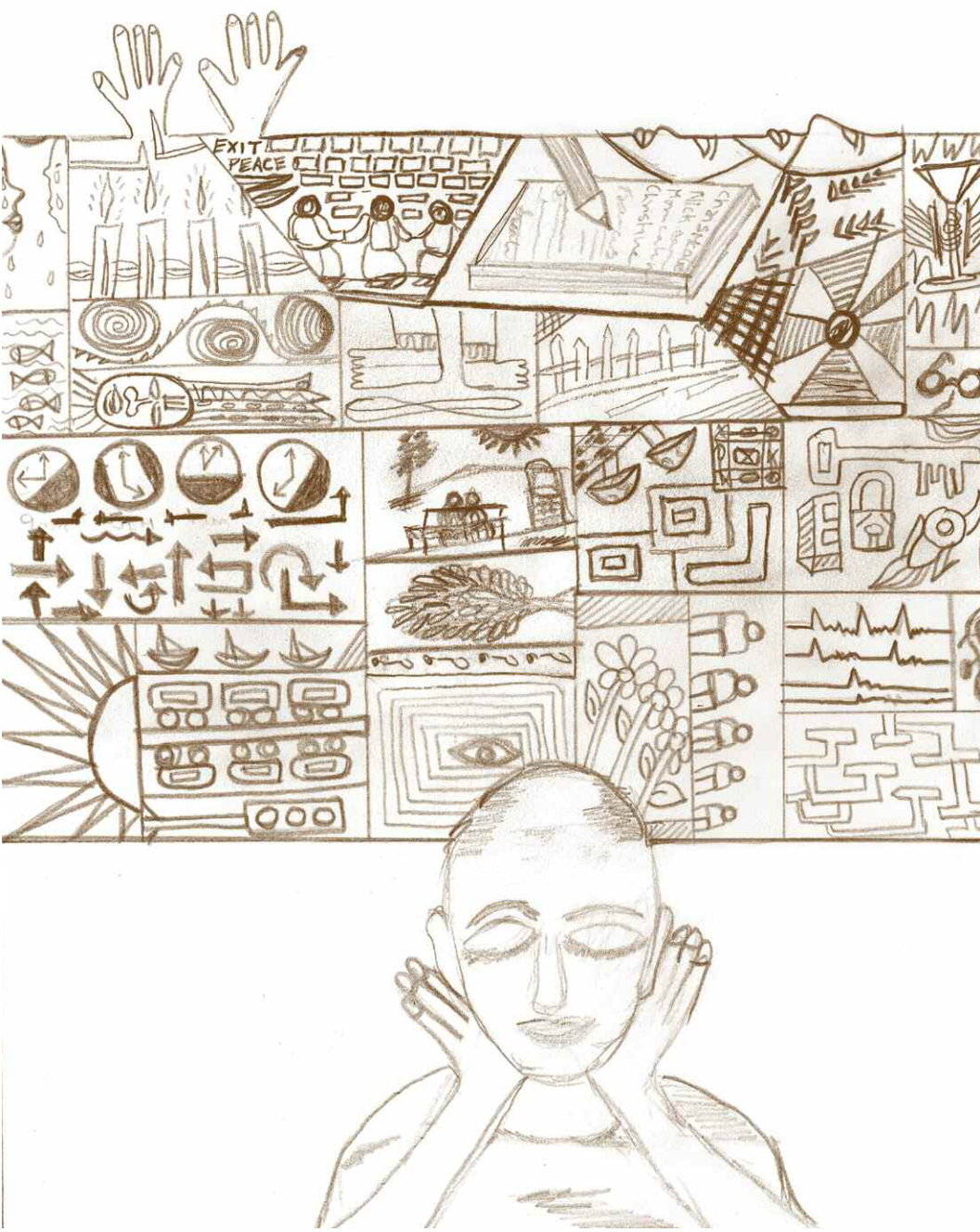


INSCAPE

2009



INSCAPE

2009

the literary magazine of
Pasadena City College
Pasadena, California
Volume 64

(formerly *Pipes of Pan*, volumes 1-29)

Inscape is the Pasadena City College student literary magazine. It appears once a year in the spring. PCC students serve as the magazine's editors; editors market the magazine, review submissions, and design its layout.

All PCC students—full or part-time—are invited to submit their creative writing and art to the magazine's faculty advisor, Christopher McCabe. Submission guidelines and information regarding *Inscape* editorial positions are available in the English Division office in C245.

Copyright 2009 by *Inscape*, English Division, Pasadena City College, Pasadena, California.

Cover Illustration: Swati Panchal

All rights revert to author and artist upon publication.

Senior Editors

Nicholas Cardet
Christine Kha
Swati Panchal

Associate Editors

Hyun Joo Kim
Francis Marotta

Art Director

Swati Panchal

Faculty Advisor

Christopher McCabe

*“I am all these words, images,
and inspirations and this literary
magazine is a showcase of my work
as well as my fellow eclectic peers.”*

– Christine Kha



CONTENTS

I Am <i>by Amber Ornelas</i>	8
A Connection <i>by Dan Beuschlein</i>	11
Ars Poetica <i>by Nima Jalali-Ghajar</i>	13
A Step Behind <i>by Rosa Elena Benavides</i>	14
Look Forward <i>by Tina Renea Johnson</i>	18
Leaving Home <i>by Sherry Fuqua-Gilson</i>	20
Depression <i>by Jane Kim</i>	24
Leticia <i>by Roberto Navarro</i>	26
Loser <i>by Beverly Kikuta</i> NONFICTION AWARD WINNER	31
Strange Fruit That Says Forget Me Not <i>by Mae Ramirez</i>	36
A Race of a Lifetime <i>by Christine Kha</i>	38
Serpentigena <i>by Francis Marotta</i>	41
A Flower Without Sun <i>by Phillip Daniel Turner</i>	46
Broken <i>by Angela P. Liu</i>	47
A History of Smoke <i>by Jonathan Eduardo Mota</i>	48
Love in the Time of Supernova <i>by Dale A. Zapata</i> SHORT STORY AWARD WINNER	51

Outside the Door <i>by Jesse Clemens</i> POETRY AWARD WINNER	65
Target Haikus <i>by William Kloezezan</i>	66
Blood <i>by Tracy Vanity</i>	67
Professor Crow Gives A Lecture <i>by Safford Chamberlain</i>	71
6th and Main <i>by Nico Zurita</i>	72
Call It What You Want <i>by Nicholas Cardet</i>	76
Bathing <i>by Tamara Glenn Gunn</i>	79
Ratted Superstar <i>by Tracy Vanity</i>	80
glassbags <i>by A. Child</i>	85
Hot Time <i>by Wendy Markowitz</i>	86
Contributors	93
Acknowledgements	97
Literature Program at PCC	98
Creative Writing at PCC	99

I Am

by Amber Ornelas

• NONFICTION •

I am a psychic when I write. I can look into the future and regret the past. I am Death when I write. I know the lifespan of every human being and how one will die. Absolute power trickles from my mind down to my fingertips as they hover anxiously above my blank canvas. Should the sky be blue or green? Should the ocean be home to mermaids or the sky a theater to our world? Will she have blue eyes, green eyes or both? Should the smell of chocolate linger on every street corner? Should the man walking down the alley die from a heart attack... or should the ground open up and swallow?

We all have absolute power when it comes to writing. But I find that many writers cheat themselves by selling their souls to genres and repetitive plots.

"Well, I'm not a horror writer," one says.

"I'm not a mystery writer," says another. No you're not a horror writer, or a mystery writer or a romance writer. You're a writer! Is this world so wonderful and perfect that you want to duplicate it a thousand times over? Why do writers harness such awesome God given power? We have the ability to change the world by creating worlds but we are slaves to stereotypes. We have heard the saying, "Write what you know." Well, I disagree. Write what you don't know and introduce it to what you do. We create escapes from a sometimes weary, ugly world to worlds beyond our wildest dreams. We're the Sci-fi version of Travelocity. If you're in the mood for the fast paced city of New York or the fantastical world of The Shire, then pop a squat and crack a book. We give so much to the world, why do we settle for anything less than amazing?

***We all have absolute
power when it comes
to writing.***

So writers break free from the shackles of the mundane and expected and discover the power within. You are chess players. You decide every move good or bad. You are warriors. You fight for what you believe in through poetry, novels and stanzas. You are guardian Angels. You protect your characters until the end. You are nurturers. You wipe the tears from heavy-laden eyes and congratulate good deeds. You are sadists. You inflict pain whenever you please and watch their torment unfold. We as writers are God.



Photo Illustration: Jesus Ruiz

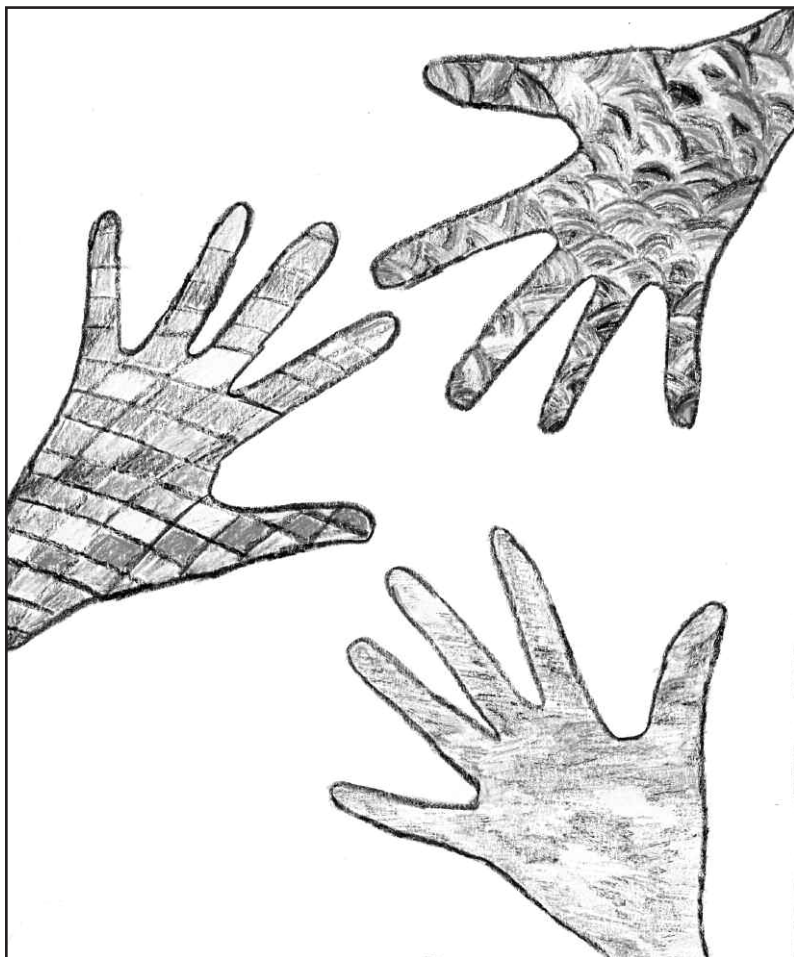


Illustration: Swati Panchal

A Connection

by Dan Beuschlein

• FICTION •

I am watching a Japanese man walk away from the R building. He has a shaved head and the beginnings of a beard. His features are handsome, and he carries a large black case in his right hand. The long, bulky container seems too short to hold a musical instrument and too narrow for textbooks, so I imagine he is an art student and inside this container he carries paints and brushes. In his other hand, his left, he holds a small stack of papers that flutter in the cool breeze. I am reminded of prayers written upon various scraps of papers tied to trees and fences for good luck on New Years Day, just like I've seen in Japan.

The man's posture is tall and proud, yet he stands at attention with his head bowed. He wears a frown not quite hidden by his beard but strangely accentuated by it. His pause seems to last an eternity and I feel his sigh of sadness sitting sixty feet away as if it were my own. I feel my jaw tense and the heartache and shame of tears well up in my eyes. I feel an immense connection to the Japanese man and want to say something, anything, to help alleviate our shared sorrow.

*I imagine the dread of
a doctor's visit he
cannot pay for...*

I imagine he has lost his job as a conceptual designer at a struggling auto company, and his landlord is evicting him for late payment. I imagine the dread of a doctor's visit he cannot pay for, his horror at the expensive cancer treatment the doctor will prescribe. I feel the heartache of a lover who left him for a richer more handsome suitor. While I do not know the truth behind the problems this poor man is facing, I know all too well my own. I feel helpless sitting so far away, the sixty feet become sixty miles. Yet the truth is the Japanese man in blue jeans and a tee-shirt is literally within shouting distance.

As I sit paralyzed by a flood of emotions and painful feelings the man lifts his head as if he found a spot of inner peace and determination. His frown recedes into a slight smile and there is a light of hope in his eyes. He glances in my direction, perhaps aware of our connection. In shame I quickly turn my head to glance at a group of young nursing students walking past in their brightly colored scrubs. The man follows my lead and takes a look at the nursing students. We both watch them walk happily past, chatting to themselves about future dreams of becoming great healers.

Watching from the corner of my eye I see the man take a painful step forward, as if walking on coals for the first time. His gaze is planted firmly on his feet as he slowly but surely takes step after step forward. There is a momentary pause between two steps, then another, and my heart is torn in two as this brief moment stretches into eternity. As if finding a miniscule amount of determination and resolve with each step the man's pace gradually gains momentum. As he walks away into the distance he does not glance back. This time it is I who wears the frown, and at this moment I realize the Japanese man is my hero and I have let him down.

Ars Poetica

by Nima Jalali-Ghajar

• POETRY •

Poetry is the man in the corner,
Who writes his essay on Social Justice the moment he gets off
of Work.

He is dressed in a Congolese national flag-blue flannel shirt,
with white in his hair,

And attends the local community college, yearning for
education.

Poetry is the coffee that carries him through the night.

Poetry is the newly laundered skirt,
Its fabric clipped to the clothesline,
With waves inching beyond its final stitch.
Poetry cannot recall last night's soaking lust.

Poetry is the man who transcends numbers,
yet still strums and sings with an emergence I'll remember.

Poetry is the bird in its youth who flies through the cloud,
Without knowledge of what exists within the menacing fluff.

Poetry is another sip for the man who's had one too many
Or perhaps the sober tears he sheds on the daily.

Poetry is the hands that sully the rug with blood foreign to
your vein,
Transforming itself from an ocean to a lake to a pond to a
puddle to a stain.

Poetry is the nightmare within a dream,
A Nightmare.
Poetry is the dream within a nightmare.
A Dream.

A Step Behind

by Rosa Elena Benavides

• NONFICTION •

I always knew she would have a hard time managing herself. Ever since she was little and couldn't keep up with her own feet.

Whenever she would pick up speed, just to reach me, she would end up ten feet behind me on the ground. With bloody knees and a swollen face. Crying. Now, I don't know whether those were tears of frustration or pain. I wish I would have asked.

I think when she was in high school she already knew life would not be easy for her.

I remember leaving home to go to college. I was so thankful that I didn't know how to drive, so that I would have to dorm

*Then I would run out,
telling some sort of lie of
why I couldn't hear them.*

there and not live at home. Now I don't know if that was such a good thing. I also remember being told that I didn't have permission to live at

the school campus. This was the only time I stood up for myself, "Well, if I can't live there, will YOU buy me a car and teach me how to drive?" That shut them up. And I moved on secretly with my plans. I could only apply to schools that accepted my fee waivers and that were within city limits. That was before I got ballsy.

I didn't realize that leaving my home behind would have so many consequences; not so much on myself (although it changed my life completely), but on those that I left behind.

My sister and I never really got along. She would wear my new clothing that would take me months to save up for, without asking me. I would find them worn, without tags, with deodorant stains. I always found them in hidden corners, under the bed, in between dirty clothing. She would hide them, like a child hides her mother's broken lipstick because she knew she wasn't supposed to be playing with it in the first place. Our ages only differ by 15 months. I remember once, looking in the refrigera-

tor for a cookie my mom had brought me from work. I didn't find it. As soon as I turned around, I found her. Eating my cookie. Under the dining table. After she had eaten hers. I didn't really care for cookies. Heck, I don't really eat sweets. But since it was mine, I began to complain. I guess it was the principle of it all. And we would argue. But that was not always the case. We were a family of seven. There were times that you just had to make allies out of your enemies in order to survive.

We shared a tiny bedroom that was 9' x 6'. The closet was bigger than the walking space. There was only enough room for the bunk beds and those were pushed so far towards the corner that they covered a whole

window. This barely gave enough room for the entry door to swing open. Once you swung that door open,

*She had promised to save
the world. I'm still waiting
for her to save herself.*

you only had enough space to stand there, stupidly, looking at the closet. But I loved that closet. It would always be mostly empty. We never had enough clothing between the both of us to fill it up. But the best part was the old integrated cabinets above the closet. They were big enough for me to hide in. That was my favorite hiding place. I would use the old beaten dresser to climb up there and I would make myself into a ball, like a roly-polly. I would hear my name being called out, once and again. I would close my eyes as if that would also cause for my ears to shut down and pretend not to hear a thing. After sensing frustrated tones associated with my name, I would slowly peer out, make sure there was no one out there, and balance my right foot on the top of the dresser and quickly take out my left foot to balance the rest of my weight. Then I would run out, telling some sort of lie of why I couldn't hear them.

But I never realized how hard she had it. In her head.

She later confessed that my leaving affected her greatly. I never knew why. Maybe she had it hard, being used to me doing all the housework, and me being mostly responsible for all the kids in the house. Suddenly, she inherited the throne. Princess Clean-It-All. Even though she refused to accept her political duties.

