

# THE LAUREL REVIEW

Volume 42

Number 1

Co-editors: Rebecca Aronson, John Gallaher, Bryn Gribben

Contributing Editors: Martha Rhodes, Reginald Shepherd

Editorial Assistant: Amanda Meyer

Fiction Reader: Brenda Lewis

Cover Art: Natalie Gallaher

Cover Design: Amber Hashemi, Publications Assistant,  
Northwest Missouri State University

Typography: Teresa Carter, Publications Coordinator,  
Northwest Missouri State University

*The Laurel Review* publishes two issues each calendar year. Closed May 1–August 31. Reports one month to four months. No translations or simultaneous submissions. No manuscript can be returned nor query answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. U.S. subscription rates are \$10 for one year, \$18 for two years, and \$24 for three years. International rates are \$14 for one year, \$23 for two years, and \$30 for three years. Available back issues are \$4.00 (plus \$1.00 postage and handling). Address all submissions and other correspondence to *The Laurel Review*, Green Tower Press, Department of English, Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, MO 64468-6001.

*The Laurel Review* is indexed in the *Index of American Periodical Verse*, the *Annual Index to Poetry in Periodicals*, the *American Humanities Index*, and the *Index to Periodical Fiction*. A cumulative index appears in every sixth volume.

The views expressed in *The Laurel Review* do not necessarily correspond to those of Northwest Missouri State University, and the University's support of this magazine should not be seen as an endorsement of any philosophy other than faith in free expression.

MAC  
MISSOURI ARTS COUNCIL

Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Missouri Arts Council, a State Agency.

Copyright 2007 Green Tower Press  
All rights reserved  
ISSN 0023-9003

*Patrick Madden*

## Divers Weights and Divers Measures

### BUT NOT TODAY

Normally you would accompany a mention of Disney's recent *102 Dalmatians* with appropriate cynicism, perhaps an allusion to its underhanded profit motivation, its unrepentant exploitation of cheap emotional tugs and immature gags. You would not have seen it, but you could not have escaped the television commercials and the previews and the plastic toys in your children's Happy Meals, and perhaps your wife took the children to a Saturday matinee and you asked perfunctorily, "How was it?" and she replied, "It was cute," and left it at that. But Leonardo lay dying in the sanatorium and you went to see him and although you already knew, he explained about the soups and the jello and the bag attached to his side, gave intricate and intimate details about the extent of his cancer and the series of operations that left him without a large intestine. To make conversation, you mentioned that your grandmother had died of colon cancer. Realizing too late your grievous error, you talked hurriedly about the advances you were sure medical science must have made since your grandmother's passing, which was before you were born. And he didn't yet know he was really dying, so he said, "When I get out of here, the first thing I'm going to do is take Kiara to see *102 Dalmatians*." Kiara was then four. And he did just that before he died, during a brief respite, and so you may now wonder if this counts as a happy ending, or if one can still write about death, a subject that very well fits the admonition of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. By *one*, of course, you mean *you*.

### SO IT CIRCLES BACK

My sister told me on the phone that she'd heard from my father, and he from my mother, who denies any knowledge of the grim details, and eventually no one is sure who brought the news in from the outside about their friend's daughter, age 21, while her father, with his red hair, was on business in China and called back right before Christmas to such horrifying news that

his daughter is dead in her prime, a bright, beautiful girl, as they all are after they're dead. But the rumor is that it was suicide, a grievous unknowable sin from which there may be no salvation for a Catholic like her, and shameful added to heartbreaking for her parents, but the casket was closed and the question never asked. "You don't know how," says my father, "so you just quietly pay your respects and offer the platitudes, knowing they'll never melt through the freeze."

## TATO

The headline about the firefighter killed at the port was already far on its way to the nether regions of my mind when it was called back by a phone call early Sunday morning. Estela Morán waited until the conversation was winding down to tell me that the whole town of Durazno was sad. *Do you know why?* she asked. I didn't.

Then I had what the end of the article would have given me had I continued my reading: Carlos Hernández of Durazno leaves behind a pregnant wife and a two-year-old daughter. He is survived by his parents, his brother, his sister, his grandparents up the street, his cousins across town, his neighbors pulling weeds in the garden out back, sitting in the shade of the tree in their front yard sipping mate in the late afternoon, the horses grazing under the eucalyptus trees cast in silhouette by the setting sun, the swirling rage of clouds and refracted violets and reds and oranges as day gives way to night, as an old friend ruminates the shifted weight of those anonymous words he had chosen to forget.

There were other deaths in the newspaper that day, and the next day, and every day thereafter. I have forgotten them all.

