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An Interview with Sandra Gilbert

by: Josh Cembellin & Samantha Lê

We sat down one afternoon to speak with Sandra M. Gilbert about her semester as Lurie Distinguished Visiting Writer at San Jose State University. Professor Gilbert was very warm. She invited us into her office, where we noticed that her only personal belongings were a few books resting on a large wooden shelf. Despite the lack of embellishments, Professor Gilbert decorated the room with her enthusiasm, optimism... and a Diet Coke.

Josh Cembellin: What was your motivation for accepting the Lurie Position?

Sandra Gilbert: That's easy! I retired from teaching at Davis three or four years ago, and what I miss the most is teaching verse writing workshops, both undergraduate and graduate ones. Especially graduate ones where you get people who really care about their writing and are devoted to learning more about their craft and trying a range of experiments.

Samantha Lê: Are the classes usually the same, or are they always different for you every time?

SG: Every class is different. The dynamics of every group are different. It depends on the individuals in the group, and I can't predict from year to year and group to group. That's what makes it interesting, too. And it's very interesting for me because when I give people, what I see a number of you call prompts—I guess that's a word that's in a lot of use now, but I used to call exercises or poetry ideas—I often do some of that stuff myself.

JC: What are you most looking forward to during your time at SJSU?

SG: Well, I would have to say all my classes. My other class, Topics in Women's Literary History, surprisingly, because it is a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, struck me as very interesting and fun. So I'm very excited about that because I get to teach several books that I co-edited with

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TOP 10

REASONS TO DATE OUTSIDE THE LITERARY DISCIPLINES

by: *Vince Bergado*

10. Other people might find your Shakespearean pickup lines interesting.
9. You won't be exposed in a workshop for that drunken one night stand.
8. You might find someone who prefers talking to you over reading a book.
7. They will forgive you for liking Dan Brown and Harry Potter.
6. Your habit of reading books (any books) will be considered interesting and quaint.
5. Differing opinions on Post-modernism can be a deal-breaker.
4. You can teach them proper use of object case pronouns, and they can teach you the proper application of the information found in Cosmo and Maxim.
3. It's not like you have to worry about gold diggers.
2. They won't wonder why you have not published yet.
1. Nowhere to go but up – make your mom proud!

An Interview with Sandra Gilbert

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Susan Gubar; but I've never actually taught the theory book, so I'm interested in that. However, I would be less than honest if I didn't say that I'm most excited about the poets.

JC: Is there anything that you would like to take from your experience at SJSU?

SG: I think what I take away from all my experiences teaching is that I learn a lot. I always learn. I hope I learn new strategies as a teacher, but I learn from students. I learn the ideas that my students have and from teaching different texts in different ways. Also, I learn how to read new poems and new stories in surprising fashions.

SL: Do you teach fiction as well or always poetry?

SG: I have taught fiction, but it's been a long time. And I certainly would not feel as competent to teach fiction as I do to teach poetry. Something I've never taught, which is what I actually write a lot now, is non-fiction, "memoiristic" prose. At Davis, for example, we only just started having a specialist in creative non-fiction. I've never taught it, but I would be interested. Certainly, when I was teaching at Princeton where there was no graduate verse writing program, or creative writing, but there was a very rich and amazing undergraduate program, but I don't think there was any creative non-fiction.

SL: But that's very popular now. Everybody's going to that genre.

SG: It's so popular now. I know, that's something that, one of these days, I'll hope somebody will want me to teach. I know people who show me manuscripts that they would like my views of. And I would have to say that even though I write it, I would need to learn how to teach it. Because, since I've never done it, I don't know what works best with students. It would be challenging, but it would be interesting.

JC: Are there any particular authors, or memoirists, that you like?

SG: Oh, that's too hard. Impossible! I mean there are so many amazing memoirists—certainly Nancy Meyers, who writes a lot about disability, for example. You know, there are so many people. There was that Joan Didion book *The Year of Magical Thinking* that was on the top of the Best Seller's list for a long time. Every issue of the Times Book Review has another interesting set of memoirs that they blueprint. It almost gets to be too competitive a form.

