


wall

A Literary Journal

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All communication should be directed to:
Saddleback College
c/o Liberal Arts Division
28000 Marguerite Pkwy
Mission Viejo, CA 92692
(949) 582-4500

<http://www.saddleback.edu>

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Volume X

Spring 2010

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Cover Art by Varsha Patel

"Huntington Beach Pier"

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

Introduction

Marshall McLuhan once wrote: “I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it.” Literary journals such as *Wall* are such a DEW line—always trying to present what is next in art, both literary and visual. As important as it is to pay homage to the past, it is imperative that we single out new styles of writing and art as showing us what is to come. Though no one can say how art will progress in the years ahead, this is a sample of where it is now. Each piece tells a story of how we interpret the world, whether it is through memories of previous generations as in the story “Dutch’s Zero,” or through art collages such as “Born on the FM Airwaves.”

In selecting stories for this edition, we wanted to represent a diverse range of stories, experiences, and styles. Though we did include stories, poems, and art that represented Southern California, there are also those that lead us through different cultures and countries. Poems such as “Hai Yang” reveal the emotions stirred up by the Chinese sea, while “The World’s Changed” explores race relations here in our own country. In the personal essays, “Turning Around” and “Just Legal”, light is shed on situations that were once sometimes hidden from society.

Of course, the thirteen of us could not do it on our own, and a great deal is owed to Professor Suki Fisher, who gave us the help and guidance to create a *Wall* that we can be proud of. A note of gratitude is also owed to the English and art professors at Saddleback who have promoted *Wall* and encouraged their students to submit their work.

Erik Adams
Editor in Chief

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Acknowledgements

“Once upon a time in the wilderness of the slush pile, there were many lone voices crying out to be heard. And some were.”

-- Howard Junker

As the editor of *Zyzzyyva* magazine, Howard Junker only publishes West Coast writers who have never appeared in print before. Like *Zyzzyyva*, *Wall* is at the mercy of the slush pile. Thus I commend the brave authors, poets, and artists who submitted and congratulate the few, but deserving voices that will be heard. To those whose work was unpublished, I have one piece of advice: never stop trying. The lifeblood of a student-published literary magazine is the contributions from the student body, whose work and creativity (along with the staff submissions) comprise the merit of the entire magazine.

The *Wall* staff expresses deep gratitude and wishes to acknowledge the Board of Trustees whose continued support enables the publication of this magazine and, by extension, many first-in-print writers and artists. The Board of Trustees includes: President David Lang, Vice-President Nancy M. Padberg, Thomas A. Fuentes, William O. Jay, Marcia Milchiker, Donald P. Wagner, and John S. Williams. We would also like to thank the Student Trustee Bi'Anca Bailey, Chancellor Dr. Raghu P. Mathur, and the college President, Tod A. Burnett.

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Bobby Fujimoto
Fiction Editor

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

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THE DAM BURST

by Jonathan Martin

Change is hard. Everything changes, but a lot of our lives are spent clinging to things as they were, refusing to acknowledge that yesterday is gone and tomorrow is a frightening place. Sometimes, change is like a crashing wave, quick and violent: it pulls you under and leaves you clawing for the surface, for sanity, but you aren't sure which way that is. Other times, it's like the trickle of a stream that carves a path through solid stone. Nobody can tell just when it happens, but the clefts and valleys of who we are become shaped by that same constant wearing away of time and elements. For me, change was like a burst dam. I was invited on an expedition to a Karen refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. It was there that the last drop fell, too much for the dam to hold. Every excuse I used to build that wall against the sea of doubt in my heart crumbled, and I was swept away. My experience with the Karen people left me confused, hurting, and cut from the moors of my deepest beliefs, but I would never trade a second of it.

It took place during my second trip to Thailand. I was a missionary, or so I claimed, but I realize now that I went to Thailand to find my own salvation rather than spreading it to others. My faith in Christ had come at a difficult time in my life when my meth-dealer sat me down and told me about Jesus. This occurred days before I would have reached rock bottom: stranded on the streets and contemplating suicide. My heart had almost burst as I wept with joy and repentance before the Lord for my life of darkness. My life had a purpose! I was the happiest I had ever been. But though I had faith, I struggled with demons and a skeptic's mind. Looking back, I can see that so many times as I shared the Gospel in Thailand I was having a verbal argument with my own doubts more than anything else. But my faith was my purpose for living. It had become what defined me as a person. The pressure built.

That day the air sweltered with a sticky tropical heat, frying chili peppers at the restaurant next door tickled the nose, and a small herd of cows wandered through the street unfazed by the honking scooters that zipped around them. Pastor Joe, our head pastor from the States, was visiting me and Peter, my fellow missionary, in Udon Thani, a

ESSBA

large city in North Eastern Thailand. Pastor Joe was the type of man who never stopped, and it was after two days without a moment to myself that Pastor Joe decided to invite me to go with him to the refugee camp. I was given only a few hours to pack my things before I took an overnight bus ride to Chiang Mai (Pastor Joe took a flight) where I would meet up again with the pastor, then take another bus ride through the mountains to the Thai-Burma border, where we would meet up with a Karen general before sneaking into a refugee camp in a war zone. Pastor Joe, a tall Italian with a huge belly, bald head, wide shoulders, and New York accent, rarely stopped to consider little matters like the comfort and convenience of others. It wasn't that he didn't care—the burly man was gentle and kind-hearted—but he was on a mission: to bring relief to the Karen people in any way possible, and to raise global awareness of their struggle.

I had been told many stories about the Karen people from Pastor Joe's first-hand perspective. They are one of the many tribal people of Myanmar, formerly Burma, a fragmented and developing country that is currently governed by a military regime composed of the largest ethnic group in Myanmar, the Burmese. The Karen people live mostly in the mountains and survive off the land, planting their own crops and raising their own livestock. There are no cars, electricity, running water, or even roads to drive on should you actually have a car. They are a people that have been forced into a war, fighting for their very right to exist. The Burmese military has been practicing genocide on the Karen people for the last fifty years. Atrocities continue to this day, but go unnoticed at large, and the Burmese military continues to escalate its assault. I was going to be taken to one of the largest refugee camps within Myanmar, a place where people flee after villages are burned, husbands are killed, and wives are raped. To Pastor Joe, I was another pair of eyes with a voice that could carry the message beyond the borders of Myanmar. To me, it was another chance to see God perform a miracle; asking God to show me His hand at work in a tangible way was one of my nightly rituals. As it was, I only managed a few hours' sleep each night.

There was a fire burning in the forest somewhere, and a smoky haze stung my eyes as our small boat cruised slowly up the river. It was the hot season, and the tall jungle-covered hills and cliffs lining the banks were browning. I couldn't see anything, but Domo, a Karen friend of Pastor Joe, would occasionally point to where a Burmese watch-post was supposed to be. This would not have been very reassuring to anybody who was smuggling supplies illegally into a war zone, but I was told not to worry because

the watchmen knew us and were frequently bribed. Absorbed in my own thoughts, I spent little time listening to the pastor's plans, except for those that involved his meetings with Sylvester Stallone and the production of *Rambo IV*.

After two hours, I saw the sandy beach with bamboo buildings strewn along the shore and the little dock where we finally landed. I grabbed our packs and Pastor Joe's camera gear, and clambered awkwardly out of the boat to set foot for the first time in a war zone. It seemed like it should feel different there, somehow more menacing as if the hate and evil of war should soak the very ground and air of the place, but it didn't.

When they saw the big pastor approaching, a small crowd formed at the dock crying "Joe! Joe!" as they jostled for a turn to shake his hand, their faces bright with excitement and smiles. Since little of the attention was directed toward me, I trudged up the beach. I wrapped a damp cloth around my head and neck to keep off the broiling midday heat that seemed all the more oppressive when combined with the thick smoke, and followed the group that buzzed around Pastor Joe back into the hills where the refugee camp sprawled haphazardly across a valley and up onto the surrounding hills. I stood and absorbed the place, taking in the small bamboo huts built on teak wood stilts, their roofs covered with cured teak leaves, and the gardens filled with vegetables both common and foreign. Short dark men effortlessly carried the trunks of young teak trees on their shoulders by twos as they built homes for incoming refugees; women, burdened with water urns or infants, busied themselves while children scurried around at play or else hid behind their mothers' skirts and watched our group enter the camp. It was beautiful, but I made myself remember that every one of these people, all 3000 or more, were only here because their homes had been destroyed and they were forced to flee for their lives.

We passed by the school and hospital our ministry was funding, and made our way to a hut a bit larger than the ones around it, where apparently a horde of women had been scrambling to put together the finest meal they could manage at short notice. I'm sure it was a feast by their standards, and it was fun to watch the Karen people use their hands to eat rice and pull pieces of meat and vegetables out of the communal bowls. Most Americans would be horrified by such a haphazard swapping of bacteria, but I had long gotten over it. I ate my fill, but the MSG-loaded food wasn't very good compared to the food that I had eaten in Thailand. As we ate, the general and Pastor Joe were making plans while our faithful Karen friend, Domo, translated back and forth. While the ladies

continued dotting on us, and the men continued making their plans, I sat back and began to pray as a troubling heaviness began to set on my heart. I had seen nothing among these people that would have told me they were refugees. Were they that strong, resilient, and steadfast in their faith, or had war and death become so ingrained in them that it was no longer a tragedy but a fact of life?

When we finished eating, it was already dusk and would soon be dark. By the time we were given a spot in a large hut to spend the night, all that could be seen were little flickers of light dotting the hillsides. I was exhausted, but I stayed up a long time that night praying and thinking. I was struggling to find the answer to why God allowed suffering. Why did it so arbitrarily befall the innocent and the wicked? No answers came that night, and like every other night, I pleaded with God to let me see one thing that could not be explained except by divine intervention. All I wanted was one miracle, just one! I had become a missionary because I thought the mission field would be the place I would see the miraculous happen, but after three years still nothing. That night doubt filled my heart.

We awoke to roosters crowing in the cool and dark of the morning, the camp still shrouded by smoke. I wasn't in the mood, but Pastor Joe had planned a big morning Bible study, so I put on my pious face and smiled and prayed and sang with the rest of them (after all, missionaries have to be perfect). Afterwards, we sat down to a morning meal of rice porridge served by a young man, who introduced himself as Danny. He was a couple of years my junior, and he even spoke enough Thai and English for us to have a conversation. After washing dishes, we decided to walk to the beach to buy some coffee from one of the shoreline shops. We laughed together and swapped stories of our homes; he tried to teach me to speak Karen and I helped him with English. It was decided that he would stay with me that day to help translate and be my guide. We were going to record interviews with the people of the camp to use in a documentary later.

The interviews were heartbreaking. Bamboo floors creaked, flies buzzed around the room, and everybody sat fanning themselves with whatever lay close at hand as we listened to story after story of tragedy. Nobody went without crying that day, including me. How could you help but cry listening to a young man break down into sobs as he tells you about watching his pregnant wife killed by a stray bullet, taking his unborn child with her? Or a man who had gone out to work on a rice paddy, only to return to his village to see it burnt to the ground, the bodies of his friends and family strewn

throughout the wreckage, carcasses burnt beyond recognition? There were stories of escaping the soldiers only to have children die from fever and sickness as they walked on foot through the mountains to find the refugee camp. It was a litany of exhaustion, hunger, pain, murder, torture, and rape.

I had cried a lot, but I just felt numb by the time we were done. The only thing I can imagine worse than what the Karen people had gone through is the countless multitudes of people who have suffered just as much in life, but had an eternity of suffering to look forward to in hell as a reward for this “gift” we call life. How could God allow such pain to be possible?

The next spot we visited was the hospital. I think it was worse than the interviews. A long, single-room bamboo building on short stilts, the hospital had only hammocks, mats spread out on the floor, and one volunteer doctor with some donated supplies from the States. There were perhaps ten people being treated at that time and some family members in the building. We stopped at each mat, gave our condolences to the sick, and offered up prayers for mercy and comfort. Three patients stood out to me that day: their conditions were probably fatal. One man, slung in a hammock, covered with bloody bandages, and delirious from fever and pain, had been hit by the shrapnel from a landmine his brother stepped on. His brother was killed instantly and, I thought, was the luckier of the two. The next two were children with malaria, a boy and a girl. They were both encircled by family members, who wore wooden masks of stoic endurance, giving no indication that they were waiting for the last rattling breaths of their own children. In the United States, none of these three would have died. As I knelt before them, I prayed to God that they wouldn't have to die, that He would spare at least the children, whose families had already lost so much. I prayed for a miracle. I prayed that divine power would fall upon that place with such glory that no one who beheld it could ever turn back and say, “there is no God.” Wasn't healing the lost and broken within the providence of God? I begged Him harder for this than I ever had for anything. I had cried more that day than any other day I could remember, and when I began to cry again, Pastor Joe told me to go for a walk. I could see tears in his eyes, too.

Danny went with me on that walk. The sun was still high and the heat too great to do anything but sit in the shade of one of the huts. I gave out candy and played with some of the children. We talked as best we could before we were given some food, and I was starting to feel better as I tried awkwardly to emulate the way Danny ate the rice with

his fingers, but I ended up making a big mess of myself. Danny, and the group of people that had come to watch the big white guy try to eat like them, thought it was hilarious. As the sun lowered and the heat was no longer unbearable, people began emerging from their huts. Women talked as they cooked and cleaned, and the men and children took out soccer balls and started to play in a wide field on one side of the valley. A sense of normalcy had just started to return to the day when Pastor Joe came walking up to us with his usual entourage of smiling Karen admirers. "I know this is going to be difficult, but one of the boys with malaria in the hospital just passed away," Pastor Joe told me before leaving to prepare the message he would give at the child's memorial.

Needing to get cleaned up myself, I trudged back to the little hut that was our restroom while my mind raced, struggling with grief over the death of a little boy I had just left. Why couldn't God have healed him? Didn't He care about the suffering of these people that believed in Him? I had prayed, and prayed, and prayed every night asking for a miracle for years. Nothing! I had asked for the life of one child and what did I get? He died an hour after I left! God wasn't there, or He just didn't care. I had given up years of my life to do what His word commanded; I taught and shared about Jesus when I could have been going to school, but almighty God who formed the heavens with a word couldn't do one simple thing, not even once, to prove that He was there. At that moment I decided I would no longer follow God, and that if He wanted me to believe in Him, then it was up to Him to prove Himself to me.

The dam, which held back my years of doubt, had burst.

I seethed inside with hurt and anger, and I wasn't ready to talk to anybody. The whole purpose of my life had just been taken from me. I took a walk down to the river to be alone and sat on the bank, my thoughts racing as I took little leaves from a bush next to me, tearing each one into little pieces before tossing the shreds into the water. "I have accomplished practically nothing of measurable value. I have no friends. I don't own anything. I have no useful skills. I'm not pretty. I have nothing to return to. What does a missionary who has spent the last three years of his life in a foreign country do when he no longer believes in the mission?" These were my thoughts as I sat beside gently lapping waters that glittered with the setting sun, and cried for a life that was drifting away as surely as the little leaves caught and spun around in the eddies and currents of the river.

I was poised, once again, at the brink of a dark precipice before the gaping abyss of a world without God. A gifted and troubled child, I had concluded that only God could

justify enduring a life of misery that would one day end in a twinkling and be forever swallowed by that great void. But there was no God for me, only oblivion. Six billion souls, along with the countless stars of heaven, were only a fleeting spark of light amidst that darkness. A rush of panic welled up from my gut threatening to choke me, but then peace: I could live my own life now. I was free from the suffocating laws of religion that trapped me in a misery of guilt. I would walk my own path, now, down the middle-road of agnosticism. Avoiding other people in my path, I made my way back to the long hut where we would soon offer up prayers for the departed soul of the young boy. I sat silent through the candlelit service and contemplated what it all meant: suffering, life, death, God.

I couldn't come up with any answers, and I still haven't to this day.

THE WORLD'S CHANGED

“He walks through the door
Smiling in his new paisley shirt...”

The room ends their conversations in unison
With eyes staring from every angle.

Sweat streams down his emotionless face
As he takes a deep breath,
And gets a chill
From the sense of unwelcome.

“...The store clerk lifts the sign
Whites Only...”

His heart races softer than a whisper
Alarmed
Panicked and unsteady.

“...He stands alone
And stares down the shotgun barrel.”

The world changes like the seasons
Without warning
as humans' nature adapts.

Springing forth a new voice:
“I Have a Dream”
Blooming in beauty bestowed with
New growth

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Towards the pursuit of happiness

As the soiled become fruitful
A rose stems from a seed
The world stands as one
Unique by difference

And develops into what seems like summer's perfection
Like nature at its peak,

But the heat waves bring high humidity
The richest grass turns peridot
Life dries out
And begins to fall.

Clouds touch the ground;
Leaves descend softer than a whisper,
Segregating amongst themselves
Green from red.

Tears stream down the faceless sky
Slowly shivering
As the droplets turn to sleet.

The streets flood with snow
And the trees wither
From the chiseling breeze
Of the cold, heartless winter.

We are all "equal";
The world's changed.

-- *Gary Guymon*

THE CHAGRIN OF A WHIM

by *Fleurette Chong*

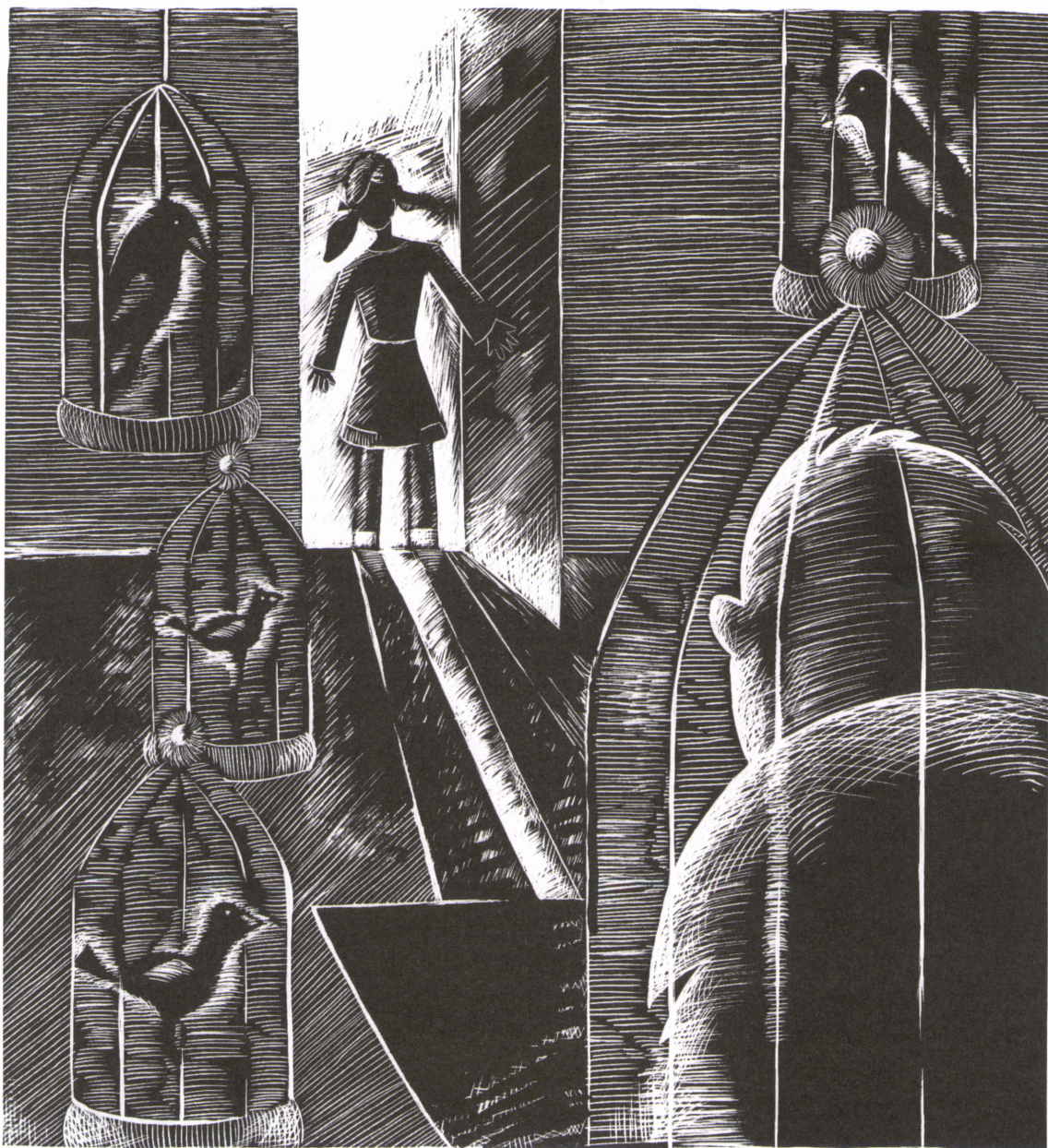
When Leslie Thompson saw the gigantic wooden caterpillar ahead of her, she knew she had successfully escaped the confines of her mother's house. The overprotective rules and sometimes paranoid precautions had been suffocating her since the beginning of her summer stay. Even though she wasn't too far away from her father's home in Jackson, Leslie felt as if her mother lived in a completely different world. Only the oppressive humid weather reminded her that she was still in Mississippi. It was when things became too much that Leslie decided to escape.

Once, her mother had taken a wrong turn on the way to Wal-Mart. A detour into an unfamiliar neighborhood revealed an abandoned playground. Even though her forehead was covered in a sheen of perspiration and although the back of her pink, floral-print summer dress was soaked, Leslie felt a chilling sensation upon finally finding herself alone. She sat on the back of the wooden caterpillar and surveyed her surroundings.

There was a wooden train that had four empty box cars attached to it. A see-saw sat between two wooden zebras ready to be ridden. There was also a set of swings, but the seats had fallen off because of the rusted metal chains. A sparse forest surrounded the playground. The green and brown backdrop somehow made Leslie feel safe.

Feeling the midday sun on the back of her exposed neck, Leslie curled up inside of a boxcar, seeking shade, and promptly fell asleep. Running away was hard for the nine year old girl and the symphony played out by the multitudes of insects about her lulled her to sleep.

The unbearable heat eventually woke Leslie from her nap. She hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast, but her parched lips demanded moisture before she could even think about food. She considered her options as she examined a group of love bugs that had infiltrated her boxcar. Some were attached at the rear, and some were alone. Leslie thought about going home, and a heated frustration welled up inside of her, threatening to spill out from her tear ducts. She began to pull apart the black and red insects that were



physically attached to one another.

“Stupid bugs,” she muttered. “It’s not fair. I’m all alone.”

When she had her third pair of love bugs in hand, she heard the sound of a whistle in the far-off distance. Then a dog barked. She suddenly remembered Dixie, her golden retriever, back home at her father’s house and put the love bugs down guiltily. Trying to repent, she started to pair the lone red and black bugs that had yet to find a mate. Leslie found that it didn’t quite work the way she wanted it to; they died before finding their other halves.

Chagrined by her dealings with the love bugs that had so faithfully kept her company in the boxcar, Leslie stepped out of the playground and set off into the woods. She knew that many houses in that part of town had vast expanses of backyard. She hoped that, if she kept on walking, she would eventually find herself in one of those owned pieces of land.

After singing three rounds of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” to herself, Leslie found an old house in a clearing. With a quiet whoop of joy, she ran toward the front porch. She knocked on the door while calling out, “Hello? Could I please have a glass of water?”

Her sweat felt like it had congealed and, upon feeling the cool air coming from one of the open windows, Leslie suddenly felt very sticky and gross. Eager to have some water, she tried the door. It clicked open effortlessly and Leslie stepped inside.

“Hello?” she called out again. “Anyone home?”

A soft shuffling noise drew Leslie to the living room, where she met a wondrous sight. Doves, pigeons, even large black crows, all in great metal cages filled the whole living room. Most were asleep with their small heads tucked under a wing. But what made Leslie scream was not a bird. It was a thing. An ugly creature in one of the cages, as big as a dog, stared at Leslie with beady eyes.

Leslie ran outside and hid behind a tree a good ninety yards from the house. Leslie felt her heart beating in her throat. Even though she closed her eyes tight, she still felt the gaze of the caged creature.

What drew Leslie back into the house was not her thirst. Her dry mouth had been forgotten a while ago. What drew Leslie Thompson back was the clear, ringing voice that sounded from the house. The voice was human, she was sure of that. But the melody was that of a beautiful song bird.

Leslie inched closer and closer until she found herself at the doorway once more.

She peeked in to see the creature singing the very song she heard outside. Silently, Leslie scrutinized the creature; it was dark brown with dirt and grime. There was a great black mass of matted hair on the top of its head, covering most of its face. It sat like a chicken, except a chicken, Leslie was pretty sure, had no hands or feet like this creature did. What was curious to Leslie was that its hands sat slack and unused at the creature's hips. Its nails were like claws, long and yellowed as well as thick and sharp. And when the creature was done with its song, a long and agile tongue came out of its mouth to lap up some water sitting in a bowl at the edge of its cage.

