



# Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub.

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cover image:

**Emma Farber**

*Languish*

oil on canvas, 30 inches x 40 inches

inside back cover image:

**Regina Stanmar '03**

*Delicate Isolation*

2010, digital photography, 8 inches x 10 inches

first glossy image:

**Meghan Hollister**

*Reverie*

2010, mixed media, 18 inches x 24 inches

intro poem

**Meghan Hollister**

*Epigraph*

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Special thanks to Leslie Bell and Joseph Lappie.

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*You asked me a question  
in the silence of the night  
in the hazy moment before slumber  
that made my heart stop.*

## The Dead Leaves

that yesterday floated  
on top of the water  
in the half-filled pool  
today sit soaked  
and brown  
in clumps at the bottom  
crushing their dark shadows.  
The garden is picked bare  
and cut back for winter.  
The poolside chairs  
are empty and waiting to be filled  
with the first snow.

—Jeremy Burke '99

## Floating Down a Concrete Walk

It feels so strange  
to be here  
    walking around  
on all of these old sidewalks again.  
Strange to see the buildings  
where I began  
to learn that there is more  
to know than there is time  
enough to glimpse.

The people smile and say hi  
like I'm not an aberration.  
Others grab me  
by the arm, shake it  
as if I've returned  
from 6 feet beneath  
the frost-filled Iowa soil.

    It feels that way  
    sometimes. My breath is cold  
    and frost grows from my eyebrows  
    like that strange fungus  
    on the oranges  
    in the back of the refrigerator.

The wind blows hard  
through this stretch of concrete walk.  
It makes me huddle closer  
to myself inside my winter coat.  
Hunching over, I whisper  
the names of people  
I see floating in the distance.

—Jeremy Burke '99

## Butterflies in Barcelona

How I wish I were twenty again.

Those Barcelona girls who stroll  
along La Rambla,  
that broad, shady boulevard,  
know they are beautiful,  
but they bear that knowledge  
in good grace, as they do  
the lock of hair that blows  
tantalizingly across their eyes  
as they stroll.

They wear short skirts—  
with black tights, for modesty, I suppose,  
and low-top boots of Spanish leather,  
and they move with easy grace,  
past the shops and sidewalk artists,  
with that hint of slow vaivén,  
that subtle sway you might miss  
unless you are seated on a park bench  
dreaming of your long-gone youth.

If you look more than a minute,  
the click of heels moves on,  
but then a few slow steps  
and the dark-eyed beauty looks back  
and throws a friendly smile carelessly  
over her shoulder. Then she is gone.

But that little smile becomes  
a yellow butterfly that flutters back and  
brushes your cheek, and then  
the boulevard and the trees are  
suddenly full of yellow butterflies.

—Ralph G. Smith '47

## Tortas en Toluca

Pretty as she was,  
it was not Carlota that I remember so clearly  
on that sunny Mexican morning  
on the plaza in Toluca, with the smell  
of charcoal in the air, grilling the chorizo,  
on market day, with the Indians sitting by their shaded lean-to's,  
with the fruits and vegetables and that wonderful pottery  
with the black and yellow designs spread out around them.

No—it was the sandwich she fixed  
from a can of tuna she had brought along,  
and mayo, and avocado, from those small  
purple aguacates that she got there in the market,  
that taste so good  
spread on a bolillo or telera, the buns  
she bought for ten centavos  
from the old lady with the basketful  
and prepared while we sat on the hard bench  
in the plaza, happy, laughing at each other,  
and devouring the impromptu tortas,  
which were delicious, and matched our mood.

Yes, she was pretty, and perhaps it was her laugh,  
her smile, her tousled hair that overcame  
the beauty of her being, the totality,  
which are like the things we cannot see  
while looking into the sun.

But the sandwich I remember, and the sunny day.  
And our happiness and laughter, all delicious.

—Ralph G. Smith '47



Adam Hurlburt '08  
*Wonderlust (top), Wanderlust (bottom)*

2010, digital photography

## Where the Road Bends

They tell me my mama never did know when to shut up. That's why she died. Right up where Kindle Road turns and those tall pines get real dense. She'd been out on Hinkson with my Uncle Jack and some of the guys from the foundry. Can you believe that? Wading with the fishes with me in her belly after eight months.

They tell me she'd been drinking some of Jack's home brew. Guess it was pretty strong stuff, and maybe the sun got to her, too. She was all over dancing—they tell me my mama loved to dance. She started dancing with that man Kevin. Got his girl Missy all riled up. Missy got up in my mama's face, calling her "whore" and "slut." My mama started yelling back real loud—got that mouth going—ended up smacking Missy on the cheek. That got Missy all pissed off, and my mama got in my uncle's truck and sped off. Missy was pretty bitter, 'cause she raced my mama down, right around the bend.

Mama shouldn't have been driving. She slammed into a pine all quick, probably ninety or so. Old John saw it from his front porch. He ran right over to the tree. The truck was smoking and all crunched up. He looked her right in the eyes, and she stared right back at him.

Missy came running up to Old John. He yelled at her to go inside and call the ambulance. They had to come all the way from Brenton, and it took them a while to get there. Old John kept staring at my mama. He says she kept looking back at him with her head against the steering wheel. She was crying. He talked to her and told her everything would be all right. He watched her die right there. Saddest thing he ever saw.

Old John tells me that when the ambulance finally did arrive, it was all too late to save my mama. They drove her back to the hospital anyhow, looking to save me. Old John rode with us in the back. When we got back to the hospital, they had to cut me out of her, and I was still alive. From then on, I was my grandma's baby. She named me Johnny after that old man.

No one really could explain why I was alive—still can't to this day. They're always using words like "unbelievable" and calling

me a miracle. I don't know. I guess it's not unbelievable to me. I mean, I'm right here, flesh and bones. And I sure don't feel like a miracle. Everyone always looks at me funny when I say that, like I'm speaking sins.

They tell me I was at my mama's funeral. I don't remember it, though, being that I was just a few days old. They tell me it was a nice one, if funerals can be nice. Closed casket, everybody crying and all that. I guess that Missy girl who had raced my mama down didn't come. They tell me she was never quite the same after that. When someone dies, it seems the guilt is divided up between everyone. Coulda done this, shoulda done that—you know. I guess Missy took that guilt from everyone that day my mama died.

I felt bad when Missy died. I was about sixteen, and it was summer time. I remember hearing the ambulance run through town, but I went on working outside. When I went in at night, I found my grandma crying. I remember asking her why, and she said, "That girl that killed your mama got run over by a train." She went on crying, and I just sort of stood there in the kitchen.

Guess she'd been drinking again, wandering the tracks alone one night, and the train took her damn life. I felt pretty sore about it. I had hardly ever seen Missy around town, and when I did, at the grocery or at the lake or whatnot, she never could look at me. I looked at her, though. She looked like a nice lady. I didn't see no harm in her. I didn't see a killer in Missy, and I didn't understand why my grandma thought she killed my mama.

I look back now, and I feel bad about the whole thing. I didn't ever make her feel right about what had happened. I didn't ever tell her that what she did she didn't mean to do. And that night my grandma called her a killer, I just stood there in the kitchen, watching her cry.

—Sarah Gless '08



## Battle Fatigue

Dad's final bit of wisdom, imparted two weeks before he died, was for me to learn to pick my battles. I didn't understand what he meant, and he had no time to explain. Only years later did I realize how funny this advice was, for after the war had ended and Dad returned from New Guinea, married a younger woman, and became a father, he never found another battle worth waging or a cause worth the fight.

He said this in the autumn of my twelfth year after we had returned from the country. Although I think of that day often, I have no idea why he had chosen that afternoon to teach me to fire a rifle. Perhaps he knew time wasn't in his favor and so wanted to pass down some last father-to-son lesson before it was too late. But people do what they do for both complex reasons and no good reason at all. So his courage to return may have had something to do with the half-pint of Old Crow inside the glove compartment. But whether he came home because he sensed the end or because of momentary contrived daring, I suspect it was disappointment and remorse that consumed him.

I remember Dad only in pictures and fragments of memory. He was short and too heavy for his frame. Not that he was obese like our neighbor Mrs. Corbin, whose arms and legs wiggled like disturbed water when she walked, but big in the way that if he stood straight and looked down he wouldn't have seen his shoes. Once while standing in line at the Methodist's Easter picnic, I overheard two men talking about him, not realizing I was so near. The taller said, "Bob's got to watch it. He can't say no to a third helping or a fresh drink." The other one laughed. "Can't say I blame him any," the taller man went on. "A shame what happened."

His friend said, "We served. We're not letting it get to us."

The taller man said, "Hell, we were supply clerks. We counted inventory and stamped forms. It wasn't the same."

"A lot had it bad. He's got a great wife and two little boys."

"You think that's enough?" the taller one said. "You know what he lived through. The malaria. Jungle rot. Monsoons. Mud

up to your calves. Snipers. Snakes so venomous one bite could kill you in seconds. And then, coming back home when your buddies didn't. It changes a man. It's got to."

That's what I heard as I waited to get Dad more ham and potato salad while he, Mom, and Larry, my little brother, sat on a blanket under an elm well out of earshot.

Not that any of it had stopped him from playing softball that day before the picnic, and thinking back to that afternoon, I know that he played well for a man who drank too much, chained-smoked Lucky Strikes, and loved his steak covered in catsup and his fried potatoes hidden in gravy. As a younger man, Dad might have been a shortstop, a slick fielder who'd let nothing get by him, a bulldog of a player who refused to back down when larger men charged at him from first base while he awaited the catcher's throw at second. That might have been Dad at one time, but I don't know. I could never ask him, and Mom never said. Her stories started later, after he had returned a middle-aged man from the South Pacific, resumed his job at the bank, gained weight, and found no battle worth fighting.

Months after that picnic, I came home from school to find Grandma sitting on the couch and Dad's chair gone.

Before I could say anything, Grandma said, "I'll be staying with you for a while. Your mother will explain when she gets home." After that, Larry and I only saw him when uncles and aunts were around.

And now it was an autumn afternoon and he had returned. Larry first saw his car parked a block from our house. Dad got out and waved us over, and we both took off, excited to see him. He rubbed our heads like he always did, and we climbed over him, Larry even more excited than I was.

"You've grown, Larry," he said. "Both of you. I can see it." Dad bent down to look me straight in the face, and asked, "Your mom home?"

I hesitated. I know, because Dad asked again. With his hand on my shoulder, I said that Mom was at the store and Grandma

was inside quilting. He looked at the house, still rubbing Larry's head, then told me to get in his car, that he had something to show me. I saw Larry's disappointment as if a great betrayal had just taken place.

"Why, Dad?" I said, "Where're we going?"

Until then I didn't know it was possible to feel so many conflicting things at once. I was sad for Larry and relieved that he wouldn't have to come; scared to get in the car and eager to do so; proud he wanted me and sorry that he did.

Dad, too, saw Larry's disappointment, and like he had done with me, he stooped to eye level. "I'll come back for you. But right now your grandmother needs to know that your brother's with me and that we'll be back soon."

Larry wanted to say something, but before he could, Dad said, "It's okay, Larry. Tell your grandmother everything's fine. When we get back it'll be your turn. I promise." Dad tried rubbing Larry's head, but Larry shook it off. He could be stubborn when he felt slighted. He could withdraw and turn sullen and stay that way for a long, long time.

Dad opened the passenger door for me. In the backseat I saw a blanket, and sticking out from the folds was a gun barrel. I also noticed the filled ashtray and the half-pint on its side in the open glove compartment. Larry ran to the door and pulled on the handle.

