



Stone Canoe, a Journal of Arts, Literature and Social Commentary, is published annually by Syracuse University. Address all correspondence to:

Stone Canoe, 700 University Avenue, Syracuse, New York 13244-2530. E-mail: stonecanoe@uc.syr.edu.
Phone: 315-443-3225/4165. Fax: 315-443-4174. Web: stonecanoejournal.org.

Stone Canoe showcases the work of a diverse mix of emerging and well-established artists and writers with ties to Upstate New York. In so doing, the journal supports Syracuse University's ongoing commitment to creative community partnerships, and seeks to promote greater awareness of the cultural and intellectual richness of the region.

The views expressed in the contents of this journal are solely those of the contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Syracuse University, its trustees, staff, faculty, or students.

Stone Canoe considers for inclusion previously unpublished short fiction, creative nonfiction, short plays, poems, essays, technology writing, and works of visual art in any medium. Submissions must be sent via our web site, and must include a short biographical statement and contact information. Consult our web site stonecanoejournal.org/submission for updated instructions on submissions manager and forms.

All submissions are automatically considered for one of five *Stone Canoe* prizes in the appropriate category. There is no additional fee required. Details about each prize are provided on our web site.

All rights for individual works revert to contributors upon publication, though *Stone Canoe* may seek permission to feature submitted work on its web site.

Stone Canoe is set in Times New Roman, a serif typeface commissioned by the British newspaper *The Times* in 1931, created by Victor Lardent at the English branch of Monotype.

Stone Canoe 8 is available for purchase through our web site, stonecanoejournal.org, or by sending a check to: *Stone Canoe*, 700 University Avenue, Syracuse, New York, 13244-2530.

The educational rate for classroom use is \$10, and past individual issues are \$14.

Stone Canoe is also available at Syracuse University Bookstores, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com, as well as at other regional bookstores and at a number of other arts venues.

ISSN: 1934-9963 ISBN: 978-1-62890-297--6

Stone Canoe is a proud member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses.



2014 | Number 8

Editor
Robert Colley

Drama Editor
Kyle Bass

Fiction Editor
Patrick Lawler

Moving Images Editor
Nancy Keefe Rhodes

Music Editors
Neva Pilgrim
Steven Stucky

Nonfiction Editor
Steven Yao

Poetry Editor
Stephen Kuusisto

Visual Arts Editor
Melora Griffis

Veterans' Writing Prize Editors
Matthew Zeller
Brian Turner

Contributing Editor
Doran Larson

Assistant Editors
Allison Vincent
Martha Zvonik

Art Director
Adam Rozum

Production Manager
Karen Nadolski

Copy Editors
Megan Davidson
C. S. Phoénix



SYRACUSE
UNIVERSITY
University College

Daegan Miller

A LETTER TO MY SON AS HE NEARS HIS SECOND BIRTHDAY

Ithaca, New York
The Middle of February 2013

Dear W.,

It is mid-February in Ithaca—cold and grey and damp—and as I deliberately, hesitantly peck this letter out to you, and as I look around our small house, and as I marvel at all the traces of you that were not here two years ago (the colorful, shapely buttons on the floor that you love to toss, the wobbling stacks of board books, the partially deflated, iridescent, star-shaped balloon that you won't let us toss), as I look at the accumulated stuff of a not-yet-two-year-old who is less than three weeks from his second birthday, I find my thoughts twisting back upon themselves, becoming a living knot where memory feels both new and old as we edge, moment by moment, closer to closing the circle and again reliving the miracle of your birth.

As I'm sure you'll come to know, I've never been a "Believer" in any sort of religious sense. But what has always struck me about the Episcopalian tradition I was brought up in is the well-worn, well-known circularity of the year. The same celebrations, psalms, and songs for the same events that occur with the same clocklike regularity, the same time, every year: a buildup, from birth to death, and, finally, resurrection, endlessly repeated. When I was little, and my parents would take me to the small, white church in Old Kinderhook, New York, I used to bury my head in my arms and slump over the hard, darkly-polished wooden back of the pew in front of us, bored to the edge of bad behavior by a trinity of our country minister's droning voice, the stuffy closeness of God's house, and the prayers, repeated by so many voices that the words lost all distinct shape. I would wonder: doesn't this get old? We all know the story. This happened last year, I thought, and the one before that and all the ones before that, forever. Don't you remember? Why are we here, doing this again, for, literally, the two-thousandth time?

Maybe it's that I'm getting older; or maybe it's having a kid—you—or maybe it's that, as an historian, I spend most of my waking hours living with the past; or maybe all three—I don't know. But I've begun to experience time differently, circularly, and

this revolution feels...not comforting, exactly, but familiar, as if our three lives—yours, and mine, and Mom's—annularly orbit a shared tale, a narrative rod giving strength and courage and meaning, our own founding story that nonetheless changes slightly with every pass. Like the way that the rings your Mom and I gave to each other on our wedding day—meant to symbolize the continuity of love—are slowly being molded by our fingers, are losing their perfect mechanical circularity for something more humanly oblong, and so are becoming personal, golden bands that can truly fit on only one person's finger, ever, a record of our lives together.

