

Accident vs. Design

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Colter Jacobsen - 11 years



Colter Jacobsen - Swabbies

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A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

Issue 7 Contributors

George David Clark

Joe Clarke

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Nicholas Leaskou

Eric Lehman

Jane Nakagawa

Jim Nelson

Greg Oaks

Brian Pera

Kian Razi

Jaime Robles

Lynne Shapiro

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Founders:

Rosita Nunes (Founding Editor), a graduate of the USF MFA in Writing program, has always had a hand in startups, transitions and turnarounds. She has held many titles over the years, and this one is among the best. Switchback is a project to be proud of, thanks to a continuing flow of talent coming together to bring it life with each issue.

Alex Davis (Co-Founding Editor) has an MFA in Writing from the University of San Francisco. His poems have been published in Five Fingers Review. He has a tattoo with hidden meaning.

Editors:

Kelly Krumrie (Managing Editor) is about to be finished with her MFA at USF, if she could wrap up this story collection business. Also, she is good at working retail.

Stephen Beachy (Content Advisor) is the author of two novels, *The Whistling Song* and *Distortion*, and most recently the novellas *Some Phantom* and *No Time Flat*, his evil twins. He has been teaching at USF since 1999. Check out his website: www.livingjelly.com.

Colin Bean (Tech Editor) is Yet Another Software Developer living in the Bay Area.

Associate Editors:

Kelci Baughman McDowell is a first year student in the USF MFA in Writing Program. She loves poetry more than her family and her boyfriend, but also has a familial fondness for plants and cats. She works in USF's Gleeson Library | Geschke Center as a Reference Assistant where she shows off her supernatural gift of fixing printer jams.

Jim Cole, a writer, is writing a novel and living in Alameda, CA, with his wife and two sons. He is in his second year in the MFA program at USF.

Carrie Hechtman is a poet in her second year in USF's MFA program.

Kathryn Hopping is a first year student in the USF MFA in Writing Program. She wrote her first story at the age of seven and discovered that telling lies on paper was socially acceptable. She is currently studying poetry—a great and, until now, unrequited love. Her desire is to find the narrow ledge between poetry and fiction and write both from there. Providing endless material for her writing are her husband, son, two daughters, two step-daughters, an Australian Shepherd, two cats, and several crazed neighbors. She lives and works as a substitute teacher in Alameda, California.

Nicole McFadden obtained a BA in English Literature from the University of Oregon where she served as a poetry editor for the Northwest Review. She is currently a first year student in USF's MFA Program where she is crafting a memoir called *In the Middle of the Street* and a collection of essays about her year in India, where she trained many of the people in a certain tech company to “neutralize” their charming accents. She also teaches English as a Second Language in San Francisco and has taught in Japan, Spain, and India.

Melanie Russo began writing at the age of fifteen after a freak table tennis accident convinced her (and her opponent) that she would never be good at sports. Ever. Many short stories, a few dirty limericks, two punk bands, and one English degree later, she is now studying long fiction at the University of San Francisco's MFA Program in Creative Writing, and is currently working on her very first novel about desert-dwelling, cross-dressing criminals. She kindly requests that if you see her on the street, not to ask her about it.

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11 Years

Colter Jacobsen



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Colter Jacobsen

It has taken Colter Jacobsen his entire life to create the following joke (which is meant to be on a popsicle-stick, where a child must lick his way to the punchline): how did the boxer get licked? the punchline.

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http://swback.com/issues/007/bios/Colter_Jacobsen.html[7/10/20, 8:54:13 PM]

Swabbies

Colter Jacobsen



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Abundant Life

Kian Razi

At sixteen I was diagnosed with a rare stomach ailment, a superfluous hole had developed. I was in the hospital for six days. I was given codeine tablets. I was allergic to codeine. I nearly died. I was given a morphine drip and lovingly gazed at my pierced left vein for two weeks. In and out I went. The surgeons repaired the hole in my stomach and I was finally allowed to return home. I walked with a hunched back for almost two months. At twenty the hole reappeared. Instead of going to the hospital I stole opiates from Sam's mother. Sam was my closest friend. "All Jewish moms are addicted to prescription drugs," he told me once. He was only half Jewish. He claimed the other half was Navajo, though his father looked white as paper to me. Sam's mother, Meredith "Mama Mia!" Johnson, had immense fake breasts and bad teeth. I snuck into her bedroom one afternoon and sniffed her large black bras and absconded into the bathroom for a quick jerk-off. Sam and I got high on Hydromorphone (Dilaudid) and Phenmetrazine. Sam was asthmatic so we tried getting high on Albuterol. It did nothing. Sam drowned in Lake Ballinger trying to reach the bottom. For me, intense Jungian psychotherapy became my substitute for opiates.

My father's youngest brother was kicked out of the family long before I was born. He was a devout alcoholic and beat his girlfriends religiously. Worst of all, he repeatedly disobeyed his mother. It was my father's job to exile him, and he did. My father lived with that guilt all his life and in the end, when he heard of his brother's sodden demise, the guilt exploded in him like a trumpeter's squall. This was the second time I saw my father weep. The first was the day my mother, a Turkish woman with sound Turkish values (Respect! Moderation!) finally freed herself from my father's distorted beliefs. My father sent money to Denmark where his brother's wife and children lived, and never again mentioned his brother. Old family photos went missing.

People called my dad Al, and thought it stood for Alberto. In fact it stood for Ali. My father let people think he was Italian, or Greek, or even Lebanese. My father was Iranian. He called himself Persian, but that's a euphemism; there's no Persia. He knew Iranian translated to barbarian in America. His English was horrendous. He could never enunciate the *th* sound; it came out as *t*, like in talk. We were at Dominos once and my father was attempting to order thin crust. "Tin crust—tin," he said to the pink-faced kid behind the counter. I wanted to hide. My father blamed everyone else for his shortcomings. "The Arabs raped our people," he said. "We're supposed to be Zoroastrians!" My father never spoke English to me. Only Farsi. Afghanistan is the only other country in the world where Farsi is spoken.

Drug lords repossessed the poppy fields in Afghanistan. "We have abandoned our purpose there," a professor of History at Yale wrote in an article. "We are washing our hands, having accomplished nothing. We've built a house with no roof or door and said it was ok to move in." After reading the article, really apropos of nothing, I thought about the hypocrisy that weaves its way through the self-proclaimed virtuosity of fanatical Islam, and I thought about the time—I'd heard the story often—when my grandmother purposely burnt my mother's dinner while my mother was pregnant with me. My grandmother was strict in her beliefs. My grandmother was wicked.

In Rome I found Bukowski. Bukowski taught me about Celine, Mahler, how to take a whiskey shit and respect it, the horses, what it looks like to see a pit bull's stomach gutted like a fish, what it means to fuck, to hate, but secretly love, secretly cry for justice, to work at the post office, to have a terrible complexion, to wonder why no one remembers Sherwood Anderson, and that love is a dog from hell. Bukowski said he hit some of his girlfriends, but if you ask me, he only wished he'd hit them.

I volunteered at Steven's Hospital when I was fourteen. I thought I was going to be a doctor. What a flawed sense a reality I had. I hated it. But I worked with Kristen. Kristen was eighteen, had blonde hair, large beautiful breasts (my father once told me that all you needed was a handful; he was drunk), and an ass that brought a tear to your eye. I was too young at the time to know what it meant to cry over something like that. I attempted nothing with Kristen but in countless nights of desperate imagination. I learned to hate doctors for their bravado. Nurses were short or butch, or both. A simple woman in her mid-sixties managed the front desk where Kristen and I worked. She refused to be left alone. "Do you know what Murphy's Law is?" the old lady said. "It's like irony. When you least expect something to happen, it happens." What she meant was, if we'd left her alone a thousand anxious visitors would miraculously appear and she'd

drown in concern. Kristen and I stayed with her most of the time; we answered phones and made buttons. Kristen smelled like pineapple everyday.

At Il Duomo (The Cathedral) in Florence, I was sitting and writing in my journal. I'd had enough of Jesus by then; churches became resting places, places to pass the time between bars and museums. As I wrote an old man came and sat beside me. He said hello and asked where I was from. My broken Italian somehow led him to think I was a Christian missionary from Santa Barbara. It was the best I could do. He asked if I had a girlfriend. I told him that I used to. It's what I meant to say. He asked if I liked boys. I said no. He placed his hand on my knee and I did nothing. Not for a few seconds anyway. Then I slowly moved my knee away from him and with a look made it clear that I was not going to be sucking his dick. This was the house of God.

