

## Mark Vogel

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### Official record

No rest for the wicked in the search  
    an hour before dawn for the thesis  
in yellowed layers of a mother's unwritten  
vita—through diplomas, contracts,  
recipes, letters—the deliberate, disorganized  
    detritus of a small town life.

The weak lamp is not up the task, too early  
to face the bright. Essential photos,  
familiar but unlabeled, beckon from boxes,  
    but promise only ancient faces,  
untold stories. Writing the definitive  
obituary will be a struggle, especially when  
outside a mist blows upriver, the wet  
    already settled in, as a day of fog,  
more windy drift. She murmurs from the bed  
in the next room, as if worn scenes swirl/refuse to lie still,  
for only she can act out the past/assign  
    dates with smiles and asides.

Her gentle cough says no one here can  
make simple the rich decades—that essence  
is already public and congealed, known to  
    neighbors, and those that count.

So inevitable that later, when the day fully wakes,  
she will grope half-blind, and insist again  
every pile must be explored/the recipe  
    for Lazy Man's Pie savored.

Separated by walls, her child-like talk  
comes from the bedroom, followed by  
the half-imagined sound of blankets  
    falling to the floor.

A practiced groan signals the dream is over/  
the day is alive, when struggle is required/  
getting upright on sticklike legs to point  
    out the funny story (again) as  
a gem. To guide the immature rude  
beast (me) unaware of rules/so fragile  
anticipating loss like a black hole.

Looking for the mythical one  
true way she as teacher would approve.

## Great bear adventures

*Grizzlies are equal opportunity maulers, attacking without regard to race, creed, ethnicity or marijuana use."*

**Harpers, May 2011**

Not uncommon for a college boy to smoke reefer before work, that by definition is temporary/pocket money/secondary to education's nebulous degree plan. So big boss man should have guessed that even in Montana those not fully formed might well smile and plunge ahead/pretend capabilities/comfortable to discover cock-eyed consequences later.

O my high sky/when a wisp of clouds reveals nine colors scooting/far above a tiresome leap with yellowed files/thin moral labels/to what never is obvious—the many judges connecting the spontaneous act to smoking pot to bear anger attack. They spoke loud ahead of time/then afterwards again/those that mouth scripted liturgy that paints red all that is dumb.

Thank god, the real verdict spread irony, and bandaged the wound mostly right. The spacey kid plunged in ripped on a wild path he didn't yet understand, but *it wasn't like he wandered into the grizzly pen looking for munchies*. He showed up for work maybe late/muttered the wrong joke/but he was still young/fresh/not yet addicted to Home Depot, or fully formed

when flickering myopia pushed the edge, and the stanky grizzly, irritable, growled at his late lunch, before undeniable violence cracked wide the mundane, then moved on like a slow moving thunderstorm. The somber court solved the deliberate lumbering mystery in one hour, and gave the kid scarred hokey jokey perspective. Observers left upbeat,

having learned that play as a way of knowing is not a crime, even in Montana—  
not even for one day.

## **Biting as a way of life**

When the blood can't help but pulse,  
and chaos is dirty,  
and conversation bends weird,  
tormented desire gnaws and nibbles  
at the quick, insistent in the search  
for a tremor within—the sure source under the skin—  
as if from birth quiet destruction kernels,  
worming essence that seeks exposure.  
When the wind shifts and clothes don't fit,  
from the side a thin voice babbles:  
*Call your mother. Change the vacuum bag.*  
*Daily remove lint from the dryer.*  
*While doing homework, look the part,*  
as if a bearded bear from 1972 drones:  
*You become the monster you now cultivate.*  
And, without being asked, a friend  
in tights worries about abs,  
one specific stretching exercise,  
atrocious beauty, as frenetic air leaks winter.  
When scooting clouds push what seems  
appropriate bleak forward, the lumbering  
rabid bull from *Old Yeller* drools  
on the horizon. Then fingers *must* bite  
at the unattainable. As an habitual  
character flaw, again familiar childish  
fears bloat, fed large by taunting  
extremities.

## Unquestioned domestic death

The plastic palm tree and bright pink gravel  
stupidly defined a desk as the tropics,  
    the exotic wild threatening to spread.  
Into this local world a turtle appeared as  
an undocumented pet, fresh from an alien flood  
of snakes, alligators, lizards, frogs—  
    in a time when no one released lists  
of imported mortality, or named day-glo  
painted shelled creatures, or questioned how  
alligators adapted to captivity, or thrived as  
    legends in the sewers when flushed away.

The turtle swam in his pool, old before his time,  
    then wide-eyed and free on special  
days tracked exquisite footprints on the desk.  
Most days he floated sleepy and mute in his kingdom  
waiting for minnows which never arrived.  
    With no apparent needs beyond eating,  
and no fronts altering bedroom weather, his  
nights and days seemed a meditation, though  
his algae stench entered dreams like a  
    premonition of dying.

Concrete memory of the cactus in the window,  
    and Led Zeppelin din, and Walter Cronkite  
remained alive for years, but no hint exists  
about the turtle's death, or when exactly his home  
moved to the attic, just in case his kind returned.

    Though light still floats and stalls,  
then speeds ahead, and rooms change colors  
like a chameleon adjusting, nowhere lingers  
the yellowed history of turtles, or white mice,  
    or guppies, or the biting hamster

that died before getting fat. No bold orange  
    and black sign states how the edict  
appeared to replace cages, to push aside  
the childish past, and forget on purpose,  
like it was all a silly game, then move on  
    to larger more needy pets.

**Mark Vogel** has published short stories in *Cities and Roads*, *Knight Literary Journal*, *Whimperbang*, *SN Review*, and *Our Stories*. Poetry has appeared in *Poetry Midwest*, *English Journal*, *Cape Rock*, *Dark Sky*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Broken Bridge Review* and other journals. He is currently Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, and directs the Appalachian Writing Project.