

Outside the Box

From the Editors:

Outside the Box features Creative Nonfiction stories written by our students. Creative Nonfiction is writing that is factually true but reads like fiction. Creative Nonfiction, also known as literary journalism, is a relatively new genre in the field of writing, combining the best skills of the journalist, the poet and the fiction writer. Creative Nonfiction isn't a twist of the truth; it is taking the truth and treating it in a creative, thought-provoking and entertaining manner.

Baby-Think-It-Over

By: Rebecca Jeskey

Morning, and the obnoxious drone of an alarm clock fills the room. A 14-year-old girl dresses for school, brushes her hair and grabs everything she needs before leaving the house: her lunch, her backpack, her gym bag and her daughter.

For one week, this girl is a mom. Only two days into parenthood, the girl already tosses her daughter, Madison, carelessly into the baby carrier without strapping her in. On the way to the bus stop, the baby falls out and tumbles onto the pavement. The bus nears and the girl hurriedly snatches up Madison by her left leg.

None of this is because the girl is a bad mother. Madison isn't a baby at all, but a device made to protect girls that are too young for pregnancy and too old for dolls.

BIRTH

A company named RealityWorks, previously known as Baby-Think-It-Over, Inc., conceived Madison as a teenage pregnancy prevention strategy. This project was perfect for Shaler Area, a school district that thrived on protecting their students. Examples of the ridiculous measures they took include are, but are not limited to: teachers handing out rape whistles to every female before senior prom, and the district banning dodge ball from gym classes after terming it barbaric. Shaler's Life Cycles class used the Baby-Think-It-Over concept as another tactic to shield a younger generation from what was beyond their control.

FAMILY NAMES: THE QUALITY OF YOUR NAME DEPENDS ON HOW MUCH YOUR MOTHER HATES YOU

All of the young women who adopted Madison changed her name more than they ever changed her diaper.

The naming process had little to do with family heritage or tradition. Generally, the adopters chose common names at random. One mother called her Amanda. Another referred to her as Julie. Most called her A Pain In The Ass. And one mother decided on the name Sausage.

Sausage Mom was one of the select mothers that didn't believe in the safety of car seats, one that made a hobby out of punting Madison across streets and often threatened to amputate her newly adopted daughter limb by limb. Maybe Sausage Mom really just liked sausage. But her ac-



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tions and history of abuse suggested that all she really wanted to do was watch her baby fry in a pan. She viewed Madison as most others did: numb to touch, incapable of feeling.

FAMILY GENETICS: YOU LOOK UNFORTUNATE DE- SPITE WHO YOUR MOM IS

As both a doll and a baby, Madison was ugly. Her toes curled and her fists clenched like she'd swing back at her abusive mothers if her arms had allowed it. Her half-open eyelids made one wonder if Gerber sold reefer-flavored baby food (or at least made the stoners wonder), and her facial expression gave the impression that she was persistently angry. Chubby cheeks didn't define her face. Her skin wasn't soft or warm like a human's;

she was just a pile of cold plastic.

And she was useless. Her arms and legs, immobile. Her eyes incapable of blinking. Her face did not move or change shape whenever she cried her muffled, torturous cry. Her coos were creepy and unnatural. She always waited until there was complete silence to voice her deranged childish giggle: "Aaaaheheh."

FAMILY REPUTATION: YOUR MOTHER IS A SLUT

Friday night at Ross Park Mall. Heads turned to stare at the gangly 14-year-old holding Madison in one arm, searching through racks of clothes with the other. An old woman who could have been Danny DeVito's twin sister strolled past with her walker. She scowled, making every wrinkle engraved in her sandpaper

skin more prominent. Ms. DeVito muttered to herself, "Look at that little slut. She should be ashamed of herself. That baby doesn't even have a hat!"

KEY EVENTS: KIDNAPPING AND ABANDONMENT

Kidnappers aren't always shady characters lurking the playground. Abductors can be anyone, even special-education students named Brenna.

A clutter of eighth and ninth graders filed out of classrooms after lunch, making the hallways hectic and crowded. Brenna took this opportunity to sidle next to one of Madison's mothers and grab the baby from her arms.

"MINE!" Brenna shouted, cradling Madison and running through the hallway like a football player sprinting to

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PRISONERS OF WAR

By: Cadwell Turnbull

To talk about War you need an anecdote to offer a glimpse into his eccentric personality. Sometimes a story is the only way to shed light into the personality of greatness; a simple list of contradictory qualities and traits won't do. No relationships between contradictions can be found in a list. In order to offer a really good glimpse into the being, the enigma, named War, you need a story that sums him up in interesting and colorful detail.

And here is that story...

A thick mushroom cloud extends far into the sky with a peculiar purple tint. With the destructive force of 20,000 tons of TNT, whole cities are reduced to almost nothing.

People are crushed between buildings or pushed against walls, compressing skin and bone into dust. The mixture of cold and hot air creates unprecedented firestorms, a living furnace bent on incinerating human flesh.

Later, a woman sits in a hospital, dying. There is a mass of swollen burnt flesh where her face used to be, the smell of scorched epidermis like the taste of copper in her pulverized mouth. She lives for another two months.

War was always insatiable...and destructive, but on August 6th and 9th of the 45th year of the twentieth century, War outdid even himself.

The reasons are contested, but whatever the reason, War was so angry with the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that he dropped atomic bombs on the two islands, reduced 200,000 people, mostly civilians, into a memory easily dismissed. To this day, inhabitants of those islands still suffer from illness due to the radioactive exposure released by those bombs.

But that's War for you, unaware of the repercussions of his impulsive actions.

If you were to ask War why he did it, he would give you various reasons. One would probably be that it was a favor to the Americans in order to redeem himself for the events that took place at Pearl Harbor; War has no lasting allegiances.

