

# The Metropolitan



Untitled Watercolor Nicholas Tabor

A Magazine of Writing  
by Students  
at Metropolitan Community College

2008

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by Students  
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“Literature is news that stays news.”

Ezra Pound

# The Metropolitan 2008

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

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://commhum.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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Printed in Omaha, Nebraska by Barnhart Press  
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## 2008 Writing Awards

For his poem “The Anticyclone,” Steven Balters is the winner of The Metropolitan 2008 Prize for Student Writing, a 12-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Patricia Sedlacek is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for her essay “The Race.” The second runner-up, Amber Johnson, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her essay “The Sandbox.”

### The Anticyclone

*Steven Balters*

How long will you wait  
For the train to come in,

Straining to hear the whistle  
Somewhere over the hill,

When you know that it's bound  
For an entirely different station?

And what would you gain  
From its arrival at the platform?

The cold-faced conductor  
Wouldn't listen to you anyway,

Those in the dining car  
Would only laugh and sip their wine,

And the indifferent engineer  
Wouldn't invite you on board.

You appear more alone than you really are  
At that Siberian railway stop,

Letting the wind press on your shoulders  
And thinking of your favorite fairy tale:

Two people understanding each other.

## Break in the Binge

*Steven Balters*

A spring storm rolled steadily outside,  
The rain falling hard,  
The bird bath overflowing.

You drank Keemun until you were sick  
With your cousin still ill,  
Your uncle, downstairs, alone with the lightning,  
Your mother, somewhere in the depths of the house,  
And you selecting more tea, counting the thunder,  
And watching the bird bath overflow.

## The Race

*Patricia Sedlacek*

As Kel stepped out of the ranch house door, she was greeted by another crystal clear, perfect June, mountain morning in South Lake Tahoe. *Another day in paradise*, she thought to herself while adjusting her new Ray-Bans that had cost her nearly a week's salary.

She made her way down to the barn to start the daily ritual of saddling horses for the hordes of tourists who would be rolling into the dusty parking lot within the hour. After stumbling through the excited pack of dogs that rushed to greet her, she stopped to brush the dust from her designer jeans. Hearing a familiar rumble, Kel turned to see her brother Mike pulling into the parking lot. He was driving his old, rust-infected Chevy and pulling his primer-grey, homemade horse trailer. Her younger brother was prone to disappear for days, especially over the weekends when the barn was the busiest.

"Where've ya been, Mikey?" Kel asked as she applied another coat of lip gloss.

"Carson," he replied with a wink, disengaging himself from his dilapidated rig.

"What ya got in the trailer?" she asked.

"Oh, you'll like this one. I bought him from this old guy that I met at Sharky's Bar last night," Mike said and spit tobacco juice, nearly hitting her red snakeskin boots.

Kel walked with Mike to the back of the trailer and helped him drop the loading door. Her brother backed the big bay horse down the ramp. After getting a good look at her little brother's new horse, Kel thought to herself, *Unless he got him for free, he paid too much*. The poor thing looked as if he had missed many meals, and she could count his ribs from six feet away. His feet had been neglected for many months; they were overgrown, chipped, and broken in several places. His head hung low, and his eyes were dull and listless, like old pennies in a forgotten jar.

"Only gave two-fifty for him," Mike said with a sly grin, as he wiped the caked mud from the bay's face with his worn and frayed shirt sleeve. "The old guy said he bought him off the track

a few years ago and was going to make a jumper out of him. Then he found out he has a bad heart, can't take too much pressure, but he'll make a fine trial horse for some rich yuppie's kid."

Kel's little brother fancied himself to be somewhat of a world class horse trader, buying cheap and reselling for a profit. As Kel walked toward the barn shaking her head, she heard Mike yell after her, "Maybe if you're real lucky, I'll let you try him in a few days."

It was nearly a week later when she saw the big bay horse again. It was another one of those perfect June days, clear blue sky, the scent of pine trees and campfire filling the air. She'd spent a busy morning renting out horses to one group of tourists after another and was preparing to go out on what her obsessively controlling stepmother called "Safety Patrol." They always offered to send a guide with every group, but most people preferred to ride without one. For this reason, there were always one or two employees riding the trails, making sure all was well with horses and customers.

Kel was bridling her fancy little sorrel mare, the one with the flaxen mane and tail that matched her own blonde hair picture perfectly, when Mike rode up on his new bay horse. The horse looked much better; he'd put on some weight, and his hooves were trimmed and sporting new shoes. She also noticed a little sparkle in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Hey, Kel, why don't you take this one? He's real gentle and pretty smooth."

"No thanks, Mikey, I prefer riding my own investments, and you know how tourists like to take pictures sometimes. I look better on this horse."

"Oh come on, you chicken, take this one, or are you afraid he'll run off with you?" Mike teased, as he dismounted the bay and shoved the reins into her hand.

She wanted to say, *Why yes, now that you mention it, I am a bit scared to ride off on some big ugly dink I don't know*, but instead, "Give him here," was all she said.

"Excuse me, can you tell us who we need to talk to around here to rent a couple of good horses?"

Kel and Mike both turned in the direction of the voice and saw two ladies standing on the other side of the corral fence. They were dressed almost exactly alike: matching oversized Harrah's Casino t-shirts, one in bright blue stretch pants, the other in fluorescent pink. Each had a bejeweled fanny-pack, the cheap kind found in all the hotel gift shops, strapped tightly around their rather excessive, what used-to-be waists. They were what her brother would call a couple of big eaters.

