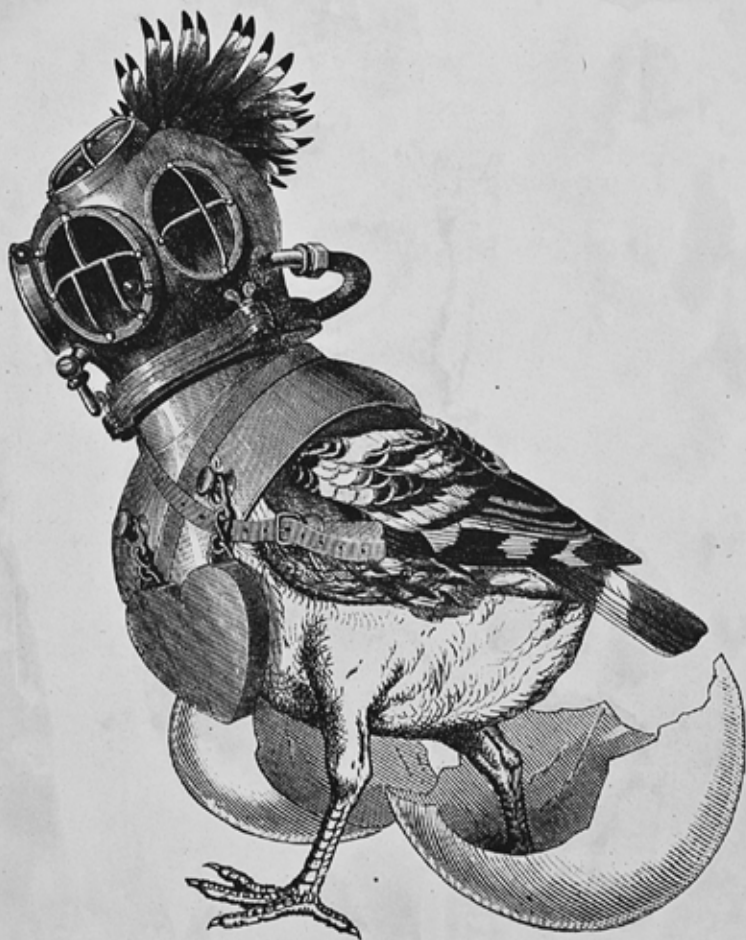


D O C U M E N T



THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

# D O C U M E N T

THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE  
SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

## **EDITORS**

Lee Griffith and Catherine Ramsdell

## **GRADUATE INTERN**

Tiffany Cullen

a publication of

SCAD: THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS

Cover art by Leigh Guldig, M.F.A., illustration, 2012.

All work is © 2013 in the names of the individual artists.

## THE SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN IS THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS.

---

One of those careers is writing.

## WRITING

*B.F.A., M.F.A.*

---

People skilled in the art of written communication are in demand. The writing program at SCAD emphasizes passion and practicality, and offers instruction in a variety of areas:

- Creative nonfiction (memoirs, personal essays)
- Journalism (news/feature stories, personality profiles, literary journalism)
- Business (proposals, white papers, business correspondence, reports)
- Nonprofit (newsletters, brochures, grant proposals)
- Web and new media (blogs, interactive media)
- Fiction (novels, short stories)

Visiting authors explain the practical aspects of writing, share their work, and offer feedback to student writers. Guests include:

- |                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| • Chris Abani        | • Philippa Gregory    |
| • Margaret Atwood    | • Jamaica Kincaid     |
| • Nick Bantock       | • Chuck Klosterman    |
| • Roy Blount Jr.     | • Elizabeth Kostova   |
| • Robert Olen Butler | • Walter Mosley       |
| • Augusten Burroughs | • David Shields       |
| • Bret Easton Ellis  | • Kathryn Stockett    |
| • Stanley Fish       | • Susan Rebecca White |
| • Jaimy Gordon       | • Colson Whitehead    |

## WHY STUDY WRITING AT AN ART AND DESIGN UNIVERSITY?

---

Because writing is an art.

## CAREERS

---

At both undergraduate and graduate levels, the program focuses on producing professional writers who are prepared for careers in a broad range of fields. Careers for SCAD graduates include:

- Blogger
- Copywriter
- Critic
- Editor
- Grant writer
- Magazine journalist
- News reporter
- Novelist
- Professor/Educator
- Publicist
- Science and medical writer
- Social media marketer
- Technical writer
- Travel writer

SCAD students intern at companies such as:

- Atlanta INtown Paper
- Atlanta Magazine
- Atlanta Spirit—parent company of the Atlanta Hawks
- Black Entertainment Television
- Cartoon Network
- Connect
- Elle
- Frederic C. Beil Publisher
- Georgia Public Broadcasting
- Grey Global Group
- Marie Claire
- Marvel Comics
- Pregnancy & Newborn Magazine
- Savannah Magazine
- Savannah Morning News
- SELF Magazine
- skirt!
- Telfair Museum
- The Atlantic
- The Moth
- South Magazine
- Studiocom
- The William Breman Museum
- Vanity Fair
- W
- Waterside News
- WTOG-TV

## PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

---

Students also gain real-world experience through in-house publishing opportunities such as Artemis and Document—the literary journals—and SCAD Student Media, which includes District, The Connector, SCAD Radio, SCAD Atlanta Radio, SCAN, and District Quarterly.

## OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

---

The writing program at SCAD also offers off-campus programs that feature Writing About Place and other classes in locations such as Lacoste, France, and New York City.

## STUDY WRITING IN THE CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF SCAD.

### *Savannah*

Phone: 800.869.7223 or 912.525.5100

Fax: 912.525.5986

E-mail: [admission@scad.edu](mailto:admission@scad.edu)

P.O. Box 2072

Savannah, GA 31402

USA

### *Atlanta*

Phone: 877.722.3285 or 404.253.2700

Fax: 404.253.3254

E-mail: [scadatl@scad.edu](mailto:scadatl@scad.edu)

P.O. Box 77300

Atlanta, GA 30357

USA

[scad.edu/writing](http://scad.edu/writing)

## CONTENTS

---

### *GUN-SHY*

A. K. BOEHRINGER

8

### *FLESH OF DUST AND BLOOD AND FIRE*

PRISCILLA ALARCON

16

### *MYSTERY MEN: THE MEN BEHIND THE MYTH OF JIM FRENCH'S COLT STUDIOS*

STEVE DRUM

22

### *THE MAN WHO COULD NOT LOVE*

NANCY PECK

28

### *A HEMLINE OF CONDOMS*

CHANTEL TATTOLI

36

### *RACES WON, RACES BORROWED*

CAITLIN O'GRADY

46

### *HARDLY NOTICEABLE*

IDA T. RONASZEGI

56

### *THE ISLE OF LOST THINGS*

ALLY WRIGHT

64

---



## GUN-SHY

*A. K. Boehringer*

I knew it was unloaded, but I still made him show me, just to be sure. As we stood side-by-side in our bedroom one night, he pulled the slide back again, tilting it slightly so that I could see inside. I peered into the chamber. There was nothing but darkness, an idling hollowness.

"Clear?" he asked.

My husband's voice was serious. Tonight we were practicing again. He raised his eyebrows in anticipation of my response. I felt like I, too, needed to act serious, so I fought what felt like the pull of an oncoming smile. Instead, I nodded.

"Clear," I said.

He released the slide with a sharp, attention-grabbing click. The sound alone was intimidating. He handed it to me, then waited for me to clear it again as I'd been taught. *A/ways clear the gun for yourself*, I heard him say in my head. I copied his actions, though not as smoothly. Using the strength of my right hand, I pulled the slide back, and although its springs resisted me, I still got a peek inside.

Still dark. Still hollow.

The muscles in my hand relaxed and the slide again glided back into place. Stretching out my right hand, I suspended the gun in my left, making sure to point the barrel at the ground. Even without that warm flash of chambered gold, that small shiny member, I held it gingerly, uncomfortably. Almost unintentionally, my fingers curled around the grip, careful to avoid the trigger, like a woman's eyes avoiding a stranger's.

"Hold it right," he corrected me.

I've been taught how to hold a gun and how to shoot it, too. I know not to touch the trigger until my hands are up and out in front of me, steady and strong, the gun safely secured within their grip. I know not to squeeze until I've found my aim. I know not to aim until I'm ready, until I fully intend to shoot, until I am completely committed to it—the trigger, the bullet, the moment. Until I mean it. Then I squeeze.

*Click.*

I knew the chamber was empty, but I still felt a small rush. Whether it was caused by thrill or fear, I'm still not sure.

\*

Across the United States, an estimated 15 to 20 million women own—and carry—their own guns. Some use them for work, in law enforcement and security jobs. Some use them for fun, in shooting competitions and on hunting trips. Some women, though, use guns for an entirely different reason. For these women, guns are not for enjoyment, for hobby or recreation, but for personal safety. They are used for bodily protection.

Where I'm from in the South, gun-toting women are by no means an anomaly. I should know—my husband wants me to be one of them.

Some people talk about feeling empowered when they recall their experiences with guns. Simply holding a gun can make you feel powerful, if you are comfortable with the weapon, if you know how to use the machine. But perhaps you do not even have to know. Maybe the dead weight of it in your hands is enough, or the plain promise behind a slow squeeze of the trigger. Maybe knowing what it can do is enough to make you feel powerful.

It is these thoughts that play through my mind when I pick up my husband's Glock, or any of his guns for that matter, and force my finger to its cold, rigid trigger. When I watch him shoot at the range—knowing my turn is coming up next—a single question spins around my head, nagging at me with the intensity of a gnat, punctuated by persistence.

*Are you ready for this?*

I long to be the self-reliant Southern woman; in-charge and distinctly unafraid. The independent feminist in me pounds away, asking me what I'm so hung up on. But for me, guns present an ongoing dilemma: To carry, or not to carry? The question is anything but uncomplicated—anything but easy.

Choosing to carry means that, someday, I might choose to shoot. I might pull the trigger. I might stop a beating heart. Somewhere inside, that feels like a sin.

Am I ready to shoot?

It's something I'm still warming to.

\*

The South is a gun culture. Most of us believe in the right to bear arms—whether we bear or not. But that doesn't mean you won't get some looks—some raised eyebrows. Talk about guns—about *your* gun—and prepare to be associated with every extreme stereotype, from pro-secession Confederates to doomsday hoarders. Not everyone here is completely comfortable with guns. Myself, at times, included.

The first time I ever pulled a gun's trigger was when I was eighteen, during my first trip to a local shooting range with my father. Feeling the bullet leave the barrel in one forceful, explosive instant gave me a new kind of rush, something I'd never quite experienced before. But, I wasn't sure if the feeling was good. I wondered: *Is this what empowerment feels like?* The only feelings I could recognize were anxiety, uneasiness, and a hint of the wild, reeling experience of being a little out-of-control.

"You'll get used to it," my father assured me. "It just takes a little time and practice to get comfortable with it."

I wasn't so sure.

Years later, every time I raise the gun, point the barrel, and finally squeeze, a wave of apprehension rolls over me, steadily swelling in the space of time between my finger's pull and the gun's blast. The only difference is that now I've come to expect it. I wait for that feeling as much as I wait for the gun to go off. Like the smoke from the barrel, the feeling lingers. It swirls.

\*

The women I know who shoot and carry—many of them my friends—say their guns make them feel safe. Women form bonds with their guns, and like any good, secure relationship, this brings some peace of mind. Regular, ritualistic cleaning fosters closeness and familiarity. Trips to the range ensure that practice makes perfect. Concealed carrying, I imagine, feels like sharing a secret with a very close friend. And women like secrets. Secrets can save lives.

