Writers’ Night
Time, Summertime, No Time
August 2006
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>D. E. Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What If One Said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lost Book of Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brendon Etter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telling a Joke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kevin Krein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not That You’ll Ever Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mary Steil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coming Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Robert Rokke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rooster’s Crow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wandering Walleye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Doug Mead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Running Out of Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Stephanie Vasko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paying Tribute to Saintes Maries de la Mer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Raven Bradt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Echo of My Birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time Is Suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before Time Became Their Skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Olivia Frey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black Back-Ups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Originally presented at the Northfield Arts Guild Art Studio, Wednesday, August 9, 2006
All copyrights retained by the individual authors
http://www.northfieldartsguild.org
edited by Rob Hardy in Kenilworth, Warwickshire, Great Britain
D.E. Green

*What if one said*

It’s time to call it quits,
To say we can’t go on this way—
Or that. It’s time to jump in a lake,
Go off the deep end, spy with one’s little eye.

It’s time for misery to love company,
For us not to look back—in anger
Or otherwise. It’s time to get on
With it--or without it or whatever.

It’s time to stop complaining,
To take one’s life into—or with—
one’s own hands, to forge ahead,
to dig out the marrow and the pith.

It’s time, to be sure,
Time to stop wanting more
Time as time runs out,
Time to settle the old score.

But why say it? Why commit the crime
When one can go on dreaming?
The Lost Book of Hours

We worked by the old seasonal clock reversed:
fall for planting, winter for growth,
spring for harvesting—summer, our day of rest.
But now the powers that be demand accountability,
so budget and grade sheet, bottom line and cutback,
replace the rhythms of academic cultivation.
There is no going back to medieval gowns,
candlelight contemplation, uninterrupted illumination.

Even here we’ve replaced the bells with buzzers,
computed ourselves into every equation,
installed escalators to the top of ivory towers.

Productivity orchestrates our labors, thoughts
lost in the hustle and bustle of exchanged ideas—
our mental currency, the bits and bytes of commerce.
Brendon Etter

Telling a Joke

Cast:
  Bob
  Rob

Setting: Blank stage.

Bob: O.K. O.K.! Rob, I’m going to tell you a joke!

Rob: Great! I love jokes. Shoot!

Bob: Yeah, I knew that! That’s why I’m telling you one!

Rob: Great. What’s the joke?

Bob: Right! O.K. O.K. Here’s the joke...

(pause)

Rob: The joke?

Bob: O.K. Right. The joke.

(pause, Rob coughs)

Bob: Alright, here goes. Ask me why I’m so funny?

Rob: Is that the joke?

Bob: No, no, no... you have to ask me why I’m so funny.

Rob: Why are you so funny?
Bob: (with no sense of timing at all) Timing.

(Rob looks at Bob as if the joke’s not finished, raises his eyebrows, Bob is chuckling to himself, pause)

Rob: I... uh... o.k. That’s the joke.

Bob: Yep. Get it?! Huh?

Rob: I think so...

Bob: O.K. O.K. I’ll tell it again.

Rob: No, I don’t think...

Bob: Don’t worry, you’ll get it this time!

Rob: I think I got...

Bob: No, no, no, ask me why I’m so funny!

Rob: (slight pause) Ummm... why are you so funny?

Bob: Timing!

Rob: (slight chuckles) Right. Timing, I heard that.

Bob: Yeah, I love that joke!

Rob: Where’d you hear it?

Bob: My brother-in-law told it to me a few months ago.

Rob: Your brother-in-law? The comedian?

Bob: Yeah, that one.

Rob: I met him once at your place. I remember. He’s hilarious.
Bob: Usually, but he told the joke all wrong.

Rob: This joke, the one you just told me?

Bob: Yeah, he’d say "Ask me why I’m so funny", like I did.

Rob: Right...

Bob: So I’d say "Why are you so funny?"

Rob: Uh-huh...

Bob: And he’d say "Timing!"

Rob: Yeah, like you did...

Bob: Except he’d say "Timing!" really loud, and he wouldn’t wait for me to finish asking him why he’s so funny!

Rob: Really?

Bob: Yeah, just cut me off before I was done doing what he told me to do.

Rob: (putting it together in his head, big smile forming, then small laughs, building) Ohhh! I get it!

Bob: What?

Rob: The joke! I get it!

Bob: Yeah, you already said you did.

Rob: No, I mean I get why it’s funny! (realizing too late that he just offended Bob)

Bob: (a little hurt) You laughed when I told it...
Rob: (trying to cover his stumble) Uhhh... yeah, yeah, because it’s funny. And your joke was funny too!

Bob: Too? It should be! It’s the same joke.

Rob: Ummm... welll... uh... (trying to think of a way out) Why don’t we try this?

Bob: What?

Rob: Why don’t you ask me why I’m so funny?

Bob: Because I know the joke.

Rob: Huh?

Bob: Why should I ask you why you’re so funny? I know the joke; I just told it to you, twice.

Rob: I know, I know, I know. I want to try something to show you, uhh... I want to try something.

Bob: And?

Rob: Just play along.... please?

Bob: Alright... why are you so funny?

Rob: (loudly and quickly, right after Bob says "you" in his line) Timing!!

Bob: You cut me off!

Rob: (laughing a bit, trying to convince Bob that it’s better told this way) I know! That’s the joke! Get it!

