Class Anthology
ENG 290: Writing Essays New Yorker Style
Nora Crow and Brooke Hauser
Dear Reader,

The following essays were written by students in the advanced nonfiction writing course, ENG 290: Writing Essays *New Yorker* Style, taught by Nora Crow and Brooke Hauser, during the Fall 2012 semester at Smith College.

In addition to keeping a reporter’s notebook, students completed several short exercises in response to course readings, wrote five essays, and critiqued each other’s papers during in-class workshops. At the end of the course, students turned in final portfolios showcasing their best work. Each student also submitted one essay for this anthology.

Enjoy!
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Notes from a Native Daughter (or Son): Writing About Home

Joan Didion says she wants to tell the reader “what it is like to come from a place like Sacramento.” Considering the way she uses history, social customs, landscape, family background, childhood experience, and adult impressions to give us an understanding of where she comes from, go on to write your own description of what it means to come from wherever you come from.
Green Cereal Bowls

By Joe Martinez

Willy Loman said that Waterbury was a fine city, with a famous clock. If you have traveled extensively in New England, it’s likely that you have come across the same city, conveniently located at the intersection of Route 8 and Route 84 in the western part of Connecticut. When you came across Waterbury during your travels, it is also likely that your first thought was, “That Willy Loman sure was full of crap.”

Luckily for us, this essay isn’t about Waterbury, its failing school system, its exorbitant crime rate, or its broken-down clock. Instead, it’s a blueprint for escaping the city. I hope that you’ll now be able to avoid the decrepit clock tower, the gray foothills that lie to the northwest, the clogged highway that snakes east, and the abandoned rubber factories along the banks of the coffee-colored Naugatuck River far south. Waterbury is not a destination; when people have the resources, they escape.

If you do find yourself in the shadow of Waterbury’s clock tower, do not panic. Drive west on Main Street. You will pass innumerable strip malls, the storefronts arranged in a meticulous order: tanning salon, Laundromat, Chinese buffet. Turn right when you hit Rudy Avenue. You will begin to see a variety of dilapidated grey warehouses, their high windows broken by the well-placed throws of marauding groups of young truants. A left onto Woodbury Road will bring you to the outskirts of Waterbury. Here you will find only multi-family houses seemingly painted to produce nausea—cyan, lime, goldenrod. Their porches sag in the middle, and their Sentras and Camrys are parked along the street to create an impenetrable steel wall. Take a right onto Route 61.
When you’ve made your way far enough outside the reach of Waterbury, the road will begin to curve and roll. The land opens up with green pastures, fields of corn, barns, livestock. Route 61 rises for a mile or so before cresting and heading down towards a reservoir in a valley. If the light is just right, it will glint off the reservoir and you’ll feel like you’re driving down into a green cereal bowl, with a little milk left at the bottom. And, if the light is right again, you might think it quite beautiful. Four or five miles up the road, you will come to an intersection with a single, blinking red light. I grew up in the town with the blinking red light. It’s called Bethlehem, and it’s about a half-an-hour drive northwest of Waterbury. It is a small town, but there are big families. Inevitably some of the kids from the big families stay around town and start their own families. And so it goes.

Larry Crawford is from one of those big families, and one of my best friends. He grew up with five siblings: Daisy and Farren, Ryan, Larry, Elliott and Shawn. They lived in a big white house off of Main Street, and in their front yard was the basketball hoop that Logan’s dad bought when we were in middle school. We quickly figured out how to lower the hoop so that we could dunk. With the shorter hoop we created a game called “Mini-Ball” that was basically a mixture of football and basketball. It was played with a smaller ball, the dribbling rules were loosely officiated, and pushing, shoving, and blocking were legal. Each team had two players. My teammate was the youngest Crawford son, Shawn. Larry played with our friend Jason. Our friend Brian was teamed with Elliott. During the summer months, we would play Mini-Ball from noon until it was too dark to see. Mrs. Crawford would bring us Gatorade. She’d laugh when Shawn and I
would beat Larry and Jason, and Shawn would trash talk his older brother, peppering him with verbal jabs like a prizefighter.

I played Little League baseball with Larry, Brian, and Jason at Hebert Park, which is just south of the blinking red light. You probably noticed it off to the left on your way up Route 61. After games, we would get ice cream with our families at Carl’s Shoppe. A left at the light will bring you there. We went to elementary school at Bethlehem Elementary School, about a quarter mile up the road after taking a right at the blinking light. We all went to church at North Congregational, which was a stone’s throw from the elementary school. The town and surrounding areas were founded by a group of religious dissidents from Stratford, England in the 1670s. They were led by a man named Shelden, and there are many Shelden’s still in the area today. In fact, in high school I played soccer with Brian Shelden, who told me his family has been in Bethlehem since then, except for a short stint in the early 1900s. He wasn’t a very good soccer player, though. If you went straight through the blinking red light, you’d come to the Bethlehem Fairgrounds, which bustled for three days in early September every year. At the fair, Larry, Shawn, Elliott, Brian, Jason, and I would buy the wristband that allowed us unlimited rides on all of the carnival attractions. We’d spend the night on the Afterburner, and the Screamin’ Swing, and the Looping Starship. You couldn’t pay me to get on the Tilt-a-Whirl now.

I think part of what attracted my parents, and likely other families, to such a small town was that everyone looked out for each other. You couldn’t fall too far out of line when your basketball coach knew the police chief, who was married to your Algebra teacher, who was a bridesmaid in Mrs. Crawford’s wedding. When I got that C- in
Algebra, my mom knew before I did. When I got caught speeding down into that green cereal bowl, the police chief told me to stop being an idiot or he’d tell my dad how fast I was going. I got away with a warning. Bethlehem was safe. The schools were pretty good. Also, it’s tough to move when there are roads named after you. Shelden Hill Road is just beyond the fairgrounds.

It is a thirty-minute drive to Waterbury. Shawn Crawford drove out of the cereal bowl, over those gray foothills, and into the shadow of the decrepit clock tower one December evening almost four years ago. He bought heroin there, and when his friends tried to rouse him the next morning, he didn’t wake up.

The funeral home is on the southwest corner of the intersection with the blinking red light. Larry, Brian, Jason, and I were all there for Shawn’s memorial. The police chief was there, and our basketball coach was there. It was the first sad day for my collective group of friends. Shawn was the first person that we had known who had escaped the watchful eyes of Bethlehem. I wondered if Shawn had destroyed himself or if there was someone else to blame. Had the pall of drug-addled Waterbury stretched to our hometown? I remembered playing Mini-Ball with Shawn, how I had never seen him with anything but a smile on his face.

The town was embarrassed. There were hushed conversations around dinner tables. The Keegan’s house had a “For Sale” sign out front shortly after Shawn’s funeral. The Lovitz family moved. Then the Cook family was gone, and the Harmon family followed. Certainly not solely based on Shawn’s passing, but the general idea was that this was no longer our idyllic home. It had been tainted.
I was back home recently, so I called Larry who is still around town working at a local high school. It was late, but he picked up and we talked for a while. His girlfriend had just received her nursing license. He was looking at jobs in San Francisco and New Hampshire, but the tone of his voice said that the search was half-hearted. The conversation stalled. I asked him what there was to do around town these days, even though I knew the answer. There’s never much to do in a town with one blinking light. I told him I was going to go for a drive. It was a cool, clear night, and I have this thing for stars after being stuck in New York City since college. He told me to swing by and pick him up.

My mom has an old Volkswagen convertible. I put on a sweatshirt and took the keys. I’ve always loved to drive it because it’s a manual transmission, and on the windy roads around town I feel like a racecar driver. It took me the five minutes it has always taken to get to the Crawford’s house. The basketball hoop was still there, but just barely. We did quite a number on that poor hoop over the years. Larry jumped in, and we headed off. We took a left at the blinking light and wound our way up Guilds Hollow Road. Along the way, we listened to bands that we had loved in high school like Built to Spill and Minus the Bear. We didn’t talk much. Larry told me to head to the airport, which is really just an old hangar on top of a huge hill that is home to a few small, old airplanes. I took a left onto Carmel Hill Road and pulled off onto the dirt where the airplanes were parked. From here, you could see the land stretch out far below us. The small town of Woodbury was south. The bigger town of Thomaston was east. The city of Waterbury glinted near the horizon to the southeast, about ten miles away.
Waterbury looked harmless from up here. Larry had brought a couple beers which we cracked open. The city fell out of my mind, and I doubt it was ever on Larry’s because he was ranting now about how his favorite soccer club was playing poorly of late. We talked about the memorable soccer games that we had played in. We talked about the snow day when the police chief caught Jason on Main Street pulling Brian on a sled behind his Jeep Cherokee. We finished our beers and affixed the cans to the propeller of the nearest airplane. I drove him back and we went our separate ways, but we were still together. We need people we love with us as we move left and right, north and south.
Don’t Mess

By Emma Phipps

Sometimes the most formative places in our lives aren’t the ones in which we spent the most time. Sometimes the most formative places are the getaways, the little islands of paradise and childhood bliss that we carry with us through our lives as untainted memories. So even though I spent most of my early life in a small house in a suburb of Philadelphia, the place I want to tell you about is not that house.

My mother was born and raised in Texas. Even though she eventually met a Yankee, fell in love with him, and moved north, Texas has always been a part of her. Her love for her home state was passed down to her children – it’s almost as though half our DNA is Texan. As kids, our summers were spent at The Lake, which was our name for the chunk of land on a reservoir in the Texas hill country owned by my mother’s family, the Calverts. At the end of every school year we would pack up our dinky Toyota van and trundle south towards San Antonio, stopping for the night in Best Westerns and La Quinta Inns in Indiana, Missouri, and Oklahoma. I don’t remember these places so much as I remember sitting in the van, watching unfamiliar scenery fly by and waiting to cross the Texas state line.

The journey took about five days, and while I’m sure there were times when my siblings and I would bicker and make my parents’ lives difficult, all I can remember are the good things: listening to Bill Cosby tapes, playing car games, and (most importantly) Travel Treats. Travel Treats were presents we picked out for ourselves before leaving Philadelphia, but instead of giving them to us right away, our mother would tuck them into her special knapsack and dispense them slowly over the course of the trip. Travel
Treats were only given on the drive to Texas. Sometimes they consisted of candy or gum, but more often than not, it was comic books and games. Travel Treats would keep the peace inside our little Toyota, and we could savor them all summer long. And even more than that, they distracted us from the time-honored question asked by children on car trips throughout the United States – “are we there yet?”

Three things signified our impending arrival at The Lake: first, a road my dad affectionately dubbed Bump Gate Road, a ridiculously turbulent path that led us to the second landmark – a large red ranch-style gate, held shut by a chain lock that required a combination to open. Getting out of the van to open the gate was a rite of passage. You had to be able to remember the combination, which was my grandfather’s birthday, and know to look out for rattlesnakes and cacti. I remember watching my older brother with envy from inside the car as he swung the big red gate back, granting us entry. The third and final landmark was the most exciting. Just beyond the gate was an old wooden sign, proclaiming, “STOP. STEEP HILL. USE LOW GEAR.” And beyond this, as one might guess, wound an incredibly steep and meandering road, cutting into the limestone cliffside and leading down into the valley where the reservoir lay. We would squeal with delight as we rounded each tight bend, giggling at the array of tiny crosses and fake flowers put there by my grandmother as a dark joke.

The descent ended when the road bottomed out into the property itself, a verdant strip of land covered with huge trees and dotted with small houses built over the years to accommodate the ever-growing Calvert family. The lawn ran all the way down to the water, separated from it only by a wooden wall (which would sometimes be submerged if the spring rains had been heavy enough). A small wooden dock stretched out towards the
middle of the narrow lake. We had to be forced to help unload the car. All we wanted to do was run flailing down to the dock and cannonball into the cool water, clothes and all.

Over the next few days, we would be joined by my mother’s siblings and their families. All of us cousins would sleep in one large room, eat together at the picnic tables on the stone porch, and spend our days swimming, fishing, and playing games of dress-up and make-believe together. The family dogs would run rampant on the grass and splash into the water to fetch the sticks we threw for them. Our parents would sit on the dock and watch us splash around. It was the kind of perfect pastoral summer that most suburban children only read about in books, or experience for one week at a sleep-away camp. We would stay there for weeks, hemmed in by cedar trees and brush and the towering limestone cliffs that rose up out of the water on the other side of the lake.

My siblings and I were the only three children that hadn’t been born in Texas. When we arrived, we spoke with no accent, but by the time the summer was over, we would bid farewell to our extended family by hollering “BYE Y’ALL” out the open window of the van. We landed in our paradise with pale skin and clean white sneakers – a few weeks later, we were brown as nuts and our feet were callused and dusty from walking barefoot along the stony path that led from one house to the next. We became strong and limber from days of swimming and hiking. We felt like little pioneer children, deeply connected to the land and living together at the end of our wagon train.

The best part about our dusty corner of heaven is that it had its fair share of danger, too. We had to check our shoes each morning for scorpions, and always look under the steps to the porch to make sure there were no cottonmouth snakes lying in wait for a tender exposed ankle. We learned how to tell a regular ant nest from a fire ant nest.
The learning curve for this was steep; as soon as you stepped in one for the first time, you never made the same mistake again. Unlike the sheltered suburban children I went to school with, in this place, we were given freedom, and with it, responsibility. There was no one watching us every minute of the day. And even though help was never far away, it was up to us to be alert and take care of ourselves.

It was at The Lake that I felt most like a child – both safe in the knowledge that my parents were nearby if I were really in trouble, and free to wander off into a world of my own imagination. In the water, my cousins and I were mermaids. We dove to the silty bottom for pearls. We collected arrowheads from among the rocks along the path. My grandfather taught us how to drive the golf cart, and our aunts and uncles taught us how to waterski. We grew more there than anywhere else, because we could be whatever we felt like being. There are more pictures of me in Texas than there are of me at home in Philadelphia, and in nearly all of them, I’m not alone, but rather flanked on either side by family – siblings, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and the rotating cast of dogs (usually black labs, the preferred Calvert hunting companion). In some of the pictures, I am a princess, adorned with feathers and a tiara. In others, I’m a cowboy, holding a pop-gun rifle as though it were my only line of defense against the wildness of the west. And sometimes I’m just a tow-headed little girl wearing cutoffs and a hand-me-down T-shirt, my grin revealing missing teeth and an inner thirst for mischief.

