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POETRY

Avalon Theater

Amy Schoofs-Rahne

As the legend went,
Elaine's fiery red hair caught in the cogs.
Ringlets weaving through the brain
twining down into the celluloid Charybdis.

She had danced like mad Morgana about the great spinning circle
weaving the celluloid lines of lives and loves.
Behind her the street lights shone
through the small window, double glassed against arc explosion.

Her head slammed down on the spool as she screamed
and slapped her palm against the big red emergency stop,
hopelessly tangled into the machine,
tresses burning in the gate.
The film broke and flailed and slapped against her ankles.

Below all went dark after the flash and clatter
as her locks infested the frame,
streaming arachnoidally, across the
silver screen.

Her hair shorn, she returned that night
cut but not bleeding,
to do the break down,
and count the stubs.

[RETURN](#)



Alabaster

Alex Elliott

Drowning only makes my heart beat faster;
the water fills me with rebellious thrill.
My thirst, not sated, nor my life hereafter

continues exclusive of disaster,
for which I've found there's no successful pill;
drowning only makes my heart beat faster.

Nighttime floods secretly please the aster;
visions of star-flower sex give me chills.
My thirst, not sated, nor my life hereafter

recalls these convulsions, only laughter,
since, though my body shook from water's fill,
drowning only makes my heart beat faster.

My mortality is much like Castor's;
star-pinned life, rather, un-death, will not kill
my thirst, not sated, nor my life hereafter.

Overflow your tub of alabaster;
the water at its brim cannot fulfill –
drowning only makes my heart beat faster –
my thirst, not sated, nor my life hereafter.

[RETURN](#)



Mental Salutations

Ali Boyd

I will be standing in the hall when
You get home, I have
Sat up all night ringing my fingers
And thinking if you won't love me,
What chance have I got?
Applying and reapplying my lipstick from that
Angry red tube you gave me, flipping my curls and checking my face,
I wait.

But when you do saunter in you face
Is the face of all the women you've kissed
While I sat by, so I ask you
How your day was and you smile.
You say "alright," and pat me on the shoulder.
I ought to grit my teeth and throw a fit, yet,
I don't feel so lonely
So I breeze by your open mouth.

Out the door
With my suitcase and you
Forget me the moment I am out of sight.

(No that's not what happened,
Just what it felt like.)

There was a time when I would have breathed
Only for you, but
You have never looked for me, alone.
Now I'm gone.

[RETURN](#)



Mussels

Ian Parker

They live happily on the surf-beaten bare rock
Of the North Atlantic coast,
And on submerged debris and dock pilings.
They colonize quickly on webs of man-made rope,
Strung by the hands of their unknown destructors.

They grow from free-floating sperm and ovum,
Riding the tidal currents for the weeks
Of their larval stage, until the lucky few
Settle on a suitably hard surface; eager to begin
Their long, motionless march toward death.

They live without complaint, loners in their shelter
Of shell. They suck water through the doors
Of their sparsely furnished and inescapable studio apartments.
They live with little luxury; their cloudy-walled
Homes offering only the necessary amenities for bivalve life.

They live one link from the bottom of the food chain,
Enjoying a flavorless diet of plankton swallowed
With salt water. Their defense are weak,
And cannot protect them from starfish, and snails,
And the unknown foe who takes them from above.

They live in confusion as their quiet neighborhood
Is ripped through the waves to the painfully dry air.
They shut their doors tight against intrusion,
But gloved hands throw them into crates
With enough water to keep them barely alive.

They live in fear as predators in white coats knock
On the walls of their houses until they show signs of life.
They brace themselves against their invasive enemy,
But must relent at last as the turbulent, boiling water
Sears their flesh and finally weakens their powerful muscles.

[RETURN](#)



Uncertain is a Verb

Desiree Valentine

Uncertain is a verb
It's the life that's lived
Escaping a shroud
But cowering in fear,
Unnerved

A corset holds
But the stomach juices
Still churn

Uncertain is a verb
Cool to the touch
But your touch is cold
Is the glass half empty
Or is the glass half full?

Am I holding you up
Or shackling me down
The cuffs on my wrists
Look pretty, like bracelets
But they clang
like emergency sounds

Uncertain is a verb
We walk through streets
paved by our own feet
while the highway swerves to
align itself with our deeds

Who is who
And what is where
And why should I care?

Uncertain is a verb
And it's a question
And a noun
And it's something to learn

It's the skin that holds you in
While itself regenerating
Uncertain is a verb...

The Future

Ali Boyd

When I was younger we drove through the desert.
Family vacation to New Mexico,
the artistic center of somebody's universe,
the Paris of the American southwest with more sand
and fewer monuments.
I scanned the desert, glued to my headphones,
soaking up the rusty asceticism when I felt it-
that burgeoning rush, that tiny snap within
the walls of the soul.

Will I return here?

Years later, walking through
the towering shadows of a city campus,
I found myself inside a little chapel. History;
the swirling secrets of past footsteps,
coated the stones like dust.
I put fingertips to the cool wall and I felt it,
and invented a million and two reasons to
follow my heart to strait to it.

I hope this is the path.

If I listen to the metronome of my
chest, I can test each decision
on an invisible scale, the primordial remains
of some wind or water spirit, steering a smaller vessel
to a place of unknown anchorage.
Is it fate? Is it hubris to hope you're meant to find
Something beneath the hustle and bustle?
A thing entirely your own?

And where will it be?

One day, in the future,
I want to wake up and realize
I am where I have always
wanted to be.

[RETURN](#)



The Quail's Husband

Emilie Eschbacher

Gather closely children and I will tell you a tale
of the handsome Moor and his lovely wife.
She was captured by a musician, and turned into a quail,
then released on her husband's hunting night.

The moon was bright and full, the grass shone with dew
while the handsome Moor hid in waiting
for the traditional quail hunt to begin. But he knew
something would go wrong while the moon was shining

so bright and full. A quail appeared
and instinctually he aimed his sharp-tipped arrow
at the unsuspecting tiny bird. The heard
the wind whisper to put down the weapon or all would end in sorrow.

He paused for a minute, not a moment more,
and shot his arrow into the heart.
Oh how he wished he would have hesitated, for
from the quail he saw his wife's body transform, slowly, in parts.

Goodbye, my love sang the quail as she died.
He could only echo her sentiments as he mourned
the loss of such beauty, such love, such life. He cried
out, knowing he was doomed to roam in state that was forever forlorn.

[RETURN](#)



Progress Report

Amanda Wolff

progress report.
31. marzo. 2009.

update: jumped
off the edge of every
thing
one
day
stripped of
the voice
the context
the default
things that form this I
am exposed as
flowers naked, defenseless
scalp burning, hairless
a girl whose walls break, she cries
until all the make-up peels
away

status: falling
with nothing to cling to
down
right
left
wandering as
a child
a stranger
an exile
plucked from safe home harbors
doubts, fears, now
feet stumbling, faithless
tongue twisted, speechless
a girl who's lost, so she drives
until something looks familiar
here

mission: find,
or at least search for I
don't
know
I
should meet me

in the pit
on the bottom
at this moment
is ripe for open eyes, new names,
pieces broken but brave
muscles tearing, growing,
layers stripping, all is showing here
is a girl who decides, who flies
so far away just to meet
herself

amanda wolff
santiago, chile

[RETURN](#)



FICTION

Over Canadian Whiskey

Austin Gilmour

She was twenty-four feet from bow to stern, entirely of mahogany, and my grandfather had built her instead of going to college. I once asked him if he regretted not going to school, and he replied, “how could anyone regret building something so beautiful?” And she was beautiful; everything about that sailboat was stunning. I had never been out on her, never out of the harbor. My parents, my father, saw nothing in sailing, and so had prevented me from accompanying my grandfather. But each time I watched my grandfather preparing her for a sail, I couldn’t help but wonder how I might one day be the one sailing, and someone else watching the bobbing mast disappear into the swells of Lake Huron. It was a sight I knew well.

For years I had been watching my grandfather rig the sailboat; from stepping the mast and tightening the stays, to hoisting the main sail and securing the sheets, I knew how to do it all. I had studied and yearned and begged to be allowed to sail, but my feet remained dry at my father’s bidding.

The fishermen in town say it’s in a man’s blood--the will to live on the lake, to take what Huron gives and harness it. My grandfather had never been a fisherman, but they all respected him. It was something about his own respect for the water, the nature he engrossed himself in. For some time my grandfather had allowed me to follow him into the bar where the fishermen went after a week on the lake. My parents thought we went on walks around the wharf and fish market because we always came back with some kind of salmon or trout or whatever they had been catching, but they didn’t need to know. I was so proud to be there with him, to hear the stories they swapped and smell their strong drinks as though I, too, were drinking.