## THINGS I KNOW, THINGS I WONDER, THINGS I'D LIKE TO SAY

I have learned that if a pregnant woman leaves a craving for food unsatisfied, her child will be born with a birthmark resembling the desired food in exactly the spot where she then touched herself. Thus my brother-in-law had a pear shape on his leg.

I have learned that if someone speaks ill of you, your ears will itch and you will scratch. Thus have I, an unbeliever, learned to leave my ears alone in the presence of my in-laws, who might imagine me to have many enemies.

I have learned that if someone far away is thinking of you, you will drop an object whose name begins with the first letter of that person's name. It is this last that I ponder as my mind wanders to the future in order to consider the present, to the P-things I will give to my children to place on their shelves, in their pantries or their parlors, things to have always on hand, ready for the dropping.

## STOPPED ON THE SIDE OF I-70 NEAR GREEN RIVER, UTAH

Patrick is four, Adriana is two, and the family is driving to Canyonlands National Park for the day. Adriana is throwing up frequently: four times during the trip, which would normally take less than four hours, but today will take five. The third time she throws up, I stop the car on the shoulder, jump out swiftly, open the back door, peel off her clothes, careful to contain the liquids within the folds of the garments, unsuccessful at keeping it out of her hair. Patrick needs to pee, so I let him out on the side away from the road and try to keep an eye on him while he pulls down his shorts, while I run to the back of the car, pop open the hatch, grab a plastic bag and some paper towels, and my wife tends to Adriana and her soiled car seat. He is intelligent enough, I imagine, to know that he should stay far away from the road and the trucks barreling by at seventy-five miles per hour, but I am his father, and my stomach wrenches with fear and memory of the dreams that jerk me awake with sweat and the taste of copper and the unrelenting, unavoidable urge to check on him in his bed, where I've always found him sleeping soundly, usually twisted in his sheets like a croissant, sometimes breathing calmly, sometimes grinding his teeth. I touch his shoulder as I pass the bag to his mother, then I crouch to see in his eyes. I tell him that the road is very dangerous, that he should stay on this side of the car, that he's not to move quickly, and a passing truck blasts us with its wake, an audible pop of air that shakes the car and blows Patrick's hair forward into his eyes. I freeze, suddenly struck with the image of my son running into the road. I close my eyes as they well up, and I am shaking even after my children are clean and relieved and buckled safely back in their car seats. I forget to release the parking brake until I've reached thirty-five miles an hour, zipping along the rumble strips gathering speed to enter the freeway. I curse silently, but the vision will not leave me. It is too much to have before me the infinite perils of existence.

## COLD COMFORT

The boy, seven, is terrified by heights and speeds, avoids roller coasters and jostling amusement park rides. His sister, five, loves the thrill of those rides, is the first to volunteer for a mid-summer ski-lift ride up Mount Timpanogos, at Robert Redford's Sundance Resort. My parents are visiting, this is a special opportunity, so we finally prevail on the boy, convince him that nothing bad will happen, he can ride between Dad and Grandpa, for safety.

Halfway up the slope, where the ground drops away far below, there are jagged rocks jutting, the boy grips the lap bar tremblingly, whiteknuckledly. I hold his shoulders, my father holds his thigh. His sister, on the other side of Grandpa, smiles in the wind, her hair flies, her eyes squint against the sun.

"Don't worry, Pato," she says across to her brother. A swell of thankful pride begins somewhere inside me.

"We're all going to die someday."

## ALL/MOST

Maybe we shouldn't have let Adi watch *King Kong*, but we did. When the men trapped the ape, when they shot at him, bound him, put him on display, ran from him screaming, she protested, "Gorillas are the nicest animals! Mommy, aren't gorillas the nicest animals?" and when it ended, when they shot King Kong from their biplanes and he slipped to the street below and photographers clambered on his chest to snap shots of his grimace, she cried, attenuating her understanding of the way the world works: "I thought most movies are supposed to have happy endings." Just yesterday she would have left out the most.

## WHEREFORE?

That the tree that will make the box that will hold me when I leave is alive and my deceased grandfather's age, home to insects, birds, squirrels, surrounded by its kind, towering above others, drinking the earth, stretching for the sun.

## ON WRITING

How each word is born, in part, from the word before; how the first sentence, its cast, its rhythm, its tense, et cetera, drives what follows: informationally, chronologically, emotionally. When I was positioned front left of the marching band formation my junior year, practicing for the Epcot parade, and Adam Terry on baritone and I on trombone led the band whither we would, and sometimes, while playing "On Broadway," where our part was a simple down-on-one up-to-three beat, and we ducked and bobbed with the syncopation and blatted our notes and made marching fun, and others followed, laughing. But our director, Mr. Boor (which was his real name and which fit him well) wouldn't have it, and grew angry, and thus missed what might have been, even for him, brief moments of joy.

