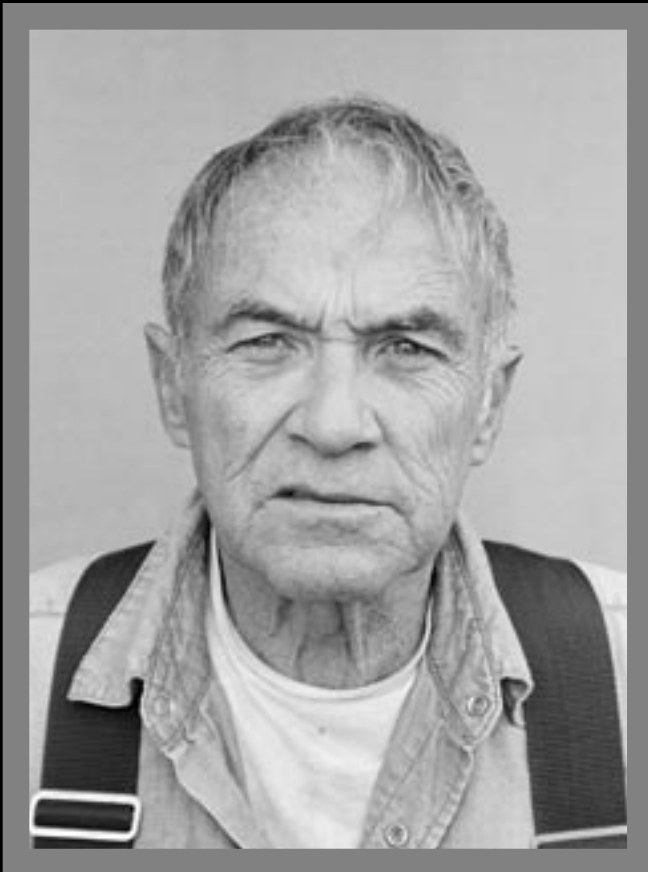


The Metropolitan



Leo Pigment Print John Simet

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2009

The Metropolitan

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by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2009

“Longevity conquers scandal every time.”

Shelby Foote

The Metropolitan 2009

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects Metro writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

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2009 Writing Awards

For his story “Making Your Mark,” Paul Garth is the winner of The Metropolitan 2009 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Madeline Radcliff, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for her play *Happy Birthday*. The second runner-up, Liz Renner, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her essay “Men I Did Not Marry.”

Making Your Mark

Paul Garth

The town that we grew up in was like any other, really. You'd drive through Nebraska or Iowa or Kansas and see a thousand just like it, a pretty Main Street surrounded by modest homes that slowly morphed into smaller, less well-kept homes that eventually turned into trailers on concrete blocks the further from Main you went. You could probably pick up Elk Water and drop it into the middle of some wheat or cornfield, and the people of the town would continue on as if nothing was different. Which it wouldn't be, if you get what I mean. We did all the normal things that happen in a town like that; church was pretty important for everyone, as were football games on Friday nights in the fall. Afterwards, everyone my age went out and got drunk, and our parents pretended that they didn't know what we were doing. The Sheriff might break up a few parties every now and again, but he did it in such an easygoing, amicable way that no one ever actually felt like we were in trouble. We had the occasional scandal, like when Ericka Depont got pregnant with the band teacher's kid, or when Alex Simmons and his cousin Don killed each other in some weird double suicide. The rumor was they left a note, that they blamed all of us in Elk Water for what they did. I wasn't close in years to either of them, so their deaths didn't shake me up the way they did a lot of people. But when I was older, I began to sympathize, and *that* did shake me up, the fact that I understood why they had done it. Overall though, it wasn't a bad way to grow up, but it gets to you after a while, before you realize it even. You feel trapped, and you start to look for ways out without realizing what you're looking for.

I was eighteen my senior year, a year older than everyone else because the year before I had been kicked out of school for getting in a fight. I don't remember who it was with or what started it, other than that I used to have an anger problem. I just remember sitting there in the principal's office with my dad to my left and my mom to the right, and being told that I was expelled for the rest of the year. I remember I could feel my dad's anger coming through his skin, and I knew that I would get

my ass kicked when we got home. I ended up working at Jim Harvinson's John Deere dealership for the rest of the year, fixing tractors and doing odd jobs for Jim, before I finally went back to school the next fall, my dad forcing me by saying things like, "No son of mine is going to be a high school dropout. You go back, you get your degree, and then I don't care if you sell tractors till Jesus comes back. But you're not doing anything until you get that diploma."

In the fall of my second senior year, on a Friday after school had let out, my best friend Jacob and I were hanging out behind the football field. The sky was heavy and gray, and a breeze was blowing that smelled of the smoke of an old man burning leaves. We were sitting on the top of some old kegs that had been left in the field and smoking cigarettes. Both of us were in contemplative moods, and we talked of things deeper than the gossip at school. We talked about music and our parents and how every time fall and winter pulled into Elk Water we felt that we had died a little inside. I was doing most of the talking. Jacob hunched over the keg, his elbows on his knees. When I finally finished my thought, he looked at me and said, "I went to Alex Simmons' grave the other day."

I was shocked, but I tried to play it off like it was no big deal at all. Jacob and I had known each other long enough and been close enough that I thought that nothing he said or did could shock me. "The f*** you do that for?"

