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# My Flamboyant Grandson

By George Saunders

I HAD BROUGHT MY GRANDSON TO NEW YORK TO SEE A show. Because what is he always doing, up here in Oneonta? Singing and dancing, sometimes to my old show-tune records, but more often than not to his favorite CD, *Babar Sings!*, sometimes even making up his own steps, which I do not mind, or rather I try not to mind it. Although I admit that once, coming into his room and finding him wearing a pink boa while singing, in the voice of the Old Lady, “I Have Never Met a Man Like That Elephant,” I had to walk out and give it some deep thought and prayer, as was also the case when he lumbered into the parlor during a recent church Couples Dinner, singing “Big and Slow, Yet So Very Regal,” wearing a tablecloth spray-painted gray, so as to more closely resemble Babar.

Being a man who knows something about grandfatherly disapproval, having had a grandfather who constantly taunted me for having enlarged calves—to the extent that even today, when bathing, I find myself thinking unkind thoughts about Grandfather—what I prayed on both occasions was: Dear Lord, he is what he is, let me love him no matter what. If he is a gay child, God bless him, if he is a non-gay child who simply very much enjoys wearing his grandmother’s wig while singing “Edelweiss” to the dog, so be it, and in either case let me communicate my love and acceptance in everything I do.

Because where is a child to go for unconditional love, if not to his grandfather? He has had it tough, in my view, with his mother in Nevada and a father unknown, raised by his grandmother and me in an otherwise childless neighborhood, playing alone in a tiny yard that ends in a graveyard wall. The boys in his school are hard on him, as are the girls, as are his teachers, and recently we found his book bag in the Susquehanna, and recently also found, taped to the back of his jacket, a derogatory note, and the writing on it was not at all that childish-looking, and there were rumors that his bus driver had written it.

Then one day I had a revelation. If the lad likes to sing and dance, I thought, why not expose him to the finest singing and dancing there is? So I called 1-800-CULTURE, got our Promissory Voucher in the mail, and on Teddy’s birthday we took the train down to New York.

As we entered the magnificent lobby of the Eisner Theater, I was in good spirits, saying to Teddy, “The size of this stage will make that little stage I built you behind the garage look pathetic.” When suddenly we were stopped by a stern

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young fellow (a Mr. Ernesti, I believe) who said, "We are sorry, sir, but you cannot be admitted on merely a Promissory Voucher, are you kidding us, you must take your Voucher and your Proof of Purchase from at least six of our Major Artistic Sponsors, such as AOL, such as Coke, and go at once to the Redemption Center on Forty-fourth and Broadway to get your real actual tickets, and please do not be late, as late-comers cannot be admitted, due to special effects which occur early, which require total darkness in order to simulate the African jungle at night."

Well, this was news to me. But I was not about to disappoint the boy.

We left the Eisner and started up Broadway, the Everly Readers in the sidewalk reading the Everly Strips in our shoes, the building-mounted miniscreens at eye level showing images reflective of the Personal Preferences we'd stated on our monthly Everly Preference Worksheets, the numerous Cybec Sudden Emergent Screens out-thrusting or down-thrusting inches from our faces, and in addition I could very clearly hear the sound-only messages being beamed to me and me alone via various Casio Aural Focusers, such as one that shouted out to me between Forty-second and Forty-third, "Mr. Petrillo, you chose Burger King eight times last fiscal year but only two times thus far this fiscal year, please do not forsake us now, there is a store one block north!" in the voice of Broadway star Elaine Weston, while at Forty-third a light-pole-mounted Focuser shouted, "Golly, Leonard, remember your childhood on the farm in Oneonta? Why not reclaim those roots with a Starbucks Country Roast?" in a celebrity-rural voice I could not identify, possibly Buck Owens. And then, best of all, in the doorway of PLC Electronics, a life-size Gene Kelly hologram suddenly appeared, tap-dancing, saying, "Leonard, my data indicates you're a bit of an old-timer like myself! Gosh, in our day, life was simpler, wasn't it, Leonard? Why not come in and let Frankie Z. explain the latest gizmos!" And he looked so real I called out to Teddy, "Teddy, look there, Gene Kelly, do you remember I mentioned him to you as one of the all-time greats?" But Teddy of course did not see Gene Kelly, Gene Kelly not being one of his Preferences, but instead saw his hero Babar, swinging a small monkey on his trunk while saying that his data indicated that Teddy did not yet own a Nintendo.

So that was fun, that was very New York, but what was not so fun was, by the time we got through the line at the

Redemption Center, it was ten minutes until showtime, and my feet had swollen up the way they do shortly before they begin spontaneously bleeding, which they have done ever since a winter spent in the freezing muck of Cho-Bai, Korea. It is something I have learned to live with. If I can sit, that is helpful. If I can lean against something, also good. Best of all, if I can take my shoes off. Which I did, leaning against a wall.

All around and above us were those towering walls of light, curving across building fronts, embedded in the sidewalks, custom-fitted to light poles: a cartoon lion eating a man in a suit; a rain of gold coins falling into the canoe of a naked rainforest family; a woman in lingerie running a bottle of Pepsi between her breasts; the Merrill Lynch talking fist asking, "Are you kicking ass or kissing it?"; a perfect human rear, dancing; a fake flock of geese turning into a field of Bebe logos; a dying grandmother's room filled with roses by a FedEx man who then holds up a card saying, "No Charge."

