The Journal

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Dartmouth College

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The Journal is a biannual publication for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Dartmouth College. We showcase the strongest creative and analytical work produced by current MALS students as well as MALS alumni. We believe by selecting and integrating work from all four of the program’s concentrations, we’ll promote intellectual engagement, fruitful questioning, and honest discourse within the realm of liberal studies.

We are currently accepting submissions in all MALS concentrations. We are looking for creative (short story, short non-fiction, poetry, photos) as well as analytical pieces. If you have any questions, comments, or are interested in writing a feature piece, please email either Kathryn.A.Moritz@Dartmouth.edu or Jamaal@Dartmouth.edu
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Dear Reader,

We are extremely happy to present you the first issue of *The MALS Journal*. We received a plethora of smart, sensitive, and insightful submissions. All were read and selected anonymously. We thank you for your enthusiasm, your readership, and we encourage you to continue the conversation. We would also like to thank Wole Ojurongbe, Donald Pease PhD, and Carole Webber, for their support and encouragement as we embark on this new and exciting academic endeavor.

Katie Moritz grew up in rural Vermont, fifty miles south of the Canadian border. She finds meaning in the art of writing and pleasure in the act of reading. At the University of Vermont she studied English and Religion. While attending university, she traveled to India, the Dominican Republic, and Italy. Last winter she went to Alaska to start her thesis, a collection of short stories that take place in Vermont. She believes honest writing, a curious mind, and a commitment to seek out knowledge can change an individual as well as the world. She is currently a teaching assistant for Writing 2-3 and plans to pursue a career in writing and pedagogy.
Jamaal comes from an eclectic background. He attended four high schools, Manchester Community College, New England College, and he is now a MALS student at Dartmouth College. His passion for social justice and multicultural education has taken him to Jinotega, Nicaragua and Monte Christi, Dominican Republic. While traveling abroad he engaged in service learning opportunities that touched his soul and changed his life course. Because Jamaal has moved often, he feels the margins of society must be better discussed and better understood. He hopes to use his many perspectives to help engage the Dartmouth community in new kinds of academic dialogues. As a lover of all things different, Jamaal hopes The Journal will evoke a fascination for the Other as well as help readers identify, engage, and comprehend all that makes us each unique.

The following pieces have something to say. Although these voices address different experiences of poverty, authenticity, nature, gender, role identification, socio-political hegemonies, and cultural histories, they all, in their own way, push back. They push back at what is expected, at what is easy to define. They push back to remind us as readers, learners, and human beings, that these voices exist, that these voices are important, that these voices have something to teach us.

We should listen.

Happy Reading,
The Editors
Contributors

Chelsea Tremblay grew up in the mountainous rainforest of Petersburg, Alaska and went to Washington State University in the rolling hills of the Palouse. There she received a B.A. in Political Science and Women's Studies. After caffeinating and working for a year in Seattle, she made her way to the Upper Valley to join the MALS program. Her general priorities in life are to learn as much as possible, to be an actively compassionate citizen of the world, and to enjoy every sandwich.

Sara Crane Persechino is a third-year MALS student with a Creative Writing focus. She is passionate about reproductive justice, and currently works for NARAL Pro-Choice New Hampshire. In her spare time she enjoys exploring the outdoors with her husband and working in their gardens.

Jackson Shutlz is an alumnus of Washington State University, where he received a degree in Women's Studies in 2010. His research interests include oral histories of marginalized communities, the triad of men's violence, access to information technologies and the uses of social networking in community creation, men's role in sexual assault prevention, representations of transmasculinities, and technology and internet law.

Karl Yaeger grew up in Helena, Montana and received a BA in Political Science from Western Washington University. After spending time with Tobias Wolff during his visit to Dartmouth, he wanted to write a piece on why his voice, in particular, is beneficial for young writers to hear.

Henry Paige is a second term MALSian on the Cultural Studies track. He joined Dartmouth after teaching middle school in Boston Public Schools for 8 years. Under the name of H. Hassan Paige, he has published a book of poetry entitled, “Prometheus deMannequin in Looking for Love” as part of a series he is currently working on.
Thea Calitri-Martin is a musician; teaching elementary school music during the day and playing classical/jazz French horn wherever she can. She is following the creative writing track in the MALS program.

DeWayne Hayes (MALS ’13) is a political and corporate speechwriter who came to MALS in 2010 to study creative writing. He currently is working on his thesis, a novel of humorous fiction called The Eskimo Menace.

Keith Chapman grew up in Illinois and graduated from MALS in 2012 with a concentration in creative writing. He now works as a writer for Dartmouth College. He hopes to one day dedicate himself completely to writing fiction.

Preston McBride ’11 MALS ’13 (Comanche), born in New Jersey, majored in Economics and minored in Native American Studies at Dartmouth College. He is on the Cultural Studies track in MALS and is currently taking his last class. In his free time he enjoys the outdoors, kayaking, fishing, hunting, snowboarding, and time with friends. His academic interests lie at the intersection of health, disease, death, and US Federal Indian Policy, namely genocide. He hopes to pursue his doctoral degree in American History. His piece “Eugenic Sterilization in America” was written for Professor Pano Rodis’s class, Figuring and Disfiguring: An Introduction to Disability Studies, in the summer of 2012.

Cinnamon Spear is a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. She grew up on the Reservation in southeastern Montana attended Dartmouth where she majored in Native American Studies. She tried Montana State University’s Post-Bacc Pre-Med program but soon quit and returned to Dartmouth to study creative writing and share her voice. Writing is Cinnamon’s sanctuary, freedom, and also her duty. In her life, she flies back and forth between poverty and privilege and in this exposed bi-cultured hybrid state, feels it is her responsibility to teach the world about the Northern Cheyenne people as well as teach her people about the world.
Eight hundred Ndns and one white girl
Packed into the parking lot of the Tribal Office
Waiting for the annual firework show
A three-legged mangy dog with tits to the ground
Hobbles in front of us
“Whose dog is that?”
Nobody’s. Everybody’s.
BRUNO LATOUR, DONNA HARAWAY, AND THE MEANING OF MODERNITY

CHELSEA TREMBLAY

There are times when the potential totalizing scope of a crisis calls for introspection by the self as well as by the entire system responsible for the crisis. Climate change is one such occasion. At once a political, social and ecological crisis, it is the kind of phenomenon that demands more than mere response. Rather, it begs for a moment of analysis: a time to wonder how it is possible to have brought our world to the point of such irreparable change. Therefore this paper will step out of the milieu of immediate politics and broadly question the assumptions and actions which have brought society to this point. In order to do this, the paper turns to the work of two science studies scholars, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, who not only question the very foundations of Western thought but bring those questions into the political immediacy of the now.

First and foremost, it is necessary to interrogate the foundational assumption that within Western thought, human beings exist in a separated, elevated space. This is easy to say but it is much harder to accept. Rarely are human beings thought to be just as much a part of the ecosystem as any of the other animal species. In many ways they are no better or worse than any other group of organisms trying to survive. However, this is difficult to internalize because it means rejecting the anthropocentric model of human activities and motivations while at the same time recognizing the possibilities involved in fostering a more holistic relationship with a world that has largely been subsumed under our own interests.

The inability to move away from an anthropocentric viewpoint is particularly evident when the question of how to take action fails to break new ground and instead relies on old answers and solutions. Although proposed solutions still rely on the tools and mentalities that have gotten human beings to this point of crisis, this reliance has great transformative
potential. It allows humans to question the very essence of who they have constructed themselves to be. How human are we really when we rely on machines to help us live and depend on an environment that is becoming more hostile to our presence? What are the constructs that have brought us to this point? In what ways are these constructs already being contested? Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway both attempt to deconstruct the process of modernization: what it means to be human, our place in the world, and the way we frame those ideas. In examining assumptions of modernity, these scholars question the identities and affiliations of modernity. They question universalization and create categories of organization while simultaneously disputing their relevance. Therefore, is examining the Natural warranted? And if so, does it inadvertently perpetuate a sense of separation?

**Where We Are: Conceptualizing Modernity**

In his essay “War of the Worlds,” Bruno Latour interrogates the modernist separation of culture from nature and the way it allowed for universal humanism disguised as imperialist Western domination. This false sense of unity is addressed in Latour’s concept of nature. He states “If cultural differences shined so vividly, this was because the unity of nature provided the common denominator” (306). Reason decrees that this unity is the epitome of progress and that any opposition would be retrograde. However Latour contends that this illusion of global unity is actually crumbling and that what were once considered facts are now up for debate. In the search for “the objective origin of the common world” that would serve “thus to draw nearer to unity” (308), Latour actually sees modernization, despite being responsible for colonizing and appropriating cultures worldwide, as the common denominator.

Latour’s modernity created separation between society and nature in a similar way that the age of Reason took up the role rendered to religion and the natural order. Latour argues, “For if nature had the immediate advantage of imparting unification, it also had the serious drawback, in the eyes of its very promoters, or being fundamentally devoid of meaning” (308). Meaning is relegated to the human realm. It does not exist within the realm of nature and so counterbalances the assumption that everything
that could be controlled would be done so by human action alone. With nature thus alienated from the realm of control, Western society has to create something that will help locate themselves in the world.

Haraway’s essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” searches for meaning beyond the organic, into the technical. When she writes “In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense – a ‘final’ irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the ‘West’s’ escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space” (316), the loss of the natural gives way to the cyborg. A product of the age of modernization, the cyborg, “[S]kips the step of original unity, or identification with nature in the Western sense” (316). Hence Haraway looks past the age of modernity and instead focuses on what can be composed out of the remnants of an age she sees as fully in the past.

**Conceptualizing Categories: Resisting the Lure of Universalization**

Haraway sees power in creating identities built on fragments. Arguing that the last two centuries of science have effectively, “[R]educed the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science” (317), Haraway sees the organism as one boundary that has been thoroughly transgressed. Another boundary that could lead to construction of a cyborg identity is the distinction between organism (animal-human) and machine. This is threatened by the liveliness of our machines as we become more inert (317). The third boundary, between the physical and non-physical, is a subset of the second between organism and machine. Calling attention to the way miniaturization has altered our technologies to the point that power is to be found in the smallest of our creations, Haraway highlights the way the most theoretically advanced scientific fields focus on the ethereal qualities of the universe. In all, Haraway sees the modern developments in the scientific realm, be they the “sun-worshippers” or those whose work has blurred the human and animal line past the point of return, as helping complicate the categories our earlier scientific discoveries helped establish in the age of Reason.
Latour sees the age of Reason as punctuated by the Scientific Revolution. He also believes that categorization is one of the supposedly infallible “facts,” given to society by the discoveries of the age. Yet as time goes on and science becomes further focused on the micro levels of analysis, the similarities between what were once considered wholly separate entities are becoming more apparent. More so even than the differential phenotypes that first made the imposition of various categories an accepted trend. Latour believes that the field of science has now gotten to the point that:

Facts are no longer the mouth-shutting alternative to politics, but what has to be stabilized instead. To use another etymology, “objects” which had been conceived as wholly exterior to the social and political realm, have become “things” again, that is, in the sense of the mixture of assemblies, issues, causes for concerns, data, law suits, controversies. (312)

Latour refers to these conflicts over what were once constituted as facts, “Science Wars.” When facts become a matter of debate in the scientific community, issues of truth become something settled in the political realm rather than the scientific, which puts the entire notion of a singular truth in question. For if science, the arbiter of progress and modernity, the voice of Reason, fails to find common ground, how can it maintain its foothold as the assumed norm?

Haraway reaffirms Latour’s assertions that technologies are created with a very direct social role in mind, saying, “Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings” (327). As the scientific consensus changes, so too will the social order. Where will these changes lead and what is precluded when attempting to predict something that is heretofore almost impossible to even imagine?

Even as the categorizations discussed above are challenged and even transgressed, the tendency to create universal understandings may still exist. Historically, the universalization of experiences and concepts was used in a pseudo-colonialist attempt at creating a world of a singular
ontology, one major truth, and a collective concept of what it means to be human. Latour sees the role of Reason as a universalizing concept that attempted to supercede any other cultural norms. No matter how different individual countries or cultures were, so long as they accepted the concept of Reason, any conflicts that appeared could be overcome. The only task left was to convert populations who resisted modernization, or at least give the illusion of inclusion. “Diversity could be handled by tolerance – but of a very condescending sort since the many cultures were debarred from any ontological claim to participate in the controversial definition of the one world of nature” (307).

Without the pretense of this singular kind of culture, what will rise from the ashes? Is Latour right, that the post-modern fragmentation is exposing a war of the worlds now that, “Peace, the hypocritical peace of modernity, is well and truly over”? (313) What other, perhaps less fatalistic, perspectives on this dissolution of a common humanity may be pieced together from the fragments of modernity? Modernity advanced due to the radical break between “us” and “them” (309). This binary eventually became an overwhelming force that appeared on the brink of achieving total domination. While the problematic nature of that imperialist attitude does not need to be elaborated here, it is worth asking: is it possible for that phenomenon, a singular concept shared by the majority of the world, to be free of imperialism and domination? Could a global ontology be created that is built on valuing the fragmentation and differences that come from rejection of universal identity? Could recognizing the value of fragmentation be enough to create a politics of affinity?

Haraway’s cyborg could be one attempt at such politics. From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. (319)

Because Haraway’s concept of identities is built out of fragmentation, her idea of the cyborg has revolutionary potential: “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed
political work” (318-19). She argues that many alternate conceptualizations of the world outside of the Western dominant rely on essentialist reductions, and so she calls for a politics of affinity. By referring to the same acts of unity-through-domination or unity-through-incorporation that Latour highlights in his piece, Haraway calls for embracing the fluidity available in this construction of identities.

Fragmentation and politics of affinity do not need to maintain the individualist, or even isolationist, narrative that were so popular in the age of Reason. Haraway is fully aware of the revolutionary potential of bonding through similar interests rather than biologically determined characteristics. “Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection — they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party” (316-17).

Rather than simply seeking access to ontologies that have already defined and limited the possible implications of a particular identity within exclusionary economic and political systems, the cyborg is liberated to follow its desires beyond organic/mechanical, beyond human/non-human nature. Haraway articulates that the stakes for this sort of politics are high:

In the traditions of ‘Western’ science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other – the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination (316).

Therefore, how these barriers are policed and the consequences of their material forms ultimately dictate their true level of power. In order for a concept like the cyborg to become reality, what kind of political transformations will have to be made possible? What other potential identities or realities are implied in these arguments? Is it asking the impossible to even imagine these questions?

In the spirit of asking the impossible, it is worth moving forward to interrogate the “why not” of the cyborg and any companion identities that may be created, whether in opposition or partnership? Haraway sees
potential in the future, saying “It remains to be seen whether all ‘epistemologies’ as Western political people have known them fail us in the task to build effective affinities” (321). When Haraway elaborates on the creation of a political kind of unity that is not based on appropriation, incorporation and taxonomic identification, she is calling for a specific kind of political action, imagining a symbolic new kind of identity and then carrying it out into the world. (321)

This is the work many feminist and cultural studies scholars attempt, yet Haraway claims, “Most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artifacts associated with ‘high technology’ and scientific culture” (319). The inability to look beyond categories when it comes to producing new kinds of politics and identities is the first sign that the groundwork laid by modernization in the Western world may be too deeply entrenched. How could those categories still be so easily reinforced, even among the very populations attempting to confront them? Are the forces that created the conditions for those rigid boundaries changing, or are they merely taking on a more progressive image as a kind of survival technique? The conceptualization of nature and the natural, primarily by sheer omission, is one way the old assumptions are being carried over.

Rethinking the Natural

Thus far this analysis has been about the way modernization has altered the perspective of humanity itself in relation to the rest of the world. Yet both Haraway and Latour also question the anthropocentric vision of that perspective. Renegotiating the vision of humans as the dominant force in the world, the politics of affinity means including in these reflections every element previously relegated to non-human, be it in either organic or mechanical form, in a way that does not prioritize the experience of humans. Renegotiating the political to become inherently more than human is an integral part of this new society.

How this would come about is another matter. The cyborg dispenses the concept of holistic identities and it is not necessarily born out of the organic. Does that mean it does not have room for the reconception
of nature that will come with the kind of epistemological shift moving past modernity? Latour sees the current presentation of the natural as the common ground from which all other differences sprout. If the fragmentation that has created the conditions for the creation of the cyborg renders prior constructions of barriers impotent in their ability to contain the concepts they were originally created for, is nature being omitted from these new conceptions? After all, nature was a concept constructed as a way to give meaning to what it meant to be human, leaving the natural as a category open for interpretation. Latour’s essay leaves the division rendered useless without offering an alternative. Haraway’s concept of the cyborg is firmly situated outside of the realm of the natural, leaving it to be inserted as a part of a fragmented identity. Is that enough of a representation? If the cyborg is an example of the human becoming so reliant on the mechanical properties in life, is the biological aspect of the human what connects it with the concept of the natural? The elimination of those differences, such as between animals and humans, or between plants and sentient beings, would constitute a radical departure from the way we currently organize the natural order.

**Past Post-Modernity**

Haraway and Latour strive to find a way to make sense of the post-modernity stage in which we find ourselves. Whether there’s hope is up for debate. Haraway is more explicitly affirmative, stating that the purpose of the essay was written in “The utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” (316). Latour, in decrying the hidden war of civilizations that has waged without acknowledgment, sees opening the reality of war up to the acknowledgement of the public is the only way for it to end. For Latour this means throwing aside the veneer of tolerance created under the age of Western dominance. For Haraway it means constructing partial identities, such as the cyborg, out of affinity.

Now that the Age of Reason has devolved into the Age of Fragmentation, where does that leave us? In regards to globalization and the subsequent end of the Modern age, Latour argues that, “Going global or worldwide has become a serious problem to be solved, and is no longer
the obvious solution to all conflicts as it was before, during the times of modernization” (313). Globalization, according to Latour, was made possible by the tools of the post-industrial economy. The pervasiveness of these new technologies and the transformative effect they have had on the economic system corroborates Haraway’s assertions that “Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (319). As Globalization changes economic systems, the people within that system also change. The dialectic previously imagined by Haraway and Latour then encourages a kind of awareness which will ultimately increase the likelihood of a global awakening.