"I dunno. We've heard stories about this kid since we were in the sixth grade. About how he didn't give a shit and just... just went for it. He made his mark. I guess I just kind of wanted to see it."

"That's a pretty shitty way to make your mark," I said and stared ahead at the football team practicing for their game that night on the field, red jerseys smashing into white jerseys like a wave.

"I'm not saying it was smart," Jacob said and flicked his cigarette into the tall grass. "But we're still talking about it, aren't we?"

The football team lost that night, and afterwards it seemed that everyone in Elk Water walked out of the field in a mood

that was as black as the De Mars players' uniforms. Jacob and I had been wandering around the track the whole game, not really watching or caring, but even we were affected. "Bullshit," Jacob said as we walked to his car, kicking at the grass. We fell into a silence that was atypical of us, and I stuffed my hands into my jean pockets and lowered my head.

As we got to the car, we were surprised to see Janice Hightower leaning against it, her hair tossing in the slow wind. I had never noticed before, but it occurred to me then that she was beautiful, and I felt jealousy flame inside me when I saw the eyes that she looked at Jacob with.

"Hey guys," she said casually, as if we had planned to meet her there after the game.

"Shitty night, huh?" Jacob asked. I just waved.

"Jacob, did it ever occur to you that the night is just starting?"

"I want some beer," I said out of turn and instantly felt like an idiot for steamrolling her flirtatiousness with Jacob.

"I'm sure we'll find something to do tonight," he said, not missing a beat. "Get in. Let's go look for trouble."

We drove for the better part of an hour, taking the streets up and down, driving by the houses where there were usually parties, only to find and see nothing but darkened windows and leaves blowing across the front yards. It was a lonely night, and the three of us felt that we might have been the only people in Elk Water, or maybe even the world. One by one suggestions for other things to do came up and were shot down. Paul's Diner, the rock quarry, going and bugging Burt at the gas station, all shot down by one or another, as we drove the roads aimlessly.

We were near the outskirts of town, where the fields butted up against the overgrown lawns and the roads turned from pavement to dust, when I got a flash of inspiration. "Jacob, I think that we should go see Alex Simmons' grave. I think I want to see it." I thought that my suggestion would be rejected, if not by Jacob then definitely by Janice, but I caught him giving her a glance in the rearview mirror, and it suddenly occurred to me that he might *not* share every detail of his life with me, that maybe he actually *had* planned to meet her by his car after the

game, that maybe he had told her on the phone about his trip to the cemetery, that it wasn't a surprise to her at all. I felt lost and alone in that moment, and all I wanted to do was to get out of the car and run.

"Good idea," he said and we were off with Janice laughing in the back seat.

No one was sure if the cemetery had a night watchman of some sort, so we parked about a half mile away and walked along the shoulder of the road, our jackets wrapped around us to ward off the wind that had come up in the last hour. We didn't talk as we approached the tall, wrought iron gates and climbed them, even though I felt that I had a million things to say that were ready to tumble out of my mouth. The tension cleared up as we made our way closer and closer to the grave, Jacob and Janice playfully pushing each other and laughing. Behind me, Janice whispered, "It's soo spooky, Jacob," and I saw him grab her hand. I was in the lead even though I had no idea which direction the grave was in when I turned around and asked them, "Do you think it's true? Do you think they did it because of the town?"

Jacob removed his hand from Janice's arm and stuffed it into his jacket. "Probably. I'm kind of surprised it doesn't happen more often, really."

"Don't be an idiot, Ryan," Janice said to me. "It doesn't matter why they did it. They did it, and now our parents seem to think that we're all suicidal, it feels like."

I nodded and began to walk again, confident that I would stumble on Alex's grave if I just walked long enough. The wind ripped at my ears, and Jacob and Janice fell behind me several feet, as if they were suddenly uninterested in this whole trip. But I *was* interested and growing more so by the second. The legend of Alex Simmons and his cousin had been a part of my teenage years, a tall tale planted in my head when I was twelve, and I was going to stare at his grave, the grave that had caused so many kids like me to lie awake and be jealous of the fact that they had found a way out. I thought of my job working on tractors and of how I was kicked out of school the year before and how that afternoon I had lied to Jacob and said that it seemed like a shitty

way to make a mark, when really Jacob had been right. They had made a mark, not on themselves or the town, but on all of us.

"It's over here," Janice yelled out from my right, her voice carried by the wind to me.

I turned on my heels and headed in their direction, wondering what kind of grave it would be. Would it have a cross on the top, or would it be just a plain tombstone? What would the inscription say? Would it have his birthday on it?

The grave sat at the crest of a small hill, and they were standing in front of it looking down, their hands at their sides. My idea of the grave had proven to be completely wrong—it wasn't a tombstone at all in the way that I thought of them, but more of a slab of marble laid across the grass, the surface reflecting moonlight back up at us:

ALEX SIMMONS
JAN 23, 1971 – SEPTEMBER 14, 1987
"BELOVED SON,
FOREVER GONE,
TAKEN INTO
THE ARMS OF GOD"

"F***ing weird."

They were the only words that I could think to say, and no one said anything for a long time. I felt my emotions let go, and hate and desperation and anger and fear welled up inside of me until I felt myself ready to burst. I looked over, and Jacob had slipped his hand back into Janice's, both of them looking at each other instead of the grave.

