Dogwood

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EDITORS' NOTE

The number of submissions to the magazine increases each year, and we are delighted to have such wonderful work to read and consider. We thank our judges Marilyn Hacker and Stewart O'Nan, and we congratulate our prize winner, Michael Pearce, who may be one of the first in a national contest, judged blindly, to win both competitions. Below are the comments on his winning entries.

First Prize, Poetry, "My Father's Brother," Michael Pearce

I selected the poem "My Father's Brother" especially for its approach to narration, not meant to be exemplary and thus allowing itself the loops and bends of accident and almost gratuitous observation. There is a quality of fable about the poem, which had the result for me of its having a universal quality in its very particularity. It is an entirely American narrative in its specificities, and yet the story that is its focus—with the supporting roles played by a community described as existing in historical and economic reality, and yet partaking of the qualities of folk-tale towns—could be found in a contemporary poem from Latin America, the Middle East, or Eastern Europe. The turn accomplished by the poet in the last five lines convinced me.

—Marilyn Hacker

She has also selected three honorable mentions: "Slag" by Leslie Anne Mcilroy, "Sometime after the Golden Anniversary" by Jean L. Kreiling, and "The Unwanted Girls" by Amanda Auchter.

underwear drawer, who can stop him? Where does one file a complaint? All a poor man with no country, no mother, no father, no friends has is his honor and his wits, such as they are. So Gumple packs them up in no time, one suitcase full of honor, one full of wits. And maybe those suitcases are only half full, I make no great claims. And that very day Frank Gumple, trimmed down to a simple Gump, moves across town. And here I am, now, two years later, in this place, with you."

I look at Gump and then at his tackle box. "Is that one of your suitcases, Gump?"

His face relaxes, some of the pain and wrath trickling back down into his chest. "Yes, it is. This is the suitcase that carries my wits. Which I am ready to share with you, if you are ready. Are you ready to learn to fish the sewers? It is a special skill I have brought from my own lost city of Krakow. You will be the first in your city. Are you ready to learn, young Grady?"

"Will you lock me in the closet again, Gump?"

"No, never. I promise."

He crouches, his face square in front of mine: small wide nose of a boxer, razor scab on his stubbly chin, protruding ears trying to escape from his head. His eyes look straight into me, gray irises glimmering yellow flecks of madness, this man who has saved my proud and thankless family from hunger, who will teach me survival and crime, who will—I can only hope and pray—save *me* from my family. "I'm ready to learn, Gump. Please don't lock me up again."

"Never again, my little Grady. I promise you: never twice the same punishment."

Reverse Psychology

Amy Marcott

THE MAN STOMPS ONTO THE dock, his footstep rattling all the way to your end, and you instantly sense something is wrong. Maybe it's the way his head bobbles as if for balance or merely the energy of his arrival, so discordant on this, day four of nearly hundred-degree temperatures. Heat that can almost take your breath away. But he takes a few self-assured strides and you begin to doubt yourself and turn your attention back to the kids swimming in the deep end—four park rats, as the stalwarts are affectionately called, judging each other's cannonball splashes off the platform anchored in the swimming area. Often, you're nothing more than a glorified babysitter to these pre-adolescents, who slip like otters in and out of the water, most avoiding arguments or neglect at home. Once in a while you let them wear your whistle and keys around their necks, and they beam with pride. The same pride you feel wearing the white tank emblazoned with a red cross and LIFEGUARD. You've worked hard for this, the highest-paying summer job in town.

The unrelenting sun reflecting off the lake on this cloudless August day scorches your shoulders and gives you a headache despite your sunglasses. People must have escaped to air-conditioning because it's just the park rats and two women sitting in the fenced-off shallow end, bobbing their babies into the water like tea bags.

The man approaches your position next to one of two metal ladders leading to the deep end where you can see all the swimmers.

"Some heat," he says.

