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INTRODUCTION

Collin College is a poster child of diversity; anyone who studies here is immediately faced with discussions which prove quickly that we are each distinctively individual, yet somehow all still part of a unified global journey. Forces 2008 has a multicultural voice featuring sneak peeks from an American Indian childhood in Oklahoma to a “radical” young girl’s coming of age in the 80’s “Thaw” of Moscow, from a profound view of a “Masterwork” to a squirrel that has something to do with Jesus and Starbucks. Most works reflect that we are simply on a daily journey to fit into our own skin while shedding the cocoon of our childhood.

R. Scott Yarbrough
Editor of FORCES Literary Magazine
Hummingbird
Sydney Portilla-Diggs

It was in your nature
To flit from
Bloom to bloom.
Because of this,
You were only
In my life
For the briefest of moments.
Still we loved . . .
And to love you
Was fast
And searing
And chaotic.
I'd like to think
That you hovered
Nearer to me because
I had the
Sweetest nectar.
I am Afraid

Allison Smith

I am afraid of bony fingers
And if they are cold, it’s even worse.
I can feel them around my neck already.
A nervous hand, I’d chop off my arm.
Watch how still I am in the water, I barely make a wave.
If I leave the water running, I can’t hear your voice,
So I haven’t bathed for days.
I’d recognize your voice if you were behind me.
Turn around.
I love your voice
Imprinted in my head,
Each inflection like a filthy hand
On a white wall.
If you say you love me,
I’ll drown.
If you say you love me,
I’ll destroy
Everything.

I’ve seen rain and fire
Together.
In the rain
a woman in a flannel nightgown, blue and white flowers
Dripping into each other,
Watching her house
Burn.
This is when I need you most.
Blue haze, thick smoke, your unwavering hand cupped over my mouth
I am not screaming
I am not suffocating
I cannot be turned to ash.
The Cantonese custom of exhumation
After seven years, the bodies of the dead are exhumed
And the bones are scraped and cleaned and sent to the village of origin.
Where shall I send myself?
Who will claim my life?
The lines of my palm are deep.
They dig below the surface of my skin
Inscribe my bones
And crack
Like dried mud.
Buried in these cracks is the history of my life
Break me in half and you will find yourself in the marrow
That spills to the floor.

Like water:
Like an ocean.
Superfluous.
A flood that will tear leaves and limb, and rot will change
My form.
You’ll pull the marigolds that flourish in the meadows,
Each yellow flower will smell of my flesh.
I believe in desire.
I believe in memory.
I believe I can be whole again.

This

Jessica Rogalski

This is how I fade,
Light bleeding into dark.
Staring at my reflection, seeing
Lines and edges, blurry
Ego tangled with regret.
This is how I shout,
Against all instincts that hold me back.
Fighting to keep my voice.
One voice, the only voice.
LEORA HOISTED HER SLACKS AT THE KNEE AND DROPPED TO THE GROUND.

With her bottom stuck straight up in the air, she peered under the shed and clucked, "Here, Kitty," then went still, not even breathing as her eyes darted back and forth, hunting for the stray that had attacked her for no good reason. Why, all Leora'd done was turn the hose to the tomatoes when out from under that shed jumped a black fur ball, making the most god-awful sound. From where I stood, it looked to nearly cause Leora — well, there ain't no polite way to say this — to nearly wet herself. I could've laughed 'til high noon, but I knew Leora wouldn't take kindly to that, so I kept right on picking myself some tomatoes from her garden while she grabbed Roy's old rake from inside the shed.

Now, Leora never was soft on inedible animals, especially strays, and I could see she had no intention of letting that little beast terrorize her garden. She fisted that rake and lowered herself so that her cheek set right in the dirt beside the shed. It was clear as anything that she meant that little homeless cat no good. Problem was, she couldn't make out exactly where under the shed the animal was hid. That shed was one of those assemble-yourself, aluminum contraptions — just the kind of thing Roy'd buy — but he didn't trouble to flatten the land before he screwed it together. Needless to say, it didn't set level. So Roy took himself a wheelbarrow and borrowed some bricks left over from the church addition. When he hoisted up the far side, he created a gloriously dark crawl space for critters in the family way and saddled Leora with her current strife.

It was dark as Hades under that shed and so was the cat. Though Leora made some valiant pokes under there with the rake handle, she just couldn't get a good smack on the thing, much less scare it off. One thing about Leora, she ain't easily discouraged. One thing about me? Well, I'm not stupid. I got my tomatoes, said my "thank-yous," and "va-moosed" out of there before she dragged me into her battle with that wild kitten.

The way Leora tells it, she'd been flat on her belly for more than an hour, fishing around like that for a solid hunk of cat, blindly chasing hissing sounds, and — I'm certain, though she ain't likely to admit it — cursing up a storm. All of a sudden, out of the blue, behind her she says she heard a fence plank groan.

So, she glanced back over the rake tines and found that little Winnie Fletcher had clambered up the back side of her fence and was standing on the cross board, staring down at her through eyes as round as store-bought onions.

Or was it that time when I ceased crying,
Because in the endless depth of your blue eyes,
That day I found myself forever smiling,
My heart so full of joy that it could touch the skies?

Perhaps it was the day I felt alone inside,
And I could think of no one else but you
And when I found you by my side,
My soul's search ended and I felt so new?

I know not when my love for you began,
For it is God who joins soul to soul
And God is love by you I once was told

Was it that early September day,
When we spent time by a quiet lake,
You heard my call and came my way
Your arms the drowning child to take?

Maybe it was the end of that evening
When in your eyes I saw the longing
To give your love to those around you,
Until the loneliness would no more abound you?
We shoulder the leavings of all that is past.
Avert our eyes from its pictures of death.
Wrap roots pulled from furrows in yesterday's news;
We crate the remains of this final harvest;
The possible beneath this always uncertain earth.

Over our tongues. Seed rests in fallen fruit to spread
Apples firm for picking, their juice runs tart, cool
The Angel-Wing mounds in finished growth.
Believed that summer would flower again,
We always believed that spring would come;
(from page 5)
Poor Leora. Anytime she went to do some gardening, there was that cat — hiss, hiss, hiss — and there was that girl upon the fence — yap, yap, yap. Leora, Winnie would say, “you ever give Hissy milk?” And I’d hear about it.

“Leora, why don’t you ever smile at Hissy?” And I’d hear about it.

“Leora, who teaches pet store cats to be nice? You suppose people teach ‘em, or do mother cats?”

“Leora, do cats go to Heaven?”

Leora told Winnie that Hissy was sure to go to hell. “Cats are like people,” she said. “Some good, some bad. The wheat and the chaff. That’s how God made it.”

“So you think God made Hissy a bad cat?”

“Winnie was sassing her — I say so, too. “I leave it to Him” was all Leora said before she stomped inside to call me.

I listened to the whole story, then settled Leora down — again. But this time I told her everyone saw the situation for what it really was. Here was the no-good cat, every day pitching a hissy-fit, and there was Leora patiently caring for it even though it didn’t deserve none. I told her all that hissing only highlighted the kind of woman she was, and not to let it get her down. She thanked me, I swear I could feel fire burning in Leora’s heart.