"I think I'm going to go and see..." I paused and tried to think of some other point of interest inside of the cemetery, but nothing came, and I walked off with the sounds of laughter in my ears. I walked around the graveyard for what felt like a long time, feeling the wind on my face and the leaves crackling beneath my sneakers. A part of me was aware that Jacob and Janice were probably under a tree in the far corner of the cemetery, exploring each other's bodies. I toyed with the thought in my head; I could picture it even. My blood felt hot beneath my

skin, and from somewhere inside of me, I felt the sudden urge to leave Elk Water forever immediately. To just take my parents' car and head to Omaha or Des Moines or Minneapolis, anywhere but where I was.

The shed appeared out of nowhere, its green walls hidden in the shadows of the trees that hung overhead, shaking in the wind. The only reason that I saw it was the moonlight reflecting over the metal trim around the frame, flashing across my vision. I walked to it, drawn, and without thinking, I felt myself pulling at the door.

It opened in my hands, unexpectedly unlocked, and I stepped inside.

The inside of the maintenance shed smelled of dirt and must, the scent of earth and sweat, and even in the low light, the walls glimmered and glowed with the metal hanging from the hooks tacked into the wood and framing. Shovels and picks and spades hung from their wooden shafts, and I put my hands around the handle of a pick, lifted it in my arms, and played with the weight. It was heavy but solid, and feeling that rough wood against my palms filled me with a sense of power that I hadn't ever felt before. I tossed the pick from hand to hand, getting a grasp on the balance of the tool, and then walked back out into the graveyard, closing the door behind me.

As I walked back across the graveyard, I felt my mind reeling, as if I had taken drugs or become suddenly drunk; I thought of the last time that I had been there, two years before, after Mr. Campbell, our middle school science teacher, died of a heart attack while mowing his yard on a hot August day. No other students had come to the funeral, and I felt out of place and alone there, thinking back to the greatest lesson that Mr. Campbell had ever taught me, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Mowing the yard on a hot summer day had caused a reaction, and whatever it was that I was about to do certainly would have consequences.

There was a part of me that knew what I was planning all along, there had to have been. But when I was in front of the grave again, Jacob and Janice long gone, I remember asking myself what I was doing there with the pick in my hand. I stood

there motionless for what felt like a long time, the head of the pick resting on the ground and me leaning against the handle, reading and rereading the epitaph over and over again. "Beloved son, forever gone, taken into the arms of God." The pick was no longer humming in my hands, and as the humming faded, so did my sense of immediacy. Indecision and weakness overwhelmed me, and I turned to walk away.

And then, the wind carried noises to me, noises coming from the grass at the bottom of a hill a few hundred yards away, quiet moans and pleasurable gruntings. What I had seen in my mind was right. They were doing it with no consideration of me; they couldn't even wait until they dropped me off. I could feel my hands tingle and hum with the anger, like power lines felled by a storm. I turned in an instant, the pick sliding in my hands like a piece of machinery gliding over my head, and I brought it down with a ground-pounding force into the exact middle of the slab that was Alex Simmons' headstone.

The crack of the blow reverberated and hung in the air, the strike shattering both the marble and the calmness of the night. I stood kneeling over the gravestone for a moment, my brain swimming in the boiling blood coursing through my temples. I listened, straining my ears for any sound, but nothing came, and I stood up again and stared at the headstone. I had taken a large chunk out of it, but in many ways, it didn't seem like enough.

I took a step back, hefting the pick into my hand again, and wondered if it was all true, if Alex and Don had killed themselves because our shitty little town had choked the life out of them; I wondered if it was choking the life out of me, and then I wondered if the town was as suffocating and miserable as it was because of the actions of these boys.

I had never seen Alex in my life, that I can remember anyway, but in that moment, his image was crystal clear in my head. A boy with short brown hair, a wide-set nose and dark green eyes that seemed dull and faded. And then that image turned, the face replaced by gaping black and red with teeth protruding, and a body in blue jeans slumped against the blood splattered wall. The pick came down again, and then again.

And then I was in a frenzy. Adrenaline pumped through

my heart, and I became lightheaded and began to sweat fear and anger; I was striking at his name, striking at that f***ing thoughtlessly dumb poem, and then I was swinging at my father, at my principal, at Jacob, at Janice, at Jim, at Don, at Paul from the diner, at Burt from the gas station, at my teachers, at my preacher, at my grandmother, at everyone in that f***ing worthless town that had kept me there, that had given up hope, that had let their dreams die, that had never thought of their kids or if this would be a good place to raise them, at the blood that covered my hands from holding the pick too tight, at the scream that was coming from my throat high and girlish and terrified, and then at the hands pulling at my shoulders and the yelling from behind me screaming for me to stop, and then I collapsed in a pile of sweat and floppy bones.

I don't remember walking to the car, or where Jacob got the tee shirt that he wrapped my hands in, but I do remember sitting in the back of his car, Janice with her arm around me, and Jacob casting scared glances from the rearview mirror as he drove me back home. Finally, when it seemed that the silence was becoming too much, he asked me, "Jesus Christ, Ryan, what happened to you back there?"

