

WALL



2013

WALL

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WALL is a student-produced literary journal of Saddleback College.
All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College.
Submissions to WALL are reviewed, selected, and edited by the students on the journal staff.
We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life. However, the opinions and ideas
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To submit your work for the 2014 edition of WALL, please see the guidelines for submission on
the WALL website at <http://saddleback.edu/la/Wall.html>. The deadline is February 10, 2014.

**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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It takes a lot of time, energy, inspiration, and dedication to build WALL from the ground up every year. Luckily, Saddleback College's literary journal can count on a solid foundation in the form of the administrators, faculty members, campus staff, and community contributors who lend their support.

We would like to thank South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Gary L. Poertner and the district's Board of Trustees: Nancy M. Padberg, T.J. Prendergast, III, Marcia Milchiker, William O. Jay, David B. Lang, Timothy Jemal, James R. Wright, and David Robinson.

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Special thanks goes to professors Stevenson, Suki Fisher, and Jennifer Hedgecock for encouraging their students to contribute their work to WALL.

Other major contributors to the creative process include Chris Clafin, Chair of the Graphics Department, whose students provided the graphic illustrations for the journal; Professor of Journalism Amara Aguilar; Ali Dorri, instructional assistant for the Lariat; Giziel Leftwich, who keeps the WALL website up to date for us; and Meredith Casil, who provided volunteer assistance.

We also thank Edgard Aguilar at Orange County Commercial Printing and John Hesketh at Photomation.

To borrow a familiar phrase that is also the title of this year's captivating cover art by Iman Moujtahed, the "Writings on the Wall" are displayed for your reading pleasure on the pages that follow.

Please enjoy!

Amy Sterling Casil
Gina Victoria Shaffer
Faculty Advisors
WALL 2013

EDITOR'S NOTE

I am nineteen years old, but I feel 119. The mirror confirms that I have yet to sprout grey hairs, but deep down I know that I eluded this particular revision to my dome with the help of my guardian angels: the WALL staff. Yes, my eyes have carefully toiled over each word and page, but it was the dedication of my wonderful WALL staff that placed the final product in your hands. Some people call it delegation; I call it teamwork. The load was shared, and with the immense talent of each staff member, our journal is one of a kind.

It was a privilege to review and publish the literary and artistic talent of Saddleback students. With a submission acceptance rate of approximately 25 percent, this year's WALL proudly showcases the finest work our students have to offer. From comedy to horror, slice-of-life to international hot topics, WALL offers it all. Every piece is a journey. As a reader, you will find yourself swept away into a literary realm characterized by incomparable excellence. These pages are filled with passion: passion displayed through images and words by the contributors, as well as passion displayed by the ever-dedicated WALL staff members.

This year's WALL benefitted from the advice of two sensational professors: Amy Casil and Gina Shaffer. With her seemingly infinite knowledge of the publishing world, Professor Casil helped transform WALL into an expertly crafted literary journal. Professor Shaffer played a pivotal role in encouraging writers and artists on campus to submit to the literary journal. WALL is truly blessed to have these exceptional professors who kept the staff on track.

Happy reading,

Alexander Kusztyk
Editor-in-Chief

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Cover Art

Writings on the Wall*	Iman Moujtahed	Cover
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*A photomanipulation that includes images of ancient castle ruins in Syria; Iman's lines of poetry embedded within the bricks; and a self-portrait in a handmade corset, the piece is, in the words of the artist, "like the journey into becoming an open book."

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Illustration by Rebecca Goolsby

Jed Fell in the Fish Tank

Fiction • Kenny Murphy

There it was: kelp, scenic colorful pebbles, bubbles, angelfish, tropical fish, 800 gallons of water, and Jed. I'll tell you how he saved our fins.

Our tank was right across the exhibit from the biggest in the opening hall of the aquarium. This thing was a giant, to say the least. Sure, people paid their respects, and the fans were always cordial to my crew and I, but to be completely honest with you, we had nothing on the tank across the way. It was the centerpiece of the whole place: a show stealer. My school and I sat in the shadows, forehead on fin, in disgust, and a little bit of jealousy ran through the filtered water of our tank. We knew that we probably were never going to have the spotlight of the aquarium, unless some miracle happened.

It might not be a big deal to you, but we barracuda aren't much privy to coming in second place, especially not to a bunch of colorful, stuck up, gill-heads in the tank across. We had come up with many last ditch efforts to win over the crowd. We choreographed dance routines, but the lack of music didn't help with rhythm. My poor cousin Eddie was willing to put together a few jokes for a set, but because of this damn thick glass, the crowd couldn't hear a thing. It's a shame, too, because he even had material on the mediocrity of aquarium food. Alas, we sat in defeat over the unsung attempts we had to win over the fish enthusiasts. I guess it's not all that bad here in the main hall though. My buddy Vinny the Tiger Shark has his tank over by the day-care center. He's been complaining

and filed a request to get transferred over by the angelfish tank, and I don't blame him. Imagine a bunch of little humans grabbing your fins all day long, but still, he can daydream about those gorgeous angelfish that, between you and me, are definitely out of his league.

I was staring at the new treasure chest the marine life crew had put in our tank: fake, of course, and very much in the way. That chest is sitting in my feeding spot. Eddie reminded me that this flashy little chest might attract more deserved attention to this side of the aquarium. It was summertime, and that meant it was the playoffs for the fish. As the competitiveness peaks this time of year, it was now or never to be the big fish in the pretty good-sized pond with the summer tourists. If we didn't attract big enough crowds, the rumors were, our school of barracuda might be relocated. Just when our hopes of being the best seemed dead in the water, it happened.

It was about midday, just around feeding time. The water in our tank seemed polluted with a sense of failure: we had tried everything. The people would only give a slight glance at our glistening scales, only to be wooed over by the talentless clown fish across the way with the slightest glance. Of course, when their food hit

the water they attracted the crowd because of the feeding frenzy. I gotta tell you: it was like one of those air shows when those fish swoop in for their daily meal. Their formations were flawless and precision dead-on as they swam across each other at great speeds, winning over those people in Hawaiian shirts outside the glass. Those fish were nothing but a bunch of show-offs who pranced in the ecosystem. There we were, watching the "show," our demeanor defeated, when a swarm of bubbles interrupted their champion routine.

Sweet Halibut, that was a fish we hadn't seen before. The force of the intern hitting the water pushed all the momentum in the tank to a dead halt. The bubbles ascended at great speeds to greet the surface, while a collared shirt became submerged under twelve feet of water. His black polo darkened from all the water intake, yet his name tag shined "Jed" in a silver rectangle. The longhaired, slacks-wearing teen was startled as he came face to face with Hank the Eel. I feel bad, too. Hank isn't really the type for conversation; he hides in that crevice all day because his nerves get the best of him.

The aquarium on-lookers roared, gathering around the large sheet of glass that separated them from the new trainee engulfed in water. The

newcomer, Jed, had interrupted the prime performance by being the “food conductor” of the show, standing over the railing apparently too far, dropping food nibblets and himself into the waters below. He hadn’t volunteered himself to inspect the inside of the tank; he just had a stroke of “trainee luck” as the rescue divers described it in the “accident report.” Jed had earned our tank an unexpected victory.

The aquarium had to take safety precautions and clean out the largest tank in the opening hall. This left our watery chateau as the sight to see. It feels great being in first, and that treasure chest doesn’t look too bad after all. We had been sent a hero from the heavens, or more appropriately, we had been sent Jed, the hero from the feeding zone above.

Sure, he was a nice enough kid bringing us our meals on time and what not. I kind of feel sorry for the fella; even though he didn’t get fired, Jed was not allowed near any of the tanks for awhile. Instead he clutched the title of “Bathroom Duty.” While the other employees gave him some serious heat, our tank gave him an ovation every time he passed us. The damn glass got in the way again and he never heard it, but it’s the thought that counts. At least now we won’t be sitting in that crappy tank out by the back exit. Like I said, we barracuda don’t take too kindly to coming in second. I would sit here and chat with you more, but today there’s a class of kindergarteners coming, and well, you know, we need to prepare our dance routine.

My Aunt Belle

Essay • Elaine Michals-Cohen

My dad was one of five siblings. My Aunt Belle was the only girl. She became the matriarch of the family.

Physically, she was an imposing figure. Although she was petite in height, she had a bosom that reached from Boston to L. A. Thank you, Aunt Belle, for that gene. She worked at a very upscale women's boutique in downtown Boston. She always wore a black skirt with a crisscrossed black top and high heels, her hair pulled back in a severe bun. She also wore big glasses with "diamonds" on the sides and big jewelry. This all contributed to her imposing stature.

From her appearance one would think her stern, but she had a heart as big as her bosom and one trait that embarrassed all her brothers: My Aunt Belle had a potty mouth

that could cause a sailor to blush. Her favorite epithet was one long word, "sonofabitchbastard." She used it to express happiness and surprise as well as sadness and anger. Her daughter once said of her, "My mother used the 'f' word before it was fashionable." Uneffingbelievable.

Aunt Belle brought home countless cashmere sweaters from her store as part of her sales commission. Her four sisters-in-law and her three nieces all had cashmere wardrobes. My parents both worked and we had no money, but I went off to college with a drawer full of cashmere sweaters and a closet full of matching skirts! Uneffingbelievable!!

Aunt Belle was a great cook and made everything with real butter and real cream cheese, filling our arteries with gobs of cholesterol. That did not

help our propensity for cholesterol related ailments. She had a daughter who eventually passed away from cardiovascular disease and complications of diabetes. Her son passed away in his early thirties from kidney disease. Her daughter was beautiful and a talented dancer. Since she was 12 years older than me, I idolized her.

In addition to showering all her nieces and one nephew with love, Aunt Belle also gave us many laughs. When my younger brother was about five years old, she closed the door behind us and my brother screamed, "You closed the door on Dada Mae!" Aunt Belle opened the door, looked around, and saw nothing. She did not know that Dada Mae was my brother's imaginary friend. She guffawed with great joy and repeated that story for many years to come.

Sometime in her early seventies Aunt Belle had open heart surgery. We went to visit her when she came home and she told us a story that is etched in my memory: As she was being discharged from the hospital, the orderly weighed her and said aloud, "100 pounds." She looked at him and said for all the world to hear, "Are you crazy? One tit weighs 100 pounds!" Uneffingbelievable!

At this point in time, Aunt Belle was low on funds but would never ask for help. One of my older cousins wrote to all the other cousins, and we all chipped in to keep her in a small but bright senior apartment. We were able to make sure it was furnished nicely, so she could have a degree of comfort. Although she did not know the source of this largesse, we all were happy in the knowledge that we could finally give back.

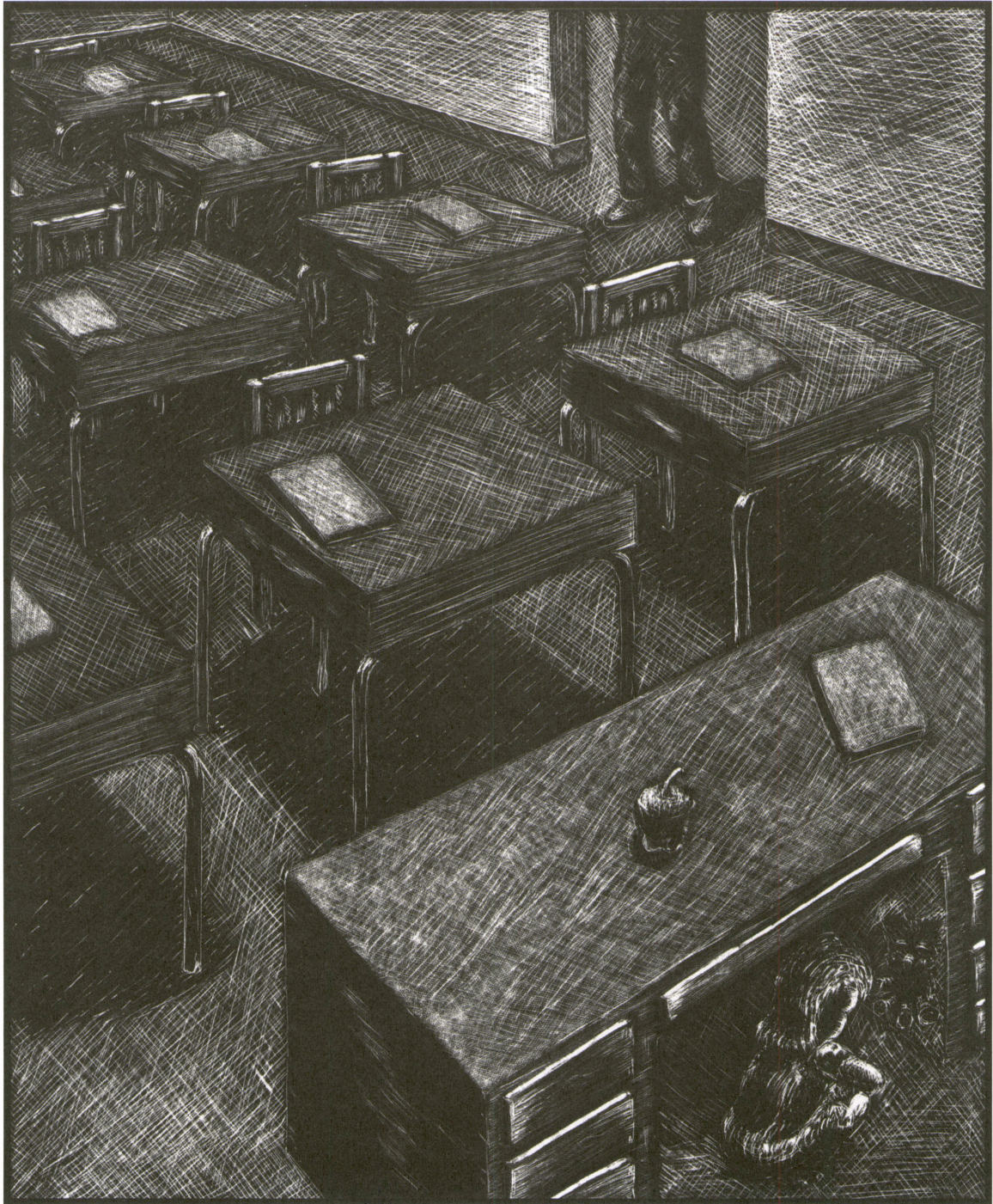


Illustration by Brian Perry

Guns for Giggles

Poem • Mikayla Moore

There is nothing so sad as
the little girl who looks at me
with big doe eyes and an eager smile
as She explains what a “lock down” is.

How She hides under her teacher’s
Big Oak Desk, or in the cloak closet
in case a Bad Man with a gun comes
visiting to wreak terror and bloodshed.

How She doesn’t understand that
it’s not a game of hide-and-seek,
Because if caught by the Bad Man
She’ll never see six, or seven, or prom.

Her teacher might try to save Her,
a white lie turned Red with arterial spray.
Her teacher might fail, murder could prevail,
and we'd give candles and teddies to Her grave.

But I can't imagine this sweet little girl
Dead on the floor with a hole in Her head,
Leaking Her sweetness and smiles and giggles
Out on the carpet, into a sticky puddle of red.

This girl who squeals at every joke
and tries to tickle my tummy and toes.
This girl whose smile lights a whole world
and will try anything if She can wiggle.

But Bad Men make Her practice:
Running and Hiding and Dying.
And because She's only five,
the joke of death makes Her smile.

Keeping Tied Up

Poem • India Diggs

It got easier to panic
paint spilling onto a rug--
It all comes out at once with little to spare.
Until I said the words, I was not aware they existed--
Deep breath, more to come, inhale, inherently twisted.
I want this person, all the flaws, the frustration, the waiting--
this person with the deep blue sea in his eyes and the hope of a child.
But I cannot stop the inevitable feelings that settle like dust on the coffee table.
I want to bathe in the sunshine and you want to soak in the rain.
I will dry you up with my rays and you will drown me all the same.
But I will not give up on you--
But if I can't say what's on my mind, it will end up all over my skin--
scratched in.
I will end up in the ground.

But I want this, I want this right now, and in all my rational thought,
I couldn't find one without
you in it.

Your name is branded into my brain and your face is in my deepest of sleeps.

I could never rid myself of such a beautiful disaster--
and so I let it sing.

I let us drown each other in dry heat.

I could never let go of what makes my heart beat.

beat.

beat.

beat.

Procrastination

Poem • Daniel Luschei

How often I wish for the will
to bring me out of procrastination's swill;
Many a hardship would be avoided still,
And I would feel a lot less like a shill.

A poem composed in a mere minute
Cannot have that much quality in it;
I wish I could stop being such an idle ass,
For then my troubles would come to pass.

So I beseech thee to accept this for a grade
And not whack this errant student across the head with a spade;
Forgive this poem which barely crosses the minimum requirement
And not beat this errant poet into early retirement.

The Monster

Fiction • Kyle Campbell

In the dark lands we call home there lives a creature, an unspoken horror left over from ages past. It possesses a terrible hunger for our kind. Sometimes stealing only a handful and sometimes carting us away by the hundreds; the pattern always changes. Few of us are old enough to remember it, and those who are, hid themselves in an effort to elude it. Our elders, old and stale, abandoned us without passing on any knowledge or wisdom, leaving only an empty legacy, lost and without guidance or purpose.

But nothing is lost to the monster.

Soon it will come again; it always has, always does, and *always* will. We are powerless to stop it, possessing neither the knowledge nor the technology to defeat it. We are a simple people, little more than a large

family clumped together in this scrap of nowhere. There are not many of us left, most having been devoured already. The few that remain are from the bottom of our society: undesirables. No one would have guessed that we would be all that remains of our once proud people.

So here we live, waiting for – and dreading – the moment the horror hungers again. It always comes at the first light of day, a single ravenous claw that gleams in the morning light. Forged over centuries of adaptation and evolution, its claw has become adept at capturing us, shepherding our people straight into its gaping maw.

Many of us thought to run, understanding that to stay would mean certain doom. That was when we realized the awful truth and aban-

doned all hope. We are imprisoned here, in the darkness, any chance of escape prevented by an impassable barrier. We cannot travel past it, only gaze through sullenly, waiting for the first light of day, waiting to see if we would survive this time. We are nothing more than cattle to this terrible monster, waiting to be slaughtered for its breakfast.

The only thought that keeps us going is the knowledge that somehow our elders managed to leave this place. Somehow they had found a way to escape. As for why they never came back, nobody really knows. Some suggest that perhaps they did not want to come back and that we deserve to be here, paying for the sins of past lives. Others believe that they were hunted down by the monster and eaten and that there *are* no elders left. None of that matters to us now. It won't be long before the creature comes back for us.

Dawn now breaks over our home, much like a door illuminated by some secret light beyond it, gently but sinisterly washing over us. As we became able to fully see again, a cry floats across our small prison. Most of us do not know what exactly is to come. It is a terrible feeling to know the fate before you, but far worse is to understand that there is nothing you can do to change your grim destiny.

It is time. That much is certain.

Looking towards the light, a large shadowy figure murders the feeble rays seeking entry, briefly casting our home into darkness once again. The world begins to shake as it approaches, reaching forward with one of its long arms and using its terrifying strength to pick up our confined lands. A thunderous boom echoes from all directions and the tremors reach a crescendo; we hear the sound of our prison bending and breaking as the creature grasps it. Our stomachs churn as, suddenly, the ground beneath us seems to slip away. Encased in transparent captivity, the monster has stolen the very earth, leaving only us and our fears.

We fear that the monster will decide to eat all of us, knowing there are not enough of us to sate its incredible hunger for more than a day. Each step it takes booms across the world, and each step violently shakes our prison, tossing us about. We watch helplessly as we are carried away from the shadows. An eternity flows by, each second passing more slowly than the last, almost as if our bodies saw the end edging closer and sought to make the most of our remaining time.

The thunderous footsteps abruptly stop, and for a brief moment everything is still. We look

to one another, piled in a heap as we are, searching for any hint of reassurance and finding none. Most of us are still alive, though some are broken and battered, pieces missing here and there. The sobs of agony and despair multiply.

All our gazes turn towards the ground, or rather, where the ground once was, to find that we are flying. Our invisible prison now gives a perfect view of a familiar nightmarish landscape, jagged and dead. Directly beneath us lies a massive plateau, otherwise featureless save for an ancient caldera, its smooth bowl-shaped interior cooled in ages long forgotten. We have journeyed here before, but it is different knowing that this time it is our turn.

This is where it plans to devour us.

Looking above, the humongous hand appears to be holding the very air itself, though some of us understand that it is the barrier, our prison, that it holds. Our insides toss and turn again as we are lowered towards the plateau with frightening speed. An explosion resounds around us as we are thrown to the ground once more. We have been precariously placed upon the precipice of the plateau. Not too far from our perch resides the caldera, its steep hillsides the only defining feature in an otherwise barren landscape.

Pure terror splatters across our faces, mouths opened wide at the prospects we face.