Dad said, "I told you to go back, Larry. Now do what I said. I'm still your father." The two looked at each other, neither one backing down until Larry gave up and walked away. He stopped, picked up a rock, and threw it as hard as he could at Mrs. Corbin's cat. Dad got in and reached across me to slam the glove compartment shut. He made a U-turn and we drove away.

After a short drive into the country, Dad pulled off the gravel road and stopped. He told me to get out and wait for him beside the pasture gate. Walking away, I heard the glove compartment open and close. When I turned I saw Dad reach into the backseat for the rifle. At the gate he removed the bailing-wire latch and we

entered. The rifle rested in the crook of his arm, the barrel pointing down and away.

The fall afternoon was clear and mild, with only wispy clouds floating between the blue sky and us. As we walked along the rutted road, Dad asked about school, my homework, if I was getting along with Mom and not giving her or the teachers a hard time. And he asked about Larry.

I told him what he wanted to hear and then asked, "When are you coming back home, Dad?"

He rubbed the top of my head. "I hope soon, Charles."

He called me Charles when everyone else called me Chip. In time everyone would call me that, but by then Dad would be long dead and well forgotten, Mom would be living with her sister in Nevada, and I would be teaching junior high social studies in Montrose, Colorado. As for Larry, after learning little from a series of minor offenses, he had gotten into trouble so serious that he would be spending another three to five years at Oklahoma's Mack Alford Correctional. I visit when I can.

I said, "We had trouble with that faucet again. I bet you could have fixed it." Dad looked across the field and pulled out another Lucky with his lips. He replaced the pack, then lighted the cigarette with his heavy, well-used silver lighter emboldened with his regimental design. As much as I hated the smell of cigarettes and seeing the discolored butts pushed and twisted into ashtrays, I missed watching the production Dad made of flipping that lighter open and spinning the spark wheel. I smelled the familiar naphtha right before he touched the flame to the end. He was practiced, relaxed, and in his own world.

We didn't go far down that road, but I remember it with the clarity of an event just passed. The corn stalks had browned to the color of grocery bags and turned brittle. I heard a tractor grind in another pasture and smelled the dust kicked up from the harvesting. We didn't talk much after exhausting school and life at home. I glanced at him from time to time, and at the cigarette he moved between his fingers and mouth. When we climbed a small rise, he

began to pant. He stopped and looked around the field.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ll catch up.” I did as told but soon turned to make sure he was all right. He had his back to me but stood at enough of an angle for me to see him spin the cap back on the half-pint and slide the bottle into his inside coat pocket. I knew what could happen when Dad came home late and how Mom would fret and insist that we go to bed early despite our protests. As the oldest, it was my job to keep Larry with me and to obey her, as she became quiet and expectant, as if bracing for bad news.

I turned away before he caught me watching and went on like he wanted. Soon he directed me into a pasture, and I saw the stone remains of an old homestead.

Dad handed me the rifle. It felt heavy and awkward, and I didn’t like its oily smell or feel. “Stay here,” he said.

Dad set the targets on the foundation wall and walked back to me, pulling another Lucky free with his lips. He went through his routine of flipping, spinning, touching, and snapping. Dad closed his eyes, inhaled, and held it before blowing out.

“Don’t ever start,” he said. “It’s a habit that brings little pleasure.”

Yet he seemed relaxed and at peace. “Then just quit, Dad.”

He smiled. “I will, Charles. Someday I will.”

He dropped the butt and twisted it out before taking the rifle back to examine.

“You’re old enough to learn what a rifle feels like, Charles. How you hold it, the way it rests in your hands, how it kicks when fired.” He handed it to me. “Go on, get it on your shoulder.”

I placed it like I’d done with all my toy rifles. This time the barrel circled and wavered.

He took it from me. “Watch,” he said. “It starts with position. Keep your feet shoulder width, weight evenly distributed. Relax, and turn your hips like this to your target. Set the butt-stock high on your shoulder, Charles, and hold it there tight. When you fire, it’s going to kick, so be ready for it. Get the target in your sight, and when you’re ready, squeeze the trigger in one smooth mo-

tion.” He looked over his shoulder at me and smiled. “Got that?”

I nodded.

“This is what’s called a slide-action rifle, so when you’re ready, set the bullet into the chamber by pulling back like so.” Dad positioned himself and aimed. “Remember, set yourself and relax. That’s key, Charles. Let the target come to you.” He fired. The kick rocked him, and the crack was violent and unexpected. I flinched and stepped back. On the wall a can lifted and disappeared.

He put the rifle back into my hands. I still didn’t like it. “It’s not important that you hit your target, Charles. It’s a rhythm. It’s doing something over and over until you don’t think about it anymore. It’s important that you respect what this is. All guns are loaded until you determine they aren’t. Never point it at anyone. Keep the safety on and leave your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire. There’s more to it, but that’s a good start.”

I placed it on my shoulder and tried to steady myself and breathe like Dad had explained.

“Relax, Charles,” I heard him say. “And when you’re locked in, squeeze the trigger.”

He stood behind me so that I could hear but not see him. He had another Lucky going, and that, mixed with the smell of the fired rifle, the oily barrel, and the alcohol on his breath made me sick.

“Go on, Charles; I’m right here,” he said. I closed my eyes, hoping that would settle me.

“You’ll need to look at the target, Charles.” The rifle quivered and my shoulders began to ache.

My finger on the trigger felt small and insignificant. Had he said squeeze? Was I to place my weight on the front leg? It didn’t matter. When the shot went off the sound was immediate and painful, and my shoulder hurt as if it had been torn away. The gun barrel dropped until it pointed at the ground. Dad inhaled, then blew out the smoke in one long stream before grinding the Lucky deep into the ground.

"That's okay, Charles," he said. "Slide the next cartridge into place and try again."

Setting the bullet was easier than I thought, but lifting the rifle back up was not.

"Get it on your shoulder, Charles."

I struggled, going so far as to lean backwards in an attempt to raise the barrel. "I can't. It's heavy."

"On your shoulder, Charles," Dad insisted. "It's no more than seven pounds." Somehow I got the stock up and set. Either out of frustration or to placate him, I fired, the bullet going somewhere unknown and unintended.

"You're not trying, Charles," he said in a tone I knew often led to an argument with Mom. "Set the next cartridge and do it again."

"Please, Dad. I don't want to."

"Don't say that. Set the bullet. Get in position. Isolate your target. Then fire." I tried all that, I know. I slid the action like he wanted. I somehow lifted the rifle to my shoulder, angry enough to ignore my discomfort for the moment. But the bottles and cans on the wall looked to me as if they were underwater. I tried to wipe my eyes but could not turn enough to reach my shoulder.

"Steady now, Charles. Look at the target."

I fired again, wildly I know, but I did. He let me stand there for a moment afraid to speak or turn around. The sound of the gunshot faded in waves. I felt the rifle being taken from me, and I braced for his anger.

Dad said in almost a whisper, "It's okay, Charles. You tried." He rubbed my head in a way that made it worse. "Go sit."

I found a soft patch of grass near the tree line and watched Dad raise the rifle, square himself, and fire, knocking a can in the air. He fired again, shattering a Coke bottle into a hundred pieces. His third shot sent another can flying. Without looking at me, he said, "It's just something I can do, Charles. That's all it is."

We didn't talk on the way back. I didn't feel well, and Dad drove as if he had something on his mind. I watched the fields and

farmhouses pass. When we reached town, he said, "I'd like you and Larry to come visit me. See my apartment. Maybe sleep over. It's a lot different than here. It's downtown, and even at night it's never dark enough to see the stars." He lit another cigarette and cracked his window.

"You said you wanted to quit, Dad," I said, not looking at him as we crossed the railroad tracks.

He rolled the window further down and tossed it out. "You're right, but habits are armor plated. Tell you what, I promise not to smoke when it's just you and me in the car." He tousled my hair, hoping to get a smile.

He turned the corner onto our street and I saw Mom and Uncle Will standing in our yard. Uncle Will, a big man who stood over Mom like a stepladder over a stool, straightened when he saw us. Mom folded her arms.

Dad parked a block away like he'd done earlier that day. "Go on, Charles," he said. "You can get out here."

"You said you'd take Larry next."

Dad pulled out another Lucky and pushed in the car's lighter, forgetting his promise. "Now's not a good time." The lighter popped out and he touched it to the cigarette. "Tell him I'll be back soon. Tell him it won't be long." Uncle Will began walking towards us. Mom remained in the front yard.

"You'd better go," he said. I started to speak, but Dad held up his hand. "We'll do it again, Charles. You, me, and Larry. The three of us."

I watched Uncle Will approach. "Looks like he wants to talk."

"Now's not a good time."

"But—"

"Listen, not every time's the best time. Learn to pick your battles." Dad reached across me to open the car door. I smelled the smoke on his sleeve and noticed strands of gray at his temple that his black dye had missed. He sat back and placed his hand on my head as if to rub it in his playful way, but didn't. He smiled then, a tired smile, and said, "I'm sorry. I should have waited. I

should have known better.” I know he had more to say, but he stopped when he saw Uncle Will getting closer. With his palm on my shoulder he gave me the nudge I can still feel to this day. “You need to go, Charles.” As soon as I got out, he closed the door and left.

Uncle Will touched my arm. “You alright, Chip?”

I didn’t answer. I watched Dad’s car speed over a rise and disappear.

His arm went around my back. “Come on. Your Mom wants to see you.”

Two weeks later after Mom’s anger had subsided and she’d extracted promises from us that we’d never again go off with him without her knowing about it, I answered the telephone and listened as a man’s voice I didn’t recognize asked if Mrs. Donovan was home. I called to Mom and then went back to the kitchen to finish my peanut butter sandwich.

I heard Mom say, “This is Beth Donovan.” Pause. “Yes, he’s my husband.” Seconds later, and in a different voice, she said, “Oh.” After that, she got quiet for a long time. I got up from the table and saw that Mom had pulled a chair closer to the phone.

“On the sidewalk?” she said. She noticed me and waved me back into the kitchen. I didn’t go. “Tomorrow? That’s impossible.” She listened, making notes on a pad. “Of course he’s a veteran.” She made more notes, then stood up. “I got it, okay? I understand.”

She set the phone down with great care. With her back to me, she said, “Go get Larry. I have something to tell you boys.”

Mom told us about Dad in a matter-of-fact way. After she saw the effect the news had on Larry, she tried to hold us both, but Larry didn’t want to be touched, so he went back outside without saying a thing, despite Mom standing at the door calling to him.

To this day, Larry still blames others for his troubles. But it seems just as likely that his moodiness and capacity to feel slighted when circumstances don’t go his way are as innate as his blonde hair and pleasant grin. Still, if we are what we experience, then

there may be truth in what he believes. We are brothers, but we seldom saw things the same. With Dad, he remembers disappointment and promises not kept. I remember Dad’s regret and his hand on my head, knowing how much he wanted to tease it but couldn’t. Mom has her own memories, although she only talks about them when asked and says only as much as she has to. I suspect it might have been different for Dad had he not come back changed. But this is about battles that may or may not be worth fighting. In the end, I believe he wanted to find one more when he took what he had and tried to teach his son what he knew on an autumn afternoon in a pasture while corn was harvested in a faraway field.

