The Blue Route

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A Memorable Spell

By Marissa Bulger

"Please be here," he thought, scanning the room from his place just past the double doors of the cafeteria. "Come on, Nick, come on, come on." His heart started to return to its normal pace as he caught sight of the short redhead carrying a tray away from the lunch line, toward the usual table. William allowed himself to release the breath it felt like he'd been holding in since this morning, when Nick wasn't in homeroom. He walked straight to the table, skipping the line for tacos and milk, and let his worn backpack hit the table with a thunk. He liked to carry all of his books with him throughout the day so that he didn't have to climb the two flights back to the 7th grade lockers. He had found if he leaned slightly forward and walked quickly, most of the weight would settle in the middle of his back, making them easier to carry.

"Hey Nick, where were you this morning?"

"I had a doctor's appointment before lunch, so my mom let me sleep in," Nick said.

William nodded and slid as best he could into the chair in front of him. He had felt sick and anxious all day, thinking Nick wasn't coming to school and wouldn't be at lunch. Nick didn't usually have much to say, but to eat lunch alone was unthinkable. William had not had to eat lunch by himself in over a year and he was glad for the company, just as he knew Nick was, no matter how silent he might be. Knowing he wouldn't have to eat his sandwich in a shower stall in the locker room, William's worries left him and he unzipped the thick black zipper of the largest compartment of his backpack, pulling out a blue, insulated lunch pail.

He reached for the peanut butter and jelly sandwich Aunt Jackie had made him that morning, the grape jelly soaking through the white bread, giving it a pink tint. William then set up the rest of his lunch the way he liked it best: fruit punch juice box on the right side, chocolate pudding cup behind his sandwich, empty lunch pail on the floor, and napkin tucked into the space between the buttons on his polo shirt. He would never forget the day in 3rd grade when he squeezed his juice box too tightly and the straw sprayed a stream of red juice all over his shirt. He had spent the afternoon enduring the stares and snickers of his classmates as he tried to ignore his wet, sticky shirt, and was now very careful not to spill.

The silence between the two made the 45 minutes of the lunch period go much quicker for William than if he'd had to think up ways to keep a conversation going. He reached down for his lunch pail and found that it was several feet away, against the wall. He figured someone may have kicked it accidentally on the way to the trashcan, and he dusted it off, stuffing it into his bag, his face twisting with the effort.

He was grateful for the sound of the bell that rang out. No chance to be herded outside for recess. He had wrongfully assumed that the junior high kids didn't have

recess. He was not athletic, he knew, and did not want to draw any greater attention to this detail than he was already required to during gym class three times a week.

"How was lunch, William?"

He looked up to see Mrs. Wasser's kind, expectant face. Mrs. Wasser always waited until the last student had left the cafeteria before returning to her classroom and, in doing so, always walked next to that student as the mass of students before them shuffled down the hall and around the corner to 6th period. It was always William.

His response was the same each day. "Lunch was good, Mrs. Wasser." Leaving the cafeteria meant that he had someone to sit with that day, and therefore, squished sandwich or not, lunch was good. Usually, Mrs. Wasser would keep the same pace as William, asking him questions about other classes, mentioning which book she was thinking his class might read next. He knew she probably paid him special attention because she had been a friend of his mother, but he appreciated it nonetheless. His other teachers did not walk with him in the hallways or chat with him about lunch. He was not a good student, a fact he found profoundly unfair considering his lack of athleticism, and teachers, he understood, preferred to spend time with the good students.

It wasn't that he didn't try. Sitting at the kitchen table later that night, he was trying to understand how to identify the stages of mitosis, trying quite hard really. All he could think was that the splitting cells looked like big fried eggs.

"How's the homework coming?" Aunt Jackie glanced over shoulder to ask the question as she moved past the table to the cupboard, taking out a pot that William hoped had something to do with dinner. He wasn't hungry, but it would be a good excuse to put his schoolwork away until later.

"Okay," he said brightly, not wanting to repeat the long division episode, when Aunt Jackie had sat beside him at the table for over an hour, explaining equations and theories he probably wouldn't need until high school, if he ever made it through junior high.

Having set a pot full of water on the stove, she stood next to him, surveying the mess of books and papers spread out on the table. She picked up the crumpled list of school announcements that had been crushed beneath at least one textbook and placed her thin, purple glasses, hanging from a beaded chain around her neck, onto the very edge of her nose.

"William, you never mentioned that there was a spelling bee at school," she said, her voice expressing excitement. "I didn't even know they still had those. Alice won the school spelling bee 3 years in a row," she said of his mother.

"I didn't know that," was all he said. Did his aunt expect him to compete in the school spelling bee? He could think of nothing worse than standing in front of the entire

school, being asked to speak at all really – but having to spell would probably present a unique opportunity for the most severe embarrassment.

That was all that was said about the spelling bee, but William had trouble putting it out of his mind as he lay in his twin bed that night. What would it be like to be the Spelling Bee Champion like his mother? Surely, the other kids wouldn't make fun of him if they knew that he was smart all along. His teachers might not even make him do homework for a few days, once they realized their mistake in assuming he was just one of the slow kids.

He knew the spelling bee was this Friday because he recalled his realization that he would be granted a reprieve from gym class that afternoon. That gave him 4 days to practice. He smiled. He knew he could do it. He was going to win the school spelling bee, just like his mother.