One of my favorite creative non-fiction writers is Susan Griffin. She's wonderful, marvelous; she's got an uncanny way; she's a poet, but she's also a writer of creative non-fiction. And she's wonderful at incorporating personal memories and autobiographical material with meditative ideas and reportage; and that's hard to do. I note how hard it is to do, and that's why I would approach teaching such a course with some trepidation, because I would not know yet how to teach people to do it. I'm still trying to teach myself!

JC: In the graduate poetry workshop, you're focusing on the "Estrangement and the Art of Poetry." How did you come up with this concept and what makes it a successful approach?

An Interview with Sandra Gilbert

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SG: Well let's hope it's a successful approach. I taught that course before at Davis with different texts. I added a new mix of texts and some new prompts. But I actually think that poetry is a way of defamiliarizing or estranging the world. I actually think that poetry is looking at everything in a new way, as if you were seeing it, not for the first time necessarily, but from a strange perspective, like in that poem by Craig Raine, "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." Looking at the world with Martian eyes or in some strange way lets you really have a fresh sense. I think the most important thing is to get people to flee from clichés.

JC: Since women's literature classes are not often offered at SJSU, what are some important ideas you hope that your students will take away from your class?

SG: I can't believe that! Maybe you shouldn't quote me, but I can't believe that in 2009 there aren't more courses. I have met a couple of people in the English Department who have said that they would like to teach those courses. The most important idea that I want people to take away...two major ideas: one is that there are female literary traditions; there are literary traditions that are shaped by women as a gendered group. But moreover, there are ways in which writing by both men and women are shaped and reflected as we would expect: by gender identity. And it's just so important, and it seems to be now so, not obvious, but important. That's what I want people to take away.

There was a moment in the '70s and '80s when everybody was doing that and establishing Women's Studies programs and Gender Studies programs, and now there are even Masculinity programs. And if that moment went by, then the energy probably would have lapsed.

JC: How would you compare the Bay Area to other locations in which you've taught and lived?

SG: Since the Bay Area is my favorite part of the world other than Paris and Florence, I would say it's the nicest place to teach! There is a difference. There was always a difference between—I would say this particularly about undergraduate poets—my undergraduate poets at Princeton and my undergraduate poets at Davis. Graduate students are more sophisticated. But my California students were more free and imaginative. My Princeton students were more uptight. It was very hard to get them to think metaphorically. So some of the things I did with this estrangement course I may actually have begun thinking about while I was at Princeton, because

they were very good at doing strict forms. They were better than my California students at writing sonnets, and they got very upset if I didn't assign sonnets and villanelles. I think that the general kind of student who goes to Princeton is maybe more "Sciencey" or more quantitative. It was hard to get them to loosen up.

SL: Do you think it's a cultural difference between the schools or a result of their location, such as a difference between East Coast and West Coast writers?

SG: I thought of it as an East Coast, West Coast difference. You also could say it's an Ivy League difference, but I'm not sure. I taught at Indiana, and it's true that the Indiana students are more like the California students—more good at being imaginative, and less good at uptight, strict, formal kinds of writing. I prefer to start working with imaginative students and then get them to learn how to write strict forms. It took me a long time to realize at Princeton what I had to do to get kids who weren't used to thinking in a visionary or metaphorical way to think like that. It was an interesting challenge.

SL: Do you think poetry can be taught?

SG: Yes. I think there has to be some innate passion for poetic thinking. But I think it's possible to, especially in a workshop where there are a lot of people collaboratively thinking about their art, get people to imagine new ways of writing and stretch themselves creatively. I mean if there's nothing there then there's no interest in it. But people who take a workshop must have some interest, and there must be something to be taught. I hope it can be; otherwise what am I doing?

SG: You could also make the argument that many, many people are potentially poets who don't even know they are. And then of course, there might be people who think they're poets...but I like to be very optimistic about the possibilities for what people can learn. I have a body of material to teach in the women's lit course. There are actual, not just ideas, but facts, that I can transmit. I don't think that's so much true in a verse writing seminar. I think there's something that people can get out of it, something people can gain, something that I gain. And if I can gain then other people can gain, to put it very narcissistically!