*—James O’Gorman*







Meghan Hollister  
*Memory(stream)flows*

2011, mixed media papercut collage, 18 inches x 24 inches



Meghan Hollister  
*Grow*

2011, mixed media papercut collage, 18 inches x 24 inches



**Meg Wendling '10**  
*entwine*

2010, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 48 inches



**Meg Wendling '10**  
*peel*

2010, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 48 inches





**Camri Wolf**  
*Consciousness*

2011, digital photography, 9 inches x 7 inches



**Aubrey Heusinkveld**  
*Untitled*

2011, digital photography, 13 inches x 10 inches



**Alison Filley**  
*Katy*

2010, digitally printed fabric, glass beads, glitter, rhinestone buttons, 12 inches x 28.5 inches x 2.5 inches



**Alison Filley**  
*Sarah*

2010, digitally printed fabric, embossing powder, buttons 12 inches x 29 inches x 2 inches





**Zach Cleve '10**  
*Abandoned Schoolhouse*

2010, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 30 inches



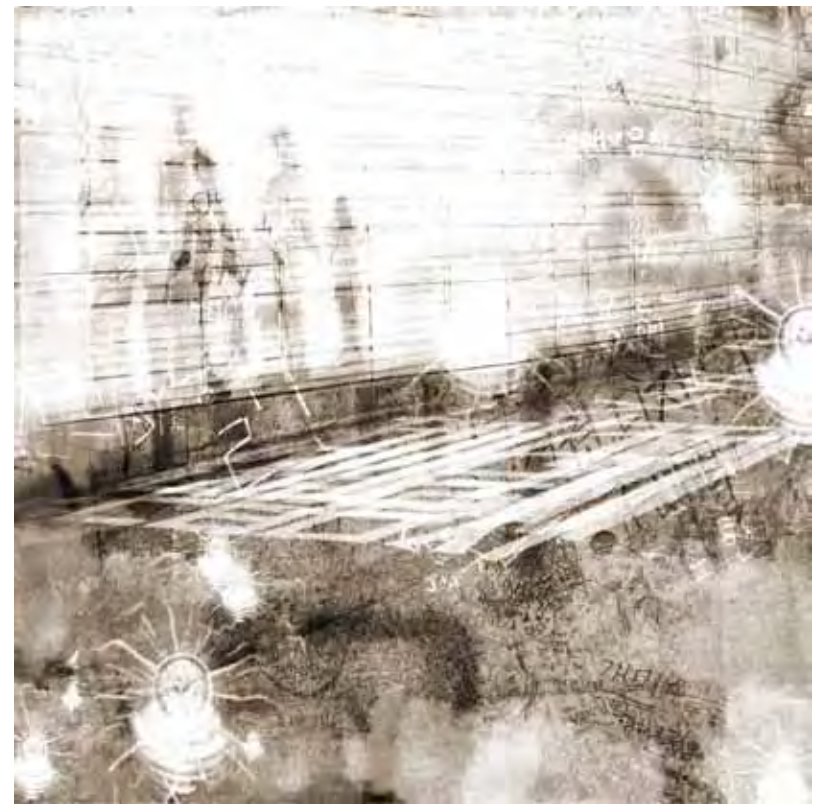
**Kristin Quinn**  
*Mail Myself to You*

2007–2008, oil on canvas, 5 feet x 4 feet



**Renee Meyer Ernst**  
*Neither Here nor There*

2009, digital collage painting, 20 inches x 20 inches



**Renee Meyer Ernst**  
*Imprint*

2010, digital collage painting, 20 inches x 20 inches



Thomas Burke  
*Clash*

2010, 35mm photography



Adam Hurlburt '08  
*A Space Through Time*

2010, digital photography





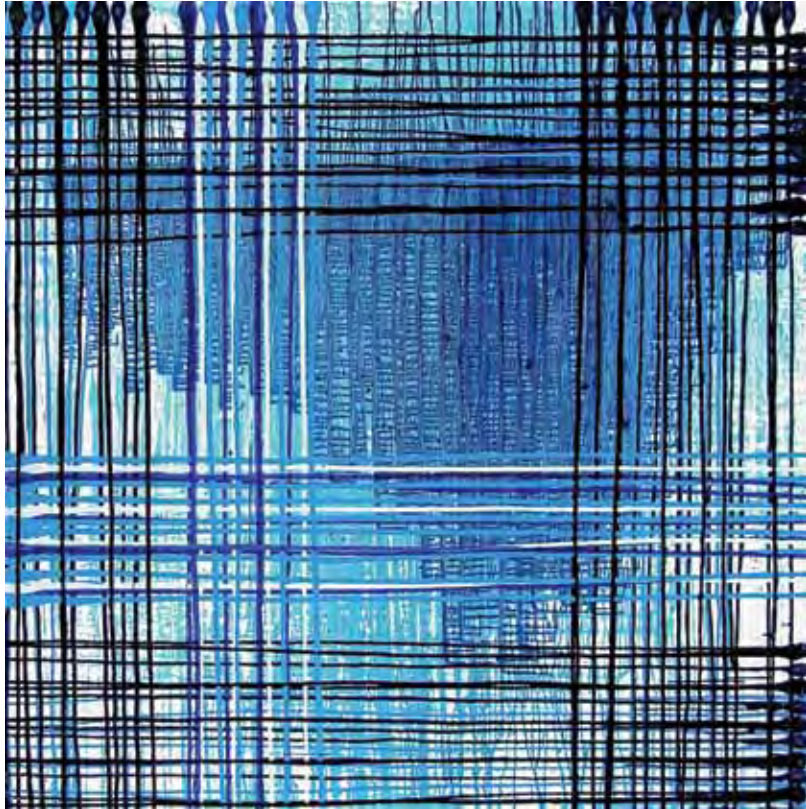
**Lisa Ford '10**  
*Literally*

2010, oil on canvas, 4 feet x 4 feet



**Rachel Longstreet '09**  
*Fork*

2010, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 32 inches



Hannah Gough '10  
*Senior Year*

2010, oil on canvas, 4 feet x 4 feet



Leslie Bell '72  
*At the Tide Pools*

2010, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches



**Munir Sayegh**  
*Wajib Maghrebi*

2009, digital photography

## Effluvia

A story-track for  
Tchaikovsky's *Orchestral Suite #3*, final movement  
USSR State Symphony Orchestra & Yevgeni Svetlanov

0:00

It snapped untethered from its umbilical twig without a sound, undone by old age, or tugged by rebirth. The aspen leaf, as yellow as a delicious apple, gasped in exhilaration, or at least that is what it would have done, if it could. It swirled aloft, surrounded by other similarly unbound leaves—children of clones. He, (why he? She, then) laughed—or would have laughed as it swam and dove and lofted and jerked in obedience to the vicissitudinous breezes, which, as you know, always run in packs that time of year.

0:49

The mad chaotic dance of the late leaves (leaves come in dances, like geese in gaggles or dolphin pods) was the last of the season, the thought of it being such could have made the leaf proud or bitter or morose or relieved, or tired. Instead it was glad—if it could have been anything. The air was crowded with the transparent silhouettes of these new émigrés into space. Together, they illustrate amusement as deftly as a smile.

1:42

The shape of the movement of the leaves in consort in the air, like a sporting team on a poly-dimensional field, was whimsical, but not without order and even a kind of drama: shoved aloft as if pushed from behind like a child on a swing, stalled and twisting lazily down inimitably, lured forward like the lip of a browsing deer, tugged back as if by an overprotective hand. It was—this leaf, that is—playing. They all were, together. And since victory is ephemeral, and thus all is loss, this game, like all games, could simply be enjoyed for what it was.



2:19

Indeed, the leaf had no memory to regret or mourn or be relieved of. It, like any child, had already forgotten from whence it had sprung. Nor did the leaf fret about the future, though it was, inevitably, falling. It laughed, or would have, just as it would have, if it could have, heard the very laughter of the universe. Being oblivious of time, it took its time. It repeated itself. It did not care. It did not have a care, even if it could have.

3:14

Asking how long this game lasted is precisely to miss the point. It lasted forever. It lasted a second or two . . . or ten, perhaps. See? That knowledge doesn't help at all, does it? I'll answer for you: no. Now listen.

3:55

Whence the anger? Why be distracted from laughter for even the length of time it takes to ask about it? Now, stop it.

4:06

But of course, the play did end. With a gentle bump the leaf landed on its back, so to speak, on the skin of the water of a creek that fed into the Yellowstone. The only witness to this once-every-eternity event was the tree-bark-like nose of an enormously sprawling sunken snapping turtle, whose clouded eyes blinked in stultified acknowledgment of the occasion with the emotionless atemporality of Brahma.

It sighed—the leaf that is, not the turtle—and not really, but it would have. Like a kid staggering off the merry-go-round, too tired and disoriented to laugh any more, and plopping down contentedly next to her (why her? his, then) already portly young mother on the picnic grass, the leaf laid back and looked up.

4:35

Had I once been there? It thought about it. Really? How utterly improbable. What would it have been that sustained me in that other world? Suspended, then? Held aloft in that unimaginable blue? It just isn't likely; I would have noticed. Wouldn't I have? How could I have missed that mass of cumulus stacking up like Wind River boulder cliffs in thickly bulky heaps of shapes so remarkable that they invite even as they defy comparison? No, though I am catching my breath from some sort of exertion, and while I am sensitive to the waning vestiges of a grin, it just must be that I have always been here, on my back, so to speak, drifting in windless riverly lethargy. Ahhh.

It sighed again, or would have.

5:44

Behind it, having been tugged free from its hallowed cache by some ancient storm-induced torrent, a wooden cask bobbed in what little current there was. It had been, though the leaf would not have known this, even if it were capable of knowing anything, the treasure of venison packed in bear grease and buried by some minion of Captain Meriwether Lewis for the return trip. But they'd not found it, and now it was here, stinking of rot in the warm sun, though mostly submerged, and aimlessly aimed downstream, which is the only direction anything can really go.

6:16

There were other things that the leaf might have noticed, if it could have. Along the bottom of the stream, under its back, so to speak, were arrow heads and brass shell casings and once-shiny buttons embossed with spread eagles. There were bones too. Horse bones and human bones and human teeth . . . the very antithesis of a toothless grin—that is to say, all tooth and no grin—each thing settled contentedly, if not exactly permanently, amidst the pebbles and water-logged logs of a not very animated creek

bed.

Up ahead, unknown to the unknowing leaf, a semperalert antelope was about to draw cautious water from the stream while behind it—and quite known to it—lounged in the crumpled untidiness of a discarded quilt—a vast brown organism called a bison herd undulated, itched itself, shifted, and behaved rather remarkably like the clouds overhead in that now-forgotten world, that other, illusory, life, already just a meandering brown shadow, as if grazing, as if mocking the grazing of the herd.

7:44

And in the midst of that mammalian cloud shape, as if constituting its dully sentient genitalia, two bulls were squaring off for a ritual as efficacious as the consecration of a host. Boorish and vulgar, also exquisitely brutal, the moaning bellow, the stamping hoof, the roiling dust, then that hide muted slamming of tremendous skulls . . . spoke not only of mundane sex, but the violence that is life. Again. Again.

8:14

But by then, by the time the leaf would have cruised past that part of the river, it will have succumbed to the soggyiness of complacency, and will have slipped beneath the waterskin. Submerged, it will then roll more than drift, and if it had had any consciousness, it would, by then, have lost it.

8:45

Oh, this should be over—our hero is dead—but there are two mistakes. The first is that there is no death, and the second is that there is no hero. Or rather, our hero is a drowned leaf. All heroes are drowned leaves, and not because of some tragic Russian fate; it is their nature to be, and this is why they are not more dangerous than they are. Besides, the hero-leaf (why hero? All right then, heroine) will roll lazily until it is unraveled into bits that will

feed something ever smaller, so perhaps its real heroism is just beginning. This would have pleased the leaf, if it were capable of pleasure.

But what are we to do without her? The sun in the blue-so-blue sky has not even heated the air into whiteness yet. Whose voice is speaking? Whose eyes see? This would be terrifying, if there were nothing capable of terror. This is unsettling. Worse, it is unsatisfying.

9:43

As unsatisfying and as unsettling as midday . . . equal measures of aspiration and regret.

