

WALL

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WALL



VOLUME XI

2011

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Wall is a student-produced literary magazine of Saddleback College. All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College. The submissions of *Wall* are reviewed, selected, and edited by the students on the magazine staff. We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life. However, the opinions and ideas contained here in no way represent those of Saddleback College or the SOCCCD Board of Trustees; they are solely those of the authors and creators of those particular works.



John Keats once said, “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced.” With this quote, I ask each reader to think back to your finest day, most traumatic experience, or even just an insignificant memory that, for one reason or another, would not vacate your mind. It is through each side-aching laugh, each salty tear, and each elongated yawn that we learn to both love and hate. Ultimately, we allow ourselves to be influenced by our inner monologues, which can serve to not only be encouraging companions, but also frightening ones. It is within the pages of stories such as “Closing Pandora’s Box” and within the stanzas of poems like “A Stepmother’s Love” that we begin to feel the quiet agony conveyed by these writers. Through this process, readers are able to catch a glimpse at past events, which have transformed the authors into the people they are today.

Sometimes within the silence of our minds we begin to doubt even the momentary flicker of a thought, exemplified by Jeremy Jordan in his short story “Psychotic and Back Again . . .” Within the consequences of these fleeting lapses of judgment, our worst memories are shaped. These memories will eventually lead us to a crossroad, gifting us with the serenity and poise known to carry children into adulthood. With all of these in mind, I urge you to use the memories and lessons stored in the corners of your mind to lend your empathy, imagination, and even your ignorance to our writers, allowing them to guide you into their world where they can share their most vulnerable, proud, and life-affirming moments.

Jaclyn Fauls
Editor in Chief



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Wall is a touchstone of individual accomplishments guided by a community of literary champions. From inside, it was a journey of appreciation and respect as we combed through the works of our contemporaries, all of whom submitted literary pieces that originated from superbly inventive minds. Somewhere along the way we drifted from our roles as students and became committed to the responsibility of presenting the works in a format that honors and reflects the quality of the vast student submissions. *Wall* took shape in a manner akin to the laws of the universe where things evolved over time within a framework of constraint, and although a seemingly organized progression, the truth is we were guided by a unifying and ever-present force in the form of Professor Suki Fisher. Beyond the technical rigors of writing, she demonstrated that the pursuit of literary knowledge is ultimately a humanistic endeavor.

We also acknowledge the immeasurable support of Saddleback College. First, we must thank the Board of Trustees: Nancy M Padberg, T.J. Prendergast III, Marcia Milchiker, Thomas A. Fuentes, William O. Jay, David B. Lang, and Frank M. Meldau. In addition, we are indebted to the supportive English Department Chairs, Bill Stevenson and Bruce Gilman, and the Dean of Liberal Arts, Kevin O'Connor. We'd also like to thank Chris Claffin, whose knowledge of graphic design is interwoven in the pages of *Wall*, John Hesketh at Photomation, and our friends at Tableau Publishing who reinforce the axiom that *as long as the book exists the author cannot perish*.

As you enjoy the creative works of the authors and artists contained in *Wall*, we hope you embrace the complexities and interconnectedness of each story. For we travel this journey together, and as you begin to engage the creative visions on the pages that follow, consider these words by Henry David Thoreau as accompaniment for your literary travels: "What a wonderful miracle if only we could look through each other's eyes for an instant."

Mike Macey
Poetry Editor

❖ *Wall is a community space for creative displays.* ❖
*It is a fresh canvas, a blank surface begging for decoration,
a vast white page awaiting our words and images.*



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CLOSING PANDORA'S BOX

by Ben S.

Humans have an expansive history of psychotropic drug use. It is impossible to grow up in our society and remain ignorant of the reality that, throughout all walks of life, large portions of people choose to be inebriated in one fashion or another, for as many reasons as there are users. As a child, I felt awkward and uncomfortable in my own skin, and I am told by my mother that I had a frightening fondness for Benadryl. In those formative years, I felt out of place and alone, finding the easy way out of my discomfort with the use of psychoactive substances. I led a life that was both nomadic and hermitic, devoted to chasing the elusive high offered by a selection of street drugs, running from both myself and the consequences of my mounting addiction. It was when I stopped running and began learning how to live that I entered adulthood.

From the beginning, I was a difficult child. Diagnosed with ADD, I was a handful in the classroom and worse on the playground, frequently starting fights with the soft suburban children. Looking back on it, I suppose I was angered by their apparently easy way of playing with one another, carefree and imaginative, each individual able to meld seamlessly with the group. I felt separated from the mainland of society, trapped on my own island of frustration and loneliness.

When I was nine, my family moved to New Zealand, and the differences that I felt from my peers were magnified by my accent, the means of my family, and my unfamiliarity with cricket. A keen rugby player, I found a home in the aggression of the sport, but it wasn't enough to overcome the awkwardness I felt during social interactions. I was an outcast, and nobody seemed to mind when I took to wandering alone through the library and corridors of my school, passing lunch hours and recesses in solitude.

Following a confession of misery to my mother, I was sent to a boarding school that was a few hundred miles from our home. A twelve-year-old boy anxious for a fresh start, I brought all of my ineptitude, desperation and strangeness with me, and the situation worsened. I quickly became a scapegoat, and was targeted for beatings and humiliation by the other students, who were mostly toughened farm kids and weren't scared to come back to a fight with the odds restacked. Surviving boarding school was a

numbers game, and as a loner, I fared poorly.

It was a fateful day in Health Science when a teacher began to explain the motivation that some people felt to drink and get high. As he elaborated on the social effects of alcohol (the relaxation that it offered, the chance to show off and impress people, and the fact that marijuana made people seem cooler than they ordinarily might), I realized that my salvation might lie in substances. I approached a classmate of mine who had always been relatively kind, and inquired as to whether he knew how to procure pot.

That weekend, I realized just how much I hated being sober and that I was a being with one purpose: to get and stay as high as possible, for as long as possible. Pot built the wall I needed between the world and me, and it created a sense of imperviousness as my isolation grew. My drug-induced apathy gave me the confidence I needed to don a pair of sunglasses and headphones, unafraid of being attacked from behind. Aware that, instead of being a vulnerable nerd, I was becoming a slightly menacing weirdo, my classmates ceased their harassment. I had the audacity to attend a few parties, where my readiness to drink and smoke whatever was offered brought me the favorable reputation that had always escaped me.

Of course, as I smoked more, I did less and became a burnout in record time. My parents were at a loss and decided to send their sixteen-year-old problem to a different boarding school, back in the United States. Thus began the geographic response to my drug solution, which I would learn to rely upon as the consequences of my habit started to catch up with me. Bouncing from boarding school to treatment program and back again, I aged chronologically but retained the maturity of a stunted youth.

I was a one-trick pony, finding the parties in any element I landed in, making surface friendships based upon mutual convenience. I was still lonely, but I had the tools to mask it. Having given up on boarding schools and institutions, I lived with my grandparents in northern California while attending public high school. There, a teacher who found me getting high by myself in a bathroom stall busted me, and I faced being homeless. Deciding instead to make an admission of powerlessness over substance abuse, I attended my first 12-step meeting and realized that I was a garden-variety drug addict. After accruing a few months of sobriety, I finished school and was accepted into a small liberal-arts school in Indiana.

During the summer before college, I returned to New Zealand and my old habits, consequently lasting a mere month in college. I enjoyed my time and my reputation for being an exotic wild card—a rugby-playing tough guy with access to party favors. In

hindsight, these were the first times when I experienced blackouts, but my day-to-day routine of drinking and smoking whatever I could get my hands on was so rehearsed that I hardly noticed when a few days began to disappear on me. My lack of enthusiasm for academia was soon noticed, and after an ecstasy-induced tell-all session with a guidance counselor, I went back to New Zealand to work on one of my dad's sheep farms.

The work on Rainbow Station was hard and mindless. Because I was in a very rural area, there was no pot to be found, so I perfected alcoholism in order to drown out the miserable reality that had become my life. After a few months, I had had enough—my boozy world had become too lonely—and I decided to move to Australia, hoping to get a job as a waiter, planning to surf and enjoy the beach during my time off. Having bought nothing besides low-quality liquor for the past few months, I had pulled together a small savings, which I spent on airfare to Aussie.

It didn't take long for the reality of job-hunting in a tourist-Mecca to set in. As I settled on self-employment, running large amounts of low-grade pot from inland growers to the surfers in the beach city where I had set up my tent, I took large risks for a relatively low profit margin. Even worse, I was losing the ability to get high. While I had developed a tolerance to alcohol and weed, I had never experienced an actual immunity before. It frightened me. Without the brief euphoria that accompanied my routine, it was impossible for me to justify what I was doing to myself. Not long thereafter, an acid trip revealed that I was wasting my life and would soon be imprisoned for my chosen vocation, so I packed my bags and headed back to New Zealand, where admission into one of the several public universities was a simple process.

And then I fell in love. Ronnie was a few years my senior and had just finished her Bachelor of Science, majoring in biochemistry. She was serious, motivated, and for some reason saw me as a suitable mate. I got sober, transferring my dependence upon substances to a pathetic need for her approval, and passed my classes with her help. We became inseparable—I had never known love like this before and was intoxicated by her affection. She was smitten with my worldliness and gratified by the fact that she was integral in turning my life around, but I relapsed not long after my first year at school and started staying up late at night, drinking and smoking. If I came to bed early enough to catch her awake, she would be crying, knowing what I was doing to myself and that the future she had envisioned with me was taking second place to my addiction. After a year and a half, she gave up.

I was despondent, and after a suicide attempt and a ten-day stay in a hospital psych ward, I earnestly sought help, hoping to get her back. More than that, I hoped to

get my life together and gain control of myself. I finally saw that the solution I sought in drinking and drugs would cost me dearly, and that if I couldn't get control of it, it would probably kill me. Soon after, I shipped back to the U.S., to a facility that specialized in the treatment of patients who have relapsed.

I spent three months there, hard at work on myself. Though miserably depressed, I had some belief that recovery was possible, so I held nothing back from the counselors and my peers, confessing all of my sins and confronting many of my demons. When the time came for me to leave, I made plans to enroll in a university in the capital of New Zealand, and while I waited for the semester to start, I decided to take a motorcycle trip around the country. Despite having hit bottom and having committed myself to recovery, I lasted for twenty-one days, folding as soon as a stranger passed a pipe my way. I attempted to get clean again, to stick to my plan, but I couldn't. It is said that when one dances with a gorilla, one isn't done until the gorilla says so.

Flunking out of school, I made a halfhearted second attempt on my own life, and once again sought help. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this second bottoming-out experience paled in comparison to the severity of my first, but it highlighted just how powerless I was over both my addictions and my life. Born of this powerlessness was the desperation I needed to begin a true recovery.

Help came in the form of a bare-bones rehab, in Dana Point, CA. I showed up broken, disheartened, and willing. I decided to do whatever was suggested by anyone who had more than one year of sobriety. I attended thirteen 12-step meetings each week, and paid close attention to everything that was said. Crucially, I abandoned both my militant atheism and my belief that I knew what was in my best interest. With those ideas behind me, I gained strength from the groups of fellow recovering people with whom I associated. When my time in rehab was up, I decided that I would stay near the people who knew me.

Spending another six months in a sober living house, I worked closely with a sponsor and a counselor. I committed to staying sober for an entire year, quelling my panic at that idea with the thought that, if I stayed sober for that year, and life was still as uncomfortable as it always had been when I was sober, nobody could say I hadn't tried when I followed my alcoholism and addiction to their final, irretrievable end.

Days passed slowly, but weeks flew by. I stayed clean, moving out of my sober living house and in with my sponsor. I followed him like a lost dog, and when he said (or suggested that I might want to) jump, I did it. If he asked me to clean the shower, I cleaned it until it sparkled. When he suggested that I look for a job, I made that my sole

vocation, and after months of searching, I found employment as a valet at a local hotel. After months of running and bicycling anywhere I had to go, I had saved enough money to buy a motorcycle and became mobile. The pure glee that I felt as I first rolled on the throttle of that twenty-seven year old Suzuki and watched the world speed by me was indescribable, and it's something that I try to draw on today when things seem humdrum.

Eventually, I moved out of my sponsor's house and into my own apartment. When I made it to one year sober, I was stunned as much by that as by the fact that I had kept my job. I made friends at work and at meetings, and my phone began filling up with numbers of people whom I could call when I was lonely or bored. I became a part of life. I started dating, clumsily and painfully, and got better at that, too.

A second year came and went, and I started school. Somewhere along the way, I had decided that I could help people who were headed where I had been, that maybe I could direct people away from the depths of hell that I had experienced. I started paying taxes and planning for my future. I became a sober, twenty-four year old man who was happy most of the time—who had purpose and direction. While I still attended meetings, I found that I did not need to attend them so frequently—just enough to remind me of who and what I am, that I need to always beware of that first drink or drug, and that there's a solution to whatever is going on in my life as long as I'm sober and above ground.

As I look back on my life today, the difference is clear. Today, I face my problems head-on, even when they seem overwhelming, and I don't run from my mistakes. I have found freedom in the responsibility and accountability that I used to shy from; I can be depended on as an employee and as a friend, and I am constantly looking to grow in order to meet life's challenges, instead of finding ways to shrink my life to fit me. Where I once cowered, childlike, hiding my vulnerability behind a mask of inebriation, I now take a stand, do my best, and persevere. I didn't recognize it at the time, but when I hit my second bottom, I had two paths open to me. One path led to me stumbling on as I was, inebriated and pathetic, sick and waiting to die, and the other path led to me growing up, belated but making good time, taking my place in adulthood. Today I'm not sure that it was me who made the decision, and I'm not sure where it will lead, but it is clear which path I'm on.

FICTION

THE ACID HOUSE

by Jordan Bruce

We found him dead on the bathroom floor, an empty syringe in the toilet, his hands clinging to the shower curtain in a rigor mortis fused grip. There was no blood, no vomit, no excrement, and no urine. Nothing to indicate death except the pale flesh and blue lips, the black empty eyes and the unsettling stillness that permeated the room, a stillness that drowned Michelle's screams into muted sobs and allowed my cries for help, for 911, to fall on deaf ears. And then there was the smell, a nauseating concoction of rotting meat and shit. I recognized it instantly, even though I'd never been anywhere near a dead body before.

Later, after Jim had ordered the others to move the body downstairs, I sat in my room, the room I shared with Neil, who was now resting his eternal slumber on a weathered, three legged coffee table that was propped up by a stack of philosophy textbooks and heavily notated bibles. I thought about this, and it made me angry. Then I began to wonder why it made me angry. It certainly didn't matter to Neil. Nothing did anymore.

I stared at the wall across from me. I stared at Neil's bed, with the sheets rumpled and dirty. I stared at the cassette player on the floor. I stared at the books piled into a corner of the room. I stared at the antique rug that masked the scratched and gouged hardwood floors. I stared at the packed bag next to the door, Neil's bag. I stared until I realized I wasn't staring at any thing or object, but at the space around it: the void, the empty, the negative. I stared, and then I fell asleep.

I woke to a crashing, brass sound that reverberated through the house's thin walls. It was Jim's call, and I knew the others would heed it and that for the moment it was wise for me to follow their lead. Still, I hesitated—running my hands through my hair and staring blankly at the ceiling, before sighing and shutting my eyes for a few brief moments. Doors opened and shut, and a soft parade of feet shuffled their way downstairs. Then it was dead silent.

As I sat up, the bed groaned, startling me. The room was dark, oppressive and claustrophobic. I wanted a light but that was impossible. There was no electricity in the



ILLUSTRATION BY NICK CALLAWAY

house, hadn't been for months.

Slowly, I got to my feet and made my way to the door. When I opened it, I wasn't surprised at the cold draft of the hallway. The house lacked heating as well as electricity. The corridor beyond was caught in a perpetual gloom, only alleviated by a soft, flickering orange glow at the end of the hall, where a single candle lay on the top stair. Shuffling down the hall, I quieted my footsteps and tried to make out the torn and peeling wallpaper. At the face of every door, names were carved, rough and jagged, like with a knife. *Michelle, Jessica, and Peter. Sarah, Jennifer, and Carly. Pam and Caitlin. Gabe and Bree.* Mine read *Tom and Neil.* There were more doors carved with more names downstairs. Nineteen total, not including Jim, and seventeen of those names were now crowded in the living room, fawning over the Man and his words of wisdom.

At the bottom of the stairs I moved into the foyer, dreading every step forward as I approached the doorway to the living room. Standing in the shadows, I saw clearly into the brightly lit room. There were candles everywhere, on tables and cabinets, window sills and bookshelves—even on the floor. Large blue drapes on the windows trapped the light, and the room was washed in an orange hue. At one end of the room, next to one of the windows, sat Jim's "Bossed Gong," which Jim used to call his followers to him. Its ring was more frequent and more effective than that of a church's iron bell. In the center of the room was a large gas lantern, and the others were drawn around it in a half circle, with Jim sitting in the middle. I didn't go to them, not right away. Instead, I stood for a moment in the refuge of the shadows and studied my so-called brothers and sisters with their sunken faces and bloodshot eyes, their flushed and clammy skin, their greasy and matted hair; the women thin to the bone, and the men dirty and unshaven. They were the half-dead. But what stood out the most was the way they all looked towards Jim—with desperate pleading eyes, like those of a child or a lover.

Jim sat directly behind the light so the others could all see his face, which was as fresh and clean as any angel's. He was a man in his mid-thirties with long, dark hair slicked back and dullish brown eyes that almost seemed black. Michelle sat beside him. Her arms were wrapped limply around his right, her head on his shoulder. He rested his hand on her thigh, and every so often he would squeeze and stroke it. If anyone else in the room saw this, they ignored it. Instead, they listened with rapt attention as Jim spoke softly to them, though I couldn't make out the hushed and murmured words.

Frozen in place in the doorway, I watched as Jim abruptly halted his sermon and gazed up and outward into the dark edges of the room. His eyes were focused in my direction, and it seemed for a moment that they were not only looking at me, but into me.

It was a look that pierced through the vast illusion of space perpetuated by the shadows I stood in, and right down into my heart. I shivered, and it was then that Jim rose.

“Thomas,” he called out into the dark, into my head, his voice smooth, with a slight southern accent, his demeanor capricious. “Won’t you sit with us?”

I had no choice. When I stepped into the light, Jim’s lips curved into a mad smile.

“You can sit next to me, Thomas.” He gestured to an occupied seat. “Caitlin, Jennifer, make room for Thomas, please.”

Moving into the room, into the presence of my so-called brothers and sisters, I sat down on the plush couch and stole a glance at Michelle, at her sore and red downcast eyes. Jim sat back down between us. He turned to me, and instantly I smelled that rancid odor again, of rotting meat and shit—the smell of death.

“I have some things to say to you, Thomas. Things which I believe would be for the greater benefit for everyone to hear as well.” His voice inflected empathy, even compassion, but I didn’t buy it.

“I know you were close to Neil. You were like brothers, more so than anyone else here. So I know it will be painful to hear what I have to say, but for your brothers’ and sisters’ sake, and for your own, it needs to be said.”

Jim’s gaze was stern, and he turned away to face the rest of the group, making sure to fix his eyes on every man and woman.

“Look around you and you will notice that we gather here one short for the most tragic of reasons, the loss of someone we all held dear, the loss of a brother. When he came to live with us, Neil was broke and destitute. His family had abandoned him, kicked him out of house and home, left him to fend for himself.”

He spoke slowly and clearly, letting every word soak into the drug-addled collective conscious of the room. Briefly I wondered who was and wasn’t frying right now. I wondered if Jim himself was frying.

“Then, Tom ran into him one day. You see, Tom and Neil were childhood friends, and when Tom heard of Neil’s plight, he offered him food and shelter. But more than that, he offered him a home, with a new family, and new direction in life. Neil had his problems, yes. When he came to us he suffered from an angry addiction to the most diabolical of man-made poisons. But...” He stopped for a moment, gazing lovingly at Michelle who sat beside him with her face slack and her eyes grateful, and brushed her hair with the tips of his fingers “... he found Michelle. Their love was beginning to cure his affliction.”

Jim sighed, and the change in tone was immediate and abrupt. The mean spirit of

his words was written on his face, encoded in his speech.

“But Neil was weak. He had a weak mind, and a weak will, and was closed off and closed up to new sensations and experiences. Yes, he sat with us many times and drank with us many more, but did he ever truly accept the path we had to offer? No, he did not.”

His hand gestures grew wilder, his delivery more rapid and violent.

“He began slipping back into old ways of thinking, old habits, and like the rest of the miserable sheep out there in the world, he ground himself in fear and mistrust. Greed and jealousy, ignorance and bigotry. He denied his own salvation, and he denied the strength necessary to break free from the clutches of doubt and avarice. He denied me. He defied me. He made a choice to dirty his blood and now he lies, not thirty feet from where we sit, a *dead* man. Woe to those who follow in his example. If ever there was such a sorry creature of a man more deserving of pity, it was Neil. Still, he was a brother, more to some than to others, which is why tomorrow we will burn his body and take his ashes for ourselves as a keepsake.”

We all sat in silence. Rage shook within me—so much so that I was unable to act or to speak. But I could feel it all right, in the pulsating beat of my heart, the quivering vein in my forehead, the tremor in my hands. Every instinct told me I should lash at him, denounce his bullshit, tear at his face and rip his lips off so that I would never again have to see that satisfied grin he flashed his mute and frozen audience. But something constrained me. Maybe it was the way he looked at me, with such condemnation, and yet, empathy. Maybe it was just fear and indecision.

Jim finally took his seat. He gestured to two of the girls, Pam and Sarah, who rose soundlessly and exited the room towards the kitchen. I watched their forms bleed away into the dark hallway.

Jim cleared his throat. “Tonight, as we drink, I want to remind all of you of the truth of your existence.”

The girls reentered the room, each carrying a tray. On each tray were nine glasses, a pitcher of water, and a small dropper. They set out filling each glass and passed one to each and every person. Jim went on.

“There is no God.”

My glass was cold and damp, the water clean and fresh. Jim took his glass wordlessly.

“No heaven or hell.”

When each held their drink, Pam and Sarah took the droppers and squeezed into

each glass three drops of a clear and translucent liquid.

“There is no afterlife, no rebirth, no redemption. We are given just the one life, and most people, all of us here in fact, are undeserving of even that.”

Jim measured his words carefully, giving each its proper impact. He looked to me one last time, and at that moment, I thought only of Neil’s body, wrapped in blankets, rotting away in the game room. And when I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the sight, it wasn’t Neil’s body that I saw but my own.

“What sets us apart,” said Jim, “from the lost and frightened masses, is that we recognize our worthlessness. We recognize the futility of our struggles and the lie of progress. And we are freed by that recognition.”

He held his glass in the air—a toast.

“Free to take the drink and cross entire horizons.”