The next few days passed quickly, too quickly for William, but he was beginning to feel prepared. Aunt Jackie had a set of encyclopedias and he was methodically moving through the A volume, stopping at words beginning with several vowels or with tricky consonant combinations. He would sit in his classes and imagine the words he might be asked to spell, then spell them to himself, slowly, slightly nodding his head with each letter, dipping his chin just a bit.

"Relief," said the professional, disembodied voice in his head. "R-E-L-I-E-F," he thought to himself, his chin bobbing from left to right, seeing the word in the air. "Acquire," the voice demanded of him. "A-C…or A-Q…" He couldn't decide which it was but vowed to check the encyclopedia later to be sure. He was ready. Aunt Jackie had been delighted when she discovered the reason for his sudden interest in her encyclopedia set and, of course, the constant nodding. She'd told him all the tricks she knew about remembering tough words, and the exceptions to the spelling rules he'd learned in school. On the day of the spelling bee she put two chocolate pudding cups in his lunch pail and wrote a good luck note on William's napkin.

William was supposed to report to the gym five minutes before the lunch period was over, to get ready before the rest of the school arrived, but he did not want to leave Nick sitting alone. Instead, he waited anxiously for the bell to ring. He was nervous, but confident. He had learned how to spell so many words. Surely no one else had practiced like he had. No one else's mother had won the spelling bee three years in a row.

Mrs. Wasser waved at him as he raced out of the cafeteria at the sound of the bell. He would not be the last, lingering student today. Arriving in the gym, ten or so other students were already seated in chairs on the stage. He recognized them all, but no one was speaking, so he took the empty chair that was left for him and sat on his hands while they waited for instructions. He decided to practice while he waited, scanning the room for things he could spell. Chair. C-H-A-I-R. Shoelace. S-H-O-E-L-A-C-E. Water Fountain. Hm. Would they ask for a word that was really two words? He couldn't spot anything that was easy enough to spell, but hard enough that they might ask it. He didn't

have much longer to consider it though, as other students were quickly filling up the bleachers in the gym. He counted down the line. He would be twelfth, the last to go. He rocked forward, still sitting on his hands, and waited.

The principal stepped up to the microphone on the side of the stage.

"Let's get started then," she said, holding a stack of index cards. "We'll begin on the far side. William?" He was first. He stared straight ahead.

"Free Willy!" someone yelled. A few people laughed.

"William?" she said again.

He was supposed to stand. He pushed off the chair with his hands and stood, feet touching one another, directly in front of it. He nodded, still looking straight ahead.

"Your word is *antique*." Even the other students on stage had turned their heads to look at him, but he was not bothered, not nervous. He knew the word.

"A." Nod. "N." Nod. "T." Nod. "I." Nod. Q-U-E. He said the last letters quickly, impatient to get them out, to prove he could spell the word.

"That is correct," she said, her voice tinted with surprise or delight or maybe both.

William sat back and waited for his turn to come around again. He'd felt a bolt of confidence from his success, and was eager for another. A few students answered correctly, as he had, but others slipped up. He felt for them, being disqualified so quickly. Emily Sanders was one of the smartest kids in his class but had struggled over *portrait*. By the time the first round was over, there were 6 students still on stage. He was ready.

"William, your word is *frustrated.*"

"F." Nod. Definitely F. Then R. "R." Nod. "U." Nod. Then it must be… "S." Nod. "T." Nod. He sounded each syllable out in his head, feeling every nuance of the word on his tongue, without saying it aloud. "E." Nod.

"I'm sorry William, that is incorrect."

But he wasn't finished. He hadn't finished the word. It was incorrect because he wasn't done spelling yet. Had he paused too long? He looked up at his principal in confusion, then out to the faces staring back at him. When the others had been disqualified they'd left the stage immediately. William probably would have done the same if he'd misspelled the word, but he was sure this was a mistake. A few people started laughing again, but it was uncomfortable, nervous laughter, and had lost the mocking tone William had heard earlier. Shocked and embarrassed, William looked down at his feet and watched them carry him to the stairs at the edge of the stage, down onto the gym floor, and out the door and around the corner into the boys' locker room. He hoped no one would come after him. He was stupid to try. Stupid to think he could win something, could win the spelling bee like his mother. He felt a twinge in his stomach and his throat caught when he thought about telling Aunt Jackie that he had lost. She would be disappointed. He knew the spelling bee was only important to him because

his mother was gone. If it were she who had told him about her multiple victories, he would have felt differently. He wouldn't have said the letter 'e' in front of the whole school and he wouldn't be hiding in the locker room until he had to face his aunt.

He waited until the pounding of feet on the bleachers had stopped, indicating that everyone had filed out of the gym. Outside the confines of the locker room, William took the long way to his locker, knowing the best stairs and halls to take to avoid seeing anyone. He didn't think they would say anything to him anyways, but he still preferred to be alone. For the same reason, he sat in the very front seat on the way home, well out of reach of the loud kids in the back, but pressed against the window so that the bus driver would not try to talk to him. The bus driver did not know he was not a good student, and so he did not avoid him as some teachers did.

William took his time walking from the door of the bus to the front door of the house. It was difficult to balance his overstuffed backpack at such a slow place, so he straightened up and let it slide off his back, into his hand. He dragged it up the front walk way and pulled it up each step to the front porch, allowing the satisfying clunk each time. He prepared himself to see his aunt, to tell her that he wasn't like his mother at all, that he had lost.

Aunt Jackie was sitting at the kitchen table when he walked in. He wondered if she was really reading the magazine in her hand or if she'd just been waiting for him.