Bob: Yes! Except "timing" is supposed to come after I finish asking
the question!

Rob: No, no, no, no, no! See, you interrupt the person asking the question, because the word "timing" indicates that humor is more about when and how things are said, rather than the exact words. See?

Bob: But then no one hears the end of the question!

Rob: Ahh, but they already know what the question will be!

Bob: What?

Rob: Yes, because the joke starts with the first person telling the second person to ask him why he’s so funny!

Bob: No it doesn’t! The joke starts when the first person asks the other person why he’s so funny.

Rob: Listen, ummm... Let’s try it again!

Bob: O.K. Ask me why I’m so funny.

Rob: No, no, no. You ask me why I’m so funny.

Bob: No! You’re not funny! You can’t even tell this simple joke right!

Rob: Yes, I can! I’m telling it the way it’s supposed to be told, Bob!

Bob: No you’re not! I’m not playing along with your destruction of a great joke!!

Rob: Ahh... c’mon. Trust me, you’ll get it.... even more... this time.

Bob: No!! "Timing" has to come after the question!!
Rob: (thinks for moment) Just try it...

Bob: No!!

Rob: (he’s really dying to tell what is now his favorite joke)
Please!

Bob: (louder, very forceful) No!! Drop it!!

Rob: Just once!!

Bob: (extremely loudly and quickly) Fine!!! Whyareyousofunny!!!

(Rob looks at Bob, holding in immense glee and some barely
contained
laughter, an angry Bob stares back, waits for the punch line, is
confused, then gets even more angry, hold pose, direct connection
between actors, like an explosion waiting to happen, long pause,
lights start to fade, Bob turns away quickly, as soon as Bob starts to
turn away...)

Rob: Timing.

(lights out immediately, maybe a glimpse of Bob turning back toward
Rob)

(end)
Kevin Krein

Not That You’ll Ever Know

It’s my own fault that I’ve been waiting for you for so long.

You told me that we’d “run into each other” tonight, and you told me that you get off of work at 8 o’clock, or “maybe earlier,” and it’s that last part, the “maybe earlier,” that’s why I’ve been here for so long. I already finished my drink. It wasn’t even all that great, but I choked it down—the lukewarm, watery latte. There’s only one person who works here that can make a decent latte, and she’s not working tonight. I was hungry too, and I bought a turnover. I ate that already, and it wasn’t anything outstanding. But I rushed through dinner just to make sure I had enough time to get here…and wait. You know, the food is terrible, the coffee is bitter and the atmosphere here is overcrowded. It always is. I don’t see what’s so great about this place—but yet, you and almost everybody else I know always insist on meeting here. And I don’t want to argue.

So I’ve been sitting here, waiting—for a while now. Long enough to have checked the email I didn’t have and look for the jobs that I’m not qualified for. “Eventually running into each other.” That’s only something you would say. But you’ve always been like that—“aloof” I guess is the right word. Maybe not the right word, but it’s a word nonetheless. I don’t really know if there’s a word that sums up what it is you do. The way I’ve always thought you to breeze through life, making mistakes, laughing them off and then letting other people either help you clean up the mess, or just cleaning up the mess for you.

Sometimes they were small things. Do you remember that summer we stayed on campus and you lived down the hall from me? I was sitting in your room, and I did that a lot that summer because you had put an air conditioner in your window, even though you weren’t supposed to—see, there’s a perfect example right there. You could
have faked a doctor’s note like everyone else that lived in our hall and gotten the school to buy and install the air conditioner for you. But you didn’t. You brought your own, you weren’t supposed to and do you remember? I helped you put it in. You needed that piece of plywood cut down and I let you into the scene shop in the theatre to use the table saw.

Anyway, I think we were probably watching your DVDs of the first season of 24, and you turned to me and asked if I had read any John Updike. I said that I had started a book by him once, but lost interest. You told me you really felt like reading some stuff by him, and you wanted to go to the library and check some books out. But you couldn’t. Do you remember why? I do.

You said you hadn’t returned a bunch of books, and you had a lot of late fees. So many late fees that they were calling your parents house to tell them. You didn’t even know where the books were, you told me. So you asked me if I would go to the library the next day and check some books out for you. I did it, of course, but I was hesitant. I didn’t want you losing them, and then sticking me with the late fees. I think I had written down when they were due—made myself a big note—to make sure that they got back on time. I think you were mad that I did that. Like I didn’t trust you or something. And looking back now, two years later, I didn’t trust you. But I didn’t care.

That was the summer you started to drink too much. Do you remember that? I do, because it surprised me—and I was always reminded by the alcohol you hid in your room and the vomit stained jeans you left in the hallway outside of your door. I guess I remembered you as the clean-cut kid I befriended our first year in college. Too much time had passed since then, though, and we lost touch with one another. It was the summer that you broke up with Cara for the last time—do you remember what you told me? You said you had told her you wanted to end the relationship, again, and she didn’t take it well. She started shaking and told you to get out. You told her in your room though.
It was the summer I had to help you move out of your summer room into your room for the fall in the dorm across the street. And see, here’s another example of how you are so aloof to everything—you had left town the weekend we had to move everything out. You told me you weren’t worried about it, and that you’d take care of it when you got back in a week. And do you remember what happened then? The director of our building called you on your cell phone and told you that you had to come back, and that you had to move your stuff out before you could leave. And I remember you were on the phone with your mother, and you were talking about what to do—and I said that I would help. And we moved your stuff over in roughly four hours. Then when we were done, you took me to Hardee’s and bought me a cheeseburger for dinner, you drove me back to campus, and then you left.