Abandonment in this lonely place . . . Yes.

9:54

It couldn't have known it, of course, but the creek has an oxymoronic name, which most likely was not intended as a zen koan. It was, of course, "little" from a vulture's sky perspective and "big" from that of a mosquito. So then, that's its niche, that is every niche, probably: bigger beaked, littler beaked; littler and bigger flower; little horn, big horn. There will always be a bigger bison and a littler bison than any bison.

10:23

This creek was littler than big, and it knew its place. It must have, because it generally stayed in it.

But not contentedly so. High crescent moons of naked black bank attested to its hunger, or at least its anger. It wants to go straight, damn it, and it would devour earth and cottonwood and rabbit warren to do so, given enough rage, swollen with sufficient rain. The sky weeps so that rivers can pretend for a while that they are something they are not.

But this creek. Smuggly and sluggishly pushing detritus and influvia along as if it were content—and tranquil, as if it had achieved priestly tranquility. It probably would have thought so, and would have believed it, because, though a river, it cannot see around its next bend or behind its last. It is not, as the Buddha thought he had discovered, at once always the same and always new. He didn't stick around long enough, perhaps. For now it is contentment. If forces beyond its ken—which is all of them, of course—trigger another fit, another season of outrage, then it will be that, and the animate and the inanimate will be sucked into its voracity. But it won't be this day . . . this bucolic just past midday.

11:35

A mosquito, who would, if it could, and it might, somehow, think that this is a big river, gets bored, or the mosquito equivalent of boredom. Negligent, then, it drifts too high from the sheltering shoulder of chewed and slipping banks and gets caught in a swirl that just may have lifted its attention to the open vistas and the confluence of the creek and river which was inexorable without being threatening . . . as nothing that will be is a threat, just a fact not yet conceived of (for the confluence has always been there, or somewhere nearby, anyway). Why then, o man, the mosquito should have thought, biblically—Kohelth is Hebrew for mosquito—layup worries and anxieties for tomorrow? Between the moment occupied by the mosquito and the place where the streams met was the capricious slither of the creek, for now the mosquito might have perceived that it was littler than big after all. There were scars where it had fought for rectitude, most of them healed over in the balm of resignation of bend and yield and sloth that, in this case, looked like a scrubby meadow of Little and Big bluestem, side-oats, yucca, bison wallow, and blow out penstemon.

Beyond the nearscape, through the haze of afternoon heated air and curtains of dust, a keen-eyed witness, had there been one, might have pretended to be able to discern the faint shapes of the

mountains, even as private doubt and general opinion would have left him nigglingly insecure: most likely those traces of horizon are not even clouds, but simply the result of what one would want, or at least expect, to see.

But the place was defined by the winds, which moved like invisible dances of leaves and which, if they had been visible—and they might have been, to something, in some sense; smell, perhaps?—would have reminded any such visionary creature of the curling and eddying of hot and cold threads of water in the stream below. Yes, there are as many waters in a creek as there are breezes in the blue. Both waters and winds undulated in not always choppy harmony with the shape of rankly blanketed hills and jagged stripped coolies (for winds lose their tempers too, like waters, if either could). But the last thing that the mosquito might have been aware of before the yucca moth was fatally thrust by an errant wind current into its path would have been the way forb and flower exposed the winds and made them visible, the way a beautiful woman makes you look for the first time at the plain man on her arm.

13:49

Humans. Warrior men and women and children, as if on parade, so stiflingly full of themselves and their chests and their hair and their arms, attacking the setting sun in quixotic skirmishing on the skin of the earth that is more like the play of the leaf in the breeze than anything. Ironic gravitas: for that is what separates the human mind from the hind's awareness, the mosquito's perception, the leaf's existence. The human out here on this confluence thinks of himself and of her; herself and him. And in this introspection-extraspection they mount horses, stripped naked, hoist comically useless shields, raise guns and spears and arrows and throats and charge. Racing over the plains kicking up dust and manure, scattering prairie chicken and fox, laughing boldly in the face of the red-gold sky orb, whom they would defeat. They

bounce, cajole, nudge, and vie with one another to count coup on the sun. Mind seems to have added to survival instinct the literary whimsy of “conquer.” Cue the kettle drums.

15:25

But, if not taken seriously, it is a pretty sight, this skinny majesty of combat. And it doesn't last long. The Sun set, warriors cheer their victory and slap one another on the back and drag pony and spear and wounded and dead back to the tiyospe: the largest human organism that can survive on this high prairie. They hug and dance and sing their victory until one by one they notice the consequences. Trills evaporate between throat and lip. Only now do they realize they're now blind and alone. They had slain the sun and so faced an enemy they could not see: the black night. Because they can feel, they are afraid. Because they can feel, they huddle together. Because they can feel, they sing back the enshrouding aloneness. Because they can, they set fire to the grass to see—still blind to their blindness. And night's new allies, the winds, stir the flames until animal and human animal are driven like children before a storm.

16:06

But inversely so, since they find shelter only in water. Huddling in the comforting hug of the river bank, the flames die famished and the smoke rolls up through the cottonwood as the fickle and incontinent breezes—for fun, one might think—change sides, driving the fire back to blackness, and the water cools the scorched skin and shriveled throat and calms nerves and horses and babies. Hugging one another and whispering lies of courage, one of them might have thought it, because she could, that sometimes survival is a kind of conquering, and anyway they had, hadn't they, lit the night?

As the flames succumb to famine, the naked children dance and drench themselves in the still warm blood black ash, thrilled at the

distinct possibility of stepping on hot embers . . . and the threat fills them with wild joy and their parents laugh and eyes look into eyes that say, “Yes: I would not be alone; would you?”

17:31

Lovemaking can be tender or sweet or conquest or violent or mindless thrash. It can be about the other or the self or neither or nothing or nothingness. But it can also be a victory parade, an unabashed paeon to recreation, an untethered leaf celebrated and hoisted and cheered on by breezes and currents and the mirthful stars that burn ever dimmer out of sight like dying embers on the cosmic blackscape like a burned prairie of space.

17:51

Sunrise. Survival. Life. This Moment. Cue the little & big horns.

—Bud Grant '80

## If You Can Cough, Keep Coughing

There are two ways to get rid of ringworm. Any doctor can prescribe an anti-fungal cream. Ringworm is, of course, a fungus and not a worm. The cream takes two weeks to destroy the infection, and it's not recommended that you be physically active while waiting for it to work. This, the first option, was not an option. I worked eleven hour days at the kind of job where paid vacation leave is an abstraction. I also didn't have medical insurance, but most importantly I couldn't take two weeks off. I was a manual laborer and an athlete. The second option, Terry told me, is quicker and cheaper.

Terry had become a mentor of sorts. I ran into him in a locker room. A couple of his teeth grew crooked. He fought on an amateur circuit but never made it pro. There was a bench between us where our bags rested. Really it was the notion of a bench, long ago worn through by hundreds of tired men. Every few months the gym staff repainted it thick dark green. The paint pooled in the cracks and dried still dripping down the sides.

When I first met him, Terry had just finished dressing and was watching me fumble with my clean white hand wraps. There's a lot to be said about this. A man puts on shorts and a shirt. A man brushes his teeth once or twice a day. But wrapping your hands is nothing like those things. It's novel. It's deliberate in ways they are not. Our hands are fragile from birth. It's important for some men to overcome their nature. The hands are made up of too many bones. The tendons and ligaments have to work tirelessly to keep each bone in line, and to turn something like that into a club requires foresight. Even prehistoric man used tools for combat, and solid wood 2x4's have been known to shatter on contact with men's heads. It takes a heightened sense of personal disregard to employ that mess of hard and soft tissue like a brick against someone's skull.

I was new and hadn't been able to fully break in a set of hand wraps. It's important to learn their length, learn how many times they will loop around the palm and fingers and wrist. Once they have absorbed enough sweat and had enough sweat washed out

of them and been hung to dry a hundred times, they will fit your hand better than any one else's. I could never get the style right, and kept trying different ones. There's a Mexican style and a Thai style and others. My wraps always seemed too short, too inflexible.

Terry had been smiling while I struggled.

"You're going to need different ones," he said.

"I just bought these; they're new."

"Yeah, they look new. Throw them out." He'd stood his ground.

That day Terry let me borrow a pair of his own. They were long and yellow and stretchy. Made in Mexico. He showed me how to work the wrap around the palm from different angles—start tight and then loosen up as you incorporate the fingers. It's fine if your thumb goes numb, but when the fingers lose circulation it saps strength from the whole arm. Done properly it takes only a couple minutes. A couple of minutes transforms you. A man takes a shower and laces his shoes. A man eats cereal for breakfast. But when a man wraps his hands, things change inside him. Neural connections form quicker and uglier. The weak beautiful thing he once used for writing and shuffling cards has given up the ghost. It is mummified and takes on a new infallible life. You can't open a doorknob. It's hard to manipulate the combination on a lock, and shaking hands becomes clumsy. That's not to say it's uncomfortable. The feeling is alien, but just right. The hand naturally seeks a fist. It resists being forced open.

After visiting the gym for months, I developed ringworm. Actually, I developed a small rash and Terry, again in the locker room, identified it as ringworm. I told him I didn't have time to visit a doctor and didn't have the money. He could relate, and pulled up the leg of his shorts to reveal where he had employed the second option for getting rid of ringworm. There were little clusters of white-and-pink scar tissue. The hair there grew poorly, unnaturally colored the same as the skin.

Terry added items to my grocery list. He told me I'd have to pick up a cheap toothbrush, the kind dentists hand out with

sugar-free bubblegum. I'd need bleach and possibly some gauze. Those big square bandages they give to burn patients would work best, but he had never been able to find any.

"Don't be a pussy. That's the most important part." He left me with a little retired boxer sage wisdom.

The next day, Thursday, I got off work and swung by the grocer's. That morning I had remembered to put a bottle of bleach and some old gauze along with my lunchbox in my Jeep. The gauze was well used and had small stains on the edges. Inside the grocer I headed toward the hygiene aisles. I was looking for a cheap toothbrush; expendability was important. I settled on the second-cheapest one—a twin-pack, in case I needed to repeat the procedure. It contained matching kid-sized brushes, one translucent blue and the other red. The cashier rang me up, and I smiled at her without opening my mouth. *Yes, these kid's toothbrushes are for me. No, this is all I need today.*

I drove to Seth's apartment in Moline. It was actually his girlfriend's, but he spent a lot of time there. Seth was worried that her previous boyfriend was still stalking her. He had thrown a dead animal onto her porch, and while she was home alone he tried to break in through a window. One day the guy had left a journal outside. He had written down every single thing Seth's girlfriend had done over the previous few weeks. *Put plates in cupboard. Turned off kitchen light. Sat on couch. Put feet up.* It was a tedious account. This surprised me. I'd known him a few years before. He'd been pretty normal and hadn't struck me as being especially meticulous.

Seth greeted me at the front door with a handshake. We'd known each other our entire lives. He was a couple of inches taller than me, but in kindergarten I'd been the tallest in our class.

"So, what exactly are you planning on doing?" he asked.

"Well, I've got to get rid of this damn ringworm."

I pulled up my shirt to show him the red circle offset a few inches from my bellybutton. It was the size of a quarter, a poorly executed tattoo. An Ouroboros—a snake eating its tail—meant to

remind me of the cyclical nature of life. It needed to be destroyed. I walked to the bathroom with my bleach and toothbrush. The gauze was outside in my glove box. I took off my shirt while Seth told me about his day. Nothing extramundane. His bosses were morons, incompetent coworkers, gas too expensive to drive from the country to the city every day. I set the bottle of bleach on the counter and took the blue brush out of its blister pack. Seth was making plans to attend a community college. His dad had wanted him to stay at home and join the family business—a self-owned photography studio. The bottle of bleach was half empty. I had been using it to disinfect plumbing at home. The kid's brush was too short. I had to pinch it between my thumb and index finger to make sure it reached far enough to get soaked. Seth wanted a different life for himself. Photography was a hobby. I pulled the brush out dripping and used it to scrub the right side of my stomach, concentrating on the symbolic snake.