During the school year, we would carry little vestiges of our summer getaways with us. Our arrowhead collections made us popular with the other kids in the neighborhood. We received cowboy boots for Christmas and birthdays. My aunt once gave us all white T-shirts emblazoned with the Texas flag that said “DON’T MESS
WITH TEXAS.” Some Yankee kids might have been embarrassed to wear this open show of love for what they might have thought was such a backwards, redneck place. We wore them until they were full of holes. We told everyone who would listen about The Lake. We talked about it as though there were no other lakes in the world.

What they rarely understood was that the tiny spot of land in the Texas hill country was more than just a family vacation spot, more than just a lake-front property. It was a bit of wildness that we carried inside us. As long as we had The Lake, we were brave, we were strong, we were Texan.
“What are you studying?” She asks.

Wince. She’s looking at me the way they always look at me when we have that first awkward exchange. She’s making her eyes big and wide, nodding repeatedly like some human bobble head, trying to convince me that she is, in fact, interested in everything I have to say and hanging on my every word. We all do it.

“I’m a Religious Studies major. What about you?” To be honest, I have no idea what she says in reply. With bated breath, I suffer through the following cordialities, waiting for the other shoe to drop, the next inevitable question.

“So where are you from?”

Lynn. Lynn. The city of sin.
You never come out the way you went in.
You ask for a water, and they give you gin.
The damnedest city you ever lived in.
Lynn. Lynn. The city of sin.

The poem races through my brain like ticker tape for the mind’s eye. That horribly catchy and famous little poem. Most people only know the first two lines. So I have a choice. I can tell her I’m from Lynn and risk her responding with that first insidious rhyme, fully believing herself to be outlandishly clever: “Lynn, Lynn, city of sin.” God, wouldn’t that be awful. Or…

“I’m from just outside of Boston.” And thank heavens, she doesn’t ask me to specify.

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I have to laugh. People ask the questions harmlessly, trying to generate genuine conversation. They're the standard algorithm: what are you studying, and where are you from? The first answer never gets old. I reply that I'm a Religious Studies major, and more often than not, it's immediately assumed that at any moment I’m going to yank out my leather-bound Bible and start spewing scripture and Jesus jargon. I usually try to mention something about a Buddhist studies class to put their tender, heathen spirits at ease. Throwing in Buddha or the Bhagavad Gita is just a culturally acceptable way to balance my social bank account. But as to where I'm from, I think that little poem speaks for itself. It follows me around. I keep time to it. I count sheep with it. Usually I say I'm from Just-Outside-Of-Boston, MA. If the person gets testy and insists on being from the area, I tell them I’m from Salem. People know that perverted, capitalized history. Let them assume I'm a witch. Anything is better than having some unsuspecting girl from the wealthy suburbs of Wellesley of Marblehead quote that poem at me. No one wants to hang out with the Jesus freak from sin city; the irony is just too much.

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Lynn, Massachusetts! The perfect place to raise your family,” said no one ever. I mean, can you imagine? “Yes, and just across the street from your mouse-infested, mold-infected cardboard box of a home, your ten-year-old can learn to shoot dope with needles left under the jungle gym!” Home sweet home. What a dump. Some people are proud to be an American, but mostly I’m just proud to have survived twelve years in the Lynn Public School system without a record. You never come out the way you went in.

Lynn still resembles something of the 1950s mobster body politic of New York City on a subsidized scale. The superintendent is married to someone in the city
councilor’s office; the mayor is a four-foot-nine Republican female (the horror!), and the principal of Lynn English High School hasn’t been to one drama performance, one school dance, or one tennis match in fifteen years. But he makes all the football games, which, I should add, they never win.

Lynn has been making itself the butt end of everyone’s joke since as far back as the history books go. It’s a sick joke, a sort of black humor. Because people joke about the stabbings, the shootings, the gang wars, the school bombs, police brutality, but mostly it’s a nervous laugh. You’re from Lynn? Oh no, don’t beat me up! Don’t call your gang to put a hit on my family! And you say it with a smile, facetiously, even though “The Gang Unit has indicated that Lynn currently has approximately 1700 gang members, 20 major gangs, and 18-20 minor gangs.”\(^1\) The most active members are between the ages of 12 and 18. People don’t know any other way to process the headlines reading “Flax Pond construction site finds ten year old boy floating in the water.” So they laugh about it.

Maybe I’m too harsh. I guess it hasn’t always been bad. Here’s this for a laugh: The last time Lynn was anything to write home about (aside from school shootings and dirty cops), was roughly the late 18th century. Lynn was quite the hub of activity two hundred and fifty years ago! If you study old cities in Massachusetts, you’ll come across a phenomenon known as the “mill town.” Lowell is stupidly the most famous, but only because their mills didn't have the decency to burn down like all the others. Leominster, Laurence, and Lowell are all historic mill towns that sprang up near a river. You've seen pictures of giant, square structures teetering halfway over the lip of a river or canal with one of those big, wooden wheels. See, that’s what powered the first factories’ machines before electricity: the current made the wheel turn, and the wheel made magic.

\(^1\) [http://www.northshore.edu/ppi/pdf/wp_gang_initiative.pdf](http://www.northshore.edu/ppi/pdf/wp_gang_initiative.pdf)
Mill towns in the Northeast have this narrative history of making things, and I suppose it must have started in the mills, but it spread. Like some noxious disease. People started to identify with what they made, what they produced. Yes, but what do you make? Lowell made textiles. Salem made witches. Charlestown made bank robbers. Lynn made shoes.

But then, I suppose we can’t hold Lynn up as just another statistical mill town following the same mill town script. Lynn was always different because it wasn’t built on a river: It practically throws itself into the ocean. (Actually, in the ‘80s city officials tried to rename the Lynn Ocean Park, but they scrapped the idea after they realized people would start saying, Don’t go there after dark. Dunderheads.) Instead of rivers, Lynn had miles of beachfront property on which to build beautiful homes for the Waspy, white educated people of Massachusetts. Today, this area of Lynn, famous for its enormous Victorian homes, is known as the Diamond District. Still wealthy. Still white. But literally one street over, on Broad Street, or Lewis Street, you will find enormous complexes of low-income and Section 8 housing. The way these mill towns developed, the disparity of wealth was drastic. Due to the nature of the work, it was hard to make anything of yourself; there was no corporate ladder to climb. Some neighborhoods became beautiful, and others grew up poor.

In its heyday, Lynn was a booming place of business. Before the big mills and the factories, all the shoes were made by hand. Shoes were fashioned from strips of flax, which had to be made soft and palpable before they could be used. Shoemakers would soak these flax strips in the small ponds that dot Lynn's topography. The pond behind my house was thus named Flax Pond.
Downtown is still haunted with the architectural memories of boisterous street traffic, fancy shops, and high class living. Beautiful brick and stone buildings stand like the exposed bones of a dead and decomposed history. Once upon a time, the streets were filled with shoppers and wealthy chairmen and CEOs. The sign on the old Edison Hotel still hangs like a tombstone from the brick facade, but what once boasted a grand ballroom and a famous crystal chandelier has now been converted into office space and crumby apartments. The streets are graveyards, and the ghosts of success and civilization now look out through the boarded up windows of failed businesses on a world that looks so different now.

Most of Lynn's old shoe factories burned down before the 1920s. Eventually, even the buildings that survived the fires, that stood like a monument to a dead industry, fell into disrepair. Lynn stopped making shoes. But don’t worry! It wasn’t long before our resilient mill town (by that point a mill city) started to make new things, better things; a new industry lit up the town. Literally. Lynn, Massachusetts was home to the first electrically-illuminated, nighttime baseball game. You can thank General Electric for that. In the 1950s, GE, the same superpower that makes your airplane engines and your lightbulbs, employed, well, everyone. Some of our high school teachers who grew up in Lynn talked about how quiet it got over Labor Day weekend: The GE plants shut down for the holiday, when everyone vacationed on the Cape or in Maine.

That was probably Lynn's last great moment in history, before computers and machines started to replace humans for free labor, the last gasp of the solid middle class. The last time Lynn was considered economically successful was more then sixty years ago. It was a center of progress and pride with a busy downtown neighborhood for the
fast-paced and monetarily endowed. My Nana tells stories about strutting downtown in
her high heels, shopping in the department stores that occupied the first two floors of
Lynn's gorgeous brick beauties. It's a black and white photograph in an old history book,
captions in small print with a date that feels positively fossil. That was Union Street?
Once upon time it was the center of Lynn's nightlife. You don't just walk down Union
Street anymore, not by yourself, and never, ever after dark.

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Downtown Lynn is shaped like a boot. I'm not kidding. Some tacky city
contractor thought it would be just delightful to make the Commons curve so that the
whole thing was shaped like a damn shoe. Really? We've got more kids on the free lunch
program than any other town in our county, but you want to put in millions of dollars so
that we can sell cool post cards in the visitor center? Please. People don't visit Lynn.

Today, the GE plants have outsourced a huge percentage of their workforce
overseas, and replaced the assembly-line workers with machines and computers. But that
doesn’t mean Lynn has stopped making thing! You've heard of Marshmallow Fluff? The
sticky white gunk you put between two slices of bread with a slab of peanut butter and
call it a lunch? That’s what me make in Lynn today. The teachers actually took us on
field trips to visit that factory as students. They took us out of school, stuck us on a bus,
and paraded us around this cramped, dirty warehouse that makes a concoction of high-
fructose corn syrup and egg whites. Instead of teaching them how to read, let's show our
second graders how cool it is that Lynn, Massachusetts is responsible for just one more
product contributing to childhood obesity.
When I was a freshman in high school, the town next to us, Marblehead, Massachusetts, worked itself into a right fit. The way the school funding works, Lynn's high schools end up getting a lot more public money than Marblehead High. Why? Because Marblehead is the third or fourth wealthiest township in the state. So when the outraged parents brought this obvious injustice to the State Rep for their area, he responded appropriately. “Your sons and daughters are the future captains of industry,” he said, “And as such, you have a responsibility to those less fortunate than you.” I'm interpreting with my own personal bias, but he basically told the Marblehead parents that the poor Lynn kids need all the help they can get. After, when their sons and daughters are in charge of huge businesses or running for President, they can’t have idiots working for them, can they?

Well, that just did not sit well with the students of Lynn English High School. We spent weeks making a huge scene, a big stink. “We can be captains of industry, too!” Sure, if you turn in your homework on time. If you stop throwing fists in the cafeteria. If you stop taking field trips to the goddamn Fluff factory and learn how to do basic math. Let’s make a deal, kiddies. When more than half of you start to graduate at your proper grade reading level (hell, when more than half of you start to graduate, period), you’ll have earned the right to complain.

Lynn doesn't make captains of industry.

Lynn makes Fluff.
Greenville the Beautiful

By Annie Berman

There are rich folk, there are poor folk, who imagine they are wise,  
And they’re very quick to shatter all the little family ties.  
Each goes searching after pleasure in his own selected way,  
Each with strangers likes to wander, and with strangers likes to play.  
But it’s bitterness they harvest, and it’s empty joy they find,  
For the children that are wisest are the stick-together kind.

-Edgar Guest, 1917

Joel was driving through the downpour fast, his warm four-wheel drive  
confidently flying through sheets of water that would make a lesser car hydroplane.  Joel  
is our town historian, concerned with preserving the past.  His hair is white and he wears  
neatly pressed slacks and pastel or nautical shirts, and loves his town, family, tabby cat  
named Andy, and my mother.  He likes to tag horseshoe crabs and then set them free, and  
has written a book attempting to prove that a prominent minister from our town accused  
of murdering a “simple-minded” girl in the 1800s was actually innocent.  (He has since  
decided that he was, in fact, guilty.)  I was asking him questions from the backseat to  
distract myself from what I was convinced was my imminent death – there was no reason  
to be driving this fast.  Anyway, there was a chance he would be proposing to my mom  
any day now, and I wanted to make sure I’d asked him everything that needed to be  
asked, like any good journalist and daughter should.

He goes, “I think marriage should be between a man and a woman.”

What? Why?

“I think they’re missing something.”

What?
“It’s hard to explain.” Then we almost hydroplaned. The next day I confronted my mom about this deeply upsetting conversation.

“The only thing they’re missing is THEIR RIGHTS!” I said indignantly as we walked together towards a beach. “Your SISTER is gay and married and has the most meaningful life ever! How can you let him say things like that?” My mom batted her hand like there was a bug near her ear.

“I think I understand what he is saying,” she said. “I think raising children – “

“Gay people can ADOPT children, Mom! And you can be perfectly happy without children!”

Later, I went to a spongy patch of land, murky and weedy, to clear my head. It is land that cannot be built on and was consequently made into a wildlife preserve. Marshes used to be destroyed on a regular basis because no one remembered how secretly full of life they are. This saved one near the apartment complex I grew up in with my twin sister and mom seems dead until you listen at night to the chorus of crickets and frogs unseen. The road that borders the preserved marshland is twisted and unlit; past dusk, deer stare shell shocked into the headlights.

When Joel visited an art gallery in Cape Cod, he told me he would have bought one of the scenic images but would rather buy images of Greenville, Connecticut, our hometown, to hang around his house. That’s one way that he and I differ. If I were to draw Greenville, I would probably use only straight lines, primary colors bordered with black sharpie. Because in middle school I would spend two hours on Sunday nights uncurling my hair with hot irons that steamed the bathroom with a sickly burning smell and left my hair limp and still, and stayed straight, to my delight, for days. I watched
television when I got home from school. I wrote sad journal entries while the mothers of Greenville (not mine) played tennis.

Greenville is a town, Joel will gladly tell you, that had been marinating in history since before the puritans grimly and barely survived their first winter here: the school mascot is controversially an Indian. There are plaques on the doors visible from the roads that remind everyone just how old these houses really are, and once a young man died of heat stroke while carrying the coffin of his grandfather a few miles to the cemetery. There are churches, cute bookstores and cafes, and a grassy town green with many war memorials, where sheep used to graze but now teenagers smoke and hang out, but only at night, like moths gathering clandestinely in the moonlight. These young people are, I suppose, hazy-happy, angry and in love. I never really hung out on the town green at night. The town is sleepy and motionless by nine – there is nothing to keep Greenville awake, though I slept fitfully.

