Jack Straw Productions is a non-profit multidisciplinary arts organization dedicated to the creation, production, and presentation of all forms of audio art.

Jack Straw Productions' history began in 1962, when a group of artists, educators, and journalists formed the Jack Straw Foundation, which founded KRAB-FM, one of the first community radio stations in the United States. Building on its rich history of community access and support, Jack Straw continues to assist artists, educational institutions, and community organizations that are interested in working creatively with sound through our professional audio production facility, artist residency programs, educational programs, and community partnerships.

The Jack Straw Writers Program was established as a component of the Artist Support Program, which assists artists in all disciplines who want to incorporate sound in their work. Each year an invited curator selects the participating writers from a large pool of applicants. The purpose of the Writers Program is to introduce local writers to the medium of recorded audio; to encourage the creation of new literary work; and to present the writers and their work in live readings, this anthology, and on the internet. Participants receive training in vocal presentation and microphone technique to prepare them for studio recording and live recording at public readings. Their recorded readings and interviews with the curator are then used to produce audio features for our website and broadcast.
Jack Straw Writers Anthology, Volume 16
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Introduction

Many years ago I assigned myself the task of reading all the books published by friends of mine. Most of the books had been sent as gifts and many were signed. I decided it was time to read them so that I wouldn’t have to avoid the obvious query from them or resort to lying about having read their books. As I made my way through these books, it was clear that not only were the words on the pages telling me a story, but also the memories and outside knowledge of these writers informed how I read their work and what I added to the page. I had known many of these writers before any of us had published a book. Some were incredibly famous, others, as the saying goes, were still “emerging.” Many of them had helped me work through my own writing with simple and helpful advice. Once at a residency, I complained to Susan Sontag about how poorly I had written that day and she told me a story about how she used the word “really” twenty-four times in a single chapter of a novel she was working on. She said that we all write badly, but we keep writing until the writing gets better. At the time we were rowing a boat on Lake Como in Italy. Writing is like rowing—if you keep moving your hands and brain, you move forward.

Every time we place a stack of books on our nightstand, next to our bed, we’re curating a collection of writers whose books might share a common theme, a genre, a point of view, or any number of other applied factors we bring into the decision of which books occupy that space next to us and in our minds. I have the good fortune of being a professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Washington and my colleagues are always discussing books, recommending books, and creating new work.

I see the writers collected here as a collective of people like my colleagues at the UW who show the rest of us a path we want to follow as fellow writers and as readers. All of the work collected in this anthology is work in progress. The beauty of the Jack Straw Writer’s Program is we get a chance, during the year, to watch the writing develop, listen to how it’s presented—in short, peek over their shoulders while they write. Oh, how annoying, but nonetheless, a rare and valuable opportunity to ask the question, “What are you writing?” and find twelve writers who are willing to
not only answer the question, but also talk about the work of writing with each other and with an audience of fellow writers and readers.

The writers collected here range from unpublished to well-established with several books to their credit and from early twenties and still enrolled in college to retired senior citizen status. Some of them have been students of mine at the UW (one from each of the last four decades!), which gives me the rare opportunity of seeing several of my former students in one room and having them engage in a discussion with each other about their writing and the progression of their work since graduation. It’s kind of surreal for me, but a curator looks for those kinds of moments to exploit and to put writers together who share a common ground, whether it’s my classroom or a common artistic DNA in their work.

These twelve writers are doing the hard work of rowing the boat, while, as curator, all I’m doing is the fishing. When I read their work and listen to their voices, I’m traveling with them. They take us inside their families, their neighborhoods, and their memories. They describe the personal risks they took and convert those to artistic risks. They try to make language do something that they hadn’t tried before. They mine their memories and past and try and make their work match what resides in their mind and heart. They disobey family members who tell them not to write about them. They take their passion on the road and find cities and countries they’ve never been to before, and along the way they meet healers and fighters and lovers and farmers and smugglers and murderers and dancers.

What’s great about these twelve works in progress is that they’ll lead someday to a stack of twelve books that you must read. Really.

–Shawn Wong, curator

2012 Jack Straw Writers Program
Kathleen Alcalá

Our Friends, the Bees

An Excerpt from Notes from a Food Oasis, an exploration of sustainability on Bainbridge Island

Most Saturdays, you can find Chuck Schafer at the Bainbridge Island Farmers’ Market. Chuck is an evangelist, a zealot who wants to convert you to what he’s found out about life. He doesn’t sell anything, or even offer samples. He just brings some of his equipment and talks about the wonders of apiary.

“Just like me three years ago, people are astonished to learn about bees.”

Yet Schafer was surprisingly shy when it came to showing me his bees. I had to use all of my persuasive powers to get him to invite me over. The Schafers live high on a sunny hill at the south end of Bainbridge Island. I followed him there one day after the market, after helping load a centrifuge, trays from a hive with a bit of comb stuck to them, samples of pollen, and other large, heavy equipment onto the back of his truck.

We entered a greenhouse overrun with beekeeping equipment. He extracted two sets of beekeeper’s white overalls and helped me get into a set meant for someone over six feet tall, Schafer’s son. A sort of space helmet fits over your head with a face veil that covers the neck and zips onto the suit. Needless to say, the gloves were too big, but I had brought a set of cotton garden gloves.

Schafer placed some pine needles on a table in the back yard and set them on fire. Some people prefer untreated burlap, he said, but any natural tinder will work. When a tiny blaze was going, he transferred it to a bit of moss and placed it in the smoker, a small box with a bellows on the back. Then he worked the bellows until puffs of aromatic smoke came out. “Some people sing to them,” he said, “instead of using smoke.”

Only then did we walk around to the front of the house, now the domain of his bees, with its spectacular view of the water. “If I move too fast,” he said, “they get alarmed. But as long as I move at a slow, even pace, they are fine.” I tried to remember that as I moved through the cloud of bees – slow, even pace.
Each hive is like a Chinese puzzle box made of pine. The box contains framed screens, much like window screens, that can be lifted out individually to be examined, cleaned, or harvested.

“People have been keeping bees forever,” Schafer said, “but there’s still a lot we don’t know.”

When I made this appointment, I wasn’t sure how macho we were going to be in approaching the bees, so I wore long pants and brought my own garden gloves and a long-sleeved white shirt. It turns out that Schafer is quite conservative when it comes to handling the bees. He always wears a beekeeper’s suit and gloves, although he has switched from the unwieldy gloves that look leftover from early NASA designs to blue stretchy gloves that offer more dexterity. He tried working without gloves once, but when a bee crawled across his hand, he automatically slapped it and got stung. “There are guys who work in tee shirts and shorts,” he said, but Schafer is not one of them. “They get stung.”

My garden gloves worked fine, but as I lifted and set aside the sections of a hive at Schafer’s direction, the cotton kept sticking to the sticky substance the bees use to glue things together. It’s called propolis. I kept removing my gloves anyway, to take pictures with my cell phone.

Schafer directed me away from an area where I had been standing, because I was blocking the bees’ path in and out of one of the three hives. Each hive contains 70,000 to 100,000 bees. I realized that they have regular flyways, things to do. Schafer pointed to the built-up center of the frame I was holding. The bees always start at the center, working outward in an oval. It looks like they are randomly crawling around, but I realized that each bee has its own subroutine that fits into the overall program of the hive, which is to hatch, grow, feed, and protect as many bees as possible. Each hive is a computer about the size of my very first desktop, maybe a little bigger.

The bees are about a half-inch long, with the drones slightly larger. Schafer keeps Italian honey bees, known for their good nature and willingness to work with humans. They seemed very relaxed. If I looked closely, maybe I would see them holding tiny glasses of chianti. And this was the best part, maybe the coolest thing that happened while researching this book: As I held the frames, crawling with bees, and turned them over to look at both sides, I realized that the bees knew a perfect stranger was handling them,
and they allowed me to do it. It’s like the Borg on *Star Trek* – if I am not interfering with the program, I am of no consequence.

Schafer had me pull out each section, and set the frame gently on edge as we paged through the hive like a book. The newer frames were on the ends, and were maintained by younger bees. These bees were a little shinier, moved a little faster. You could almost hear the drum and bass when you pulled out those frames. Schafer was looking for the queen to show me when we came across an odd lump of wax on the end of a frame. With a putty knife, he scraped it off and held it in the palm of his glove. Just then, a large bee began to break out of it.

“Look at that! A new queen.”

That? It looked like the rear end of a bee. Any bee. How could he tell? But as she emerged, we could see that the queen was slightly longer than the worker bees, but slender.

“That’s what a virgin queen looks like. Once she starts to produce eggs, her abdomen will become wider.” Uh huh.

Schafer was really pleased. “I’ve never seen that happen before! Just because you came over to look at the bees.” He explained that beekeepers try to mark the queens with a dot from a Sharpie, but they always move too fast for him. He’s afraid he’ll squash it.

Meanwhile, the new queen walked around on the blue expanse of his glove, touching antenna with the other two or three bees that had ridden along on the bit of comb, telling them she was in charge. “They’re accepting her,” he said. She dropped down to the hive below, and began her reign.

Soon she would fly away with the drones in pursuit and mate. Then she would start a new hive. “Probably on my neighbor’s property,” Schafer said, “and he’ll be pissed.” Schafer can then capture the queen and set her up in a new box hive, of which there are three right now. The rest of her subjects will obediently follow.

Bainbridge experienced a bee dieback along with the rest of the country in recent years; beekeepers speculate on whether it was mites, a fungus, or some other factor that caused the bees from entire hives to disappear. As a rule, beekeepers send off for a fresh batch each spring, rather than trying to protect their earlier hives. I’m not sure what happens to bees that make it through the winter, if they remain in their same hive to thrive or not.
Bees travel no more than two or three miles from their hives to collect pollen; Schafer says there appear to be sufficient numbers on the island for the pollination of our fruits and vegetables. The only reason people move hives on Bainbridge is to get a particular flavor of honey. Although there are fruit trees and other choices on Bainbridge, “It’s all blackberries,” said Schafer, “and then, not even native,” meaning the bees prefer the Himalayan blackberries that will inherit the Bainbridge Island earth along with English Ivy and Scotch Broom, all invasive species crowding out the other low growth.

Plenty of insects besides bees participate in the pollination game – wasps, birds, even small mammals that move through the tall weeds and collect and shed pollen. I didn’t realize until now that honey bees are old world, brought to the Americas by Europeans, and called “the white man’s flies” by Native Americans. Corn pollinates by wind, and there are other types of bees than honey bees that pollinate. They just don’t make honey. But the plants that interest humans mostly depend on bees.

“When I started keeping bees, I thought my yard would be full of them. But if you look at this lavender,” he said, pointed to a nearby bush, “it’s about ten bumble bees to every honey bee.” Schafer has deliberately added plants that bees are supposed to prefer, but they go where they will. He pointed downhill to a garden enclosed by a deer fence. “They told me to plant California bluebells for the bees, but the deer eat them, so now that big patch in the middle of my vegetables is for the bees.” Out of season, the bluebells form an unattractive grey green clump in the middle of his edible greens.

The bees are mesmerizing, like Philip Glass music, repetition and variation too complex to comprehend, yet perfectly understandable, and I realized how people can get hooked on beekeeping. I’ve always enjoyed the bees that visit my own lavender. They are among the first signs of spring in our area, coming out to visit the early lavender blossoms as they develop along the stems. I checked on a sunny day to see how many were honey bees and how many were bumble bees, and decided it was about forty/sixty. There are probably more choices for the bees in the neighborhood around Schafer’s house, where there are large yards full of flowers and old fruit trees. There is more pavement where I live, but still, lots of blackberries in season.
When I describe my visit to the bees to the next door neighbor, he is ready to go in on a couple of hives with me. Only some of their squash was pollinated last year, leading to gourds that began to develop, then stopped and shriveled. But I know that way lies danger, of me constantly checking on the bees, fussing over them, wondering if the queen was comfortable and well-fed as she cranked out eggs deep in the hive. Bees do not sleep at night, I learned. Rather, they perform indoor work like constructing new cells, only stopping for the occasional catnap in their six to eight week lives.

Schafer was worried about the new queen. She emerged late in the season, and the bees might be reluctant to swarm and start a new hive. They would need to produce enough honey to carry them through the winter.

“Fall is when they get cranky,” he said, “because that’s when they are more protective of their honey.”

As you can see, the bees are part of our gift economy. We do not compensate them for the honey, other than to provide hives in which they can build their combs. There are plenty of natural nesting sites on the island, although other people might try to destroy them. Another beekeeping friend recounted how he accidently took too much honey one fall. The next time he opened the hive, the bees rushed out and attacked him. Clearly, they know that the beekeepers are helping themselves to the honey, but tolerate it – up to a point.
In spite of wise words by John Steinbeck, I originally came to Cannon Beach to write the prologue of this book rather than the first chapter, but the truth in John’s quote nagged at me:

A prologue is written last but placed first to explain the book’s shortcomings and to ask the reader to be kind. But a prologue is also a note of farewell from the writer to his book. For years the writer and his book have been together—friends or bitter enemies but very close as only love and fighting can accomplish.

Then suddenly the book is done. It is a kind of death. This is the requiem.

I experienced that feeling when writing the prologue of my first book. Summoning a faint memory of yolky Italian sunlight, I said goodbye to my two-month residency in Civita di Bagnoregio on a chilly November night in Seattle. The rain was relentless—a dark, bitter farewell to what had been the warmest, most productive time of my life.

Today, tucked away in a toasty cottage on an equally dank morning on the northern coast of Oregon, I’m standing at the edge of a new journey rather than the end. This is a season of beginnings—a time for dreaming up questions, not answers.

*Hidden City Diaries* began as a wispy idea two years ago as I prepared for my Italian sojourn. Soon after, I left the U.S. and fell in love with a 2,500-year-old Etruscan hill town. Each day, as I carried groceries on my back up and down a steep footbridge, pausing to greet my neighbors in Italian, my desire to return home withered.