"My friend told me it's important to get the ringworm and the area right around it." I gave Seth a play-by-play.

"Doesn't it hurt?" he asked.

I smiled and put on a show for him and his girlfriend, working my hardest to make all the veins pop out on my forehead and neck. I shouted and trembled like a Pentecostal. It was funny, but they didn't laugh. They were used to this behavior. It didn't hurt as much as I had expected. Things rarely do. I'd been burned with other chemicals. Stronger ones. The pain reminded me of running barefoot as a child. The slapping of bare feet hitting pavement. The thumping you feel in your stomach when you make it onto grass and dirt. The mud that slows you down and sprays from your flailing heels to paint the back of your shirt and piss off your mom. The patch started bleeding. When I paused from scrubbing, droplets appeared like condensation on a glass of summer lemonade.

"My friend told me it's important to scrub deeper when it starts bleeding. It's hard to put much force behind this little thing."

Still smiling, I held up the kid's brush in front of Seth's face. Using only my index finger and thumb, I dumped the brush back into the bleach every few seconds. It mixed with the oozing blood on my stomach. The solution ran in short streams down my pale skin and absorbed into the waist band of my boxers. The blood struggled to dye them red, but the bleach won out. It turned everything white and yellow like dog's teeth. I considered stripping the rest of my clothes off and covering up with a towel, but there was no sense in ruining one of their towels.

I dipped the brush a few more times and could hear its plastic tip hit the side of the bottle. It was holding up well. The bleach was caustic enough to quickly work through my skin, but left the brush relatively intact. My hand was getting slippery with sweat, or bleach and maybe a little blood. I stopped.

The wound looked great. It was clean, as it should be. It wasn't bleeding much. I folded a few squares of toilet paper and sponged up excess liquid. Without the toothbrush tearing into it, I only felt a dull sting. I'd had tattoos that hurt more. There was no chance of ringworm surviving, and I had another toothbrush.

I was pleased with my work. Seth smiled. His girlfriend, bored, had left halfway through. Seth himself seemed to lose a little interest in my way every year. I rarely saw him. He had less faith in my activities. What had become of our friendship? Would we now only meet over holidays? Stop by each other's places when we're traveling through town? I'd tell him what I'd done and wanted to do. He'd tell me what he'd done and wanted to do. I'd make a joke. He'd laugh on his way out the door.

I didn't stay at their apartment for long. There was a lot to get done at home. I still needed to cook and eat. I needed to stretch and meditate. I needed to finish a movie I had rented a few days before. A documentary on Amish teenagers. At the age of sixteen some Amish undergo a rite of passage known as rumspringa. They may enter the modern world or chose to be baptized forever into Amish society. Some of the youth do separate. The modern world, my world, then becomes a unique kind of isolation for them.

I drove Route 6 past the airport. There were no planes taking off. Highway 150 leads all the way home. Sometimes I took Cemetery Road, where the trees grow thick and close. On Cemetery there are fewer mailboxes marking the gravel shoulder. A trailer park staples all its residents' boxes together in a big pile near the road. The drive gave me time to remember more of Terry's advice. First—don't be a pussy. That seemed obvious now. Second—don't let it get infected.

I took the turn for my house. It's a long twisting gravel driveway down one side of a valley. My house is built into the opposite side. It's half buried, a hermit's cave. My parents bought it that way. My Jeep annunciates all the uneven spots in the gravel. At the beginning of each week I use an iron rake to smooth out the gravel, and by midweek it's rough and potted. I've started driving through the weeds to try and cut down on the wear and tear.

It feels like it is my house these days. The rest of my family separated and moved away. My sister lives in St. Louis. My parents moved to a suburb of Cleveland. They never call it a suburb of Cleveland but prefer to use its actual city name in all conversations. This is their choice. With everyone else gone I am left to take care of the property and make sure it is eventually sold to a seventy-year-old psychologist who wants to practice landscaping. Oddly enough, my family never cared for landscaping.

The garage door no longer opens electronically. To open it you have to work your fingers between the rough pavement of the driveway and the metal lip of the door. The skin on the back of your fingers, that begins growing where the fingernail stops, always gets torn. I could prevent this by leaving a rock under the door to keep it raised a few inches, but then someone walking by might realize that they can also open it manually.

I park in front of the door. A different person might stop using a garage if it stopped opening for them. I can't sleep with my vehicle outside. I'm convinced that in the middle of the night when things are as dark as they'll get, the Jeep will be changed somehow. I won't want it in the morning. The same way I was

told when I was in grade school that if I touched a bird's egg the mother would never come back. The baby inside would surely die from neglect even if someone just tapped it with the very tip of their index finger. That would kill the baby. That same year, one of my classmates had found a robin's egg in a young evergreen tree. He had crushed the egg in his small hand and showed my teacher. She cried and washed his hand for him. It didn't bother me, but I wouldn't have done what he did—ever.

I parked in the garage and closed the door behind me. It was pitch black with the door closed. The light doesn't work. Barely anything works. I felt my way to the door and took off my boots. They could dry outside. The house was completely dark. I was the only one there.

Last week a friend stopped by, and we went for a run through the woods. After the run, I tried to show him how to throw a better punch. I held pads in the air and yelled encouragement at him.

“Tuck your chin to your chest!”

“Force air through your nose!”

“Use your whole fucking body! Start with your hips and the soles of your feet!”

We played our roles well. He pretended to want to take something seriously. I pretended to be good at helping people. That was a week ago. Two weeks before that, a real estate agent showed the house to some clients. She avoids me at all costs. There was always a phone call preceding her visits. If I wasn't completely sure of my schedule on any given day, she would choose another and be gone before I was home. I always wondered what the prospective families thought when they looked around. There were no cars in the garage. The kitchen was empty except for a quietly humming mini-fridge sitting against a wall. All of the rooms were bare except my own. The walls were completely bare. There was new carpeting. The carpet's glue smell filled the entire house. It wasn't the same place I had been raised in, where I had grown tall. The real estate agent had told me I could lock my room when I wasn't home and she wouldn't bother anything in it. She didn't have a key. I locked

the room every time I left the house. My house within a house. A single man's cell in a monastery.

During the day, I worked for a plant nursery. I was on a team that did off-site jobs, but spent some time each day at the actual nursery. In between jobs I would water plants. The place was expansive. You could find any kind of bush or flower or tree. I never remembered the fertilizers we sold. There were too many kinds. People would ask for the either best or the cheapest, and I would argue with myself over which one that could possibly be. I practiced improvisation. They ate it up. Customers sought me out for advice.

“Hey, could I ask you a question?”

“How can I help you?”

“What is your highest-quality dry fertilizer?”

“That's the cracked black coffee bean. The shell fragments provide near perfect micro-aeration for all kinds of plants. Although, the dry 70/30 malto mix is really good, too. Is this for a tree or a smaller plant?”

“I need it for a couple red thistles,” he said confidently, happy to be having a conversation with an expert.

“That's a hard call, but I would probably try the 70/30.”

Then I'd go into the back of the shop and pull out a few bags of our most expensive fertilizer. The companies adjusted the horse-manure-to-dirt ratio slightly and increased the price. The customers never returned unhappy. Or if they did, I wasn't there to see it. I was off-site doing my actual job.

The work day started at six or seven or eight, depending on a constantly changing schedule. To get eight hours of sleep I would need to lie down by nine. The sun would still be up, rays entering through my bedroom window. With or without the light, I could barely sleep. Each night, I rested for a few hours. Upon waking I walked down the hall to the empty bathroom and stared at my own face staring back at me. I pulled my lower lip down and felt my gums and teeth. They were worn out and thin. I brushed them with a toothbrush each morning and at night before trying to



sleep.

When I had been hired on to work at the nursery the bosses made me a couple of promises. I explained to them how I couldn't afford to work more than forty hours a week.

"I've got a few amateur boxing matches this summer. I'll work hard while I'm here, but I need to be able to train and rest."

"You just worry about getting the job done. We won't schedule you for more than forty hours."

I had been putting in ten-and eleven-hour days since the beginning. The bosses sat next to me in the plastic break room chairs and told me I didn't have to work more than forty hours. Then they had me come in on Saturdays. They apologized. There was too much work for me to not be there. I worked on a crew with one or two other men. There were four of these crews. We met at the nursery in the morning and split ourselves up. The bosses handed out work orders and gave us simple instructions: don't do drugs while driving our trucks.

Everyone was working sixty-and seventy-hour weeks. A good number didn't speak fluent English. I couldn't believe they had driver's licenses. Of course, not all did. I would often partner up with a guy who couldn't drive and I would have to drive the truck. He had two DUIs on his record. He also had a baby's momma and kids. They didn't live with him. The DUIs were their fault, he explained to me, and he was very convincing.

There was another man who was in his late fifties. He spoke broken English and couldn't use a tape measure. He told me he couldn't read the numbers. He was good at his job. Somehow, he made sure that he didn't get assigned to a job he would be bad at. He also had kids. And somehow, by working this job, a job he was good at, he provided for a family of six children.

I was different from these men. I felt alone with them. Near the end of each work week, they told me that I wasn't like most fighters they knew. Why was I quiet when I worked? They wondered why I couldn't relate to them, why I didn't have anything to say to them. As I drove to jobs, they slept in the passenger seat.

When we arrived at a site, I took off my hat before I knocked on the client's door and I did all the talking.

The workday wrapped up around five. The crews met back at the nursery, unpacked the equipment from the trucks, and put it away. There was a vending machine where you could buy a drink for fifty cents. The lemonade was the best, but it ran out quickly. One time, I put in my two quarters to find out that the only thing left was root beer. I selected it, but when it rolled down to the bottom I left it there and went home.

After work I drove my Jeep along the highways to my gym. There, I said hello to the receptionist, showered with soap, changed clothes, and wrapped my hands. If the receptionist wasn't there, I would walk through the door and smile at where she usually sat. She seemed nice, but I didn't know anything about her. She may have been mean; a lot of people are.

I trained for a couple hours in the evenings. I jumped rope, I performed pull-ups and dead lifts. I spent time working over the heavy bag. I trained with the other men. There were so many things to remember. Tuck the chin. Force the breathing. Use your entire body. Keep your footwork efficient. Did you wrap your hands too tight? Are your gloves starting to wear out? Remember the basics. Remember to avoid thinking about death.

Terry stopped me one day. He grabbed my shoulders with his powerful hands. I had been warming up with lunges and burpees. Sweat already stung my eyes and made me blink. There was nothing natural about him. I walked around weighing a fair hundred and ninety. Terry was at least fifty pounds heavier. His face looked like an old Halloween mask. I was convinced he'd had voodoo plastic surgery in Thailand, but he wouldn't admit to anything. He had a tattoo of a dead octopus on his left tricep, the tail end of a harpoon sticking out of its head.

"Are you all right?" He was concerned.

"Yeah, I think so. Am I bleeding or something?"

"You look like shit. Go look at yourself in a mirror."

I stopped working and walked to the bathroom. Terry was

right. Parts of my body were bright red, other parts ghost white. My face looked like a possum's, like the possum my dad had destroyed when I was a kid. The possum that walked around our front yard during the middle of the day. The possum that my dad knew had rabies so he shot it with a pistol and burned its body.

