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# **FROM THE WRITING CENTER**

**A CELEBRATION OF WRITING  
DONE IN AND AROUND  
THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA WRITING CENTER**

**S P R I N G 2 0 1 3**

**EDITED BY CASSANDRA BAUSMAN, JACOB HORN & MITCH NAKAUE**





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## **ARTIST'S STATEMENT: "THE FOUND NARRATIVE"**

### **TAYLOR YOCOM**

The Found Narrative collection incorporates elements that any writer can identify with: text and inspiration. For my mixed media pieces, I flip through a vintage magazine and find images that seem to tell a story. From there, I use my own interpretation to discover what is going on in the image: whether it is a photograph or drawn advertisement. To convey the inherent narrative, I repeat a phrase over and over on the page with my typewriter. This repetition solidifies the message and evokes a feeling from the piece while still being presented in a uniform manner.

The inspiration for my work draws similar parallels to inspiration for fiction or other forms of writing. My art is special and nuanced as it tries to bring forth a latent story from an already produced image instead of creating a completely original composition. In a way, I am similar to writers, as I bring together a variety of elements to create my own story. For some pieces I use poems my friends have written (special thanks to Charles Wanless and Caitlin Dorsett) and play with my found images to perfectly evoke the story in the stanzas.

Visual and written arts are the backbone for any culture. My art incorporates both in literal and metaphorical ways. The typed word in the works highlights the importance of text and written words. Even more importantly, the words demonstrate a story created from the found images. I sincerely hope that you appreciate the artwork and can discover your own stories in the pieces.



## **CHAPTER EXCERPT, UNTITLED MEMOIR**

### **DEVIN VAN DYKE**

This is the opening part of a chapter. It is a true story.

The psychiatrists that took me to court usually won for the first two fourteen-day holds as well as the initial three day stint for which there is no legal recourse. Eventually I always won my freedom, or they didn't try to keep me past those initial 31 days. Out of something like a dozen times of being kept for those first three days, only twice did they hold me—or rather have me treated—in a long term facility meant to house you for more than thirty days.

The idea that you're "housed" comes from the nature of the environment itself: literally no larger than you would expect a small minimum security prison to be for a similar number of people. Two or three inpatients per room with the absolute minimum of furnishings—imagine jail, but not appointed in stainless-indestructible-steel. Warehouse is a kind word available to those who can surmount the mind-numbing effects of the drugs and remain aware of the starkness of their surroundings. These places quickly become warehouses on drugs.

The world you inhabit has no personal identity—its like staff doesn't want you to be unique, they want you to be a hole in their peg board. Maybe they don't want to form an attachment to your predicament, or maybe they think they'll catch it. I knew from conversations with my peers that some fellow visitors routinely went to long-term-care for six-month holds. Some earned a second hold. The thought of spending six months in a hospital scared me.

After losing in court I knew I would be sent to a long-term-care facility and dreaded the continued loss of my freedom, but I knew it was not in my best interest to continue resisting the idea that I needed treatment. Staff saw resistance to treatment as being uncooperative and showing a lack of insight, which was then used in court as a reason for continued housing. Apparently I needed treatment because I denied I needed treatment. In order to gain eventual freedom I would have to embrace the treatment without either dissent, claims that I could be treated differently, or belief that needed no treatment at all.

It took staff a few days to find a long-term care facility to treat me, and it felt like they were taking extra time to punish me. They tried to sell me the place based on a value system not of my choosing. They reasoned that I would have more freedom and the place would be quieter. I voiced my concerns for luxuries such as coffee and my own pack of cigarettes and at least a junk food machine, but the staff who were caring for me spoke one language and I spoke another.

In their view, coffee and fatty foods were bad, but living through psychoactive drugs was good. With this realization I turned around to hide my grimace, masking my snickering and rolling my eyes so far I could almost see the staff's smug expression looking at my back.

Since they had won in court all I could do was accept that I was going to leave Sonoma County and wind up someplace several hours' drive away. So much for visits



from family and friends—I mean eight hours one-way, that means a motel to a rational person. Few of my friends had the resources for a motel. I was sentenced to Merced Manor within three days of my court date, with the caveat that I would come back to Oakcrest (the county-of-residence facility and originator of court ordered holds) to be re-evaluated in a month.

I told the other patients about where I was going, and in their sedated, slowed down world they could only express that it was a good place. I got the impression during those conversations that, given their drugged state and mine, it was really hard to be discriminatory about what was good or bad. When medicated it's hard to do anything except what you're told to do. It was easier to say it was good generally than to be specific about what was good about it. In other words, while being locked up for six months—bad—you might get out to go on a coffee run ten or twelve times—good. How can you have a positive outlook on the coffee runs when they're buried in six months of incarceration?

I looked forward to going because the staff said I would enjoy it more than being where I was, and there would be constant new arrivals and a lot of activity a lot of the time. Staff believed it would be better for me because they felt I needed to continue to take medications and believed that I would not do so if they let me out. They were right—I never continue to take *their* drugs when they let me go. In their view I didn't need treatment *per se*, they just felt I should take drugs in order to not get locked up. I have always had a hard time with the idea that I need to take drugs in order to be considered sane, normal or acceptable to society.

I didn't go along with the mental health professional's view that I needed the treatment they could provide, partly because I am not the kind of person who will cede control over their own life. I am an independent, tenacious, outspoken and take-charge kind of guy. It's hard for me to give in to anything—especially the abstract, inextricable part of me that a mental illness represents. I can't imagine being like everyone else. By this time in my early twenties I had learned to live with the thoughts that are me and wished that others could be more open-minded about the manner in which people are different.

The treatment milieu itself was also in opposition to my passion and vibrancy. The activities were boring and centered on a couch-potato lifestyle, which in turn cultivated sedentary minds in my peers and me. Physical activities fuel my mental faculties; the health of one facilitates the health of the other, and they grow stronger in tandem. I have to have action in my life, both physical and mental. Missing these activities while being treated fueled feelings of helplessness and resentment. This way of thinking translated into anger towards staff that I was not allowed to express. The health care team was unified in their deafness toward what I felt were legitimate concerns about my care. By the time I lost in court, I understood not to vent my frustrations about my care to anyone involved in it. I assumed that I would find the same basic attitudes towards my feelings at the long-term care facility I was bound for.

The hospital of departure had a special category of workers that delivered people to the long term care facilities: transporters—it has a trekky, militaristic feel to it. I fancied the driver as my chauffeur and our escort as a nice



lady along for the ride. When we left Oakcrest they both sat in the front seat and let me have a cigarette in the parking lot just before taking off. It was a small kindness given me as a reward for my continued amiability and probably a desire that I would not try to run away during the trip south.

I climbed in the back of the ubiquitous four-door sedan after the escort unlocked the door and held it open. She reached into the hinge, flipped a lever and said, "Don't worry about that, we just can't have you trying to jump out while were going down the freeway."

"I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid." She laughed and I smiled back. The locking mechanism is the same kind the cops have—you can open the door from the outside, but not from the inside. As soon as I was belted in and the car was moving I discovered my window only went down a couple of inches. I left unsaid that all we needed were some cuffs for me and a light bar for the car. I'm certain the staff had told them some of my background, including my incessant belief that I didn't need medication and that I wasn't *ill*. My crime was lack of insight, and I was guilty. Jails, mental hospitals and freedom all lie on a continuum, and the relative degree of self-determination when locked up is directly related to who holds the key and how they perceive their charge.

The escort looked over her shoulder at me and asked me what kind of music I liked as she held a box full of cassettes. Ralph the driver glanced at me in the rear view mirror and said, "I got us the car with the good stereo because Merced is a long way."