Yet, when I hold a gun I feel burdened. I am uneasy with it, or perhaps more precisely, with the responsibility of it. I am not sure if it is a power I want to take.

My husband gets frustrated with my uncertainties, my seeming indifference on the subject. But, it's not that I'm indifferent—I'm ambivalent. My feelings are mixed and many. Our conversations often repeat the same pattern of dialogue.

"Why don't you sign up for that class?" he'll begin, referring to a women's gun safety course he has been urging me to take. And then, in response to my shrugs or sighs or silence: "I want you to be able to protect yourself. Even if you don't want to do it for yourself, can you do it for me?"

I avoid answering this impossible-to-say-no-to question because I have nothing to say that will satisfy him or me. I can't yet say, "Yes." Sometimes, I answer him with a half-hearted "I will," but he knows just as well as I do what that means. My reluctance upsets him. Sometimes it upsets me too.

\*

A few months before we got married, we made a trip to the courthouse to apply for our marriage license. While we were waiting in the little office, a middle-aged woman wearing heels and a gray, tailored suit walked in.

"Hello. I need to talk to someone about my concealed weapon's license," she told the woman at the desk. "I've yet to receive it in the mail, and I was wondering..."

"See?" my husband interjected, whispering in my ear. "Lots of women here carry."

I nodded.

"Lots of women probably do," I replied.

"Well, why don't you get your license? Just apply for it, then it's done."

"I will, after we get married," I assured him.

The promise, though, was empty. We both knew it—our stalemate on the subject was far from new.

Yet I know my husband has a point. Today, in 2013, millions of women carry guns. Millions of women need to protect themselves. Millions of women need reliable defense. They need security, dependability, an old friend with a secret.

I wondered why the woman in the gray, tailored suit needed a license. Had something happened to her? Did she feel unsafe? Did she need protection? Perhaps she needed to feel empowered, to feel powerful, to feel in control. To be in control.

She certainly wouldn't be the only one—Gun Owners of America reports that 200,000 women use guns in self-defense each year.

Despite my uncertainty, I know one thing for sure: we live in an uncontrollable world—something I read about and pray not to see. A world of random muggings, desperate hold-ups, haphazard hijackings, and pointless killings. But we also live in a world of methodical burglary, strategic kidnapping, and calculated murder. It's no secret that we live in a rape culture—a world where women's bodies are vulnerable to violence, anger, and brutality—a culture where one in five women have been assaulted. Women are attacked every day and sometimes killed.

My mother never taught me to live in fear. Guns aren't a product of paranoia; they're an act of deterrence. "A little secret to fall back on," she says. "Just in case."

"Guns may be dangerous," my mother says, "but danger itself is unpredictable."

If mothers are worried about their daughters, should we really be the ones keeping secrets? Perhaps it's time to find a little security in spilling the beans: women are packing heat. Although their profile may be low, their numbers are not. Especially, it seems, in the South.

But to me, this group of women feels distant. They are still more a number to study than a group to sign up with. Right now, I'm still learning to shoot.

\*

My father and my husband weren't always into guns. They weren't always "gun enthusiasts," as they say. In fact, the men in my life began showing an interest in pistols, rifles, revolvers, holsters, bullets, and cartridges only a few years ago. Now, they go to the range as often as they can. I am always invited—and encouraged—to come along.

My husband started collecting guns halfway through his deployment to Afghanistan as an Army pilot. Two small scars remind us of the time he took a bullet through his arm and leg while flying in combat. He owns the same model of the gun he was shot with—an old Russian rifle that shoots long, round 7.62 mm bullets.

To him, guns are unmistakably linked to personal responsibility; they're for your own safekeeping.

"I realized that people will harm you, that only you can truly defend yourself," he told me one day as I watched him meticulously clean the dark, steel barrel. "I realized that you can't expect anyone else to save you in time."

His words struck me in the same way that the bullet struck him: it was abrupt and surprisingly painful, "like a



hammer, not a pierce.” Together with his team, he was able to safely land the aircraft that day—upset only because the enemy got away.

*You can’t expect anyone else to save you in time.*

My father’s interest reflects similar, if not the same, beliefs. “It’s about control,” he says. “It’s about knowing you can control something so deadly. And knowing I can protect my family.”

To both my husband and my father, guns are about safety and defense. Guns are about protecting yourself and those you love, defending your home and property. Defending—for my husband—the troops and civilians on the ground.

They address distrust in humanity.

But I can never blame my family’s beliefs—their shared mindset—on the South. They’re not from here. Although they’ve lived in the South for many years—my parents more than twenty, and my husband six—they’re from the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Northern Midwest. Not the South—that’s just me. In a way, only I represent the South in my family—only I am so tied to it. Only I *feel* it. This is my home and my culture, but like anything loved, there comes a time when you must question it. My Southern identity is mine, but like most Southerners can tell you, it requires responsibility—guns aside.

Perhaps the burden of responsibility I feel while holding a gun is really the responsibility I feel for my own life, here in my South. Perhaps my apprehension lies in the burden of my own safekeeping, in becoming my own keeper, which requires admitting that I am a woman and can be attacked, killed. It asks that I take power and control for myself. For me, this is a hard reality to finally and fully face. Looking it dead in the eyes—for anyone, that’s confrontational.

\*

Standing next to me in our lane at the shooting range, my husband handed me a fresh magazine. It carried six tightly packed .45-caliber bullets, stacked together like a line of soldiers waiting for the trigger’s command. With one forceful motion of my palm, I loaded them into the gun’s well, making sure the magazine was properly seated. I looked to him for approval—he nodded.

“Now chamber your first round,” he said.

Holding the Glock in my right hand, I used my left to pull and release the slide. I knew the bullet was loaded.

“All right, you’re armed and ready to go,” he said as he stepped back out of the lane.

The white paper outline of my enemy hung a few yards in front of me, fresh and clean. It was shaped like a man with bulky shoulders, a wide torso, and a masculine-looking head. I picked my mark, deciding on the upper chest area. Clenching the gun in my fists, I lifted it up and out in front of my body, holding it as I’d been taught. My eyes stared between the sights, fixing my target. My finger found the trigger. I exhaled, then slowly squeezed, hearing my father’s voice in my head. *Don’t anticipate; let it surprise you.*

*Bang!*

A small dark hole appeared on the target’s right shoulder. “Nice!” I heard my husband say.

I aimed again, breathed out, and squeezed.

*Bang! Bang!*

A few inches to the left, two more tears in the target’s chest. “Good job, babe!”

Three to four inches in diameter, the group was far from perfect. An ideal group stays within a boundary the size of a quarter. But my aim does not have to be perfect; it only has to stop someone, to stop an attack. It only has to control a situation. *Remember, you shoot to stop, not to kill*, my father always says.

I emptied the last three bullets into the pseudo-man’s head.

\*

The more I shoot, the smaller the waves of apprehension I feel pulsing between each slow squeeze. Pulling the trigger feels less sinister, less treacherous—less likely to knock me off my feet.

Perhaps shooting is a cerebral game. Perhaps one’s unease with guns comes from years of hearing the words “deadly” and “dangerous” in the same sentence as the word “gun,” from seeing the menacing ways guns are portrayed in television shows and movies. Perhaps the unease is a psychological reaction to a machine so metallic and cold. Perhaps it’s a subconscious response to the acts implied by the gun’s very existence, acts of controlling, of defending, of killing. Perhaps the unease is a response to the taking of power—to trading a husband’s hand for an entirely different kind of grip.

Perhaps it’s just a matter of “getting used to it,” of coming to terms with the gun and reconciling it with who you are and what you believe in. As in any relationship, getting acquainted and comfortable takes time, especially when one half of the whole is so unforgiving.



## FLESH OF DUST AND BLOOD AND FIRE

*Priscilla Alarcon*

*Dedicated to Winson Chen*

First

Mother's skin stretches to accommodate the bulbous sac of water where we originate. Stretch marks: bear paws on skin of belly, hips, and breasts. Claw-line scars lighten, but never disappear. No laser, cream, or cure masks evidence of existence.

*Winson was born, Asian skin, olive and smooth and shining wet, as beautiful as any other baby boy ever was.*

Alive.

Derived from a single ancestral Eve's mitochondrial cell.

We, born in sensitive vulnerability. Arrive. Wet. Warm.

Gasping first breaths.

Some will come gray-skinned. Some will come blue.

Born into death.

Always, all come coated in body blood and fluid.

*He had breath.*

Shrieking pink.

*With ten fingers. Ten toes.*

Fingers and foot's toes, our first identification prints. The intricacies of unique thumbs, like the zebra's stripes; no two toe swirls are ever formed alike.

After the birth, foreskin, umbilical cord and placenta are discarded. Discards sometimes live second lives in laboratories, alongside aborted stem cells and malignant tissue harvests.

Those are the lucky ones.

Next

We strive to live in this world of strife. Through trauma,  
we persevere, without so much as a satisfactory, chitinous crunch  
of thorax under the sole of a shoe.

*Winson burned alive for twenty-five minutes, and he died,  
but he didn't.*

*Resuscitation reversed Dead On Arrival.*

*He awoke three months later from an extended morphine-  
dream coma. A coma-dream nightmare about a cross-country crime  
spree and homosexual gang rapes in a maximum-security prison.*

*His father said:*

*"Son, you've had an accident."*

*Winson first asked for a mirror, and after he used it, he tried  
to die.*

*Un-plugging artificial extensions,  
destroying the mechanical, inorganic system keeping him  
alive, removing lines of intravenous morphine,  
rejecting pretense of medicinal vitality  
and hypertonic saline nutrient drippings.*

*He spent six months wrapped in white. Gauze  
held his marrow meat sinews, in  
absence of epidermal shell,  
he became a man,  
delicate, corporeality  
folded in one thousand paper-crane prayers.*

*Unwrapped, his blood flesh was pink red, raw as  
fresh-killed cow's hide on a spitting grill.*

We, our flesh and bones, taut muscles stretched over skeletal  
frame, are blood eyeballs. Not gleaming fish scales shining silver.

After

It all withers. Decomposition begins long before the body dies.

After age sixteen, your neck skin starts losing elasticity.

After age thirty: women's bones are too old to benefit from

calcium supplementation; the testosterone that makes a man a  
man dissipates by the day. Wrinkles of age replace tautness of  
youth. Sagging is as inevitable as a baby's behind is smooth.

*Winson has a body map of burns and scars.*

*His legs, a quilt of square skin grafts. His arms, rippled fish  
scales, feel like cobblestones worn smooth. He has one fully  
functioning hand, and another forever curled in a hammer-claw  
fist. Though his fingerprints have changed, they are still uniquely  
his. But this is not the body he was born with. It is now new. It is  
foreign. It is his, and it is him.*

Think of rotten skin stretched across a faceless skull in  
decomposition. The dirt clumps beneath maggots in feast. The  
congregation of slithering worm-crawl squirms. How long does it  
take for once-fluid eyeballs sunk in sockets to dissolve? To deflate?

*The fire consumed most of his face and the cartilage was the  
first to go. He lives with one eye of fluid and one eye of glass painted  
black. In sleep, his lids only half close, and whites of hard-boiled-egg  
eyes are left exposed to the night. Meanwhile, on the bedside table, a  
Mr. Potato Head nose, a silly-puttied prosthetic, molded from the  
distinguished features of an old Jewish doctor, ill-shaped for the face  
of this Chinese boy, waits until morning to be bolted in its place.*

*Tattooed sideburns and eyebrows fill in patches of skull  
where hair will never grow. Hair plugs scalp, grown thick black.  
After more than one hundred reconstructive procedures,  
he is addicted to plastic surgery.  
Lip injections let him smile how he wants to.  
Almost like the way he used to.  
We scar. We bruise. We bleed. We break.*

Our skin can be grafted, faces transplanted, blood transfused,  
and bone marrow borrowed from bones of baboons. Cuticles are  
shorn, chewed until torn ragged and bleeding, but they regenerate.