He would probably say that he was trying to show human beings how destructive he could be, perhaps to scare them into not calling him so often. But this was apparently ineffective, since it did nothing to curb humanity's appetite for War.

like moss on wood, trillions of dollars in damages, explosions that leave handless, legless, headless corpses, cannons blasting away body parts, bullets ripping through flesh, shot down planes, debt, post traumatic stress disorders, and those poor people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forming permanent shadows with their ash: yet we can't seem to let ourselves get rid of the insatiable bastard. There is just

your favorite shoes and attack your cat (you were stupid enough to think they could live together) and then lick your face. The fact that it licks your face seems to be enough for you to keep it and forget the fact that it is a menace. It is your fault after all; you didn't train the damn thing.

It may be obvious by now that the person that is writing this hates War and thinks that he is an overrated idiot that

er, that War is popular and has won a big place in the collective conscience, like fast food binges, and the Hello Kitty epidemic. We must pay homage to him because it would be impossible to see a world without him. (*The dog just pissed on your carpet...he licks your face, and you smile*)

What would a world like that be like without his impressive ability to make us numb to horrors? We would probably be bored and be more inclined to idle gossip. Or maybe we would have found the cure to cancer already.

Who knows?

Perhaps we would have found Peace—the mythological fugitive that eludes capture.

Some people say that War is the only one who can find Peace. But this may be a sham. We have known the piece of shit for a long time, and he still has no clue where she is. Most likely she is with the Sami people or on YouTube.

The appeal of War must lie in our intimate and long history with it, like an old couple that stays together more for the familiarity than for the pleasure. He is a constant in our ever-changing universe, the builder and destroyer of our civilizations and our sanity, the ever-reaching and all-encompassing divinity of violence and death, a way to settle difficult disputes.

So let us pay praise to our friend, our confidant, our predecessor and likely descendant. Let us rejoice in the legacy that we have built and that we will forever be known for, to ourselves, and the space aliens we don't know about. Let us take pride in the reasons we have made to justify his existence, even as he rapes and pillages us in his often extravagant ways.

Let us tell the 200,000 people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose dust has spread across the earth, and the modest approximately 75,000 Sami people, who herd reindeer, that War is necessary and still is, because we are still so silly that we cannot agree on anything. And because of this we must compete with each other, drag each other through the mud, exploit, oppress, imprison, murder, and destroy each other—all in the name of that pompous asshole.

And then when we are done, let us call upon him again, or run skinless through the streets until we can't take it anymore. And since running skinless isn't really an option, the only real likely choice is to summon him again for vengeance, or to fight terrorists, or to prevent atomic bombs from ever being used again, or to bring Peace, wherever she is.

Because though we hate the sick bastard, we can't live without him, and that fact is merrily sprinkled all across our beautiful and civilized modern society equipped with realities shows such as *I Love Money* (so does War), rich people with golden toilets and poor people in their sprawling shanty towns, a consortium of democratic and dictatorial nations, and unlimited text messaging.

We have come so far and it would be a profoundly stupid thing to give up on the poor bastard now. There is too much at stake. The irony...



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War isn't picky about his dance partners. Here, PFC Robert Roper embraces an unidentified Japanese woman.

too much at stake. The irony.

But think of all the good he has done. He has overthrown oppressive regimes, united people, created various technical advances, and, on occasion, boosted economies. It would leave a slightly less bitter taste in the mouth if War wasn't also responsible for bringing those oppres-

sive regimes into power, uniting people against other people, creating technical advances that more effectively extinguish life, and, on occasion, causing the boosted economy to collapse in on itself.

Nevertheless, we must love him, because he is still here, making us laugh with his dark humor, and cry with his often merciless cruelty.

In a sense War is reminiscent of untrained dogs that pee everywhere and eat

we only keep around because we are also idiots. But isn't that an unfair conclusion for the writer to make? Isn't War inherent, like chewing, or the urge to find people to have sex with? For us to get rid of War would be like trying to live without skin... wouldn't it?

Well, the Sami people would probably say no. According to the Smithsonian's book entitled *Human*, these indigenous nomadic people of Lapland are said to be the only known culture to have never met War. And they still have their skin. The absence of War, it seems, does not seem to cause them any irritation at all—considering the fact that they were able to live without him for so long—and they are actually regarded as quite Peace-loving. (*Who is this Peace person?*)

So maybe it is just that we want War, and not that we need it. Or perhaps the Sami people did meet War and just didn't tell anyone. I guess it is a matter of which is more likely.

Nonetheless, it is without a doubt, regardless of the feelings of the biased writ-

“But that's War for you, unaware of the repercussions of his impulsive actions.”

Some would say that War simply did it to show how powerful he now was by showing that he could obliterate cities in a matter of seconds, a new record. Or he simply did it to add to his list of atrocities.

But no *real* reason is needed for War. War simply *does* things. And apparently this impulsivity makes him really attractive.

Ours is a love-hate relationship it seems. Dry blood on city walls, piles of dead bodies at a labor camp, turning green

dan

By: Angela Elnyczky

“Lucille!” my grandfather’s voice – slurred from excessive use of painkillers and gruff from years of cigar smoking – bellowed through the downstairs. “Call the police!”

“Be quiet! I’m already on the phone!” Lucille’s, my grandmother, voice was shrill with a sense of urgency.

I was almost 4 years old and I can still remember the tricycle I had gotten for Christmas that year. My hands were tight around the plastic purple handlebars. My mother, then 21 years old, raced from her room to follow the sound of the commotion and I followed suit, peddling behind her. The blue wheels moved easily across the shaggy carpet of the living room. The sound of the television blaring nonsensical commercial jingles drowned out the sounds of further voices, made what else my grandfather was saying indistinguishable.

My mother crossed the kitchen threshold and rushed toward the door; I stopped peddling. The kitchen slanted, leaned as if it was going to fall away from the rest of the house. I pulled my feet from the pedals and let the tricycle glide over the linoleum floor. Gravity took over and it rolled on its own, colliding with the cabinets directly ahead. I planted both feet, taking small steps backwards to guide the tricycle back to the threshold.

I looked to my mother before pulling my feet up from the floor to repeat the ride down. I asked, “Who’s that?” My natural curiosity always drove me to ask questions. My first words were a question.