“So, Sebastian. When are you getting your feet wet, eh?” one of the bearded fishermen asked, golden drink splashing about with the gestures of his hand, and his voice

gruff with the hardness that comes of a man who has spent his life on the lake. My grandfather was watching out of the corner of his eye, but otherwise letting me be.

"I'm not sure," I said full of confidence because I was sitting at a bar, and yet I was scared to say something wrong. "My parents aren't happy with the idea."

"Not happy?" I could smell the gold drink and smoke from the movement of his whiskers; it had stopped bothering me last summer. "With what?"

I shrugged. "Dangerous they say. My dad's always been scared of the lake, and would like if we all were, too." At this I saw my grandfather turn toward us and set down the cigar he wasn't supposed to be smoking.

"My son's not one to acquire sea legs, Ralph," my grandfather said, "and he would love it if everyone felt the same way." His voice was flat, and face plain, but his eyes betrayed his nonchalance about my father's failure to accept Huron.

"Ah well," Ralph consoled. "Leaves more room for us out there. More fish, too." I smiled from his comment then looked at my grandfather. His lips curved into a smile beneath white stubble, but his eyes didn't.

On the walk back to the cottage that night my grandfather didn't say too much, but he never really did. We walked beside one another, my two or three strides to my grandfather's one. The sun had set but there was some light left in the sky. Day fishermen were still on the water.

"Son," my grandfather said amongst the sounds of Huron, the waves she battered the shore with, and the trees that blocked the town from Huron's wind. "How old are you now? About twelve, right?"

"Yeah," I said, my brows questioning him. "I'll be twelve in two weeks."

"That's right, June twenty-first is the big day." Even while he talked, his eyes rested on something ahead of us. "That's about right." I didn't ask him what he meant, even though I wanted to. I felt like if I asked him I would disrupt something, as though he was just talking what he was thinking, and if I asked what he meant he would stop saying anything. We kept walking, shoulder to elbow, our feet moving across the weathered road.

The day seemed nice enough. The morning had dawned with a pleasant fog, and now the afternoon looked a promising few hours until dusk. My grandfather was ready to sail. I saw something in his eyes that returned the gaze off the lake, as though he was

actually called onto the water. I helped as he brought down the sail bags and inserted the battens. I hitched the jib sail to the forward stay and passed its sheet through the cleats. My grandfather checked the tiller and the rudder, making sure everything was in sailing condition. It was, and she was ready to sail.

“Son,” my grandfather turned toward me, “would you like to join me?” I held his gaze, stunned by the question. I could see on his lips the faintest of smiles, his standard of revealing no emotion.

“But,” I stammered, still in awe. “My parents.”

“They left for the day. Remember?”

I smiled and it felt like my cheeks would split in half. My grandfather didn’t need an answer, as I ran down the dock and slid into the sailboat. We pushed off the dock with the subtlest ease that takes years to develop. It was more my grandfather’s work than mine. I knew sailing without ever sailing; I knew the affinity the water held for silence, for reflection. Neither of us spoke; in a sailboat, there’s no need to speak, the water does that for you.

“Huron is a jealous woman,” I overheard my grandfather explain to my father two years ago. “She will just as soon give you the perfect wind as send a storm across your stern. I’ve had friends sail across the Atlantic with little trouble, who return and wreck a boat in Huron. It’s different sailing. Winds come up fast, storms blow in from all directions, and swells will beat you on all sides. But these things are what make the lake so inviting. You’ve got to tame her, plead with her to allow you this one more sail. And when she takes you, when she overturns you and sends your heart through your chest in fear, and she will, that’s when you know you’ve gotten to her and you remember you’re nothing compared to the lake. Huron keeps me humble and young.”

“The danger is too much. It’s irresponsible for anyone to sail in the lake, dad.” My father’s voice was strained, which happened when he was running out of things to say, when he knew he was losing. “Especially in such a small boat. If you have to sail, get a bigger one.”

“Listen son, you take sailing away from me, I’ll have nothing. Your mother didn’t like my sailing, but she supported me. She clung to the gunwales until her hands turned white, but she still sailed with me. And now, when I’m sailing, I’m with her; the water and wind,

it's nature surrounding me. And Elizabeth--" My grandfather's voice had quieted, and tears were forming in his eyes. The only other time I had seen him cry was at my grandmother's funeral, and I couldn't watch it again. I turned from where I was listening to their conversation in the kitchen and ran out the back door.

We were well into the lake. Grandfather was at the tiller, and I was toying with the jib sheets, my hands starting to redden from my tight grip. The clouds now covered the sun, but we sailed on in the darkening water without concern. I looked out over the bow, at the tree line that stretched past the small town, past the end of the beach, and into the horizon that was becoming less distinctive. I was sailing.

The wind took the sails with such ease that I was amazed we were moving at all. Because my grandfather refused to use a motor, I was for the first time completely separated from modern technology. "No self-respecting sailor uses a motor, damnit. I'd rather swim to shore than put one of those exhaust-farting devil machines on the back of my sailboat," my grandfather said after my own father had suggested he put a small outboard motor on the sailboat in case of emergencies. With God as creator of both him and nature, he figured, he would not corrupt sailing with some man-made implement. His was a simple philosophy.

Huron wind made a sound like no other; a low, howling sound that could shake the cottage and send trees peak over stump. I'd never heard the wind from the lake, caught by the sails, harnessed by the sharp cut of the canvass edges, powering the wooden boat across the water. I just sat, slightly slumped to one side, jib sheet in hand, watching the sails and feeling the wind. I was taken in by the swells' dance--up then down then up. Sometimes one would bump us to the port then back to starboard then port again. It had a beat, sailing, all of it. The sound, certainly, and the feeling and sight, too. The beat connected us to the lake itself, a part of the flow of the swells and the rush of the wind. I seemed closer to my grandfather, sharing something blessed to him and him teaching me. I breathed slow and deep and smiled.

"Congratulations, son," my grandfather said without taking his eyes off the bow and lake beyond. I smiled, but was unsure of what he was congratulating me for.

"Your first sail, son. It's a big day," he said, answering my unasked question. "One of the biggest."

“Thanks for bringing me out here, Grandpa.” I looked at his eyes. They were squinted, even though the sun was hidden, and the wrinkles on his face were appropriate on the lake--they matched the rough swells and rippled surface. I thought I’d like my eyes to look like that one day.

“The day I took your father out here was one of the happiest. He had just turned twelve and gathered enough courage to agree to a sail.” He smiled wide, and showed his teeth. “Your grandmother was a little nervous that afternoon, but she knew it was time. He was very nervous.”

“Was it time for me to sail?” I asked slowly. I looked toward the stern and my grandfather, waiting for his answer.

He nodded. “It was, son. You would have sailed at six, if your father had let you. Not all of us appreciate it, Sebastian. Sailing. It’s time when you can understand the beauty. You do.” I looked to the bow again, and smiled at its lively bounce off the crest of several swells. I did understand the beauty.

My hands shook, either from the cooling air or the excitement of being on the water after years of watching my grandfather sail. That moment would remain one of my fondest memories for years--the struggle with the jib, the adrenaline from heeling, and the chilling wind raising the hair on my arms. The clouds above us darkened, the swells lifting us, then dropping us as if threatening to swallow the tree that kept us afloat. I tried to hide my sudden fright, but I was sure my grandfather noticed.

“Son,” my grandfather said, “let out the jib a little.” I did what he said, having trouble with the cleat only for a moment. At the same time a swell crashed into the cockpit, and my heart reacted.

“Grandpa,” I stuttered out of my now cold lips, “are we all right?”

“Yes son. Just a little wet is all.” We continued, our bow now pointing parallel to the shore about a mile into Huron, and I wondered if we should be heading back. The swells grew with each rise and fall, and water sprayed our faces. I looked back at my grandfather, his eyes intent. They seemed to be searching for something in the lake. And this concentration scared me. It wasn’t right. I felt it.

“Grandpa,” I shouted over the wind. “Should we be going back?”

"We can't, son. Do you see where the wind is coming from?" He pointed north, behind us, toward the dock. "It's picking up, and we wouldn't be able to make it back quickly enough."

"Quickly enough for what?" I asked.

"On this lake, son, storms come up fast. Sometimes too fast for sailors to react. That's what's happening."

My heart pounded; my hands shook uncontrollably. "What does that mean?"