At the creature's movement, Leslie immediately regained her thirst. She rushed into the kitchen at the other end of the living room, causing the birds to squawk and crow at her sudden movements. She positioned her mouth underneath the faucet and turned on the cold tap. Leslie felt the moisture run from her teeth to her tongue, from the roof of her mouth to her scratchy throat. Only once she felt her stomach bulge from the water did she stop the tap.

Now at leisure, with her belly filled with water, Leslie stepped into the living room once again. The birds regarded her carefully with small black eyes. While all the birds were pecking at their feed, Leslie noticed a plate of dried beef at the bottom of the creature's cage. She watched hungrily as the creature tore at its meal. By the time the creature was done, Leslie was more fascinated than hungry. She had noticed something.

"You're a boy, aren't you?" she asked carefully and quietly. "Why are you in there?"

The boy sat still. His eyes were trained on Leslie's but he made no sound. Miffed at the boy's silence, Leslie grasped at the bars of the cage and shook them lightly.

"Can't you hear me?" she asked loudly.

When the boy turned his back to her and scrunched himself up at the back of his cage, Leslie kicked the metal bars. When she did, the door to the cage clattered open, and Leslie discovered something odd. It was just a normal bird cage. There was no padlock and no key required to twist open the latch.

"Why don't you just come out?"

The boy flapped his arms with his hands remaining limp at his sides. He opened his mouth and let out a noisy squawk that sounded halfway between a human and a bird. Shuddering, Leslie left the house and ran back toward the wooden caterpillar.

When she arrived at the familiar playground, her mother was there with two

policemen.

“Oh, Leslie! Leslie!” Her mother cried out when the girl burst out from the woods. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

Her mother’s streaked face and messy hair told of her turmoil during Leslie’s disappearance and, suddenly, Leslie was ashamed. The two policemen drove them back in their black and white car. While in the backseat with her mother, Leslie wondered about the boy.

“I’m sorry, baby,” her mother whispered. “I was only trying to protect you. You know that, right?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“I love you so much. You know that, right?”

“Yes, Ma. I love you, too.”

A week later, Leslie’s mother returned home with a small cage. It contained a blue parakeet.

“It’s for you, baby,” her mother cooed. “I know you have Dixie at your father’s, but I thought you might be lonely over here.”

Leslie clapped her hands gleefully and took the cage to her new play space in the garage.

“What’s your name?” she asked the bird.

It regarded her silently with black beady eyes. When Leslie prodded at the cage with her fingers, the bird flapped its colorful wings and let out a tiny squawk. At once, Leslie lost the joy she had felt at acquiring a new friend.

The garage door creaked as Leslie opened it and stepped out.

“Leslie?” Her mother called in a worried voice. “Where are you going?”

“Just outside in the backyard, to play with the bird.”

“Okay. Be careful, baby,” her mother reminded her. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Ma.”

She walked carefully, holding the cage out an arm’s length from her body so that the cage wouldn’t jostle. Leslie stopped in the center of her mother’s backyard. She set the cage down and peered in between the bars.

“I love you, too,” she whispered to the parakeet. “And that’s why I’ll let you go.”

But when the cage door opened, the parakeet sat unmoved. When at last it hopped toward the exit, the bird poked its head out once, then twice before flying back into the cage. Confused, Leslie lowered her head so that she was eye level with the bird.

“Maybe. . .” She thought aloud. “Maybe you love me, too.”

And with that, Leslie took the cage back up in her arms. On her way back to the house, the cage doors flapped loose to the rhythm of Leslie’s movements. Not once did the bird fly free.

AN ANGEL IN FLIGHT

by Suzan M. Wendzel

The frigid, blustering wind whipped my jacket as I hurried onto the tarmac. My cheeks stung in pain as a new arctic gust bit into my skin. Burying my ears into my black woolen scarf, I clutched a book under one arm, adjusted my grip on the overnight bag, and scuttled up the steps, willing the passengers on. *Why wouldn't these people move any faster?* I angrily thought to myself as I leaned into the man ahead of me. The black storm clouds above me matched my mood. Why did I think this trip to Las Vegas would lift my spirits? Sin City of all places! I did not even like the place. I must be desperate.

My dark thoughts turned bitter when the flight attendant directed me to my seat in the last row of the plane. How miserable – yet how fitting! Right next to the john. Undoubtedly, we were also in for severe turbulence. I irritably tore off my now too-hot coat, stuffed it into the overhead bin above, and slammed my body into the aisle seat. At least the middle seat appeared to be unoccupied. Maybe I could spread out a bit and get some reading done. I opened my copy of *When One Door Closes*, which was a gift from a friend. My job was ending in a few months and I was worried, obviously depressed, and in a state of angst.

As a Strategic Analyst for the new business development group of the Fortune-500 automotive firm Calsonic International, my position was often difficult but well-paid. The automotive world was harsh and antiquated, led by traditional white American males and, recently, by even more traditional Japanese males. Room for employee growth was slim. For a female, it was considered impossible. Indeed, working my way up to this specialist position in the corporate headquarters was unprecedented in the six years during my employment. Over the years, my efforts culminated in ever-increasing responsibilities—not all of them enjoyable.

Since Calsonic was closing its Irvine office to relocate to Detroit, my position would end soon. Like lemmings, employees stumbled over each other to evacuate the company prior to shutdown, and good fortune suddenly spilled into my lap. Just two months earlier, I was handed the plum assignment of building a new headquarters in

Detroit, Michigan: a \$9 million dollar project. My boss, who knew of my education in interior design, assigned me to the task with some trepidation. “No woman had been assigned to such a high level position before,” he warned. I would undoubtedly encounter resentment from the men. Ignoring his concern, I grabbed the brass ring with gusto. It had been years since I had practiced my profession because the 1990 recession had all but killed the design industry in California.

I peered out the window. Dark clouds obliterated the small ray of light outside the 737. I shuddered, running my attention away from the blustering darkness. In 1991, I had forced myself to take this “temporary” job at Calsonic to pay my mortgage. Once the recession ended, I planned to return to the design world. But the years and the recession wore on. Marketing, new business development, strategic analysis—although interesting, these disciplines were not my passion. I tried to make the work fulfilling, but found little joy in marketing truck hoses when my love was art. My career was mired in boredom. With the ennui, my soul slowly died. A drone, my zeal for life soon disappeared.

However, this brief foray back into the world of design had rekindled my frozen spirit. Could I make it again in interior design? *Could I earn a living in this risky profession?* I sighed to myself; I had to make a choice and soon. I tried to concentrate on the book, a guide to life decisions.

The jet engine roared. The plane fought against the headwinds as it tore from the ground, severing itself from mother earth. Battling strains of gravity, we rocked into the ominous storm clouds above, pitching and yawning with ceaseless abandon.

Overnight, things had changed for me. The headquarters project catapulted me from a quiet, efficient office girl who had fought to be heard, into a vivid, confident leader of a multi-national, interdisciplinary project. I worked day and night, educating and cajoling Calsonic’s cantankerous executives, developing and leading factious internal teams, drawing schematics and designs, and allying and collaborated with the new architects. I thrived. I was in love with life again. My boss noticed the difference immediately, as did others, and my career and status grew within the company. With unclipped wings, I soared with glee over my new world.

When a thunderclap shivered the plane, I slouched further down in my seat, growing queasy with the buffeting movements. In a few months, all this would end. The new headquarters building would be my swan song to Calsonic, my final tribute to this company that had taught me so much about politics and chauvinism. Ironically, I found

my own people once more. After six years in automotive marketing, I landed back in my rightful world: art and design.

With knowledge comes dilemma. Having tasted the sweet fruit of design once again, how could I continue on in a career in marketing? Yet, wouldn't that be the prudent thing to do? As a designer, one's success is perilous, fraught with ups and downs. Having experienced the starving artist routine, I was now spoiled by the steady paycheck that a marketing position brings. What should I do? Continue on in marketing for the money? Or face potential bankruptcy in the career that I loved? Everyone I asked counseled me, each contradicting the other. I was more confused than ever. My despair deepened.

I strained for illumination in the darkening cabin. Attempting to read, I flipped half-heartedly among the pages. Disparate, desperate thoughts screamed for my attention while I skimmed a sentence and the plane pitched precariously to the right. The wings slammed violently up and down as the fuselage creaked and groaned under the strain of the storm. *So the roller coaster ride begins*, I thought. Maybe the plane would go down. Maybe we would all hurl into the ground below. Maybe I would die. Then I wouldn't have to make this impossible decision. The hard years. The good years. The dead years. Passion or practicality? And then that feeling again, immersing myself in the pure, warm euphoria of my design work. Is anything so bitter than losing re-found hope? Giving up on reading, I closed the book and looked around me. The middle seat had remained empty after all. Next to the window was a small wiry man of indeterminate race, wearing black dreadlocks, an earring and a hat. The coated man hunched over a notebook. Looking out at the blackening skies, I inadvertently caught his gaze.

"Going to Vegas on business or pleasure?" I heard myself asking as he looked at me. He introduced himself as Darrell Eubanks.

"I am going home to my family. I make this trip every Friday night from working in Orange County," he said with a kind smile.

"Oh?" I continued, "What is it you do in Orange County?"

"I am an architect," he answered quietly.

My heart stopped. Heat rushed to my face. I could feel my heartbeat in the palms of my hands as I stared in awe. An architect! To interior designers, architects are gods. It was a love-hate relationship; these brilliant professionals can make or break a concept. As an architectural major, I had taken many courses in the early 1980s to find this profession sorely underpaid and undervalued. When I later switched to interior design, my artistic

sensibility was realized, but I never lost my respect and admiration for this hardworking group. Architects had been even harder hit by the 90s recession. Many left their careers never to return.

As the plane rocked, I quizzed him on his background. He was originally from a ghetto in Los Angeles. A teacher had watched his interest in drawing from a young age and had mentored him, even finding him full scholarships.

“If it wasn’t for that instructor,” said Darrell, “I never would have gone to college.” Graduating the same year as I, Darrell launched his career in Las Vegas. It was there he met and married his wife, an interior designer, and married.

“And the recession?” I asked. “Were you able to continue working though the early 1990s?”

“No,” he said simply, “we lost everything.” Riveted, I drank in each word as he told me of losing his house just when his wife announced she was pregnant and of his mother-in-law demanding that he take a job, any job. *That is just what I did*, I thought. Out of desperation, I had stupidly grabbed the first job that came along. I had always felt that I had sold out, but I was being practical. How was it he had the integrity to stay his course?

“I am an architect,” he repeated. The plane ride smoothed perceptibly as we poured over his schematics of the Bellagio Hotel while he described his five years of unemployment. Perusing his working drawings for the new forum shops, he told me of his re-employment ... and his new house ... and new child. Today, top caliber architectural firms were fighting for him.

“I like your life,” I whispered.

“Me, too,” he laughed

The plane’s descent through the sapphire sky filled me with wonder. I had not stuck to my passion but chased the dollar. This separates us; a man of courage from a woman of desolation.

Landing at the airport, we strode through the terminal together, our eyes dilating in the suddenly clear, bright daylight. The day was warm and crisp. Tossing my jacket in my bag, I stammered a good-bye. “You are a designer,” he said, “an artist. Never lose that. It is your gift. Be willing to sacrifice all and you will succeed.”

I shook his hand, too overcome to speak. This simple man was my angel; every cell of me knew he spoke the truth. Slinging a backpack over his shoulder, he strode

blithely toward the sunlit concourse. I noticed that brilliant rays were streaming through the windows, illuminating the airport in a vivid dance of light. *This will be a fun trip after all*, I suddenly thought as I watched him walk away. He turned to raise a gangly arm as he waved good-bye, rounded a corner, and walked out of sight.

I never saw Darrell again. By the time I uncovered his telephone number, he had left his architectural firm for a new position. But in my mind on that warm, crystalline, sun-drenched day, Darrell Eubanks had rounded the last corner, turned into an angel, lifted his arms, and ascended to heaven.

CRATE & BARREL

by Angelica Barraza

The door burst open. The door slammed shut. Sometime in between, Richard Crate & Barrepacked his things and left.

I tried to move to stop you, to tell you something that would make you stay, but couldn't. I sat motionless in the living room, listening to the opening of drawers, the rattle of empty hangers. For a moment, the sound of your footsteps stopped at the doorway. I did not turn around to look, but I knew your eyes were sweeping the house, taking it all in one last time.

The pause meant more than your apology.

I traced the seams of the leather couch with my fingers, feeling nothing.

The blinds were half open. Between the vertical slats time continued; children skipped home from school with brightly colored lunch pails. Dad sifted through the mail while loosening his work tie. I longed for their world as the sun shifted, trapping me inside a prison cell of light and dark. I counted the days I loved you as I drifted off into sleep.

Rick paused in the threshold. He opened his mouth. Closed it. He gazed at the man on the couch and felt everything. His relationship with Charles came flooding back to him in faded sepia tones, for that's all his sanity would allow. Any more color to the memories and he would choke, or drown, or maybe even stay.

The palm of his left hand was clammy. It gripped the doorknob and slipped, just a little, just enough for him to lose composure. He regained it quickly, though, just in case—in case his lover of nearly ten years turned his head and gave him the full weight of his eyes. And he would meet Charles' gaze, his slight frame and suitcase reflected back to him in the prettiest shades of emerald green. He would stand still and let the man on the couch see through the mask; let him trace with his eyes the creases of his forehead, the laugh lines that were etched deep into his weathered skin. He would let him see just how

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deep his love for him was rooted, and that the blossom, so breathtaking, so painstakingly beautiful, was all he could have ever dreamed of. But he couldn't live his life asleep. Sooner or later, he had to wake up and go home to his wife.

But Charles never budged. No eyes were met. No masks were lifted. No volumes were spoken with a single, stolen look. So Rick kept on walking. The door slammed shut.

Tracy ran her delicate hand down the length of the receiver. She had toyed with the idea for years now, but had never had the guts to do it. Today, however, it was her son's seventh birthday. Today, she insisted, she's had enough.

The pads of her fingertips pushed in the numbers, one after the other, seven in all. The phone rang twice before Valerie answered.

"Richard Rhodes' office. How may I help you?" The perfect secretary voice, pleasant and upbeat.

"Hi Val. It's Tracy."

"Oh hi! So glad to hear you're feeling better. You had us all worried there for a second."

Tracy could smell the other woman's cherry lip gloss through the small holes in the receiver. "Rick told you about that? It was only a silly cold."

"Oh, no need to play it down. Pneumonia is so not a silly cold. We had to call in a paralegal from the downtown office to cover his files while he was with you in the hospital. It turned out to be quite the mess, but I'm sure you already know this. Did you get the flowers I sent?"

The last time Tracy had been in a hospital she was cradling a newborn baby in her arms, seven years ago to the day. She inhaled a giant air of breath. "Yes Valerie. I got the flowers. They were lovely. Thank you." She exhaled. The air pushed past her lips unsteady and broken. Enough, she reminded herself. She'd had enough. "Rick isn't still in the office, is he?"

"Well no, he took the day off for your son's birthday."

"And has he been working more late nights than usual?"

"I don't know what you mean by usual..."

"You know, more in the past six months than before. Before his partner retired."

There was a long silence.

"Parker hasn't retired." The secretary swallowed. "And the late nights..."

“There haven’t been any late nights, have there?”

“Tracy, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

The car rolled to an unwilling stop at Sixteen Hillside Terrace. A cobblestone walkway with palm trees led to a giant three-tiered house with double doors of glass.

Rick cut the engine and sighed.

He paused in the driver’s seat with his safety belt taut across his lap. Through the windows he could see his wife, Tracy, setting the table. Her hair was twisted in intricate curls, lips painted the perfect shade of crimson. She was pretty, he thought. But why was she not enough?

With reluctance, he opened the car door and stepped out into fading sunlight. That’s when their eyes met through the window. Tracy paused with a porcelain plate in her hand, Rick with a jingling keychain. Over his shoulder was a shopping bag with “thank you” stamped across the plastic in red. Inside was a poorly wrapped present for his son. He stared at his wife and she stared back. They stood frozen with eyes meeting through the glass. Tracy smiled. Rick did, too, and he made his way across the cobblestones toward his family.

At seven o’ clock dinner was served: Sloppy Joe’s and mashed potatoes, his son’s favorite, but his son wasn’t there. He had eaten earlier and had gone off to a friend’s house to play with his new toys. So it was just Rick and Tracy, sitting across from each other. They were two strangers gathered around a mahogany table from Crate&Barrel: husband and wife.

“So.” She pushed the meat across her plate with a fork. “How was work today?”

“Busy.” He didn’t skip a beat.

Tracy dabbed her mouth with a cloth napkin.

The clock on the wall ticking. Silver against porcelain. Scrapes. Faintly, the sound of chewing.

“Have you heard from Parker at all?”

Rick’s eyebrows rose. He refolded the napkin on his lap and cleared his throat.

“Just last week.”

“And...”

“...and what?”

“Well, how’s he doing? You should invite him and Donna over for dinner next

weekend. I haven't seen them in ages."

"They'll be out of town."

"What about the weekend after?" She pressed.

"I don't know."

"Well, you should ask. They must—"

"I thought you hated Donna."

"I never said—"

"Tracy, what is up with you?" Rick stood up from his chair. He threw his napkin onto his half-empty plate. "Anyone else you want to pester me about seeing? The Reynolds? Andersons? How about the darling couple that just moved in down the street? I'm sure they'd love to have dinner next weekend."

His wife lowered her eyes and went silent. Rick sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to say more, but didn't. Somewhere along the years, his marriage had shriveled into contrivances and meaningless apologies. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

"I know," she said. Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Know what? That I'm sorry?"

Tracy's foot started tapping the tiled floor. She looked at him, at her husband of almost twenty years, and shut her eyes tight. Her mouth opened and closed, without a sound escaping. He looked at her then, too, really looked at her. Her Atlantic-blue eyes were puffy, bags had started forming under her lower lids. Those crimson lips; when was the last time he'd kissed them? He had forgotten what they felt like pressed against his own.

"I know," she repeated. Her eyes were heavy when they opened, peering straight into his naked heart.

So this was the day, he thought; a Tuesday, his son's birthday. The very same day that he told Charles he couldn't. That he just couldn't anymore.

Rick and Tracy didn't move for a long time. They just stared speechless in the face of Truth, in the kitchen, with Sloppy Joe's on their plates. In the silence, he apologized for everything, for not being the man she needed him to be. And she forgave him. Part of him was so happy that he was finally caught, that it was over. He was exposed. He didn't have to lie anymore. So this was the day, he thought; this was the day.

He let out a breath he had been holding for nearly ten years and grabbed the keys to his car.

My eyes flickered awake. The sound of footsteps strewed themselves across the pavement. They clicked on the porch like your shoes did, the same soft patter of leather soles that I love. But it couldn't be you. So I shifted on the couch and closed my eyes. Keys. Outside of my door, fidgeting with the lock. Only one other person had a copy to my apartment. My heart fluttered.

The door burst open.

WINDOW (REMNANTS)

Window brings cold air on toes.
 One lamp modestly lighting walls.
A single empty beer,
 Just some foam at the base.
Pink, white, and purple blanket,
 Wrapped over body and shoulders.
Two cigarette butts in glass tray.
 The nude woman, book in hand,
Curled up like water in sheets of bed.
 Red velvet muslin wrinkled into bends.
Two cats licking paws before rest.
 A single nipple revealed,
By each of two bodies,
 Male and female,
Both hardened by winter breeze
 Before sleep.
She puts on pajamas,
 Brings in two bowls
Of homemade chicken soup
 As they steam.
A third cigarette lit,
 Now down to its end.
The room begins to stink of smoke,
 While a blue ballpoint pen rolls along a page,
And a single magic moment,
 So rare and layered with good faith,
Quickly passes away, and yet, somehow
 Remains.

-- *Chris Wakefield*

DISTANCE

by Erik Adams

A conic light beams onto the screen, bouncing light and shadows around the brown interior of the theater. The tiny dark reservoirs of wear and tear that scatter over the black and white feature prove the film's age. Imperfections in the splicing of the reels, the blurred frames and audible pops, remind the audience of the human activity involved in projecting deteriorating strands of celluloid.

They both sit there, two people out of a handful of other strangers in the same dark place, staring slightly upward at the image of a smoke-filled bar. The camera focuses in on a table that seats a newspaper columnist and a press agent, arguing over which one was the most ruthless and underhanded. With their horn-rimmed eyeglasses and tumblers of scotch, they chain smoked their way through deceptions and blackmail. Within the course of an hour and a half, wives are cheated on, deals are made sacrificing family members for financial gain, and remorse for their actions is left smoldering in the ashtray with the crushed butt-end of their cigarettes. After the credits roll and the lion roars for the last time, the lights come on and the two people leave, right behind the others in the theater.

Once outside, they both agree to have a drink together. Even the nighttime is bright. Being inside a darkened room looking at varying shades of grey flicker before their eyes, they take a short time to get acquainted with the traffic headlights, street lamps and brightly-lit signs on surrounding store fronts illuminating the air. They feel the electricity as they walk and hear its high pitch sound, so faint it is almost inaudible. Neither of them has anything to say, letting the awkward silence take over as the dominant sound. The same silence that, aside from a few introductory greetings, had filled the space between them from the moment he picked her up, all through the five block walk to the theater. "So where are we going?" was what she said. "To a movie—an older one," was his response. He only sees old films.

Quickly pacing their way through the crowds, they pretend that the shouts and mutterings of the passing foot traffic, the brake-squeaks and car horns of the street

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traffic, are too overwhelming to be heard through. Instead, they look at street signs and advertisements. Brightly colored photo ads of new young people in new young clothes glare at them from the bus stops, while tall signs for the latest cars checker the evening sky.

He isn't thrilled about taking her out and she isn't crazy about the idea either. Being too passive to argue with Nick when he had arranged for them to meet, they are now stuck with each other for a short time. During the movie he looked over at her, trying to register some feeling for her. The reflection of light from the screen lit up her face, making her eyes appear wide and bulging. Her dour countenance reflected her boredom with the film. She wanted just as much as he did to get this over with.

Up until now, all that was said was necessary conversation: Greeting her at the door, buying the tickets, asking if she wanted anything to eat from the lobby. Now, they are out of the theater. And, feeling under pressure to quit this taciturn behavior, he finally says something: "What did you think?"

"It was good." Such a flat answer has him grasping for more rope to keep the dialogue going, but she saves him in time.

"What was the name of the main actor?" she says.

"Which one? There were two."

"The newspaper man. The one that seemed more underhanded than the other guy."

"That was Burt Lancaster."

"Is he dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead."

She likes that he took her to an older movie, taking it as a sign that he appreciates the past and isn't so easily taken in by the new. If nothing else, she is slightly curious who he is underneath his awkward mannerisms and shy way of speaking. He looks uncomfortable in his own skin, but is too timid to complain. Two blocks walking and they are at their own bar, not smoke filled, and aside from the two people in the corner wagering a couple of dollars on a pool game, there is nothing underhanded or ruthless. No deception, no blackmail. Dimly lit and brown, it is the same color as the theater.

A Tom Waits song is heard playing, the jagged edges of his parched voice blends with the percussive clanking of bottles and dishes. At a booth in the corner, they sit down and catch the attention of a server to take their drink orders: two gin and tonics. Once

their orders are taken, the oppressive silence between them is hard to ignore and she is scrambling for something to say, no matter how trivial, to pass the time.

Five minutes of malaise pass until the drinks come. They sit there pretending to look at advertisement cards placed on the table, their glossy texture flaunts the pastel and neon colors advertising after-hours clubs and cheap beverages. Picking these up, turning them over, turning them over again, and then resting them back down on the table, their eyes are looking but not seeing. Examining the walls of the bar, they stare at various mirrors and beer ads. They look at others around them; at people who are excited to be out and enjoying themselves. Deep laughs and pats on the back, the evening is far from over and those people want to be where they are.

When the drinks arrive, they each take a sip and share a brief meeting of the eyes which makes both of them nervously chuckle. Finally, he dives in with a question to relieve the silence.

“So, Nick said that you do photo restoration?” He doesn’t want to talk about work, but he is also afraid to ask anything too personal.

“I’m an apprentice, yeah. Still in training.”

“How did you land on that?”

“I don’t know, really. I’ve always had a passion for photography, but I’m a horrible photographer. I guess it’s the next closest thing. It’s something about the old photographs. New ones don’t intrigue me.” She stares down into her gin and tonic, playing with the slender red straw.

He feels a spark of interest. “Yeah, I know what you mean. The people in those photos taken at the turn of the century always have such strange looks on their faces.”