And standing beneath all that bounty was our little Teddy, tiny and sad, whose grandfather could not even manage to get him into one crummy show.

So I said to myself, Get off the wall, old man, blood or no blood, just keep the legs moving and soon enough you'll be there. And off we went, me hobbling, Teddy holding my arm, making decent time, and I think we would have made the curtain. Except suddenly there appeared a Citizen Helper, who asked were we from out of town, and was that why, via removing my shoes, I had caused my Everly Strips to be rendered Inoperative?

I should say here that I am no stranger to innovative approaches to advertising, having pioneered the use of towable signboards in Oneonta back in the Nixon years, when I towed a fleet of thirty around town with a Dodge Dart, wearing a suit that today would be found comic. By which I mean I have no problem with the concept of the Everly Strip. That is not why I had my shoes off. I am as patriotic as the next guy. Rather, as I have said, it was due to my bleeding feet.

I told all this to the Citizen Helper, who asked if I was aware that, by rendering my Strips Inoperative, I was sacrificing a terrific opportunity to Celebrate My Preferences?

And I said yes, yes, I regretted this very much.

He said he was sorry about my feet, he himself having a trick elbow, and that he would be happy to forget this unfortunate incident if I would only put my shoes back on and

complete the rest of my walk extremely slowly, looking energetically to both left and right, so that the higher density of Messages thus received would compensate for those I had missed.

And I admit, I was a little short with that Helper, and said, "Young man, these dark patches on my socks are blood, do you or do you not see them?"

Which was when his face changed and he said, "Please do not snap at me, sir, I hope you are aware of the fact that I can write you up?"

And then I made a mistake.

Because as I looked at that Citizen Helper—his round face, his pale sideburns, the way his feet turned in—it seemed to me that I knew him. Or rather, it seemed that he could not be so very different from me when I was a young man, not so different from the friends of my youth—from Jeffie DeSoto, say, who once fought a Lithuanian gang that had stuck an M-80 up the ass of a cat, or from Ken Larmer, who had such a sweet tenor voice and died stifling a laugh in the hills above Koi-Jeng.

I brought out a twenty and, leaning over, said, "Look, please, the kid just really wants to see this show."

Which is when he pulled out his pad and began to write!

Now, even being from Oneonta, I knew that being written up does not take one or two minutes. We would be standing there at least half an hour, after which we would have to go to an Active Complaints Center, where they would check our Strips for Operability and make us watch that corrective video called *Robust Economy, Super Moral Climate!*, which I had already been made to watch three times last winter, when I was out of work and we could not afford cable.

And we would totally miss *Babar Sings!*

"Please," I said, "please, we have seen plenty of personalized messages, via both the building-mounted miniscreens at eye level and those suddenly out-thrusting Cybec Emergent Screens, we have learned plenty for one day, honest to God we have—"

And he said, "Sir, since when do you make the call as far as when you have received enough useful information from our Artistic Partners?"

And just kept writing me up.

Well, there I was, in my socks, there was Teddy, with a scared look in his eyes I hadn't seen since his toddler days, when he had such a fear of chickens that we could never buy

Rosemont eggs due to the cartoon chicken on the carton, or, if we did, had to first cut the chicken off, with scissors we kept in the car for that purpose. So I made a quick decision, and seized that Citizen Helper's ticket pad and flung it into the street, shouting at Teddy, "Run! Run!"

And run he did. And run I did. And while that Citizen Helper floundered in the street, torn between chasing us and retrieving his pad, we raced down Broadway, and, glancing back over my shoulder, I saw a hulking young man stick out his foot, and down that Helper went, and soon I was handing our tickets to the same stern Mr. Ernesti, who was now less stern, and in we went, and took our seats, as stars appeared overhead and the Eisner was transformed into a nighttime jungle.

And suddenly there was Babar, looking with longing toward Paris, where the Old Lady was saying that she had dreamed of someone named Babar, and did any of us know who this Babar was, and where he might be found? And Teddy knew the answer, from the Original Cast CD, which was *Babar is within us, in all of our hearts*, and he shouted it out with all of the other children, as the Old Lady began singing "The King Inside of You."

And let me tell you, from that moment, everything changed for Teddy. I am happy to report he has joined the play at school. He wears a scarf everywhere he goes, throwing it over his shoulder with what can only be described as bravado, and says, whenever asked, that he has decided to become an actor. This from a boy too timid to trick-or-treat! This from the boy we once found walking home from school in tears, padlocked to his own bike! There are no more late-night crying episodes, he no longer writes on his arms with permanent marker, he leaps out of bed in the morning, anxious to get to school, and dons his scarf, and is already sitting at the table eating breakfast when we come down.

The other day as he got off the bus I heard him say to his bus driver, cool as a cucumber, "See you at the Oscars."