"Means we'll have to pull her to shore somewhere. Get off the lake." A few swells came over the gunwales, soaking my feet. "We can't come about now. The wind would take us over."

I tried to forget about my heart beating so heavily my chest felt it would break. But I didn't. The excitement and the fear and the sudden cold wind all kept me there, in the sailboat, eyes glued to the oncoming storm. The swells were just short of breaking onto us, and if that happened, she would have no chance. She would be flooded and we would be lost to do anything. She would lower in the water, forfeit buoyancy, and just the slightest wind or swell would be enough to send us under.

The rain started as my grandfather broke the silence, "Son, the jib." Grandfather's voice was urgent, unsettling. I looked to the bow and saw the sail I was supposed to be in control of. It flopped wildly about the forward stay, pulling the sheets out of the cleats and overboard.

I leaped across the cockpit toward the cleat. My hands clenched around the two inches of sheet that remained in the boat. The displacement of my weight gave the wind an opportunity to test us, as the windward side raised above the waterline. My grandfather recovered, skillfully controlling the tiller to keep us from overturning. He was two feet above me on the starboard side, as I lay strewn over wet lines and soaked rigging. I held firmly onto the jib sheet, my muscles cramping from the heavy strain and cold water. I could just see his face through the sudden rain; it turned for only a moment in a horrified expression. My heart sank, flooded with the fear that my grandfather's face surrendered. In the moment when terror seized my body, I was overwhelmed with a feeling of uselessness, that my grandfather was alone on the water, and I was dead weight. I would be the end to this sail.

While still sprawled across the port side of the cockpit, the leeward gunwales dipped under the water, and my face was suddenly consumed by a surge of water coming in over the side. In the panic that ensued I tried to stand, scrambling upward, for air, for safety. There was none. My hand lost the coarse sheet as frigid water rushed up my pants, past my stomach, and over my head.

Breathe, breathe! I plunged upward, my muscles aching from the struggle. My arms and legs kicked madly about, slowed by the water that surrounded me. I never saw light when my head broke the surface; the sky was as dark as the water. I pulled air into my lungs, feeling it fill my chest. Rain pelted my head, and a swell threw me toward the sky, then sucked me back. My eyes searched for the boat, for my grandfather. I could see nothing; they were gone.

I treaded water, fighting to turn my body around and watching for any sign of an overturned boat. In the deafening sound of the wind and water I thought I heard my name, but it was too dark and rough to see much while floating in the surging lake. My eyes darted, but I couldn't see farther than a few feet. I swam toward my name.

"Sebastian," a pause before another, "Sebastian." My name was yelled in an even tone, as though I was being searched for in our house.

"Grandpa!" I struggled to move toward the sound. My muscles cramped with the movement. My outstretched arm hit something hard. She was overturned. The hull pointed skyward, and my heart sank again. The rudder flopped from side to side, the wind playing its tune to our defeat.

A hand pulled my collar away from the boat. "Are you all right, son?"

"Yes grandpa, I'm fine."

"Very good," he said. The swells kept us pulling at one another to keep a close distance.

"Are you okay?" I asked, thinking of his old age.

"Certainly, son." There was something in the way he said this that made it seem he was trying to convince himself. I looked toward the sky-gazing hull again.

"What are we going to do?" I was struggling to keep my voice clam.

My grandfather turned us both toward her, a look of pain stretched across his face. I wanted to ask if it was because of the overturned sailboat, or if he was actually hurt, but

stayed silent in fear of making the situation worse. The two of us treaded water for what seemed far too long in such bad weather, but my grandfather made no movements. His eyes were fixed on his overturned boat, and for a moment I thought I saw tears in his eyes. But in so much water who could tell such a thing?

“We have to go,” my grandfather said, barely audible over the wind and the swells. My heart was broken, as confusion overtook me. “Go? What about--”

“It’s time, son,” my grandfather cut me off. “The storm is promising to get worse, and we’ll need to get to safety as soon as we can. We can’t stay with her. These life jackets are old and will get waterlogged. We wouldn’t make it through the storm.” His voice was still concentrating and controlled. His face returned to its usual emotion-hiding sternness, as he spared nothing from me in his explanation. I looked to him, frowning in my confusion. He must have noticed the look. “There’s no way we can right her in this,” he said shaking his head and motioning around us. “It’s her time, son.”

“What do you mean?” But as I asked he turned toward to skyward hull, dragging me by the strap of my lifejacket.

“Son, you’ll have to swim on your own. I’ll have a hard enough time getting myself back. Hold on to me for a minute.” I did what he said as he let go and fiddled under water. His hands came up again with his belt. He looped it through my jacket first, then his. As he fastened the buckle and pulled on it to make sure it would hold, I noticed his hands were shaking. I looked at mine that had been shaking for most of the sail and wondered if his shook because of fear or the cold, or both.

“If anything goes wrong,” he paused, looking at me, “if I stop, you won’t be able to drag me in, too.” I began shaking my head. “Son, listen,” he remained perfectly calm, too calm. “You’ll need to undo the belt and leave me. Do you understand this, son?” His eyes never left mine. “Do you understand?” he said, his voice strong and cold.

“Yes, grandfather.” I couldn’t say anything else. A swell broke over our heads and I felt the pull from the belt as my grandfather pulled me back above the water.

“Let’s go,” he said, urgency finally finding its way into his voice. We swam together, legs kicking and arms pulling our bodies through the black water; the sky was gone. My grandfather was still strong. He swam in front of me, swimming as much for himself as for me. I couldn’t see anything but his head and the splashing from our efforts.

One swell after another took us, and our heads would dip under the water with each one. I wondered how he knew which way to swim and if we'd make it before our lifejackets filled with water. My hand was still cramped from holding the jib and I would periodically pull it into my chest, swimming with only my left arm.

The lightening started, the wind was increasing all the time, and the swells began breaking more regularly. First my arms, and then my legs, gave way to exhaustion and I thought it impossible to continue. My thoughts were focused so much on continuing to swim, keeping my body afloat and keeping up with my grandfather, that I never considered how close death was to us. I didn't try to imagine drowning, and I didn't fear its potential pain. My world was swimming and keeping my head above the water. Nothing else.

Well past physical exhaustion, when it hurt to keep moving, I felt a pull on my jacket. I squinted in front of me and realized my grandfather was no longer pulling me forward. Lightening flashed and I remembered to be terrified.

"Grandpa!" I yelled at him. "Grandpa!"

A swell crashed over us, taking us with it under water. My arms groped to pull me to the surface, but I was held back at the waist. My legs kicked, but were blocked by something. In the trough of a wave my head came out for a second and the air gave my muscles life. Submerged again, I struggled against the resistance and finally broke the surface.

My hands felt for my grandfather, while my legs kept me afloat on the choppy water-Huron in all her majesty. "Grandpa?" I splashed water into his face, then realized the futility of this action. I felt a tear find its way out of my eye, and it wasn't just rain. My voice shuttered as I called to my grandfather again, "Grandpa? Hey!" I didn't know what to say, how to get him back. In the desperation I tried punching him in the chest, but the water slowed my hand to a soft tap. I lifted my exhausted arm above the surface and brought a hand against his face. I must have hit hard, because even my hand, numb from the cold water, stung.

We were being taken back out into the lake; the tide between swells was getting stronger. I looked again at my grandfather's face, red from where I had hit him. Then it dawned on me that I had no idea what direction the shore was in. In the time I had struggled with my grandfather and tread water I lost my bearings. Panic overtook me and I

screamed. There were no words, no names, it was just sound that came from my mouth. It wasn't anger really, or even fear, but defeat. I felt utterly defeated.

Yet another swell broke over my head, sending us under. For the first time, the idea of not struggling upward crossed my mind. I didn't want to give up, but I didn't think I could fight any longer. I was used. My breath was failing, my chest heaving. The water around me seemed to get darker and for the first time I noticed it was calm beneath the surface. Above there was a maddening storm, threatening and dangerous, but beneath it was peaceful, and I felt no need to fight.

My foot hit something and the sudden feeling brought me back to the cold reality of drowning. I didn't want to. My chest was empty and I fought the urge to inhale the lake. My hand brushed against something coarse; it wasn't my grandfather. I felt for the object, my last efforts darting my hand in every direction. Sand! It was sand!

Instinct finally took me and I dug my feet into the lake bottom, launching us upward. The resistance from my grandfather was almost too much, but my head soon broke the surface. I saw a tree as the water cleared from my eyes and my chest welcomed air. The shore was near.