I couldn't help but say, "Hey you don't have to go the speed limit—let's have some fun! You know, put on some

rock-and-roll and kick some ass!" It's easy for people to interpret my energy and enthusiasm as indicative of manic processes—or they can see it as the exuberance I have for whatever is going on around me, be it good or bad. With sarcastic relish expressed at every opportunity, I will find a way to embrace my circumstances. Given enough time, understanding and space, I will cajole myself into a positive view of my situation. I put a happy foot forward and plunged into the ice cold water, accepting hospitalization but trusting I could manipulate the circumstances into something tolerable.

The escort checked with me to be sure I could hear the music okay and told me, "The hospital gave us lunch money, and we'll stop in the afternoon to take a break. I hope you didn't drink a lot of coffee."

"We don't get real coffee, so what's the point?"

"Sometimes in long-term care you can take walks and buy some."

I could feel a chink in the armor of her resolve and heard empathy in her voice. I had to take a shot, so I said, "Maybe at the afternoon break we could stop and I could get a small coffee?"

She glanced at Ralph as we merged with the light traffic headed south. "Yeah, we might be able to do that."

Her response guaranteed my good attitude and angelic behavior.

After our coffee and a total of eight hours of sitting as passenger, we pulled up to what might have been some kind of high class resort. It had a roundabout driveway with well-manicured shrubs—the whole deal was so pristine I wondered if it was all new. I belted out my



concern to Ralph in the driver's seat, "How long has this place been here?"

"I dunno, Devin. I've been coming here for about ten years or so."

"You mean the hospital's been sending its victims this far away for that long?" My words dripped attitude.

"Yeah, and they were probably at it for longer than that."

Visions of covered wagons transporting detainees leapt into my thoughts. I giggled to myself as the escort got out and opened my door from the outside. They let me smoke part of a cigarette as Ralph talked into an intercom on the wall. The resort, as I thought of it, was situated in a fairly nice neighborhood—the kind where there really couldn't be crime either because there was nothing to steal or because what was there wasn't worth stealing. There were a few small buildings, a plumbing business and a few empty lots. Ralph, done with his conversation at the intercom, told me there was a small store a few blocks away that he had heard good reports about from other transportees. I voiced my ongoing concern, "They got coffee and smokes?"

"Affirmative on both, but this place only lets you have a pack a day and no more."

I immediately regretted not having squirreled away a few packs in some manner that might confuse a would-be searcher and began planning to hide a pack. "How long till you think they'll let me out to get some coffee?"

"That I don't know. You're certainly polite and seem well-behaved to me."

The extra-wide front door opened, appearing to be made of nice wood paneling, but on closer examination it

turned out to be rusted metal. A traditional nurse dressed in scrubs walked through, thrust her hand out past Ralph and the escort straight to me, and said, "You must be Devin."

I looked at Ralph and then to the escort while wondering how the hell she guessed correctly. It never occurred to me that Ralph and crew were so frequently at this door that she knew them by face. I replied, "Have you served dinner? We got to have a meal on the road but you know I'm hungry."

"Actually we have just enough time to get you settled in, and then tomorrow they'll do a more complete intake. And I'll be sure dinner gets to your room and that we're done with our business before it comes, how's that?"

My mood lightened with the nurse's attention to the right priorities.



**WANTED: A MAN FOR MY MOM**  
**RENÉE L WILL**

**Height:** Tall

**Weight:** 678 inches

**Eye Color:** Blue or green because those are my favorite colors

**Hair Color:** Brown like mine

**Race:** He wins!

**Traveling Radius:** Radio?

**Skills:** Really good at building with Ninjago Lego sets and Christmas. And for my mom, too. You could help my mom teach transforming Transformers, so that when they are cars or trucks or me how to ride a bike with two wheels. You could take turns with planes their wheels will still work

**Job(s):** Soldier, fire fighter, a trash man, plays for the Chicago White Sox or the Chicago Bulls

**Hobbies:** Plays the sports my mom doesn't play, like football and soccer, and does things my mom doesn't do, like watch *Ben 10* or play with super heroes and chess

**About my Mom:** She likes to talk on the phone to her friends and go to the grocery store. She has blonde hair and brown eyes (which I don't).

**About Me:** I'm really good at swimming. I want to play flag football this fall and take hockey lessons this winter. I always beat my mom at board games (well, except Connect Four). I just lost my first two teeth in the same day. The Tooth Fairy came. I got dollars. My best buddy is Matt.

**Phone Number:** I forgot it. Oh yeah, 9-1-1

**Address:** Wait...my mom's or my dad's house? My mom lives in the country of Iowa City and my dad lives in the state of Cedar Rapids.

**Comments:** You'll have to buy me presents for birthdays and me opening the door for my mom and helping her to carry in groceries and empty the dishwasher, so that I can have a break



## MIRACLE DAUGHTER

WANYI TAO

"Hi, my dear mom. You are finally here!" A big sweet smile hangs on my face. I am trying to be nice to her because I don't want to have any hard times with my mother-in-law.

"Hi, where is my son?" Her face looks exhausted. I know it is not easy for a fifty-six year old woman who flew 14 hours from Shanghai to Chicago, but I expect her to show respect to me.

"He is in the lab, but he will be back before dinner." I help her with her luggage and walk to the parking lot. "Mom, you made it here. I am proud of you." I am bending over backwards to please her.

We get home at 2:45p.m. She goes to bed after saying hi to my little boy. I start preparing dinner and feeding him.

"Could you please go to China town, and bring five dishes back?" I ask the nanny.

My freelance job allows me to stay home. Even though I am at home, I am not good with cooking. My mother-in-law, like most mothers-in-law, thinks her daughter-in-law has to be a good cook. But rather than cooking myself, I prefer to buy some delicious Chinese food from Chinatown in order to give her a good impression.

Hard-working Bing—my husband—brings my Anji back from school at 5:30; he tells her this lady is her grandmother. Anji is afraid of strangers, and she needs time to accept them in her world.

"I miss you, my dear son." Her eyes become warm with kindness and maternal lure. "You are looking skinnier.

Someone has not been take good care of you." She looks directly at me when she says this.

'Can't a thirty-six year-old man take care of himself?' I think.

"Mom, I missed you too. I hope you will have a good time here," Bing says. I know he is trying to avoid the argument that his mom wants.

Despite the tension, we have a nice dinner together as a family. It was a long day for me, and I need some rest, so we go to bed. My honey, Bing, tells me that he is glad I am his wife. Everything is on the right track until my mother-in-law knocks on the door at two in the morning.

She wakes me up because of jet-lag, and she wants to have a conversation with me. She must be kidding! She can't just wake me up and talk about crap.

The war between mother and daughter-in-law is beginning. Bing goes to work earlier this morning because yesterday something had gone wrong with his data collection. He leaves his mother and me at home together, and I don't know what will happen between us.

I decide to let Anji stay home for a week or two in order to grow more comfortable with her grandmother. But Anji doesn't speak any Chinese, and my mother-in-law cannot speak English. I don't know how to make them communicate. And Anji doesn't talk that much.

One nice thing about my mother-in-law is that she is a good cook, and she cooks every meal for us.



"Lunch is ready." Her voice comes from the kitchen. "Don't forget to feed my grandson." I note that the tone of her voice makes her seem aloof and unfriendly.

"Thanks, Mom. We're coming." I try to be nice to her.

Anji doesn't want to sit on the table and have lunch with us. I honestly don't care because she prefers things her way. As long as she eats something, that's what matters.

"Hey, where are you going?" My mother-in-law grabs Anji's arm and grows angry about her impolite behavior.