WHEN AN EVERLY READER IS READING, THEN SUDDENLY stops, it is not hard to trace, and within a week I received a certified letter setting my fine at one thousand dollars, and stating that, in lieu of the fine, I could elect to return to the Originating Location of my Infraction (they included a map) and, under the supervision of that Citizen Helper, retrace my steps, shoes on, thus reclaiming a significant opportunity to Celebrate My Preferences.

This, to me, is not America.

What America is, to me, is a guy doesn't want to buy, you let him not buy, you respect his not buying. A guy has a crazy notion different from your crazy notion, you pat him on the back and say, Hey pal, nice crazy notion, let's go have a beer. America, to me, should be shouting all the time, a bunch of shouting voices, most of them wrong, some of them nuts, but please, not just one droning glamorous reasonable voice.

But do the math: a day's pay, plus train ticket, plus meals, plus taxis to avoid the bleeding feet, still that is less than one thousand.

So down I went.

That Citizen Helper, whose name was Rob, said he was glad about my change of heart. Every time a voice shot into my ear, telling me things about myself I already knew, every time a celebrity hologram walked up like an old friend, Rob checked a box on my Infraction Correction Form and said,

"Isn't that amazing, Mr. Petrillo, that we can do that, that we can know you so well, that we can help you identify the things you want and need?"

And I would say, "Yes, Rob, that is amazing," sick in the gut but trying to keep my mind on the five hundred bucks I was saving, and all the dance classes that would buy.

As for Teddy, as I write this it is nearly midnight and he is tapping in the room above. He looks like a bird, our boy, he watches the same musical fifteen times in a row. Walking through the mall, he suddenly emits a random line of dialogue and lunges off to the side, doing a dance step that resembles a stumble, spilling his drink, plowing into a group of incredulous snickering Oneontans. He looks like no one else, acts like no one else, his clothes are increasingly like plumage, late at night he choreographs using plastic Army men, he fits no mold and has no friends, but I believe in my heart that someday something beautiful may come from him.



George Saunders G'88 is an English professor who teaches in the Creative Writing Program at SU. He is the author of three short-story collections, *In Persuasion Nation*, *Pastoralia*, and *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*; a novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*; a collection of essays, *The Braindead Megaphone* (all published by Riverhead Books); and a children's book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (Random House). He writes regularly for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *GQ*, and has won four National Magazine Awards for his short stories. In 2006, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" for "bringing to contemporary American fiction a sense of humor, pathos, and literary style all his own."

## Poetry | Courtney Queeney

### NOTES FOR MY FUTURE BIOGRAPHER

The dark things I did started young, stayed.

Then I heard a cello and thought,  
Oh. That's how you say it.

I could spell and count to a hundred  
in several languages, but never learned the words  
to help anyone to a church.

There were X number of men;  
I couldn't solve for X.

With the chameleon as my model  
I greened and glowed outside,  
or rippled underwater.  
Alone, I was translucent, I was

barely, but survived myself  
those early years,

which prepared me  
for the later ones,  
when I felt like furniture

and never told the truth.

### CONFESSION

Forgive me. There was an oath  
I swore to the first man, then betrayed

because I liked the lying down, the loss  
of control.  
Because there's some male in me.

I was pried overly open,  
a gutted fish, and you the stropped knife,  
and the exchange depended on violence done  
each upon the other. You cut some thing loose.

She digs under fences.  
Her whimpers have a fang in them.

Now I don't come no matter who calls,  
nothing sits right. Fell me,

I'd be perfect timber:  
bucked, limbed, quartered,  
drawn, delivered.

Burn me. I'd be faithful as ash.

Excerpted from *Filibuster to Delay a Kiss, and Other Poems*. Copyright © 2007 by Courtney Queeney. Reprinted by arrangement with The Random House Publishing Group.



## THE TROUBLE WITH OPENINGS

is they unclose you, your body  
become an invitation to pillage.  
You let a man burgle your organs  
then feed him before he flees  
out the window, down the fire escape.  
You say, *Come back anytime, I'll be in.*  
*I've been deflead, my shots are up to date.*  
Then he's gone and you're left  
with only all your wide-open empties  
which spread, and burrow through your walls,  
and admit so much.

## THE ANTI-LEADING LADY ON LONGING

I was in that bar where enough shadow inks  
over my face to wear it out.  
Then I was in a car, propelled forward  
by a series of controlled explosions,  
strapped in for safety, aware  
that at a certain speed no such thing exists.

When everyone else mooned up at stars, contriving a map,  
the stars I saw were ice and dust, secular chips,  
so I studied the water stains on my ceiling  
till I knew those fissures and ribs  
better than the cathedral roof of my own mouth.

I translate love from the hush of a hung-up phone  
before a body comes to engage me for an hour.  
The sound of new snow falling over old snow  
outside my window.

I went on with the wrong men so long  
I burnished to a high shine, but always my head  
insisted on the front door, the calculated retreat.

Nights, I lower to my floorboards  
and negotiate with the wood.

I've never met the male of my kind.