The power of conceptualizing boundaries does not come from focusing on the perimeter. Instead, the power lies in imagining what is situated between, or even beyond, the limitations by which we are constrained. Thus, in the spirit of embracing the unknowable, we must continue to ask questions: Is the cyborg too heavily implicated in the products of Western modernization? Do the cyborg’s roots in Western development mean its existence will inherently remain a purely Western possibility? Or is that a presumption built on a problematic idea of Western technological supremacy?

Although both Haraway and Latour are products of the West, they write critically of it. Perhaps this is because they each refuse to take for granted common Western assumptions. Yet what prompted this questioning? Is it recognition of the improper positioning of Western dominance, both in geopolitical and in metaphysical terms? Or more fundamentally, does this questioning signal a much more serious charge: is the Western model itself a fallacy? If so, is questioning the West’s dominant position the first step in transforming and re-positioning power?

Ultimately Haraway and Latour are calling for an end to universalized identities. However, is it possible to create a universal identity built on anti-universalism in order to move beyond the façade of tolerance into a truly hybrid society where neither the organic nor the material are inherently prioritized over the other? Where divergent epistemologies are not marginalized for the sake of the dominant? How can this new conception include nature if we, as a society, have reduced its status as a mere backdrop to what actually matters? Will the impending ecological crises of
climate change spur a greater recognition of humanity’s place in the global ecosystem? Or will it merely reinforce our proven tendency to dominate?

Works Cited

From April 23rd to April 27th, Tobias Wolff, the noted short story writer and memoirist, visited Dartmouth College as a Montgomery Fellow. Wolff is not only a widely published author, but also a well-respected teacher (he currently runs a graduate fiction workshop at Stanford). As a Montgomery Fellow, he visited undergraduate English classes, met with faculty, gave a free lecture to the campus and community, and participated in a Q&A luncheon with graduate students. I attended two of the events: the campus lecture and the graduate student lunch. After hearing him speak over the course of a couple days, I better understood Wolff. He is a consummate pro, so to speak, and he cares deeply about writing—both as a craft and vocation. While these traits certainly aren’t reserved for Wolff alone—lots of writers are good writers, lots of writers care about writing—they are by no means commonplace. Given this, Wolff’s visit to Dartmouth was important because it allowed young writers to listen to a seasoned writer. Even more importantly, it allowed young writers to meet someone who still believes in writing—its depth and breadth, its capacity and potential.

I first read Wolff’s work in the anthology Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules, edited by David Sedaris. On an idle Sunday, November of my freshman year, I purchased the book and decided that I’d read it over the course of the afternoon. By the end of the collection, somewhat text-lagged, I was pleased to see that the final piece, Wolff’s Bullet in the Brain, was a short one. I read the story—though not all that carefully—and, upon finishing it, froze; I felt as if someone had told me something of grave significance, yet I hadn’t been actively listening. I reread the story. After the second reading, I nearly dropped the book on my lap. The short story—six, maybe seven pages—hit me in an immensely personal, basal way. It told me things I’d always wanted to hear, but I’d never even known that I’d wanted to hear them. I was entranced.

At its core, Bullet in the Brain is about how life’s trajectory can
be quietly numbing, if not entirely deadening. It demonstrates how passion can be usurped by banality, how one’s vigor can fizzle without one even recognizing that it is doing so, how life can become extraordinarily mundane. The piece offers no real suggestions on how to live, but, to my nascent readings, it offered one distinct admonition: do not squander the miraculous reality that we are living, breathing, human beings. There are a million ways to deride this notion as ‘touchy-feely,’ or melodramatic, but I think that these sorts of reactions are precisely why the story struck me. Modernity and contemporary culture want you to think that life is bullshit, that there is no such thing as a beautiful life. In an era that values sex over love and money over family, becoming disillusioned with life isn’t an idle risk; for many it’s almost an inevitability. That is, unless one chooses to live and think otherwise. That was my introduction to Wolff.

* Wolff is not a romantic. When he speaks on writing, he does not use flowery language, nor does he soliloquize about the art form. Rather, he comes off as a pragmatic: writing is essential—a must—but it’s not some Club Med. He also has the air and aura of a military man, which he was. He’s composed, though not rigid, and extremely measured with his words—which ones he uses and the pace at which he says them. He is also startlingly honest. For example, during the question and answer portion of the community lecture, a student asked, “What specific advice can you give to young writers?”

He paused, ran a finger along his mustache, and said, “I really don’t have all that much advice to give. But, I can tell you, be patient.”

I smiled at this response. I smiled because I’m sure that that’s what he actually believes—that he really doesn’t have all that much advice to give, and that writers do just need to be patient. This sort of counsel may not be all that moving, but that is his point: writing is a process, an endeavor, and no golden nugget of wisdom can make it otherwise.

Wolff has some of the least complicated prose among contemporary writers. Rather than embellishing his work with complicated syntax or using frequently-send-the-reader-to-the-dictionary diction, the beauty of the writing is in its simplicity. It is tight, unadorned, much like how he speaks. However, the weight of his work tends to rest in its subject matter. Many of his stories detail only a routine scenario and a protagonist who
must make a clear decision. Yet there is little moralizing in any of his work. (Much of his excellent novel Old School is about a prep-school student’s decision to plagiarize a short story. However, I doubt that anyone who’s read the book feels all that different about plagiarism itself. The moral of the story is the story. In other words, it’s descriptive, not prescriptive lit.) In this sense, I can’t help but to think that Wolff sees the world—and life—in largely basic terms: as people, we have lots of choices and it is our duty to, hopefully, make the best ones.

On Wolff’s third day at Dartmouth, fifteen graduate students, myself included, attended the Montgomery luncheon. As I had only been at Dartmouth for a few weeks, I had little idea of what to expect at such a function. I was delightfully surprised. The event was casual as well as intimate. We sat around a living room eating panini and asked Wolff whatever was on our minds. It basically felt like any regular English class with a teacher we liked. After the event, one of my creative writing classmates summed it up best: “I felt like I was talking with my uncle, not the guy Leo DiCaprio played in the film adaptation of his memoir.”

It’s very interesting to watch a room full of young writers talk to a celebrated author. In a sense, it’s inherently pleasing (think LeBron shooting around with a college team), yet, on another level, it’s also a bit unusual. As Wolff alluded to during the community lecture, what can an accomplished writer really tell a young writer? Other than be patient, keep doing it, be committed? In a 2003 interview with the Paris Review, Wolff described writing as such:

You probably won’t be very good at the beginning, but you will become better, and eventually you may actually become good. But it doesn’t help...to measure yourself against prodigies like Conrad or Crane or Rimbaud. There’s always going to be somebody who did it better than you, faster than you, and you don’t want to make comparisons that will discourage you in your work.

Even though I read this interview prior to the grad student lunch, I didn’t fully understand the sentiment until I watched him fielding questions from a small, engaged group. Wolff’s responses were affable and char-
acteristically thoughtful, but, make no mistake, he certainly didn’t pretend to offer writing’s equivalent of a get-rich-quick scheme. In response to a student who asked how to decide a good ending to a story, he simply said, “I think a lot—and just choose what’s right.” As someone who wants to write professionally, I then understood why the opportunity to have casual time with a writer like Wolff was so valuable: I have a long slog ahead of me; this fact is unavoidable; this personal slogging is the only thing that produces great works.

I am happy I got to hear him speak on writing in such a personal environment. It helped me better understand that meaningful, life-changing art isn’t made by any sort of foreign deity. It’s made by regular people who put a lot of commitment, energy, and feeling into their craft. And for beginners, there is no substitute for spending time with these people—those who have devoted themselves to the craft of writing. Because from their devotion, once in a great while, comes something extraordinary. And it can make one tremble, pause, and reexamine oneself. This is the power of literature. It is irreversible.
I Am From...

Henry H. Paige

I am from the hidden mysteries teaching the history of the beauties of human atrocities.

I am from multiple pieces of past lives seeping through portals to the family I’ve been born to;

I am from loud, boastfully energetic thanksgivings leading into even louder Christmases collecting a family community closer knit than the baby blanket I still hold, 24 year old stuffed animals succumbed to sibling tug o wars and high moon pillow fights ending in crying nights.

I am from a nana racing through religions searching for saints unaware of the fact that she was one until I rubbed her feet on my graduation day;

I am from the matriarchal matriculation of a square mother reminding me, “be smart, be wise and remember when you go out, you represent not only you, but your family, your community and God too…”

From peanut butter and jelly sandwich tea parties on the floor of a furniture-less flat to the frantic phone calls placed to state police who ask, “Mr. Paige have you called your mother yet?” all after 3-week disappearing
acts.

I am from four generations of males rooted in a renaissance-tap-dancing, truck-driving, Hall-of-fame-tennis-coaching, Henry Edward Paige;

From brother to brother to brother; to me; to brother to brother; to son. From a round father, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

I am from a preconceived pressure cooker slow simmering perfection seasoned with a
dash of feeling “not quite adequate enough,” a pinch of “good but not great,” and a dab of “could be better.”

I am from a yin and yang of social constraints and the confused bumbling brain manufactured by not knowing where to fit in

I am from downtrodden districts, private education, self-inflicted isolation, identity-displacement and subconscious-sentiment-confrontation challenging all my beliefs and defensive techniques,

From hiding hurt feelings from harsh criticisms said with seemingly good intentions.

I am from misplaced blames and displaced angers lingering long after constantly changing circumstances force reconfigurations of my forgotten regulations when mental manipulations of survival strategies learned quickly along secluded street blocks where “you talk white” fights sent me home with bruised ribs, black eyes, and a damaged spirit that had me participating in gang life, witnessing drive-bys, knife carrying and bear-
ing burners too hot to get caught with while skipping through shadows to elude Harvard Square skinheads on roller-blading Thursdays.

I am from glorified violence usurping spiritual silence with a “ride or die” youth and a “me against the world” mentality while car racing down Blue Hill Ave and American Legion Highway on half flat tires.

From the fulfillment of base desires, alcoholic tendencies and drug addictions that chase away woes through dry tears supermen decline to shed.

I am from the heavens and hells built by the upheaval of utopian ideals shattered by a society that loves to torture its citizens with what’s real; dreams not deferred, but dashed upon sidewalks like porcelain from the roofs of Lenox St. projects.

I am from a legacy refusing to lose;

From a fishing community flying 1000’s of miles over sea swells searching for a better life in war-raged America, the land of the beautiful, free and dictatorly democratic.

I am from the “revolutionary gangsterism” and political pimping pumping through the veins of east coast road trips, from Toronto to Miami creating French Canadian connections, the type of web that genes of greatness are blessed in.
More importantly…

I am from the depths of hopeful faith that those dreams may be born again into budding trees with leaves enough to shelter those who believe that life is too rough.

From winds spreading seeds and whispering,

“Struggle not just to Survive, but to Succeed…”
**Foreword**

This project has been an incredible journey. I’ve had an amazing opportunity to delve into the stories and psyches of seven incredible transgender individuals, as well as one non-trans partner. The stories they told me were both inspiring and heartbreaking.

One of the challenges I faced in writing this piece was the inadequacy of the English language for discussing gender. For example, one of the interviewees prefers to use the gender-neutral pronouns ze and hir. These pronouns look and sound unnatural, but that same awkwardness can make a pointed political statement about how ingrained the binary gender paradigm is in US culture. Adequate language likewise failed many of the individuals I interviewed. Nearly all of them had great difficulty describing how they felt prior to transition, and no one had any succinct way to describe the powerful force that drove them to come out to their partners and families.

Regardless, the stories contained herein provide a wonderful and varied collection of experiences and emotions about transitioning. Some of the interviewees were forthcoming and conveyed a great urgency in sharing their history, while others were more shy and reserved. I believe these reservations come from a place of pain — for they who lost the most in their transitions had more difficulty telling their stories. Although transitioning was a painful process for some, these incredible people wear their emotional scars like a badge of honor and conveyed a deep desire to share their experiences with others.
The Cast of Characters

Alex is a female to male gender non-conforming transman. Ze lives in Florida and prefers the gender-neutral pronouns ze/hir. Ze is studying to be an emergency room nurse.

Enzo is a female to male transman in his early forties. He grew up in Chicago, but currently lives and works in South Carolina. He works as a therapist.

Gertrude is a male to female transwoman in her late forties. She lives in Albany, New York. She has two children, and her oldest son graduated from high school this year.

Julie is a male to female transwoman in her early fifties. She lives in Philadelphia and has three sons. She still lives in the same neighborhood where she grew up. She is an artist and graphic designer.

Mary is a cisgender\(^1\) woman. She lives in Philadelphia with her (now) wife, Julie. She is a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.

Samuel is a female to male transman in his mid twenties. He is a graduate student at Washington State University. He is studying social work and hopes to counsel LGBTQ youth upon completion of his degree.

Shauna is a male to female transwoman in her early sixties. She lives in Burlington, VT and was an engineer at the University of Vermont. She just retired in the spring and is looking forward to spending her retirement advocating for transgender youth.

Yoel is a female to male transman in his mid thirties. He lives in Philadelphia with his husband and three children.

Introduction

The term “transgender” is used to describe the participants of these interviews, with the exception of Mary. All of the individuals I spoke with use a completely different set of terminology by which to refer to themselves. I recognize that defining individuals with such a homogenous label is problematic, but this history is geared toward those outside of the transgender community, and the speakers have given me permission to breach etiquette for the sake of clarity. In this sense, “transgender” is used as an umbrella term for anyone who feels uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth and has taken steps to challenge that gender assignment.

\(^1\) Someone who is cisgender is someone who lives and identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.
Transitioning from one gender to another is always a complicated process. There are medical and legal difficulties that must be considered, and there are also social barriers that must be crossed. While many transgender people recognize their cross-gender feelings at an early age, they are not always presented with the information or resources needed to make an informed decision about physically transitioning their bodies. Transfolk often suppress their feelings and desires for years in order to better assimilate to a dominant culture that encourages prescribed binary gender roles. When a transperson transitions later in life, there are often more intricate family and social aspects to consider. Marriage, children, work and community can serve as sources of support or sites of devastation for transitioning adults.

Romantic relationships become especially complicated during a transition. Although frequently conflated, gender identity and sexuality are two separate and distinct aspects of a person’s expression. Gender identity describes the way a person perceives their own gender, while sexuality describes to whom a person is attracted. When a person transitions from one gender to another, issues of sexuality become unclear. If a person transitions from male to female, but continues to be in a relationship with a woman, is this formerly heterosexual couple now a lesbian couple? Does gender transition impact how the couple perceives their relationship, and how others perceive their relationship? These questions are simultaneously simplified and complicated by the following stories, as each speaker tells his, her or hir tale of transitioning while in a relationship.

**There was a Conflict Within Myself**
The first step in coming out involves coming to terms with one’s gender identity and deciding if the cross-gender feelings one has are strong enough to act upon.

**Julie:** As a child, I knew I wanted to be a girl. Fifty years ago that wasn’t something people talked about, so for about 48 years I put all of those feelings aside. In my adult life, I still felt that I wanted to be a woman, but I did all I could to suppress those feelings. I was married to a beautiful woman, and we had three wonderful kids. Why would I change anything?

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2. Transitioning typically involves social, medical or surgical interventions to make one’s body more closely resemble one’s desired gender. Some transfolk use hormones, some seek genital reassignment surgery, others utilize clothing and mannerisms to express their gender identities.
Shauna: Although I didn’t tell anyone I wanted to be a woman until I was 53, I have very clear memories of wanting to change my gender as early as five years old. When a relative would say, “You’re turning into such a handsome young man”, that just rubbed me the wrong way. “No!” I would think, “Can’t you see? What’s wrong with you?”

I knew there was a conflict within myself. I couldn’t put a label on it and I couldn’t define it, but I found myself pushing the boundaries of gender to find where the limits were, to figure out what constituted the difference between men and women. I spent years trying to clarify that in my own mind, and I was never successful.

Making the decision to transition is a task that takes deep personal insight and self-reflection. Sometimes, looking so deeply into oneself reveals an innate need to transition. At other times, looking outwardly and realizing the inaccuracy of societal stereotypes can be the spur one needs to transition.

Gertrude: I first knew something was wrong when I was a child. I always felt like I didn’t belong in my body. When I went through puberty I was devastated: I felt so betrayed by my body. In high school, I figured out that I was good at sports and I ignored those cross-gender feelings for a lot of years. Yet the older I got, the less happy I became with my body. I wanted to be a woman, but I couldn’t find any other people who were like me. I thought that transexuals3 were always gay men first. I knew I wasn’t gay; I just wanted to be a woman. When I finally realized that stereotype was wrong, I knew I wanted to change myself.

While most trans people transition neatly from one gender to another, there are some transfolk whose genders are very fluid. Enzo is one such person. He embodies a very ambiguous gender presentation, and strangers never know whether to call him “Sir” or “Ma’am.” In his professional life, Enzo uses feminine pronouns, but in his personal life he prefers masculine pronouns.

3. Transexuals (also transsexuals) are individuals who fall under the umbrella term of transgender. Often, but not always, “transexual” indicates a person who has medically or surgically altered their body.
Enzo: I knew at four years old that I was a boy, but it laid dormant for a lot of years. I realized I might be transgender around 1997, but I didn’t start self-identifying for another ten years. I started hormones four years ago, at a low dose. I really like the effects, and I’ve been able to go slow and autonomously choose how I want to transition. I live in a fluid existence because I have a professional life where I’m still seen as female. I don’t know if I’ll ever “completely transition” to pass as male all the time, but it gets really tiresome to stay in the middle.

While making the decision to transition can be extraordinarily difficult for anyone, it can be even more trying for individuals who have not yet come to terms with their sexualities.

Samuel: I was in relationship with Tracy for over five years, and for the first four years of our time together I was female. In the sense of sexuality and gender, we had an extremely complicated relationship. I knew there was something wrong, but I didn’t have the language for it: I didn’t know transitioning was an option.

When Tracy and I started dating, we lived in a very small, conservative town. We hid the fact that we were in a same-sex relationship by simultaneously dating people of the opposite sex. We both superficially dated boys for the sake of appearance, while we were actually seeing one another in private. Tracy was a few years older than me and while we stayed in a long-distance relationship when she moved to college, we also continued to date men so that our friends and parents wouldn’t suspect anything. I dated an Eagle Scout while I was dating her. She knew I was dating him: he didn’t know I was dating her, of course.