"I..." I tried to answer, to justify it in some way, but nothing came, and I looked at him and Janice and said, "F*** Elk Water."

Next to me, Janice unwrapped her arm from around me and stared at the head rest of Jacob's seat, and we were all silent while they took me home.

When I walked in the door, my father was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a beer and reading a World War II history book. "Hey, Ryan," he said, not looking up, "Tough loss tonight. Whatchya been doing?"

I didn't say anything, just stood in the doorway to the kitchen, and when he finally looked up, he wore a look of worry on his face that showed his true age, and the look of worry turned into a look of true concern when he saw the bandages around my palms.

"What the hell happened?"

"I smashed Alex Simmons' gravestone," I said and braced myself for him to jump up from the table and punch me. But it never came. Instead, he looked at me for a long while before standing up and going to the refrigerator and pulling out a beer. He set it on the side of the table across from him and motioned for me to sit down and join him, sliding the beer across the table.

I sat and cradled the bottle in my wrapped hands for a long time before I drank. My father sat looking at me quietly, and when I put the bottle back down again, he laughed a mischievous laugh.

"Frankly, Ryan, I am pretty goddamned amazed that no one has done that before. Seemed to me that smashing that poor kid's grave should be a rite of passage in this town."

"It should be," I said and drank again.

"I'm not too big on the idea of messing with a person's grave, Ryan, but in a way I'm proud of you, I think. You didn't do it for attention, did you?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't know why I was doing it until I was doing it."

"It's pretty hopeless, isn't it? Having that shit hanging over you kids on top of everything else."

I looked at him for a long time. "I have to get out, Dad."

"I know you do. And you will. You're a smart boy. And even though I'll miss ya, I don't want you spending forever in this town." He shook his head in a sad way, and for the first time I realized how tender my Dad could be. "That's why I kicked your ass when you said you were thinking about not going back to school, that you were going to maybe work for Jim. I couldn't see you make the same mistakes that I did."

We sat there in the kitchen, letting our words sink into each other, feeling the bonds of love that stretched across the table, and I wondered if anything could break them after I had so plainly admitted to grave desecration, and I realized that nothing could.

"Anyone know what else you did?"

"Jacob and Janice. But they won't say anything."

He nodded. "Good. Now get your hands cleaned and get to bed. I don't want your mother to wake up. I don't know if she'd be so understanding."

I stood up from the table and felt a slightly drunk happiness creep through my limbs, the kind of happiness that only the first beer with your father can bring. “Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, Ryan,” he said and then opened his book back up and sat beneath the light at the table, a deep smile on his face.

It was impossible to go to sleep. My knuckles and palms felt like bells with permanently swinging clappers inside them, my mind was racing, and for the first time in my life, I noticed things that I had never noticed before—that my sheets were scratchy like cotton candy, that the tree outside my window didn’t look like the witch I thought it had when I was a kid, but a tower or a skyscraper full of possibility. I lay there for hours, listening to the pages being turned in my Dad’s book and the sounds of him sitting in his chair. I heard him go to bed, and I lay thinking over and over again that I was the only man still awake in the house. Finally, when the wind stopped blowing and the moon had dropped and hidden behind the neighbor’s house, I fell asleep.

That night I had a dream that Alex Simmons walked me through the halls of the high school on my first day of freshman year, and we skipped all of my classes and just walked around the building until the 3:10 bell rang and the halls filled up with students rushing for the remains of the summer air, and somehow in the rush, we got separated and pulled in different directions, but as I went my way and he went his, he turned around and waved at me, and then yelled that he hoped I had a good year.

Happy Birthday *Madeline Radcliff*

An old woman, RUTH, sits on a park bench. She is smiling, holding a gift in her lap. Birds chirp. She sees a bird in front of her and pulls out a bag of bread crumbs.

RUTH: Hello, little fellow.

She tosses the bread crumbs. She enjoys watching the bird for a moment. A young woman, CAROLINE, enters. She watches Ruth for a moment, unnoticed.

CAROLINE: Hello.

RUTH: Oh heavens! You scared me!

CAROLINE: I’m sorry.

RUTH: Oh, I’m old, dear. Everything seems to startle me anymore.

CAROLINE: *(Pause)* Can I sit with you?

RUTH: Oh certainly, sweetheart. I don’t know how long I’ll be here, though. I’m meeting my granddaughter. It’s her birthday. Mine, too. We always spend our birthday afternoon together, here. I’ve always loved this park, but this is like a second home to that girl.

CAROLINE: How old is she today?

RUTH: Nine.

CAROLINE: Nine. You always meet here?

RUTH: Yes. In fact, it’s always right here. At this very bench. It’s her favorite spot in the park. She calls it the World’s Eye.

CAROLINE: Why's that?

RUTH: If you walk up to the edge, right in front of you there, in between those two skinny trees and look down, you'll be looking right at the center of the lake.

CAROLINE: Is that so?

Caroline stands, walks to the edge of the stage, and looks down.

RUTH: She says standing right there, at that very angle, the whole park is reflected back towards you. The trees, flowers, people, sky.

CAROLINE: Beautiful. *(She backs away.)* Like looking into someone's eye and seeing yourself.

RUTH: Exactly.

CAROLINE: She seems like a smart nine-year-old.

RUTH: She's very ahead of her time.

CAROLINE: What's your name?

