid,” she replied with hope.

“No. Although that would be nice. No, I saw a therapist.”

“You did? No way. You?”

“Why do you say it like that? You?”

“Because you just seem to have your shit together. I thought I was the only fucked up one in the family,” she spat.

“I’m not effed up. I just need guidance.” After that word left my mouth, we both started laughing and couldn’t stop. The kind of laugh that comes from your toes and takes over your whole body. My stomach hurt almost as much as it did after my sobbing sessions. “No, you’re right. I am fucked up,” I finally managed to say.

“You said the F word.”

“Yeah. Yeah. So what? Get over it.”

“So how did it go? Who did you see?”

“His name is Dr. James Neil. He’s funny. He has a similar sense of humor to yours.”

“Oh, you really are fucked up then. Get out while you can,” she mused.

“I like him.”

“Is it weird seeing a guy shrink?”

“He’s not a shrink. Only psychiatrists are called shrinks. He’s a psychologist. And no, it’s not weird seeing a man. Why should it be weird?”

“I don’t know. How do you tell him girl things? How would he understand a woman?” she asked seriously.

“I don’t think my issues are unique to women. You’re a lesbian. Of course you’d want a woman.”

“I don’t hate men, Kat. I just think they’re stupid.” We laughed again at that one. My ribs hurt. “You know that’s not true. Some of my best friends are men. I just don’t want their dicks in me, but they’re not stupid”

“Tina!”

“What?”

“Oh my God. Whatever. Anyway, he seems good. I’ve only seen him once so far. I don’t know about you, but when I left his office, I was a complete wreck. I’m surprised I made it home.”

“Yeah, that happened to me too. You should have told me you were going. I could have warned you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. I probably wouldn’t have gone if I’d known. David took Brian for the night and I called into work sick the next day. I felt like I had the flu or had been hit by a Mack truck. My whole body hurt from the inside out. I thought therapy was supposed to help you. I feel like I had the shit beat out of me.”

“I know the feeling. Been there, done that.”

“Does this happen every time? I don’t have enough sick days to take off every Tuesday following a Monday session.”

“For me it happened only the first two or three times, but after that it gets easier. You won’t have to call in sick next time because you will know it’s coming. Take my advice. Get a really good bottle of wine and plan on take-out the days you have your appointment. Don’t skimp on the wine. You deserve it. Trust me; it works.”

“Now I wish I had talked to you before. You’ve got this down to a science.”

“So how did it go? Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. Not now. I don’t feel like crying again. I just wanted to say hi,” I said as the tears began to fall again. I thought that well was dry.

“Are you okay? Are you crying? What’s wrong?”

I could hear the worry in her voice. “Yes, I’m crying. Again. Don’t worry about it, though; it seems to happen whenever the wind blows these days. I’m getting used to it. I told Brian I had allergies.”

When we got off the phone I made a note to myself to pick up some waterproof mascara.

As Tina warned, the next two visits to Dr. Neil were followed by the need for really good wine and take-out. I fought the tears less each time and saw them more as cleansing than

weakening. Although my body was left weaker at the end of a session, my mind seemed to be getting stronger. I started walking each day and took a multi-vitamin. I wanted my body to get physically fit as my soul was getting emotionally fit. It felt good.

Even though I no longer felt like a loser to be seeking mental health, Tina was the only person I told. She didn't judge me, and we shared the same parents with the same issues. Talking with her was like another therapy session, without the co-pay.

## Chasing Ghosts

*Angela Joslin*

The night before was the last day I saw my kids. I am the teacher who wants school to last *one* more day. I haven't unpacked or put away any of the items I brought home from school because it is still a bit sad for me. Teaching is my second career, and I never thought it would change my life. I now realize that the kids I taught would become my own.