I’ve been sitting here for over an hour now, waiting for you. I’ve watched the storm clouds that were gathering in the distance turn into rain. The rain stopped, and now there’s a rainbow. I’ve watched people come in to this coffee shop, and I’ve watched people go. Every car I see approaching is yours to me. Then as the headlights get closer, and as I can see what kind of car it is—as I can see who is behind the wheel, it’s not you. It’s disappointing—this glimmer of hope that vanishes as fast as it appeared, and my heart sinks just a little more. Sitting here, I wonder if you’re going to show up. I keep expecting my cell phone to ring, and to look down and see your name. I wouldn’t even need to answer it to know what you would say. I look at the minutes passing by on my watch, and it’s getting farther and farther past the time you said you’d be here. Then again, you didn’t really specify. And as I stated in the beginning of this letter, it’s my own fault I’ve been waiting here for so long.

I guess it’s at this point that I could address why I’m writing this letter at all. A letter I’m not going to send. Isn’t that the way it always goes with letters though? It’s like a line in a Ryan Adams song that I know you’ve never heard that goes: “this afternoon with you has been something like a letter; the kind that someone writes and never sends.” This is a letter out of boredom I guess—trying to fill this time here while I sit, alone, and wait for you. You’ve never
had a problem with being someplace on your own, have you? I remember that about you. You actually prefer to go places on your own. Sometimes I wish that I could be like that—maybe just a little. But I can’t be left to my own devices. That’s why I haunt these coffee shops nightly. I can’t be left in my apartment alone. I need some form of interaction with others—even if it’s just the woman behind the counter asking me what I want to drink.

But none of this will last that much longer, and that’s why we are meeting, aren’t we? It’s because I’m leaving town forever and I thought that it would be good if I could see you once more before I left. We’ve both been living in this city for so long now. You a little longer than I—you stayed on campus that extra summer and you didn’t move back home after graduation. Do you remember when I asked you for help, last July, when I was trying to figure out a way to make everything work out with moving back to the city? Do you remember when I asked you if I could stay at your place for a while if I needed to until I saved up enough money to find something I could afford? Do you remember the message you left on my phone? Jesus, I wish I still had that saved. I had it saved for so long, and then I lost it. You were so drunk when you left it. I was glad I had turned my phone off the night you left it. It was 2 a.m. when you called me back, slurring your speech into a message. “Of course you can stay with me...as long as you want to.” Or something to that effect. Do you remember that? You probably don’t.

The next day I emailed you to say that I had gotten your message, and you wrote me back and said that I could only stay with you for two weeks at the most. It’s funny how things change when you’ve sobered up. But I guess you meant well. I think you always did.

The sun is setting now. It reminds me of that night when I moved back to town and we got together. It was supposed to be here—at this coffee shop that I’m sitting in—but you called me while I was on my way over to it and told me you hadn’t had any dinner yet and you wanted to meet at that restaurant you used to work at on the river. We sat outside, and you seemed so excited to hear about the job I had just started, to hear about how moving back to the city
went—you insisted on buying me a drink—and I sat there drinking a
glass of wine while you ate dinner.

You were excited, and I suppose I was too. Everything was so new to
me, and I believed I held the city in the palm of my hand. I was so
foolish. Naïve. I realize that now. It’s been almost a year—and this
life that I chose has practically broken me. But you’ll never know—
ever really know. You only know through what I’ve alluded to.
You’ll never really know how cold my apartment was during the
winter. You’ll never know what it’s like to sacrifice financially—to
live paycheck to paycheck. I know you never will know what that’s
like. Your parents will always catch you when you fall. I remember
not too long ago I ran into you here—a night much like this one—and
I was sitting at a table towards the back. You sat down in the other
chair, your drink in one hand, and a book to study for the LSAT in
the other. You told me you wanted to go to law school now.

But I’m getting off track here, and it’s getting later and later and
you’re still not here. We started talking about money that night. You
mentioned you had a large amount coming back from your tax
return. Much larger than mine—and I told you that I was saving
mine—and I suggested that you do the same. You had said
something about buying a bunch of new clothing. “A new spring
wardrobe,” I think was how you put it. Maybe you were kidding.
You started talking about how you actually should use the money to
fix the situation you were in with your car insurance. Do you
remember that? It’s really not the kind of thing someone can forget.
You confessed to me that you switched car insurance providers, and
somehow—you said you didn’t know how—that you had no
coverage. I couldn’t believe it. At the same time, I should expect that
from you. It’s like the library books, only on a much larger scale.
You just sit idly by and wait for someone else to clean up the mess
you’ve created.

You’ve been my friend for a long time—and sometimes I’m surprised
we’ve been able to maintain the friendship. We’re so different, you
and me, and I guess we’ll always be that way. I’ve had to grow up
faster than you. I hate to use the word “reckless” to describe you.
Maybe “fancy free” is a better way to put it. You were the first friend I made in college, the first person I saw when I moved back to the city, and now you’re one of the first people I’m saying goodbye to—and getting back to what I was saying before, a few paragraphs up, is that I really thought we’d see more of each other since we were both living in this city. I guess work kept you busy. And I guess life takes people in different directions. Months went by and I never heard from you. I figured I’d see you at this coffee shop some night, or at the grocery store. I mean, everyone’s got to eat, right? But I never did. It would have been easy for me to call you, or to send you an email—but I didn’t. That’s the pattern everyone falls into, isn’t it? You get lazy, and expect the other person to hold up the friendship.

