

Whatever Happened to Chris Olsen?

Carol Franks—English

Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thane own were. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

—John Donne (Meditation I7, 1624)

Chris Olsen is dead. He didn't want to die. I don't know if he thought much about his purpose in life, but he has made me aware again of my own.

On January 9, 2004, Portland, Oregon, was encrusted in an icy snow so hard that no one, no matter how large, could break through it to walk. Somehow an ambulance backed into the east side of the apartment complex, where I have lived for over a decade. I couldn't see who was being loaded into the back, but when the ambulance drove away, the siren wasn't blaring and the lights weren't flashing. That meant that there was no hurry. The passenger was dead.

I don't know my neighbors very well. The apartments are low budget and nondescript. Let me illustrate what I mean by nondescript. Two or three years after I moved in, I came home one night, cold sober, and pulled into the apartment complex to the west of mine. I parked my car in what I thought was my space—in front of a juniper hedge. I went to a door that I thought was mine, put the key in the deadbolt, and tried to open the door. My key didn't work. At that moment, I noticed that the apartment number—same style, same positioning—wasn't mine. I pulled my key from the deadbolt and fled.

As I fled, I heard the apartment door open, and a young man's voice barked at me through the darkness, "Who are you?!"

I froze. In the United States, many city dwellers have guns for just such occasions. "You're never going to believe this," I began, "but I live in the apartment to the east and..."

He laughed. "I've put my key in your deadbolt, too."

That's what I mean by nondescript. In such apartments, turnover is high. Only two or three of my neighbors have been here as long as I. My purpose in life has nothing to do with acquiring better housing. Mine suffices.

On January 10, I learned that the dead neighbor was Chris Olsen, a man in his early fifties who had, in fact, lived in the apartment complex longer than I. Over the years, Chris and I had chatted by our mailboxes from time to time, mostly about weather and cats (a mutual love), but sometimes about bigger things—his allergies and heart trouble, my father's death, his night work at a printing office. He never mentioned family, just whatever cat had moved in on him at the time, always a savvy street cat, who could teach me to follow it to Chris's door to ring the doorbell so Chris would let it in. His cats were always smart—survivors.

I speculated that the couple who lived next to me and asked Chris to baby-sit their toddler were somehow related to him. Chris ate lots of meals there, and the little boy adored Chris, addressing him as Uncle Chris. After Chris died, I was surprised to learn that the people next door were good neighbors to Chris, nothing more. Just good neighbors. Better than I.

Chris was an odd man, perhaps what people used to call a savant—someone with noticeable patches of brightness and

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PSU-AAUP

Unit Ties Creative Arts Supplement



Welcome to the first ever Creative Arts Supplement, appearing irregularly in Unit Ties. We welcome any creative pieces from our members. If you have something to contribute to future newsletters, please send it to aaup@psuaaup.net or via campus mail (mailcode "AAUP"). For more information, please contact the AAUP office at aaup@psuaaup.net or 5-4414. We hope you enjoy this supplement.

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The Airspace of Home: Where Protestors and Soldiers Meet

My eyes met him as I followed the line of passengers
to my seat on the plane, directly behind his
leathered skin, camouflage shirt and pants,
closely shaved hair, slightly protruding ears,
searching eyes, and I didn't know what to do;

I looked away thinking
of Internet photos
of our troops sleeping
on the tarmac on mere blankets,
on 120 degree Fahrenheit days,
sitting unprotected in open top vehicles,
or trying to catch some rest in a dry hole
in the middle of the desert,
all those young men and women
watching each other's backs,
now one less to watch;

I tapped this soldier on the shoulder,
remembering the men in the Dining Hall at St. Francis,
the one always in multiple coats,
no matter what time of year, Army green,
always a bit damp, a bit moldy,
anxious for the Eucharist
as much for the bread as for salvation,
for a hand on his musty shoulder,
living we're not sure where,
but not in the confines of a building,
that would be too dangerous,
but in the open, under a bridge, on the streets.

A car backfired on a sunny day in Aspen in the 70s
and my friend hit the pavement,

said it was just a habit
he was having difficulty shedding,
he testified to catching some sleep on his feet, in a swamp,
of officers taking jewelry off the bodies of the enemy
after a kill,
of their fighting over the haul;
the troops never knew the location of the enemy,
the battalion had to be 24/7 vigilant,
in swamps, on their feet, uncertain.

