The dog ate my oven mitt

BY WAYNE WOOD

Sharon and I get home from work at different times and we often leave notes for each other on the kitchen counter.

Often these notes are about what we’re going to have for dinner or what the dogs have been up to. Here, I swear, was how one of them ended not long ago: “Zoe didn’t eat breakfast. She threw up thumb of oven mitt. Love, Sharon.”

Zoe, our 5-year-old greyhound-beagle mix who came to live with us about six months ago, is afraid of thunder and had had a storm-related freak-out the day before. Sharon and I had been away from home at the time and Zoe was so discombobulated that she had taken an oven mitt from the counter by the stove and eaten the thumb. Predictably, this do-it-yourself dog roughage didn’t stay down, and I’d have to say that Sharon’s chronicling of this canine digestive event made for one of my favorite kitchen counter notes of all time.

Some of our counter notes have been sad over the past year or so, because it has been a period of dog transition for us. Since last fall, both of our terrier mixes, Sugar and Stella, reached the point where the illnesses of old age had sapped their lives of pleasure, and we made the difficult decisions, a few months apart, to humanely end their lives. During that time of sickness and decline, the notes tended to deal with what kind of day our elderly dogs were having.

We’ve gone through the end-of-life process with a few pets now over the years, and it never gets easier. When it comes to the end, knowing you are doing the kind thing helps—but it still hurts to let a creature who has been such a part of your life go.

I’ve sometimes heard people who have just lost a beloved pet say that they will never get another one. The lifespans of dogs and

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This is the annual Summer Reading issue of House Organ, featuring the winners of the House Organ Writing Contest, as well as some Honorable Mentions. In fact, there was so much good writing that some Honorable Mentions will be printed in future issues of House Organ. Too much good writing is a nice problem to have.

The winner of the Poetry category is Jeff High of Cardiothoracic Surgery whose poem “The Alzheimer’s Patient” is a short story in verse about a caregiver, a patient and an old baseball glove.

The Nonfiction category winner is “Forever Twenty-What?” by Dana C. Smith of the Pharmacy at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital, a laugh-out-loud funny shopping trip with a fashion-conscious teenager and her bewildered aunt.

The Fiction winner is “Melting,” by Daniel Dorset of the Vanderbilt Institute of Chemical Biology. Even if you’re not a hockey fan, this story of coming to grips with the bumps of life will ring true.

There were 58 entries in the Writing Contest this year,—again presenting ample evidence that the Medical Center is full of writers walking around disguised as normal people. Thanks to everybody who entered and, on behalf of those whose work is published here, thanks for reading.
Another day, another patient,
Another dry report
Another twelve of drips and meds
And paperwork to sort.

So just who are you little man?
No eye contact, no smiles.
You simply sit there with a stare
That goes ten thousand miles.

And strange, he held a baseball glove
While sitting on his bed.
With well-worn stitch and tethered strands
And lettering faded red.

The sunlight through the blinds cast bars
Across his weathered face.
Locked inside an imprisoned mind
That knew not time or place.

I said “How do you feel today?”
My voice he clearly heard.
He looked at me then looked away
And would not speak a word.

His face was gray, his hair unkept
His eyes were troubled deep.
Memories of faces, doors, and names
Had long since gone to sleep.

No doubt that he could hear my words
Yet chose to ignore it.
But when I asked about the glove
He said, “My brother wore it.”

He did not know his age or name
Or what he was there for.
But spoke about a sandlot game
Long before the war.

As words poured out his face transformed
And light now filled his eyes.
His voice was firm, his smile was warm.
His shoulders twice their size.

It was a small town rivalry
The local pennant race.
The bottom of the ninth and he
Was stranded on third base.
Two batters had been at the plate
And watched the ball go by.
They swung too low or swung too late
With one more left to try.

The game was tied, the team was spent
The sun was falling late.
Then walking from the dugout went
His brother to the plate.

A quiet boy, tall and tan
Who rarely spoke a word.
Sized up the fellow on the mound
Then smiled at him on third.

The pitcher held up high his glove
He looked from side to side
He threw the pitch and then his brother
Just gave that ball a ride.

“It was his hit that won the game
But the moment when I scored
The team began to chant my name
The crowd began to roar.”

“My older brother simply smiled
For what we both had done.
But he was the real hero while
All I did was run.”

Three times more on that day
He told me this same story.
About his brother and a game
And long forgotten glory.

Each time when he was done he’d sink
Back deep into his mind.
All forgotten it was the only
Memory he could find.

That afternoon a man showed up
Who wore the Father’s collar.
And joyfully told me that my patient
Had been a priest and scholar.

“We called him Father Catch,” he said
And spoke with loving pride.
“For everywhere that he went
That glove was by his side.”

“From college days when he was
The envy of his peers.
And on his desk at Divinity School
Where he taught for many years.”

“In time he felt the call to go
And serve on distant shores.
It went with him to Africa where
He worked among the poor.”

“Then for years he quietly served
His heart and faith he’d follow.
A clinic in Bogota and
The slums of Sao Paulo.”

“He had an energy, a beaming smile,
And always had that glove.
He laughed, he prayed, and lived his life
With free unfailing love.”

“But then the years took their toll
And his health began to yield.
And so the brothers brought him back
And he left the mission field.”

“What he once was is all but gone
And few no longer know.
But every now and then his eyes
Will have that brilliant glow.”

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“He taught us all with such a passion
And raised our minds beyond.
And stirred our hearts to serve but now
Most of us are gone.”

When he was through I told about
The story of the game.
He said he’d never heard of it
Or knew the brother’s name.

The older brother he had been told
Was killed in the attack
Upon the sands of Utah beach
And never made it back.

“He never did talk much about
His brother or his home.
And everyone had always thought
The glove had been his own.”

The Father left, the workday passed,
The card swipe in the hall.
But I was simply at a loss
To understand it all.

It seemed his loves were long since gone
And life was in December,
But the perfect poetry of that day
Was what he still remembered.

All his life he made the choice
To forsake more earthly goals
This little man with the glove
Had touched ten thousand souls.

And all his life he had that glove
And yet had told no other
That this one thing he held so dear
Had always been his brother’s.

