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While putting together this edition of The Chestatee Review, I was reminded of the ancient curse, popularly supposed to be Chinese: May you live in interesting times. We are victims of that curse, you and I. This has been an odd and somewhat disturbing year for us all. The world around us seems at once distant and close; its violence and its beauty vying for our attention. I might be taken as remiss if I did not at least acknowledge the current conflict in which our country finds itself embroiled; but apart from that acknowledgement, I will say nothing. The Chestatee Review is not a political forum; it is a place to celebrate the literary, a place in which one can explore the meanings of Life and Art without recourse to the political and divisive.

As usual, many of the works within emerged from Tom Sauret’s Creative Writing class, and many thanks are due him for his unfailing support of our efforts. Also as usual many more submissions were made than could be printed. I thank all of you who submitted work and urge you to continue to write, paint, draw, or do whatever it is you do that unleashes your creativity. All those who create Art are heroes in some small way. This edition of The Chestatee Review is dedicated, then, to heroes great and small: those who sacrifice and suffer for Life and Art, be they writers or soldiers, astronauts or artists. Thank you, dear reader, as well. You are the reason we have this strange habit of scratching away with pen on paper. Your appreciation of what to us is an exercise in catharsis makes it all worthwhile.

Matthew Lewis
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Coelacanth*

I stand before the case in the Fossils wing
Of the Natural History Museum.
Within, a thing from out of time,
A fish (or not?), so much larger than it seems in the photos
In back issues of the Geographical.
"Steel-grey" is the cliché
For the color of the thing,
But cobalt blue is what I see.
The giant blank eye stares back at me,
The stubby pegs of teeth in the gaping mouth
And those clumsy not-fins
Which seem somehow wrong.

But ask the coelacanth about us
In a hundred million years.
We think our brains lock us out of the cycle,
But this fishfossil thing exists
(As does all else in nature)
Because it works.
And "whatever works" is nature's motto.
Wrongness, as so much else,
Comes down to perspective.

*The coelacanth (SEE-la-kanth) is a large lobe-finned fish, Latimeria spp., which was thought to have been extinct until 1938 when specimens began to be collected and identified off the coast of Madagascar. It has only recently been filmed in situ. Although the term is misleading, the coelacanth has come to represent a quintessential "missing link."

Matthew Lewis
Woman and Serpent

I am Eve
Mother and Goddess of earth.
Listen closely.
A new myth
Is about to unfold.

I saw an enormous goldfish
Pop out of a lake of fire,
Like an angel’s ascension,
Only to retreat back down
Into murky waters
Like a six-horned beast.

The lily pads above him —
Sweet drifters —
Spreading, moving, outward
To a cool breath whisper of
Clouds-god-man.

Prince Goldfish,
Sweeping up to the edge of the pond
He opens his mouth, then
Ahook-a§nare-abitesize nibble.
Jerk-twich-flungupfromthe

Burning and flames.
Ripples move out across the heat
And a sharp ice-covered land
Spreads out over Eden’s waters.
The goldfish now caught in my net.
I eat him,
His bones now my bones.

Jessica Murphy
Position on Yoga Positions

In one short moment of sweet peace,
I stretch and breathe and meditate
And feel my stress released.
So that I can concentrate.
Happy Baby forgets the classes.
Dog rips up the tests.
Proud Warrior defeats the masses
Who interrupt my rest.
But then I hear the telephone
Or recall an undone chore
And must leave Cat and Cow alone
Together on the floor.
The world still calls and must be met.
It’s not time for a break just yet.

Michelle Gilstrap

Life is Like...

Play.

Life begins nice and slow
Introductions, discoveries, and inventions.
Slowly as time goes by
Complications, difficulties, and tribulations.

Fast Forward.

Past the troubles you want to skip
Sacrifice, decisions, and avarice.
To the victories you want to see.
Promises, solutions, and kindness.

Rewind.

Back to the past, once held dear.
Independence, freedom, and liveliness.
And to all the things you miss,
Compliments, wit, and confidence.

Pause.

At the times you want to remember.
Birthdays, weekends, and holidays.
People and things from a time before
Family, friends and property.

Stop.

Matt Bruneau
Debojo de la Luna Gitana

Purple flowers falling at my feet,
The reflection of the Torre de Oro on the Guadalquivir,
The lingering fragrance of wisteria, ever-so-sweet,
Los sonidos de las trompetas echoing in my ear.

The yellow wooden wheels spinning by,
Detrás de los pasos finos fuertes, their necks arched high.
Walking in high-heeled shoes on cobblestone streets,
Bailando toda la noche en la discoteca Antique.

Café con leche and walks through the royal park,
Ringing church bells at the break of dawn,
Stars and stripes on a Spanish heart,
La palabra 'logar' splits on my tongue.

Picking an orange and eating it straight from the tree,
Was one of life's little indulgences for me.
El sabor de la naranja en mi boca,
La piel de los gitanos, the color of mocha.

Los trajes de flamenco and flowers in my hair,
Sevillanas strummed out on a guitar.
Drinking mantanzilla y rebuho without a care,
This dream I had once wished upon a star.

La Maestranza and the blood-stained sand,
Los paisajes blancos waving from their hands.

Los pasos, los nazarenos, the smell of incense as they passed,
La cara del Obispo, lit by the candles of midnight mass.

Triana, Los Remedios, El Barrio Santa Cruz,
Each night my bleeding heart cries, "Una noche más."
La Giraldita, my beacon if my way were ever confused,
Como respiró la ciudad, mi alma está en paz.

El campo, los amigos, las memorias that I hold,
Not wanting to part with la lengua of my soul.
Mis risas, mis pesar, mis lágrimas, mi sonrisa,
Mi esperanza, mi sueño, mi corazón, mi Sevilla.

Julie Pass

Rain Potential

Out on the porch at Hunter’s apartment, with the floodlight shining, I slumped in the same old tattered loveseat as last night, and maybe the night before, but who can tell when it all blends together like this. Everybody’s talking and smoking and passing wine, and all turn heads ‘cause out comes Alyx, my sister. Can she tell I’m drunk?

I want to get up and hug her, but I don’t want to look weird in front of Hunter and his friends. They work together right around the corner at Domino’s and are something like two years younger than me. There’s a few more guys, maybe a little younger, and the occasional girl, scattered around the apartment, playing Playstation, downloading porn, and sometimes strumming a guitar. And then there’s Cassie.

Hunter says hey to Alyx, winking, and smoothing a peeled Budweiser label onto his shirt.

"Where you been all day? Did you move in over here or something?" she asks me.

"Not really. How long you in town for?" I ask her. She left Gainesville two years ago to work for a publishing company in Atlanta.

"Just today. I went by the house and talked to dad." It’s a trailer, but she calls it the house.

"Why?"

"I was passing through. He said you ain’t at home anymore." She opens her purse.

"He gave me this." She hands me a piece of notebook paper, torn in half, with dad’s dirty scrawl on it. It says, "Ethan, went to Harrah’s. Cereal is in the cabinet. Love Dad."

The casino again. "I know where the cereal is," I mumble and wad it up, and drop it on the blotchy, wine-stained porch. It rolls past one of the cigarette-stuffed gaps in between the planks and rests next to Hunter’s shoe.

"Look like a trashcan out here?" he says.

I pick up the wad, and stuff it in my pocket, but not before threatening to steal his pot of gold. He just shakes his head at me.

Cassie comes stumbling in from the kitchen, sits down next to me on the tattered loveseat, and hands me a can of Southpaw. I introduce her to Alyx as "Cassandra, one of my friends."

Alys glances at Cassie but offers no greeting.

"I saw J.L. yesterday," she says.

J.L. was my best friend back in high school.

"What’s he up to?"

"He asked about you. He got a job at The Atlanta Journal."

"No shit?"

"I told him you were still in Gainesville. He said to give him a call. Oh, Dad said the power got cut off. When I came in he had all the doors and windows open so he wouldn’t suffocate," she says.

