Best American Again!

Congratulations to Cinthia Ritchie. Her contest-winning essay, “Running,” which ran in Sport Literate in 2012, has been anthologized in The Best American Sports Writing 2013. What’s more, Frank Soos got a notable nod for “Another Kind of Loneliness,” which led off our pages two issues back. Ritchie and Soos, both Alaskan writers by coincidence, are our small press heroes holding their own in the Big Leagues.
Rip City:

We hope each issue of *Sport Literate* provides readers with thought-provoking literature on life's leisurely diversions. This year’s offering, however, seems particularly cognizant—if not somewhat bodily obsessed—with questions about why we take on these activities. Hence the title Body and Mind 2013. We don’t know this yesteryear fellow on the cover. But he certainly seems intense and mindful of his own temple. Photo courtesy of ThinkStockPhotos.
BEGIN

In memory of Charlie Lewsader
1946-2013
On Body Experiences and Mindful Expansions

Foreword

William Meiners

Funny how these Sport Literate issues come together. Other than the occasional football, baseball, or swimsuit special collection, we’re not consciously thinking of themes. But within these pages, many of our writers and poets are thinking boldly aloud about bodies and what to make of all this leisure time beneath our feet.

Running enthusiasts push aching legs and thinning frames beyond limits. As does a fighting poet in her contest-winning poem. In the back, a son bonds with his father over Alabama Crimson Tide football. But we begin with a distant-remembering narrator recalling her family affairs at an uncle’s fish fry. Elsewhere, through poetic musings, a young wife revisits her family’s minor league baseball days.

Outdoorsmen, adept in both poetry and prose, reflect on fishing and share campsite tales of visits from undomesticated bears. These aren’t the Bernstein Bears dropping by for lox and bagels. We’ve also got an automotive section, where two poets reflect on muscle cars, horses beneath the hood, and all things cherry bomb.

Though there are fewer literal balls in the air, there is much to ponder about the deeper meaning in diversions. Two essayists, for example, discover a sense of “otherness” through sports. One white kid becomes distinctly aware of his own color (or lack of it) as plays hoops on a predominately black basketball court. A young woman considers her role as a trespasser in the ironically machismo world of Fantasy Football.

As you might suspect in a journal of this name, there are allusions to literary lions like John Cheever, William Faulkner, and Henry David Thoreau. Three contributors conjure up those writers to make some artistic sense of their own motivations. Dave Essinger, an ultramarathon runner and a teacher of Cheever, won our essay contest for his efforts. Joey Franklin, a former scoutmaster, looks for something of Thoreau, even Norman Rockwell, as he leads two reluctant scouts up a Utah mountain. It’s both funny and beautifully written.

As always, I hope you’ll spend some time with the works to follow. It seems a bit like old times at Sport Literate. I watch sports, all the time. It’s the reality television of my world and I will schedule my weekends and evenings around a collection of young men I’ll never meet pitted against each other in games with bouncing balls. And I know that sounds silly, too. I wonder how much of a near half century I’ve passed simply bearing witness to games.

I like a good story, too. They didn’t have ADD when I was a kid, but I’m as an impatient reader as you’ll find. Another shameful admission by a literary magazine editor? But the simple mission of Sport Literate has always been to publish the true stories and close-to-the-bone poetry that we like and simply cannot shake. Dig into the rest of the 108 pages and I think you’ll be struck by its staying power.

It’s been almost a decade since I stood on Notre Dame sidelines (envious of the longer lenses beside me) to cover football games. I’m more fan than a journalist, and certainly more fan than photographer, but I did blog about the Irish on our website. Honestly—and this may sound odd coming from a guy who founded a sports journal—I don’t really like reading and writing about “sports.” Fortunately, I don’t think anyone in this edition is focusing on just a game. I watch sports, all the time. It’s the reality television of my world and I will schedule my weekends and evenings around a collection of young men I’ll never meet pitted against each other in games with bouncing balls. And I know that sounds silly, too. I wonder how much of a near half century I’ve passed simply bearing witness to games.

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Special thanks to Rus Bradburd, our guest essay judge, and all the folks (listed on page 4) who breathe life into this literary endeavor. They spend a lot of time reading and designing for free and the magazine is richer for it. Artistically speaking that is; SL makes no bank.

I constantly think about hanging this thing up, becoming a grownup, or maybe putting this effort into backyard landscaping. But then I wouldn’t be one of the first people to read and publish an essay about the hallucinating effects of an ultramarathon. Or ponder the poetic significance of an empty baseball diamond in winter.

You can build the bank a bit through a subscription or donation. Come on, 20 bucks. A c-note if you’re feeling friendly. I’ll keep SL going as long as we keep getting good work and I’m not putting my family in the poor house. The son of a financial planner (that’s him pictured back in the day, when he escaped to Tahiti to paint the natives), I missed that gene. But I did inherit his love of sports. Maybe even an ear for a good story. And so it seems, after all these years, that’s why I’m here.
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Writers, we welcome poetry and all types of creative nonfiction (personal essays, literary journalism, travel pieces, etc.) that fall within our broad definition of sport. Query, too, with interview and photo essay ideas. Only submissions with a self-addressed, stamped envelope will be returned. Read this issue, and any back issues if you like (available online), and send something good our way.

Support

Thanks to everyone who has supported Sport Literate over the years. Published under the umbrella of Pint-Size Publications, an Illinois nonprofit, Sport Literate stays in print because of grants from the Illinois Arts Council, along with subscribers and supporters like you. And we are a true nonprofit, this year back in good graces with the IRS. Please consider joining our team with a tax-deductible donation.

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Note: As this Volume 8 ends, we’re going to clear the decks before the start of Volume 9.

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Fish Fry at Uncle John’s
Who’s on First
Kate Meadows

We bump into the dirt driveway, parking next to Uncle John’s 1990 Ford Ranger, the little purple truck he uses for the occasional trips into town. Spud the cow dog bounds up to greet us. He’d leap through the truck if he could. A blazing orange chewed-up Frisbee rests forgotten in the dry yard. The grimy grey tool shed yawns into the afternoon sun, adorned with rusty yellow-and-brown Wyoming license plates.

As I step out of the backseat, I tuck my fists into the sleeves of Dad’s red plaid flannel shirt, the one I snatched from his closet this morning. I will not touch the overexcited dog and its disgusting, uncontrolled slobber. I follow Dad up old planks of wood over dried mud to the battered screen door. The screen has been ripped out, creating a large hole. Dad beats on the wooden door frame. “Come in!” the old man hollers, almost instantly, as if he’s been waiting for us all day.

I take one final blessed breath of fresh air.

It’s a Sunday in late August, and we’ve come to this boxy cabin nestled at the base of the Wyoming Mountain Range 11 miles west of Pinedale for the annual Neely family fish fry. The fish fry is a tradition that goes back 40 years or more, when the entire Neely clan ventured down western Wyoming’s old rutted two-tracks for days of camping and cooking Dutch-oven meals. The women brought in potatoes and onions and biscuits, and the men spent scorching afternoons on Horse Creek catching trout, which the whole family devoured in the evenings around crackling campfires.

The tradition lasted until people started building dirt roads in that part of the country. The new roads made the lakes and streams more accessible to out-of-towners, and the fish population dwindled. The gatherings were moved to Grandma’s and Grandpa’s place on the hill overlooking town, and the fishermen started frequenting an old whitefish hole Grandpa knew of out behind the airport. Then Grandma started threatening divorce, claiming that after 45 years of marriage she’d had enough of Grandpa’s selfish and reckless ways. With the relationship visibly rocky up on the hill, Uncle John volunteered to host the event at his place. He’s an old bachelor who’s lived in the mountains his whole life. Aside from Thanksgiving and Christmas, when he still makes the trip to town for a big meal and nap at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s, the fish fry is his one social event of the year. This year, he has enlisted the help of his nephew, Jimmy Carl, and a few friends like Red and Louie and Bobby to catch enough trout to feed 40 people. They’ve fished across the country all summer to save up enough for the event, keeping the fish on ice until the big day.

Uncle John sits in his pea green La-Z-Boy, television turned up too loud, playing with something made of nails.

“How’s Katie?” he asks, emitting an old growl of spit and tobacco.

I purse my lips together and smile, wondering why the old-timers in Sublette County always address me in the third person. Katie, I want to say, is not excited to be here. Katie knows the fish fry is an exciting reunion for the old-timers, but for a teenager? C’mom. Katie is only here because her dad asked her to come.

But I don’t say those things. I just nod, keep my mouth shut tight, and inhale short, shallow breaths. Even with the crisp mountain breeze flapping through the hole in the screen door, the cabin’s stench of salty meat and stale spices is overpowering. At least we’ll be spending most of the afternoon outside.

It’s not that I don’t like Uncle John. It’s just that I don’t know what to do with myself here, out in the middle of nowhere with an odd, uncivilized man who is old enough to have lived through the Depression. Soon Uncle John’s driveway will be crowded with dented pickups and friends and neighbors who have chiseled out their lives on the dry Sublette County soil, people who wouldn’t trade a back-breaking Wyoming lifestyle of raising cattle and killing mountain lions for anything. And all I can think about is how that lifestyle is not for me, despite generations of my family growing up in this very region. Unlike the rest of my family, I haven’t done a tough thing in my life. If I were completely honest, against the grit and hard work of these true Wyoming folk, I feel weak and uninteresting.

Uncle John turns down the TV. He’s wearing a pale t-shirt stained with what looks to be a few dribbles of Copenhagen and big, faded black jeans held up by thick suspenders. His belly tumbles over the top of his pants. A handful of Louis L’Amour paperbacks are haphazardly stacked on a table next to him, their brittle pages yellowed with age, and dirty laundry spills out from behind the half-closed door of his bedroom. A small gesture of hospitality. This is the place his friends affectionately call “The Boar’s Nest.” A hand-carved sign bearing the name is tacked to the front of the cabin.

The man has never raised a family of his own. He was in love once, his friends all know, way back in the ‘40s. But he got dumped. He has never shown
children in another woman since. Yet on this one day in August, he somehow fits into everyone else’s family.

John is as lazy as they get. I hear my Grandma Lucy’s creaking voice faint in my memory. It was an off-handed remark she made to my dad over tea break one afternoon, when he and I had come over to help her plant some trees in the back yard. But he does good, making his own way. He’s never owed anybody nothing.

She rarely has a good thing to say about anybody. But in those words I saw a spark of kindness, as if she actually saw her older brother-in-law as something of a jewel.

Uncle John reaches for an odd-looking contraption, an old jelly jar with what looks to be bits of wood and wire inside.

“Got a new one for you to try,” he says, handing the thing to my dad. “I put this one together last week. I figured one out sorta like it and thought I could make somethin’ similar.”

The cabin is littered with these homemade puzzles, created out of gadgets from hardware stores and forgotten corners of the tool shed. Uncle John makes most of them himself, imitating contraptions he sees in catalogues or in the homes of old ranching friends. When he isn’t whistling a miniature goat or watching The Weather Channel, he’s putting together the latest of these stumpers. I marvel at his patience, thinking of the last thing I tried to put together, my stereo. I couldn’t figure out which colored wire to plug into which hole, and, afraid I’d electrocute myself, hollered for Dad’s help.

Dad hands the contraption back to Uncle John, barely taking time to look at it, and puts his hand on my shoulder. “We better go start unloading that fish,” he says. He gives me a reassuring pat, and I follow him out the battered screen door, my lips still stuck tight together.

Outside in the bright sunlight, Spud the cow dog is waiting in fierce anticipation with his mangled Frisbee. I won’t touch that thing with a 10-foot pole. I pick up a rock instead, and make a throwing motion. The dog bounds away, tearing through the sagebrush like a hungry, wild fox. I’m still holding the rock when he stops, about 10 yards away, and peers into the sky.

“Gotcha,” I say, under my breath.

Uncle John waddles out to the front stoop and pulls up his rainbow-colored suspenders in one big heave.

“Gary’s bringing Faye up from Denver,” he says, as Dad and I walk away from him toward the truck. Aunt Faye is Uncle John’s favorite sister. Of his nine siblings, only two still survive, Aunt Faye and my Grandpa Bucky, who is the youngest.
Laramie. He always knew he wanted to stay in the mountains, to be connected to the wilderness and the wildlife that marked dark paths among the rugged country. Wild life.

I remind myself why I am here: Dad has asked me to come, to help him fry fish, since Mom won’t make it to the event this year. She is putting up new wallpaper in the bathroom, and it has to get done this weekend. I wonder how much of her urgency to finish the project is an excuse to avoid her crazy in-laws. She would never admit to it, but coming from a wholesome Lutheran family in Minnesota, I think she sometimes needs a break from Dad’s noisy and unreligious family. I don’t blame her. Part of me wishes I could help her out today instead, doing the more domestic chores instead of trying to fit into this raucous family gathering.

But I want to help my dad, too. I am starting to see that his undying attempts to be a part of my teenage life—shooting hoops in the driveway with me nightly when I wanted to be a WNBA star, listening patiently to my squeaky flute practices, saying “yes” to a Scrabble game no matter what he was in the middle of—are his way of giving me something he never had, a parent who would drop anything to spend time with him. I want to somehow return that favor, give him something he craves. Someday I will leave this place and seek out a new life away from the foul-mouthed ranchers and gristy old cowboys. Unlike my dad, I don’t dream of staying here, although considering a life apart from these towering all-encompassing mountains, with their deep blue and snow-white peaks that stretch like giants into the sky, seems like something of a betrayal. For now, I say to myself with a deep breath, I am here. For my dad.

Uncle John has set up a folding table outside the tool shed, and three massive cast iron pots are hanging from iron tripods inside the shed. This is where we’ll cook the fish, tossing them into the pots according to how we season them: one pot for lemon pepper, one pot for BOOTSIE’S Cajun, and one pot for plain. That’s how Mom would eat her fish if she were here, bland with no seasoning. In fact, I think she’s the whole reason why Dad doesn’t season all of the fish in the cooler. Surely the rough-edged cowboys and ranch hands who wear tired Wranglers and shit-clad cowboy boots will take their fish with some spice. I beg my mom to cut off when I was in first grade. “Look at those pretty little curls. Aren’t ‘dey sweet!”

Soon friends and neighboring ranchers start pulling onto the property. As they saunter over to the tool shed, the folding table outside fills up with a grand potluck: fried potatoes, baked beans, Jell-O, rolls bought from Faler’s General Store, gooey chocolate cake. Conversations percolate between skinny housewives and hard-bitten newspaper writers, ranchers and waitresses. They talk about the haying season and catch up on each other’s kids. Many of those kids are my classmates, and they won’t come, because they’ll have better things to do. Come Monday morning, a good bunch of them will know I was here, with the old-timers. I tell myself I don’t care.

My job mixing the cornmeal and spices in paper bags doesn’t last long, and soon I am standing awkwardly, playing with my hands, watching my dad do one of the things he does best. He batters pieces of trout with egg, then rolls them in the seasoning mix, before placing them into hot Dutch ovens full of boiling grease. It takes just minutes for the fish to fry, and soon Dad is slapping down plates of fish on the table.

“This one is spicy,” he shouts out, to no one in particular. “Right, Katie?”

I nod and drum up a big smile for him.

I decide I will eat as quickly as possible and then disappear into the willows behind Uncle John’s cabin, to avoid the banter of the old folks. I’ve done my duty for my dad, and he’s going to want to catch up with all of the familiar faces, anyway.

Just as I am about to get in line at the food table, Aunt Faye arrives. Dad, who I’ve been lamely standing next to for the past 20 minutes, gives me a knowing look.

“Look who’s here,” he says. “You’d better go say hi.”

A special lawn chair has been set up just for my old aunt in the middle of the shed, and her son, Gary, is leading her to it. She walks slowly, in small, tentative steps. Her dark glasses make me think she’s gone blind.

“Hi,” I say, holding out my hand as I reach her.

“Hi, honey!” she coos, fingerling a strand of my blonde hair—the same hair I begged my mom to cut off when I was in first grade. “Look at those pretty little curls. Aren’t ‘dey sweet!”

Her voice drips with the too-sweet sap of baby talk. She always talks to my hair like this. She loves the natural curls. I hate them. They’re unruly and no matter what I do with a curling iron or blow dryer, I cannot control them.

We hug, and she kisses me on the lips. She’s old and it’s weird, but I shake it off. This is the way she always greets me, and I haven’t died from it yet.

“How are you?” I ask. I clutch her cold, knobby hands, a gesture that I quickly decide is too grown-up. But I don’t know what else to do with my hands, so I keep holding on to hers.
“Oh, I’m fine, just fine,” she says, the slightest hint of a southern drawl twanging the long “I” sound. She grew up in Oklahoma, picking cotton on her family’s farm. So did Uncle John. Grandpa Bucky, the baby of the family, was too young. Even now, the family discord shows through: Aunt Faye and Uncle John are best of friends; Grandpa is the black sheep, still just the foolish, too-spontaneous baby brother.

Aunt Faye asks me to go to Gary’s car and bring her back her knit satchel. In it, she has four or five $2 bills, folded origami-style to resemble frogs. She knows I love frogs.

“Ain’t they the cutest little t’ings?” she says. Her gold teeth flash in the sun.

“Thank you,” I say, studying them. I know she probably went through painstaking hours to make these things, but what am I going to do with them? I imagine her in her boxy little home in the Denver suburbs, curtains drawn, listening to old Buck Owens records at 4 a.m. while she carefully creases $2 bills. We know her routine, having stayed the night at her house a few times: up at 3:30, breakfast by 5, and down for the night by 7 p.m. at the latest. The trip to Pinedale is her one big journey of the year.

Soon my great aunt is surrounded by old friends who want to know how she fared on the drive up and what’s new in Denver. The thought of my great aunt living in a city still baffles me. This is the same aunt who grew up in rural Oklahoma in the ’30s fashioning “pickle gitters” and bag swings–crude porch swings made from rope and burlap sacks. She moved with her family to Sublette County as a teenager and spent half her life breaking horses and playing dirty tricks on her brothers. She, like so many of these old-timers, has lived the tough life: hard honest work, cold nights in ramshackle cabins, enduring long and isolated winters in these unrelenting mountains. She and her brothers drove cattle between ranches, brought home skunks in shoeboxes and doctored sick birds with sticks.

I weasel my way to the long folding table, keeping my head down. I quickly fill a paper plate with food and then head back toward Dad, my refuge in the shed. I am starving. But I am also longing to escape this atmosphere, for just a little while. I can’t stop thinking about Aunt Faye and how my life measures up to hers. I’ve been on a horse a few times, simply out of peer pressure, but not once have I been brave enough to kick the flanks into anything more than a lope. I have no brothers to play dirty tricks on—and even if I did, I wouldn’t know how to trick them. I sleep with an electric blanket.

I swallow the last bite and pitch my grease-stained paper plate into the big aluminum trash can.

“I’ll be back,” I holler to Dad.

He gives me a nod and a quick smile. It is almost sympathetic, I think.
I duck out across the barbed wire fence behind Uncle John’s house. The air smells of fresh bark, muddy water and ranch cows. I watch blue butterflies and remember how Aunt Faye once took me on a safari out here, with an enormous bug-catching net. We swooped the air for butterflies all afternoon.

The Green River flows gently beneath steep dirt hills, where chives and rose bushes grow along the river bank. This is where Dad taught me a trick with a horse fly. Once, after I felt the sharp sting of a horse fly bite on this same river, Dad caught one of the flying pests and held it by its vibrating wing. He picked a long blade of brown grass and stuck it up the fly’s rear end.

“You have to stick it in just right,” Dad would say. “If you stab it in the wrong, you’ll kill it.”

I believed him.

With that, he’d bite the blade of grass in half, leaving a few inches stick-ingout of the fly’s rear. Then, he let the fly go, laughing as it bumbled in the air, clumsily trying to forge a path through the breeze like a drunk stumbling out of a bar.

The quiet back behind the cabin is eerie. I try not to think about the wild things that lurk out here. I am so used to being protected, completely safe, that it’s almost annoying. Next to the roughed-up locals, I feel like a pathetic fairytale princess. For just a minute, I want to believe I can stand up to this wilderness.

At the river’s edge, I take off my shoes. Maybe I’ll go for a swim. The freezing bite of a mountain river might be just the jolt I need to feel like some-one interesting.

I shove my feet into the water. The cold numbs my toes almost instantly. I try to stay that way, feet under water. But the icy ache is too much. I pull them back out and shiver.

Loneliness weighs heavily on me. I wonder with a pang how Uncle John wards off the lonesomeness that must threaten to creep into every still afternoon he spends up here. Once, when he was working as a ranch hand in this part of the country, he tried to winter at his uncle’s cabin further up in the Wyoming Range. The isolation, Dad said, was too much for him and he literally went stir crazy, not thinking clearly and forgetting how to do mundane tasks like fry bacon and put milk in the fridge. He wound up in a mental institution in Salt Lake City for a few days. He’s never talked about it since.

Is that what it means to be tough, enduring until you drive yourself out of your mind? Hardening yourself like an impassive stone against the whippings life throws at you?