My mother and grandfather’s voices mixed; I couldn’t tell which one had answered. Outside. Truck. Dan. Police. I didn’t know the details at the time, but I knew that Dan was the name of my biological father. With a world that was only as big as my own backyard, that was the only Dan they could possibly mean.

I climbed off the plastic purple seat of the tricycle and crawled across the kitchen towards the front door. I knelt behind my grandfather, trying to look out

the door from between his legs. I wanted to see this Dan’s face. As I crawled closer, the collar of my shirt began to gently choke me the way it would a dog when it tries the length of its leash. My mother grabbed hold of the back of my shirt, using it to pull me back every time I was too close. I tried again, the way innocent pups do, and all I could see was the bed of a dark truck before the leash was taut again and my mother pulled me back.

I tested this boundary a few more times – every time with the same result. Whenever the police officer arrived, I climbed back on my tricycle and watched him. I remember his calm demeanor, his round face, the handlebar mustache. I climbed back on the bicycle, walking it back to the threshold again and releasing it – another

“ Even if I found him, what would I say? Introduce myself? Hope that he would crack a joke to make me laugh -- and as the laughter subsided I’d tell him to go to hell? ”

mild collision.

That day was the closest I had come to meeting Dan, my biological father. My mother said that the whole ordeal only lasted a few minutes, that it was hardly a big deal. All that Dan had said, she said, was that he wanted to talk to her. Whatever his intentions were that night, he didn’t make another attempt again. Each day presents a new opportunity to take an action, to own up to a responsibility or to confront a fear. Taking no action is still a choice.

As I grew up, I only knew a few things about my biological father -- the color of his hair, his eyes and that his name was Dan. I imagined him to be tall with a medium build with longer, straight dirty blonde hair. He drove a truck, wore flannel jackets and torn jeans and worked with his hands. I was told that I shared his blue eyes, but I never imagined them. He didn’t have a face.

By the time I was a teenager, I was angry. I discovered that I have two younger

half-sisters and somewhere, there is a picture of us all together as young children. If they shared my curiosity and asked who was in the picture, what would he tell them? Would he say that it was a cousin they never met, or would he tell his version of the story? I used to think that he would have always chosen the former, but I know I’ll never be sure.

I wanted to be, though, and with the help of a friend in high school I started to try to find him. According to countless Internet searches, there are hundreds of men named Dan Herman (as well as Herrman and Hermann and Herrmann) surrounding the Pittsburgh area. One heads a family-affairs law firm with his wife in New Castle; another has a petty police record of drug and alcohol charges.

My friend lost interest sorting through it all and I followed suit shortly after. Even if I found him, what would I say? Introduce myself? Hope that he would crack a joke to make me laugh -- and as the laughter subsided I’d tell him to go to hell? I thought I was angry, but I really wasn’t sure just how I felt.

More than anything, though, I wanted to see his face. My family had often told me the many physical characteristics I inherited from him, but I needed to see the proof for myself. Shortly before my 21st birthday, my mother showed me the pictures she had collected from the time that they were together. At first I was taken aback by how slight his build was – in one picture he wore a half-shirt, an unfortunate part of late-1980s fashion, that showed his hipbones protruding, his jeans nearly falling off them. His hair was long, but it wasn’t straight. It was wavy, slightly frizzed, and made him look like a blonde version of Jim Morrison. He had

a five o’clock shadow and dirty Nike high-tops. A cigarette burned away between his fingers, the blue-gray smoke frozen in time. His eyes are blue, but I can’t see them. Even when they aren’t covered with his oversized sunglasses, the grainy photography makes them look black.

Maybe the day that Dan showed up in his truck at my front door he had the best intentions in mind. Maybe my grandfather overreacted and Dan didn’t want to have to deal with it. After all, he was still a teenager, a dirtily handsome man and had his entire life ahead of him -- but every day presents a different opportunity, another choice to be made. Taking no action is a choice. No matter what choice is taken, eventually, responsibility only lies in ourselves and the choices we’ve made. I don’t blame Dan for the wrong decisions I’ve made, the reckless actions I’ve taken or the times I’ve lashed out. In the end, I’m the one responsible for every choice I’ve made. He is responsible for his as you are for yours.

If life played out like a cheesy movie and happy endings were a tangible thing, the ending to this story -- of not knowing -- would be several years in the future: my wedding day. Before I emerge from the dressing room, there would be a knock on the door. I would open it to find a clean-shaven man approaching his 50s dressed in a tuxedo with blue eyes and kempt dirty blonde hair. He’d awkwardly introduce himself and tell about how he had read a name or saw a picture in a newspaper and how he came here. Then there would be a long lull in conversation and he would be the one to break it.

“I’m sorry. Maybe we could, you know, get to know each other sometime,” his voice would be gruff, a bit repressed.

“I’d like that,” I’d respond, genuine, perhaps even smiling.

There would be another long pause before I would say something about having to go. “Would you like me to walk you down the aisle?” Dan would say.

“No thanks,” I’d reply, “I can do it myself.”

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score a touchdown.

Being the little bitch she was, Madison didn’t cry in the arms of her kidnapper, but screamed her head off when Brenna safely handed her back to her mom.

The next day, that same mother had to stay after school for a meeting. Since Madison was an inconvenience, with her random crying fits at the most inappropriate times, she left her in the gym locker room until the meeting was over. A half hour later, she returned and discovered Madison was missing.

“Have you seen a Life Cycles baby lying around?” she asked everyone as she frantically searched for Madison. “My mom is going to kill me if I lost her. We’ll have to pay \$200 to replace her.

“Near the point of giving up, she miraculously found Madison in one of the locker room showers. Luckily the water wasn’t turned on. And like always, luckily Madison wasn’t real.

She exhaled a breath of relief, looked

at the baby and said, “I. Hate. You.”

FAMILY MOTTO: SCREW IT

Pain In The Ass Madison made a habit of crying every morning between the ungodly hours of 2:00 and 4:00 A.M. Placing a red key in the slot in her back and holding it for 30 minutes was the only way to shut her up. The computer inside of her body monitored how long she cried before her mothers tended to her.

