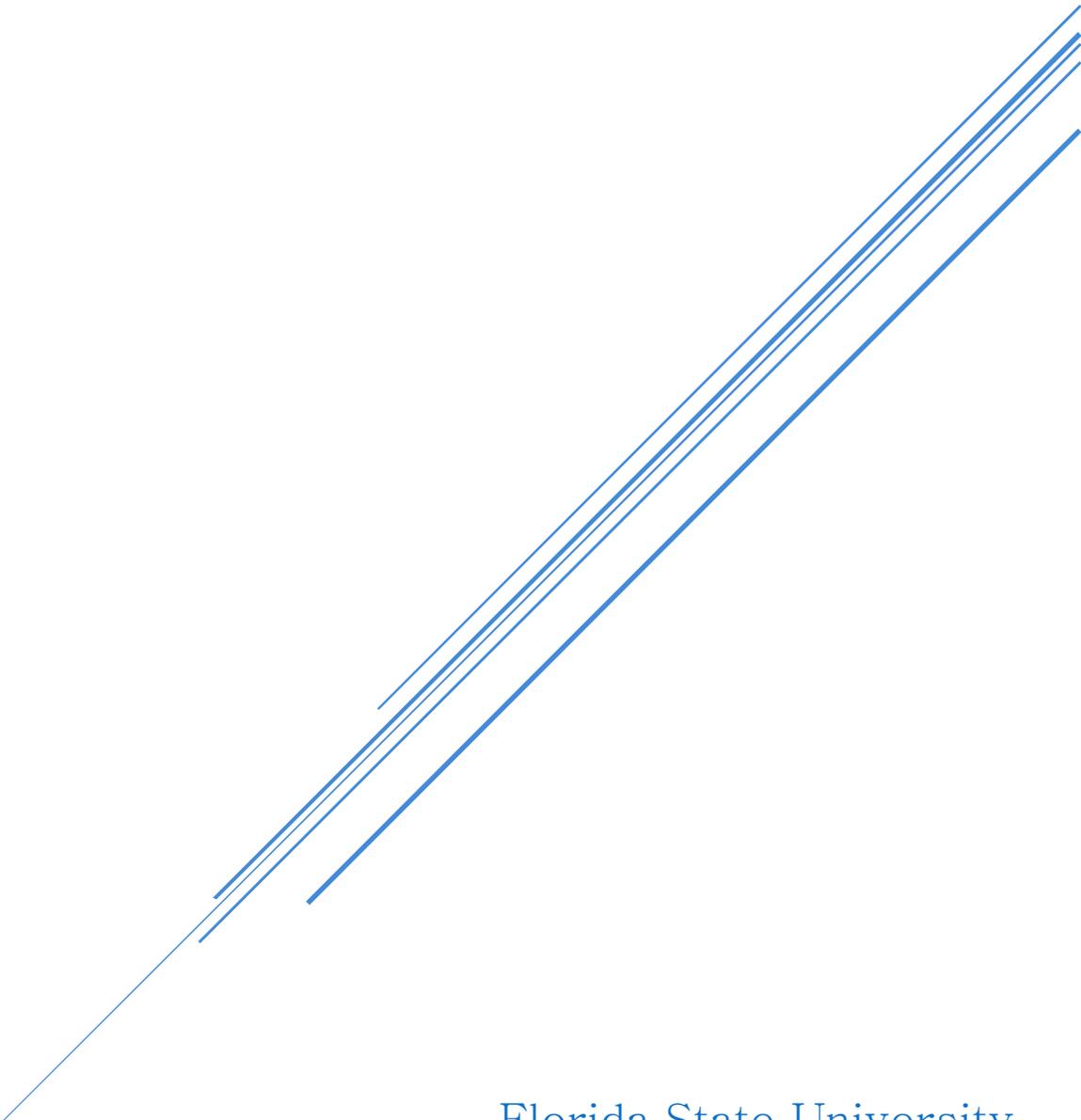


THE KUDZU REVIEW

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Florida State University

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POETRY

Still Life

BY Scott Horn

Waiting in line for my espresso, I can tell from his tattoos that he wants to kick my ass. It isn't a matter of bad blood or a case of spilled creamer; he just looks fit to fight the whole world until he wrestles his hip out of place, with the wretched, sneering dragon in particular – more than the Jolly Roger or even the Iron Cross – writhing over the crag of his shoulder, the flat snout smoking and flared across his veins.

It's okay, though. I have a lonely rose crowned with filigree and a tattered scroll unfurled down one arm that says I: smoke Parliaments (I do), cry after sex (I might), and, as a cheap salesman of conclusions, a tailor of scene and a cobbler of sentiment, I sit in this very café and write poems about crying after sex (I do), and that I really want you to ask me about them.

But if I never scratch out another sorry line about girls or pocket lint or the hair sucked down the shower drain, it won't matter. He and I have globed ourselves into pieces of fruit – forever the orange, forever the apple – to be picked up and turned over and posed in a ceramic bowl, like the painting hanging silent and still above the half and half in a coffee shop, where nobody

bothers to look up as they stir their
tea and chai.

Stories from a Shoe Department

BY Eric Zerkel

Fluids

As a child I always fantasized about being something bigger than life. A hero. I fancied all the jobs that society looks upon with some sort of special flair; those were my jobs of destiny. Flash-forward a decade and my ambitions were quite a bit curtailed. The setting for my first job was hardly space or a crime scene; it was a twenty four thousand square foot prison cell. You were only lucky enough to see sunlight if you manned a post by an entrance, and trust me I wasn't one of those lucky few; eight hours of my day were fluorescent. Still, I had no reason to complain. Walking into that place for the first time I had a lot to be optimistic about. Just like my overly-ambitious younger self I knew two things were a certainty: I was going to get paid, and I wasn't going to be a janitor.

Or so I thought. I was like a parent overwhelmed with the excitement of the birth of my first child. Too caught up in the moment to think about the inevitability of poopy-diapers and vomit spells. If I learned one life lesson from my time in a shoe department it's this: wherever people go, their fluids follow. I was blinded by the façade that was janitors and bathrooms.

As a shoe salesman I had one inalienable perk – I never had to clean fitting rooms. Oh, I heard the lore of stained pants and used condoms from my less than fortunate customer service reps, but I was in a position of privilege, and so the stories remained less-than real to me. I triumphantly sat upon my shoe ridden throne of ignorance, until one day, it all came crashing down on me.