Eventually, the fellowship ended and I returned, despondent with American life. A month later, I exited the bus on First Avenue near the Lusty Lady during its final days of operation. I was daydreaming about a man I met in Venice as I turned the corner of Harbor Steps only to be pelted in the face by a brutal gust of rain.

Drenched and forlorn, I couldn’t tell the difference between tears and raindrops dripping from my eyelashes. Daydreams could
no longer protect me from the reality of being home—I had to accept it. Only then was I ready to write my prologue.

Thankfully, the brutality of my feelings faded in time and America worked its way back into my heart. That March, I traveled to Detroit to see my uncle, who was dying of cancer; I returned in April for his funeral. The assembly line of his life left me raw: his 40-year career at Chrysler, the bleakness of the Midwest and its endless bingo halls and urban blight . . . but I was intrigued by my home town’s ability to wear strife so well.

Later that year, I was romanced by the honeyed warmth of Austin: salsa and chips, barbecue, the dulcet notes of Texas drawl, being called *darlin’* and *sugar*, tapping my toe to Slaid Cleaves at the Saxon Pub and hearing phrases like, “Aunt Stephani is upstairs takin’ her beauty pill.”

My greatest surprise came during a rendezvous in Las Vegas—a city that I had written off after a series of regrets and blistering hangovers. This time, the ugliness of Sin City was as captivating as its pimped-out allure. After that trip, my thoughts were poised on America.

Last summer, I returned to Italy, too. I fought the August swelter to revisit Civita and brush elbows with paparazzi at the Venice Film Festival. I found myself walking arm-in-arm with Denis, the man who I had daydreamed of while descending Harbor Steps into reality. We wandered through the floating labyrinth of alleys, pausing to embrace on bridges. I was in heaven . . . but I kept thinking of home.

As I boarded the *vaporetto* to return, I looked back to find Denis standing on the dock. He leaned against the rail, smiling into the sunlight. He held up his hand and I waved back without regret.

Connecting through JFK on the flight home, my heart surged to hear the TSA agents bark orders in accents from Brooklyn and Queens. Something in their harsh vowels felt like home. Like me, they were American.

I know that I’ll return to Europe, but now it’s time to explore that which is both domestic and foreign: the country of my birth.

**11:58 am PST**

The concept behind *Hidden City Diaries* began with a patriotic bent (*can I love America as much as I love Europe?*) and a hint of Jane
Jacobs (*what are the elements of a great city?*) It eventually boiled down to one question: *how does place make us who we are?* This book is a personal investigation of the space where people and place unite—the hidden cities inside each of us.

As a member of Gen-X, I’m part of a so-called lost generation that author John Ulrich describes as “without identity, who face an uncertain, ill-defined (and perhaps hostile) future.” I’ve come to see that exploring these questions, studying how we’re all lost to a degree, and looking for connections between us as a people is what I was born to do.

*Hidden City Diaries* isn’t travel writing or traditional memoir, but an expedition into the place where our psychological landscape ends and the sidewalk begins within the context of modern-day America. Together, we are a nation of detectives peering into the mysteries of our origins. Ours are but a handful of stories linked to billions of others.

**3:12 pm PST**

*Hidden City Diaries.* I debated the name for some time (*Is “Diaries” too dramatic?*) but if this shit ain’t confessional, then I don’t know what is.

I breathed deeply as I buckled my seat belt and said the name aloud before taking off yesterday. A fan of mass transit and planes, Tacoma is the farthest I’ve driven in years; I felt nervous about going beyond it. Yet, from the first journey to the last, I have vowed to step outside of my comfort zone; a classic American road trip seemed a fitting way to begin a collection of essays based on my travels.

With only the rasp of Lucinda Williams to guide me, I pulled out of the parking lot in Pioneer Square. I was excited and apprehensive, frustrated at the slow and go . . . then increasingly calm, like I had all the time in the world. I carried few belongings, and with every mile I felt a growing sense of lightness.

Rain coated my windshield and let up, then it sprinkled again. This went on for a hundred miles. I began the journey at Exit 164 on I-5, and headed south towards Exit 40 to Kelso/Longview. Those were a long two-and-a-half hours filled with bumper-to-bumper traffic, strip malls, and fast food restaurants.

It wasn’t until I approached the Lewis and Clark Bridge with its rusted lattice of gray and cream trusses that my trip began to
feel epic. As we ascended, I smelled the massive piles of cut timber on the riverbanks below. In a single lane headed skyward, a line of cars left Washington, passing a small green sign that read, “Now entering Oregon.” No passports or security checkpoints, just a twisting, turning road that became Highway 30W. My heart raced when I took the curves at 60 miles an hour, thinking, *This is the farthest I’ve ever driven alone.*

Beyond the border, temperatures dropped and the expanse of off-ramps and gas stations fell away. The road narrowed to two lanes—one in, one out. Mists fell low and the road was ensconced in marshes and forest. I pictured how the Oregon coast might have looked thousands of years ago, still underwater, muddy and fertile with prehistoric fish poking at the muck with giant barbels.

South of Astoria on Highway 101, the road turned away from city lights towards obscurity. My only company was a series of small road signs that provided no guidance, only suggested that there were other paths.

The sky turned ultramarine, then fell to pitch, making it impossible to discern the ground from the heavens. Mists rose again, splattering my windshield with millions of pin-prick drops. Fog billowed in as if propelled by a giant breath, sweeping blindness across lane markings that I could barely discern.

My feeble headlights pressed against the claustrophobia of darkness—a velvet curtain hurtling towards me, a lone ferry captain bound for the underworld.

Thirty minutes later, the sign for Sunset Boulevard was a dim beacon of relief. When I finally reached the Hidden Villa Cottages after nearly five hours in transit, my head and my stomach were empty. I dropped my bags and found a comforting bowl of seafood risotto at a fire-lit bistro nearby. With a glass of cabernet in hand, I doodled in my notebook, first a small circle labeled with the words, “This is your comfort zone,” then a larger circle beside it with the words, “This is where the magic happens.”

All journeys require that we step outside a circle of familiarity to discover something. We leave dull creature comforts behind to open our minds to the world. But how many journeys are necessary to keep life fresh? Is there a point when travel prevents us from establishing roots or remaining in one place keeps us from growing into who we are?
I wondered how someone like Odysseus, the ultimate seeker, spent his days after returning home. Once the euphoria of resting in bed, embracing his wife, and eating his favorite meals had passed, was he content to remain—or did he tempt fate with sailing trips, hoping that winds might overcome his vessel again?

10:49 pm PST

Like Odysseus, perhaps, I’ve been in port too long. It’s time to get on the road, which leads back to my question: what is it about places like Seattle—or California or Boston—that make us who we are?

What do we learn from streets, cafes, skyscrapers, gardens, waterfronts and farms? What differences do north, south, east and west engender in us? How do these incredibly diverse places shape our identity as Americans?

Over time, each city that we encounter becomes part of who we are—through visits and through the stories we share of our experiences. As places pass into us, we become inextricably connected with the physical world, constantly refining and redefining who we are by where we pause.

For me—a woman traveling in this chilly town on a wind-whipped beach, down the street from Haystack Rock and a warm restaurant where a local band is playing—I’m glad to have stepped outside the circle of my comfort zone. I’m grateful for the magic that happens when I least expect it, often far from home.

Tomorrow, I’ll be back on the highway headed north, reveling in the knowledge that we’ll explore many cities together. We’ll head to Nashville and Boston first, then Highway 101 in California and eventually, Santa Fe, Charleston, New York, Chicago, Miami, and finally Seattle. It may be a familiar to me now, but I think we’ll find hidden cities underneath it when the journey is done.

The barrier will fall away each time we step out the front door. Street by street and town by town, America will become a bit crisper in view and we’ll find pieces of ourselves every place that we go.
So there’s this moment. This strange moment when you realize that people in your family aren’t just your family, but they’re real live people. It’s really eerie, and it comes really suddenly, because all at once, you sort of begin to understand that things aren’t black and white. You start to entertain the notion that people—even people in your family who are supposed to be all exemplary and wise— have glaring flaws.

When I was younger, about eleven or twelve, I went to visit my mother’s family in Florida. My favorite thing about going down there was spending time with my two cousins, and going to see my Uncle Jeff, who always loved to spend quality time with us. Usually, this meant something like teaching us how to open beer bottles with lighters, but sometimes it meant something a tad more meaningful. One time, he decided to take us along with him when he went to work. We quickly learned that this meant spending a sweltering Floridian afternoon being slammed around like unwilling pinballs in the back of my Uncle Jeff’s offensively red pick-up truck, our awkward tween bodies shaped around an enormous vat of fertilizer.

We rumbled along, vibrating against the plastic ridges that seemed optimized for discomfort. Our heads bobbed without any particular rhythm over the edge of the pick-up, whose sides were emblazoned with Uncle Jeff’s winning company tagline: “We make Ants Say Uncle!” Every once in a while, he’d would holler something indiscernible, which we eventually learned to take as a battle cry or a crazed, giddy warning shout, since it was almost always followed by an enormous jerk. (We later learned that he was trying to delight us by catching air off of speed bumps. “I won’t do that again though, girls. Every time I did it, it made me spill a little bit of my Smirnoff.”)

During this festival of pain, Uncle Jeff decided to let us stop at McDonald’s, where he barreled his car toward the drive-through window. “Hey!” He sloshed. “Could you throw some packets of ketchup on the ground so that I could drive over them and my girls could watch ‘em pop?” The ponytailed McDonald’s employee looked alarmed.

When she failed to respond, meeting Uncle Jeff’s imploring look with something that can only be described as “judgmental incredulousness,” he shrugged and peered out at us in the back, where
we were dividing our time equally between examining our bruises and fanning each other. “Well, girls! This was fruitless.” And we drove off.

But that wasn’t even the moment I realized something was a little off-kilter with him. What tipped me off was what happened immediately afterward. After a short but jarring ride from McDonald’s, we stopped at a red light next to a large van full of equally large African-American men. Uncle Jeff seized the opportunity to roll down his window and tell the driver a joke about “those negroes.” I had never felt such secondhand embarrassment. And what was I supposed to do with that emotion? Just accept that my Uncle Jeff is a racist? Maybe.

Instead, I tried to make sense of it: it’s probably not Uncle Jeff’s fault that he’s such an appalling racist. Maybe he’s just a product of his time? Then again, it’s certainly his fault that he hasn’t gotten over his opinions with age and exposure to, you know, my gay mother. I’m always surprised when he uses the word “fag” since it’s always really rubbed me the wrong way, given my upbringing and general respect for humanity. One morning, when he was teaching me to drive, I was gripping the steering wheel in abject terror wondering how I was ever convinced to take lessons from what is certainly America’s most threatening road menace. He interrupted my wild terror when he squeezed my knee with his sausage-y fingers and pointed at a nearby mansion. “That house. Fags live in that house!” He barked. My mind hadn’t managed to craft a response before he continued. “The color combination! No straight people would ever think up that color combination.” After my amused silence, he considered his comment. “I mean, you know I love your mom.”

“No, yeah, I know that!”

“Please don’t think I’m a shit heel.”

“Uncle Jeff, I don’t think you’re a shit heel.”

“Likewise.” And he took a swig of his open container.

I really don’t think he’s a shit heel. It would be so simple if Uncle Jeff were nothing more than the drooling imbecile I’ve been describing. I’d write him off with flippant ease, never defend his shortcomings, and rub my temples whenever he’d tell the story of the time he roped himself to the back of a Trans Am while strapped in rollerblades, hollering at his crony to “give it some gas!” It’s just not that simple.

The summer before I went to college, Uncle Jeff and I were driving to the grocery store when he spied a distant, grayish tree and bellowed, “That Bismarck Palm has about four months left on it.”

“What do you mean?”

“‘S got Verticillium Wilt. Identifiable by a smooth fungus. It’s a crafty motherfucker.”
“You can see that all the way from here?”

He burped, sighed, and puffed out his chest. “Yup.”

Uncle Jeff then proceeded to point out every terminal tree in a twelve-block radius. His knowledge of plants and their harrowing diseases was the most impressive thing I had ever heard. I could only stare at him in awe as he spouted off a list of the thirty-six most prominent fern genera. For the first time, I felt like he had something to teach me besides how to trick the cops into thinking that you’re sober. It was the first time I felt something more than the unquestioned familial love that is more innate than earned or intentional.

But still, I hadn’t figured him out yet, because even among all of his vast horticultural knowledge, and his somewhat teddy bear-like qualities, he was still Uncle Jeff: the man who, when eyeing a miniature Ming Vase at the local art museum, slurred, “I’d like to take a shot of Jägie out of that.”

And not having him figured out never really bothered me until he had a stroke last summer. I was beside myself (admittedly, though, a little part of me felt like he had it coming since his favorite meal has always been “beer breakfast”).

Over Christmas, I went back to Florida expecting to greet a solemn, traumatized family. Here’s what I encountered instead:

“Your damn uncle is demanding that we go to Disneyworld.” My grandma shook her head. “He keeps wantin’ to ride the roller coasters. I keep tellin’ ‘im, ‘Jeffy! Your body’s gonna give out on one of those things. One of those stupid veins in your head will take its last breath and die,’ but he’ll have none of it. ‘At least I’ll go out happy,’ he says, ‘I don’t see what the big deal is,’ he says. Jesus.”

Oh that’s right. We don’t deal with tragedy. When Uncle Jeff lost his big toe to gangrene, no one gave him any pity, and I’m pretty sure my mom sent him a big bag of toe-shaped candies.

“Where is he?”

“At home, playin’ the Wii.” She shrugged. “He’s actually gotten quite good at that bowling game. The one arm he can still move is really bulking up.”

She drove me straight to Uncle Jeff’s house. Like most houses in West Palm Beach (which is pretty much Palm Beach’s armpit) it had only one, large floor, was comprised of a sickly gray stucco, and had presumably been featured on Cops. The yard was blotched with dry yellow patches of dead saw grass, which were adorned with pert little piles of ash and the occasional glass bottle. A smiling, bearded garden gnome lay on his side by the front door, holding a chipped ceramic sign etched with the phrase “Welcome Gnome!” in fragile, curled letters.
I stepped neatly over the fallen gnome, pressed down on the soft plastic door handle, and swung the door open. I was immediately hit with the familiar gust of cigarette smoke and a few tragic droplets of Febreeze.