She was prom queen you know. She was also class presi-

dent. She was in the school's decathlon program. Won at least a couple of bronze medals and one silver one. She was very popular. She was also very smart. She had promised to save the world.

I'm still waiting for her to save herself.

We still talk. But I only hear one side of the story. It's when I hear the other side, when I feel sad.

The other day I was called to go pick her up. I didn't question the caller. I just turned back and drove up there, canceling my previous engagement. I'm starting to feel that my life is sometimes put on hold, waiting for another of those calls. Sometimes life just gets canceled. She was lying on a bed, pretending to be asleep. I really wanted to see her girls. To make sure they were okay. But he kept pointing in her direction, telling me where she was. He blocked my path, forcing me to turn back and go to her.

I played with her dyed hair. It had been dyed three times in the past five days. Her hair is now cut short, the tips of her hair barely long enough to reach the back of her neck. I sat next to her on the bed, thinking it awkward that I would share that space. I gave her a strong squeeze, bending myself over her, covering her with my body. And I lay there for moments, thinking of how she must be hurting, until I started to hurt. We both cried. She would gasp for air, suffocating her cries, exhausted. Defeated. And I held her tighter.

I let her breathe it all out. And once again, I failed to ask what was wrong.

After a while, I lifted myself and let my fingers glide through her hair. Her beautiful fine hair, now a mesh of rusted metal. Most of it gone. But, I kept at it. It reminded me of the times she would ask me to play with her hair. She would lean on my lap, and cry, quietly, until someone would come into the room. This time, she just closed her eyes. And I was glad. When I had walked in, her eyes glowed blackness. I couldn't make out the white of her eyes. Just black. I thought she had ruptured a vein in her eye.

I sat there, slowly stroking my fingers from the root of her

hair to the ends, for over a half an hour. Until I started noticing the impatient voice on the other side of the room. I didn't have the heart to wake her, now that sleep had mercy on her. She looked so peaceful. But I could hear the persistent edginess on the other voice. And the clattering of glasses. The thrust of a scoop into a pile of ice, once and three times again. Hard.

So I started to wake her, hugging her gently and whispering her name. She wouldn't budge. And I slightly raised the volume of my voice. "Are you ready to leave?" She nodded painfully. She rose, and with a strength that I hadn't seen in her that day, she got up, looked for her boots, hardened her face and called for the girls. "It's time to leave. Let's go." I hated seeing her like this. I helped her with the remaining of her belongings and walked down to the car. He followed us. But she would have none of it then.

Until the next day.

*He blocked my path,
forcing me to turn back
and go to her.*

Look Forward

by Tina Renea Johnson

• POETRY •

I have a crook in my neck that bark
the orders of a drill sergeant:
Feet together. Arms down. Back straight.
Face forward. Shoulders back. Chin up.
Your soul is bleeding!

How freakin' annoying!

Who cares to be harassed by
their lungs demand for air
or their kidneys' exhaustion from stress
or their heart's plea for retribution?

I have never been one
to answer my own call for reparation.
My ritual is to be oblivious of desires; to shun my need for the
caressing warmth of a friend,

of a confidant, of a brother, of a mother.

And I dare not even think
of the body's need to be fondled;
to be in a blossoming romance other
than the one I cultivate
with a moist Sock-It-To-Me cake
(flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, pecans, brown sugar,
lemon glaze icing—ooh, we!)

When I think of the sly way it quiets my scream,
I salivate.

The thought of parting with Sock-It-To-Me
for the sake of human touch,
is only slightly intriguing.

Without social interaction
I have ample time to ponder this bohemian crook.

It feels better:

when I apply pressure,
when I apply heat, when I apply cold,
when I'm not looking over my shoulder at the past;
at what can't be changed, wishing
for a different outcome, praying
that what was, really wasn't.

As I weep over a
a childhood lost, a body invaded,
the love of a father that was suppose to be,
that I long to be, that could never be,
that I require to be,

this crook travels gently
across the base of my neck
and whispers,
when you're ready,

look forward.

Leaving Home

by Sherry Fuqua-Gilson

• NONFICTION •

"I think it's time for me to leave," I said trying to be nonchalant, even cheerful, as my mother and I relaxed at home after a pleasant dinner out. I shouldn't have sprung it on her that way but there is no subtlety in adolescence. I suppose I thought that if we had a nice evening first it would make my announcement easier for her to take but she felt ambushed. She knew immediately what I meant. She had seen it coming, read my letters and journals, contemplated her strategy. She was broadsided nonetheless. I was the good

kid, sweet and easy going. At sixteen I was too young to leave home, hadn't even

"Don't you know what white men do to black women?"

graduated high school yet. An aunt would later say that I must be on drugs. I objected to that. 'On drugs' implied abuse. My recreational appreciation of controlled substances was modest and well modulated. And it had nothing to do with leaving home. I felt that I was ready. And, of course, there was a boy. He was a junior at UCLA. He had long wavy hair and a penchant for Levis and moccasins. He had a vintage Karmann Ghia and an apartment in Venice.

My mother, not knowing what else to do, called her mother. I don't recall what I expected my grandmother to say but what she said was, "Don't you know what white men do to black women?" I definitely wasn't expecting that. "Gee, Grandma," I thought or may have even said, "No, I don't think I do." They are incapable of honorable intentions towards you she said, only a prurient interest in an exotic experience. Those weren't her exact words but that was the general idea. Clearly she had missed the Civil Rights movement and the Age of Aquarius. But I didn't think she was foolish. She had the weight of a difficult history behind her. She was wrong though. Whatever challenges the boy and I were to face in the coming years, that would not be one of them.

At some point in the conversation I realized that neither my

grandmother nor my mother felt they had the power to command me to stay. They hadn't detected how tenuous my resolve was, how easily I might have been dissuaded by even a moderate threat.

My father was fairly disinterested. I found it vaguely disappointing that he said I could do whatever I wanted. It shouldn't have surprised me though.

He was a very modern sort of parent, an iconoclast with a counterculture sensibility and the detachment

Clearly she had missed the Civil Rights movement and the Age of Aquarius.

that comes with an every other weekend schedule of parental responsibility. By the end of the evening I realized I was free to go.

My mother spent the next day or two with my stepfather. They were no longer married but had a long time relationship that neither could quite let go of. My mother later confessed that she had spent some of that time trying to convince my stepfather to find someone to persuade my boyfriend to do his fishing in another pond. My stepfather had contacts on the street, nothing really dangerous, but certainly he knew someone who could put a little fear in the boy. My stepfather declined.

When my mother returned we went out to dinner again. She talked about herself, her fear of being alone. She had concerns

This document, served to my door by a representative of the court...

about my future but she trusted me. She would always be there if things went awry. I shared my fears with her, my excitement

and trepidation. Our relationship had changed overnight. In the coming days I gathered my things together. My mother visited her lawyer. She had decided to emancipate me.

The document entitled, 'Notice of Emancipation and Relinquishment of Parental Responsibility for a Minor Child', described me as the 'living issue' of the marriage between my parents, a description I found fascinating. After details of my birth and my parents' divorce and custody agreement it recounted my action of 'voluntarily and willfully' removing my person from my mother's residence and establishing my residence

elsewhere. Finally, it said, by my voluntary decision and actions I had emancipated myself and was now fully responsible for my person and conduct thereby relieving my mother of any liability to the third person imposed by California Civil Code Section 1714.1. Dated this 2nd day of August, 1972.

This document, served to my door by a representative of the court, was my own personal emancipation proclamation, an official declaration of independence. I was thrilled. Needless to say I gained instant celebrity among my friends, my value dramatically increased. Not known for bold, rash or impulsive action I had done what they only dreamed of, something no one would have expected of me.

Within a week of my departure my mother repainted and rearranged my room, making it her own. She would use it as a guest room, workroom, bonus room. It wasn't a lack of sentimentality on her part although she was never one for overt sentiment. But she had a wonderful quality of forward motion. She refused to linger over what she felt unable to change. She set her focus ahead.

The move was easy. At sixteen you don't own much. No moving vans required. The boy's apartment, now our apartment, was just blocks from the beach at the end of a canal full of ducks and filthy water. We had a wonderful roommate and good friends in the other apartments. I registered for school, signing all my own papers, and eventually settled on the Continuation School at Venice High where the teachers allowed you to call them by first name and the rules and hours were flexible. I found a part-time job in the office of a small company that sold resistors and capacitors. We joined a food co-op.

After a month or two I invited my mother to dinner. We tidied everything, made a meal we thought she would enjoy and waited nervously for her arrival. She arrived, right on time of course, and made much of our modest home. If she had any reservations she kept them to herself. The content of our conversation, what food we served is lost to memory. But what I remember clearly about that evening, the picture that still comes

frequently to mind, is how beautiful my mother was, how charming and at ease. She had found a way to be comfortable with this new reality. She very nearly approved.

My grandmother was another story. I didn't know then that I would be permanently sacrificing that relationship, not that I believe the knowledge would have altered my course. She didn't understand my willingness to jettison the past in favor of an uncertain future. She couldn't forgive my foolishness in preferring my wishful thinking to her well documented realities.

I remember the story of my grandmother first meeting my father, then seventeen and my mother's new beau. "Boy, are you colored?" she asked him. He was very fair with curly brown hair. Whatever African ancestry he had was well hidden. "Yes," he said. "Are you sure?" she had asked, eyeing him carefully. "My mama told me I was," he had replied. My grandmother found this very funny and it was enough to gain him entry. It took only one drop to certify you as a member of the club and no one would be fool enough to claim membership if they didn't have to. She was herself of mixed ancestry, her seven children an all American mongrel brood from freckled red to caramel brunette. But she was from a time when the boundaries of race seemed absolute. Culturally, socially, legally, there were no gray areas. You were either one thing or another.

Once I left home my grandmother would never quite look at me again, more through me, or past me. I was not dead to her but I was removed from her inner circle, banished to a more distant orbit. She would have come around eventually, I'm certain, but she didn't have enough years left. I still don't completely understand her reaction. I was not the first or the last in our family to venture afield. Perhaps there is an untold story there.

Depression

by Jane Kim

• POETRY •

Teardrop in my hand
It rolls
ever so gently
over, under
leaving a trail
glistening, slick, wet
It's not me
I swear
It's just not me
Sitting here
Eyes wet and soft
weak
the hardness, the iciness, the cage of ice
gone
Things not going the way I want it to be
The cry of the heart
wails on in my head
I can't speak
Silent monster cries
yells and screams
fury
dies down to sadness
hurt
The coldness seeps in
wraps around my soul
the eyes are blank
the body - a child
the soul, too old

Love is never here
No such thing
Not really in being
Instead
Fear of others
Of the possibility of love
A blink
I come back
Time goes on
It won't stop
So I'll stay here in the dark...wishing,
Always wishing
That life could be perfect...
(for happiness, love to reign eternal)

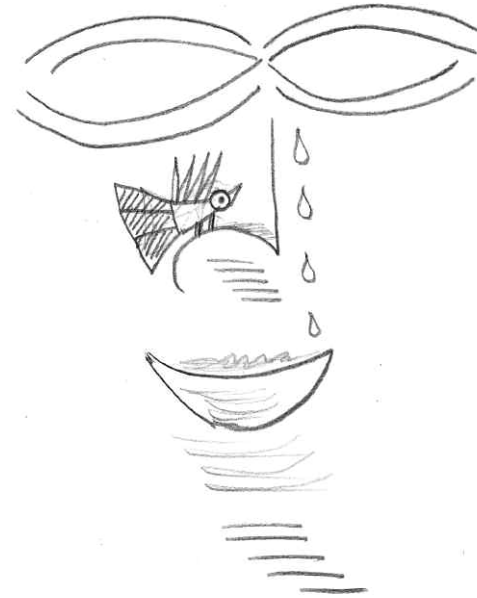


Illustration: Swati Panchal

Leticia

by Roberto Navarro

• FICTION •

I'm married, but I'm in love with another woman. I have been in love with Leticia for ten years. I met and married my wife knowing full well that I was in love with Leticia. In fact, I'm waiting for the love of my life right now.

It was exactly ten years ago today that I was driving down Whittier Boulevard. It was one o'clock in the morning and I was going home to East L.A. after dropping off by then girlfriend in Pico Rivera. Whittier Boulevard is a large well lit boulevard. That is until you get to a half mile stretch in East L.A. Here there is a cemetery on each side of the street. On the south side of the street is a Jewish cemetery and on the north side is a Catholic cemetery. Each cemetery has large trees whose branches extend out on to the street and add to the darkness and eeriness.

Half way down this stretch I see a woman walking by herself. I pull over. "Hey, wanna a ride?" She doesn't respond and just keeps walking. After several more "wanna rides," I tell her, "Listen I'm only thinking of your

***I'm married, but I'm in love
with another woman.***

safety. It ain't safe walking in this area, especially at one in the morning." Finally

she stops and looks into my car but doesn't say anything. I once again plead, "Listen, I promise that I will only take you to wherever you're going and I won't do anything to you. I promise." "Okay, but I'm not going very far, just to Indiana and Olympic. If you try anything I'll scream as loud as I can."

She gets in and sits as close to the passenger door as possible. She keeps one hand on the door handle. We drive in silence. I notice that she has jet black hair that flows down to her shoulders, porcelain skin where you almost see her veins, full red lips with a ruby red lipstick, and large ebony eyes that have been crying. Also, she's wearing what appears to be a fancy pink prom dress with a white corsage just above her left breast. She's also wearing a two strand white pearl necklace.

Finally after a few blocks I get the nerve to talk to her. I ask

her, "Why are you walking by yourself in the middle of the night?" She starts sobbing. "Tonight was my prom and I wanted everything to be magical. But all the time at the dance my boyfriend kept putting his hands all over me. After the dance he wanted to take me to a motel. I kept telling him to take me home but, he wouldn't listen and he wouldn't stop the car so I could get out. So, I jumped out of the car and now I'm walking home."

When I turn left on Whittier and Indiana she relaxes because we are getting closer to her home. I ask her name and the school she goes to. She answers, "My name is Leticia and, I go to Roosevelt High where I'm a senior." I tell her that I graduated from Garfield High School, so we talked about the game and how bad she felt when my school beat Roosevelt.

Just as we go under the 5 Freeway she points to the second house, on the right, from the corner. I pull over and stop the car. But she doesn't get out and we sit there talking about everything, her plans for college, her future, my job, and our families.

Everything is going so great that we don't notice the time, that is until we see the sun cutting into the darkness and she says, "The sun will be coming up in a little while, I should go in before my mother comes out here and drags me in."

I tell her, "I enjoyed talking with you and I want to see you again. Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

"Yes, I'd like that. Since I no longer have a boyfriend we can do it tonight."

"Great! I'll be here tonight at eight."

She smiles, leans toward me and kisses me softly on my lips and gets out of the car. I keep looking at her as she opens the fence door and walks up to the front door of the small green house. I leave before she goes inside. As I'm driving I pull out my handkerchief and wipe the ruby red lipstick off my lips.

Waking up around two in the afternoon, the first thing I see is the handkerchief with the lipstick. That gives me a jolt of energy and I jump out of bed. I rush out to buy a new sport coat. I also stop and buy a dozen long stem red roses at the flower shop. When I get home I wash the car and by the time I finish

***"It ain't safe walking in
this area, especially at
one in the morning."***

its time to get ready for my date.

I arrive sharply at eight. I take the box of roses and walk to the front door. To tell you the truth I'm so happy and ecstatic that I'm really surprised that I'm not dancing my way up to the door.

I knock on the door and when an older lady answers the door I stand erect and proudly announce, "Senora, I'm here for Leticia." Her face changes from a curious look to a bewildered look and then she suddenly slams the door in my face. I don't know what to do. I know this is the right house so, I again knock and same lady answers the door.

This time when she opens the door her eyes are red and it's obvious that she has been crying. Before I have a chance to say anything she tells me, "Why do you come to my house to hurt me?"

"Senora, I don't mean any harm. I'm just here to pick up Lety for our date," I meekly respond. Nothing is said for next

***... I pull out my handkerchief
and wipe the ruby red
lipstick off my lips.***

ten seconds, which seems like a lifetime. Finally I utter, "I met Lety last night. She was walking alone by

the cemetery on Whittier Boulevard so I gave her ride. I brought her here and we sat in the car," I say, as I point to my car. "For hours talking. And before she came inside this house, she asked me to come pick her up tonight."

She pushes opens the screen door and motions for me to enter. I walk in still holding the box of roses in my arms. It's a small living room and she leads me to the T.V. where she picks up a picture. She shows it to me and asks, "Is this the girl you were with last night?"

I look at the picture and see Lety and somehow feel vindicated that I am at the right house. I tell her, "Si, Si senora. This is my Lety, the one I was with last night."

She makes the sign of the cross and tells me, "Mijo, the girl in this picture is my Lety." Her lips are trembling and the tears streaming down her face but she goes on to say, "But she died a year ago. Yesterday was the first anniversary of her death."

The box of roses drops to the floor and I just stand there with my mouth open. Finally, I manage to utter, "Senora the Lety I was with last night was wearing a pink prom dress with a white pearl necklace."

"Aye dios mio" she says and again makes the sign of the cross, "Mijo we buried her at the cemetery on Whittier and with that dress and necklace"

Again I'm speechless and there is another moment of silence. After a few seconds I manage to ask, "Ah, how did she die?"

With tears still streaming down her cheeks she tells me, "Her boyfriend told us and the police that for no apparent reason she opened the passenger door of his car and jumped out. When she hit the ground the rear wheel ran over her and killed her."

I'm numb. I walk to my car and drive off.