It haunted me to understand
How in spite of all the strife
He never failed to joyfully follow
The compass of his life.

Oh little man what held you up
Against the storms and thunder
That the ever changing tides of life
Could not wash you under?

How was it that you found the joy
To measure out your day?
Whatever made you so content
To be this jar of clay?

The next morning the room was clean.
He was no longer there.
I learned that he had been discharged
And gone to hospice care.

Three weeks more would come and go
And then late one day.
The Father came to tell me that
The old priest passed away.

He held that old tan baseball glove
And put it in my hand.
But from my face he clearly knew
I did not understand.

“I think he liked you very much,”
Was all that he did say.
Then he smiled and shook my hand
And turned and walked away.

And still I wondered at his life
And all he held so dear.
And as I grew to understand
One simple truth came clear.

He had no children, had no wife
And likely died alone.
But he had a hero all his life
One that brought him home.

Because of him I simply vowed
To live not just as taker.
But make a difference in a world
In need of difference-makers.

That other’s needs are not expense
And self should not hold sway.
But find joy in the present tense
And not some future day.

The glove sits on my mantel now
The leather cracked and plain
And friends ask who and what but I’m
Not sure I can explain.

I knew him only for a day
But I’m the better for it.
So when they ask I simply smile
And say, “My brother wore it.”

Jeff High, R.N., in the hallway of the 3rd floor OR.
They call this city “the graveyard,” a place to where former hockey stars who are past their prime get traded, where their once-mighty flame fizzes out in a few apathetic paragraphs in the back of the sports section. Even worse, this is where any pretensions to legendary status are beaten down to nothing with every successive loss.

I used to live my dream. I was the starting goalie for the team of the city I grew up in, the Thunder Bay Mounties, and I backstopped us all the way to the Cup. I did it twice more in four years, and throughout that time my name was on the lips of every man, woman, and child in Canada. But after we fizzled out in the first round of the playoffs the season after our third Cup win, the owner lost his nerve and fired the GM and coaching staff. Before I knew it I was packing my bags for the American Southwest.

I will never be able to fully purge the feeling that firmly lodged itself in the deepest part of my gut when I heard I had been traded. The new GM called a meeting on his first day on the job, and he gave a few other players their marching orders first: Gradicek, former rookie of the year who had three consecutive hundred-point seasons, went to California. Vadislav, a defensemen whose hits sent a shockwave rolling across the entire span of the glass, went to the expansion team in the American north. Hollingvist, the playmaker who had set up so many great goals and was almost psychic with his no-look passes, went to New England. They all left in silence, exchanging glances that said a thousand goodbyes and best wishes, and shared in a split second the memories, heartbreaks, and triumphs that, in a world free of the salary-dumping owners and impatient GMs, would keep teams like ours united until the players themselves knew it was time to yield to the next generation.

I was watching the doorway through which they left when my name was called. It was such a shock to hear my name that I didn’t even acknowledge it at first. I was still staring at the door, try-
ing to blink away the tears that kept coming as I imagined my former teammates, all in their thirties, fading away into anonymity, our rungs on the Cup moving up and up through the years and finally being taken off as teams replaced us. No place in the Hall, no retired jerseys fluttering in the arena rafters, our chances at immortality all but ruined because we were being traded away to obscurity at our primes. The shock only intensified when my name was immediately followed by “you’re being traded to the Dust Devils.” That was it from Levine, the bastard. No “thanks for the Cups,” no “thanks for breaking all those records,” no “thanks for taking a pay cut that season so we could bring in Tredeaux.” Just the news that I was being traded, like livestock. Players groaned in sympathy. It came to me in a rush; in one week my wife would have to quit her job that she’d had for ten years, my kids would have to leave their friends and their safe, successful schools, and we would have to leave the house my family had lived in for four generations, with its immaculate sheet of ice in the backyard where I honed my skills before I could even stand upright. We were moving to a city that the educated, ostensibly intelligent men who ran the league thought could embrace and appreciate the game of hockey, even though the mercury never ventured below sixty degrees. And those same men, who seemed to be on a mission from God to dilute our beautiful, intricate game and spread it thin across a nation obsessed with so many other things than hockey, all the way down to the tropical coastlines and parched deserts that hadn’t seen a piece of ice larger than a snow cone since the last Ice Age—those men were dead wrong.

I aged five years that day, when I stepped off the plane and everything around me was undulating in what seemed like some invisible liquid or vapor. I told my wife I needed to go to the doctor, that I was having heat stroke and I couldn’t see straight. She assured me it was natural, that I was just seeing distortion from the heat waves rising off of the ground. At that moment I began to question my love for the sport, began to question the unwavering dedication I possessed since I first strapped on a pair of skates to putting myself between two metal posts and flopping around like a seal on hot grease to prevent a piece of frozen rubber from squirting past me. I cursed everything that day, the worst day of my life, that abominable day when we moved into our apartment. I cursed myself for not being good enough to stay in Ontario. I cursed the GM, of course. I cursed the owner for bringing in the GM, and I cursed the game as a whole for doing this to me. As a kid, I was smart, polite and motivated, and I could have been anything other than an athlete, and on that day I would have changed everything, would have erased the Cups and the awards and the endless legions of cheering fans that so faithfully crammed into the arena every game night to chant my name and sing the praises of my team, just so that I didn’t have to uproot my family from what was a perfect life and move down to this crime-riddled, perpetually sweltering anomaly of a town in a desert that was otherwise void of life. I cursed as the bones in my back tried their best to break free from each other as I dragged the furniture up the stairs. I cursed as the slick coat of sweat grew thicker and thicker over every square centimeter of my body and was diverted by miniscule canyon on the bridge of my nose directly into my left eye. But I reserved the best, most vulgar and outraged imprecations for the moment when I realized that the shoddy, undoubtedly refurbished air conditioner that kept our “luxury” apartment at temperatures on the verge of sustaining human life died in a pitiful display of leaking coolant and smoke.

“I’m sorry about that, sir,” the obviously disinterested lady at the front desk said when I called to report the broken unit. “We’ll have someone out there in the next day or two. What was your name again?”