"Hey there, how'd it go today?" she asked, looking up at him standing in the doorway.

He thought about lying. He imagined telling her he'd won the whole thing and had no homework for a week and that everyone had chanted his name when he won and he'd gotten a medal for it but they wanted to keep it at school to display and he might not even enter next year just to make it fair because he had done so much better than everyone else it was no contest at all.

"I got second," he said.

Aunt Jackie gasped, in the good way, clasping her hands together for a second before running over to him and holding his face in her cool, smooth hands, then pulling him toward her, his nose pressed up against the glasses she wore around her neck.

"Second place is wonderful, William. I am so proud of you!" she said. She pulled back and looked at him and in that moment they were both thinking the same thing. Knowing that his mother knew the truth, William hoped it was enough for her that he had tried. He had stood plainly before everyone – not sitting in the back corner of a classroom or looking down when he walked – and had really tried.

"Well, I think we should celebrate. Let me put the chicken back in the fridge and you and I will go to Friendly's tonight."

William felt himself warm with her approval. He swallowed his guilt at lying and let himself have just this one thing. On Monday he would return to school and would still be William. Free Willy. Hoping not to sit alone. Being ignored even by his teachers. For now, he was the Spelling Bee Runner-Up and he was going to celebrate with his aunt.

Looking over the ice cream menu with Aunt Jackie, William had trouble deciding between the Reese's sundae and the brownie sundae when he heard his aunt call out someone's name.

"Michelle," she said brightly, waving to a woman who had just walked in.

William turned to see who his aunt had recognized and saw Mrs. Wasser making her way toward them. He dropped his menu onto the table and looked down, waiting for it to be over.

'Hi guys," Mrs. Wasser said, leaning over the table a bit to add, "You doing okay, William?"

"Well, of course, we're out celebrating. I've just had dinner with the 2nd place Spelling Bee Champion," Aunt Jackie said. Hearing the pride in her voice, William expected to be ashamed, but felt gratified, even worthy.

Mrs. Wasser's forehead creased as her eyebrows furrowed and drew toward one another briefly, but smoothed as her pursed lips relaxed and turned into a smile.

"That's right," she said. Then, to William, she added, "Enjoy it, you deserve it."

He looked up at her kind face and felt her hand gently pat his shoulder as she turned.

"Thanks, Mrs. Wasser," he said, shyly.

He picked up his menu again and looked up at his aunt.

"I think I'll get the brownie sundae, what about you Aunt Jackie?"

primary colors

By Melissa Goodrich

through the leaves, it looked like a girl
lay blue in a garden,
arching her back into a capital C
and curling around an egg so tiny she
deposited it
into the V of her shirt
and let her breasts hold something
cool and round and new.

the wind buoyed up
everything
the moon, the mountains,
a leaf like a dollar bill; the wind
waved its red hands and pressed them
deep, like two trenches,
into the girl's back, and she
pressed back, as to be sucked
into the scoop, to become
an eclipse of grass around
a glass of sun in a puddle
of blooding blossoms tender.
but of course
(and this was partially the wind's fault)
she punctured the egg
and stained her clothes yellow
and the disk fell out of her eyes
and the wind dropped out of her kelp hair –

this was of course all a matter time
(what do you expect from rough-housing
with eggs?) but from
the egg's perspective, this was
freedom of expression
converging, making malleable,
cleaving to form but *sine cera*
reshaping reallocating redistributing
modulating metamorphosing
constantly out of self and into
the great baked shape.

Distortion

By Kara Knickerbocker

Windowed your split view,
Like the exterior of my conversation with vodka-
My words, tumbling from strawberry c**h**ap stick l**i**ps:
“I wouldn’**t** li**e** to you, I swear.”
You search through **li**mb**e**d teeth just in ca**s**e,
Not believing reassurance I foun**d** in the sh**o**t glass.
The**n**, rake up my **t**ongue becau**s**e it’s keeping **h**idd**e**n truth.
My tonsils become the rough bark of our argument-an**d** **t**here!
Hit realizati**o**n, **b**y **e**ventually looking out **f**r**o**m inside you**r** livin**g** room:
I bear no fruit; aging and losing branches.
Stepping outside like I always knew you would, disgust feeding that chainsaw hypocrisy,
You cut down the di**v**id**e**d tree of my **n**aïve mouth.

Mr. Roadtrip

By Tara Jo Quinn

First stop: my house—Langhorne, Pennsylvania. I made French toast and scrambled eggs in order to 'stave off the hunger of the night,' as Bob would say later at a gas station in Kansas City.

On the way to my house, Bob called.

'Print off a picture of Brian,' he said.

So I did. I went online and found a picture of him beside a campfire because I knew that we'd be camping a lot. Then I affixed the picture to a piece of cardboard, fully equipped with a handle—and there we had it, the fifth member of our entourage, Brian-on-a-stick.

We'd wanted the actual Brian to join us, but he needed to work instead. He was going to be a knife salesman but ended up quitting within the first week. We discovered that in Harrisburg, the second time around.

Aside from Bob, myself, and Brian-on-a-stick, our party included Allison, my best friend, and Duckbasket, a wicker, duck-shaped basket we'd acquired for free at a flea market in Harrisburg two years before. Duckbasket frequented our mis-adventures.

