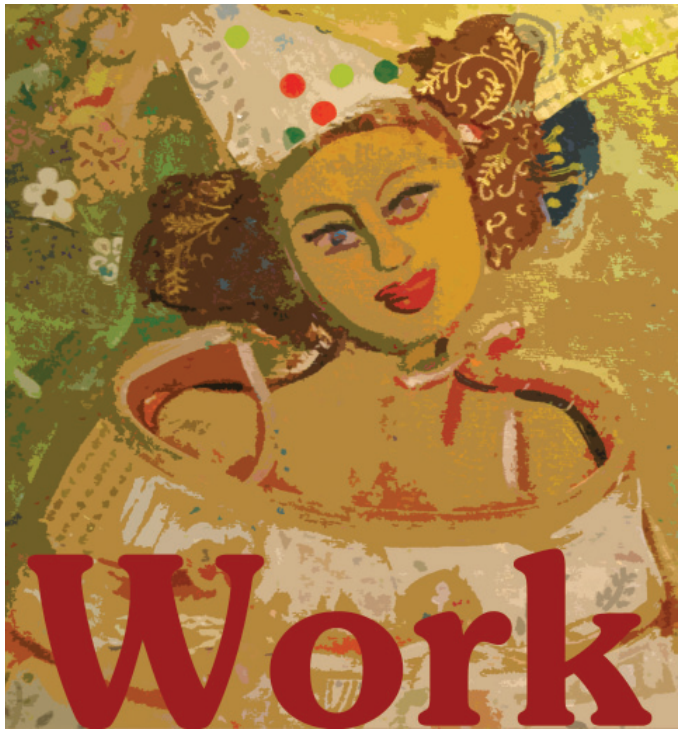
WORK: Memoir, Fiction & Poetry Anthology
Fiction Editors: Marko Fong, Nancy Bourne, Jo-Anne Rosen
Poetry Editors: Amanda Yskamp and Douglas Larsen

"Blue Money" by Michelle Valois originally appeared in *The Rockhurst Review* (as "Good Money"), 2001; "Blue Hands, Black Coffee" appeared in *The Baltimore Review* (as "Human Resources"), 2012

© 2013, Owen Abbott, Marylu Downing, Jessica Hahn, LouAnn Shepard Muhm, Ken Poyner, Marsha Temlock, James Stafford, Michelle Valois

Wordrunner echapbooks




Wordrunner eChapbooks | September 2013

"Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying"

—*Studs Terkel*

# Contents


*Michelle Valois*
Blue Money . . . . . 1
Blue Ford Truck . . . . . 3
Blue Hands, Black Coffee . . . . . 4

*Marylu Downing*
The Tap Dancing Birthday Cake . . . . . 6

*Jessica Hahn*
Happiness . . . . . 10

*Marsha Temlock*
15,000 Keystrokes . . . . . 15

*Owen Abbott*
Stayfree Carefree . . . . . 25

*Ken Poyner*
The Pirate . . . . . 33

*LouAnn Shepard Muhm*
Waitress . . . . . 34

*James Stafford*
Out to the Air Above . . . . . 36

About the Authors . . . . . 43


# Blue Money

*Michelle Valois*

The men from my father's shop come over to play cards, big men with small names and tattooed forearms. Eagles etched in blue ink that match the dye from the shop where they work, the dye that works its way through the skin of fingers smudged machinist blue, a blue I could never find in my box of crayons, a blue not crepe-papered on the walls of George Street Elementary School.

They come on Saturday afternoons, hauling cases of beer, bushels of clams, thick meat my father cooks on the fireplace he made out of cinder blocks and an old grate he found one Saturday at the dump. Six or seven steaks at a time, plus hot dogs for us kids. Smoke fills the front yard where my sisters and I play, away from the back yard, but edging the game toward the side yard to watch the men from our father's shop drink beer and play cards.

*You're it*, fingers point, dare. *You go*.

My older sisters wait by the fading rhododendrons while I creep under the picnic table, trying to find change. I tuck my plump body between steel-toed work boots, avoiding still-burning cigarette butts. I pocket a few dirty dimes and nickels, along with the prospect of more to come as the day turns to night and the men are still here and my mother says, *God damn it, the men are still here*.

We make like we are playing hide and seek, but we only hide in one place and nobody ever seeks out the person crouched under the picnic table looking for the money drinking men drop.

*Stay in the front yard like I told you*. Our mother's housecoat is always pressed, and on Saturdays she gets her hair set.

*Pair of tens. Ace high. God damn it*. Someone pays the pot and the pot grows. Someone says, *I got hands like feet*, and the men laugh because they all know what that is like, and then

someone who is not laughing loses another hand. We watch and will the men to slide more coins over the red-stained slats of wood, to have more of the beer that makes them sing too loud, talk too loud, bet too high, so they don't notice change fall to the ground.

We have watched all this before, heard our mother curse, the men sing, bet, drink, lose. Watched coins slide and fall through slats. Coins smudged blue from inky hands jingling them in pockets. *Some money you just have to pretend you don't need*, our father will say when he loses again, the coins and bills dirty with machine shop grease. And when she scolds him for going to the bank in his work clothes on payday, he shrugs: *Don't matter, the money's good.*

*You kids get your supper and come right back in the front yard.*

We grab hot dogs and stuff them into rolls, eat. We could sing along with the men if our mother would let us, and sometimes she does, until the men grab too fast and sing too loud. Then we wait for the quiet of the men gone home.

*He always gets the kids riled up, can't put them to bed at a decent hour*. She is on the phone. *Get out and dry off girls. I tell him why at our house, and him always losing.*

We rinse each other's hair and towel ourselves dry, counting imaginary coins in our head, more than we saw, more than we ever see.

The sheets are cool. From the open window we can hear the men, the songs, the jingle of dirty coins in piles getting bigger.

We are four to a bed and we kick ourselves into a comfortable jangle of knobby knees and bicker about coins we will find, coins we never find. Hours later, when our father begins to snore and our mother has stopped yelling, we climb out of bed and sneak out back. My older sisters never find much because they only look for shiny silver, but I find change, smudged dark blue.



# Blue Ford Truck

*Michelle Valois*

> *"What did I know, what did I know*
> of love's austere and lonely offices?"
>
> — *Robert Hayden*

Fenders round, some rust; manual transmission; gearbox on the steering wheel; ashtray filled with smoked-down Camels— How ashamed I was that Friday night when you picked me up at the high school dance in your new used truck, and my friends and I climbed onto the hard metal bed, and you drove us home.

Some friend's parent would have driven me to the dance, a deal I had brokered on the telephone that afternoon, while you were at work; some friend's parent in a four-door sedan with a back seat roomy enough for three teenage girls.

Were you ready for bed at 10:00 but stayed awake because I had promised you would pick us up? Or did our taxi service interrupt some Friday night television show, a sit-com or Battle-of-the-Bulge re-run? Or had you, perhaps, fallen asleep in your recliner, the one with the grease stains that never washed off from the machine shop where you worked ten-hour shifts, and had you woken up just in time to drive to school and park your truck under a street lamp that glorified and magnified my shame?

Blue Ford truck, fenders round, some rust — take me home.

# Blue Hands, Black Coffee

*Michelle Valois*

My father's hands were blue from the molds he made in the machine shop where he worked. My father's hands were strong. My father's hands struck out, sometimes; sometimes they repaired what was broken around the house. Usually his hands held cans of beer or shots of Jack Daniels or cups of strong coffee. On Saturdays, if there was no overtime, his hands cocked a gun. On Sundays, they were folded in prayer. Later in the day they shuffled a deck of dog-eared cards as we and grandparents and sometimes aunts and uncles huddled around the dining room table to play Pitch. When we were infants, his hands cradled us, after my mother had bathed and powdered our tiny bodies but before she put us to bed. I could not remember his hands like this.

Last week, in my daily paper, I saw a help wanted ad for a job at the local university. The Physics Department was seeking a tool and die maker, someone to run the department's machine shop, someone who could assist professors and graduate students with the *instruments and tools needed in the fabrication of the scientific equipment used in sponsored research*.