He drank deeply and with great exaggeration. Michelle was the first to take after his lead, and as my eyes scanned the room, I saw the others’ doubts giving way and their sense of purpose sharply defining itself into one single act of obedience. One by one, they folded, each downing their glass without hesitation.

And when their eyes were all on me, and when Jim flashed what I’m sure he intended to be a pleasant, reassuring smile, I drank too.

Hours or minutes later, I couldn’t tell, I was lying in my bed, trying to shield my eyes from the blaring red light that ceded back and forth from a corner of the room like a wave, and trying to drown out the rattle and hum of some invisible machinery that buzzed in my ears. I was shaking and moaning, on the verge of tears.

The room was infested with shadows, deeper and deeper wells of black that wormed their way about, across the ceiling, slithering along the floor, crawling up my bed, choking and strangling my resolve, seeking to blot out the knowledge that this was all just a drug-induced nightmare. The floor seemed to mime my breathing, moving up and moving down. The walls pushed outwards, stretching into the terrifying infinite, every inch now a mile, every second an agonizing hour. I closed my eyes and witnessed shades of darkness rearrange themselves into a macabre puppet show, casting images of skulls and burning funeral pyres.

There were footsteps out in the hall beyond, large and pounding, resonating the crushing weight of the thing they carried, cracking the floorboards beneath. Suddenly, a fiery orange light pierced the cracks of the door, and a new image was cast, monstrous and grotesque, the specter of a thing large, hoofed and horned, claws sharp and razored,

snarling and panting like a bull. It shook and pounded at the door, rattling it off its hinges, trying to break it down. This went on for minutes it seemed. I spent each one trying to convince myself none of this was really happening. When the shaking stopped, the specter remained, and I listened to the thing's breathing, imagining the flare of its nostrils, the heave of its chest. Then a scratching sound echoed deep, loud and abrasive, like wood being carved.

And like the shattering of the tide on rocks, the vision broke, and I was alone in my empty room, where the walls were suddenly walls once again and there was nothing outside my door, and no sounds except my own gasping and panicked breath.

The next morning, heading out to join the others constructing the pyre, I closed my door as I was leaving and caught a glance at the beaten oak and faded paint, and at the three vertical gouges slashed across Neil's name.

The grey woods that surrounded the house provided us relative anonymity from the neighbors, of which there were few. The weather was somber and overcast, and I inhaled deeply the crisp and invigorating air. Jim didn't let us out much. Jim was, curiously, nowhere to be seen. I stayed back from the rest of them, watching as they cut and trimmed branches from the multitude of dead trees and gathered them into a pile. Michelle was at the forefront. She organized what was brought to her around the cheap wooden base we'd hammered together, arranging first a bed, and then an interior shroud of stakes meant to concentrate the flames over the body.

She looked clean and, for the first time in a long while, healthy.

"Tom!" She called out. "Give me a hand."

I went over to her and helped her heft up a large bundle of stakes, lazily twined together with dried twig and vine. She wiped her hands on her jeans and smiled.

"Tonight will be a beautiful night for a fire. And this weather, huh? It's gorgeous. Neil loved the cold and the rain." She said this without a stutter or a sigh, her voice enthused, her conscience clear.

The longer I looked at her, the more disconcerted I grew. She shouldn't be this... content.

Swallowing a few times, I cleared my throat. "So we're really just going to burn him in the backyard?"

She gave me a look of confusion, and for a second the languid smile on her face dropped. "Jim says this is an honorable way to care for the deceased."

"Jesus, Michelle, this is Neil we're talking about. Not two days he's dead, and

you're out here humming songs and building a bonfire.”

“I wasn't humming.”

“Well, you sure as hell look like you could have been,” I snapped then took a breath. “Look, lately I've started to notice things—things about Jim.”

“What about Jim?” she asked.

I was annoyed. “What about Jim? He dopes us every day with acid and mescaline. He takes his pick of the girls. He tells us that we're worthless—I mean, Jesus Christ, did you even listen to what he said about Neil last night, or in any of his other *sermons*?”

“Jim was right. Neil could have leaned on me, he could have leaned on Jim, but instead he decided to shoot up and now he's exactly where he chose to put himself.”

“Is that what Jim told you last night? I saw you go upstairs with him.”

“God, you're pathetic,” she grunted.

“You're wrong. Neil hadn't shot up in over a month. And he wanted to go home, talked about it all the time—how he missed his parents, his dog. If you don't believe me, his packed bag is still up in my room. He was getting clean, Michelle. He was getting out of this fucking madhouse and he wanted to take us with him.”

“What are you saying?”

I got in close, lowering my voice to a whisper. “I'm saying I don't believe for a second that Neil willingly took the hit that killed him. Jim knew he was gonna leave and that he was going to take you with him. So he forced Neil to take that overdose. I just know it.”

Michelle shook her head sadly and clutched my hands lightly in hers, then kissed them and whispered softly. “Thomas, you're paranoid, and sad, and in denial and—”

I tore my hands from hers, startling her. Roughly, I gripped her head and shoved it sideways towards the house. She struggled meekly, but my grasp was firm.

“Look at that house! It was once your mother's house, once your house! And now it's his. Look at it.”

And she did. I saw her eyes move, scanning the surface, taking in the cracked and weathered paint, the dead lawn, the decaying shrubbery, the half-naked willow whose gnarled branches wrapped around a corner of the house as if in a death vice. Taking in the dirty, blacked-out windows and the old scratched and beaten solid oak doors. Taking in the moss-eaten path that led to the back door, and the weed-infested cracks that spindled up the pavement. Or so I hoped.

“This was your home, Michelle, and you let him in. Look what he's done to it. It was once a good house.”

And so it was. I remembered. Looking at it now, I thought it a miracle that the place hadn't been condemned, that the neighbors hadn't complained or that the police or the government hadn't forcibly confiscated the thing. They ought to, I thought. They ought to take it away and give it to someone good and clean, with a wife and children. That's what houses were made for. Not this. What a waste.

I held her gaze there for a while longer, and when I felt her muscles go slack and limp, I let go of her head. She stared for a few more moments before turning sharply towards me and slapping me.

As she stomped away, I rubbed my cheek and, turning back towards the house, saw Jim standing there, his eyes steady, his mouth firm. Then I saw him smile.

They carried Neil's rancid body out in procession, holding it like a sack of dead animals, and then rolled it carelessly onto the pyre. When the fire lit and the yard erupted into a colored chorus of flames, I couldn't bear to look at anyone. I couldn't stand to look at their bored faces, their empty eyes. Even Michelle, who stood apart from the others, drew her attention not towards the flames and body being burnt, but to the smoke that feathered up to the clouded night sky and the sparks that rained down like confetti across the yard.

I sat near the tree line, where the light from the fire obscured every moving body and shape into a nameless silhouette. I barely reacted to the sound of snapping twigs and footsteps before Jim was already next to me, a water glass in each of his hands. As he sat down, gesturing for me to take one, I ignored him.

"You know, Tom, I always liked you. Something about you—I don't know—I just feel like I can drop the pretense, be myself. But I heard something very upsetting today, from Michelle."

I looked up at him, cautiously.

"She told me that you thought I killed our brother Neil, here."

There was a pregnant pause, and I could tell he was reveling in it.

"Right now you're thinking, given what you assume to know about me, that I'm about to put on this nice reassuring façade, that I'm going to be sympathetic and concerned, that I'm going to try and lure you into believing that I am innocent with this Mother Teresa act." He leaned in. "On any other night you'd be right, but this isn't just any night, is it Tom?"

"What the hell do you want?"

Jim stifled a laugh. "Here's the thing, Tom: I don't care much about murder. Never

have. I could kill a man in cold blood and it wouldn't make a lick of difference to my conscience. No, I don't care that you think I murdered your heroin-junkie friend. What I took offense to, was the idea that I did it to keep my hands on that tight little squeeze, Michelle. Such an old and tired cliché. There's not a woman on this earth worth killing for. They just ain't worth the time it'd take to wash the blood off your hands."

Jim wrung his hands together and exhaled through his teeth.

"And what do I need Michelle for anyway, hmm? I could have my pick of any girl here... and I have."

His face dark against the fire, he looked to see if he'd provoked a reaction. He hadn't.

"I'll tell you what I would kill for, Tom." Tilting his head in my direction, he leaned in so close I could smell the dead meat on his breath. "I'd kill for reputation. If ever there was such a low creature that called himself a man who went around spreading slanderous lies about me to the ignorant masses, well, I'd seek out and cut that scalawag's throat so fast he wouldn't even feel the pinch of my knife."

I swallowed hard and tried to avoid his fixed gaze.

"Your dead friend burning up over there? He was weak and a coward. His girlfriend is an impressionable whore, and all those people crowding around him are so doped up on the kool-aid that they'd follow me to hell—some already have. You are nothing. Powerless. The only thing you can do is walk away."

Without another word, Jim stood and walked towards the fire. He spread his arms to welcome the heat, and opened his mouth to catch the ash, and it was then that it dawned on me—all the fears and suspicions crystallizing into one pure and unadulterated set of truths.

As he moved to stand next to the fire, as the flames danced in front of his face and the embers coated his shoulders, I knew that he was the devil, and that those lonely souls who crowded around him now belonged to him, had perhaps always belonged to him. For the first time, I understood the true nature of the house that stood so prominently before the madness that festered on its lawns and under its roof. It was elemental and nameless, a gaping black hole that devoured the lost and the damned, obliging the world's willful obliviousness to its presence, gladly embracing its neighbors' pretentious neglect. It was a terror. It was a house—but not mine, not any longer.

POETRY

MY NATURE

I see you floating softly
fluttering from flower to flower
your touch was so sensual
I gave you all
in silence mostly
you drained me
Your caress changed me
this placid body held life
these lips could speak and smile
and warmth filled me
I wanted you to feel my need
wanted you to stay
But your eyes flickered
your wings spread and beat in a single motion
and the warmth that filled me dissipated
there was a parting breeze
that washed all feeling from my body
now I watch you from my field
dancing in the wind for all to see
as I wilt
and I hate my nature

—*Jeremy Jordan*

TWIN TOWERS METAMORPHOSIS

Fire sand panes glitter and reflect,
Twin arms stretched upward, to direct,
Atlas holding blue curtains aside,
Wisps of white-spun light collide.

High misty bracelets circle and touch,
Fade as sun rays penetrate and clutch,
For all to look in awe and praise,
A place of wonder, minds to gaze.

Rare bird with wings pressed tight,
Must soar with no branch to alight,
Keen eyes fooled by prism lakes,
Golden puddles, sunset makes.

All is changed forever, beauty lost,
Thunder roaring, fire arrows tossed,
Crushing, falling, darkness plowed,
Evil searing hope, now allowed.

Proud building tall, swallowed in ash,
Loves and memories move in the past,
Kind heroes lost, live now with God,
Brave deeds to all bequeath our awe.

Our earth has moved, its axis changed,
Waves pushed by those with hearts insane,
Good deeds we saw by many men,
Prove lambs to make us safe again.

—*Sharon Dee Langdale*

ESSAY

A DAY COVERED IN BLOOD

by Anonymous

What is it about blood that has such an effect on a person? Is it the color, the way it flows so smoothly down the skin? Is it the amount, or is it because it's a sign that life is fading away? When blood begins to spill, death is not far behind. There may come a time when a man, who fears the sight of blood, will have to make a choice between running from it or being covered in it to save a life. The horrific day may come when that same man finds himself standing over a person lying in a pool of blood so rich that he can see his own reflection. Will he find the strength deep inside his soul to overcome the terror of a red liquid that symbolizes death brewing in the air? Or, will he be overtaken and let his world go black as his mind shuts down? Three weeks into my second deployment into Iraq, I awoke one morning, having no idea that by day's end, the ground would be covered in blood. I was going to have to choose between running from what I feared or finding the courage to overcome that fear to save the lives of my brothers.

It was judgment day; the sun had just set on a scorching, hot day in Iraq. As I held a bag of ice on my neck in an attempt to cool myself down, my uniform clung to my body, soaking up my sweat like a sponge. I was sweating so much that I could taste the salt as perspiration rolled down the center of my face. When I sat down on an old, wooden bench that was directly outside the three-story hotel building that we utilized as our living quarters, I could see the ten-foot wall surrounding our building, protecting us from the city beyond. The long exposure to the intense environment had weakened the wall, causing it to crack and crumble so that pieces of concrete lay strewn across the ground. Some protection it provided.

While I sat there, I could hear the flawed radio transmissions coming from the headquarter room; the radio operators were talking to our units, who were starting their night patrols through the city. Overhead, the chopping sounds of the helicopters' rotors reverberated through the air as they flew by—a typical preparation for on-call air support in case any units got into trouble. I was happy that the day was coming to an end and that I could hit the rack soon. All that changed when I got up to go back inside the building.

In an instant, a huge explosion shook the ground like an earthquake. Everything was shaking and rattling as pieces of the hotel started falling to the ground. Afraid that

it would collapse, I sprinted away from the building to make sure that the debris didn't hit me. Choking from the dirt storm that was released by the blast and rubbing my eyes to get the particles out, I blinked a few times until my vision returned. When I looked around, it was like watching a movie scene from the Apocalypse. A gray mushroom cloud bloomed up into the sky, and I felt my heart sink to the bottom of my stomach. It only meant one thing; there were Marines who were now fighting for their lives.

With no time to waste, my fellow Marines and I started setting up a mass casualty site in the dining area on the first floor of the hotel. At two hundred feet in length and sixty feet in width, the dining area was the only place large enough to accommodate the projected number of casualties. And the dingy walls, with their gray patches of chipped paint, seemed to make it an appropriate setting for the events to come. We set up three lines of stretchers that ran horizontally with the building. Each stretcher had a first aid kit which included: two IV's, six pressure dressings, three rolls of medical tape, and plastic strips with a sticky film at the end of them. The strips were designed to seal wounds where the lungs had been pierced—otherwise known as sucking chest wounds. Five Marines and two Navy corpsmen were standing by each stretcher wearing latex gloves. Everyone was standing around with visible uncertainty on their faces; they appeared to be wondering what was about to come through the entrance of the dining area, which had now turned into an emergency room.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of vehicle engines roaring in from the front gate. Within moments, we would all be in a similar nightmare that would soon become our only reality. As drivers slammed their breaks, the sound of tires cutting through the gravel was unleashed. I could hear vehicle doors opening with men screaming inside, and objects being knocked over as the sounds got closer. As abruptly as it had begun, the noise stopped. For a second, I thought everything I had heard was a figment of my imagination, and then it happened. The doors blew open, and my heart paused as I was immediately hit by a tidal wave of soldiers, crimson fluid flowing from every pore in their body.

Marines soaked in blood came storming through the entrance as they carried the wounded in their arms. Losing whatever phobia I'd had of blood, I instantly started helping my brothers get the wounded onto the stretchers to start applying first aid. As I grabbed the first Marine, I could see his cooked flesh from where the hot shrapnel had sliced through his body. His blood was spilling all over me and down to the ground as I lifted him onto the stretcher. Parts of his uniform had melted into his body. The only way the corpsman could remove the cloth was to cut the soldier's flesh with surgical scissors.

As we carved out the burnt pieces of his uniform, what remained of his flesh resembled broiled steak. Applying pressure to a three-inch gash below his right collarbone, I simultaneously attempted to stop the bleeding from his stomach. Another corpsman was injecting fluids into his IV.

The wounded man made eye contact, silently asking if he was going to live. I could see the tears in his eyes; they were filled with the fear of death. I kept telling him he was going to live, even though I had no idea.

Everything was happening so quickly that, by the time I looked up, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The room had a raging river of blood flowing through it. Everyone aiding the wounded looked as if they'd bathed in red paint. The room smelled of overcooked hamburger while pieces of burnt flesh blanketed the floor. Screams of, "I'm losing him" filled the room. Suddenly, everything went into slow motion and it seemed like the world froze, but I could still move. I could see angels hovering in the room, preparing to escort souls to heaven and comfort the dying. It was the warmest, yet darkest feeling I had ever felt. Where was God? How could he allow something like this to happen?

In that moment, time stood still. Seconds later, I snapped back into action when the corpsman yelled at me, "Sergeant, let's get him strapped in; the birds are here." My patient had finally stabilized enough to hand him over to the medical flight crew where he would be transported to a nearby hospital. A four-man team lifted the Marine and carried him to the flight pad.

As the remaining wounded were air-lifted, the storm inside the make-shift emergency room finally dissipated. Every Marine and Navy corpsman had tears flowing down their cheeks, turning red as they intermingled with caked blood.

When the moving wheels of stretchers intersected them, the streams of blood came to an abrupt stop. One Marine fell to his knees in tears as he held what was left of his friend's uniform; it was shredded through the arms where shrapnel had ripped through it. He clutched it, curling into a fetal position, lying in blood as his mind completely shut down. He knew that he would never again see his friend.

Others walked around in a zombie-like haze, acting as if their very life force had been sucked out of them. I diverted my attention from my surroundings to my hands. Aside from the dried, caked blood, I found particles of burnt flesh embedded in my palms. When the flesh mixed with the blood, it created a syrup-like substance that saturated my hands. Sitting down against the wall, I let my legs slip across the floor, pushing the blood outward like a boat cutting through water. I found myself in an odd

situation as I rubbed the blood together between my fingers and pondered the fact that five hours ago, I couldn't stand the site of blood and there I was sitting in it.

As I pondered, I felt a piece of my humanity fade away. My eyelids grew heavy and tired from playing tug-of-war with death. For an hour, I sat as the clean up commenced around me. Eventually, I fell asleep hoping that when I awoke my past reality would be nothing more than a horrible dream. Unfortunately, it wasn't. My world had changed. Death was now an invisible person who followed me around to make sure that I never forgot that day. I now ask myself: Is this what God intended me to feel like? Was this punishment for something I had done?

At times, while walking down the street with friends, I see Death looking at me from across the street, smiling. Because I'm the only one who knows what it looks like, I'm the only one who can see it, but I do not acknowledge its presence. I refuse to give it what it craves. It may have taken a part of me, but one thing it did *not* take was my will to find and regain happiness and my humanity. As long as I have that, it can never win. I hope the men who shared that horrible day with me were able to find happiness as well. I hope that Death wasn't completely able to consume their souls with hate, regret, and guilt. And, if the day shall ever come again for me, where Death shall brew itself in the form of human blood, I will never allow it to consume my soul again.

ESSAY

WOUNDED WARRIOR

by Megan Gonzales

At the age of twenty, I will be the first to admit that I have spent the majority of my life oblivious and, quite frankly, unconcerned with the world around me. Even with my mother serving in the Army for twenty years, I had no real concept of war or the everyday problems that people faced in the United States. To be honest, it all seemed quite trivial compared to my own life as a teenager. It was not that I was selfish, but more that I knew so little due to the way I was raised. I felt, in a way, impervious to the dangers of the world. At the time, life was about having as much fun as possible, so there was no need to pay much mind to anything else. I wish I could say getting married and moving across the country, away from everything I knew, changed that view, but in all reality it did not. Instead, it was the emotional journey and drastic life changes after my husband's accident in Afghanistan, that truly opened up the world to me and showed me just how real, cruel, and compassionate it actually was.

The morning of June 12th, 2010 is one that I can never forget as it repeats itself over and over again in my head, like a bad dream. As I did most mornings, since the loneliness of an empty bed often caused restlessness, I lay sleeping on my parents' couch. It had been two months since my husband deployed and almost two weeks since I'd last heard his voice. I still kept the phone resting next to my head, as I had every other night waiting for an unexpected phone call. At 9:00 a.m. that morning, the phone rang. Without hesitation, I awoke and quickly reached for the phone. My heart raced at the sight of the odd yet somewhat familiar number, as I knew it could be no one other than my husband. Unfortunately, when I answered, it was not a familiar voice that answered back. My first reaction was immediate disappointment and irritation that my excitement was over nothing. It was not until I heard the distressed tone of the man's voice and the words "Marine Headquarters" that I knew something was wrong. Within seconds, my mind went completely blank and tears began streaming down my face. I slowly fell to the ground as the strange man, whom I had never met, informed me that my husband had been involved in an improvised explosive device (IED) accident, which—in an instant—took his left leg, left eye, and nearly his life. Not one single emotion could best explain how I felt in that moment. Nothing so real had ever happened before—at least, not to me.

It took a week for the Marine Corps to get my husband back to the United States; it was, undoubtedly, the longest week of my life. On the night that he arrived, as I loaded my things into the car, I tried to remain calm. What no one knew was, that deep down, I was secretly a nervous wreck. So many thoughts raced through my head during the drive to the hospital. Would he still remember me? Would I be scared? Would he be a different person? Would I start crying and not be able to stop? Did I look okay? Every possible question, no matter how crazy, went through my mind during that thirty-minute drive. My nervousness certainly did not fade, while I sat patiently in the waiting room. When the nurse finally came out to tell us we were able to see him, I opted to go in alone as I was terrified how I would react. She pointed me toward my husband's room, and after taking a few deep breaths to calm myself, I walked in. My heart dropped. I had never seen anything like it. Even worse was the fact that it was *my* husband lying in that bed, the man whom I loved more than anything in the entire world.

Tubes poured from every part of his body: his face, his arms, his back, his stomach, and even from underneath the thin knitted blanket that covered him from the waist down. His left eye had swollen to the size of a baseball, and black scabs covered most of his face and arms from where the shrapnel had hit him. He was so weak and vulnerable, a side of him that I had never seen before. Without any thought or reluctance, I knelt down beside his bed and held his hand as he slowly drifted back to sleep. And just as I had on our wedding day, I vowed I would stand by him forever. From that night on, I refused to leave his side. For the first time in my life, I saw the reality of war first hand, and it disgusted me. How could this world be filled with so much hate to the point that someone could have the intention of not only killing my husband and his brothers, but also completely innocent people? Within the span of a week, I'd gone from barely having any solid view of the world, to seeing it as nothing but a malicious, spiteful, and volatile place.

I spent the next two months talking to countless doctors during the day or sleeping by my husband's bed at night. Some days became extremely overwhelming with the number of doctors constantly coming in and out at all hours. It was hard to fathom how one person could need so many different doctors. It was as if every inch of his body needed its own team to fix him. There was no doubt they were all the best at what they did, and I was quickly amazed at how determined and dedicated they were in helping him. Even more amazing, were the people who spent most of their free time, if not their whole day, doing whatever they could to help each and every injured Marine and soldier; whether it was the small act of passing out thank you cards, snacks, and gifts or sitting down and talking with them on a personal level. Letters and gifts were constantly coming

in through the mail as well. They were from a range of people including family members, friends, friends of friends, and family members of friends; some even came from complete strangers. I never knew so many people could care so much about someone whom they had never met. Some had even dedicated their entire lives to helping our wounded warriors in any way possible. Despite everything that had happened and how angry I was, I soon began to realize just how generous and unselfish people in the world could be.

