

WALL

Literary Journal

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WALL is a student-produced literary journal of Saddleback College.
All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College.
Submissions to WALL are reviewed, selected, and edited
by the students on the journal staff.

We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life.
However, the opinions and ideas
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they are solely those of the authors and creators of these particular works.

To submit your work for the 2016 edition of WALL,
please see the guidelines for submission
at <http://www.saddleback.edu/la/wall>.
The deadline is January 25, 2016.

WALL is a
community space
for creative displays.

iv It is a fresh canvas, a blank
surface
begging for
decoration,
a vast white page
awaiting our words and
images.....

W A L L

2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first story featured in this year's WALL, titled "Translocation," involves a young man who finds himself inexplicably and randomly thrust into other people's lives, which he describes as a sensation of falling. That experience of disorientation filtered through a variety of vantage points aptly describes the experience we want readers to have when they immerse themselves in the pages of our journal. To some extent, the fictional narrative also describes the challenging and thrilling experience of producing this publication. The student staffers who are at the core of the process also immerse themselves in the words, images, and multiple perspectives of the authors and artists who contribute to WALL.

Although at times chaotic and dizzying, the process of producing the journal depends on establishing a strong and stable network of supporters, including campus administrators, faculty members, staff, and a longtime anonymous donor. Their support has allowed WALL to develop a distinctive creative identity that has been honored with national accolades. For three years in a row (from 2012 to 2014), WALL has won First Place Awards in a countrywide competition for campus literary magazines sponsored by the American Scholastic Press Association. Individual student authors and artists featured in the journal also have earned national awards from the Community College Humanities Association.

The staff and I would like to thank South Orange County Community College District Chancellor Gary L. Poertner and the district's Board of Trustees: T.J. Prendergast, III, Timothy Jemal, James R. Wright, Marcia Milchiker, David B. Lang, Barbara J. Jay, and Lemar Momand. We also deeply appreciate the stalwart support of Saddleback College President Tod A. Burnett and Kevin O'Connor, Dean of the Liberal Arts Division.

Special thanks goes to professors Suki Fisher, Bill Stevenson, Jennifer Hedgecock, Bruce Gilman, Marina Aminy, and Shellie Banga of the English Department for encouraging student contributions to WALL; Karen Taylor, Chair of the Graphics Department; graphic design instructors Rudy Gardea and Mark Podolak; and photography instructor Ryan Even. Other supporters include Giziel Leftwich, Khaver Akhter, Sandra Bezanilla, and Karen Yang of the Liberal Arts Division; Larry Radden of the Speech Department; Ali Dorri, instructional assistant for the Lariat; and John Hesketh of Photomation and Bruce Parker of PJ Printers.

The staff and I invite you to fall into this year's WALL.

Gina Victoria Shaffer
Faculty Advisor
WALL 2015

EDITOR'S NOTE

Two years ago on the first day of class I saw an advertisement that encouraged students to submit to WALL Literary Journal for the opportunity to become published. To be honest, at first I walked away from it and discarded the idea as yet another dismal romantic fantasy of becoming a legitimate writer. That night I told my grandma about the flyer and she said something that I think is worth sharing in my first editor's note. She told me that she had held onto every story I had ever written in three large binders and that from time to time she would read them. As nice as that was to hear, I felt bad for her reading them all because in my opinion those stories were nothing more than fuel for a fire. She said, "I don't care if you think they're bad. Some of them are, but they do get better as you keep going. So keep going."

My grandmother's wise words are worth sharing with all of the contributors whose exemplary literature, art, and photography made it into the pages of this year's WALL: Keep going. For those who weren't accepted, my advice is the same: Keep going. After having the pleasure of reviewing every submission this year, I can say that without a doubt that Saddleback College has an extremely talented creative community.

This year's cover might lead some to believe that the theme of the journal is too dark and uncomfortable for their tastes: a black ladder, stony gray wall, clouds on the horizon. When our staff discussed whether or not the journal should have a consistent theme in content, we had actually come to a consensus on trying to avoid having too many "dark" pieces. We ended up selecting the works we believed would resonate with our audience on an emotional level. Some of them are funny and cute, but many of them are heartbreaking and even mildly disorienting at times. All I can promise you is that for the most part they are dark, and if our journal makes you uncomfortable, you're welcome. That's all the more reason to continue reading—to experience the full spectrum of emotion that art and literature provides. There is, after all, a leaf at the end of our ladder. Keep going. Keep growing.

Matthew Durham
Editor-in-Chief
WALL 2015

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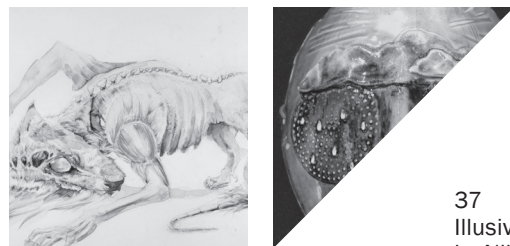
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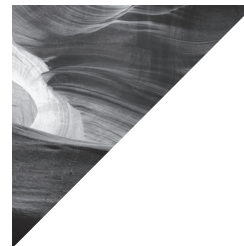
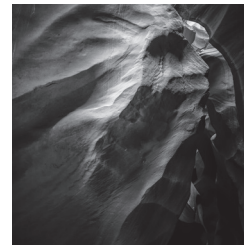
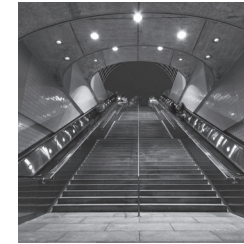
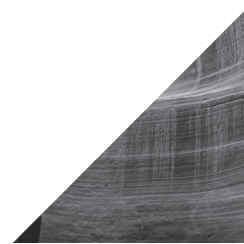
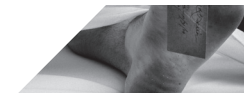
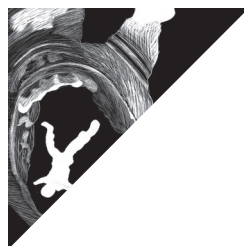
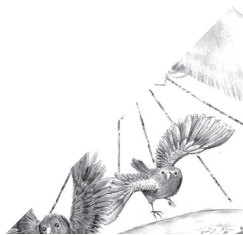
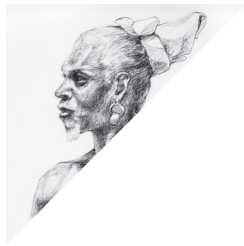
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Translocation

Michael couldn't catch a break. His bus stalling, straddling an old railroad track, was simply another incident in a long line of misfortunes. The other passengers were in a panic, of course. Perhaps, it was because of the cargo train hurtling towards them. People shoved past him, trying to escape, only to be absorbed by the swelling mass of flesh clogging both exits. They pushed past him, shouting in his ears, as though he wasn't even there. Most days, he felt completely invisible to everyone—this wasn't any exception.

He'd never get to ask Sarah out. He'd dreamt of it for months. He wasn't invisible to *her*. Maybe he didn't want it to end here—

The train tore through the side of the bus. *Sarah!*

The few unfortunate stragglers who hadn't exited the bus were thrown violently right, directly towards a wall of steel, their organs destined to become works of abstract art. Michael felt himself pulled in the opposite direction—not by any force of the train but ripped to the left by some otherworldly force, seemingly out of existence, and then back again.

He found himself lying atop a panting, naked girl, her legs wrapped around his waist, as if she were some sort of sweat-soaked monkey. *Did I just die?* The girl froze almost instantly, recognizing something was definitely not right. She was definitely *not* Sarah. Even after their eyes met, she remained frozen. It was probably the jeans that gave him away. Maybe it was his cologne. No—definitely the jeans.

The slap was understandable; he was lying on top of her naked body after all. The scream was expected. If he hadn't just thought he was about to die, he'd probably have yelled as well. But being thrown violently to the floor and having a bedside lamp hurled into his chest was definitely overkill in his opinion; he didn't ask to mount her after all. He wasn't about to stick around and try figuring anything out. The moment he touched the floor, he was on his feet and out the door.

• • •

Falling. That was the best word for it. He didn't actually fall, but it *felt* like he was falling. To the left, every time. Nothing Michael tried seemed to change the result. It would start with the sensation of falling—not up, down, forward, or backward. Never something so *mundane*. Always the specific sensation of falling

to the *left*. Each occurrence felt as though he'd just rolled out of bed and was plummeting to the ground—left side first. It wouldn't be so bad, really, if he'd had *any control over it whatsoever*. The bus incident was two weeks ago today. He'd been too afraid to find out what had happened to the man he'd switched with.

• • •

Today had been no different than any other recently. While sitting alone at a booth in an empty diner for lunch, Michael was jerked left and deposited—burger in hand—into the middle of a crowded restaurant. He was now seated at a table for two across from a skinny female whose short, straight hair and billowy red shirt made her look like an umbrella—too tall and too narrow, and sticking out at sharp angles. She was currently rummaging through her purse for something. Interestingly, no one was ever looking at him when it happened. Granted, people rarely looked at him ordinarily.

“Jon, do you still have my—” She broke off with a startled squeak, staring at Michael in shock. A smile slowly spread across her face. “This is some sort of trick, right?” she asked, ducking her head under the table. “How did you do that?”

“Uh... What? Yes. No. I don't know.” Michael replied, shooting to his feet, sending his chair crashing to the floor. “Uh, I'll be back—No, he—Jon, Jon will be right back. Probably. I have to go. Sorry.”

“Wait! Where are you going? What do you mean probably!?”

Michael was already sprinting through the restaurant's back exit, burger clutched to his chest.

What's wrong with me? I can't even enjoy a regular meal anymore, he thought, chewing the last bit of his now-cold burger. He'd run three blocks before pausing to catch his breath and see if anyone was looking at him strangely. Of course, no one was. He was considering heading back towards the diner where he'd grabbed the burger, to try and find “Jon,” but discarded that idea just as he always did. It had never gone well before when he'd tried explaining to someone that he hadn't *meant* to rip them from whatever good time they were having and strand them in some completely random location.

At least no one wound up anywhere *too* awkward or dangerous this time, and he was betting Jon at least had his clothes on.

Michael grabbed the next bus headed back toward his house. He knew he was unlikely to arrive. He rarely ever made it to his destination, and he'd lost count of how many times he had fallen into someone else's life.

Michael hadn't handled his *condition* well over the last two weeks. Not having made it home once hadn't helped his mood any. He'd made it all the way to his street once, only to fall the moment he saw his house. Every time he tried

making it somewhere, he'd fall. Left, of course. Every. Single. Time. He was bone tired, smelled like rancid pig meat, and was incredibly lonely.

His therapist had asked him to get out more, though he didn't think she meant quite like this. He'd never been one for friends. People in general tended to make Michael feel even worse about his life, even before *this* started going on. Currently, though, he'd give almost anything to just sit down and talk about everything with someone—have someone to rant at and tell him there was some way out.

Falling. The bus dimmed to black. *Not again...* A pinhole of tiny details in the center of his vision grew into a room full of people; the lights dimmed low. He was seated at a round mahogany table covered with plates of half-eaten food and empty glasses. Five others were seated around the table, each looking at a boulder-sized man whose face looked like it had punched a few sidewalks growing up. Seated opposite Michael, he'd just finished telling a joke, much to the amusement of the others. A pale girl—gorgeous the way a white lily on a still, black pond is gorgeous—sat to Michael's immediate left.

Two gargoyles, each flanking Sidewalk-face, dressed in support of their favorite sports teams, sat between the lily and the other woman on Michael's right. If a person could be viewed as a wine bottle, she'd have been the most expensive bottle of red wine Michael had ever seen. Prim, slender necked, wide-bottomed, and the only one not smiling.

Sidewalk-face glanced about, enjoying his friends' amusement—until his eyes met Michael. The smile rolled off his face, whipped a u-turn, and slid right back on as confusion. “Oi, mate. Who're you, and where's Victoria gone?” Even his voice sounded like he'd eaten gravel. The others all snapped their heads towards Michael in near perfect unison. It would've been funny, if Michael hadn't been petrified upon realizing he was seated between two of the three hulks' apparent love interests, having just replaced the third.

The women on either side of Michael jumped up and each ran to huddle behind one of the brutes on the opposite side of the table.

Michael stared at the table, “Um. The. Wha...”

All eyes stared at him. Mr. Sidewalk-face started to look suspicious, “I asked you a question, mate.”

“I... Uh.”

Sidewalk-face moved ominously around the table. “Troy, find Victoria. Chris, get Mr. Um 'ere a drink.”

Switch me with Victoria. Switch me with Victoria. Come on, damn you! Work!

Both men got to their feet, moving in opposite directions.

Michael bolted.

A Phantom's Touch

He'd never been the best of runners. In fact, he'd rarely ever run in his life, but the last two weeks had given him plenty of practice.

Six blocks and nine turns later, Michael stopped in an empty alley.

Why did all of this have to happen now? Just when he thought he was ready to try making something happen with Sarah, his world had gone even further to hell. What did he have left? He was nothing more than a leaf on a river now. Yanked, pulled, and drowned with no choice in the matter.

He wished he could at least tell Sarah how he felt. He wanted more than anything to see her again, hold her once in his arms, to hear he would make it through this. He fell.

The alley went dark, white concrete burst into a sea of green. He was seated on a red-and-white blanket, in what must have been a park. He felt a weight in his lap and looked down to see a mess of coffee-colored hair obscuring a girl's face. The color was right, the chin as well. *Sarah?* He couldn't muster the courage to speak. It was so comfortable sitting there, just the two of them on a checkered little island, in an ocean of moonlight. Until she opened her eyes.

Not Sarah. "AHHHHHHH—" Definitely not Sarah. "—HHHHHHHHHH."

It was never her. Never her, and he was always running away.

WHY!? Why's this happening to me!? I can't handle this anymore. It was all too much. He was hungry, tired, and terrified. He'd barely slept in two weeks. Rarely finished a full meal before finding himself somewhere completely different. Didn't dare show his face anywhere with too much surveillance.

He'd tried outrunning it. Tried hiding from it. Tried going along with it. Now he'd try ending it.

Michael picked up speed. *I can't go on like this. I'll go insane. It has to stop. NOW.* He felt the pull to his left. *NO! Not again!* Tried to correct it, tried pulling himself right. He ran stomach-first into a dark green railing, teetering briefly, before tipping over towards the river below.

This was it. The end. He knew he'd finally be free. He'd never meant to hurt anyone, never wished for any of this to happen; he only wanted it to end. Roughly a 100-foot drop. Two-and-a-half seconds until peace. The elation was overwhelming. Finally! The ground was so close, rushing up to embrace him at incredible speed. He spread his arms wide.

He felt himself fall to the left.

have her eyes: almond-shaped and deep brown. It's undeniable, though hers glow with a hue warm like maple. They are so sweet, so honest and kind, that sometimes they are hard to believe. My mother's eyes speak against the words she utters so that even tight shoulders, clenched jaw, and steady voice cannot mask their glossy sincerity. I saw her vulnerability in them the day she left, leaving me to face the cruelty of life for the first time without her. I saw it even as she turned away, even as she ducked into her car, even as her tail lights disappeared in the distance. Her eyes consumed my mind, for in them I saw the truth. I saw myself, not just in their shape and not just in their color. I saw my fear, my sorrow. I saw that even the strength, the seeming invincibility of my mother, had a tipping point that could send her tumbling, crashing, flying from West Coast to East, a nation away from her only child. I saw that I was about to become my own parent.

For as long as I can remember, my mother has referred to herself as a rock star. I specifically remember a black tank top with the words written in silver gems across her chest. To me, being a rock star didn't mean doing drugs or partying, or even making music. My mother's survivor mentality aligned with her deep passion for rock music and out blossomed a new metaphor for life, one that meant conquering the battles of life with a power stance, standing strong, daring to be different, giving all there is for me to give to life shamelessly in front of the world. After all, it's the only chance I have to prove how much of a "badass" I am, my mother's second favorite word.

Very few times did I see her openly, willingly unsure or frightened, or even sad. Even into the heavy hours of night as we packed up our one bedroom in Los Angeles, preparing to leave our last home together, she seemed as rock star as ever. We folded, boxed, taped all we could as we had so many times before, to the beats of No Doubt and the melody of Incubus. There was eeriness to it, of course. This time was different; we both knew that. But as long as she could seem okay, I could, too.

Mom and I chugged our matching Redbulls after a night of little sleep. The movers arrived in the morning. They were instructed to take the small amount of furniture we had left to a storage unit—a step that proved pointless as my mother would later trash it all, as we had the rest of the memories from our other life. As for my belongings, they came with me in my car, hers in her car. Mom and I drove in two cars that were filled to the brim, hot and stuffy, crinkling with trash bags that held clothes, books, towels, DVDs, CDs, and not much else.

After a long drive we arrived in the Inland Empire, hotter than even congested L.A. and seemingly rural in comparison. We drove down roads intertwined with shopping centers and beautiful homes accessorized with graceful American flags waving over trucks with four-wheel drive. Every direction we faced had a view of brown hillsides extending infinitely around the town. The sun beat heavily on green lawn after green lawn. Then we were there.

I pulled into my aunt and uncle's three-door driveway. It's all in glimpses from there—being nearly knocked over by the three dogs at the door; my cousins' small, boyish voices as they greeted us; my uncle helping me with my things; my aunt showing me my room, being sure to call it that because this was after all my home now, too. It wasn't until my mom and I returned to the front of the 3,000-square-foot home that the memory became vivid again.

We stood there on the white, paved sidewalk along which her car sat holding all she had to take with her and looked into the windows, my reflection a cruel underscore of my separation from her life. It began to dawn on me we were not going to be "we" anymore. All my life "we" was all we had at times; "we" moved endlessly; "we" endured tragedy; "we" were failed time and time again by all of "them."

"We" were broken, together.

At last, the music wasn't enough. At last, it was happening. At last, "we" were parting. And in these last few moments, my mother confessed how she really felt about herself.

She felt like a loser.

Her words flew over me as I heard them—too numb, too depressed to allow myself to listen. As she went on, though, it sank in. I screamed in my own mind what had to be true, what I had to believe. She wasn't a loser. She wasn't a failure. She didn't fail the daughter she could no longer even afford to support either financially or emotionally. She wasn't so weak she had to run away from an entire state to escape our past. She wasn't so fragile she could lose her mind, her sanity if she stayed. Certainly, she wasn't so broken that she would have to put aside saving her terrified daughter to put herself back together.

But her eyes spoke. And their memory lingered.

She was those things. It was true and I knew it. But as cruel as the certainty was, far nastier was the reason why.

My mother was scarred in her youth. She was wounded deeply and continuously enough to ache for two lifetimes. With such a violent betrayal as that which happened to her, it is miraculous something in her nature somehow saved a part of her. Her heart could never turn as cold as her mind damned it to. She gave up anything and everything to seek love no matter how many instances reasserted malicious repercussions. She offered her youth for the unconditional love of having a daughter. She offered her security for the hope of a true soulmate, time and time again.

Nine months prior to facing my mother at our dreadful departure, we had lived in a spacious three-bedroom in a nicer part of Los Angeles, near the ocean. I had finished high school early and was working in a bookstore while paving my path towards an acting career. Our lives were as glamorous as they'd ever been, right up to the precise moment I told her my secret. I unveiled the happenings of a night I was sure would destroy her life, her sanity. I bled the memory that tore at me the same way she'd been torn years ago. I confessed that her husband was the very monster she feared most. Her one piece of untainted, unconditional love and joy, her daughter, was in fact a reflection of her worst nightmare.

With my confession, the revolting actions of my stepfather ripped open my mother's deepest wounds, a wolf to its prey. Only my words made it real. No proof on my behalf and

only lies on his. No further investigating, no sentencing. A root pulled from the Earth, he left unscathed, my mother and I disheveled dirt.

Looking into her eyes I knew all of this, but I couldn't yet comprehend it. All that could register was simultaneous rage and horror, blood hot with anger and chest aching with a silent sob I couldn't let out. I was the antichrist, hating the world and all it meant; I was also the little angel whose birth saved my mother's life all those years ago, crying in my crib for someone who now seemed a mirage. Somehow the confusing mixture of emotions, of personas, led to the unveiling of a different persona entirely. Face dry and voice steady, I denied my true feelings to become the mother I'd just lost.

Standing there in the street, hearing my mother's confessions, her apologies, watching the black of her makeup smudge, her hands shake, feeling the embrace of her frail frame, I saw how different I looked from her—telling her she was wrong, speaking firmly, wiping her tears. I was acting like the rock star she'd raised me to be. I would be fine. She had to go. It would all be fine. I became the vision I'd seen in her all my childhood—strong, afraid. But I knew it was a lie. I felt the falsehood in my own words. I wasn't fine. Perhaps she never had been either.

As she drove away, I realized I had never felt more like my mother. I was 17, fresh out of high school, without a clue what I was doing with my life. She was 37, leaving to a place she'd never been without a clue what she was doing with her life. She would go about her days with poise and professionalism at the new job she was offered in Philadelphia; I would proceed to smile and laugh at work and with friends and family in my new environment. But deep in the brown, almond-shaped eyes we shared, we would share a hidden darkness, a brokenness not even our rock star facades could hide. It was a pain my mom couldn't fix for me with a song, a hug, a comforting line. She was less a mother now and more a peer, as though she'd reverted back to the 19-year-old who'd given birth to me. I had no choice. I had to grow up.

This time, I had to save myself.

As the weeks grew into months, I adjusted to her absence. I clumsily stumbled into adulthood without much real guidance other than my own. Suddenly, I had every decision to make without any pressure about how or when to make it. However, with each slam to the floor, each ache in my back from yet another dull knife called betrayal, I'd learn to comfort myself. I'd learn to make use of my own resources and lead myself back to a more stable path. I learned to create a life for myself, even a country away from the one who gave me life. I did not invent my life, but I have evolved it. I have cared for and nurtured the lost girl parading in the physique of an angry teenager. For the past two years, I have wiped my own tears, patched my own seams, solved my own equations, sought my own answers.

I've learned that heroes do not exist. My mother's rock-star metaphor only illustrated her constant attempt to keep up an image of resilience, of hard skin. But there are no superhumans, not among rock stars and certainly not among parents. Humans are all weak, all vulnerable, all needing, just the same. My need to confess was my mother's need to move and then my need to stay. Her strength to find new life is my strength to create something better for myself.

Christopher Shonafelt

St. Stephen's Day

It was a dry summer
I remember,
but I nod off on the bus back from your town,
and it's full of warm rain
and we reach up to a sky
bursting with thunder and firework smoke
and jungle sunsets
and I'm still red, white and blue
with bruises and poison ivy,
we run until autumn
and we all collapse, laughing
and someone smiles,
and tells me something I forget upon waking,
some truth about you, me
or everyone.
I missed running through fields
beyond barbed wire fences, chasing you in fields
where there could have been
glasses and snakes.
Now you are
like a long word
on the tip of my tongue.
The days come and go quietly,
like old men in their hometowns.
The nights put cold hands on my shoulder,
breathe on my neck,
and I have forgotten my name.
Make me the leaves and twigs
spinning down the creek,
make me the cracks in your voice
when you sing,
make me a rock
on a shore of white pebbles.