I have to finish this because I just saw you drive past. You didn’t see me though. And I’ve been sitting by this window for so long now. The conversations of those around me have been getting louder and louder. There’s so much more I wanted to write in this though. It seems I’ve run out of time, and you’ll never know anyway. I guess I started writing this out of boredom—but it’s become so much more than that now. This is everything we aren’t going to talk about here, spilled out on these pages. You’re going to come in here and order your drink, and you’re going to sit down and we’re going to talk about the present, not the past. We’re going to talk about why I’m leaving, and the direction our lives are taking now. We’re going to talk about nothing at all. Those kind of somewhat shallow conversations old friends have about nothing—about people we know, films we’ve seen, records we’ve heard and I’m going to put this letter away when you come through the door, and if you ask what I was writing, I’ll lie to you. You’ll never read this, and we will never relive any of this.

After tonight, this is going to be it for a while. You know that, though, don’t you. But we’ll always be friends in one way or another. And you know why I’m leaving, and you know that I wish only the best for you—

—yes. There you are.
Goodbye and take care, my friend.
Mary Steil

Boys

A heavy blanket of hot air folds itself around me like a heavy blanket this June night.
The parking lot smells of melting asphalt and in front of me, under the street lamp,
My car sparkles like a hot tin can.

Footsteps behind me
my nephews running
Throwing a ball high into the night sky.

Suddenly they are close behind me
And then, laughing, they pass me
One on each side
Throwing the small ball hard into the blackness above.

We stop to watch the bright white orb rocket away from us
fading into a gray shadow
disappearing.

In an instant it reappears, falling toward their open gloves
They yell to each other
Boy voices even higher as they shout
“I’ve got it!” “I’ve got it!”
Running into the shadows
They vanish
But suddenly they are back, chasing each other
Chasing the ball.

I put our hats and bags in the car and turn to call them
We need to leave this dark parking lot, I need to take them home.
But there’s rare magic in their laughter tonight and all I can do is stand still and listen.
Coming Home

When you left, Gretchen, it was April.
The air smelled of warm black dirt
Lilacs, the tender spikes of new grass.

You were just a small lump under while blankets on the stretcher.
When you saw us you smiled and curled stiff fingers into a wave
Then, you were gone.
You didn’t see the bright green leaves flutter like small birds in the
maple trees
Or hear boys on skateboards rolling past your house.
There was no time to say goodbye to the quiet front porch
Your crossword puzzle book
Your shawl.

You were gone
To a hospital, a nursing home
An assisted care facility where you said the other residents were
confused and strange.
You closed your door to them and begged to have dinner alone in
your room.
Then you got sick and spent months in a hospital
When you returned it was to the nursing home with its tiled floors
Wheelchairs crawling crablike through halls that smelled of sickness
and death.
Frightened and confused you cried for help, you wanted to go home.
You cried for the old days, when your husband Frank was alive
When every neighbor was your friend.

Last night, Gretchen, you found a way to leave
Sliding from the soft folds of your skin you shook off the bones that
broke
the legs that wobbled
Then, light as a breeze, floated away from all this.
Frank was waiting, together you said goodbye to this town
Goodbye to the stores you’d never visited
To the neighbors you never met.

Maybe in your heaven, Gretchen, it is a winter day in 1950, late afternoon
A dark swollen sky hangs low over the town.
You step onto your porch, letting the cold air tickle the sweat on your forehead.
Behind you the kitchen is heady with the hot smell of baking.

It is quiet.
Snow cushions the houses
Cars have been put up on blocks for the winter and men walk to work
Disappearing each morning down the hill with their hats pulled low over their foreheads, Woolen mufflers wrapped tight around their necks.

When the men leave the women of the neighborhood wash breakfast dishes
Then wrap their babies in blankets and come together for coffee.
In a mist of cigarette smoke and steam you gossip with your friends
While the children play in the next room.

It’s late now and the homes have disappeared into the darkness
A streetlight breathes a puddle of yellow into the sidewalk and you turn toward the north,
watching for Frank, waiting to feel his arms around you again, his lips on your cheek.

You will tell him about the life you lived without him
How you filled your days watching juncos and bluebirds, jays and chickadees
Cardinals, sparrows, robins.
Wondering if they had partners
Wishing you did.

You learned to use a VCR and ate brownies with tomato slices.
But your heart was sad and quick to find others who suffered.
Like the stranger who came to your door looking for work
You gave him cold water and a saw so he could trim your trees
Then paid him three times more than anyone else would have charged.
And waved as he drove away in an old pickup truck with his pregnant wife.

The young woman you hired to paint your house
When she asked for more money you gave it to her because you admired her
She was a woman with her own business, how brave.
When she finished her work your checkbook was missing.
The paint started peeling in a year.