Two years ago I looked for my first job as a teacher. I was hired at St. Bernard's, a small private Catholic middle and high school located in Uncasville, Connecticut. I was excited, scared, and not at all Catholic. But I knew this teaching opportunity was just what I needed to get my feet wet until I could get a job in public school. I taught six, seventh, and eighth grade Social Studies. My eighth graders were always my favorite. I had three sets of twins my first year. Most of the time I could not tell them apart. My favorite set of twins were so different from each other. One was crazy and outgoing. Eddie was the kind of kid you wanted to high five because you thought his acts of mischief were hilarious. Or his brother Andrew who was the smarter, calmer one who I would go to for music advice—has anyone else heard of a band called Dispatch? Or Matt. I know someday I will be hiking in a small South American country and will stumble upon some natives with an enormous banner of his face, chanting, Long Live Matt Anderson. And I will never forget Katherine, a fourteen year-old hippie who I begged never to join a cult. My love affair was evident. It got so bad that I would come home daily and relay stories to my boyfriend. I swear Chris could hold conversations about the kids with my fellow teachers even without having met any of my students. During a graduation rehearsal it was pretty obvious how I felt about these kids. I opened my mouth and began to speak with tears streaming down my face. I think they received the message loud and clear. When my eighth graders left me I thought there is no way possible that I will ever love my next group of kids as much as the last ones. They were leaving me and I had to find new favorites. But as September rolled around I met a new crop of kids and fell in love all over again.

This past year was no exception. I was hired at Montville High School to teach freshmen and sophomores. I started the year with memories of my kids from St. Bernard's attached to me like ghosts. I knew that for the first few months I would be comparing my new kids to my former students. No way they could ever match up. Well, not only did they match up, but they exceeded it. Nate and I had a very rocky relationship, that is until I related one of the philosopher's quests to his own behavior in my class—the battle between good and evil. From then on, the moment he would step out of line I would ask, "Good or evil today, Nate?" and automatically he would break

out of his funk. Mitch and Molly, whom I lovingly refer to as M&M, I could tell they were always scheming in the back of the classroom together. There was Nina who had a major crush on Adam. I would constantly make up examples in class about their pretend relationship. Pathetically, when my half year courses were over, I took it personally when some of my students started their new semester classes without me.

I could write an anthology about many of my students this year, detailing all of the great experiences I have shared with them in my classroom. I even started to cry during one of the final exams because I would no longer be able to spend eighty-two minutes with that group of students again. I had been exorcised. As I sit here and finish this piece, I can hear the words from the song play in my head, "I'll see you in September ..."

# Caught Being Ugly

Amanda Lister

*“Love of beauty is taste. The creation of beauty is art.”*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

*“All these things you have said of beauty,  
Yet in truth you spoke not of her but of needs unsatisfied,  
And beauty is not a need but an ecstasy.  
It is not a mouth thirsting nor an empty hand stretched forth,  
But rather a heart enflamed and a soul enchanted.”*

—Kahlil Gibran

## Scene One

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*The stage is a bedroom. As the play is told in four short, episodic scenes throughout the course of the first twenty-five years of Cassandra’s life, the bedroom is decorated differently to illustrate her age in each scene. It is minimalist—there is only enough to identify her age and that it’s a bedroom.*

*The bedroom here is clearly that of a young girl’s. Down stage right, now plunged in shadow, is an antique table and vanity mirror.*

*[As the lights on the bedroom come up, Cassandra is in bed, stirring. Although one actress plays all “stages” of Cassandra, she is clearly dressed in little kid pajamas. She narrates to us here as though an adult, but she mimes the movements of her memory. We hear, faintly, the noises of Lori, Cassandra’s mother, putting on her makeup.]*

CASSANDRA:

On the good mornings I would wake up to the sounds of rustling drawers and tweezers clicking against the table as my mother got ready in the “makeup room” that shared a wall with my bedroom. I could hear the old wood and wicker chair creak as she sat in front of the mirror, applying foundation, eye shadow, and powder with meticulous care. Like all very young girls, I thought my mother perfect and beautiful, so much that I would often climb out of bed and sit on the floor outside of the closed makeup room door, just listening.

*[The light comes up on Lori at her makeup table.]*

CASSANDRA:

The routine was that eventually I’d make some identifying noise. A fake sneeze, a heavy sigh, or a cleared throat would prompt my mother to call,

LORI:

Cassandra? Come in, sweetie.

CASSANDRA

I’d open the door just enough to squeeze through, and then I would come in, sit on the worn, makeup stained carpet, and admire her beauty and precision. Usually, during these rare, treasured

glimpses into the part of my mother that was Lori, not mom, I would sit silently, afraid to rupture the careful beauty of the moment. Sometimes, however, we would exchange a few words, verbal trinkets that I kept close to my heart.

Mom, why don't you get ready in your bedroom or the bathroom like Aunt Bonnie or Jen's mom?

LORI:  
Because. We must never be caught being ugly.

*[Lights fade on scene one. During the set change, we hear the following phone conversation. Cassandra sounds older, around middle school age.]*

CASSANDRA:  
Hello, mom?