Sandra M. Gilbert is the author of seven collections of poetry, a memoir, an anthology of elegies, along with a number of critical works and essays. For a complete biography and list of publications, please visit: www.sandramgilbert.com

Afternoon

by: *Samantha Lê*

on the phone with you
a door creaks

in the room of your life
you are alone
receiving
sad ghosts of our own

are you tired yet of copper-tasting
doubts
never been nicked
like a bloody hangnail
never been caked
by a wild
woman
snailing her tongue down
the depths of your throat
like a leviathan

Coming Home

by: *Ninos Oshaana*

In my country
we gargle blood
from silver nozzles
guzzle like frenzied
hummingbirds
blind ravenous
infants.

We pink plush
graze lush
lawns praise
laws and burgers
and diamonds
and murders.

I have to tell
you that I'm losing
my mind
like a pair of keys
like a pair of legs.

It's just
war.
Don't cry.
I will be home soon.
Like an Astronaut.
Like a bomb.

Climbing Upward and Looking Back into California's Mountaineering History

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN ARNOLD

by: *Vincent Bergado*

Dan Arnold, a Spring 08 graduate of the SJSU MFA, will soon have his nonfiction book, *Early Days in the Range of Light*, published by Counterpoint Press. Although he published fiction in *ZYZZYVA* as a student, he changed his primary track to follow his passion for the great peaks of the Sierra and the mountaineering heritage of California. Slated for release this fall, the book chronicles the historical climbs of fifteen awe-inspiring summits in the state's largest range, and the author's effort to retrace those ascents. The result is incisive prose and a historical perspective that explores the the mountain adventurer spirit.

VB: What got you started on the path to writing *Early Days in the Range of Light*?

DA: It was a long, gradual process. As I spent an increasing amount of time in the Sierra, I heard more and more about the stories of the first mountaineers. These stories were amazing, but they were always fragmentary—a few sentences here, a footnote there. It surprised me that no one had written a full account of the mountaineering history of this era. As I started to think about writing that kind of book myself, it became clear to me that I did not want to just sit on the sidelines and tell strictly third-person history. Right from the beginning, I wanted to be more involved and see for myself what climbing at that time would have been like.

VB: What was the most difficult stage in the genesis of the book?

DA: From a craft perspective, the most difficult decision was always how present I—as a first person narrator—should be in the book. Striking the right balance was hard. Even though I wanted to be involved, I didn't want to get in the way of the men and women I was following. I wanted their stories to be the primary focus. At the same time, it seemed to me that my perspective and the stories from my own adventures doing the old climbs would provide the entryway into the era for a modern reader. I suppose I wanted to be a guide, to use an obvious climbing metaphor. I wanted the essential relationship to be between the reader, the mountains and the old climbers, with me there to offer perspective, tell stories and help the journey make narrative sense.

VB: How long was the entire research and writing process?

DA: Start-to-finish, *Early Days* took me four years, though if you include the time I spent in Yosemite and the Sierra before I started to think about the book, the research time would stretch back much longer. I have an enormous box of notes from all the time I spent in manuscript libraries reading letters and journals and old notebooks. Only a fraction of that material actually appears in the book, though all of it was relevant in terms of shaping my ideas about the place and time. I think most nonfiction books are probably like that—a colossal



Searching for Religion in Iced Tea

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON THE ORDINARY

by: *Samantha Lê*

Concrete – This morning, through the moon roof of my car, the sky hung heavy, mirroring the grayness of the concrete freeways. Caught in the middle world where gods won't tread, flattened between dense, gray fog from above and hard, gray roads below; I looked for the first time at the landscape of my world. It is one made up of man's gray ambition. Hard edges. Right angles. Concrete structures and walls stood silent; cities and roadways stretched farther east than my eyes could see.

Driving through the city, I was struck by the impermanent nature of this fabricated world constructed from concrete and held together by re-bar. Buildings that cannot be moved suddenly sprouted limbs before my eyes. From the malleable dirt, structures rose and fell, rebuilding themselves from the carcass of what came before, always with indifference toward the past. Freeways grew longer and wider while I slept. Concrete dried and hardened inside my chest.