*His Superman tattoo was middle-split: eroded, but not  
erased by the flames.*

*Noting the irony of this cracked symbol, he asked:*

*"If the man of steel could die, what are my chances  
of survival?"*

*The remaining ink on his arm was re-grafted to his back,  
with added words:*

*"Only the strong survive."*

Then

We survive, just penetrable hide and no fearsome tusks.  
Without the ugliness of cockroach antennae to strike fear into  
superior beings. No armadillo's armor. No porcupine's spines spike  
out to protect us.

At the urging of a snake, the teeth sank into red forbidden  
skin to taste the sinful, yet seductive, white pulp.

*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they  
realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and  
made coverings for themselves.* Then the flesh that was not hidden  
became their shame. Until to primordial dust it does return.



## MYSTERY MEN: THE MEN BEHIND THE MYTH OF JIM FRENCH'S COLT STUDIOS<sup>†</sup>

*Steve Drum*

Last year, I fell down a Google Images rabbit hole searching for a vintage photo of a mustachioed man, alone and nude in the bluffs of a rocky desert canyon. Call it a keepsake from adolescence. As is often the case, the man in my head proved difficult to find.

What I stumbled upon instead was an online community of gays devoted to speculation over the fates of their favorite, untouchably beautiful men from nudie magazines and dirty sex loops: alleged real names, alleged wives, alleged professions, alleged sightings in grocery stores or elevators. I found message boards dating back more than fifteen years, chronicling a network of star-struck detectives across the globe.

I did the math on the disco-haired, mutton-chopped, mustachioed man in my head; he would probably be in his early to mid-sixties today.

Where does a life go after a naked stint in the desert? Do you tell your friends? Your family? Do you cross over to hardcore and burn out in the fast lane, Dirk Diggler-style?

If he was lucky, his career as a nude model lasted another five years or so, before he was spit onto the proverbial side of the road. But does his ass ever pop up on his computer screen as he drinks his morning coffee?

<sup>†</sup> A version of this article originally appeared in *The Huffington Post*.

I suppose the narrative has more potential if we assume the man is gay and lives in a world where he can actually put his sexual celebrity to use. But what if he weren't gay? Or if he wasn't sure? When his grandchildren take him out for Father's Day brunch, does the gay waiter recognize him?

As a lifelong consumer of porn, I couldn't believe these questions had never crossed my mind.

Where do porn stars go when we're done with them?

After perusing the fourth or fifth "What Ever Happened To..." forum I found, I noticed the objects of these fans' affections shared a similar watermark in the corner of their photos: Colt Studios.

Jim French started Colt Studios in the late 1960s, founding the most successful empire of male nude imagery since Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild. The gay community had just torn its way out of the Stonewall Inn and into the public eye. The U.S. Post Office had just lifted its ban on male frontal nudes passing through the mail system. Under the pseudonym "Rip Colt," French created a sleek, visual language for worshipping the male body.

Today, French's images have become icons of a singular moment in gay history: post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS, post-beef-cake and pre-VHS.

"Let's face it," one user posted on a Jake Tanner fan page. "Before the advent of VCRs, we had Colt. Period."

French sold his rights to Colt Studios in 2003. And when the company changed hands, the men of Colt went from looking like golden gods to looking...kind of like everyone else. Much has been said about the artistry of Jim French, but what about the men French captured in his lens?

John Pruitt, Carl Hardwick, Pete Kuzak, Steve Kelso, Gordon Grant. Before I flipped through the catalog of Colt names, I hadn't realized the effect Colt's faces and bodies had on the fantasy world of my own awkward adolescence.

Since the days of Jim French, sexual stardom has become a self-made industry of amateur Xtube stars, requiring only a camera phone, an accident, an ex-lover's scorn, or a rough weekend. Even our higher-end porn stars can be possessed through Facebook and Twitter until there isn't a shred of intrigue left between "us" and "them."

But Colt was born of an era of fantasy, its men existing only in French's photographs. There is a tradition of communication gaps between gay men, the narrative always broken into disparate eras with disparate priorities.

We'll fetishize an age demographic for its body type or wisdom or youth. But how often do we compare notes between generations?

Open gay culture is young. There's no need to speculate as to what the men of Colt experienced.

These men aren't "vintage." They are still alive.

I decided to search out as many Colt models as I could and give them the opportunity to answer my questions themselves.

As you might imagine, most of these guys are pretty hard to track down. They were working for Colt under pseudonyms. Straight or gay, many of these men grew uncomfortable with sexual stardom and made every effort to disconnect from their former selves. Googling Colt pseudonyms only led to more Colt photographs. For all the paranoia regarding the hyper-accessibility of personal information on the Internet, it seems it is still very possible to disappear in 2012 America.

Steve Schulte, who modeled under the pseudonym "Nick Chase" from about 1977 to 1980, told me that he had "figured it was this underground thing that would make [him] a little cash on the side and no one would ever see it and that would be that."

Schulte, an openly gay man, went onto a successful career in California politics, running for mayor of West Hollywood in 1986.

"I was as gun-shy about the pictures coming out as you might imagine," Schulte said.

His right-wing opponent published a flier showing a very professional Schulte in a suit and tie beside a nude image Jim French had taken of Schulte during his days as a Colt model.

A caption beneath the photos read: "Which Steve Schulte are you voting for?"

Schulte said the ordeal forced him to "face up to it and say, 'Look, this is a part of my past. I'm not ashamed of it.'"

Luckily, his opponent's attacks fell on deaf ears. West Hollywood's strong gay community came out to support him and elected him mayor.

"I think that other gay men appreciated this part of my life," Schulte told me. "One guy said, 'Steve took off his clothes and became one of us.' But it was still very humbling for me. I couldn't come out claiming to be the best asshole in the world."

Some of French's models weren't as fortunate. From the collected notes and gossip on the Colt message boards, it seems many men did cross over to hardcore porn in the eighties and were killed by the AIDS epidemic. Some tried to bank their Colt

fame as high-priced prostitutes, spiraling into an underground life of sex and hardcore drug use.

"Please leave me alone," one former Colt model wrote in response to my request for an interview. "I really wish that whole part of my life would just go away."

When so many men refused with such vehemence to share their stories, I assumed there was some lurid exploitation scandal to cover up. But the models I've spoken with had only kind things to say about Jim French and the environment on the Colt set.

"Jim was always a very decent, very kind man," said Kip de Borhegyi, who modeled for French under the name "Jason Brahm" in the early nineties. "But it was my own personal legacy I had to think about. I just couldn't do anything that I thought I might regret ten years later."

De Borhegyi went on to say that, while he always considered French an artist and not a pornographer, the accessibility of Colt images over the Internet became confusing after he'd decided to move on with his life.

"Even when I began working for Jim, people were still ordering Colt in the mail. It was part of why I was comfortable working with him. He was very adamant about the release of his photos. We had no way of knowing how the Internet would change all that. My pictures pop up everywhere now. It's impossible to police. And, needless to say, very strange."

After thanking Kip profusely for his time, I decided to ask: "Do you ever regret it?"

"No," he answered with a sigh. "I really don't."

He went silent for a second.

"Well, okay," he said. "There's this one photo of my butt that always seems to come up that I don't think I ever really need to see again. But for the most part, I really don't regret any of it. I think the photos are beautiful. And at that time, in terms of my body, I could compete with the best of them. I think it's amazing and kind of sad that some of these guys who used to model for Colt are trying to hide from it now. These men were beautiful. I keep saying it, but Jim's photos are works of art. I really believe that. I don't think we have any reason to be ashamed."

I asked Schulte what he thinks when he looks at the photos now. He answered with another sigh.

"I don't want to be labeled as a 'Colt model.' This is a part of why I stopped doing it. I'm not merely—*anything*. I wasn't merely the mayor of West Hollywood. I wasn't merely the director

of the Gay and Lesbian Center. And I wasn't merely a model for Jim French. We're all lots of things. We're more complicated than a single part of our lives. No one wants to be labeled for just one of them."

Schulte goes silent for a second. And for that second, I feel embarrassed for even asking, even tracking this man down and attempting to compare notes with a fantasy I'll never fully understand.

"But here's the thing," Schulte said. "I don't really look at the pictures very often. Every once in a while, I come across them or someone asks me to sign one. I guess a part of me is kind of shocked at my hubris, but—I think they're good pictures. And yeah, I'm glad I did it."





## THE MAN WHO COULD NOT LOVE

*Nancy Peck*

I gave up looking for it the day of my mother's funeral. Me at age forty-four. If I were going to get it from my father, that would have been the day. He was a new widower. I was now motherless. We should have both felt vulnerable on this raw day. A funeral is the right setting for a hug.

It never came. And my gesture of empathy was rejected.

The family had agreed the funeral music should be Claude Debussy's *Claire de Lune* played as a piano solo. Since the time she learned to play it on the piano, we associated that piece with Mom. We found a woman who would play it on short notice. Men rolled a piano into the church. The melody typified Mom—dainty octaves, light, airy, flowing notes, demure, cautious—tentative yet very much in earnest. Like her, this music relayed innocence and a steadfast hope. For these several minutes the pews seemed suspended, listening. Not a breath was heard, not even my own.

Each of us, her three adult children, assembled at the lectern. The minister sat down in the corner. We hooked arms for support and spoke of Mom. I spoke first between tears. I shared the story of when I was a child and came home from a difficult day in second grade. I was sobbing because a classmate could color pictures better than I could. "She never goes outside the lines," I gushed. "And it isn't fair." Mom lifted me up onto her lap, a floral A-line skirt. She listened. She rescued my bangs from my tears, re-gathered my ponytail, and placed her cheekbone on the top of



my head. That was all I needed— attention and affection—not the brand new box of crayons I thought would guarantee my success.

At the end of the funeral service the family trailed out the door—a single file of shrugged, black-padded shoulders.

I distinctly remember this next incident, and my husband noticed it too. As I followed my father through the door, I put my right palm on his left shoulder with tender condolence. He just turned away.

\*

Ours was a suburban home—a fortunate pentagram of shelter, rectangles of grass, safe streets for kick-the-can, home-made cookies and friends. It appeared balanced to the average Avon Lady and Electrolux salesman. Mom was home all day to make meals. She read, found missing socks, ironed my dolly's clothes. Dad had a steady job as an accountant in a nearby pharmaceutical company. New York City was just a train ride away. Each August, Mom hauled us to a big department store to buy back-to-school plaids, corduroy jumpers, saddle shoes and a year's worth of socks. Mom seemed to enjoy making the small color decisions that hung on hangers. She wrote out her own check. Once we were ushered back home with our whines of fatigue and our shopping boxes, she opened four glass bottles of Coke and a turquoise bag of Wise potato chips. We sprawled in front of a Mickey Mouse Club rerun, and Mom took her swollen size eights out of her high-heeled pumps.

Sunday School was mandatory as soon as I could strap on my patent-leather shoes by myself. There I learned how to interlace my fingers, flip my hands over, and wiggle the fingers. "Here's the steeple, open the doors and there are all the people." There was a different teacher every week, baskets of pointless crayons, seriously illustrated books of cypress trees, fish, bread, and people in long outfits and sandals. And there were many pictures of a man with long, flowing hair that curled under and onto his shoulders, hair like my sister's when she took out her rollers. Some of the children were strangers, but I took comfort that "Jesus loves me this I know." The teacher read a story, and then we played monkey-in-the-middle until the hour was up. Mommy lingered in her maroon choir gown, leaving me the last child collected. Daddy held back to discuss church business. Daddy looked after the tall man in big sleeves. I squirmed and hummed, "He's got the whole world in His hands; He's got the itty-bitty baby in His hands."