LORI:  
Yes, dear? What is it, Cassie?

CASSANDRA:  
I need to come home. Can you pick me up?

LORI:  
*[pause]* I thought you were at Phil's pool party with your friends. I just dropped you off a half hour ago.

CASSANDRA:  
Well yes, but—

LORI:  
Cassie dear, I just put my pajamas on and I'm not going out now. Stay with your friends until your father comes home. *[noise of phone clicking as Lori hangs up]*

## Scene Two

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*[The lights come up on Cassandra's bedroom, now decorated to the tastes of a twelve-year-old. Cassandra slams into the room through the door. She wears clothes that are clearly thrown on over a wet bathing suit. She goes straight to the vanity mirror now in the room and starts inspecting her lip, dabbing bits of concealer on it. When satisfied with that, she moves around the room and to her bed, sulking.]*

CASSANDRA:  
Ridiculous. I hate cold sores! All that time covering it up to get tossed into the pool. I lied that my eyes had been open when Joe threw me into the water. I lied and said that the chlorine was burning them. It gave me an excuse to cover my face and leave.

I can't believe she wouldn't come get me. It's not like she had to get out of the car and talk to anyone. So what if she's in her pajamas if no one sees her? I actually hitchhiked home. The two

guys in the Jeep were pretty cute. Too bad I had this big ugly cold sore the whole time. At least I'll never have to see them again.

*[Lights fade again and we hear the following phone conversation.]*

LORI:  
Hello?

CASSANDRA:  
Hey mom, it's me. Listen, I've had a really rotten long weekend and I need to get away for a bit, so I'm on my way to see you!

LORI:  
Oh. Don't you have class or something?

CASSANDRA:  
No, mom, summer vacation starts earlier for college.

LORI:  
Oh. Where are you?

CASSANDRA:  
I'm about halfway there, so I'll be there in another hour or so.

LORI:  
You know I'm not feeling too well today. I just put bag balm on my face, and I was going to lay down and rest a little. Maybe today's not a good day.

CASSANDRA:  
Nah don't worry about it, I don't care what you look like. You can even take a nap; I'll just watch TV. Like I said, I just need to get away and thought I'd come see you. Maybe order some Chinese food later.

LORI:  
*[pause]* Maybe another time.

CASSANDRA:  
Mom, I've been driving for an hour.

LORI:  
I really don't feel well.

CASSANDRA:  
Fine. *[phone click]*

## Scene Three

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*[Lights come up on what is now Cassandra's college dormitory. She enters with a toothbrush in her mouth, wearing a slip. As she brushes her teeth, she searches for her high heels, finally finding them. She is getting ready for a date. She exits then reenters without the toothbrush. Throughout the following monologue she is moving around the room as she gets dressed and ready.]*

CASSANDRA:

Of course, we have to go out for dinner. My stomach's been twisting and turning all week on those stupid herbal cleansing supplements.

You see, Gerry is very open when it comes to talking about his "uglies." He names his farts, shows off his toe fungus, and feels completely at ease sharing every detail of his bowel movements.

Well, apparently, he's equally as comfortable discussing *my* uglies, to all our friends, so I've always hid my ugly moments from him. Well, this past weekend, when we all went up to the little cottage in Maine, with the *teeny* little bathroom ... I just couldn't do it. I couldn't go to the bathroom in his presence. Four and a half days without excreting anything other than urine. My stomach hurt after day two, so I tried not eating much during days three, four, and five. Ha. Now I'll be spending the next month on bowel cleansing tablets, all the while trying to convince Gerry that I'm not anorexic.

How do I look?

*[Lights fade to black and we hear the following phone conversation.]*

LORI:

Hello?

CASSANDRA:

Mom, where the hell are you?

LORI:

Are you at Becky's wedding?

CASSANDRA:

Yes, and you're not. Where are you? We're starting soon.

LORI:

My stomach's been really upset today, Cass. I need to stay home and rest.

CASSANDRA:

What? Mom, she's my sister, you need to be here. You can't just not come.

LORI:

Dad's there. That's what's important. Rebecca isn't my daughter. I'd feel weird being there.

CASSANDRA:

Didn't you rsvp that you'd attend? That's rude if nothing else. Will you make it to the reception?