It’s time now. You open the screen door and stare hard into the darkness
There, a glow of a cigarette, a footstep
Lightly, softly, you run.
Robert Rokke

The Rooster’s Crow

The Rooster’s Crow by Robert Rokke

Chicken of white feather,
Said that he'd do better-
Dipped in ink from head to toe
And, thus, became a black crow.

He flew away, never bound;
Left the farm; roamed the town,
As a bird who was free-
He sat up in a big pine tree!
His caws filled the silent air,
His coal-blue eyes looked for fare.

He stole the wheat!
He stole the corn,
Which got for him—
The farmer’s scorn!

Then winter came! Wind was fierce;
Snow was cold; and scratch was scarce!
(The chicken coop now’d be fine!)
But, hen, his friend, warned: “Watch his kind!”

What should he do? No food in bins!
One must fly up with the winds—
Searching from high abode
For some carrot on the road!

A circling owl swooping round,
Seized a mouse—on the ground,
And brought it to our friend’s face
(Who just couldn’t stand the taste)

“Have a bite!” the rooster said,
Holding it at crow’s bent head.

“No, not now!” “I’m just fine.”
“Maybe some other time?”

“Can’t you eat, my troubled son?”
Asked the wise owl. “What have you done?”

A long pause—the thought came;
“Maybe disguise ain’t worth the pain?”

“I’m no crow!” said the cock,
“I wouldn’t be of common stock!”

(Boo-howl! Boo-howl!)

His tears washed away the black
And then appeared his white back.

Owl’s big eyes gave alarm!
Cock flew back to poultry farm!

To chicken coop by farmer’s door,
Quote the rooster. “Never more!”
Wandering Walleye

(My poem is adopted from Bob Nolan’s lyrics in his song “Tumbling Tumbleweeds”).

I’m a silver senior,
Angling all day long.
Bo-oating and fishing
Never do me wrong!

Sun tops a Minnesota noon.
I sail aloiig and sing a tune:

See them gamely upstream.
Nothing alarms them it seems.
Lonely I’m here with a dream.
Floating along with the wandering Wall-all-eye!

Cares of the past are behind.
Nowhere to go, but I’ll find-
Just how to cast out the line.
Reeling and landing a wonderful Wall-all-eye!

I know when night has gone That a new world’s born at dawn.
I’ll keep trolling along.
Deep in my heart is a song.
Here on the lake I belong.
Drifting along with the wandering Wall-all-eye!
Doug Mead

*Running Out of Time*

It is the same every time I run in the Arboretum. As I hook the leash up to my dog and begin down the path toward the bridge, I check my watch. By the time I reach the other side of the bridge, it’s already 5 minutes earlier.

We take off at a leisurely pace, nothing too taxing, both of us happy for the time away from the world. As we continue down the path, I watch the river run back towards Faribault, slowly drawing branches and trash back to their source. My thoughts toy with current problems, issues at work or in my family, but as the run progresses, topics of the past begin to predominate. On this day, financial insecurity draws my mind to previous jobs where I made more money. I feel a cool breeze of air conditioning on my neck and my view of the surrounding oak savanna begins to disappear. For a moment, I’m back in the laboratory. But there is no happiness there. Slowly the forest reappears, the trees shrinking and the leaves rhythmically collecting themselves and rising up to the branches. My dog is gone now.

As I run down a path whose gravel becomes less and less eroded, I remember reading a story by Kurt Vonnegut about a man who could go back and forth in time. I have never gone forward except to return to the present. And I am bound by these woods and their rules, my time machine.

I charge up the next hill with the vigor of youth, putting out of my mind the thoughts of fear and doubt. My breath shortens but my legs are strong and I’m 20 pounds lighter. When I reach the top, I have the energy to maintain my pace. Checking my left wrist for my watch, I notice that both it and my wedding ring are gone. At one point, it even turns to night and I’m cross country skiing under a full moon. The air turns cold and all I can think about are final exams and papers that need writing. In time, the weather returns to summer. I’m less that half the age I was when I began.
At the fork in the trail, I enter the doctor’s office. The doctor is wearing a white lab coat, like the one I would wear years later, and talking to me in his most sympathetic manner. I know what he’ll say. He’ll tell me that because I have asthma, I’ll never be able to run. I am filled with anger but not at him. I curse my lungs and my body for failing me. I stumble and find myself running in the forest once again but this time I have something in my hand. It’s a kite string. The woods give way to a grassy hill and my father and I are trying to get a box kite airborne. He throws the kite into the air and I take off running for all I’m worth. The kite briefly floats but eventually I feel it bumping along the ground behind me. Box kites never fly well. I feel my chest tighten from the effort and as my father approaches, I try to reign in my rasping breaths to forestall the inevitable trip back to the car. “Just … one … more … try … please.” An ache is growing in my knees. The forest returns and begins growing again and with it returns the memory of my father’s death 12 years ago. I am forty-two now, perhaps the age my father was on that windy afternoon of kites. I have tried flying a box kite with my own son and met with similar success. With the help of modern medicine, I have run for many years now, away from things and towards others. The same lungs that once imprisoned me can now set me free. In school, I learned about the second law of thermodynamics which states that that the arrow of time moves in only one direction and that only with the expenditure of work can order be brought out of chaos. And I am losing my energy. My dog returns, soaking wet from having swum in a river that now flows towards the Mississippi. Flies begin to buzz around my head as if my slowing pace allowed them to catch up. I look at my watch and see that 40 minutes have passed.
Stephanie Vasko