Allison did most of the planning because she's the best with details, but the trip had originated in the mind of Bob. One day in his dorm room, Bob thought to himself, 'I've never been out West.' Then he went onto Google Maps and played a game that my brother and I used to play with globes in elementary school: he closed his eyes and, at random, pointed at a spot on the map. His finger landed on Ekalaka, Montana, which was good enough for him because he liked the sound of the name—so much consonance and assonance. In the dining commons one afternoon he announced his destination and, about a month later, asked me and Allison to join him.

Allison and I became friends during our freshman year of college because both of us were involved in this drama ministry group on campus called Transformed. Basically, the group went around to various churches in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, performing skits that propagated various Christian stances and viewpoints. Both Allison and I hated the group, but we liked each other and so maintained our friendship.

Bob had become a close friend of ours somewhere along the way, too. I don't remember exactly how it happened. What I remember most about the beginnings of our friendship were a series of 'Tom Jones runs,' late night trips to Tom Jones, this grodey, smoke-filled diner located about twenty-five minutes from our college campus. A group of us—generally accompanied by Duckbasket—would pile into Allison's German grandmother of a convertible, Broomhildagarde, along with someone else's larger, more reliable sedan, around midnight; and then we'd make the trek to Tom Jones, normally while blasting ska music.

I also know that Bob must have firmly been cemented in our minds as a close friend by September of sophomore year because Allison and I wrote him into a short play around that time. It was about an egocentric minstrel who was in love with a snotty princess; Bob was to play the minstrel. We never actually got around to performing it, though, which is part of why it was so surprising that we were leaving my tree-enshrouded cabin for the wide-open West at all.

What I remember most about Pennsylvania is the tall, swaying grass, the incredible girth of the state in general, and the House of Pigeons. I wanted to stop and see this sanctuary for the vermin of the sky, but Allison said no: 'If we start stopping at places now we'll never get to Montana.'

She was probably right.

In Ypsilanti, Michigan, we encountered our first trial. See, Allison's little brother is a Boy Scout and consequently has a Boy Scout tent. Her father agreed to let us borrow said tent for camping purposes. But when we got to our Ypsilanti campsite and prepared to set up shop, we realized that some tent poles were missing. Allison was distressed; she was also afflicted with PMS, which I'm sure only bolstered her agitation. ('We will never plan a trip around my period again,' is one of her new catchphrases.) Bob was busy trying, unsuccessfully, to rearrange and fix the tent poles; and with each passing minute our community pool of frustration was exponentially increasing.

I, as usual, was standing around feeling useless, aimlessly picking up and putting down random poles and handfuls of nylon tent, pretending to help but mostly just getting in the way. Eventually I gave up my enterprise and took a step back—at first sulking over how little I had to contribute; but eventually I gained some perspective.

I looked at our tent. It was able to stand, and, really, we only needed it for sleeping. The nylon at the top was just caving in on itself a bit. No worries—our tent was fully functional: it just looked a little dejected and droopy.
I had an idea.

'Let's just call him Droopenstein!'

Allison lit up at this.

'Can we call him *Von* Droopenstein?' she asked.

Then Bob chimed in:

'*Castle* Von Droopenstein?'

And there we had it, a name for our dopey, little Boy Scout tent.

Bob, Allison, and I drew a dejected picture of Castle Von Droopenstein in our Boy Scout-themed picture journal. We also decided that Droopenstein made noises like a Wookie. And with that we were satisfied. So we let the tent be and went over to visit a Ypsilanti lake.

A single swan glided across the water's surface as the sun set. We took about fifty pictures of it on Bob's camera, which he later lost in Wisconsin.

Early the next morning, we gathered up our supplies—including Castle Von Droopenstein, Duckbasket, and Brian-on-a-stick—hopped back into the Toyota Avalon Allison's mother had lent us, and made our way to Chicago. There, we planned to meet Bob's friend Jamal. Bob had lots of friends that we met along the way because Bob has lots of friends everywhere: *planet Earth* is the place where everybody knows his name, basically. Bob had met Jamal—and most of his other cross-country acquaintances—doing youth work someplace or another. But currently Jamal lived in Chicago, and we were excited to see Chicago because we'd been told there would be parrots.

According to Bob, someone in Chicago had some pet parrots that one day escaped and, like most invasive species, proceeded to multiply like wildfire. Now green parrots were allegedly as bountiful in the city of Chicago as rock doves were in Philadelphia.

But we didn't spot a single bird.

Two years later, I made a friend from Chicago. When I asked him about the parrots he scoffed. He had never heard of such a thing, and he prided himself on his knowledge of the city.

Next stop: the grand old Mississippi—someplace, Wisconsin. I had never seen her before, even though I'd read about her in *Huckleberry Finn*. She smelled like dead fish, and Bob's friend told us not to put our feet in.

'There are bodies in there,' she said, which sufficiently convinced us to keep our shoes on.

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Halfway through North Dakota in a day. The land was so flat that it was difficult to tell where the curves of the road began. I drove consciously nearsighted, and it gave me a headache.

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In Bismarck, we ate s'mores with Elvis. He was a good sport about holding Brian-on-a-stick for photographs. And Duckbasket still wears one of his polyester, gold scarves.

Elvis' mother said that her boy taught Biology to middle-schoolers on weekdays.

The next day we met another handful of North Dakota mothers in a church at Salem, a small town overlooked by the world's largest bovine, Salem Sue. This enormous plaster cow, complete with obnoxious, pink, udder veins, was the first tourist trap that Allison allowed us to succumb to.

'How can we not go?' she asked when we saw Sue's mammoth silhouette looming atop a great hill in the distance.

