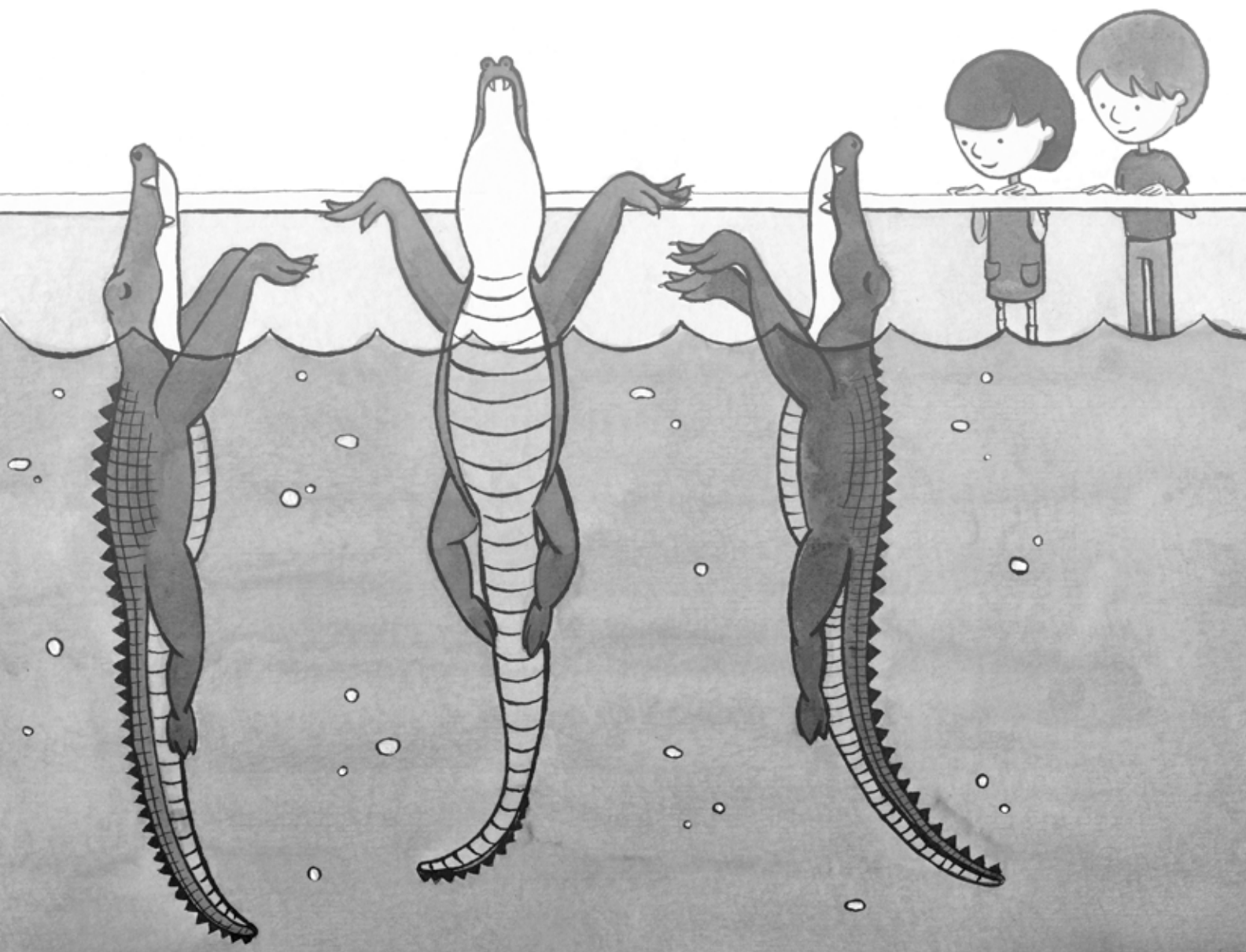
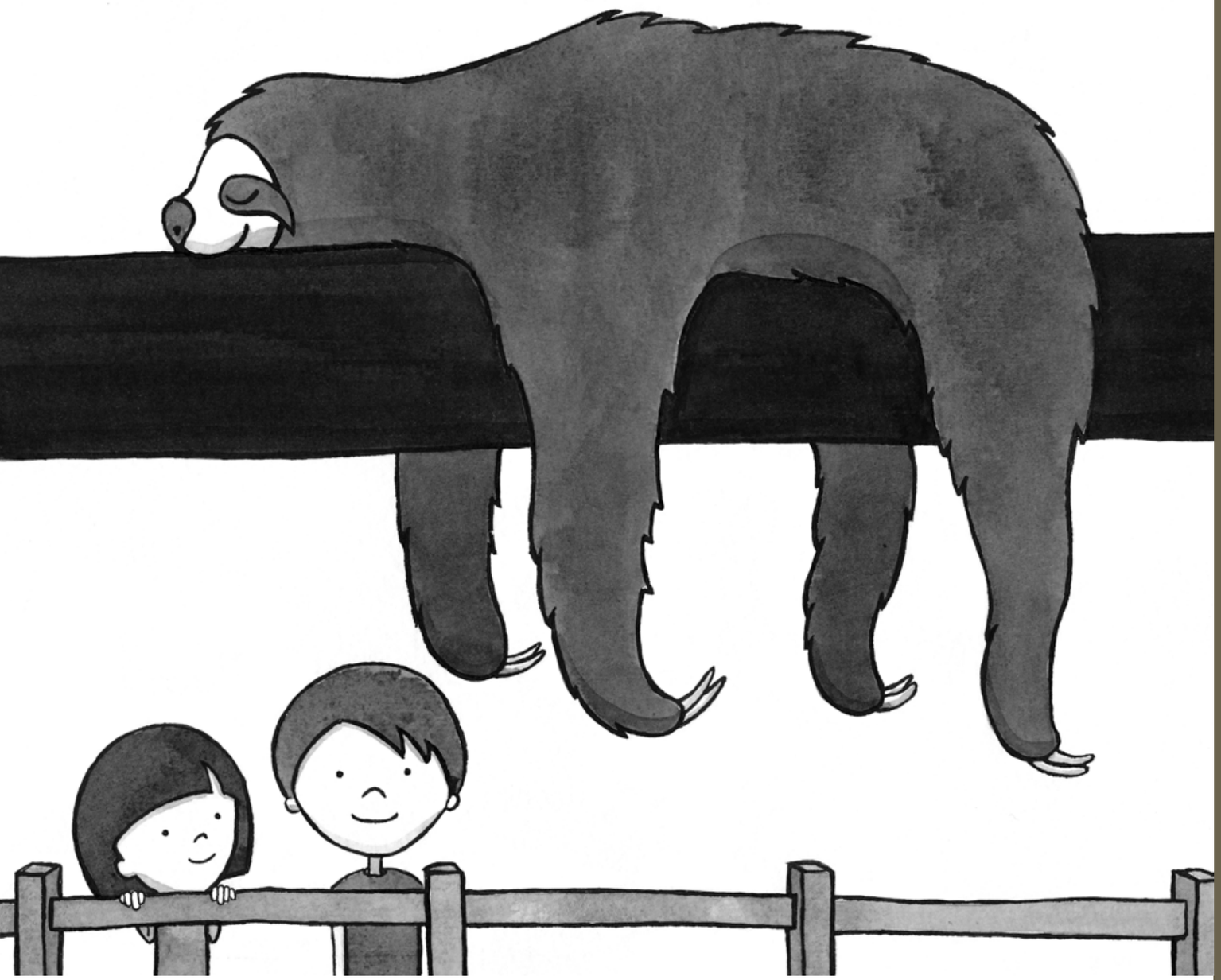
under the gum tree

TELL STORIES WITHOUT SHAME : JULY 2013





cover: synchronized crocodiles

left: sleeping sloth

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about

Under the Gum Tree is an independent literary arts micro-magazine. Because we strive for authentic connections through vulnerability, we exclusively publish creative nonfiction and visual art. We try to publish quarterly, but mostly whenever we feel like it, and accept submissions year-round. For complete submission guidelines, please visit **underthegumtree.com**.

All questions and comments may be directed to **info@underthegumtree.com**.

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the teller, not the tale

Sometimes I worry about publishing stories similar to something we've previously published. I mean, don't readers expect magazines—especially literary magazines—to keep things fresh, to introduce them to new ideas and experiences on a regular basis? I know I have that expectation of the magazines that I subscribe to.

Then my sister and I took our annual trip to Ashland, Oregon, where we saw three plays at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. With one exception, we have gone every year since 2005. This year we saw *King Lear*, *My Fair Lady*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And do you know what? It was not the first time we had seen OSF do a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In fact, over the six years that we have gone, we have seen several plays more than once—because they are that good.

Not only have I seen live productions of the plays more than once, but also I have read them more than once. There are other books I've read more than once as well, namely *The Great Gatsby*, on which I did most of my undergraduate research. I still have the copy that I read over and over while I was in college, complete with all my handwritten notes and underlining. It's a loved copy.

This tells me that even when stories have similarities, we read them anyway. And we reread the same stories. Why do we do this?

Well I can answer for myself and say that I watch the plays more than once because each performance brings something new to the story and inevitably I take away something new. I believe the same thing happens when we write and share our stories. Just because there are similarities to someone else's doesn't make them any less impactful—if anything the opposite is true. Similarities in stories demonstrate the power of the human experience. Similarities in stories are what unite us as fellow journeyers as we try to find our way and make sense of life. Not only that, but also each writer has a unique voice that brings a new perspective to this thing we call the human condition.

I think you will see some similarities in the stories of this issue. There are themes of longing for family connection, doing everything possible just to make it through the day, trying to find a place of belonging, and of expecting more from our fellow man. Maybe you will find a similarity between the stories in these pages and your own. If that is the case then (and I've said this before) we are doing our job.

If you like what we are doing here at *Under the Gum Tree*, the best way you can support us (after subscribing or buying a copy, thank you!) is to share the magazine with someone you know who might also like to support us.

Thank you and, as always, here's to telling stories without shame.