"Don't touch her, she doesn't like to be touched!" I yell automatically, and as I finish yelling, Anji runs away. I glance at my mother-in-law. She is shocked.

Leaning on the kitchen door, I call out to Anji, "Hey, my sweet heart. Calm down. It's ok, your grandmother just cares about you."

Secure in her own room, Anji tears many large pieces of paper into small pieces. That is how she releases her emotion and calms down. I don't know how, but she gets comfort from doing it.

My mother-in-law walks to Anlong's room. She doesn't seem to care about her granddaughter. "Anlong is crying, how can you not be around him all the time?" she asks. She walks into Anji's room chiding me, then says, "Help me to connect to the Mahjong games on your computer, I want to play." The way she speaks to me is like a mistress to her servant. I feel she never has a smiling face for me. Her smiles are only for her son and grandson. She thinks Anji's bad behavior is taught by me.

"I don't think your mother likes me, she never smiles at me," I whisper on the bed to my darling.

"My mom doesn't like to smile at anyone. Don't worry, honey, she likes you!" He caresses me lovingly.

Bing is the only connection between these two women. I am trying to be a good daughter-in-law, for his sake, so I really don't care what his mother says about me.

One day, I am talking pictures of Anji and me and uploading them to my Twitter and Facebook.

"Don't you feel shame in having a disabled child?"

"No, I think it is great to have her in my life," I bristle.

"Are you out of your mind? Like mother, like daughter," she mutters.

"She is also your granddaughter." I smile a bitter smile.

"I don't understand why my son married you," she says with a scornful voice.

"Because he loves me, and you don't know what we have been through." I put on an air of complacency.

The conversation reminds me of my reaction to Anji's diagnosis. I remember the doctor's face as he told us about Anji.

"What, what did you just say?" I was shocked by the doctor's words.

"I'm sorry. According to the exam, she is autistic," the doctor repeated without any facial expression. I guessed he faced these situations all the time.

"What do you mean? I don't understand!" How could my lovely child be autistic? My mind was jumbled. What would happen to my little girl?

My husband was much calmer than I was. "What causes autism?" he asked the doctor.

"It is because .... neurons...brain cells..." the doctor said seriously, in an explanation filled with professional knowledge and language that we didn't understand.

"Please explain it more simply," said my husband, as politely as he could.



The doctor paused in his discussion. Then said, simply,  
“We don’t know.”

We don’t know?

“What do you mean, ‘don’t know?’ You are a doctor! How can you not know? Can this be cured?” I was almost yelling. He was not doing his job; he did not even know what things could cause this illness.

“Please calm down, miss. I am sorry but there is no way to cure your daughter. You can make her life more comfortable and productive,” explained the doctor, while lounging in his chair.

The doctor was not worried about my daughter, but he did point out a rehabilitation institution that educated autistic children. We went to every one, and compared them. Bing and I wanted to find the best one for Anji. Anji deserved the best.

“What are you thinking about?” My mother-in-law’s impatient voice pulls me back to the conversation. “You are crazy! I don’t want to argue with you. Bring me to some place where I can shop.”

“Not today. I have an interview, and I have to leave.” I am too tired to smile at her. I ask her to “Please keep an eye on the children, thanks,” and grab my purse and go out to relax.

Shopping helps me to release my emotions. I don’t really have an interview, I just need some fresh air and to get out of the house.

When I get back, I realize that she isn’t talking to me. She pretends that I am not in the house.

“Mom, I liked your cooking,” I say when we have dinner around the table.

“Hmm...”

“I really do.” I reveal my true sentiments naturally.

Her eyes glance momentarily at me but her mouth refuses to speak.

Bing comes back from work early today because he wants to see how we are doing.

“Mom, thank you for dinner.”

Bing smells something wrong between his mother and me, and tries to coax his mother first.

She smiles, but is still not talking.

“Hey, do you know why the ocean is blue?” I try a joke to lighten the atmosphere.

Everybody shakes their head.

“Because all the little fish go blu, blu blu.”

No one laughs.

“We can do some family activities this weekend,” I suggest.

Still no one responds.

Bing shakes his head, hinting to me that I should keep silent.

The awkward dinner eventually finishes, but it seems to last forever.

I clean all the dishes while Bing and his mother watch TV in the living room for rest of the night.

I lull Anlong to sleep and then Anji. They are both wonderful children. I love them more than anything.

And I think I am not the only one having a hard time with my mother-in-law.



## **BOOK WALL CLICK POW**

### **JUSTIN ROMANS**

Po-e-tree, dumb to thee, monkey bars, play with stars, pickled melons, steal St. Helens, and the people at the gallows hang on. It sits on the table, just a tool, it won't move unless you touch it. Simple click and the world is won. The answer will come, give it time. The toilet paper smiles as it lets me unroll it from its core. POP, no... soda rots the teeth, so say the people with the bright lights and stings of yesterday. Don't try this at home; it chills to the bone. Pictures, videos, smells, and all the rest decay; so stay away. Hate breeds hate, we've had higher stakes, so let's sit very still, and watch the night... no fright. BOOM goes the bomb that winks when it explodes, he means no harm; he's just doing his job. He is following orders from his master, it's in his wiring. So fry the bacon on the stove, and enjoy the bits of pig, and don't forget; even the little ones go, it can't be that bad, can it, store it in the cellar and leave it for some.... other time... spare a dime, pantomime, can't REFINE, never mind.

The goal of this was to use personification and onomatopoeia. I think I did it well enough because I gave the bomb a personality and I tried with the toilet paper, but I wasn't going to elaborate that much about it because I don't think it would have fit well. The only reason I brought up the bomb was for onomatopoeia, and it turns out that I got to meet both of the goals with that portion of the poem, which works out nicely because was having problems with this effort. It's not my usual style.

This poem is met to be read slowly. It's a dark poem if you think about it. From the start it is talking about people hanging from the gallows. It also references a pistol, thoughts of suicide, videos and pictures of death and decay, and how people aren't meant to see those kinds of things. It also alludes to children dying. It references the fears of the cold war and the problems in the Middle East through "hate breeds hate". It also reminds readers that every animal that you eat had to die so that you could eat it. People don't think much about that, so I thought I should throw it in this dark poem. I also bring up that people are meant to self-destruct; we can't help it, it's in our blood. People will have wars and fight and die until the last person leaves this Earth.

The name of it didn't really fit in to what it turned out to be. I think the reason why is because I made the title, and saved, and went and did something else and came back to it. I was really tired when I wrote this, and maybe that's why is turned out to be different than what I thought it was going to be. I kept the title because it included "click POW," and that sets the stage for both the pistol and thoughts of suicide. I think people could read way too much into the interpretation of this poem. I'm not even aware of how much meaning this poem could have for somebody, but that's what's so great about poetry, right?



## CONNECTED IN AN UNCONNECTED WORLD

### JOYLENE BEADLESTON

iPads, iPods, iPhones, Kindles, Nooks, Facebook,  
Linked-In, e-mail, Skype, Twitter, and texting.  
We are so connected  
living in an unconnected world.

I want to talk to you about important things,  
but you are too busy “liking” Facebook updates on your  
wall,  
uploading another daily altered pic of yourself,  
creeping a stranger’s ‘friend’ profile.

I’m grasping my seat belt as you  
are texting  
another meaningless message  
on Twitter  
zooming through another stop sign.  
You curse at the mother in the van of full of children,  
as the semi-truck driver swerves and sways to avoid  
hitting you with his  
d o u b l e - w i d e.

So many exciting community events are happening  
that we’re missing  
as you delete  
your masses of e-mail,  
check  
Linked-In and Facebook notifications.  
A connection in an unconnected world...

