

INSCAPE 2012

INSCAPE

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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.

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Short Story

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Foreword

As *Inscape* editors, we are often asked what we do. Here's a summary. We read over one hundred short stories, poems, and non-fiction writing submitted for publication in the magazine. The editors, all of us, are creative writers, as well, and treat the submissions with respect. We know first-hand the very difficult process of allowing one's writing to be evaluated by others. Our responsibility, therefore, requires serious consideration of the manuscripts submitted and involvement with the publication process from start to finish. We keep the deadlines. We pick the type fonts. We determine the layout and choose the art. All of these things are selected in support of the writing that we decide is right for the publication.

However, our time and concerns are most heavily involved with the student writing. We review each submission separately, once, twice, sometimes three or more times. We work alone as well as in clearly defined groups, during and outside of classroom hours. Our jobs extend past semester's end, from fall, through winter and into the spring. All of the submissions are discussed with passion and appreciative care. The task is, after all, critical. Since *Inscape* can only accept 15% of all submitted work, the selection process is tough. In the end, we regret that not all of the fine writing submitted could be included.

As editors, we find the reading of the many submitted manuscripts an enlightening and exhilarating experience, particularly in the discovery of writers blessed with exceptional but unheralded talent. The published submissions cover a broad spectrum: from the hurricane-threatened waters of a Louisiana Bayou to the heart-breaking tale of a relative isolated by religious standards. All of the published poems, short stories, and nonfiction provide examples of superior writing. We realize that each work involves an author's disciplined and often arduous literary efforts, and as editors, we salute their talent. We are proud and grateful to present their extraordinary work to the readers of *Inscape*.

— Gloria Komaba and the *Inscape* editors



Dark Stars

by Kevin Lopez

Astronomers have reason to believe that there is no such
thing as a
twinkling star. They believe that the time it takes for the
light to
travel to us just makes it appear so. I beg to differ. I like
to
believe that shimmering light is an electric dream,
battling moving
fingers and shadow puppets in the moonlit sky. Moving
concrete lines
in eyes as I see you as a child screaming "I DECLARE
A THUMB WAR!" and
me singing "TAG, YOU ARE IT!" as the chorus line.
It is a 5 year old boy pulling on my sleeve telling me,
"Hey mister,
did you know I can shoot lasers from my eyes...well in
my dreams I
can." Its sunflowers manifesting into casual smiles,
throwing our
outstretched arms at the sun, trying to catch a beam of
light.

And I know that sticks and stones will never break my
bones and words
will probably do some definite damage but it's ok,
because mom and dad
will be there to mend our wounds. Afraid that our bones
can shatter
like glass and believing what science says is true, that we
are
nothing but a spec on a spec on a spec on a spec.
Running away from

confrontation and letting FEAR tell us that there is a
monster under
the bed. You see...

Astronomers have reason to believe that there is no such
thing as a
twinkling star. They believe that the time it takes for the
light to
travel to us just makes it appear so. But I say...fuck
that. I say the
one true thing we can take from life's lessons is that...
the sun will
come out; tomorrow bet your bottom dollar that
tomorrow there'll be
sun. just like I believe that light flickering off in the
distance is
you sending me an S.O.S. letting me know that
someone needs saving. I
build forts out of bed sheets and elbow grease, use
dreams as my
mortar its imaginations running wild, pretending the
floor is made out
of lava. It's having that fundamental understanding that
everything
that we once stood for and everything we knew will
always be true.

Cherries and Cranberries

by Kendra Villa

“I’m sorry, but you’re mad! You’re absolutely and completely mad! The distinction is so blatantly obvious that it sickens me. What’s this,” he paused, his voice anxious and panicked, grabbing his arms in multiple places—profusely, mockingly. “I can feel my skin changing colors—how am I now? How do I look to you? Am I as peaked as a lamb? As limp, as green, as a string bean? Tell me, do I look as though I’ve had a fright? As though I have just peed and wet my pants? Or, better yet, soiled myself? Tell me—“

No, Charlie thought, but you do look as though your mother still dresses you, you ass. Charlie examined his friend’s attire, the navy blue blazer worn over a soft-yellow polo that was tucked sloppily into high-waisted school-uniform shorts.

“Tell me,” Ian continued, his lips slightly stained from a chocolate bar, “is my face not exuding its usual handsome persuasiveness? I can’t see any other reason as to why you would disagree with me. This face always seems to charm the hell outta’ anyone I have any sort of disagreement with.” Ian took another bite of his chocolate.

“See, Charlie,” he swallowed, licking the remnants off his unusually small lips. “Your stance holds no value for me. I mean, not just because you’re terribly and completely mistaken, no; but because you’ve no persuasiveness in your face. Your mug is as unsightly as a four hundred pound woman licking the drippings off an ice cream cone! Ha ha! I won’t even make an attempt to compare the look on your face when you’re heated or in an argument—“

Charlie kept his head lowered but his eyes peered up at Ian. He clenched his chocolate bar in one hand and ripped the grass from out of the ground with the other.

“I mean, ha, you must be mad!” Ian took another small bite of the chocolate bar, pausing to savor its flavors and contemplate. “You’re wrong about this just as you are with any other debate we have! If your tongue were working properly, it would detect the subtle qualities of a dried cranberry.”

“But they’re—“

“Sweet, yet sour . . . It’s almost unbearable to think that you disagree. The bitterness of the dark chocolate and the rather buttery taste of the almonds couldn’t possibly go better with cherries; they’d be too sweet, too inconspicuous.”

Ian examined his half-eaten chocolate bar as Charlie looked throughout the park for somewhere other than the aggravating site of Ian to rest his eyes.

“Ha ha, I just don’t understand, Charlie. How do you get along without your senses?”

Charlie’s grip tightened on his chocolate bar, crushing it to pieces.

“It’s a good thing we’re having this little debate. I would’ve never figured out why you have such terrible luck with girls. Ha ha.” Ian’s smile was a checkerboard of large teeth and fragmented chocolate. “It’s your goddamn tongue! The thing’s broken, can’t function!”

“Shut up, Ian!” For once Charlie’s eyes were not fixed on the

ground. They exhibited a maddening look of intolerance and were directed straight at Ian.

“Arrogant ass!” Charlie took the broken pieces of chocolate from the ground and hurled them at Ian’s face.

“Whoa, ha ha! Let’s not get uncivilized! That almost hurt, ha ha.”

Charlie released a quick stream of breath through his flared nostrils. He lowered his head, his dark hair falling into place like a curtain over his eyes which had returned their focus on the ground.

“So what is it then, old man? Are they cherries or are they cranberries?” Ian appeared calm, as if ready to start the debate with seriousness.

Charlie hesitated. “They’re cher—“

“Cranberries! Ha ha! Oohh,” Ian put the backside of his hand to his forehead and began to sway. “I am beginning to feel rather peaked again, friend! Help me! Ha ha.”

“They’re not even sour enough! They’re not even bitter!” Charlie felt suddenly exhausted. “It’s like I was saying before—no matter what process they’ve undergone, like drying, for example, they retain their taste! Their distinctive qualities! So, even if they were cranber—“

“Which they are.”

“—ries, they’d have a hint of bitterness. Nothing that sour could rid itself of its bitterness completely! Drying them out does not make them any sweeter—they have to be cherries!”

The vendor who had sold Ian and Charlie their chocolate bars had completed his first lap around the park and was now walking past them about to begin his second round. Had the man's cart not possessed a bell and had the cobblestone beneath its wheels been any of a softer surface for it to tread on, neither Ian or Charlie would have realized his passing; they could have continued arguing until the park had cleared and until the sun had been replaced by the moon.

"Hey!" Ian called for the candy man's attention. The man turned away from his cart towards them, revealing the size of the large and round belly that hid itself beneath the man's chocolate-stained apron and pink and brown striped pants. He appeared to be startled by Ian's call, but his face portrayed a grave and tired look as he awaited Ian's next words.

"What fruit did you mix into this chocolate, old man? Tell me, are they cherries or are they cranberries?"

The man's face remained stern, vexed, as if he were silently demanding of Ian not to trouble him with such a trivial matter. He reached into his cart, his arm hidden as he blindly felt for the answer. He pulled out his hand and displayed small dried pieces of fruit upon his outstretched palm. Ian and Charlie sat up straight, their eyes reaching to the height of the candy man's hand.

Charlie smiled.

"Cherries."

LA is My Lady

by Sidonie Tise

I want to feel
your fabulous hard dieting body
against mine.

I want your
white-tan-smooth-dark shoulders,
your architecture-sharp hips,
under my hands.

I want the slam of your
nine-hour traffic jams.
I want the slap of your
radiated concrete heat.

I want your irradiated neon smile,
to stutter the pulse of my flatlining heart.

You don't care about me
and you belong to me,
and to those who say
LA is my lady

I say

you don't know the bitch at all.

Quiet Carpeted Hallways

by Angela Nicholson

“There’s no other feeling like it. It’s a little human being that you just made and gave birth to and you held for nine months.

It’s a really crazy experience because its unconditional, immediate love

and so much love, it’s like a love you’ve never experienced until that moment comes and it was really beautiful.”