Once all of my husband's surgeries were complete and his wounds healed, he was transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to begin his prosthetic and rehabilitation process. It was a refreshing change from Bethesda Naval Hospital, where I witnessed the grueling first stages of recovery. At Walter Reed, I was able to watch the same wounded soldiers I'd seen at Bethesda, get out of their beds and begin their remarkable journey towards living a normal life.

Day after day, I watched not only my husband, but also other single and double leg amputees gradually re-learn how to walk, ride a bike, and run again. Those with amputated arms, despite being able to walk, had the challenge of learning how to use mechanical arms to pick up objects, to write, and to button a shirt with ease. It was nothing short of inspirational. However, it was not their ability to walk or pick up an object using a prosthetic limb that made them so extraordinary, but rather their surprisingly positive attitude through it all. Whether it was my husband or the quadruple amputee, Corporal Todd Nicely, or Sergeant Major Raymond Mackey (who, after twenty-seven years of service, lost both his legs in Afghanistan), they would all say the exact same thing when asked about their experiences: they had no regrets. In fact, every single one of them wished that he could go back to Afghanistan—not for revenge, but because they felt their job was incomplete. Even with their injuries, they wanted no sympathy and, in no way, felt sorry for themselves because they had made the choice to risk their own lives. They wanted to make the United States a better and safer place for this generation and for every generation that follows. They were proud of what they had accomplished for our nation and were more than willing to risk their lives over again, given another chance. If that is not selfless, then I have no idea what is.

After all of this, it is quite embarrassing to admit that barely a year ago I went about my day without a care in the world about anyone or anything, not feeling even a bit of guilt. Fortunately, this journey (although not yet over) has taught me a lot about life, the world, and the people in it. I now realize that I owe the privilege of feeling safe, doing whatever I wish in life, and yes, going about my day without a care in the world, to those

men and women who have, and will, selflessly put their lives on the line for others. For those who do not give them the respect they deserve or stare with disgust at their wounds, I cannot be mad; I was no different. Instead, I will say that they have a lot to learn.

As for war, I have seen how cruel it can be, but I know it will continue to be a necessary evil until we can all come together as one. Through my husband, other wounded warriors, their caregivers, and volunteers, I come to realize that, for all of the awful people in the world, there are just as many, if not more, caring and commendable ones. Furthermore, there is more to life than just having fun and trying to get through it. It is about putting yourself aside for a moment and doing something to help others, whether it is a simple act of kindness or something that benefits the entire world. Seeing first-hand how short and precious life is, it is not something that I want to waste. My only hope is that I, too, can live as selflessly as some of the remarkable people that I have met through this experience.

POETRY

THE STRUGGLE

I hate who I am when I'm around you.

Each battle,
A destructive encounter.
Wounds worsened,
Shredding the fibers
Of your heart.

My words are licks of fire,
Scorching,
Consuming,
Leaving you smoldering.

My bitterness, a claw,
The talons slashing,
Tearing you to pieces.

And even as I roar,
My heart falters.
Our relationship
Disintegrates into ashes.

I yearn to
Fight
To overcome,
Pierce this inner dragon
With the sword
Of my virtue.

But my skin is
Impenetrable,

And I am
Unable to stand
Against the mass of my disgust.

The music of my soul,
The familiar melody of faith,
Could soothe this beast within.

Alone,
I must remember it.

For this misfortune is my own.
And though the dragon has the upper hand,
The warrior
Must
Prevail.

—*Kelli Brodhag*

ILLUSTRATION BY MADISON COCHRAN



THE CHERRY BLOSSOM

by Rachel Hassey

Lily gently marched on the balls of her feet down the rocky cobblestone road of Georgetown's bustling city streets. Maneuvering through the city and its people required a rigorous protocol. She was simultaneously overwhelmed with the sensations that both the entire world and not a single soul were conscious of her presence. Every muscle of Lily's body was tense, as if ready to jump at a moment's notice, yet with exhausting mental control, she managed to flow with the rest of the crowd down the road and to her favorite park.

Lily loved nothing more than to walk through the park near home. It was a quaint park: a winding cement trail dividing a few trees—all encased by a grey chain-link fence and quietly crammed between a busy road and housing tracks. Compared to the clamor of the big city, the park was as serene as it was lonely. Every afternoon, after the household duties but before her husband returned from work, Lily would treat herself to an hour's stroll. She was by far the park's most frequent inhabitant. It was like a room of her own. When in the park, she was something more than when she was outside of it. In the park, she could just be.

When she had first moved to Washington, D.C., this park was the first place George, her husband, had taken her. Together on the park's only bench, they had laid out the groundwork for their own American Dream. George, who had just passed the Bar before the war, would start in at a small law firm, working his way up to the point that one day—they hoped—he would enter the city's elite world of politics. He wanted three sons, who would play ball and be just like their dad. And Lily would always be there for him.

Aside from the local market, the park was all she comfortably knew. George had always promised that, when he had some time off from work, he would show her around more, "if it would make her happy." But that day never came. So, instead, Lily had resorted to creating small worlds for herself within the confines of the grey sidewalk slabs that formed the park's perimeter. At first, she had used the slabs of concrete to guide her through the park. She was the kind of walker who always stayed to the right side and made a point to never step on anything small that lay on the cement. She also tried very

hard to stay out of other people's way, but not as much as they avoided her.

Today, as had become her custom over the last few months, Lily abandoned the sidewalk, choosing to form her own paths through the new spring grass. Spring was Lily's favorite season. All the plants slowly came out of hiding, growing harmoniously with one another to make the most beautiful gardens. And on this day, the weather was particularly comfortable, as the sun generously wrapped her in its warm embrace. She took a seat on a small plot of earth under her most favorite plant, the cherry tree.

As she did, a small fox-like dog ran up to her, eagerly anticipating affection. She looked into the deep brown eyes of the small animal as she offered her hand out as a sign of respect, before scratching the beautiful animal.

"Luna, get back here!" shouted a man who was about the same age as her husband. Lily and Luna froze for just an instant before survival instincts took over. The dog obediently ran back to the man.

Lily, in her best English, said, "Luna, what a lovely name."

"Yeah," grunted the man, awkwardly averting his gaze from hers.

Inside, Lily knew she had done nothing wrong, but still she bowed her head down while her face flushed with embarrassment. While she had slowly grown accustomed to the American hostility towards the Japanese, such resignation had never stopped her confusion. In Japan, the American boys were notorious for their infatuation with Japanese women. But they were just fantasies of vacation to the young men, "Geishas" or little porcelain dolls to be played with and then left behind. And the last of American affection had quickly diminished once the War was over. As if in sympathy, Luna gave Lily an apologetic glance as the dog stood obediently beside her master, who gave his bitch a slight kick to the gut before hastily moving her along. Heartbroken, Lily watched as the innocent animal walked away, tail between her legs.

Lily had grown accustomed to the rude utterances and averted glances. She had developed a skin as thick as the bark upon which she now rested her back. America had been so different from what she had anticipated. Even in the beautiful park, her body and mind could only wander for so long before the all-encompassing chain-link fence interrupted. Sometimes she hated the fence for being so grey and cold, but other times she was grateful for its transparent protection. Through it, she could watch the ongoing events of her new world, unnoticed. The city life played out like a scripted picture, and everyone had his or her role. When undisturbed by outsiders, the city flowed so smoothly like a movie picture. Unfortunately, experience had taught Lily that there was no room for foreigners in this film. So she stayed hidden, tucked in the shade of the cherry tree.

And Lily did so dearly adore the cherry trees. Of course, when they were in bloom and most beautiful, everyone in Washington loved them, too. Sometimes, she wondered if the Americans even remembered that the trees were a gift from the Empress. Even though their roots were in American soil, Lily knew that they too were Japanese, and this little secret filled her with much pride. As she deeply inhaled the tree's scent, which was as soft and pink as the petals it produced, her earlier anxieties diminished. Looking around her, she saw a lone blossom that the wind had uprooted from its cluster. To Lily, that one fragile flower was everything. In comparison to the many layers of a rose or the exoticness of an orchid, the cherry blossom's beauty lay in its simplicity. For the rest of her hour, she sat under the tree, admiring her cherry blossom.

Slowly the sun began to fall and Lily knew it was time to head home. For a moment she considered taking the proud flower back with her. She could press it in a book or keep it by her nightstand. But the thought of the soft flower trapped in her hard home seemed . . . a travesty. Instead, she placed the blossom back where she had found it, on a clean bed of spring grass in her favorite park—where it could just be.

POETRY

DEATH'S GALLERY

So we sat in Death's Gallery
Amidst the seas of mourned faces and living carcasses
All done up in silk and satin
To dress their billowy eyes and plastic smiles:
My future in a glimpse

Death's Mistress came to us
Her skin caked and grave
Her suit trim and proper
With the precision of a sadist or a stone carver
Embellished with artificial sympathy and an unyielding patience
For us to assemble our motley selves

We followed her down into the hall
Shuffling our feet on Ritz-reject carpet
Scouring past rococo furniture
Wallowing in an ocean of placid browns and sober whites
To see at last her holding ajar The Door
A silent, solemn beckoning step
Into that harrowing place with the naïve name:
The viewing room

And the levies broke at our viewing
The raging water of guilt and sorrow
Drowning our denials and expectations
Filling us up to bursting till they poured from our eyes and noses
And choked our sobs

He lay there
At greater ease now than he'd ever been when his heart had still beat
Ornamented in his flannel shirt and Nirvana tee

His hair combed and his face relieved
His hands still and his flesh cold and stiff
Like he needed a good thawing

And yet the longer I kept my eyes fixed
The hollower he became

When Lady Death returned, straight and composed,
As we wiped our eyes and snorted into tissues
She inquired if we needed anything
Yes, I gazed narrowly,
A voodoo priest to raise him back to the living
And someone alive to answer why they have the gall to still breathe
While one of mine lies dead and stuffed

—*Jordan Bruce*

ESSAY

THE DARKNESS THAT PULLS

by Kirsten Blanco

The gray area between unconsciousness and awareness is a funny place. You have not completely surrendered to the foreboding darkness that pokes irritatingly at the corners of your eyes, but you are not quite cognitive enough to make a noise to let others know the wheels are still turning in your head. The crushing weight above you pushes you deeper and deeper into the realm of unconsciousness, and before you go out completely, you wonder if you will just slip away forever. Suddenly as quickly as it disappeared, the light comes rushing back with a twitch of the leg or a wiggle of the fingers—signs that life is slowly returning to your body. Shapes blur and focus before your eyes and, for a few moments, you do not know where you are. Just like waking up from a nightmare, you are finally able to regain your bearings and return to your normal life after several minutes.

I have been here so many times that I have an easy familiarity with the darkness that pulls me under, and there are no longer any surprises. People visit this place for many different reasons, whether it is intentional or not. For me, going here for a reason completely out of my control has left a great impact on my life.

I was only fourteen years old when my life drastically changed. The day was like any other September in southern California. The sun was bright, beating down in a relentless wave of heat. Despite the intolerable outside temperature, it was a beautiful afternoon. It was the type of day people from all over the world came to enjoy every year. The birds were chirping, singing their songs from the towering heights of the trees that stood in the backyard, butterflies were weaving in and out of flowers, fluttering through the bright explosions of colors that painted the hillside. Tearing my eyes away from the window, I looked down at my homework scattered across the kitchen table. It was only the second week of my sophomore year of high school, and already I had several hours of reading, highlighting, and analyzing ahead of me. I wanted to escape the confines of the house so badly, but real life was sitting right in front of me. It was not until later that night when everything would take a turn for the worse.

That evening was one of the worst I ever experienced. I was inexplicably exhausted, my head was spinning, and my dinner was coming dangerously close to

making a comeback appearance. With a box of tissues in one hand a small trashcan in easy reach of the other, I did nothing but lay around all night. The beginning of the school year meant one thing—everyone’s immune system was adjusting to an onslaught of new germs that flew around from person to person. My mom suggested that it was nothing but a virus, and naturally, I believed her. I had probably just been one of the unfortunates caught in the flight path of a wayward microbe.

The following morning was the first of what would be five visits to the emergency room at Mission Hospital. I was catching up on schoolwork while I was at home when every muscle in my body weakened and an aching, stabbing pain shot through the back of my head and neck. Whatever “virus” this was surely knew how to make a person miserable.

During that first hospital visit, every test imaginable—including blood tests, CT scans, and a toxicology screening—was performed, but doctors were unable to find anything significant in the results. I was sent home shortly after, only to return the following day. This time my body was completely paralyzed. Again, there was no answer, only a shake of the head and an “I’ve never seen this before.” I tried not to worry, especially since it would only make everything worse. Trying and succeeding, however, are two completely different concepts.

The next few months were a blur of more trips to the ER, visits to neurologists who proved to be nothing but disappointments in their diagnoses, and admittance to the Children’s Hospital of Orange County. We were told by the specialists at CHOC that I had “atypical migraines.” It made no sense, but it was something that I could hold onto, unlike the intangible mystery surrounding me before. Since I missed so much class, I had to withdraw and continue my schooling from home. Despite having multiple migraines a day during some weeks, I was determined to finish off the school year with good grades. I was not going to let these migraines get the best of me. My family and I were going to keep searching for an answer.

By the spring of 2009, my migraines had transformed from episodes of paralysis to periods of unconsciousness. The first time I lost consciousness will stay with me forever, as it was the first time that I had ever truly feared something. I never knew when the episodes were going to strike, and no one could explain why it happened. My doctors were still convinced that these fell under the “atypical migraine” category, and after an adjustment of medication, we were able to somewhat manage the migraines. I returned to JSerra Catholic High School in the fall, and was excited that I would finally have the chance to go back to a somewhat normal life. However, my newfound normalcy lasted an

astounding three days, and once again I found myself drifting in and out of consciousness for the next couple of weeks.

It was another ordinary day—ironically another sweltering September afternoon. After waking up to the steady, hypnotizing rhythm of a heart monitor—as well as the smell of stale air and the feel of an itchy gown—one of my worst fears was confirmed. I was back in the hospital, and I had no recollection of arriving there. It was no surprise that the doctor told my mom and me that nothing abnormal was found in the tests he ordered, but he was hesitant to send me home. Three transport nurses arrived shortly thereafter, with large, cheesy smiles on their faces despite the late hour. As they loaded me into the ambulance, I could not help but notice the CHOC logo on the door: a blue bear with a bandage around its arm. I silently wished that everything could be fixed with a band-aid, as it would make my life so much easier. The nurse focused on her clipboard the entire drive, unsure of what to say to a fifteen year old who looked as helpless as a young child.

As soon as I arrived at CHOC, a doctor asked all of the required questions, not ending the rapid-fire inquisition until almost one o'clock in the morning. More doctors arrived, no doubt disturbing my roommate's sleep with the squeaky shuffle of shoes on linoleum. One of the most irritating things about CHOC is that it is a teaching hospital, and not only do the patients each have two main doctors assigned to them, but each patient also has the doctors who are completing their residency. There were probably seven or eight of them standing at the foot of my bed at one point, all with a look of bewilderment across their faces. After being inconsiderately awakened the following morning by the blood-sucking phlebotomist, I was forced to drink a sickly sweet liquid for a five-hour glucose test to see if my blood sugar levels contributed to the migraines. Even though I spiraled into another migraine when my glucose levels crashed two hours later, the doctors did not want to say that it related in any way to my migraines. They chose to ignore the fact that I lay unconscious right before their eyes.

It was now my fourth day in the hospital. I was having extreme little-brother-withdrawals by that time, as four days without their constant bickering, laughing, and overall mischief resulted in an eerie, unsettling silence. Only parents were allowed inside of the hospital because of the H₁N₁ lockdown, and the isolation I felt made me feel worse than I already did. I spent a quiet thirty-six hours with dozens of electroencephalogram (EEG) electrodes attached to my scalp while doctors checked for seizures, but the test proved futile. Despite the three migraines I had while hooked up to the machine, nothing of concern was found in the pattern of my brain waves.

Shoving his hands proudly into the pockets of his white coat, Dr. Schneider—the head neurologist whom I had met briefly the day before—announced that nothing was there, implying that I was faking my symptoms. I tried to keep myself from snapping at him. How could he seriously believe that I would tear myself away from my life *for attention*? I had already pegged him as my least favorite doctor when I first met him, but he managed to drop even lower on the list with that comment. He told us that I possibly had Conversion Disorder, a psychological issue in which the brain puts us in a different state of mind when we do not want to deal with something traumatic. He explained that my inability to cope with something stressful in my life was causing the unconsciousness. I pointed out to him that the psychologist he sent in earlier that day had already declared that I was not crazy. Dr. Schneider continued to look at me with a patronizing stare, ready to argue if he needed to. He resumed the conversation with my mom rather than me, as if I was too young and immature for him to waste his precious time on. This *really* irritated me.

I was tired of being treated like a child. I may not have even been sixteen yet, but I had been through more than most adults could even imagine. I was obviously old enough to understand what was going on, and the doctors had no right to talk to me like a child. Tuning out the doctor, I focused my attention straight ahead.

It was as I was staring at the pink and blue-cotton-candy-colored walls that I had an epiphany. My theory was one not backed by science or influenced by years of medical school. It was more common sense than anything else. I suggested that the painful, paralyzing migraines I had experienced the previous year constituted the “traumatic event,” and that the unconsciousness was my body’s way of escaping the oncoming misery. The doctors in the room considered the idea, saying that anything was possible. One of them, who turned out to be my favorite of the group, looked as if he was really thinking about it, and I was happy that someone was *finally* listening to me rather than silently telling me I was nothing but a foolish kid. Dr. Schneider, who was not satisfied with the prognosis by one of his colleagues, decided that whatever my condition was, it was not normal; therefore, it was a “complicated” migraine. If *complicated* is the best that the brilliant, mastermind neurologists of Orange County can come up with, then medicine clearly must be a complex field of study.

Only one doctor stayed behind as the others exited the room. He assured me that they were going to put a name to my condition, and that I would be put at the top of his list of interesting patients. I was tired of being *interesting*, tired of being looked at like a walking case study. I was a person, not an experiment. The following morning, I was

discharged from CHOC with nothing but a bruise on my chest from countless sternum rubs and the diagnosis of “complicated migraine” typed on my papers. This answer was not good enough, and my family was going to keep searching for something that would finally help.

Looking back almost two years after that first day in September of 2008, I have realized one thing about the world. At not even seventeen years of age, I know that life is not always rainbows and butterflies. If there is anything that I have learned from my experiences, it is that we must always face adversity head-on. Rather than cowering in the face of hardship, we have to meet it with a smile and tell ourselves that we cannot let it beat us; everything is going to be okay eventually. Even though I still do not have a definitive answer about my condition, I know that I have to continue to hold my head high and accept this hardship as just another obstacle in the road. Sometimes we have to be at the bottom before things start looking up.

POETRY

ADRIFT IN LOST LOVE

The nomad journeys from lost love
bearing wounds of proximity.
Unraveled from the *who*, yet
interwoven with the *what* that he loves.

Quiet shouts of despair continue to appear
while in her silence there is a prayer.
Knowing that night brings no reprise
afraid of what might arise with closed eyes.

The nomad lives nowhere and everywhere
and in time the drifting will stop.
The solace lies in the nomad's creed:
he will die before love kills him.

—Patrick O'Keefe

POETRY

HELEN

...and her fever
Lasts a half-moment
Before drowning
into the cataracts
of the river.

Nestled in the crook of my arm,
teeth scraping at the skin
and dry, cracked lips mapping
the spider-webs of my veins

O, my hideous Helen!
I am wreathed in twig-limbs
And knobby knees.
Pointed elbows
And hot exhaustion.

Her throat thrums
(*slides, stretches, shrinks*)
beneath my fingers
steady and rhythmic.

I can feel it,
Somehow, somewhere,
between the
thump in my chest
and the *buzz* in my ears.

When she sleeps
(*so still, so cold, curled up, curled in*)
Away into the night,
That white gossamer sleeve,
Tickling the outline of her jaw,
Flutters to every breath.

—*Kimberly Du*

THE PEASANT WOMAN'S SKIRTS

by Cynthia Weitz

Shoshka, my mother, relished the tale of how she saved her lover from soldiers who were searching the village for conscripts. As death drew near, my mother retold the event more and more often—even in my father's presence.

The story began in Lipnishuk, a rural Lithuanian *shtetl* or village. One evening in late summer, after news of an imminent raid, Shoshka's first thought was to rescue Avramka, the handsome, dark-eyed man she loved. A year earlier, at the end of WWII, her brother, Eliyah, had been dragged off to serve in the army, and no word had come from him since.

To spare Avramka the same fate, Shoshka raced through the unpaved streets. All at once, she heard the clip-clop of approaching horses. Shoshka froze. She was aware that she, a pretty maiden, would be prized by the marauders. Not knowing which way to turn, she flattened herself against a nearby wall, hoping to remain undetected.

As soon as she felt it safe to continue, she carefully made her way from house to house. Out of nowhere, a guard dog appeared, snarling and baring its teeth. Straining against the leash, it lunged at her. Shoshka quickly skittered away, her heart pounding as she darted behind a series of trees, braving to venture out from time to time.

The heavy thump of boots signaled the soldiers were close at hand. Afraid they would see her, she crouched behind a bush, waiting until the noise grew fainter.

In the distance she spied a barn, which could provide a temporary hiding place. There she surprised a tall peasant woman, who was feeding oats to the horses.

Shoshka hurried back across the yard, stopping when the woman called out, "Wait."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, *pani* (lady). I've been running to warn my friend of the soldiers, but I hear them nearby and I'm afraid they'll find me."

The old woman replied, "I know your family. During the time my husband was too sick to work, your father saved bread from the bakery where he worked and sent it to feed our children. Come, I'll hide you."

Shoshka followed the woman to her house, which—like most in the village—was constructed of rough wood slats with a roof pitched high against the rain and snow.

The woman brought her into the kitchen, where a pan of fried onions sat on the stove, permeating the house with a pungent smell.

The pani donned a long cloak over the voluminous skirts that fell to her ankles. Then she went to the bedroom and returned with a large blanket. Pulling over a wood armchair with a wide rush seat, she sat down next to the kitchen fireplace and said, "You're small. You'll fit under my skirts. With my cloak and a blanket, no one will know you're there. I'll leave the door unlatched. If the soldiers knock, I'll tell them it's open."

Shoshka crawled beneath the skirts, scrunching up her body as best she could. The woman arranged the blanket that reached from her ample lap down to the floor. She said, "I have my yarn and knitting needles; anyone who comes will find me busy, making a sweater."

Soon they heard pounding at the door.

"Who's there?" the woman shouted. "Open up and be quick about it. The door's unlocked."

The soldiers tromped in, and a deep voice called out, "Any boys here over age thirteen?"

"Do you think an old woman like me would have young sons?"

"Even so," the soldier replied, "you may be hiding a young girl we spotted in the street earlier."