On Sundays, the big meal was in the middle of the day. Dad presided at the head of the table in the only chair with arms.

Still wearing his jacket and tie, he carved meat. He sat erect, compensating for his short stature. The dark hair around his small ears had a wave that came and went with the barber's scissors. My sister Susan and I sat on one side of the table, my brother Charlie's crew cut poked up behind the centerpiece. Mom sat at the kitchen end. We took turns saying grace. Susan held her fists in front of her. Charlie, using the cover of a tablecloth, added another wad to the collection of gum under the table's ledge. I kicked the chair legs.

As an adult, years later, Susan reminded me of one Sunday dinner when we were young—she twelve and I, a mere six. In separate episodes we each grew up learning: Do Not Talk Back to Dad. This was my first lesson. I yelped to my father, "You're not the boss of me!" The chandelier might just as well have come tumbling down. He thrust forward, took hold of my arm, and squeezed. Dinner came to an abrupt end. Mom and her apron slid off to the kitchen. My father sent me to my room. My sister never digested a meal well again.

Pencil marks on the doorframe showed us growing in inches. The tension in the household grew, too. Dad managed what it was we talked about, when and how we talked about it. When Mom saw the car coming down the driveway each weekday at 5:15, she turned off our rock and roll, stashed her *Good Housekeeping* magazine, and ran to pull two squat glasses out of the liquor cabinet. The back door opened.

Dad did not hug, share his day or ask about ours; he didn't take pride in any of our trivial accomplishments. We never got advice or heard stories of his boyhood. We never got to hold hands, sit on his lap. He never said, "I love you." It just wasn't in his vernacular.

In retrospect, all three children reacted to Dad's emotional distance differently. My sister, the middle child, held much inside and struggled to sweep away hovering tension. The confrontations she witnessed made her want to hide. It was my older brother who absorbed the "black sheep" branding. By the time my father was president of the Board of Education, Charlie was breaking into the local high school through a trap door on the roof. Charlie was proud of this police blotter entry. Dad was not. When my father was attending consistory meetings, my brother was shooting neighbors' trashcans up into the air with homemade incendiaries. The two males in the family grew to be ashamed and embarrassed of each other. My father's hair grew in silver; my brother's hair grew long.

Dad's physical tolerance for alcohol diminished. When the two older children left for college, Mom and I were center-stage. Dad's need, rather his command for respect mixed with multiple shots of gin and tonic—light on the tonic—made for a bad cocktail. When I was a teenager, Sunday school morphed into confirmation classes. One Sunday night, a school friend attended for the first time. Janet was a wisecracking extrovert with a knack for making me laugh. I was snickering in a back-row chair. The teacher noticed but said nothing to us. Before I even got home, he must have phoned my father. The house was unusually dark. Dad was pacing, Mom out of sight, upstairs in bed. With the force of a howitzer, he lit into me about disrespect. He threw a heavy cigarette stand across the room. He backed me into the corner. What I had done was degrade his image, the image he was trying to portray among the consistory, deacons, elders, his minister, maybe even God. (He never did share just how he felt about God.) His two other children had stopped setting foot in church, any church, once they left home. I, the last hope, was beginning to follow their lead. The incident of that night simply reinforced my fear of my father's wrath. And my voice became silent.

Dad took an early retirement at age fifty-five, quitting his corporate finance job. We never learned the details of that job departure but, as adult children, we figured that his bosses had wanted him to do something less than ethical. He would rather quit than compromise his integrity. So he rented an office downtown a half mile from home and filed tax returns for relatives and elderly widows. When Dad came home from his office for lunch, he would set his briefcase down, confirm that the clock's second hand had reached noon, then fling open the cabinet, stir up a martini, and proceed to make a Wonder Bread peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. A second martini would follow that.

When I visited after my own college graduation, conversations generally deteriorated. He seemed to use me as a tool to wield drama. He put me in the role of captive to be chastised, prisoner to be punished, and child to be taught a lesson. Even into my late twenties and early thirties, I went through waves of feeling sorry for him, of giving him the benefit of the doubt, of letting bygones be just that. Again and again, I tried to connect and build a relationship. A Saturday lunchtime visit went something like this:

Mom served spears of Stouffer's French bread pizza in portions to match her own waning appetite.

"Dad, I noticed you have a lot of cardinals at the bird

feeder. Using a new type of bird seed?" I compiled my stiff, hollow query with care. I tread cautiously.

"Now why would I want to use a new type of bird seed? Is there some newfangled seed you think I should have? What's wrong with the seed I've been using for the last decade? You have a problem with that?"

The table had turned into a flurry of fervor and vitriol. My attempts at talk sank to a deteriorated mess of hurt. Plates held abandoned crusts.

\*

As an adult I began what would become several years of psychotherapy. I remember the instant I realized what I missed out on as a child, as an adolescent, and as an adult. There was a *Time* magazine on the waiting room table. In it was an ad for life insurance with a photo of a young father. He tenderly cradled his naked baby. I realized then just how much I longed for a father like that—one who would have held my little hand in his and looked into my eyes with pride.

The yearning was palpable. My therapist remarked, "How sad. Your father seems out of the Victorian era." I said, "I now see how fathers are EVERY bit as important as mothers." Since that day I have looked on with appreciation whenever young fathers carefully set their babies into strollers or balance their toddlers on their shoulders, protecting them. Loving them.

\*

When my husband and I became parents, we left the city and moved to our first house in the same town as my parents. We frequently visited Mom and Dad for dinner. But it was many an evening I returned to our own house in tears, my attempts at conversation with Dad again crippled. He dismissed things that I wanted to share with him. He bit off my words with a fury. I hurt. He could have shared his wisdom; he could have taken pride in my accomplishments. He could have held my babies.

My husband and I recall one night after a dinner at their house, dishes done. Dad still teetered from his pre-dinner cocktails. There was a book on the table. It was a cheap anthology of jokes someone had given him. He suddenly gripped the book and hustled out the back door. We followed. A cigarette lighter came out of his pocket. After several sparks the book finally caught fire. He flung the blaze into the azalea bushes. We questioned. He didn't reveal which joke offended him, and we can only speculate that it must have been disrespectful to something. Life had let him

down. He was disillusioned. His penchant for irrational argument lost Mom and Dad friends. All in their social circle saw Dad's pattern of drinking and breaking into argument. The party invitations stopped. We felt sorry for him—who wouldn't?—but we also saw how it changed our mother's quality of life.

While Mom was ill and after she died, Dad had a nightly rendezvous with a bottle of wine. He would sit in the kitchen after the cocktails had worn off. A pie sat on the table, a haven for mold. By now his posture was slumped, his head completely silver. His stomach protruded like a boulder and stretched a much-worn cardigan sweater. He dug at the label and polished the bottle off at precisely 10:30 p.m. before lumbering upstairs for just five short hours of sleep. He visited a psychotherapist once.

\*

A shadow on Dad's lung X-ray revealed cancer when he was eighty-four, and for a couple of years my brother lived in Dad's house. Charlie could have free room and board while he met some child-support responsibilities. Eventually Dad became bed-ridden upstairs, his cancer metastasized. A wonderful housekeeper named Carrie cooked and laundered when my brother worked.

A hospice team came, a DNR sign—Do Not Resuscitate—Scotch-taped to the sorry old wallpaper. Church elders visited now and then, and he gave them lectures on how the church should take more care of its aging and dying. They left reassuring him.

I boarded a flight in Burbank, California, where my family and I were living at the time. I flew with some trepidation, yet wanted to offer a brief respite to caregivers. This one last time, surely Dad would grant a hug, break down this façade. I offered my warm hand to hold my father's cold one.

One evening, it began sleeting. Other than a diffused street lamp, it was dark beyond the windowpanes. I sent Carrie home early. I went upstairs to check on Dad, to ask if there was anything he needed. Though he was weak, I still feared the man. As I climbed the steps I considered that there was a 50/50 chance of an argument and hurt after only a few utterances. I was being way too generous with the odds. His room was dark.

"Can I bring you anything, Dad?"

"No. Carrie will bring me dinner."

"I sent Carrie home, Dad. It's sleeting and the roads are getting slippery."

"Carrie knows how to cook my dinner."

"Dad, I can do it," I said, thinking of all the meals I had prepared for my own children these many years. "I can cook a supper for you. Would you like some soup?"

"Only Carrie knows how to do it. Never mind, don't bother," he said. The he did his best to shift his body away in the mass of sheet wrinkles.

I poached him an egg and scraped butter on a slice of toast, feeling infantilized yet again. While I had earlier vowed I would give up looking for his attention, affection, approval, I was never able to stop seeking it.

Later, as I dropped the food into the garbage disposal, I recalled W. H. Auden's words: "If equal affection cannot be, let the more loving be me." But words are merely words. The next morning I said to my brother, "I will do anything you need, to help you, but I cannot stay here another day to bear the brunt of Dad." I cut my trip short by two days and escaped to the airport. On board, I held myself in an airplane blanket. I thought it best to go back home to a family that did love me, did need me. I had left Dad, left home. I cut out to protect myself. That hug from Dad—that one last chance I came three thousand miles to receive—the hug I was sure Dad would at least and at last provide from his deathbed—was not to be. Two weeks later Charlie called Susan and me. Dad died during the night.

I'm very much my father's daughter. My sister often says, "You two were too much alike." Stubborn, highly principled. With our common genetics we both wound ourselves up tight around our individual perceptions of integrity. There is no doubt I am his child—our common wave in the hair, short physical stature, the short arms needing the attention of a tailor. There has never been any doubt I am of his loins. We just never found a path of affection to walk down together.

When Dad died we scrambled to choose a photo and write a newspaper obituary that would include everything in the way of his civic accomplishments. We struggled to construct the landmark history of the man—the man who didn't reveal himself to us or share his own inner workings. We felt embarrassed for our lack of knowing him and of his knowing us. At his funeral, which fewer people attended than my mother's six years prior, the minister alluded to the fact that we had omitted a number of important contributions.

Dad gave much to his community. But he gave so little of himself to us.



## A HEMLINE OF CONDOMS<sup>†</sup>

*Chantel Tattoli*

Maybe twenty baby gators crowded the restaurant's yellow wall. Their tails flicked into C's. Their plastic mother was not far away, on a wall abutting. Her mouth was agape and the little hunter greens followed mom's example, all ostensibly shocked by Caitlin's story or, could be, begging for bits of our burgers.

"She pulled a...a, a...," Caitlin petered. Her face cramped. "Of condoms," she pronounced. She blinked at Lynn and me sitting across the booth. Our friend looked horrified. "A what of condoms? When they're still connected, what are they called?" Brown hair swung out from behind Caitlin's right ear, curtain to eye and cheek.

Lynn, with Lynn-ish aplomb, turned to me. "You're the collective noun enthusiast. You should know."

I did not. "But Lynn. You're the one with the medical background."

Lynn had worked for Planned Parenthood and knew condoms as singles in a fish bowl.

"The collective noun for condoms," Caitlin intoned. "The collective noun for condoms."

Three MFA writing students. Three people who would go out of their way to find *le mot juste*. Would prize it from the damp hip of a cave—pinch it from melon mush (a whole day spent dropping them on their heads, checking)—piece it from a lawnmower graveyard four odd states over. Who'd bring it

<sup>†</sup> A version of this essay originally appeared in *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*.

back in waxed paper? Peel the blanket and expect you to coo, dammit, coo?