The closest fitting room to the shoe department was just around the corner in the women's plus sizes section. To say that I even knew it existed would have been an utter and complete lie. Literally ninety-nine percent of my day was confined to the small shoe department and the stock room behind it. The only time I was forced to venture out was to return what we called, "Put-Backs," the collection of unwanted non-shoe merchandise left behind throughout the day

It was the end of my shift, and so I volunteered to return all of the various clothing items to their respective departments before I headed out. I dropped off items in a specific order, walking around the bottom floor in a massive loop – first came Lingerie, then Petites, followed by Juniors, Children's, and finally Plus Sizes. As I was dropping off a rather large pair of sweat pants onto the plus sizes counter something caught the corner of my eye.

Emerging from the desolate corner of the store was a naked woman. She was sobbing hysterically, tears rolling down her eyes with great ferocity crying out, “Someone please help! Help me!”

Not knowing if this woman was seriously injured, and being the only one around, I jumped into action. I dropped the remainder of my Put-Backs onto the floor and ran through the obstacle course of racks, until I was about five feet away. Then I stopped. The picture was clearer now; the woman was standing there, naked from head to toe, clutching her clothes in her hands, glaring up at me with shame. Her clothes, and similarly her body, were all covered in feces. Oh. My. God.

I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t touch her. She was naked. She was covered in feces. So we stood in front of each other like two cowboys waiting to duel, my eyes scanning the length of her body, her eyes opening wider and wider with each passing second. And then she drew. Shooting me dead with a blood-curdling scream.

“Ma’am! Please calm down! I’ll get someone…a woman! Just…go back inside the fitting room… just give me…give me a second!”

And so I ran. I ran nowhere, and everywhere, around racks of clothes, past registers, through crowds of customers, looking for the first sign of long hair I could find.

I never found out first hand why that woman decided to walk out into the middle of a place of business naked, covered in her own feces, or how such a thing was even physically possible, but the not-so-fortunate first woman associate I found did give me quite the vivid recap of the fitting room.

Apparently the wall of the fitting room facing the stall door was completely covered with feces. The floor was stained deep brown. All the clothes were ruined, and I presume later burned. For a couple of days the fitting room was zoned off and shut down for the janitor to disinfect and clean the scene of the crime.

That was probably the worst run in I had with fluids. There was the time that I was telling a woman about a shoe she was interested in, only for her to interrupt my stream of professional knowledge with a stream of vomit all over the shoe display. Or the time that a woman brought in one of those toy Yorkies in her purse, only for it to throw up its latest treat all over the register. Oh and I can’t forget about the mother who knowingly brought her sick son in to get new shoes, only to have him puke all over me while I was measuring his foot. But you just can’t top nudity, feces, and the awful sexual tension created by fancying yourself a hero and stumbling upon the aforementioned, so those only get honorable mentions.

As an aside, after watching with pity as the same janitor cleaned up yet another incident with fluids, I decided to apologize on behalf of those who had committed the accidents. She was on her knees, cleaning up a pile of vomit in between the lingerie section and the shoe department, and so I casually strolled up behind her saying, “I’m sorry you have to clean up all of this. I don’t know how you can do it.” She turned around, bright blue

gloves on her hands, and looking up at me with a smile muttered, “It’s not so bad. I don’t have a sense of smell,” and then she turned calmly back to her pile of vomit. Now I can’t help but think that all janitors must check off a box on their application saying they can’t smell before they can officially take the position. It’s just not humane otherwise.

Steel Toe Boots

When you work in just about any job that involves interacting with people, there are going to be questions. How you respond to those questions usually defines the legitimacy with which the questioner views the answerer. In the shoe business the questions are relatively simple. There are basic questions like: “What colors do these come in?” “Do you have this in a size ___?” “How much do these cost?” At the most complicated level there are shoe-specific questions like: “Do you have an inch and a half red peep-toe with a strap on the back?” Or what has become quite notorious to me, “Do these boots come in a steel-toe?”

“Do these come in a steel-toe?” I probably heard that question five thousand six hundred and ninety-three times in my five years of service in that shoe department, but most of them came from one man. You see, Wolverine never understood that, no matter what day of the week it was, no matter what week of the month it was, and no matter what month of the year it was, that wolverine boots – hence the nick-name Wolverine – did not come in a steel toe. I would lean against the register, waiting for a customer to pounce on, and I would spot him, hobbling in from the left side of the shoe department, wife by his side, making the treacherous journey through the pumps and strappy formal wear, inevitably arriving just to my right, in the work boot section.

Now, there is a certain type of man who wears a work boot, and if the Brawny Man or Paul Bunyan come to mind, you are pretty much spot on. Wolverine, of course, fit the bill. He wore red and black flannel shirts, tattered white-washed Wrangler jeans, and off-brand Birkenstock-esque leather sandals. His face was leathery, like an old couch shoved to the curb with a “Please Take” sign attached to it. He must have been in his late forties, but the presumable wear of whatever job he undertook made him look closer to seventy. His wife, on the other hand, was a Dolly Parton incarnate, minus a few teeth, plus a few wrinkles. As I said, their trek through the shoe department was a routine. I used to wonder if they had anything better to do with their time than waste mine, but Wolverine would step up to the wall of shoe displays and grab the same boot, a dark brown, waterproof, non-steel toe, Wolverine and examine it over and over again, prying the sole with his hands, sticking his palm in the bottom of the boot and pressing down with authority.

I was never the only one working. Let’s just say that Wolverine had a special thing for me. He would hunt me down, mid-shoe sale, interrupting with, “Do these come in a steel toe?” There it is again. I would calmly reply, “No Sir, we don’t carry Wolverines in a steel toe.” And would escort him to the only steel toe boots we had, a poorly made off-brand for thirty-nine ninety-nine. His reply would never change, he would look up from the boot that he was fumbling in his hands and say, “Really?” as if he was taken aback.

Yes, Really. This is the thirty-ninth time you have asked this question. The answer never changes. Knowing that my job was done, I would walk away, seeking out my next sale, hoping that he wouldn't do what he always does next. But he did.

He would resign to the fact that he wanted a Wolverine boot, but there was no steel toe. He would swear up and down that such a boot existed, that he had bought it here recently, and it looked just like the one in his hand. And this is where the wife comes in, to cultivate the situation. It's amazing what a woman's moral support can do.

"Yeah Hun, I think you're right. You did get this here. In a steel-toe. I know it. You know what? I think you should try that boot on right here. What size do you wear?"

"Dunno," he would reply. Of course I knew. Size 11 on the right foot, 10 on the left.

I should take this time to discuss how it amazes me that adults do not know their shoe sizes. It's understandable for children; their feet are constantly growing, but a grown man? A grown man's foot never changes. Never. There is no excuse for what would follow, The Measurement. Let me preface this by saying that foot hygiene is downright essential. I recommend that you wash your feet, clip your toenails, and wear socks with shoes. Trust me, I'm a shoe doctor.