Then we hear the sound of our prison being opened. Above us the enormous paw grabs hold of our cage again, and with unbelievable power, it rips the very clouds away, revealing the gnashing mandibles and sickening smile we have all dreaded for so long. Its muzzle opens wider, and suddenly a rush of air flows inward, and a powerfully foul odor streams across us. The stench of the monster's breath alone would have been enough to kill if not for our inherent desire to live. The hot breath of the creature puffs across us several times before stopping.

Screams echo out and we begin to tumble. Our tormentor sinisterly tips our cage to one side, causing us to pile up closer and closer to its phalanges, clacking against the barrier eagerly. The sickening crack of bodies breaking and colliding sing out in a cacophonous chorus. Some of us try to resist, wedging into hard-to-reach places, but between the shaking and the steep incline it is not long before we all tumble into a free fall. A few of the lucky ones die on impact.

But only a few.

Those left alive lie still, either fear or pain grappling their spirits, chaining them into place. To move

now would be to attract the monster's attention. Risking a look around, it becomes apparent that we have been dumped into the pit, whose sides are far too high to scale. This basin would become a mass grave, our bodies piled one on top of another in a clumsy fashion. The monster wants to feast on us all at once.

As if to confirm our fears, within our field of view appears the claw. It rises up into the sky, an obelisk predicting our doom. It glimmers in the morning light, nearly blinding anyone who dares to look upon it. It is poised to strike, aimed towards our cores, empty and devoid of any mercy.

And as I watch it descend towards me, I truly feel alone for the first time in my short life. I know that I am going to die.

"Mom!" The monster moaned.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"We're out of milk and I already made a bowl of cereal."

"Just put the cereal back in the plastic container."

"But what am I gonna do for breakfast?"

"I think we still have some bread in the fridge. Make some toast or something."

"Can't I have some of the waffles in the freezer?"

"Sure, honey, I gotta go to work now. I'll see you later tonight."

"Okay, mom."

In the frozen wastelands we call home, there lives a creature, an unspoken horror left over from ages past. It possesses a terrible hunger for our kind...

Sin by Silence: Chains That Bind

Essay • Lorraine Sears

Never telling was an unspoken rule in the house of my upbringing which ultimately led to the loss of my childhood. He knew, too, I would not tell; silence permitted him to sin.

He leads me to a grassy area at the Santa Ana Zoo where he gives me drugs. Then, he covertly brings me to a motel where he takes me into a darkened room. A luminous glow sheds light on the dark figure in the corner: a faceless man with square shoulders, perched on a similarly square chair. An explosion of fear erupts from within me as I am made to sit on the bed's edge facing not the man, but the television. I see now what has been casting shadows across the room: a young girl in a snuff film. I gasp as I grasp my fate. It is a very dark day when one prays only for rape.

Someone has taken hold of my shoulders. My head darts left to see that the darkest of the men has a hold on me while the lighter one steps from the corner into view. He approaches, steps past me, and hurriedly heads for the door. I try to rise and follow; I grab his arm but am shaken loose. My escape is thwarted, while his is not. I have, however, taken flight from reality. I am catatonic, I do not fight, and I do what I am asked by this dark man. I feed his frenzy, quench his thirst, and sustain his hunger – so ravenous it is criminal.

He is extraordinarily heavy atop me. I smell and taste him, his dark skin, swelling with sweat, pungent, dense, and vile. He clutches my throat as he climaxes. I am not afraid of living with his violent acts;

I am afraid of dying by them and leaving those who love me disgraced by the circumstance and brutality of my death. I await my maker to meet me, to touch me, and to release me. He does, in a sense; the man's crude hands are loosened, my neck is free from his grip, and my vision returns. What I see is his sinister grimace. He acts graciously as if I have given him a gift – my innocence, my dignity, my honor.

I dress slowly, hypnotically. I am led through the door and over to the parking lot in full view. I am no longer a secret, nothing to be curious about. I am damaged, worth far less than this morning, worthy only of being discarded. I might not have met the same demise as the young girl in that film, but I feel no loneliness greater, no depth of despair deeper. I am the walking dead. I go home and try to forget, pretend I am okay. He phones daily, taunting me, torturing me. I muster courage to tell him I will report his rape should he call again. He laughs and hangs up. I look to my parents sitting two feet away; they pretend, too, that I am okay. In silence the room recedes, the bright day turns dark, and I fall away to the welcoming warmth of dejection, where I reside for the next 20 years: a victim, blameworthy for another's crime.

I am anxious and nervous, full of anger and fear. Depression does not elude me, and I am riddled with guilt, shame, lacking any worth. My senses are alive, yet I wish they were dead. The taste and smell of sweat sickens me, the sight of darkened rooms and sly smiles alarm me, and the sound of deep voices frightens me. A rough touch makes me recoil; anyone sneaking up on me is startling and elicits horrific photographic memories.

At age 34, with the dissolution of a 16-year marriage, I find that alcohol offers some relief. It is at first comforting and soothing, then powerful and problematic, and ultimately insidious and demoralizing. It is mean, menacing, and maniacal. Much like the man from so long ago. I am no longer relieved but am reliving the trauma. I do not function well and my life has become unmanageable. My two teenage children are suffering the effects of my behavior. They are being victimized by their mother's alcoholism. By no fault of their own, they, too, are experiencing trauma they are not responsible for or guilty of. In desperation I stop crying and cry out for help. I will no longer be silenced, nor will I allow my children the same legacy.

So you see, had I not become an alcoholic, I might never have found my voice, enabling me treatment for

my alcoholism and the underlying symptoms of trauma. With thorough and prolonged care and management I found a path to recovery, traded humiliation for humility, replaced judgment for discernment, learned that forgiveness freed me of victimization and secured me as a survivor. I became an advocate and liaison for those suffering from addiction

and sexual trauma alike, and most importantly released my children and myself from our binding chains.

Not very long ago I drove by that zoo and motel. There were no shadows or dark figures to be fearful of, no memories too horrid to escape, yet I gasped as I grasped how this experience was, undeniably, a sin by silence that needs, by rule, to be spoken.

Deceiving Beauty

Poem • Christian Zimmer

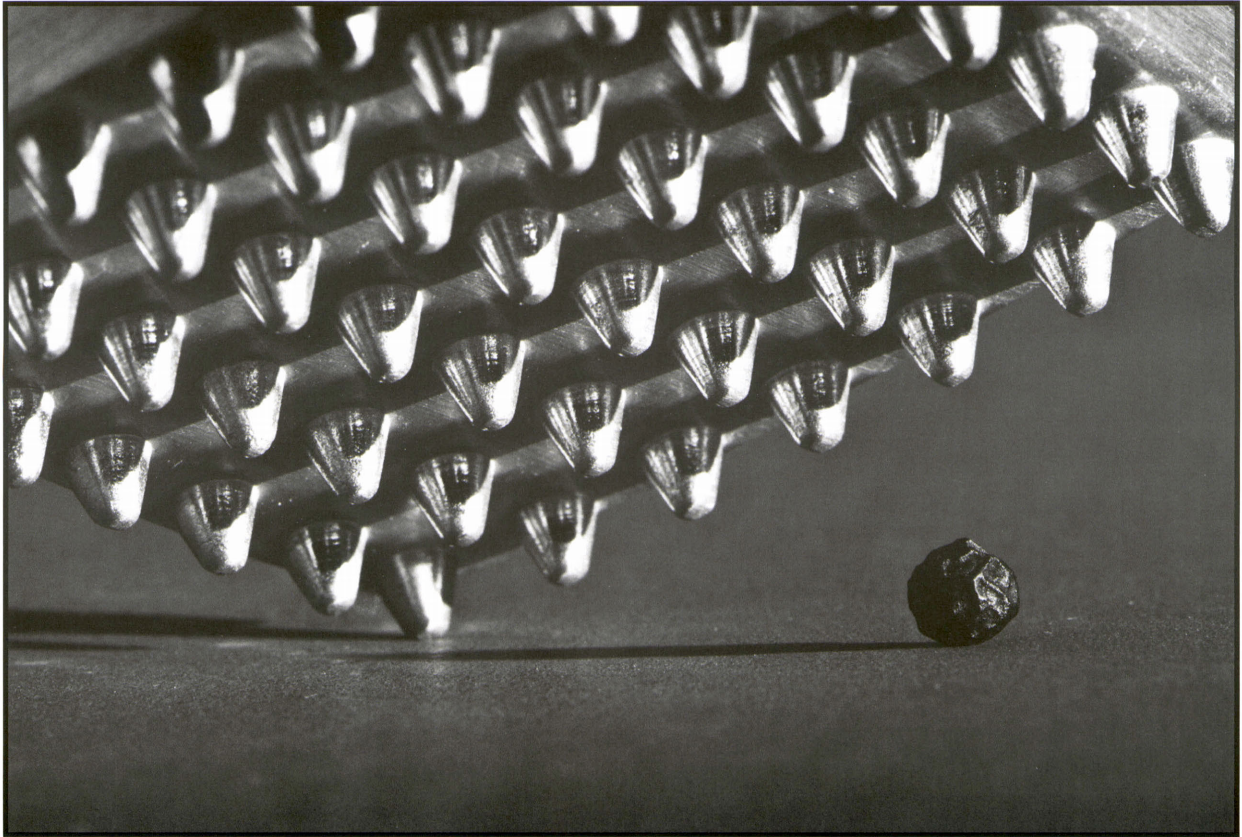
Deceit springs to life in fatal attraction,
Conquers all obstacles of misled satisfaction,
Sums up the whole with antagonizing fractions,
Swallows focus with the seductive aroma of distraction,
Suffocates the mind with the lack of swift action,
Defuses the heart when the time bomb nears reaction.

The heart dwells inside with enhanced disguise,
Holds secrets within that lie before true eyes,
Crumbles before beauty and physical signs,
Lusts from the wellspring of devious lies,
Hunts for true answers in false bonded ties,
Ignores well-being in the plight of dark vibes.



Soaked

Digital Photograph • Mirt Norgren



HAL

Digital Photograph • Andrew Steelman

original 24" x 60"



Lost in the City

Acrylic on Canvas • Cay Varholick

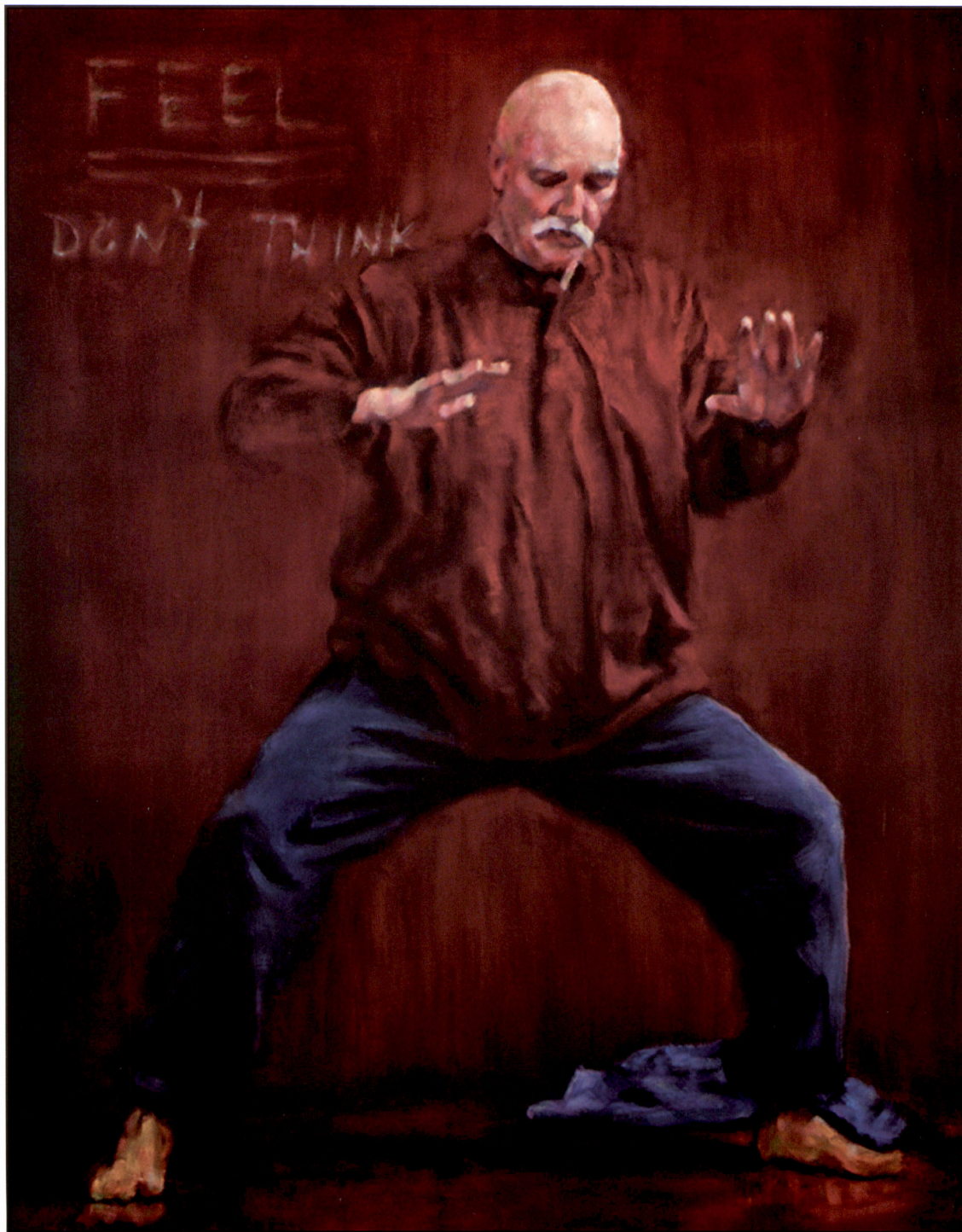
original 30" x 40"



Good Habits

Acrylic on Canvas • Ellen Rose

original 30" x 40"



Feeling Grounded
Oil on Canvas • Fredrick Eck

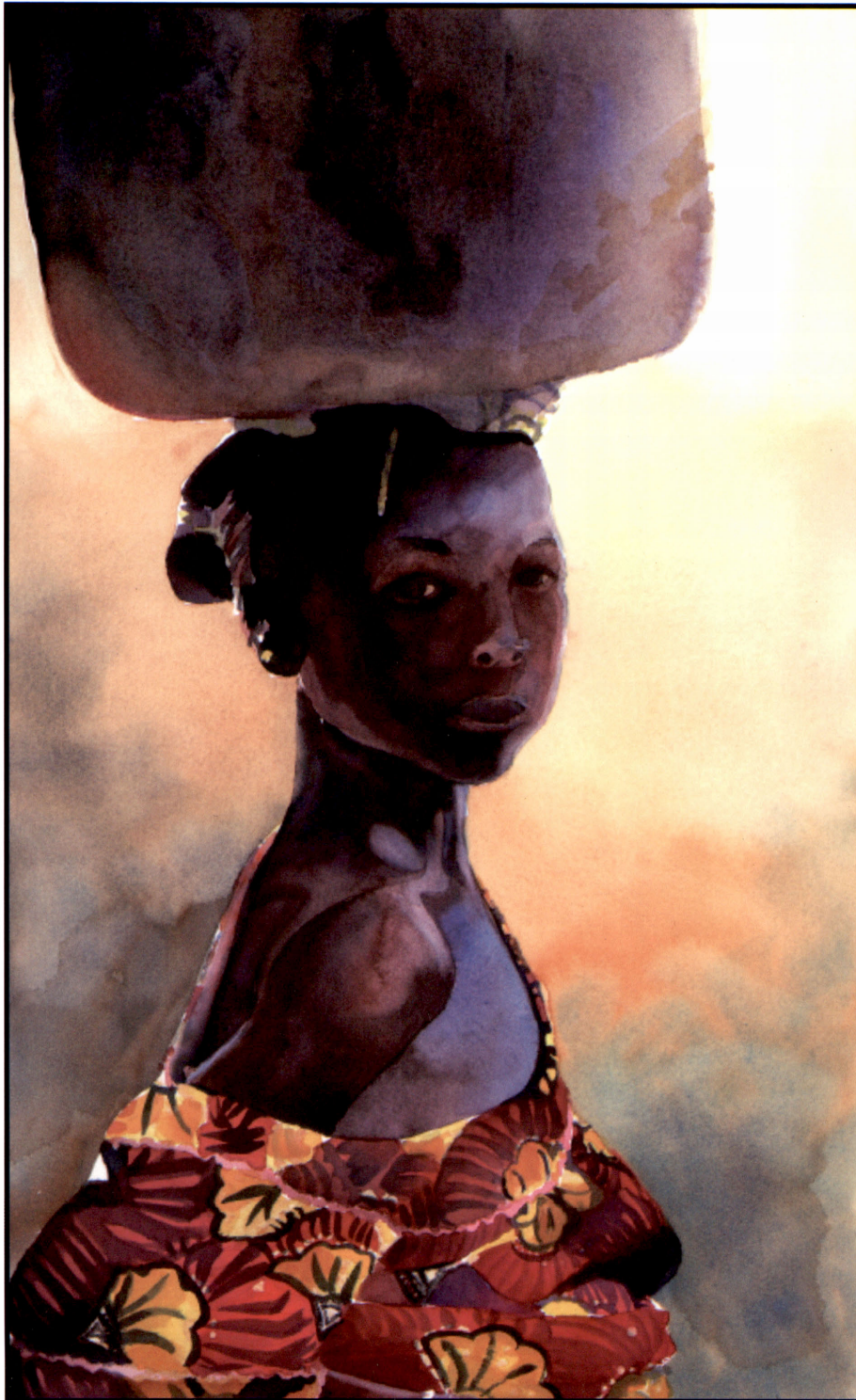
original 18" x 24"



Celebration of the New Year 2013

Oil on Canvas • Celia Wu

original 18" x 30"



Young Girl Bearing Burdens

Watercolor • Linda West



Life Pushes Hard
Photograph • Annie Perez

The Victorians

Poem • Adrienne Cross

They line the sidewalks proudly dressed in pubescent watercolors. Their chalk-colored shadows create long velvet streaks in the lime-spotted trees. The trees seem to magically shed their leaves like haunted rain. While this may be an illusion of both sight and sound, illusions are, after all, only peripheral in nature and tend to vanish like fireflies. The hard wintry branches of the trees scrape against the darkened windowpanes, which are the homes of black widows, both human and insect.

A solitary homeless man curses as he stumbles down the oily black streets. He curses softly as he passes by an occasional lighted window, a scant harbinger of warmth. In the fetid alley nearby, a vile, striped cat hisses, arching his thin back in the rain. High on the roof, a brass weathervane slowly levitates, first north, then south, to and fro, aimless as a broken wing... Only the reckless and the homeless are out on this frigid night. The San Francisco fog, arriving on time, embraces the painted ladies in petticoats standing rigidly on the hill: its turgid, cold fingers soon curl around them with a sigh.

Al-Majnoon

Poem • Aristo Fatwan

I've walked the desert in deepest dark
When moon and stars shineth not
When Jinn and Ghoul roam the sands
And plot mischief with idle hands.

I've seen the ruins of cities vast
And old and never built to last
Of what remains from eldritch times
Things I dare not put in rhymes.

I've heard of languages long thought dead
Whose whispers fill me with great dread
Secrets never meant to be shared
And truths never meant to be bared.

I've felt a love that was forbidden
And music of peculiar rhythm
Which God himself kept out of sight
But permeates these desert nights.

I've touched the souls of young and old
Ice that was hot and fire cold
Sensations that left no mark nor scar
And souls of demons sealed in jars.

I've smelled the foulness on the wind
It is the scent of mortal sins
It grows stronger day by day
Will it cease? I dare not say.

I've walked the desert in deepest dark
It is the depths of the human heart.

White Knuckles

Poem • Hayley Vaughan

This place I am in is unsteady.
I keep going back and forth,
From hollow to contented.
I have this hope that has no hold.

This place I am in is unsteady.
Yet I keep hold,
With bare, white knuckles.
These memories I push away
Are fighting back.
They won't be stifled.

This place I am in is unsteady.
Even as I continue my grasping,
My soul reaches toward a void.
My heart is who I am.
So I keep hold,
With bare, white knuckles.

First Person Shooter

Fiction • Ken Carandang

Private Arthur Jackson didn't notice the gradient of blues spanned across the morning sky because his army cap was pulled down low over his eyes. The San Diego sun had not yet risen and it was dark outside as Jackson walked out of the briefing room where he had just received the intel. A jeep approached and stopped to pick him up. He hoisted himself in and then strapped on the seatbelt as the jeep sped off. Jackson looked out the window at the buildings that passed by and tried to avoid the thoughts that were in his head. Instead he tried think about the events that led him up to this point.

Jackson had been admitted into the military because he was good at first person shooter video games. But not just good, he had been considered a professional in the videogame world and frequently held the top spots on the global leaderboard. Little did he know that for years the Central Intelligence Agency had been monitoring every flick of his thumb and push of a button for their analysis. They recruited him and put him through months of rigorous training involving concentration and fine motor skill control. They drilled him in missions that could last five hours or twenty-five seconds. Jackson was being driven to the former kind; however, it was his

first mission that would not be a drill.

