the jefferson review collection

plus three 2004-2007

prose and poetry by hal cobb
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facilitated by Denise Tanner in the fall semester of 2003
Many thanks for her guidance and encouragement

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or a send an e-mail via JPay.com
I drove here several hours, from where I live in Indiana, to honor a single individual today. His name is Hal Cobb and I’m glad to finally see him.

I taught here several years ago. I taught English here, and I taught Literature, and then I stopped because I lived too far away. But it is delightful to be here. My memories of teaching here are marvelous; the best students, the best school in the system. And I’ve waited a long time to meet the individuals who have been submitting to the Jefferson Review.

Not everybody gets published in this annual literary review. We carefully read the submissions for selection. Mr. Cobb has been outstanding, not just in this year’s publication, but in last year’s Jefferson Review. But before I give him this award, I want to say some things about Mr. Cobb. He has been awarded an Honorable Mention in Drama by the PEN American Center Prison Writing Awards for his monologue “The Spittin’ Image.” I don’t know if you know how prestigious that is. The president of the PEN American Center is Salman Rushdie, the prize winning and internationally published author. PEN American Center is an association of writers and editors working to advance literature, to defend free expression, and to foster international literary fellowship. I feel like I know [Mr. Cobb] having read so much of his material. In fact, “The Spittin’ Image” is an expanded version of a poem we published in last year’s Jefferson Review.

It’s not just Hal Cobb I’m here to honor, not just the student. I’m here to honor a teacher too. Her name is Joyce Hancock. She died tragically in an apartment fire in 1997 at the age of 53. We say she taught English, but she really taught students. And like so many professors, she never forgot the difference. She was also a writer; an Appalachian homespun poet. Like Hal Cobb, she published her poems and memories in the Jefferson Review. Like Hal Cobb, she shared her current perceptions and childhood memories with us through writing, and without hiding behind her words, but boldly and brazenly to reveal her mind. To read her was to know her.

So in 2002, the English Program at Jefferson Community College found the only way to properly honor the teacher and writer we call Joyce. We had an English Program Award. It was dusty from disuse. We hadn’t chosen to give any cheer to the student with the highest
grades. That isn't what we prized the most. The award was forgotten. In 2002, we realized that Joyce should not be erased by time. We still remember this teacher and writer of letters. I guess, as Hal Cobb once wrote, "time heals nothing." So we created the Joyce Hancock Award for Creative Writing. It is an annual English Program Award given once a year to one student, but now with special purpose who, to paraphrase Hal Cobb, will no longer limit himself to what others consider safe, will not live within the polite bounds and politically correct borders of someone else's comfort. You see, like Joyce, there are students who, as he said, "will not be chained, will not be confined, will not be limited, and shall not be defined."

Here's a line you might like. The Hindu philosopher Gurdjieff once said, "To escape from a prison, you must first know you are in a prison." Not all prisons are visible to the eye. But to the poet's eye, they open.

Joyce fled this world and Hal Cobb has fled this prison just as surely, because his words are printed in books outside these walls. His mind flies over these razor wires time and time again. I know this to be true. As the chair of Jefferson Community College's Joyce Hancock Creative Writing Award Committee, I have been reading his work now for two years. We published a memoir and nine poems in the 2004 book and two memoirs and six poems in this year's Jefferson Review, making him our most prolific contributor, I'm sure. Any of that work, any piece, could have earned him this award.

I'm happy to announce the 2005 Joyce Hancock Creative Writing Award has been awarded to Hal Cobb, specifically for his creative nonfiction piece, a memory, a memoir entitled: "The Shadeland Drive-In." It's a short piece about boys going to the drive-in.

This is an award he has earned ten times over, and I know, I know, Joyce Hancock is smiling.
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The Back Seat Boys (formerly The Shadeland Drive-In)

On rare summer Friday nights Dad would use Mom's not-so-secret recipe to pop corn in the big cast aluminum kettle, using bacon grease from the crock kept next to the stove instead of cooking oil. Once popped, it was poured into a large paper bag, drizzled with a stick of melted Fleishman's Corn Oil Margarine, and sprinkled with a hearty smattering of salt right from the Morton's "When It Rains, It Pours" canister. He'd place the shaken bag of popcorn, a carton of jumbo screw top Pepsi-Colas, and a Tupperware bowl of refrigerator ice cubes into the white '65 Chevy Bel-Air with the three boys and head off to either the Pendleton Pike Drive-In close to home or the Shadeland Drive-In across the street from the Western Electric factory where Mom worked second shift, three to eleven, putting telephones together with surgically-taped and finger-creased hands.

The three boys preferred the Pendleton Pike Drive-In. A mini-roller coaster was the highlight of the playground beneath the giant, imageless movie screen, endlessly circling the not-so-big hills and valleys of the not-so-long track until other kids demanded their turn. Dusk would shut down the playground as elongated El Greco images appeared on the colossal screen towering above. Previews of coming attractions, visions of dancing concession stand hot dogs and wax-cupped soft drinks with straws always seemed out of reach for boys with empty pockets, both on the screen and in the concession stand. We could only suffer our way through the tempting aromas of light-bulb roasted rotisserie wiener, fresh-popped movie-house popcorn, and the visual torture of candy-stuffed display cases and ice cream posters on our way to the stinky public restroom.

Upon return to the car and the inevitable brotherly wrangling for shotgun seat and prime viewing, Dad would divvy up ice cubes and Pepsi to parched, sweaty boys thrilled with the rare treat of a carbonated thirst quencher. Intimidating threats were hurled at the back seat boys not spill anything on the new, pristine turquoise upholstery of the recently purchased showroom demo. "Don't let anything slide down behind the seat," he'd say as he handed a large Tupperware bowl not-so-full of popcorn to the boys in back.

Technicolor cartoons were always sandwiched between the previews and the main feature, a sharp reminder that Saturday morning cartoons viewed while sprawled on the living room floor in front of our own entertainment center TV were still statically black and white, and would be for some time to come. The boys rarely made it through the first of the weekly double feature bill. The first to tire out or get bored would crawl up into the big back shelf of a window (a bunk with a view) staring up into the starry night over the endless rows of parked cars attentively paired up around drive-in extension speaker poles. The second to succumb to boredom or weariness would curl up in the big back seat, no longer concerned about the invisible border line that had divided back seat territory, rolling his face
down into the big deep back incline to secretly probe the crack of the banquette for lost toys or loose change. Then he’d fall asleep, bare legs chilled, jacket for a blanket.

The boy who managed to win shotgun seat had to try and stay awake the longest. Whatever prestige may have been gained by winning the prized pole position was lost in leg room. The ice bowl and Pepsi carton were kept on the floorboard passenger side front. And there was the implied responsibility to stay awake like an adult at least until intermission. If you couldn’t stay awake you only had half a seat to curl up in, and that only if you could convince Dad to put the greasy bag of popcorn and its protective layer of towels on the floorboard too. If not, you had to roll up your jacket like a pillow and wedge it between your shoulder and the door window to try and sleep upright. You didn’t lose face if you lasted longer the boys in back.

We rarely made it through a second feature because shortly before eleven o’clock Dad would return the extension speaker to its home cradle on the pole. He’d quietly start the car and slowly creep through the furrowed lanes between the mounded rows, parking lights only, until we reached the perimeter road that lead past the playground. The idle roller coaster would be dancing with aurora borealis light from the screen as we pulled around past the ticket booth to the late night and short drive to the sprawling factory on Shadeland Drive.

The apex of the night, better than the endless rounds on the roller coaster, better than the ice-cold tickle of Pepsi on a parched throat, better than any preview, Technicolor cartoon or dancing hot dog, and more beautiful than any Hollywood starlet — was the discovery of Mom exiting the formidable fortress of a factory, expectantly reviewing the line of cars curbed like limos at a premiere, and the light of recognition in her eyes when she spotted us. I’d lean out the window as far as humanly possible, waving my arms like a madman, to be the first to catch her weary gaze and see the warming of her Mona Lisa smile. As the shotgun boy conceded his spot by slipping over the front bench seat into the back, Mom would gracefully glide to the four-door family sedan, slide into the passenger-side door and politely give Dad a prim and proper kiss on the cheek — a rare public display of their private affection. The roller coaster adventurers who had earlier wrangled, tangled, and longed for more, were now happy, contended back seat boys safe and secure on the way back home.

