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Magazine & Feature Writing

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1988 words

Magazine and Feature Writing

Magazine and Feature Writing; JOU 5505. Fifteen students aged 20 to 56.

Dreamers. Seekers. Climbers. Teachers. Workers. Parents. Husbands. Wives. Ex-husbands, wives. Graduate students, undergrads.

Me, Miriam Bitner, I'm searching for release, atonement, my own voice. Almost 40 and nothing to show for it. Marriage and motherhood have eaten up my reserves, and left me filled to bursting with words. So I thought writing – writing other people's stories – would offer release.

Hard to say about the others. One woman dresses in business outfits and compiles the student newspaper articles she publishes in a portfolio. She has aspirations.

Two are graduate assistants, teaching classes themselves and stringing for the local papers.

A girl, an undergrad, comes in late and yawns long and wide so her fillings show; her tongue curls against the floor of her mouth and her tonsils twitch. She declares her hunger nightly, referring to it as a hostile takeover that catches her off guard.

Then there's Wade. He's one course shy of his B.A. Toward the end of the semester, he tells me his age – 47. I would have guessed him closer to 30. He seems an oversized boy in a grown up body. His face is enormous and round. His short, stiff, orange hair lays in whorls heavy with cowlicks. He is big, but stubby; his body, too long and dense

for his limbs.

Wade's comments in class throughout the semester are off the mark. He has one of those deep, resonant voices and he speaks with complete sincerity. I have never seen him smile, although he laughs sometimes – a guffaw that jars with its volume and intensity. His voice doesn't match what he says. His grasp is limited to minor points, which he latches onto ferociously and repeats too many times.

There's no final exam in this class. The last class is just an excuse to turn in our feature stories and assemble at the campus tavern. Dr. T. asks for volunteers to read their stories.

Nobody wants to go first. We exchange glances and shrugs. We look up, surprised, when Wade speaks up in a voice even deeper and more serious than usual: "Well, I'll start then."

He meets Dr. T's gaze just long enough to confirm he has the floor before he propels forward. "I want to read from my journal." (The journal was supposed to record reactions to the assigned readings in experimental and literary journalism.) He arranges his spiral bound notebook in front of him, opens it to a page marked with a loose sheet of paper.

He clears his throat with a drawn-out movement that bulges out from his neck. Otherwise he sits perfectly still, his heavy hands splayed open on the table and no sign of tension in his fleshy, large-jowled face.

"The sound of a car engine is what brought it back like it was happening all over again. I didn't recognize the sound at first. But I recognized the feeling that something bad was about to happen.

I was a boy. I didn't notice dates. But I had a feel for time passing. And I felt the

unease around me.

My father's VA check would have arrived yesterday. He'd lost a leg stepping on a mine in World War I. Our living was his disability, and the ironing my mother took in and our hens and our garden.

We had an old car, a Chevy Nova, that my mother didn't drive. The engine ran rough and when it was shut off, it continued running for several minutes until it choked on itself.

The sound of the engine blocked out the sounds of my father struggling out of the car. After it quieted, I heard his crutches skidding on the gravel walk to the house. On good days, he planted them firmly and swung himself forward smoothly. But when he drank, his crutches made sloppy contact with the ground and he lurched between them unevenly.

Wade sits motionless in his seat. Blotches of sweat show through his shirt, which stretches tight across his chest and gut. The rest of us fidget. The undergrad girl chews gum, smacking it with her tongue, keeping a beat. My feet gyrate under the table. Another student traces circles on the table with her fingers. Even Dr. T. bounces an eraser against his palm. We don't look at each other's faces. Not at Wade's and not at each other's.

"Before he came, I was sitting at the round table in our kitchen. My brother sat next to me. My sister and mother were placing dishes on the table. It was what my mother called a garden supper – cuc's and onions and tomatoes soaked in vinegar, soup beans and corn bread. My mother baked cornbread in a big iron skillet and turned it out upside down on a plate. The crust crunched when I bit into it and tasted of honey. I was hungry. When I heard him, my mind kept jumping between the corn bread and getting away.

When I heard the latch disengage, my mother looked at me. Her eyes said everything. My sister and brother were already gone out the back door. I slipped into the bedroom I shared with my brother just behind the kitchen.

I hid in the wardrobe. Our house had no closets, just huge, open-backed wardrobes fashioned out of oak boards and door fronts. My mother pressed our clothes and folded them and pressed down the folds so they looked like they came new from a store. She stacked them in neat piles on the wardrobe shelves, along with woolen blankets and sweaters. She had a great belief in moth balls, so the air inside the wardrobe where I hid smelled sharp and irritating. I lay myself on top of the piles of ironed clothes. The weight of my body flattened them just enough to make room for me under the next shelf.