My father met every requirement, except for a high school diploma, but I could see him fast-talking his way into an interview and into the job, offering to fix the diesel engine on the department chair's 475-horse-powered boat and then being invited to go deep sea fishing. He would smoke with the maintenance men, 100 feet from the nearest building; check lottery numbers with the department secretaries; tease the academic dean, a bespectacled man in awe of my father's unwavering ability to operate and fix every machine in the university's shop (which would be cleaner and better ventilated than anything my father had ever worked in before).





My father in a white, buttoned-down shirt; ironed, but which would not stay clean and pressed long. I would visit him often at work. He would introduce me to his graduate students, young men who, when they looked at him, wished their own fathers could handle tools like that. He would make a point of walking by the offices of the department's faculty and introducing me as one of them. *My daughter, the professor*, he would boast, and add, almost apologetically, *English*, and then, because he could never help himself, *We always thought she spoke good enough*, which is what he started saying the year I left for college.

I want to pen a letter, on his behalf, to the department of human resources:

> *Dear Sir or Madam:*
>
> *Enclosed please find the resume of a man who, with half a century of experience as a tool and die maker and extensive knowledge of manufactured materials, most notably plastics; three years of active duty during the second world war; a surprisingly gentle fathering ability; not to mention overall likeability and unquestionable collegiality; meets nearly every one of your desired qualifications.*

At his wake, twenty-five years before such a job was ever advertised or maybe even existed, I was struck by how white my father's hands were, folded upon his chest –not the white of pressed dress shirts, the kind he never wore to work; not the white of an empty sheet of paper, or a baby tooth, or cream – he liked his coffee black.

# The Tap Dancing Birthday Cake

*Marylu Downing*

The cake costume, an ingenious, lovely construction of wooden bars and wire covered in white satin, has no armholes. Like ballast, arms are necessary to keep the tap dancer going, generate energy, and balance the legs with the rest of the body.

It's not just the lack of arms, which means less of a dance, the shape of the costume itself is limiting. Like a belly in the last months of pregnancy, the cake's in the way. There will be no hugging, no leaning into a good looking man. I can't shake hands, or take a potty break.

Tonight I'm doing my second gig as *The Tap Dancing Birthday Cake.* It's a step above jumping out of a cake. This new job came with the new house, new schools and new car pool. It came with the "start over." The job is in Marin County, where people have the money to pay for a singing, or in this case, a tap-dancing greeting card, just for the hell of it.

I've navigated two sets of stairs and knocked on the door with my shoe, the front tap making a loud clatter that immediately brings the hostess to the door. She's wearing a sexy black negligee. When I look around the room, everyone is in some sort of sleeping attire. It's a slumber party," she explains.

Now the music starts. "*Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I m 64?*" the Beatles ask. The insecurity of relationships and aging. I over-exaggerate the steps to draw attention away from the lack of arms as I clinch my teeth into a great big smile because, if nothing else, a dancing cake who is only 37 years old should be happy!

A man calls out, "Beautiful!" I don't know if he means the dancing or me, but it keeps me tapping. A small droplet of perspiration clings to my chin just below the place where the strap





from the cone-shaped hat digs into skin at the juncture of cheek and jaw. Now I've come to the part of "trenches" where arms, if I could use them, would swing rapidly back and forth along with the legs. Instead, my arms lie trapped beneath frothy fabric icing, squished below the shoulder mechanism that holds the costume together. Inadvertently arm and finger muscles twitch inside the cake. Out of habit they want to be part of the act.

My new friend, Sara, describes this job as "a perverse form of therapy." I'm working my way back to being the fast-paced mother-worker-bee. The cake is part of the plan. If I can be the cake, then it will all work out somehow.

I haven't told my husband about the underpants, satin to match the cake, with the words "Happy Birthday" written on the backside. His response to the new job has been, "When are you going to get over it? Now you're just making a spectacle of yourself!"

The panties, my little secret, stretching tightly across my rear. Intended to get a laugh, or something else.

It's not necessarily sexy being a tap dancing birthday cake. The job just doesn't feel right and I know I've got to quit, but just when I don't know. The question whirls through my mind in time to the music. The binding discomfort of the costume feels familiar, like a swaddling cloth meant to keep the baby from crying.

I almost trip just now on the "maxi ford," *jump shuffle jump*, probably too much for the plywood platform's uneven surface. The plywood, delivered with the music earlier in the day, a surprise for the two birthday boys' 40th. One of their wives has told me that they were fraternity brothers at Stanford.

Finally the sweat droplet falls from my chin, leaving a small round mark as it soaks into the wood. Claustrophobia is only a few tap steps away. The golden rosettes bounce around as I dance. This cake is about to slide off its platter onto the ground and ruin a good party.

The music concludes, and I turn away and tip the cake to get the Happy Birthday laugh and titillate the easy marks. Then I bow. I want it sort of balletic, except that without arms extended,

I simply wobble. For a minute, the room spins in a haze of color. This is the time that's hardest, when people expect the cake to stick around and join the party. Be good for a few more laughs. Fear lights up my eyes, but the crowd probably sees it as excitement, the two emotions like fraternal twins.

"Fantastic legs," one of the birthday boys says, lips curling back to expose a perfect set of white teeth. Probably an orthodontist. "Can I get you a drink? Oh, no, I guess unless I pour the drink down your throat...there's no way for you to drink, is there?"

"Thanks anyway," I say through clenched teeth, "Oh yes, and Happy Birthday!"

A short, rotund man spews bits of alcohol-laden saliva into my face as he says, "You know, I can get you a job that will make you some <u>real</u> money!" If I had a hand, I would slap him, but I simply pull a cake-like u-turn and walk toward the door, my face red and sweaty.

The hostess comes over with an envelope of money for the talent agency. "Oh, dear, well, I guess I'll just tuck this under your hat," she says, pulling the already strained rubber chinstrap aside and sticking the envelope up into the cone, wriggling the silver mylar flames that are affixed to the top of the hat. My curly hair, unleashed for a minute, springs out from under the cone.

"Thanks," I mutter, as the strap snaps back into its comfortable fleshy niche. "You were great, everyone loved you. Can't you stay a little longer? " coos the co-hostess.

"'Got to get home, " I say. " I'm glad it all worked out," I add, no real personality coming through. Just trying to maintain before I scream. At least I can run and scream, if I need to. No arms required. She opens the door for me, bell shaped cake knocking against the door frame.

The stairs are misted by fog. I take a deep breath. My heart pounds and for a minute I stand frozen at the top. The thought of going back into a mob of drunken party-goers seems even scarier, so I Ginger Rogerly take that first step down, aware that taps can be very slippery. On the second step, I curse the lack of arms again.



It would be easy to fall to the bottom, creating a fatal head injury and ripping the cake costume into tiny, shiny shards. The girls would cry and my husband might miss me, might have regrets about his fondness for moms in the car pool. I think of a perfectly round little yellow pill with a heart shaped cutout in the center, a *Mother's Little Helper*, but there is none of that now.

As I reach the landing at the bottom of the stairs, I let out the breath I'd been holding and take in another, cold air stinging a little. Maybe disappearing isn't such a bad idea. I could fling myself down, falling and tumbling, rolling like an unexploded stick of dynamite down the hilly streets. Arms pinned to my sides, panties bumping against cement, wire twisting free. Gaining momentum, I'd disappear, never to be seen or heard from again. A blur of white, scattering a trail of tattered rosettes, hat a madly whirling glow of silver and neon pink against the darkness.

# Happiness

*Jessica Hahn*

*1.*

"I got a job at the Daily Scoop," I say to Mom, who's busy mixing Stoli and lemonade at the kitchen counter. Her face is tight. She's going to Pleasanton Correctional Facility in a month or so, but I'm all about my job. I'm fourteen and the idea of working is a ray of happiness. I'm hovering on the edge of a rite of passage. Mom is going to jail. I'm moving to Uncle Phil's. Natalie's back from college to—hah—keep an eye on me. The future is nebulous as all fuck, but hey, I'm gonna be paid. I pour myself a lemonade.

Mom sits at the round table next to the French doors to the porch. The old chair with the scrape marks on the floor is her throne, and she sits and looks at the wall of windows, down at the valley San Francisco appears to be. I sit across, sipping on juice. For years she sat ringed by long-haired friends as they chopped up coke on mirrored plates, passed joints knobby as old man's fingers, and yammered their stories long into the night while I brooded downstairs in fleece pajamas, wondering when they'd go home.

