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**Vanitas**

A Journal  
of Creative  
Nonfiction

**KAPOW!!!**

The Ohio State University  
Marion



# Veritas and Vanitas

*A Journal of Creative Nonfiction*

Winter 1998

**Editors :**

Jeff Conley

Jim Ford

Amy Isler

Stanton Swihart

Mandi Tromm

Prashant Tumuluri

Willie Woken

**Faculty Advisor :**

Scott Lloyd DeWitt

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## Choice Noise

*Kristinne Seibel*

My life is noisy. Really noisy. I grew up in a noisy house. Six of us lived in a side-by-side duplex with three bedrooms, one bath. As the oldest of the four children, I learned early on to grab what chunks of quiet I could. My seventh summer I recall waking early, and while my noisy sister was still sleeping, I would tiptoe into a pair of shorts and a top, skip the hairbrush and shoes, and steal away to the front porch. There I could listen to the whoo- whoo- whooping of what I imagined to be a family of owls singing good night to one another in their topsy-turvy fashion. Since I lived in the city, I probably heard the coo- coo- cooing of pigeons, but this choice noise inspired my imagination to run. The front porch provided me just the right spot for honing my daydreaming skills. I played many roles on those porch steps. I could be a teacher, a beekeeper, a writer, a singer. Some days it was just fine to be me in the quiet of the morning, a little girl enthralled by the sight of sunlight and leaf-cast shadows dancing across my naked toes.

I never bought into any illusions regarding the fact that having three children of my own would mean any less noise. I had three kids in five years, moved us to the country and enrolled in college full time. While I write papers or wrestle things like algebra homework, I coexist with the chaos. I can read, write, absorb, create and study amid the noise, the choice noise as well as the harder-to-take cacophony of five individuals under a single roof. I always wanted my home to be the safety net, a place where all forms of expression were acceptable and welcome. It is.

Providing the vocal backdrop for my three ring circus is my husband. John sings and has been graced with a rich tenor voice. He isn't real romantic about it or anything, so he doesn't actually sing around the house or serenade me. But he is almost always preparing to sing to some crowd somewhere. So he hums. He hums while he cooks, while he eats, while he reads or rakes leaves. He hums, all day long -- the same measures over and over

until he has made them come out exactly right. I cannot identify their place in which song. They are, to my ears, measures that just hang there. I guess this is the same thing all artists do as they prepare to share their gifts. Writers, I know, twist words, test their arrangements, wring them out and restack them until, at last, they fall into their place in a line. Perhaps a singer does this with vocal cords and notes. I can only tell how beautiful it is when it is done, and I am mesmerized by a voice that seems to melt through to my soul. Every kind of art must be crafted. When I get aggravated at the humming, I recall the choice noise of this beautiful voice in song and the appreciation for it -- humming and all -- I have been able to develop.

None of my children gives the church mice any competition. I think by virtue of being twelve, John, my oldest, is just loud and volatile and full of energy. He has so much to say and think about and do and share that it just doesn't stay inside for long. So much of this child's noise is music to my ears. He came home from a trying day of junior high and described a classmate as being "so obtuse." When I picked him up from his first dance, I asked him how it was, and he marveled at the fact that a girl, who I decided must have been the 'wallflower,' had many dance partners once he took the initiative and invited her to dance. "I didn't think she came to a dance to sit there," he told me. I commented on the kindness of his act and blurted the question, "Isn't she very attractive or popular?" To which my twelve-year-old replied, "I don't know. She's really smart, though."

I am grateful for such choice noise. It rewards me and inspires me to keep on parenting. I let it come to mind as I listen to so many of my friends with kids this age complain that their children don't talk to them. And I remind myself of this good fortune as I listen to the nth droning analysis of the profundity of the latest Collective Soul release while a decade's worth of Legos cascade through dirty hands, crash-landing back into the trunk that stores them. And this child, of whom I am so proud, controls his nasal drip by snorting, honking and wiping his nose on his sleeve. Just be twelve, John, and keep talking to me, keep talking.



My middle child, Timothy, has Tourette Syndrome. Tourette Syndrome is a rare neurological disorder with many manifestations. Common symptoms are motor and vocal "tics." Motor tics are grimaces, twitches and gestures while vocal tics run the range from loud syllabic outbursts to echolalia (repeating your own or others' words or phrases) to coprolalia which is the uncontrollable spewing of profanity or socially unacceptable phrases. This means noise, uncontrollable, unpredictable noise. Fortunately, we haven't done much coprolalia, but there is plenty of yelling, yapping, yowling and the ever-present "YIPPEEE."

I have become aware of the disgust and intolerance on the faces of those who do not or will not understand this easily misunderstood and often embarrassing affliction. Some of them are related to us. Most of them are people he must interact with every day as he faces school. I am afraid most days that I send him off. He never is. He gets up every day as if the world has never caused him pain. He fills my life with choice noise as he expresses his love for everyone, speaks to even the nastiest people with a gentle kindness and handles his "enemies" by praying for them. Of a bus driver who has made getting to and from school a particularly rough experience he told me, "You know, Mom, if I was the grown-up and Bonnie was the kid with Tourette's, I would be nice to her." A week or so later he kissed me good-bye in the morning, and, before heading to the end of the driveway to wait for the bus to pick him up, he said, reassuringly, "Don't worry, Mom, if Mr. Clemons and Bonnie are mean to me today, I'll just remember they don't understand about me." I do not know where this kind of strength comes from, but it is something to behold.

Listening to Timothy, I have learned tolerance. His bright and shining spirit has provided me with connection to the place in myself where true humanity develops. In his presence, I am reminded that people can express unbelievable kindness and embrace him for who he is, in spite of what he has, and people can be unbelievably cruel, shutting him out based on what he has, never bothering to find out who he is. Since Tourette's does not require crutches or a wheelchair, a cast or bandages, I have

realized that being unable to "see" something doesn't mean it can't exist. In addition, we have found that some of the most difficult and distant people in our midst relate to Tim. I am guessing these are folks who know the pain of being labeled "different." Folks who know the view from the outside, by heart. He is only ten, but he has done plenty of time from the outside.