"I hope you have better horses here than that stable down the street. We just came from there, and those lazy horses wouldn't go. It didn't matter how hard we kicked them; all they would do is walk, and we want fast horses," Pink Pants said.

"We complained to the manager, and he gave us our money back and told us to come here," chimed in Blue Pants.

"I'm sure we can fix you up," Kel said, then turned and yelled toward the rent barn, "Hey, Katie, take care of these ladies please." Without a word, Pink Pants and Blue Pants waddled toward the sign-up desk at the rent barn. Kel turned back and looked at her brother, who just rolled his eyes and shook his head with a smile.

Kel hadn't realized how tall Mike's new bay horse really was until she tried to get on him. Extra-tight Wranglers look good, but they're a bad combination with a tall horse. This was one of the two reasons she preferred short horses, the other being that it was a shorter distance to the ground for emergency dismount or unintended ejection. After a short struggle to get on, Kel and the big bay horse left the corral area and headed out toward the private riding trails of the ranch.

The main trail wound its way through the pines for a short distance, and then the trees opened up into a large meadow dissected by the Truckee River. The colors of the meadow were breathtakingly beautiful: the bright greens of the grass, the lacy purple and yellow wild flowers dappled with a bright burst of orange from the delicate, California poppy.

Kel followed the main trail to the river crossing and slowly guided the unfamiliar horse down the concrete-reinforced embankment, already becoming slick with summer moss. The horse moved slowly through the cold water, choosing each step

carefully. She stopped him in the middle where the clear water was the deepest and sat for a moment watching two rainbow trout meander past the horse's dark legs in search of their noontime meal. After the fish had moved on, she softly urged the bay forward and up the far side of the concrete embankment. At this point, the trail split into three different directions. She chose the trail to her left. It was the most popular with customers. She urged the bay into a trot and then gently squeezed her legs, pushing him into a slow lope. Mike was right; he was very smooth, each foot hitting the ground softly like little pillows. He was responding to the reins nicely, too. Power steering is always a welcome surprise.

Kel was really beginning to enjoy her new used Cadillac of a horse when off to her right she caught a glimpse of fluorescent pink accompanied by a piercing scream. She pulled hard on the reins, and the big bay came to a stop. It's always good to know the brakes work, too. She quickly looked to her right again and saw a grey horse with Miss Pink Pants coming down a hill out of the trees at breakneck speed. The rider's screams sliced sharply through the peaceful meadow.

"Oh shit!" Kel said out loud, spinning the big bay around and digging her heels in hard. They were immediately in hot pursuit.

The runaway and his reluctant passenger were heading directly for the main trail back to the rent barn. Kel knew that Miss "We want fast horses" Pink Pants could fall off at any time, but it would probably happen when those metal horseshoes hit the slick concrete at the river crossing, where both horse and rider would go down in a bone-crunching heap. She could see the reins hanging loosely around the gray's neck, while the woman had a death grip on the saddle horn with both hands. This particular strategy was a bit puzzling; it was like driving a car at seventy miles per hour and holding onto the dashboard instead of the steering wheel.

Kel had hoped to catch up to them where the two trails merged into one. Although the bay was in a full gallop, they hadn't closed the gap by much. Kel leaned forward as far as she could, throwing her arms up the sides of his long neck, and dug

her heels in hard once more, hoping to get a little more speed out of the big bay horse. She had never ridden a thoroughbred ex-racehorse before and was shocked to realize that she had just happened upon the nitro-turbo-thruster button. It is that fifth gear that only thoroughbred racehorses have and, up until that moment, she never knew for sure existed. For a split second, she could have sworn they had become airborne. The length of the bay's stride seemed to double, and his legs were stretching so far out in front of his chest she couldn't believe they were his. She had to grip hard with her legs to keep from becoming unseated herself. She turned her head slightly to one side, and the great god of wind speed confiscated her new Ray-Bans right off her face. Looking ahead once more, she realized they had cut the distance by half and were still gaining.

The landscape flew by in a muted green blur, and after a few long moments, they were right behind the grey and his hysterical co-pilot. Seeing the river crossing just ahead, Kel maneuvered the bay to the side of the grey, and in a few more strides, they were neck and neck. She took the reins in one hand and reached down with the other to grab the loose rein of the runaway, pulling him in closely to the bay and slowing them both down at the same time. They all came to a sweaty, breathless stop.

Kel quickly jumped off the bay and helped Pink Pants to the ground. She had stopped screaming but was white as a sheet and shaking uncontrollably. Kel was feeling like a bowl of Grandma's green Jell-O herself.

After a few minutes, Blue Pants rode up and dismounted. She rushed to her friend and asked her if she was all right. Pink Pants could only nod her head. Then Blue Pants turned to Kel and screamed sarcastically, "What's wrong with you people, renting out crazy animals like that?"

"It wasn't the horse," was all Kel could say, as she wiped the sweat off her own very pale face.

With a forced smile, she kindly asked the two ladies if they would like to remount, and she would escort them back to the barn. Not surprisingly, they declined and said they would prefer to walk.