Every night was the same thing: her eerie computerized “Whaaa” woke up her mothers and they stumbled out of bed. Too lazy to turn the light on, they sat in the darkness of their rooms and violently turned the key. Their eyes fluttered. They could never stay awake long enough. The key slipped as they nodded off and Madison started screaming, waking them up once more.

“Ughhhh, screw it,” they moaned, shoving Madison into a closet and putting a

pillow over their heads to fall back to sleep.

In the mornings when they walked to class, they often accidentally bumped Madison’s head into lockers. “Well, screw it. She can’t feel it,” they told their friends.

Even Mrs. Garman, the Life Cycles teacher, eventually learned to just say screw it.

“But Mrs. Garman, I had a track meet,” girls complained.

“Your baby is still your responsibility. You wouldn’t let a real child cry for two hours.”

“But that’s not fair. I can’t help it that I have other things to do.”

“Okay. Okay,” Mrs. Garman said, feeling compassionate like she always did for her students. “I understand. I’m sure I can offer extra credit,” her voice echoing the softness of Madison’s quiet coo.

The baby cried for two hours. So what? The mother had a track meet. It’s not an actual child. So screw it.

That was the basis of Madison’s existence: no one cared about her because she

wasn’t real. She was a doll set out to teach teenagers about motherhood, but all she really did was demonstrate inconvenience. RealityWorks and Shaler expected her to accomplish an impossible task: to make the unreal somehow real. To teach experience without any experience at all.

And she prevented nothing.

Because life is not preventable.

Sausage Mom actually became pregnant and dropped out of school two years after she passed Life Cycles. Soon-to-be moms impregnated the high school’s hallways. Kids found other ways to hurt themselves without the so-called barbaric sport of dodge ball, and rape whistles did little to prevent bad things from happening after prom.

These incidents are not failures on Shaler’s behalf. They are not ironic twists of fate. They are things that simply happen, no matter how padded the playground is, no matter how realistic a doll’s features are, and no matter how hard people fight to prevent them.

Lost: American Dreams

Two Stories of Men Drinking Away their American Dreams

Walt's American Dream

By: Dan Pasqua

Walt lives in a house, but it is nearly impossible to imagine him in any kind of structured, domestic setting.

His appearance is that of a stereotypical drifter: the tight jeans with rips, stains, burn marks, and oil patches, along with a plaid shirt that looks like was dragged through dust and half-heartedly brushed off. He is skinny and resembles someone who may eat once every few days. When asked if he knew Walt, a friend's dad replied, "Ah, f---in' old junkie."

His thin, scraggly brown-turning-to-gray hair goes in many directions, and if it went straight back, it would probably reach his shoulders. The dirty, faded hat he wears covers up the beginning of a bald spot.

Walt looks like he may have tan skin, but it kind of resembles a dirt color, so it's hard to tell, and his 5 o'clock shadow blends in perfectly. He has most of his teeth.

Walt is a man who repeatedly moons authority and society, and probably has for as long as he's been around. His physical appearance is proof that he doesn't have a care in the world what anybody thinks about him; he doesn't have to appear sexy and well-groomed for anyone. To have the love of his Old Lady and his dog is enough. He doesn't care if his clothes are worn and dirty, or if his dog is held hostage by an old, severed television cable.

All that matters to Walt is enjoying what makes him happy in life: the beauty of nature, old blues music, his Old Lady, his beer, his weed, his dog, The Cliff, and the company of strangers.

There is a cliff overlooking Main Street in Sharpsburg. The Cliff is home to a spectacular view. Looking past the trees to the left finds the Allegheny River winding its way alongside Sharpsburg until it flows out of sight. Off to the right is a view of the river racing traffic on Route 28 towards Pittsburgh, where the legendary inclines are visible on the horizon, and also a clock tower with giant, red digital numbers. It is so far away that with even slightly bad vision it is impossible to read.

As beautiful a place as The Cliff can be, it is also a sad place, destroyed by those who have no concern for its beauty, but only use it as a place to hide out. The Cliff is crawling with potheads and junior high drunks who roll their shredded cases of American Light down the hill until they stop on the next level. After the kids roll their cases down, they try to throw their empty beer cans into the remnants of

the cases. Since the hillside is a good enough home for empty beer cans and cases, it also becomes the home of empty cigarette packs, fast food bags, liquor bottles, and other trash.

Walt loves the cliff more than anybody else who goes there. He goes for the beauty of it; it never gets old to him. His house is visible from The Cliff, and he claims to have a telescope at his house pointing up at The Cliff so he can see when people are up there or when it is vacant. It is a place he goes to relax with a cooler full of cheap beer, a couple bowls of weed, and his dog Buddy.



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Buddy is a small dog with a coat similar to a person's hair after they haven't bathed in about a week; it's greasy. Around Buddy's neck is a cable, about six feet long, from an old broken television. When he isn't sniffing around the rock or sneaking away from Walt and climbing up the path, he stands on the edge of the cliff barking. "Look! He's the Lion King, man," Walt yells. "That's right Buddy! Let the world know this is your house!" He throws back his head and barks in unison with Buddy.

In a serious moment, Walt makes clear his disdain for people who use the cliff as their own personal, backyard dump: "I brought up a trash can so people wouldn't throw their shit on the hillside, but you know what they f---in' did? They waited until it was full and threw it over the hillside, the dumb bastards."

It's not hard to imagine that Walt doesn't really fit well into the so-called norm. On top of his homeless appearance and fondness of alcohol and weed, he is a loudmouth who swears more than a fleet of sailors. He tells stories of run-ins with the law, how he can't stand the district magistrate, or really the whole structure of our society. "The system is f---ed up man, I'm tellin' ya. The shit they do to get money is unreal. They don't give a damn

See WALT, page 6

NECTAR FROM THE GODS

By: Amanda Shaffer

Modern life, too, is often a mechanical oppression and liquor is the only mechanical relief.

— Ernest Hemmingway

Listening to Josh talk is like hitting a deer with your car. For the five seconds before the nightmare happens, you want to stop, go around it, and somehow get away from it. But you can't. So you brace yourself and get ready for the murder.