"Yeah, I know, but it ain’t like he ain’t got the money to pay for it." He ain’t
punched enough holes in the wall to allow ventilation?
"Speaking of power bills..." Hunter shoots a look at me. I owe him some money for the utilities. In fact, it's the only thing I help out with. I don't pay rent here at the apartment; I'm just a visiting student, therefore I shouldn't have to pay what he and the other tenants pay.
"I'll get it to you pretty soon," I say. I have every bit of the money in my wallet, but something keeps me from reaching for it.
"How's the internship going?" Alys says.
"It's...not going too well," I say.
"He got fired," blurts Hunter.
"You got fired! It was an internship Ethan... what'd you do?" she says.
"I didn't show up for a couple days. I was kinda sick."
"He was kinda hungover," squawks Hunter, punching one of his friends in the arm.
Alys turns to me, and I shrug my shoulders. I got the position last spring in hopes of becoming a real reporter. It'd been my aspiration until recently. And after a few months archiving old newspapers, making Xerox copies, and never being allowed to contribute more than the occasional wedding announcement, I lost my desire to show up.
She stands at the wooden deck and looks up at me with this scared expression. She stands up and announces, "I've got to get back. I've got work in the morning." As she walks toward the door, she snatches at my shirt sleeve, urging me to follow her into the apartment.
When we get inside, she hugs me and starts going through her purse. "What do you want?" I ask.
She stops rummaging, brings her head level with mine, closes her eyes, and inhales.
"What is it?"
"You smell like dad," she says, beginning to dig again in her purse.
"Ethan... you're going to get away from here soon, right?"
"Why?"
"All your old friends are doing something... good... and here you are... with these kids."
"They ain't kids."
"You should read this," she says, and stuffs something in my hand, and walks away.
It's a tri-fold pamphlet with bright text.
"Where you going?" I yell.
"Going home."
"Hey!" I yell, and the door slams.
I walk back out on the porch and light a cigarette. I drop down into one of the plastic chairs and stuff the pamphlet into my pocket. I look over at Hunter and company. They're standing opposite me, taking turns punching each other in the arm.
One of them, out of breath, nods his head eagerly at me. "Hit me!" he says.
"No. Where's the wine?" I say.
"Here," says Hunter. I spin off the cap and hear it hit the deck, but don't matter.
Hunter picks up the screw-top cap and thrusts it at me. "What'd I say about the porch?"
I stand up and throw my plastic chair off the deck.
Hunter follows me inside. "What the hell's your problem?"
"You and the freakin' lollipop guilt out there."
"Take a shot with me."
We both go scouring for shotglasses in the kitchen, but no luck. He finds a greasy red plastic cup in the sink with Ramen noodles floating in it, and rinses it out. I can't even find something so stabby and use the cap off the Smirnoff bottle. "I hate vodka."
"Hell, at least it's Smirnoff."
I gulp the capful.
"You know," says Hunter, with squinted eyes from the throat-burn, "you look a little bit like your sister."
"You look like one of those six-ounce midget bottles of Budweiser."
He laughs. "You drunk?"
"No."
"Hell!"
"How much you had to drink?"
"Count the shirt, bitch." He points to his t-shirt, which has several Budweiser labels plastered to it.
"I'm gonna go piss."
He sticks a cigarette in his mouth and says, "Come get me when you're outta there."
I flip on the light-switch and close the door. J.L. landed a job at the A.J.C., and I can't even keep an internship with the local daily... should get out of here now... but tomorrow night, when there's nothing else to do, and Hunter calls, and don't dig the life-change, and I don't wanna be stuck, friendless, alone in the dark on a Saturday night, I'll think differently.
I stare into the mirror above the bathroom sink. I run my fingers through my hair, put one hand on my hip, and sway back and forth. With all of the light in here, every little blemish on my face is magnified. My pale skin and bony face look more drastic than usual. The stubble on my face makes me look dirty.
"What if I don't stop drinking tonight?" I unclip my cellphone and look at the time: 12:59. It passes so fast these summer nights.
I make a pit stop at the fridge, where the Southpaw's cold and salty.
I walk out on the porch, and Hunter's sitting on the wooden deck with a chubby girl I've never seen before, his arm around her. And there's Cassie, a loyal lapdog, on the tattered love seat. "I'm outta the bathroom," I tell Hunter.
"I pissed on that BMW." He points down, three stories. "Same one you hit with the chair."
I pop the top of my can and tell everybody my theory about this terrible beer. "See, all the good beer companies drained the last sip out of each bottle of their... respectively good beer... and dumped it in a barrel, and took turns taking sips in that barrel... and... this is what I'm drinking." I take another sip and look over at Cassie. She's got that you'll do sex appeal. She's drinking Southpaw and smiling at my drunken ram. "The only girl I know that'll drink Southpaw," I say, and she giggles real cute. I always thought she was cute, but that giggle did it for me. I sit down right next to her on the loveseat.

She scoots close and rests a foot on my leg. It's nice to know there's someone there, even if it's just for the next few conscious hours. She reaches for my hand, and I reach for my beer. I take a sip, and then fumble for her hand. ****

Waking up this summer morning, my brain feels like a dead organ. My mouth and throat go beyond parched. I try to move, and every muscle is sore. I roll over and stand up, and it looks like the usual Columbine-job here. There's kids sprawled in every way, whichever way they fell. Cassie's in the fetal position, topless, balled up in a corner. Her vein-blue skin, dotted with crimson blodches, stands out like highlighted text. An empy bottle's resting on its side next to her limp hand. She's not dead, just looks like it, good ol' anonymous ad.

Stepping over empy potato chip bags and beer bottles, items triggering a glimpse—a fleeting memory, unwanted, like the salty cigarette-smoked flavor of your finger when you throw it down your throat to be rid of that slow-circling sickness so you can go drink more—I step out onto the wooden porch and plop down into a plastic chair. I reach into my pocket for cigarettes, and a bright-colored piece of paper falls out onto the wooden floor. It's the pamphlet Alya gave me. In big, bright, fat letters:

Overcoming Alcoholism ON YOUR OWN.

The cool morning air feels nice, and I close my eyes and drag, and almost feel alive. But that goes away when I open my eyes. Among the cans and bottles passed out on the wooden porch, snow-sprinkled in gray ash, I count 12 cans of Southpaw and marvel that I have a pulse; that, and that there's only one cigarette left in the crinkly soft-pack I bought late last night, joels me.

I put out my cigarette, half-smoked, and open the tri-fold pamphlet. In bright red text, one of the mantras reads, I COULD BE USING MY MONEY FOR BETTER THINGS.

In the bathroom, I stick my head in the sink, drink water until my stomach no longer feels the grinding void, and look at my reflection in the mirror. Puffy bloodshot eyes, red-lined carpet tansos across my face... what happened last night... something to wake me up.

I pace around the bathroom. In the same apartment, with the same people, doing the same... shit... why am I here?

I push open the bathroom door, motivated, quoting from the pamphlet. TO ABSTAIN FROM THAT WHICH I ENJOY, YET SIMULTANEOUSLY DESTROYS MY POTENTIAL—"Hey Ethan," says Cassie, her voice like a glass of ice water on my bare skin, and I brush past her, hoping she thinks even less of what happened last night than I do.

"I'll see you tonight," she yells, as I open the front door.

Without turning, I shout, "I won't be here tonight."

I walk out, not bothering to talk to anybody about how much so and so drank last night, or who got laid, or who fell off the balcony. Out the door, and as soon as it slams shut, I stop and wonder what I'll do tonight. What's there to do in that dark, lonely trailer?

Like always, I park up next to the road 'cause the driveway's a slope and my little car don't handle the gravel too well. The sky's dark and cloudy. The only good thing about cloudy skies is the rain potential. I love the idea of water collecting, then bursting away from the darkness. I hear stories of acid rain, but how can I believe that and still want to get out of bed.

Once in dad's trailer, I fill and refill a big tall glass of faucet-cold water, drinking every bit in a couple of quick upurns. I look in the cabinet, and there's a new box of fruity Pebbles. That's my favorite cereal. I grab the box and park in front of the television. I hit the power button on the remote control several times, before tossing it across the room, remembering the absence of electricity.

After eating probably half the box, sans milk, I perform the ritual of raising all the blinds in the house. It doesn't do a lot of a whole good, though, without the sun. I sit back down in dad's recliner and pull the pamphlet out from my pocket. I DON'T HAVE TO DRINK JUST BECAUSE MY FRIENDS ARE DRINKING.

Right, screw those guys... gonna break through like a delve, get the hell outta here, get another job and surge forward... but come on now, ain't nobody forcing me to stay... I'm the one... up later than the average porch-dweller, egging the pass-outs to wake up, take a shot, and play PlayStation with me.

I think about the last time I saw Dad, sitting in this same chair a few weeks ago. It was the first time he mentioned this trip to Harrah's.

I was asleep in bed on an un-hungover morning. "Ethan, come 'ere," he yelled from the living room.

I rubbed my eyes and saw the sun seeping through the blinds in my window. It charged me, and I got out of bed, lifted the blinds off the hinges, and dropped them in a pile on the rust-colored carpet.