After church we ate breakfast at a diner whose menus wished us to 'have a super-fantastic day!' The milk there tasted like band-aids, which was ironic considering Salem's monument to the producers of said milk. Perhaps they were over-compensating.

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A few hours later we arrived in Ekalaka—population 436. The residents regarded us with untrusting eyes.

'They probably think we're murderers,' Allison said.

Bob didn't care: he accosted the natives.

'We don't get many visitors,' said a woman with skin like a golden raisin. She then proceeded to relate tales of her dogs' numerous scuffles with a mountain lion.

We later found out she was the town eccentric.

We stayed in a hotel—*the* hotel—at Ekalaka. It was called the Guest House. We stayed there because we thought it was a bed & breakfast; we thought that was quaint—but breakfast was never served. Still, it was fortunate that we stayed there because it stormed in the southeastern corner of Montana that night. We watched dust sail down Main Street and lightening whiten the entire Big Sky from the Guest House's front door.

In the morning we joked about how the blustery winds would have blown Castle Von Droopenstein back over North Dakota had we attempted to reside in him that night.

Breakfast was served at the diner next door. But since the electricity was out everywhere, the place was packed, and pancakes were being made slowly, with the help of a generator.

Next stop: a gas station—anywhere, preferably.

We didn't take into account that no electricity meant no working gas stations, too. This was a problem because we were extremely low on fuel and, next thing we knew, suddenly off-course in the Middle of Nowhere, Wyoming. When panic was truly beginning to strike, we located a functional service station; and, while Bob paid for gas, I sat on the toe of the large, plaster cowboy boot out front.

The West is all about large plaster statues.

The West is also all about Lewis & Clark. We encountered countless signs referencing these two early 19th century explorers. Seriously, almost everything that had to do with history out there had to do with Lewis & Clark. They're like the Founding Fathers of the West.

To honor them, I bought my brother a pack of Lewis & Clark playing cards.

We reached the South Dakota Badlands at sunset, and I knew that Allison was my best friend when she hung up on her boyfriend to go explore the scenery with me.

'We're here, so I wanted to be here,' she said. 'Besides, I can talk to him when it's dark.'

Once in a camp office parking lot, we decided the Avalon needed a name. We settled on Madame Evelyn Roadtrip. She was Mr. Roadtrip's wife, which is what we'd been calling our road trip since we planned him in April.

'And we're like triplets inside her womb!' I said.

'Ew!' giggled Allison.

And as we made our way inside, the three of us jested about amniotic fluids.

Inside Evelyn's womb, there were three positions to fill. Obviously, there was the driver. Then, in the passenger seat, there was the direction-reader and iPod jockey. Finally, someone needed to take care of backseat management, which entailed taking naps, reading books, and feasting upon our over-abundance of animal crackers.

Backseat manager often had a tummy ache.

Rapid City was a vaudeville act of blinking lights and presidential puns.

Mount Rushmore hid in shame behind some other mountains and a thick layer of fog-mist.

On rainy days, the ex-presidents look as though they're crying. Dark streaks decorate their rock-hewn faces.

America, America...

Allison asked a stranger to take pictures of us posing as our forefathers. Bob played Lincoln; Allison, Washington; I was Jefferson; and Duckbasket filled in for Roosevelt.

Brian-on-a-stick opted out for this one.

In Kansas City we met another friend of Bob's. She took us to an Indian restaurant called Korma Sutra, and the owner gave us free mango juice.

That night we read a story about how giraffes come from Neptune, and we promised each other to tell fabulous lies to our someday-children before taking late-night naps. Three hours 'til we next embarked.

Our destination was Allison's grandma's farm, but we made a stop at Moonshine, Illinois, along the way. Population? Two.

The town of Moonshine is basically a plot of land where famous Moonburgers are produced daily. The establishment only serves burgers until 12:30pm but over a hundred guests show up a day—despite the fact that no other buildings are in sight: this place is no commercial district.

Bob heard about moonshine from Oprah. And stopping there was one of his reasons for wanting to take the road trip at all.

'This is the best burger I've ever had,' he professed as we feasted at a wooden picnic table.

In Moonshine, the burgers are marinated in wish-fulfillment.

At Grandma's farm, I watched ducks in a small creek while Bob uncovered Grandpa's dirt bike and set it to good use. And Allison picked clover with which she wove herself a crown.

At sunset that night, we drove to the cemetery. We watched the sky's changing colors chase us through the rear window. They threatened to overtake us, threatened to make us pass into something else.

Grandma's tombstone was fashioned like a bench. She wanted people to be comfortable during their visits.

We picked her bouquets of weeds by the roadside.

And here was something of completion—a journey's end, a resting place. Sure, we went on to Ohio—to visit relatives—and Harrisburg—to see our friends. But this was where the story ended.

Grandma's ghost smiled after us, with the sunset; and in the twilight we visited the town general store, searching for dinner.

The rest was just retelling.

House Hymn

By Aakash Suchak

I looked up, and
she stirred something in me.
The red carpet hummed,
the piano whistled auburn mudslide.

She sang like a choir,
she sang like a bullfrog,
like a tough widow with a homeless bite.

She sang like an open window;
An immaculate baker, my rolling convict.
This solemn monk sinking
like a chaste anchor.

Now, in the shallow water,
A wet cloth, a harsh slap
on the rocks.

During grace, she
sparks into song, ignites the hymn
And sets the room alight.