Uncle Jeff made a gargled noise of delight.
“Heeeeyy sweetie!” He picked up a nearby bowl of yellowish something. “Want some egg salad?”

He mashed a spoonful into his mouth. A soft crumb remained on the corner of his lip, where it mingled with a small droplet of drool.
“No, I’m fine, thank you.”
“So how was the flight? Did you sit next to some fat guy?”
“It was good! And no, I got lucky this time. How are you, Uncle Jeff?”

But I knew how he was. He looked like he hadn’t moved in days. He had let his grayed beard grow in strange patches, and his skin was yellowed with age and malnourishment. He looked remarkably like his front lawn.

“Hey, you can call me Uncle Stroke-y now.” He laughed: four slow, deep “heh” noises. “Oh, you want some beef jerky?”

“Actually Uncle Jeff, I don’t really like beef jerky.”

His face fell. “Oh, yeah. Me either.”

A few moments passed in unwelcome silence as I tried to think of a response. But he beat me to it.
“I uh, I order mine special from Arizona. I think it’s bison. Or something. Yeah, I think it’s bison.”

“Yeah?”

And all of a sudden I was alerted of another man’s presence in the room purely by his smell. I dared to look around. His shirt said something about penises or fucking. Something he undoubtedly thought would make women’s nipples harden with unbridled passion. He offered me a ginger ale.

“Who the hell is that?” I whispered in Uncle Jeff’s ear.

“Oh him? That’s Skippy.”

“His name is Skippy? His parents actually named him Skippy?”

“Naw, I mean, his name’s Joe, but I’ve got too many friends named Joe, so I named him Skippy.”

I shrugged, and turned to Skippy, who, thanks to what I’m sure was a delightfully complex drug cocktail, had been completely oblivious to our hushed conversation about his general existence.

“Sure, Skippy. I’ll take a ginger ale.”

He brandished a grin that didn’t extend to his eyes, and handed me an already-prepared glass of sparkling liquid. For some reason I
didn't consider how suspicious that was, and I gulped the stuff right
down, because I, you know, usually assume that drinks people give
me aren't laced with something.

“Uncle Jeff, does this have liquor in it?”

He gave a small dismissive gesture with his functioning hand.

“Of course!”

“. . . Just liquor?”

“Fuck if I know, sweetie.”

I pushed aside a few ashtrays and set my glass on the table while
Uncle Jeff started to bellow at Skippy.

“Skippy! Go back to the others!”

“. . . Th—There are others?” I asked, perplexed.

“Yeah, I got a buncha my friends living with me now. You know,
‘cuz I need the help and all. What with my bein’ a fuckin’ invalid.” He
gave me a loopy grin.

I craned my neck to peer into the kitchen, and lo and behold:
Uncle Jeff had collected a small cohort of unsavory assistants, who
he told me waited on him hand and toe-less foot.

“Greg over there changes my urine jug for me. DON’TCHA
GREG!”

A man wearing a stained wife beater raised his glass at us.

“Yeah, Greg. Greg’s great.”

He sighed, gulped his beer, and seemed to be thinking about
something important. His brow furrowed.

“Sal, I don’t like you seeing me like this.”

“Seeing you like what?”

“Seeing me all, looking like shit and havin’ people wait on me and
whatnot. This just . . . this isn’t how I want you to remember me. You
know, like when I die.”

“Uncle Jeff I don’t—“

“I wanna die on the couch. Remote in hand!”

I giggled.

“And bury me with that remote. Like I’m an Egyptian.”

“I promise.”

And even though the promise was empty (because burying him
with a remote is just ridiculous), I felt connected to Uncle Jeff just
then—bonded by the humor of the entire situation. But I still didn’t
feel like I understood him. He's not all bad. No one who calls cashews
“smiling peanuts” can be all bad. But he's not all good either. He's
something else. Some people aren't there to be figured out.
For four years I corresponded with serial murderer Kendall Francois, who pleaded guilty in 1998 to strangling eight women in New York State. I had covered his case as a reporter, but our letters were driven by personal, rather than journalistic goals. This excerpt is from my manuscript about that time.

The idea that I had been sitting in court, watching yet unknown to him, frustrated Kendall so much that he phoned as soon as he was back in jail to propose that we meet in person. I had suggested this before, many times, but Kendall always demurred. It made no sense, he’d say. If I was so leery of his gaze that I refused to send a photograph, how could I be comfortable sitting close enough to talk? Kendall couldn’t see how a conversation might feel safer to me than knowing he held my picture in his hands. Reasoning was useless. It was like trying to make myself heard in a cave of echoes. Control was the sticking point for us both; I refused to relinquish it by allowing him to view me whenever he chose, and Kendall demanded exactly that. To hear him tell it, my image on a piece of paper meant nothing. He said he rarely glanced at the pictures of family he’d been allowed to keep in jail, though he liked knowing they were close.

All of our back-and-forth gave way to Kendall’s curiosity. He told me to visit in two days, and to arrive at 7:45 a.m.

“You’re sure about this?” I said. “Don’t make me get up that early if you’re just going to turn me away.”

Kendall laughed. He was always awake to see the dawn.

At the Hamilton Street jail, I wrote down the name of the inmate I’d come to see and presented my driver’s license to a guard with eyes like shiny black beans. Immediately, he shook his head. No, Kendall was not accepting visitors. But I’d been invited, I told him, Kendall was expecting me. The guard looked skeptical and stalked off to confer with an administrator. He was still shaking his head when he returned. Across the room, a fat teenager began to wail, barred from using an out-of-state ID to visit her brother, and her shrieks grew louder as the guards marched back and forth trying to handle my request. The girl was blotchy and bloated. Her hair,
ratty. Her sobbing turned hysterical, then abusive. Next to her, I sounded reasonable – just a white woman waiting to visit with a black serial killer, all her papers in order. They let me in.

I was shown to a stuffy cubicle with cinderblock walls painted dull mustard. Inside, a filthy armchair had been pulled to a narrow ledge where you were supposed to rest your elbows, speak into a handset and stare at your loved one through Plexiglas. The chair was low and saggy. Sitting in it, I could rest my chin on the shelf. “One hour,” said the guard, locking me inside. A moment later, he cracked the door open again. “You know, a lot of them looked like you – the victims – small, dark hair.” I nodded yes, I knew that, and he shut the door again. Seconds passed. Thick, slow, suffocating. The fabric of my shirt felt clingy, outlining my shoulders, bunching up across my chest. I’d thought so carefully about what to wear. Something that would make me look approachable and pleasant. Something that would say I was there neither to punish nor judge. I wore jeans, flat shoes, no makeup. I wanted to look like a friend.

On the other side of the glass I heard keys turning inside a heavy lock – the sound of an unchangeable moment – and held my breath. I couldn’t believe this was about to happen. To that point, corresponding with Kendall had been like a game, a dare, something artificial and apart from my real life. In our letters, I could craft the person he saw – be the authoritarian interviewer or show sensitive vulnerability – whatever I thought might draw him out. The phone calls were harder; it felt like Kendall heard my heart thundering through every silence. Still, there had been the safety of my home, the knowledge that he couldn’t see me biting my lip, scribbling notes. Now we would be looking into each other’s eyes. I froze, my mind paralyzed like a mouse beneath the claws of a descending owl.

The metal door swung open and there was Kendall, filling the frame. He stared down at me. My heart shriveled to the size of a pebble. Three guards worked to unlock his restraints as Kendall stood patiently, his face brushed with the trace of a smile. After they left his mouth broke open into a wide grin – greedy and expectant, like I was a Sunday dinner he was sitting down to eat. He picked up a handset on his side of the glass but could not get control of himself long enough to speak. He gaped and guffawed, turning his big head away and swiveling back in awe. “You’re tiny!” he gasped.
Just an illusion, I told him. Merely the result of my low-slung chair. I jumped up and sat on its hard steel arm to demonstrate. But now I felt over-exposed and Kendall was laughing again, shaking his head in disbelief. I slid back down onto the moldy cushion.

“Most of the people on this planet look small to me,” he offered.

I cast about for the right introduction, something that would put us both at ease, but a decade of chatty interviewer tricks fell away like shattered glass. I asked Kendall when he would be transferred to state prison and if he knew where they were sending him. He did not. I asked what it had been like growing up in Poughkeepsie and how he felt about leaving. “I feel like I’m being interviewed by the high school paper,” he said.

So I began there, inquiring about the football team, his friends and former teachers. Kendall had little to say about any of that. He wanted to talk music and movies. At one time I’d imagined him alone in his bedroom, listening to blues and soul — music that I liked — but almost all of my early assumptions turned out to be wrong. White pop was what Kendall craved. “Queen is the best rock group. Billy Joel is probably the best singer,” he said, parroting the “favorites” listed by his graduating class in the 1989 Arlington High School yearbook. I was disappointed. I had enjoyed thinking of Kendall as complex and independent. He was, instead, a wannabe.

As we spoke, his eyelids fluttered and he blinked often, rubbing his face. If we’d met two years prior, before he was wearing a state-issued orange jumpsuit, I would have considered Kendall a bit off, but harmless. He seemed like a goofball, an easy, low-commitment pal. His teammates had loved him for that, for being big and gentle, constant and unthreatening. Women remembered how he’d kept them laughing for hours in the college cafeteria, holding court with his Star Trek impressions. Guys he’d played cards with gave no thought to leaving him alone with their girlfriends, and the girlfriends barely remembered him at all.

He told me I reminded him of a friend from kindergarten, a bubbly redhead named Rachel. He cataloged dozens of people who’d crossed his path in this peripheral manner, ruminating over comments they’d made decades earlier, quietly determining that these were slights and then announcing to me that he did not wish to discuss them any longer. Anger over high school had touched off the whole murderous cycle, he said, but Poughkeepsie itself was
really to blame: “The gateway to Hell is somewhere in this town,” he told me. “I’ve been saying that for years.”

I’d despaired at the city too, ached at the sight of menthol-smoking teenage moms wheeling new babies down pocked sidewalks while shrieking at confused toddlers who wandered behind. The place breathed lost opportunity. Yet to hear Kendall dismiss it that way was excruciating. “It’s not like I was killing saints,” he sneered, rolling his eyes.

After high school graduation, Kendall had enlisted in the Army to earn money for college. “Worst mistake of my life,” he said. He’d been stationed in Hawaii, where several local prostitutes had disappeared during the same time, but Kendall insisted he knew nothing about that. His few trips off base had revolved around playing video games at the nearest bar and keeping a low profile. “Hawaii is full of the most racist people on earth,” he said. “They hate everyone – black, white, anyone who’s not Hawaiian. Of course, pretty much everyone hates white people, though that’s not specifically your fault.”

Three years into his four-year commitment, Kendall was discharged for being overweight. He refused to talk about this too, saying only that he never should have returned home. That was in 1992, though as far as anyone knew his crimes didn’t begin until 1996. What had happened during the intervening years? He shook his head before the question was out of my mouth, muttering about public assistance and saying he’d wanted to study zoology at community college because he liked animals. He’d hoped to become a science teacher.

“High school science?” I asked.

“No. High school kids aren’t very nice. I wanted to teach middle school.”

He got only as far as cleaning its hallways. It must have been hard to come home, aimless and broke, kicked out of the Army and hired to sweep floors at a school you’d graduated eight years before. Kendall rubbed his face and said he didn’t want to talk about that, either.

“Did you ever get any sort of help or counseling?”

“No.”

Kendall had trudged through twenty-seven years, massive yet unseen. A county judge sentenced him to a few months of group
therapy for sexual deviants after he was arrested for beating up a prostitute, but by then five corpses were rotting in his attic. The sessions did little good. Kendall killed two more women while attending those weekly meetings, and not until he sat in jail awaiting a decision on the death penalty was a social worker dispatched. She had been helpful, Kendall allowed, but the therapy was over now that he was headed for state prison.

“Did you ever want to talk to someone when you were a kid?” I asked. “Do you think it would have helped?”

Kendall was quiet for a long time before answering.

“Looking back from what I know now, yes.”

* * *

I walked out of our interview oddly elated. This was not a seething monster. Kendall was a person you could converse with, a man who struggled with the thoughts in his head, who loved music and fantasy. And I had survived him. I pulled out of the parking lot, smiling to myself. But within minutes the thrill had evaporated and the clammy weight of failure draped itself around my shoulders like a dank towel. Kendall had seen all of my earnestness, all of my fear; by the time I got home the humiliation was overwhelming. I tried to write about our visit and nodded off at my desk. I curled up on a sofa and stared out the window. Hours slid past. By mid-afternoon, I crawled into bed and lay there, my mind echoing like an empty warehouse. Every time I shut my eyes I saw Kendall’s aviator glasses and huge teeth. I could not name my feelings and did not try. I just waited for the horrible blankness to pass and barely noticed how hard I was fighting not to cry.
Reading 2
May 11, 2012

Sharon Hashimoto
Johanna Stoberock
Mitsu Sundvall
Nick Wong
Mitsi tell me this morning, we gotta go Uwajimaya. Mango on sale! Buy ten, all for one dollah. Juicy, sweet kind you like from Maui.