As awful as it is to feel anger, it’s even worse to do so because of helplessness.
and outright disbelief. That overwhelming synergy is what drives men to do horrible things. My voice became weak and strained. “You don’t know who I am?”

“Nope, sure don’t,” she said with the same amount of disinterest, but added impatience.

“Sean Gravier?”

“Who?”

“The goaltender for the Dust Devils?” I never thought, not even in the worst of my nightmares, that I would ever have to introduce myself that way.

“Are they a baseball team?”

“The Dust Devils hockey team, the professional hockey team that plays one mile down the road from this hellhole of an apartment.”

“Okay, whatever you say. How do you spell your name again?”

“And what the hell do you mean two days?” In Canada, if I called anyone anywhere and told them I needed something, if I just needed some hot sauce for my chicken sandwich, within five minutes there would be a Canadian Army paratrooper touching down in my front yard cradling a bottle of Tabasco, or a mountie at my door, eyes urgent and mouth curled in a gleeful smile, with a crate of Jim’s Devil Blood. My whole body was shaking. I was completely broken. “It’s ninety-eight degrees outside, I have two kids and the thermostat is already showing eighty degrees! Two days? We’re going to die in here. Dead, dead with vultures circling over Apartment 100C, do you hear?”

“There’s a hotel down the road if you need different accommodations while you’re waiting.”

I barely managed to keep a desperate grip on the crumbled remnants of my composure as I gave her my information. I turned to my family, bunched up behind me and staring with their hurt yet forgiving faces that weakened me even further. “We’re staying in a hotel until they fix the air conditioner. Everyone pack a suitcase,” I said, trying feebly to imitate some fearless leader and keep their confidence somewhere higher than mine.

We unpacked clothes from the boxes and packed them into suitcases. Our
sweat was dripping everywhere; we gave up trying to wipe it off. It dribbled off of our bodies and soaked the carpet. We got in our shambing rental car (no time to go look for another car to buy) and drove down to the hotel I recognized from my rare trips here on away games. I don’t know how I managed to keep from breaking down right there in front of my wife and kids. Maybe I kept my misery in check by finding the humor in the situation as I was staring at that hotel, I honestly don’t remember. I tried to cram some cheerfulness into my demeanor.

“Well, I know for a fact the air conditioners work here,” I said with a weak smile, as I faintly recalled myself and my teammates sweating in the seventy-degree December night, trying to figure out how the hell people survived in this wretched climate.

We found no vacancy there or anywhere else in the downtown area, and then we drove around the outskirts for another hour through an endless series of identical intersections trying to find a vacant room, the car’s air conditioner was straining to keep us all at ninety-eight degrees. We finally found a room in an ancient, nondescript hotel in a part of town I don’t care to recall. No one said a word as we dejectedly unloaded our bags and then shuffled down the sidewalk to one of the ubiquitous burger pits and choked down cold, rubbery fries and sandwiches completely devoid of anything satisfying.

The part where my memory is a bit clearer was the moment when I stepped in the shower with its ominous brown and black spots and streaks scattered on the manila surfaces and was greeted with a slow trickle of tepid water that listlessly fell directly into the drain beneath me. That was when I, Sean Gravier, the man who had held the Cup three times in front of innumerable screaming, elated fans, whose name was at one point destined to resonate in the discussions of great hockey players for decades to come, sat down in a moldy basin in front of a pathetic dribble of water and blubbered like a disappointed child at Christmas. I was exhausted in every conceivable aspect, right down to the pores that had produced more sweat in twelve hours than in my whole life before that day combined.

I would be dishonest if I said things didn’t get better after that day. You know what they say about hitting rock bottom. But I never again felt as potent, as virile, as immortal as I did back in Canada, where I was a demigod, a legend to be. I remember opening the paper (appropriately named The Sun) the next day in the hotel lobby out of curiosity, just to see where hockey and I ranked in the grand scheme of things down amongst the cacti and kangaroo rats. See, anywhere in Canada, there could be a nuclear war that just started, or an assassination of a high-ranking government official in an industrialized nation, but these would cede the front-page headline to the arrival of Sean Gravier, three-time Cup winning goalie. I wasn’t so disappointed to see that this wasn’t the case in my new home. I could understand that in a non-traditional hockey market, the fact that House Republicans were yet again accusing the Democrats of hypocrisy in lobbying reform was of more importance.

I hopefully tossed aside the front section of the paper and shuffled through to sports. I could also understand football taking top honors on the sports page. No big deal, I thought, turning the page over to see where I would fall on page two—nothing about hockey there either, just basketball. Another article about baseball spilled over onto the third page. High school football claimed page four as its own. Sure, sure. I became more impatient, scanning headlines and first sentences for my name or my new team’s name. I saw nothing, nothing at all, not even on the next-to-the-last page. The back page was reserved for all-state high school athletes. I threw the paper down on the floor, lowered my head, and took a deep breath. Local news, I thought. I bet it made local news. I picked up section B and skimmed through it quickly—nothing, nothing about sports there. No photos, no headlines, nothing, I guess that’s what a sports section is for. I snatched up the sports section again, desperately flinging the pages as I tried to find some acknowl-

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I aged five years that day, when I stepped off the plane and everything around me was undulating in what seemed like some invisible liquid or vapor.

I told my wife I needed to go to the doctor, that I was having heat stroke and I couldn’t see straight.

She assured me it was natural, that I was just seeing distortion from the heat waves rising off of the ground.
I grabbed my still-steaming cup of coffee (like anything ever got cold there) and took it all down in one swig.

My insides burned, burned like the endless, sprawling blacktop and buildings outside, like the pathetic chartreuse grass that seemed to be planted around every edifice as a joke or half-hearted imitation, burned like everything else in that forsaken, flat, sweltering pit of a town.