Janna Marlies Maron

Editor & Publisher

morning routine

elizabeth bales frank

blue suburban skies

Rosemary was in charge of the funeral. She was the oldest, the best organized and, as a hotel executive, the one who negotiated the bereavement rate for our rooms at the Hilton St. Louis Frontenac, a faux-Versailles pile on Lindbergh Boulevard, which historic signs claim was once part of the Lewis and Clark trail. Lindbergh Boulevard is Lindbergh Boulevard throughout the suburbs of St. Louis until it gets to the town of Kirkwood, where it becomes Kirkwood Road. Once it leaves Kirkwood, it returns to its identity as Lindbergh Boulevard. Kirkwood doesn't take kindly to outsiders. The funeral service was being held at the Kirkwood Methodist Church, which serves as Kirkwood's social focal point. Rosemary decreed that at the service, I was to sit in the family pew. "Because you are family, Elizabeth. You *are*."

of course, if I really had been family, no one would have made a point of telling me so. But if you feed an alley cat, it keeps coming back, and Rosemary was merely being kind enough to preserve the family tradition of letting me hang around in the kitchen. It had been this way since Rosemary's youngest sister Daisy brought me home from junior high school. Daisy was my best friend. At the time of the funeral, we had been friends for thirty years.

It was Daisy's stepfather who was dead, her stepfather who looked so uncannily like Gary Cooper, in old photographs, in real life, the soft wary eyes, the long elegant limbs, the planes and angles of his face, that I will call him Coop. Daisy's mother, Bobbi, lost her first husband to a heart attack. Coop's wife died of cancer, suggesting in her throes, according to the legend, that Bobbi would make a fine replacement. Coop and Bobbi were neighbors, then friends in mourning, then friends, then spouses in a family renewed. There was a boy, Coop Jr., but he was mostly offstage.

Front and center was the garden of grateful girls: Bobbi and her daughters Rosemary, Lily, and Daisy.

My own family had no such savior. My mother had died of a stroke when I was eight. My brother and sister were teenagers. My father was lost. He had no idea how to cope with children, and he resented the expectation that he rise to the occasion. He provided for us, why did he have to guide us as well? We were to look after ourselves, look after each other, but leave him out of it. Our lives changed as though we'd existed only through the power of my mother's imagination, as though we were characters in her unfinished novel, and without her we were set to drift along blank pages, following different narratives that only haphazardly overlapped.

For want of a babysitter, my father took me with him to his bars. A bar is a dull place to be when you are nine, ten, eleven. There was nothing to do but sneak fruit from the garnish tray, stare at the ballgame and watch the men drain their glasses and guffaw about the wives they were hiding from. In the summer months, he sent me away to camp. And it was on one child-free summer night that he walked into a bar and met the woman who would become his second wife.

• • • •

"One-two-three-four." One of us counted the pendulum's swings, the other watched the clock. I think the point of the experiment, which devoured several consecutive days of eighth grade physics, was to establish that a pendulum would always adjust to an innate rhythm, regardless of the height from which it was initially launched. We would have taken this as a given, as we had no interest in pendulums, but such is the way of science class. Daisy was my lab partner.

"One-two-three-four—"

" 'One, two, three, four,' " Daisy sang, " 'can I have a little more, five, six, seven-eight-nine-ten, I love you.' "

My head snapped up. Everyone our age knew about the Beatles, but no one else really cared. Our classmates felt entitled to their own culture, Brady Bunch lunchbox, bell-bottomed and bad shag haircut as it may have been—it was theirs and they were never embarrassed by it. But Daisy and I felt we'd been born too late. We didn't remember the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. Or when our first TV arrived in the living room. Or when my mother or her father were flesh and blood and not figures in a shrine. We had come late to the party and the party was over. But what we could do, what we could do really well, with all the single-minded devotion of girls in their early teens, was become the most devoted post-Beatle Beatle fans *ever.*

" 'A B C D,' " Daisy sang, " 'can I take my friend to tea?' " She raised her eyes to find me staring and explained, "My stepdad took me to see *Yellow Submarine*."

Nobody's parents, back then, made an effort to be "best friends" with their kids, or to be "cool." They were adults and they had enough to do to make sure we kept our stereos down and our grades up without having to worry about trying to be cool. And yet Daisy's stepdad was cool. He wasn't

cool because of his lifestyle, a word which would have made him scowl. "Style" was something Bobbi did to her hair. "Life" was made up of what he had struggled hard to make easy, growing up as he had in the backwoods of the bootheel of Missouri. His efforts paid off into days divided thus: working week at the office, Saturdays on hunting trips if the weather was fine, cleaning the gun room if it was not, Sunday at the Kirkwood Methodist church because that's where Bobbi saw her friends, mowing the lawn in the summer, stacking firewood in the winter, and whatever small pleasures he could craft from the remaining hours. *There, beneath the blue suburban skies*.

"Luzbuth?"

I glanced up. We were in Daisy's living room. Daisy was in the kitchen, receiving instruction from Bobbi; regarding what not to do that night: leave the house, play the music loud, stay up late being silly. I was watching a *Star Trek* rerun and Coop stood behind me, holding a book he'd taken off a shelf. He was initiating a conversation, I realized with a flush of panic. I was still intimidated by him then, although I knew I wasn't in trouble. When I was in trouble, I was "E-luz-buth."

"Do you like short stories?"

I shrugged.

"I think I like," Coop said, shaking the book he held for emphasis, "short stories better than almost anything else to read. When I go off to bed, I like a story, but I like to finish what I started. You can't do that with a novel. You'd have to stay up all night. Now, with a short story, you get the whole story, you get to finish what you start and then you go off to sleep."

"I, uh, I guess I never thought of it like that."

Having made his point, Coop went off to bed. I had never had (would never have) a similar conversation with my own father, such a straightforward search for common ground.

Coop was cool because he was warm. I didn't know that then. All I knew at the time was a surge of canine-like devotion.

• • • •

Throughout his life, Coop attracted a following of strays, mostly Daisy's friends, who sent messages and flowers to the funeral. As a faux-family member, I was invited to speak a tribute from the pulpit along with Daisy's sisters. The lyrical metaphors which had seemed so inspired when I wrote them in New York didn't go over so well in Kirkwood. Facing a sea of pious faces, I realized they didn't know what the hell I was talking about. When I tried to speak plainly, I grew inarticulate, blinked back tears, cleared my throat, hurried off. Once the family tributes were complete, the strangely merry minister ("what a cele*bra*tion here today!") invited others to speak from the pews. Daisy's cousin Dennis, her nemesis during the one-two-three-four years, rose from the congregation like a Quaker, and simply ('tis a gift to be simple) summed up what I had been trying to say in my eulogy.

"Well, I *had* a dad." Dennis sounded puzzled, almost peevish, as though his father were a speech he'd misplaced and he was patting down his pockets in his search. "I had a dad, but Coop was always more of a dad to me than my own."

• • • •

"My father died when I was a little boy," Coop told me once "And my mother married again. And that man she married was mean."

I was an adult by the time he told me this, on one of my rare visits home, which always included several hours with Bobbi and Coop. After college, I saw them more often than Daisy did, since Daisy had in-laws and small children. My own family obligations were down to just the dad who, well, I had. When my father gathered me at the airport, we routinely visited two bars before we got to his place, not including the "quick snort" he took in the airport bar to fortify his way to the parking garage. He didn't tell me stories, and expressed no interest in hearing mine. We stared into our drinks and blinked at the ballgame, speaking only to scold the players: "Oh, come on! You shoulda had that!"

"My stepfather, he'd beat us with a switch," Coop told me. "He'd make us go out in the yard and cut off a branch. And if it wasn't as big as he wanted—he'd like it as big around as his thumb—he'd march us out and make us pick one twice as thick. Oh, he was a mean, mean man."

(When I repeated this to Daisy at dinner after the funeral, she was astonished. Coop had never so much as mentioned his stepfather to her.)

After a pause, Bobbi asked, "More wine, Luzbuth?"

Every visit home, I plopped in the black leather chair across from their black leather couch, or sat in the kitchen while they fed me cheese, crackers and questions.

Did I still like living in New York City?

I did.

And did I still ride those subways?

I did.

Well, all right. They guessed I really didn't need a car in New York City. What with the buses and those subways.

No. No car necessary. Nowhere to park, anyway.

And I still didn't have a gun.

No.

"You really ought to have a gun up there all by yourself in New York City." They always emphasized the "New," as though wistful for the old York City, a more civilized town with an abundance of parking and guns.

"Maybe so, Coop, but it's against the law to own a handgun there."

"What, *nobody* can have a gun?" Bobbi would ask, dismayed as though a gun was an essential accessory, like a handbag.

"Criminals can have guns," Coop would snarl, fist on the table. "Just not nice people like Luzbuth."

I was equally touched by his indignation that I was forced to roam the wilds of New York City on foot and unarmed, and that Coop would describe me as "nice," despite so much evidence to the contrary. I was not not "nice" in the traditional sense — that is, not fast, not *slutty* — but I was not nice in that I had flouted the Kirkwood convention by seeking out more than was my due: state college, local marriage, reasonable career in insurance or nursing, real estate or education. And they knew I was not "nice" because of the famous walk home.

"Do you remember that time the girls tried to walk home from Webster Groves?" Bobbi would ask, as Coop refilled her cut-glass goblet with wine, and then my glass, and then his own glass with a shot of Jack Daniels. His eyes would meet mine. Yes, we'd all heard this tale a dozen times; yes, Bobbi had a streak of the Tennessee Williams heroine in her, spinning out the same yarn again and again as though the strands might just once knit themselves into a different fabric. Yes, Coop's eyes would say, yes, Luzbuth, you played the outlaw, so cowboy up and listen to the legend.

"Well, I don't think either one of 'em realized how far it was," Bobbi would continue as Coop sat back and lit up a cigarette. "What was it y'all were trying to learn?"

"Transcendental meditation," I would answer.

• • • •

Of course we tried to learn transcendental meditation. What else would two restless, arty, dreamy, unpopular, Beatle-besotted kids do in Kirkwood in 1975? *Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?* Daisy and I were already writing novels, separately, tracing the rise and fall of fictitious British rock-n-roll bands. We couldn't play a musical instrument, we couldn't date, we couldn't change our genetic makeup and transform into the kind of girls boys would even want to date, we couldn't bring back the past, but we could, we felt, *transcend*.

I remember almost nothing about the actual process. I know we had a book written by the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi which showed a pyramid demonstrating levels of consciousness. I recall that a group of us met in a house in Webster Groves where we listened to a lecture, then met another time and heard a shorter lecture and were led into a group meditation, which I felt that I failed, distracted as I was by birdsong, other people's shuffling, the memory of whatever song had been playing on the radio when Bobbi drove us over, and my own ping-ponging grievances. There was a private ceremony in which I handed my guru a clean white handkerchief, a piece of fresh fruit and a humble bouquet. In return, I received my mantra, my own private password into the world of spiritual regeneration.