The jeep stopped and the driver turned around in his seat to look Jackson over. "You okay back there, sir? You didn't say anything this whole ride."

"Yeah..." Jackson gave his head a slight shake. "Yes I'm fine, I just—

"You look a little pale, too," continued the driver.

"I just forgot to have my coffee this morning," Jackson said. He looked away.

In front of the jeep stood a metal container the size of a small office, neighbored by a huge satellite dish that was just as tall and pointing eastward. The container was conservatively painted tan all over and had many antennae sticking up from the roof. A sign above the door of the container read "Ground Control Station."

Jackson left the jeep and moved toward the container. The driver gave one last look at his passenger's sallow and distraught complexion. "Get em' good." Jackson ignored him and went into the container.

Sensing his presence, the lights turned on as he entered. He sat in a padded chair in front of an array of black screens and put on a head set. Within arm's reach, a single controller lay on a pedestal ahead of him. Its white plastic casing was molded so it would fit into two palms comfortably.

In the place where the thumbs would naturally be, lay two analog sticks for movement and aiming controls, as well as a few buttons that were positioned within reach. On the back was a red button that emulated the trigger of a gun, placed there for the index finger. Jackson took the controller and placed it in the correct position in his hands, and the screens blinked to life. A voice spoke through the headset, "Private Arthur Jackson, S.A.I.D. controller, identification number 03813, please confirm."

"Affirmative. Private Jackson 03813, on standby."

"...mission starting in 5...4...3...2..."

The Semi-Autonomous Infantry Drone, a.k.a. S.A.I.D., was birthed out of the most classified niches of both military and science. It stood at a mere five feet tall and weighed about as much as an adolescent; however, its stature was quite deceiving. Beneath its kevlar enforced exterior was a network of carbon nanotube muscle fibers that gave this small android super-human strength and speed. This function was, however, just for convenience's sake; it was equipped with a silenced submachine gun and an autonomous computer that bestowed on it flawless aim, accomplishing the drone's true function.

Seventy-five hundred miles away,

a fierce sandstorm blotted out the light from the sun and shrouded the earth in red. In the middle of this pandemonium the drone stood, apparently lifeless, but its vessels of wire were charged with energy. Then it received its commands. The artificial muscles in its legs flexed abruptly and the drone bolted forward at inhuman speed. Soon a magnificent mansion appeared behind the barricade of a brick wall. Using its autonomous computer, the drone calculated the dimensions of the wall. Scaling the wall, it landed on the other side, its legs emitting a pneumatic sigh; then it sped off again toward the mansion.

Jackson recalled the numerous hours of his training and knew that the next few moments would be quick and easy. The directions he received in his intel led him into an extremely large and ornate building. Parking his drone, he peered at the door of the room he was to enter. He voiced in and confirmed his position, and in a few moments the voice answered back.

“Position confirmed, Private. Please proceed.”

Jackson slowly pushed his thumb forward on the controller and the door opened noiselessly. He guided the drone through a hallway and

stopped at the threshold at the end. Jackson surveyed the scene. The sandstorm still raged outside, the wind audible, and from the window, an eerie red glow bathed the room. Jackson’s eyes adjusted and he saw his target laying on a four-poster bed, beside a woman. They both seemed fast asleep so he maneuvered the drone closer and took aim. Using the man’s nose he oriented the crosshairs in the center of his face and then moved them upward. Then the computer kicked in, and like a surgeon, positioned the aim directly on the center of the forehead. He was ready.

Then Jackson looked down at the man’s face. It was cleanly shaven and had a naïve, helpless look; his face was peaceful in his sleep. The lines around the eyes and mouth were still smooth; the man was still very young, maybe even younger than himself. This man was probably still somewhat ignorant of the world and his actions. A woman next to him: his wife? He could even be a father... just like—

“Fire! Now!” the voice yelled through the headset.

Jackson hesitated. Perspiration slid down his neck, dampening his collar. His hands shook uncontrollably, hardly fit to control the drone, but the crosshairs were already in position. All he need do now is squeeze the trigger. Then the young man opened his eyes

and, shocked at the sight in front of him, he contorted his face in horror. The eyes widened and the dark pupils stared back into Jackson's.

He couldn't let the target call for help. Jackson squeezed the trigger and the screen flashed from the gun's muzzle. Facial features broke down into a scarlet mess as the silenced gun spat out bullets mercilessly. Explosions of blood flew in all directions, splotching the furniture. The body tensed and an arm flew up in useless defense. Then the body lay limp.

A few seconds passed before he finally let go of the trigger, and Jackson sat panting from the intensity. Immediately the woman awoke, unaware of what was going on. She looked down at her hands and saw them covered in blood and organ matter. Jackson had to act. He took this as his cue to maneuver the drone toward its escape. He heard the screams slowly fading away as the drone fled the room.

"You did a good job, son. You've just saved hundreds of lives." They'd told him this with nods of approval. He looked past the steering wheel as he drove down the highway. Inside his head, a feeling of emptiness dominated. Something was missing, like something had been taken away, as if Jackson himself had become a drone.

He felt betrayed by something, or was it that he was the betrayer, of someone's life, his wife, children... or himself? Then he began to think. *This is not a video game; this is the real thing. I killed him. He had no chance, his face... Nobody deserves that.* The guilt intensified and he felt it burning within his core. Soon he couldn't stand it anymore. He had to let it loose somehow. Jackson pulled over to the side road and barely opened the door as the contents of his stomach spilled out onto the road. He heaved until there was nothing left and then some, his body attempting to regurgitate its own stomach.

Jackson wiped his mouth clean, closed the door, and sat there panting. He accelerated the car back into the traffic that was all a blur now. And the scenes reentered his head. He saw the youthful face morphing into pure terror. The gory scene playing out in his mind over and over again wouldn't stop; he felt the spot on his finger that made the miniscule squeeze of the trigger that had caused it all.

His surroundings snapped him back to reality. It was a very familiar place. When he realized for the first time where he was, he had driven into his neighborhood. Jackson parked the car in his driveway and just sat there, still battling the

demons in his head, still battling himself. He had just had the most ethically conflicting experience of his life. However, even after what had happened that day, the next moments to come would be the most difficult challenge yet. He was faced with a decision. He could let his guilt wear him out, ruining his life until he perished. Or he could forget this and put it behind him, move on with his life, and face his wife and children.

The thoughts had now acquired an accusing tone. *This is not a game. You're a killer, a murderer.* Jackson got out of his car. *Nobody*

deserves what you did to him. He walked up the steps. *He didn't deserve to die. You can't live like this.* He stood in front of the door. *You will never be forgiven. How can you call yourself a father! You can't go in there! Everybody will know.* He rang the doorbell and closed his eyes. With the greatest effort of his life, he followed the only path that was left for him: to forget.

The door opened and his wife was standing there with her usual, beautiful smile. Arthur Jackson managed to produce his own. He hugged and kissed her, and went to greet the kids.

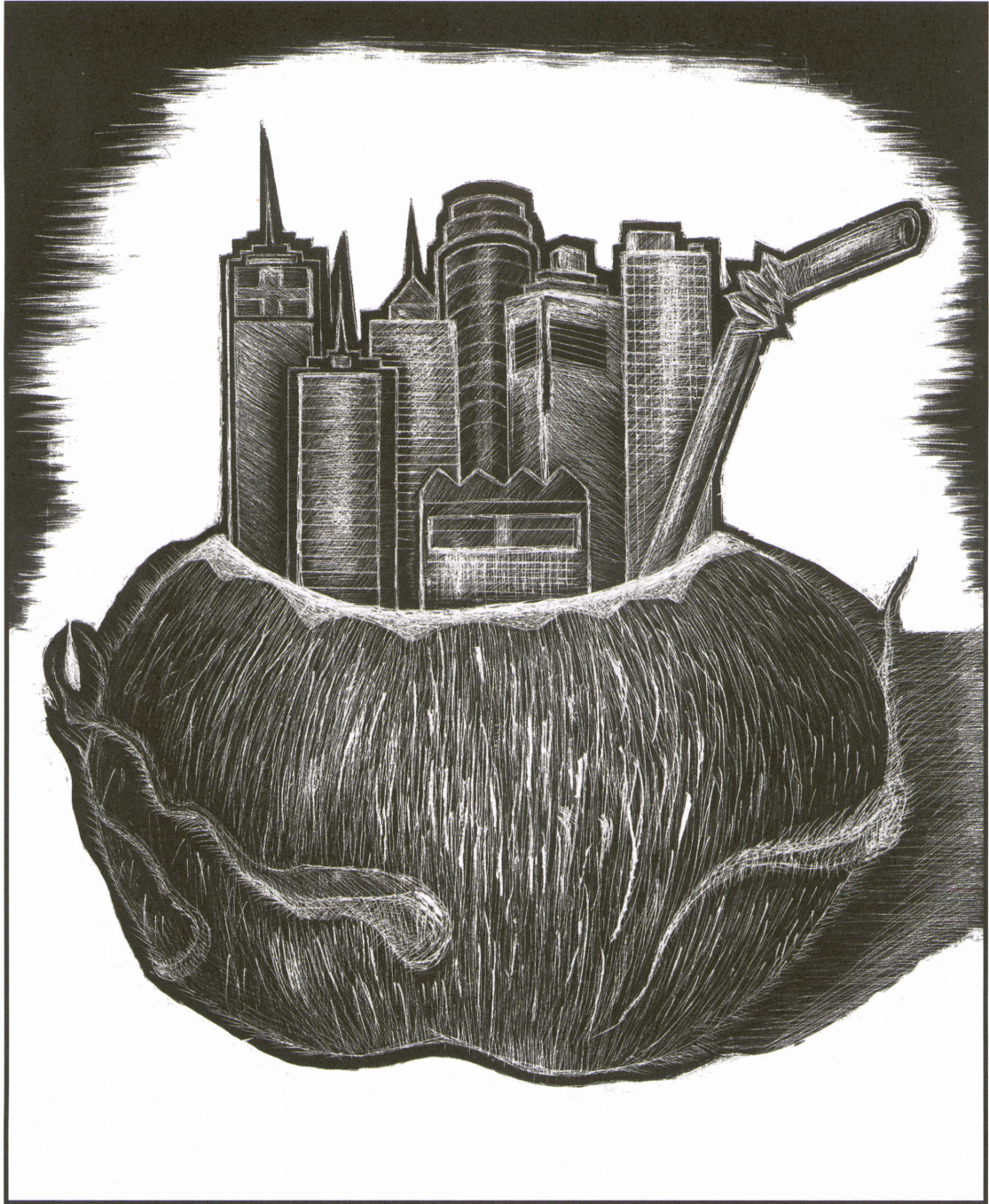


Illustration by Miles Brooks

Cherish the Land

Essay • Rosalind Sewell

Our feet crunched over the rough lava as we carefully made our way, wary of each step, knowing that a slip could result in our flesh being cut as if by razors. We were far from any means of aid. As we walked, my anticipation grew, for I was eager to find what we were looking for. I had no idea of the immeasurable and rare beauty that night would unveil to my companions and me. We paused in our quest to watch the sun's molten orange sphere slip beneath the ocean waves, and as the sky darkened into the deep blues of twilight, the stars were revealed in a dazzling multitude. We continued on, and the moon rose full and radiant, lighting our way and bringing out iridescent hues in the black rope-like formations of the treacherous lava fields. To my left, the gradual climb of Kilauea, the volcano, rose steadily upward, the

peak hidden in a halo of silver-flecked clouds. On my right, the Pacific Ocean stretched out in its immensity, waves breaking on the cliffs, to which I gave a respectful distance.

My three companions and I walked for a few miles for what seemed like hours, but time and distance can be distorted at night and in such an expansive landscape. Finally, as we came to the crest of a small rise, we caught a glimpse of what we had been searching for: an amber glow still far off on the side of the mountain. As we drew closer, a pillar of steam hissed at the base of one cliff like a ghost of the water it once was, ascending towards the heavens to join the night sky. Slowly the river of molten lava came into view, and even though we were still a few miles away, we stopped to watch from a distance. We were

already far enough away from the road to be called foolish — any further was an unnecessary risk. People died on these lava fields; they would walk along the cliffs, which could break off and fall into the churning sea. Occasionally, I had heard of bodies that were found as if sleeping — they had been engulfed in poisonous volcanic gases — a silent assassin that kills without warning. We were close enough on this night. On a future night I would get so close to the molten rock that the heat burned my eyelashes as I stuck a branch into the creeping river of fire.

We watched, captivated, as from its depths the earth released its fiery core, and the lava flowed in a glowing ribbon across the land, plunged from the sea cliffs, and met the water in a cloud of steam. We were witnessing the birth of new land. Then, even as we watched, the earth opened up in a few other areas, and the individual flows joined to form a perfect pentagon: the geometric symbol stark red gold against the black of the mountainside. We were stunned. “Look! Do you see what I’m seeing?” we asked each other. The auspicious night was far from over.

Back the way from which we’d come, a mist of low clouds had gathered, and the wind picked up, whipping my long hair into a tangle about my face. An

eerie feeling came over me and the scene before us. We turned to head back and our audible gasps could be heard as we saw what had formed behind us: a rare night rainbow stood against the mist of the clouds. This was not the ring around the moon that is often seen. No, this was a full arch that stretched across the sky. Its colors were in subtle pastel hues and it gleamed silver white — a shimmering echo of its bolder daytime cousin. Mesmerized, we soaked in the raw beauty that surrounded us. The power of the lava, the enchantment of the full moon, and the mysticism of the night rainbow stirred in me a reverence for the elements of nature that surrounded me. I was being shown something sacred, and I was humbled by its magnificence. The volcano Goddess, Madam Pele, has the power to give and to take away. On that night she gave to my family and me a gift of wonder: the land that we walk on is alive, and we must care for her because we are fortunate to call her home.

Since the age of twelve, I grew up in a scattering of tiny towns throughout the north and northeast side of the Big Island of Hawaii. Raised close to the land, I was cocooned in the green of the cane fields and the rainforests that I called home. Though divorced, my parents shared a deep reverence for nature and encouraged its exploration in my brother and me. We didn’t have texting on our cell phones, the

movie theater was an hour away, and we didn't watch TV. Our entertainment was to hike out to hidden waterfalls and swimming holes, or to walk along the bluffs and discover miniature worlds in tide pools, or to venture into the spectacular valleys at the end of the road. The soft, green rolling hills and mist-soaked eucalyptus forests of the Kohala Mountains enchanted me: my world was alive with the magic of the earth, and it gave me a sense of wonder that I cherish to this day.

I was fortunate to be raised in a community where the Hawaiian people embraced their heritage, and—in the footsteps of their ancestors—cultivated a great affinity for the land and took it upon themselves to be stewards of it. The land provided for the people, so the people cared for the land — that was what was morally right. The motto of Hawaii echoes these views: *Ua mau ke ea o ka `aina i ka pono*: The life of the land is preserved in righteousness.

Malama `aina — care for the land, *aloha `aina* — love the land, my *kumu hula* (hula teacher) would tell her students. *Kumu* (teacher) taught the other hula students and me to respect nature as everything that we danced told stories of earth and sky, wind and water. All of our hula implements we would gather from nature and craft to our own design. We would dance on the edge of the Halema'uma'u Crater

in reverence of the power of the volcano, honoring the spirits who dwelled there. I was raised in a culture steeped in myth and legend, and there were stories about how every plant and animal on those Islands came to be. I wholeheartedly embraced this love of the land, the slower pace of island life, and the freedom that only communing with nature can bring.

Now, I have moved to Orange County, California, and my heart misses the connection with the land that I had cultivated on the island. Nature is no longer my constant companion. I yearn for the presence of the sacred earth that I felt so strongly growing up in Hawaii. Sometimes when I feel trapped by the concrete walls of the cities, swallowed by the sea of traffic, or lost in the rush in which everything seems to move here, I search out trails to explore or a green park in which to walk, trying to rekindle the feeling of communion with the living earth. Though the land is different here — dry and prickly with cacti — it is still the earth: this brings me back to my roots and grounds me. When I begin to question the existence of magic in the world that now surrounds me, I need only to remember that night long ago when, on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean by the light of a full moon, a volcano created new land under a starlit sky, and a night rainbow blessed its birth.

Big and Grand

Fiction • Taryn Whitaker

The little fountain in front of me dried out years ago, but I can still smell the summer water streaming over the porcelain flowers and see it glittering in the sunlight. My grandpa takes a long drag of his last Marlboro, and I watch the neon embers and grey ash slowly eat the paper. He shortens the tip of the cigarette on his fingertips, and I wish I could imprint every word he says into me, like the new blackened burns on his thumbs. His words rush at me with a sense of calmed urgency, but it's too hot or raining too hard, or something, and I can't hear him. I feel my heart pump too hard like it's trying to churn butter and my breath stop in my throat. The too-hot sky melts into the beige stucco house walls and I'm mad the sky's making so much goddamn noise that I can't hear my

grandpa, until finally his voice triumphs over my chaos and "move along, Anna" makes its way to me.

I breathe finally, a gasp, as Dad shakes me awake and says, "Anna, the morticians are coming. Go say goodbye."

I peel my sweat-stuck arms from the leather couch and even though I don't have any desire to see the body, or know why I would want to say goodbye to it, my feet are all of a sudden shuffling into my grandparents' bedroom doorway. I shut the door behind me and walk all the way around the bed, circumventing piles of paperwork, the dog bed, and dead body stench to stand over my grandma who didn't hear me come in. Her eyes blink, heavy, over and over and over: 80 percent asleep.

"Grandma." I put my hand on her wrist, pretending to be comforting,

because it's too intense to actually be.

"Oh, Anna. Hi honey." She smiles sweetly even though her husband's three-hour-dead body is next to her. Too much love for me to process; I take my hand away. I don't do the whole "how are you feeling?" thing because that's practically trivial at this point. I look at him, no breaths moving him, feet extra covered, and then back at Grandma and she says, "He told your dad to turn him towards me, and he grabbed my hand and said, 'Lin... bye' and I said, 'No, Larry, don't say that!' He was so strong and he said, 'Bye' and then I saw he left... and his eyes... his eyes just... I kept staring at his eyelashes and thinking 'my God, I never knew how long his eyelashes are. So thick, and full'..." And she looks right at me, and we both kinda chuckle 'cause we know when weird, dark things are funny.

I ask her, "Are his feet feeling chilly?" and she smiles, conscious enough to recognize her silly grandma-like behavior.

"I know his medicine made him hot; he would rip off the covers even in his sleep." She swings her arm above her torso over and over to show me how he took off blankets. "But his feet always stayed so cold. They were freezing!" She shivers, becoming his feet. The thin

silhouette of my grandpa's once drink-milk-by-the-gallon body makes no motion to remove the up-to-his-chin comforters.

Grandma's words drift slowly along her half-sleep. "I grabbed a couple extra blankets before you came in. Or maybe it was a little while ago, when you first got back, because I remember hearing the front door and thinking that you were here..." I know her rambling isn't the typical Xanax- or Vicodin- induced one I'm used to, since she stopped using when he was diagnosed, but I stop listening anyway and eventually she goes back to grief-sleep.

I don't move for a long time. The clock ticks are miniature marching soldiers. I don't know why they're wearing tap shoes. They all look like British soldiers from I don't know when. Like the Nutcracker almost. Maybe that's what the shoes are for. They aren't really going to war; it's a play. I'm in the theater and that's why it's so dark in here, not because my family hates sunshine. Because they're trying to make the play more enjoyable. My grandpa, who still isn't breathing, had the best taste in movies of anyone I've ever known. And that's the truth. Maybe in death he can make sure I never have to sit through another shit movie again. I

stare at his stillness until my vision wobbles. I'm not surprised when the doorbell rings and I don't want to but I side-step through Grandma's clutter-strewn bedside so she can get through to make sure my grandpa looks okay before she lets them take him. I don't know where to move my feet to and my feet are too awake now to know where to take me, so I look in the mirror and think maybe a familiar image will make me remember his skin was not always pale-green and grey and musty and slimy like it is now.

Sitting with me on the back of the couch while they put him in a body bag, my aunt, Amy, tells me how she had her moment alone with him. With his body. Talking to it and making her peace, getting closure and apologizing, forgiving and reminiscing.

Amy says, "Anna, he loved you so much. Really." She means to say she was never as close to him as I was. I smile and we hug and I have nothing meaningful to say back to her so I don't say anything. She tells me how she wishes her husband Dan was here instead of jail in Portland. She doesn't say this, but it's because that way someone else could take care of Nate for her. Even though I'm listening, I start

to zone out on her straight blonde hair. And, I don't know, I'm sort of sitting here with impossibly heavy skin and featherweight bones. His insides are all sorts of medication combinations and sadness. I want to do some tribal shit, like to ensure he's not stuck here or damned or has still-feeling body parts while he's cremated. But I don't know any rituals or mantras to chant and I'm just as unknowledgeable as I ever was.