In the living room, Dad reclined, stabling a cigarette into an ashtray. He stared at the blank television screen.

"Sit down," he said, taking a sip of coffee.

His eyes remained fixed on the television, perhaps trying to evoke guilt from me for the situation.

"Well, you're 21."

"I am 21."

"Old enough to gamble."

I nodded my head. The sun waned and vanished behind a single, white cloud.

"You wanna go with me to Harrah's?"

"Not really."
"Not really," he echoed in a whisper. He took another sip of coffee, and returned his gaze to the television.

"Is that all you wanted?"

"I need some money to get the power back on."

"I ain't got that much left."

"Shit."

"I haven't got a job yet."

"Well, if you weren't drinking every goddamn night."

"If you weren't blowing your money on whores!"

He picked up the remote control, closed his fist around it like he meant to crush it, and threw it across the room. It smashed against the woodgrain-wallpapered wall. I walked out the front door, got into my car, revved the little motor, and drove to the apartment.

I stare into the television reflection. I can't see everything as clearly in that black-gray screen. The silhouette of stacked books next to the recliner looks almost like a nightstand. The couch doesn't look as dilapidated. I can't tell how puffy my eyes are, how pale my skin is.

Fearing boredom—that could bring birth to a wandering mind, that could awaken me to the fact that it's soon to be Saturday night, and I'm really going to sit this one out, not going into luminous streets, radio blasting, cigarette dangling from my hand, into a night of potential at the crowded apartment—I decide to take a nap.

I blink my eyes. It's 4 p.m., and I've still got the dead brain. I'm only awake because my phone is ringing. I grab for it, still lying on my back.

"Hell of a night." It's Hunter.

"Was it?"

"Pretty," he drones.

"What are you doin' after work tonight?"

"Goin' home."

"You don't wanna catch a movie or something?"

"No, I'm pretty tired."

"I just can't do it tonight."

"What, drink?"

"Yeah."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Ain't this shit gettin' a little odd?"

"Hell. You should still stop by."

"No."

"OK. Well, Cassie said you were gonna be here. What's up with y'all?"

"Nothing."

One less hungover day of shouting puree, cursing my beating heart, and coughing up spider eggs from chain-smoked chugs is a step forward, and then after today, conquer the next day, and one step at a time. Just as with any linear process... but why does day-one have to be today? Why not tomorrow, or a week from now? It's the summer, and what'll I do if I ain't over there, livin' it up with the folk I been livin' with all summer anyway? I hang up the phone and wonder if I might get in touch with J.L. I scroll through the directory on my cellphone, passing Cassie's number, which she keyed in as "cassiexxoxo." I find and call J.L.'s cellphone number. There's no answer, but I get his voice mail: "Hi, this is J.L., leave me a message, or you can get me at the office." The office! God it's true! My old friends have become puppies. I leave him a message, saying we should get together.

This at least gives me something to look forward to. Up until now I've seen the day as a prelude into night. Time isn't measured by the red-glowing digits of Emerson clock radio, or the darkness made light by the lazy upstroke of one's hand. My cellphone rings. It's J.L., who just happens to be off today, and wants to come pick me up. About an hour later, I hear gravel crunching outside. I walk to the front door and don't recognize the vehicle. But J.L. gets out.

"Ethan! How the hell are ya, bud?"

"Hey J.L."

He walks around his brand-new Toyota Camry to shake my hand. "Your dad at work?"

"Yeah right."

He chuckles, seeing it's ok to laugh about my dad being worthless. He laughs literally like, "Hahahaha!"

Riding along in this fresh-smelling car, J.L. begins with the well-meaning small talk. I kind of hate it, but kind of welcome it, because I don't know what else I'd say to him. Physical separation, even in close relationships, can change what once was a close bond.

"How are things with the Times?"

"I got fired."

"What?"

"I missed work like three times, and the executive editor fired me."

"Holy cow!"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I heard you're a real reporter now."

"Yeah, slaving as an intern for a whole year finally paid off."

"That's great man, congratulations. The Atlanta Journal."

"Thanks. So what have you been up to?"

"Well... I've been lookin' around for another job... hanging out with some friends."

"Do I know them?"

"You probably know Hunter Brady. He graduated a couple years after us."

"No! That kid with like size-three shoes? Oh man, we used to give that kid so much shit. Anybody from our class?"
"No. Just a bunch of kids."
"I understand."

We drive to the mall and get tickets for From Dust till Dawn. Sitting in the dimly lit theatre, I notice little things about J.L., like the way he crosses his legs in that fashion once thought to be evidence of latent homosexuality, and his way of gesturing with casual waves of his right arm, little things I haven't seen anybody do all summer. He acts like a gentleman I guess.

After the movie we walk back to his car. It's getting dark already since the sun's not out.

"How did you do it?" I ask.
"I worked my ass off."
"It's hard for me. I'm smart enough, but I can't walk the straight and narrow."
"You're smarter than me. You need to get away from these kids."
"I need to."

"You're one of the smartest guys I know. You know, if you want to get on as an intern I can put in a good word for you. They're always looking for young and ambitious talent."

"Could you seriously do that? That'd be great! I'm getting out of Gainesville."
He drops me off at the trailer as the world turns dark purple.

My dad's big truck sits in the gravel driveway.

I walk in the door and close it softly, not wanting to wake him if he's sleeping. This is not an act of altruism. I hear him snoring and recognize his slumped figure on the recliner. His mouth hangs open, and through his nostrils comes the most shrill and haunting whistle. There's an empty pint of Jack in his hand. He must have lost a lot of cash at Harrah's.

With this in mind, I tread softly into my room, knowing a night with a fight with dad will only jangle my nerves worse. I lie down in bed, and pray for sleep. I stare at what's quickly becoming darkness. Wonder what Hunter's up to...probably macking on Cassie...they must be wondering why I haven't showed...bust the time I snap into the first car and watch the sunset.

It's rough sitting in bed, staring at darkness, knowing how bright and populated other places are. I toss and turn for an hour, and all I can think about is getting over to the apartment.

I pick up my cellphone to call Hunter...one ring...two...three...four.

ENDURE THE NIGHT. YOU'LL BE MORE EXPERIENCED AND PREPARED FOR TOMORROW NIGHT. What better way to test yourself than being around drunk people, with a fridge full of beer.

I open my bedroom door to escape, but my cellphone rings. I shut the door so my voice won't wake Dad.

It's J.L. "Ethan? I got some great news bud. If you're interested that is. I called my editor, and he wants you to come in for an interview tomorrow morning. Isn't that spectacular?"

"Seriously? Hell yeah, dude. This is it...second chance...ticket out of here...did he just say "spectacular"? "What time should I come in?"
"He said anytime before nine."
"God, I appreciate this man."
"Anytime bud."
I hang up and set the alarm on my phone for 6 a.m., hoping with all the optimism I got that tomorrow morning things will change.

As I tiptoe through the living room, I notice Dad isn't snoozing anymore, so I wait for the sound of his voice. But I don't foresee the fat-strong arm that swings around my neck, ripping my feet from the carpet. Falling down in the darkness is weird. Your expectations of when the fall ends are out of whack, and you're always about to hit the ground.

The powerful phantom strides my chest and punches me in the throat. I hear the voice of my father. "Break into my house, asshole?"

I try to answer, but all that comes is a whisper. I manage to grab one of the hands and twist it around. When I feel the give of his weight, I swing hard at the dark air. My bony fist smacks his face, and the weight lifts off. I can breathe for a second, and start to get up, but he pins me again. He hits me right in the nose, and I can feel the blood run down the side of my face. Trying again to use my vocal chords proves futile. I see violence as the only way out. I bear hug his torso, and lunge backward. We roll over a couple times, until I'm on top. I pin his arms to the ground. He brings his knee up real hard, cracking into my ribcage, and I roll off and scramble away on my hands and knees. All I can do is weep. The throat-punch has me speechless.

"Where the fuck you at?"
I hear him stumbling toward me, and I just freeze up. He steps on my hand, and seizes me by the forearm. I close my eyes. The whiplash-lightening jolts my head backward. And I gasp out, "Dad?"

All I hear is heavy breathing, and all I smell is alcohol and blood.

"It's me Dad!"
Between heavy snatches of breath, he says, "Ethan. What are you sneaking around for?"

"I was just going outside."
He starts to explain himself but stops halfway.

"I think you broke my nose," I say.
He struggles, and stands up. "Come on, let's go outside. We'll look at it under the light."