"Look for yourselves. There's nowhere to hide in this little house."

Enveloped by darkness, Shoshka trembled at the ensuing loud crash of furniture and the stomping of feet, followed by wild laughter and the jangling of breaking glass.

The peasant woman remained silent, clicking her knitting needles faster and faster.

When the soldiers had their fill of mischief, one approached the woman. "Why are you bundled up in this warm weather, *pani*?"

The woman dropped her knitting and without covering her mouth, she braced one hand on her chest, coughing again and again, from deep within. She fished a cloth from under the blanket and wiped her lips. "I suffer from consumption and I'm feeling chilled tonight. Take care so you won't catch it."

Shoshka heard what sounded like retreating footsteps, and the soldier with the deep voice said, "We'd better go. We have our quota to fill."

As the door slammed, the woman spit and cursed after them, "*Psia Krew, Psia Krew* (Dog Blood, Dog Blood)."

Still huddled under the peasant woman's skirts, Shoshka had difficulty breathing.

Waves of dizziness washed over her, and the odor of fried onions made her sick. She worried about reaching Avramka's house at the outskirts of the village, before the soldiers arrived to take him away.

She pleaded, "It must be safe to leave by now."

Lifting the coverings to free her, the peasant woman helped Shoshka stand. She stretched her cramped legs and looked in disbelief at the smashed dishes and broken furniture strewn about. The soldiers had emptied canisters, tossing their contents in the air. Layers of flour and sugar blanketed every surface of the kitchen.

In the bedroom, clothing spilled from an overturned cabinet and the straw pallet lay on the floor. Dirty tread marks from the soldiers' boots besmirched a finely embroidered featherbed.

Shoshka burst into tears. "I'm sorry, *pani*, for causing you this trouble. I wish I could stay and help you clean up, but I must warn Avramka before it's too late."

The old woman opened the door and peered into the darkness. "The streets are quiet now. Go, but be careful."

Shoshka hugged the peasant woman, thanking her repeatedly for hiding her. She brought *pani's* fingers to her lips and kissed them one by one.

Looking around to make sure the neighborhood was empty of soldiers, Shoshka crept through the village towards Avramka's house, where she climbed the steps and rapped softly.

Avramka's *muter* (mother) answered. Although more than a year had elapsed since the death of the woman's husband, she still wore a torn garment, the mourning symbol, customary only during the Jewish seven-day *Shiva* period.

Seeing the raven-haired beauty who had been chasing her beloved, first-born son, she bristled. "Avramka's asleep; don't bother him."

Shoshka rushed past her to the tiny room Avramka shared with his two brothers and shouted, "Quick, you need to hide; the soldiers are searching for young men."

Avramka sat up and rubbed his half-closed, brown eyes; Shoshka pulled him to his feet, and the pair fled to the nearby woods where they lay all night in each other's arms, kissing with an urgency brought on by their recent escape.

Between kisses, Shoshka stroked Avramka's dark, curly beard while he caressed her creamy, white neck and ran his fingers through her long, silky hair. They made plans to emigrate from Lipnishuk.

By daylight, with no further signs of the soldiers, the pair separated; each returning to their respective homes.

For months, they continued to talk about leaving, but her parents died suddenly. Without a firm commitment from Avramka, Shoshka knew she couldn't remain in the *shtetl* alone, so she made arrangements to sail for America.

Tearfully, she begged Avramka to accompany her.

"I'll come later. I promise."

"When?"

"My brothers are still young. One is eleven and the other is only nine. With my father gone, I'm responsible now.

"Your *muter* can take care of them."

"But she..."

During our last visit, a week before she died, my mother retold the story of how she had hidden under the peasant woman's skirts to save Avramka.

After she finished, I asked if she had ever heard of him again. My mother shrugged and threw up her hands. "We sent a few letters back and forth, and then...."

In a voice filled with sorrow, she added, "Who knows if he survived the Holocaust? If he hadn't listened to his *muter*, Avramka might be alive today."

JOSEPHINE

by Calvin T. Verga

It's June in Kathmandu. Rick sits at a table outside a café, appreciating a cup of coffee. The day is early, the morning fog just beginning to lift from the valley as the sun rises. Dust fills the air as rickshaw operators pick up their first passengers of the day and street merchants lay their blankets down on the sidewalks, beginning to display their handy-crafts.

The air leaves a chalky taste in Rick's mouth. A couple of tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan have taught him that thick, dirty air goes quite well with coffee and cigarettes. Reminded of this, he lights himself a smoke then closes his eyes as he leans his head back and pulls a long drag. He tries to think of something other than the job, but it's all that floods his mind. *The last few months have been a shit storm. Everything needs to proceed smoothly. It's all worth it. The German says a couple more weeks and we can move these stones. No problem. If they haven't caught up with me by now, it's doubtful they ever will. Besides, let 'em. I'll grease those dirtbags before they ever see it coming.* His anxieties subside with the exhalation of smoke.

A short, dark, barrel-chested waiter appears, refilling Rick's coffee and placing a day old *New York Times* on the table.

"It's the monsoon season isn't it? When's the rain due?" Rick asks, conceding to the waiter's expertise.

"Yes, you are right," the waiter's gaze shifts from Rick to the sky, looking towards the northern edge of Kathmandu Valley. He continues, "The rain was expected late this year, but it looks like we may see some this afternoon."

"Welcomed by me, keeps the dust down."

The waiter nods in agreement and heads back inside the café. Rick sits reading the paper.

Rick has kept a solemn existence for practically his entire adult life: eight years spent in the shadows for the US military, the last few years spent on security details with varying legitimacy. His most recent job in Dubai has left him in possession of a dozen grape-sized pink diamonds. Cut and polished, these diamonds will fetch millions on Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive. He's got no doubt someone is missing these diamonds, but he

rests assured knowing that the job was executed cleanly and that his footprint in Dubai was kept to a minimum. If there are people coming, Rick will be ready.

His attention is drawn from the paper to a female figure making her way towards him. He can tell by her walk that his stare is not only warranted but welcomed. Her necklaces and bracelets reflect the sunlight, her face disguised by distance and shadow. Rick gives his attention back to the *New York Times* and the woman enters the café. She emerges onto the patio and sits at an adjacent table facing him.

“Quite a day it’s turning out to be,” she says.

“Supposed to rain later.”

“What a pity.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame.”

The waiter approaches carrying a tiny white cup standing on a tiny white saucer and places it on the table in front of the woman.

“Care for a smoke?” Rick asks.

“I would. Thank you.”

They sit together, awaiting the rain, sharing coffee, cigarettes, and small talk. Her name is Josephine; she’s French. She collects and sells antique hand-crafted furniture and rarities. She travels throughout Southeast Asia hunting down items for clients or seeking out hidden treasures that will fetch premium prices back in Europe. Her mother got her into the business, she muses insincerely, and this is her third time to Nepal this year. Rick knows she’s lying. After years of military training and instincts that would rival a Great White’s, he doesn’t need proof to know. He can feel it. She is here to kill him and to retrieve the diamonds. He won’t allow this to happen. After all he’s been through for these damned diamonds, he isn’t about to lose them over some broad with a sweet smile and nice walk. He needs to know more about her, figure her out. He’ll do what is needed, but he is smart enough to investigate first.

“May I suggest dinner tonight?” Rick asks.

“You may.”

“*Kantipurs*, do you know where it is?”

“Yes.”

“How does eight o’clock sound?”

“Perfect.”

“Great, well I must get going. It was a pleasure to meet you, and I look forward to dinner.”

“As do I. Good day, handsome,” she says, flashing a toothless smile at him.

“Good day, beautiful.”

Rick leaves the café and cuts through the market on his way to the German’s. As he makes his way through the crowded streets acknowledging local merchants he’s befriended, he becomes acutely aware of the routine he’s established. *Mornings at the café, afternoons at the market, evenings with the Germans. I let them catch up with me, and now . . . and now? Did the Germans set me up? Is she really here to kill me? Don’t be stupid, don’t get sloppy. No loose ends.*

Rick had never intended to stick around Nepal for long. After Dubai, he made his way high up into the Himalayas and settled in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery. A couple of months later, he emerged and came down to Kathmandu. Soon after, he met Englebert, the German, at a café. Englebert owned a textile factory in town; he’d been in Kathmandu for decades. Sharing an affinity for jazz, they got to talking: Englebert had a connection back in Berlin who had lined up a buyer for the diamonds in Paris. Rick came to trust his new companion, a trust his instincts do not allow.

Rick reaches Englebert’s and informs him about Josephine. They sit on a couch in Englebert’s living room.

“You got to get out of town, man.”

“I will soon enough.”

“Are the diamonds safe?”

“They’ll be fine,” Rick says as he stands up, pulling a snubbed-nose revolver from the back waist of his pants. Before Englebert can get a word out, three rounds go into his chest.

The downpour has been relentless since late in the afternoon, only now letting up as Rick leaves the hotel. Rushing streams outline the dark empty streets as he heads to Kantipur’s. *I shouldn’t have killed Englebert. I had to, but I don’t have to kill Josephine. I could offer her a deal; she’ll have to take it. We could live our lives together or separately, but she could live.* The streets gently brighten as he nears the restaurant until he’s completely immersed in a neon frenzy.

In a back room, separated from the main dining room by a long hallway, Rick sits on a purple floor cushion. There is a matching cushion for Josephine and a wood table-top resting on a larger purple cushion. Two large white cylindrical candles burn on the table; a purple and white marbled orchid sits between them. A canvas of a blue Hindu god suppressing an uprising of demons lies in an ornate gold frame on the back wall. At the entrance, a deep red cloth embroidered with a large gold papal tree serves as a door. The aroma of curry permeates the air. The hostess pulls back the door, and in walks Josephine.

The dinner consists of several courses; the main entrée is *dal bhat*. The conversation is interrupted when the waitress enters the room. She serves them milk tea for dessert and leaves the room.

“Would it bother you if I smoke?” Josephine asks, placing her hand on Rick’s arm.

“Not in the least,” Rick grabs his pack of cigarettes.

“You mind hashish?” she asks.

“I mind even less,” he says.

Josephine rolls a small ball of hash between her thumb and index finger. She grabs rolling papers and a packet of loose-leaf tobacco from her handbag, and rolls the hash into a long, thin cigarette. She lights the spliff on the candle and hands it over to Rick, repeating the process for herself.

“I’m not trying to dismiss Rothko as an influential artist, but I cannot remain silent as you make comparisons to Picasso.” Rick takes a drag from his spliff. “He had an impact, but Picasso was a god damn game changer.” He releases a thick cloud of smoke.

“It’s subjective,” she says.

“Well, of course, it’s subjective. While I’m not going to deny Culture Club’s contributions to an era, I’m not going to compare their influence to that of Beethoven or Jelly Roll Morton, for that matter.”

“You *are* an idiot.” Josephine jokes, taking a short, concise hit from her spliff. Gently pursing her lips, she pushes out a puff of smoke. “I’d love to show you the Krishna mask I was telling you about. We could go back to my hotel room for a drink.”

“Sounds excellent.”

Outside it is pouring. Josephine’s room is just around the corner. They decide to run for it. Rick holds his jacket over her head as they gallop over puddles and splash their way along the sidewalk.

They enter her room sopping wet. The room is dark, only lit by the moonlight coming in from the balcony. They embrace one another, their soaking wet clothes falling to the floor. She breaks away, walks to the dresser, and lights incense. Lavender-fragranced smoke begins to fill the room as Josephine takes Rick by the hand and leads him to the bed.

A little later, after they manage to untangle their limbs from one another, Rick sits up in bed and lights a cigarette. Josephine slips out from underneath the bed sheets, her nude body highlighted by the moonlight as she makes her way towards the washroom. She turns on the washroom light and closes the door. Exiting the washroom as silently

as she's entered it, Josephine holds out a silenced .45 caliber, H & K. with luminescent sights fixed on the bed, her eyes still adjusting to the change in light. A hand grips her face, covering her mouth. A blade presses against her neck. Blood sprays the wall as her gun drops to the floor. All of her weight now burdens Rick. He backs up into the washroom, cradles the limp body in his arms, and places it in the tub to bleed out.

Rick walks out of the washroom and over to the nightstand. He lights a cigarette and heads back into the washroom picking up the abandoned gun on the way. Sitting on the edge of the tub, he thinks of his family whom he hasn't seen in years, he thinks of the wars, he thinks of Englebert. Finally, as he raises the gun to the side of his head, he thinks of Josephine.

FICTION

OLÉ

by Daniel DeLeon

This has not been the most pleasant day of my life, Fernando ruminates, his mouth dry from sucking the hot afternoon air, his chest moist, a combination of sweat and blood that drips all the way down his legs. His aching neck and shoulders make his head feel heavy; he struggles to lift it. *There he is again. Why does he pester me so?* Fernando scratches the grainy hard-packed sand and prepares the charge.

Rafael's *traje de lucas* glimmers in the blazing afternoon sun, light reflecting off the golden embroidery and sequins sewn onto a jacket specifically made to fit the contour of his body. Adorned with decorative epaulettes, the bottom of the jacket ends just below his ribs. He wears knee-length tights decorated to match his jacket, on his feet, *zapatillas*, flat slippers similar to a ballerina's and secured with a bow. Underneath the *traje de lucas* he wears a white collared shirt and a thin red tie like a businessman might wear. He is costumed like a dancer, yet he is all business. His movement is ballerina-like, elegant and precise. He straightens out his right leg, bends his left leg placing it slightly in front of his right leg, pushing his *derrière* back an inch or two, leans his upper body forward, points his sword at Fernando, and prepares for the charge.

I'll get him this time.

Rafael's sword is curved at the end like a cupped hand. Palm down, the "fingers" help the sword find its way into the flesh. Fernando charges. Rafael lunges, attempting to thrust the sword between the shoulder blades. It must go in behind the lowered head, exposed now because of the weakened muscles. He will drive the sword into Fernando's heart. The sword penetrates Fernando's skin but sticks on a vertebra, bending almost in half like a pole-vaulter's pole, then escapes from Rafael's grip and swings twenty feet into the air, spinning and glinting in the hot afternoon sun. The *aficionados* who have come to witness the spectacle howl in disapproval. Rafael must run for cover and regroup behind a barricade that Fernando cannot penetrate. Even though he is wounded and exhausted, Fernando has the capacity to mutilate Rafael.



A lone trumpet blows a couple of sorrowful yet defiant bars of a *paso doble*,



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTINA GERGERE

announcing Fernando's entrance into the bullfighting arena, Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas, Madrid. When the gates open, he scampers into the middle of the ring and stands proud, his head lifted high, his horns symmetrical, his body muscular, his coat a deep lustrous black. Through countless generations of selective breeding—strength, courage, size, aggressiveness—Fernando has become what is known as a *toro bravo*. He weighs more than 1500 pounds, can sprint as fast as a horse, and his strength is immeasurable.

The arena is roughly the size of a baseball diamond, except it is round with a hard sandy surface. Beyond the fence, climbing upwards, hoards of *aficionados* fill the stands; some pay a premium to sit in the shade. Stylishly dressed women cool themselves with colorful folding fans. A man holds a frosty beer bottle against his forehead, bringing relief from the torrid afternoon sun.

Several barricades form an inner circle approximately three feet way from the arena wall. They are thick and wooden, dark brown and bloodstained. Rafael's assistant comes out from behind a barricade wearing a *traje de luces* embroidered in silver to signify his subservience. He wields a pink cape and shakes it to get Fernando's attention. Fernando charges across the bullring. The assistant disappears behind the barricade. On the other side of the ring another assistant shakes his pink cape. Fernando charges again. The results are the same. A few more charges tire Fernando enough for Rafael to face him for the first time.

Rafael knows what to expect from Fernando, what Fernando is capable of, how he will react, what it will take to defeat him. It is that knowledge that gives Rafael the advantage. Fernando knows nothing about Rafael. This is by design. If Fernando had ever done battle with a *toreador*, if Fernando had ever dealt with a cape before, he would have learned to differentiate the man from the cape and would have the advantage. The battle between Fernando and Rafael reaffirms the superiority of brains over brawn. Fernando is intelligent but uneducated. Fernando weighs ten times as much as Rafael. Fernando has horns and powerful muscles that can destroy Rafael—but Rafael knows what to expect.

Rafael struts into the middle of the arena, shoulders back, head high. With one outstretched arm, he shows Fernando the cape.

Maybe this one won't disappear, Fernando thinks as he takes a breath, lowers his head, and charges.

Rafael swings his arm gracefully, as if he were showing someone which way to the kitchen. He makes it look effortless, but standing still in the cross hairs of a charging bull is no easy task. Hidden behind Rafael's exquisite mannerisms is a swaggering display of courage.

Fernando gets close enough to smell the soap Rafael bathed with. It smells like lilacs and reminds him of home where he lived a peaceful, almost regal, existence on a *finca* in Salamanca with a herd of *toros bravos*. He spent afternoons lounging under the shade of oak trees—but he will not lounge today.

He passes through Rafael's cape into the hot afternoon sun. *What strange animal is this?* He thinks the cape is part of Rafael, the part that must be destroyed. Fernando charges again, only to glide through the thin wispy cape. Rafael knows that Fernando will not solve the mystery and uses the cape to guide Fernando as if he were directing his dance partner. Fernando's savagery, Rafael's elegance, they twist and twirl in the center of the ring, each "pass" a brief and intricate ballet demonstrating Rafael's mastery over Fernando. The *aficionados* bellow resounding "Olés."

The lone trumpet blows a few bars of the *paso doble*. Rafael retreats behind a barricade. Two mounted horses enter the ring, covered in thick-quilted protective blankets. Blinders keep them from seeing Fernando. On their backs, *picadores* carry lances, ten feet in length, and wear metal protective knee-high boots. The *picadores* guide their horses to opposite sides of the ring and wait near the outer wall for Fernando's attack.

Fernando charges a horse and butts his head into the padding, nearly knocking the horse off its feet. Simultaneously the *picador* drives his lance into Fernando's back, just between his shoulder blades at the base of his neck. Fernando continues to drive the horse toward the wall. The *picador* continues to drive his lance into Fernando's neck muscles. The *picador* draws first blood. It trickles over Fernando's ebony hide, giving it a red tinge and a wetted look.

Now you're pissing me off.

Fernando lowers his head, buries his horns into the padded horse, and lifts the horse and rider completely off the ground. He rams them into the outer wall, and as they topple over, the pink capes come rushing out from behind the barricades, distracting Fernando just long enough for the horse and rider to prepare for the next charge. After the *picadores* have dealt out their share of punishment, the trumpeter signals the next phase, and the horses exit the arena.

Rafael's assistants put down their pink capes and pick up their *banderillas*: bright colored sticks, a couple of feet long, decorated like *piñatas*, with sharp metal barbs at one end. Fernando stands in the middle of the ring. The assistant steps out from behind the barricade. He holds one *banderilla* in each hand. He raises his arms over his head as if to make the letter Y with his body. His fingers keep the barbs pointed at Fernando, the

blunt ends nestled in his palms. He advances toward Fernando, first slowly, measuring his stride. Fernando charges, and the assistant, in turn, runs directly at Fernando. They are on a full sprint collision course, Fernando dipping his horns in anticipation of the kill, the assistant looking like a madman with his arms outstretched over his head. At the last possible second, the assistant calculates the arc in which Fernando can turn and veers to place himself just inside the arc. At the same time, he brings down both *banderillas* with all his might and drives them into Fernando's back. He contorts his body to avoid being gored by Fernando's horns, which narrowly miss him as he flies by. Fernando stops and turns around, now adorned with two *banderillas* hanging from atop his shoulders. The barbs agitate him and cause him to bleed more profusely. He watches the assistant dash towards the outer fence, disappearing behind the barricade.

Fernando is confused. Missing the target he is aiming for is completely foreign to him. *Crafty creatures*, he thinks. But everything is happening too fast for him to assimilate and adjust to the strange behavior. He becomes angrier instead, more focused, intent on killing his adversary, which makes him more vulnerable.

The other assistant makes his mad dash at Fernando, but only manages to add one brightly colored *banderilla* to the bouquet dangling from Fernando's black and bloodied withers.

The trumpet takes on the timbre of a baby's cry when it announces the final phase of the *corrida*. Rafael gives up his large cape for a smaller red one called a *muleta*.



An assistant returns the lost sword to Rafael, who is now eager to come out from behind the barricade. Rafael unfurls the *muleta* and guides Fernando through a series of passes—each pass rewarded with cacophonous “*Olés*” from the *aficionados*. On one pass, he holds the *muleta* with one arm behind his back and stretches it out with the other. On another pass, he gets down on his knees.

Fernando and Rafael face off again. The loss of blood, the searing sun, and the constant battle have taken their toll on Fernando, his movements sluggish, his reaction time delayed, his head ever so heavy, panting, bleeding, but incapable of retreat. He has no concept of negotiating an equitable solution. Kill or be killed is all he knows, and he expects to kill.

Rafael assumes his killing pose. Fernando charges. This time the sword finds its way through the shoulder blades and into Fernando's heart. He tastes his salty blood gurgling in his mouth but stands proud. Amid the dangling *banderillas*, a shiny sword handle protrudes.

Fernando sees a pink cape waving to his right. It wasn't a clean kill. He twists around to charge the pink cape, which disappears as another one waves to his left. His heart is still pumping blood. He twists to his left, but that cape vanishes, then back to charge the pink cape that appears on his right. The sword in his torso swings like a pendulum and severs his aorta. His legs weaken. He topples down on his front knees and collapses to the ground. Still able to move his head, he struggles to gore the assistants. *I'll get you sons of bitches.* In his final moments, he still can't fathom defeat.

Rafael approaches calmly. With a swift thrust, he pokes a small dagger into the soft spot at the base of Fernando's skull. Fernando's muscles stiffen and make one violent twitch as if he has been shocked with electricity. Like his father and his father's father before him, he gasps his last breath in a bullring in Spain. It is the inescapable fate of the *toro bravo*. His body goes limp. His head crashes down on the hard sandy surface, and Fernando lies dead in the hot afternoon sun.

POETRY

YOUR LOVE

Your love—it calls like pain hidden in songs.
The cry is dim yet scolds my heart again.
I try to disregard the sting, though strong.
Then I lay puzzled thoughts inscribed by pen.
At times my mind cannot decide the trail.
Still I shove on with hopes to keep your love;
And overthrow the aches, I cannot fail.
This ideal is too great to let go of.
But fate will not allow my words to soar.
This love can only leave my breath in vain.
Your bay now bawls as loud as beastly roars!
My dear, there's nothing left for me to gain.
 I bid this pleasant feud a soft adieu.
 And hope my heart returns to good as new.