I walked into the leasing office to pick up a UPS package, feigning apathy at meeting the new assistant manager, but secretly entirely curious about this new girl that my roommate deemed a babe. It was a short encounter; I exchanged about five words and took the package from her, but it was enough time to pick up on her sexy geeky demeanor, complete with dark chunky glasses and beautifully curled hair. What a setup, I thought. Vanessa looked like she was in her early twenties and she was already running the show by herself full-time at my apartment complex. Judging from my roommate’s approval, I assumed he liked her because he thought she was “easy.” Knowing that, I immediately wrote her off as a potential friend.

When the two of them were hanging out at Beard Papa’s a month later, she sent me a message and asked if I would like her to bring me back a cream puff. Like it? What’s not to like about free dessert? I was surprised that Vanessa would even think of me. When I came over to her studio apartment that night to share a cream puff, I was bombarded with Hello Kitty collectibles. Her clothes were housed in pink and white Hello

Kitty furniture. Her fridge was decked with Hello Kitty Pez dispensers. Even her water came from a Hello Kitty jug. But the light airiness of cream puffs and Hello Kitty was absolutely no indication of what I was to learn that night.

Woven among our conversation about cooking chicken and reading books came the revelation that Vanessa had a child at age 17 with a man who was 20. This information spilled out of lips that were calm, her eyes gazing at me with the casualness that usually accompanies small talk. I don't even remember what I asked her that allowed me such access into a person I knew so little about prior to this moment. Vanessa's story certainly didn't stop at her high school pregnancy though. That was simply the entryway into a house full of stories about repeatedly running away from home, her tumultuous relationship with her mother, never finishing high school, her poverty and inability to buy nutritious food for her son, and abusive boyfriends whom she depended on. These once hidden parts of her, completely unrecognizable on the surface, were offered freely to me, not as a request for pity but as simple answers to my questions.

But where was her son? There was certainly no sign of him here. No toys, no children's clothes. I had never seen her walking down the hallway with any children. The emptiness of her apartment didn't quite make sense to me now that I knew about her past.

"We got into a physical fight in front of my son. We were grabbing each

other and hitting each other and my son was screaming. He knew that

something wrong was happening and I just never ever wanted him to ever

have to see something like that and be involved in anything like that because

when I was growing up, I saw my parents fight all the time. I don't ever

remember seeing them happy. I didn't want that for him, I didn't want

those types of memories for him. He deserved to have a better upbringing

so that was when I was like, "That's it. That's it."

Although there are no legal adoption papers yet, her son is in the care of his paternal grandparents. The last time that Vanessa saw him was for a visit around Christmas time almost a year ago. They went back to the church that she had gone to when she was a kid. Vanessa and her son read stories from the Bible and she bought him Veggie-ables toys to play with. Her son used to be her whole world and now she could only spend a few hours with him on a pew. Two beings that were once inseparable with love now don't even see each other once a year.

The girl that I thought had some simple American life spent last night crying over old photos of her son. When I think of my own middle class upbringing, how could I know anything about the grip that abusive relationships can have on a person? It took Vanessa years to get away from the physical fighting and verbal abuse of her other boyfriend. It was this abuse that drove her to seek a better life for her son where he wouldn't witness the fighting. Her son could escape it, but Vanessa had nowhere to go. No resources, no money, no past experiences that taught her self-confidence. Even though my life hasn't taken the same path as hers, I can relate to the feelings of loneliness and desperation that she went through. But as Vanessa sat on her bed, petting her giant black cat and telling me plainly about her past,

I couldn't understand why she would stay in a relationship that she despised for years, one which harmed her and separated her from her son. I thought, *why didn't you just leave this guy?* My own upbringing taught me to search outside of myself for any resources I lacked. I learned to value myself and never let anyone put me down. My grandfather lived his life under the mentality that no matter what, you pull yourself up by your own bootstraps in order to overcome and succeed. But now I see that these lessons are exactly that: lessons. They are lessons that I was lucky to learn the easy way. These values are not inherent in me; I obtained them because of my family and the culture that surrounded me. Small town America taught me how to put Band-Aids on my wounds and Vanessa came from a place where Band-Aids didn't exist.

Beneath her pretty hair and her dark rimmed glasses, Vanessa is another person today: one who finally has her own apartment for the first time in her life, who has health insurance and who has begun to fight against the clutches of her upbringing and her past. Just months ago, these were only dreams.

-
1. Drop the pastry dough in mounds onto the baking sheet, depending on the desired size of the cream puffs.
 2. Bake in a high temperature oven for 15 minutes, and then reduce heat slightly for the remainder of the time. The high temperature is necessary for the dough to rise quickly. Do not open the oven door while they are in high heat.
 3. Use a sharp knife to poke a hole in the bottom and check the interior.
-

The most delicate and scrumptious cream puffs have only arrived at their state of perfection through blasts of high heat and stabs from a sharp knife. It is only once they are completely baked that you can move on to filling them with cream and dusting with powdered sugar. Vanessa has a far more intimate knowledge of a 400° oven than I do, but when I pass by the leasing office at our apartment building to do laundry, she seems just the same as me. She's chatting on the phone with her own grandmother and waves sheepishly, knowing I caught her at work while she wasn't working. I laugh and wave back, wondering if she thought about her son this morning while she slipped into her pencil skirt and heels, appearing on the outside like a perfectly put together woman.

Facts & Figures

by Bennett Rogers

my nose is a radar
tickled by threat
camouflaged in freckles
well-tuned spots.

my feet are a boat
of howler monkeys
wild on wind
lost at sea.

my love is a window
milk-stained, transparent
opening, closing
smashing flat fingers.

my sex is a hole
(in reason) teeter-totter physics
flower-power logic
complain to H.R.

my sadness is a hat
sitting on top
sun-shield, force-field
triumph cop.

my hope is a wish
grown old, panicked
drunk and stumbling
like the crumbling calf.

Vanilla Ice Cream

by Gaby Alexander

“She’s pregnant! No way. Get the fuck outta here!” My mother yells into the phone as I sit nearby. I know she is talking about my cousin who was sent overseas to live with her grandparents. The whole reason she was sent overseas was because she was too friendly with the menfolk. I laughed violently at the irony of this situation.

My mother hangs up the phone and turns to me. I try hard not to laugh, but you know those moments when you try hard not to do something it ends up just getting worse? My mother was not amused.

“So, how is Jessica?” I managed to ask once I stopped laughing.

“She’s pregnant.”

“Oh, good for her. I guess.”

In all honesty, I felt like her life was over now that she’s pregnant. I myself never plan on having kids and told my mom that I would rent out the empty space in my uterus to some backpackers. Again, she was not amused.

“You know the problem with girls these days?” my mother asked. They all just give away their ice cream.”

I stopped doodling on my homework and looked up in confusion.

“And you.” She points to me. “Don’t give up your ice cream to any boy who says he’s hungry.”

“Sweet baby Moses, please stop talking.”

“And don’t go licking any random boy’s popsicle just because you have a craving for sweets.”

At this point I began to gather my things and head to the kitchen. I had no intention of staying and listening to my mother talk about “sweets.”

“Girls these days just give their ice cream to anybody.”

I left the room before she could finish her elaborate metaphor. I didn’t have the nerve to go back in and say, “Mom, I like ice cream. I don’t like popsicles.”

The next day at school I explained to my best friend why she would probably never want to eat ice cream again. She is an avid fan of popsicles.

“Well did you say anything?”

“Manda, it’s not like I could just go up to her and say something. I would get killed.”

“Porky, why?”

“Do you understand how religious that woman is? If she could marry Jesus she probably would. It’s kinda creepy.”

“I don’t get why people wouldn’t be okay with that. I mean, I don’t care. I even forget sometimes. Why is it an issue?”

“I don’t know. Do you remember that time in high school, when that boy took my seat then said, ‘You’re gay. I don’t have to be nice to homos.’

“Why didn’t you say something? You need to stop letting people treat you like that. Why can’t you stand up for yourself?”

I shrugged. I had told Amanda of my Sapphic nature in high school. I was terrified of her reaction. Now, I’m glad she sometimes forgets.

“Are you out in any of your classes?” she asks.

“Sort of.” I had no problem being out in college. Though, I operate on a don’t ask, don’t tell basis. I learned when not to be out, I would rather people didn’t throw fruit at me like they did in high school.

“But at home I am so deep in the closet I practically live in Narnia.”

“Narnia sucks. I hate that movie.”

“Can you focus please?”

She always did have the bad habit of digressing.

“What am I supposed to do? I’m getting tired of her always asking if I have a boyfriend or when I plan on getting married.”

I watched her think for a moment. Being a math major, I always assume she will give me the most logical answer.

“I’ll go home with you and you tell her I’m your girl friend.”

It’s bad to assume things.

“Why is that the answer you always come up with? How will that help?”

“Well, maybe if she sees you with a girl, she’ll get the point and since I’ll be there, maybe she won’t be as harsh?”

“Manda, don’t be mad, but no one will believe you are lesbianic. I mean, remember that whole ordeal with the track team?”

She sighed and gave me her “please don’t ever bring that up again” face. I love that face. I always bring it up again.

It didn’t hit me until then that I would have a different life, not because I would be changing, but the world’s view of me would change. I will have to come out of that closet. I will have to tell my family and other people. I will have to stop hiding. As liberating as it sounds, I couldn’t describe the fear that came with freedom.

“Don’t they have a club on campus for gay people?” Amanda asks.