Things didn't get better. The next day at work, I was in pain. It felt like there was something awful stuck between my shoulder blades. Like someone had come into my room at night and put something sharp between my shoulder blades while I slept. My work crew had to dig out a foot and a half of topsoil, and then we were going to put in a patio. When I moved my arms, my back and shoulders screamed. I stuck the shovel in the ground and it was too much. When I stomped my feet on the blade of the shovel, it made my back spasm and freeze stiff. I couldn't lift the shovel again. The dirt stayed where it was.

I told my bosses this was their fault. "You told me you would only schedule me for forty hours. You looked me in the eyes and told me that. Why did you tell me that? I can't even lift my arms. I can't work now! I can't train! I have to quit. How the hell should I feed myself? What should I tell my friends? When I meet someone for the first time at the grocery store or at a party and they ask me what I did this summer, should I tell them I quit my job because it hurt too much to lift my arms, and because I reminded myself of a possum my dad destroyed and turned into ashes?" They understood that if it wasn't working out, it wasn't working out.

I took the next week off and never went back. There was no point in trying to train at all. Each morning, I woke up in more pain. Terry called me to see if I was all right, and I told him I was fine. He said he knew he shouldn't have worried about me. He told me he'd give me a ride to the doctor if I needed it, but he knew I didn't have insurance and was now dirt poor.

On the fourth day, I started running out of food. I had a hard decision to make. Was it worth it to leave the house? I hadn't seen another person in days. Would they look the same and recognize me as one of their own? Would it be easier to starve? I put on a

dark red shirt and a pair of filthy blue jeans. They were stained with dirt from my last day of labor. The Jeep started up with its usual sequence of shakes and shudders. I pulled out of the garage and headed up the driveway.

Halfway to the highway there were two small apple trees. Each year, they produced dozens of sour green baking apples. You can't eat them without cooking them. The deer don't follow those rules. There was a small family of them. Three large adults chewed at the fruit while a fawn half their size stood by. I regretted driving toward them. I tried to stop before I scared them, but it was too late. They heard me and saw a giant metal machine coming their way. The adults sprinted, making it to the fence and easily vaulting over. They didn't stop. The child followed but couldn't keep up. At the fence it jumped and tangled its legs in the metal frame. I put my Jeep in park and threw open my door. My back slowed me down, but I ran to the deer. Its family was out of sight. The deer got free of the fence and saw me coming. It jumped. It backed up and jumped again, each effort failing. The little thing tried fitting under the fence. It tried smashing through. It threw its brown hide against the metal wiring. But the fence held strong. I got closer and decided I would just grab the fawn and throw it over. It would try to kick me and get away, but I was much stronger. I'd bear hug it and squeeze it tight, arch my back, and let it go over the top. This is how I had helped my dogs when they were puppies. On the other side, the deer would employ its skills to find its family again. It heard me. Its small heart and lungs were about to explode. It looked into my eyes, only yards away, and jumped. Its hooves cleared the twisted wire. It ran, and as its thin legs cut through the tall weeds, I turned back to my vehicle.

I had a list of things that I needed to pick up at the grocery store: bread, rice, eggs, broccoli, and toothpaste. Near the automatic opening doors was a trashcan. It had an ashtray filled with sand on its lid. A handful of people were coming in and out of the store. None of them were talking to each other. I took the grocery list out of my pocket and crumpled it into a ball. The yellow legal

pad paper it was written on appeared as bright crescents between the gaps of my fingers. I smashed it into the ashtray like a cigarette butt and headed to the liquor aisles for a twelve pack. When I paid, the cashier told me to have a nice day, and I told her to have a nice day, too.

By the time I made it back home, the sun was almost gone. The horizon line complicated things. The walls of the valley made the sun disappear quickly, and the tree line started smothering the light well before that. I twisted the cap off of a still-cold bottle. The pain in my shoulder blades was nearly unbearable. I gulped the beer. The grass had grown tall and crooked around the gravel of the driveway. In small patches it was breaking through and pushing the rock away.

The grass needs cutting a couple times a week. It prospers here. In the garage I topped off the tractor's gas tank and made sure its mower blades were sharp. I reached under the metal housing and ran my fingers along the blade's edge. They weren't acute like a kitchen knife but felt more like an ice skate's. They were clean and rotated a few degrees from the pressure of my touch.

I packed a bag full of bottles and started the tractor's engine. It was worse than my Jeep. There were loud popping noises that let you know how far to close the choke. When the popping noises became a quick snapping rumble, you knew it was time to slide the throttle forward. The gears were labeled in Aesopian symbols. You start on the capital P, move to the turtle, then the double hash mark, triple hash mark, and finally a rabbit or hare.

I reversed the tractor out of the garage and headed away from the house with the blades spinning full speed. It had been a long time since I'd had anything to drink, and with the heat of the day I felt its effects already. The steering wheel required a lot of strength, and with one hand holding a bottle, my turns grew wide. I was hoping to get a good amount cut before dark.

A hundred yards from my garage I came over the crest of a hill and started down the far side. At the bottom a figure appeared, chewing at the long uncut grass. He heard me. He had to have

heard me. The tractor's motor thumped and spit and screamed noise in all directions. The tractor's wheels tripped down the hill, picking up speed and force. The deer didn't move. He must have been three or four times the size of the adults I had seen earlier. They weren't even the same species. He was prehistoric—and proud.

“Why the hell don't you move? Don't I scare you?”

I screamed at him and reached down to shift into a lower gear. The lever wedged itself between slots. What is wrong with him? Animals did funny things like that after disasters. I once saw a picture of a bear and a coyote crawling out of a forest that had been decimated by a firestorm. The pair didn't even notice each other. Feet apart they walked along like they were shopping for a new jacket and couldn't think of anything funny to say.

The tractor started to slow down. I took another gulp from my bottle and it caught in my throat. I started choking, coughing, and snapping my head forward. I threw the half-empty bottle toward the deer. The remaining liquid fountained out the top as it spun end over end. He looked up at me and then down to the grass.

—Patrick Wehe '10



**Calista Heckman**  
*For the Sake of Clarity*

2011, ink paper, 8.5 inches x 8.5 inches

## Maziku the Farmer

Maziku was born and grew up in Dar es Salaam when Dar es Salaam was still a small town. He went to primary school there and finished Standard Eight in 1961, the year of Independence. He got a job working for a company and finally became chief clerk.

Maziku, however, had two problems. The first was that he was careless with his money. He liked to spend it and enjoy life. So he had no savings, never built a house, did not look for a farm, and made no preparations for the future.

In 1975, Maziku met a girl named Martina when she came from Tabora to visit her brother, who was working in the same company as Maziku. Maziku married her, and he lived happily with his wife, spending and spending, but still he did not make any preparations for the future.

In 1979, after a lot of worries, Martina at last gave birth to a baby daughter. They called her Mauja. Maziku now realized he had to save and prepare for the future. He tried to save from his salary, but this was when prices went up . . . and up . . . and up. Martina tried to help him by making mats and selling them, but still the prices went up. She started to cook chapattis to sell, but still the prices went up.

Finally Maziku and his wife realized that this life was impossible. They were running faster and faster, but they were not moving at all. They were working harder and harder, but their life remained the same. So one day, Maziku and his wife sat down and discussed what to do. Mauja was now ready to go to Standard One, but they did not even know how they would buy the uniform.

This brings us to Maziku's second problem. Maziku had a good heart, was generous, helped others, and had always been a hard worker, but he was stubborn. If he decided to do something, you could never change him. Even if you proved to him that he was wrong, he would not change his mind. Martina knew this. She realized that it was a waste of time to argue with him. Maybe this was because Maziku had grown up without any relatives except his parents and was the only child. His father was also an

only child, and his parents, Maziku's grandparents, had died soon after he had moved to Dar es Salaam.

Maybe here we can say that Maziku also had a third problem, but it was a problem that was not his fault. He had never lived in a village. He had never cultivated a farm. He did not know how hard the work was. He had listened to the radio and read books, and he thought that life in the village was wonderful. So one day, he called his wife and said to her, "Martina, we are doing nothing here in town. Let us go to the village. Life on the farm is easier than life in town. You wake up when you want to, you plant, you weed, you harvest, and you eat. No problem."

Martina had grown up in the village. She told him, "Bwana, life on the farm is not easy. You have to work hard. Of course if you work hard, you can have a good life, but you have to work very hard."

"That is not true, Martina," Maziku replied. "You know it is not true. Let us go to the village. Maybe we can get a better life."

"But you will have to work hard," Martina insisted. "If we do not work hard, we will fail."

"Rubbish," said Maziku. "You dig, you plant, you weed, you eat. No problem."

Martina realized that her husband was in his stubborn mood, so she told him, "All right. But it is no good doing things too fast. I have some relatives in Morogoro. They tell me that there is a lot of land there. Let me go to see them, and then the first year I will cultivate there while you continue to work here. If I succeed, you can resign next year and join me on the farm."

Maziku agreed, so that year Martina moved to her relatives in Morogoro. She got a farm of ten acres. That year she could not cultivate the whole farm, but she planted according to the instructions of Bwana *Shamba* and used fertilizer in the right way, so she got sixty bags of maize. Now, sixty bags of maize were more than Maziku's salary for the whole year. So they decided that Maziku would resign and come to join his wife in the village.

When Maziku arrived in Morogoro, he was still sure that life on the farm was easy. The harvest was finished, and the peasants were resting for a short time before cleaning their farms and preparing for the rains. They found a place for Mauja in the primary school, and Maziku spent this short time getting to know his neighbors and building a small temporary house for his family. It was a small, friendly village, and he was quickly accepted by everyone. After all, they already knew his wife.

It was soon time to start digging the *shambas* again. Maziku was always telling everyone that he was ready to work very hard, and the night before the first day, he told his wife to wake him up early. She woke up at five o'clock. She prepared the bath water for her husband, cooked some porridge, and then woke him. At least, she tried to wake him, but he refused.

"It is too early, Martina. You can't dig in the dark. You will cut off your foot."

Maziku pulled up his sheet again and continued to sleep. His wife went to work in the *shamba* on her own. The ground was sandy and soft, and she was working well when her husband arrived at half past eight.

"Oh, Martina, why didn't you wake me up? I told you . . ."

"But I did wake you up," said Martina. "You refused to get out of bed."

"You didn't try hard enough," Maziku replied.

Martina didn't waste her time arguing. She went on digging. So Maziku also started to work.

They worked side by side. Martina soon began to move ahead of her husband—one meter, two meters, three meters . . . her husband's work got slower and slower. He was always stopping for a rest. He began to complain that his back was hurting, his legs were hurting, his arms were hurting, his hands were hurting.

"Martina, why are you going so fast?" Maziku asked. "There is no hurry. We don't have to finish the *shamba* today."

Martina didn't listen to him. She knew the rainy season was near. She knew the first rains were for planting. She wanted to

finish all the cultivating before the rains started.

But her husband continued to complain. "Martina, don't go so fast. This is not the way to farm at all. You will get too tired and then you won't be able to cultivate tomorrow."

Martina just laughed. Her hoe went up and down, up and down. Each time it went down with a loud THOK, clouds of earth surrounded her.

Maziku watched her and sneezed. "Ah, this dust is too much. We need a tractor, Martina! Why don't we wait for the village tractor?"

The only answer was THOK THOK THOK.

Maziku tried again: "Martina, haven't you brought any food to the *shamba*? I am hungry. You can't dig on an empty stomach. Let's stop and eat. Then we'll dig much better."

THOK THOK THOK. Mama Martina said nothing. So Maziku started to work again. He worked for fifteen minutes. That was enough for him. He called again: "Mama Martina?"

THOK THOK THOK.

"Ah, that woman will kill herself for no reason," Maziku said to himself. He put down his hoe and sat down under the nearby mango tree.