Jefferson Review 2005
Joyce Hancock Creative Writing Award 2005
Midsummer Showers

Everybody else got to go to Aunt Charlisle’s that early May afternoon. Mark protested as best he could when told he’d have to stay at home with his big sister Phyllis even though he knew there was no changing his dad’s mind once it was made up. Besides, Mark had already spoiled the family’s Saturday morning plans.

Mark pouted to think his brothers would soon be sitting on the big floral couch in Aunt Charlisle’s living room playing Cootie Bug and resisting the lure of her crystal candy dish on the side table brimming with melt-in-your-mouth after-dinner mints; resisting the temptation to sit-and-spin on the green vinyl ottoman with the lazy-susan top; resisting the urge to ask what their dad had told them never to ask for. “You wait until she offers,” he’d threaten every time on the twenty minute drive to his big sister’s house.

The boys knew they just had to be patient because every time they’d visit, Aunt Charlisle would always ask, “Boys, would you like to help yourselves to a Coke?” “Yes, ma’am,” they’d recite as rehearsed rushing past the adults having coffee at the dining room table. Their dad’s glare had no slowing effect at Aunt Charlisle’s house. They’d hear her giggle as she chided her little brother, “Oh, Eugene, just let ’em go.”

Through her little kitchen, down the steep as a ladder cellar steps by the back door, the boys would fly to the great old treasure chest of a refrigerator downstairs with the pull-down latch and frosty freezer shelf inside. Mark sighed jealously at the thought of his brothers reaching inside the little old icebox, pulling out a chilled green six ounce bottle each, popping the cap in the Coca-Cola bottle opener mounted on the side, and retiring to the covered back patio to sip or guzzle the best little cold Cokes in the whole wide world, right from the bottle.

Mark knew he wasn’t really being punished by having to stay at home, but thinking of Charlisle’s Cokes, it certainly felt like it. His mom and dad had been told at the emergency room a few hours earlier that he should take it easy for the rest of the day after the doctor stitched up his foot and a nurse gave him a tetanus shot.

He’d been next door that morning, barefoot, pushing Sissy Vickers on her backyard swing when it happened. Mark got Sissy swinging so high he stepped aside just as the rusty steel pipe swing set lifted up from the ground and slammed down on side of his foot. When his foot was freed on the next pass, he hurdled over the chain link fence to get to the back door on the breezeway. He was more afraid of getting into trouble than the sight of the badly bleeding arc-shaped wound. Sissy’s screams summoned his mom from the kitchen and his dad from the back yard hydrangeas.
“What have you done now?” his dad grumbled as his mother fetched some clean rags and first aid supplies from the house. Mark felt really stupid and was sure his dad would be really mad. He hadn’t felt much pain at all until his dad started gently rinsing the foot with the garden hose. A jolt shot through Mark and he drifted in and out on the trip to the hospital. He woke up feeling queasy on the way back home in the back seat of the 65’ Chevy Bel-Air. His foot was bandaged and was really, really sore.

Phyllis was in the kitchen ironing after the rest of the family left for Charlsie’s, dreaming of her wedding coming up in a month, just a few weeks shy of her nineteenth birthday. When she graduated from high school the year before she immediately landed a job at the downtown Social Security office thanks to her keen typing and shorthand skills, and her teacher’s recommendation. “A good government job,” she’d heard her father boast.

Phyllis had known her fiancé Joe ever since her family started attending the little church his grandfather had helped to found. He was a year older than Phyllis and they’d been friends and sweethearts for as long as Mark could remember. Joe would pick Phyllis up every morning and drive her to work in his brand new burgundy GTO with black bucket seats. Mark and his brothers would run to the living room picture window every weekday morning when Joe honked the horn to catch a glimpse of the coolest guy and the neatest car they’d ever seen. Joe would wave at the boys as he would hold the car door open to let Phyllis slip into her seat. Joe had a good job too, according to Dad, as an apprentice pressman for a textbook publisher not far from Phyllis’ Social Security office. If their dad would let them, the boys would ride with Phyllis and Joe to church on Sunday Morning. They didn’t know what was cooler — slipping into the backseat by pushing the front seat forward, or getting out of the two-door muscle car in front of their friends once they got to church.

Phyllis thought her wedding would be nearly perfect if she could just scrape up enough money to buy contacts so she wouldn’t have to wear the cat eye glasses she’d grown to hate. But with the expense of a wedding, the honeymoon and setting up her first apartment with Joe, money for contact lenses seemed a long shot in the near future.

Mark was all sprawled out on a patch of the plush green carpeting next to the plastic slip-covered, custom made, ivory and gold brocade French Provincial sectional sofa tailored especially for his mother’s petite frame and the plastic runner that ran from the front door to the kitchen and down the hall to the bedrooms. It was a rare treat to be in the living room unsupervised with a drawing pad and pencil. Phyllis had tuned the radio in the living room Philco entertainment system to WFBM, her favorite Top 40 station and turned the volume up louder than Mom would permit when she was home. Mark thought it a bit naughty and fun to be part of something so subversive.
The phone startled him when it rang. "Would you get that Mark," Phyllis asked. "Better turn the radio down first in case it’s Mom." Mark hobbled to the radio and back to the black rotary phone on top of the round leather-topped pedestal table in the corner. "Hello, Cobb residence," Mark answered as trained.

"Well, Hello-o-o!" said the booming voice on the radio and the phone at the same time. "This is Crazy Charlie calling from WFBM radio. Woof Boom Mary’s Phrase for the Day Jackpot is now up to two hundred and ten dollars with an extra special bonus prize from L.S. Ayres and Company. Are you listening to WFBM radio this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir, we are!" Mark squeaked out.

"Whoa there, Nellie," said the voice from two places, "you sound awfully young. Is there anyone older at home right now?"

"Yes sir, my big sister Phyllis is here." Mark almost dropped the phone as he hopped the few feet to the kitchen door. "Phyllis!"

"I know, I know," Phyllis stammered nearly tripping over Mark. He was too excited to be offended when he heard the D.J say, "The little girl who answered the phone just went to get her big sister."

Phyllis gave her name to Crazy Charlie and confirmed that she was eighteen or over. He teased her with the big prize package and asked, "Okay, Big Sister Phyllis from Lawrence, Indiana for today’s grand prize package can you tell me Woof Boom Mary’s Phrase for the Day?"

"O-o-o-ooh-h-h," Phyllis stalled with a whimper in her voice. "I wasn’t paying attention."

"Midsummer Showers! Midsummer Showers!" Mark blurted out. "Midsummer Showers!"

Phyllis echoed tentatively, "Midsummer Showers?"

"You need to thank your little sister there, Big Sister Phyllis, because that’s absolutely right!" Crazy Charlie announced, "Midsummer Showers is the Phrase for the Day."

"No, no that’s my little brother Mark," Phyllis cried with pride.
"Well, it's a good thing your little brother was paying attention today because you have just won two hundred and ten dollars cash money and a gift certificate for a two piece bathing suit from the new Catalina Summer Collection courtesy of L.S. Ayres Department Store!"

Phyllis jumped, Mark hopped and they screamed and hugged as Crazy Charlie played some wacky victory song in the background. Mark had gone from feeling really stupid and feeling left out to feeling really, really smart and right in the middle of things in just a few short hours.

"And just what are you going to do with your Woof Boom Mary prize package, Big Sister Phyllis?" Crazy Charlie inquired.

Without hesitation Phyllis proclaimed, "I'm getting a new pair of contact lenses for my wedding next month and a new bathing suit for my honeymoon!"