One time Joel drove me and my friend Erin Eggy to our chorus concert, and he informed her that he knew the woman who used to own her house. “There used to be snakes in your basement!” Erin had a father who was a surgeon, who worked all day and rarely saw his daughter, and a mother who was a pediatrician, who worked all day and rarely saw Erin either. Erin’s house was chock-full of food in shiny packages, the kind that could be consumed by a kid whose parents weren’t around, so Erin was chubby and not the best student in part because her parents expected her do very well but could not help her with much. Behind her back, girls said things like “Those very expensive clothes Erin is wearing look awful on her. Not nice at all,” and she cried a lot and didn’t hang out or date much in high school. Once when I slept over at her house, I couldn’t
sleep because we were in this glass porch in the back of the house with ceilings two stories high, and I felt unimportant and afraid in such a cavernous, empty place.

I wanted to tell Joel that small humiliations stick to you like specks of dust, insignificant until they’re not; until you’re gray, invisible, so he would understand that no place is perfect. I remember my second grade best friend’s lankiness, silky hair, sportiness, and how she was the most popular, the smartest, how my teacher loved her best. The most popular boy in the class liked her a lot, too – I remember him pinned in the gravel on the playground by his best friend, squirming wildly, panicked, while we stood around him, waiting for him to tell Molly he liked her. I remember a fifth grade friend who asked me every day if I really was her friend. You don’t like me because I’m black, isn’t that true? She was the only African-American in the school. I remember how much we all loved the kids who had grand birthday parties in their castle-like homes; we swam in heated pools, played video games and made sundaes, and the night after, I stared into the darkness and listened to my sister and mother breathing slowly in their sleep in the bedroom we shared, and wished for a castle please.

And in high school, I made friends who I didn’t have much in common with, and didn’t speak or laugh much. I cared passionately about some things – the books we read in English class and the music guitars and human voices could make – and cared little about most else. I figured that certain people would never be my friends so I didn’t let them near me. The summer after my junior year, I flew two thousand miles to a California wilderness, where I spent eight hours a day with eight other teenagers building trails with double jacks and rock bars and hiking to mountaintops with views that looked more like postcard backdrops than real places. That summer I felt deeply free from
Greenville, Connecticut. I was a different person, time moved slowly and I changed—my life back “home” was insignificant in the face of this natural beauty, hard labor, and people with interesting pasts who loved me already. Senior year was like lying in the sand serenely, waiting for high tide to come in and college to take me away— for good this time. Joel told me he was homesick when he went to Bowdoin and came back right after college. When he told me that, I felt a little heartless for wanting to leave forever.

Greenville is beautiful. The cute town houses, pottery barn teen bedrooms, fathers with briefcases, oceanfronts, trees and money are all so pristine. Joel’s quiet porch overlooks a marsh, the ocean, and a field with cows grazing. My mom and him spend every Friday night ordering take-out to eat on that porch, listening to crickets and feeling safe, and I am glad for them. But Mr. Powers, My U.S. history teacher, told us a story about a class of Greenville first graders who went on a field trip with two groups of first graders from elementary schools in nearby, far more diverse towns. According to Mr. Powers (who chuckled meanly as he told us this story), the class of Greenville children cried and huddled together while the other two classes happily intermingled, glad to meet new friends. Was he right? Was he right to tell this story? All I knew was I didn’t like Greenville much, either.

Joel has part of a poem written in 1917 by Edgar Guest called “The Stick-Together Families” hanging above the fireplace in the house where he has lived since he was born:

   The stick-together families are happier by far
   Than the brothers and the sisters who take separate highways are.
   The gladdest people living are the wholesome folk who make
   A circle at the fireside that no power but death can break.
   And the finest of conventions ever held beneath the sun
   Are the little family gatherings when the busy day is done..,
But I think Edgar was afraid of change and difference. This poem terrifies me because its rhymes disguise its harsh insularity. On a drive home from Massachusetts, Joel felt anxious to be back in Greenville already. “I love getting back from vacations because being home feels so good,” he explained. I shook my head, unable to relate. Home was far away. Home is sun setting behind mountains, growing up and learning to write, love that breaks, and places I still have to see.
The Embedded Reporter: Informing and Illuminating the Facts

In a 1968 review of Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in *The New York Times*, critic Dan Wakefield observes: “The author writes about the contemporary world… and though her own personality does not self-indulgently intrude itself on her subjects, it informs and illuminates them.”

Didion, Nora Ephron, Susan Orlean, and Gore Vidal—whose essays we will read this week—are all examples of essayists who, at times, also assume the role of an embedded reporter. But they are not “objective” witnesses to the events or subcultures they cover. Each of these writers possesses a voice that “informs and illuminates” the facts.

For your next assignment, experience something new and write about it. You can choose to be the guinea pig, like Ephron, who writes about getting a makeover for *Cosmo*. Or, you can be more of an observer/anthropologist like Orlean, who writes about riding the Wellesley bus with college students. Your experience may be as dramatic as dyeing your hair hot pink (just don’t blame me if you hate it later) or as mundane as waiting for the bus downtown. But try to do something that’s a little out of your comfort zone; try to do something outside the realm of the Smith campus. And, most importantly, take notes. Good notes are one of the keys to good nonfiction writing.

Your perspective should “inform and illuminate” your subject, without intruding on the story you’re trying to tell. In addition to a narrative arc, I will be looking for scene-setting details, character sketches, and interesting dialogue.
A Night at the Greenfield Grange

By Amelia Burke

It was seven thirty by the time I was able to drag myself out of my house into the apocalypse. Huge bulbous gray clouds had sunk the heavens to skyscraper height and I was sure that God had once again emerged to obliterate our Babel. As a necessary precaution, I texted my sister. “This is the beginning of the end,” I managed to tap out in the unnatural darkness. “If they can’t find my body, tell them to check the Greenfield area.” Apparently undisturbed at the prospect of my bloated, blue-tinged corpse floating somewhere off of I-91 Northbound, she responded “Sounds like a fun Saturday night – YOLO!” Well, I told myself, that was a reality we might well face during the course of the evening. But by now I had already ripped myself out of my friend’s Snuggie and my warm living room – with its postprandial viewing of Moulin Rouge – and into the wilds of night. A-dancing I would go.

Despite receiving a healthy dose of movie musicals, I don’t usually find myself dancing in public places. It’s not that I refuse on principle – I’m all for turning off the lights and getting jiggy with some MIKA in my bedroom. I just find that attempting to produce organized movements with other people requires a coordination and physical creativity that I’ve left underdeveloped. So when an acquaintance approached me about going to a contra dance, I waffled a bit. (This also had something to do with the fact that I had no idea what exactly contra dancing was. I had only heard the term used through the Gender-Free Contra Dance Nights, often led by a dance group called Gays for Patsy, held weekly in my parents’ church.) But a piqued curiosity is not easily ignored; I soon found myself agreeing to a Saturday night rendezvous at the Greenfield Grange. Trying not to
interpret the approaching storm as an example of divine intervention, however, had proved difficult – even the feral Smith squirrels were fleeing for shelter. I put my chin against my chest and began to plow my way over to the Green Street garage.

April, the tall chemistry major who was to serve as my Virgil on our journey into the abyss, arrived several long minutes later. Our chaperone was a man named Ralph whom April had found through the Western Mass Contra Dance list serve. I had not yet decided if accepting a ride from a stranger named Ralph to a hill town in Western Massachusetts in an impending storm was a good idea, regardless of which list serves he might participate in. But this was certainly no time for prudence – experience must be gained. Soon our preposterous skirts (the better to spin you with!) were flounced over the seats of Ralph’s Prius. How comforting to be wedged into a back seat corner by yards and yards of pink heavy cotton, even as we slid (with the typical silence of hybrid vehicles) to our doom. April and Ralph, apparently unaware of the tragedy unfolding before them, initiated introductory chit-chat in the front seat. I passively designated April as our representative. Yes, we were Smith students. Chemistry and Middle Eastern Studies. Me: Boston. Her: Providence, where she had grown up attending dances. At this last bit Ralph, an older man who appeared to sprout white hair from every angle of his head and face, giving him the look of an albino chia-pet, replied in muted assent. “Well, we have a good dance here in Greenfield. Lots of regular dancers who’ve been at it for a while.” Appreciative murmurs followed and a brief silence.

“Thanks so much for offering to drive us down,” I decided to throw in, “I’ve never done contra dancing before and I’m pretty excited” Ralph’s facial hairs suddenly splayed at odd angles into a sort of phalanx formation. He seemed perturbed.
“Well. In that case I’ll have the first dance with you, if I may.” This did not appear to be a question. “And we’ll do a quick lesson beforehand on some of the basics, before it starts up. We won’t have time to do much. Have you done other styles of dance?”

I considered lying. No – too easily caught. “Um. A bit of square dancing. Once.”

This was not an appropriate response. “We’ll go over a few steps before hand,” he repeated. Perhaps my ignorance had released a pedagogic urge from his barreled frame, because he soon continued, “I’ll set you up with some good teachers, too. We have lots of guys that think they’re good teachers but afterwards we have to go and unteach everything they did …You know, five, ten years ago it used to be a lot harder for new dancers to come in. Every 30 new folks showed up, about two would come back next dance. We used to get out afterwards, this was when we’d finish well after midnight, and there’d be maybe one or two of the new folks left. But I’ll steer you away from the fellows to avoid.”

I nodded in a way that I hoped expressed gratitude and watched the rain slam against my window, pondering the politics of contra dancing. Somehow we managed to arrive safely at the Grange, a solid, barn-like structure on a patch of woods not far from the center of town. By the time we arrived at twenty to nine the lights from inside had splotched into the dark vaporous air like watercolor; the building appeared to be leaking warmth. I slid out of the back seat, promising Ralph to meet him for a pre-dance lesson, and took a long cool breath. Well, at least we would be indoors. And, gathering up my skirt, I hustled up the stairs after April.
The space was of the Elongated New England Parish Hall style, opening up to a group of wooden windows in the back and a three-foot stage at the front. The white-washed walls were varied with framed historic photographs and a large community bulletin board in the back, and the stage was already filled with a small group of musicians: fiddle, guitar, banjo, and what appeared to be a mandolin. I buckled, startled by the sudden brightness and the easy chatter of the thin, long-skirted women who papered the walls in small groups. The men gathered together also, but in smaller groups, and looked, on the whole, less uniform than the women. There were quite a few old potbellied types in jeans, some hippies with bandanas tied like sweat bands, a couple of lanky students, a jockey looking man in a muscle shirt, and what looked like an 11-year-old boy in a white shirt and tie. We paid the ten dollar admission fee (no student rate) with a bit of hesitation, but the presence of a live band was reassuring. Nothing like rousing music to thicken the blood when the building might suddenly be blown away. I imagined forty pairs of dancing slippers peeking out from under the Grange for the Munchins of some far-off land to discover.

None of the groups of dancers had reacted to our arrival, so I glued myself to April’s shoulder and tried to dry off until Ralph called me over a few minutes later for boot camp. Part One: Positioning. I held my left hand firmly (“Not like a noodle”) on his right shoulder blade and he placed his hand on my back, our alternate hands meeting. This was the beginning of Swing position, in which the unfortunate female is spun dramatically around in a whirl pool of her own skirt, attempting to circle on the ball of her right foot while using the other to push off. It was like being on a scooter and having your father constantly pushing you clockwise in a dizzying loop. But attempting to keep
myself upright proved an excellent distraction from the startling intimacy of a stranger’s shoulder blade, which I somehow could not regard with the same easy informality of hand-holding. It was odd; I was, after all, used to the types of dances found in parties and clubs – dances that sometimes reached far greater degrees of contact than one’s palm touching someone’s back through his shirt. But those were interactions in loud, dark, surreal places, and without sustained eye contact. A far cry from the Grange and a billowing pink skirt.

As we ran through moves with names like the Allemande Left, Ladies’ Chain, and Half Hey, I began to settle my nerves. I was here on a mission, after all. I would accept the role of the young dancing ingénue and learn what I could from these geometrically-minded people with unorthodox night lives. Ralph, unaware that he had become a component of my research, finished up his lesson. He had, he said, done all he could to prepare me; he suggested I try to have fun. We marched forth into the fray.

The dancers, in the brief minutes of our absence, had managed to unstick themselves from the walls and form two sets of lines down the hall. Men stood on the right, left hands out to their partners. At the front of the room, spearing himself off of the edge of the stage, stood the caller. Our first caller was cartoonishly old, with a small figure that immediately brought to mind a shoot of new asparagus. This gentle fellow was named Ralph Sweet, Prius-Ralph informed me: “He called his first dance in 1948, the year I was born.” I had never been in the presence of so many Ralphps before – somehow I had considered the name to inhabit the more distant coasts of Australia and New Zealand – but if anyone were destined to be a Ralph Sweet, this would be he. Prius-Ralph approached his elder and informed him of my special circumstance (namely,
incompetence) and the generous Mr. Sweet gallantly volunteered as my next partner. So this is what it has come to, I mused. Strangers asking other strangers to dance with me. Well, I would take it. I was not, after all, in a position to spin myself.

After we had found our places at the beginning of the line, Mr. Sweet began, in loud lyrical rhythm, to call the movements. First he gave a slow introduction to the moves of the set, breaking them down into their component steps as we followed haltingly. Then, as the fiddle started up, he directed us with a sort of hopping regularity to each of the moves in time. I am sure we began with a relatively simple set but I remember only a whirl of frenzy. Each pair made its way, amoeba-like, through various twists and spins, down the line to the end of the hall and back. I soon realized that we had been placed at the head of the group as another bit of mercy toward me: when dancers reach the end of the line they have to wait and re-incorporate themselves into the dance without losing their timing. I clutched Ralph for dear life.