I follow him, holding my nose and limping. We walk across the street, and beneath the heavy-shining street light I sit down and lean my head against the pole. While he examines my nose, breathing heavy snort-fumes, I notice the big red splash on his cheekbone. "That's gonna be a black eye," I say.

"You're damn right. You're a hell of a brawler."
Using a flashing light and a roll of toilet paper we get cleaned up in front of the bathroom mirror. Upon close examination we decide nothing's broken. But I know I'll be hurting for the next few days.
Dad sets up the flashlight so it's pointing up at the ceiling, in the center of the living room, kind of like a little lamp. He sits down in his recliner, and I sit on the floor, across from him, in front of the television.

We small-talk it for a little while. He's drunk, and sorry for what he did, even though he won't say it. I'm still shaking from it all. I tell him I'll have to be going, but I'll be back after my interview tomorrow morning.

He smiles at that, and I notice for the first time a resemblance in his and my sister's face. He begins rocking back and forth in his recliner, his eyelids coming down slow. I start to walk out the front door but stop. I walk over and hand him several twenty-dollar bills. "Here's for the electricity, Dad."

Getting out of my car I can see drunk people hanging off Hunter's porch. MOST FATAL FALLS ARE LINKED TO ALCOHOL USE. I pull the pamphlet from my pocket, thinking of Alys, as I rip it up.

Walking up the steps, I think about giving Hunter the news.

I walk into the kitchen, and he's standing at the counter, Budweiser labels plastered all over the front and back of his shirt, pouring some bourbon in a glass. "There's a cold one in the freezer."

"No. I'm not drinking tonight."

"Well, hell. Hey, Cassie's out there." He thrusts his glass in the direction of the porch. "I kept tellin' her you wasn't comin. But she said you were...and here you are."

"Yeah, I'll hang out for a little while."

"Hell. Might as well since you're here," he says. The smell of beer floats freely. I can hear people carrying on, and being loud and ugly and drunk, really. They sound like they're having a good time. I hear the "plink" of a beer cap on the porch. Hunter downs the bourbon, then grabs a beer from the refrigerator. "You comin' out?"

"Yeah." I follow him out the door, and the first person I see is Cassie, leaning on the railing.

I sit down in the tattered loveseat.

Cassie comes over and sits down. "I knew you'd come back to me," she says and scoots real close. She looks real cute tonight.

"You really like that stuff?" I ask, pointing to a lone can of Southpaw at her feet. She smiles and puts an arm over my shoulder. I pull her closer, and she giggles.

Frank Reddy

Mister Dean
Photograph by Diego Ibarra
Spoken Locusts

The men on TV open their mouths
And locusts pour out.
A whispering hum as they cover my face.
The locusts catch me.

I run from the room and cover my ears.
The locusts hum louder.
Out on the street, I think that I'm safe.
The locusts are gone.

I walk past a bum. He smiles and speaks
And locusts pour out.
I run past a priest. He nods as I pass
And spits locusts at me.

I fly back to my room, slam off the TV.
The locusts are gone.
My wife walks to me. Her face shows concern.
Did the locusts find her?

I reach out to her. A tear stains my cheek.
I fear the locusts.
Her cranberry lips part to soothe me.
She breathes locusts at me.

I jump to my feet and knock them away.
From her, locusts too.
The hum now a rose as they swarm from her mouth.
Locusts on her lips.

I fall to the floor and cover my face
To hide the sight of the locusts.
I try to speak out, my words just buzz.
I speak locusts too.

Jessica Murphy

Scene in Central Park

Camellias sway.
The bench, silent —
Alone — waiting for a
Body; a

Weeping willow overhangs the
Scene, brown and red-
Rusted. Sulfur
Eating at it.

A blur passes
—moves—
through a wall
of daisy-hemmed brick.

Jeffrey Yoann
Thief

The crash wakes me from my television-droning reverie.
"Little bugger’s back," I think.
I move to the window to scare him off.
I’ve never seen him.
But every morning I see enough evidence
To convict him, sure.
The toppled boxes, the cat food strewn,
The precise scattering of little clawed footprints.
And there he is –
Picking up bits of cat food,
Delicately turning them, washing them in nothing.
Shiny black nose weffing the air.
Hunched over the cats’ bowl, bold as brass.
Ringed tail abristle with concentration as he crunches.
Suddenly he stops – he knows (supernaturally that I’m watching,
Even though I pull the blinds only the smallest fraction.
He turns and looks, glittereyed and blackmasked,
Though less nervous than I.
And as he eats, the cats stare wide-eyed, annoyed at the intrusion.
Forever foes of entropy, they don’t like disruption in their ordered lives.
And here is this wild foreigner, this barbarian outsider;
This pretender who brings forestchaos to the porch,
Cattike but not cutty, caged though uncaged,
Forcing their awareness (and mine)
To a higher level,
One which encompasses a world they (I) know nothing of.
Not that the ‘coon realizes this.
He doesn’t care:
Perhaps he’s as blinkered as the cats (I) was (were) before.
No. He knows full well the effect he has.
The cats glance at me, demanding that I do something;
Remove this outlander from the porch.
But he knows that I will only watch.
He knows he is safe; a gift from the darkness,
Knows I will watch enchanted,
Grace by nature,
His presence touching forgotten wildness within.
What fierce glee, this rush of adrenaline – confronting the wild,
Meeting the forest firsthand, on its own terms, not mine.
Yes. He’s well aware that he honors me with himself.
And I watch until, sated at last, he turns, looks me straight in the eye,
The Penny

Walking along the sidewalk
He saw a penny
Its green Lincoln staring up at him
A penny will bring you luck
His grandmother used to tell him.
Bending to pick it up
He saw a sign, a billboard,
Bill Gates staring down at him
Luck does not come that easily
If there is such a thing at all
Bill Gates told him now.
He walked on.

Margaret Burris

Nihilist on the Porch Preaching the Gospel

Out on the third floor
I told her nothing matters
And she said, "Jump then."

Frank Reddy
Isolation
Photograph by Diego Ibarra
Dr. Seuss Syndrome

I read Dr. Seuss
Day in and day out.
I read Dr. Seuss
When my son is about.

I read about fish
And the wish made by fish.
I read of a cat
And his big, stupid hat.

I read in damn rhyme
So much of the time,
That I just can't quite help
Always rhyming myself.

And using this tempo
To make all the words go
Into a line and
Fit hand in hand
Is very hard to do
If you're not Dr. Seuss.

My advice to you is
If you ever have kids
Keep Dr. Seuss out and Shel Silverstein in.

Michelle Gilstrap
Tennis Tournament

In the blazing sun
On the hard-baked courts
I wait for the ball
I know I will lose
(She’s winning 40-15)
All I want is a drink of water
The ball blows right by me
Well I won
She tells me
She is ecstatic
I ply her win
She will have to play again
As we shake hands
I revel in my wonderful defeat.

Margaret Burriess
Mum
Pencil drawing by Hsin-Ching (Grace) Yu

Resolution
Monoprint by Hsin-Ching (Grace) Yu
Reverie
Computer graphics by Hsin-Ching (Grace) Yu

Solitude
Ink drawing by Hsin-Ching (Grace) Yu
An Immaculate Obsession

I worked in a run-down theatre for a long time. I got paid minimum wage from the time I started until the time I quit.

I was an usher, the kid that stands in front of a shiny silver ticket pole. I filled the hollow pole with ticket stubs and directed patrons to their respective movies.

Every night, between show times, there was the long, unendurable wait until the next show. Waiting that long, just standing there, sucked. That's not to say I enjoyed the hands-on work of tearing tickets during show times; I just liked to be doing something. This is the kind of restlessness that got me into trouble a lot of times. For instance, I'd gotten into the habit of clutching the pole, leaning forward on it, and tipping it dangerously off the ground. Or I'd pull the heavy metal cap off the top and toss it up in the air like a baseball. My boss always got pissed about it. "Get back to work," he'd say. "You're not acting professional." I'd snap the metal cap back onto the ticket pole, swearing, "Sorry, Mr. Ingram...it won't happen again."

"I know it won't happen again," he'd say, or sometimes, "Straighten that bowtie!" followed by his trademark smoker's cough.

Killing time between shows had degenerated so far that me and Damon had begun to place bets on the Strobe Light, a light above the rickety front entrance doors of the theatre that flickered on and off at random. "Five bucks says the light comes on before it tonight" he'd say.

The memory of one particular night at the movie theatre is vivid. That night my boss told me that it was my turn to clean the popcorn kettle. "I just cleaned it the night before last, I thought. It's Damon's turn. What actually came out of my mouth: "Damon, um...he uh...""