After that, I was to report to the meditation center, meet with my guru and silently recite my mantra to myself in front of him for thirty or forty minutes while Daisy sat in the waiting room reading *Rolling Stone*. Then we switched places. We were passionately bored with meditation by then, bitter about our lack of oneness with the universe. Meditation hadn't helped my asthma or taught me patience (both of which factors I had used to persuade my stepmother to fork over the money), and it hadn't made Daisy feel any cooler at junior high, where she was still the girl with the arcane musical knowledge and the Arkansas accent. Moreover, our guru was not an Eastern mystic in flowing white robes, but an unsmiling hippie pilgrim with watery eyes, drifting through post-Woodstock enlightenment fads. Perhaps Daisy and I had hoped to experience words *flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup*. But instead we found ourselves trapped with our same old weirdo thoughts.

So we decided to abandon meditation. In teenage parlance, we ditched it. On the afternoon of our last scheduled meditation session, Bobbi dropped us off, we waved goodbye, and as soon as she was out of sight we headed for the ice cream shop. There we sat and chatted about how cool we would be in the future, slurped and ate up all our pocket money until, long after my stepmother was late in picking us up, we lacked even the dime it would have taken to make a phone call.

This was a test on my part. And like most unspoken ultimatums, it failed.

My stepmother was often late in picking me up. Once she married my father, we had a household of seven children, and I was still the youngest. My sister moved out, my brother went to college, leaving me the resident stepchild. Publicly, my stepmother proclaimed that we were a successful blended family. "We are like the family in *Yours, Mine and Ours*!" she liked to proclaim, and that might have been true, had Doris Day and Brian Keith portrayed overwhelmed, numbed alcoholics. In front of outsiders, she professed a democratic love, but at home, she was a despot. I hadn't really expected her to love me. I was too far down my own path to benefit from her guidance, and besides, I thought she was a fool.

"When you get to junior high, don't ever raise your hand in the classroom," she advised me. "Boys don't like smart girls."

So, we could not work it out. I had none of the traits she valued, and she was irritated by what gifts I did have to offer. That much I could transcend, but the lying, the false public front of harmony, bothered me. "One big happy family—just like *The Brady Bunch*!" and "Their mother, watching down from heaven, made this marriage happen." My mother, who would accept nothing less than straight As on a report card (and who never once made reference to heaven), arranged my father's subsequent marriage to a woman he met in a bar, who counseled playing dumb to achieve social

success? Okay, it more than bothered me—it infuriated me in that way teenagers are made livid by hypocrisy. She didn't love us all the same, she wouldn't stop lying about it, and I was going to prove it was a lie.

I didn't remind her that morning as I left for school that it was her turn to fetch us from meditation. I watched her smoke her cigarettes and drink her coffee. I watched her turn the pages of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I said nothing and left the house. Your mother should know.

We could have strolled over to the meditation center and asked to use their phone. We could have asked the guy behind the ice cream counter to use his phone; his glares certainly indicated that he would be glad to be rid of us.

"Well, we could walk," I said.

"Well, I don't think either one of 'em knew how far it was," Bobbi would say as Coop sat back and lit up a cigarette.

It was a field short of five miles, a never-ending hike through boulevards and cul-de-sacs as the shades of evening lowered and became night. The distance from Daisy's house to downtown Webster Groves was the length of six songs, three commercials and a traffic report on the radio in Bobbi's station wagon. It was more than two hours on foot. When darkness obscured the shoulder of the road—there were few sidewalks, since no one walked—we knocked on doors of people we knew when we happened upon their houses. No one was home. We eyed passing cars hoping for rescue but were too timid to go as far as sticking out our thumbs.

It was strange, then, that Coop didn't see us. Because he was out looking. When we failed to arrive home, Bobbi had called my house but no one answered. The meditation center reported that we never arrived for our session. That's all Bobbi needed: The next time she touched the telephone, she knew she would hear of the discovery of our violated dead bodies. Coop strode to the garage where he kept his guns, grabbed a few, and headed off to search the ditches.

Despite his unity with the universe, our guru failed to divine our whereabouts, even when Coop threatened to go back to his car and come back with the guns. This undoubtedly entertaining encounter between eastern philosophy and western violence was interrupted when Bobbi called the center again, this time to report that we had finally staggered in, Daisy in tears and on a sprained ankle. Bobbi turned her betrayed back to us, wiping the counter, shaking her head when we tried to speak, until Coop arrived—in no time at all, it seemed to us, having just crossed that same vast track of land—and gathered Bobbi into a manly embrace. Bobbi placed her hands against his chest and wept into his shirt. Daisy wept at the kitchen table. I set my jaw and turned, now that it was far, far too late, to use the phone.

I called three, maybe four of my parents' favorite watering holes until at last a bartender said, "Yup," and handed my stepmother the receiver. My outrage was loud and eloquent, interrupted only by the tinkling of ice as my stepmother took a long, sustaining pull of a gin and tonic, which sedated her occasional response, "Well, honey, you should have *reminded* me. I can't keep track of all you kids."

"Kid a mine talked to me like that," I heard the guy on the next stool advise her, "I'd smack 'em."

I hung up and burst into tears. I did deserve a smacking. My stepmother of course wasn't the "you" who was actually responsible for this misguided trek. It was my real mother, who had so unreasonably died; it was my father, who had remarried in large part to abdicate the responsibility of parenthood. Mainly it was me. I knew better. Kind as her parents were, Daisy's parents were not my parents.

My parents were drinking at a bar, unaware that anyone had thought me missing, irritated that I had dampened their evening with my irresponsibility. I could spend countless nights in the spare of Daisy's twin beds. I could discuss short stories with Coop and learn to make his coffee the way he liked it, but I wasn't a real daughter. Real daughters had flowery names and gemstone eyes. I was bossy and belligerent and given to bouts of repellent sadness and stubbornness. I was a stepdaughter. *There's nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time.*

Bobbi put her arms around me and I stood rigid, as I always did in the rare occurrence of hugs. Then Coop patted my shoulder and at his forgiveness, my crying exploded like an old pump, a gush of water followed by a squeak, then another gush, another squeak. Absolution was new territory for me, discovered, you might say, at the end of *a long and winding road that led to their door.*

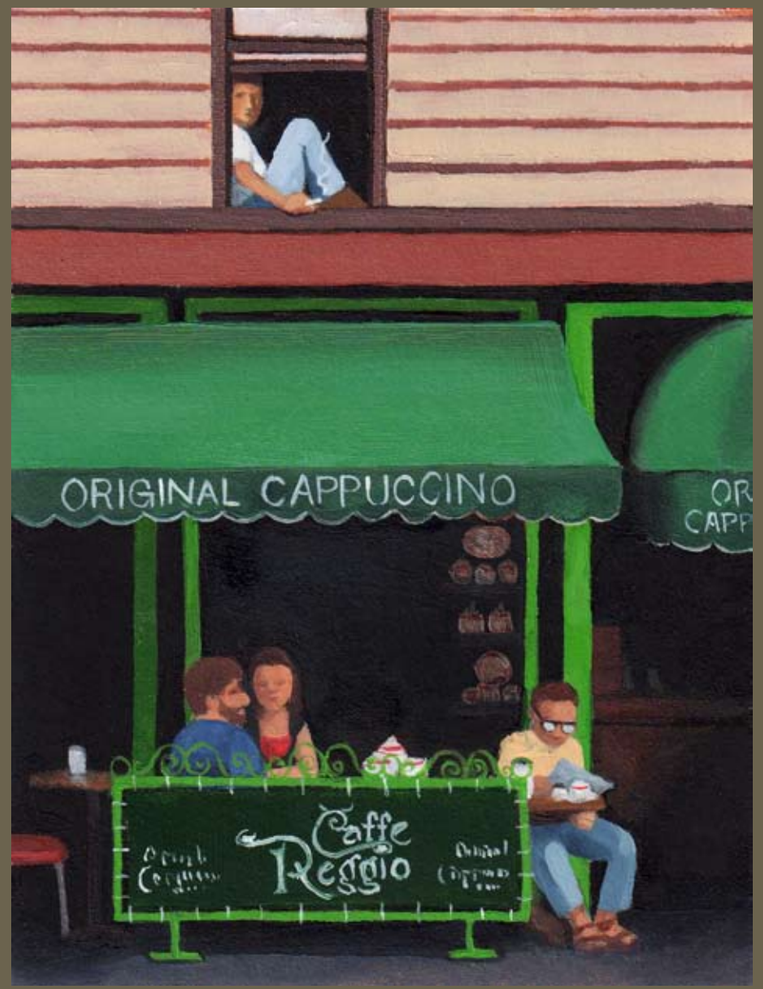
"I'll never hear that story again," I said to Daisy at the funeral dinner. "About how we walked home from Webster Groves."

"Mama always remembered that."

"Because I worried her half to death."

"Because it was the first time," Daisy said, "that you hugged her back."

Elizabeth Bales Frank is a novelist and essayist who lives in Astoria, New York. Her work has appeared in *The Sun, Post Road, Elysian Fields Quarterly, The Laurel Review, epiphany, The New York Times, Glamour, Cosmopolitan,* and other publications. She manages the website **somuchsomanysofew.wordpress.com**, which covers the literature of World War II.



above: mcdougal cafe
right: union square king

robert vivian

this is how you shoot the people

Come with me to America inside the Wal*Mart in Alma,
Michigan and see it looking for things that will never make
it happy; see it crying and see it dying and suffering without
so much as a whimper except for the backfiring muffler
of a monster truck out in the parking lot that causes your
shoulder blades to jump in a sudden bolt of fear tied to a
thousand other shooting deaths and all of them with blood
still oozing through their fingers;