The steady repetition, however, allowed me constant opportunities for improvement: each move needed to be as carefully ordered and delivered as a filet mignon. By the end of the first 15-minute number I had danced the positions into my memory and even begun to revel in a few stylish skirt-flips. Ralph seemed reasonably pleased with my progress (“In case you were wondering, you’re doing better than a lot of beginners”), and a man about my age even requested my hand for the next one, apparently unaware that it would be roughly equivalent to dancing with a wooden log. Besides, I apologized in what I hoped was a maidenly manner, I had been promised to Mr. Sweet.
Ralph certainly knew his moves, but Mr. Sweet was an excellent dancer, the kind that deludes you into confidence. We began to follow the more complex footwork of sets like *Bee in her Bonnet* and *The Shoeless Trip to Harpswell*, names that reminded me of my mother’s quilting patterns. Some of the sets had been composed by local dancers and the level of difficulty varied enormously. Many were simple and apparently familiar to the group, but a few surprised us with their complexity. At the end of a set the rows would unravel and an anarchical applause would erupt for the caller and the musicians (who, it seemed, were also local – the fiddle player was quite clearly the guitarist’s father). For the next few minutes most couples split and sought out new partners, but I decided I’d do better to stand immobile in the center of the storm and hope. It seemed perfectly acceptable for a lady to invite a gent to the floor, but I couldn’t bear asking some poor sap to endanger himself. Besides, I had no idea how to tell the experienced dancers from the mediocre, and after a disastrous spin with a fellow novice I decided to stick with the pros. Those who asked me seemed to know what they were getting into and the male to female ratio was, surprisingly enough, in my favor. I hadn’t envisioned quite so many men; there was always a thin splattering of them waiting on the walls for the next dance. I felt positively choosy.

Mr. Sweet was succeeded by an exuberant older Italian man named Al, also quite slight of frame, who seemed to dance to the role of the playful grandfather, throwing in ebullient “Ay!”s and good-natured winks when I was spun back towards him after a few moves with my neighbor, or when I mutilated a move particularly cruelly. Ralph claimed (rather patronizingly) that Al was “not a great teacher, but perfectly harmless.” Not every partner was so easygoing – the elitists were indeed afoot. Many of the dance sets required
extensive interactions with your corner as well as your partner, so the couple you found
next to yourself became vital, a fact I always neglected to consider until part way through
a dance, when I would find myself chained to my neighbors in a sort of pernicious double
date. During one dance I was placed next to a man who was particularly hostile (whether
he was one of the teachers-to-look-out-for I never confirmed) who danced every spin as if
it were an exercise of power, his hand digging, trowel-like, into my back. I began to
reconsider my distain for nineteenth century heroines who seem to have spent their time
attending dances and appraising their partners incessantly. Perhaps this was a reputable
way to discern character; noticing how guys treated the flailing newbie might be like
checking out how your dinner date treats the server. Not to mention a dancer’s style of
leading might reveal all sorts of interesting traits. Compatibility on the dance floor – the
first step to compatibility in life!

The pairs and foursomes continued to interweave until just before midnight,
sharing one another along the line until they returned safely home to their partner. At the
last song, the whirling forms that had held themselves together with such unthinking
concentration broke. There was a sudden eruption of coffee hour chatter. I found myself
quite hot, my blistered feet weeping resentfully through my rubber Keds, and met April
in the bathroom splashing water on her face. The dancers exchanged their shoes for rain
boots and meandered through their goodbyes, occasionally giving me a holler to come
back next time. The echoes of the hall blurred into the patter of the rain and I peered into
the wet darkness to find that the deluge had faded into irregular drips. There were a few
shapes in the darkness, pink-cheeked and chattering as they hopped contently to their
cars. My feet still humming with the heat of the hall, I did a do-si-do around a puddle and opened my mouth to catch the rain.
Caramel Glaze

By Hillary Reale

My heart is racing and I haven’t even parked the car in front of Walgreens yet. I sit there for a moment looking at the front door trying to breathe through my nose. I shut the car off and, wide-eyed, enter the automatic doors that know what I am there for, and they open magically just wanting to make this easy for me. I accept the offer and scan the signs above the aisles for my item. I am amazed and somehow reassured that I don’t have to hunt—it has its very own aisle.

I hesitate for a moment and scan my short-term memory for anything I might need while I’m there. Yes, that little cover-make-up-stick-concealer-thing for the dark circles under my eyes. My options are limited because I found out the hard way that I’m allergic to most make-up so I begin to make a production out of reading every ingredient of the cover-make-up-stick-concealer-thing from every product line on the wall. I know I am trying to change the subject, distracting myself from my real point of coming here. Twenty-seven minutes later, I have the concealer in my hand, getting sticky in my clammy palm, and make my way over to the Hair Color aisle.

I had my hair professionally colored once in my life and have been to a salon to have it trimmed or shaped only two other times in my thirty-nine years. I have colored my hair at home many times over the years partly because I grew up with two women (and only two women) and I can honestly say that I don’t know their natural hair color. I will assume that it shares some of the same characteristics of my own, but I can’t say for sure. Another reason I colored my hair at home was out of pure spontaneity and the results were, without fail, disastrous.
I would call my hair “brunette” but when it falls to bathroom floor after a trim, I am sure that it’s black (the fluorescent lights and sunshine are, I’m convinced in the moment, deceptive and hoaxish). I am inherently opposed to anything that hints at red or anywhere in the red family so I concentrate on the dark shades being offered on the shelves that promise me light or medium brown highlights. Normally, I am frugal and won’t buy anything that isn’t on sale, but my body feels like lead and I wonder if paralysis is setting in, so this might not be the best time to negotiate over a couple of dollars.

If given enough time I would have talked myself out something so impulsive, but I seem to be craving adrenalin this afternoon (I do the same with food, exercise, cigarettes, and vacuuming). I study several boxes and thank something in the universe that I’m not blonde because the variations of Ash, Honey, and Strawberry are too much to think about. There is just one row devoted to brown and brown-like shades. I pick up a few boxes and turn them over in my hand, pretending to care about the shine and luxuriousness that they promote but I am more interested in the girl on the cover. Some have really bitchy looks on their faces and, I imagine, attitudes to match. Some look bored. And some, I’m positive, are sporting their God-given natural locks. I am suddenly full of mistrust. In a fraction of the time it took me to choose the cover-make-up-stick-concealer-thing, I settle on L’ORÉAL Paris Couleur Experte Express 5.0 Caramel Glaze. I immediately feel French and at ease. The woman on the box is beautiful, sassy, and confident. Right now, so am I.
I swagger up to the counter with my new box and my new attitude and take a few moments to fill out their Walgreens customer card in a valiant effort to force myself to act normal and regulate my breathing before I get behind the wheel.

I can no longer avoid the strands of gray that my daughter, Regan, begrudgingly plucks from my head every two weeks or so with a set of tweezers. Regan, with her long locks that are so heavy and shiny and the color of dark chocolate dipped in sunshine, the nineteen year-old woman, with stunning waves that looks amazing even rolling out of bed in the morning, has much better things than do than assist me in plucking sessions. I make her save them as she yanks them out, and I hold them while she works, collecting them in my palm while I assure myself that when I get really old I will be a beautiful silver-haired sophisticate rather than a splotchy gray mid-lifer. Regan is grossed out and I know I may only be able to ask her for this favor one or two more times since she is getting older and stronger and I haven’t been able to figure out a way to force her to do this for me.

I arrive home in a daze, not sure how I got there, and I secretly hope that I didn’t run over anything on the way. I take a deep breath and lay the pamphlet of directions, a flimsy set of disposable gloves that don’t convince me of their reliability, various chemicals, and what looks like a thimble with nubby bristles (for those that don’t have discolored roots and want only to spruce up their look with highlights). I evaluate the contents and shake the empty box, making sure I haven’t overlooked a vital toner or conditioner. I mix what the directions tell me to mix and hope to God that I don’t screw up pouring the Gel Crème Color base into the Multi-Tonal Crème. The directions caution that once I shake it, there is the potential for an explosion and that I should “REMOVE
flat cap IMMEDIATELY.” I collect my thoughts and clear my head to continue reading: For all-over application, I should “SATURATE” my hair and leave the foul ammonia stuff on my head for 15 minutes. I am instructed to “pile hair loosely on top of head.” I pay special attention to the area where Regan does the most plucking and dab a few drops around my hairline. Within moments of this treatment, I am staring in the mirror for signs of change. I didn’t check the time I started and I’m not sure if I should have started counting from when I began or when I piled loosely. I’m not at all sure about this and I begin to pace. I go into the kitchen and ready the faucet, unscrew the tube of conditioner and tap my fingers. I head back into the bathroom and strain my eyes for signs of reddening potential. I don’t see anything happening. Maybe this isn’t working. Maybe I didn’t put enough on. Maybe this shade was recalled and Walgreens wasn’t paying attention? I pace in the kitchen for what seems like much more like three hours than the directed 15 minutes. I panic and run back into the bathroom and imagine that I may have mixed the wrong bottles together. I go over the inventory and I’m relatively certain that I did it right.

I remember something about my neighbor saying that when she had attempted highlights at home and it came out eerily similar to Pepe Le Pew, she used Prell shampoo and it thankfully stripped all the added color away. I run to the window to see if her car is here.

I can’t wait another second. I re-check the running water to be sure I don’t scald myself and jam my head under the kitchen faucet. My ears are filling with warm brown residue. I rinse it again until the water runs clear. Reluctantly satisfied, I apply a much-greater-than-recommended amount of conditioner onto my hair and I use my chewed-to-
the-quick fingertips to scrub the slippery stuff into lather. And I lather again. I submerge my head once more. Now I am splashing water all over the counter and onto the floor. I reach for the towel that is already soaked from my frantic splashing and scour my scalp. I stop only when it hurts too much.

I continue to rough up my hair with a towel and stand in front of the mirror to inspect the damage. I squint. I turn to the side. I turn to the other side. My bangs are practically dried from the severe towel drying and I catch my breath as my strands seem to lighten before my very eyes.

   Oh, God, what have I done?

   Oh, shit. It’s getting lighter.

   No! Stop lightening!

   No more! STOP!

   Oh, shit.

I have discovered, quite by accident that I’m pretty good in traumatic situations—I am able to keep my cool in the moment only to fall apart later. Standing there, mouth agape, I am overcome with an incredible urgency to get rid of all this coloring equipment. I swing into action gathering all the bottles, creams, and rumpled gloves. I crumble the directions into a tight ball and pause only for a second to remark on how much stuff is still left in the bottle. A part of me wants to save it (just in case?), but I am quickly reminded of the potential for combustion and I would have a hard time explaining that to the firefighters when they eventually get here. So, I sweep it into the trash with the rest of the items. I sit down. I take a deep breath. As if startled, I jump up and head back to
the mirror. My hair is quickly drying into the maddening curls that I loathed my entire life.

I can’t stand it. I cannot watch the destruction as it unfolds. I pull my hair off my face, slide a headband over the top, and cinch the rest into a knotty, tight, ponytail. I force the hideous tendrils into submission and make a tremendous effort to ignore my head for as long as I can.

I try to keep busy with emails and I move books in front of the mirror in my room to resist the temptation to gawk. I can’t concentrate. I am paralyzed. I’m having a hard time breathing and I wonder if it constitutes a medical emergency. The sound of the door snaps me out my paralysis and I run into the kitchen to greet my daughter, Regan. I stand there and wait for the horror to creep across her face.

“Hi,” she says.

Hi? Hi!

“Regan!” I demand.

“What?”

“Uh, do you notice anything different about your mother?”

She studies my face and looks me up and down several times. She says, “Well, no. Not really.” I am dumbfounded. I yank the headband free, and wrench the elastic out of my hair along with several kinky curls. I vigorously shake my ringlets inches from her face:

“You don’t notice anything?”

She hesitates and says at last, “Fine! I’ll get the tweezers! But this is the last time!”
Women in New York City are partial to joining cults. We are traditionalists by nature. Perhaps it’s the only way to stay sane in a city full of psychos and schemers. However, on the streets, we appear to be freaks in our own right. You see, these clans we latch onto revolve around one thing: sweating. The Big Apple is home to leagues of women who will shell out $40 for a group exercise class without batting an eye (with $500 eyelash extensions). The sight of ladies, red in the face, strolling through the streets in spandex, chugging liters of Smartwater, with sweat-drenched hair piled atop their heads, is just about as common as a Starbucks. Apparently the “check me out me I just burned six-hundred calories” look is very much en vogue.

A couple of weeks ago, my friend Taylor called me up; she knew I was coming home for the weekend, as was she. We caught up on the usual: school, friends, boyfriends, parents, and pets. “Oh, wait, I’m on Groupon and there’s an amazing deal on boot camp classes. We should go! The guy trains Lea Michele!” “Sure!” I said. How intense could this guy possibly be? His client is on Glee. “We can go this weekend” I responded with lukewarm enthusiasm. After a few more minutes of mindless chatter, Taylor and I hung up. Why did I say I’d go? I thought to myself. I’ve worked out at the same spin studio for the past three years. I’m openly addicted. Obsessed. I couldn’t imagine perspiring anywhere else. Nothing pales in comparison. It’s my church. However, moms are always right, aren’t they? And mine always encourages me to do things that may scare me, so here I went. A few clicks later and it was official.
If the Internet is good for something, it’s finding ways to unnecessarily freak yourself out about something to the point where you seriously consider hiding in your bedroom for the rest of your life. My usual workout of choice promises “an intense full-body workout with a fun and energizing atmosphere,” and delivers. Upon Google-ing this boot camp class I was to attend, I had to mentally prepare for “a blend of marine corps high intense drills meets kickboxing meets yoga.” Great. How many squats and lunges were in my future? Does this trainer make people cry? It’s outside?! Sounds like public humiliation in disguise of a calorie-scorching workout.

