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# Tom Bennitt

## Molt

Once I found a black snake's molted skin in my backyard. I never saw the snake, but there was additional evidence. A few months earlier, I had mowed over a dead rat. The rat's carcass was infested with maggots feeding on the innards, crawling joyfully through the eye sockets.

I've heard that some lobsters will shed their shell and grow a new one several times in their long life. Why do some creatures molt, but not us? Molt comes from the Latin root, *mature*, to change. Yet it's one letter away from "melt" and the adjective "molten" means something liquefied by heat.

I grew up a mile from the Armco Steel Mill, where my uncle worked. To make steel, you throw coal, limestone, and iron ore into a blast furnace. Then cook those ingredients at 2500 degrees until they melt into a thick tawny liquid, which pours out of the blast furnace into rivulets that resemble pig troughs. When the liquid cools and hardens, it becomes cast iron. Add some nickel and a few other alloys and presto, you just made steel.

The other day, Oprah interviewed a woman, Connie, who had just undergone a face transplant. The woman's husband had shot her in the face from close range, just a few feet away, obliterating her nose and cheekbones and jaw. Her face had imploded. They replaced it with a face taken from a woman with similar bone structure who had died just a few hours earlier. The surgery took twenty-two hours. On the Oprah show, Connie's new transplanted face looked like a thick, square wad of Play-Doh had been slapped onto the front of her skull. It was shaped like a trapezoid, with her jowls extending out wider than her forehead. She must take a dozen pills every day for the rest of her life so the new face doesn't reject her. Imagine being so ugly that your own face rejects you.

Why can't we humans shed our skin and grow a new layer? Last night my girlfriend gave me the first pedicure I've ever had. She shaved the dead skin off my toes and the bottom of my foot with an old razor. The layers were so thick that I never even felt anything. The dead skin came off my foot like the shavings from a pencil being sharpened. Then she washed and scrubbed my feet, and put lotion on them. Now my feet feel

shiny and new, and I feel younger. I wonder if that's how snakes feel when they molt.

# Bob Durr

## Damn the Gods of Greece

Damn the Gods of Greece  
Good businessmen,  
For what they give they get  
Back ten times ten  
And not in gold, but lives of men.  
But what they give is often  
Finer yet  
Than any price they ever hope  
To get.

So bless them for their  
Gifts in carpe diem sin,  
But damn the gods of Greece  
Again  
For toying with the lives of men.

## Galileo

Galileo, in the cold cathedral,  
Timing with his pulse the swinging lamp,  
Knew more of God than all  
Who came to worship the golden icons  
of that place,  
Who killed him because his world was  
fully round  
And theirs but a place of sharp corners  
And an endless fall.

# Elizabeth Cameron

## Letters

Olivia still had her red hair, although dyed, when I met her. I would have been nine or ten. Her flesh was just losing its suppleness; she hadn't yet married her third husband. On cold mornings after we let the horses out she would press my hands up under her shirt, beneath the warm bulk of her breasts. It sounds strange, but the fleshy heat of the skin there, just beginning to droop and fold, was comforting. She told me that in Montana (on the sheep farm with her first husband, the father of her daughters) they would stand around talking with their hands nestled just inside the hind legs of their horses, where the hair lay thin and the heat of their groins spread. "It's the warmest place on their bodies," she said. She also said just standing there you could see the stars stretching out all around, and they whorled out like you were at the very center of their valley. I imagined the sharp division of the air between the crackling heat of the fire and the cold, cold night pressing in.

She was a different creature, coming from a long line of women—the first of four daughters,

the mother of two more. She had one granddaughter with exquisite little fingers and breath and milky skin, who died a few days after her birth. Looking back on it, I might say that this was the point at which Olivia changed. She married, left the stable, moved to a different part of town. I saw her through her window, years later—she was trimming and ornamenting the Christmas tree, and her hair had gone all silver.

And the second period of our friendship began. She saw me through the window that day, and over the subsequent dinners and beers she began connecting all the myriad little, shining points she had given me almost carelessly, here and there, during the course of our old acquaintance at the stable. All these things—her first husband, Montana, the children and dogs and birds she had raised, her trips to New York art galleries and the mink coat she had owned and the things she had learned about sex as an art—all these grew out of and swirled around this long, great love affair she had had with Bruce, her first husband's brother. Bruce, who sent her a tape in which he laughed and howled like a wolf—and her lips compressed and her hand on the wheel of the car trembled as we listened to it. No one, she told me, had ever heard this before.

I was probably eighteen then, and I embarked on a journey I told no one about. We had fallen into the habit of weekly dinners, and one night as I was lingering at the door she sat me down and asked for, as she called it, a huge favor. “It would be a lot of work,” she said. “It might be hard.” I must have had some idea as to what she wanted—and I was excited. She gave me boxes of letters and tapes to organize into a pristine record of their affair—one of his, which she had kept, and one of hers, which he had sent back. She cried as she spoke, this aging woman, gathering bulk and wrinkles about her, tilting her head to the side and catching tears as they formed with the tip of her pinky. I recalled the times I had seen her express emotion: once, brandishing a long clawed rake at a horse who ran madly, eye-whites reeling and flaring, and would not go in his stall; once, standing on the steps outside the tack room with a fellow rider, whispering and crying about a fight she had had with Kurt (the third husband) just before the wedding; once, drawing up tower-like beside the groceries she had bought for our dinner when I told her I couldn’t stay long. Each time I had pretended not to see. Now I had to express some sort of sympathy under the gaze of her unfathomable and yet very simple

misery. But still, I was excited. I *wanted* to sift through these musty sexual intrigues and get to know the straight heart of someone.