Suddenly, I find myself longing to hear those old voices again. I want to be there, back with Dad, who will soon return to the cabin to start scrubbing out the Dutch ovens by hand. I want to listen to Uncle John’s raggy breaths, and sit on his ancient yellow couch.

I bound back through the tangle of willows, praying I don’t spook a moose. I crawl under the barbed wire fence and burst into the cabin just as Uncle John, content in his chair, stretches behind him for his long-reach grab-ber tool. He jury rigged the thing out of steel so he could fetch out-of-reach items without getting up.

“Oh, Spud,” he says, taking a mighty breath.

He casts the tool onto the floor and, inch-by-inch, brings a raunchy green tennis ball to his feet. Spud is up on all fours now, waiting.

“Here, Katie,” he says. “Why don’t you throw it outside for him?”

I put my full hand on the slobbery thing and throw the ball as hard as I can. Uncle John laughs jovially as his cow dog bounds away again. And suddenly I am not thinking about the slimy residue the ball has left on the palm of my hand. Instead, I am thinking about how good the throw feels on my arm, hard and strong and sure.

Kate Meadows is a creative nonfiction writer and author specializing in journalism and personal essays. She has published work in Writer’s Digest and Chicken Soup for the Soul, as well as Kansas City Parent, American Snowmobiler, and numerous trade and regional publications. The daughter of a small-town judge and a Polaris snowmobile and ATV dealer, she grew up in the mountains and loved to drag race snowmobiles. Her book, Tough Love: A Wyoming Childhood, explores her years as an only child growing up among the grisly and sometimes uncivilized characters who call western Wyoming home. Kate lives in Louisburg, Kansas, with her husband and two sons. For more, visit www.katemeadows.com.
I didn’t become white until sixth grade when suddenly everyone else on the basketball court was black. It happened like that. My elementary school had been almost entirely white, but my middle school—the basketball court anyway—was a realization of heterogeneous aspirations, a proud cross-section of early 1990s multiculturalism, insofar as such a thing was possible in predominantly white Portland.

At least that’s how I remember it. Really, perception of diversity in those days was probably a function of how good a person was at basketball. To the mediocre or below-average player, a look around would have revealed a mostly white game being played in a majority white school. But if you were a good player playing in the school’s most competitive games—and I was—you played in games that were at least half, and sometimes all, black. Except, if you were white, for you.

It doesn’t take long playing in such games to learn that being among the racial minority means to be made acutely aware of what one’s race is. The forces of essentialization manifest as swiftly as a good crossover; you know it’s happened to you only after the fact, as you stand there exposed. But whereas the crossover leads to two points and some hectoring that will be erased from memory by the next play, awareness of essentialism is interminable. When it was revealed to me that I was slow, unathletic, and boring, the discovery was twofold: first, the “facts” themselves; second, their necessity. (Of course, I could always hang my hat on those stalwart virtues of white basketball: having “good fundamentals” and “playing the right way.”) That this qualifies as discovery is illustrative of the kind of naiveté produced in homogeneity.

I watched plenty of NBA and was exposed to an average amount of mainstream media and cultural opinion. Couple this with the fact that I was not stupid and I knew long before middle school that white people were slow, unathletic, and boring. What I did not understand, except notionally, is that I was white. I knew it, but I didn’t know it. Had never been made to feel deep down anything but normal. My whiteness was an abstraction, an idea irrelevant to my daily life. And white basketball players, in my daily life, lived on TV only, in the black world of the NBA. The basketball players I knew weren’t white, they were just boys like me: Mike, Shaun, Tim, and so on—names not races. But middle school concretized my whiteness. My skin color was never irrelevant there. I couldn’t play basketball there without being reminded that not only did white players not live only on TV, they were in my midst, and in fact I was one. This was quite a thing to discover with no warning.

***

One thing to appreciate about this subject is exactly how important basketball was to me in those days. Had it been a passing hobby, as it was for some of my friends, a fun way to pass the lunch period, maybe it wouldn’t have made such an impact on my identity. But for me then nothing mattered more than basketball. I played for an hour, sometimes two hours, in the gym before school, again in the gym at lunch, and after school either on the playground or at home in my backyard. I dragged friends out of bed on the weekends. I made them play long past their interest waned. And when I could not find anyone to play with I would shoot alone until my hands were raw, the skin on my fingertips actually split open and pulling apart from itself.
Watching a good NBA game was the only thing that could entice me from playing. All of my favorite players—Magic Johnson, Isiah Thomas, Tim Hardaway, Anfernee Hardaway, Hakeem Olajuwon, all of the Blazers’ starters plus Cliff Robinson—were black. And this was no accident. The world I loved was a black world and to be white was to be different, to be inadequate. I recognized two categories in the NBA: white and normal. It was the same outside the NBA, except the categories were different: white and not-normal. And before sixth grade nothing in my life was like the NBA—but middle school scrambled all this. The day alternated back and forth between basketball and class, as I alternated from minority to not, accompanying social dynamics fluctuating wildly.

But the fissure was not absolute. Some rules of the classroom applied on the court; most significantly, white kids were to pretend to be colorblind. No one ever told us to adopt this front, but we absorbed it and its gravity. There was no chance we were going to even mention the color black, let alone in reference to a person, but the black kids were plenty ready to say “white” and hold a metaphorical mirror or a literal finger up to our faces.

It’s probably natural that I resented white NBA players during these years, Larry Bird foremost. Their existence racialized me on a daily basis, and the consequent pressure to play to stereotype was significant, and for the most part I conformed, so much so that I would play aggressively in games with white players and become a meek jump shooter in games with black players, who I knew I couldn’t compete with athletically. When occasionally I would summon the courage to play against stereotype and deploy a crossover dribble or throw an around-the-back pass I would take great pride in the illicit-seeming attention I received. If being called “Larry Bird” sounded to me like only half a compliment, I interpreted “wigger” as only half insult. Both terms constituted subversive reminders to remember my place, even as I occasionally transgressed it. That role, to wit: shoot open three-pointers and otherwise stay out of the way. But to be included in any way—even on the receiving end of a pseudo-insult—was to be in some respect respected. Hearing I was “alright... for a white boy” was to maybe not really be white after all. Or so I hoped.

The development of my white racial identity, I’ve learned, follows a common path.

“White people,” writes Janet E. Helms in A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person, “are raised to be confused about their own color. While they are taught to be aware of other people’s color, polite White persons do not mention color in public—especially their own.” I was embarrassed by my race and wished to pretend I didn’t have one. This strikes me now less as a unique fact about my adolescence and more as an embodiment of an attitude that haunts our culture.

To be white was to aspire to a false neutrality, to confuse ubiquity and dominance for a kind of objectivity or normalcy. But on the basketball court I couldn’t get away with that kind of passive (default) totalization; basketball forced me to understand whiteness as a racial identity.

And not only was I white, but the black players were unapologetically black, meaning they didn’t try to suppress their race but flaunted it. They sagged their pants, spoke in slang, referenced hip-hop—things by the unspoken code we were allowed to imitate only from a distance: sagging our pants only so far, using their slang only moderately, etc. The most dramatic—and, to be honest, most terrifying—demonstration of blackness, however, came in the form of frequent declarations of “nigga,” which functioned on too many levels to parse here but is germane to this reflection as the gesture most effective in making me long for racelessness (which was probably one of its functions). According to Helms, “White people have difficulty accepting that they have a race and therefore are threatened by groups who have no such difficulties.” That’s got to be the truest sentence I’ve ever read about my central experience of being in middle school. Ignorance was blissfully less confusing, and confusion was so often painful.

Following Helms’s model, I was undergoing Disintegration, which is “characterized by conscious acknowledgment of one’s own Whiteness and recognition that being White has definite social implications.” Such social implications, once recognized, were impossible to ignore. I came to see the classroom approximately as an inverse of the court. That is, basketball allowed me to imagine what the classroom might feel like from the side of the black minority. So even as my race evaporated into the default cultural hegemony, my preoccupation with it lingered. I could never not be white again.

Back before I was white, when black signified a hypothetical state of basketball predisposition, I had of course wanted to be black. I’d wanted to have a race. But since starting to accept the shameful (it felt) truth that my whiteness was a race, an insight only made possible through regular interaction with non-whites, I began to wonder what it was that distinguished us. We were treated differently, and it followed that we were different, and that those differences arose from the body.

I was curious about such differences. What does a cut look like on black skin? Can you see the blood? And band-aids must look strange. Do bruises show? What about a black eye? The curiosity went both ways. Speaking of my
own personal skin, it tends toward the redder end of white. When I do anything that requires effort my face turns red, and when I really exert myself, as in a sufficiently competitive game, it crosses fully over into purple. (What’s the black equivalent of this?) One day during a middle school game, an opposing player going after a steal slapped me hard across the forearm. Shortly after, an almost-glowing white imprint of his hand emerged from the reddish-pink of my skin. Fairly shocked by this image, the same player stopped the game, pointed at me, and shouted, “Yo, white boy got funky skin.” It was true. Not that I cared to be reminded.

The happyish ending to this period is that as we progressed through middle school race became increasingly irrelevant to how we interacted on the basketball court and off. As we accumulated enough experience, we started to assess players according to their individual strengths and weaknesses rather than according to what we thought we could tell about someone before the games even started. By eighth grade not only were there Tim and Mike, Shaun and Scott, but there were Kenneth and Jermaine, TJ and Brison. Just a group of adolescent boys with their own names and a basketball. But the real lesson of that first year wasn’t that there we were people under our races (though we were); the lesson that stuck was that even if we were people under our races, we never took our races off. Not in basketball, not in the classroom, not in life. I was white and therefore relatively powerful and privileged enough to not be constantly racialized (just on the basketball court)—but that fact itself was the product of race, a race, mine: whiteness—in all its implications.

Now for the fuller and more honest postscript to this period. Since high school, when basketball lost its significance for me, and continuing on through the rest of my American life, not once have I had to confront my race except on my terms, when I felt like it. And as this feels to me like a great misfortune, I am ever grateful for a time 20 years ago when my relationship to hierarchies of power was inverted for a few hours every day and on the court I sometimes felt victimized and intimidated and belittled. Without having been made to understand what it feels like to be a lesser human being I would have been one.

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Winning Like a Girl

Katie Cortese

On a Friday in the heated middle of last year’s Fantasy Football season, my husband read me a text from his longtime best friend. The gist: “If Katie wins this week, I will throw an epic fit.” Because I’m a girl, see. And boys don’t lose to girls where football is concerned, in actual or virtual realms.

Listening to the message, I knew three things for sure: (1) Despite impending natural disasters (i.e. the fringe of Hurricane Sandy, currently dousing my parents’ house in Massachusetts), injured running backs (there’s nothing a little ankle tape can’t fix, right?) and all the obvious pitfalls of possessing an x chromosome (if only I could stop squealing over Lance Moore’s spandex-covered butt!)—I would win; (2) The texter would blame his loss on bad luck, Mars in retrograde, or anything besides the fact that I had compared injury reports on RotoWorld to Michael Fabiano’s Start ‘Em/Sit ‘Em recommendations and carefully considered the week’s matchups, and; (3) My win would do nothing to change his notion that my team was inherently inferior to his, despite his losing record.

Considering that all of the above came true, what I can’t figure out is why the texter’s assumptions—and his condescension—still bothers me now, after the season has been over for months. And it does bother me. Like, a lot. I know it probably shouldn’t. I won the game in question, after all, and while I missed the playoffs by a handful of points, I know it wasn’t because I pee sitting down. Shouldn’t winning have been its own revenge?

First the facts: I knew I would win because Drew Brees was my quarterback, and Percy Harvin my star wide receiver. I knew I’d win because I believed Wes Welker would remain a key component of the Pats’ offense, despite Belichick’s recent (over)reliance on his two burly tight ends, Gronk and Hernandez. I knew I would win because that week my team was stronger than the texter’s team—let’s call him Spot, for confidentiality. And because I—though the only female team owner in the history of the National Tecate League—am just as capable of researching players, drafting well and making last minute, gut-shot decisions as the men whose teams I battled last season, despite my lack of a penis.

But even I know that I won that week in part because Lady Luck abandoned the texter’s side to stand by me, seasoning a simmering pot I’d already stocked with tasty ingredients. No matter the science behind one’s roster selection, or how painstakingly one studies the week’s matchups, or how reliable a player has proven himself over the first half of the season, or how many foolproof wikis crop up to guide owners to a win, Fantasy Football is like a low-stakes stock market. There’s probably a *Moneyball*-type formula that would produce the perfect team—barring natural disasters, freak injuries, and every other bump in the road—but a payout of $250 hasn’t motivated anyone I know to figure it out. That money would be useful to a grad student/adjunct household such as ours, but with as much enjoyment as I get out of playing, I want FF to be less like work than my actual job.

So, if eight months later I can admit that win was due, in some part at least, to luck, then why should I care about Spot singling out that loss as more catastrophic than the four he’d previously suffered against male buddies? If Brees hadn’t thrown a garbage touchdown to Jimmy Graham in the dwindling minutes of an unwinnable game, after all, I’d have faced a long climb back to playoff contention. But then, I’m the only player Spot has ever bothered to text my husband about regarding his fear of a loss. The four games his team failed to win before me were hard-fought battles against lifelong scholars of the game, whereas his loss to me was just embarrassing. Not just because I’m a newcomer to the league; simply because his logical mind was supposed to trump my emotional sensitivity; his brute strength my general fragility; his aggressive yang my yielding yin.

And yet, if I asked him point-blank to explain the implications of that text, I’m sure he would hotly deny any sexism. Conscious or accidental. Spot is an educated guy, progressive, liberal. He was a vocal major before switching to writing in college, not your average meathead (if such a thing exists). And I even *like* Spot. He’s a funny guy. Held my husband’s bachelor party, abided by Robby’s insistence on no strippers and invited the bachelorettes over when we tired of clubbing. He’s no monster of the dark ages from which certain Republican politicians seem to have hailed.

And yet: that text. That attitude belying adherence to some “natural” order in which men fight and women submit. Men hunt and women gather. Men yell and women whisper.

“I won the game in question, after all, and while I missed the playoffs by a handful of points, I know it wasn’t because I pee sitting down.”
On some level, what interests me more than my inevitable win over Spot, and the offense I took to a comment he probably thought would never reach my ears, is the ferocious drive that’s overtaken me—the drive to win, yes, but also the drive to demonstrate my competency in an arena to which I freely admit I’m a Jody-come-lately. I grew up a baseball fan and still burn with pride every time I remember pointing out a Red Sox triple play to my grandfather, whose eyes were going bad, and who had to wait for the replay before he could exclaim with joy that I called the game better than the announcers at only eight years old. Wasn’t I some kind of genius?

Nonno’s joy aside, I’m no kind of genius, but especially concerning football, a sport in which my education began during the courtship period during which my now-husband manfully overcame his aversion for the Patriots (he’s an Eagles fan, and anyone who knows their NFL history will remember that team’s brutal loss in Superbowl XXXIX when the Pats became a dynasty) in order to initiate me into what is essentially his religion.

It took a while to warm to it, but learning the intricacies of the game of football—both in its current, safety-conscious incarnation, and by soaking up its storied past—has become a true passion. I like thinking about its social implications (gladiators, catharsis) in the same way I like thinking about the subtle social messages embedded in zombie movies (fear of disease and what comes after death), which is not distinct from the dominant interest in my life, the reading, writing, interpreting and championing of literature. Every football game has a narrative that is all the more exciting for the choose-your-own-adventure quality of the coaches and players living it. It’s unscripted and packed with real danger; the ultimate reality television experience. The meticulous record-keeping of its high priests and priestesses (yes, a few women have finally penetrated that inner sanctum) belies a respect for history bordering on obsession. In a world where legislators seek to diminish the role of sociology, history, English and other humanities subjects on college campuses, the NFL’s emphasis on comparing stars of the past to the present’s rising talent is nothing less than Homeric tribute, and—dare I say it—heroic.

Still, I know I should be cautious with my affections. It’s no secret the NFL is trying hard to woo the ladies. To them, “female fans” are synonymous with “untapped market” right along with the millions of consumers in foreign countries where soccer holds captive the popular imagination. It’s not for convenience or a scheduling conflict that the Rams held “home field advantage” against the Patriots in London last season, after all. That the NFL has committed to promote Breast Cancer awareness is a good thing, but not a fully altruistic one. The pink hats and wrist-warmers and cleats and towels are bright enough to catch the eye of both sexes in a crowded sports bar. And if we don’t want to bid on the once-worn pink duds (proceeds benefiting the American Cancer Society’s Community Health Advocates National Grants for Empowerment program, or CHANGE), another tab on the same website has slim-fitting, contoured, adjusted-for-boobs jerseys for sale at only $94.99, designer leather purses emblazoned with our team’s name and colors (a steal at $795.00), as well as an array of cheese plates and chip bowls to help us domestic cheerleaders throw the most team-spirited “homegate” party ever.

I should be insulted by that pandering (okay, the cheese plates get to me). But I’m in too deep to quit. And while I really am grateful to Spot for being a loyal friend to my husband—it hasn’t escaped my notice that his team slogan is: “F@#K you, pussy!” It’s probably a reference from a news story I missed in the off season, or a comment on Robert Kraft (the owner of the Patriots, a division rival of Spot’s favorite team, the Miami Dolphins) whose picture sits next to the slogan, or an inside joke with the other 10 guys in the league so ancient and codified that it’s not worth getting upset over. But it’s also a challenge, and I took it personally.

Maybe then, embracing Fantasy Football is just an extension of the same hunger that pushes me to learn, write and do things that force me from my comfort zone, no different from the yoga balance postures I attempt despite the likelihood that my body will not comply. I’m not a natural athlete and the only place I’ve been able to maintain a handstand is the ball in my house where I can walk up one wall to prop myself against its opposite. It’s cheating, I guess, but I think of it as training my shoulders to support my weight, and as a way of acclimating to the strange sensation of hovering upside-down above hard ground. One day, I will join the men and women in my classes who kick up easily against the wall or freestyle in space, biceps taut and quivering. I’ll have to get over my fear of success first, though. What happens if I get up and can’t keep myself from crashing back down? Worse, what happens when I achieve the posture and must set a new, terrifying goal before which I’ll feel incompetent all over again?

“Maybe embracing Fantasy Football is just an extension of the same hunger that pushes me to learn, write and do things that force me from my comfort zone.”
Next season, I’m no one’s favorite to win it all. I spent most of last season in dead center—sixth place (though second in points)—and the win against Spot that I thought of as pivotal didn’t even bump me up one spot in the rankings. I’m okay with all of that. Next season will bring a slate of new ball games to slug out, and in Fantasy, as in life, I’m an incurable optimist. When the season starts up again, I’m planning to keep my team in contention however I can—monitoring players’ health stats, working the waiver wire, proposing trades, lurking the blogs, watching games and learning all the while.

That Sunday in October, I wanted my win to show Spot that gender, at least as far as Fantasy Football prowess goes, is immaterial. Both his and mine. But wouldn’t it have been easy to dismiss his text as childish and silly if I didn’t fear on some level it was true? As an adult human being, I have to recognize that I’m responsible for my own emotions, and as Eleanor Roosevelt said many years ago, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” I’m setting my sights on next year’s championship, but more importantly, I’m trying to move past the need to prove myself to Spot, or to my more vocal, more familiar, more damning critic: myself.

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“Gentlemen, start your engines. Ready your mallets.”

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Bears have a great purpose in life: to eat. The bears of Yosemite pursue this ursine goal with greater zeal than most of their cousins. As is the case with all of those who follow a single-minded course through life, they often find adventure.

Bears and climbers, needless to say, have much in common and often share meals. I remind Dave Gregory of this fact frequently. I have no doubt they’d find his curries and Yorkshire savories at least as tasty as my California barbecued tri-tip and ranch beans. I am hopeful that we will have a modest encounter with a bear. I feel Dave’s first trip to Yosemite Valley won’t be complete without it. Still, I feel that I ought to play by the rules. I have not hidden a tuna-fish can beneath his pillow. I have not dipped his socks in honey or blackberry jam. I have—quite altruistically and in hopes of preparing him psychologically for close encounters of the furry kind—told him all of my best bear stories, twice.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that there are, more or less, two distinct, kinds of rock climbers: those who carouse and seem to treat actual climbing as an ancillary activity and those who don’t? Back in 1978, three of the former type of climber (myself included) and one of the latter decided to do the Snake Dike route on Half Dome.

The beginning of Snake Dike is six miles from and 3,000 feet above the Valley. The four of us—Bill, Terry, Big Michael, and me—humped camping gear up the Nevada Falls Trail through broiling June sunshine. We camped under pines beside the Merced River. The sun dropped behind Half Dome like a white-hot stone into a bucket. Dusk stroked our trail-fevered brows with cool, blue fingers. We sat before the lazy flames of a small fire and relaxed. Tree shadows closed around us like hands clasping.