Oh boy, I think. Mouth water.
At store, I see wife of guy I know next to nappa, bok choy, green onions. Not really friend. Same age, you know—eighty-two. McKinley High School. Same regiment in army. Sometime hang around. Call him “Sauce” for Masayasu cuz haoles no can say name right.
Hello, hello, Sauce wife say.
I no remember wife name. Smile, nod.
How come you no visit? Long, long time we no see you.
I squeeze mango, don’t want green kind. Ask how Sauce doing these days.
Not good, Sauce wife tell me, shake head. She whisper under breath: Diabetes. He on dialysis three day a week, hook up to machine. Blood go round and round, come out clean.
When hear that, feel good I eat healthy fruit, not so much salt. Even at New Year’s. Now five year into new century, more and more friends gone just like that. Have to watch sugar, shoyu. Nowadays Mitsi scold me all the time. Index finger go shake, shake, shake while voice get loud. She look like poodle lap-dog with hair on back stand up. Own mouth start to smile, but then remember Sauce wife sad.
Not good since Sauce big kind guy like thick tree trunk. No worry. He eat plenty. But I remember how Sauce cheap kind of guy who bring one tiny bag potato chip to poker party, or one six pack to drink. More I look, Sauce wife look all beat up, tired. Saggy kind eye. Messy grey hair she keep pushing out of face.
She keep talking ‘bout shunt in arm and swollen ankle. Purple skin. Blood stain she no can get out.
Uh huh, uh huh, I say, that too bad. Glad not me. Can tell she hungry for talk.
Corner of eye, I look for Mitsi. Outside, sun shine in parking lot. Big flock pigeon come down. Wings make wind stir up dirty plastic bag. Want to get away, but how be nice? Try back away. Mango roll
all over grocery cart bottom. Nice seeing you, I say, rocking wrist, little hand wave. More like want to push away.

Anytime, you call! she tell me.

Ga-ding, ga-ding go bad cart wheel when I push fast. Find Mitsu in noodle section, two aisle away. She try decide between udon and somen—which better buy. Bumbye, I figure Sauce wife go down canned good, past takenoko and water chestnut; then seaweed nori—kind sprinkle ovuh rice, heat up with green tea. Soon Sauce wife find Mitsu.

Oh, oh, I think. Mitsu not nice, but she polite. Mitsu good daughter, good friend--get stuff done. She help put stamp in envelope for koden thank you. Lots time she help out at church bazaar, rolling makizushi.

Know what Mitsu say, This your friend. What friend, I think. Friend mean you do nice for each other. Not one-way, I do everything. I no want spend time in little room with sick man. Man I no like from waaaay back.

Mitsu, I say. Let's go eat Koharu restaurant bento. You like 'em California roll. My treat! But we gotta go right now, 'fore line get long.

Mitsu still looking at noodle wrapper, writing in Japanese. In small spot, English direction she sometime follow.

Hurry up, I say. Den try take package out of Mitsu hand.

She look at me funny, eyebrow pinching forehead, big kind What? on face. She slow—poka poka along.

We get mango now, come back later for other stuff, I say.

At checkout, I bag up mango. Pay exact money so no change, no wait for cashier. On way out, sliding glass door go whoosh, Mitsu see Sauce wife get into check-out line. I take Mitsu arm, walk her quick-like to car.

I say, Boy, I hungry. Pat tummy.


We beat crowd, I tell Mitsu.

Mitsu fold towel into square and put back in basket. Why you no like Louise, Mitsu ask.

Louise okay. Kind of feel sorry. She put up with Sauce long time. I ’member their wedding, big kind, everybody come—family from Hanapepe on Kauai, high school buddy, work people from Sauce job in fish store. I surprise when Sauce ask me, Be best man. Have to plan bachelor party. I nervous ’bout keeping wedding ring in pocket. Over fifty year. Now he sick. Long, long time Louise stuck.

One time Sauce tell me, We good friends. You no huu huu, no complain. I like you lots! Eh, Bruddah? Sauce big smile should make me laugh. Inside, heart go badda boom. Something not right. Dat day, lunch time, Sauce say, Pay for me please? I catch you later. Dollah here, dollah there—little stuff start to add up. Sauce nevah pay back. Almost every day, see Sauce. Grudge get big. Tired of watching fat man eat hamburger in circle, ask me, You no finish fries? Tired of me saying, Time for oil change in your truck. Or, Sauce, your deck need new wood, paint.

Last time see Sauce, we go Nasalle River. Look for spot in water—rocky shadow where fish hide. But all time, Sauce follow me around, too close. Pull line in, walk down bank ten feet. Same thing, ovuh and ovuh. Always fight for best spot. When drop off at home, Sauce tell wife: Louise, clean fish for me.

I tell Sauce, Clean fish you self! Good fisherman get hen egg, dust with borax, freeze ‘em up for bait. But Sauce lazy. That it, I think. Next time Sauce call, ask go fish some more? Nah, I tell him. River too muddy. When I want fish, I call Rocky instead. Good thing I have other friend. Poor Louise, only one husband.

Mitsi want to know, when last time I see Sauce?

I think, Wow, ten mebbe fifteen year – no wonder wife look old. But I know Mitsi, how she like way Sauce tell her, You cook good. Your coconut haupia taste fine! Mitsi tell ’em, Eat some more! Sauce say, Bruddah, you lucky! Pretty mainland wife, cook Hawai’i style just for you.

I finish chicken wing. Swallow careful. Make sure don’t go down wrong pipe. Take time, but Mitsi waiting. I hand her little bottle shoyu.


How explain people not same. Little boy in vacant lot, we play baseball all day. Sauce have strong arm then, fast pitch like blur over home plate. Spit, throw ball in mitt all the time. Thock. Thock. Strike ‘em out. He win plenty game for team. Smart pitcher. Surprise from skinny little kid. Yeah, was good time, then. Sauce tip hat, wipe nose with back of hand—me shortstop, all outfielder know batter try steal base.

Mitsi small part right, big part wrong. Long time ago, things nice. But lots happen she don’t know. Sauce make Mitsi feel good. She only see stuff on top: pretty boy smile, ha ha kind laugh.

Mitsi clear throat. Big cough. She take tiny little cup and suck down tea in one swallow. Bang cup back on table.

Japanese businessmen look ovuh our way. They mouth say nothing, but they eyes go, Whaa?

People sick, Mitsi say, you go see. Can’t say nothing when they ashes or bury in ground.

I hang head. When she like this, better stay quiet. Sometime I think Mitsi scared. Night time she think I sleep. Blanket tucked in tight to stay warm. Funny weight on chest. I peek, see Mitsi hand on my chest. I breathe, feel her hand go up, down, up, down. I know she check to make sure I alive. Then I make big noise, pretend-kind snore. Mitsi settle back down, pull blanket up to cover her cold nose.

Waitress in kimono come with bento check. Mitsi go pat, pat on mouth, wiping with napkin but I can tell she gather all up for talk in car. I look in wallet, know I going to pay big-time.
Rosie has never wanted a puppy. Occasionally she mentions that kittens in pictures look cute, but she’s never asked for one. She doesn’t like fish. She doesn’t like hamsters. She feeds the guinea pig at school but she doesn’t want to touch it. She loves the idea of birds, but when she once had the opportunity to let a budgie walk on her hand, she shrieked and ran out of the room. So it’s with some nervousness that Elliot walks with her through the doors of the animal shelter.

They’re going to the shelter for a party, a birthday party for another five-year-old who is turning six. The invitation had paw prints on the front and bones next to each line of information. Rosie brought it home in her backpack, and shoved it into his hand as soon as he walked in the door after work on Tuesday of last week. “Why can’t your mother take you?” he’d said, and Allison had walked out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Rosie has never had a birthday party like this. Her parties are ones where the kids are shoved into the backyard and told not to come inside unless they need to pee. Her parties involve magic markers set up on a picnic table and an ice cream cake and, maybe next year, a piñata. This party has taken planning. The kids were asked to bring presents for the animals, and Rosie is carrying a bag of doggie treats with a big pink bow stuck to its side. She’s wearing a striped dress and a headband that has tiger ears attached to it. She’d wanted him to paint on whiskers, but he hadn’t been able to find Allison’s eyeliner, and he certainly wasn’t going to ask Allison where it was. From the way Rosie was dressed, he’d wondered if she thought she was going to the zoo.

It is lovely outside in the parking lot, clear and windy but with an edge of spring on its way. When the doors close behind them, the air changes.

For Elliot, the smell is recognizable. It smells like the vet’s office he used to bring his dog to when he was a kid. And also like the dog grooming place where his dog would get a bath and a haircut and come home looking bald and embarrassed. It smells of a kind of cleanliness that reminds you of the dirt that just got cleaned away. Maybe the smell is flea powder, or a particular kind of animal
shampoo. All the places he’s ever been that handle cats and dogs have it, as if the smell has built on itself over years, more and more powder or shampoo, until it would be impossible for the place to smell of anything else. Really, they should just open a window.

So it’s the smell that hits him first, but once he’s used to that, he can’t believe it wasn’t the sounds that hit him instantly. They’re not terrible sounds—just barking and whirring kinds of sounds—but they’re constant: puppies wagging their tails? Kittens falling off climbing trees? Purring? Yipping? Tiny nails scraping on the floor? He shivers. He looks at Rosie. She is standing very tall and he wonders which animal she thinks she’s going to give her present to.

They’re late. Of course they’re late. Elliot generally gets everywhere on time, but throw a kid into the mix and there’s never any question but that some unexpected delay will occur. Today it was the tiger ears. Rosie said they were on her dresser, but it turns out they were really under her bed. They couldn’t leave without them. It took twenty minutes to figure out where they were. Anyway, the tour has started, and they have to rush to catch up, and all the little girls have already put their presents into some kind of holding area, but Elliot doesn’t know where it is, and Rosie doesn’t know where it is, and she clutches the bag to her chest just the way she clutches her stuffed tiger to her chest at night.

There are six little girls. One of them might be a boy—Elliot can’t tell. He thinks he remembers Rosie telling him something about one of her friends having a twin brother. Their mothers trail behind them. Elliot is the only father, other than the father of the birthday girl. The birthday father looks at him sympathetically, but Elliot is not sure what the sympathy is about. Is it that they’re so outnumbered by the mothers? Or is it that they have to spend any time here at all? Or is it a general look of sympathy about all the animals without homes, living behind glass walls and sleeping in cages? Is it about all the animals, so young they don’t even know that it’s a home they’re hoping for? Or is it sympathy for what he’s certain will be a daughter begging for a puppy by the end of the party? Elliot isn’t sure, but he shrugs his shoulders and nods his head.

A woman from the shelter leads them through. She is tall and blonde, but not in a sexy way. Elliot wishes she were sexy, and then wonders what is wrong with him, that he’s at a birthday party, at an animal shelter, wishing the woman who worked there was hot.
She’s wearing a uniform that looks like a mechanic’s jumper. It’s dark blue, and Elliot thinks he sees paw prints on her leg. Maybe they’re just dirt and not part of her uniform at all. These days, the accuracy of his vision fails him all the time. She takes them to the adult dogs first. They’re mangy and sad, and Rosie won’t even go into the room where they’re kept. After that, they go to the room with the puppies.

“I have a surprise,” the woman says. “It’s play time!” An assistant comes in holding six little dogs—a puppy for each of the kids. The room fills with yipping and the girls are smiling like they’re in a movie about girls playing with puppies, and the puppies squirm and leap and nip and cuddle. Only Rosie isn’t dealing well. She edges to the back wall, and Elliot picks her up. He’s holding her like she’s his very own nestling puppy, and she’s whimpering just like a little dog, and he’s worried that if she stays as scared as she is, she’ll pee on him just like that other puppy just peed on the birthday girl. He tries to smile and say that everything’s okay. He’s managed to get them to the door by now, and there they are, outside, looking through the big glass window from the hallway.

“Rosie,” Elliot says, “Rosie, they’re just puppies. You don’t need to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” she says.

“Then what’s going on?” he asks. If Allison could see him now, she’d applaud his patience.

“I just don’t like them. It tried to bite me.”

“Are you sure? Puppies use their teeth to play.”

“I’m sure,” she says. “It was doing it on purpose.” And that’s that. What difference does it make, Elliot thinks, if something tries to bite you or if you just think it did? Doesn’t it all add up the same? Doesn’t it all get us outside here, in the hall, looking in but not touching?

The party moves from the puppies to the kittens, but Elliot and Rosie stay out in the hall. She’s heavy in his arms. The bag of doggie treats adds to her weight. She whimpers into his neck, but her whimpering has changed and he suspects she’s smiling. He can’t see for sure, though, because her face is so close it’s become blurry. The kittens swarm around their room, climbing on carpeted posts. They have cages they live in, but they get a few stints of playtime every day. There’s a gray striped kitten and an orange kitten and two black kittens with white patches on their throats, and a number
of tortoise shell types. They’re cute. Elliot thinks he wouldn’t mind holding one, if he could just put Rosie down.

He thinks about Allison this morning, and the noise of the dishes as she unloaded the dishwasher. Was it extra loud? Was there some kind of message she was sending, the way she closed the cabinets with some special kind of force? Was there something he was supposed to understand from the way she slipped out of bed without turning to him, and the way the shower rushed down, far away, beyond the bedroom wall? “You take her,” Allison said. “It’s your day. I don’t see why I should always be the one to take the kids to parties.” He understood what she was saying, but still, there was some kind of betrayal there that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“I want to touch a kitten,” Rosie says. “Kittens and tigers are both cats, you know.” They go into the room, being careful to close the door quickly so nothing can get out. The mewing is loud inside the glass, as is the sound of children giggling. It’s a whole other world inside, even though the only barrier to it had been transparent. Elliot puts Rosie down, Rosie bends down to touch a kitten, Elliot prepares to smile, and Rosie turns to him. Her face should be open. Her face should be filled with wonder. A kitten has jumped into her arms. But the look that she gives him is of such overwhelming panic that he scoops her up without thinking, and runs with her into the hall.

“IT scratched me,” she screams.
“Let me see,” he says.
“I’m scared,” she says. “This time I’m scared.”
She has a tiny scratch, a thin red mark on the inside of her arm. She screams and screams and the woman in the blue jumpsuit comes running, and the little girls line up against the glass in the kitten playroom and stare, and the doggie treats drop to the floor, and Elliot doesn’t know what to do. Where is Allison, he thinks. Where is she? Where is my wife? How am I here alone? Rosie screams. The girls watch and point and the kittens continue playing and mewing.