The sound of the bedroom door opening spits down the hallway and Amy sits up straight and leans back, shifting her body around like she's trying to get a better view, as if we're at some magic show. I just watch my feet kick and feel the soft squish of the couch-back on my heels. The linoleum makes sounds reluctantly as the gurney wheels tear across it. I have no memories flooding back to my conscious brain while the hallway shows the rolling deathbed to the door. They stop in front of Amy and me and she gets up and feels around the bag for his arm and rubs it and says "bye dad" and cries and stuff. Now everyone's looking at me and this whole thing is fucking stupid so I don't know, I guess for the hell of it, my legs stand me up and I look right at the body bag with the carcass zipped away and I watch my forearm and shaky fingertips sift

through his empty energy field of his no-longer-remains remains. I would like to point out there is no epiphany or great spiritual awakening or even some mild sense of closure in this act as my insides jolt when my fingers reach his calf or whatever the hell's under there. I guess that was the big and grand last encounter everyone's looking at me to make sense of. Hands all wrapped around my waist, where my solar-plexus chakra is, I look at one of the kindly morticians like "dude, this is dumb," but he's still waiting for my big, grand last words.

So we're all here alone now. Everyone's evacuated the bedroom except me. I'm 409-ing the by-the-gallon death fluids Dad told me slobbered out of my grandpa's mouth, pores, and possibly even eyes from the sound of it, the instant he died. I have already taken the mattress pad to the trash. It goes basically like this: Grandma and Dad are exempt from the dead-person-clean-up-squad because they saw the death-fest occur. Amy is because he loved me more than her, and Nate doesn't have to because he's three. As I scrub and spray and scrub and spray, I keep thinking how long it's been since I heard him whistle. He was so beyond social norms. He went everywhere barefoot; it wasn't

a hippie-status political statement, just slob status. Even when he was terminally ill he had a lighter in each pocket during outpatient surgery.

The curtains are closed enough so they won't notice natural Earth air getting inside from my left-open sliding glass door. I feel maybe a small bit of enlightenment when I sit in his chair outside. I don't know. That's when I hear Amy's whining from the bedroom.

"Mom."

"Hi, Amy."

"God, my back hurts from giving Nate a bath. Yuck, we need some Febreze up in dis bitch."

I think to myself that the black-chick-with-attitude voice was only funny when my grandpa did it.

"Hmm." Grandma already knows her game. "What do you want, Amy?"

"I'm in a lot of pain, Mom. I just need a couple." Every word drags out with such exaggerated self-pity. I light one of my grandpa's cigarettes so she knows I can hear her.

"I don't know, Amy. C'mon, I'm already running low since either you or Tim stole from me -"

"Wait, be quiet!" She starts to whisper frantically. "Is Anna out there? Is that door open?" There's a pause. And then she composes her voice. "Mom, can I show you some-

thing in my bedroom really quick?”

I'm only surprised it took her this long to start nagging.

“Anna, are you over there?”
The depth of my dad's voice rumbles annoyance in my gut. Already exasperated, I turn the corner and examine his stance, trying to determine what today's drug of choice is. “Why have you been ignoring me? You can talk to Amy and you can talk to Grandma, but you can't talk to me, huh? I see how it is.” He doesn't wait for me to respond. “Whatever, Anna, go ahead and be like that. But we're family and we need to be there for each other. I'm going through a really hard time right now and would really like to talk to my daughter about it. But I guess if my daughter wants to be a little bitch I should say fuck it. But I'm not 'cause I'm not gonna give up on you like you give up on me. Why don't you just fucking go and run off with your stinky-ass hippie friends? Fuckin' bullshit if you ask me.”

My cigarette's burned to the butt by now. He's expecting the typical duel I always give in to for entertainment purposes, but I don't see the point. I flick my butt into the ashtray and look at him like I pity him and walk to the door. He keeps yelling but I slide the door closed. I don't slam it or lock it, or call him Tim instead of

Dad to piss him off, because there's still no point. That stuff was only funny when my grandpa was there to laugh at him with me.

Folding chairs at my grandpa's funeral. Folding chairs and a pastor is the best they can do. All in the family room. I have to do something. I make a mix CD of his favorite tunes. I get a black poster board and metallic pens. I blow up a fly ass photo of him at Kinko's and put it on this super finely crafted antique easel I borrowed from my other grandma. You can't make out the words of the awesome quote on my poster board, 'cause I had to squish them together to make them fit. But it reads,

“I'm lucky to be under
The same sky that held
The exhale from your first breath
Like a ring on a pillow of clouds.”

When I hear people start to get here, I stay locked in the bathroom, even though I'm dressed already. I lace and unlace my fingers about six hundred times before I realize who the first guest is. No wonder Dad rushed up to answer the door. Wasted-face drinking would have been preferable to this. I hear the click-click-click of the needle being flicked echo through the door of his

bedroom. Instead of going in and flipping out like usual and making perma-tweaked Chad twenty-five times more nervous than he already is, I stand still and ponder my lack of anger. I'm trying not to think about how Grandma keeps asking me to move in here.

My grandpa's sister, Geri, and her husband, Elwin, are the next people who show up. Dad and Chad – best buddies for life, party till the day they die and so on – are out driving into the neighbor's trash bins. Geri's always been this like mega-Christian, but not in a closed-minded dickhead kind of way, more like an angelic peace-bringer kind of way. So I'm sort of relying on her to be the other one here who has some insight and says some meaningful shit. I have a speech and whatever, but nothing's going to do any justice to the stuff going on here. I'm still waiting for the flock of swans at his favorite lake and fifteen opera singers and Deepak Chopra to give a speech and all those kinds of things. But so far all we've got going is some sloppy silver cursive and the fact that I'm wearing high heels, even though he thought it was completely ridiculous when women went so far out of their way to look good. He said if he was going to live any longer he would figure out why the hell they do that. I think it's gotta show something.

We're all sitting in rows now, in folding chairs, in the family room, and I almost want to stand by my chair to show my disdain for all the things wrong here, but that wouldn't quite make a big enough statement. Dad's got seven of his buddies from high school here. Chad, John, Mike, Chris, Rodney, Gary, and Tad. All fucked up except John. Mike has this thing where he becomes incredibly uncomfortable in situations that do not revolve around him. He's sitting directly in front of me, shaking his foot and swiveling his head around the room five hundred plus times. No matter where I look I see his impatience jiggling in my peripherals. Chad's right next to me, popping his jaw and rubbing his shoulders and making wheezing sounds over and over and over. Geri's way over in the back corner like she doesn't want to be seen. Grandma's sisters didn't come, said they couldn't afford the flight. She's on my other side, thankfully not trying to hold my hand or anything. I don't eat any of the food my grandpa's cousin brought over because I want it to be acknowledged how disturbed over this whole thing I am.

The pastor says some stuff about how everybody was all overjoyed when they were around my grandpa

and that's when I hear the shriek in my ear, feel a sweaty, snotted hand uproot my straightened-for-the-occasion hair, and see Nate sprint into the pastor and fall to the ground and cry. I look over at Amy like "what the fuck is this?" but she looks head on like she's too intent on what profound crap that guy's saying to notice her offspring's terrorizing my grandpa's death ceremony. He bolts off into the kitchen and opens and slams the refrigerator door over and over and over. I want some glass jar to knock his ass out, but all that's dropping are little mini ketchups from all the fast food these fuckin' people eat. Grandma takes the stage and composes herself very well and starts to talk about how brave he was when he died even though he was so scared of doctors.

Nate screeches, "I WANNA BA-BA!" and I swear Amy was still using when she was preggo with him because no three-year-old should still say shit like that, especially not during a funeral. I stare at Amy until my

eyes burn, but I'm either imagining this or she's too fucked up to notice or maybe she really is this selfish. Her straight blonde hair starts having a glowing green effect and there aren't any sounds until I notice I'm almost leaning off my chair and sit back up. As I do, the pastor's saying, "... and has affected so many around him, as evidenced by the bright blue eyes he passed down to his son and daughter, Tim and Amy."

At that Amy gets in all-sobs and Tim puts his face in his hands and I stand up so straight and fast my chair bangs into the wall since there are only two damn rows of people here and I start to shout, not my lungs and vocal cords, but me, and I say, "Fuck you all!" and I shove my way through the front row of special guests and give Mike a big whap on the head and even though I'm well aware this is very unceremonious and not this big, grand revelation speech, I walk straight out the front door into moving along.

Cruel Cadence

Poem • Molly Gallagher

Your insecurity contaminated other's souls with such a destructive disease
Injecting the tingling sensation of being needed,
accompanied by the quivering culmination of rejection,
each of which conjoined to form the mass manipulation of an entire herd.
You told me to read your pretty, pretty words,
Not knowing that I would start from the end and move toward the beginning.
They held startling confessions and blueprints of your ruthless agenda
and yet I still praised your grandiose facade: "C'est magnifique!"
I dipped my toe in your seductive pool of vanquishment,
soaked myself with your empty "I love you's" and worse disregard,
Only to find myself wrung out in the yard, dehydrated and tired.

Someday you'll drown in your thoughts, in the dark, all alone,
wrapped up in a quilt that your dear mama has sewn.

Keys to Freedom

Fiction • Ann Coffee

My parents bought me a piano when I was six years old. My father would accompany me by playing along on his harmonica and my mother would make requests.

The piano was an old upright that was of massive proportion. It looked and felt sturdy, being made of solid wood in a rich cognac color, changing from black to brownish tones depending on how the sunlight bounced off its lofty surfaces. It had been shellacked to a high gloss many times over, standing a good six feet in height. The piano covered a major part of one wall in our den, devouring all other objects in the room.

The keys were a direct contrast. They were a dull ivory with a grey yellowish tint, much like a row of large decayed teeth. It was an old Baldwin piano, circa 1914 or there-

abouts. My parents spent \$75 on it. With inflation, that would be around \$525 today, certainly an investment for their middle child. We found the old upright down in a dusty basement, in a dimly lit corner at Dallas' Original Piano and Music Store.

We were told its first home had been somewhere in Colorado. Decades later, it found its way to Texas via the Santa Fe railroad. I was sure it had been owned by the Unsinkable Molly Brown, or maybe, it had been played in an old western saloon since it had a blended odor of stale cigarettes and beer.

The piano came with a long, hard piano bench, where my friends and I would sit for hours hammering out and singing our favorite tunes. When played, the keys rang a bit tinny, and two did not pro-

duce sound at all. The highest notes occasionally would produce a ping or a flat tone as though not connected to the rest. Overall, it had a charming, early Americana pitch somewhere between vaudeville and a Scott Joplin jazzy sound.

I loved that piano. However, I remember being required to practice at least an hour every day, which took me away from my friends in the afternoons. I began to feel stifled, resentful. By the time I was ten, my friends trumped practice and it began to show.

In our house, most things were on the honor system. My siblings and I were latchkey kids: we were on our own until our parents came home from work. We had a lot of freedom early in our lives and were expected to make rational decisions about everyday matters. My mother would declare, "With freedom comes responsibility." She expected certain things from us. From me, it was to master the keyboard with integrity through daily self-discipline.

Due to my tattling siblings and lower marks, my mother discovered I was not practicing. She informed me that for every hour I missed of practice, I was to practice two. She enforced this rule on the first day of summer break, rationalizing that I would have more hours to practice.

I began to hate my piano. This big black thing was dominating my life. I would sit and look at the keys in disgust, wanting desperately to be free from its massive embrace.

One day I decided my piano needed a facelift, reasoning that if it looked better, I would play better. It was my piano. No one else played it, and I could do what I wanted with it, right? Without telling a soul, I took some of my babysitting money and rode my bike to the local paint store and picked out my favorite color: "sunny side up" yellow. I felt the freedom of this decision move over me like a paintbrush. I was happy and determined.

That night, I hid the paint cans in my closet; the following day was going to be the big makeover. Fortunately for me, there would be no prying eyes because both my sister and brother were away at camp.

As soon as my parents left for work, I covered the floor around the piano with newspapers so I wouldn't mess up the hardwoods. I knew I would get in trouble for that. I began early, first opening the can, stirring the contents, and finally painting. It took me all day to cover every inch of that mighty sound machine. By 4 p.m., I was done. I stood back to check out the results: what was once the gorilla in the room was now a new

fortress of shimmering yellow. I gulped. I gulped again, quite expecting to see feathers shooting out from its piano pores. I froze, realizing it was too late now to have regrets. I had only an hour before my parents came home. I had to think and act quickly. Panic set in.

I cleared all the papers, cleaned up the den, put chicken and potatoes in the oven for dinner, and began practicing madly. I chose only my best songs. I chose only those that my parents loved.

I heard the door open. I heard my mother say, "Hmm, something smells good." My heart was racing, and I was playing the best I'd ever played in my life. Dad began singing along with mother, who was in another room. Suddenly, everything went quiet except for me, still banging out the marching cords of "The Marines Hymn." I could feel my parents' presence, their body heat just behind me. I kept playing, now singing loudly, as though everything was normal.

Quite unnaturally, both my parents began singing again. I turned around, cowardly looking up at them.

They were trying hard not to laugh. My mother, semi-serious, semi-not, had only one request. She asked if I would play "On the Sunny Side of the Street." I turned back to the piano, not knowing whether to faint or cry, and robotically obliged.

Not another word was uttered about the piano that night except for the obvious question of why yellow? I did not have a good answer. I know now it was about spreading my wings, flying to the sun and back, knowing I might get burned.

Years later, when all of us had left our parents' proverbial nest and were discovering what the real cost of freedom entails, my parents decided to sell the yellow piano. They put an ad in the paper and immediately were swarmed with calls. 'Ol Yellow was sold for \$250 in less than 24 hours. Mother always said, "It was because it was yellow."

Occasionally, I'll think about that sweet old piano and wonder what became of it. I hope there is another young girl somewhere who is learning how to find her own freedom among those keys, her own pursuit of happiness.

original 22" x 30"



Splashes of Music
Watercolor • Lidya Buenrostro

original 2" x 2"



Earth's Core

Copper Pendant with Turquoise Stone • Merriam Tayanipour

original 24" x 36"



Perfect Day

Linocut • Varsha Patel

original 12" x 16"



Rusting Away
Watercolor • Dotti Barnes

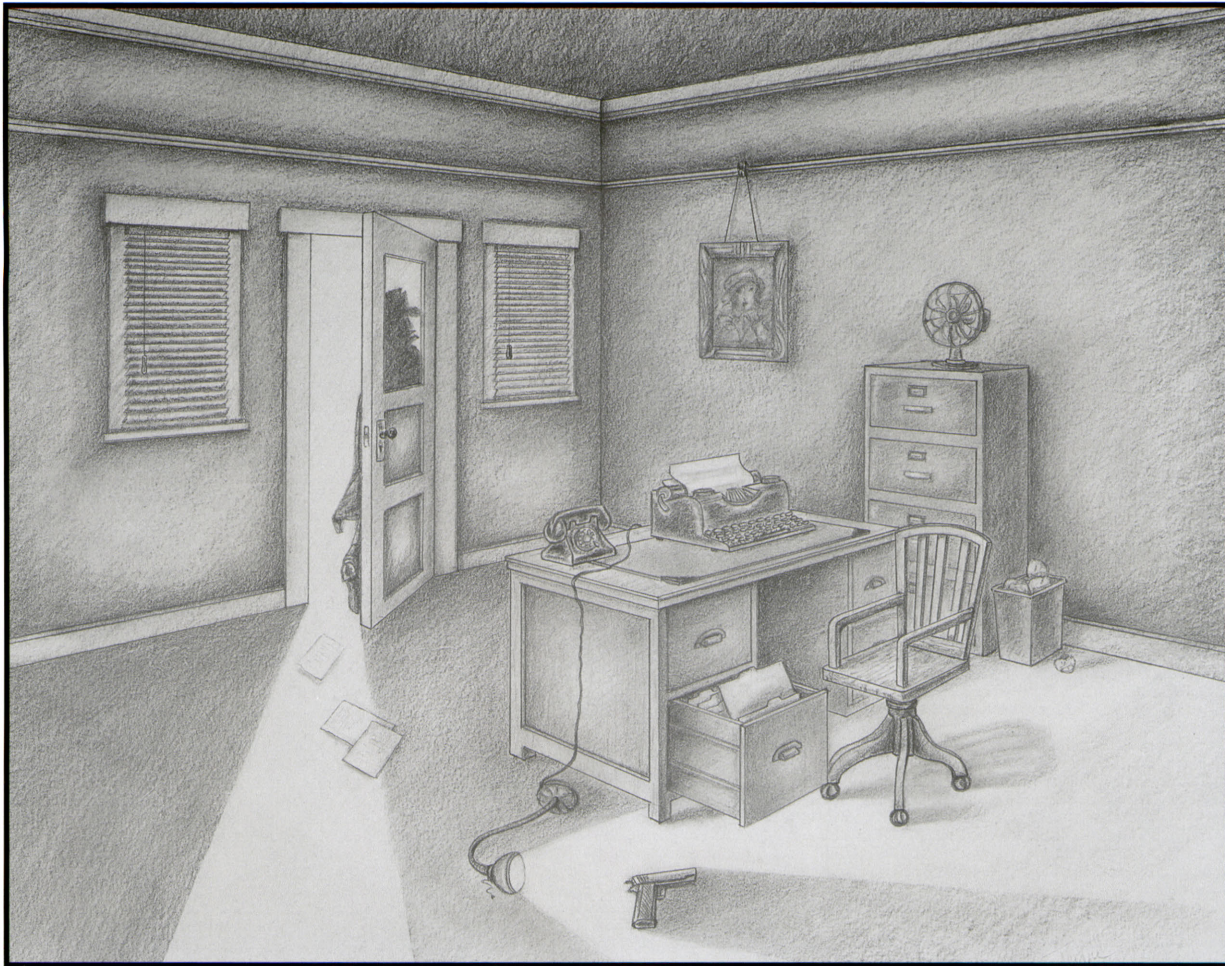
original 18" x 24"



Dream

Acrylic on Canvas • Christine Huynh

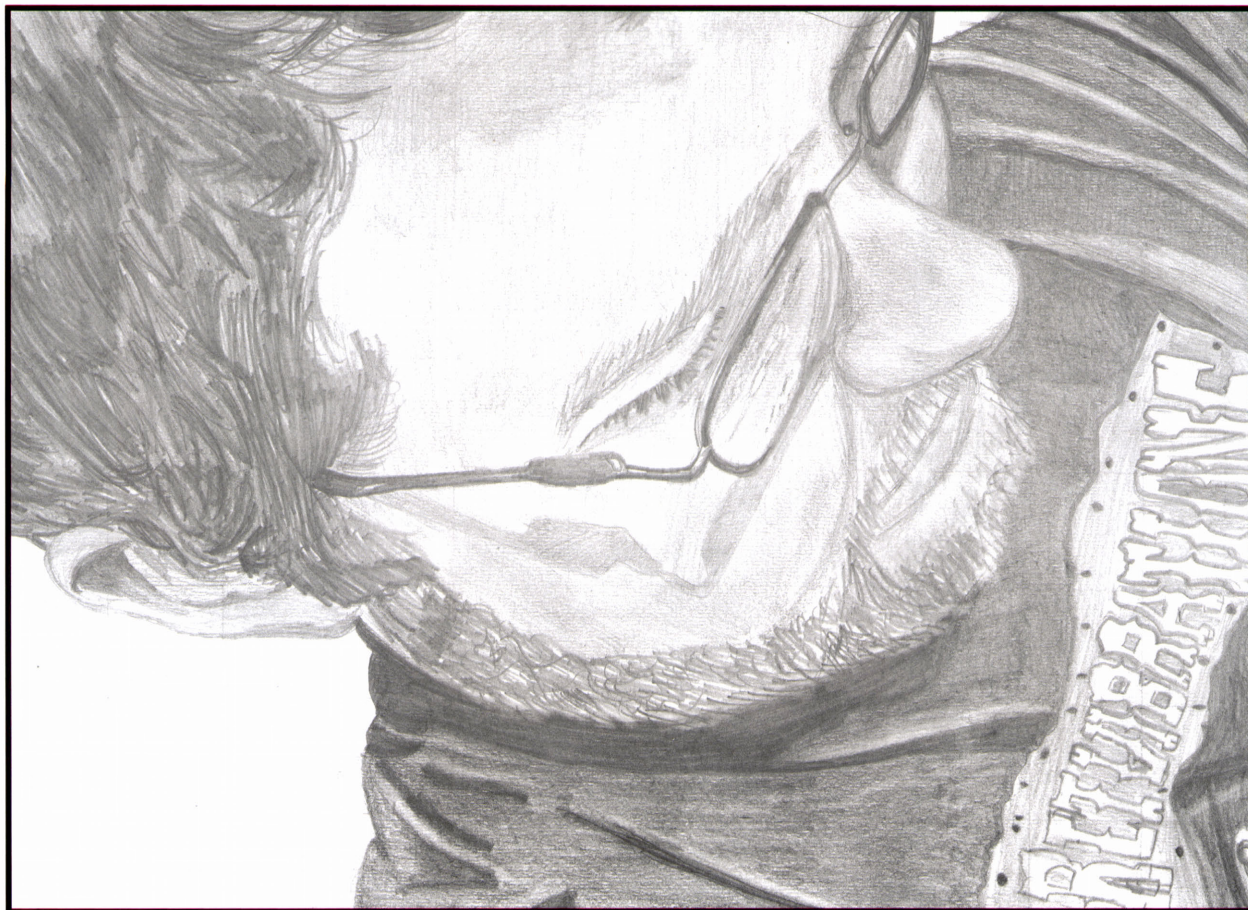
original 16" x 20"



Night Shadows

Graphite on Paper • Jayne Osborne-Dion

original 8" x 11"



Lost in Thoughts
Graphite on Paper • Helene Nguyen



Grey Mare

Photograph • Susan Brown-Matsumoto

Humility in a High Position

Essay • Keatyn Bucknam

Ever since I was a child, I strove for greatness. To me, truly great people were those whom others upheld and looked up to, the leaders. Leaders were important; they were assertive and confident, spirited and bold, and they always gained my respect and admiration. I thought that to amount to anything, I had to be like that. When I began searching for a place where I could develop these characteristics for myself, I stumbled upon the Shea Center, a therapeutic horse-riding center for children with a range of disabilities. It was the perfect opportunity to develop the qualities of a leader; working with horses, I

would grow in boldness, and having children look up to me would make me more confident. However, through working at the Shea Center and striving to be assertive and bold, I realized that a true leader is one who can put himself or herself aside, one who can exercise humility with a meek and gentle spirit.