Saturday morning rolled around. Boot camp day. Sir, yes sir. For two girls that enjoy working out as much as we do, Taylor and I were particularly miserable on this dreadfully grey Manhattan day. As we approached the Chelsea building, young women came pouring out of the elevator looking as if they’d just been submerged in a dunk tank. Good sign. This wasn’t a scam. “I can’t believe how much we ran today. We’ve never done that before,” one girl said to her friend, “I know. It was literal hell.” Bad sign. These girls were built like amazons, and they were just tortured? We were officially screwed, to put it lightly. We tightened our ponytails and shoelaces, bracing ourselves for our first real encounter with Kenny, our trainer and the owner of Peacecore. I say real because he called us the night before to confirm our places in Saturday’s 9AM session. “Didn’t he sound a little scary?” Taylor asked as we walked through the hallways. I agreed. It felt like what I would imagine a blind date might feel like. A couple of twists and turns later and we had found our meeting place, a small studio with windows overlooking 16th street. An unidentifiable pop song played as a couple of women practiced bicep curls and shoulder presses in the mirror. A booming voice called out from behind us as we placed
our bags against the wall. “Here for the 9AM, ladies?” Time for the grand reveal! There was Kenny, about 6’2, glowing bald head, every inch of his arm covered in menacing black and white tattoos. Not really my type. After signing in, and signing our lives away, we were instructed to join the rest of the ladies warming up. Of course as we lifted and raised and pressed and curled, we giggled and gave each other knowing looks in the mirror. Once the entire class arrived, we were to grab our water bottles and head outside.

Before I knew it, we were jogging westward, Poland Spring bottles in hand. No verbal cue, just a giant, bald-headed, Addidas-clad man leading the pack. We stopped in front of a brick wall off 10th avenue. Time for jumping jacks, lunges, and fifty shades of squats. Between exercises and half-motivating half-intimidating comments from Kenny, deliverymen whistled, zooming by on bikes.

“Drop it lower! Drop it lower!” Kenny would shout like he was recalling some sort of warped rap song.

Tourists snapped photos from the backseat of a cab. A couple strolled by arm in arm, “Those girls are no joke,” the guy said to his girlfriend. We were most certainly on display. Men in fur coats and six inch platforms and strangers screaming at the top of their lungs are commonplace in New York, but no, not us. These ten women bouncing around in their Nikes on a cool, crisp Saturday morning were suddenly as surprising and exciting as spotting your favorite celebrity at the supermarket (looking like a hot mess). For a highly observant individual like myself, it was impossible to ignore the catcalls and camera snaps.

“LET’S GO, LADIES!” Kenny boomed.
Once we started jogging towards the West Side Highway, things began looking up. Bikers and runners training for the upcoming marathon whizzed by us as we set up camp on a picnic table by Pier 40. The breeze from the Hudson was much appreciated.

I was here. I was being watched. I had already gotten through the worst of it, so I figured I might as well keep going. As we ran laps, jumped onto benches, pushed up off of benches, jumped rope and sent our heart rates skyrocketing, Taylor and I let out many a breathless chuckle and admittances of near defeat. *We totally rock for getting through this,* we said to each other with a mere glance. Not for long though, before Kenny shouted “Keep it goin’ ladies! Keep! It! Going! I would say you’re almost done but YOU ARE NOT!” To think we all strutted into Peacecore, in head-to-toe Lululemon, thinking we were fitness champions. Not to say that we weren’t, but the entire experience proved that being a creature of habit is not the best thing we can do for ourselves. Chances are if you’re trembling afterwards, it was much, much needed. We did it, “ladies!”

The next morning my 95-pound Tibetan Mastiff stormed into my bedroom demanding to be walked. I rolled over about a quarter of an inch and realized that my entire body felt as if it was being sucked into one of those space-saver bags they sell on late-night infomercials. I stumbled out of bed, literally, completely unable to bend my knees thanks to tremendously tight quadriceps. I spent the next 48 hours staggering through life like the Tin Man, constantly reminded of the risk I almost didn’t take. But then again, we could all use a boost from an ex-Marine, even if it happens only once.
Oysters and Wings: Using Food as a Lens

The celebrated food writer M.F.K. Fisher wrote an entire book examining the oyster. *New Yorker* writer Calvin Trillin wrote a short cultural history of the Buffalo chicken wing. Now, you will add to this tradition of food writing. Pick one food—such as the oyster or the Buffalo wing—and use it as a lens through which to tell a bigger story.

You may write an essay that includes a personal and/or cultural history associated with the food in question. Depending on the route you take, you might need to spend some time in the library researching your topic. But be careful not to hand in a term paper. You should give your subject a human face or element, and the facts should be informed and illuminated by your perspective.

Alternatively, you may choose to write about the food in the context of a current cultural phenomenon, in which case your research would be based on reporting—observing, interviewing, etc. For example, you could write a Soup Nazi-esque story about the endless line for ice cream at Herrell’s. Or, you could talk to the owner about how new flavors are created. Whether dining on campus or downtown, be adventurous. Consider tasting new foods (a cake-batter milkshake, for instance, or yak meat at the Tibetan restaurant in town), talking to new people (a dining services employee, perhaps)—and give us a revelation.

Whichever option you select, the challenge is the same: to focus on the chosen food, to stay true to your dominant theme, and through it to tell a story. Colorful dialogue and scene-setting details will help make your subjects come alive.
The Art of Making Best & High Quality Tea

By Kritika Tara Deb

For Complete Satisfaction there is nothing Better than DARJEELING TEA.

Nothing better than sitting in an old, British-style wicker chair, at 7 o’clock on a November morning, with the cold, crisp mountain air for company as it wafts through the open house and mingles with the heat of the only electric heater available. Nothing like warming your hands on a mug-full of tea that smells so delicately of the Himalayan foothills, while watching the clear blue sky open up to the snow capped mountains looming over Darjeeling. Nothing like the train climbing uphill with great effort in the distance, its little whistle singing with the routinely visiting blackbird who seems to express this serenity, this moment of awakening when taking your first sip, in the most elegantly simplest of songs...

...I thought while sitting in a cramped New York apartment. The window’s view was obstructed by the ABC studio next door, and the frame refused to open more than two inches, just enough space to allow the sound of people I don’t know rushing to where they won’t find any peace to infiltrate the two-room house. At least I had my tea. It tasted the same, and the smell was my sole constant upon which I based my reality every morning. The one element that reminded me every day that the mountains were waiting. The central heating of the apartment did not subtract any value from the warmth that radiated from the oversized mug between my hands. This warmth spread to unattainable places; it reached into the nostalgia of the past. The mountains are waiting.

HOW TO PREPARE A GOOD TEA. A) Boil fresh water in kettle, do not underboil or over boil. I might have over boiled. I cautiously dipped my tongue into the mug,
while the steam filled the space, allowing me to smell the memories before tasting them. My tongue touched the surface to taste the temperature.

My mother pulled her tongue out, and scrunched her face. “Too hot,” she said, grimacing. My grandmother walked into the room, muttering her morning prayers as she swung the dome-shaped incense holder around the space. The heavy smell of prayer, of hope, of spirituality swallowed the light smell of reality for a moment; but only for a moment. The smoke prayers were carried away (the mountains were waiting to receive them) by the clean, crisp Darjeeling air, and the aroma of tea emerged again. My grandfather sighed. “Chori, daughter, drink it slowly. Just because we have ample amounts does not mean that you should not appreciate the flavor. These leaves were given to us by the owner of Bloomfield Tea estate.” He reached into a tin jar and showed my mother the dried up leaves. “See? These leaves are kind of long—it’s whole leaf grade, and he gave us the first flush, or first pick. The best of the tea leaves.” My mother listened carefully. Bushy hair oiled and tightly braided, starched uniform, hands behind back like the British nuns at school taught her to do, she seemed to emulate the remnants of Proper English culture that were strongly engrained in the descendants of Nepali Gurkha soldiers recruited to fight the wars of their colonizers. She had heard this lecture from her father many times; she knew that even though there was not enough money to afford meat, or even lentils every day, as my grandfather worked without commission as a politician, there was always tea. Always tea.

My grandfather took the train often to Calcutta; as the President of the Shramitsung, a union of tea-pickers of Darjeeling, for at least 20 years he went to the capital of the state of West Bengal to fight for their minimum wage salaries. The tea-
pickers worked long hours on the lush green mountain-side, picking leaves off the plump little bushes they could not afford to buy. They filled their *dokos*, hand-woven baskets, with the rare commodity, as the load on their backs grew heavier throughout the day. The aristocrats of India, who overtook the British as owners after the country’s independence, were so rich they didn’t feel the need to stay in Darjeeling, and lived in big cities like Calcutta. They made sure that the high in demand Darjeeling tea, comprising only 1% of all the tea harvested in the world, was not given to the workers, who slaved day in and day out, but were exported all across the world for far more expensive a price than the labor cost. First flush saved not for the insignificant town of Darjeeling, but for outsiders—and for my grandfather. The tea estate owners made sure to be on good standing with him as he negotiated for the workers; so there were always presents, and presence for that matter, of tea. “We always have the best tea. You must be grateful,” my Grandfather told my mother. He got up from his wooden chair, and opened his fist of tea leaves over the boiling pot of water. The tea leaves fluttered gracefully into the pot, like leaves falling after a long, hard monsoon to welcome the winter with a carpeted ground of copper tones.

*B* Wash pot with little warm water add tea leaf (one tea spoon per cup and one extra for the pot). My mother looked into the empty jar, with the remaining dust of tea leaves huddled pitifully in the corner at the bottom. Nearly half a century later, that life seemed a century away. It seemed ironic that there was plenty of everything else—lentils, meat, water, clothing—in our tiny New York apartment. “The tea leaves are nearly finished,” she noted disappointedly, and I looked up to see her rummaging through the pantry of our overstuffed and claustrophobic apartment, producing a large plastic bag
containing little brown paper bundles, and a big box of Lipton Red Label tea. Every month or so, my mother would bring out the two and spend a few hours meticulously mixing both and searching for the right consistency of Lipton and Darjeeling tea; just enough Darjeeling that she could still appreciate the smell awaken her nostalgia every morning, and just enough Lipton so that the Darjeeling tea leaves lasted longer throughout the year, at least until her next trip home. The mountains were waiting for her tea leaves to finish.

For 30 years, my mother brought tea leaves to America to remind her every day of who she was. Whenever we came back from Darjeeling, our suitcases were always overweight; they were fit to burst with tea leaves that her sisters had gifted to her before leaving, and with the heavy memories of what family used to be in the past. The house in Darjeeling echoed the smoke prayers my Grandmother put so much faith in; the silence of the house projected ghostly images of a family no longer there to boil water on the stove for tea. All boarded up with a large, rusty lock on the front door, the house that used to hold the comforting smell of tea only had air seeping in through the cracks between walls, lingering with the forming dust. The people from memories had come and gone, draining their mugs of tea and moving on. All they had left behind, at the bottom of their cups, were the wrinkled, drained residue. It seems unfair that the check-in person at the airport should make us pay for overweight memories.

At least Customs was never a problem. My mother never declared her stash on the immigration form, and she walked out of baggage claim always with head held high, coolly strolling past the sniffing dogs who became magically immune to the smell of tea.
leaves, and the security officers suspiciously eyeing our abnormally large suitcases. Only indication: she had a death-grip on the handle of the suitcase.

Nobody could pry those tea leaves away from her.

Very early the next morning, we were rewarded by my mother’s Customs performance. While the city that never sleeps is barely awake, the two of us would be fully alert, opening the first packet of tea leaves of the bunch we brought back in a puff of dust that resembled the opening of an old, coveted history book. We would wait for the electric kettle to boil; a stark contrast from the whistle kettle that sang on a faraway Darjeeling morning, harmonizing with the iconic miniature ‘toy’ train that chugged up the mountain. We would sit in the quiet loneliness of early morning together, waiting for the sun, sipping the stories my mother would tell me of the Darjeeling she remembered, until there was no more tea left in our mugs. Then we would heat another round of water.

*C) Pour boiled water into pot and keep covered for 3 to 5 minutes.* The kettle clicked off, as I read the label on the bundle of tea leaves my mother had given me to take to college. The language was amusing; the tea was produced by the *Best & High Quality TEA Suppliers* (because, clearly, ‘best’ is not enough). The fragile, sadly fading label had an innocently happy and care-free tone, and no attention to grammar (because there is no time in life to be picky about those things—it is more important to enjoy a good cup of tea while you can). There was a sketch of a lady with a *doko* balanced on her back while she picks tea leaves. I could not tell whether she was smiling or not.

I pour the still bubbling hot water into the teapot, and wait. I wait for the water to soak into the leaves picked by hands withered by hours in the sun; I wait for the flavor of clean air to blend with the New York water, and for the steamy aroma of smoke prayers
to whisper to me about the mountains I have nearly forgotten. The mountains are waiting to tell me their history.

D) Stir, filter, add milk, add sugar to taste & sip in the goodness of Darjeeling tea.
Black Gold

By Catherine Ellsberg

Since I was about fifteen, I’ve been guzzling coffee as if it were the sweet, or rather bitter, nectar of the gods. I went to acting school in New York City for several pivotal teenage years, and since I rebuffed the normal vices of the other lanky thespians—skin-tight black jeans, Marlboros, vodka-drenched Saturday soirées—caffeine became my elixir. (I pictured those PSA commercials: “Running is my drug of choice.” Except coffee really was…I became addicted to the black mulch at the bottom of my thermos.)

Admittedly, I was no connoisseur in the beginning stages of this love/love relationship. There was a Starbucks across the street from school, which suited me just fine; sure, it was a bit pricey, but hey, I was young, fatigued, and I had gold metro coins burning through my back-pocket. I never read or lingered in this factory of muffins and whipped cream; it was purely a five-minute transaction, a quick fix.

If I wanted to study lines or read a play, I headed over to Simple Tea on E 13th St. This was the kind of place where they turned up the volume when The Cardigans came on in the hipster version of Musak; where platters of greenish hummus wraps were slid over the counter for a whopping ten dollars; where you could sit on a velvet couch next to a bearded man reading Alex Ross on his iPad. You could experience all this at Simple for a price: sipping an espresso and feeling superior to the patrons of the Starbucks where you hadn’t stopped earlier that morning.

You could say that my attachment to Black Gold has only intensified over time, and since my arrival at college, it’s become downright addictive. The headaches, the
shakes, the pining for that acerbic first, scorching gulp are all symptoms of a greater condition.

When I first arrived in Northampton to attend Smith, I naturally explored my new surroundings: used bookstores, homemade clothing shops with bizarre mountain goat mannequins in the display cases, chocolate emporia. Of course, I couldn’t help but take in the number of coffee joints—several on each block, a caffeinated corner just beckoning.