It’s possible that a bottle of Sausal tequila was passed between the three carousers. Terry, dedicated alpinist that he is, refrained from sharing brew of cactus with the rest of us. He wanted a clear head for the climb. He also wanted the rest of us to arise with our heads still attached to our bodies. This last sentiment was inspired by no particular concern for us. He simply wanted at least one person to be able to see and hold a rope for him. He mentioned that it would be a good idea for us to stow the cactus juice and go to bed.

We ignored him.
He stood, glowered, gesticulated, pleaded.

We ignored him.

Disgusted and defeated, he rolled out his bag on a cushion of pine needles and retired.

Good stuff, tequila—liquid sunlight to the moderate drinker; flaming blood of poor damned souls, skimmed off the very coals of hell to those who overindulge. Got a punch like Ali, too. Slug down a full shot and you’ll lose the top of your head above the eyebrows. On the enticing edge of overindulgence, our Sausal bottle yielded up its last fiery drops. How did that happen?

Bill, smiling, beatific in the afterglow of an internal Sausal sunset, wandered over to his bag and crawled in. Big Michael and I remained by the fire, conversing lethargically, staring into the fire’s fading coals. Soon we noticed that two of the coals appeared to be staring back.

Just beyond the fire, perhaps four feet away, two yellow, glowing eyes—bear’s eyes—peered at us with hopeful interest. Michael and I looked back at the bear. Señor Oso had crawled up to our fireside in hopes of finding a plate of alpine spaghetti.

No luck, Oso. Two facts allowed me to receive our visitor with equanimity: the tequila I’d consumed and the certainty that I don’t taste very good in comparison with most other things on a bear’s menu. I think, though I can’t speak from personal experience, that Big Michael doesn’t taste very good, either.

Oso looked at me. 
Oso looked at Michael.

An easily discernable thought passed across Oso’s face: these guys have nothing worth eating and, besides, the big one looks pretty tough. Oso crawled backwards, out of the firelight, into the dark. Michael and I exhaled with not a little relief. We grinned at each other. The thought crossed my mind that true friends should at some point attempt to retrieve this situation, should attack the bear with flaming sticks, should belabor its flanks with flung stones, should, at the very least, scream warning imprecations at the marauder.

Michael and I did nothing. Curiosity defeated our heroic impulses. What would happen when the bear finally met Bill?

Oso’s long, wet, hairy nose poked inquisitively into the sleeping bag.

Bill rose from his bag like Lazarus and roared like a scalded tiger. Unbeknownst to Michael and me, he had not been slumbering. He’d been plotting attack! His shattering roar and truly terrifying visage sent Oso into a frenzy of retreat. Fur frizzed out by the electricity of fear, eyes popped out, legs wind-milling, the bear galloped sideways into the woods.

Almost into the woods. I neglected to mention that Terry really was asleep. Further, he was asleep directly in the path of the retreating bruin. Oblivious to all but the fearsome Bill, the bear trampled Terry.

A bear’s claws are longer than my fingers and are sharper than hypodermic needles. These long, sharp claws made lots of little holes in Terry’s sleeping bag. Fortunately, they made no holes in Terry, but Terry did wake up. He screamed, “A BEAR! A BEAR STEPPED ON ME!”

We saw it, Terry. We liked it.

Robert Walton is a retired teacher with 36 years of service. He’s also a lifelong rock climber and mountaineer. His home crags are in Pinnacles National Park where he’s made many first ascents. He has also climbed extensively in Yosemite and the Sierras. His writing about climbing has been published in Ascent and in Loose Screed. His Civil War novel Dawn Drums has just been published and is available on Amazon. See his website at chaosgatebook.wordpress.com.
Half a beer it maybe took him,
could be less or more,
to pull that first Rainbow from the water,
Daniel saying nothing as he unhooked the fish,
crushed its skull with a collapse of his heel
and weaved the chain link through its gill.
It was the first of many to float belly-up
off the seawall at Carson Pegasus
with Daniel’s boot print pressed
into the scales and side.

And what a shame it was for me
to cast throughout the day
and well into the night—
even the weeds, they feel like fish
when gone so long without a bite.
And what it was to be alone
and drunk and pacing
in the absent light, kicking
cans of Coors into the water.
Those who one time cared for me,
somewhere, caring for another,
and I for no one or nothing.

Hidden within the brush and high cattail grass
were the bodies of trout, the youngest trout,
with their pretty scales and paltry meat.
Some catch so many they choose
to keep only their proudest.
The others perish in the August sun,
to rise in air, an offering.
Come morning we learned their scent,
remembering something, shapeless and distant.
Speechless from the smell of it.
Muscle Car

Poetry

Jeffrey Alfier

circa 1974, or circa long-gone

We just had to build us one, turn a rusted heap left out back of a south Jersey barn into a scream of thunder, kissed to life by our own hands. It began with every car mag we stole from 7-11, though it was safer to ask Bobby’s dropout brother to get us a couple when he went in for his donut and malt, sweet-talking the trashy blonde clerk, both stepping out to smoke, locked in shy silhouette by the ice machine.

When we got the mags we looked past the sleek chopped cars—an Olds Vista Cruiser or a Shelby GT to die for—to drop our eyes on leopardskin girls in the ads, always part Ellie May Clampett, part not-quite legal, whiplash smiles to almost divert us from chopping the ’38 Ford truck we got for a steal from Bobby’s brother.

As hard as ever, we put our hearts into intake manifolds and carb kits, rigging up sheetmetal only to create a mismatch, one of our grinders overheating and warping the hood. Still, our days flew like pistons. We were high on Cosmoline and libido, the nights rolling the way we wanted them to, changing direction fast as a dashboard compass, going on without end, like one of those stupid daytime dramas we always hated, where someone’s forever almost falling in love.
One All Saints’ Day in Widow Akulina’s Meadow

Always seems they’re found a thousand miles from home, but a ’55 Chrysler with its gunsight taillights was dumped in our own town, mid-August, in a corner of that crazy widow’s field, the spot me and three other guys grew the magic herb that floated us through summer before Sheriff Trishka found the plot, dug it out. We knew her oldest son, Gavrilo, lover of Detroit iron, considered overhead-valve V-8s the Second Coming. He traded hard knowledge that he was two saltines away from bankrupt for a pipedream of muscling that Chrysler heap into racetrack jackpots—a bank vault on wheels he wants to name The White Wolf, its sculptured chrome glimmering like archangel trumpets.

The first day at restoration, Gavrilo ventured from the clapboard he shared with his mother, trudged into their meadow, briars and thistles clutching his jeans. Sweaty and breathing hard, he shielded his eyes and gazed across to his hulking fantasy, the early sky a bluish void, the air sultry. Pining for our lost herb, we drove slowly past their land that day, noticed him out there under the hood. That icon of rust won’t be anything but a beater, no class to ever compete. He looked up at us, his proud smile was a bit frightful, his head full of beautiful delusions. He’ll never un-ass this town, that sullen meadow; just end someday one of carnies at our summer fair manning booths for rides that make us sick, the games we never win.

When a Chocolate Chip Cherry Bomb Cadillac Was All I Learned of the Bible’s Harlot-Queen

In the summer of my sixteenth year, I had a catechism lesson from a nun who read the ominous sermon of a long dead Baptist preacher—Payday Someday—just to startle with the horrendous fate of Jezebel we libidinous teens. Well I ain’t sure I was shaken to the groin the way other dudes in class mighta’ been, but that very Saturday I went down to a muscle car show and Ratrod show just off the last Tucson exit. There was a model, decked in tattoos of spiders and skulls, leaning her gaunt ribs against the body of a ’57 Deville, threading her fingers between the double fins of the hood ornament. I don’t know where she was from, but in a voice the raw cough of a raven, she told me she was born wary—like a cottonmouth, like anything that’ll bite ya’ dead, schoolboy…

I asked what she called the color of that dazzling Cadillac. Her reply was drowned by some jerk peeling-out in a Packard ratrod, throwing dirt our way, throwing my mind off the question my older brother suddenly showed up to answer for me: It’s chocolate chip cherry bomb, ya dumbass…

As she looked past me, my dad suddenly tapped me on the shoulder, said let’s go, boy. So we headed back home where desert stones hold their heat in the dark.

Jeffrey Alfier is a five-time Pushcart nominee and the author of The Wolf Yearling (Silver Birch Press) and Idyll for a Vanishing River (Glass Lyre Press). He is the founder and co-editor of San Pedro River Review.
Katie Caldwell Meets a Plumber at the Muscle Car Dance

Poetry

Tobi Cogswell

Squat-bodied Chevys plant themselves like a garden of boiling colors – the red not seen in 50 years and a green so old it makes nostalgia feel young.

She follows the hood ornaments to the dance floor, a blues band tuning up, that particular beat that says I’ll sing about anything and you’ll crave it. All the longing you’ll ever need.

You can awkwardly dance to it, or look around. And look around she does. He’s got 10 years on her if a day, graceful in that dirty torn t-shirt kind of way that says he’s a working man, taking a break from the present to drift back to his past,

when Saturday nights meant shine her up, race her reckless, then get the girl. And she wants to be that girl. Cherry-red lips and a yellow dress match anywhere she ends up.

Life was more unhardened then, the danger more in their minds, adrenaline churning and a pack of smokes hiding in the glove box for later.

She can still do that high-school sidle, she is by his side in a heartbeat. The blues makes him talkative; the ex and his girls live three states away, he’s been here all his life, has a good business left from his father, and a dog.

She takes his hand, dances gracefully among the clowning tourists, visitors to this world in plaid shorts and wrist bands. And in that dance she becomes everything to him. Don’t matter nothin’ ‘bout tomorrow. He knows she’ll be there, sure as the dice hanging from the rear-view.

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Welcome Wagon

**Poetry**

Lorene Delany-Ullman

_Little Rock, Arkansas, Texas League, 1979_

The first minor league baseball season in Little Rock, the wives encouraged me to call the Welcome Wagon lady. They’d already received free stuff from her. A genteel woman in a modest dress and heels, I met the Welcome Wagon hostess at the door in shorts, t-shirt, and flip-flops. We sat together at the kitchen table side by side. She arrived with her Southern hospitality swelling on her tongue, a gift basket full of coupons, and samples from local businesses I’d never use because the ads made them seem cheap and gimmicky. Her last gift was a cardboard container of salt for good luck.

* That summer Denis got pneumonia, hacked his way through part of his first season in double-A ball. He was placed on the 15-day disabled list, missed ten games. In our one-bedroom apartment, I was glad for the sloppy layout of two twin beds pushed together into one; the baby’s port-a-crib nearby hugging the corner. I slept facing the baby the nights Denis coughed too much.

* I kept the salt. I don’t remember who told me, “A gift of salt so that life may always have flavor.” I remember luck because, along with talent, that’s what a ball player needs.

Alligator Mouth

**Poem**

Lorene Delany-Ullman

In baseball, an “alligator mouth” is a loud or noisy person. If there were a loudmouth in my family, who would it be? As a child, I remember my mother drinking too much at a party held in our living room, her full-mouthed laughter. At most family gatherings, I couldn’t compete with cousins—my voice wasn’t big enough.

* “You took my granddaughter away from me when you moved to St. Pete, then Little Rock,” my mother said. It was July when my parents came to visit, and our first full season in the minor leagues. Dad drove their new Toyota Camry from California to Little Rock. We had no doubts: Denis would play major league ball.

* Mom and Dad stayed in a local motel on W. Markham Street—I hadn’t offered my parents a bed, there just wasn’t room for all that family. On a Sunday, dad drove us to the Arkansas Alligator Farm in Hot Springs where we could “pet a live American gator.” I pushed our daughter’s stroller across bridges and boardwalks between enclaves of alligators; saw a man feed them raw chicken. Dad carried her to the chain link fence to pet the fallow deer.

Inside the little museum was the Merman, half baby-ape, half fish. I didn’t know he had been sewn together and glued over with paper mâché. Enclosed in a glass box, he appeared mummified, reclining on pink satin, his tiny teeth showing in a booming mouth.

Later, we feasted on catfish and hush puppies—it was the first time my mother had eaten catfish, and she couldn’t finish it.

* In the grandstands at Ray Winder Field, there was more than one alligator mouth—outraged fans who booed or heckled our husbands. We wives could be loud, too.

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Lorene Delany-Ullman’s book of prose poems, _Camouflage for the Neighborhood_, was the winner of the 2011 Sentence Award, and published by Firewheel Editions (December 2012). In addition, she has most recently published creative nonfiction and poetry in _AGNI, Cimarron Review, Zócalo Public Square, Naugatuck River Review_, and _Chaparral_. She is currently collaborating with artist, Jody Servon, on Saved, an ongoing photographic and poetic exploration of the human experience of life, death, and memory. She teaches composition at the University of California, Irvine.
I am searching online forums for techniques on how to work out better—how to become a machine—when I stumble across the quote, “That which you work against will always work against you.” When I look it up I find it’s from “Iron” an essay about weightlifting published in Details magazine by Henry Rollins, the lead singer of the hardcore punk band Black Flag. During shows Rollins is known for confidently prowling the stage without a shirt while sweat rivulets over his chiseled chest. Rollins purposefully flexes his bulging bicep when he curls the microphone to his screaming mouth. I would never have thought that Rollins had considered himself a loser and a spaz as a kid. In his essay, Rollins says a gym teacher turned him on to working out. He reinvented himself by building a shell of muscles around his weak body.

Rollins admits to listening to ballads while working out. It’s like he’s in love with the “the Iron,” as he calls it. Rollins says that the gift of the Iron is that it is not easy to lift it off the mat. Rollins reflects that you can build yourself up as much as you want, “But 200 pounds is always 200 pounds.” You can change, but the way you measure yourself always stays the same. To me, a mile is still a mile. Four years ago, I started running to shrink away from being the fat kid.

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I am a boy getting a breast exam. My mom is concerned. She says “concerned” the same way she does when we go shopping and she asks where the husky section is. Mom lets me pick out my clothes, because even though she’s overweight too, she can only eyeball how big I am.

In the doctor’s office, my thick naked thighs squeeze on top of the examining table. I’m sweating and my skin glues to the butcher paper. I wish I could just cut away my fat.

The doctor feels me up. His hands squeeze my droopy chest. He’s searching for something wedging between my chest plate and pectoral muscles like an extra layer of meat on a sandwich. He is slow and thorough.

Mom sits in a chair in the corner watching me like TV. I stare at her the whole time. I shouldn’t have told her I was embarrassed to dress out in front of the other middle school boys in the locker room. Do you need a bra? they ask and point to me as I dress out. Man Boobs, they say and try to pinch me before I can pull my T-shirt down.

The doctor doesn’t have much to say. He’s fat, fatter than me. I’ve always liked him because he feels bad recommending weight loss to me. He clutches his love handles and tucks them into the waist of his pants.

The doctor looks over at Mom. He shakes his head. Mom shrugs her shoulders and says that she was concerned that it might be something more. I hoped the doctor would find growths to scoop out, tumors to do chemo on, a thyroid problem I could swallow a pill for; anything other than me just being fat.

***

I am a fulltime college student, I have a part-time office job at the university, and I work out at least 10 hours every week. But working out is my real job. Clock in, clock out. Even if I skip class or I sneak up the back stairs of my office building when I’m late, I only feel guilty when I don’t work out. I do sets of 20 pushups as easy as I used to eat a serving size (17) of potato chips.

When I first started running, I could hardly do 10 pushups without plummeting my knee to the ground after a set. I was soft. I would let myself skip working out if I ran three miles in under 25 minutes. I would blow out the final stretch back home and check my time on the kitchen’s microwave. Recently, I’ve clocked a 17 minute 12 second three-miler. I could run another mile and still pass the fat kid trying to run fast enough not to have to work out.

Now, I do at least 150 pushups a week. I don’t just do the pushup where you have your palms parallel to your shoulders as you lower your arms to a 90-degree angle then press up. No. I inhale as I let the tension clinch my lower body from my ankles through the stones of my calves and along my hamstrings that are as flat as slate.

My biceps ache supporting the fat kid’s belly. I take a moment to hate this feeling, hate him. The fat kid’s chest heaves as it hangs with gravity. He wants me to give up. I do not let myself buckle under the fat kid’s weight. I gush out my breath. I press up and away from sinking.

I have not had a good workout unless afterward my fingertips numb so I can’t hold a pen, my arms inflate so much that I can’t scratch my back, and my knees shake so much I don’t know if I can stand. Edging my body to collapse—instead of listening to the fat kid begging me to skip a set—and shuddering as I get up feels better than the afterglow of sex.

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In high school, I am 195 pounds—an almost 200 pound blob of fat wearing XL T-shirts whose necks tighten like a noose and the armholes squeeze my arms like a sausage casing and a 38-inch waist that is so tight the paunch of my belly folds over my belt. I want to blame someone, something: snack food companies, video
I am in my room with my friend John, a wrestling jock. He points to the
guitar leaning against my wall and asks me if I can play something for him. I
say sure, adding that I can even do a few songs with my eyes closed. I love the
thump, thump of the bass in any song by the punk band Rancid.

“Alright man, rock on,” John says, raising devil horns.

So I sling the guitar strap over my neck. I hate how it makes my chest part
into two distinct mounds. I switch on the amp and the speaker buzzes. Then I
plug in the cord from my bass to the input, sizzling like steak on a grill.

Once, John said how he wished he had a more built chest like mine, but not as
fat. I felt the backhand compliment was like someone patting my shoulder a little too
hard. I don’t know why John and I are friends. We don’t have much in common.

It’s wrestling season and as I tune up John tells me about running “stadiums”
in sweatpants and a hoodie, taking suppositories squatted over the toilet,
and sticking his finger in his mouth to touch his uvula like a magic button at the
back of his throat; all to drop weight for his matches.

“Bloodclot.” I hum the lyrics, “I can see 360. I can see all around me.” When I
near the bass solo and my chest is brushed by something. With my eyes
still closed, I shrug my shoulder, trying to adjust the guitar strap. And then it
comes again as gently as the fuzz of lint. I miss a note, but keep playing.

I hold the neck of the bass in my other hand, defending myself. John thinks
this is funny, like it’s all a joke. I think about how guns are called axes. I want
to chop John into pieces of meat.

When I read the Rollins essay, I know I need to add resistance. It is not enough
to do pushups anymore. On the U.S. military’s physical training website I find
how to incorporate weights.

I take two 15-pound free-weights and set them on the ground, parallel with
my body hovering in pushup position. My thumbs rest on the bars. If I were to
curl my arm all the way back then I would look like a hitchhiker.

I press up, puffing out my breath as I straighten my arms and lock my
elbows. I adjust to balance on one arm, and then pull the other arm with the free-
weight up next to my kidney. I hold the free-weight like a boxing glove. I punch
the 15 pounds back to the floor, beating up the fat kid.

As I do my final set of these free-weight pushups, I think of myself as John
Henry—the folk hero who slung 20-pound sledgehammers in each hand to beat
a steam engine in a race to open a hole through a mountain. Then I feel the tis-
sue in my bicep stretch like Silly Putty pulled too far—snapping. Looking at my
bicep, I remember that John Henry won against the steam engine, but his heart
wore out. It was not enough to be a man. A bruised knot rises like a speed bump
in my vein. I need to make myself into a machine. I massage the popped blood
vessel, smothering it back into my hungry body.

At my annual physical, the doctor shines a light in my eyes and checks my
ears and has me take deep breaths while he puts his stethoscope on my chest.
For my physical the year before, when I began putting in 20 miles of running a
week, I was in the same examining room. I noticed the doctor had me breathe
longer than usual. “It’s probably nothing,” the doctor said. “But I’d like to do
an EKG.”

The EKG would test the strength of my heart. The doctor wanted to see if
my heart was weak. I knew my grandmother (my mom’s side) had died after
surgery on an aneurism. Nodes were placed on my chest like a constellation and
electrical cords connected-the-dots.

The results were negative. I just had a low at-rest heart rate because of the
running. I asked a nurse what I could do about that. She said, they never sug-
gested this, but I could add salt to my diet to spike my heart rate.

After my physical, I wanted to see how fast I could go. I clocked my best
mile at 5 minutes and 20 seconds. I know that that’s not that fast. In 2000, there
were only six American men recorded who ran sub 4-minute miles. I have a
125,000 times better chance of getting struck by lightning than running faster
than 15 miles per hour.

I can’t run that fast more than a mile. In comparison, during the 2007
Olympic marathon trials, Ryan Shay, with a record of running a 5 minute 8 sec-
ond pace for 26.2 miles, had to run 3 minutes faster than his best to qualify for the
2008 summer games. Trying to subtract time, Shay collapsed from a massive
heart attack. The chambers that pumped his blood were too big, constricting too tightly that day; he was like a car topping out for too long and his heart was a little wet engine that blew. Shay died from running.

If I knew about Shay when I had my EKG, I might’ve stopped running for fear that my heart would slow, slow, slow, and then stop. But now, I know that I would rather risk dying than not being able to keep losing weight. This time, the doctor does another EKG and says that my heart is amazing. “I hate runners,” the doctor says. I’m not sure if he’s jealous or joking. Either way, I’m glad that I can keep trying to kill the fat kid without killing myself.