The letters, as I saw, were a long and snarled prelude to a life together that Bruce simply would not, in the end, come to. They waited for months and long years; they divorced their spouses; they planned his move to Montana; there were plans to be made still, and loose ends to tie up, and delays became despair, and, quite simply and inevitably, he never came.

What did she say to me that day when she saw me through the window and invited me in? How were things, I wanted to know. How were things with Kurt? I had never seen them together, married. She showed me the slanted, attic-like upstairs where she kept her art studio and slept. Kurt's bedroom was downstairs. Didn't she want something more, I wanted to know. She described the calm progression of days, the routine of a husband and wife moving quietly around each other. "I have had my great, big, earth-shaking love," she said. "And I never want anything like it again. I'm content now."

(And then, later, sitting in the booth of a Mexican restaurant, after I had returned the

letters: “I’m still in here,” she told me. “I’m ready. I’m just waiting.”)

# John Duval

## Photo Circa 1969

I have a photograph of me when I  
Was ten. A blur between door frames  
Holding a cat. I see mud splatters  
So it must have rained.  
I'm blurring and the cat is frantic.  
He must have sensed the camera  
And tried to hold me still. That cat  
Could never understand when I was ten  
And photographed that I was blurred.  
Often people see this rush and say  
Oh a kitty, or darling cat. I'm so far gone  
In concrete steps they're only sure of my  
Bad eyes and point out that nearsighted children  
Are often hard to see. I started sporting  
Glasses next time I was photographed. Same cat  
Dug into my knees. I blurred so bad  
The lenses streaked odd little windows.  
My aunts thought I was a real blind  
Blur by age twelve and traveled down to see  
For themselves. I remember glinting down those  
Steps as someone's shutter closed in reflex.  
I think they were surprised and pretended  
Not to notice until I unfocused against  
Their textured kisses.

# Colter Cruthirds

## Sidekick

It was hot like black vinyl in August. Hank passed me a pear from the ice-chest and opened himself a beer. We'd been at the creek all day, mostly because we had nothing better to do.

"It's like this—" Hank said. He always said that. 'It's like this,' he would say—or: 'here's how it is,' like he was some sort of authority on something.

"It's like this," he said. "Kids like that are destined to do good. Jennifer whats-her-name—that Asian girl."<sup>6</sup>

"Nguyen." The pear was cold. I bit into it. It was sweet and soft, like a ripe persimmon.

"Yeah. Jennifer Nguyen. Class president—never missed a day of school in twelve years. Her destiny is all sewn up." He took a big drink and dug his feet into the sand. "She'll go to college, marry the right guy, spawn some sort of freakish super-kids—that kind of shit."

A car sped by, heading north. The echo under the bridge sounded like a banshee playing a bass drum. I had a hangover.

“Five years from now, she’ll be ordering marble counter-tops for her kitchen and taking scuba lessons. We won’t be doing shit.”

“You never know.”

“It’s like this,” Hank said. “We’re never going to be astronauts. It’s just beyond the fucking realm of possibilities for us.”

“I don’t want to be an astronaut.” I said, though I admit I’d never considered being that far away from home.

“Don’t sidestep the issue. It doesn’t matter what you want—you’ll never be a goddamn astronaut.” He repeated this, but slowly—like how he talks to his grandma. “You will never be an astronaut, Paul.”

I didn’t want to respond. I took another bite of the pear and wiped some sand off my knee.

“You know what I mean.” he said. “Right?” He stood up and kicked at the sand, stretched his arms behind his back. “I’m just saying that some people have it easy.”

I pulled my baseball cap down and laid down. It’s hard to swallow when you’re on your back—but by all counts, it was a damn fine pear.

# Author Information

Tom Bennett received a John and Renee Grisham fellowship and is an MFA candidate in Fiction at The University of Mississippi. Born and raised in western Pennsylvania, he graduated from Bowdoin College and the Penn State School of Law. Tom's short stories have been published in *Twisted Tongue*, *River Walk Journal*, and *Bewildering Stories*. He is a recipient of a 2007 Culver Short Fiction Prize.

Elizabeth Cameron was born and raised on the Oregon coast. She is currently in the MFA program at the University of Memphis. She has worked a variety of unrelated jobs, including pizza-making, book-shelving, and detailing the life of the Giant Pacific Octopus for tourists at the Seaside Aquarium.

Colter Cruthirds lives with his family in South Mississippi. He teaches English at the University by day, and manages the UPS station by night. His work has appeared in *Product Magazine*, *Dew on the Kudzu*, *The Cathead Biscuit Review*, and others.

Bob Durr holds a Master of Arts in English from Mississippi State University. He tends his garden and has poetic thoughts near Starkville, Mississippi.

John Duval is a graduate of The University of Mississippi. He plies his trade and writes in and around Jackson, Mississippi.