I’ve often fancied myself studying in said cafes; I’ve always wanted to be that student who just pulls out her laptop, flexes her wrists, and gets going on her paper, even amid the thrumming noise of brunch chatter and whimpering four-year-olds with sticky fingers. Sadly, this plan never really works out to my liking. This past week, I set out determined, my back sagging beneath about thirty pounds of binders, Norton anthologies, and film textbooks, in search of the study experience in your typical atypical Northampton coffee shop. My first attempt: Woodstar.

I’ve heard good things about Woodstar. (Full disclosure: I prefer the croissants of Lunch, aka 40 Green Street, but strangely, they’re closed on Saturdays. How progressive of them. Not.) It’s not even noon, and already there’s a line snaking its way from the door to the cash register. I have to make do with a seat wedged in between several rowdy customers (these are the hard-core brunchers I suppose—they’ve just gots to have that gluten-free loaf, fresh from the oven!). My L.L. Bean sack makes a resounding thud as it lands on the floor, I stake my claim to a vacant seat with my heavy winter coat, and work my way to the line.

So I’m basically myopic, FYI. I really should use it more to my advantage—you know, wear cute little glasses that complement my bob. Instead, I just wear the same pair
I’ve had since the 8th grade. Or rather, I don’t wear them. This makes seeing the menu from all the way in the back really difficult, but I figure the selection is your standard muffins and bagels.

As I approach, I almost feel a little pressured; I’ve come all this way (several feet, that is), and the decision between a chocolate or plain croissant is an important one. As I make my way to the register to place my order, I stumble over my own words, and am not sure where to focus my gaze: the barista seems to penetrate into my sleep-deprived soul, as if to say Go on, we both know what you want. “Uh…c-c-coffee, please.” “Sure, leave room for milk?” “No!” I say just a little too loudly. (To clarify: there’s no real reason why I drink my coffee black. Someone once asked whether I had a lactose intolerance, or some perfectly granola question like that. No, call me a Russophile, but I like the burning sensation of plain black coffee. I’ll deal with the acid reflux later in life. But I digress.) He rings up my order as I impulsively add a toasted, buttered bagel (what, I need sustenance to get through this Sainte-Beuve) and grudgingly smack down an hour’s pay for what looks like doll’s food.

I take my burning mug, my petit déjeuner, and head back for my seat, where I reach in my bag for Crime and Punishment. “‘Good God!’ he cried, ‘can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike her on the head, split her skull open...’” Raskolnikov’s inner torment is interrupted by the sound of some serious slurping. I surreptitiously peek out to my side, and notice a middle-aged man enjoying a giant latte. He gestures for one of the baristas to come over and says, in an exasperated tone, “Now, are you sure there aren’t any more sprouted wheat loaves? See, I like the feel of the
grains. It’s good for your teeth, you know.” Geez Louise. It looks like the double-murder of the 19th century will just have to wait.

After a few more minutes of attempting to read, I decide to give it a rest. At first, it’s the distraction of the chaos around me. I can’t seem to turn my attention to anything useful; I rummage through the Facebook profiles of old elementary school teachers and high school frenemies and frequently apply Aveda mulberry-tinted chapstick. I decide to look my best because you never know who could walk in, right?

OK, that’s not true. After a while, I figure I know exactly who’s going to walk in. There is, after all, a Woodstar type. Let’s start with the men. To my right, there’s aforementioned middle-aged man. For the most part, though, there are just a lot of young guys in their mid-twenties, all wearing what seem to be Urban Outfitters ensembles (though I like to think that if prodded, these strapping gents would probably pretend they’re put together from Urban Exchange, or that the alpaca sweaters they’re wearing were hand-made by some children they met in a Bolivian village). There’s a wide spectrum when it comes to facial hair: the shaggy Bushwick look, or to the extreme, the Amish beard. Then again, there’s also the bare baby-face, with hair combed to the side, perhaps a Byronic forelock drooping poetically. But back to the issue of clothing: lots and lots of argyle, skinny jeans of a surprising array of colors (teal is in, just so you know), large, chunky-framed glasses. Of course, there’s the flannel collection (lumberjacks: Woodstar’s the place to be!), the slightly cheesy cardigans reminiscent of Mr. Rogers. Let’s not forget the shoes: usually lace-up boots if they’re going for the Appalachia look, or if they’re just sitting back with some Proust on a crisp November day, it’s more of a loafer morning. A noticeable lack of Converse, I should point out.
Now, surely not all of these men are just sitting around, nibbling on éclairs (man, those looked good), ripe for the taking. You’re right, they’re not. As I sit back, I tune into the epic phenomenon of: the coffee date.

I lean back, forget all about Dostoyevsky, and turn up my iPod so I can have a nice soundtrack to accompany the scene. As I tune into The National, I try to pay attention to the seeming couples surrounding me; once I notice one couple, I suddenly take in a whole room of adorable, tattooed, spectacled, hippy/hipster/an-ambiguous-combination thereof giggling and eating those damn diet bagels. If my dad were here, he’d probably volunteer some platitude like, Love is in the air. I think not.

I change the song to About to Die.

I lean into the table, and as the Dirty Projectors blast away, I go up to order another coffee. “Large,” I proclaim defiantly. This time the barista nods quickly. He doesn’t even ask if I want to talk out my feelings. He knows I mean business, and slides down a steaming bowl.

I squeeze back into my seat. I watch as girls decked in Doc Martens, oversized button-downs, and chic mini-turbans stroll past and take their place across from their “coffee dates.” I pick up Crime and Punishment and as I turn my head up for a second, a guy strolls by, nods to the book cover, and winks (ooh yeah, Russian nihilism—so sexy).

Just as I’m about to sink onto the floor out of general malaise and a little wrenching feeling in my stomach from perhaps a coffee overdose, I notice someone interesting out of the corner of my eye. I’m suddenly all about sneaky peripheral vision, as I notice this very attractive guy, well, noticing me. Intriguing.
Sure, he’s wearing a striped cardigan, but it shouts more academic chic than smarmy old man with smoker’s breath. His pants are fine, I guess, but I really like his shoes. It’s actually embarrassing how much I like this guy’s shoes. Is this even normal? They’re these simple brown flats. But there’s something so…elegant about them.

So this guy keeps scribbling in his notebook, and every so often, he looks up and actually stares intently at me. I’d be a little weirded out, except I’m mostly just curious. Plus, as I’ve mentioned, the man’s got great taste in shoes. Occasionally we make eye contact, but it’s not awkward, it’s just a sort of Hi look.

Whenever he glances at me and then looks back down at his spiral notebook, writing furiously, I can’t help but think that he’s writing about me. (Well, why not?) And so next thing you know, I start to alter my movements just the tiniest bit—just to edit them. I pull out Anna Karenina to change it up—who knows, maybe he needs some juicy details for a story or profile or something, right?—and every now and then laugh as if the travails of Vronsky and Levin were as witty as The Huffington Post. (It makes for a rather incongruous experience, let me tell you.) I flip my hair every now and then, just getting that perfect angle. (In retrospect, I probably seemed as if I were trying to rid my scalp of lice right there in the café.) I pull out my own notebook, jot down my various weird musings. This guy’s totally going to come up to me any second. Just any second, he’s going to say hi and we can go out on our own coffee date and I’ll start wearing alpaca sweaters, too, and I bet he’ll tell me where he got those shoes…

“Hey honey, sorry I’m late,” I hear a high, clear voice from beyond, snapping me awake from my reverie. A beautiful woman kisses my neighbor.
I swig the last bit of my coffee, put away my books, and zip up my bag. I think I’ve done enough “studying” for an afternoon.

I leave Woodstar, and as I walk down the street to my house, I suddenly feel lethargic as ever. As my feet drag on the sidewalk, I spot Haymarket.

Well, maybe I could use just one more cup before I head home.
All Mixed Up

By Ayelet Reiter

The first and only time I tried to make shakshuka I failed spectacularly. I headed into it confidently, having been told multiple times by various friends that “you just can’t mess up shakshuka.” Later, having told them that I did, in fact, mess it up, they mostly responded with “how do you screw up shakshuka?” I must have achieved the impossible, since, despite picking out the sweetest tomatoes Jerusalem had to offer and painstakingly following every step in my mother’s recipe, when it came time to crack the eggs, both just rolled off of the vegetables instead of nicely poaching into a little pocket within them. I tried to scoop them back on top neatly, but instead, they just rolled around, becoming more scrambled than poached. It was edible, but it certainly wasn’t shakshuka.

When done right, shakshuka is incomparably delicious, a dish even more fun to eat than it is to say. Shakshuka is originally a Tunisian dish, popular today throughout North Africa and the Middle East, consisting of a stew of cooked tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, spiced to one’s liking, with eggs, which, when cooked properly, become poached into the vegetables. Shakshuka can be the perfect winter breakfast, comfort food or hangover cure.

Despite being linked to Tunisia (likely due to its name, which translates to “all mixed up” in Tunisian dialect), its origin story is shady at best. Some claim the dish was actually inspired by the Turkish dish menemen (also a mixture of onion, peppers, tomatoes and eggs), which was spread throughout the Ottoman Empire. Yemenites have laid claim to it. Still, over time, it became popular especially among Sephardi Jews in North African countries, and has become a staple among both Jewish and Israeli cuisines.
Boston Globe writer Ted Weesner claimed that shakshuka “might score tops in an Israeli food election - if there were such a thing and were hummus disqualified due to term limits.” It was through this chain of events that shakshuka eventually made its way into my family and my home.

Although I had grown up watching my parents devour shakshuka, I spent most of my younger life avoiding it at all costs. I never liked tomatoes, and having been even pickier then than I am now, I stayed away from any food that was a little too colorful (or for that matter, healthy). It was only upon visiting a family friend all of three years ago that I had it for the first time. I had heard my mother on the phone with her friend earlier that day explaining that I don’t eat meat. After her friend probably went through all the trouble of completely rearranging her menu, I felt awful letting that shakshuka go to waste. So I tried it, and found that even despite the tomatoes, I was completely blown away. It seems so simple, but the mixture of the fresh vegetables with the spices melded so perfectly I had to savor every bite. Not to mention, the dish completely affirmed my belief that just about any food can be greatly improved by the addition of a fried egg or two. As I dipped the country bread into the last remaining bits of sauce, I couldn’t help but wonder, What took me so long?

My mother’s shakshuka was even better. If it weren’t for the ridiculous levels of cholesterol, I could easily sit and eat it through the night. Like the shady shakshuka origin story, I was never completely sure from where or whom my mother learned to make it. Although she is more than proud of her own Sephardi heritage, her family’s cooking was always more Italian than North African. Still, I did know that my mother is adamantly against using recipes. Instead, she likes to experiment, until she figures out her own way
of cooking. Even in those once-in-a-blue-moon moments when I have found her with a decades-old cookbook, she has always found ways to make it her own – the recipe is only inspiration. Of course, her years of carefully developed cooking skills mean that her experiments, even on the very rare occasions that they fail, still taste much better than mine. In my (very limited) cooking experience, I have also preferred to go without a recipe, but I know far less about cooking to really justify using this method.

So it was this past summer, living on my own for the first time in an apartment in Jerusalem with a fully equipped kitchen, when I asked her to pass along her shakshuka recipe. It is somewhat ironic that I planned to attempt making it to assuage my homesickness, since I was now in a region where I could go to any hole-in-the-wall café and order shakshuka, where I found multiple brands of canned shakshuka stew (‘just add eggs!’) and where any passerby on the street thinks they had the secret to the perfect shakshuka. But there was no need for that since I had already found the perfect shakshuka in my own home, and I realized that part of my path to adulthood would involve learning to make it myself.

Even before I set oil to skillet, just reading over the recipe in the e-mail from my mother helped curb my homesickness. Having written down her own method of making it, the e-mail was filled with colloquialisms and transliterated Hebrew. I couldn’t help but read it in my mother’s voice. She introduced the recipe with “Chamudi,” (a Hebrew term of endearment meaning “sweetheart” or “cutie”), “Here is how you make shakshuka. You need to eat it with country bread and dip the bread in the shakshuka.” The rest of the recipe featured measurement increments such as “a little,” and sidenotes such as “if it makes tssssss noise lower the fire”. The final steps explained that “you can ‘nest’ the
eggs a little into the vegetable, and you can also cover the pan (if you have a cover) - it will cause the white to cover the yellow (like sunny-side-down)” and of course, “Enjoy!!!!” Despite my complete failure at trying it for myself, how could I not be happy given four exclamation marks?

Still, it’s not only my mother who has such specific and careful shakshuka-making policies. Today, everyone from world-renowned chefs to Middle East cookbook writers to food bloggers have their own spin on the dish. To start with, there are thousands of variations. Some substitute bell peppers for chili peppers to give the dish that extra hot factor. Some add spinach – I once tried a variation at an East Village café that completely replaced the tomatoes with a creamy spinach mixture. I wasn’t sure it was actually shakshuka, but it was heavenly nonetheless. Some add potatoes to make a heartier meal. Some add eggplant – I, however, would never do that. Even the most delicious of shakshukas wouldn’t get me to like eggplant. Other alternatives include “chamshuka”, which adds beef to the mix. I once had shakshuka served on top of hummus, which, while it sounds intriguing, is not a meal I would particularly care to repeat.

The newest recipe to be thrown in the ring comes from Jerusalem: A Cookbook, written by Jerusalem residents Yotam Ottolenghi, an Israeli and Sami Tamimi, a Palestinian. In particular, their recipe calls for a variety of ingredients including something called “Pilpelchuma”. Their recipe also calls for half a cup of labaneh, a thick cheese spread. Although I have never personally tried shakshuka with labaneh, the simple thought of the combination of the two makes my mouth water. They distinctly note to
“serve with good white bread and nothing else.” Eating shakshuka demands your undivided attention. No other food should dare to take that away.