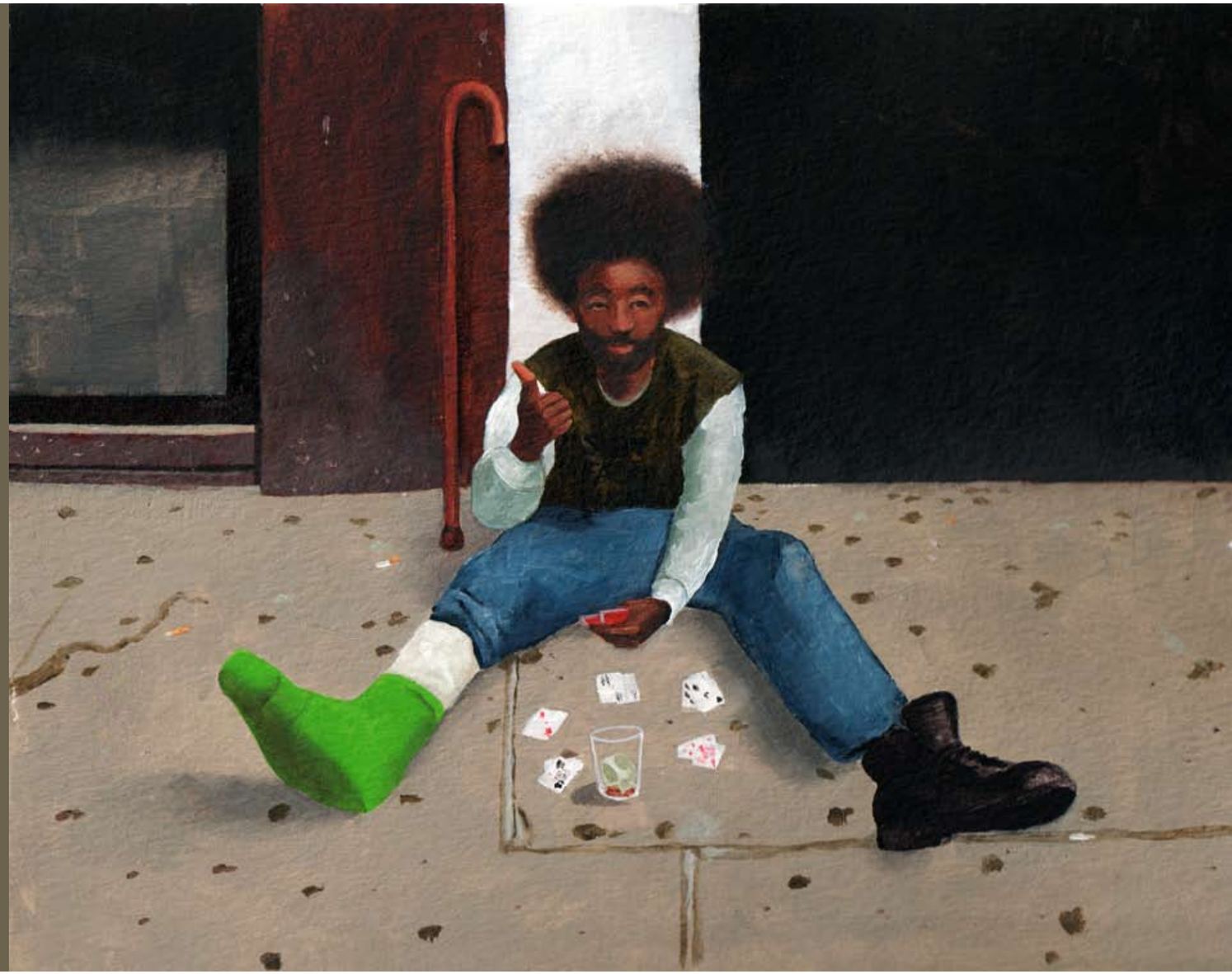
come with me to America inside these plane hanger walls and watch it gnashing its teeth in carnival display next to the wall of missing persons and the faded ghost of an elderly greeter dressed all in blue who died years ago saying "Welcome to Wal*Mart, Welcome to Wal*Mart" with a Sisyphean emphasis that was eventually leeched of all emotion in the aftermath of mind-numbing repetition, though maybe she wanted a few trickling grains of pity and kindness even if they're no good for her now. Come to America and see the mostly smiling faces of these same missing persons, most of whom are children and all of whom must be loved by someone, which is something you say to yourself as if you're trying to convince yourself of something that has to be true, trying to give yourself something like hope and redemption in the silent wake of their vanishing. One of the missing was twelve at the time he disappeared and one of them is named Javier while another one's named Kneisha; one of them has the scar of a sickle moon on her left cheek bone and all of them are trapped in their grainy photographs that will haunt you in vectors of inconceivable desolation in the chilling certainty that the continent of North America has swallowed each one of them so that they have vanished from the face of the earth.

Come to America and see its slow-moving traffic of motorized wheelchairs on the polished concrete floors and the patrons who use them, many of them seeming to be slowly driving down a great, endless slope toward a weirdly lit tunnel with flashing lights on the wall that will eventually blind them and turn their bodies into pools of standing water, some of them with their mouths open wide and teeth filled with what looks like flecks of Wonder bread, and then see the kids dressed up in Goth with baby pins in their noses and see the old Army veterans with different pins stuck into their sharply creased ball caps as if they are ready to restore order and decency to the next generation by whatever dire means necessary before they themselves fade into sepia tones of old pictures curling at the edges in random cigar boxes; see the teenage mother as a pint-sized and slightly countrified version of *mater dolorosa* with torn jeans and one kid in a shopping cart and another trailing behind brandishing a red plastic replica of an AK-47, his beautiful blond cowlick sticking up as he imitates the sound of firing said weapon in a kill radius roughly twenty yards in diameter, mowing down everyone he sees in the action movie of his mind; see the look on the young mother's face who seems on the brink of an appalling revelation and is too tired to look away and see half a city block of flat screens twenty feet high broadcasting sports, bake-offs, eating contests, buildings going down in flames in distant lands and a hurricane survivor talking into a microphone with his hand held to the side of his head in utter disbelief; see golf courses and palms trees and cartoon tenderness as Bambi nuzzles up to her mother before she is killed, see America in aisle after aisle of all that cannot sustain us, that crowds in on us and towers above us, all that has nothing to do with beauty or truth or forever, row after row after row of false promises and same day merchandise, shelves holding neatly stacked items of megadeath.

And then hold my hand and listen very, very carefully to America and all it has to tell us in overheard conversations and intimate disclosures and cell phone quips, instructions having to do with paper towels and credit card receipts, muzak from the 80s pumped out over the sound system, try to listen very, very carefully to what America has to say and then please tell me what it means, "I'm going to put you back in the cart now"—"Here's an envelope for India ink"—"Do you know they have a new tackle box"—"Ask him if he needs some pop and what kind"—"By all means it should work on a keyboard"—and then the man with his son in the sporting goods section holding up a shiny, snub-nosed semiautomatic revolver with a grin on his face as we walk by and overhear him telling his son, "This is how you shoot the people," and his son looking up at him with wonder and does it matter if his father was joking because This is how you shoot the people and This is how you instruct them; This is how you mow them down and This is how you raise your infamous Facebook page; This is how you crystallize fear and This is how you hold the people and This is how you mold them and break them down; This is how you shake them up and This is how you give them fire and This is how you make them afraid of fire; This is how the people will react as they run screaming for the doors tripping over each other, tripping over themselves; This is how you shoot the people so the people will not leave their houses; This is how it will all go down and This is how you'll become a footnote in history; This is how I smile at you, son, my dearest chosen one, while I hold the cherished piece of all your boyhood dreams; This is how much you mean to me and This is how your own weapon can give you power and great Kevlar feelings of invincibility; This is what it feels like to be a god and you are God when you hold this semiautomatic weapon in the palm of your cool, cool hand and point it at the ones you want to teach a lesson or get through to in cleaning bolts of pure terror, especially the ones who think they're better than you, who will be more than willing to suck your cock if you don't shoot them; This is how you shoot the people, son, and This is what it means, and This is how it works, and This is how you pull the trigger, and This is what it will sound like; and This is how it will feel as a great rushing river of adrenaline flows through your system as you get high on your own body's chemicals; This is how you take a life and This is how it will feel when you shoot the people and you keep shooting them and feel their immortal souls flying past you as you send them on their way, and This is what I have to give to you, This is what I have to say, America, stand up for what you believe in right here in Wal*Mart, defend your God-given rights and all the rest from sea to shining sea, take no prisoners in the knowledge that we're number one and will be the last one standing before they drag our corpses away, heroes long after the last credits roll and the screen goes black, everyone in the theatre already dead or gone.

Robert Vivian is the author of *The Tall Grass Trilogy*, *Water And Abandon*, and the collections of essays *Cold Snap As Yearning* and *The Least Cricket Of Evening*. He teaches at Alma College in the low-residency MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

guy in a cast



mare biddle

tuesday morning

"Where are the Fuji apples?"

I'm a little too frantic.

"it's okay, Mama, I like the ones from the co-op better anyway. I'll run up there this afternoon," she says.

"I'm sorry." Swallowing hard, deliberately.

"It's okay. Do you want me to get other stuff on the list?" She waits. "Do you just wanna go home instead?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll get cat food, paper towels, and peanut butter and jelly." Off she goes, my daughter in her role as supporting actress to my leading, and failing, maternal overcompensation.

"Fine," I say, but she was gone. I am left facing the Romaine lettuce, wrestling with a bag, my face betraying me with tears. These plastic produce bags never open.

"Where are the goddamn yams? These aren't yams! What are these ugly things anyway?"

This woman, easily eighty-two years in the making, screeches at young Randy, the only employee in the produce section. As plain as the acne on his chin and the blue in his ever helpful eyes, it's clear that Randy wants to be the star-employee-of-the-week, his goal to affix the blue star to the corner of his nametag. "Well? Where are they?"

Where indeed? If we only knew where Randy is keeping the goddamn yams, she and I, we could go about our day, less screeching and less crying. I don't know why, but I look his way as well. I join her in the expectation of a satisfactory answer and pronto. I need a remedy to this uncertainty so clearly of Randy's making.

"They're right here, ma'am," Randy stretches across the hot house tomatoes and lifts a specimen from the yam bin.

"Those aren't yams." She adjusts her jaw. "Are those yams? They don't look like any yams I've ever seen."

"Yes ma'am, these are yams. We have organic yams on the other table if you prefer them." He rounds the corner, reaching for a second offering in earnest, although possibly calculated, hope of finding her demanded answer.

"Hmm. Well I see now. Thank you," says my tart friend, letting go of her finely pitched tone in favor of a conciliatory smile. Damn. I liked our righteous demand for yams. Goddamn yams. I knot the baggie holding the yellow pepper for tonight's salad ($1.99 a piece) and see my daughter's victorious grin marching upon me.

"Okay, the cat food is ten for seven dollars, so I got ten. I brought paper towels, and they have snowmen on them! I was going to get honey for Dad, but they don't have the right kind. This is the peanut butter you like, right? Oh, and blackberry jam, please, for me?" Her favorite.

"Sure, sweetie," I croak and flip a tear off my cheek. My demanding friend in her black wool hat and Sunday-best nylons making their get away beneath her wool skirt, also black, says excuse me and passes on my right. I bet her name is Trudie. She looks like a Trudie.

"What's next?" My daughter prods, "Did you find the apples?" What's that saying, *an apple a day keeps the doctor away*? As if that were all it took to keep doctors and sickness and pain away. My son likes apples. Where are the apples? I scan the department for Randy but having completed his good deed he's disappeared, probably out back sneaking a cigarette, which would be frowned upon if he were star-employee-of-the-week. Trudie is moving toward the bacon and lunchmeat.