Before skyscrapers, the clouds floated closer to our heads. Before freeways, we were embraced in the arms of mountains and nurtured by the tongues of rivers. But with concrete, we have created monsters whose tentacles pierce the sky and dig through the earth. They reach into the very soul of who we are. These are monsters we can no longer control. And one gray day, much like today, when we find ourselves pressed tightly between the dense gray sky and the impenetrable gray concrete, when we are surrendering our souls at the feet of these monsters, the roads, buildings, freeways and monuments will remain indifferent to our self-inflicted demise. Concrete knows that it will endure long after we decay.

Crabbing

by: *D.E. Kern*

Memories of Bill's boat come with prompting, return trips to Barnegat Bay. They are thin as water crust, coating where brine meets blue, smudged pictures, blurred as edges of clouds.

We worked lines over starboard, pulled onion sandwiches from the well, bobbed like saltwater apples until our skin smelled of sea. Our skipper's windswept tuft of hair rose like a crown on some broad-winged gull, a species built for gliding the shore fronting Farragut's namesake school, a training ground for boys charged with the task of mastering jib and main. He wheeled past their craft with Ahab's precision, sailed by something other than sight, and taught maritime lessons in a language of raised eyebrows, pointed fingers, and sideways glances, saving words for his first mate Hap, a man defined by his emotions.

Our captain shared Melville's religion until meeting the holy man, a fresh-water fish uneasy with sand between his toes. But it was different for me on these waters, where the Atlantic met the Toms, and I smiled as the wind washed like a swell over my 5-year-old face.

Celtic Crusade

by: *K.M. Rice*

The Pagan Prince among you stands
Yet him you do not see. You point
With your stigmata hands, baying
Witchcraft, Darkness and Sorcery.
As the hart you track with hunting bands
He yearns for green and to be free.

Condemn away with cloistered cross
For he will find no meaning there
Where steeples climb in place of trees
And chiming bells do bird songs drown.
He knows what praying priests have lost
And why the kneeling nuns do frown.

For he believes in beauty bold,
In all the wonders bounty gives
Receiving lips that lust for life
And sees divine in all the wild,
Not only in faerie light. Behold
A bliss as pure as laughter of a child.



Climbing Upward and Looking Back into California's Mountaineering History

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background of research with only a small amount showing through in the text itself.

VB: Was it hard to narrow the information from California's history and make it dovetail with your own thoughts and experiences?

DA: In each chapter, I tried to pick one specific intersection between the historical climb and my own experience to serve as the thematic bridge that held the chapter together. So, for example, in Chapter 3, it was the philosophical relationship between science and adventure (many of the early mountaineers were geologists); in Chapter 7, it was environmentalism and wilderness.

VB: You're very agile and precise with the imagery. Did you ever find yourself struggling with new ways to talk about or describe the mountains? Did it ever feel like it was too much for words?

DA: All the time. I spent a lot of hours staring at my mental images of the Sierra and searching for phrases that captured both the visual appearance of the mountains and the experience of climbing them. I wanted—perhaps almost to a fault—to avoid scenic clichés, because I felt that a reader wouldn't really see the mountains unless the words were fresh and stimulated the imagination. Mentally, I often bumped up against catch-phrases, words like "indescribable" or "beyond words," and I tried to use them as self-motivation.

VB: How did you document your adventures? Was this harder to do when you were very limited by your gear?

DA: For nearly all of the climbs I had a small notebook with me, and I would write in it at least once a day. Each notebook became completely invaluable when I sat down to work on that chapter. I have a pretty good

memory, but still, there were small, wonderful details that I wrote in the journals but had forgotten. And reading through my notebooks would take me back to the mountains in a way that simply sitting there and thinking about them didn't.

VB: Do you have a specific writing routine when you are at home?

DA: I try to write every day that I'm not away climbing, even if it's only for an hour. I find that writing consistently makes it much easier to get started each day and makes me more productive. Ideally, I get up and start to work first thing, because that's when my head is clearest, and write for four to six hours.