Kel lingered in the meadow awhile trying to regain her composure, letting the horses graze on the sweet grass, and thinking to herself, *People just don't get it. A horse is not a machine, like a go-cart.* She took a long look at her brother's big bay horse. God he was ugly, but she knew she would never have caught that runaway on her own pretty little sorrel horse.

Kel remounted the bay and led the other two horses back to the barn. The two women had apparently gotten into their car and left without saying a word to anyone or even asking for their money back. She tied up the rent horses and led the bay toward the house where her brother was coming out of the door, wiping mustard from his mouth with his shirttail.

"Well, how did ya like him, Kel?" Mike asked with his Cheshire Cat grin. "You didn't ride him too hard, did ya? I forgot to remind you he had a bad heart."

"I don't know how you do it, Mikey, but I'd hang onto this one for a while if I were you," she said. "The horse might have a bad heart, but it's sure a big one."

## The Sandbox

*Amber Johnson*

The steam was rising gradually from the ground. It was about 130 degrees. How could anyone want to live here? It was like a prison. We were only allowed to leave when they said we could. I arrived January 10, 2006. I was counting down the tortuous days until next February and was nearly halfway there. I had parked myself on an upside-down Desert Storm era, 15-gallon bucket that had been weathered by sand, wind, and time. It was almost brown and had a small fracture through the middle of the bottom. I made up my mind to stay in the shade of the awning attached to my barracks that consisted of an old, desert camouflage, medium-sized tan tent that smelled like mold and felt like worn-out sandpaper. One cot was allowed per soldier, and like the rest of our equipment, it was aged and sounded like a rusty vault being unlocked as it was opened. I shared this tent with three other female soldiers: Private Holland, Private Calendar, and Private First Class Rodriguez. I liked it, though; it was just a five-minute walk from the chow hall. I spent a lot of time there.

As I wondered how everything was going back home, my first line supervisor walked up to me. Sergeant Griffen was one of the shortest, sweetest, most soft-spoken people in our company. She told me that my squad needed to report to the first sergeant immediately for a mission. I let her know I would inform the squad to be ready in an hour. My heart sank into my gut. Without her telling me, I already knew what was going on. I had been left as squad leader in charge until Staff Sergeant Winters got back from R&R, which she needed more than any of us. I still don't know how someone could work thirty hours in a twenty-four hour day. I got up from the half-melted pail and slowly walked inside our tent. Only one out of the three soldiers was taking a break there. I asked where Private Holland and Private First Class Rodriguez were. As Private Calendar told me they had gone to the chow hall, the two of them returned. I told the group to bag up and report to the first sergeant by 1530, so they got their weapons and water bags ready.

Ten minutes before 1530 rolled around, the three very young, new soldiers came walking up to the first sergeant's office where I was waiting. Private Holland, a short Hispanic female with raven hair, was a soldier who went strictly by regulations and whose job was with army supplies. Private First Class Rodriguez, who worked with Holland, had a darker complexion; she was mixed Scots and Black and had a very calm and relaxed attitude. Private Calendar walked a few steps ahead of them, one of her boot strings hanging out. "Let's roll, yo," she said, tripping over the untucked string. I asked her if she was nervous. "Never," she informed me, fixing her boot. I knew what they were feeling. I felt it, too, the first time I went on a mission outside the wire. You're scared, not knowing who's out there and what they might try to do to you.

In the office, First Sergeant Toney briefed us about a casualty pickup detail. He told us who we needed to see, how we were going to get there, and when we could come back. I explained that Staff Sergeant Winters was on leave, and I couldn't afford to lose any of my team. He told me, "You're all I got, kid." I walked out of the first sergeant's office and had everyone collect extra ammo. I won't ever forget those soldiers' faces as long as I live. They had the look of death in their eyes. I was scared for them, and I knew that if anybody made one wrong move, it would jeopardize the mission along with our lives.

We headed to the motor pool where all the vehicles for our unit were kept. I signed out a humvee, brand new with all the perks; it had doors and air conditioning. We would be riding in style, I told my troops. I tried to lighten the mood, which seemed to help at least a little. In this business, we try to find every single silver lining we can, no matter how small. I prayed we left alive and came back the same way. We passed the front checkpoint on our way out. The guards saluted us and we saluted back, wondering if this would be the last time we would raise our hands to brow in honor.

The casualty pickup was only ten miles away but seemed an endless drive. Ten miles is the distance most folks drive to work. Thinking about an everyday trip can help squelch the fear. No one had spoken a word since we left. Twenty minutes went

by and we were driving along at 10 miles an hour, the fastest we wanted to go to keep away from roadside bombs or IEDs. I hate IEDs. They're hard to spot most of the time. It's amazing to me how a Coke can or an old cell phone can be made into a small, efficient bomb. Forty minutes went past. I couldn't believe it. We were almost there, and no conflict or explosions. It's almost eerie going through this ocean of sand, the waves of grainy sediment still and quiet. Its scent was like that of a beach. We were driving in a boundless sandbox. Private Calendar joked about building sand castles when she got back.

Just like that, we were at the pickup site and ready to work. The station looked like a glorified cardboard box made of plywood and was the size of four semi-trucks attached to each other. We reported to the sergeant in charge and were divided into teams. I was paired with Calendar, and Rodriguez was paired with Holland. We split up and headed to the casualty station. The first guy we picked up was a U.S. soldier. Like all the fatalities there, he had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. I felt sorry for him even though there didn't appear to be any physical damage to him. I took his large, lifeless, blue hands, and Calendar took his feet. We headed towards our humvee, about ten feet away from the pickup site.