My boss raised his eyebrows. He walked over to the concession stand and glanced around, his head darting left then right, and got a flower-and-bird-decorated courtesy cup out of the counter. He looked around wildly, as if possessing the Holy Grail. Nobody was supposed to touch the courtesy cups without permission from Ingram.

I stood there, cursing him in my mind, imagining telling him that he was wrong, nonchalantly and in a masculine voice.

There was this rotation system with the nightly closing procedures. One kid might have to sweep the floors and dash down carpeted halls with the squeaky sweeper; another might be in charge of refilling all of the metal ice-bins with big 2-gallon buckets and re-stocking the candy and cups; and that would leave just me and the popcorn kettle. It was the worst. I never understood the uneven skew of responsibility that went with cleaning that big bastard. Whoever cleaned the popper was to bag the unused popcorn to be used at a later date; remove the seed filter and wipe it down; break down the kettle itself, wiping every greasy part clean; wipe the glass window enclosing the kettle; and finally, put it all together, and hope he didn't miss anything when Ingram came through with the White Glove.

This might not sound too horrible if one didn't know what pulsed through this
mechanical hell-spawn. There was this solidified oil that an employee, designated as
the popcorn server, put into the kettle. This is the slop that added the sunny, yellow-
glow to movie theatre popcorn. The slime facilitated the smooth popping of the pop-
corn, sans black smoke, and burned bitter kernels. I watched it trickle from the mouth
of the kettle and sighed.

The only thing that kept me from an all-night depression on that particular night was
a girl who pushed open the rickety doors of the movie theatre. The Strobe Light above
the front entrance flickered on as she passed under it. I could hear that sound that you
hear when you flip on a PC, that digital rendition of divinity. She was an immaculate
obsession from that very moment.

She walked past the concession stand, directly in front of my silver ticket pole. She
was accompanied by a short, unattractive girl, who was explaining something about
popcorn prices.

My mind went through a billion thoughts: can’t let this opportunity pass. I have to
talk to her, say something profound. I tried to think up some pickup lines, but she was
approaching my post quickly.

I thought about Damon, that smooth-talking ape at the concession stand, who didn’t
sweat this stuff. Seeing me shift my feet back and forth, drumming my sweating palms
on the sides of the cold, silver ticket pole, he nodded toward the girl’s ass, and grinned
real big. You bastard, I thought, and something about pearls and swine came to mind,
but the girls were moving closer and closer to me and my pole, the short girl clearly
dominating conversation, but I couldn’t make out a word. My girl just kept nodding
and nodding with a chilling smile and these uncanny green eyes.

It all came down to right at that moment. The situation at hand was everything to
me. What I was about to do, how I was about to act, and what I was about to say, had
serious destruction-potential.

She stood in front of me, smiling. *How are you doing...tonight?* I asked.
Her short friend spoke: *We’re doing just fine, how are you?*
I could hear her talking, but I wasn’t looking at her. My eyes were going from the
green-eyed girl to the floor, green-eyes...floor...green-eyes...floor... *I’m doing...well.*

*What the hell do people usually say in a situation like this?* Yes...um...busy night here.

The girl with the beautiful eyes smiled again, unaffected by my phonetic pitfall.
I noticed that I hadn’t taken the ticket that she had been holding in front of me for God
knows how long. *Oh, sorry,* I squeaked.
I tore the ticket, dropped the stub into the silver pole, and handed her the other half.
She walked away, leaving me with no closure and full of thoughts about the atrocity I’d
just committed.

I remembered the words *busy night.* I could hear myself speaking the phrase. I
heard it over and over again in my head, like a cracked record. I looked around the movie
theatre lobby and wanted to tear out my tongue and jam it into the ticket pole. The
lobby was empty, except for my coworkers, and a guy with a Dale Earnhardt shirt and a
backward Atlanta Braves cap shuffling my way. A bleach-blonde woman with jeans that
were too tight followed him. *sup dude,* he said in a Deliverance drawl.

*Hey,* I mumbled.
He held their tickets out, urging me to take them. I reached mechanically for them,
and he jerked them away. He grinned, nudging his girlfriend to watch. He did it again,
and of course I reached for them again. He laughed.
*I bet you want these tickets, man.*
*Yeah.*
*Ticket-takers what’s you do best, ain’t it?*
*I don’t know.*

*Where’d you get that bowtie? It looks real cute on you.* He winked at me.
I stared at him for a second, there was silence, and then he and the woman erupted
in laughter. *Don’t start cryin,* he said through his chortling and put the tickets in my
hand. I watched them walk down the hall; he kept turning around and grinning at me.

Then, not knowing I was still watching (or maybe they did), he embraced the woman
and stuck his tongue down her throat about halfway down the hall. I just watched, half-
replied, half-curious, and seeing me stare, Billy Bob shouted, *Take a picture, dude; it’ll
last a little longer!* I needed a cigarette.

I fished around in my black movie theatre vest for a box of cigarettes that didn’t
exist. I went through all of my pockets, producing only my car keys and one of those
lattice Bic lighters with the child-proof metal strip. It was a pink lighter I had come upon
while cleaning out one of the auditoriums a few weeks prior, and I usually had to hide
in a dark corner to light a cigarette, for fear that my friend, Damon, the concession stand
womanizer, might see it.

No cigarettes. This was catastrophic. Who the hell made those laws about tobacco?

In six months I could legally buy cigarettes, but until that day came it was a constant
worry. Who would buy them next? How much more could I burn before formally
being labeled a moocher?

Well, there was one person that I could always go to for a quick nicotine fix. But it
came with a price: nausea. Unfiltered cigarettes. If you look at the Surgeon General’s
warning on the box of these little white toxic cylinders, it actually says, *You will die.*
My boss was a dick, but at least he was always eager to contribute to my delinquency.
I knocked on the thick wooden door of his office. Through the door I could hear his
lungs discharging as he coughed. He opened the door, but blocked me from entering.
*What is it?* he asked, or rather, demanded to know.
*Could I um...borrow a cigarette?*

*You can have one, but I don’t want it back!* He broke out in laughter. He sounded
like a panting dog.
He handed me a no-filter Winston, wouldn’t even let me get it out of the pack, that
prick.
*Did you turn off the popcorn kettle yet?* he asked, suddenly and very seriously.
*No.*
*It can’t be cleaned properly if it ain’t had enough time to cool.*
*I’ll do it.*
*And don’t forget about theatre-checks tonight.*
"All right."

A theater check was one of the perks that came with being the usher. When performing a theater check the usher walks up and down the rows of the auditorium, asking those with their feet propped on the seat in front of them to kindly sit properly and take their feet down, a humiliating task.

He reminded me to switch off the kettle and closed the thick wooden door in my face. I had never been inside his office. It pissed me off that he wouldn’t ever invite me in; I could care less about anything that might be in there, it was the principle.

I went outside. My buddy, Damon, the concession stand man, pushed open the theater’s rickety doors right behind me. He was one of those guys that you just had to constantly question. I mean, I’d known him for a long time and he’d never, as far as I knew, lied to me. But the stuff that he told me was just unbelievable. According to Damon, he’d ‘been with 37 different women.’ This would be believable if it weren’t for the fact that he looked like a cross between a mole and a gorilla. “What’s up dude?” he said, until cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“Not much...Hey! You didn’t tell me you had cigarettes.”

“You didn’t ask me.”

“Dangit.”

“What? You’ve already got one!”

“It’s unfiltered.”

“You’re gonna be sick.” He lit his cigarette and we both sat down on the curb in front of the movie theatre. “It wouldn’t have mattered if you had asked me for a cigarette,” he took a long drag, while squinting his eyes. “This is my last one.”

I let a few seconds pass. “Hey man, you hear that?”

“No, what?”

SHHHH! Placing a concerned look on my face, I walked around the corner of the building. Out of Damon’s view, I quickly dug into my pockets for the pink lighter. I lit my cigarette with a quick flick of the thumb, and pushed the lighter into my pocket, forgetting about the child-proof metal strip’s mega gripping action, and reappeared for Damon.

“What’d you do that for?” he asked.

“Oh, well, I thought I heard something behind the corner there...” The lighter hit the pavement with a plastic “click” noise. I put my foot on top of it, and glanced, flinching, at Damon, but he was oblivious: staring out at the parking lot. I reached down, snatched it, and pushed it carefully back into my pocket.

Suddenly, the obvious: I could’ve asked Damon’s lighter.

I told Damon about the girl, and my failed attempt at charming her.