The first day I volunteered at the Shea Center I was presented with two volunteer opportunities, one of which would lead me more directly to my goal. I could either become a side-walker and work directly with the child, or I could become a horse leader and work directly with the horse. Immediately, I saw side-walk-

ers as more of a supporting role, so I aimed to become a horse leader. To earn that position, I had to be able to read the horse's body language and control his reactions in order to keep both horse and rider safe. To do this, I had to be confident and bold in my movements and manner. Ultimately, I was chosen for this position. Somebody had recognized those characteristics in me, and I felt that I was taking steps in the right direction.

Though I seemed to have all the qualities of leadership, I knew I was lacking something: I began to wonder what that was. As I led the horse around the arena, I searched my surroundings for answers. I looked both at the people I worked with and at the animals as well. Working closely with the horses made me wonder why they were held in such esteem by society. Almost everyone loves horses, but I had never given much thought to the reasons why I loved them. Initially, their strength came to mind. Their immense size and strength are a testimony to their beauty, yet I knew that alone, those qualities were not enough to make them extraordinary. Such strong, powerful, one thousand-pound animals could easily abuse their strength against a one hundred and thirty-pound person, but they didn't. Why was that? Why

did they not exercise their power on me? I stood there confused, suddenly afraid for a moment standing next to that massive animal. I stole a glance back at my side-walker. I was momentarily distracted as my thoughts were turned toward him and the child upon the horse. I noticed the way he was talking to the child and how effortlessly happy they seemed. They talked easily, quietly; nothing was forced or fake. Immediately, I thought to myself, "That child is looking up to him. Why is he the one admired if I have the leadership position?" Children did not uphold me the way I expected; instead, they upheld the person with less authority.

Instead of wallowing in my jealousy, I studied him until I found an answer. Looking at my side-walker, I noticed that he had one quality that I didn't: meekness. He was not talking to the child as if he were superior. He had no pride, no ego, no sense at all that he was smarter or stronger or better: he was simply talking, completely humbled in his position. Even his literal position next to the horse conveyed his attitude, looking up at the child on the horse's back. Contrary to popular belief, meek does not describe someone who is weak or timid, but somebody who can hold his or her strength under control. The side-walker still

had confidence and strength, but he held himself with such gentle control that he wasn't arrogant. Through humility and a gentle spirit, he was able to connect emotionally with the child and give the child an experience far beyond any that I could give. Suddenly, the horse snorted, and my thoughts were drawn back to the animal. Horses are a prime example of meekness; they are strong, yet they choose to let humans control them when they could easily do as they wish. It is through their humility that they are useful. A spirited horse is of no use when it comes to doing jobs designed for horses -- pulling heavy

loads, carrying people. Only a gentle horse can do those jobs efficiently.

Similarly, people who are strong-willed and prideful are really of no use as leaders. They simply cannot do the job properly. Looking back at leaders of the past, it made sense. The leaders that everybody loved were not those who abused their strength and power, but those who kept their strength under control. Those meek people left the best legacies for the future: they were selfless and gentle, kind and compassionate. Greatness can only be awarded to those who truly deserve it, not those who take it for themselves.

Endless Destination

Poem • Drew Goldenberg

Man's greatest vocation,
one that never lends vacation,
and runs many of us rampant
around our nation.

Sit here kid, be patient.
You'll find out soon enough
when you return from that day shift.

Suit up and put on that tie.
One more day, one more lie.

Whatever happens, you still gotta try.

Even when so many
are running recklessly awry,
and refuse to ever bat an eye,

*there will come a time
where you step inside
your light of lime,*

and suddenly, everything will cost a dime,
and you'll lie back while the wind chimes chime
and ask yourself:

Why? Why was I trying to climb
that entire time?

Philophobic

Poem • Sarah Anderson

The tide of death rumbles in my stomach
Ravenous for my chilling heart.
It sees the way darkness has crept in
The way I pulled our love apart.

The thudding in my soul starts to slow
As quiet memories fill my bloodstream
Gloriously you're transfused in my veins

Death doesn't like me in my drug dreams.

My eyes stutter in their farewell
But I know I won't miss this act
Affection tasted bitter, so I broke you
With all of the feelings I lacked.

Sacrifice

Essay • Cynthia Leimbach

The door shuts behind me with an unintended finality, echoing deep within my seven-year-old son's heart. To him I have silently signaled that I have chosen to give all of my undivided attention to my homework, thus ignoring him. If only he knew the piercing pain that dividing my attention causes me. The symptoms on my end range from guilt to pride as the psychological pendulum swings precariously back and forth in an endless battle. I am guilty of allowing precious moments of quality time between us to slip silently through time's side door as I pursue my degrees. Yet I am proud that I am reaching my academic goals, which will ultimately provide us the vision of freedom and quality of life that we have built together. We often speak of our future home,

filled with a puppy for him and independence for us both. Ours is a place that is small but warm, filled with music, books, and each other. Nevertheless, at what cost?

I hear it in his voice as he declares his love for me--guilty of no crime, only that he craves my attention and is missing his mommy. In the middle of each night I hear his sleepy voice call out for me, "Mommy? I have to go to the bathrooom!" or "I need a drink of water." But lately I've been woken up to just "Mommy? I love you," which nearly breaks my heart. Once awake, he slides in next to me in bed as I am perched upright with my reading lamp on, highlighters, books, and papers strewn around me. I hear myself barking at him to be mindful of my work while, simultaneously, my inner goddess hates

my scholastic self. I force myself to pull away, dividing my focus to read a book with him or scratch his back until we give each other kisses and say goodnight. His final words to me every night are the same. "Will you be here in the morning, Mom?" he asks, holding his breath, awaiting my response. "Miles, I am always here for you, honey, but Mommy needs time for herself, too," I say, searching for the right response.

My answer depends on the day of the week, and I have trained him well. Miles has cleverly memorized my odd schedule and coyly inquires on only the eves before I will leave. He knows that if mommy does not get to do yoga for herself, he will get either a happy mom or a crappy mom. Therefore, it is with great reluctance that he accepts my decision, his disappointment obvious either way. My commitment to my practice is not a win/win for me, as I must rise at 4:20 a.m. with both of our bags and lunches packed the night before. Organization and commitment are essential. Yet I question myself incessantly: am I doing the right thing for us right here, right now? Moreover, at what cost does my well-being come?

Then there are Saturdays. My reward is time well spent in the company of a certain young fellow with

a cleft in his chin, a smattering of freckles upon the bridge of his nose, and a mischievous light always present in his sparkling blue eyes. We lie in bed giggling and I spoil him, bringing him rich, buttery French toast in bed followed by a long, silly bath. Frolicking in the warmth of the water, he says to me, "I wish you were on one of those magicians' spinning wheels, so I could throw darts at you." What! I do not even want to try to psychoanalyze this one. So instead, I play along, and stand in the doorway with my arms and legs outstretched as within Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, rolling my head in circles, as he begins to chuck tiny Lego's and alien Squinky's at me. Saturday mornings are good but nowhere near enough.

He misses me, and I cherish our car rides back and forth from school, providing me with precious memories all the while. He babbles on about how clever an advertisement for love would be if they used a chicken with its sharp beak trying to kiss a human. I repeat his words as I praise him, telling him that is a good "chicken kiss idea." He shouts over the music from the backseat, "No, Mom! I didn't say chicken quesadilla!" I smile wide as suddenly our car is filled with spontaneous laughter. I am listening, son. Believe me, I am listening.

I remind myself that these are good problems to have as I reflect upon many of the examples of hardships concerning poverty, violence, and illness, which prevail within our world today. I am fortunate not to have been born a woman in the village of Lusaze in Uganda, who must sacrifice entire days (seven days a week) on backbreaking nine-hour treks to refill makeshift buckets with contaminated water for her family to consume. With their children in tow, to help carry the burdensome loads, they are caught in a never-ending cycle. These children will never be educated; therefore, their cycle will never be broken, as mine has. Like me, they have both perseverance and determination. However, without education, these people's lives will never improve. Therefore, I am grateful as I rise each morning with my expectations, eager to accept and face each sacrifice I *get* to make.

Closer still, in our never-secure ghettos of Compton, or my hometown of Inglewood, where dark and foreboding violence, abuse, and death prevail. Here is a place where the sounds of sirens and gunshots ring out incessantly and the children here are hungry in First World ways. Perhaps more painful for them, they are teased with our society's advertisements waved in front of their eyes daily, mocking their empty stomachs

and empty pockets. These children's lives are often filled with a silent pain that goes unnoticed. While our nation reacts to tragic and senseless loss of life in recent mass shootings, such as Columbine and Sandy Hook Elementary School, these children of California's ghettos are in lockdowns daily and just plain down mostly as their lives are silently sacrificed to fifth-generation failures, destined only to repeat a vicious cycle. What happens to their dreams? What choices do they have?

Some dreams are simple while others are grand; some are forever swept away. However, sometimes if we are very lucky the universe will provide us with an opportunity to appreciate what we do have. Life is funny that way, as we never know where it will lead us. One of the most profoundly joy-filled experiences I have recently had (an experience inspired by a toy drive at Miles' school), was the honor to volunteer at The Jessie Rees Foundation. The organization was founded by Jessie, a local twelve-year-old girl whose mission is to bring joy to her fellow terminal cancer patients. Along with these courageous children are their brave parents and siblings, who are terrified of loss, terrified of losing someone they love, to a devastating disease. Jessie lost her battle a little

over a year ago. However, she brings hope to thousands of these miraculously strong people every single day, as her legend lives on. My children, our children, do not suffer from life-threatening illnesses or imposing circumstances. I am blessed with good health, as I am reminded *once again* what truly wonderful problems I have.

Therefore, I choose to say my sacrifices are nothing. I assert that my sacrificial concerns all but pale in comparison. I am grateful to have my insignificant challenges laid out clearly before me. Because mine is a

road paved with promise and hope. Both of which I can and will attain, as will my son because of some hard choices and opportunities I am willing to rise to. I can see, I can touch, I can taste, I can hear, I am listening, I am savoring, I have vision, I have purpose, and I have *become* the difference. So when that door shuts tonight, or that voice pipes up in the morning, I may cry inwardly as he is crying out, but I will remember to be thankful for even my worst moment with my son. Why, you may ask? Because I should be so lucky.

Find a Way

Essay • James Haston

I lived in the city of Bloomington, a very poor city in Southern California, in a neighborhood full of felons, drug fiends, vagrants, and gangsters. I remember being forced to live in this disgusting place during my first two years of high school. The home I stayed in, if I dare to call it a home, was accompanied by the likes of those people: they were mostly adults, the same age as my father, some older than him. I would ask myself every day why I lived in a disease-infested house with cockroaches and used needles: it seemed just a few years before this I had a somewhat normal life. I was a product of someone else's environment and I did not want that life.

The situation I was in made my education suffer. In fact, I did not take advantage of any opportuni-

ties when I attended high school. I struggled to appreciate my education because the hectic environment at home consumed my thoughts every day. I hardly remember my high school years: it's all a painful blur. Though the circumstances surrounding my life at that time were uncontrollable, the efforts and choices I made during high school were all under my control. If I could go back in time, my endeavors would have been much more productive. I should have used the condition I was engulfed in as fuel to achieve academic success. Instead, I used the environment of my life as an excuse to be mediocre, and that's a decision I still regret.

I often wonder what the aftermath of our actions are; I think of what has happened to my family.

My father made terrible decisions in life. When he was sixteen years old, he dropped out of high school and started using methamphetamines and other highly addictive drugs. Consequently, he did not get his GED until he was thirty-four years old, and he received it behind prison bars. His father did not graduate from high school either and also suffered from drug addiction. My birth mother abandoned me when I was three years old, and I have not seen her since the day she left. There is one memory, though, that has been instilled in my heart and mind, and it helped shape the person I am today.

I was in the backyard of my home, the drug house, standing there with three grown men after I walked home from school. The pungent smell of alcohol and cigarette smoke emitted from their pores. One of them was smoking a marijuana joint; the other two were taking hits from their meth pipes. I wanted to know if any of them had seen my father; I wasn't in their presence for more than a minute. Dave, one of the men with a meth pipe, looked at me and asked as I started to turn away, "Eh, man, do you want to hit this?" I was fourteen, and this grown thirty-year-old man asked me, a child, if I wanted to smoke his meth pipe. I walked away to my room in disbelief. On

my way, I found my father: he was in the back room, taking hits from a meth pipe. It was the first time I had seen him using drugs. My heart dropped; the man I once looked up to, my best friend, had succumbed to the same turmoil as the scum around him. I stopped in front of him, and we stared into each other's eyes as he asked me, "Are you okay, son?" I never answered his question: I couldn't speak. I realized that I had lost my father at that moment; the only person that I truly loved had fallen from my grip. I just wanted to cry. It was my only way of coping; I was alone. That day I promised myself that I would never be like my father or his father. I would break the vicious cycle of addiction in my family. I pledged to myself that I would never abandon my children. While my moral values were not yet concrete, I knew with absolute certainty that I would never be like those people. I would be successful in my life.

After graduating from high school, I started working towards one of my childhood dreams: to become a firefighter. It took four years to achieve, but I accomplished my goal. I used the experiences of my childhood as motivation to achieve the success my father did not achieve. I never stopped fighting for my father, and I spent years trying to get him

back. I remember visiting him in prison, hoping to spark a fire in his soul. Seeing him behind bullet-resistant glass surrounded by pounds of concrete was immeasurably painful. Every visit I made, he promised me that someday we would be a family again, that he would find a way to overcome his addiction. I wanted to trust in his empty promises, but after years of witnessing him fail time and again, I was beginning to lose hope that he would survive. A year and a half after I graduated from high

school, my father fought one final battle against his life-altering addiction and found his way back home. He finally defeated the disease that haunted him for so many years. The circumstances that life presents are not always easy to deal with, but being educated in every facet of life will aid in the preparation for achieving success. Adversity is imminent; however, all obstacles can be transcended. Failure is an option, but learning from mistakes is the key to finding a path to greatness.

Toy Soldiers

Poem • Kyle Cabrera

When I was just a little child,
a box of army men compiled
they marched outside into the dirt
I would go to war for sport.

A hammer made them into ruins,
their bodies looking mostly human
a weed whacker spun to bend their form,
their humanity now looked lukewarm
the nails pierced punctures through my men,
their voices screaming in my head
fireworks strewn them like confetti
my face and palms becoming sweaty
a knife cut off their arms and legs
the men inside my head now begged
a match melted them into the mud

my eyes could now see wax green blood
pliers squished their heads and bodies
now *my* humanity was rotting
screws fell like missiles from the sky
I couldn't help but watch them die
formations doused in gasoline
I prayed to Mary Magdalene.

When I was done I couldn't breathe
I ran inside to watch T.V.
the toys still mutilated in the dirt.
Now I look as an adult
out my window where I reside
where The Towers were beside.
I watch the news and Congress speaks
and reminisce the after weeks
and I wonder if they ever played
with army men or green brigades
If Congress had toys, hers or his...

I mean when they were kids, that is.

The Lasting Rose

Fiction • Hayley Shea

“Honey!!” I called. “Are you ready? We have to get going.”

“Coming!” came the answer from the hallway.

Glancing around our little kitchen, I saw that everything appeared to be in its place. The aroma of cinnamon lingered in the air. Soon the pot on the stove began to boil and I leaned over to turn it down. The familiar ladle rested easy in my hand as I poured steaming apple cider into our two mugs.

I clutched my cup in my hands, holding it near my chest. My eyes gazed out the window, resting upon the garden that John had worked on so tirelessly. Sixty years, three kids, and five grandchildren later, the view still took my breath away.

I could hear John’s gentle footsteps coming down the hall, and I stood waiting for his sure embrace. As I relaxed into his familiar arms I closed my eyes and my world became still.

That was the last moment I remember until my eyes slid open to find a hospital bed beneath me. I glanced to the left and my mind relaxed as my eyes rested on John. He was always my rock. No matter where I was, his presence was sure to keep me calm.

What I couldn’t understand was the concerned and sorrowful look on his face. I went to ask him what was wrong, but all that came out was a slight moan. Confusion filled me as I tried unsuccessfully to open my mouth to speak. I went to grab

his hand for comfort, but my hand didn't follow my intentions. Fear plunged into my eyes as I stared helplessly at John.

Having just noticed my open eyes, John made his way over to the bed saying, "It's okay, sweetheart. Don't worry. I'm here and you're all right. Just stay calm and let me explain."

He sat on the edge of the bed and took my hands between his.

For the next few minutes he spoke gently to me. I lay there listening, but the only two words I seemed to have heard were "stroke" and "paralyzed."

As a tear slipped down my face he paused, and I watched the tender look in his eyes draw nearer as he kissed away the tears streaking my face.

He drew back and looked into my eyes and said, "I know you can hear and understand me. I'm so sorry that you won't be able to express yourself so vibrantly as you always have. But listen. All you need are your eyes; they speak to me. They show me the beautiful woman inside this still body."

I slowly blinked at him in understanding.

He left the nursing home a few hours after dinner. And the next day he was back, bearing flowers from our garden at home. His presence was the healing balm to my new and frightening situation. He sat with me, ate with me, read my Bible to

me, took me out to the garden to feel the sunshine on my skin, and opened the window so I could hear the pitter-patter of the rain on the greenery outside. Our lives developed into a new type of normal. Our days were simple, but happiness and love persisted as long as we were together.

One morning my eyes lingered upon the flower blooming just outside the window, reminding me of John's love for the outdoors. I was eager to see his face light up when he walked in and saw the newly emerging beauty.

I waited all day for his smiling face to peer around the doorframe, but as each hour wore away the light-hearted smile in my eyes faded to worry.

When the lights were turned down, sleep would not come. The pain of uncertainty and separation kept my eyes from closing. But as the room began to lighten, exhaustion crowded in.

As my eyes slid open, the worry returned with a scene of my family talking in hushed tones by the door. John was not among them. As they looked in my direction with trepidation in their eyes, I knew. I knew that I would never again watch as John walked in and lit up the room with his smile. I knew that I would never again look into those understanding eyes and

feel comfort. I knew that I would never again feel my hand held in his.

The days wore on. No visitors. No one who understood my situation. The nurses went about their duties, never once taking the time to look into a little old woman's eyes. I began to wonder why God had me here at all. I was not serving any purpose to further His kingdom. Just sitting, watching, and waiting for what seemed like nothing.

One day a nurse walked into my room and began to open the blinds. Thinking I was asleep, she stood there looking out for a moment. I watched as a tear slid down her face. As she turned to go, she saw that I was awake. Our eyes met, and in that brief moment, her gaze explained her pain. She pulled away to return to her duties, but not without the realization that she had shared her hurt with me.

In that exchange, I began to understand that there was something I could do. And I began to pray. Each day I prayed for that nurse and each person I came across. I knew they didn't know it, but God knew my heart.

A few months later, that nurse walked in and sat down. She was still for a moment, and I waited patiently for an explanation of her visit. She lifted her eyes to meet mine and said, "I know you understand your surroundings. I'm sorry you no longer have visitors every day. But I wanted to say thank you. That day you looked me in the eyes with such compassion, was the day that I lost something very dear to me. I didn't know how I could go on, but your look gave me hope. So I thank you. And know that you are making a difference."

A smile shone clearly from my eyes, and as I watched the nurse go in peace I realized that God was still using me. Despite my frail and broken body, He was using me to encourage and that was purpose enough for me.

I will serve Him as long as He wishes to use me here.

We often forget these souls when their bodies no longer let them function. But they are still alive, and their lives have meaning. Each with a past of triumph, failure, strength, and wisdom; respect is the least they deserve.

Judge Sholomson and My Garbled English

Essay • Fatemeh Ayoughi

It is now three months since I have been in America, a dream come true, but too late. It seems like a dream of heaven, but you have to die first. I can see your smile, but let me explain because there is a tragedy behind this story. Most Iranians are against religious fascism, so in order to save their lives, they run away from the hell that the “Mulas” (a humble name for Iranian religious government leaders) have made for them. They go to borderline countries to apply for American visas, but they are often denied and return home. Unfortunately, when

they come back they will be arrested and tortured, or executed. Sometimes, those that are tortured will have another chance to go out of the country, and they will then receive an American visa easily.