The party ends in the lobby of the shelter. The birthday girl opens cards and hands over presents to the shelter lady. At least one parent is trying to talk her daughter out of a hoped for adoption. The girl who Elliot is now sure is a boy tosses a squeaky ball from hand to hand and resists his mother when she tells him it’s time to give the ball away. Rosie has forgotten her fear now that she is no
longer faced with its cause. The orphans are down the hall, separated by several doors instead of just a sheet of glass. Elliot can still hear their cries, but he can’t see them. I need shelter, he thinks. I need a place of comfort and food and love from strangers. Where is my home? When will someone choose me?

“What did you think?” Elliot asks Rosie on their way out to the car.

“It was okay,” she says. “I thought there would be monkeys.”

“It’s a shelter,” he says. “It’s not a zoo.”

“I’d rather go to a zoo,” she says. “I’d rather go some place where you don’t have to touch anything.” She is still wearing her tiger ears. He sometimes thinks of her as a little animal, fierce and moved by instinct. We are all animals, he thinks. We hide our claws and we hide our teeth, but we are still governed by desire and fear. He buckles her into her seat. When he bends over her, he can smell the shelter on her skin.
Mitsu Sundvall

White Shoulders - San Francisco, 1953

From Tongue-Cut Sparrows, a family memoir in progress

No eyebrows. She doesn’t have any eyebrows. There are the usual five holes upon the blank face to look through nightclub mirrors, inhale White Shoulders perfume, swallow Chinese cracked crab, and spit out the Lord’s name in vain. But no eyebrows. Reaching for the bottle of perfume she immerses herself in a heavy mist of white gardenias and white roses thickened with spice.

“Goddamn bastard. I’ll show him who’s a yellow chink. Jap—I’m a Jap. And my shoulders are white, goddamn it. White Shoulders—twenty-five goddamn dollars an ounce, you bastard.” In the mirror she sees her grandmother seated behind her right shoulder.

“It’s okay, Grandma. I’m just talking to myself. This hakujin guy tried to cut me off for a parking space on Grant Avenue, for crying out loud. Not even in New York City did I hear such language.” She reaches for the bottle of scotch among the cold cream, make-up in five shades of flesh, and eyebrow pencils in ten shades of black. She pours a glass of the scotch. It has to be Cutty Sark. Once she asked the bartender for a Cutty Sark and she knew by looking at the glass that it was some kind of Black & White with the Scottie dogs on it. She almost threw it back in his face.

“Just a few minutes, Grandma. The show’s an hour long and then we’ll go eat China-meshi, okay? We’ll have crab and those shiny noodles and the hom-yu for Aunt Beni. You know, stinky fish and chopped pork. That’s Auntie’s favorite. Oh, I forgot you can’t eat pork. For crying out loud, Grandma, how can you stand those Seventh-Day Adventists? Nothing but little obachans in gray eating nothing but Vegemeat and tofu. How can you stand it?”

Grandma sits up just behind her granddaughter, admiring the clipper ship on the bottle of Scotch. The name of her Savior is taken in vain several times, but the words fall on the porches of her ears without entering. She adjusts her hearing aid. Everyone’s voice was getting further away. Jesu, tatsukete kudasai. Jesus save me, she murmured in her sleep.
“Grandma, do you hear me? Oh, what’s the use talking to someone who can’t hear and then can’t understand. When are you going to learn English, Grandma? You been here over fifty years, for chrissake. I been living in Chinatown for two years and now I can speak the goddamn language.”

She pauses to tweeze out the three millimeters of hair remaining on her left brow. The aroma of White Shoulders carries her to some distant place far from the dressing room of a Chinatown nightclub, far from another chorus girl’s scent of Tabu. Looking in the mirror, she sees her grandmother. “I love you, Grandma.”

“Sah–neh, Chibi–” sighs Grandma, smiling. She grasped a lot of meaning from the sound of a voice. When she was young she had contemplated the difference between the sacred and the profane, but now she felt it didn’t matter. She noticed that the profane often seeped from the pursed lips of the pious, and in the eyes of the most depraved there was always something sacred waiting to be retrieved. There were good people who ate pork chops and stole things, and there were bad people who prayed all the time and ate only vegetables.

She thought of her daughter Sabuye. Where did she get those beautiful legs? Not like her own daikon ashi, short and thick like a Japanese radish. All Sabuye had wanted to do was ride bareback on the beach at Carmel with those wild boys. And look what happened. Eighteen years old with a baby she did not want. Is that the baby’s fault? Poor Chibi, she sighed, using the Japanese diminutive that means small.

The young mother shrugged in disgust. “No matter what I put on her, no matter how pretty, she doesn’t look good. And she never smiles. Oh, well, I guess it’s my punishment.” Sabuye turned away from the child. Chubby tried not to listen to the words. Doesn’t look good, never smiles, my punishment. At four years old she knew the sounds of those words and what they meant.

“Oh my God! Fifteen minutes before show time! I better hustle my bustle. Someone said Frank Sinatra’s out there. Where’s Aunt Beni? Did she bring Amy too? Oh my God, the whole goddamn family.” She leans into the mirror and begins to draw her self-portrait. First the eyes are rimmed with black. Then she covers her lips with a surreal red that gives them a life of their own. Now when she talks it is her lips that have something to say; when she
smiles it is her lips that are pleased; when she eats it is because her lips are hungry. The eyelashes are glued on next. Like a pharaoh’s feather fans, they flap a breeze onto her cheeks. At last, the eyebrows, marking the text of her face with clues to her sadness, anger, or happiness.

Grandma stares at her granddaughter’s image in the mirror. “Ma-a-ah–mezurashi koto, neh!” she mutters. Extraordinary. “Ee-ron-na-shtoh ah-roo . . .” Yes, there are all kinds of people in the world. And how does she keep those little round covers on her chi-chis from falling off? They must be pasted on somehow. “Tai-hen desu, neh!” My, how uncomfortable. She lays the pink beaded sweater on her granddaughter’s bare shoulders.

“That’s okay, Grandma. It’s hot in here. Atsui, desho? How can you stand it? Grandma, take your coat off, for crying out loud.”

Those goddamn nuns at the convent. They made you wear long sleeves and long stockings on eighty-degree days, for chrissake. I was getting a rash and throwing up but what did they care? Better to get sick and die than let your knees see the light of day. For taking my stockings off, I had to kneel on hard peas all morning. I read where the Pope said short skirts may be more comfortable, but they are dangerous for the soul. Get a load of him, dangerous for the soul, can you beat that?

After three years in the convent, if I was good I could come home when I was fourteen, Mama said. I finally heard from her. It was in the merry month of May, 1942, five months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. We were going to a concentration camp, for God’s sake, just for being Japanese. What World War II had to do with our family was a mystery to me. Mama could care less about politics, and my stepfather L.M.—half Japanese and half Italian—called the Emperor a goddamn Jap. So it’s not like the United States government had to worry about our family bowing to the Emperor and handing over all the top secrets we knew. And Grandma, they confiscated her little radio so she couldn’t send signals to the enemy. Then they threw her in the goddamn camp too, while Uncle Luther and Uncle Hoagy joined the U.S. Army. Nothing made any sense any more.

It got me out of that convent all right, but into another frying pan. They shipped us out to Poston in the middle of the Arizona desert and dumped us into one room of an army barrack—Mama, L.M., Louis, Freddie, and John-Boy. And me, of course. That was dynamite.
I knew I would be crazy if I had to stay there for three more years. According to L.M., I couldn’t do anything right—my hair was too long, my skirt too short, my lipstick too bright. Every day there was something wrong with me. And the goddamn sun was burning the tops of my shoulders black.

Some people say I forced myself out of the family, that I was incorrigible, or some such dog poop, but I don’t give a rat’s ass what anybody says. I couldn’t stand it any more. Since L.M. was such a big shot with the MaryKnoll fathers, he sent me to the convent in Tarrytown.

The day after her fourteenth birthday in 1942, Cheryl was permitted to leave the Poston concentration camp for citizens of Japanese ancestry. Incorrigible behavior, her step-father said, and the authorities allowed that she would be one less enemy suspect to endanger the West Coast. She was shipped to Mount Saint Michael’s School for girls on New York’s Hudson River. Cheryl made her way into New York City and began hat-checking at Sammy Lee’s Chinatown nightclub. On her eighteenth birthday, she joined the all-Asian chorus line, China Doll Revue.

After the war, every Christmas she would call Los Angeles, but her mother was always at Mass or on some mission to feed the poor and hungry of her parish. The sisters praised the good works her mother was doing at the Lamb of God House for Unmarried Mothers. Cheryl hadn’t seen her in ten years and stopped calling.

“Auntie! You better go get a seat! Do you really think Grandma should watch? Okay, but sit way in the back. I don’t want to see my grandma while I’m up there in a goddamn chorus line. Oh well, what else bad can God do to my life already but strike me dead, for chrissake, at twenty-two with my pasties on?”

The fake smile she forces onto the front of her head is a fire screen she pulls down to keep from being burned by flying sparks. She is the third girl on the right, between Lana Wong and Nikki Nojima. Tammy Toy isn’t there that night. She was caught walking out of Mel’s Radio Emporium with a TV and was spending the month in jail.

“What a bunch of losers. Me, I’ve got plans. I’m going to marry a rich man with a big house with bird fountains everywhere. I’m going to have three mink coats—midnight black, sable brown, and platinum pink. I will drive up to Mama’s old house in Los Angeles in my white
Cadillac and scream twenty-five Hail Marys until she comes out and says Well, hello, Chubby. Because I’m a survivor. They threw me out. I could’ve been a prostitute or whatever, but I never did that.

There she was, with her mother’s beautiful legs, her mother’s youthful daring and grace. She had done everything her mother had wanted to do: She became a dancer, she drank the best scotch and wore the best perfume. She married rich. She was her mother’s daughter after all.

Now in 1990 at age eighty, Cheryl’s mother drifts in and out of the moment. She looks at the fading sepia photographs of a 1930s day—chiffon dresses over slender hips, hair marcelled into waves, lips tied up in red bows (the kind Valentino kissed), silken legs crossed in a starlet pose (boys were always giving her silk stockings). And who is that unhappy little girl over to one side? What a face. Never smiling. A knot tightens in her stomach. The old woman crosses herself and puts the photographs away. She will never take them out again.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, San Francisco’s own Forbidden City presents Miss Cheryl Lee as the Playgirl of the Orient!”

Grandma sits in the back, her gray head almost obscured in cigarette smoke. The music is loud and full of brass but she can’t hear the tune. Glasses of tea-colored liquid are clinking. Aunt Beni and cousin Amy are sipping daiquiris. The girl with the pink sequined ostrich fan floating over her white shoulders is Cheryl.

Amy elbows her mother. “Don’t look now but there’s Frank Sinatra! Mama, I said don’t look, and you swivel your head like a stupid fan. How embarrassing.” She giggles again. “One of Cheryl’s eyebrows is way crooked. Did you ever see such a fake smile?”

The spotlights are blinding and no one in the chorus line can see Grandma waving at her granddaughter.
“Forgetting my handwraps” costs me 200 pushups. “Talking back” costs me another 250. These two coded decrees meant to instill the virtues of “responsibility” and “respect” sit amongst a laundry list of penalties posted on the wall of the boxing gym, my second home for the formative years of my life. “Home” is probably the best way to describe a boxing gym; it represents a beacon of familiarity. It is a place of transformation, not only of the physical body, but for the individual character as well. “I’ve had ex-convicts, former drug addicts, and plenty of lost kids walk through that door,” my coach tells me. “Anyone that needs it can train.” And sure enough, posted outside the gym door is a staunch reminder of its ethos: “This is a safe zone, all are welcome here.”

For the better part of my twenties, I’ve spent countless hours in stuffy boxing gyms around the world in an attempt to undo the notion that boxing is solely a sport of savagery. Usually by the time a fighter is twenty, his amateur record is in the double, if not triple digits, and in extreme cases, a twenty-year-old fighter is already half a decade into his professional career. The first time I set foot into a real boxing gym my twentieth birthday had just passed and I had barely gotten into a real fight, let alone understood the mechanics of throwing a proper punch. But there is something addictive about the sport, a particular subculture with its own set of norms and its own language; eventually it would be the language I would use to communicate with the world.

Traveling the global south as a young adult has become a trend in recent years, and like any trend, it has become commodified. For eighteen months I traveled through nine countries in Latin America on a university fellowship, and I was quickly immersed in an industry escorting travelers from experience to experience with as little inconvenience as possible. It worried me when I started becoming desensitized to seeing a crouched woman cradling her infant child outside of a church begging for money, or when I stopped giving a second thought to the lives of the countless vendors that peddle manufactured sweets to support their families. Places become scenery, people become props. They become an
inconvenience to consuming an experience. But there is often a deeper, complicated history to a place, a story behind its people.

This disregard, however, is seldom the fault of the visitor. We fall into corners of comfort simply because we are human. We are on a constant search for connection, for comprehension, and familiarity, so when traveling, we go from traveler’s point to traveler’s point, undoubtedly meeting people from other places, but ultimately because we share some commonality – a social background, a language, a common experience – to help bridge the gap.

One day while passing a gym in Antigua, Guatemala, I saw two men walk out with pairs of boxing gloves tossed across their shoulders. I did my best with my preadolescent Spanish to inquire about their fighting mitts, but they looked perplexed at my horrible syntax. Instead I just raised my hands in a traditional boxing guard to which they smiled and nodded. Then I pointed to myself, raised my hands, and nodded. The next day we were sparring, and the rest is history. From there I trained in eleven boxing gyms from Guatemala to Argentina. At first I thought I was breaking barriers, but I later realized that I too sought out comforts of familiarity, and given the circumstances, the boxing gym was the most familiar place I knew.

Entering a boxing gym in another country makes you a tourist in two ways. The first being the quite obvious one of being in another country, but the second is a more subtle form of diplomacy. The way you hold your hands, the distance of your stance, whether you lead left hooks off the jab or always follow up with the right hand, is a representation of your school. Essentially, it is your dialect to the language of boxing, and once you announce an intention to fight, the entire ambiance of the gym shifts; people stare as you walk by, silently estimating how you size up in the ring.

