Swerve

I’m sorry about that time I ran over a piece of wood in the road. A pound of marijuana in the trunk and a faulty brake light—any minute the cops might have pulled us over, so you were edgy already, and then I ran over that piece of stray lumber without even slowing down. Thunk, thunk, and then the wood spun behind us on the road. Your dark face dimmed even darker, and you didn’t yell at first, only turned to look out the window, and I made the second mistake: What’s wrong? That’s when you exploded. You’re so careless, you don’t even think, what if there had been a nail in that damn thing, you yelled, your face so twisted now, and ugly. And I’m always the one that has to fix it whenever something breaks.

I’m sorry, I said, and I said it again, and we continued on our way through the desert, in the dark of night, with the contraband you had put in our trunk, with the brake light you hadn’t fixed blinking on and off, me driving because you were too drunk, or too tired, or too depressed, and we traveled for miles into our future, where eventually I would apologize for the eggs being overcooked, and for the price of light bulbs, and for the way the sun blared through our trailer windows and made everything too bright, and I would apologize when I had the music on and when I had it off, I’d say sorry for being in the bathroom, and sorry for crying, and sorry for laughing, I would apologize, finally, for simply being alive, and even now I’m sorry I didn’t swerve, I didn’t get out of the way.

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Brenda Miller is the author of the essay collections Blessing of the Animals and Season of the Body (2002) which was a finalist for the PEN American Center Book Award in Creative Nonfiction. She has received five Pushcart Prizes, and her work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including Fourth Genre, Creative Nonfiction, The Sun, Utne Reader, The Georgia Review and Witness. She co-authored, with Suzanne Paola, the textbook Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction and she serves as editor-in-chief of the Bellingham Review. (Brevity, 2009)
On the Occasion of my 20th Wedding Anniversary

When I eat breakfast at the kitchen table, I see a Ziploc full of something crumbly and gray that looks like pot. My eleven-year-old son explains: “These are mouse bones and a mouse skull.” He removes them, places before me a tiny criss cross pile of miniature sticks so delicate I don’t dare touch them. But I do. The teeth are periods packed tight inside the sharp jaw like a zipper. Femurs are drumsticks for gnats. Inside the skull Georgia O'Keefe swoons. We marvel at the durability of bones.

I keep my mother’s white satin wedding shoes on a bookshelf in my study. Inside they say “QualiCraft” on a pink leather footbed. The toe box is pointed sharp as a fresh pencil tip. They fit me, just, though walking in them proves impossible without pain. I imagine my mother wincing up the papered aisle, toes pointed piously towards the blonde Lutheran cross ahead. Back in my hearty black sandals, my feet settle softly, spread out with all the room they need.

My husband and I fought once, terribly, in our dining room. It was winter’s limp end—snowbanks slouched outside the window, the children pressed between plaid flannel. I used the “f” word and he cut the heart out of me by insulting my writing. Infrequent fighters, we struggled to perform. I cried, ran out the front door and down the street to our town’s vintage movie theatre where I promptly fell asleep in the back row. It was a comedy.

I sit on the front porch reading a book of prose poems. “I rose from the dead just to see what’s for dinner.” The way the sunlight hits the grass reminds me of Ella Fenske, an old lady who lived next to my grandparents in Minnesota. Her entire yard was devoted to potato gardens, front and back. She wore plaid zip up housedresses and hobbled in sturdy brown shoes. For birthdays, she gave us cards with two dollars inside, and signed them, “Neighbor Ella Fenske, $2.00.” She didn’t want us to forget.

The traditional gift for the twentieth wedding anniversary is china. We order takeout: fried wontons, Hunan shrimp, five-spice tofu, plain lo mein (for the kids), honey chicken (for the kids). Our champagne flutes rattle on the glass patio table as cars cruise past. The kids drink tumblers of milk and attempt to photograph us but the sun proves too bright for clarity. Our daughter eats her fortune cookie but hands the wrinkled fortune over to us: “Well done is better than well said.”