She marched right up to the girl, who spun around, but not before Leora had an old-fashioned hold of her ear. “Move,” she barked. “Course, Hissy was long gone.

“Let go!” The child squirmed, but Leora had a firm pinch. Ear dragging is all in the elbow. You have to hold your elbow just right. And Leora did that — through the gate and right on up to the Fletcher’s front door.

Stood on the sidewalk, figuring this was Leora’s battle, but I didn’t miss nothing. You know those Fletchers that Mrs. Fletcher stretched out like a mother bear in her tracks.

I turned away, shaking my head, and not quite knowing what to do with myself. I’m not saying I didn’t want to be there. Leora’d want me to stay, I knew that, or she’d have told me not to follow her when I did. But, well, I felt like the mother who waits in the car, waiting to see if her thirteen-year son scores his first kiss on his date’s doorstep. Awkward.

“Is something wrong, Leora?” I heard Mrs. Fletcher say. Glancing over, I saw her scoop up her year-old boy, half-naked in a t-shirt and diaper. He banged on her chest. “Winnie was trespassing,” Leora said, and Mrs. Fletcher put the baby back down. “I caught her handling a dangerous stray.”

Winnie’s head popped out from behind her mother’s back. “Hissy’s not dangerous to me!”

Mrs. Fletcher glanced at me, then touched the top of Winnie’s head and said, “Go on to your room.” Winnie’s date’s doorstep. Awkward.

“Leora, Winnie told me later that the little darling with an affection for cats stuck out her tongue before carrying the baby down the hall.

“I’m very sorry Winnie troubled you,” Mrs. Fletcher said, “but I have to tell you I’ve been concerned about this cat. Is it true you’re feeding some wild thing you found under your shed?”

Leora straightened, said boldly and real loud (which I figured was for my benefit), “It seemed to be doing just fine.”

“Leora, you ever give Hissy milk?” the mother called. “Take Bubba.”

“Winnie could get hurt,” Leora said as Winnie stomped back in.

“Leora,” Mrs. Fletcher said, all sweet, as Winnie hoisted the baby onto her hip, “My daughter does have an affection for animals.”

I took about four steps and came up beside her, so she wouldn’t think she had to work so hard for me to hear. I tipped my head at Mrs. Fletcher, but she ignored me. Kept on talking.

“But the kitten hasn’t had any shots.”
Leora stared at her blankly I’m sure, touting the cost of those shots.

“I don’t like a stray being so near my children!”

Leora got that same look in her eyes that she gets when she’s a fist to beat me in gin.

“Mrs. Fletcher,” she said, “Hissy’s not even big enough to climb the fence. Maybe if you kept Winnie on your side...”

“I can do that,” Mrs. Fletcher nodded, shifting her weight, “but just how long do you think you can keep that animal on your side of the fence?”

Leora hushed real fast, glanced at me. What was I supposed to do?

“Cats carry-diseases, Leora Parvo, dysentery, worms...”

Leora looked Mrs. Fletcher square in the eye, then turned all of a sudden, and walked back across the Fletcher’s weed lawn to her own home. I bid Leora’s neighbor a civilized farewell, but added, “Climbing that old fence, it’s just not safe.”

The woman closed the door, but I was already moving after my friend.

I tried to tell Leora what was what, but she didn’t want to talk about it. Just said, “Let’s go to a movie.” I asked which one and she shrugged, said I could pick.

I got out my car keys, and we stopped at my place first so I could pick up a sweater. The whole drive, I could tell that a part of Leora was real angry, being scolded part of her, too — that part that makes her get up in the morning.

When I got there, she picked up a half-empty bag of Cats D’Light and took me out by the shed. I waved at Winnie, who I could clearly see peering through the slats, then watched as Leora unlocked the shed. She walked deep inside and poured out some cat food pellets. As soon as we backed far enough away, Hissy darted out from beneath the shed, ran inside it, and pounced on the food. Leora dashed forward and slammed the shed door.

“Why’d you do that, Leora?” Winnie asked, all frantic, her left eye and nose showing through where a slit was missing.

Leora didn’t answer, just snapped the lock, then led me back inside and used the telephone.

I sat with her, watching Fox News and talking about that missing pregnant woman. Two hours later, Animal Control rang the front bell. Leora answered it, said to meet her round back, where she explained everything to the catcher as he pulled a long pole with a wire noose on the end out of his truck. Leora opened the gate, worked the combination of the shed, then stepped back. I heard Winnie breathing hard behind the fence.

The cat hissed up a storm soon as the catcher stepped inside. He had a little trouble slipping the noose around Hissy’s neck — the cat climbed up the aluminum slat was missing.

“Chinese, it is,” she said, then looked over at me, her eyes all smiling. “You think Winnie will survive?”

I nodded, then held up the bag of cat food. “What do I do with this?”

“I think I’d like to see that movie again, the one from yesterday.”

I understood. “But no McDonald’s this time,” I said, following her inside Roy’s old shed. “Let’s try that new Chinese buffet’ across the highway.”

She nodded, placed the cat food bag on the floor, then picked up the few tools — a wrench, a screwdriver, and I don’t know what — that the catcher had accidentally knocked off the overhead when he yanked Hissy out.

“Chinese...” Leora wondered as she replaced the tools. “Do they eat cats?”

I laughed. It was wicked, but I laughed. “That’s dogs,” I said, “with Chinese barbeque.”

She grunted and smiled at the same time. “I think scoring...” I thought, “I didn’t see that movie again, the one from yesterday.”

I understood. “But no McDonald’s this time,” I said, following her inside Roy’s old shed. “Let’s try that new Chinese buffet’ across the highway.”

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I Never Lived in the Colored South

Sydney Portilla-Diggs

I never lived in the colored south,
But caught the eye of
An old pink man who did
My daughter and I sat
In the shallow end of
A country club swimming pool, and
Under his critical gaze,
I came to realize
That we were the only lavender family in the water.
I wonder if that old pink man
Forgot for the time when
It used to be an all-pink club.
They would have
Drained every last drop of water
From the pool and had some colored servants scrub it down with disinfectant
If a colored stuck one toe in the water.
Defiantly,
And deliberately
I held my breath
And submerged
My entire lavender body
In the water.
When I came up again,
The old pink man was gone.

Day's Beauty – A SONNET

Betsy Green

The day gave up her beauty to the night
And wrapped its shadowed shawl around her land
Allowing those who dwell in simpler light
To revel in their doings as she planned.
Through one open eye she still sees the soul
Who make by night the markings of their way
Until again, her radiance takes in the whole
Of that which sin and vile left on display.
For those who choose to see her golden face
And live exposed to every fault within
Are reminded of the need for her grace
When viewed to remnants of night’s shameful den.
Then day’s beauty seems even greater still
Shining forth from those who gave to her their will.