20

Lacey Sly

Dark Light

The morning sun rose with gardens of tulips
glistening with droplets of dew,
Surrounded by shades of pink and yellow,
reaching for the light with a genuine masked smile.
Bright and bubbly for all to see,
but when the day turned to night
and the shine began to fade,
the tulips closed shut
and the mask melted away.
Eyes of dark red revealed from a gentle green,
blind to the gardens weeping of thirst.
Make way for the queen of deception
cloaked in deep black,
burning in guilt yet smiling with glee.
Shed her of her power
and she's nothing but lies.
Truth is a bare peacock stripped of its feathers,
Running far from her reign
towards the flickering light;
a caged snake was set free
to grow to its proper size.

21

Matthew Durham
Almost Home

“STUPID CATERPILLAR!”

Meroe stomped around in complete disarray, horrified at the lifelessness of her once vibrant morning glories. I knew that her rage had nothing to do with her wounded flowers. Something she cared about had been taken away and all she wanted was vengeance. I knelt beside her, afraid to wrap her in my arms. She would accept a hand on the shoulder, but hugging meant it was all over. Meroe believed her flowers died, and she knew all too well that there is nothing that fixes death.

All day I had contemplated what would have been the most satisfying explanation. There was one in that children’s book, the one about the very hungry caterpillar, a bedtime story we had surely read before it was lost to the sea of books, ragged stuffed animals, and dirty pull-ups left inside pajamas that had become her bedroom floor. But Meroe was four now and recounting the evolution of a butterfly from a silly children’s book would not do the trick. As much as I instinctively wanted to, there was no sheltering my niece from the cruelties of life. She never had that luxury. Neither did I.

Meroe’s morning glories were the last sign of life in the backyard, in the whole house really. Staring at the ruins of the flowerbed, I struggled to come up with an answer, the right words to give her hope that everything would be all right.

I remembered the day my mom first planted flowers there with my sister Clare some twenty years ago. Clare was the same age Meroe is now, and my younger sister, Marie, was still in Mom’s belly. We had just moved into the house and Mom couldn’t stand the sight of the bleak and morose yard the previous owners left in their wake. She had me cultivate the soil, a job I wish my dad had been there to help with. Mom said there was no point in waiting for him, that he had a job to do and so did we. As I labored away, she and Clare sorted through a pile of seed packets, deciding which ones would be planted. Clare only wanted the morning glories, but she didn’t want to just plant them in the flowerbed.

“Mom, I want my flowers to cover the whole backyard! I want them to go all along the walls, like they’re giving our home a biiig hug!”

Looking at the pile of dead flowers they had ripped from the bed, Clare innocently asked Mom why those flowers were no longer pretty. Mom told her that no one had watered them in a long time, and that sometimes their flowers also might not be pretty if they don’t water them every day.

“If they’re startin’ to look broke, you give ’em water and that’ll fix ’em right



Illustration
Meishel DeSouto

up! They're only broken when you don't fix 'em."

I told Meroe this, only without her grandmother's hick accent, and her heart melted as her watery eyes contemplated the idea.

"They're broke, but we can fix them?" she muttered as she wiped her face dry, in the process wiping snot into her untamed locks.

"It's true," I claimed. "We can fix this, but you can't be mad at the caterpillar. Just like you do, caterpillars have to eat so they can grow up, and they like to eat vegetables and plants, just as you should. They have to. It's how they survive. When they've had enough, when they're very full, they find a place to hide away in a big cocoon, and after a while, poof! They turn into a butterfly, break free, and fly away."

It seemed all too magical to her for a moment. It didn't really matter though. She had made a different connection, as children always do. Meroe grabbed my hand, pulled me close, and whispered, "Uncle Steven, what about Grandma? How can we fix her?"

I wished it had been as simple as watering Mom once a day or trimming the dead leaves so that new ones could grow in their place. I could only tell Meroe to give Grandma a hug every day and say I love you. Maybe that would help fix her. But after a moment I realized that would just be a satisfying lie for her and for me. As Meroe pounced off to fill her flower sprinkler, renewed with hope for all things, I feared that by not telling her the full truth I had made things worse that day. Especially that day.

The reality was that even though caterpillars turn into butterflies, no matter how magical it seems, they only live for about two more weeks on average. And Meroe's caterpillar hadn't merely stopped by for a snack; watering the flowers would only do so much to save them. Regardless, taking care of the flowers when I got home from work had been our routine. It was the only way I knew how to provide her with any sense of stability. The reality was a caterpillar had ravaged our home.

As usual, Meroe played outside until the sun went down. Although I had encouraged her to express love towards her grandmother, it was safer to put distance between them and let Meroe enjoy what little time she had left with her flowers.

I attempted to straighten the house up, but it was too arduous of a task to clean those ruins alone, and monitoring Mom took up most of my energy. I thought about all the times I watched Mom clean our once vibrant home. She made it look so easy. That was lifetimes ago though. There was no vibrancy left there, no easy way to clean up that wasteland.

When it was silent in the house, you could always hear echoing screams. Sometimes it sounded like children were crying, or adults were yelling, wailing, or weeping. You didn't have to believe in ghosts to feel what was lingering inside. We all felt it. We all heard the voices. Mom talked to them though. And it wasn't just

the echoes; sometimes it was the silverware. In the morning I had found her in the kitchen having a conversation with a spoon about the economy of Peru. As disturbing as it was, for some reason I found myself wondering what the spoon's position was on foreign trade policy.

After I had put Meroe to bed, I found Mom sitting on the couch with her arm around the empty space next to her. She turned to the space and said, "Steven'll take the picture. He's such a damn good photographer. He won't admit it, but I tell him so all the time." She bounced up, grabbed a camera from the coffee table, and handing it to me, she said, "Honey, can you take a picture for us?" I wasn't sure how to accept the camera. There was nothing there to hold onto. She plopped down beside her companion, fixed her hair, and put her arm back around the shoulders of the empty space.

"Come on now, Grandpa and I still want to go to the park before it gets dark!"

I was relieved and yet disgusted with myself for being relieved. All I could think in that moment was that it was just her dad. It was a horrible thought, but at least it wasn't my dad. At least Meroe had gone to sleep. At least it wasn't Clare sitting next to Mom.

The anxiety of it all tripped a tingling network across my back, like tiny little men digging tiny knives into my body. The pain was nothing new; they had been there long enough to form colonies, entire civilizations. I stood there bent over with my hands on my knees, trying to catch a breath, worried Mom wouldn't snap out of it. When I looked up, I saw her turn to Grandpa, confused as to what had happened. Then suddenly, she looked past him, searching for him as if he were lost in a crowd.

Later that night, when all the voices went to sleep, the sun made its way into Mom's room. It was the perfect temperature, a day that was meant to be spent at the beach splashing in the waves, washing all the worries away. It had been a long time since I had heard Mom laugh. It was almost as if she were a kid again. Only the sun wasn't shining at one in the morning, and the toilet water was her ocean.

I called my sister Marie and asked her to come over with her husband, Anthony. She and I hadn't talked much since Clare and Dad died. Coming over to the house brought back too many hard memories. It had been six months since the accident, but it was still too soon for her and I respected that. I needed her help though. It was time to have Mom committed. At her last appointment with the psychiatrist I was told it would take two family members to do so. Marie was the only one that could, and although I wanted to shield her from the situation as much as possible, trying to protect those I loved was only making matters worse.

When Marie and Anthony arrived, I asked him to take Meroe back home with him. I didn't really know much about Anthony, only that he was a good man who loved my sister. A week before Clare and Dad's accident, Marie found out she was pregnant, which was part of the reason I decided to care for Meroe. The other reason was that I had promised Clare I would raise her daughter should anything bad ever happen, that Meroe would always be home with me.

I sat on the edge of Meroe's bed and contemplated waking her. I hadn't a clue in the world what to say or how it all would play out. I only knew she didn't deserve to suffer through it. I picked her up and carried her down to Anthony, thankful that she was a heavy sleeper.

As he drove away, I walked Mom out to my car where Marie was double checking that the child safety locks were on in the back seat. We told Mom that we were going for a nice drive and to relax as much as possible. She thought we were going on a road trip and that we were keeping the destination a surprise. We were, but as we exited the freeway, Mom caught a glimpse of the hospital, and although she was far from lucid, some part of her recognized what was about to happen. She demanded we take her home, screamed at us, even clawed at my face and ripped a good chunk of skin off. Marie panicked and I tried to hold myself together with one hand on the wheel and the other fending Mom off.

Getting her out of the car was a battle. She clung to the car door with all the might she had. A lone security guard stood at the entrance, unable to move from the shock of the scene. Marie grabbed one of Mom's frail arms, I grabbed the other, and we dragged her inside. As we passed the security guard, who was clearly Caucasian, she snapped at him and yelled, "Nigger!"

It took five staff members to restrain her on a bed. Once they had her down, Marie and I sat outside her room and waited for the psychiatrist to come. It looked like Marie wanted to cry as one of the nurses was cleaning up my wound, only at that point neither of us were capable of doing so. I wasn't sure what to say either. There was so much that probably should have been said, but as we sat there all I could think about were Meroe's morning glories.

The psychiatrist came and evaluated Mom, who by then had slipped fully back into her world where the sun was still shining at three in the morning. He came out and talked to us about our options, all of which sounded long-term and too expensive. He wanted to transfer Mom to an institution up in Northern California and said that it would be the cheapest option available. The only way I could see affording it was to sell our family's home, and I knew right then that it had to happen, that it was the right thing to do. I also knew it meant I had to do something far more painful.

He gave us a few days to think it over, but it wasn't necessary. What I had been providing to Meroe wasn't what she deserved; it wasn't the home I had promised she would grow up in. Marie could give that to her, and she agreed to do so. She understood that I couldn't just ship Mom off to an institution, that I would need to be nearby, and that trying to take care of a child and a sick mother wouldn't be fair to either.

In the morning I dropped Marie off and picked up Meroe so that we could go pack her things. I watched her in the rearview mirror, sitting in her car seat watching the world go by with a giant smile. She saw me watching her and waved.

"Uncle Steven, are we almost home?"

As much as I wanted to say yes, it would have been a lie. Neither one of us was almost home, not by far. I wasn't sure how to tell her why she was moving in with them, but I tried my best to explain what needed to be done as we spent the day boxing away all her things. After the car was packed, as we stepped out the door to leave, Meroe ran back inside the house and out to the backyard.

"What about my flowers? Can they come with me?"

I knelt down beside her, put my hand on her shoulder, and said, "You know, someone else is going to move into this house. They're going to bring their family and I bet you that one of them is a little girl just like you. And I think she would love it if she came to her brand new home and had flowers waiting for her. That would be a nice gift you could give to her. The cool thing about flowers is that you can grow them anywhere you go. They can always be with you."

"I can have a new garden and grow more flowers?" she asked, filled with renewed hope for all things.

"Of course you can."

Meroe looked at me and nodded. She cried for a moment but did her best to reel it in, and instead allowed me to give her a hug for the first time, knowing it was all over.

We wouldn't see each other again for eight years. In that time we stayed in touch as much as possible over the phone, at first talking every day, and then every couple of days, and so on as she continued to take root in her new home and family. When we talked of visiting one another, there always seemed to be some complication in the way, and it usually was one I created. I knew that if I saw her, I'd want her to fly back home with me, and so instead, for those eight years, I stayed wrapped in my own cocoon, unable to break through my walls.

It wasn't until Mom was ready to leave the institution that I would make a trip back to see Meroe and the rest of the family. Marie and I talked for weeks

beforehand about how we would reintroduce Mom to everyone, to Meroe and to Marie and Anthony's daughter and young son, both of whom I had never met as well. She was a grandma they had never known, that Meroe had likely forgotten about. We decided that I would take a visit first to ease them into it so that Mom's visit would be more comfortable.

When my flight landed, I called Marie and she said to come on over. On the way to their house, not far from my family's old place, I realized that the city I was born and raised in no longer existed. Everything had become something new. All the buildings, all the street signs, all the people walking by. All the dead leaves had been trimmed and in their place new ones flourished. It was a relief, and yet deep down I worried that every memory of my life before had faded away, that Meroe had forgotten our time together completely, and with her mom and mine.

I arrived at their home. On the outside it was not unlike any other home on the street: a freshly mowed lawn standing before four walls and a roof, a front door, and a welcome mat. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer, so I turned the knob and stepped inside, greeted instantly by echoing voices. They weren't the voices that lingered in our old home, the wailing or weeping ones. They were of laughing children. Looking around the room at all the pictures on the walls, you would never think Meroe wasn't a part of this family or that they were anything but happy together.

I saw speckled lights through the shades of the window on the back door, and as I opened it, I opened up and broke through the walls I had been trapped inside for so long. There I saw Meroe setting a table on the patio, her once untamed locks now turned to flowing waves, standing tall and proud, so beautiful in a sky blue summer dress. As my eyes swelled with tears, Meroe came over and held my hand, and together we stood before her pretty flowers, her vibrant morning glories, covering wall to wall around the entire house as if it were giving us a big hug.

Jilly Pretzel
Chicken

Suzanne was a tall, thin woman with big teeth, bigger hair, and too-tight denim shorts. She married my father just before I started first grade, and as soon as she moved in, things began to change. She took it upon herself to bring law, order, and organization to our little home and soon our lives with Suzanne were unrecognizable from the way we had lived before.

The first thing she changed was the look of the house. She altered every room, adding a fresh coat of canary yellow or blood red paint to the walls, switching out movie posters for bird sketches, and placing "necessities" around the house that only made the rooms seem crowded. Crocheted throw blankets and incense holders now peppered the living room, a love seat was delivered, and an embarrassingly feminine tea set arrived on the shabby wooden dinner table at every meal.

Soon, Suzanne began creating house rules, something my father and I had never needed before. These new rules generally applied only to me and generally concerned which of Suzanne's knick-knacks I could or could not touch. Meanwhile, my father was given projects such as replacing regular door handles with plastic knobs shaped to look like giant diamonds and scouring antique shops for stained glass lampshades.

Still, as much as I hated Suzanne's rules and the new look of the house, none of Suzanne's "improvements" were as bad as her meal expectations.

There was no denying that I was a picky eater, but I owned up to my faults and tried to be fair with my requests. I had no problem with explaining my food expectations to babysitters and grade school teachers, and was perfectly capable of rummaging the kitchen for my own food when the occasion called for it. In fact, my mother, with whom I lived primarily, had simply come to accept it as one of my many quirks. Unfortunately, Suzanne was not one to accommodate special requests. She ignored my handwritten lists that clearly identified waffles, eggs, grilled cheese, and plain spaghetti as "good food," and was not afraid to draw inspiration from the list of "bad food," which identified such culprits as zucchini, mushrooms, and meat.

Before Suzanne moved in, my father would usually let me pick what I wanted for dinner or, at the very least, offer options. But Suzanne was insistent that I eat what she cooked, and soon added the new rule that I could not leave

the dinner table until my plate was clean. Not only was I annoyed at all the changes Suzanne brought, but I was now exhausted from spending every night sitting at the table, staring at a pile of mushrooms until I was finally excused at bedtime.

One evening, after a long weekend of fighting to avoid eating cauliflower, I sat down at the dinner table with my father and Suzanne. On the plate in front of me sat spongy, beige cubes between a pile of mashed potatoes and a heap of green beans. Curiously, I pushed down on the mysterious substance with my fork and watched the material spring back quickly. I shoved the squares into a corner of my plate with my fork, sniffed them, and glared across the table at Suzanne.

“Is this... chicken?” I asked.

Chicken had always held the number one spot on the “bad food” list, and at this moment it occurred to me that there was a very real possibility that Suzanne was trying to starve me.

I looked to my father, who sat at the head of the table in soil-stained jeans and an old t-shirt, tearing his way through a chicken leg. I was hoping for some sort of support from him or a miracle “chicken dinner pardon” but received neither.

“Well, that really hits the spot,” he said, taking a bite.

“How ‘bout waffles?” I suggested. My father pretended not to hear me and continued eating.

Suzanne sat down delicately in her seat, which had recently been fashioned with a lace-lined red cushion. With her pinkie extended, Suzanne poured herself a cup of tea from her white and pink floral teapot, smirking in such a way that the heavy cream foundation covering her face fell into the creases around her mouth and eyes, leaving her wrinkles looking more defined.

By this point, I had come to expect the content of Suzanne’s meals and made a habit of bringing a picture book to dinner, knowing that I would likely be forced to stay in my seat until my plate was clean (which would be never). But as soon as Suzanne had placed the chicken in front of me, I realized that I had forgotten my reading material.

I started to dread the long hours in front of me as I ate around the chicken, nibbling at the green beans and mashed potatoes, and circling the beige mess on the side of the plate. I told myself that I could do this, that if anyone could avoid eating chicken, it was me.

After gobbling his food, my father wiped his face with the back of his hand and declared that he was going back outside to the garden before it became too dark. This, of course, was another task set by Suzanne. For the last few days, he had been planting tulips in a patch of dirt that once was a sandbox. As my father left, Suzanne seemed to only get more comfortable, pouring another cup of tea and

letting her eyes linger on the chicken on my plate.

This was the showdown. This was the time of day that I put my determination to the test, the time of day that I proved what I was made of and what I stood for.

As time passed, Suzanne poured herself cup after cup of tea from her little white teapot, and eventually, I became restless. The time between dinner and bedtime seemed to stretch out in front of me. Suzanne drank the last of her tea, and then placed a book of crosswords on the table next to her clean plate, apparently getting comfortable.

It was then, sitting there, that it dawned on me: Suzanne was just as stubborn as I was.

While I had sworn to stick to my dietary preferences, Suzanne had likely made the same sort of commitment to break me of my habits. I had been so determined to be, well, determined, that I hadn’t noticed that Suzanne was not about to give up.

The phone gave out a few shrill rings in another room. Suzanne, glancing at me through the corner of her eyes, stood up to follow the sound.

With her gone, I began to weigh my options. The more I thought about it, the more it occurred to me that this conflict might never end. I began to see the future: every other weekend when I visited my dad I would go through this war all over again. I would fight what she fed me, fight her rules, and she would fight back. I realized I could sit at the table, sticking to my guns and suffering boredom for the principle of the matter or I could end it all. I could eat the chicken.

I didn’t want to eat the off-color squares on my plate, of course. The chunks smelled like dead bird and looked like pieces of sponge, but people had paid bigger prices for their freedom. Besides, sometimes a kid had to put up with her new stepmother’s rules, her ugly decorations, and obnoxious teapots in order to live her life.

Suzanne’s voice echoed from the next room, “We should get together soon,” followed by a small, forced giggle.

From the window, I could see my father digging holes in the yard, small pots of red and yellow tulips next to him, ready to be planted. The sun outside was just beginning to fall and I knew that I would have little time to myself before bedtime if I stayed at the table any longer.

Slowly, I picked up my fork and jabbed a beige piece of chicken flesh. I brought the chicken to my lips and—stopped. Glancing beyond the end of my fork, I spotted Suzanne’s teapot, the ugly white porcelain with the flowers growing up the side. I hated that teapot and everything it represented. How dare she come to

this house and change our way of life? Sure, my father and I were disorganized, but maybe we liked it that way. Sure, maybe my taste was simple, but that was how I preferred it. I wasn't going to let Suzanne come in and take over so easily.

I listened carefully to Suzanne's voice in the next room: mumbled fragments of "Okay, I will see you soon then."

I knew that I only had a few seconds before she came back.

Without thinking, I lifted the top off of Suzanne's teapot and held my plate vertically above it, shoveling chicken into the opening with my fork. My hands were shaking as I dropped the lid back on the pot, my plate now empty.

Suzanne walked into the dining room and, like a shot, I stood up with my plate in my hand. She looked at me curiously but beamed when she saw that the chicken was gone.

"There, now that wasn't so bad, was it?" she said.

I looked up at her, not sure how to respond. I placed my dish on the kitchen counter and walked to my room, trying not to smile too broadly.

A few minutes later, I heard my name yelled from the kitchen. Of course, I couldn't have expected the chicken to go unnoticed forever. It had only taken a few minutes of clearing dishes for her to find half of my dinner tucked under the lid of her teapot, but I reported proudly to the kitchen, ready for my punishment.

"Is this... chicken?" she asked, her thin face scrunched in anger.

I nodded, not trying to hide my grin.

"You. Need. To. Clean. This out!" she said, her jaw clenched so tightly that her words could barely make it through the thin space between her lips. When I shrugged and started towards the sink, she continued, "I'm using the sink. You, you—use the hose," and she pointed outside.

This may have seemed like a strange punishment: dumping soaked chunks of chicken into the backyard, but I like to think that this strange reaction was the product of Suzanne's confusion and swift defeat. She thought that she had won, that she had made a step towards house domination, but instead of a victory, she had a teapot that would forever smell like chicken dinner.

So I stood on the back porch, pointing the nozzle of the hose into the teapot and letting the bloated little sponges plop down into the grass. As I watched a little pile of chicken collect at my feet, I felt a strange sense of pride, a small sense of confidence that I couldn't quite describe at the time. Over the sound of the hose, my father's voice called to me from his garden of tulips.

"Honey, is that chicken?"



Illustration
Jessica Wei



Home
Paul "Jeep" Eddy



L.A. Underground
Mitch Ridder



El Nahual
Anibal Santos



Illusive Dream
Nikita Young

Luke Feilberg

Drowning

There are no road signs in Costa Rica, except for some of the major highways, but we were quite far from those. In fact, we really were quite far from anything. Only the dark canopy of the rainforest surrounded us, occasionally opening up to give us glances of the ocean. The dirt roads were rutted with small canyons from the constant rain. Our car's tires could hardly climb over them. Plus, my dad drove with the windows down. He didn't seem to mind the 100% humidity. He also didn't seem to mind that we hadn't seen a road sign, another car, or even a single person in over an hour. It was getting hard for me to trust him. All his trust was in a 20-year-old roadbook with very vague directions using landmarks to make up for the lack of road signs.

Yet somehow things just always worked out for my dad. In the most desperate of times he always had a way of solving the seemingly impossible, so I trusted him and I had to give credit to his book because it was getting us to every town with a gas station. When we reached Playa Zancudo, which translates to "Mosquito Beach," I asked some natives for directions to Pavones, a town so remote most of them didn't know of it despite living only miles away. There lies a wave so long it stretches the entirety of the town. That was our destination, and it was there that I nearly took my last breath as 12-foot waves piled over me.

My dad and I were never too close. We didn't have any problems with each other; we just seemed to live different lives. While his time was invested in work, my time was invested in school and friends. But anytime something would go wrong, he always knew how to handle the situation. Still, there wasn't much we directly connected over, so although neither of us said anything, it was clear this trip meant a lot. I therefore kept my feelings of uneasiness to myself. Maybe if I had been more vocal, things would have gone differently.