Paying Tribute to Saintes Maries de la Mer

As a young girl, my cousins,
Roped into babysitting me,
Would hold me upside down,
And tell me that they would sell me to the gypsies.
This explains, why at 4 am,
On the Mediterranean coast,
I shook all over,
Calling out to the girls ahead of me
On the pitch black path,
Trying not to wake the gitans on the shore
Sleeping in their caravans until the next day
Of hocking tchotskis.
We huddle on the beachfront,
Strength in numbers,
Bikes strewn on the reeds,
Food of the mosquitoes,
Staring at the city lights,
Mistaking them for the sunrise.
Raven Brandt

The Echo of My Birth

For thirty-one years
the echo of my birth
has sounded,
appearing yearly
a forgotten wave
that breaks upon shore.

The echo soon leaves
to keep time as beats of heart
as I return to spirit
no longer held by time,
lost upon endless shores
untouched by the sound of waves.

Slowly beneath my geology shifts
draws my flesh nearer death
as time rages softly
through rivery wrinkles,
until days and weeks crash the shore
with song and dessert,

Reminders of forgettings’ failure
to remain forgotten,
returned to time by those who
hold one dearly
in fragile memory
of the day they were born.
Time is suffering

Where does all the Time go, some ask?
As if it gathers on some distant shore.

Perhaps it eyes us from afar,
Happy to be free of our grasping,
Happy to have time to itself.

But what use would Time have for more time?
To be Time itself would seem enough.
Yet to be human, for many, is not enough;
To be, for many, is lost at birth.

Humans suffer in their search for more Time,
Struggling to prolong Eternity,
To keep death alive.

They suffer in their search for peace,
Striving to create the perfect moment,
To conform the world to some romantic thought.

It kills them to think about the world’s suffering,
Yet they continue to think…
And to suffer,
Which no one can deny them.

Only Silence, who holds nothing,
Can set their suffering free.

So stop chasing the whereabouts of Time
And be grateful it has gone,
And left silence for you to be.

Heather Westmoreland
Before time became their skin

There exists no right time, but only time itself— naked, empty, silent time, whose voice is not its own, but that of restless souls who imbue it with life so it can once again cradle them inside its cold, indifferent arms; until it sleeps, falling from them like a dead skin, giving birth to timelessness, the eternal skin, the skinless skin, the elastic sheath whose boundaries never settle, whose limitless expanse reminds them of past selves— innocent, curious selves that once tirelessly lived, before time became their skin and illusions became the space they breathed, dimming their undying fire within, too darkened to dry the persistent tears of time, that now burn like salt in aging eyes.

Heather Westmoreland
Immediately after slavery in the United States, the southern white people found themselves without servants. Women who were accustomed to having a nurse, maid, cook, and laundress found themselves without sufficient money to pay wages to all these. There was a great amount of work to be done, and the great problem confronting married women who had not been taught to work and who thought it beneath their standing to soil their hands, found it very difficult.

There were, on the other hand, many Negro women who needed work.

Mattie Green raised me on Saturdays. Mattie Green was the last in a long succession of African American women who took care of me, cleaned our house, ironed our clothes, and cooked our dinner while my mother worked on Saturdays.

Mattie Green was “Miss Mattie” to her white employers, even though she was a “Mrs.,” and I called her “Mattie,” not “Mrs. Green.” It never occurred to me, and no one told me, to address her in any other way, even though I called my best friend’s mother “Mrs. Duncan,” not “June,” and called my teachers “Mrs. Throckmorton” and “Mrs. Estaver,” not “Virginia” or “Jane.”

My most vivid childhood memory is of Mattie Green at the ironing board, humming a tuneless sound, more like a melodious groan than a song, ironing, smoking and watching television. When Mattie didn’t smoke, she dipped snuff, and as she ironed. She would turn behind her, bring her coffee can up to her mouth, and spit
genteelly into it. I was indifferent to her snuff habit, in fact, it seemed natural to me. My own paternal grandmother Mamie who lived in Virginia also dipped snuff, and kept her spit can by her chair in the living room.

When Mattie turned sixty-five, she got her first social security check, and she quit smoking, both on the same day. From then on she chewed gum.

Mattie wore white or pink starched uniforms. She was polite and deferential to my mother, addressing her as “Miz Cool,” though not so deferential to me. Whenever she spoke to me, she said my whole name, “Libby Cool,” and she offered me advice about living at every opportunity: “Libby Cool, the most important thing is to be nice.” “Libby Cool, nice is as nice does.” “Children should respect their elders and not talk back.” When I was in junior high, she called some of my friends “Trash,” particularly Lorrie Butler who thickened her eye lashes with black eye liner and bleached her hair. She called the young black men in the “Quarters” “those damn Niggers.”

Each Saturday as she packed her plastic shopping bag at the end of the day with her empty sardine can, her handkerchiefs, her gum and other assorted belongings, she murmured, “I hope those damn Niggers are quiet tonight. I’m tired and don’t want no foolishness.” Mattie lived one block north of Front Street (now called Martin Luther King Boulevard), the main street of the Quarters, and one block south of the railroad tracks, the line of demarcation between white Homestead and the Quarters. Mattie’s house was surrounded on three sides by weedy vacant lots, and she had put up a chain link fence that she had bought on credit at Sears, which she was able to do because one of her employers was Dave Forrest, the manager of the store.