My grandfather wore flannel shirts softened limp by Downy, read National Geographics with a magnifying glass, and made butter for a living. My grandmother grew fat red tomatoes, wore navy pointed Keds, and let God decide. Their daughter, my mother, married a man she shouldn’t have whose Buddy Holly glasses masked greater troubles ahead. They tried to warn her but reckless won. My mother grew gaunt, her collarbones so fragile and fine it seemed possible they could snap at any moment.
My husband pulls up in the Mazda and finds me by candlelight on the porch. Next door a neighbor rumbles his trash bin to the curb. Two young women bike by on fat tires, slow, helmetless, talking easy and quiet. “It’s summer,” my husband says, “and yet, not quite.” We talk for a long time about our trip to Quebec City, the new burrito place down the street, our son’s loose tooth and does he really still believe in the tooth fairy? “There’s a chance,” I say. Our dog barks once at a squirrel then lies hounded at our feet. We both squint down the street to see what happens next.

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Anne Panning is the author of two short story collections, as well as the novel Butter. She has won The Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction, and is currently at work on a memoir, Dragonfly Notes: A Memoir of Motherhood and Loss. She teaches creative writing at SUNY-Brockport. (2013, Brevity)
Sunday

A porch swing sways, and the chains in the eyehooks screwed into the rafters let out their lazy creaks as if this is a day of rest for them, too. Or nearly so. They still have to support the weight of the neighbor who pushes ever so lightly with her foot and feels the breeze on her face and listens through the window screen to the radio playing dance music in her living room. The faint sounds of big band tunes: “Moonglow,” “In the Mood,” “Begin the Beguine.”

Somewhere down the street, a screen door taps against the frame. This is one of those afternoons when the air is so still that sounds travel. Someone is listening to a Cardinals’ game on the radio; someone else is turning the pages of the Evansville Courier, or the Vincennes Sun-Commercial, or maybe last week’s Summer Press that they’ve finally found enough time to read. The pages rattle just a bit, but not in an unpleasant way, more the way a soft brush sounds when swept through a girl’s long hair.

And maybe it’s that girl who sighs, daydreaming about the boy she loves.

Uptown, a ceiling fan turns slow circles in the sundries store where the girl’s mother sits behind the counter using a file on her fingernails and watching the hand on the Bubble Up clock click off another minute.

Across the street, in front of the TV Repair Shop, a boy and girl sit on the hood of his Impala and watch the color set that’s always on in the window even though they can’t hear the sound. The boy has a Pall Mall between his lips, but he hasn’t lit it. He keeps flicking the lid of his Zippo open and then, after long intervals, closed, and the woman in the sundries store closes her eyes and remembers her husband when she first fell in love with him and how he was never in a hurry, how she thought they had all the time in the world.

“Baby,” the boy on the Impala says, and he draws out that long “a” sound as if it’s the sweetest taste he can ever imagine, and he wants to hold onto it as long as he can.

Eventually, the Impala inches away from the curb. The woman in the sundries store switches off the ceiling fan and turns the deadbolt lock on the door. Her daughter writes her boyfriend’s name over and over on a piece of notebook paper, her handwriting all loops and tails. The baseball game ends and the radio goes off, its hot tubes ticking as they cool. The newspaper slips to the floor as the reader dozes. The porch swing, empty now, sways a time or two and then is still.

Call it a sleepy town. Call it a dead town. My hometown where once upon a time on summer Sundays there was time, if we wanted it, to listen. I hear the porch swing creak, the radio play, the baseball announcer murmur, the girl sigh, the newspaper pages rustle, the ceiling fan turn, the clock hand click, the Zippo open and close, the boy say, “Baa-ay. Oh, Baa-ay.”

I hear it all, and my listening tells me this: when it comes to our writing and our living, nothing is too small a thing.

The lock turns at the sundries store. The woman’s sensible heels make gentle tapping noises on the sidewalk as she starts toward home, taking her time as she strolls past the houses where baseball games and newspapers and porch swings and lovesick girls have gone silent. So slow and dreamy her
pace until she climbs the steps to her house, takes the doorknob in her hand. Just before she turns it, she whispers to herself, *Baa-by, Baa-by.* That word. Just before she goes inside, she sighs.