“I’m sure they do. There’s a club for everything.”

“Why don’t you go and make some friends? Maybe you can meet a lesbatron who looks like energy drink girl.” She laughs

“Never bring that up again!”

Touché, Manda.

Later that month, I found myself sitting in a room full of people and still feeling completely alone. The gay men have taken over one corner. They all seem to know each other either directly or through mutual friends. The lesbians have taken over another corner. Again, they all seem to know each other. I am never one to give in to stereotypes, but the lesbians in this room made it hard not to give in. They all wore similar outfits. For a moment I thought I was seeing doubles. They wore baggy slacks, button-down shirts, and ties, and short hair across the lot of them. One of them even looked like that Justin Beiber kid. I fully expect him to come out as a lesbian soon.

I sat alone watching them socialize with friends. I looked nothing like the lesbians. So much so that they thought I was the lone straight girl in the room. Where were they getting this absurd idea that I was straight? I wear my hair long. I cannot part with my knee-high boots and skinny jeans. I just happened

to be wearing a skin tight low cut sweater. I had used my lotion made of gold flakes that day. I felt like I failed a class in lesbian school. But who are they to stereotype? We go through enough with narrow-minded straight people. Why does the gay community have to bring each other down? I sat there and pondered until I decided to leave. Operation Rainbow Brigade was a failure.

Days after the failure of Operation Rainbow Brigade I sat in history class thinking over past events. I never thought it would be such a big deal to be a lesbian. I really don't understand why people make it a big deal. I'm still the same girl who makes them cookies when they're sad. The same girl who will honestly tell you that those jeans don't make your butt look fat, but the fat makes your butt look fat. The same girl who will stand outside your house in the rain because you told me you needed a hug. How do I become a different person simply because I tell you I like girls and not boys?

Behind me a few boys are talking and giggling amongst themselves. They are huddled over a laptop, the light from the screen illuminates their seemingly disgusted grins.

"Dude, lesbos are so weird. What the fuck right?"

"I know! I think they just need a guy like me to show them what's what!"

They high five and laugh. I sat there steeped in my own anger and utter sadness. I wanted to say something, but my mouth refused to create coherent words. Instead, I wriggle with irritation in my seat.

"Hey, you boys," The professor points them out. "Don't you know: one of the greatest writers in history was, in fact, a lesbian."

I look up at him and smile.

"Not only was she from the island of Lesbos, but she was quite popular with the ladies. Which I know will never apply to you. So best to be quiet, all right?"

I grin happily and watch my teacher do the same. I wanted to get out of my seat and give him a jumping high five, which



to me would have been totally appropriate. I sat with my head held high during that class. Maybe all was not lost after all.

I stood outside the building of my film class during break one day watching people go by, people cramming last minute for a test. People waiting impatiently for bad coffee at the coffee hut. People walking hand in hand with their significant other. I watched these people the most. I only see heterosexual couples. In fact, I've only ever seen heterosexual couples walking hand in hand at this school. I can't understand why. That should not be a fact.

"Excuse me." I heard someone bring me out of my thoughts.

I look up to see a boy I have never seen before.

"Can you tell me what time it is?"

I didn't have a watch or my phone with me.

"About two, I think. I don't have a watch sorry."

"Oh okay. Thanks. Hey, aren't you in one of my classes?"

I shaved my head no, looking again at the couples that walk by.

"Oh, I've seen you around and I couldn't help but notice you were staring at me."

I tried so hard to contain my laughter. "Excuse me? I've actually never seen you around here before. I tend to zone out. So, sorry if you thought that I was staring."

The boy laughs. "That's okay. You don't you have to lie."

"What? I'm not lying about anything. If you'll excuse me I have to get back to class."

I turn to leave, but he blocked my way.

"You wanna go get something to eat after your class? Like a burger or something?"

"No, I don't. I am a vagaterian."

I step aside thinking he got the clue.

"You mean, a vegetarian? That's cool. You can get a salad. Girls don't eat anyway, right?"

At this point, my conversation with Amanda popped into my head. She was right. She is always right.

"No, I mean as in vagaterian. As in, I like girls, not boys. So if you'll please just leave me alone now."

“You’re joking right? You don’t look like a dyke.”

“You don’t look like a complete douche balloon, but you are.”

I got up the stairs to head into the building when I hear the straw that breaks my back.

“Fucking dyke. You’re just saying that to get my attention.”

There have only been a few times in my life when I have ever felt such rage: once in middle school when a boy said something rude about my mother, once in high school when I was told the only girl I ever truly loved was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and another time in elementary school when a girl pulled the hair of the girl I liked. This time would be added to my rage list.

I turned and looked at the boy. “You’re really dense, aren’t you? You really have the audacity to think that I would say that to get your attention? Then you insult me by calling me a dyke, which is a derogatory term by the way. Oh sorry. You probably don’t even know what that means.”

He doesn’t move. “Yeah, whatever. You don’t know how to feel shit when it’s handed to you.”

“Do you know what it’s like to be afraid to go home? Or to have people tell you that you are the reason their god created AIDS to kill us off; or that I should be dead; or that I didn’t deserve any right just because I loved someone’s daughter and not their sons? Do you know what it’s like not to be able to see the only woman you ever loved in the hospital because her parents didn’t like the fact that their daughter was in love with another woman? Do you know what it’s like to be afraid to hold your girlfriend’s hand in public? Do you know what it is like to hate yourself so much because you are different that you were willing to end your own life? No. I don’t think you do. So please, do us all a favor and go fuck a knife because I’ve had it with people like you.” With that I turned to see my teacher watching the whole scene.

The boy walks away. My teacher put his hand on my shoulder. I hardly noticed as steam was coming out of my ears.

“I know people can be stupid. If that ever happens again, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say behind sobs.

I sat at the edge of a river, half listening to my geology professor talk about how rocks are old and half day-dreaming about “ice cream.” I looked around into my classmates’ faces. Most of them know I am a lesbatron. They were fine with it. I can’t imagine now why it had been so hard for me to stand up for myself. Maybe because I didn’t think anyone else would stand behind me, that I wasn’t worth it. Or maybe I was still a child, afraid to be myself. I wonder about all the other people out there who are like me. Those who are afraid to come out or stand up for themselves. I still haven’t told my mom, but I’m okay with that.

A guy next to me stepped on my bag as he balanced on a log by the river’s edge. I watch him inch his way along the log.

He turns to me and says, “You better not push me in and make me all wet.”

I got up and grabbed my bag. “Nope, sorry I only make girls wet.”

I heard the laughs of my classmates as I walked away from the class, grinning with pride. I made my way back to the parking lot of the park where I met Amanda in her car. I told her about my dramatic exit.

“That was probably one of the best exits ever,” I say.

“And I thought vagaterian was clever.” She paused and thought for a moment. “Because you only eat vagtables!”

We both laughed, one of those laughs where you are unsure if you are laughing at the genuine wittiness of the comment or its sheer stupidity.

“So what about your mom?”

“It can wait. I’ll figure it out.”

“Just go, ‘Hey Mom, I like ice cream!’

I smile at her.

“Hey, what flavor of ice cream do you like anyway? Like chocolate or mocha?”

I bit my lip to try and stop myself from grinning.

“Vanilla.”

little universe

by Sachí Terry

There was a little galaxy of cells in my uterus
as we walked down Pasadena Avenue
I did not know

Passing lit up shops with telling delicate things on display
How framed windows sealed the smiling mannequins
With their secrets
They knew

We were laughing at a different world then
Made ironic and cold by the trend of hard love
Before a little spine grew
Day by day into an Eiffel tower

We passed the Melting Pot restaurant
Where men in ties and women in silk
Lined up in anticipation
I saw a child dragging her feet and pulling away from
her mother
Looking at something miraculous I couldn't see
She was pointing at you

We walked past toy shops
where cut-out paper daisies sang:
"It's a small world after all"
I didn't sing along then,
I didn't hear the song
Not until a pinching heart
Started to issue a beat

Down this busy avenue
The people carrying shopping bags
Are wise men carrying gifts
And jewelry is baring its beauty behind counters
From where diamonds of you were mined
Craftsmen hurry away in workshops
To create something to make you grow a smile
And manufacture a fingerprint of awareness
Now I know

Big Enough

by Amy Cannon

This afternoon, around four, I called her. I had learned her number watching him dial when he had forgotten to make an excuse or when I saw the numbers light up on his phone's screen under the word "Home." I closed my eyes quickly afterwards, pretending to be asleep as he pressed "Ignore," but I could still see those numbers, flaring like fireworks across the back of my eyelids. I would dare myself to dial them when he was asleep. I would even start to sometimes. I would press one button, then wait a long time before pressing the next. I would dial a six when he wasn't looking. Minutes later, I would lean on the two, as if by accident. Today wasn't the first time I managed to type out the whole number onto the screen of my phone, but it was the first time I pressed 'Send.' I looked at the full list of numbers a long time before I did it. I stared at them so long they stopped making sense as numbers. They looked like letters I'd never learned, spelling something I couldn't read.

*

The key I had given him scraped in the lock a little after two. I was lying on my bed, tapping listlessly on my computer. The light fell in stripes through the blinds onto the screen, and it was hard to see. I didn't look up. He came in without saying anything. He clicked the screen of my computer shut, sliding it up and away from me toward the head of the bed, and rolled me from my stomach to my back. He stretched himself out on top of me and sighed into my hair.