For the next few weeks I questioned if I really saw and talked to Lety. But I knew I did and I had proof, her handkerchief. I broke up with my girlfriend and I couldn't be with any other woman because she was always on my mind. Most of nights were spent driving up and down Whittier Boulevard looking for her. Finally a year to the date that I first I saw her I saw her again. Thereafter, every year on that date I'm here on Whittier Boulevard, by the cemetery, waiting for her. And every year I offer her a ride which she refuses at first but eventually gets in. Every year I give her a ride to the same house. Every year we spend hours talking outside that house. Every year we make plans to see each other the following night. And every year she kisses me softly on my lips. Oh, and every year I wipe the lipstick off my lips with a handkerchief that I later save with the others.

"Oh, there she is."



Illustration: Swati Panchal



Illustration: Swati Panchal

(Fragments, then. Because that's the only way I know how to tell it.)

It is downright uncanny how easily I lose things. Not just tangible things, either; things that should be lodged in my memory have a way of quietly slipping away: conversations, associations, incidents, facts, and most impressively, an entire language. Despite my constant use of Japanese during my childhood, despite the fact that it is the native language of my parents, and despite, most of all, the infamously rigorous weekend school that I attended for seven miserable years, I forgot a great majority of it within two years. By the time I was 19 even my accent began fading, and the few words I could manage to eke out were tinted with an unmistakable American twang.

Some Time in 1990 — Monterey Park

At the age of four, I got lost while walking to my grandmother's house by myself. I like referring to this occurrence as the time I accidentally ran away from home. I was tired of playing in my room, so while still clad in a Mickey Mouse nightgown (which I remember clearly, though when I attempt to confirm this with my mother she says she cannot recall. Something about being too busy drowning in panic, but no matter) I walked out the door and headed off in some sort of general direction. My mother came home to find her husband watching television and cooking dinner, and her son playing on his computer in his room; both had no idea where the youngest child was. She was not pleased. I was picked up by the cops before I could reach my destination, and according to my father's version of the story, I was talking to some strange man when they pulled up. That recollection, like the path to my grandmother's house, was also lost.

Winter of 1997—Arcadia

I decided to try out religion out of sheer boredom; I had nothing to do on Sundays and I heard my friend mention this church place she frequented, so I thought I would give it a try. After a month of having to get up in the morning, I quit. Nothing lost there—guess I never had the faith. I remain an apathetic agnostic to this day.

October 2002—Arcadia

During my junior year of high school, I just lost interest. I thought I could get out of my head for a little bit by using a colorful assortment of pills, but unfortunately that escape was rudely cut short when I awoke in the intensive care unit in restraints. After spending a few days developing a passionate hatred for catheters and being forced to ingest the most disgusting medicine ever conceived (Mucamous—the name says it all), I was shipped off to Las Encinas where they locked away the drawstrings to my pants, my shoelaces, and my toothbrush. For my own good, of course. One day I was having a nice chat with one of the mental health technicians—techs, they were called—when a little boy ran up to me asking for the key to the restroom. I told him I didn't have any keys to the place, but he persisted. I looked over at the tech (Gilbert or Gil, though not Jill) for help, but he simply grinned and shrugged.

He then turned to the boy and said, "Just don't ask her for aspirin. She'll give you the whole bottle!"

I shot him a withering look.

"Haha, very funny."

And he laughed, because it was. I'm not quite sure what it is I learned during my stay there, but a good joke was definitely told.

September 2004—San Francisco

Naturally it took an art school to make me realize I had zero artistic prowess. After graduating high school I attended the Academy of Art University as an advertising major, but I couldn't handle the lower level core classes such as "sketching" and "colors." Obtained my first job, developed a routine: got off of work, walked through throngs of indignant homeless, caught the bus to the dorm, changed out of my work uniform which reeked of pop-

corn only to discover the smell had seeped into my skin. I was greatly disillusioned, but probably no more so than any other freshman. After a semester of being angry at charcoal and color wheels, I dropped out and went back home.

November 2007—Binghamton

After attending Pasadena City College for a year and a half, I finally achieved my dream of transferring to a college in New York. Unfortunately, Binghamton University was in the area of the state that was technically known as "Buttfuck Nowhere." Despite its location, though, I became rather smitten with the school. My California upbringing meant that I was unable to tolerate anything that could be referred to as "weather," so I had an interesting time trying to see exactly how many layers of clothing I could wear before I rendered myself immobile. My friends, being native New Yorkers, were constantly amused by my pathetic inability to handle the cold. They were also perplexed by my decision to leave California in order to go to Binghamton, convinced that I had it entirely backwards.

I would have really liked to have graduated from there, or at least finished one year without some sort of preposterous and completely avoidable disaster. Unfortunately a night of razor blade shenanigans and self-medication landed me, once again, in the psych ward without the comfort of shoestrings or drawstrings. I did get to keep my toothbrush that time around, but that was small comfort for spending my Thanksgiving break in a hospital.

I didn't particularly care for the psychiatrist that was assigned to me during my stay. His idea of a proper first meeting was waking me up from a drug-induced sleep and immediately demanding to know the state of my psyche. I have trouble with communication even when at my most conscious, so the best I could manage at the time was some noncommittal grunts. He said I was being uncooperative. He prescribed medication like it was going out of style, stopping not at anti-depressants like my previous shrinks, but bounding into the anti-seizure and anti-epileptic territory. The meds count topped off at five, and the pills conspired to make me sleepy, dizzy, lethargic, nauseous and hyperactive, but not, strangely enough, any less crazy. My doctor diagnosed me with an unspecified mood disorder. He called in

another psychiatrist for a consultation and that one diagnosed me with Bipolar II disorder. My social worker, Steve, diagnosed me as being a drama queen.

When I was released I still had no idea what was wrong with me, but I did know that a sense of humor was a dangerous thing to have in a psychiatric ward. I also learned that it could be quite difficult to tell the patients apart from the employees; we were allowed to wear our street clothes, and most of us were not nearly as psychotic as the movies always seem to make out. (Incidentally, day to day life in a nuthouse was disappointingly dull. Occasionally someone would protest the system by lugging their mattress around their room or hurl a table during an argument, but those were rarities.) The main thing that separated the two groups was the noise each made when they walked. I could always tell when a tech was coming because of the jingling—their pockets contained keys, loose change, and other small metal objects we were not allowed to have. We were a silent, soft, shuffling group in our slippered feet and empty pockets.

Incidentally, I never did find half the stuff I surrendered from my pockets when I was first admitted. Some other things I lost were a chance at staying at the school, and any belief I had that I was not hell bent on making my life as complicated and problematic as possible.

March 2008—Macon

Georgia seemed like a good idea at the time, though I could never fully explain why. I experienced first-hand how living with friends could ruin perfectly good friendships. I lived in absolute filth for six months, though there were brief moments of reprieve when the LSD kicked in and I lost myself for hours finding intricate crystal formations in a bowl of chocolate ice cream. I was a waitress, then a barista. There was another brief stint at the hospital there, but what can be said about that stay that hasn't already been said? Passing out in a pool of my own vomit was new, but the overdose was not; I am nothing if not a creature of habit. Shrinks still could not figure out why I was wrong in the head. I still had my shoelaces taken away. Other than the collared greens that they tried to pass off as spinach on the dinner

tray, it was all standard fare. I did, however, immensely enjoy the rocking chairs in the group therapy room.

Wrap Up

I suppose that this would be a good time for some introspection, an intense look deep within myself. This can be the part where I take my anecdotes and start analyzing, theorizing, hypothesizing, criticizing, and prophesizing them until epiphanies start dribbling out my ear like so much enlightened earwax.

No one can go through life and stay exactly the same. Everyone is constantly gaining and losing parts of themselves every day. In that respect, I am just like anybody else. However, things that are considered to be of general importance do not seem to slip away from others as easily and readily as they do from me.

Why?

Perhaps I am scared that the changes I have undergone were not drastic enough, that essentially I am still that stupid little girl who managed to accidentally run away from home. Or perhaps I believe that if I change enough, evolve enough, that I can grow out of my old memories. I can forget how I woke up in a strange room that smelled of antiseptic and blinded me with its fluorescent lighting, and the panic that set in when I realized that I could not move my arms and legs because they were bound to the bed. I can forget the unmitigated annoyance I felt at the paramedics for dragging me into consciousness and taking me away from my brief and beautiful moment of absolute nothingness. I can forget that, for my third hospitalization, my first thought upon coming to was, "Not again..." Most of all, I can also forget whatever it was that compelled me to keep putting myself in these situations.

Maybe I'm so terrified of stagnating, of never being able to escape the person in these memories that I will gladly submit to any form of change, even if it means giving up large parts of myself. Do I want sanity or wholeness? Sacrifices must be made.

I suppose that if I were introspective, it would end up something more or less like that. However, as one of my many psychiatrists once remarked, I have very little insight into myself. So don't look into it too deeply.

Strange Fruit That Says Forget Me Not

by Mae Ramirez

• POETRY •

produced from the shopping cart and the grocery bag
picked up and torn on my way into the backseat i
rolled out onto the floor and i
rolled but to no surprise
did not lose control when i hit the back door i
spread wider than possibility and found myself to be
a beautiful ingredient dizzy and disobedient
tired of the freezer burn and intoxicating mind numb i

discovered i was not a grape on the vine,
or a mango you could call mine
but a flower of the sun
a forget-me-not drained from lying
so deep in the soil
my petals and stem shot toward
the sky and i

stood five feet
tall with gentle rage
burning more than the sidewalks of your childhood that
you ran
barefooted on to catch a Flintstones push pop and
two strawberry shortcakes i

stood five feet
tall with love at capacity
pouring from all sides and seeping onto your bedroom carpet
even though you tried to plunge me down i

stood five feet
tall with ruthless words
crawling for miles past the gold of San Francisco,
the smoggy horizon, the daughters of Juarez,
the sun of Jalisco
big me, with my sounds
too much for your heart to swallow i

stand five feet tall outside your four walls you
bamboozling out the glass and beaming
while I'm making quips you sit there
scheming how to set me back on display
but no, NO
not this time.

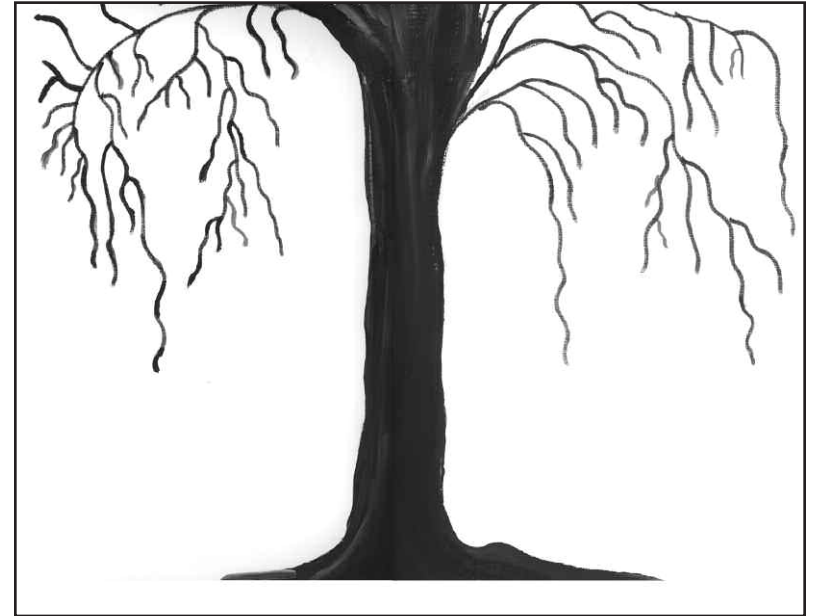


Illustration: Swati Panchal

A Race of a Lifetime

by Christine Kha

• NONFICTION •

Everyone races; whether you are a marathon competitor racing for the finish line, or a girl racing her biological clock to get settled and impregnated before half her eggs spoil—everyone runs a race, a race against time. There is no way to avoid this mostly silent clock. When I think of time passing, I hear the sterile sound of “tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .” from one of those simple double A battery operated clocks which can be found echoing in kitchens, classrooms, and hospitals alike. Sometimes the ticking can be ignored, other times it crescendos into a slow maddening pulse.

We have all heard that second click by, hated the sound it made, taken it for granted—been abruptly reminded of it, and even been lulled to sleep by its echo. Unlike a feeling, time can be physically seen with the setting of the sun, the appearance of laugh wrinkles, and at the lower right hand corner of every computer screen. We are all reminded of it daily, frequently, almost relentlessly with bells, alarms, and deadlines. Time is made for money making, drinking, love making, family, Taco Tuesdays, grocery shopping, traveling, and the list goes on. There are some of us who try to do it all, some who are in denial of its pressuring existence, and others who take advantage of every moment because they took it all for granted once. Every person is all of those people in their lifetimes.

My only piece of advice when working with the Oh So Powerful Time is to accept its presence. Time can either be the most forgiving parent or the reaper, so it is best to squeeze every imaginable amount of juice from it possible. Enjoy life, take the time to find what interests you and what your passions are especially before you buy the gown, shake the dean’s hand, and receive your diploma in the mail. Fight the catch-22 of employ-

I N S C A P E

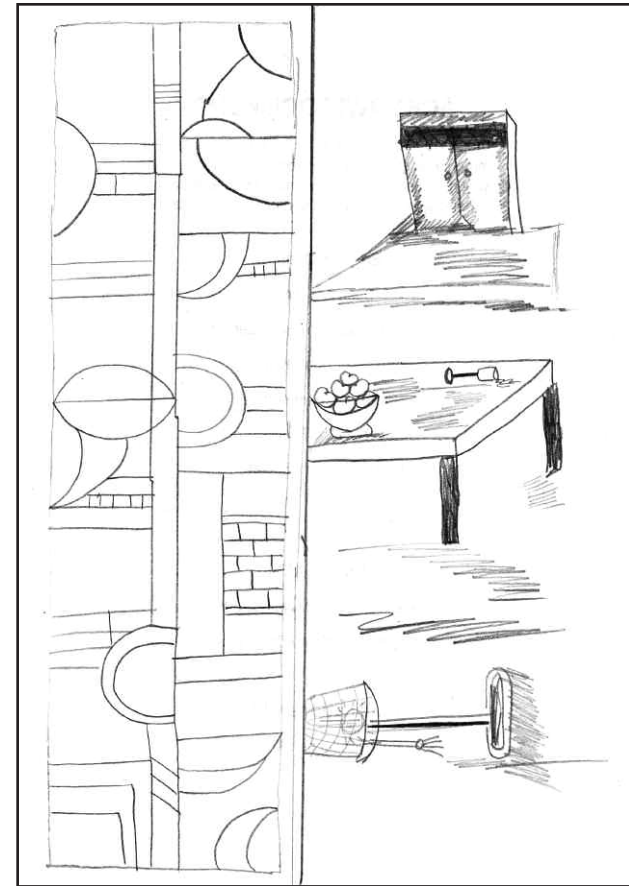


Illustration: Swati Panchal

ment and experience. Victory lies in overcoming the battle in traffic, on hold for tech help, and 400 count bed sheets. Life is more than throwing babies in car seats, forgetting coffee cups on kitchen counters, and substituting yogurt in a plastic tube for a real breakfast. Vote against the race and instead for cultivating your own path and one free of the validations of others.

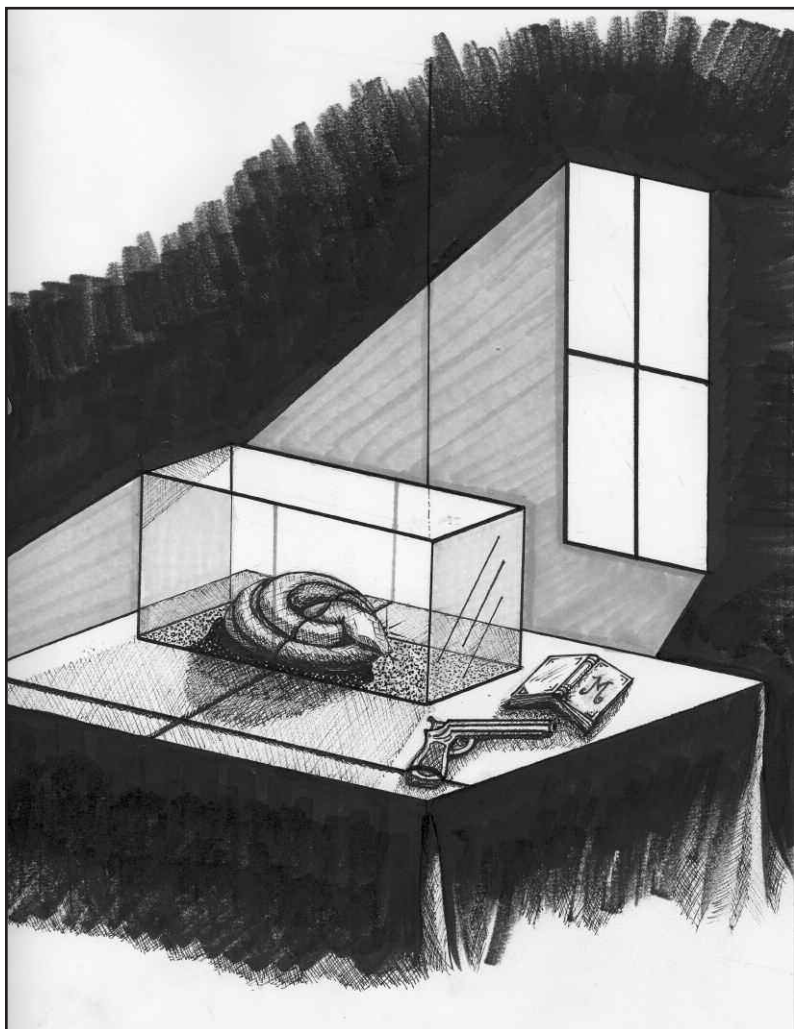


Illustration: Emilio B. Anorve

"Serpentigena"

by Francis Marotta

• FICTION •

"Serpentigena," the short story that follows, is inspired by the Greek myth of Medusa, a woman of such beauty that Poseidon, the god of water, was determined to have her. Medusa, attempting to flee Poseidon, took refuge in the temple of Athena where Poseidon found her and raped her. Athena, the goddess of knowledge, was furious that her temple had been desecrated, so as punishment she turned Medusa into a monstrous snake-haired gorgon who could turn men to stone. "Serpentigena" tells the story of Medusa's descendent and how there are times when past wrongs can be made right.