I want to hug you, or even hold your hand.  
I want to have engaging face-to face conversations.

You shake your head as I speak,  
but are you listening  
or following on Twitter as you tweet a celebrity,  
sending empty and meaningless details of a life  
to a person you may never know or meet?  
In reality you gain pound after pound,  
sitting hour after hour, lonely but ‘connecting’  
through the moments in your unconnected world  
texted, ‘shared.’

You are reading another Nook-book while you cook  
Cook burned dinners, smoke and fire alarms now common.  
I want to, and want you to, engage the possibilities of  
adventures... authentically  
To connect to the daily realities of life with active in-person  
participation.  
To live life fully, with those that you really care about,  
before your family is lost,  
before the unused dinner table has cracked,  
before you are so old that the empty coldness could  
resemble frost.

I see your small ear-buds connected  
unconnecting me via iPod  
from your connected world  
of electronic devices  
as I walk out the door,  
no longer a child ignored,  
but an adult with a real voice...



## **QUESTION EVERYTHING**

**JOYLENE BEADLESTON**

### **Question ....**

The religious man who raises his voice, “We are all brothers, all our blood runs the color of red, love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Shaking his finger, he says, ‘but some are not equaled just evil.’

### **Question ....**

The educator who asks you to lower your raised hand when important current issues don’t follow a stereotypical or political plan.

### **Question...**

The doctor who can’t remember your name, who rushes through your health chart, ignoring your concerns, ready to disperse pharmaceutical, profitable poison, not nature’s healing plan.

### **Question ...**

The singer whose written lyrics sounds a bit insane like “rape your kid. Throw her over the Bridge,” exploiting every part of the female physical being to make famous a name.

Not much artistic talent, just empty words, shiny glitter and spandex.

### **Question ....**

The painter whose vision is failing, who doesn’t really know how to interpret his own painting.

The painter who charges more than a cosmetic surgeon.

### **Question ....**

The leader whose followers are worshiping every word of his speeches only to promote more propaganda hate, pain, death, and cement walls instead of connecting bridges.

### **Question everything...**

Ask important question no one dares ask, listen intently, raise your voice loudly, even by twittering, texting or, googling.

Social media has much power and possibility; take action to make a positive difference with intentionality.

### **Question everything...**

The truth you seek, and what you think you know, and what you don’t yet know, until you question everything.



## **BARTLEBY AND COMMUNICATION MEDIA: 'I WOULD PREFER NOT TO' JIZHI LING**

Communication media has gone through a dramatic change since in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Long distance communication methods have morphed from letters to telegrams to text messages, from fixed-line telephone to cell phone to IM chat. There are more ways today—almost—to talk with your friends, coworkers, employers and family members than things to say to actually them. Although people in 1950 could have perhaps imaged what the world would be like after a few decades, they wouldn't have been able to fathom that we'd communicate with sentences like, "Gr8. C U soon!" While these new technologies can allow s to become more engaged with one another, they can also give us more chances to be disengaged and say "I would prefer not to."

For instance, a week ago, I texted my boyfriend, "eat out tonite?" But he didn't reply, not immediately and not even after a few hours. I began to wonder if he hadn't gotten my message or if he'd maybe forgotten to reply. I even wondered if he didn't want to see me! It was quite annoying. Then a term from Literature class came to my mind: passive aggression. Instead of saying "I would prefer not to," he was opting to not engage with me by not even replying. If the same situation were to occur in 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, without phones or texting or so much technology, I would have probably gone to his home, knocked his door and eventually—even if I had to wait for a very long wait, eventually—he would open the door reluctantly and be forced to find an excuse for not coming

at least. He'd be forced by presence to at least actively disengage. Compared with the previous case, where we mostly communicated via face to face interactions, nowadays embarrassment reduces chances to mere moments of passive aggression. As communication technology has developed, people have been given more and more ways to become "Bartlebys."

Passive aggressive behaviors are quite common nowadays, such as procrastination, hostile jokes, stubbornness, resentment and sullenness. In other words, a man can do very little to get what he wants, so why would he do more? Just like the example above, if my boyfriend had tried to find a reason not to come, it would have taken time to think, organization and negotiation, whereas not replying is the most succinct and brief way of answering. Saying something by saying nothing. Literarily, *Bartleby* is a classic example of these behaviors. A classic stage in *Bartleby* is that Bartleby doesn't reply or replies "I would prefer not to" when the narrator, his boss, is asking him to do something. For example, on wikinote, *I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. [...] but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, 'I would prefer not to.'*" This quote illustrates the first instance of Bartleby refusing to perform a task. The description of the narrator's thoughts states the problem that Bartleby causes throughout the entire book.



By refusing to do with the same assumptions he causes strife and confusion in the people around him, eventually leading to his own isolation.

Another question rises, what's the difference between "I would prefer not to" and "I will not"? A person saying "I would prefer not to," has a fully considered his words and may even sound polite to his boss, instead of capricious and emotional with "I will not." The former one is doing and affecting nothing, while the latter one is taking a stance. What's more, it's not easy to argue with "Bartleby" when he states his confidently and indifferently. In addition, it allows authority and power to remain with others rather than Bartleby. "Bartleby's" way shows his preference or assumptions. He forces counter one to be more overwhelming and impose on his performance. It's no doubt to the difficulty to reply to a passive aggressive statement. What's worse, it'll make the relationship a little bit awkward to be smooth.

Today, we have a Group "Meh" to represent the modern Bartleby model, which is "a revolutionary, game-changing social network from the tragically apathetic," from Ian Crouch at *The New Yorker*. Meh expresses boredom, exhaustion and disregard. For every ambiguous question, meh is a good choice today. But in the workplace, passive-aggressive behaviors will damage the team's unity and productivity. For example, in a discussion, whatever questions that a person asks, a few people reply with meh. It'll decrease office efficiency and frustration among workers. The same as in the classroom, if someone packs his stuff and prepares to leave before the class ends, others will do the same thing and the instructor will be distracted by

the surroundings. Though they don't say anything mostly, their behaviors will influence others easily.

New communication tools accelerate the "Barleby" phenomenon. We can choose to ignore a call, email or message, though we know that they are there. Although new communication tools shorten our distance and let us be more engaged, we still need to be aware of the "Barleby" effect.



## CONCERNED CITIZEN

### NICK EDINGER

At first I didn't hear him, so glad was I that he didn't notice my bloodshot eyes drifting off from his drone. "I'm sorry, boss," I said, "what do you want me to do?"

"This will be hard for you to prove." Darnell's 'Chicago Police Dept.' jacket pinched his elbows as he leaned on my paper-stricken desk. I quietly kicked at the hollow filing cabinet underneath in rhythm, chewing at the inside of my thin cheek as my coworkers hissed about their little cases today. "No question about it, though... Concerned Citizen is insane."

Concerned Citizen isn't insane; he's just bad at his job. We didn't mind him passing out sandwiches to the beggars his brown boots glided by; it was when he fought a mugger or a rapist that the force and I had to break up the fight and save his ass again. No matter how he limped, he could proudly join us at the station to report the crime he tried to stop. Eventually, we realized it was best to just not ask his name. Whenever we did, the threads of his brown ski mask would somehow stiffen as he beamed and shouted, "I am just a concerned citizen!" before slamming through the doors on his run out. We grew amused by the name, and it was a better moniker than "Red-Eyes." New cops were sometimes told, behind grins, that they had a worst record than an old guy in 19<sup>th</sup>-century pajamas.