"You do me zero good," I said, muffled by his weight. I tried dramatic statements on him sometimes.

“Why do you call me then?” His voice was even and measured, as usual. I tensed a little at the point he had.

“Well, it’s not like you do me that much...” I stopped before I said the word ‘bad.’ He did do me bad, but it was hard to say how much. He didn’t let me finish anyway. He was laughing against the skin of my neck. “You’re right, I don’t *do* you that much.”

I tried to shove him off of me, but he had let his whole body go limp and heavy against mine, and his dead weight was too much for me to move. I didn’t like it. It made me wonder what I would do if he died on top of me. *Not a real fear*, I told myself. *He’s young. He runs.* I could feel the strength of his heartbeat against me. But I could imagine how heavy his lifeless bulk would be. I looked into his eyes, and thought at him, *What then?* I imagined getting a burst of strength, like they talk about happening in crisis, where people can lift cars. *He’s not as heavy as a car.* I figured I could lift him off me, if he died — but maybe not.

I read an interview once of a girl whose father was swept off their boat in a storm, and she had tried and tried to pull him back in. She said she kept expecting to get stronger, to be able to save him, but she never did. He drowned. She never got strong enough. That could happen to me. I was still looking into his eyes.

“Hey. *Move.*”

“*You* move.”

“I can’t move with you on top of me.”

“Where do you want me to move to?” He pulled back a little to look me over. A certain smile propped up the corners of his eyes, “California?” He called parts of my body after different states. California was my right shoulder. He pulled himself up on me a little so he could kiss it.

“I *would* like to move, I guess.” I was thinking about California, how I wanted to see the beaches, watch people surf. I didn’t really want to learn, just watch people do it, just sit on the hot sand and watch people slide across the surface of waves like magic. He hooked his thumbs and forefingers under my shirt, and slid it up over my stomach and bra and toward my face. I imagined it was a wave, rolling up over me. I lifted my arms over my head, laying my wrists on the cool of my computer, to help him.

“I would like to move you.” He said things like that, but only in bed. That’s the only place you can, really. He had worked my shirt up over my head, and let it drop to the floor. He slid one hand slowly down Montana and ran the fingers of his other hand lightly over Mississippi. I liked Mississippi pretty well, and sometimes he’d make me spell it before he’d touch me there. “*M-i-s-s-*” he whispered in my left ear, until he starts to kiss it (Hawaii). He was no more off me than before, but it didn’t seem like he was falling asleep either, and as his body shifted, I could too. I turned my head to look into the light, slatted by the blinds. I listened to our breathing, the bed’s creak over the noise of traffic outside, the sound of distant sirens.

I knew I wasn’t going to see California, and I knew that if I did, I’d be disappointed, like with him. He didn’t take off his wedding ring when we were together. When he slid his left hand over me I could feel it on my skin. It was always cold. I was curious about California like I had been curious about being with someone married to someone else. They both sounded exotic, exciting. Neither was likely to turn out.

In a lull, tangled together, he and I talked about how we used to be able to take a phone off the hook. A Billy Joel song had

come on playing from my computer, now on the floor, half-muffled by my shirt. That started it.

“I do want to disappear for a while.”

“Take the phone off the hook?”

“Yeah. If I could. I wish my cell phone had a hook I could take it off of.”

He mimed throwing my phone out the window, and I stopped him, but just turning it off wasn’t satisfying either, so he had the idea to call Time.

I don’t actually know if that’s what it’s called, but it’s the number you dial and a robotic woman with an assuring voice tells you ‘At the tone the time will be...’ I used to call and listen to her the night of a time change. To be on the phone at the right time, and listen to her clear syllables at the right time, and hear the loss or gain of an hour to your life felt right, felt like the accident of falling in love.

He dialed Time, and I thought it was such a good idea that I kissed and kissed him. I won’t say where. I’ve never named anything about him. I don’t even call him his name. I don’t call him anything. We kissed and moved back and forth against each other and listened to the muffled sound of the voice telling us what the time would be at this tone, and then at this tone, and then at this tone.

It was satisfying to know no one could reach us because we were listening to Time. It was soothing to overhear Time pass, to have it read out to us by a robot woman and know she could keep on reading to us forever. She could always be on the other end of the line, reading Time undisturbed. I didn’t feel undisturbed. I couldn’t go on forever. I didn’t know if I loved him, but knew I didn’t want to believe in her, or that anything of him



existed outside the pressure of his arms, the weight of him against me.

He knew I wasn't "with" him if I went still in his arms, underneath him or on top of him. The Time woman's faint voice was punctuated by her chimes, and I felt the cold tap of his ring on the small of my back, my hip. I closed my eyes to the stripes of light shining in on us, suddenly too bright, and felt myself stiffen. He slowed and stopped and asked me where I was. He asked me that a lot, and I never really had an answer. Sometimes I would tease and say that I was in California or Alaska or Illinois. That's why he started assigning parts of my body place names. ("Is this Alaska? What about this? Does this feel like Alaska?") He could pin down those places.

*

I stared at her number so long my eyes went unfocused, but my finger didn't shake when I pressed "Send." I had dialed the number methodically, automatically. I held the phone hard to my ear to hear over the sound of my shower and him in it. The ringing pulsed loudly, certainly in my head.

"Hello?" She wouldn't recognize my number. *Home*, I thought. That was the name for hers.

I had spent the afternoon listening to the professional voice of Time, and somehow expected this woman to sound just as far away, but she didn't. Her voice was higher than I expected, weaker. She sounded harried, but she had answered. It moved me that she had answered an unknown number. "Hello?" she repeated.

My voice had clearly gone. I opened and shut my mouth, and opened and shut it again. I heard her shifting, a scuffle against

the mouthpiece as if she had drawn the phone away from her ear and put it back again. “Hello?” She exhaled loudly into my ear, impatient, tired. She sounded like the Time woman should have, worn out by the thing she recited. She sounded like she didn’t have the energy to go on, talking to no one, and I didn’t blame her. I listened to the muffled sound of her ending the call. I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked hard at its face. “I’m sleeping with your husband,” I said to it. It flashed back the number of seconds I had said nothing to someone I didn’t know. I threw the phone across the room at the closed bathroom door. It didn’t hit the door like I wanted it to, and it didn’t shatter like I wanted it to even more. It thunked lamely on the floor, a few feet short. Too short. Too little. I left.

I left from my own apartment, with him in it. I left without my shoes on. I did that on purpose. Another dramatic statement, I guess. But something else, too. A promise that I couldn’t go far without coming back. That implicit promise made my stomach twist. I walked the way I knew had no sidewalks, stepped hard on rough asphalt, making myself feel each pang. *What could I have told her? What would have been the point?* I kicked deliberately at the small shining pebbles of shattered windshields. I walked over shreds of tire and twists of plastic and metal. The light was sapping out of the sky. It felt like I couldn’t get enough air, no matter how deeply I breathed.

*

He might have heard the door slam. He might even have read the Call Log of the phone I had left on the floor. I was limping along the side of the road, refusing to think about how close I still was to home, when I heard the sound of his car behind me. He leaned out the window, calling my name. When I didn’t stop or look back, he pulled the car in front of me sharply, heading

me off, and got out. We stood and looked at each other. “What are you doing?” he said. “Leaving to California,” I said. He paused for a long moment. He looked down at my feet. “Not on those you’re not.” I looked down too. He stepped toward me uncertainly, like he was scared of what I might do, but I let him pick me up and set me carefully on the driver’s seat, with my feet hanging out over the road. He was looking at my face, but I didn’t look up. In a small, quick movement, he knelt down in front of me. It made my whole body go cold when he did that. But he didn’t say anything. He just picked up each foot into his hands and brushed and brushed at the soles of my feet with his fingertips to loosen the debris.

Driving back through the dark, he gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles went white. “You know I can’t.” His voice was the quiet one I dreaded. I noticed for the first time how it was weak, like hers. “Who asked you to?” I said. My own voice sounded flat and metallic. He was silent. Then I was silent.

He ran water into the tub, and set my feet in it, and washed and disinfected them. He murmured “Baby — Oh, Baby,” at each new cut he discovered. I cried when he pressed them with a washcloth. I cried hard at the excuse of a little pain. My sobs were silent. I was silent as he coaxed me into bed, and was silent as he closed his arms around me, and was silent as he whispered to me about the places we’d go. I was silent until his hands twitched and trembled against me, his breathing evened and I knew he was asleep.

*

This time, when I leave, I take my shoes. I eased myself out of his arms slowly, and he shifts but doesn’t wake up. I find my phone on the floor and put it firmly in my pocket. I close the

door softly behind me. I walk far and fast, though my feet are tender. The street lights look dim, and the moisture in the air gives each one a watery halo in the dark. I pull out my phone and dial her number without looking. I press Send. I feel my chest expand with each ring. I expect to be screamed at or hung up on or disbelieved. I might just be big enough to leave, but not big enough to go silently, without making myself something that had a place and a name in his life. Not adding up all 50 states of me, not big enough for that.

The Man from the Sea

by Rhianna McGaughey

There once was a man from the sea
He always bent down on one knee
To fish for his food
-With such gratitude
Until the fish mouthed: "Marry me?"



