

Volume 6, Number 2
Summer/Fall 2011



Silk Road

a literary crossroads

Pacific University in Oregon

Silk Road

a literary crossroads

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Bridget Booher's essay, "Body Map of My Life," originally appeared in the collection *You Are Here*, published by Princeton Architectural Press (2003).

SUBMISSIONS

The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction and translations from August through April. Submission information can be found at our website: silkroad.pacificu.edu. All rights revert to author upon publication.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions for *Silk Road* include two print issues per year. Visit our website for more information: silkroad.pacificu.edu.

PUBLISHER

Silk Road (ISSN 1931-6933) is published semi-annually by Pacific University in Oregon and funded by the Department of English and the College of Arts and Sciences.

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Cover painting: Anna Stump; cover design by Sami Auclair

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Editor's Note

Silk Road 6.2 is an exceptional issue, which I guess can be said of any print publication expanding at the rate we are. We held our first international writing contest and have published over fifty writers in Volume 6 alone. Our magazines are maps of moving language that include Kenya, India, Iraq, Alaska, Taiwan, Turkey, Italy, Japan and everywhere else in between. In this issue, we travel from the heartland of the United States to the unbound Atlantic Ocean. Bridget Booher even maps herself in “Body Map of My Life.” Writers, like our flash fiction contest honorable mention Katie Cortese, take us to places that exist only in the mind and to the shimmering islands of past and present, where poet Ahmet Uysal says a “breeze sings to me in all languages at once.” Masha Hamilton, in discussing the young terrorist in her novel, *31 Hours*, proves there is nowhere a driven writer will not dare to go. In an interview with us, she explains what was necessary for her as an artist to write into “the grey”—an honest, difficult space where she could find no easy answers to why a person would destroy a beloved city and people. Good writing asks the best questions in all their variety and intensity. As writers and readers we follow in hot pursuit of revelations that will most surely surprise us.

Kathlene Postma
Editor in Chief

Flash Fiction Contest

1st Place: “A Writer’s Story,” by Steve Edwards

Honorable Mention: “Let Down Your Hair,” by Katie Cortese

Stories are funhouses, controlled syntactical machines designed to “do something” to us as readers. We experience the sudden slanting floor, the puff of air from a hidden corner, a shake, a turn, a hallway that loops back and forces a new perspective. Such a funhouse of words is hard to create on any level, but when the story is about a story, or in the case of this year’s winning piece a meta-fiction, the stakes become much higher. The level of artistic talent needed to build such a machine is quite considerable.

Flash Fiction Contest winner Steve Edwards hits this mark in “A Writer’s Story.” From the moment I read the opening lines, I knew I was in a carefully layered, controlled universe where Mr. Edwards wanted to play and--most importantly in such a piece – wanted me to join in the fun, the highest compliment a meta-fictional story can offer. The interplay between narrator and characters and the resonance of pathos and play are quite remarkable. They leave us wanting more.

It is with great pleasure *Silk Road* presents this delightful selection by Steve Edwards, “A Writer’s Story.”

Greg Belliveau
Senior Fiction Editor

A Writer's Story

Steve Edwards

In this story there is a mother and a father. Though they are not your mother and father—and neither, really, are they mine (with the exception of a few inconspicuous similarities I hope you can overlook)—they will suffice as this story's mother and father. In another story, a less ambiguous story, well, who knows? I can't say that this mother and father would serve very well as the mother and father in an unambiguous story, a story whose moral is clear as the nose on your face. Which is a cliché my mother used from time to time. "The answer's clear as the nose on your face," she would say, late at night, at the kitchen table, as I sat sweating over a series of incomprehensible math problems. But that was my mother, not the mother in this story. The mother in this story doesn't have a son. She has a daughter. The daughter is good at math and never has to sit at that big kitchen table, late at night, hot tears ready to explode because the numbers in the math book won't hold still—numbers like little swarming gnats that buzz about her head. The daughter's problem is her father. He was killed in a helicopter crash in California when she was just five years old. She has one very clear memory of him, one shining crystal memory, and for the last two days she has not been able to remember it. Which for her is terrifying. Which makes her feel as though she is the one—not the helicopter crash six years ago—that killed him. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose the last memory of my own father, who is still very much alive, and who is so, well, for lack of a better word, memorable. The way he once dreamed a rabbit hopped into a trap we'd built and rubbed with apple, and the way it was there—the rabbit—when we checked