The Fathers

By Nathan Wainstein

Don’t look at the Fathers.
Leering out of the dark,
lights ringing their boy-faces,
Lights turned inward, non-lights
radiating non-shadow.
Born with sacred eyes
they have perceived
History in negatives

and girls and boys in technicolor.
They are looking at you
and not looking: the Fathers
only detect contrast. You
are like static on a security monitor,
a freefloating soul.
Your non-face is shattered.
So don’t look at them.
Would you stare at the holes of a blind man?

Oratio

By Nathan Wainstein

And in that spring there were festivals on the riverfront.
And dusk heard basketballs in the street.
And many people were robbed or beaten after dark.
And car amps beat like veins and disappeared.
And on warm nights we rolled up in the pale kitchen, cooked pasta,
climbed on the roof and looked at the skyscrapers.
And sunsets were like sacrifices, and the city blocks like bones.
And I ran hard through dusky alleys as treeleaves opened, let in lamps.
And coming through the rain one night, color of air, we saw the lights
mark two dead, man and girl, and didn't think anything of it.
And there were break-ins around the corner.
And spring wind crushed us in our bedrooms.
And the body was a machine and it sang like water.
And in the courtyard under the old tree, sprouted through bricks,
under fountain's murmur, we picked grapes from the hard rough
bowl and I thought of Pound: *wave, color of grape's pulp*.
And we were all great men.

And in that summer I began to drive.
And I slept for weeks without dreaming.
And we lost track of time.
And then the dogs began to bark at night.
And the pigeons sat fat on the chains.
And I felt things turn on me.
And I felt them turn on me and accuse.
And the pictures in my house began to watch me.
And the stair and the bathroom light began to watch me.
And I felt the heaviness of my house.
And there was dust and gum on the sidewalk.
And the smell of hair filled me with hate.
And the smell of breath filled me with hate.
And the motion of bodies filled me with hate.
And there was no rain for thirty-three days.
And in that summer death shook us.
Death shook the cinderblocks of our home.
And we were all great men.

NEW WYRM

By Nathan Wainstein

1
I think of *Beowulf*.
I think of that ruined man
who built the barrow in the cliff.

He saw that time had eaten man.
That objects ruin.
I think of the dragon.

I think that the dragon of our age
is diffusing itself
through blank tunnels. The day

will come when, immaterial,
it rises screaming

2
out of the Internet.

The Internet, like the old
North, has depths
and mountains, burnt-over lands,

unknown objects,
stark pointless structures
with weird inscriptions.

Maybe in a hundred years
some specialists will find
some long-hidden chamber

entered through the shattered iris
of a starlet.

3
Inside

there will be formless statues.
A junk-heap of strange

discarded objects.
Voices will moan
half-formed sounds like man-childs
and the vein

of the ancient beast
will be carelessly
punctured.

Then things will burn.

The Children of the Dragon

By Brendan Work

North Vietnam, 1966.

High over Ha Long Bay, something catches fire in the heavens. The explosion is no more than a marigold blooming in the vast lavender sky, and when Cho looks up it has gone. He returns his gaze to the beach, to his job gathering the snails inching up the shore. But a terrific sputtering noise grabs his attention again and he looks up. Cho's fingers loosen on his sack of snails. Now he cannot miss it—a bright fireball streaking out of the sky, heaving and tailing black smoke. It zooms toward Cho and his floating village. His feet stay frozen in the sand, his heart stops and his eyes widen. Even the chatter of the monkeys and the caw of the thrushes fall silent to the stranglehold of the moment. In the last second of the fireball's dive, it paints the limestone rocks a pleasing peach color and in the reflection of the still water, it becomes doubly magnificent. Then, with a whoosh and a tremendous crash that sends the world of Ha Long Bay into chaos, the fireball plunges into the lagoon between the Kissing Rocks and Sung Sot Cave.

The floating houses of the village rock as the crash ripples outward. None capsize, but furnishings, buckets, and fishing nets fall overboard as the houseboats bob on the water. Over on shore, snails make their escape as Cho remains rooted to the beach, awestruck. When the village awakens on a regular day, the people leave like birds from the nest, gliding away in all directions, toward Tortoise Islet in the north, or west to Fighting Cock Rock, or wherever the fish are swimming. Now it is like a disturbed beehive. In the moonlight, Cho can see the first one to untie his rowboat and paddle out is Bao, the wiry man who sells betel leaves. As he rows against the sudden swells of the lagoon, he is joined by the nosy Phuong sisters, and then someone Cho cannot recognize from afar, and then swarms upon swarms of tiny boats moving madly toward the spot where flames still dance on the surface.

Cho sprints down the beach to his boat and throws in his bag of snails, which is less than half full. His hands trembling, he rows into the lagoon to join the rest of the villagers. Although the ripples are not yet calmed, his feverish strokes bring him there in a matter of minutes, driven by a thrill he has never felt before. He rows up and finds a spot on the outside of the crowd next to Huong, one of the young village girls. Both have to make sporadic strokes to stay in place.

"Do you know what's going on?" asks Cho.

"No," Huong responds in a terrified whimper, her face lit up by the flames. "I was asleep."

"I—I was getting snails."

"Did you see it? What was it? What happened?"

Cho stops rowing for a moment and glides backward on a ripple. "It was a…I don't know."

“What did it look like?” asks a man on in front of Cho.

“You saw it?” asks another.

Cho paddles back into place and stares ahead. “It was all fire. It was like a huge fire thrown into the lagoon.”

“All fire? What was on fire?”

“I don’t know.”