## INVITATION

*for Sarah C. Harwell*

The invitation that never came claimed, *Come, this should be fun,*  
and being a sucker for events where I'm unwanted  
I shrugged on my prettiest face and the shirt I wear

to be tastefully naked in public, I cultivated each eyelash.  
By the time Sidekick honked outside I'd talked down  
to my mirror for hours, and was ready to hole up at home,

but Sidekick insisted we circle the party in her car,  
practicing the smoldering looks we'd bless the men with,  
imagining the way each one would sit in shadow,

though some of them we bargained back down to boys  
renamed Flimsy, Slipknot, Inflation. Eroded egos  
shored up by the wailing radio, which advertised our options

as either: a) happily ever after, or b) a lifetime of wretchedness,  
we entered the usual awkward: the host was large with light,  
he had a love, everyone else was half of a pair.

Sidekick and I gnawed at stale bread crusts like the prisoners we were.  
We took down a book and read some dead men aloud  
to stave off despair, which worked for ten or eleven minutes.

Then I exiled myself to the porch to phone people  
scattered across other hours, my real friends, and confess  
*Some of us here will be utter failures and I am not immune,*

but when I couldn't reach anyone in my same state  
of intoxication, I tottered home on my stilts  
along the park where girls wearing pheromones like mine

are violated or disappeared,  
and called my sleeping father, and spoke into his answering machine  
as fast as I forgot what I needed to say,

messages he would hear  
a year from now, a thousand miles away, yesterday.

## FILIBUSTER TO DELAY A KISS

I invoked the dictionary's authority—*Incidental to Incompatible*,  
*Juvenile Hormone to Kangaroo*, *Keeper to Ketchup*,  
*Plain People to Planned Parenthood*, *Yokel to Yuck*—  
then segued into ingredients from a cereal box side panel,  
the noble gases: helium, neon. When I forgot my own chemistry,  
I rattled off one page of the phone book, Smith to Smith,  
then argued against drilling for oil in the Arctic,  
then shut my eyes to describe the windshield's panopticon from memory,  
then opened them and fugued lyrically on ocean reeds—  
all so he'd lose interest, wander off—I recited Woolf's last letter,  
floundered through Hamlet's *To be or not to be*, mustered  
synonyms for *alone*, *insulated*, *aloof*, because at any break  
I knew there'd be the hand over my mouth.  
There'd be his mouth.



Courtney Queeney G'05 is a poet whose work is collected in *Filibuster to Delay a Kiss, and Other Poems* (Random House). Her poetry has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Three New Poets*, and elsewhere. She resides in her native Chicago and continues to scribble.

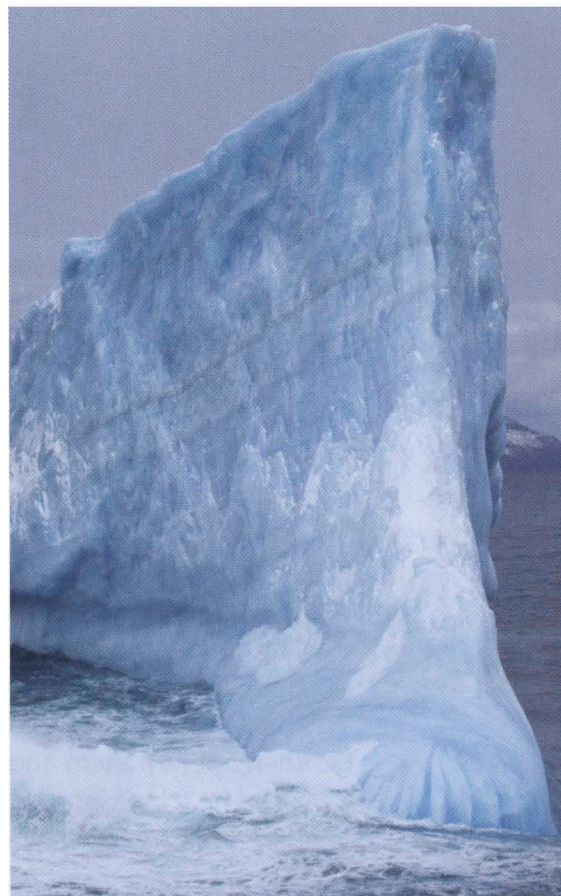
## Poetry | James Gendron

### TRIALS OF THE EARLY ASTRONOMERS

A long-forgotten predecessor of Galileo fashioned a primitive telescope out of a red rose.

*The universe is deeply red, he would tell his students, and folds in on itself endlessly. It is the vortex into which the Earth itself will someday be drawn.*

On the eve of his heresy trial the man was finally discredited. It turned out he'd been looking into the wrong end. The universe is a tall, green tower protruding from a scarlet mountaintop.



### LA PATRIE

Every night I trade places with the village of La Patrie, Quebec. Where is La Patrie? La Patrie is in the mind of La Patrie. And one day I climbed out of my own imagination.

And La Patrie is in the horses of La Patrie, so I am there also. They think, not in words, but in La Patrie. They're powered by the ghosts of slaughtered horses. The wells are full of dead flies no bigger than apple seeds.

The farmers of La Patrie stand in their night fields and grow night. Night is not a sky event, it's a dark grain that grows in unknown towns, always nearby but unknown, where the houses turn inside-out as you enter them, keeping you outside.