I was born in Tehran on June 2, 1978. This was right before the revolution, right before Carter's hostage crisis. I was a child of The Shah. I was born in my grandmother's house. My father held me under the throat of a half decapitated sheep and washed me in its blood. Two hundred people came and watched and chanted "Allah O-Akhbar!" (God is great!). The day after, they did this for another child in the neighborhood. They did this for all newborns. Before my grandmother died, every year on my birthday, she would burn some esoteric spice called esfhand and fill the house with smoke. With the black, pasty residue she'd draw an X on my forehead. This was in observance of my equal divinity in the world, because it was well understood that we were all equally divine.

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Kian Razi

Born: Tehran, Iran, June 2, 1978, to rave reviews. Lived all over. Found the soggy Northwest to my liking. Stayed a while. Took break-dancing classes at an early age. Starred in the holiday classic Breakin' 2, Electric Boogaloo. Loved and lost. Joined a clandestine, finger-lickin' good organization known as "KFC" and infiltrated a subculture of mall-people. Realized the world was seriously fucked, so to feel better I got a new hairdo.

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reheating fish

Joe Clarke

twenty seconds is not
enough time to think
about the novel I'm writing
or the poem I have to write not
enough time to call my
mom clip my fingernails wash
the cereal bowl I used
this morning just seven
seconds now wait six
almost down to five
just not enough time for
anything, really, three
just barely enough to
think of things I'll do one
day when I have some time

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Joe Clarke

Joseph Clarke is in his second year at the MFA in Writing Program at USF. He grew up in Manhattan Beach, CA, and attended UCLA, where he earned a BA in Philosophy. He enjoys surfing, golfing, and reading, and he always figured that when he finally had the chance to write an autobio sketch he would have something more interesting to say.

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(untitled)

Jaime Robles

Can a stitch in time sew up
a tear in space, pulling
shut four dimensions into three?
Or two? Thread's
slim line following transparent needle
then curving in tight around the edges—
seaming nothingness
into space colorless and iridescent as silk.
A stab of pain catches the breath:
thumb pricked, a globe
of red wobbly at the tip.

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Jaime Robles

Jaime Robles writes text for both musical and visual settings. She often collaborates with composer Peter Josheff, and a scene from their work-in-progress opera *Inferno* was produced by StageMedia in San Francisco in June 2007. Their one-act opera *Diary* was produced in 2004 by the San Francisco opera theater Fresh Voices. She has published work in *Conjunctions*, *First Intensity*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Luna*, *New American Writing*, *Transfer*, and *Volt*, among others. Formerly the literary acquisitions editor for *The Lapis Press*, she is currently the editor and publisher of *Five Fingers Review*.

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A Lifted Idea

Jim Nelson

10 August

An idea for a story came to him one night in bed. He found his feet and found the light switch and a pen. Then it was gone. His idea had disappeared. It was a substantial idea, not merely a good opening or a sweet line of dialogue. It arced from start to finish. It had weight and girth. Then it grew legs and walked off, and all that remained were clumps and shards of the idea, the flavor of cookie batter on a mixing spoon but no cookies to be found.

*

26 August

Two weeks later, he spent a Saturday afternoon walking the library's stacks of philosophy books. His eyes darted at names—Wittgenstein, Carnap—until he found one to unshelve and peruse. The flood of rhetoric and abstractions washed over the aches of daily life, like drinking to forget. He'd written less than a page since the night he'd lost his idea. Writing had come to terrify him now. Stories and novels reminded him of his deficiency. High academia was his bottle to draw from.

He found a book by Czlezov, *On Past and Experimental Selves*. It argued for reentering one's past mind and reliving experiences and states of consciousness. Czlezov proposed a method as straightforward as baking cookies.

Shards of the lost story idea lay scattered in his mind, enough pieces for the edges of the jigsaw puzzle but nothing for the center. He knew the story regarded memory and rediscovery. It revisited a crucial moment in the main character's past life. That moment had slipped away. The loss of this inspiration caused a nostalgia in him, a tuning fork rung once and the harmonic overtone refusing to decay.

He read and reread Czlezov's recipe until it was warmly familiar. He closed his eyes, let his shoulders and arms go limp, and breathed purposefully. He shut out the ambient noise in the library, the crinkling of folding newspaper and the mouse squeaks of a book cart pushed past. His consciousness did loosen. It slithered down the library staircase and to the nighttime in his apartment, and then it coiled around his bed from two weeks earlier.

*

10 August

Light as a draft slipping under a window cracked open, the foreign presence of his future consciousness tingles his past body and awakens him. His feet slap hardwood and his hand paws the light switch. The lamp blinds him and the stun shakes the idea loose. Soon it'll slip free from the bank and dissolve into the stream. But his future self has it now and he wrests it away. His future self gathers all of it up, even the shards and clumps left hanging on the bank. He is greedy. He leaves nothing behind for his past self. He tucks the idea under his armpit, puts a finger over his lips, and sneaks off with the inspiration he'll use to write the story he'd all but forgotten.

*

10 August

An idea for a story came to him one night in bed. He found his feet and found the light switch and a pen. Then it was gone. His idea had disappeared. It grew legs and walked off without the courtesy to leave behind a shard or a clump as a memento. He chalked it up as a dream. It was the fantasy of having worthy language and facing the reality of lacking meaning and substance. It was eating your mother's Toll House cookie batter when you were six and not remembering the taste or even the feel of it on your tongue.

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Jim Nelson

Jim Nelson's work has been published in *Instant City*, *SmokeLong*, *Watchword*, *Transfer*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Judas*, *Suck*, and *FEED*. Awards include first prize in the Clark College Fiction Contest and a Webby nomination for his now-abandoned webzine Ad Nauseam. Today he lives in San Francisco's Tenderloin. He has yet to be mugged. His home on the web is [barbecuingpeople.com](#).

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Bryce Canyon and the Nature of the Universe

Eric Lehman

Many billions of lifetimes ago, sedimentation begins to take place here. For sixty million years a great seaway sloshes northwestward into this region, depositing sediments of varying thickness and composition. The water invades, retreats, and repeats the process. Finally retreating to the southeast, the sea leaves gray brown sediments thousands of feet thick. Rivers trickle out of the highlands. They deposit iron-rich, limy sediments into a freshwater lake system. These will someday give the Pink Cliffs their brilliant and unusual colors.

A desert creeps onto this piece of the earth's crust, which is a thousand miles south of where it rests on the mantle during human occupation. Sand dunes shift with a million years of windy climatic changes. As a granule of sand crests a dune, it tumbles down the backside, to rest there with its brethren, collecting, joining, lithifying into overlapping layers of the eponymous sandstone.

Uplift! The earth pulls apart, moving and tilting great blocks along north-south trending fault lines. Layers, once connected, displace vertically by several thousand feet. Older layers lay side by side with younger ones. Streams begin to remove sediments deposited by their bubbling ancestors. Arroyos widen, exposing rock layers that breathe the surface air after millions of years. The water erodes this rock mechanically and chemically. Scouring, grading, and gullying occur when fast moving water scrapes its silt, gravel, and rock debris against firmer bedrock. Steep slopes increase water speed and energy, which is influenced by faults and joints from ancient compressional forces. Slow moving water enters minute rock pores and dissolves the cements that hold the rock together, leaving loose grains to wash away.

At what is today Bryce Canyon, softer Cretaceous rocks were loosened and carried away from the upthrown block by the Paria River. The resulting valley is carved out of rocks that lie deep beneath the Paunsaugunt Plateau, whose edge is now exposed to erosion. As gullies widen to become canyons, fins of rock are exposed to further erosion along vertical cracks. Layers peel off, leaving vertical columns, which are the wonders that humans snap photos of by the millions. My brother is one of these humans, and who can blame him? The formation looks like some red desert god-creature had chewed the side of the mesa for a while and then let the toothy edge melt in the Mesozoic sun. As we stop for these photographic moments, the rental car makes its slow, methodical way down the length of Bryce, really a sequence of amphitheaters and not a canyon at all.