Ever since I could remember she worked. She didn't believe in "work" per se, not in a traditional sense. "Work is for peons," she once said when I was a little kid, giving me an aristocratic smirk as she chomped on a Benson and Hedges and swung her leather purse over her shoulder, grabbed her hairbrush and pulled it through her big blonde Janis Joplin hair. "Come on kid, let's go."

And I'd be dancing, just about. I was home for the day, for whatever reason, and lucky me got to follow her to her work.

Her Sixties-era candy apple colored convertible Mustang guttered out of our driveway on the steepest hill in San Francisco, roared up Carolina to Coral, slalomed past the Potrero Hill housing projects, and cruised like a blazing fire into Hunter's Point.





I leaned in, no seatbelt on, country music twanging on the radio. Wind whipped my long brown hair. Mom's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "Don't ever tell people about my work. Capiche?"

"I know, I know. You sell wood. Raven Industries, blah blah."

I lay back on the black leather seat, hot as tortillas and smelling just as good, top down with the sun warm on my face.

Mom parked across the street from the warehouse on Evans Street, never in front. She was a dungareed figure, no bra under her Guatemalan shirt, her hair frizzy from the car ride, flip-flops slapping, purse swinging.

You could smell skunk from the sidewalk. We'd slip inside our warehouse, the cool air, dark space, and high ceiling like an urban cathedral. Even with piles of lumber there was all the space I'd ever want for roller-skating, spinning in circles, or pedaling a Big Wheel.

Way in the back was a room built of plywood. Under the doorframe and along the edges a golden glow emanated, like something nuclear pulsed inside. Faint strains of violin, flute and clarinet came from the vault. Mom opened the padlocks, revealing a glittering room with silver walls of Mylar, ceiling lights hanging like enormous fireflies, and a forest of bright green plants towering five feet tall out of black plastic pots. "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" played on the radio hanging on the wall. The humid air smelled thick and rich, warm and earthy, comfortable.

"Okay kiddo, you know the drill," Mom said and hung her purse on a hook.

She was off with a hose, watering and humming to herself. Sometimes I'd put my book down—I always brought a book—and walk the aisles on the uneven floor, my fingers brushing the sticky leaves that hung like five-fingered paper-thin hands. My reflection was a funhouse face on silver walls.

On the ride home I asked, "Why can't I say what you really do for work?"

We parked under our grape vines and our golden retriever barked behind our fence. Mom slammed her door. "Because if you tell people what I do," she paused to fix me with her gaze, "the cops will take me away. You want me to go to jail?"

And for many years it was just so. She worked, and come summer we'd travel: Samoa and Micronesia, Madagascar and the Seychelles.

*2.*

I work at the Daily Scoop during my tenth grade year, before Mom goes off to Pleasanton, and while she's there I make lattes with golden espresso and perfect foam cushions. I spread cream cheese on bagels, slice red onions thin as a sheet of Zig-Zags, scoop ice cream. Dylan is my favorite co-worker. He's purple haired, wears tight black jeans and a pentagram pendant. I have a crush on him, but he's gay. He's the first friend who lives alone, in a beehive of an apartment complex off of Ocean Avenue, and I envy him. We believe in witchcraft. "Do what you will, but harm none," is our motto. "What we do is secret," we believe. We attempt astral projection and guided meditations. He tells me about his many past lives, and that he was once a pharaoh, and that he remembers being hung at Salem. He also regales me with the tale of how he jerked off on his bed while a workman watched from the telephone lines outside his window.

I've been living with Uncle Phil ever since Mom went to jail. He owns a bird store, woop de doo. He hates it. He plays the role of the quasi gay bird store owner, walking like a pigeon and prattling to the public and the difference between cockatoos and cockatiels. Standing on the concrete floor gives him sciatica, and then he's a grumpy asshole when he gets home.

My room's in the attic. Nobody enters but me. My room is my safe haven, a sacred place that smells of burnt sage and mugwort. I lie on my bed and meditate, feel myself rise. I soar out of the room and over the city with its glittering lights, fly across the





bay, flying east under the moon or the sun, tethered by a glowing filament of floss unraveling from my solar plexus, a tenuous spider web between reality and dream.

The ice cream parlor is also a haven. The one time I run away because Uncle Phil dragged me by my leg from my attic room for not fucking doing some dishes. I run across Potrero Hill to the Daily Scoop and hide out in the bathroom until Dylan's shift is over. He'll take me home. We wait for the 22 Fillmore, but at the same time it lurches into view, my mother's convertible roars up. My big sister, a furious Amazon without a clue as to what's going on in my life, is driving. She slams the door so hard it'd snap your hand off. Her eyes are popping out her head. She screams at Dylan: "I'll fucking beat your ass if you fucking kidnap my little sister!"

Dylan throws up his palms. "But—but—"

"I'll smash your fucking face in!"

Dylan flees onto the bus.

*3.*

"Whacha gonna do with all your moolah?" Mom asks me, sitting the required arms-distance away, the table between us. Uncle Phil sits at another corner, legs and arms crossed, eyebrows raised. We're in a courtyard, sky overhead and grey buildings all around. Guards with guns lurk in corners.

Since Mom's incarceration, I've changed. I know what it's like, finally, to get drunk and stoned. I've been to my first punk show; the anger and simplicity of the music has an allure that Mozart can't trump. My hair's dyed a Crayola color, and my Army jacket is decorated in safety pins and patches. Mom's changed too, lost weight and verve. Her complacency disarms me. She's always been mom and dad, one tough broad. Now she's trying to hold hands though her palms are too sweaty, and I feel better to just fold my arms. I want to leave this shithole.

Birds fly overhead. I'm thinking about a story Mom told me: "I take walks every morning around the track here every day, and

sometimes I find these decapitated birds. They fly into the razor wire. They don't see it. Poor things."

My uncle looks at his watch. I glare at him. He's got nothing special to get back to. He hates the bird store.

Money doesn't mean happiness. Happiness is knowing I'd kept my mouth shut, that I never was a narc. Happiness is getting twenty bucks from Uncle Phil to get out of his house. Happiness is found at the bottom of a Mickey's forty. Happiness is screaming into a darkened nightclub, jumping into the mosh pit. Happiness is being in control.

"Yo! Kiddo?" Mom says, fingering the hem of her ugly uniform. "Whatcha gonna do with all that moolah?" Behind her a guard shifts and I imagine forks in his eyes.

It's not enough for a car to get out of town, I think. It's not enough for what I want, which is to rewind time to when we flew over the hills in her red car and landed in warm earth, some safe cocoon of childhood where work just didn't matter. I'm ready to go now.



# 15,000 Keystrokes

*Marsha Temlock*

Eliot stood in front of my desk while I gathered the forty-two hand-scrawled pages he'd given me to read.

"So what did you think?"

"I'm afraid—"

"Never mind." He thrust the forty-two in his briefcase, stuffed with the other five hundred and six pages. He'd been doling out *The History of the Implacable World* from the time I started working as a vocational counselor at Voc Op, a psychosocial program for the psychologically disabled. For six months I hadn't been able to make head or tail of his indecipherable intelligence and had finally given up.

Eliot swiped a frond of greasy black hair back over his bulldog forehead. "If you had taken the time to peruse my account of the implacable Julius Caesar, Miss Bowers, you would have learned that his downfall, as Shakespeare would have us believe, was not his disregard of Calpurnia's warning, but his failure to solidify his relationships with his rivals. Partnerships, even with the lowly, would have served him in the end."

"Michael is beginning class, Eliot. I'm sure he is wondering where you are."

"I would not presume to second-guess Michael."

"Go," I said. "And that clock is ten minutes slow."

He looked at his steel-banded Citizen. "Seven minutes, three seconds."

"Go."

Even with the door closed I could hear Eliot's heavy lumbering footfalls as he made his way to the classroom. For a minute or so I sat at my desk and stared at the Rorschach patterns of peeling puce paint. Squinting, I made out a one-legged cat and a series of clouds. I worked steadily for fifteen minutes updating my case notes, gave up, and decided to get a cup of coffee.

The staff room was next to what was euphemistically called Voc Op's computer training center. Michael Tomas was in front of the room explaining some shorthand function in Word. Twenty clients hunched over donated IBM computers following his instruction. I watched Eliot tapping away.