Few buildings in the Quarters resembled Mattie’s neat sea green house, surrounded by a yard and fence. Every morning Mattie picked up the trash that had blown against the fence, or the broken bottles near the road. Potted geraniums, petunias and poinsettias sat on the front stoop, and bougainvillea bushes sprawled under the windows, which were guarded by a white aluminum awning with a dark green stripe down the left side. A small kumquat tree struggled in the front yard, and straggling lime trees in the back.
Two blocks down on the opposite side of the road, a four story apartment building stood in stark contrast to Mattie’s tidy home. At one time, the paint on the apartment building had been fresh, sea green like Mattie’s house. But the paint now was peeling, with whole patches of grey cement block exposed. Some windows had awnings, others had none, still others with awnings that were ragged and bent, twisted in the last hurricane and never replaced. Stained bedspreads were flung out the windows to be aired on the sills, children’s broken bicycles and deflated balls littered the ground next to rusted cars, tireless, raised on cement blocks. Someone once dreamed of escape in these cars, or at least a cool ride down Front Street.

The children played in the dust because the apartment building had no lawn, worn away long ago by hundreds of running feet and too many cars leaking oil. Or no hose to water the grass so that it withered in the tropical sun. The yard was hard packed sand and gravel, and the black skin of the children would turn white from the dust.

When my mother and I drove up in front of Mattie’s on Saturday morning, the young black men would be sitting on the outside stairs that led to each floor, smoking, gesturing into the clear air. Their legs sometimes dangled over the sides of the steps, or their arms hung casually on a window sill, their backs to the walls. They would talk and laugh together, loud and boisterous. Sometimes they would glance in our direction, and I would look away and study the clouds or the flies buzzing on the dashboard of the car. anything to keep from looking at them.

Mattie brought me candy every Saturday—Mary Janes, gum, hard candies—in a small brown paper bag. If she hadn’t had time to get the candy for me before my mother picked me up, she would make my mother stop by Lucky Market in the Quarters where she got it. My mother would be annoyed, but there was no deterring Miss Mattie. Mattie also brought us a cake that she had baked—Lemon Sponge, Pineapple Upside Down Cake, white cake with cocoanut icing, and Mattie’s specialty, German Chocolate Cake. Mattie baked all of these cakes from scratch. She sold cakes to others, other employers or friends of employers. It was by cleaning houses and baking and cooking that Mattie was able to send her daughter
Nettie Maude to college, and was able to support herself with the small amount she received from Social Security.

Mattie was fifty when she first came to work for us in 1956. She was the granddaughter of a slave. Her mother had cooked on the same plantation in Georgia where her grandmother had cooked as a slave. When she worked for us, she cooked abundantly and cleaned indifferently. But she stubbornly insisted on doing certain cleaning chores her way. After moving to our new house on 302 Terrace, my mother had finally saved enough money to put down indoor-outdoor carpet in the kitchen. The terrazzo floor was hard and cold. Even after mother had the carpet installed, Mattie insisted on wet mopping the floor the same way she had mopped the terrazzo. She thought it was foolish to put a carpet in the kitchen, and insisted that the only way to clean anything was soap and water, or a broom. Not vacuums or special chemical cleaners. The kitchen carpet turned a muddy grey, and never seemed to dry completely, but my mother let Mattie have her way.

Mostly Mattie ironed. She ironed for five hours, with breaks to start the spaghetti sauce, or to spit in her can, or to answer the phone. She ironed my father’s white dress shirts. Mattie ironed my mother’s crisp white uniforms. Some of them were polyester and didn’t need to be ironed, but Mattie insisted anyway on ‘just touchin’ ‘em up a bit.” Mattie ironed my dresses, custom-made by chain-smoking Mrs. Brown across the street.

The clothes that had been washed and dried during the week sat folded but wrinkled in our laundry basket waiting for Mattie. Immediately when she arrived she began sprinkling the clothes with the Pepsi bottle fitted out with a nozzle, like from a small watering can. Sprinkling was essential in those days when clothes were mostly cotton, and before the steam iron.

As Mattie ironed, the smells living in the clothes after months of washing and wearing them were released. My mother’s “Youth Dew” perfume, my father’s “Old Spice” cologne, Mrs. Brown’s cigarette smoke. Yet the smells seemed cleaner, and the lines of our everyday living were pressed straight.

I would like to write something romantic about my relationship with Mattie, something idealized, like I learned basic homely truths
from this rustic philosopher, this steadfast maternal presence in my life. But that romantic vision would have emerged out of my white delusion. Now I can only write the truth. Mattie did have advice for me, always, and frequently unwelcomed. If she heard a harsh tone in my voice when I talked on the phone, she would say afterward, “Don’t nobody deserve to be talked to that way, and she would turn back to her ironing. She reminded me to be nice, and dress in a lady-like way. She was visibly distressed when I started wearing jeans out with my friends, and was horrified when I wore jeans to church, even if we were going to cut pine boughs to make wreaths at Christmas. Church was the House of the Lord.

Mattie and I did not have long soulful talks, and I did not sit at her feet while she captured the history of Florida and the lives of her people in folk tales. No stories, no rich didactic narratives. She spoke in an imperative shorthand, and her statements were almost always clichés. ‘The Lord don’t give you more than you can bear” and “They time will come”.