Illustration: Gaby Alexander

Something Quite Important

SHORT STORY
WINNER

by Kendra Villa

I know what you must be wondering—you've a perfectly good reason to question my reasons for walking so late at night, alone; for it is one thing for a man to make such an unwise choice, but it is far more so for a young lady like myself to do. But I've something quite important to do. And I must reassure you that I am a young lady of wit and intelligence, and I've never made a decision that I knew I could not handle.

A few days ago I received a letter from my eldest sister informing me that she had just given birth to her first baby, and that if his Auntie wished to make a visit that I was more than welcome. We live relatively close to one another, possibly within a six mile radius, my sister occupying a home in the east side of the village of Belle Terre, New York; and I to the south, in the lower west side of Videire de Meir, right along the border of Belle Terre. So I made the visit, and along the way, the way in which I am re-traveling now, I lost a very important piece of me. Now, if this were a literal translation, my search would be much, *much* easier; because then I would be on the lookout for a lost leg, or an ear, or an arm, hopping along lopsided and half-deaf as I sway without a balance. But of course it's not that simple—what I've lost is something so small that if I do not find it, it and I will be lost forever. So, you see, I *must* find it, and you must help me. So please, *please* keep your eyes open. And your ears, and your mouths, and your noses and your toes-es, but especially, *especially*, your minds, open.

The importance of finding this item is of a pressing matter because it is something that helps to keep me and my mind

within this surreal reality that you (may) and They call Reality. Now, I know that what I have just said to you sounds as though what I am looking for is something completely abstract, but it's not. It *is* tangible, I assure you. But I cannot express to the fullest extent how devastated and completely bewildered I am by the fact that I have lost it! I check every morning, every noon, every night, of every day to see if I have it on me, because without it, I feel ugly, and I become lost and detached. So if you could just continue with me and help me to find it, (and believe me, you will know it when you see it!) I assure you that I will be *most* thankful, and your reward will be great.

I had such a terrible dream last night! I cannot explain it all to you, you see? For it was far too graphic and so sinister that I am afraid my depictions of the images I saw will seed themselves within your minds and germinate while you sleep. Thankfully, for you, though, I am a sensitive person by nature, and with fine consideration of your emotions, I have decided to spare you that torment. However, the details of my dream are vividly known to me; but ironically, they are of such high number that I cannot accurately recall any exact sequence of events, nor can I even understand the dream itself as a whole. But what I *can* tell you—for it is the *least* that I can do for having talked so much about it—is this: the conclusion of my dream. I was shot—and I was killed.

Oh, but I assure you that I am not disturbed!—not *completely*, anyway. But if I do say so myself, I may just be crooked enough to be put into a sanitarium. Oh, but I'll never go! I can hardly imagine (can *you*?) just what would become of me and my mind if I were to be kept within those walls: white walkways, whispers, weirdos. Why, I don't mind so much the white walls that I hear others denounce so often—monochromatic

sceneries or settings actually seem to put my mind at ease. But it is the thought of being amongst those slumped and solemn figures as they wander and waddle, back and forth, back and forth, through the halls, cursing or hissing or standing at a moan with not a look upon their faces. And all the while I'd be completely aware of the fact that I am not "*sane*" enough to be out there, but not "*insane*" enough to be kept within walls. Do you understand?

But enough of that for now—all of this talk is making me slightly frightened. I think that now is a good time for me to introduce myself. After all, an introduction is a fine start for us to get to know one another: my name is Miri Lowella. I am twenty-two years of age, and I am the youngest of six sisters. I've a strong liking for numbers, manners, and the rhythmic waves of words; but I take a strong *disliking* towards loud noises (and more *precisely* the people who create such noises! And if the loudness is *within* their voices, or if it is a nasally, raspy, cringing, tinging of a voice, I actually become quite angry), and a disliking for uneven, un-organized things. Oh, and *onions*, of course.

But first I must admit to you that this fright from my dream has not come to an end, and I ask that I may take a slight detour from it because it is making me weary. I should put an end to it, my thinking—walking alone at night through a darkened park that is buried within an abundance of trees can certainly make one feel a bit eerie. But a scenery such as this certainly isn't the most suited for one to be able to put an end to terrible thoughts. I can hardly see where I am going, for the lights are dim and dying and the stoned pavement beneath my heels is glistening with reflections from the recently ended rain.

Oh, how I wish it wasn't so cold tonight! My face is frozen and my toes have gone numb. Why, if I were to hit myself on the head with a hammer I would shatter into pieces and melt upon the floor! Oh, don't ask me why or if I would do such a thing—I would never, I don't think, though I am sure that my mind could use the readjustment! Now, I wonder where this thing of mine could be. I recognize this bush; and that stump of a tree—I distinctly remember seeing the oranges and the yellows of its flowers and the spottiness of their leaves, and I remember this bark and the hollowness of the pith. I had stood here for a moment as I peeled off the sloppiness of a slug and the stickiness of its self from underneath my shoe; I had accidentally squashed him as he was making his way across the path. But anyway—as I was walking over here, I think I was moving quickly. Would I have felt it when I lost it? I wonder if anyone would consider it of value if they were to find it...

And now I wonder if you can feel this, too; for it is a distinct and threatening thing, but I feel the heaviness of the weight of someone or some thing's gaze upon me. And as I am turning around, I am looking every which way, searching for the source of this powerful weight. But as I look back, standing at the very end of this pathway that has lead me through the park, all that I can see are the darkened spots of my soiled footsteps that have dampened the glisten of the slickness of the cobblestone, the layers and layers of dark green, slouching trees, shedding tears of rain from every needle, and the fading flicker of street-lamps. Everything else is still, quiet. But still, I feel it (*do you?*)—it's taunting me.

I've seen only two people out tonight, both men, both drunk, and old, and grey, and hoarse. They grabbed at my arm—not both at once, of course, but one first and later the other—and begged me for change; their teeth were yellowed and crammed

with food. “Jusht one zrink, ma’am,” one had continued with thick spit in his throat. “Ish *all* thad I need!” But I didn’t have any change. And each one, after receiving my response to their pleas, pushed their flattened and ragged caps up and above their eyes, their long hair messy and their skin damp and dirty, and they wore upon their faces the same smirking grimace.

“Jusht where’re you going?” the first one had asked. And as I was pausing to think of an answer, the man nudged himself into the remaining space between us. He lifted his head to give himself height and pushed his head beneath my chin, squinting his eyes with suspicion as he peered up into mine; then he pointed his dirty, half-covered-by-a-glove finger in my face.

“Girl o’ yer age shoulda know thad idiz quite ‘uh *da*angerous thing to be a’walkin’ these streets so late!”

What a drunken clever man! I think I might have let out a laugh after he had said it to me; but I maintained my manners and kept my composure. I couldn’t tell him where I was—well, where I *am* going, of course; that would’ve been quite a stupid thing to reveal. So I told him that I am on my way home, that I was almost there, quite actually, and that I was very thankful for his concern.

And now that it has become darker, for the last few awake are beginning to blow out their candles, I am beginning to wonder whether I’ve gotten myself into something that I may not be able to resolve. I am beginning to feel rather tired; I wonder if you feel the same? But I can’t—no, I mustn’t—take a break. I feel the weight of that gaze once more. Oh, my body is trembling and my mind is tight; I feel a sinister presence lurking about. I hear the shuffling of feet as they scurry between the shadows, then a sudden and silent pause.



And from out of the darkness appears this gnome of a man, with his belly protruding and his height reduced. He has a grin on his face as he proposes an introduction.

“My name is Mr. Man Craven,” he begins. “And I’ve something ravin’ that you are most certainly... cravin’...”

From out of his pocket he pulls a small item, and he displays upon his stretched palm a silver ring of a rose dulled with age and encrusted with garnet. How beautiful it is! I cannot even begin to explain to you what the sight of this ring has done to me! My insides are turning and my mind is awash with the color of white.

“I seen you drop it the other day,” he says. “But you was in much too much of a hurry for me to catch you.”

“Oh, you must let me hold it!” I beg of him.

But the man has the nerve to shake his head in disapproval. His lips slowly part like the curtains of a stage, and the crowded mess of his brown-splintered teeth is now revealed. And as I reach for the ring, the night sky turns white. He claws at my arm.

“It’s not yours...anymore!” he hisses, tightening his fingers ‘round my wrist.

“Oh, but it is!”

And it *is*, after all! I lost it, and he’s found it! And to be precise, a family heirloom is what *it* is, meant only to be passed along once an epiphany had taken place for its owner. And when my mother gave it to me, her epiphany being “material items do not console the mind, but that only the mind can console the mind” (quite an extravagant realization, if I may say so myself), I’d finally felt a sense of belonging.

And as the man and I continue to argue, I see the darkness of the night disappearing; the street walls are beginning to crumble

to the floor, and the ground beneath our feet has turned to a solid and single hue.

“You simply *must* give it back!” What a wretched man—what an ugly, vile, miserable old man, trying to keep the ring of a young girl who is so obviously disturbed! And as we claw back and forth, I take possession of my ring once more and instantly become detached from the mindset I was in. It is no longer dark, but a bright and blinding white. And as I adjust my eyes, I see an old man collapsed upon the floor in front of me, with the plumpness of his body covered by a slip made out of bed sheet, crying and clenching his fingers ‘round his arms.