STONE

"So it started with a rape..."

The thought flashed across my mind like summer lightning.

I got out of bed as if it were a trap; the book fell to the floor. I knew what was happening. I looked at the closed doors of my wardrobe. Then I opened all the windows. It was dark and rain was coming. Ia lay coiled in its glass cage, sleeping peacefully. She was but one of the things I inherited when my mother passed away. How old the snake was no one knew...she had passed from my grandmother to my mother and now to me. I would be her last caretaker.

I opened the wardrobe. Perhaps it was the lamplight or shadow, but the jacket and pants seemed to shimmer and call out to me. I was instantly afraid. My hands betrayed me as they touched the fur of the coat. It was silver and gray, and the sensation of its touch gave me chills. The pants seemed almost liquid; golden and slick like virgin oils. There was no mistaking snakeskin. As my hands moved from fur to skin, the smell of rain and animal washed over me. In the distance, it thundered.

*As my hands moved
from fur to skin, the
smell of rain and animal
washed over me.*

These were the things I inherited. These things were mine: the jacket, the pants, the book, Ia, the gun and something far more: I inherited the task of revenge.

I turned, leaving the wardrobe doors open, and realized that Ia had awoken and had been watching me. Her diamond head raised and pressed against the glass so that her eyes; cold and ancient, followed my every movement.

As I made plane reservations, I began to form a simple plan. It would take two days. One day for each. It started to rain as I finally went to sleep.

WATER

It seemed that there were two of them. One lived in the east, the other in the west. I lived in the middle. I would go west first.

The night before I left I dreamt of water. My family has always had an aversion to and fascination with the ocean. It is a distrustful body: its waves scheming — a crashing lullaby of seductive lies. It is a man, the sea, and I was not as easily seduced as others in my family had been. My dreams were hard and rabid. Water pulled me under and stroked my skin with tide-full hands. Rapturous echoes filled me with memories of diamonds glistening on the water, fire burning, waves crashing. There was a temple, a woman with such beauty I cried because I knew what was coming and then it did.

I awoke; the heft of the gun an alarm clock, a warning. The last images of him, emerging wet and terrible from the water, left a bitter taste of salt and blood in my mouth.

The sun blazed white and harsh; Helios' chariot whipping the clouds into submission across the blue of the Californian sky. My sunglasses scorned him. The coat, silver and gray like the moon, mocked the heat. My body absorbed the warmth as if I were indeed a snake and the west a rock where I would bathe. If people stared, I didn't care. Purpose precedes care. I wore nothing underneath the coat, nothing underneath the pants; the gun cooled my back where it was secured at my waist, the book tucked in an inner pocket of the coat guiding me. The sound of my boots thumped against the cement of his street like music, like whispered threats or the Riverman rowing against the Styx. It was all a song, all of it.

The door to his house was before me; as I leaned against it, I felt the water of him, the passion.

How long had she suffered as a monster? How deep the punishment?

I was inside. I heard the ocean everywhere cry out to warn him, but it was not to be... He was mine, the last descendent of the sea as I of stone. Somewhere far away I knew the snakes were watching.

As I held him in my gaze, I couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, I could turn men to stone just by looking at them.

That was my last thought before I shot him.

KNOWLEDGE

Then there was one.

The gun was secure under the plane, wrapped and hidden in a suitcase. The coat had taken to cradling me when I slept. The pants became more like a second skin than something I took off and put on. They were me; they smelled cold and animal-like. I slept as the plane swept me East.

I landed at night: the sky a bruised nightshade of purples and blacks, the moon hidden in the bosom of Artemis. I had no friend in the moon and was indifferent to its secretiveness. The

coat warmed me in the night chill. Although I was still bare underneath, the thick fur of the collar warmed my heart and muscles so that I moved quicker and with renewed venom.

As I was the last of my lineage, this was my task.

I thought of my mother and her mother and so on back to when it all began. Had there always been such a desire for revenge, such a need to set it all right?

My feet moved in and out of crowds, my eyes still hidden behind the glasses. The book was now silent, as it had given up its last secret. The throb of the gun sent chills down my back, it was hungry for this; had been fashioned for this.

The gun had been forged by a descendent far back and far away from the metal of a shield and the bronze of a statue. I knew stone and metal work well. It was a skill passed down through our family, which created a business that still thrived. Our work graced gardens and homes of the rich all across America.

My mother, in particular, had an amazing talent for sculpting women. My favorite, a nude woman with flowing hair that reminded me of snakes, still rests in our garden. One night I found her kneeling by it and crying, the book that I now possess by her side; I asked her why she was crying and she replied only, "Doesn't she make you want to cry?"

The sculpture had been beautiful and heartbreaking, and invoked a feeling of sadness and anger that struck me like the final blow of an axe to a tree. As I arrived, the great house as pompous as a great sleeping bird, I felt the axe fall again. This time the anger that washed over me made all the sense in the world.

The moon came out as I entered the yard, and I made out two great statues guarding the doors. As I drew closer, I realized

***Then in one blow,
temperamental as a
God's whim, I shot.***

I was right in feeling the house was birdlike; the statues were great owls. There was the bird of knowledge, which was the familiar to the one who cast my family

from beauty to horror, woman to serpent; the very incarnation of my families' disgrace. I smashed the heads of both birds with the butt of the gun. A screech of mercy could be heard in the trees behind me.

A language I understood for the first time rang through me as I entered the house. The birds cried out that name, the name I yearned to cry. It sounded deadly on the air, like a rattle or hiss. It was the name I had long wished to utter, to release from a legacy of terror and fear and now, as I stood over the sleeping creature that was my last quarry, I felt the gun yearning for that same release.

As I looked around, I saw all of it clearly lined in the volumes of books and papers that filled the sleeping woman's room. There was knowledge everywhere, but now there were also snakes. She and I so close to being family. My greatest descen-

dent a worshipper who sought protection, hers a supposed Goddess of terrible wisdom and vanity, linked forever.

Then in one blow, temperamental as a God's whim, I shot. As the blood of knowledge began to spill, I felt centuries of shame and sadness wash away. The entirely brilliant gold of vengeance filled me with its terrible pleasure.

Perhaps it was only my imagination, but, as I left the house, the screeching changed; instead of birds, I heard snakes speak to me, saying; "Medusa...Medusa...Medusa!"

A Flower Without Sun

by Phillip Daniel Turner

• POETRY •

I wrote this poem for a very important occasion – its purpose was not as an exercise, but as a short tribute to a misunderstood and unappreciated woman who happens to be my mother.

There lies before me in unknown clarity
A vast garden filled with shrubs of every sort;
Weeds vines grasses in all directions oppress the mind.

There is here a strange truth to be felt,
Unseen it seems to linger like an evil taste-
This jungle cheats the eye of its noble purpose
And desires to overgrow the lesser five senses.

What common verdure swallows its million members in
deadly chaos

Only to regurgitate its mass in yet another landscape
Which endlessly grows also amorphous and without purpose?

This wilderness gives few fruit which to find
I must first blaze a path with fire through thickest opposition,
To search then in those lonely places where life seems long
departed

For that rare flower which is ever the harbinger of fortune,
Bringer of beauty all of one color and meaning,
Bearer of fruit from among a civilization of the fruitless.

There are no mirrors in the wilderness:
The fruit must be seen and touched with eyes and heart-
Give me then no stream to enamor my own fruiting falsehood,
For I have seen a flower in the wilderness.

Let mine be the only sunlight to that flower,
For if the jealous sun breeds but weeds
My knowledge shall shine the light of love
Upon her who once shone it on me
To make me what I am.

May you glow forever
In the light of those who see,
O lonely flower
Be thou lonely no more!

Broken

by Angela P. Liu

• POETRY •

The vase shattered, the petals scattered
Sound of silence never lasts
Exchange of fire and gunshots
The home is under attack
There is no shelter to hide
The little one fights the tears alone

It's falling apart, slipping away
Broken pieces left unfixed
The wounds are not to be touched
It takes more than words to heal
There is no one left who cares
The little one bears the weight alone

Trust is nothing stronger than a thread
All the lies would not be missed
Was there love before hatred
A pseudo attempt would do
No effort has ever been made
The little one slips through the crack

Promises are meant to be broken
Scars burn deep in memory
Gun shy and shivering
Don't bother to start over
There is nothing left to fix
The little one could never forget

A History of Smoke

by Jonathan Eduardo Mota

• NONFICTION •

Barbara and I were sitting on the stony steps that lead to the second floor of our apartment building with our backs to the pool on our summer vacation. My mother wasn't home and as a rule I wasn't allowed to go swimming unless she was around. "What about a beer?" Barbara asked. "Have you ever tasted beer? I told her I had but only because I had confused an open can of Tecate for a can of coke.

"What about cigarettes? Have you ever smoked one?" I said I hadn't. Barbara said she had and told me she smoked all the time at parties. We were both in seventh grade but Barbara was 13 and I was 12. Barbara

started wearing make-up before most of the other girls but she wasn't very good at applying it. She

wore thick, dark brown lip liner, no lip stick, plucked her eyebrows way too thinly and drew them back in, again arched way up high mid-forehead with the same lip liner. I knew this because she would wipe it off with tissue every forty-five minutes and reapply it.

She had a reputation and mean adjectives to go along with it: "slut," "whore." And she hung out with the Spanish-speaking kids who were all picked on like her. For fear of being associated with any whores or sluts, I cowardly retreated to a much safer but equally disrespected group of boys whose lives apparently revolved around NASCAR and Godzilla movies. But back at those steps and that entire summer she was my best friend.

"I really want a cigarette right now, lets go find cigarette butts and smoke them; I'll teach you how," she said. At first I refused to smoke but gave in, plus I knew where to find brand new ones. My dad rented out a room to the son of a man he knew in Mexico. He was about 19 or 20 at the time and smoked heavily. My

And she hung out with the Spanish-speaking kids who were all picked on like her.

original plan was to sneak into his bedroom and steal some from his drawer; I didn't have to. He was in the living room, feet resting on the coffee table and watching a Spanish talk show. "Gumaro, me regalas un cigarro?" I asked for a cigarette and he gave me three, no questions asked. We smoked those three cigarettes and every other we could find that summer.

This August I went to San Francisco as a 'roadie'. My friend Jamie and her sister have a band called 'Pristines'. It was a weekend full of ringing ears, 'Kettle One Vodka tonics', three packs of Marlboro mediums and juicy gossip. On our quiet ride back home on the 5 freeway I missed a breath and I couldn't catch it. I panicked and rolled down the window and yelled, "I can't breath!" From that moment on, it turned into a full fledged anxiety attack, sweaty palms, shaky hands and ludicrous thoughts of having a partly collapsed lung.

It lasted the whole rest of the ride home, which had to be about four hours long. Blaming my collapsed lung on cigarettes, in a panicked plea I asked god to not let me die and I promised I wouldn't smoke for two months but quickly retracted my first offer and came back with a second shortened offer of quitting for just one, convincing myself that I was being a bit dramatic.

The next month went on as planned. I didn't smoke at all. I didn't smoke at parties; I didn't smoke on my front building steps. I didn't smoke after work, and didn't share cigarettes with my best friend Nicole. I didn't have a cigarette when I was angry, or when I was drunk. I didn't have a cigarette because I'd already finished my last one. I did, however, pack cigarettes for

From that moment on, it turned into a full fledged anxiety attack...

my friends who always asked me to.

On September 22nd it had been a month since I last had a cigarette. On the 21st of September I went to work and I worked a really arduous 9 hour shift where plus-sized men and women ordered plus-sized meals. When I got home I put on a pair of shorts because it was appropriate for the hot weather. I watched some of the Olympics or a Michael

Phelps profile. At midnight I got in my car, drove to the Shell station where I bought a pack of Marlboro Mediums. I drove back to my house and sat on my front building steps, lit up a cigarette and didn't enjoy it as much as I thought I would.

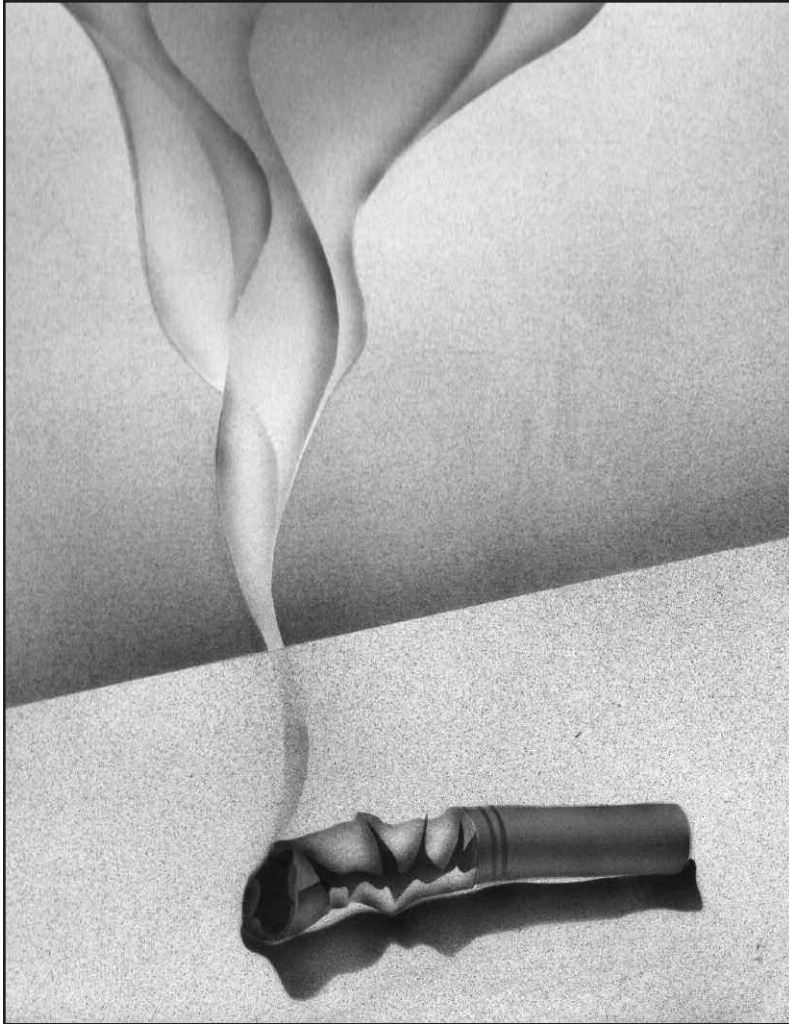


Illustration: Jesus Ruiz

Love in the Time of Supernova

by Dale A. Zapata

SHORT STORY AWARD WINNER

If you really want to hear about it, I knew I would love only two things for the rest of my life: good books and women. It's hard to put a date on it, but I'd say it was in 8th grade when this became clear. It was the year that I first read *Catcher in the Rye* and it was also the year I hit puberty. I knew I would love books and women because, Jesus, the things they did to you. The way they open themselves up to you and let you dive right in, savoring every bit of them and taking you in where they'd wrap you up, and in the throes of

I knew I would love only two things for the rest of my life: good books and women.

their passions, and you'd get lost and thoroughly convinced that there is no better place to be than deep, deep inside. And even when you reach the end, there's always the good ones, the ones you loved, that you find yourself revisiting and falling in love with all over again. Anyway, this story is mainly about one of those two things. It's about a girl I loved. It's a story you've probably heard a thousand times before, perhaps a thousand different ways, but I thought you might like to hear it again.

To this day, Casey still doesn't read much (No, Casey is not the girl I loved, but I did have a thing for her at one or two key points in my life, but that is another story altogether). She might have had a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* from high school, but she didn't have a clue where it was. I used to tell her that it was the best book of all time, that I had practically memorized it. She always told me she hated it, that there was something about Holden's phony personality that irked her when she read it the first time. I'd tell her to reread it, that she might have missed some things when she read it the first time because she had to read it for school and things might be different now that she's just reading it for fun. She promised that one day she'd read it again, but I never held her to it.

I remember the day she came in to work looking shitty like God had just shit on her car and Cylons had just obliterated her hometown and killed her family. It was the day Casey's ex-boyfriend had come to town to visit her and totally ripped into her about the way she was living and yada yada yada. It was the

I made her laugh a couple of times and we ended up hands-on touchy feely all over each other.

first time I had seen her crying. I did my best to console her, but I knew I wasn't very good at these situations, and so, well, I asked Casey out to dinner, just the two of us. We went out to the Santa Monica for seafood and spent the rest of the night just holding hands and walking around the Promenade.

After stopping for gas, she drove me home, neither of us talking, but both of us smiling. I was getting out of the car when she said the wildest thing; she said "I love you." It must have been habit, and I almost didn't hear it, but when I did, I turned around and gave her a kiss. Nothing fancy. And then we both just sorta sat there. "It's funny," she said to me, "all you have to do is say something nobody understands, and they'll do practically anything you want them to."