FARMROAD IN TEXAS

Josh Dryk

OLD FOLKS AT HOME

Justin Houston

I never lived in the colored south,
But caught the eye of
An old pink man who did
My daughter and I sat
In the shallow end of
A country club swimming pool, and
Under his critical gaze,
I came to realize
That we were the only lavender family in the water.
I wonder if that old pink man
Forgot for the time when
It used to be an all-pink club.
They would have
Drained every last drop of water
From the pool and had some colored servants scrub it down with disinfectant
If a colored stuck one toe in the water.
Defiantly,
And deliberately
I held my breath
And submerged
My entire lavender body
In the water.
When I came up again,
The old pink man was gone.
THE SOUND OF MOTORBIKES became a roaring crescendo and a crowd of several thousand surged towards Pakistan’s border with India. Mounted police lashed out with bamboo canes and women and children screamed as they were crushed against a gate blocking the way to the ‘Wagah’ frontier crossing, fifty meters away.

“Pakistan Zindabad!” (Long live Pakistan!) bellowed the crowd, in between cursing the police. One man fell to the ground, blood pouring from his head, searching for his glasses amid a sea of lost shoes.

So began the Independence Day celebrations on the fourteenth of August along the line where Britain hurriedly divided the “Jewel in the Crown.” Sixty years ago on that day in history, triggered the biggest mass migration in history.

The prevailing atmosphere was actually more festive than aggressive — the crowds had come to see the ritual flag-raising ceremony by goose-stepping border guards in regimental finery. But the chaos and violence served as a reminder of the bloody scenes that followed Britain’s decision to split Punjab, one of its colony’s most populous and prosperous regions, down the middle.

Pakistanis celebrated their nation’s sixtieth birthday on Tuesday, the fourteenth of August, 2007 with celebratory gunfire and colorful displays of national pride, pushing the problems of recent political turmoil and surging militant violence into the background for a day.

Tens of thousands of people rallied throughout the world’s second most populous Muslim nation waving Pakistan’s olive-green flag with a white crescent, while others held small prayer gatherings at home. Women dabbled their forearm in elaborate henna-drawn flowers in national colors, and children ran through the streets late into Monday night setting off firecrackers.

And there I stood in front of the television thinking … Independence Day reminded me of the time when on one thirteenth of August, many, many years ago, our dad brought all of us kids together and told us a story. He told us how he was a young

Ode to a Kansas Night

Jessica Rogalski

Mirthless trees bask in fading light,
Surrounded by earth in shades of pine, amber, smoldering red.
Admiring dying clouds of fading white,
While an indifferent wind snaps around them.

Fierce fire disappears as the day bows low,
Taking its cue, letting the evening take hold.
Earth assesses the moment: ground and sky, firm and steady.
Moon radiates, beaming through fading aura of sun

Starfire abates,
Swallowed by the horizon.
While hazy sky melts into liquid black,
Star flecks slowly dominate the night.

With a breath, I sink back into the frozen grass;
Beneath the charcoal evening, everything is diminished.
boy at the time of independence and how his mother stitched a Pakistani flag for him, so he could go out and demonstrate with the Muslim League. He had proudly raised it at the demonstration despite being in a city that had seen its fair share of Hindu-Muslim riots. Then, he continued on to teach us what the different colors and the Chaand (Crescent) Sitaara (Star) on the Pakistani flag represented. Finally, my mom followed the tradition and stitched a large flag from green and white cloth for us kids to put up on our house. It was the largest flag at that time in our neighborhood and we proudly raised it on our house every year until I left for the US.

Even now we talk about it and what it meant for the entire family to raise the flag together. Given what is going on in Pakistan, I almost feel I need to be back there again, to raise a giant green and white flag to show that nothing can bind us together more than our common nationality.

One incident that left me devastated shortly before my migration was one that’ll remain like a permanent scar on my mind. My neighborhood was going mad. Fireworks, horns, confetti, blaring music, excited screams of people—all the visible signs of a festive night were present. Everyone had been celebrating for twenty-four hours now. My city was going berserk. “Pakistan Zind-a-bad!” (Long live Pakistan!) screamed the jubilant people out in the streets and roads; the sixtieth anniversary of this country: Independence Day.

Screams. Shouts. Tooting and honking. Roars of motorbikes. Flames of fireworks. Background music in every store, mall, and elevator tuned to the patriotic mode. Public buildings glittered with colorful bunting and Pakistan’s green and white national flag flew proudly from balconies, bicycles and cars as the country marked its sixtieth birthday.

Everyone was jovial.

I sat uneasily.

Don’t get me wrong, the fourteenth of August is one of those few days I like to celebrate... though, of course, I do it in my own quiet way by tracing the wall of the balcony and terrace of my house with little candles. I love the interplay of dark and light it creates, after the sun sets in. And were you to look at my house from a distance, at eight in the night, a merrier sight would not greet your eyes. Some two hundred odd candles glittering and blinking in the dark, their flames glowing bright, reaching higher and higher, casting the glow on the walls, radiating warmth. No music. No loud horns. Just candles for me. My celebrations, be it for anything, were always subtle and quiet.

That night, however, my candles did not light. The wind kept on reaching out with its long lithe hands, pinching the flames between its two fingers. No candle burned.

Why was everyone so unconcerned and wrapped up in themselves? Why were they being so selfish? Did they not see... My candles did not burn.

The eleven-year-old boy, working to make sure his family manages a meager meal once daily... or perhaps once every two days. I could not tell, he looked skeletal enough. The eleven-year-old boy longingly watching kids marching past holding flags, watching children running to the market to buy flags, badges, bunting and other Independence Day decorations. He must be wondering the meaning of the word “Freedom” and “Independence,” I imagine. For him the word freedom only encompasses freedom from hunger and basic needs never fulfilled. Freedom from always struggling to survive, to stay alive.

The eleven-year-old boy I had been seeing daily, on my way back home, the same little boy with his picture in the paper that day, his fragile body bloody and lifeless, run over by a motorbike while the biker was performing an Independence Day stunt... and green and white balloon-skins spewed at his side. Bright red seeping through green and white. Bright red set brilliantly against the dull asphalt. Green and white and red. Shouts and laughter outside. Green and white and red. Happy Independence. Green and white and red. My candles would not burn.
I STILL HAVE VIVID MEMORIES OF GROWING UP AMONG MY INDIAN RELATIVES IN OKLAHOMA. In the late ’40s and early ’50s, before I was born, the state of Oklahoma had started removing the Native Americans from the reservations. The Government had built several blocks of homes for them, all one-bedroom, and my father, who was part Comanche and part Creek, qualified for one of them. We lived there in a community of Comanche, Apache and Kiowas in Oklahoma City.

However, I spent much of my childhood visiting my grandparents, who lived out in the country on a farm. I can still remember my Great Grandmother Minnie, even though she died when I was a child. I can remember her long braided hair and how much she looked liked the other Indian women in my neighborhood.

My grandparents had much to do with the training and character building of their grandchildren. My oldest brother Roy and I, often with our cousins Susan and Janine, visited them on weekends to help with the farm work. Grandma Ruby Nell used to give each of us a bucket and sent us into the orchard to pick apples, peaches, pears and cherries, always with strict instructions not eat any of the cherries. After filling our buckets, we took them to her to wash and remove the stems.