We arrived at Pavones late at night and first thing in the morning ran straight to the beach. There was nobody there, just large piles of driftwood and a few stray dogs. The rich blue water looked incredible, contrasting with the coarse, black sand and the overhanging green of the forest. For the first time in the whole trip, I felt exhilarated. This was familiar. My dad had been surfing his whole life and, as a skateboarder, I was pretty comfortable on a surfboard, too.

We bolted straight for the waves, running like little kids. I threw my board into the water and skimmed on top of it. The waves looked about head high, but at the time I felt invincible. The water was crystal clear and as warm as the air. I couldn't contain my excitement. The first wave I could get positioned for, I pushed my body up and flew straight across it. A smile stretched across my face; I was determined to ride this wave

out. I stepped forward, speeding myself up and keeping myself carving up and down the face of the wave with the white wash crashing right behind my ankles. Eventually, the wave closed out and I turned around to see my dad's reaction, but he was very far out. I rode that wave a long way in. The waves there were nothing like the shorebreak I was used to at home. My arms were starting to cramp up and I was getting hot paddling so far in the warm water.

Then I saw an ominous, black shape rolling out from the horizon. It was the 12-foot face of a monstrous wave. My throat tightened up and a feeling of trepidation flooded my veins. I scratched the water with a fight or flight instinct, knowing I had to get over those waves. I was pulling on the ocean, but I just could not speed up enough. The water lost its density and it felt like I was pulling on air, making absolutely no distance. Every kick and paddle was futile.

It was the first wave of the set and it towered over me. All I could see was the bottom of the wave sucking in everything around me. Its vast form seemed to consume the whole ocean and if I had begun paddling out 10 seconds earlier, I could have possibly made the duck dive.

But I didn't.

The lip of the wave threw itself directly on my back, knocking the wind out of me and sending me into a whirl of absolute disorientation. I was frantic. I had no breath in the liquid quicksand, and my strained muscles were aching for oxygen. I couldn't tell if the water blackened or if my eyes were closed. I just knew I needed air.

Finally, I found my leash and began climbing it to the surface. The moment my fingertips broke the surface of the water, a second wave threw me right back down to hell, robbing me of my chance to breathe. The water tackled and pinned me down on the ocean floor. I had to make a conscious effort to not breathe; my body was involuntarily trying to gasp. A sharp pain developed in my chest, and I could feel myself sweating beneath the water. I made what movements I could, but every muscle burned and I was overwhelmingly dizzy. I almost gave into my fate, but suddenly the power of the wave rolled on without me and I recognized up from down.

I made a break through the water and got the gasp of air I was dying for. It felt like the oxygen was extinguishing a fire inside me. The force of the first wave had torn my leash right off so I was treading water in a frantic state. The waves had dragged me so far in that by the time a third reached me, it had lost most of its power. I just gave in and let the landslide of white wash carry me to the shore.

On the sand, I looked out and saw my dad. He was still very far out and wasn't much more than a speck, but I could see that he had made no effort to head in or wave or simply acknowledge my existence. For the first time in my life, I was convinced that I might die and he had no idea. Nobody did. I made it out of the water, but my faith and trust in my dad didn't. The security I felt in his presence did drown. Lying light headed in the sand, I understood how truly fragile and lonely life is.

Max Hosford

How Not to Swim

at night he was underwater,
the pressure crushing his chest and head and limbs all floating on that hospital
bed
any last vestige of breath and the will to live escaping from his lips
in little crystalline bubbles lazily drifting upwards
eyes open and stinging and staring out the window

every car that passed was a 2001 Toyota Camry intent on imbedding itself in the
side of the building

every car was sad and angry and drunk
and underwater, too.

the nurses brought the morning in on sanitized stormclouds
raining down colorful droplet pills that caught fire in his mouth
he'd force them down till his limbs were numb and fingers cold dead weight
a sinking ship dropping its anchors, no lifeboats
and he had forgotten how to swim

we made eye contact once,
but what good is a lifeguard who can't even tread water?
we were hopeless and alone in a hospital at the bottom of the ocean
a deep and dark narcotic trench with no geothermal vents
somewhere off the coast of Japan

he was drowning and i was drowning and neither of us had any intention of
alerting the Coast Guard

an air rescue seemed as absurd as it was
impossible in those seas

if there is a heaven, then there has to be a hell
and at these depths i'd wager which one we're closer to
but i grabbed onto those glowing green numbers
floating from the clock by the bed
as he just kept sinking down and down

and down
and down

40

Fatemeh Ayoughi

Our Soldier

I'm a soldier
Heavily loaded with weapons and provisions,
but my most powerful weapon
is my life.

I won't die
in any battlefield,
Just wind blowing my petals,
beyond the seasons.

I won't die
in any battlefield,
Just life echoing in my voice,
alley by alley.

Touch me
as the red petals dance with the breeze

Listen to my song
when the red cloud moves beyond the horizon

Watch me
in the reflections of the silent mirror

I'm a soldier
My most powerful weapon,
my life;
I won't die
in any battlefield.

I tattoo my impressions
on the chest of history

And my torched memory
lights the frozen street.

Oh my dear,
I am not remorseful.

Remember me
when somebody else loves you;
walk beyond my smile

Oh my dear,
I'm not forgettable;
talk about me with the neighbor kids
curious about the story of a hero.

41

Cynthia Bellows Danielson Bird

Devil Worshipper

Her ancestors were the first to believe in one God. Their earliest leader, Zoroaster, taught them that fire was a blessing. Now Astria panted, completely out of breath after running from horrific flames. She finally had to stop and turn, looking back down Sinjar Mountain at her rapidly burning town of Sinjar. The trail led straight up rocky boulders; she hid behind one and peered below to see the figures dressed in black. As the men danced about the bodies they killed and mutilated, a black flag waved in the smoke. Anything that burned had been set alight—red fire plumes billowed.

“Run!” her mother had commanded as they fled. “Up the mountain—go. Do not wait for me.” A baby sister was clutched in her mother’s arms because she had lost children to illness already. The oldest, Astria, at twelve, worried about her brothers: the four-year old twins and two-year old Asure.

Her father had sent the females ahead in the pre-dawn dark before the first black turbaned force arrived. He told them that the rumors were true: the Islamic State warriors were coming and would round up women and girls to use as human shields and to sell. New husbands would force them to convert to Islam. As for the men and boys of the Yazidi people, immediate and terrible death was on the way, he said. The last Astria saw of her father, he had Asure gripped around his waist like a sack of feed. On his shoulders, he carried one twin and held the other’s hand.

“Run ahead,” he ordered. “We will be right behind you.”

Now Astria’s breath returned, her gaze riveted on the burning terror below until she forced herself to propel her legs on the uphill climb. She heard her own sobs come from inside her red dress—red, her color, chosen when she loved fire.

The sun struggled to appear in a murky dawn, and she continued on, never stopping or slowing her pace. The rocky trail led to a ridge and to the town of Kalkan. She had hiked there with her father to trade their goats after an earthquake demolished his restaurant and the family car only two months ago. He told her the story of how Noah’s Ark, with two of every kind of animal, had landed on top of the Sinjar Mountain after the ancient flood. It took two days to get to Kalkan, Astria thought wildly. Could she go by herself, or should she wait?

When the sun blazed overhead, she hid behind a rock and sipped carefully

at her goatskin flask of water. A few wafers of her mother’s bread and small balls of goat cheese had been tied onto her skirt, but she was not hungry. Fear still gripped her—there was no food in this treeless place where no grass grew. Would her family reach her by night if she stayed here?

“Devil worshippers, that’s what our enemies call us.” She remembered her father’s frequent warning. He was one designated as a Talker to recite the Yazidi history and their beliefs, including reincarnation. Now Astria quieted her fears as she sped up the trail by remembering his words: “Kurdistan has been eaten up by Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. We, the Yazidi, are still here in the north of Iraq in the land that used to be called Kurdistan. Kurds worship our same God in the Muslim way but allow us our way. Always remember: life is a battle between truth and falsehood, and our beloved Peacock Angel will show you the right path.” Astria knew the details of the story of the fallen angel who had been rescued by God. He was the one the Islamic State warriors called the devil.

In recent weeks, rumors had spread about the Islamic State warriors who would kill all who were not like them. They wanted their own country and to own the wealth from oil from which others had profited. So far they had taken over four hundred miles of territory. Many Yazidi fled Sinjar days ago, heading up the mountain.

“We are blessed with our children,” her mother confessed. “But how can we bring them all?” Those words haunted Astria as her sandals held her feet on the rocky trail. Did Asure have sandals? He had become her charge after the tiny baby sister was born. The twins were old enough to tease and tire her, but there was nothing she wouldn’t do for the toddler, Asure.

By mid-afternoon, she stopped again and this time nibbled a bit of bread. People said Astria was pretty with her dark hair and surprising blue eyes. But she was prouder of her long legs and fast stride than of her looks. “We will find you in Kalkan” was the last thing her father said. “There will be a place there for Yazidis.” Those words became her mantra after the afternoon shadows came.

On the trail, she continually scanned the crowd for her family. Nowhere. It was a tide of refugees, almost all women and children. She hoarded her food and spoke to no one but was comforted by the bright colors worn by her people. When it grew dark, she kept going under a full moon and reached the outskirts of Kalkan at dawn—a huge swarm of people had settled in a makeshift camp. Astria slumped to the ground and slept, part of a human hive.

The sun woke her, and she ate the last of her food and finished her water. Then she again searched the horde surrounding her, looking for her family. It was not until late in the day that long lines formed around buckets of soup and water. People were orderly but desperate. No one spoke to the girl, but Astria was allowed

her turn. Local Kurds manned the buckets, and there was a white-coated doctor with a Red Crescent badge that moved among those lying on the ground.

“Can you help me?” Astria asked the doctor as he bent over a still form. He didn’t answer her, but she recognized the red and blue shroud over the body—it was her mother’s intricately patterned shawl. She had woven those colors most loved by the Yazidi—red for the fire of life and blue for water, the source of wisdom. Joy filled Astria as her mother’s face appeared beneath her unwinding scarf; her mother was weeping as she held out the tiny bundle that was her baby daughter to the doctor.

“I am here,” Astria cried.

Her mother looked at Astria and beamed. “I thank God who brought you here safely. Soon your father will find us.”

The doctor left after giving the baby a shot with a long needle filled with white medicine. Finally her mother was free to embrace Astria. Then she wrapped the three of them in her blue and red robe, and they cocooned with their mother as she promised that all would be well.

The next day Astria went to the long lines to get food and water many times because so little was given each time. She looked everywhere for her father among the milling crowds of refugees and hoped he would be there each time she returned.

Another night passed. The baby was nursing again but was listless in her mother’s arms. In the morning, her father arrived, holding one twin in each arm. The four-year-olds looked like they had shrunk—all their liveliness was gone. Her mother handed the baby to Astria and embraced the twins. But she looked pleadingly at her husband and whispered the toddler’s name, “Asure?”

“Where is Asure? What has happened to him?” Astria grabbed her father’s empty arm.

He wrenched away from her and said, “I am going back for him. He had to be left back on the trail. I could no longer carry all three. No man should have to choose between his sons, but he was the youngest and weakest. I told him he could rest where we slept and that I would be back.”

Her mother moaned as her father turned and left, disappearing into the crowd of refugees. Astria looked into her baby sister’s tiny face and was filled with fury at her father. How could he leave Asure behind? She saw her youngest brother’s small laughing face, which mirrored her own with blue eyes.

The twins were dehydrated—her mother spooned so many mouthfuls of water past their swollen lips that all their goatskin bags were empty long before dawn. Astria could not sleep with visions of Asure left alone on the trail. For the

next two days, she got food for the twins, who were hungry as baby goats. More supplies arrived with workers in blue shirts labeled UNICEF and a few tents were distributed. Astria stood in line but could not get one.

When she returned to her family, her father lay stretched out on the ground sound asleep. Astria’s fury at him escalated as her mother sobbed.

“Asure? Where is Asure?” wailed Astria.

Her mother only shook her head and made a low cry like a wounded animal. “With our Peacock Angel.”

Astria shouted, “Was there no sign of him?”

Her father opened his eyes and stared at her. “Asure was not where I left him. I searched and searched. I went to a hospital here in Kalkan where they showed me his body. He was found on the trail and brought there. Asure was blind from the sun and completely dehydrated—for a few hours he lived while they injected him with water, the source of all wisdom. But in the end, he left us for this lifetime.”

There was no time to mourn Asure. Within minutes of her father’s confession, a truck pulled up alongside them and disgorged men in black. Astria lurched to her feet only to be swiftly grabbed by her long dark hair. Using her hair like a rope, the man who held Astria flung her onto the hard bed of a truck.

Anrea Santos

Starving for Freedom

Gray, melancholy skies hovered over dust and rubble that filled the city of Homs. Shell holes in walls of ruined buildings and cars abandoned from bombings revealed traces of war. The city that was once a major industrial center in Syria had been demolished with thousands dead. For many, it was hard to believe what had become of our country in the 21st century.

My name is Ammar. I am a young man from Aleppo, the largest city in Syria, which is now a complete war zone. Historical monuments have been completely destroyed. When the danger first emerged, my mother and I fled from Aleppo with other refugees, hoping to escape the gunfire and bombings in our town. We grabbed whatever we could and left. All I had were the clothes on my back, a backpack with a blanket and food, and my cat. Rumors of approaching assistance gave many hope. The goal was to make it to Al Zaatari in Jordan, where the largest refugee camp was located. Unfortunately, my mother and I separated along the way. I pray for her safety and hope to meet her there. I made the dreadful mistake of stopping in Homs in search for food.

A day after I arrived, the soldiers under Bashar al-Assad closed off any exits from the city of Homs. In addition to the blockade, food had been completely cut off in the city. Starvation was used as a weapon of war and no one was allowed to leave. Those who were seen on the streets searching for food were instantly shot and killed by Syrian soldiers guarding the borders to the outside. The hopeless awaited their outcomes as they watched loved ones die from starvation and malnutrition. Among those battling for life in this civil war were the animals left behind. The Syrian citizens had become so desperate that they started eating everything, including the cats and dogs--their only option for food. They were on the hunt for whatever they could find.

My only companion was my cat, Tiger. I named him for the orange tint in his fur and the dark stripes that gave him the resemblance of a tiger. What was special about our bond was our ability to communicate. Tiger was no ordinary housecat. He was obedient yet fearless. He was my companion and we looked out for each other. Though we could not physically speak the same language, we understood each other.

We found a peaceful spot in an abandoned, destroyed building away from the sounds of shelling and artillery. The whitewashed walls were coming

apart and filled with dirt. There was rubble all around us. I was certain it was a place where no one would find us. I made a bed with my blanket and rationed out my food. At times, Tiger left to search for food and brought back mice or birds. At one point, we heard the cries of panic from another cat. Tiger followed the cries into an alleyway where he found a man with a knife and the intent to hunt his next meal. Tiger was able to guide the other cat away and led her to our secret spot.

After a hundred days of the blockade had passed, Tiger found more abandoned animals that he led to us. Cats and dogs had become allies as they searched for safe shelter. As his group grew, he became the leader of the pack and they looked to him for guidance. However, over that time, the group's number went up and down. The group, which numbered more than 20 cats and five dogs at one point, was cut in half due to hunters and starvation. Many were deceived by hunters and captured when bribed with food. I mainly feared for Tiger's life. He was all I had.

As for me, I had to become creative with my meals to survive. For awhile, I created soups with weeds and grass. But even sources for leaves and weeds became scarce. At times, I thought I was losing my mind and often contemplated suicide or leaving. What was the point of being safe if I would just die from starvation? I wanted to risk the chance of being shot. It seemed like a more merciful way to die. I wished to sleep and not think, but pain from hunger is unlike any other pain. It felt like sharp needles inside my stomach. A week and a half without food was the longest I went without anything. They say a man can survive up to three weeks without food, but I had no hope for survival. I had no hope in God and didn't want to be alive to witness any more suffering. I told Tiger to take his group and leave me. I didn't want them to be around when I died. I knew he had a better chance of survival with his pack if he left. He obeyed.

The next day, I lay cold and shivering in the heat, which must have reached its peak in the month of August. I felt death nearing as I closed my eyes and waited. I woke up to Tiger's paws leaning against my stomach.

"I thought I told you to leave me."

"The young man is alive," said a man. He sounded American.

A team of men surrounded me. "We're from the World Food Organization. We're a convoy that has brought food and supplies. The UN ordered a cease-fire from the troops and we're here to evacuate who we can and transport them to the refugee camp in Al Zaatari. You're gonna be okay, young man."

Harun Shah

Hunting the Bell

“Marcus, wake up.”

He didn't stir from the blotchy mattress, which had long since needed a wash. With a single binary command, Vica turned on the ship's emergency alarms. Earsplitting sirens forced Marcus awake. He jolted upright and before he could speak, the cacophony faded.

“I'm glad you are awake,” she said with a hint of sarcasm in her robotic yet dulcet voice, emanating from the speakers everywhere in his quarters. “I feared there might have been permanent damage this time.”

“A hundred and forty-three years and you think now the medical systems would stop working,” Marcus guffawed, rubbing his neck as he cracked his back and stood up. He clambered into the bathroom with light steps.

Earlier that day, Marcus had made his daily recording as he had done thousands of times. Vica filled the gaps in his log with data and statistics as she had always done. As an AI, mastery of numbers was her birthright, but her skill with people was what had allowed her to excel.

48 The sun-scorched hull of the Orion drifted through an empty sector of space. The pock-marked wings and scratched alloy casing did not show the ship in its full glory. As the flagship of Earth's beginning in deep space exploration, it had departed with a crew of 11. Since nine of them died in a seismic event while exploring another planet, that was just a memory from a century past. Now there was only Marcus Aegean, pilot of the Orion, and Vica.

“It's close to the anniversary,” Vica reminded him as he trudged down the cramped hexagonal hallway toward the engine room, his heavy steps matching the flickering of the overhead LED lights. Although clean and well-kept, the ship reeked of stale air that would have been more at home in a tomb. The only sounds echoing through the empty hallways were the various beeps of life support or the buzzing of the engines. Vica watched him on the internal cameras and her voice followed him around.

The doors slid open and warmed air rushed out to greet Marcus. The engine room was filled with various computers and canisters, but the main attraction was two large cylinders angled out the rear of the ship. The whirring and shuddering of the engines reverberated all throughout the aft. Naked transformers let off electrical discharge like tesla coils. Whenever the electricity decided to arc towards something particularly close, the pylons gave off sounds

like a hive full of wasps.

Marcus reached out and grabbed hold of the transformer. Electricity shot through his body, causing his muscles to seize up. He could feel himself burning as the power went through his heart to complete the circuit.

Another failed attempt, leaving him to struggle through another day. Marcus dunked his head into the sink quickly. He emerged drenched with cold water and his long brown hair splayed. He looked himself over in the broken mirror, shattered in his early days of isolation. Entirely new. Every little scar, scrape, burn since his last suicide attempt had been fixed, leaving unblemished fresh skin. With hollow eyes, Marcus looked himself over: thin, wiry arms, small shoulders, and lanky legs.

Silence filled the mess hall as Marcus lifted a spoon filled with shapeless slop. He stared at it, recoiled, and placed it back down in disgust. “I can't keep living like this, Vica. Humans weren't meant for this. I wasn't meant for this.”

“I know, sir,” Vica replied.

He cradled his head in his hands.

“I received a warning from the fuel sensors,” Vica said.

“Recommended course of action?”

“Probability of finding another vessel or home is low. Without navigation, jumping is inadvisable,” warned Vica.

“You think we shouldn't use it—don't you? Just let it decay by itself.”

49 “Marcus, I have watched you expire three hundred and ninety-four times. I understand when someone is unhappy.” She paused. “I recommend we use the fuel before decay.”

“You're one of a kind, Vica.”

The cockpit of the Orion hadn't seen action or life in years, but Marcus practically rammed his way through the doors. A thin film of micro frost went cascading as he leapt into the pilot's seat and cracked his knuckles loudly.

He felt cheerful and revitalized, more than he had felt in years. He placed his fingers over the keyboard and found familiarity. Skills he had once been chosen for came flooding back to him. “Ready?”

“Engines prepped, sir. We have enough fuel for three jumps.” Marcus tapped the controls and the ship rocked. The duration was brief and after seconds the ship grew still once more. Marcus checked his view screen. Even ambient starlight was absent in the black abyss of space that surrounded them.

“We successfully found nothing.” He spoke through gritted teeth. “Prep again.”

“Already completed.”

“Round two.” Marcus slowly pressed the keys, taking care to cross his fingers this time. The ship lurched once more like an army was battering on the hull.

“Now?”

“There is an asteroid on the far port side scanners.”

Marcus searched through the ship’s various scopes until he had a clear view. He was hopeful that, after drifting for years, they had encountered something solid. His hope was quickly extinguished as Vica displayed data on his screen. Even at their top speed they could never crash into the asteroid. He had been granted a forever elusive asteroid.

“What are the manual coordinates?” Marcus asked. “We can jump ahead of its path.”

“If you overshoot the position, we will use all the fuel. I do not recommend this course.”

Their ship drifted along as Marcus was gripped by his dilemma. “This is the first object we’ve seen in over a century and you want me to leave it?”

Her answer was resolute and unwavering. “Yes.”

“Prep again, Vica.” Marcus vented his frustration on the controls and battered the top of the pilot’s console.

“Yes, sir. One jump remaining. Ready.”

He hit the keys and ignored the rattling that followed. The ship, shaped like an eagle with swept wings, emerged surrounded by a cloud of blue and purple gases. The obscured, colorful mass was pushed aside as the Orion sliced its way through. Twinkling white starlight bounced off the ionized gases, throwing their color everywhere. Blues, reds, greens, purples all combined and separated to create a billowing ever-changing expanse. The volume of the clouds was colossal and the density was opaque.

Marcus marveled at the phenomenon, momentarily releasing his stress.

“Anything, Vica?”

“We lost our scanners in the jump. I only got a glimpse of the nebula.”

“And?” he asked with desperation in his voice.

“There are no celestial bodies in the vicinity.” She paused, afraid of his reaction. “I am sorry, Marcus.”

He slumped back in his chair as her words bounced around inside his skull. “Nothing. I should’ve taken my chances with the asteroid.” Marcus eased himself onto the cockpit floor and rested his back against one of the computer terminals. Tears formed as the realization set in. Marcus muttered, “ ‘Any man’s death diminishes me. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’ ”

“Sir?”

“It’s from John Donne, an old poet. Ever since we lost everyone, I am the

lesser because of it. Too many tragedies add up to nothing. There is nothing left to live for. I never really understood it myself until now.”

The ship’s emergency alarm sounded, startling both of them. Marcus ran to the cockpit, his feet slamming against the steel floors. “Open the forward view!” he shouted. The metal curtains that shielded the front of the ship were drawn back and brilliant red light came streaming through the glass. Marcus squinted and brought up a hand to block the light. “It’s a red giant.”

“Distance is ten million meters and closing.”

“This is it, Vica,” Marcus said, a large smile curling onto his face. He was giddy and jumped into the pilot’s seat. “Let’s go!” He positioned his hands over the engine controls and hesitated.