When I graduated from high school, I followed her to college. Leaving my small town was so critical in my development as a queer person: it was the first time I’d met anyone gay or lesbian. My freshman year, my best friends were a flamboyantly gay guy and a butch lesbian. I assumed we were the only queer people in the university. Of course, I was terribly mistaken.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who transition easily and without
much personal or familial conflict.

**Yoel:** I’ve known I was trans my entire life. I was a tomboy as a child, and I’ve always been “one of the guys.” I’m not sure I ever really had to come out. If anything, friends and family asked me whether or not I was going to transition. It’s not something I ever struggled with: I am who I am in the moment, and that’s all that really matters.

**Would it be Worth the Losses?**

_Transitioning later in life often means risking a career and a relationship. Transfolk are forced to grapple with the question of whether or not transitioning would be worth the potential loss of their families, communities and livelihoods._

**Gertrude:** I was married for 18 years before I told my wife I wanted to be a woman. We met in college, hit it off, and the rest was history. For a long time, we were really happy as a couple, but as an individual I wasn’t satisfied. I’m forty-nine and I’ve only really been happy for the past two years.

Before I came out to my wife, I lived a secret life. I told her I was in a bowling league, and on Friday nights I’d leave with my bowling bag full of women’s clothing and makeup and my wig. I’d go to a drag bar and just be with other people who felt the same as I did. At first, I thought drag was just something I had to get out of my system, but the more I did it, the happier I felt as a woman. I hated the rest of the week when I had to pretend to feel like a man.

**Samuel:** During my sophomore year, I started attending the LGBTQ social club on campus. I fell into a crowd of extremely butch lesbians. I did everything they did: I rode a motorbike, wore a leather jacket, shaved my head, and started drinking and smoking. We were hardcore dykes. I finally came out to my friends and family as a lesbian, and truthfully, no one was surprised. Even though my friends and family were all very supportive, Tracy became very uncomfortable being seen with me in public. She told me I looked “too lesbian.” I think she was afraid that people would find out that she was in a gay relationship if she associated with someone who looked as butch as I did. The interesting thing about
Tracy is that even though she was dating me, she didn’t self-identify as a lesbian. She always said, “I’m completely straight. I just happened to fall in love with a woman.”

Throughout that year, my gender became more and more masculine. I looked very male, and a lot of the time people would refer to me by male pronouns. Much to my disappointment, I had a very high voice, so as soon as I spoke people would realize that I was female. I became increasingly frustrated when people would call me “Miss” or “Ma’am,” even though I was a woman. I finally figured out that I needed to make sure that no one would ever call me “she” again.

*Much like Enzo, Alex embodies a very androgynous gender. Ze prefers gender-neutral pronouns, but still considers hirself to be a transman.*

**Alex:** I was in high school when I really started thinking about my gender. I had figured out my sexuality much earlier: I was only 13 when I realized I was a lesbian. Throughout middle school and high school I dated girls, but that wasn’t enough. Something wasn’t clicking. I talked about these thoughts a lot with my counselor, but it still took years for me to decide to transition.

*Interviewing transfolk about their transition decisions provides insight into a very personal time of their lives. Yet their transitions impact more than just themselves. The perspectives of partners are equally valuable in piecing together a complete tapestry of romance and transition. Mary provides one such perspective.*

**Mary:** Julie and I met in college, though she was Jules back then. We had quite a few mutual friends, and we ended up being at a lot of the same places at the same time. I first noticed how sweet and caring she was. She was so charming. She was also on the football team, which didn’t hurt one bit. [Laughs]

I knew something was different about Jules early on. Even though he was great at sports and very outdoorsy, there was a certain graceful quality to everything he did. I was always very attracted to that. Jules fit in really
well with all of his friends and he was a fantastic husband and father. At the same time, there was always a certain sadness to him, like a pain that he couldn’t speak.

**Julie:** With each passing year I became unhappier with my body, with my life. I knew I wanted to change, needed to change, and it came to a point where there was only one thing stopping me: the thought of losing my family. I had heard every story about men telling their wives that they’re transgender, and they always seemed to end in divorce. I’ve heard that statistically, nine out of ten marriages won’t last a transition. That was terrifying to me. I wanted to be a woman more than anything in the world, but would it be worth the losses? It got to a point that I had to find out.

**It’s About Time You Figured it Out**

There is a very powerful force that causes transfolk to decide that they are willing to endure medication, surgery, and the potential loss of community and family support in order to be true to themselves. Transitioning is not a selfish or lighthearted decision. As Shauna told me, “My transition was a matter of life and death.”

**Shauna:** I had been married for 35 years before I came out to my wife. I knew it was going to be a nightmare, that she would be devastated. I spent weeks agonizing over how I was going to explain to her that I wanted to be a woman. When I finally did tell her, she took it even worse than I imagined. She cried for three whole days, and we ended up separating by the end of the week. When we divorced, she took me to the cleaners. The judge determined that my cross-dressing was a fetish and that my wife had every right to leave me. I ended up paying an astronomical amount in spousal support.

**Samuel:** Before I started the long journey to begin hormone replacement therapy, I knew I’d have to tell Tracy that I wanted to transition. She had been so unsupportive of my gender presentation as a lesbian that I assumed she would leave me when I told her I was going to transition.

I was traveling out of town the day I finally affirmed to myself that I was transgender and that I was going to go through with a medical transition.
I really wanted to tell my family, but I decided that Tracy deserved to find out first, so I called her on the phone from my hotel. I was so nervous I could barely hold the phone. I told her that I wanted to be a boy and her response was not at all what I expected. She said, “Yeah, I know. It’s about time you figured it out.”

**Gertrude:** When I told my wife that I had been dressing as a woman, she did not take it well. She was horrified that someone might have seen me wearing drag. She was angry and called me every name in the book. She said she refused to be with me if I was going to even think about changing my gender, and she kicked me out of the house. She couldn’t stand to look at me.

*When transfolk transition later in life, they are often met with animosity and confusion by their partners. The circumstances described by Gertrude and Shauna are not uncommon. As Julie stated, nine out of ten marriages will not last a transition*. As Julie stated, nine out of ten marriages will not last a transition⁴. Some research suggests that this high divorce rate may be due, in part, to a lack of education about transitioning among the general heterosexual population. However, gay and lesbian couples can also have difficulty maintaining their relationship during a partner’s gender transition.

**Enzo:** As I was growing up, I had primarily lesbian relationships: all of my partners have been female-bodied and most of them have been lesbian-identified. I came out as trans while in a lesbian relationship, which was really difficult. We had been together for eleven years and I felt like my partner was tolerant, but not embracing. She was only supportive to the extent that it was comfortable for her. When I was lesbian or butch, that was fine, but when I started saying I was male, my partner got defensive and uncomfortable.

She had difficulty, in general, with men. I think she was afraid that I would become like the men she knew. She had been with men before me, but she was very clear that she was a lesbian. She wanted to maintain that label and that space and she was not okay with me identifying as male or saying that I

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⁴ According to Joanne Herman’s *Transgender Explained For Those Who Are Not*, this statistic is accurate.
was uncomfortable in women’s-only spaces.

There were times when my partner could be compassionate and there were times when she could be really nasty and say “Well, what if I decide to become a boy?” It felt really taunting and unfair to have her say that. I think that was just being used as ammunition for a larger issue, and that became part of our dynamic. Yet at the same time, she wanted to understand my desire to transition. She hosted a radio show and she interviewed a lot of my trans guy friends on the radio because she was curious about the topic. She wanted to be proactive on the public level, but on a personal level she really struggled with it.

I think the final straw was when I told her I wanted to use my last name instead of my birth name. She would call me by my last name at home as a nickname, but when I started using it professionally she became very uncomfortable. She monitored how I looked: she said I might not succeed professionally if I looked too masculine. Ultimately, she projected a lot of her own self-esteem issues on me. She was very much ingrained in a lesbian identity and she never could get over the thought that I was taking that identity away from her.

While there are undeniably high rates of divorce and separation when one partner transitions, there are also some beautiful success stories for both gay and heterosexual couples.

Alex: I tested the waters for a long time before I came out to my girlfriend. We’d been dating for a few years, and every so often I’d pose the question: “Would you still love me if I were a boy?”

I think she got tired of me asking this question, and one day she said, “I would love you if you were a boy, or if you were a grape.”

It was good to hear her verbal support, but I was still worried there wouldn’t be any follow through if I actually came out as trans. I didn’t press the issue for a few weeks, but inside it was eating me up. One day we were driving in the car and I pulled over, looked at her and said, “Maddy,
I’m a grape.”

She knew exactly what I meant. She hugged me and said, “And I love you anyway.”

Throughout my transition, she has been ridiculously supportive of me. She’s gone to therapy with me, has helped me administer my testosterone shots, and has changed the words she uses to describe her sexuality. She used to say she was “bisexual” but now she says she’s “pansexual” because it describes our relationship so much better. I cannot imagine being with someone who is more supportive of me. We’ve gotten through a lot of rough times together and she’s allowed me to stay strong and not compromise myself.

**Mary**: One day I came home from work and Jules had made a wonderful dinner for the family, which wasn’t uncommon, yet I knew something was wrong. He was very nervous and he barely ate anything. He told our sons how much he loved them and how he would always be there for them. After dinner, he told me that we needed to talk. I was terrified that he was going to tell me he had cancer or that he wanted a divorce.

**Julie**: After everyone I’d talked to, everything I’d read, I could only assume that my wife was going to leave me when I told her I wanted to be a woman. I prepared myself the best I could: I packed a suitcase, arranged to stay with a friend, told my kids how much I loved them. Then I finally sat down with my wife and told her, “Mary, this may come as a shock to you, and I don’t expect you to want to stay with me, but I want to be a woman.”

To my surprise and delight, Mary took my hand and said, “Is that all? When you told me we needed to talk, I thought it was something serious.”

5. Pansexuality describes a sexual orientation that includes people across the gender spectrum. Some transfolk feel that the word bisexual implies that there are only two sexes. Alex feels that Ze embodies an androgynous gender that does not fit neatly into a binary male/female category.
I immediately started crying. I told her how scared I had been, and I showed her that I had already packed a suitcase. She told me that after 25 years of marriage I should have known that she would stand by me through anything. We had a long talk about what my transition would look like. I don’t know which one of us cried more.

**Mary:** When Jules told me he wanted to be a woman I was so relieved! I knew it would take a lot of adjustment for the whole family, but marriage is about adapting. I loved Jules unconditionally and I always had. To be honest, I was a little offended that he thought I’d leave him over something as silly as a sex change. [Laughs]

**Yoel:** My husband, Matt, knew I wanted to be a boy before we got married. When we were engaged he told me how much he liked my tomboyish style. I told him I wasn’t just going to be a tomboy. He simply said, “As long as you’ll still marry me.”

We really wanted to have kids, so I didn’t start physically transitioning for another 12 years. As soon as I finished breast-feeding our third child, I told Matt it was time. I started hormones within a few months and had a mastectomy shortly thereafter. There are so many trans people who cannot wait to start their transition, but waiting never really bothered me. I have three biological children and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.

**There Were so Many People to Tell**

*Coming out to a partner is only one portion of the transition process. Transfolk must also tell their extended families, employers and communities about their decision to transition.*

**Julie:** One of the more complicated aspects of me transitioning was figuring out how we were going to tell everybody. Our family never moved from where we grew up: we’ve lived there 51 years. My parents are still around, my brothers are still around, Mary’s family is still around. There were so many people to tell that I’m transgender. I just wanted to sit them all down on a train and file them through, “Yes, I’m going to be a woman. Next!”
Enzo: My partner was three or four years older than me, and very much in the women’s community. Although I knew how to navigate there, I didn’t feel comfortable in a lesbian space: it’s still familiar, but it’s not who I am.

When I started hanging out with younger kids who identified as queer, that was harder for my partner to understand. The notion of queer theory and of being queer, rather than forcing oneself into a binary set of categories, made much more sense in my life. There is a whole movement and consciousness-raising piece that younger people are a part of. These are the youth who have been through queer studies courses and who understand transgender as a non-issue. Whereas in my generation I feel like transitioning is a much bigger issue.

Gertrude: For the past four years, I’ve been an adult mentor with my son’s high school robotics team. There are about forty other kids and their parents in the program. I worried when I came out whether I was going to be able to stay a mentor with the robotics program, since it’s in a school setting. I knew as I started taking hormones that I wasn’t going to be able to and there would be a lot of exposure both for my son and me.

I sat down with the president of the robotics club and told him that I was going to become a woman. To my surprise he still wanted me to participate. So I had a meeting with the parents first, and they told the students, and then I just showed up at the next robotics meeting as a woman. Not a single student left the program, not a single parent was upset. In fact, I only received one email about the situation. It was from one of the parent’s whose child was a protégé of mine. The email said, “I was really concerned when we heard there was going to be a meeting about you. We thought you were leaving the robots program. Thank goodness you’re only changing your gender!”

This year I was the head mentor of the program, and the kids nominated me for a national award for my participation.

Yoel: Since my transition was planned far in advance, we’ve had the
luxury of long-term planning. As I began hormones, we moved to a community where we knew we would find a lot of acceptance. It means that there are five of us in an 800 square foot apartment, and that the living room is our son’s bedroom and our daughter’s room is an alcove off the dining room, but it has mostly been a very smooth effort. We’re in a neighborhood where, when I told the neighbors that I was trans they said, “Oh, so is our babysitter!”

In our neighborhood, the houses are all clustered together and all of the kids play with one another. There is only one family that we haven’t spoken to before. They are rather conservatively religious, so we have not explicitly befriended them. I have been going through my transition over the past year, and I introduced myself to them as Yoel. If you speak Hebrew, which they obviously do not, it’s very clearly a male name. I spoke with them both before and after top surgery, and prior to the surgery I was very large-chested. They’ve never said anything about me either way, but they mostly avoid talking to my husband and me when they can avoid it. [Laughs] What are you going to do?

**Your Kids are More Resilient Than You Think They Are**

*When a person has kids before they transition, they must also come out to their children. Explaining gender identity in age appropriate terms can be a very challenging undertaking.*

**Mary:** One of my biggest concerns was about how we would tell our kids that their father was going to be a woman, and how they would react. We spent a lot of time talking about the best way to tell them. When we finally did tell them, we tag-teamed them: Jules went in first and told them that he wanted to be a woman, and then I sat with them and talked them through their reactions.

**Julie:** What we didn’t want is for information about my transition to come sideways to the kids, so we decided to tell them everything before we told anyone else. We told the boys one at a time. Our eldest, Kevin, is 17 now. He was 15 when I told him I wanted to be a woman. Naturally, he was upset that the man who taught him how to throw a football wanted to
wear pretty dresses. I think that letting him be mad was really important. He yelled at me for about an hour, and then Mary came in to take my place.

Mary: When I walked in to Kevin’s room, he was pretty upset. Jules needed a break to collect himself, so I took Kevin to get a milkshake. I drove to a restaurant across town so that we would have more time to talk. Mostly, he was just afraid that things would change. He told me he wanted a dad who would play basketball with him, who would talk to him about girls, who would teach him how to weld. I said, “You may not always have a dad who will do those things with you, but you will always have a parent who will.”

Julie: When Mary and Kevin came home my son gave me a hug. He apologized for being so angry. Then he told me that I was going to have a really hard time beating him at basketball in a dress. [Laughs]

Our middle child was much easier to tell. He didn’t react with anger. In fact, he didn’t really react at all. I worry about him the most because he’s never really talked it out with either Mary or myself. I told him I was going to be a woman and he said, “That’s cool.”

Yoel: My desire to transition wasn’t something that we ever kept a secret from our kids. Matt and I brought it up with the kids frequently, in age appropriate terms. Our sons are young and they aren’t quite grasping the idea of gender yet. We thought it was very important to introduce the idea to them on our own terms, and we will keep talking about it with them.

Our daughter, on the other hand, understands that gender transitioning is viewed skeptically by most. She’s 11 and she doesn’t want me to pick her up from school, because her concern is that her friends might not take it very well. She wants me to attend school concerts and plays, when all of the kids are up on stage, but she’s been very nervous about her friends seeing me up close.

We took her to meet with my therapist to work out some plans. She will
be attending middle school next year, and she’ll be switching to a different school that’s closer to where we live. We toured the school earlier this year, and they had a big LGBT history wall, so I think she’ll have an easier time there.

Although children can react to the news that a parent is transitioning with confusion and hostility, the love between a parent and child is an incredibly strong bond, and the experience of parents coming out as transgender to their children are overwhelmingly positive.

Gertrude: Before we divorced, my wife and I had two wonderful sons together. They’re 17 and ten now. Unfortunately, my wife was the one who told my sons about my transition, and she did it in a really negative way. She told them I was sick. I think a lot of her initial negativity was coming from a place of betrayal. She felt like I had been lying to her, and I was, but I wasn’t lying about being a woman: I was lying about being a man. We’re on speaking terms now, and we actively decided that we wanted to do what was best for our children. We share custody of them and we both spend a lot of time with the boys.

My sons knew that I was living as a woman part of the time, but it got to the point where I could no longer be the other person, except for really special occasions. I sat them both down and said, “If it’s okay with you guys, I’d rather be me all the time now. I’ll understand if you have a concert at school and you really want the other person to show up: I love you and I’m willing to do that.”

My youngest son said to me, “Why would we ever ask that of you?” That brought me to tears.

I said, “Tomorrow I think I’m going to start being me always. Is that okay with you?”

Phrasing it that way gave them the opportunity to object, but they never did. They are such great kids. My take is that this generation of kids, in addition to being colorblind, is also largely gender-blind as well.
**Mary**: We told our children about Jules’ transition over a period of about six months. He wasn’t in a hurry to start hormones, so we decided to wait until our youngest, who had just turned ten, was a little bit older before we told him. One day just Jules and I picked Marcus up from school. The other boys were staying with friends, so it was just the three of us in the car. Marcus got really excited and said, “Oh boy, is this it?”

I said, “What do you mean?”

Marcus looked at me with big, wide eyes and said, “Kevin said Dad was going to tell me that he wanted to have lady parts, and then you’d take me for a milkshake. Can I get a hot fudge sundae instead?”