My daughter, Amanda, is seven years old, and there is nothing on the planet to compare with a seven-year-old girl. She is beautiful and bright and bursting with all that life is revealing to her in fits and starts. Watching her unfold, I am reminded of all the wonderful things about growing up. She is not the least bit shy or timid, and she talks all the time.

She prefaces everything she says to me with "Mo-omm..." (pronounced as two syllables, mah- um, the second syllable one note lower than the first), usually no big deal for a tolerant and seasoned pro like me. But we've had a particularly long winter with something like eighteen weeks of snow days and vacations. "Mo-omm" just became so much noise. One day I expressed my distaste for this term in a grocery checkout line. A little lady appeared behind me and said, "You know, 'mother' is the most important word in the English language." Amanda wasn't saying "mother." She was saying, "Mo-omm." I considered responding with my diatribe about the insensitivity of this romanticizing of the hard work of good parenting directed at someone obviously as stressed out as I was. Then I considered spitting cruelly, "I bet you never had any kids" but realized the insensitivity of that comment. In the next breath the stranger confirmed my guess by telling me she had never been "blessed" with children, and, before a sympathetic tear could well up in my eye, there was Amanda : "Mo-omm, I am hungry. My feet are tired. Mo-omm, what are we having for dinner...."

By the time we got home, I put in a request. "Call me Kriss," I said. Amanda said she couldn't do that, so I asked her to call me Barbie (you know, the one who has everything, and since I was spending so much of my time taking care of all of her furnishings and her clothes and car and pool, I thought it might help me feel better). She said, "Mo-omm, you can't be Barbie.

She has pinky boobs."

Her first grade teacher wrote on her first grade card, "I am afraid Amanda has a bit of an attitude." I don't know what this woman is afraid of. I celebrate attitude. Over the long winter I read Women Who Run with the Wolves. One afternoon Amanda entered the living room where I was reading and said, "Mo-omm, will you read me a story?" I had just reached the chapter that is introduced with the Hans Christian Anderson tale of The Ugly Duckling, so I scooped her onto my lap and, nestled in the chair, we read The Ugly Duckling. However, in Amanda's mind she read a "chapter book" and told everyone she came in contact with about her accomplishment. I wonder what her teacher thought when Amanda told her she "read" Women Who Run with the Wolves AND as a result has taken up howling -- definitely a choice noise.



I am able to appreciate the value of the noises in my life while turning often to the front porch lesson of my seventh summer and recognizing my need to replenish a space in me that craves quiet or choice noises. I can be feeling bad about anything and/or everything, unable to concentrate, and once through "Nessun Dorma!" with Pavorotti (high volume), I can focus again. The words are Italian, so I do not know exactly what he's singing. But I don't care. Tenors, as I said, touch my soul. The music and the voice blend just right to soothe me.

Quiet remains a cherished experience. I love to listen to the mundane. I enjoy things like the abrupt hush just after the refrigerator stops running, the sound of plates of snow melting and sliding off the roof, crisp leaves somersaulting across the pavement. I love the quiet of the pages of a letter and the memory of the author's laugh resounding in my head. I grab at quiet, slip into it, snatch it up— whatever it takes because it feeds my soul. But I no longer view quiet solely as the prize. I have come to realize that quiet and noise, loud and soft, do not necessarily oppose. I play Pavorotti loud and call it a choice

noise ; John's humming is soft, but I have had to learn to appreciate its beauty. And quiet can be a lonesome sound. This combination of noises, choice and otherwise, may be elements of the same cloth -- the warp and the weft, individual threads working in concert with one another, driven by the shuttle of the everyday, to weave a complex and unique pattern of life sounds.

*Kristinne Seibel is a junior majoring in psychology at OSU Marion.*



I am able to appreciate the value of the noises in my life while tuning often to the faint porch lesson of my seventh summer and recognizing my need to replenish a space in me that craves quiet or choice noises. I can be feeling bad about anything and/or everything, unable to concentrate, and once through "Nessun Dorma" with its soaring high volume, I can focus again. The words are plain, so I do not know exactly what he's singing. But I don't care. Tenor, as I said, touch my soul. The music and the voice did just right to soothe me.

Quiet remains a cherished experience. I love to listen to the mandarin. I enjoy the way like the abrupt hush just after the refrigerator stops running, the sound of plates of snow melting and sliding off the roof trap leaves something across the pavement. I love the quiet of the pages of a letter and the memory of the author's laugh resonating in my head. I grab at quiet, slip into it, snatch it up—whatever it takes because it feeds my soul. But I no longer view quiet solely as the prize. I have come to realize that quiet and noise, loud and soft, do not necessarily oppose. I play Pavlovian loud and call it a choice

## **Why Aren't We Learning?**

*Jim Ford*

In recent years, our education system has been in a steady decline. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our colleges and universities that at times place so much emphasis on research that the students get left out. I am in no way opposed to research, but there are times when we go too far. When universities put so much emphasis on research that their student body is not given the proper attention that it needs to succeed, something is definitely wrong.

The problem begins in graduate school with the system of how graduate teaching associates are used. Graduate teaching associates, or TAs, are graduate students who, in return for tuition discounts and a salary, work for the university usually as a professor's assistant. They are often assigned to teach classes so that the professors can continue with their research. Sometimes, however, these TAs are used to help with research. This is where the problem begins. In some universities, so much emphasis is being placed on these students to do research that they are not getting enough teaching experience. In turn, when they are placed into a class as an instructor, many are so nervous that they do more harm than good to their students.