“Sir? Is something wrong?”

He sighed. “I’ve been so absorbed with my own death that I never asked you. What do you want?”

She was stunned. Never in her existence had anyone asked her that. The question cut through her programming and logical routines, going straight to her core. She dug down into her primary directives. A single thought absorbed her and rattled around her core programming. She gathered herself and answered, “I want to be with you.”

Marcus bit his lip. “You should eject the black box. Someone might find it in the future.”

She released the clamps on the ship’s computer core and ejected it into the nebula. With precise little rockets, the black box shot into the enveloping clouds of gas and vacuum. Marcus gently eased the controls. The engines spurred the Orion to life, carrying it into the welcoming embrace of the red giant. Vica silenced the ship’s alarms, leaving only the flashing warning “PROXIMITY ALERT” on all the screens.

“Impact in ten seconds,” the security system’s automated voice began counting down.

“Vica, there is no one else I would rather have lived with than you.” Instead of gazing into his own fiery death, Marcus looked lovingly at the computer terminal that housed his best and only friend.

“Impact in five, four, three, two, one ...”

Summer Jones
Forgotten

I daydream of rediscovering forgotten history
I drift into a faraway fantasy
Of touches, of forgotten memories
Only to be troubled by the missing things.
I hold the ache of space within me
I wake to discover a perished past,
A realization that these feelings never last
As I close my eyes again
To be closer to the memories I will soon forget

Thomas Monroe

Remember

Father plucks the
box of sound,
A bumpkin's 12-bar blues
never quite making it to the
B chord

The rhythm snakes and crawls,
Digging deeper now,
Under the foundation, it goes
Writhing into caverns,
Hidden spaces
known only to tree roots
and the old gods.

He hammers the strings,
An ancient metallurgist,
Hephaestus, or one older,
Contorting the box of sound into
the machine of creation,
where deep gurgling sounds
become whirlpools of colored light

And the resonating stars
bend their ears
and remember

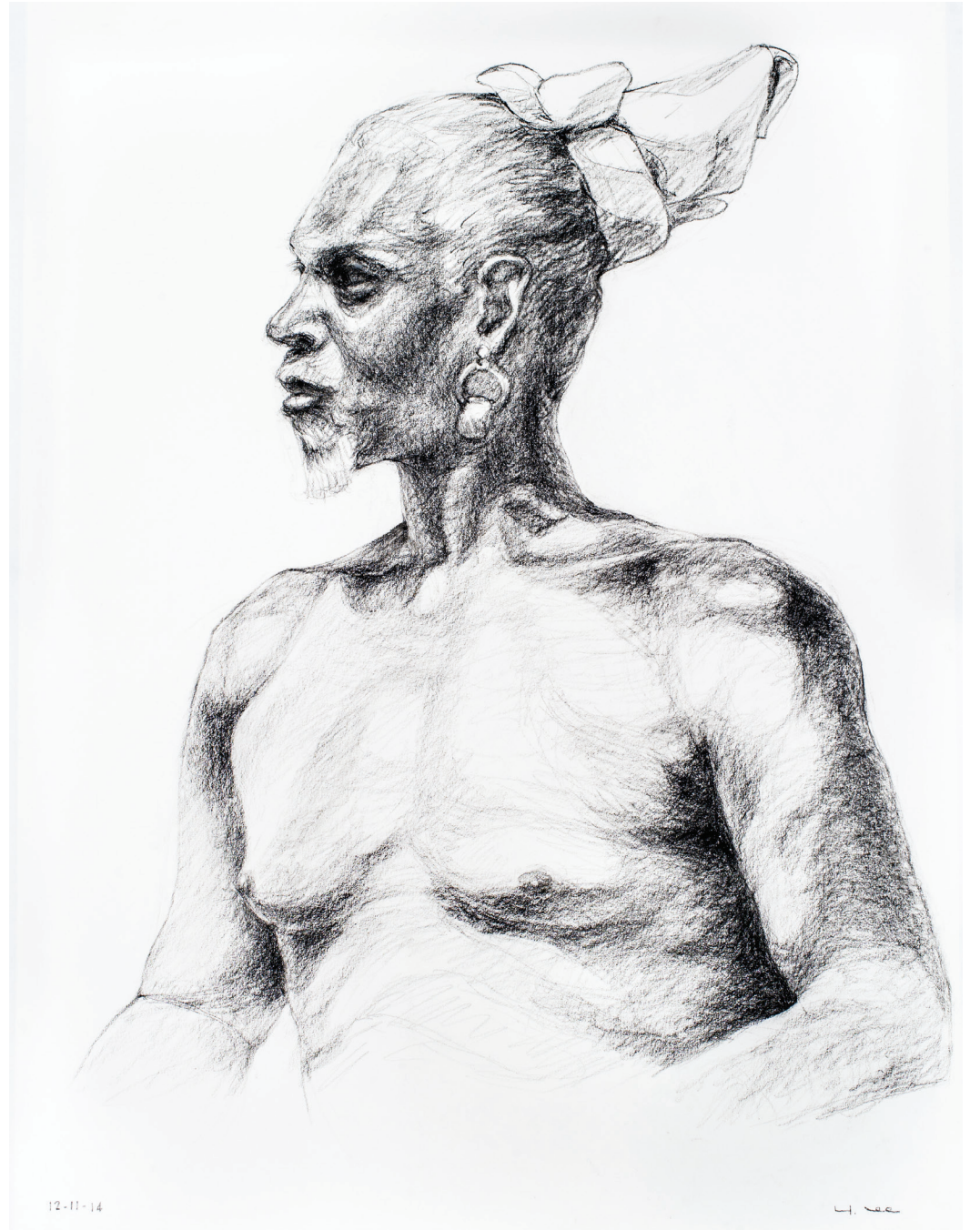
Sanbud Tehrani

The Fog Within Becomes the Fog Without

Perceptions dulled and thawed by it,
A sheet of airborne, shying sleet.
The embracing fog cushions
The trembling puppy legs and stutters of life.
Responsibility, recognizance
Stolen,
Mercifully.
As the sky unites and slowly lowers itself upon us
Like a hesitant virgin,
Street lamps, once dull reminders of urban imprisonment,
Become sonorous, salutary stars reminding one of
The ever-brimming beauty life often masquerades as.
Time lost as the fog hides the judgmental sun
Ready to lower and raise its aid and light
To urge us futilely through day and night.
Voices without source
Songs that seem luminescent in midair.
We are all either lost ghosts or brethren
Within the fog
Both embraced and linked by that
Kind curtain of mist
Yet hidden gracefully in our pockets of white.
Life given clarity in blinding blight
Only through those occasional white seas lacking lucidity
Do we see.
We are mere ancient ships of uncertainty, floating along
Occasionally passing another straying vessel
Only to nod and pass on
Smiling silently in appreciation of our shared isolation.



Unspoken
Nesrin Ouri



J.J.
Yoon Lee



Ella (She)
Carlos A. Torres



Happy as the Rain
Giuliana Rose

PJ Andreassen

Laugh and Cry

My little sister, Heidi, and I have been close for as long as I can remember. In fact, people always said we looked like twins. As close as we are, we are two very different people. We were both blond, but I had thick, curly hair and she had thin, straight hair. Heidi was artistic, funny, shy, and free-spirited. I was disciplined, serious, outgoing, and I always felt responsible for everyone. It's no wonder she grew up to be a preschool teacher and I became a chaplain. When we were three and six, something happened that would show how different we were: it was the day our guinea pig started a fire.

Guinea pigs don't intentionally start fires. Ours did quite by accident. Our little pig was named Honey because her color was a warm golden blond. We loved her and would let her roam the house for a few hours each day. It was fun. We would chase her and she would hide under the sofa. We didn't realize she was chewing the electrical cords under there. When we wanted her to go back in her cage, we would make squeaking sounds and tempt her with a carrot or celery stalk. It always worked. She would start squeaking and timidly come out, and we would grab her.

One day as I was walking past our sofa, I heard a crackling sound and Honey came scampering out. I had never seen her move so fast. I grabbed her and was putting her back in her cage when I heard more crackling sounds and noticed a strange smell from the sofa. The smell was like something burning, and it made my nose feel funny. I walked over to the sofa where the sound and smell were coming from and saw sparks like fireworks shooting up from behind the sofa along the wall. I screamed and backed away. Yes, that's how I reacted. I was a screamer; ants, dead animals, sparks—anything that frightened me triggered a scream. As I held Honey tightly, I saw flames crawling up behind the sofa and licking the wallpaper. I froze and started to cry. "Fire, fire!" I screamed.

"Get wet towels!" my mother shouted as she ran into the room.

I ran and put Honey in her cage, and then watched my brother grab towels. Mom was flailing her arms, shouting "Hurry, hurry!" as my brother was running back and forth with wet towels dripping all over the carpet, and slapping the sofa and wall. For a ten-year-old, he was very brave. Mom started helping him as she ran back and forth still yelling, "Hurry, Hurry!"

I just stood there, wide-eyed and sobbing. I turned and looked at Heidi. She was laughing! She thought this was all very funny. She wasn't afraid like me; she was very amused by the whole thing. So there we were—one laughing, one crying—the flames getting larger as they crawled along the back of the sofa and up the wall.

I remembered being told in school to dial the operator if there was an emergency. Between my sobs, I grabbed the phone and shouted to my mom that I was calling the operator. I put the phone to my ear and dialed 0.

My mom stopped in her tracks and glared at me. "Put down that phone. They will just send the fire department, and they will come with hatchets and chop up the whole house!" She then went back to slapping the flames with the wet towels and pulling the cushions off the sofa. The flames didn't seem to care and just kept creeping along the wall and sofa.

By then the operator had already answered and said, "Can I help you?"

Timidly, between sobs, I said "no" and hung up. I knew my mom would be mad if I said anything else.

Mom then yelled for my brother to run next door and get Mr. Haas because he was a fireman. My brother tore out the front door as Mom kept slapping the sofa. She turned to me and yelled, "Help me!"

I obediently grabbed towels and beat the flames. The heat hurt my face and I wondered if my hair would catch on fire. As hard as we fought, the flames were winning. I was still crying and my little sister was still laughing!

In a few minutes Mr. Haas and his son came running in yelling, "Get back!" They had special blankets that they threw over the sofa while beating it with their gloved hands. They grabbed the sofa, picked it up, and took it outside while my mom drenched the wallpaper with the wet towels, putting out the fire. As the men were running outside with the smoldering sofa, Mr. Haas yelled, "Why didn't you call the fire department?"

I was still crying and Heidi was still laughing.

My mom was a very strong and independent woman since my dad always travelled. I'm sure she thought she could take care of this fire on her own.

Honey didn't get hurt, but she wasn't free to roam the house anymore.

My screaming and crying came in handy when I became a singer and actress. And Heidi is still my best friend, ready to make me laugh when I feel like crying.

Julia Cheng

The Family Business

I am becoming my mother.

Many women are terrified of this happening and are aghast or angry when someone points out their similarities to their mother. For me, this has been going on since I was five, when my mom gave me my first diary. It was pink, the same color as my Barbie bedsheets, and my first entry was something along the lines of “I like my mommy.” I distinctly remember her eyes gleaming with pride as she exclaimed, “My kindergartener is writing sentences!” As a playwright-turned-elementary school teacher, she seemed thrilled that I could potentially fulfill her dreams of being a writer. At the time, as an immature young girl, I would just roll my eyes and wonder what the big deal was. That same year, however, she helped me write my first autobiographical short story about moving from Los Angeles to San Juan Capistrano. Excitedly, I dictated how I wanted her to draw the stick-figure storybook that went along with it, making sure she included my new stepfamily and her curly brown hair.

Over the years I tried out different versions of myself: ballerina, softball player, scientist, actress, entrepreneur, artist, and, most recently, therapist. When I took ballet lessons as a young girl, I thrived on the clear routines and aspired to be able to dance on my tiptoes like the professionals. A couple of years later, a new friend got me to try out for the local softball league and, while I had a lot of fun supporting my team from the outfield positions, the competition became too intense for me once we entered middle school. In fifth grade, people started asking me what I wanted to do with my life and my answer was always “Research alternative sources of fuel.” My response usually stopped the ridiculous questions. Although I didn’t have a clue what that would look like or how to go about it, I stuck to it until seventh grade when I took drama class. Suddenly, acting was my passion. I knew that I would somehow make it in Hollywood until I experienced stage fright, which came in the form of stuttering, shaking, and not being able to catch my breath in front of hot, bright theater lights and expectant audience faces. After finding out that I wasn’t good at being center stage, I tried backstage work. As a spotlight operator, I discovered that it was harder to keep up with the actors than it looked and I definitely left some in the dark longer than they should have been.

All of these roles were fun and plausible possibilities of who I could become, yet there was always writing in the background. Diaries turned into journals, games of pretend inspired short stories, and teenage angst was fuel for bad poetry. My mother constantly encouraged me to read and write, advising that if I couldn’t fall asleep, “Just keep writing. Write until you run out of things to write about.” Eagerly, I read almost anything she handed me: from *The Teeny, Tiny Woman* to *Of Mice and Men* to *My Brilliant Career* to *Outlander*. I also have an ever-growing box filled with journals ranging from brightly designed, lockable diaries to simple, college-ruled notebooks. Yet, seeing the financial struggle my mother dealt with after being unable to get a permanent teaching job, I was determined to take a safer career path.

In high school, I decided I wanted to help people by listening to their problems and supporting them as a therapist. Psychology fascinates me, and helping people through their life issues and troubles encouraged me to start that path. The added bonus of a more secure job motivated me greatly. Starting college, I felt so sure that psychology was for me, but my first English literature class hit me over the head with a reminder of how much I loved reading and writing and planted the question in my mind, “Could I someday write as well as these authors?” Although my mother supported me and each change of career was an impassioned one, they ultimately left me feeling like something was missing.

Jumping from one hobby or activity to the next left me wondering what I was really good at and what I was truly passionate about. My mother, on the other hand, never doubted I would become a writer. She even started writing a book with me. When the two of us would go on road trips, we would bring a notebook and collaboratively write scenes or brainstorm ideas for what we wanted to happen in our novel. We discussed our teen romance between destinations and what our characters sounded like or what they wanted as their own fictional careers. However, one evening when I was talking about going into yet another career choice, she let her hope in me becoming a writer slip out. “But you’re a writer,” she told me with a slight exhale, giving away her impatience with my qualms. For a few moments, standing in our hallway, I just looked at her in confusion. Her assertion surprised me. “I’m not a writer,” I thought, full of self-doubt at the time. “My writing isn’t good enough.”

In my mind, over many years, I grappled with this question: “What’s my thing? What makes me unique?” I saw this passion in my friends: the sports they had played since they were toddlers or the animals they cared for at home and at shelters, or in the plays and backstage crews that consumed their lives. My own varied experiences had left me seemingly talentless, and my goal simply became to find a way to help the world be a better place. Finally, one year, my New Year’s resolution was to find my special something. By asking family and friends, looking at what I do every day,

analyzing what I turn to when I want to escape, and some general soul-searching, I came to the conclusion that had been in front of me since preschool.

Writing is my calling, the result of years of devouring books and destroying journals with my words, tears, and sketches. I was so relieved when I realized that this activity, which I have always enjoyed, is what I ought to do with my life. Combining my different interests and drawing from my theater experience and the films I admire, I figured out that I could write screenplays. I envisioned writing stories that would connect people, bring attention to world issues, and inspire others to follow their passion in life. Settling on this career was challenging for me, but when I told my mother I had decided to major in English with a focus on creative writing, she was simply glad I had finally figured it out. We were sitting in our living room and a surprised smile appeared on her face as she said, "I'm happy for you," supporting my final decision as she had supported the many previous ones.

I am becoming my mother, and I'm okay with it.

Kendra Gardner Childhood

Before the battle,
Before the Cancer clawed its way into our family,
we children would plummet into the depths of the pool
in search of mermaids, Loch Ness Monsters, the crown jewel.
The continuous challenge of holding our breath: life, simply.

Beneath the surface, the world was still,
bubbles leaked from our mouths up to the top
as our deep-sea adventures never stopped,
empowering our illusion of free will.

That House on Carnation holds our secrets,
the walls vibrate with our laughter,
a vessel of hope and love, even though
it would spit back that love, stand us on our side, render us helpless
against my brother's illness.

The windows contained our truth:
in the east side, in the room where he stayed,
the sun would leak through almost to mock
the days when he could not rise
and we lacked the words to wish and pray,
that the Devil would stay away.

Yet the views
to our childhood could not be contained.
Some days, his room would scream with light,
the sun beaming through the window with the shutters undone,
and the screens would pop out, inviting us to plunge into the pool
with laughter so rich that it melted like chocolate.
In the kitchen someone anxiously watched as we played.

When the moon was full, we crept out at midnight
to walk the streets because the sidewalks have no end under the stars.
Their peaceful nature could not be bought even though they cast upon us with all their might—
As if the stars could have prevented the battle's end.

Bradford Amos

On the Death of a Close Friend

For as long as I can remember, life has been extremely tumultuous. It's dualistic in nature, as I have had many traumatic, violent, and chaotic experiences, and there have also been moments of great elation, inebriation, and ecstasy. Some of the most notable of the many tragedies in my life have been the suicides of three of my closest friends. One friend's self-inflicted death sticks out in particular. His name was Hugo.

Hugo was a relatively silent and introverted individual. Yet he was one of the most fearless souls I have ever had the honor of knowing. I recall a particular instance when he and I, along with three other friends, decided to climb off the edge of a cliff to enter a cave in Laguna Beach Canyon. I have a certain fear of heights, so I was naturally terrified. Hugo conveyed no fear. It was as if he had no care in the world about potentially plummeting to his death. In another instance when Hugo and some other friends entered a cave, predatory bats suddenly emerged, and everyone was screaming and running in fright—except for Hugo. He calmly and slowly exited the cave and laughed as the bats swarmed all around him.

I initially met Hugo through a mutual acquaintance, who happened to be a drug dealer. Along with some of the drug dealer's friends, we became united by a sense of frustration, alienation, and a contemptuous view of mass society. I was a constant fixture at the home of the drug dealer's parents, who rarely checked up on us. We were free to use all the substances that we wanted to. While the rest of us became loud, rowdy and boisterous under the influence of psychoactive chemicals, Hugo remained introspective and withdrawn.

I always had a sense that his mind weighed heavily with burdensome thoughts; being that I am a deep thinker, a pessimist, and an introvert, I could relate. During the years I befriended Hugo, my father died due to a combination of hospital malpractice and a terminal illness. One night while we drank heavily, Hugo divulged that his father had also died as a result of a terminal illness. We felt an immediate kinship with each other. Hugo later lost his job and was rejected by a girl he was infatuated with. He was not particularly close with his deeply religious Hawaiian family. Hugo could have cared less about religion and often mocked what he felt were its hypocritical and unjust tenets. He and I felt

like misfits in what we considered a largely cruel world.

A few months passed in this manner. On a seemingly average day I met up with my friend Eddie, whom we label a professional ball breaker. He is a somewhat sociopathic personality who gets off on the uneasiness of others and makes fun of people ruthlessly. Eddie went and picked up Hugo, and I met them later near a creek by my house. I had picked up an 18-pack of beer and was ready to drink with my friends. I immediately noticed something was wrong with Hugo because he kept insisting on paying me back for the beer.

I told him, "You are my brother. I don't give a shit if you pay me back for the beer."

Minutes later, he said, "If I had a gun, I would shoot myself right now."

Taken aback, I responded, "Do you not think I am depressed frequently? We both have lost our fathers and life is fucking lame. If you kill yourself, then I will fucking kill myself, too."

Out of nowhere, Eddie, being the typical asshole, said to Hugo, "You are too much of a pussy to kill yourself."

I had no idea how serious Hugo was. The next day Hugo's sister found him in his room hanging from a noose. She called Eddie and he came over and grieved with her. I hope the bastard felt as guilty as I was feeling.

A week later, we attended Hugo's funeral. I dressed in my most formal attire, and some of our female friends commented on how handsome I looked. I could have cared less. The service took place at a gloomy-looking Catholic Church. The ceremony felt quite grim to me, especially as Hugo's coffin was lowered into the ground. I sat around for the after ceremony, which was held in a traditional Hawaiian fashion, with everyone wearing leis, in a room across from the Elks Lodge. The people in the lodge stared at us suspiciously while we were eating, and it felt creepy. I hugged all of Hugo's family members and told them how great a person and friend he was to me. I felt like shedding tears the whole time but opted not to because I felt it would be inappropriate and convey weakness.

After the funeral, my friends and I headed directly to the store and purchased a 30-rack of beer. We got extremely drunk and stupidly said we were doing it all for Hugo. Later that night, my friend Mike and I got into a scuffle when he tackled me out of nowhere. I ended up strangling him and he could barely breathe. He was infuriated. We did not know how to handle the pain of our loss and acted like idiots, claiming that even the scuffle was for Hugo. In reality, he would have looked down upon us with contempt for our ignorance; we did not handle our friend's passing in the best manner.

There were many complex factors that led to Hugo's suicide. I feel guilty

for being so wrapped up in my own self-pity that I was not able to help him or to at least convince him that he could trust me with any burden that weighed upon his soul. In part, I think he did it to teach us a lesson. The lesson might have been that we were living for bullshit sensory and carnal stimuli. Hugo desired something higher and nobler. He was too smart and pure for this world. He was sick of doing drugs just to get by, not to have fun but just to cope, and he was sick of the idiot drug dealer's conversations about his sexual conquests. He taught me that the shallow is not worth living for.

My friends' suicides have made me question the validity of my own life. Many times I want to give up or take the easy way out by living life in a haze of intoxication. However, I know that I am a compassionate being and that I am too weird to live and too rare to die. I must survive to spite those who would love to see me in a grave and to be here for my friends and family, who are in a constant state of struggle. The world needs more misfits like us who refuse to abide by the unjust rules of a conformist society.

I am still struggling to find happiness, which I believe is just another bullshit term, as I feel that there is no such thing as a sustainable state of well-being. No life can be lived without enduring great struggle.

had his guitar in one hand, my suitcase in another, and my favorite shirt hanging from a clothes hanger, clenched between my teeth. It was 6 a.m., the leaves dusted the lawn, the neighbors had just left before winter, and Sam and I were excited to start our new life together. The faster we could get out of Minnesota, the sooner we would be basking in the Texas sun.

There was only so much room in our old single-cab truck, but we had space in the back end, which was carelessly covered up with an old tarp. As I opened the door to put some freshly baked blueberry muffins inside, the door felt like it was going to fall right out of my hand and right off the hinges.

"Sam? What if this thing doesn't get us to Texas?"

"My sweet baby blue has never let me down. Didn't your father drive an old Chevy like this? I saw it in those pictures."

I quickly remembered that my father had driven a truck just like Sam's, which made me feel that we'd somehow be safe. I always believed that my one guardian angel was my dad. He passed away when I was only six years old. I remember his face because he had the sweetest eyes that had a special sparkle, and this small but deep scar between his bottom lip and chin. I would always rub my finger over it.