Obviously he already knew what was going on, but we had a talk to make sure he had the right information nevertheless. He definitely had a lot of questions, but most of them were about ice cream.

**Gertrude**: For the past week, I’ve been posting pictures of my son at his graduation on Facebook. I’ve been getting notes from transfolk who ask me, “Gertrude, what’s the secret to your success?”

I wish there was some honest-to-God silver bullet, but the one piece of advice I could offer is when you’re working with your children, ask them for their input instead of telling them you’re going to do something. Try to make all of your decisions based on knowledge, instead of based on fear. Your kids are a lot more resilient than you think they are, so give them some credit. And if you love them, and they love you, then this can work out.

**I’m Glad I was True to Myself**

**Samuel**: At first, I was ridiculously relieved and elated by Tracy’s support of my transition. She was almost more excited about it than I was, and I became increasingly wary of her actions. During the next few months I switched to wearing men’s clothing exclusively, started going by “Samuel” instead of “Samantha”, began asking friends and family to call me “he” instead of “she” and ultimately started taking testosterone. The hormones lowered my voice within a few weeks. I also gained a lot of muscle, and
sprouted some facial hair. I grew an Adam’s apple practically overnight. The more male I looked, the more willing Tracy was to be seen in public with me. Suddenly, she wanted to hold my hand in public, she invited me to her sorority events, and she was thrilled to finally have a “real” boyfriend.

I felt really objectified. Tracy had been so uncomfortable with me finding my roots as a lesbian, but she loved the fact that I was transitioning because, outwardly, we were going to look like a “normal heterosexual couple.” That realization jaded our relationship for me and I decided I didn’t want to be with someone whose acceptance of me was so conditional.

We had quite a nasty break-up. We’d been living together for three years, so there were a lot of material things to divide up. It’s been over four years since we split up, and she’s still furious with me. Looking back I’m glad I was true to myself and that I was strong enough to leave a relationship that was so provisional.

**Yoel:** My husband has been my rock. He didn’t bat an eyelash when I told him I wanted to transition, he orchestrated our move to a more accepting neighborhood, and he’s been wonderful at helping me explain my transition to the kids. Having open and frank communication made this period of my life, a time that is so disastrous for many couples, a complete and utter non-issue. I have a great life, a wonderful family and I thank G-d for that everyday.

**Shauna:** Even though my marriage ended disastrously, I wouldn’t change my decision. I had hit a wall and it felt like I didn’t have any other choices: transition or die. I had planned out everything about how I was going to commit suicide: I knew when, where and how. I told my therapist about my plans one morning, and she convinced me to put those suicidal thoughts on hold and give transitioning a try. Together we mapped out a timeline for my transition, and as I started taking hormones, my suicidal thoughts started to dissipate. As people started seeing me for the woman I was supposed to be, I felt that a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders.
Transitioning came at a price: I’ve been single for the past 11 years and I suspect I always will be. Yet, losing my marriage is better than losing my life. If I wouldn’t have transitioned I would not be here today.

**Conclusion**

*Despite the statistics of separation and divorce, and despite the negativity associated with coming out as transgender later in life, all of the individuals in this history said they were glad they chose to transition, regardless of the cost. This unbelievably strong need to transition pushes the boundaries of societal acceptability, and the results to relationships and families can be devastating. There is an incredible amount of sacrifice, determination and perseverance associated with transitioning. Yet, not a single participant said that they would change their decision. As Shauna beautiful and summarily stated, the benefit of transitioning was definitely worth the cost.*
Tantrum

Her head and back pressed the floor
heels beating
face tragic
mouth howling

Someone had moved her chair

She did not want to sit on it
had not been near it
for the last twenty minutes

But it was HER chair

They were skyping Uncle Nick
Great Grandpa needed a chair with a pillow
Near the end of the conversation
She had suddenly noticed

Her chair was not where it belonged
“MY CHAIR!!”

They tried to carry on
Cross county words were lost beneath
Toddler powered decibels
Nick chuckled, perhaps not missing them so much now

Great Grandma: “We can move…”
Great Grandpa “You mustn’t give in…”
Grandma: “Try to ignore…”
Mom: “Welcome to three years old…”

Eyes flowing, she leaned on Grandma
looking at Nick

Grandma hugged her, whispering
“Do you want to say bye bye?”

She whispered, “Yes.”
I’m halfway across Grassy Pond when I realize my fiancé is still on land. It’s just starting to drizzle, and I’m eager to set up camp in case the rain gets worse.

“Matt! Are you coming?” I shout. Then I see it. I turn around to resume paddling and catch a glimpse of the statuesque bird. Quietly, I zip open my camera case and pull out my Nikon. Lens cap off, I point my kayak in the direction of this great blue heron and start taking its picture. Matt suddenly nears the cove the heron inhabits; I signal to him to stay quiet. The current pushes our bright blue and green kayaks from the center of the pond towards the rocky edge. As we approach, the heron gracefully pulls itself out of the muck and starts to walk on the mounds of mud poking up from the water. It comes towards us, craning its s-shaped neck this way and that.

I zoom in and out and in again, trying to make out the details of this prehistoric creature. The heron flaps open its seven-foot wingspan, flaunting its slate gray feathers.

“Can we call this one Walter?” Matt whispers from behind me.

The heron’s gender is indiscernible to our untrained eyes, but for some reason, Walter fits. We watch for a while longer as our cooler and camping gear slicken with rainwater. Finally Walter flies off in the direction from which we had come. He lands in another pool of lily pads as we paddle towards the island we’ll inhabit for the next twenty-four hours.

Grassy Pond is more a swamp than a pond. It is accessible only by snowmobile trails and a rocky dirt road behind the mess hall of a church camp. It’s one of the few bodies of water in Contoocook New Hampshire without houses dotting the shoreline. Aside from our kayaks and their contents, the entire panorama is devoid of manmade objects. The periphery is primarily covered in hemlocks; above them jut the Mink Hills of Henniker.

Three years ago, when Matt and I first got our kayaks, we brought them straight to this pond with the tags still on. It was our first time kayaking together and as we rounded the backside of the island we’re now
camping on, a deer jumped off and started swimming towards shore. When I reached for my camera that evening, I was sorely disappointed to realize I had forgotten it at home. Now it’s second nature to grab my camera when I go outdoors—just in case. The joy I find in nature is not only being there in the present; it’s being able to look at a photograph years later and bring myself right back to that moment.

By the time we finally find a flat patch of land on the island and set up camp, the rain has ceased. Matt decides to cut a trail among the low-brush blueberry bushes from camp to the kayaks. Meanwhile, I set out on a solo kayak trip. My version of kayaking involves less paddling, and more drifting while reading. Jodi Picoult is interrupted, however, when Walter flies overhead and lands in a swatch of cattails.

Intrigue beats out laziness. Positioned no more than thirty feet away, I snap pictures of Walter while he fishes. Occasionally I take my finger off the shutter release to swat at a horsefly; by and large though, the bugs are kept at bay by the metallic blue dragonflies darting around my kayak. Walter tolerates my presence for a while, but after he’s caught two fish, small perch, he flies off again.

Later, as the sun sinks behind the Minks, Matt and I set out on a pre-dinner kayak. We follow the channels of water cutting through the lily pads and milfoil. Eventually, we reach a cove Walter has already found. I lift my camera from its position on my lap and take a couple pictures. Matt wants to go closer; I don’t want to scare Walter away. It’s also quite difficult to paddle and take pictures at the same time. So, Matt pushes my kayak forward, and paddles to catch up. It’s a slow process, but suddenly we’re a mere twenty-feet away from him. Through my viewfinder, I can make out the black and white speckles of the front of his long neck, and the black plume that extends from behind his eye down the back of his neck. I pass the camera to Matt so he can examine Walter up close, too. Walter stands in silence, watching the water for fish. It’s a slow hunt, but after a couple of rounds we can tell when he’s about to go in for the kill. His neck extends, and then contracts before piercing the water with his blade-like bill. As the splash of water recedes and his head emerges, I can see the shiny black body of a small fish trapped in his beak. He slides it down his throat, and the fish wriggles the whole way down, desperately searching for a way out.
With my camera set to automatic focus, I capture the whole hunt on camera. The neck plunge, the splash of water, the shimmying fish, it’s all there. I’m reviewing the photos when Matt pushes my kayak closer still. Walter hesitates momentarily before taking off in a flurry of gray feathers. He’s landed only twenty feet away. Still it seems clear we’ve overstepped our boundaries—time to let him fish in solitude.

But as we’re paddling back towards camp, Walter flies back towards us, landing perpendicular from the kayaks. Maybe he doesn’t want us to leave? We face him, and he claps his bill at us. Fifteen feet away, with the aid again of my telephoto lens, I watch Walter’s piercing yellow eyes scan his surroundings. He stands four feet tall when his thin black legs pull him up out of the water, his long, slender, white belly feathers dripping. He makes one more unsuccessful attempt at spearing a fish before leaving us for good.

We’re cooking hot dogs on a stone fire pit Matt made when the sun fully sinks below the tree line. As I dab homemade relish on my bun, a loud cry interrupts my train of thought. Fraunk fraunk. Walter’s guttural calls echo across the water as he swoops in low through the tree line, just over our campsite. Good night we reply.

The next morning, I’m exploring our island by boat. On the sunny side, the rocks are dotted with painted turtles. When they all finally abandon their sunspots to hide in the water, I look up from my camera to see Walter imperiously perched on the rocky peninsula of the island. Before I can lift the camera back to my eye, however, I notice a beaver swimming towards me. I train my focus on the beaver until it notices my presence, and quickly dips under the water.

Now it’s just Walter and me. I paddle away from him first, before arching my path back to the peninsula. My kayak and camera are pointed directly at him. He seems unfazed, and rather than fly off he maintains a stoic pose, allowing me to photograph his left and right profile.

While I’m changing my memory card, he flies just a stone’s throw away to a pile of swamp debris piled up in front of a beaver house. Walter’s scaly black feet balance on the refuse, and he prepares for a round of fishing. I readjust my kayak so that the current is pushing me ever closer to him, eliminating the hassle of paddling. Watching through my lens there
is a sense of detachment from the moment—the plastic and metal of the camera act as a buffer between this wild creature and me.

When I set the camera down for a moment, and observe Walter with my naked eye, the gravity of the situation overwhelms me. With his body fully out of the water, he towers over me. I’m now only a kayak length away from him. Quickly, I pull the camera back to my eye. Now, I have to point it upwards ever so slightly to fit his head in the frame of the shot.

Slowly, the heron slides into the water, his legs now hidden. He’s patient, but my arms grow tired from holding the camera up, waiting for him, waiting for a fish. Finally, Walter’s neck cranes forward, and retracts. Staring downward, he forcefully thrusts himself into the water. When he comes back up, his orange and black beak is empty. He rights himself and goes back to his perch, where he shakes himself dry.

After a brief reprieve, he takes flight again. He soars swiftly right past my kayak. Looking through the camera lens, I feel as if I could reach out and touch the tip of his wing.
It was nearing the end of 2010, a soy year. The even numbers were soy years on Francesca’s father’s farm in the wind-scarred countryside surrounding Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The odd years were corn harvests. It was better for the soil if the soy crop and corn were rotated every year. This was for some reason that Francesca didn’t understand—although her father knew all the intricacies of it. The soil, that is.

Francesca never liked the soy years. There was something much more romantic about her youth—mystical, even—playing, getting lost among the stalks of corn, eating it fresh off the cob, dancing between the aisles trying to evade her lumbering father, hunting her down before dusk. Eventually he’d emerge, parting the thick green stalks—exposing a crooked bed of teeth as yellow as the corn—and snatch Francesca up around the waist and hoist her over his shoulder. As Clint carried her back to the farmhouse, he’d say, “You stinker!” and pat her gently on the bottom. In the soy years, though, Francesca had nowhere to hide.

Francesca’s mother died during a soy year. Lung cancer. It was 2004, Francesca’s sophomore year of high school. While the mother and daughter were close in physical appearance—a wispy, slight frame; blonde hair, gunmetal blue eyes, and defiant jaw—they were opposites in their respective demeanors. Francesca’s mother was Finnish, almost comically accurate in her personification of Scandinavian stereotypes: cold and stoic, a smoker, borderline alcoholic, distant even with the closest of family members. Her father was the opposite, being the son of an Italian immigrant. He was loving and emotional; though he had acquired the outwardly reticent public mannerisms, which seemed learned by most Midwesterners. Francesca was more like her father in this way, in her loving warmth. The two were close, especially so since Francesca’s mother died.

The cancer left only Clint and his daughter on the farm, as well as the Mexican workers. There were a half dozen of them. Francesca didn’t know if they were illegals or not. Wisconsin was a long way north to come from Mexico, at least that was what Francesca thought. But maybe that
had been their rationale, too: who would suspect illegals to be working the fields of Fond du Lac? Regardless, she never had the nerve to ask her father of where exactly they had originated. And she couldn’t ask the workers, for they only spoke Spanish. Clint spoke some Spanish, albeit a very Americanized flavor of it. Whenever he instructed them on the tasks to be done, it sounded as if he wasn’t even trying to cover his American accent. Francesca guessed he didn’t need to; he was obliging enough in other ways, ways that were more appreciated by the workers than trying to pronounce things correctly. Francesca’s mother had spoken much better Spanish to the farm hands; being European she had learned several languages before coming to the United States.

Francesca’s mother died in the fall, in the midst of a terrible harvest. That year the little green buds of soy barely peeked through the dirt. This left the land looking lonely and endless and miserable. Father’s fields held no aura in the soy years. There was nothing dreamy about them, nothing to get lost in like the towering corn stalks. Corn was a relic of the past Americana, Francesca thought, of the Midwest. Soy was the new, unfamiliar future of farming. The current 2010 winter featured a monotonous layer of snow covering the flat soy fields, uninterrupted, all the way to the piercing blue horizon.

Francesca could have gone to a better school than Beloit College. She had been accepted into the University of Wisconsin, but that was too big for her: she was afraid she might be swallowed into a pit of anonymity in Madison. The University of Chicago had wanted her as well, which was an achievement in itself for a farmer’s daughter from Fond du Lac. But the city was too intimidating, too far away, the students too studious. On the bright orange day in the fall of her senior year, when the large envelope adorned with the seal of the University of Chicago arrived, Francesca came bounding home to tell her father the news.

“That’s something, sweetheart,” he said, swallowing, pinching at his nostril with his index finger and a thumb. His blurry eyes swirled with a look that comprised of both pride and sorrow, “It’s a long way from home.”

Francesca couldn’t go to Chicago. As much as her father had told her, with a defiant wagging finger, “You’re not to worry about me,” she knew it would torture Clint to see her depart to such a faraway place. Distant in physical space, yes, but more importantly, a departure from
him and his morals—everything he had built for her—for a new, glamorous way of life, as if her father’s tireless hard work had not satisfied her. It would be a betrayal, a wound she would never be able to stitch back up. So Beloit College was the final choice, maybe the only choice. The inevitable choice, anyway. It appealed to Francesca not because of what it was, but rather what it wasn’t. It was not far from home, it was not too big, not intimidating, nor a departure from her humble upbringing. And it was not expensive, at least not for her: Beloit had granted Francesca a full academic scholarship back when she had originally enrolled in the fall of 2006. Located in rural southern Wisconsin, a rusted out industrial town, Beloit was now a random congregation of buildings and houses that emerged out of the land of dairy farms and rows of corn. It offered little more than the school. These cornfields sprawled across the horizon, only occasionally separated or marked by the faded red wooden planks that formed silos and barns.

But it had been a good three and a half years at Beloit College for Francesca. Truly, it had been. Not particularly exciting, for sure, but she had made nice friends, had nice professors, and would receive a decent degree. Besides, Francesca reasoned, she had little use for excitement. The loss of her mother in high school had been, amidst numerous other emotions, exciting. She needed no more of that. She would earn her degree without alienating her father, without sacrificing her roots.

Francesca made the hour drive northeast every month or so to spend the weekend with her father. They would watch movies that Francesca wanted to see; he’d take her out to dinner at her favorite restaurant—Shiner’s—and he’d make her favorite ‘egg in a basket’ sandwich that she could never do herself without bursting the yolk.

Occasionally her father reciprocated, coming to Beloit. He’d knock on her apartment door on a Saturday afternoon with his trademark scraggly beard, work boots, and a six-pack of Leinenkugel’s dangling from his calloused fingers. They went to the Beloit football games together, and Clint would bitch under his breath about the Buccaneer’s play calling, “Don’t know why they’re throwing the ball on 3rd and two...”

Clint only came late in the fall, once the bulk of the harvest was done with, and so she began to expect him to come on those Saturdays in November. Clint never seemed to want to leave campus -- or Francesca—
on those visits. They’d get dinner and then he’d insist on ice cream at the Dairy Castle, and some coffee at the little corner shop on the town square. Eventually—begrudgingly—Clint would leave late in the evening to make the monotonous two-hour drive back to Fond du Lac in his silver 1994 Chevy Silverado. Before departing he would wrap Francesca up in a long hug of thick flannel, and always say, “Keep being good Frankie. You’re the only right thing in this world anymore.” She was too naïve to ever believe that. But Francesca did believe she was the only thing right in his world. Ever since mother had died, Francesca seemed his only vested interest—a role she originally inherited reluctantly—but now relished.

These unannounced visits weren’t intrusive; Francesca thought they were endearing. What other father would do this? Besides, she had nothing to hide…but she did need to tell her father about Charlie. Francesca knew she couldn’t put it off any longer. Especially since graduation was only a semester away.

Francesca awoke, entangled with Charlie. His heavy, hairy arm stretched over her soft abdomen, trapping her against the firm twin mattress. The morning light was just starting to glimmer in through the window above her bed. Francesca turned to her other side, careful not to disrupt the arm that fell lifeless over her. She faced Charlie now. She reached over him to grab her phone off the nightstand. She had a new text message. Perhaps that was what had awoken her.

*Morning. Just hit the road. Should be there around 9:30. –Dad*

Dad always signed off with his name, even in text messages—he didn’t seem to understand that Francesca could see whom the text was from. He texted her, often early in the morning, when he got up before dawn to get ready for the day. Her phone said it was 7:17 a.m.