Annie, my boss, came up from behind. "Busy bees, aren't they."

"Check out Eliot's earmuffs."

"The headphones are to drown out the voices."

"His fingers smoke."

"Michael clocked him at 15,000 kph on the numeric pad."

"What's average?"

"Five thousand is okay. Anything around twelve thousand is impressive. But fifteen … like you said, you can smell the smoke."

The staff room was nothing more than a glorified broom closet—a couple of shelves for the Mister Coffee, mugs, plastic spoons, and open can of coffee. Annie

I stirred in two teaspoons of Coffee-mate, made a face, and tapped in two more.

"Did I hear right that Rhonda Jay quit her job because she overheard someone call her crazy?" Annie asked.

"I think someone just made an offhand comment—you know how it goes—and she was sure they were talking about her so she up and left." I sighed. "I don't know, Annie. What's the good of teaching them any of this if they can't hold a job?"

Annie rested her hand on my shoulder. "Hope is the thing with feathers—/That perches in the soul—/And sings the tune without the words—/And never stops—at all—"

"Well maybe you should have hired Emily Dickinson."

"She's dead and you're not."

"Do you know what Julius Caesar's biggest mistake was?"

"His togas were too short and his pecker stuck out?"

"He spent too much energy warring with his enemies when he should have been forming partnerships with his rivals."

"Don't tell me you actually read his stuff?"





"Eliot's really brilliant."

"And he's also really …" Annie tapped the side of her head with her forefinger.

I guess I have only myself to blame if I get discouraged. When Annie hired me to be Voc Op's vocational counselor, she was quick to point out it was easier to sell clunkers than the mentally ill. I'm no hero. I took the job because the ink was still wet on my MSW and my divorce agreement.

Late that afternoon, Eliot Minowsky rapped on my door just as I was packing to leave.

"Miss Bowers"

Without looking up to see who it was, I bellowed, "I'm about to take off Eliot. This will have to wait."

"Can I come in?"

"I'd like to miss rush hour traffic, Eliot." Too late. When I looked up, all six two of him, gangly and gargantuan, stood there in front me blocking the hall light. He stretched out his bear paw and handed me an envelope.

I took the envelope and said something about how debonair he looked. Was he going out? Despite any change in temperature, Eliot typically wore a beige trench coat belted tightly at the waist, and underneath, a faded flannel shirt and baggy tan chinos, cuffs dripping over unlaced sneakers.

Eliot was decked out in a long black coat, a white silk scarf draped around his neck. Granted the coat was two sizes too large for his big frame. The sides hung like heavy drapes. All that was missing was a pair of opera glasses.

He smiled mischievously while I opened the envelope. Inside was a newspaper clipping advertising a Sears Roebuck washer/dryer.

"Are you thinking about buying new appliances, Eliot? If so I'm really not the one to ask." I make do with anything that accepts coins at the Soap and Suds where nowadays I take my laundry.

Eliot laughed. I'd never heard him laugh before. I'd seen him snarl but had never known his face to light up with such amusement.

"Eliot, do you want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Bien sur."

I frowned because he'd lapsed into that annoying habit of speaking French to avoid saying what's on his mind.

"Mademoiselle, je suis—"

"Oh, knock it off," I cried.

"I am happy to report that I am no longer a ward of the state."

"Excuse me?"

"I am no longer a ward of the state," he repeated exuberantly.

I stared at him in disbelief. "Are you telling me you have a job?"

"Yes."

"That's what this is all about then … the reason for your outfit."

"One must dress the part. At seven o'clock I will be conferring with a representative of corporate America."

"In other words, you have an interview at Sears?"

"Oui."

"Well, how about that?" I whistled softly.

"How about what?"

I sat down and carefully formed my next remark. If this were true, I didn't want Eliot to blow this opportunity. "Sears is a very good company to work for, Eliot. In fact it's an excellent company. Do you know the name of the person who is interviewing you?"

"I am to go to Human Resources and ask for a Mr. Sully. I believe that was the name given to me by his assistant, the woman I spoke to when I called about the data entry position for which I am inordinately qualified."

I blinked, still taking in the fact that Eliot had done this on his own. "This is extraordinary news."

Eliot folded his arms across his chest. "Why, Miss Bowers, you seem surprised or should I say astonished by my news."

"I …I'm a bit taken aback since we never discussed your employment," I stammered. Eliot definitely had the skills, clocking in at 15,000 kpm. I asked myself why I had never bothered suggesting he apply for work and the answer was obvious. He had unwound



the scarf from around his neck and opened his too-large coat. I took in his outdated brown suit (probably a relic from his father who passed away years ago) and shirt that looked like it had been washed in tea, a button missing at the collar; and the tie—a wide red-and-black striped affair—held in place with what appeared to be a Masonic tie clip.

Eliot searched my face. His eyes darkened. "Did you expect me to go back to making cardboard boxes?"

I blushed. "Of course not." He was referring to an earlier job when a previous work counselor had him assembling boxes for a greeting card company.

Eliot had been a brilliant student at Princeton when he had his major psychotic break. The early signs of schizophrenia had been ignored. Medication stabilized his condition, but there were constant battles with the disease he fought valiantly. It wasn't surprising that the monotonous assembly work sent him, tout de suite, to the psychiatric ward.

I got up and was about to clap my hand on his shoulder but remembered Eliot did not like to be touched. "This is fantastic news," I said. "I couldn't be happier. Are you nervous about the interview?"

"I am perfectly prepared," he told me.

"The interview is at seven. You probably have enough time to get a haircut," I suggested.

"Is that advisable, Miss Bowers?"

"Advisable," I repeated.

"Well, then I will do it!" He slammed his hand on the desk.

I grinned. "Let me know how it goes."

"Bien sur."

I winced.

Eliot was hired to work the graveyard shift which meant he checked in with me around five o'clock. I'd given him my cell number in case he had to reach me if he had any problems. From seven to twelve he entered warranty numbers for Sears Roebuck washers, dryers, refrigerators, lawn mowers, television sets, air conditioners,

sewing machines, stereos, vacuum cleaners and snowblowers. The first two weeks he reported Mr. Sully had complimented him on his data entry precision.

"I'm the fastest data entry clerk in the department."

"That's good news, Eliot. I'm not surprised."

The third week on the job Eliot was not as sanguine. Two co-workers were giving him a hard time. "You don't have to be friends," I said, "but you should make an effort to get along with them."

"Like Caesar."

"In a way."

The next call was to tell me he had solved the problem. The two co-workers were adding their work to his pile.

"I don't like the sound of that, Eliot," I said. "You mustn't let those men take advantage of you."

A week later Eliot called at one a.m. By the time I realized my cell phone had gone off, I missed his call. I debated calling him back, but I knew if I didn't, I would worry all night.

"Mr. Sully is going to fire me."

"How do you know? Did he criticize your work? Maybe you're just being … too hard on yourself."

"He knows I've been doing Pompy's and Casey's work. He put us all on warning."

"He's giving you all another chance, Eliot. Don't let those guys trick you into doing their work. You hear?"

"I've got to slow down, I guess, or they'll get into trouble."

"Well, that's not right. Jeez, Eliot. Think about it, huh."

The next time Eliot called he said Casey had been let go. "He kept coming in late and Mr. Sully finally got onto that he was fixing his time sheet."

"Well that's good," I said. But Eliot said there were other problems. He found some stuff on his computer he hadn't put there. My ears perked up. "What kind of stuff?" There was a deep silence. "Did you find porn, Eliot?"

"I didn't put it there."





"I didn't think so. Maybe that guy Casey was getting back at you. You better let Mr. Sully know if he doesn't know already. There's something called employee surveillance, a way of seeing what employees put up that doesn't belong there."

"Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting." I sensed Eliot's shudder. "I told Pompy and he got rid of it."

"That's not the point."

"Pompy is my friend."

"Are you still doing his work?"

"I can't talk anymore."

"Eliot, answer me."

"I don't mind. He's not like the others."

All that day and later that night, I thought about Eliot. I considered stopping by Sears and meeting this Pompy. But, hell, that was Eliot's problem. He'd have to solve it. I was turning into Voc Cop.