RUTH: Ruth.

CAROLINE: Ruth. Nice to meet you.

RUTH: Yes. *(Pause)* You know, I bought her a journal. She loves to write, but she's always writing on loose sheets of paper. It should all be together. At least that's what I think.

CAROLINE: That's a great gift. You know, my grandmother was the first person to give me a journal. *(Pause)* I'm a writer now. I've had probably a hundred journals since then, but I still get so much inspiration from that first one. It's the best thing I'll ever write.

RUTH: You're a writer?

CAROLINE: Yes. In fact, I just got this, in the mail, this morning. *(She pulls out a letter)* From the publishers.

She hands it to Ruth. She reads it silently.

RUTH: Oh! Oh goodness! Congratulations, dear! That's wonderful news.

CAROLINE: Thank you.

RUTH: And all because your grandma gave you a journal. I'll have to tell my Caroline. She'll be so excited.

CAROLINE: Her name is Caroline?

RUTH: Yes.

CAROLINE: I *(Pause)* I wish my grandma were here to read this.

RUTH: Oh dear, I'm so sorry she's not.

CAROLINE: Yes. So am I. *(She cries.)*

RUTH: Oh there, there sweetheart. *(She opens her purse and pulls out a Kleenex. She wipes Caroline's cheeks.)* There we are. Deep breaths.

CAROLINE: You're very nice.

RUTH: I don't try to be. It just comes with age. *(Pause)* She's proud of you. Even though she's not here to say it herself. She's a grandma. She knows and she's proud.

CAROLINE: You don't know how much that means.

RUTH: Do you ever feed birds?

CAROLINE: I used to. A long time ago.

Ruth pulls out the bag of crumbs and sets it in between her and Caroline.

RUTH: There's something calming about it, I think. Try it.

They both toss crumbs in silence for a moment.

CAROLINE: Ruth?

RUTH: Yes?

CAROLINE: Are you and your granddaughter close?

RUTH: Yes. Very.

CAROLINE: You spend a lot of time together?

RUTH: Yes. Her father...isn't in the picture and her mother has a full-time job to support her. She spends most of her afternoons, after school, with me. Has for most of her life. I know everything about that girl. Every freckle, every scar. Every...

CAROLINE: Everything?

Ruth looks at Caroline quizzically. Then, she becomes nearly frightened.

RUTH: What did you say your name was?

CAROLINE: I never told you my name.

RUTH: Do *(Pause)* Do I know you somehow?

CAROLINE: Do you think you do?

They stare at one another for a long time. Ruth turns away.

RUTH: I'm sorry. I get confused sometimes.

CAROLINE: It's all right.

RUTH: I—I don't feel so well all of a sudden.

CAROLINE: Let me help you.

Ruth begins to stand with the help of Caroline. Then, as if a switch flips, she pulls away from Caroline and is in complete panic.

RUTH: Who are you? Get away from me! When did I get here?

CAROLINE: Calm down. Everything's all right. I'm just here to help.

RUTH: Who are you?

Long pause.

CAROLINE: My name is Caroline.

RUTH: Caroline. *(She calms)* That's my granddaughter's name. I'm meeting her here. It her birthday. Mine, too...we have the same birthday. We always spend it together.

Long pause. Ruth stands.

RUTH: Maybe I should go home. Maybe she forgot or needs a ride.

CAROLINE: Where is home?

RUTH: Down in midtown. I've lived there for thirty years now. Since my daughter was only seven.

CAROLINE: Ruth...you don't live there anymore.

RUTH: Yes I do. How would you know? I know where I live.

CAROLINE: You need to come with me to that building, over there.

RUTH: That's a nursing home.

CAROLINE: Yes.

RUTH: Oh. *(Pause)* Oh my. I can't seem to make sense of anything.

CAROLINE: It's all right, let me walk with you. Your granddaughter will be there.

RUTH: What if she's not? And she comes here and I'm not here waiting. She'll be so disappointed.

CAROLINE: Trust me. You could never disappoint her. She loves you.

RUTH: Yes. And I love her. She's nine today, you know. She calls this the World's Eye.

CAROLINE: Yes, yes. She'll be happy to see you.

RUTH: Well. All right.

CAROLINE: Come on. Let me walk you back. This way. *(She points off stage.)*

Ruth exits. Caroline looks at the edge of the stage then back towards Ruth. She exits.

Men I Did Not Marry (An Ode to Dorothy Parker)

Liz Renner

Note to editors: Dorothy Parker's short story "Men I'm Not Married To" appeared in the June 17, 1922 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*. My submission is intended to be an homage to Parker and a continuation of the conversation.

No matter where I trek,
No matter how I fare,
In short—even when life's a wreck,
The men are always there.
At airports or parties, even a 5K race,
The meetings tend to vary,
They pop up every place—
The men I did not marry.

I contemplate as they pass me by;
Internally I declare,
"There but for the grace of God," I sigh,
"Goes a man whose name I'd share!"
They represent nothing unique,
They do as others do,
They succeed or fail—regardless of my critique,
The men I am not married to.

I'm sure among their friends
Each is, no doubt, a king.
Although we came to different ends
I wouldn't change a thing.
Yet worry wrinkles not their brows;
No regret over heated words said.
With some I exchanged keys but never vows,
The men I never wed.