VB: Is there a lesson from early in your exploration of writing or something from the workshop that continues to resonate with you?

DA: Probably the most valuable lesson I learned from the workshop process was the importance of taking the time to make the words right. I write really slowly. If I can get a good paragraph out of an hour or two, I'm usually pleased. I hope someday I'm a little faster, but right now that's what it takes for me to make good prose.

VB: Finally, how did you market your manuscript? Any words of advice?

DA: I had a pretty unpleasant relationship with an agent that lasted for about a year and a half. The experience taught me that if things don't seem right, and lines of communication aren't open, it's probably best to move on.

Dan Arnold has also been the editor of the Stanford Alpine Journal, and is currently working on a collection of short stories.



Frigid No More

by: *Nikolina Kulidzan*

SSG Ford can hang a boot up your ass, don't you worry.
BDUs button up because the zippers are too noisy,
On one occasion, a Captain explained to me.
Away from authority SSG laughed and disagreed:
It's because they equip soldiers with sewing kits.
If the enemy can hear you zipping up your pants,
Perhaps, you are already in a pretty deep shit.
Not quite as controversial are the Class B's
But being 65 percent polyester, they can get itchy.
Tight in the shoulders, however, they respond
Promptly and obediently to any change of volume in the
upper body.
Lifting, for a moment, my eyes from a book,
I noticed these frequent metamorphoses.

I used to know all there was to know about Wednesday nights
at the library.
They were quiet. Maybe there was actually an intelligent show
on TV.
Sitting on the floor, shelves sky over me,
Converging into a crease, a roof, shelter walls.
If it wasn't for all the words arranged in a particular order,
And feelings carved into material existence,
If it wasn't for the rustle of my thoughts turning the pages,
Being frigid would be a much bigger curse.

I didn't meet the Sergeant in the library.
After we had sex for the first time, he pronounced me a
sovereign country.
The rest came naturally:
We continued sliding down the path of what people would
commonly refer to as
An unsuitable relationship.
Dropping bombs on the White-City was as much about
peacekeeping
As my soundless unbuttoning of his BDUs is about loving.

But this is not about revenge.
If breaking one GI heart could recover Serbian industry,
I'd go for it. However, I doubt the possibility.
The Sergeant is actually dear to me. He didn't quite repair the
destroyed bridges,
But he rescued me from frigidity. Serbia should be grateful.
He's fully dedicated to making me happy.
As soon as I asked, he stopped calling me sweetheart and honey,
He hinted at the possibility of reading a book in its entirety,
He even promised to be a Human Rights activist for Halloween
If it would only please me.

Watching the image in the mirror lick her fang, I can't help
smiling at the irony:
Him becoming the colony of the country he personally granted
its sovereignty.

My Back Pages

LIT'S 5-LETTER DIRTY WORD – A CASE OF LANGUAGE RUN AMUCK

by: D.E. Kern

I write short. I specialize in poetry and brief nonfiction, namely columns. Sure, I take on longer projects here and there—I push myself past 750 words. But the short stuff has paid the bills for 15 years.

When you and your editor count words, you learn to appreciate precise language. Nouns and verbs are gold. Everything else is stainless steel at best.

I get perturbed when people supplement our rich language with made-up terms—such as playdate, greenspace, Vanagon—and when words that have served us perfectly well for decades suddenly have their definition, well, redefined.

Don't worry; this isn't the column where some old, white guy kvetches about variations in the use of the word bad or fly. My goal here is not to cut the knees out from under the hip-hop industry. Rather, my concern is with a word bantered around English departments under false pretenses—genre.

In the past, genre referred to a loose set of criteria used to classify compositions. In literature, the word described both the various disciplines of writing—fiction, nonfiction, poetry—and a set of categories assigned according to content—romance, mystery, western, coming-of-age tale, etc. Now, it's a catch-all term for poor, hackneyed, or mass-produced writing—the bibliophiles' invective.