When I didn't hear from Eliot for a solid week, I figured he had worked the Pompy problem out. He'd been at his job for two whole months. He rarely checked in so work must be going okay. I drummed my fingers on the desk and decided I would call Eliot and make some excuse about having to update my case notes. Maybe we'd meet somewhere. Take him to lunch. That's what I'd do.

"He's at work," Mrs. Minowsky told me. "They changed his schedule. He goes in at two and works until eight."

"Well, that's nice," I said.

"But I told him not to go in today," his mother said.

"Is he sick?"

"No, but I had this dream there would be trouble. Do you believe in dreams foretelling the future, Miss Bowers?"

"Not really. I think sometimes we have strong feelings that are based on certain information. Do you know something about Eliot and what's going on at work, Mrs. Minowsky?"

"Call me Calla. Mrs. Minowsky makes me sound so old."

"Do you know something about Eliot and work?" I repeated.

"No, it's just this feeling."

"Please have Eliot call me when he gets home, Calla. He has my cell number."

"He shouldn't have gone in."

I wondered about Eliot's mother. They say the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree. And then I forgot about both of them because that night was Annie's farewell party. For weeks the staff and clients had been planning the event. The board members, corporate sponsor, and the bigwigs from the Department of Mental Health would all be there. One of the board members had gotten his local golf club to give us the ballroom. The clients had retreated to the corners. Most of them had never been to such a posh event, and were standing around eating canapés and nursing their soft drinks. We'd specified that under no conditions was alcohol to be served.

I was charming the hell out of an IBMer, telling him how great the new old computers were when I got the call.

"Will you excuse me? It's a client."

"You are never off duty, are you?" the man said.

"This is a special case. The call is from one of our *working* clients. He's doing data entry for Sears Roebuck," I bragged, although my legs felt wobbly.

"Then by all means take the call."

I rushed into the lobby and called Eliot back. I did not recognize the number. It took two tries before he picked up. "Where are you?" There was a lot of street noise and I figured he had stepped outside to make the call. Then I remembered Eliot did not have a mobile so he was probably in a phone booth. I didn't know how many were left, but apparently he'd found one because that's where he was calling from, he said.

"They stole my briefcase."

I made him repeat what had happened, but it was difficult making sense of what he was trying to tell me. Either he was crying or the line was breaking up.

Two club members were returning from a round of golf. They looked down the hall and hearing the noise, one of them said, "I think Bill said tonight the loonies had booked the party room."



My face burned. "Eliot," I cried, "you've got to slow down. Tell me what happened. You said Mr. Sully fired Pompy. What does that have to do with you? Pompy blamed you because he got caught? Well he had a right to get fired. He was using you. I'm glad you told Mr. Sully what Pompy was up to. No. That wasn't it." I pressed my cell closer to my ear. "You did what? You entered phony names and warranty numbers in the computer? You messed up their database. Jesus, Eliot. Why did you do that?"

"Pompy knew he was going to get fired and he told me we had to get back at corporate America."

"He said that? No, it wasn't Pompy? I don't understand. Who did, Eliot? Who told you to screw up the system?"

I gulped. "Where are you, Eliot? What's wrong? Stop crying, I can't understand you. Damn it, Eliot."

"Mon chef d'oeuvre." He was wailing.

"Shit. Where are you? I can't help you if you don't speak English.

Are you anywhere near Sears?"

"Oui."

I wrinkled my forehead and tried to think what to say, to do. "Eliot I'm at Annie's farewell party. In three minutes I'm supposed to make a speech and tell the whole damn place how much we are going to miss Annie." I was sweating. My dress stuck to my thighs like a sausage casing. "This is a really bad time for you to be calling me. Go home and come by the agency tomorrow and we'll talk."

He moaned like a sick calf.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Eliot." It suddenly occurred to me there might be no tomorrow. "Okay, don't do anything. Stay exactly where you are. I'm coming to get you, Eliot. I'm coming."

"Oui. Yes." His voice was growing fainter.

I told the kid who parked my car to pull it around while I rushed back into the party, found Michael, and explained I had to leave. "It's Eliot. I've got to meet him and no, it can't wait. Fill in. Say something about how fantastic Annie is."

Michael looked like he'd been hit by a truck. "What should I say?"

"Quote Emily Dickinson. The thing about hope has feathers."

I prayed while I drove. *Eliot, please don't do anything before I get there.* What was I afraid of? That my client was going to strangle himself with the telephone cord? That he was going to throw himself in front of a car or bus?

God, he screwed Sears. He was screwing corporate America.

When I located the phone booth, Eliot was curled into a ball, his face pressed to the floor. I reached down and managed to pull him up. I wrapped my arms around him, held him until he stopped shaking. Then I walked him back and forth because he needed to get some air in his lungs. I put him in the backseat of my car while I made a phone call and begged a perfect stranger to send an ambulance.

Eliot spent a month in the psych ward of a state hospital. When I visited, he was so doped up he didn't know who I was. He never came back to our program; he stayed home where it was safe. He became a permanent ward of the state. E.W. Minowsky's *History of the Implacable World* ended with the failings of Julius Caesar.

I learned that Pompy had seized Eliot's briefcase when Mr. Sully discovered that all the data he'd entered was falsified. Out of spite, Pompy dumped the contents in the Sears Roebuck parking lot after threatening to beat Eliot to a pulp. Eliot managed to get away. He hid in the phone booth where I found him.

When I went back to collect the hand-scrawled pages, the ones that had not blown away shimmered under a full moon. It was the same moon that was said to cause insanity in those who looked directly into its face.



# Stayfree Carefree

*Owen Abbott*

**2007.** I watched my supervisor writhe on the cold warehouse floor, screaming in pain. Nothing I could do. Everyone was watching and standing still. Making Christmas wreaths.

I decided I was done with warehouse work.

**2010.** I'm working in a warehouse again. Twelve hour shifts, weekends and Monday. During training we had to watch an hour-long video about unions. The recorded voice spoke with the familiar mimicry of a corporate-shill pretending to be human. Told us unions tear communities apart.

A skit was presented, showing middle-aged employees getting together at a local pizza shop after work. They are happy, laughing, joking. They are friends. One of them joins a union, and from then on, she isn't invited. All of her friends turn on her and laugh at her behind her back, during their once-friendly occasions. This is the way they think we live. Friendly after-work get-togethers at a pizza shop.

To conclude, the voice assures us that it's not trying to tell us not to join a union—the voice is our friend. It just wants us to consider the possible consequences of our actions. The voice says that it's looking out for us—that unionizing is a weighty decision, not to be made lightly. "After all," it says, "a union would jeopardize the fun, fast, and friendly environment!"

A managerial suit asks us if we have any questions for her about unions when the video finishes. We have none, and she smiles.

Yesterday, my job was to fill semi-trailers numbers 50-58 with boxes of cheap merchandise for distribution to superstores. Some of it heavy, some of it light. The boxes of slide down the conveyors rapidly, and I fill each trailer from floor to ceiling with walls of the boxes, keeping them as compact as possible.

A box labeled "Stayfree" comes down the conveyor into trailer 52, followed by one labeled "Carefree." I set them aside and move to work on the other trailers.

The lunch bell rings. A man stops me on my way to the break room and asks how I like the job..

I say, "It's good. I'd like to stay here."

He looks at me and says, "What you want is to go to college." Tells me he should have gone himself, but missed his chance, had a son, and now he's too old. He's not free. He's not carefree.

"Go to college," he says again.

I'm used to this speech.

**2007.** When I was working in the wreath warehouse, I brought a book to read during lunch every day.

One day an old man came by during lunch. I was sitting on the floor. He told me that you're not supposed to sit on a cold concrete floor, or else you'll get hemorrhoids. I never sat on the floor again. This concluded my higher education in the warehouse world. Then he noticed my book.

He was surprised. Asked if I was "some sort of college-boy." I told him no. He told me I should go. A crowd gathered around. All of the people on break were staring at me like I was a circus animal.

Lunch ended. We returned to our workplaces. A woman in the back said to her friend, "I used to bring books to work, but I didn't *read* them."

**2010.** I accumulate a large number of boxes labeled "carefree" and "stayfree" in trailer 52 and build a wall to the ceiling out of them, facing out and ordered, "Stayfree, Carefree, Stayfree, Carefree." I wonder if whoever unloads the trailer will see it and get the message, or if he'll just unload things.