Mark never knew the rush and pride of winning something that seemed so big before, and he'd never seen Phyllis so excited. He got that rush again when Phyllis and Joe returned from picking up the big prize from the radio station and they sat him down on the living room couch and gave him a crisp new ten dollar bill. To nine year old in 1966 it seemed like a million bucks. "I can buy a whole boatload of little Cokes now," Mark thought to himself.

But the biggest rush of pride and joy came on the Fifth of June when from his perch as church organist page-turner Mark watched Phyllis walk down the aisle with their blubbering, white-as-a-ghost father. She was a beautiful bride sporting a U-necked, empire-waisted, A-line satin gown with a short Barbie-bubble bouffant sprouting a fountain of shoulder length toile from its pillbox base. Beneath the veil Mark could spy a shy, nervous grin, and wide hopeful eyes without the dreaded cat eye frame glasses. Mark was pleased and proud, and thought that Midsummer Showers was perhaps the best wedding present a kid could ever give a big sister.
Who Was That Masked Man Anyway?

It was my turn, in the summer of my fifteenth year, in the footsteps of my sisters and a brother before me, to go to work with Dad, a food services manager at a pharmaceutical research farm – king of the cafeteria lunch.

I didn’t recognize the debonair Fred Astaire in my father’s kitchen whites, sashaying and gliding through morning preparations leaving joy and laughter in his wake. Who was this masked man whistling and joking, flirting and cajoling with the women he called “his girls” who made up his crew?

He made sure I was taught the kitchen trade the right way (his way or the highway) by dad-trained salad girls, bakers, cook’s assistants, and even sometimes the master chef himself would impart his culinary knowledge. Presentation was the perfect complement to careful and meticulous preparation. A well place garnish proved his professional grace and élan.

Everything was right in his cafeteria kingdom unless, of course, someone strayed by omission or commission from his ordered culinary vision. Then, the genial Dr. Chefyl would give way to the hideous Mr. Hyde (whom I thought never left our house), humiliation his preferred tool. A drill sergeant’s fury mixed with a brain surgeon’s precision, he’d cut to the quick with his sharp tongue: complete and utter compliance his demand.

At 10:30 every morning he’d don his tall chef’s hat, masterfully placed with a slight tilt, and make the backstage transformation from kitchen song-and-dance man to serving line emcee / dining room maître d’ / dinner time diva with mock humility, always insisting the food was the real star while extracting compliments (if one were foolish enough to remain silent in his presence). He wasn’t really a master chef, but no one dared burst his bubble. He was just a good ol’ southern cook trained by his hard-knocks mama (while tied to her apron strings) and the navy’s cook school. He did raise the level of institutional food beyond common expectation and was well know his flavorful, good ol’ home cookin’ served hot and well portioned at reasonable prices.

The proof was in the pudding – or in his case the first carrot cake of the region. In the late 1960s his sister sent him the recipe from Alabama and when his delighted and satisfied customers notified a local food critic of the delectable new dessert treat, a feature story and photograph appeared in the Indianapolis Star-News. “Isn’t that just the moistest cake you ever sank your teeth into?” he’d ask eliciting compliments. “It just gets better with age.”

Thursdays there were always Rueben Sandwiches served on a crisp leaf of Bibb lettuce. Fridays you could always count on Deep Fried Catfish with French Fries or Oven-baked Cod
with a sprinkle of paprika, a thin twist of a lemon slice, and a fresh sprig of parsley with a side of Creamy Coleslaw. He was well known for his Meatloaf in Creole Sauce, Mama's Fried Chicken with Mashed Potatoes and Gravy, and (because all the dieticians of the day insisted so) a once weekly offering of Liver and Onions. The Manhattan was a favorite featured dish—an open faced roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes all generously smothered in a rich beef gravy; and for those nostalgic for another time, what he called the Po' Boy platter—just potatoes, bread and gravy; no meat at all.

There were BLTs and Classic Club Sandwiches, each served with a crisp dill spear and a hearty smattering of wavy potato chips, and the freshest looking Chef's Salad north of the Mason-Dixon Line. A wedge cut tomato stuffed with tuna salad or a dollop of cottage cheese served with canned peach halves on a bed of lettuce were available for those who just might be watching their waist lines.

As lunch time would come and go, the manager / chef / diva would work the lunch room stragglers for compliments (suggestions were not preferred) while the gals would break down the line careful to preserve leftover quantities for the big boss man's verdict. The summer trainee was relegated to the dish room to empty conveyed cafeteria trays of paper napkins, spent cigarettes, and depleted condiment packets; rinsing away any uneaten morsels and served-there-purpose garnishes. The various size plates had to be separated, glasses, cups and saucers, and silverware all place in their appropriate racks and run through the industrial strength dishwasher. Lipstick stains had to be pretreated. Then, while the dishes were still hot enough to cook your fingers, they were returned to their spring-loaded dispensers and wheeled back to their proper place behind the serving line for another cafeteria lunch time serving day.

The day would end by 2:30 in the afternoon with all the stainless steel gleaming bright, the white tile floors and walls sparkling and spotless (they'd better be or there'd be hell to pay) under the harsh fluorescent lights. The storeroom, icebox and freezer inventory reviewed by the taskmaster as his busy crew cleaned up the place and set up to start over in the morning. Menus planned, vendor orders placed, any private dining rooms arrangements coordinated, he would then usher the subjects of this ordered world out of his domain, turns off the lights, and with a last forlorn scan of his keen kitchen kingdom, close and lock the door behind him.

Without a word, we'd walk out to the parking lot shedding the roles of boss and summertime help to resume the usual act of reticent father and acquiescent son. The silence between us scratched only with the sounds of the highway and the afternoon AM radio.
Artistic Vision

I come from a working class family. My parents, children of the Depression, are hard working, self-reliant, salt of the earth kind of people. My father told me once that his family was poor, but my mother’s family was dirt poor. Up to then I didn’t know there were defining nuances shaping genres of poverty. We never thought we were poor. It never felt like it when we were growing up, so in essence we really weren’t.

My parents worked hard to provide us with all the things that fate and fortune had denied them. But even the nice things in our house had to serve a useful utility. Most everything we had was of an extremely practical purpose. With seven people in a three bedroom, one bath, cookie-cutter cracker box, there was room for little else.

Two teenaged girls lived in one small bedroom with a sturdy English pine twin bed and accompanying trundle. Three pre-adolescent boys were in a slightly larger room on a set of rough hewn ranch oak bunk beds with yet another trundle. Dad cut apart an art nouveau vanity that matched a bedframe and curved veneer dresser with Bakelite handles to liberate two bed stands when he and Mom upgraded to a king-size mattress and retired the full-size head and footboards to the garage along with the sawed-off four foot round mirror. The room became practically wall to wall mattress.

In our cramped tract house kitchen the washing machine served as a countertop between the Roper gas range and sink. The dryer was stuck behind the back door. The kitchen table that dominated the tiny room with its seven chairs was used for folding freshly laundered clothing and homework between meals. Art making was banished to the garage and bedrooms.

No proud childhood drawings were to be found on our two door, freezer-on-top, middle-of-the-line Frigidaire, though the occasional child-made mini-loop-loomed hot pad would be used to set a hot from the oven Corningware casserole dish on a Vacation Bible School Lincoln log-esque trivet to protect the laminate and chrome dinette set.

Art in and of itself was a luxury we could not afford, except for a large pastoral print of an idyllic mythological countryside on faux-brush-stroke-textured pressboard with a gold balsa wood frame that likely came from a dime store adorning our most-of-the-time off-limits, not quite so modest living room wall. And of course, there was that eight by ten framed print of Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane on the boys’ bedroom wall to remind them that someone was always watching.
As the story goes—Dad wrestled an ornate porcelain lamp with delicate flower petals and gilt-edged leaves out of the hands of another shopper at a Wasson’s Department store closeout sale; it matched the one already clutched in his bargain hunting grip. The lamps were the perfect complement to the French Provincial, three piece sectional sofa covered with rococo fruitwood carving and a luxuriously tufted ivory and gold brocade that was custom fit to my mother’s petite frame, but large enough to seat the whole family on the rare occasions there were visitors important enough to invite the children into the most of the time off-limits living room. Now, I know the sofa sounds like an extravagance, but it was a practical investment. Our five foot, one inch mother could sit back comfortably and keep her feet flat on the floor like a proper lady on her custom made sofa. Practical didn’t mean it couldn’t look pretty.