Nice, right? Not really. I asked her what she meant by "I love you," if she meant it in a romantic or platonic way, but she just laughed and told me that we were just friends, and I wasn't really her type.

I played the action-free/just friends role like a gifted actor, but tried to get the hell out of that no man's land, and jump into fray that is a girl's pants. We went to parties some nights after work because that's one thing we had in common, our ability to get trashed. When you are trashed the mind switches gears and instead of thinking all the time about jobs and rent, you think about dumb things like your ability to rhyme sick, or who's gonna whoop who in NBA live, or who'd win in a fight Sauron (from *Lord of the Rings*) or Sauron (from *X-Men*), or who'd win in a fight, the Terminator or Robocop, and you also think about all the different things you'd do to get laid because if you don't get laid, everything else is just a waste of time.

Anyway, Casey and I went to a party one night and we made

a bet on who'd get laid first. The first girl I talked to that night is an example of something that is a complete waste of time. She saw my glasses and the way I dress and would ask questions that are borderline offensive like, "Hey do you like indie music?" I would tell her, "No I don't, but I do read a lot of books." And she would say, "I love *Catcher in the Rye*!" And I would tell her, "Everyone loves *Catcher in the Rye*. It's really nothing special. Get off my nuts." I don't remember much after that except that she called me an asshole, and ran into the street crying, and get this, she got attacked by an angry balrog. No joke.

The second girl I talked to that night was a quiet one. She was dragged along by a friend of a friend, and she played the role of the quiet chick that sits on the couch all night long. She was sitting there, sipping her double apple Schmirnoff all nonchalantly, when I started spitting game. I made her laugh a couple of times and we ended up hands-on touchy feely all over each other. I had a hard-on like it was infused with adamantium. But faster than Captain Marvel could say "Shazam!", her friend came storming out the bathroom like the mother of all cockblocks on some "fuck you, asshole" shit at a guy who apparently, like me, was inches away from getting some. Before I knew it, they had jetted and I was stuck with balls bothered more blue than a Muddy Waters record.

By the end of the night, only Casey got laid. I knew this because of the way she walked (like she had been sitting on the M. Bison's right fist all night long), but I also knew this because she told me. She looked at me with that cloud nine look in her eyes, and held up her hands as a rough guesstimation and all she said was "Fucking. Amazing." I paid for her gas on the car ride home and before she dropped me off I looked into her eyes and she looked into mine and she said, get out of the car you dork. That was the nature of the relationship. We were good friends. That is all.

Weeks go by, party after party, and I guess it started to show. I'd be at work shelving books all slow and depressed, not even batting an eye when somebody mentioned Batman or the Watch-

...her friend came storming out the bathroom like the mother of all cockblocks...

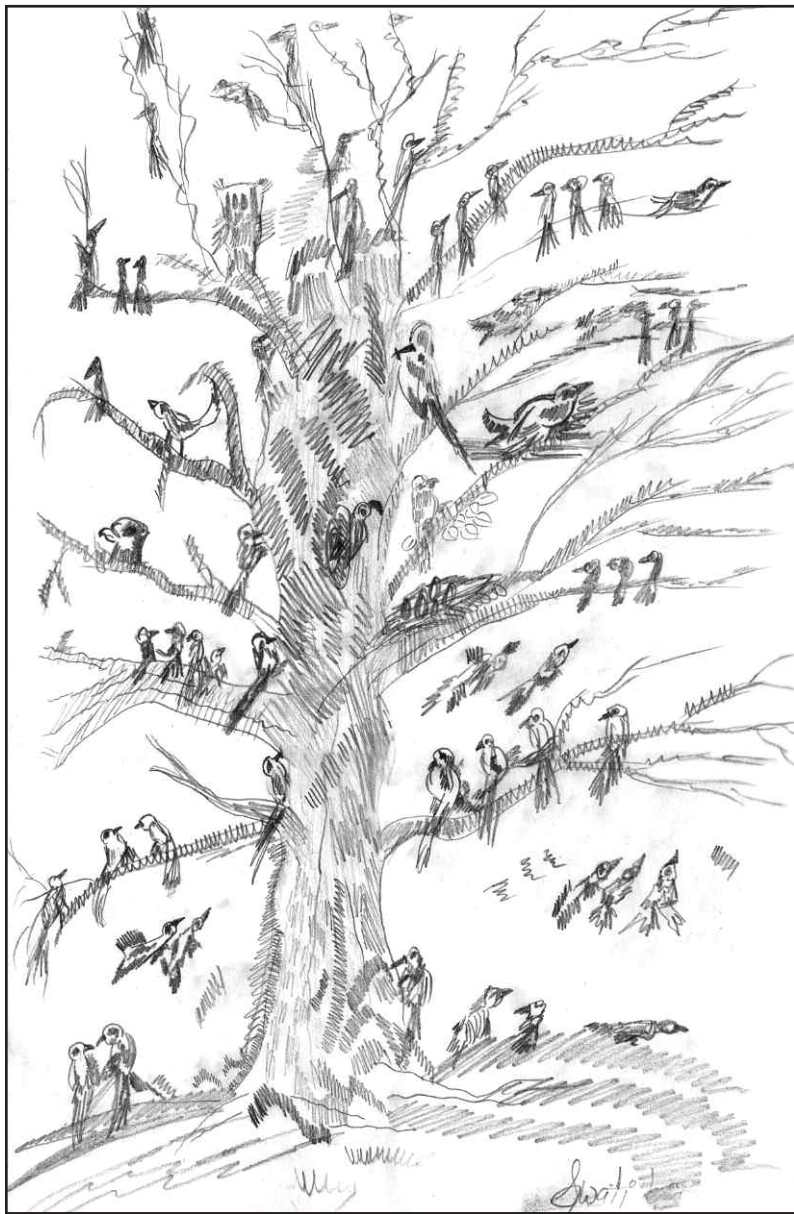


Illustration: Swati Panchal

men. One day Casey came up to me and I just iced her out. I know what's up, she said, you're sad 'cause you can't get laid. And I looked at her with sad puppy dog eyes, as if to say, Will you help me? And she laughed and said, Get up young padawan, we're going to find you a girl.

First things first, she said doodling across a yellow legal pad, What's wrong? And I told her my predicament. I told her that to my anguish, it was becoming increasingly difficult for me to get laid. Finding a girl that put out for guys like me was like trying to find the chupacabra, not in the sense that they were all scary vicious monsters, but in the sense that they were elusive and both fodder for urban legends. She asked me what kind of girls

***Finding a girl that put out for
guys like me was like trying
to find the chupacabra...***

I was into. I told her that I was into all types of girls. All girls except the fat ones. And the ones with funny accents. And

the scary butch ones. I told her that the perfect girl had to read books, but not manga, I hated manga. Graphic novels and comics were okay, especially if it was Batman or X-Men. I didn't like girls who read romance novels. Science fiction-fantasy chicks were alright, and if they could shoot the shit about Herbert or Bradbury that was bonus points. If they read *Twilight* or Harry Potter, I was fine with that but, were any of those girls over 13? If the girl reads self-help books or any of that metaphysics crap, forget about it. I wasn't falling for that dicktrap again. I told her that I thought girls who read Klosterman and Hunter S. Thompson were hot, but not the girls that read *Post-Secret*, they were all dumb. I mean it's a book with pictures of postcards. Really, Who cares? I told her that I could see myself getting into girls who were into the whole McSweeney's thing, you know, the Ellen Page clique except not the ones that looked like Ellen Page. I told her I was a Pisces. I liked long walks on the beach, I was allergic to cats, so no cats, and that was pretty much it.

"And who does that leave?" she asked.

"That leaves cute, brunette, non-reader types."

Casey smiled, "Unfortunately we're fresh out of that."

And that's how she hooked me up, not with a cheerleader, but with something better. The next week she introduced me to

her friend Jane and we hit it off right away. She came to the bookstore one day and the girl was drop dead gorgeous like nothing else. I took her on a tour of the fiction section and when we got to Salinger she said that she loved *Catcher in the Rye*, but thought that *Franny and Zooey* was a million times better, citing the spiritual progression the characters from states of ignorance to enlightenment. I know, right? I was floored.

After our first meeting, Jane and I saw each other almost everyday. On my breaks she'd meet me in the parking lot for cigarettes and a sandwich and sometimes we'd make out in the loading zone behind the store.

She had a bangin' body. I mean, it wasn't any Cindy Crawford sexy model kind of body. But it was a good body, well rounded in all the right places. It was awesome. I'd come back to work and Casey would raise her eyebrow at me and I'd smile and, well, she knew what was up. I was in love.

The great thing about all of this was that not only was Jane into great books, but she was into movies in a big way. She told me her favorite movie was *The Long Goodbye* and she explained to me how the movie was the best Marlowe adaptation because the fact that Marlowe existed in the 70's as an anachronism further highlighted the existentialist tendencies of Chandler's detective fiction. I was about to argue that *The Big Sleep* was actually the perfect adaptation and that *The Long Goodbye* was a good movie, but that it was ruined by its uncharacteristically Marlowe ending, but as I opened my mouth to speak, I lost myself in Jane's gorgeous green eyes.

I mean it when I say she had gorgeous green eyes. They were the kind of green the water turns when the sun sets in paradise. They were like the beacons of light in *The Great Gatsby*, something you could reach out for, the kind that beckoned for you to reach across the ocean and hold on to, but not green like greed or money. Just green like good things were green. They were green like nothing else was green.

One night she came over and we watched the entire Aliens series back to back. And then we had sex! It was epic. I'm talking Superman & Wonder Woman kind of sex. The kind of sex

***It was epic. I'm talking
Superman & Wonder
Woman kind of sex.***

that would make Marques de Sade and Henry Miller say "Hey, why didn't I think of that?" It wasn't the kind of sex most people talk about because it was the kind of sex the gods have in their dreams. And it went on just like Lionel Richie promised me in his music: All. Night. Long.

Life was good. I was the king of the jungle like how Simba felt after he nailed Nala. I was unstoppable, even Casey tried to stop me and tell me that I was getting carried away and that I wasn't staying focused on the important things like, say, my job. My boss came up to me one day (my boss, by the way, is this overweight, insecure bulldyke whose only contribution to the store was unholy dumps left swirling in the employee bathroom) and she saw that my section was falling to pieces and she told me, "You need to step it up, now. Don't fall asleep at the wheel." And so I gave her the finger and brushed her off like dirt off my shoulder. Who really gives a shit?

Because what else can you think about after you've fallen in love. It's the one thing that gives your life importance. What was that one thing Tom Robbins said? "Who knows how to make love stay? Answer me that and I'll reveal to you the purpose of the moon."

And, well, one night Jane dropped the bomb on me. After a dinner downtown, the two of us spent the night in the backseat of my car somewhere in the

mountains making love. When we were finished, we got out of the car and re-

placed the tire we had popped because when we made love it was just that intense. After that, we rolled blankets across dirt and just lay there, naked, waiting for the sun to rise. It was magical. There were shooting stars and dancing unicorns and ethereal music rising from the basin. I was whispering sweet nothings into her ear like, "There's more where that came from" and "You ain't seen nothing yet." She was stroking my chest like it was Fabio's chest, and I was running my fingers through her hair like it was Fabio's hair and everything was fabulous. And then she stopped stroking and she looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I have something to tell you."

"What is it?" I asked.

***She was stroking my chest
like it was Fabio's chest...***

"Don't be afraid, okay? It's really no big deal."

"Jane, what is it?"

"I'm a nihilist."

I had no response. Just a dull, blank, mind fucked stare.

"No, really, I'm a nihilist."

"Whatever you are, I'll still love you, my little teddy bear."

I wrapped my arms around her and snuggled my way into her bosom.

"You don't get it do you?"

And then then mountain disappeared. We were suddenly sitting in a paper boat that was rocking to-and-fro in a huge toilet bowl. I was no longer hugging Jane, I was now hugging a teddy bear.

"You see what I mean?" the teddy bear asked, its beady black eyes poking holes into my soul.

"But it can't be true. You asserted your beliefs to me. You told me that Franny and Zooey was a better work than *Catcher in the Rye*, a value judgment that requires an understanding of the absolute and objective meanings of both works and the ethical and moral foundations on which they are built! You can't be a nihilist!"

"You are not seeing the whole picture," the teddy bear responded. The paper boat swayed in the waves, and I can smell the piss and feces soaking into the stern and weighing the whole thing down. I tried to grab a hold of something, but ended up tearing into the deck.

"But I love you, Jane, I love you. That means something, doesn't it? That phrase has value. It's substantiated by history unfolding as we speak. I continue to love you as I've learned to love, with a love that's unfaltering and unchangeable, a love that has lasted ages before me and will last for ages henceforth. It is not just my love I am offering to you but the love of all men to every woman. It is a love I am sure of. Our relationship, it means something. It has value. It means something to me. For Christ's sake, Jane! Don't do this to me! It means something to me!"

"Yes," the teddy bear said, "but what does it mean now?"

"It still means everything!"

"Even if it's nothing?"

And at that, it all went away. Everything was flushed down, down, down into nothing. I was thrown into a pit of never ending darkness that stretched on and on, forever.

"I still love you!" I screamed as my body was dragged into the void. "I will always love you!"

The echoes of my voice followed me deep into the dark, empty void until the darkness consumed me, my mind, my body and my spirit.

I awoke in a daze surrounded by Nazis. They started shooting. Nah. Made you look. But that's certainly what it felt like. What had really happened was she broke up with me. She got dressed up and told me to drive her home. When I asked her why she felt this way, she told me that she felt tired and like all her love was wasted. Wasted. Losers at bars get wasted. Bad poetry gets crumpled up and wasted. I wanted her to tell her that, but I was too holed up in heartbreak hotel to say anything.

She sat for a few moments staring out the window, and then she finally said, "Listen, I just don't have time for you right now. You're a nice guy (FUCK!!!!), but you're too into things that don't concern me. Comic books and action figures and shit. They are great, yeah, but get back to me when you grow up. Please, don't make this harder than it has to be."

I felt crushed, like Galactus had just entered my Marvel universe and fucked-shit-up. It had been the best week of my life, and then it was over, just

like that. I didn't know what to do. Casey felt bad, of course, and she tried to make up for it. She posted

Wasted. Losers at bars get wasted. Bad poetry gets crumpled up and wasted.

pictures of kittens with funny captions on my locker, and made me zombie cupcakes, and placed drawings of Batman and Superman into the books I was reading at the time, and she bought me a carton of herbal cigarettes because she knew I hated them. In the entire time I had known her, I was never so close Casey, and I was never so close to getting in with Casey, but I guess it was my state of mind that let her slip away. I told her to cut off all the lines and just let me fall. And she looked me in the eyes and tell me she was sorry and I'd tell her Casey, I know. And we'd hug it out like more than good friends do.

Jane did it to prove a point, that no one could truly know if they were in love. But I've got to believe that there are easier, less demeaning ways to drive that point home. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that's a whole lotta work to prove a point. And you'd be right. I saw her at the bookstore not too long ago; it had been almost a year since the night she broke up with me. I was on my break, smoking cigarettes in the loading dock, giving Murakami another shot to impress me, and she found me sitting there. She came up to me and asked for a cigarette, looking pretty as ever, and she threw her book bags up on the dock and sat next to me. It was the afternoon and the sun was setting and the wind was blowing across the empty parking lot like in those cheesy romantic movies, which was neither inappropriate nor unwelcome.

I remember what she was wearing, one of those flowery summer dresses that girls like to wear. And I couldn't help but feel that even the dress, nothing more than sheets fabric sewn to-

...smoking cigarettes in the loading dock, giving Murakami another shot...

gether, was getting in the way of things. The way she teased me with her skin, when not too long ago she was only all too willing to

bare it all. We didn't talk for little a while, instead we just sat there with the wind blowing across the pages of my books and tugging at her summer dress, both of us smoking our cigarettes like old men and swinging our legs like little kids on a playground bench during recess.

"I'm sorry," she said, "about everything."

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "It's nothing."

We got started talking about books we were reading; she told me how she was reading the Howard Zinn book, and I told her I was reading the new Murakami. We got into a discussion about Japanese literature and how it's difficult to translate well from their language into ours. Eventually we got talking about the nature of literature itself, how it adapts to new environments and never really rots like people say it does. No matter how shitty the world turns out to be, no matter how loud Al Gore starts yelling about it, there would always be great literature.

And I guess the heart of the conversation was something she

had been thinking about while we were apart. She turned to me, and looked me in the eyes, and she asked me: If I had the option to relive that one week exactly as it was, over and over again, for the rest of my life, would I choose to do so? And I told her no, I wouldn't. And at that, I got up to go back to work.

Of course, the next day, the most poetic of all coincidences takes place. Casey comes into work crying, sobbing, like Cylons had obliterated her hometown and killed her family. She came up to me while I was sorting books and she told me there had been a car crash, that Jane had

They were attaching new bandages and removing old ones...

been driving home on the freeway, fell asleep at the wheel and drove off the overpass. Casey told me that she was suffering from a punctured lung, fractures in her ribs, legs and arms. Her front teeth had been knocked out, her skin was badly burnt, and she had lacerations tracing her outline from her belly to the top of her scalp.

When we had been told it was okay to visit, Casey and I went to the trauma center where Jane was recuperating. The doctors said that they had been able to stabilize her breathing, and she was recovering faster than Wolverine in duress. But they warned us that she was still pretty beaten up, and that we probably would be surprised to say the least, to see her in the condition that she was in. When we entered the room she looked exactly as they said, with her legs propped up and bandages wrapped around her entire body except for her arms and face. Her eyes were swollen shut and the nurses had to inform us that she was still sleeping. They were attaching new bandages and removing old ones, and replacing the fluid bags on her IV. One of them was removing the bedpan from under her bed, and replacing the vomit bucket on the left side of her bed. It was strange to see how things had ended up like this. Casey left the room saying that she couldn't bear to see her friend like that.