Let's go back a little to review my background and how I became familiar with America. I first became familiar with the word USA when I was in grade seven in my English lesson. The textbook introduced the American lifestyle and routines through a story about Mr. Smith's family. Mr. Smith's family at home in the evening, Mr. Smith's family at

the picnic, Mr. Smith's family at New Year, Mr. Smith at Halloween. At the end of the semester we knew how Mr. Smith goes to the toilet and how many times his baby farts! But we did not learn how and what Mr. Smith's children learned in school, or about American social relationships, or why school buses are yellow and the same form. Who is their second God or King like we have, and when do all important persons kiss his hand and unimportant ones his shoes? What color are his shoes? How much do they pay him to be an important person like Parliament members or governors? I found the answers to some of these questions later, and it was interesting that not only do Americans lack a king, but they criticize their president and sometimes ridicule him, which would bring the death penalty in my country.

But in those 15 years of studying English, it seems that I did not really learn English because at that point in my life I had to use a translator to talk in the immigration court.

In Immigration Court in Los Angeles, after I passed the security line, I went to the courtroom. The room was almost full of people whose dreams had come true, too. They were from different countries. I looked for my attorney. She was sit-

ting in the first row of the benches. This part is separated by a wooden gate. There were three seats that were empty, two steps up at the end of the room. Opposite them were a table and chairs. The right one was occupied by the government's attorney, and the left one, for a translator, was empty. The middle seats were for the applicant and the attorney. I looked around; most of the people wore specific costumes, I guess from their own countries. If they want to have the same lifestyle that they had in their country, why did they move to a new place like the US? But my attorney's opinion was right when she said that here in America you can do anything you want. The courtroom was furnished with executive furniture, which showed that a serious performance was being done by an important person. Exactly at nine o'clock, the door on the right side of the room was opened; the first two women in formal dresses, then the judge with a black robe came in. He was a tall, thin man with a trusting face. I stood up and my attorney followed. When I looked around, no one stood up, just us, which drew the judge's attention to me.

"Where did she come from?" Judge Sholomson asked my attorney. It was interesting and different from the courts that I had seen in the mov-

ies. He knew my attorney and they had talked informally on many occasions. She answered that I was from Iran. He sat in his chair and started to work with folders that were on top of each other, higher than his head. Then he chose one of them.

“Fat e mmea A oo ki,” he read the name. I looked at the people to see who had the strange name, but nobody answered. My attorney answered and stood up. I was surprised that he called my name! I looked at my attorney. She was standing up and asked me why I was sitting, so I stood up. We passed the wooden gate and sat in the middle seats. The judge started with a long introduction, but because of my English and anxiety, I did not understand completely. Also the translator was whispering close to my ear so I could not concentrate. That means the translator not only did not help me but bothered me.

The judge had already read my case and wanted to know why I needed a translator when I claimed to have graduated with a degree in English literature. Before I could answer, my attorney explained that I was a political prisoner in Iran and I was tortured by electric shock; the effect impacted me. My brain was damaged and I lost 80 percent of my memory. Then she added that the doctor’s

proof was included. Her detailed explanations were perfect. In the English courses we never learned how to speak; we just learned words and grammar to read the literature but never used them for speaking skills. In this predicament, I was startled.

“Objection, your Honor” came from the woman who was sitting on my attorney’s left side, the government attorney. I looked at her with surprise. How could my English be an objection from her! But as she continued, I saw she was not involved with what was going on in the courtroom. She explained that she was looking at a copy of my passport; because I had traveled to many countries, I had to translate all stamps in my passport. She wanted to know where I traveled before I came to the US! We lost the argument on the previous subject. That means she stopped us, so the judge turned to the new subject. Then I looked at the stamps on my passport. Each stamp was a circle that on half was written the name of the country in the local language; the other half was written in English. which the US attorney easily could read. Nobody bothered to look. In fact, the judge ordered that the stamps be translated, which they already had been, and scheduled us for twelve months later. Through the next twelve

months, I passed more English courses. In contrast to my country, these English courses emphasized conversation and comprehension more than vocabulary and grammar, so my understanding of English got better and better.

There is hearsay within the immigrant applicants that one of the easiest ways to earn residency in the US is by marriage. I remember I had my own philosophy about marriage. I was still single. In my art class I had found a friend and we had some nice conversations. By that time, we found out we had the same interest about many subjects like art, spending free time, and social subjects. This was starting a friendship that became deeper and deeper. I already talked about my situation in the US so he tried to help me when I was in trouble with my low memory and confusion. One day he knew I had to go to Immigration Court, so he volunteered to give me a ride and come with me.

Again, the courtroom was full of immigrants from all over the world with different customs. Again, my attorney was sitting in the first row. And again, when the judge came in, nobody else, just my friend, the attorney, and I stood up. And again Judge Sholomson drew attention to me and my friend.

"Who is he?" the judge asked my attorney before he sat.

"Her fiancé, your Honor," she replied. I don't know why she said that without my advising her. It was a bad situation because I didn't have time to explain to her, and I was embarrassed for my friend. When the judge sat down in his chair, he moved the folders and called a name. One of the participants stood up to go through the gate with his attorney. And again the judge started his specific introduction. I did not listen to him. Meanwhile, I drank some water from my bottle and burped without any control.

Suddenly Judge Sholomson yelled, "I heard you say something. If you talk one more time, I will give an order to take you out." My American friend, who had never seen an immigration court, was looking around, surprised at everything. Anyway, my attorney helped me with her apology. I felt anxiety from the judge yelling because of the screaming and torture I experienced in the Iranian prison. I just watched and tried to make myself relax by taking a pill, which Judge Sholomson noticed.

After the first trial, he called my name. I followed my attorney to sit before him. Again he started his introduction and I understood some of it, while the translator was whispering

close to my ear. When he asked me if I understood, the translator replied, "Yes, your Honor" before I could answer. Then he asked the US attorney, who was different from the last time, if he had all of his copies. His answer was yes, but he mentioned that he saw a crime in my background. I could not see my friend's reaction, but I could guess. At last the judge made his decision; we had to wait for a new investigation. Then the next schedule was set for two years later. Later, my attorney found out the US attorney was looking at the wrong document; he was reading about the first participant, who had already received his residency!

After two years we came back with the same routine, but without my friend. Through the two years I passed more English courses. I was in the creative writing level class at that time. The story was the same; the only difference was Judge Sholomson pronounced my name correctly. At this time, I looked at the US attorney. He was a blond young man. His smile made me comfortable. The judge started his introduction and I understood all of his rhetoric. When he asked me if I needed a translator, I responded by saying that I didn't need one. He asked the US attorney if he had any specific notations and his answer was negative. At last, he sug-

gested to my attorney that she start to question me. She asked why I was in this court hearing.

"I am an educated woman who is a well-known author and poet in my country," I explained. "I was abused and tortured for my ideas." My attorney asked for more details. I was explaining that I had written an article about women's and children's lost rights in Iran. I was arrested by religious fascists. I was jailed for seven months in a small cage. I explained how every day in the middle of the night they took me for questioning. They told me I must confess that I am anti-Muslim, which would end in a death penalty by stoning. When I declined, I was hit on the head with an electric baton, which shocked me and damaged my brain. One of the side effects was that I lost my memory. I think my testimony was beyond Judge Sholomson's ability to contain his emotion because when I looked at him, his face was twitching, and his eyes were damp with tears. Suddenly, he changed the subject and asked a question.

"Did you have plans to marry with the gentleman that was with you last time?" the judge asked me. "In America, an easy way to get a green card is by marriage. Did you know that?" Because I was shaking, remember-

ing all of these horrible events, his change of subject gave me a chance to take a break from this emotional testimony. I answered by saying that I had asked him for marriage, but he told me that you have to be a resident in the US, so he suggested that I go to the Immigration Court to receive a green card first. "Now I have come here for a green card,

and you tell me I should go get married to receive a green card," I replied. "Your Honor, how can my broken mind solve this paradox?" First the judge, then everybody else, started laughing.

"You are right, so today in this court your paradox will be solved," Judge Sholomson said. "Congratulations. Welcome to America."

Revenge: Justice or Ignorance?

Essay • Daniel Chang

“Let me see the hole in your backpack, you Chink!” said Tommy, a typical bully at my middle school. “Wow man, you call that a hole? Boohoo! Alec ripped a hole in my backpack!” I sat there in disgust while being interrogated by Tommy the day after I reported his friend Alec for taking my rolling backpack on a joyride, causing it to flip over, which tore a hole in the bottom pocket. I had finally cooled down from being a hothead; I hadn’t been in a fight for a whole year. Sixth grade was supposed to be a new beginning with new people and new opportunities, or so I thought. What I didn’t know was that the situation at hand would eventually be the

catalyst that triggered the explosion of a nuclear weapon known as the vengeful side of my personality.

Since I was very young, I have been looked down upon because of my race. Because I was a slightly awkward, reserved Asian kid, the white kids from my neighborhood often harassed me or pelted me with plastic BB pellets while I rode my bike. As a result, I harbored a deep hatred for racism describable only by two words: silent rage. Most people would agree that there are two types of anger. There is explosive and violent anger, and there is silent anger. With explosive anger, you get the person who has constant issues

and sees a mentor or a psychologist to treat the symptoms. With silent anger, you get Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other similar cases with teens suddenly going crazy. Unfortunately for me, I tended toward the latter, and this deep rage nearly turned my group of friends into a team of social mercenaries.

The day of October 12, 2005 started out just like any normal day. I went through all of my classes in the usual uninteresting drag familiar to all teenage students. Little did I know that before sixth period, my life would be changed forever. As I sat outside my sixth period class waiting for the teacher to arrive, a student named Alec came to me and started making wisecracks about my rolling backpack, asking in a very condescending tone if my books were too heavy for me. After I responded with a quick "go away," he grabbed my backpack and rolled it around, hollering, "Hey look! I'm Daniel Chang! I can't lift ten pounds of books so I got a wheelie backpack!" He dragged my backpack, with me in pursuit, until it flipped over, ripping a hole in the bottom pocket. In an attempt to contain my anger, I went directly to the vice principal with the issue. The next day, after Tommy ridiculed me in front of everyone during lunch, something in my mind just snapped. In that

moment, I made up my mind that bullying was despicable, and getting my revenge was not enough. I was going to eliminate every bully one by one, and it would not be pretty.

After two days of contemplating I revealed to my close-knit group of friends that I intended to inflict as much pain on the bullies as they had on us over the years. The word "mercy" was nowhere near the destination of my map of how we were to take our vengeance. My best friend, Marc, was not open to the idea. He had always been the voice of reason during my eccentric shenanigans, but I quickly tossed him out of our goal completely, thinking he'd just get in our way. My plan was complicated and required much time. We were to wait and prepare for five whole years until our junior year of high school to initiate our mission. After five years, we would act as "social mercenaries," taking letters and requests to hunt and punish bullies and other arrogant, popular crowd "untouchables."

During the five-year gap between when our plan was drawn and the time we were scheduled to initiate, the group and I had done many things. First, we decided on the name for the group. Because our school's mascot was the wolverine, the final agreement was the "Iron Wolves" and we designed our logo: the word

“wolf” in Chinese with a special font. I combined several different types of kung fu to formulate an exclusive form known only to the wolves called “wolf claw,” and the group learned and practiced it for the full five years. Along with that, we all got together and designed a wolf-car; the resulting vehicle is the one I drive to this day. Finally, by the end of five years, we had saved up more than a thousand dollars. We were locked, loaded, and ready to challenge anyone who got in our way.

As junior year approached, the group was excited about the future. We thought of the people we could protect, the bullies who would be brought to justice, and the glory we could have as the first successful vigilante team. One day I met a girl on Facebook who was searching for help with people bullying her, and she wanted to post her bullies’ names on public pages all over Facebook, shaming them out of doing any more bullying. The group thought it’d be a good idea to use the Internet as a cyber-weapon on bullies, so we agreed. After we posted, however, one of the so-called “bullies” messaged me saying that the girl had Asperger’s syndrome and never got along with anybody. She had told him she loved him, but when he declined and tried to break

ties with her, she followed his group of friends and constantly messaged him, even going as far as making several Facebook accounts to talk to him. When he grew overly annoyed of the stalking and became aggressive, she thought of him as a bully and reported him to me. As it turned out, I had just publicly humiliated an innocent human being, not just in front of a few friends at lunch, but in front of the whole world. In the five years of planning and training, I had prepared to become exactly what I hated: a bully. I had become so wrapped up in my personal vendetta that I actually thought that bullying the bullies was going to solve problems. That day, I gained a new perspective on the world. One cannot simply attack people suspected to be bullies, because there is always another side to the story. Getting together with a few friends and hunting people you don’t like while wearing a mask doesn’t make you a hero. In fact, all it does is make your group a gang. Luckily, I stopped before I went over the deep end and learned something from the experience. My friends, however, were not too fond of spending five years planning and training for something that didn’t happen. Then again, people weren’t all too excited when Y2K didn’t happen, but they still lived on.

After our realization the group put an end to the vigilante idea. Just because I didn't go on to save the day fighting bad guys with my group, however, doesn't mean I've given up on the anti-bullying cause. I created a Facebook group called "Supporters of Peace," and within a few weeks, more than 100 members joined. We are now on track to be sponsored by the Boys and Girls Club of America. We are also one step closer to our final goal: to pass a federal law that

allows a bully to be charged with anything from negligence to manslaughter, depending on each case, if his or her bullying contributed to a victim's suicide. I believe this new goal will drive our cause to new heights.

So, as we continue to fight for our cause using more legal methods, we still watch superhero movies for entertainment; only from now on, rather than dreaming of glory, we just sit and say, "Been there, and happy we *hadn't* done that."

My Life: For Better or Worse

Essay • Eric Ritter

Retired General Norman Schwarzkopf once said, “The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it,” and it is true. The reverse is also true, that doing something the easy way does not mean that it is the right way. The easy way for me was experimenting with steroids, which I expected would only benefit my progress towards becoming a well-developed Marine. However, something unexpected happened while I was using steroids: my perspective grew more than my muscles.

Steroids were what ultimately led to my military career ending prematurely. Before my career

ended, I was a young, immature, and ungrateful punk. Being in the military was everything to me: my narrow-minded outlook on life showed how nothing else mattered. On December 30, 2010, before my second deployment, a group of my friends and I decided we were going to deploy with every advantage possible, so we began using steroids. We knew it was not the right thing to do, but who was going to tell us not to when we were risking our lives to fight for freedom? Quickly, we grew stronger and more confident before we shipped off again, this time for Afghanistan. We felt

unstoppable. One day, soon after injecting steroids, Chris, my best friend and father of my godchild, left some needles in my room. That day turned out to be our first surprise room inspection by our commanding officer. The two of us were immediately searched by military police along with our room, and we were arrested. I knew that since the needles were in my room, I would be on the hook for what was inside. Considering the families and individuals that could potentially be affected, I decided to take the responsibility for another person's mistake. Not realizing the terrible consequences I would receive, I did not easily accept being stripped of my hard-earned veteran benefits and discharged from the Marine Corps. The military life was all I knew and all I had wanted to do. Being kicked out of my home for the past three years abruptly forced me to start over.

I thought my life was over when I was handed my discharge papers and told "Good luck." Slowly, I shifted from an immature punk into a scared, helpless, and angry kid. Out on my own and low on money, I hit the lowest point of my life. Having a steady paycheck for years with no rent certainly did not prepare me to be on my own. My understanding of

the world changed. I gained a sense of appreciation for the small things, like having a roof over my head and being able to eat every day. Learning how to adjust to civilian society was extremely difficult, and I did not know whether or not to just give up. I decided to move to California, where I continued to struggle to make ends meet. With no room for negotiation, I accepted the first job offer that came my way, for a low-paying sales position at a gym. This was not the life anyone imagines when thinking of California living, and to this day it still feels foreign--every day waking up and not knowing whether I will still have enough money left to eat. Losing my whole career helped me expand my knowledge of the harsh reality of poverty. The apprehensive feelings from this hardship still, however, did not even compare to the flood of emotions that came with the news that two of my friends had died in combat.

Steroids ruined my military career but saved my life. On April 23, 2011, a roadside bomb detonated in Afghanistan during a routine patrol. The bomb struck the same vehicle in which I had ridden for months. That bomb killed two of my very close friends. I thought that this could not be real, that it could not have actually happened. I cried uncontrollably for

the first time in years. How bizarre, I thought, that one instance could have the power to change our lives forever. I had trouble accepting I was only spared due to my own bad decisions. A scared kid transformed that day into a grateful and mature man.

From my perspective, I had lost everything when I was arrested, when in fact I had gained the rest of my life. It is funny how an event strong enough to ruin one's life can also be

what saves it. As it turns out, I would rather live with a black mark than die young with honor. When we are young and inexperienced, we do not comprehend how valuable a person's life truly is. Thanks to the sacrifice of my two close friends, I will always see the positive in any outcome. Nearly everyone has a defining moment when they will recognize the significance of the old question "Is the glass half empty or half full?" This is mine.



Illustration by Lina Hamudot

What If?

Fiction • Ryan Vann

Ian watches the last car's lights fade into the night over the rim of his well-used wineglass then turns to the remains of the drawing room of the McCall House. He circles the room, reflecting on the scorched husk the House had been before he had it restored. Ian had made sure every one of the guests had taken a long solid look at the photos of the original, so they could best appreciate his results, his expense, and his prosperity. His knee strikes a wandering end table and he lets out a whistle, finally seeing the mess his guests had made. Downing what's left in his glass, he lets it fall to the floor—one last gift for his cleaning staff before he retires to his study.

It is the only room in the house that was off limits to his guests: a completely private space, only acces-

sible through an enclosed staircase. Twisting the handle, Ian pulls open the door and freezes. Resting halfway up the staircase are a small, well-worn notepad and a dirty orange. He glares at the items on the stairs. No one was allowed in this staircase, so why are these here? Did someone go in his *private* study? He snatches the items off the step and thunders up the curving stairs, throwing open the door to his study.

He scours the room for half an hour. It's as he left it. Not a thing out of place. Still, someone violated his wishes. Ian sits down at his oversized desk and stares at the objects. The orange, covered in dust, hair and filth, goes straight into the trashcan underneath his desk. He picks up the notepad. It's small and cheap, with a spiral on the top, the kind meant

for pockets. Its front cover is a faded blue; the back is creased cardboard, singed in one corner. Both sides are clean of text. Most of the paper in the notebook had been torn out, leaving it deflated. He flips the cover over and focuses on the first page. The handwriting is square and clean, written in pen. His eyes stop on the title.

McCall House 009

Ian clenches his teeth. They were writing something about his house? 009? Have they written about it more than once? He continues.

I've been stuck on this staircase for almost 20 minutes now.

I've tried turning back, repeatedly, and I'm positive that I start going back down, but I only get a few steps before I notice that I'm going up again. I can't even tell when I turn around. It just keeps going. Is this like the hallway Ben found? I hope so, because he eventually found a door. I've been trying to get a hold of the team on the radio, but there's no response. They probably can't hear me, but it makes me feel better. I'm going to miss check in.

Ian flips to the next page.

It's been about 45 minutes now.

I tried to mark the steps. Every five steps I've been placing one of our blue tags and counting. This was working just dandy until the tags started coming back. At first I was only finding them one at a time, just how I had left them. Later on, they started to show up in groups. I tried sticking them on the walls instead of the steps. Same result. I was trying to gauge how far I've been moving, but now I'm not even sure I've been moving at all.

What's moving the tags, and how are they getting ahead of me?

Ian rereads the first two pages twice. His left leg becomes restless while he contemplates the notepad. It's just fiction? Someone sneaked in just to leave behind a Twilight Zone reject? He pulls the second page up hard, tearing it halfway off.

One hour and 30 minutes. No way out yet, but I found something interesting. I slipped and dropped my water bottle, which rolled down the staircase. Since I can't seem to go back down I figured it was lost, but it came back just like the tags. In this case it maintained its momentum and came rolling down the steps. I had to test this again, so I tossed the orange from my lunch.

Ian leans back in his chair and glances briefly at the trash can underneath his desk before returning to the page.

It too, came back from above. Is above the right word?

I'm now certain that the staircase is a loop. This explains how I've been moving so far in here, and how the tags were getting ahead of me, but not how they were moved.

Or how I can get out of here.

If I throw the orange just right I can play catch with myself.

One hour 45 minutes. I threw the orange and it didn't come back.

Ian sets the notepad on his desk, leans down, and picks up his trash can by the rim. He stares at the orange rolling around at the bottom of the can, noticing that beyond being filthy it's also split and dented in several locations, as if it had in fact been thrown around. He lingers on the orange for a moment longer, acknowledging the detail whoever wrote in this notepad had for their prank.

Three hours 21 minutes. I'm getting something on the radio. There's too much static for me to tell what, but it's a good sign. It's almost sundown and Mark told us not to be here after dark. I'm ready to get out of here.