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Lee Martin is the Pulitzer Prize Finalist author of *The Bright Forever* and other works of fiction and nonfiction. His stories and essays have appeared in Harper’s, Ms., Creative Nonfiction, The Georgia Review, The Kenyon Review, and elsewhere. He is the winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council. He teaches in the MFA Program at The Ohio State University, where he was the winner of the 2006 Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching. *(Lascaux Review, 2014)*
Onomatopoeia

Sometimes, the English language gets it right. The “b” in “subtle” is a nice touch. However, a language this wordy is bound to get it wrong sometimes. The word “unnecessary” is too long, for example, and shouldn’t “onomatopoeia” sound like the concept it describes? The word could be shorter, too, like “hum” or “buzz.” Maybe it would stretch to two syllables, like “murmur” or “yodel.” Unfortunately, English is immune to logic. Since we’re talking literary terms, here’s a metaphor for you: English is a thrift store donation bin piled with castoffs from other languages. Although onomatopoeia sounds like a fancy Greek dessert or the sound a dog makes while dreaming, it’s a fancy term for a sound-effect word, often highlighted in poetry.

Most of us encounter onomatopoeia, that gangly peacock of a word, in middle school. My memories are tinted with the same industrial beige the classroom walls were painted. Mrs. Wagner is drawing words in large cartoon fonts on the chalkboard. ZOOM! CRACKLE! Her eyes are wild with manic energy as she faces the class and calls for more examples.

I remember dutifully writing the word in my notebook, marveling at the numerous “Os” in my sloppy cursive. A smarter student would have puzzled over the inconsistency of those O sounds. Across the room, my friend Damien was playing with his father’s wedding ring. The whole class period, he spun it on his desk or twirled it around a pencil.

After class, he told me, almost boasting, that his parents were getting divorced, although that didn’t explain why he had the ring. It was a plain, dull gold artifact from the world of adults. It wasn’t a cursed object, but it carried a shadow of tragedy, and it certainly eclipsed anything I owned in terms of value. I didn’t ask to touch it, partly because I sensed he wouldn’t let me. My parents were still married, although their fingers had swelled to the point where removing their rings was impossible anyway.

The next day, and the next, Damien carried the ring like some personal hurt to be nursed and fiercely protected. Maybe it was a show; back in middle school, everything had a whiff of performance, but when he started bouncing it off lockers and chasing it down the hall, he ignored everyone, like we were a crowd in a dream. I couldn’t imagine my parents divorcing, but from the expression on his face, his was a tragedy that dimmed the world.

Our classroom floors were an invincible, off-white tile, and Damien started bouncing the ring off them, chasing it around as we settled into our desks. I’d cringe every time, but the ring never found its way into a heater grate, never vanished into some grimy corner recess. Each time, he retrieved it. Mostly, I marveled at the sound the ring made against the floor—it was a persistent, golden tone that hovered in the air while splitting it. Even decades after I’ve forgotten Damien’s face and voice, I can almost see that sound, can picture that particular vibration in the air.

Some memories have their own orbit, and this one’s is annual, although I’m surprised each time. I’m an English teacher now, which means I get to draw the word on a chalkboard, make sound effects, and ask my students for more examples. If education is a cycle, a circle, or a series of loops, I’ve been drawn in—someday, one of my students will teach the same lesson, double-checking the
textbook to make sure they’ve spelled the word correctly. But within the loop of my thoughts, there’s the sound of Damien’s father’s wedding ring, and I’m not sure why it’s endured when so many others have faded. I suppose it’s a distinct sound I’ve never heard since. As an object, the ring itself is an easy symbol, although its meaning seems inverted in this case. What’s the opposite of commitment and infinite love? Maybe the sound remains because it’s a reminder that literature’s terms and lessons don’t always apply cleanly to real life, that every moment is ripe with chaos and entropy, a bouncing flash of gold with a boy scrambling after it.