My grandmother was born in La Patrie. Do I love my grandmother? Yes. And does she love me? Yes.

Birds trade places with the moon. Farmers trade places simply, simply with the dark.

## BLACK CANDLE

They told me about the atom,  
how there's more space than matter inside it,  
how even solid objects are full of space,  
and using this knowledge  
I passed through a horse.

So quiet in there, and so dark,  
lit from below by a black candle's  
black flame. And I passed through  
the horse's fear of death. Amazing.  
I didn't know it was like that

for horses. I'm learning  
to die like a horse. There's no  
indignity in horse-death.  
Just a stall, a blank stall  
at the end of a long barn.

The only thing in this stall  
is a single window. View:  
a glacier, devouring a continent,  
bluewhite, moving  
with perpetual suddenness.

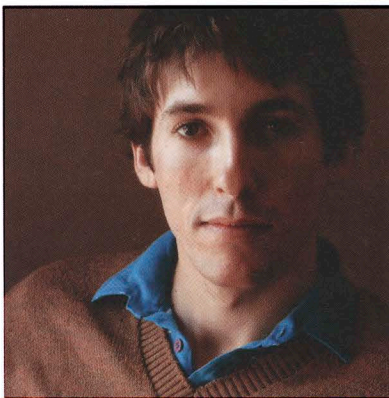


Photo courtesy of James Gendron

## THE TRENDS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

Finally I was able to disappear from the vertical plane.

I left for work, disguised as a line with the equation  $Y=8$ ,  
completely invisible except to the few people I bisected.

I met a beautiful parabola that morning and spent the entire day  
dreaming of our next point of intersection.

There were stars everywhere. The light left them in four prescribed  
directions.

There were others like me, all stuck in the ground like swords in a  
magician's casket.

James Gendron G'08 was born and raised in Portland, Maine. He just earned an M.F.A. degree from the Creative Writing Program, where he was the Lou Reed/Delmore Schwartz Scholar. His poems have appeared in *The Indiana Review* and *The Brooklyn Review*.



# American Youth

By Phil LaMarche

THE TWO BOYS WALKED THE HIGH RIDGE AT THE CENTER of the wood road, avoiding the muddy ruts along the sides. Loggers had powered their hulking machines along the makeshift pathways—the huge skidder tires clawing deep cuts into the soft earth. The men had taken the timber of any value and only the undesirable trees remained: the young, the mangled and twisted, the rotten and sick. The boys made their way through the difficult clutter of leftover branches that now thatched the forest floor. The sun broke the sparse canopy and beat on their sweating necks.

Terry caught a toe on the cut end of an exposed root and stumbled into several lurching steps. His backpack rattled. The other boy sidestepped the splintered butt of wood and quickly tiptoed around a small birch stump. Terry stood a head taller than the boy and he was half again as broad, but he wore his body like an oversize suit. The boy was still small and nimble, but he wasn't happy about it. He looked at Terry's body and he wanted one of his own. Terry's neck and arms were thick like a man's. The backpack looked like a child's toy, dangling between his broad shoulders.

Terry tripped again. He hopped the rut at the side of the path and took a seat on a broad stump. The cut wood was still pale and creamy. White sawdust clung to the dead leaves on the ground like early snow. Terry bent over his

knees and clutched the laces of his work boot. He wore them untied and loose, as was the fashion in their school for boots and high-tops. Now he straightened his leg and leaned back, pulling the boot tight. He bow-tied the laces and set to his other foot.

The boy eyed Terry's hands and forearms as he pulled. They were covered in coarse red hair that matched the color of his closely shorn scalp. The boy's arms were undefined. What hair he had on his body was blond and thin.

Terry grunted when he stood. He hopped back on the trail. The boy was six months his senior, but Terry's size earned him the lead through the maze of skid roads. When Terry wondered which way to proceed, the boy pointed knowingly from behind. He'd grown up hunting the Darling land with his father and uncle. But several years back, Mr. Darling had died and his children had sold the property to a developer. Within weeks, NO TRESPASSING signs surrounded the four hundred acres. Within months, the land had been subdivided and the town's zoning board confronted with plans for a handful of upscale housing developments.

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In effect, the boys were trespassing, but there was no one around to catch them. When the economy had gone bad and stayed bad, the development stopped. The groaning cement trucks quit their runs in and out of the new neighborhoods. The swarms of subcontractors disappeared and the developer's Mercedes no longer made its rounds about town. It was rumored that the money from the recent logging contract was all he had left to fend off foreclosure.

The boys walked out into the clearing of Woodbury Heights, the last of the developer's projects. He'd pushed the road into the woods, paved it, and even managed to cut several of the prospective house lots before the recession settled in. Piles of soil and unearthed boulders now cluttered the landscape. Leafless trees lay prone, their roots reaching elliptically into the air. The deep black of the new pavement stood out from the mess of the rest of the scene.

The boys made their way to the culvert at the end of the road. The August sun hung heavily on the two and came back at them from the hot blacktop.

"You sure?" the boy said.

Terry nodded. He slid his arms out of the backpack and pulled out three glass bottles.

"How you know?"