So he would waddle up to me from behind, tap me on the shoulder, and ask, "Could you measure my foot?" And so, being the dedicated employee that I was, I put myself through the torture. I would grab the black-faced men's Brannock device from behind the counter, drop down on one knee in front of this man, and hold my breath. It wasn't just the smell. It was the view. His big toe was literally smashed, what remained was the right side of what used to be his toenail, which was stained a deep-dehydrated pee yellow. This toenail, and the one directly next to it, were so long that they curled underneath his hairy toes. Dirt and what I can only describe as a metaphysically alien black foot fungus covered the rest of his foot. His left foot was so smashed up, from what he would later describe to me as a "machine malfunction," that he literally needed a full size smaller on that foot. Usually, I just slide the Brannock device in front of an adult's foot, and they place their heel into the heel rest and I measure their arch, and toe length. I usually never have to touch the feet. But this man wasn't usual. I don't want to admit it, but I think this man had to have been some sort of sadist. There is nothing else I can say. He would look down on me, and say, "hey there boy, could you lift my foot up and put it on that thing?"

Can I? Well yes I can. Will I? It's at this point that the customer service brain washing you receive during training kicks in. No sensible man would ever touch that foot. There is no reason to. But in the back of my mind I started to see my boss with his arms folded, glaring at me in disapproval, reciting the "Customer First" line of the core tenants of customer service like a monk in a monastery. And so I would reach slowly, my hand swaying ever so slightly back and forth like it was caught in an invisible cross wind, and grab this man's foot with my bare hand, placing it on the Brannock device. Only to find out what I already knew, what he must have known. Size 10.

Back to School!

Even though the shoe department lacked the light of day, it wasn't all that different from the outside world. Much like leaves changing in autumn, or the first snowfall of winter, so too our little department would change. The only difference between department stores' seasons and actual seasons are the dates. For us, the seasons were Christmas, Easter, Summer (also known as the doldrums) and Back to School. Each season had its own unique flavor, a smorgasbord of customers, complaints, and decor that could make even the strongest stomach churn after repeated exposure.

Having experienced my fair share of all of these seasons, I can say without a doubt that Back to School was the worst. Not in the sense of volume of customers, Christmas gets the nod in that category, but in the type of customer. During this magical time of the year, the shoe department turned into a daycare center. I'm convinced that shoe shopping for kids is at the bottom of every mother's back to school list, right in between buying paper bags to house packed lunches and tissues for stuffy noses. By the time the mothers trudged into the shoe department they had all but abandoned their motherly instincts in favor of the sit back and watch disapprovingly approach to parenting. I never fancied myself good with children but I found myself forced into the role of father, prying little kids off of racks, and directing my "stern voice" at kids running around the glass shoe displays.

When I wasn't partaking in kiddy riot control, I was parting the Red Sea of little maggoty toes. The mothers were all thrown together in a little corner of our department, waving little shoes in my direction, shouting, "Could you measure her foot!" It's completely understandable for children to get their feet measured, they are constantly growing, but that doesn't make the job any more desirable. I remember one particular day, a Saturday, the "BIGGEST SALE OF THEM ALL! EVEN BIGGER THAN THE LAST ONE AND THE EIGHT MORE TO COME!" and my manager had the bright idea to split the employees up into sectors of the shoe department. I should take this moment to point out the sheer lunacy of this idea. It was Back to School. Who goes to School? Kids. So where are all the customers going to be? In the children's section. Yet, despite the obvious state of affairs, in true Stalin-esque fashion, he divvied up responsibility into sectors, as if the department were some sort of planned economy.

So I waddled into work that day with the expectation that I could hide behind strappy heels and sandals to escape the torrid of screaming mothers, only to be pulled aside in the stock room and shown an amateur sketch of the departments sections, with the initials E.Z. plopped right in the middle of the Children's Section. Like a soldier on guard, I was given the orders to never leave my post, not even to sleep, eat, or relieve myself. It was at this point that I realized that the sheer destructive wrath of hundreds of impatient mothers would be cascading down upon me in waves for the next eight hours. If only I had known.

I quickly realized that it wasn't efficient enough to put the children's Brannock device back in its proper place. I carried it everywhere I went. I would push my way through the clumps of people, plop down on one knee in the middle of the mob and yell, "Who needs their foot measured?" And on cue the little feet would pop out of space, disembodied, dirty little toes

wiggling in the open air screaming for attention. And I would spin. Around and around in circles, measuring feet, looking up at parents' faces and assigning them numbers in my head ranging from ten and one half to seven. Rinse. Repeat. Rinse. Repeat.

The never-ending repetition always masked the true grit of Back to School. When the adrenaline wore off, and the dress shoes were kicked off, I felt like I had been kicked by each and every one of those little kids. A dull pain throbbed in the small of my back, the khaki knees on my dress pants soiled black, and my feet protested even the lightest step. I don't think I have ever recovered from my exposure to Back to School. I almost hope I'm sterile. Then again maybe that explains the absence of fathers. Maybe they all sold shoes. That's the only legitimate excuse I can think of.

In the End

My retail/shoe selling experience lasted four and a half years. In that time, I ran across thousands of people. And while it's easy to lump them all into categories, problematic or otherwise, they are still people, individually different. While there were no happy endings when I left, I now realize that I can take something away from all of the horror. People are just downright different, and their stories are unbelievably unique. Wolverine lived the life of a less aware version of Bill Murray in Groundhog Day, but every day that he came into the shoe department I became a part of his repetition, and therefore a part of his story. The woman who couldn't control her bowels had obvious physical issues, but for that moment in time we shared that same feeling of helplessness. All those worn-out mothers and little feet run together in my mind, but looking back, I now realize that I became a father to those little kids for a short period of time.

I was just a shoe guy. I just processed sizes and executed the same command over and over again. I just exchanged countless shoeboxes, but in the process exchanged stories. And these stories are something infinitely more valuable than a paycheck or work experience; they have defined who I am. They have become a part of my story.

Interview with Poet Steve Kistulentz

BY Katie Boué

During the spring of my sophomore year, I went out on a limb and enrolled in a Poetic Technique course. As fate would have it, I met one of the most influential instructors during this class—Steve Kistulentz. While I’m still a failure as a poet, I left Steve’s poetry class with a stronger understanding of myself as a writer. His honest style and cynical subject matter reminds writers that the most important aspect in your work is maintaining personal truth. His poems featured in *No Tell Motel* are a testament to his mercilessly open personality. It was a thrilling opportunity for me to reconnect with my old mentor, and dig a little into the inner workings of his mind as he prepares for the release of his upcoming book, *The Luckless Age*.

Katie Boué: Greetings, Steve! It’s been quite a while since our last encounter. How is life treating you in Jackson? Would you say that moving has affected your writing?