LORI: *[We can hear in her voice that she's beginning to cry.]*

No, I just ... I can't. I don't feel good. You have a nice time. Send my love. *[phone clicks]*

## Scene Four

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*[Lights come up on the set, now Cassandra's condominium. She enters, kissing Tony, her new boyfriend.]*

CASSANDRA:

I know it's soon and all, but do you want to spend the night?

*[They kiss again, moving towards the bed. The lights fade out as they collapse onto the mattress. While the stage is dark, we see a small, glowing, digital clock being picked up and set for 5:30 am. The lights slowly fade in, simulating morning. Cassandra and Tony are in bed together, facing each other, asleep, both disheveled from the passionate night. Cassandra is on the SL side, with the alarm clock to her left. The alarm clock chimes. Both characters open their eyes, looking at each other, sleepily, for a moment. Then Cassandra stretches out an arm and rolls to her left, intending to silence the alarm. Instead she tumbles out of bed, landing on the floor.]*

CASSANDRA:

*[pause]* I can't believe I just did that.

TONY:

*[laughing softly]* You just fell out of bed. I think that's my favorite thing you've ever done.

*[lights fade, spot on Cassandra as she sits on the floor, tousled hair, smudged mascara.]*

CASSANDRA:

Well how's that for a story to tell your kids someday? *[sighs]* For all my efforts, I've never been able to avoid getting caught being ugly. My mother was always so elegant when it came to seeming perfect.

But I guess ... what's the point? How much do you have to sacrifice to do that? I've tried, and it takes work! Don't get me wrong; it's engrained in me still. The fear of getting caught being ugly courses through my DNA. When I set my alarm last night for 5:30, it was so I could sneak out of bed, shower, and be dressed with makeup on before Tony here got a chance to wake up and see me looking unkempt.

And yet, part of me wants to celebrate this. I was caught being ugly... and maybe it was somehow endearing. And hell, if I fell out of bed this early on in the relationship, at least the expectation for me to be *human* is there.

What is ugly anyway? There must be some kind of beauty in those moments. In a woman putting her makeup on, or walking around the house covered in bag balm, or falling out of bed. Maybe ... maybe those are the moments that transcend beauty and become ... art. *[fade to black]*

## Music Education

*Kim Roberts*

When I was young, my father told me that he had taken me to Boston to see the symphony. It was hard to believe. My father was an ex-Marine. He had been in the Korean War, and I think he had killed a man. He was a stocky man with a furrowed brow, wiry red hair, freckled arms like pistons, and I had never seen him in a suit. He said that it was true, though, but I was too young to remember it. “How young, Daddy?”

“Very young,” he replied.

I imagined myself as a baby, wrapped in soft white ermine, the lights of the city glistening as he proudly cradled me in his dark arms, shielding me from the frigid January night. Wealthy women in fur with manicured nails and benevolent smiles peered at my peaceful face and parted as we entered the hall. Or maybe I was a precocious four-year-old. Wearing a blue velour dress and a fuzzy white cardigan against the late September air, I gripped my father’s hand tightly as he adjusted his step to mine and we walked the busy city streets. I sat primly in the velvet seats, my black patent leather shoes dangling above the carpeted floor, hands folded as I waited for the symphony to begin. I gazed wide-eyed as the house lights went down, the curtain parted, and the magic began.

I don’t remember any of this but what I do remember is my father conducting, his arms pumping at the air, his arms extended as he commanded the different instruments to respond. The wooden living room floor of our tiny ranch reverberated with every crescendo, with every cannon from Beethoven’s Ninth. I sat in the miniature painted blue wicker chair, absolutely riveted to the seat in awe and fear. His face was a curious mixture of pain and joy as he listened for the low deep sound of the oboes to respond and invited the piping flute to play along. The first piece he taught me about was Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. As he conducted, he yelled above the music, “And this is where the duck comes in,” and struck the air with his invisible baton. I waited in dread for the wolf to creep in and destroy the happy scene. Then, even though I covered my ears tightly and grimaced, I could still feel the wolf coming up through the floorboards.

Years later, after yet another move, he installed large speakers in every corner of the living room and retreated to his worn beige Lazy Boy. He surrendered to the soft melodies of Brahms and the ordered spirit of Mozart. But he never conducted. During these days, he sat in the Lazy Boy, leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and listened, a glass of silvery liquid and ice always beside him. His freckled arms rested easily on the arm of the chair while his fingers ran

vaguely up and down the side of the glass in time to the music. As the music took over, his face relaxed with a look of painful peace.