"My brother," Terry told him. "Two parts gas, one part oil." He took out three socks and tied knots in them. He soaked the socks with the mixture in the bottles and stuffed a knot through each open bottleneck. Then he went to the side of the road and wiped his hands on the tall grass.

When he returned, he took up one of the bottles, held a lighter to the sock, and heaved the cocktail. It crashed and set a good portion of pavement afire.

"See," Terry said. "Told you."

The boy smiled.

They watched the fire slowly subside.

Terry lit and tossed a second. Again the pavement burned.

"Let me," the boy said.

Terry handed him the last of the three bottles and the boy held it, his arm cocked and ready. Terry thumbed the lighter and touched it to the sock. The boy waited for the flame to catch, crow-hopped a quick three steps, and overhanded the bottle. It reminded him of some second-rate firework, the trajectory neither high nor fast. When it crashed down, the flames spilled across the tarmac and waved in the air. The

boy stared at the fire, a dumb smile on his soft face.

A jab in the ribs brought him around quickly. Terry pointed a thumb down the road. His head was cocked, an ear in the direction of his hand. His eyes looked at the sky. The boy heard it too, an engine in low gear, climbing the hill. Terry turned and sprinted. The boy chased after him but couldn't keep up. With the sound of the engine growing closer, Terry didn't try to make it to the trail they'd come on. Instead he bolted over the shoulder of the road, through the underbrush, and into the woods. The boy followed.

With the broad hardwoods gone, the hiding wasn't good. Terry sprawled behind a fir sapling and the boy crouched behind a good-size stump. He panted, catching his breath. When he saw the police cruiser, his chest froze and he could hardly get more than a quick gasp. He looked back at Terry.

"Think it's burning?" the boy said.

Terry shrugged. "Come on," he said, once the cruiser had passed. He jumped to his feet and waved for the boy to follow.

"I don't think we should move."

"No way," Terry said, as he turned and lumbered into the woods. The boy looked back at the road. He heard Terry crashing through the brush and dead leaves behind him. He turned and ran after his friend. He didn't want to be alone.

Though Terry was a more powerful sprinter, his size worked against him over a longer distance and the boy overtook him.

"Where you going?" said the boy.

Terry pointed in the direction he was running.

The boy shook his head and motioned off to his right.

Terry nodded and followed.

When the two could run no farther, they stopped and rested, their torsos bent, hands heavy on their knees.

"Duncan?" the boy said.

Terry shrugged.

"I hope it was Duncan."

"Me too."

"Don't tell."

"Don't tell me not to tell," Terry said.

The boy looked down and then away.

"Besides," Terry told him, "I'm the one reeks of gas." He reached down and wiped his hands on the leaves of a small tree.

THEY WALKED UNTIL THEY REACHED SANDY CREEK, THE first development to go up on the Darling property. Prior to the building and landscaping, it had been a sandpit where teenagers rallied dirt bikes and hopped-up pickups. Where teenagers and twenty-somethings gathered around bonfires and drank beer until the police chased them out. Terry and the boy had hunted bullfrogs at the water holes there. When they couldn't catch them, they threw stones.

Now it was Sandy Creek, but in the heat of summer, the creek was more of a bog, and it plagued the new neighborhood with mosquitoes. The local carpenters and handymen had turned a good profit screening in the expansive porches of the new homes. On the road, the boy couldn't help noticing how different the subdivision was from the rest of the town. The uniform homes rose like tiered gunships from the ground, sitting nearly on top of one another—their grand picture windows looked out on other grand picture windows. The lawns were flat and cropped like crew cuts. The trees were planted. The gardens didn't bear produce.

At the end of the Sandy Creek road, the two boys stopped. Terry lived in one direction and the boy in the other.

"Want to come over?" Terry said.

The boy shook his head, unwilling to chance another encounter with Terry's two older brothers. They had a routine called the Daily Beating, and although the name implied a schedule, they simply pounced on Terry when the feeling struck them. During the boy's last visit, they included him in a new game they called Help Him—He's Drowning. One brother grabbed the boy by the back of the neck and dunked his head up and down in their above-ground pool. The other stood on the patio, pointing and shouting, "Help him—he's drowning! For the love of God, someone help!"

After hacking out the chlorinated water, hunkered on his hands and knees, the boy walked all the way home in his dripping swimsuit.

"No thanks," he told Terry.

Terry paused for a moment but the boy didn't extend an invitation.

"See you," Terry said.

"Yeah," said the boy.

When Terry was out of sight, the boy went back into Sandy Creek. He walked to the elaborate entryway of one of the large homes. It was hardly dusk, but the chandelier over the door was already lit. He'd ditched Terry because he knew his

chances of getting invited inside were greater without him. Terry had fought Kevin Dennison earlier in the summer and fattened his lip. The boy pushed the doorbell and heard the elegant chime inside. He heard footsteps approaching and the door opened.

"Theodore," Mrs. Dennison said. She smiled and her eyes squinted. "How are you?"

The boy hated being called Theodore but he smiled back. "Fine," he said. "You?"

"Not bad," she said. Mrs. Dennison was young. Young to have kids his age, the boy thought. She was slender and her short dark hair looked shiny and soft to the touch. "Ready for school?"

He shook his head.