Steve Kistulentz: The move hasn’t had so much of an impact as has my new job. I haven’t been in Mississippi long enough for the state to claim me as one of its own; maybe the biggest impact has been that I bought a nearly 70-year-old house that needed a ton of work. So maybe it’s a competition between the hammer and paintbrush versus the computer for my time.

KB: I always ask fellow writers and my mentors about their creative process. Do you have any strange daily rituals or habits?

SK: This question makes me think of one of my favorite movie scenes of all time. It’s from *Reversal of Fortune*, which is the story of the murder trial of wealthy socialite Claus von Bulow. Von Bulow was accused of the attempted murder of his wife, Sunny, and he was represented by the famed Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz. In the film, Dershowitz confronts von Bulow as he gets into a waiting car following his acquittal on murder charges; the lawyer says, “Mr. von Bulow, you are a very strange man,” to which von Bulow (played with cynical gusto by Jeremy Irons) replies, “Mr. Dershowitz, you have no idea.”

I think most people have no idea how much of a toll writing takes. As I tell my students, everyone wants to be a writer, but very few people have the stomach for doing the work that it takes to become one. So maybe the strangest habit I have is that I actually write.

The truth is that I’ve whittled all the bad habits that writers have out of my life. I don’t smoke. I don’t hit the town every night. I cook dinner for my wife three or four nights a week. We watch movies on TiVo. Which means that the strangest daily habit I have is my work. I try to accomplish one tangible thing for my writing and one thing for my career as a writer each day. Sundays, I rest. And watch sports.

KB: Let's talk about your collection of poetry, *No Tell Motel*. I really enjoyed experiencing your poetry and the work of other featured writers like Michael Koshkin – whose poems reminded me of everything you told us not to attempt during your lectures. My sampling of the work featured on *No Tell Motel* left me with one major question: What exactly is a 'fuck poem'?

SK: The first one of those poems to be written was the David Lee Roth Fuck Poem. Diamond Dave is a persona, a larger-than-life character, and he often seems to me to be what the Los Angeles of the latter half of the 20th century is about. He is a living, breathing synecdoche. I vaguely recalled an interview with Dave where he said that all good rock and roll songs are about cars, money, or girls. So really, I just wanted to write a poem about all three. Somewhere in that process it occurred to me that the audience of all those songs—the people Dave was writing for—were people he wanted to sleep with.

For me, the word fuck just kept creeping in there. At first I thought it was an accident, but it turns out that I'm a bit of a subversive. If there's one thing I could change in this world, it would be to lift this ridiculous Puritanism that taints public life in America. We're a repressed culture, and worse, one that subjugates women. I think somewhere in the fuck poems there are some cautionary tales about both of those things.

KB: Do these risqué poems originate from real-life experiences, or does your imagination really craft your detailed material from scratch?

SK: Those poems are really pastiche. That's me taking the interesting parts of things I've read, things I've seen in films or heard in music, and putting them side-by-side. For the detectives out there, there are literally dozens of intertextual references in each one; the David Lee Roth poem makes mention of things that range from the New Testament to Motley Crue. But there's very little in there of me, except for the desire to provoke, and the wish that we could all be open and frank about our desires.

KB: Speaking of imagination – your poem 'Wonderamaland' promises that your childhood recollections "begin wit the absolute truth." Does this guarantee hold true throughout your work? At what point does truth hand the reins over to creativity and fantasy? Also, I must admit that I was endlessly charmed by the line "back to the swaddled coziness of my bed and a stuffed yet voiceless bear."

SK: Well I did think as a kid that if you concentrated hard enough, you could teleport yourself back home. I mean, the books I was reading told me that a mouse could talk and ride a motorcycle, and that a colony of brilliant rats lived a few miles away from my house, so teleportation didn't seem that unlikely. I'd say too that the heart of that poem is the conjectural leap that it makes at the end; we're looking at an imaginary America, one where the Kennedys weren't shot. One where we acknowledge the crime that was American involvement in Vietnam. But for the most part, truth is relative, both in the real world and in my book. In other words, one of the least interesting parts of a poem is the antecedent of its pronouns.

KB: I noticed that you frequently incorporated different works into your poetry, like Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov*. Are these poems shaped around a pre-existing inspiration drawn from the various works you feature within them, or do you seek these sources once the poem's seed has already been planted in your mind?

SK: The poem that mentions Dostoevsky is doing so within the context of a short film made for public television in the 1990s. It's by the director Hal Hartley, called *Surviving Desire*, and stars Martin Donovan as a rather inept and love-addled English professor. He spends an entire semester teaching one paragraph from *The Brothers Karamazov*, namely one of Father Zossima's typically overheated monologues. "It's an important paragraph," the professor says over and over again. So the film gave me permission to look at the novel in a different way, and the Father Zossima character has all of these great scenes wherein he basically walks in and delivers a sermonette. I wanted the poems to capture that kind of arch and heated dialogue; that's how we talk when we talk about love, and it's how I wanted the voice of that poem to sound. And it's how Hartley's character sounds. But what he says—the narrative content—is the more typical province of poetry, the failed love affair.

KB: You utilize Biblical language multiple times within these poems. While my personal interaction with you would lead me to immediately label it as a reflection of your cynical views of religion, I have to wonder about your relationship with spirituality and faith. Do you identify with any religious mindset? If so, how does this affect your poetic mind?

SK: I'm endlessly fascinated with ideas of religion, faith and spirituality. But for me, the bulk of that interest has to do with a scholarly look at various source texts. I'm far better versed in the Bible, its history and meanings, than most traditionally observant Christians that I meet, and I'm much more willing to accept meaning as a flexible thing. For me, encountering the Bible as an anthology of spiritual texts was a way for me to understand history, understand the grotesque perversions of modern religion, and to reclaim a personal relationship with those stories. But that's something I have on my own, outside any denomination, or any congregation.

KB: California has a fairly strong presence within your poetry, as brief as it may be in some poems. Have you lived or traveled to California? If not, what draws you to the ideas of the Pacific ocean and Hollywood? If so, can you elaborate on anything specific in California that left a lasting impression on your work?

SK: My sister lived in Southern California for almost 20 years, and I spent a lot of time there, but it was always as an outsider. Visiting Los Angeles as a teenager made me feel like an expatriate in my own country. I grew up in a very homogenous neighborhood that was almost exclusively white, upper middle class, and whose success was directly tied to the Reagan-era military-industrial complex. I remember driving through Inglewood on my way to the racetrack at Hollywood Park and seeing a low-rider for the first time. A few years after that I read Lawrence Wechsler's biography of the artist Robert Irwin, called *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, where Irwin talks about growing up in Southern California's car culture of the 1950s. And to a kid who had no culture—my father and all his friends wore the same thing to work every day, as indistinct as if they were

wearing prison jumpsuits—those cars were like jewels. They'd ceased to be a car or an art project and became this fetishized thing. So I left California the first couple of times doing not much more than contriving a way to come back. But it was always just to look.