As an adult, I played Prokofiev for my children. “Grampy’s music,” they called it. Matthew danced like a bird, pirouetting across the floor, and Julia drew quietly at the kitchen table, immune to its power. But as soon as I heard the first dark notes of the wolf, my heart resonated and stopped in its tracks.

Birchwood Residential Treatment Center was on the other side of town, but the low flat building was now familiar to me, and I deftly turned aside as the automatic door opened and dispensed a wheelchair and its driver. The frail old woman squinted into the sunshine and reached for the younger hand of the person pushing her. “Oh, good morning, Sylvie,” I said quickly as I entered. The hallway was cool and dry. On the walls hung paintings of flowers and beach scenes, and shriveled old people rested in chairs or on canes like members of some dark receiving line. I peered into room 24, the first room on the right after the nurses’ station, and my father was letting Danny, a young male nurse, feed his arms through the sleeves of a heavy brown sweater.

“How are we doing today, Dad?” I said, picking up a couple of used Kleenex from the side of the raised bed. My father rubbed his elbow thoughtfully and looked up at me. I repeated myself, only louder this time.

“So, how are we today?”

“Older than dirt, same as yesterday,” he said sardonically. Danny looked at me with a grimace.

“His sugar was a little high this morning. Too many cookies at lunch yesterday. We’ll be checking it again tomorrow, but until then, no sweets.” Dan grabbed a dirty towel from the bed and left the room, closing the door slightly as he left.

Dad eased himself into the recliner beside his bed and looked at me. As we chatted quietly, a small clock radio on the nightstand just barely played easy listening music in the background. I reached over to switch it off and casually asked, “Do you remember, Dad, when you took me to the symphony?”

“Symphony? What symphony?” he asked. “I never took you to any symphony,” and looked absently out the window into the bright light of the day.

## The Battle

*Alex Rode*

I was molested by my uncle when I was six years old. At least I think I was. He took me up to the attic in my grandparents' farm house. We were the only ones there, and he was very close to me. And that's all that I remember. My next memory is of my aunt screaming, "What are you doing, you son of a bitch?!"

The house filled and swirled with heated voices, an unintelligible mixture of English and Polish; Uncle Willy at the center, silent and still. I don't remember who else was there, but I do remember fear.

The incident was never mentioned, at home or during our carefree visits to Wisconsin. Nobody talked about it. Least of all me. Uncle Willy, however, was always there, a silent observer of my life. Over time, my memory of that event faded away.

I had not thought about what happened that day for many years.

My life continued. I graduated from college and went away to flight school to train as a Navy pilot. My memories of Wisconsin were pushed aside to make room for emergency procedures and cockpit checklists. It continued that way for the next fifteen years. After my last deployment, it was time for reassignment. My next tour would be behind a desk at the Pentagon, in the personnel area. Not my first choice.

My days there were anything but exciting. Responding to requests for standard information from next of kin or Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for data on a hometown hero were all I seemed to do. In March of 1985, I received a simply-worded letter from a family in North Dakota to send the personal records of their son, an Army corporal who was classified as missing in action in the final year of WWII. Their letter said that the only correspondence they received forty years ago was a telegram informing them he was missing in action and presumed dead. They buried themselves in grief and over the years continued on with their lives in Midwestern silence. This month, he would have been sixty, and for reasons they could not communicate, they wanted to know what happened, where he was when he was declared missing. Anything at all.

Intrigued by this request, I pulled the personal file on this young man and saw that the last service record entry was his transfer to the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry in December of 1944. Something about that date that made me pause. Continuing with his file, I saw several references to the Battle of the Bulge.

The thought of that battle stirred up a muddle of confusing emotions. And it had nothing to do with the family in North Dakota and their request. It led me back to that morning in the

attic twenty-eight years ago. I remember hearing that Uncle Willy had changed because of what happened in the Battle of the Bulge. That connection to my uncle and that battle was impossible to brush aside. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know what happened to Uncle Willy, once described by my mom in a rare moment of disclosure as a hard working young man who loved a good joke. I was trying to help a military family come to closure for a loss of a son, but was I? What I found out would lead me to a place I never thought I would end up.

I didn't know much about the specific battles of WWII. I knew about the Normandy invasion, the Battle of Britain, and the general chronology of the war. This battle, however, was almost an aside, an asterisk in a terrible global conflict. I was determined, however, to get some answers. Whatever they were.