You glance over quickly. "Grueling." And for a split second, your heart stops with his resemblance to your mother's ex-boyfriend, "the lingerer," who sat in the parking lot last summer watching you. But it's not him. This man's hair is too curly and mussed up, for one. J.B.L. hair you and your best friend would joke—just been laid. He has a wrestler's build and thick dark eyebrows that a caricaturist would find altogether too easy, fuzzy arms and legs, probably a hairy chest too but he wears a T-shirt.

"How's the wa—," the man asks, but a plane flying overhead combined with a park rat's "cowabunga" shriek and cannonball overpower his words.

"Sorry?" you say.

"How. Is. The. Wa-ter," he enunciates. And then you smell it. Rum. You'd bet your life on it.

"Refreshing?" you say, questioning not the water temperature but his level of inebriation.

He surveys the lake on all sides of him, then stares at his suit's drawstring and reties it, pulling one loop all the way through, although he doesn't notice. A baby squeals in the shallow end as his mother glides him through the water, saying *weeeee* as she does.

"*Weeee-eeee-eee,*" the man mocks, swaying forward then back then catching himself abruptly. You imagine him falling into the shallow end on his head and having to stabilize him until the other lifeguard, who's off taking a break, retrieves the backboard from shore.

"Ever save anyone?" he asks, holding on to the ladder now with one hand, standing close to you. He swallows a half-hiccup.

You were taught what to fear from the intoxicated. The way heat can intensify alcohol's effects on their coordination, how it can lead to heat stroke and passing out. How they can overestimate their swimming ability or easily panic in deep water if you try to rescue them and climb your body as they clamor for air, taking you down with them. You look toward the park entrance for the other lifeguard, who went to the drugstore across the street for pop and potato chips, but of course there's no sign of him yet.

"Hey, Girlie. I assed you a quession." And there's the rum smell again. Now you have to babysit him too until help arrives. At best, coax him off the dock. Barring that, make him forget he wants to swim. "You ever save anyone?"

"Nope. No saves." You try to sound casual. It's the first thing people ask when you tell them you're a lifeguard. And when you shake your head, they don't bother hiding their disappointment. No one's ever died on my watch either, you say, but they've already lost interest. You're not a true lifeguard. They think *Baywatch*: sharks and surging ocean and flailing arms. They don't think brown lake near the marina, the twelfth most polluted lake in Michigan, if you believe the German woman who comes every evening for a dip. If she's right, the fact is almost unbearable since in Michigan, you're never more than six miles from an inland lake. You don't ask for her evi-

dence because a part of you believes it, what with the murk you're afraid will infect your eyes and permanently blur your vision. Not to mention the fear of what you might see in this contamination: trashy fish slicked with boat oil, mutant amoeba. Ridiculous anxieties, you know, so you keep them to yourself. You prefer pools. Clear, chlorinated, fish- and weed-free pools, like the ones in which you earned your lifeguarding certification. But the only lifeguarded pool nearby belongs to the country club one town over, and they hire their own.

"I didn't think so. You don't seem like a real lifeguard."

You don't quite know how to respond. You yourself wonder at times how good a rescuer you'd be if someone started drowning at the edge of the swim area, which—you're told—reaches fifteen feet at the ropes, then drops quickly to twenty-five feet of water clogged with shackling weeds. You've never tested the depths. Beyond eight feet, it doesn't matter; your ears can't take the pressure, not even with those techniques you've been taught to relieve pain as you descend. If someone did need rescuing from the deepest lake bottom, you figure adrenaline would propel you. You'd push past the pain and hope your eardrums wouldn't burst, the possibility of which scares you. Because once they did, that would be it, wouldn't it? There would be no repair, no more hearing the water slap-sucking against the dock's supports or the speedboats slicing and smacking the water after clearing the lake for a second or two at a time? You've never really researched it; you've just felt the pain quickly intensify as you practiced surface dives during lifeguarding class.