This guy seemed to be getting lighter as we went along, and I couldn't understand why. He was still in his uniform with the best pair of combat boots money could buy. He wore a tan-colored shirt with two pairs of dog tags, one around his neck and one shoved into his boot. Luckily, he still had the rest of his body or they would have shoved a pair of those silver dog tags in between his teeth or up the roof of his mouth to identify him. He was a non-denominational Christian who had an allergy to bee stings. He was a former drill sergeant, according to the badge on his pocket. His name was Ed Gribbsby. Ed looked real sharp. His face was serene. Calendar start to whimper. I looked up at Calendar who told me the man was slipping from her grip. "This guy is pretty light," I told her, and then I saw the crimson, gelatinous, slime on her hands. I looked under Ed's limp motionless body and saw a trail that would be fit for any shark if we had been in water. I realized his increasing weightlessness was

due to the massive, gaping hole left in what used to be his back. It looked like fresh hamburger and smelled like sour water from a vase of old flowers, mixed with cottage cheese and an outhouse that had never been emptied. We got him onto the humvee, and Calendar began to cry and regurgitate all that food she ate at the chow hall. "I didn't know we had spaghetti today," I told her in some vile attempt to calm her down. I let her have a few minutes to gather herself. We still had a mission to do. Finally, ten bodies later, we saw Holland and Rodriguez walking out to us. We all climbed into the humvee and rode a little bit faster than before. Nobody said anything. All we heard was the wind and the wheels crushing sand underneath us.

We were saluted by the guards on our way back into the front checkpoint we had left a few hours before. The sun was beginning to set behind the Afghan mountains, creating a swirl of purple clouds and dim-orange sky. It was cooler then, enough to wear a jacket. More than anything, we were thankful to be alive, seeing firsthand what war can do. We parked the humvee at the casualty drop-off location where all of the soldiers were identified and prepared to be flown back home. Everyone reported back to the first sergeant's office, where we were debriefed and given the next day off. Everybody walked back to the tent, showered, and slumped into their cots. The soldier's faces were blank and expressionless. I could have told them everything would be all right or tried to console them in some way. I thought it would be better to let things quiet down in their minds. We all lay silent. No one slept that night.

## Guinness

*Sarah Gregory*

Standing on the bar  
So tall and  
Proud,  
A black concoction which  
Looks like melted licorice  
And whistles from  
The tap.

I detest your  
Arrogance to be poured  
So uniquely  
Into a glass with an  
Advertisement on it,  
Your seduction to grown men  
Who stagger in a haze  
And fall in ditches.

## The Cost of Obsession

*Zedeka Poindexter*

“An Act of Vengeance” by Isabel Allende hinges on a brutal attack on the body and home of Dulce Rosa Orellano by guerilla Tadeo Céspedes. The steps taken by both to change their lives and public perception after this event were initially successful, but did not have the intended effect. Separately, Dulce Rosa and Tadeo built existences that made it impossible for them to be whole, functional beings when their paths crossed again. The main characters in Allende’s story are ultimately undone by the contradiction between their public facades and their private obsessions.

Dulce Rosa is presented to the reader as a plain canvas—an average girl who was revered for her family’s fortune and her ability to dance and play the piano. The combination of her non-aesthetic assets and money transformed her into a woman who had a reputation far greater than she could have earned if she were truly lovely. Her malleable image also made it substantially easier for her to manipulate public opinion as she became older.

After the attack by Tadeo, the townspeople assumed she was fine. It was not that it did not occur to them that there could or even should be a problem, but the text suggests they bought into the image that Dulce Rosa worked to project:

Many people asked themselves how it was possible that the girl had not ended up in a straight jacket in a sanitarium or as a novice with the Carmelite nuns. Nevertheless, since there were frequent parties at the Orellano villa, with the passage of time people stopped talking about the tragedy and erased the murdered senator from their memories. (Allende 39)

The townspeople believed exactly what Dulce Rosa wanted them to. When she was a young woman, they projected grace and beauty onto her. Perhaps this is how she learned to present the appearance of sanity to her peers instead of the revenge that fueled her.

During this time, Tadeo also changed his public image, although in a very different way. The story never describes him

as a blank vessel for others’ opinions. Tadeo is described as a man who was exactly what he wanted to be. He was a man of war and sought fights when there were none to be had. Tadeo made specific choices to use money and power available to him to transform himself in others’ eyes:

Peace, the exercise of government, and the use of power turned him into a settled, hard-working man. With the passage of time people began to call him Don Tadeo. He bought a ranch on the other side of the mountains, devoted himself to administering justice, and ended up as mayor. (Allende 40)

After his image changed, Tadeo still heard tales of Dulce Rosa. Each retelling refueled his obsession with the woman he had attacked many years before. Tadeo had become a man referred to with great respect, but internally he was not free of the evils he committed. This connection went well beyond guilt. The text suggests the girl he raped had become his standard for beauty. He saw her image in all other women he came across. Eventually, the recurrence of this sight drove him to return to the place where he had left her bloodied.