\*

In the preface to his 1993 edition of *An Exaltation of Larks*, James Lipton identifies six categories of collective noun:

1. Onomatopoeia: a murmuration of starlings, a gaggle of geese.
2. Characteristic (by far the largest family): a leap of leopards, a skulk of foxes.
3. Appearance: a knot of toads, a parliament of owls.
4. Habitat: a shoal of bass, a nest of rabbits.
5. Comment (pro or con depending on viewpoint): a richness of martens, a cowardice of curs.
6. Error (in transcription or printing; sometimes preserved for centuries): "school" of fish was originally intended to be "shoal."

This is a book never out of print since its publication in 1968. Whereas that edition put down 175 terms, the 1993 Ultimate Edition lists 1,100 collective nouns. A *glory* of collective nouns, can we just say?

In the year 1486, *Boke of Seynt Albans* (*The Book of St. Albans*) became the first collection of nouns of multitude in English. And it was in England, in that fifteenth century Lipton tells us, when these nouns really proliferated. In the fifteenth century, the fecundity of the English language is a thing to behold. Imagine this world. Shakespeare will not coin the word "bedroom" for another century (though condoms have long existed in Europe). It is an etymological spring, says Lipton, "that can only be compared in importance and scope to the intellectual effusions of Periclean Greece or cinquecento Italy." In the fifteenth century, collective nouns are concerned with gentlemen's hunts; they are terms of venery.

*A skulk of foxes.*

*A badling of ducks.*

*A cete of badgers.*

If, in the beginning, collective nouns were fashioned for animals, you needn't be an honest-to-God animal anymore. Six hundred years later, the hunt is for the right word.

It's perfect. The other definition for "venery" is sexual *indulgence*. Why shouldn't condoms have preoccupied my friends and me?

\*

"A rosary! A *rosary* of condoms." I waited for applause.  
C: "No."

L: "What is the matter with you?"

"But it's *hysterical*," I whined. I watched Caitlin's face. Watched her judge then forgive me for using hysterical instead of *hilarious*. Was Irish Caitlin offended by a rosary of condoms? No, not really. Though it would have to be something easy, was her thinking. Like *roll*, *string*, or *line*.

I felt strongly it should speak to how condoms link up like sausages.

Lynn was sitting so still, her blonde, tightly wound curls as buzzed as live wires. She was thinking. Above us, the gators were an eager congregation (*congregation* is the collective noun for alligators). They on that yellow river wall were watchful, and esurient.

"Language is a zoo," Holly Woodward has said, "and you feed bits of yourself to the words." And would if all the little alligators would say, *Amen*. Because the last stage of a medieval hunt was the *curée*, when raw game bits were thrown to the dogs (a *kennel*, or if they are hounds, a *cry*), all I wanted to do was feed the gators.

Caitlin was texting. Without looking up she said someone had voted "sleeve."

*Booo. An individually packaged condom, that. Can we please remember they're perforated?*

Lynn spoke, "Like arcade tickets."

*Yes! Good.* (How they fold over, almost accordion...)

It dawned. *Accordion*.

L & C's heads bobbed. Not bad.

I swigged my IPA. I slipped the paper cummerbund off a napkin. Caitlin handed over a pen and a list began. *Chain?*

*Belt.* Think chastity belt.

*Magazine.* Think Rambo's ammunition.

L: "In case you need to reload?"

*Hah.* I stared at the *crown molding*. A crown molding of condoms.

*A zigzag? A tail? A ribbon? A scarf? Sash, necklace?*

Let it be a *staircase* of condoms.

Let it be a *vertebrate* of condoms.

Be a *hemline*.

Weren't those like scenes in stories? Didn't they intimate stories?

"You need to stop," Lynn told me.

"But I am a freak, Lynn. I like D'Agata." (We agree that means something. John D'Agata does things with language arguably inappropriate. To say the least, he plays. I should ask John D'Agata what he thinks the collective noun is for condoms.)

We asked Steve Jobs (which is to say we asked Siri). We queried the oracle of oracles—Google. We consulted BFFs—one of whom is in pharmaceutical school—Trojan's website, CVS's website, and Urban Dictionary. One of us asked the editor-in-chief of a celebrated magazine. He offered:

a *bevy* of condoms?

a *surplus* of condoms?

a *wall* of condoms?

*Bevy?! Mister Editor, sir, that seems apt in no way.*

"What's the use of them having names if they won't answer to them?" wondered a gnat in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (The collective is a *cloud* of gnats). "What really connects words and things?" Anne Carson has questioned. The use of them. What really?

Collective nouns strike me as another chance for a name, in case, after all, the rose doesn't smell as sweet. In case something should feel like a misnomer, try again. Collective nouns are a second chance to be known. And there you go. Here you are. A naming this time that is truly aphoristic. In an assemblage, you should ask what is the most outstanding aspect. The "quintessential part," coaxes Lipton. A great collective noun captures the soul of the individual in the group.

Lipton: they are about "large illuminations in small flashes."

But he is wary of collective nouns that pun, which he thinks wreck the determination. I imagine Lipton remonstrating, his goodly narrator's voice framed by his *Inside the Actors Studio* beard. *Stop laughing*, he says. *This is seriously beautiful*, he says. *Zip! But please, not zingers*. I think Lipton would not approve of us.

\*

To the girls: "A *tongue*? That's awful, is it?"

"That's awful," said Lynn.

Caitlin moaned. "It's a *gaggle*."

My eyelids like guillotines dropped. "It is not a *gaggle*."

Silence.

"An *escalator*?" I ventured.

"Absolutely not!" Lynn pooh-poohed.

"I'm asking Alexis," Caitlin said. "Alexis has China wisdom."

(We all knew Alexis is Singaporean.)

"She says a *sausage link*."

Me: "I said that, see. It's funny."

*Time* printed what may be the only joke about collective nouns in their September 19th, 1955 issue:

Four dons were walking down an Oxford street one evening. All were philologists and members of the English department. They were discussing group nouns: a covey of quail, a pride of lions, an exaltation of larks.

As they talked, they passed four ladies of the evening. The dons did not exactly ignore the hussies—in a literary way, that is. One of them asked: "How would you describe a group like that?"

Suggested the first: "A jam of tarts?" The second: "A flourish of strumpets?" The third: "An essay of Trollope's?" Then the dean of the dons, the eldest and most scholarly of them all, closed the discussion: "I wish that you gentlemen would consider 'An anthology of pros.'"

Then consider an episode of the British comedy *Not the Nine O'clock News*, "Gerald the Gorilla" (1979). Behind a coffee table on which sit yellow silk daffodils (a *bouquet*), there's a beige blazer of a professor in one chair, and, to his right, a man in a hirsute suit; their legs cross genteelly. "How did Gerald get on without his family?" Their gorgeous blonde interviewer wants to know.

"Well," answers the professor, "to begin with, Gerald did make various attempts to contact his old flange of gorillas."

Gerald interrupts: "It's a *whoop*, professor. A *whoop*. It's a *flange* of baboons!"

The skit was so popular, now primatologists commonly call a group of baboons—technically a *troupe*—a *flange*. Does Lipton know about this?

\*

In 1989, Louis Phillips, in Volume 78, Number 3 of *The English Journal*, said, "Still, the time may be upon us to add some new collectives to the list." A *split* of divorce lawyers. A *cram* of students. He went on. "And what would a dictionary call a collection of light-hearted pieces such as this?" Phillips asked. "A blot of verbs?"

There exists a newer organization called All Sorts, "a linguistic experiment" in association with the West Port Book Festival, held in Edinburgh. All Sorts is asking for charisma. They



ask we propose modern collective nouns. So we go play. And among the duds, such pearls do result:

An *icarus* of global warming deniers  
 A *zsa zsa* of exes  
 A *one* of tiggers  
 An *eyjafjallajökull* of complications  
 A *rumour* of macs  
 An *angelina jolie* of adopted children  
 A *gentrification* of baristas  
 A *seemingly-empty room* of ninjas  
 An *azure* of smurfs  
 A *bell jar* of suicides  
 A *papier mâché* of to-do lists  
 A *bloodbath* of track changes  
 A *sic* of editors  
 An *iteration* of collective nouns  
 An *art* of collective nouns  
 An *obsessive* of collective nouns

On the question of condoms, contributors have only advanced “a *baby* of split condoms,” and “a *caligula* of condoms.” Caligula, the Roman Emperor from 37 AD to 41 AD, whose incestuous relationship with his three sisters and his seeming goal to turn the palace into a brothel, has been much talked about in the centuries since. But collective nouns can do that, can appoint the past to the present. An *icarus* of *global warming deniers*. And hearing it, do we shudder? We probably do. Collective nouns can make things seem really real. They are believable.

And actually, there are collective nouns for things you wouldn’t believe. Comic artist David Malki!—who spells his name with an exclamation point, which he considers an honorific, and uses “in the same manner as ‘Jr.’ or ‘PhD’”—creates work from nineteenth-century woodcuts and engravings, which he scans in from a collection of old books or from Los Angeles Central Library volumes. Malki! has adapted “The Stoakes-Whibley Natural Index of Supernatural Collective Nouns.” “FOR HOLIDAY OR EVERYDAY!” he says. And we note:

A blanket of poltergeists (Spectral Class)  
 A chimney of djinns (Demon Class)  
 A sleigh of Santa Claus (Elven Class)  
 A pantheon of gods (Heavenly Class)  
 A jake of Jedi (Human Class)

A nervousness of AIs (Mechanical Class)  
 A doubting of Cyclopes (Monster Class)  
 An industry of villains (Psychotic Class)  
 A pension of aliens (Foreign Class)  
 A braid of chimeræ (Wildlife Class)  
 A basement of vampires (Undead Class)  
 A duty of Frankenstein’s monsters (Irregular)

The girls and I left the burger joint. Technically, the restaurant had already closed.

Outside, scuffing the cobblestoned sidewalk: “A *pathway*?”

Oh, the looks Lynn can give.

We moved to some curbside seating.

*Garland*. Imagine condoms decking the gymnasiums of Sadie Hawkins dances.

Caitlin said, “*Streamer*.” We all loved streamer, so onomatopoeia. Screamer. Stream—we could have gone on. Instead, we went home.

\*

Proposals for the collective noun for condoms are still trickling in. Two days after the burger joint, a sea of people turns out for a free concert in the park. We pass Hannah, who’s heard about our talk. “A *reel*!” she shouts. She turns back. “Or a *ream*!”

When Nina comes to visit Lynn, she says, “A *skein*.” Nina had earlier texted *yard*. She wonders. Perhaps you can buy condoms by the yard. At Jo-Ann Fabric? (She discovers you can buy rulered condoms.)

Matt, someone freshly minted from comedy school: “A *compromise* of condoms.”

James, our writing department chair, seconds *magazine*. Might be *bandolier*.

My boyfriend recommends a *weekend* of condoms.

After I’ve explained myself to Joel, a potter who experiments with form: “Then shouldn’t it be an *essay* of condoms?”

Look how we play with our language. How it putties in our hands. Is our favorite toy, even. Our heart-song out loud. This is how we wax.

Lipton signs off in his introduction:

I have two earnest hopes: one, that the evangelist tone of this preface will be forgiven; and, two, that a few from Parts III and IV—and even from Part V—will stick to our ribs and be ingested into our speech. If they do,

it isn't just that we will be able to turn to someone and coolly and correctly say, "Look—a charm of finches." What is more important is that a charm of poetry will have slipped quietly into our lives.

Well, that's right.

One of my professors has tendered a *gross*. In fourth grade, his friend reaches into a drawer of his father's nightstand and pulls out what I imagine that father calls rubbers. That friend grows up to be a man who says they're a *gross* of condoms, so economic. He grows up, in fact, to become a condom distributor. "Gross" is a purveyor's word. A *gross* of bottle rockets or could be anything. Whatever's selling.

Right now, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is best-selling. Caitlin refers me to Chapter 8. Christian Grey "opens the top drawer of the chest and removes a packet of condoms." My knee-jerk response is, since E.L. James is saying *packet*, I'm against it.