Three hours 47 minutes. The radio cleared up a bit. It's just breathing. They aren't acknowledging me.

Four hours three minutes. The breathing from the radio is getting louder. It's driving me crazy.

Ian rolls the page up and notices a sudden change in the handwriting. It's sloppy, as if written with haste.

Disabled the radio. I can still hear the breathing. I can't tell if it's behind or ahead of me.

Is there a difference?

Behind

There is a dark line shooting from the top of the "d" in "Behind" all the way to the edge of the page, jagged like lightning at first, then straight as an arrow. As if he had jumped while writing it.

Ian adjusts his posture, taking the opportunity to look from one corner of the room to the other, then at the door to the staircase. It's cracked open, slightly. He was sure that he'd closed it before but assures himself that he must have been mistaken. He flips to the next page. The handwriting has changed again. This time becoming shaky and more spaced out.

I panicked when I saw it. I ran.

I'm not sure where I thought I

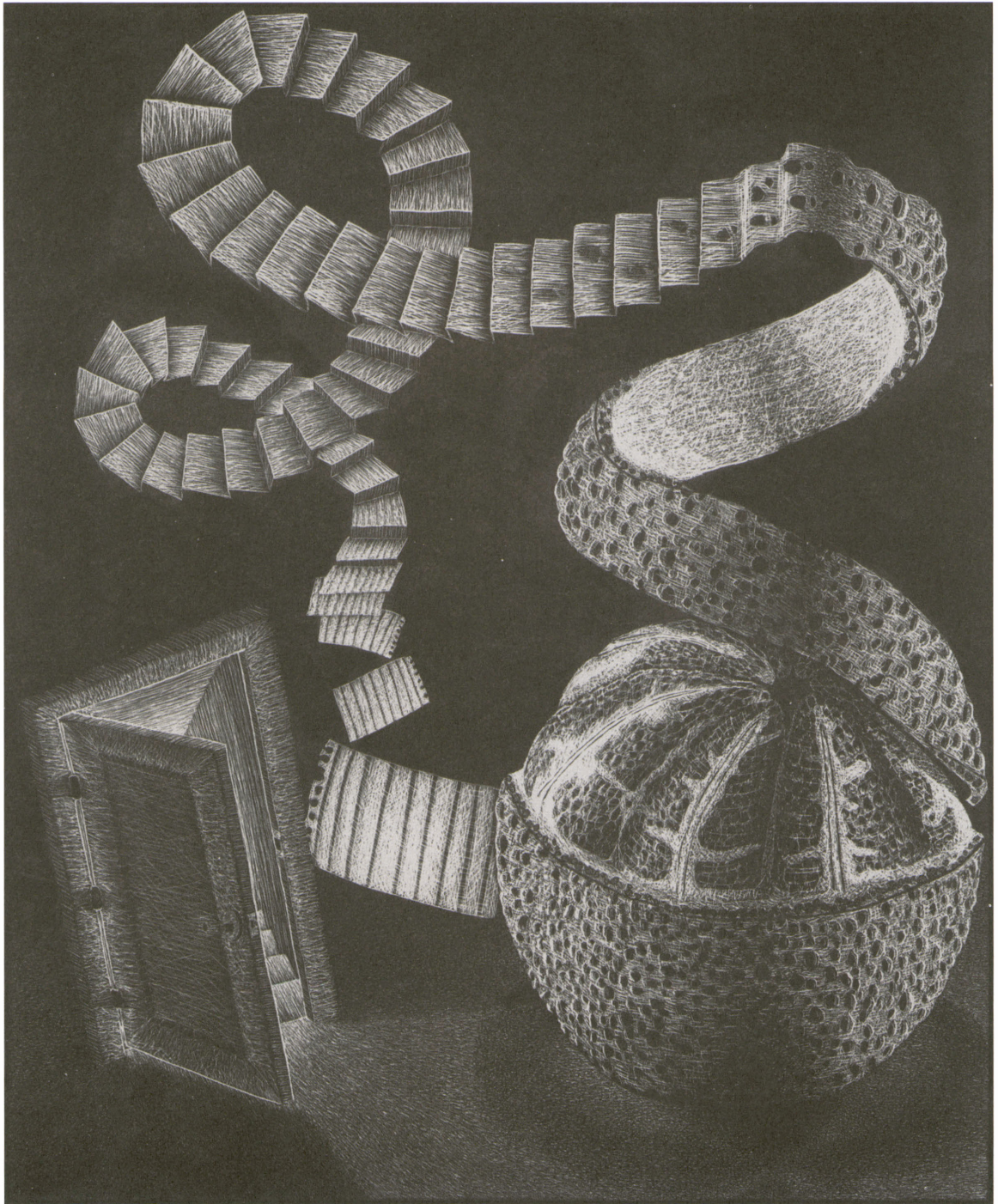


Illustration by Shannon Renz

was going. Too used to places leading somewhere instead of nowhere.

CLICK

Ian jumps in his seat, snapping his head towards the closed door. Feeling the sudden chill of adrenaline, he chastises himself for jumping at something so common as the air closing a door, and continues reading.

I'm going to die here. I'm sure. I slipped running, and now my ankle and two fingers are broken.

It's just waiting.

Sitting in the dark where the staircase curves.

Just breathing.

I can't walk.

I'm not going to be able to stay awake much longer. It's waiting for that. I still have my matches. Plenty of paper.

I bet that thing doesn't have a fire extinguisher.

Ian turns the page halfway before realizing that the rest of the notepad is torn out. He closes it and puts it face down on his desk. He notices the singed corner again and realizes that

he's scowling. He stares at the notebook, trying to rationalize why it was here. Someone had violated his rules and invaded his privacy just to leave him a story. Why? To scare him with a piece of cheap fiction and a dirty fruit? No. Certainly they had meant to spoil his big night. He smiles as he rises from his desk, and slowly advances towards the door. He won't let them spoil anything. His smile grows as he muses over the idea of using the notepad as some sort of attraction at his next party. That would surely drive whoever did this crazy. They'll know he can't be rattled so easily.

Ian's stride becomes confident, quickening his pace to the door. He reaches out, and stops, his fingertips hovering just short of the handle. He reels his hand back and leans forward, listening. Ian can't hear what he's looking for; his heartbeat had grown too loud. He breathes slowly, attempting to relax himself. He knows there's nothing on the other side of that door. He knows he's safe. Still, he stands behind the door, unwilling to remove the only barrier between himself and something he knows cannot possibly be there. His confidence buried by a simple notion.

What if?

The King of the Beasts

Poem • Christopher Shonafelt

When I was a child I thought I was going to hell
But my family was too kind to tell me.
I had a dream that we were all taken to a room
By the police
And shot in the head.

It's nice to sit in gardens with nobody in them.
My thoughts are blunt instruments
And holes in sand;
If you walk by, don't speak to me.
Most houses here have open doors
To rooms with nobody in them,

And for all their nothing there is nothing enough.
These are the days
Of machine-smells and mud on plastic
Of sandpaper and bright sunlight
When our town is full of shapes
In the street
In their blankets of flies.
And the whole world is air caught in my throat;
These are the days when there are things I cannot look at.
When he comes
We all take turns smiling and not knowing why
Falling in warm water,
He comes,
Pounding his black horse full of screams and sweat
The king of the beasts.

Family Portrait

Essay • Amber Herrel

For show-and-tell day at school I want to bring a picture of my magic rocking chair. We're supposed to bring a picture of our family, but my family picture won't look like any of the other kids' pictures. In my family picture you'd see Oma, Opa, and my mother Jill – all blue-eyed and blond with snowy skin standing behind me, my mother's hand resting on my shoulders. Then me – not blue-eyed, not blond, but me – with skin the color of pale raisins, and eyes and hair dark as any black sheep. My favorite photographs of my family aren't on paper; they're in my mind.

It's June and I know today is Big Housecleaning Day because Jill is wearing that blue and white bandanna like a hat tied around her long, blond hair. If I had hair as pretty as Sleeping Beauty's, I would never

cover it up the way Jill does. Sometimes I wish I had my own bandanna to cover my hair, but that's because mine is short and frizzy, too dark and curly to ever find the ends. Chia-pet hair. Sometimes Jill clips colorful sparkly barrettes against my scalp, but you can never see the colorful sparkles; the curls overpower them the way a gray cloud covers the sun and they just disappear in the dark.

The only time Jill ever wears that blue and white bandanna is when the sun is glowing and the air is so hot and gusty from the Santa Ana winds that it makes your eyes and throat dry. It's also the only time she wears wrinkly shorts with splotches of paint on them and what she calls a tube-top stretches around her chest. That's her no-nonsense housecleaning outfit. She never goes to the store or sees

the neighbors when she's in the middle of no-nonsense housecleaning.

With the curtains off and the windows open, the house seems bright, almost new. In the kitchen, Jill is cleaning the fragile things – mostly china dishes and crystal vases we use with Oma's good silver during Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and any other special day worth celebrating. In the storage room she pulls out things from cupboards and closets: dusty suitcases, a set of bongo drums, photo albums and cassette players, things I haven't seen before and other things – old forgotten things that will probably end up in the trash. For now, they'll go in a pile.

Jill always tackles the furniture last. By then it's the end of the day and she knows which furniture still has a home and which is hitching a ride with the Salvation Army. She picks up the rocking chair – the wicker rocking chair, *our* rocking chair – but she's heading the wrong way with it. She's heading towards the junk pile and I grab her arm.

The rocking chair doesn't sit in her bedroom anymore, not after the rain came down on it when Opa left it by mistake out in the backyard. But once it was dry, he brought it inside again and set it in the living room, with a frown. Its blond wood is rotting and peeling away, and this past September was

the last time Jill and I sat on it. But that doesn't make me want to throw it away.

School begins again next season and it's always after school that I sit on Jill's lap in that chair. My head hides in the soft folds of her sweater as I curl up on her lap, cradled by the rocking chair. Then the rocking rhythm of the chair begins, and she smooths my hair and hums softly, peaceful songs that have no words. It makes me forget the early hours of my afternoon.

Palms sweating, back pressed against the red brick wall, eyes glued to my white socks and new Buster Brown shoes. It saves me from the glares of the fifth-grade twins, Chow Haun and Chow Muey.

The first girl pokes my chest and asks, "Are you adopted?"

"No."

"Then where's your dad?" the other one asks.

I think someone stole my voice, but then, barely, I say to the asphalt all I've been told, "I don't have one."

"What do you mean you don't have one? *Everyone* has a dad. Are you stupid?"

I think every muscle in my face is twisting a different way.

"My mom and dad say you're adopted."

The bell ending recess sounds

loud above my head and takes the twins away until tomorrow.

I know if I sit with Jill long enough, she will read to me: stories of princesses and faraway lands, and about kids like me who believed happy thoughts so hard that they learned how to fly. I always ask her to read from Peter Pan. Peter Pan never had a mother and that makes me feel lucky.

Some of my mom's friends have rocking chairs, but I don't feel any better when I rock on them. Our

chair is magic. I guess Jill forgot about that. She says the rocking chair can't hold us anymore, that it'll break if we try to sit on it. She says we won't need it this year. I know that come September it will be strong enough again; she just has to believe. From her expression I can tell that she doesn't believe me, doesn't believe that our rocking chair is magical. Even so, she carries it back into the living room and sets it down again where Opa once placed it, with an apology.

A Light Alone

Fiction • Amy Cameron

Morning light shone in through the window that overlooked the alley and cast a cold gray pallor on the tiny kitchen. Its plaster walls were exposed in patches where dingy, flowered wallpaper peeled away from brown seams. The old man stood at the stove in a thin, baggy sweatshirt and faded pinstriped pajama bottoms that were too big for him. His cracked leather slippers bulged from white gym socks worn underneath. He folded over his omelette, waiting for the egg to set in the middle, and wondered if his wife was angry with him.

“I hope you die before me, Frank, because you’re useless on your own,” his wife, Ann, had whispered last night in bed, long after they had turned off their

reading lights. Laying on his side, he could see her face illuminated by the streetlight, hardened cold cream caked into her wrinkles. Her eyes were closed and he wondered if she knew he was still awake. He said nothing back.

The percolator began to burble on the narrow formica counter as he rolled his greasy breakfast from the pan onto a plate set at the kitchen table. The other end of the table was set with a teacup, saucer, and spoon. A long line of prescription pill bottles all labeled with “A” in red nail polish stood by the place setting. The stench of bug spray and grease mingled with the rich aroma of fresh coffee and filled the room, saturating its walls.

Ann was never much of a breakfast person. She wouldn’t get up until closer to 10 a.m.

Probably sleep till noon if I let her, Frank thought irritably.

He usually ate breakfast alone in this small kitchen at the back of the house -- sometimes when it was still dark outside. He used to eat with his children when they were little and still lived there. They would wake up early and race down the narrow, green carpeted stairs to find him with all the breakfast things crowding the counters, the pan already hot on the burner, waiting for their breakfast orders.

He was always showered, dressed and ready for the day back then. Even on the weekends. Even after he retired. Only recently had he started coming down unwashed and he wondered vaguely why that was.

Sitting down at the table, he reached for the salt shaker and realized it wasn't there. "God-damn her," he barked. "Why does she always have to move things around?" He shoved his chair back, hobbled a few steps over to the cabinet, and rooted around for the salt. "Damn. Where is it?"

He leaned sideways towards the next cabinet before he noticed the little white shaker next to his plate, half covered by a dishcloth. "God-damn it," he muttered as he dropped into his chair to eat.

A dull thud sounded against the

screen door at the front of the house as he was finishing his coffee. He shuffled outside to fetch the paper. *Have to grab it right away,* he thought bitterly. *If you aren't quick, someone'll steal it.*

A beat-up black sedan raced down the narrow city street, jerked to a stop in front of Frank's house, and double parked beside his car.

"Hey!" Frank called from his porch. "You can't park there. You're barricading me in."

The young man was already out of the car and locking his door, not looking at Frank.

"You hear me? I'm talking to you. That's my handicap spot. Don't you see the sign?" Frank's heart raced at the audacity of the young guy. The man smirked at Frank and turned to leave. He waved a tattooed arm in the air as he disappeared around the corner. A vein in Frank's neck throbbed violently as he charged into his house to call 9-1-1.

"Are you requesting an officer be sent to ticket the vehicle, sir?" the dispatcher asked.

"I want him towed."

"Sir, we do not tow from public parking spots in residential neighborhoods."

"But he's blocking my handicap spot. My wife is eighty-four years old and could have an emergency. I need access to my car!"

"Calm down, sir. I'll send an officer out to assess the situation."

After the dispatcher hung up, Frank stood clutching the receiver tightly for a moment more before he ambled over to the couch and lay down, his breathing still ragged.

The phone jolted him awake an hour later. He grabbed the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mr. Matello? This is Dr. Capista's office. I'm calling to reschedule the appointment you missed yesterday."

"What? I was never told about any appointment. I couldn't have missed something I was unaware of, now could I?"

"Well, nevertheless, sir, the doctor wants to see you and I'm calling to reschedule. Does 9 a.m. Friday morning work for you?"

"Yes. That should be fine. But next time don't make any more appointments for me through my wife, alright? She forgets to tell me and then I miss them. All future appointments should be made with me personally, understand?"

"Okay, Mr. Matello, we'll see you Friday."

He slammed down the receiver and cursed his wife again.

"Why can't she remember to write things down like I tell her?" he

said and went to poke around in the refrigerator for lunch. He noticed a plate loosely covered with tinfoil and unwrapped it. On it were five unfrosted cupcakes, hard as rocks. He remembered Sam and Allie were supposed to come back in a few days to decorate them. That was over seven weeks ago.

The kids get busy with school and soccer practice and things, he thought as he slid them into the trashcan. Next time they come over, I'll make sure we eat the cupcakes together.

Daylight was beginning to fade when the young man returned to his car. His cocky smile dissolved as he noticed the white slip of paper tucked under his wiper blade.

"You called the cops on me?" he screamed up at Frank, who was waiting in an ancient beach chair on his front porch.

A deep sense of satisfaction filled Frank as he watched the young man tear the paper from his windshield and glare at it -- the color rising in his smooth face.

"I told you not to park in my spot."

"This ticket is for three hundred eighty bucks! Are you kidding me?"

The man roared, charging a few paces towards the steps leading up to the porch.

Frank tensed in his chair. "You broke the law. It's not my fault. I told you not to park there and you ignored me. Now you can't ignore that ticket."

"Like you even had somewhere to go, old man," the young guy said, his voice ominously low. He advanced another step across the narrow city sidewalk towards the porch stairs.

Frank's head throbbed with his accelerated heartbeat as he watched the man's fists clench, the thick arm muscles bunching up under his tattoos. The young man mounted the stairs two at a time. Sweat dripped into Frank's left eye, stinging it. Burning it. A sharp pain ripped through his chest, his tongue felt heavy and thick, making it difficult to speak.

"As if you *ever* have anywhere to go, do you, old man? And that bastard would have docked my pay if I was late again this morning, but you don't give a shit about that. You don't care about anything except that goddamn parking spot."

The young man stalked across the porch to within arm's reach when Frank slumped sideways out of his chair, tipping it over and knocking his head against the concrete floor.

A fire truck responded to the 9-1-1 call. The firefighters found the next of kin emergency contact

information in Frank's wallet and his son, Anthony, arrived just as Frank regained consciousness.

"Dad. Are you okay?" Anthony knelt over him, squeezing his hand.

"Anthony," Frank said and smiled. "What happened?" He looked at the firefighters standing on his porch.

"You're gonna be just fine, Mr. Matello," a firefighter answered. "Looks like you fell out of your chair and hit your head. You were knocked unconscious for a few minutes. We took your vitals. You had a little anxiety attack, but you're just fine now."

"So I didn't have a heart attack?" Frank asked. "Where's Mom? Does she know yet?"

"No, Dad...not a heart attack." Anthony said carefully. "Everything is gonna be okay."

"Anthony, where's Mom? I need to tell her I'm alright."

"Dad. You remember..."

"Go inside and get your mother right now," Frank snapped. "She must be worried."

"Dad, I... Dad, Mom isn't in the house." Anthony blew out a long breath and looked away. He raked a hand through his hair. The firefighters were packing up to go, but they all stopped and turned towards Anthony. The young man with tattoos, sitting on the steps, stared at him, too.

Frank looked up at his son, his yellow muddled eyes wide and wet with tears.

"I thought...but...she was so cold. I called 9-1-1..." Frank's voice broke. His frail body began to shake as his son wrapped his arms around him.

"It's okay, Dad. I know."

After a moment, a fireman cleared his throat. "Mr. Matello, we called your doctor and he is gonna stop by early tomorrow to check on you. We don't think you have to go to the ER and everyone would like to avoid putting you through all that. Is that clear?"

"Yes, I understand." Frank said. He sat up and noticed the young man sitting on the steps. He was slumped over, dirty hands twisted into greasy hair, his elbows on his knees. He stared straight down at nothing.

Anthony helped his father to his feet and they made their way into the house. Easing Frank into a recliner in the front room, Anthony flicked on the TV.

"I'll be back soon, okay, Dad? I've gotta get back to work right now, but I'll stop by with Jen and the kids maybe next weekend? Sound good? You gonna be alright?"

"I'm fine." Frank closed his eyes.

"The doctor will be here tomorrow morning, first thing. See you later, Pop."

"Bye now, son," Frank said without opening his eyes.

"Bye, Dad. See you soon." And Anthony was gone.

Frank woke up two hours later, not hungry for dinner. The room was dark—the only light coming from the television blaring loudly on a commercial. He groped for the remote control on the little side table and couldn't find it.

"Goddamn her. She doesn't even watch TV. Why is she always touching the damn remote?"

Frank turned on the lamp next to him and heaved himself off his chair to look around the empty room. He saw the remote on the sofa and hobbled over to get it. On the way back to his chair, he noticed the time on the little wooden clock they had gotten as a wedding present. It was half past eight.

"And I bet she's already gone to bed now, too."

He blew out a long breath as he stared at the clock, not moving. Then he turned and dropped heavily back into his seat.

Experimentation

Poem • Sterling Arthur Leva

I've experimented with a lot of things in my day.

I mainlined Romanticism and heard Genesis in a creaky, quiet singing voice in Oakland, although the Slim staccato said it was Dakota.

I took a shot of Surrealism and Dallied with daguerrotypical dandies as if it were 1931 and I was the only one who couldn't read the hands of the crooked clocks (pointing posthaste towards a past purgatorial pointillist punishment), all polka dots and sunspots.

I freebased Existentialism and spent many an ethereal evening evoking egotistical poltergeists and fishing for cracked psyches in the carpeted psychoses of an existence that wasn't entirely mine (but not entirely not mine either).

I downed Modernism like the last dregs from a Parisian wine not suitable for modern times and, lo and behold, it just made me whine and laugh all the way to the Left Bank.

I tried Transcendentalism and saw transcendent beauty in a pair of tarnished transvestite eyes on the corner of Turk & Taylor, with a tailored truth trying to be female, downing ale to forsake the male.

Then I racked a rail of Realism and really regretted the rush, man.
Ain't nothing rawer than realizing that reality is realer than the most
ravaging night terrors.