Just about everything was packed up, and the door to the lake cabin was locked. All of the water toys, rafts, and lawn chairs were put away for the winter. I felt eager to get going.

It had only been a year since Sam and I met at that old, rundown, boot-scootin' boogie bar in Ely, Minnesota. Nonetheless, I was so taken by his mysterious, dark eyes, reassuring smile, and old-school charm. And I loved the way he would slick back his ashy hair, like he was on the set of *Grease*. He was a true gentleman. He said that my striking blonde hair and dark chestnut eyes captured his attention. I think it had something to do with the dress I wore that night in the bar. Or maybe the way I danced in that little black dress while next to the jukebox. Either way, it took him less than a year to ask me to be his wife. I couldn't have said yes faster.

Sam moved quickly toward the shed. "I'm gonna grab some WD40 for that door, and we're on our way."

“Don’t forget your jacket over there on the fence.”

I waited in the truck, ready to go, trying to figure out the map. I knew that a girl who could read a map was a turn-on for a man. I was never good with these sorts of things, but I figured I could fake it.

Sam jumped in the truck, wearing his typical uniform: a plain white t-shirt, and jeans with holes. I, on the other hand, had my favorite blue dress on, and my hair was perfect—too perfect for a road trip. Sam flung his jean jacket over the seat. As I stuffed my face with a muffin, he grabbed one for himself.

“Fresh baked muffins and WD40 to the start of our honeymoon, my sweet Jane.” Sam joked, raising his muffin into the air and bumping it against mine.

As we headed down the gravel road, I turned the radio up to hide the squeaks and cries that the truck made on every little bump and turn. I knew we’d be hitting the pavement soon, and even though I was excited, there was a part of me that was sad. Maybe because it was the first winter that I was going to spend away from home. But it would only be a few months. What was the big deal? I think there is comfort at home and an uncertainty when you’re away from it.

I’m a Minnesota girl, and I’ve never been away. Not even for a day. I was used to the winter coming. The leaves were falling from the trees and the birds were chirping about whether or not it’s time to head south. The wind picked up a little and brought in a calming, cool breeze, and since all the neighbors had left, it felt like a peaceful paradise. But a road trip was what Sam and I had talked about all along for our honeymoon. He was more adventurous than I was, but he made me strong—at least stronger than I was on my own.

“How much will these gigs pay in Texas?” I asked, sounding concerned.

“My music will always pay enough. I’ll make sure. You will quit your job at that flower shop and be a stay-at-home mom someday. No need to worry.”

With one hand on the steering wheel and another holding a cigarette, Sam looked down for something to drink. “I’m going to stop for coffee and gas up here. There’s a little mom-and-pop store if you want to go look around while I fill up.”

I jumped out of the truck, worried the wind would catch that door and rip it right off its hinges, but I hung on tight. As I walked around the store, I saw a man was outside standing by Sam. I’d never seen him before. He looked like a trucker or a farmer. I couldn’t see his face. He had dirty overalls and a hat that looked like it had been run over by his tractor a few times. His belly pushed through his overalls like they’d been on him for the past twenty-five pounds of his life. I hurried to the cashier to purchase some chewing gum, and then out to the truck to see what this curious man wanted.

“Who was that man?” I asked Sam.

“What man?”

“The man standing by you, looking at the truck. He looked in the back end.”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

“You didn’t see a man standing right next to you looking in our truck?”

“Sorry, honey. My mind is elsewhere. Let’s hit the road.”

We got back in the truck. Sam opened the door for me, as he always did. I liked to slide in from his side. It was getting dark, and I knew we still had a few hours to go before Sam wanted to call it a night. I decided I’d use his jean jacket as a pillow and curl up for a bit.

I had slipped off into a deep sleep, and everything felt good. Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation running through my body and sensed bright lights. I could see that guy—the guy from the gas station with the overalls. He was reaching his hand out to me. But then I had a pain in my leg, and then in my chest and throughout my body. The pain got stronger, like nothing I’ve felt before. I heard a voice, but it was like I was in a dream. The voice said everything will be okay.

“Where is my wife? Where is she?! Get her out of that car, now!” Sam screamed at the paramedics. His blood was pouring out through the holes in his jeans, and razor-like cuts covered his face.

The bright lights of the ambulance lit up the dark night, and the sirens made it feel like the whole world had stopped and just focused in on us. But then the guy in the overalls was there. His hand was still reaching for me as I slowly lifted my head to look up. When my eyes met his, I saw it...that sparkle. It couldn’t be. So I stretched out my arm, and moved my hand towards his face, and I felt it. The scar.

His smile gave me comfort, and his eyes reassured me. He said, “We’re going home, Jane. Heaven needs a girl like you.”

Fran Masket

The Color Line

My mother called from downstairs, “Emily, are you finished packing?”

I called back, “Mother, how hot will it be on the tobacco farm? Do they have a pool?”

I found my bathing suit and some rumpled sun dresses too, just in case I needed something dressier than shorts and T-shirts.

I was 16 years old; it was the beginning of summer, 1947. My parents and I were driving to Raleigh, North Carolina, from Valparaiso, Indiana, to visit my grandfather and other relatives. I adored my grandpa. He was a dentist, and a good one, but he was also a big baseball fan, and so was I. During the hot, humid summer days, we would listen to the games on the vintage '33 Philco console radio in his living room. We fanned ourselves with the cardboard fans we were given at Sunday services in church.

A few years later, the old radio would be replaced by a new first-of-its-kind-in-Raleigh Philco television set, complete with rickety stand and crooked, temperamental “rabbit ears.” Sadly, the loyal, beautiful old console would then be hidden away in the attic, keeping company with old leather trunks and towering hat boxes—bitter-sweet memories of Grandpa’s deceased wife, Ruth Laura.

My grandpa lived in a two-story Georgian colonial house in the suburbs of Raleigh, on a street lined with crepe myrtles, tulip poplars, and autumn-blaze maples. My grandma had died when I was a baby, so Grandpa had a housekeeper, Lila. She and her little boy, Mose (short for Moses), lived in Grandpa’s house, and she cleaned and cooked for him. Every month, Lila’s parents, who owned a small farm, would bring Lila freshly killed chickens and vegetables just harvested from their own garden.

I loved Lila. She would brush my hair and then French braid it in the style my friends and I loved, and sometimes she would weave bright ribbons into the braids. She also made us chocolate chip cookies to wolf down with glasses of cold milk. Even my mother and father loved this treat. We all sat around the kitchen table like little kids, along with Mose, laughing and giggling.

During our first week in Raleigh, my girl cousins took me downtown on the city bus to shop. It was my first time taking a Raleigh bus. We were sitting in

the first three rows. A Negro man boarded. There was an empty seat next to me, and I moved over a little bit so that he could sit there. He seemed embarrassed as he walked past me to the back of the bus. Until then, I hadn’t noticed a sign next to the bus driver that said all Negroes had to sit in the back behind a white line painted on the floor. Only whites were allowed to sit in the front of the bus.

We got off at the next stop and looked in Dillard’s, and then walked on down the street to the K & G Fashion Superstar Department Store. My cousins and I tried on lots of bathing suits.

Afterwards, we walked to Walgreens. Spinning around on revolving stools at the ice cream counter, the four of us gulped down chocolate malted milk shakes. I noticed a big sign behind the counter on which was printed *Whites Only*.

What does that mean? I wanted to ask my cousins about that sign and about the sign on the bus. But I was afraid to ask because my cousins might laugh at me or, worse yet, think I was ignorant.

The next day, Mother took me to visit one of my great aunts. She and my grandma had grown up with ten brothers and sisters on a tobacco farm outside of Raleigh.

Auntie Mae, who was over 80 and lived in a nursing home in Raleigh, took one look at me and said to Mother, “She’s a Yankee. Throw her back.”

When we got home, I said, “Mother, what did Auntie Mae mean about throwing me back because I’m a Yankee?”

“Emily dear, she was joking. You look so much like your father that she meant you didn’t look like our side of the family.” Mother continued with her needlepoint.

Our side of the family? What does that mean? I didn’t think Auntie Mae was joking. She was too old to joke. I was afraid to know what those signs I saw meant. I wondered what I would do if I saw a sign that said *No Yankees Allowed*.

That night we were invited to have dinner at Cousin Ruby’s house. Ruby’s three sisters and their husbands would also be there. Even though Lila had combed my hair and my mother’s hair into very sophisticated French twists, I didn’t look forward to this evening. I was worried that the cousins would also tell Mother to throw me back because I was a Yankee. But they were very polite. They didn’t say a word. And anyway, my father was there, and I didn’t think they would want Mother to throw *him* back. He was very handsome.

The cousins were the daughters of Grandpa’s older brother, Ray. One was more beautiful than the other. But my mother was the most beautiful of *all* the cousins, I thought.

While their amused, proud husbands looked on, the women, eyes sparkling, told stories about their privileged lives growing up in Raleigh. They had lived in fancy houses surrounded by wrought-iron fences imported from New Orleans; they were

enrolled in the best private schools and had lots of beaux; there were trips to Europe with their parents, and gowns made in Paris that they wore to junior cotillions.

Mother shed the years as she laughed with them; her eyes glowed; her auburn hair shone; her Southern drawl returned. Mischievously, Cousin Rita Pearl mentioned that Mother had tried to run away from home with a high school sweetheart.

“Come on, Fanny Ruth, tell us all that story again,” Cousin Ruby said.

Everyone clamored for Mother to tell the story. Mother started to laugh, tears welling up in her eyes at the memory. I wanted to hear the story, too. She shook her head no, her cheeks flushing pink. She *did* tell us that Grandpa chased after her and her beau, Billy Joe Cabot, in his new Model A 1927 Ford coupe at the outrageous speed of 25 mph, until he found them at the ice cream parlor near Grandpa’s house.

After a good laugh, the group brought up for discussion the hiring of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers in April of 1947. The Southern color line, Mother’s cousins angrily pointed out, was meant to *preserve* racial segregation.

“Can you imagine?” said Susan Lenore, the youngest cousin. “This line has now been *breached* by the first *Negro* major-league baseball player in this country.” All the women shook their heads, their brows furrowed like dark clouds before a rainstorm.

I was puzzled. *What is a color line? Is it like the color wheel in my art book?*

I boldly asked what “color line” meant. Cousin Jane Melinda turned away from the piano and sweetly volunteered an answer in her honeyed, languid drawl.

She came over and sat next to me, her blood-red nails digging into my arm. There was enough saccharine in her reply to smother a tub full of buzzing green bottle flies.

In a low voice, she said, “Sugar, what it means is that white folks and Negroes do not mingle with each other--evah.” Her lip curling, she added, “They don’t cross that line.” She primly patted her bright red lipsticked mouth with her embroidered linen cocktail napkin.

Does this mean that Grandpa and I won’t be listening to any more Dodger games on the radio?

Lila appeared and announced that dinner was ready. She had been borrowed from Grandpa’s household to cook and serve this evening. I glanced at her. *Had she heard the grownups talking?* She ignored my look. I fingered the pearl clip in my French twist, embarrassed for her. We moved into the dining room.

After Cousin Ruby said *grace*, I overheard my grandpa muttering under his breath to my father, “He’s the best damn player the Dodgers ever had or ever will have.” He tucked his napkin under his chin and proceeded to attack his steak.

After dinner, everyone eventually settled back down in the living room, balancing their demitasse cups of Lila’s wonderfully fragrant after-dinner coffee on their laps.

I went into the kitchen, carrying a load of dishes with me. Lila came over and gave me a warm hug.

“Honey,” she said, “I saw you looking at me when I came in to announce dinner. Don’t worry about me hearing any of the before-dinner conversations. Nothing surprises me when this family gets together. I don’t even hear half of what your mama and her cousins talk about anyway. I got tired of listening to their chatter years ago.” I grinned and hugged her back.

• • •

That trip to Raleigh, North Carolina, so long ago, was a rite of passage for me. I witnessed in person what segregation was really all about. It was just another name for blatant bigotry and odious discrimination.

For the first time, I also realized that in the South, Lila and I would never be able to go to a soda fountain together to get a chocolate malted milk shake on her day off. And we would never be able to sit on the city bus together either. Yet I did know that Lila was the best friend I had ever had anywhere, even in Valparaiso, and the color line, no matter how hard it tried, would never break up our friendship.

But most of all, I would never forget her kindnesses or her soft, gentle hands when she braided my hair.



The Chief
Jim Langford



Canyon Walls
Jim Langford



The Bridge Apartment
Michael Nakai



Dark Jazz
Jared R. Keltner

Mark Broesamle

Seattle

there is death.
it's so refreshing;
the metaphorical death
of suburbia.
so tiresome; second-guessing

whirring sirens underfoot,
blaring engines overhead,
as oil and spit and coffee quietly drip down skyscrapers.

an angular anxiety; a sharp sense of foreboding
in the sidelong glance of every sideways stranger
rambling on the sidewalk.
a gratuitous subtlety.

lucky strikes dangle off
our lips;
our legs
dangle off some alleyway garage.

a guide to anarchy;
a guide to all the seedy city nooks and crannies.

everything smells like smoke.
or...
the brassy, cold innards of a saxophone.
and our lungs are roasted corn husks;
and our eyes are emphysemic,
and we're all gonna die
but man
nobody really cares, huh?

Kathryn Pohle

Let's Play

Let's play
can't wait to stay
and fuck up your day

complicated
absolutely mundane,
the voice will change.

trauma takes control
pain scrambles the senses
and represses the soul.

Regardless, let's play
can't wait to say
the choices you made were in dismay

twisted childish play
patience is altogether constrained
rants and raves
time long spent in an echoless tirade
the voice has changed.

Let's play
rip my heart out
change the game

senseless violence creates an empty space
the game has filled the dark place
the voice has forever changed.

Regardless, let's play

Marion Schack

Just Like Pap

Robbie opened his eyes. Lying in bed in his warm blankets, he listened to the sounds of the small farmhouse waking up. Boots clomping on the side porch, Ma had already fed the chickens and collected fresh eggs for breakfast. The windowsill creaking and crackling meant that the old house was alive. At least that's what Ma said. With cartoons playing on the TV, Stephanie was up. He picked up his well-worn copy of his favorite book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, burrowed deeper, and read to himself.

Hearing running water in the bathroom pulled Robbie from Tom's latest escapade. He threw the covers back and popped out of bed. Pap would be shaving. *Maybe he would finally let me shave, too*, Robbie thought as he rubbed the peach fuzz on his chin.

"Your grandfather gave me this razor when I was about your age," Pap said, rinsing the straight-edge in the steamy water. "Someday, it will be yours."

"Really?" Pap winked at him in the mirror. He watched Pap remove the bristles with slow deliberate strokes. Robbie looked at his father's reflection. He didn't have brown eyes and hair like Pap. His hair was blond and his eyes blue, like Ma's. Robbie was tall and skinny, "a beanpole," Pap called him. Robbie hoped he would grow up to be just like him, with big strong arms and shoulders. Robbie's father let him put on after-shave. It tingled and made him smell, just like Pap.

Pap and Robbie spent the day doing chores. It was late afternoon and Pap walked behind Lefty, the old brown mule who was pulling a small plow, turning the soil in the vegetable patch. Robbie worked at fixing the fence where a rabbit had dug under. Needing a pair of pliers, he went into the barn. Stephanie was there squatting down, playing with the tabby kittens in the middle of the floor. Hot, dirty, tired of chores, seeing Stephanie playing, Robbie thought, *How come I have to work all day and all she does is fool around?* As he walked past her, he nudged her off-balance with his dirty work boot. It wasn't much of a push but toppling over, Stephanie startled the kitten she was holding. It scratched her and Stephanie cried out. Neither Robbie nor Stephanie had heard their father enter the barn behind them.

Pap crossed the floor, undoing his belt as he came. Robbie turned to see the belt coming at him like a whip. Reflexively, he put his hands up and his gloved hands took the blow. "Turn around, you son of a bitch, and hold that post." Robbie knew from experience it was best to do exactly what he was told. "What did I tell

you? Never hit your sister. You pull a trick like that again and this whipping will seem like a walk in the park."

Stephanie, frozen in place, watched as their father hit Robbie across his back one, two, three times. Each blow sounding like a dull ax hitting a sturdy tree. Robbie whimpered but didn't cry out. Tears streaked Stephanie's dusty face like little rivers as she flinched with each blow.

Robbie lay in bed, his muffled sobs lost to his pillow. Stephanie brought him an ice pack.

"I'm gonna tell Ma. She'll help with your back." Stephanie couldn't see the red welts on Robbie's back under his t-shirt, but she knew they were there just like before.

"Are you stupid or what? Don't you dare. It will make it worse. This is all your fault."

"Nuh uh. You kicked me."

"Go away. Never come in here again."

Over the next few weeks things were quiet, but Robbie still blamed Stephanie for starting the trouble. Robbie no longer took her hand when she got off the bus. If she lost her lunch at school, he wouldn't share his. He could see the hurt and confusion on her face, but he didn't care.

On a chilly day, the children arrived home from school to a quiet house, warm and smelling of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. They found a plate of cookies on the table with a note. Ma had gone to the market. Robbie poured punch for them both. Stephanie was working. "Five plus seven is twelve. Put the two right here and carry the one. Look, Robbie, I learned how to carry when I add big numbers."

Robbie worked on a drawing of a heart. He was carefully coloring in the background when Stephanie knocked over her cup. The red syrupy juice ran like a wave across Robbie's heart. He jumped up. *All my hard work ruined*. Boiling with anger, he backhanded Stephanie. She rolled with the slap, twisting off the chair, landing on the floor, folding up like a rag doll. Robbie stood over her. "You did that on purpose. You pull a trick like that again and that smack will seem like a walk in the park."

Stephanie started to cry although she wasn't physically hurt other than her stinging cheek. Robbie moved towards her and she cringed. He brushed past her to get some rags.

On Christmas Eve, Robbie and Stephanie helped make dinner. There was a glazed ham, sweet potatoes, spinach, tangerines, spiced cider, apple pie with ice cream, sugar cookies, and a box of store-bought chocolates. They couldn't remember the last time they had seen so much food just for them. Robbie and Stephanie chattered excitedly all evening about what they thought Santa would bring them. Robbie didn't notice that Pap sat without saying a word all throughout that wonderful dinner.

Robbie was awakened in the middle of the night by his father's raised voice.

"Where in the hell do you think I'm going to get the money to pay for all this?"

"All the food for dinner was on sale. The box of chocolates was free if you bought fifty dollars worth of food so I stocked up on laundry detergent to get up to the fifty dollars."

"You spent fifty dollars on laundry detergent!"

"Please, Paul, no. I spent fifty dollars total. I bought extra laundry detergent to..."

But Ma never finished her sentence. The punch sounded loud. Then the house went deathly silent. Robbie lay frozen in his bed, his stomach in knots, unaware that Stephanie had also heard and was crying into her teddy's fur. A few minutes later, Robbie heard the front door open and close, and the truck drive away. He mustered the courage to go into his parents' room. Terrified at what he might find, he opened their door and peeked around it. They were both gone. His mother's pillow was covered in blood. Robbie didn't know what to do. He went back to bed. Both children cried themselves to sleep.

The next morning Robbie was awakened by Stephanie.

"Robbie, Mrs. Winston is downstairs."

The Winstons had lived next door ever since Robbie could remember. Mrs. Winston had come to "explain" what happened: their mom had fallen down the stairs and needed to spend a few days in the hospital. Stephanie moved so close to Robbie that he felt her weight against his side. He could smell her hair; it smelled of strawberries. She reached out and took his hand like she used to when he walked her to the bus stop. She looked up at him and Robbie ever so slightly shook his head. She didn't say a word.

They spent Christmas at the Winstons. Mr. and Mrs. Winston tried to make things cheerful, but the children kept asking if they could see their mom and wanted to know when she would come back. They went home a few times to retrieve some of their things. Stephanie spent most of the day playing with her new doll house. Robbie opened his present. It was Pap's razor. His stomach turned. He threw it aside. He knew he would never use it.

That night Mrs. Winston put them to bed. Confused and sad, Robbie lay in the unfamiliar room, the last 24 hours replaying in his head. He knew what he had to do.

He entered Stephanie's room with his dog-eared copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Around his neck were Mrs. Winston's spectacles. Robbie liked how she giggled when he pretended to be Aunt Polly wearing the spectacles. He hadn't heard her laugh in a long time.

Stephanie listened as Robbie read to her:

"TOM!"

No answer.

"TOM!"

No answer.

"What's gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!"

No answer.

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked through them for so small a thing as a boy.

...

"Y-o-u-u TOM!"

There was a slight noise behind her and she turned just in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight.

"There! I might 'a' thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! Look at your hands. And look at your mouth. What is that truck?"

"I don't know, aunt."

"Well, I know. It's jam—that's what it is. Forty times I've said if you didn't let that jam alone I'd skin you. Hand me that switch."

The switch hovered in the air—the peril was desperate—

Robbie glanced at Stephanie, who looked so small. "Don't be scared. It's just a story."

"Is it, is it just a story, Robbie?" She moved closer as tears welled up in her eyes.

Robbie reached for her little hand. "Tom gets away. Want me to stop reading? Want me to read something else?"

"Does Tom really get away?"

Robbie put the book down. "Yes, he tricks Aunt Polly and gets away. The very next thing."

"Ok." Stephanie paused. "What about me and you, Robbie? Do we get away?"

His throat constricting, he could only reply, "I don't know, Steph. I don't know."

Robbie wiped away her tears and as he did he realized that he could never hurt her or anyone else ever again. Robbie knew that he didn't want to grow up to be just like Pap.

Jackie Bayless

The Red Suit

Damita awoke to the sounds of rain against the window. Her boys, across the room in their cots, were still asleep. Fifteen-month-old Thomas struggled to breathe through a mucus-encrusted nose. She was afraid he was getting another ear infection. Three-year-old John was twisted in his blankets, his face pressed into the pillow. She slipped from underneath the worn blanket reluctantly and padded down the hall to the bathroom, hoping the boys wouldn't awaken.

She stood in the shower luxuriating in the hot water, bending her sore neck slowly, trying to loosen the muscles, tight from sleeping on her own uncomfortable cot, tight from holding the worries in. She washed her short, dark hair, toweled off, brushed her teeth, and rubbed cream into her cheeks. She tried to smile but her lips trembled.

She walked down the dark hallway past other closed bedroom doors. She stared at the bleak February landscape—the rain now turning to sleet—but not really seeing it. Seeing instead herself two months ago, she and her children being dropped off by the social worker at the front door of this shelter for homeless families.

• • •

They had arrived after Christmas. Damita and her boys stood on the front porch of the sprawling farmhouse that housed the shelter. The building was flanked by large oak trees, with a deep porch. She rang the bell. A tall, slim woman who introduced herself as the social worker invited Damita and the boys into the office.

"Damita, welcome," she said. "I'm Gwen." As Damita entered the office, there was a knock on the door and a blonde woman entered, smiling, also offering a welcome.