The first draft of *Our Family's Story*, according to my telling, begins on March 16, 2010, the day I turned thirty, an age I had feared. "Jesus," I said to Mom. "Thirty. I'm officially old."

It was a hot summer, that summer; a good summer for gardening. We planted tomatillos for green salsa, and squash, sweet peas, and spicy radishes. And it was the summer we decided that we wanted to start a family. On July 2, at 9:22 a.m., while I was digging deep in the archives of nineteenth-century American culture in Worcester, Massachusetts, I received this e-mail from Mom:

Test: Positive! Yikes! I knew it had to be, though, from the way I was feeling.
Wow! Something to celebrate (with sobriety).
Can't wait to see you later, Pops. Wow....
I love you so much!

Our dream had taken root, and I replied:

Holy moly...I love you so, so much!!!! We're going to raise a wonderful, beautiful child, you and I...This is wonderful news...
I'll take a break in a little bit and give you a call!

I signed the e-mail: "Your Incredibly Fertile D."

We schemed and planned, we fought the heat and morning sickness, that summer. We told our family and close friends about you, and on August 13, Mom and I went to her midwife's office, where the midwife pointed some strange-looking device at Mom's rounding belly, and we heard a tiny, strong ten-week-old heart thumping away, vitally, assuredly—the world's promise to all of us. It was an ecstatic symphony, right there in that sort of institutional office in an office park that nevertheless shone like a sacred pilgrimage site visited by couples expecting miracles. We heard your heart. Our little person. Alive. Healthy. Perfect.

Later that day I was bitten by a dog, a quick, telling kiss, and drove to the hospital to rule out rabies. Maybe it was the dog bite, or maybe it was insecurity over impending fatherhood. Whatever it was, it somehow made it impossible for me to ignore the other pain that I had been concealing.

And so the next day, August 14, I went back to the doctor's office to have the dull

ache in my groin examined—a mysterious hard spot where there shouldn't have been one. By mid-morning, I had my diagnosis: testicular cancer.

Surgery followed immediately, and after, Mom and I went to Maine, there to meet your grandparents on Monhegan Island, the artists' island. It rained the entire time, which was wonderful, in a way—the whole world was a fluid, flowing, living wetness. We took walks, hobbles, really, and we got back to scheming, planning, dreaming. On one of these walks, Mom found your name.

The surgery, though, didn't entirely work.

And so a few weeks later I hoisted myself into the barber's chair, asking for the first crew cut of my life.

"How short?" my longtime barber asked.

"Short as it goes," I answered, avoiding his eyes as they sought mine in the mirror.

Chemotherapy began a few weeks later, in September, I think, and I spent all of that terrible fall and winter of 2010-2011 befogged by a toxic plague-fighting, brain-numbing brine, and then slowly, mercifully drying out from the chemicals they pumped into me—sometimes for eight hours a day—those chemicals that drained my energy, so that walking even a few hundred yards was a triumph.

I remember that fall bitterly: discovering that chemo deadened some of the nerves in my fingertips and left weird blotches across my back, biceps, and armpits; pulling the hair out of my shaved head in the shower, tuft by dead tuft, and then having to clean the drain because there was so much stubble choking the bathtub's gullet that the water stood ankle deep, soapy and stagnant and prickly; learning that the chemicals flowing through my body might render me impotent; visiting Syracuse's fertility clinic, as Mom's belly swelled, trying to give ourselves the option of giving you a brother or sister.

And I remember that fall angrily: instead of getting to do the stereotypical things expectant fathers should get to do—build or fix things, fret about college funds, make your Mom's favorite foods, give her back rubs, or hold her tight—I spent hours in the chemo ward among the others, gaunt and pale and scared, worrying over blood counts, trying desperately to stay warm as the weather got chillier, hiding my shameful baldness under a series of hats. I'm most of all bitter that I worried about cuddling your Mom, my beautiful wife, because the effluvia seeping out of my pores might get absorbed by her, by *you*; bitter that I spent those months fearing that my very presence was toxic and that by simply wanting to be there for you both—a good father and a good husband—I was causing harm. I didn't read parenting books, but, instead, medical studies, histories of cancer, all the stuff about end-of-life planning that the Livestrong Foundation sends. For the first time ever, I didn't see the leaves change color.

The days grew short and dark and cold, as a biting wind blew the trees bare, leaving behind thin skeletal hands to rake at the cloudy sky. I had always loved fall, before, savored the sweet melancholy of living at the tail-end of a year. I finished chemo at the

end of November and got my first “all clear”—it appeared to have worked—and we all drove four hours back east to your grandparents’—my parents—back to Canaan for a big Thanksgiving celebration; but I was too tired and slept through most of it.