"What'd he do?" I was back at the cramped white box of an office, with the speckled and orange notes posted everywhere, detailing clues to reminders to warnings about

the coffeemaker. Darnell tried in vain to hide his pixie ear from me with a pressed hand.

"Nothing. That's why we need you," he said, fading hair sagging like his lanky body. "Even if he's doing things legally, he's an old man that can't be in the best of health. If he wanted to be a cop, then more power to him. Why do our work in such a roundabout way? We need an excuse to get him off our streets and into a hospital, and I can't risk a legal stain on my record now. Look, you must have seen *something* during his visits. He trusts you. Hell, weird guy like that might think you're cute. Your fingers drum on your leg during a good case, and you only do your job when you think you're on a good case," he growled.

"So you've chosen me because I'm curious about him." I brushed some of my panther hair behind my ear. "Look, I hope you're not expecting a testimony from an insane man on his own insanity."

"You're to avoid him at all costs." Darnell leaned into me, the desk's creak sharp amongst the ringing phones and panicked coworkers. "Here's some people I--"

"I've got a good mind on who to visit." I smile at the crumpled card he began pulling from his leather jacket, my folded arms over a stomach that kept crawling past my pelvis. "At least two people. Wouldn't be here if I didn't right?"

He didn't smile back this time. "That's part of it, actually. I've chosen you because my time here is short, and I won't leave this place in worse shape than when I arrived."



Once I'm out, I won't have the obligation to protect your secrets. You've been meticulous, Officer, but even you can't hide forever. How about you do some work for once?"

I had no idea what he was talking about: the bribes or the weed? Still, he had the thick eyebrow rise again. He doesn't know what he's talking about. But I should give him this drop of victory, if only so he doesn't do some actual police work. I'll give a slight shake of my head, and straining eyes, before changing the subject in the worst way possible.

"W-why not fire me?"

He leaned back, smiling. "A man in a mask deals in deception. And I know you won't rest until you've stomped out even the subtlest of lies."

\*

I've kept a record of whom Concerned Citizen's brought in and where they're at now; Darnell's not the only one who doesn't fully trust him. My best hope for info led me to the suburb of Creek's End and its twisting green roads between endless lifted houses. Grey leaves bounced between the cars and the cropped lawns. My feet broke into an arch as I ascended the stone steps of a squatting anomaly in the suburb; the house of someone that proves basic manners to even low criminals count for something. The shrill doorbell doesn't do much beyond buzz my finger, so I press it two more times.

Miss. Hirsch opened the door a couple minutes later, with patches of her hair shining. "The doorbell rung the first time, you know," she muttered before coughing into a bleached-out t-shirt.

"Hello."

"This is outside your jurisdiction, isn't it?"

I gave her a slight smile. "That's why I'm asking questions as a citizen. That's all."

Her knuckles pointed at me, their dirt still clinging. Eventually, they moved from the splinters and beckoned me in.

"You're lucky you're nice." Her croak matched her plump, lined face.

I moved into her small house, into the series of wooden rooms, cluttered with shrink-wrap and newspaper, abandoned of furniture. She went over to her sink and plunged her hands until a 'plop' was heard.

"Keep talkin', dearie."

With nowhere to sit, I leaned on my heels. "At 2:16 in the morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009, you were found in an altercation with Concerned Citizen, a vigilante known for his signature costume of brown boots, pants, armored vest and mask; red belt, gloves, shirt, goggles; ziplock bags with sandwiches, pepper spray, handcuffs, rope, and duct tape."

She turned while holding a soapy dish decorated by a circle of teddy bears, the steaming water still dripping. "...No paper. I'm impressed."

"After bringing you both to the station, he--"

"I'm not a moron, woman, I remember that part."

"My question to you is what you remember about that man."

She had stopped scrubbing. Her back loosened up. "It's about time that fucker got done in."

"I'm not arresting him now." I moved into her kitchen, a kitchen near impossible to navigate by its plastic wrappings and food stains. "I'm investigating. The



department's concerned for his safety, but mostly for his arrestees."

"Don't you have rules against vigilantes?"

"But not against citizen's arrests." I stepped closer. "It's a legitimate way of acting without police presence, if done right." Even the soap water here shriveled my nose. I'm reminded of my Arthur Conan Doyle novels: 'Data! Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay.'

"So if he's so nice, why did your buddies suggest I leave Chicago the moment I got out of jail?"

Before I could reach for a dish, her tongue snapped against shaky teeth, "Oh, don't bother, I'll take care of it."

"Well, Miss. Hirsch, that's my question to you. Why would you run away from him?"

After finally snatching the faucet and ending the creaking stream of hot water, Miss Hirsch wrung out her sponge. Her chipped blue nails still shone strong.

She sighed, "I keep forgetting you're not like the other cops. So the question, then, is what do I have that you need to know about? Are you afraid of him? Or maybe you don't know- I don't think you've had to suffer the fear that you can't feed even your own mother."

"Miss Hirsch, tell me about the night."

"But you'll still stand by your dog if he keeps fetching you 'crooks.' Yes, yes, it's no surprise where he gets the bread for his sandwiches then. He may cry on and on about 'JAY-sus,' but--"

"Stay on subject." I dig my nails into the insides of my fingers.

"Oh, I'm not finished yet. What I'm getting at is it's time to ask you some things, like how a nice lady like you got into that badge."

It didn't take long to remember, but long to get it out. "My first hospital visit, I saw a policewoman comforting a gang war victim. Later, I read in an article that it was really one of the greatest interrogations in the force."

"But that's gone, isn't it?" she said after scrapping off some dust from her bagging pants. Oh, don't be shy, I've seen that breathing before. I know how you smoke on your downtime."

I grabbed a folding chair and sit down quickly.

"You've never thought of your hero when getting a joint, huh? You and everybody else. 'Least you can hide back when things go through, when you lose purpose after years and years of running. I lose my balance once, and your psycho keeps me down."

Scattered thumps were heard on the spotless ceiling.

After pointing at the door with a grimy plate, she threw the water and the screeching hiss back on. "Get going. I might like you, but Mother certainly doesn't."

\*

"I've beaten you," Amir smirks while we sit at a wire table and chairs, eating on the baking Chicago street outside the drab-olive color of my favorite coffee shop, where the food is cheap and the customers are always changing. We meet here weekly to share stories of dumb criminals that even comedy shows let slip by, and this meeting couldn't have arrived any sooner. "Woman and boyfriend go grocery shopping, leave their kid in the car. It's July, before I forget. Some homeless guy carjacks it, apparently not noticing the kid until later- I'll get to that. We found out that he returned a few minutes later. Guy took the car back, waited for the



couple, and then shouted at them for letting the kid roast inside. No one's seen him again. Drove little Henry crazy; I stopped by, and he's still got notes. I think he traced the guy back to the mafia somehow."

Amir Darnell (Mr. Darnell when I'm with his son) stirred the spoon in his Fazenda Santa Ines Coffee, his glowing contact lenses directed towards it. His pile of hair is even deader than his son's, though he's slimmed down in his retired life. My pen escapes my hand and tumbles down the dirty sidewalk for only a few rotations before Mr. Darnell leaps out of the chair to snatch it for me.

"Thanks." I take it back and put in on the two-week old reports in between us. "Well, I'll have a better story next round. You're not going to get new tales anytime soon."

He hasn't stopped smiling his plastic smile. "No you won't."

I laugh. "Well, I might not get any new stories anytime soon too. The mysteries aren't as much fun as they used to be. So that guy doesn't match CC's description, right?"

"Wrong color... you've been assigned to track him. Do you need-"

"Actually, I do this time." He's been staring at my bulgy nose for a while now. "Your son once mentioned you'd take records of your lunch if you could find a way to make it feel better. You've probably worked more than the rest of the force combined. What do you know about Concerned Citizen?"