But Mattie Green did give me a great gift, in addition to the cakes and the meals and the clean clothes. It was with her on Saturdays that I could do nothing. That I needn’t perform or accomplish, except to “be nice.” I could just sit on the floor and watch television. Or sit in the chair and read a comic. I could just be. She did not measure or weigh or count my existence the way that most others—particularly my mother and my teachers—did. That grade or that report, or that grammatical way to talk, and that way to hold the note. Mattie’s simple philosophy embodied an impossible world of love that my church preached and my parents echoed—”Do unto others” and yet I always knew there was a subtext. “It’s good to be nice, but it’s essential to be smart, successful, and beautiful.”

One November afternoon when I was home from college on Thanksgiving break. I drove to Mattie’s house to pick up a cake my mother had ordered. As usual, her yard was tidy. The metal awnings were faded, but in working order. The poinsettias and begonias guarded her door. As usual, I avoided the eyes of the black men sitting on the steps of the apartment building. Still sitting, as though they had never left in all those years.

In the thirteen years Mattie had worked for us, that November afternoon was the first time I had stepped into her house. The small
front room, the living room, was cluttered with newspapers, plastic flowers in vases, greeting cards, photos, some in frames, some stuck inside other frames or propped against lamps, bending and yellowed, wanting protection from humidity and the many hands that traveled through those rooms. Hand-embroidered pillows, Bibles, laundry baskets of clean wrinkled clothes and clean folded clothes, dirty clothes covered discreetly by bath towels and, of course, the omnipresent ironing board, propped up like a sentinel protecting the mess. On every surface where there was no clutter, there was a different cake, a cake carefully arranged on a plate, the plate resting on a dish towel or a bath towel. Dark chocolate layer cakes, white cocoanut layer cakes, lemon sponge sheet cakes, pineapple upside down cakes, and her special German chocolate cakes. Lemon meringue pies and key lime pies, made, I knew, from the limes in her back yard. Chocolate pies with graham cracker crust, and sweet potato pies.

It was a room I had never lived in, and that my mother wouldn’t have allowed. Shoe boxes with slips of paper spilling out—the words to a hymn, or someone’s address, cardboard boxes with dusty shoes worn at the heels. Dresses hanging in the doorways. Hats with veils on the backs of chairs. A choir robe over the couch. Dust resting on everything.

Mattie coaxed me to sit down on the crowded couch, and she disappeared into her bedroom. She came out with a shoe box full of photos and began talking about Minna Lou and her cousin Henry who had been in the Great War. And Ella, her sister’s girl who had just visited her. She broke her arm this summer, fell off a fence.

These names meant nothing to me, but I sat patiently and listened because Mattie’s fast-forward voice spoke an unnamed urgency. What seemed to matter to her was that I would hear their names, and she seemed not to think for a second about the fact that I had no idea who these people were, or cared, or that in all the years she had cleaned our house I had never thought to visit her or deigned to walk with her to the door, except perhaps to carry her rubber overshoes when her own hands were too full and my mother was tired, or about the real reason I had come, to pick up the cake. I was a visitor in her world for that moment, and it was enough. She brought
me in, unequivocally. The mess’~ room was acceptance. The domestic clutter was grace.

I finally had to go. I walked with her into the kitchen, where more cakes rested on the table. The counters, however, were clear, ready for more mixing and sifting, while every cupboard door was open, revealing bowls and flour and bags of sugar, waiting patiently like the iron. Only a brief respite in a life where work was life.

In the early seventies when I was in college, I starved myself, almost to death. At 5’5”, I weighed just over 100 pounds. Men thought I was beautiful. Women envied me. I loathed myself, perhaps dieting so that I would disappear.

In order to maintain my weight, or weightlessness, you could say, I ate little. I ate one scrambled egg and a piece of dry toast for breakfast, a glass of cranberry juice at lunch, and a lettuce salad for dinner. Every day, for years. Mattie was still coming on Saturdays, and when I came home on vacations, she never said anything about my weight, although our family doctor put me on the scale one afternoon when I picked my mother up from work. But Mattie watched me carefully as I sliced a piece of lemon sponge cake or chocolate sheet cake or gingerbread cake one inch wide and two inches long. I allowed myself that small piece every day until the cake grew stale and my father would box it up and take it to Sears where he worked. Mattie would just watch me, and say every time, “You need more cake than that, girl.” I did need more cake than that.

It is 1995 and I am listening to Kate Rushin read from her poem “Black Back Ups.” I am weeping.

At school
In Ohio
I swear to Gawd
There was always somebody
Telling me that the only person
In their whole house
Who listened and understood them
Despite the money and the lessons
Was the housekeeper
And I knew it was true
But what was I supposed to say?

I am weeping, but I am not weeping for Mattie Green. I don’t even know the date that she died, or where she was buried. I am weeping for myself. I need to be forgiven, but Mattie is dead. I need for her to be alive so that she can do just one more thing for me. Because, you see, Mattie Green’s work is never done.

Aunt Jemima on the Pancake Box
Aunt Jemima on the Pancake Box?
Aunt jemimaonthepancakebox?
Auntj emimaonthepancakebox?
AintchamamaonthepanCakebOX?

Mama Mama
Get off that box
And come home to me “The Black Back-Ups”