And yet, despite all of this I also remember a branching excitement as we crept past the solstice, as the days grew longer, as the angle of the sun’s rays fell more directly, more nourishingly, slowly but noticeably warming the earth in preparation. Mom and I made a cast of her belly, and painted a big, healthy tree on it. We glued dried sugar maple leaves to the branches, and we hung it above your changing table. I figured out how to strap on the baby carrier, and—just to make sure that I wouldn’t let you slip—I put a large, pear-shaped spaghetti squash in it to lug around the house for practice.

You, my beautiful, healthy son, born bluish and bigger than either Mom or I could have believed, came to us on Thursday morning, around 10:30, after a quick C-section, performed a few floors above the chemo ward, at the hospital just down the road from our home. Both rooms, as I remember, looked out over Cayuga Lake, but I remember the view from yours. It was March 10, 2011, and snowing gently: March to March, one cycle completed.

Cancer and childbirth have become the two major, inextricably entangled narrative poles in this, my new life, though I’d give anything for them to be free of each other. You were joyfully and hopefully conceived at the same time that I began to darkly worry something had gone wrong with me. We discovered positively that Mom was pregnant with you when her hCG levels rapidly rose; we discovered that I had cancer because *my* hCG levels also rose—doubling, and then doubling again as the new life inside of me took root and stretched its malformed arms. I was whisked into the operating room to have the abomination feeding off of me cut out, and months later, Mom and I could compare abdominal scars.

The anger and bitterness isn’t gone, and I’m not sure it ever will be. It continues to gnaw at my guts in the form of a black fear. I get scared, sleepless scared, whenever I think of the future: will I have one, or will cancer steal that, too? Have I unknowingly deformed yours with my corruptible genetics? You’ve done nothing wrong, ever—all you want is to eat pasta with mushrooms, look at birds, and dance to our rockabilly records, and yet you’ve been saddled with my cellular history. For how many generations does the Bible say children must pay for the sins of their fathers? Am I an unwilling Abraham? What story works, here?

Cancer stole time from me, from us, the very most valuable time that only comes once in an expectant dad’s—in an expectant-for-the-first-time—family history. And cancer casts its shadow over my view of the future.

But the story revolving around the poles of diagnosis and birth has changed from its first-draft version. It now has two years of accreted memories and firsts augmenting its spare narrative bones: your first smile, first giggle, first steps; long jogging-stroller runs together, endless games of chase or peek-a-boo, or making up jokes. Winter brings with

worked—and we all
back to Canaan for a
ugh most of it.

ment as we crept past
ays fell more directly,
preparation. Mom and
We glued dried sugar
ng table. I figured out
ouldn't let you slip—I
ouse for practice.

either Mom or I could
fter a quick C-section,
st down the road from
Lake, but I remember
March to March, one

ly entangled narrative
be free of each other.
hat I began to darkly
nitively that Mom was
ered that I had cancer
again as the new life
whisked into the oper-
nd months later, Mom

will be. It continues to
ess scared, whenever I
? Have I unknowingly
hing wrong, ever—all
ce to our rockabilly re-
how many generations
rs? Am I an unwilling

e time that only comes
—family history. And

h has changed from its
d firsts augmenting its
g jogging-stroller runs
kes. Winter brings with

it birds flocking to our bird feeder, and you watch diligently, shouting every time you see a goldfinch, jay, or woodpecker. Mid-August is marked not just by the despair of diagnosis, but by the recollection of picking strawberries and huckleberries, their juice staining hands and mouths, the sweetness imprinting itself on our memories.

Today is March 1, 2013, and the red-winged blackbirds have come back, much to your delight. It's nine days until your birthday which we'll celebrate with the most wonderfully exciting thing you can conceive: a hot cocoa party. "Tocoa," you call it. Last year, Mom made your first birthday cake, a monkey cake, and you liked it, though not quite as much as the celery sticks that we assumed only the adults would eat. We had taken your shirt off so you wouldn't mash frosting into it, and so my vision of you and your first cake is of a bare-chested little boy bespattered from nose to bellybutton with sugary yellow-and-brown goo, and little chunks of chewed-up-and-spat-out organic celery sticking up here and there like the first tufts of clover cropping out of a muddy spring field. What will be my new memories to layer on top of this one?

It snowed today, and was again a dank Ithaca grey, but the chickadees were out, chattering their spring songs—*Spring's here, Spring's here*, Mom has taught you they sing—and the dampness smelled not just cold but earthily fecund, the smell of warmer green days and promise. This is the way Ithaca smells when February turns into March, when we throw rocks and sticks into the slush puddles, expecting grass. Soon, we'll roll around on the lawn, and spend long hours by the pond, and explore the woods, looking for the sorts of overhanging trees that will make good forts, keeping us both safe.

We've made it through the winter, to another March, our third together, drawing closer to the day when we'll give thanks for your birth and for each other, and, keeping our growing story in mind, turn our faces towards the rising sun to laugh.

I love you forever, son.

-Dad