My father’s passion was gardening. Hydrangeas, peonies, favorite roses; flowering forsythia (the bush of choice to garner leg-splitting switches for bad boys), chain-link-climbing sweet peas, a bed of low lying rose moss between concrete driveway tire treads; rows of old fashioned flags (as he called his collection of irises), stri-ped (always pronounced with two syllables) grass from his mama’s Alabama front yard, and Hawaiian Hibiscus grown from seed he’d smuggled back from World War II and grown ever since. Fresh mint grew off the front stoop to garnish summertime iced tea. Early spring crocus followed by tulips pushed their way through thawing soil beneath a dwarf crabapple tree in the front yard. Rhubarb was banished to the back corner of the yard and surreptitiously sneaked into strawberry and cherry pies. Big, thick-sliced, old fashioned Hoosier beefsteak tomatoes graced our dinner table all summer long.

My mother was a domestic diva long before anyone ever heard of Martha Stewart. Cleanliness and order were her waking meditation. Ammonia, Ajax, and Mr. Clean were the aromatic incense of her sacred space. S.O.S Pads, Fuller Brushes, Plaxex Living Gloves and lots of elbow grease were the tools of her daily devotional practice. Approaching the house from the backyard breezeway, a row of shoes by the backdoor signaled one was entering a shrine. No noise, no dirt, no shoes allowed.

It was second grade, I think, when I overheard Mrs. Davis bragging to my parents at a PTA Open House about my artful observation and execution. A piece of toast drawn and cut out for a demonstration of a well balanced breakfast had caught her critical eye. While most second graders were simply drawing squares for toast, I had drawn it in the shape of the Wonder Bread I knew—pinched and rounded at the top where the dough overflows the pan while baking. In that moment I realized I saw the world in a way subtly different than most. I also noticed that Mrs. Davis’ saggy boobs hung below her high waisted, wide belted skirts, but I never said anything to anybody.

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10
my first gig

the kindergarten year-end show
was circus-themed that year
I don’t remember if I sang
I smiled from ear to ear

I wore brown baggy overalls
a red-maned lion-eared cap
a feature role in my first gig
my grin a toothless gap

but best of all was bambi stulz
to crack the whip her chore
her leotard and emcee hat
made little lions roar
the johnny 7OM8

the big christmas present that year
was the johnny seven-oh-em-eight
the ultimate macho boy toy that
santa brought for my brothers and me

it was a life sized, all plastic
army green, junior commando, combination
bazooka / grenade-launcher / machine-gun
with its own tripod and shoulder strap

the moment was captured
for posterity's sake by dad's
one-flash-per-bulb brownie
in snapshot black and white

but who is that fey little boy
in footed flannel pajamas
all apple-cheeked and twinkle-eyed
in front of the cardboard holiday hearth

proudly displaying the season's
foremost and first place prize
while flying in the face of the
family policy: don't ask — don't tell

in a full presentational pose that
would make carol merrill proud
i'm on my knees with a slightly arched back
and all my freckles sparkling like stars

one hand is demonstrating
the real life trigger action
while the other arm is outstretched
palm up in full spokes-model sweep

and yet, despite this early and dramatic
frilly-edged photographic evidence
there are still those who hope and pray
that i'm just going through a phase

Jefferson Review 2004
bag ladies-in-waiting

the picture in my mind shows
steve and I each dressed
in a deb or phyllis non-frilly frock
our dime-store half masks not quite
concealing our secret boy identities
the dad-barbered hollywood burrs
betraying our halloween garb

steve's seven-year-old goofy grin
a sharp contrast to my straight forward
just-the-fact-ma'am five-year-old frown
i was probably hoping for more than
my older sisters' hand-me-downs
for my trick-or-treat masquerade

posed and supposedly costumed in front
of the big TV cabinet in the living room
grasping giant shopping bags with built-in straps
empty sacks hopeful of halloween fulfillment
we were a couple of pre-adolescent
drag bag ladies-in-waiting

steve seems way too happy
to be in that plaid schoolgirl dress
perhaps his fit better than mine
lord knows, those white gloves
were way too big for me
my mother's house

every spring
you could find her
hunkered down
in the backyard grass

playtex living
gloves in hand
a can of ajax
a wire brush
and dad's prized
collection of cast
iron skillets

knowing it would
piss him off, that
he would cuss her
as he regreased them
with bacon drippings
from the crock kept
next to the stove

"they're no good
unless they're cure,"
he'd curse
as he place them
in a low-heat oven
for days on end

she'd scrub them anyway
for hours she scour
blackened iron to
glistening gun-metal gray

the iron skillets
had been his mother's
(one of them at least)
and his mother never, ever
baptized them in dishwater
and never, ever
God forbid
scrubbed away the
sacred curing of daily use

but his mother wasn't there
this was my mother's house
and it was spring
and everything from
floor to ceiling would be
scrubbed and cleaned
including those damned
greasy skillets

if cleanliness
is next to godliness
then, by god
my mother will sit
at his right hand

and every spring
she'll make sure
no bacon grease stays
on god's skillets too long
no matter what his mother
may have done
miracle whip

my father
picked me that day
to run an errand —
to go to the grocery store
all by myself —
my very first solo trip

it meant he thought
i was big enough
to walk three
blocks unescorted
cross the residential
streets and make
it safely to the
other side of busy
two-lane franklin road
without his watchful eye

it meant he thought
i was smart enough
to navigate the,
grocery store
search the tall
overstuffed aisles
and find the
needle-in-a-haystack
prize he desired

it meant he thought
i was trustworthy enough
to handle paper money
and make sure
the cashier gave me
the correct change
to return to him

so, off i went
proud as a peacock
my first great adventure
with the ornately
written word
“mayonnaise” stuffed
in my shirt pocket
on a folded piece
of his fancy
letter-writing paper

pleased as punch
on my return
i approached
the kitchen table
clutching a
paper bag in one hand
correct change in the other
presenting the proud offering
my father required of me

i held my breath
lowered my eyes
placed the bag and
the change on the
table before him
anticipating the words
“well done, my son”

as he looked into the bag
there were no words –
rolling eyes and a tongue
clicking with disapproval
were almost drowned out
by the falling chair
as he grabbed the bag
and his car keys and
headed out the back –
the slam of the screen door
punctuated his departure

he never admitted even
the slightest mistake
or saw eyes well up
or heard the crush
of a tender spirit

what he had to have
right then and there
what he really wanted
and all he ever used
was miracle whip
sweet charlotte

i dreamed in color sometimes
back when i was nine or ten
some nights in black and white
happy, colorful disneyesque adventures
and preadolescent nightmare dream-noir

the black and white dream
that haunted my sleep for years
was a personalized rerun of
Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte

charlotte would come to me
regularly in black and white
to chop off my head and right hand
just like in the movie
after that scene had been
irretrievably driven into my brain
on a double feature night at the
shadeland drive-in picture show

i’d watched the movie enthralled
from the backseat of our ’65 chevy bel-air
resting my chin on my arms
on the back of the front bench seat between
my big-brother-who-called- shot-gun
and father’s heads
until the chop, chop scene
chased me into the big back window
to curl up into a frightened fetal position
feigning sleep –
the cool window steaming
against a starlit sky with my rapid breath

for months, it seemed, or years
every night as i tried to close my eyes
in a wide-eyed attempt to sleep
i’d wrap my right wrist and neck tight
with the wound up and twisted sheet
blanket and bedspread
while the not-so-innocent theme song
“hush, hush sweet charlotte,
charlotte don’t you cry”
echoed in my skull and
haunted my desire to sleep

it wasn’t an irrational fear, i swear
a lady named charlotte
had just moved into the house behind us —
our backyards shared the same chain link fence
and we didn’t really know that much about her anyway