Nuggets of truth rest at the heart of every cliché, and I'm sure most of us can pair an author with a mangled, murdered, and buried genre. There's Danielle Steel

and the romance; Tom Clancy and the espionage thriller; John Grisham and the courtroom drama; Michael Crichton and the biological nightmare scenario. But what of Stephen King and his sci-fi/horror/thrillers? His novella *The Body*—which inspired the movie "Stand by Me"—didn't keep me awake at night. Rather, it's a sweet story about childhood friends and their loss of innocence. Along with *The Green Mile* serial novel, it knocks the notion of King living in a rut right out of the ballpark.

Come to think of it, what's the problem with a narrow focus? I don't know of too many people who knock J.R.R. Tolkien and Ray Bradbury for being fantasy and science fiction authors. And what of James Michener? Didn't he do for the Dickensian-sized epic focused on a particular portion of the American landscape (see Hawaii, Chesapeake, Texas, and Alaska) what Grisham did for the courtroom? I guess it depends on who you ask.

Art cannot exist as an entity unto itself, residing in a place where it's set on a pedestal for the sake of aesthetics. Instead, literature, music, and visual communication must be brought into the real world where they're subject to criticism. But, given that need, it would be nice if we could be kind and honest with one another. There's a time and place for labeling bad writing as bad writing. Altering the language in order to give the literati its own dirty little word is just bad form.





Eds Sophisticated

by: Josh Cembellin

Eds drain through vent like water
strained from spaghetti.
So warm up there, he claim.
Watching them sleep again.
So foreign now this house be
with second level and new blue-
print, boys' room a closet.
Dark that closet be, don't go down there
lest you care to see him, say he.
That closet door open
where their heads used to be.
Stairs go up to heaven.
Heaven down to Hell.
Confused Eds wander.
He ain't here by choice, by gosh.
Think he alive, think he lost.
Wonder why familiar faces dwell
in unfamiliar place, wonder why
mirror don't show his face.
Fire not warm, ice not cold.
Bourbon be wet paint.
Eds in wet paint drown,
imagine swallow all that paint.
Imagine sifting through vent holes.
You see Eds tonight you
see God. You see Eds tonight
Devil you see smoking.
Leaves fall in summer
in winter flowers grow.
It matter not since Eds can't paint it.
And if you can't paint it
you can't live it, say Eds.
Eds be sophisticated so.

That Day in the Dark

"REMEMBERING NOVEMBER 5, 2004"

by: Teri Carter

With our collective euphoria over President Obama's win this past November, I still recall a very different day, just four years ago. We all woke on the morning of November 5, 2004 and as Yogi Berra would say, it was *déjà vu* all over again. George W. Bush had already been our President for four years and it was a disaster. Remember how there was no chance – no way! – he could win again?

He did.

And for me, this is how the day went down.

The morning after the election, I woke in the dark at six o'clock with a headache. I turned on the television and channel-surfed the news: CNN, Fox, MSNBC.

There remained no declared winner.

In the kitchen, I flipped the switch for the nightlight next to the sink, opting for minimal light. I heated a cup of water in the microwave and grabbed two packets of tea from a cardboard box. The sunflower-yellow tea bags read: "A single cup of Tazo Calm has been known to have the same effect as sitting for 45 minutes in a mountain meadow on a sunny day with your shoes off."

Maybe it was a sign.

My husband, who had been working in China and Japan for two weeks, called from his Tokyo hotel. "Any results yet?" he asked.

I told him no, but that it did not look good for our guy.

"The Japanese are convinced Bush won't be re-elected," he said. "They think we Americans know we made a mistake the first time and now we're going to fix it. I had dinner last night with some locals. They can't believe we'd do this again. It scares them to death that America is the only superpower left. Who's going to keep us from doing whatever we want?"

THE TV NEWS: A journalist at Le Matin of Switzerland said today, "It is now time to understand that George W. Bush was not a four-year aberration but represents the new America. They wanted him? Well, they got him. This time if the sky falls on their heads, they will have no one to blame but themselves."

Around 10 a.m., my neighbor, Gayle, stopped by. She had a skip in her step.

"I'm hoping for Bush," she said, waving crossed fingers in the air.