In my research, the first unclassified Army document I came across gave this account of that battle. It read:

*“After 5 years of war, the Allies thought the end was near. Paris was retaken, as well as Naples and Rome. Hitler, however, had one last plan. His counterattack, in December of 1944, planned to split the British-American alliance. He would then negotiate a peace and escape his eventual fate. That battle was the Battle of the Bulge. It was the single biggest and bloodiest battle American soldiers have ever fought.*

*“In December of 1944, Hitler sent 30 divisions, 250 thousand men and boys to the Belgium front in an effort to divide the Allied armies. On the first day of the battle, the losses were astounding. The allies were outnumbered in some cases 10 to 1. By Christmas, the Germans had opened a bulge of 50 miles into Allied lines. On one December day, 4000 American troops had surrendered to the Germans, the biggest mass surrender since Bataan.*

*“General Eisenhower’s response was immediate. He saw this as the final battle of the war, and deployed 500,000 troops to turn the tide.*

*“One officer reported, ‘The conditions were abysmal. The soldiers often fought in zero-temperature and driving snow, which prevented them from seeing more than 10 or 20 yards in front of them. With equipment and uniforms that were designed for warmer times, frostbite became a terrible reality. Because soldiers were often cut off from their divisions in foxholes, the wounded, in some cases, literally froze to death.’*

*“As the battle wore on and the Americans suffered more and more casualties, men had to be found to take their places. As a result, physical standards were lowered, and training was cut short. Soldiers who had been physically wounded or disturbed by combat were given cursory treatment and shipped back to the front.*

*“It seemed like you’re in this deadly struggle under miserable conditions and the whole universe was united against you,” recalls a sergeant of the 84th Infantry.*

*“Men who were wounded and were redeemable were in a very bad position,” he recalls. ‘It’s very hard to forget the expressions on their faces ... a kind of hollow-eyed, lifeless, slack-jawed expression. ... It’s almost as though they’re going to a hopeless doom.’*

*“The Battle of the Bulge ended in the last few days of January 1945, when American troops made their way back to the original lines: the ones they had held when the battle began. Over sixteen thousand Americans had lost their lives and more than 60,000 were wounded or captured; German casualties were said to be twice that.*

*“And for many veterans, the terrible battle has never ended.*

*“It doesn’t go away,” said the sergeant in the 84th Infantry. ‘It sleeps sometimes, but then it awakens again ... It’s an enormity of an experience. And everything after that has been a footnote.’”*

I slowly put down the report, and I sat there lost in thought. All these conflicting emotions surfaced and struggled to be heard. My mind froze on that phrase: “the hollow-eyed, lifeless, slack-jawed expression.” I knew that look. I remembered that look. I was afraid of that look.

There was nothing in the young man’s record that indicated anything new. He was transferred to the battle when fighting was most intense. Anything could have happened. We would never know. My thoughts, however, were of him alone in a foxhole, his hands frozen around his M-1 rifle, a mute witness to the 105 millimeter shells exploding around him. He had fought his final battle. Wearily, I closed the file. What do I do now? What do I tell his family? I knew I would eventually send them the records. But I promised myself I would call them to express my condolences for the loss of their son. I wish I could have done more.

I got home late that day. As I headed up to bed, I quickly scanned the pile of mail. There, on top, was the monthly letter from my mother. In it, she told me about the weather and how the farmers needed more rain, how she and my dad were feeling, and what kind of woodworking projects he was working on. The same every month. She ended by saying my Uncle Willy had died last week. He had been living at the VA home, a couple hundred miles away, for the last five years. He had been a heavy smoker and died of lung cancer. She was the only family member to go the funeral.

I put the letter down and stood there in silence, aware of the slow rhythm of my breathing. What did I think about his death? I couldn’t decide. Obscuring my thoughts was the young soldier from North Dakota, for he had also just died. They were both strangers to me but

were connected in war. Linked in a frightening battle that took their lives, in one way or another. One living his own battle in the years after the war. I could not pretend to imagine what they went through or how it changed them.

My dizzying thoughts turned to Willy. What happened to him in the war? What had it done to him? How did he become so broken? I knew that war is ruthless, unforgiving, and random, but I could not put the fear behind me. I was still that six year-old innocent kid, in many ways.

In the end, the enormity of these two events swept over me. I did the only thing I could; I leaned my head against the wall and wept.