I turned my back to the shore, grabbed the belt, and kicked. The struggle seemed less than before, though I think it was hope that carried us onto the beach.

I fell three times while pulling my grandfather onto the shore, surprised at how much harder it was to bear his weight out of the water. The sand made for poor traction when with each step it gave way to the weight of my efforts. Once I stopped pulling him from the water, I bent over his head. His eyes were still closed and I couldn't tell if his chest was moving; I was shaking too much myself. I cursed myself for not knowing CPR, and quickly ran through a list of movies in my head. While tears started flowing again, I relied on *The Sandlot* for an image of CPR. I blew into my grandfather's mouth, but instantly coughed from the water that had found its way into my own lungs. I tried pushing on his chest, but found I had no strength left as my right hand seized again, sending a shooting pain up my arm. The screaming came once more, though it took a moment for me to realize it was me. Then, with the horror and anger that rushed through me, I sent my clasped hands down onto my grandfather's chest with a final, terrible yell.

All hope was lost, stolen from my heart, and tears came easier now. I fell beside my grandfather, curled tightly in the cold rain and relentless wind. I remembered my father's avoidance and it occurred to me that I didn't actually know why he hated and feared Huron. It seemed so reasonable that he kept me from the water, wanted my grandfather to retire to land. And it seemed like weeks ago that I stepped onto the sailboat to sail my first.

A chill shook me even more vigorously as a gust blew wet sand against my face. I ducked under my arm, ready to awake from the nightmare, when I felt a cold pressure on my hand. I tried to bush it away but it held tighter. I looked over my arm to see a weathered face smiling.

"Grandpa?" I was unsure if I actually said anything, or if I just thought it.

"Son, we should be getting back now," he said with such simplicity that it seemed we were leaving the fishermen's bar for the night. I stared back at him, questioning my own consciousness and thinking that I might actually be dreaming. I felt my body shake and this time it wasn't my muscles. "Hey," it was a gruff voice that had said many words, "Son, let's get back. Have some warm soup with a fire."

"That was a night, eh?" my grandfather said, smiling at me from across a worn table and over several chipped glasses.

I nodded, though a smile seemed far from my lips. I had tried replaying the sail in my memory a number of times, but when the water first touched my face I lost concentration.

"So where's the rest of the family?" Ralph asked, bringing a glass of whiskey to his lips. I had watched the barman pour the golden liquid out of a round bottle. Velvet whiskey something, it said on the label.

"They've returned to the city for the season," my grandfather responded while I stared out the window into the darkening sky. Huron was as still as glass and people walked along its shore. I shook my head at them. "They weren't too happy about Sebastian sailing," my grandfather continued.

"I can't imagine. Why'd they leave him with you?"

"My son and I had a talk."

"The one who's not too keen on the water?"

"That's right. Fear's a terrible thing. Sebastian would hate the water for life if he didn't stay."

"How'd you convince your son?" Ralph's face seemed to speak as much as his mouth did, his expressions changing with every sentence.

My grandfather smiled and nodded his head with the slightest of motions toward me. "He saved my life."

The noise drained from my ears and my thoughts took me to the dark cottage and the warm fire--and the yelling. It seemed less a memory than a voice recording, since I had spent the evening staring into burning wood, my mind blank. It started as soon as my grandfather and I turned down the sandy road, my father approached yelling about the police and a search party on standby. I felt my mother's arms around me and imagined they'd be dry, but all I could remember feeling was the cold wetness of my clothes. We still had our lifejackets on, soaked through and useless.

"Son, can we wait for dry clothes?" My grandfather had asked.

"Wait? Wait!" my father shouted. "You try waiting while your son's missing and--"

"Not now, Hun. Let's get them warm and fed," my mother said, an arm leaving me and pulling on my father. My father muttered something and turned away without touching either my grandfather or myself. I was too cold to care.

Once inside I remembered more yelling, more fighting, but no words. I didn't know if I was being scolded for going, or if my grandfather was held responsible. I can't even remember eating anything, though I'm sure I did. In my memory it's just the fire and the sounds; everything else is dark. And in the morning I had wanted to go home, away from the lake, the water, the thing that wanted me dead. But I didn't. I stayed on the shore, with the feeling that I couldn't go as much as I wanted.

"Dad," I had said. "I can't go home yet." He had woken up wanting to fight, packed, and half way out the door. He demanded I go with them, but the thought made me feel sick.

I had remembered what my grandfather said the day before, while on Huron and before the storm. It wasn't for everyone, my father included. But I had known the beauty, and had experienced the worst. I had been taken in by Huron, and had won, though just barely. It had injured me, claimed something of my courage and I wanted it back.

“If I go home, dad, I’ll be afraid,” I had said. It was hard to watch him after that. He packed everything in the car, loaded my mother and sisters, and left. As he pulled from the driveway and toward the city, he shouted “bye” without turning to see me wave. I watched my family drive away from Huron, from me, and felt as though I had abandoned them somehow the night before. I didn’t leave, but I had the sick feeling anyway.

Back in the bar, my thoughts collected, I noticed Ralph looking at me. He made to say something but must have thought better of it after seeing my blank stare.

I nodded to him, and smiled. “We pick up the lumber tomorrow.”

[RETURN](#)



Words of Right

Kira Boswell

I woke up to the sound of my father screaming, “McNally bus is leaving in fifteen minutes! Up and at ‘em!”

I took a deep breath and inhaled a pungent smell of stale cigarettes from my clothes that were strewn over the ground and even worse, the scent that came from the layer on my skin and hair. My eyes were so dry that I only dared to open them the tiniest bit. As I peeked over my covers to look at the clock that read 7:25, my eyes felt as if they were about to leap out of my head. I felt a hard buzz go through my face, and then a harder thump through my entire head. Following this, a steady pain took over my entire body. I pulled my hand out of my covers and rubbed my face. Excruciating pain shot through my face and I remembered the pavement I ate right before Charlie Kroll continued to beat the shit out of me. I groaned at the thought of what my father would say. I looked at my arms that were badly scraped up and lifted myself out of bed.

Black. *Woah*. I flopped back into my bed and gave myself a few seconds to think about the night. *Damnit Sean. Stop starting fights that I always have to bail you out of*. I lifted myself out of my sheets covered with splotches of blood, but much slower this time. I made my way to the bathroom when I was sure none of my family members were in the hallway and stared at myself in the mirror. *Great*. The top layer of my lip was ripped off my face and it continued to bleed still. My freckled, right cheek was badly scratched up, but nothing beat the fat black eye that would make my mother weep. There was no avoiding them though. The McNally family doesn’t miss eight o’clock mass on Sunday. Ever.

There was a clanging of cereal bowls downstairs in the kitchen as my younger brother, Jack, and sisters, Jillian and Charlotte, loaded their dirty dishes into the dishwasher. The sound of Jack’s feet made their way up the stairs. He knocked softly. “David? Dad wants to know if you’re awake.”

I sighed. “Yes, I’m awake, Jack.”

“Okay,” he whispered through the door. His little feet scurried back down the stairs and I shook my head.

I looked at myself in the mirror again. I opened the medicine cabinet and found a bar of soap and cleaned off the dry blood crusted over my face the best I could. I winced at the touch of my own hands and the warm water in my cuts. I dried off my face with a towel and opened my eyes to see the light blue towel now red and blue. I threw the towel in the trash and put a bunch of tissue over it hoping my mother wouldn't notice. I hurried out of the bathroom to find my dad coming up the stairs. His blank face changed instantly to a look of concern and then became furiously red within seconds.

"What the hell, David? Christ!"

I sighed and uttered, "Yeah...I know" and turned into my room to get ready for church.

"Get back here!" he screamed and appeared in my doorway. "What the hell happened?" I looked up at him as I pulled off my blood stained t-shirt and threw on my church shirt, which I was pretty certain was dirty. "You know what-- I don't even want to know right now. Get dressed and get into the car. Now." He pounded each foot onto the wooden stairs as he walked. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he screamed, "Let's go!" and slammed the front door behind him. I threw on a pair of wrinkled khakis and heard the car start up. I opened the bedroom door to see my mother nervously ushering Jack out the front door, followed by Jillian and Charlotte. I waited for them to shut the door behind them before I followed.