Initial encounters with boxing gyms are generally mixed. Some greet me with open arms, others glare at me with skepticism. Usually, the question they always seem to ask is when was the last time an Asian kid walked through the doors. One instance of particular difficulty was in Lima, Peru. After one coach scolded me for browsing the gym during his training session, I was training in the parking lot. But things changed when I started sparring Jonathan Maicelo, the number one professional lightweight ranked in Peru, a distinction undisclosed to me before I stepped inside the ring.
I remember the first five punches crashing into my face with such successive speed and intensity that the headgear flew off my head. Maicelo then followed up with a number of chopping lefts and rights down towards my midsection, leaving a bruised rib and a week’s worth of troubled breathing. There was a smug sense of satisfaction amongst the coaches; a belief that I had gotten what I deserved since I had been clamoring for it a week beforehand.

But the next day I showed up, bruised and sore from the day previous, and I hopped in the ring to fight again. The second stanza preceded much like the first, though I noticed that there turns a corner where violence no longer satisfies. At one point the scolding coach looked at me with eyes so full of pity that they almost said, “you don’t have to do this.” But in some sense, I did. If I wanted to claim any morsel of understanding to the life of a prizefighter, I had to know what it felt like to be hurt.

Afterwards Maicelo came up to me and said, “Now I won’t call you ‘Chino’. I will call you by your name because I have respect for you.” And despite nearly everybody throughout all of Latin America calling me ‘Chino’, Maicelo kept his promise. He always used my name. From then on my relationship with the gym changed, and when you hang around long enough, the place starts opening up. People start dropping tidbits of their past, and slowly you are able to put the pieces together to see a better picture of their lives.

Boxing is the sport of the dispossessed. Unlike many other pursuits of athletic prowess, almost all of boxing’s athletes come from places of little recourse. They live in poor neighborhoods, they work shitty jobs, and they have little-to-no opportunity to break the chains of generational poverty. The reason for this is quite simple. Boxing gyms are not expensive to run and it is a trade of relatively simple tools. Duct tape can revive the life of a heavybag for years, and you could learn all the sport’s mechanics in the square footage of a small walk-in closet. It is not uncommon for fighters to share gloves from a community bin or swap headgear in between sparring sessions, so equipment costs to practitioners can be virtually non-existent.

In the United States, boxing gyms mostly reside in bad areas because start up costs are low and that is where they are needed most. In Latin America, most boxing gyms are part of large government-funded sports complexes located in a central area of
the city because in impoverished neighborhoods of the third world, even the minimal costs to operate a fight club are hard to come by. At times there is a sprinkle of college grads and urban professionals, but most of the serious ones come from the bottom because above all else, boxing is seen as a way out.

The reasons a fighter chooses to fight are varied. Some fight for money, others fight for fame, but all of them fight to be someone in life. I asked one Colombian fighter why most boxers come from poor backgrounds, and he told me it was to yell to the world, “I’m here! I exist!” Boxing serves as a pronouncement of existence, an affirmation of worth in the world.

But it would be romantic to say that all boxers would have been lost without the sport. Of course there are certainly those for whom that has been the case, but I met an equal amount of fighters who believe they would have been a dedicated student, a working professional, or perhaps even a pop media superstar, had it not been for boxing. Some just told me what they wouldn’t be doing: No killing, no stealing.

It’s a matter of pride in choosing the kind of person to be in life. It’s a matter of character, and true character is revealed in micro-movements, the subtle gestures that happen when nobody is looking. I remember walking in downtown Lima with Maicelo when in mid-conversation he casually placed a handful of coins into the hands of a woman and her child who looked like they hadn’t eaten in days. At times fighters perform such gestures because they understand the situation first hand.

Boxers never enter the ring alone. They bring with them their history, their family, sometimes an entire nation on their back, and more often than not, they fight for those that depend on them. When one fighter carried his 1-yr old into the gym, I asked him if he ever wanted his son to fight. “No,” he said sternly. “I fight so my son doesn’t have to.”

But I have yet to meet a fighter that regretted his decision to take up the sport; one reason is that it has been the gateway to seeing the world. Many fighters never thought they would board a plane, but now they proudly catalogue the list of countries where they’ve competed: Argentina, Australia, Philippines, the United States, and the list goes on. I once asked a fighter why he chose France as
his favorite visit in all his trips. “Because the culture was the most
different from mine,” he said to me. “It was a new experience.”

It should not be forgotten that despite what we do or where
we come from, we are not that different as human beings. We have
the same curiosity for the world, and the same desire to explore
that curiosity. But it should also not be forgotten that there are
obvious differences in traveling as a tourist as opposed to traveling
as a fighter.

For many fighters, boxing is a medium to change their lives,
but it is by no means an easy one. The sport’s foundation is based
on an exchange of punches, many to the body, most to the face.
Life outside the ring requires a monastic discipline, abstinence
from the poisons for a prizefighter: drugs, alcohol, fatty foods and
sexual indulgence, which from my experience are pretty much
the objectives of a random night out at a traveler’s hostel. Yet the
consequences for partaking in such indulgences proved different
between the two. For one, an entire career was at risk; for the other,
just another night out.

It was very strange to live between two worlds, perhaps even
more bizarre that these two worlds managed to exist at the same
time and in the same space. But there are still those momentary
crossroads where worlds are able to intersect, that brief medium of
comprehension that occurs over a shared practice. Because despite
any barriers, of language or of culture, for a moment in the ring,
we understood each other in perhaps the most fundamental way
possible. We did what has been done over the course of human
history: we fought and made peace. And afterward, left with a better
understanding of one another.
Reading 3
May 18, 2012

Stacey Bennetts
Kaia Chessen
Lacey Jane Henson
Carol Light
The following is a condensed chapter of my memoir about smuggling drugs with my family from the age of eight to 21, being indicted during my last semester of law school for conspiracy to import 32 tons of marijuana from Thailand to Canada, recovering from alcoholism and an eating disorder, and appealing to two state supreme courts to be permitted to practice law as a criminal defense attorney.

As winter petered out in Montana – which means in May – Dad began traveling to Georgia frequently. The family American Express card kick-started his portion of the Jamaica deal with $18,000 in seed money. Don’t leave home without it! Dad kept saying. Since Dad was the parent in charge that summer, he invited me and Bon to help. It’ll be fun. We’ll drive across the whole United States. How many kids get to do that? What sane kid would want to do that, I should have asked. But Bon and I were easily seduced at the prospect of any adventure with Dad, no matter how homely the packaging.

Mom left Dad for the umpteenth time that winter and had declined to ride with us. Neither Bon nor I wanted Mom to join us much. It seemed like all she did lately was yell at Dad and cry on us. But the same malleable minds that convinced us we were on a family vacation told us it would be different this time if Mom and Dad got together. This time it wouldn’t end with stomping, slamming, and screaming. This time – reunion #15 – the four of us would cavort at the Atlanta Holiday Inn pool, shop at the mall, and return to Montana: One. Happy. Family. Dad never said it out loud, but he wanted Mom back. He had wanted her back since the first day she left, when I was one and a half. He wanted her back . . . but she always left. Lately, I wanted her to leave . . . but she always came back. We couldn’t seem to get in sync that way.

We tossed our three duffle bags under the back topper of our red Toyota pickup, which Dad called The Piglet due to its prodigious gas habit, and hollered Hi-Ball the crossovers! in unison. We never
took a family trip without invoking the anthem Dad picked up working for the Burlington Northern Railroad.

Bob Seger’s *Against The Wind* dominated the cassette player when we moved out of FM range - which was often. Our collective mood rose and fell to the rhythm of blood sugar peaks and valleys as we indulged in our typical road fare: Ritz crackers, Colby cheddar, summer sausage, Coca-Cola, and Brach’s Circus Peanuts. After passing through lovely Beulah, Wyoming, Bon put the lid on our green Coleman cooler, carefully folded the knife on the Swiss and said, “You shoulda named Stacey ‘Beulah’; that woulda been excellent.”

“That’s so funny I forgot to laugh,” I said, turning to Dad. “Who’s gonna be in Georgia again?”

“Steve . . . and some guys you don’t know . . . Beulah.”

I stole a swig from Dad’s Coke as punishment and ventured, “Mr. Wonderful gonna be there?” I was always happy for an opportunity to see our longtime family friend and worldly - not unattractive - kingpin, but I pretended I was above it.

“Nope. Roger Reaves is though. Bringing his DC-3 to fly product from Jamaica to Atlanta. Among other escapades, he keeps a regular landing-strip gig with some Georgian good-ol-boys.”

* * *

I don’t recall getting out of the car again until we gassed up in Plains, Georgia, took pictures of Jimmy Carter’s Peanut Warehouse, and stopped to look at cotton. We had never seen cotton, so Dad led us through a field outside of town, where dry, spindly, stalks supported beards of white fluff. Some showed signs of bursting from their cocoons to make a run for it - probably something I should have considered at that point in the trip. But, not unlike the cotton bolls, I was not leaving the fold until an outside force plucked me free; plus, both our root systems were highly developed, with a depth double our surface heights.

By the time we reached Atlanta, Bon and I were thrilled Dad had convinced Mom to fly out after all. All tan and muscular five feet ten inches of her. She arrived fresh and eager, and I felt the familiar click, like the final square of a Rubik’s Cube snapping into place. Dad likely lured her with the promise of fresh weed, funds, and family. The hotel pool kept Mom and us happy for the 48 hours it took Dad to orchestrate the late-night rendezvous with B.J., and
load The Piglet and rental car with marijuana. “Stow and go,” they
called it.

Though we secured our second driver in Mom, it turned out
Dad’s reconciliation hopes required he and Mom pilot The Piglet
together. Besides, they had a duty to conduct a deep sample of the
product. That left Bon and me sitting pretty - just as I had hoped - in
a rented 1978 four-door Cadillac DeVille. Dark blue with matching
vinyl top. *Eight cylinders make it run fast and smooth,* Dad explained.
And, in 1978, Cadillac added an electronic height sensor thing-a-
majig - perfect for adjusting the body to heavy loads. But the most
important thing, I knew, from years of experience, was trunk size.
The Caddy sported a formidable trunk, along with a top-notch lock
to protect the Family Secret.

Bon held a learner’s permit, since she had survived her first
14½ years of life. This allowed her to drive with a fully licensed co-
pilot in the car; my parents’ interpreted the law as a fully licensed
driver behind the car. At 13, I didn’t even have a learner’s permit, but
Mom and Dad let me drive anyway. They reasoned, *Montana kids
regularly drive as soon as a foot can reach the gas pedal of a tractor.*
Not that we had a tractor.

Bon and I switched every couple hours, or whenever Mom and
Dad pulled over for a pee break. Starting out, we were so pleased
with our grown-up selves we didn’t even care how far it was to
Montana. But like any high, our artificial joy could not be sustained.
By the time we hit Alabama, we reverted to our cranky comfort
zones, interspersed with erratic giggles, the odd nap wedged here
and there. We tried reading, singing, talking, snacking.

Peering up from my WordSearch, I stared at the endless expanse
of pavement. My head pounded with the thrum of a budding ear
infection; *maybe my rotting insides are creeping out my ear holes,* I
thought. To kill time and ease the pain, I lodged a complaint with
the driver: “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Bon said.

“Yah. You did. You were going 68 again. The dash thing said 68
and the speed limit’s 60.”

“Close enough. Dad says you can go five miles over . . . they
don’t care if you go a little over.”

“Dad says that in Montana, not in Alabama. And not when you
have Family Secret in the trunk.”
Easing off the gas, Bon said, “Okay... there. See... 64. Satisfied, Queen of the World?” She reached for the radio, but I beat her to it, covering the controls with my hand. “Passenger does the radio,” I said, pleased with my show of power.

As if a reminder I had as much power as a Georgia cotton boll, a siren interjected its jarring Mee-Maw, Mee-Maw, into our isolated world. I whipped my head toward the back window. Flashing lights - the folks I had been trained to expect from long nights with Dad’s cocaine-induced search for the Men With Shiny Shoes.

“Shit. What do I do?” Bon said, even as she guided the Cadillac to the shoulder.

My inner-boss took over, shoving fear to its hiding place deep within. “Pull over. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

As soon as we stopped, Bon opened her window to a blast of Hades heat that swept into the car like a warning. We craned our necks to confirm we had not imagined the police car. One uniformed officer quickly approached. Bon leaned out the window and confessed: “I’m so sorry... I was going too fast wasn’t I?”

The police officer folded his large frame at the waist to get a look through the window. “License and registration?”

“I told her to slow down,” I offered, as I opened the glove box and rooted around as if I might find moral support in the shallow hold. My fingers had trouble grasping the few documents. *Am I shaking? I don’t shake,* I thought. There had been no “how to’s” on police stops before Dad handed off the keys. I looked toward the officer, watching us through the open window, cars moving behind him in slow motion. “This is a rental car,” I said. “Our parents got it... they’re following us... home. From a... vacation.” I could feel a drop of sweat run between my barely-there breasts. “Here it is.” As I leaned in front of Bonnie and handed him the Hertz pamphlet, the gun in his holster came into view and repelled me back into my seat with a visceral jolt.

Bon fiddled with her wallet, pulling scraps of paper out of tight slots. A turtleneck of red crept toward her face. “We’re from Montana,” Bon said, finally placing her learner’s permit in the officer’s large hand.

I thought he would return to his car to call for back-up, like on TV, but no sooner did I suck in a deep breath than he popped
his head back in and handed everything to Bonnie, saying, simply, “You need to slow down, girls; you’ve got a long drive ahead of you.”

As the patrolman turned his back on us, Bon slipped the Caddy into drive, and slowly merged onto the interstate, arms stiff to the wheel. I stared into my rear view mirror to monitor his retreat for a long minute, until his car looked like an ant on the horizon.

“Oh my God!” The words burst from my mouth like I’d been swimming underwater. Fear quickly morphed to elation as I felt the rush of getting away with something, a feeling I knew well, maybe craved. “What do we do now?”