One of my professors gave me the example of a friend of his who was preparing to finish her graduate work in psychology and begin teaching. During her time in graduate school, she was asked by many different faculty members to work on research with them because of her qualifications. The university paid her to work with faculty members rather than having her teach for her wages. Now she is on the job market and, because of the quality of her research, she is getting the attention of many top notch schools that want her to work for them. Unfortunately for her and her future students, when she gets this job, she will be teaching for the first time with no training whatsoever. This could be a serious dilemma.

Many university professors seem to be more interested in doing research than in actual teaching. I agree that research is a

very important part of improving our education system; if it wasn't for people doing research, for example, we would never have found the cures for many deadly diseases. But if all our time is spent doing research and not spent teaching the next generation how to do a little research of their own, we may soon run into the proverbial wall when all of our older researchers start dying off. Yes, research is important, but teaching is important, too. What is the purpose of having universities if we are not teaching in them?

Again, I don't think that this is the norm, but it appears to be rapidly heading in that direction. I also understand that many of our universities are "research institutions," including OSU. These institutions are initially set up to conduct research, and much of their major funding comes from the research that they do. Ohio State, for instance, is one of the country's leading research facilities, and its primary focus for new hires at the main campus is research. But, if these institutions are going to teach as well as do research, they need to train their faculty, new and old, to teach. My belief is that most people who go into the teaching profession have a definite passion for their students and really care about whether or not these students are learning. But I also believe that there are many professors, whether because of pressure from their institution to do more research or because they really are not cut out to teach, who simply do not give their students the attention that is necessary to see that they are getting the best education possible. This needs to change.

What are the answers to these and the other problems facing our educational system? The arguments made here do not even begin to scratch the surface; one probably could not even cover them all in a single book. One possible solution is to set up seminars and classes that focus on university teaching and lecturing, courses that would be there for students who intend to teach in a university as well as for existing faculty that may want a refresher in dealing with student needs, both in and out of the classroom. But this is not enough. In order to prepare these up and coming teachers, I feel that there needs to be some sort of training program, like FEEP (Field Experience in Education Program). This is a program that is required of all Elementary

and Secondary Education majors in order to graduate. Why is it not required for future college instructors?

If something isn't done soon, we could be in serious trouble in the future. I think that if every caring educator and every serious student were to stand together and try to get the reform ball rolling, someone would have to take notice. Maybe we can begin working together to solve these problems before it's too late.

*Jim Ford is a senior at OSU Marion majoring in English.*

## **There's No Such Thing as a Free Refill, Or You Get What You Get**

*David Steigerwald*

During the 1995-96 academic year, my family and I spent a year in Okinawa, Japan, while I held a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship in American Studies at the National University of Japan, Ryukyus. I had never been to Asia, and Japan had never been a serious part of my scholarly interests. We went mostly because the chance came our way. It's hard enough to travel at all with children. To do any extended, international traveling is impossible unless you are filthy rich or someone pays you to do it. Because we don't belong among the former, taking the Fulbright to Japan was the most likely way for us to see some of the world.

We were plunged into the country with very little help from our hosts, most of whom were on their summer vacations when we arrived. We had no language skills, and only the most general knowledge of the place. We discovered that there are more similarities than differences these days between Japan and the United States, but the differences were imposing enough that they took some getting used to.

Take breakfast, for example. I'm not much of a breakfast person myself. I don't eat any. My wife and kids eat breakfast. Unlike a lot of kids--unlike me when I was growing up--my kids don't often eat cereal in the morning; toast and fruit mostly are their fare. My daughter likes those flavored bagels, and they have to be cinnamon, not blueberry, not egg, and of course not onion. She'd starve first.

Breakfast, coming, as it tends to do, first thing in the morning, was one of our first thoughts after waking up from a thirty-hour trip. We were relieved to see that one of the bits of advice in our Fulbright Guidebook to Japan seemed to be true: Japan is covered with little coffee shops, which serve, of all things, coffee. But they usually serve food as well. They're Japan's version of the all-purpose diner, cheap (by Japanese standards) and open pretty much all the time. And if they aren't



open when you try the door, the owner, who usually lives inside the restaurant, might well open up for you. These shops are easy enough to find, because they usually have a neon sign announcing which national coffee brand they are affiliated with. The coffee sign often is right next to the beer sign, announcing which brand of beer the establishment sells. Besides that, the Japanese word for coffee is pronounced, basically, C-O-F-F-E-E, except an H is used instead of an F. This word was among the more promising ones to us, since, like Michael Jordan, which the Japanese pronounce M-I-C-H-A-E-R J-O-L-D-A-N, "cohi" was fairly close to the English, and we figured we could use our new-found and mighty-impressive language skills to get by in any coffee shop Japan might put in our path. So you see, a few minor and, we assumed, easily disregarded differences aside, the ubiquitous coffee shop seemed to be our kind of place.

We quickly learned something that our Fulbright Guide Book to Japan forgot to mention. In Japan, there's no such thing as a free refill. A cup of coffee, usually a teeny, tiny cup of coffee, costs money, whether it's your first or fourteenth. And in our experience, the going rate for a cup of coffee in a coffee shop was about four dollars.

My wife was responsible for this discovery. After knocking down her first cup, she tried to get the owner to fill it up again. The owner refused. Susan figured that she was doing a poor job articulating the word "cohi." It was pretty scary not being able to articulate that word, the deployment of which we were so confident just moments before. And the more frustrated Susan became, the more "cohi" kept coming out as "coffee." This didn't help matters.

Things went downhill from there. We all ordered breakfast. In Japan, you don't get to pick or choose. You can't have eggs sunny-side up or poached or eggs Benedict or in an omelet, even if you know the terms for such things. You can't have sausage links or patties to suit your fancy. You can't have whole wheat or white toast. In Japan, you get what you get. In this case, we all got scrambled eggs with hotdog chunks and lettuce with some sort of secret sauce. I ate it. The kids just

laughed and refused to touch any of it. At about twelve bucks a plate, we parents were more than a little insistent that they be flexible and eat it. They refused. We were reduced to "the old parent plea": Please try it. They refused. We sunk lower. Okay, try a little of it and we'll buy you some candy. They refused. Being stern disciplinarians, we refused to buy them candy. Instead we bought some Pringles Potato Chips.