Looking past him, her eyes focus on the wall behind. On it hangs a picture of a thin face with the hardship of a full life burrowed into the wrinkles of his forehead and cheeks. It is a close up, and she sees clearly the sagging jowls and the elongated ears reaching downward. He wears eyeglasses in the photo, but his eyes appear whited-out from what must have been a camera glare. Without his eyes, it is hard to tell what he is feeling. His partially open mouth shows no white teeth, just a black oval below his prominent nose. The picture itself, probably taken in the early 1900s, is kept from further harm from the elements by an 8” x 10” frame, which is far too large for the photo’s size of four or five square inches. There is nothing written to say who the picture is of, nothing to tell about its history except for what the photograph itself tells. “It was because they

had to stand still for so long and the camera focuses in on them long enough to fold all their pain, happiness, regret—all the different layers of their life, into one expression.” She breaks out of her meditative stare and takes another drink.

He imagines her pouring over those sepia tones and carefully retouching every shade of brown: making the age vanish and restoring the memory for those who held a place for long forgotten people. The diminishing recognition for people we used to encounter everyday is suddenly jolted awake by a photograph. Lost now in the finished grains of the wooden table top, his eyes encounter water stains and scratch marks.

She looks at her date. Staring off into the surface of the table, his expression takes on that same look of discomfort that graces the profiles of people in the photographs she restores. He excuses himself to use the restroom. Splashing some water on his face, he tries to ignore the scent of stale urine and stagnant water.

Peeking out the door, he sees her in the corner booth, fidgeting with her hands, lips stretched tightly against her teeth as if contemplating a serious decision. With the anxious up and down bounce of her right leg, she is equally as nervous as he is. Both of them just waiting for the evening to be over.

Needing some time to think, some time alone, he stays in there leaning against the sink and gathering his thoughts. Remembering the reason why Nick had set them up, he tries to recall the conversation. Nick’s exact words were: “She’ll remind you of someone; someone from a long time ago. You’ll know who I’m talking about.” Conjuring up faces from the past seems like an endless task for a few minutes in a public restroom. He has known Nick almost his entire life, and knows the blind date was his attempt to get him out of the house for a little while. Tired of seeing his friend stay home day and night, Nick had set up the date. He would have said anything to convince him to socialize more.

Looking at his watch, twelve minutes have passed and he remembers no one that is similar to her. He feels, though, that somewhere in between the old photographs and films, they have something in common. It is the photographs and images that bind his memories, and hers as well.

When he comes out of the restroom, the booth they were sitting in is empty. Their drinks are still there, sweating heavily and watered down with the melting ice. After glancing around the bar and finally realizing her absence, he asks the bartender if he saw her leave: “About five minutes ago. She shouldn’t have gone too far.”

The indentation from where she was sitting was still molded into the worn out leather seats. This, along with the slight Chapstick smudge on her almost full glass, is the only evidence of her brief presence in his life. He puts his hand to the seat and feels that it is still warm. Only wanting to stay there for five or ten minutes, he ends up staying longer. Sitting down in the place where she sat, drinking from the same spot on the glass where she drank, he wonders about the thoughts going through her head while doing restorations; knowing that she is making the past clearer for those who want to remember. In his mind, he imagines her walking down the street, perhaps back to her apartment or maybe off to somewhere else to leave these past few hours behind.

Leaving twenty dollars for the drinks and tip, he walks back out into the streets. As he passes the theater again, the manager is putting up tomorrow's movie title, *Rebecca*, on the marquee. Thinking more about who his fleeing date is supposed to remind him of, his impulse is to call Nick right now, but he holds back. He doesn't want to be reminded of a distant memory no matter who it is. Not yet. One day she'll push herself to the front of his mind. Something will trigger it. For now, he lets go of the past and breathes in the electric night air. The streets are still bright, the sky is still dark, and people still pass him on the sidewalk, taking their shadows with them.

TURNING AROUND

-- *Anonymous*

Dear frightened, angry, and confused student,

I know the frustration of a dull blade, and the relief a sharp blade brings when it breaks the skin. I know the despair and confusion of a broken noose. I know the turmoil and overwhelming misery of looking a stranger in the mirror. And the only way I know these things is that I, too, am transsexual (by definition, not identification) and have made it this far to be writing to you. I have experienced the fear and self consciousness of living a lie, feeling that every bystander is laughing at me, but I also know the fear and self consciousness of going out as myself. Despite the feeling being similar, it is different...you are yourself. You feel naked, but feel a lot closer to whole. The catch is: you have to survive to experience this. You need to ensure that you do well in school, to provide a future for yourself. You must learn to persevere and then persevere through learning: that way, you can establish superiority despite whatever else someone may think about you.

I remember feeling different from other kids around me as early as I can remember in kindergarten or so. It was subtle things for me like preferring to play "house" and make-believe games. I finally figured out a term for what I was feeling during fifth grade. Being transsexual or having Gender Identity Disorder (GID) seemed to fit perfectly. In the sixth grade, I decided to start growing my hair out as it was something I could do without too many questions. A year or so later, I experienced my first bouts of depression as my body started to change in the wrong direction after what seemed to be false hopes of a female puberty beginning. I began self harm at this point as an outlet for my pain, wishing things would work out. This continued and was enough of an outlet for a while; but my first suicide attempt was during my sophomore year in high school. I tried to hang myself. It turned out that, in my desperation, I had not tied the rope tight enough. The noose broke loose and I fell. I felt so frustrated that the pain of living a lie would continue. I wanted for it to end oh so badly. Eventually, I decided that I needed

someone personal to talk to and help me work through this. Other than the trans-support chat room that I had been to, I had told no one. So I told my friend Mary, whom I knew was bisexual and would be the most likely to understand. She was extremely supportive of me and became an even better friend through all of our discussions. I decided that I wanted to get on hormones to correct my secondary sex characteristics and had the drugs mailed to her from an online pharmacy.

I still remember taking the first dose, the almost euphoria of knowing that this little pill was the start of moving in the right direction. However, when Mary moved after a few months, I lost all hope of transitioning; the male hormones took over again and, with them, my extreme depression. I didn't sleep because I'd stay up at night questioning who I was and why this happened to me, crying all the way. I slept through a lot of classes as I lost any drive to do well in school. I felt I was as good as dead without transitioning. Once a straight-A student, I failed classes due to my depression and apathy. All through high school, I went through bouts of more and less depressive states, utilizing different outlets, whether it was digital art or cutting my legs and arms. After another failed suicide attempt by way of pain-killer overdose, I had decided that I needed to do something about my GID or I would end up dead. By that time, my family had moved to a smaller place near the post office, so I opened a P.O. Box and had medications sent there. My outlook on life changed as the hormones reworked my body; I have just recently been able to mostly see myself in the mirror. I have come a long way but have a long way to go. Being okay with me is part of the equation; the other part is society recognizing me as I identify.

I know the hardships associated with trans issues very well, but I also know that things can be done about them on all levels. I know that, despite trans issues being a unique phenomenon, there are other situations in which people are faced with comparable feelings. One such situation is that of a foreigner living in a strange land, unable to speak the language. While shown on a symphonic level by Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, I think the trials and tribulations of this situation are well illustrated by Richard Rodriguez's "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." As a current renowned scholar, it'd be difficult imagining him ever having serious problems with the educational system, but he faced being ostracized as a child simply because of a language barrier. Rodriguez embodies this social phenomenon by explaining that "while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by being assimilated into public society, such

an assimilation makes possible the achievement of public individuality” (248). Rodriguez establishes that assimilation to society is a positive thing and that any loss of heritage is made up for. This justifies his stance against the compartmentalized life provided by bilingual education. Furthermore, this passage could be applied to anyone who has a secret identity, whether it is their true financial circumstance, sexual orientation, or (in my case) gender identity. They would all benefit from removing the barrier between their lives. I know from experience the sensation of having two social spheres (the private being my true gender identity and the public being my male mask), that it takes a lot out of you living a lie and that it only gets worse over time. Removing the barrier that everyone expects you to have in order to give way to expressing yourself is a powerful thing. You are vulnerable, but real.

While for the time being a public identity to hide behind is necessary to survive and avoid the childish ridicule of high school bigots, moving toward your goal is a step by step process. The most important thing is to realize that there is hope for the future, that high school really is short despite it feeling like an eternity. Make sure that future is as bright as it can be by applying yourself in school. Let it be your constructive outlet. What you can do now to make things easier is find some friends to confide in so that you can discuss your feelings. Just coming out to someone is a major step in the right direction. If your parents are open minded, you could even come out to them, but do so with extreme caution as an adverse reaction may leave you without a home to go back to or worse. However, if your parents are open, you may be able to start on the long road to transition sooner rather than later (while supervised). I strongly recommend coming out to a parent if you genuinely think they will be opened hearted. It is easy to make excuses not to do so, but you would benefit from taking the leap. If you have reason to believe your parents would disown you, be as patient as you can. There are resources out there if you can gain access to them, whether it be counseling or support groups. You can do things now, such as growing your hair out and working on your voice, which you will be thankful for later. Also, like I had done, it is possible to begin hormone replacement therapy on your own with extreme caution and knowledge of the risks. For me, it was well worth self medicating because I had spent a lot of time in thought and research. If you are to do something as drastic as hormone treatments without coming out to your parents, you can get away with it for a time, but eventually they will notice changes, so be aware of that. There is a lot to live for despite being transgender. Transition is a hurdle,

but afterwards you will be thankful to be alive.

There will be times when you just want to put an end to your suffering; there probably have been already. However, death is easy and selfish. The challenge is in perseverance with a reward of fulfillment, wholeness, and happiness. The world will benefit from you as it probably already has, so don't deny others the pleasure of getting to know you as the unique person you are. Your education will speak volumes in the future and will establish superiority over even the worst of bigots, because you prevailed through the worst of times and came out on top. As illustrated by Rodriguez, you have both a public and private sphere...learn more about your true self and break away from your public wall. Look forward to the future but set small goals to move closer to that ever so big picture, and it will come before you know it. Learn to love who you are and who you are discovering yourself to be; you possess an inner beauty unlike that of anyone else. Just be.

Sincerely,

Anonymous

THE PRUFROCK BLUES

sometimes my body is the perfect house,
until i hear the subterranean song from the phonograph
softly playing from the cellar, behind closed doors

crashing down, the chandelier is in shambles; it begins,
no choice but to let the staccato shake you down, as the assault
starts with the saddest souls, head high it doesn't let up.
the trumpet flares and blasts with no brakes like a train with too much coal,
as one drum listens to another in the ear.

but then the smooth jazz creeps in the back door
on awkward cello feet, no hammers, just the rhythm.
it picks at and flicks the soul-scabs. i let 'em fly with the jazz
and, after, the lonely harmonica breaks in and the wind sings
through its teeth. tell me no lies, harmonica.

and pick up the pace, harmonica.
i've got a tempo like a fat dog on short legs.
then the harmonica complies and tramples over that sheet music
with feet of fire,
like the burning wretch
who wears the scars
from the scabs.

trombone: lead the way to healing, but don't take away the marks,
let 'em bruise in the brass punches that follow with the
crescendo!
the trumpets want back in, climbing uphill,
haunting the melancholy, endlessly cruel.

then outta nowhere she comes,
like a gently humming saint in a quiet crowded bar
the nine, the mother of all funk chords,
she trembles like the brass and soothes like the cello; and the snake
can't help but sneak in with its rat a tat tat percussion pressure

yes, i feel it now.

it takes a man away and picks apart the soul
i can hear her murmur in my heart, like the one i've felt from birth
until the staccato comes back
downhill

the beat overwhelms,
in waves of punctuated sighs
and the cello screams like
i've never heard
up up up down and up and away
i miss the funk, the harmonica, even the trumpets
as it all starts to fade in resolution,
oh,

why couldn't it stay?
or take my wicked soul away?

--Bobby Fujimoto

BUBBLES

by Amelia Rushbrooke

Myra knew from the first moment she saw the Stevenson family that their values were all wrong. The mother had frosted hair and a frothy white cocktail dress totally inappropriate for church. The little girl wore a perfectly tailored pink leather jacket that must have cost a small fortune, and the husband's teeth were unnaturally white against his dark tan.

Myra's neighbor, Janice, was taken in by the whole bleached-tanned-groomed-waxed package.

"Isn't that a good-looking family?" she said to Myra as they stood together after the service. "The mother's just gorgeous."

Myra looked over to where the new family stood surrounded by admiring parishioners.

"Yes, she's very ... put-together, isn't she? Some people put a lot of money into their appearance these days."

Janice raised her eyebrows and lowered her voice.

"Do you think she's had some work done?" she said, looking appraisingly back at Mrs. Stevenson.

"You know *I* wouldn't know about that kind of thing." Myra said. "I'm not up on all these trends."

"Do you know who I heard *did* have some work done?" Janice said. "That third-grade teacher, Mrs. Hodder. A full facelift *and* lipo, apparently."

Myra laid her hand on Janice's arm and inclined her head.

"This sounds like gossip to me," she said gently. "And we can't be going around judging our neighbors."

"I know. You're right." Janice said, sighing. "But we can't all be as good you are, Myra."

Myra smiled when she remembered that comment later. She was a woman proud of her humility.

At Scrabble morning the following Wednesday, Myra heard the Stevenson family mentioned again. Her sister-in-law, Pearl, was the one to bring them up.

“I heard that the Stevensons are in one of those big new houses in Gilded Acres. They say that those places are going for a million each, some of them,” Pearl said.

Myra narrowed her eyes at her Scrabble letters then looked up at the others and shook her head sadly.

“Don’t you think it’s sad how materialistic we’ve become these days?” Myra said. “Imagine: a million dollars! What that might have done for the little orphans in Haiti. I’m not saying that the Stevenson’s aren’t decent Christians, but ... well, you have to wonder about people’s priorities sometimes.”

There was a general sighing and murmuring for the Haitian orphans and people’s incorrect priorities, and Myra waited respectfully for a moment before clicking her word down on the board: N-O-B-L-E, with a double letter score for the “B.” She waited for Pearl and Janice to refer to her own noble qualities, but neither of them seemed to make the connection.

“The house is beautiful inside, though. Not flashy at all,” Janice said.

Myra froze for a moment, but tried to keep her voice and expression light and breezy.

“Oh, did you visit them Janice? I didn’t know,” she said.

Janice went pink and started to fidget with her letters.

“They – Cheryl and Jonathan – invited us for a barbeque last night. Just a casual thing with some of the families from church,” she said.

Myra smiled tightly and clenched her five new Scrabble pieces in her fist.

“Well, tell us about the house then!” Pearl said, and Janice launched into an excited account of Italian granite tops, elaborate crown moldings, and an outdoor room complete with barbeque pit.

“It’s all done *so* tastefully, though, really. And they’re such nice, down-to-earth people.”

Myra collected the empty cups and saucers from the table.

“Keep going; I’ll just be a minute,” she said over her shoulder as she moved towards the kitchen.

Once out of sight of the living room, Myra let her shoulders sag. She put the

dishes in the sink, squirted too much green detergent onto them, and ran the tap until the bubbles glistened extravagantly above the counter tops. She stared down at the warped red Formica and felt a wave of panic.

Why had Cheryl Stevenson not invited her to the barbeque? Surely someone had told her that Myra was the president of the Ladies' Auxiliary and three-time recipient of the Service in the Community Award—It would have been four if not for Fran Dryden, with her wild eyebrows and pathetic overalls and stinking cat charities. What had Cheryl heard about Myra? That her husband made less than forty thousand a year? That her children went to public school? Had Cheryl seen the late-model minivan Myra's family drove away from church in?

Myra took three deep breaths, smiled brightly, and went back to the living room, where Janice was still talking about the Stevensons.

"I swear, about this high off the plate!" Janice was saying.

"What did I miss?" Myra said.

"Oh, I was just talking about Cheryl's pavlova. About this high!" Janice said, indicating a height about a foot from Myra's coffee table.

"Hmm—I wonder if she made it herself," Myra said. "You know, it's funny, but I don't like them when they're super high. Most of the top part is just hollow."

There was a pause. Janice and Pearl glanced at each other. Myra could feel tears gathering at the corners of her eyes.

"Of course, nobody does pavlova like you do, Myra," Pearl said reassuringly. "That's a given."

Janice leaned forward in her chair, put her hand on Myra's knee, and said, "I'm sure Cheryl would have invited you if she'd heard about you. Maybe they accidentally left you off the parish contact list this month?"

"Oh, Janice, be serious. This isn't high school!" Myra said, blinking hard. "The Stevensons can invite anyone they want to their own barbeque. Anyway, it doesn't sound like we have that much in common. I'm a very simple person."

After Pearl and Janice had left, Myra stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She noticed the gray roots showing under her dignified ash blonde, and the deepening lines on her forehead and beside her mouth.

She frowned at herself sternly, then bent and scabbled urgently in the cupboard

under the sink for the peppermint scented foot scrub that Pearl had given her for Christmas. The label on the foot-shaped bottle promised an end to tough and calloused heels.

Myra tore off the lid, squirted a handful of the coarse, pink paste onto her palm, crushed it onto her aging forehead, and scrubbed angrily, back and forth, up and down, imagining the wrinkled skin coming off layer by awful layer. She imagined herself smooth and bronze and radiant, like the women who shone from the pages of the *Vogue* magazines she hid at the bottom of the camping supplies box in the guestroom closet.

When she finally rinsed off the peppermint abrasive, the skin on her forehead was red-raw and shining. The wrinkles were as deep as ever.

Myra watched herself in the mirror.

“Ridiculous.” She said. “A *ridiculous* person.”

She kept watching herself, even as tears blurred her vision; even through the tears she could see the glow of her forehead.

The phone rang in the kitchen and Myra hurriedly splashed her burning face with water and went to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mrs. Norris?”

The woman’s voice was unfamiliar.

“Yes, this is she. Who’s speaking please?”

“This is Cheryl Stevenson. I don’t know if you remember Pastor Michael doing a welcome for us in church on Sunday?”

“Of course. Well, and welcome to the community! You’re already a celebrity here, you know. My neighbor Janice has been talking about nothing else.”

“Did she tell you about the little barbeque we had yesterday?” Cheryl said. There was concern in her voice.

“Yes, she did mention something”

“Oh my goodness. Oh, and that’s what I called about. To apologize. My husband and I were both going to call half the numbers on the list Pastor Michael gave us; I took the A to M and Jonathan took the O to Z and somehow the N families were just ... missed out!”

Relief weighed Myra down; she sat abruptly on the kitchen floor.

“And I’ve been feeling just *awful* since I realized you’d been left out, especially

after the ladies have been telling me about your charity work.”

Myra was surprised to hear Cheryl’s voice rising in pitch. Could someone with a million dollar house really be nervous talking to her, Myra? Perhaps the church ladies had explained the three Service in the Community Awards and how it should have been four.

Myra leaned her forehead against the slight cool of the refrigerator door. Images of the ice and yogurt and cucumbers inside began to slide through her mind.

“Honestly, it’s fine,” she said, anxious now to get off the phone and attend to her burning skin. “I’m sure we’ll have another chance to get together soon.”

“Yes. Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to come over for coffee today!” Cheryl said. “You could tell me about all the wonderful work you do. And maybe I could help out with something ... if there’s a need for volunteers?”

Myra sat up away from the fridge and pulled her shoulders back.

“I’m sure I’ll be able to find a little job for you somewhere,” she said. “It’s so rare these days that people are willing to make a real commitment to helping those less fortunate.”

“Oh, yes, I know.” Cheryl said. “Please do come over today: it would be lovely to chat about all this in person.”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to make it today” Myra said quickly, putting her fingers to her tortured forehead. “But how about next Wednesday morning? Would that work for you?”

“Wonderful!” Cheryl said. “I’ll make us lemon meringue pie. But Myra, I just hope you’ll excuse our mess when you come over. We have so much cleaning and unpacking still to do.”

“Don’t even think of it!” Myra said. “To be honest, I just don’t notice superficial things like that.”

Above Myra’s head, the glossy detergent bubbles in the sink were quietly bursting.

HARBOR NIGHTS

Electricity rings and sings through
As a steady current flirts with the indifferent crafts.
Their poles stand proud and erect, boasting of their masses.
Some pirate, some patriot, but many show no favor;
Each with countless stories of vast waters and
Adventures at sea of which no one knows,
Parading their ignorance. Stop. They float back
And gaze tenderly at the sky,
Whispering signs of immortality,
Desperate for the dreams they once passed by.

-- *Christopher Brandon Cochran*

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DIGNIFIED

by Jessie Martin

During the dead of summer in southern Georgia, the humidity is something you can always rely on. Mavis Crain always cursed the damp air for making her precious curls fall and frizz, especially when she lived in her ex-husband Frank's house because they were too poor with too many children too soon to afford air conditioning. And as if her own hair wasn't enough trouble, she had five children's hair and bodies to worry about. She'd wake their clammy bodies from bed and wash and dry them only to find them smelling of sweat again minutes later. But now, things were different. Mavis was well-kept in Atlanta with a new, rich man who had no children. And Mavis was conveniently committed to only seeing her children once every thirty days on the second Saturday of the month.

Between the valium her doctor gave her for her "feminine disorder," the alcohol and parties, and the endless shopping sprees, Mavis hardly thought of them. The mornings always found her feeling sentimental, though. Like this morning. Mavis woke in a moment of clarity from her valium haze and felt a terrible weight on her chest, which constricted her heart and lungs and made her feel as if all her children were clamoring for her at once. She swore she could feel their small sticky hands pressing into her skin, tugging at her hair. And that smell that pervaded her nostrils, of a child's sweat, more sweet than salty, was unbearable. She rushed to the shower and scrubbed every inch of her body until she was sure she only smelled of the lilac and jasmine that her bar soap was infused with. All the while, she mustered her mental strength to ward off the rush of images of her children's faces. What might they be doing right now? It was Saturday morning. Was she supposed to go and see them? Which Saturday of the month was it anyway, the second or third? Hadn't she just seen them? It must have been the third then. Mavis stepped lightly from her marble shower to her marble floor and patted herself down with a fluffy white towel. She smelled her skin once more and popped another valium and climbed back into her bed and the charmed life that she was really destined for.

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An hour's drive south of Mavis, her daughter Jane was well aware that it was the second Saturday of July. As the first glimpse of the hot summer sun peaked over the horizon, a mocking bird perched above Jane's window began its cacophony. Her brothers hated how the mocking bird sang every morning and threatened to shoot him with their bb guns. His loud, persistent song bothered her sometimes too, but today, she was thankful for his voice. It let her know it was time. Jane sat before her old, spotted mirror that her father had been so resourceful to save from being thrown out by one of the neighbors and untied the green pieces of cloth that she had placed in her hair the night before to form perfect spiral curls. This was one of the few things her mother had taught her how to do that she actually remembered. All the strips of green cloth lay in a neat heap on the scuffed wooden floor of her room, and Jane took one last look at herself before rising to wake her sisters and untie their hair. She held her shoulders back and practiced that confident look her mother always had in her eyes. Jane knew how important it was that they all looked polished for their mother. Janie had noticed that her mother was more apt to hug them when they looked nice.

"Janie, please keep quiet!" Melanie groaned as Jane tried to coax her from her slumber. But Jane got Melanie and Kristy from bed after a few gentle tries because they loved their big sister and always seemed ready to listen to someone. Then Jane rushed out of their bedroom and came lumbering back down the hall with a navy blue plastic suitcase to put in two days worth of clothing for them all. She packed their suitcase with the utmost care, doing her best to fold the clothes as the old Black maid her father hired soon after their mother left had. Last time they had all seen the poor woman, she had run screaming out of the house, swearing she'd never be back. Jane's brother Pat had lost a garter snake in the house, and it ended up in the laundry basket full of clothes that the maid was folding. Daddy had been so mad when he came home and none of the laundry had been folded. Jane was determined to fold the best she could after that.

"Patrick! James!" Jane shouted, knocking on the door to the boys' room and peeking her head in before the boys had a chance to say whether or not she could enter their girl-free designated haven.

"It's time to get up! Mom will be here in less than an hour!"

"Ugh, Jane, buzz off!" Pat, the older of the two boys barked bitterly.

"Patrick, you know you'd never be ready in time unless I helped you!"

"You know you'd never be ready in time unless I helped you," Patrick mimicked,

burrowing his head deeper into his pillow and pulling his covers over his ears.

Over the course of an hour, Jane coaxed her brothers and sisters to get ready in time to be picked up by their mother for the weekend. She managed to prepare everyone toast and only burned one piece, her best record to date. She did leave the jam jar and their dirty plates on the kitchen counter, though, something she would usually never forget to clean because Daddy made sure she'd never forget once before. But the excitement that filled her breast at seeing her mother was so great, that she didn't remember.