When Josh stops speaking for a few brief moments, the acoustic sounds of Hank the III emerge from the living

room. On the right side of the comic is the second scene. Josh and Captain Spaulding still face each other. The beer is no longer in Josh's mouth but resting in his hand. Josh tells Captain Spaulding, "I think you should shut the &*@! up."

Josh takes a sip from the can that reads Bud Light. "I'll kill you," he says as his eyes immerse themselves into the depths of the digital clock. It's eight o'clock. That only leaves five more hours of hardcore drinking.

* * *

A slight pause is in the air as Josh drinks the last of his unemployment money downward from his mouth, to his esophagus, and to his stomach. A splash of the light hops trickles onto his short sleeved black shirt, and it creates a sensuous smell in the kitchen. It trickles onto the faded words that read, "Have a crap-pie day."

"I love that the government pays me to sit around and drink all day. I love living off your money. What else would I be doing? Trying to find a job!? Hah," Josh says as he squints his sleep-deprived eyes.

An overbearing odor steams from Josh's body. It has been a few days since soap has caressed his skin. He doesn't care what you think of his odor. Josh doesn't care what you think — period. Honestly, he would rather plunge himself into the depths of hell than listen to you talk. Josh is nothing special though. He's just a guy living in your modern American culture. He's just a guy looking for his American dream.

* * *

Josh doesn't know Henry David Thoreau, which wouldn't startle a fly. But, Josh would find it irresistible to embark on the Thoreauvian journey at Walden Pond — in the woods, in a shack, by a pond, no technology, a hammer, and with no other bodies to bother him.

In fact, their appearance certainly would look similar. Both around 5'11" and 170 pounds. Straight-leg blue jeans, mangled work boots, a blue flannel shirt with thermal lining, scruffy beard, lanky but rough, and the same hunched back from either sitting too long or chopping wood too long. However, Josh wouldn't write about human existence. He would sit on the porch in solitude, like he does during the winds of spring and summer, and watch life pass him by.

When asked if he knew of Thoreau, Josh replied, "Did he kill anybody?"

Josh lives in the country now, which to some is more than enough solitude. Bulger is serene. The Romantics would have had harmonious, passionate seizures over Bulger. It is an epic painting waiting for a zealous hand.

See NECTAR, page 7

room. Hank softly sings *I'm drinkin' some George Jones, and a little bit of Coe and gradually strings in the background. Haggard's easin' my misery and Waylon's keepin' me from home.* "The nectar from the gods tastes pretty fine today," Josh says as he looks at the picture hanging on smoke colored wall of his house in the rural area of Bulger, Pennsylvania. *I'm here gettin' wasted, here with my country heroes.*

In fact, the picture is really just a comic printed from a refurbished computer on tattered printer paper. The comic makes Josh smile. "Hell yea, my dad gave that picture to me for Christmas," Josh exclaims as if he's trying to scream and talk simultaneously. His fingers brush themselves over his russet beard, as he tries to get crumbs out. "It's my memento. Wait. I think I mean motto," he shrugs. "Screw it."

The picture is mounted somewhat crookedly in a too-large chestnut frame. The picture sits closer to the bottom right of the frame, which leaves a maze of cardboard to gaze at.

The comic has two scenes in their own peaceful boxes. In the left box, there are two stick figures facing each other. One stick figure, who is a replica of Josh, drinks a beer. The second stick figure, Captain Spaulding, is on the right. Captain Spaulding tells Josh in a word balloon, "You should stop drinking."

PLAYING WITH FIRE

By: Susan Snow

Welding. What springs to mind? Flying sparks, intense heat. Big guys in coveralls, shielded like astronauts. Steel. The foundation for bridges, for buildings, for cars, for innumerable things in daily life, well, at least the ones that haven't been replaced with plastic.

To say welding is a foreign land to me would be a grand understatement. For a woman who gets a Phillips and regular screwdriver confused, welding with a torch burning at 5500 degrees is a great idea.

Why, then, am I sitting on an overturned bucket outside the garage, with a torch in my hand and assorted pieces of steel in front of me?

Welding is not something I ever had a

desire to do. When my husband, Ken, offered to teach me, I was hesitant, judging by the burn scars — hundreds of them — on his arms from sparks and molten pieces of metals. But I found myself agreeing to do it. I figured, barring some disaster like burning down the garage, I would get a glimpse into what his work was like.

I feel unprotected in jeans, a t-shirt, and New Balance sneakers. A bandana pushed down to my eyebrows keeps my hair back and acts as a buffer against the face shield. A pair of work gloves—a size too big—completes my get-up. The tinted shield feels weird since I never even wear sunglasses.

Here's a quick explanation of the technical process of oxy-fuel welding, as opposed to the ancient art of forge welding — hammering the plates together

— or arc welding, which uses electricity. Oxy-fuel is a little safer, there's less flash and less spatter. In this case, we're using acetylene as the fuel so it's called...Oxy-acetylene welding. Two valved tanks on a cart are connected to the torch with a set of hoses, green for oxygen, red for acetylene. The torch has valves for each, and at the end of the torch is the tip, bent at an angle, where the action is. Igniting the acetylene (C₂H₂) and then mixing in the oxygen makes it hot enough to weld with.

Ken goes over what I'm supposed to do, smoothly demonstrating everything. He makes a good instructor, confidence coming from years of experience. He's patient, answering all my questions, and questions within questions. If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't even attempt this, but I trust him. So I'm going to try to put four little pieces of steel together.

"Hold it like a pen," he says. But the torch is a lot heavier than a pen. Once we adjust the tip and wind the hoses around me and over my shoulder, it takes some pressure off.

Ken won't just hand it to me, I have to do it all myself. I open the fuel valve and light it clumsily with the striker. A flame shoots out, flapping like a flag in a breeze and sends off a burning confetti of carbon bits. By adding some oxygen the flame turns bluish. The outer flame surrounds a small bright cone, where the heat is the most intense. Of course, welding is like cooking — too long or too hot, and it's burnt, too fast or too cool, and it's not thoroughly done.