It is not poetry. Not what you hear as tuning in the narrow corridors of your bones.





## RACES WON, RACES BORROWED

*Caitlin O'Grady*

It was a school where everything was borrowed, nothing belonged, and there were no roots. The principal was picked from Louisiana, as were other faculty members. Almost none of the people there had ever even worked in that school system before. The property was on loan, the school building was borrowed. In fact, the building had been abandoned for some time. The summer before it all started they had to pry it open, remove the decay, and empty it out. It's tough to gauge how much asbestos powder fell on the cleaners, but it's safe to say that it did fall.

The building was from the fifties, an anachronism but with no retro charm. When you were in there, it *felt* like the nineteen fifties. Every item in that school, the chairs, the desks, the ancient chalkboards, all of it felt of that time. It was puzzling. Why did they start a new school two years before the permanent building could be built? But they did start it. They bussed the boys out there. Fifteen city miles from their homes in Atlanta to the still-rural parts east. That old school house was tucked into an empty neighborhood, a school that had long ago come to terms with the fact that its bell no longer rang, that the children no longer whispered in the halls. A school that was content to have been boarded up for the past fifteen years. So of course it rejected being disturbed. The wax wouldn't hold to the floor, the mold quickly crept back through the white wash, the walls refused to hold the posters we hung, and the air conditioner refused to blow. It smelled, it was hot, and nothing seemed to stick.

When the boys first arrived, they seemed small, smaller than the average sixth grader. They weren't like how they said they would be. The boys didn't yell at me; they listened to my instructions; they didn't talk back. I still attribute that to shock. It had to have been the smell of the place, the rejection of the walls, and the quiet of the rural setting. They must have been reeling from the bus ride and missing the familiarity of their elementary school. (Later I would learn that many of these boys had never been farther than their neighborhoods, most had never been out of the city, and only a few had left the state.) But slowly, they accustomed themselves to the place, the building. They learned her temperament. They figured out she was just an ornery old lady who no longer had the strength to wrangle the grandkids, who rejected visitors and was content to die in solitude. They learned that the other teachers were new too. They could tell we weren't from around here; they could see that most of us were young and didn't know how to sort all this out any better than they did. That was when the battle began.

The first morning of the year I woke up early. I had laid my outfit out the night before. I wanted to look the part—what I thought the part should be. I was concerned with dressing myself to fit in with the school, with the part of the young teacher, with the vibe of the fifties architecture. I wore a conservative black boat-neck dress with cap sleeves—it grazed my knees—and a white cardigan over my shoulders. But in homage to my youth, my spunk, and my approachability, I wore red pumps.

Many of my outfits were fashioned that way. I remember buying a lot of fifties-inspired dresses, although I had never dressed like that before. I think it was the building. I had been a thespian in college. I knew how to “dress the part.” Dressing the part—it must have been a means of control or, more likely, it was a means of denial. To match the desks and the chairs, to blend in with the set meant that this wasn't really my life.

There are several reasons why I wouldn't and couldn't, for at least a year, come to terms with the fact that this was my real life. First and foremost it was the bleeding. The boys were constantly bleeding. They bled from the nose; they bled from their elbows, knees, and mouths. They were forever coming to me with some bleeding orifice that needed to be bandaged, hands held out for help. Their blood would stain my dresses. They had to come to me because there was no nurse to send them to.

I was supposed to teach history. My beloved history—the good stuff, too—European revolutions, ancient civilizations, the

World Wars, all the conquests and explorations. It was the kind of stuff I was sure boys would love. I thought that we would gather around and read and talk and re-create and re-enact. But it's hard to do those things with sixth-grade boys who haven't yet learned to read a map, to identify the country in which they live, who were several years behind grade-level in reading. It's hard to do that with boys who are hungry and tired and pissed off. It's hard to do that when the blood is spilling.

I had an hour every afternoon dedicated to mentoring. We had our group for an hour and a half. They told us to keep the boys in our rooms. They didn't care about anything else. “Just make sure they don't run the halls,” was the only guideline they gave us. They told us not to report any discipline problems. For the first few months there was nothing else to report.

One afternoon, when the rooms felt especially stuffy, we cranked open the windows. There was film on all the windows that faced the back of the school. I guess it was decided they weren't worth cleaning. At this point I didn't mind the dirt; clean windows were the least of my worries. At the end of the day, it was especially hard to get the boys' attention. I tried several things and then I decided I just wanted them to like me. So when, anecdotally, I mentioned that I had always been a very fast runner and when Vandez, one of the boys, challenged me in front of the class, I told them I'd go outside and race them.

The boys were stunned. “Right now?” they asked. “But we're in school.” I found it perplexing that they suddenly cared whether we went outside and raced. It was like they thought we were cheating. I caught them cheating all the time; I wasn't sure why they cared now.

The boys giddily lined up; they followed me single-file out a side exit and shuffled down the fire escape to the field in back. I was wearing one of my fifties-style dresses, cream colored with capped sleeves. With yellow pumps to reveal my youth, my approachability.

I ended up taking the shoes off. The boys, like gentleman, led me softly by my arm over the hill to the field. I don't know where it came from, the sudden ability to be gentle, careful, and chivalrous. But I didn't let on that I was impressed. I acted as if it were perfectly normal. If I had let on how sweet it was, how it reminded me they were just kids, then I might have cried.

Once we were at the top of the hill, I placed my shoes neatly beside each other. The boys followed suit, taking their shoes off and actually responding when I encouraged them to line theirs up, too. I told them to take their socks off if they were taking

their shoes off. I said this because I didn't want their mothers to have to deal with stains or tears. Marquise said that his Mom tells him to do that too. This comment bolstered me. It made me feel more rooted; a small connection was forged.

Michael, one of the smallest students, didn't want to run. He would be the judge. The other boys didn't approve, but I sternly informed them that I was in charge and that Michael was keeping the time. I told them he would stand at the finish line. The makeshift line was about fifty yards away. The starting line was hard to manage. Toes and whole feet tried to sneak across. There were several false starts.

"On your mark, get set, go."

Finally, we were off.

It didn't occur to me until I was running that I might lose, that one of these ten- or eleven- or twelve-year-old boys could be faster than me. I guess I figured because I was older and taller that I was abler. It scared me that Lloyd was so close on my heels. But I pushed and pushed and won. I narrowly won. Maybe I didn't really win. Lloyd was so close, but the boys thought I won and started dancing and hollering and high-fiving each other while recapping the race's nuances.

Several other classrooms had taken notice and had gone to their windows to watch us. Ms. Hunter-Graham even called out, "That's right, Ms. O'Grady!" I knew that all the other classes were jealous of the boys in mine. They wanted to be out there in the afternoon sun with their shoes off, smelling the grass and sweat. I thought this meant that I had really accomplished something. I thought a true bond was forged. I would now be the cool teacher who wouldn't get punked. They would listen to me about homework and history. I should have lived in the moment and enjoyed the small victory, an afternoon where at least we weren't fighting. I should have appreciated it for what it was: a happy thirty minutes, a nice story for them, a moment.

\*

My classroom was an old laboratory. I used one of the lab tables as my desk. I worked around the gas pipe and water-spout. It seemed like we were always working around something. They gave us things sporadically to help us improve our effectiveness. Once they gave me a microphone so the boys could hear me better. My principal said I wasn't always loud enough. I thought I yelled all day. By the end of one, I was too beat to try. I was out of it.

Mr. English was next door and impeccably well dressed. He took most things less personally than I. Sometimes we would talk. One day I went next door during planning to see what he planned to do for our mentor class that day. Sometimes we borrowed lesson plans or worksheets. They were always telling us, "Don't re-invent the wheel," without giving us any wheel to use. So sometimes we would share. I sat talking to him, he in his desk and me in a child's desk. We were brainstorming ideas when I noticed a green book on his shelf. I absentmindedly walked to pick it up and then started reading it.

I was inspired to use the quotes from the book, to somehow share them with my students. Mr. English thought it was a good idea. It was ten or fifteen minutes until the bell. That's how strained we were, deciding things at the last minute. Or, that's how young we were, not thinking of the consequences, not judging the effectiveness of writing several horrifying facts about the reality of black men in America today on the chalkboards throughout my classroom. I was sure that the boys would read the quotes and we would sit down and have an hour-long discussion about the statistics and how we could prevent them from determining the boys' future.

It's not important what the book was called or who wrote it. It's just important to know its gist; it was a book that had compiled a bunch of harrowing and horrifying statistics about African American males. For example: "In the inner city half of black men do not finish high school." Or something to that effect.

So I went back into my classroom, the repurposed laboratory, the walls lined with chalkboards. I decided to pick some particularly disturbing statistics and write them in large letters all over the chalkboards. I boxed off each quote to emphasize its importance, to draw the boys' attention. Then I waited, not long, because everything was done at the last minute. The bell rang and the boys hustled up from the basement where they had electives. They were supposed to be studying art or music or cooking or language or computers down there. But mostly they were coloring worksheets and completing word-finds for candy.

Boys from my mentor class came into the room sucking on the candy they had earned or pouting and pushing about the candy they had not earned, sweat beading down their temples. I was surprised to see how quickly they noticed the quotes filling the chalkboards. I hadn't even thought of anything to say. I had mostly been concerned with making them look appealing and

eye-catching. Vandez was the first to cry. He asked me indignantly, "Why would you say this about us?"

I was surprised they could comprehend the words so well. Michael, who couldn't read, asked Lloyd what was going on. Lloyd had already balled up his fists. He said, "She thinks these things about us."

"Wait, no, I don't think these things about you. These are statistics compiled by researchers, you know like at the Urban Institute and the University of Michigan and Columbia."

"Well, if you didn't think these things about us then why would you write them?"

"But I don't think these things about you. These are facts. They are based on evidence. They're true but—"

"So this is what's going to happen to us?"

"Well, no, it's what society expects to happen to you, based on the data."

"It's what you expect."

"No, I don't."

"Yes you do. Why else would you write that?"

"Look, I don't want these things to happen to you! I don't think these things should happen to you. I think you are better than this stuff. So if it makes you angry then erase them."

"What?"

"ERASE THEM."

With a thunderous rush to every board in the room, the quotes were destroyed. Chalk fell off the ledges. The boys didn't use erasers. They used their hands. They smeared oil and candy and snot onto the boards, which were now covered in their fingerprints. Some were still crying, but they were tears of exhilaration. I hadn't planned to command them to do that. Honestly, I hadn't expected them to really read the boards. I had expected to coax them into looking at the words or to read the words to them. I had expected to pull teeth to get them to care about what the words said. I had expected to give up and play a geography game.

We stood for a few seconds looking around at each other for clues about what to do now. I didn't have one. But I felt it was important to harness this new energy, so I asked them to come to the classroom library section and sit on the carpet. I sat on the carpet with them. I asked the boys how the words on the board made them feel. They said they made them feel sad. I explained to them the difference between opinion and factual information. I explained that most times the two were different. I explained

about research and university studies. I felt I was communicating clearly and hoped they could understand. They were listening, they asked questions. Even Jakiern, the class clown, was listening, so I knew this was important.

Then I decided to test the waters and see if any of this had registered. I did something that adults choose to do either too little or too much. I asked again how they were *feeling*.

Lloyd said he felt better about me but upset about the information. Marquise said that he was happy to have the ability to erase the information, but that he liked that I showed it to them. Vandez still wasn't talking to me. Renico said that it made him sad, but that it helped him to want to fight to prove all the white people wrong.

The white people wrong. I listened to this and politely, calmly replied, "Well Renico, I understand that these are disturbing facts and they are facts that you should want to change, but you can't say all white people think this. These are facts that people came to learn through research." I was satisfied with my answer, proud even that I handled it so eloquently.