It was December 16, and Francesca had taken her last final of the semester yesterday. She’d be back on the farm in Fond du Lac through New Year’s Eve. Charlie would head home today too, heading northwest over the lattice of farmland to his family’s home in Minneapolis.

Francesca gently nuzzled her face against Charlie’s, which was sharp with stubble, but still felt familiar and inviting. She patted his arm that clung to her, and then gently scratched down the length of his arm from his elbow to his wrist with her fingernails.
“Heyyyy,” she whispered. She pulled the white bed sheet over their heads, creating an intimate canopy over them.

Charlie didn’t open his eyes, but instinctively lunged toward her and gave her a quick kiss, before laying his head back on their shared pillow. Francesca waited a few moments, seeing if he’d wake up on his own.

“How ya doing?”

“Tired,” Charlie whispered back. He still had not opened his eyes.

“Me too,” she said. She squeezed her cold foot between Charlie’s thick calves, trying to warm her toes with his body heat.

There was another lingering pause. She looked at Charlie, his shaggy brown hair falling over his eyebrows and onto the pillow. His eyes hosted dried up crumbs at the corners. He looked perfectly content, sleeping beside her.

“Hey,” she said again, “My dad’s going go be here soon. I gotta get up and pack.”

Charlie inhaled a deep breath and opened his eyes, wiping off the crumbs from his eyes. His breath smelled of whiskey. Francesca found the aroma strangely pleasing, nonetheless.

“Already?” He asked.

“Yep,” Francesca said, “You know my dad.”

“No I don’t,” he gave a light chuckle, “Remember?”

Francesca winced, immediately regretting having left herself open to this comment.

“I know,” she said, “Anyway, you’ve heard how he is.”

“Let’s sleep for another hour,” Charlie said, “I’ll help you pack then.”

“Come on,” she pleaded, “I gotta get up. He’s going to be here soon.”

“Have you even told him about California yet?”

Charlie had been accepted to UCLA Medical School. The two had recently agreed to move out there after graduation, though Francesca wasn’t sure what she’d do for work. An English degree from Beloit and a cute face could only get you so far in a big, faraway city. Who would know of Beloit there? But, she wanted to be with Charlie. Francesca wiped her brow and pushed her dirty blonde hair behind her right ear. The silence
hung tangibly in the cold bedroom. She hadn’t told her dad about Charlie yet, much less California.

“Not yet,” she said. “Now, come on. Let’s get up.”

“Why does he always pick you up so early?” Charlie asked. His eyes closed back shut again.

“He’s used to getting up early, even in the wintertime,” Francesca replied, “Plus, he’s excited to see me, I’m sure.”

“Has he started dating again?” This seemed an odd inquiry to Francesca. She thought that she fielded the same question from Charlie just a couple weeks ago.

“No, not yet. I keep telling him he should,” she said, pausing. She breathed in deeply and shifted so she lay on her back, looking up at the rough bumps of the acoustic ceiling tiles of her apartment.

She continued, “He doesn’t seem interested, though.”

“I don’t know what he is going to do,” Charlie said, “When we move to California.”

“I don’t know either. Let’s not worry about it,” she said, skirting around the topic, “Let’s worry about getting up and getting packed.”

“Has he always been like this?” Charlie asked.

“Like what?” She yanked her toes out from the clutches of Charlie’s calves.

“Like, I don’t know--” Charlie opened his eyes, “So dependent on you?”

Francesca dropped her arm on the bed in slight exasperation. This really wasn’t any of Charlie’s business, but in a way it was, since Francesca had been so uneasy about telling her father of their relationship since it started four months ago.

“I mean, I guess,” Francesca closed her eyes. She was partly trying to remember, and partly wishing this conversation would stop, “It got worse, obviously, when Mom died.”

Francesca suddenly needed a breath of fresh air, their recycled warm breath felt stale underneath the cover of the sheet. She pulled sheet off of their heads, and felt the cooler air rush over her face and neck.

“Yeah,” Charlie said.

They both lay there, eyes open, gently alternating breaths, their chests slowly rising and falling.
Francesca suddenly felt the need to explain herself, to defend her father from this unwarranted attack. Her father shouldn’t be criticized for loving his daughter unconditionally—even if it could be overbearing at times.

“I just think I’m one of the few things that bring him joy, you know?”

She turned her head to look at Charlie, but his eyes were closed again.

“You ever have the feeling that just being there, just your presence, makes somebody happy?”

Francesca couldn’t tell if Charlie were listening or not, but she continued on anyway. It felt good to articulate these things aloud; it didn’t matter whether anyone was listening to her.

“I think he’s just really proud. Happy that I’ve got a future ahead of me. It’s like he can take credit for what I do in the future. That makes him proud.”

“Mhmm,” Charlie said. He didn’t seem to hear her, but rather only sensed the break in conversation, which cued him that it was his turn to say something.

“Get up,” she said, “If you’re not going to listen to me.”

She shoved his thick arm off of her, poking him in his exposed stomach.

“Hey,” he brought his arms in tight to his torso to defend himself, “Whoa.”

Francesca was wearing his white v-neck undershirt; the neckline of the oversized shirt plunged, exposing her slight, pale breasts. She shifted upright, and climbed over him. She straddled Charlie briefly in her white underwear, as she pushed off his shoulder, reaching her bare feet for the floor below. Her delicate toes fell upon Charlie’s crumpled brown corduroy blazer, which he had worn to the Christmas party last night.

The morning light increasingly spilled in the circular window above her twin bed, soothingly engulfing the room in a blonde glow and dispatching long dark shadows across the white walls. Francesca walked to her closet and pulled the cloth hamper out of it’s metal frame, her delicate arms flexing as she pulled it out on to the floor, tying it off at the top. She placed it on top of her duffel bag of clean clothes by the door. Charlie sat
up now, seeming startled by her sudden bustling around the room.

“You’re bringing all that dirty laundry home?” He asked, again wiping his eyes. He let his head fall back onto the wall, giving off a light thud. His eyes were darkly outlined; his hair fell over them. Charlie’s eyes moved slowly around the room-- lingering silently on whatever they happened to fall on-- from behind the intermittent curtain of curls.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Some housewarming gift that is,” he said.

Francesca shot him a glare.

“Dad doesn’t mind,” she said. She pulled a hair tie off her thin wrist, peeling the long, flowing yellow strands back into a tight ponytail.

“Doing laundry?”

“Yeah, I actually think he likes it,” she said.

Francesca paused, then she sharply added, “He likes cooking and cleaning for me, you know.”

Charlie swung his legs over the bed. He wore only his white boxer shorts.

“All right,” he said, conceding, “What do you need help with?”

“Honestly,” she said tersely, “I’ve got it.”

She pinched her lips together. Her forehead was suddenly lined with deep wrinkles.

“You sure?” Charlie said. He combed her face over with his eyes, “You mad at me?”

“No,” she said, “I’m not.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. He didn’t sound convinced.

“I just get stressed before seeing Dad. I’ve got to shower and get this place in order.”

“Right,” Charlie said, in a voice just louder than a whisper. He slung his left leg through the pant leg of his jeans. It seemed, increasingly, that it was time for him to leave.

“Look,” she said dropping the messenger bag by the door. She walked over to Charlie and kissed him.

“I’m just not sure yet about California,” she let out a loud exhale. She folded her arms across her chest.

Charlie stared at her blankly. A long silence. He took a step back from her.
“You’re not sure about California?” He repeated.
She nodded. Her eyes shot down at the floor.
He licked his lips, “Or you’re not sure about me?”
“Come on, Char,” she said. She reached for his hand. “I’m sure
about you, of course. I’m just not sure about my dad. I just, I don’t know if
I can do that to him—”
She paused.
“I need more time to think about it,” Francesca said.
“Maybe you should tell him about us,” Charlie pushed Francesca’s
hand away from him. “That’d be a start.”
“I will,” she said, her voice fading, “I will.”
Her eyes ran over the interwoven wooden planks of the floor.
She took a step closer to Charlie and tried to kiss him. He resisted.
“You can’t put this off forever,” he said, “You’re eventually going to
have to pick, and not just for me. For you. Are you going to give up your
own life because of him? Because he is alone?”
“I know,” Francesca said, her voice fading, “I know.”
“I don’t want to talk to you until you tell your Dad about us,”
Charlie said. The tone of his quivering voice didn’t suggest that he was as
angry, as much as he was hurt. He left the room with such abruptness that
Francesca felt a slight gust of air as he walked past her.
Francesca sighed loudly. She grabbed a tissue from off her dresser
and dabbed at her eyes. She sat back down on the bed. She gnawed on a
fingernail. She glanced around the room, trying to make a mental check-
list of things that needed to be done before Dad arrived. She only thought
back to Charlie, though. And how she could tell her father. Her heartbeat
accelerated, her shoulders shuddered, even as she contemplated the imag-
ined conversation.
After a brisk shower and some packing, Francesca heard a knock on
the door as she made her bed up. She looked out the window of her room
and saw her father on the front stoop. He was wearing a red and white
flannel shirt beneath a brown canvas jacket, a Green Bay Packers hat cover-
ing up his silver hair, and his usual jeans and tan work boots. Francesca
thought he usually looked younger than his fifty-seven years, but today he
looked every bit his age. If not older. His hazel eyes glanced uncomfortably
around the yard and the adjacent campus behind. His hands were shoved
deep into his pockets. He looked uneasy to be in such an academic setting. She didn’t see his Chevy truck; he must have parked in back.

Francesca finished pulling the comforter back over her bed, tucking it tightly into the side of the bed that pinched against the wall. She fluffed the pillow setting it atop the bedspread, and pulled a wool sweater over her bra and left the room, scampering down the stairs.

She opened the door.

“Dad!” She exclaimed, with a wide smile. She hoped her eyes were not still red from tearing up earlier. They held each other in a lingering hug, before Francesca invited Clint inside.

“How’ve you been?” She asked, rubbing her palm over his shoulder blade as she led him through the doorway.

“Fine,” he said. He put his hands back in his pockets. He looked around again. “Place looks good.”

“Everyone’s already left,” she said, “so it’s been pretty quiet.”

“Must be nice,” he said, in a voice that was barely audible.

“You need anything to drink?” She asked. “I can make some coffee.”

“Nah, I’ve got some in the truck. Got a cup at BP?”

As he said this, Clint put his palm over his mouth, as he if were covering a yawn.

Francesca gazed at him briefly, before heading back up the stairs. He seemed quieter than usual, nervous. Like he had been in the months after Mom died, Francesca thought. Or right when she had been accepted to the University of Chicago.

“Well, I’ll just grab my stuff and then we can go then?”

“Mhmm. Sounds good.”

She got to the top of the stairs and looked back down at him. He was still at the bottom of the stairs, glancing around the foyer and wiping at his mouth with his palm. Then he seemed to come to his senses,

“Oh,” he said, looking up at her, “Let me help.”

Clint followed her up the stairs and looked around her room, picking up her bag of dirty clothes and throwing it over his shoulder. In his right hand his thick calloused hand gripped her duffel bag. Francesca grabbed the small messenger bag.

“This it?” He asked.

“Yep,” she said, “That’s it.”
“Okay then,” he said as he headed for the stairs.

Seeing her father in this nervous state, it felt as if he already knew that she would be moving to California. Francesca had thought about telling him about Charlie and California on the ride home. That way he’d have a couple weeks to digest the news, and she could see first hand how he reacted to all of it while she was home. Francesca thought it might help to have her there, at home, while he thought about how things would be with her in L.A. But now she couldn’t tell him, if he was already in this disoriented state. She had to find out was wrong, now, before she inflicted any more damage.

She opened the door for him and closed it behind him, as he stepped out onto the frozen wooden porch. He moved slowly, awkwardly, as he staggered down the steps with the heavy baggage.

“Truck’s around back,” he said. They stepped down the stairs and turned left to the small parking lot behind the duplex. Francesca followed him, looking him over from behind, still trying to solve what was bothering him.

“Say—uh— Frankie,” he said as they rounded the back of the duplex, “I brought someone I want you to meet today.”

Francesca glanced up as they came around the corner, the lot coming into view. Perched in the passenger seat was a middle-aged blonde woman, looking out through the windshield. The door opened and the lady stepped down from the truck. She towered over Francesca, seemed like by half a foot. Francesca thought she was around 5’9,” at least. The lady’s face was wrinkled somewhat, but looked plastic in places and not quite symmetrical. She had blue eyes that matched her thick coating of eyeliner, peering out from behind rows of fake eyelashes. She offered Francesca a feigned smile,

“Well hello there!” She said. Her voice was high pitched, it sounded like she was exaggerating a southern accent.

The lady spread her arms wide welcoming Francesca for a hug, but Francesca only extended a hand in front of her. Her dad looked anxiously at the two at the front of the truck, as he tossed the baggage in the bed.

“It’s my pleasure,” the lady said, “I’m Tammy.”

“Tammy?” Francesca repeated.

“Yes,” the plastic lady said, “Like the old country singer.”
“Francesca.”
Her father had already opened the driver’s side door and had one foot inside on the floor mat.

“Let’s get going,” he said, “It’s cold out here.”
Tammy acted like she was going to sit in the backseat, but Francesca beat her to it. Francesca pulled the lever of the passenger seat forward, before hopping in back.

“I insist,” Tammy said.

“No it’s fine,” Francesca countered, “I’m shorter.”
She saw Tammy shoot a glance over at Clint. He started the truck back up, the cabin shaking as the engine grumbled to life. He put the Silverado in reverse and started the drive out to I-43, accelerating rapidly away from every four-way stop sign. Francesca peered over the passenger seat at the center console. There was no gas station coffee in the cup holder.

In a few minutes they got onto the two-lane highway. Clint was trying to make small talk. He asked Frankie about her finals and this and that, yammering about the Packers surprising run, “Might make the play-offs if they can get by Chicago next week. And they’ll be resting their starters.”

Tammy wasn’t saying much. But Francesca did notice an occasional touch of the hand on top of Clint’s, when he rested it on the knob of the manual transmission.

“How long have you two been seeing each other?” Francesca asked. Her heart beat faster. Any nervousness Francesca had about the looming conversation about Charlie and California had been replaced with a knot of venomous betrayal that tightened her stomach.

“Well—” Clint immediately started in, and shot a sheepish look back at Frankie in the rearview mirror.

“Seven months,” Tammy chirped, “Right, Clint?”
There was a pause. Clint accelerated and shifted into a higher gear.

“Now wait,” she said, “That can’t be right.”

“Beginning of April, so—” Tammy counted out the months on her fingers, as if to emphasize each month to Francesca. “April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, and now, December,” Tammy finished counting.
“Nine months!” She exclaimed, “If you count this one. Can you believe that Clint?”

She beamed over at Clint.

“Hard to believe,” he said.

“Nine months?” Francesca asked.

Suddenly, Francesca felt nauseated. Betrayed. How come her father hadn’t told her? Clint had lied to her, even after she had asked about whether he was seeing anyone. After she had encouraged him to date again. She had encouraged it, but now that it had matriculated, in the form of this lady with the heavy eyeliner and fake southern drawl, Francesca wished she hadn’t.

She hadn’t been honest with him about Charlie, either. But her father was the adult. He was supposed to act like one. Francesca had—for too long—acted as an emotional caregiver, mature beyond her years. And now Clint couldn’t even tell her about this. Had the attention—the gratitude—she’d given him not been enough?

These were the same questions that Francesca had expected Clint to confront after she told him about California and Charlie. Now, these same questions faced her in a most glaring fashion. Had she failed him somehow?

Francesca looked out the small rectangular window of the extended cab. It had a slight crack in it that she hadn’t noticed before. Then again, Francesca couldn’t remember the last time she rode in the back. Or the last time she’d looked out this window.

Past the dirty glass, she took notice of every car peeking out from behind farmhouses, the one hiding behind a massive silo. Or of the shoddy one level motels that lined I-43, the salt-ridden cars with differing state license plates parked next to each other, paired up in front of the front door to their rooms. She thought of Charlie, driving home alone across the same barren country, north to Minneapolis. It seemed so impossible, she thought, that the beautifully depressing landscape—that hid nothing in its endlessness, kept from view, could still hold so many vast secrets. She thought their relationship—that father and daughter—had been open, honest, like the timeless fields of Wisconsin. For a significant stretch now, I-43 was lined solely by soy fields.

Eventually, the forced and mindless small talk faded. A lingering silence swept into the cabin like dusk, as the truck rumbled down the high-
way. They made it through the town of Fond du Lac with Lake Michigan as a backdrop, and down county line road past her old high school—sights that normally would make Francesca smile with their familiarity. But she remained tightlipped in the back seat, barely blinking as she stared out the cracked window. Soon Chuck was making a slow right turn onto his property, the Chevy truck lumbering over the customary greeting of the bumps from the cattle guard, and onto the frozen dirt road.

Tammy and Clint unbuckled their seat belts as they pulled up to the farmhouse. Francesca put a firm hand on her father’s shoulder, reaching from the backseat.

“Dad,” she said, “Can we have a minute?”

Clint glanced over his shoulder and nodded, skirting his eyes away from Tammy. Tammy left the car without another word, shaking the cabin as she closed the passenger door firmly shut. The idling engine grumbled, but other than that the cabin was quiet.

“Dad,” she repeated, her hand still on his shoulder, “I’ve got a boyfriend.”

Clint looked up at her in the rearview mirror. He didn’t turn around from the steering wheel. It seemed as if Clint couldn’t make eye contact with his daughter. He clasped his hands in his lap and looked down at the floorboards.

“I love him. We’re moving to California together after we graduate.”

Her father sighed violently. His upper lip quivered in the rear view mirror. His calloused fingers scratched at his wrinkled forehead, before adjusting the brim of his Packers hat. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and the old truck’s engine shuddered silent.

“I’m sorry, Frankie,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry—I’m sorry, if I didn’t handle this right.”

“You’ve done everything else right,” she said. “So don’t be sorry.”

This she meant wholeheartedly. Francesca knew that he had done the best he could. She appreciated that. But she didn’t feel as if it were much consolation to Clint, not much consolation for her leaving to California. She let go of his shoulder.

“But now,” Francesca continued, “I need to do what’s right for me.”

There was a slight shakiness in her throat.
Clint sniffled loudly. He wiped his nose with the back of his palm. He pushed the keys deep into the pocket of his jeans. He got out of the truck and slammed the door.