the trap that next morning. You get the idea. For the daughter, though, it's already happened. She's killed her father by forgetting her one and only memory of him (her one and only memory that is a story and not just a blur of sensations: his smell, his touch, some inner emotional memory latent in her blood). So she asks her mother at dinner that night: "Tell me something about daddy." She is eleven. Did I mention that? She is eleven and plays the violin. There are other details: she has a dog, a best friend, a pen-pal in Honduras named Consuelo. Now it's the summertime, and she and her mother are eating dinner on the patio, where no one ever does math homework, and she says, "Tell me something about daddy." And the mother says, "What do you want to know, sweetie?" And the one thing the daughter wants to know is something her mother can't tell her, because that's the thing about memory—no one else can hold it for you. Not really. Not in the way the daughter wishes at this moment. "I don't know," she says, frowning into her spaghetti (dinner is pretty casual at their house). "Just tell me something about him." And the mother thinks it over, takes a sip of wine, looks off somewhere, out across their leafy backyard, not really focusing on any one object. She tells her daughter a story about the father, how the first time he went up in an airplane and saw the low-hanging clouds over St. Louis—or maybe it was some other city—he thought there was a fire. He thought the clouds were smoke, that the city was burning. Just for a second. Then he realized it was clouds, just clouds, and laughed at himself. "Your father loved to laugh," her mother says, nodding, her gaze returning from wherever it had gone, leveling on her daughter. And just like that, the daughter remembers: she'd fallen off her bike and scraped her elbow, and her father had rushed in and picked her up and threw her into the air, again and again, until she'd laughed herself silly in his arms. And remembering, she excuses herself from the table and dashes off to her bedroom where she finds paper and pencil and writes it down, every last word, so that she will

A Writer's Story

Which makes me very glad—you, too, I'm sure. Because if I were that daughter, and if the mother and father of the story were my mother and father, well, things might have turned out differently. Maybe I'd have had that one shining memory, and maybe I'd have forgotten for a week and grown anxious and felt as though I were the one who killed him—I can imagine that. But with my mother, good woman though she is, I can also imagine silence growing up like weeds around the source of any and all pain in our lives. And so I won't say anything. Ever. I won't ask the first thing about my father and his death, because I'd have learned over time that the sound of my own puny voice against all her silence would only magnify the suffering and emptiness I felt. But like the daughter—how very like the daughter—I would write it all down, every word, not to remember but to imagine how it might have been different if words could have helped us. Perhaps this is why in all the stories I write—and maybe in all of yours—there is a mother and a father, and pain, silence, and yet also a word or two that makes a difference, an unlikely tenderness of heart, because despite every hurt you or I endure, some part of us holds out hope. Maybe these stories we tell are just clouds after all. Maybe the city is not on fire.

Twelve Hour Shift

Steve Edwards

The nurse left work at five o'clock. She had to pick up her son at the Y, from swim lessons. The banker left at six to meet a woman for drinks downtown. At seven, the schoolteacher walked down an empty hallway, past empty classrooms, heels clicking, and breezed through a set of double-doors into the warm night air. At eight, thinking of his ailing mother, the mayor dropped two ice cubes into a highball glass, poured three fingers of Johnny Walker and said a prayer. At nine, the sprinklers came on at Western View golf course. A crow rose squawking from the sand trap. Second-shift at Kawasaki let out at ten and the workers—beards and eyelashes flecked with metal shavings—streamed out of the parking lot, long lines of headlights down Highway 77. At eleven, a weather satellite soundlessly crossed the sky. All night people slept and dreamed: midnight, one o'clock, two o'clock. The cop pulling the night shift at the county jail, dozing at his desk, dreamed a woman he used to love. The widow in the crumbling stucco house on 40th and Elm—the one who keeps a sack of peanuts for the squirrels—dreamed her girlhood on the Great Plains riding horses. The priest dreamed jingling keys. The rabbi dreamed rain pelting an umbrella. Mothers and fathers dreamed. Boys and girls. Cats and dogs and mice. Outside, a tender sickle of grass yielded to a bead of dew with the moon in its eye. The breeze galloped through a patch of Queen Anne's Lace. A star no one ever wished on winked out. Darkness is the seed from which love breaks open like a sprout, wrote the poet in his lamp-lit study, momentarily stopping time as he sucked on the end of his pen. When he started writing again, time picked up where it left off. At three, the firefighter

Twelve Hour Shift

had a second bowl of chili. At four, the all-night donut fryer lit a cigarette and pondered the murky depths of his steaming vats of grease. At five, the nurse returned to work for another twelve-hour shift in pediatrics. Her feet already hurt. One by one she dropped pills—white, pink, blue—into paper cups for boys the same age as her son.

The Nameless

Zeina Hashem Beck

What do you call the space between
the written word and the blank page,
names in the distance and distance without names?