I opened the front door to find a painfully bright sun to greet my pounding headache. Everyone was already in the car. My father refused to look at me and my mother, astonished, covered her mouth with both hands when she saw my face. Jillian had left the back door open for me and I climbed in. My mother took one more look at me, her eyes welling up before she turned her body, harshly, towards the window. The car ride was silent, which I didn't mind. Jillian and Charlotte stared at my face during the whole first half of church, stunned. My father, still red in the face, ushered me out of the church before the closing hymn. I walked towards the back of the church with my head down, trying to avoid the looks I felt. My father walked briskly to the car and I struggled to keep up with him. He ordered me to get in the front seat. Before I even had a chance to shut the door, the screaming began.

“I don’t know what the hell to do with you David! This is the third time this year you have gotten in a fight!” He paused to purse his lips together and breathe deeply. His face turned bright red and he raised his voice even louder, “I don’t even care to hear what happened this time! I’m sick of your bullshit stories! Sick of them!” He couldn’t even look at me. He stared straight down at the steering wheel.

I never lied to my dad the way my friends did to their fathers. I started to explain, “Charlie Kr-.”

“You know what David? I don’t want to hear about Charlie Kroll! I can’t take this anymore!” He paused to look at me. He softened his voice, but what he said was far from soft. “Come home when you’re ready to act eighteen.”

I felt my face burn. My eye didn’t hurt anymore. I pulled the door handle, half expecting my father to stop me. He didn’t. I put my feet on the gravel parking lot, expecting him to stop me again, but he didn’t. I slammed the car door hard and started down the sidewalk towards downtown Greenayche. I had no idea where I was going and I needed ibuprofen bad. I looked back and saw my father staring blankly out the front windshield.

“Shit,” I muttered and kicked the gravel. The church bells started to ring and I could feel my family’s eyes on me as they came out the church doors. I quickened my step and refused to look back at them. Moments later, the family Expedition zoomed by and tears started to fall down my face.

I pressed the button on the side of my cell phone. It was 1:12- a little over four hours since my father’s screaming fit in the church parking lot. I found myself stationed across the street from the sports bar where my father spent many Sunday afternoons. While the time seemed to be moving at a terribly slow speed, I wasn’t sure how I had managed to sit in this one position for such a long time.

While my body was dead still, my mind raced and my blood boiled. I couldn’t remember the last time my father had let me explain myself. I hate those dirty looks he always gives me. I started to think of all the times he had shot me that look. My hands started to sweat. I couldn’t think of a single instance when his look accused me wrongly. He knows. That pissed me off even more. Whatever, I thought. He probably did the same

kind of stuff when he was in high school. My mind began to slow as I thought of the way he looks at my sisters and Jack.

I remembered the first time my father took me to Eddie's Sports Bar. My feet danced above the ground as I swung them from the bar stool.

"Two root beers," my father called to an old family friend that I had always referred to as Uncle Rudy.

"Comin' right up, Bobby."

My father looked at me the same way he looked at my younger brother and sisters now. He patted my back so hard I almost fell off the stool.

Uncle Rudy slammed two enormous root beers in front of us. "I heard your birthday is coming up in a few days Davey Boy. Eight, huh?"

He still calls me Davey Boy. I hate it.

"Eight years old! Wow." My father answered for me. That hasn't changed either.

We got home just in time for dinner. I remember how mad my mom would get when Dad would bring me to Eddie's.

"He has homework, Bobby. And all he's accomplished today is getting cavities from all that soda!"

My dad chuckled and patted me on the back—too hard again. "Don't forget what I told you today David."

I never really paid attention to his speeches. They would drag on for hours about stuff I didn't have a clue about. I loved going to Eddie's with him though. I didn't care how long he would go on about respect for myself, my family, and women. I wondered if he would give Jack the same talks he gave me.

I looked up at Eddie's and I thought about how I had been kicked out of my house. I shifted on the bench at the unsettling thought and started to get angry again. Sean had called me twice since church, but I ignored both of the calls. I didn't feel like talking about last night. It was his fault that I was in this mess anyway. My phone began to buzz again. I sighed expecting the dumbass' name to show up on the screen again, but instead it showed up as an Unknown Caller. No doubt it was Sean trying to trick me into answering. I

silenced it and shoved it back into my pocket. Moments later, I felt another short buzz through my pants meaning I had a voicemail from the idiot. I pulled out my phone and hit speed dial one.

It was my sister, Charlotte. Sobbing. I stopped breathing. It was hard to make out what she was saying. She mentioned something about a pay phone in Grover Park, which was only about four blocks from where I was. I immediately sat up from my slouching position on the bench.

“Mom didn’t answer her phone and I can’t remember Dad’s number.” She sniffled and seemed to try to calm herself down, as if I might have trouble understanding. “Jillian and I were on the bike trail.” Her voice was hard to distinguish again but I thought she said something about Jillian passing out. My thirteen-year-old twin sisters had been inseparable since they were born. But when Jillian was four, she was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. She must have forgotten to bring glucose tabs along on their bike ride. I hung up on the message because it became a jumbled mess of Charlotte crying and yelling. I looked down the street and remembered that there was a Walgreens only a half a block from where I was at and sprinted there. Panting, I dialed 9-1-1, hoping that my sister had already done so. I was relieved to find that the dispatcher had heard from a young girl only a couple minutes ago that claimed her sister had fallen unconscious from a low blood glucose level. Hanging up, I grabbed the first thing in sight that would have a large amount of sugar in it. Fruit snacks. I threw a crumpled up five dollar bill at the cashier and ran out. I was pretty sure that wasn’t enough to cover this economy size box of fruit snacks but that was the last thing I was worried about. My heart pounded as I sped up. I passed Eddie’s, glancing at the parking lot for his car. No luck. I ran through a couple more blocks before I reached a small patch of trees I could cut through to get to Grover Park faster. It had been at least ten minutes since Charlotte called and I panicked at the thought of my unconscious sister. I reached the parking lot of Grover Park and spotted the pay phone Charlotte must have used. I ran through more trees, almost falling several times, until I reached the bike path I used to ride on when I was younger. I looked both ways, wondering which way they could be and shouted Charlotte’s name. The only sound I could hear was the gravel crunching under my own feet as I guessed and turned right down the path. I shouted Charlotte’s name again, louder this time, but I still didn’t get a response. I reached a fork in

the road, where the regular bike path kept going straight, and a smaller, muddier path went to the left. I stepped forward to continue down the bike path when I remembered the time I took them down the muddy path to show them all the bike jumps my friends and I had discovered. I took my chances and starting sprinting down the secret path. I could hear a clock ticking in my head and wondered if the paramedics would find my sisters before I did. I turned the corner to find Charlotte hunched over Jillian, sobbing uncontrollably. Their bikes were strewn across the dirt and Jillian lay on her back, not moving. Charlotte screamed when she saw me and started to run towards me, but I could tell she was very reluctant to leave her best friend lying on the ground.

My heart stopped as I looked at Jillian's still body. "What happened?" I said, more as a reaction than a real question. I ripped open the box I held under my arm and sat Jillian up with Charlotte's help. We started to shove the animal-shaped fruit snacks under her teeth and into her mouth.

"Jill, chew. JILL. CHEW." My voice quivered when I tried to sound strong. Charlotte started to cry again. "She didn't bring any of her stuff?" I asked, already knowing the answer. "The glucose-gun?"

"No, we just forgot everything," Charlotte said in between sobs. I thought about how my parents always reminded Jillian that it was her responsibility to remember her tester and insulin, but I had a feeling that Charlotte felt like it was half her responsibility to remind her to bring it too.

Jillian had started to slowly chew on her own after Charlotte began to move her jaw up and down once or twice. I let out a sigh. I didn't realize that I had stopped breathing until I started again. We fed her a few more, but she tired quickly and I had a feeling that she needed more than a few fruit snacks. I lifted her over my shoulder and stood up. Charlotte scrambled to stand up next to me and we started towards the fork in the path. I sat on the ground and held Jillian in my arms, trying to feed her more. Jillian had more freckles than Charlotte, but besides that, they were identical. Same silky red hair that fell in their faces, same gangly arms and legs that were covered in freckles as well. They both had the same small, pointy nose that I wasn't as lucky to inherit from my mother. Rather, I had my father's nose-bigger and slightly crooked. In fact, I had my dad's unruly brown hair as well, and hopefully I would turn out to be as tall as him one day. Jillian was starting to

chew a little easier when I spotted the paramedics down the path. They came carrying bags upon bags of supplies. I hoped there was a glucose-gun in there somewhere. I quickly explained that Jillian fainted, but Charlotte took over, telling the paramedics that she was diabetic. One of them reached into his pack and pulled out a glucose gun and gave it to Jillian. Shortly after, Jillian opened her glassy eyes.