she could have very easily
climbed the fence with a hatchet
sneaked into our house
in the middle of the night and
chop, chop sweet charlotted me
right in my very own bunk

night after night
week after week
year after year
i rolled the edge of the bed linens
into ever tightening wads until
i was shrouded in a tight, protective cocoon
against any hatchet yielding charlottes
that just might happen
to live in the neighborhood

of course
the neck and the wrist brace kept me
from rolling over in my sleep
and sometimes even from breathing
but i was determined to wake up
completely whole in the morning
with my head and hand intact

then one day
it hit me out of the blue
charlotte's boyfriend in the movie
was named john
just like my little brother
and he slept on the trundle
that conveniently pulled out
from under my bunk
and his bed was in between
the bedroom door and me

and even if
a crazy neighbor woman named charlotte
broke into our house wielding a hatchet
and a hankering to kill somebody
she go for a john before
she'd go for a mark

and even though i'd be sad
to see my little brother go
at least i'd be safe and
i wouldn't have to bind
my neck and arm up anymore

maybe
i should have
said something to john
the elm tree

zacheaus climbed a sycamore tree
"for the lord he wanted to see"
according to the song I learned in
mrs. giltner's sunday school class
way back when I was just four or five

but when my dad climbed the elm tree
in our front yard on schoen drive
it was with far less pious intent

a blight had attacked the elm trees in the
cocooned environment of harrison park
hungry little worms found the elms in
our neighborhood irresistibly delicious
and turned lush leaves into brittle parchment
as they ate their way through
the boughs and branches

conventional methods of dusting and
spraying with industrial grade pesticides and
painting white stripes around the trunks did little
to impede the progress of the hungry little buggers

but my dad was not about to
concede his mighty shade tree
to an infestation of uninvited pests
and decided to take drastic measures

it was towards the end of a long
hot summer when the kids were banned
from the front yard except to come out
one by one when called to take their turn
steadying the ladder as dad would climb up
to the big branches with a hand saw
to take a stab at pruning

he began cutting and pruning
and hacking away at any branch
that had the slightest sign of infestation
he started low and he hacked and he cut
he went further up and he cut and he hacked
he went up as far as he possibly could
pruning away, sending diseased branches
crashing to the ground below to show
those damned worms just whose tree this was

he'd call out to the banished boys
when it was safe below to drag felled branches
teeming with pestilence, around
to the back yard and chop them
into smaller logs and pieces
for a sacrificial bonfire
sending those elm-eating worms to a fiery hell —
the little buggers didn't stand a chance

the people in our neighborhood
thought my dad was crazy
as he butchered the tree
until there was nothing left but
a giant pitchfork in our front yard
as if picasso or salvador dali had taken a stab
at some sort of surreal tree surgery —
it's just that post modern sculpture
wasn't all that much appreciated
in our cookie-cutter subdivision

"just drive until you see the fork in the road"
we were the butt of the neighborhood joke
"that's the cobb house" — snicker, snicker
but my father never flinched or batted an eye
he remained unusually quiet
and serenely confident —
he obviously knew something
the rest of us didn't

dad didn't help matters much
to dispel the question of his sanity
as he'd drive down schoen drive
slow down by a group of our friends and ask
if they knew where schoen drive was...
we'd duck down in the floorboard
of the back seat hoping not to be seen —
he thought he was being funny

and then, at church
he'd embarrass me half to death
by sitting behind a group of my friends and
rather than shushing us like a normal person
he'd lean over and whisper stuff like
"brother don is preaching so loud
i can't hear a word you're saying"
i could've just crawled up under
the pew and stayed there forever —
we learned to sit in the back row
so he couldn't sneak up on us

it was a long, long barren fall and winter
in the narrow shadow of
the tined telephone pole
that used to be our tree
grey skies and snowy banks against
our white clapboard house just made
the truncated trunk stand out even more

the school bus stop was right
in front of that stupid tree
and everybody got to see
the ever loving eye sore every day
and we had to hear about it every day
on the way to school
and every afternoon
as the bus would slowly round the bend
bringing the emaciated elm
into every bodies' view and the
whole thing would start all over again

but what seemed like an eternal winter
gave way to a vibrant renascent spring
and something miraculous began to happen
something only my smug long-suffering father
had silently and sagaciously expected all along

the pitchfork sprouted lovesprings
the lovesprings stretched into leafy twigs
the leafy twigs burgeoned
into beautiful branches
the beautiful branches
reached out in all directions
up and down and all around
lush and green until the tree
gloriously and magnificently filled out
reaching to the highest heavens
in tremendous triumph

by midsummer
the former elm of embarrassment
that had seemed more
like a sundial than a shade tree
was the most exquisite and
elegant tree for miles around and
there wasn’t a gosh-darned leaf-eating worm
to be seen of found in or on
my faithful and farsighted father’s flora

yes, zacheaus
climbed the sycamore tree
to get a better view —
but my father
climbed the elm tree
on schoen drive show the
whole damned neighborhood
just what an elm tree was
supposed to look like
olans mills dad

i always thought your
hair was black when you
were young because the
frilly-edged monotone photos
of your youth made your
slicked-back hair seem so

it made me disbelieve
the family claim that I was
the spittin' image of you
since I started off a towhead
before turning mousy brown

memory ascribes only
one color for your hair—
you must have been
thirty-one when I was born
thirty-six by the time
of my vaguest recollection
and for me your hair has
always been hoary white

i never thought it made you look old
you always seemed so suave an debonair
a transplanted southern version of
David Niven or Peter Lawford
or Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes

there was that special bottle
of hair conditioner in the
bathroom shower caddy
that no one but you could use—
your cautionary rinse
against unsightly yellow

you were always superbly groomed
your hair neat and trim
a perfect wave combed to one side
with Vitalis the high note

to your final splash of Old Spice

my favorite studio portrait of you
interred in the scrapbook of my mind
could've been a Hollywood publicity still
you, handsome as the day is long
your hair a sexy, salt-n-pepper gray
matched to perfection with a
subtly striped seersucker jacket

and your winsome grin upturned
to something or someone just
out of frame on the upper right
a playful, knowing twinkle in
the pale panes of your secret soul

the telling and nearly unseen clue
is a mystical wisp of smoke
(a genie sneaking out of a bottle?)
trailing languorously skyward
from the casually held cigarette
in the strategically posed hand
atop your conveniently placed knee

the question that rises in me
like that slow swirl of smoke:
just who, or what
makes you smile like that?
decades of you

i don’t know if it was your senior picture
or an eight by ten portrait
you had especially made for dad
when he lied about his age
to ship out as a navy cook
while you were both in high school

you looked like a nineteen-forty’s starlet
with your long pompadoured locks
dark honey eyes and ruby red lips
i don’t remember any other photograph
where your smile is so full
of hope and promise

your face has a rather timeless quality —
smooth porcelain, more texture than color
the photographic evidence shows
the same smoothness
in your childhood pictures
in photos as a young woman
and it’s the same today on the verge
of becoming a great grandmother
only the style and color of your hair
and the light in your eyes
indicate the slightest surface change

the earliest photograph i remember of you
i guess to be your first grade picture
your eyes seem full of terror
(you’ve never said why)
more than grade school jitters
a hint of auschwitz in the air

by the time your fifth child
was in the first grade
group portraits with you
as hub-of-the-family mom
the eyes that had gone from
childhood terror to teenage promise
seemed overtaken by sadness
a lonely desperation
in your soul-weary gaze
despite the forced bemusement
of your Mona Lisa smile
the full lips of youth
gone tight and terse

now in candid shots captured of
doting grandmother with beloved grandchild
your hair is no longer dark and pompadoured
but strategically coiffed and wispy white
and once again there’s a hint
of that hope and promise smile
not forced or posed
but genteel and natural

just a hint of the terrified little girl
and the wide-eyed teenager
on the brink of war and marriage
even the overwhelmed and isolated housewife
can be seen in the world-wise woman
you’ve become
an “I have survived” aura
exudes a calm assurance and
leads me to conclude that you are
a somewhat contented creature
of inexplicable experiences
i can only hope
(or cringe)
to imagine