I know forgetting. I know
forgetting happens before
remembering.
But what happens after?

Give me a word
lukewarm and not so
comprehensible,
a word that drops
like white shadows
from the sky.

What name?
Give me a name
that melts like rain
and smells like moonlight
on my skin.

Topo

John Ashford

In the late afternoon my classes were over for the day and I took my usual walk up the road that led out of the village and into the African countryside. Thorn trees lined the rutted, dusty track. Scrub brush grew along its edge bearing hard fruit, nature's version of tough love in the Kalahari.

In the distance, I saw dust stirred by a donkey cart, but as the cart approached the village it jerked, lunged, and then stopped. The animals seemed aimless and the cart weaved from one side to another. It stopped, and then lurched forward crazily.

I thought the driver must be drunk and giving confusing signals to his donkeys, but as it got nearer I could see the driver wasn't drunk. Sitting high up on a crude wooden seat with a friend beside him, I recognized the driver as a young man named Topo, a former student. Plainly, he had no idea how to direct the donkeys and his lack of skill slowed his progress. But it didn't stop him. Nothing stopped Topo.

I'd gotten to know Topo when I was new to the village, shortly after the Peace Corps had delivered my wife and me to the dusty Botswana village in the back of a cattle truck. I was assigned to lecture at the new college of education. As it happened, my students were scattered around the country doing their practice teaching. Meanwhile, I spent my first six months teaching at a nearby secondary school.

I'd been at the school for only a few weeks when I attended my first staff meeting. Topo was the main item on the agenda. The headmaster was being taken to task by the teachers for his failure to properly discipline the boy. A dignified man with skin

the color of light coffee, the headmaster sat in the circle listening to comments. As usual, he was impeccably dressed, wearing a tan sport jacket, starched white shirt and dark tie.

“He needs to be beaten soundly,” one of the teachers said of Topo.

“Why is this boy even allowed to stay in school?” asked another. The question suggested the rejection of a child, something that almost never happens in a village in Botswana. When students were sent home, they were expected to return as soon as possible with a parent. It was a measure of the degree of frustration with Topo that someone would suggest sending him away.

I was seated in a hard wooden chair slightly outside the circle. I wasn't the only expatriate teacher on the staff. Near me, sat a woman from India. An Australian teacher of English was across the room. There were two men from Zambia, teachers of math and science. All of us had felt our share of annoyance with Topo, but we listened in silence.

I was surprised to hear the headmaster being chided for his leniency. A week after I arrived he had spoken to me sternly for being too soft. He wanted a more authoritarian presence, someone who used the cane to keep students on their best behavior. He was disappointed with this white skinned middle-aged man who refused to strike students. I told him, “I quit a perfectly good job to come to teach here. I didn't give up a career in America to beat African children.”

Now, the shoe was on the other foot and he was being deemed too soft. He sat quietly across the room taking in the comments and occasionally, jotting a note on a pad, or calling attention to a matter of process. He showed no visible reaction to the scolding tone of the teacher's voices or the direct accusation that he was coddling a student.

Topo's given name was a shortened form of a much longer phrase

Topo

in the Setswana language that meant, *This is the child I have requested from God.*

In my afternoon class, however, he showed no awareness of his divine origins. He squirmed in his seat for two hours. If he had been in an American school his impulsiveness and acting out would get him a diagnosis of A.D.D. His attention span barely carried him five minutes into any assignment. Thinking deeply or concentrating on a classroom task was not his thing. On a typical day he twisted in his chair midway through a short study time to steal an essay book or to copy another student's work. A minute later, I'd see him throw a pen to a friend across the room. After that he pointed, convulsed in laughter, at the antics of a classmate. In those moments of action, his eyes sparkled with the thrill of the moment and the companionship of his friends – or “partners in crime” as I sometimes thought of them.

My reluctance to use corporal punishment on my students did not mean that I didn't feel frustration with his behavior. But even if I'd become more authoritarian it wouldn't have made any difference. Topo was in constant trouble in all his classes.

Annoying as his behavior was in class, he was always good natured. There was never a time when I saw him display anger. On our once-a-month cleanup day when students swept, washed windows, waxed floors, Topo was a great help. He loved physical activity. He reminded me of young men I'd known in Seattle, whose personalities seemed to change when they played sports, worked, or created something with their hands.

At the secondary school, each day began with a gathering on the grounds for a ten minute assembly. The deputy headmaster, a French speaking Tamil from Mauritius, presided over the singing of a hymn and bible reading. One morning in particular, the deputy made a few announcements after the brief prayer, and then added, “I want to see these students immediately after assembly in my office.” Everybody knew that anyone whose name was on that list

had an appointment to be beaten that morning. The deputy ended his list in a humorous tone, "...and my good friend, Topo." It was a line he used frequently and that always got a laugh from the assembled student body.