I’ve heard how some people tack up a pair of “fat clothes” to their wall. Some have a circus tent of a 3XL T-shirt, or a pair of 54-inch jeans (the biggest size made), or an extra-long tie to fit around their neck. I buy “goal clothes”—a size too small to shrink myself into. As soon as I fit, I throw away my husky clothes. I don’t want anyone else to wear them.

I keep a workout journal. Looking through the previous four months I add up what I’ve gained: 280 miles running—from my home in Orlando, I could have run north past the state line of Florida. In my four years of running, I’ve gone more than 2,500 miles—the length of the Appalachian Trail and back. If my body were a car, I would need an oil change.

In an issue of Runner’s World magazine, I idolize the marathoners who put in more weekly miles than they drive. They are taut stick figures with a stretch of lean muscles woven around elastic tendons. They look like they are dying to run. There’s a hunger behind their eyes like they can’t wait to come back from a run emptied and eat, eat, eat, because they earned it.

On the back cover is a North Face ad: There’s a man, Tim Twietmeyer, with a salt and pepper, caterpillar-thick mustache and in his heavily callused hands is a plate of silver belt buckles that look like cheap, pewter souvenirs you could buy at any gift shop outside of a mine-turned-museum. Each of those belt buckles is stamped with the words “Western States”—an ultramarathon held in the Rocky Mountains. The race was originally a horse race, until in 1974 Gordy Ainsleigh, a myth of a man, rode to the starting line on a horse that collapsed from exhaustion. Instead of getting a replacement steed, Gordy, a 200-pound burly guy, said he would run the race on foot.

You have to imagine Gordy as a man with sinews of muscles that probably looked like roots and a set of coal black eyes set in his skull draped with vines of hair. This mountainman not only ran and finished, but also crossed the finish line in less than 24 hours—the cutoff time for horses.

And the silver belt buckles aren’t just participation medals for finishing. The race is 100 miles. Silver means running the race in less than 24 hours. The Western States is more mileage in one day than I run in a month. And there are more than 25 buckles on the plate. Tim’s granite-face looks like he could run against the wind forever without being worn down.

In the corner of the ad is North Face’s slogan: Never Stop Exploring. I have never asked myself: How far is far enough? Next to Tim, I don’t really run that much.

When I run, I never walk. It’s not just because I agree with one minor shoe company’s ad that “If you ran without sacrifice, congratulations. You just jogged.” I run without slowing because it is the only time I feel weightless. In the split seconds of my legs slicing the air like scissors, my feet hover above the ground, against gravity. I am a blur of a body, without mass.

One person’s “run” is not another person’s run. I believe “running” to be running 7-minute or less miles—the speed that would get you kicked off a high school men’s cross country team if you ran any slower. When I run, I run. My stride spreads over sidewalk blocks, though I mostly run on the road’s asphalt, facing traffic. I like to have the cars spotlight me.

Running is subtracting the fat kid. Each step pounds the fat kid on the anvil of the road. The more I hit him, the less he will be.

***

In high school, my brother and I watch Kevin James’ standup comedy routine on TV. James makes a joke about how he used to be able to wolf down two Big Macs. He loved to eat. James says that now, he can only get halfway through one Big Mac without feeling like a bear that has been shot in the ass. He’s tired of eating.

We laugh. My brother is skinny. He has a car and always buys fast food before we watch TV together. I don’t ask him, he just buys it and feeds me. I feel like a farm animal always ready to eat.

Kevin James says his goal is to lose enough weight so his stomach doesn’t jiggle as he brushes his teeth. My brother laughs, but he doesn’t notice how James is wearing all black. I know it is the best slimming color. Instead of pointing that out, I laugh, too. Not because it is funny, but because laughing at James is like wearing black.

There’s a note that is always on top of my desk: flex abs.

I lay on my back like a turtle on its shell. I am exposing my belly as I do crunches. I curl up, off one shoulder blade with my fingers at my ears, and I touch
my right elbow to my left knee, and then mirror the modified sit-up. Each time I come up, I feel like a whale breaching as I puff out air and clench my belly button toward my chin, flattening my back. I’m waiting for my sixpack to surface.

I follow the modified sit-ups with a set of crunches where my back is flat against the ground while my legs are straight up in the air. My feet could walk on the ceiling. I am the letter L. Every time I lower my legs to the floor, I imagine myself as a lever on a slot machine pulled downward for the jackpot.

When I am done with my workout, I take off my T-shirt and walk through the hallway to the kitchen. I don’t care about the sweet and sour stench of my drying sweat, because I want to see my skin’s shine in the window across from the refrigerator. I parade back to my room like a glistening rooster. A cock. A jock.

Every night I brush my teeth without a shirt. Looking in the mirror, I think, How much more of the fat kid can I erase?

One day, I am running a paced three-miles, when I see a kid, probably just beginning college, really hoofing it on the sidewalk down my street. He isn’t wearing a shirt. I can see the curves of his toned muscles etched on his bare back. Instead of slowing down and coming to a stop, ending my run; I keep going and catch up with the kid.

“Hey,” I say as I run next to the gutter, parallel with the kid on the sidewalk.

The kid slows down as he sizes up my running uniform: I am wearing my short-shorts with its swim trunk-like lining so I can easily slip them up and over the bricks of my thighs. My shoes have no laces, only a pull-string system. I have on a loose, long sleeve mesh shirt.

The kid lifts his chin to acknowledge me, and then goes back to his quick pace.

“You know,” I say. “You should run in the road.” I normally don’t like to have a conversation while running, and I hardly ever run with other people because they always say I go too fast, but I feel like passing on some advice to this kid. “The cement will mess up your knees.”

The kid comes down into the street, but speeds up. He listened to me, but I don’t think he wants to hear any more.

I follow the kid and lengthen my stride, accelerating through a turn. I gain and run a half-step in front of him. Even though I speed up, I am breathing in and out only through my nose, while the kid begins to breathe in and out through his mouth to keep up. If he isn’t going to hear more from me, I want to show him what running is. I let him pull ahead, only to pass him in a few strides. I am going to get him to empty himself out.

On a quarter-mile straightaway the kid takes off. He pounds his heels into the asphalt, kicking his knees back wildly. His arms flail like he is trying to grab a rope to pull himself ahead of me.

I smile. I like this kid’s spunk. I lean my shoulders forward and lift onto my tiptoes, prancing. I know I am running at about 90 percent effort. I eat air like a buffet. In through my teeth and blown back out through my mouth. Efficient. I pass the kid.

I hear the kid stop. I turn around, running backward, with my arms open. “Come on,” I say.
The kid looks like he hates me as he sets his palms on his knees, hyperventilating. I know that feeling of giving your all. Your stomach’s acid tickles your throat. You might throw up.

I slap my hand down on my tough thigh. I laugh like a bark, challenging the emptied kid. I am glad to give him this gift of being nothing.

* * *

I come home from running and find my mom eating at the table. When I look at her I lose my post-run appetite. Mom’s T-shirts are as wide as long, she has elastic in her jeans’ waist, and recently she’s bought “house dresses” that I hope she won’t wear in public. The style is called a muumuu and when Mom is eating ice cream before noon I can’t help but think of the word “cow.”

I try to bring up the fact that the spoon in her hand is the same as a needle in her arm. She’s putting junk in her body. Mom says, “I never bugged you about your weight.” I wish she had just told the fat kid to go run laps around the neighborhood. Instead, Mom signed herself up for the Weigh Down program with the mantra “Eat when you’re hungry, stop when you’re full.” She talked about a self-control exercise of having only one M&M from the bag and then putting the rest in her purse. Later, there was an empty wrapper in the garbage.

I go to the fridge to get some water. On the wall bordering the kitchen and Mom’s study, there’s a photo of Mom and her sisters when they’re all in college. And Mom is skinny. Her short-shorts are cuffed. Mom’s thighs are milky smooth with no hair, no dimples, no cellulite.

At the fridge, I fill up my cup from the water filter. I stopped drinking soda as soon as I wanted to make the fat kid thirst. I lost 10 pounds in a few months. I drink at least 64 ounces of water every day. My piss is so clear I don’t have to flush.

As I gulp water I watch Mom, still eating. She looks at me and says between mouthfuls, “You work so hard.” I want to tell Mom I believe the quote from 5 foot, 6 inch and 105-pound super model Kate Moss that “Nothing tastes as good as thin feels.” Sometimes, I want to be skinny enough to not have to work out anymore. I know of some runners who have such a low body fat percentage that in summer they have to wear a jacket outside or else they will shiver in the sun.

In the office, I call an intern weak. I mean it jokingly from one guy to another. The intern takes it personally. I guess it’s because he’s pudgy. Before I know it, the intern says he bets he can do more pushups than me.

I lift one eyebrow and smile with my lips closed. I pull my shirtsleeve back and show him my baseball bicep. My veins look like stitching through my skin.

The intern stands up, staring at me.

“Alright,” I say. “Right here, right now.” I point at the intern and then to the hallway.

The intern follows me out of the office door. He looks at the hallway’s carpet where I’m still pointing. He claps his hands together. This is his last chance to give up. But he gets down on his palms and starts to puff out his pushups. I respect him for being a man about this, but I am going to show him what it takes to be a machine.

I get into position for perfect pushups: my hands at my shoulders, my butt tucked in, back straight, and elbows locked ready to bend down to 90 degrees and back up again. My hydraulic arms pump. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth like an exhaust pipe. I hold each pushup for one second, idling, and look at the intern struggle.

The intern does his 16th pushup with his arms shaking, just able to lock his elbow back up. His knees plummet into the carpet. I finish a set of 25 by leaping onto my feet and standing up, brushing off my hands on my pants.

The intern is gasping. He looks disappointed with himself. I look into the office. My boss and the other interns aren’t watching. I don’t know if they’ve seen any of this. I want to point to the ground and say, “Look at this,” like something happened here that was important.

Now, I weigh 165 pounds and am 6 feet in my running shoes. I wear medium-sized T-shirts that are loose over my chest and 33-inch waist jeans that I always have to wear with a belt. When I knock my knees together, my thighs do not touch until the cleft of my groin.

Depending on if I shit or just ate, my weight fluxes as low as 160 and as high as 170. I use the same scale, in the same grocery store, at the same time to weigh myself every week. It might seem like I’m obsessed. But I don’t have a scale in my bathroom. If I did, I’d weigh myself every day, and then I would be obsessed.

At the grocery store, I stand on the scale. I watch the needle soar up the numbers and stop. My eyebrows furrow and I look down at my feet, stomping the metal sensor.

The scale reads 156 pounds. I am not dyslexic. The needle points to the number that is too low.

I step off the scale and then step back on. The scale reads 156 pounds, again. I am wearing sneakers, jeans, and a T-shirt like I always do whenever I’m not running. I jump up and down on the scale, seeing if it wasn’t registering all of me. Still, the scale reads 156 pounds.

I consider exchanging my basket for a cart to load up and pack on weight. But I walk the aisles with a basket, picking out items for a three-ingredient
kitsch and get behind two women in the 10-items-or-fewer line. Two other women fill in behind me, so that I am sandwiched in-between them all.

The manager in a navy cardigan comes up to me and taps my shoulder. “Sir, please follow me,” she says.

I look left and right. I want to say I would never steal food. As I lift my arm to point my finger at myself and ask, “Me?” the manager smiles and shakes her head a little, cutting off my question.

“I’m just going to open up another lane for you,” she says.

I wonder if she’s hitting on me.

The two women behind form a cha-cha line. The manager ushers me forward, then notices the women linked to me and her hand cleaves the air. “No,” the manager says. “You can stay in this line.” The way she smiles at them is so different from assuring me.

I had relatively the same amount of groceries as the women in line with me. I didn’t act like I was in a hurry. I’ve been coming here for years and have never received special treatment. I don’t ask why I was plucked from the one grocery line to another. The fat kid never would have been chosen.

In two days, I check my weight again. This time, the scale says 154 pounds. I am shaking as I leave the supermarket without buying groceries.

During the week, I come back and check my weight two more times: 157 pounds and then 155 pounds.

That afternoon, I call my doctor. “Maybe you need to eat more,” my doctor says. I want to argue that that has never been the answer. But I realize I may have finally killed the fat kid, because I am being told I should not subtract anymore of him from me. I have to maintain instead of plummet. It’s the difference between sprinting until I collapse and pacing to go the distance.

soon after I am told I have to find balance, a beautiful, skinny college friend of mine who recovered from anorexia tells me a poem of hers, titled “she is a small, thin girl,” is published online. I read it and love it. To other people it might be about numbers, but I know it is about how we look in the funhouse mirror of our mind. My friend captures the struggle with her lines:

so she forced herself to eat
(every day for months, she would force herself
and it felt like lifting weights, training for a marathon)

When I get home from my classes at the university, I turn on the stove. I fill up a pot of water. My stomach croaks. I think of how you can put a frog in cold water, set it on a burner, turn on the heat, and it will allow itself to be boiled alive.

As the pasta churns, I realize I have been losing weight since entering college. If 195 pounds looks like a potato, then 150 pounds is a celery stick. I don’t like the feeling of being full, because I feel like I’m gaining.

Instead of eating the pasta, I turn on my coffeemaker. This is a trick I learned: coffee satiates hunger and its caffeine propels any workout. I listen to the sputter of the percolation and stretch.

I drink a cup of coffee and decide to go running without my shirt on. I am not the fat kid anymore. I’m antsy. I want to show off the body I’ve built.

I don’t normally run without my shirt. One summer, when I still had some flab from the fat kid, I ran without a shirt so I could tan at the same time. I remember passing a house and hearing someone whistle from their garage. I didn’t know if they were mocking me. For the rest of the run, I wanted the security of a T-shirt covering my body.

In the present quiet of my afternoon run, I glance at parked car’s windows or just feel old “problem areas” that invisibly jiggle and shift, now uncontained by a shirt. As I run, I think about the Buddhist idea of Nirvana: becoming nothing. I was a cup of water being poured into an ocean. But I want even less than that. I want to evaporate.

A breeze hits my bare chest and combs through my stomach hair. I didn’t eat the pasta and I already absorbed the coffee’s caffeine. My energy is draining. Soon I am going to be running on fumes. I know this is dangerous, but the gift of running is that you get to see how far you can go on empty.

I will not reach the horizon; still I keep my chin straight ahead. I don’t glance at the windows of the parked cars. I am afraid of seeing the fat kid’s reflection. There will always be pushups, crunches, curls, and mile after mile after mile. I go.

This essay originally appeared in the winter 2011 issue of Stymie and later received a Notable mention in Best American Sports Writing 2012.

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A red biplane came upon my troop that morning in a slow quiet grumble like some late August thunderhead rolling out of the west. An airplane was the last thing we had expected to encounter on our hike, me and the motley pair of Boy Scouts who had reluctantly followed me up this mountain. But there it was sputtering in our direction, cutting a noisy line across the sky toward us. We were on the second day of a two-day hike that I’d hoped would provide some cheap wilderness enlightenment, but until that moment, you would have thought the boys, with their cast-down heads and shuffling feet, were marching to their deaths. So when I saw that small plane coming right at us, and saw the boys standing speechless on the path behind me, I allowed myself a little hope. Our hike was nearly over and I was becoming desperate for these boys to feel something, anything out here on this windswept ridge—and I thought maybe this plane would come with some meaning mounted on its wings, thought that maybe it would wake them up to the wild earth as it slipped around them on all sides.

We began our trip on Friday afternoon, turning off the highway and striking up the side of Squaw Peak Ridge on the narrow paved road into Rock Canyon which turns to gravel as it leaves the gristled crest and descends into the green. From the valley suburbs, the Wasatch Mountains look ragged, brown, and foreboding, but concealed within their granite walls is an oasis of aspen, fern, and wildflower, a lost world of snow-melt photosynthesis, a High Uinta Eden crawling with cougars, bears, and rattlesnakes. I pointed all this out to the Boy Scouts riding in the back of the truck as we dropped into the canyon, told them about the snake I saw a few weeks earlier curled in the grass beside the road, and showed them the bite kit I’d bought for our trip. One boy smirked and wanted to know if I thought the rain would let up. The other boy, who’d been staring out the window, turned to me with a blank look and shrugged.

We parked the truck in the deepest draw of the canyon and start our climb. Behind us lay an abandoned, overgrown campground, and ahead of us ran five miles of narrow trail leading to our summit. For nearly three hours the boys marched behind me with their heads down, grumbling through rain-soaked underbrush and stands of quaking aspen. They wanted to break every 10 minutes to lean their packs against the trees, sip Gatorade, complain about wet socks, and ask if we could stop for the night. By the time we pitched our tents in the grassy meadow below Shingle Mill Peak, they were so tired, bored, and bothered that they just wanted to eat and go to bed.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” wrote Henry David Thoreau in the opening pages of Walden, “to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” With a borrowed axe, Thoreau spent the spring and early summer of 1845 felling trees, splitting logs, and notching mortise and tenon joints to build himself a cabin on the shore of a small lake near Concord, Massachusetts. He brought bread and butter for lunch, wrapped in his daily newspaper, which he read while he ate, his pitch-covered hands seasoning the meal with a slight hint of pine. I imagine that flavor was part of the answer Thoreau was searching for—one of the essential facts of life that could ward off the fear of never really living. As a scoutmaster in my mid-twenties trying to motivate a handful of teenage boys, I spent much of my time experiencing this fear on their behalf because they so rarely seemed concerned about anything at all.

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I began working with the Boy Scouts in my neighborhood during my sophomore year of college. There were six of them: Bronson, Brian, Serge,
Tyler, Landon, and Leo. As a young husband with a small boy of my own, I imagined working as a Scoutmaster would be practice for raising my own son, a way to escape to the woods myself, and a way to pass on some of my own hard-learned “essential facts.”

We met every Tuesday in a room off the gymnasium at our church, and though a few of them wore their uniforms, brought their handbooks, and earned their share of merit badges, most just liked to camp, as long as camping didn’t interfere with their social lives. They listened to LewDacris and Nelly in their Ipods, played basketball and Xbox ‘till all hours of the night, and drank Mountain Dew by the liter. At our weekly meetings they leaned back in their chairs and looked sideways at each other, waiting for me to finish my lesson about plant habitats, wilderness survival, or proper flag folding. The basketballs were always out before I could say, “Dismissed.”

This trip was supposed to be a game changer—a motivational gauntlet that would bring them one step closer to manhood. Our narrow strip of suburban Utah shouldered up to some of the most magnificent mountain terrain in North America, and while we’d been out there to camp in the past, we’d never hiked a summit. This was an opportunity for the boys to feel the vastness of it all, the sheer size of the mountains, the expansive wilderness that civilization only thinks it has conquered. I wanted the boys to “get in touch” with nature in ways they hadn’t before, and in so doing, get in touch with themselves—discover a way to look at the world from the canyon side of things.

At our Tuesday meetings, the boys even seemed relatively enthusiastic. Together we chose a peak, reviewed backpacking essentials, made our own signal mirrors, and in the church parking lot learned how to aim those mirrors from one mountaintop to another using a compass. We went over and over what to bring (extra socks, rain gear, sunscreen) and what not to bring (Ipod, Gameboy, Mountain Dew), and the night before the trip, I called each of them to double-check that they’d be ready. The next day, a half hour after we were supposed to leave, only Landon and Serge had shown up. Tyler had forgotten about football, Bronson and Leo had overlooked family activities, and Brian had just plain forgotten.

When I turned seven, my mother took me to JC Penney’s to buy my first Cub Scout Handbook. I was about as tall as the glass counter, and while mom talked to the clerk I peered inside the display case. There was a stack of pinewood derby cars, a pyramid of blue Cub Scout mugs, and a brown, flat-brimmed Smokey the Bear hat. There were gold-colored pins and steam-pressed uniforms, rows of merit badges, a pair of hiking boots, and even a Swiss Army knife with a fold-out screwdriver and bone saw. I was hooked. I wanted to be the Scout on the cover of Boys’ Life, gazing intently at my leader as he revealed the mysteries of the compass. I wanted to sleep in a tent pitched in a row of identical canvas tents, stand and salute the flag with a dozen other boys in green shorts and knee-high socks, and march single file into a wilderness that would teach me to be a man. I wanted the Norman Rockwell Scouting experience. I doubted my Boy Scouts even knew who Norman Rockwell was.

The older of the two boys on the trip, Serge, hadn’t earned a merit badge or rank advancement in two years, but he came on almost every campout. He was the second-oldest of four brothers and the oldest at home. His single mother worked at a local non-profit dedicated to helping Hispanic immigrants adjust to life in the United States. Serge volunteered there occasionally, cleaning and helping his mother run errands. For our summit hike he wore a pair of baggy jeans and unlaced basketball shoes, and for food he brought a foot-long hoagie sandwich and a sixer of Gatorade. Every trip he hiked slowly, ambiguously, as if he didn’t know or care where he was going, and he almost never said a word. When he did speak, it was with an archer’s caution—quiet, well-aimed, and deliberate.