A part of me started to go in that conference room in Canada the moment I found out I was traded. It was an awful thing, even just to witness, when a goalie’s mind starts to leave him. He notices the crowd and their various taunts or cheers. He notices the empty rows of seats. The silliest little things divert his attention, like a tear or bloodstain on an opponents uniform as he skates in for the shot. The puck is no longer a burning pulsar moving in slow motion. He is no longer able to stare down the leading goal-scorer in the league and supernaturally put his glove exactly where the puck will be a nanosecond after it leaves his stick. The pain becomes noticeable, a thousand times more so. Unless the goalie is fully in the game, the first thing that comes to mind before a save is made is the unyielding ice below. And while we’re talking about pucks, a goalie’s mind, properly honed, usually overrides the primal instinct to avoid objects flying directly towards his head. When you see a goalie flinch or bring his shoulders in slightly to protect himself from the impact of a slapshot, you know he’s beginning to lose it.

As soon as my skates hit the slush, I made my first mistake. It was innocent enough, I was simply curious to see how many people had come to watch the first game of the season. To my horror, half the seats were empty, and most of the fans that bothered to show up weren’t even standing to cheer our entrance. To make it worse, the rink announcer’s voice was shrill and obnoxious, like he was presiding over a free-for-all fight rather than introducing the greatest players of one of the most sophisticated and challenging sports in existence. It didn’t help my focus at all when he mispronounced my name. The season opener was a miserable 6-1 loss that only the opposing team’s fans stayed to watch. I wasn’t exactly ashamed of my performance—the score was deceiving considering I had to make 45 saves that game and we hardly got across their blue line.

Things didn’t get much worse than that, but misery was a constant companion in the beginning. The turning point of the season came when we played against my old team on their ice. It was so wonderful to be in Thunder Bay again, and the one day the team spent in town flew by. I remember being late to the dressing room because I went to see old neighbors and my home which we had rented out for the season. No one on the team, not even the coach, seemed surprised that I was late. Kappfa was suited up and ready to play. He acted happy to see me, but his disappointment at my arrival was obvious.

When I skated onto the ice, I went towards the wrong goal before quickly realizing my mistake. I was home again,
and I played like it. I turned away the shots of my former teammates and some of the replacements like they were throwing wads of paper at me. The crowd began to chant my name; I felt the ice vibrating through my skates. Thanks to a shot that found its way through my five-hole, we were down one to zero in the second, but my resolve solidified after my replacement—my stand-in—showboated after making a stop that paled to the twenty or so I had already made. Mintras—“The Swede”—was his name. He was on my ice, celebrating, and I was not going to let him win.

Midway through the third, we were still trailing by one, and my porous defense had haplessly let two of my ex-teammates plow into me. As we were untangling ourselves from the pile-up, Michel Kvoruk, who was always the first to skate over and congratulate me after a big win when we played together as Mounties, put his hand on my shoulder. “We miss you up here, chief,” he said before skating away. A few minutes later our leading scorer ripped a shot past The Swede, and for the first time in the season I raised my hands in celebration of a goal. I felt a new lightness surging through my body, and my senses became more acute. The Swede and I exchanged glares through our masks as the teams lined back up at center. The onslaught on my goal continued through the third period but I was a stonewall. I wasn’t an object of ridicule back home. I love the game. I was able to shrug off the more annoying things about the desert, and I even stepped outside on the January and February nights to bask in the dry desert breeze. I stopped desperately combing the Sports section. I stopped hearing the jeering and murmuring of the lifeless crowds. The players, the ice, and whole arenas blurred and receded to the periphery of my consciousness and the puck stood out once again like a neutron star. My team took notice and started to pick up their play, rallying behind my newfound confidence. We were still low in our conference, but we had stopped playing like it. We were a band of cast-offs, struggling to maintain our dignity and respect in a town where hockey didn’t belong and wasn’t accepted, and we found strength in each others’ struggles. We starting accumulating three and four game winning streaks, and we found places around town to celebrate our victories and commiserate after defeats.

Finally, in the first week of April, the regular season reached its merciful conclusion. I had made arrangements a few weeks before to go back to Ontario for the summer where I would spend time relaxing with friends and family and working out with former teammates at the local rink. The buzzer sounded to end the final game, and the crowd, larger than usual, cheered louder for the 3-1 win than they had for any other game all season. I was happy, truly content for the first time since the Thunder Bay game. As I started toward the bench, I thought about cleaning out my locker, taking care of the formalities of leaving town, and getting on the plane back home to Thunder Bay. Motsky was the first one to congratulate me. “Sean, San Francisco and Vegas both lost tonight!” he shouted over the cheering fans and pumping music. “We’re eighth in the conference! We’re going to the playoffs!”
I’ll admit it. I went to the mall looking like a fashion disaster victim from one of those makeover shows on TLC. I wish Stacy and Clinton from “What Not To Wear” would pay a visit to my closet. Ninety percent of my wardrobe is exercise clothes and scrubs, which are very forgiving for people like me whose weight tends to fluctuate by 20 pounds. Instead of overpaid stylists to help revamp my wardrobe, I enlisted the help of my trend-savvy, quite stylish, 15-year-old niece, Meredith. I needed a makeover and she was eager to do the job.

“Come on, Aunt Dana. Let’s go to Forever 21. I’ll fix you up. I’ll find you something cute to wear in there, and everything is really cheap, too,” she said.

I could see a look in her eyes, like she was fast-forwarding pages from the latest Seventeen magazine in her mind. “Forever 21. It means if you wear their clothes, you’ll look like you’re 21 forever. Don’t you want to be 21 forever?” Meredith innocently asked.

“No, not really,” I replied. Poor Meredith. So young, so naïve. The only way I’d go back to 21 is if I could take everything I know now, wrap up my last 19 years of life experiences, and pack all that knowledge in the nice, tight little package that used to be my body.

“Meredith, I’m 40. Women of a certain age should not be shopping in stores called Forever 21 unless they are, indeed, shopping for someone under the age of 21. Certainly there are rules about things like this,” I said. “Perhaps not mall-enforced rules, but rules of society, like not wearing white after Labor Day. Every Southern woman knows not to wear white after Labor Day.” My thoughts wandered off into a daydream where I hear Britney, a 16-year-old sales clerk say, “Sorry ma’am, I need to see your ID. You were born in 1967?!! You aren’t allowed to shop here. Perhaps Coldwater Creek on the second level is more your type store. Their clothes are for mature ladies. My grandma likes to shop there.”