"Wrong peanut butter. Chunky, not creamy." I hand the jar back to my teenage daughter on the near eve of her sixteenth birthday, so eager to ease this moment for me, another in a string of bad months. I crane to see if Trudie picked up any yams after all, but she's turning the corner, and my eyes can no longer reach her.

I adjust my purse strap and push the cart forward. My son, Blackberry Jam's little brother, just has to turn the corner next week. Next week will be better—less pain, less waiting, less worry that he will never have the opportunity to be star-employee-of-the-week. Trudie would like my boy even though he hates yams. Goddamn yams. I make a mental note to stop at the co-op for apples on our way home.

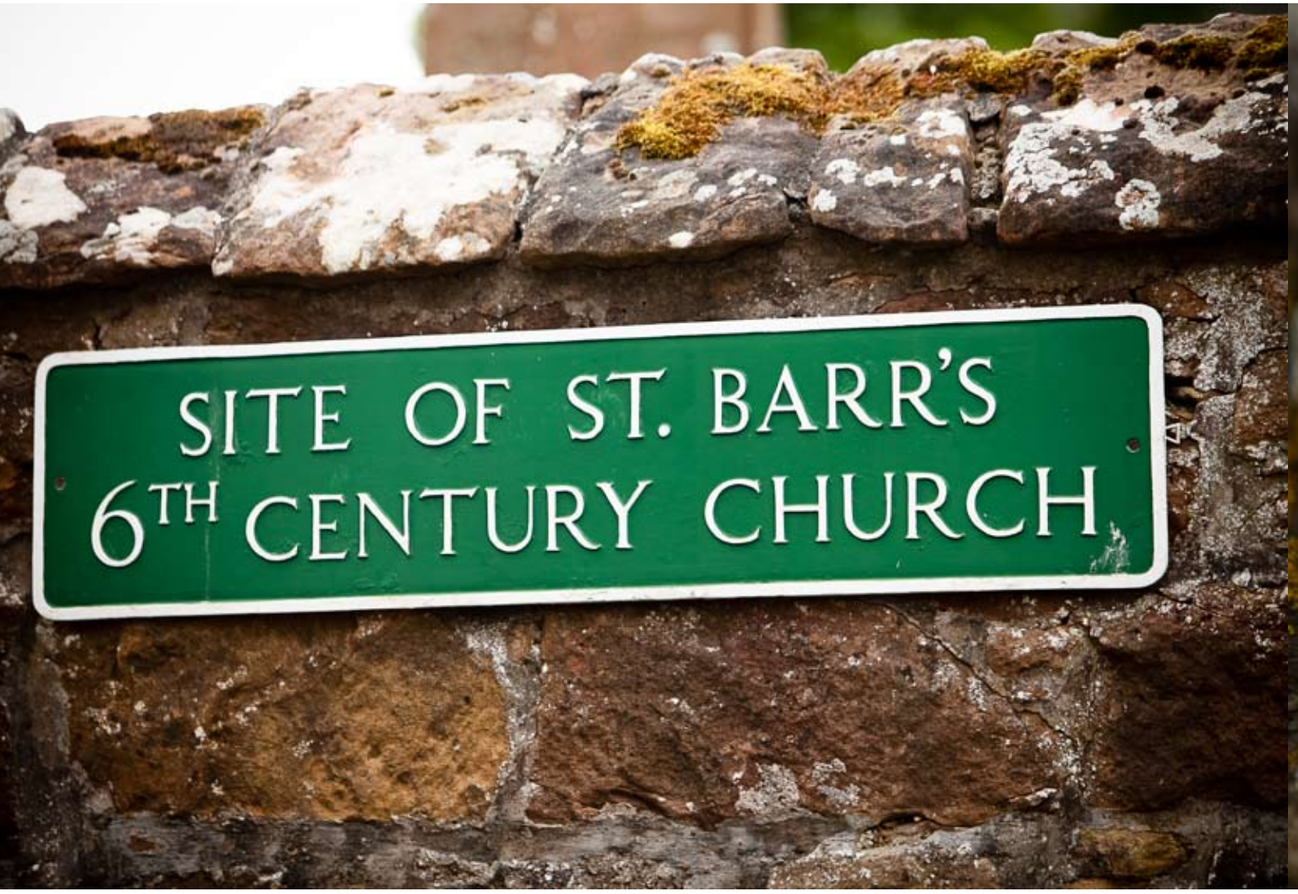
Mare Biddle is a playwright, author and editor. She's done some good writing and some bad writing, to good reviews and bad reviews, in perplexing combinations. Mostly she just keeps practicing. You can find her online at **marebiddle.com**.