Not everyone agrees with that sentiment. Food blogger Tori Avey writes, “For breakfast, serve with warm crusty bread or pita that can be dipped into the sauce (if you’re gluten-intolerant, skip the bread). For dinner, serve with a green side salad for a light, easy meal.” Whether or not serving a salad on the side is blasphemous is up to Ottolenghi and Tamimi to decide. Another food blogger on “Jewish Cuisine: Connecting History and Nutrition” describes the cardinal rules of shakshuka as “1) It must be served in a cast iron pan that it was made in - for the authentic look and 2) Use bread to mop up the sauce.” For the health-conscious, she warns “ordering shakshuka for breakfast – BIG MISTAKE. Despite that being the popular option in [Israel], your body will not thank you for it. Too much oil, too early in the day.” Her recipe calls for multigrain bread, less oil and fewer egg yolks. I’m not sure that I really worry all that much about my health while I’m eating shakshuka, but hey, even in its oily, yolky, white-bready form, it’s probably healthier than Eggs Benedict. One blogger describes shakshuka as “a hearty, flavorful, zesty meal that allows you to travel to the Middle East with your taste buds.”

My mother has objected to most published shakshuka recipes, mentioning that she thinks garlic should never be used in shakshuka (every other recipe I have seen disagrees). The Lonely Planet featured “Shakshuka in Jerusalem” on their top ten list of “Where to find the world’s best breakfasts”, writing “don’t forget to ask for extra crusty bread to mop up the hearty sauce.” Amusingly enough, nearly every recipe recalls just how simple the dish is to make. Clearly, they have never seen me cooking.
When I told my mother of my complete failure, she just said, “You have to watch me making it.” Surely enough, on one of my first nights back in the States, I carefully observed the delicate art of making perfect shakshuka as I watched the just milky enough eggs being cupped beautifully into the colorful vegetables. The day before Thanksgiving, upon telling my mother that I was writing an essay about shakshuka and thus craving it more than ever, we made it together again. That night, as my family happily devoured our creation, my mother told me, “Something about Shakshuka always reminds me of home. The colors look like sunshine and the smell of the tomatoes and the spices and the eggs brings up memories of the open-air market.” Reading through these recipes, I realized that it’s not just shakshuka, but it’s the stories that it comes with. Whether these cooks and bloggers first had shakshuka in their mother’s kitchen, in a crowded café in Jaffa or at a family friend’s, they all have memories attached to it. Sometimes, it’s a matter of finding the perfect spice or vegetable to add to it. But usually, it’s a matter of the company you keep. Serve with good white bread and the warmth of those around you.
An Edible Thank You

By Amelia Murphy

Peaches and plums should not be pink. Unfortunately for the wallpaper in our kitchen, its busy design included oddly pink-colored fruit, which doomed it from the start in my mother’s eyes. My mom spent weeks tediously scraping off the fruit wallpaper to paint the kitchen a vibrant forest green. My fuzzy childhood memory tells me it was around this time she discovered a golden recipe for Almond Apricot biscotti.

Most people think of biscotti as dry and overpriced at Starbucks, but this recipe revolutionized the long rectangular cookie. Our green kitchen would periodically turn into a magical biscotti workshop, producing scrumptious yellow logs of it cooked from scratch. The flavorful treat soon became my mom’s specialty.

At first, I didn’t understand the allure of a crunchy stick without chocolate as its main ingredient. What’s the point? I much preferred my mom’s silver bell cookies: peanut butter cookies with Hershey’s kisses popped delightfully on top. When eaten minutes after coming out of the oven, the chocolate oozed inside your mouth, swirling with the peanut butter in a way that made your taste buds relax and want to sit by a fire next to a Christmas tree. How could you prefer a crunchy bar with fruit and nuts over such a sweet cookie?

The adults did not see it the way I did. They gobbled the biscotti up, unperturbed by its lack of sugar, raving about its flavor and begging for more. I don’t remember eating much of it as a child. I was more often the bearer of biscotti rather than the eater of biscotti. My mom would put them in pretty plastic bags wrapped with colored ribbon for my brother and me to deliver to our teachers at the end of the school year or to neighbors.
at Christmastime.

The biscotti’s forte is as a dipping cookie. Bland biscotti can be salvaged by way of a cup of coffee or hot chocolate, which softens and adds taste to the cookie. The uniqueness of Mom’s biscotti came in its balance between crunchy and soft, dry and moist, every crumb coming together in apricot harmony. As I grew older, I began to recognize the genius of Mom’s biscotti. Its almonds, apricots, and white chocolate were born to be baked together. Her biscotti never came out bland or dry.

Biscotti was the reason we always had a bottle of apricot-flavored brandy on the top shelf of our coat closet, just next to the hook for the aprons. For a family of dark chocolate lovers, we also had a surprisingly large stash of Ghirardelli white chocolate in the cooking cupboard. A Costco-sized packet of almonds always sat in the freezer, waiting to be painstakingly sliced and toasted quickly in the oven. Toasting almonds was a tricky step, and it sometimes ended with the squeal of our fire alarm.

The word biscotti means “twice-baked,” and yet that was my least favorite part of the cookie. I firmly believed it reached its highest quality after baking it once—any further bakings made it hard and crumbly. I would time my entrance into the kitchen accordingly. Just as a sheet of biscotti came out of the oven, I would swoop in and snag one of the end pieces before they went back in. No matter how hard I tried to convince Mom otherwise, they were doomed to be baked twice, even three times.

At some point, the biscotti won me over. It went from yummy status to out-of-this-world-delicious status. The many heartfelt thank yous from my teachers stuck with me, and I kept eating the messed up end pieces. As my taste buds matured, they appreciated the delicacy more and more, until I too agreed my mom’s biscotti was
something special. Perhaps even more so than the Silver Bell cookies.

I would often come home from school to the signature aroma of toasted almonds and apricot and Mom hard at work making her coveted biscotti. Much to my chagrin, it was almost always destined for someone else: friends, family, neighbors, teachers, the mailman, or ballet instructors. Nevertheless, I would dutifully deliver the biscotti gifts, building up a true biscotti following over the years. It was a hit with everyone.

My love of cooking stemmed directly from my mom and her teaching; however, biscotti was somehow always distinctly her territory. I remember baking it only once with her, and the production had also involved my cousin, my aunt, and four aprons. I did not master the long and involved cooking process. The summer after she got sick with cancer, Mom spent a lot of time on our yellow couch. We went through recipes together, and she would instruct me on what foods to make. I would follow the recipes carefully, stepping into the living room to ask questions every few minutes, no matter how silly. (“If it says melted butter, do I have to melt it?”) We didn’t get to biscotti that summer.

At one point, Mom had considered going into the biscotti business. She started experimenting with different flavors. I don’t remember the exact combinations, but she wrote of them enthusiastically in her letters to me in college. I later found a piece of notebook paper floating around the house with handwritten tables of biscotti ingredients and prices. They add up to an expensive gourmet cookie.

I’m not sure it would have truly worked as a business. The point of Mom’s biscotti was the heartfelt thank you cooked into each piece. They were meant to go to the teachers who made learning come alive, the friends and family for their everyday love, and the friends and neighbors who delivered home-cooked meals to us when we needed
them. They were meant to be given away.

Even after she was gone, her biscotti continued giving. My aunts showed up to her celebration of life with suitcases of homemade biscotti to give away. The guests were thrilled to taste the signature almond and apricot delicacy again. When we gave them copies of the well-worn recipe so they could continue the biscotti baking tradition, their eyes filled with gratitude and spilled over with tears.

I didn’t bring myself up to conquering the recipe on my own until this past summer. I wanted to thank the directors of my Florence, Italy study abroad program, for they had gone above and beyond their call of duty that year, helping me in every possible way to adjust and thrive in a new culture. This called for a special gift, and Mom’s voice whispered in my head: “Almond Apricot biscotti.” Of course.

I found her recipe and followed it carefully. I went through the same steps she used to go through: toasting the almonds, chopping the dried apricot and white chocolate into tiny pieces, and forming the dough into a log. I even cooked it three times. I now understood it needed to be cooked this many times to withstand being dunked into hot beverages. I still taste-tested an end piece before putting the logs back into the oven for the second time. Cooking Mom’s biscotti was like yoga, except instead of connecting back with my body, I was connecting with her. A sense of calm permeated my movements. It was up to me to continue the biscotti tradition. My biscotti turned out a little crumbly, but it was still delicious and well received in Italy by my study abroad directors.

Just like the woman who used to cook it, this biscotti is not bland or dry at all. It melted in my mouth as I tried the first bite in our green and yellow kitchen. Following his
nose, my brother barged in right after the biscotti came out of the oven. What timing he has! Just as peaches and plums should not be pink, biscotti should not be squandered away, so my brother and I ate some freshly baked biscotti together. He brought the crumbly bits to his friends at the skate park, and I packed the rest into little plastic bags. Share it with everyone, and, as I can distinctly hear my mom saying, “Don’t forget to write your thank you notes.”

**Almond Apricot Biscotti Recipe:**

2 3/4 c. sifted all purpose flour  
1 1/2 c. sugar  
1/2 c. chilled unsalted butter, cut into pieces  
2 1/2 tsp. baking powder  
1 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. ground ginger  
3 1/2 oz. white chocolate, cut into pieces  
1 2/3 c. whole almonds, toasted  
2 large eggs  
1/4 cup plus 1 Tbsp. apricot-flavored brandy  
2 tsp. almond extract  
1 6-oz. package dried apricots, diced


Reduce heat to 300 degrees. Put logs on cutting board and cut each log crosswise into 3/4-inch wide slices. Arrange cookies cut side down on sheet. Bake 10 minutes. Gently turn cookies over and bake 10 minutes. Transfer to rack and cool.
In his introduction to the anthology, *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker*, editor David Remnick lists the many different types of profiles that have run in the magazine. “There are Profiles of malice . . . and Profiles of praise . . . There are Profiles about identity . . . and Profiles about the strangeness of American fame,” he writes. “One quality that runs through all the best Profiles . . . is a sense of obsession. So many of these pieces are about people who reveal an obsession with one corner of human experience or another . . . In every great Profile, too, the writer is equally obsessed.”

For your next assignment, find someone to profile. You may choose someone famous (see Gay Talese’s legendary write-around profile of Frank Sinatra) or someone unknown (see Susan Orlean’s profile of a ten-year-old American male), someone you know or someone you wish you knew. Just choose wisely: Find a subject who deeply interests you, and whose life story you have some access to, whether via in-person interviews or through research.

If you decide to do an in-person interview, take a page from Talese: Interview not just the profile subject, but the people who work with or know the subject and can shine some light on what makes that person unique. If you choose to go the research route, try to get your hands on original, primary sources; for instance, you may discover fascinating material about your subject in letters or journals that are part of the Sophia Smith Collection.

Either way, make sure you have an angle. As you will discover in this week’s readings, the writers don’t attempt to tell entire life stories. Instead, they focus on defining moments in their subjects’ lives, and in doing so they are able to distill the essence of their characters. With your subject, you should similarly aim to capture a moment in time. As always, use scene-setting details and dialogue (quotes you’ve gotten or quotes you’ve come across in your research), and try to tell a story that hasn’t been told before.
Squeaky Shoes

By Rosamond Hayden

Nelle Feliciano has a party to plan. On December 24, 2012 she will turn eight, and she is not about to let this momentous event sneak up on her. In August, with a mere four months to go before the big day, Nelle sat down with a piece of paper and some magic markers to make a plan. Luckily, Nelle is a stickler for archiving important moments and ideas and asked her Mom to take a video of the party planning process. Looking into the camera, an ice cream sandwich in one hand, Nelle waves and holds up the piece of paper on which she has written the agenda. Like any good party, this one has multiple stages.

“First, getting ready,” she reads. “We need eye shadow, lipstick, nail polish, and blush. Then the salon part of the party: doing hair, hot massage towels,” she pauses to think and take a lick of her ice cream. “Oh yeah, and glitter.”

“Why did you pick a makeup party for your party idea?” Nelle’s mother asks, doing her best Barbara Walters imitation.

“Because I love putting makeup on other people.”

“Really, more than putting it on yourself?”

“Yeah, because then you can really appreciate your work.”

In Nelle’s world, a plan is essential, and if it involves glitter, well that is all the better. I recently caught up with Nelle to ask her how the party planning was going and to get the details of her new life as a second-grader. I told her I wanted to interview her for a project for school, and as usual she was all business. We made a plan to chat over Skype and at the appointed time her newly toothless grin filled my laptop screen.

“Is it okay if I write down some of what you say?” I asked.
“Yeah, I am taking notes too” she said, holding up the yellow legal pad she already had prepared.

A few months before they went to China to adopt her, Nelle’s parents received a picture of the little girl that would soon be their daughter. In the photo, Nelle is sitting on huge pink inflatable chair shaped like Hello Kitty that appears as if it could swallow her up. She stares intently at the camera, her small mouth a straight line between two big cheeks. Now, those baby cheeks are gone and her arms and legs are strong from countless cartwheels. Her dark hair hits her shoulders and she often tucks it behind her ear in a way that strikes me as very grown up. In her eyes though, I see the same earnest, expectant look.

Those eyes light up with contained but genuine enthusiasm when I ask her about her upcoming birthday. She explains the benefits of a birthday so close to Christmas and notes that she is looking forward to three sets of presents from her “friend party, family, party, and Christmas.” She is, however, careful to remind me of what is most important.

“I like getting lots of presents, but on your birthday you also get lots of love and love is more important than presents.”

Next, we head into a new phase of the interview which Nelle calls, “sister information.” Almost two years ago, just after Nelle’s sixth birthday, her Mom left for India to bring home Nelle’s little sister Anju, who is now four years old. Nelle excels in her role as a big sister and is kind and patient most of the time.

“I like being a sister because I am sometimes right, but sometimes Anju is right,” she admits with a shrug of her shoulders. Nelle’s aunt Anne told me that once while Nelle
and Anju were playing at her house, she asked them what they were playing and they responded, “We are playing family.”

I can hear Anju in the background as Nelle takes a minute to write something in her notebook. She goes over what we have talked about so far and says, “I am just replaying the thoughts.”

As she carefully and methodically summarizes our conversation so far, I picture her sitting at her little desk at school and writing and reading with the same focus and skill. Not long after she learned to write, her handwriting was neater than my own, and she now writes pages and pages of stories and reads chapter books all by herself. Even more impressive, though, is how much she loves school. With a backpack as big as she is and packed with books, drawings, and pictures, Nelle practically skips to school every morning. I asked her what she likes most about second grade, and she listed P.E., music, library, art, and computer class.