My niece grabbed my arm and gave it a shake, grounding me back in reality. “Aunt Dana, what are you talking about? We’ve got to get moving. You need some jeans and some cute tops, too—something with color. When we get home, I’ll do your hair and make-up, too.”

We looked at the jewelry and other accessories at the 21 store. I couldn’t bring myself to try on any of the clothes. Rack after rack of polyester, spandex, rayon, and nylon, some covered in rhinestones, others with a satin sheen. There was not a natural fiber in the house. If someone lit a match, we’d all burst into flames surrounded by this clothing.

The garments were made from cheap materials, imported from Malaysia, cheaply sewn together, mass produced, and all appeared to be in size extra small petite. Do elves shop here? What adult is small enough to fit in these garments? These clothes are so trendy, you could wear them out to a club one night and they’ll be out of style by the time you get home the next morning. Oh, but what a bargain! A brand new shirt for only $6.88? I’ve never seen prices so low.

Meredith was busy trying to put together an ensemble for me, but all I could think about was some poor little 8-year-old girl sitting at her sewing machine in a factory somewhere across the sea, piece milling these garments together in a sweatshop so she can earn her one American dollar for the day. I just can’t do it. Trendy and cute if you are 15. Sad and pathetic if you are 40.

I decided I needed to loosen up, throw caution to the wind and try to embrace the teen scene, interested to see what the kids are wearing these days. Mall stores seem to be geared towards...
the teen shopper. I could tell it was prom season by the abundance of teen formal wear. I went to the prom in 1983, long before these kids were even born. Vegas cocktail waitress attire wasn’t appropriate in the 1980s at our prom, but times have changed. All the bright colors, the loud music, mile-long lines to the cash registers, racks and racks of misplaced clothing items and the smell of synthetic fibers started to make me a bit nervous.

Meredith bought a few inexpensive necklaces with big plans to take them apart and make her own jewelry creations. No matter how hard I tried, I felt like I was trying to play a role of a person I am clearly not, the role of delusional middle-aged woman who still thinks she is in her 20s.

I saw a bin full of colorful elastic bands. “Meredith, while you look for those jeans, I’m going to go over there and look at those headbands,” I said.

I picked up one of the bands and realized this was not a headband at all. This was a pair of underwear, thong underwear. I cannot believe these kids are wearing thong underwear. Where are their parents? I wanted to tell Meredith to please stop being a teenager. I’m not ready for her to be this grown up. We should be shopping for her at Limited Too or Gymboree, not trendy teen clothing stores.

Our next stop was Abercrombie & Fitch. The store was dark and the music was blaring so loud, I looked around to see if we’d accidentally entered a nightclub instead of a clothing store. There was an entire wall stocked floor to ceiling with blue jeans. A college-aged sales associate was steady folding T-shirts, oblivious to the fact that I actually needed help retrieving blue jeans from the top shelf. He must have been too distracted by the dance music. Maybe his eyes were strained from having to work in the dark. Whatever the reason, he was of no help to me.

Meredith found a ladder and hopped up there herself to grab several pairs of jeans. I’m not a big fan of the low rise jeans, but that is all we could find. Any size that fit around my gigantic hips had a gap in the waist of at least 3 inches. When I sat down on the bench in the fitting room, half my rear end was exposed. I modeled each pair of jeans for Meredith.

“They are too big in the waist. See, my underwear is showing. I can’t wear these in public,” I said, disappointed that we were two hours into our shopping trip and I had nothing to show for it.

“That’s the way they are supposed to fit,” Meredith explained. “Everybody’s rear end shows. You just need to wear a belt.”

I don’t agree with that logic. Pants are supposed to cover your back side, not offer a little peek of what should not be seen. For women over 40, it’s time to cover that stuff up, not have cracks exposed. Nobody wants to see that.

We weaved in and out of the larger department stores, but our mission to make me over was a no-go. I noticed leggings are back in style. I used to wear those in the ‘80s. And look, madras plaid shorts with grosgrain ribbon belts. I used to wear those 25 YEARS AGO when I was a slave to the “Official Preppy Handbook.” When I was a teenager in the mid-1980s, we all looked like we’d just stepped off a golf course. The look has been tweaked a bit for 2008, but the style is basically the same—just trashier.

I decided before the mall closed, I needed to steer Meredith towards stores where I knew I’d find sensible clothing for middle-aged women, like Eddie Bauer and Talbots. In the end, my niece did select a pair of figure-flattering jeans and three shirts to wear with them to update my look. To her credit, she did a very good job. Most days, I still look like a Glamour “don’t,” but with Meredith’s youthful influence, maybe there is hope.

I couldn’t bring myself to try on any of the clothes.

Rack after rack of polyester, spandex, rayon, and nylon, some covered in rhinestones, others with a satin sheen.

There was not a natural fiber in the house.

Our next stop was another youthful establishment called Wet Seal. I flipped through the racks of clothing not even quiet sure what I was seeing. Is this a skirt or a top? Meredith dug through a table of tank tops, trying to find three colors she liked so she could get the 3 for $12.99 sale price.

I picked up a size XL tank top, thinking I might actually find something to add to my workout wardrobe. I held one up to my chest. The top was so tiny; it looked like it belonged to a small child. Again I asked myself, “Who wears this stuff? When did XL turn into extra small?” I thought it was supposed to be the other way around. Don’t clothing manufacturers tend to give us a false sense of thinness by turning last year’s size 8 into this year’s size 6? That’s how it works in ladies’ clothing. I’m obviously out of touch with junior department styles and sizes.

“It’s so hard to find size 00 blue jeans,” Meredith said in exasperation.

“Yeah, that sounds like a real problem,” I replied in a sarcastic tone. I had no idea such a size existed.

“It IS a problem,” she whined dramatically.
Cold winter night sky, you draw me
Up into the crystal clarity that seems
So far from where I am on the inside.
Even when the city lights obscure the stars
With their occasional brilliant glee peeping through,
The blackness between the bare branches
Offers an internal security blanket.
I could stare... all night...
Letting all the knots in my mind unravel
Were it not for the knots in my muscles
Fighting the piercingly chill wind.
I look down shivering,
Pulling my coat and scarf around me tightly,
Still standing still...
My unfocused eyes keep staring mentally upwards
Until I shake myself out of reverie and walk on.
Ah, winter in all its nighttime glory!
I like the bare trees standing nakedly real
Against the shallow unreality of
Man’s pomp and circumstance.
Black sky, you pull me out of the urban crunch
Into the uncluttered infinity of natural creation,
Even if just for a few moments.
I can trudge on smiling again because we touched,
You and I, dark knight sky, and shared
A peace beyond comprehension.