Gayle is a single mother and born-again Christian, a kind and generous woman who has earned her living cleaning houses for twenty years. She and her pre-teen

That Day in the Dark

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daughter both had multiple surgeries in the last two years, and they do not have adequate health insurance. She recently told me that their medical bills had surpassed \$300,000.

“I don’t know much about George Bush’s politics,” Gayle said. “But I completely agree with his core values and good moral character. You may not like his politics, but you have to admit: he sure believes in family.”

THE TV NEWS: The Democrats were focused on lowering health care costs and providing affordable coverage as opposed to issuing tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans and handouts for pharmaceutical companies.

My friend, Sue, called from Colorado. She was exhausted, she said. Just exhausted! Her family was settling into their new, multimillion-dollar, 8,000 square-foot homes in the mountains, a home where she would soon be throwing parties for top military brass. They had recently sold their business – a company that built state-of-the-art shooting ranges for law enforcement and the military. Her husband’s college roommate was a senior White House official. The war in Iraq had made them wealthy.

“At least now, we’ll be able to finish the job in Iraq,” she said. “And that’s what needs to be done. We ought to just go over there and blow those camel-jockeys off the face of the earth. They’re all terrorists—nothing but a bunch of cave rats.”

THE TV NEWS: The administration is preparing to ask Congress for up to \$75 billion more to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with other anti-terror operations. The figure indicates that the war’s costs are far exceeding expectations laid out early this year.

Danielle, a twenty-two year old college student and first-time voter, is from New York. She was the only person I knew who was still undecided on Election Day.

“I made up my mind as I was walking into the booth,” she said. “I felt like I had to vote because everybody was voting, but I didn’t really understand any of that issue stuff. Except for Iraq. I’m definitely worried about those Iraqis, aren’t you? Don’t laugh, but in the end it came down to baseball. I love the Yankees and Kerry’s from Boston—I can’t vote for a Red Sox fan!”

THE TV NEWS: Bush’s victory was not based on his demonstrated competence in office or on a litany of perceived

successes. For all the talk about values, the president ran a campaign that appealed, above all, to voters’ fears and prejudices. He said, essentially, to be very afraid of those who may have thoughts and beliefs and values that differ from your own.

My sister, Michele, called next. She gets a kick out of getting under my skin. Michele lives in a small town in southern Illinois. Her husband, Dan, is a prison guard. Dan spends eight hours a day sitting in a tower, listening to talk radio and staring down at a yard of inmates surrounded by razor wire.

“You know I’m not all that political,” she said. “Of course, Dan voted for Bush. Gun control, gay marriage and all that. When we were watching the returns last night I asked him why California always goes Democrat, and he said, ‘Because, Michele, that’s where all the fags live.’ The kids had fun voting at school, though. Trace’s second grade class even got ‘I Voted’ stickers. He was so excited when he got home; told me he voted for Bush because Kerry was a flip-flopper. Isn’t that hysterical?! That’s all he knows about these guys. Flip-flopper!”

Michele could barely contain her laughter.

She never did say if she voted.

THE TV NEWS: President Bush is one of the most talented dividers in American political history. He skillfully used anti-gay bigotry, the Bible, even war to divide Americans so as to conquer Kerry. Senior campaign advisor, Karl Rove, built a whole campaign around this point of view, casting Kerry as a “flip-flopper” and “out of the mainstream.”

It was in the afternoon when the final phone call came. Helen, a new friend and staunch conservative, gave her condolences – “Sorry your guy lost!” – but she closed with the following statement: “Somebody said, you thought I was a closet Democrat,” she said. “Let me promise you, I am not! I’m a Bush girl! Being an American all boils down to personal responsibility and hard work. Just finish high school and don’t get pregnant, it’s as simple as that. This is America. We’ve all got the same opportunities.”

THE TV NEWS: Kerry may or may not have met Bush at Yale, but he had met his kind before. At Kerry’s prep school, boys like Bush were known as regs – regular guys – the cool, sarcastic in-crowd that made awkward, eager-to-please boys like John Kerry feel low and left out. The regs were insular, stuck up and too sure of themselves to reach out to, or even see, the wider world.

That Day in the Dark

(continued from page 10)

By noon, Senator Kerry conceded.