“David! Oh thank God!” I looked up to see my mother and father running towards us and Jack bouncing in my father’s arms. My mother’s red, puffy eyes revealed her concern. Reaching down and sitting Jillian up in her lap, I was now relieved of my thirteen year old sister’s heavy body. I offered to take Jack from my dad.

“Yes. Thank you, son.” His discerning stare lasted longer than usual.

We didn’t give the paramedics a chance to tell us only one person was allowed to ride with Jill. All six of us crowded into the ambulance and went to the hospital. Jillian was going to be ok. This was my first opportunity to press play on my thoughts that had been put on pause since I heard Charlotte’s voice. I had just remembered how mad I was supposed to be at the man sitting next to me. I wondered what he was thinking about and wondered if he could ever understand my life. I wished I could explain it to him.

I thought of the time I visited my Grandma McNally in Rhode Island. I was young, but I still remember the pictures of my father that were hanging around the house. I had no idea at the time that I would turn out to look so much like him. I remembered the stories my grandmother would start to tell, but my father would stop. All of a sudden I remembered something my grandma told my father while I sat next to her on the couch.

“If he’s anything like you Bobby, you’ve got a lot of work on your hands.”

The doctor warned Jillian to never forget her glucose tabs when going on bike rides and told my parents that she was only moments away from a diabetic coma. I strolled outside of the hospital room my siblings occupied as my mom walked in.

“Jack, stop jumping on the bed! Charlotte, you’re going to suffocate your sister if you don’t give her some room.”

I shuffled over to my father who was sitting on the bench outside of the room. His wrinkled and freckled face looked up at me as I approached him. “Dad....Can I just tell you what happened? I just—“

He held up his hand to stop me. “David, let’s just go home. It’s been a long day.”

And just like that, he knew. He knew, but he didn’t understand. Just like that, he didn’t let me explain again.

[RETURN](#)



Napa Valley

Cecilia Ehlenbach

I moved out of my parents' house on my eighteenth birthday. The last words directed at my back by my father's worn out voice: "Charlie, just don't get in over your head." Bought a train ticket for \$289- took me from Cleveland to Chicago and from Chicago to Martinez, California. The trip lasted three days and I was a crumpled, tired mess when I finally stumbled into the red dirt of Martinez. The dirt there clung to your clothes, covered your hair with a fine film. It was rough on my lungs, gave me nosebleeds in the beginning, but those stopped after the first few days. They say Martinez soil is good for your skin. Grocery stores and convenience stores sold it by the glass bottle, a strange clay-like concoction labeled "Martinez Milagros".

The city was nice, a mix of distant mountain ranges and old buildings and parks that I wandered through with an ice cream cone. I ate a lot of ice cream that first week; stands were set up on every other street corner and it felt good to wander aimlessly with something purposeful melting down my hand, arm, elbow. A different ice cream flavor for every place I visited— chocolate chip banana for Alhambra Valley, butter pecan while taking in the sights of the Carquinez Strait and the Sierra mountain range, strawberry during a visit to the Waterbird Regional Preserve, two scoops vanilla and one scoop chocolate for my walk along the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

The Super 8 I had checked into was a sad affair; I avoided my room, leaving early for breakfasts at a diner and returning only when the sun had nearly finished setting. The TV got more static than channels and the bathtub looked like it hadn't been given a good scrub in several months. The bathroom towels were exchanged exactly twice for fresh ones. My sheets were changed once. Rundown, and it was still eating up my money— I needed a job. I went down to the front desk one night to ask for directions to a job placement agency. The same man had been working the desk since my arrival two weeks prior. His nametag said Andrew. He had a nice face, but it was confusing: his mouth frowned and his eyes flirted. I didn't know what kind of a message he was trying to send out.

"I was wondering if you have a yellow pages back there," I said to him. His sly eyes looked me up and down and focused on the green stripes of my t-shirt. I felt uncomfortable, and flattered. "Or maybe you know where the nearest job placement agency is?"

"Where are you from?" His voice surprised me. It was very low, much lower than I remembered from our first contact on check-in day.

"Ohio."

"I've never been outside of California. Wouldn't want to go any place else." Andrew's eyes probed mine. I wondered if he was happy. His mouth had moved from a frown into a thin line. His eyes began to dance.

"Martinez seems nice."

"Eating a lot of ice cream here?"

"What?"

"Your shirt." I looked down and saw the white drippings of mint chip across the front, a thin trail from neckline to hem. My face turned red, which made Andrew's eyes smile and his mouth pucker up.

"We don't have outdoor ice cream stands set up like this back in Cleveland. Come September and it starts to get cold already," I said sheepishly.

He changed the subject. "What kind of work are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure. Something outside maybe."

"You should go to Napa. A lot of the grapes need harvesting starting now. They're always looking for more workers. You flew in?"

"No, I took a train."

"Go back to the train station tomorrow. There's a bus that leaves from there and goes to Napa Valley midday every day. It's a short ride: only 40 minutes or so. I'm sure you could find some temporary work at one of the vineyards. They always need people around this time of year." He turned towards the computer monitor sitting to his left. "The bus leaves at 12:30. I'd leave here around 12:00 to catch it. \$15 fare."

I couldn't have made an objection if I'd wanted to. Andrew had made my mind up for me. The plan seemed okay. I was drifting. It felt nice to get a little direction. I said my thank you's and we parted ways, his eyes making love to the back of my head as I pushed the button for the elevator.

I gathered my things, a small pile of personal effects, the next morning from all of the odd places they'd migrated to in the room, and shoved them into the single suitcase I'd brought with me. A couple of t-shirts and sweatshirts, another pair of jeans, underwear and

socks, a nearly depleted stick of deodorant, a toothbrush, and a few books I'd meant to read for awhile, Milan Kundera's *Immortality* being at the top of the list. The suitcase was a relic from my grandfather, an ugly olive-colored thing that had seen a few wars, a couple different countries, and a handful of sordid love affairs. It was the only thing I'd brought with me to remind me of home and my roots.

Andrew and his mismatched face wasn't sitting behind the desk in the lobby. I left the motel without a goodbye.

The bus was there when I got to the train station. It was nearly empty of passengers. The quiet suited me. I stowed my suitcase on the rack above, settled into a window seat near the back, and fell asleep with my face plastered to the window.

* * *

My face left marks on the window as the emergency personnel peeled it away from the glass. My right eye was clouded over, but the left took it all in: the blood staining the window the same rust color as the Martinez soil, the bits of face clinging to the sticky glass, the broken bus holding in my broken body.

"Don't move your head," said a voice. Strong hands lifted me unto a backboard, strapped in my limbs, and sloppily raised my body. We began moving, the pace slowing and starting abruptly. My face felt caved in on the right side, colder than the rest of my body. Muscles went through spasms, nerves twitched, and the fibers of my face felt exposed. I imagined my face with a cheek missing and I imagined the cheek left behind to rest on the window. My eyes closed and I fell asleep a second time.

* * *

My parents flew to Napa to retrieve my body. They brought me home, set me up in my bedroom underneath the covers I had just left, and waited for me to talk. They waited for a month. My mother changed the flowers in the vase beside my bed, just like in the movies. My father sat next to my still, silent form until late in the night, telling me stories about myself as a child, begging me to truly wake up, to break my silence, just like in the movies. They kept a month-long vigil over the son that had left and been brought back to them by the providence of some divine power and no matter that he was sleeping and no one knew when he would wake up, he'd come back.

* * *

The first image that crossed my mind when I woke up early one morning several weeks after my return was that of a face with laughing eyes and a scowling sensual mouth. It was confusing and I couldn't place it so I decided to first make sense of the room around me. It was disconcerting. Things felt out of place somehow, but I couldn't remember how they used to be arranged in the bedroom.

My mother brought in breakfast on a tray as she had every other morning since I'd come home: jelly toast, scrambled eggs, fruit salad, a glass of milk. Our eyes met for an instant, and she looked away, busying herself with laying out a napkin on my nightstand and placing the fork on top of it at the right angle.

"I don't want to be here." My voice sounded rough.

My mother's back straightened up and she called to my father, "Frank! Frank!"

He came hurtling into the room, belly swinging, eyes wild and fearful.

"Say it again, Charlie. He spoke to me just now. Say it to your father."

I took a deep breath. "I don't want to be here."

My father shoved his face into mine. His breath smelled like the mild salsa he mixed in with his eggs. "Well, you ungrateful son-of-a-bitch, you are here. We flew out to get you on our dime. Since coming home, you've laid in this bed acting like the sullen little son-of-a-bitch you are while your mother runs herself ragged serving you on hand and foot. If you weren't missing half your face ..."