Ode to a Winter Night

BY CARA COBLE

Finance

Night doesn’t fall...

BY CAROL GRAU
Friends of Monroe Carell Jr.
Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt

It rises
silent
from hollow & brush
ascending ever darker
floating up from treetops
from hills
stripping the sky
uncovering stars.

Poetry

honorable mention
Conceived, ideas mature, cocooned, and secure, the embryonic Organisms hibernate, are nourished by and intrinsic to Brain cells—creating, sorting, sending, performing a job.

Whispering messages, recording images, processing a constant flow, Evoked potentials form to retrieve aging, increasingly elusive, Brilliant but intangible, dusty memories caught in a gossamer web.

Spidery time persist, spinning an intricate crystalline maze which reflects Blinding concepts, almost too intense or immense to absorb.

Electrical impulses revisit the vertigo of a kiss, or echo a dear silenced voice.

Wisdom emerges from the silken tomb in an endless cycle to renew.

Butterflies erupt, disseminating thoughts whether dazzling or drab.

Obscure images vitalize minds, blank pages, canvases, or mute instruments to Celebrate common experience and elevate being to the infinite and cosmic.

i remember up one side and down the other a rolling shiver of love that made me feel big made me feel small made me feel it all i drove past the same places different now i was warmed from a frost i didn’t know until it was gone gratitude rose inside me until i smiled thankfulness for something i couldn’t explain but knew for sure my hands looked gentle but strong and unfamiliar i was learning that’s when i knew i was changed i touched my face and i sensed it was you
Western Hike, Utah

BY LAURIE V. SOILEAU
Junior League of Nashville Center for Advanced Maternal-Fetal Care

The rising spires of rosy hue
pervasive persimmon rust
and blue the creeping green
and shocking overviews
this enchanting mystery

With sleepless eyes we, like termite spies
on every trail and cliffhanging rise crawl
through sandy crusted earth ablaze
in sunny warmth and hear
living echoes of foreign tongues.

Imaginary gods and queens along the rim
we settle there with arms drawn in
we can’t conceive of what has left them here.
waiting in the summer sun and winter spring and fall
the tonnage of sand was washed away
where has it gone?

Dissolved to mysterious lands in cavernous crypts
or bottomlands to fill another palace petrified.
to me this vision is earthly, rooted, grounded,
quite content to stand each personage of stone, naked
but never alone to rising sun and pining moon
as long as eternity demand
each crevasse
an unknown story unsung song
of history and being.

The years and centuries roll by undaunted by the op’ning sky
these spirits becoming more refined,
defined, individual
how should I complain of tired feet or muscle’s ache
or heat-steam’d rain when an unexpected quake
or shiver in this earth could take me down
into depths of deepest red or black or
purple orange cracks in stone beneath my feet—
they are living still

And yet we gasp and gaze across this fiery
pastel maze
the Garden of the Queen
and nameless millions at our feet
rising peacefully at our sides
towering, soaring towards the massive blue;
unceasing breathless castles
not of children’s seaside hands—
life itself has carven every curve
as pure delight.
He believed in mermaids. My grandfather, William Edgar Austin, believed. He used to look for them as the sun was going down, standing out there for hours with his hands on his forehead, shielding his eyes from the last bit of sunlight. He would stand that way until my mother was finally able to coax him into the house. She would use some of his favorite things to bribe him. Sometimes a piece of coconut pie, a cup of hot chocolate or a story. He loved stories, and he loved it when we would read to him. His eyes had gotten so bad that he had trouble reading small print, he couldn’t keep up with reading glasses; plus it was hard for him to concentrate once he got older.

Oh, how my grandfather loved a good story. He was the best storyteller I have ever met. I swear I honestly thought that he owned a circus and that he met my grandmother on a night when the monkeys got loose. He said she was the only person who could help him catch them. That they fell in love in the monkey house. So real were his stories that I truly thought that my mother was born under the Big Top and that she was the world’s youngest trapeze artist. I could see her; her pink sequined leotard covering her diaper as she performed death-defying stunts 20 feet in the air. I never doubted it—why would I? My mother was fearless.

Whew, when my mother overheard me telling one of my friends the story! She was mad at first—told me to apologize to my friend for telling such an outrageous lie and accused me of being as bad as her father. She threatened to make me lick the bar of soap for lying, but when I burst into tears she realized that I wasn’t crying because I hated the taste of Dial, but because my grandfather had lied to me. Understand, I knew—that my grandfather owned a circus. I could describe it to you in detail. I was honestly confused.

She called my grandfather up and told him to come over right away, that he had some explaining to do. She gave him an earful—she chewed him up one side and down the other. He pulled into our driveway within the hour.

I will never forget the look on his face. Or the way he sucked me in. With my mother standing watch he told me that he had never really owned a circus. That he and my grandmother had never caught monkeys together and my mother hadn’t worn a pink sequined leotard while she was still in diapers. He finished with a wink and my mother threw up her hands and walked away.

“For the love of Pete…..” she mumbled as she walked off. I was convinced that he had, in fact, once owned a circus but for some reason my mother didn’t want me to know about it.

There were other stories. He told me how he and my grandmother once were called in to take care of a potential problem; in Africa, no less. Their job was to tame wild lions. Apparently, the lions were causing all sorts of havoc and the only thing short of killing them all was to tame them. He said my grandmother could wear them down with nothing but her razor sharp tongue. He said she learned that from her mother, his mother-in-law. He said it was a sight to see, in less than an hour she would have even the mightiest lion begging for mercy. He said it was the easiest job he’d ever had—all he had to do was watch and tell her when the lions had had enough. He said she never seemed to know when to stop once she got started. She never backed down; she stood her ground—all 4-foot 10-inches of her. He said my mother would have made her proud.