Bonnie stared straight ahead in silence.

“Drive. Keep driving,” I answered myself. “No . . . maybe pull over for Mom and Dad? Or turn at the next exit? Where are they?” I looked behind us as if they would magically appear.

“They passed us,” Bon finally said. “Mom and Dad passed when we were pulled over.”
Kaia Chessen

This Is What It Is: A Love Story in the City

Wedgwood

Two stereos, a laptop, and a disc-man attached to a guitar amplifier are positioned carefully at each corner of Elsa’s one-bedroom apartment. “One, two, three,” they say, and press the buttons all at once. Spread across the floor, four friends stare at the ceiling. The music is weaving in and out, sometimes cacophony, sometimes barking dogs. It is all an experiment. When it’s over, there is a discussion about the joy of uncommon words. Jack is the last to leave. He is a slender man, and his vintage jacket gaps around the shoulders. He pauses on the porch, and exclaims to Elsa, propped wearily against the door frame, that he is fascinated by her muliebrity. After he leaves, she looks up the word in the dictionary. “Feminine qualities,” she reads in small print. “Womanhood.” She refuses to speak to Jack for a week.

Madison Valley

It is late and winter and they have just finished watching a documentary on type-script. Elsa’s apartment is an hour away by bus, so she accepts Jack’s offer to stay over and, as they are progressive and young and friends, and as she has since forgiven him for his comment on the porch that evening several months ago, she sees no problem in choosing his bed over the dog-hair-coated couch. But when the lights are out, he asks in hushed tones for her permission to wrap his arm around her. She tenses, and understanding very well the meaning implied in such a gesture, says, “I don’t think so.” She says this because, although she cares about Jack, although she enjoys his companionship, she is fairly certain she could never actually be attracted to him; because she is the kind of girl who stands by her decisions and she has already refused him once. But then, of course, she wonders if she should have known better than to sleep in his bed. Jack, on the other hand, is too tired to be upset. He can smell her hair, its scent of cinnamon and bath soap, from where he rests on his pillow. They lie inches from one another, awake, each listening to the other’s
slow breathing, wondering for a few moments before they drift off, what might have happened if she’d relented.

**Capitol Hill**

Jack sings a playful show tune at the karaoke bar and all the gay men swoon. He has taken off his glasses and jacket, but leaves on his English flat cap. Someone else sings a love song, something from another time, and Jack and Elsa dance. He leads, and she follows his footsteps. He is irrefutably charming, but Elsa wouldn’t dare tell him so. The woman at the bar has a crew cut and at least a dozen earrings. “You are the cutest couple,” she tells them. They exchange amused glances, but do not correct her.

**Crown Hill**

Elsa believes that Saturday evenings are sometimes best spent alone with a teacup and wandering thoughts. On her mind tonight are moments from her day: a man preaching damnation on the street corner; children bounding in a city park; sleet on the brick-laid streets; and cakes in the shape of animals in a bakery window. She begins to ask herself bigger questions to address impending change in her life. Will she be a barista forever? Where will she live when her lease expires this summer? These questions are difficult, but the next one is easier. It is a question she has asked herself before, but has never before had an answer. What kind of person does she really want to be with? It starts small, and then pours in in a flood. Maybe the word “never,” the word that she used all those months ago, was an overstatement. She says his name out loud in a stutter, in the astonished way one might exclaim on discovering a long lost heirloom under the sofa.

**Crown Hill**

She is nervous all evening, more quiet than normal, bumbling through the art gallery. She tries to tell him as they sit over a beer, but she fails at words. She loses to him at billiards, but just barely, before they leave for the quiet of her house. Sitting next to him on the couch, she rests her head on his shoulder. She doesn’t warn him, she just rests it there. It is the best way to say what she means. “Really?” Jack asks as they both labor to wrap their heads around what she’s done. It is three years since he first suggested, in more
words, the same. “Really?” he asks her again. He is a wreck at work the next day.

**Green Lake**

People sometimes ask them where they met. Like at this dinner party tonight. The girl, a poet, is asking to be polite. Sometimes it was a coincidence involving a misplaced letter, a happenstance meeting at a monastery in Thailand, an airborne encounter during a hot air ballooning class. Tonight, Jack initiates the story. “In truth, we were on a mushroom foraging excursion in the Scottish Highlands,” he says with a half grin in Elsa’s direction. “You nearly stumbled face first into a plot of chanterelles,” she adds. “And when you decided you had had enough fungi, you nearly froze to death swimming in the lochs,” he says. Elsa laughs. “You’re right. I’d forgotten.” The girl nods, accepting their gross and esoteric fabrication as truth. At Jack’s department’s meet-and-greet next week, they will have become acquainted building churches in Namibia.

**Capitol Hill**

“When we retire, we should move away from here and live on the Maldive islands,” she says the first time she sleeps at his apartment. “Okay,” he tells her. “Where are the Maldive islands?” She shrugs her shoulders. “Somewhere off the coast of India.” “Okay,” he says again, “but I like Capitol Hill. Can we live here until then?” She says, “Green Lake is more friendly.” “How about we meet in the middle?” he says. “Wedgwood.” “What a compromise,” she says and adds, “and we’ll have a couple children.” He laughs. “I don’t want children.” She laughs too. “We’re too young to know what we want.”

**Crown Hill**

Her body is twisting and her breathing uneven. When she can’t sleep, he doesn’t sleep. So he reaches for the glass of water on the night stand, and sips at it. She takes it from him, drinking the remainder before collapsing on his shoulder. He strokes her hair and tells a story to calm her. A rabbit named Harold has gotten lost in the woods. There is a search party, an ocean, a boat, another
character who is a porcupine. Her head is heavy on his chest. He gently rolls her over and he doesn’t ask permission when he wraps his arm around her slumbering body.

**Capitol Hill**

Across from Jack’s building is another apartment complex. On nights when Elsa sits in the old easy chair next to his window, waiting for him to finish grading his students’ papers, she glances down and can see into the windows of his neighbors who have left their blinds open. In one window, an older man stares into the blue glow of a computer screen. He stops to scratch his nose and adjust his glasses, to fuss over his cat. In another window, a woman in her underwear reclines on a couch. A man undoes his tie. They open containers of Chinese food, and eat with chopsticks. She in her underwear, and he with his tie undone. In another window, there are only boxes and boxes. Elsa, restless, rises to go to the kitchen to put on some tea. She has given Jack the pretty copper tea kettle she found at the swap market. “This will be the first thing to go in the breakup,” Jack had said that day. She had hated that he’d said that. When Elsa returns, she sees a young woman standing among the boxes, all alone. She is not packing or unpacking. She is just looking around her in a daze. The tea kettle is whistling, and Elsa leaves again to pour it into a mug that says, “I heart West Virginia.” When she returns a second time, the girl with the boxes is gone. The lights are dark in the man and woman’s apartment. The old man is in the same place with the same blue glow and a cat curled in his lap. Jack is finished with his work now. On the record player is Cat Stevens. “Ooh, baby baby it’s a wild world,” the singer croons. “It’s so sweet,” Jack says. “She’s leaving him and he’s telling her to take good care.” Jack and Elsa are dancing in the living room. “It’s your fault I have been all in a panic,” she whispers. “Why is it my fault?” he asks. She is quiet. Her falling in love with him was poor planning. She strokes his hair, as though a soothing gesture might soothe an impossible situation. “There is no middle ground,” he says finally and she nods. “So that’s that,” he says. She drops her hands. “Really?” She doesn’t cry and doesn’t argue. “Really?” One of them pulls the cord on the blinds and lets them fall.
Capitol Hill

The city, which they once shared, now stands to be split between them like books taken from a bookshelf. They have agreed to meet for coffee. There is snow outside and the city is abandoned, shut down. Only this little shop is still open. It glows from the inside. She sees him sitting at a table behind the glass, with a newspaper spread out in front of him. He looks up as she walks in. He has been eager to see his old friend, but now with her here in front of him, he sees her sadness. Inside the shop, there are other customers. They are sipping from heavy mugs, smiling and laughing. Elsa orders tea. As she sits across from him, a teardrop breaks loose, and then another, and she makes a fruitless attempt to hide her face. He asks her how she’s been, and she only nods. He is searching for something else to say. “You take Green Lake,” he considers. The whole experience is uncomfortable. “I’ll take Capitol Hill.” And somehow, in their desire to ease this discomfort, they end up at his apartment. There, the scene is the same as all the other evenings she has spent sprawled across his couch, listening to the crackling of vinyl, lying awake in his bed. There is his easy chair, the tea kettle, his neighbors in their separate spaces. And there he is, with his soft curls and that furrowed expression he sometimes gets when he’s about to say something difficult. “Thank God we didn’t have to divide the children,” for example. “The teapot is yours,” for example. Everything is exactly as it’s always been, except that now they feel intolerably alone together. “You can stay if you want to,” he tells her. She shakes her head, but suggests he hold her and, briefly, he does. If someone were to catch this moment from just the right angle through a window perhaps, they might look like some former version of themselves.
We woke up that morning to find the world had changed overnight, covered in a sparkly new blanket of snow. Icicles hung from the thorn tree outside our front door – a tree I’d always considered ugly until that moment, when those bright little ornaments of ice were dangling from its limbs. It was the perfect morning to sleep in, curl up with a book and hot chocolate, but Mom had other plans. “We are starting off this year right,” she told me, standing above my bed. Considering we went to church every Sunday, I argued, this seemed like one Jesus wouldn’t mind we skipped. She just sighed and tugged the comforter from my bed, tossing it into the corner of the room. My skin prickled in the cool air and any hope of more sleep fluttered away for good.

The three of us got ready and then bundled up in coats and scarves before heading out to the parking lot. Mom stayed outside to scrape the frost from the windshield while Claire and I waited inside our Ford Escort, which shuddered while it warmed up, spitting out lukewarm air from the vents. I angled them away from me, watching Mom’s face appear in the clean spots of window again and again. Her eyes were so intent on the glass, it was like she didn’t even see us on the other side of it, sitting right in front of her.

In the back seat, Claire was practicing her memory verse aloud. She still hadn’t gotten it down, so I kept correcting her, until she started crying.

“No one’s going to care,” I said, turning to look at her in the back seat. “You’re not going to Hell for this or anything.”

Which only made her cry harder.

“You’re doing that overreacting thing again,” I said, and turned around in my seat, ignoring her snotty-sounding sobs. Mom was always really nice to Claire when she was upset, which usually worked, but I got sick of coddling her. And sometimes her tears even seemed manipulative. If she was already crying over something, who could have the heart to get mad?
I just sat quietly in the car, waiting for Mom to come in and fix everything, which of course she did. Why not sing the verse, she suggested, after bursting into the car from the cold. “I mean, think about how many songs you have memorized, Claire.”

Claire nodded, slowly, and you could see the idea taking hold: *Maybe Mom is right.* She even wound up smiling.

Mom sang it to the tune of “Row Your Boat” one time, and then Claire joined in on the second round, and we took off. I clicked my fingernails across the windowpane, silently pressed my nose to the cold glass. I slipped away from them, letting my mind rest in the bright, clean pocket of the New Year.

I loved thinking about all the things that were possible whenever the New Year hit. “Talk to me when you’re eighteen,” Mom always said when I tried to argue for permission to see a movie or go to some party that wasn’t allowed. Eighteen seemed so far away, but then again . . . I’d be free in a little less than three New Years from this one.

Maybe in three years, I’d be beautiful like my mom and start drawing men’s eyes. Maybe I would move to an apartment in Chicago with hardwood floors and a baby grand, where I’d have parties and drink fancy wine. Or maybe I would even move to Paris, like my piano teacher Lily just had. Maybe we could even be roommates for a while.

Maybe I could even start changing my life right now, at the beginning of this brand new year. I could become the family drama queen and fling open my car door, tumbling out into the snow. I would run into the fields for miles, my breath steaming before me, until my legs ached from cold. Until the boy I liked found me and rescued me and carried me home in his strong arms. I’d noticed his arms ever since last summer, the way they filled up his shirtsleeves. I loved strong arms, the idea of them around me. I’d imagined them wrapping and holding me, and now I imagined them carrying me home from the fields, back to Mom.

But then my seatbelt snapped across my chest. My mom had hit the brakes. Hard. I gasped, trying to breathe as the belt held tight against my throat. The white world spun as our car careened on the ice. I realized my mother was making a kind of scream. I shouted something at her. The words were hard to get out, thick as peanut butter in my mouth. Mom kept staring straight ahead,
trilling and trilling. A sound like a bird. We all began screaming then, in unison. Three birds now, we were trapped somewhere. We were birds that wanted to get free.

The car zigged and zagged and then finally came to a crooked stop across the road. Mom stopped making the sound all at once. Claire and I quieted down when she did and silence ballooned in the car. I couldn't tell whose breath was whose, and when Mom kept staring silently at the windshield, I was scared her breath was gone. I thought of my dad's face in the casket, the way it had been swollen around the neck. I wanted to shake Mom hard until she screamed or slapped me. Anything to prove she still could.

She said: “It was so weird,” and for a sweet moment, I felt relieved by the sound of her voice. She sounded so normal, so alive. “I could feel the Spirit in me for a little.” She pressed her hands to her breastbone. “He wants me to pick that man up.” She pointed and it was as if she'd zapped him into the air: A tall man in a long black coat who was walking along the side of the road a ways ahead. I thought of the raccoons we sometimes saw digging through our trashcan in summer. They had these scary little hands. I heard somewhere that they can entrance caged chickens with those hands, wiggling their fingers through the bars, until the chicken comes so close they can snap its neck.

“Mom? I'm scared!” Claire called from the backseat. Her voice lifted and trembled at the end, but she managed to hold it together. She didn't quite cry.

“Oh Claire-baby, don't be,” Mom said, reaching back to squeeze Claire's toe. “I'm sorry I scared you. This is like the Good Samaritan. Remember that story? God wants me to be like that guy,” she said.