Through the wall, which was thin, I heard the scrape and grunt of our front door, swollen with rainwater, pushing against the frame. I knew he would have almost fallen with the sudden giving way of the door. I heard his crutches jump and catch on the floor boards as he stopped his fall. He muttered, goddamn door. Then he shouted, slurring his words. Mar-tha (he drew it out like it was two words) what the hell kinda supper d'ya call this? My mam never wooda served a meal with nothin but beans.

I heard the plates sliding against the wood as he swept his crutch across the table. And then china shattering on the floor. My mother's voice sounded far off, Don't Frank. Please don't.

Ya crazy ugly bitch. Tits like shrunk-up peas. Whore. I seen the way ya look at other men. Think I don't know what goes on here when I'm gone. Tho why any'd want ya's beyond me. Ugly bitch whore. Stinking bitch.

I could feel the heat of my mother's body through the wall. It pressed close against me like the shelf above me and the poison air. Then the wall trembled with the thwunk, thwunk, thwunk of his crutch against it, hitting and missing her body.

And in my head I could see the cornbread, all broken up on the floor."

Wade closes his notebook abruptly. He stares down at the cover of it as if the gold lettering holds some key. "I've never told about it before. I thought I had it put away where I'd never find it," he says, his voice little more than a whisper.

Even the undergrad girl stops smacking her gum. Every motion, every little release of nervous tension, stops. No one even breathes.

Dr. T. breaks the spell. "Well, thank you Wade." He stammers something about the cathartic value of journaling. Doesn't say anything about misunderstanding the assignment. Or that he's sorry Wade grew up that way. "And, um, now let's get the rest of you to share your work." As if we had never heard it.

We read, two or three pages each, from stories about homeless shelters and head start programs and nursing homes and teen pregnancies. Dr. T. starts to dismiss us, thank us for a good semester, and then remembers, "Blackwell, you never did your presentation on the John Hershey rebuttal, did you?"

Blackwell is one of the TA's. "Coming up," he says.

Thinking anticlimax, we shuffle through folders to find the rebuttal. I tune out Blackwell's voice.

I think of my son, Henry, who bears my husband's first name, but nothing else. I glance at my watch. 8 p.m. He will have finished eating, or not eating, more likely. My husband forces him to eat, can't tolerate his lack of hunger. But Thursdays, my husband plays poker and a sitter watches Henry. She'll be tucking him into bed now. I picture his

head, his blond curls encircling his face on the pillow like a halo. My husband thinks his hair looks effeminate. When he was five, starting kindergarten, my husband cut it so short the ringlets couldn't curl, but within a week his head was all ringed again. Now seven, Henry insists on keeping his hair longer. He has a way of shaking his head that sends his curls flying; it infuriates his father.

When I bend over to kiss him at bedtime, I see the angel at first. Until the heady mother-love feeling gives way to resentment. Henry deflates me. He holds me by force, looking deep into my eyes, insisting, "Mom, I have to tell you something." I start out listening, but he goes on and on. Maybe if I could snuggle down on the bed with him, fall asleep myself. But he has rules about that. "Don't sit on my bed. Don't touch my sheets, Mom. Just kiss me right here on my forehead." So I get impatient, shift my weight from leg to leg. I have such a short attention span when it comes to Henry. He always wants more from me than I can give. I cut him off finally, "Stop, Henry. Go to sleep." Leave him in tears.

The image of Henry merges with my picture of Wade as a boy. I see him frozen at the table, his eyes locked with his mother's. The mother I picture is right out of those Dust Bowl photographs, but with my features. The look combines fear and regret and failure, all those things I feel when I can't focus my maternal feelings and can't ameliorate my husband's disappointment in Henry – in his anxiousness, his femininity. The connections remain vague, but somehow a piece of Wade's catharsis becomes my own. I am still, quiet inside my head.

I'm not listening to Blackwell's presentation, but I snap back when I hear the word "naked." Blackwell talks about standing naked in front of his first class. He asks, "What is more true – the dream about my naked vulnerability or the *reality* of *acting* at ease in front of the class?" All semester we have argued about the responsibility of the reporter to report

accurate, documented events versus the need to communicate the human reality behind the events. Objectivity versus subjectivity. The possibility of objectivity drew me to journalism in the first place, but tonight I realize subjectivity has won out – Wade’s and Backwell’s and my own.

In the hallway after class we mass together, heading down the east wing toward the tavern. Wade goes the other direction, without a word to anyone. I think about calling after him, but I am unwilling to break my internal silence. It never was, I realize, my voice that I sought.

Reaching the tavern with the others, I don’t turn in. I walk on to the bay front edge where I stand and listen to the barely perceptible lap of the water against the sand. I stand there for a long time without impatience or thoughts of leaving.