We reach Rainbow Point and walk down an orange trail, skirting snowdrifts and muddying our feet. After taking a short-cut through a stand of conifers we reach the edge of a long cliff. Off to the right is the official "point," but we head the other direction. Bristlecone pines perch on the edge, loving the cold wind. The strange trees are twisted and ancient. A few lay on their sides, knocked over by erosion and some terrible storm. I touch the cracking bark reverently. Compared to the age of this rock, these trees are as green as I am. And yet here they stand, nearly two thousand years old, watching the earth spin around the sun like a human watches the spinning of a car tire.

The landscape in the distance looks ordinary, mortal. Far off to the southeast, we can make out Navajo Mountain. We head back to the car, ready for a longer hike. After zipping back along the ridge, stopping at the Lodge to fill our water bottles, and resting in the cool lobby, we head down into the valley. Scratched ruby walls and pinnacles rise around us. The occasional pine tree makes a home in the rock. Natural arches and spiraling fingers give the place a fragmented geometry. At the bottom, the surface levels out, tufts of grass and spiny plants joining the pines.

A chipmunk follows us, begging for our granola bars. I watch him scuttle alongside as we wander down the trail. In a few years he will be dead. In several more, perhaps I will be. A nanosecond compared to the time scale working all around me. Nevertheless, someday even this seemingly unyielding stone will dissolve. My whole life I've come to places like this and wondered about the nature of the universe. Often, I liked to believe that existence was essentially bittersweet, that linear time and freedom of choice led to the elimination of alternatives, and therefore the wonderful essence of things as they are was tainted by the things that are not. Today, I realize that this was egotism, that only human perception gives this illusion. The universe has no nature, no structure as we understand it. Meaningful or meaningless? Truth or lies? Accident or design? These are concepts that just don't apply. Humans created them, carved them the way time carved this valley. All thoughts, all ideas, all human experiences simply do not register outside of themselves. As soon as we apply them universally, they fall apart. This is not nihilism. There is no such thing. At least, as far as these stone pillars are concerned.

Some stray traveler comes along the path and calls these stony wonders "hoodoos." A small name. Nevertheless, the hoodoos change color as the soft sun dips low. Shadows shoot across the valley, creating pockets of surprising darkness. Bizarre formations still tower above us in orange majesty. The trail bleeds gravel and hot dust, while gradations of rock

mark our upward journey. Hard to believe that snow waits again at the top. My brother and I stop for a moment, feeling the gritty sandstone with our hands. I measure the distance between us and Sunset Point. Not that far to go. So, we take a moment to absorb the surroundings, a moment to be glad to be simply alive, functioning in the present tense. Someday we'll reach the waiting plateau, but not here, not on this page.

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Eric Lehman

Eric D. Lehman is a professor at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut and the editor of *Connecticut Literary Collective* and *Groundswell*. His creative work includes fiction, poetry, travel stories, and critical essays and has been featured in various journals, such as *Hackwriters*, *Umbrella*, *Venture Magazine*, *Microhorror*, *SNReview*, *Empty Mirror Books*, *Nexus*, and *Identity Theory*.

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Falling debris

Jaime Robles

His present is the same color as his past—gray; rain filled, memory’s wilderness a seepage. Roses above and below—soaked, shattered, but more brightly colored. He falls through the rose window and into another time he believes is in the past but persists always in the moment: mercury from a broken thermometer skitters in planetary pellets. It’s a long way down, the past transmutes to ocher. He is tweening from point A to point B: only the ground grows closer in those few seconds, stretched out, elastic. The falling debris reflected in his eyes flutters like an intimate note torn in pieces and dropped out the window. When he wakes color will have returned to the world, but his memory will liquefy to mizzle. Just walk into a dark room with a candle to see what I mean.

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Trees Marching Out of the Ocean

George David Clark

1.

The dead trees are marching out of the ocean,
trailing their roots through the sand,
dredging long crooked tracks up the beach.
Pecans and pin oaks and cypress,
their dripping cerements of Spanish moss.
One navigates the boardwalk
bowing against the handrails like a drunkard.
Others wade through the marsh awash in fog,
through the tall wild grasses, cattails, and sea spray.
And there is not anything now
that we can do to stop them advancing
on this slumberous three-storey house
not two hundred yards from the sea.
I have numbered the gray hours
between myself and the lights
coming on later tonight across the bay
(to the west: lights on Wilmington Island;
northeast: Hilton Head; and between them:
the undersides of the clouds, lit for a moment
as they skirt the Thunderhead Marina).
They are seven windy hours too many.

2.

Grandfather, off chemo for the last time,
his cancer now of the everything, is living
as I am with my aunt in this, her enormous house.
For exercise one or the both of us take him out
twice a day to eat. First, always at six-thirty,
to The Sunrise where the waitress, whose pretty
name is Julie, asks if he wants his regular.
My grandfather is a man with a regular
at a little breakfast-only joint within earshot
of the waves coming in and the high yawning
of seagulls: two eggs and grits, wheat toast,
strawberry jelly. He should not have so much
salt, but the grits need it. We have lunch
at one of the many seafood restaurants
where he orders lobster, takes a few good bites
before he's done, and supper we eat at the house
in front of the evening news. Nine o'clock he says,
Ok, and I help him up from his corduroy recliner.
Such ease in his shoulders, such ease
in his back. As he rests on the side of the new
hospital-style bed, his house shoes slide off.

3.

Before we leave in the mornings for breakfast
we drink a cup of coffee and I empty

a handful of peanuts onto the deck table
for a few local jays and cardinals, some pecans
for the squirrels. We watch the cardinal
through the sliding glass door, filling his beak
with as many peanuts as he can carry.
The space for the last nut always too small,
he must discard and discard until he finds one
broken, just the right size. We were up early today,
or the birds late. The beach lay nestled in fog.
Grandfather said something I couldn't quite hear
(phlegm in his throat, television on),
but it sounded like, *The trees are marching
out of the ocean*. I asked him, *What?*,
but either he didn't hear me or there was no, *what*.
He took another black sip of coffee.
As I rose to begin moving us to the car, he pointed.
Yes, he said, and when I looked one of the jays,
that dash of color, was there. We watched it
for a moment, then we turned and let it go.

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George David Clark

George David Clark is a Hoyns Fellow in the MFA program at the University of Virginia where he directs an undergraduate poetry workshop. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *West Branch*, *Tar River Poetry*, *North American Review*, *Lake Effect*, and elsewhere. On the web his work can also be found at *Boxcar Poetry Review* (www.boxcarpoetry.com/004/clark_george_david_001.html and www.boxcarpoetry.com/005/clark_george_david_002.html).

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Jane Nakagawa

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Jane Nakagawa

SKIN MUSEUM (2006) and AQUILINE (007) are Jane Joritz-Nakagawa's books of poetry, both published in Japan. Her third book, EXHIBIT C, is forthcoming in 2008. Other poems have been in *New American Writing*, *580 Split*, *Bateau*, *Tinfish*, and dozens of other journals. Email is welcome at janenakagawa at yahoo dot com.

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Issue 7: Accident vs. Design

A Publication of the **USF MFA in Writing Program**

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Cutting Room Floor

Brian Pera

Stuffy, remote, and secluded, an attic is the household's inner psyche. If our lives are movies we screen for ourselves and each other, our attics are often the cutting room floor. We put things there when we run out of room for them, which is sometimes another way of saying: in the context of the story we're telling, they no longer fit in. Through careful editing, we whittle it all into a narrative. "In three weeks, I was a good waitress," Mildred Pierce tells her audience, "in six weeks, I felt as though I'd worked in a restaurant all my life, and in three months, I was one of the best waitresses in the place." Exposition means elision, compression, privileging one piece of information over others. One key scene, one little piece of the picture, properly placed, can alter the entire trajectory of a plot. Too much information, or the wrong kind, can derail an intended impression. The attic serves as damage control and image management. Editing has to do not only with pacing, but with consistency, coherence, and believability. Who gets final cut is often an issue. The films of Orson Welles, considered uncommercial, were infamously tampered with by the money men, often bastardizing the director's original intentions. *The Lady From Shanghai*, initially 155 minutes, was butchered down by Columbia Pictures to 88. RKO studios cut *The Magnificent Ambersons* in half. Mildred Pierce did things in James M. Cain's novel which ultimately had no place on the screen. The movie was a star vehicle, driven by market imperatives. In the course of adaptation, words were put into Mildred's mouth—by Joan Crawford, her director, her editor, and her screenwriter—in ways which steered novel and character in slightly different directions. Joan as Mildred was an interpretation, informed by Joan's own feelings about motherhood and her adopted daughter, Christina, her various very public divorces, and her career.