He sat quiet, thinking it over maybe, then jumped up, and made the noises people make when they stretch and yawn at the same time.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Drive us to that Mexican place,” he said, referring to a small restaurant up the street.

We walked to Ingram’s office to get permission. “What? You both ate earlier?” said Ingram.

“That was five hours ago, lunch,” Damon said, smirking at him.

“I’ll give you ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes!! Are you kidding?”

Ingram looked up at the wall of his office and looked back at us, as if saying, “9:57, 9:56, 9:55.”

We got into my car, and left the movie theater parking lot.

As I drove, Damon began coaching me. “Now, if you like this girl as much as you say you do, and you don’t talk to her before this night’s over, I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

“It’s rough tough. I can’t think of what to say to her.”

“Don’t think about it. Just talk to her.”

It sounded so simple. Could it be done? Could I merely approach her and say something clever?

“You can’t just dwell on it like you’re doing. It’ll make you get butterflies.” I nodded eagerly as he talked. “But onto more important things,” he said, “You may think that I didn’t notice that cute lighter...”

We arrived at the Mexican restaurant. I wasn’t even hungry. I just needed to get away from the theatre for a little while. Fearing criticism from Damon about how weird it is to not eat after going through the trouble of driving to a restaurant, I ordered something. “I want a Mexican Cheese steak,” I said to our waitress.

“I don’t understand?”

“Mexican Cheese steak.”

“Nachos and cheese.”

“No, a Mexican Cheese steak.”

Her eyes darted left and right, searching for an answer to this insane riddle. “Cheesesteak!” Damon roared, accentuating the syllables.

The woman wrote this down, took Damon’s order, and walked away.

He inhaled his food like a fat oaf. I could barely eat any of my Cheese steak. What time have I for such trivial things? I stared at it for a few minutes, trying to decide if I should take it with me or just give it to Damon. I gave it to him, and he devoured it without pausing for breath.

We drove back to the movie theatre. Ingram was waiting; angrily pacing and puffing on a no-filter Winston in the front of the building.

“Where have you two been? I can’t run this place by myself!”

We took our places at our posts. I was once again trapped behind the silver ticket pole. I remembered the popcorn kettle needed to be shut off. I yelled for Damon, who was in the concession stand, about 30 feet away, to turn it off. If we were to run out of popcorn, the patrons would have to do without. I had my orders from the boss man. As much as I dreaded it, I had to ensure that “proper cleaning” was going to take place.

As I tore the customers’ tickets, I began thinking about the girl, which was, as
Damon had advised, a poor tactic.
"She's All That" is in the third door on the left, ma'am."

It was fate. She was the prettiest girl I had ever seen, and she was in my movie theatre.

"Last door on the right."

Those eyes, how could she not remain at her home every night, in front of a mirror, staring in amazement and pride, wondering why she should share these uncanny soul windows with the rest of the world?

*Shakespeare in Love*, first door on the left.

She'd have to see the purity in my eyes, the honesty, even if words did fail me. She'd see something peculiar; she'd know to set me apart from the others.

"Third door on the right, ma'am."

The crowd finally thinned out and eventually vanished. My duties, as usher, were over. I shot a victorious glance toward the ticket pole and walked over to the cushioned benches in the lobby. I figured the popcorn kettle could wait a few minutes. It was probably still hot, anyway. I sat back and relaxed, but not for long, because to my absolute surprise in strolled my girl, without her short friend.

She approached the concession stand and began staring through the plexiglass arrangement of movie theatre candy. I looked around for Damon; he was supposed to be manning the concession stand. He was gone. I got up and walked toward her. As I came close, I felt my pulse quicken a bit, and I felt kind of light-headed, like with the first puff from an unfiltered cigarette.

When I reached the cash register, I chimed off the obligatory "Can I help you?" She looked up at me and smiled. I eagerly smiled back. She looked at the candy again, with a thoughtful expression on her face. I casually leaned on the counter that separated us. Even if I thought for sure that she had seen something unique in me, I couldn't have reached out for her; the counter was an obstruction, a short, unattractive barrier that kept us apart.

She pointed to a candy bar and looked up at me. I got it out for her and, trying to sound flirty and cute, asked, "Anything else with that, ma'am?" It must have worked because she smiled back at me.

"A dollar twenty-five," I said.

She set down three one-dollar bills on the counter and smiled at me again. I took two of them and when I handed her change back to her, our hands touched, and I was smitten. I was, in fact, so dazed that she had already walked away and back into her movie before I was aware of her absence.

Damon came out of Ingram's office, whistling.

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"Talkin' to Ingram."

"About what?"

"A pay raise."

"Pay raise?"

"Yeah."

"You suck at your job, though."

"Yeah."

"Did he tell you to go to hell?"

"No."

"You're lying!"

"Nope."

The knowledge that Damon would be making more than me, a minimum wage worker, upset me. "What kind of raise is it?"

"I'm not comfortable discussing that with you."

"What!"

"It's never a good idea to discuss your wages."

I let it go. "Well, while you were gone I was covering your ass."

"Thanks." He walked into the concession stand and sat down on a stool. He put his head down on the counter. I wondered if I should ask Ingram for a raise.

I realized what I should do. I'd bring her a courtesy cup of ice water! She'd need something to drink with that candy bar. Damn! If I could remember which movie was printed on her ticket stub, though. Well, it was a weekend, and that meant there wouldn't be the usual 100 people occupying each auditorium. I could easily find her.

I'd just look for the immaculate glow.

I snatched one of the flower-and-bird-decorated courtesy cups from the cabinet under the cash register. I filled it with ice, started for the water fountain, but felt a rebellious jolt and filled the cup with Coke. This was more devious an act than it sounds, for Ingram discouraged the use of courtesy cups, unless he approved it himself, and snatching Coke was probably insult to injury. He bought the cups with his own money and was deeply pained by the $1.99 he spent each month on 24-packs of six ounce containers. Always. "Use one more cup, and it's comin' outta your pay!"

I glanced back at Damon, who had fallen asleep, slumped against the counter of the concession stand.

I began the search, staying wary of my boss, for fear of reprisal. I had my alibi though: "Oh, just a theatre-check, Mr. Ingram, and I thought I'd bring some Coke with me for stamina."

After three unsuccessful "theatre-checks" I found the girl. I peered into the auditorium and recognized her silhouette against the flashing projector light. She was in one of the middle rows, sitting close to her friend. I noticed that the cup was in bad form: dripping with condensation, cheap paper bottom blistering, ice beginning to melt. I walked down to the end of her row.

Someone shouted "Hey!" from somewhere in the front. But I paid no mind.

Her friend turned and looked at me, but I couldn't see the expression on her face because of the darkness of the auditorium. I walked carefully, holding the Coke in front of me, away from my body. I approached her friend and got down on one knee. "This Coke's for your friend," I said, my voice a bit shaky. She took the cup, casually handed it to her friend, and turned her attention back to the movie screen. All was great and fine for the moment because the girl peaked her head around and smiled at me.
"Thought you might want something with the candy," I whispered.

"What?" said the girl that I wasn't talking to.

"I said I do." "SHHHH!!!" an individual sprayed from behind us.

I looked back to see who it was, but was distracted by the figure standing in the doorway of the auditorium. It was Mr. Ingram. I got back up quickly, and began walking toward the door, trying to remember my line.

"What are you doing in here?" asked the boss.

"Um, I was, um, doin' the uh... What is it called?" "theatre-check."

"Oh... Well... there's somebody right there with their feet up."

I looked, and sure enough, someone actually did have their feet up. Why, God, oh why must we be placed in this crucible of incessant humiliation? Is there no breaking point?

"Tell him to put his feet down," said Mr. Ingram, his eyebrows elevated.

I trudged down the aisle. He was sitting in the second row from the front. What luck! Now everyone in the theatre (chiefly, my girl) was going to see the ignominy of the usher.

I approached the theatre-etiquette-offender. "Can you please put your feet down?"

"What?" In a Deliverance drawl.

I repeated the words, and he put his feet down, smirked, and turned to the bleach-blonde girl, who laughed. I began walking back up the aisle, looking at the silhouette of my boss.

I walked back to the lobby and took a seat on the stool in the concession stand.

Damon was missing again. A few minutes passed as I skimmed through the movietime-sheet, which would reveal how long of a wait I would have before the girl came out of the auditorium.

*****

Twenty minutes until I see her. And can't screw it up this time, I thought.

Ingram walked in, already giving me an evil look for sitting down. I hated being stuck alone with him. I always felt like he wanted me to ask him about his life, or initiate a meaningful conversation. Feeling philanthropic, I threw him a bone. "So how old's that popper?"