KB: Your upcoming book, *The Luckless Age*, is scheduled to be released in early 2011. What can readers expect from your latest work?

SK: My favorite phrase about the book came from working with my editor at Red Hen Press, Kate Gale. We decided in conversation that the book was equal parts funeral dirge and redemption song. That poem “Wonderamaland,” for me, is almost like the center of the book in that way. I wanted people to understand that the 1960s represent both how close we came to realizing the promise of the American project, and how willing we were to throw away that dream in favor of the more immediate distractions of consumerism. That all being said, I tried very hard to write what I think of as a democratic book, one that is at home on the table at the barbershop as it would be in the hands of a critic.

KB: Any final words for your leftover students left here to waste away at Florida State University? Advice for starving writers?

SK: I always ask students to think about why they are writing what they are. It's hard work, but it's good hard work. So why not write about the things you love? I started doing this because I wanted people to see the world the way I did, but now I want people to feel the way I do. Like the Wilco song says, I am trying to break your heart.

KB: Thank you for gracing me with your insights and wisdom, Steve. I'm truly looking forward to reading *The Luckless Age*. Where can I scoop a copy?

SK: *The Luckless Age* will be published by Red Hen Press in February 2011 and will be available through www.redhen.org and through all the major online booksellers. And I'll be reading in Tallahassee at the Warehouse on March 15, so I can sign your copy then.

Interview with Michelle Fray, Knopf Editor

BY Samantha Malone

Michelle Fray is the executive editor for the Children and Young Adult imprint of Random House Publishing called Knopf. She has been working in publishing for 15 years and was the editor for the Inheritance Cycle book series by Christopher Paolini as well as the Penderwicks which is a National Book Award winner.

Samantha Malone: How did you get started in the publishing industry?

Michelle Fray: I was actually planning to go back to grad school and I was thinking, I was going to take a few years off before grad school and I am such a huge reader that I thought I'll try to get a job in publishing for 2 years and here I am.

SM: Did you ever consider writing?

MF: No I've never wanted to be a writer. There is a lot of writing involved in publishing being an editor but not the same kind. I really enjoy being an editor and taking a lens on someone else's work and figuring out the puzzle of how to make it better.

SM: How has the industry changed since you started?

MF: It has changed a lot since I started. I'm in children's books. It's definitely changed a lot. Just as an example, when I started you could not touch a fantasy novel with a 10 foot pole. Fantasy was very unpopular, it was very difficult to buy and then Phillip Pullman came along with his dark materials, and then of course Harry Potter came along and that changed everything with making fantasy popular again and it really changed how fantasy was thought of by the publishing community and the general community, realizing that children can make a book. It's a significant industry as well as being a really great way to contribute to society

SM: How many books does your imprint publish a year?

MF: I think our imprint, Knopf, publishes about 70 books a year.

SM: What do you usually look for in a manuscript?

MF: You definitely know within a couple pages if someone can write, if they're a really talented writer or not, and what I look for is a great voice that captures me. It's not really the topic; it's the way the story is told.

SM: How are manuscripts chosen to be published?

MF: It's a very subjective process. They're really chosen by the editor. In our group, we sometimes share manuscripts with each other. At other houses, they'll have to go through a rigorous process where all different departments will get to chime in, so sales and marketing and subsidiaries. In some companies, they look at every submission; here we

don't really have that. It's really in the editor's control unless it's a really big purchase; then, we have to know that the whole team is behind it. But for almost everything else, it's the editor working in conjunction with the publishing director, making a decision based on your own belief in the book

SM: Explain the general editing process.

MF: Usually, after I buy a book I'll do an editorial letter to the author to let them know where I feel the book needs to be improved. Usually this is a more general letter; it will be dealing with bigger issues, thematic issues, bigger character questions, that kind of thing, and then the author will have a chance to revise and hopefully they will take their time and revise carefully and slowly. Then I will read another version and usually there's at least one or two more editorial letters after that and as the editorial process kind of goes along the notes will probably get more specific and kind of focus on particular details more as we get closer to the finish line. Usually it's 2 or 3 revisions for a book before it's ready to go to copy-editing—sometimes 4 or even 5, but it's usually around 2 or 3. Then the book goes to copy. Before it goes to copy-editing, I'll line-edit the book, which we'll all do along the way as well. We'll all write queries in the margins and say, "oh, can you explain why this is happening now," when something else happened on a prior page. I'll edit the manuscript to flow better as well, and then once all that's taken care of it goes to copy editing. The copy editors are really the ones who fix the book for grammar and keep track of all of the grammatical inconsistencies. Then it goes back to the editor to review—and the author as well—and the author and I make decisions about which changes we want to accept and which changes we do not. Sometimes the author doesn't want to be grammatically correct for a certain reason—because it's spoken in a certain tone of voice or it's more colloquial or something like that—so after the author and I have reviewed the copy-edited manuscript it goes to the design department and it goes into type. The designer chooses a font and look for the book and the designer starts working on the covers as well, and after that it's proof-read. The galleys are proof-read again and again and the author has a chance to look at them, as do I until it's absolutely perfect and then finally the book prints.

SM: How do you think the publishing industry will be impacted by the jump to digital?

MF: I guess we'll have to see exactly how things unfold. People have been talking about Ebooks for a while, and it didn't really take off until the last year or two. It's still, I think, only about 1-3% of sales, but that's obviously going to keep growing exponentially every year. Ultimately, I think it does mean there are going to be some shifts within publishing houses, but houses are about making decisions about content and deciding how to present content. So, Ebooks are a big change in a lot of ways, but they're also, in other ways, just another format.

SM: What is it like to publish a first-time author?

MF: It's really exciting. You get to see the process and it's almost like having a kid. It's really exciting with a first time author because this process is new for them and getting to

see it through their eyes is really exciting. It's very gratifying to be the one to nurture it along.

SM: What's your favorite thing about your job?

MF: It's the relationship with the authors and the books themselves. Those things never get old. You work with people for years and years, you develop really meaningful relationships with them, really interesting creative partnerships with them. Sometimes, just sitting there, I have such an appreciation getting to read with my pencil and figure out how to push it to the next level.

SM: What advice would you give students trying to get into the industry?

MF: Using any contacts you have; getting in the door is always the hardest part.

Interviewed by Samantha Malone

Book Review: “I’m Down: A Memoir”

BY Noelle Kennady

Mishna Wolff. *I’m Down: a Memoir*. St. Martin’s Griffin, New York. 2009.