Like Joan, we're all actors, interpreting our roles, our performances, the past, and each other. Things happened one way, as far as we're concerned—or should have—or might have. If our lives are movies, and the attic is the cutting room floor, the house is a stage or a screen for our highly biased dramas. We tell the story through well-rehearsed expressions and gestures, through acceptable dinner conversation, through the clothes we wear and the products we buy and the meticulously selective chronologies of our family albums. Often, in noir, the witness who didn't testify at the scene of the crime turns up a little later—and knows who was at the wheel. He turns up in the pristine family den, a dark spot in the bright, shiny kitchen, an unexpected guest at the dining room table, disrupting our dinner theater. Noir and pulp are the American home turned inside out and upside down: the attic as dirty laundry, spilled, in one big amorphous mess, across the living room floor.

In the story of my family, men can be counted on not to be counted on, and women can be counted on to keep learning the hard way. One of my grandfathers was so regularly unfaithful, such an unreliable narrator, that nothing he said could be taken at face value. The other disappeared into alcoholism. Both left the little details to their wives. Each of my grandmothers worked tirelessly for her house, raising a family as if by herself, working as hard as or harder than her husband, with much less credit and much more grief than gratitude. Each struggled with an image she'd created to protect herself in various ways, a tough, self-sufficient facade, refusing to discuss the hurt her husband had caused her. As a child, I rarely ever saw my mother's father, an amateur photographer with professional aspirations. Given his walking papers by my grandmother, he kept walking. He'd moved clear out of the way by the time I was born, embarrassed by a small town reputation no amount of sweet talking or posturing could live down, defeated, eventually, by the discrepancies between his private and public images. I knew him through the vocabulary of curse words reserved for his name.

Despite the hostility he inspired, he wasn't the first man to leave my grandmother, I later discovered. Her own father, along with his pregnant, underage mistress, died in the family car, from exhaust fumes, during an illicit parking lot rendezvous. They'd grabbed a quick lunch—though not quickly enough; when their bodies were discovered, the better part of a sandwich was lodged in the young girl's throat. My grandmother thought the world of her father, regardless, but she didn't think much of her husband, or so she wanted you to believe, as if she'd married him by accident, without knowing what she was doing, as if she wasn't herself at the time. She brought him up only to dismiss him in some more elaborately malicious way. Though they'd raised three daughters together, the house my grandparents once shared gave

little if any indication they'd both resided there. Until a certain age, I never saw a picture of "him" amongst my grandmother's possessions. I never saw any proof they'd lived under the same roof—that "him" had actually existed—until I snuck into the attic.

The big surprise was how much my grandmother had saved and stockpiled upstairs. In retrospect, it made sense, for a woman whose expression had never given anything away. Anything associated with happy memories, with incidents she openly acknowledged and still often candidly talked about, had been packed into cardboard boxes, some of which were labeled and stacked immediately inside the door, or somewhere close by. The most accessible area of the attic reflected the picture of things I'd been given, corroborating my grandmother's version of events. Dresses from her youth, a program from Elvis Presley's Hawaiian concert, real estate brochures, Norman Rockwell collector plates, flatware, foot wear, and a lamp made out of a blowfish. All of these items illustrated anecdotes I'd heard at various times, so often I felt I might have been there, but they were only a fraction of the attic's contents. Beyond them, where the ceiling sloped down with the roof, was another story.

Buried under a large, dust-covered air duct, I found several suitcases, each packed full of slides, photographs, and personal mementos. For the most part, they showed locations and occasions I'd seen or heard about throughout my childhood. The only real difference was my grandfather's presence in them. Together, they filled holes in the story I'd been told about my mother's upbringing. They complicated, to the point of utter bewilderment, the impressions I'd been given by my grandmother, superimposing conflicting figures into the frame. Most of the photos had been taken by my grandfather himself, reinforcing all the more viscerally the sense that they represented, in some significant way, his side of things. By collecting, and withholding them, my grandmother sought the last word.

The attic, like the serpentine convolutions of pulp and film noir, is typically a big mess. Studio boss Harry Cohn, story has it, offered a reward to anyone who could explain the plot of *The Lady From Shanghai* to him. Pulp piled irony upon irony, depredation upon depredation, favoring characterization over narrative cohesion. We keep saying we intend to straighten it all up—the mess up there, in the attic—we'll get to it, we say—but we rarely do. No single sequence in noir expresses this "great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality" more memorably than the final showdown in the Magic Maze of Mirrors, the climactic scene in *The Lady From Shanghai*, wherein Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth, bumping up against themselves and each other, enact on celluloid a kinetic, self-delusional estrangement reflective of their personal life at the time. The couple had split, the marriage old news, by the time the movie came out.

Noir tells its stories in flashback, narrated by detectives—official, inadvertent, and amateur—men or women misled by false testimony. Hopelessly turned around in a labyrinth of misinformation, heading down one dead end after another, the noir narrator tries to get to the bottom of an apparently bottomless enigma. The so-called clues, up close, are often more like question marks. Mildred Pierce's narration, a series of urgent flashbacks designed to protect her daughter Veda, leads us to believe that Mildred herself is her husband's murderer—and in a sense she is. The standard reading of Mildred Pierce, novel and film, takes it as a punishment of the increasingly independent modern woman. Leaving the home front, she steps into the minefield of emancipation, triggering the destruction of everyone around her.

Clearly, the movie doesn't think too highly of women, but it doesn't think too much of men, either. Men, women, mothers and daughters, friends, lovers, and enemies: Mildred Pierce concerns itself with the tragic folly of interpersonal communication in general, the patterns our pasts lock us into, the vast distance between us and the people with whom we're closest, and the inevitable likelihood of misleading and misreading ourselves and each other. "Only one thing worried me," says Mildred, in Crawford's inimitable voice-over. "That Veda would find out I was a waitress." And yet, like Harry Cohn, she just doesn't get it. Veda's expectations of her mother were instilled by Mildred herself. "You think just because you made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady," Veda tells her mother, after discovering her secret, "but you can't, because you'll never be anything but a common frump whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing." Her statement, which registers as an indictment, signals one of pulp's most central dilemmas: the ultimate irreducibility of who you are. Despite the square-shouldered minks, which augment her true shape, despite changes of scenery and any manner of elaborately painted mask, Mildred can only hide who she really is for so long. Sooner or later, someone's bound to brave the ladder and venture up into the attic. Sooner or later, someone's bound to ferret out the truth.

You can't escape your past, noir says repeatedly. My grandfather's mother left him with her parents, who referred to him as "The Bastard." My grandfather was socially inept, I'm told, and photography served many purposes for him, allowing him a way to engage with other people, with women especially, who might have reminded him of his mother. Like my grandmother, he never really knew his father. He'd met him only once, without realizing it, when he was a child. My grandfather and my grandmother both had a lot of baggage, and brought it into their relationship. After he married my grandmother, the couple got into real estate. They moved to the middle of nowhere and built a town, a reputation, and a name for themselves from scratch, but once a bastard, always a bastard.

My grandfather wasted their hard-earned money—on other women, a plane, nice cars—living beyond their means. He'd come from nothing and had nothing to show for it. To some extent, he'd been an outsider in his grandparents' home, and must have left feeling he had no place, no right, to take anything with him. Years later, when my grandmother finally sent him packing, he left with only the shirt on his back. He'd made a laughing stock of his wife. His image was bad for hers. Noir characters are forever crossing social boundaries, they might be upwardly mobile, but they always get yanked back, abruptly, to where they started out, with a lot more momentum and a much nastier landing. The characters of pulp and noir are doomed but dream of happy endings. As a teenager, my grandmother shamed her mother by taking up with the brother of her dead father's mistress. Like my grandfather, she seemed to look for her father and mother in other people, never quite sure what exactly it was she was looking for. My grandmother was unusually determined for a woman her age. She went after what she wanted, and she couldn't be talked to.