—*Myke Bartholomew*

George Cattanach

ART
NEAR BLINDNESS

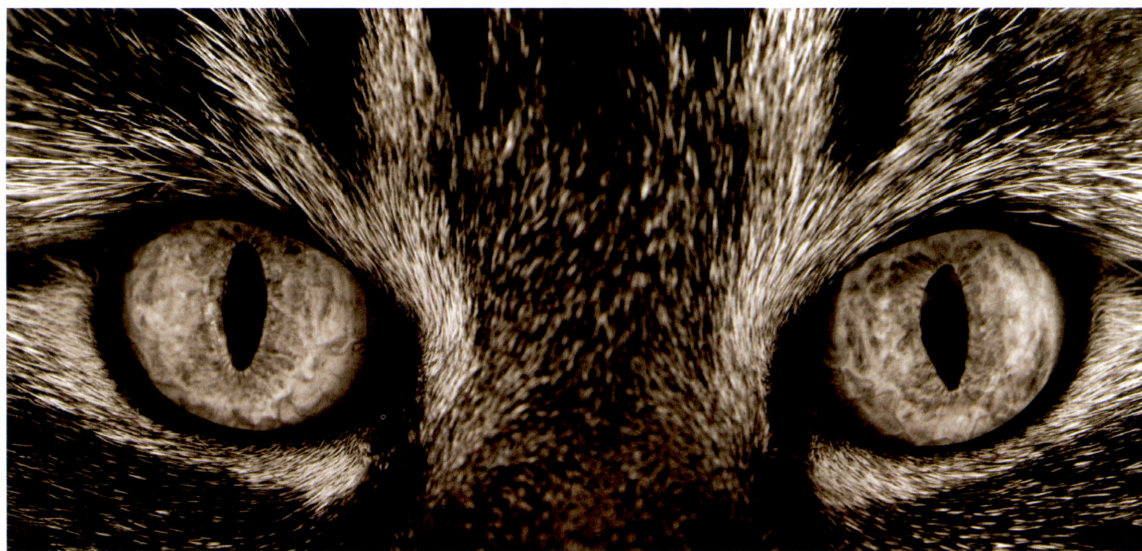


"I shut my eyes in order to see."

—Paul Gauguin

Susan Brown Matsumoto

EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

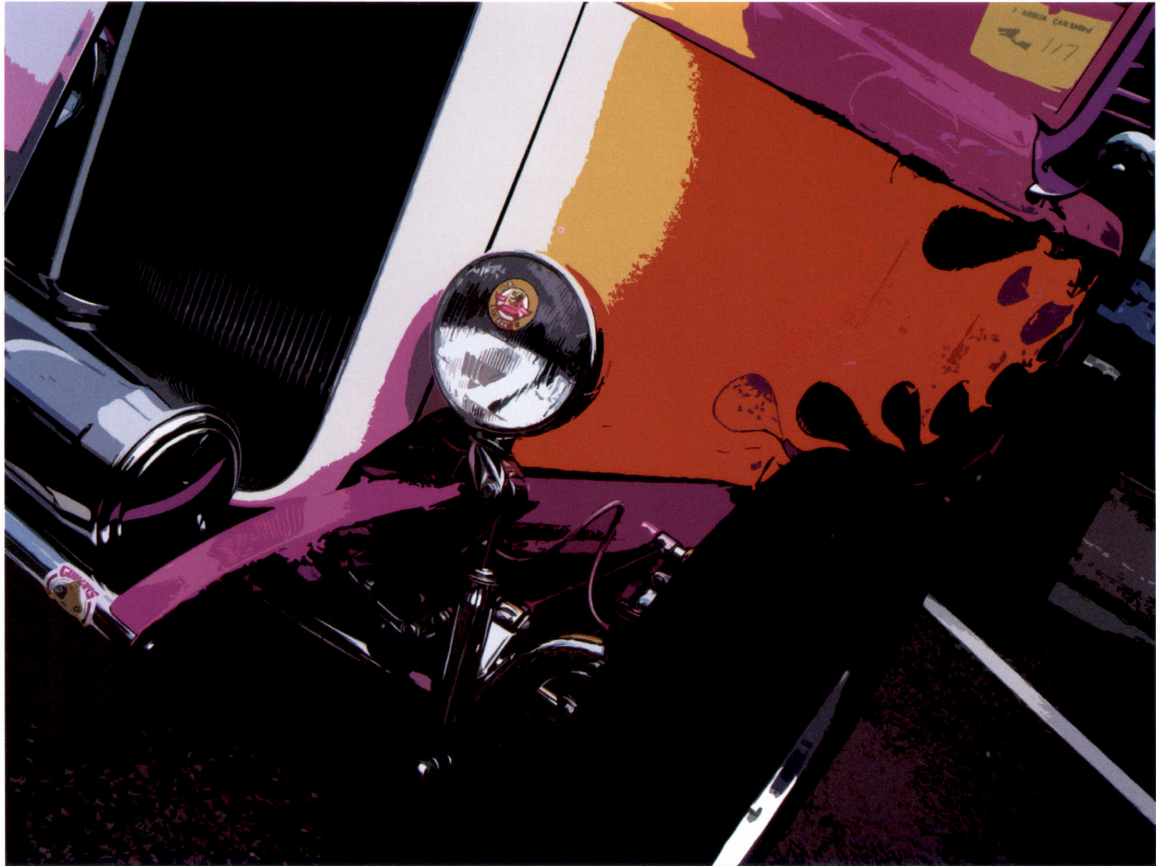


“Thou art the Great Cat, the avenger of the Gods, and the judge of words, and the president of the sovereign chiefs and the governor of the holy Circle; thou art indeed...the Great Cat.”

—Inscription on the Royal Tombs at Thebes

Robyn Scott

FLAME CAR



“Any man who can drive safely while kissing a pretty girl is simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves.”

—Albert Einstein

Gabriel Gonzalez

MATRON ETHERA OF VHAL

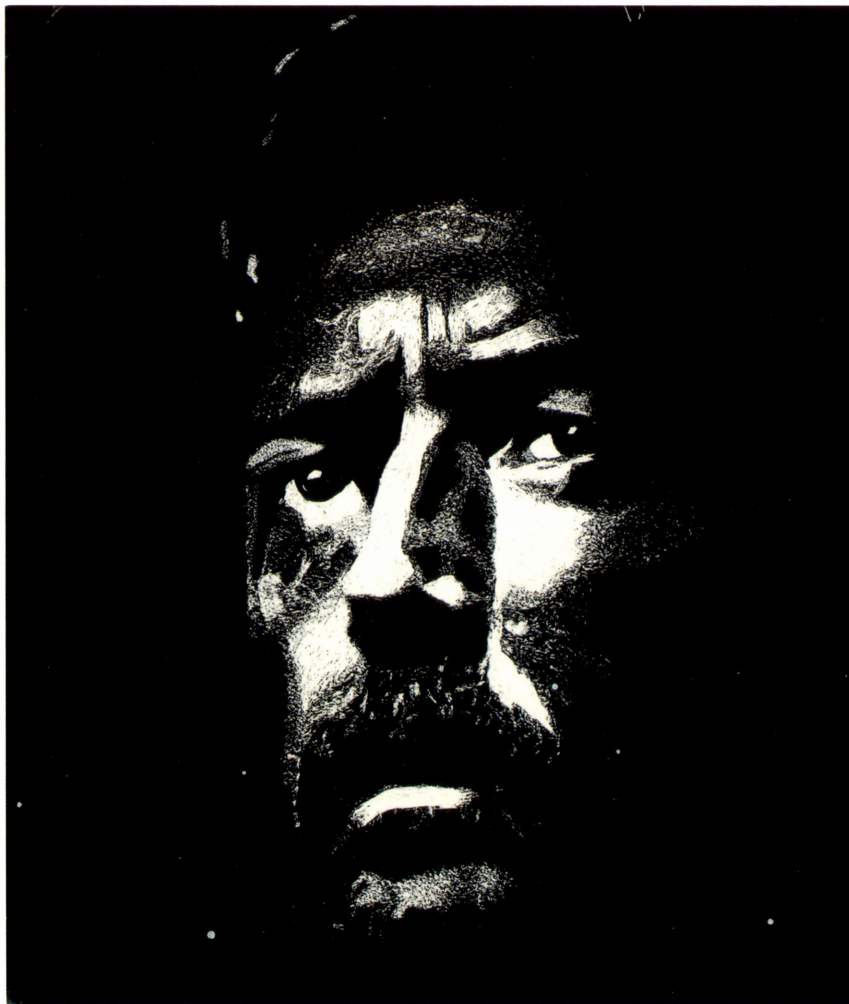


“Peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience.”

—Thomas Merton

Johnny Seo

ESCAPE



"Thought, dream, future."

Varsha Patel

REFLECTION



“In the colorful reflection we have what is life.”

—Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe

Carissa Savant

THE WORLD'S BEAUTY



“Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window.”

—Charles Baudelaire

Leah Bowman

SUNSET 24



“And you run and run to catch up with the sun, but it’s sinking, racing around to come up behind you again.”

—Pink Floyd

Cay Varholick

VIEW FROM THE MONTAGE



“There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior of the soul.”

—Victor Hugo

Inga Buell

UNDER THE SAN CLEMENTE PIER



“Loneliness adds beauty to life. It puts a special burn on sunsets and makes night air smell better.”

—Henry Rollins

Carla Meberg
VILLA



“Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it.”

—Confucius

George Cattanach

IGNORANT BLISS



“The aim of art is not to represent the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”

—Aristotle

Natasha de Sá

BREATH OF DEATH



“To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is...at last, to love it for, what it is, and then to put it away.”

—Virginia Woolf

Iman Moujtahed

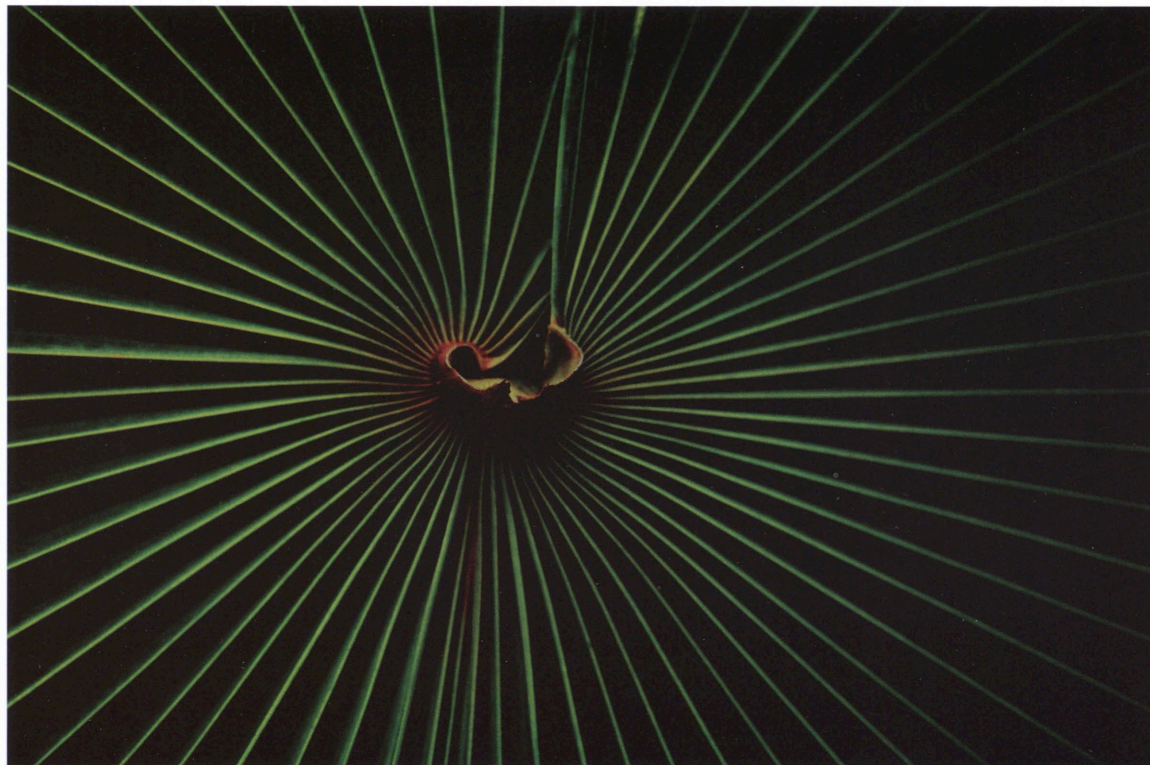
ILLUSIONS OF A DIFFERENT WORLD



“And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Susan Brown Matsumoto
FERN



“Joy in looking and comprehending is nature’s most beautiful gift.”

—Albert Einstein

J. L. Ayala

DENIAL



“I’m not saying that I’ve been everywhere and I’ve done everything, but I do know it’s a pretty amazing planet we live on here, and a man would have to be some kind of FOOL to think we’re alone in THIS universe.”

—Jack Burton

FIGMENT OF A QUEEN

My Silhouette is unknown
as I lie in the glacial snow
so numbing to my bones, I think I've grown unhurried
In this foreign place, where there is only light
 I will become Queen

Tea leaves descend from above,
filling my cup with un-kept futures,
snow angels gather in their winter coats
emptying my pockets of all my yesterdays
 here I can become keeper of them all

This curious place has awakened,
breathing, singeing me to life
whispering trees fight beside me,
watching my trail of sugar in the snow,
 I fit the crown above my head

Embrace me for all time,
twine my memories to a string,
wrap up my former soul; send it back to moments passed
here, I will not need worry
 I am Queen
 I am Queen of them all

—*Rachel Savitt*

ESSAY

PSYCHOTIC AND BACK AGAIN . . .

by Jeremy Jordan

Growing up, I always had to learn the hard way. If I were told the kitchen stove was hot, I would immediately put my hand to it, just to make sure. I moved around a lot, even lived with surrogate families, but all the wisdom imparted on me acted only as theories—theories that I would one day have to test. So when I was told that drugs and psych meds didn't mix, it should come to no surprise that I would test this "theory" and, in doing so, literally lose my mind.

As a child, I was always the odd kid out, more emotional and introverted than most other kids, including my siblings. Nobody knew it then, but I was suffering from manic depression. It was typical for me to spend half—maybe a whole day—as a very ecstatic, energetic ten year old, while I spent the other half hating myself and wishing I were dead. This cycle made for a very rocky and sometimes isolated youth.

When I turned twelve or thirteen, I stopped sleeping. Instead, I spent my nights crying in bed, my thoughts running a hundred miles an hour. I would think myself into very deep depressions and sometimes try to harm myself, looking for a way to change my life. It definitely felt as if things couldn't get much worse. Since my parents had divorced when I was about six, (which completely turned my world upside down), I had been living with my mom and sister. But when the insomnia started, I went to go live with my dad, who happened to be a therapist. Recognizing the severity of my depression, my dad assigned me to a psychologist specializing in depression and insomnia. Immediately, the psychologist put me on medication. Unfortunately, because I was still pretty young, I didn't always take my meds, so the problems got worse.

With or without mental issues, school is a stressful place for a kid. But transferring from my small town Oklahoma public school to one in the metropolis of Chicago made it near impossible. I had breakdowns at school, times when I would curl up on the floor and just shut down. These events, coupled with repeated suicide attempts, landed me in the psych wards of hospitals over ten times in the course of six years.

Of course, seeking to change my life or even my feelings towards life, I turned to illegal drugs like marijuana and cocaine. When someone of my mental state uses drugs, it's sometimes considered "self-medicating." To date, my "self-medicating" has put me

in rehab twice. My battle with substance abuse is ongoing, but I've quit more drugs than most people have tried. As a result, I have suffered some pretty awful hangovers and learned that antidepressants don't work very well when supplemented with depressants.

When I turned eighteen, I moved out to live on my own back in Oklahoma. On the day before my nineteenth birthday, my father committed suicide. I was very close to my dad and his sudden death almost killed me. I started using drugs at an incredible rate, barely keeping up with my psych meds. I was high on pot all day, every day. For a full year, I stopped being sober. Then, one day, something inside me just snapped.

One morning, I was working alone at Pizza Hut when a flood of intense emotions suddenly overwhelmed me. I knew I wasn't going to be able to finish my job. So I called my roommate and co-worker, sobbing uncontrollably and asking him to come replace me. This was the beginning of the biggest, longest and most awful manic episode that I've ever experienced. I didn't sleep at all for the next three or four days. Instead, at night, I paced around the apartment with a pen, writing gibberish on pizza boxes and napkins about God and the meaning of life. It often felt like I was on the verge of a breakthrough instead of a breakdown.

I listened to music by bands like No Doubt and Pearl Jam and thought that God was speaking to me through their lyrics, especially in a song titled "Jeremy." My first name being Jeremy, I thought God was revealing a forgotten part of my past. One night, I left the house grasping my Little Foot doll from the movie *The Land Before Time* (I'd had it since I was six), determined to walk to the hospital, which was probably about ten miles away. I made it a couple of blocks before I tried screaming telepathically for the police to come get me. When that didn't work, I walked back to the apartment only to hear a radio broadcast announcing that a policeman had been shot that night, and being in the state that I was in, I thought that I had shot him telepathically and that they were coming to arrest me.

In contrast to those sleepless nights, the daytime wasn't much better. I hung out with friends, mostly proposing theories and asking questions about God and death. And for unknown reasons, my friends entertained my ideas and questions. I was also having hallucinations; in a mirror, I saw my reflection change from a demon to an angel. Then I told everyone—and believed—that my dad's spirit was reincarnated in me. And since I was stoned all the time and probably one of the wackiest people my friends knew, they weren't able to recognize how severely unbalanced I was. But my sister and her boyfriend, who lived with me, knew this was getting crazy, even for me. None of our friends would take them seriously when my roommates told them something was wrong,

so my sister just watched and waited.

Eventually I started to become agitated, due to lack of sleep, and yelled at my sister to help me, which she quickly tried to do. Since I didn't have insurance, she and her boyfriend took me to a crisis intervention center in the basement of a hospital. During the admission process, I remember telling a counselor that I was Pestilence and that my brother, dad, and sister made the rest of the Four Horsemen. I was treated there for a week.

During that week, I feared for my life every minute. The place had a prison mentality to it, and it didn't help that two other patients, both older guys, were constantly threatening to kill me. After that first week, when I showed no signs of improvement, the crisis center sent me to a residential mental facility, turning things from bad to worse. The place they sent me to was in the middle of nowhere in a suburb of Oklahoma City.

This place was for the insane or those with little hope of recovering. Some men crawled on the floor, showing complete submissiveness to everyone around them; some would talk to themselves or scream uncontrollably, and others were just plain threatening. I was scared to death and would pray for forgiveness from whatever sin had landed me there. Staring out the window at cars driving by, I thought about how lucky those people were to be going somewhere. I told myself that if I were ever again sane or free, I would never take for granted the ability to *choose* to do something and go somewhere, as opposed to letting those decisions be made for me.

I knew there was a possibility that I might be stuck in there for the rest of my life, and it scared the crap out of me. I tried calling my mom, begging her to save me, but she lived in California and, being a psych nurse, believed I was where I needed to be. The facility was awful. All of the staff was desensitized to the patients' behaviors, ignoring both them and their pleas. I awoke one night to find one of the creepiest patients of the facility in my room, looming over me with his hands dripping blood. Luckily, it was his own blood. To make matters worse, one of the guys who had been threatening to kill me had followed me over from the crisis center to the new facility. But he was actually relatively sane compared to my new fellow patients.

Finally, after a few weeks, the staff realized I wasn't a threat to myself or others, and that I was starting to calm down. So they released me to go stay with my step-grandparents. Boy, did they have their hands full. As happy as I was to be free, I was like a blank slate when I got out. I didn't know what money was and thought that other people could read my mind. I was quietly insane, but getting a little better every day.

In the end, this whole experience has made me realize that I walk a thin line

between sanity and losing it all. It's hard now to relate to that insane person I was, but I do try to remember how scary it was and my vows to not take life for granted. These memories make it a little easier to keep myself in line. Something else I have to remember is that there are consequences for every action, and those consequences may be administered by people who don't know how sweet I am or how hard I try to be a good person. And some of these consequences, like the ones I had to suffer through, become inescapable.

POETRY
JOSHUA TREE

The desert wind's hushed and rhythmic woosh
Must sound to a child like the rush of blood past the womb.
So harsh a thing as the desert can soothing be,
In the midst of the twisting forest of Joshua trees;
In the midst of the windy, winding forest of sun
And sand and the Joshua tree.

The soft clucking of the quail mother's coo
Calls her young to her breast in behest of the heat of noon
To seek the shade of crooked bush and sleep,
Lulled by the mystical sound of the sandy sea;
Lulled by the woosh of the wind and the sand 'neath the sun
And the twist of the Joshua tree.

—*Edie Montgomery*

COLD NOVEMBER DAY

by Adam Archiable

The leaves fall from surrounding oak trees to the frost ridden ground. Squirrels dance frantically, scavenging for the last of the food before the snow lays a white blanket over the woodland forest. The sound of the woods consumes all senses, and it seems that I become engulfed by this mystic beauty. The dead frosted leaves on the ground make it hard to hear the distinct sound of an approaching deer. With every crunch of the deer's footsteps, my heart beats harder and my once calm hands begin to shake uncontrollably. This elusive creature is one of beauty and elegance. For this and many other reasons, bow hunting whitetail deer in Wisconsin is my escape from reality.

It is 4:00 in the morning; the dark and ominous glow of the full moon pierces through the darkness. It is going to be cloudy and a bone chilling 32 degrees with a chance of snow. Grabbing my bow and hunting gear, I get on the road for my hour and a half trek west. The drive is full of nocturnal animals, yet the road shows no sign of human existence. All I see is the darkness that surrounds my truck. As I round a sharp corner, my bright lights spot three deer on the side of the road. I take this as a sign of good luck and hope that I can intercept a fattened buck heading back to his bedding area. The final turn takes me from a paved road to a gravel goat trail. Towering over six feet tall, the corn stalks allow a passageway just broad enough for my truck. As I venture through a corn maze road at five in the morning, I can only ponder what the rest of civilization is doing: sleeping in a nice warm bed or perhaps just waking and preparing a hot and much needed breakfast. Then there are the outdoor enthusiasts like myself, who wake before the sun has a chance to peak over the horizon and venture into freezing temperatures with no guarantee that a victorious kill is near.

Dressed head to toe in camouflage, I begin my journey into the wild fully equipped with my bow, Wasp Brodhead tipped carbon fiber arrows, and warm boots. I walk on a narrow path that leads me across a corn field into the woods. Because the full moon projects enough ambient light to guide me through the dense forest, there is no need for a flashlight.