I filled the trailer. It went on its way. Message in a bottle.

New trailer comes in. This one has holes at the top of the walls for ventilation, and sunlight comes in. I drive to this dimly lit warehouse when it's dark, and its dark again when I leave. I'm no longer used to sunlight. Somebody has written on the truck's siding in permanent marker.

"Get out of here!" "Live for today!" "Education is a money machine!" "Leave the daily grind, it's pathetic!"

Trailer graffiti. Like the bathroom hieroglyphics you see in men's room stalls, but more inspirational and heartfelt and depressing.

Whoever wrote it—he's stuck.

Like the man with the son who told me he's too old. He's locked — inside the walls of cheap merchandise they pay us to build.

Still as far as getting a message across, it beats arranging boxes of tampons. "Stayfree, carefree."

"Go to college," the permanent marker message says.

**2002.** When I was in high school, I aced the tests but didn't do the homework. I didn't care. I sealed away my future.

The guidance counselor, spec ed teacher, and school psych analyze me, and have me sent into special education: a black mark on my life — a source of shame. I watch for four years. Normal kids are pulled into my special ed class, and then manipulated.

One kid comes in — he's the new kid. He's shy. This is initially the reason why they put him into the class. Not for a learning disability, but for being "emotionally disturbed."

But he's normal and he becomes my friend. Sometimes he voices his opinion. Says that he doesn't think he's supposed to be here. She tells him that he is. That she didn't make a mistake. She recommends that he start taking pills. Teachers can diagnose things.

Over the years, he changes. He becomes what she wanted him to become. Invariably, this happens to every normal person that gets pulled into the class. Every R.P. McMurphy is lobotomized. I become the Big Chief.

Stay quiet. Be polite. Pretend.

**2006.** I'm eighteen; I have to attend a meeting. An "IEP" meeting — the mass produced "individualized education plan" meeting which goes the same way for every one of us crazy students.

The teacher puts a thick packet of information about me on the desk and tells me to just sign it and initial it and sign it again and then I can be on my way. The psych sits in a chair next to her saying nothing. "It's just a formality," the teacher says. "Don't read it — that's a waste of time." Reading things is a waste of time?

Teachers kept taking away my books. Over the years I lost two Ray Bradbury anthologies and multiple novels. Never returned. I spent too much time reading in classes.

Reading things is a waste of time.

I insist on reading through the packet anyway, past the wishy-washy first page, into the second, into the third where things start getting hidden. It says I have "severe antisocial disorder" with a "clear lack of emotions." Emotionally disturbed.

I've studied psychology. "Sociopath" is an obsolete term. The blanket term used today is "Severe Anti-Social Disorder." A sociopath will use any means to gain an end. Operate without empathy. Thought to lack emotions. Not necessarily criminal, but calculating and capable of criminal acts. "Antisocial" appears to mean everything from psychopath to sociopath to shy.

They're trying to mark me as a cataclysmic case. This is her diagnosis as a teacher. She smiles. She has something to gain.

I am her bolstered credential. I am her job security. I am a means to an end.

I push away the form. "I'm not signing."

She stops smiling. She tells me that it would be illegal for them to keep this file on record if I don't sign. That it would have to be shredded, *all of her work* would be shredded. She urges me to sign. Tells me college could be a possibility for me if I sign.

"Think about the bigger picture!"

I didn't sign.

**2010.** I woke up this morning and some of my fingers had fallen out of joint. Must have happened during the night. Byproduct of long hours of manual labor and an old injury from my time as a woodsman. I'm used to it. I put them back into place and go to





the computer lab to write. It's my weekend.

Stayfree, carefree.

**2007.** My supervisor came to work twenty minutes late.

She was a larger woman, middle-aged. She came in panting heavily. "I'm sorry… I'm late…" she panted. "Car… broke down… Had to walk…" Everyone was making wreaths.

It's a long walk in the cold.

Her face was bright red.

I focused on my work. Ten minutes later I heard the first scream and looked over to see her slumped over her table, her face was scarlet.

Everyone stared. Nobody moved. Everyone was making wreaths.

She was screaming like she was dying.

She was a step away from me. Nothing I could do.

Someone with a radio called for the big boss. The big boss came in. Stood before the woman. My supervisor was now lying on the concrete floor now. You're not supposed to sit on a concrete floor or else you'll get hemorrhoids.

He looked down. Pulled up his radio. Said, 'we have a code blue.' Then walked away.

Everyone kept making wreaths and staring while she kept screaming. I tried to block it out of my mind. They had a code for this. "Code Blue." This meant a procedure was being acted out. Everything going according to plan. Someone had called an ambulance. I tried to focus on the wreaths, those jolly symbols of disposable income.

When I was a woodsman I used to cut the boughs off balsam trees, thousands of pounds per day, and sell them to the wreath warehouse. At twenty three cents per pound it was a good job until my truck caught fire and burned to death. That's why I had to go to the warehouse for employment.

The ambulance arrived. Pimple faced manboys with a stretcher came in, and the slack jawed leader looked down at our supervisor.

Her face was scarlet as she clutched her chest. She was still screaming on the floor.

"Uhhhhh." He says. "Ma'am. What I'm going to need you to do… Is get up, and get on the stretcher."

This was the plan being followed. This was the procedure. This was code blue?

They got her out. Eventually. Once she stopped screaming. Once she stopped panting and the red in her face started to diminish.

At the end of the day, she called from the hospital. Told us she "threw her back out."

When I was a woodsman, I would cut down the trees that remained standing but that were really already dead. It occurred to me often when I was at the warehouse and when I was at school that I was like the trees — standing dead.

When I came back to the lower half of the state, I thought about the people. There are people here.

There were people in the northwoods too, of course, but not as many. And when election season came, a politician rallied the people against the library. He blamed the library for everything from high water bills to the ineffective volunteer fire department to the lack of funding for a public cemetery. He concluded every speech he made, every tirade with the paper, with the statement, "I hope you all join me up on this journey."

I still don't know what that meant.

*Here* in the city, there are people that don't do that. They don't rally against libraries, they don't scapegoat everything in sight for the sake of scapegoating.

This is what I believed too.

While in the city, I think about getting a job in retail.. At a bookstore, preferably. I apply at Harry Schwartz, but their entire chain goes out of business. I apply at Barnes and Noble.

I call. A woman answers the phone and I ask if anyone has seen my application and if I can speak with management. She laughs and says, "We get *dozens* of applications each day." Emphasizing "dozens." Okay.





I apply at half-priced books, but I already know I won't get the job.

Through our early experiences, we are forever marked as leaders, followers, or outcasts. These are my experiences. Survival in the woods. Warehouse work. Temp work. Warehouse work.

At the library, I'm looking up a Vonnegut book on the catalog computer. A high school kid in line behind me is talking with his mother in line at the card catalog computer. He's talking about a job he's hoping to get. I take a notecard and the pencil provided. Write out, "best of luck!" and walk away, leaving it on the keyboard. Maybe he finds it, maybe he doesn't.

Stayfree, Carefree.

**2008.** I went to the public computer lab, one day, to write.

I walked in and there was utter silence. Usually the place is packed with students, but it was almost empty. Most of the people were sitting at the computers on the far, opposite side of the lab. There was no sound of typing.

I walk to the center of the lab, and sit down across from one of the few people sitting in the center of the lab.

Within seconds of my booting up, the man across from me shouts, "I'm going to kill you!"

I look up. Blink a few times. He's looking past me, at a young couple sitting at a nearby computer. They're frozen. I look around. Everyone is frozen. Everyone is looking. The people who work at the lab are no place to be seen. Everyone stares at the man.

Every few seconds, the man has another outburst. "Going to dump your bodies in a *ditch*!"

Another pause.

"I got connections!"

Everyone is still silent. Everyone is still staring. I am at the wreath warehouse again, where everyone stares and nobody does anything.

Who is this man?

A sociopath?

I was marked as one of those, too.

I think—if I don't have emotions, if I don't have fear, I can stop this man.

I stand up and tell the man to leave. Silence. Now he's staring at me.

The couple that he initially threatened leaves quickly.

The man repeats his threat. This time he directs it at me. "I got *connections*."

Yeah, yeah. And you're sitting in a lab, looking at MySpace.

This is the anatomy of my experience. The experiences I wrote out on another application to another book store. They look so different on the application.