Then there was the one where he was a fighter pilot in World War II. He even
had some scars that he told me he got when his plane crashed in enemy territory. I never did hear how he got out of that one. Funny—I never even questioned it, never thought about it, because there was always something else just as interesting waiting to be told.

But then my grandfather started getting old and forgetful. I mean, he had always been old, but he was changing. I heard words like dementia, eccentric. Words like Alzheimer’s. I didn’t know what these words meant, but I knew they weren’t good. I understood they had something to do with the way his stories had changed. He didn’t tell really tell them anymore. Except for same story about the mermaids. He obsessed over them—like I said before he would look for them for hours. He told me over and over how they were out there and that he was supposed to meet them. He would forget he had told me, sometimes telling me the same thing twice in 10 minutes. I would always listen to him; just like it was the first I’d ever heard of them. I never let on that I knew the story by heart.

One night not long before he disappeared, he said that a mermaid had come to him in a dream. The red-haired mermaid told him that she was going to come for him, for him to be ready.

The red-haired mermaid came for him and he is with my grandmother down below the waves. It is easy for me to accept that. My grandfather was such a good storyteller that he could make you believe anything.

One night not long before he disappeared, he said that a mermaid had come to him in a dream. It was a great story, just like in the old days; you could see her red hair and taste the salt in the air. There was a beautiful kingdom made of coral he said, he had seen it. My grandmother was there, but instead the legs that had turned stiff and useless, she had a tail! She could swim like a fish! His eyes lit up and he looked like his old self. The red-haired mermaid told him that she was going to come for him, for him to be ready.

I never doubted him for a minute. It’s been awhile since I last heard him tell that story, but I can still remember every word. I will never forget the way his eyes lit up as he told me the story of the beautiful red-haired mermaid.

My mother said that it’s not healthy for me to deny that my grandfather has died. She reminds me over and over that I saw him that morning, the morning when he didn’t come down for breakfast. She reminds me that I am the one who went to see why he wasn’t sitting at the table. That I was the one who called for her and my father, told them to come quick, that grandfather was gone. And I tell her he was gone—that the empty husk left behind in my grandfather’s bed was not my grandfather. That the thing that we buried two days later; the strange, pale look-alike grandfather, was not him.

I honestly believe that she did come for him; that the beautiful, red-haired mermaid came for him and he is with my grandmother down below the waves. It is easy for me to accept that. My grandfather was such a good storyteller that he could make you believe anything.

Plus it would explain the sand I wake to find on my bedroom floor each morning. When just the night before my floor was swept clean. Or the piles of shells I find on my desk and in my dresser drawers. Once I even woke to find a sand dollar tucked under my pillow. But I can never tell anyone, I know that they won’t believe me. No one wants to hear these kinds of stories.

Maybe one day, I will have a grandson of my own that I can tell this story to.

A grandson who believes.
Health and Wellness activities heat up for summer

Start! moving toward 1 billion steps

Vanderbilt is partnering with the American Heart Association to offer the Start! initiative. Health Plus and Vanderbilt Heart are providing this physical activity program for faculty and staff and encouraging everyone to participate in reaching the goal of 1,000 participants and an updated goal of 1 billion combined steps by Oct. 31.

You can register by going to Health Plus Web site www.healthplus.vanderbilt.edu, and clicking on the green Start! button.

Each registered participant also receives a step pedometer, a paper tracking log for your activities, and resources to help you succeed. Receive your starter bag by visiting Health Plus during all hours of operation or stop by at the Vanderbilt Valet at Medical Center North or the Children’s Hospital. Each participant will also have access to a variety of walking maps for the Vanderbilt area and be able to participate in walking events all year long that will help you move more.

Even those who prefer a physical activity other than walking can participate. Since Start! is about being more physically active, the site allows staff and faculty to track other activities. Any activity can be converted to steps through the online tracker.

Participants can qualify for prizes for each of three challenges during the year. During the currently under way Challenge 2, participants with 150,000 steps or more before July 31 receive a backpack as a prize. All activities for Challenge 2 must be entered in the Online Step Tracker by Aug. 7.

Those with a total of 450,000 steps at the end of Challenge 3 will also be entered in a drawing for bigger prizes.

Health Plus will host a celebration of the end of Challenge 2 on Wednesday, Aug. 6, from noon to 1 p.m. in the courtyard behind Light Hall. Planned events include an ice cream giveaway, door prizes, and learning who achieved the most activity during the Challenge.

Life Phase Series

The Life Phase series showcases speakers who have ideas to help staff and faculty balance work and home responsibilities. This month’s Life Phase series is titled “Preventing Injury as we Age,” presented by Scott Cooper from the Vanderbilt Orthopaedics Institute. The program will be held Thursday, July 17, from noon to 1 p.m. in 419 Light Hall.

Babies and You

Health Plus offers Babies and You, a work site prenatal health promotion program, to all Vanderbilt employees, spouses and dependents. The program encourages early and consistent prenatal care and provides monthly educational opportunities on issues relating to perinatal health.

Enrollment is voluntary and free but must be completed during the first trimester of pregnancy. Call 343-8943 to enroll and learn how mothers-to-be can earn a $100 savings bond (taxable) for their new baby. Fathers-to-be and grandparents-to-be are welcome. Door prizes are given at each program.

All classes are from noon to 1 p.m. This month’s class is “Nutrition: Eating for Two,” presented by Marilyn Holmes, Health Plus manager and registered dietitian. The class will be Thursday, June 17, in 411 Light Hall.

Group Fitness News

Fitness through Dance—This class is held Mondays at 6:15 p.m. and the featured dance changes monthly. The dance for June is Nia, a fusion of dance moves and more, and in July, learn the basics of belly dancing.

The Aerobic Challenge—Participants will be rewarded for participating in a variety of group fitness classes offered at Health Plus through Aug. 21. Each group fitness class equals one point, and those who take the superclass on Aug. 21 will earn four points. Those who earn 33 points— which works out to two-and-a-half classes a week—win a prize. Those who earn 55 points—four classes a week—will win a bigger prize. Participants also can earn bonus points throughout the challenge. There will be a grand prize for the person taking the most classes.