“But Mom,” I said, “who walks in this weather? What if he's . . . ?” News footage unreeled in my mind – our empty car, blood seeping into snow. A television reporter in a blue pantsuit making lots of gestures with her hands. I looked at the man again. He was still walking up ahead and I wondered why he hadn't noticed us, or if he had, why he was ignoring us. We were an out-of-control car full of screaming girls. It seemed weird that he wouldn't at least look.

“You guys have to trust me on this,” she said. “Okay Claire?” Claire nodded, solemnly.

“What about me?” I said.
But my opinion didn’t matter. We jerked forward until our car rolled up alongside the man. Mom asked me to roll down my window and when I didn’t immediately do so, she reached over me to do it herself.

“Excuse me,” she called. Her voice was bright, normal. The man turned to face us. From where I sat, I could only see his midsection, the big black buttons of his coat done up tight. “Would you like a ride?” she called up at him.

He came closer, leaned down, and placed a hand on the window. I noticed his hand first, because of its size. It looked enormous in its puffy blue glove. He had headphones on, but slipped them off. I could hear the faint beat of something turned up loud but couldn’t make out what it was. I wondered if it was Johnny Cash or Tom Waits.

But he stopped the Walkman before I could tell.

Mom repeated her offer of a ride.

“You don’t even know where I’m going,” he said. I could smell the meaty undertone in his breath. It wasn’t bad, necessarily, but it was different than the breaths I was used to. I hadn’t been this close to a strange man in a long time. I studied his face: icy blue eyes, grey stubble along the jaw, a single dimple in the left cheek when he smiled at Mom. It looked like he hadn’t shaved in a while.

“Well, we’re still offering,” Mom said.

“I live out that way,” he said, gesturing down the road. “It’s a ways out. I don’t mind walking.”

“We’re just headed to church. Won’t be a problem to drop you there at all.”

“You’re persistent,” he said, the dimple showing again.

“Well, I’d just love you to accept is all,” Mom said. “It’s so cold out there and everything. I’d just be crushed if you said no.”

I held my breath, figuring that this would be it: the moment when he would either leave or kill us. But instead he laughed.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose it wouldn’t be very kind of me to say no.”

He brought a chill into the car, along with the smell of his breath and body. It was like the fields and the wind, and something dark underneath. I wondered what we smelled like to him. I put down my sun visor and pretended to check my makeup, even though I wasn’t wearing any. I angled the mirror. He looked giant, hulking
back there next to Claire. He told her hi, and then took off his cap, ran a hand through his hair.

“Hey,” she said. He grabbed her toe and pinched it. She flinched, startled.

“Aww man,” he said, lifting his hands up. “I’m sorry.” And then he looked at her in this way that made me stop being afraid he would do something bad. He had this really genuinely sad look. Most grown-ups would brush off a reaction like that from a kid, but he seemed to take it to heart.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mom said. “She’s sensitive. You’re okay Claire, aren’t you?”

Claire nodded at him, solemnly, too enthralled to be upset. Or maybe she also recognized how he was taking her seriously. Mom told him our names; his was Paul.

“Where are you from?” Mom asked. “Just let me know where I need to turn,” she added, starting down the road.

“Seattle,” he said.

“What brought you all the way out here?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” he said.

“Well, we like stories,” she said.

It was true. I mean, what had Christianity taught us if not to be lovers of stories, believers in the truth of story? The Bible is full of them. We tell them to ourselves over and over and listen to people dissect them for fun. We tell them to God in our prayers. I turned and nodded at Paul in the back seat to affirm this.

“If you’re sure,” he said, addressing Claire.

She sat silently for a few moments, thinking, relishing that she was the one who got to make the choice. “Tell,” she said.

“From the beginning,” Mom added.

“Alright then,” he said. “I’ve come this far. I guess I might as well keep letting you tell me what to do.” There was a teasing note in his voice. “It really started with a girl I fell in love with.”
These poems are experiments with a variety of forms. “Antoinette” is propelled forward with alliteration, though not so insistently as in Anglo-Saxon verse. “Finger Exercises” plays with three different meters. “Cento” is a pastiche of lines from other well-known poems. An alba is a morning song to a lover. The last bit of light verse, “Letter to Santa,” is what I dubbed a double-half-decaf abecedarian; shorter than a true abecedarian, the first letters of the lines move through half of the alphabet before winding back up the last letters of the lines with the second half of the alphabet.

Antoinette

One tuna sandwich locked in the lunchbox, the child is breakfasted, dressed, and brushed. After the blown kiss at the school bus, a trailside jog with the dog, chasing ducks. Shower. Yoga stretch. A glimpse of sun. Fingering, badly, a forgotten etude on the piano, newly tuned. Flapping like a grackle over gravel midmorning to the mailbox, checking for checks. How can I sit here, like this, flaunting happiness? I haven’t even assembled the tsunami emergency kit. The French press brews. I don’t choose to read the news; something’s always bound to get us. Steady rain on the skylight tries to drip in. Meanwhile, the unruptured soap bubble in which I and the tooth fairy still coexist. Let the debt ceiling wait. Let them eat cupcakes.
Finger Exercises

1.
Rough bristles buff tough tufa bright to smear the moon on squares and streets. In orange jumpsuits workers sweep, and bottles scrape the Roman night. A hush floods as the sky grows light when weary travelers fall asleep.

2.
Bleary tourist orders double jet-lag stalling macchiato, pays for peaches, steps staccato off to gawk at ancient rubble.

3.
The umbrellas collapse when the market breaks down. Watch the gulls and the swifts as they circle and sift through the lost and the found of trashed napkins and maps. If a mind in its flight could swoop low now and then, pluck from life’s souvenirs one bright wrapper, the gift of a light bob to fix to the tail of its kite, never roosting on fear before lifting again . . .
**Cento**

Tomorrow’s tangle to the winds resign  
And wash the dusk with silver soon, full soon  
Announced by all the trumpets of the sky  
The sea that bares her bosom to the moon

The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world  
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair  
And the lion glares through the dun forest  
to lick his wounds in secret in his lair

How time has ticked a heaven round the stars  
And lip to lip it murmured while you live  
Little we see in Nature that is ours  
Awake Aeolian lyre, awake, and give

**Alba Discotheque**  

*winter sunrise*

Pink lamé sundogs  
bodyguard  
the bigwig’s dazzled rise.  
Steam gleams  
and billows blow  
from a furnace vent  
nearby the window  
where ice hyphens wink,  
crystallized and spun  
beneath the molten  
mirrored ball—  
like sequined glitterati  
or hungry paparazzi  
they flash  
across a rosy sky.
Letter to Santa

double-half-decaf abecedarian

A little tinsel, maybe? Sleigh bell jolly razzmatazz?
Bring it on: firelight, Santa’s lap, spruce and holly.
Carols sung, *pa rum pa pum pum*. If I could just relax.
Deliver me from global worry—3 a.m. Plump my pillow?
Eggnog’s empty. Prisoner of the wind, I’d like a shiv
For my stocking, new camisole for my trousseau—
God rouse my merry gentleman. What else is on my list?
Hey, so glad you asked. Minimize the maximus,
If you would, of this gluteus. Sweet nothings murmur,
Jingle me, trim my tree. And this, Kris Kringle, esq.,
Kiss me? I’ll watch you undo, unwrap, unzip.
Lip-lock, O, love me, Saint Nick. Ho, ho, ho,
Much more mistletoe! Yes, yours, Ginny Estrogen
Curator **Shawn Wong** is a professor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Washington. His first novel, *Homebase*, won both the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award and the 15th Annual Governor’s Writers Day Award of Washington. He is also the co-editor and editor of six Asian American and American multicultural literary anthologies and co-editor of *Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980-1990* and *Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980-1990*, two volumes of contemporary American multicultural poetry and fiction (W. W. Norton, 1992). His second novel, *American Knees*, was adapted into a film titled *Americanese*, directed by Eric Byler, which has won several film festival awards.

**Kathleen Alcalá** is the author of a collection of stories, three novels set in 19th Century Mexico, and a collection of essays. Her work has received awards that include two Artist Trust Fellowships, a previous Jack Straw Writers Program residency, and a Western States Book Award. Her current project is an exploration of sustainability on Bainbridge Island called “Notes from a Food Oasis.” A graduate of Stanford, the University of Washington, and the University of New Orleans MFA program in Creative Writing, Kathleen teaches at the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts on Whidbey Island. She is a member of writers groups Los Norteños and The Seattle7. More at kathleenalcala.com.

**Stacey Bennetts** is a mother, a writer, and a criminal defense attorney in Seattle, Washington. She married her Hastings College of the Law classmate - and landlord during her house arrest stint - Dennis Carroll. Stacey is editing her 330 page unpublished memoir, *Trial By Error: Confessions of an Eight-Year-Old Drug Smuggler*, while a student of the 2012 EDGE Professional Development Program for Writers and the Jack Straw Writers Program.

**Kaia Chessen** is a writer and cellist living in Seattle, Washington. She holds a Bachelors Degree in Creative Writing from the University of Washington, where she was nominated for an Associated Writing Programs Intro Awards in 2005 and co-authored the short story “Getting Undressed” with novelist Shawn Wong in 2007, which was
interpreted in a performance through a Mary Gates Endowment Fellowship. Her short story “Onagadori” was a finalist for Glimmer Train Press Inc. As an intern and freelance writer for the local arts and activist publication *The Stranger* in 2008 and 2009, she wrote reviews, blog posts, and news features. She is currently working on a series of short stories about her experiences as an outsider traveling in West Africa.

**Gabriela Denise Frank**, a Detroit native and Seattle resident, is the author of *Civita Veritas: An Italian Fellowship Journey*, published in 2011. The book is based on her experience in the unique Italian hill town of Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, where she lived as a Fellow of the Northwest Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in Italy (NIAUSI). Gabriela holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Arizona and an Associate of Applied Arts with Honors in Graphic Design from the Art Institute of Seattle. In 2010 she launched a blog (hiddencitydiaries.com), which she continues to write today.


**Lacey Jane Henson** grew up in Illinois, and spent a few years in New Mexico before landing in Seattle. She earned an MFA from the University of Washington in 2006 and currently organizes a popular local reading series called “The Off Hours.” In 2009, she won first-prize in the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction given by *Nimrod International*. Her stories have appeared in *Nimrod, MAKE: A Chicago Literary Magazine, Vestal Review, Third Coast*, and other literary journals. In addition to stories, she is currently at work finishing her first novel, *Nobody Told Me*.

**Carol Light**’s poems have appeared in *Narrative Magazine, American Life in Poetry, Poetry Northwest, Literary Bohemian, Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. She was awarded GAP funding from Artist Trust in 2011. She is a graduate of the University of Washington MFA program in poetry and an adjunct faculty
member at Olympic College. She lives with her family in Port Townsend, Washington.

**Sally Neumann**, currently a proud resident of Seattle, is finishing her Bachelor’s degree in English and Psychology at the University of Washington. She enjoys writing humorous excerpts about her family—or whatever strikes her fancy—and spends much of her time being generally sedentary (watching movies, reading books, watching movies that once were books). But when she isn’t hampered by the all-too-present rain, she enjoys dining in restaurants, exploring new places, and going rock climbing. She’s fascinated by people, emotions, cults, the occult, relationships, and all the complexities they engender. Though she’ll never be able to understand any of them fully, there’s nothing she loves more than to unpack and explore.

**Claudia Rowe** is a journalist, essayist, and writer of creative nonfiction. For seven years she was a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and several national magazines. In 2003, after a residency at Hedgebrook on Whidbey Island, she flew back to New York, packed up her car and hit the road for Seattle, where for six years she covered social issues at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Her essay about that solo road trip was published in *A Matter of Choice: 25 People Who Transformed Their Lives* (Seal Press, 2004). Her writing about juvenile justice won a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism in 2008 and has been honored by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. To blow off steam, she practices drumming to Led Zeppelin.

**Johanna Stoberock**’s novel, *City of Ghosts*, was published by W.W. Norton. Her essays, reviews, and short fiction have appeared in *The Wilson Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, *Eclipse*, *The Seattle Times*, and numerous other publications. She has been awarded residencies at the Corporation of Yaddo, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Millay Colony. She lives in Walla Walla, where she teaches at Whitman College.

**Mitsu Sundvall** is a writer from Berkeley, New York City, and Seattle. She has been a Harper & Row editor, an Artist Trust and Seattle Arts Commission awardee, and a Seattle Times book reviewer, and is a Hedgebrook and Edge programs alumna. *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*
is a family memoir that includes a shogun, an anarchist plotting overthrow of the Emperor, a judo-wrestling grandmother, a fast-talking chorus girl, a mother who recites Chaucer, a pool hustler, a heroin addict, and the writer James Baldwin, with some ordinary people who had some extraordinary experiences. Backdrops include the Tokyo Imperial Palace, Cannery Row Monterey, a Utah concentration camp, a Chinatown nightclub, and a New York City seder. In these stories of struggle and aspiration she hopes, as Grace Paley said about writing memoir, to save a few lives.

Nick Wong is a writer and photographer who explores culture through the art of boxing. A Mary Gates Scholar, a Bonderman Fellow, and a VONA alum, he served as the assistant editor at The International Examiner from 2009-2010 and now freelances for online boxing websites. He is currently writing his first book about his journey through the boxing gyms of Latin America (thewanderingpugilist.com), and working towards his dream of building boxing gyms around the world.
About the Jack Straw Writers Program

The Jack Straw Writers Program, which was established in 1997, has included more than 200 Pacific Northwest writers who represent a diverse range of literary genres.

The purpose of the Jack Straw Writers Program is to introduce local writers to the medium of recorded audio; to encourage the creation of new literary work; and to present the writers and their work in live readings, in this anthology, on the web, and on the radio. Each year an invited curator selects the participating writers from a large pool of applicants based foremost on artistic excellence. Writers receive training in vocal presentation, performance, and microphone technique to prepare them for studio recording and live recording at public readings. Their recorded readings and interviews with the curator are then used to produce features on our web site, for radio broadcast, and for internet podcasts.
Jack Straw Productions

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