The younger boy, Landon, on the other hand, had a Kalashnikov approach to conversation. I met him shortly after moving into the neighborhood and he invited me on a camping trip before I’d even volunteered with the troop. He talked all the way up the trail that night, peppering Serge with questions, jokes, and Hardy slaps on the back. Serge remained quiet, mostly, and the two of them were in their tents shortly after dinner, asleep before the sun went down.

For all his volume, Landon was much more than just a talker; he was the real Scout in our group. In addition to collecting a slew of merit badges, he had earned his Life Scout, the second highest rank for boys, and he attended almost every activity. He spent summers on staff at organized Scout camps and served in the junior ROTC program at his high school. Still, I couldn’t even convince Landon to stay up long enough to see the stars come out. Instead, while the boys climbed into their tent, I sat up with the fire, drying our wet socks and shoes for the morning hike. Around me, 50,000 millennia of granite glowed pink in the sunset. Aspen leaves shimmered in the wind, and the cold breath of the mountain sighed down the canyon walls. Eventually, the alpine cathedral paled, faded, and disappeared into the darkness. Clouds rolled in, their low, gray canopy blocking out the stars, and as I zipped myself into my tent, the wind picked up, drowning out the sounds of the night, leaving me alone to wonder, and worry about the morning.
It was the solitude of Walden Pond that Thoreau valued most: “I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself.” Yet his small world was little more than a story he wrote down—a lie he told himself to make his narrow patch of woods feel more substantial. His hunt for the essential facts required a certain amount of alone time with nature to be sure, but with Emerson’s cabin just a mile away, the rail line and a neighbor’s fence visible on the horizon, and visitors stopping by more than occasionally, meditative solace must have been hard to come by. I can’t fault his desire to get away though. Thoreau recognized better than most the sedative effects of modern life, and he recognized the power of the wilderness to rouse us from our sleep.

At 7:00 a.m. I rousted the boys, and we went over our plan: eat breakfast and hit the trail by 8:30 so we could be on our peak by 11:00. Landon and Serge shared a Pop Tart on the other side of the fire ring and half listened as I recapped the details. I told them about the American flag stuck in a rock cairn at the summit and a canister there for hikers to leave notes in. I reminded them about the other troops that would be on Mt. Nebo to the south, Mt. Timpanogos to the north, and Mt. Goshen to the west. I held up one of our homemade mirrors. If the clouds cleared, I explained, we’d be reflecting sunlight in their directions by lunchtime. The boys looked like they might climb back into their sleeping bags. I told them to pack up, and while they broke down their tent, murmuring about the clouds and the shortage of Pop Tarts, I turned the mirror over in my hands trying in vain to catch some kind of signal.

We could have purchased survival signal mirrors at an outdoor store for less than $10, but we chose to make them out of scrap instead. We got small pieces of mirror from a local glass company and used screw drivers and files to scratch out pea-sized sight holes in the center of the gray reflective backing of each piece. Then, aligning the sight holes, we glued two pieces back-to-back, creating a double-sided mirror with a solitary sight hole at its center.

To cast a signal, you first stand so that you are facing both your light source (usually the sun) and your target. Then you hold the mirror up to your dominant eye with one hand and look through the sight hole at your other hand as you raise it out in front of you, fingers extended in a peace sign. Next, you sight your target through the crosshairs of your outstretched fingers. To capture the necessary light, you simply rotate the mirror in the direction of your light source and watch through the sight hole for a reflection of light to appear on your raised fingers. The distance your signal will travel depends on two things: the strength of the light source and the clarity of the air.

One Tuesday night, using a high-powered flashlight and their mirrors, all six of my Scouts discovered how the right mixture of geometry and patience could produce strong signals across the gymnasium, on the ceiling, and in each other’s eyes. Each was eager to try it out on the mountaintop. That morning, as we made our final preparations for the climb, I worried that even if the sun did come out, there may be no great metaphorical moment for anyone. I worried we might hike for hours and come home with little more than the dirt in our shoes, that our proximity to nature had tamed it, rendered a 10,000 foot peak a mere sideshow, a distraction, a checkbox on a long list of things we really ought to do.

From our base camp, the trail to the peak took us out of the thick underbrush onto a windy slope that led to the slowly rising saddle ahead. Below the trail the canyon opened up to reveal a tiny sliver of the valley floor and a hint of gray horizon, and visitors stopping by more than occasionally, meditative solace there may be no great metaphorical moment for anyone. I worried we might even if the sun did come out, perhaps they had noticed that the larger trees had given way to a scattering of juniper bushes and alpine grass growing in the washes beneath us. I wondered if they had noticed the deer droppings or the snake’s burrow just off the trail. We were stepping into the dizzying skyline at more than 9,000 feet above sea level, and I wondered if they could, in this quiet, sense our distance from the valley floor and its everyday hustle—their entire world reduced to a vanishing point on a landscape canvas. Perhaps they had noticed. Perhaps they had looked over their shoulders, down the slope of the canyon, and were feeling something. I decided to ask them.

“What are you thinking about boys?”

Landon laughed. “When I get home, I’m going to take a shower and play my Xbox all night.” Serge just wanted to know how much longer we’d be.

I decided to quit asking questions.

My first overnight backpacking trip as a 12-year-old Boy Scout, I ran caboose in a line of a dozen other 12-year-olds up two and a half miles of switchbacks and undulating trails to a small lake stocked with rainbow trout. We hiked in a blinding downpour all afternoon and when we finally arrived at camp, we rushed to pitch our tents. Abandoning our ambitions for a fire and a fresh-fish dinner, we lay in our soaked sleeping bags, an inch of water pooling in the bottom of our tents, and ate cold hot dogs as we shivered and cursed the scoutmaster who’d brought us out there. As an adult, though, I think back on that trip and what comes to mind is not the wet socks and cold, sleepless night, but how fog lifted off the lake in the morning and how my friend, standing alone on the sandy lakeshore, pulled taut a fishing line as a rainbow trout arched out of the water. I have painted that scene in my mind the way I imagine Rockwell would have—subtle, idyllic, and unabashedly...
sentimental. I believed then in the mythology of the woods, that they would offer their own brand of salvation from the dangers and pitfalls of the world, that an important part of who I am as a human being could only be found outdoors—and I still do, though I was never sure how to make that rub off on my Scouts, especially the ones who couldn’t be bothered to even show up. What’s worse than a boy too busy to sleep out under the stars? Perhaps a boy who comes out under those stars and finds no reason to search them for answers.

Thoreau cultivated a distaste for time, for the economy of schedules and the waste of men’s minds to the business of making money, of making small talk, of making things. Rather than allow work bells and dinner parties and “petty pleasures” to drag us from one end of the day to the other, Thoreau would have us live “as deliberately as Nature.” But how does one keep time like the migrating swan, gather food with the cautious tenacity of a grazing deer, ride the current like a fallen leaf, observe the sky like a quiet mountain?

The deepest thinker of my scouts, Leo, chose to spend the weekend with his dad. Leo’s parents had been separated for more than two years, and his mother worked fulltime to take care of him and his younger brother and sister. I always had mixed feelings about his absence on a camping trip. Leo complained about any type of work, whether washing dishes or pitching a tent, and he often scrapped with the other boys. Once, he argued an entire evening with Landon about who should go collect firewood, and they ended up eating dinner cold. At the same time though, in that rare quiet moment around the campsite, when he thought no one else could hear him, Leo opened up. He asked about my child, my wife, and my career plans. He told me about the motorcycle his father would buy him, the trips they would take, the fun they would have.

In between campouts, Leo often stopped by my house unannounced. I could always tell he wanted to talk but didn’t always know what to say. Instead, he offered to walk my dog, mow my lawn, and hold my son. One day, I asked him about school. Leo always refused to read during Scout meetings, and I knew he had trouble with vowels. I knew that he attended a special literacy class once a week and that reading frustrated him. I asked him to bring a book the next time he came by, and, to my surprise, he did. Three times a week we met together to read. I wrote vowels on notebook paper and we practiced. Dog, hog, jog, log. Book, cook, shook, hook. We read from a simplified version of Journey to the Center of the Earth. He forced the vowels to make sense in his mind. He was asking questions, making progress, and learning to read. At least, that’s what I wanted to think. Instead, our tutoring sessions piddled out after less than a
month. The copy of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* sat on my bookshelf, waiting for him to come get it.

We reached the mountain saddle at 9:45 a.m. For the first time we could see beyond the canyon wall to the east. The Rocky Mountains spread out beneath us, rolling toward Wyoming and Colorado. For miles in that direction we could see few signs of human life. Behind us, to the west, the grid-lined streets of our hometown sprawled across the valley and disappeared into the shallow waters of Utah Lake.

We sat down on some rocks to drink. The boys sagged with exhaustion. Clouds were still blocking the sun and I was beginning to fear a revolt from the boys who leaned against each other, staring at the ground.

Norman Rockwell’s scoutmasters make it look so easy—tending fire under starlight as the dozing heads of Scouts peek out of pup tent flaps; raising a red-sleeved arm in thoughtful gesture as neckerchiefed young boys hang on his every word; pointing the way forward at the head of a green-uniformed troop armed with bed rolls and great open-mouthed smiles. In my favorite image, Rockwell’s Scoutmaster stands, clipboard in hand, fielding questions from a tenderfoot at his side while boys lowering a canoe into the water behind them wave energetically at a group on the opposite shore. And in the foreground, a younger scout kneels at a fire and offers a ladle of something hot to a fellow scout who bends low and sips from the spoon—no Pop Tarts in sight.

Our water break on the saddle lasted longer than usual. Behind us lay the trail that winds down and back into the meadow where our tents are pitched. The boys seemed to lean in that direction as they sat on the ground, waiting for me to give the word. Ahead of us waited the final mile and a half—a poorly marked ascent across large, unnatural ledges cut into the side of the mountain. These ledges, so large and permanent that we could see them from the valley floor, are actually erosion terraces carved out by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933.

That year Utah County had an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent, and the average income was less than a dollar a day. The Civilian Conservation Corps brought hundreds of young men, many just a few years older than my Scouts, up into this canyon and others like it, not for exercise and enlightenment, but for the dignity of a pay stub.

That same year Norman Rockwell painted a calendar portrait of smiling, saluting Boy Scouts from all over the world—hopeful, youthful faces with eyes only for the future. Rockwell’s painting, titled “An Army of Friendship,” was inspired by the 1933 Boy Scout World Jamboree held in the forested hillsides outside Budapest, Hungary. Both the painting and the Jamboree seem to throw themselves in the face of the global economic crisis of the time. Nearly 26,000 Boy Scouts from around the world converged on the Royal Forest of Godollo for two weeks of living in the woods with other uniformed boys, trading patches, tying knots, and playing field games—two weeks of trying to discover something essential about themselves, despite the chaos and uncertainty around them.

But in Utah, so many thousands of miles from that artificial celebration of the wilderness, manhood, and teamwork, other boys were applying for spots on labor crews—sometimes five applicants vying for one shovel. Those who were hired spent the next decade reshaping the Utah wilderness, one spadeful at a time. They built dams, spread seed, planted trees, established campgrounds, and, on steep mountain slopes like those beneath Shingle Mill Peak, they dug out terraces more than 10 feet wide. Inexperienced crewmembers received $30 a month, 25 of which was sent home to family, and they were fed and lodged at work camps along the Wasatch Front.

Perhaps on a hot July afternoon that summer, when the last terrace of the day had been dug, and most of the men and boys were heading down the mountain to camp, a few of them put down their shovels and headed for the peak. Perhaps they stepped carefully over the alpine grass and crumbling rock and paused to rest, nostrils full of juniper pollen. Maybe they sat on boulders at the summit and adjusted their socks, pondered the soreness in their backs, and picked at the blisters on their hands. I picture them peering down into the valley, looking for their street, or at least their neighborhood, and I imagine them talking about their families down the mountain, about the children who call them “Papa,” and cling to their legs when they come home to visit. Flinging a shovel to bring money home must have felt to them like the most deliberate kind of living—those grown men so full of worry and concern, moving a mountain to make ends meet. But I see the younger boys jostling each other, throwing rocks, and making plans for their time off. Sure they were a cheap labor crew, but the worry of the world may not yet have overtaken them completely. This mountain, to them, may have simply been a mountain, about the children who call them “Papa,” and cling to their legs when they come home to visit. Flinging a shovel to bring money home must have felt to them like the most deliberate kind of living—those grown men so full of worry and concern, moving a mountain to make ends meet. But I see the younger boys jostling each other, throwing rocks, and making plans for their time off. Sure they were a cheap labor crew, but the worry of the world may not yet have overtaken them completely. This mountain, to them, may have simply been a mountain, and the only thing essential or deliberate about any of it may have been the way they dared each other to walk to the edge, the way they tossed stones like hand grenades into the void, the way they cupped their hands around their mouths and hollered just to hear their own echoes across the canyon.

“Let us settle ourselves,” wrote Thoreau. “And work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris.
and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality.”

With a little prodding, the boys rose from their water break and we began our terrace ascent. But after only a few steps we heard the sound of that biplane approaching. The noise seemed close, and all of us looked up, but there was nothing. Leveling my eyes with the mountain saddle, I caught sight of the red, single-engine plane flying right at us. It took a moment to realize that though we were firmly planted on the ground, standing this high on the mountain meant we were very much in the air. The engine noise grew louder and the boys and I gazed wide-eyed as the pilot, looking through a pair of flight goggles and waving to us from the open cockpit, passed just 20 feet above our heads, and then unexpectedly tilted skyward and began a slow climb. After a few seconds, the plane’s engine sputtered and then stalled. For a moment we stood in perfect silence and stared at the plane suspended above us in the air.

Then the plane rotated downward and twisted in mid-air like an Olympic platform diver. The engine kicked on again, and the pilot pulled up the nose of the plane and turned away from the mountain and us, heading into the horizon.

The boys whooped and hollered and waved, and for the first time, they seemed genuinely pleased to be up on the mountain. They smiled, and shouted, and patted each other on the back. We all wished aloud that we’d brought our cameras. Their pace quickened and for the first time on the trip, I didn’t feel like I was dragging them along.

But the optimism only lasted one switchback. Soon they were shuffling their feet again, heads down, seemingly oblivious to the fast approaching mountaintop. Or weren’t they? Perhaps that plane lingered in their minds the way it hand lingered in the air. After all, they were out of Gatorade and Pop Tarts, and the clouds were there to stay, but both boys were still on the trail, one in front of me, and one behind me, stepping between root and rock as we approached the summit. None of us could have told you the grand metaphor in that airplane, only that it was small, but overwhelming; that it’s climb was narrow and steep; that its red paint shocked the gray sky; and that watching that plane pivot and float in the air above our heads near the top of that mountain was a kind of personal, if accidental triumph.
I was gradually won over by the hugely popular book, *Born to Run*, an examination of the ultra marathon and the odd folks—and tribes—who have come to dominate the races. These runners seem to be in touch with something essential about the human spirit, something in our DNA that has to do with survival of the human species. Yet, the book seemed to miss some of the darker aspects of the self-flagellation that passes for sport. Maybe Christopher McDougall was waiting for “Hallucinating in Suburbia...” to cover that.

Like a brilliant ball coach, the author of “Hallucinating in Suburbia...” (Dave Essinger, I was told later) takes parts that cannot possibly fit and forges a smartly functioning “whole.” Unlike Ted Kaczynski, the author does it with warmth, compassion, and wit. And the author has uncovered what, in retrospect, seems obvious: If Ned Merrill, the protagonist in John Cheever’s “The Swimmer” were not in rehab today, he might very well be an ultra marathoner. These guys run as if their lives were at stake for a reason: their lives are at stake—not that they would get eaten by beasts if they stopped; the motivation is all in their heads. But like the best Buddhists (marathoners with the same attention to breathing patterns, yet of a different ilk), the runners absorb the suffering like a high-carb snack at the 50-mile marker.

Most impressive about “Hallucinating in Suburbia...” is how unwilling the essay is to glorify the sport. Nobody who reads this essay is going to sign up for the Leadville 100, just as Cheever’s “The Swimmer” wouldn’t inspire anyone to jump into our neighbor’s pool. And, like the Cheever classic the author (and contest judge) reveres, the writing never gets sentimental.

Essinger runs after much more interesting issues. Like Cheever, he meets middle class angst head-on. What exactly is it about the human heart that would compel a person to torture himself for so long? Though his methods were ghastly, was the Unabomber correct about over-indulgent suburbanites?

“Hallucinating in Suburbia...” is a surprising and insightful essay in a strong field of runner-ups.

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I hadn’t realized how disoriented the man shuffling beside me was. “How’s it going?” I asked between gasps, moving at an excruciatingly slow jog myself, barely lifting the soles of my shoes from the gravel path. The weak beam of my headlamp lit only a bluish circle on the ground in front of me, and in the humid air rising off the river, my every exhaled breath clouded before my eyes.

“My pencil tips,” the man wheezed, “are all worn down. All of them. This is bad.”

“Hang in,” I told him as I passed. “Stay strong.” There was nothing I could do for him. We were nearing the end of the 100-mile Burning River Endurance Run. Before the sun rose again, we’d be at the race’s finish in downtown Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

I don’t know the man, but I can say a few things about him with reasonable certainty. Like me, he wanted to be there; we’d both signed up, juggled our calendars, and paid a fair amount of money to inflict this intentional horror on our minds and bodies. Neither of us had started with any illusions of winning the race, or anything more heroic than finishing. He had trained extensively to be here, still moving forward now after mile 90, and we can assume he led a comfortable enough life to support the relatively luxurious and privileged hobby of long-distance running. I’ll never know what named or unnamed goal drove him here, hallucinating on a suburban recreational path at an hour when all reputable citizens were in bed; I’ll never know what finishing the race proved in his own personal narrative. Like hundreds of others, though, something about the crowded big-city marathon, lined with cheering spectators, had long ago proved inadequate, and some unfulfilled absence in his ordinary life drove him to seek an epic level of trial and deprivation.

I knew, too, that he had made the choice repeatedly that night to keep going, long after all pretenses of novelty, adventure, or fun had perished.

Next July marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of John Cheever’s landmark short story “The Swimmer.” In this story, a bon vivant type named Neddy wakes pleasantly hungover and, after a dip in his hosts’ pool, decides to swim his way home via a chain of backyard suburban pools. We are told that he felt as if “he had made a discovery, a contribution to modern geography,” and would name his route the River Lucinda, after his wife. After all, he “had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure.”

What begins as a lark turns gradually weird as we realize, from cues like the seasons changing way too fast, that we are not in a strictly realist story. Neddy’s receptions from friends and neighbors grow increasingly colder, until finally he arrives home to find his wife and children gone, his house deserted, and his own body weakened and aged. It’s a dark allegory for alcoholism, postwar American consumerism, and arguably many other things. When I teach “The Swimmer,” students invariably ask why the time and seasons don’t make conventional sense, why Neddy doesn’t sensibly give up when his game turns sour, and what it all means.

An ultramarathon, meanwhile, is technically any footrace longer than a marathon’s 26.2 miles. A relatively new phenomenon, the number of ultras has been increasing exponentially. Twenty years ago there were fewer than 20, 100-mile races in North America, six years ago there were nearly 40, and now there are more than 100. Including 50K, 50-mile and other distances, literally hundreds of organized ultras take place annually in the U.S., mostly off-road, on-trail courses. And not all are confined to remote wilderness. Burning River, for example, snakes its way through a half dozen metroparks between Cleveland and Akron. Hikers and campers and passersby ask how far we are really running, what we do for food (carry carb gels and stop at aid stations), what we do when it gets dark (wear headlamps and carry flashlights), or rains (get wet), and, occasionally, the big existential question: Why?

Although recently popular nonfiction portrays ultramarathons as the mystical and exclusive province of forgotten tribes, and some fiction paints those who run them in a deviant context of cult-like obsession, the reality, as always, is less sensational. The vast majority of American ultrarunners have achieved at least middle-class economic security, and are gainfully employed at non-menial, challenging, even fulfilling occupations. Surveys suggest that participants in 100-mile races are most likely to be married men in their mid-30s to mid-50s, and are more than twice as likely as the general populace to have a college degree. Though we might ask why they would subject themselves to such an ordeal, my own experience would corroborate this portrait of the typical ultrarunner as mentally stable and financially secure.

Financial stability is something of a prerequisite. While running may seem the idyllically simplest of sports, it can get expensive. Direct costs like a couple of new pairs of shoes every year, clothing and other equipment, and race fees, all

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add up, as do more indirect costs like access to decent health coverage, and 10 hours or more of free time per week. And while the running community is by all accounts exceedingly friendly and open, it’s also a segregated one. The popular notion that some disadvantaged, under-resourced youth can step into a pair of cast-off Nikes and participate in the most primal of sports just doesn’t seem to happen that often in North America, where recreational long-distance running has become a first-world hobby of the moderately privileged.