In Her Image  
*Pamela Santerre*

I realized, trapped beneath you,  
Eve felt this way:  
Powerless as the day  
she was Created;  
Adam, the absolved  
father of man,  
pounded hard into her.

She too wished for background noise,  
For something else  
to concentrate on,  
than the endless pounding  
on the womb of mankind.

She as well must have  
moaned every so often,  
twisted  
this way  
and that,  
and  
“*ohmyGod*”  
feigned divine pleasure.

She also hoped  
that Adam would  
*just hurry up*  
and sow his godly seed  
so she could sleep.

She was the first to cover  
her shame with fig leaves  
when Adam callously  
rolled over and  
ignored the tears that  
snaked down  
her cheeks.

I realized, trapped beneath you,  
Why Eve needed the forbidden  
fruit of another man.  
Eternal damnation  
Was worth  
one taste of temptation  
And freedom from  
an isolated, lonely Paradise

## Table Etiquette

*Sarah Beth Stonoha*

A table can represent family gatherings, discussions, and celebrations in any household. Most families have certain guidelines that they follow at a table. Keeping your elbows off the table, not talking with your mouth full, and using please and thank you are typical and acceptable rules that many people use at their tables. Not in our family. We follow a different code of table etiquette. In my family, everyone has a table.

When my mom was growing up, she and her sisters began what we now refer to as the table tradition. This table is a type of table that exists only in the minds of family members. An imaginary piece of furniture that symbolizes you as a person and what describes you. Essentially, what people will remember about you. For example, if you could place items on Britney Spears' table, what would you put? Birth Control, Cheetos, maybe a pair of clippers? What about Homer Simpson's table? Duff beer, a dozen doughnuts, a remote control.

Before deciding about what should be placed on a person's table, there are rules to follow:

1. Only family members are allowed to put things on or take things off the table
2. You are not in charge of what goes onto your individual table
3. You can attempt to appeal a table selection or object
4. If you do not allow the family to add or take away the item on your table, you are out of the family. Not really, but there really is no other alternative because that's the way it is.
5. Tables can be any size or shape
6. You can be as creative as you want with what you place on members' tables
7. Anyone's table that should no longer be in the family dynamic because of irreconcilable differences will be sold to Bob's Furniture at a reasonable price, and placed into the pit, where someone will have more use for it.

Let me share with you what my family's tables look like. First is my dad, who probably built his own table and will never let a moment pass by in which he doesn't tell you that he built it, and then proceed to take you step by step through the process. A U.S. Air force patch is there, plus a chef's hat, a Boston Red Sox bumper sticker, and a slew of Moody Blues CD's. A model thunderbird would be parked on there as well since he asks for the real deal every Christmas.

Mom's table is cluttered but cozy, made out of whatever sticks she collected in the yard that day. It's nestled closely near my dad's table, but every now and then it would be hard to find and we'd have to go looking for it and drag it back to where it belongs. Paintbrushes, paints, and

sponges would take up most of the top, along with another pile of rocks and sticks. I never have to worry about my mom plopping my kids in front of the TV. Nope, it'll never happen. They will be outside with grandma collecting rocks and sticks. A lady slipper would be lovingly given a home. Gardening tools, a coffee spoon, dancing shoes, and ... the pink tank top. For as long as I can remember, my mom has had this pink tank top with a flower on the side. It's her "crap it's hot" tank top. We all have one of those, but I still picture my mom's. After I told her that this would be a staple on her table, she proceeded to wear it for the next two encounters that we had. Lastly there is some kind of object on there that tells us what she picked up on the side of the road that day. "Isn't this great! And it was free!" Window panes, bittersweet, armchair, you never know.

Nathan, my oldest brother, is next. A perfect drawing table that might as well be solid gold and placed in its own room. It would be immaculate, with every sketching pencil aligned and every storyboard labeled. Spiderman would be perched somewhere and there would have to be a ticket to Fenway Park. His wife Heather would need some room, and knowing my brother he'd probably give her most of the table top for her Chicago World's Fair memorabilia and a picture of their dog Epie.

My younger brother Daniel's table is really a desk, which is complacently stuck right in the middle of my parents'. I take that back. It would be hanging out ON my parents' tables. My mom would have to have a little hanky on her table to dust off Daniel's things every once in a while, because god forbid he did it for himself. The textbooks would collect the most dust, I'm sure. Guitar strings, hair gel, converse sneakers, and camera film. I wish he would get more serious about his photography talent. The legs of his table would be green ... then maybe orange ... then green again ... maybe red. You know, depending on the day. There's a large part of his table that should be empty since he still has time for us to add more to it.