I stayed. I moved up to her bedside and pulled up a chair. She smelled like the hospital, like rubbing alcohol and gauze and tender flesh. I looked her face and I couldn't recognize her. I tried to piece her back together in my head, reattaching flaps of skin to how I thought they were supposed to be. But I could-

n't do it. All I saw was heaps of bruised and charred flesh. I wondered about the crash, about the moment when she had changed from one state of being into another, if she had been awake to know that when she woke up, things would be different. And I found myself angry for letting my love slip away, I could feel it slipping through my fingers like a rope made of sand.

I was standing there, with sweat pooling in my fist, thinking, C'mon, God of love, show me what to do, tell me how to set this right. And the God of Love appeared to me in person out of an opening in the space-time divide. She showed up in her flowy long white gown, glowing like the brilliant collision of a million suns, looking like a combination of Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* and Tinker-Bell. She walked up to me and ran her milky smooth fingers across my cheek like a loving mother and she said, What's wrong child?

I told her how I felt, that I didn't know how to love her anymore. That she had changed since I had known

*I told the God of Love
that all I saw was her
flesh, her tender flesh...*

her, and that I had changed since I had known her and that I was having trouble finding my way back to loving her. I knew that I had loved her in the past, and that I may have loved her yesterday, but I'd never had to love her like this. I told her that I needed her to help me find a way to love her again. I wanted to love her again, and she needed me to love her all the time.

The God of Love smiled at me and pulled up a chair and sat down in front of me. We were sitting there the two of next to Jane's hospital bed like we were inhabiting a single moment stretched to infinity. Child, she said to me, close your eyes. And she instructed me to imagine Jane. I told the God of Love that all I saw was her flesh, her tender flesh, and the scars that carried the burden of knowing the beauty she once carried. Look harder, the God of Love told me, look harder and I promise you will find what you need. And then she disappeared, went into her fairy godmother portal and up and went.

I hadn't seen anything. She hadn't given me anything, not a hint of advice, no amulet by which I could decipher my deepest,

most emo of emotions. Seeing her like this reminded me of that void, that flushing down of all things beautiful into something that's nothing at all. And then, all of a sudden, I felt different. I felt like something was calling me, beckoning me to reach out and grab it, hold on to it and never let it go. I remembered that behind those purple, swollen, unlovable eyelids, something incredible was hiding, something I had revered fondly when I was with her. What was it Marlowe said at the end of *The Long Good-bye*? Nobody cares. Yeah, I think that was it. Nobody cares, Jane. Nobody cares about you with your face all fucked up. Nobody cares but me. And from behind that grotesque heap of flesh that held her blind, I felt those magnificent green eyes burning holes into my soul.



Illustration: Swati Panchal

Outside The Door

by Jesse Clemens

POETRY AWARD WINNER

All this time it has been outside the door,
Carving democracy slogans into the wood,
The patriot's vandal, more feral than ever before.

The barrage chaffs my idealism until I'm sore,
And it would re-arrange me if it could,
All this time, it taps outside the door.

It drinks the donors dry but still wants more,
Leaving new deserts, neat piles of firewood,
Nationalism's scoundrel, more feral than before.

They say it goes the same way evermore.
They cut the wires and preach of brotherhood,
And all this time, it pounds outside the door.

There's no such thing as evil at the core,
But ignorance takes blindly, bad or good,
The primitive vandals, more feral than before.

Don't waste your time and try to kill a war,
For the laws of life are already understood.
But quiet, while it's still outside the door,
Eaten by shame, and more ravenous than before.



TA GET®

Haikus

by William Kloezezan

• POETRY •

They are not our "guests"
Nobody invited them
They just wandered in

Just ladders and air
Can be in my pull aisles
I can't be more plain

Another Red Card!
Can the enthusiasm
'Cause it sickens me

Red shirt, khaki pants
Whoever thought these colors
Might flatter fat guys

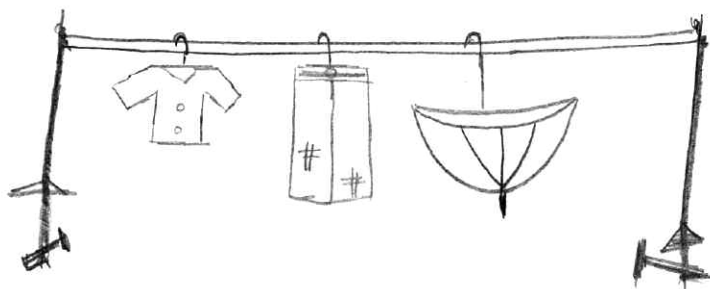


Illustration: Swati Panchal

Blood

by Tracy Vanity

• FICTION •

The sound of his knife squeaking against the plate brought me back to a time when dinner meant delightful sounds and smells and delicious food. I usually loved dinnertime: the smell of a freshly cooked meal being carried through those swinging doors into the dining room, the soft clink of fragile wine glasses as the servants placed them down on the table, the satisfactory scrape of freshly polished silver against glistening fine china, the initial feelings of euphoria as I bite down into my food after sitting there in eager hunger for what felt like forever. I usually relished these sensations but not at all this day.

We were sitting at a long glossy dinner table, just me and him. I was on one end and a dozen chairs later he was sitting on the other end cutting into his dinner with a sharpened steel knife and matching fork. His platter was also made of steel and made a sharp squeak as the knife scraped against it, making it sound like an off key violin. I knew he was making that noise on purpose.

*He wore a black Italian
suit with needle thin
gray pinstripes...*

I looked over at him and felt a mix of revulsion and pleasure. He was beautiful in a frightening sort of way. He wore a black Italian suit with needle thin gray pinstripes that was finely tailored to perfectly fit his tall and slender frame. His black shiny hair was freshly trimmed and combed carefully to the side so not one hair was out of place. He wore white gloves and even as he ate he did not get one speck on them. Everything was exactly the way he wanted it to be.

His eyes never left mine. They were his strongest feature: steel blue pits painted with permanent cold anger that buried into every part of me. His face was all sharp angles with a long slender nose that pointed towards the ground in defiance and a long sharp chin that only strengthened his glare. His complexion was a ghastly pale glow but he did not look sickly or weak he just looked rather...unnatural.

Everything felt unnatural. He sat tall and stiff as if his chair were made of the hardest wood. I did not need to stand up to know he was not sitting on a chair. He was not sitting on anything at all. But there he was, feet firmly planted on the ground and knees bent at a perfect 90 degrees with no strain at all. I on the other hand, was sitting on a hard chair with my legs dangling over weakly. I am sure he was enjoying this.

A mute servant came out of nowhere and slapped my dinner onto my plate like a bag of cement. This sudden change of ambience forced me to realize my immediate surroundings. I don't know how I could have missed it.

My platter was a huge white circle of cheap shiny plastic and my matching eating utensils were in a pile right above my plate. The forks and knives were mixed together in a triangular shape: flimsy pieces of bendable plastic, this was what I had to eat with.

I looked over at him and watched as he easily sliced through his steak with his knife and sank his sharp fork into a perfectly cut square piece of flesh. I followed the fork up to his mouth where his perfect white teeth tore off a bit of steak with the same ease as a kid tearing cotton candy with their tongue. I shuddered. He smiled.

He should not have been able to tear into it so easily, as the meat was not cooked at all. It was completely rare and still covered with blood. But even with all the blood, not one drop grazed his white gloves.

I heard him clear his throat to snap me back to attention at what was right in front of me. Looking at my dinner again, I finally realized what it was. It was also meat... a thick raw steak so big it curved over the ends of my platter dripping blood onto the table.

Sniffing the air out of habit, I choked on the unfamiliar stench. It was a warm earthy smell. I could feel the steam rising from my plate and slapping me in the face. I tried not to notice the blood continue to ooze out of that raw mass. It looked at if whatever this used to be had still been alive not too long ago. I begged my stomach to go the other direction.

I...don't...eat...meat...

"SILENCE!" He yelled even though I was only saying it in my head. As far as I could tell, he was probably yelling in his. I tried

hard not to think about anything and quickly hummed a happy little tune as I twirled a strand of curly blonde hair in complete submission. His eyes relaxed and he nodded slightly in approval. He then cleared his throat again and pointed a gloved hand towards my plate.

"Eat." It was not a question.

I grabbed a plastic fork and knife from the pile. They felt so small and weak in my hands. I was not used to eating with such things. I looked at my plate again and tried very hard not to gag. The ends of the steak were still dripping blood, making a nice river along the table in case I needed reminding of what it was that I was about to eat. I knew exactly what this meat had been but I tried hard not to think about it. I had to eat it.

The steak responded by squirting my eye with warm, stinking blood.

I stabbed my fork slowly into the meat, causing blood to spurt out onto my forehead. I could feel his eyes flicker in amusement but he did not smile or move at all. I tried to stick my stubby little plastic knife into the meat in an attempt to cut off a piece but it would not sink in. It was like trying to cut into wet rubber. I put so much strain into the fork that the handle broke off in my hand.

Now in the middle of the dripping red was a small prick of timid white. I didn't bother trying to take out the broken fork and reached for another instead. I dug it into a different part of the steak, trying for the ends, which did not seem as thick. The steak responded by squirting my eye with warm, stinking blood. I gagged and looked over at him to see if he noticed. He shifted a bit and arched a perfect black eyebrow at me in disapproval. He looked so beautiful that way.

With extra energy I dug the knife back into the meat, this time not putting as much strain into the fork. After sawing at it for eternity and getting blood all over my face in the process, I finally managed to free up a tiny piece. It was so small and I was glad, maybe I would not taste it. I placed it into my mouth and bit down hard.

At the same moment he bent over and pulled out a shiny gold pocket watch out of his pocket. I knew what time it was

even sitting from here. Every time he looked at his watch, it always said the same thing.

It was midnight.

I put the watch back into my handbag down by my legs. My back was straight and perfect and my feet were firmly planted on the floor, knees bent at a perfect 90 as if sitting on a firm chair, but I sat on nothing at all, I sat on nothing but air.

I looked down at my plate and breathed in deeply. I loved dinnertime and this was my favorite dish. My perfectly sharpened knife dug easily into my steak. It was completely raw, just the way I liked it.

As I tore off a bit of meat from my shiny steel fork, I noticed him over at the other end of the table, making a face as he stabbed his stubby plastic fork into his dinner. Blood spurted all over his shirt and he tried hard not to gag. I arched my perfect blonde eyebrow at him in disapproval. I looked so beautiful that way...

Professor Crow Gives A Lecture

by Safford Chamberlain

• POETRY •

"The conversation of crows is wholly about love and the weather."

—Attributed to Homer

I see, dear boy, you are consumed
with bitterness and rancor. You
forget, it seems, those simple rules
of decent thought that you were taught
by your good Daddy. And when
your new love you revile
with words like bitch and cunt,
when you her curse, you smudge
with smut your Daddy's soul, who knew
that self must suffer and forbear,
must give up every cherished grudge
to hope to breathe love's stunning air.

6th and Main

by Nico Zurita

• NONFICTION •

Picture this: It's just around midnight in downtown Los Angeles; an emaciated and shabbily dressed man emerges from the shadows of a narrow street bordered on each side by tall loft apartment buildings (the dwellings of the more fortunate downtown residents—dwellings of which I am lucky enough to be one). The man is walking briskly, almost desperately to an unknown destination, which is not so uncommon in the area, but I notice something odd about him as he approaches; he is wearing a makeshift turban around his head that looks to be

My apartment looks out onto the red neon sign of Cole's Bar...

fashioned for more personal than cultural reasons, and he's wearing a white cloth around his face attached to the turban. The strange cloth

covers all but his eyes, eyes which look like the haunted, hollow sockets of a horror film zombie, and which look right through me as he passes. His eyes tell me that I am mortal and therefore not from his world; he is a man driven by the instincts of a scarred existence forbidden to my kind—he wants nothing to do with me, and so he scurries past me, losing himself in the night.

It's late and eerie quiet for downtown as I walk my dogs on the street below my fourth floor loft apartment. My apartment looks out onto the red neon sign of Cole's Bar, an historical landmark underground bar and deli which still retains its original 1920's style décor, and which was part of the draw of my moving into a neighborhood still in a struggle between gentrification and decay. I used to frequent Cole's when it had live cabaret-style music performances, and I had thought that the red light from the neon sign would offer me the comfort of familiarity, as it had always reminded me of the friendly neighborhood bar in the 80's sitcom "Cheers". But I soon found out that the neighborhood offered me a lot more than I bargained for.

My eyes followed the mysterious turbaned man until he disappeared from sight, my mind running through the possibilities of his personal history. Was he terribly disfigured in an accident, and then escaped to the city—a good place to hide in plain sight—and forced to live out an isolated existence on deserted downtown streets after midnight as a “freak of nature”, never to come into contact

...I was welcomed by a jumper on the 7th floor of the Cecil Hotel...

with humans or know the meaning of friendship or human companionship? Or was he some kind of paranoid “germ-a-phobe” trying to protect himself from environmental toxins or a possible government poisoning conspiracy? I was full of curious ideas as I rounded the corner and almost bumped into my neighbor pulling his convertible BMW up to the parking gate, his blond hair and white teeth almost sparkling with a blinding, shiny aura. My neighbor, a successful actor, waves hello to me as he drives behind the secured wrought iron gates to his penthouse loft. He is home from work on the set of some big blockbuster movie I'm guessing, and his particular apartment I'm also guessing is about ten times the size of mine. It occurred to me in that moment, that my neighborhood right there on the corner of 6th and Main was like an intersecting line for two entirely opposing modes of existence.

In my first week of moving there, I was welcomed by a jumper on the 7th floor of the Cecil Hotel just three buildings down on Main Street. The Cecil Hotel is an infamous drug infested welfare hotel which has temporarily housed such legendary icons as satanic serial killer Richard Ramirez, and starving artist writer Hubert Selby Jr. in his pre- “Last Exit to Brooklyn” days. The Cecil's dark history precedes itself so around Christmas time, when a man with a gun on the 7th floor threatened to either shoot himself, or commit suicide by jumping out of the window of his hotel room, I considered it all to be par for the Cecil's course. This happened early in the morning and as I was leaving for work that day, I noticed that the police had cordoned off four square blocks of downtown. They had positioned a giant blow up device under the man's window in case he decided to reject the “death by gun” method and take a swan

dive off the Cecil's balcony. The morning's dramatic climax came when the SWAT team, who had been slowly climbing the fire escape, finally apprehended the man, and after a skuffle to retrieve the gun he had been waving around, had him hog tied and taken into custody.

The event had taken on a circus feel, with the media and police frenzy and the blow up device that even resembled a circus tent. Passersby were stopped, their mouths agape, and it's sad to admit there was an excitement in the air over the event. It isn't that uncommon I suppose, for things out of the ordinary to strike the attentions of others, but still, I couldn't help but to feel a bit ashamed of myself at my own morbid curiosity.

Desperate people, druggies, vagrants, immigrants, yuppies, families, misfits, businessmen, lawyers, jocks, actors, artists, weekend warriors, criminals—these are all types of people that cross the corner of 6th and Main. Their lives intersect for an instant, but never mingle, never blend. The most that is offered is the wondering. I look at their faces, their dress, their posturing and I can only guess about their lives. Are they hiding secrets, do they have families that love them? Are they going home to an empty room, a cardboard box, or a penthouse apartment tonight?

I wonder what the common bond between us is, and what drew me to live in the midst of such a strange cross section of Los Angeles. We're all looking for something, but it's as if none of us have been able to identify it yet. My curiosity is what drove me here, but for others it's desperation. Some people come here by their own choice—usually those that can afford to live in the ivory towers safely above the chaos, but others end up here right in the middle of it. They just “end up” here. Right next to skid row, downtown is the last step on the rung of humanity. But I challenge myself always to find something beautiful from ugliness. There is always something that shines if you look hard enough for it. I have seen it in the faces of the people passing, in the faces of children, in beggars and desolate souls. I've seen it in the smog and the grit and the grime and the haze of downtown in the afternoon—in the gum stained sidewalks and the

I couldn't help but to feel a bit ashamed of myself at my own morbid curiosity.

graffitied city scapes. And after it rains, there is always a rainbow in the gutter.

People have asked me why I have taken such an interest in downtown Los Angeles. “It's dirty and it smells bad,” they usually say. True, I wouldn't let my dog eat off the sidewalk and unless you find the smell of smoke and urine pleasing then, yes, it does smell bad, but it's a love/hate thing I tell

True, I wouldn't let my dog eat off the sidewalk...

them. The city is unpredictable—not safe or conventional and not often dull. I like the idea of walking out my door and not knowing what I'm going to run across. I've seen vagrants puking on the sidewalks, I've seen drug deals, movies being filmed, model photo shoots, a dwarf with a clubbed foot, an angelic albino, a junkie paraplegic, speed addicts doing dances for themselves in the glare of shop windows, seedy prostitution dealings, a tattooed faced man on a bicycle buying crack, wild eyed lunatics screaming at the top of their lungs to invisible strangers—and it's all beautiful, every strange, terrifying bit of it...

Maybe someday I'll have a rocking chair and a house in Glendale, but for now I'll take the city and all its dirt and grime and chaos. And if I ever have to choose between the two, well I'll take a rainbow gutter over a freshly mowed lawn any day.