Neither character was surprised by their second meeting. Tadeo knew exactly how to return to the last place he had seen his victim. He recognized the landscape of the property he had destroyed and the features of the woman who still lived there. There was no shock when Dulce Rosa saw him. Her only response was to say, “You’ve finally come, Tadeo Céspedes” (Allende 40).

Both had spent thirty years preparing for the time their paths crossed. Dulce Rosa ran her property and the products it produced instead of crumbling or searching for a man to do it for her. She threw parties and took control of her image as a single, independent woman. Tadeo had become a respected land owner. Instead of being associated with violence, he had status in his new community. Perhaps she was stronger and perhaps he was more legitimate. Both could be true, but they had spent every day reliving their first meeting. These characters were tied to each other by an act of violence and their individual attempts to build lives around that moment instead of beyond it. Tadeo

was obsessed with the image of a bloody child. Dulce Rosa built a new image so she could avenge the child he never stopped imagining.

It is possible that both truly changed in the three decades between their meetings, but it is more possible that they simply built paths back toward each other, each becoming a conduit of emotion projected at the other. The love they professed seems plausible only because they spent so long concentrating emotions on each other. It would have been impossible for them to be separate entities. Each character's obsession for the other was an integral part of what they had become beneath the layer of public respectability that they had built. This is proven in Dulce Rosa's thoughts when Tadeo presents himself to her again: "She went over her perfect plan of vengeance, but did not feel the expected happiness; instead she felt its opposite, a profound melancholy" (Allende 41). To complete the plan she would have to destroy the fuel for her existence, her self-proclaimed "only mission on earth" (Allende 39).

These characters' choices of how to interact with each other were limited by the lives they lived between their first and second meetings. How could Tadeo not be happy? He was arm's length from the object of his desire. Although Dulce Rosa accepted Tadeo's proposal, she had arranged her life so that her primary options were to honor either love or revenge. The third option devised to release her from the choice was as much a part of the image she built as the love she felt. Her suicide is a direct result of a lifetime of building her world around what she would do when Tadeo came to her again. Dulce Rosa "knew that she could not carry out the vengeance she had planned because she loved the killer, but she was also unable to quiet the Senator's ghost" (Allende 41).

Dulce Rosa's last documented thought was of the limitations of her options. Tadeo's last thought was of guilt and penance. Both of these characters were able to successfully manipulate public opinion. It showed in each explanation of how they evolved after the rape. What brought this story to the tragic ending was the fact neither modified their internal motivations. If Don Tadeo had not been forced by his obsession to return,

Dulce Rosa would not have been faced with choosing between love, honor and her eventual suicide. If Dulce Rosa had released herself from her quest for vengeance, she would have had additional and less extreme options at her disposal if Tadeo had reintroduced himself into her life.

There is power in controlling what the world assumes. Learning how to project an image can give people opportunities they would not have access to otherwise. The reinvention of Dulce Rosa and "Don" Tadeo in the eyes of those around them proves this. Each character's reinvention also proves that change is more than just public opinion. The death of Dulce Rosa and despair of Tadeo are direct results of their internal conflicts. The internal workings of a public figure need to be just as healthy as the face the person shows the world. If these two sides of a person are not congruent, then they open themselves up for disaster when faced with their own demons.

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## An Inconvenient Suicide

*Katria Wyslotsky*

After a lengthy and thorough review of his life, Frank Finck concluded that everyone whom he had attempted to emulate, everyone whom he had at one point or another respected, or anyone who had a talent that he envied had killed himself or herself. It couldn't have been purely coincidental, for how could anyone have so many heroes commit suicide in the relatively short amount of time they'd been on the earth? Was this some sort of subliminal message sent from the great beyond? Was this just the nature of the life of an artist? And, why had he been saddled with the unfortunate last name of Finck? Life, it seemed, was an endless mystery.

Punk rocker Sid Vicious, *Saturday Night Live* comedian Chris Farley, and songwriter Elliot Smith overdosed on various legal and illegal pharmaceuticals. Kurt Cobain stared down the barrel of a gun seconds before he pulled the trigger and the back of his head splattered against the wall. The pattern his viscera left behind was reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock painting. Michael Hutchens appeared to have everything except a healthy sex life. INXS, the name of his band, seemed to predict his future, for it was officially reported that he accidentally hung himself while legally intoxicated and attempting to achieve personal sexual gratification. No doubt, his wife didn't appreciate that particular item of information being printed on his death certificate. It definitely wasn't a memento she wanted to keep for her grandchildren.

Having reached the end of her desire to live, one chilly February morning poet Sylvia Plath fed her children, hung some laundry outdoors on the clothes line to dry, and then stuck her head in the oven without bothering with the pilot light and inhaled deeply. Maybe she forgot that the turkey was supposed to go in first.

Donny Hathaway, soul music balladeer, sang a duet with Roberta Flack at Carnegie Hall, checked himself into the Essex House, and jumped out of the window of his room on the

fifteenth floor. He was later hosed off the asphalt. The month of August in the city could be brutal.

Actor, screenwriter, and playwright Spaulding Gray, while commuting between Manhattan boroughs, completed the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, neatly folded his overcoat, laid it on a bench on top of the puzzle, and stepped off of the Staten Island Ferry into the muck and mire that is the Hudson Bay. If he hadn't drowned, then the diseases he would have picked up in the water would have killed him. It was a mystery as to how far his body had floated out into the ocean before a fishing trawler scooped him out of the briny water. Ironic, too.