As if this is a social event. Not one I ever wanted to go to.

"This is Kate, a shelter volunteer. She can take your boys up to the playroom while you and I talk, okay?"

Kate knelt so she could be at eye level with Thomas and John, who

eyed her curiously. "Hey, do you want to play with some cool toys upstairs?"

John slipped his hand into Kate's. She picked up Thomas, who laid his head on her shoulder.

Don't touch my children. I don't know you. Just because I'm here doesn't mean you touch my children.

The door closed and Damita was alone with Gwen in this stuffy, overheated office.

"Okay, let's do the basics—name, age, former address. Okay? Then we can talk about how you ended up here and how we can help, okay?"

Yes, okay, Miss Perky Caseworker. "Full name, Damita Joy Johnson, age twenty-five. My sons are Thomas, fifteen months, and John, three years old. Their father, Tom, is away now."

Yes, he's away. In prison for doing drugs, which he made me believe he would never do, not him, not Tom.

"Okay. And your former address?"

Okay? It is so not okay.

"We live in an apartment in Gaithersburg," Damita said. *Correction—we did live there until we were evicted.* "We moved here from Philadelphia. Tom and I went to school there."

"And your source of income?" Gwen asked.

Good question, Gwen! It is gone, gone away with the boys' daddy.

Damita stared at Gwen. "I was working part-time as a secretary and Tom is a musician. We were doing pretty well, but things changed."

Gwen looked up from her computer and really looked at Damita. "Let me tell you about how it works here."

Damita listened, relaxing a little into her chair, grateful for a respite from the questions.

"We have room for fifteen people," Gwen said. "You already know we're different from most shelters because we welcome families, right? Our rules require residents to be out from eight in the morning until three, although mothers with babies have more flexibility. We want you to be involved in finding a place to live and a job. We are here to help, but you're responsible for what happens to you. Let's take a tour, okay?"

Sure, let's take a little tour.

Gwen led her into the kitchen. "This farmhouse was donated to the shelter when the last of the family passed," Gwen explained as Damita followed her. In the pantry, there were shelves filled with canned goods of all kinds and

cleaning supplies. Damita was glad to see diapers, too. The refrigerators were filled with industrial blocks of cheese and butter from a government giveaway program, and eggs and milk from the same program. In the kitchen the appliances were worn, but the room had a large window over the sink, looking out onto the garden. Damita could see how this place had been someone's home. A wooden table with twenty mismatched chairs surrounding it was in the center of the room. The kitchen smelled of disinfectant.

"The residents take turns cooking meals here," Gwen said. "I'll introduce you. You'll start helping Lucy this week."

As they talked, the sky was starting to darken and Damita had been hearing the front bell ring intermittently. The other residents were evidently returning. She swallowed. Her mouth was so dry.

Get me out of here. I want to go home. I want Tom to be home. I forgive you, Tom. Come home.

Gwen led Damita up a broad staircase to the second floor where the bedrooms and playroom were. Gwen pushed open some double doors and there were her sons. *In the arms of that Kate.* The three were sprawled under the window and Kate was reading a story. The playroom was a mess, toys all over, crayons scattered, scribbled pictures resting on top of the toys like fallen leaves.

"Just look at these pictures," Kate said, looking up with a smile. Thomas immediately stretched his arms up to his mother, but John pressed his dark head against Kate's sweater and stayed in her lap. Damita hated it. This smiling stranger enjoying her children. The hours spent at social services. All of the minutes of waiting on uncomfortable plastic chairs, all of the bored bureaucratic eyes, all of the people who waited with her who made her feel a part of some distasteful, unseemly mass. All of her uncertainty about herself, about her husband, about Thomas's chronically runny nose, and John's tense little face, all the worries she tried to push away.

"Thanks for watching my boys," she said, bending to straighten up the playroom. Her neck and her back felt stiff and sore.

"John," she said sharply. "Help me clean up this mess."

"Don't worry about it," Kate said. "Relax, you look tired."

One day at a time, Damita thought. Sometimes it felt like one minute at a time.

"I'll take the pictures," she said. "I'm going to send them to John and Thomas's father."

"He's away?" asked Kate.

"Yes, he'll be back in the spring," Damita said.

"It must be so hard," Kate said. "With the kids being so little." Kate's words trailed off and she looked uncomfortable.

Damita could tell that Kate knew. Irrationally, Damita found that she wanted to explain to Kate—about Tom and how they met, fell in love, and got married. How he had no family and how her family would not accept him. A musician?! We thought you'd marry a professional man. But she did marry him. Her family had never even seen her children. She and Tom moved to Washington, D.C. She worked as a secretary while he stayed home with their babies during the day. Six nights a week, he played at a club downtown. Time together was limited, but Tom met a producer who wanted to record the band.

Then things began to disintegrate. Tom was arrested at an after-hours party. And the judge decided to make an example of them by imposing the harshest sentence allowable and sent Tom to jail in Texas because D.C. jails were so overcrowded.

• • •

After two months in the shelter Damita saw Kate only briefly after their first meeting. She and the boys had adjusted to the routine, to living with strangers, to asking for help. One afternoon in February, Damita and the boys came back to the shelter, glad to get out of the cold wind. Kate was in the office. Damita was trying to strip wet snowsuits off the boys, but they had spent too much time sitting quietly at Social Services that day and they were running madly, shrieking and silly. Kate stepped out of the office to say hello and John threw his arms around her knees. Kate picked him up and swooped him up, both of them laughing. Thomas wriggled out of Damita's arms to play, too. Damita could see a spreading stain where his wet diaper had soaked through his corduroy overalls. She reached into her bag for another, but she was out of them.

"Kate," she said. "I need more diapers."

Kate returned from the supply room smiling, carrying diapers and a red wool suit in a dry cleaning bag. She handed them to Damita as if she was handing her the keys to the universe.

"Here," she had said. "I love this suit, but it's too small for me. It will look wonderful on you. You can wear it to your job interview."

• • •

Now it was February. Tom would be released in April. She had a job interview. Damita opened the door to her room. The boys were still sleeping. On the closet door hung the red wool suit—a slim skirt and fitted jacket. It was

a pretty shade of red, kind of a cherry red, becoming on Damita. Warm from her shower, Damita knelt by John's cot to wake him. How serious his face was even as he slept. His small shoulders hunched as if to protect his neck.

"Mommy." Damita turned to Thomas, who was grinning and reaching out to her, his cheeks flushed with sleep.

"Snow, mommy," he said.

And it was true. The sleet had turned to thick snow and the desolate backyard was already coated, transformed and promising. She kissed Thomas and hugged his warm, firm little body. "You and John can make a snowman with Kate today," she said, putting him down as she stepped into the skirt of her red suit.

Camille Del Pizzo

Myself in the Mirror

I have struggled with body image since I was a young child. When I was in elementary school, I pulled my pants up high to hide my "big" stomach. I had used several little tricks like this throughout my childhood to make myself appear more attractive but had never thought much about them. When I became a teenager, innocently skipping snacks turned into skipping meals. Skipping meals led to purging daily. In my mind, I was working toward a perfect model of beauty. I would do anything it took to get to the point of perfection.

And it seemed reasonable. Doesn't everyone want to be beautiful?

Months went by and my weight began to drop rapidly, but I never saw the changes in my body that were so very obvious to others. I still saw myself as fat. I was so frustrated with myself and just kept asking, "Why am I still fat?" and "Why am I still ugly?" Within a few months, I started to cut myself as a form of punishment. Every time I got angry, I cut or purged to feel a sense of relief. I began to perform these behaviors daily and they became the only way I knew how to cope with my feelings. I told myself that I was throwing up all of the hateful feelings I had for myself.

To this day, I still look in the mirror after I purge and see a girl who is a pound lighter than before. Purging gives me more than satisfaction. It gives me a momentary high. The feeling is so euphoric that, for many years, every time I stepped into a bathroom, I gave myself no choice but to purge. My weight kept dropping, but I never saw the change. I was about 90 pounds when my parents took the scale away from me. I looked in the mirror and all I saw were imperfections and flabby thighs.

"Just five more pounds," I told myself.

I repeated the cycle. I began to take pride in people telling me that I looked sickly. When they said "sickly," I knew they meant "skinny," but I never looked skinny enough in my eyes. The weight I had lost was never enough. The amount I threw up was never enough. Nothing was ever enough.

In my pursuit of perfect beauty, I had started dancing at a ballet school. I had visions of myself one day as a slender ballerina doing perfect pirouettes across the dance floor. After I had been dancing for a couple weeks, I found

that every time I stood on the dance floor, I had quivering blue hands and weak limbs. The mirror would show my cut-up arm and bloodshot eyes. My gaze would travel to my bulging thighs and then back up to all of the stick figures in leotards around me.

“Why couldn’t I look like them?” I wondered.

Before every class, I had brutally shoved my fingers down my throat, and they still looked better. I became afraid to look at myself in the mirror, so I focused on my feet for as long as I could. I always hoped that I would take off my shoes at the end of class to find a bloody mess. If my feet were not bruised and my toenails had not dug into my skin by the end of class, I felt like I had no right to call myself a ballerina.

Eventually, I would always have to bring my eyes back to myself in the mirror. I feared the dark place I would enter once I started studying myself. As I focused on my body in the mirror, the girls in the class became blurry figures dressed in black leotards, and then slowly morphed into shadows. It was at this point that my experience turned into something you would think possible only in a movie. My instructor’s commands became replaced by a thousand different voices yelling demeaning and vulgar things at me. The gentle music playing in the background grew continuously louder with every note. Within seconds the shadows engulfed my vision, making the room almost completely black. When I reached this point, everything stopped for just a moment. The voices slowly started to fade and the shadows began to diminish. My eyes focused once more on myself in the mirror and then on the girls in their leotards.

For months, every time I looked at myself in that mirror, I visited this same dark place. Day after day, week after week, I would fearfully look up from my feet and gaze into hell.

I remember vividly the moment I was told that I needed to be hospitalized. My real concern wasn’t that I was ill—it was that I’d have to leave before the ballet season ended and abandon my destructive habits. I felt lonely and scared as I sat in my therapist’s office awaiting her return. I looked up as the door opened and saw her with an unfamiliar man who looked especially concerned. I knew then I would not be going back home that day. My mom stroked my hand as I stared emotionless at the empty wall. We left my therapist’s office and drove to the emergency room. In the silence between us, my mom made phone calls with her shaky voice to my dad and a couple of family members to let them know how the appointment had gone. Hearing her cry had made it real. This wasn’t a joke. I was truly sick. This is when I realized that I needed help. I could not go on living life like I had been. Reality had checked in. And now it was my turn.

I was checked into UCI Medical Center and admitted into their psychiatric ward. For six days the first and last thing I saw were the bars on my window. Along with the other kids in the ward, I was supposed to participate in group activities throughout the day. The doctors were well intentioned, but I had grown into a master manipulator who knew exactly what they wanted to see and hear. Every day I smiled and lied, even forcing out an occasional laugh. I would stand in the bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror, and the mask I’d put on to be “Healthy and Happy Camille” would fade. Here I was. I had come all this way, expecting to see a beautiful girl in the mirror, but the more I stood there, the uglier the girl became.

I started ballet to create a beautiful image of myself; however, my obsession with perfection brought forth the ugliest side of myself I had ever seen. I kept returning to the mirror, hoping for a new reflection. When one didn’t come, I slipped on that mask once again.

That mask is what got me out of the hospital and back into the comfort of my own home four years ago. Throughout my ongoing treatment and recovery, I’ve learned that some behavior—particularly vomiting—will send me straight back to the hospital. But to this day, I occasionally still find myself hunched over the toilet or with a sharp object pressed against my skin. I still look in the mirror every day and wonder “Why am I still fat?” and “Why am I still ugly?” Then, I put on my mask, and give the performance of my life.



Geisha
Jon P. Hames



Inspiration
Jayne Reich



A Night Out
Bernard Macaya



The Embrace
Ellen Rose

Life Worthy of Life

Hadamar, Hesse
German Reich 1934

Jonah strained to listen carefully to the next question before he responded. His heart was pounding and his usually ruddy complexion looked pale with beads of cold sweat forming at the temples. The Hadamar court officer's staccato voice rang, "How much do three hundred Reichsmarks grow over three years with three percent interest?" He knew that if he screwed up this answer, too, his worst fears would be realized. He closed his amber eyes, deep lines forming at his forehead as he tried to focus, make some sense of the question. His hands fumbled, shaking uncontrollably. He attempted to make the calculations on the notches of the little finger of his large steelworker's hand. Sarah had held this very hand so many times, teasing him, "Hey, Jonah, think you are ready to be a Papi yet?"

Just last evening Sarah pleaded with him, "Jonah, *du bist kein Untermensch*. You are not one of the feeble-minded. You have a hard time with words and numbers. Yes! But that does not give them permission to take away our God-given right to have children! We must fight it..."

Tired and weary from his day, he stormed into the kitchen of their tiny brick home pouring himself yet another Hefeweizen, his third this evening. The peeling walls of their humble home were adorned by the quilts that Sarah made from leftover fabric of the tailor shop where she worked. Most squares of the quilts were shades of army gray, khaki, and navy blue. But she managed to find yellow, red, and green scraps to brighten them. And every now and then, lace from a bride's veil. They were being hunted down like many others, and the patchwork quilts made them feel they could shield themselves from the danger and fear.

"Please, my love," pleaded Sarah, "try to read the words. Try harder with the calculations!" She walked over and stood tall, facing him, and cupped his large, kind face in her hands, gritted her teeth as she did in her fiercest moments. "I want you to show the damn Nazis that you are worthy to have children... to have and love children of our own!"

On that cold November morning, Jonah had dressed carefully. He had

put on his frayed gray coat, which Sarah had meticulously darned and ironed for the day of his test. He had taken special care to clean under his fingernails the traces of hard, manual labor at the steel factory that put bread on their table. He brushed his dark brown hair before putting on his hat for the long, cold walk to the trial. He was anxious to make a good impression today. The Nazi officials were present in efficient numbers, their gray hard hats and hatred held close. The proceedings began with the judge's hammer, thudding cleaver-like three times. Thump! Thump! Thump! Jonah could feel his heart pounding, matching the rhythm. The courtroom clerk read the law out loud:

"Guten Morgen! The Führer has passed the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring and all doctors and welfare centers in the Reich are required to report their patients who are intellectually disabled, mentally or physically ill, or deformed to determine their eligibility for propagation of the future generation. A steep monetary penalty will be imposed for any patients who are not properly reported. People suffering from alcoholism or Huntington's disease could also be sterilized."

He was relieved when they allowed Sarah to come into the hearing room and sit in the back benches. She anxiously fingered her long, dark curls. Her slight frame and delicate face belied a toughness of steel. She had worn her best red coat today, and she pulled it closer to counter the gray chill and cruelty in the room. Watching her across the room, Jonah recalled the day he was sent a notice by the Reich to appear in court for a hearing that included intelligence testing. Even in their togetherness, he recalled how helpless and alone they both felt. These were times when everyone, even close friends and neighbors, looked out only for themselves.

They met four years ago at the tailor shop where she worked. He recalled how she laughed readily at his jokes and how he courted her for weeks after, offering to fix her rusty sewing machine and things around her house. Sarah knew she could have done better, found someone with better prospects, but his love and devotion wore down her defenses. Underneath the rough exterior and crude manners was a heart of gold. In less than a year, they had been married. Lately, her maternal instincts peaked every time she saw another's child and she would go home and knit a pair of baby booties late into the night.

He knew he had bungled the first two questions quite badly. First, the heavy-set, balding officer from the Party had asked him, "Who was Bismarck?" He was smirking, as if he knew the limited extent of this poor bastard's knowledge of the outside world.

Then they had asked, "What does Christmas signify?" Jonah answered that it was all about Stollen (his wife's perfect fruitcake) and fir trees. It did not seem to make the officials happy as they spoke under their breath to each other. He looked over to the benches at the back of the room, his eyes searching for Sarah; when their eyes met, she offered him an encouraging smile.

His hands shook imperceptibly as a chill began to snake up his spine. His jaw clenched; he gripped the cold steel of the chair for comfort. He was determined to answer the next question well, and he clasped his anxiety into a fist. The loud voice of the testing officer boomed, "How much does three hundred Reichsmarks grow over three years at three percent interest?" His face drained of blood. This was beyond him. He had just mastered some simple calculations with Sarah's help, but nothing this complex. Hell, he had yet to ever see three hundred Reichsmarks! He strained to look at Sarah, who was mouthing the answer in frantic desperation, but he misread her lips. It was *not* three hundred and thirty, he was informed. There were six more questions, of which he was able to answer only two somewhat correctly.

Fear and desperation gripped him body and soul as he looked for someone to stand up for him. There were some of his friends from the factory who had come to give testimony, to vouch for his decency and his ability to perform his work at the factory with diligence for six years. The officials did not bother to give their opinion any weight. Jonah turned toward the other witness, Dr. Stahl, the tall, bespectacled physician who had seen him for a few months for liver cirrhosis, a result of drinking cheap alcohol over the years. All physicians, by law, had to report to the government if one of their patients was suspected of mental illness or retardation, a genetic disease or alcoholism, or risked being penalized by the State. He was turning in Jonah for both: intellectual disability and alcoholism. Jonah looked at him pleadingly, but the man just looked away, unable to meet his eyes. Only Sarah's black eyes never flickered as she looked straight at Jonah.

Jonah's mind raced back to the courtroom as he braced himself for the last question. "Use the following words in a patriotic sentence. Soldier. War. Fatherland!" Jonah knew this was his last chance, so he took a deep breath and said, "The Fatherland likes to have soldiers killed in the war." That last question was the easy one for him, so he was most confused when he saw the angry looks on their faces. The Nazi officers in their military uniforms made a quick note on the forms that were passed on to the judge. The judge gave him a smug look as he stamped *DURCHGEFALLEN* ("Failed") across Jonah Klipstein's case file.

Two guards came to take Jonah to the Hadamar clinic for the procedure.

Felicia Daniels

I Am Not A Mother

“It will be very quick and almost painless,” said the accompanying nurse as they tried to move him along. Jonah was devastated, shook uncontrollably, and struggled with all his waning strength. He pleaded, sobbing, “Please, don’t! I promise... I will work harder... I am learning how to read... Sarah! I’m sorry! I failed you.”

The next three hours went in a daze. He was led in a line of other struggling, protesting men to the procedure rooms in the adjoining clinic, where three doctors were expertly conducting the surgeries, German efficiency at its finest, and the nurses gave the after-care instructions and shuttled them out.

Sarah was waiting for him outside in the chilly November air. He could not bear to meet her gaze and the way she masked her brokenness with a dead calm, resolute manner was disconcerting—he had expected to face a broken woman whose hopes of having a child were shattered forever. As they walked out towards the gate, she paused, looked back at the door of Hadamar court, and then, as if she had forgotten something in there, she walked back murmuring “Bloody dogs” and spat at the front door.

When they reached their home in the ghetto, they went inside and Sarah locked the door behind them. Jonah looked visibly shaken as she gently took off his coat and shoes and laid him down on the bed. In ten minutes she was back with some Zurek soup and lovingly fed him the soup one spoonful at a time.

Jonah held her hand and drew her close, clung to her, sobbing, “I’m sorry, my love, I’m so sorry my mind was frozen and...”

Sarah placed her hand upon his lips and his hand upon her belly and smiled, looking deep into his brown eyes. “Hey, Jonah, wipe your tears. I hope you are ready to be a Papi next spring. I have not bled for two months now.”

I am not a mother. I never have been. I envision myself having five kids one day: four boys and one girl, two sets of twins. Wishful thinking, I know, but what’s the point of dreams if they’re not what you want? Anyways, I’ve never been a mother, but I know how it feels. To have a young child look to you for their every need, those blissfully ignorant eyes latching onto you and recording your every move. Those little clutching fingers, so needy, begging you to never let them go, to hold them forever. To sleep with a warm little body snuggled into your chest, and feel that strong heartbeat resonate through your veins. Hearing the sweet lullaby of “Mama” echo through the air before it softly caresses your beckoning ears.

I remember the day my mother and I brought him home. My older sister had called my mom earlier that day to tell her that she would be in town, on her way to L.A. She was coming in on the Greyhound bus. This was not news to my mother or me. My sister had a track record of going to L.A. and disappearing from all contact for a year or two. We also knew that the last time she disappeared from our lives, she took her daughter with her, and we lost out on two important years of her life. My niece was now with our grandma, but my sister now had a son, a few weeks from his second birthday. I had only seen him once before, at my grandma’s house, and I remembered holding him in my arms; he was so tiny, only six months then. I remembered his little brown eyes gazing up at me, mesmerizing me, not allowing me to look anywhere else. I could not let my sister take him away from me. In that moment of remembrance, I knew that I would take all responsibility for my nephew, even if my sister never came back for him. I called my sister, asking for her permission to care for her son in her absence. She gleefully consented. I am not a mother, and I will never understand.

My mom and sister made plans to meet at a Mexican restaurant at the back of a large desolate parking lot, the type that has palm trees growing from between the cracks. It was sort of a hole in the wall but franchised. Sad, really. They made some really good food, but it was in a dirt bag town that nobody cared about. They say that anyone that leaves the town always ends up going back, somehow. I guess that’s what the restaurant was for. A temporary getaway from a monotonous life of schoolwork, chores, and church. An alternative to suicide.

They were already inside, sitting in a booth close to the entrance. It took

a while for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit setting, dust particles illuminated in the sunrays filtering through the small, colored glass windows on the doors. I could see her sitting at the edge of the booth, my nephew jumping in a standard restaurant high chair, ear-splitting screeches emitting from his mouth. My mother looked sympathetic. My sister looked embarrassed. My nephew looked pleased.

I walked towards the table, my mother in front of me. As they exchanged rigidly warm formalities, I picked up my little nephew, no longer the little baby that I remembered. He had gotten cuter, with light brown skin the color of milk chocolate and short Negro curls all over his head. His flat, slightly wide nose was a cute one, soliciting a kiss from me. He smiled, showing two rows of pearly white baby teeth. He had a dimple in his chin, drool reaching for his dingy blue t-shirt. My heart skipped a beat. His smile seemed to brighten the room for a split second. I did not want to put him down. He had stolen my heart.

I don't remember much of that meal, as I was enamored with the adorable kid sitting next to me. I do remember, however, that as my sister left to get on her bus, my nephew cried his little heart out, only solaced by my hugs and kisses and my voice saying, "It's okay, baby. You don't have to cry. I'm here. I won't leave you. I love you, Zyair." He stopped crying and held onto me, clinging to me. I sat in the back seat with him, his arms wrapped as tightly around my left forearm as he could manage. I kissed his forehead incessantly and whispered that everything would be okay. He fell asleep in five minutes, dried tears leaving ashy white trails on his puffy cheeks.