Without the shield, you can't see anything but a blurry white mass of sparks, painful to look at. Shield down, it's a different world. The tip of the cone, barely touching the metal, starts the heating process. By making tiny circles evenly between the two plates, the steel slowly

turns to a glow and begins to liquefy, creating a mirrored puddle.

It's time to travel with the circles, inch down the seam in ever slowness, creating a bond between the plates. It's transfixing to watch this happen — like a kid chasing lightning bugs, only the glow is steady. I'm concentrating fiercely on remaining even and straight, and feel relieved to reach the end. Proudly looking it over as it cools, I see that though it isn't pretty, the plates are fused.

The next set is more complicated. I try to lay down filler metal between two pieces of steel. It's fine if Ken helps guide my hand, but on my own I can't get into the rocking rhythm he described. Heat the base plate, dab the rod. Heat, dab, heat, dab. But the rod keeps getting stuck and I have to melt it off. I stop, flicking up the shield in frustration. The still-hot metal has burnt black globs where I messed it up. Oh well. Like anything, it takes practice.

I see now how some might say welding is romantic, in a way. It's dirty and physical. It's fiery, it's attractively dangerous, it's merging separate pieces into one. As Ken calls it — a marriage.

And undoubtedly, it's good for ours. The few stolen hours to do this gives us alone time that's hard to come by with kids. It's better than marriage counseling, we're at ease with each other, bonding over a shared experience.

Plus, it gives me a new respect for his job; it's more than just a paycheck. I never realized welding was so intense, and required so much steadiness and precision. My head hurts from the shield strapped too tight, my eyes are watering from focusing on such a small spot, and my hand feels a little numb. I wouldn't want to do this for eight hours a day. Sure, it was fun, but I won't be putting down the pen for the torch any time soon.



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The writer as she gears up to weld a corner joint

Xui Li Liu

By: Moriah Jamrom

Anny stands in front of the mirror in the dimly lit public restroom of Tokyo Sushi Buffet. She wears all black: black pants; a black polo on top of a black long sleeved shirt; black socks; black tennis shoes, as if she were attending a funeral for all of the dead fish her husband Frank filets and rolls into Philadelphia rolls at the sushi bar. She leans over the sink, bringing her round, friendly face closer to the reflective glass. She applies lotion to her naked olive skin, paying special attention to the lines around her eyes and mouth. The lotion smells like old ladies; the very thing she is trying to avoid becoming.

"I'm starting to look very old," she says with a sigh. "Guess how much this costs," she says, shaking the bottle of lotion and carefully squirting a tiny bit more into her hand. "It's only \$15. Not very expensive, but it works."

Anny is a citizen of China, living and working in the United States of America. She values all the things Americans value, yet she has to be tested and charged a fee to become a citizen. Anny is the human

side of immigration in America.

Standing at five feet tall, Anny is thin, but strong. She exercises during her breaks in the party room, doing lunges and squats among the crimson cloth covered tables on the hard wood floors. She is 39 years old. Her short, dark hair lays flat on her neck. She wears red lipstick. She drinks hot tea in a glass and red wine from a box. She brushes her teeth in the sink in the servers' station. She sings karaoke in Mandarin Chinese. She warms sticky rice in the microwave at the bar and hides there to eat it.

Anny works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which (as one can especially conclude on a busy Friday night at Tokyo Sushi Buffet) has a surprisingly large Asian community. She is a hostess, head waitress, and manager one day a week. She busses tables, serves drinks, cleans thoroughly, and makes the servers' schedule weekly. Every patron assumes she is Japanese, even though her Chinese round, flat features, cheek bones and accent prove otherwise.

Anny is not her real name, of course. She chose the title from an imaginary list of other very common and very Americanized names such as Cindy, Jen, Wendy,

Crystal, Kate or Sue. Her real name is Xue Li Liu, which she says is common in China. Anny is easier for Americans to remember.

The Kimlan Foods Company sends a free box of fortune cookies with the restaurant's dark soy sauce order. These free cookies cannot be served to custom-

you get what you give. Anny squints her eyes with deep thought. With her mouth full of vanilla flavored cookie, she replies, "This is very true."

Frank and Anny moved from the Fujian Province in China to New York in 2000 to commute to New Jersey for work. They have lived in America using green

“Fortune cookies are neither Japanese nor Chinese. The kind of fortune cookies Kimlan sends were invented in San Francisco.”

ers and are considered too Chinese to be handed out for dessert in a Japanese restaurant. Fortune cookies are neither Japanese nor Chinese. The kind of fortune cookies Kimlan sends were invented in San Francisco. Anny eats one every day. Today her fortune reads, "In life, one can expect to receive what they offer to others." Anny asks an American co-worker to translate the so-called Chinese proverb. Like the New Radicals song, her co-worker explains, the fortune means that

cards for nine years. Last year, Frank was offered the position as head sushi chef for Tokyo Sushi Buffet. Anny applied and was hired soon after.

Before moving from China, Anny's friends told her that if you work hard, it is easy to make money in America. "I came here to have a good future," Anny says. "A lot of people move here from my home town. Before I came here, it was very difficult to make money. A lot of companies were not doing well, like now in America.

See XUI LI LU, next page

Suzanne Sommers

Life lessons learned from a car with a personality all her own

By: Ellen Horn

If Suzanne smoked cigarettes they would be Pall Malls. Looking at her family-sedan-like appearance, you wouldn't get the vibe that she would be badass enough to handle the toxic fumes. What isn't obvious to the eye is that Suzanne is a fighter. Her figure doesn't show it but she's been through more than most people can handle.

Steel. She isn't afraid of breakdown. Those toxic fumes wouldn't even begin to consume her. The few dents and bruises she's acquired come from a lifetime of servitude. A lifetime that's involved: three owners; children; dogs; and inclement driving conditions. She's the strong, silent type. People don't see that about her, though. They see the surface. The porcelain blue paint, four wheels, four doors, the one gash she has on her right hubcap. Suzanne has the curves of a voluptuous woman. She has a few birthmarks and blemishes. Suzanne isn't afraid of what people think. She's been around long enough to be proud of the abrasions. After all, it's what's under the hood that really matters. And Suzanne's got a lot of heart under that hood.