The five children walked down the dirt road that led to the end of their property. Their mouths watered with hopes of ice cream sundaes like the ones their mother treated them to last time she took them away. Jane tried to lead the bunch and linked arms with her younger sisters because they were smaller than the boys, and she didn't want them to fall behind. She looked back at their old, white wooden house, and frowned at how it seemed to lean on its side and their front yard was in disarray with weeds and rusted car parts. She hoped with all her heart it would be the last time she'd have to look at it. Patrick and James made their way along side their sisters but were inclined to find distractions, kicking rocks or racing ahead of the girls to taunt them for their slow pace. Then they would come running back to them to circle about them and pull at Kristy's uneven pig tails that Jane had prided herself in arranging that morning. Once Kristy began to cry, Jane had enough of the boy's pestering and punched Pat in the arm.

"I bet she's not coming, Jane," Patrick declared in retort crossing his arms and skeptically eyeing the road where their mother's car would come from, if she came.

"Don't say that, Pat. You know last time she meant to come. She just got sick. She would have called if she couldn't make it," Jane said and gave her brother a warning scowl. He had better not put worries like that in the younger one's hearts.

"Will Mamma have on a nice white coat like last time, Janie?" Melanie asked.

"Maybe. That was a very pretty coat, wasn't it?" Jane replied and bade her sisters to come and sit with her atop their suitcase until Mother showed.

"Why would she wear a fur coat in the middle of summer? And she wouldn't even let us hug her last time because it was white, like she thought we'd make her dirty," Patrick countered.

"Yeah, what did you say it was made of again?" Melanie asked ignoring Patrick and snuggling up to her big sister.

“Rabbits.”

“I’ve never seen no white rabbit before.”

“Well, none live around here. They come from the North Pole.”

“Like Santa, huh?”

“Yes, just like Santa,” Jane affirmed and began to draw shapes of hearts and stars in the dirt with the front of her shoe.

“I hope we get to stay at that cool place with all the beds in one room and a swimming pool!” James stated with delight.

“I’m sure we will, James,” Jane assured him.

“I’d rather go to Mom’s house.”

“You know there’s not enough room for us there,” Jane countered

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem right, never taking us to a house. You think she even has a house?” Patrick eyed Jane with serious concern this time.

“Well, of course, she does, silly! Everybody always has a house!”

An hour passed and the children began to grow impatient as their excitement waned with the increasing summer heat. Kristy began to moan and cry because she was thirsty, and the boys threatened to run back to the house.

“You know she told us to meet her here! And we promised. You don’t go breaking promises,” Jane scolded her brothers.

“What if we just go back to the house for some water? We’ll be right back!”

“No, it doesn’t work that way! Mamma will only pick us up from here. You know she won’t take us away with her if we are in the house!”

“Why does she hate it so much? It’s just a house,” Patrick said.

“Look, we are all waiting here until she comes! She could just be late. Maybe she forgot presents for us and had to go back and get them. That’s probably it.”

“Presents?” Kristy asked, picking her head up from Jane’s lap and smiled, revealing two dimples in her cherub angel cheeks.

“Yes, presents,” Jane smiled back and stroked the sweaty pieces of Kristy’s blond hair off her forehead.

“What kind of presents, Janie?” Melanie asked.

“Oh, you know. Something we’ll all like. Pat will probably get a book on reptiles and James will get his very own baseball glove, and Melanie will get a Barbie with brown hair-”

“Yeah! Just like mine!” Melanie shrieked with delight and twirled her curly brown hair in her fingers.

“And Kristy,” Jane continued, “will get a new teddy bear with perfect blue button eyes. And James and Patrick won’t rip them off this one’s face!” Jane said glaring at her brothers.

“What will you get, Janie?” Melanie pressed further.

Jane thought for some time. She had forgotten to remember herself and what she might want. She toyed with the end of her faded yellow dress and twisted the frays of cotton in between her fingers. She had noticed that her mother never wore dresses with frays. That morning, she had been embarrassed to put on her yellow dress because the girls at school with nice dresses had made fun of her for wearing it so often, but it was the only one she had. A dress, she decided, is better than no dress. The last time she had seen her mother, she was wearing a red dress. It was the color of cherries, especially when they stained Jane’s lips after she had fit as many into her mouth as possible. Her brother Patrick always scoffed at her for this behavior, but cherries were her favorite. Her mother had promised to come and take her away when she was in that cherry red dress too, and not just for the weekend, but forever.

“Don’t tell your brothers and sisters,” her mother had warned, “I’d like to take all of you, but I just don’t have the room.”

Jane remembered how pretty her mother’s olive complexion had looked in that cherry red dress. She had the same color skin as her mother and thought a dress that color would look good on her too.

“I’d like a cherry red dress,” Jane said softly.

“That sounds real nice, Janie,” Melanie said and interlaced her fingers with her sister’s.

The noon sun was now high in the sky, and the group of eager children sat dejectedly at the end of the dirt road that led to their property. They weren’t greeted by their mother; instead, their father came home early from work, as was routine for Saturdays.

He called to them from the window of his paint-chipped forest green station wagon and said, “Your mother didn’t show then?”

“No,” Patrick answered first, “I knew she wouldn’t.”

“She still might come!” Jane yelled.

"I'm hungry," Melanie whined.

James agreed.

"Alright my precious cargo," Jane's father exclaimed as he walked around to the back of the car to open the trunk for Patrick and James, "climb on in!" The boys loved facing the opposite direction from everyone else in the car, so they could always make faces at the drivers of other cars. This time, they made faces at Jane, who obstinately determined to wait the whole day through for her mother. She couldn't tell them why.

"Jane, at least come home for lunch," her father encouraged, but she would not budge from her seat atop the suitcase.

"Alright, I'll bring something to you then," he said and drove to the house.

Jane sat outside waiting for her mother until the sun lowered in the sky and a wind picked up that cooled her sunburnt skin and drifted the scent of the kudzu vine's first summer blooms into her nose. Jane loved the smell of those magenta-colored flowers. The vine had appeared soon after her mother left and had been creeping its way up the side of their house ever since. Her father cursed the vine and her mother at every failed attempt he made at killing it. Jane loved the pungent scent of its flowers, though, and tried to see the fresh blooms as the last, fleeting sign that her mother would come. But it was getting so late, and Jane was becoming overwhelmed with a feeling that Patrick had been right. She tried to believe her mother must be doing something really important to have not shown, but why didn't she call the day before to let her know? She didn't know if she was more embarrassed because Patrick was right or because she had believed her mother would come to take her away. Either way, neither had turned out in her favor, and she felt like a fool. The thought that her mother didn't care enough about her to come that day, that she preferred to do things other than seeing her children, made its way to the forefront of her nine year old thoughts and, she couldn't find any way to push it out of her mind. Jane felt just as embarrassed as she had the day her mother dropped her off for school in the morning and never came for her in the afternoon. That was the last day she was ever seen at their house. Tears welled up in Janie's eyes and made their way down her cheeks, making clean streaks on her sweaty, dirt-coated skin. She quickly wiped her face and reprimanded herself for this sign of weakness. She couldn't ever let her brothers and sisters see her like this. Maybe she ought to run away and find her mother herself.

Jane began to run as fast as she could dragging the over-sized suitcase behind her and didn't stop running until she could no longer catch her breath. She began walking

after taking in two deep breaths and turned off her street, Cherokee Circle, and made her way to the wooden bridge that went over Dogwood Creek. Jane listened to the bubbling sounds of the water moving swiftly through the creek. She loved how crisp and cool its waters felt after playing in the Dogwood Grove all day. It was beginning to grow dark, and a barn owl screeched sending a chill down Jane's spine. She had never been this far from home alone at night, and there was still no sign of her mother. But how could she go back? She wasn't supposed to go back. Today was supposed to be the beginning of her new life with her mother.

As Janie caught her breath, her thoughts fell to what her father had asked her the last time she saw her mother. "Your mother, she's a real dignified lady now isn't she?" her father had asked. Jane didn't know what that word meant and asked her father. "It means real special, someone people look up to and admire," he had told her while patting the top of her head. "I guess she's better off with that Bob Wheeler and his high society, Janie. Oh, you just look so much like her, my pretty girl." He picked her up and twirled her around, but Jane caught the tinge of regret in her father's voice. He couldn't change the fact that Mavis had left them, but he still wished that he could have given more to Mavis than just a motorcycle and a way out after they had met at the end of the war in Germany. The problem was, their circumstances changed, and he could never offer her a way out of raising five children. "Well, I think you're the real dignified one, Daddy," Janie had lovingly replied.

She knew that today, her mother had fallen short of the word's real meaning. It couldn't be dignified to leave your children and rarely come to see them no matter how rich and beautiful you were. Her classmates had given her an idea of this when they whispered things behind her back after her mom left and the other parents stared at her with a concerned look in their eyes. Resting her face against the smooth wood of the bridge, Jane thought of her siblings, of how much she loved them. Even if their house was old and worn down and her father would get angry sometimes, she realized she couldn't bear not seeing them again and was overwhelmed with a longing to be close to the rest of her family. She didn't want her siblings to get made fun of at school because she left them too. Jane took a deep breath and turned around on Dogwood Bridge and headed back to her home, at first slowly dragging the suitcase behind her. Then, she broke into a sprint. She decided she would never leave her siblings, and in some way, she knew that made her dignified, whether she had a cherry red colored dress or not.

SEED

I am no different from a wild oak;
as you once were, before the forest grew up around you.
I feel as though the apple fell from the tree
and rolled down a cliff.

My growth is directed at the light of the sun—
the warm yellow holding hands with the smooth green leaves, pulling upwards—
not by my roots, though they draw life from the Earth
they know nothing of the sky.

You were not a witness
when I weathered the winter's storm.
With the wind I whispered this.
“The wind distorts,” you said.

You were absent when I took root—
it was far from any grove.

The same as you, I am a tree.
You watch with a backwards telescope
and see only a twig.

-- *Niina Satola*

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HAI YÁNG

My heart rests as
upon your face, I gaze.
Your ebb and flow is a lullaby.
The wind dives from purple clouds and
You toss it to the stars;
It somersaults back to earth,
And gently breathes in my hair,
carrying flecks of you to me.
They sink into my skin with a sting.
It is your sovereignty and power
That keeps an intimacy with me.

I come to you in tears; you sing to me.
I come to you in laughter; you laugh with me.
I come to you in anger; you roar with fury.

Hǎi Yáng. A mighty force to be reckoned with.
The sweet song lulling children into deep-slumber dreams.
The colossal creature swallowing sailors whole,
Into the depths of its infinite belly.

You are endless.
You are uncontainable.
Elaborate.
Beautiful.
Your soul
Is mine.

All through time you have hosted wild conquest.

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Great men have lost,
Have found themselves in you.
Kingdom of Poseidon,
Ship-wrecker,
Underminer of cunning Odysseus,
Container of fierce Calypso,
Confounder of Columbus,
Faithful lover of pilfering pirates,
Captivator of infidels,
Intimidator of the invincible,
Nurturer of gargantuan monsters.

The complete reflection of the soul
Contained within my body.

Perhaps that is why I come to you.
You summon me forth,
To gaze upon my rippled reflection.
When I submit
To the thundering crash of your waves;
When I see you coupled
With a vast blanket of shimmering stars,
It is then I know
I have found myself.

My beginning, my middle, my end,

My eternity.

-- *Alexandra Simpson*



DODGING A BULLET

by Barbara Lawrence

I remember how excited I was the year I turned seven when we spent the summer at Uncle George's farm in New Hampshire. Tall and lanky in denim and work boots, Uncle George was a quiet man. When he skewered you with his eyes and gave an order, you jumped to obey. If you did a good job, his weather-beaten face would crack into an easy grin and his ice-blue eyes would melt. He was an old-fashioned farmer, raising crops and animals in the lush hills of New England. The prospect of spending a whole month in the country with the Victorian farm house, which looked like a three-tiered wedding cake, the faded red barn filled with cows, horses and pigs, and acres of open land to run free on made us dizzy with anticipation. My teenage sister and brother had spent previous summers there, but this was my first time away from the home without Mom and Dad.

When we arrived, there was a crowd of cousins to meet us. Uncle George and Aunt Vera only had one daughter, Connie, but there were also the foster children. Mom, whose motto was: "if you don't have anything bad to say, don't waste your breath," told us the "fosters" weren't really family, just labor to help out on the farm. There did seem to be several teenage boys from up in Concord, not usually the first choice for fostering but there were also some younger kids around my age. To me even foster-cousins were family, an observation lent credence by the fact that we all slept in two big bedrooms up on the third floor of the house: boys in one room, girls in the other.

Our first day, we lined up in front of Uncle George while he assigned chores. The older kids helped with feeding and cleaning up after the animals, while us little ones helped in the vegetable garden: weeding, picking beans, and scouting for tomato bugs. At seventeen, Jerry was the oldest of our foster cousins, a brash, tough boy who always wore jeans, a white t-shirt, and a pair of well-worn motorcycle boots. My brother Jim, who was fifteen that summer, immediately became Jerry's disciple; imitating his walk and how he would lean up against any structure he came close to. Being the oldest of the boys, they were allowed to help Uncle George with the more difficult farm work—including driving the tractor.

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After our chores were done we were free to roam the property, with two exceptions. The farm was bisected by the Appalachian Trail, and all summer, bearded and bearded hikers would pass through the narrow, fenced off lane that ran through the back fields. “Keep clear of those people,” we were warned. “We don’t want strangers loitering around the farm.” The only other restricted area was the large paddock where a huge, black bull was kept. “You kids stay away from Bullet,” Uncle George growled. “He’s a mean tempered beast and don’t tolerate no teasing.” I had no intention of getting anywhere near this monster, with his hulking blue-black body and glaring red eyes. He would charge the fence when anyone so much as walked by his pen on the way to the barn.

Being children, we immediately rewrote the rules, ignoring completely those that interfered with our entertainment. For the first few days, after finishing our chores we would sneak over to the trail to hang on the fence and watch for passing hikers. The novelty soon wore off, however, and we looked for other diversions. Jerry was the first to suggest we go visit Bullet’s paddock.

“He can’t hurt you,” Jerry assured us. “He’s inside the fence and we’ll be on the outside.”

“Maybe he can’t hurt you, but Dad sure can whip your butt,” Connie pointed out.

“Are you gonna let these sissy girls and babies tell you what to do, Jim?” Jerry challenged my brother.

Jim, of course, would rather be trampled by a bull than look bad in front of Jerry, who came from the city and was so much more worldly. My sister Kathy might have been able to talk some sense into his head, being a year older and the only person Jim really listened to, but she was in the kitchen with Aunt Vera, grinding some innocent cut of meat into the ubiquitous hash that stretched a single roast into a meal for twenty people. “Heck no, let’s go,” Jim answered, and the two young toughs set off toward the forbidden paddock with a gaggle of younger kids waddling behind.

Bullet regarded us with a wary eye as we approached his pen. He didn’t make a move other than to lower his head and keep us in his line of sight. He wasn’t sure what was on the agenda, but he was going to be prepared.

Jerry swaggered right up to the fence, propping a foot on the bottom rail. “Ain’t he something, Jim?” he casually inquired as if a ton of beef wasn’t sizing him up from the other side of the fence. Jim, who wasn’t feeling quite so nonchalant, merely nodded his

agreement. "Heck," Jerry speculated, "I bet you I could be in and out of the pen before ol' Bullet even knew I was there. What do you think, Jimbo?"

"Ignore him, Jimmy," Connie piped up. "He's just showing off. You stop it, Jerry, or I'll go tell Dad what you're doing!"

"Well, go then!" yelled Jerry, jumping at Connie and throwing up his hands. And that's what she did, taking off as if Bullet himself was chasing her. Jerry turned his attention back to Jim, who was definitely looking uneasy at the turn of events. "C'mon, then, let's show these kids how the big boys play," said Jerry as he bent and slipped between the fence rails. Jim hesitated for a heartbeat then followed Jerry's lead.

Bullet continued to regard the boys warily but made no movement toward them. "You see?" Jerry laughed. "That big lump of steak don't even know what to make of us!" He took a step away from the fence, deeper in to the paddock. When Bullet still didn't react, Jerry moved farther away from the fence, turning to face the crowd of onlookers. "Look at me. I ain't afraid of no stupid cow!" he shouted, leaning forward and wagging his fanny toward the bull.

It happened in a split second; first Bullet was standing on the far side of the pen giving Jerry the eye, then he was exploding across the grass, closing the gap before any of us even thought to scream. Too late, Jerry bolted for the safety of the fence, which Jim had already slipped through. We all stood rooted to the ground as the huge, black locomotive charged toward my cousin, steamy breath shooting from his nostrils like a dragon. Jerry wasn't more than a few steps from the fence when his foot slipped and he went down on one knee.

We were all so intent on the impending tragedy unfolding before our eyes that none of us saw Uncle George run up to the fence, skid to a halt, set his feet, and lift his rifle, I don't think he even took aim; he just pointed the gun and pulled the trigger. Bullet had too much momentum built up to stop, but the impact of the slug deflected his trajectory just enough to save Jerry's foolish life. Instead of trampling the helpless boy, the bull staggered off balance for a moment, then toppled over like a granite avalanche and lay on his side. His enormous chest heaved and blood poured from the bullet hole in his shoulder.

Now the screaming began, a chorus of high-pitched shrieks cut short by Uncle George's bark, "Go on home, all of you!" No one needed to be told twice. We turned like a school of fish and fled for the safety of the house as Uncle slipped through the fence

to Jerry, who was lying in the grass next to the stunned bull. I took one look over my shoulder and saw Jim, frozen and white-faced, watching as his idol was lifted and carried from the paddock.

Bullet recovered from his wound with no appreciable change in temperament. Jerry ended up with a broken leg and an impressive scar on his shin in the shape of a hoof, where Bullet had kicked him on the way down. I don't know how he managed it, but he continued to swagger even on crutches. Uncle George and Aunt Vera agreed that the farm was too dangerous for someone of Jerry's high spirits. A few days after the incident at the paddock, a case worker appeared and Jerry and his belongings left with her. It wasn't until many years later that I understood exactly what happened that day, and why Jerry had left so abruptly.

Our parents decided we'd had enough fun and relaxation on the farm and drove up the next weekend to take us home. Back in school for his junior year in high school, Jim's academic career took an unexpected turn for the better. He spent less time running around with his friends and applied himself to his books, finishing the term with his best grades ever. Mom was ecstatic and called Uncle George to thank him for making a man of Jim. I don't know what Uncle George told her about the events of the past summer, but Mom never seemed the wiser. As for Jim, he never talked about what happened or mentioned Jerry's name when asked about his summer vacation; he also never visited the farm again.

BROKEN ENGLISH

When the wind blows, the grass waves,
Like silent children, they point their blades.
For snakes crawl deep within their midst, silent also,
Far more cruel than kids.
Forked tongues split the air,
Pooled thick at his feet,
Breathing his thoughts
And tasting his heat,
Waiting patiently for
Mismatched arms to meet,
Holding hands, they dance to the tune of deceit.
For a moment only, not a second more,
His heels become victim,
And he kneels to the floor.
The children dance and quietly they say,
“He is gone now, but he’ll be back someday.”
When that day breaks, they will point their blades,
And armed with their words, the serpent will be slain.

-- *Kayle Adam Yanez*

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JUST LEGAL

by Brair Weippert

In many ways the American legal system has proven it has faults. To many, these cracks are extreme cases that will likely never touch their lives. For those who experience these rare cases, it can start a life-altering domino effect in an undesired direction. It seems as though the law should be simple, black and white. Murderers go to jail, while law abiding citizens live out their goals and ambitions. Unfortunately, there is a lot of grey area one can get lost in. For me, the ongoing and increasingly popular battle to legalize marijuana led me to a crossroads between federal and state laws.

Doubt and fright were not the emotions I felt as Dave and I drove up highway 101 on my eighteenth birthday. I felt excitement and ease, and was happy to get away with the love of my life. I knew as long as I had him by my side everything would be fine; Dave had always made everything in my life okay. The lack of positive support, my lack of self-esteem, everything I lacked he filled with his overwhelming sense of pride in me. This was my turn to help and support Dave in an adventure that would help not just his life, but also our life together.

The six-hour drive was brought on by Dave's massive sixteen thousand dollar hospital bill. He had been under the effects of a drug called psilocybin, or magic mushrooms, when he suffered a stabbed kidney. That might sound crazy to most, and I agree that our lives were anything but normal, but he isn't a bad person, just someone who made a bad decision and could not handle the things he ate. This journey was not only necessary to pay bills, but also a long-needed getaway from our more than hectic lives.

From the 101, we exited at the small town of Atascadero, which was a contrast to the fast-paced life of Orange County. The town was very small, about an hour north of Santa Barbara and two hours south of San Francisco. The locals were retirees who mostly lived on farmland; the houses were very far from one another. The town consisted of knitting shops and thrift stores. The only outsiders, mostly truckers, were drawn in by the only In-N-Out for miles on the long stretch of highway.

The In-N-Out was located within a couple hundred yards of the house we occupied. When we entered the surprisingly large home on Monterey Road, we were greeted by two men who would become our roommates and, in a short time, our good friends. One was an older man named Derek, the other a chemistry major from Arroyo, John. We spent the next three weeks humbly living a small-town life. Dave and I spent the weekends watching Animal Planet and sipping whiskey. We took walks through the woods of high oaks and pine trees and watched the squirrels skitter around. When Dave was away, I filled my days working on crafts for the annual Atascadero craft show. And on several occasions, the older couple who owned the house let me join in on trimming the delicate and temperamental marijuana plants. I resented that Dave made double what I did by lazily trimming bud, while I worked my butt off to clean the owners' house. It felt unfair that I was seen as a child by the elders who surrounded me, but later I realized how lucky I was that I was not treated as an equal part in the operation. It would be crucial for me during the upcoming events.

November 5, 2008, was a day I would never have imagined. I awoke to the sun shining through our blinds, and roused Dave so we could begin the day. We drove up the windy road with the windows down while the thin, crisp mountain air chilled our skin. We blasted techno music and smoked cigarettes in between sips of thick, warm coffee. Gazing at the streets crawling with tarantulas, Dave and I talked about the future and the things we wanted to accomplish in life. I slipped my fingers into his, kissed his cheek, and told him I could go anywhere in the world with him and be more than content. We arrived at the San Fernando house at seven like on any other day. Dave opened the front door and we climbed up the stairs. When we got to the top, he kissed me softly on the lips and told me how much he would miss me. I giggled because I would only be in the next room. Dave went in the trimming room to the right as I went in the craft room to the left. Still in my pajamas, I grabbed a pillow and fell fast asleep.

I rose for the second time that day to Rebecca telling me in a shaky voice that there were officers at the front door. Prior to coming to the grow house, Dave and I had been told it was all state legal and abided with the marijuana regulations. With this in mind, I asked her if they had a search warrant and she said no. I wasn't too worried because of the information I had been told. I walked downstairs, Rebecca by my side, and watched Jack, her husband, very nervously talking to the officers. I remained composed as the officers asked that Rebecca, Dave, Derek and I sit on the other side of

the driveway, away from Jack. Jack was babbling on and on about being an ex-marine police officer, trying to defend himself with the fact that he was a good citizen who had served his country. I watched as he pathetically made himself look guilty, saying that he had papers and everything was legal before they even asked. He talked and talked but presented no papers of any kind.

I looked over at Derek and saw tears filling his eyes, and at that moment I knew something was wrong. Since Dave and I had been there such a short time and our contribution to this operation was minimal, especially me being only the cleaning lady, I was expecting leniency. I watched as they let Andrew, a trimmer who had been there years before us, free. They arrested Jack and started coming down hard on him, asking why he would let such a young girl be part of this. They were referring to me. It was then I saw tears filling Jack's eyes and beginning to fall down his face. I mouthed that it wasn't his fault and that I didn't blame him. Shockingly, I found myself in cuffs next. Although the long road I had ahead of me hadn't sunk in, being in cuffs hit a soft spot in me, and I, too, let the tears flow like a child. Then they arrested the remaining three: Rebecca, Derek and Dave. The police were methodical in their routine, pushing our heads down as we slipped into the cop car. We began our trip to the nearest jail while listening to none other than Tom Petty's "You Don't Have to Live Like a Refugee." It was as if the world was playing a joke on me.

What seemed like hours later, we arrived at San Luis Obispo County Jail. I got a mug shot taken and my fingerprints processed as they moved us through the system. I was fitted in a red jumpsuit, complete with red Crocs, and placed into a Plexiglas holding cell for eight hours. Each of our bails was set at a hundred thousand dollars. Even if I wanted to make bail, it wasn't possible. I was going to have to wait this out. Eventually, Rebecca and I were transferred into a cell containing bunk beds and twenty other inmates. I spent the next three days giving my food away after I noticed the girls took a liking to me when I did this. I wasn't given a bunk bed and instead slept in a plastic boat the size of my body on the floor, with no pillow and one very thin, itchy blanket. The only thing I consumed was coffee. Rebecca and I held each other in the corner as women who were expecting to be there much longer eyed our friendship in envy. Letting other inmates know you are weak when they have it much worse off is not a good idea in jail. The ones who did take a liking to me heard my story and assured me I would be released and probably not ever go to trial. With this, my mind began racing with possibilities, not

realizing it was a false sense of hope.