As I place each foot carefully on the path, I try to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb anything that might be lurking in the darkness. This seems to be an impossible

feat. Each step I take seems to be amplified like it is being projected on loud speakers. Making my way deeper into the darkness, I find myself coming upon a bubbling creek. The flowing water moving across the rough rocks below drowns out the noise of my footsteps. The wind starts to pick up and gently glides across my face, drying the sweat that has accumulated on my skin. As I arrive at the orange ribbon that marks where my tree stand sits, I pause for a minute to let the perspiration dissipate before I ascend into the tree like a camouflaged monkey, wielding my bow and essential hunting gear. In the distance, I can see the sun struggle to break the horizon as I settle in.

Anticipation runs through my body as I continue to sit and wait. The sun has broken the horizon and is now shining gloriously. The oak leaves that lay gently on the ground beneath me begin to shimmer in the light of the sun, and the frost that clings ever so tightly to everything in the forest is now melting away. Unfortunately, the wet oak leaves make everything in this vast woodland area less noisy, making it harder to hear the skittish deer moving through the woods. As the sun progressively rises higher into the cloudy blue sky, everything in the woods seems to come alive. Birds play on the branches of trees while two squirrels chase each other on top of logs and tree trunks. I peer through the dead tree branches in front of my stand and see a soybean field seventy yards in front of me. In that moment, I notice that there is something moving across the field and honing in on my position. It is the elusive wild creature that I have come to conquer.

As the male deer makes his way across the bean field and into the woods, I start to shake with excitement. The deer is now on the edge of the bean field on the verge of entering the woods. He makes his way cautiously, looking every direction and strategically placing one hoof in front of the other. He stops and nibbles on an acorn nestling in between the leaves. I want to jump up and scream at the deer, "COME HERE NOW!" But, I hold back the temptation to draw back my bow and shoot a premature shot that could possibly miss or hit the deer where it would not fatally wound it. Patiently, I must wait. As the deer makes his way to the creek, which is forty yards from my stand, he stops and takes a drink. Now I can see his true beauty. The antlers have grown in thick and look like a spider web made of bone. His body is abnormally large. The mixtures of brown, white, and gray hair bleed into the brown background of the woods. Truly magnificent.

Slowly I pick up my bow and stand up. "Slow and steady," I tell myself. Getting to my feet, I realize that my knees are shaking violently, not allowing me to get a clean shot. The buck notices me as I attempt to stand. He begins to scamper away but abruptly stops, looking closer at me to ascertain if I am a threat. He turns walking to his left and

stops again. Putting his head down and picking it back up again, he looks at me with every crunch of the acorn in his mouth. I stare deep into his big black eyes and feel as if he knows what I am thinking and what my next move is going to be. He puts his head down again, taking a couple of steps, CRACK! A bird next to me flies off as a branch falls to the ground. Those piercing black eyes remain on me as he walks away. It is just my luck that I get this magnificent animal in front of me with a great shot only to have the opportunity escape me. The buck circles back and is now farther away, but still I don't have a clean shot. To my surprise he comes back to the same spot where he had been spooked. Can it be? Have the hunting gods blessed me with another opportunity to take this magnificent beast? He comes to a dead stop behind a tree. This is the opportunity that I have been waiting for.

I pull back my bow; it seems heavy in my nervously shaking hands. I look up to the sky and then back down to my sights before taking a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and releasing my arrow. It slices through the air with precision and accuracy, flying straight for the intended target. The arrow hits right behind the shoulder blade and rips through the outer layer of the buck. Blood seeps out of the wound like a flash flood in the Mojave Desert. Kicking violently in the air, the deer runs off in the direction that he had come from. I can see him running full speed through the woods as he makes his way into the soybean field. His legs start to give out midway through the field, and he falls head over heels. Filled with excitement and joy, I nearly fall out of my tree stand. I feel at ease; like I have accomplished an amazing feat and all the life has been drained out of me.

After I loaded him into the truck, I headed to the local gas station to get him tagged. As I drove down the road, satisfied with my kill, people would pull up next to me and gaze at the magnificent creature. "Nice buck...good job!" They would say as they drove away filled with greed. It truly was a glorious day, filled with a roller coaster of emotions and highly self-fulfilling. Although I have been hunting for over eleven years, that day was the first opportunity that I have had to take a big buck. I was blessed with an opportunity of a lifetime, and I took full advantage. Being in those woods, seeing the beauty that nature had and still has to offer, I found where I belong.

ILLUSTRATION BY GERALD BONES



THE LOST WASP

by Elizabeth A. Rico

The Old Owl Tavern was hidden amongst the shops and restaurants that littered the streets of Santa Monica. An ancient wooden sign with faded gold letters hung above the door to mark its existence. Unlike its neighbors, the tavern had no windows or elaborate decorations to entice those roaming the streets. Only a heavy oak door with a silver owl embedded in the caramel wood and a lantern lighting the entrance at night called to those who needed the warmth and comfort within.

Once inside it was easy to forget the life you lived outside, the person you were or the person you were pretending to be, and time—well—time became a concept so abstract it was best left alone. Elegant orange and red paper lanterns were suspended from the ceiling like miniature moons rising after sunset. Dark wooden tables and chairs created a checkerboard across the creamy tile floor. Day or night you would be greeted by the soothing tones of James Porter, the legendary God of the Glass: a tall, clean-cut, sixty-five year old gentleman whose dark green eyes could read a person like a book. By his side stood his apprentice, Arthur: a young man of twenty-five, whose straw colored hair always seemed to be at war with him, and whose amber eyes were filled with curiosity.

Every year, for the last five years, James would send Arthur out of town in the fall to train with bartenders from all over the world, closing The Old Owl Tavern until Arthur returned. No one ever thought much of it; they figured James went on vacation. Who doesn't need one of those every now and then? But in October of 1964 James became very ill, and rather than going out on his yearly quest, Arthur persuaded James to let him stay and look after the tavern.

Unfortunately most customers planned their vacations around The Old Owl's schedule, and while a few people wandered in from time to time, no one ever stayed long enough for Arthur's taste. One evening near the end of the month, the door swung open with such force that Arthur almost dropped the glass he was polishing. A young woman stood just outside as if uncertain whether she wanted to go in or not. Outside, the fog had rolled in so thick that you could not see the shops on the other side of the street.

"Welcome," Arthur said cheerfully. "Evening, Porter!" the woman replied

energetically letting the door slam shut behind her.

“James is resting upstairs. The doctors say he’s got a touch of pneumonia, so of course Mr. Porter would pick the logical choice of ignoring the doctors completely. I’m Arthur by the way—Artie for short.”

The woman looked puzzled but smiled and approached the bar confidently. She wore long khaki pants, a white button up shirt that clearly belonged to a man because the sleeves were rolled up several times, and black dress shoes that were shined to perfection. Her long curly brown hair was pinned in a graceful bun. As she drew nearer to the bar, Arthur noticed a pair of small silver wings just above the breast pocket. She ordered an Andromeda and waited eagerly for Arthur to work his magic. There was something about her that seemed to change the whole feel of the Tavern.

“I can go get James if you like,” he said pulling out the necessary ingredients.

“That’s okay, Artie. Let him sleep. I’m Gertrude. Gertrude Tompkin Silver,” she said leaning over the counter to shake his hand. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Same here,” said Arthur shaking her hand firmly. He added the finishing touches to Gertrude’s drink and placed it in front of her. “How is it you know James?”

“Oh, we used to work at Mines Field together during the war. He taught me how to fly. It was because of him I managed to finish training and became part of WASP,” she said with a sad look in her eye.

“WASP?”

“Women’s Airforce Service Pilots. I used to ferry everything from the small PT trainers to the B-29 super fortress all across the country, instruct new pilots, and even tow targets for the boys to practice with. I was one of only 1,075 women to get their wings,” she said proudly adjusting hers. Gertrude took a sip of her drink, savoring every flavor that graced her tongue. “You know I almost went with Jacqueline Cochran to join the Air Transport Auxiliary in Britain, but after Thomas died...”

“Must have been tough learning how to fly during the war. I imagine there was a lot of pressure on everyone. Any planes give you a particularly hard time?”

“Yes,” Gertrude laughed. “That damn P-51 Mustang!” She finished half the drink. “I took off from Mines Field in Los Angeles on October 26th of ’44 on a day just like this. I was supposed to fly to Palm Springs for the night and head out to Arizona the next morning. But the engine stalled as I tried to climb the higher altitude,” she said shaking her head. “Of course, the instruments failed, and the fog outside was so thick I couldn’t tell where the sky stopped and the earth began. I went down right into the Santa Monica Bay.”

"It's a miracle you survived," Arthur said as she polished off the drink.

"Yes...a miracle," she said tapping her fingers on the bar. "Listen, Artie, I have to go." Gertrude pulled out a folded envelope from her back pocket and placed it tenderly in Arthur's hands. "Can you make sure James gets that? I believe it's what he has been looking for." She got up to leave, and when she reached the door, she turned to absorb every detail of The Old Owl Tavern before finally heading out.

A few minutes later, James came downstairs draped in thick blankets to get a mug of hot apple cider and rum. When Arthur handed James the envelope that Gertrude had left behind and explained who it was from, James became extremely pale.

"Who did you say gave this to you?" James said, hands trembling. His eyes were filled with a mixture of fear and joy.

"She said her name was Gertrude Tompkin Silver."

"Impossible! She's been dead for twenty years!"

"WHAT? You're joking. I shook her hand and gave her a drink. She sat right there on that stool and held a conversation with me. She was here, James. I swear she was."

James slowly opened the envelope and pulled its contents out. Inside was a small map of the Santa Monica Bay. A large X circled in red was located at the southern tip of the Santa Monica Canyon, miles off course from where everyone estimated Gertrude would have gone down. The words "Dive Deep" were written just to the right of it. On the back was a short hand-written note.

Hope this helps.

XOXO,

"Tommy"

PS. Open The Old Owl in the fall. Everyone's miserable without it. Especially you.

It was then that Arthur discovered that every fall for the past twenty years, James would search both land and sea in hopes of finding the remnants of Gertrude's plane. He felt terrible for clearing her to take off that evening and had been haunted by her mysterious disappearance ever since. At last he could put the past behind him.

As soon as James was well enough, he took a crew of volunteer divers out to the Canyon and discovered the wreckage of Gertrude's missing P-51 Mustang. Gertrude Tompkin Silver was finally laid to rest. And while Arthur had passed on the information that Gertrude had provided about the details of the crash, no official reason was given for the tragic event that took her life. The Old Owl remains open year-round these days and is now a frequent stop for other members of WASP who share stories about Gertrude, the war, and how much life has changed since 1944.

POETRY

A STEP-MOTHER'S LOVE

In the early morning hours
On that mountain pass
The scent of pine trees filled your nostrils
When your mother's screams bled
To silence

A ruinous accident, they said

Time laboring uphill,
The world heavy upon your shoulders

Is she alive?

You asked with whispered voice
And terror-filled eyes.
Oh how you prayed.
Was it possible? *Could she really ever come back?*

I met you in your youth
Eleven years of life
You had blue eyes of hope
In your world full of pain
Filled with rage

I could never take her place

A step-mother knows
She will forever be second-class

It was never a duty or a job
But how I love you like my own,
My teary-eyed survivor boy whose

Childhood ended in the middle of the night.
I'm here to tell you the pain will subside
But I doubt you'll hear me for the longest time.

—*Rondi Elyse Brown*

ESSAY

RUNNING ON EMPTY

by Cynthia Leimbach

Sometimes when closing my eyes, I can see the most beautiful things, but my life wasn't always this way. Every cursed detail of that fearful night is recalled: when, at five-years-old, I lost both my innocence and my virginity.

My parents had dressed up to go out on a date for the evening, and for the first time, they were leaving my baby brother and me with a babysitter. I remember how pretty my mom looked and how good she smelled as we hugged and waved goodbye at the end of the long L-shaped hallway that led into the garage.

It wasn't long after they left that the next-door neighbor, with whom they had left us, approached me using direct words, sleazy eyes, and the largest knife in our kitchen. His intent was crystal clear. Feeling my doubt from his verbal threats, he proved his point by bashing my brother's delicate nine-month-old head hard against a nearby wall, knocking the baby out. I wouldn't learn until the next morning that my brother had survived. The babysitter threatened to kill me and my family if I didn't submit to his every command. The next few hours were slow and torturous. They stretched like taffy before me, like an underwater tour of hell. Paralyzed by fear, I allowed my babysitter/predator to lock the both of us in my bedroom. Even now, I have no idea how long he had locked us in there, but I remember my tears of pain-turned-relief at the sound of the electric garage door opening. He scurried off me, dashing to get dressed. Meanwhile, I picked up my small flannel pajamas from the floor before walking down the hall and into the bathroom. Once inside, I locked the door and took a pink washcloth from the shelf where my mother kept our towels. I ran it under icy cold water and lowered my pants to wipe the blood from my body and legs. Then, I hid the washcloth in the trashcan before ducking back to my room where I pretended to sleep.

That first night turned into a seven-year long process of sodomy and regular molestations as I sacrificed my childhood to save my sibling's life as well as my own—or so I believed. My innocence was stolen before childhood had a real chance to develop. Instead, my life was catapulted into a small sad world where laughter and happiness played only a minor part. Today, I can admit that I am not naïve to circumstance, nor am I a stranger to pain.

My impossible situation dragged on until my abuser finally married and moved away. I broke down not long after that. The psychological and emotional demons became too much to bear, and I ended up crumpled naked on a bathroom floor with a .22 pistol while sheriffs knocked down the door to prevent me from blowing my brains out. That stunt resulted in a mandatory 72-hour psych evaluation in Huntington Beach Hospital, where they took away my matches but gave me a nice view of the cemetery. Somewhere in the parade of psychologists who interviewed me while I clumsily smoked too many cigarettes, it was decided that I was, in fact, no longer a threat to myself.

Upon my release, I sat next to my mom in the small lobby of her OB/GYN's office. While lying frigid on my back, staring at a poster of a baby chick on the ceiling above me, I was thoroughly examined. When the exam was finally over, we were called into the doctor's private office, where the multiple degrees on his wall provided me with ample distraction as he made his announcement that I would no longer be able to bear children. As usual, there was no response from my icy cold island of a mother.

What I allowed to happen next is actually quite common among sexual abuse survivors and victims: I unsuccessfully attempted to drink, smoke, snort, swallow and fuck my pain away. I felt violently angry as I was running fast and furiously away from my life, never realizing that my vices were only smoke and mirrors meant to distract me from my dark past.

Caught in a vicious cycle of escape, I constantly looked for something, anything, to fill that void. Suffering from low self-esteem, I felt as if my only accomplishments were that I was a great liar by five years of age and a con artist by fifteen. It was with these piss-poor decision making skills that I decided to sell all of my worldly possessions and drop out of high school in the tenth grade. Armed with a new journal and the proceeds that I gained from selling my BMW, I fled to Madrid, Spain.

I had a friend there who had been an exchange student and spent summers with my family and me. When I needed a change, her family readily extended a generous invitation to me. Upon my arrival, I observed that my friend had become fluent in seven languages, which prompted me to think more about school and the pursuit of a higher education. The globe became my playground as I spent the next few years working at just about every shit job you could imagine during my travels around the world. I spent years exploring both Eastern and Western cultures and religions in my search for inner peace. I tried yoga, diets, meditation and drugs. To escape my dismal reality, I turned to the stage as a child singer and actress. Little did I know then that my creative talents would bring me the only happiness that I had ever known. There were brief moments of

accomplishment that were always accompanied by ecstasy and champagne as I would hear one of my new songs played on the radio. While couch surfing the world through music, I lived a life of wanderlust and fantasy.

The year that I turned twenty-five, I landed back in Huntington Beach, California, where I once again lived and took on my next challenge, cervical cancer. During the next two years, I lost almost half of my body weight, all of my hair, and most of my mind. I battled those cancer-raging-cells until I finally won.

All that time lying in hospital beds provides patients with great insight and perspective on their lives. I think that I was beginning to realize the distinction between being a victim and a survivor, and I was learning that what had happened to me did not define my character. It dawned on me that I had never tried to apply myself in school, yet I still managed to pass into the next grade, year after year. Perhaps I was indeed more capable than I had previously thought. A passion and love for reading books of any kind had always been present. Now that life was extending its outstretched hand before me, what was I to do with it? Yet, old ways are not easily changed. Producing and performing underground music, I continued to bounce back and forth between California and Western Europe. In order to supplement this lifestyle, I was living the life of a fabulous hardworking hipster, who always had to multitask and hold down some sort of sales career.

It was at about this time that I found myself in Hawaii with my then D.J. boyfriend, pregnant at thirty-four. Of course, given my history, I took the pregnancy to be a divine cue from the Universe, Krishna, God, and Buddha, that I had been infused and blessed with a miracle child. I needed to do everything in my power to cherish this incredible gift. As though the powers-that-be were forcing me to face and heal my lifelong traumas, the doctors put me on bed rest, and I was faced with the requirement to sacrifice my career and sanity once again. And after three surgeries in order to ensure a safe delivery, in bed I stayed. This forced me to be “still,” which inspired me to finally stop “running.” As a result of the sexual abuse, which had damaged and infected my cervix—ultimately leading to the cancer—I really wasn’t left with much of a cervix to speak of. My body was missing the part that keeps a baby inside of its mother’s womb. Through a cerclage procedure, the doctors had to implant a false cervix and stitch it into place. It was imperative that I lay on my back for the entire pregnancy in order to keep the baby alive and well. Early in 2005, at exactly thirty-six weeks, my son Vinyl was born.

By the time he turned two, I had come to realize some critically important life

lessons. In particular, I discovered that I was a person who liked to lead by example, and as such, needed to accomplish some goals—and quickly—preferably before my son hit adolescence and began to define his place in the world. As I taught Vinyl to relax and let people like him for who he truly was, I took my own advice and learned to be “natural,” not constantly feeling the need to go, go, go. Through motherhood, I perfected patience.

I finally understood the importance of staying in school and getting an education. And then came the hard part: how was I going to instill these morals and values that had become such an integral part of who I was into my beautiful son? How dare I become a hypocrite and expect him to go to school when I did not? How was I going to financially support us both as a tenth grade drop out? So, in 2007, at the beginning of an economic crisis, I made the decision to go back to school. Having long lost my appetite and energy for being the life of the party, I did the unthinkable and ended up right back where I had started: living back at home with my parents and my baby. Arriving full circle, I was humbled along the way.

Looking back at my life, I know now that I am a strong survivor and that what happened to me was an atrocious and vicious act committed against me. It does not get to define me. Vinyl is my miracle child, my pride. He is a healthy, witty, and bright little boy who helps his mom study and keeps her laughing by saying things like, “Mommy, I think my hippocampus is broken!” or “It may not look like I’m busy, but my cells are!” By far the best is when he tells me that he loves me more than a donkey (his favorite animal), Chik-Fil-A, and God—where God lives, and infinity times thirty million.

There is a profound beauty in the quality of life I am showing him today. There is a richness and texture to the beat of each new day, most of which he would not have known if I had not gone back to school. Yes, I am that lady: the oldest one in every classroom who wishes every day that she could press rewind and have completed her degrees years ago. I am thankful and lucky that I can sit in an honors English class and hear the words of inspiring author and fellow survivor Sherman Alexie as he attempts to reach forgotten Indian children who live on a reservation: “They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. ‘Books,’ I say to them. ‘Books,’ I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save their lives.”

I am crying now as I hold my head in my hands. I cry, for I have lived the power of these words: I cry to heal and I cry because I have crossed a threshold into a realm where the power to redefine a life is possible. I am *not* most people and I am damn proud of that. I can relate to Alexie’s people: the nameless, faceless children who have no

voice, no education, and no representation. I can relate and understand because of my very personal insight, as I now have the chance to encourage others so that they may also choose to reflect, create, and imagine. I know firsthand what an amazing world awaits out there, and I have been given the pleasure of being appointed as someone's guide through it. It amazes me when I think of how shallow that journey for my son may have been if I had not returned to my education. In a way, life is beginning again and I hope that, along the way, I get more opportunities to share some of my life experiences with people who have gone through what I did. Who knows, some of them may even be listening at this very moment.

THE RED KING

by Kimberly Du

The café was a dimly lit, proverbial hole-in-the-wall. La Tazza Calda had stood on the corner of Superior and Baker for a long, long time. Luke Kerensky had attended its opening all those years ago, when the establishment was still run by the founder and his late friend (may he rest in peace), Giuseppe. He had passed away decades ago, but every now and then, memories of him would resurface.

With some regret, Kerensky realized that he hadn't visited at all in recent years. The Little Italy wooden chairs had been replaced with black, metal chairs. Also present were half-moon, stained-glass light fixtures, which were chained precariously above the tables. The original café, for all intents and purposes, was gone.

He eased into an armchair near the fireplace. Opposite him was a glass coffee table, and beyond that was an orange couch, pushed so far back into the wall that it was outlined by a halo of chipped paint. A group of college students were huddled in the very back, all wearing black turtlenecks and slung khaki messenger bags.

Today was Kerensky's birthday. Seventy years old, and he had only thought to go on a walk around the park and then order tea from Giuseppe's café. Visiting an old friend, after all, meant staring at a slab of rock that proclaimed the date a life began and the date that same life ended. On this day in particular, the last thing he wanted to be reminded of was how his own cosmic life count was dwindling down to zero.

Issuing a ragged breath, Kerensky ran a hand through his hair and then pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Are you playing?" a voice suddenly broke into his thoughts.

A young girl—eleven or twelve, maybe—sat opposite him, and had set up the complementary old wooden chess set that was on the bottom shelf of the coffee table. She was wearing a school uniform. The familiar leonine crest informed him that she attended the high school down the block, famous around Queens for its "Gifted Youth" accelerated learning program. There was a red backpack engulfing the seat cushion beside her.

Curious, Kerensky returned his attention to the chess set. The two kings were missing, Kerensky noticed, and instead they were replaced with checkers chips—a black for the black side, and a red for the white side.

“Sure,” he shrugged. “You want black or white?”

The girl probed him with a baleful gaze, like one would expect from a drenched cat. “Black.”

And so the game began. As was becoming increasingly obvious, she was very good at chess. A few hours later found them still going at it. He was down to five pieces—she, seven. Several minutes ago, he had castled her rook. But the game was dwindling down now. They both knew he had her cornered.

“Great game,” he congratulated her once he had captured her “king” (the black checker piece). He had been sweating a little there. She was a ruthless player—cautious, but not above sacrificing pieces to put into play aggressive moves. She also possessed an amazing sense of foresight that he did not realize was possible for someone of her age.

The girl nodded. She was frowning, the corners of her mouth turned down as if she was savoring a lemon. “You’re very good.”

“Thanks.”

She got up to leave, casting him a dark look over her shoulder as she did so. When she swung open the door, sunshine flooded in, piercing the dark sanctuary of the café. He half-expected the teens in black to hiss out and melt into the shadows, but when he glanced their way, he instead saw them admiring a vintage video recorder.

“We’ll play another game sometime,” Kerensky called out.

She didn’t reply. The only sign that she’d even heard him was the slightest pause in her step.