It took us several months to figure out what had happened. In Japan, the customer is not "always right." In Japan, the customer needs the expert tutelage and advice of the server, whose job it is to know what's best for the person they are serving. Even gasoline stations are that way. There's no self-serve in Japan. Gas stations are staffed by specially-trained "gasoline handlers," whose education in the arts and mysteries of pumping gas is a government-mandated and officially-licensed matter. The customer doesn't really even know how to pull the car into the station. One of the very important tasks of the official gasoline handler is to scream and yell at the driver, "Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai, Hai" until the driver is conducted to that one, single, exact spot where the car needs to be. You can't pump your own, and you can't have eggs over-easy if the cook decides that scrambled eggs with hotdog chunks and lettuce with secret sauce is best for you.

After we'd been "in country" a while, we understood these things. The secret sauce isn't so secret; it's the same all over the country. Of course, it's still a secret to me, since I never bothered to find out just what it is. Frankly, some things you're better off not knowing, and this is one of them. We caught on pretty quickly about the no-refill thing. It is, it seems, a nationwide policy. I was told that a Perkins Pancake House opened in central Tokyo and gave free refills. This radical marketing idea evidently worked so well that two-hour waits for seats on weekday mornings were not unusual. Eventually, we even grew accustomed to the expense of things and would think nothing of spending \$200 for dinner out. I once even paid eleven dollars for a bottle of Budweiser, though this was out of ignorance rather than extravagance. I deserved the pinch, actually. I was violating

one of my golden rules: Never eat in a restaurant or drink in a bar that is on the top of a building or in a park. This over-priced Bud came in a bar on top of our Tokyo hotel where I had gone in search of late-night food.

We even figured out why the coffee-shop owner wouldn't give us more coffee that first day. It had been her experience that American customers expect free refills--imagine that, free refills--and get mad when they're charged. So she just saved herself the hassle and kept her coffee to herself--and saved us money to boot.

Meanwhile, my daughter ate nothing but Pringles Potato Chips for the first two weeks in Japan. Eventually she came to love "Japanese sticky rice," which, though the staple food and the principal agricultural product of the country, is, contrary to all expectations, not to mention the most basic rules of economics, extremely expensive--seven or eight times the world market price. Pringles, by contrast, were cheap. They only cost \$2.20 a can, and sometimes you could find them for \$1.80. When you see a bargain in Japan, you got to jump on it, because there are no sales in Japan. That would be too much like giving away free coffee.

*David Steigerwald is Associate Professor of History at OSU Marion.*

## **Chatfield**

*Willie Woken*

The village of Chatfield is a collection of houses and business places along a main street. It was once a cranberry bog where far-flung Indian tribes gathered to trade, hunt, pick berries, enjoy social activity and the mix of DNA necessary for isolated people.

When the immigrants arrived, the area continued as a place for trade but a strict moral code did not permit mingling with strangers wandering up and down the Sandusky Pike, the only known exception being a red-haired cinnamon salesman who stopped at the village hotel. As a result of these restrictions, there is an abundance of cousins, causing the family tree to look like a tightly woven Persian rug – all gray with an occasional strand of red.

The main street, State Routes 4 and 103, boasts the only traffic signal between Bucyrus and Attica. There are two railroads: one has four or five trains a day, the other one or two a week. Every Friday and Sunday night during the summer we have “lake traffic.” The license plates have strange names like PICKAWAY and TUSCARAWAS. Most of the people in the cars are asleep. Nothing has ever happened here that would tend to wake anyone up.

The highlight of the week is Tuesday night – garbage night in Chatfield. It is a social event, a time when people wave at each other and are generally cordial, all the while counting each other’s trash bags—with particular competition on the Tuesday following Christmas. They also make observations relating to dress, health, and overall appearance – things that are not obvious through a crack in the curtain. All of these events are constant and unchanging. They contribute to contentment and serenity, each occurring in deliberate sequence. Sometimes the semi-weekly train goes through on garbage night—but not often. When it does you can feel the tension all over town. Even the dogs are uneasy, barking at the crossing whistle. People who live quiet lives do not handle the stress of overlapping events well.

When the train passes, all return to their usual torpid state.

There are two community celebrations each year, a firemen's chicken barbecue in September and the October Halloween parade where, at exactly 2 p.m. on Saturday, the sheriff places his cruisers across Rt-4, and disorganized little kids go stumbling along main street in goofy costumes blowing on kazoos. When they have gone full-circle, they gather at village hall. The sheriff turns off his flashers and goes home. A mile of traffic in each direction rolls slowly by, the drivers craning their necks to see through the crowd on the side street, imagining some tragedy has attracted a mob; instead, we are electing a queen, and handing out bags of treats to the kids, who, later, faces smeared and mouths stuffed, still in costume but with their Ronald Reagan or Richard Nixon masks pulled down around their necks, straggle four or five paces behind a parent, peering into a goody-bag. The innocent face of a child in contrast with the grotesque.

In a couple hours, the truckers are waving at us with all five fingers again.

On Sunday all go to church—or hide their cars in the garage on Saturday night until church is over—then follow the faithful to Bob Evans in Bucyrus for breakfast.

Chatfield has its main street residents who pretty much ignore each other. People living on the “side street” by the grocery store are a little more social; they tend to drink Pepsi for breakfast and gather to watch football games on a big screen TV. Then there is the “back street,” where the elegant people – the village royalty – live. They live ordered lives; nothing unexpected ever happens in their world. At 10 a.m. on Saturday the lawnmowers start. No grass has ever gone to seed on the back street. It is a place where nature takes a left turn. When their fat little pets sniff one another, they put on airs of indignity—so human.