Among the suitcases in my grandmother's attic were various black and white glamour shots. Taken by my grandfather, the photos revealed a side of my grandmother I'd never seen or imagined before. Imitating the Hollywood portraiture he admired, my grandfather had portrayed his young wife as various starlets of the day, posing her in pearls and furs and various hairstyles under highly keyed lighting. The expression on my grandmother's face in this handful of photos is relaxed enough to indicate she was game, an enthusiastic if unpracticed participant in her own recreation, whether to keep her husband's interest piqued or to entertain and enact an image of herself otherwise inaccessible and unacceptable. After finding the photos, I could never look at my grandmother again without seeing some undiscovered star, a loose amalgamation of Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, and Rita Hayworth. I couldn't watch noir without seeing her in it.

My first exposure to pulp came from my grandmother's own neglected library in the back room, a more motley assortment of books than the library in her den, which contained encyclopedias, historical biographies, and atlases, mostly hard bound. For me, this other library was closely associated, if not inseparable, from the attic. Lining the bookshelves were paperbacks, Penguins, Pockets, Anchors and Ballantines, "complete and unabridged," and their trashier kissing cousins, celebrity biographies from the thirties through the fifties, airport reading, and gothic romance novels, all of which interested me equally. Perhaps because I'd found them together, I made no moral distinctions between one and another. All seemed forgotten or forbidden to me, as if knowledge in general were a suspect pursuit. I knew enough not to be caught reading these books, because I wasn't supposed to be "up there," but I wondered why they were left virtually out in the open, too, and wished I could ask questions about them. Once my grandmother relegated something to the back room or the attic, it seemed, she could never bring herself to look at it again, not even to get rid of it.

Inevitably, I viewed her life and secrets through the prism of the various pulp plots and characters on her shelves. Her story seemed just as melodramatic to me as any of their tortured peregrinations, defined by tragic incident, missed opportunities, dashed hopes and monumental betrayals, an "almost overwhelming feeling of impending doom." "She fell for the wrong man." "He liked fast cars and beautiful women." I merged the stories together, mixing and matching through fantasy and imaginative role-play, concerning myself more with tone than plausibility. I don't think I ever really understood my grandmother, but I wanted to. I identified with her more than I did with my grandfather, putting me that much more at risk of repeating his mistakes, if only because I couldn't see myself in them. I think I was trying to find a way to connect the grandmother I knew, or thought I knew, with the person she'd hidden from me, to understand her through movies and books, the things available to me, and I adapted and interpreted in various serviceable ways the language and logic of these things to explain the plot points of her past. My grandmother was the woman in the photos I'd

seen, a femme fatale, the girl from Bells, Tennessee, the tough, bitter broad who lived downstairs, or some combination of these—or no one, at least in the sense I imagined. Most of the more pressing questions are so unanswerable in the end. Why does Veda—why did my grandmother—betray her past by taking up with a man responsible for compromising her mother's self-image? I collected my grandmother's emotional detritus, in secret, trying to figure it all out. I got that urge, to collect and invest, from her.

I wasn't there the day my grandmother died, but I think I know the story. The night before, she'd insisted my mother go home and get some rest, sleep in late, she'd be okay, she said, but the next morning, my mother had a funny feeling. She went to my grandmother's a little later than usual, after a phone call she'd made to the house went unanswered. Walking in, she heard her name called out: "Patricia," after Patrick, the boy my grandmother met before my grandfather, and almost married. My mother found my grandmother in the bathroom, where she'd probably been applying her make-up, slumped against a wall. She was still in her robe and appeared to have fallen off her chair. "I need to lay down," she told my mother, and my mother tried to lift her, but my grandmother's body was too limp to maneuver. My mother called the paramedics. When she returned, my grandmother was vomiting. It looked like she wasn't breathing, but her heart was still beating. My mother performed mouth to mouth until the ambulance arrived, though my grandmother wasn't responding; she'd slipped into a coma. A woman who insisted on applying lipstick at the very least before allowing anyone to take her photo, she would have hated being seen by anyone without her face on.

I myself wasn't prepared for the shock of her appearance, later that day, when I saw her in the hospital. Hooked up to life support, her body shaking arrhythmically from the kicks of the life support machine, she was totally unrecognizable, frail and slightly lopsided. It was impossible to see her any other way. I couldn't reconcile the figure on the bed with the woman in my grandfather's photos, with the woman I'd made her in my mind. Her eyes had milked over and rolled back into her head. You couldn't tell what she was thinking, if she was thinking at all. The next few days were agonizing, seeing her like that, trying to decide what to do—what she'd want us to do. My grandmother collected stamps, postcards, rocks and crystals, antiques, and various other conversation pieces. Any or all of those things might have said a lot about her, but they didn't tell us whether to pull the plug or not. We sat in the waiting room, feeling helpless. We started telling our stories about her, and it struck me, after hearing my family's feelings about her, that we'd all known very different people in her. Though I'd long since recognized the significant incongruities between the person my grandmother had revealed to me and the woman I saw in my grandfather's photos, I'd bridged those gaps, mentally and emotionally, to such an extent that they felt seamless to me. It had never really occurred to me, the fact there might be even more to her. "Gilda didn't do any of those things you've been losing sleep over," a cop tells Johnny in *Gilda*, just when Johnny's most confident he has Gilda all figured out. "Not any of them. It was just an act. Every bit of it. And I'll give you credit. You were a great audience." Some of the lines in that movie could have been lifted directly from my grandmother's life. Then again, maybe she'd seen the movie herself, and certain parts stayed with her.

There was a time in my twenties when no one in my family really knew where I was or what I was doing. I didn't want them to know. I'd never been good about birthdays. I'd never remembered Easter, Valentine's Day, and only belatedly presented Christmas gifts, along with a lot of excuses. By then, I was wrapped up in my life and didn't really think of anyone else too much. My own problems, my own childhood dramas, were too pressing. They pressed right up against me, blocking out everyone and everything else. When, several years later, I re-appeared, I thought I was a changed person. I wanted to believe I could be. I wanted to prove to my grandmother, those last years of her life, that not all men were like my grandfather—that I wasn't, at least—and I wrote her letters full of praise, extolling her virtues, her importance to me. I knew who she really was, I told her. She and I were on the same page. I still had trouble remembering holidays, but she and I understood each other now, I told myself. I think my grandmother knew how full of shit I was. I think she was more than a little familiar with sweet-talking and men who have a way with women. I think she saw my grandfather in me, and herself, the two of them combined. Maybe she accepted that, or maybe I just like to think so.

My grandfather reappeared himself, soon after I did. He moved back into town. My grandmother was pretty frail by then, had trouble eating, keeping hydrated, getting around, and my grandfather called her a few times, offering to help in whatever way he could, he wanted to make up for the past, but she refused. I imagine it kicked up a lot of dust for her. Sensing her resentment, I took what I imagined was her side. He was wrong and she was right. We didn't want him around. He'd never set foot in her house again, after they parted ways, but he showed up at the hospital during her coma, and his daughters, hoping for closure, ushered him into her room. I despised him for even thinking he could come, for

going against her wishes, for kicking her when she was down, which is how I viewed his visit. At the time, I knew she wouldn't want him to see her that way, but now I'm not so sure she wouldn't have wanted to see him at all. Watching Gilda, it dawned on me that the word hate, for my grandmother, at least in reference to my grandfather, might mean the opposite, like it had for Hayworth and Ford, or at the very least something much too complicated to apprehend. "With these mirrors, it's hard to tell," says Bannister, Rita Hayworth's double-crossed husband in *The Lady From Shanghai*, pointing his gun at his better half. As the shooting begins in the Magic Maze of Mirrors, one shattered image instantaneously replaced by another, husband and wife merge and divide, combine and recombine. "You are aiming at me, aren't you?" Bannister sneers tentatively. "I'm aiming at you, lover. Of course, killing you is killing myself. It's the same thing."

