

# East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

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### Saying Goodbye to People You Know

By: Brooks Rexroat

So it's night and everybody mills around with drinks in their hands, the parents in one room, the graduates in another, everyone's clothing in some form of regression from the ceremony: ties loosened or off or wrapped bandana-like at the hairline, heels replaced by tennis shoes but dresses still gleaming, except the spots down near the hem or up by the bust line or on the previously glowing white of a starched collar where brand new wine stains lurk but no one cares enough to tend to them.

We've all done this once for high school with cakes and punch and grandparents, then again for bachelor's degrees with Coors and Boone's Farm all-night goodbyes to people we swore we'd stay tight with forever, and yeah—there was a New Years' Party and a road trip once, but now half those last names are murky if they're even the same and we look twice and click accept with a shrug when they find us now on Facebook. But this is the last one: it's the end of grad school and the end of delay, and we can almost hear our parents (over there in the kitchen, where they've clustered around the little bit of good wine someone was dumb enough to bring) switching on the double-basin sink faucet to wash their hands of us.

The shy girl quietly gathers up her family—it was forgone conclusion she'd leave first—and the last we see of her is the swaying of her sundress as she crosses the street, then the side of her face as she ducks into the passenger seat of her mom's sedan. And the clown, he's next—he says real loud goodbyes until everyone stops to take account of his exit, tells everyone he's got somewhere more important to be, other goodbyes to say (we know better), and so he leaves us his fake-drunk flourish complete with a faux stumble for effect, tells one last dumb joke about his cat and we laugh like we always have even though it's not funny—again. And the single mom, she didn't stop by at all, but she was never around much anyway; still, we talk about her, wonder where she'll be in five years, and how much more she'll have accomplished than any of us. The younger ones linger, drinking up beers their evacuating elders abandon in a tub of diminishing ice, this year's class peeling off to ascend by default. And the rest of us get quieter, the stereo loses its energy and its volume, the dance moves get tamer then stop—then the standing, too and most of us settle into the Goodwill couch and the random collection of chairs and the rest stand because we know our next move will be away.

We talk about the headaches we'll have in the morning, and how we're too old for all this childish stuff—killing time because no one wants to be next to disappear. All the parents gone by now back to the Holiday Inn, it's still and uncomfortable, lots of weight shifting from one leg to the other because we're restless and tired but still planted in place. But when the clock cuts its way to two, the married guy points to his drink-wavering wife and says, "Better get her home before we have to carry her," and we nod and handshake and hug. The class drunk is taking up half a couch, and even if he weren't passed out, he wouldn't remember the goodbyes anyway, so we take pictures of him drooling, pose him in what feel at that hour like hilarious ways and entrust this last view of him to our memory chips.

And then it's gone from a bombastic group, a we, to just me and her—it's just us left, and we look at each other and we check out watches and we smile, both toeing up to sad terrain, trying to guess how much of the what-if speech we should bother offering, and out of a three-year chronology this is just a couple of seconds' worth of awkward, but it's a moment that deserves more time, that deserves more thought, deserves an impression deeper than those camera chips could provide and so we stand and burn the sad discomfort into our minds, tucking it someplace we can find it on a later day when we feel hopeful or wistful or bored. I end it, though, with, "I've got a long drive," and she does too, so she says, "Me too." And the thing is that when we wake up early in separate apartments and push gas pedals of separate cars to cross all those miles, we're going in the same direction most of the trip, just splitting to branch northward and southward, respectively, at the end—when it really means something.

We hug under that dim yellowed light, in that sour-smelling ranch house and we tell each other, "Stay in touch," and we answer each other, "Of course," and neither one believes the other—despite how much as we want to. My car is on one side of the block and hers is on the other, and so we pass each other, one last time, just a flicker when our headlights cross and we both look at the other. I wave but it's too late for her to see, and I imagine she waves, but it's too late for me to see, and I turn on the radio and imagine it'll be some sad song that I'll forever correlate with this particular leaving, but it's just a commercial for a furniture place that's going out of business, just to reopen in the fall when the students come back, just like it has each year. So I shut off the sound and there's a quiet lane overhung by birches just regaining their leaves and it's all over, just like that.



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## Interview with Brooks Rexroat

By: Alex Grashel



The interview was conducted orally, between Alexander E. Grashel, who was the interviewer, and the interviewee, Professor Brooks Rexroat. The interview took place on Friday, November 15th, 2015 around 8:30a.m in UC Clermont's student lounge. The East Fork Journal is forever grateful for Professor Brooks Rexroat's contributions to UC Clermont and the East Fork Journal.

*As an ex-journalist, how does writing for a journal compare with writing fiction?*

The thing about writing in journalism is that you get to see people on either the best or worst day of their life, which allowed me to gain a lot of empathy and compassion towards the people I was interviewing. When you're writing fiction, you don't have to be constrained by the truth and are thus farther removed from the character compared to when you're talking with a real person.

*After being very successful as a journalist, what made you want to become a teacher?*

During my first few years as a journalist, I moonlighted as a coach. During my time spent in Chattanooga, Tennessee working for the Times Free Press, I got to a place where even though I loved my work, I really missed interacting with students. My parents were elementary school teachers, so there was some background in the field for me, but I saw an opportunity in higher education to combine my love for writing with my love for teaching together into one career, and it's been a satisfying move.

*How did your involvement at UC Clermont help you in your writing career?*

While attending UC Clermont as a post-secondary student, I was a writer for the Lantern. I remember that the faculty really seemed to enjoy my writing and they encouraged me to pursue writing as a career. I look back on it now and I realize how significant it was for them to do that for me. Now I fully understand what it's like to be a professor: sometimes we get so caught up in marking up papers that we often forget to tell students how good they are. I'm very happy to be able to be in a position that allows me to give back. That's something that I really enjoy doing. While I was still working as a journalist, I had the opportunity to spend several months working with a family that was handling a loved one's Alzheimer's, and the resulting article produced some powerful results in that community. I've had a chance to tell stories in both fictional and true formats, and the thing that continues to strike me is that wherever you go, people generally seek opportunities to accomplish some good. My best moments have been the times I've been able to help others accomplish that.

*How important is it for beginning writer's to submit their work to journals?*

It is a tremendously important for beginning writers to submit their work for review because it allows you to learn how to get published and to be able to get a sense of where you are as a writer. Seek publication, find markets for your readers, and get your work to the best people for your work. Don't give up. When I was at graduate school at Morehead I didn't get any of my papers published until the last month I was there, and ironically, I ended up getting one story published per week after that. I will say this; success is more difficult once you get out of school. The more distance there is between you and the editors, the colder the process becomes.

**Brooks Rexroat writes and teaches in Cincinnati, Ohio. He holds a B.A. in print journalism from Morehead State University (Ky.) and an MFA in creative writing from Southern Illinois University. His work has been published in Weave Magazine, Midwestern Gothic, The Montreal Review, Best of Ohio Short Stories Vol. 1, and Every River on Earth—Writing From Appalachian Ohio (Ohio University Press, 2014). He was a winner of the 2012 London Telegraph (U.K.) International Short Story Competition. Visit him online at <http://www.brooksrexroat.com>.**