And finally, even Englishman Lawrence Oates, the intrepid Antarctic explorer who had survived subzero temperatures, polar bear attacks, the walrus mating season, and frostbite, disappointed Frank by throwing back the flap of his tent and calmly announcing to the shivering members of his expedition to the South Pole, "I am just going outside and may be awhile." With a stiff upper lip, he walked directly into a blizzard of massive proportion, never to return. It took days for his body to defrost so that it could finally be laid in a coffin.

So it came to pass early one morning that Frank found himself giving serious consideration to ending his own life. Why? Who's to say? It might have been destiny. It might have been that he was chronically depressed. It might have been the copious amount of tequila he'd imbibed the night before. It might have been a lot of things, none of which truly made any sense. Suicide, it seemed, was the key to eternal happiness, the end to the aggravating utility bills which made him slightly hysterical each month, an answer to some unknown question of the meaning of life, and an interesting way to pass an otherwise dull Monday night. However, being the meticulous planner that he was, Frank needed to carefully examine his various options for suicide, and he took certain measures to make certain that he was not distracted in any way while he conducted the necessary research into his ultimate demise. He disconnected the phone to prevent being disturbed by its seemingly incessant ringing and closed the curtains on all the windows so that the early morning sun was blocked. He prepared snacks to maintain his strength during the

course of his endeavor. Then, Frank spent an entire day carefully listing and weighing the merits of various options for suicide. He did this in neat columns on the monitor of his computer using Excel software. After all, he was an Internal Revenue Service officer, and all government employees have a proud and proven reputation for being efficient and highly organized. No one could say that Frank didn't follow the rules.

Overdosing on chemicals was his first option. Yes, to sleep, perchance to dream. That was the question. However, as is proven on his high school and college transcripts, Frank was never proficient in chemistry or biology and feared dosing himself incorrectly. The slightest miscalculation could mean the difference between death and copious and, quite possibly, projectile vomiting, and Frank had major sanitation issues that had yet to be addressed with his therapist. Basically, he had an overwhelming aversion to vomiting and would, at all costs, avoid it whenever and wherever possible. Therefore, a planned overdose was shelved before it was given any serious consideration. Vomiting was anathema.

A gunshot to the head. Quick. Painless... unless you missed. That's when things could get messy. Plus, there was the entire aspect of purchasing the gun, waiting while a background check was done, learning how to use the weapon, and then purchasing the requisite ammunition. It seemed to be such a lot of work for one good shot. Expensive, too. Also, there was the problem of someone being put to the task of scraping his gray matter off the walls that needed to be considered if he was successful and his aim was true. Once again, the old albatross called "sanitation issues" reared its ugly head. He'd recently had his apartment painted a lovely and delicate shade of robin's egg blue only after having spent days meticulously spackling every pinhole, every dent, and every tiny hairline crack on the walls. Also, one had to consider one's appearance while laid out in a coffin. Appearances were of primary importance to Frank. A first impression is a lasting impression. What if one of his friends brought a date to his funeral? Gruesome, yes. However, one could not find fault with his friends since sympathy sex was the motivating factor. A man in mourning required the attention of a good woman and an

outlet for his grief. Anyway, it wouldn't do to be buried wearing a football helmet with a chin strap to hold it in place because he had blasted his skull into tiny little shards that had imbedded themselves into the now immaculate walls. No, a gunshot to the head met the same demise as an overdose; both were too messy, too unorganized, and he was simply far too anal-retentive to pursue either method. No muss, no fuss. This was Frank's most important rule to live by.

Drowning was simply too odious and horrifying to even consider. If he couldn't see the bottom of any body of water and if it wasn't thoroughly chlorinated and bleached to the point where the liquid bore no resemblance whatsoever to what could be found in any body of water produced by Mother Nature, then Frank wasn't going to get into it. That was the bottom line. The thought of walking barefoot into a lake as the ooze located on the bottom squished up between his toes made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Plus, after drowning and sinking to the bottom of the water, there was the physical bloating from the gases building up due to decomposition, his body eventually popping to the surface like a buoy, and nibbling fish to consider. He'd worked long and hard to develop a trim figure, six-pack abs, and a clear complexion. Ending his life in the unfiltered raw sewage of the nearest lake or the local kiddie pool lacked dignity. Plus, it was far too unsanitary. Someone at his funeral might ask, "What's that smell?" and it would be Frank.

Jumping off a high edifice was his next option. Certainly, there were buildings tall enough in town that would make the job easy and efficient. Closing his eyes, he could see himself soaring through the air with the grace of an Olympic diver. However, Frank had a morbid fear of heights, so it was out of the question. He'd never be able to work up the courage to peer over the edge of a building and into the abyss, much less jump off.

Frank's major appliances all ran on electricity, so emulating Sylvia Plath ended before it even began. He hadn't been exploring since the third grade, and airfare to the Antarctic was appallingly expensive, so walking bravely into a blizzard had to be dismissed.

Finally, Frank found himself left with one option: hanging. In his youth, he'd been a member of the Boy Scouts and earned numerous merit badges in woodworking, athletics, crafts, and various other areas of interest. Only one merit badge eluded him... the merit badge for sailors' knots. Having been a bit slow as a child, Frank required one long and tedious year to finally learn to tie his own shoelaces. Sighing heavily, his mother had bravely resigned herself to the fact that her son would be wearing loafers or shoes with Velcro straps the rest of his life. To her complete delight, he surprised her one day and showed her how he could tie his own shoes. Untying them, however, took another year of rigorous practice.