One test required you to retrieve a ten-pound brick submerged seven to ten feet. Your anxiety grew as you watched classmates race to complete the timed challenge in the ten-foot diving pool. A brick meant nothing, you rationalized. You weren't learning deep-sea diving. But you don't like to fail, and you needed to pass the class. So you began your descent with every intention of succeeding, inching closer to the black rubber brick. You tried; you did. But everyone had to fail at something, right? Wasn't the act of deciding what you failed at in itself a triumph? The pressure tightened around your head and blood pulsed in your eardrums and you imagined them shattering. So you surfaced and told the instructor you were recovering from a sinus infection, not ashamed one bit at the lie. He nodded, understanding. The next class you

passed the test with the brick eight feet deep. Good enough.

Two unfamiliar children approach the dock, and you make them demonstrate crawl strokes in the shallow end before they're allowed into deep water. You keep one eye on the man, squinting, the sun full in your face. By the time you finish, he's overtaken your post. He grips the ladder and leans back. If his hands slip, he'll Nestea plunge outside the swim area.

"You might want to be careful," you tell him, hoping for the right mix of authority and unconcern.

He glares at you. "Worry about yourself. I don't take orders."

You hold up both hands, as if surrendering to him. "Just a suggestion." You try to sound nice, though it disgusts you to have to act pleasantly at all toward him. You've had ample experience with quick-change drunks from your mother's current and former boyfriends.

He rights himself and leans in closer to you. "I don't take suggestions either."

The two new children climb the ladder and quickly jump in again.

"God dammit," the man says shaking his foot. Then, once they've resurfaced, "You drenched my shoes."

"Sorry, Mister. It was an accident," one kid offers.

"Accident, my ass." He half lunges at them, as if he'd grab them if they weren't already in the water. The children's eyes widen, and you motion for them to play next to the other ladder and narrow your eyes at the man's profile.

"Little shits," he says.

You've had it this week with people breaking rules and copping attitudes. The drunk foursome who pulled a speedboat right up next to the swim area, spilling trash and beer cans onto the shore as they staggered to the bathrooms, swearing when you confronted them and pulling away just as the police arrived. The grubby teenagers who commandeered the swing set and shoved a park rat. The mother who laid into you for giving her son a thirty-minute time-out after numerous warnings not to run on the dock, the woman so relentless you had to threaten to call the police on her too. It's the heat. It makes people edgy, restless, nasty. The same heat you read about in social psychology class that encouraged crowds to yell *Jump!* at someone threatening to plunge off a building.

Really, this waterfront park isn't worth everyone's emotion: just a scrubby swath of grass littered with duck crap, two splintering picnic tables, a sagging swing set, and a view of the boats easing into the marina to gas up, a constant reminder of the succinct class structure overshadowing lake life—those with boats and those without.

"You don't seem strong enough to save an adult," the man says, staring mostly at your breasts as he talks.

"I've had a lot of training." You cross your arms and concentrate on the swimmers, thinking of the football player you often towed in lifeguarding class whose muscle acted as a natural anchor, intensifying the rescue drills. This man, too, would sink with all that muscle bulking his frame.

"Sure, Sweetheart. Whatever." He watches seaweed approach the dock. "Tell you what, I'll start drowning so you can say you've made a save."

"No, thanks," you say quickly. "Absolutely not."

"Oh, come on. It'd be fun. You and me out there," he nods toward the water, "your arm around my chest, pulling me in." He directs a spit bullet into the water, its bubbles floating for several seconds on the lake surface before disappearing.

"I wouldn't do that," you say, referring to the towing method. You'd hold either his wrist or one end of a rescue tube as he held the other.

"Oh no? I'm not good enough?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Prissy bitch." He staggers down the dock, and you wince, waiting for him to fall, but he makes it to the opposite side, takes off his shoes, and stands on the ladder's top rung. The two children swim back to your side of the dock.

You look again at the park entrance, but there's no one there. A familiar feeling of dread fills your stomach, and your pulse quickens. "Sir?" you say, walking over to the man but standing out of his reach. "I think you should go sit on shore for a while."