But it was enough.

A few weeks later, Kerensky met her there again. He collapsed his umbrella and shook off the excess rainwater above the porch before stepping inside.

“Hi,” he said, sitting down. They were both in the same seats from before. “What are you doing?”

The girl blinked, still hunched over her newspaper. *Oh*, he thought, *a crossword puzzle*. She sat up, scowling at her unexpected visitor.

“You.”

“Me.”

“Have you come for a rematch?” She spoke dismissively, as if he instead had instigated the game and lost. The girl’s gaze was still trained on the crossword.

“Only if you have the time,” he humored her.

“Later, then. I’m busy.”

He sat there for a while, watching her struggle with one of the words. She glanced

up at him now and then when she thought he wasn't looking.

"Do you know the story of Alexander the Great and the Gordian Knot?"

"What?"

She had caught him off guard. It took him half a second to realize that she was starting up a topic of conversation. It took him another half a second to respond.

"He couldn't undo the knot, so he cut it with his sword."

She hummed in approval. "Would you consider yourself well-read?"

"Not particularly."

"Yes, the Gordian Knot," she nodded. "This could be mine."

With that, she ripped the newspaper in two. The girl then unceremoniously pulled out the chess game from the bottom shelf.

"I'm black, you're white. Make your move."

On the fourth day, he learned that she was not as confident as she made herself out to be.

The café louder and more crowded than usual, Kerensky had to angle his head down to better hear his friend and accommodate her rather diminutive height. At the window, there was already a line of five. Furtively, they slipped into the sixth and seventh spots.

"That's my mother's brother," said the girl, pointing to the scruffy-looking man behind the cash register. The two carried a passing resemblance to one another—one borne from dark hair and a small, squashed nose. When it was their turn, the man seemed to perk up a little, if the twitch in his gaze was any indication. Kerensky ordered black coffee and the girl snatched a bottle of mineral water from the side cooler.

"Hi," muttered the man as he rang up their order. Now up close, Kerensky realized that the uncle was younger than he seemed from a distance.

"I noticed you guys playing, and have been meaning to introduce myself but," he tapped the drawer of the cash register, "well, you know how it goes."

Kerensky nodded.

"You stay out of trouble, okay?" he directed his question to the girl, who was now dispassionately staring at the wall behind his shoulder. She nodded minutely, shooting him a fraction of a polite smile.

The uncle became somewhat of a friend. Sometimes, he would send the busboy over to them with cups of water ("But no coffee," he joked, "and no Fiji. I gotta make my money somehow, and family don't get special treatment.").

Kerensky and the girl now had a fairly regular routine. As a retiree with a

disgustingly large amount of time on his hands, he allowed her to arrange their meetings exactly to suit her needs. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Friday afternoons. These were the only times she could go, right after class. Then her mother would pick her up. The two played chess more often than not, but they soon came to introduce more games into their weekly meetings. She surprised Kerensky with strategic games like Chinese checkers and chess, Othello, Shogi, and Backgammon.

In retaliation, Kerensky brought Monopoly and Risk. Among other games.

“Candy Land?” She stared at the two-dimensional board and its pastel colored pictures.

“Hm, yes. I was digging around the attic and found this among some of the boxes. It’s dusty, of course, but it should work out just fine. I used to play this with my daughter, but that was a lifetime ago,” he murmured distractedly.

He was rummaging around the box for more markers. The brittle, forty-year old rubber bands had snapped so that the cards were all mixed up. Exasperated, he dumped the box’s contents out into a pile.

“I refuse to play this.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she hissed, pointing at the side of the box. “This is a child’s game. Are you between the ages of three and six?”

Kerensky bristled. “The age restriction doesn’t diminish the fun that could be had playing it.”

But no matter how he tried to explain the merits of playing Candy Land, she shot them all down with surprising accuracy. There was no merit, she proclaimed. No strategy and no skill. They ended up playing Risk, although he was sure the real reason that she didn’t want to play was that she caught her uncle snickering at them from behind a blender.

Before he knew it, three months had passed. Four, then five.

The fifth of December. He was the first to arrive, as always. She usually came around three o’clock, and always, unfailingly, left six on the dot. Today was chilly. Kerensky had a scarf coiled tightly about his neck, and a Lundberg Stetson firmly perched atop his head. The old man bought coffee—black, like his mood—and took his usual place down on the orange couch. From where he sat, he saw the girl’s uncle whistling behind the counter, a newspaper opened up in front of him.

Three o’clock came. And went. Kerensky’s coffee cup was completely depleted by three-o-five, and by three-fifty, he trashed his fourth cup, while the crumbs from his

buttered croissant were swept away by the busboy.

“I don’t think she’s coming,” said the uncle suddenly.

Kerensky had no choice but to agree.

The seventh of December. He had a thunderous rant about the importance of punctuality already stored in his head, just waiting to be unleashed onto the young, unsuspecting girl. A sudden tap on his shoulder shook him from his thoughts.

“She told me to tell you,” said the uncle, apologetically digging his hands into his apron pockets, “that she couldn’t make it today. The kid said she was sorry.”

The ninth. “I’m not supposed to tell you why, but she’s not coming today either. She said not to expect her for a long time and not to wait up, because you’d be wasting your time. Her words, not mine.” The young man did not elaborate on what she meant by “long time.”

Two weeks had passed much in the same manner. Despite what the girl’s uncle would tell him those afternoons, Kerensky would wait a while for her to show, up to an hour, if he felt he was lucky that day. To pass the time, he played rounds of chess against himself. Once in a while, he would imagine what move she would make, and play it. Imagination allowed her to become his opponent once again.

And so, this was how it came to be that Kerensky would take a reluctant step into January 1st, while half-dragging his other leg from the thicket-mired bogs of yesteryear. His daughter called him that morning, wishing him a Happy New Year—her voice as distant as the city in which she lived. By habit, he found himself running the morning bus route that led to La Tazza Calda.

And then all of his hopes disintegrated to dust. There Kerensky stood, stalled in the doorway with a white-knuckled fist clenched tightly over the door knob. The bitter smile he had been working up towards the café owner now sat frozen on his face, half-formed. It was not altogether a smile but rather an affectation, or mimicry of one, instead hanging limply from his chin like loose, wrinkled flesh. His eyes were trained on the old chess set—their chess set—which had been tucked under the lower shelf of the rectangular coffee table.

Kerensky swept his eyes across the floor, around the table and under it. He staggered forward. It must have fallen. Below the rug? No, not there. On the cushions? Between them? Perhaps here...no, not there, either. It had been there the last time he visited, which was two days ago. This...this had to be a recent occurrence. While he would usually play chess to bide his time, today he could not. Was not *able* to. For today, there was no king. The red checker piece—the one that had always substituted for *his*

king—was missing. He glanced at his hands. They were shaking. Then his eyes zoomed back to the chess board. No. Still not there. Only the red king was missing and no other piece.

Blinding nervousness propelled Kerensky to the counter. He folded his arms against the countertop, which supported his chest when he leaned into it. Even the sides of his ribs felt the indent from the ball in his wrist joint.

“Has anyone pulled out that old chess board lately?” he asked as casually as he could.

“I don’t know,” the uncle scratched his chin. “The only customers I’ve seen even bothering with that thing are you two. But, you know, sometimes the shop gets busy—“

“It’s gone.” Kerensky blurted out.

“Pardon?”

“That one checker chip. The red one?” Gesticulating, he flung his arm wide open and almost knocked over a salt and pepper shaker. “It’s gone. I’ve looked, and its not there. Without it, the game’s not a complete set.”

Without her, we’re not a complete set.

It was still early; the café had just barely opened when Kerensky stepped in. Even the busboys hadn’t arrived yet. And so, the open sign remained turned. Its neon brother, plugged to his outlet, stayed at rest in fitful slumber. The front doors were locked. With no one to walk in and bother them, the two men spent the next few hours lifting and sliding furniture.

Yet they could still not locate the missing piece. Either someone had thrown it out or taken it by mistake. Stolen it. Maybe a little kid, messing around. Until now, Kerensky had forgotten that the old wooden chess board was open to the public. It could be easily accessed by all other visitors to La Tazza Calda. He and the girl had played with the set so often that he had begun thinking that it was their personal property and theirs alone.

He had been a fool.

The uncle looked to him sympathetically again. Vaguely hallucinating, Kerensky adjusted his tired eyes and thought for a moment that a teenage Giuseppe stood in the uncle’s place. This guy could pull it off, with that Italian swagger and those dulcet tones in his voice. Just like sepia-toned Giuseppe from the photo frames.

“Thank you.” There was really nothing else to say.

Once they rearranged the furniture back into their original positions, Kerensky immediately made for the door.

“Wait.”

Kerensky did not turn back, but his shoulders stiffened.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this, but, oh, screw it, whatever,” the girl’s uncle cleared his throat. “Her grandpa is in the hospital. Real sick. I saw him once—and I don’t think he’s got much time left. My sister told me that the kid’s pretty attached to him.”

“A grandfather,” Kerensky whispered. He thought of his own grandchildren, and how they ignored his presence at the odd holiday dinners and family reunions. Everything in his family, as a matter of fact, felt forced. As if blood relation was a mystical red rope, binding them together at the most inopportune times. His role as a grandfather was one of convenience.

“She grew dependent on him, I guess. Looking at her, I can tell she doesn’t have many friends. I don’t know what it’s like for her at school, but...I think, it can get lonely. She’s...different. You’ve heard the way she speaks—how she brings up facts from out of nowhere?”

Kerensky did not answer. His shoes now felt like steel anvils, anchoring him to the spot. All of a sudden, he became very aware of the ticking of the clock, the quiet hum from the vent.

“I think it intimidates people, makes brats angry. They think she’s doing it on purpose, but she’s not, that’s just the way her brain is wired,” the uncle shrugged, not realizing that his honesty was actually very insightful.

Silence reigned. A long stretch of absolutely nothing, neither man expelling so much as one breath. Finally, finally, Kerensky shook his head.

“Thank you...thank you for telling me that.”

Almost as an afterthought, his eyes darted to the chess board. At its one missing red splash of color, and how it was just a boring, black-and-white world without it.

Keeping his face carefully blank, Kerensky promised the girl’s uncle that he would be back tomorrow.

He went home.

The sun went down as the earth rotated and the moon reared its cratered face. Yet sleep eluded him. Beyond exhausted, Kerensky lay in bed as still as a dead man and gazed at his window, waiting for light to peek out from the blinds.

Waiting.

Nothing to do, precisely, but just that.

ESSAY

PERSONAL EVALUATION LETTER

by T. C. West

Have you ever chased a train fueled by crystal meth? Have you ever run as fast as you can: arms pumping, legs aching, and lungs bursting? I ran past the point of sanity; I ran with every ounce of strength; and I ran farther than my body could carry me. I had to stop that train. Shouting, I ran until I couldn't catch my breath all the while the conductor ignored me. I caught a glimpse of my daughter out of the corner of my eye. She looked straight at me and just kept on flying by.

It has been some time since I stopped chasing that train, but a part of my heart can still be found traveling down those empty tracks. It beats with a hollow ping instead of a steady thump. A precious few moments are wasted each day longing for the train's return. It is as though I find myself standing at the platform awaiting its arrival—only to remind myself that it is gone. That time is past and it is a new day.

Regret is a heavy burden, and climbing out from under it takes all my strength. I can see the sunrise of a new morning, but today I am different. Chasing that train has changed me. Somewhere in my desperation I lost the sense of where I was going. My daughter was headed to a place I could not follow. I tried to, and it cost me. Those who love me say it cost me. Maybe they think I did not run fast enough. Coming back from that place is so hard. In my mind that scene keeps roaring by, and I force myself to let it go.

When I was in high school, crystal meth—this train to which I refer—only ran on the outskirts of town. Some of the kids I knew would go out to meet it, but most of us stayed away. It had a big skull and crossbones painted on the side. Now the drug has almost become mainstream, running right through town and passing through the high school with lights flashing and music pumping. Cranking base has replaced the blaring horn, and someone put glitter on the skull and crossbones. As soon as my daughter saw those bright party lights, she was mesmerized. She came home sparkling and talking vibrantly. She seemed exuberant, but then she would get so tired. Each day when I went to say good morning, another part of her had disappeared. She shrank two sizes. Then once again, she would be so happy, so up that sleep was a long time coming. But once it arrived, she slept like the dead—only to drag herself awake the next morning before

she would race off to school. I remember the promise high school held for her future. Everything was changing since the crystal meth train came through town.

And then the day arrived when the train ran right through my living room. I swore it was there. It is a crazy experience to have something so big blaze through your home, destroying everything tender in its way, and yet I strained to find evidence that it existed. Crystal meth is the most devious opponent. The craziest thing about it is how hard it is to prove. I did not know to look for pupil dilation or for needle marks between her toes. I could just see her sweetness slipping away. She seemed harder each passing day. Our once affectionate chatter dissipated as attempts at conversation were met with bitter and adamant responses.

Crystal meth is a tiny white powder. It almost looks like a little pile of dust. If I held it on the palm of my hand, I could blow it all over the room with one shallow puff of breath. Sometimes it is a little crystal pebble, so weightless that I could throw it across the schoolyard. I stand so big and powerful when I compare my size to the drug itself, but it had the force to shatter my family. It had the speed to capture the mind and the will of a high school senior I loved. Crystal meth looks as harmless as baby powder, but the disguise belies its freight train strength. As soon as she got onboard it took her far, far away. She could stand next to me and still be out of reach.

If you had told me what my future held, I would not have believed you. No way! Even when I was standing on the tracks and the train was blaring its horn at me, I would think: *She is going to get off. She is going to get off at this stop. She is not going to go any further.* Then I would chase her frantically to the next stop, and I was sure she was going to get off drugs this time. *She is going to get off this time.* But away she would go again and again.

In reality there is no train. In reality my teenage daughter got hooked on meth in high school. Trying to stop her from throwing her life away with drugs was like trying to stop a runaway train. Maybe some of you have someone in your life that is hooked on drugs. Maybe you have watched as someone you love lets a lifetime of hopes and dreams fade away as they sink lower and lower into addiction. Living with an addict can become a nightmare; although it didn't start out that way. For my daughter, high school was the bomb: playing soccer, riding motorcycles, surfing, and hanging out with lots of friends. Most of her friends are still doing all those things. A couple of them compete at the X-Games. I can envision her excitedly cheering for them in the stands with a smile so bright it would light up her whole face. It hurts to envision her in a prison cell—in which she currently resides, so I try not to. However, the vision sneaks in, invading my mind

when I am watching a movie and a prison scene plays on that giant screen: *My little girl is in there!* The thought stabs me in the chest. Life changes in unimaginable ways when people you love become addicts.

People on meth often believe that they are gaining altitude even while they are falling. To them, they're living it up and high school has become the sickest party. They can get going so fast that the fall is happening way before they know it. In his essay "Dwelling in Possibilities," Mark Edmundson, the celebrated professor from the University of Virginia, described how college students of today have the ability to be multiple places at the same time. Loaded with technology, they are frequently in ten or more places at once. By dispersing their attention in so many places simultaneously, it keeps them from being fully present in the moment. He warns of the risk of crashing from multiplying possibilities to such an extent that one is not present in any one moment. The danger of not being present in any moment is even more disconcerting for addicts. With drug addiction, possibilities are not being expanded. Possibilities are being discarded. Addicts not only become lost to their loved ones, they become lost to themselves. Crashing is not from trying to be everywhere at once. Crashing is from trying to be nowhere at all.

Everything I did to persuade her to get off drugs failed. Until high school, failure meant to lose at a game of soccer or perform poorly on a test. It was not the loss of precious possibilities, it was just something you shook off and tried again. The most difficult truth for me to accept has been that I cannot stop someone from becoming an addict. I wanted to give my little girl the world. I would never have chosen this life for her. Over and over, I resisted this truth. Only she has the right to choose who she will be. You are at the age of growing your own wings. I hope that you choose to fly to the sunlight and never suffer the shadows of an oppressive prison cell. With all my heart, I wish for you to be wise, to be clean, and to be free.

BETH

by Jaclyn Fauls

He first met her at a friend's party three months earlier. Out of consideration, they had been introduced, and she had moved on to mingle with the rest of the crowd. She wasn't by any means the prettiest girl there; her mute brown hair hung in straight strands barely sweeping her shoulders, her wide-set green eyes were hooded by overly made up eyelashes. She walked like a little girl—a combination of a skip and a scuttle, always remaining half a step behind whomever she was following.

After the introduction, her hand barely touching his in a polite handshake, he watched her disappear through the crowd in search of a face she recognized. He moved with her, keeping her in his eye line, enamored with the way she carried herself. He watched as she laughed until she cried, as she listened to stories told by the other partiers. He watched her car drive away until the brake lights were no more than two parallel red specs dancing in the middle of the abandoned street.

When he got back to his house, he thought of the girl whom he'd met. He thought of her bubbly laugh, her sparkling charm, and even imagined a conversation they never had. He couldn't wait to meet her again, to ask her name, her phone number, if she had any plans later. And so for the next month he attended every party that his friends threw at their houses and hosted a few of his own, but she never came. He thought he would never see her again.

Weeks after their first meeting, he saw her at his neighborhood farmer's market; she was giggling and chatting with the merchants, probably charming her way into a discount. From across the display of eggplants, he watched as she carefully pulled a yellow daisy from the organized pile and smelled it, closing her eyes as she did so.

He took a step towards her. This was his chance, his only opportunity. Fate had stepped in and had given him one more day with her. He took another step and she turned to smile at him. Clearly, she remembered him, she must have. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed his fear and marched up to her, reintroducing himself. She smiled sweetly, took his hand, and said she didn't remember him. But it was nice to meet him...again, she finished with a soft chuckle.

She didn't remember him? How could she not know him? She had been all he had thought about for the past month. Maybe she was a different girl with the same look. He turned to leave, humiliated, until she turned to face him again.

"You're Jake...Campbell, right? Carrie's brother?" she asked innocently. As if she didn't know. And then he realized her game: she was playing coy, pretending to forget him so he would want her more. They chatted lightly for a few minutes, Jake telling all of his best jokes; she smiling at everything he had to say. After their time was over and fate retracted its intervention, she picked up her bags to walk away, but first turning to ask him to tell his sister hello. He promised he would. He left smiling like a fool and bought the flower she had touched.

Jake looked into the elaborate petals of the flowers, his imagination spilling into reality. He saw the green of her eyes and the yellow petals tangling as if she were standing in a meadow, laughing and smelling daisies. As he inhaled deeply, the pollen from the blossom tickled his nose, forcing him to sneeze—sending the petals flying away from him in dizzy circles. He laughed to the merchant, who raised a skeptical eyebrow and returned to his work. Jake looked after her, watching her legs try to outrun one another in a hurried scuttle. He stepped over the stem of the naked bud, slowly advancing towards her; watching, waiting, wanting.



After she rounded the corner past the man selling fresh lemonade, the green-eyed girl turned to watch Jake leave. She closed her eyes and grimaced, trying to shake the creepy feeling he had given her. Though she had feigned ignorance, she remembered meeting him at the party; his cold, clammy hands grabbing at her, his foul breath of stale cigarettes and cheap beer pouring over her. He was disgusting. Sure, he was attractive enough, his brown eyes and dark hair an easy target for any girl looking for someone to warm her body next to. But there was something about him, something sinister he kept from the world. A secret. And she had no intention of finding out what it was.

And as she stood in the farmer's market that day, she had felt him watching her, the hairs on her arm standing on end. Nervous and attempting to distract herself, she talked quickly with the man who was trying to sell her a dying flower. She plucked one up, closed her eyes, and brought it to her nose. *Go away*, she thought. *Please, just go away*. Hoping it was her imagination, she put down the morbid blossom and turned to face the boy as a disgusting freeze crept up her spine and settled at the back of her neck.

She tried to smile, barely raising the corners of her lips. Jake reintroduced himself, and she pretended to not know him, hoping he would leave. At the exact moment

he turned, she spoke and cursed herself for it. She mentioned his younger sister, chuckled nervously at his sarcasm, and told him the first line she thought of to excuse herself. She watched him buy the daisy she touched. She walked as quickly as she could, trying to outrun Jake's unflinching stare but the icy chill beckoned her to look back. She watched him leave, but the freeze did not. It lingered for the rest of the day, creeping its way up and down her spine.

She couldn't shake him. Everywhere she went, she felt as if he were watching. Every person who turned a corner too quickly was Jake; every branch that scraped across her window was his attempt at breaking in. She wanted to believe that she was paranoid and her fear was nothing more than the result of too much caffeine before bed. So she stopped drinking sodas and coffee, but the fear continued to climb out of her conscience only to take up residence in the shadows.

Later that night, alone in her room, she stared at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars that glittered her ceiling, hoping to find a simple solution. She'd gotten attention from guys before; she could feel them staring after her when she walked past them but this one was different. She didn't know if it was the practiced cyclical expressions his eyes seemed to convey or how he always seemed to be playing for an audience. Either way, his incessant advances followed by her constant rejections spilled into her patience, forcing her to think more about him than she liked.

As a rule, whenever something stressed her out, she would run it off until her legs turned to jelly and her sides burned. And if the tall, muscular, obscenely attractive jocks were at the gym at the same time she was, it would only make her workout better. When she jumped onto the treadmill, her muscles contracting around her legs, she watched the built basketball player perform tricks for his buddies and the ogling high school girls. She had always wanted to talk to him and decided that today would be the day. She bit her lip, climbed from the machine, and stood so that her best assets could be displayed.

"You're pretty good with that," she cooed, nodding towards the basketball.

He spun around quickly, looking over her body before responding, "You think so?"

"Yeah," she ran her fingers through her sweat dampened hair. She was an expert when it came to flirting and, by the way he cocked his head and twitched his mouth in a coy smile, she could tell he was too. She laughed at his punch lines and pretended to be offended when he asked if she needed any help toning her long legs. He nodded to every man who passed him, and she glared at any girl who stared at him for too long.

"So, I'm assuming that asking you to join me in the shower is a bit

presumptuous?” he teased.

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Just a little.”

“How about coffee, then?” Before she could answer, a bombshell blonde with perky...everything...strolled into their little world and tyrannically took over. The blonde took the jock by the arm, leading him to another part of the gym, asking him to help her work out.

The green eyed girl went back to her treadmill, hoping he would glance over and come back to her and her long legs. He didn't. She climbed off the machine and barely made it to her car before a barrage of self loathing spilled over her. Even though he hadn't *technically* rejected her, it still felt that way.

She got back to her little yellow house, took a shower, and reached for her father's vintage camera that he had granted her in his will. If working out wasn't enough of a distraction from her problems—pictures would be. She went to the small park just behind her house and snapped a few shots of children playing on swing sets and climbing monkey bars with the occasional parent looking on cautiously.