“I’m allergic to raisins”. That was Mishna Wolff’s response to any fellow nine-year-old at her prep school who inquired as to why her lunch ticket was a different color from theirs. Explaining that she was poor and on scholarship to attend a Yuppie-infested school full of blasé Lacoste-wearing MIT zombies was just not an option. *I’m Down: a Memoir* is a compilation of scenes that Wolff recalls. Some are of “learning how to cap” with her black neighborhood kids that affectionately called her “wonder bread” and “mayonnaise”, and others are of her quest to fit in with wealthy, lunchbox-wielding brats at her school for the gifted. In her memoir, Wolff parallels the challenges in establishing relationships with her peers to her relationship with her father.

From the get-go, we’re introduced to Wolff’s father as a white man who feels most alive and secure when immersed in the black community. According to Wolff, “...he strutted around with a short perm...telling jokes like Redd Foxx, and giving advice like Jesse Jackson”. Perhaps due to this, the memoir illustrates how the author, aside from race and class, learned to see things only in black and white. In the span of approximately eight years—the memoir ends when Mishna’s fourteen—her struggles morph from merely fitting in with peers and classmates to finding a place within her family. As one might suspect, the memoir shifts as the author chooses to reveal more instances in striking detail. Her need to impress her father and be his “little girl” manifests itself in her sacrificing her own desires in order to do what might make him proud: joining track, trying her uncoordinated hand at basketball, even diving, bad pun intended, into the community swim team, although she would have rather been wearing a football jersey while “running into things headfirst”.

Recounting failed attempts to be “down”, Wolff sharply revisits episodes from her past in a way that is painfully humorous. *I’m Down* is consistently funny, but then again, much of the humor operates on a moderate-level. True, her comedy likes to play dress up: sometimes it is sarcastic and self-deprecating, other times it is indubitably self-confident. Regarding her insult, or “capping”, skills, they often become laugh-out-loud funny due to the author’s approach in presentation. An author aware of her own humor is seldom as effective when delivering the punch line, yet Wolff is able to do so with aplomb.

As long as you have the hands to open up the pages, the book will read itself. Who doesn’t want to listen to politically-incorrect and biting sarcastic tales told in the voice of a sassy youngster? I never thought that I would become emotionally-invested in a personal memoir about a white girl growing up in the slums of Seattle with a father who frequently deemed his daughter an “embarrassment” and left her to make cornbread and “sit on the overpass over MLK taunting passing motorists with rocks and middle fingers” at the age of

nine. Still, I found myself remarkably affected, engrossed in the story of Wolff's quest to find herself and befriend unicorn-drawing, would-be Goth kids.

Mishna Wolff shows herself here in *I'm Down* as hungry: hungry for food, for love, for attention, for wealth, for acceptance. It is not a tragedy by any means, although it tugs at the heart strings the way her character craves to be heard and understood. Before she can be either, however, she must succumb to being the outcast paste-eating clown at her school because she can't swap stories with her peers about going skiing or having "more money than God". Mishna Wolff makes minutiae more than entertaining; under her wing it becomes essential to understanding the intricacies of class struggle, as well as race and gender relations. At times, the author's informal style becomes too colloquial for comfort, and strict grammarians may cringe at the early syntax. This is all part of Wolff's allure, however, and one might say that as she ages, so does the voice and maturity of the memoir. Overall, Wolff's quest to be "down" culminates in a victory, as this memoir succeeds in its poignancy, sagacity, and wit.

I'm Frightened, Arizona

BY Cody Ross Gusto

6:24 p.m.

The toe of her boot meets the rubber as she deals the tire a swift kick. “God dammit. It’s flat.” He rounds the hood of the car, kneeling to investigate the front-right tire. He takes off his dust-caked sunglasses, pointing to a small incision. “Must’ve been a nail.” His sister scoffs. “Well, this is fucking great.” She reaches into her purse for a pack of cigarettes. The Arizona sun has acquiesced with the demands of an eager nightfall, slowly fading into the ground. Few cars are on the highway. Returning to the driver’s seat he turns on the hazards, muttering obscenities to nobody in particular. She takes a drag, turning toward the vast expanse of land opposite the highway. Over the din of engines roaring by, he can hear her inappreciable attempt at humor: “Hey, remember when we were kids and we said we wanted to trek the Sahara? Here we are!” Cigarette pinned between both lips, she opens her arms wide, exhibiting the cactus-filled Sonoran desert much like a ringmaster would a circus. She lowers her arms slowly and whispers softly to herself: “Just one big fucking desert.” Turning back toward her brother, she brushes her thick auburn hair from her eyes. Another drag and she drops the cigarette to the ground, smothering it with the toe of her boot. She speaks loudly over the rising wind and the occasional straggle of passing cars. “This is an omen, Daniel. I wish you would’ve listened to me. This whole thing is a bad idea.” Eyes closed, Daniel pretends not to hear her. Frustrated, she stomps her way toward the passenger side door, opens it, and sits down next to her brother. Her piercing eyes reserve every bit of intensity for moments like these. “Daniel.” Eyes still closed. Ignored again. She rolls her eyes, reaches across her brother and leans heavily on the horn. Daniel’s eyes snap open. He rises startled, only to slump back down again at the sight of his sister’s satisfied smirk. “Why the hell would you do that?” She answers matter-of-factly: “I hate being ignored.” Daniel rubs his eyes and puts his aviators back on, eager to avoid another onslaught of dust and sand. “Ain’t that the truth.” She ignores him. “I just don’t understand why we’re doing this. I really don’t. This is a terrible idea.” Daniel’s retort is quick and biting. “Well then why the hell did you come with me, Jen? Huh?” She’s quiet for a moment. “I don’t know. I’m curious too. I want to see what he looks like. Mom slapped me the one time I asked for a picture.” Daniel: “So what’s the problem?” Jennifer stares at him incredulously. “You don’t see the ramifications of this? How this could be a very, very bad idea?” Daniel stops her short. “Jen, I know. Okay? You don’t have to lecture me. I just need to see him. For myself. I need a little bit of closure.” She sends a bemused look her brother’s way, obviously searching for words. Her mouth hangs wide for several moments, weighing the consequences of furthering the argument. Finally, she closes her mouth and

looks forward. “Call AAA..” Daniel: “What’s the number?” Jennifer’s hands fly into the air. “How the hell should I know?” She turns toward her brother as he files through the contents of his wallet. He shakes his head and relinquishes a defeated smile. “Well, doesn’t matter now. I forgot the card.” Through pursed lips, Jennifer recites a well-rehearsed obscenity. Daniel: “Hey, there should be a callbox along here somewhere though. Shouldn’t be more than a half a mile down the road.” This comment is greeted by a contemplative silence. Eyes meet. The siblings turn to each other simultaneously, placing a clenched fist on an open palm. “Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!” Jennifer smiles triumphantly as she snips her brother’s flat, prone hand. Pleadingly: “Best two out of three?” A head shake no and a dismissive wave. “Shoo, Daniel. I think I’ll have my nap now. Do hurry though. I’m craving a hot bath.” Daniel storms indignantly from the car, making sure to leave both a sinister glare and a slammed door behind for his sister. Jennifer wears a self-satisfied smile as she lights another cigarette, shielding the lighter’s flame from a determined wind. Slipping off her boots, she raises her long, slender legs and crosses them gracefully atop the dashboard.