A year later, my grandmother's estate was boxed up and sold off at auction. Nice victorian pump organ, Queen Anne game table, Tiffany style slag glass lamp, Norman Rockwell collector plates, flatware set, lots of neat old cameras, 10 millimeter black sea pearl necklace in gold with diamonds, Masonic ring with 1/3 carat 30 pt diamond in 14 kt gold, plus tons of miscellaneous items not listed. The attic and storage shed are full of untold treasures! Something for everyone. Call 870-266-SOLD. I was out of town at the time, partly because I couldn't stand the thought of my grandmother's possessions being divided and dispersed, but also because, like my grandfather, I'd always dealt with pain by finding a watertight excuse for leaving. I have no idea what happened to all those paperbacks, or anything else, though I'm told several people who'd known my grandmother bid on some of her possessions, just to have a piece of her, something to remember her by. I asked for a Polaroid Land camera out of my grandmother's bedroom closet, probably because it fused memories of my grandparents into one object, representing a mutual hobby they both enjoyed. My grandmother's house was put up for sale soon after the auction. The new owners say they can feel her there, even though they've never met her. They know what she looked like, but not who she was, and they ask a lot of questions. This couple wasn't messing around. They didn't waste much time. They finished the back room right off the bat, making it into a family coffee bar like something out of an Italian Villa. They like "the Mediterranean Style," apparently, which is something I'm guessing they made up. They've never been to Europe, but they've seen pictures. They have a pretty good idea what it looks like, they think.

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Issue 7: Accident vs. Design

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The Tightrope Walker

Lynne Shapiro

My Surrealist underpinnings are with me always. Buried beneath a responsible looking exterior and piles of laundry, is a one time surrealist adventurer who believes in accident, as a way of infusing life—and art—with a requisite wildness. Louis Aragon's prologue to *Paris Peasant* still has the power to move me and remind me of the priorities of my youth. At the ripe old age of twenty-six, Aragon announced, "I no longer wish to refrain from the errors of my fingers, the errors of my eyes. I know now that these errors are not just booby traps but curious paths leading towards a destination that they alone can reveal." At twice his age, I'm less a surrealist of the streets these days but my connection to Surrealist philosophy is evident, especially in my writing. I court chance and coincidence, and invite "that which I cannot control" to sit at my table and be my muse.

Aragon continues in the prologue to ponder how long he can retain his youthful sense of the marvelous, since he's witnessed it "fade away in every man who advances into his own life as though along an always smoother road...who rids himself progressively of the taste and texture of the unwonted." I've taken that smoother road—for all the obvious reasons—but I haven't entirely shut the door to the "unwonted"; rather, it serves my writing well, ensures that the unexpected, pure majesty of the everyday does not disappear from my work. I also have more fun as a writer.

Accident alone simply cannot lead to good writing; a balancing act is required. That's where the tightrope walker comes in, the quintessential image of the surrealist and, as I see it, the writer I strive to be. To maintain balance, the tightrope walker inhabits the space "between" opposites. The Surrealists wanted to walk the line between childhood and adulthood, for example, striving to take the best part of childhood (the magic, faith, and fearlessness) and the best part of adulthood (the freedom to fall in love, stay up late, make choices). Too much child or too much adult, life *and* art will suffer. Lean too far into the chaos, for example, and all order is lost. The surrealist/writer descends into madness or paranoia, thinking there is a greater design than there is; that chance has happened for a reason.

The ultimate, dynamic goal is reconciliation of opposites. In writing *Nadja* (which is not a novel, though you'll find it in the fiction section of your bookstore), Andre Breton provides a how-to book for the careful undertaking of Surrealist activity. He offers a record, with photo documentation, of how he met his muse, Nadja, and the time they spent together. The lesson is in the conclusion of their story. Breton ends up with a book. Nadja ends up in an insane asylum. Too much freedom, we see, without any control, ultimately leads to a loss of that freedom.

Conversely, if pulled too far in the direction of control and order, misled by the overreaching desire for "perfection," the surrealist and the writer will become tiresome, stodgy, and academic. We need wildness (wilderness) in our work. (I think it is relevant that today's domestic turkeys drown in rain and starve while standing in feed; they cannot stand up, or mate, on their own; we've bred out their wildness in our search for superior breast meat. American Indians encouraged wild birds to stop over and mate with their domestic birds, thereby ensuring a live DNA pool and ongoing evolution.)

I've redirected my obsessive side—from being the go-to gal for info about books, films, what to do with kids—to scouring the landscape of small publications as I reinvent myself as a writer. While strongly attracted to post-card formats, broadsides delivered guerilla style and, publication in a box of chocolates, what I've come to crave most are themed issues. Someone in, say, Minnesota or Kansas flings an idea or a request out into the beyond, trolling for possible submissions. "Got anything on piano? Nuns? Mushrooms? Perfectionism? Accident vs. design?"

I am lured by the chance meeting of the theme, whatever it might be, and my work, not unlike Lautreamont's "chance meeting between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table," a surrealist precept. I fiddled with a particular poem for decades, always returning it to the drawer. My poem meets a new context, comes alive in my hand, when it's married suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, to the theme of, say, "Festival!" Whether it's published or not, isn't the point; what matters is that my poem has met the outside world and is changed, transmuted in a way that wouldn't have happened otherwise. The result—I am not a writer toiling alone but a member of the greater universe, with whom I, thrillingly, *collaborate*. This is the perfect writing plan for me. I see it allows me to enjoy myself and forget my "inner critic."

I regularly played the game, “The One in the Other,” as part of the Dada and Surrealist Practicum I taught for years. It helps keep the creative juices flowing, and is another example of how the Surrealists walked the tightrope between opposites. One person, let’s call him or her The Poet, selects an object, let’s say, a piano. The Poet keeps the object a secret, but asks the group to “Guess what I am?” Individuals suggest possible objects, for example, “Are you a nun?” The Poet responds, for example, “No, I’m not a nun, but like a nun from afar you see only pattern, black and white.” Or, “No, I’m not a nun, but like a nun if you close your eyes and touch me, you will find yourself touching a medium for spiritual transcendence.” The possible answers are infinite. The poet tightrope walks between the two images, and brings them together. The poet’s job is to make poetry, to take whatever comes his or her way (like a magician) and transmute it into poetic gold by finding the metaphoric similarity that exists between the two objects, any two objects. The poet must be able to “see” the objects deeply. Sometimes, when editing a piece of writing, I use “The One in the Other” to help my paragraphs flow into one another, to connect seemingly disparate thoughts.

The surrealist/writer must be prepared for accident; this means more than having the requisite tools. Aragon prepared himself to accept errors in a new, enlightened way. Being prepared means ready to listen or see, so that you receive and not reject. If I am fearful of being blown off course, I close myself off to the marvelous. In *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rainer Maria Rilke writes about der Blumenmuskel, a sea anemone, which opens so far it cannot close again. When, the poet asks, “are we finally open and receivers?” When I am receptive, a flood of rich raw materials comes to me. I can weed through them afterwards!

Victor Brauner’s painting *The Surrealist* provides another opportunity to think about the balancing act. Brauner depicts the surrealist artist as The Magician from the Tarot who holds in his hands the powerful forces of the universe. What is unique here, however, is that the Magician’s hat is marked with an aleph, the symbol of another Tarot card, The Fool. The Surrealist, Brauner tells us, is both Magician and Fool, two seemingly opposite characters. The fool is innocent, experiencing things for the first time; the magician has knowledge of the world. Like the tightrope walker, The Fool is depicted walking on the edge, this time of a cliff. The writer has the Magician’s knowledge but must be able to see things afresh, as though “for the first time.” (I had the first line of Surrealist Paul Eluard’s poem, “Always for the First Time/Toujours pour le premiere fois” engraved into my husband’s wedding ring; my friend chose to read Eluard’s poem at my wedding without knowing this.)

I usually began the Dada and Surrealist Practicum by giving students an assignment based on Tristan Tzara’s “How to Write a Dada Poem”:

- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you want to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake gently.
- Then take out the words one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.
- And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

The assignment provided a deceptively simple entrée into a complex course of study, and gave an opportunity to better understand the difference between Dada and Surrealism. It also left a great deal of room for variations in interpretation. Completed student poems generally fell into three general categories: 1) poems by students who felt the assignment was beneath them and who, therefore, put little time into creating the poems, 2) poems by good little girls and boys, often from religious schools, who faithfully copied each and every word, even though they found the poems meaningless, especially when the tiniest words often fell to the bottom of the bag and 3) open-minded students who accepted the process and, at times, manipulated chance. The comparison of student poems was interesting to all, especially when it proved how right Tzara was; the completed poems did indeed reflect their writers.