1000 WORDS

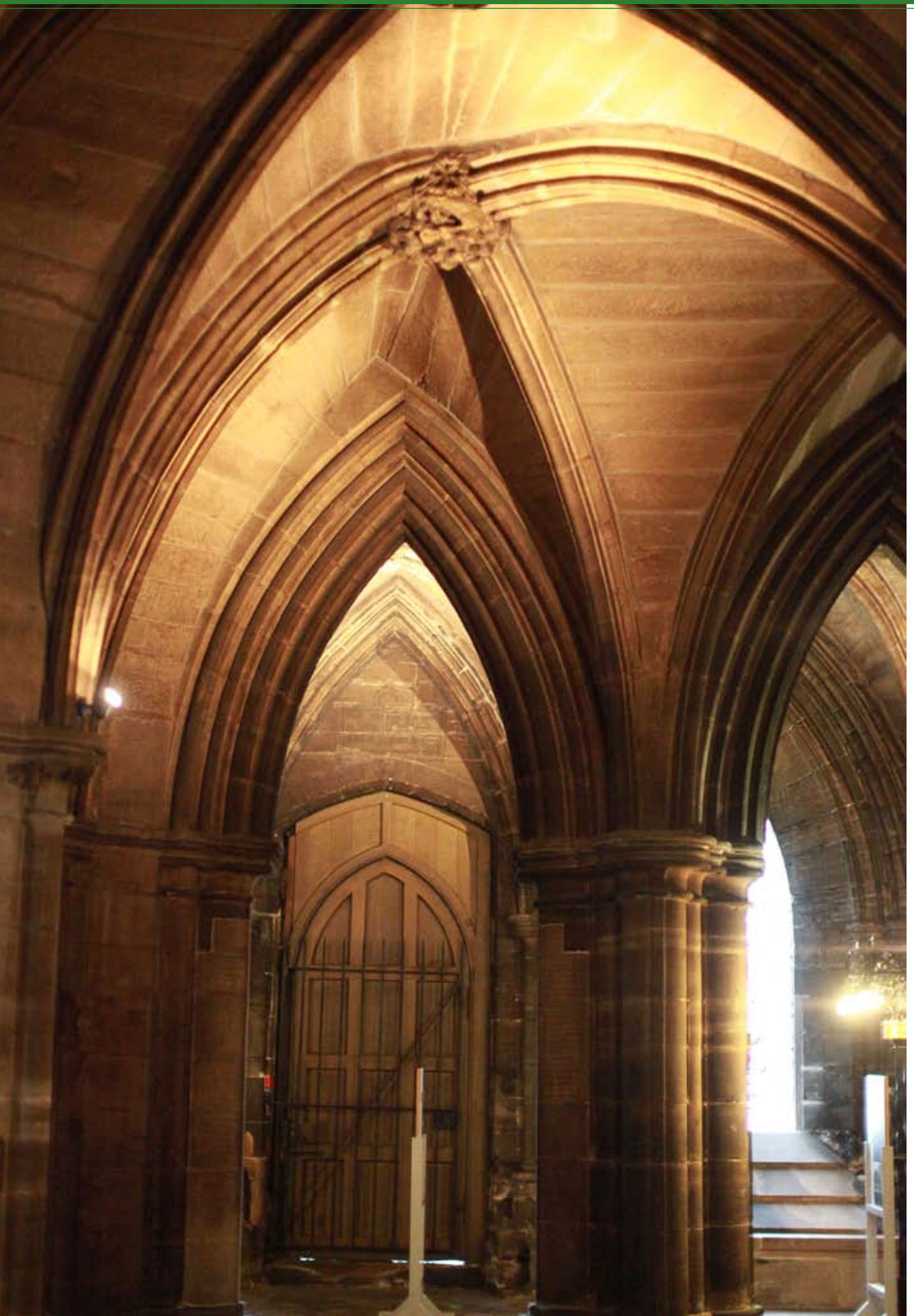
penny sylvia

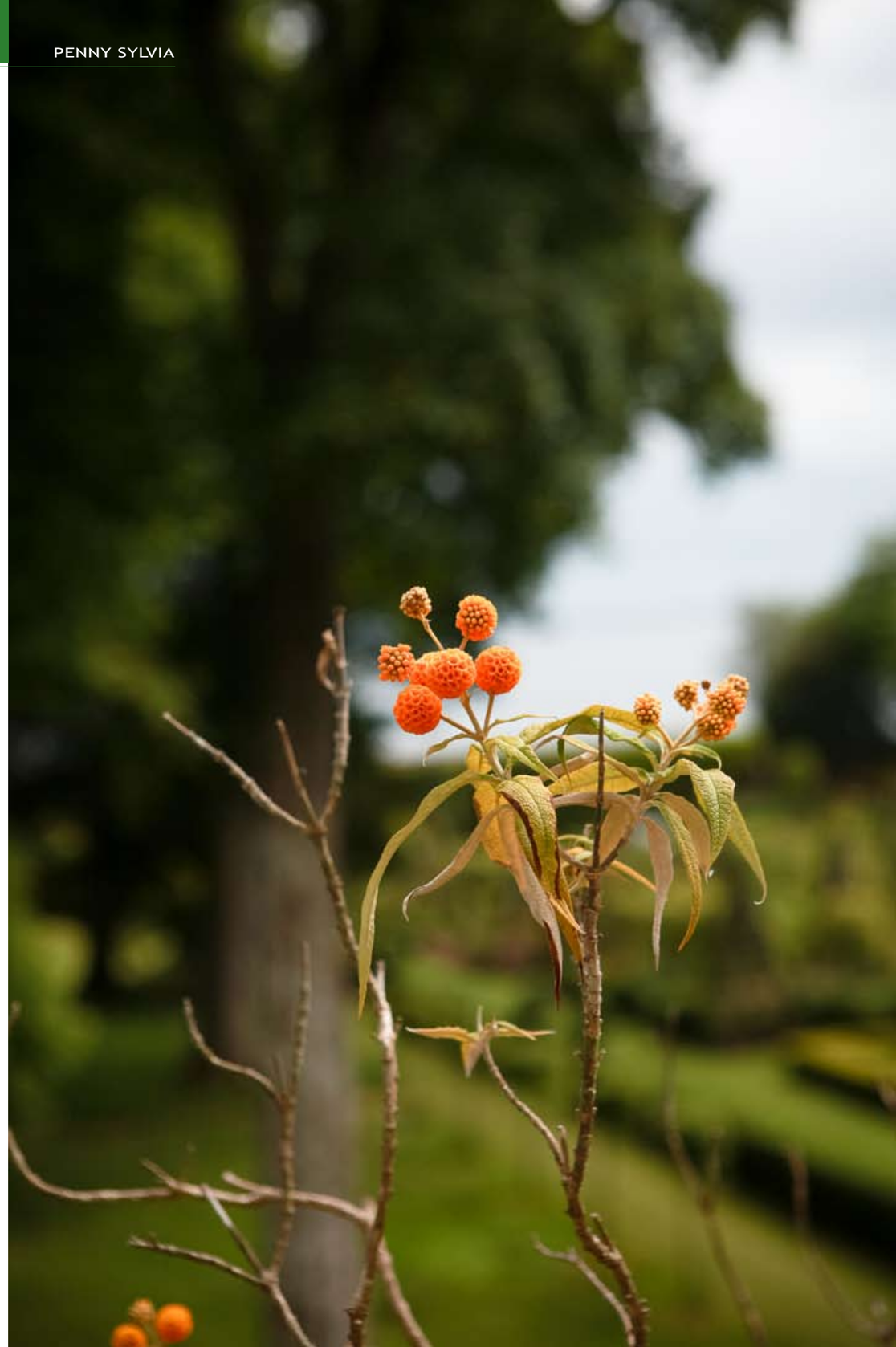
scotland

a photo essay


SITE OF ST. BARR'S
6TH CENTURY CHURCH

About two and a half years ago, my grandmother, who I was incredibly close to, passed away. She was from Scotland. By the crazy chance of being at the right place at the right time (shooting a destination wedding in Jamaica) guests asked if I could come to Scotland and shoot their wedding; of course my answer was yes—calmly on the outside and ecstatically on the inside. I was incredibly taken with Scotland. At times I was unable to pull out my camera and take photographs. It was deeply personal to be there. I was walking around the same places my grandmother had when she was a child.






PENNY SYLVIA


Fearn House


CERAVOLO


TELEPHONE
TELEPHONE

While there on assignment, I was able to explore for a few days on my own. It was incredible, the texture of things—moss, sand, and rocks. The thought that those things were old and new was amazing to me. There was something about the sky...I love capturing the sky when I photograph because on any day it can be different and memorable. I always try to capture the sky.

Penny Sylvia is an international lifestyle photographer specializing in capturing real moments. Penny enjoys having an occupation that embraces her passion for life. When not traveling the world shooting weddings and commercial work, Penny enjoys her family, good food and friends. Find her online at **pennysylvia.com**.

robert freedman

happy family

I loved going to the Chinese Restaurant. It likely had a more specific name, but it's not one I ever remember any of us using. We all simply called it the Chinese Restaurant. And when my dad announced that we were going there for dinner, my brother and I could not contain our excitement and began leaping up and down.

we would all pile into the family car—a grayish 1954 Buick sedan—Mom and Dad in the front seat, the three of us in the back. My older sister Linda sat strategically between me and Paul, so we wouldn't fool around and make Dad angry enough to stop the car, turn around with that twisted-up look on his face and say, "One more word and we're going to turn around and go home. Is that what you want?"

And we'd both look down and say, no that wasn't what we wanted at all, we really, truly, deeply wanted to go to the Chinese Restaurant and we would be good boys from now on we promised swear to God. Linda looked smug, glad we were getting what we deserved. She was convinced we were the most annoying brothers in the world. She may have even been willing to give up the Chinese dinner just to see us punished. But, in the end, we all knew, including Dad, that he was not going to turn around and take us home. Not now, not when we were so close to Chinatown we could almost smell the fishy odors wafting through the open car windows.

Dad turned back to the front, put the car in gear and drove on, and my brother and I looked at each other, over Linda, and grinned.

Chinatown in Philadelphia is down by the waterfront. I always thought it was strange that a neighborhood could be named in such a way. It would be like someone calling our West Philadelphia neighborhood Jew Town or parts of North Philly, Negro Place. But the people in Chinatown didn't seem to mind, as far as I could tell. All the shops and restaurants announced it on their store fronts. Maybe they were proud of being Chinese and didn't want to be mixed up with the rest of us. Their food was sure different and a whole lot better, I thought, than the stuff we ate back in Jew Town.

The hostess always seemed unusually happy to see us, smiling and bowing and quickly leading us to our favorite table, right near the fish tank—a beautiful, big, bubbling aquarium with all sorts of colorful tropical fish swimming around.

We didn't even have to read the menus. We all knew what we wanted. But we looked anyway, just to be polite. I don't remember talking very much before we ordered. Our family wasn't very chatty. I don't think Dad felt he had anything to say to children and we kids knew we weren't supposed to bother him. Mom always warned us about this: "Don't talk to your father," she'd say. "He's got too much on his mind." I wondered what terrible things were going on in his head, but I knew better than to ask. I had learned the hard way not to irritate my father.

But at the Chinese Restaurant the mood was more easygoing. Sometimes Dad would smile and tell Mom some story about one of his patients. And he wouldn't even get mad if Paul and I started laughing about something or began teasing Linda.

When the waitress came to take our order, Dad was, of course, the one who spoke. "We'll start with the egg rolls," he told her, speaking slowly in his deep doctor's voice. My taste buds were already throbbing, thinking about the golden brown, crispy rolls that would soon arrive along with the fiery hot mustard that you could dip your section of egg roll into if you dared. "And we'll have Won Ton soup," Dad told her. It was only years later that I discovered there were other types of Chinese soups.

"Then we'll have a double order of spare ribs." Paul and I could hardly sit still at this point. Spare ribs were our absolute favorite. More bone than meat, but so tasty and greasy. What could be better than food you could eat with your hands, and right in front of your father without him reaching over and smacking your hand with his fork. "Also we'll have the Chow Mein."

Then sometimes Dad would look at me and nod, which meant I got to tell the waitress the next dish. "Moo Goo Gai Pan," I almost shouted. Dad must have known how much I loved to say that name. I didn't care so much about the dish itself, something full of chicken and mushrooms and other vegetables, but the name was magical. Moo Goo Gai Pan.

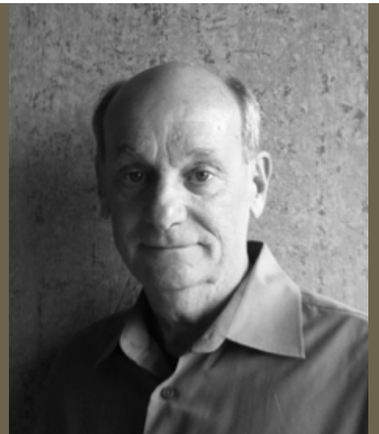
Then it was Mom's turn to order, and like everything else, it was always the same. "And I will have the shrimp in oyster sauce." It somehow seemed so elegant and exotic—two foods that we never ate at home and here combined into one dish.

We didn't have to order the bowls of white rice or the hot tea; we knew the waitress would bring those without asking. That's how wonderful eating at the Chinese Restaurant was. Hot tea in little porcelain cups and all our favorite dishes served under gleaming metal covers, and all of us passing the platters and the rice around the table and Dad asking who was ready for more soup to be ladled into their bowl and Mom smiling as she forked up her pink shrimp and for at least that moment I could believe we were a happy family.

By the time the fortune cookies were delivered along with the check, Paul and I felt brave enough to read the silly messages out loud: "You will meet a dark stranger." "Healthy life can be yours." "One's love is like the ocean." "Keep always a happy face." We all were laughing. I wanted it to go on and on. I wanted us to live forever in the Chinese Restaurant.

But after Dad had paid the check and left a few extra dollars on the table for a tip, he cinched up his loosened tie, slipped back into his jacket, and said, "Okay, we're all done here. It's time to go back."

"No!" I burst out. "I don't wanta leave." Mom shot a warning look in my direction. But Dad just stared straight ahead, as if he hadn't even heard me.



Robert Freedman is a writer and teacher. Originally from Philadelphia, he now lives in Portland and Cape Meares, Oregon. He still roots for the Phillies, though. He has published work over a forty-year career. His novel, *Fancypants: an autobiographical novel* was published in 2008. His work has appeared in *Tikkun*, *Drash*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Still Crazy*, and many others. His recent short story in *Still Crazy* has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He currently teaches memoir workshops at the Multnomah Arts Center.

weekends with dad

lee olsen

sharp,
no flats—breathe here

I began taking saxophone lessons from Darrell Matthews in the fifth grade. He taught at the junior high school after hours, and we met once a week for two years. Mr. Matthews and I sat in the empty band room, playing from photocopied sheet music nestled on dinged-up, tilting music stands.

shifting

light angled through high windows, projector-like, illuminating a backdrop of orange-carpeted walls and lightly dusted glossies of the greats: Chopin, Mozart, J.S. Bach, Debussy, Mahler, and so on. We spoke of nothing but music and scheduling—I knew nothing of his personal life, except that he was passionate about music and cigarettes. I smelled them on him every time we met, and the ashy-gray scent made me wonder, *How can his lungs hold notes for sooo long*?

Once a week during the dry, deserty Utah summer between fifth and sixth grade, mom drove me to lessons at Mr. Matthew's home. After scratching out a check and sending me up to the door, she headed around the corner to visit her sister. Darrell and I played jazz in the coolness of his basement—in front of a large screen door that opened onto his back yard—sending the warm staccato sound out across the burned-up lawn, through a weathered cedar-wood fence, into the hot stillness of the neighborhood.

When I moved on to junior high, the band teacher, Ms. Tams, arranged for me to enter directly into the symphonic band, rather than sitting through a needless year with the first-years. This was a blessing and a curse: As a newly-arrived second-chair seventh grader, I had no friends in the symphonic. All my friends were in beginner band or orchestra. The third-chair saxophonist, Matt, didn't like me because I superseded him without experiencing the rite of passage that was beginner band. The first-chair, Kasey, didn't like me because she didn't like anybody. A human rendition of Kenny G, complete with Jheri curl, she had a mouth full of braces and a lisped explanation of the social strata of the band.