Of course, we usually ate some cherries. When Grandma Ruby Nell asked us if we had, Roy always said “no,” but she knew he was lying. She would then lead us out into the front yard and tell us to break a switch off the bush. If we selected a short, thin switch, she would walk out herself, choose a longer, thicker one, and switch us with it.

It took us a year or two to figure out how she always knew we were lying. You see, the house had no indoor plumbing, no bathroom with mirrors, just an outhouse.

After the new, modern bathroom was put in later, we could go inside, look in the mirror, and see the cherry stains all around our mouths!

Grandmother Ruby Nell taught me many practical lessons: cooking, canning and sewing. Since she happened to be my Sunday School teacher, she also made sure I learned my Bible verses. Because I had trouble learning to read—I would see the words all run together on the page—I developed a practical way of teaching me. She always had green beans from the garden for me to snap with her in the evening. We would sit on the front porch swing, and she would say, “Repeat after me: ‘The Lord is my Shepherd. ’” Then she would have me snap each end of the green bean. Then the next line: “I shall not want,” and I would snap each end of another green bean. We would continue until I knew all the lines, and got the green beans snapped at the same time.

My grandpas were also important in my life. After my parents divorced, when I was eight, Grandpa Wall came to live with us. He worked with my father’s dad, who had his own carpentry business. It was what every hyperactive girl needed, two grandfathers paying attention to her. They would often take Roy and me to work with them on Saturdays. I learned to sand baseboards and to use a hammer.

Grandpa Wall used to tell me, “If someone is willing to teach you something, you should learn it. You never know down the road of life when you might be able to use it.” Both grandfathers told me that they didn’t care what I did for a living when I grew up. I could be a dishwasher in a restaurant if I wanted to, but I must make sure to be the best dishwasher they had. “If not,” they said, “the pay check doesn’t belong to you.”

(continued on page 20, second column)
My mother also demonstrated a strong work ethic. Finding herself divorced, with a small family and no work training, she began taking night courses in secretarial college. Meanwhile, she needed a job. She began working full time as a cashier at Turner’s Grocery Store, just across the street from my elementary school. She made hot dogs every day, and we children could walk across the street and buy them for lunch as long as we sat on the grocery steps to eat them. The hot dogs cost five cents, and a 6-ounce cold Coca-Cola cost five cents. My mother would make the best hot dogs, with lots of chili, mustard, and onions. The kids at my school called her the Hot Dog Lady. She continued working there until she graduated from the secretarial college and got a job, as a secretary for an insurance company.

I worked in the neighborhood too. I did babysitting for the Indian families in my neighborhood, but I didn’t get money. They always paid me with commodities, which were given to them by the state. In a circle on every item was a label that read, “Indian Reservation, Oklahoma.” My payment would be perhaps a ten-pound sack of flour, a 10-pound sack of sugar, a can of powdered eggs (which had a greenish color) and a small box of bird or a block of chocolate.

One day at school I overheard two girls talking about making a whole dollar fifty babysitting. I went home and told my mom. After listening to me, she said, “Let’s get out what you made when you went to babysit the other night. Let’s see, a sack of flour, a sack of sugar a large block of chocolate, powdered eggs, one pound of butter and a jar of honey. Well, it comes to seven dollars,” she said. “Which is better, one dollar and fifty cents an hour or seven dollar’s worth of groceries?” I never complained again!

As I started into the eleventh grade in 1970, our school offered beauty college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy that, although both girls and boys could take beauty college classes, auto shop was only for boys.

The first haircut I did in beauty college was on a mannequin head with very long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small part of the long hair.

I began sectioning and cutting, sectioning and cutting. I ended up giving a short page-boy haircut, not at all what Mrs. Haul expected. As I finished it, Mrs. Haul walked by, stopped, grabbed my scissors and comb, and screamed, “Your Mother owes me eighteen dollars! These are new and were supposed to last for two whole years!”

Meanwhile, she needed a job. She began working full time as a cashier at Turner’s Grocery Store, just across the street from my elementary school. She made hot dogs every day, and we children could walk across the street and buy them for lunch as long as we sat on the grocery steps to eat them. The hot dogs cost five cents, and a 6-ounce cold Coca-Cola cost five cents. My mother would make the best hot dogs, with lots of chili, mustard, and onions. The kids at my school called her the Hot Dog Lady. She continued working there until she graduated from the secretarial college and got a job, as a secretary for an insurance company.

I worked in the neighborhood too. I did babysitting for the Indian families in my neighborhood, but I didn’t get money. They always paid me with commodities, which were given to them by the state. In a circle on every item was a label that read, “Indian Reservation, Oklahoma.” My payment would be perhaps a ten-pound sack of flour, a 10-pound sack of sugar, a can of powdered eggs (which had a greenish color) and a small box of bird or a block of chocolate.

One day at school I overheard two girls talking about making a whole dollar fifty babysitting. I went home and told my mom. After listening to me, she said, “Let’s get out what you made when you went to babysit the other night. Let’s see, a sack of flour, a sack of sugar a large block of chocolate, powdered eggs, one pound of butter and a jar of honey. Well, it comes to seven dollars,” she said. “Which is better, one dollar and fifty cents an hour or seven dollar’s worth of groceries?” I never complained again!

As I started into the eleventh grade in 1970, our school offered beauty college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy that, although both girls and boys could take beauty college classes, auto shop was only for boys.

The first haircut I did in beauty college was on a mannequin head with very long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small part of the long hair.

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When Is Art?

Scott Robinson

I was one of many bewildered freshmen wandering through the stacks of textbooks at the community college bookstore. I found the required books for English, government, American history and art appreciation. The title of the latter made me pause. What is Art?

“Yes!” I thought to myself. “That makes sense. I have to have a clear definition of what art is if I’m gonna be an art major.” Standing in the crowded aisle, I flung open the book and read the first sentence:

“The only way to begin this book is to make clear that we are not going to arrive at any single answer to the question, What is art?”

“What a rip-off!” I said to myself. “I’m not paying for this!”

The book was written by the legendary John Canaday, though I had no idea at the time who the author was. Years later I was better able to appreciate what Canaday was trying to say. Many scholars have tried to define what art is. All failed. Canaday simply dispensed with the matter and got on with what art historians generally agreed upon as the basics of art appreciation.

Some cultures have no word for art, much less a concept of artists or art museums. This does not mean they live without art. Art to them may be that blanket, this bowl or a carved idol. Taking such an object out of context and placing it on a pedestal in an art museum makes no sense in many cultures. In some cases, this would virtually destroy the object because its use as a blanket, bowl or idol is exactly what makes it art—or whatever they call it. On the other hand, there are examples of art whose purpose is not realized until the object is destroyed rather than preserved in a museum. Navaho sand paintings will not dispose of the malevolent spirits captured in the design until the artwork is gathered up and cast to the wind.

So why has every book on art appreciation, save Canaday’s, attempted to define art even though the task is impossible? All the conflicting definitions make the field of art appreciation so, well, downright exacerbating. Canaday’s outright dismissal of the question forced me to question how could I dedicate my entire adult life studying something that could not be defined?