By the time Frank joined the Boy Scouts, he'd successfully conquered his footwear problems and was prepared to face and summarily conquer and control any knot that came his way. Skill, however, and rote memorization eluded him, and he found himself having nightmares about the clothesline, where his mother hung his boxer shorts to dry. In his nightly trips into the semiconscious world, it slithered up his legs and torso like an Anaconda and squeezed him until he felt his eyes would pop out like corks just before his head exploded like an overfilled balloon. It was his nightly shrieks of horror that made his father moan, "Do something! He sounds like he's being skinned alive!" to Frank's mother. Ever the resourceful one, and, never having been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, she finally gave thanks for that fateful drunken night she neglected to take her birth control pill which led to the conception of her only and somewhat sullen child, and she happily drove off to the store and purchased an electric clothing dryer which she'd been eyeing enviously for the better part of a year. And, after flirting outrageously with the hormonally-addled young sales clerk, managed to have it delivered the very next day. Years later, even though Frank had been through numerous and costly psychoanalysis sessions, the clothesline nightmare still haunted him from time to time, rendering the revisiting of events from his youth that had seriously scarred his psyche rather impossible. Hanging himself, therefore, was simply out of the question since it could not be

accomplished with a simple bow knot. It might have looked pretty and bizarrely decorative, but it wouldn't get the job done.

Thus, Frank found himself out of options and out of columns in Excel. Without his noticing it, the sun had set and the stars were twinkling brightly in the night sky. Life, when he thought about it, really wasn't all that bad. In fact, he was having a pretty good time lately. Actually, he was having a great time! He had plenty of money in the bank, a plasma television and a stereo system which was the envy of all his friends, and he had a girlfriend who didn't make his eyes hurt when he looked at her. She was neat and orderly, too! No, there really was no logical or reasonable reason to kill himself. Sadly, he realized that people have flaws and weaknesses that may precipitate some poor decisions that could lead one to determining that suicide was the ultimate solution. There seemed to be no socially acceptable, dignified, or even remotely politically correct method of accomplishing his own suicide. And, most importantly, what made him reconsider his plans and banished all thoughts of suicide from Frank's head was the simple fact that tax season was right around the corner and he had audits to prepare. Many audits. Perhaps even hundreds of audits. The great mystery of life had been solved and, once again, his own life had meaning and purpose. Ahead of him were many lives tied up in financial knots that he would take great delight in slowly, meticulously, and with exquisite precision unraveling. Alone, in his pristine and tastefully decorated apartment, Frank Finck smiled in the dark. In fact, his oddly reptilian grin stretched from ear to ear, revealing gleaming white and perfectly formed carnivorous teeth. Exhilarated, Frank had never before felt so alive.

## In Our Backyard

*Glen Ross*

Walking along the boardwalk just outside of the Fontenelle Nature Center's back door, I felt a pang of doubt. The moist, July air was thick and hard to breath. The wind, with its searing bite, did little to cool the pollen-rich broth. The heat, along with the sound of the leaves, reminded me of sizzling bacon. My plan was to hike to the opposite end of the forest. Although the distance was no more than two miles in a straight line, on winding trails and hills, the distance had to be at least five miles. I strolled deep into the forest with a sense of confidence and my wide-brimmed hat, camera, notebook and pen.

Before leaving the nature center, I had spoken with Gary Garabrandt, the Director of Science and Stewardship at the Fontenelle Nature Association. As I examined the artifacts in the exhibit room, Garabrandt, a tall slender man wearing hunter green work pants and a brown Fontenelle Nature Center t-shirt, had entered the room and introduced himself. We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries before he led me to his office. His white hair and beard along with oversized glasses fit his soft-spoken yet competent manner. Garabrandt, considered the local authority on the forest and its history, has been with the nature center since 1970. Sitting in his crowded yet organized office, we talked for over an hour about the forest and its history before I set off alone on my quest.

On the trail, I passed a Nebraska Phase native dwelling site dated to around 1150 A.D. and was disappointed to see nothing more than a shallow dent in the ground. Around 1910, Robert Gilder, painter and amateur archeologist, dug and then backfilled the exploratory trench. During the interview, Garabrandt had warned me that the dwellings would not look like the photographs taken in 1937 when the Nebraska State Historical Society excavated a different site located near the southern boundary of the forest. The trees and foliage quickly recaptured the site once the team moved on.

According to Garabrandt, native tribes had settled in the reserve's bluffs and floodplains after the last ice age had carved

out the scenic valley that provided Bellevue its name. As I descended into the forest's ravines, I understood the attraction of the area. Both the heat and humidity faded as the canopy closed above me. The cool breeze reminded me of the air-conditioning in Garabrandt's office where he had said, "Even though it's called Fontenelle Forest, it is actually an oak hickory woodland; however, you will find areas in the deeper ravines where the canopy is heavy enough to be considered a true forest." The woodland provided nuts, berries and edible plants for foraging as well as ample game for hunting, making the area a prime location to settle.