"How's that?"

"I said how old's that popper?"

"Been here since we opened."

"Wow."

"Only thing older than the popcorn kettle's that ole' ticket pole."

"Holy cow." Then I heard a movie theatre door open and close. Ingram nodded his head in the direction of the cash register. I got up and slapped both hands around the ancient machine, ready for action, not thinking; telling myself it's the only way to go.

Without her partner, the short, unattractive girl walked into the lobby. In her hand, a tell-tale object: the used courtesy cup. She did what was imminent. She held up the paper cup and asked for a "courtesy Coke refill."

I bit my lip and turned to Ingram, whose eyebrows were already levitating above his head.

"A what?" he asked her.

"I want some more free Coke."

"You heartless whore, I thought."

"Who gave you free Coke?" my boss demanded to know.

She faked a look of sudden epiphany, shifted her eyes to mine, and mouthed a whispered, "Oops."

She tossed it in the trash can and turned around to walk back into her movie.

What followed was a long speech about the virtues of frugality and the rising threat of my being written up (three write-up slips equaled job termination). I didn't even attempt to explain my way out of it. I just let Ingram yell and jump around while I nodded and attempted to look as if I was stricken with shame. As a kind of punishment for my sins, Ingram told me to take out the trash in the restrooms. That was fine with me, though, anything but the popcorn popper. I glanced at its gaping mouth, its backward-titled head, clouds of smoke rising out.

"Never, ever touch these cups again without permission." He stormed off, and I heard a fleeting cough as his office door slammed.

I walked into the men's restroom, removed the monstrous trash can lid, and yanked the bag out. I replaced it with a fresh new liner.

I knocked on the women's restroom door, and said, "Cleaning!" Hearing no response to my warning I opened the door and walked in. I removed the trashcan lid and pulled out the full bag. But I forgot to bring the trash can liners into the restroom with me, so I set down the bag, and walked out the door. Outside the door, at the concession stand stood the redneck with the Braves cup. It took him a second to realize the potential of the situation at hand. But you could tell it hit him when he started nodding his head and grinned. "Now, now!"

I walked over to the concession stand counter, and grabbed one of the trash can liners I'd set out. I walked back toward the women's restroom to finish the job. "Now where in the hell you goin', Mary Ann?"

I turned around, and said, "I gotta put this liner in."

"Liner?" she said, and looked at me like I was stupid. I held it up for him to see.

"That's a trash bag, sweetheart."

I stuffed the liner into the trash can and came out of the restroom. He stared up at the popcorn prices. He ordered a large popcorn, with extra butter, or as he put it, grinning ear to ear, "Give me a large butter with extra popcorn."

I waved a limp-wristed goodbye to me. I was too busy worrying about the girl. I'd begin cleaning the popcorn kettle to get my mind off her. Dwelling on speaking with her, as Damon had warned, would only complicate the situation.

The kettle: that silver mechanic that was so cumbensome to maintain. Why Mr. Ingram just buy a new one? It seemed a simple solution.

I looked at the clock above the men's restroom, 5 minutes until her movie gets out.
What better to make me nervous than a countdown?

I got out some Windex and a rag, and wiped down the glass surrounding the kettle. It was a futile task because the streaks would never come off. But Ingram could tell, somehow, when the effort had not been put forth. I finished with that part of the task.

*OK, let's tackle the kettle,* knowing I wouldn't as soon as I thought it. I just stared at it. I felt like breaking the evil thing. The residual oil in and around the kettle had completely solidified. The yellow/orange wax had, in its liquid form, bubbled out all around the mouth, and had formed little knuckles. The more I stared, the more I hated the idea of it.

But I looked up at the clock to find that my girl's movie would be ending any second. I took a seat on a high stool inside of the concession stand. From this post, I could see all and be close enough to talk to anyone who came out of an auditorium.

I made myself blank out. I concentrated on the silver ticket pole that stood across from me.

I heard the doors of an auditorium swing open and bash the wall, revisiting an old dent that had been there all along. There she was, chatting with her short friend.

She walked closer, closer. She was passing by. *Say something!*

"Excuse me!* I yelled.

She stopped and turned to me, those green eyes scowling. She said nothing. *Um...haven't we met before?* "Damn it, I thought, of all things.

Again, she said nothing, but blinked a few times and smiled.

"I'm sorry," said the short, unattractive girl, "but my girlfriend doesn't speak English."

My face felt hot, and I looked at the ground, and up again, and said, "OK," still not quite grasping.

They both smiled stupidly, nodded their heads, and walked out the front rickety doors.

I stared at the pendulum motion of the swinging doors, finally coming to a complete stop. I heard the distant gagging coughs of Ingram, got a buttery whiff of popcorn oil, and stood up straight, kicking the stool aside.

I tore the metal cup off the top of the ticket pole and slung a massive fastball right into the kettle.

I bolted through the lobby, out the rickety doors, and ran across the parking lot. I reached in my pocket for my car keys, but dropped them and the pink Bic on the pavement. I picked up the keys and unlocked the door of my car. I started to open it, but hesitated, seeing the reflection in the window: an awkward kid, face smeared by acne, in a black vest and bowtie. I was wasting my life here, and I looked like an idiot.

I got in my car and drove, feeling the quick motion of air blasting against my face.

*Frank Reddy*
Interview: William Bradley Strickland

William Bradley Strickland is Professor of English at Gainesville College. He is a native of New Holland, Georgia, and attended school in Gainesville. He obtained a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of Georgia, and has done postdoctoral work at UNC Chapel Hill. He has taught at UGA, Oglethorpe University, Truett-McConnell College, Valdosta State College, and Lakeview Academy before coming to GC. He has published novels (mostly for young adults), short stories and poems, and many nonfiction works, book reviews, and study guides. Many of his books are parts of series such as Wishbone, Star Trek: Starfleet Academy, Are You Afraid of the Dark?, and others. He was awarded the Georgia Author of the Year in 1998 for The Spectre from the Magician's Museum and in 2001 for When Mack Came Back. Dr. Strickland graciously allowed The Chestatee Review an interview about his writing.
CHESTATEE REVIEW: How long have you been a writer?


CR: How did you gain an interest in being a writer?

WBS: Partly from my family heritage. I came from around here in Georgia. I have a large family and many of my relatives seemed to be storytellers. I enjoyed their stories as a child, even when I had to sneak downstairs to hear them. I grew up with storytelling all around me. I had an aptitude for English in high school and tried to write stories whenever possible.

CR: What was your first published story, and how did it happen?

WBS: My first published story was written in high school, out of boredom. It was a ghost story like the ones my folks used to tell and it was bought for about $100 and published a year later. It was titled "The Grave," but there was already a classic with that title, so when Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine purchased it they retitled it "The Third Grave" and published it in about 1966.

CR: Were any of your later works based on tales told by your family?

WBS: Some works have incorporated elements of those stories. A little autobiography is in a lot of the stories, too.

CR: Who were some of your early writing influences?

WBS: I loved the writings of Ray Bradbury when I first started; he has a very poetic style. His writing has a childlike sense of wonder that appealed to me, and I used him as one of my earlier models.

I began reading classic writers, but unlike many of my classmates I actually enjoyed them, especially Charles Dickens, for his creation of characters. Through Dickens I gained an admiration for Shakespeare; they share many of the same qualities as writers. Both have wonderful characters with a wonderful sense of realism. I'm the only teenager that I know of who would take a paperback of Shakespeare around with me during the summer and read it.

CR: What have you written besides short stories?

WBS: I've written about 100 short stories and essays, some very bad poetry occasionally; I'm not much of a poet. I have written or co-written 55 novels, many for young readers. I've written short pieces for the stage and written or co-written a dozen or so pieces for radio and audio.

CR: Describe your writing process. Is there a particular technique that you use when you write?

WBS: I begin by imagining a character because I'm most interested in characters. The first step is daydreaming—thinking up a personality that appeals to me as a writer. Not necessarily a good guy because rogues and villains are interesting too. I try to imagine situations where a character has a problem or difficulty. Unlike carpentry, you don't build a story; you let it grow and come out of the characters. You try to keep one step ahead and see how a character's aspirations, hopes and dreams can be foiled at every turn. The key that a lot of young writers miss is that a writer has to make things difficult and not easy. If it's easy there's not much of a story. If it's difficult the story is much more engaging.

CR: Do you try to set aside time for writing or do you just write when the mood strikes you?