One correspondent back from Iraq said,
that he just couldn't look at a car or truck and assume
it was a mother taking her child to school,
or even if it was, it was safe.
He'd never been on assignment
to a war where there was no front line,
that there wasn't anywhere that was safe,
the bombs could be anywhere, everywhere.

A young man on the news this week, spoke
of how the Iraqis use fellow citizens as human shields,
and that even though it goes against all he knows and believes,
he sometimes has to shoot these shields and those they protect,
to save his own life.

The young man in the seat in front of mine turned to meet my
eyes;
“Welcome home,” I said, “thank you.”

—Susan Reese

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editor of Unit Ties.*

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dullness. He took pride in living on his own, paying his rent on time, being kind to children and other neighbors, and caring for whatever half-feral cat that had claimed him at the time. He was computer savvy and had worked at the same job for over twelve years. He didn't have a driver's license, but he could read. Sometimes, as he looked through his mail, he read to me. I think he wanted to show me that he could read. A few times he read something to me and asked me what it meant. We chatted amicably about his junk mail.

Chris must have walked or bussed to work, though I never saw him leave or come home. Sometimes, I saw him shambling like a large toddler to the Plaid Pantry, a twenty-four-hour convenience store two blocks west of the apartments. Chris wasn't noticeably large, perhaps 5'9" and 190 pounds—boxy, but not obese, but his movement spoke of marginal motor skills.

At one of our mailbox chats, I learned that he had once been mugged and robbed on his way to the convenience store; another time, his apartment had been broken into and his computer stolen. In the spirit of small talk, I told him about the window peeper I'd had—and my 1985 Toyota that had been stolen in 1995. Generally, we had little crime in our complex, but no one was affluent. Chris and I never talked about poverty. And we never talked about God or religion. Or purpose. Chris had that emotional intelligence and recognizable goodness that made children and stray cats love him. I respected him.

On the other hand, Chris was, by anyone's standards, odd. One late-fall day, five years or so before his death, I had the sad duty of going to his apartment door to tell him that his current cat, a long-haired, tuxedo tom that Chris had named Pooter, had been struck by a car on Division Street, which ran east and west in front of our apartments, and was lying dead under the junipers. I tried to be tactful, but Chris's grief was instant and deep. Despite the fall chill, Chris shuffled barefoot in his short, blue terrycloth robe across the parking lot to the junipers to fetch Pooter. As he walked, stunned, he talked, "Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Maybe it's not Pooter. Maybe it's some other cat. Oh no. Maybe he's not dead. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no." I was sorry I hadn't simply disposed of Pooter's body.

As Chris bowed over Pooter, the blue robe crept too high in back and fell open in front, fully exposing his genitals to me and to a few onlookers who had gathered. Chris petted Pooter's black-and-white fur and let his tears drip onto the stiffening cat. The man that I had guessed was related to Chris joined us. "Close your robe and stand up, Chris," he growled.

Chris stood, clutching his cat to his heart, and somehow managed to close his robe. His grief had made him oblivious to a small matter like public nudity, a nudity that was, to those who knew him, asexual. He carried the dead cat into his apartment and closed the door behind him.

A few days later, Chris thanked me for letting him know about Pooter, and he insisted on showing me a memorial he had erected in his apartment. On his printer, he had produced a large photo, poster-sized, of Pooter. The poster was on the wall above a long, narrow table. The table held a variety of small incense burners, a crucifix, and a white ceramic bowl, probably Pooter's dish. There was also a large boot box on the table. I didn't ask Chris what was in it. I couldn't smell anything dead, and Chris's apartment was clean, if cluttered. My eyes held briefly on the crucifix. Perhaps St. Francis would take care of Chris's cat. "Pooter would like this," I said. Chris smiled serenely.

At other times, when my apartment was too hot, I'd open my secluded front door so the air would move. Many times over the years, I'd be startled to turn toward my door only to see Chris—inside my apartment—crouched on his hands and knees, wearing his faded blue jeans and worn tee-shirt, his thick glasses sliding down his nose, looking under my daybed for my cat Jeremiah—just to say hello to her. Generally, because I wasn't expecting to see a middle-aged man crouched on my floor, I'd holler, "Jesus!"

"I'm sorry," Chris would always say. "I didn't mean to scare you." He always

meant it, genuinely. But, sometimes only days later, he'd startle a "Jesus!" out of me again.

Chris was like that: simple with patches of brightness.

In November of 2003, two months or so before he died, Chris had come into hard times. After over twelve years of steady work, he had been laid off. Despite the term "laid off," Chris knew the lay-off was permanent. At our mailboxes, Chris told me the bad news. He added, "I've lost my health insurance, too."

