

Q&A with Curtis Gillespie

Author of *In the Chair*

Winner: Gold Award: Best Article Alberta/N.W.T. 2014

Eighteen Bridges, Spring 2013



TMS: *When did you know you wanted to write about haircuts and your father?*

CG: I've always had very fond and very clear memories of the haircuts we got as kids. I've never cared about my hair, and I thought: I wonder *why* I don't care about my hair? Why do I have vivid memories of getting my hair cut? These memories are always very tied to my dad. Probably the first time it occurred to me as something to write about was the mid '90s.

TMS: *How did you find an entry point into the story?*

CG: That's one of the reasons the essay percolated for so long. I didn't know what the entry point was, what the through-line was. You just feel in your bones there's something there, and you have to wait for it to reveal itself. I knew it had something to do with my dad. Because he passed when I was at such a young age, everything is so hyper-intense. I kept thinking about how he was a really bad barber. It wasn't like he enjoyed doing it—it was a financial thing. Then I realized I had a through-line to play with.

TMS: *How did it end up in *Eighteen Bridges*?*

CG: I finally wrote a draft I liked, but it didn't go quite as deep. Around 2012, I sent the essay to *Granta* Magazine. I got an email from a senior editor saying this is great, it's really funny, I really enjoyed it, but it's not right for us. I could tell she wasn't really telling me what she thought. So I emailed her back saying I'm old enough and experienced enough that if you had trouble with one particular aspect of this or if you know of a way to make it better, I would really appreciate the feedback. She sent me an email back saying well in fact there was one major flaw: "I kept waiting and waiting for you to go deeper into the meaning and the symbolism of your relationship with your father, and it never came. And so even though the essay was very well-written and funny, it felt very surface-level." That's when I added the part about life being like a lake I'm crossing in a rowboat, going forward but always looking back. That whole section was not in the first draft. That one simple metaphor took that level where it really put everything that I was thinking about in context.

TMS: *When you write a first-person piece like this, is it tough to avoid sentimentality?*

CG: It's a tough line to walk. Sentimentality kills a piece stone-dead, but a lack of heart makes it never lift off the ground. It's such a delicate balance. It's something that I pay attention to anytime I write something that has any significant emotional content. I make sure I'm always focusing on really honest emotions. And the best way I can express that emotion is through physicality—through the body, and/or through metaphor or symbol. That's one way that I try and avoid sentimentality. Not always successfully, but I try.

TMS: *How do you recreate scenes with such vividness (such as the Korean massage scene)?*

CG: Throughout my writing life, I've kept a journal. It wasn't a haircut diary but I took notes here and there. Recreating scenes like that is actually something I have no trouble with. Like a lot of writers, I'm very visual. I see things like a movie playing in my head. So when I'm putting it down on the page, I'm trying to look at every corner of the frame to see if there's a detail I might have missed.

TMS: *What do you think new writers can learn from your experience of writing this essay?*

CG: It was a funny piece, in the sense that it took so long to flower. Maybe that's a sign for other writers: don't rush it. If you have something you know is good, but isn't ready, put it away, because your subconscious is always working.

Jeremy Klaszus conducted this interview for TMS.