Then I stumbled onto a different approach to this old problem. I was taking a doctoral course on the philosophy of music when my professor introduced me to Nelson Goodman’s book on the Languages of Art. Goodman was wrestling with a much deeper philosophical issue about the nature of music, but something he said seemed to make sense of the “what is art?” question. Part of Goodman’s reasoning was that music exists only as it is performed; thus he emphasized the when of music. Maybe we were asking the wrong question about art.

What if we asked when is art rather than what?
An even longer pause indicates a momentary loss of ideas. The most stellar minds of science gathered in one room, yet they are utterly stumped. They boldly devised a plan to forever alter mankind’s relationship to the universe, but they lack the means to express the significance of the event.

“Now ‘bout a speech,” the lead scientist suggests. “You mean a ‘Four score and twenty years ago’ sort of speech?” another wonders.

“Well, yeah,” the leader responds. “Something like that.”

“I was once in Toastmasters,” another interjected, “but I don’t feel qualified to write something of this magnitude. I don’t feel qualified to write something of the magnitude. The entire world will be watching.”

They instantly realized that they had forgotten something necessary for the mission—they forgot about art. An extraordinary occasion demands extraordinary language. Ordinary words or actions simply will not do. NASA had to look beyond the realm of science for the appropriate words, to poetry, to express the meaning of what they were about to do. NASA took ordinary language and made it extra-ordinary—poetic—so that everyone watching Neil Armstrong taking that famous step would know that what he was doing—indeed the moment we were experiencing—was significant. It had meaning.

That is when art happens. Whenever we take something ordinary and make it extra-ordinary, we are making art. We do not normally talk in words like “One small step,” do we? Imagine giving your fast food order as, “Give me one cheeseburger with fries, hold the pickles—or give me death!” It would not make sense because ordering a cheeseburger is not a meaningful event. Whatever is produced in this ordinary-to-extraordinary process is secondary to the human impulse to convey something meaningful. This is not so much a definition of art as it is recognition of the universal human desire to express meaning—and recognizing when it happens.

A graduate deserves a toast, which is an arful use of language. When people are married, we dress them in symbolic costumes. To honor the dead, we give the moment meaning with a eulogy. We commission monuments to mark a hallowed place where soldiers died, to commemorate a great leader, or to represent the abstract ideals of a nation. We gather for performances of dance, music, and drama not just to be entertained, but as a way of exploring what it means to be human.

Observe any important moment in the life of a person (a Bar Mitzvah, wedding, marriage, funeral) or a group of people (a declaration of war, proclamation of freedom, recognition of achievement), and art will happen. Indeed, the only way to give something any meaning whatsoever is through some form of artistic expression, be it through artful language, music, dance or the visual arts. We may not be able to define what art is, but we always know when it happens. Whenever an individual or group tries to communicate something is meaningful, that is when art happens.

Consider all the kinds of art used, for example, to perform High Mass in St. Peter’s Cathedral. Remove every form of art and see what remains. Begin with painting and sculpture. There goes Bernini’s Baldacchino. What about music? No angelic chorale reverberating throughout the vaulted nave. What about dance? No choreographed movement allowed. No solemn procession, ritual kneeling, or sign of the cross on one’s chest. What about literature? The Church’s magnificent liturgy must go, as does the Pope’s homily. As to the craft arts, there can be no bejeweled censer issuing incense or ring on the Pope’s finger. There is no hand-crafted Bible at the hand-carved pulpit either. In fact, there is no furniture at all. What about interior design and architecture? The inspirational wall and ceiling mosaics disappear along with the dome designed by Michelangelo. Costume design? The uniforms created by Michelangelo for the Swiss Guard are gone, too, along with all the distinguishing vestments of the ranking clergy. No symbols of any sort—no ictus, no chi-rho, not even a simple cross. Nothing is left but a large group of naked people standing in a big open space. How meaningful is that?

We convey our deepest sense of individual and communal identity through artful use of language, movement, dress, sound, image, and performance. Indeed there are no vehicles of meaning other than the arts. That is what the writer Henry Miller meant when he said, “Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life.”

We may not know what art is, but every culture knows when something meaningful is being expressed. Language is no longer just words, but a bond of marriage or a right of passage into adulthood. A bowl for serving rice becomes a symbolic vessel of life-giving forces. The tattoos on one’s body become more than decorative; they prove one’s birthright. The next time someone suggests that art is a luxury, imagine life without artistic expression. Imagine Neil Armstrong stepping onto the lunar surface in silence.
New and Old

Sandra Herron

Friendly people, asking all kinds of questions;
In
How is it, where I came from?

But I am busy looking
At the tall elevators
At the immense airport
At the sterile brown buildings
At the scary highways
At the huge coke machines

Busy in a surrealistic city

Learning to speak
A language without subjunctive
A straightforward culture
Where translations are bad
And cognates don’t work

Suddenly, a taste of home
The Girl Scout cookies
Sweet potatoes and rum

 dreams

Denise Durian

His voice sounds like he is wearing yellow.
Why are the rainbow colored ghosts in my bathtub?
As the elevator headed to the bottom floor, it ended up in traffic on the 91 freeway.
My dog is cooking dinner tonight.
The lint on the carpet has smiling faces.
Let’s all go back to the Land of the Lost.
The hairy tree stump wanted to go to the game.
Rowing our boats through the sand was fun.
The high school smells hard because the doors are red.
The snail echoed as it entered the room.
Did you hear what the flower said?
Hello little flower, how was your flight?
The bell was about to leave for the day.
Susan ate the chair when she saw the red light.
I can hear the taste of the chalkboard clearly.
The rainbow landed on a pile of feathers.
The wind was choking so much that it snagged.
The cake was nagging the little red boy.
Our coat tail wore the name tag as well.
We had no name tag for our coat tail.
Genkua ze abyat baubsha
He sounds fat.
Ode to Normalcy and Routine

Brian Shade

Century old oaks and greens mute the pain we feel
At the hospital. My pod in the basement is colorless,
A concentration camp.

Photos of lost friends and lovers pierce my heart with sorrow and anger.
Metal phones dangle on the wall.
Who can I call? Who can relate?

My room isolates further, the bed hard, my body asexual.
The north wind chills my nerves and cells relentlessly –
A cactus bombarded with thorns and pricks.

Overdosing and ice-cream weaken the pain, but thorns penetrate my dreams creating
Impressionistic images.
Covered with five blankets and a mouthpiece to stop grinding teeth. Waking up takes
A couple of hours.

"Ha, ha," I chuckle sarcastically. "How much deeper can I go?"
"I'll descend deeper like a bird or gladiator soars!"
Then self-hatred erodes sadness, as waves on a powdery beach.

Weeks of surreal indecisiveness wane,
Suddenly I trudge out of bed and my room,
Reaching a new habitat called the ground floor.

Happiness begins
To engulf me in
Endless activity and colors:
Red roses, studly blue wranglers, and an army green windbreaker.
Photos and art projects regain significance.
Mom and Dad visit and we get fresh air by the oaks.

The new room is cozy, my attitude smoother, my appetite back.

 proclaimed. As bedtime approaches, I reflect
"Did I survive or thrive another day?"
My name is Jon Doe and I’m glad to be here.
IT HAD BEEN ONLY THREE YEARS AGO, WE WERE HIKING BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL. We had trudged the eight miles from the canyon rim down to the river when my complaining went over the top.