"Just the physical and what he's done. You guys probably have the same thing."

"Alright, on Sergeant Astraea then. And please don't get up now, you can get back up to me later."

Mr. Darnell's amber teeth bit his red bottom lip. Someone across the street screamed into a cell phone.

"It's Hirsch," he muttered as his big hand wrapped around his ball face.

I tucked my shoulders in closer towards his scent of shaved pencils. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"I don't need records for that. I made my mind up to retire that night, but that's the only reason- it's not a related thing."

With anyone else, I'd attack that muttering addition until the real answer could crawl out.

"Hirsch was an interesting case," he continued. "I did what I could for her, and she'd keep pushing back. Until the night he found her, I kept giving any mercy I could, kept trying to put her on welfare. I know the stigma, but even so- she had a fierce spirit about things like that."

Now, Concerned Citizen, that's the guy. Nearly as incorruptible as her, but knew what to do with what I gave him. They'll build statues of him someday.

But..." He leaned back and covered his mouth with a small hand, and didn't speak as the smell of burnt polish sausage glided from another restaurant. "I- I know part of the reason why Concerned Citizen's doing this was being messed-up by the system. You know, individualists and such. And he hasn't caught too many white-collar crime guys like that."

So you were there when Astraea brought her in."

I nod.

"So I-I-I don't need to talk about... about..."

"About the aftermath of the fight." I brought my shoulders down once his trimmed hand stopped shaking.



"Yes, good. And I go outside, and Conce- the guy, he... how is he not fazed by that?" he uttered before looking in a circle around him, at the other patrons on sharp black metal chairs. He turned back, "I mean, he just laid down the facts as usual."

"Self-defense isn't pretty. Astraea confirmed it."

"I know. But CC seemed so distant. The white-collar guys, the ones that 'made' him... they should've been punished, not her. If anyone."

I stir my hot dog sprinkled salad with a lusterless fork. "So what's that mean for us?"

"It means he's ruthless about corruption, of any sort." He took up his bagel and glared at me. "And that he'll make no exceptions to that."

\*

The streetlamps were on by the time I reached the obnoxious green spires of Old St. Pat's. I spent most of my time with tight shoulders, looking at the long locks of street-huggers, thinking about how CC might be there waiting for me once the word got beyond the Darnells. My visit wasn't entirely wasted, though: Amir reminded me I should ask around about what church Concerned Citizen bows to.

The lamps hanging inside weren't strong enough for me to see anything beyond kneeling lumps in the pews. Everything focused on the golden altar I stood in front of. This was boring. I'm not sure what I expected coming here, but standing like a fool waiting for him to storm in couldn't have been it.

"He's not coming today."

That came from a well-combed teen with hunched shoulders and folded hands in the pew next to me.

"He would have been here a half-hour ago if he was. He's not the autograph-type, if you're wondering." Even whispers echoed in here. "I'm Ali, by the way. Nice to meet you."

Slowly, I took the hands from my side and slumped in next to him.

"So you know him pretty well, huh?" I asked.

"We talked, once. Seems like a nice guy, it's just that he's always rushed. And he's not big on autographs."

"So is this all a church mission, or what?"

He turned away from the altar. His chapped lips were rich in interlocking detail. "Have you ever thought of asking him?"

I shook my head, deliberating how I should arrange myself to look less stupid.

"I have. Wondered if he had, maybe, an origin story, like a superhero, right? Well, he did, and he..." After scanning the aisles, he looked at me again. "Y'know, I don't think I should do the voice. The other parishioners would get annoyed."

"It's ok, go on."

"Well, he said that he had a white-collar job in the city once. At his building's café, he saw a co-worker slip a Reese's-Pieces bag past the register. He didn't do anything about it."

He stared at the front of my hair for two seconds and then bowed his head back.

"And?"

"And that's it."



It's hard to maintain your cool after hearing the stupidest thing ever. I pulled my badge from my pocket and snapped to get his attention.

"Don't treat me like a fool," I growled, brandishing the badge's curves. "Tell me the truth about your friend."

"But I did!" His thick legs pushed just a few inches away from me. "I know it seems dumb, but who am I to say that!"

Eventually, I ended my part of the stare-down and moved jelly muscles up. "Thanks for the info." Each footstep clamped on the stone as I pondered the lies surrounding the most fascinating human I knew.

\*

A farewell cake was being cut up by Darnell's replacement a few days later. I found a way off duty for this, of course, but couldn't avoid Darnell sneaking away from his congratulators and closing us into his now-vacated office. He flicked the lights on, and I removed my sunglasses with a jolt and a little blush.

"It'd be remiss of me to leave without finding out what you found," he grinned. I'd confident he looks in his bathroom mirror each morning and thinks to himself 'Chiseled. That's me all right.'

"Well," I addressed to the ground, "not much after the first day, partially for want of trying." (He sighed— a lot of his complaints towards me were about exactly this.) "The only substantial thing I found was that he claims a single shoplifting prompted all this."

After I relayed the story of the chapped-lip teen, Darnell stood tacit in annoyance.

"I had my doubts too, so I asked the man himself. It was practically verbatim."

"I told you not to do that! We can't trust him, this job was really important."

Now I got to sigh. "You haven't given me an 'unimportant' one yet. Look, it worked out fine— there's enough to justify hospitalizing him."

"...I can work with that, then." Hairy palms reached for the door.

"I don't think you *should*, though."

The doorknob carefully untwisted. I could feel his eyes.

"Darnell, how did you get into this business in the first place?"

He brought chapped hands to his face. "My dad. You've met him- a good man, even if he thinks a tell is something a bank does."

"How often did you think of him on the job?"

Before his lips could move, I continued, "Do you really think he'd be ok with you hunting down one of the best things to happen to us? Look, I've been distracted from my moment too. The point is, Concerned Citizen hasn't been. There's not something wrong with him: *there's something wrong with the rest of us*. We're given the greatest moments in our lives, moments that make us get up and do something with our lives, and we just *forget*? He doesn't. He is forever his moment in time, never moving outside his guilt, never stopping. He saw the worst corruption in our world, and everyone else is telling him to 'get over it.' We need to be like him. For all our talk about 'masks,' maybe we'd be more honest if we were more like him. He reminds



me of why I got into all this, and I won't let go again, even if he personally ends up kicking the crap out of me. I can promise you I'll be off to the asylum before he is."

Darnell's hand still covered his mouth softly as his breathing slowed. After all this time, I'd forgotten that this was how he beamed. He reached into his jacket.

"I know we're in good hands, then." Emptying his pocket to bring a note floating to the floor, he opened the door back into the festivities he greeted with open arms.

Once the door closed, I scrambled for the note and brought it close to my raven hair. When I put it down, I began running through my mind the best techniques for handwriting analysis.

*To the esteemed Officer Darnell,*

*If you are permitted, I would humbly request that you keep an eye on anyone with a slim stomach and a shaved head that you find with Reese's Pieces in his pocket. I have been on the hunt for a while for such a detestable criminal. Finding him would bring me great joy.*

*May the Lord's blessings be ever upon you,  
A Concerned Citizen*



## **BODY IMAGE**

**FARIDA AL RIMAWI**

I always thought that the ideal body image is a tall thin woman with sleek hair! Why do I think that? Maybe it is because I do not have any of these traits. Do we all want what we do not have? What we cannot have? Is this the ugly truth? What is the ideal body image? Why do we need a body image?

I was inspired to write about body image, ever since I read the article “gorgeous little girl” by Kate Fridkis on her blog. She writes about body image, beauty, and self-esteem.