The crowd of boats begins to buzz as villagers gossip and argue about the fire. Only a few remain silent in its glow, though it begins to flicker out. Most join in the hubbub. The drone of conversation goes on until one of the village elders hushes it with a loud croak.

“Quiet!” comes her ailing voice. “Quiet! We know what has occurred. There is no other explanation.” She pauses to interlace her old fingers and heaves a dramatic sigh. “The dragon has returned.”

No one laughs as they might have the day before. In the hush, the lagoon laps up against the sides of the boats. Then shouts arise from across the circle.

“Shut up! Go away, you crazy bitch!”

“Old hag! Get out of here!”

But the elder’s wrinkled face does not yield. She strikes back despite being overpowered, waving her arms about, casting shadows on the moonlit water. It’s a story Cho has heard before, so he can afford to miss the parts lost in the uproar: local legend of the Vietnamese war against the Chinese tells of a dragon sent to protect the land. As it flew into the bay, it spewed jade and jewels into the water. These gems became the limestone karsts of Ha Long Vinh—Bay of the Descending Dragon—that warded off naval invasion for centuries. The elder, now furious with the villagers’ blasphemous rejection of history, is shouting again and again that the dragon had returned.

“We are the children of the dragon!” she shrieks. “All of us!”

“Crazy bitch! Go away!”

The water roils with the villagers’ argument. The Phuong sisters start to shout over the old woman, saying little more than “Bitch!” and “Shut up!” and slapping their oars on the surface. The man who buys Cho’s snails starts to bang his hands on the side of his boat. Women rant, men grumble, children scream. But beneath the squabble, in the depths of the lagoon, another struggle goes unheard.

No one saw Bao dive. He is a lean man with taut muscles and a crook in his back characteristic of fishermen, who can slip into the water without a splash. In his youth with the village boys he learned his place as a skilled swimmer. Underwater, he can see clearly. When he descends into the lagoon to find the sunken fireball—which he, like Cho, observed in restless absence of sleep—he is confused to find metal wreckage bubbling and hissing in the deep. It is, for the most part, in one charred piece. He remembers the shape from a pamphlet he keeps in the corner of his houseboat. And he remembers the name: it is a fighter jet, like the ones the National Liberation Front

officers had promised Bao would be able to fly if he left the floating village and joined the people's war. But Bao cannot figure out why the NLF dropped one of their jets into Ha Long Bay—so as the other villagers bicker high above his head, he swims closer. His heart thumps in his ribcage.

Bao darts about the debris, looking for a way to get closer. Seeing a hole in the fuselage near the cockpit, he slithers in. There are gas bubbles rising everywhere, obscuring his typically clear vision, and the water is uncharacteristically warm. Against his better judgment he reaches out to feel the sunken plane's side paneling, and burns himself on the still-searing metal. He gasps in pain, and the lagoon floods into his lungs. Bao coughs, involuntarily letting in more of the saltwater, and begins to panic. He starts to swim out, but unable to see amidst the steam bubbles, he meets the hot metal siding instead. He flails, catching his limbs on the plane's destroyed aluminum framing, and his brain demands oxygen louder than ever. But Bao, whose life floating on the still lagoon has always facilitated calm but never demanded it, starts heaving. His lungs take on flows of the revolting saltwater. He feels his limbs grow heavy and the corners of his vision darken. With a final effort he thrashes to leave the fizzing fuselage, but his ankle remains caught in the twisted frame. Then Bao passes out. His body begins to sway like seaweed, his heart stops, and his brain dies. A day later, Bao's ankle simply slips out of the plane wreckage and his body rises to the surface of Ha Long Bay.

But although Bao's young daughter still wails, the floating village already knows what he might have revealed. The fireball was a US F-4 Thunderchief, says the NLF officer whose motorboat puttered up to the string of houseboats the next day. It was shot down by the People's Army of Vietnam.

From the edge of the crowd, Huong creases a pamphlet between her fingers. She looks out onto the lagoon, half-listening to the short woman in the olive fatigues. The water is still again, but none of the boats are out. The gray limestone karsts poke out of the bay like crooked fingertips—Horse Neck Formation and Black Cloud Isle and all the unnamed monoliths on the horizon. They look lonely to Huong. She imagines the fish swimming along the bottom of the bay, eyes darting. The bantam chickens bustle in their cages but don't squawk and the forest monkeys have stopped hooting. The morning after the crash, she was struck by the solemn silence of the floating village. The people bartered in silence, paddling their rowboats from stall to stall with slow strokes, passing blank stares to each other and muttering about poor Bao.

Huong looks at the short woman, whose hands are clasped respectfully in front of her. The last NLF recruiter gesticulated wildly and kicked over boxes, but this woman speaks earnestly. She seems to touch on a feeling that Huong is on the brink of understanding—no revolutionary fervor, no talk of people's liberation or imperialism or freedom fighting, and no party slogans. Instead she shakes her head, exhales, and says the simple fact.

"It won't be the same anymore."

Huong knows it. She leaves the circle of people in a daze and tells her father and mother she is going to fight with the NLF. It isn't her heart that tells her to go, she explains, it's her gut. She doesn't want to leave, but she cannot stay where everything is silent and broken. And with that she drapes her fishing net over her father's outstretched hand, dips her rowboat into the lagoon and goes ashore, swallowing the urge to take one last glimpse of Ha Long Bay.