2007-2010: Job Title: Woodsman. Reason for leaving? Seasonal.

2008-2009: Job Title: Temp. Reason for leaving? Temp.

2010-Present: Job Title: Warehouse Worker. Reason for leaving? N/A.

Will I get the job? Perhaps not. Our early work experience marks us forever as leaders, followers, or outcasts. But I might as well try.

Stayfree, carefree.



# The Pirate

*Ken Poyner*

It is the fish, stupid.
The fish that come into the rich
Tan waters of our shore, bathing in hollow
Sunlight, gathering the shallow sea's life
To grow into commerce, and markets
Filled with simple, uncomplicated
Commodities. The fish
Do not know they are inside anyone's
Territorial waters. A small
Outboard motor pasted on what, thick generations ago,
Would have been a dugout canoe:
And the dumbest of fisherman
With the flimsiest of nets
Can, by watching for fish signs,
Load his boat with enough harvest
To make a small joy inside of our shared poverty.
Or once could.
Now our nation's territorial waters
Have no Navy to protect them and
The factory ships with mile long nets
Scour the ocean, roll in the fat fish
Without ever seeing them, ground them
Into their cavernous holds. Nights you can see
Their lights like burial fires
Calling home the witnesses of death.
There is no one to chase them away, and so
It is the fish, stupid.
No fish: but there is still a family, a taste
For cigarettes and beer, a nephew
To bring up in the family trade.
One of us has a plan.

# Waitress

*LouAnn Shepard Muhm*

They speak to you
in Spanish
to be funny
or in response to
your dark hair and eyes
and you answer in French
so they know
this is no ordinary
restaurant,
but you laugh along
because they are funny
on vacation with their compadres
and they love the food
the drink
and you who bring it to them
and remember from last summer
a lime not a lemon
in their iced tea
or no salt on the margarita,
and for every one who asks
for your number
or comments on your dress
there are two who ask
what you are reading
or whether you have published
lately,
and you are there with your compadres
dancing out an incredible ballet
of hot plates and crushed ice
until you go home
where your husband says
you smell like quesadillas
and he likes it
and your children
to whom checks mean nothing
squeal
as you empty your pockets
of all the gleaming coins
that they can count.

# Out to the Air Above

*James Stafford*

I'd just gotten off the kitchen phone. My father, who wouldn't let me stay in the house unless I had a summer job, rested the newspaper on his belly when I dropped the phone into its cradle. My mother was out.

"So, you're a roofer now?" he said.

"What's wrong with that?"

"I'd pay to see that," he smirked. "You're going to find out shingles are a lot heavier than school books."

My parents were turning my old room into something new, maybe a sewing room for my mother or something. Paint chips littered the threshold of my room, shaken loose from the empty hinges. Adhesive tape and pushpins scarred the walls; loblolly pines cast pallid shadows through the bare window. They crept across the threadbare comforter and climbed the empty little shelf near the closet. I unclipped my duffel bag and shook the contents onto the closet floor, since there was no clothes rod, then lay down and let the distant echo of the TV lull me to sleep.

The next morning I pulled on a tee-shirt and Levi's, threw on a pair of high tops, and rode to Kimbrell's Hardware Store. Seven a.m. came and went, then seven-thirty. A rickety, white pickup truck pulled up at eight o'clock, heavy metal blaring through its open windows. "You John?" the driver asked.

"Yes sir."

"Get in." The passenger door's handle was missing. Danny stretched a beefy arm across the seat and opened the door from the inside. "Sorry I'm late. You know how it is." His arms and face were deeply sun freckled and the first hints of crow's feet were forming around his brown eyes. A light moustache stained his upper lip, and his shoulder-length hair feathered perfectly down the center. He tapped his wedding ring on the steering wheel in time with the music. It was too early for drum solos. "You had breakfast yet?"

"I had a little something."

Danny turned and looked at me skeptically,. "Damn, son, you're skin and bones. We got to get some food in you. I take care of my crew."

We stopped at Randy's Stop-N-Go just off Valley Falls Road, where the Holden's Grocery used to be. Danny swiped a *Penthouse* from the newsstand and slid into a booth.

"How you doing, darlin'? What can I get y'all?"

"You know what I want, Miss Alice," Danny sighed.

The waitress fluttered her baby blue eyelids and flashed a smoke-yellowed smile. "Quietin' down, now. What do you want, hon?"

"Bring us a couple of ham biscuits and some coffee," he winked. Danny rapped on the Formica table with his ring and opened his magazine. "Busy day today. Going to be a hot one."

Danny flipped pages of the *Penthouse* and drank his coffee. Occasionally he grunted and muttered "that's what I'm talking about." I grinned, mouth full of ham biscuit, imagining what we'd look like in an Edward Hopper painting. Finally, around nine a.m. he tossed the magazine aside. "You about ready to get going, son?" he asked.

We took Valley Falls Road to a narrow dirt driveway, the old truck bumping and wheezing. The road ended at a small trailer park. I reached for the door handle. "Stay here," Danny ordered, "I need to see a man about a horse."

I stared through the cracked windshield, waiting. This wasn't a trailer park — it was a notch cut into the woods where three dented old single-wides rested, their tin white underpinnings stained red with Carolina clay. Kudzu yanked on power poles and scruffy pine trees; tore at an upended Westinghouse refrigerator; pulled at the trailers' hand railings. The woods were so still, so silent. I imagined the kudzu creeping through my open window and carrying me away.

Danny emerged from the trailer eating a thin slice of dry bread, his shirt untucked. A wisp of pot smoke trailed behind him. "That's what I'm talking about," he said with a wink. "We need to get to the site. It's going to be a hot one today. Lot to do. Long day." He turned up the radio.

We arrived at the house at ten o'clock. The only vehicle parked on the street was a yellow Datsun pickup with two disheveled men sitting on the tailgate, smoking cigarettes. This was the rest of Danny's crew: Wayne, a weathered, wiry kid about my age; and Virgil, who must have been twice that. Virgil flashed a big smile and waved a bent hand. Wayne jumped from the tailgate and ground his cigarette with his heel.

The house was an enormous, white brick colonial with Doric columns like grinning teeth and a hemline embroidered with azaleas and sweetspire. A latticed wisteria vine shaded the porch's southern exposure. Its curious white flowers shimmied up the drainpipe and weaved between the roof's gnarled shingles.

"Come on, boys, we got a lot to do," Danny said. "Get those ladders around back." He tossed me a flat-nosed shovel.

The ladders bobbed and swayed as we climbed them, shovels on our shoulders. I squinted down at the thirty foot drop into the sweetspire and crawled onto the roof. Danny glanced quickly at the brittle, curled surface shimmering in the late morning heat and walked back to the ladder. "Get to it," he said. "I'm going to take care of some business. If you boys hear any cars, you stay on the backside of the house."

Virgil handed Wayne a shovel and they began popping the shingles loose. I picked a spot and did the same, the nails squeaking beneath my shovel. The asphalt broke loose from the shingles when we jammed the shovels underneath and pried them loose. They skittered down the roof and tumbled off of the edge . Shove. Pop. Step. Shove. Pop. Step. The work was monotonous but meditative, rhythmic. We worked quietly, no small talk. The shovel grew heavier and my hands began to burn. Shove. Pop. Step.

Danny's voice startled me. "Not bad," he said, "half a side in an





hour." A dusting of loosened asphalt clung to my sweaty forearms and coated the rooftop . Danny stripped a section of black roofing paper and examined the plywood sheathing beneath. "Look at this. They let this bastard leak so long it rotted a hole. Dumb ass city slickers too stupid to come in out the rain." Virgil and Wayne laughed and I pretended to laugh, too. Danny continued, "I got to go to the lumber yard and get a patch."

When Danny returned at noon, the backside of the house was deshingled almost to the peak. "Come on down, boys. Lunch time," he yelled from the yard. We shimmied down the ladders and jumped over mounds of fallen shingles, my feet squishy in my canvas sneakers. The shingles lay broken on the patio, in the grass, the sweetspire, wherever they happened to fall. Azaleas drooped beneath their weight. Danny climbed back into his truck. "I'll be back in about an hour. Got to see a man about a horse." He winked and pulled away, rapping his ring on the steering wheel.