I procrastinated in writing this piece because body image is a critical issue in American culture. What should I write? Will I add value to the discussion? Should I write my opinion or the professional one? I do not want to bore you with the statistics and facts about body image. We all know it is a serious issue. I have read about solutions and suggestions for changing the way you see yourself. There is tons of advice on personal blogs, in mental health experts’ opinions and in dietitians’ advice. Nevertheless, the problem is growing.

Honestly, I never had issues with my body image when I was a kid. I never saw my mom gazing at the mirror, complaining about her body. She had a lot of responsibilities: six kids, home chores, and teaching. She did not have time to worry about her looks. We never discussed it in my home. My mom was not worried about my looks but instead about my education, grades, confidence, and good manners.

I always thought I was beautiful enough and never worried about my body image or body shape. I’m not a goddess of beauty. I’m not beautiful by many standards of beauty. When I got married, I gained weight and started to look at the mirror regularly. I wanted to be the prettiest girl my husband would ever see. I started to hate my body and lose confidence in myself. I tried to lose weight in a healthy way. I did lose it, but it took me over a year.

I was not interested in fashion, makeup, or anything that could make me beautiful until my late twenties when I became pregnant. I was intimidated. I worried about what my body would look like: How big my belly will be? Will I look older than my real age if I gain a lot of weight? Will I look like a boring mother who forgets that she is a woman in the first place?

During my pregnancy, being a nutritionist helped me a lot to gain the expected weight, and to lose it after delivery. In contrary to my expectations, gaining weight in pregnancy for the sake of my baby made me glow. Seeing my growing belly every morning and counting the remaining days made me really happy about how my body looked. Now after four months of delivery, I lost the excess weight and this experience has helped me a lot in accepting my body.

Do I feel good about my body? Not every day—I’m human. I can go out with a bare face and even when my face looks pale. I’m not a manikin: I am alive, I can breathe, I can talk, I can smile, and I can hear birds singing at the



sunrise. Why do I need more than that? Why do I need an approval permit from society, affirming that I'm beautiful? I believe that everyone has a distinctive personality and a special charm, and it does not have to be in their body or their faces.

As a nutritionist, what I can do to participate in solving this problem? Will giving people more diets, more nutrition advice work? Are not we sick from all the rules? What I can say is the ideal body weight does not mean one should be skinny; there is a range for body weight related to height. We do not have the same body types and, that is what makes some people look thinner or heavier. We should respect our body types. It gives us uniqueness; otherwise we all would look like replicas! Some women are curvy, while others have an apple shape or a pear shape. Even if you follow a healthy plan diet carefully and works out most of the weekdays, you may not attain the thin, skinny body you are dying for. I'm not telling you that to frustrate you but to be realistic, so you will not anticipate something that may not happen.

What I'm trying to say here that the culture we live in has a strong influence on the way we see ourselves in the mirror. We may struggle to change the culture that judges us by our looks, but we should work tirelessly together to change the way we see ourselves and others.



**PASSING OVER, EXCERPT FROM *RED SHOES***  
**TRUDI ANNE STARBECK-MILLER**

Life is withering away from my entire body while it quietly lets go of its passion, its orneriness and its “get-up-and-go-ed-ness”. My blue chenille bedspread with the orange, turquoise and purple flowers Papa bought in Tijuana is pulled up all cozy, brushing my lips like a wooly caterpillar. I am limp and dog-tired from “fighting the good fight.” My attic bedroom is dreadfully still, and I can feel the dankness oozing from behind the secret storage rooms with their stunted doors, both curiously placed along the knotty-pine walls that were home to all the knotty pine eyeballs that were forever and a day staring at me.

Those walls shape the room that I share with my sister Heidi. They also hold the door to our room closed, so I can slip through with my last breath and glide on over to the other side in a clandestine manner. I love that word, “clandestine.” It could just about be someone’s name. If I was going to live past this day I would name my first daughter Clandestine. I feel like I am going to explode, trying my best to hold absolutely still so I do not appear a mess when they come for my remains.

I thought this passing-over experience was supposed to be peaceful. Why in the world do people say “*Rest in Peace*” anyway? It is always so damned quiet when I go to the cemeteries that I just want to scream and run around like a crazy person. However, it has never, ever been quiet in my head—or my body for that matter. It’s not like I hear other voices or the greasy, horned, red guy, but my own voice requires a lot of space.

Am I really the only one making any noise here? My breathing is too loud just like my voice. It’s because of the planes and now those modern jets. We live two blocks from Highway 101, and right on the other side of the highway is SFO, the San Francisco International Airport. Our house is smack dab in the middle of the landing flight path. The planes and jets fly so low that when they slither over our house the sky above gets as dark as a giant, gloomy cloud. A sinister shadow unhurriedly creeps across the earth and our whole house shakes, reminding each of us of the 1956 quake. Well, not as bad as that actual day, but similar to the aftershocks we had for weeks after. Earthquakes are thunderous, like a locomotive train ripping down your street and through your house, and the noise from the jets is louder and lasts longer. You can’t hear anything but the roar of the engines for about three minutes from beginning to end as they fly over, with the middle minute being the most deafening.

I do not understand why, if planes can go so fast, they fly so slow over our house. Sometimes everything shakes so bad our cupboard doors open, the Melmac clatters like a pair of Halloween false teeth, our chrome and blue vinyl kitchen chairs quiver in place, and, once in a while, you can see a frightened mouse trying to find a safe place to hide.

No matter where you are in San Bruno from about the El Camino Real on down to 101, when a plane or a jet begins its long descent most everyone just stops talking and goes into their own heads, except for my Oma. She just keeps on talking and talking and yelling at us like we can



hear everything she says, and then she gets mad when we do not know what she was saying. She does not speak English well, and I think she is losing her hearing from the jets. Actually, I am quite certain she is.

Our school, the Bel Aire Elementary Grade School, is eight blocks south and has the same airport noise. It is rather nice there when a plane goes over because some of the teachers forget who they were yelling at when the roar of the engines grinds out all the sounds, but my teacher always remembers. That woman has never once forgotten when she was yelling at me. I cannot sit still and for some reason that seems to really annoy her. Parts of me always want to be moving. Especially my feet and my legs. I have to swing them or kick something. I cannot help it. I call it “the feeling.” It is like all these wiggles are storing up inside me like an enormous bag of alley cats trying to escape. Certainly, if I were to ever stop moving—and I do believe this with all my heart—I will one day finally explode and all my guts will fly about like a barf bag falling from one of those jets, throwing up guts all over the place. Consequently, I do not stop moving.

It is my hope and prayer that when she finds my body, my mom will put me in one of the garden plots outside the mausoleums where my Daddy and Papa are buried in the crypts. The marble in the cemetery is so cold and dead. Soft, peach-colored swirls like a 50-50 orange and vanilla ice cream bar and that same frozen permanence all at the same time. It is hard and dreadfully cold. It is an endless sharp cold.

I inspect the gloomy, puffy-eyed people who come to see their dead loved ones. I want to shout that my Daddy died too. It's not fair. None of this is fair. My mom takes us

to see my Daddy and my Papa. My Oma, my mom's mom, usually goes with us. They are vigilant. At some times tearful, but they always, always ceremoniously arrange the flowers in the brass vases that hang in the brass rings on the outside of each crypt. When you look down each row, the flowers loom along, lined up like houses in the avenues of the city, a Sailor or Soldier standing guard in front of each one. It is as if they are quietly, nobly, waiting for death to relieve them of their duties and burdens of this warring life. The flowers are always beautiful and smell even better. I think that is what death will smell like.