This isn't the story of perfection. Although, it would be easy to say that Suzanne doesn't embody perfection in the least. This isn't the story of breaking parts or fixing them, even though Suzanne has more broken parts than any of us. What this story is about is friendship. It's about realizing that even in the ugly there's beauty; that even something as small as a car can make you realize things about yourself. There's meaning in even the smallest things. This is the story of Suzanne Sommers, the only car that can teach life lessons by breaking down.

She was born in the Heartland: a true American. Rough, rugged, built to last. Suzanne wasn't always Suzanne. In fact, her certificate calls her a Subaru Impreza. Her color is dovetail blue, and her birthday is around March of '97. These descriptions are technical. Clear, cut, and dry. Those descriptions don't suit her. Suzanne wasn't made to fit the mold. Her real personality comes out when she's faced with challenges. There are many moments that define Suzanne. She isn't part of the pack and fitting in isn't her style. Suzanne doesn't do well with the stop and go. Give her a task and she'll get it done. Don't break her stride. Let her do the work. She doesn't take no for an answer.

Suzanne loves to dance. As a matter of fact, put on the right song, she'll show you a move or two. She's able to dance with the best of 'em. At red lights, stop signs, Suzanne has all eyes on her. Suz can only get her groove on when there's a good song playing, though. She can be a total diva. Her favorite song consists of the beat of a Led Zeppelin song with the lyrics of Billy Joel. Call her a little emo and she'll kick your ass.

Suz revs and pulls herself up the hill.



© Susan Snow

Her exasperated lungs give out a heavy sigh. The kind of sigh that says "let me rest." It's hot out. The sun is beating down, and the fresh smell of exhaust toxins fill the air. Summer. This is the time when Suz realizes she's old. Summer is the season when her youth escapes her, and she realizes she can't push herself any harder. By the time she gets to the top, her heart is sputtering and her body shakes. This is Suz at her finest. She's getting ready to show everyone her newest dance move: the shake and stall. Suz always loves it when there's a good song on. The loud music makes her feel sexy. The song playing: Billy Joel's, "We Didn't Start The Fire." Her body shakes, sputters, and completely stops. Apparently, Billy Joel has a way with cars. Dead. Another minor breakdown to show how much life can get to us sometimes. Her metal parts grind to life and she's back in action. Like most people, her breakdowns come at the most inopportune times. The only difference between Suz and everyone else is her breakdowns require just a quick restart and she's ready to go. Suzanne reminds us that life is short. Pick yourself up and move on. Don't wallow in despair. Dance it out if you have to.

Seasons can be a bitch. The older Suz gets the more she realizes that she's incapable of navigating certain terrain. Call it the ruins of an elderly body mixed with a youthful heart. Snow. As much as Suz loves the warm weather to dance in, the snow proves to be an even more powerful force. Hibernating isn't an option for her. She has a job to do and come eight feet of snow, she's gonna get it done. If nothing else, Suz is trustworthy. Feeling safe in her company isn't a problem at all. Believe in her, she'll get you anywhere alive.

The road was covered. Snow. Ice. Snow.

The salt trucks were going in the wrong direction. Being out in this weather had

to be the worst idea anyone has ever had. Going to Penn State in a blizzard certainly wasn't Suzanne's idea. However, she knew the drill. She tried to keep it steady. Her tires gnawed and gnashed at the snow. *Thump*: Snow bank. Regaining her composure she started again. The snow crunching beneath her became louder. She slid, slipped, and threw herself around. Suz never made her effort noticeable. She never showed her fear. She kept her companions warm, safe, and alive. Her face was covered in a thick sheet of ice. What could be seen of her eyes was a dismal light, clouded and dull. Her beautiful blue enamel looked like she had come from the depths of the arctic. Suz put up a hell of a fight against the snow and the sleet. She chugged along, breathing heavy all the way. People die in those conditions. Not Suz, or anyone she loved. She was determined to keep people safe. Having someone she loved get her wasn't an option. However, sliding into a snow bank, fishtailing, and losing her balance a few times was. Once her tires felt the surface of dry land, you could hear her moan a sigh of relief. She slid into a parking spot and took a good three-day rest.

Suzanne got her loved ones there alive. Never faltering, never failing. Like a dependable friend, she pulled through when times were rough. Don't forget about the people who mean the most to you

There are lessons that can be learned from the things we own. Life is not about perfection or having the best of everything. Sometimes you have to love something more than you love yourself. Suzanne is the best example. She encompasses the best of a friendship. She's always been there, ready in the wings when she's needed. Her personality makes her hard to forget. These days, Suzanne is content basking in the glow of the sunlight. She's happy with who she is, and what she's all about. We could all learn a thing or two about being a good friend from Suzanne.

XUI LI LIU, continued

People lost their jobs."

Anny and Frank work very hard. They spend six out of seven days at the restaurant, from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. They devote their lives to the restaurant in the name of hard work. Anny spends her days cleaning forks, carpets, walls, and tables. "When you keep busy, more customers come," she says superstitiously.

The couple have two sons, Steven and Frank, Jr. "Smart boys," Anny brags. They were both born in America and, at five and three years old respectively, are bilingual. At Tokyo's Chinese New Year party (rather than a Christmas party), Anny dressed Steven and Frank, Jr. in traditional Chinese silk vests. The little boys ran around, dancing under the colorful disco ball in their pink and yellow vests, greeting other children with both "ni hao" and "hello".

With all of the fees and paperwork, it would cost Anny and Frank over \$1,200 to become U.S. citizens. Anny wishes to be an American, but the price is too expensive right now.

America is Anny's home and she likes it here. She likes the work opportunities available for her and her husband. She likes the education her children have the opportunity to receive. She wants to find inexpensive classes to improve her English. She wants to be an American. "People are nice here," Anny says about America. "Not always, but sometimes."

WALT, from page 4

about us, man."