Virgil pulled a cooler out of the Datsun and unloaded a couple of Cokes and ham sandwiches. He handed one to Wayne. "Where's you lunch, son?" he asked me. With his leathery skin and crazy quilt smile I assumed that he would be hard to understand, like one of the Hortons from over on the Mill Hill. But instead he spoke as clearly as Deacon Calhoun at New Pisgah Baptist.

"I thought we'd be going somewhere," I replied.

They laughed. "You going to eat good tonight, then." Virgil waved his ham sandwich toward the house. "I'd imagine they won't mind if you get a drink out of the hose."

I turned on the water and took a long drink. The azalea beside the spigot was about to snap under the weight of the fallen shingles. I removed them as if I were trauma nurse removing broken glass, then pulled some from the sweetspire. Wayne lit a cigarette and leaned back on his elbows in the bed of the truck, his baseball cap pulled over his eyes. Virgil stared quietly at the woods beside the house, smoke curling from the cigarette wedged between his crooked fingers. I wished that I smoked. Smokers always have something to do.

I started a shingle pile just on the edge of the woods, where the thick grass ended and the untended forest began. It started out like a woodpile, but as I moved closer to the house I lost interest in carrying neat stacks across the lawn. I made a game of it, tossing the flatter pieces like Frisbees: ten points for a leaner, twenty if it landed clean on the pile, and fifty if it landed on top. Virgil drifted up beside me.

"You're a hard worker, ain't you boy?"

"Guess so."

"Danny likes hard workers. The way you work you'll probably only have to do one job before he starts paying you. He's a good man, Danny," Virgil said.

"What do you mean, before he starts paying me?"

"Son, you can't expect him to pay you until he knows he can trust you. How's he supposed to know whether or not he can count on you?" A hiss of smoke escaped the corner of Virgil's mouth. "I'm his best worker and even I had to do three jobs before he started paying me. He says I'm going to be foreman soon. But you got to slow down, son. There's plenty more work to do."

"You got that right," I said awkwardly.

"I mean, Danny ain't here right now. There's nobody to impress." I followed him back to the truck and joined him on the tailgate. We sat together, watching the pine trees sway in the afternoon breeze.

Danny pulled up around two o'clock. "All right, boys, we got a lot to do," he announced as he stepped out of his pickup. He strapped on his tool belt, grabbed the plywood out of the truck bed, and we headed back to the ladders. My legs shook as I climbed back onto the roof. Danny kneeled and pried the rotten sheathing away from the joists. I wobbled up to the peak, to the shove-pop-step business of the day, but my sneakers would no longer grip the grainy surface of the deshingled roof. I sat down. I lay down. But still I slid toward the sweetspire thirty feet below. Every inch of surface area pressed against the roof, but I was no match for the sandy roofing paper. As I slid past Danny, I held



out my hand. He continued prying at the rotted boards. Couldn't he hear my heart pounding?

"You hit the ground, you don't work for me," he shrugged.

Inches before my heels hit the rain gutter I stopped sliding. I looked down at the sweetspire, and then crawled back up the roof, past Danny. "Don't you have more sense than to wear tennis shoes on a roofing job?" he was smiling. I could hear Virgil and Wayne laughing on the other side of the house.

"You could've held out your hand," I snapped.

"What, so you could drag me down with you? I don't have no insurance, don't have no permits. You want it to be your fault I go out of business?"

That evening when Danny dropped me off in front of Kimbrell's Hardware Store he idled for a moment, wedding ring tapping against the steering wheel. "You're a pretty good worker, boy. I'd like to see you become a regular. We work hard, but I take care of my crew," he said.

"I appreciate that," I said, easing out of the truck, "but I don't think this is the best fit for me."

"Like I'm saying, it won't take a worker like you long to earn your stripes. I might even make you foreman someday." Danny turned up the radio and threw the battered truck into gear. "Anyway, you change your mind I'll be here at seven in the morning," he yelled.

It was eight o'clock when I walked into the house. The glow from the television dimly outlined my father lazing in his recliner.

"What happened – you get fired?"

"Sure, Dad."

"I'd pay to see that. I told you those fellas wouldn't put up with a pansy who can't pull his weight."

My stomach growled. "Yes sir."

"Back home one day and you get fired. This ain't a hotel, college boy. You're not my burden."

I slowly climbed the stairs to my old bedroom, the faint glow of the television flickering in the stairwell like cool flames. The

loblolly pines cast their shadows across the packed duffel resting in the center of the bed. I rolled the bag onto the floor and collapsed, legs twitching against the worn comforter. I lay there, imagining myself climbing like wisteria, higher and higher; climbing until my father's roof lay beneath me like a shingle crumbling in the sweetspire. I pictured his lights dimming as kudzu crept quietly through open windows and carried the house away. Someday he would need me. Someday I would bear him on these aching shoulders.



# About the Authors

**Owen Abbott.** While you are reading this, Owen Abbott is currently hard at work, stocking shelves at a grocery store, or assembling things in a factory, or stacking boxes in a warehouse, or being yelled at by a customer, or hiding from inept and incompetent management in a bathroom stall somewhere; or he is unemployed and between jobs. If he is employed, he is probably making minimum wage. Sometimes, he sleeps. He won a small scholarship in 2011 for his story, "Stayfree Carefree."

**Marylu Downing**. Marylu Downing is a messy painter, a quirky writer and long time western Sonoma County resident. While she has hung up her tap shoes, she still remembers the joys of clattering across a wooden floor. See more of her writing in: *Tales from the West Pole* (to be published November 2013). Look for her art at www.studioml.com.

**Jessica Erica Hahn**. Jessica Erica Hahn, MFA, has self-published several books, something she's both proud and slightly ashamed of. Her story "The Company of Strangers" appeared in Wordrunner eChapbook's 2012 anthology *Loss* and a non-fiction piece "Nobody's Driving," in the March 2013 *Prick of the Spindle*. She received the 2012, Clark-Gross Award in the Novel for *Into the Sea* (to be renamed *The Junk Magician & The Countess of Nowhere*), San Francisco State University. She was also awarded a 2013, Red Gate Residency in Beijing, China. Presently she is trying to write while raising newborn twin girls.

**LouAnn Shepard Muhm**. LouAnn Shepard Muhm is a poet and teacher from northern Minnesota. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Antiphon, Pirene's Fountain, North Coast Review, Alba, Red River Review, Eclectica, qarrtsiluni,* and *CALYX,* among other journals and anthologies, and she was a finalist for the Creekwalker Poetry Prize and the Late Blooms Postcard Series. Muhm is a recipient of Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative

Grants in Poetry in 2006 and 2012. Her full-length poetry collection *Breaking the Glass* (Loonfeather Press, 2008) was a finalist for the Midwest Book Award in Poetry.

**Ken Poyner.** Ken Poyner lives in the lower right hand corner of Virginia, with his power-lifter wife and a number of house animals. His 2013 e-book, *Constant Animals,* unruly fictions, is available at all the usual e-book sites, and you should go buy it so more brewery workers can keep their jobs. Recent work is out in *Corium, Analog Science Fiction, Spittoon, Poet Lore, Mobius* and many other places. He webs at www.kpoyner.com, where you can find links to purchase his book, more work, and stunning pictures of his wife lifting.

**James Stafford**. James Stafford writes creative non-fiction from his home in Northern California. His stories have appeared in several literary magazines, and he currently serves as the arts and entertainment editor for *The Good Men Project Magazine* (www.goodmenproject.com). You can follow him at www.jamesostafford.com or on Twitter at: @jamesostafford

**Marsha Temlock.** Marsha Temlock is the author of *Your Child's Divorce— What to Expect, What You Can Do* (Impact Publishers, Inc.). She writes a blog for the Huffington Post on family relationships. Her short stories and poetry have been published in dozens of literary e-zines. She teaches English at Norwalk Community College in CT.

**Michelle Valois**. Michelle Valois lives in western Massachusetts with her partner and their three children. Her writing has appeared in *TriQuarterly, The Massachusetts Review, Pank, Brevity, Fourth Genre, The Baltimore Review, The Literary Bohemian*, and others. She teaches writing and humanities at a community college and blogs at www.readmelikeabook.net. Her first book *Lost Gods and Hungry Sailors* will be published in early 2014 by Big Table Publishing.