“It is mine, it is mine,” I hear him repeat.

I don’t understand; I believe I should stand and take a look around. What a peculiar little place: there is no color whatsoever, simply white. And the people here are very... unique. Oh, you don’t suppose...! Oh, no, it can’t be.

Now, I don’t quite understand just how I got to this place, but I *do* think that you’ve got to get me out. After all, I don’t belong here (*do* I)? These nurses, they know my name, but I do not know how; I have never told them. How could I have if I have never been to such a place? I don’t suppose you’ve told them about me, have you? No, I don’t believe you would do such a thing. So we’ve got to get them to let me out of here; I’ve got to make a visit to my nephew, after all. I am going to leave now; I will inform the nurses of this misunderstanding, and that I’ve something very important to do. You’re going to come with me aren’t you? Oh, you should, you should—it’s something quite important, I assure you.

Beating Back the Ghosts

by Kbrysten Rogers

Twenty-one pairs of feet cease their choreography:
in and out, back and forth,
Hands shifting between blocks and punches,
synchronized moments ago, suddenly,

Stopped.

Silence echoes over the cleared blue mat,
“Matthew!”
Feet scramble, fingers tighten
the yellow belt bright against the white gi,
Seven years of breath surge without a sound
Like a young girl tip-toeing for a late-night snack.

He breathes in ‘n out to steady his racing heart, stops,
Before his sensei, ready, bows
Kata! Taikyoku Shodan!
Begins.

The snack has been snatched away.

Laughing faces swarm before him, a thrust
To his back sends him sprawling, the ghost
Of a larger hand leaving.

All a memory, invisible boys,
Attackers, all the same:
This time a chance to punch, to block, to kick,
Many surround, one force to be reckoned with.

Skin scraped from his hands
At the impact with the cement, he lifts
Himself up, turns to look,
The boy's sweater swishes in the wind, walks away.
Matthew charges,
A running bull seeing a red flag.

The boy cries out, alarm on his dirty
Face, topples under crushing weight,
Matthew climbs on top,
Hair swishing on his back, fists fly,
Children cry out, one runs for help.

A teacher comes running, her skirt leaving
A trail behind, one that Matthew will not follow,
Reluctant to secede. Arms restrain him, pull him off,

The boy stays on the ground, bleeds.
One pair of feet ceases their choreography.



The Color of a Sinner

NONFICTION
WINNER

by Haebitchan Jung

To my Mama: The greatest Mama in the entire world.

In the most unexpected times, a swallowed memory of my past gets regurgitated back into my consciousness. I see myself when I was eight, inside a local toy shop with no one present except me and the acute silence. The next thing I know, I dash outside the store with gold hidden in my hand, a traceless robbery. I guess I should now confide to you that I had become a thief by the age of eight. My age was special because nobody dared accuse a pure child of any crime. You are the lucky ones for none have heard of this story of sin – not even my dear parents. Bless their hearts and nurse my soul because stealing is one thing, but keeping that a secret from God is another.

This infamous incident took place in Korea: a nation of pride, “tiger” mothers, and colors. Colors are distinctive to me perhaps since that toy shop was always brimming with every color of a rainbow. The shop was barely as large as my living room, which meant that the walk was terribly narrow. In fact, the entrance was just big enough to allow one person in and out at a time. In all four rectangular corners of the store, long vertical shelves covered the walls, where boxes of colorful toys quickly found their niches. But I still wonder about what kind of toys were within those boxes. Because when you are eight-years-old and not tall enough to reach the counter or the shelves, the vertical distance in between them is similar to that of the earth and the sky.

Most of all, I still think about the glass display under that front counter. Oh yes, I remember the menagerie of Pokémon figurines that were tiny and waxy but stood proudly in the display. Inches apart, there were Pikachu, and Charizard, and so much more Pokémon that shone in their poses and colors. But none of the hand-sized collectibles could compare to Zapdos,

the Legendary Bird Pokémon. In bright regal yellow that could easily be mistaken for gold, she appeared more prestigious than any of the other creatures. She had wings like a serrated crown and had a carrot-like beak for fierce pecking. With a powerful gaze, she used her telescopic sight to pierce through the enemy's heart and used her lightening-like attack moves for complete annihilation. You can understand why any child would covet a figurine frozen in wax and magnificence. But the fundamental error was that she wasn't mine.

"Mom?" I shook her awake from her afternoon dozing in the living room sofa. "Can you buy me Zapdos at the toy shop? I really want it."

"No." Her execution was quick but majestic. "If it's that Pokémon, you don't need it."

"I do need it. All my friends have a figurine of some type of Pokémon. All I have are Pokémon *cards*. It's not the same thing!"

My aunt chimed in, "I'm sure that that thing he wants is affordable. Besides, he says that his friends have them."

My aunt was very valuable at times. The store's owner was a friend of my aunt and sometimes gave me free Pokémon cards, though my mother disapproved of the behavior. This is where the "tiger" mother aspect comes in. A "no" meant a "no," regardless of money or my tantrums. She was strict and devoted in preventing any toy from spoiling me, and today was no exception.

Haebitchan was purely too *innocent* to fathom Mother's intentions then. Instead, I donned my sandals after the conversation and traversed to the toy shop. Within minutes, I covered the distance and opened the store's steel door that creaked with every moving inch. The owner came into the light and he seemed pleased by my presence. He was in his early forties, illuminating a distinguished face. Nonetheless, he was a bit too old to manage a shop frequented by noisy kids and innocent-looking robbers. Maybe his age had given way to grief, for he regularly left the shop by the back door. He lit cigarettes and whether he cared or not, he left his valuable toys unattended and vulnerable.

“So what could I help you with today, Happy-Chan?” The owner called me by unusual monikers. He was standing behind the front counter with the cash register.

I looked around the decorated shop. I always found myself spiritually fulfilled every time I visited this shop. Everything was so familiar yet so unfamiliar, with toys of blue, white, pink, green, and lastly, yellow. But even with the explosion of colors and lights encroaching on my privacy, I felt an indescribable comfort and relief from the pains of the everyday world. My eyes narrowed and focused on the glass display beneath the counter. In that zoo of animated creatures was the lady of my desire and worship, Zapdos.

“Ah yes, the yellow Pokémon doll.” He spoke as if everything now had made sense. “You like it Jackie-Chan? Kids like this doll more than any other ones I have in the display. But I don’t understand what’s the fuss is about.”

“Uh-huh. Do you have recorders? It’s for my music class in school.” I finally spoke to change the subject. I reached out my hands and placed money on the top of the counter. His words bothered me since the lady’s name happened to be Zapdos, an ethereal figurine, not a stupid doll.

He chuckled. “This shop never run out of them. When I was your age, I felt divine when I was able to eat rice twice a day. But look at you. Now you go to a shop and you enter another world with everything life can possibly want ...”

The man exited the counter and went to one of the tall shelves for the requested item. His lips were moving but I paid no attention. Rather, I glued my eyes to the curious yellow lady that was about five-inches tall. She made me feel excited and queasy at the same time. My heart was pumping faster as my eyes widened. I could not explain this odd pleasure/constipation that melted my self-control. I wanted her to be mine, but Mother never allowed it to be. She said “no” to almost every toy I wanted. She even punished me for those Pokémon cards that my aunt had bought for me. I dared not imagine the consequences if I were to buy Zapdos when she already said “no.” She just did not like me or care about my feelings. But I was going to get Zapdos – no matter what it would take to do so.

“Are you looking at that thing again? Why don’t you just ask for me to show it to you? Come on, here.” The owner handed me the recorder and went back to the counter. He played with his ring of keys, found the special one, and inserted it into the deadbolt attached at the back of the display.

“What, no, that’s okay. I have to go now. Mom is waiting for me.”

My words must have been outside his earshot because he continued and soon laid the statue on the top of the counter.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see it? I think that you really like this thing. The colors of your eyes are really lighting up.”

He seemed to know more about this innocent child than the child knew of himself. What else did he know about me? After a hasty “Thank you mister,” I exited from this mysterious place with the recorder clenched in my left hand.

I took five uneasy steps outside and stopped. I was past the windows and the door so the owner could not see me. But my spirit was back inside the shop, idolizing the golden statue. My blood raced again. There were customers going in and out of the store. Thoughts raced through my head, like how the owner was wearing a blue polo and how Zapdos was outside of her cage, open and defenseless. I contorted my face reflecting a look of the Devil.

Did purity stop Haebitchan then – to stop the dark thoughts from forming as I pushed against the creaky door? I would not ask myself these questions for if I had, I would not have turned into the sinner I am now. After a minute, I turned around to the direction of the store. I took five uneasy steps and opened the door. I pulled it slowly to stifle the alarming creaks. Instantly, I noticed that the owner was right; I had entered another world. This was the place of my worship, a sacred ground of spiritual protection. I placed my steps carefully while I used my eyes to examine if my lady was there as before.

Of course she was. She was perched on the top of the counter where the owner had laid her. But where was the owner himself? In fact where was everybody? There was nobody in the

shop at all. The man was absent which meant that my lover and I alone in the shop. *Did he go out the back door for his usual smoke?* I asked myself.