After sitting down, Maziku opened Martina's basket to see if she had brought any food. He found some maize and beans. He told himself, "I will only eat a small amount, and then I'll continue working." He finished a quarter of the food. Then he started to put the dish back into the basket, but his stomach complained. "Well, just a little more," he thought. "This digging is hard work." So he took out the dish and started to eat again. He finished another quarter. "Okay, that's enough. The rest is for Martina." He put the dish back in the basket and started to stand up. But his stomach complained again. "Ah, this woman, why does she bring so little food? I still feel hungry and it's only half past eleven. It's her fault. She should prepare more food. Let me eat a little more. She won't realize."

So Maziku sat down again and ate another quarter. Then he

shook the remainder of the maize and beans to hide how much he had eaten and put the dish back into the basket. This time he did actually stand up, but now everything was hurting: his arms, his hands, his legs, his back, his head, his neck, even his toes were hurting. And he was beginning to feel sleepy. "Let me rest first for fifteen minutes," he thought, "and then I'll go back to work."

As soon as Maziku sat down, however, he felt hungry again. He looked at the dish and started to pick it up. "No, that's Martina's," he told himself. "But why did she cook so little? It's her fault. Yes. I will teach her a lesson. If she cooks too little, she cannot expect to eat. How can you cultivate when you are starving?" So he picked up the dish and finished all the food. "That will teach her."

After all Maziku's hard work and even harder eating, he lay down and went to sleep. When some of the villagers passed the *shamba*, they were very surprised. There was Mama Martina working hard, but where was Maziku? Then they saw him under the tree, fast asleep. They laughed and shook their heads: "Hmm, these town people . . ."

Meanwhile, Martina continued to work very hard. She was quite happy that her husband was resting, because he did very little work anyway and he was always trying to interrupt her. By one o'clock she had finished a big piece of the *shamba*, so she decided to drink a little water and eat some food before continuing. She walked slowly back to the tree where she had left her basket. There she found Maziku fast asleep. She smiled, went to the basket, and pulled out the dish of food. "Loooo!" She couldn't believe her eyes—all the food was finished! She was very angry indeed. Martina looked at her husband and then shook him hard. "Wake up, Maziku, wake up! It's time to eat."

"Oh, good," said Maziku groggily as he awoke. "Have you brought some more maize and beans? That first lot was delicious."

Martina could not believe her ears. He was not even sorry! "No, I have not brought any more food," she said. "I was cultivating. Now I am hungry. What am I going to eat?"

Maziku realized his mistake.” “I am very sorry, Martina. I was very hungry after all my hard work. I was so hungry that I couldn’t stop myself. Let’s finish work for today. Then you can cook some more food. Anyway, it’s your fault. Why did you cook so little?”

As her husband was talking, Martina got more and more angry. Finally she stopped him. “What are you talking about?” she challenged. “I came here on my own last year. I did all the work myself. We got a good harvest. Now you say you have come to help me? Is this helping me? Sleeping under the tree? Eating all my food? Telling me to go and cook more? Aaah!” She was so angry that she had to stop speaking. But her eyes were full of anger.

Maziku knew that look. He knew his wife. And he knew he was wrong and regretted eating all the food. But there was nothing he could do. It was useless to apologize; his wife was still hungry. Quickly he picked up the hoes and the basket. “Come on, my wife,” he said. “I was wrong. Please forgive me; I won’t do it again. Let’s go to the *mtama* bar where they sell roast meat and plantains.”

“But that will not solve our problem, Maziku. If we waste our money like this, we’ll never succeed.”

“Don’t worry, Martina,” Maziku assured her. “I will not make the same mistake again. I am very sorry. I was wrong. You must remember, I am still learning. Please forgive me.”

Martina was not satisfied, but what could she do? Once the water has been spilt, you can’t pick it up again. So, when Maziku set off for the *mtama* bar, carrying the hoes, she sighed heavily and followed.

When they got to the bar, Maziku ordered the meat and plantains and a big plastic mug of *mtama*. Martina drank in silence until the food was ready. Then she ate quickly and returned home to see Mauja and prepare the evening meal.

Maziku stayed in the bar talking and drinking with the villagers. After he’d been drinking for some time, the village men asked him, “Why have you come to the village, Maziku? All our young men leave the village to go to town, but you leave the town and

come to the village.”

“I do not know what your young men are looking for in town,” Maziku said, “but I can tell you one thing: life in town is very tough. You can’t live on your salary.”

“Then why do young men say you have a better life in town?” the men asked. “Electricity, films, shops full of things, plenty of food in the market, water from taps—so many things.”

“It’s true that all those things are there,” Maziku replied, “but you still need money to get them. I used to get up every morning at five o’clock. I would eat only a bun for breakfast and rush to get the bus. I worked all day. All through those hours, I had no chance of eating again; the food in town is too expensive. So I worked all day on an empty stomach. And even with all that work, still I found that I was going nowhere. No, life in the town is not easy—unless you steal or you have other income.”

Some of the villagers knew that Maziku was telling the truth. After all, they had been to town and seen the life there. But one old man, Mzee Kombo, was not satisfied. He said, “I hear all these stories, but you’re not telling the truth. The problem in the big towns these days is that all the men want to do is drink and chase girls.”

Maziku laughed. “Mzee, do you know the price of beer these days? If I used all my salary to buy beer, I could still buy only twenty with the whole of my month’s salary—all of it. Nothing for food or rent. No, Mzee, we couldn’t afford to drink beer; we were drinking *mtama*. Or they called it *mtama*, but it was not as good as the *mtama* in the village.

“And for girls, haven’t you heard the song ‘Maridadi Sana?’ No money. First you must dress smartly—and where is the money to buy smart clothes? Then you must give her a present, and not a small one either. Where is the money for that? Then you must take her out to the cinema or somewhere else. Where is all this money? And after all that, she will probably say no because she has found someone better. I go without food all day, and then you want me to spend money on girls. No thank you.”

Everyone laughed. Maziku was beginning to get drunk. He went on: "But, my friends, life in the village is not easy either. Today I went to dig and my whole body started to ache, headache, back ache, leg ache—how do you do it?"

"Oh, that's why we saw you fast asleep under the tree. So, you thought farming was easy, hey?"

"Yes, you dig, you plant, you weed, you harvest, and you eat. That's all, isn't it? How do you manage it? You seem to work a little and drink a lot, but your farms are very good."

"We work hard, my friend. If you work hard, you will get used to the work."

Maziku, as usual, refused to listen. "It's not true. Your wives do all the work. You men are just drinking."

The men were amused by Maziku's words, but they were also a bit hurt. They knew that a farming life was a tough one. It was not just drinking and talking. So they decided to teach him a lesson—that drinking and farming cannot be cooked in the same pot. They told Maziku, "Your problem is that you do not work the right way. *Mtama* gives us strength to work. So when you wake up in the morning, drink some *mtama* instead of having porridge. Then take a gallon of *mtama* to the farm with you. If you feel your back is starting to ache, drink a little *mtama*. If your arms start to ache, drink a little *mtama*. If your legs start to ache, drink a little *mtama*. And when your head starts to ache, lie down and rest for five minutes and you will be fine."

"Is that really so?" asked Maziku. "If you drink *mtama*, you will work well?"

"Yes," said the men. "A hoe is not like a pen. It needs *mtama* to keep it moving. That is the way we all work."

"Well, friends," said Maziku, "see how ignorant I am. Hey, sister, can you lend me a gallon can to take *mtama* home with me for tomorrow?"

The girl brought a gallon can from outside the house, filled it with *mtama*, and gave it to Maziku.

Maziku paid for the *mtama* and started to walk home. On the

way he began singing.

The next day, Maziku followed the men's advice. As soon as he woke up, he washed his face and then drank some *mtama* from the gallon can.

His wife was very surprised. "What are you doing, Maziku? Are you becoming a drunkard?"

"Of course not, Martina," he replied. "This is the way to cultivate well. You should know that; you were born in the village."

"Yes, I was born in the village. And that is why I know that you never drink before farming."

"The problem," countered Maziku, "is that women are weak. We men can drink and work. The men told me so in the *mtama* bar."

Martina was going to reply, but just then her neighbor called her. When she went out to see him, he told her, "Please, Martina, don't be surprised and don't be angry if your husband drinks today. Don't be angry with us and don't be angry with him. He thinks work on the farm is just drinking and enjoying himself. We want to teach him a lesson. Let him drink and then let him see if he can work."

Martina laughed. "All right. But only today."

"Of course. One day is enough. He won't do it again."

Maziku was now ready to go to the farm, so they left. Martina carried a hoe and a basket of maize and beans. Maziku carried a hoe and the gallon can. When they reached the farm, they started to work, but Maziku soon got tired. After one hour, everything began to ache. He remembered the advice of the men: "If anything starts to ache, drink a little *mtama*." He put down his hoe and drank a little. Then, twenty minutes later, he drank a little more . . . and a little more . . . and a little more . . . and a little more.

Maziku soon found it difficult to lift up his hoe, and then his head started to ache. So again he remembered the advice: "When the head starts to ache lie down and rest for five minutes." He went to the mango tree nearby and quickly went to sleep.

Martina realized what was happening, but she said nothing.



She just took her hoe and went on cultivating. When it was time for lunch, she went to the mango tree and found Maziku fast asleep, but all the food was still in the basket. Maziku was snoring loudly, so Mama Martina shook him. "Wake up, Maziku. It's time to eat. Wake up."

Maziku did not reply.

She shook him again. "Wake up; you have slept for three hours."

"Please don't disturb me, Martina," Maziku finally responded. "I am resting for a few minutes."

"A few minutes!" Martina exclaimed. "It's one o'clock. Wake up and eat."

"Don't make jokes, woman. I've been asleep for only a few minutes."

"Look at the sun, then."

Maziku looked at the sun. He was shocked. "But the men told me that if my head aches, I must lie down for a few minutes. . . ."

"Well, they were wrong. Now eat."

When Maziku looked at the food, he didn't want to eat at all. His head was aching badly. He just wanted to sleep. So he turned over and went to sleep again.

Martina laughed. She ate her food and went back to work. By evening, she had finished a big part of the farm, so she went back to her husband. He was still asleep. She shook him again: "It's evening and you are still asleep. Look at you, you lazy man. You have done no work all day."

Maziku tried to say something, but his head still ached. He felt that little men were hammering inside his head. His mouth was dry. His legs were weak. So he could say nothing. He picked up his hoe and tried to walk back to the village, but he could not walk straight, so Martina had to help him.

When they got to the village, the men at the *mtama* bar called to Maziku: "How was the farming today?"

"Terrible," he replied. "I followed your advice, but it was hopeless. I drank *mtama* when I woke up, and when anything started to

ache I drank again. Then I went to sleep when my head started to ache. I slept the whole day, but now my head is aching even more. I'm never going to follow your advice again."

The men laughed and laughed. "Listen, Maziku, we wanted to teach you a lesson. You think that life is easy in the village and that we just drink without doing any work. And when we give you good advice about working hard, you won't listen. So we decided to show you that drink and work don't go together. We work hard. Look at our hands. Now look at your hands. You don't know how to work. If your legs start to ache, go on working. If your arms start to ache, go on working. Even if your head start to ache, go on working. It will be very difficult for the first two weeks, but after that, you will be used to work. It will not be easy, but you will be able to cope with it."

Maziku looked at them with big eyes. Then he shook his head. He had nothing to say. They were right. He shook his head a second time and walked slowly home. "Hey, Maziku, sing us another song," the men shouted. But Maziku didn't sing a song. He went back home, ate quietly, and went to bed.