While the cutting up of words, of sense, of logic is Dada, the act of putting word beside word is surrealist. Some students let the words run on in paragraphs; a line ended where the page ended. When different readers read these poems, the meaning kept changing because the author did not assign line breaks. Other poets made meaning by deciding that the 5th word pulled from the bag, for example, would be the last word in the first line, rather than the first word of the second line. Here we see the writer as reader; this is often the case in situations that involve chance. As the words leave the bag, the reader becomes the author. The act of reading sets the words in their context. Each word takes its meaning because of context. When words are set free from their conventional moorings, we see them afresh, with all their

potential; the same is true for color. A particular red, placed next to a particular brown, will appear to be a different color altogether when placed next to blue. The Cut-Up poem is, again, a balancing of accident and order. Two words may converge, linked by the reader/writer, for the first time. The spontaneous result may or may not feel inspired.

As someone who has begun to write, finally, in middle age, I recognize how my surrealist roots serve me. They're the tools I can turn to when I need a breath of fresh air or just plain fun. Should I decide to get down from the tightrope, there's always the possibility of getting into the car and taking off down new roads, some with switchbacks, perhaps, which are really like tightropes with hairpin curves. The goal is the same, being focused, going with the flow, not over the edge to the right or over the edge to the left, but staying the course, keeping straight down the middle of the road, and taking in all the random sights and sounds along the way.

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Issue 7: Accident vs. Design

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Lynne Shapiro is a teacher and writer living in Hoboken, New Jersey. Making it past the halfway point of her life, she's begun to publish poems and stories to make room for new ones. She's had work in the British magazine *Myselfia*, and the following on-line journals: "St. Francis and the Island of Foula" (<http://www.terrain.org/essays/21/shapiro.htm>), "Who Left Whom? And Why it Matters" (www.hissquarterly.com Vol. 4, Issue 4, Front View: The Fiction), "Ozone Park to Zone Five" (<http://www.clockwisecat.blogspot.com/> Issue 6), and "Coyote at my Door" (<http://www.tiny-lights.com/searchlights.html?id=269>). "Cradle and All" will be published in *Mourning Sickness – Stories and Poems About Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Loss*, www.omniartslc.com, 2008.

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Where Our Wives Are

Greg Oaks

Walking was not as easy for George as it used to be. His long limbs put a strain on his muscles; he felt like a man on stilts. Only a few minutes into the stroll and he was breathless and lightheaded. He walked through steam pouring from a manhole cover and it fogged his glasses, making the streetlights leak together.

A car with dark windows slowed. George took off his glasses to look for a hint of passengers, even a face in the back like a tonsil, but he saw nothing.

As he passed by one house, a woman yelled, "You're nuts!" and a man walked out, kicked the door and fumbled with a pack of cigarettes.

When George got home, he saw teenagers sitting on his neighbor's porch, waiting. George waved. One of the kids raised a hand.

In the local paper, the police blotter was always after the obituaries. George wondered if that was meant to take the menace from crime, to remind victims that at least they'd survived. One day the blotter listed an incident on George's street:

ASSAULT

When an elderly man at a bus stop refused to hand over his wallet to a group of men, they stabbed him and dragged him to a pick-up. A security guard intervened, they dropped the victim and escaped.

George was taken with the anonymity of "victim," an unknown variable, like the x in algebra. He pictured a faceless man, in his seventies, like himself, only more terror-stricken at the way everyday life can tangle and knot itself into violence.

Karen, George's daughter-in-law in California, joined an organization called Citizens for Prevention of Violent Crime. One day she phoned, saying she wanted George to fly up and talk about his wife Mary at one of the meetings.

He asked her, "About her or the murder?"

"Whatever you feel comfortable with, Dad. You could just describe her."

"Just talk?"

"That's all, Dad. Talk."

"What's the point then, Karen?"

He could hear her sigh. She never mentioned it again.

The newspapers sometimes still referred to Mary's death as "the brutal Wehman murder." As topics went, violence against the elderly was popular. George scanned the paper. These articles seemed to copy each other: the surviving family broken, the senseless murder. At least they were better than the obituaries, where murder was censored as a cause.

George had helped the groups search the fields for Mary. Some of his old high school students helped but George couldn't talk to them. He preferred strangers, the young man heaving a board to look under it, the groups of people kicking trash.

The fifth day of the search, a police car pulled up, letting out a man with a clip-on tie and mirrored sunglasses. People stopped in the fields to watch. The man said, "There's no reason, George." Then he said, "The dental records matched."

George said, "You mean the teeth?"

"Yes, the teeth."

"Well, why didn't you goddam say it?"

"I'm sorry."

"Her teeth."

"Yes, the teeth."

"Well next time say it."

George used to teach math and coach football. His teams had a few winning years in the seventies. He hadn't been tough enough on his athletes. In the nineties the other coaches shifted him to baseball, mainly, George knew, to keep him

from being fired. Everyone—students, athletes, coaches—called him "Big G," and the football coaches sometimes asked him to give half-time pep talks for important games.

He sometimes ran into his old students. Once downtown, a familiar man in a suit put his arms in the air saying, "Class of '82." Recently a fat man in a passing dump truck yelled down, "Big G! How's it going!" George waved and yelled back, "Pretty good!"

When George read the word "Americans" in the newspaper, he liked to think that this vague term applied to the weave of his old students, whatever they might be—salespersons, doctors, cab-drivers. When he saw a poll that most Americans were against welfare, he wondered if he should have included references to the poor in his classes.

He had never considered himself "American," even in the seventies when Mary was taking him to ERA rallies. Americans liked different music than he did, different movies, books also. For George, the news made it seem like these Americans had gotten together in secret, behind his back, and had decided on issues he was still confused about. So it was only now that George felt any connection to the country. Americans were simply his old students. He'd helped gather them together.

One afternoon, as George walked to Wal-Mart, someone in a passing car threw a small carton of milk, which exploded with a loud *cachunk* over the back of his shirt and his khakis. He stood there for a few minutes. Milk dribbled down his back and formed a small puddle at his feet. A few cars passed, one very slowly. Finally, he continued in the same direction.

By the time he got to Wal-Mart, the afternoon heat was drawing a dairy sourness from his clothes. He scanned the cars in the lot for anything unusual. Inside, he picked out an extra-large shirt from the men's department and took it to the register.

As the kid at the register rang it up, George told him, "Someone threw a carton of milk at me."

The kid stopped pressing the register and looked up at him. "What?" He was clean-cut and short, familiar like an old student.

"Someone threw a carton of milk at me."

"No way."

George said, "Yes way," and turned around to show the kid his stain.

"That's that smell," the kid said, then caught himself. "Jerks out there," he added, shaking his head. Then he continued on the register, saying, "So you're here for a replacement."

George half-smiled and said, "Would you believe it? I was coming here for a shirt anyway."

"No way!"

"Yes." George nodded.

George's neighbor across the street, Bob, had tried to set George up with elderly women, friendly widows. George refused. Growing old with his wife was one thing—doing it together seemed to cancel out many signs of age. These new widows were just plain old, as if they'd always been in that state, never young, pretty, busy. George talked to them at church, at the grocery store. They were sturdy, distant, but with soft eyes, possibly waiting for him to make the first move. A few of Mary's old friends sometimes called. They were too patient with his silences, one of the younger ones once telling him, "You're such an introspective man, George."

Everyone thought he was lonely—he knew. To him it seemed the wrong word. George liked being alone. He only watched TV for the news and he spent most of his time in the backyard, pruning trees, taking care of the lawn, repairing a shutter, a rail, a bird feeder. The work and memory of work made the yard seem his. In the spring, the huge oak in the back made the yard deep and shady. Sometimes he took naps in a lawn chair under the waving branches. Sometimes Bob came over and they sat on the back porch, both of them looking into the yard as they talked. Bob was also a widower, but a smaller man, who dipped tobacco and always had a humorous, tricky look. He wore a baseball cap like it belonged there, and told long, funny stories that were a pleasure to George. When Bob started one he'd told before, George would shake his head, "No Bob, I've heard that one." Sometimes Bob told dirty jokes. He seemed to collect them more and more, one time bringing a Playboy to read a particularly well-worded joke. George laughed at some of these.