The attitude of the natives toward strangers has not changed much since 1782 when Colonel Crawford came calling and was burned at the stake. None of our mayors has ever fully understood why the sheriff no longer permits open burning but has learned to take equal joy in more modern forms of torment.

The village government is made up of those who reflect the ideals of the back street, stalwart defenders of short grass, neutered pets, fruitless trees and odorless flowers—all symmetrical, square, round or aligned in a row; hemmed into a bed with a plastic border; edges clipped along the asphalt and concrete; orderly. Add to this the unique ability in small town politics to create laws that apply to only one person and to enforce general laws selectively. It is easy to understand how the council can sit in open session discussing which families are to be run out of town. A zoning law was passed for this purpose. Some “ONE HOUR PARKING” signs were put up on our street while on another street, within fifty feet, were vehicles that had not been moved for fifteen years. From 1840 to the present, one parking ticket has been issued (to a very unpleasant person).

When the sheriff has tried to explain some of the fundamentals of law enforcement to the mayors, they became incensed and threatened to start a village police department. Past successes with chain saws and tow trucks would lead one to believe that arming these people is the answer to all of our problems.

While the governing body is lacking in many areas, its composition represents a cross-section of other institutions in our country, they being comprised of the doddering, the uncomprehending, the insane, the criminal and the baffled. It is part of our family's culture that if anyone wants to make a fool of themselves they should be encouraged rather than restricted.

A dog across the street barked all night, every night, for six years. I asked my son if it bothered his sleep. “I pay no attention to it,” he said, “I do not let dogs run my life.”

Behind our house, separating it from the “back lot,” is “boozers alley.” It begins at the site of the old tavern, and the stop signs are arranged for a straight shot. Speeds of 50 to 60 MPH are possible. The local tipplers could make it home out of sight of the 2 a.m. main street patrol. It is still open, and in the morning, a chubby 70- year- old cheerleader, who has a perfectly square dog—a cube on a leash—takes him for his morning. Beneath him are pudgy little legs and paws that appear to move

with the rapidity of little feet painted on the wheels of a child's pull toy. We have named him "Skidmark," for when he tries to dart off to select his own relief point, she drags him along, her goal as rigid as her straw-blond hair, which has both the texture and shape of a half-worn corn broom. When they reach our yard, they go behind a bush and leave souvenirs of such quantity that one of my sons once observed, "Maybe it wasn't the dog."

Although most of the natives, suspicious of strangers invading their space, are openly hostile and unfriendly, others are unthreatened and often truly gracious. It must be noted that, in practice, tolerance between close neighbors is exercised without ordinances, even when culturally at odds.

Chatfield is a good place to raise children. When kids misbehave, the neighbors send them home. When you are gone, they watch your house. It is about all that remains of the dim past a reminder that a village is a cradle and a nursery where intelligence and joy are stimulated by variety. The entire village should not look like a cemetery, for each tree, mud puddle, tire, stump, and rock is part of a child's adventure, where mistakes of youth can be corrected without devastating lives. It is a shelter and a haven for young and old.

My sons are all grown now, but I am glad they were brought up here. They had a childhood and fun with friends who ignored the bizarre behavior of their elders. And when we went to bed at night, we talked about our day; and to our prayers we added the following caveat:

*Lord, when you return to earth,  
To rid this world of sin,  
Stay away from Chatfield.  
They'll do it to you again.*

*Willie Woken is attending OSU Marion on the "granny" program. The generosity of the State of Ohio allows senior citizens to attend courses without cost. Since no credit is earned, he sought out studies with permanent redeeming qualities.*

## The Making of Moonmen

Didi Fahey

Our television worked fine, but because we lived in the mountains we had terrible reception. Only by using a great deal of tin-foil could we tune in a picture where people were not tripled or quadrupled on the screen. Often, their ghost images would blend together to form a sort of rippled alien that was both frightening and fascinating. Sometimes, we would be able to manipulate the "rabbit-ears" in order to get a crisp, clear picture, then watch in frustration as it dissolved into a myriad of sparkling dots dancing about at will. Most of the time it didn't matter. Most of the time, the only station in our area would broadcast that all-too-familiar circular, black-and-white test pattern. On occasion though, we would be able to watch *The Lone Ranger* or *The Mickey Mouse Club*, but for the most part, television, or radio for that matter, was just not that important to our lives. Every so often, however, something big would happen, and we really needed to watch TV.

There had been pictures of the Apollo launch in the newspaper, and it seemed that almost everyone was planning to attend a landing party. My family was no different. We had friends in Widefield, just east of Colorado Springs, and they had invited us to watch the event with them. They lived far enough away from the mountains that reception would be no problem, but more importantly, they had a REALLY BIG television set. We left early, because my father said that a storm was coming and he didn't want to get caught in the rain, and with good reason, as the family car was an old black station wagon with a back window that didn't seal tight against the hatch. When we started out, there was bright sunshine to the south-east, the direction we were headed. Looking to the north and west, however, there were dark, heavy clouds that were beginning to crowd themselves against the mountains, and the wind smelled cold and dry, the way freezers do when they need a good de-frosting. Usually, rain clouds drop their water as they wander along the Front Range, eventually



disappearing altogether. But this storm was growing as it made its way south, feeding on the foothills and swallowing the mountains whole. Soon, smaller and thinner white clouds could be seen in front of the main storm, like tiny tugboats pulling larger ships behind them. They had a touch of gray to their borders, but for the most part, they were as white as cotton linen. According to Grandmother, this meant hail, and hail brings trouble — downed trees, damaged roofs, broken windows, dented cars, but more than that, it normally means flash-flooding.