His speech trailed off. My mother burst out sobbing. They left my room together, both shaking for their own reasons.

The ceiling was covered in little water stains.

* * *

The doctor in California had told me that a semi had plowed into the bus. The driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. I entered a week-long coma after the accident. I'd hit my head pretty hard against the glass window. There may be some damage, some memory loss. They'd put thirty-three stitches in my cheek. If the vision in my right eye was a little foggy and unfocused, it should improve with time. My face ached. I took a cocktail of aspirin and pain pills every few hours.

* * *

"Are you napping, Charlie?" my mother's soft voice asked from the light of the hallway. I'd shut all of the drapes.

"No."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes."

She tiptoed over to my bed and perched at the foot of it. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about what your father said before."

"You don't have to apologize for him."

"I know, but he's not going to apologize himself. He's a little mixed up. He was angry, and then when we got the news, he felt so incredibly guilty the entire flight out there, and has been so worried these last few weeks. And now you've driven him to anger again."

My jaw tensed up. "You can leave now, Mom."

She got up and closed the door behind her. I closed my eyes tight and tried to remember why the figure with the contradicting face was so important to me.

* * *

I didn't have to take pills as often anymore. My cheek hurt less. It had begun to itch now. The scars were red and angry and oozed yellow when I scratched at them. The stitches had been removed. The nurse told me the scarring would be minimal if I didn't itch my face.

I had gone on a couple excursions out of the house with my mom to places like the grocery store and the post office. The bandages on my face always drew a lot of attention and commentary. My mother held onto my elbow in public as if I might go missing, or maybe to show the world this poor boy did have a mother that loved him.

I only saw my father at dinnertime. He didn't visit me in my room. We didn't talk to one another.

* * *

My father had called me a faggot. "I didn't raise my son to turn into some sort of a faggot." We were eating birthday cake. I can't remember what I did to make him say it, but he said it, and it cut into me.

I got up from the table quickly and went upstairs. My parents' voices began shouting at one another. I quickly packed Grandpa's suitcase: deodorant, clothing, toothbrush, *Immortality*.

"Charlie, where are you going?" my mother asked in a frantic voice. She ran over to me and put her hands on my shoulders.

"Leaving."

"Oh God, Frank, he's leaving. He's leaving! Charlie, sit down. Please, sit down."

"I'm leaving, Mom."

"Frank, you drove him to this. Why the hell did you say that? Charlie, honey, sit down, you're being irrational."

"Let me him go."

"What? Frank! I can't just let him walk out this door. He's a child."

"He's an adult. Let him go. If he has to run away to man up, let him go."

My mother dropped her hands from my shoulders and backed away. I opened the side door and heard my father say, in a worn out voice, "Charlie, just don't get in over your head."

* * *

Andrew. The face belonged to Andrew, the desk clerk. I felt drawn to that face for reasons I couldn't explain or at least couldn't remember anymore.

The suitcase was packed again the next morning, but this time I walked out the side door to silence.

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CREATIVE NON-FICTION

The Professional and the Polar Twin: a Five-Act Drama (with Author's Notes)

Mark Brennan Kelley

Prologue: The Curse of Mankind

"In each of us there are two natures. If this primitive duality of man, good and evil, could be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that is unbearable. It is the curse of mankind that these polar twins should be constantly struggling."

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

"He does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking. He is a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

Alcoholics Anonymous, The Big Book

People say that doctors make the worst patients. The case of Dr. Jekyll proves this tired adage true. Dr. Henry Jekyll was a good and honest man, but, once he drank his potion, he was also a homicidal maniac. Dr. Jekyll convinced the world that his evil nature was in fact a different person, Mr. Hyde, and resolved to fight this other nature alone. My father, Dr. Kelley, faced a similar fate: through a potion, he unlocked his other nature and attempted to hide the result from the world. Dr. Jekyll's evil nature ultimately led to his demise. Would my father die?

Act One: The Phone Call

"Now and then the family will be plagued by specters from the past, for the drinking career of almost every alcoholic has been marked by escapades, funny, humiliating, shameful or tragic."

Alcoholics Anonymous, The Big Book

It's a warm September afternoon: like most nineteen year olds, I spend the day ignoring my schoolwork, playing videogames in the dorms instead. Midterms don't start for a month anyway. Until then, I have time to focus on more important things: TJ has just bought Madden 2008 and I'm struggling to learn the controls. The phone rings. It's my father. Why is he calling on a Monday afternoon? I answer: he can talk while I make this critical third-down conversion. "Mark?" he asks in a weary tone. He's been crying. I leave the room. I brace myself. "I'm sorry," he says, "I'm going to have to go away for a while, and I don't know what is going to happen. I fucked up." My bracing does little to soften the blow. Words escape me. He says some other things, but I'm not listening. Instead, I'm thinking about all the times this call probably should have happened. I think about all the times my father has "fucked up" in my life and his. "Mark, are you there?" I refocus. He tells me what happened. I desperately hang to every word. It can't possibly be as bad as it sounds. He always fixes it: even when he fucks up, life eventually returns to normal. I hold out hope that this is the case. But the more I listen, the less I hope. This time is different.

My most pressing question about that day is also the most obvious: why did my father go to work with alcohol still in his system? The hospital knew his condition and didn't discriminate so long as he came to work completely clean. He knew he was going to be tested that Monday morning. Yet he failed. Why? I still don't know, but I can guess. My father didn't have as much control as he wanted us to believe, as he wanted to believe. His confidence, charisma, and intelligence made him a good doctor. They also made him a good alcoholic — "good" in the sense that he was skilled at hiding it, hard to catch. "Is Dad drunk?" I often asked myself growing up, not wanting to know but asking anyway.

Act Two: Power Rangers and Nosey Teachers

"The first impulse will be to bury these skeletons in a dark closet and padlock the door. The family may be possessed by the idea."

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

It's a chilly November morning: I missed the bus, so Mom is driving me to first grade. But I'm not thinking about school. Sitting in the back seat, my mind engages in a

feverish debate: which Power Ranger do I want for Christmas? The red one is more popular, but I like the blue one. Mother disrupts my concentration. "Honey, did you remember your spelling homework?" I answer positively. She keeps talking, but I'm lost in thought: Mike already has the blue one. Do I want the same one as Mike? We arrive at school. As I exit the car, my mother includes a final direction: "If anyone asks, tell them Daddy is on a business trip and will be gone for two weeks." Kissing me goodbye, she leaves me to my thoughts. Why is Daddy on business? Who would want to know about Daddy anyway? But these thoughts are fleeting. I'm late, and it's time to go inside.

After lunch, Mrs. Davis calls me to her desk. Did I forget to hand in my spelling homework? As I reach her, she leans close. "Where is your Daddy? I heard he is out of town," she asks softly. Now everything makes sense. Mommy wanted Mrs. Davis to know where Daddy is. I eagerly recite my lines: "Daddy is on a business trip and will be gone for two weeks." She doesn't seem satisfied, but directs me to my seat. By the time I reach my desk, my mind has shifted to more important matters: I think I want the red Power Ranger instead.

As a child, I knew my father drank. And I knew his absence during those two weeks had to do with his drinking. But the connection was made clear only after my mother heard what happened at school. She told me Daddy was "sick" and was in Chicago to get better. I understood, as much as six-year old can understand such a thing: Daddy was at the hospital where he could be cured. Only now do I understand fully: he was in Chicago for an Alcoholics Anonymous program. And he wouldn't be cured. But that wasn't the story I told the world. If anyone asked again, and they would, I would stick to my lines. That day, I learned I had a role to play. That day, for the first time but certainly not the last, I played my part beautifully: Mrs. Davis bought my act. In two weeks, my father returned and the production was allowed to continue.

In this production, my father had the leading role. In our small Midwestern town with a population of 9,000, my father was "Doc." Around town, "Doc" was well liked and respected: he had a beautiful wife, four accomplished sons, and a successful medical practice. In short, his life was perfect. Naturally, my father did all he could to protect this reputation. He never went to the bars. Too public. Same went for the local AA meetings. If

you asked around town, most people would tell you that “Doc” didn’t drink. But my father drank. He drank in secret, alone, sneaking pulls in the bathroom, in the car. He drank at home. And we knew: we saw the empty bottles in the trash. But we were willing to let my father struggle alone. As the years passed, we desperately ignored his other side. Sure there were good days, months, even years, but, without notice, the monster would always come back. Each time, we pretended that *it* wasn’t real, that *it* would all go away. *It* didn’t.