Francesca exhaled. Francesca punched Charlie’s number into her phone. She’d make everything right between the two of them. As the phone rang, she looked back outside the window. Her father’s arched silhouette lumbered slowly towards the farmhouse, his head down-- the lonely figure was sharply contrasted with the lonelier frozen gray soy fields, which looked in wintertime as if they would stay this barren, this isolated, forever.
EUGENIC STERILIZATION IN AMERICA:
A QUESTION OF GENOCIDE?
PRESTON MCBRIDE

History of Eugenics and Sterilization in America

At the turn of the twentieth century, America was experiencing an influx of immigrants. As Professor of Education Ann G. Winfield indicates in Eugenics and Education in America, public alarm was on the rise. She contends that Cubberly’s interpretation of eugenics illustrates the dominant view that these immigrants were “of a very different sort” and were “largely illiterate, docile, [and] often lacking initiative.” Cubberly then stated, “[they have] served to dilute tremendously our national stock and to weaken and corrupt our political life… [there was also a] rise to a large, poverty-stricken underclass concentrated in American cities.”\(^1\) As such, eugenicists argued that the human gene pool was in danger of being weakened in terms of intelligence, strength, and ability through miscegenation and “wanton breeding” by “inferior” peoples.\(^2\) Therefore, eugenicists were compelled to step in for the ‘good of the race.’ As investigative journalist Edwin Black saw it,

In America, this battle to wipe out whole ethnic groups was fought not by armies with guns nor by hate sects at the margins. Rather, this pernicious white-gloved war was prosecuted by esteemed professors, elite universities, wealthy industrialists and government officials colluding in a racist, pseudo-scientific movement called eugenics. The purpose: create a superior Nordic race.\(^3\)

Compulsory sterilization in America began in 1907 when Indiana passed the first sterilization law focused on preventing criminal births. Two
2. Ibid, 6.
years later, in 1909, California, Washington, and Oregon also passed sterilization laws. According to Black, these states originally targeted “habitual criminals” and rapists, mandating sterilization as additional punishment for the “prevention of procreation.” But this limitation soon expanded to governing the reproductive rights of “defective strains” of genes. In all, over thirty states passed eugenic sterilization laws both as a means of population control of ‘undesirables’ and as a means to regulate the gene pool. Carlson, as reported by Winfield, stated, “[sterilization laws governed] the reproduction of ‘defective strains’ within the general human population…. Those considered ‘defective’ were people who were blind, deaf, epileptic, ‘feebleminded,’ paupers, alcoholics, prison inmates, institutional populations, unmarried mothers, and children thought to be sexually deviant due to masturbation.” Thus these laws disproportionately affected ‘disabled’ or ‘defective’ persons. By 1957 nearly 60,000 individuals had been sterilized. However, because sterilization continued until the 1980s, the total number is unknown.

California is most notorious for its law because of its vast scope and sheer numbers of victims. Chapter 720 of the state’s statutory code, entitled “An act to permit asexualization of inmates of the state hospitals and the California Home for the Care and Training of Feeble-Minded Children, and of convicts in the state prisons,” permitted castration or sterilization of state convicts and the residents of the California Home for the Care and Training of Feebleminded Children in Sonoma County if it was deemed appropriate and beneficial to the prisoners “physical, mental or moral condition” by a panel of the “resident physician…the general superintendent of state hospitals [and] the secretary of the state board of health.” No patient consent was necessary. The rhetoric and justification proceeded as follows: “Of course, not all children of an insane person will… themselves become insane. But those who themselves are fortunate enough to escape,

4. Black, War Against the Weak, 67.
5. See Appendix I.
7. See Appendix I.
may nevertheless hand on to posterity the elements, which, in some future combination, will again produce insanity.” The report continued, “In modern civilizations, where the weak and helpless are protected so carefully, it is not possible to depend on Nature to solve this problem of the survival of the unfit.” By 1929, California had sterilized over 6,000 persons. And by 1957 the state had forcibly sterilized over 20,000 individuals. Of these 11,683 were deemed ‘mentally ill’ and another 7,514 were ‘mentally deficient.’ Accordingly, 96% of the victims, by 1957, were ‘disabled’ as defined by the State.

Other states boasted successful eugenic sterilization laws and policies. By the end of 1917, Indiana, Washington, California, Connecticut, Nevada, Iowa, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Michigan, Kansas, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Oregon, and South Dakota had passed sterilization laws. In total, these states sterilized over 35,315 by 1957 (See Appendix I).

Several states were prominent in the national eugenic discussion. Kansas passed its first eugenics statute on March 14, 1913. Limited to “inmates of all State institutions entrusted with the care or custody of habitual criminals, idiots, epileptics, imbeciles and insane,” the law permitted sterilizations after accounting for “the physical and mental condition… record and family history, to the effect that the subject’s condition is deemed unimprovable, and consequently procreation will be undesirable.”

Similarly, Oregon passed its take on eugenics on February 19, 1917, subjecting “Feeble-minded, insane, epileptic, habitual criminals, moral degenerates, and sexual perverts… of institutions” to forced sterilization as “purely eugenical and therapeutic.” Their goal: “for betterment of physical, mental, neural or psychic condition of inmate to protect society, and not in any manner a punitive manner.” Removing the biological reproductive rights of persons is punitive, regardless of how it is viewed. As of January 1, 1921, Oregon had stripped 127 ‘inmates’ of their reproductive rights, inarguably causing some extent of physical and mental harm. By 1957, this number had jumped to 2,177. While the

10. See Appendix I.
11. Ibid, 11-12.
original intention of Oregon’s eugenic laws was directed at criminals, the ‘disabled’ were disproportionately affected as the definition broadened to include any person ‘unfit’ in the state’s eyes. Of the 127 sterilizations, only three were from the state penitentiary, whereas 114 were performed at “institutions for the insane.”

North Carolina’s General Assembly passed its first sterilization law in 1929 and a second “constitutional” law in 1933; the same year Nazi Germany passed the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring” and Hitler began sterilizing and systematically murdering Germany’s ‘disabled’ populations. Under the law, North Carolina’s Eugenics Board could authorize sterilizations based on the presumption of feeblemindedness, epilepsy, and mental disease, but could not authorize any case on physical or social grounds, unless a mental condition was also present.

One North Carolinian, Mary, aged 16, was an only child whose parents were separated. Neither had a proper education and her mother was deemed “immoral.” Mary was admitted to Samarcand Manor State Home and Industrial School, where she was determined to be promiscuous, “disobedient, and delinquent.” Upon being diagnosed as “borderline [mentally] deficient,” she was observed and found to be “easily influenced, lacking energy and initiative.” Result: the patient had poor chances of “future adjustment and sterilization was recommended.” Mary was just one victim of North Carolina’s eugenics program. From 1933 to June 30, 1947, the state executed 1,852 sterilizations, according to Moya Woodside. By 1957, 2,620 more sterilizations had been performed with or without consent.

Likewise, Virginia had extensive eugenic sterilization policies that disproportionately impacted ‘unfit’ or ‘disabled’ persons and women. The state passed Virginia SB 281 entitled “Eugenical Sterilization Act” on March 20, 1924. It was aimed at “individuals…afflicted with hereditary forms of insanity that are recurrent, idiocy, imbecility, feeble-mindedness or epilepsy.” In all, between 1924 and 1979, 7,325 ‘disabled’ persons were sterilized under the law. 6,683 of them occurred prior to 1957. Of those

15. Ibid, 15, 36.
16. Subtracting 1,852 from the total presented in Appendix I.
Race and poverty eventually played an important role in sterilization laws and decisions. This policy stemmed from the inherent racial hierarchy of which Europeans envisioned themselves at the top. Evocative of this view, on the floor of the US Senate on February 7, 1899, South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman explained his racist views: “It was not because we are Democrats, but because we understand and realize what it is to have two races side by side that cannot mix or mingle without deterioration and injury to both and the ultimate destruction of the civilization of the higher.” On the same day Virginia passed its sterilization law, it also passed the “Racial Integrity Act.” This illegalized the marriage of “any white person [to any person] save a white person.”

Popenoe and Johnson offer definition, scope, and goals of eugenic policies, as purported by Winfield: “The problem of eugenics is to make legal, social and economic adjustments that (1) a larger proportion of superior persons will have children than at present, (2) that the average number of offspring of each superior person will be greater than at present, (3) that the most inferior persons will have no children, and finally, that (4) other inferior persons will have fewer children than now.”

...[they] fell roughly into three areas: poor, minority, and socially deviant. Poor whites, both urban and rural, were often deemed mentally ‘unfit’ and labeled with the dubious term “feebleminded.” They ranged from unwed mothers and young boys who masturbated, to anyone whose poverty, isolation, language, or habits rendered them unacceptable by “polite” society.

20. Winfield, Eugenics and Education in America, 70.
21. Ibid, 64.
In 1927, the first real challenge to sterilization laws came before the Supreme Court of the United States with the case Buck v. Bell. Justice Oliver J. Holmes rendered the majority opinion, stating,

...is the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health, and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization.... It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.22

This rhetoric was apparently grounded in public consciousness, as eugenic policies continued for decades. Thus, as Black summarizes, “by the end of 1940, no fewer than 35,878 men and women had been sterilized or castrated—almost 30,000 of them after Buck v. Bell.”23


She stated, “In normal medical practice, hysterectomies are rare in women of child bearing age unless there is cancer or other medical problems.” England further questions the techniques used in the procedures and the methods used to obtain consent, noting harassment. According to Jane Lawrence, an investigation by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) determined that an estimated 3,406 Indigenous women were sterilized at four of twelve IHS areas, and at least twenty-three sterilization were executed on women younger than twenty-one. While the report shied away from the issue of coerced consent, it did state that the HIS did not follow the “necessary regulations and that the informed consent forms did not adhere to the standards set.” According to Bill Wagner, South Dakota Senator James Abourezk extrapolated that “given the small American Indian population, the 3,400 Indian sterilization figure…would be compared to sterilizing 452,000 non-Indian women.” Further studies indicate that between 25% and 50% of Native American women were sterilized in the 1970s to reduce birth rates. These sterilizations were once again based upon the notion that these women were poor. As a result of the sterilizations, they suffered from “higher rates of marital problems, alcoholism, drug abuse, psychological difficulties, shame, and guilt.”

Similar tactics to regulate birth rates and decrease poverty were used by the United States government against Puerto Rican women. As stated in Patience Schell’s “Eugenics Policy and Practice in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico,” the Puerto Rican legislature legalized sterilizations on the basis of controlling overpopulation and “undesirable elements” of the population in 1937. Next, Schell asserts that only 97 involuntary sterilizations were performed, but voluntary sterilizations became the dominant mode for population control until the 1960s. Sterilization as a means of birth control as well as birth control pills were tested on Puerto Rico’s poor inhabitants long before they were introduced to the American public. Thus, because some Puerto Rican women were involuntarily sterilized, it can be seen as experimental genocide.

Analysis

Eugenic policies in the United States and abroad, which manifest in sterilization policies, have broad consequences for the victims of these heinous crimes. Above the tremendous physical and emotional trauma suffered, the victims are deprived of their biological right of reproduction. As the policies are intended to and succeeded in limiting reproduction, there are also economic ramifications. Sterilization at the most basic level results in the loss of prosperity from many fronts, including personal, communal, and potential. Sterilization policies equivocate hegemonic discourse in practice. In addition, they have been declared unconstitutional by numerous courts, yet the practice continued.²⁹

The demographic impact of sterilization policies in the United States between 1907 and the 1980s is significant. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact amount of individuals sterilized during the institutionalization of eugenic policies, we can assume it is greater than the 60,000 cases reported by 1957 because the policies extended until at least the late 1970s. In addition to the decreased potential for population growth, sterilization has multi-generational impacts. Presently, in the United States, 2.1 children are born to each woman, according to the World Bank’s “Fertility Rate” indicator.³⁰ The zero generation lost the potential of 126,000 lives. The first ‘lost’ generation another 264,600; and the second, 517,860 lives.

Assuming, for simplicity of calculations, the fertility rate is a constant 2.1 since 1960, and that each generation has children in twenty-year increments, by 2000 the results of forced sterilizations in the United States have claimed the life, or potential life, of over one million children. Would this not be genocide? To put this number in perspective, that is more than the amount of ‘disabled’ persons sterilized in the Holocaust-200,000 more than the total death toll from the Rwandan genocide, and more than those killed in the entirety of the Armenian genocide.

Beyond quantifiable metrics, forced sterilization affects the victim’s psyche as well as well their physical wellbeing. One Californian victim, Charlie Follett, describes the physical pain involved in the process.²⁹ See Appendix II.

during a CNN interview disseminated on March 8, 2012. He heard about the pain from other boys deemed too unfit to reproduce and one day endured it himself. Follett described the pain of the procedure, stating that it felt “like they were pulling my whole insides out.”

Another victim from North Carolina, Elaine Riddick, shared her story of a forcible rape, then subsequent sterilization immediately after giving birth. In the interview she describes how her illiterate grandmother was harassed to provide consent for the operation under the threat of withholding the families’ welfare payments. Upon asking the state for an explanation, Riddick utters that they had determined that because of her rape, she was “feeble-minded” and “she could not take care of herself… tie her shoes…that I was just incompetent.” In addition, the state faulted her for not working, even though she was only 13 at the time. To which she replies, “Should I not have been in school? They were saying that feeble-mindedness is hereditary.” With tears in her eyes, she continues, “So they sterilized me so that I would not produce ‘my kind.’ Mind you that I am not illiterate, nor feeble-minded… To me, they took away all of my rights.”

Riddick contests, to the best of her knowledge, that the State of North Carolina forcibly sterilized children as young as eight years of age. The only reason she could give for the justification of this policy is “because they’re black.” In 1970, under the Nixon administration, the federal government increased Medicaid-funded sterilizations of impoverished Americans. While many of these sterilizations in the 70s were not ‘consensual,’ it has been alleged that patients were either mis or uninformed about the procedures.

These primary accounts of the psychological trauma coincide with immense physical complications. The first and most obvious ramification to surgery is pain. In addition, sterilization operations could potentially have the following ramifications: heavy blood loss, hematoma, infection, inflammation, organ injury (bowel, bladder, and intestine), pelvic infection, and

complications from anesthesia.34 Indeed, there are potential medical complications to any surgical operation, and to say otherwise would be a disservice to the severity of the issue. Yet, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that some victims did not suffer from these complications. Sterilizations inflict both mental and physical harm. Psychologically, operations compromised mental health as evident by victim’s stories of shame, confusion, and grief.35

Forced sterilizations continue to this day. Some governments and institutions still believe in these eugenic policies, regardless of their demographic impact. China and India’s restrictive policies on childbearing employ forced sterilization as a means of Malthusian birth control. Allegedly, the United States still supports sterilization programs through tax money provided by USAID in Peru and India.36 Furthermore, forced sterilization is still used as a punitive measure against political dissidents. For instance, it is alleged that a 46-year-old Chinese woman was forcibly sterilized in retaliation for bringing up a petition.37 As Argentinian writer Ernesto Sabato observes, “It looks like the dignity of human life has never been among globalization masterminds’ concerns.”38

The victims of forced sterilization tend to be people on the periphery of their respective cultures and ‘civilizations.’ For the most part, the sick, ‘disabled,’ poor, and ethnic minorities do not register in public discourse, and when they do, they are portrayed with negative stereotypes. There is nothing about being sick, ‘disabled,’ poor, or a minority that

38. Pelaez, “When sterilization becomes genocide”.

Dartmouth College
negates the human condition. To the contrary, adversity strengthens it. We need to remember that these persons are just that: people, deserved of the same rights ‘normal’ people enjoy.

Conclusion

Analyzing compulsory sterilization policies within the context of genocide has advantages and limitations. First off, genocide is a highly contested word that typically is associated with outright mass murder. However, there are other intricacies of the legally binding definition purported by the United Nations. According to Benjamin Lieberman, legal studies scholar Raphael Lemkin sought a concept that “[encompassed] the phenomenon of existential killing.” And during the World War II he coined the term “genocide.” Genocide was then legally reinforced by the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The convention passed resolution 260 on December 9, 1948, which provided legally grounded framework necessary to prosecute international crimes of genocide and mass murder. According to Article II of the treaty, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a “national, ethnical, racial or religious” group, such as:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Most genocides of the twentieth century involve the first clause and mass

slaughter of civilians. However, often overlooked are examples of unpunished genocides that continue to this day under the guise of mercy killings or population control.

I will now provide four additional definitions of genocide that can be found in Adam Jones’s, Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction. In 1976, sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz wrote,

[Genocide is] a structural and systematic destruction of innocent people by a state bureaucratic apparatus… Genocide represents a systematic effort over time to liquidate a national population, usually a minority…[and] functions as a fundamental political policy to assure conformity and participation of the citizenry.41

Twelve years later, historian Henry Huttenbach defined genocide as, “any act that puts the very existence of a group in jeopardy.”42 The same year (1988), Helen Fein, historical sociologist, defined genocide as,

… a series of purposeful actions by a perpetrator(s) to destroy a collectivity through mass or selective murders of group members and suppressing the biological and social reproduction of the collectivity. This can be accomplished through the imposed proscription or restriction of reproduction of group members, increasing infant mortality and breaking the linkage between reproduction and socialization of children in the family or group of origin. The perpetrator may represent the state of the victim, another state, or another collectivity.43

Then in 1996, Horowitz updated and reiterated his definition of genocide, stating,

Genocide is herein defined as a structural and systematic destruction of innocent people by a state bureaucratic apparatus….Genocide means the physical dismemberment and liquidation of people on large scales, an attempt by those who rule to achieve the total

42. Ibid, 18.
43. Ibid, 18.
elimination of a subject
people.44

As you can see, most genocide definitions include provisions for mass murder, but it is not a requisite condition to apply the term to systematic injustices perpetrated against groups within a society by bureaucratic institutions. For example, if we investigate Fein’s definition, it becomes clear that sterilization of a group that is perpetrated in order to reduce or eliminate the biological reproduction capacities of groups fulfills the qualifications of her definition. And, limiting biological reproduction can be seen as a means to the eventual elimination of a group in these five definitions.