But one beauty of literature is its density. The word “ring”—simultaneously a noun and verb, easily stretched into an adjective—offers numerous meanings. It reminds us that language captures time and space and sound while transcending each, that the universe can be shaped meaningfully on the page—and if we listen hard enough, there’s a perfect word for everything.

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In the summer of 2012, Robert Yune worked as a stand-in for George Takei and has appeared as an extra in commercials and movies such as Me and Earl and the Dying Girl, Fathers and Daughters, and I’m Your Woman. Yune’s fiction has been published in Green Mountains Review, The Kenyon Review, and Pleiades, among others. In 2009, he received a writing fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. In 2015, his debut novel Eighty Days of Sunlight was nominated for the International DUBLIN Literary Award. Other nominees that year included Lauren Groff, Kazuo Ishiguro and Salman Rushdie. His debut story collection Impossible Children won the 2017 Mary McCarthy Prize and was published in October 2019 by Sarabande Books. (The Normal School, 2021)
The Cruelty We Delivered: An Apology

I.

We didn’t know what to do—your rocket energy sending Thai monks into fits, as they chased you through the Chicago temple, hands hiking robes like dresses, flip flops slapping callused heels. Your trouble made us roll our eyes and turn our back when you wanted nothing more than to pal around with us. You were a boy after all. So were we. But boys are cruel with neglect, crueler than the violence our hands are capable of.

II.

We said cruel things, too. In our secret circle. In the temple library, where dust coated books about suffering, where furniture went to rot in the damp back room. Someone said, *he smells like barf.* Someone said, *Thai white trash.* I said, *No wonder his parents dumped him.* How could we know you hid behind a shelf of Buddhist books, patting a stray cat that made a nest in the hollow of a cabinet? How could we know what was to follow? If we did, would we have stopped our tongues?

III.

*He’s lonely,* your grandmother told us. She sold curry-fried chicken and sticky rice on Sundays, like food carts in Thailand. After Buddhism class, we handed her crisp bills for sustenance. *Play with him,* she said, flipping drumsticks over on the grill, her hair kept under a shower cap. *Free food,* she said.

We were working class boys. Free was free.

IV.

But your play was different. *Watch,* you said and launched a rock through a temple window. *Watch,* you said and trampled through the monks’ vegetable garden, tomatoes staining your Converse. The monks would come then, your name a battle cry from exasperated mouths. What vows might they have broken if they caught you? You were, I’m sure, the thought that stirred them out of meditative moments.

We won’t lie. It was funny: robed men in a mad dash after a sliver of a boy bounding bushes and Benzes. But your laughter—how can we forget that cackle that scattered crows?

V.

Once, you showed us a kitten, a ball of grey in your dark hands. We circled you. We cooed. We tried to touch it, but you yanked it away, held it to your chest. *It misses its mother,* you said and delivered it back to its litter.

VI.
Our parents said you hung yourself. This was years later when we got married and we had children and we lived in other parts of the world. We weren’t surprised. We nodded. But I bet we thought about our cruelty and shrunk into ourselves.

I can’t shake this image though: the time you stole holy water and dumped it over your head, the dripping glee on your face, your grin a half moon, your teeth blinding white. I remember that, my head hanging low, wishing forgiveness in the form of rain.