Being in jail gives you a peculiar state of mind. You are the same person you have always been, but the slow ticking minutes allow you to find joy in simple things like a conversation, and in the same moment of happiness, you look around and realize where you are. I saw the four walls that surrounded me and began feeling hopeless and trapped, like I was suffocating. The meaning of freedom finally hit me. We were allowed out once; we ate lunch on a cement floor that was surrounded from the sides to above our heads with chain link fence. Rebecca and I held each other and cried over something even the poorest can enjoy, the blue skies and sunshine. My self-worth had never fallen so low.

I spent three days in jail before being released because I had not been arraigned. All six of us were released at nine at night. We walked twenty miles, me with no shoes, into downtown San Luis Obispo. Dave and I were told to go back to Dana Point as soon as possible and wait for a letter. Dave and I attempted to resume our lives together. But, we eventually separated and I moved back in with my mom. Eight months passed with no word. Then, one morning, I woke up to ten DEA agents pointing guns at my head. They told me I was needed for questioning, but I knew better. I was being re-arrested. More surprising was that I was taken to the federal prison in Los Angeles. The lead agent informed me that the case had been turned over to the feds because there were more than three thousand plants and eighty pounds of ready product involved. Luckily, my bail was only fifty grand, and my mom was able to pay it. I was released on certain terms, the most difficult of which was not being able to contact Dave.

I am currently awaiting trial; the date is set for October 5. I could never have fathomed how hard this could be, especially emotionally. I felt like I was guilty without ever being convicted because of the terms I was given. Pre-trial probation is the same as probation, and I had always thought it was supposed to be “innocent until proven guilty.” Among other things, I lost the one thing that was most important to me: Dave. That loss has made me unstable in every aspect of my life. Most frustrating of all, six workers were never arrested. They had been there for years and actually contributed in the making of everything, while I was simply a cleaning lady.

The saying “wrong place at the wrong time” is the quote I base my life on now. This case has presented me with struggles I would never have expected. I struggle with peace of mind, knowing I don’t have freedom. I struggle with watching the man I love hold another woman instead of me. I struggle with my own happiness because of the

things I can't control. Worst of all, I never know what is coming next. The constant waiting process you must go through to be found innocent is almost unbearable. The thing that really breaks my heart is not being able to go through this with the supporter I need, Dave.

Karina Fakhrudekova
SILHOUETTE

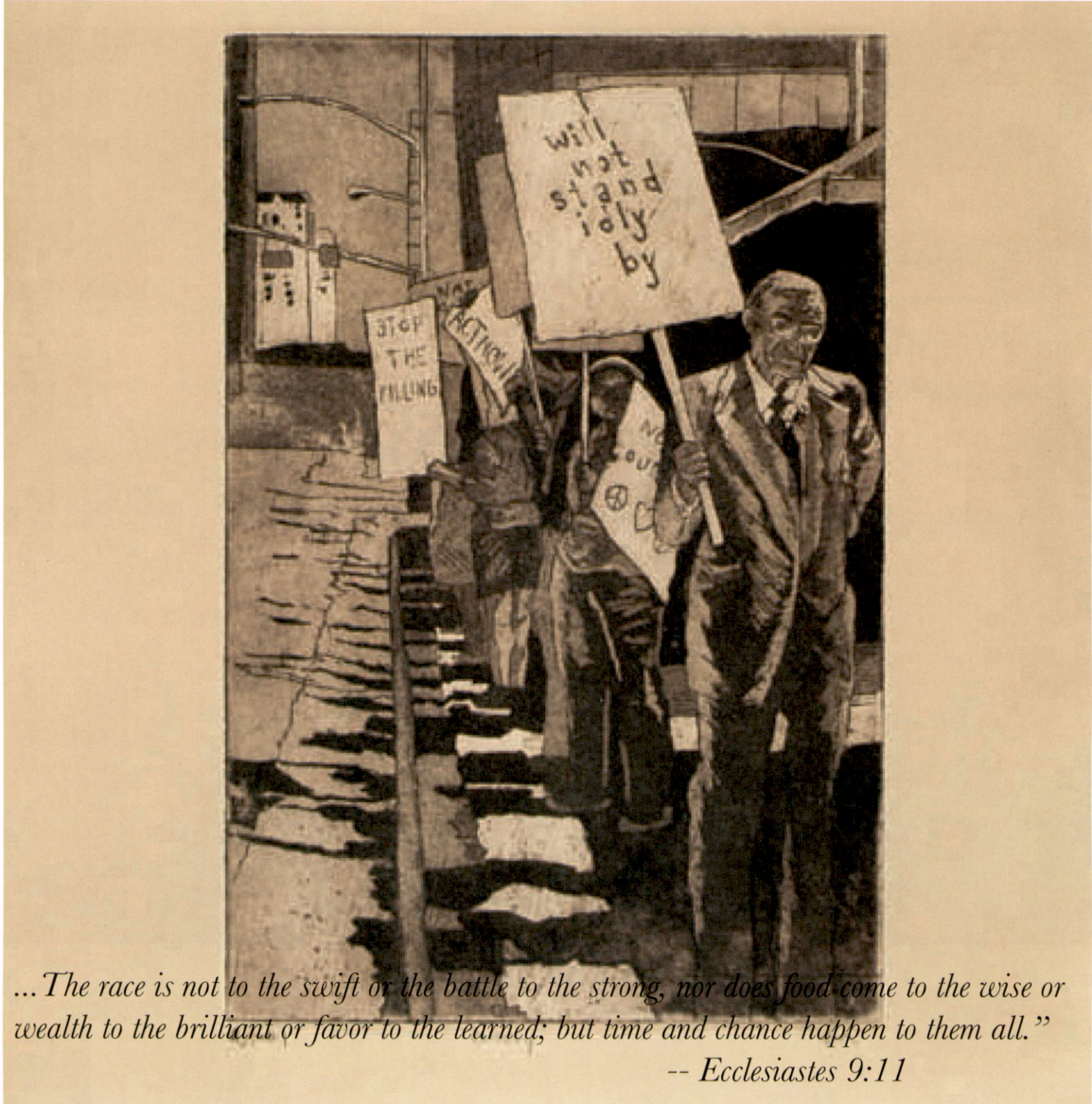


“Nothing happens unless we first dream.”

Bonnie Massey

OUTCRY

"I have seen something else under the sun:



...The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all."

-- Ecclesiastes 9:11

Heather Tribolet

BORN ON THE F.M. AIRWAVES



“Before you speak, think about what you’re trying to say.”
-- *Against Me!*

Rosa Ward
KOIS





“Colorful Harmony”

Oliver Yu

MAINSTREAM

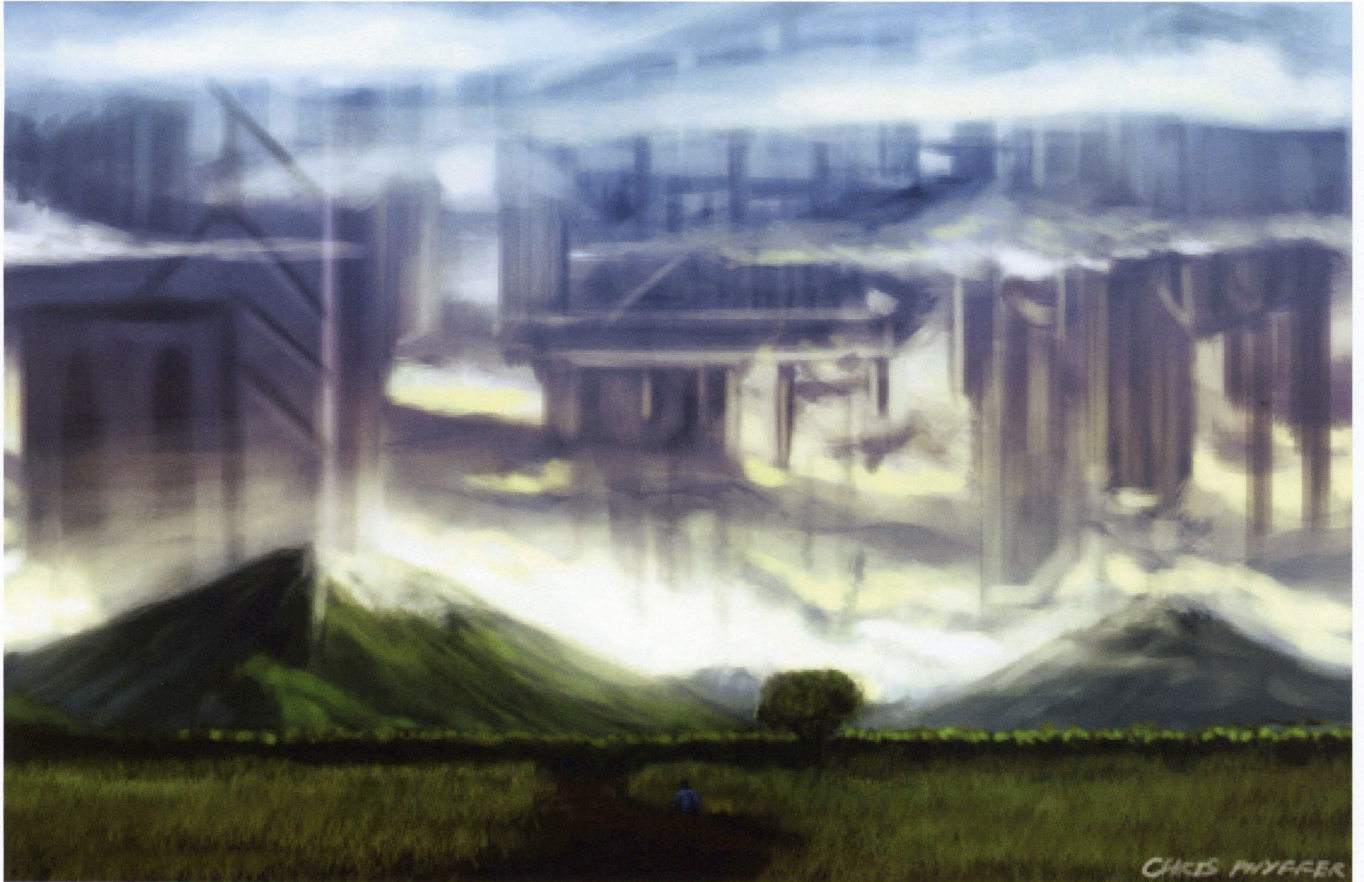


“In the desert a fountain is springing.”

-- George Gordon, Lord Byron

Chris Physter

LANDSCAPE

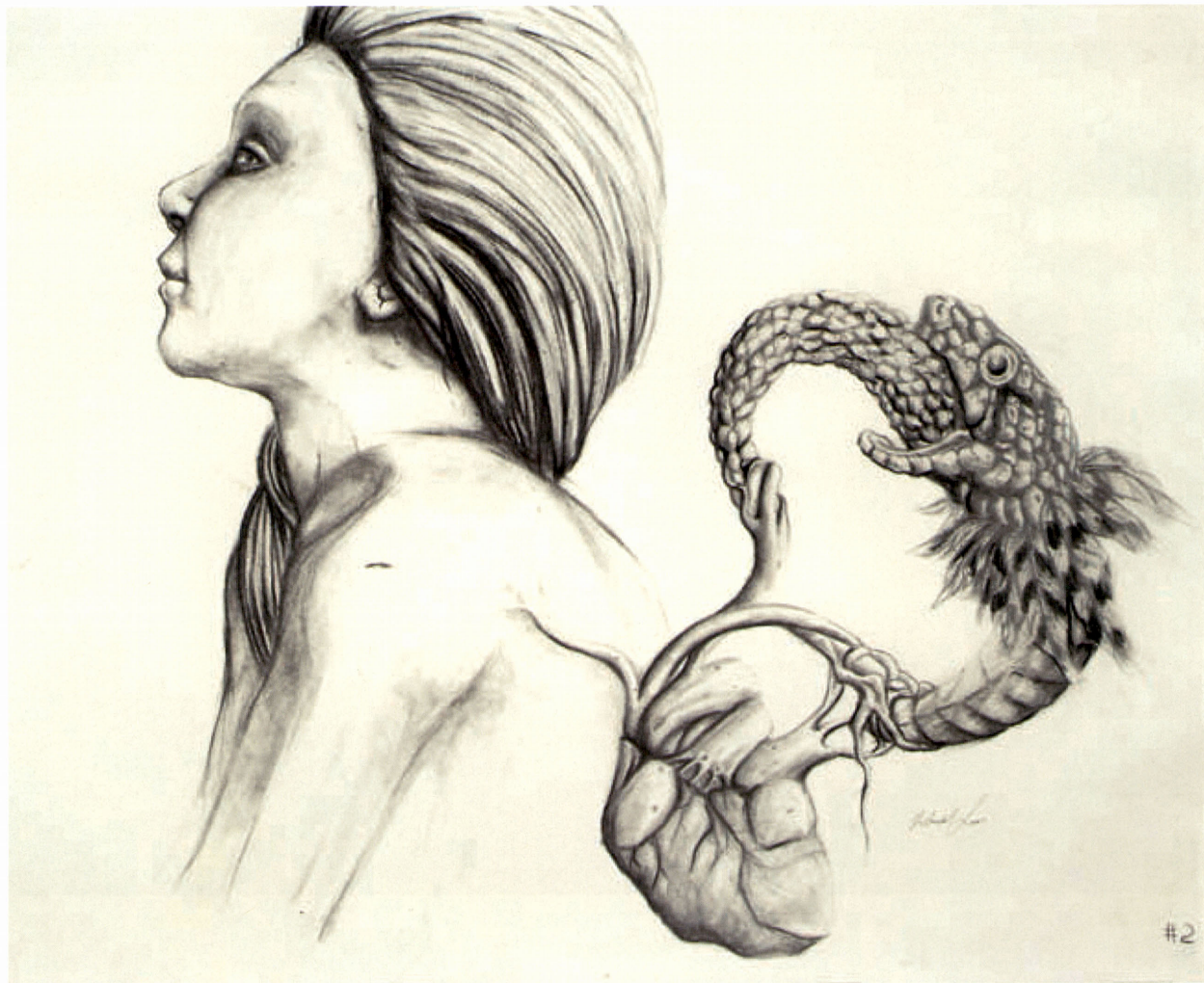


*“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of by
your philosophy.”*

-- William Shakespeare

Maribel Lopez

AZTEC SACRIFICE



“On their right, a ball of copal burns above an offering of paper.”
-- *Tudela Codex*

Stephanie Jasniy

FIGHTER



“No matter what we do, no matter what we say, we’re the song inside the tune, full of beautiful mistakes, and everywhere we go, the sun will always shine.”

-- Christina Aguilera

Heather Tribolet

AQUEOUS TRANSMISSION



“Maybe we could meet again further down the river.”

-- Incubus

Linda Ruddy

NATIVE LAND



“Those who dwell among the beauties of the earth are never alone or weary of life.”

-- Rachel Carson

Amber Adams

SLEEP AND FORM PROTECTION FROM THE RAW



“Art doesn’t transform. It just plain forms.”

-- Roy Lichtenstein

Matthew Jung
PINEAPPLE?



“There is less pineapple in the pieces of clay than in the sum of their parts.”

Linda Ruddy

TRANSITION



“There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

-- Anais Nin

Caroline Verhagen
FINAL DAYS



“Leave the real for the surreal and you will find a new dimension.”

Susan Brown-Matsumoto

INTERWEAVE



“Interweave your uniqueness with art and be your own masterpiece.”

FISH

by Megan Crothers

I'd like to flatter people, but then I'd have to worry about sincerity. Sure, I could tell you that I "loveyou too," look deep into your eyes with synthetic infatuation and say all of the things you daydreamed I would say. But, the internal hassle of justifying such a lie would wear me down, and I'm in this Life Thing for the long haul.

Got to make my sanity last.

Milk it.

I handed my dear friend a small square note. Its edges were worn and fuzzy from weeks of sliding around in my jacket pocket. In it, a lie resided, a coiled snake waiting for the moment to strike.

"I love you, Heather," he said without opening the note. Stupid. He knew what the note contained and was taking his last shot, throwing all his cards on the table. But his words were so out of character. Not carefully chosen, not well researched, not snapping at another's self esteem with biting wit and bastardly sarcasm. They were honest and abrupt. I had no idea what to do with them. They sat in my hands, blinking at me, waiting for my response. So we sat in the Land of Awkward, listening to the silence.

Social limbo.

His three words hung above us, like icicles about to fall. *I love you.* The cold night nibbled through my coat, my thick-knit sweater, my thermal undershirt, until it could find some naked human skin to roughen into gooseflesh.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just...don't."

The icicle words came crashing down on our heads and shoulders, little daggers of hope now melting in the heat of sheepish shame. Damn lofty ambitions, they scrape up your pride.

His pride.

"It's fine," he said sharply. "I'm just crazy."

"That's an understatement," I said, teasing. He did not laugh. He was unable to

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see anything that extended beyond the horizons of his moment, his pain, his rejection.

I shifted noisily on the wooden park bench. The taste of dinner crouched like stagnant water in my mouth; tuna melt, half an apple, milk. Fishy mouth, fishy words. *I love you, Heather.* They rattled around in my head, unsure of where to settle.

The kids in elementary school used to call me Fish Lips. Tonight, I was Fish Breath. I sighed, annoyed with the drawn-out silence, and watched my breath in front of me. Little white puffs of life hanging in the black air. I looked to the man next to me, the friend who had just crossed a very specific line and was now steeping in rejection. His breath rushed from his nose, then paused in front of his face, unsure of what to do with it's newfound freedom, before disappearing with the wind.

He got up off the bench, his side lifting slightly with the absence of weight. Snow crunched under his feet and he turned to face me. The misty lamplight above defined his features with droopy shadows so that all that really stood out were the whites of his eyes and his piano key teeth. Offbeat, out of tune.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll be seeing you.”

In all the old familiar places.

He knew how much I loved Billie Holiday. He knew what those musical words meant, and was using them as a weapon. Bring up the memories, then make them hurt. I just stared back at him, unsure if any reaction from me would feed his famished heartbreak. I wanted to be the hard knock that would heal, not the fix he came to for masochistic comfort. He would take anything at this point. I couldn’t be sweet or polite while still wanting to be the bubbling scar of victory over love that would later grace his heart.

“We’re still friends, right?” I said selfishly, knowing his pain and contradicting my intentions. My words hit him like bullets, each syllable driving into his body, making it tense, hardening his hurt.

“You want friendship?” he said stiffly. “You don’t want me, but you want to keep this up?”

His face now looked like a stranger’s, all eyes and teeth yelling at me in the dark. I could feel his anger like a sour taste in my mouth, and I scowled at him like a child.

“You are unbelievable,” he said, looking at me through defeated eyes.

“I just thou-”

“You led me on! You got what you wanted and led me on! Aren’t you done, or do

you want to hurt me some more?”

He was talking with his hands now, as if the movement would drive the meaning into my ears more effectively. I could hear him breathing through his nose as he lowered his arms and looked down at his feet. I suddenly felt foul, bad breath and selfishness stinking up the air around me. I just wanted to curl up and drift away from confrontation, a dead bug under a dusty bed.

“Friends don’t act the way we do,” he said, still looking down. “I can’t be your fill-in for male attention.”

“So we’re still friends?” I asked innocently.

He crouched down, looked at me eye-level, and very slowly said, “I don’t ever want to see you again, Heather. Find someone else to use.”

Then he turned and walked away.

Ooh, you’re such a bad boy. Did you come out of your mother, talkin’ that way?

Lyrics floated around in my head, daring me to run up to him, whip him around, and say them right to his pathetic puppy-dog face. They were taunting me, those lyrics, but I couldn’t succumb. His months of confused love and unmet feelings had come up like guts and vomit, hot and smelly on the frozen ground. His gutted heart was gasping for air at my feet. I watched my dear friend walk away, unopened note still in hand, waving the remnants of shattered friendship over his head like a flag.

His tiny victory.

My unmentionable loss. It was hardly noticeable in comparison to the battle gleaming on my life’s peaks, a sunrise of flickering hope and emotional gambles. I couldn’t give him a chance; my sight was closing in, suffocated by my unquenchable desire for someone else. I was in love with Alexander Clems, and that note was the reason why.

Uncooked shrimp sat in barrels, watching me with their black caviar eyes, scrutinizing my movement. I walked with legs, they swam using creepy little fins; now they were piled in a bucket, curled up like translucent puppies, waiting for The Walking to scoop them up and fry them in oil.

Next were the fish, stacked on top of one another like slimy Jenga blocks, eyes peering out through the fins like hidden camera lenses. They were all watching me.

I quickened my pace, feeling judged and stripped by the dead sea creatures. They

had had their dignity taken away by men with nets and lures, just like me, and they all knew it. They could smell it in my eyes. Tangled up in sweet netted words, lured and snared by soft touches.

I began to count my steps.

One, two, three...

The pier lumbered closer, a giant wooden finger hovering over the sea, daring to touch it.

Nine, ten, eleven...

If I could just reach the end, just let the salt lick my cheeks for a while, then maybe my memories would float away. Temporary amnesia, ocean-induced. I could forget that I had defiled a relationship, deceived a sweet man. Become a lewd stereotype in the rosy light of a perfect future.

Twenty-two, twenty-three...

The sodium wind felt like a cat's tongue, rough and thorough, cleaning my soiled conscience. I stepped onto the pier, boards arching under my weathered Doc Marten boots. Damp air wove in and out of the holes in my ripped fishnet tights, and I shoved my hands in the pockets of my navy pea coat. I stretched my fingers to the pocket corners and felt a small, folded square of paper. It was *the note*. The cowardly blow I would deliver to the one man who cared for me above all others. I clenched it in my hand until I reached the end of the pier. It felt cruel and foreign, a hot coal singeing my fingers, the skin blistering and bubbling with guilt. It was short and crude, the little note, and I rested my elbows on the painted wood railing as I unfolded it, the fiery square of paper steaming between my fingers.

Dear Friend,

I'm not ever going to have feelings for you.

Sorry.

-Heather

The note stared at me for a while, and I looked back dumbly at it. It was plain, to the point, and blunt; all that it needed to be, with no ribbons and bows to dress up the ugliness. I pulled away from the railing and began my trot home, rubbing the fateful paper between my fingers. A little square of hurt, that's all it was, and I was its eager deliverer.

"You could just let it blow away," said a man's voice behind me. I stopped, not

turning around to meet the voice's owner, just shivering beneath my coat and threadbare blue dress. The voice sounded again, accompanied by heavy steps nearing my back.

"It's a suicide note, right?" I swung around, a quick retaliation simmering on my tongue, and found my face inches from another's.

"That's a pretty rash statement," I said smoothly, not moving away from the strange face. "How dare you."

I then took a step back to survey the audacious man. He was close to my age, no more than twenty-five, with ruffled brown hair and deep-set brown eyes. Upon this first glance, I saw nothing special about him. Little did I know that this was Alexander Clems, and his seemingly mundane features would later permeate my thoughts, my words.

Alexander stood, resting his weight on one leg and pulling a wooden tobacco pipe from his pocket, void of reply. I watched him through the mist, gulls and waves and the lives of fish murmuring in the wind, as he struck a match, cradled the flame with his hand, and sucked it into the pipe. His tobacco smelled sweet and leathery, and he peered at me over the pipe as he puffed.

"So sorry, I must be mistaken," he said with a smirk. "Normally the girls that come up here, the dying ones, have it written all over them. You're the first one I've gotten wrong."

"How many have you gotten right?" I asked dryly, still annoyed.

"Twelve."

I felt my eyes widen. Twelve lives tossed into the sea, twelve futures now foaming in the crests of waves.

"It's pretty grim," Alexander continued, puffing some more from the pipe and squinting into the distance. "They never listen."

He looked back at me, eyes seemingly deeper than before.

"You would have been lucky number thirteen."

I smiled faintly and shook my head, ashamed of the conversation.

"Sorry to disappoint," I said quietly. "Although I am here on death's business."

"Killing a man?" he asked.

I sighed and put my hands on my hips, bones soggy and aching, ready to rattle on home. What did this stranger care about the destruction I was about to inflict on one of my dearest companions? I was ashamed enough already. I didn't want to answer him.

"Alright, lucky thirteen," Alexander said with a wink, "how about we work it out

over coffee?”

And so we did.

Seven months and four days since the words exchanged on the pier. I caught myself drifting back to that cloudy day as I wandered the rows at the library. Libraries had always been exciting for me, all the books whispering sweet escapes at you through their bindings, taunting you with stories and words to fill the gaps in your heart, though no glittering title seemed worthy of my pain today.