Compulsory sterilization of ethnic minorities in America constitutes genocide based on three clauses of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Whereas noncoerced consensual sterilizations can be seen as a form of birth control, forced sterilizations, however, constitute genocide in that they (1) cause serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (2) deliberately inflict on the group, conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; and, (3) impose measures intended to prevent births within the group. The groups falling under this legal definition are ethnic minorities. But what about the sterilizations of mentally, physically, and developmentally disabled persons?

This question is more problematic and the one of genocide requires further analysis. First off, the definition of genocide, given by the United Nations, is narrow in scope and precludes ‘groups’ that are not “national, ethnical, racial or religious.” Are ‘disabled’ persons not a group? To the contrary, they constitute “a number of people…that are located close together or are considered or classed together.”45 One can simply perform a “Google” search and find that associations and organizations exist for their protection and enjoyment.

Even if it can be argued that ‘disabled’ persons constitute a group in the legal definition of genocide, another hurdle exists in charging the crime of genocide. While the United Nations’ definition of genocide was

44. Ibid, 19. Emphasis original.
passed in 1948, it was not ratified by the United States government until November 4, 1988 under President Ronald Reagan and the “Proxmire Act,” seven years after the last forced sterilization.46 Individuals (and governments) are protected from the retroactive application of criminal law.47 This is also known as retroactive justice. Because the last forced sterilization in America took place seven years prior to the ratification of the genocide convention, it stands that they cannot be indicted for their actions. However, Australian legal expert James Popple has noted three instances, including the Nuremberg Trials, in which retroactive justice was carried out. I am not arguing for the retroactive application of genocide, but instead presenting retroactive justice as one possible means for retribution.

If involuntary sterilization of ‘disabled’ persons, and minorities cannot be considered genocide, at the very least, these acts constitute crimes against humanity. Defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as “acts…committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population,” including “enforced sterilization.”48 To systematically revoke the biological reproductive rights of individuals, subject them to physical and mental harm, and deny their humanity, certainly is a crime.

Some opponents of eugenic policies have contemporarily supported reparations for victims. For instance, in North Carolina, Governor Beverly Perdue has set up a task force to determine how the state should proceed with compensating victims. While the $50,000 payout per victim passed the State House, it was defeated in the Senate.49 This shows that Americans, at least in part, have changed their view of the controversial

eugenic policies. And, it also is reassuring that these crimes will not be ignored and perhaps, to some extent, victims will be compensated for undergoing grueling trauma.

As Former Vice-President Hubert Humphrey said to Congress on November 4, 1977, “the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life—the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”50 Thus far, we’ve done an appalling job.

50. Former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey in Congressional Record, 95th Cong., 1st sess., Vol. 123, November 4, 1977, p. 37287 (c. 3).
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SEWANNEE NARRATIVE

MATTHEW BERKSHIRE

We reposed in the long grass
Sweating, as the scent of gunpowder
Lingered in the air.

I rubbed my sore shoulder
And sipped sweet bourbon
While we wondered after
The ghosts of deer.

Walking back to the road,
There were tourists wishing to
Have their picture taken
In front of a sign that reads
Matanzas Bay Next Exit.

They look happy in their
Bright polyester shirts,
And sunglasses

“Do they know that Matanzas means massacre?”
Sheeeeet. That what that means?

An armadillo lays dead by the truck.

You wanna eat it?
“How long do you think it’s been there?”
Wasn’t there when we parked.
“Can’t we shoot a live one?”
Shoot the dead one if it makes you happy,
But let’s eat him.
She laughed,
brown hair seeming at once
Beautiful.

Que paso?

She turned,
amber flecked eyes
fully feral.

“I knew them once.”

Tu sabia quien?

“All thousand sailors
Solemnly searching
For the sea.”

I raked the paper
Reading of tragic
Footballers, but still
she was beautiful.
I was around the age of thirteen when I realized what makes a good Cheyenne woman: her frybread, her sewing, and her beadwork. When the pressure of being a woman was weighing on my adolescent mind (during that stage when absolutely anything of significance is amplified by a thousand and can cause the breakdown of a teenage lifetime) I would slowly repeat to myself, attributing each word with utmost seriousness: “You are about to become the woman you will be for the rest of your life” (not realizing that at the age of twenty-five, this statement would still ring true). And so I set out to learn the arts of frybread, sewing, and beadwork.

When I was in eighth grade I was fortunate to participate in a fundraising event where we made and sold Indian Tacos. These tacos are made of all the contents of a regular taco but instead of a corn or flour tortilla, the base of this beauty is a big ol’ piece of frybread. Golden discs of dough float in popping hot skillets of vegetable oil or lard. Like many tasty treats, they are super unhealthy but incredibly delicious. As a young girl, I admired the brave women whose fingers almost touched the grease as they fearlessly added another piece to the pan-as if the searing heat could not faze them. There was playground beef similar to, “My mom makes better frybread than yours” or “my grandma’s frybread is the BEST across the whole entire reservation.” However, my mother never learned to make bread, so I became the savior and household bread-maker at the age of fourteen. Frybread Sundays attracted cousins and friends, near and far, until I left for college and took my bread-making skills with me.

When I was a high school freshman I learned to bead peyote stitch in Cheyenne Culture class. This rare cylindrical style is used to decorate things such as pens, lanyards, stethoscopes, and other items. With a needle placed between thumb and forefinger, I pick up and place into the design one single bead at a time. Needless to say I require a minimum of two things: patience and hand-eye coordination. Lacking much of the former as a teenager, my beading skills fell dormant. In the fall of my senior year in college, I needed to give a special birthday gift. After seven years, I picked up a needle and beaded what turned out to be an impressive lanyard. It
was a fire-color design of reds, oranges, and yellows on black, with a line or two of silver to make it pop. It’s all about the pop! Since then my bead-working skills have been revived and refined.

Later that fall, my Ojibwe friend taught me to bead flat stitch. This style allowed me to lay anywhere between five and nine beads at a time and so the work moved much more quickly. Most regalia for both male and female powwow dancers are beaded flat stitch, or lazy stitch, which is very similar in style. “Medallions” or “dallies” are necklaces worn with large hanging beaded pendants, which may have a traditional design or meaning. More popular dallies are beaded NFL or NBA logos to show team dedication and support. One of my most recent pieces was Sonic the Hedgehog. When I showed my father, he said laughing, “Sonic? That’s not Native!” I replied, “Dad, all the non-Natives want bear paws, howling wolves, or geometric “Native” designs and all the Natives want this stuff, icons from popular culture.”

Beading is truly an art form that requires talent, skill, and craftsmanship. All the beads are connected with the same thread so in order to correct a mistake rows upon rows of work must be undone. Every bead-worker must find balance, however. There is an expectation that the rows lay nice and flat alongside one another. Perfection. Yet at the same time, we are taught to purposefully add one bead, color out of place. Imperfection. This is to represent our humility and knowledge that we are human and we make mistakes, for only Creator is perfect. It also helps one identify their beadwork in cases of loss or thievery. For example: “my braid-tie is the yellow one with the purple bead in the upper right corner.”

Reminiscent of painting, both the design composition and color selection are critical. When I start a piece, I throw many different colored beads together, adding and taking away certain colors until I get that pop. It is usually high contrast designs that draw the eye in. I have a tendency to accent my work with fire-colors, perhaps to pay homage to the piece that brought my hands and heart back to life.

There is no feeling like that of working hard with my hands knowing that it will bring happiness to a person, couple, or family. I’ve always said that beading is therapeutic. It clears my mind. Instead of thinking, I am able to turn my brain off and just witness the dance of beads in hand. Sometimes I do not know whether a pattern needs five or six beads, so I
take a guess. The satisfaction of pulling the thread and watching the correct number of beads align exactly into the place I had intended almost gives me butterflies. Damn, I’m good. Moments like that provide me confidence in myself as a beadworker, artist, and woman.

As far as sewing is concerned, I’ve only recently purchased my own machine. I think the key to being a great seamstress is knowing how to identify and fix all problems regarding the bobbin. All of our Native regalia (powwow outfits, ribbon shirts, and ceremonial clothes) are made ourselves, by hand. So, undoubtedly, yes, I will continue to work on improving my sewing skills; but I no longer assess myself so harshly on my ability or inability to sew. I believe I have grown into a good Cheyenne woman regardless. For now, I will make bread when called upon and I will enjoy and share my work with beads.

Beadwork is not just an aesthetic art. It is our culture. It carries our history and tells the stories of our future. Some pieces have been passed down for generations while others are being made to welcome the unborn. I realize that I am fortunate to hold this past, present, and future in my hands. I remain cognizant of my well-being when I work, for we are taught to put good thoughts and prayers into everything we create. Whether I am beading a turtle to protect a baby boy’s umbilical cord, a Broncos medallion for a hardcore Denver fan, or a set of powwow jewelry so a little girl can dance for the first time, I lay every bead and tie every knot with love in my heart. I pray that there comes a day where I can teach my daughter to hold a needle, all the while singing silent songs of gratitude to the grandmothers who came before me and kept this art alive.
I was dreaming I was in Mrs. Norton’s fifth grade Arkansas History class giving an oral report on Hernando de Soto and how they slipped his lifeless body into the muddy waters of the mighty Mississip’ under cover of night to keep the Indians from finding out he wasn’t an immortal sun god after all. Some think he’s really at the bottom of Lake Chicot, but more important to me was that I keep talking because I wasn’t wearing pants and I clung to the lectern in white knuckle desperation as Mrs. Norton tried to drag me out so the other students could laugh at me. They pounded on their desks with their tiny fists to egg her on — pounding and pounding — and I knew in order to answer the phone that was ringing, I’d have to let go, at least one hand, and that was risking a lot. But I could tell it was my phone and awake or not, I was going to answer it. Just as soon as I could find it.

“Hello?” I groaned, except it sounded like a well-executed Elmer Fudd impression – Mel Blanc not Arthur Bryan – “heh-whoa?”

“Why aren’t you out here?” the voice demanded to know. “Are you still in bed?”

“Who is this? No!”

I don’t know why, but we people-pleasers never like to admit when we’re asleep, it’s some sort of inborn empathy – you don’t want to make someone feel bad for waking you I guess. We’ll claim to be “resting our eyes” or other such nonsense. Assholes on the other hand, they’ll tell you right out.

I was halfway sitting up now, one foot on the living room floor. Suddenly, a pounding at the front door vibrated clean through me. Rude awakening had just given way to possible home invasion. Through the dirty smoked glass of the rental house storm door, I could see the foggy outline of someone backlit by headlights, holding a cell phone to his ear.

“We said we were leaving at five a.m. It’s five a.m.! Why aren’t you out here?” The voice was commandingly stereophonic – in my right ear and everywhere else in the universe simultaneously, with a slight delay due
to rural Arkansas’s spotty cell service.

Slowly, jagged pieces of reality were being pasted together in an ugly mosaic in my mind. Last night, some of the boys from the plant took me out for drinks to welcome me aboard. After several beers and an indeterminate number of shots, I agreed to go “skirmishin’” with Harold Quimby, known around the plant as “Chigger.” At some point I even agreed to a daybreak departure. Why, God, a daybreak departure? I wasn’t even sure what this skirmishin’ business was last night – was it that thing where you grab catfish out of the water with your bare hands or was that something else? – and it certainly wasn’t any clearer this morning, but now the bill for drunken covenants had come due in 138 pounds of anxious Chigger on my porch.

Owning up to being asleep was my only defense at this point. “I overslept – you’re going to have to give me a minute.”

“No der. Let me in.”

“I can’t right now. Give me a minute.”

“What do you mean you can’t? I can tell you’re right there on the couch. Let me in.”

I couldn’t recall why I’d slept on the couch naked from the waist down, tee shirt and necktie begging the question what happened to my button-down, but it was no way to greet a coworker I’d known less than twelve hours – especially one of the boys from the plant floor. After all, I was management. Sort of. Middle management with morning wood. Nocturnal tumescence is a mysterious and oddly prideful thing but not at all like khaki chinos – there are occasions where it’s just inappropriate. If Chigger had only known the storm door was unlocked, things could have gotten weird.

“You’re going to have to give me a minute.”

Chigger’s Chevy Suburban was no warm, safe place after having been throttled into the day with the ringing and banging and what all. Held together by overlapping layers of Bondo and bailing wire, it looked about ten years past the point where anyone had cared for or taken any pride in it. The Silver Bullet (as Chigger referred to her) was just transportation, and it made for an odd scene – a guy so skinny he all but disappeared when he turned sideways to you, driving a truck so long it appeared to sag in
the middle. Sitting concave in the oversized seat set too far back from the steering wheel, Chigger didn’t look to be driving The Bullet so much as hanging on for dear life – body puffed like a sail from the headwind. With stringy, thinning blonde hair and a wiry brown goatee hanging like a mossy stalactite two or three inches below his chin, he looked older and dirtier than he probably was. He had kind blue eyes and an easy smile though, and with a shower and a shave – maybe some corduroy pants – I could almost envision him passing for a Pentecostal preacher or a guy asking you to support public television.

Even in the early summer, daybreak slipstream coming through The Bullet’s many cracks and gaps was bracing. I wished I’d put on more than just jeans and a tee shirt. But Chigger told me he had the clothes “taken care of.” In the rush to get on the road, the statement didn’t even register on me as curious.

“We gotta stop and get coffee,” I said matter-of-factly, though I knew I was at Chigger’s mercy on this thing.

“What we gotta do is stop for gas. Goddurnit!”

“Good, then we can get coffee too.”

“Goddurnit, I hate going to Roy Rogers though.”

“How come?”

“I get the skeevs there ever since my old man told me he slept with the fat lady who runs the place when they were in high school together. But it’s the only gas station on this side of town, clear on into Brinkley. That’s the way he said it too: ‘I slept with her’ like it was the romantic culmernation of a night of tango and cocktails, not somethin’ that happened on a lawn chair. Why would you tell your kid somethin’ like that? Seriously. It ain’t braggin’. I figure from the size of her, there’s an outside chance she may have been passable pretty forty years ago, but I guarantee she had cankles since eighth grade. Everyone knows that’s the underpinnin’ for a doublewide that’s zoned, perc test approved, and just waiting to be backed into the lot. Every time I gotta fill up there I feel like I just swallowed a ball of night crawlers. The thought of that girthy heifer lookin’ me over but seein’ my old man is a form of molestation.”

I watched in the side mirror as Chigger jabbed the gas hose nozzle at the small aperture in the side of The Bullet. Does he not even have a gas cap? From the spaghetti pattern of scratches around the hole, it was appar-
ent he had a hard time hitting the mark on the first try and took no care whatsoever for The Bullet’s faded paint job. Then I latched onto another shard of the mosaic from last night.

While he was off in the bathroom, some guys had explained to me that Chigger had a bad left eye from where he took a baseball hit at a company picnic, which left him with a near complete lack of depth perception. He wasn’t playing – he was over by the corndog stand showing Bill Lansing’s teenage daughter how he could take a drag off her Marlboro Light, pull the skin of his lower left eyelid down and make the smoke come out of his tear duct when a high-arching homerun caught him dead in the face. The corndog guy said he thought Chigger’s head exploded because of the puff of smoke that erupted. The cataract that resulted was the reason he had no concept of personal space when he was talking to you – he seemed to always think he was thirty-six inches away though he never was, it was generally more like twelve. In fact, they said that was the origin of his nickname “Chigger” – when he talked to you, he was on you like a parasitic mite.

Once he’d managed to set the trigger on the gas nozzle, Chigger turned and walked toward the station. He stopped and doubled back suddenly. “You want a cinnamon roll?” he muttered as I was leaning my throbbing head against the window.

“Just coffee,” I said. “Wait, I’ll come in with you, I need some fresh air.”

“Well you ain’t gonna find none out here.” With that, he lifted one leg and loosed about four cubic feet of poisoned gas. It was a ratio way out of proportion to his size. “Whew, I feel better now that we got that out in the open!”

I couldn’t believe it – Saturday morning, hung-over, walking through a noxious cloud before sunup, at a gas station with a guy I didn’t know but who appeared to be the plant punch line, on the way to go do something I hadn’t the foggiest idea about when I should have been asleep. I would have gotten up around the crack of noon and started unpacking boxes.

You see, I’d been transferred from Little Rock to trouble-shoot the lock line at the Helena gas cap division – the sub-assembly line where they install the locks on the locking gas caps, which sold for $3 more
than the standard model. A three-month tour of duty in the hinterlands to figure out why defective product was going out. Hundreds of gas caps had been sent across the country to Napa and Pep Boys but the majority to AutoZone and hundreds of motorists subsequently found themselves locked out of their own gas tank. This wouldn’t do. The company was not only obligated to refund the purchase price, but to pay the locksmith bills that were coming in fifteen or twenty a week, because the caps were built so solidly you couldn’t get one off with a crowbar. It turns out while this is frustrating to a couple of juvenile delinquents with a rubber hose trying to siphon your gas, it’s downright infuriating to the kind of guy who would go down to the AutoZone and buy an aftermarket lockable gas cap for his car, only to be its first and only victim.

Management suspected incompetence due to a metric-to-standard conversion issue inherent with the switch to German-made chrome-plated brass locks, but rumors of foul play were floating around the head office; someone even used the word saboteur. Once I consulted Daniel Webster on just what a “saboteur” was, I realized this was the most exciting assignment I’d had in six years with the company and would undoubtedly lead to a promotion. Goodbye cubicles and thirty minute lunch breaks. The whole thing reeked of intrigue and danger.

“Mornin’ fellas,” the large lady said.

“Mornin’, Mrs. Evans,” Chigger replied, his Roy Rogers reference prompting a grin to unfold across the gas-n-snack matron’s upper chin.

“Gonna need a fill on pump four, two coffees and one of them large bags of seeds.”

“Sunflower or punkin?” she asked.

“Sunflower.”

“You know the punkins are more healthful,” she advised. “More than half your daily recollected serving of manganese. And good for men’s health too – I just read an article about it in the Sunday supplement.” Leaning towards him and in a learned whispering voice, “You know, the prostrate.”

“I’m good on manganese,” Chigger replied, avoiding eye contact. I poured two coffees and as the lady rang everything up, Chigger laid down cash, scooped up his seeds and commenced to vacating the premises, with me two steps behind. As the glass door swung closed behind us, a merry
bon voyage rang out: “Tell your daddy Verna says ‘hey!’ …”

I understood about those night crawlers.