Bob's wife had died of cancer, and he liked to pretend it didn't bother him. He once said to George, "I hope she's up above. If not, I bet she's giving hell to hell."

George was looking into the yard and could tell Bob had turned to look at him. Bob said, "Yours is probably forming rallies and marches right now."

"In the afterlife?" George said. At that moment, a gust came up and shook the big oak. "How do we get there?"

Sometimes George remembered an old story he could tell. Since he'd retired, though, his stories had gradually seemed to lose their purpose. Recently, he noticed that he was talking in fragments, as if he couldn't muster what it took to finish a plain sentence. The words seemed to wander off when he'd said enough. He'd say, "Did you hear what the President said yesterday about the, uh, cuts—" and Bob would nod in understanding.

One afternoon, George tried to tell an old story about an uncle who, after his mother's death, started a forest fire. Yet, somehow George lost the ending, the sense of grieving and fiery expression. Bob laughed like the story was a joke and George said, "You know, I remember that story as better than I told it."

Bob smiled. "Ain't that the point?"

After Bob left, George fixed himself a glass of iced tea. He sat and drank it and watched himself in the hall mirror, a big man at a tiny table.

George woke up one morning to find that his car had been taken from his driveway. There was no broken glass, blood, just a quiet, empty driveway, so peaceful he almost didn't call the police.

As the officer stood in the driveway filling out the report, George told him, "If you find it and it's in bad shape, just—"

The officer blocked the sun from his eyes with his pen hand. "Excuse me?"

"I don't want to see it." After the officer left, George paced the house. His driveway was empty and he tried to think of things to do. Twice he walked out to the street and looked both ways, as if this would encourage someone to bring the car back.

The next day, a different officer pulled up, followed by a wrecker with George's car. George had to identify it because the license plates had been removed. The back seat was knifed and there were burn holes in the front. It didn't smell like George's car. The back window was smashed—the officer said they had caught the kids in the act of trashing it. One of the teenagers next door. There was a brown stain on the back carpet. George shut the door and told the officer it was his car.

The officer said, "All right." Then he put on his sunglasses and leaned against the car like it was his own. He said, "George, I know about your wife's case. Does this make you suspect your neighbors?"

George shook his head, "No."

"Have they lived there long enough?"

George remembered offering to help them move in. The father had scowled and the boy, shoulders hunched, had seemed both frightened and angry, but hardly enough to steal a car, much less commit a murder. George said, "Long enough, but no," with the same distaste as when two years before the investigators had suggested old students. He refused to think it. They were children.

The officer pulled at his bottom lip. "All right," he said, like he was waiting for George to change his mind.

The next day the blotter read:

VEHICLE THEFT

5500 Johnson St.: Police followed noise to cul-de-sac where youths were vandalizing stolen car. The officers gave chase and nabbed two of the culprits.

* * *

George was surrounded by voices. He'd find himself talking, repeating phrases or questions like, "You OK?" Once he caught himself and said loudly, "Stop it!" just as the newspaper boy knocked on the screen door. He seemed to be doing this more and more, and caring less. The house had voices too. It seemed to soak up noise from outside, drafty with sound like other houses were with breeze. George once heard a voice in the kitchen say, "I need to return it," and when he walked in, the sound of footsteps outside, a car door. One night he heard faint delicate laughter. He turned on the lights and walked from room to room, but never heard it again. Gradually, he began to accept the house's noises. Sometimes he lay in bed and listened, trying to piece together its personality.

A week after his car was found, he woke up with Mary's voice in the room as if she had just said something. He replayed her, just as he used to when she'd asked if he'd been listening. This morning she had said, "You need help, Sweetie." He lay in his bed for a moment. Then he got up and looked out his window into the sunny yard. Through the screen, it looked blurred and antiseptic. A bush swayed in the breeze. He thought, that's the way she talked.

That morning, he turned on the TV just for the sound.

The first day of summer, a man dressed as a phone repairman came to George's door and said that the phone company was re-wiring some of the old neighborhoods. The man held a big toolbox and had addressed George by his last name.

George said, "I never called for service."

He smiled, "Today is your lucky day. We just bought a round on the house." He was tan and wore an AT&T shirt with sweat rings at the arm pits.

George told him, "Well there's a rotary in the bedroom."

"Let me at it." George realized that it would take bluntness to get rid of him now. The man was practically a state employee; George decided to let him in.

George took him to the bedroom, and as the man walked by George could see the top part of a ponytail tucked into the back of his shirt. In the bedroom, George pointed out the rotary phone in the far corner.

The man said thanks and stood in the middle of the room like he was waiting for George to leave. George said, "OK," and walked back into the living room. He sat down. He could hear the tool box open. Something bothered him, and he looked out the front window. There was no phone truck, only an old Toyota parked in front of the neighbor's house. The man couldn't have been carrying the toolbox around the neighborhood. George listened for the sound of tools but the bedroom was silent.

George thought of calling the phone company to check, but the man could listen in. Then there was a loud click from the bedroom and the man called, "George, could you come back here for a second?"

Just then George remembered something in the news about fake repairmen and the elderly. Something about knives. "George?" the man called out again, his voice odd.

George answered, "Yes, hold on." He walked lightly to the kitchen, which offered another approach to the bedroom. The floor squeaked once. He could see the edge of the bedroom door and he moved closer. The mirror above the dresser became visible. In it he could see the back of the man crouched low next to the door, like he wanted to surprise George walking in. The phone was in its corner on the other side of the room. In the mirror, the man's ponytail was out of his shirt and long.

For a second, George was amazed that it was actually happening. He'd finally gotten to the front of the line; everything else had been practice. His own piece of violence had arrived.

He looked down and saw his hammer on the kitchen table. He picked it up. It felt odd in his hand, heavy, and he knew he didn't care enough to swing it. He quietly laid it on the table, and looked back through the doorway at the mirror. The man shifted and George saw the edge of the old phone jack as the man pulled it from the wall, colored wires and all. The man called again,

"Mr. Wehman?"

George breathed now and answered, "Yeah?"

"I guess you ran the phone wire under the carpet?"

He backed into the kitchen. "Yes. Years ago. I forgot."

"I'm just going to cut it, if you don't mind, and put a new jack in the wall. OK?"

"Please do." He breathed.

As the man finished up, he said from the bedroom, "You know, this is my last installation."

"What?"

"This is my last day. I've quit."

George could hear him close his tool box. The man walked into the kitchen and glanced at the cupboards. "Do you mind if I get a glass of water?" He seemed to be looking for a particular glass and then reached for one with painted flowers. Filling it from the sink, he said, "My wife is my supervisor. I had to quit." He drank it all at once, his nose filling the glass. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. The man finished and added, "It was either that or divorce." He wiped his mouth and smiled: "And we can't do that—we have a kid." He handed the glass back to George. "And a bird."

They looked into each other's eyes. The man's were golden like sand, and wide. They reminded George of a cat's eyes, only happy. George couldn't say anything. It had been so long since he'd looked this closely at a person. The man said something George didn't hear.

"What?" George said.

"You OK?"

"Yes. Sure." George leaned back against a chair and didn't look at the man again.

The next day was hot. George was walking up his driveway to get the mail when he saw the boy next door, slouching on the front steps, looking at the street.

George stopped. He said, "What'd they do to you for stealing my car?"

The boy looked frightened and very thin. He said, "Just a little juvy."

"Do you dislike me for some reason?"

He shrugged, "No."

George walked up the short slope of the property to the stoop. He said, "Then why?" Closer, George could see his eyes were bloodshot and sad.

When the boy didn't answer, George said, "My wife taught me to fox trot but I'm not any good." The boy shook his head, confused, like he wanted to understand.

George said, "I have a problem making eye contact. So, there's just voices." He looked away, and could see the boy do the same. George said, "I guess I'm not right."

The boy said, "Maybe you should look at their mouths," and he pointed to his, like it was just some object. George looked at the finger, the serious mouth set like a prune, and he knew this was advice Mary wouldn't have known or needed. He said, "OK," and when he smiled, the boy did too, and George realized they were looking at each other's mouths like a couple of old twins, embarrassed.

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