Alexander was drifting away. He was no longer smirking and joking and calling me “lucky thirteen.” There were monsters in his chest, feeding on his love, and devils dancing on his fingers as he wrote feverishly in his journal. Depression had caved in the walls of his soul, and was leaking out through his eyes, oily sadness smudging his features and soiling his face. You could see it when he looked at you, taking in the sight to his brain but not making the twelve-inch journey to his heart. Alexander was a ghost, a mannequin man going through the motions. There was no reason, no formula to decipher the rate of depression versus the rate of my love.

I was drawn, almost magnetically, to that old copy of Moby Dick. Alexander and I had spent an entire day reading it, sprawled out in the classic book section like annoying teenagers, barely flinching when people had to step over our outstretched legs. We later signed our names in hidden places; my initials looping around page thirteen, his in the margin of page twelve. I pulled the book from the shelf and flipped to our markings, the nostalgic pencil letters barely visible. They were monuments to the untrained heart, the irrational mind. We had devoured each other too quickly, not able to digest our time together without a stomachache. I snapped the book shut, my eyes stinging with the pain of Alexander’s slow fade from my life.

“I don’t want any damn optimism!” Nine months since the pier, the note. Alexander threw the inspirational book I had gotten him out the window and into the rain. “I don’t want that fucking plastic cheer that you bought for \$14.99 in the Barnes and Noble self-help section.”

My cheeks were burning, stomach swimming. I had thought it would help, but he wanted his depression. It was precious to him, a comfortable blanket to burrow in. He was too much of a realist, and wanted to see himself in the harsh glare of reality. “Forget

La Vie En Rose,” he once told me. “Forget rose-tinted glasses. It’s a façade, Heather.” It should have been evident to me then that something foul was creeping up on him, fishy slime inching up his limbs. An imposter planted the seeds of poison in the willing soil of his once unpolluted mind.

Alexander stomped back out to the porch, sitting heavily in the creaky wooden chair. He had been there for days, soaking in his mood and the wet weather.

His eyes had once been both tame and wild, calculated mannerisms barely fastening over the spontaneity convulsing under his skin. They were full of those two aching traits, swimming in circles like our clothes in the dryer. I had counted on those eyes, but now they lacked anything. No steaming shirts and sweaters circling the irises. Instead, the world and its cruel riddles snaked around his sockets, beastly and hungering. Feeding on his mind and greedily spoiling the things I had come to count on seeing.

I walked out to the side of the house and plucked the discarded book from the mud. It seemed so futile, a book, yet it had smelled so strongly of hope, not only for Alexander, but for me as well. I quietly floated back inside, setting the book on the scrubbed wooden table and leaning against the porch doorframe.

Alexander sat on the porch, brooding and damp, not remotely mindful of the rain or the cold. His thin body shuddered every so often under the sheer fabric of his t-shirt, long sinewy legs twitching, like a sputtering engine. Then he would settle again, perfectly still and staring. I watched him lift his pipe to his mouth, sucking the smoke and then letting it trickle from his nostrils like a dwindling bloody nose. He was nowhere now, and yet my fascination with him still lingered. I wanted to grasp his mind, shake it between my hands and demand what it thought it was doing.

Where he thought he was going.

But my presence seemed to aggravate him. His back bristled when I passed, and his eyes retreated further back, nestling into darkness and gazing out from their weepy posts. He just slouched in those chairs, the ones we had found curbside waiting for two vagrant lovers to pick them up. Those were the days when his eyes were easy to set ablaze: a dusty hardback, a photograph, or my body next to him in the morning. Now he slept on the couch, his leaky hiding place stowed deep under the faltering constructs of our love.

He inhaled again, the pipe quivering slightly with the rainy breeze. I wrapped my coat around me more tightly, whether to stave off the breeze or the sting of his mental

absence, I couldn't decide.

The wind coiled around my neck and down the doorframe. It smelled oily and metallic, filling the crevices of my senses like plaster. I wondered if Alexander could smell it too. Wondered if the scent was enough to ground him again, just for a few minutes. Just long enough to realize that I had slipped away from the doorframe and was now sitting beside him, holding his hand, secretly helping him to fight the demons crouching behind him. The rain intensified, screaming down on the thin rooftop with a soul-wrenching cry.

Tears from heaven.

Then, in the middle of the noise and woeful weeping of the clouds, Alexander tightened his grip on my hand. I looked over at him, watching as the eyes slowly surfaced from beneath the sludge. I could feel his pulse in his hand, warm and electric and swimming through his veins. He turned his head slightly towards me, eyes not fully facing mine, and said quietly, "Can you smell the rain?"

I began to cry, tangles of emotion swimming out of my eyes like schools of smelly fishes, weaving through the sea of my freckles in silvery packs. They were free; escaped from the nets, dodging the lures, and nudging my heart, reminding me that the desperate wails of love can do things; maybe even great things. Songs and lyrics danced around in my mind, rejoicing, confused, but moving.

I live off love. I feed off love. I breathe off love. I think of love. I drink of love. I sink in love. And in the middle of the night I need my love. I need to grieve and need to need and be in love.

He was my love. I had met him by some glorious chance, a flickering abnormality of schedules, a morbid first conversation. I would never let the sea take him, not with the nets and lures of my feelings. My Alexander Clems would never succumb to the pier and be lucky number thirteen. That was my title.

THE LAST FAREWELL

by Sherri Ahrar

It is so hard to say goodbye to someone whom you know you are not going to see again. I had never given much thought to how I would say goodbye to my grandmother. I never imagined that it would be like this. I had to move to another country to join the rest of my family and live there for the rest of my life, somewhere so far from her house and warm hands.

The parting took place in a city named Shiraz, in Iran, in a big complex for low-income people where most of the residents were the elderly or single mothers. She lived in one of those cozy apartments and kept it very neat and clean. It was on the first floor because she had difficulty with walking up stairs. There were kids all over the place in the complex, always reminding me of a kindergarten with no teacher. The entrance to her apartment had an extra security door made out of iron rods, which made the building look like a prison. When she opened the door, I did not have the heart to go in.

Something touched me deep inside, the knowledge that it was the last visit, and I think she had the same feeling. She was standing by the doorway of her apartment, holding in one hand a bowl of water that had a green leaf floating in it, and our Holy Book in her other hand, as was custom. She looked so tired and sad but she was standing like a mountain, strong and firm. She held me so tight and said, "I know you have to go, my dear. Don't worry about me. I will be fine." I could see loneliness in her eyes, but I could not say even one word. It was so hard for me to say goodbye.

I closed my eyes and remembered when I was a little child and how I would enjoy listening to her stories while eating the scrambled eggs she made me with a loaf of fresh, hot bread and a cup of very sweet tea. That was the most joyful time of my life. I could still picture it in my mind.

She had my hands and I whispered in her ear, "I love you, Grandma. I will always love you and keep you in my heart."

It was so cold and the warmth of her body made me warm. I did not want to leave her. I wished I could stay in her arms forever. I started to cry and could not stop. The

Bassem

ocean that would stretch between us began to widen before my eyes. Oh my God, it was time to say goodbye. I kissed her on her cheeks, and she did the same to me. I promised to come back soon, but I knew that it was not going to happen. She raised the Holy Book in her hand and ensured my health by making me pass underneath it three times. I kissed the book each time I passed. "God bless you, my sweetheart," she said. I looked at her kind face, light skin, and her lovely, gray, long hair. Her eyes looked smaller since she no longer wore glasses. Since she had eye surgery, she used contact lenses. Her long dress with big blue buttons was like a very nice, warm shelter for me in that cold weather, and I tried to remember everything about her forever in my mind.

"Tell your mom I know why she had to leave me and go over there. I know that she has to take care of your sister's new baby; but tell her I'm waiting for her to come back. I want her to be by my side when my time to leave comes around," she said.

"No, Grandma, you will never leave us. We will be together again. I promise you," I cried. Then I released her hands and left her. I turned around and looked behind my shoulder every two seconds. She threw water on the ground after me as a symbol of hope that the passenger would return one day. I felt like I was not moving forward. It was the hardest experience that I had ever gone through. I felt like I was carrying all the sorrows of the world on my shoulders.

My grandmother passed away a few months later with my mother by her side, but I did not get the chance to be there. I still think of her as if she is alive and waiting for me to come back to Iran. I am going to live with all the good memories of her in my mind, and I will love her forever.

CRAWL

Joyous lush mountain hike through my head,
Alongside this incessant labor of love. Persistent
Steam train, what do you ask of me?
Overwhelming, excessive creativity spins
Like a spider. All of this crawls through my
Cerebellum, vanquishing any hints or chances
Of listlessness. Creation juts out and erupts from
My mind to the earth; teeming, springing with
New life. Brilliance exploding within my mind,
Like fireworks and helium filled balloons
Within my mental crevice.
Synapses firing, mushroom clouds
Partake in all new connections. A vicious,
Ramped, rapid fire connection uptakes and partakes
My mind to fresh life realities,
After the mayhem and Manhattan dust settles.

-- *Alex Burrow*

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DUTCH'S ZERO

by Bret Ziegler

An older gentleman stood quietly behind a podium in a black suit. The midday sun warmed his broad shoulders and a gentle breeze tugged at his gray hair. He retrieved a pair of glasses from a breast pocket and perched them on his nose. Looking down at his notes, he took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

“Most of you knew Dad as a wise leader, a knowledgeable teacher, a faithful Marine and a dependable friend. But to Ricky and me, he was a devoted father and a modest hero.”

“Zero’s at three o’clock low, ‘bout a mile,” Dutch’s wingman’s voice crackled over the radio. Dutch turned his head and eyes to the right. Just below were four Japanese Zero fighters. They were hedging the clouds and heading away from Dutch and his flight of four Corsairs.

“Tally ho,” Dutch acknowledged, “I have a visual. Climb to twelve K.” He began a course to intercept the Zeroes from above and behind, using the sun and surprise to their advantage.

Major Hans Van Dorland, or “Dutch,” was a Pearl Harbor survivor. He was stationed at Ewa, Hawaii, during the attack. All of his squadron’s aircraft were destroyed or heavily damaged on the initial wave of the Japanese assault on the outlying airfield on Oahu. Dutch and most of his fellow pilots were reassigned to other squadrons after Pearl Harbor. Two years later, he found himself executive officer at twenty-eight years old. He was considered an “old man” by the new Lieutenants who comprised most of the aviators in the Marine Corps in 1943. The other pilots in his current flight felt that Dutch was the best pilot in the squadron; Dutch had four kills, more than anyone else in the outfit. He knew what he was doing.

“When I was eleven, Dad helped my brother Ricky and me build our own soap box derby cars. Dad brought some wood and wheels, and guided us through putting it



all together without smashing our thumbs with hammers. In the end, our 'racers' looked almost identical except for the paint jobs. On race day, Ricky and I won our heats until we met up in the final race with three other kids. I knew I had the advantage; after all, I was bigger, heavier and more experienced.

"The starting flag waved and the five of us slowly rolled off the starting line. Within a hundred feet, I had a car-length lead on Ricky. Then, half way, he had closed the lead to less than a couple feet. We hit the bottom of the hill and were neck-and-neck with fifty feet to the checkered flag. We crossed the finish line nearly simultaneously and Uncle Virgil snapped a picture."

Descending at four hundred knots, Dutch fired a burst at the rearmost Zero in the formation. The tracers passed wide left. He shot another burst, closer, but still wide left. The targeted Zero lurched upward and flipped to the right. Dutch and his wingman followed it, peeling down and away from the other Zeroes. It was out of his gun sights. Dutch tossed and rolled to gain the ability to hit the target. Diving, the Zero swung right, then left, and then right again attempting to shake Dutch and his wingman. Dutch watched patiently and throttled back slightly; he didn't want to overtake his prey. Then, descending through four thousand feet, the target turned hard left. The Zero neared his cockpit crosshairs. He shot a long burst. Simultaneously, his wingman shot a burst. The target erupted in smoke and started a lazy twisting dive into the sea below.

"The race officials consulted one another and ruled Ricky the winner. Naturally, I was devastated.

Dad said, 'Good race' and urged me to shake Ricky's hand. As I held out my hand, Ricky looked up at me with a proud, toothy smile. Instead, he gave me a big hug and thanked me as if I had given him the trophy. It was nice to see him so happy, even though I thought I'd won."

Dutch and his wingman rejoined the other Corsairs as the remaining Zeroes fled to the north. Dutch and his fellow pilots landed at Bougainville, pleased that one more enemy airplane was shot down. The men assembled in the ready room after turning in their gear and flight logs.

"Lieutenant Price, what the hell were you doing? You were supposed to be

covering me. Did you scan to see if anyone followed us down?" Dutch asked, frustrated by the lieutenant's lack of self-control and disregard of safty protocol.

"That Jap was dancing in my crosshairs, so I zapped him. I figured you were out of position and I didn't want to let him to get away."

"You were *my* wingman; you were supposed to watch *our* backs, not shoot at the target."

"I know, sir. But I was right there and he looked like a fat turkey."

"Lieutenant Price, this ain't your war to fight alone and we can't afford to lose you, or anyone else. We trust you to play by the rules. You pull that crap again and you're grounded!"

"A week later, Dad asked me to meet him in front of the fireplace, where he showed me the picture Uncle Virgil had taken at the race. It showed I had edged out Ricky for the win, barely. He smiled and said, 'This shows something different than everyone thinks,' and he pointed to Ricky's trophy on the mantle. 'See that trophy? It means a great deal to Ricky. You know showing him this picture might make things right for you, but what will it do for him?'

"He handed me the picture. I looked at it closely. *I did win the race*, I thought, *but Ricky has never won anything*. I tossed the picture into the smoldering fire and watched it burn. It was the right thing to do. Dad smiled bigger than I have ever seen and gave me a bear hug."

The following day, Dutch and the Lieutenant were assigned to patrol the same Japanese shipping corridor. On the way to the flight line, a corporal from the intelligence tent asked for the men to watch the gun film from the day before. Dutch was out of time and told the Corporal he would meet with him when they returned from their mission.

The flight of four Corsairs took off and climbed to eight thousand feet, heading northwest. The sky was clear. White, puffy clouds masked the tropical islands below. Twelve miles from the northern tip of Bougainville with ten minutes of fuel available, the Lieutenant spotted four aircraft headed south, possible Zeroes.

"Bandits, five o'clock!"

"Son of a bitch," Dutch muttered under his breath. He quickly looked over his left shoulder. "Zeroes." He commanded the flight to engage the Japanese aircraft and

watch their fuel. Head-to-head, Dutch and the lieutenant passed a Zero within fifty feet. A second Zero passed just overhead as they turned to catch the first. With the stick pulled back and hard left, Dutch glanced back to look for the lieutenant. From the corner of his eye, he saw a stream of tracers run through the wings and fuselage of his wingman's aircraft. Smoke erupted from the engine. Parts of his cowling peeled off into the slipstream. As Dutch continued his climbing turn, a third Zero shot past him in pursuit of the disabled Corsair.

“Bail out! Bail out!”

Dutch began a dive to pursue the Zero on the lieutenant's tail. The smoke from the crippled aircraft was a disheartening trail to follow. The Major barreled down through two thousand feet. Approaching the cloud tops, he lost sight of the lieutenant and the pursuing Zero in the mist of the clouds. His fuel gauge was dropping faster than his altimeter; Dutch knew he had only seconds to search for the Lieutenant and Zero before he had to pull out and head home. He punched through the bottom of the clouds and saw the disabled Corsair on fire and in a steep dive. The plane hit the waves sending rotten whitewater skyward. He scanned the area. No Zero. And no chute.

Dutch landed at the airfield and his engine sputtered as he taxied back to the tarmac. He headed toward the ready-room tent and was again intercepted by the corporal from intelligence. “Sir,” he called for Dutch's attention.

“Corporal Lewis, I know what you're going to say and I think it would be best to leave it be.”

“Sir?”

“You think you got things mixed up, right?”

“But that kill yesterday? You're an ace.”

“Corporal, Lieutenant Price was someone's son and somewhere soon his parents will suffer a heartbreaking loss.” He paused and looked the Marine in the eye. “Leave it be. It's the right thing to do.”

“In '91 I had the privilege of accompanying Dad to a reunion of his war buddies. I met many of the individuals Dad talked about over the years. In one conversation, a squadron mate of Dad's told me about a mix-up that occurred when Dad was in the Solomon Islands, flying missions against the Japanese. The man told me Dad shot down a fifth airplane, but never took credit. This denied Dad the distinction of being called an

ace.

“I asked why he never accepted recognition for the shoot-down. He said it was ‘a trophy on someone else’s mantle’ and ‘it meant a great deal more to him than me.’ He knew it wouldn’t change the outcome of the war or make him a better pilot, Marine or man.

“Dad was many things to many people over his lifetime, but to me he was and always will be an ace.”

The man removed his glasses and tucked them away into his jacket pocket. He was met with an embrace from another older gentleman as he stepped away from the podium.

Ricky donned his trademark toothy grin and softly said, “Thank you, Andy, but my first big win was being born your brother.”

TAP, TAP, TAP YOUR STAPLES

by Jane Burke

“Staples in their ears,” was all I heard the nurses talk about in the break room. Two nurses had lost ten pounds by this acupuncture method. I laughed at them at first but finally began to listen and became a believer in this unique way to lose weight. A hundred dollars; fifty dollars per ear was the cost. Tap the staples five minutes before eating, and they will act as an acupuncture method, diminishing your appetite. It sounded a little wacky, but I found myself dialing the doctor and getting an appointment. His office was in the basement of a medical building. When I arrived, I had to pass people sitting on the steps outside—all the way down to the door of his office. Inside his office, at least twenty more people sat in chairs lining the walls to the nurse’s station. I felt all eyes on me as I checked in. I imagined they would keep track that I went back out to the steps to wait my turn. After giving the clerk my information and my Visa, I scurried back outside to sit on the stoop until a stair became available. I began to feel a little more confident that this method must have merit. Surely all these people couldn’t be wrong. I struck up a conversation with a chubby lady on the stair ahead of me. “How do you like this doctor? Do you think this thing works?” Three people chimed in for her. As I heard different reports of the success of this method, my enthusiasm increased. Each one extolled the wonders of acupuncture. By the time I snaked my way down the steps, around the room, and to the exam room, I was willing to have the doctor stick a staple in my eye to achieve these great results.

Dr. Chung looked very professional in his immaculate lab coat. I purposely came in my nurse’s uniform to see if I could possibly work out a professional discount. I attempted to get control of the situation by telling him I did not believe in his method. I informed him that I was not going to be one of those who would tap, tap, tap, on staples and then starve myself to give him good results. I looked him square in the eye and said, “I am willing to pay you fifty dollars instead of the one hundred. Twenty-five per ear, and I promise to faithfully follow the tapping routine and if I lose the weight agreed upon, I’ll pay you the other fifty. It will be a plus for you, because as a fellow professional, people

will believe me and want to come to you.” He stared at me for a moment and then to my amazement nodded his head that he would agree to this bargain.

On the wall next to the reclining chair was a huge poster of an ear. He took a pointer and pointed to the various parts of the ear, saying that the ear is a microcosm of the human body. “Picture a baby lying in a fetal position in this ear.” He went on. “I plan to put a staple in your ear where your stomach is located hypothetically. When you are five minutes from eating a meal, you tap the staples, which will activate the acupuncture property, and your stomach will feel queasy so that you won’t feel like eating.” That sounded logical to me. I assured him I would do my part by tapping the staples for the required five minutes but absolutely would not pretend to feel anything that I truly didn’t experience.

When he turned my head to the side, I saw the staple gun, which looked like a regular staple gun, and then all of a sudden, BAM into my right ear. It hurt. My nose started running and tears came to my eyes. He repeated the procedure on the left ear, BAM again. My nose and eyes were flowing. He looked sympathetic and said, “In another hour or so it will stop hurting, but don’t forget to tap.” As I was hurriedly ushered out of the room, I tried to compose myself. I am not good with pain, but I felt it was rather unseemly to be seen crying while in a nurse’s uniform.

It was dinnertime by the time I arrived home, but I couldn’t bring myself to touch my ears, much less tap them. My husband and children were seated around the dinner table looking at me as I came into the room. I decided not to tell them about the routine I would be following. I needed sympathy, not their clever, witty remarks that I knew would be forthcoming. I stared them all down and went to my room in silent suffering. In bed that night, I had to lie on my back so my sore ears wouldn’t touch anything.

The next day my ears were still sore but I carefully checked my watch and started tapping my staples for the full five minutes. I quickly discovered that five minutes is a long time when you’re sitting with your elbows on the table tapping at your ears. Ignoring the looks that I was getting from the kids, I ate a larger breakfast than I usually consumed as I had had no supper. In spite of all the tapping, my appetite was just fine. I experienced no queasiness or nausea. The days and weeks went by with me faithfully tapping on my ears before each meal. On the way home from work was the most difficult time. Holding on to the steering wheel, I would tap one ear at a time. This took a total of ten minutes. However, when I arrived home, I was starving and everything I could get my

hands on was consumed without a pang of queasiness. The tapping wasn't working.

After a month, I went back to Dr. Chung. I hadn't lost a pound. It might have been the clothes I was wearing, but the scale showed a half pound gain. Dr. Chung didn't seem too surprised. "Sometimes I miss the stomach when I put in the staples. I will remove them and put them in a different location." The staple removal hurt as much as the insertion. But BAM, BAM and I had two new staples. This time the anticipation made the pain even more acute.

Another month went by and, I have to confess, I wasn't as faithful about the tapping for the full five minutes. I never felt queasy at all, nor did I lose my appetite. At my next appointment, Dr. Chung saw that the needle on the scale hadn't budged. He painfully removed the staples and somehow convinced me to try one more thing. He showed me on the ear chart the place where my liver was located. "Now, after you tap and activate the staples, you will feel bilious and nauseous because of the liver involvement." BAM, BAM. I had staples where my liver was located. I knew when I left his office that this time—regardless if I was bilious, nauseous, or queasy—whether I lost or gained weight, I would never wind my way down those steps and into that chair again. In the following months, I tapped more or less faithfully, with absolutely no results. I had no nausea or biliousness. I quit tapping. I told my husband I planned to die with the staples in my ears. "Just be sure to have my hair down over my ears when I'm in the casket," I said. I don't want people to see them and start blabbing about the staples when they could say nice things about me.

Two months went by and one of the staples worked its way out. The other staple was dangling half out. One morning, I was in the tub bathing before going to work. As I washed my ear, a washcloth thread got hooked on the staple. It hurt so much to move the cloth. I had to hang on to it. I tried not to panic, but I couldn't figure out how I was going to get out of the tub and dressed while holding the cloth in place. I heard my husband at the front door leaving for the office. I yelled, "Honey, Help! Don't go yet! I've got a wash cloth stuck in my ear." There was a silence, but I knew he had heard me. He came in the bathroom with his overcoat still on. As he was bending over the tub, he started a harangue about the stupid things I did, how gullible I was, and how I fell for every cockeyed idea that comes along. All through this diatribe he tried to unhook the thread of the cloth. I didn't care what he was saying. I tried to help him by holding the cloth in place. After a few yelps out of me, he finally got it unhooked and took off, out of the room. I was

relieved, but the whole process made my nose run.

Maybe it's a throwback to this incident, but I have to avoid using staple guns. They make my nose run. Perhaps it is a bit of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Recently, I heard that RMDC (Rapid Eye Movement Therapy) is a new remedy for PTSS. Maybe I should try it.

ZOMBIES

The last weary train sheers into the station,
Children gushing from its rusty gates.
Sound tangling in the grubby mist,
their furor indistinct.
Bright trenches of Autumn flicker:
A smoker's lighter, low on fuel.

Two pairs of boots thumping.
Two hands swinging at the hips.
One large with hair on the knuckles,
One small, perfectly kept.
Neither keeping the other.

The pill bottle coaxing from her purse
rattles like an anxious toddler.
Her husband's mind wanders to the bottle;
Not the sound—
the bubbles
and the chugs.

His mouth waters.

He stares at her, then his ring.
Their color drained
like film noir.

Mr.? Are you okay?

-- Evan Westendorf

THE DEAD STARE

by Jason Henderson

As obvious as it might seem, death is truly paralyzing to witness. To stare into her lifeless form slowed my life to a crawl. Were there a moment of nothingness—an opportunity to grasp and concede it—it would have been then, looking into my wife’s motionless face. The body seemed so secure and rigid, makeup decorating her cold, pale face. I was aware of it all: the cool of the setting sun, the figures robed in black and masked in mourning, down to the smallest detail. How does one truly begin to describe such a feeling, place, and gathering of people? How do I, in the face of the abyss, overcome such an immense gravity, one that consumes everything indifferently like a voracious, eyeless maw?