## REMEMBERING

I saw the old man a few weeks later in the same plaza. I was rushing to get to a class, but I stopped anyway. He hadn't seen me. We shook hands and spoke briefly. I explained that I was in a hurry and didn't have time to talk much, but I wanted to say hello again. He smiled and recalled our previous conversation. "You've got to come back some day and sit a while, rest. Read your book and write, like you did that day," he said. "Remember?"

I did.

"Life is too precious to waste it running here and there," he said. "Take the time to sit and observe life."

I said I would and did he have a watch. He did. It was already seven.

As I left he took my hand again and said, "Thank you. Thank you for remembering me."

## SUBJUNCTIVE

From my friends in Uruguay whom I didn't get to see during my last visit: "*Lo importante es que te hayas acordado de nosotros*": "The important thing is that you've remembered us." But the compound verb is cast in the subjunctive, the less-than-joined, so that the saying is to me an unintentional barb, "*que te hayas acordado*," as if to cast aspersions, to mean without quite saying. It is doubt required by grammar.

Had the English language a more pronounced or practiced subjunctive case, I should feel inclined to use it all of the time. It is the case of the supposed, the doubted, the if, the essay.

### PLAYING IT COOL

Today as we were driving home, we saw a car with the license plate "HEY JUDE." I started singing it, not really knowing which parts come in which order. When I came to "Don't you know that it's a fool who plays it cool by making his world a little colder," Karina said, "I really like that message." What message? "That it's stupid to pretend you're cool by being cold, without emotions." I had never thought of that before. I would guess I've heard the song more than a hundred times, and most of those times I've been singing along, but I never quite got that meaning, which now, of course, seems so obvious. It may be because I didn't command that kind of inverted syntax when I was a child and first heard the song. I simply thought it was a demonstrative sentence, not an advisory one. Something like "See over there? That's a fool who plays it cool..." And somehow, a "fool" was not a bad thing.

Later tonight, after I've written the above paragraph and Karina's read it over my shoulder, and after I've again sung the line, Karina explains, "I always thought it was 'it's so fool to play it cool,'" which to her, who didn't command English when she was young and first heard the song, means "it's so foolish..." and thus, I understand, she understood because she misunderstood.

### WE SOMETIMES CATCH A WINDOW

Before her bath, Adriana tries on her mother's shoes, gets our attention, and says, "I look so Mommy!"

During her bath, she soaps up her body and says, "I look so snowman!" then soaps up her chin and says, "I look so Santa Claus!"

And almost all at once, but slowly, I understand that on its surface there is nothing memorable about today that I should desire it, that it will be gone, and then will her uncommon way of saying things be gone, and then will my memory of her saying these things be gone, so that generations hence, when some descendant finds the record of "Adriana Laura Madden. b. 20 January 2000. d. 7 June 2087" or whatever it will be, he will have missed the whole point.

### WE LOCK THE FRONT GATE

We lock the front gate as much to keep the children in as to keep thieves out, because the world is big and unpredictable and sometimes evil. It is a world where children are kidnapped and run over by cars and bitten by dogs and beaten and lost for days and reported kidnapped by a stranger in a big car only to be found electrocuted behind the dryer in the basement.

But there, coming down the road, are three children, three girls, the oldest hardly older than my son, the youngest younger than my daughter, pushing a broken cart filled with flattened cardboard that they've collected and will sell. They live up the street on unclaimed land next to the path we take to get to church on Sunday in an unfinished house in the muck with their patchy dogs and muddy geese and tethered horse bowing, peaceful, tearing at the overgrown grass outside their barbed-wire fence. Their hair is matted, their faces dirty, their feet bare and already gnarled, and they're not yet dead or kidnapped or hit by cars. And their mother and father?

### FLEETING INSIGHT INTO THE BRAIN'S FILING SYSTEM STRUCTURE

Somewhere always near the surface, buzzing, an eye or ear or hankering for ideas floating on the air to be plucked out and picked up by as many as come across them, without cross-pollination, so that even redundant notions may be "original" or as close as we can get.

Somewhere on the shelf of the cabinet at my in-laws' house, the *New Dictionary of Dreams* (in Spanish). And we're off.

Years ago when words were newer, and maybe more sonorous, I discovered that the word *dictionary* was almost like "Dick, Sean, Mary," which might be the names of three of your schoolmates or characters in a book like *Dick and Jane*, which I never really read, but which I knew about, as does everyone. I carried Dick, Sean, and Mary in my head for years, never really finding a use for them, though they come back to bother me every now and then. They weren't funny enough to make a joke out of, and, of course, Mary was there messing things up by not being named Airy. (I didn't know name Ari then, and it's no good anyway: wrong A-sound.) And, though I use dictionaries often without any complications, here, this day, Dick, Sean, and Mary returned. I didn't know what to do with them.