She smiled. "High school already. I can hardly believe it," she said. "Are you nervous?"

"Nah," he said.

"Don't tell him I said so, but I think Kevin is."

He smiled. "Kevin and Bobby here?"

"They're with their father," she told him.

He nodded. He knew the Dennisons were separated. He knew Mr. Dennison already had a girlfriend.

"Why don't you come by tomorrow," she said. "I'll tell them you were here."

"All right—have a good night."

"You too, Theodore." She smiled and retreated back inside the house.

He spun about, hopped down the stairs, and walked across the brick sidewalk to the road. When he turned, he balked at the sight of Terry, standing at the corner where they had parted. Terry had a cigarette. The boy knew the way he tried to hide it—his hand cupped around the butt, arm hanging casually at his side. Terry looked at the boy, took a drag, and left for the second time. An ill feeling settled inside the boy. He'd been caught in the midst of his defection, and worse, Terry had predicted the betrayal.

The boy scuffed his shoe hard across the pavement. He picked up a rock and hurled it at a real estate sign in front of a home. It struck loud and metallic. He winced and quickly looked around for any witnesses. The flash of fear overwhelmed the feeling he'd had upon seeing Terry—upon seeing Terry see him. He jogged to the end of the Sandy Creek road, but Terry was gone. The boy stood for a moment at the intersection before he turned and headed home.

As he walked, the din of evening crickets poured in from the surrounding woods. The pavement was old and cracked at the edges. The sand the town spread for traction in winter collected in small dunes in the ditch. Trees grew close at the sides and reached over the road. Some bore scars from accidents and run-ins with snowplows. Here and there a beer can littered the ditch, sometimes a hubcap or paper coffee cup.

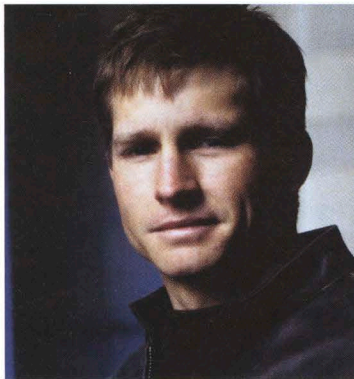
Before the boy got to the Humphreys' house, he bent over and fisted two good-size stones. The Humphreys always had one mongrel dog or another that came to snarl at the foot traffic that passed. Every couple years the dogs were run down by cars and replaced. The boy passed in front of their home, but the dog didn't show. A barn stood on the back corner of their property and an old pony, round-bellied and sway-backed, wandered a corral back there. The boy remembered sneaking through the woods to throw rocks at the horse and watch it twitch and buck. He passed out of sight of the Humphreys' and dropped the two stones.

When he came around the bend to his house, he saw the real estate sign on his lawn. It was only two months old and

it still caught his eye. His father had sold life insurance until the recession whittled away his commissions.

Earlier that summer, he found better work, but far off—in Pennsylvania. The boy's mother had fought the decision but her salary as a schoolteacher wouldn't cover the bills and there was little she could do but concede. The father moved into an efficiency, eight hours south, while the boy and his mother stayed home—the father hopeful for its sale, the mother for a change in the economy.

The boy walked across the mouth of the driveway and down the edge of the lawn. He eyed the front of the house and listened for coming cars. When all seemed clear he bent over and wrenched the sign back and forth, loosening the soil's grip on it. After that bit of handiwork, the sign came out easily. Clods of dirt still clung to its legs. With a hand on the top two corners, he jogged to the opposite side of the road, raised the sign above his head, and heaved it into the ditch for the third time. On each occasion, the real estate agent would track it down, skewer it back in the lawn, and curse the local teenage hooligans. It was a small delight for the boy, and he knew he would keep at it until he was caught.



Phil LaMarche '98, G'03 is the author of *American Youth: A Novel* (Random House). He was awarded the Ivan Klima Fellowship in fiction in Prague and a Summer Literary Seminars Fellowship in St. Petersburg, Russia. His work has appeared in *Esquire* and *The London Telegraph*, as well as other journals and anthologies. His story "In the Tradition of My Family," published in *Ninth Letter* and the 2005 *Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories* anthology, was made into a film by orLater Productions. He teaches creative writing at SU and lives in Central New York with his wife.



## Poetry | Christopher Kennedy

### DURATION OF THE SPIDER

Though spider is my nature,  
I aim toward human urges and shape  
my face to suit the mood around me.  
I stick to corners and wait,  
my web strewn with stunned buzz.  
Silent, I hope for redemption,  
but I know damnation lurks at the end  
of a lizard's blue tongue  
or a frightened child's hand. A simple flick  
from nowhere, and I cease to be.  
At night, I wait for a finger  
to switch the harsh light into existence  
and pray, when judgment comes, to ransom  
my weight with the currency of dead flies.