the affectionate images
photographically preserved
are an amazing amalgamation
of all the delicate
delightful and difficult
decades of you
whatever it was

i never knew you but i always hated
whatever it was you did to her

whatever it was
your picture never graced our walls
and your name was never, ever mention

and yet, i feel you deep within my bones
and in her perpetual, unspoken sadness

i met you once
"don’t believe a word he says"
she warned

you seemed more like an enigmatic relic
a cigar-store indian, a museum piece
than someone who had been her daddy

i’d seen it in the buried photographs
at the bottom of her garage-banished chest
(our halloween coffin) once filled with hope
now full of off-season clothes-
and secret memories

your proud proboscis, half-cherokee, far more
pronounced than her quarter-blood nose
but you shared the same distant, steely eyes

in person, that one time
you weren’t nearly as imposing
as your ominous absence had led me to believe

you were so small and silent
sitting in some stranger’s kitchen
at the alabama wake of her mother
your ex-wife twice over and
you were supposed to somehow fill
the empty space of my grandfather
whatever it was
(our father told us surreptitiously)
you weren’t welcome in her house
unless you could sober up

i guess you never could
‘cause you never, ever
darkened our doorstep
or for all we know
ever took the time to find out
where she was or who we were
or even how many of us
there were all together

yet still, you inhabited
every dark corner of our house
you were the skeleton in the closet
the chains clanging in the attic
the gloom in the air
the one we could ever mention
but never, ever quite forget

is that why she kept her house
sanitized and hospital clean?
an attempt to keep you at bay
cleanse away the memory
by bleaching the walls
scouring the bathroom
stripping the kitchen floor with ammonia
each week to apply a fresh coat of wax?

shaking loose the cobwebs
sweeping out the closets
dusting even the tops of doors
and the bottom of dressers
and inspecting our attempts at cleanliness
with little white gloves?

i have heard it rumored that she was once
her daddy’s little girl, the apple of your eye—
what was it that plucked her
from that prime position of pride?
her perpetual silence makes me wonder
is she the one who fell from grace or
did grace have nothing to do with it at all?

imagine my surprise
years after I flew the coop
to get as far away as possible
from the silent misunderstanding
that seemed to be the glue for all the rest
to learn she left her Indiana home
to retrieve you from your Alabama trailer
when you could no longer care for yourself

she fetched you up north
and put you in a nursing home
nearby the home she worked hard
all her life to retire in
to keep a watchful eye on you
in your twilight time —
close, but not too close

and now that you are dead and gone
she admits she did it out of a sense of duty
because there was no one else to do it —
it was her job and it had to be done

I had hoped it had been out of love
that somehow she had reached
deep within herself —
moved through her silent pain to find a place
of forgiveness and reconciliation
for whatever it was you did to her

and that she would be able to help me
move through the pain and loneliness
and sense of disconnection
she unwittingly passed on to me
and hope against hope
she would someday be able to forgive me
for all the pain and suffering
i added to her already full plate

and still i wonder —
does she finally feel safe?
does she feel like she
protected us from
whatever it was
no one could protect her?

has she come
to any quiet resolution at all?
has the dark, unspoken secrets —
the unacknowledged fear
passed on through her genes
and her demeanor
to her children
and her grandchildren
and her great grandchildren?

will your haunting remain
until someone shines a light on it
and calls the demon out
proclaiming loudly that
you no longer have a hold on us
for whatever it was
you did to her?
the melting

one day I'll make
a life mask of you
the wise and wizened
gentle grandmother

a sharp contrast to
the cold and distant
nazi cleaning woman
i recall as my mother

there's that first grade photo
i remember as well —
auschwitz-terror in your eyes

from a mold of the mask
i'll make a memory bust
filled with water and
that first grade picture

removed from the freezer
under warm lights i'll
videotape the melting
brickwall

the confused manchild
thought no on really knew
or cared or understood
anything about him at all or
what he was going through or
his personal private pain —
the poor tormented thing

he attempted suicide
by swallowing half a bottle of
 Bayer aspirin from the bathroom closet
after returning from the
Alabama funeral of the
grandmother he never really knew

his mama got up
in the middle of the night
when she heard him puking his guts out
not quite making it to the bathroom
before he hurled

the chalky-white refuse
of his stomach a stark contrast
to the plush green carpeting
of the upstairs landing

she dutifully gave him a cool, damp washcloth
while he huddled over the porcelain bowl —
she wiped his bangs from his sweaty brow
and returned to clean up
the putrid, bileful mess

she never, ever asked him
what it possibly could have been
that made him sick to his stomach
its expelled contents on the green carpet
he thought to be the telltale sign
but the family motto, “don’t ask, don’t tell”
took precedence over any possible curiosity
she may have had in the middle of the night
or the next morning
or the day after
for nothing was ever asked
and nothing ever told

in pitiful response
the teen of unspoken pain
turned to his grumbacher
opaque watercolor set to
express the confusion of life’s silence

he traced his hand on a sheet of heavy paper
and bricked it with a mason’s care using
a fine camel hair brush as a trowel

he inked her distant, weary eyes
her thin pursed lips and silent sadness
in the center of his outreached palm

little did he know at the time
the prophetic power of that particular portrait
as he discovered the same image staring back
from the mirror in a few decades time
still life with zenith

i bought a seventeen inch
black and white portable
zenith television set
with my paper route money
when we finally moved into a house
large enough for three boys
to have rooms of their own after
the older girls had flown the coop

it was the first time in
my twelve or thirteen years
that i didn’t have to share
a room with the foreigners
who were my kindred and kin –
i felt like an alien trying to fit in

the room became my womb
a warm and separate cocoon
which i papered with my artwork
on condition that i’d patch and paint
the walls when i grew up and moved out

watercolor portraits, macramé curtains
art class collages, decoupage and sketches
an egg-shaped papier maché hanging lamp
and a rickety pine parsons table
i made in eighth grade wood shop all
staked the claim to my personal space

i’d escape to the safety
of my sanctuary daily
when the requirement
of forced participation in
family, school, and church
had been dutifully fulfilled

the broadcast options of
three national networks and
the jefferson review collection plus three

one regional station became
the white noise of my solace
and solo adolescent artscape
i'd sketch or paint or craft
through afternoons of Dark Shadows
Mike Douglas and Dinah Shore
at night Batman, Mac Davis and
Sonny and Cher were private patrons
in the small studio of my personal art

but one day of sketching
nearly came to a tragic end
when a crime of ignorance
was perpetrated on my turf

i had staged a simple still life
on the rickety table with
the propped up short leg
that served as my TV stand
a matte-black painted wine bottle
stuffed with dried gold star flowers
and an ice-sweating plastic tumbler

the central focus of the piece was
a converse high top tennis shoe —
the canvas crumpled into carefully
nuanced folds for delicate shading —
the shoelace carelessly cascading
off the edge of the tabletop

after hours of intricate observation
exquisite and eloquent execution
my not-so-innocent little brother
barged into my sacred space and
plopped down on the bed beside me

i can't work with you shaking the bed!
get out of my room! i screamed
i'm trying to draw, you moron!

hal cobb
the jefferson review collection plus three

I'm trying to draw, he mocked
as he lurched off the bed and
landed in a chair next to the table

time slowed down to a dreamlike crawl as
he snatched the shoe from its featured spot
in the center of my still life with zenith
I can't see the TV, he blurted out
as a scream from the depths of my soul
rose up from the core of my very being
NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O!