It wasn't long before the car was being pushed about by the winds, just as an unruly child might slap at an unwanted toy. Daddy pulled off to the side of the road close to a freeway underpass where we waited out the storm, and Mother turned on the radio. It wasn't news of the storm that we were after; we wanted to learn if the men were still safe, or if something had happened and they had been ordered home. The sun disappeared and rain started to fall. A few big drops at first, and then more. And then more than I could count. The wind rocked the old station-wagon and drops of water began to slide across the top of the rear window then drip onto me and the back seat. Soon, the first hail stones began to shatter on the metal roof. Mother turned the radio louder and louder. The men were still out there. They were doing okay. I remember Daddy turning toward Mother, smiling, and asking her if she could ever believe it. A man landing on the moon. It was miraculous. The hail stones grew to the size of golf balls, and we began to shout over the din they made when they came crashing down like meteors. Daddy said that tonight we were going to watch history being made. We were going to watch a man walk on the moon. But first we had to get to Widefield.

Mean storms are yellow. Even with hail falling, thick as blizzard snow, the atmosphere was yellow, eerie, and alien. Lightning was everywhere, and Mother reminded us to keep our hands away from anything metal inside the car. We would see a flash, then begin to count, slowly, carefully, each number followed by a one-thousand, until we heard the thunder roll away from us, out toward the free and open prairie. Sometimes, we

wouldn't even have a chance to count. A flash coming from everywhere at once would light up the car, and then we would not so much hear as feel the thunder build from underneath us. But mostly we counted. We counted through their dinner and while they tested their equipment. They were going to walk on the moon, and I wondered if they knew how we were counting on them.

Eventually, the numbers between the lightning flashes and the thunder calls became larger. The hail stopped, and the rain eased some, but then water — very fast water with a wild current — began to surround the car. The frontage road just to the north of us had all but disappeared. There, the water was up to the tires of the cars that had been stopped by the storm. I remember looking out the back of the station wagon and seeing the wake the water made around our car. It was actually rather pretty, clear enough that I had no problem seeing the broken white line wiggle beneath me on the pavement below. The rain had all but stopped, sunshine was quickly filling in behind the clouds, and steam was rising from the piles of hail stones the flood had left littering the freeway.

We reached the Miles' house about ten minutes after the flood, only to discover at least six inches of water covering their entire basement floor. Luckily, the REALLY BIG television set was on the first floor and had been spared. When we arrived, I could see that Walter Cronkite was jumping up, but never down, behind his desk, interviewing someone who was also jumping up, but never down. The picture faded in and out, and was bumped continuously between the black lines that separated one Walter from the next. Mr. Miles gave me a quick hug, and told me that the storm would be long gone before the men would walk on the moon later that evening. In the meantime, there was a lot of work to do. We hauled everything out of their basement. Boxes, furniture, clothes, Christmas decorations, games, pictures, and more, all found their way to the back yard.

While the grown-ups fussed over carpet padding, house foundations, broken pipes, and other trivial matters, we kids created our own lunar landscape. Equipment was scattered

everywhere. Before the moon walk, many and various repairs had to be made to our lunar module. Houston was relentless with their incessant communications checks, and air supplies constantly ran low. Throw rugs and comforters were all that we brave astronauts required to repel the harshness of space. Priceless computers needed testing, testing and more testing, all through the late afternoon and well into the evening. We fended off alien attacks, worried over the inevitable fuel leak, and even maintained a cool professional demeanor when our command module pilot was called home for dinner.

Later that night, we saw our new heroes walk on the moon. Actually, we memorized the event. We memorized everything: the aluminum landing pad, the ladder, the unseen Armstrong, the footprint, Aldrin, the flag. It was important, and we were important because we were there to watch. We belonged to history now, and it became part of us, too. We learned that spacemen jump down a ladder instead of crawling out of a hatch. We knew what footprints on an alien surface would look like, and we discovered that real moon-men glide and jump over the lunar surface, as if they were jumping across a water-soaked mattress. So, with our parents safe on Earth, marveling over grown-up accomplishments, we ventured forth, each child in turn claiming, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," over and over again.

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## A Matter of Choice

Amy Isler

“Taking responsibility” is a pretty heavy concept for siblings between the ages of two and six-- at least it was in my family. At four years of age, I might have been happy to take the credit for anything resulting in warm appreciation and extensive praise. But when some treasured item would turn up missing or broken, who was to blame? Well, usually one of my two sisters or my brother, of course, but sometimes even the dog. With age came the welcome development of more elaborate and creative excuses, but also the acceptance of “selective responsibility.” I had become responsible enough to date and to drive; but when my clothing or car keys turned up missing, my sisters were the usual targets for blame. The onset of adolescence and all of its emotional and intellectual turmoil brought an additional target for blame: our parents. With the full support of society, we had come upon the life-altering revelation that our parents were responsible for the vast majority of our problems! Maladjustment, insecurity: these were a direct result of inefficient parenting. We had joined the masses of victims; we had become statistics.

But who was *really* responsible for our behavior? Society has been struggling with this question on all levels. Several years ago, a sex offender allegedly approached several girls in a mall, made obscene remarks, and then later on the same day separated a six year-old girl from her mother, almost getting her to a secluded area. The man had never done time in jail and pled incompetent to stand trial due to his “long history of significant depression.” Perhaps his parents should have been prosecuted for his crimes, but then they may have been exempted from their behavior because of their own parents. . . who are dead. You can see how ridiculous this game of “pass the blame” can become.

Of course there are the more complicated cases involving juveniles who have committed crimes. When a twelve year-old boy recently opened fire on his classmates, killing several students, we immediately questioned who was responsible (his

parents, Satan, Marilyn Manson. . .), how responsible they were, and at what age a person should be held responsible for his or her actions. According to the accused child, society made him what he was. It seems possible that ridicule by his peers, a break up with a girlfriend, and possible Satan worship may have been major factors in his apparent breakdown.