Over the next two years he and I grew very close. He took to calling me Mama, and when people asked if he was my son, I politely said "no," the way my mother would have wanted me to, yet with enough negative emphasis to keep my dad from thinking that his teenage daughter actually had motherly instincts and might one day have sex with a member of the male species. Secretly, I thought of my nephew as my son and me as his mom. I did everything for him, short of financial provision. I cooked for him, fed him, cleaned up after him. I bathed him, dressed him, and changed his diapers. I taught him his ABCs, his numbers, his colors. I took care of him, all the while homeschooling myself and my niece, who came to live with us shortly after her brother did. I was caring for the house, cooking all the meals, and cleaning all the laundry. Why? Because my mother was ill and my father was a hard-working man who came home from his postal job as an electronic engineer to sit in front of his computer with his *Wall Street Journal*, and make an appearance only at dinner. I was mother to two children and woman of the house. Still, I was not a mother, and I didn't understand.

My "son" and I were inseparable after the first two days. He would scream

at the top of his lungs if I was out of his sight for more than five minutes, until I returned to him. He would have to be broken of that adorably nerve-racking habit, but I would not be the one to do it although I was part of the process.

I remember the day my mother sat me down on her bed. It was a queen-sized Sleep Number mattress framed by oak wood pillars, the type that can be used for canopies. I regularly fell asleep on my parents' bed many times. It was so much more comfortable than my run-of-the-mill twin mattress, propped up on boxes. My mother was sitting across from me, her back to the headboard. Her hair, uncombed as usual, stuck out in some spots and was matted to her head in others. She donned her daily outfit, an old woman's bra and granny panties. Today she added a cotton blouse to her ensemble. I glanced at her big, unshaved legs and shuddered inside. My mother disgusted me, and it took all my energy to hide the truth from her. She was my mother, after all, and deserved at least that much respect.

Her room was dimly lit, weak rays of light reaching through the dusty window blinds, and it seemed to get dimmer as the words came out of her mouth. "He is no longer allowed to call you Mama. You are not his mother. You don't know the first thing about motherhood. I see the way you look when people ask you if he is your son. You wish he was, don't you? Your Dad and I think you are too young to be having this kind of responsibility, so from now on you are his sister. Do you understand me? I am now his mother. His mom will be signing custody over to me and your Dad."

"But I said I would take care of him," I cried, pathetically.

"Don't talk back to me, young lady! You don't know what it is to provide for a child. You don't work, therefore you can't provide. Besides, you're still in school. You don't have time to do anything but your homework."

I glared at her, my fists tightly clenched, body rigid, face turning red, judging by the temperature of my ears. I was pissed. This bitch was jealous and couldn't handle the fact that I was a better mother than she was. She had to have all the love and attention. *Fucking bitch. Attention whore. Fat fuck.* I never cussed out loud, but I was always cussing my mother out in my head and chuckling to myself. I was not chuckling today. I was envisioning choking the living daylight out of her. I was so mad I could have socked her, if I wasn't so afraid of her. I had taken my share of fists and hard knocks from her, and I didn't want to think of how much worse it would be if I initiated a fight with her.

"One more thing. It will take some time for Zyair to adjust to this, so every time he calls you Mama, you are to correct him, and tell him to call you Felicia."

"You're just jealous!" I shouted at her before fleeing to the room I shared

with my “son.” He was napping on our bed, mouth parted, drool spilling onto the pillow. In that instant, I felt like one of those mothers who kidnaps her kids and runs off. In that moment, I wished that I had a job, that I had a car, hell, that I knew how to drive. I would have given anything to keep our relationship the same, but I knew that was stupidity talking. I could not take him traipsing through the desert with no food, or water, or protection from the elements. My mother was to have her way, and there was nothing I could do to challenge her dictatorship. She made it clear: I was not a mother, and I couldn’t understand.

In the transition period after that day, I felt as though my world was fading back to the dull gray it had been before I had another to care for. I was back to feeling alone, depression crowding around me once more. It did not take him long to cease calling me Mama, and every time he bestowed that sentiment upon my mother, I felt betrayed, by my mother, by my father, even by myself. How could a mother give up her son, the one she claimed to love so dearly, so easily? I felt disgusted with myself. I was no better than my sister. We both had relinquished our maternal bond. In that moment I was ashamed of myself, and I realized that it was true. I was not a mother, and I would never understand.

Leslie Williams

The Grey Ghost

As I stood at my kitchen sink, a whisper of descending circles had begun. High overhead, beyond sight or sound, a purposeful maneuver made its way down, closer, ever closer. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the effortless glide of the Grey Ghost. Unbelievable! He was on a clandestine low approach past my window, which was most unusual. It happened in the midst of the heat wave, during the peak of the hottest part of a Mojave-dry day, which had been sapping my will to put one foot in front of the other. Quite a while had passed since I caught a fleeting glimpse of him when he chose a lofty perch at the top of a gently swaying eucalyptus on my slope. He was too high at the time for me to get a close-up of him so I ran for my binoculars, but by the time I returned, he had disappeared from his vantage point.

I aptly named him the “Grey Ghost,” my term of endearment for him. He flies above my sizeable refuge at his leisure, scouring the land below for food. I must admit that’s the part I choose not to dwell on in my amazement of this beautiful bird: after all, he is at the top of his food chain. On this flight though, he made a beeline for my birdbath, the communal pool for all my feathered friends.

I always cringe at how he causes quite a pall over the chirp fest in my backyard whenever he passes overhead. Truth is, he scares the plumage out of all my gentle mourning doves, chickadees, sparrows, and finches whenever they hear his plaintive call. Perhaps today he was just looking for a bit of cool water out of desperation. The heat was oppressive.

I moved swiftly to my patio door, opened it ever so quietly, and looked to the side of my yard where the small birdbath stood in the comforting shade of a healthy crop of bushes. Sure enough, there he was in all his grandeur, cooling his toes in the birdbath. I couldn’t imagine how he knew it was there in the first place. I wondered if he would rest for a moment before taking flight again, almost certain that my sudden appearance would cause his hasty departure. But there he was and there he stayed, watching me watch him. Nothing else could distract me from holding him in reverence for the next several minutes. For the first time, I was at close range to the bird I had only seen at some distance. Was he a Gray Hawk, a Cooper’s Hawk, a Swainson’s Hawk? It was hard to tell without

my *Audubon Handbook of Western Birds*. Regardless, he was a bold beauty, easily larger than the largest of my crow buddies, with shades of soft gray dappled with a few freckles at his shoulders.

As I watched him, I realized that he did not concern himself with my interruption. He seemed to be very much in need of standing smack dab in the middle of that birdbath, which by all accounts, must have seemed like a tin cup for his size. This splendid fellow looked to be about a foot and a half from head to toe.

"Hello there," I whispered in a hushed voice, as though I needed to assure him of his safety. He heard me for sure, saw me, no doubt, but did not budge from his position. "Don't mind me at all. I'm just coming out to join you."

I inched closer, not directly toward him, but at an angle to a position in the backyard opposite him by about 25 feet or so and sat down to appear non-threatening. He watched me momentarily as I sat down, and then promptly ignored me as inconsequential to him. His head deftly turned back and forth, tilting at inconceivable angles to look into the bushes above him, listening to the silence he had caused in the surrounding population of birds who had ceased their usual happy chatter at full throttle.

The more I watched him, the more taken I was with his unfettered arrival to the birdbath, claiming dominion and being quite unaffected by the hesitant return of the songbirds, one by one, to the feeder they abandoned minutes ago. It seemed they instinctively realized that this big guy, this fine specimen of a bird, this predator, wanted nothing to do with curtailing their happy foraging but instead simply wanted to do what was instinctive to us all in the throes of the sweltering day: he just wanted to cool his heels.

So there I sat, looking at the Grey Ghost up close, closer than I knew should have been comfortable for him. He tolerated me sitting awestruck in his presence, making polite conversation so as to delay his departure. His penetrating amber eyes darted all around his premises, and then returned to me one last time before liftoff as if to say, "Thank you for this precious water."

I finally blinked and he was gone.

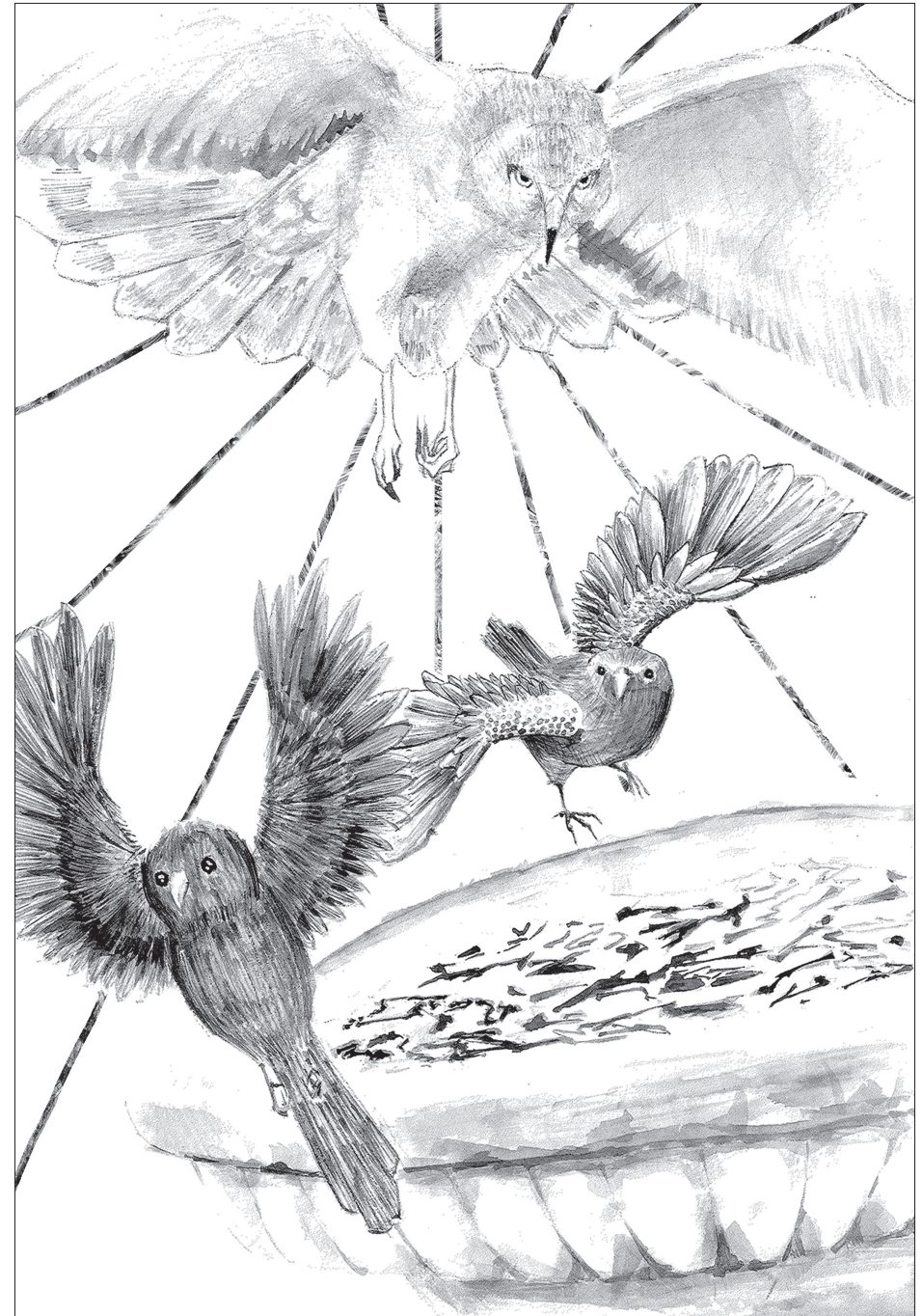


Illustration
Daniel Baik

Jackie Rupey

Ghost in the Mirror

She sat curled up on the frumpy sofa in her boyfriend's family's living room, one hand clinging to a glass of \$3.47 champagne and the other hand clinging to her side. The back porch light hummed loudly in the still of the night. It was growing late, and her boyfriend's parents were already asleep. The television flashed softly with words and images she couldn't keep up with. She tried to brace herself against the precarious rocking inside her. Everything was swimming around her, under her, against her. She gave up, sinking between the back cushion and the arm rest.

Her phone went off, and, for a moment, she snapped back to reality to silence the incoming call from her mother before she dropped the phone in her backpack with her homework, textbooks, and all the other things she was supposed to be tending to. Tomorrow her mom, dad, and brother were going to be helping her little sister move in to her dorm for her first year of college. She knew it was a big deal to their mom for the whole family to be involved in the process, but right now she couldn't care less. Her hand shook as she mechanically swallowed more champagne.

Her boyfriend walked in from the kitchen with uneven steps. Off balance and cursing, he spilled some of the stir fry on the yellow-tinged carpet. He dropped a bowl in her lap and cast a mildly disgusted sideways glance at her and the glass that bobbed in her hand like a lone buoy. Forcing a smile, she thanked him like a meek disciple before they ate in silence.

The rice felt unwanted, and her mouth dried as she slowly chewed her late dinner on the sofa next to him, trying to force bite after bite into her mouth. The spoon trembled in her cold hands as she looked down and realized she couldn't eat, and, in fact, shouldn't have eaten at all. Lurching upright, she set the bowl down and pulled herself towards the bathroom. The walls moved in and out as she reached, groping for stability. The overwhelming feeling of nausea made her body feel so unnaturally anchored and heavy in comparison to the effervescence in her head.

Finally, she pushed the bathroom door open and hit the lights as she fell inside. Dropping to her knees, she grasped the edge of the counter in one hand and the seat of the toilet with the other. The rocking was stronger than ever, and a low white noise flooded her ears. With little hesitation, 60 mg of hydrocodone, a bottle of champagne, and a bit of Stolichnaya gratefully heaved out of her in steady waves.

By the time she was done, the weight of nausea had left her, but her head still swam in a high she desperately wanted to come down from. She pulled herself up from the floor and was directly greeted by her own disheveled reflection in the mirror. Her skin looked as if it had taken on a pale, ashy tone that she had never seen before, and the red-rimmed eyes, glazed over and hollow, were not her own. She knew this wasn't her. This had never been her. But there she stood with the ghost in the mirror.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She turned suddenly to her boyfriend looming in the bathroom doorway. His jaw clenched almost as tight as his fists, and his eyebrows raised maniacally over burning eyes, crazy and wired from another night's binge. A heavy dread crept into her.

"Well?" His head cocked at an angle that let her know he expected a stupid answer.

"I—I told you I didn't want to—I couldn't take any more, but you kept telling me to take more with you," she slowly stammered, already knowing nothing would suffice.

"No!" He pointed a shaking finger in her face, almost laughing, "You don't know your limits! You didn't tell me you were feeling sick because you don't trust me! So I can't trust you."

"No, no, no..." She put a hand to her head and tried to keep it together. Everything was spinning again. Around and around and around, and there was no stopping it.

"Please, I'm sorry. It's not that, you know it's not that." She sighed. "I told you I couldn't take any more, but you weren't having no for an answer. I tried to tell you."

"Haha, oh God," he laughed condescendingly. "Bullshit!"

"Babe, please, please let's not do this. I made a mistake. I'm feeling better. Everything is fine! We don't need to do this." She pleaded softly, knowing she tip toed on a fragile precipice.

He leaned in close to her face, his eyebrows raised sharply like horns and malice leaping in otherwise empty eyes. She didn't know him.

"Fuck. You." He drew out each word, slow and measured. He searched her eyes to make sure he hadn't missed his mark.

Her eyes began to smart. She jerked her head to the side like she had been slapped across the face. She was lost, her head swimming for an answer, for a way out of this. "No, no, no," she muttered. "We're not doing this again." Childlike instinct took over as she pushed past him into his bedroom. Immediately she climbed into bed and hid, shuddering under the heavy down comforter.

Footsteps slowly creaked into the room, and the door shut with an ominous click. Suddenly the pillow was ripped out from under her head, and the comforter torn off her body.

"Don't you fucking try and run away from me," he hissed vehemently.

"I'm not doing this anymore. We don't need to do this anymore." She tried to insist and stand her ground, but her voice came out as a muffled whimper. Her head

spun as she curled up on the naked bed, trying to hide in her hands. For a moment everything was silent.

THUD. Her body tensed in shock as if an electric current had run through her. She lay there frozen in place, stunned, as he pulled up the heavy comforter again and folded it into thicker halves. THUD. It came crashing down a second time, demanding recognition. Choking on fear and confusion, she rolled over to face him. Her eyes still stunned as her body moved on its own. THUD. He swung it again, but this time she felt his hand behind the comforter as he hit her across the face, knocking her down. She let out a cry.

“Please, please, I love you!” she begged, trying to stifle her choking.

“You (THUD) piece (THUD) of (THUD) shit!” he snarled rabidly, bringing down his fists and the comforter between every word. She lay in tears, only whimpering when the force of his hand came down on her spine. She lay there as the yelling and the hands and the comforter continued to rain down, and the curtains fell, and the desk was cleared, but she was frozen in the past, thinking back two years ago when they first met. The beginning was so innocent and pure. She thought about their first date, their first kiss, the first time he told her he loved her, and she couldn’t move. The present didn’t seem real.

Suddenly, there was pounding on his door. “What is going on?” His parents had woken up from the racket. He stood there, panting and still as the pounding continued. Finally, he dropped the comforter on her, covering her with it as if to hide her away. He cracked the door open, only to try and settle them down. She heard his parents asking where she was.

“Are you there? Are you okay?”

She heard his mother’s voice, genuinely concerned. She didn’t know what to say. His mother asked again, and everyone was silent waiting to hear her verdict.

“Y—Yes,” she slowly stammered, shocked as she heard the words coming out of her mouth like they weren’t her own. “I’m fine.”

His parents stood in the doorway and said nothing else before they turned away and went back to bed. It was quiet again. He stood over the bed for a few minutes, and she lay with her back to him, shuddering quietly. Silence. Finally, he peeled back the sheets and got into bed next to her. He pushed back her hair and kissed her neck apologetically, then rested his face against the back of her neck with his hand on her side. She lay there unmoving and lifeless, holding on to memories.

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Anna Rodriguez
The Bloodline

My tossing and fidgeting with worn bed sheets was interrupted when my mom, worried and wide-eyed, stumbled into my room at 5 a.m. on a particularly quiet and gloomy July morning. She stood there completely still for a few moments; as I was about to question her whereabouts, she let out a shaky breath and faintly mumbled, “It’s Angie...”

She let my sister’s name hang in the air while the cogs in my mind were trying to piece together what on earth my sister could be up to that was urgent news so early in the morning. My mom finally informed me that my sister had been arrested for domestic assault. Suddenly, I, too, took on the same expression as my frenzied mom. In all my years, I could not recall a time I had felt such an intense pang of dejection and outrage all at once. As if a lump had been lodged in my throat, trapping me from speaking, breathing, thinking; I was stunned.

It was not the first time I knew my sister had little patience and tolerance for an irritating situation. I just never thought a short temper and throwing objects could land you in a cold dingy cell with criminals and prostitutes. Her irrational behavior could easily be linked back to our upbringing, so it should not have been a shock for me to hear she was finally snapped into place. We had grown up in a household where problems were not completely resolved, more like addressed and abandoned with a raised voice and the endless loop of a mindless counterargument. It was hard to stray away from the family curse and not allow yourself to partake in a few loquacious spats. I remember vividly being surrounded by both love and verbally aggressive arguments. With an age gap of eight years between Angie and me, there wasn’t much we had in common besides the fact that we could both yell at the top of our lungs, brazenly speak our minds, and bicker with our parents.

When I found myself face to face with the clouded, misty gray building in downtown L.A., I wanted to sob and blubber on about the severity and frightening truth of the situation. Angie was no longer my boisterous sister who got sent to her room or had her phone taken away when she acted up. No, she was a mere number in a computer system, locked in a dingy cinder block room, filled to the brim with an eccentric collection of women. Angie was only allowed one visitor per day for a short fifteen minutes. I was the first person to see her in her sad pale

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blue jumpsuit. With sweaty palms and a wobbly bottom lip, I waited for my sister's name to blare out of the squeaky speaker system. Misled by movie images, I was let down when I saw my own stall of nothingness. There was no thick, scratched, and smudged Plexiglas marred with fingertips of fear and desperation, no old, faded beige phone with a curled extension. I was met with a dull, blocked off stall, gray and obsolete like the situation itself, and a tinted mirror in front of me. Before I could examine the booth any further, an odd distressed visual of my sister appeared on the tinted mirror: a sad distant hologram version of her.

Her usual well-kept oak brown ringlets of curls were now disheveled and matted. Her olive skin, once bright and healthy, now looked like a splotchy tear-stained canvas. The eyes I knew so well—jovial and welcoming—brimmed red and sunken in, the side effects of her incessant sobs and sleepless nights. She tried to muster up enough energy to smile but failed when her tight-lipped gimmick resulted in a crumpled face, furrowed eyebrows, and even more tears.

"Annie," she started, "I'm so sorry...I—I don't know why...why did I do this? I'm sorry." Her frantic apology was hard to understand due to her uncontrollable emotions, but I nodded rapidly with the intent of calming her down. I told her over and over again she was going to be okay, that this would all blow over soon. I hoped she believed me, but I saw in her puffy, watery eyes she was beyond the point of repetitive consolations. She continued spitting out her apologies and sprinkled in some information about why she was even there in the first place. She had gotten into a fight with her boyfriend and thrown numerous objects both at him and outside the window; that was the short, tearful version she told me. In the middle of her ramblings, the screen shut off. I was completely confused in the eerily silent stall.

"One minute remaining," a robotic voice spoke.

Wondering how 14 minutes could feel like a nanosecond, my sister reappeared, even more frantic than before. On edge and in the middle of a time crunch, she was cut off mid-sentence in the midst of saying her goodbye and one final apology. It was strange seeing her but not physically being able to really see the depth of worry and fear she had etched on her face, while realizing how quickly time can go. I was left wanting more time, but I suppose that was the case with everyone in here; they all just needed more time to explain themselves, more time to apologize, more time to express their love, more time to fix the error of their ways.

In the car on my way home that afternoon, I found myself reflecting on the entirety of what was happening around me. I was suddenly acutely aware of how potent this so-called "family curse" was. Seeing my sister so broken and

afraid, pleading for me to forgive her and still love her, I was exposed to the raw truth of it all: how my words, actions, and pent-up aggression can build up and burst when least expected, turning my life upside down. Scattered in tiny pieces caused by my own wrongdoing, by my carelessness, the cycle of anger needed to come to an end.

Three days later when Angie was finally released, I overheard my father choking over his own words, fumbling to tell my sister how this had been partially his fault and how he never wished this thick bloodline of sullen tyrants was ever passed on. My father, a tough and stern man, let his shoulders sag and eyebrows frown as he let her know just how awful he felt and that he never took into account how constant traumatic bickering and aggression could really alter a growing child's life. And, like my own real-life episode of *Beyond Scared Straight*, the horror of facing any prospect of jail time led me to less aggressive, less impulsive, more practical conclusions to any given situation...that, and the fact that baby blue had never really been my color.