President Bush gave his victory speech.

THE TV NEWS: In his acceptance speech, President Bush likened his win to having money in the bank. "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it. It's my style." Bush defended his tax cuts that favor the wealthy, contending that they have helped boost the economy for everyone. He said he would move ahead forcefully to carry out his agenda.

At six o'clock, it was dark again and more of Yogi Berra's words came to mind: "It was impossible to get a conversation going," he said. "Everybody was talking too much."

I stopped answering the phone and turned off the news.

Four more years.



We're in This Line

by: Erik Olson

"Here, this space looks good," said my father, a six-foot-four-inch yeti of a man with thin hair and thick glasses. I parked the Tacoma – he had bought it for Mom about two years earlier – and stepped onto the parking lot. It was time to get it over with.

We finally got to Costco about a half hour before it closed, with no dinner and an empty tank of gas. I muffled my thoughts: why don't my parents shop for more than one dinner at a time? Why do they spend so much money on convenience? Why are we buying a bed that does not yet have a place to go?

In the store we were greeted by fifty flat screen TVs. We pressed on. Dad scanned pallets for anything interesting while I honed in on the mattress set. After a few seconds he caught up.

"Is this the one?" he asked.

"Yeah."

A heavysset woman on the cusp of retirement dropped all her weight on one corner of a nearby

mattress and said, "Whoop! This one sags a bit!" I smiled at her.

"So it's \$350?" my father continued.

I glanced at the tag hanging above the display model. "No, it looks like it's normally \$500 but this has a rebate. So it ends up being \$450."

"She said it was going to be \$350," he said.

"Well then don't buy it. Just tell her, it's more than you thought it would be."

"She'll be disappointed that I didn't come home with her bed." He threw his hands up in resignation and sighed, the same sigh that always meant he was defeated and there was nothing he could do but go along with someone else's wishes. In reality, there were always options, but he could never be made to see them. "I don't know. I guess I'll just get it anyway." He left for the section of the store devoted to prepackaged dinners.

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We're in This Line

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The large woman had heard the whole exchange. We made eye-contact, and I said, "Parents."

"You'll be one too someday," she said with a wrinkly grin.

By this point, I was more than ready to leave.

I pushed the platform, newly encumbered with queen-sized box spring and mattress, over to some salads in plastic containers. "Which one did Mom want?" Dad asked.

"Beats me. Just get what looks good."

He piled a rotisserie chicken, a Greek salad, and some grapes on top of the mattress. We headed for the front of the store.

In line ahead of us was the same large woman as before. She saw us and said, "Go ahead of me. I can wait a while."

"Are you sure?" We had fewer items than she had, but I still was reluctant to line-hop.

"No, no, go ahead. My husband wanders through the store." We moved closer to the cash register, and I

smiled politely in her direction. "He has five months to live. Has cancer. He just wanders, and ..." she looked off in the distance, across the vast impersonal warehouse of wholesale goods. Her bespectacled eyes were not as cheerful as they had been earlier. "He wanders."

Her words had startled me into silence, and I couldn't make eye-contact anymore. I wanted to be there for her but I hoped she had nothing more to say.

Her husband slowly rolled a cart up to the checkout lines. He was maybe fifteen years her senior and clearly disoriented.

"Over here," she said. "We're in this line." She put the contents of their two carts together and stood with him, waiting by his side.

Dad noticed none of this. I put the smaller items on the conveyor belt while he fumbled through his wallet looking for a debit card.

"Well, Mom should like dinner tonight," he said.

"Yeah. She sure will."

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In the News

Evelyn A. So will be seeing her writing in *The Mutanabbi Street Starts Here Anthology* (Red Hen Press, 2009) and in an upcoming issue *Caesura*.

Let us know next time you find a class that includes a free trip back east: The staff of **Reed Magazine** was sent to the AWP conference in Chicago, thanks to a grant from Arts Council Silicon Valley. The conference took place from February 11-14, and MFAers **Teri Carter** and **Liz McDonald** were among those making the trip.

And speaking of *Reed Magazine*, **Samantha Lê's** "Blues Woman" will be published in the Spring 09 issue.