“My God, I can’t feel my legs and I’m about to have a heat stroke. When I go, just cover me with rocks so the buzzards don’t get me.”

Laura just laughed and said, “Come on big boy. I’ll carry the heavy pack. There’s only a mile left to go.”

Now, she lay in a hospital bed set up in our living room. The oxygen concentrator hummed and bubbled next to the bed. We had made this arrangement for the convenience of the hospice nurse who visited twice daily, and to accommodate the flow of visitors.

Her mother had struggled to convince me to make this arrangement. I thought that whenever Laura woke up, realizing where she was would be a horrible reminder of why she was there.

The last two years had been a series of losing one battle after another. The first battle was with vanity. Laura lost her hair, but no big deal. She still retained her natural grace and was the patient. Later, the side effects of chemo kept her from driving.

The battle for independence was the hardest for her. She held onto it for as long as she could, but when her sense of balance began to desert her, she had to rely on me to walk her to the bathroom, help her up and down, lift her in and out of the tub. I had to take control of her medications. The whole brain radiation affected her short term memory. I saw the frustration in her eyes when she would begin a sentence, but then couldn’t remember the words she needed to complete it.

The cancer even assaulted dignity. The hospice nurse recommended a catheter when her legs became too weak to support her. Laura hated the catheter. She confronted the nurse, making her promise not to use it, even if she might not be conscious to resist. She made me promise, too.

I carried her to the bathroom for a while, but even that became too difficult. We resorted to the diapers. Changing and bathing her didn’t feel like a burden. It seemed more a privilege to be close enough to serve in that way without causing her embarrassment.

It had been longer than a day since I had seen her conscious and longer than that since she had been able to speak. I watched her as I changed the damp sheets, trying not to disturb her. I saw her grinace as I lifted and rolled her back onto the clean sheets. I said, “I’m so sorry, Honey.” I didn’t know if she could even hear me anymore. I had spoken quietly, but inside my mind I screamed contradictory prayers. “God, please, one more remission.” And, “Please, God, take her now. Don’t let her suffer anymore.” I was ashamed I could conceive such a thought.

I was adjusting the sheets when I felt her hand lightly touch my arm. I looked. Her eyes were half open, but steady, and focused directly on mine. Searching. Searching, and then, consoling. A point of light reflected from a tear, hanging, balanced in the corner of her left eye. As her eyes closed, the tear slowly slid away.
I stood at the bottom of the great grey stairs leading up to the Art Institute of Chicago. My breathing was shallow, as I had hurried past everything to get to this much-anticipated destination. Monet’s work was behind those doors, and I could hardly wait to run up the stairs and burst into the exhibit. I decided to act like an adult, even though I felt childlike in my desire and glee; I managed to walk up the stairs with the same external composure of all those around me. Once I entered the exhibit full the moment I had been waiting for came, almost too quickly. There before me was a Monet, in my memory, it was eight feet long. I stood in awe as I looked at the masterpiece; it is still beyond my ability to describe with words...my vocabulary too limited, or maybe the whole vocabulary of mankind is too limited for the masterwork that was before me. I stood, taking it in. And then, slowly, I was drawn forward. I walked as close as the thick brown velvet rope would allow, wanting to take in the fullness of the work before me. I leaned in, as close as a breath. I was shocked. It was a mass of wild, aggressive, random brush strokes that made no sense to my cognitive mind. The colors: a mass of confusion that looked like a first grader’s attempt at mixing color. I leaned back from the rope, surely I was missing something. Nope; nothing there except a confusion of discordant colors. The caustic smear of burnt sienna, the angry jabs of indigo, and the sorrowful strokes of aubergine didn’t seem to fit into this tranquil garden scene. I was so disappointed. I backed away, and as I did, the further back I moved, the more the masterwork began to make sense again. Its beauty returned, and with it my understanding of the master painter grew ever deeper. He knew what this budding artist hadn’t a clue of; he knew that it took darkness to make the light colors burst forth; it took caustic sienna to cast the shadows for the effervescent orange and blue, indigo and aubergine played off the butter yellow and rich azure. It took all those conflicting colors to make a masterpiece. He, the master, knew that only with the darkest of color spotted here and there could the joyful painting have depth and beauty.

I know another Master, who seems to know ever so much about using the darkest of colors in our lives. Often times I rail at him, questioning how he can allow such darkness in life, how can sienna, indigo and umber be good for us? I shake my fist and question him, “Why won’t you fix this dark mess?” After seeing Monet I received an answer to my litany of whys. I understood that I needed to hand over the dark paint filled brushes of my life, and let the Master paint them into this painting of me. As long as I hold onto the dark brushes, shaking them with my insistent impertinence, I stop the Master painter from using them to add depth, texture, and richness into my life story. When I hold onto them in anger or waiting for the Master to fix what is “clearly wrong,” I lose the opportunity for these life experiences to enrich the colors of me; I remain flat, achromatic, shallow. So now, on my good days, I find myself reaching into my hidden places and finding the darkest umbers and inky blacks, ready to turn them over so the Master can paint them into something beautiful.
LIVING IN A COUNTRY THAT AMERICANS USED TO CALL “COMMUNISTIC” WAS AN EASY THING FOR A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, ESPECIALLY IF YOU WERE FROM MOSCOW LIKE ME. One had just a few duties to carry on: learn how to march and salute at festivities, study your young pioneer’s vow, and know your enemies. The last one was very important. Our official enemy was the “decadent, capitalist West,” with its epicenter in the USA. I was lucky to grow up in the 80s—in the time my parents’ generation thankfully called “The Thaw.” To the Soviet mind, that meant “relief.” It was probably that sense of a new relaxation that made it possible for a t-shirt with the American flag and the word “Texas” on it to enter my suitcase one summer when I was leaving Moscow to visit my grandparents in Kirgizstan.

My grandparents had lived in Kirgizstan since my grandfather was transferred there for army service in the ’50s. My grandmother, born and raised in the Soviet Empire, was a dedicated and unyielding communist. She fled from hunger in the Ukraine under Stalin, only to fight for him in the Second World War and grieve for him when he finally died. The communist ideology had always been the fuel of his generation. Even in the time of “The Thaw,” grandpa would sing along with grandma in the car to all those lofty patriotic songs, while I was dying of shame from them in the backseat. Grandpa’s interest in politics made him well-informed about all bad news from the ‘Center of Evil.’ The treatment of blacks in the US, the horrors of the Vietnam War, obscene new dances with silly names like ‘rock-n-roll,’ free talk about the Western form of love called ‘sex,’ or assassinations among corrupt Western politicians all confirmed his belief that the Soviet Union really was the best place to be. Since I was a girl, talking with me about the news on TV was not appropriate. So, every time grandpa was watching TV, I was watching his face and reactions to the news to learn more about the world outside and him. Grandpa’s knowledge and competence earned him a strong reputation in our family. His word was law, and his decisions were unquestionable.