"The flutes are a clique—all stuck up. Percussionists are a clique—all in punk bands and think the symphonic is for nerds. The genuine nerds are the clarinets. The bassoonist doesn't want to be here—he only plays 'cause his parents make him. The brass are all screw-offs, except the French horns—they're just a different variation of the flutes."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. When we tour the elementary schools and go to comp at Utah State, you can stick by me—if you want."

Inevitably, I reached a point where I did not want to play any longer. It was only an hour or two of practice every other day, but I knew during that window that my friends were out having more fun than me. One afternoon, in the July heat, the family drove out to Mom's childhood home for Sunday lunch with the grandparents. We lounged around on the shaded, Astro-turfed back patio, listening to the Rain Birds clucking water across the lawn. Mom spoke of the progress I was making and joked about my wish to quit. I rolled my eyes, descended deeper into the mugginess of a padded deck chair.

"Alto sax was always my favorite instrument," Grandpa said to no one in particular. "*Hmm-hmm-HMMM—hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm—HMMM . . .*" He hummed and buzzed and stared off across the lawn, squint-eyed, over his apple trees, toward the mountains in the east.

Back home I practiced in the front room, layering scales over the white noise of the swamp cooler as it whirled and spat on the rooftop and sent cool-damp air blustering through a large vent in the hallway ceiling. After warming up, I walked slowly through a simplified version of "Loch Lomond," "Traditional Scottish Folk Song," from a method book—one of the first songs I had ever mastered, and a change of pace from the chromatics and majors and corny practice pieces assigned to me.

"That sounds *so beautiful*," Mom said, peeking around the corner. "I want you to play that at my funeral."

"Yeah, Mom, okay."

I played it through again.

• • • •

My first junior high girlfriend was a flautist. With perfect flautist posture, she made eyes at me across a crescent of nascent musicians, across the podium where Ms. Tams jabbed and slashed her baton through the air with a *pah-pahpah-pah-pahpah-paaah* of her puckered, mustachioed mouth. When I glimpsed those flautist eyes over the top of my music stand, I squirmed and fought off the humiliating reed squeak every adolescent saxophone player knows too well.

When the entire school trooped to Smith's Marketplace on an early-out afternoon, Tara and I walked together. Passing the horse corral kitty-corner to the elementary school, several of the boys, including myself, created a human chain by linking hands in front of the electric fence. The outermost two stepped forward, grasping the wire simultaneously with their free hands. The jolt passed through us, a sharp black-orange *Bzzp!!* running from palm to shoulder to heart to shoulder to palm and so on. *You guys are going to kill yourselves*, someone shrieked. We laughed and laughed, but refused to try it again.

Passing the cemetery, Tara interlaced her slender flautist fingers with my awkward saxophonist fingers. She pressed her body against mine when the sky began to drizzle, and tilted her face upward, hoping for a firsthand inspection of my embouchure.

• • • •

After hours of practicing together in our front room, Mom accompanied me on the piano at the North Ogden Junior High Christmas Concert: "Kemp's Jig," a flitty folksong Darrell Matthews convinced me to play.

Though I kept it a secret at home, it was not hard in the gymnasium for my mom to realize the flautist was my girlfriend. Tara gravitated toward me and we sat together between our respective numbers as our fellow, equally-awkward students slogged through their Christmas pieces. My mom's awareness was a problem only because she had told me over and over again that I was not supposed to date until I was sixteen or older. I ended up pushing away the flautist because I could not bear the guilt of disobeying my mom.

I pushed Tara away at the same time I began pushing away the symphonic band and the E flat alto—at the same time I began pushing away my parents and my siblings. Teenage angst was setting in, naturally, and I replaced my family with friends. I replaced John Coltrane and Charlie Parker with Bad Religion and Social Distortion. Band was not cool or rewarding anymore. I took up the electric guitar, and the saxophone found its way to the top shelf of my closet.

As I forged my new junior high identity, I learned from an obituary that Darrell Matthews had died. There he was in two-by-one-inch black-and-white matte, with his big fob of hair, his smoky-yellow-tinted eyeglasses, and his sly half smile. Polyester shirt, gold chain, chest hair (polyester pants, penny loafers, Marlboros not pictured).

In high school, a salient truth made its way down the grapevine. Darrell Matthews committed suicide. Mom heard this from her sister who lived around the block from him—she told my sister but demanded that this little detail be kept from me. Not surprisingly, my sister eventually spilled the secret.

"You know he didn't die, right? He killed himself. Mom didn't tell you?"

"No—I didn't know. How? Why?"

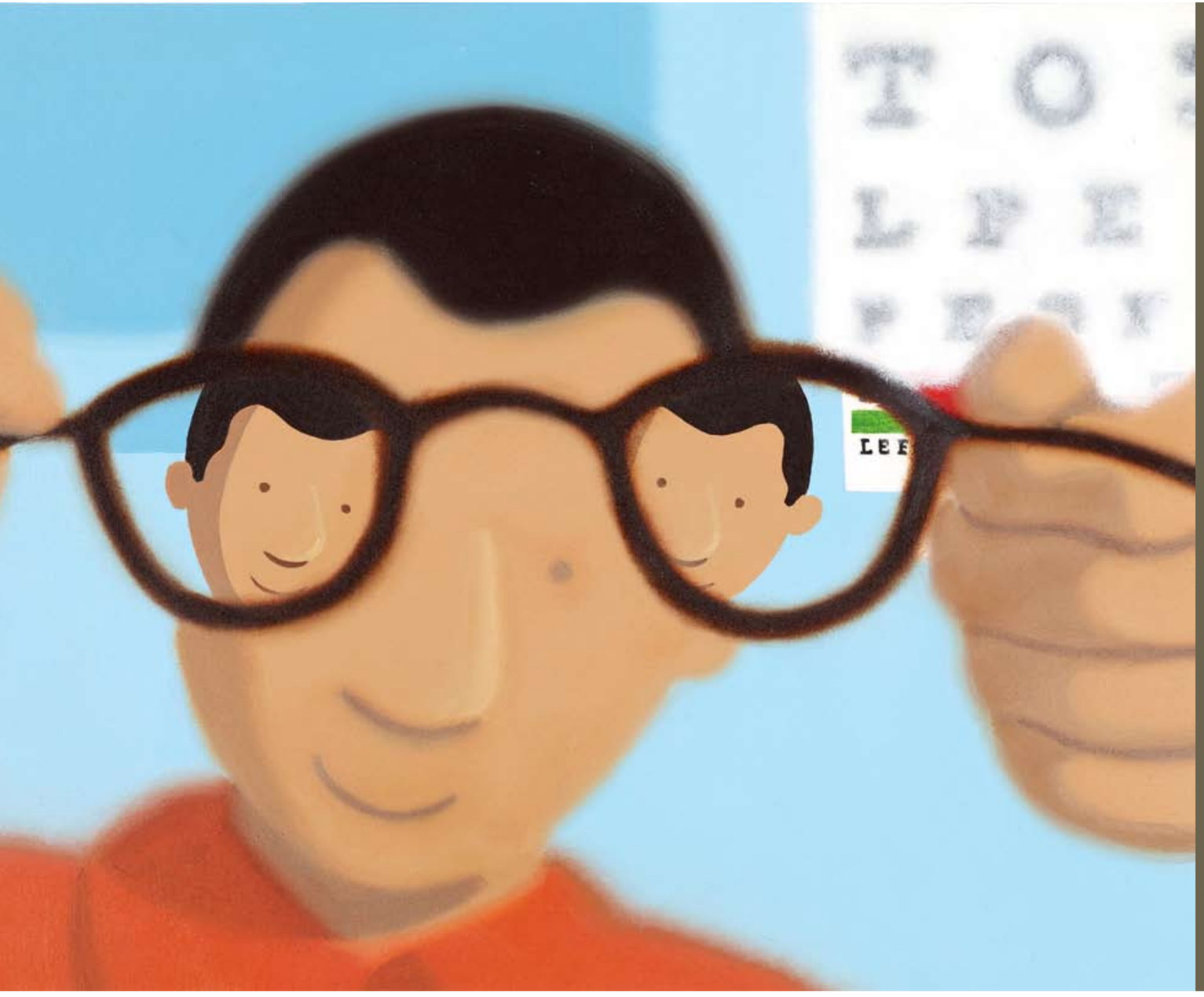
"I dunno. She didn't say."

• • • •

I packed my saxophone when I left Utah for graduate school in Washington, and, after a long hiatus, have begun playing again. I bring it out, assemble it, dangle it from my neck, and ease into simple jazz melodies, warbling tunes I played countless times as a younger me. The notes strike up memories. I revisit and edit mental sequences and stills of a life tied up in the playing of music—family, friends, music, school. Images flash in my head as I listen to "Giant Steps" or as I pull out my saxophone and slide a reed into my mouth while flipping through sheet music annotated with the scribbly hand of my instructor, Darrell Matthews: *sharp, no flats—breathe here—tongue, slur—crescendo—LOUD!!*

My mind touches on the past as I chirp out songs first learned fifteen years ago, and the feelings bear down like a number two Rico reed pressing across my lip, drawing the skin across my teeth, slowly opening the tender flesh and spreading the iron-tinted taste of wood throughout my mouth as I riff repeatedly. The music comes stutteringly at first, then flows smoothly, naturally—muscle memory at its finest. To some degree, playing the saxophone is like riding an expensive, complicated bike: You never forget the fundamentals.

Lee Olsen grew up in northern Utah where he learned the alto saxophone and the guitar, along with an appreciation for backpacking, cycling, traveling, storytelling, and literature. He studied aviation and English at Utah State University before interning at Utah State University Press, teaching ESL at King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi, Thailand, and beginning an English master's degree in 2012 at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, where he currently resides. He can be reached at **lee.olsen@wwu.edu**.



eye doctor

linda silver

looking for a signal

It's late on Christmas Eve. I sit shivering in the car outside an isolated convenience store in Northern Minnesota, my breath steaming up the car windows. The store is dark, but icicle lights strung around the front reflect in the windows and shed a glow over the frozen parking lot. A Hamm's beer sign blinks rhythmically, splashing red streaks across the snow.

I peer at my cell phone. Two signal bars. I try the number again.

on the other side of the planet, near Brisbane, Australia, it's already late afternoon on Christmas day and hot—the Queensland summer. The residents of Sinammon Village Nursing Home will have had their Christmas dinner and are probably dozing in their chairs, their red and green paper hats askew on their tired heads.

The call goes through and rings half a dozen times while I picture my father in his bedroom at Sinammon Village, prizing himself off his bed and shuffling to the phone.

Suddenly the ringing stops. *Call Failed* flashes on the screen. "Shit!" I check the signal again. Still two bars. I pull up *Favorites* and tap *Dad* again.