Sturm Und Drang made me strong and drunk, and I still can't figure
out whether or not I sold my soul to the devil. But I do have a diabolical
contract lying around here somewhere...

I bought some Beat poetry off a beat junkie off Skate & Thrashbury,
but the words beat me down like a sad, sad clown until I forged my
own mental Coney Island. I was starving, hysterical, but never naked,
so I took the tempo and the credo and put it in my pants pocket for
my own cruel devices.

I've been achy for Aestheticism and dopesick for Dadaism, after I got
a taste from a tasteless turncoat in Orinda. It all seemed Shakespear-
ean to me, but it was mostly beer and shakes, as far as I could see.

Now I'm sniffing Sentimentalism and seeing stars,

And literary schools are like classic cars:

They look real radical from afar--

But try to buy one and you won't get far.

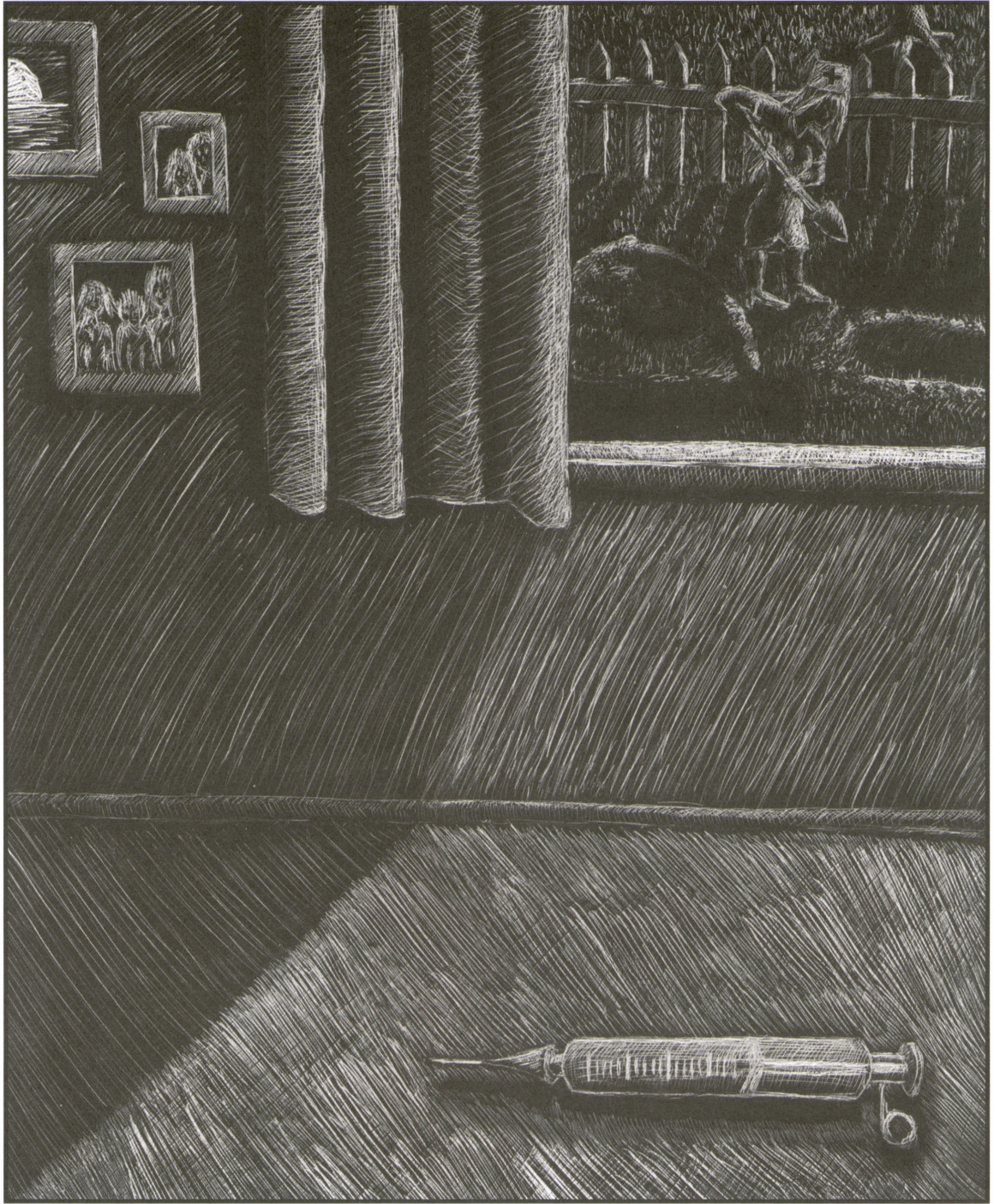


Illustration by Matt Curry

Sweet Dreams

Fiction • Alexander Kusztyk

Metronome. Synced to her son's music playing in her head, each clomp of her heels keeps steady time on the cool tile hospital floor. Her new shoes. She couldn't resist bringing them to work today. As a nurse, Patty is subjugated to comfy, soft-soled, white sneakers. Plain old sneakers. It was time for a change, hence the shoes. They were flamboyant and bold, unlike the bland, sterile surroundings and routine at work. In a way, her son reminded her of her shoes and she loved him for it. She could see his fingers gliding smoothly over the piano keys, striking each note with a divine tenderness and passion.

Patty walks across the parking structure, gets in her '93 Toyota Corolla and turns the key. Nothing. She curses and tries again. The old car gives a cough of protest but turns

over. As she makes her way home, Patty anticipates the concert that awaits her. She pictures his refined visage, topped with a lustrous mane of chestnut hair vehemently swaying along with the music. *I love my boy*. When she nears the house, she rolls down the windows as usual to try and catch a note or two that might chance to waft her way. She listens. No music. Patty pulls into the driveway, ears straining, then sits for a moment just waiting. Silence. Brows furrowed, she gets out of the car and trots up to the door, ignoring the pain in her feet from her new heels. As she fumbles for the key, the door flies open, revealing her husband, Mike, standing framed in the doorway. His strained expression gives way to one of fear as he centers his gaze upon her. Alarmed, Patty asks,

"What is it?"

"It's Joe. I don't know where he is or what's happened to him. He never came home from class this afternoon. I've called over and over again but no answer."

"What?" Her chest tightens with panic as the reality of what he is saying sinks in. Then she flings herself into Mike's arms, letting her tears run freely.

"There, there," he says softly. "It's all right. I'll try calling him again."

They go to the phone and dial. No response. Anxious, Patty grabs the receiver from Mike and begs Joe to call her back as soon as he gets the message.

It's getting so hard to protect him now that he's in college. Head swimming, she staggers into the living room and collapses onto the dusty sofa in a dead swoon.

She awakes with a start. Blinking, she looks around, willing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. A creak of a floorboard. Heart pounding, Patty edges off the couch and onto the floor. *It must be an intruder.* She clumsily crawls on her hands and knees over to her purse and reaches inside. She feels around until her hand closes on a syringe. A thin-lipped smile spreads across her face. Another creak, this time close to the stairs. Like a cat, Patty tiptoes across

the living room to the sound. A black mass appears before her. She lets out a war cry and plunges the needle into the intruder's neck. The dark figure whirls around and drowsily reaches for the attacker before falling to the floor with a terrible sound.

"Patty?" Lights flip on and Mike comes rushing down the stairs. "What in the world!"

Patty, adrenaline gone, looks up at her husband with a pale face. The syringe falls from her fingers and clatters on the floor.

"Joe! What did you do to him?" He looks down at the syringe next to his son's head. "And what's that?"

Patty, surprised at her own composure, calmly states, "It's for my work."

"You injected him with something.... I can't believe it." Mike starts, visibly shaking. "And look at his head! He's bleeding!"

"He probably hit it on the stairs when he fell," she explains. "I didn't know it was him."

Mike rushes up the stairs and asks over his shoulder, "What did you inject him with?"

Patty waves him off, saying, "It's just an anesthetic. He'll come around in a couple hours."

He gasps. "An anesthetic! What are you doing with that?"

"I always carry it in case I'm attacked. I thought Joe was a robber

or something.” Patty casts an anxious look at her husband. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to put on a shirt and drive my son to the emergency room.”

“You can’t do that. I’ll lose my job if they find out about the anesthesia.”

“Our son’s dying!” He crests the stairs and turns around. “Don’t just stand there. Help stop his bleeding!”

Patty kneels down and casts a glance up the stairs. Mike is gone. If she is going to protect Joe, she has to protect herself. Determined, she gets up and runs to the kitchen. Pulling a knife out of the drawer, she quickly returns to Joe’s side.

When Mike descends the stairs, Patty says, “Help me pick up Joe.”

As he reaches down, she swiftly moves behind him and puts the knife against his neck.

“Whoa! We need to help Joe. What are you doing?” The man was clearly startled.

“I’m not losing my job. Go to bed.”

“No.”

She bends down and whispers, “Why don’t I help you?” The next moment the knife bites into his flesh and the man lies with his son, peacefully.

Patty beams at them. “You two are so cute together.” Her eyes cut to Joe’s pocket as his phone buzzes. She takes it out. *One New Message*

From Yana. Patty opens it: “Hey Joey, I loved our dinner tonight! You’re amazing.”

She scowls. “Joe never said anything about a girlfriend! Who is this Yana?” Patty steps over the bodies and goes up the stairs to the computer. Clicking onto Facebook, she looks through her son’s friends. Patty didn’t have a Facebook account, but she frequently checked Joe’s account to make sure he was not up to mischief. “Yana, where are you?” she mutters.

Yana’s cheerful countenance finally appears on the screen. She has blonde hair and lightly tanned skin. Patty clicks on the About section of the page. Everything is blocked except for Yana’s “Interested In: Men” and “Religion: Atheist.” An idea pops into Patty’s head. She cackles and starts texting Yana, saying, “Aw, thanks! Hey I was wondering. Do you love me?” An immediate response comes in: “Of course! Don’t I say that all the time?” Patty responds, “Then come to my church this Saturday with me. It’s off of District Street. I’ll already be there because I’m volunteering, but come at 7:30 p.m. It’s really fun :).” Proud of her cunning, Patty sits back in the chair and snarls, “I’m coming for you, Yana.” The phone buzzes. Patty looks at the message: “K I’ll be there <3.”

Friday passes with nothing out

of the ordinary. Patty comes home from work with a surgical mask because the house smells terribly foul. She spends most of Saturday moving bodies. Joe is dragged up to his bed because he needs some rest and Mike is thrown into a freshly dug hole in the backyard. Patty goes to the nursery and buys a rafflesia that she plants on top of Mike. She knows the decaying flesh odor emitted from the rafflesia would halt any investigation.

Patty checks the time: 7 p.m. She grins and exclaims, "Time to have some fun!" Before leaving she checks on Joe to see if he needs another dose. Still sleeping. *I love my boy.* Next, she goes into the garage and opens the door of Joe's new Dodge Charger. As she drives to church, she reflects on the past few days. Something snapped, but it was a good snap. Patty now feels more empowered than ever before and she likes it. Before they were all just thoughts, thoughts and plots that never came to fruition. But now, with Joe in danger of a relationship, it was clearly time to act. *I have to.*

She rolls into the parking lot at 7:15 p.m. It is reasonably packed, but not a person is in sight. Patty sighs with relief. The church service

started at 7 p.m., but she purposely told Yana 7:30 p.m. to make sure no witnesses would be present.

She waits. Finally, a fairly new Honda Civic drives into the parking lot. Yana. Patty can see the blonde girl as the car pulls into a space at the far end of the lot. Patty turns the ignition and her son's Charger roars to life. She watches Yana get out and begin her walk to the church building. As Yana is crossing between the last row of cars and the entrance, Patty floors the car and slams into the pretty thing. Patty looks in the rear view mirror and sees a twist of bloodied limbs that bears no resemblance to the girl.

Patty howls with laughter and starts driving home. Noticing Joe's iPod still plugged into the car, she presses Play. She hears Mozart's Commendatore Scene from the opera *Don Giovanni*. The powerful theme jolts Patty and makes her shake. She rips into the driveway and flies out of the car, eager to get away from the chilling music.

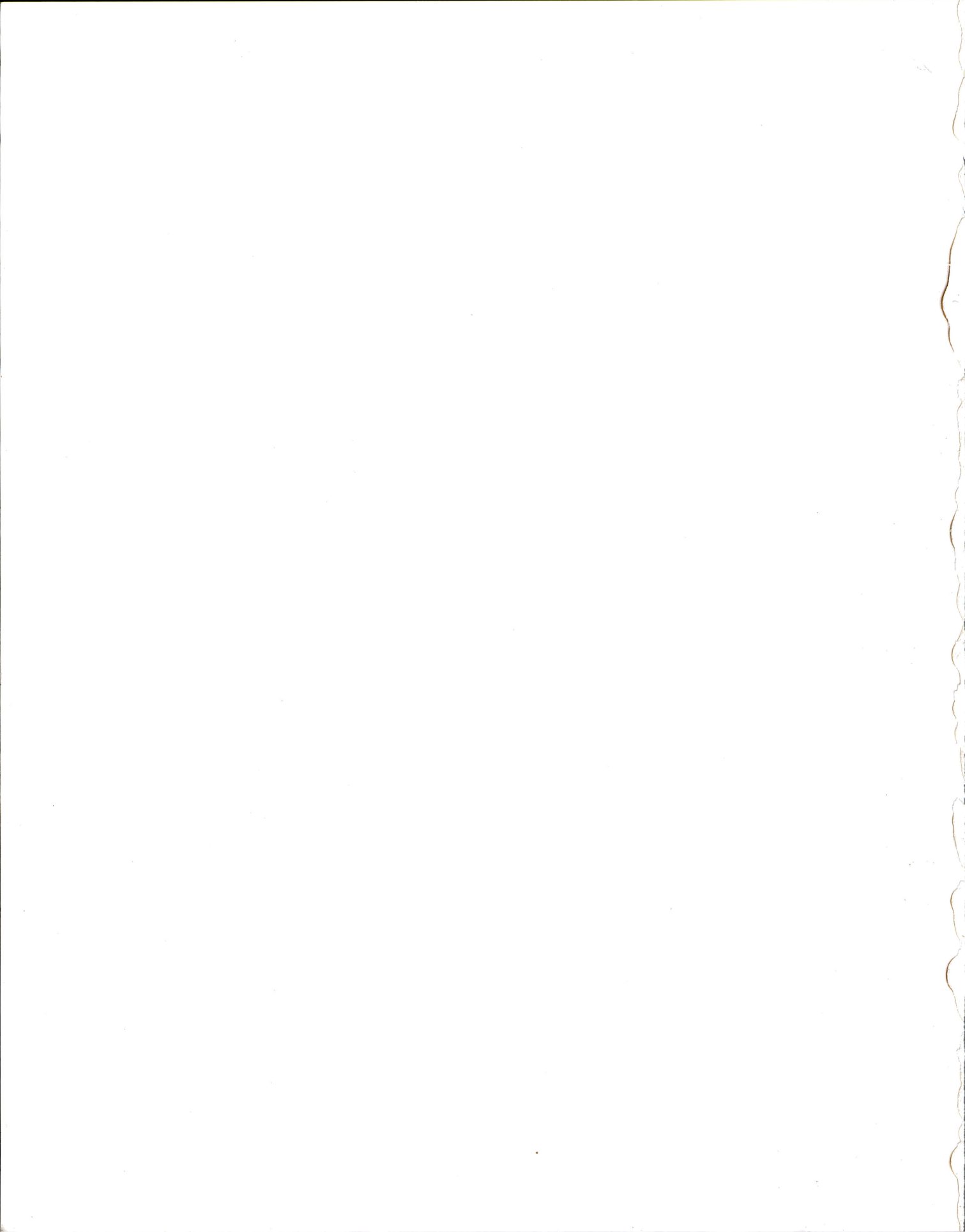
Patty ascends the stairs and enters Joe's room. Blood is still seeping from his head wound and he seems so peaceful. She stands over his still frame and whispers, "You're safe now, my darling Joe. Sweet dreams."

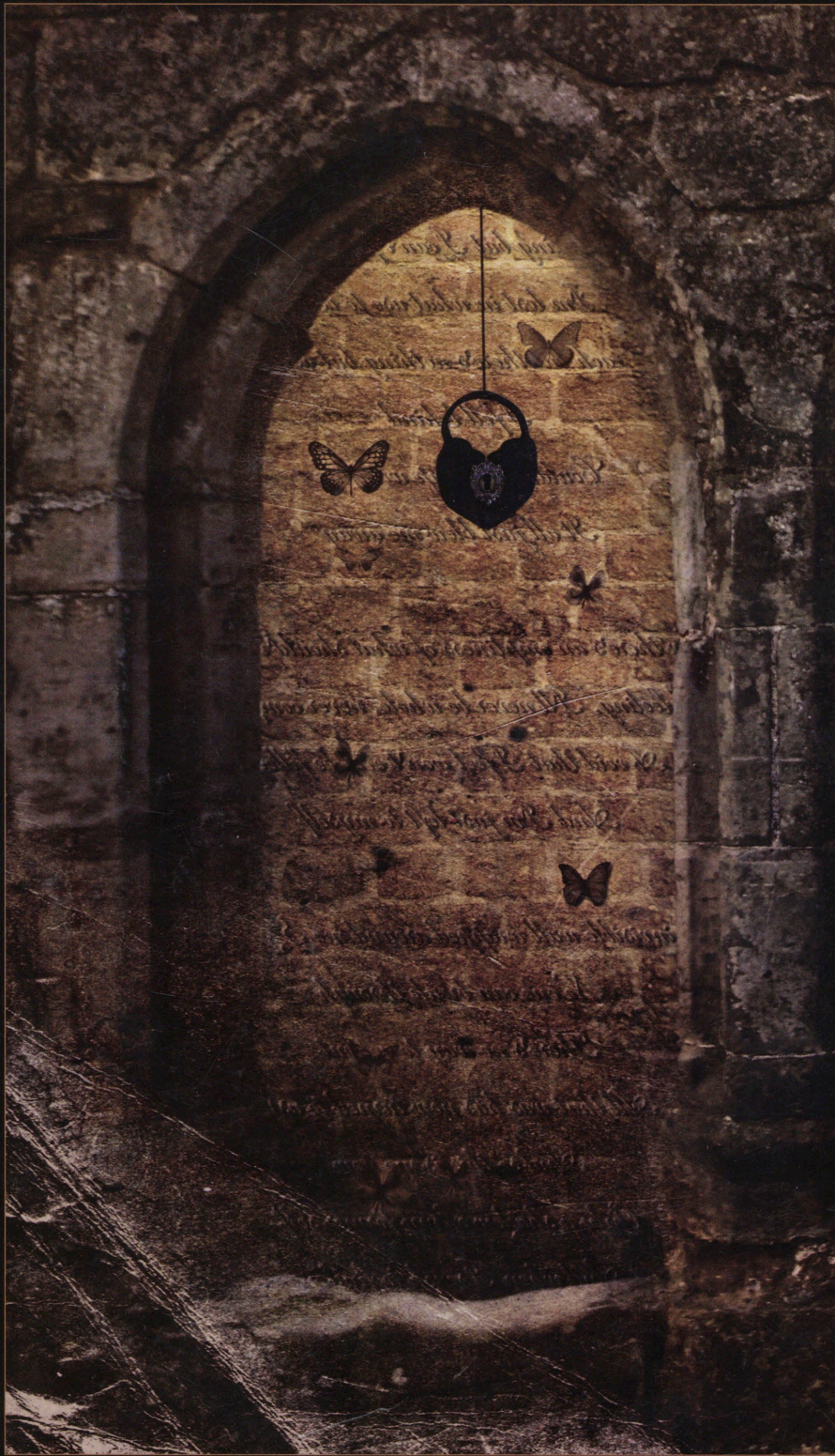
Man and Fly

Fiction • Leilani Harrison

Across from me a man sits, drinking his tea peacefully. Every day at this hour he sits at the window and slowly sips. He peers through a glass barrier at a world beyond his reach. Two cubes of sugar drown in his cup. His eyes droop; the lust for life is gone. The spoon dances twice around the perimeter of the cup, then rests. His eyes spark at the first glance of a fly: a simple but rather obtrusive fly. The fly flirts with the man's nose for a moment. The man is surprised now to find the fly in his cup of tea, squirming with every last fiber. The man tilts his head to study the scene closely. With every passing second the man feels more and more uncomfortable, as if his skin is suffocating him. Respiration becomes a

hard practice. He feels a sensation of boiling water being splashed on his lungs. His eyes fixate on the fighting fly. Paralysis takes over. He is screaming for life, but no one can hear. His wings are trying to escape from hell. One last ecstasy of movement then.... The man's blood stops and he is suddenly in the small white cup and the fly is studying him. Both their muscles relax and a teardrop escapes from the man. The fly tilts his head, then gets up and leaves the café. The man in the tea closes his eyes and finds nothing, not even the leftovers of what his soul once was. He opens his eyes very slowly and timidly. Our eyes meet and in the darkness of his eyes I see regret. He is wounded and stranded, floating in his tea.





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