9:27 p.m.

Daniel lies prone on his bed, one hand behind his head, the other firmly grasping his copy of “The Dharma Bums.” Jennifer emerges from the bathroom, head tilted to one side. A succession of grimaces run their course across her face as she attempts to comb through the knots in her thick, damp hair. “God dammit.” Daniel lowers his book and peers at his sister over his prescription reading glasses. He notices her attire: strapless shirt, blue jeans, boots. Six of the ten fingers are adorned with a variety of rings and an elegant necklace hugs her collarbone. “Where are you going?” Still brushing. “There’s a bar just down the road.” Feeling his look, she reassures him. “Listen, just one drink. Maybe two. I just need a beer, Dan.” Dan readjusts his glasses and returns to his book. “Okay, but remember, we’re getting up pretty early in the morning.” Jen relocates to the bathroom, turning on the faucet to brush her teeth. Between rinses, a barely coherent “Yeah, yeah” is discernible. Another thought crosses Dan’s mind: “And no guys!” Jen winks as she saunters back into the room. She slaps her brother’s leg, eager for his attention. He looks up. “Listen, take advantage of any and every complimentary object in this hellhole, okay? I already shoved those tiny shampoo and body wash bottles in my suitcase. Can’t beat free shit, right?” Dan shakes his head. “Hey, at least you don’t have any shame.” Jen smiles and kisses her brother on the cheek. “Love you too. Don’t stay up for me. I’ve got the keycard. I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

2:32 a.m.

He can’t get any sleep. He sits upright in bed, his bare feet meeting the hotel carpet for the first time in several hours. He checks his phone. Still nothing. She hadn’t returned the last three texts he had sent. Still sporting his pajama pants, Daniel dons his deck shoes and grabs a sheet off of the bed. Outside the air is crisp and vital. The blackness is wholesome and only off-set by a faint neon sign every quarter mile. As if drawn by some

invisible force, Daniel's eyes rise to absorb the thousand specks above him. The black pool fills his vision, reciprocating simultaneous feelings of ineptitude and admiration. Daniel smiles as he recites a line from his last Kerouac escapade: "The stars were the same then as they are now." He inhales deeply, loving the moment. Life is a language that few people ever become fluent in. Daniel sees, listens and hears. As the wind caresses his cheek, Daniel smiles, acknowledging the opportunity of clarity he's seldom been exposed to in his 26 years of existence. He reaches the bar, gazing silently at the image of a crimson hound eagerly gulping a mug of brew. "WELCOME TO BIG RED." Daniel's eyes widen. "Christ." He enters and is immediately greeted with a sparsely-populated collection of bikers, benders, losers, trampers, and far-off lovers. Over there. He spots his sister in the arms of a young 30-something . They're slow dancing. The 30-something whispers sweet nothings into her ear. She laughs and buries her head into his shoulder. The jukebox is playing "I Found A Reason" by The Velvet Underground. Daniel knows immediately it was she who put it on. She played the record over and over again the week their mother died. Daniel would listen against the door as she would cry for hours and hours. He would hug her, but he knew it wouldn't help.

HONEY, I FOUND A REASON.

Daniel leans against the far wall, watching his sister dance. His initial annoyance with her being out this late has subsided.

AND YOU KNOW THE REASON, DEAR IT'S YOU.

He looks around. He sees the lonesome. Drinks nursing all wounds.

AND I'VE WALKED DOWN LIFE'S LONESOME HIGHWAYS.

A golden retriever nurses her pups in a makeshift dog bed in the corner. Big Red, no doubt.

HAND IN HAND WITH MYSELF.

Jennifer laughs with the man she doesn't know.

AND I REALIZE HOW MANY PATHS HAVE CROSSED BETWEEN US.

Daniel draws strange looks. He forgot about the pajamas and the blanket. He rebuttals with winks and nods.

OH I DO BELIEVE.

Jen wobbles slightly. 30-something catches her fall. She's vulnerable.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU PERCEIVE.

Daniel approaches his sister.

WHAT COMES IS BETTER THAN WHAT CAME BEFORE.

Dan taps on his sister's shoulder. "Honey?" The 30-something looks up suspiciously. Jennifer turns slowly, eyes glossy. Her answer is louder than she intended. "DAN? I told you I was..gonna be back later." Dan grabs his sister's wrist gently. "I know babe, but we've gotta get up early tomorrow remember?" Jennifer sports a puzzled mask. The 30-something's mask has hers beat. He stutters: "You..you're...married?" Jennifer shrugs. "I guess so." She lets out a giggle. Daniel looks wild-eyed from her to the confounded man. "You didn't let her drink did you? She's pregnant!" He turns back to the intoxicated Jennifer, whose state of mind allowed for this type of game playing. The 30-something's eyes widen. Stumbling: "Hey man, I...I didn't know anything about that! I didn't even know she was married, man!" Daniel shoots a vicious stare, leaving poor 30-something rooted in his spot. Brother and sister pour out into the street laughing hysterically. "Holy shit. His face was priceless!" Jen nods, giggling frantically to herself. "He com-completely bought it! I...kinda feel bad though, you know?" Dan waves this off. "Nah, he'll be fine." He glances at his sister, who has begun to tremble slightly in the brisk early morning air. He wraps her in the sheet and pulls her tight. "Come on, let's get you back. You're gonna have a rough morning." A moment of silence is ultimately broken by Jen: "I gotta pee."

9:05 a.m.

I-10. Windows down, wind filtering through her thick hair. Johnny Cash's baritone voice rattles the speakers. She takes a drag. Looking down at the notecard, she turns to her brother. "2105 Hayden Dr., Casa Grande, Arizona. 15 miles. We're almost there." Daniel stares forward with both hands on the wheel. He nods. "You getting nervous?" Jen takes a moment before answering. "Yes. And I still think this is a bad idea. This feels wrong." He retorts: "Listen, I'm having a tough time listening to ominous warnings from someone who's smoking herself to death." He turns to his sister. She meets his gaze. The two exchange glares for a moment before Jennifer inhales deeply from her cigarette and blows it in her brother's face. "Shut up, Dan."

9:26 a.m.