Others laughed, but it made my heart sink to see him that morning. Even Topo, enjoying the attention, joined in the laughter. But then he stood still for a moment as if frozen to the spot. Silhouetted in the sunlight, I saw his large head and broad shoulders that tapered down to narrow, child-like hips. Pausing in the middle of the school grounds, he looked around as if expecting help. As I watched it made me wonder what he was thinking.

When he finally moved away from the assembly towards the administration offices, he wasn't performing for his friends; nothing about his actions seemed comical. His rhythmic, rocking, shuffling walk – usually Topo's form of "cool" – instead, seemed more like a form of controlled turmoil. His small, almost delicate, arms and hands were pressed tightly to his body as if bound by a rope. I had the impression of a large person, almost adult, whose body had withered. His head and shoulders, too large for the rest his small body, moved back and forth with the rhythm of his gait. His feet placed one ahead of the other, his whole body tapering to that single point making contact with the earth.

Topo's behavior had become an agenda item at the staff meeting because he'd crossed a line and the headmaster began the discussion by outlining the facts for the teachers. Apparently, the police had come to school to talk to Topo about a theft in the village. His misbehavior had been elevated to criminal activity.

Topo had been living by himself in a mud walled thatched hut. His mother disappeared and a neighbor woman, realizing he wasn't getting enough to eat, invited him to stay in her compound. She fed him for about a week, but one day when she returned from doing errands she found that money was missing – twenty pula –

Topo

from a bag stashed under her mattress. The woman was furious that this boy she had fed would steal from her. She called the village police. The headmaster added that the woman continued to feed Topo, but she no longer would let him enter her house.

After hearing the story, a teacher at the far end of the room spoke up, “This one – Topo – he is in the office of the deputy one day. He is in the office of the headmaster the next day. This goes on week after week. If it were anyone else he would have been sent from school after three visits. Why is this boy getting such favorable treatment? Why is he being allowed to stay in school?”

A buzz of conversation began around the room and without waiting for the headmaster to recognize her, another teacher shouted angrily, “How many strokes is he getting when we send him to you?”

The teacher had spoken out of turn and the headmaster reminded everyone in the room that all comments must be directed to the chair, meaning himself.

Despite his best efforts, however, the discussion became noisy. Members of the staff argued that it would be more effective for teachers to beat the students as soon as the offense occurred. When a student is sent to the deputy or the headmaster, the student is not seen immediately and may not receive the beating for two or three days, they said.

I looked around to the other expat teachers. They seemed as puzzled as I was by the arguments. The young man was already receiving beatings from the headmaster and the deputy, several times a week and it puzzled all of us why more would be better. None of the punishments seemed to change Topo’s behavior.

The headmaster restored order by reminding teachers there is a prescribed manner for administering punishment. One can only use a stick of a certain size, girls cannot be struck on the buttocks, and no one may be hit on the head. He stressed that it is important to follow the rules and have a witness. Even if students do not

receive punishment immediately, it is better to refer those matters to the administration in case of a complaint by the student or by parents.

In the case of Topo, he went on, “He is not receiving special treatment. As a student here, he is a member of our family, and as any one of us would with a troubled member of our own family, I have talked with him, counseled him, and I have administered beatings to him. But with this one, this boy, Topo, I cannot close my eyes to the damage that he has suffered. He is emotionally scarred. He is a problem here at the school, but will that problem go away if we turn him loose on the village? I do not think so. I think he will be in jail. And then what have we accomplished? Here is a boy – a child really – whose mother has beaten him mercilessly and deserted him. Can you imagine? She tried to kill him. She tied him to a tree. Beat him on the head. Look at the scars on his head sometime.”

The headmaster turned to set his notepad on a table, and then continued, “I admit that I have a soft spot for Topo when I realize the cruelty he has endured. I think he deserves a chance to succeed at something. I think he deserves to belong somewhere. In good conscience, I cannot turn this boy out of the school as long as I think there is a chance for him here.”

Every one had apparently had their say and even the headmaster seemed to tire of the matter. By the time he ended the conversation he sounded short of patience. “This administration and this headmaster can be soft. We can be soft when it comes to students that need a second chance and we can be soft when it comes to teachers who sometimes break the rules. I can be understanding when I see the circumstances. I do not report everything. However, do not think that if you ask me to be unbending and hard to the extreme with students that I cannot be hard, as well, when it comes to asking wayward teachers to toe the line.”