Historically, running as a sport evolved as a product of leisure. Only decades ago, running for fun or fitness was a curiosity. Neddy Merrill’s swim would have been no less eccentric had he announced his intention to run home, across the county. And in previous centuries, when making a living often required hard daily physical labor, running for fun would be dangerously wasteful of resources; for quite a while, the whole point of being upper-class was not having to work in the fields and sweat and toil in the sun.

Today, we don’t have to plow 30 acres of farmland behind the lumbering butt of an ox. Or buck timber or split firewood until our palms bleed. For most of modern first-world humanity, real hardship, the life-or-death struggles fought by our forefathers, has gotten damned hard to find.

So, here we are, so many of us, with this ingrained work ethic and no real outlet for it. Maybe quite a few of us struggle with this unfulfilled, old-school, frustrated physical drive, because on a daily basis, there’s just no work—no real, strenuous, physically taxing work—for us to do. Days spent at the computer often deliver little in the way of tangible, concrete accomplishment. We are an information-based society, even as we romanticize the artisans, the makers, those who labor and produce.

Neddy Merrill fits the demographic of a modern ultrarunner: married, white, male, middle-aged. Financially secure, free from imminent threat or challenge. While we might call his journey quixotic or deluded or tragic, it does not seem unnatural for his character.

Furthermore, his chosen mode of travel corroborates what we suppose about him. Swimming, the central means by which Neddy encounters the world of his story, as an activity carries definite classist and racist overtones. It connotes leisure and white privilege. In this sense, his stunt of brashly swimming across the literal landscape becomes aggressive, openly arrogant. He means to inflict himself upon the environment, flippantly assert his dominance over it, personally and geographically and socially. A psychologically driven literary analysis might ask what fears and insecurities motivate his display.

Thirty or 40 miles into an ultra, someone always asks, “Why is it we do this to ourselves again?” Though rhetorical, it’s still a good and valid question. Why indeed? If tempted to answer literally, I might suggest that life is suffering, and to understand life, we must understand suffering. Running for 20 or 30 hours will invoke controlled, constructed suffering. This suffering is safe, and temporary, and unlikely to cause permanent damage. It will not inconvenience our loved ones, beyond a bit of transient anxiety. The modern supported ultra is suffering as commodified experience.

Despite the recent boom in organized ultramarathons, participants make up a very narrow slice of the population—think one percent of one percent. Or, to put it another way, if 0.5 percent of Americans ran a marathon last year, we’re talking about even fewer who go farther.

“Extreme” races have seen much more growth, meanwhile, at more reasonable distances. Throughout the country, Tough Mudders, Warrior Dashes, and 200-mile overnight team relays have sprung up as major athletic industry. For a substantial but affordable price, you can run through mud and obstacles and electrical shocks, and spend a day and a night crammed into a smelly van with half a dozen of your best middle-aged buds. We’re far from the first to invent the idea of faking or recreating our youth in order to recapture it, or pretend it isn’t over. Indeed, dumb stunts like Neddy Merrill’s swim are almost de rigeur, and if anything, we might wonder what’s taken the sports entertainment business so long to cash in.

To look at it another way, while physical work is largely absent from our lives, and all of the traditional opportunities for testing and proving ourselves are past—after all, wars are for the young—many of us secretly long for dire situations. We fantasize about crises like in the movies, circumstances and conflicts that will impose narrative and purpose on our lives—but only vicariously.

Witness the popularity of post-apocalyptic dramas. These are most recently visible in the Zombie Apocalypse craze, but before that came the plague narratives, and before that the post-nuclear-holocaust dystopias. Need we take this all the way back to Robinson Crusoe, to demonstrate a continuing fetish for a stripped-down existence? Call it a fantasy of escape from civilization, to a world where day-to-day survival makes life meaningful. Indeed, where does TV capitalize on this more than in the show Survivor? Relatable characters, real people, are literally transported from their everyday trivial lives and resituated in a narrative where the compelling goals are physical and mental competitions; the cash prize is only an excuse. We could do that, we say, watching Survivor or The Walking Dead, and in our imaginations we’re reprimed from the comfortable, easy lives we subconsciously despise.
Jason “Ras” Vaughan, an athlete who is taking ultrarunning to new extremes, recently recorded an OKT (Only Known Time) for a Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim-x3 crossing of the Grand Canyon. That’s starting at one rim, running/hiking down and back up the other side, and returning to his starting point—and then repeating the same route twice more, non-stop. It took him 68 hours and 10 minutes.

In a recent interview with Tim Mathis for Trail Runner magazine, Ras discusses how he keeps going. “A favorite mental exercise is to ask myself, if my daughter’s life were in danger and the only thing that could save her would be to complete this distance, could I do it? And the answer is always, undoubtedly, yes. I can run. I can powerhike. I can walk. I can crawl. Whatever it takes. At that point I have to admit that I am physically capable of doing it, so it’s just a matter of motivating myself to do so. That line of reasoning takes ‘can’t’ off the table. The question then becomes, how quickly or how slowly?”

We all like to imagine that, if truly tested, we would find the strength to persevere. Relatively few of us externalize those fantasies into real tests of our abilities, but the impulse itself is a common one.

For most of us, our everyday life is achingly devoid of narrative. There being really no such thing as a vision quest anymore in modern, secular America, training oneself physically and mentally for a grueling athletic test may be the next best thing. Runners in ultras may hallucinate. They may throw up. They may cry and forget their own names. And, unlike so much else in our self-esteem culture, there is a very real chance of failure. Courses have cutoff times—and unlike Fun Runs where every participant gets a ribbon, half or more of the starters in the longer ultras may go home without the garishly outsized belt-buckle most races hand out as finisher’s medals. Interestingly, in ultra parlance, to “buckle” means not to break or fail, but to successfully finish under the cutoff time.

Benedictine monks are encouraged to meditate on how each day could be the day of their death. Buddhist self-help books with titles like “Relax, You’re Going to Die!” promote the looming eternal presence of death as a path to mindfulness and the fuller contemplation of life. Chances are that most of us will go through horrible deprivation and humiliation before we die. This will happen. The process is likely to be physically unpleasant.

Meanwhile, it’s possible to acquaint ourselves with corporeal death in a more prosaic way, in controlled dosages. My cousin, who possesses advanced degrees in chemistry and biology, pronounces cheerfully, “‘The Wall’? When runners say, ‘I’m dying’? On a cellular level, that’s exactly what’s happening.” We’re having this conversation over Thanksgiving dinner. We’re eating stuffing and gravy, and turkey, the dark meat. “Sweeping, catastrophic, cell death. Biologically, your body really believes you’re dying. So, it reacts accordingly.”

Running all day and all night is, most simply, a proposition of calories. Simple physics dictates that most people will exhaust their body’s energy stores of glycogen in the first three or four hours, and after that, burning mostly body fat gets inefficient and painful. You need to eat, and most ultramarathons are supported by aid stations roughly every four or five miles. Offerings range from the spare to the lavish, but we’re not talking about the paper cups of water or Gatorade handed out halfway through your local 5K. There’s no way of predicting what will look good—or what you’ll be able to keep down—in the middle of the night. Some aid stations resemble surreally misplaced buffets, with spreads including homemade cookies, breads and poundcakes, fruit, carbohydrate gels and electrolyte pills, watermelon, pierogies, pasta, soda (cold or warm, fizzy or flat), M&Ms, PB&J, turkey sandwiches, chocolate turtles, homemade hummus, popsicles, ramen noodles, potato soup, hard-boiled eggs, coffee hot or iced…. Arriving at one of these stations is reminiscent of Neddy’s early receptions, when his neighbors pour him a drink and toast his adventure. Every runner, from the leaders to the last stragglers battling cutoff times, is received like a Super Bowl MVP between plays—or maybe it’s more like being met by an Indy pit crew. I’ve staggered in, glazed and bewildered, had my hydration pack stripped, filled, and slapped back on my back before I could verbalize more than hello. Experienced volunteers push calories, and give firm advice: I’ve been made to sit down (or not), or carry a banana on my way out, more than once.

As the race goes on, the celebratory atmosphere tilts more toward managed catastrophe, a battlefield triage, with walking-wounded runners shuffling in circles and mumbling into hot cocoa cups, and others green-faced and ill in camp chairs or stretched out on the dewy grass. Race numbers are torn off and handed over, ceremoniously or with disgust, to formally drop out of the race.

The longer you linger in such an oasis, the harder it gets to go on. Each is best departed quickly for the next.

Midway through his expedition, Neddy encounters a major highway crossing, and has to wait, half-dressed and humiliated, before he’s able to cross and carry on. Cheever tells us Neddy “had known from the start that this was a part of his
journey—it had been on his maps—but confronted now with the lines of traffic, worming through the summery light, he found himself unprepared.”

Adversities test Neddy’s resolve, but for reasons both practical and psychological, he carries on. Toward the end, a single lap the length of a residential pool challenges his strength in a way he could not have comprehended that morning, back when “he had an inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools.” He’s chilled to the bone, and feels he “might never be warm again.” He climbs feebly the ladder down into his last pool.

Though the aid stations at ultras never turn cold and unwelcoming as do Neddy’s receptions, the empty miles at night provide more than enough doubt and regret. We think, “I wasn’t expecting this,” when the exhaustion and mental and physical weakness become more than we signed on for. We knew better when we started, but somehow memories of previous races get blotted from our minds; the well of despair is deep and new, a surprise each time.

Neddy should have foreseen more practically the problems with his idea. More symbolically, he should have seen where his lifestyle was leading. Insert here a commentary on American postwar consumer paradise. Insert here our apparently unending capacities for denial, wishful thinking, naivety. Insert here, “If we do not change direction, we will end up where we are headed.”

My loose misunderstanding of Buddhism starts at the Four Noble Truths, and the metaphor that makes the best sense of them for me is one particular 100-mile race. In its current incarnation, this race’s course consists of four roughly equal loops.

On the first loop, while the sun rises and through the morning, just about everyone feels good. We understand intellectually how it will be later on, but that understanding stays distant. We comprehend abstractly that suffering exists in the world, and that it will inevitably come to us.

Over the second loop, the afternoon sun may get hot. We pass the same trail for a second time, no longer on fresh legs. With half the race ahead of us, we may wonder what we’ve gotten ourselves into. We begin to consider how suffering will be an unavoidable component of our experience, soon. Suffering is coming to us.

For most runners, the sun sets during our third loop. New things begin to hurt. The same sections of trail seem longer and more difficult, and serious doubts arise. We contemplate means of ending our suffering. No matter how we have prepared ourselves, the idea is seductive that we can just stop. Every aid station offers the opportunity to drop out. Consequences are rationalized.

By the fourth and final loop, the dark path looks nothing like the ones we followed all day; goals are let go, one by one. We will not finish as quickly as we had hoped. Then the fallback goal time after that is let go. We may wonder if we will finish at all, but we understand, maybe, that stopping won’t solve anything more than temporarily. Goals were just goals, and finishing is just finishing. Suffering becomes only suffering, and carries no meaning beyond itself. Try to stay on the path.

Immediately after one of these events, I’m not elated or overjoyed so much as just, prosaically enough, tired, irritable from physical exhaustion and sleep deprivation. And a day or so later, after sleeping but when the limbs are still heavy, the muscles still sore, I’m not calmed or at peace or fulfilled or validated so much; life isn’t sweeter or more bearable or suddenly imbued with meaning.

I do feel quiet. The feeling dissipates, leaving no particularly mystical insight behind.

The Unabomber Ted Kaczynski posits in his “Industrial Society and Its Future” that modern identities are oversocialized and stunted, in that we are deprived of “real goals,” or inherently meaningful activities tied directly to our basic needs. Our participation in society necessitates a dependence on others to fulfill these needs, and robs us of agency in our own lives.

To maintain the illusion that our lives and our actions have meaning, he asserts, we develop “surrogate goals” that we artificially imbue with meaning. We know explicitly what Kaczynski thinks of long-distance running: he uses it as perhaps his clearest example of how modern humanity devotes significant time and energy into an arbitrary, trivial goal in order to sublimate the absence of real challenge or meaning in our lives.

To Kaczynski, Neddy Merrill would be the epitome of what’s wrong with our industrialized bourgeois society. He is an oppressive participant in the system, and at the same time deeply, tragically, inherently unfulfilled. The lack of meaningful goals in his life, the unquestioned ease with which luxuries are furnished and his basic needs are answered, drains him of purpose. The story, in this light, illustrates his inevitable self-destructive dissolution.

“The Swimmer” is many things: allegory for postwar American delusion and denial, the decay and hollow demise of upper-class modernity; the fickle betrayal at the heart of the American dream. It is a critique and denunciation of a way of life as much as it is a tragedy or cautionary tale. As readers, we must
identify with Neddy for the story to work, but his arrogance invokes a ready ambivalence as well, and the ending can be read as a kind of social retribution, if he gets what he’s deserved.

Of course, the story is not a perfect analogue for the modern ultramarathon, but if “The Swimmer” makes significant observations about postwar American culture and ideals, the surreal story’s real-life parallels raise the same questions in the 21st century about American life, leisure and pursuit of happiness. Was Cheever’s story prophetic, of a society that would literalize his metaphor more than anyone could have imagined? Does his story read differently now, 50 years later, as privileged fitness tourists travel the world for “adventure races” the way Hemingway’s Lost Generation characters sought new exotic drinks? In hindsight, this convergence of human nature, first-world leisure, commercialized athleticism, and the popular imagination may have been inevitable. Have we assimilated Cheever’s cautionary tale and, in the ultimate inversion, embraced its central metaphor as a model?

In any case, knowing what we know, the question of “why Neddy does it” is beside the point, regardless of whether you’d swim across the county or run 100 miles yourself. The next time a friend shares a post-race pic of himself mud-splattered and wearing Viking horns and hoisting a stein of beer, or a coworker shows up Monday morning disoriented and smiling and wearing a new gaudy belt buckle and unable to negotiate the stairs, maybe their irrationality won’t be so unfathomable.

Maybe even, some dark summer night, you’ll imagine a splash in your pool, and reach for a rocks glass before hitting the searchlights. Maybe you’ll glimpse a string of bobbing headlamps in the metropark after midnight, and instead of shaking your head, you’ll wonder if you still have those running shoes.

Maybe the shoes still fit, you’ll think. Maybe the water’s just fine.

Dave Essinger’s recent fiction and essays have appeared in The Pinch, Quarter After Eight, Pinдельйboz, Weber—The Contemporary West, and elsewhere. He received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and currently teaches creative writing and edits the literary magazine Slippery Elm at The University of Findlay, in Ohio. He has run the Mohican and Burning River 100-mile races four times each, and his favorite pointless workout is 10x1600s. He recently finished a novel about ultrarunners.
Liquid salt, toxins, dripping down my skin fast as mercury,  
He streaks Vaseline on my nose, brow, stomach,  
 Tells me to be calm, tells me to focus on my distance, my defense, pace myself.  
Everything feels far away. I close my eyes, breathe, think about my feet  
Firm on the red canvas ring. The constant buzz of the crowd. Standing room only.  
Crackling speakers. Neon lights. High pitched whistles. The noises are sharp and loud  
Like screeching breaks on trash day, but his voice soft and clear as  
A mother’s kiss after the lullaby, before leaving the room unnoticed.

He sends me off like a child to her first day of school.  
I grunt, a tiger’s low, stern growl and the warm fear boils down an inch inside  
my gut. Face to face, her eyes glacial, I picture her breakable,  
Her legs brittle firewood, her arms china dolls,  
Her torso the carcass of grandma’s Christmas turkey,  
Hitting her with a hard cross so her ripe head splits open,  
Seeds and juice spilling over my gloves.

The bell sounds crisp as lightning and she races to attack. Noises subside,  
Like muffled screams from headphones of a punk rock kid on the bus.  
I hear only my breath, his voice behind me and the slap of arms and legs against  
Skin and leather. Electrons fire swiftly. Adrenaline gushes through blood.  
The sting of a loud hook and I return with a kick.  
Looking for patches of unguarded skin, timing her combinations,  
Passion overcomes fear and I am in it.  
Then the bell sounds again.

He kneels before me, massages my long weapons,  
My swords of meat and bone.  
Tells me to step out more, tells me to keep on my toes, to watch for hooks.  
His words dance around me like dandelion fluff,  
Can’t catch them so I stare into his eyes. Solid, blue steel.  
I feel my fists tight with gauze. I feel his touch, firm, deep.  
I am here, now, more present than ever.

Roxy Richardson began writing in middle school in Maryland where she won the first-ever Creating Writing Award at Sandy Spring Friends School. She graduated from La Salle University in Philadelphia with a BA in communications. After college she moved to Los Angeles. She was a semi-finalist in the Chesterfield Screenwriting Competition in 2002. For 10 years she set aside writing to focus on her career as a professional Muay Thai fighter. Today she lives in LA where she owns her own gym, Function 5 Fitness. On her days off she enjoys writing and spending time with her boyfriend and their cats.
As I was putting my daughter to bed one recent night, she complained of a loose tooth that refused to come out. We discussed various methods of speeding up the process, all of which involved some degree of pain. Not able to find a satisfactory solution, I suggested she run full speed into a wall. “That would do it,” I told her. “It worked for me, when I was your age.” I had a friend who was a little bit faster than me. I didn’t like details. “It happened when I was just your age,” I began. “I was a fast runner in the fifth grade. But I had a friend who was a little bit faster than me. I didn’t like coming in second place all the time, so my goal was to beat him in a foot race—just once. Just once, and I would be satisfied...”

The abridged version of the story goes like this: I did beat my friend in a foot race, once and only once. I wonder if he remembers this. It was inside the gym at Weitzel Elementary School, in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1973, in Mr. Riley’s PE class. The accomplishment did not give me much satisfaction, but it did relieve me of some teeth. I won the race because my nemesis saw the brick wall and slowed down, while I was looking to the side to see who was ahead. By the time I faced forward, it was too late. BAM. To everyone’s amusement, I spit out two teeth as blood trickled from my mouth. This cautionary tale could mean many things: Pride cometh before a downfall. Watch where you are going. Pay attention, for Christ’s sake. Be careful what you wish for. To my daughter, it proved what she already knew: fifth-grade boys are idiots.

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From the same period of my life, I have another (and better) memory of running. My family was on a camping trip in northern Minnesota. We had caught a creel of fish, bluegills, I think, at Lake-Of-The-Woods, on the Canadian border. It felt like wild country to me, on the edge of some great mystery. We had just finished setting up our tent-trailer (the kind no one has anymore, essentially an aluminum box with a side-flap that served as a kitchen counter) when the sky turned a strange pea-green-soup color and the wind started raking trees at the campground. Tornado weather. My mother, listening to the radio for any reports of funnel clouds, mentioned that the nearby town of Warroad was clocking gusts at 75 miles an hour. I remember this because she used the phrase “hurricane force.” Our tent would not stay up. We had to eat our Spam and beans and then sleep in the station wagon, which rocked back and forth.

The clouds roiled in all shades of charcoal gray to olive green, to deep cold blue, and seemed to form pockets from which bursts of glorious violence emanated. Lightning shredded the sky above the lake. But there was no place else for us to go; there was only one road to the campground, and it headed back the way we had come, into worse weather. We hunkered down. But no funnel cloud developed, and it seemed safe enough for the kids to play. The wind filled me with fierce and primitive joy, and I ran and ran and ran through fields of grass, leaping into the air, amazed when a gust would catch my skinny body and push it back, so that I landed in the same place from which I launched. I felt that the wind and I had become a single force, shaving the grass, whipping the lake into a foaming frenzy. I swallowed a bug—or, to be more precise, the wind blasted the unfortunate insect through my open mouth, and it slammed with sharp and startling force into the back of my throat. This did not disturb me at all. It added to my sense of glee. I was one with the wind, the grass, even the bug.

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So not long after I tell Angela the bedtime story about losing my teeth, I make contact with my old friend, who I haven’t seen in 30 years. As it turns out, we share a common interest in rock climbing. My friend’s wife, a fine photographer and climber in her own right, has taken some great photos of her husband on various climbs. I learn that they are coming through Washington on a trip to Alaska. We arrange to spend a day at Index, a local granite crag. A few days before they arrive, I take another gander at some of the photos, and remark to my wife that it looks like he has been leading some pretty hard climbs—a grade harder than anything I have so far led. “So?” my wife replies. (She has a knack for asking the right questions.) “I’m just saying,” I mutter, with a hint of annoyance. Angela, peering up from her Calvin & Hobbes comic book, asks “Is this the same guy you raced against in the fifth grade when you knocked out your teeth?” “Yes,” I answer. She trades a certain look with her mother, and I feel compelled to add “I’m not in the fifth grade anymore.” My wife keeps her silence, just keeps cooking those eggs. Maddening, how she manages to say nothing and something at the same time.