Illustration: Swati Panchal

Call It What You Want

by Nicholas Cardet

• FICTION •

You look at it and it seems like any ordinary tool that almost anyone now a day's uses on a daily, if not hourly and, even in some cases minute after minute basis. It's bright orange with gray trim and white numbers, and when a button is pushed the numbers light up blue, making the blue numbers and the orange color contrast greatly. It's beaten up and weathered even

*...messages typed
across its keypad that
leave into the air...*

though its not that old only a year and a half at most. When light reflects off the screen you can see the scratches and finger prints that make people say it's

time to invest in a new one. Many of the scratches are from the pounding the piece of equipment takes. It's been dropped, thrown, sprayed with a sprinkler, gone through a dryer, and slammed in frustration most of all. But as I look at the device its outer layer is not what I think about, the contents of it as well as the words of love, frustration, disappointment, excitement, and necessity is what comes to mind most of all. The messages typed across its keypad that leave into the air and show up at some preconceived location are always up for debate and the constant thought of, "How will this one be perceived?" But what this weapon has become to me now is exactly that, because only arguments and "discussions" that turn into yelling matches grace its keyboard and move from one receiver to another speaker with no time for white noise.

It started with a text message, a little note typed into the keyboard that hits a satellite and bounces off to its destination. You know what's coming with that fearful "beep." In this case there were many beeps but when your lifeline to the world is in your back pocket and you're in a loud restaurant, that fatal beep gets washed away in the tidal wave of sound streaming from Japanese men yelling and the talk of people who might have had to much sake. Once the messages were received I already knew that an argument would ensue. Once I got home I returned the

message with a phone call, and then it began or ended, I'm not sure which it is yet. It's difficult to determine if this was the beginning of a large fight or the end of a relationship.

I have always thought it was funny that mass of computer chips, plastic, and electricity was designed to help miss communication between people. But all its done is create new ways for miscommunication. An example would be when someone has decided to give you a ring there are three options when picking up. One is to answer the phone and go about your conversation, another is the silent button which lets the phone ring but you just don't hear it and now people can say "hmm I didn't even know I got a phone call from you, when did you call?" When all they did was ignore your call in the first place but now making up for it later by saying they didn't get it. And then there is the so named "F#@! You" button which is actually just the ignore button. If you use that one then people take it in the worst way. They believe that you are mad, upset, frustrated, or the "I cant believe that person did that!" which then leads to more messages and phone calls. When all the person had to realize is that you're busy at the moment. Also there is the, was to busy to message you back, which end's that same was as the ignore button. The only difference is that you begin to receive large quantities of text messages that prompt your email to tell you that your inbox is 100% full.

The argument has gone for three weeks and the need for throat lozenges' & a doctor's check for carpel tunnel is getting close. What is needed is space to think & get over each other; but there is that small piece of plastic in the pocket, which feels like it weighs a few tons now. This once useful Swiss army knife of sorts has become a lock & chain that is not letting go. It's funny because this cell phone was once used to keep two people together when they were thousands of miles apart when they needed it most. It's now a link that is keeping two people together that are only a freeway drive away.

Bathing

by Tamara Glenn Gunn

• POETRY •

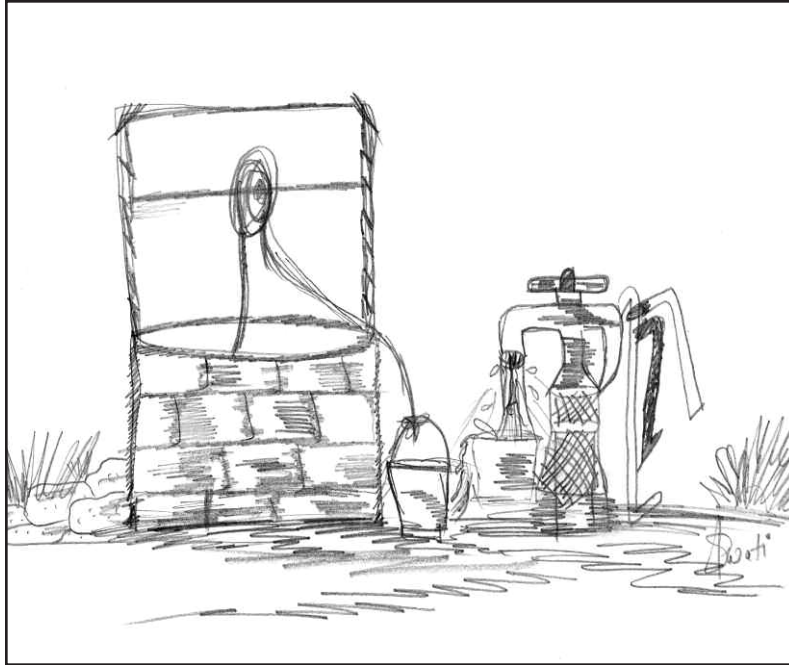


Illustration: Swati Panchal

The heat of the water turns my skin red. I like it hot so hot it burns my fair white skin I lift my legs out and put them up on the cold slick pink tile I wilt into the water and my pink breasts that now match the pink tile stick out of the water like islands. I feel sweat beads collecting on my temples and upper lip I lick it off and its salty, no surprise. As I suck my cigarette the paper sizzles ash falls into the water and dissolves like magic dust then disperses into the tub of murky gray blue water I added too much peppermint oil, but it feels nice the two conflicting temperatures on my skin. Hot water that burns yet its cooled by the peppermint and I like it. My lungs fill with smoke and my chest and rib cage lift out of the water and a pool of water collects between my breasts it trickles in a river down to my belly button I lift my hips, the water sloshes up to the front of the tub and crashes to the back hitting the sides and my flesh the river reverses and heads back to my chest cavity. I exhale and sink back into the water. I watch the smoke play with itself for a moment drifting higher and higher and then with a sudden change in direction it is sucked out of the window through the part in the dark black lace curtains. My bathroom stinks of sweet smelling chemicals; my tub has just been re-glazed. They painted over the old tarnished chipping ugly green gray rusted lining. Just painted right over and now it's sparkling and new. So white when I first stepped in to look at it I was blinded, it made the whole room brighter. Will that old tarnished chipping ugly green gray rusted veneer ever show its face again? Or will this new fine white finish be what shines on?

Ratted Superstar

by Tracy Vanity

• FICTION •

I open my eyes and I see fire and glitter. Where the fuck did all this glitter come from? I can't remember, but glitter can even make a car crash look fabulous.

The smoke is beginning to replace all my oxygen. I need to get out of the car right now. I press the red button to undo my seatbelt but it's jammed. I pull on the strap to try and get enough slack so I can wiggle out of the seatbelt, but it doesn't budge. I lift my right leg up a little so I can stick my fingers into the top of my boot. I pull out Sheila, my lucky pink switchblade. Sheila slices through the seatbelt like it's made of butter. Good girl.

I'm ready to go, I pull on the handle to open my side of the door but it doesn't move...of course. I lean across the passenger side to try that door but even before I touch it I know it's not going to open. It doesn't. The windows are stuck on both sides too. I stab my window with Sheila's blade until I see a spider web. I kick the middle of the web as hard as I can with the heel of my boot and shield my eyes. SHATTER! Good, it worked. I wiggle out of the car, making sure I put Sheila back in my boot. As soon as I get far enough away, the car explodes.

At first I enjoy it because a car exploding right in front of my face is an interesting thing to watch, but then I remember that's it's MY car that just blew up. It was a tiny Euro wind-up toy of a sports car that ran on bio diesel and could go from 0 to 60 in 2.9 seconds. I felt like James fucking Bond in that car and now it was just bits of broken glass and metal. A piece of metal flies right by my face but I don't flinch. I'm too busy thinking about the car. Her name was Eva.

I look around trying to remember how I ended up like this but then I notice soft stuff is falling on me. At first I think it's ash

but I look at my hand and see that it's glitter. It's raining glitter and I feel like I'm in a parade. Where did all this glitter come from? I watch the glitter fall until all of it settles to the ground. Once it does I go back to trying to remember...

The last thing I remember is sitting on the side of the road that overlooked a deep lake. There is a rickety little bridge over the lake and I see an old man in a horse drawn carriage passing over the bridge. I know what's going to happen before it happens, the bridge crumbles and the carriage falls over with the old man following after. The horse is submerged first and the old man tries to swim but it looks like something is pulling him down. He soon goes under too. I am all the way across the lake on a hill, there is no way I can go over there to save them in time. All I can do is sit in my car and watch. When the horse bobs back up from the water its body is already stiff...

I notice the flames have finally settled down so only a few random pieces of car are still burning. I walk over to the wreckage in search of clues. I am a detective at a crime scene. It is so much easier to solve the mystery of your life when you pretend you aren't the one living it.

I hear a familiar song coming from under a piece of burnt metal that used to be my door. I kick the door over with the tip of my boot and see Lucy, my cell phone. The song is louder now and I laugh when I realize what song it is. I hum along as I unfold Lucy to see whose calling. My caller I.D. says it's someone by the name of "Connor." I don't answer it. When the message icon pops up on the screen I press the "ok" button to listen to my messages. I might find an important clue.

Before I am ready to listen I hear a man's voice yelling in my ear, "Vanity? This is Connor. Where the fuck are you? You should have been here hours ago! Are you on another one of your binges again? Call me!" Click.

The next message comes on even though I don't want it to. "Vanity, this is Connor again, I really hope you didn't overdose. If you did OD I hope you videotaped it so I have something to give the news stations. We can do an emotional P.R. piece on the

***I don't remember where
I live but I don't worry
about that now.***

***I felt like James fucking Bond in
that car and now it was just bits
of broken glass and metal.***

downside of fame. We'll show a montage of your whole career and then have someone narrate over it saying how you've gone on a downward spiral because you couldn't deal with your success. We'll play it everyday until your funeral and end the clip by saying what a fucking tragedy it all is.

"We'll even play one of the sadder songs on your last album. That would wrap it up nicely. I hope you left a decent looking corpse because I want some good pictures of it to give to the papers. Your final album will sell like crazy. This could be the best thing for your career! If you're not dead then fucking call me!"

Another message comes on but this time it's a woman's voice and she's not yelling, "Hello Ms. Vanity? Asher Wallace calling from *Bastard Sun Magazine*. I have been trying to get a hold of you since you did not show up for your interview last week. I hope you're ok, but if you have had a nervous breakdown and wish to exploit it for publicity, please consider B.S. when you want to talk about it. We'll pay you handsomely and even donate

***...if you have had a nervous
breakdown and wish to
exploit it for publicity...***

to your favorite charity. We know how you love donating to charity. So please feel free to call us at anytime to reschedule

an interview, I hope to hear from you soon Ms. Vanity! Ciao!" Click. She was wrong, I hated donating to charity.

I look around and I notice I'm in some kind of desert. There is nothing for miles except for train tracks. I walk along the tracks and hope a train comes soon to take me home. I don't remember where I live but I don't worry about that now. Something about this seems very familiar and I am not sure why. My phone rings again and I look and see it's someone by the name of "Blake", I don't recognize the name but I answer it anyway.

"Hello?" I press the phone against my ear as hard as I can.

"Vanity?" Whoever it is sounds worried.

"Hi Blake." I am not sure what else to say.

"Vanity, where are you?"

"In the desert. Eva exploded."

"Who's Eva...you mean the fucking car? How did that happen? Are you alright?"

I nod but then I remember he can't see me. "Yes...but I don't know where I am and I can't remember anything. I'm walking along the train tracks so the train can take me home."

"Vanity, are you fucking around?"

"No, why would I fuck around?"

"Vanity, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" I am not sure what he is getting at but he is starting to bother me. I don't want to talk on the phone anymore.

"Vanity, just stay where you are, I'll come get you."

Who the fuck is this anyway? "No. The train will get me. I don't even know you."

"Vanity, please don't move, I know where you are. Don't get on the train."

I hang up the phone just as a shiny black train is coming down the tracks. It stops right in front of me without a sound. The train is so silent I can hear the smoke come out of the stack. Why does this seem so familiar?

I feel movement behind me and I turn towards the area where my car exploded but instead of steaming piles of car, I see a tiny Euro wind up toy completely intact with someone struggling inside. I walk over to the car and look through the windshield and I see the person inside. It's me.

When I open my eyes the flashes from the cameras blind me again. I can't see anything but the outline of a huge black crowd around me. I hear the loud swarm of thousands of people talking all at once. A voice says loudly in my ear, "Smile Vanity, wave to the crowd!" The voice matches the one that was yelling at me through Lucy after Eva exploded. I look to see who the voice belongs to but all I can make out is the silhouette of someone with a really long sharp nose before the flashes from the cameras blind me again.

"Smile! Wave!" The voice commands again. I don't know what else to do so I smile and wave. I am clinging to the arms of the voice and it leads me into a building and up some steps. I still can't see anything but flashing lights, and the buzzing of the crowd is making my head hurt. But I keep smiling and waving until the arms push me onto a stage where the buzz is so

loud it blankets my entire body and I can do nothing but give in.

A huge bright light hits me right in my eyes so I see nothing but white. The brightness is just as loud as the roars of the crowd. I flail my arms in front of me like a confused blind man in the middle of a busy freeway and something falls towards me and I grab it. The roar gets louder and I feel what I've caught and it's a long thin pole holding a microphone that hits my lips. The voice commands me to sing and I do. I sing as loud as I can to drown out the noise. It is the only thing that seems to help. I try to find my voice in the crowd so I scream as loud as I can and let my voice drown me.

When I wake up I see nothing but flashing lights and I am led into a building by arms. That same voice yells commands in my ear, which I follow without thinking. As soon as I walk inside, it is too dark and all I can see is black. This time I sit down and when I am finally able to focus my eyes I see I am on a balcony overlooking a theater. The red curtains part and I see a movie screen.

The movie is about me. I see myself on stage and then I see myself watching the movie. I then see myself driving, I'm driving Eva off a cliff and I crash. I escape right before Eva explodes and then I am on my cell phone. Then the train comes and I turn around and I see Eva intact and I'm inside.

I look at myself struggling in the car and I remember the old man in the carriage. I can't look anymore, I don't remember if I'm the one in the car or the one looking out of the car or the one watching it as a movie. When I try to make sense of it, my head spins so hard I can't see anything. My head will not stop spinning now.

I remember the train and the spinning pauses. The train is in front of me still waiting. I sense something behind me and I want to turn around again but I stop myself. I make myself get on the train. I can hear Blake yelling in my ear to not get on the train. I don't know if I still have the phone to my ear but I'm afraid to check. As soon as I board the train, everything is silent and I see glitter falling like rain. As the train moves I watch the glitter fall and I am relieved.

glassbags

by A. Child

• POETRY •

"Auntie, what's eating you behind your eye?"
street people
the corner holds a market
that can only be seen when the moon is hiding from
her children

dirty men from huts beside the freeway
sell select cut meat
still cold of course,
"of course"

women stand as if all ready spread and exposed
never knowing that the fact that they were willing was the
thing paid for
what came after was just for show

shine men reflect false moon
light selling swallowing in moths whole
fish bowling them in their bellies
moth eyes change swelling false moon reflect

but
the guy with the glassbags
the only one not product on display
not open with need
not thumping good book

That's our man
he puts magic hour on the map
souls at peace
crystals cut pain ventricle but leave jagged drooling scabs
magnify kaleidoscope the little beautie I see
but sever the finger-snap connected color in my eye

Hot Time

by Wendy Markowitz

• FICTION •

Las Vegas in the summertime is the Iron Man competition for relentless heat. The sun is the cruel white light of an angry klieg lamp aimed at your head. There is no shade; you will not cast a shadow. No matter how early you start your day you will be greeted by a furnace blast of nature because there will be wind and it will get hotter.

For days on end it will top out at 120 degrees but from 115 on you won't care. Your legs will be heavy from having to

*Their world is visible from
ours but separate; we live
along side them like pets
or guests at an Inn.*

move. Your sweat will not get a chance to cool you – your skin will dry tight and salty. Your armpits will chafe; you won't feel clean again till winter. Your only hope is a swimming pool and we didn't have one – we endured by sleeping till night and not going out till the streetlights came on. To survive we would switch to the vampire's clock - this was childhood.

My brother Stephen is five years older but twenty years more immature. This only works because I am born old and he refuses to grow up. Somewhere around fifth grade I pass him completely. I am taller than him, more capable in all things and measurably less afraid of the world. He hates me but I am not his biggest piece of bad news. That distinction goes to our father - Woody. Woody could never be mistaken for a kind man and his son notably disappoints him. Lucky for me I fall far below Woody's radar since I am just a girl.

"The boy has shit for brains," he states as fact to our mother as if no one can hear him.

"Woody, please," she cocks her head in our direction and knits her penciled brows together.

"Please nothing. He's an idiot."

He and our mother sit together in the dining room. They smoke cigarettes, listen to music and talk. Their world is visible from ours but separate; we live along side them like pets or guests at an Inn. They speak around us not to us.

"I'm sure he's trying," our mother says lighting another cigarette and then picking the tobacco off her tongue. Her fingernails match her red lipstick.

"No such thing as "trying." Woody stamps his out in the overflowing ashtray and stands to leave. He spot shines the tops of his Italian loafers on the backs of his alternate calves, straightens his slim suit and adjusts his thin tie.

Woody plays trumpet at the Riviera Hotel. Our parents moved to Las Vegas for the steady work. Before that it was the road or long stints at Supper Clubs. By the mid 1950's Las Vegas was full of entertainers, one of them was our father.

We have aluminum foil covering our windows for daytime sleeping. Woody leaves at night and returns early in the morning. During the school year we pass him in the hall, he's friendlier at that time of day, possibly still drunk. Summertime means he sees way too much of us.