Act Three: The Polar Twin

“As we became subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm, the chilling vapor that is loneliness settled down. It thickened, ever becoming blacker.”

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

It’s a rainy June evening: my three brothers and I are sitting in the living room of our cabin in Wisconsin. We spent the day in the boat, but it has gotten dark, so we have nothing better to do than watch Law and Order and talk. Brendan can’t wait to get back to Notre Dame, and I’m excited to get my driver’s license next month. Chris and Mike just sit back and enjoy the show. We’ve owned the cabin for a few years, and we like it. Dad likes it more: he drives here every free weekend. The brothers know why he comes so often. At the cabin, he no longer needs to be “Doc.” Far from the watching eyes, he gives up his struggle and indulges his other nature. Out Dr. Jekyll, in Mr. Hyde. But we don’t talk about that. Enjoying each other’s company, we can ignore this grim reality. That is, until my father stumbles in. His already tanned face is redder still. His hair is a mess. The room gets quiet. Should we ignore him? He stands a few feet away, staring at us. We sit. He stares. Someone has to say something. “Just go to bed, Dad. Go to bed,” Brendan says. My father isn’t usually a mean drunk, but, on this night, these words send him into a rage. “Fuck you, don’t tell me what to do” he snarls back. My father stumbles toward us, eyes raging. We wrestle him to the ground. He wails. He moans. As I fight to restrain him, I see something. Is the man before me really my father? Looking into his eyes, I do not recognize him. Looking into his eyes, I see a tormented soul. I see a tortured man losing a

lonely fight. It's over in an instant. We let him go and he stumbles to his room. The brothers make plans to leave in the morning. We can't stand this place anymore.

Didn't Ezekiel write that "the son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity"? Yet, this episode, among countless others, has defined my personality more than I care to realize. I am the textbook definition of a child of an alcoholic. I didn't realize how true this was until I actually read the textbook. "Fear of conflict?" Check. "Constant need to maintain control?" Check. "Always wanting to please others?" Check. "Inability to relate to peers?" Check. There are many more symptoms, some of which I don't fit, most of which I do. I tell myself that I will never be like him: my father probably said the same thing. But his father, also a "Dr. Kelley," was an alcoholic; my great grandfather was too. In fact, Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to become alcoholics themselves. My brothers and I have been blessed with great genes, but the genetic tendency toward alcoholism haunts my mind: it's all but certain one of us has a polar twin.

Act Four: The Phone Call, Part Deux

"When your husband is bad, you become a trembling recluse, wishing the telephone had never been invented."

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

It's a cool September morning: a day after my phone call with my father, I walk around like everything is normal. Yesterday, TJ asked why we didn't finish our game. I told him I was losing anyway, that I had a call about a sick relative. At least I didn't lie. But I can't tell him the whole truth: he wouldn't understand. I focus on school. If my mind is occupied with the War of 1812 and Aristotle's metaphysics, then I'll forget that my life is falling apart. I stare at my books, but find myself distracted. The phone rings. This time, it's a friend's mother. Willing to accept any distraction, I answer. We exchange pleasantries, but I can tell she has something to say. Then a pause. Why isn't she saying anything? As I prepare to break the stalemate, she asks, "How is your dad's back?" His back? What in the hell is this woman talking about? I remain silent. She continues, "I

heard Doc broke his back and had to leave town for surgery. If that's not it, what *really* happened?" Now I understand: it's a trap. I want to scream. I want to cry. Instead, I quickly compose myself. I tell her I have to go, that I will call right her back. I don't. I call my mother. She'll tell me what to say: she always has the right lines. Trying to start my sophomore year in college, I feel like I'm in first grade once again.

At heart, not much had changed. I was still an ashamed little boy trying to hide a secret from the world. I guess some things were different. Over the years, I had practiced my act. It had become second nature. By the time I had reached college, our "perfect" life almost seemed like reality. I desperately wanted it to be so. If I performed well enough, perhaps what I showed the world would become reality. On that September morning, I realized the foolishness of this hope. In reality, the production was falling apart: my father was gone, off to a treatment center in Oregon. The leading role was vacant: the rest of us were left wondering how to save face.

Act Five: The Thanksgiving Feast

"Years of living with an alcoholic is almost sure to make any wife or child neurotic. The entire family is, to some extent, ill."

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

It's a frigid November evening: with my father gone, the rest of the family sits in Brendan's studio apartment in New York City. It's Thanksgiving, but you can't tell that by looking at us. I think about previous Thanksgiving dinners at home. Joined by friends and family, we would eat turkey and watch football. None of us say why we are in New York, eating leftover turkey without the gravy, but we know. We are running away. None of us have the strength to face family and friends. And it's all his fault. Words of thanks are replaced with damnations. It's hard to say who said what: venom shoots in every direction. "He ruined everything. The stupid drunk has thrown our lives away. Mother should leave him. She should have nothing to do with such a failure." All the while, my mother sits in the corner, stupefied. What has become of her Thanksgiving feast?

In previous years, we had been quick to give thanks. That Thanksgiving was a test of our ability to recognize our blessings when they were unclear. We failed. We drank deep our resentment. In our confused pain, we were searching for an outlet. As the man who shattered our delicate production, my father was the obvious choice. It was true that he had destroyed our old life, but was that a bad thing? As we grappled with an uncertain future, one thing became clear; we did not want to restage the farce. With that, a new question arose; was my father to take part in this new life, whatever it may be?

Epilogue: End of Production

"The most satisfactory years of your existence lie ahead."

Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Big Book*

It's Thanksgiving morning, one year after that Thanksgiving in New York. Yesterday, my mother read the first draft of what is to become this drama. As we sit in the kitchen, I'm nervous. We haven't talked about the events on which I have written. I doubt she even remembers that chilly November morning when I was in first grade. I didn't tell her I was writing this story, I didn't ask for permission. I just wrote. Coming home from my junior year, I'm wondering if showing her the story was a bad idea. Does she like it? Is she offended? I don't ask her these questions. But she seems to read them on my face. "Was your childhood really that bad?" she asks. She doesn't sound angry or upset, just hurt and a little ashamed. I tell her that no, it certainly wasn't that bad. More like ninety percent good, ten percent bad. The ten percent was just more memorable. She is only half convinced. "But isn't it all better now that we have moved. Don't you like the new house?" It was true, the move has made things better: no longer a notable family in that town of 9,000, we are nobodies in a city of 115,000. Over the past six months, my mother has tried hard to make the new house a home. I don't know what to say. I feel guilty: it was not my intention to make my mother feel bad. As I stand wondering what to say next, my father comes into the room. Perhaps he'll make the situation clearer. I ask him what he thinks of the piece. "You know, I like it. In my meetings, we often talk about alcoholics as actors." Since his return from treatment in Oregon, my father continues to attend AA meetings. The change is drastic: he no longer drinks, and is able to talk about his alcoholism freely and without shame. Seeing my father's ease, my mother softens. "Did you hear the new rumor

back home?" she says lightly, "Apparently your father is a professor at the university. How does that sound Doc?" He laughs. "I don't know about students, but I have plenty of residents to look after. I suppose they count." "Doc" is still a bit of a mystery back home: one day he was seeing patients and the next he was gone. Naturally, theories arose. This new theory is one of many: some held to the story that he broke his back, while others heard that he ran off with his secretary. The truth is far less interesting. In reality, he joined a new medical practice. He's been there only a few months but he seems to like it. He tells us that he may have to go in today, and, right on cue, my father gets a call. "The new guy always gets picked on," he jokes as he hangs up the phone. He kisses my mother, gives me a hug, and promises to get home before dinner. He wouldn't dare miss another of my mother's Thanksgiving feasts.

In the year between those Thanksgivings, my family struggled to save our lives from tragedy. If the story had ended on that November night in New York, it certainly would have been tragic. Thankfully, it did not. But there was no single event that saved us, only a stringing together of minor events: there were awkward phone calls in the December following his return from Oregon; a reunion in January that almost didn't happen; the decision in March to sell cabin; the cross-state move in the summer months; and the Thanksgiving that saw the family together for the first time. During this time, my father remained sober. And he remains sober. But he knows that his fight isn't over. He is still an alcoholic. My father cannot be separated from his polar twin: he is cursed to constantly struggle. For too long, my family was unwilling to face this fate. We relied on a production to mask the truth and give the perception of perfection. That production seems so foolish now that the props of our former life are gone. Over these past two years, our life has been restaged. Only this time, it isn't an act. And it doesn't need to be perfect. It's real.

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