It starts early, this need to compare one’s self to others. I am most blessed when I can escape it. Perhaps one reason for this is that I’m not really very good at anything. I think another (and more interesting) reason is that a certain freedom, a lightness of being, comes from the dissolution of ego. As a kid, I
was instinctively drawn to running and climbing. There are various reasons for this, but certainly one reason is that in these activities I felt free of the need to measure up to anyone’s expectation. Although I was an active and fairly athletic kid, I was lacking in the self-confidence and aggressiveness that distinguishes a kid on the playground or in team sports. I was always afraid that under pressure I would mess up, and this anxiety led me to try too hard—which, paradoxically, dooms one to awkwardness when grace is most essential. I was the kid that ran all over the basketball court, but never got the ball.

I loved to be alone in the woods, where no one was watching and I was free to be capable. I loved running along the Pipeline road near my home, scrambling on the boulders of Mount Elden, climbing in the Ponderosas as high as I could get. I found myself by losing myself in the immediacy of nature and the rhythms of my own exertion. This state-of-being is not characterized by reflective thought; on the contrary, it is characterized by the absence of reflective thought. There is, in moments of rapt attention, an evaporation of the self into an ocean of sensation during which the boundary that we usually feel between the physical and the spiritual melts away. This can’t happen, for me at any rate, when I am keeping score.

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Twenty years after I ate a bug in a windstorm, I was the third baseman on a church softball team in Missoula, Montana. I liked playing third base. I liked the line-drives, the need for sudden bursts of speed. I discovered in myself the competitive spirit that I lacked as a child. Unfortunately, despite the presence of some good athletes and power-hitters, our team had a miserable record. The reason—or at least the most evident of a few reasons—was our right fielder, Richard “Pot-Shot” Potter. Pot-Shot was a burly man, strong as a bear, with an arm like a cannon. He was also developmentally disabled, and a resident of the men’s group home my first wife and I managed together. Pot-Shot loved softball, but didn’t grasp the point of the game.

I would nod and say “uh-huh.”

And then, next game, he would trot out to scoop up right field grounders, wind up his cannon arm with every ounce of spirit he had, and hurl the softball into some distant pocket of sky as if he and God were playing a game of catch. Upon discovering this tendency, the members of an unscrupulous team (and there are some in church league) would shout just as loudly at Rich as we would, and likely as not the ball would come crashing down with stunning force on the opposing team’s dugout just a couple of seconds after runners from each and every base rounded third where I was helpless to hinder them. If the batters on the opposing team knew how to aim their hits toward right field, the innings were long indeed. Eventually, we’d manage three outs, and Rich would come loping up to our dugout with a huge grin on his face. This is one of my finest memories of Missoula: Mount Sentinel and Mount Jumbo in the background, bathed in the beer-colored light of summer sunset, and Richard “Pot-Shot” Potter high-fiving his teammates as he entered the dugout, saying “Hoooboy! Lots of balls!”

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In 1981, I played trombone in the jazz ensemble at Anchorage Community College in Alaska. It was in this group that I met Mike—a kid with flaming red hair, an adventurous spirit, a thirst for spiritual experiences, and a true gift for jazz trombone. I, on the other hand, loved jazz band the way Pot-Shot loved softball, which is to say I put my heart and soul into it, but I probably wasn’t an asset to the ensemble. I sat second chair, but sometimes there is a lot of difference between first and second chair. My tone was asthmatic and pinched, whereas Mike’s was bold, full, and golden—like a sunset. I often felt inadequate when I realized the gap between Mike’s talents and mine, just as I felt inadequate 10 years earlier when I couldn’t run fast enough. However, I loved the music, and when it was my turn to take a solo, the feelings of inferiority and the need to compare myself to Mike evaporated in the sheer joy of improvisation. I don’t know how it sounded to an audience, but it sounded good in my head. Mike, God bless him, was gracious enough to never disabuse me of that notion.

We became friends. Sometimes we’d head out to the sea stacks along Turnagain Arm, where we scrambled up the shattered rock and watched the bore tides come in while we drank Guinness, ate brown goat cheese, and talked about Buddhism and Christianity. We chased a moose (bad idea), panned for gold at his family’s claim on the Kenai Peninsula, and listened for hours to recordings of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and JJ Johnson.

While we hiked through Alaskan wilderness, I shared with him my love of the desert. In particular, I spoke to him of an unnamed spring in the Grand Canyon, nestled at the base of the Redwall Limestone below Horseshoe Mesa on the way to Sockdolager Rapids. Seen from above, it was a tiny, blessed burst of vegetation where the water emerged from the ground, and then a thin thread of vibrant green as the water snaked its way down through jumbled vermillion rock, and then vanished as abruptly as it began. Water in the desert—all the more
precious because of its fleeting presence. It was, I said, a sacred spot. I described the deep alcoves of limestone, how echoes came back in waves.

I moved back to Arizona and didn’t hear from Mike for a couple of years. One March night, he called out of the blue and said he was in Utah and was on his way to Flagstaff. He had one goal: to play his trombone at that spring, if I would take him there. So on a cold, windy March day we headed for the canyon.

We trudged and slipped down muddy switchbacks with Mike’s trombone until we found a place where the Redwall Limestone formed a vast horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre. Mike began with scales and arpeggios, which vaulted from cliff to cliff until it seemed there was a chorus of hidden trombonists perched on ledges throughout the canyon. We took turns playing the horn. We played Brahms, hymns, jazz standards—alternating soaring golden tones with delightfully fat and brassy-edged low notes. The music swirled through alcoves and spilled over ridges until it seemed to come from the sky itself.

As we were hiking out of the canyon, we encountered a backpacker who laughed when he saw the trombone case. The celestial music, as he described it, had spooked him; he had wondered if it might be Judgment Day.

Since that time, the canyon has become more crowded, even its wilder sections. I would hesitate to do what we did again. The opportunity for silence and solitude is one of the best gifts of nature, and perhaps our music might have been a crude invasion of someone’s peace. But I can’t say I regret it.

It didn’t matter that Mike was a better trombonist than me. What mattered was that our peculiar decision to lug a brass horn down to Horseshoe Mesa—something that probably could have earned us a ticket or at least a lecture from a ranger—unfolded into an extraordinary moment in which the creativity of human beings dovetailed exquisitely with the glory of nature. It is not hokey, I hope, to attach the word praise to what happened, and where praise is present, ego blows away in the wind.

And so my friend who I have not seen in 30 years arrives, and, yes, it turns out that he is a better climber than me and he has more hair. In fact, he has dreads. We went to a place called Index, where jagged peaks jut into the sky above a river called the Skykomish—an apt name for a mountain stream that throws itself against boulders and is filled with steelhead that throw themselves upstream, with equal vigor. We chose a fine three-pitch route up the wall, and, like the steelhead, fought against gravity. I groveled my way up, not in fine style and taking a few falls, while my friend led all three pitches, clean. But that is not the point.

The point is that late that night, when I closed my eyes and drifted into sleep, I relived just how it felt to get a finger lock in the thin crack of “Slow Children,” to lay back against a sharp arete, step gingerly into a delicate stem, have my feet hold, and take just one second to look across the valley at the splendid north face of Mount Index and the quicksilver ribbon of Bridalveil Falls tumbling through the forest of Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock, and Alaskan Cedar. I once again sensed the sun on the back of my neck, smelled the breeze infused with the resin of all those trees, and felt in my throbbing fingertips the texture of granite on crimped ledges. And that is the same feeling, or pretty damn similar, to running into a hurricane wind, playing trombone in the Grand Canyon, or firing softballs as high and as hard as you can just for the sheer holy hell of it. So what if someone does it better? The point of the game is joy. Even a 47-year-old man, ordinary in all respects, can feel it. And I can still keep all my teeth.

Mark Rozema’s first book of nonfiction, Road Trip, will be soon be published by Boreal Books. His recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Flyway, The Superstition Review, The Soundings Review, Weber—The Contemporary West, and Camas—The Nature of The West. He lives in Shoreline, Washington, where he enjoys climbing, running, gardening, and spending time with his wife, daughters, and dogs.
In the Back of the End Zone

Essay

I’m standing in my seat, section RR, row 65, pretty high up in the west end zone of Bryant-Denny Stadium. I’m scanning the lower sections wishing that we’d brought those binoculars, the ones he used to hand me at halftime so I could look at “all the pretty girls.” The action on the field in these opening minutes of the third quarter doesn’t interest me right now. If I don’t see him emerge from the tunnel soon, I’m calling Emergency Services. Just then, his head appears, the still-curving gray hair on the sides, the bright pink skin on top. He walks haltingly, one step with the right, the left coming up slowly to meet it. He looks up, searching the sea of unknown faces. Finally, he sees me now. Still, he recognizes me.

I can breathe normally again, but for how long?

***

I’m 9 years old, attending my first college football game with my Daddy. His steady hand clutches mine as he maneuvers us through throngs of Crimson-clad fans and a smattering of bright Orange foes.

It’s 1965, Alabama versus Tennessee at Birmingham’s Legion Field. We arrive at the main gate, No. 7, and I see the souvenir vendors hawking shakers and pennants and Roll Tide metal buttons with streaming crimson and white ribbons hanging from them. I want one of these but hesitate. I don’t want to break my Daddy’s mood because, even at age nine, I know he’s nervous. He’s always nervous before Alabama games. He wants us to be in our seats now. It’s only noon, the game doesn’t start until 1:30, but it’s important for us to be there before the team arrives, as if without us, the team cannot win.

As if they might feel abandoned, alone.

Daddy buys us a ten-cent newspaper with today’s lineups. This plus our hamburgers and Cokes we take to our seats in the lower West stands, on the right of the press box side at about the 5 yard line. I try not to drink all my Coke, because I know that I can go to the bathroom only when he goes. I can’t wait for the game to start; I just know we’re gonna win.

Alabama’s season started with a controversial loss to Georgia. We feel that they cheated. I remember crying at the unfairness, at a Bulldog receiver whose knees were clearly touching the ground before he lateralled for Georgia’s winning touchdown. Since then, our quarterback, Steve Sloan, has led us to five straight victories, and from what I gather, Tennessee will be the sixth.

But of course, nothing is ever certain when you’re counting on college-age guys.

By the waning moments of the game, Alabama has squandered scoring chances through fumbles and interceptions, and now, Sloan is hurt and we’re depending on sophomore Kenny Stabler to lead our last-second charge. The score is 7-7, but we’re inside the Tennessee 10 yard line. Stabler is sacked, and then instead of calling time out as the seconds tick away, he lines the team up and throws the ball out of bounds to save that last, precious timeout. Now he can take one more shot at the end zone before turning to our not-so-reliable kicker for a winning field goal. Or at least that’s what I think must be going on in the Bama QB’s mind.

For there is another, sadder reality. When he threw the ball away, Stabler viewed the scoreboard clock which clearly displayed THIRD DOWN. But the sideline marker showed just as clearly FOURTH DOWN, or at least the barely perceptible “4” hidden amongst players, officials, and coaches. Stabler didn’t see it. I didn’t see it. I don’t know how many of the 60,000 fans in attendance that day did see it.

But I know one who did. He was sitting right beside me:

“No!!!! Don’t throw it away……….DAMN IT!!!!!!

Damn it indeed.

Tennessee has the ball now; their quarterback takes a knee and Orange fans everywhere rejoice because to them, after losing to Alabama for the last six years, a tie is as good as a wink to a blind coach.

It’s funny when I think about it, but my first high school football game—our hometown Bessemer Purple Tigers versus Birmingham’s Banks High Jets—ended in a 13-13 tie. What was it with me and ties? Even when I was told that “A tie is like kissing your sister,” it meant nothing to me. I had no sister and wouldn’t kiss her if I did.

It’s a strange feeling believing that your team should have won, but knowing, at least, that you didn’t lose.

But if I feel strange, my Daddy feels bitter. Most definitely. The hand that grips mine is still steady, but hardly reassuring, as we race the nearly two miles to our car which he has situated perfectly, facing the highway. He screams us out of the parking lot, and who really knows if that scream is from our accelerator or from my Daddy’s throat? Though we succeed in beating all the traffic home, on the way, as he tunes into the Bama radio station to hear the post-game obit, I wonder only this:

“Will he ever take me to another football game again?”

And at season’s end, when Alabama defeats Nebraska in the Orange Bowl and wins the National Championship, I’m still wondering.
My fears were unfounded. By the next season, he had planned our game, and fortunately, the victim was Vanderbilt. We won 42-6, and I felt that I had passed some rite; I had entered the adult world of relishing victory in person with my father, and as we drove home that October day, he explained how superior Alabama was in every phase of the game to the lowly Commodores from Nashville.

At 11 years old, I thought I was a man.

Each year afterward I went to a game with my Daddy. My mother gave up her ticket willingly. She went to games only for the spectacle, only to have an outing of some sort since Daddy was never the outgoing, man-about-town type. Mom was also an Auburn fan, not the best company for my Daddy during these crucial Bama games.

When they did go together, however, they always brought my brother and me a souvenir from the game. Player autographs, game programs, once, even one of those buttons with ribbons. But on one evening after an afternoon game—a day in November when Alabama narrowly defeated Mississippi State 20-19—they returned with sweatshirts for my brother and me. Mine was white with the university seal emblazoned in Crimson, and “The University of Alabama” circling that seal. I wore my sweatshirt religiously every weekend and on many days after school. I don’t know why, exactly, it meant so much. I don’t know what it said to me out of all the other shirts and Alabama-laden gear I had. Maybe it was because no one else had one like it—my mark of distinction. I wore my prized gift the next season too, even when it started to tighten on me.

Sometime later, out of my sight and knowledge, my mother got rid of my shirt, or maybe she gave it to someone. Thinking that it might have been thrown into the trash heap hurts too much. We had a maid then. Dissie. Dissie had grandchildren. Maybe one of them got my sweatshirt. I hope so.

Because really, I forgot it after a time. Completely. Yet, something about it stayed with me. Often I miss what I never realized at the time was most important to me. What I never realized I had.

What did I have in those days? And what, now, am I missing?

My dad and I went to Alabama games through my high school years. The last game we saw together in this era was the 1973 Iron Bowl. My only Iron Bowl. On this cloudy late November Saturday, Alabama beat Auburn 17-13. Auburn almost won, too. Their wing-back, Thomas Gossum, caught a touchdown pass that might have cinched the game had he not stepped out of bounds before making the catch. The reception was ruled illegal, and so we won. But it was one of those victories where you see so clearly that you could or should have lost. Relief tinged with the knowledge that, most likely, you were lucky and undeserving of the win. Thomas Gossum became a local TV-news sports anchor, and every time I’d see him in the ensuing years, I’d think: “One step less and maybe you’d be somewhere else, somewhere better.” I often wonder if that’s what he was thinking too.

When I entered college, Dad and I stopped going to Alabama games together. He’d still go to three or four every year, but by then instead of buying his ticket, he worked out a deal to get a stadium pass, allowing him to move about the stadium and sit or stand wherever he wanted. While I still kept up with the team’s fortunes, I had other concerns. I didn’t go to “The University” but rather attended a much smaller school. There, I focused on literature, got involved in semi-radical politics and student government. Football sweatshirts and Crimson pennants faded from my world, and I didn’t attend another game for more than 20 years.

I thought during that time that I had put the past securely behind me. That it was dead. But I was still so young and had only begun to learn my own history. I had only begun to study the literature and philosophy of the South’s great writer, William Faulkner.

He’s safe beside me now, back in his seat. I should never have let him go to the restroom alone. But to have done otherwise would be an admission I’m not ready to make. I see now that our relationship is changing, that we’re past something, though I still refuse to identify what that something is. Sometimes, he’ll point to a player, and I don’t know if his words are matching his thoughts, if he is actually saying what he means.

I’m doubting his memory. His mind. But then he says:

“Don’t you see number 27? He’s the one who made that tackle. Right there!”

And I look, but I don’t see number 27. Until he emerges from the pile.

My Daddy is right. He knows what he’s talking about, and I’m so relieved that I don’t even add the last part of my thought: “This time.”

But even I can’t dismiss that his actions and reactions are slower this year. Even his profanity is muted. Where are the “damns” and “hells” at least? For Bama is definitely not playing flawlessly.

Still, the Crimson Tide has led for most of the game, but with less than a minute to go, the lead is only four points and Arkansas has the ball at midfield. They could still win; they could pull off a miracle pass like Louisiana Tech did last week. Louisiana Tech should never beat Alabama. Not in this life, or any other for that matter.
The Hogs have one more play, for the clock will run out afterward. Their quarterback, Clint Stoerner, drops back and flings the ball to the end zone. Right in our line of sight. I can see what will happen now. And it does. Their receiver is tall, but three Bama defensive backs surround him. They all jump for the ball, and a Bama defender bats it away from the Hog receiver. My relief doesn’t register because, yes, I see the ball angling toward the ground, but right into the arm space of another Arkansas back. He reaches, he actually touches the ball. My heart stops and I see our drive home. Without my Daddy’s cussing. Without his quick rage and utter contempt for all that has happened. I’ll hear only a baffled silence. One that I won’t know how to fill.

I don’t close my eyes, though, and what I see next gives me hope for all humankind, forever. The Arkansas back drops the ball. The ball hits the ground and bounces.

How can there be such eternal joy over a brown football lying still on a cold green field?

I grab my Daddy’s arm. And we scream together, along with the 90,000 other fans in attendance.

On this fall day, we’ve won.

***

I do miss things more than I’ll admit. Sometime after I turn 40, after I’ve been teaching Faulkner for 15 years, it hits me that my past is neither “dead,” nor “past;” for now, I want to go to Alabama games again with my Dad. Why have I waited so long? Why have I waited for him to make the first move? It’s so silly. I don’t have to wait or wonder whether he’d like to go. So I call the Alabama ticket office, order two tickets for whatever game they have available, and then call him with this news:

“Dad, you and I are going to see Alabama play Arkansas this year!”

There is only a moment’s pause.

“Did you get the seats up high? You know that’s the best place to watch!”

“Yeah, they’re as high as I could get.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard him happier.

And so our tradition is renewed, and I imagine that it will go on indefinitely, or at least for the next 10 of 15 years. He’s only 68; surely we have time.

For the next five years we select our games. My wife and two daughters and I drive the 500-mile round trip to Bessemer, and then on game day, Dad and I head to Tuscaloosa, always managing to arrive early enough to get into our seats to keep the players company as they go through their warmups.

Although we lose to Arkansas on that first renewal, I don’t mind so much...
because even Alabama losses mean that Dad and I are together, that we’re experi-
encing “this” together. It’s a ritual and history we’re keeping alive, and though we are only one pair of father and son devotees, I don’t believe anyone is more obsessed in their devotion to Alabama football than we are.

I recognize that it’s always been that way, too. Once, when I was a Cub Scout and our Pack was holding its annual pinewood derby/dinner, our Pack leader, Jack Guyton—also a neighbor of ours—announced that they were awarding a special prize that evening to one of the fathers. I don’t remember what the prize was actually for, but Mr. Guyton brought out a framed photograph of star Bama quarterback Joe Namath, with a slip of white paper underneath the photo bearing Namath’s flared-script autograph.

“We’re giving this emblem to the one person here tonight who would most appreciate it. The most dedicated Alabama fan we know. Alvin Barr.”

Everyone roared their approval, and though I knew they were right, I still couldn’t believe that they were so perceptive—that they knew my father so completely.

That they appreciated him and his love for the Crimson Tide as much as I did.

And my disbelief barely diminished as I saw him walk to the stage to accept his award.

That framed Namath icon sacredly adorned our den wall for decades, strate-
gically placed just above the television set.

I’m ashamed that I don’t know where it rests today, or if we still have it at all.

The year after we lost to Arkansas, we handed a much less distinguished foe a lopsided loss. On our way back to the car, we passed the Alabama Bookstore on Paul Bryant Drive. As I glanced in the window, my heart stopped. There, hang-
ing on the far wall, was a white sweatshirt, wrapped in clear dry-cleaning style plastic, clearly showing the Crimson University seal, the legend, University of Alabama, encircling that seal.

“Dad, I have to go in here!”

I was breaking our normal protocol, of course. Beating traffic, or in this case, risking not beating it. He was in a good humor though: “Go ahead, but don’t take too long.”

I’ll remember his smile, always, as if he knew what I was about to buy. As if this had been his plan all along.

When I saw the price on this all-cotton sweatshirt, I almost gave it up. Forty five dollars for a sweatshirt? What would my wife say? How crazy would she think I was? To what degree would she be right?

Fortunately—or maybe not-so-much for my budget—I’m a person who clearly sees that a large price today will mean nothing years into the future. I’m a tremendous rationalizer. So I bought the shirt, my “remembrance of things past,” or as the newer translation of Proust’s epic puts it, my successful “search for lost time.”

***

We walk away from the stadium, thrilled at the last-second victory over Arkansas, but still sweating from the near-miracle pass. We’re physically drained and for the moment I have stopped worrying about all that my Dad is or isn’t anymore.

I hear another fan say, “Yeah, but next week we have to go to the Swamp and deal with the Gators!”

“Hey, give us a chance to relish this one before you start worrying about next week,” I respond.

This week is everything for me; this moment is the only one I have, or want. I don’t want it to fade or recede into history too quickly.