Boot Camp—Held Thursdays at 5:30 p.m., this is an intense, full body workout that focuses on all muscles. It includes drills such as push ups, jumping jacks and crunches. Boot Camp meets at the Campus Recreation Center outdoor track.

Organized Track—This is a class for intermediate to advanced runners. Participants will practice speed work, which includes intervals of 400 meters up to 1600 meters. The distance and time is based upon your individual fitness level. This class meets every Tuesday and Thursday at 12:30 p.m., rain or shine, at the Campus Recreation Center outdoor track.

Health and Wellness offers Podcasts

Health and Wellness now offers weekly podcasts. Listen to brief interviews, tips and tidbits on a variety of health and wellness topics ranging from deep-breathing exercises to surviving divorce to preparing for overseas travel. Visit www.vanderbilt.edu/HRS/wellness/hepodcasts.htm to listen from your computer or your MP3 Player.

Eldercare Checklists Online

Those who are caring for an elderly parent or in-law and who are searching for an appropriate facility to aid in that care may find help with one of the eldercare checklists that will help when choosing a facility for your loved one on the Vanderbilt Child and Family Center Web site at www.childandfamilycenter.vanderbilt.edu.

Occupational Health Clinic hits the road

The Occupational Health Clinic now visits Vanderbilt Hospital and Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital each month to help make getting shots and skin tests even more convenient for hospital staff. Staff and faculty may drop by during any of these sessions to get all the immunizations and testing needed.
To help managers track compliance, the performance evaluation system will automatically know whether OHC has your information up to date or not, so act now to beat the rush.

OHC staff are in room 6107 of VUH from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the fourth Monday of each month, and in the Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital, room 7011, from 1:15 to 4:30 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month.

Services provided are immunizations, TB skin tests, screening/review of records and lab collections for required screening.

Help for Domestic Violence —Right Here
Domestic violence, stalking, emotional abuse and sexual assault are problems we don’t want to think about, but for some faculty and staff members at Vanderbilt, they can’t stop thinking about it because it is their reality. If this applies to you, contact Project Safe with Work/Life Connections-EAP, at 936-1327.

Go for the Gold 2008 under way
The 2008 edition of Go for the Gold is about to get under way, with several changes. As last year, full time active, benefits eligible staff and faculty can complete the Gold Level of the Go For The Gold Incentives Program and receive $20 per month in wellness credit in 2008. More than 13,000 faculty and staff participated in the program last year, and are being rewarded by Vanderbilt for engaging in healthy lifestyle practices.

Here are the steps:

Step 1
Do your yearly Health Risk Assessment to learn what your health risks are and what you can do to become as healthy as possible.

Step 2
Do your yearly Wellness Action Log to focus on healthy actions that will help you maintain or improve your health.

Step 3
View the 2008 Game Plan For Your Health, which is titled “Five Keys to Financial Health.”

Steps one and two are also available for spouses and domestic partners of staff and faculty, which adds a wellness credit of $5 for each step.

All the steps can be completed at www.vanderbilt.edu/HRS/wellness/hpgftg.htm.

There is also help available at the following times and places:
Thursday, July 31, Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital, room 2104, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.
At Health Plus during all hours of operation
At the Occupational Health Clinic, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The deadline for completion is Nov. 30.
cats are such that most of us will outlive a series of them in our lives, and—stop me if I’ve made this point before, possibly in the previous paragraph—losing a beloved pet hurts.

Here’s the practical advice I give to those of you who have a dog and you’re concerned about the pain of loss. Get another one. Now. A vice dog, a backup dog, a dog who will be there when you must need a dog.

Sure, two or three dogs are more trouble than one. More food, more vet bills, more demands for chin rubs and ear scratches. But they also keep each other company, form their own mini-pack (and sometimes let you be an honorary member), and generally add to the panache of the household.

And when the time comes, as it will, to help one of them go from this side of the veil to the next, take it from me: there is no function a pet can provide that is more valuable than to greet you at the door after you’ve made the long drive home from the vet’s office. You don’t need a new dog that day; you need a dog you know and who knows you.

Which brings me, again, to the pair of hounds Sharon and I are left with: Jake, the three-legged beagle, and Zoe, the hound mix. Jake came to us from a rescue organization, Zoe from a shelter. As Sharon pointed out one night when they were curled up asleep and lovable, they had both been abandoned—thrown away—by previous families. Although things have turned out well for them—the truth is they’ve pretty much won the Dog Lottery—it is sad to think of all the dogs who are just as loving and for whom things don’t turn out so well.

Jake and Zoe are quite a pair of goofballs. We open the back door and they charge insanely out into the yard, completely convinced that this is the one time out of the thousands they’ve done this that they are going to teach one of those pesky squirrels or rabbits a lesson. Lately they’ve even been making life miserable for, of all things, a lizard which has taken up residence under the foundation at the corner of the garage.

After a few minutes of sniffing around, barking, and accomplishing pretty much nothing hunting-wise, they come back with their tongues lolling in big happy grins. Foiled again! But they don’t seem to care. Jake and Zoe, like most dogs, provide vivid examples of what the exuberance of life looks like.

Life lessons from hounds on a hot summer afternoon.

And if a storm comes up later, here’s another life lesson: I’m going to make sure the new oven mitt is out of reach.

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**Story of father and son wins writing award**

The *House Organ* story “Alex and His Father,” written by Wayne Wood, has won the 2008 Prism Award for writing from the Tennessee Society for Healthcare Marketing and Public Relations.

The feature, which was the cover story of the December 2007-January 2008 issue, was about School of Nursing faculty member Tom Cook and his son, Alex. Tom adopted Alex, who is HIV positive, as a toddler at a time when the disease was considered fatal. The story celebrated Alex’s graduation from high school and his starting college, and also celebrated the advances in treatment for those with HIV that made Alex’s growing-up possible.

The award marks the fifth time *House Organ* has won a Prism Award, most recently last year when it was the winner of the Internal Publications category.

The story may be read at the *House Organ* Web site. Go to [www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan](http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/houseorgan) and find the December-January issue using the Back Issues button.