I remember one of his decisions. That summer I was spending my school vacation at their home in Kirgizstan like usual. My grandparents had lived in Kirgizstan since my grandfather was transferred there for army service in the ’50s. That summer evening, he was sitting at the table in our backyard waiting for his dinner and reading a newspaper. Tired from work, he stretched himself, smiled pleasurably and took a long breath trying to catch all those flavors coming from the kitchen. Finally, grandma set the table and called me from the street for dinner. I galloped in, excited from the daily adventures and unable to calm down. I just started swallowing everything from my plate when the strangely stern voice of my grandpa made me freeze for a second.

“Hey! My t-shirt!” I looked down and introduced my favorite piece of clothing. “Where did you get it?” said the same low, deep voice. “My parents’ decided to use the shortest possible form of answer since my mouth was pretty busy with potatoes.” “Hmm…”

“What’s wrong with that shirt?” my grandma intervened.

“Don’t you see the American flag on it? And—what’s that? It even says ‘Texas’ on it! Right there!”

“OH! Mmm… OK,” said grandma, peaceably considering the discussion to be over. I, for my part, saw the t-shirt already folded in my suitcase awaiting its flight back to Moscow in a couple of months.

“Take it off! I’m going to burn it in the oven,” grandpa stated. “No, wait! After dinner! And I’m going to call your parents this weekend. I just can’t believe it! The American flag and then ‘Texas’!” he returned to his dinner. Now, the discussion was over.

I was speechless. I loved that t-shirt. It fulfilled all most important requirements of coolness out there, in my world, where “The Thaw” had just begun. First, it had more than two colors. Second, it didn’t deform or lose those colors after you washed it. And third, it had those magnificent non-Cyrillic letters on it: the letters not everyone could read. Those letters were crucial. Not only did they represent the forbidden world of capitalism with its supposed decomposing prosperity, social inequity, and high unemployment, they also demonstrated how close the owner of the clothes with such letters was to the forbidden world. Being close to that world was the unwritten law of coolness. After all, the white stars and red stripes on it, the symbol of viciousness, made the final touch and provided one with an aura of political disobedience. Now, I was supposed to say goodbye to that precious world.

Soon after dinner, though, grandpa’s mood changed. The meal, the rest, the warm shower and some good news on TV did their magical work on him and he decided to reverse his judgment. Instead of burning the t-shirt, he decided to throw it under the bench in our sauna and use it as his foot towel. This idea of a daily symbolic humiliation of our enemy appeared to him as a much better way to express his patriotism. I didn’t care about patriotism and suffered every time I went to the sauna and saw the shirt hanging lonely and sadly under the bench. Then, I wished I had burned it. However, I didn’t resent my grandpa’s ruling on the t-shirt issue. After all, I felt as if we were from different planets and my twelve-year-old vocabulary wasn’t good enough to explain that new complexity to him.

Sixteen years later, I introduced my American fiancé and his dad to my family in Moscow. When I told this story at our new family dinner, grandpa laughed with us and shook his head as he couldn’t believe it. “Good Lord, how life can change,” he said.

Sixteen months ago, my life brought me to Texas. Here, I bought a new t-shirt for my grandpa with the word “Texas” on it and sent it to him. He, being used to the stiffness of military clothes, had been trying to get used to this strange piece of clothing with incomplete sleeves and without buttons for about one year. Then, his life changed for the last time. In his memories he used to criticize the new world of Russian democracy, but, thanks to some of my stories from here, he also learned that one can have a pretty nice life in the world of predatory capitalism. My t-shirt reminded him of all those changes that one life can make.
Ode to the Working Man

Nicholas Bennett

I revere your skin
As it glides through the fields,
That glistening sheen
Shines true of your health.

I adore that sweat as
it grants us asylum,
A somatic glaze
That stifles the heat.

I absorb your scent
as it speaks of hard labor,
exchanging free smiles
At the sign of our strength.

I’ve learned to see
in backlands and beauty,
An alternate thinking
That I will now praise.
AVA HAD OVERSLEPT AGAIN.

Her childhood plastic pony alarm clock flashed in bold, block red digital numbers 7:32. Ava needed to arrive at work by nine, no later. She knew she couldn’t be late, not for the fourth Monday in a row. Of course, Ava had amazing excuses for her constant tardiness and absences: food poisoning from undercooked shellfish, a broken axel after driving her pick-up into a ditch, and excruciatingly painful menstrual cramps. Normally, Ava wouldn’t complain to her boss about her cramps, but she needed a good excuse on that particular Monday because her boss had just found out his boyfriend was cheating on him with another man. The second she said “…and the cramps just kept coming and coming…” her boss stopped asking questions. She remembered his fierce blue eyes bulging and his mouth stretching into a huge ‘O’. But she didn’t dare arrive late again.

Ava forced her thin body up and out of the bed to the mirror. She checked both sides of her face, smiled to see her teeth and flipped her long natural blonde hair forward and back once. For her job she was expected to look her best, but she couldn’t go without her usual cup of Starbucks coffee. Every morning before work she got her caffeine fix from the siren in green. Besides, she didn’t really need to take a shower or put on makeup. Unlike some of the girls at the university, Ava didn’t damage her skin by using tanning beds. With a quick cherry-flavored lip-gloss application, she was ready to get to Starbucks and then to work.

Ava fumbled for her keys in her purse as she skipped to her apartment door to leave. She kicked the heavy door open and let it shut hard behind her. Her silky hair almost got caught. She touched the thick blonde strands with her hands and looked at the freshly cut ends, just to make sure. The next door neighbor’s kid lost his finger that way. Ava felt the kid deserved it after all the screaming and fussing and racket he made during his temper tantrums.
Sometimes he braided it. Sometimes he gave Jesus a brush Jesus’ long human-made hair with her mom’s brush. She still pictured her father as a teenager, going outside to the mailbox. Her dad even went so far as to chain Jesus’ feet to the mailbox post when she lived there. Her parents always had to make a “statement,” so they strategically placed the chains in the particular spot where it happened.

Once Ava arrived at her new food-full pickup truck in the parking lot, she noticed the truck bed’s cover lid had tilted a little too far to the left and her bed’s back door had bingo’d open. The back door never seemed to stay up, even with the chains. She was arriving with a few of her friends. When she got her next paycheck she’d get it fixed. She figured she could last a few more weeks with it broken; she’d change the lid enough to keep the wind beautifully, like a furry flag, every time the wheel spun closer and closer towards the drive-thru monitor.

Ava drove up and claimed her cup of caffeine that satisfied her addiction. She smelled the coffee in the cool air that evaporated from the ice cubes. The mixture of the cool ice and still-warm coffee soothed her throat all the way down. She felt the first sip settle nicely in her stomach.

“Dear Jesus let me be able to work on time,” she prayed aloud. She paused, halfway in prayer, to take a sip from her coffee. Ava looked at the cup, cocked her head to the side, and nodded in approval. She smirked at her lips and ran her tongue around the lid of the coffee. Her eyes quivered in satisfaction. “If you do, I’ll love you forever.”

As she pulled back onto the street, she heard the bed truck hinge open again. Ava cursed and shook her head, but she didn’t have time to fix it.