Around one in the morning, Walt talks about an encounter with some cops while picking up trash from The Cliff. "Alright, get this, man. I hate seein' this place get trashed and treated like a f---in' dump, so one day I grabbed a handful of garbage bags and come up here to clean up a bit." He takes a couple swigs of beer. "Ahh," he sighs. "It's cheap man, but it'll knock you on your ass. Anyway, I'm down on the third level, man, and I see this cop drive by and I'm like 'F--k this pig, man.' So I put my trash down, turn around, pull down my pants, and moon the motherf---r! Haha! No shit, man!"

He lights a cigarette, which he bought from an Indian reservation: "I bought two years worth of smokes from a reservation 'cause they don't tax it, but I got a \$2,000 tax bill from our government anyways, the greedy bastards. They musta figured out what I was doing."

After cracking open another beer, he continues his story. "Anyways, I finished my business cleaning up and whatnot and I'm luggin' six trash bags of shit from this hillside up the trail to go back to my truck, and as soon as I get out of the woods, I see a cop car, man." The look on his face resembles someone who smells a dead, rotting animal. "They said to me, 'So you think it's funny disrespecting cops?' and they beat me bloody, man. I mean, I guess I shouldna dunnit, but f--k them man, all on their high horses and shit. They ain't no better than anyone else, and I want them to know it."

NECTAR, from page 4

It's far enough away from Burgettstown, so you're not white trash. It's too far away from Robinson to be viewed as civilized by suburbia. The once untouched air of Bulger is too technologically advanced for Josh. Bulger has running water.

* * *

Josh first appeared on this Earth merely a few months after Ronald Regan was sworn into office for his second chance, and merely a few months before the first Nintendo Entertainment System defined technology.

Skipping thousands of beer cans over Josh's life...

Once upon a time, he fixed cars at a Corwin, Chrysler-Jeep in Hickory, Pennsylvania. Bad economy. Slow business. The time came to eliminate names from the payroll. (Pssst...Corwin sells about one car a month now.)

"I hated that crap job anyway. It was crap. I got all the worst jobs. Transmissions and head light fixes. Those are the worst and most pain in the ass jobs to do," Josh claims as he stares at his voluptuous blue and silver can. "Piss on it. It got in the way of my drinking anyways."

CNN claims that 1.2 million people lost their jobs in 2008. Circuit City just went out of business as of January 17, 2009. According to their website, 34,000 people lost their jobs. That is 34,000 people already on tally and only seventeen days into a new year packed full of recession.

It seems that Josh was not alone during the last year of Bush's presidency.

* * *

The light from the cigarette is just enough to see the dirt and oil embedded in the cuticles of his index and middle finger. The latter he loves to use while driving, daydreaming, drinking, dozing, deep-frying, disliking, or during any type of doing.

The imprints from his steel-toe boots left permanent marks on the overexposed

rose colored carpet. He lounges on the same floral cushion every morning when the light begins to set ablaze the small house.

"Now that I don't have a job, I can drink all the time. It's the life. All I do is build the fire and drink the drink. I go to my Dad's house to chop down trees sometimes. My dad is always drunk, and my mom is always yelling at him for hiding beer in the woods. He'll be in the woods for hours. My mom will go on a rampage trying to find him. Good times," Josh says as readjusts his withered CORWIN baseball cap.

Josh doesn't have many friends these days. His days used to be filled with conversing with as many people as possible and creating havoc in Bulger. Besides his two roommates, one of their girlfriends, he doesn't care for much human conversation anymore.

"I'm not an alcoholic. My dad is. Unlike him, I just know how to drink. Everyone should enroll in my Bordo School of Drinking. Twenty dollars an hour, and you'll be a pro just like me."

* * *

It's early in the evening. Josh's roommate and his girlfriend wrap themselves in blankets as they watch a movie in the cold and breathless house. It's 15 degrees outside. Unfortunately, there is not an ounce of heating oil, and Josh burned all the firewood a week ago.

Josh stumbles into the house, and he's been drinking since, well, somewhere between the chirping of the birds and the airing of the Price is Right. Josh pulls his jeans onto his thin torso. His belt buckle reads "Redneck." The top of his boxer brief makes an appearance as they hold themselves together by strings on the elastic. He pulls his shirt down; the cold on his back gives him goose bumps.

He sits in his usual spot. It's always saved for him. After setting his McDonald's on the floor, he doesn't notice that Maggie smells his salty fries. The tan mutt manages to indulge herself before getting yelled at by Josh. Her tail stops

wagging.

Dialogue from "Hostel" fills the room. A surgical blade slices through the Achilles tendon of the blonde, naïve American. And the wannabe doctor who doesn't eat a salad with a fork is a freak. The American begs for his life as the pedophile enjoys watching him suffer.

Please! I have money! I'll &@!ing pay you! Ten times, two times - whatever you want!*

Forgetting about his food, just like he forgot about the first twenty-four years of his life, Josh pulls out his cigarettes.

Pay me?

"I'm so depressed," Josh claims as he lights his Marlboro Red, which are buy-one-get-one at the Unimart in Midway.

No one is paying me. In fact, I'm the one paying THEM!

* * *

On a refreshing note, most Americans will wake up tomorrow, have some coffee, and maybe run around their suburban plans in their tight, sweaty Under Armor. It takes time to look so good.

Some will go to their nice paying jobs. Some will go to their Ivy League schools and study physics. Some will study how to advance the world. Some will study the arts. Others will drool on a desk while they are supposed to be studying such things.

Josh will get up around noon. He will call his buddy Kramer, the owner of Josh's beloved Kramer's Tavern, and tell him to open for him.

For some people, just like Josh, the world is too cruel to be like most Americans.

"If I had bullets in this gun," he shows off his well-kept pistol, "I would kill everybody. Seriously. The only thing that keeps me from not killing is the jail thing. I don't need guys hitting on me. The world is crap. I hate everybody. I should run this world. We'd all have a little more fun."

For Josh, reality is too shocking to see through sober eyes. It's better to see with drunk goggles and a clouded vision. Joshua Bordo is just trying to live in American culture with a faded American dream.

Outside the Box

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The work that appears in *Outside the Box* represents the efforts of many talented individuals.

Without them this magazine would not be possible.

We hope that you enjoy their work.