"I've been working out," blurts my brother at Woody when he walks by. "In the garage, I built a chinning bar and I bought some weights."

Woody is tall, over six feet. His looks are Germanic, his posture still military from his time as an officer. His jaw line is prominent, his eyes are the color of dull chrome reflecting a winter sky. He's very tan, very muscular, very vain. He smokes and drinks and plays jazz, our mother is intoxicated by him.

*He speaks like a boy who
has only one chance...*

"You did what to my garage?" he asks and looks down at Stephen, who is short, weak chinned, and pale, skinny and red haired.

"I'm bulking up! I'm drinking Power Drinks and lifting weights." He speaks like a boy who has only one chance; his eyes are the same steely grey.

"What a waste," Woody sniffs as he lights another Camel, holds it between his lips and puts on his watch. "Don't mess with my garage".

Stephen is frozen where he stands; he listens to Woody's Cadillac drive away; a short blast of hot air enters the house from the brief opening of the door. The oven is outside, we live in the fridge.

Lelia is our mother, her life revolves around Woody, she exists in a state of suspended animation until he returns, she waits and she reads. She has committed much to memory and can delight our father with Gilbert and Sullivan. She is tiny, barely

The Vietnam War is all around us, he wants to enlist.

five feet, white as eggs. Her face is delicate. Her eyes are heavy lidded, her lips full, she has an exquisite nose. She's a painter, a watercolorist – her easel is in the living room in front of the hi-fi console, she wears black treader pants and Woody's white shirts. She's educated and refined – Woody adores her. She hasn't a single domestic or maternal bone in her body.

Stephen is allergic to everything. He sneezes and wheezes and drains snot and coughs and rubs his eyes and nose raw. Lelia treats him like a contagious disease, pushes tissue boxes in his direction and sends him to doctors on his own. She blames the desert dust. The doctors pump him with steroids and asthma inhalers; his nerves are stretched thin as razor blades.

"Can't you keep your hands clean?" is all Lelia can offer. She's convinced he brings his allergy episodes on himself by being covered in allergens.

"I'm as clean as I can get," my brother snaps; he would never cry.

His room is fanatically tidy, everything in its place; he dedicates his Saturdays to this purpose. He never had many friends and those few have left for college. He meticulously maintains his beloved arrowhead collection prominently on top of his dresser; he lines them up with a ruler. When Woody finally agrees to see them, his eyes roll with disregard.

"Hard to be macho when you're pink." I say to Stephen as I pass the bathroom; he is spraying himself with Solarcane. We are always sunburned or we're peeling and then we're crispy white again - nothing sticks, we can't absorb color. Woody can, but our skin reflects Lelia. "Why do you even try to tan?"

"Shut the fuck up!" He slams the door.

"He's slow to accept the fact that he isn't Cicero", I say as I reach down to pet our dog; I say it loud enough to penetrate the

door. I feel him flipping me off on the other side with both hands.

It's 1967, I am fourteen and going into ninth grade. Stephen graduated in May but doesn't know what to do next. The Vietnam War is all around us, he wants to enlist.

"You think if you enlist it will impress Woody?" This tortures him, I know but it's what I see. I'm no good at keeping quiet. Stephen throws whatever's in his hands at my head, I duck, it hits the stereo and chips the console. "You're dead," I say smiling; he slams me against the wall on his way out of the house.

I go back to my room to lie on the bed and stare; I listen to my brother out in the garage. There's a faint clanging when his weights hit the cement. Our father is an athlete, he plays tennis and golf and skis in the winter. My brother passed out from heat stroke the one time Woody took him to play tennis. Stephen can't play golf because he's allergic to the grass and he broke his leg skiing when he was eight, never allowed to go again.

"You think if you enlist it will impress Woody?"

"He's a walking embarrassment, I've known stronger kittens," Woody said to his buddies once when they were all drunk and hanging out in the back yard. Everyone laughed.

Stephen is developing muscles in his arms. His stomach is getting as flat as a slab of sidewalk and his thighs bulge in his tight jeans. He is wiry and short and pumped up in personality. His allergy medication keeps him speedy and irritable. He announces he intends to join the Marines and Woody laughs, "You couldn't find the Marines."

"Get the fuck out of the bathroom," my brother shouts suddenly one afternoon as I am curling my hair with a curling iron.

"Don't think so," I say back non-challantly.

"I need a shower." He shoves the open door towards me, it hits the wall sending the brass knob into the plaster.

"Slow down psycho – use their bathroom," I gesture toward the master bedroom with the hot wand.

Our father is out playing golf and our mother is off shopping for more high heels. Both cars are gone. The drone of the massive air conditioner makes the roof hum.

He yanks the door out of the wall and clips my elbow on the way.

"Hey! Watch yourself." I look at him in the mirror. We look a lot alike, as if our parents waited five years to drop the second twin. I notice his cheeks and forehead are horribly broken out.

"I don't need HIS fucking bathroom, bitch, get out of my way!" His face an inch from mine.

"You can wait!" I push him with my free hand and threaten him with the hot wand. He reaches to grab it from me; he wraps his fingers around the burning metal before he realizes his error.

I've been stealing the car all summer after she goes to bed.

"You fucking bitch! You burned me!" he screams, along with screams of pain.

"You burned yourself you idiot. You zit crazed IDIOT!" I can scream too.

He pulls the plug from the socket and in one quick move lassos the cord around my neck. The hot curling part is dangling and burning us both. We are crammed together in the bathroom screaming and flailing when our mother walks by.

I see her face as she passes. She tries to be invisible. Stephen is strangling me. I am kicking him and we are both trying to dodge the hot wand. Lelia continues down the hall to her room. I cannot scream for help. Stephen is insane with rage. I knee him in the groin and run, the cord is still around my neck, the wand finally cool enough to bare.

He doesn't chase me. I run out the front door and around to Lelia's bedroom window. From the front yard I holler at the shiny aluminum pane, "Wake Up! Wake Up you bitch!"

Inside I hear nothing.

I have tiny burn marks everywhere. I get the cord off my neck and throw the curling iron into the street. Some neighbors are outside, they pretend not to see. They ignore our family. I pound on her window, smack it with my open palm. I stand between the oleander bushes and the house, still screaming, "Do something!" The house remains silent. I run back inside to an empty kitchen, grab her keys off the counter and squeal away in her gold Chrysler New Yorker. I've been stealing the car all summer after she goes to bed. A boy taught me how to drive, it was-

n't that hard. I'm speeding out of town on Tonopah highway when I realize I am barefoot and penniless. I turn the car around and head to my girlfriend Adi's house. Her parents are never home.

"What the hell?" she asks opening the door.

"Do you have any money?"

"No, want some shoes?" She is already getting me some and a cool washcloth for my burns. "What the hell happened?"

"Stephen. Stephen happened. I need to get out of here."

"Again? He's out of control." She hands me cream for my burns. "Uncle Spiro has money."

Adi's Uncle Spiro is a dealer at the Sahara, a questionable character but lots of fun, and always loaded with cash. We walk right up to his blackjack table and he motions us away with his eyes, taps his watch and makes the sign for "five." We go to the coffee shop and wait.

Adi and I have been ditching school for years; we know every hotel coffee shop in town. Uncle Spiro finds us and sits down.

"You girls in trouble?"

"I need some money Spiro, I'll pay you back, I need to go to Denver."

"Denver? Whew, what's in Denver, how much?" He takes a wad of hundreds out of his pocket and removes the money clip.

"Three? I don't know, five maybe?" I stare at his money and wonder how long I need to be gone. "Five."

Uncle Spiro counts out five one hundred dollar bills like a hand of poker. Five of a kind. "I got to get back, good luck kid."

Adi starts to cry. "You'll never come back."

"He tried to strangle me. If I stay, I'm an asshole." I hand her a napkin. "Come with me to the house. I need to pack." We pay for our cokes with one of the hundreds.

As I turn the Chrysler onto our street we see the cop car. We pass the house and park around the corner. It's evening now, only about 100 degrees. The dry wind banks

The garage door is open, another unforgivable sin.

every surface with fine sand, and we can see into the living room where Lelia stands talking to two officers. Woody sits off to one side dressed in a dark suit, legs crossed, smoking. The front

door is ajar, a sin in air conditioning country, Cicero sees me and runs out - his tail wagging. Stephen is nowhere in sight.

"Your neighbor called; we have to check it out," one policeman says as the other writes in a tiny notebook. They stand on either side of our mother. "You're sure you know where your daughter is and that she's not in your car?"

"Of course, I lent my car to a girlfriend." Lelia is aggravated; it pleases me to see her squirm. She and I both know she knows that I take the car; we are locked in a secret duel of Who Cares? She must keep it from Woody though. I like that.

"I got to go Babe, first show's at nine." Woody snaps the latch on his trumpet case.

"And now my husband is taking the Cadillac." She sighs looking up at the manly cops. "We're not close with our neighbors, if that matters." Adi and I watch from the kitchen window. Cicero licks my hand.

"I'll bet no one's thought to feed you, huh boy," I say to the finest member of our family. I pat his soft head.

Woody heads our way and we dive for the side of the house. The garage door is open, another unforgivable sin. He doesn't notice till he turns on his headlights then we hear him yell. He's yelling inside his Cadillac. The windows are up and it's muffled but he's yelling. Not words, just one long endless note. Now he's laying on the horn. He's honking and honking and yelling. The cops run out of the house followed by our mother. Woody is pointing straight ahead. He doesn't roll down the window or open the door.

He continues to scream inside his air tight Cadillac.

Adi and I are behind the car while Cicero jumps on my legs. We look through the white Cadillac into the dark garage and there illuminated by the head light is something swinging. Swinging from the chinning bar. Stephen is hanging in the light, a chair is on its side and Lelia falls to her knees. The police grab his slight body and hold him; they untie his noose and lay him gently on the hard garage floor. The younger cop cradles Stephen's head in his open palms. My brother is tiny in their presence. They check for signs of life. We encircle this soundless tragedy in the heat of Woody's oppressive garage. He stays in his Cadillac and stares. All the cool air escapes through the un-

CONTRIBUTORS

E B. A E is a local artist who works in entertainment as a costumer. It was Emilio who inspired this "Serpentigena" story, it was he who asked the writer, "Why can't someone write a story where Medusa doesn't get the fuzzy end of the lollipop?" Once Emilio read the piece he was inspired to create an illustration for the story.

SAE E ABE A DES was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She enjoys spending time with her husband who is a great inspiration to her life and work.

DA B ESC E is a Child Development major, and transferring to Cal State Los Angeles in Fall 2009. As a returning student he has found great significance and meaning to life through the pursuit of a college degree. He hopes to pass along this newfound passion for learning to family, friends, and students of his own in the future.

C AS CA DET is currently looking at a career in sports journalism, he took on the job as an editor of this magazine. An epiphany about taking opportunities has lead to his busy life style which in turn didn't allow him to write a better bio for this publication.

SAFF D C A BE A is a retired English teacher, and he has spent over 40 years studying to play the jazz saxophone. He published *An Unsung Cat*, a biography of saxophonist Warne Marsh.

A. C D writes poetry as an exercise in literature. In the coming year he will self-publish a book of poetry, a book of short stories and a guide to organic smoothies.

ESSE C E E S has been attending PCC for one year, where he is currently an English major. He has been writing seriously for over seven years, primarily as a poet, both on the page and as a spoken-word artist. His goal is to transfer to California State University, Northridge, and to ultimately become a professional writer and a teacher of literature at the college level.

CONTRIBUTORS

SE YF A-G S is a nearly native Californian, having arrived from Ohio at the age of two in the time of Sputnik. Her one previous published writing credit is as a contributor to the 2008 book of six-word memoirs, 'Not Quite What I Was Planning'. Her entry: Perpetual work in progress, need editor.

A A A -G A A is influenced by writers like Albert Camus, Pablo Neruda and Toni Morrison and also enjoys tracing his cultural history through Persian writers like Forough Farrokhzad, Shahrnush Parsipur, and Ahmad Shamlu. His interests include delving into the multiplicate spheres of global film, playing and watching soccer, and exploring different genres of music.

TA A A G E G has returned to college after 4 years of gaining real world experience and knowledge. She was raised in the Appalachian Mountains and resides now in Toluca Lake. She writes poems and recipes when she feels inspired.

T A E EA S spends the bulk of her time in recovery from childhood sexual abuse. Her writing is birthed through her recovery process. Writing is her ministry—meaning it connects her to the deepest part of herself and others. Through writing she explores the rage, sadness, joy and excitement of this thing we call life.

C ST E A is currently seeking out her ideal career and in the meantime volunteering, traveling, and soul searching. Her essay, "A Race of a Lifetime," was one of her pieces for her first creative writing course at the age of 22. She is a graduate of Cal State University Fullerton and wishes everyone a great day!

BE E Y TA recently returned from a brief and mostly unproductive stint backpacking around Europe and has more or less settled down to a life of naps and dumpster kittens. She hopes to acquire a hammock in the near future.

Y was born in Seoul, Korea, spent her adolescence in Vancouver, Canada, and now resides in Pasadena. Her major is communications, and she is looking forward to transferring to either UCLA or UC Berkeley. She hopes to become a fiction writer and a journalist.

CONTRIBUTORS

A E is a Los Angelean, who always has her nose stuck in some book or other and writes dark poems and stories. She is also able to sing like a lark and goes around singing all day, like a radio. Laughing is how she attracts friends.

W A EZE A is not sure what a "byline" looks like and usually finds it worrisome to catch himself speaking in the third person. He apologizes for the delay but he rarely checks his E-mail and would officially be a Luddite if he didn't love his I-pod so damn much. He also believes that the world must be quite a silly place if anyone thinks these haikus are worth reading.

A GE A . is a 17-year-old from Hong Kong who reads everything from science and technologies to classical literature and thriller fictions. She currently lives with her aunt's family in San Marino and enjoys her new life in LA while she continues to pursue her college education.

WE DY A W TZ is an older student whose life's meanderings only recently brought her to this academic endeavor. She plans to continue her education and eventually teach. Her love of writing fell out of her love of books.

F A CS A TTA has been writing, reading and dreaming since he was a wee thing. His mother has told the story of him pulling books through the bars of his crib. Presently he is studying to become a librarian and claims to be an amateur demonologist. He says being a writer means I can fix mythological travesties and set about doing so.

AT A ED A D TA resides in the greater East Los Angeles area with a hell of a lot of siblings and tries to do schoolwork amidst all the noise.

BE T A A is a 64 year-old retiree. He mainly travels and plays golf. The rest of the time he writes and says it's still a lot of fun putting a story on paper.

SWAT A C A is intoxicated with trees, mountains, and oceans. Her favorite pastimes are reading, writing, art, evening walks, gardening, playing keyboard, and cooking at times. She plans to achieve a balance between her personal and professional life and be happy no matter what she chooses to be.

CONTRIBUTORS

AE A EZ grew up in Montebello, California, loving her culture, her city, the sun and the trees, and the beauty of words. She one day hopes to empower youth through education so that they may defy the negative experiences they may face in their lives.

DA E T E is a sometime writer and was once a discerning reader who now finds himself barely afloat in a sea of self-doubt. He has lived in Germany, China, Mexico and the US, but considers himself a citizen of the whole world. He devotes the bulk of his time and energies, as any mortal should, to his only true passion: the game of chess.

T ACY A TY is a writer, filmmaker and CEO of The Celebration Corporation ©. She is currently working on The Puzzle Factory II as well as her first feature length movie “Clown Goes Mad” about two enemy assassins hired to kill God. She is also currently heading the “Anton Steele for God” campaign which can be found at www.votesteele.com

DA E A. ZA ATA would like to have a drink with you.

C Z TA chooses to decline being pigeonholed in a definition of self (as her intentions are to attempt a re-invention of herself at every moment of living in a zen-like way). In this case, the best suitable descriptive word would be “transmutable”...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 2009 *Inscape* editors wish to acknowledge the tremendous support and generous assistance of the following members of the Pasadena City College community in helping to make this edition of *Inscape* possible:

English Division

Dean Amy Ulmer
Professor Jane Hallinger
Professor Brian Kennedy
Professor Manuel Perea
Professor Elsie Rivas Gomez
Denise Albright, Secretary
Jill Keller, Clerk

Student Affairs

Scott Thayer, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs
Sharon Hinton, Student Affairs Bookkeeper

Publications Office

Jesus Ruiz, Production Artist/Typesetter

And to all the writers and artists who submitted their work.

Literature Program

a Pa adena Ci C llege

nglish Major in Literature at P

E P C C E D

. C

F , E D E

. L

18

,
C

. R

E 1C E 26

L S

C S

Creative Writing

a Pa adena Ci C llege

nglish 5 (reative Writing)

P :E E 1B. C

; , .I

;

. Transfer Credit: CSU; UH.

*CAN: ENGL 6.

nglish 5 (reative Writing)

P :E 5A, 6, 7 8. C

: , ,

Transfer Credit: CSU; UH

nglish 8 (Writing Poetry)

P :E E 1A.

. R

CSU; UH

. Transfer Credit:

nglish (reative Nonfiction)

P :E 1A.

, , . Transfer
Credit: CSU; UH

nglish 20 (Independent Study – Inscape ditor)

P :E 1A

Inscape

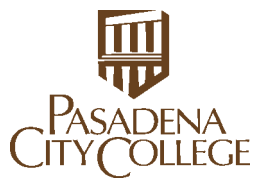
. E

*“Together we shall speak,
the language of silence,
the language of soul.”*

– Swati Panchal



Price:
\$5 for one copy
\$10 for three



1570 East Colorado Boulevard • Pasadena, CA 91106-2003
www.pasadena.edu