By the time she entered the highway she sang and begged along to Aretha Franklin, almost forgetting the back door was open. Ava noticed the cars around her getting out of the way of her truck and her truck. The smaller Mustangs and BMWs and other city cars swerved either to the left or to the right, but didn’t block her. At least they didn’t block her.

Ava yelled into the drive-thru, but Ava couldn’t stop or she’d be late. She peeled out of her apartment complex and onto the open road. Starbucks was only a few miles onto the open road andAVA cringed when she heard a hissing “pop” followed by the “thunk” of its small body against the metal.

“Thank you, Starbucks!” Everyone on the road seemed to have their cell phones to their ears. Ava took great interest in looking at their facial expressions and hand gestures from her rearview window. All seemed to look mad and disgusted. Ava thought she’d probably feel mad and disgusted too if she had to work in a cubicle. The radio clock flashed 8:31 A.M. as she pulled into the mall parking lot. Ava slammed the door shut and ran across the lot, happy Jesus had gotten her there on time. Ava wouldn’t get fired today. She raised her hands to heaven and whispered. “Thank you, Almighty One! R-E-S-P-E-C-T!” Ava yelled as she clutched her coffee in her right hand and the wheel of her truck. She stopped the wheel a few times as she sang. The ice cubes danced in unison to the beat. “Thank you, Starbucks!”

“Finally,” her boss grumbled. “Go clock in and start your shift!”

“Dear Jesus let me make it to work on time,” she prayed under her breath. “Jesus said let me make it to work on time.”

She continued to hum to Aretha Franklin as she drove up and claimed her cup of caffeine that satisfied her addiction. She smelled the coffee in the cool air that evaporated from the ice cubes. The mixture of the cool ice and still-warm coffee soothed her throat all the way down. She felt the first sip settle nicely in her stomach. She just happened to witness the event. For all the others it was a regular occurrence.

She sighed. At least Jesus had gotten her to work on time. With a jump and a push, Jesus disappeared into the depths of the hulking green metal trash compactor. She smirked her hands together afterwards, in an attempt to rid her hands of Squirrely’s blood. But she couldn’t rid herself off it. No matter how hard she tried.
We all know the problem: students drop, but we’re never quite sure why. My colleague, Ted McFerrin undertook this study under duress; three of his five classes had come under scrutiny by administration due to drop rates. Ted is a good teacher and is well-liked and has a good reputation. Therefore, part of the original thought was that the courses were troubled simply because of the nature of the offering: the course was Technical Writing, and several were coupled with Distance Learning. Still, Ted could feel an administrative push to find an answer and “fix it.” Thus, I thought it rather brave for Ted to see the research as a challenge rather than as a direct personal insult; we all have students drop.

Ted first approached the problem by looking to the experts, current research, and trends, assuming through statistics he might find a plug-in, pat answer. Becoming increasingly frustrated by the fact that Ted felt that the research continued to exhibit an attitude that was “certainly the professor must be the cause of the waning numbers,” Ted decided to do something rather radical and proactive. His question: why not ask the real students who drop the real reasons they drop and what can/could the college do/or have done to change/or alter that decision?

Research and Ted’s study revealed some overlapping conclusions; obviously, certain responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the faculty, advising, admissions, financial aid, and administration, and each group is quick to point the finger while ignoring the thumb that is pointed back at themselves: “Surely it must be the faculty.” “Surely it must be the students. Kids these days.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” “Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven’t been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know.” 

All could very well be true; the student may have dropped because of a lack of discipline on their part, or they may have disliked the instruction or instructor, or they may have changed majors, or a work schedule, or received misguided advising, or been dropped for lack of payment, or had boyfriend/girlfriend problems, classes too early, or classes too late, or the teacher might have been “mean.” Still, there was more. Mixed with this myriad of excuses or shortfalls, some of the evidence is contradictory, an oxymoron unto itself. Half the students want more attention while the other half want less; the instructor is not tough enough or the instructor is too difficult; or the teacher is too reactive or too proactive; or the teacher stays on the subject too much or the teacher strays from the subject, or the teacher is too personal or not personal enough. WHAT TO DO?
Thus, Ted took it upon himself to follow his classes for two years Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters targeting English 2311 (Technical Writing offered both as a traditional class and as distance learning), but he didn’t provide surveys telling the student what to think but rather left it wide open instead. Each semester, as one project, the students were asked to complete a roundtable discussion with tabulated results and honest answers as to why students had dropped classes in the past. Some of the results coincided but other results simply churn already muddy water, adding even more surprising reasons to an already unmanageable list.

One project, the students were asked to complete a roundtable discussion with tabulated results and honest answers as to why students had dropped classes in the past. Some of the results coincided but other results simply churn already muddy water, adding even more surprising reasons to an already unmanageable list. See which reasons you expect and ones you don’t and decide what we are to draw from this convoluted reaction to a seemingly simple question. The following are listed as A) most common answers Ted received to B) fairly common and C) on occasion as reasons determining dropping a class.

**A**
1. Need more on campus housing so it would be convenient to get to class
2. Offer classes when they are convenient to the student rather than convenient for the instructor or the institution
3. Cost of books and the lack of the use of those books
4. Filler Classes
5. Grant or Tuition/drop in order to avoid loss of grant money
6. Poor food service or lack of availability
7. Transportation issues including bus schedules, convenience of parking, space and distance in the parking lots from building
8. Not enough communication with the students via e-mail, telephone, or immediate response to questions and problems
9. Offer class locations more convenient to students

**B**
1. Not enough information on the professors profiles and ratings going in (myprofessor.com)
2. Students should lead orientation or at least have input into the orientation process
3. Lack of access (again immediate) to resource information: schedules, times, etc...
4. Not enough assessment before being placed in classes (I couldn’t believe this one)
5. Students should be held more accountable for attendance and assignments

**C**
1. Teachers don’t vary teaching style enough/too much lecture/stray from the topic
2. Teachers expect students to change and adapt while students expect teachers to motivate
3. Instructors need more supervision and should be held accountable
4. Lecturers should have English language skills
5. Establish and adhere to a strict attendance policy
6. Students should be held accountable

Thus the answer is wonderfully opaque; it boils down to the reason I don’t like topics that become blame games. There is no certain answer because humanity and discipline and desire and age and responsibility and expectations and world events and hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes and health issues and the economy and personal life choices and frustration and moves and job opportunities and simple human will or lack of will all become factors. Perhaps the easiest comparison is the same as asking why one marriage works as opposed to one that doesn’t. Somewhere is a mutual respect; somewhere is a two-way passion for the content; somewhere is a two-way willingness to succeed rather than a determination to fail; somewhere is a willingness to compromise but a determination never to settle.

Therefore, Ted and I decided that the real reason students drop — Well, it depends … It is like the irony of cancer and who it chooses as its bedmate: we have some idea, but it certainly would not hurt to treat each case individually and with a respect for the individual as an individual rather than as the disease. In fact, Ted said one way he improved his drop rate dramatically was simply to tell the students during the first class day, “Talk to me before you drop the class. There may be something we can do.” Then, he added, laughing, “but some students … they need to drop.” Some do, and that’s another problem and another paper.