"I'm not going anywhere." He sneers and toe-tests the water.

"I don't think you're in a condition to be swimming."

He lowers down to his calves. "You want to give me a test in the kiddie pool? Is that it? I know how to swim."

"I'm sure you do." You move closer. "But–"

"But nothing. I'll do whatever I goddamn please." His index finger nearly grazes your breast, but you know better than to brush it away. A speedboat buzzes around the promontory, arching a rooster tail high into the air. The sun throbs against your back.

The dock trembles and you turn and see the cannonballers speed-walk away, too fast for you to ask them to get the other lifeguard. "Don't test me today," you say, resisting the urge to call him pal or buddy. "I'm not in the mood."

"Oh, poor baby."

You wipe sweat from your forehead. You aren't made for this kind of weather. The energy-sapping, oven heat. "You've had your fun. Take your party elsewhere."

He climbs back up the ladder and shakes water off the bottom of his legs, dark tendrils of hair inking his calves. "Make me."

You should just ignore him. Though short, he could easily overpower you. Or he could be another Jesus freak, like the woman yesterday who seemed so nice, striking up a conversation as you sat in the shade on a break checking park passes. She asked about the swimming lessons you taught weekday mornings, about your studies and future plans far away from this town. Ten minutes of pleasantries only to interrupt with "So, have you accepted Jesus as your savior?" You would have lied and told her you're an atheist if you didn't also fear some higher power's retribution. You hated the woman's arrogance and conviction. Hated how she targeted you as someone lacking something. Hated that you didn't believe in anything strongly enough to give her more than an embarrassed stammer. You're done with these cocky assholes, all converging on you. Suddenly, you feel fearless.

You back away from him and retrieve your cell phone from your bag. "Fine, I'm calling the police." You make a show of turning the phone on, even though there's no reception on the dock and you'd need to use the landline on shore.

He shakes his head and laughs. "Nice try. Cell phones don't work down here."

You drop your shoulders, trying to look more annoyed than defeated. "Just leave."

"You can't tell me what to do, little girl. You don't have it in you. I can

swim to the middle of the lake if I want. Hell, I could swim all the way across." He points to the oak-lined promontory on the opposite shore two hundred yards away. Beyond it, the lake opens up wide and winds into several inlets. At least it does on the map. You've never seen the entire lake. He bares his teeth, leering. What does he expect you to say?

You look at his caveman-hairy legs and his self-satisfied smirk and think about your mother's newest man, the one she's sure is it, how he sweep-slapped a bottle of beer against the wall the other night and left a trail of froth and fizz that was almost like art, except your heart was pounding too much to appreciate it. This man is yet another drunk you have to wait to grow bored so he'll move on and give up the fight. You don't have time for this. You've already spent years with the likes of him. You glance at the mothers in the shallow end and the two swimmers in the deep oblivious to your conversation, unaware of the threat this man poses. You should be paying attention to them, not wasting time with this loser. *Then do it*, you think. *Coward*. "It's farther than it looks. Swimming's not the same as running."

"No, *really*?"

You brush off his mockery. "You'd get halfway out there and start doggie paddling, praying a boat takes pity on you and lets you climb aboard. That is, if one doesn't hit you first. And with that sunny disposition of yours, I wouldn't hold my breath."

"You don't believe me?"

You shake your head. Now it's your turn to scoff. "A couple minutes out there and you'll be pleading for help, but don't bother looking to me. You'd be out of my jurisdiction." You doubt this is true; you'd likely still be expected to rescue him. Just like you had to clean up the drunk boaters' trash on the shore. Just like you're always cleaning up after these people.

"Guess we'll find out then," he says and without fanfare dives in and continues swimming underwater. Mission accomplished, you think as you watch his legs disappear.