I walked towards the lady, a little faster and quieter this time until I stood an inch behind the counter. I looked around again and used my ears to catch for any noises. There was nothing at all. I finally believed that the owner had gone out for a smoke. Such thoughts freed me from my *own* cage; it was not money that mattered in the first place for Zapdos. It was the thoughts of rebelling against the governing figure that created the stimulus. It was the sweet spirit of acting without my mother's control. I was going to break the laws. Mother's laws. God's laws. But my god was never going to know.

I set down the recorder and extended both my arms to reach Zapdos. When that proved difficult, I tiptoed as much as I could to help me in my crime. I wrapped my fingers until all ten of them gripped her. Oh how great it felt. The pleasure I've yearned for such an unbearable long time! Now we were together at last, our forbidden nuptial completed. She was mine forever.

I heard a sound coming from the back door. A small but a sure sound of footsteps got louder by each counting second. Impulsively, I snatched the figure from the counter and lifted my recorder from the ground. I sprinted to the door while disregarding those strident creaks, and ousted myself to the streets of *Mok-Dong*. I dashed to wherever my feet led me while I screamed inside my head. *Ha! I'm so happy. God I'm so happy. I knew I could do it! I told you that I was going to get it!*

Back home, I zoomed into my room and locked the door, making sure that nobody saw anything yellow. Inside my room, I held her up, brought her down to hug her, and kissed her on her beak. A small pockmark brushed against my finger; I turned her around where in the back of her pointy wings, there was an indentation: "Made in China."

"Haebitchan? What are you doing and why'd you lock this door?" A warm, familiar voice penetrated.

"Hey Mom. I'm, uh, changing clothes right now. So don't come in yet."

“Okay sweetie, but I want to let you know that your aunt called for you a minute ago. Something about the toy shop and the owner wanting to talk to you. Hope everything’s okay.”

It struck me then. I was literally frozen and did not know how to react. My mind was blank and my teeth were chattering. I was confused: where did my ceaseless pride and joy disappear to? I was now downright scared but did not know if it was mother’s punishments that blanketed me in fear or the sheer fact that something terrible was imminent. I was petrified at the thought of men in badges busting down my protective door and dragging me to jail. I feared their badges and guns more than I feared God, who I was told would send me to hell if I did anything bad, like stealing.

But I did not return the call. Instead, I cowered myself under the sheets while I convinced myself that this was just a bad dream. But with the accursed Chinese product gripped in my left hand, denial was futile. The owner obviously knew who the culprit of the missing doll was. But he did not call again after his unanswered phone call. He stopped pursuing the issue though he could have easily punished the rotten thief. Yet he kept his mouth quiet and so did I. My sweet mom did not know a thing. Never did I return to that shop again.

The next day was a school day, and I sat silently in my chair before the music class began. From my backpack, I took out my black and silver-colored recorder. When I gripped it, its rocky plastic texture was nothing like the soft waxy texture of Zapdos. I looked around the classroom, which was brimming with raucous uncontrollable children. They flashed their Pokémon figurines and made ugly sounds from their mouths, imitating the cries that Pokémon made. But none was holding Zapdos. A child came up to me and asked me where *my* Pokémon was.

“I don’t have any,” I replied.

That comment turned out to be the truth. When I arrived home, the yellow Pokémon doll, along with the rest of my Pokémon cards, had completely vanished from my room. I

asked my mother what happened and she responded, "I threw them away." And that was the end of the discussion.

I did not feel a deep sorrow over the loss. But I gradually began to ache from the guilt of deceiving my poor mama than the crime itself. The pain was like that of a small paper-cut; I felt its continuous sharp sting when I least expected it. But the size never mattered anyway. The thing that matters is that this wound never closes. I try to choke down the painful memories in my throat, but I regurgitate it to where my inner eyes can see too clearly. And even after a decade, the wound is still there.

The devilish event frightened me so much that I never dared to steal anything from anyone anymore. When I see precious items at the edge of my fingertips, an image of a yellow doll suddenly appears to me and looks at me with the same expression, it is the color of my sins, a living proof of a child who stole the yellow made-in-China doll from a local toy shop in the small town of *Mok-Dong*.

Last Monument

by Matthew Martins

I

We make a bold deep stroke to tear the earth apart.
With yellow jaws painted, with roaring engines leak,
with tracks in earthy clay and mud and rock and sun
let in by parting of the clouds for days on end,
stretched far as eyes can see, over the mine below,
with pirate deeds we had, the right to scour (the) land.

With roar of beasts of new, the ground does quake and tear
with oil pumped out from the deepest veins of earth;
heavy in its barrel it burns into the sky,
so free like fish in sea; till trapped by heavy black.

We are not animal; we build our homes of steel
tempered by the rage of fierce flames that burn in heart
of man made furnace that boils until it burns
the trees and stones of earth to ash and up to sky.

II

We have unearthed the bones, soiled and full of moss
from time pressed into mines. We then toss them aside
to fork our own thunder; like storm clouds we do crowd,
with gleaming bars of steel, with wood like foundations,
to set into the ground, to clear this old lot.
Again we make the strokes to tear the earth apart,

although I do suspect, that all was once so green,
looking around freely, in wonder of the gray
above waiting for flood of rain to wash me out,
but the dry air does press into my aching bones;

polluted by the rape of earthly elements
eroding far before we came to do the same,
but still I feel the weight upon my worn out back
as I do carry bags of sand to level earth,

III

to rout the plants in here to stop their free range grow.
The silent foreman says, "Well done" as he does sigh,
as he does oversee; the damage we have done
to bones of homes that we had used to live in peace
with trees around the yard, with poppies looking up
as children running past, trampled our gay garden;

until city towers did crack the blue of sky
and all old trains did stretch like bullets shooting by
with thick trails of smog that did not go awry
for back then there was no plan for this thick black.

When it all started we had nothing but our homes
that seem like old caves now with scanty fires lit
with us all forced so close together with the earth,
trusting like animals; we fence around our site.

IV

Now rooted into earth there is so little left
for us to take before we will have nothing left
to move before we build, *Last Monument* to us...

Garbage Mountain

by Scott Russell

The wind was cold on that February night. James found himself on a street corner in Oceanside, with his hands in his pockets, stomach empty, and \$200 dollars in his bag. His contract with the Marine Corps recently expired, and he was by a lamp-post out the back gate.

They gave him classes how to adjust to civilian life, and even went as far as to help him with a resume, but James wondered what good was all that. “Why,” he muttered to himself, trying to rationalize his situation and the events leading up to his present status.

Where everyone else in his “civilianization” class bragged about having places to go, money to be made, women to do, James had nowhere to go; and no place that he wanted to go. The instructors of his class seemed so “cock-sure” of themselves, but James knew they were merely trying to justify their place in life.

His Staff Sergeant tried to instill in him the benefits of staying for four more years. “Within four years, you will be sure to make Sergeant and have troops underneath you,” his Staff Sergeant recited. But James didn’t want four more years. He didn’t want troops underneath him. He had only risen to the rank of Lance Corporal, (E-3), a “give-me rank,” and was glad that was his final position. The Corps had been an unnatural environment to James.

Within the last four years, James had gotten married, started a family, and had two sons. When he came back from “the sand-

box,” they had cleared out, and left him with served divorce papers. He really had no other family. His Dad split when he was small (having died since) and his Mom was a total crackpot. Only her cats and a long list of thieving boyfriends would mourn her soon enough.

He had sold his beater-car for a thousand dollars two weeks ago. Some kid straight from the infantry school had taken it off his hands to scoot around town in. Knowing the likelihood of his situation in the near future, he spent most of his money on wine, women and song. He knew that he could make more money if he wanted.

Alone, he made his way to the rail station. As he walked, he thought to himself, *‘Los Angeles isn’t that great, but it is good enough for the time being.’* He only halfway believed his own thoughts. The city of angels, seemed about as inviting as the city of brotherly love; his hometown. Philadelphia should have been called the “the city of Cain and Able.” At least he knew Los Angeles would be warmer.

A woman in her late fifties, with a dirty brown shirt, a shawl, round face and half dozen shopping bags sat at the station. She was having a conversation with herself, when she looked up and realized that a jarhead was walking towards her.

“Do you have a dollar,” the woman said, with a quick follow up of, “I need fare for the Metro Link.”

Looking at the woman, as unkempt and wild as she was, James saw that this very well could be him by next month. James thought, *‘I’ll do better than that, I’ll get her a ticket for the train.’*

“Mama, it is your lucky day, I’ll get you a ticket.”

“I don’t want you to buy me the ticket, I want a dollar.”

“You can keep the money you have, and I will get you a ticket.”

“Damnation for you if you buy me a ticket,” then added, “all I want is a dollar.”

James considered what she said. He almost felt sorry for her. In a way, she reminded him of his mother. He could only imagine what his dollar would buy her. Well, if escape is wanted on this cold February night, well, then he had a dollar for her.

Los Angeles seemed like a place for new beginnings. L.A. was a Mecca for those wanting an escape, from the lost dreams of Hollywood, to the San Fernando “porn capital of the world” Valley. People from all walks of life, every corner of the world, flocked to Los Angeles. It was a warm dry habitat for all sorts of creatures as the desert osculated its masses. Even in its Ranchero days, Los Angeles was crooked at best. It bragged “a murder every night.”