When she got back to her house, she saw a blinking red light coming from her answering machine, signaling a missed call. She didn't remember giving the jock her number, but on the off chance she had, maybe he had called. She looked in the mirror, straightening her hair, smoothing out her top and her cut off jean shorts, then laughed at herself because nobody was watching her. She turned on the machine, the automated introduction growing the suspense as to who called, and listened.

“Hello, this is an automated call from...” the monotonous machine told her the message had been erased. A telemarketer. The only people who call are telemarketers.

She went to her makeshift darkroom in her cellar, developed her pictures, and began looking through them for imperfections she could fix. The pictures all made her smile—bright colors, smiling children, even the suspicious parents' cautious expressions made her laugh. But it wasn't until the final picture she held in her hands, the noxious chemicals that developed the pictures running down her arms, that her smile faded.

He wore dark blue jeans and a black pullover sweater. He sat on the semi-shaded bench by the slide, and he was staring in her direction. Needing to see his face more clearly, she knocked over the stack of pictures and books littering her desk to find the magnifying glass. She nearly dove for the little plastic device when she saw it peering from behind the cover of a book that had been knocked to the ground. She took a deep breath before looking at the picture; it couldn't be Jake. It just couldn't. She watched as the fuzzy image grew in the tiny glass, her eyes focusing on the pixilated face in the

frame. His dark hair and darker eyes weren't looking at her. They were looking at what appeared to be the man's daughter—a little girl with a big red balloon tied to her wrist on the monkey bars—the focus of the picture.

She exhaled a sigh of relief then wondered why she was relieved. She had a man—well, Jake was more of a boy in maturity—, but a full grown man nonetheless interested in her, infatuated even. Guys like him didn't come around very often. She put down the magnifying glass still atop the picture, the fuzzy image back to its original size, and a part of her wished it had been Jake.

After a sleepless night, she finally rose to the decision that she had been stubbornly ignorant, not allowing Jake the chance to prove himself. So that when he nervously called her with the request of a Friday night dinner, she hastily agreed, smiling as he thanked her profusely for the chance. She found his excitement charming and somewhat comforting. When they made plans to meet for Italian, she suggested a new café that had just opened. He laughed; her enthusiasm sparked his intent, and he told her that he knew of a better, more intimate café that she would like. But when she asked about it, he told her to wait. "Trust me. It's worth the surprise."

When Friday finally came, she drove to Jake's house in her favorite blue dress, trying to think of all the different places he could take her. As she knocked on his heavy wooden door, she smiled to herself relishing the flurry of butterflies that had crept into her stomach. She had been so silly about the whole thing.

He opened the door, dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a black button-up, a kitchen towel slung over his shoulder. He invited her in, poured her a glass of merlot, and asked her if she preferred mushrooms or spinach.

She looked from her wine glass to him, "I thought we were going out..."

"No," he said, stirring something in a large pot, "I said I would take you to the best Italian café in the city. Well, here it is," he gestured around the kitchen.

She skeptically agreed, but after taking a taste of his marinara sauce, she relaxed and drank her wine. When Jake served his pasta, she was polishing off her second glass of merlot. He poured her another and beckoned her to join him at the plainly decorated dining table. They flirted and laughed together, her face pink from either wine or a developing interest, she couldn't tell. He turned on some music, her favorite jazz band, and asked her to dance. He was surprisingly light on his feet. He swept her up to his room where he made love to her, and she lay silently until the morning sun arose, leaving as soon as she could. She hadn't intended on having sex but their date had begun so poetically that she thought the rest of the night would turn out the same. It didn't. He'd

given her cheap two-dollar wine he picked up at the liquor store on the way home—she'd found the receipt—and her head throbbed because of it.

She crept silently from his bed, gathering her clothes from the corners of his room where they'd been drunkenly flung the night before. She slid into her car and begged the engine to whisper when she slid in her key. She'd barely made it back to her house when the bile rose in her throat at the thought of a man whose charm was only irresistible if accompanied by a bottle of cheap wine.

Jake woke up with the heat of the sun on his face. He stretched, said good morning to the girl who was no longer there, and smiled. He had finally received a taste of what he had wanted. And he wanted more. She was his now. Forever. Her lovemaking had told him everything. She had arched her back and moaned his named, the sweet smell of wine lingering on her breath.

After that night, his fascination with her grew. He wanted to be around her, surround himself with everything that reminded him of her. He went to her house every day, bringing her bouquets of wildflowers and presents. She threw them back in his face, told him and slammed the door on him. But he returned, daily, with more flowers, more presents. He never took offense—this was their game, their tango. She'd pretend not to care, and he'd pretend to be offended.

It wasn't until her friends showed up at his doorstep several days later that he began to doubt her commitment. They had asked nicely if he could just move on, find a new love; someone who deserved a "nice guy like him." They were rational, their logic was irrefutable, but love wasn't logical. He couldn't stay away—he had to be near her.

It had been a year since she had last seen Jake. She'd almost forgotten completely about him, completely enveloped in her new career that had stolen and relocated her away from her family and friends. She was happy, but Jake was not.

He found her almost two months—and two hundred miles from where he was—after she left. He had been watching her, carefully, so she wouldn't see him. It wasn't until ten months after he'd found her that she was finally alone—taking pictures of a dense meadow with an antique camera. He watched her cautiously, smiling whenever she bent down to smell a flower or laughing at herself for stumbling over a rock. He confronted her, her jaw dropping in a silent confusing scream. He wanted to be with her, he loved her—she had to know. She tried to run, but he needed her to stay.

When she disappeared, the news covered it and search parties were formed. Yes, she had disappeared, but Jake had not, and nobody seemed interested in the man who'd only slept with her once.

THE PROM

I didn't know I was no longer your love
when you brought gardenias fragrant with sweet memories,
pinned them to my dress, and guiltily confessed your infidelity.
Yet, with the flowers now cloying, we went to the prom
And I danced with you to songs that used to move us:
slow, dreamy tunes with sentimental lyrics
crooned by velvet voices of the '50s,
feelings disallowed by the need to carry on
and the underlying dread
of the final goodbye that would have to be said.
The gardenias smelled like funerals.

—*Nancy Algotson*

POETRY

FOR ANOTHER

Why must we live if we only live to destroy?
Love has fallen away from man
he walks in complete darkness
not knowing what makes him stumble.

Is it caused by who we are
where we've been, or
what we have accomplished in this world?

There is something
it reaches further and penetrates deeper than once thought.
Love will always sustain unhindered for those who live chained.

To any who have died
there are words worth saying:
you are not alive yet still moving.

Why move at all if love is not involved?
Die less for ones self
in the moments that will pass
and love can die less--for this life
we must at one time grasp.

—*Eric Downey*

SAVED FOR A REASON

by S. Merra

In my high school years, I was an experimental wild child, never turning my back on a challenge. Unfortunately, my friends were just as reckless. We thought we were invincible, ready to conquer the world. I suppose that the root of this mayhem began in December of 2007, when I was introduced to raves and the drug ecstasy. It was just a small pill; what could be the harm in that, right? So I took ecstasy as if it were a Tic Tac, indulging in a drug that provided me with one of the best sensations I had ever experienced. At the time, I was young and naïve. I didn't think about the consequences that came with swallowing a small pill.

In the beginning, it seemed so inconsequential. As soon as I entered a rave with my friends, the first pill would slide into my mouth and down my throat. It was our routine to enter the rave, stand in a close huddle, make sure no one was watching, and then swallow ecstasy. All of us would make sure we kept hydrated throughout the night, and we would all look out for each other (Gosh, we were so smart!). On drugs and not in my right state of mind, I would dance the night away. As the music would hammer through my body, I would stare at the swiveling bright lights, marveling at how the colors intersected one another.

People would come up behind me and massage my body. To me, this marvelous feeling, combined with the ecstasy, surpassed even that of an orgasm. Looking back, the whole rave scene was dirty and unhealthy. But back then, I was more adventurous and risky, and had quickly become infatuated with "rolling."

In the summer of 2009, after I had just graduated Santa Margarita Catholic High School with a 3.4 GPA, I felt the need to run wild and do whatever I wanted before leaving for college. The year prior, I had attended the Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC), which was the best rave I had ever experienced. I was dying to go again, and when Insomniac Events (the company that hosts the raves) announced that they would make that same EDC a two-day event, I just knew that I had to participate.

The only problem was how to propose this trip to my mom. My friend Jenny and I came up with a brilliant idea: we convinced her mom to rent us a hotel room for two nights in L.A., saying that we were going to a concert in the area. Due to the fact it was

Jenny's birthday weekend, this idea worked. The birthday part was true, minus the fact that I had left out many details and stretched the truth. When my mom and I discussed the plans, I acted like a complete bitch. To this day, I still remember what she said to me before I left: "Please *do not* take any pills."

I wish I had listened. We arrived at our hotel on Friday late afternoon and only had a couple of hours to get ready for the night. Jenny and I got ready in the bathroom, blasting music while our boyfriends patiently watched TV. By the time we finished, glitter was all over the bathroom and we had used so much hairspray that someone would be able to get high off the fumes alone. Our anticipation was building up inside of us, and at that moment, I knew it was going to be a good night. We left our hotel and parked the car outside the Coliseum. The next thing I remember is waking up in a hospital bed in Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. And the month was no longer June. It was August. What had happened?

I couldn't talk. I couldn't walk (let alone move my body). I couldn't eat or drink, at least not by myself. And, most importantly, I didn't know what had happened to me or why I was in the hospital. No one would tell me why I was there because my mom had asked my friends not to fill me in on what had happened.

It turned out that I had overdosed on ecstasy an hour before the rave ended. Jenny and her boyfriend had left me with my own boyfriend because they had gotten annoyed at the fact that "I wasn't feeling well." So they left to go to a different stage. Shortly after they left, I collapsed and had a grand mal-seizure. Although my boyfriend was also under the influence, he was able to recognize that I needed medical assistance and brought me to the medical tent. From there, I was put in an ambulance and rushed to the hospital. My boyfriend told me that the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) had to strap me down as I was kicking and screaming. For two hours, my boyfriend waited in the emergency room while the doctors tried to resuscitate me. I was then brought up to the ICU.

No one called my mom to let her know I was in the hospital. Eventually, she received a call from the hospital early the next morning, and they told her that I had been in an accident and was most likely going to die. Every doctor told her that I was not going to make it. Yet during my two-month coma, I never gave up. The ecstasy had caused my organs to shut down, so I was put on life support. To breathe, I had to use a ventilator. Twice a day, my blood had to be purified by dialysis machines. Along with all these complications, I also suffered from four strokes.

After I awoke, I was transferred to Mission Viejo Hospital, where I was in acute physical rehab for three months. I still wasn't able to walk. From Mission Hospital, I

again transferred, this time to the Center for Nuero Skills (CNS) in Bakersfield. My stay spanned a period of three months, and then I was released home to the outpatient therapy at Mission Hospital for another three months. During all of these times I was in intensive physical rehab, I was so scared of the unknown, of the possibility that I would never walk again or be coherent enough to attend college at a regular pace. Yet despite these worries, I tried my best to remain positive and high-spirited.

This entire experience forced me to grow up. The moment I realized what had happened to me was the moment I began to view the world differently. Before my accident, I was a self absorbed, materialistic, and rude party girl. All I cared about was which party was my next target and where I was going to sleep when I became plastered. Through this experience, I have learned so much about myself and how strong, courageous, and caring I am capable of being.

For example, I used to be afraid of people who had disabilities and looked different from me. But when I was placed in a rehabilitation clinic, almost every person there had a type of disability. Most of the people there were in wheelchairs, mangled and drooling, unable to eat, bathe, or use the restroom by themselves. Because I lived in this community and got to know the people there, I became more compassionate and less judgmental of appearances.

There is a saying: "Walk a mile in a man's shoes before you judge him." Well, I can say that I have walked that mile. While I was using a wheelchair, cane, and walker, I was on the receiving end of the same judgmental stares and laughs—the same reactions that I, too, once had towards disabled people. And believe me, those reactions didn't feel too good. This accident changed my entire life. My head is clear, I am sober, and I view life in an entirely different perspective now. I take time to appreciate small things and try not to stress over insignificant problems. By coping with the difficult experiences that ecstasy had subjected me to, I came to realize that I was no longer a child.

Today, I can honestly say that I am glad this happened to me. I had been going down the wrong path and needed a wake up call. If this accident had never happened, I would not be who I am today. Yet although I accept my experiences, I wish the resulting damage had not been so extensive. Perhaps the most rewarding part of this entire ordeal has to be when I receive messages and emails from kids telling me that hearing my story inspired them to change their lives for the better. Everything, it seems, happens for a reason.

I was saved for a reason.

FICTION

THE WAY OUT

by Natasha de Sá

Teja rushed into the hospital. It was a hot, humid summer afternoon in Mumbai. She had just traveled in one of the most crowded trains in India, the humidity and heat making everything worse. Even though she was on time for her shift, she didn't have a minute to spare to get to a restroom and freshen up. But she went anyway; she couldn't possibly be drenched in sweat around patients.

Jumping over the feet of the patients sitting on the dirty, germ-ridden floor of the waiting area, Teja ran to the nearest restroom. As she dabbed her face and neck with a wet washcloth, she caught a glimpse of her hands in the mirror. Teja shut her eyes. In her mind her hands were normal; it was the only way she could cope. With her eyes clenched, she tried to shut out the memory of her childhood but it crept its way in. She remembered the sun first—but that didn't guarantee a good day.



The sun poured in through the rusty bars of the open kitchen window, casting a large shadow on the wall that faced it. It hadn't rained in over a day; the days were hotter than hell, and opening the windows for ventilation meant that crows flew in and stole food lying around. The bars were wide, and it wouldn't have been the first time a crow had been able to sneak through them.

When it came to birds, crows were low creatures. The filthy, disease-ridden creatures ate dead rats and garbage besides the occasional steal; however, Teja knew their life was better than hers. She wished she were a crow; she was being blamed while they were free to fly.

"Don't lie to me, you evil bitch!" her stepmother screamed.

It hadn't been the first time she was blamed for something like this; Teja's stepmother blamed Teja for everything bad in her life. Her husband, Teja's stepfather, had died shortly after Teja was adopted. He had died in a car accident while driving home from work one night; however, Teja's stepmother superstitiously believed it was Teja who had caused it by coming into their home and their lives. Since then, everything that went wrong was Teja's fault.

Teja exhaled deeply, as if in that breath all her memories could rush out of her.



ILLUSTRATION BY BILL MERRITT

She quickly exited the restroom, heading towards the nurses station. Work was her sanctuary; she loved nursing people back to health, from tears to smiles, just like the story of her life.

“Sorry I’m late.” She said to the other nurse at the station.

“It’s okay. Could you go to room 16 for me, though? The woman who just got admitted today is having a hysterectomy at four-thirty. Insanely nervous and bitchy don’t begin to describe her. I can’t go back in there.” The nurse told Teja as she grabbed her bag and hurried towards the nearest exit, so Teja was left with no choice but to attend to the annoying patient.

Teja heard the woman yelling as she got near the room. She stepped inside and stared at the large, middle-aged woman lying in the hospital bed, yelling at someone on the phone. “Shut up! I don’t want to hear any more out of you! So what if you’ve been up all night? You children are so ungrateful! My surgery is at four-thirty! You should’ve been here by now!” She hung up and looked at Teja. “This is the worst hospital! Disgusting service! I have been calling the nurse for fifteen whole minutes. . .”

The woman kept screaming, complaining about everything from the sterile hospital smell to the look on the faces of hospital staff when she yelled at them. Through the noise, Teja could distinctly hear her mother yelling at her. She began to shiver—it was like she was back in her mother’s house.



Teja stood silently, her tiny body bent and shivering. She was twenty but her dark fear-filled eyes, were still those of a five year old. She stared at the floor knowing her fate; the pot of water on the stove bubbled violently. Her bony, frayed hands, which had already been burned so many times, would be immersed into the scalding liquid. It was the only punishment she had ever known. She prayed that her stepmother wouldn’t kill her, and that she could someday escape from this torture chamber that was supposed to be her home.

When her punishment ended, Teja stared at herself in the old mirror that hung over the white basin of her little square bathroom. The basin’s clear white was now stained with innumerable drops of blood. Teja winced as she wrapped her hands in a piece of cloth that she had cut out of an old dress.

“Are you listening?” The woman in front of her screamed.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” Teja mumbled and made her way out of the room back to the nearest on-call room, so no one could see her burst into tears. She hadn’t helped the patient; she couldn’t. The woman had reminded her of her mother in a way no one else

ever had.

The on-call room was empty. Teja buried her face into a pillow and cried. *Think of the good things; think of Manoj*, Teja kept telling herself, but she couldn't seem to shake the thoughts that haunted her. Manoj had been so kind to her; she owed it to him to be okay. *He didn't deserve a depressed wife*, she thought. Teja went back to the nurses station, determined to throw herself into her work in a feeble attempt to forget everything that had happened.

"Teja, where've you been? Room 16's been calling!" The nurse who had been covering for her at the Nurses Station dropped the chart in Teja's hands and hurried away with her own stack of charts. *That woman is not my mother. I can do this*, Teja chanted silently to herself. She turned to walk back to room 16.



She could feel the blood thumping in her swollen hands. The bandages she'd wrapped her wounds in were already steeped in blood. She wanted to leave, to go back home, but she had no real home to flee to. If she returned to her mother without the necessary enthusiasm, her mother would conjure a worse punishment—one that Teja did not want to imagine. She stood silently at the kitchen's threshold, watching her tormentor carefully dispose of the blood-stained water. She inhaled deeply, hoping to hide the pain she was in, and entered.



"Oh! It's you again? Why do I have to get the mentally ill nurse who runs away from the room instead of helping me?" The woman in room 16 exclaimed.

Teja looked into the woman's large dark brown eyes. She asked the woman what she needed, then explained to the woman that the doctor would be in soon to answer all of the questions she was asking.

"Look at this room! Even the curtains are filthy!" The woman said, as Teja was about to leave, making Teja look back, and catching her eye. *I know those eyes, I know those eyes*, Teja thought to herself.

"I will send the cleaning lady in; you can tell her to change the curtains." Teja squeaked and left the room.

Once she sank into her swivel chair at the nurses station, she tried to sort through the blood and urine reports that she had received from pathology. *Those eyes*, Teja thought. *Those are her eyes. HER eyes. But she is younger, it can't be. . .*

The red light blinked. Room 16 needed her once more. She trudged. *What could it be this time?* The door stood slightly ajar. A young man ushered her in.

“Is my mother going to be okay? Where is her doctor? Are her sugar levels normal? Are they going to proceed with the surgery?”

“It’s a minor surgery,” Teja replied, “her sugar levels are normal. She should be fine.”

“It’s 3:30! Where is the doctor?” The woman was impatient. “And this is hurting me!” She pointed to her left wrist where the saline drip had been injected.

Teja stared at the woman’s brawny arm, her calloused elbow, the colored glass bangles that symbolized her marriage, the tiny gold design on each of those bangles. *Mothers bangles—the marks—they leave marks on her wrinkled skin, Teja realized. Those are her hands.*

“I’ll change the needle.” She told the woman, her voice slightly shaking, “Your blood must’ve clotted.” As she re-administered the drip, she felt the woman’s arm. Every callous, crease and raised vein seemed as if they were her mother’s.

When she got back to the station, she informed the woman’s doctor that he had numerous questions waiting to be answered in Room 16. She almost told the doctor that she didn’t want to go back in there. *I’m afraid of her. If it’s going to affect my work maybe I should tell them I can’t go back in there, but what am I going to tell them? That the woman is my mother? She’s not my mother, she can’t be, but. . . she’s the same.* Teja panicked, nervously sorting through her mailbox and attending to requests from various doctors. *Don’t think about it; there’s too much to do,* Teja tried to scold herself. She tried to be efficient and complete each task systematically, but she almost couldn’t anymore. All her efforts went into ignoring the nagging feeling that the woman was, in fact, her mother.

A loud screech from a stretcher made Teja look up from her computer screen only to find the woman being wheeled away to surgery. As the stretcher passed the nurses station, Teja noticed the woman’s height. She was stocky and had large calves. The woman glanced over, and Teja looked with fear into her mother’s eyes.

She was terrified. As she ran to the on call room once again, she chanted, “She’s not my mother. She’s not my mother. . . she’s not my mother.” She buried her face into a pillow, still chanting, trying her best to hold on to her sanity. But the woman’s gaze still haunted her.



“Teja wake up!” Her mother’s voice said. Teja’s eyes flew open, only to find that it was one of the cleaning ladies. “They’ve been looking everywhere for you. Are you ill?” The old woman asked.

Teja sat up in her bunk; it was already 6:30. She had slept for two straight hours, and work was pending. Stress had stolen her away. "I'm fine. Thanks for waking me up." She told the woman and rushed back to the nurses' station.

A pile of charts sat on the counter; she had to check on post-op patients. As she read through them, her phone buzzed. It was a text from Manoj, "I love you! ☺" it read. Teja sighed, wishing she could be with her husband at that moment, but she had to go to room 16. *She's sedated. You'll be fine*, Teja told herself. When she entered the room to check on her patient, the room fluttered while her heart beat frantically, and she found herself looking down at her past.

Teja's mother slept soundly. Teja stared at the cruel face that had always yelled at her, the hands that had hit her, the woman who had burned her. The chart and everything she held in her hands slipped through her scarred, limp fingers. Tears stained Teja's face as her worst nightmare lay before her. But then a feeling of calm swept over her, as if she wasn't in control anymore. She didn't hear her mother yelling at her; she didn't see the anger in her eyes. Time slowed down as her breathing became even. She felt as numb as the person she was facing. She felt as if she were no longer Teja, no longer that scared little girl. She felt strong. Teja picked up a syringe, filled it with air and jabbed it in her mother's neck.

Like a bird that was no longer caged, Teja's pain flew away. Shutting the door neatly behind her, she stepped out of the room, reading Manoj's text once again. Teja smiled. Finally, she was free.

POETRY

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY

He gave me a rose still tightly closed
a deep, velvet red
Charmed from a neighboring yard
The best kind, he always said,
As long as you thank the house

Dozens of perfect petals pressed in a book
Each a cherished whisper from the past
The moment felt real
Till he vanished...but my heart
Found a place to smile

A friend fixed the rose to my lapel
With a safety pin from her slip
Just like Aunt Milly, I laughed
And a million childhood memories
Crowded my mind...of a woman who loved me
At a time so crucial, when chains of pins
Adorned her clothes as if priceless jewelry
How germane, a life chasing islands of
Unpolished gems, and she'd been the first
Large, some small, gold or tarnished

Bits of a world in constant flux
Desperate fingers gripping tight till they bled
Never smooth, nor without the painful prick
Inflicted by the mangled and disjointed
Still holding fast to every trusted link, as each
Rendered strength to bear the next storm
Ever gratefully waiting, for love to grant
...another rose

—*Patricia A. Day*



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