Renico responded, "Yeah, but the white people figured it out."

"Well yeah, white people worked on some of the stuff, but so did black people and Hispanic people and other types of people," I explained.

"Yeah, but mostly white people," someone said.

I answered, "Let's be careful, because not all white people dislike black people. I mean, think about me, Ms. O'Grady. I care for you all very much and I'm white."

Then they were rolling on the floor laughing.

"You're not white!" Renico said.

Note: I'm white. And not is-she-or-isn't-she white. I'M WHITE. I have red hair and fair skin. I sunburn. Badly.

"Well of course I'm white. What are you talking about? I mean, look at my hair, it's red, my skin, it's white."

"You ain't white. What're you talking about? You crazy," said Jakiern. They all agreed there was no way I was white.

"Well, what am I?" I asked.

"You're black," they all agreed.

"But why do you think I'm black?" I asked.

They couldn't come to a conclusion why. I guess they figured I was black because everyone who was in their lives was black. Most everyone who had ever taught them was black. And I had, in fact, even dressed their bloody scrapes.

I tried my best to convince them I was white and, for that day at least, they were still skeptical. I told them to ask the other teachers to verify. Then Vandez, my toughest, my meanest, and my angriest, looked at me and said in his usually hateful tone, "Look, Ms. O'G, you may be able to get by with that, but we all know you're African American."

I had nothing to say. I was in a borrowed building, I had no roots, I wasn't from around there. I was used to repurposing things, and now I was expected to borrow a race too.



## HARDLY NOTICEABLE

*Ida T. Ronaszegi*

In the winter of 2005, my husband and I decided to spend a week in Washington, D.C. with our three teenagers, and one late afternoon we found ourselves in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. We had been walking in and out of museums since ten in the morning and by four that afternoon everyone was getting tired. The kids picked up the pace as we proceeded to the second floor to visit *Science and Innovation*. We made our way through the west gallery, where, right next to the original Star-Spangled Banner, there was a special exhibition that caught my attention: *Whatever Happened to Polio?* I slowed down, but my heart beat faster.

"Mom, aren't you coming?" My children looked frustrated. They had already taken in what they could in one day and wanted to rush through.

"You guys go ahead," I answered. "Come back and get me in a little while." I wanted to stay and study every inch of information on the circular wall. I wanted to learn about this virus that, according to a 1954 autobiography by polio victim Larry Alexander, caused a "fear you had no defense against, something that hit without logic or reason. Yesterday it was the man down the block. Today it could be you or your children."

In June of 1934 in Hungary, the poliovirus hit a home in a town called Kerepes. Its victim was my father.

My father was ten months old when he ran a really high fever. He vomited incessantly; he had diarrhea. Suspecting the flu, his mother rushed him to their family doctor. After listening to his

chest and looking down his throat, the old Jewish physician did something that seemed strange to my grandmother. He took the baby's right foot and tickled his sole.

"Instead of tensing up the muscles, his foot is not responding," the doctor explained. "I am suspecting infantile paralysis, but please don't worry; it may be temporary." Even though he spoke reassuringly, my grandmother wasn't relieved at all. The fact that the doctor ordered further examinations in St. Laszlo Hospital in Budapest added to her anxiety.

\*

At the museum, my children and my husband left the hall; I was alone. Occasionally, a visitor or two would stroll by, but I hardly noticed. I studied. I learned that the poliovirus produced no, or minor symptoms in ninety-five percent of those infected. In about five percent of cases, a mild form resulted in flu-like symptoms of fever, stiff neck, nausea and fatigue, or a slight temporary paralysis. Only one percent of those with polio symptoms experienced a more severe form called paralytic polio, which had lasting effects. In the worst cases of paralytic polio, two to five percent of children died. This is why the family physician was cautious but hopeful. He hoped that my father was in the five percent who suffered from temporary paralysis. My grandmother feared the one percent. The next day she took the baby to St. Laszlo.

\*

At the hospital, they ran more tests, tickled him some more and confirmed the diagnosis: baby Karoly had poliomyelitis, a viral disease. The virus entered through his mouth and multiplied in his throat and gastrointestinal tract, then moved into his bloodstream and was carried to his central nervous system where it replicated and destroyed the motor neuron cells. Motor neurons control the muscles for swallowing, circulation, and respiration. They control the body's trunk, its arms and legs. For every two hundred or so virus particles that encounter a susceptible cell, only one will successfully enter and replicate. My father had a susceptible cell. One of the two hundred viral particles entered his ten-month-old body where it replicated rapidly.

"Mrs. Teuschl, we will have to keep and monitor your baby for at least seven days," the attending physician at St. Laszlo informed my grandmother. "Come back in seven days and we will know more." What horror it must have been for her and the baby. If my father carried his favorite teddy bear with him that day, it would have been burned. Everything that his little body touched had to be destroyed.

My grandmother went home, but returned to the hospital in two days. She didn't have enough money for the train, so she walked from Kerepes to Budapest, a five-hour walk, one way. On her way she stopped at a chapel to pray, then kept on walking. I don't know what thoughts were going through her mind; maybe she tried not to think at all, maybe she prayed all the way. I shuddered. The exhibit said that hospitals enforced the separation during the acute phase of the disease, so it is likely that she was not even able to go near her son. Perhaps she could look at him through a window and that was enough to make her get up in the morning and go. She made the trip three times. One day she walked, the next day she rested. On the seventh day she hoped to pick up her precious baby boy.

"We have good news for you Mrs. Teuschl," announced the doctor. He held my father in his arms. "Watch this," he said and proceeded to show her the 'test.' He tickled the baby's right foot several times, smiling each time the baby flexed his muscles slightly, but visibly. "That's what we want to see. Your baby has mild paralysis, but he may very well outgrow it by the time he is a teenager. Keep him warm always. That's VERY important." My grandmother scooped up her baby, I imagine, with a sigh of relief. She heard the doctor and was determined to follow his orders. She would make sure to keep her son warm. Always.

\*

Despite the promising diagnosis and his mother's care, my father had to wear a special pair of custom-made orthopedic shoes. His left shoe was a regular shoe. The right shoe, however, had a slightly elevated insole and had leg braces attached for support. They resembled the leg braces of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who contracted poliovirus in 1921. There is a picture of my father taken when he was about five years old. He's standing in the front yard with his older sister Emike. The picture is black-and-white, but I know his eyes are blue. He has a mischievous look. It is summer. He is wearing shorts and a shirt. He is not wearing the braces, but it's apparent that only his left leg is supporting his body. He is leaning to the right just slightly.

Growing up, I sometimes asked my father what he missed most. He said he would have loved to run.

"I would have loved to have felt the air blowing against my face or to have played offense on the soccer field. They made me a goalie instead," he said. Then he added with a grin, "I was a good header."



My father could never run, but eventually he learned to ride a bicycle, and he felt the wind blowing against his face.

By the time he began grade school in 1939, other winds began blowing in Europe: the Second World War. As the years went by and the war raged on, food became scarce, especially during winter months when my father carried a small baked potato to school in his pocket every day. It served two purposes: it warmed his hands, then it became his lunch. Toward the end of the war in 1945, the Russians came in. They set up temporary barracks in the vicinity of Budapest. Kerepes, my father's hometown, was one of their posts.

My father was about twelve when he and his friend walked by the barracks. They could smell the freshly baked bread. Oh, how they wished they could have a piece. Their salivary glands turned on by just thinking about it. As they looked closer, they realized that the kitchen window was wide open. So they made a plan. One of them would jump into the kitchen, grab some bread, then throw it out the window for the other to pick up. Then they would run away as fast as they could. They decided that my father's buddy would jump through the window and that my father would stand outside and wait to catch the pieces that would come flying. The plan was going well, really well. The kitchen was temporarily unoccupied, so his friend jumped in and stuffed his shirt with pieces of bread that were lying around the kitchen. Then he began to throw some of the bread chunks out the window for my father to catch. Suddenly, the door opened and a soldier appeared. When he saw the boy in the kitchen window, who by now was trying to escape, he reached out to grab him. He yelled, "Stoy!" *Stop!*

Of course he didn't stop. He dashed for his life. My father, realizing the gravity of the situation, hurried toward the street and hid behind the trunk of a large tree. The idea of a fresh piece of bread was so enticing to him that he had forgotten that he could not run. He stood there frozen behind the tree until the Russian soldier's angry voice faded and he felt safe to leave. He went home and put on the table the single piece of bread that he had managed to tuck into his shirt before fleeing. His friend was so scared, he didn't come around for days.

\*

Until his teenage years, my father's limp was mild. His affected leg developed nicely alongside the healthy one. There was a difference of about two centimeters between the length of

the right and left leg. His mother fussed a lot about keeping him warm. She hardly let him out of her sight. When his art teacher offered, on his own expense, to take my father with him to Paris the summer after he finished eighth grade, his mother refused to let him go. No matter how much potential, no matter how much talent her son had, there was no use arguing; she would never let him go so far away, far from her supervision.

At sixteen, something slipped. It happened while they were on vacation by a well-known lake called Balaton. It was early September. The family was to spend a week enjoying the Hungarian Sea. However, the weather was cool, and so was the water. My father didn't think the water felt *that* cold. He enjoyed swimming, showing off his talent to his mother.

"Isn't the water too cold, Karoly? Don't stay in too long. You will catch a cold," she scolded, but without the usual force. Maybe she thought he was doing so well that she could let up just a little bit and let him enjoy some healthy exercise. No one knows just how the cold water affected him, but one thing is certain: that year my father's leg stopped growing. His left leg grew three more centimeters before he was all grown-up, but his right leg stayed the same. This made a total difference of five centimeters, about the length of my thumb. In 1945 Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Once you've spent two years trying to wiggle one toe, everything is in proportion." My father would not wiggle his right toes ever again.

\*

In the United States the first known polio outbreak was in Vermont in 1894. In 1916, New York City experienced the first large polio epidemic, with more than nine thousand reported cases and 2,343 deaths. After Roosevelt became President in 1933, and with the help of his friend Basil O'Connor, he organized a yearly Birthday Ball that raised money for the care of polio patients. Out of the success of these annual fundraisers grew the grass-roots campaign that led to the establishment of The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, renamed the March of Dimes in 1938. Over the years, millions of people gave their dimes (which in 1945 bought a hot dog or two bottles of Coca-Cola) to support both the care of people and the research of treatments. These contributions financed Jonas Salk, Albert Sabin, and the other researchers who helped develop the polio vaccines. This Smithsonian exhibition opened on April 12, 2005, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the announcement that Dr. Jonas Salk's polio vaccine was safe and effective.



\*

One year after the polio vaccine came out in the United States, twenty-three-year-old Karoly met a beautiful young woman named Ida. They met at Lake Balaton, where his right leg stopped growing seven years before. They fell in love and, two years later, on August 29, 1958, they were married. A year later my mother became pregnant with their first child, my sister Tuende. That same year, the Sabin vaccine arrived in Hungary and every child was vaccinated against the dreaded poliovirus.

My mother was very pretty and some of her friends and even her sister wondered why she didn't wait for a "normal" suitor, why she "settled" for a guy like my father. Her response was short and simple: "He was such a wonderful person; I didn't even notice his leg." It's funny, but it was the same for me, too. Of course I knew that Dad had polio and that he wore special shoes, but still, he looked normal to me.

Until one winter afternoon, when I was in sixth grade.