Any ideas what my table would be? When my parents began thinking about the right table for me, my brother lovingly nudged me and said that I should probably get a table that's low to the ground so I could reach everything. I responded with, "you might as well make it a table that looks like me, too, right ... a sturdy bottom with a flat top." After listening to the ideas, teacher's desk, changing table, and bar, they decided on a round dining room table. I guess because no one else had it yet, plus on some level I know that I represent the center of our family. So here's what's on my table, and remember rule number two! I am not in charge! I am a girl that doesn't mind being on my own, so when Mom said I needed to make room for my husband Steve, naturally I tried to appeal that one. But just as I thought, Stevie always has a way of finding out how essential he is to me, so I gave in, and allowed him a smidgen of room for his

cookie jar, DVDs, and calculator. But the Yankees cap had to stay on the coat rack. Running shoes and soccer cleats are in the center. Followed by tons of jelly beans, Beatles albums, Mickey Mouse ears, and a Gryffindor scarf. My brothers tell me that I need a mini-stage somewhere for the closet actor in me. And let's me honest, I like an audience, right ... so of course there will be chairs around my table!

There are always going to be those secret items that you have on your table but you are not willing to share with the family. But that's OK, because like in any family there are secrets. I won't tell my parents about the stripper pole and disco ball that have found homes in the center of their dining room table. Just like my dad won't place a pack of Newport's anywhere where mom can see. Daniel will dust off his own textbooks to show us that he's still serious about school, but he'll secretly keep his blanket and pillow near my parents'. Nathan will hide his Drawing for Dummies book behind his sketch pad, while Mom buries her episodes of *Flavor of Love* underneath her gardening tools. In our own sick and humorous way, we are showing each other how proud we are of our accomplishments, our talents. We are sharing what each of us brings to the table. So what would you have on your family's tables?

### Summer Institute Participants

**Joseph Anastasio** teaches English and journalism at Bacon Academy in Colchester, CT. He resides in Brooklyn (the Quiet Corner) with his wife, Beth, and three sons.

**Lynda Barrow** returned to teaching in Hampton, West Hartford, and currently Mansfield CT, after spending more than a decade traveling, journaling, and experiencing “life outside of academia.” Her lifetime passions have included acting, teaching, eastern philosophy, and of course, writing.

**Regan Bertolette** is a seventh grade Integrated Language Arts teacher at Two Rivers Magnet Middle School in East Hartford, CT. She is a great lover of the outdoors and also passionate about literature and spending time with her almost-husband!

**Ann Marie Cleary** has been teaching fourth grade for the past ten years in a variety of districts. Currently she teaches in Region 16. Before that she taught in Stamford, CT, Jamaica, NY and Dayton, OH. She lives in Wolcott with her husband and newborn son.

**Mona Gardiner** has been a sixth-grade teacher for nineteen years, the last twelve in the town of Killingly (where, by the way, she grew up!). She is the mother of three grown daughters, ski club advisor and newspaper editor at Killingly Intermediate School, as well as team leader. In her spare time (spare time?), she loves to ski, kayak, and play golf.

**Michelle V. Hacker** teaches career and technical education at East Hartford High School. She also serves as the Vocational Education Department Head at EHHS and lives in Glastonbury, CT.

**Angela Joslin** teaches Social Studies at Montville High School in Oakdale, CT and lives in Norwich, CT.

**Amanda Lister** teaches English at Manchester High School.

**Kim Roberts**, an English teacher at Norwich Free Academy, currently teaches the British Literature canon to six sections of eleventh graders. In her spare time, she is the advisor for her

school's art and literary magazine and enjoys walking her dog and confusing herself with grammar questions.

**Alex Rode** has taught fifth grade at Ledyard Center School for the past five years. He is married and with one son at home. Alex also has a son and a daughter who are both married, living on the West Coast.

**Pamela M. Santerre** is a Computer /Eighth Grade Language Arts Teacher at Woodstock Middle School. She enjoys horseback riding, creative and creative non-fiction writing, and being a workaholic.

**Sarah Beth Stonoha** grew up in Lebanon, CT and currently teaches at Killingly Memorial School. She loves to run and finds inspiration in music both in and out of the classroom. Sarah Beth dreams of someday being on stage as an actress.