As we headed northwest toward Brinkley the cotton fields surrounding us were black as ink but the faintest glow of daybreak was beginning to appear in the rearview mirror – and this was causing Chigger all sorts of fits.

“Goddurnit – I can’t believe we’re gonna be late! I didn’t even sleep last night. This is history repeatin’ itself. It truly is. Those who can’t remember history are doomed to repeat it; well, goddurnit, I remember! And I’m still repeatin’ it cuz of the new guy!”

Perplexed by the fusillade, I leaned over and turned down the AM radio … “This is Lowell Rupcorn for NOAA weather radio with the accu-weather forecast …”

I needed a reality check. “So, ok, what is this thing we’re going to exactly?”

“It’s Price’s charge up the middle. Do you remember any of the stuff I told you last night?”

“The scrimshaw? …” I knew the pronunciation was off, but it was the closest I could get. I’d been throttled into the day you’ll remember.

“Skirmish! It’s skirmish, not scrimshaw! We’re skirmishers. Well, I’m a skirmisher – you’re a farb. Ha! … you’re not even a farb, you’re just more or less a stand-in. You’re not even farb material yet. You’re a buck-farb. Ha!”

“A farb? What’s that?” I didn’t think I was going to need Daniel Webster on a trip like this.

“I’m sorry, chief, I shouldn’t a called you that. You didn’t deserve that – you’re just trying to help out and I know it. I’m just flustrated cuz we’re runnin’ late.”

Chigger cracked his window and blew a slobbery ejaculation of spent sunflower shells into the slipstream. Fffthwoop …

His left cheek, the one holding the fresh seeds was drawn up a little from all the salt. It gave him the appearance of an old time gangster, the kind that talks out of one side of his mouth and says, “see” after everything. The skill it took to store seeds in the left cheek, maneuver them with the tongue, shell them with the front teeth, chew and swallow, transport
the spent casings to the right cheek, then feed in fresh ones again from the left was not lost on me – in fact it was something to ponder. I figured the plant’s locking cap sub-assembly line should run so smooth. For Chigger it was as natural as swatting a fly away from watermelon.

“Ok, in review, I’m a member of the 3rd Arkansaw Infantry Battalion. We reenact the various Civil War battles that took place in Arkansas for the education of the public and for the furthering of knowledge among the ranks as to the lifestyle and general condition of soldiers of the Confederacy. Today, we’re portrayin’ the Battle of Helena – July 4th, 1863.”

“Oh. That sounds cool.”

“You’re goddurn right it’s cool, brother! But if we don’t get there, and I mean el pranto, we’re gonna have to galvanize. And I’ll be durned if I’m doin’ that again!”

“Galvanize?” I was beginning to feel the Arkansas public schools had sent me into the world naked and ill prepared.

“Galvanize … that means we gotta go over to the Union side all day. Usually they only do that when they’re really short-handed, but our first sergeant is a first-class turd – Walt Turley, a sheriff’s deputy over in Monroe County – he makes you galvanize if you’re late. Punitive galvanization! He keeps Union blues in his minivan just in case. Then he orders all the men not to shoot you, so you gotta stay on your feet all day workin’ for Uncle Sam. Won’t even let you die. Turd!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at that. You would have too if you’d have been there.

“It ain’t funny! That guy’s a turd – you’ll see. Two years ago, we was doin’ Elkhorn Tavern – uh, you might know it as the Battle of Pea Ridge, spring of Sixty-two. Anyhow, it was warm for March and the field was muddy as all get out – looked like they’d had a tractor pull there the night before or a go-cart race. We had a big dance scheduled for Sunday night – the last night of encampment. Everyone brought their wives and girlfriends and whatnot; there was a bunch of blue-hats from Iowa and Illinois – it was gonna be a big ol’ time. I was kinda sparkin’ this recently divorced sutler gal who sold dead-on perfect mother-of-pearl-button collarless shirts with inside seams and everything. She was fittin’ me up and we got to flirtin’ back and forth. How was it she said it? Oh yeah, she said ‘You carry yourself with a stoic gauntness,’ that’s what she said. And here
was her ex-husband-slash-business-partner sittin’ not ten feet away! I said to myself, ‘Uh-huh, it’s game-on up in this mother!’

“So we was all wearin’ our best early war uniforms since it was Elkhorn Tavern – the Rebs didn’t really start lookin’ like Night of the Living Dead til’ about Chickamauga in Sixty-three – not to mention we wanted to look sharp for the dance. Early war, the wide gray line looked every bit as dashing as the other side let me tell you – history books not withstandin’.

“Well we’re in retreat mind you – it’s noon on the last day, so we’re retreatin’ and throwin’ in the towel as per historical record – ‘General Curtis, you can have Missouri and northwest Arkansas too; may you choke on it, you gout-footed turkey vulture!’ And that sapsucker Turley orders our squad to front another squad in a skirmish line, which meant we had to fire from one knee. In the mud! In our good pants! We started yellin’ at him – ‘You ain’t gonna win the war egghead, it’s almost noon!’ but he forced the issue. I ain’t never been so mad in my life as having to spend the entire night in front of the shirt gal and all them yanks with mud all over my dancin’ pants. The turd!

“Then last year, the General put him in charge of the annual fund drive for the cancer society and I’ll have you know donations was down 62-percent. Lowest drive in Battalion history. Puttin’ Turley in charge of it had people rooting for cancer.”

I said, “Well I’ll grant you, he sounds like a real pill.”
“We’re gonna get that boat licker – a few of us have been figurin’ on it. Now you didn’t hear this from me, farb, but he’s got a fratricide event in his future. He sure does. Hear that Turley? That’s a bell tollin’ for you buddy! Ding-dong!”

“Fratricide?” I knew what that one meant. “You’re going to kill his brother?”

“No man, fratricide event. Friendly fire. Pop from behind. Pop-pop-pop Turley, and you’re cold as a wagon tire!”
“Wait, you guys are just shooting blanks right?”
“Yeah, but if enough people see three or four of us aimin’ at him, and he sees them seein’ it, he’s gotta go down. You’ll find that the battlefield of reenactment is seeded with honor. And there’d be nothin’ more humiliatin’ to Turd Turley than to eat some grass. It’s a big deal for
a sergeant to die too. We’re gonna pick some big battle, a real long one – maybe Chickamauga or Shiloh where there’s some travelin’ and time off work involved – shoot him first thing, then make him lay there all goddurn day! It’d be worth the court martial to see the look on his cankerous puss! Echhhhh …”

Chigger’s laughter caused a spent hull to lodge momentarily in his windpipe. It sounded like one of those water birds you hear grinding their gears when you’re fishing at daybreak. I used the opportunity to ask: “If everyone’s shooting blanks, how do you guys know when to fall down?”

“That’s always a problem – nobody ever wants to die, especially if they spent a lot of time and money gettin’ there. Local guys, unless they just made a major wardrobe upgrade, they’ll generally go down quick as a courtesy if there’s out-of-towners skirmishin’. But if a dude flew in and rented a car … hell, a mushroom cloud wouldn’t muss his hair – might as well save your powder. All things being equal, we assign it at random. Maybe everybody with a birthday in an odd number month dies today. It also depends on the percentage of casualties a given unit took historically – you try to account for that. And the weather – if it’s hot, you can bet casualties go up 50-percent cuz guys want to lay down for a while. Some of the sneaky ones will try to get back up when gnats start botherin’ ’em and such. That’s a dirty little secret of the livin’ history community – zombies. Be sure not to die on your back though – always go down face first.”

“Why’s that?”

“Sunburn, man. You may be layin’ there for hours. Watch for cow-pies before you go down too. And it’s always nice to fall next to someone else so you got somebody to talk to. Main thing is if you get tired, just take a pop – nobody’s gonna be expectin’ much, bein’ that it’s your first time seein’ the elephant.”

“The elephant?” I was familiar with the word, just not the context.

“Yeah, you know, seein’ action. You’re encouraged to pepper your lingo with as many period expressions and phrases as you can. It’s educational. If you get lost, just play dumb – maybe your character can be a dullard or somethin’. Ha!”

I said, “Well, yeah, what exactly am I supposed to do today?” Dressing up sounded fun but I didn’t want to get yelled at for standing in the wrong place.
“You’re fillin’ in for Brooksy. He had a crown put in yesterday and the dentist told him the cannon reports might shake it loose. Last time we skirmished he had to leave the field without ever firing a shot because his bridgework fell right out of his mouth. He caught himself in the chin on the backstroke with his ramrod and it just fell out. Bad glue I guess. Poor hygiene. I don’t know. Every time he sucked in air he said it felt like cold fire — had tears wellin’ up in his eyes. Turley thought he was turnin’ tail and pulled out his sidearm and shot him. Ordered him to halt, then made a big show of shootin’ him in the back. Brooksy flipped him the bird and never even looked back. You shoulda seen ol’ Turley — the impotent rage of a blank-firin’ bully. Anyway, Brooky’s gotta ride his La-Z-Boy for 24 hours while his glue sets.”

“Does it last all day? The battle …” I was not prepared for an all-day excursion.

“Oh brother, this one’s a piece of cake. Heck, it started at daybreak and was over by ten-thirty.”

“That quick, huh? A whole battle.” My kind of recreational pursuit — out by lunch.

“Yeah, Helena was one major cluster-flunk if you get my savvy. There was so much miscommunication, it’s a wonder they made it to ten-thirty. Helena was held by the Fed’rals but they were bleeding off troops to go downriver and help Grant with the siege at Vicksburg. So General Holmes wrote to Little Rock and got permission to attack Helena — he was gonna hit it from three sides and drive ’em right in the river. The middle prong of the assault, which is what we’re doin’ today, was led by Generals James Fagan and Sterling Price …”

“You know, I think I’ve heard that name before,” I said, hoping to show that I wasn’t completely ignorant to our nation’s history.

Fifthwoop …

“Who, Sterling Price? Yeah that was the name of John Wayne’s cat in True Grit. These two guys were supposed to attack at the same time — General Holmes had ordered the assault to begin at ’daylight.’ But Fagan thought ‘daylight’ meant first light and Price thought it meant sunup. So Fagan goes chargin’ in at first light hootin’ and hollerin’ and gets all shot to Hades while Price and the boys are rubbin’ the sleep outta their eyes, squattin’ over a relief ditch. Cluster-flunk! And I can only thank the good Lord
we’re doin’ Price’s outfit today, cuz that’s first light in the rear view mirror and we’re still 10 minutes out!”

Suddenly, amidst the sound of unhealthy brake pads crying out in anguish, Chigger steered The Bullet off the road in something of a controlled crash. Though I didn’t initially see any sort of dirt road coming off the main road, I could hear the tires go from asphalt to loose dirt, and I was thrust down in my seat as The Bullet caught traction and sped off towards some woods that were now becoming visible in the day’s first diffuse rays. I wondered how the maneuver hadn’t broken the spine of the silvery beast.

“Alright, here’s the deal,” Chigger said seriously. “When we get to the parking area, that’s the last you can call me ‘Chigger,’ ok – you gotta call me ‘Private Quimby’ for the rest of the day – especially if old Turley is around. He’d love to catch you makin’ a farby mistake, but he’d take it out on me for bringin’ you.”

“No ‘Chigger’ – ok. Didn’t people have nicknames in the nineteenth century?” I was pretty sure they did. “Stonewall” is not a Christian name. The question went unanswered.

“The other thing is, we’re gonna change clothes in the parkin’ area and then have to hoof it to the campground cuz the sun is coming up fast. I should have camped here last night with the men but I figured snaggin’ a stand-in for Brooksy would be worth it. A short squad don’t look good.” I was concerned. “How far do we have to run? It might get me a little buzzed again.”

“Maybe a quarter-mile – we park in some trees away from the campground. If you leave your car out where they can see it from the battlefield, you gotta ride the horse.”

“What . . . is it a mean horse?”

“Ha! No, wood. You ever seen a sawhorse? You gotta sit on top of it for half an hour and your feet can’t touch the ground.”

“They did that in the Civil War?” It sounded more like something an abusive foster-parent would come up with.

Suddenly I saw some vehicles – lots of them in fact – parked in a random corral. The Bullet began to slow. Though he still had plenty of room, Chigger stood on the brake pedal and simultaneously spouted seed hulls and shoved the gearshift lever into “Park” a little too soon – sending
everything in The Bullet, including me, forward violently to an ignoble stop.

His normal seed mastication-ejection rhythm was thrown by his excitement to have finally arrived and Chigger forgot to turn his head. A glistening grapeshot of soggy hulls adorned the dashboard.

The sky blue wool pants were at least four sizes too big in the waist and three inches too short – this Brooksy guy must have been as wide as he was tall. I begged Chigger to let me stay in my jeans, but he was having none of that. He wouldn’t even let me keep my underwear, because Johnny Reb didn’t have them and the elastic would be “a historical paradise,” but I’m fairly sure he meant paradox. In hindsight, those softly-supportive, gently-nurturing BVDs laying abandoned in the backseat would have been “paradise” though, because pulling heavy, 180-grit wool pants over my defenseless thighs and undercarriage in the sticky pre-dawn humidity had to be a level of hell reserved for child molesters and the guy who invented the banjo.

The massive tunic swallowed me whole, but at least I was allowed to keep my tee shirt as it was plain, white and inoffensive after Chigger tore the Fruit-of-the-Loom tag out of the back. Only the gray hat fit – a kepi he called it – Brooksy was either bald or small-headed like me. If it weren’t for the thick black belt with a hefty brass buckle cinching it all together, walking would have been a problem, much less running, but Chigger insisted I wear the belt at my navel, which instantly made me feel thirty years older and positioned the steel-woolish crotch in such a way as to simulate a day spent riding a sandpaper sawhorse.

On top of all this was erected an exoskeleton of leather goods, mysterious in function, something like Batman’s utility belt. Chigger rattled off the names of the items as he attached them – words like haversack, cartridge box and others – but told me not to worry about it, as the only thing I was qualified to use at this point was the canteen and the cup, which were hung behind my left hip at the base of a leather strap extending across my chest, over my shoulder, then down across my back. Besides the black leather pouches and a bayonet hanging from my belt, I recognized a bedroll wrapped around the strap on my back but any explanation for the other stuff was lost amidst Chigger’s own furious scurrying to don his own
get-up.

Almost as an afterthought, Chigger extracted a rifle musket from the back of The Bullet and handed it to me. I was flat-out astonished at its cumbersome length and weight. “1853 Enfield,” he announced, “Dixie defender.”

The wood stock was scarred up and the dome light revealed it to be mostly black from oil, sweat and dirt. The steel was a hazy silver-gray, freckled with rust scales and pitting from inadequate lubrication or poor storage conditions – probably both. It did not speak highly of its owner’s regard for firearm maintenance and even had a visible repair to the wrist where it had been broken at one time, something only possible by dropping it or even falling on it. I’d fired a twenty-two rifle at Mt. Holly summer camp a few times as a kid, but this thing felt like an artillery piece compared to that. Chigger assured me I was simply to hold onto it and not point it at anyone: “Anyone wearin’ gray that is – everything else is open season” he quickly clarified. “I don’t have time to show you how to load and shoot, so just pretend to shoot it for now – ain’t nobody gonna trifle you once the battle is joined and the smoke’s a rollin’.”

I was a little disheartened that on a field of pretend battle, I was going to be the only guy pantomiming the firing of imaginary bullets.

Chigger used his long middle finger to dig clumsily in the soft wet area behind his back teeth and his cheek to extricate a bothersome sunflower shell fragment lodged there. From the noises he made, it appeared to be poking him in a way that delicately straddled the line between a tickle and a gag and it had to be dealt with before he entered camp. He said dignity would be paramount once he assumed his “martial persona.”

I had remained mostly silent throughout the vestment proceeding until an argument broke out over whether I would go shoeless or not. Brooksy apparently didn’t want anyone wearing his “brogans” and held them back to make sure.

Chigger’s argument was as follows: “Believe me, you wouldn’t want to wear Brooksy’s boots anyway. I wouldn’t even let a third-generation farb make that mistake. Back when I was hardcore about it, I helped Brooksy write a letter to Colonel Pickens, the battalion bylaws officer over in Fort Smith, askin’ him if we could put some Dr. Scholl’s medicated pads in them things. No dice. Rejected! Inauthentic haberdashery. If that fella...
ever comes down out of his ivory tower and bivouacs with us, we’re gonna
tent him up with Brooksy and believe me, Jim Pickens will drive to Wal-
greens full chisel and purchase said orthopedic supplements himself! Now
anyone will tell you, I’m all for authenticity, but goddurn we’re talking
about a medical condition. Not to mention unit morale – them boots has
caus ed sleepless nights!”

Chigger had assumed I would go barefoot like he and far too many
of the ill-equipped trans-Mississippi Confederate Army – the real one.
For Chigger, it helped identify him as something of a purist, though some
of the guys in his squad later told me they thought it a bit flashy. I assured
him with some conviction that I had tender feet and would not be running
around the woods barefoot for him, Sterling Price or anyone else. Time
was on my side in this argument as the sun was changing the color of the
pre-dawn sky minute-by-minute. He mumbled something about bringing
a “flip-flop-wearin’-farb” and the humiliation of it all and then he was off
like a rabbit. I loped forward awkwardly, a little dizzy from the alcohol
still in my system which had been given a cleaner burning viscosity due to
the physical exertion. We were headed toward the dim light of a distant
campfire, and I have to admit, I was nervous. Scared might be a better
word. For a moment I felt like I was really heading into battle, or at least
the unknown.

More than anything, I was amazed a guy could run through the
woods barefoot. I was really curious to see what the bottom of those feet
must look like. Soles as thick as penny-loafers I bet.

My last communication with “Chigger” (as opposed to “Private
Quimby” who did not speak of matters modern while in martial persona)
was as I yelled out to him as we were running. “What the hell is a ‘farb’
anyway?”

“It’s a contraption!” he hollered back.
“A contraption?”
“Yeah, a contraption. F-A-R-B . . . stands for ‘Far Be it from
authentic!”
He had a point.

As I struggled to keep my flip-flops from flipping clear off my feet
in the pine straw and mud, I felt many things.
Authentic was not one.