Our school was too small for all the grades to meet at once, so we alternated. One week the first four grades went in the morning and the upper grades attended in the afternoon, the next week the other way around. This week we were the "afternoon shift." It was around five-thirty in the evening and we were on recess, before the last class period began. Each class period was forty-five minutes long with a fifteen-minute recess in between. During recess the classroom helpers for the week were responsible for cleaning the blackboard and airing the classroom by opening all three windows wide. It was early December; the air was crisp. We stayed away from the windows because it was too chilly, until somebody yelled, "It's snowing." In an instant the whole class ran to the windows, excited to see the first snowflakes of the season gently falling. I don't know why, but seeing the first snowfall of the year held a certain magic. As we were hanging out the windows, trying to catch a flake or two, one of the guys, Horvath, suddenly yelled out, pointing to a figure across the street. "Look at that lame man, look at the lame!" I looked and, to my astonishment, saw that the "lame" he was pointing to was my very own father. He had just gotten off the bus and was walking toward our street. And he was limping. He was lame.

"That's Ida's dad," said one of the girls trying to subdue Horvath's enthusiasm. Horvath didn't say another word. Neither did I. The bell rang and class resumed. I think it was the chemistry teacher who came in and tried to rein in a crowd who would much

rather go outside and play in the freshly fallen snow than to try and comprehend the periodic table.

I myself was trying to comprehend the scene that had just taken place a minute before. As I looked outside the window, I could still see my father's figure limping home. His steps were sure but labored. *My dad is lame*. The thought kept coming. *My dad is lame*. I knew my father had paralysis. I knew he limped. But all that was invisible to me before. I had blocked it out somehow. Now I saw what others saw, and it hurt. It hurt because they didn't know him. They didn't know what a wonderful person he was, how caring, how loving. I wanted to tell Horvath that my father wrote poetry and he painted beautifully, even though he never made it to Paris. I wanted to tell him that my mother was never scared of my father like Horvath's mother was of his father. In fact all my friends preferred to come to my house. "Your dad is so nice," they would say.

That day I never said anything to anybody, but in 2005, on an early December afternoon, while snow gently fell in Washington, D.C., I sat in the west gallery of the *Science and Innovation* exhibition at the Museum of American History and wrote my story. I wrote it on a piece of notepaper with a number-two pencil at the exhibit's interaction table, where they asked visitors to share their stories and to drop them in the box. Every few days, the curators would take them and pin them on the wall for everyone to read. It felt good to let the whole world know that, even though my father had contracted infantile paralysis at ten months old, even though everyone might see him as a cripple, I knew and those that loved him knew that he was as whole a person as one can be.

I had just finished my story and was folding the paper in half when my son Martin reappeared.

"Mom, are you ready?" he asked, noticing my teary eyes.

"Would you like to read it before I drop it in the box? I wrote a story about Papa." He reached for the paper and began to read. When he was finished he handed it back to me. He didn't say much. His response was short and simple: "Papa's limp is hardly noticeable."



## THE ISLE OF LOST THINGS

*Ally Wright*

*"And everything that begins, then, has the possibility of ending." - Aristotle (as I remember it, from Rhetoric, and probably not as he said it.)*

If all the lost things in the world fell into black holes and landed on some island in some unnamed sea, I would be afraid to visit this isle, afraid that once I visited I would never leave, that I would become lost myself.

(It is not an unreasonable fear, this fear of becoming, myself, nothing more than a lost thing.)

If I did visit, accidentally stumbling after some misleading trail of bread crumbs to this confusing and unorganized place, the fear would vanish upon arrival, the way the nervous, excited fear of pleasant things vanishes only when you plunge headfirst into those things, with no time to over think, no time to worry about the potential of losing them. But of course if you are on the Isle of Lost Things, you are already obsessed with Loss, with End. The thing then, is not to go there.

Perhaps the thing is to plunge in here? Headfirst, without fear? The weather is warm; I should not be so afraid of the potential for cold, for the icy splash. I should not be afraid of losing what I do not yet have, what I only think I want.

I am sure that, if this island were a place, and if I went, I would give in to the attraction of all the different lost items. I would wander the maze of lonely socks and long-forgotten ticket stubs, of childhood's stuffed animals and adulthood's car keys.

Perhaps I would catch a glimpse of my grandmother's necklace, or my mother's charm, dangling from my own charm bracelet, or perhaps they would be so ensconced in the hills and valleys of lost things that they wouldn't know I was there.

And the foundation of the island would be dirt: the dirt of faith, so much faith, lost by adolescents who thought that one day it would be found again. That one day, the floundering certainty of youth would settle back down underfoot, letting them know they were "grown." They too could settle. This never happens. Faith, once lost, is never found, not in the same way. On the Isle of Lost Things, it is the strongest and most solid lost thing.

Let me be clear; this is not faith in a higher power. That faith, lost, isn't of this isle. This is the innate faith in things, the faith we put in the idea that material objects can save us, the instinctual groping for something of flesh to grab onto with our tiny fists when we first enter the world. It comes before we understand abstract concepts, before the idea of "mother" is anything more than the flesh we are groping.

This faith in things (ones that aren't lost yet, ones that could be lost) would be the dirt, and from it would grow innocence in the form of green grasslings, covering the solid ground with all the naïveté of youth.

It is on this grass, on this ground, that the lost things build. Mazes of objects. Rooms of objects.

Perhaps I would meet other people on this isle, too: real, live lost boys and girls who were lost and are still lost and did not choose to leave but wandered off, as I had. Perhaps I would not be the only person chasing what was lost, chasing it too far.

And the breath I lose when I've been running too long—or the breath taken away when the shocking or glorious happens—that would be the wind. Yes, the Isle of Lost Things would be in constant sway, swirling and mixing together so nothing could ever be found, unless you felt it, unless you knew exactly where to look.

That is how I have found things in the past. The dropped contact lens. The tiny peace-sign stud earring. The back to that earring. I lose it and suddenly turn my head and see exactly where it is.

It happens that most often what is lost is only half, and the other half is left *at a loss*. One sock, one earring, one shoe, one contact lens. I lost a shoe in the current of a strong river, and I gave the river the other shoe, let it set sail on the rushing water, so the halves could be a whole. What use is only half of a whole?

Does everything lost leave something behind, and can we only find peace in letting this last piece go, too? Letting the water rush it away? My mother said not to think about it, speak about it, when I lost the charm and the bracelet. It's bad, but it's gone. It's material; it can be replaced, but I'm still wearing its absence on my wrist. It is buried in the lost things, and I am dwelling in the remembering. (This is one reason I fear the isle.)

What do these things that I keep trying so hard not to lose and sometimes lose and become heartbroken and cling to the loss—what do these things represent? The small, slim gold cross on the small, thin gold chain—my Nana's necklace—may have, in an obvious way, stood for my Nana, whom I lost when I was young, long before I lost the necklace she gave me. (I use "lost" here inappropriately; the dead would not be part of the Isle of Lost Things. They have their own world. They are not lost, nor capable of being lost, so the euphemism serves only to placate the fear of the real word.

But isn't "lost" worse than "dead?" Almost? Dead is dead, but lost is somewhere. Somewhere buried, perhaps, but buried and waiting.)

The necklace I lost while in high school, on an overnight trip with a group that I never felt part of. Losing the cross necklace was simultaneous with my losing the belief, or the commitment to trying to believe in what the cross represented. But that's coincidence. For me, the necklace was my Nana, the memory of my Nana, and I cried when I told my mother. (It was not just the necklace I was afraid of losing.)

My mother's charm, a silver Sweet Sixteen my Nana had given her on her sixteenth birthday, I wanted. When my mother mentioned the idea to me she seemed almost embarrassed by the sentimentality of it, apparently momentarily forgetting the daughter she raised, a daughter who hoarded old jeans and ticket stubs and notebooks. I assured her that I was touched. I loved the symbolism of it, and the symbolism of the charm bracelet as a whole. I would wear my memories as little trinkets around my wrist, and I would not be able to forget them, to lose them. She bought me a silver charm bracelet of my own for my sixteenth birthday, and her charm was the first to be soldered on. Soldered, to prevent its being lost.

To this bracelet, I added my own charms over the years, as was intended. I traveled and graduated and learned new things and for each I bought a charm. A silver mask from my visit to Venice

during Carnivale. An Eiffel Tower for when I went at night and lay on the lawn in front of it with friends. The she-wolf mother of Rome, because I lived there and felt like I could be its daughter, too. The bracelet became more than just my mother, or so I thought, but losing it simply reminded me that, as she lost her mother, I will one day lose mine. This I cannot even type without crying; I cannot write words to make you understand my fear.

This is Fear, from which I suffer most.

(This is perhaps why I do not plunge in, here. I cannot lose what I do not have, so perhaps the thing is not to have it.)

It is shameful, this casual way we lose things like mothers, grandmothers. As a child, when I lost something, my mother would find it for me. Snakes would be biting me, she'd say, and I'd turn and there would be the thing I had lost. My mother laughed at this.

I lost a shoe to the river, and it felt right to sacrifice the other shoe (it strikes me now that I have done this more than once—lost shoes in rivers—though the other time it was a river of people, and I think both were snatched from me in the dancing, throbbing crowd, but they were flimsy shoes, and maybe I did not fight for the second one, after the first was gone?), but I have several earrings without mates that I am reluctant to discard. Do I think I will one day know where to find the missing piece, know suddenly where to look? Or am I simply obsessed with the memory?

One earring I wore when I was last with a guy to whom I had lost my heart. It was a matched set at the beginning of the night—we were out, celebrating a friend's birthday—and at the end I was wearing only one. I think I knew then I was done with this boy, but I was afraid of the idea of ending it, nonetheless. I was upset, disproportionately so, over the loss of the earring. They were pretty, each a golden circle with flowers and vines overrunning the edge, but I had others that were pretty, too. I keep the remaining earring (most recently, I put it in a desk drawer) because there is still something there I am afraid to lose.

(It is weird, too, that the expression is "lost my heart" when really it must have been given, taken. It would not be part of this isle either; there is a Land for Lost Hearts that is all its own.)

The Isle of Lost Things, if it existed, would mostly be jewelry, like my necklace, my bracelet, and it would be cell phones and cameras and suitcases and sweatshirts and material things that can be forgotten and replaced with the help of money, but it would be more, too, and this is why I would not want to go. It would be memories, dark or happy, deep or simple, true or not.

This is why I am afraid to go. And why I would never leave.

I've heard losing called an art and a childish thing, something we need to be good at and something we should never do, something we can control and something that cannot be controlled. It is hard to know what is true. (Or if anything is true?)

Would true mean something that could not be lost?)

My mother said that I must not dwell on the charm bracelet. Someone found it; someone probably needed the money they could get from it. They could melt it down, she said, use the silver for something new. She had lost things that were important to her, and it was rough, but it would be okay.

This is how I know the Isle of Lost Things could never really exist. Black holes don't open up under couch cushions or in dryers or even on moving trains, where I lost my charm bracelet. Everything lost was to some extent, left, and may still be where you left it. It may not be.

But the thing is, lost things are somewhere. They do not disappear. They simply move; they shift; they change what they are or whose they are. Or they stay and become buried in the dirt, an earring dropped in the grass could become an artifact dug up in hundreds of years by those people who make their lives out of finding other people's lost things and trying to figure out what they represent. (But they can never actually know, can they? What those things represent will have been long lost.)

Perhaps the charms and the chain of my bracelet will be melted down and the silver will be used to make something new: a tea cup engraved with an infant's initials, earrings that will adorn some young girl's ears when she finds someone waiting for her, when she suddenly figures out exactly where to look. She may know what it is to plunge in, enjoying the splash without fear of the cold, wet outcome. She may lose one earring and then toss the other in the trash. (The World of Things Voluntarily Discarded is a place I can't imagine.)

I do not know how, but I have to avoid stumbling onto the Isle of Lost Things. I must learn to let the other half of what is lost—the desire and the fear—race away with the river and leave me. I must learn to be left. I must learn to be here.

# D O C U M E N T