Soon, small flat bubbles mark his progress through the murk. After fifteen or twenty seconds, the bubbles near the platform, then reach it. Another bubble breaks the surface, then another, a line approaching the rope border some thirty-five yards away. Surely he'll surface any moment. Another bubble, they come slower now. Then, a mild palpitation. A hint of panic. What have

you done? You can't turn away to look for the other lifeguard because you may lose track of the bubbles and your heart races and there's another bubble wrinkling the water, but you can't stop the adrenaline and you don't know if you should jump in and get a head start or not, but you doubt you'd be able to see the bubbles from down there to know where he ends up, and technically, he's not in trouble yet, so you wait and hope for another, and there it is by the rope; he's at the fifteen-foot mark. If he starts to drown, it's close to a steep drop-off, the lake bed quickly giving way, where you don't know if you can save him. But he wouldn't let himself drown, would he? He carried on a cogent-enough conversation. Or had he slurred some words? You can't remember now. You take off your whistle and loop the rescue tube's strap over your shoulder.

Another bubble appears beyond the rope, then several seconds pass and there's nothing. Your head spins; the sun and heat push against you, the most energetic, living forces on a day like this. Was that another bubble? You can't tell. It's been almost a minute, though, his lungs likely reaching their limit if they haven't already. You alone have the power to save him, but is he worth it, this drunk who threatens children? Threatens you? Is he more important than your eardrums, than the swimmers you protect who abide by the rules? You're not supposed to ask.

You feel the dangerous insistence of the heat, demanding action. *Do it, jump!* some heat-agitated crowds have yelled to people threatening suicide, baiting jumpers to succumb to another power. The blood throbs in your eardrums. *Jump, jump, jump.* Not Jesus, as that woman was so smitten with, but the heat, you could give yourself over to that. Let it push you to the edge, teetering, as you peer into the promise of cool, the only way to be saved out here. A speedboat ignoring the no-wake zone sends short, angry waves into the swim area and you watch them rumble toward you, thinking about the absoluteness and futility of depth, about your eardrums, the dark, dirty water, the odds stacked against you. No one will blame you with those odds. You take a deep breath. And jump.

Picklocks in Oblivion

Jacob M. Appel

WE'RE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF Oblivion—not even a quarter of the drive from Richmond to Laurendale—when Janine announces that she wants to be euthanized. "This is important, Leo. If I'm ever in an accident and my brain ends up totally fried, don't you dare leave me to vegetate in some dingy warehouse. Your job is to fly me out to Oregon and slip a plastic bag over my head. You can do that for me, can't you?" Janine's voice brims with casual indignation, as though no reasonable human being could possibly refuse her request—certainly not her own boyfriend. Her nostrils flare. Her fiery auburn hair seems to burn even brighter than usual. She folds her fleshy arms across her ample chest and demands once again, "*Can't you?*"

One of the challenges of dating a twenty-five-year-old actress is that she expects to get her own way. But we've only been together six weeks, so I'm not prepared to commit myself to any terminal plug-pulling. Besides, I've cautioned Janine several times against speaking too intimately during this trip, because the locked-in man is merely paralyzed, not deaf. "Trust me," I assured her en route to the nursing home this morning, "the guy doesn't want to hear how turned-on you are." You don't need to be a Rhodes Scholar to realize that the hapless fellow also doesn't want to hear about suffocating the disabled.

"I'd have to fly you to Switzerland," I answer. "Or maybe Holland. Only doctors can assist with suicides in Oregon."

The locked-in man says nothing. That's the one thing that he's good at.

"Don't make a joke of this," warns Janine. "My mother had an aunt who worked on the Manhattan Project—one of the only female scientists at Los Alamos—but she fell down a staircase when I was in third grade. We went to visit her once in the old folks home. I'll never forget what it was like to watch a woman with a Ph.D. in particle physics struggling to spell her own name with children's blocks."

"*Please*, Janine," I implore her. "The man can hear you."

"He's sleeping."

I glance at the locked-in man through the van's rearview mirror. Sure enough, Dr Bingham's eyes are firmly shut. Sporting the tailored Italian suit