what's going on up there? mom
tried to intervene from down stairs
i felt like a stranger in a strange land
speaking a language no one understands
as i tried to describe the egregious error
of my brother's wicked ways to her

those facile folds and shadows
are gone! gone forever!
a once in a lifetime occurrence
irretrievably lost for all eternity!
she and my brother just
stood there, dumbfounded
as if i were the crazy one

with families like this
no wonder van gogh went nuts

plus two
a stitch in time

I sit and I sew
I sew and I sit
perpetually patching
the tears that I missed

darning and stitching
quilt and applique
to thread and to needle
just passes the day
a stitch in time
saves nine, they say
I’ve stitched for nine
no time is stayed

the rent to mended
the whole I must bind
the hollow of heart
that you left behind

where are the edges
unraveled, unbound?
there’s nothing but tatters
no selvedge is found

still I sit and I sew
and I sew and I sit
perpetually patching
the tears I can’t stitch
mrs. sprinkler

i don't remember if i was in
kindergarten or the first grade
when the reading light initially
sparkled inside my little head
but when it did
there was no shutting it off
or turning back...
or so i thought

very soon, Dick and Jane
just weren't fun enough
or interesting enough anymore
Dr. Seuss and his sneetches
and star bellied creatures
as well as The Cat in the Hat
with his Green Eggs and Ham
only whetted my hunger
spurred on my demands

i learned the Dewey Decimal System
and navigated the great sea of the
Lawrence Elementary School Library
my curiosity the constant North Star —
Pippi Longstocking, Sherlock Holmes
Tom Sawyer and the Brothers Grimm
became my private huckleberry friends

i loved the Disney records with
the illustrated read-along books
built right into the album covers
Pinocchio, Peter Pan, and Alice in Wonderland
all the animated features
we didn't get to go see —
you could check out headphones
and listen to the albums during study hall
if you'd earned a special library pass
reading along with the music and songs
was almost better than getting
to see the movie itself . . .
or so i told myself

i loved to read so much
(a voracious appetite one might say)
that at the end of each chapter of
assigned elementary textbook reading
i'd follow the suggestions under
"if you'd like to learn more" and
venture off on library treasure hunts
using the small drawer card catalog file
for clues to search the stacks and even
the periodical guide to send library helpers
for magazines stored in back to
unearth tremendous relics
and read, read, read

now; what was it
that i possible could have done
on that fateful third grade day
for you to publically humiliate me –
banish me from class by sending me
to the principal's office for the
very first (and only) time
in my tender young life

had you told me why then
it might have made some sense and
you wouldn't have made a wide-eyed
eight year old clip the wings of his spirit
and feel like an irredeemable piece of shit

did i ask too many questions?
did i offer too many answers?
did i interrupt too often
too eager to win your approval
with my new found child wisdom?
did i become a show-off
an unsolicited know-it-all?
just what did i do to
offend the likes of you?

you never took the time to explain it to me
but your stern silence convinced me
your baffling banishment convicted me
your sentencing me to the principal’s
office like a common criminal —
all the evidence pointed to
the facts that must be true:
i was a bad and worthless boy
i was evil, rotten to the core
all the things i’d been dad-told before
and that i’d never, ever amount to anything

what else could a frightened eight year old
conclude but reading gets you into trouble
knowing too much is not a good thing
knowledge expressed
is a threat to those in charge

that was the summation
used to irrevocably prove that
children are to seen and not heard, that
they should not answer unless called upon, that
they should not do more than they are asked, that
they should not excel
just learn to get by
do not get noticed
have a good alibi

you were probably totally unaware that
you violently and viciously ripped from
my curious and pliable young mind
the joy and excitement of reading
you pried from my vulnerable soul
the thrill and passion of discovery
you shackled my simpering spirit
to a prison wall of mediocrity and
chained to me to the belief that
it was a sin to think for oneself
it was wrong to follow one’s heart
or wonder what it would be like
to float on a raft down a lazy river
or dream of pirate treasure adventures
and hope that there might actually be
a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow

but there were things
far more important to you
conformity was your desire
and conformity you got
it was order you demanded
and order was delivered

compliance completed your godhead
of correct and proper childhood behavior
and compliance would be had
no matter whose tender spirit had
to be shattered or splattered or
squelched along the way

i learned your lessons well, mrs. sprinkler
i learned to do just enough to get by
to get by and not get noticed
to be present in body, but not in mind
to live in my head, leave all else behind
to always stay seated and not rock the boat
to sink to the bottom and not earn to float
to never ask questions and never have hope
is that what you wanted to teach me, you dope?

it very well may not have been your intention
on that pivotal day in 1965, but that was
the life sentence you pronounced on me

it was well over twenty years later
after the rest of my compliant
and silent grade school years
after my wall flower junior high and
don’t-raise-your-hand high school days
even after college semesters where I stayed
too busy with extracurricular activities to read
anything beyond skimmed knowledge

it was years after passage-of-time graduations
and under-earned diplomas and degrees
that a lover of books offered me
the possibility of parole
by enticing me to pick up
an unassigned volume again

he dared me to read again, just for fun
just for the sheer sensual delight of it
Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City*
was the delectable morsel
he tempted me with

one bite and the juice
ran down my trembling chin
to cure me from anorexic reading
then, my voracious appetite was shaken
from its cave of humiliation and hibernation

one miraculous mind-blowing book and
I was pardoned from a senseless sentence
I was set free from the joyless prison cell that
I had entered into with complete complicity and
the repressed memory of excited delight
was reawakened and rekindled in me and the
fear of your judgment placed in permanent exile

and now I read, Mrs. Sprinkler
just for the fun of it
and I ask questions
and express my opinions
and offend at times as I speak my mind
no one has to like what I read or what I say
for my tastes and ideas are my own

now listen carefully, Mrs. Sprinkler
I will be heard
and more importantly
I will read
I will haunt libraries large and small
and giant corporate bookstores though
I prefer quaint independent booksellers
and tacky little strip mall book marts
I’ll order from catalogues
and I will peruse newsstands
and dusty secondhand bookstores
I’ll stop at yard sales and garage sales
and dig through boxes of books
and exchange prized volumes
with other crazed bibliophiles and
I might even pick up a book left behind
on a park bench or bus seat and
wonder who left it there –
on gift-treasure purpose
or forlorn neglect?
I’ve gone back to the classics
I should have read in high school
and college when instead I watched
old movies and skimmed Cliff Notes
The Old Man and the Sea is
no longer East of Eden for me
Of Mice and Men no longer
stirs up The Grapes of Wrath
I’ve experienced
The Agony and The Ecstasy
and ferociously fed my Lust for Life

because of Maya I Know
Why the Caged Bird Sings
a melody distinctly different
though hauntingly familiar to
Harper’s To Kill a Mockingbird
the jefferson review collection plus three

and you know what happened
mrs. sprinkler, my desire
to read is no longer
Gone with the Wind

I find books by authors and poets I love
and read with complete abandon
from Shakespeare to Thomas Moore
and Barbara Kingsolver, Walt Whitman
to Leonard Cohen, and Billy Collins
Ed McClanahan and Frank X Walker
because of prison writing workshops
Fenton Johnson sings to my soul
and I contemplate the ruminations of
Marianne Williamson, Thomas Merton,
Gary Zukaz, Eckhardt Tolle and Kahlil Gibran

I'm not ashamed to admit
to the guilty pleasures of Anne Rice,
Tom Robbins, J.K. Rowling and Dan Brown
Charlaine Harris titillates my fancy
Kathy Reichs gets me to my Bones

my new literary friends and travel guides
help me explore brave new worlds through
words with wild, terrific and amazing imagination

they have introduced me to prodigious people
who are both like me and uniquely unlike me
and now I get to know the personalities
of people I'd never get to meet in
the halls of the usual suspects

they are my people now
and I will never, ever again —
thank you very much mrs. Sprinkler —
be trapped by small-mindedness, imposition
or spirit-killing conformity freaks

I will no longer limit myself

50
to what others consider safe
or live within the polite bounds
and politically correct borders
of someone else's comfort
for I have lived in the gray and
colorless hell of conformity
the tone-deaf and the colorblind
will never, ever take me back alive