As I made my way southward to the bottom of the bluffs and into the lowlands, I could hear birds in all directions. Several cardinals were holding a serious conversation along with other native birds such as chickadees and nuthatches. Introduced species such as sparrows and starlings joined the debate with their own distinctive, yet foreign, songs. During the interview, Garabrandt had said, "Ninety-five percent of the plants in the forest are native, but we work hard to keep up. The tree of heaven, for example, grows faster than we can cut them down, and we seem to be losing the battle against mustard garlic." He did not give a percentage of native to introduced animals, but he did give me the impression the number was much lower. When I asked about bobcats in the forest, Garabrandt smiled for the first and only time during the interview and said, "A bobcat is not likely to jump out of a tree and scratch you or anything like that."

Reaching Mormon Hollow, where the Mormons crossed the Missouri River on Peter Sarpy's ferry, meant my destination was getting near. A welcoming party of white butterflies danced in the creek bed at the entrance to the hollow. Garabrandt told me about a diarist who waited almost a month for his turn on the ferry. After the oxen pulled the wagons up the ravine, the Mormons headed to a temporary encampment near the Pappo Creek. The encampment named Cold Creek was located near present-day Ak-Sar-Ben. The settlement moved to present-day Florence where the Mormons stayed for two years before migrating to the west.

My goal lay on the other side of the bluff to the south of Mormon Hollow. The path climbing the bluff coiled and often ran along the edge and provided many spectacular, and somewhat dizzying, views of the woodlands below. The incline was steep, but the relief of leaving the insects behind in the hollow made the climb bearable. Occasionally, the path would level out; before I could catch my breath, another turn would reveal the path rising sharply again.

Winded from the climb, I reached the summit of the bluff. The path faded in and out among the noticeably younger trees as I made my way across the top of the bluff. The sharp green tang of chlorophyll replaced the rich musty stench of the older woodlands below and to the north. A wrong turn on the trail revealed a narrow grassy prairie overlooking the Missouri River valley. Stunned by the beautiful view, *la belle vue* in French, and lost in the sweet scent of the tall grass, I fumbled for my camera. Four deer sprang from the grass; without looking back, they darted into the woods halfway down the slope.

Since I could not locate the trail through the tall grass, I decided to backtrack and try the other trail. Once I reached the intersection where I believed I had gone wrong, I decided to continue my quest despite my sudden desire for a drink of water. Immediately, the new trail proved more promising. For the first time since I crested the bluff, my spirits and hopes were rising. My stride quickened as the downhill slope coiled just enough to prevent the slope from being too steep. My thirst forgotten, through the trees I saw what I had been looking for, the Logan Fontenelle memorial marker placed at the site of the original location of the village of Bellevue, founded sometime between 1805 and 1820.

Logan Fontenelle, the reserve's namesake, was the son of a Creole fur trader named Lucian Fontenelle. His mother, Meumbane, was a daughter of Big Elk, the Chief of the Omaha tribe. When Logan Fontenelle was young, the village had two names: *La Belle Vue* (due to a comment made by a Spaniard, Manuel Lisa, who allegedly exclaimed the name in French) and Council Bluffs (the name given to the entire valley as well as the Indian Agency office). Chief Big Elk, Peter Sarpy, Kit Carson

and Brigham Young were among the many notable people who had walked on the ground where I was standing.

General Dougherty arrived on the *Yellowstone*, a steamboat, to take over the Indian Agency. His fellow travellers included the adventurous German Prince Maximilian and his artist, Karl Bodmer. Bodmer's original painting of the village from 1833 is at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha. Bodmer painted it from the deck of the *Yellowstone* while docked on the banks of the Missouri River. I stood at a ten-foot drop above the railroad tracks marking the bank of the river at that time and was able to visualize the buildings in relation to the contours of the bluff. The deliberate pile of dead trees where a building had stood and the scattered, tooled stones from building foundations reinforced my belief that I had found the village. Tired and thirsty, but nonetheless proud of my discovery, I climbed back up to the top of the bluff aware of the long path ahead of me.

Lost pondering the beauty and power of nature, I almost missed seeing a fawn. With white dots standing out on the coat of brown, the fawn stood on the edge of the bluff, staring at me through curious, oversized eyes. My first instinct was to find the mother; I expected her to be close and very annoyed. We were alone, so I took a quick picture and started down the steep meandering trail into Mormon Hollow. My perseverance had paid big dividends; if I had not decided to keep searching for the village, I would not have seen the fawn.

## Your Coat

*Chelsea Balzer*

I wore your coat tonight. Out,  
into the cold wind  
that whipped the ugly city around.  
Snug, I felt still inside.  
I imagined you there,  
tried to remember your voice,  
Loud and sure. "Do not  
Do nothing." I raised the hood,  
slid my pink hands into your pockets  
and felt for anything.  
The sky was empty and black to match.  
Without one doubt, it has been  
the longest two weeks of my life.  
Pleading for what's left of real,  
warning magic to prove something to me.  
The guilt is surely creeping up behind.  
I follow anything that leans back when I fall,  
still silent. I can't keep on forgetting.  
Your loyalty lead lines to me  
but I don't know where they stop.  
And tonight, staring out, I started to see  
that I couldn't, still can't,  
take your advice.  
Standing there, totally gone  
with the spirit of loss, nothing left.  
I did nothing.  
I'd done nothing.  
What had I done?

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