“But the most thing I like is recess,” she says. “I like running around and singing on the swings.” One day last year, Nelle’s mom, my cousin, asked me to pick Nelle up from school. As I watched Nelle walk down the hallway toward me surrounded by her friends, shuffling along in their snow pants and big boots, I remembered the day I first met Nelle. I went with my family to the airport to welcome Nelle and her parents home from China. We had been told that she would likely be very shy and quiet and that we should give her space and time to adjust to her new home and family. From the beginning, though, Nelle took us by surprise. As they walked through the terminal, stiff and tired from the long flight, Nelle, in her Mom’s arms, lifted up her tiny hand and waved.
As her parents went to get their luggage, my sister and I walked Nelle back and forth through the terminal. She gripped our thumbs and wobbled unsteadily on her little chubby legs. Nelle’s dark brown eyes took in her surroundings with a mix of fascination and fear. Most of all, I remember her little white sneakers that squeaked with each step. In that moment when Nelle officially became a part of our family, at the end of one long journey and the beginning of another all I remember is the relief we all felt with each little squeak of her shoes. Each squeak was a reminder that she was here, she was safe, and she was ours.

Every once in a while, Nelle likes to look at the scrapbook her mom made her of their trip to China. Nelle has asked some questions and her parents have attempted to explain China’s “one child policy” in terms that a seven-year old can understand. She carefully turns the pages and silently considers each picture before explaining softly, “There are lots of baby girls in China.”

Now, spinning in her swivel chair, she takes a minute to consider my next question, “If you were President, what rules would you make?” She taps her chin thoughtfully and once again pushes her hair out of her eyes. After checking to make sure I am writing it all down she says, “My first rule would be everyone can pray even some people who aren’t allowed to now. Rule number two, no gum allowed outside because people spit it on the ground, and then your dog might eat it and then throw up and then your kid might start crying so, yeah, no gum allowed outside. Rule number three, if some people are poor, I would turn extra buildings into kitchens where they could get food.” She pauses, again tucks her hair behind her ears and adds, “Rule number four, there have
to be rest stops called “Noodle Kitchen” so people driving on the highway can get noodles to go.”

As you can tell from her birthday party plans, Nelle has sophisticated tastes and style. Once on a camping trip, she wore a long red plaid coat with black velvet trim and bright pink cowboy boots. Not long after Anju arrived, I spent the day with Nelle. I wanted to do something special for her because I knew things had been a little chaotic at her house since her little sister’s arrival. I took her to the mall, and as if drawn by some magnetic pull, she led me to “Claire’s.” As we crossed the threshold into the land of all things pink and sparkly, she took a deep breath as though we had entered a sacred space. I told her she could pick out one thing to buy, and she reached up to hold my hand, overpowered by the seriousness of the task. I almost regretted my generosity as she carefully picked up and examined every single item in the store. I could see the wheels turning as she weighed the pros and cons of the hot pink nail polish versus the heart-shaped mood ring. In the end, she chose a set of hair clips attached to which were thin neon-colored braided hair extensions. Not surprisingly, they looked great on her. She wore them all day long, beaming with pride and admiring her reflection in every window and mirror she passed.

“I have to go,” Nelle announces at the end of our interview. “My gym teacher says I am only supposed to spend two hours on the computer a day. It’s called the 5-2-1-0 plan. That means five fruits and vegetables, two hours of screen time, one hour of exercise, and zero sugary drinks.” Another good plan, and I know she’ll stick to it.
Twelve hours before he lost consciousness, Dr. Gerhard Werner sat at his sprawling white desk in his office at home in Austin, Texas, tapping away at his laptop. His desk was neatly arranged as always – a container of pens and sharpened pencils, fresh sticky pads at the base of his lamp, a staple remover, a wooden dish for business cards (Gerhard Werner, M.D., Department of Biomedical Engineering, University of Texas-Austin), and a tall stack of printed articles on quantum logic. Opposite his desk was a wide hanging file drawer, loaded with alphabetically organized articles on cognitive science, fractals and consciousness, and theoretical neuroscience. The letter F alone had subcategories of Fa, Fi, and Fo. Behind him was a row of recently purchased books mixed with books from the library: *The Metaphysics Within Physics. Neural Correlates of Thinking. The End of Time*. From where Gerhard sat, he had a view out his window of the Austin skyline and river below. Near the window hung a framed photograph of a thin-faced Japanese Buddha.

Gerhard was compiling notes for his tenth article in the past five years, this one entitled, “The Dynamics of Neuromodulation” for the journal *Frontiers in Physiology*. Every day he would sit at his desk for hours, hunched in a focused intensity at his computer. Occasionally he would get up to smoke a cigarette outside or make a cup of coffee with cheap grounds from Costco. Gerhard wafted a pleasant smell of coffee, nicotine, and hard cover books.

At 5 pm on this day, Gerhard shut his laptop in need of an afternoon nap on a nearby leather sofa, a habit that had started a few years back in his late 80s. About an
hour later, he rose, his button-down blue shirt and khakis looking as pressed as when he lay down. His slim body had an easy elegance and even after a nap exuded a caffeinated impatience, pulling him back to his desk. But instead, grumbling, clearing his throat, and tamping down the few white strands of hair running across his head, he went downstairs to prepare dinner for his wife of fifty-three years, Marion, who was recovering from knee surgery. Though her pain was subsiding, Gerhard insisted on caring for her still. In a manner both devoted and irritable, he set the table, heated a jar of tomato soup for her, toasted bread, and lay out a spread of cold cuts and brie. “I’m not feeling very well,” he said to Marion while eating an overcooked potato that he boiled for himself. “My stomach is upset.”

Gerhard cleaned the table and packed the dishwasher. By 9 pm, he had taken a bath, removed his teeth into a glass by the bathroom sink, taken out his expensive hearing aid, and crawled into bed. Getting sleepy, he removed his gold-framed trifocals and put down his book, a small yellow softcover by Martin Heidegger in German. At 4 am, while both he and Marion were asleep, Gerhard’s heart seized, the vessels constricted. His heart could not summon another squeeze, could not circulate the blood and much needed oxygen throughout his body. His gasp woke Marion who, in a panicked flurry, called the paramedics. Thirty minutes later at the hospital, Gerhard’s body was chilled down to 36 degrees by a machine called the Arctic Sun, shutting down his bodily systems with the hope that his brain and consciousness would recover.

Gerhard’s brain had always been an unusually active one, driven by an “insatiable curiosity,” as he put it. As a child on his way to school in Vienna’s second district, he
would plead with his father to walk faster, worried they would be late as they stopped to chat with passersby. Gerhard went to Sperl Gymnasium, the “greatest school in the world,” he said wistfully during a recent visit to his old neighborhood. After gymnasium, his plan was to matriculate at the University of Vienna to study his passion, theoretical physics.

As fate would have it, Gerhard’s graduation from gymnasium coincided with the Anschluss, Austria’s union with Germany, in 1938. Hitler required every able-bodied man, aside from Jews who were to be expelled, to join the German Army. Gerhard and his family were not Jewish (Gerhard later converted at Marion’s request) but were deeply opposed to Hitler and concerned about their own survival. After a perilous stint on the front lines in Russia, when Gerhard woke one morning in a pit next to an undetonated grenade, Gerhard’s mother pulled every political string she could to get him to safety. She enrolled him in medical school to become a medic for the German Army. Gerhard was, as always, an excellent student, and he completed his medical school training in record time. Soon after, he deserted the army, at the risk of being hanged in a tree if he were caught. Gerhard and several others survived by hiding in the University of Vienna’s basement and eating the lab animals. I heard Gerhard say a few times in his life, “Whatever doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.”

Our bodies retain the past, no matter how much the mind represses. Gerhard was driven, a survivor who looked ahead, not back. His body was perpetually leaning forward at an angle as he walked, and, I can tell you as his daughter, it was impossible to keep up with him.
Philosophically, Gerhard sided with the Pre-Socratics and with Heidegger, rejecting Cartesian dualism and the split between mind and body. And yet, Gerhard himself was a walking mind. A weekend puppeteer, I once had the idea to depict him as a large brain on skinny toothpick legs.

In a conversation my brother and I recorded on his 90th birthday, Gerhard, angry about being interviewed, shouted in his Viennese accent about the connection between philosophy and the brain. It was impossible for him to sound anything but brilliant, full of dramatic cadences: “The old Greeks called it the ultmai, the big unknown. Before we got detracted by Plato and Aristotle, this was the real thing. You are IN IT. You are not outside of it. You are IN that fucking mess. You are trying to find your place in that mess. The brain is the thing that allows you to make that sense.” The brain, the brain, it was like an esteemed member of our family. Gerhard pulled us towards a life of the mind, away from the plebian body.

Ever since computer prototypes were being developed at MIT in the 1960s, Gerhard was programming them, turning patterns on cards into brain-like logic. By the late 1970s, he was on to cyborgs, part-human-part-computer alliances, and then artificial intelligence, programming computers to think (whatever thinking was) like humans. When I was a teenager, Gerhard asked me to play checkers on a computer and record why I made each move so that a student of his could understand the micro-steps of problem solving.

Gerhard read sci-fi books, Arthur C. Clarke, which Marion also loved, later picking up William Gibson’s Neuromancer and Stanislaw Lem’s Solaris, a chilling depiction of a planet that acted like a brain, desperately seeking to connect with human
visitors. The more psychedelic Philip K. Dick was also popular in our house, blurring the lines between “reality” and the many alternate universes around us. At the age of 75, Gerhard joined Multi User Domains (MUDs), MIT’s virtual role playing platform, a precursor to Second Life. Gerhard took on the identity of Chronos, ancient Greek creator of the cosmos and Father of Time. The Greek god suited him. He was comfortable being larger than life and was, on some level, seeking a way to survive beyond the constraints of time and mortality. Could the computer be a new body, a gateway towards pure consciousness?

Gerhard’s articles, which he would email me from time to time, were indecipherable to a non-specialist. I would try to read them, and I always gave up on the first page, feeling deflated and a little dumb. He wrote in a dense Germanic style (Consciousness was always capitalized) without any compunction to explain things clearly for beginners. For instance, “The Nervous System [is] a complex dynamical system operating in a metastable regime, and capable of evolving to configurations and transitions in phase space with potential relevance for Cognition and Consciousness.”

I did make it through one article from 2011, “Letting the Brain Speak for Itself,” that was initially delivered to a lay audience. Gerhard conveys two main points: First, the language and metaphors, mostly borrowed from computer science, that neuroscientists use to understand the brain limit what we can actually understand. Second, we need a new language to know the brain on its own terms, and that language is called fractals. (In Gerhard’s witty phrasing at the end of this article: “Fractals Spoken Here.”)

Fractals, a term coined in the 1970s by mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, refer to geometric shapes that are “self-similar,” which means small sections of the shape
replicate larger sections. One famous example is the coast of England, where a slice of coast is said to mimic the pattern of the coast as a whole. This self-similarity is also seen in snowflakes, trees, neurons, and rivers. In a poetic leap, we can see our own bodies and lives as fractals of larger patterns and systems. How does this relate to consciousness?

The brain’s regulatory and sensory translation systems – the way we make sense of and interact in the world— are replicated in the still broader systems of identity-creation which, in turn, are connected to social and global “synchronization.” The brain systems, from the most minute to the most generalized, want to become self-similar, as is the tendency across all natural phenomena. We are truly interconnected.

The day of my father’s heart attack, my brother and I flew from Massachusetts to Austin. By that evening, we were sitting together with Marion in the hospital’s ICU unit surrounding Gerhard who was in a forced coma in the chilled room. My father was hooked up to beeping machines recording his breathing and heart rates. A dry erase board declared in big letters, “Dr. Werner is HOH!” to let the nurses know he was Hard of Hearing. I stood by my father’s feet. I chanted a Buddhist mantra to help him feel ease.

The next day, they started the process of defrosting Gerhard from the Arctic Sun to see what damage his brain had sustained from the lack of oxygen. There was a tiny chance he would regain consciousness. As the room temperature warmed and the nurses removed a paralytic drug through his IV, Gerhard’s forehead sparked. Ideas no longer suppressed were flashing across his brow, his eyebrows rising as if delighted by a new insight. A young neurologist explained that these currents might be little seizures. An
MRI would tell us what his brain was doing in the subcortex and the cortex, the seat of consciousness, whatever it was that allowed “Gerhard” as we knew him to emerge.

My father’s wishes had been very clear. No extreme life-saving measures. He probably would have been opposed to the already prolonged efforts. But we needed it for ourselves. By day four, the MRIs gave us the information we needed. We turned off life support, the Rabbi blessing Gerhard as we held hands and surrounded him in the hospital bed. All the beeps and machines were turned off, the tubes removed, the lights dimmed, and the curtain drawn for our privacy. After an hour of tears and goodbyes, Gerhard died gracefully, with two gasps of final breath. His consciousness, his life force, was trailing into new forms. *Daddy, where are you now?*

In Judaism, apparently, our souls don’t enter heaven or hell. We continue to exist in the ripples we have created through relationships and in our work. We exist insofar as we have affected others. My father left articles, words on paper, unfinished relationships with his past and with us. The day after he died I cracked the password to the laptop in his office, finally thinking to type the initials of my mother, brother, and me. I saw his last entry just twelve hours before he lost consciousness. I gathered some of his books and a copy of each of his recent articles.

Gerhard’s words still ripple, often conveying his charming, cranky love. In one of my last email exchanges with him, I asked my father if he had read a book about the philosopher Derek Parfit. He quickly replied,

*I am getting pissed off with these philosophers. A 10 lb heavy book – after some endless pissing around with trivia he concludes that Kant had it right, all along...There is nothing new on the horizon, Nozik writes 5000 pages on ‘justice for the hedgehogs’ – just fiddling around with Rawls, etc. I must say, your Martha Nussbaum stirs up the pot by writing about unconventional subjects! The intellectual scene is pretty drab right now.*
Where are the 50s to 70s? No excitement – I am just an old grouchy! Love Dad

As the Buddhist in my family, I held a 49 day ceremony to help my father release into his next phase. At the end of the ceremony, I planted a sunflower seedling. Three months later, the sunflower was ten feet tall, so tall I had to lean back to get the blossom in my camera for a photo. The sole yellow flower bloomed for a week and then folded over, spilling a few seeds into the ground.