I understood. Like Chris, I could be laid off. Like him, I take pride in supporting myself, in doing my job well. Some 15 years ago, as I entered the Department of English where I teach, the department chair told me, in passing, that he had gone through the adjunct teaching applications and 75 people were waiting for my position. He didn't mean anything by his statement. He just saw me and, on impulse, said it, because he thought I might be interested. I know I'm fungible; that is, at some level, I'm just like any other quarter that goes into the pay phone. I have been an adjunct at my current job for twenty-three years, a teacher for thirty-four. Still, I feel unsure of my employment future. I think that Chris had felt surer of his. Like Chris, I've lived, from time to time, without health insurance; unlike Chris, I don't have a long-term, pre-existing health problem that makes employers shy of hiring me. If I ever become seriously ill, I don't believe my employers will renew my teaching contract. As many writers have suggested, including Benjamin Cheever (*Selling Ben Cheever*, 2002), "Job security [in the United States] is a thing of the past." When our jobs go, our health insurance goes. Chris needed his heart medication.

"Are you eligible for the Oregon Health Plan?" I asked. I thought perhaps he didn't know about the option; in 1994, Oregon's Governor John Kitzhaber (M.D.) pioneered the first state health care system in the country, part of his effort to cover some of the forty-five million Americans without health coverage (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2000).

"Not until the end of January. I'm cutting back on my heart medicine, so it should last me until then." Chris was one of those waiting for eligibility.

"Does your new cat trigger your asthma?" I was somewhat acquainted with his little gray tom, a flea-bitten and unneutered street cat, who had already trained me to ring Chris's doorbell.

"No," Chris said, "cats are about the only thing I'm not allergic to."

I should have pushed the issue, but, at that time, I still thought the man who told Chris to close his robe was family. And I knew that the man's wife was a pediatric nurse. I recalled seeing Chris leave their home with leftover food, probably food that he shared with his cat.

For lots of reasons, the current theory of neighbors caring for neighbors is flawed. People need public assistance—food, clothing, shelter, and work that doesn't cost them their pride, something the Roosevelts understood. Chris had pride; he'd earned it. He'd been a steady employee and tenant as long as I'd known him. He was civil and polite, gentle with children and with his pets. Chris could no more afford to support the stray that depended on him than his neighbors could afford to pay for the medication and food he needed. While the wheels of the health-care process were grinding along, Chris was dying.

After Thanksgiving, turkeys went on sale at the local supermarket. For less than seven dollars, I bought a 21-pound turkey, baked it, trimmed an ounce or two off one side, and told Chris that I was "turkeyed out." "Could you and your kitty," I asked him, "use a fresh baked turkey?"

"We sure could."

My gift felt puny. Not enough to cover his needs. Here's another problem

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with the current political policy of replacing social services with neighborly charity: the wealthier one is, the less likely one is to be inconvenienced by a neighbor's neediness. If someone in a wealthy neighborhood goes belly up, that family discreetly disappears into a poorer neighborhood. In short, the least capable of lending financial assistance shoulder the greatest part of public assistance. Even had I known that Chris was only weeks from a fatal heart attack, I couldn't have bought his medicine for him. The most I could do was to provide a bit of food. Chris was unwilling to declare to his neighbors the depth of his need. He had pride. English has lots of words for those who ask for charity: free loaders, spongers, down-and-outers, beggars. As people fall farther, losing their homes and moving under bridges, the names become harsher: indigents, bums, ne'er-do-wells. We have not enough words for public assistance, too many words for the people who need it.

In mid-December, Chris returned my roaster, shiny clean. "If you bake another turkey and can't use it all, be sure to think of us."

"I will," I promised.

Before I got to another turkey, a cold front moved into Portland. When I wasn't snowed in, I was in my office, where I had access to a computer, writing. When I write, I am filled with purpose. Sometimes, I worked all night. Since my old cat had died in late July, nothing drew me home except eating, sleeping, and bathing. I forgot about Chris.

On the morning of January 9, from what I have pieced together since, Chris had a heart attack, dialed 911 for an ambulance, and managed to unlock his apartment door. The ambulance arrived too late to save him. His scruffy cat watched as Chris was put in the ambulance. When the cat got underfoot, trying to stay with Chris, the manager of the apartments put the cat in Chris's apartment and locked it in. In the process, the manager was badly scratched.