When Huong finally looks back, all she sees is the freshly-dug soil of her five-foot foxhole, somewhere off the Ho Chi Minh Trail, further from home than she has ever been. Streaks of light filter through the palm fronds inches above her head. She remains unseen. But even below ground, the jungle air is hot and sticky and still, not like the cool breeze that blew off the lagoon each morning, in between the crooked fingertips, and ruffled the colorful awnings of the houseboats. Above ground, falling dewdrops send her into delusions; her hands are sweaty on the stock of her rifle. Every so often, planes roar overhead. She has not moved in hours.

Outside Huong's foxhole, a parakeet starts to screech. She closes her eyes and travels back to the lagoon, to the deck of her houseboat, from where she could see the birds flutter around the Kissing Rocks, where they made their nests. Sometimes their peeps and squawks woke her up before dawn and she watched them in the rising sun. She used to wonder if birds could kiss. But the stillness of the lagoon was nothing like this. For one moment she wants to see Ha Long Bay again, even if her parents are dead, even if the whole village has gone off to fight, even if the Kissing Rocks have been leveled by a fallen jet and their bird's nests are engulfed in flames. So out of as much curiosity as longing, she stands up to full height and opens her eyes.

The palm fronds slide off her head and to Huong's dismay, only the jungle floor spreads out before her. She is overcome by shame. She thinks to duck down again, but then she hears rustling behind her and pivots as fast as she can in her foxhole, raising barrel of her rifle ever-so-slightly above ground. Her face begins to get hot. Her hands tremble. Then there's another rustle, slightly more to the right this time, and Huong sees it: a man, crouched low to the forest floor, pale white skin beaded with sweat, pointing his gun at her. They see each other at the same time.

Under the jungle canopy, there is a spat of gunfire. Birds flee the branches, off to find peace in higher canopies. In the sky, the sound of the guns fades away as helicopters flit across the treetops and huge planes glide in between the clouds. Some carry men, others carry bombs, some fly north, others fly south. One flies toward Ha Long Bay.

The pilot is an American, a balding man named Silas. He is near the end of his one-year tour in the air and has begun to go slightly mad—he has taken to dallying on missions to watch the sun dip into the sea at nightfall, flying too low over enemy batteries to cheat death, and taking his hands off the controls for several seconds at a time. He has a payload to deliver over Hai Phong, the North Vietnamese industrial capital, for perhaps the twenty-fifth time in the past two months. Silas is tired from having been in the air all day, but he knows the route. He knows the coordinates. He could fly it without thinking.

But although the flight plan warns of anti-aircraft activity in the area, this time he wants to make his approach low over Ha Long Bay—there, he has heard, the limestone monoliths look like thousands of broken teeth from above, scattered in the blue expanse. It was his predilection for intricate mechanical workings that brought Silas into the Air Force, but now, having studied too many gauges and turned too many dials, only the exquisite peculiarities of nature widen his eyes.

The day grows long as Silas flies. He is on schedule to watch the pastel sunset, but as the sky turns purple in its wake, he grows anxious—if the bay is not lit properly, it will be a wasted effort. Yet sure enough, before the light has faded, Silas glimpses the network of tiny islets far below him, and begins his descent into Ha Long Bay.

A sense of majesty spreads in Silas' chest. He casts a bleary eye over the seascape and smiles. The limestone karsts cast dusky shadows over the still water, creating the image of chess pieces under a desk lamp. Then, as Silas flies lower, they begin to look like uncut gems, jagged but each unique, and in his budding madness he pretends to pick them up one by one. Silas does not see the barrage of North Vietnamese anti-aircraft missiles. He only flies on, smiling stupidly at his handful of imaginary islands.

There is a boom, and then the fire that begins in the heavens comes quickly down to earth, crashing into the moonlit lagoon between the Kissing Rocks and Sung Sot Cave. By now, Cho has heard of many other crashes in Ha Long Bay. But he has seen only the first one, which carried the floating village on its ripples to the far reaches of the world. From the beach, he watches the explosion blossom in the sky and the ensuing fireball begins its descent. He watches its billowing serpentine tails. He watches the sides of the limestone glow pink, and in a flash of color, the still lagoon receives the dragon. But tonight only the nosy Phuong sisters meander out to the spot of the crash, followed by a few others. Cho merely shakes his head and turns around. The snails are getting away.

Contributors

Marissa Bulger is a senior English major at Villanova University, originally from Binghamton, NY. After graduation she plans to do 2 years of service with the Alliance for Catholic Education through the University of Notre Dame, teaching high school English in rural Louisiana. In 7th grade she wore thick glasses and saddle shoes and read too much to be cool.

Melissa Goodrich is a sophomore creative writing student at Susquehanna University. She has a love for photography, the Pantoum, and finds all 101 2-letter legal Scrabble words fascinating (AA is Hawaiian lava, JO is sweetheart).

Kara Knickerbocker is a freshman Creative Writing major at Susquehanna University. Born and raised in Saegertown, PA, she found her passion for writing in the sixth grade. While most of her work is poetry, Knickerbocker has found an interest in nonfiction since being at college. She enjoys travelling, live music, and spending time with her family and friends. She hopes to be an editor in the future.

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Nathan Wainstein is an apprentice playwright. He is studying history. He lives in Philadelphia.

Brendan Work is a Comparative Literature major at Swarthmore College, originally from Missoula, MT. He has taken courses in Russian, Arabic, and English literature and plans to furnish his World Literature minor with a study of African literature while abroad in Botswana in the spring. Interested in writing from a young age, Brendan is considering a career in journalism, maybe for a magazine, or a newspaper, maybe with a camera, or maybe not. His other passions include photography, rugby, and comedy.