If I touch one of those blooms, I know what will happen. I have seen this in my dreams many times, especially, in my flying dreams. I see a flower floating as I fly by, and I just have to touch it and feel the velvety and satiny petals. The colors are so magical and vibrant they seem to glow. They burst with millions of colors, like 4th of July fireworks on the bay. The moment I rest a finger upon one of the flowers it instantaneously vaporizes, but for the slightest moment its brilliant, colored flecks remain suspended in mid-air. The flash of color fades, then falls in slow motion, disappearing before it reaches the cold marble floor.

My vision and spirit are changed by the new color and the tiny light within each fleck. Each sparkle fades to nothingness, taking its life and its beauty with it. But my eyes have been illuminated and transformed by the lights from within each flower. That exact color never exists again. I desperately try to store each color I have seen somewhere inside me. But they eventually fade, like my Daddy's and Papa's voices that I have tried so hard to keep in my ears



and in my soul. I miss their voices. I miss their arms and their laughter.

When I am at the cemetery, I sometimes touch a flower belonging to a bouquet that has been so tenderly created and placed within the urn. I hope and pray that my spirit will be able to escape that wall of marble just in case, for some crazy reason, my mom puts me in where my Daddy lays.

I am still not sure which religion I want to be yet. I am also not sure when my spirit will officially leave my body. I am a procrastinator, so I do have some concerns about this. I have not really met anyone who has done this before and came back. Actually, I have, but I have not been able to get any truthful sounding answers from them.

People, they just die, or leave and I never know why. They mostly leave. I will have a lot of questions for this God guy if I leave the planet now. Or will I? I am so tired. I hope God is ready for me.

My body presses into the bottom sheet, the mattress and beyond the stuffing and springs that have supported my tired old bones all these years. It feels like a big boulder is sitting on my chest. The room seems to grow darker. I gasp a rattling, long breath. It kind of hurts my throat. My hands and feet feel as if they have disconnected from my body. They are still all twitchy though. I cannot feel my arms or my legs. My limbs have stopped working. My feet are numb, but they still jerk around like crazy under my blankets and bedspread. Maybe "the feeling" will finally be over. God knows, heaven will not be all that fun if I still have it.

I think this is it. Maybe I am going to heaven one chunk of me at a time. Like a side of beef from Saladino's Meat

Market. Holy crap! This is not what I had in mind. Oh crap! This is nothing like the movies.

CRACK! CRACK! The sound of cracking glass assaults my near-death ears. Once again, my demise is interrupted. I hear what sounds like someone breaking glass next to my fading fleshly remains. My weary, dying, old broken body lays waiting for its last breath. Could this be the angel of death knocking on the window of my soul beside my deathbed? "Oh, angels of death, have you finally come for me?"

"Trudi!" Ugh, I feel like someone just pierced my ear drums with a pick-up-stick. "Trudi! What the hell are you doing?" a cry from beyond my window howls. Oh, God, I beg that you make them go away. I am trying to die in a dignified manner. Dignified, it's such a great word. I found it the other day in our big red dictionary after I heard Chet Huntley say it on the Texaco Huntley Brinkley Report television show. It is such a dignified word. I hope God has some good dictionaries up there. My favorite book is the dictionary. I love words. Especially the ones that really make a sentence mean something. So many sentences do not mean a thing.

A voice grinds from the alley below my second-story bedroom window. "Hey! What are you doing? I know you're there." He now croons each word as if he is trying to make a song out of his nagging. "Let's go down to the creek! The pollywogs are starting to get their back legs. Come on!!"

We are not supposed to go down in that creek anymore or we will get polio. Except Gregory. He will not get polio because he is a Negro. Well, he is a half Negro. None of us really knows how this happened, but he looks just like a



Negro. I think his big sister Bernadette knows something about it. She is usually pretty nice to us, but if she is mad at any of her brothers, she suggests that she knows something about each one of them that we do not. Any girl with four brothers has a good reason to be mad sometimes. But Gregory has one of the happiest and goofiest smiles I have ever seen. His smile makes me smile even when I am sad.

If I wasn't in the final stage of dying I would have cried out the window, "Oh, please leave me alone! Can't you see I am trying to die with some dignity here?" But the muscles in my throat are paralyzed. "Oh, why don't you love me like you used to do?" croons Gregory in a Hank Williams accent. He sounds like a Negro Roy Rogers.

"What are you doing up there? Are you practicing yo' dying' again?" He's not going away. He never does. He will just stand down there in our shared cement driveway singing, yelling, and throwing rocks until our dining room door flies open with my Oma screeching Austrian obscenities at him, threatening him with her biggest wooden spoon as if it's a machete until he runs off and hides.

"You ain't dyin', so get up and get down here!"

Jeez Louise! Well, it must not be my day to die.

I throw the covers back and my feet and hands are still attached to my twelve-year-old girl body. It's a miracle! I wiggle my feet and my toes. I hate being interrupted when I am rehearsing my death bed scenes. I am getting better at it though. Each rehearsal displays my growing imaginative and haunting skill in creating this scene, my most Oscar-deserving performance yet. Oh, how I do love the movies. I stand up and stretch and pull my faded, black, long-sleeved, too-big t-shirt over my head and the boobs I am

still desperately hiding from everyone in the neighborhood and my family. If I walk with my hands bunched up under the front of my shirt and stick them out a little past my boobs no one notices. The wind can be very annoying though on some days and it can get very windy here in San Bruno because of the bay being so close.

My body drags itself back together, inside and out, except for the shelf inside me where all the secrets are stored. I stand at the top of the stairs, wondering if I can still fly from my last flying dream. I don't feel aeronautically correct, and a plane is charging like a locomotive over our house. I have a feeling it might make me off-balance, so I decide to use my skinny, hairy legs and big feet to dance down the stairs like Ginger Rogers. When she was on the *Jack Paar Show* the other night, Jack was asking her about what it was like to dance with Fred Astaire. She said "Sure he was great, but don't forget: Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards...and in high heels!" She is so amazing! I want to dance just like Ginger.

As I open the front door to our house, the light from the sun glowing through the fog blinds my resurrected body. I am not sure if all of me is back in my body yet. Some days it is better to not take up too much space in there. As my eyes begin to adjust, I walk a little wobbly towards the white picket fence that surrounds our front yard. Gregory and his brother Larry are sitting on the curb waiting. The gate creaks open onto the sidewalk. Gregory turns around and looks at me and says "Yep, she sho' was doing her dyin' scenes again....."

"Would you just shut up!" And this is not a question. I kind of spit when I say shut up. "And I am only going if we go to the cookie factory, too."



They both spring up from the curb, and at the same time my front door flies open and Oma yells “Do not go in dat crik or you vill get da polio! You vant to be like a Gifelte fish in dat iron lung machine?” We all pay close attention while she gives us the current medical reports for the neighborhood sick kids. “Your frient Yudy yust lays dere day aftah day en dat dininkh rchoom vinda shtaring at dat mirhroh!” For a moment, we are stunned with that image in our brains.

When we walk west on Walnut Avenue we can’t help but stare in passing at Judy’s Disney-like wavy blonde hair hanging off the end of her iron lung where she has been laying day after day since we were in the fourth grade. When she sees us her beautiful face lights up, smiling right side up looking like it is detached, just sitting there on that soft, white hand towel. Her head is really lying down, but her mirror is attached above her head so she can see something besides the metal coffin in which she is confined. We walk by on our way to Tanforan Horse Racing Track.

We always wave and smile, feeling so sad for her. I never once saw her go in that creek. Then we each wonder which one of us is next. I yell back to Oma that we won’t go in the creek.

But we probably will.