I will not be chained
I will not be confined
I will not be limited and
I shall not be defined by the
stone-cold order of a sterile mind

and when it comes to reading
I will raise my fist high to
the west setting sun
the turnip of a
ding-eared paperback
clenched in my proud fingers
and with God as my witness —
thank you Margaret and Scarlet
and Mrs. Sprinkler too —
I shall never go
hungry again
peace, be still

words and stories in my head
juxtaposed mumble jumbles
whirl up, up and away
rather than descend to page
refusing to channel
through my fingertips and
this cheap ass stick pen
to scrap paper, crap paper

the judge and jury
in my mind perpetually
berate, debate and deliberate
while hurricanes of thought —
ilusive images resist translation
transmutation and interpretation
and are tempest tossed on
a rocky sea of doubt

cyclonic feelings swirl
round and round as
a tropical depression of
warm front memories clash
with deep-seated denial of
cold front self-absorption

word-wrestling the vision,
hope and apprehension of
dreams that won’t delineate
second guessing inklings
that warrant prohibition of
even the slightest attempt
to blot wannabe parchment
the moment

fleeing confines of concrete and steel
white-noise voices inside my head

fast-forward projections, rewinds of regret
tapes that incessantly loop my weary brain

I retire to a patch of green grass
wide open spaces, fresh air

where I stretch, I breathe
I want to see and hear the now

as I come into my body
I begin to feel, hear and see

grass bending and bouncing
in the late october breeze

butterfly flounce and flutter
among the last blossoms of clover

killdeer chanting incessant notes
to the rifts of a buoyant bluegrass guitar

yon lowing of an unsettled calf gives way
to the languished wails of a distant train

cold-front clouds hide-n-seek the sun
as a soaring jet trails their lazy game

a tiny spider (charlotte’s heir?)
scales my lotus-crossed legs

inspecting scribbled words
as they hit the page

seeing only the moment
itsy spider leads the way

a return to the present
right here, right now, today

Jefferson Review 2004
norma jean
(ode to a former food visit)

she came
to visit me
in prison today
and brought
fried chicken
fried fish
fried potatoes
hush puppies
fried okra and
fried green tomatoes –
palpable proof of
a palatable passion

down-to-earth love
hot and crispy
juicy and tender
sown of warm
southern graciousness
and tilled with her
irreverent giggles
brought to fruition
with gospel heart
and soul

its genesis
the scattered seed
of a random kindness
unaware

her love was
seared in the fire
of trial and disappointment

her heartache and disbelief were
cured in salt-tears and prayer and somehow
she found her way to astounding understanding
and unexpected, undeserved forgiveness
today, she welcomes and accepts me
with her effervescent joy and
her never ending laughter

she spreads this friendly feast
heartily seasoned with her
god-given gifts while
extending to me
her no-holds-barred
absolutely no strings attached
complete and unconditional
southern fried love
they say

they say
blood is thicker than water
but perfidy makes blood run cold
and fear dams up the icy flow

they say
time heals all wounds
but I've heard that
time wounds all heels
and time heals nothing

the clock ticks on
the gulf expands
the deafening
silence roars

what's not said
speaks volumes more
reverberates the very soul
and drowns out
whatever it is
they say
doubting thomas

spun gold hair
  entreat fingers to weave
    burnished copper silkiness

sun bleached eyebrows
  seductively beg attention
  cry for kisses to indulge
    their long neglected beauty

cobalt eyes
  tantalizingly blue
  masquerading dark
    sparkle as if on cue
      a reassuring plea for trust

impishly smirked lips
  thick and pouty
    induce to be parted
      the promise of passion
        hot and sweet
          reckless and complete

spontaneously rehearsed words
  voluptuous and ripe
    intuitively diagnose
      too perfect a prescription
        for this wary heart
          bruised ego
            skeptical soul
              unworthy cynic
                desperate for touch
                  persuasive embrace
                    a spark worth kindling
                      deserving of love
                        transcendence
                          redemption
                            release

Jefferson Review 2004
silence

I think I know silence
in the still of the night
when cells are locked
and convicts sink into
rare snoreless slumber

a mercury bulb perpetually
buzzes as a dayroom nightlight
and lowly blowing of forced air
drones the persistent distant hum
of an industrial sized chiller out back

this supposed silence is suddenly
breached by pelting rain on barred panes
clops of thunder cut the questionable quiet
with loud flash accompanied cracks of lightning

a sudden vacuum fills the air
as ever-lighted night goes black
the rain calms to a deadened drizzle
no gentle buzzing, no lowly blowing
no hum of persistence in the distance
I am surprised by a qualm of quietude

I feel it as palpable as sea fog
creeping up the crescent mountain
kissing Kealakekua Bay at midnight
raptly engulfing everything in sight
including the waiting samurai house

shoji screens open as the thick moist mist
swallows banana, coffee, palm and papaya trees
to dance over tatami mats, wrap around rough hewn beams
and skim a water-cressed koi pond as it devours the island

I surrender to the quintessence of quietness
let it wrap its overwhelming midnight ocean mist
around and spoon me into a deep swoon of silent sleep
knowing full well my languorous lover will be gone by morning

Jefferson Review 2007
depression

secret shame of my existence
weakness of my soul
failure of my faith

ex-lover refusing to
take no for an answer
never quite out of sight
the phantom of my periphery

I have packed his bags
and set them by the door
resolved time and time again
to rid him from my indwelling

but the blue paramour of my dysphoria
woos too well my weaknesses and
makes reluctant my resolve

stealthfully feigning absence
when I am most belligerent
he seemingly subsides
beneath the horizon
eyes scanning just
above the surface

I try to ignore
the clutter he left behind
the constant and incessant craving but
the rapacious ruins hold me spellbound
while eternal emptiness gnaws at my soul

at times I may even delude myself
and think I’m free at last, free at last
thank god almighty, I’m free, free at last

but my silent stalker lures me
his familiar embrace entrances me
I am too weak, too hopelessly flawed
and soon it's as if he were never, ever gone

resignation is never the same as acceptance
giving up and drowning is not an invitation
shamefully I admit I should know better
but without him I'd have to sleep alone
resurrection

death valley has
become a blanket of blossoms
after decades of desert drought

roused by the
regularly reticent rain
wildflowers waft over a
once withered wasteland

california poppies
cavort with the kindly sun
brilliant in the balmy breeze

strewn crepe paper confetti
invite creatures great and small
to raucously celebrate resurrection

dusty death refreshed by
long absent, unexpected ablution
stirs the most cynical of dried up souls

inspired by a feature story on CBS Sunday Morning March 2005
From This Moment On

When no one else believed,  
you did;  
When no one else would care,  
you dared;  
When on one else could see,  
a spark of hope in me,  
You fanned the flame,  
and stoked the fire of possibility.

When others locked the door  
and tossed the key;  
When others turned their backs,  
you turned to me;  
When others were all done,  
that's when your work begun,  
You brought a light into my cave,  
and turned me toward the sun.

And from this moment on,  
my life will be a thank you;  
From this moment on,  
my heart is gratitude;  
When thank-you's just don't seem enough  
your gift to repay,  
The best thing that I know to do  
is give your gift away;  
So I'll pass your gift along,  
from this moment on.

When I thought I had no choice,  
you showed me;  
When I thought I had no voice,  
you heard me;  
When I thought I was lost,  
you helped me count the cost,  
You cleared a path and  
paved a way for opportunity.
And from this moment on,
    my life will be a thank you;
From this moment on,
    my heart is gratitude;
When thank-you’s just don’t seem enough
    your gift to repay,
The best thing that I know to do
    is give your gift away;
So I’ll pass your gift along,
    from this moment on.

Now I can’t turn back the hands of time,
    Undo the things I’ve done,
But I can be the best I am,
    From this moment on.

And from this moment on,
    my life will be a thank you;
From this moment on,
    my heart is gratitude;
When thank-you’s just don’t seem enough
    your gift to repay,
The best thing that I know to do
    is give your gift away;
So I’ll pass your gift along,
    from this moment on.

Yes, I’ll pass your kindness on,
    from this moment on.

dedicated to Gaye Homan
JCTC Prison Program Coordinator
Jefferson Community and Technical College
Graduation Day June 2004
at Luther Luckett Correctional Complex

Jefferson Review 2005