If they'd had the chance to tie
The knot with me for life,
They'd no doubt bring me the sun, the moon, the sky—
The men who do not call me “wife.”

MARCO

Marco was a most tortured romantic. He suffered beautifully; it truly was an art form. He sought out new ways to take happiness and find the black cloud to picnic underneath. No love was worthy that hadn't been tested, pushed, prodded and analyzed.

Marco lived for ideals with a capital “I.” Ordinary living was for sell-outs. Recognition of adult responsibilities meant caving to the conformist platitudes of “reliability” and “predictability” which led only to one thing—a slow death in the suburbs. He chased his ideals—coolness, hipness, avant-gardeness—to the ends of the earth. He once drove his rickety, rat-a-tat-tatty Honda motorcycle from Nebraska to Mexico to test his own self-reliance. My suggestion that he move out of his parents' house and try his hand at paying his own rent lacked the requisite adventure. My common sense suggestion was like a cold hard slap against the sweet, innocent baby's bottom that was his vision of “Independence Quest.” It was quite the buzzkill. So I kissed him goodbye in my driveway. No girls allowed on this knight's journey.

I lost track of Marco over the years, but stumbled upon him in a university library recently. He had been living the life I would have guessed—nomadic, bohemian and full of affairs with women who had long hair and smelled of patchouli. But time had changed him.

He was back in town studying dentistry. Yes, that's right. A dentist. He hadn't chopped his dreadlocks yet, and I didn't dare ask if they posed a health risk in his future field.

“How are your classes? Is the work difficult?” Marco had been a philosophy major as an undergrad. You know, because he was deep.

“Oh, the science is fine, but I can't stand my classmates. Everyone here is so religious.”

“Well, it is a pretty Catholic city.”

“No. It's not just Catholics; it's Christians of all kinds, and Protestants, Jews, and even Muslim students. I feel oppressed by the amount of church and temple talk I have to endure everyday. This is why I hate the U.S. Why I had to get out.”

“Well, religion isn't exactly an issue confined to the United States...”

Marco rattled on about how he was and what he thought of the world. He didn't like to cook but despised eating in restaurants (“the waiters hover around, harass you to finish and then guilt you into a tip”). He didn't like the movies, and he hated television. He didn't like to spend money, which was a good thing because he asserted that he also didn't like to work. He only liked to read and surf but had received a knee injury that put an end to his beach-bum life.

So this is what became of the windmill-fencing, adventure-seeking, tortured romantic. He of many imagined angsts achieved a wicked end—real angst. Achey and sentenced to dentistry in a town with no beaches.

TOBY

Over our first drink, Toby enthralled me with stories about the years he worked for the Honolulu Zoo. He knew more about turtles than anyone I'd ever met. Over our second drink, he captivated me with tales about his life as an Air Force pilot stationed in Europe. By our third drink, we'd made a bet about the origin of hamsters as house pets.

“I mean, where did they come from?”

“Do you think an archeologist searching ruins somewhere in Africa looked up one day and saw a pack of hamsters running free on the Sahara?”

“Probably. I bet they were rolling across a savannah, hundreds of tiny hamster wheels spinning over dirt mounds and grass. Lions and gazelles leaping out of the way to avoid being trampled.”

“Yeah, and the archeologist and his assistant grabbed a couple and named them ‘Trisket’ and ‘Molly’ and the rest is history.”

I never saw Toby again, but my curiosity got the best of me. Now I know that hamsters were discovered by a British zoologist traveling in Syria.

JEFF

Jeff was very proud of the fact that he almost never shopped for clothes in the United States. His sweaters were from Switzerland and his shirts from a company in Australia.

BEN

Ben told me about his battle with a gambling addiction. It was a fascinating story. I bet myself I wouldn't go on a second date with him.

JOE

Everyone told me I had to meet Joe. He was a great catch and a favorite around his office. Always volunteering for special causes, readily available for a happy hour or other group outings. He was a hard worker, and he liked children.

We exchanged a few emails, and he seemed pleasant enough. He warned me that he was shy and had lately become discouraged by how many women fled after a first date. He believed it took time to develop a relationship and that people needed more than one dinner to decide if they were interested in each other. I agreed and joked that we should bring our laptops to dinner. In case we had trouble making conversation we could email each other, as we seemed to do just fine communicating that way.

Dinner with Joe resembled something like eating with a shy and slightly hostile 12-year-old boy; only the conversation wasn't as stimulating and involved less eye contact. He pushed around the food on his plate. He twitched and twittered. He played obsessively with the impressive collection of rubber wristbands around both his wrists, showing a particular preference for a yellow "Live Strong" band.

DANIEL

Daniel wouldn't start karate lessons until the wart on his foot healed.

PETER

"You know Peter is a freak, don't you?" This was the first question his friends asked me the minute Peter left the room. Peter and I drove to Lincoln to help them move into their new house. I agreed to go along because we had been dating for two months, and I wanted to meet some of his friends. This line of questioning may have been the reason he kept them from me.

Why I didn't see that question as a red flag is something I wonder about to this day. I know I was impressed with his sense of humor and a fascinating wealth of knowledge about a diverse array of topics. He was also a great cook, making up ridiculous dinners out of whatever ingredients were in my refrigerator.