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I Go Back to Berryman’s

All of the streets in the trailer park are named for fruits or for dead presidents—Cherry, Lincoln, Peach, Garfield—and if you walk them and peer through windows with parted curtains, you will see love being made, hate being made, bodies being discovered, bodies being forgotten, smoking and drinking and swearing and Bible reading, you will see people doing their best, and you will see that sometimes their best is not that good, and you will see rooms where welfare mothers rock babies and sing If I needed you would you come to me?, and you will see double-wide lawns where men like my best friend’s father try to exercise the gay out of their sons by placing a bat in their hands and lobbing underhanded tosses when what their sons really want is to bring the stereo on the front porch and choreograph intricate and well-intentioned routines to top 40 pop, and you will see Renee apply tanning oil to her frail leather body as she sprawls across the driveway from where she has moved her dented pick-up pocked with bullet scars, you will see her repositioning her beach chair to follow the sun in a circle and rotate 20-20 front and back, her body so crisp and even in next week’s open casket, you will see sober fathers and drunk fathers and belt-bearing fathers and fathers who hide child pornography in secret folders on their computer, and you will see mothers like mine knocking over patio furniture in fits of manic rage, or mothers who hang confederate flags alongside American flags, or mothers who pray for drunk drivers and who pray for terrorists and who pray for their own recovery from afflictions of the mind and heart and body and soul, mothers who erect roadside memorials across town for sons and daughters squished between liquored tires, you will see old women whose children do not call or do not call often on hold with phone psychics from whom they seek guidance and answers but also sheer company, you will see old men who think of the rifles in their closets when a black or a Puerto Rican walks by but also when they catch themselves in the mirror or have too much time to think or drink, you will see motherless children riding rusted bikes and scooters and falling on cracked pavement, their knees and elbows scuffed and skinned like the scratch-off lottery tickets their fathers allow them at the liquor store checkout, you will see teenagers who consider themselves to be much older pass loosely rolled joints in the woods, the girls flashing their tits to the guys who ask nicely or who only ask or who simply insist, guys with acne on their backs which you could connect to resemble an outline of the continental forty-eight, guys who claim they’re allergic to latex, and you will see their younger brothers and younger sisters who sneak through the woods trying to find the hiding spot, and you will hear the older siblings yell, Get outta here you retards, go home, and you will see a pool the size of a postage stamp in the middle of the park where children are taught to swim, to dive, to walk don’t run walk don’t run walk don’t run, where these children compete to see who can hold their breath the longest but also to see who has the most bruises, kid fears, war stories, dead cousins, and you will see me leaving the pool despite having just arrived because I’ll never be comfortable taking my shirt off in front of anyone who isn’t a doctor, and even then, and you will see me walk back to my trailer on Lot 252, my dry towel dragging behind me like a tail that collects gravel and cigarette butts, and you will follow me into my house where my mother is having sex with her boyfriend, you will see their door close as I take off my sandals, you will see me contemplate going to the fridge—I am so thirsty—and decide against it because the kitchen is too close to my mother’s bedroom, and I don’t want to prevent her or interrupt her or make her think of me, and so instead you will see me walk into my room, where I will write in my journal on a blank page: I feel homesick but I’m writing this at home.

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Vincent Scarpa earned his MFA in fiction at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, TX. His stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in StoryQuarterly, The Austin Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, and other journals. He tweets at @vincentscarpa. (Brevity)
Reflections, While Sitting in Traffic