Dan pulls to the curb. Jennifer checks the card. 2105. "This is it." Brother and sister stare at the modest home before them. The exterior is entirely white. A humble flowerbed rests underneath the master bedroom window sill. A yard composed entirely of gravel. Several cacti rest unassuming, scattered sporadically across the yard. They exchange looks before exiting the car. Dan has begun to perspire. He drags his palms across the denim of his Levis. Jennifer lingers. She fumbles through her purse. "Dan, hold on a second." Daniel whirls around and groans at the sight of another cigarette. "God damn. You've got to be kidding me?" Inhale. Pacing. "I can't do this Dan. Why the fuck are we giving this bastard the time of day? We should've just erased this scumbag from our minds." He approaches her, laying a hand on her arm. His eyes search for hers. She turns her head away. "Jen, you know we can't do that. I'm not here to forgive. I'm here to forget. I need this to finally move on with my life. I'm sick of wondering." She bites her lip. Those involuntary tears flood the

ducts of both eyes. Long drag. Exhale. She dabs her eyes and meets the longing stare. “Alright. I’m right behind you.” Dan flashes a weak, sympathetic smile. “Come on.” Jen snuffs the cig. The two warily approach the front door. Daniel inhales deeply, taking in 26 years of ambiguity and doubt. He exhales even deeper, ready for some type of resolution. His knock is firm and authoritative. The next moment lasts an eternity. Finally, a voice from the other end of the door. “Heather, I’ve asked you 6 times to make your bed! I am NOT your maid, ya hear? What do they teach you kids in college these days?” The woman opens the door and is faced with a 20-something kid in need of a shave and a new pair of jeans. The girl to his left, slightly younger, looks uneasy. “Can I help you?” Daniel extends a hand. “Yes ma’am.” She takes it. Daniel commences his monologue. “I’m Aaron Piper and this is my sister Kelsey. We’re both graduates from University of Arizona, and we were wondering if Professor Norwood was home? I don’t know if I would’ve survived sophomore year without him. Drove from Colorado to see if we could pay the old man a visit!” Daniel forces an uneasy chuckle. Jen obliges with an uncomfortable flash of teeth as well. The woman’s powder blue eyes moisten. She liberates a sad smile and shakes her graying hair gently. “That’s sweet of you…but my husband passed almost four months ago to this day.” A small jingle. An American Shorthair passes between the woman’s legs and presses against Daniel’s jeans, purring audibly. Daniel looks down at the cat. He’s suddenly overcome with a wave of nausea. He can feel the hot tears fighting to exit their restraints. Jennifer bursts into tears and runs off the front porch. The woman looks after her. “Is she alright?” A moment passes. Daniel looks up, fighting back the wave of emotions that run their course unchecked throughout his body. “How did he die?” The question was hard, slipped through grit teeth. A slow tear finds the woman’s cheek. “A heart attack. He died of a heart attack.” Daniel nods. “I’m sorry for your loss. He was a great teacher and a good man.” Those tear filled blue eyes piercing his own. She nods adamantly, lip trembling slightly as she attempts to hold her chin high. “Yes. Yes he was.” Daniel’s consolations feel cold and involuntary to him. The woman points toward Jennifer sobbing in the car. “Are you sure she’s okay?” Dan nods gravely. “She’ll be fine. We really missed your husband’s guidance.” The woman: “Won’t you please come in for some tea or a sandwich or something? I can’t leave you two going all the way back to Colorado unfed.” Daniel humbly declines, hugs the woman, apologizes again, and turns his back to the small white house with the poor woman, the unmade beds, the jingling cat, and the cacti. His world goes silent as he treks the gravel walkway back to the car. Numbness consumes his body. As he walks, he becomes the unthinking, unfeeling vessel that too often plagues this planet.

9:38 a.m.

Daniel opens the car door, sits down, and turns to his sister. Jennifer’s cheeks bear the tear-stained paths that amalgamate at the drop-off of her jaw line. Mucus leaks from either nostril. She turns abruptly and precedes to ravage her brother with an onslaught of slaps, punches, screams and scratches. “WHY?! Why the FUCK couldn’t you have just let it go, Dan?” Daniel catches her lashes, holding both her arms. He holds her close as she

continues to struggle against him. The tears flow unchecked once more. She finally relents, burying her face into his chest. Dan rests his chin on top of her radiant auburn hair. He whispers softly: "We're alright. It'll be alright." She moans. Quietly: "He died not knowing who the fuck we were, Dan. He didn't care if we lived or died." "Sh. I know. We're not gonna do that to our kids though, alright Jen?" Still sobbing. He lifts her chin. "Hey, look at me." Eyes rise. "We are NOT going to do that to our kids, Jennifer. Your husband will always be there for you and your kids, and me and my wife are always gonna be there for ours. We always have that opportunity to do right." Jennifer nods slowly. "I just feel so...alone." Daniel looks sternly at his sister. "We've always got each other. Besides, you're too gorgeous to be by yourself. Just ask that poor jackass in the bar last night." Jen lets out a choked laugh and snuffles loudly. She lays her head in his lap. He brushes her hair gingerly. Daniel is surprised at her new-found calm. As the Arizona sun lapped his skin, Daniel wasn't sure what he would do next. A sense of pride trickled over him with the realization that he survived this moment and would survive the next. It's important to survive these moments. He took one last look at the late professor's home, kissed his sister lightly on her forehead and closed his eyes. The impression left from the morning sun was still visible through closed lids. Daniel felt the breeze through his hair and addressed his sister: "Let's go home."

Contributors

Scott Horn is a senior and a creative writing major at Florida State from Orlando, Florida. When he isn't scrambling for banal things to write about he's usually playing guitar, listening to music, or just getting that glazed look in his eye fantasizing about the new Chipotle opening on Call Street. He hopes to obtain an MFA in poetry following graduation.

Eric Zerkel is a Senior Political Science and Creative Writing double major from Fleming Island, Florida. He has plans to pursue a graduate degree in journalism, and hopes that you will read more of him in the future. He would like to thank a series of unnamed large retail stores for destroying his faith in 'the man,' while simultaneously providing him with a wealth of inspiration; without years of customer service brain washing none of this would have been possible.

Katie Boué is a senior creative writing major.

Samantha Malone is a Junior at Florida State. She is an Editing, Writing, and Media major with minors in Communications and Italian. She is a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma is so excited to be included in the fall issue of the Kudzu.

Noelle Kennady is a senior at Florida State University with a double major in Creative Writing and Theatre. She intends on earning her MFA in poetry

Cody Ross Gusto is a sophomore Creative Writing major at Florida State University. He plans to pursue a career in screen-writing and/or creative writing. He would like to thank his parents for their self-less love and guidance and his two younger siblings for their never-ending inspiration.