So I remembered Robert Palmer's song "Addicted to Love," which easily transformed, some years after my dictionary revelation, into "You might as well face it, you're a dick," then a jerky lacuna, like the missing note at the end of the Beatles' "Her Majesty," an irresolution. It was a wholly other use for Dick, one that was in confluence with my ideas of what was funny at that time in my life. I tried to extend it to "You might as well face it, you're a dick, Ted, to love," but the only guy I knew named Ted I didn't know well, so I wasn't about to try it out on him. Thankfully, the lyrical variation removed itself to the far reaches. Unfortunately, it returns randomly and without invitation.

This time it brought a friend, from the day after the Notre Dame laundry burned down with lots of our clothes inside. I was at track practice, we were stretching in the upstairs corridor of the Joyce Athletic and Convocation Center, and a blond hurdler whose name I forget started singing, in his best Tom Petty twang, "I'm freeeeeeee-, free-ballin'!"

It was funny and clever to me then because everyone knew what he meant, because we had all heard the news about the laundry, were all partaking of that common experience. And even though I doubt he really lost all his underwear in the fire, his meaning was clear, exaggeratively humorous, with its instantly understandable meaning in two words carrying the weight of a song and a slang expression and the day's events to an audience already primed, though unexpectant. Perhaps no one else who was there that day remembers the moment, maybe not even the kid who sang, but the scene is with me forever, if only briefly, and intermittently, brought back under its own steam in a random moment and without logical provocation.

## NEW USES FOR TIRED QUOTATIONS

Nevermind mountains, *Because it was there* is why I watch television when I'm bored, why I finish off a bag of chips when I'm not hungry, why I watch a sunset.

## LANGUAGE

Pato is writing letters. Already he has small handwriting, as do I, using only half of the tall lines with the dashed middle meant for him to practice his form. He writes randomly, for a whole line, then asks, "What do this say?"

He's remembering the time, a few months ago, when he brought me his gobbledegook and I pronounced it, and we laughed so hard, then he came again with another word, which this time included "poop," which I pointed out to him, and we laughed all the harder. Now I'm worried about his learning, so I explain, as I've explained before, that you can't just put letters in any old order and hope you come up with something. I don't tell him about the infinite monkeys at their typewriters somewhere off in the universe doing just that at just this very moment, and always. So he keeps at it, writing in the other room while I'm typing this, and he shows up with his results: "Best American Essays," which he's copied from my book cover.

Adi, meanwhile, writes shapes, and we call it "drawing letters," which it is at that stage, and she performs variations on the letter A, which she knows from her name, and tells me, "Daddy, look what I screeb." She means, of course, "look what I've scriven" or "scripted" or "written," because she knows the Spanish word *escribir*, and she knows enough of language's logic to create words from their Latin roots and get them right or close enough most of the time.

I'm no linguist, but I don't need years of research and grants to know that our signs are not completely arbitrary, that we are born with a thirst for language, a genetic predisposition to logic and connection and communication.

## UNCHAINED METAPHOR

There is construction behind my house, three houses at different stages of completion: one framed and roofed, one being framed, one whose foundation is being poured. There are machine and pounding noises at all hours, the steady beeping of trucks in reverse at midnight, the rhythmic hammering of who knows what at four a.m. this morning. I understand that this has come to me not as a nuisance but as a gift: the metaphor hangs in the dusty air over the black plastic strip of fence dividing the new houses from me, but it remains out of focus. I don't know if it wants an essay or a fragment or a poem or something I am not equipped to write. The men curse and laugh and their cigarette smoke curls upward, tugged, I imagine, by the humming wires and, further on, by the wind.

## LANGUAGE

Adi lying on her back, barefoot; I tapping a steady-syncoated rhythm with my hands on her soles; she says, laughing, "Daddy, what are you saying with my feet?"

## CONSIDER THE LILIES...

At the breakfast table my son asks me, *Is today Friday?*

*No*, I answer, *today is Thursday*, suddenly realizing that he has never known what day it is, nor has he needed to.

*Oh*, he says. *And is Thursday really cold?*

## FLOWER LANGUAGE

We speak Spanish in the home, when we remember, are not frustrated, or tired, and there are not other people around. One morning my daughter stood by the back door, silhouetted and refracted by the eastern sunlight coming just over the mountains.

*I speak three languages*, she said.

*Oh?* I asked.

*Yep. Spanish, English, and Flower Language.*

*And what is flower language?* I asked.

*You just stand there and don't say anything.*