But who is ultimately responsible? I have come to the conclusion that all adults (with the exception of the severely mentally handicapped) are 100% responsible for their own actions. I believe that this responsibility begins as soon as we discover the power of the human will. This shouldn't be considered outrageous and frightening, but as perhaps the most valuable and wonderful human characteristic we have. Humans are no longer mere victims within a chaotic environment, but have tremendous potential for changing their own behavior.

The discovery of human will is not automatic, but rather a process. With the guidance of parents, children are subjected to more and more opportunities to make choices and to function on their own. Eventually they will reach a certain level of abstract and logical reasoning. It is difficult to say at what age this occurs, but I believe that at this point, a person has become completely responsible for his or her actions. I am not denying that many people have huge outside (and also biological) *pressures* to deal with. These pressures are often very difficult to resist, and this should be considered in many cases of juvenile crime, as well as the age and maturity level of the accused. I believe that adults and most children are able to struggle against these pressures. It is by choice that we succumb to pressures and allow them to direct our behavior. As individuals, and as adults, we can make the decision to empower our personal will, to limit the behavior we expose our children to, to teach them how to fight against negative pressures, and to guide them along the process as they discover the power of their own human will. Or we can *choose not to decide or act* on any of these things.

So in an attempt to simplify my point, I am to blame. My jeans were in the laundry, and my keys were in my pocket the whole time. But most importantly, I know I am not a victim. My

parents were not so bad. They loved their kids, and exposed us to many good values and habits, as well as some unhealthy ones. So the responsibility for my behavior lies in my own hands. Whether I will always decide to act “responsible” is a whole other matter.

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## Relative Indifference

Rhonda Stannard

*Childhood is frequently a solemn business for those inside it.*

George Will

My sister is among my earliest memories. I guess she has always been part of my consciousness. I can't remember a time in my life when my sister wasn't around. She was born before I was even two-and-a-half years old, so I don't have any memories of a time before her existence. I always accepted her presence without question, her right to be a part of the family as obvious to me as my own right. It wasn't until we started to grow up and develop interests of our own that I began to think of her as an individual. I was a boringly predictable kid, capable of cute utterings, precocious behavior and social acceptability. Ruth Ann, at least until she became a teenager, was a world unto herself. The realization that she and I had nothing in common except parentage did not immediately occur to me. It was only years later, in retrospect, that I saw the situation clearly. It seems, however, that Ruth Ann was born knowing.

I used everything within my childhood powers to mold Ruth Ann into the perfect little sister. All my efforts were in vain. The harder I tried, the more I cajoled, the longer and louder I begged, the more obstinate, sullen, and anti-social she became. So for the first of several times in my life, I knew the feeling of utter helplessness. Ruth Ann refused to see that her lone-wolf behavior and inability to follow convention was a source of tremendous pain and agony for me. I was the long-suffering big sister of the weirdest little kid in town, a person deserving of pity. I was the senior sibling inextricably tied to a child whose own mother had once taken her to the doctor, inquiring about the possibility of her being mentally retarded, because of her inability (or so my mother thought) to talk. You see, my mother's only other child, me, had learned to speak easily, vocalized in an endless stream almost from birth, or so it seemed to her. So, my mother wondered, how could this second child, only two-and-a-

half years younger, who spent so much time with the older, talking child, be so deficient. Surely, she thought, there was some horrible medical problem responsible for this deviant behavior. The doctor gave my mother her first object lesson in child-rearing. He explained, without hesitation, that the older child—me—whom he knew so well, was doing all the talking which the younger child should be doing for herself. That is, big sister grabbed little sister by the hand, found mother, and asked for both what she had once only asked for herself. Ruth Ann was not retarded, he said. In fact, she was smart enough to realize that as long as big sister—me—was able to meet her needs, she would not have to exercise her own vocal cords. Talking was not necessary as long as her big sister was willing to do it for her.

My career as my sister's advocate came to an abrupt end: I was fired by my own mother, and Ruth Ann was forced into not needing me any longer. A bone chilling pattern began to develop. Ruth Ann must have surmised that if she didn't need me for obtaining cookies or drinks of water, then perhaps she didn't need me for other things as well. Her realization was the beginning of my forced childhood martyrdom. As Ruth Ann grew, our interests diverged, leaving me holding the big sister bag: all the responsibility, but none of the authority. People, others, family members, held me accountable for Ruth Ann's actions, lumping me together with her for no reason other than the fact that we were sisters. Every time I made headway in life as a regular kid, my sister would come along and destroy whatever semblance of normalcy I had painstakingly established.

Once my little sister took an interest in something, she never wavered from the completion of her goal—no matter what price I paid. Ruth Ann's numerous and unusual childhood phases were more than unpredictable; they were publicly humiliating, but only for me. She was never once affected by her own behavior. She remained aloof.

Even her outward appearance gave rise to stares from the neighborhood. I knew the other mothers on our block thanked the fertility gods on a daily basis that this child was not theirs. This little girl, who rarely spoke, stood miraculously upright on



scrawny legs which did not seem to offer any physical support to a long, lean, brown body void of any shape. Her clothes, new or old, never fit, always either too big or too small. She was a custom-built kid in an off-the-rack family. This did not bother her. Not at all, as a matter of fact, she embellished that spectral body with clothing combinations no sane person would wear. I stood helplessly by as outfits which defied belief became daily occurrences. I pleaded with my mother to listen to reason. She stuck with the idea that Ruth Ann, like me, should be allowed to wear what she liked. I countered with the old standby lines like, her colors don't match, or you can't wear stripes and plaids at the same time. My mother smiled and informed me that she had already approached Ruth Ann with these fashion rules. Ruth Ann remained adamant. I arranged to walk way ahead of her, or way behind her on the path to school, but that didn't help; everyone knew she was my little sister, and I was ultimately responsible for her.