### RIDDLE OF SELF-WORTH

By cannibal standards, I'm dinner for six.  
My pet vulture has the disconcerting habit of staring  
at the clock and then at me. In terms of sun,  
I plan for a long Alaskan winter. Insurance salesmen  
slink away from me at parties. A stiff breeze  
blows away my weight in gold. In the world of before  
and after, I remain steadfastly before. Last session,  
my psychiatrist shook my hand and thanked me  
for curing his insomnia. If I had a nickel for every time  
my name was associated with greatness, I would owe  
someone a quarter. My mother called recently and asked  
for her umbilical cord. Yet I'm resilient, a human cockroach.  
I'll be here for a while, blocking progress in a black leather jacket,  
switchblade quick and ruthless as a jar of pennies.



## AGE OF TRANSCENDENCE

A nervous, mildewed child, I was less afraid of ghosts  
before my father became one. I ate what I was fed  
and lay all night in the hooded dark, listening to the house breathe.  
I was never healed by the sound of wind through trees,  
the row of poplars, swaying at the end of the field,  
and I listened hard for the rush of traffic in the distance headed away.  
When I grew older, I purchased handfuls of extraction dust,  
determined to push my soul past the limits of my skin.  
Bone-sculpture, skinnier than wire, I loved my murderers.  
I loved my murderers, my friends, who loved me, too,  
all of us seduced by the same impossible desire to leave  
our bodies. I was afraid of ghosts, but I loved the end  
of the world, the idea of sitting on a hill, watching the cloud  
in the distance, one small step from the moon.

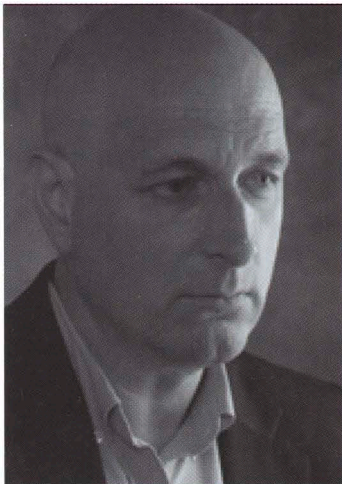
"Duration of the Spider," "Riddle of Self-Worth," "Age of Transcendence," "My Father in the Fifth Dimension," and "Dressed for Church" from *Encouragement for a Man Falling to His Death* by Christopher Kennedy. Copyright © 2007 by Christopher Kennedy. Reprinted by permission of BOA Editions, Ltd. [www.boaeditions.org](http://www.boaeditions.org).

## MY FATHER IN THE FIFTH DIMENSION

Once I attended the burning of a house.  
Late October, and each flame-tipped leaf  
that flew past threatened to set me on fire.  
A crowd gathered, and I watched as a secret  
tried to burn its way out of everyone's flame-stunned faces.  
I wouldn't learn what it was until much later.  
The house was too young to die. It was my father,  
the secret, only I didn't know it then.  
He was the house, too. But since I thought  
it was only a house, I watched it burn.  
It didn't become my father until years later  
when every presence became his absence:  
the moon in its phases, the tireless leaves  
dropping to the ground, the russet-colored horse  
that keeps its head down in a photo from another century—  
my father, also. He is timeless, traveling  
in the tightest imaginable circle on a curve  
located on a cylinder beneath an invisible plane.  
I visit there in dreams. One time, during a long visit,  
my spine slithered out of a slit at the base  
of my neck. Like a skinned-snake, it wriggled away  
until I picked it up. Then it turned into a guitar,  
and with it I struck the chord of dissonance  
and woke up to the sound of distant thunder.  
I was the train in Magritte's *Time Transfixed*,  
floating out of the fireplace, without tracks  
or destination. It was at this moment the infinite  
seemed possible. I closed my eyes. I heard a voice  
as near and remote as childhood, saying *You live  
in a country where no one speaks the language.  
Rely on the body.* It was then I became the father  
of a great desire. I wanted to put my head  
on my mother's pillow, to feel the smooth,  
curved beads of her rosary, strung in decades  
on a silver chain. But sleep is no substitute  
for death, or rather the life after death,  
so I woke up from the dream within the dream  
and set out to find a burning house, the moon,  
some fallen leaves, a horse from another century.

## DRESSED FOR CHURCH

When you get far enough away to see where you've been, it's always smaller, your father is there, swimming in a small pond, like a sunfish you caught in the St. Lawrence Seaway when you were six. And it's not as if you can circle around and come up on it from the back, see it again, large as life. It recedes as you walk, compressing into a pinprick of light. And then your mother stands next to the clothesline with the wicker laundry basket in her hands, all your father's white shirts, hanging like ghosts from the lines. And then she's gone. The shirts flap in the wind a little, and you think of wounded soldiers begging mercy in the snow and turn and walk a bit farther, fascinated by the unlikely sheen of your new shoes.



Christopher Kennedy G'88 is an English professor and the director of the M.F.A. program in creative writing at SU. A native of Syracuse, he has written three full-length poetry collections, *Trouble with the Machine* (Low Fidelity Press), *Nietzsche's Horse* (Mitki/Mitki Press), and *Encouragement for a Man Falling to His Death* (BOA Editions Ltd., 2007), which earned him the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award for 2007. He has also written a poetry chapbook, *Greatest Hits* (Pudding House), and is a founding editor of the literary journal *3rd Bed*. His work has appeared in *Grand Street*, *Ploughshares*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *McSweeney's*, and many other journals and magazines.