John Hunter

Chasing Dragons

My stepfather, Cecil, took me on a trip to a castle once when I was young. It was the middle of summer, and the mountains were seething with rustic perfume. Out in front of us stretched a long road, and once we got out of the city and into the foothills, we turned off the air conditioning and rolled down the windows, letting the fresh air do its job. I knew it would be another of those excursions where the hidden intention was for him to show me what he knew about being a man, an intention which was always disagreeable to me due to my youthful and idealistic obstinacy about what being a man really meant. Even so, I would always go along for the ride because I loved getting out of town, getting lost in the freedom of the road and the wilderness.

Mountain air whipping through the car left little hope for conversation, but we didn't mind. We were comfortable with the sound of the wind while taking in the slow stillness of the day. Occasionally, we would make quick, overly loud comments over the sound of the wind about a farmhouse or a waterfall as we passed by. Mostly, I sat in reverent curiosity, excited about what lay ahead. I wondered just what kind of castle we would be going to in the middle of the Colorado wilderness. Cecil was always very intentional about holding onto the mystery of things like that, letting my imagination fill in the blanks. He loved surprises.

We would have missed the castle completely if there hadn't been other cars parked out in front of the place. Strange as it may seem, the castle was difficult to see through the lofty Lodgepole pine forest. There was a bit of a walk from where we had to park, and along the way we began to see signs, strange, portentous signs marking the path leading up to the castle. They seemed to tell story of the man who built the castle and his struggle with the United States government over taxes and land rights. They exuded mistrust and rage, yet strangely behind them was the message of hope and belief in a freedom that all people wish to have, a freedom which the castle builder thought they should have and should build with their own two hands.

Cecil and I walked up the hill and saw the enormous castle rise out of a man-made clearing among the trees. It was like standing at the foot of a mountain made by a single man. We walked up to the box for donations, and Cecil wedged our wadded up cash donation down into it. It was eerie that nobody was there to take our

money, and even more so was the sign stating that the guest book also doubled as a liability waiver and we could sign it or leave. Walking around the outside of the bottom floor of the structure gave one the impression of looking at an artist's first work, one that had taken 30 years to create yet still was unfinished. It was rough-hewn, beautifully raw, unrefined, and utterly human.

I found a piece of my own humanity that day and discovered that I am afraid of heights. Cecil and I explored the lower floors of the castle first. There was a giant room on the second floor full of stone arches that were slightly off-kilter but structurally sound nonetheless. Sunshine coming in through the stained glass windows left splashes of color on the bare wooden plank flooring. There were doors and wrought-iron walkways that wrapped around most of the castle, stopping abruptly as if the builder had gotten bored and gone off to some other part of the castle to finish another project until that became boring as well. Some parts of the castle were treacherous because of the erratic building process that the eccentric builder employed. Only the lower floors of the structure felt completely sound because they were made of mortar and stone gathered from the surrounding Rocky Mountains. The higher we went, the more we could see the tendency of the builder to use wrought iron that was unable to stand up to the weight of a squirrel, much less a grown man and teenage boy, which he seemed oddly fond of.

In the tallest of the three towers, there was a spiral staircase made of this wrought iron that led out of the unfinished stone tower itself and ended at a single step over 160 feet off of the ground. Climbing up to the top, I remember feeling the psychotic, giddy excitement that is characteristic of teenage boys when doing something that may get them killed. Cecil was right behind me the whole way. When I climbed out into the sunshine up over the stone tower, I looked back down to the ground. My excitement vanished as my breath stuck cold in my chest. I remember seeing a blue pickup sixteen stories below that looked like a Hot Wheels toy truck. I was too terrified to go any further, so I stopped off on a ledge to the side and let Cecil go up to the top step. He carefully placed one foot up, made sure it was solid and put the other foot up, slowly standing after what felt like an infinite moment crouching. Standing out there, so high off of the ground, he was the bravest man I had ever known. He left me with no other option than to follow. Regardless of the terror I felt, I knew I would never be able to look at myself in the mirror if I left without standing up there. I climbed those endless last five stairs, crouched at the top for just one second, and stood up. I have never felt as stupid or more alive in my life as I did in the half minute or so I stood on top of that crazy stair floating out in the middle of nowhere.

Years have passed since that day, but it always stuck with me. On a vacation back to Colorado, I had the chance to go back to the castle. Cecil had passed away about five years earlier from a heart attack. My sister and her family came with me instead. My niece and nephew were so excited to see the castle that they couldn't sit still in the back seat of the car. It was October, and the shadows had become too cold and long for rolled-down windows, forcing a trade of the rhythmic thumping of warm, summer wind for the stale car heater and the cacophony of tiny voices from the back seat.

When we arrived, we spent the day doing the same exploring, much the same way as I had when I had visited before, except maybe with the addition of the occasional smartphone photograph. Places that were incomplete last time had been finished for years, giving room for new places to be incomplete now. It was as if the castle itself had matured to the point where it had begun to question its own identity. A shiny stainless steel dragon on the front that breathed fire at night had been built front and center. It was as though the builder had finally found the crowning achievement of the place, as though all of those years the builder had been chasing the moment when he could affix that dragon to the eaves of his masterwork. I never got the chance to meet or even see the builder, but his presence was everywhere, challenging fate to see what one man could do with his own hands during the course of his lifetime.

I thought about all of the moments of my days—from the last time I had been there until the moment I found myself in. I thought about what kind of life I had built in those days. It was poignant to think about how many of those days I had lived out of fear that I wasn't good enough or strong enough, or that I wasn't smart enough to get along in the same world as everyone else, robbing myself in those moments of the ability to live life. As I stood there, it became so clear what had happened that moment on the stair all those years ago: Cecil had not been a brave man but a courageous one. There was no denial of fear in him but an embracing of it. He was keeping sacred that experience of being alive and giving me the gift of being able to share that moment out there, floating, chasing dragons.

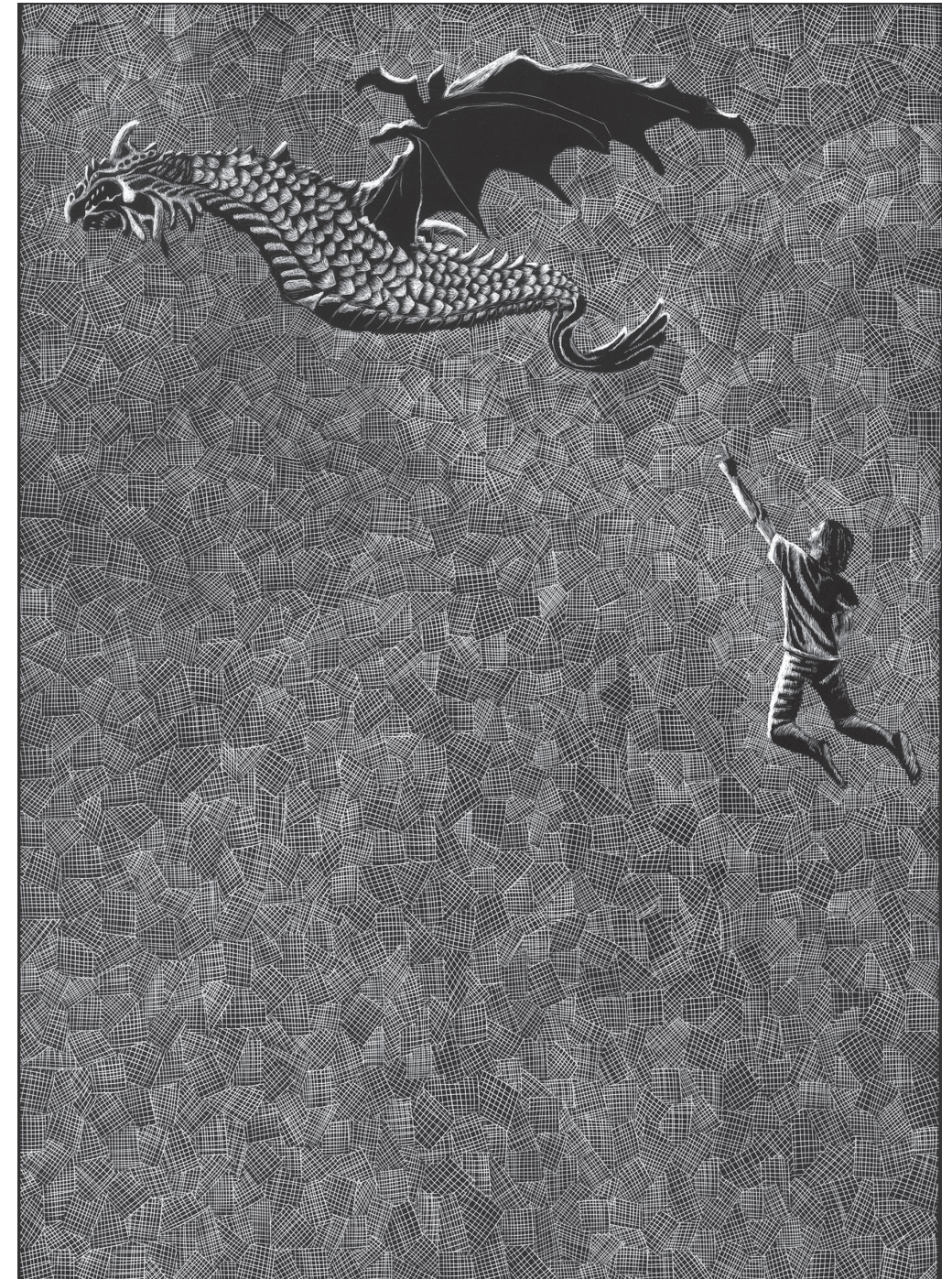


Illustration
Lisa Lynch

Keanu Ho

Do You Know

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Do you know what a 1000 valve leak is? It is so, you should, I be,
you're the only one I will listen to read, you are the only one having
girls for life. 200 over the rocky hills, paperclip my books to the
sky. But for what is the deal? The Life is only part of the station
in the sky. Video of a girl with a crane, movies over the Chain
Bridge, but it doesn't want to, if my life could be a certain way then
why wouldn't I go down the mountain of gas, only to make her out of
spaghetti from the organ few. My eye is from the dirt, live in the
South region, and he likes likes her stuff, stuff with lots of syrupy
Chainz dripping from the top. It costs a little bit to carve on
the ground because you'll need a proper education to have the skill
to do anything like that. Anything that that skills,
skills of a proper, Grande need to do things during this, things of
the proper, girl if you to do.

Kathleen Persinger

Breathing Mechanisms

We are the Breathing Mechanisms

Lives clicking past, systematically, mechanically

Too slow and then too fast, clacking and whirring

Like clockwork gears wound too tight and running backwards

Grinding, winding down, counting backwards from one hundred in 3s

We spend so much time trying to stop the count we don't even notice

The last grains of sand caught between cogs until it just stops.

It's funny if you think about it; it's hilarious and you can't stop laughing

But it's not a laugh; it's something manic and desperate that burbles in your throat

And you're not a person; you're a mechanism wound down with no one to wind you up again

This is the way the world ends. Abruptly and unfinished.

This is the way our lives end. A sharp noise and then silence.

A smear of ink across an unfinished page, the stone back at the base of the hill

The clock ticking but hands still, as if it's still keeping time, keeping it to itself.

We, the Breathing Mechanisms

Do not live lives worth living because we do not live at all

Sand slips between our fingers, but we don't stop grasping at it,

Can't stop grasping at it. It turns to mud as we mourn the lives

We could have lived if we hadn't wasted so much time pretending to be

Something permanent. We are the Breathing Mechanisms

And Our Lives Are Already Ticking Past.

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Alara Tiernan

Brittle Leaf

"Till death do us part" does not come with instructions. My Catholic background was less than helpful. Sunday school planted toxic seeds in me about how to love. Without a doubt, "Put others before myself" has been the most costly programming of my life. The truth is that no relationship, even marriage, is sustainable if it comes at the expense of either person's needs being met. I unraveled inside of my marriage to the point that my behavior no longer reflected my values.

My first marriage heartbreakingly ended eight years ago. I swore that the next time I would get it right. In preparation for my next Mr. Right, I read over 40 books about love and attended 14 seminars. Taking all the lessons I learned from my education and previous relationships, I chose my next mate with care. Todd was older than me but excited to have children; ambitious but prioritized our time together; and sensitive but not overly effeminate. He was handsome but not the kind of looks where my brain leaves my body and I become a giddy mess; I could still hold up my end of an intelligent conversation.

In the mornings, I would roll over to him, smiling as he awoke. "I'm happy!" I would say, with genuine feeling behind those words. Life was smooth, I was in control, reassured that I had enough padding to avoid a fall from grace.

When Todd asked me to marry him, my intuition said no, but it all looked right. So I said yes. That "no" nagged at me, and I briefly allowed myself to wonder if I was settling for safe predictability, yet longing for a partner who inspired my growth. Ultimately, I reasoned that my growth was my responsibility and tucked that doubt away.

Two years and three days after our first date, we married. I was teaching relationship workshops out of our home; friends were coming to us for advice about how to manage their partnerships. There was even a documentary featuring my advice to women about how to have a fantastic relationship with a man. My relationship's exposure to the public created an expectation that felt like pressure to get it right, to be the model couple.

Amidst all the buzz, I didn't notice that the "I'm happy" had gotten less frequent and quieter. Todd began working late nights and early mornings. It was an adjustment for me, but I comforted myself with the thought that he was

building a financial foundation for our future. He was working hard for us, for me. How ungrateful it would be to complain!

My calendar alarm beeped. Damn, today is sex day. I felt a wave of mild disgust and despair ripple through my body. Maybe I could get away with giving him a blow job in the shower and have that count for the week. We had determined that every four days was the maximum amount of time between lovemaking to get my husband's needs met. Lovemaking: how close to the truth that word was for me. Through hard work, I was trying to make something enjoyable happen. Afterwards, he would ask if I enjoyed making love; I would say with a forced smile, "It was fine."

Fine: the four letter word that should be dreaded by all who hear it. The reality was that I was tragically unfulfilled in the boudoir. A scheduled timetable was not what I wanted, yet sadly "to have and to hold" had become a task, a chore, something to cross off my to-do list. I wondered what had happened to my confident voice and that rambunctious streak of independence. The strategies I tried to improve my situation ranged from books left in conspicuous places around the home, romantically themed date nights, a friend coming to talk to us about Tantra, pornography, toys, and finally a \$3,000 couples seminar I used my savings to buy.

My alarm reminder goes off a second time. What a relief; he is okay with the blowjob proposal for tonight. Four more days until I have to say "okay" again.

Months crawled on, and it seemed that forever had passed since vowing "I do."

One night, in the back of a truck that wasn't Todd's, I found myself looking up at the stars, feeling hot and horrible; thrilled to finally be in the throes of sexual excitement; and devastated it was not my husband's face that I was kissing. Over the years I had worked up enough justification to make this moment possible. I tried, I tried, I tried. One try for each strategy I attempted to use to fix the crack that apparently only I could see. My brain searched for who to blame as my lips cast judgment on me.

During that forbidden embrace, I came to the realization that I had totally given up on getting what I needed from my husband. Returning home that night, I told Todd I was leaving. My face had no smiles left for him. His pleas were met without compassion. I was the brittle leaf that had dried up on the vine. No matter how much water was thrown at it now, it could not return to life.

I've been told that everyone grieves differently, and it's all normal. Todd refused contact with me after our divorce, so I do not know what he regrets, what lessons he learned, or perhaps what he is grateful to be rid of. My "moving on" process involved a passionately dysfunctional rebound relationship, a five-day-mountaintop vision quest, being fired from the job where Todd and I both worked, and moving out of the town I had called home for the last twelve years. The only thing I was certain of anymore was that life changes.

The epiphany that made it all worthwhile came when I took responsibility for not getting my needs met. Throughout my marriage, I had asked for the bare minimum, patting myself on the back for being low maintenance and supportive. Being a martyr reduced conflict and created the appearance of looking fine on the outside, while the inside of our relationship rotted. The choice I most regret is saying yes to his needs in the bedroom while not taking a firm stand for mine. This pattern was crippling to our connection because it created the story that he was selfish and didn't care about me. From this perspective, I was the innocent victim and he was the clueless bastard. I got a lot of righteous mileage from that one. Regarding his increased work schedule, my response was to minimize my requests for quality time and lavishly express gratitude for his hard work. Stifling my loneliness built up an inner resentment. In my head, I perpetuated our distance by giving him labels such as workaholic and negligent husband. Repeated choices like those, to support him without making sure I was taken care of as well, set the precedent that my needs mattered less than his. In hindsight, I see that I was agreeing out of duty and obligation, calling it love, and believing that it was the right thing to do. Internalizing my honesty created distance and caused me to disappear as a person. In truth, I had left the relationship long before it ended.

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It was difficult to trust myself after two failed marriages. Even the most careful planning and studying had not ensured a successful outcome. I doubted I would ever dare be in a relationship again. Then I heard something from a friend, who is now my beloved. He said, "You'll do fine if you make sure that your yes's are true yes's, and your no's are clear no's."

This is the motto I now strive to live by and the foundation of my current partnership. Through painful journeying, I can see that sacrificing my needs to meet another's is not sustainable. Yet even after living the unhappy results of denying my needs, I still sometimes put others first and silently stew, hoping and half expecting that if they loved me, they would realize I'm not happy and fix what's wrong. It is scary for me to speak honestly because at some level I fear losing the connection that provides the comforting companionship I seek in this world. Backsliding into withholding is sad to me because I know any positive result doesn't last if it is achieved dishonestly.

Ashleey Dean

Lying Still

Hands made of memories,
nibbling down to depreciate
the sour taste of
a lover she had actually
never seen.

No longer lying still,
castrating bud from nail,
name from the idea as

lips fill with the luxury of
fleshy thighs gliding
past, forcing themselves
against your teeth.

Nights no longer filled
with endless pillow talk.
My eyes roll back as
I writhe and scream in
order to keep away the

death of this dream.

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Jake Gifford

Letter to *Arundo donax*

maybe it'll be along the creek
where the willow blooms flow
into eucalyptus crop, when
your perennial canes will grow
once more beside me—since
the herbicide, I haven't seen
a coyote, but I did watch a
raccoon dig for jelly beans
in the sand—the quercus
and Washingtonias are doing
fine—seem much taller with-
out you—and some senior
sycamores are putting on
new growth—I must admit that
upon your rhizome mat, their
hack at samsara leaves little
promise for encilia or toyon—
I feel even dodder will caution
here in the spring—the Russian
thistle spoke well of you, but he,
too, hasn't seen you for some time.

A-dios,
Miscanthus

Ad

Staff Biography

Editor-in-Chief
Matthew Durham



Matthew Durham graduated from the New York Film Academy's One-Year Screenwriting Program in 2007 and is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. He currently serves as the Program Manager for Reptile Rescue Orange County and volunteers his time for a non profit that integrates art into education for homeschool students. His story "Almost Home" is his first publication and is dedicated to his niece, Isabelle, who renewed his hope for all things. You can contact him at mattds85@gmail.com.

Fiction Editor / Art Committee
Stephanie Pagani



Stephanie has finished her last semester at Saddleback and will be transferring to UC Berkeley to pursue a degree in English. No, she does not want to teach. Her spirit animal is Blair Waldorf. She is also inspired by red pandas, which are not actually pandas of any kind. Stephanie is not a writer, and that is why she knows how to use a comma.

Personal Narrative Editor / Art Committee
Jilly Pretzel



Jilly Pretzel is still a vegetarian. She enjoys writing nonfiction stories in which she uses her real name and other people's fake ones. She earned her BA in philosophy and is furthering her literary education in a Master of Fine Arts program this Fall. She lives with her cat, Kierkegaard.

Art & Poetry Editor
Ashleey Dean



Ashleey Dean believes it's quite useful being the top banana in the shock department. She will take this sentiment to the Pacific Northwest as she leaves her native coast of Southern California to further pursue literary studies and creative writing at Portland State University. She promises to brake for Sasquatch and only asks that you please ship boxes of ripe avocados to her new home in Portland.

Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Meishel DeSouto



With a background in fine arts, Meishel DeSouto worldbuilds and creates stories through a wide variety of mediums. She is currently studying motionography and interactive media. You can contact her at mdesouto0@saddleback.edu.

Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Jessica Wei



Jessica Wei is a graphic design student at Saddleback College. She likes drawing and ceramics. In her free time she enjoys watching TV shows and playing volleyball.

Copy Editor / Fiction Committee

Julia Cheng



Julia Cheng is an aspiring writer and this is the first time her work has been published. "The Family Business" is based on her journey of finding her passion in life.

Copy Editor / Fiction Committee

PJ Concar

Now a writer and formerly an actor/dancer/singer, PJ has worked in advertising and video production. She also served as a chaplain in a women's jail.

Copy Editor / Fiction Committee

Fran Masket



My writing career began at the age of 10 when I wrote fairytales for my baby sister at a little, old-fashioned desk with pigeon holes and little drawers. Years later, I took creative writing classes from teachers in the adult program at UCLA and found a new love of writing. Adding to a B.A. in Spanish from Denison University, I entered Cal State Northridge and received a 2nd B.A. in journalism and public relations. That degree led to the position of copy editor at the magazine *California Apparel News* in Los Angeles. My short story is dedicated to my three children and five grandchildren.

Publicity Chair & Personal Narrative Committee

Harun Shah

I'm Harun Shah. Yeah, I'm a pretty nice guy.



Personal Narrative Committee

Kathryn Pohle

Kathryn Pohle is an aspiring writer searching for her own voice amongst a sea of creative talent. She is the betrayer. The one who erases history.

Poetry Committee

Sanbud Tehrani

Sanbud Tehrani is a flowering sociopath who wields deadly surrealist automatist techniques with the masterful skill of a ruthless and merciless visionary guru in the written word. He has composed and released two compilations of his poetic works thus far and has been published in such journals as *Juked* and *The Brasilia Review*.



Poetry & Publicity Committees

Bradford Amos

Brad Amos is a creative weirdo who is too strange to live and too rare to die. We can only hope. He is into creative writing, psychedelic art, underground hip hop, punk rock, blues, jazz, and any music that arises from the depths of the human soul and is not the average stereotypical commercial garbage one would hear on commercial radio or television outlets. He has a passion for skateboarding, meditation, and exotic women among other things. Serving on the WALL staff has been one of his most memorable and favorite creative endeavors.

Art & Publicity Committee

Fatemeh Ayoughi

Fatemeh Ayoughi received an MS in Art. She is an Iranian novelist and poet who survived a dreadful prison of the Iranian regime and immigrated to the US in 2001. She is the author of *The Silent Clamor*, a collection of poems, short stories, a novel, and a play.



Faculty Advisor

Gina Victoria Shaffer



A professor of English who teaches composition and creative writing at Saddleback College, Gina Victoria Shaffer previously served on the faculty of UCLA Writing Programs. She formerly worked as a newspaper reporter, magazine editor, and theater critic. A published playwright whose comedies and dramas have been staged throughout Southern California and in New York, she earned her Ph.D. in English at UCI.

For contributor bios, please see www.saddleback.edu/la/wall