To say I feel is to equate a measure of color into the void that my thoughts have become. I am revisited by a dream from long ago. Alone in a room, without doors or windows as a source of light, I remember discovering what felt like a paint brush in my right hand, an unidentifiable plasma dripping from its rough bristles. The substance seemed to have neither form nor dimension. Heavy gobs of liquid began to rise toward what I assumed was the ceiling before fading away, with just as much of the stuff left on the brush as before. I reached out ahead of me, began to move it up and down in the darkness. With each brush stroke, a streak of light cut into the room until I was surrounded with colors so immense that I became indistinguishable and formless.

I awoke confused but turned to see my wife as she lay next to me, her familiar beauty assuring me I was safe in bed. She would comfort me later as we sipped coffee and watched the sun rise, glowing with lively radiation.

That morning seems chillingly familiar to me now. I feel as though I am indistinguishable and formless, but there are no colors, just an unfeeling gray chill. *Where is my love for her now?* I could no longer place it in my heart. My love was far away.

The chapel was filled with chatter, mostly about the stale smell of dust and wool that permeated the air. Its architecture was hardly comforting or soft. The traditional Gothic iron of ritualized designs stuck out jagged and erect against a cold granite floor.

essays

The light shining from the stained glass was a faded-out phantom of its former brilliance, somehow refusing to enter completely so as not to disturb the pool of stillness beneath. Dormant laid its foundation, tread upon by many feet, heavier because of their grief. She would have made fun of such a place, her laughter painting my face with a wry grin. Instead, I wear this grim look.

Some point during the ceremony I noticed things began to change around me and I was called to carry the casket. It was heavy, familiar and yet foreign. I could not help but grit my teeth at the irony of dead weight, and yet I couldn't figure out who was heavier.

The other men and I watched our steps as we hauled her beautifully ornate oaken cell over a rising grassy knoll. The men were friends and family. I noticed their concerned faces with quiet glances, but I refused to meet eyes with them; instead, I stared at the ground. As the men and I continued, we carefully watched our step, proceeding over a rising grassy knoll. Except for our entourage, the slopes of the resting graveyard remained lifeless and still. For what seemed a moment, we at last reached the pit, that dark hole of no return.

My wife's mother wore no veil over her face but continued to display a hardened pride, a mask of stubborn refusal to be pained over such circumstances. She was alone that day, her husband having left this world not long before. Occasionally, I would meet her eyes boring into me, searching my mind for her lost daughter. I wondered if she were there or if, instead, my love had become a black hole, imperceptible yet all devouring. As we lowered the decorated box into the pit, I saw my best friend, whose eyes had begun to tear. He was always the golden boy, the muscled and athletic, yet strangely innocent one. Rarely had he suffered anything, and so he retained a healthy and positive outlook on life. I was, on the contrary, the opposite, having suffered everything in the family, having hardened my inner self, not with prejudices or passions, but with reason and faith. At times, he would remind me of her, of my wife, in his tenderness and joy of life. Sometimes I found myself envying him but only sometimes.

The priest, a superbly athletic and fit individual, had known me personally. We would often run into each other at the gym we frequented. He was a handsome Mexican, and my best friend and I always joked that were it not for God's calling, our priest might have turned out to be an actor in pornographic films. Now, however, I could not really recall those things in a clear light. My eyes grew hazy and things distorted in interesting

fluctuations. As roses and other colorful flowers were tossed and dropped onto the casket, I felt the lonesome pit in front of me grow from within. The diggers soon appeared to seal the box underground forever. I watched, as one after another, shovels of dark soil dirtied the once immaculate coffin. I could not help but feel that for every load of dirt heaped into the pit, I was doing the same inside, heaping mounds of earth and tissue into a gaping wound in an attempt to close it up. I knew this was the beginning of a long, dreary road—a road that I had to walk alone.

ZEUS'S DANCE

by Douglas Close

Kevin's right hand hurt as he wrapped the appendage with the long, tan, cloth strip, moving it between each pair of fingers, pulling it back slowly and then between the next set, wrapping the finger, each in its turn. He made sure to keep the strip taut while continuing around his knuckles and up then once more over his hand. Finally, he ended the wrap around his wrist, as Glen had taught him over the past four months.

Kevin picked up his glasses, holding them up close to his face with care as he reviewed his work. *Not bad*, he thought, reaching over and slipping on the padded glove from the table, noticing its dark patina and the pungent smell of worn leather and fermented sweat.

Glen, his boxing instructor, was walking toward him. "Let me help you get the gloves on." He lifted Kevin's arm and tied on the glove, quickly followed by sliding on and tying the other. "Nothing is as bad as our imagination makes it out to be, Kevin. You'll live through this. I promise."

Kevin looked up at his coach, who blotted out the sun with his wild carrot top of frizzy red hair. He was covered with freckles and had a slow smile, which made him look much younger than his forty-five years. To Kevin, it presented quite the visual image: not like a boxer at all. More like a boxing scientist, which was pretty weird, especially since Glen was also his music teacher.

A boxing music teacher. All Glen was missing was his lab-coat, and all those myths about Zeus, Thor and the gods. Did that sound normal? *I'm going to get killed*, he thought to himself.

Why did my parents make me do this? I'm only thirteen, he thought. He wondered if his parents would grieve over his dead body.

Leaning close to Kevin's face, Glen spoke softly. "It will be all right. You'll do fine. Let's get up into the ring."

Kevin saw Lars Beindorf for the first time. Lars was just entering the ring, accompanied by his dad. To Kevin, his opponent looked like a bearded teenage

Neanderthal in boxing shorts.

Who would name their kid "Lars?" Are they out of their minds? Kevin thought. *I'm going to die.*

A spike of fear welled up from his gut, shot out through his arms to the tips of his fingers. He wished he was back in his room reading a book. He wanted to be a writer, not a warrior.

His anger surfaced at the sight of Mr. Beindorf. *Where's my dad?* He thought. But anger was soon to be replaced by another surge of fear, which had become a familiar companion lately.

Home was hell. Butch was there. His half-brother was four years older and just as abusive as the rest of them. He was bigger, not good in school, getting into trouble, kicked out for fighting and, of course, he couldn't stand the sight of his younger brother.

It didn't seem to matter. In fact, now that he thought of it, nothing seemed to matter or make sense anymore. All he wanted to do was sleep.

Kevin slowly entered the ring and collapsed on the stool in the corner. The sun beat down, hurting his eyes. His coach came over and made sure his mouthpiece was in. "Don't give him a chance, and remember what I taught you. Especially the songs of Zeus," Glen whispered.

Kevin tried to remember what it was that Glen was talking about, but his fear was spiking as usual. He barely heard Glen. Kevin looked up and all he saw of his coach was a looming figure, the noon sun behind him with the sun's corona around his head, causing him to look at that moment like a god with hair of fire. Then, Kevin heard the words as if from far away. "It's okay. No matter what happens, remember not to judge. It will be okay. Remember the songs."

The two teenagers met in the ring with Glen in the middle as the referee. Lars looked better close up: not a ten story building or a Neanderthal, more human somehow, smaller. Glen checked the gloves, said, "Fight fair, boys," and backed away.

The bell rang. Kevin just stood there, arms at his side. His feet were mired in concrete as he tried to remember what Glen had said. Lars took his time but closed in, getting closer with each step. Kevin broke and ran around the ring.

"Don't run!" Glen shouted. "Stand—move from side to side. Get your arms up!"

Lars was grinning from ear to ear, showing off his teeth, which Kevin thought might be steel. *What kind of teenager has metal teeth?* Kevin glanced back, and saw they

were not really steel, just stained dark with nicotine.

His fear was piercing his chest, making his breathing labored. Lars closed in, dropped his left shoulder, and let fly with a straight right-hand punch to Kevin's face, knocking his head back, causing blood to fly out his nose. Tears welling up in his eyes, Kevin tried to keep Lars at bay with his hands up, quickly backing away. In the background, Kevin heard Glen's voice. *He was singing! What was that?* Now he knew Glen was nuts.

Mr. Biendorf shouted, "That's five dollars for every punch in the nose!" Lars moved in quickly, aiming for Kevin's nose, trying to lay out his punches and planning his next move. Something was a little different this time. Something was about to happen. Kevin could feel it.

Lars let his punch fly. Kevin expected it to make contact, followed by the pain of the impact. Except he wasn't there to receive it. *What's this?* He had moved.

He was in the middle of the ring, dancing from side to side like a crazed man on a pogo stick. He knew he had moved automatically, without thinking. *What was it? How did I know to move?* He continued his dance, foot to foot, breathing better now with his elbows in.

Lars moved in, this time raising his fists slowly up. He struck again, letting a punch fly. "Wham!" Kevin mentally felt the hit, but that's all it was. *Missed!* Lars turned, confused and angry, and found Kevin virtually behind him. He was dancing and bouncing from one foot to the other, grinning through the blood running out of his nose and down his chin, feeling like some insane creature.

Mr. Biendorf sputtered like an old automobile. Lars tried to deliver a blow but never got the chance. Wham! Wham! Kevin struck Lars with two good blows to the head. *I can't believe it! This isn't really happening!* But Lars staggered back, blood running out his nose—*It's real!*

Kevin was wild, yelling and screaming and crying out as loud as he could. *This is totally impossible! I'm in a dream! That's it. This is a dream!*

He stopped shouting, slowly turned sideways, brought his arms up and tucked his elbows in toward his body, looking now straight into Lars's eyes.

Kevin's breathing was fast but steady, his heart pounding through his chest as he moved. Everything was numb. He could smell his blood as he moved closer. Lars was struggling, assuming a defensive position.

Something had changed. No—*he* had changed. No matter what, he knew that he would not run. No matter what happened—even if he was put down in his grave. He would make sure it would not be easy.

Kevin looked into his opponent's eyes and saw the fear now looking directly back into his. The gavel had dropped. Lars had received the message. This was not going to be a slam-dunk fight. Kevin quickly closed in. Wham! Wham! More blows were skillfully applied to Lars's nose, jerking his head back.

An animalistic glow appeared in Kevin's eyes. His mind was far away, neither in Heaven nor Hell, but somewhere dark in between. It was the sublime place of those who walk the plank against desperate odds against a powerful enemy.

He knew Lars was faltering. The blows came frequently now, landing on his opponent's face, one after the other, each faster than the last. Lars was in defensive mode, stumbling back, trying to land a couple of blows on Kevin's stomach, but Kevin didn't notice. It didn't matter, didn't hurt.

He felt like a god, glorious and untouchable. The bell rang out—ending the round. Nobody moved.

Glen shouted, "Okay, boys, that's enough—the fight is over!"

Both boys continued to look at each other, each not moving, reluctant. Then, ever so slowly, each boy lowered his arms and returned to his respective corner with his wounds. Lars received a blow to the back of his head from his father, followed by the verbal expression of the older man's displeasure.

His opponent hung his head, arms down by his sides, looking like a whipped animal. Kevin couldn't stand it anymore. He walked over, not sure what he was going to say, but took off his glove and put out his hand. "Good fight, Lars. You fought well. I was sure I was toast."

Kevin watched as Lars took off his glove and met Kevin's extended hand, solid and pure, looking at him now with a newfound respect. Respect he had earned.

Kevin felt good, better than he had ever felt before. His mind was clear. "See you next Saturday," Kevin said.

"Okay. See you, Kevin. You did good," Lars replied.

Lars smiled, turned and walked off with his scowling father.

Kevin turned and sat down as Glen rushed a hot towel over, washing the blood from Kevin's face. That quiet, slow smile started to appear.

“Here. Hold your head back. I was so proud of you. You fought like Zeus. It was amazing. You fought like a god.”

Kevin walked home that Saturday, after calling his mother and asking her not to pick him up. He preferred to walk home today.

The air smelled clean and sharp. The sky was blue and clear. The afternoon sun beat down.

“Yes...books are good; learning is good; peace and quiet are good. Friends are good,” he said to himself.

Boxing? Well, boxing was painful and an ordeal, but what an ordeal.

He still wasn't sure if fighting was good or bad. Maybe just something in-between. A necessary skill. He stopped to gaze at the far horizon. He did know one thing for sure, and this he knew with certainty. His half-brother, Butch, was in for a big surprise.

A CHOICE

Dark legions of the moon
Leave light in ruin
Inviting night to cloak the sun.
Now life's fire is gone
All hope extinguished by
The tears of a tortured soul.

The heroes of my heart
Dip their arrows in sun
And wait to set the world on fire.
Rising from the east
Old demons beg and plead
No mercy for their wretched lives.

-- *Ryan Birtcher*

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THE SIMPLE THINGS

by Alec Mackensen

“You and me, bud—let’s go see Santa Claus at the mall before Christmas!” James reminded me several times a day as he passed me in the crowded hallways of Dana Hills High School. With his Wild Bill Hickok lunchbox in hand and a huge smile on his face, he greeted everyone before he made his way to class. There was never a bad day for James, only laughter and amusement. It seemed unfathomable that he would not have the same opportunities as other students at Dana Hills, as James was challenged with autism, impairing his social interaction and communication. However, I was about to discover that happiness does not discriminate, even against those who have handicaps.

Two years ago I was sitting in my Calculus class, anxiously awaiting the return of our quiz on inverse functions and differentiation. To my dismay, I was handed a quiz that was marked with a “C-.” I was stunned as I felt that I had a strong grasp on the topics covered by the teacher. Along with this, my grade had been teetering at a 90 percent, and I knew that after that quiz my grade would surely slip down to the “B” range. I became apprehensive as the final exam approached; I needed to score well on it if I was to bring my grade back to an “A.” As I left the classroom, I began to think about all the pressures that were mounting in my life. My finals were looming on the horizon and my club volleyball team was bound for the Junior Olympics, only three weeks away. The UCLA recruiting coordinators would be there, and if I wanted to get an offer, my playing would need to be exceptional. Deep in thought, I tripped on a flight of stairs, causing me to stumble to the ground and drop all of my books.

“Holy Moly! Are you okay?” asked an unfamiliar voice. I pulled myself up to see an odd boy with a concerned look on his face. I assured him that I was okay and thanked him for handing me my books. When he realized that I was not injured, his worried look turned into a big, goofy smile. He stood a few inches taller than I, and had drool running down his chin.

“Hi, I’m James. Will I see you at lunch today?” inquired the boy. This marked the beginning of our friendship.

Throughout the remainder of the school year, I ran into James frequently. He was always happy to see me and made me feel like I was the only person in existence. One thing never missing was his immense smile, which looked as if it was painted on. I could not help but be happy when I was around this fine, young man. His joy was contagious and continually made me forget about my pressures. Spending time with James was therapeutic, so I tried to see him every day.

The following year, I learned of the opportunity to aide for the special education program. Eager to spend more time with James and help him develop into an adult, I signed up. I had no idea how much I would grow personally from this experience. I was assigned to help during their physical education period. The other aides and I would take the students on walks, teach them games and other activities, helping them to become more physically and socially active.

The first day I entered the special education room, I had no idea what to expect—what types of impairments I would be dealing with or how the kids would react to me. Within seconds of entering the classroom door, I was enveloped in the arms of a young man who must have been a full head taller than I was. It was none other than James. Having grown three inches over the summer, he was now standing at six feet, eight inches.

“Hi, Alec! Remember me? James?”

We spent a lot of time together during second period P.E. He told me what was happening in his life and shared his problems. He was incredibly curious and was always asking questions, which I did my best to answer. However, I was never able to give him an answer as to how Santa Claus was able to get his fat belly down a chimney. He professed his love for a fellow classmate, a pretty brunette named Josie, on a daily basis. But alas, James was too shy to talk to her. Throughout the year, I urged him to talk to Josie and encouraged him to be more confident. Outside of the classroom, I continued my social interaction with James, introducing him to other students and having lunch with him. He was always very excited to meet new people and brought smiles to everyone he came in contact with.

When I first met James, I could not help but feel sorry for him. His condition would limit the level of education he'd be able to attain, and his prospects for holding a high-paying job were not great. To the casual observer, it seemed that his impairment greatly diminished his quality of his life, but getting to know him gave me a new

perspective; he taught me that possessing intelligence is not a necessary condition to finding happiness. Over the past two years that I have known James, I have not seen him frown once. He feeds off of the energy that his friends and loved ones bring and finds joy in the simple things. I don't believe I have ever seen anyone so excited to see Santa Claus.

I sought to contribute to the well-being of the students in the special education program, but I sometimes wonder who benefited more from this arrangement. Through my service, I gained a better understanding of what is really important in life. In times of stress, I have learned to turn to my friends and loved ones for support and guidance, and seek pleasure in the simple things.

FALLS THE SHADOW

by Gloryanna Comyn

The Apocalypse was near, and she would be here soon. She would bring Him, leading, teasing, trapping. Then they could end this, accept their failure yet again, and move on. In the distance the sound of the four horsemen's approaching hoof beats rumbled faintly. They had time. Cathetel shifted nervously in the shadows of the refuse-strewn alley. Away from the streetlights, he could pretend not to see the overflowing dumpster beside him. This urban jungle was not his favorite part of Earth. Cathetel loved the green growing things that the city choked out. The smell was the worst, both now and how it would linger in his wings for days. Soon though, soon it would be over and he could leave. As soon as she...

Ouestucati walked along the sidewalk and stopped under the streetlamp on the corner, just as they had planned. Her presence seemed to refresh the area like a stiff sea wind, bringing with it new life, hope. Yes, hope that the world would not end tonight. For He walked behind her, tall, lanky, and wreathed in shadows.

Cathetel wanted to fix his eyes on his sister, his beloved Ouestucati. The light of the streetlamp gave her wings a golden glow that seemed to glitter and spark as the wind tickled her feathers. But she was not the focus, just the bait. As she laughed beneath the light, Cathetel fixed his eyes on Him, the one who stalked behind her, the dim light only hinting at the ethereal beauty He had inherited from His father. Cathetel just needed a clear shot, one clear shot and it would all be over.

"Ouestucati," he hissed, though he knew she could not hear him from across the street. "Move away."

She did not move. Her body, her wings, blocked his view of his target. What little he could see was all the more useless the way the shadows seemed to enfold Him. Cathetel continued to watch carefully for the right moment. She knew where he was. They had planned everything yesterday. She knew what had to be done. She would move. She would...

The growing vibrations in the ground sent shivers up his spine. The hoof beats

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grew louder, the clatter of steel on asphalt becoming distinct. They were running out of time. She must move. He would make her move.

Stepping out of the shadows, into the street, Cathetel cried out, “Step away from him.”

Ouestucati did not. Instead, she turned to Cathetel, still blocking his view of her companion, and announced, “You do not have to kill him this time.” Her face glowed with more than the lamp light, but this was not the glow of an angel serving God. “We have converted him. I can feel it.”

Cathetel wanted to believe her, to believe there was no need for the gun clenched against his sweaty palm. He wanted to believe that they had, finally, redeemed Lucifer’s child, as they had sworn to do all those millennia ago. But the horsemen still rode, their hoof beats echoing off the skyscrapers. The gun was still needed, for the Four Horsemen only rode if the Antichrist was ready to end the world, if the final battle was at hand.

And if that weren’t enough, Ouestucati’s supposedly repentant Antichrist was hiding behind her wearing a wicked smirk she could not see and Cathetel could only glimpse for short moments as her wings fluttered and the shadows encircled Him.

“He seeks to fool you.” Cathetel prayed to God that she would listen to him, but God would not, could not intervene in this matter. This was free will in action. “Look at him,” Cathetel commanded, pointing both arm and wing at the smirking demon in human guise behind his sister.

“There is no need,” Ouestucati proclaimed, her hand reaching over her shoulder to cup the Antichrist’s cheek with a tenderness she had never shown her brother. “I can feel the good in him. He has repented. We have finally succeeded. The cycle of death is over.”

Tears began to stream down Cathetel’s face, but they did nothing to hide the image his sister made. Her Heavenly glow dimmed, she looked mortal, debauched, just like the monster who even now dared touch her blessed wings. Abomination. If only he could get through to her, the situation might still be saved. She might still be saved. But the hoof beats rang like demented church bells, and she was so certain. “Then why do the horsemen still approach?”

“They will ride by when they see He has turned from his father, returning to wherever it is they wait. Just as they did when we intervened before,” Ouestucati said, tossing her hair with a human air of confidence.

“We cannot risk it,” Cathetel pleaded. His feet seemed glued to the stained

concrete of the sidewalk as his heart pounded in time with the approaching hoof beats. “The four have been unleashed. We must kill him or the world we love will be destroyed. We swore to prevent that.”

“Have a little faith, angel,” the Antichrist teased. Lucifer’s demonic child pressed a seductive kiss to the curve of Ouestucati’s neck.

This was not the innocent angel Cathetel had sworn an oath with, who loved the Earth as he did and was determined to preempt the final battle. They had a plan, one they had been following for millennia without conflict from either side, a plan that could change everything. Serving his father’s will, Lucifer’s child was to prompt the end, but he was half mortal. Mortals had free will. He could Choose. If they could just show him...

Why God had not stopped them, Cathetel did not know. Free will? But he knew Lucifer’s reasons now. He was looking at it as the world shook under the hooves of horses.

“Love has changed him,” Ouestucati insisted. Her wings were flared around the Antichrist, still blocking him from view. They were behind her, so she could not see how they were wilting, moulting, her feathers falling softly through the air only to begin a violent dance once they reached the vibrations that echoed through the pavement.

If Cathetel had borne a mortal soul, the pain in this moment might have driven it from him. Lucifer’s bastard had an arm wrapped about Ouestucati’s middle as a human lover might, his touch dragging her from God’s light. Cathetel felt as though he were watching Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Again. Always a demon led the way.

“Angels must love God above all, or they are no longer angels,” he whispered, his own wings fluttering frantically to match the pounding of his heart. The throbbing of blood through his ears seemed to block the sound of the Horsemen approaching for a moment. Only for a moment.

“Cannot you see how he loves me?” Ouestucati asked, her eyes alight with a pleasure that in the past she had only known in the presence of God.

“With all the love I bear you, I beg you to step away from him.” Cathetel tried one last time, raising the gun in his hand. All he could see beyond her was a hint of the Antichrist’s head, but it was the heart he needed to stop.

“With all the love I bear you, I beg you listen,” Ouestucati parroted. “He has repented.”

The sound of hoof beats on asphalt reached a thunderous volume. Dust rattled from between the bricks of the nearest walls. Even heavy pieces of trash joined the dance with the feathers that once adorned Ouestucati's wings. The horsemen were almost upon them. "When?" Cathetel gasped. It was almost impossible to acknowledge that he knew how his sister had been corrupted, to force out the abominable words. "When he bedded you?"

He fired. Twice.

The bark of the gun was barely audible over the roar of steel on asphalt, the pounding beat of the approaching Apocalypse.

Which was suddenly silent.

The riders came up the street on now-quiet hooves now the threat was passed, barely slowing to look at the scene before they rode on. They would return to whence they came, to wait for the next birthing of Lucifer's child, for their next chance at Apocalypse, for true Armageddon.

Except for one horseman, Death.

Only once the sound of the hoof beats of War, Pestilence, and Famine's horses had faded, their figures lost in the distance, did Cathetel move. The blessed bullets had flown true, passing through Ouestucati and straight into the Antichrist's heart, shredding it. His corpse, corrupted by the demonic soul within, was already dissolving into ash, burned by the sacred blessing upon the bullets. He would be back, in time. The cycle always began again. But this mortal incarnation was no more.

Ouestucati would soon follow. She lay atop her lover's disintegrating corpse looking shocked, though at the death of her lover or her own wounds Cathetel did not know. Her Fall was complete. Already the skin around the wound was blackened, corrupted. Her splayed wings were almost bare, the exposed flesh rotting.

He fell to his knees beside her, his breath trapped in his throat.

"How?" she wondered, touching the rapidly expanding corruption on her chest. Her eyes were wide, her brow furrowed with confusion.

"I'm sorry," he swore, taking her hand. It would not be long now. Only because she was newly Fallen had it taken so long for the blessed bullets to send her down to Hell. He had hoped it would not be so, even as he had known no other outcome was possible.

"Cathetel, do not give up," she begged him, her breathing ragged as the blackness reached her lungs. "It might still be ..."

“Possible?” he questioned as her earthly remains collapsed into ash, leaving a stain across his hands and robes. “Is it?” he asked softly, looking for the stars that were hidden by the city’s light.

“Is it?” he asked louder, bellowing to the oblivious world, the world that did not know how close it had come to destruction yet again.

He dropped his head and watched as a hot breath stirred the pile of intermixed ashes. Cathetel turned and glared at Death, the robed figure watching silently from astride its white horse. “Or does Lucifer expect to welcome us both to Hell?”