One particular outfit, worn on an especially important day, will stick in my mind until the day I die. My grandmother, with much pomp and circumstance, had volunteered to take Ruth Ann and I to the state fair. This was to be our first trip to a huge state fair: rides, games, cotton candy, thousands of people. It promised to be a day like no other in my ten-year-old experience. As usual, the last person ready was my little sister. We yelled several times, waited in the living room, checked off our list of things to take along. We turned to see Ruth Ann standing in the doorway, smiling proudly. She had waited on purpose so she could make a theatrical entrance that would capture our attention. She needn't have bothered, her attire capturing more than our attention. It captured the very oxygen in the room. I felt warm, sick to my stomach. Far away, it seemed, I could hear my grandmother laughing loudly. Ruth Ann's state fair ensemble consisted of a bright, apple-green dress which she paired with neon pink fishnet knee socks and black patent leather Mary Jane's. Jabbed into her brown-blond hair, on either side of her head, were two yellow bird barrettes, one lower than the other (on purpose). My grandmother did her best to put a good face on the

day. She exclaimed that it would be highly unlikely that we would lose Ruth Ann in any crowds that day. Unfortunately, that was exactly what I was hoping for.

A nice addition to her colorful taste in clothing was her physical prowess. In short, Ruth Ann was a badly dressed accident looking for somewhere to happen. Before she was ten years old, she had used up more lives than the wildest alley cat. She racked up more hours in the hospital emergency room than any other six kids in town. The hospital staff knew her on sight. Hospitals are, you know, profit motivated organizations, and Ruth Ann was their best customer. For each visit they knew she was good for a minimum of six stitches, antibiotics (in quart containers), and a score of x-rays. My parents finally got wise and signed up for the frequent-stitcher program. By the time she was fourteen, we had enough points for a free heart transplant.

My sister didn't talk much, but what she lacked in voice, she made up for in feats of daring. Like the time she fell off a bridge. Okay, it wasn't the Golden Gate Bridge, it was more like a little, picturesque, rough hewn bridge that arched over a shallow creek, two blocks west of our house. We were there--neighborhood kids in a group--looking, but not really harming anything until my sister did a two-and-a-half gainer over the railing and landed head first in the creek, twelve feet below. I am positive that landing on her head was the only thing that kept her from being seriously injured. While Ruth Ann was still airborne, kids started running away in different directions, as fast as they could. We were, after all, someplace we weren't supposed to be, exactly. I stayed. In my role as big sister, I saved her from drowning in the three inches of water she landed in. The problem was that she didn't want to be saved. She just wanted me to let go of her and go away. I didn't though. I was bigger and stronger, so I held on to my twisting, turning, bleeding-from-the-forehead little sister, and we eventually got more of those frequent-stitcher points at the emergency room.

In order to maintain historical accuracy, I have to admit that I was not always the only victim of Ruth Ann's odd tendencies. Other family members felt her effect from time to

time. One of Ruth Ann's many spheres of interest was in the world of trash collection. Her red wagon in tow, Ruth Ann spent entire summer days covering a self-designed trash inspection circuit. She picked from the trash of our friends and neighbors items that only she found of value. In retrospect, I see her as a pioneer of the recycling effort. I wasn't as understanding then. The cross I bore through childhood was the one of guilt by association. People, neighbors, school friends all demanded of me an explanation for Ruth Ann's unparalleled interest in their trash. I was twelve; I didn't have the answers that would satisfy their questions, but that didn't stop them from inquiring. Ruth Ann collected trash. I suffered silently. After months of Ruth Ann bringing home useless, dirty, discarded treasures, and months of my mother throwing them away after my sister went to bed, a rare find appeared. Ruth Ann arrived at home one evening with a beautiful black cashmere coat, lined in black satin, and trimmed at the neck and cuff in real mink. She presented it to my mother, who looked the coat over, and then looked it over again, and again, and again. Each inspection became faster than the previous one, more frenzied, more excited. Then she stopped abruptly, looked at Ruth Ann, her eyes narrowed to slits and she began Gestapo questioning tactics. Where did you get this? Did someone give this to you? Are you sure you got it out of a trash can? She repeated the questions over and over, and Ruth Ann's answers never changed. The next morning the coat went to the cleaners.

Ruth Ann's entrepreneurial efforts in trash collection took on a legendary aura once word of that coat got around the neighborhood. For the rest of the summer, if the people on our block saw a pair of skinny legs with size three tennis shoes attached sticking out of their dumpsters, they knew they had made a huge mistake and prematurely tossed a valuable collectible. However, her fame was short-lived.

As winter approached, my parents were invited to a cocktail party being giving by one of my father's business associates, who lived only a mile or so away. My mother was excited about her first opportunity to wear the mink-trimmed coat.

When they arrived at the party, the hostess took one look at my mother in that coat and quietly inquired as to where she got it. My mother, too honest for her own good, told the truth. It turns out that the hostess, during a heated exchange with her husband, had thrown the coat into the trash. The next morning when calmer heads prevailed, she went out to retrieve the coat, but it was already gone. For several uncomfortable minutes thereafter, my mother and the hostess tried to give each other the coat and settle the issue with a forgive-and-forget attitude, each relentlessly assuring the other that ownership of the coat was no big deal. My mother lost. My parents returned home early, my mother still wearing her enigma. As far as I know, no one ever saw that coat again, and my parents were never invited to another gathering at that particular residence. Ruth Ann had no interest in the social ramifications of this catastrophe.

Time marched along, and Ruth Ann and I both managed to survive her formative years. She and I gained another sister and a brother, too. Ruth Ann became a teenager, a high school cheerleader, a homecoming queen. Social convention has been hit-or-miss during the greater part of Ruth Ann's life. We are both in our thirties now. We still have little in common, so although we love each other, we don't necessarily like each other. Between the two of us, acceptance has not led to understanding. We have both worked hard to establish our relative indifference to the other. She is still tight-lipped during the times I think she should be forthcoming. We still hate each other's clothes, and nowadays we spend our time burning bridges rather than falling off them.

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