Nevertheless, his friends seemed slightly amused that I would be tangled up with the likes of him. While Peter had many good qualities, his tragic flaw was taking a good thing too far. For example, he could break the ice within moments of meeting new people. He didn't so much break the ice as smash it into a thousand pieces. He loved telling stories and was a natural actor—standing up in someone's living room and re-enacting a scene from work or just as easily a scene from Roman history, and sometimes just a scene from his last trip to the toilet.

He possessed a dangerous amount of basic knowledge about almost everything. Enough to jump into a conversation and impress whomever he had interrupted with an odd tidbit or a tantalizing factoid. "Are you talking about architecture? I love Zaha Hadid's Vitra fire station in Germany." "Did I hear you say Hubble telescope? I happen to be a stargazer, myself." "Did you drop this quarter? I don't know if you were aware, but I'm quite conversant in numismatics, particularly ancient Greek coinage."

Some subjects didn't even require actual knowledge. If he ever stumbled across something that got a laugh, he made a mental note and trotted it out whenever conversation allowed. He ran the same lines for all crowds, changing wording slightly depending on the audience (he wouldn't swear in front of my mother or small children). For instance, he dazzled family friends from Panama with his ability to speak Spanish: "Chica gotta take a leek-a!" In fact, he dazzled anyone who spoke Spanish, had been to Mexico, or worked in a Mexican restaurant with

that gem. It is curious that for all his performative tendencies Peter lacked a true appreciation for his audience. His desire to entertain was only surpassed by his desire to see people squirm. If his joke got a laugh, he was pleased, but if a joke offended, shocked, or embarrassed, he was proud.

JON

Jon was a truck driver who was saving up to buy a cricket farm. Once he got the farm established, he was going to hire a cricket farm manager, buy a sailboat, and live at sea off his earnings.

KIRK

Kirk loved James Taylor and TV shows about paranormal activities. He debated whether to take his 12-year-old son on vacation to a tree top village in Oregon or repair his ailing Saturn.

SALMAN

Salman wore a series of tee shirts that made me want to fall in love with him. The first one was "I'm for PLoS one." A shout out to an interactive, open-access journal for the communication of all peer-reviewed, scientific and medical research published by the Public Library of Science (PloS).

I'm a sucker for proud geeks. Men who embrace their big brains and aren't afraid to use them. Salman was an astronomer/physicist. He was clever and jovial. Smart and articulate. He grew up in Pakistan and had a beautiful accent and a gorgeous head of hair. He had an amazing ability to take something as far away and out of reach as the stars and bring them to me in a way I could comprehend, mostly using references to pop culture. Although he was a complete gentleman, he never paid me a single compliment. I kept waiting for one: "You look nice tonight." I craved any small acknowledgement and would have gladly settled for a generic "You have pretty eyes."

The last time I saw Salman, his tee shirt said, "Who the hell do I think I am?" I wanted to laugh and punch him.

Passing Time in Los Altos

Liz Gutekunst

The only thing I could say in Spanish was "No te preocupes" which meant "don't worry," though I once said I was a "pendejo" and thought it meant stupid. Oh, no. I do worry. I don't speak Spanish. So the men, delighted, talked at me very fast at which I smiled and understood nothing. Though sometimes I would repeat "No te preocupes."

Rats

Liz Gutekunst

After Stafford's "Passing Remark"

I never saw a rat sorry for itself. I never saw two rats consoling each other for being rats. Rats live good full rat-lives with other rats. Ratmind and rat heart plunge them into rat sex with other impassioned rats.

People say they are poison and ugly and cause disease.
I say people cause disease.
I never caught a cold or syphilis or scabies or manic depression from a rat.

Pedestal

Elizabeth Evenson-Dencklau

And you weep as you watch
the glass pedestal crumble
along with your hopes,
for it was unable to hold
the weight of your expectations.

Snow Angel

Polly Hidalgo

She tossed herself
backwards into the
fresh snow.
The cold
shock took
her breath
but quickly wore
off. Slowly she began
to move
her arms, in
her voluminous winter coat,
in arcs. Then
her legs, bundled in snow
pants, follow
carefully, very carefully
I watched
her rise, this previously
broken child
and she turned
to look
triumphant over all
her life's obstacles
at the flawless snow angel
she had made.

A Day In The Life

Ian Monaghan

The sights and sounds of an Irish dance competition rival that of any major sporting event. Of course, you won't hear the dull thud of basketballs on a polished wooden floor or the echoing crack of a bat in the season opener at Fenway Park. But these competitions are just as exciting in their own unique way.

The building itself is a large, boxy structure, one of the great steel-and-concrete castles of the twentieth century. A spacious desert of parking lots spreads out in front of it, and four triangular concrete pillars stand like towers at the entrance, their battlements emblazoned with the name of the arena. The pediment above the walkway is held aloft by great steel balustrades and gives the impression of being a sort of elevated drawbridge.

Inside, there is housed a space like most utilitarian exhibition halls and convention centers of our day. Catwalks, harsh lighting, and camera platforms are suspended by steel girders high above a concrete slab so as not to get in anyone's way. Two monolithic, carpeted walls divide the one space into three and help cut down on the noise of nearly four thousand people all talking at once.