How I remember your voice on the phone but not the last thing I said to you, the last thing you said to me, how I didn’t leave my husband, how I went back to Miami last summer and was having tostones at La Granja when I saw your brother sitting there having pollo con papas, how he didn’t even recognize me, how he looked older, like a man with a job, how you would be proud to see this man, to know him, how he looked so much like you it hurt to see him sitting there not recognizing me, how your car flew down the Palmetto Expressway doing ninety, your first DUI, your second, your suspended license, those last moments, your eyes your lips your hands your breath your blood alcohol more than three times the legal limit, how I thought if there is a God, how could there be a God when on the morning drive to work every day, every damn day having to see and not see and drive past the skid marks and the shattered glass and the pieces of you, of us, all over the concrete, how could there be a God when the only person who knew about me was your brother and now he doesn’t even recognize me, sitting there sipping his Coke through a straw and me searching his face and wanting to shake and shake him, because what does it mean to be gone from his memory, to be the only one left to carry this, what’s left of us, and how I didn’t leave my husband, how once, you and me waiting in line for some roller coaster at the Miami Youth Fair, we joked about dying a tragic roller coaster death and you said, That’s life, Ma, everybody dies, and I laughed and said, Not me, I’m gonna live forever, and you said, Forever is a long long time, how after, on my drive to work, I would listen to the morning traffic report on Power 96 and count the accidents, four-car pileup on the 836 after a motorcycle, and southbound lanes closed on the Palmetto Expressway after an overturned vehicle, and traffic delays this morning on I-95 after, how I have not spoken your name in years even though my sister-in-law unknowingly gave her second baby your name, and every time I see his baby face I think of you, the babies you will never get to name, how that morning, before, after, I listened to the traffic report like any other day, how I sipped my coffee, annoyed at all the rubbernecks making me late for work, how while I was cursing the minivans and the SUVs and the flatbed trucks merging into my lane, you were there, in your car, your eyes your lips your hands your breath your blood alcohol more than three times the legal limit, how once, after, long after, I pulled over on the shoulder of the Palmetto Expressway in the middle of rush hour traffic and asked and asked and asked, did it hurt were you scared did you tell her did she know did you still love me, how the world kept on, all the cars on the Palmetto still moving, and everybody just kept living and driving to work, how once, months before I left you for the last time, standing on the quarterdeck of a cruise ship, wind whipping my hair as I sailed away from the Port of Miami, I watched you chase the ship on your Jet Ski, wave-jumping like you had a death wish, and I already knew I would leave you, and after after after, how I was angry and then glad and then angry that your wife or your brother, nobody, ever got one of those DRIVE SAFELY memorials on the highway, how there had been a funeral service without me because how could I explain who I was, that it had been you and me for so long, before and after, your brother complicit, his memory sustaining us, how I needed him to see me, how your wife would get to be your wife always, forever, even though forever is a long long time, even though she was already with someone else, before and after, and how I didn’t leave my husband, and how your brother, keeper of your secrets, the only time he ever called was to tell me you were gone.

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The Perfect Day

The images are still with me thirty-five years later. The weather in the Northeast Michigan woods on Grand Lake is warm, heavy with fragrance of late summer, cedar pines, sandy soil, the water clapping the edge of the land. The turquoise sky turns to twilight with a soft glow of lavender rising.

I trot through the sand to the neighboring lot to see Evelyn, my mother-in-law’s best friend. A heavy-set woman, she wears a chartreuse bathing suit while sitting at her picnic table, her plump arms spooning out large scoops of potato salad for six children.

She greets with me with her warm-body hug, comforting and friendly. In conversation, she confides to me she once had seven children, but years ago her youngest boy was hit by a motorist when the driver failed to stop for the school bus. He was killed instantly in front of her house. Evelyn tells this story from a dream in her eyes, her body emptied of tears long ago as she accepted this strange life, wearing a shroud of quiet grief. As a young woman, my stomach twists. How can one live with such sorrow and still dice onions, boil eggs and chop potatoes for a large family?

Evelyn turns to me, smiles, and with her hand over her forehead in a salute to the sun, shading the last shards of light from her eyes, she says, “Isn’t this a perfect day?”

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Lisa Hadden is a writer living in the forests of Mid Michigan and received her M.A. in Creative Non-Fiction from Central Michigan University. She previously published in Riverteeth’s Beautiful Things, and other journals. Lisa is currently working on a book of memoir essays entitled, “Deerfield: A Refuge of Memory.” (River Teeth Beautiful Things, 2021)
Family Portrait

Yesterday, when I was riding the train north from Chicago back to the suburb where I live, I happened to look up from the newspaper I was reading just as the tracks veered up alongside the back of a faded brown brick building, where I saw two children seated at a kitchen table in one of its windows, with their homework spread out before them and their mother standing close behind them, leaning over, pointing to something on one of the pages. In that instant that the train clattered past, all three of them reached out, as if in one motion, without even pausing in what they were saying, it seemed, to steady the papers, the books, the pencil boxes, the glasses of milk that had started to slide. It was nothing, really. Just a flash of an image and then I was hurtling onward and they were far behind me, and yet there was something about that image that made it stay with me all the way home.

All the way home and all the way to this moment, in fact. Like a song that I can’t seem to get out of my head. The way they all reached out together automatically like that, the three of them, there in their home inside a building that looks like a sigh with a roof, where a parade of faces blurs past in both directions outside their window day and night and their kitchen table dances a jig several times every hour to a tune composed by the Chicago & Northwestern Railway. The way they all reached out together like that, the three of them, holding on.