Dad is following me now, and I have to keep slowing down so he can keep up. I’m trying not to let it register; I’m trying hard not to take his hand and lead him along. For a moment, I picture a scene where I’ve lost him, where I can’t see or find him. But then he says, “That was sure some game!”

And all is right again.

Soon, we reach the car. I’m driving us, and though I’m glad to, I can’t shake the feeling that this is all wrong. It doesn’t help that the car is facing the wrong way, making it difficult for us to exit swiftly or cleanly. Our car is the last one on the left side of this block, parked against the normal flow of traffic.

I say, mainly to myself, “I’ll have to figure out how to turn around and get out of here.”

I’m facing forward as if there lies the only possible answer. And then he says, “Just back up and then back to the left. You’ll be able to drive out with the flow then.”

It’s so simple and so right. As usual, the truth lies somewhere behind me, waiting on me to stop and let it catch up.

Or simply to look back.

I do as Dad says, and soon we’re on the road home, ahead of traffic as usual. “I’m glad we did that,” I say, relieved. “At first, I didn’t know what to do.”

“Yeah, and I’m the one who told you about it!”

His words comfort me, and I drive us back to the arms of our family: my wife and two little girls, and my mother who has made chili and grilled
cheese sandwiches for our return. I think that maybe there is still time, maybe another year or two. I sleep well that night, and the next morning we drive home.

Of course, time eventually runs out in all football games. Alabama beat Florida the next week and went on to beat them a second time in the SEC Championship game. I called my father that night, celebrating our victory.

Was it my imagination, or was the elation I expected muted? Was it a lack of the precise words, an inability to remember what happened in the first half that left him so affectless? When I hung up that night, I didn’t feel like we had won anything.

It was the strangest feeling ever.

***

Parkinson’s disease affects people in different ways. Shaking limbs but a clear mind; mild tremors only in hands; a shuffling, near-zombie like gait with a consciousness only registering the minimum of a world the patient used to know intimately.

The latter description, sadly, was my Dad a year later. We’re visiting on the weekend of the Iron Bowl, the year 2000. Alabama stinks, the last gasp of head coach Mike Dubose. Auburn leads from start to finish, and somewhere during the second quarter, Dad falls asleep in his lift chair. I don’t try to wake him and so gladly suffer the last throes of a 3-8 season in heavy silence. Fortunately, when he does awaken, he doesn’t ask who won. He neither notices that the game is over nor cares. As if it never happened at all. It will never be a part of his history, or our ritual.

And for that brief moment only, I envy him.

A month later, he’s gone. Dead, on Christmas Eve.

***

Five years ago, not-so-coincidentally arriving with the Nick Saban era at Alabama, I began taking my daughters to Bama games—once a year—a tradition I hope will continue for a long, long time. I figure that I have a few more years left in me. My daughters seem to get as excited as I do on game day. I’ve passed my passion on to them. My history.

Something else I’ll pass on one day: that sweatshirt. I wear it only occasionally, afraid of spoiling it with salsa, guacamole, mustard, or coffee. I want it to last, unornished, forever, emblem of my journey as an Alabama fan, a son, and now, a father. I’ve never explained to my daughters why this particular sweatshirt means so much to me, but in the emotional world of unspoken connections, somehow, they’ve understood.

It’s the one thing they most want of mine, and when it’s time, I’ll hand it over. Maybe they’ll live close to each other and trade it every fall weekend. Or if not, maybe they’ll meet at summer’s end each year and pass it on for the entire football season. Either way, I’m sure they’ll figure it out.

Either way, as they watch Crimson Tide players rush into the back of the end zone game after game, they’ll jump from their chairs, or stadium seats, yelling or texting the only words that seem to matter for all our generations: Hi Daddy! Roll Tide!
Running as a Means to an End

Essay

John Gifford

I worry that my best days are behind me. In a couple months I’ll be 43 years old—an age that, not that long ago, sounded so old and irrelevant, as if my body were timeless, as if I would never live past 30 and have to reckon with things like imperfect eyesight, painful joints and lethargy—although I first noticed this decline, this slide into humility, toward mortality, several years ago, sometime in my mid-30s, when I was still what most would call a “young man.”

I am a runner, and while not a particularly gifted one, I approach it with the discipline and determination of a professional because I realize that to let up, to stop now, is to say goodbye to running forever. And this gives me anxiety. Our physical conditioning is precarious in middle age and for whatever reason it is especially so for me. So as I run, I worry about not being able to run because this is the only medicine I take and, as such, running is the only way I have of dealing with myself and the world in which I live.

I always tell myself that the benefit of running isn’t extra years tacked onto the end of my life, that it isn’t squeaky-clean arteries or strong blood pressure readings. No, the benefit of running is that it will allow me to make the most of my declining years. (I hope.) That’s the goal, isn’t it? To defer gratification and happiness? To live long enough that we can, at some point, retire and spend our days doing things that are worthy of our time? That’s my understanding, but maybe I have it wrong. I’ll have to go for a run and think more about it.

This isn’t to say running doesn’t provide immediate benefits. It does. It allows me to deal with things like pollution, animal and child abuse, suburban sprawl, corporate irresponsibility, and many other of society’s ills, ills more painful even than road rash or shin splints. It takes the edge off the rage that builds inside me daily for the things I cannot change about the world, about myself. Mostly, running is an outlet into which I can direct a very finite reserve of energy, especially so for me. So as I run, I worry about not being able to run because this is the only medicine I take and, as such, running is the only way I have of dealing with myself and the world in which I live.

To give you an example: If I wanted a motor scooter as an economical means of transportation, I would peruse my newspaper’s classified ads—yes, I still love to scan the classifieds, as I’ve always believed these tiny ads, and not a newspaper’s articles, are some the best indicators of a community’s identity—or hit the garage sales on Saturday mornings. That’s not the case with my friend. He wouldn’t pursue such a frivolous item… unless it was given to him by someone who was unwilling or unable to get the thing running. This is the ideal scenario. Of course, he could inherit a scooter from a family member, or even go buy a good used one, but what fun would that be? There’s no challenge in using something to be aggravated. The trick, however—and I believe I’m getting better at this—is to capitalize on this aggravation, to channel it into something positive, productive.

I am a lifelong angler and passionate fly fisherman, and long ago I discovered the beautiful simplicity of a certain brand of fly reel, the manufacturer of which also happened to make fly-fishing luggage. How the reel maker got into the luggage business is an interesting story, and one to which I could relate. It seems this man, who had used his gifts as a machinist to build a business producing some of the world’s finest fly reels, was on a fishing trip in Alaska when his tackle bag failed. Evidently, and rightly so, he became infuriated. When he returned home, he channeled this anger into designing and producing world-class fishing luggage. I remember wanting one of his tackle bags long before I could afford one, but when that day finally arrived I marveled at the workmanship, the materials, and uncompromising perfection of that bag. The design and production hadn’t been outsourced to some foreign, cost-cutting factory; the bag was proudly made in America to the exacting specifications of its designer whose name—whose own name—was stitched to the bag’s outer flap. Its performance in the nearly 20 years I’ve owned it has served as a constant reminder of what we can accomplish when we care enough to use our frustrations as impetus to reject mediocrity.

Granted, this takes a certain amount of imagination and obsessive capacity, but the rewards are undeniable.

I have a friend who prides himself on devising economical (i.e., free) solutions to the everyday problems we all encounter around the house. He hates paying someone else to do what he can do himself, and for him, quality isn’t even a consideration. His goal is improvisation—using available tools and materials to develop a yeoman’s solution to whatever dilemma he encounters—with the ultimate goal of restoring functionality at the lowest possible (ideally, no) cost. Naturally, he’s fond of his many ingenious fixes, but he absolutely beams when he tells me how much he saved by using X, Y, or Z, which he had lying around his garage. I suppose you could call this “creative engineering,” and it manifests itself in any number of ways.

To give you an example: If I wanted a motor scooter as an economical means of transportation, I would peruse my newspaper’s classified ads—yes, I still love to scan the classifieds, as I’ve always believed these tiny ads, and not a newspaper’s articles, are some the best indicators of a community’s identity—or hit the garage sales on Saturday mornings. That’s not the case with my friend. He wouldn’t pursue such a frivolous item… unless it was given to him by someone who was unwilling or unable to get the thing running. This is the ideal scenario. Of course, he could inherit a scooter from a family member, or even go buy a good used one, but what fun would that be? There’s no challenge in using something...
that’s already perfectly functional. No chance at the glory inherent in circumventing the middleman who would serve only to lighten our wallet.

Upon acquisition of said scooter, my friend would then begin to immerse himself in the finer points of four-stroke engines, again with the goal of getting it running through the most economical means. I should mention that he is not above using duct tape when necessary or where feasible. In fact, if he’s able to incorporate this wonder material into his solution, this is one of the first things he’ll point out. It’s weird, almost like he gets royalties or bonus points from the duct tape people.

Mostly, I admire him, and others like him, for the mental tenacity with which they approach projects like this. Though I have to wonder: At what point should we decide our time is worth more than the opportunity to stick it to the middle man, and just go pay someone to fix our scooter? I guess it all depends on your idea of fun.

Me? I’m not very mechanically inclined and I find that running is a good way to deal with this shortcoming. Being unable to rebuild the motor scooter I’ve just acquired for 10 bucks is a real problem, until I run myself silly, to the point that, now exhausted, either I’m willing to pay a professional to make the necessary repairs, or I decide that what I really want is not a scooter, but to retrofit a water-reclamation system to my lawn sprinkler. At which point the scooter is made available to some other assiduous soul who may or may not possess the time, energy or skills to follow through on his dreams, but who, very likely, subscribes to Popular Mechanics.

As an adult, I’m much more selective about the projects I undertake than I used to be. Which is to say I’m extremely reluctant to tackle most things. When my wife tells me she wants to paint the house, I shudder at the thought of spending my precious free time with a paintbrush in hand. Sometimes, these proposed projects are simply whims, but if they persist, and they often do, I begin to experience a mild anxiety that is relieved only through completion of the project, or by more running.

At some point in my mid-30s, I realized that fretting over these things was actually worse, and more harmful to my health, than doing them. And since that time, I find myself a much more active participant in my own life. Buying the paint, coming home and moving the furniture, then conceding the next two days to the project, is preferable, I’ve realized, to spending weeks thinking about it, avoiding the subject, finally capitulating and, grudgingly, spending my time doing what I knew I’d have to do all along. Which leaves more time for running, and this helps with those other things over which I have less control.

The older I get, the less free time I seem to have, and the more particular I get about how I spend it. I am keen to move back to the coast as soon as my son goes off to college—still another seven years away. (Hopefully, I can convince him to go to college somewhere nearby so we can see each other regularly.) Part of the reason for this is because I’m happiest in and around coastal waters, the sand and sun, and the lush subtropical vegetation. And because I enjoy fishing and exploring these coastal ecosystems, living on the plains is like being stranded on another planet, even though there are certain benefits to living here. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking, my eyesight and joints aren’t getting any better, and our desire to have thicker, greener lawns than our neighbors, along with a host of other issues, continues to threaten the water quality of our streams and oceans, imperiling fish populations in both fresh and saltwater.

This is maddening, so I run to dull the pain. And I tell myself that if I can just stay healthy and keep my legs and back in shape, then it’s possible I may emerge from my inland exile in reasonably good condition and be able to enjoy my declining years, if not in perfect health, then at least in an environment with climate and scenery that are agreeable to me… if these things still exist.

Some days it seems I’ll never make it. Arthritis runs in my family and I’ve had problems with my joints for years, though not to the extent of my father or youngest brother, who at times seem absolutely debilitated by this disease. Still, I’m nearly 43 and I’ve got lots of miles on these joints.

I always dread winter because of the cold temperatures and objectionable weather it brings, but also because the landscape appears so dull and gloomy, and endlessly dormant, during these months. Because the cold weather affects my ability to run and keep myself in shape, it also impacts my outlook on life. Not long ago I used to fight it. I would simply bundle up and go for a run in defiance of the cold temperatures and biting wind. As I’ve aged, not only has my distaste for these conditions grown, but my body is less and less willing to go along with such frivolous and hopelessly defiant adventures. Some would say I’ve grown wise. But no. I’m just growing old.

In recent years, my knee pain has been compounded by heel spurrs, and now by pain in my ankles and hips—a dull, relentless grinding sensation during my runs, and a persistent throbbing afterwards. I know that I should get back to riding a bike, but I enjoy running. I love its inherent simplicity, the fact that it’s just you and the road, and that as I age the mental challenge intensifies accordingly. I love that every single run is a test, a chance to prove to myself that I still have something, something, of that defiant young man in me who wants to do things his way. Sure, I could slow down and walk, or take it easy and ride a bike, but what fun would that be? I think part of the attraction of running, for me, is the suffering. Fighting for air, struggling through the fatigue and pain, wrestling with your mind to convince yourself you can do another mile, is not only addictive, but it’s challenging to say the least. Every time I run the suffering is there waiting for me.
The question is: Am I up to the challenge? Am I strong enough to beat it? To overcome it? I run to find out.

Three miles used to be nothing for me. Now, it’s often a struggle to complete in any respectable time, and I have to push myself, especially my mind, to keep the proper perspective, which says it’s just three miles, that I’ve been doing this for years, that with all my experience it should be easier now than ever… even though I know and feel the many miles in my legs are a liability, not an asset.

In running, it seems, I am not only plumbing the depths, but mining the residue of a body that has been shaped and in some ways eroded by 40-plus years of life.

Strangely, while I’ve run all my life, and despite having been a fairly serious runner since my late teens, I had my best year only two years ago. At 40, I’d long since passed my prime and the aches and pains I deal with today were already at work, conspiring to slow my body, when I caught a television special about former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, one of my heroes. I remember much about his presidency, but I had forgotten he was such a serious runner, even during his years in office. The program I watched included footage of a much younger President Carter jogging “as much as 40 miles per week” during his presidency. That meant, even after taking office at 53, he regularly ran longer than I ever had. This wasn’t just revealing of his character, discipline, and fitness level; it was also an implicit challenge to me to get off my butt and stop whining. If President Carter, at 50-plus years of age, could run as much as 40 miles per week while directing the operations of an entire country, our country, the United States of America, then I could do the same at 40, especially in the absence of the nation’s hopes and dreams resting on my shoulders. Not only could I do it; I had to do it. This was a chance to prove something to myself.

So I increased my three mile daily routine. I remember I started the week by running five miles, which for me was a minor accomplishment. Then I realized this wasn’t far enough and that I’d have to push myself even harder to reach my goal. Consequently, I ran as much as eight miles a day, running every day for a week, even though I knew, and could feel, that my body needed rest after these long runs. My heel spurs were tormenting me, my knees throbbing like always, but I just pushed through it all, completing my final seven miles in the rain on a cold November day. Achieving my objective in the middle of a weekday, while my wife was at work and my son at school, my dog was the only one there to congratulate me when I returned home. And he wanted to go for a walk.

To put my accomplishment into perspective, it was only 40 miles, and I talk to others, marathoners, who run twice that or more every week. But for me it meant everything because it reminded me how powerful our minds are—not just that we can do whatever we tell ourselves we can, but that we are who we believe we are. And with this reminder, in some ways I feel younger today than I did then, even though my running has become more challenging.

I have never been what I would call a “goal-oriented person,” but I love challenges and I love defying expectations. And I’m no stranger to that feeling of satisfaction that comes from setting the bar high and working to achieve my objective. This feeling of accomplishment, of determination in the face of adversity, was palpable that November day in the rain, in part, because I knew I had accomplished something in spite of myself, and despite my notion of what is considered normal for someone my age.

Now I wonder if in 10 years I’ll be able to run 50 miles in a week. President Carter said he ran until he was in his 70s, and this is all the encouragement I need to try to do the same.

I keep telling myself the reward for getting out there on the road and traumatizing my joints is prolonged youth—a relative youth, of course, but a delayed onset of gray hair and wrinkles and atrophic muscles, nonetheless. Some days I just want to quit and I come in from my run believing I haven’t many more miles left in these legs, that soon I’ll need to get on the bicycle or find some other way to dull the pain and frustration of being me, of having so many shortcomings, of living in an imperfect world. But then I’ll have a good day, or I’ll pass a younger runner who seems to be struggling and I’ll tell myself things could be much worse. I could, after all, have this passion for fly fishing but no coastline or gurgling trout streams in which to dream about spending my declining years.

John Gifford served with the U.S. Marines during the Persian Gulf War and later received his MFA from the University of Central Oklahoma. A lifelong angler and nature enthusiast, he is the author of two books on fishing and has written for many of North America’s leading angling publications. His creative work has appeared recently in Saw Palm, Written River, The Christian Science Monitor, Orion, and The Arkansas Review. He lives in Oklahoma.
Sport Literate remains the nation’s lone literary journal focused primarily on creative nonfiction. And we’ve got a stellar lineup of poets in this issue, too. Since 1995, we’ve produced 25 issues, earned 18 grants from the Illinois Arts Council, and garnered awards and recognition in national anthologies. Think you got what it takes to make our pages? Check out the departments below that make up our standard issues.

**Who’s on First:** This first-person essay begins each issue. Mark Wukas led off “Spring Eats 1997” with “Running With Ghosts,” an essay subsequently recognized in the *Best American Sports Writing* anthology. Michael McColly’s “Christmas City, U.S.A.” won a creative nonfiction award from the Illinois Arts Council back in the day. Frank Soos was recently recognized in the same anthology for his essay, “Another Kind of Loneliness.”

**How To:** The *Sport Literate* How To is less literal in its “how-to” sense and more literary in its execution. Tennis player John Conway’s “How To Serve” in our “Pacing 1998” issue earned a creative nonfiction award from the Illinois Arts Council. Joey Franklin’s “How to Be a T-Ball Parent” won the essay contest a couple years back.

**SL Travel:** As that stranger in a strange land, what did you learn on the road? What’s the leisurely life like over there? Robert Parker’s travel piece, “The Running of the Bull,” was recognized in *Best American Essays 2006*.

**SL History:** From Judy Widen’s profile of a real-life baseball player from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League to Ben Giamo’s alternative history musings on writer Jack Kerouac, *Sport Literate* writers have used all the tricks of creative nonfiction to enhance a true story.

**Personal Essay:** We’re hip to all the nonfiction forms — nature writing, immersion journalism — whatever floats your prose. Several *Sport Literate* writers have been cited in the annual *Best American Essays* and the *Best American Sports Writing* collections. Mark Pearson’s essay, “The Short History of an Ear,” was our first to make the latter anthology’s pages. Cinthia Ritchie’s “Running” appeared there this fall.

**Poetry:** Nick Reading and Frank Van Zant are the poetry gurus around here. Frank selected “Glass,” Roxy Richardson’s poem, as the winner in this issue.

**Photo Essays:** We most often dig these out of yesteryear archives, but we’d be open to your stories in black and white. Query with your visions.

**Interviews:** We hope these are just good conversations with smart people. In past issues, we’ve featured Chicago footballers (Bear, Chris Zorich, and Cardinal, Marshall Goldberg), sportswriters (Bill Gleason and Robert Lipsyte), and even a poet (Jack Ridl). Query with suggestions.

Most submissions come online now. Send queries and Word document attachments to bill@sportliterate.org. Be a sport and buy a back issue online at www.sportliterate.org.
Winter Diamond

Poem

Jeffrey Alfier

Enter the annual Sports Fiction & Essay Contest

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Enter between November 15-May 31

$16 fee per entry. Final judge: Jendi Reiter. Submit published or unpublished stories and essays at www.winningwriters.com/sports

Unlit stadium lights collaborate with frost that edges the air.

Wind sings its dissonant tunes through chain-linked dugouts.

The year-end’s elm and sweetgum leaves cluster against the backstop.

A rusty lock no one will replace keeps a death grip on an outfield gate.

Home plate lies under hardening dirt, unswept from the final slide home.

In the infield, cleat prints are pell-mell, like scuffmarks on a ballroom floor.

A memorial plaque is flush with the fence, a name staring down the first base line.

After sundown, on a dugout bench, lovers huddle, share lies in the moonlight.
Gage David Strole
Born October 7, 2013
Body and Mind 2013
Featuring poetry, prose, and praise from

Jeffrey Alfier  
Terry Barr  
Rus Bradburd  
Tobi Cogswell  
Katie Cortese  
Lorene Delany-Ullman  
Dave Essinger  
Joey Franklin  
John Gifford  
Curtis LeBlanc  
Kate Meadows  
Scott F. Parker  
Roxy Richardson  
Mark Rozema  
Robert Walton  
Chris Wiewiora

Best American Again!
Congratulations to Cinthia Ritchie. Her contest-winning essay, “Running,” which ran in Sport Literate in 2012, has been anthologized in The Best American Sports Writing 2013. What’s more, Frank Soos got a notable nod for “Another Kind of Loneliness,” which led off our pages two issues back. Ritchie and Soos, both Alaskan writers by coincidence, are our small press heroes holding their own in the Big Leagues.