WHEN YOU ASKED ME WHY I LOVED YOU

I love you by the way, not that you would forget
sometimes I just like to say it

flashback to early morning escapes
or cute distractions interrupting brooding self-loathing

flashback to my old GMC 1500
with the dented bumper and the broken turn signals
staring at one another, eyes full of lust
talking about everything, to keep us from doing
the one thing your boyfriend wouldn't appreciate

flashback to midnight fights with guillotine eyes
and burning letters you'll never read

flashback to realizations of contrition
to thirty below apologies
because it couldn't wait until tomorrow

flashback to fingers crossed and pregnancy tests
to fragile futures pacing nervously in Life's courtroom

flashback to nestled heads and collarbones
because everything that needed to be said could wait

I love you by the way, not that you would forget
sometimes it just seems silly, almost wrong
not to say it

-- *J.M. Wells*

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CONTRACEPTION FRUSTRATION

by Caroline Epstein

My upbringing was very conservative. In reference to sex, my parents' sole position was that "nice girls don't," and I believed them. Even though my teenage years spanned the early 1960s, my small town in Connecticut was still controlled by the mores of the 1950s, so my girlfriends and I had no positive role models to tell us otherwise. I never contemplated breaking the rules until I transferred in my junior year to the University of Wisconsin, Madison where I roomed in a private dormitory filled with out-of-state female students from New York City, Chicago, and California.

After a few months living with these delightful, intelligent and free-thinking women, I came to realize that one could still be a fantastic and moral person, yet not be a virgin. The most dynamic of these students was Shana, a senior with a double major in genetics and philosophy. She was shocked to discover I was still a virgin. A few days later as I returned to the dorm after classes, Shana and a group of the women met me at the top of the front steps. Like a Wagnerian goddess, Shana stood holding a sword and asked if I would kindly kneel on the first step, which she had covered with a red velvet cloth. When I did so, she gently placed the flat of the sword on both my shoulders, making special incantations, finally naming me St. Caroline, Patron Saint of Pregnancy Scares.

Once a month I held court, listening to their various concerns. As I walked throughout the campus, people would call out, "St. Caroline! How are you?" On one hand I liked the status of patron saint, but I realized I would have to relinquish my position as soon as I lost my purity, an action I was hoping to accomplish in the near future.

In class I met Alan, a student from Appleton, Wisconsin. We fell deeply in love, and after an appropriate amount of time, we both decided we were ready to consummate our curiosity. Immediately afterwards, I ran to the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. Could you tell I had done it? Did I look wanton or sophisticated? Did Alan think less of me? The answer to all these questions was "no." I could not believe this was an event my parents had worked so hard to have me avoid. So another moral lesson was found to be hollow.

BASE

Life with Alan continued for a time, and he felt required to provide “protection.” However, this was now 1964 and around the country, especially on college campuses, the sexual revolution was in its ascendancy. The pill was easily available and wonderful, allowing men to abdicate all responsibility for “protection” and to expect that all women would be safe, willing and spontaneous sexual partners. Life went on. . .

When I married I did not want to stay on the pill, so I went to a gynecologist for an IUD. After examining me, he said I had an infantile uterus and would not be able to use even the smallest IUD made. He explained that the only way my uterus would be large enough for an IUD was to have a child. That seemed obviously contrary to my needs. My husband, twenty years older than I with two children, refused to have a vasectomy, so back to the pill I went.

As the marriage ended and I reached my mid-thirties, my new gynecologist insisted I stop the pill. With little else available, I had to use a diaphragm. I am certain most women my age or older have encountered this particular form of contraception. My first shock was seeing its size! Would an infantile uterus require such a large cover? I learned I needed perseverance and a sense of whimsy to master the techniques to properly prepare and wear my diaphragm. The first step was to relax, so I had a glass of wine. Imagine my distress the night I witnessed my diaphragm fly out of my grip, arc through the air, and affix itself to my bathroom mirror.

The issue of contraception has been frustrating, and I know I am not the only one who has suffered. My generation’s struggles have even been portrayed on TV. During an episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine discovered the sponge contraceptive was no longer going to be manufactured. She bought the store’s entire stock and filled her closets floor to ceiling with boxes of the sponge. Knowing she was condemned to a life of limited sponge supply, she had to determine in this and later episodes whether any man in her life was “sponge worthy.” I essentially felt the same way about my diaphragm. Clumsiness and laughter turned out to be great contraceptives.

Fortunately, my personal contraceptive struggles ended when I met my present husband, who had been kind enough to his first wife to have a vasectomy. Now that I have reached the age of not needing contraceptives, I am discovering the new variety of ways our young women of today have to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies. I am pleased they do not have our same contraceptive concerns of fifty years ago, though I know they now have to face their own.

THE SAD, HONEST EYES OF A DOG

The sad, honest eyes of a dog
Overlooking the city at dawn;
Ears perched whiskers moving,
Beady nose flinching at every
Simple sight of all that is God.
Eyes always slightly watering,
Peaceful in simplicity of
Breeze senses and being.
The dignified admiring eyes of a dog
Overlooking the land of man,
From the hill above the lawn,
Eyes balanced to the city at dawn.

-- *Chris Wakefield*

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LIFE TOLLS

by Anthony M. Ruddy

The old man stood on the cliff overlooking the ocean, the air crisp and clean as it filled his tired lungs. His breathing was labored yet rhythmic as he witnessed the powerful surge of the tides thrashing upon the jagged rocks below. A seagull flew overhead, its cries diminishing as it retreated into the distance in search of a meal. Enveloped by the sun's warmth, the old man felt a great sense of peace. Up the road and over the hill behind him came the opening chimes of a small church. A swell of memories flooded his mind as the ringing of the first bell reached his ears, eleven more to follow.

She stood across the hall, wrapped in a black dress. It clung snugly to her back and stomach as it made its way down the contours of her body and draped to the floor. Her breasts swelled above her bodice, creating two flawless half circles, a testament to geometric perfection. Her dark hair shone with a dazzling brilliance, spilling about her shoulders and bouncing as she laughed. Liquid fire ran down his spine and settled in his crotch. He looked around embarrassed, a slight slither of red baked on his face. She was a goddess standing amidst a band of mortal men gripped in rapture. It took him a moment to realize she was looking back at him. He wanted to flinch and look away, but he couldn't bring himself to. Her eyes were dark puddles of rich brown silk, which mesmerized him. A small smile creased the side of her mouth as she began to work her way through the crowd toward him. As she moved closer, he caught a whiff of her scent and had to gather all his strength to keep from buckling. Their gaze never wavered. She leaned in close, lips parted within inches of his ear, and the second bell tolled.

The old man was jerked out of his reverie by a large wave crashing on the rocks below. He realized he had an erection and laughed to himself. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened by itself. He smiled briefly as the third bell tolled.

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The ceremony was over within moments; they exchanged vows, each gently sliding a ring on the other's finger. He felt a new closeness in that moment, like they had finally claimed each other. He caught a tear on her cheek with his forefinger, enclosed her in his arms, and kissed her deeply. Now he stood at the bar observing his guests partaking in the festivities at hand. His groomsmen were well into their drunkenness, tripping over themselves and spilling beer as they held their glasses high on the dance floor. His best man toasted to their happiness. As he held the glass up, he caught sight of his bride across the room and their eyes met. It reminded him of the day he had first seen her. With a pat on the back, he downed the drink, and the fourth bell tolled.

The sun was hot on the old man's face and a light perspiration began to form on his brow. He wondered where life had taken his friends. He was reminded of how fast things could change. Reflecting on life's impermanent nature, he listened as the fifth bell tolled.

The car rolled up to the curb and came to a stop. He got out and made his way around the passenger side.

"Now keep your eyes closed, hun," he whispered slyly.

She clenched her eyes tighter for a moment in confirmation, a smile that seemed to stretch for miles slowly materializing on her small face. He opened the door and scooped her into his arms. She let out a squeal and playfully squeezed his butt. He turned to face their new home. The house was surrounded by a waist-high stone wall. There was a small wooden gate covered by an arch that marked the entrance to their new sanctuary. He opened it and started up the path toward the door. As he walked, she began playing with the buttons on his shirt, her head gently resting on his shoulder. Plum trees in full bloom flanked the path on either side, their powdery white flowers a sharp contrast against the deep blue sky. He stopped just before the door.

"Okay, babe, go ahead and open your eyes." He would never forget the look on her face. "This is our new home," he said.

He opened the door, crossed the threshold, and the sixth bell tolled.

The old man wiped sweat off his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. He associated so many good memories with that home. He breathed in slowly and the seventh bell tolled.

She screamed out in pain as the nurses hastened back and forth, carrying out various orders from the doctor. Immense heat emanated from her body as he sat with his hand on her forehead. Her body glistened with sweat, soaking the hospital gown, and her face contracted into a grimace as she devoted all her concentration to the moment at hand. He told her to breathe and that everything would be over soon. As he looked down and offered comfort, he realized how beautiful she was. They were experiencing a painful yet magnificent miracle. The doctor told her to push. He watched as the head slowly began to emerge, and the eighth bell tolled.

A swift breeze batted the old man's face as the memory faded from his mind. The sun was momentarily obscured by a passing cloud, cloaking him in a shadow. Mist swept up from the waves below and settled on his skin, causing it to break out in gooseflesh. A sudden coldness ran through his body and he shivered uncontrollably. The ninth bell tolled.

He was with his wife and son at the market. She told him she needed to run across the street to pick up a few things. He gave her a kiss and told his son to go with her as he ruffled the boy's hair. He watched as they walked down the aisle and out the door. The lights above aisle five flickered eerily, prompting him to rush to find what he was looking for. A jar of strawberry jelly had fallen off the shelf on aisle ten and lay shattered, its contents oozing out like congealed blood on the clean white floor. Finishing up, he made his way to the check out line, paid, and exited the store. As he unloaded the groceries into the back of his car, the loud shriek of tires invaded the air. He turned toward the piercing noise in time to see a semi truck plow into his wife and son. Smoke billowed from its tires, polluting the air with the stench of rubber. Someone to his right screamed out, followed by more cries of panic as people realized what had happened.

Time stopped. He was floating within a blur of nothingness, unable to

comprehend what he had just seen. His mind finally registered the events and he ran. He forcefully pushed himself through the throng of people that had gathered. There were shouts to call 911. A middle-aged woman, curious to see what happened, took one look and heaved out her morning breakfast. When he emerged from the thick ring of onlookers, he collapsed as he saw the carnage before him. His son was unrecognizable and he turned away, the image of small bare feet burned into his mind. He noticed the little sneakers thrown twenty yards up the road and knew that picture would haunt him for the rest of his life. His wife was still alive but all her limbs lay at awkward angles. A pool of blood was fanning out from her body, mixing with rubble and dust on the cracked asphalt. He was up in an instant and stumbled over to her in a numb daze. Kneeling down beside her, he cradled her head in his arms. She looked into his eyes and smiled. He told her he loved her and the tenth bell tolled.

Tears flowed down the old man's cheeks as a torrent of emotions overwhelmed him. He staggered back and fought the urge to sit down. His wife and son had been oblivious to the fact that death was waiting for them that day. They had no choice in the matter. They did not go out on their own terms and they were taken from him. The waves continued to crash on the rocks below. The eleventh bell tolled.

He arrived at the doctor's office promptly at 9:00 a.m. Following some tests and scans, he sat seated across from the man who would unemotionally inform him of his fate. He sat like a cold stone as the doctor's words floated slowly toward him and through him. *Cancer... metastasized... too far along... three months or less.* Treatment of chemo and radiation might extend his life another few months but meant he would likely spend his last days confined to a hospital bed in near-constant pain and discomfort. He got up without saying a word and exited, leaving the doctor to feel insignificant, arm outstretched and last words dying in empty air as he stood behind his desk, a wall of accolades behind him. He began his ride home, drove past the church and down toward the cliffs. The twelfth belled tolled.

The vast and infinite ocean stretched out before the old man and shimmered as rays of light reflected off its rippling surface. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Releasing his final breath, he stepped forward and off the cliff. While racing down toward the rocks and chaotic froth below, he saw his wife and son. He was going home. As his lifeless body swayed back and forth with the tide, the twelfth toll echoed on.

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

by Candis Osuna

I was fifteen when I met Steven. He was thirty and working as a cashier at Ralphs, where I had my first job as a courtesy clerk. On the day we first met, he was a bit flirty, asking me how old I was. I told him fifteen and inquired of his age. His response was: too old for you. Technically, I had been warned.

Our relationship changed a couple of months after my sixteenth birthday. I had come in to work upset about my estranged relationship with my father. When I was young, I was what could be called a daddy's girl, but that all changed when I was four and my parents divorced. Years of fighting, custody battles, and both parents demanding that my three siblings and I choose one over the other had completely eroded my relationship with him. I felt traded and betrayed. However, my father delivered the final crushing blow when I was eleven. We'd been arguing, as was usual, and he told me that I should just go live with my mother. He said it like he meant it—like he was willing to live without me forever.

For the first time, I felt important as Steven listened to me talk about my family. No one had ever really just listened to me. Over the next few weeks, I shared with Steven the darkest secrets from my past, hoping he would finally be the one to shed some light on them and make them go away. I was convinced that if I could find someone to love me for *me* that it would make everything I had ever experienced be okay. I was convinced my past was something I could flee.

Steven was not the first guy I thought could use his love to erase my pain. When I was fourteen, the male attention I began to receive excited me. It simulated the attention I felt I lacked from my father, and I used it as my drug. In a matter weeks, I began to use my body as a billboard. Even when dressed for school on rainy days, I always revealed more flesh than fabric, attempting to numb the lack of love I felt at home. My first interaction with a male was not a kiss but oral sex, for him not me. It was only four months before I moved on to sex. In less than a two-year time span, I had sexual intercourse with thirty-six different guys, who were okay with having sex with me but

would not want to make me their girlfriend. I shared all this with Steven. His response was that I deserved better.

Our first sexual encounter was before I was physically ready, having recently been treated for some abnormal cells on my cervix. When I informed him of my condition, Steven said that he'd gladly wait, yet he was the one to push the issue when I knew it was too soon. By this time, I was already a puppet in his hands, and I was convinced that he cared for me. As a result of our encounter, my vaginal area tore. This was the first physical mark left on my body by Steven during sex. The tear would have had a chance to fully heal if it were ever given one, but he would not allow me to go more than two days without giving him my body.

He lied to me about many things. He told me he was twenty-two long before I discovered he was thirty. He told me that he was the only one who cared for me. He told me that he loved me, and I believed him—thought that what he gave me *was* love. He wanted to be the only one to have me. Soon I quit my job and stopped talking to my friends. I liked feeling as if I was so special that I could not be shared with anyone. Now, I see how twisted it was. If he could have, I think he would have stopped me from seeing my family. He was a black hole, sucking me further away from everything.

Once he knew that he could completely control me and that I would not leave him, things began to get worse. I had been into some rough sex, especially for a sixteen year old, but this was different. He became a different person during sex: distant and removed. Looking into his eyes was always discomfoting because I would not see the guy I fell for, the one who told me I was his diamond in the rough. Broken capillaries, bruises, and blood were not uncommon. I went through a series of bladder, yeast, and bacterial infections. All of these were cries from my body to stop seeing this man, but I remained in denial and just treated them with medication. At one point my doctor began to get concerned, so I stopped seeing him and switched to a walk in-clinic, where I could see a different doctor each time. Fewer questions would be asked about my issues. I would go to any length to protect Steven. I was convinced he was doing the same for me.

I'll never forget the night he left his second mark. I was gagged with my face pressed to a pillow for the erotic asphyxiation, but also so that I would not wake his upstairs neighbor. Still, the neighbor had to have heard me when I began to scream as I twisted and turned in a feeble attempt to free myself from the pain I let my boyfriend inflict upon me. Steven firmed his grip on my shoulder and I stopped fighting him,

believing it was almost over. He got up and left the room, returning with a sheet that he slid underneath me. As he repositioned me so that I would move less, I noticed the blood running down my leg. The sheet was to protect his couch. Eventually, he finished, leaving me tied as he went to take a shower.

Once rinsed off, he collected the sheet to throw it out while I took my turn in the bathroom. Through the steam, I could not meet my eyes in the mirror. I was ashamed of myself. Deep down somewhere, I knew I should not be putting up with this. Still bleeding, I climbed into the shower, wanting to stay in the warm water forever. I wanted it to wash away everything I felt and bring me back to the beginning before I had sex, with Steven or any other guy. I just wanted to be okay.

When the bleeding finally stopped, I joined Steven back on the couch. He welcomed me into his arms. His eyes were back to normal and the pillow turned. I thought that everything was a mistake and that he did not mean to hurt me: he just got caught up in the moment, so I forgave him. Three days later, he did it again. And I forgave him again.

Somehow my parents were oblivious to all this. You would think they would notice a change in me. I would like to say now that I just hid it from them, but I am no skilled actress. They should have known something was wrong. Eventually they did find out—separately and on multiple occasions—and forbid me to see him. But they were unbelievably easy to lie to, as they were both busy with their own things. A part of me viewed this as proof that they did not care. It drove me further into Steven's arms.

During this period, things got worse. Distorted, detached-sex-Steven seeped into what I thought was the nice Steven. He began to yell at me when I got upset, sad, or questioned the way he treated me. He would often guilt-trip me, turning things around with the implication that *I* was the one hurting *him*. It worked. I felt I drove this man, who only wanted to be kind to me, to hurt me. Every time I bled, it was my own fault. Every time he was mad, I deserved it. I only wanted to make him happy so that he could love me again. And I tried my hardest. I let him degrade me in ways I hate to think of; I let him do things I do not like to speak of now—all so he would be happy and love me. I was convinced that, if I tried hard enough, I could make it work and he would not give up on me like my parents had.

Eventually, my father, who had once again caught us together, forced me to file a restraining order against Steven. Although, I did not fully cooperate, refusing to tell the

police that Steven knew I was underage when he met me. However, I was also afraid he'd get caught, so I wouldn't let him see me either. Not seeing him everyday began to give me space. I went into a depression. Over the phone, I told him that I felt like a battered woman who could not leave. His reaction was to threaten to kill me. I did not believe that a restraining order—a piece of paper—was enough to keep him away. I had seen him punch holes in the walls inches from my face. I feared the man more than anything. And he knew that, using it to keep me with him. I thought seriously about taking my own life. Eventually, I confided in a teacher, who encouraged me to tell my parents and to call the police.

It was the only time I ever saw my parents come together for me. We sat on my dad's couch as the policeman explained that, since I had violated the restraining order, I would have to be written into the report as well. It was considered a felony. I held my parents' hands as I told him that I wanted a report filed.

The officer went to his car to get his computer and check to see if Steven was in the system. What the officer discovered was a record that was pages long. Steven had several arrests for assault and drugs along with another restraining order; this one filed a few years back by another teenaged girl. With Steven's record pulled, the officer looked at me and promised that no judge would look at all this and press charges against me. He said that this was Steven's fault and they would do whatever it took to keep me safe.

The officer helped free me, but I feel as though a part of me will always be under Steven's hold. I hear loud cars and think it may be his. If it is late at night, I still cannot sleep if I hear any vehicle idle on my street. I am twenty-two now, and I know that I cannot run from a past that has made me who I am. I have a hard time with that because I hate a lot of my past and do not want to hate myself. It gets easier some days. I can say now that Steven sexually assaulted me, that I did not deserve it, and it was not okay. But not without tears in my eyes and a deep feeling of shame. We all carry our past with us. My relationship with Steven has definitely left some of the heaviest marks on me; still years later, I hold the physical and emotional scars.

PLAYING BY THE RULES

by Chelsea Leopardi

I suppose I was born like this, but I started to understand in junior high. I remember tugging on the door—taunting, threatening. I was not angry but indulged in the chaos, while Vanessa, crying, struggled to hold the door closed from the inside. She had been my friend since the first grade, but some of the other girls and I had heard her gossiping in the bathroom. The physical fight ended without consequence, but for weeks we tormented her until she stopped coming to school. I remember having to ask another girl why they were angry as I expertly mutilated and hung a Barbie in front of Vanessa's bedroom window. I could barely concentrate on her answer as I suggested we get a larger rope and noose the culprit herself. Even to this day, I have never had so much fun.

I doubled over next to the massive round concrete structure that was occupied by only a few of the old Chinese men and women who went to work as early as I did. My body continued to dry heave for a few minutes after every drop of bile, water, and vodka left my system. While studying my watering eyes and red face in a compact mirror, I saw a small boy staring at me in the glass. I turned around, smiled, and stuck out my tongue as I imagined kicking him over the yellow line to fall the six feet into my vomit, which had splattered onto the B.A.R.T tracks. Amused only for a moment, my mind wandered back to Vanessa. Eventually she told, and a few of us were put into anger counseling. A masculine, middle-aged woman told us, "It does not really matter how you feel on the inside. As long as you can be calm and collected on the out, you can always deal with your emotions later." I remained silent throughout the session. As my mind flipped the comment, the others cried and defended our position (junior high school girls are cruel). I think we all hugged by the end; Vanessa included. The counselor put her hand on my shoulder bringing me back into their reality, jabbering on about my guilt and emotions. Although she was wrong about the emotions, she was right about control. In junior high, during the anger counselor, I set some rules.

The concepts are simple. Most important, I am not allowed to be violent unless it is self defense. I have to interact with the world, practice emotion; I am never to hit the

snooze on my alarm (idle hands). I need to be exceptionally well-mannered and polite to everyone. Learning to control the laughter has been the most difficult, and I haven't quite mastered it. The problem does not seem too exasperating, but it often causes tension. Girls laugh loudly and often, but on occasions where hysterical bellowing is expected, I can usually only manage a spastic smile and a muffled sound. Other times, I cannot stop the laughter, like at cheerleading practice in high school when we accidentally dropped Mercedes on her back. The squeak she produced, the way she bounced, and the position in which her body settled was something I never imagined a human being could do. I really couldn't be expected to hold it back. I buried my face like some of the other girls, but a few people noticed I was not hiding tears.

When I reentered the station a few hours later after being sent home from work, the B.A.R.T station was no longer sparse. I barley managed to squeeze myself into a small standing spot butted up against the door of the train. Apparently, my boss had issues with me leaking on the monthly sales report. At first, I didn't notice when the blood began to trickle out of my knuckle. But, by the time I passed the papers, a dark red had oozed sideways down my hand covering three fingers, then turned sharply to snake up my arm when I lifted it vertical. Ron Metz, our Regional Director, disgusted and wincing, asked me why I would not close an open wound. I felt exposed, like my gurgling knuckle had betrayed me. Pain is incredibly dull if you don't really feel anything. My coworkers stared at me until Keaton spoke up, chuckling, "She probably just cut it and didn't even notice." Keaton thought that my detachment was cool. I smiled at her and then manipulated my face to look appropriately horrified at the finger.

When I got home, I leapt off the bus and smiled at the Hell's Angel who hangs out by the liquor store on the corner selling methamphetamine. As always, I encouraged him to follow me. I took off my coat to reveal the plunging turquoise dress that I had worn last night and pulled on again as I ran out the door for work this morning. I let our eyes linger for just a little too long, producing a shy yet inviting smile. I gripped my keys tightly between the pointer and middle finger, ready to jam them into his eye socket. The excitement caused spastic muscle movements in my hand. He must have known something was wrong, but I fancied one day he would lose himself and it would be a perfect opportunity for me to paint a gruesomely beautiful painting. I convinced myself it was technically self-defense, even if I'd led my "attacker" into a trap, the rules could be flexible.

At my apartment, there was a note taped to my door.

“I want to know what the FUCK was wrong with you last night. In case you are curious, I have stitches in my arm and three staples in my head.”

An emotion—anxiety, I guessed—flooded through me. I had never felt this before. It was strange and I didn't like it. The anxious feeling deepened when I opened the door. Apparently, I had been in such a hurry to get to work this morning that I had not noticed when I rolled out of bed. Even as I stared at the scene in front of me, I recollected only the haze of grabbing my purse, shoes, and coat, before pulling down my dirty dress and tripping out the door late for work (I had slept in, ignoring my alarm—which was really such a minor rule). I had been drinking last night. I know that. But, the note and the bloody knuckle brought back enough to verify what my mind had been circling all day: of all my rules, I had broken the most important one.

I examined the blood, skin, and hair left on the door and in the lock. I filled a bucket with hot water and dish soap to wash the red drops and their streaks off of the light switches and nearby walls. I threw out the comforter that had soaked in an extraordinary amount of blood. Smiling, I wet a white cloth and dabbed at the droplets of blood that dotted the carpet. My game was over—even if I wanted to, I didn't think I could play again. I was weary of getting in trouble, though. A life dominated by courtrooms, psychiatric wards, and jail is not appealing, so I quickly dismissed the fantasy that I was unleashed, that I could be myself. That night, I slept well then rose early for work, putting on a clean dress and make-up. And when the B.A.R.T train came speeding into the station, I simply teetered on the edge then lost my balance.