The first sound to reach your ears is the melody of a menagerie of instruments. Accordions (and don't forget the lone concertina!) blurt out a steely, nasal droning somewhere between waxed paper on a comb and an air horn. That, combined with the plaintive yet scratchy strains of violins and the airy whistle of a flute, fills the space and seeps into its cracks. Over the course of the day, it becomes a noise, but it is a pleasant noise nonetheless.

Then come the more localized sounds of the dancers practicing their steps in hallways and corners: a final rehearsal before they step onto the stage to claim their place among the winners. On concrete, the sound has a dull, flat quality, not unlike tapping one's fingernails on a desk. On the medium of a wooden stage, however, amplified by airspace from underneath, the dance becomes the series of resounding *cracks* and *booms* of an artillery brigade. It is an insistent, pulsating sound that draws out the

rhythm in the music, expounding upon it like a seasoned orator, toying with it the way a cat plays with a mouse. Then it is thrown to the judges and spectators to do with as they please.

The stages themselves are quite large, at least sixteen square feet, and get larger for the more experienced dancers. In front of the stage is a table for the judge. To the side of that, there is a chair, speaker, and microphone for the musician. There is usually only one judge, but for the top two levels there are three. Family members and friends are seated on one side of the stage, while dancers waiting for their turn sit on the opposite side.

The show that is put on by these dancers, ranging in age from ten to nineteen, is as much a visual spectacle as it is one of sound. They perform impressive feats, spinning tightly and flying across the stage with lightning speed. The jumps and mid-air spins that they view as a matter of course would be considered by people unfamiliar with the sport to be near impossible.

All of this is only enhanced by the costumes. Girls wear knee-length dresses made of thick cloth, with long sleeves and several large pleats at the bottom. They come in every color of the rainbow and are embroidered with all manner of decorations. These range from the obvious Celtic knots to the more eclectic spiderwebs, seashells, and cloth roses, and, of course, anything that sparkles or shines.

The typical outfit for boys is a dress shirt, black pants, and a black vest. However, in the upper levels, black vests are more the exception than the rule. Many of the shirts are custom-made and range from black-and-white hound's tooth to solid colors to black with white tiger stripes, and most have French cuffs. The ties feature stripes, polka dots, paisley, and every other design and color imaginable. But the real tools of this trade are the shoes. Made of soft black leather, the heels and toes are gilded in smooth fiberglass. They are the sole implements used to create the sounds so evocative of this captivating sport.

No matter how many competitions I attend, I always feel the same excitement and respect for this art form, for that is what it truly is. The flashing costumes, the music, and most of all, the extraordinary skill of the dancers—all of these things unite to create quite a memorable experience. Anyone unacquainted with this sport should definitely attend one of these competitions.

Contributors' Notes

Bob Orsi was born and raised in Omaha. He currently attends Metropolitan Community College and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Arts with a concentration in graphic communication arts. One of his goals is to some day illustrate a children's book.

Elizabeth Evenson-Dencklau is currently a student at Metropolitan Community College with plans to transfer to the University of Nebraska at Omaha in the fall of 2010. An avid reader, she lives at home with her two cats, Tip Toes and Thackery Binx, and enjoys writing poetry in her spare time.

Paul Garth's work has been selected and read at various events in the Omaha area. A native of both South Carolina and Nebraska, he currently attends the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and he plans to attend Creighton University for a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. He thanks Steve Lovett, Sana Amoura-Patterson, and Liz Renner for their support.

Liz Gutekunst grew up on the East Coast and spent her wonder years between New York City and the District of Columbia. She is a visual artist and spent the last nine years working as a graphic designer in southern California. She moved to Nebraska to go back to school and has learned something about writing, in the process.

Polly Hidalgo, a Georgia native, moved to Omaha with her husband and nine children in 2005. With six children still at home, she is currently a theatre major at the University of Nebraska at Omaha having completed a liberal arts associate's degree through Metropolitan Community College last year.

Ian Monaghan has lived in Omaha since he was born. He travels across the country competing in Irish step dance. He has also performed with the Omaha Symphony Orchestra at the Orpheum Theatre. He is currently pursuing an associate's degree in business management at Metropolitan Community College and plans to one day become an Irish dance teacher and open his own school. He spends his free time taking pictures of things.

Madeline Radcliff is a humanities student of Metropolitan Community College. She had plays featured in the 2008 and 2009 Great Plains Theatre Conference and her play, *Mountain Birds*, will be produced at the Shelterbelt Theatre this spring, marking her first production. She is an actress, last appearing in *Shelterskelter 14* at the Shelterbelt, and a singer wherever the opportunity presents itself. In her spare time, Madeline writes, plinks on the piano and guitar, and tries to make beautiful things as often as possible.

“Men I Did Not Marry (An Ode to Dorothy Parker)” is **Liz Renner's** first published work of fiction. An avid reader and fan of any story well-told, Renner enrolled in a creative writing class at Metropolitan Community College out of a desire to participate in the larger literary culture. This story was produced in that class with the help and input of instructor Steve Lovett and fellow students.

John Simet is a former elementary school teacher and a father of three. He discovered his love of photography while taking photos of his children. In 2007, at his wife's urging, he enrolled in the Commercial Still Photography Program at Metropolitan Community College. Since then he continues to work diligently to make photography his career. John hopes to one day open his own photography studio.

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