The next morning, Maziku woke up early and went to the farm and worked all day. His wife was surprised and happy, and in the evening she cooked him a special meal. After that, he gradually got used to the work.

But Maziku was still stubborn. Even when he didn't know something, he refused to take any advice. He thought that he knew everything. Even the story of the *mtama* did not change him. So he soon got into more troubles.

Eventually the time for putting fertilizer on the fields came around. Maziku said he would take the fertilizer for his wife because she wanted to wash the clothes. She told Maziku to pour half the fertilizer into a basket, because the whole bag would be too heavy for him, but Maziku refused to listen.

"I am a man," he said. "This is a small bag. I can carry it."

"But, my husband," Martina told him, "the farm is a long way away."

“Quiet, woman. I am now strong and tough. I am used to the work.”

Well, in Kiswahili, they say that if a child cries for a razor blade, give it to him. He will learn. So Martina said no more.

Maziku took the fertilizer and set off for the farm. First he carried the fertilizer under his arm. It was too heavy. Then he tried to carry it in front of him. It was still too heavy. He put it on his shoulder; too heavy. So he tried to put it on his head. That was better, but then his arms began to get tired, so he took away his arm, but then the bag fell off his head. He put the bag on his head again. It fell off. Soon all the children of the village were following him. So Maziku tried to carry the bag under his arm again . . . still heavy . . . in front of him . . . too heavy . . . on the shoulder . . . too heavy. He put it on his head again, but as soon as he took his hand away, it fell off. All the children laughed. Maziku did not want to fail in front of the children. He put the fertilizer on his head again. It fell off—once, twice, three times, four times, and then the bag split and fertilizer poured out. He quickly picked up the bag and carried it away.

One of Maziku’s neighbors saw what Maziku had left on the ground. But when he looked at it, he saw that it was not fertilizer, but sugar. So he called Maziku and asked him, “Why are you taking so much sugar to the farm? Do you want to cook tea for all the farmers?”

“I am not taking sugar,” Maziku replied. “This is fertilizer.”

“It is not fertilizer,” assured his neighbor, whose name was Gwasa. “It is sugar.”

“It is fertilizer,” said Maziku. “You surprise me. You live in the village, but you can’t see the difference between sugar and fertilizer.”

“Bwana, it is sugar. Taste! It is sugar. Taste it and see.”

“Oh, now I see you want to kill me,” Maziku accused. “If I eat fertilizer, I will die. No, don’t waste my time any more. I’m going to the *shamba*.”

Gwasa tried it once more. “This is sugar. Look. Let me taste

it.” And he took some of the sugar and ate it. “You see. It is sugar. Very sweet.”

But Maziku refused to listen. “You are wasting my time,” he said. “I tell you, if you want to eat fertilizer, that is your problem. I am going to put it on my farm.”

Maziku picked up his bag and left. Gwasa ran to tell Martina. When she heard the story, she left her clothes in the bucket and ran to the farm. She found Maziku, who was still panting from the hard job of carrying the bag to the farm.

“Oh, Martina,” he said when he saw her, “have you finished washing the clothes already?”

“No I haven’t,” she replied sternly. “I have left the clothes in the bucket because I have been told that you have brought sugar instead of fertilizer.”

“The same story,” said Maziku. “You have been talking to Gwasa, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. You should thank God for good neighbors like Gwasa. Look. Can’t you see that this is the bag of sugar you brought from Dar es Salaam when you moved here?”

Martina picked up some of the “fertilizer,” ate it, and forced Maziku to taste it as well.

Maziku had nothing to say. He had to pick up the bag, which now seemed even heavier, and carry it all the way back to their house.

The next day, Maziku went with Mama Martina to put fertilizer on their maize. When they got to the field, Martina went to one side of the farm and Maziku to the other. After a short while, Mama Martina looked in her husband’s direction, and it was a good thing she did, because she saw that he was putting fertilizer in the middle of each maize plant instead of around it. She ran over to him. “Maziku, you are making a mistake. Don’t put the fertilizer on the maize plant.”

“Why not?” he asked. “We want the maize to grow, don’t we? If we put the fertilizer on the maize plant, it will grow faster.”

“But it won’t grow faster,” Martina told him. “It will die. You

must put the fertilizer in a circle around the maize plant.”

“No, no, no. That’s rubbish. This time I am right. It is obvious that you should put the fertilizer on the maize.”

“Maziku,” said his wife, who was now getting a little angry, “Why do you never listen to what people tell you? That fertilizer is very strong. If you put it on the maize, it will burn it. The maize will grow yellow and die.”

“What do you mean, I never listen to anyone? I am reading books about agriculture these days. I want to farm scientifically, not like the old days.”

“Of course. I also want to farm scientifically. And according to science, don’t put the fertilizer on the maize.”

Maziku also got angry. “The trouble with you, Martina, is that you think you know everything just because you grew up in a village. You don’t know everything. If you put fertilizer around the plant it will go straight into the ground and the plant will get nothing. Can the plant walk to pick up the fertilizer? No. I am going to feed the plant direct.”

Martina didn’t know what to say. Her husband was so stubborn. Finally she said, “All right, Maziku, we want to be scientific, don’t we? Then let us do an experiment. You put fertilizer on the maize for the two rows of maize and I will finish the rest of the field in the same way that I cultivated last year. Then we will see who is right.”

Maziku agreed. He took the fertilizer and carefully put some of it in the middle of maize plant. Unfortunately for him, Gwasa was walking past the field when Maziku was arguing with his wife. When Gwasa told the other villagers, they all laughed, and soon a new song was heard in the village about Bwana Haambiliki (Mr. Never-Told):

*Once upon a time there was a farmer  
A farmer  
A farmer  
A farmer full of strange and new ideas*

*We laughed until our eyes were full of tears.*

*Plants are like men, he told us.  
They like a cup of tea from time to time  
So give them sugar  
Give them sugar  
Give them sugar  
And they’ll grow strong and full of maize.*

*Oh, we told him  
We told him  
We told him  
But his ears were blocked.  
Mr. Never-Told would never listen.*

*We took the sugar and put it in our tea.  
He put it in the maize  
And sad to say  
The plants never said thank you.  
Instead they fell down dead  
Stupid plants, he cried.  
They don’t know how to live at all.  
Oh Mr. Never-Told  
When will you ever learn?*

*Plants are hungry, he said.  
Their leaves are open like mouths  
So give them food  
Give them food.  
Pour it down their throats,  
Don’t put it on the ground,  
They can’t walk to pick it up.*

*Oh, we told him  
We told him*

*We told him  
But his ears were blocked.  
Mr. Never-Told would never listen*

*He took the food  
And poured it down their throats and sad to say  
The plants never said thank you.  
Instead they fell down dead.  
Stupid plants, he cried.  
They don't know to live at all.  
Oh Mr. Never-Told  
When will you ever learn?*

*What new ideas are these?  
And more are coming, we hear.  
Seeds get lonely, he says.  
They like to be planted together  
So plant five seeds in each together  
So plant five seeds in each hole  
In each hole  
In each hole.  
They like to grow together.*

*Oh, we tell him  
We tell him  
We tell him  
But his ears are blocked.  
Mr. Never-Told will never listen  
When will he ever learn?*

When Martina heard this song, it was the last straw. She decided that she has suffered enough. That evening, she asked her husband, "Have you heard the song they are singing about you in the village?"

"What song?" he asked.

"'Bwana Haambiliki.' It is all about sugar instead of fertilizer and putting fertilizer in the plants."

Maziku laughed. "They are jealous because I know more than they do."

"What!" said Martina. "Jealous! They are laughing at you because you know nothing about farming and you refuse to learn."

"That is not true. I read. I think. I try new ideas. Not like all of you. You farm the same way every year."

"Yes, and we are eating well because of it. But it is not true that we don't change. If the agriculture officer shows us new ideas that work, we follow them. He knows what he is talking about."

"No, you are wrong. You just laugh at me because I came from town. But you wait; I will show you that my ideas are right."

"If you want to do that," said Martina, "then go and find your own farm. I have had enough. People are laughing at you. And they are laughing at me because I am your wife. They are laughing at Mauja when she goes to school, so she doesn't want to go school anymore. Why are they laughing? It is not because you don't know. There are many things that we don't know. It is because you refuse to listen to people who do know."

Maziku started to speak, but his wife went on: "No, let me finish. I have had enough. I have tried to put up with you and teach you, but you won't listen. So either you go back to town and leave us here, or you find a job here in the village. But if you come to the farm again, I will leave you. Look at all the maize in this house. I grew it without your help. Now you want to destroy our fields and destroy our name as well. What kind of pride is this? You think that just because you were born in town, you know everything, but you know nothing, nothing!"

Martina started to cry. Maziku tried to talk to her, but she kept on saying, "If you come to the farm again, I am leaving you."

Actually, Maziku had already heard the song. After hearing it, he had gone to the farm. He had seen that the maize in the two rows of his was yellow and dying while the rest of the maize was dark green and healthy. So he had nothing to say. His wife was

right, and the truth hurt.

Fortunately for Maziku, there were other things he could do other than farming. The village had no accountant, so there were a lot of problems with the village's accounts. The next day, Maziku went to the village chairman and offered to help with them. The chairman agreed, and Maziku tried to write the accounts properly for all the village activities. But when the villagers saw this, they started to make more jokes: "Oh, Mr. Maziku, do you want to fertilize the books?" "Have you ordered the sacks of sugar for maize?" "Are the books lonely?" And there were many other comments.

Maziku didn't say a word. He was determined to prove to his wife and to the entire village that he could do something useful. He worked all the day. He even gave up drinking, because he was working at night.

Soon the villagers began to see that Maziku was putting the accounts of the village in good order. In fact, one of the shop assistants had to run away because he realized that Maziku would reveal his misdealings. The village shop was full of things to buy, and everything was ordered in good time. The building program was written out properly so everyone could understand.

By harvest time, people had stopped laughing at Maziku. They were grateful for his good work. Martina also saw the change in him, and she was happy. People now praised her husband. And Mauja was happy at school because the children were not laughing at her any more. At harvest time, Martina allowed her husband back onto the field, and they harvested together. It was a very good harvest (except, of course, for Maziku's two rows), and they had to hire a truck up to carry all the maize back to their house.

One evening, Maziku and Martina sat talking before they went to bed. Maziku joked with his wife, "You see, I told you. Life is easy. You dig, you plant, you weed, you harvest, and you eat. No problem. Look at all this maize."

Martina smiled. "But I am sure you understand now that it is hard work."

"Oh, yes, I do. But now I am ready to work. You should let me

back on the farm. I have learned my lesson. And I am reading a lot of books about agriculture."

Martina smiled again. "But books are not enough, Maziku. You must listen to the farmers themselves and watch what they are doing. They are the experts. They have been farming for years."

"It is true," said Maziku. "But still, a few new ideas are good."

"Of course," agreed his wife. "But not the ideas you had before." They both laughed. Then Martina said, "Yes, I will allow you back into the field—for two reasons. I think you have learned a lesson. But there is another reason. Life on the farm is good for us. I think we are going to have another child."

For once, Maziku could only listen. He was so happy that at first he could say nothing. Majua was nine years old, and she was their only child. Now they were going to have another. God had blessed their move to the village. Suddenly Maziku jumped up and began to add to the song of "Bwana Haambiliki":

*Plants don't like sugar*

*They say*

*They say*

*Plants can't eat fertilizer*

*They say*

*They say*

*But Mr. Never-Told is learning.*

*Life may be tough*

*They say*

*They say*

*They say*

*The back aches and aches*

*I know*

*I know*

*But somehow Maziku*

*And Martina*

*Together*

*We'll make it*

*We'll make it*  
*We'll make it.*

*—Erasto Naakule*