On the morning of January 10, a Saturday, I stood by Chris's door and talked to the landlady, who is a retired, first generation German immigrant, and her manager, a young man who works two other jobs. They could find no next of kin, no one to claim Chris's body. Even the couple who had befriended Chris knew nothing of his family. The landlady said that Chris had been unable to pay his rent for the last three months. "I told him not to worry," she said, "that he could make it right when he went back to work. But, of course, he was worried." She had tried to find his family on the Internet, but there were too many "Chris Olsens." She had tried to call his former employer, but the print shop was closed for the weekend. "We'll try to reach them again on Monday,"

The manager added, "I don't know what we're going to do about his belongings. It's like a garbage scow in there. And I'm not tangling with that cat again."

Half-heartedly, I spoke, "I'll take the cat home if you don't need a second pet deposit." I didn't have the hundred dollars.

"That would be great!" the landlady said. "I was going to take it home rather than having it put down, but we have a dog that doesn't care for cats."

None of us knew the cat's name, just its personality. It was a ruffian. The manager said, "I've seen it take down a squirrel."

"Maybe that's why both of its ears are torn," I recalled.

The landlady let me into Chris's apartment. "Garbage scow" was an understatement. Cat urine was only one of many dreadful smells. The floor was covered with clutter too busy to identify. I found the cat in Chris's bedroom. It recognized me and let me carry it to my apartment.

I wasn't quite ready for another cat. By fall, I thought that I might have money for another pet deposit, neutering, shots, litter, food—in short, luxury items. When I had tried to picture my next cat, I often thought of two kit-

tens—perhaps a white one and a gold one, or maybe an Abyssinian (they limewater) or a Siamese (they're keenly intelligent). I hadn't pictured anything like this ragged-eared tom. He was the antithesis of my last cat, an urbanite, a spoiled calico who used my toilet, drank from a crystal goblet, and disdained anything messy. This fellow was a thug, a street cat who scoffed at a litter box, drank from gutters, and ate like a pig, splattering half-and-half cream (his first luxury item) on my walls and snuffing his food around his dining area. He wasn't quite ready for a new human; he wasn't quite ready for civilization.

Chris died on Friday, January 9, of a massive coronary. Five days later, the landlady found a nephew in Waldport, a short distance from Portland, to claim Chris's body and handle his "estate." As the nephew, a bright, pleasant man, excavated Chris's estate, I talked with him. He and his wife were relieved not to have to take Chris's cat, "We have three already," he said.

Standing at the door, I looked again at the horrible mess of Chris's apartment, the dwelling of a man who had given up trying to fend for himself—and even for his cat. He could give his cat shelter and love, but little food, no litter box, no health care. Still, the cat had been satisfied to stay with Chris under those conditions. And he had tried to get in the ambulance with Chris. The cat knew Chris better than any of us did.

I've since named the cat Hank, and he has installed himself in my heart. Cats can do that fast. On April 1, two to three months after Chris's death, Hank told me something big about Chris. We walked together to the manager's apartment to deliver our rent check. Hank stopped on Chris's doorstep, looked up at me, and paused briefly to see if I would ring the doorbell.

"Chris is gone," I said. "You're my cat now."

Chris's death diminishes us. Chris had kept hope as long as he could. His needs were simple: he needed his job back, so he could pay his rent and electricity, buy food, and take care of his cat. He needed medication for his asthma and his heart. He needed good neighbors. He wanted to live. All of this, he was denied. First came unemployment; then the resulting poverty wore him down. Then his heart gave out.

Recently, I read a book by David K. Shieler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). For the last five or six years, Shieler has been looking into the lives or the "working poor" in the U.S. in order to "unravel the tangled strands of cause and effect that led to their individual predicaments." He prefaces his book as follows:

Most of the people I write about in this book do not have the luxury of rage. They are caught in exhausting struggles. Their wages do not lift them far enough from poverty to improve their lives, and their lives, in turn, hold them back. The term by which they are usually described, "working poor," should be an oxymoron. Nobody who works hard should be poor in America.

Shieler concludes his profile of the lives of the working poor in the United States by observing, "Workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America's prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. . . . It is time to be ashamed." It is, in fact, time to be outraged.

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Carol Franks grew up on a farm in the Badlands area of North Dakota. After graduating from the University of North Dakota in 1970, she taught secondary English and German in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana until she moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1979. Since then, she has been teaching writing at Portland State University. She is a long time member of PSU-AAUP and has served on the bargaining team. Carol won a \$10,000 Power of Purpose Award for this essay. Congratulations, Carol!