This time there's a busy signal. I envision my father with the phone to his ear, still trying to answer the first call. I hang up and count to ten before tapping the phone again. He answers on the first ring. "Hullo? Eric here."

My father's London accent, still strong after thirty-five years in Australia, fills the car with his presence.

"Hi Daddy, Merry Christmas!"

"Did you call just now? Because the phone rang, then when I picked it up there was no one there."

"Yes, Dad. It was a bad signal. But I've got through now."

Feedback from my father's hearing aid whines from the phone.

"I can't hear you. Who is it?" he says as if he knows but is not certain.

"It's Linda, Daddy." And because he has a step-daughter named Lynda living near him in Australia, I feel compelled to add, "Linda in America."

I've heard about the pain of having a parent who no longer recognizes you. But at ninety-five, my father's brain is intact, his memory clear, his reasoning still logical and sound. But each time I call it's as if I have to reintroduce myself.

"Take out your hearing aid," I say over the steady whistle emanating from the phone.

He says, "Just a minute. I'm going to take out this hearing aid."

I hear rustling and my father's exasperated mutterings, "Oh, dear me! Dear me!"

Then he says, "That's better. Hullo? Now, who is this?"

"It's Linda! Linda in America. I called to wish you Merry Christmas."

"Oh, Merry Christmas darling! Where are you?"

I tell him about the cabin our family has rented along Lake Superior's North Shore, and explain there is no cell reception at the cabin so I've had to drive five miles further up the shore to make the call. I talk about the fun we had today building a snowman with the grandchildren, and tell him it's snowing again and tomorrow we will go skiing. As I talk, I know how alien all this sounds to him.

And sure enough, he says, "Sounds cold! I don't think I'd like that."

"No, Dad, I don't think you would. You're better off where you are."

"Well, it's been quite hot here lately—too hot to sit outside. It would be nice to go for a swim."

My father and I love swimming. When I was a child in England, our family vacations were

always by the sea. I remember the sting on my sunburned skin, and the taste of salt water as the waves alternately buoyed and swamped me as I kicked and splashed toward my father's outstretched hands.

"Next time I come to see you, we'll go swimming again," I say.

On this snowy Christmas Eve, I don't yet know that my father will be dead in two days. But does he know? Does he want it this way? To die sometime between Christmas and New Year's so that the one won't be spoiled for us and we can begin the other with his death behind us?

And if I did know that this will be the last time we talk, what would we talk about? Would we have one of those half finished conversations such as we've had on my visits to see him in recent years? He, reminiscing, admitting his failures, but regretting nothing. Me, trying against the odds to tell him about my life, my family, always feeling as if I am a remnant of a life he no longer wants to remember. Or would it be like most of our phone calls, talking about the weather or food?

The snow is coming down heavier now and I flick on the windshield wipers. On the inside of the steamed-up window I trace a frowny face with my finger. I switch the car's heater to defrost, but the roar of the fan threatens this already tenuous conversation, and I turn it off.

"How was your Christmas Day? Did they give you a good dinner?" I ask him.

"Oh yes, you know, the usual—turkey with all the trimmings. Mince pies and custard. They do a nice job."

"I'm glad!"

"But the trouble is, it's all got to be mashed up for me because my teeth keep breaking! So they give me mush. It's unappetizing. The people here who have false teeth manage a lot better. I wish now I'd had them all out years ago!"

"Perhaps it's not too late," I say, knowing that it probably is. Then, "What else has been happening?"

He tells me someone came and played the electronic organ at the nursing home so they could sing carols.

"That was nice."

"Oh, I didn't go. Can't be bothered with that sort of thing."

The last time I saw my father—over six weeks ago—an entertainer had come to Sinammon Village to play for a sing-a-long with the residents. It was Melbourne Cup Day, a day when Australians don fancy hats and costumes and gather around TVs to watch the famous horse race—and to party. Dad and I each placed money in the betting pool on a horse called, *Once Were Wild*.

We'd laughed that we'd both chosen the same slyly named horse and that I'd dismissed *Americain* as a choice for me. Sitting on the edge of our chairs in front of the television, we'd cheered our horse on to its mediocre finish in the dead middle of the pack, while *Americain* won the race and the Melbourne Cup. Later, still wearing our race day hats, a corsage for me and a boutonnière for him, I'd coaxed Dad into sitting with the group in the lounge singing the old-time songs. I was surprised by the strength of his voice when he finally began singing, *Daisy, Daisy, Give me your answer do*.

I tell Dad about our plans to go to Hawaii in February. He always perks up when I talk about travelling. It echoes his own pleasure in journeying around the world with his second wife—Lynda's mother—before settling in Australia. He gets vicarious enjoyment from hearing about places I've been, or plan to go. He's never been to Hawaii, or anywhere in the United States. Which means he's never visited me.

I'm telling him about the fabulous snorkeling off the beaches on the Big Island when my phone beeps and *Call Failed* flashes on the screen again. Snow covers the car's windows now, and I slide the driver's window down to clear it. The flakes are thick and blowing sideways across the parking lot. For a moment my thumb hovers over my father's number, but then I click the phone off and slide it into my pocket. At least he knows I'm thinking about him, I tell myself.

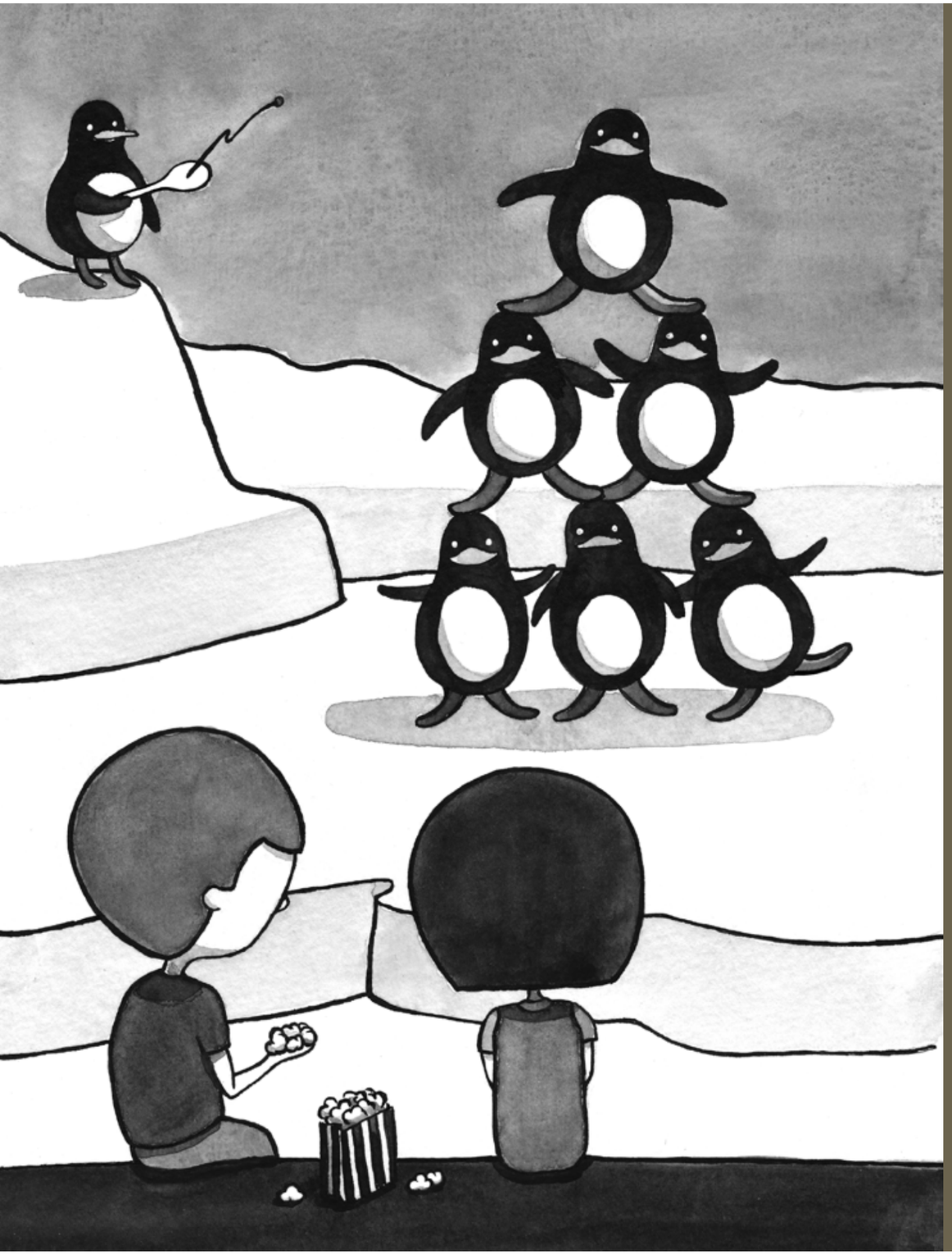
As I drive back to the cabin, snowflakes swirl in the headlights' beam. The road ahead looks like a narrowing tunnel. We'd said all there was to say, I reassure myself. Except, we hadn't. The dropped signal had cut off our usual prolonged leave-takings, repeating phrases, each reluctant to hang up while the other was still saying goodbye.

"Bye Daddy, I love you."

"Love you, darling. Thanks for ringing. Take care of yourself."

I pull up in front of the comforting glow of the cabin where my grandchildren are sleeping in excited anticipation of Christmas morning. The frowny face I'd drawn on the windshield is still faintly visible against the light and I rub at it with the cuff of my jacket before heading inside to my family.

Linda Silver grew up in England and emigrated to the US as an eager twenty-one year-old. After fifty years in the US she thinks of herself as an American, but her writing is focused on the expatriate's experience of separation and estrangement. Linda's work has been published by the Minneapolis *City Pages*, she has been a finalist in *The Loft Literary Center's* creative nonfiction contest and in the *Ventura County Writers Club's* short-short story contest. After a twenty-year career in information technology, she now spends her time traveling and writing. She is currently working on a series of linked essays and a full-length memoir about her life-changing first year in the US Linda's home for now is St. Paul, Minnesota, where she writes to the accompaniment of British birdsong.



penguin pyramid

As a kid Kristin deNeeve had the misfortune of being both book smart and unathletic. Thankfully she was able to redeem herself by drawing nice pictures. In high school her art teacher showed her the children's book Free Fall by David Wiesner and at that moment she knew she wanted to be an illustrator.

Kristin is a freelance illustrator and graphic designer located in Sacramento, California. You can see more of her work at **kristindeneeve.com**.

www.underthegumtree.com