WBS: I do a little of each, a lot of writing at night and on weekends during the school year. During summer I write just about every day. Rather than have an appointment with the keyboard I tend to set a quota for myself and say I'll do 1000 words a day or four pages a day. I begin to really get interested in the story when I begin to put it on paper. I'm an outline; when I've thought the story through, and that may be a long time because I am a slow plotter, I begin to write a stripped down version of the story. That becomes my outline. I more or less follow the
outline when I'm fleshing out the first draft although I always feel free to depart from the outline. My finished products are never much like the outline because of that. If I'm really interested in the story I can rip through ten, twelve, fourteen pages a day and not feel fatigued because I just keep rolling. I always try to do at least four pages even though as often as not, when things are going badly, I'll go back and cut them out or completely revise them out of all recognition. Rather than have a set number of hours per day I try to have a set number of words per day, 1000 words, at least. I imagine I write something every single day.

CR: Does that make the creative process a little easier?

WBS: Sometimes it's the other way around. It sets up a challenge. If I'm involved in a book and begin some kind of silly little biographical exercise with another character in the book, I may find my attention is drawn away from the major project and I'll get sidetracked. But it's a matter of discipline. If you decided to donate the time to it, time out of your life that you have to spend, then you owe it to yourself to do as good a job as you can.

CR: How do you choose the subject matter for your work?

WBS: Through the characters, really. I try to think of what the characters would be most interested in. I never begin with a theme. I never say, "I'm going to write a boy and his dog story." I think of a character and I think, "Well, this character needs a dog" and before I know it, it turns out to be a boy and his dog story. But really the subject and the theme grow out of the characters and their problems.

CR: Have you ever encountered writer's block, and if so, how do you deal with it?

WBS: Very occasionally; not very often. I have to say never when I was collaborating, because if I was having a down time, my collaborator was always able to step in and pick up where I left off. Generally, I don't. If I do have writer's block, to me it's a signal that I haven't done my prewriting. I haven't thought through all of the ramifications of the story yet and it needs more time to grow. The story is just not ripe to be picked and generally I'll work on something else for a day or two. Once or twice I've gotten really stuck. I started out once with an image rather than a character and just started to write without planning any kind of plot. I got lost after about 30,000 words with no way out. I don't know if I'll ever finish that thing or not. It's been years ago and I still pick the thing up and take a look at it.

CR: You mentioned writing with a collaborator. Is that something you do often?

WBS: Have done. My collaborator, Thomas E. Fuller, passed away in November of 2002. He had collaborated with me on about a dozen novels for young readers. I also collaborate occasionally with my wife, Barbara, usually on the novels that have to do with movie or TV tie-ins because she's more of a media fan than I am. We've done novels set in the Star Trek universe, for example. We've done some novels set in the Nickelodeon series worlds. On my own I tend not to do media tie-ins because I don't watch that many TV shows or movies. I mean, there's not really a demand for a Simpson novel.

CR: Do you have a different method of writing for different media?

WBS: That's an interesting question. Not really that I am aware of, I really don't. In all cases, as I'm writing I try to listen to the voice of the people I'm writing about. And if I'm catching the voice that seems to me that I'm hitting my goal. The same is true whether I'm writing for stage or radio. I'm listening for voices and trying to make the people have their own personal idiosyncrasies. I do the same thing with fiction, I guess. There's not a big difference.

CR: Do you find that being an English professor is beneficial to your writing or is it sometimes a hindrance?

WBS: Sometimes it's a hindrance as far as time goes. We English teachers have to grade a lot of papers. That's the reason I'm not very productive during the school year; I give a lot of my time to school. So I'm sort of a weekend writer during the school year. I think that it reinforces because being a teacher of literature makes me have to concentrate on elements of style and elements of characterization. It makes me more aware of those as a writer.
CR: What are some of your favorite pieces of literature and why?

WBS: Let me think in terms of popular literature first of all. I really like stories of the sea. I don’t know why; I’m a complete landlubber. I’ve hardly ever gotten out into the ocean. I’m very fond of the long series of novels by Patrick O’Brien because it’s sort of a tour-de-force. They are splendid imitations of 18th century novels written in the late 20th/early 21st century. They capture the flavor wonderfully and that’s something that I admire: someone who is able to go into an essentially alien world, a world of mystery, and pick up all of the details. I’ve always liked detective fiction; I’m very fond of detective puzzlers like stories by John Dixon Carr or Ellery Queen or Agatha Christie where the reader has to participate in the stories to solve the crime. But I suppose my favorite novel is by Charles Dickens, and would be David Copperfield because it’s a semi-autobiographical novel and David is actually a writer in the novel. It’s interesting to see his trials and travails as he grows into his role as a writer. In Shakespeare, I like Hamlet a lot. I like the comedies too. I have a fondness for some of the early funny pieces like The Comedy of Errors. It’s nothing but a farce, but it’s a splendid example of a farce. I like when something fulfills its potential 100%. I don’t think that you can improve on that much. I read everything. At any given moment I’m likely to have different favorites.

CR: What advice would you have for an aspiring author?

WBS: First of all: to read, to read everything and read it critically. When a writer sees a piece of writing that’s really good, a piece of writing that he or she wishes “Gee, I wish I’d done that myself,” then that’s the time to see what you can steal.

CR: So you don’t believe that everything should be 100% original?

WBS: Well, I do, but think that you can learn to steal technique, put it that way. When you read something that really moves you, you can ask yourself, “Why did that touch me?” I’d go back and look at just the technique that the writer uses to get through your defenses and emotions. I think that when you read a piece of dialogue and you think, “Well, that’s just brilliant! It couldn’t have been done any other way,” you can go back and ask, “Now, how did he make the decisions that led to that dialogue?” You can follow the technique of the writer and I really think that this is the best way for a writer to learn. I doubt that writing can be taught, although I have no doubt that writing can be learned. I think that all writing is self-taught. Then I would say, write every day. I’ve run into so many people that tell me, “I’m going to write a book one day,” and I know they never will. It may not be that every writer’s destiny is to write a book, but every writer should be a writer and produce something everyday, even if it’s nothing that sees publication.
Contributors

Margaret Burris is a Journalism major. She has been attending Gainesville College for two years. She plans to stay until Spring 2004.

Matt Bruncau is undecided as to a major, but is interested in creative writing.

Priscilla Bugari is majoring in Performing Arts and Sociology. She will be transferring to Valdosta State in the fall. She enjoys writing, photography, dancing and meeting people.

Dustonia Call is currently finishing the theatre major she started in 1994. She is proud to have had the opportunity to explore so many of her varied interests in an academic setting. She writes and takes photos for The Compass, GC's student newspaper. She hopes to continue her academic journey at UGA, where she'll study photojournalism.

Kassie Davis is an English major. She writes for The Compass, the student newspaper at GC.

Heather Daniels is an English Major at Gainesville College. She has lost count as to how many years she has actually been there. She is a staff writer on The Compass and will be an editor next year. She plans on becoming a published author of fiction and is currently working on her first novel.

Blake Duncan is a Journalism major. He hates to write about himself in third person. His main goal in life is to decide who lives and who dies.

John Furst is a Computer Science major at GC, as well as president of the GC Anime Club.

Michelle Gilstrap is an English major planning to transfer to UGA after she graduates from GC this semester. She plans to get a Master's Degree at the university so that she can teach at the college level.

Jason Hanline is an English major at GC and hopes one day to teach literature. He is an aspiring writer, but has yet to find a story. When not in class or writing he can be found playing guitar at a local coffee house.

Heather Hodges is a Journalism major, and is Editor-in-Chief of The Compass, Gainesville College's award-winning student newspaper. She plans on attending UGA in the fall. Her favorite color is pink.

Diego Ibarra is a Journalism major at GC, and is interested in art design and editing.
Drema Johnson is a Fine Arts major at Gainesville College. She is considering pursuing her Bachelors of Fine Arts at UGA, but hasn't decided what her area of specialization will be yet. Her interests include drawing, painting, sculpting and ceramics in addition to computer graphics.

Matthew Lewis is an English major at Gainesville College. His poem "Coelacanth" won first place in the Gainesville College Writing Contest. He is wavering between English and Journalism as a major but plans on pursuing one or the other at UGA in the fall, and finishing a college career he began in the last century.

Duncan McGuire is a student at GC, but is undecided as to a major.

Jessica Murphy is currently attending Kennesaw State University. Her poem "Woman and Serpent" won second prize in the Gainesville College Writing Contest.

Julie Pons is an International Business and Spanish major. She plans to transfer to UGA, to the Terry College of Business.

Mary Reddy is a Pre-Nursing major at GC. She is a native Georgian whose career goal is to become a registered nurse.