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Laura S. Distelheim’s work has appeared in *Arts & Letters, Briar Cliff Review, Creative Nonfiction, Florida Review, Iowa Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, North American Review, Shenandoah*, and elsewhere, and has received the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award, the Richard J. Margolis Award, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund Grant, and the Faulkner Society gold medal for essay. *(River Teeth Beautiful Things, 2019).*
The Pillory

A replica of a pillory in a replica of a Colonial town. My right arm into the right hole, my left arm into the left. My neck went right through the center. I laughed, not because there was anything remotely funny about being hung up in a cross, but just because it felt good to be away from home, school. The marketplace steamed with activity. The worn patch of grass beside the horseblock, the boxwoods by the cobbler’s shop, the flies buzzing above the tidy piles of dung. And it wasn’t any wonder that the faces before me receded in the glare. It wasn’t any wonder that I stopped thinking of my mother and her neck aches, or my father and his call for constant motion whenever he was home from work, even though we never got anything done. I was giving the wood exactly what it wanted. No one was going anywhere. And it was a relief to admit to what was what.

I didn’t think of the other boys once punished like that. I didn’t give a thought to the eggs, fruit, mice, and shit thrown at their faces. There can be no outrage more flagrant, Hawthorne said, than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame. But was it shame I felt? I only knew that I was tired of holding myself up. I wanted to cave in and so I caved in. Which was why, after I’d grown used to my new position, I pulled myself out and forgot I had a body.

Or took three steps backward and fell a hard five feet to the ground.

It wasn’t me, then, who dropped like a bale of hay from a burning barn. It wasn’t me lying on my back as the crowd looked on. Or me, for that matter, covering my crotch with my hand, as if I’d already known that they were hungry for murder.

A little girl screamed, and I was relieved to hear that scream tear through the heat.

Relieved, too, to hear my father walking out of the crowd. Relieved to see the arm he raised, for wasn’t that him reaching out to help me up? No, that was the crowd in that arm—I can only see it from here—and he was setting his face for what he didn’t want to do, which was to spank me as one spans an errant child, not a 12-year-old boy whose voice was on the verge of changing.

Once, twice: who can remember such things? Did I feel it? Did I send myself away? He hit me as the crowd looked on, even as his eyes said, who am I doing this for? Aren’t you my son? He stopped and he blinked, as if he hadn’t known where he’d gone. Then led me to a tool shed on the periphery, where he cleaned off my knee with a handkerchief he’d pulled from his pocket.

I don’t have to say that I spent the rest of the day swimming back and forth across the motel pool until the chlorine stung. I got up. I got up in the way we all get up against the arm that wants to keep us down.

Maybe that’s what my father already knew back then. And maybe that’s why he brought it up at the dinner table thirty years later, though I’d forgotten it, as I’d forgotten many things by then. His eyes looked through me, past me. He spoke as if that memory were just one more thing he’d been wearing around his neck, and the straight-ahead gaze it required of him was no longer serving him at this late hour, what with the bills stacking up on his desk, my mother in Ranmar Gardens, and the empty rooms of the apartment that needed cleaning.
Which was why I didn’t throw the balled-up napkin in my hand, though I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to that temptation. I put my hand over my father’s. And looked away from the face that didn’t need my forgiveness.

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Paul Lisicky is the author of six books including *Later: My Life at the Edge of the World*, one of NPR's Best Books of 2020, as well as *The Narrow Door, Unbuilt Projects, The Burning House, Famous Builder*, and *Lawnboy*. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic, BuzzFeed, Conjunctions, The Cut, Fence, The New York Times, Ploughshares, Tin House*, and in many other magazines and anthologies. He has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the James Michener/Copernicus Society, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where he has served on the Writing Committee since 2000. He has taught in the creative writing programs at Cornell University, New York University, Sarah Lawrence College, The University of Texas at Austin and elsewhere. He is currently an Associate Professor in the MFA Program at Rutgers University-Camden and lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is at work on a memoir *Animal Care and Control*. 