The train came to the station, parting its doors for James. The sun was down, the sea air had a chill, and James had a one-way ticket. It didn’t matter much to him though. He sat down and looked down the body of the train. It looked uninviting and institutional. It was like the last four years of his life.

Sitting at the back of the car, he set his head back and rested. Soon his head ignited with visions of bright unforgiving light and blazing miserable heat. There was the smell of spices and

body odor, of thirst and cottonmouth. He woke and then stood in an empty building in the desert. No one was around, he was totally alone. He grabbed for his rifle, but it was not there! Tired from the sleep still in his head, he called for his platoon-mates. No one answered. Sweat pouring off his face, alone in a deserted building he started to tremble. He heard angry voices speaking Farsi somewhere close. He wiped his brow and started whispering a Hail Mary.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee...”

He heard footsteps down the corridor.

“Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed be the fruit of thy womb, Jesus...”

Rattling comes closer down a corridor, almost to the room where James was. He scrambles to find a hiding place.

“Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us...”

The door is kicked open and a grenade is thrown in. BOOM! An explosion tears through the room.

James opened his eyes to find himself still on the train and in a cold sweat. Someone had gotten on the train and dropped a heavy bag. He only had dreams like this when he drank. James searched for the cause of the unnerving sound. He only saw the bag lady from the station. It seemed as if she was following him, a demon that he couldn't shake.

She pulled out a bottle of Night Train and continued the conversation with herself. Sarcastically he thought, *‘it ain't no Thunderbird.’*

The train ride took about an hour and a half from Oceanside, (or Oceanslime if you preferred), to his destination at Union Station, near downtown L.A. He had a cousin that supposedly lived somewhere in L.A. County, but he had not seen her since she was a kid. Child Protective Services took her when she was five. Her parents were junkies. James knew that abandonment issues were not something to mess with. He had no inclination of showing up on her doorstep expecting a hand out, much less somewhere to stay.

He exited the train in the slowest way possible and started walking. He had no place to go, and no time limit in getting there. His feet felt heavy, almost like concrete. He walked through an underground walkway, to come out on the other side. He walked up into the main station. It was large and looked as if was recently remodeled to look as it did during the 1930's and 1940's: extremely art deco. He looked at the large mosaic set in the floor, and could not help but to be in awe of the thought of people trying to build something bigger than themselves. It was the mark of people that tried to will themselves out of depression; James could relate.

Out the other side of the station was Olvera Street. It was a lane about four blocks long, with all sorts of trinkets and memorabilia that visitors could buy to commemorate their expedition to Los Angeles, Mexican Style. The tourist trap was as empty as the native people's dreams, except for a couple of nice sit-down type restaurants that had a few dwindling customers. James imagined the place during the day with wandering mariachis, women selling marijuana leaf gold necklaces and holy rosaries at the same booths.

He ventured out onto a street beyond the "town square" of

Olvera Street. He walked along and began to think. Again, he asked himself the question, "Why?"

He sat on a curb and pulled out a Lucky Strike filter. He didn't especially like Lucky Strikes, but they had a cheap two for one sale on them on the base. He struck the match, put it to the end of his cigarette, and deeply inhaled a lungfull of smoke. He exhaled a cloud into the cold sky, as if he were trying to exhale his spirit into the night. This was his only constant vice, an enemy that very well might be the death of him. He sat looking at the plume of smoke, and noticed two homeless people that were starting to argue. They were a man and a woman, the woman shorter but a lot larger than the man was. They grew louder and louder, until they were yelling.

Man: "You took my shit!"

Woman: "I didn't steal nothing!"

Man: "I know you have it!"

Woman: "You must've gave it to that crack whore when you took her to the alley!"

The man reached out and hit her. The woman, now indignant, shook it off and bulldogged him with a follow up with her knee to his groin. Then she grabbed him by his shirt, hockey-style, and repeatedly hit him in the head until he went down. She grabbed a glass pipe from a small paper bag and threw it on the ground. It shattered, no liquid came from it. Almost as quick as it started, it was finished. The woman walked away as fast as her fat legs could take her.

James sat there with his mouth slightly agape, and eyes wide open. "What the hell?" He rationalized the violence he just wit-

nessed. He saw two people fight over a couple of rocks of cocaine. Want, greed, desire, accusing, imposing yourself, brutality; the fact that they were vagrants was beside the point. People, families, companies, politicians, and nations also handle their problems in such a manner. Many men are being slain in the armpit of the universe for such reasons and less. Be that as it may, it was hard to feel sorry for a couple of bums fighting over crack cocaine.

James concluded that he shouldn't stay there. It was out in the open, making himself a target for police, other bums and bad men looking to have fun at another's expense; but where? If he went to some place too out of the way, anything could happen to him and no one would be the wiser. He shouldered his bag and once again began to walk.

As he walked, he saw a virtual army of shopping cart laden homeless. Who knew why they were here? Who knew why *he* was here? His mind was moving in real time; nothing mattered.

He passed by a club with hordes of people acting a fool. One drunk called out from a caged-in patio challenging him. James was no fool; he kept on walking. He was cold and alone. Pride was not the best answer to his dilemma.

He was almost out of the downtown area and entering the small barrios. He saw an all night laundromat. It was almost empty and offered some warmth. He entered and sat on a bench with his back to a wall. After seeing that no one was going to pose an immediate threat to James, he closed his eyes.

James was standing in the middle of his old apartment in base housing in Camp Pendleton. He felt warm and secure at last.

It was twilight and the house was quiet. He felt at ease being in familiar surroundings.

The apartment was just as he remembered. It was meager, with linoleum flooring throughout the place. It had no air conditioning for the summer, but it had a heater for the winter. The kitchen was done up in late 60's early 70's style cabinetry and woodwork. The apartment had a stuccoed exterior, and a two-bedroom interior. The Corps felt that since the boys were so small, they could share a room. It was fine to James, because he did not have to worry about rent and utilities.

It seemed like a blessing and a curse that his boys were 10 months apart in age. It was all the adjustment of having a newborn baby, times two. At least James had the knowledge that they would look out for one another when they got older. This was something that James had longed for but had never experienced growing up.

James heard noises in the back room. He noticed that the hall of the house was a different color than he remembered. Out from the bedroom came his wife with his two boys. As they came out no one seemed to notice he was there. It was as if they couldn't see him. James wondered, '*am I dead?*' That somehow he was a ghost revisiting his family.

A knock came at the front door. His wife opened the door. It was his neighbors, Joseph and Kathleen, from next door. They were dressed up as if they were going out.

Kathleen said, "I am so glad that you are letting us take your boys; I hope your church retreat goes well."

James thought this was strange since he knew that his wife was not religious by any stretch of the imagination.

“I am glad that you are giving me the day off. It is so hard with James being gone.”

His wife kissed his boys, and then turned to the neighbors and said, “if they become too much of a handful, call me, and I will come pick them up.”

No sooner than the door closed behind his sons, there came another knock, but quieter, and this time from the back door. James felt pain.

Jenny opened the back door, and there stood another man dressed for going out, but was asked to come in.

James said, “Who is this guy?”

The man came in and embraced his wife.

James said louder, “Who the FUCK is this guy?”

The man took Jenny’s hand and led her to the back room.

James screamed, “No Jenny, awww NOOO,” as he grabbed his face!

He went off after them down the hall, and walked into the room. The man spent no time lying down on top of her in the bed.

James grabbed the baseball bat that he kept behind the door and scooted over to the bed.

“Boom!”

James suddenly woke up and asked, “Boom?” There wasn’t a crack of the bat off an intruder’s skull, but a boom instead. Bright fluorescent light streamed in his eyes as he realized where he was. The booming noise was someone’s sneakers in one of the laundromat’s dryers.

He saw that he was victim to the same behavior that the two homeless people displayed a couple hours before. Really, how could he expect other men not to want the same thing that he delighted in? Beautiful wife, physical intimacy, nice family, comfortable environs, these were things that James had wanted; but so did others. He thought to himself, *‘what is the point, to never want again? To master life? To guard vigilantly against others?’*

James heard a voice. “so you made it this far?”

James was brought back to the moment. To his surprise, the old woman from the train station was sitting down next to him. She sat croqueting what looked like another shawl, wearing giant scratched up glasses with scratched lenses and a pinch of snuff in her lip.

“Why are you following me?”

“All in time son, all in good time.”

The woman continued, “You seek many things, answers, fulfillment, a life that is your own, to make meaning of the meaningless. (Laughs) Before you start asking me questions, you don’t you start answering the ones you have for yourself.”

She had a point.

The woman said, "Do you think that I am the one to give you answers? (Chuckles) I am just an old woman. They call me crazy."

James inwardly sighed.

The woman continued, "I ain't no Santa Claus though... fat ugly cracker...giving presents to those who don't need 'em. Making those poor elves slave for their big red fur lined master."

James looked around him for some suggestion that he may be dreaming.

The woman said, "Ain't no dream, Jack."

Now James looked at her as if he was seeing a ghost.

"You look at life like there is something to be had. Like there is something to be held onto. There ain't no answers. Life is a sand box, you grab at what's in there, and it just slides through your fingers. (Chuckles) You are familiar with sand, Jack!?"

"I have sand in my guts," James replied. "That still doesn't answer who you are."

She answered, "I am the woman that you gave a dollar to, nothing more. So now, it is time for me to leave you with a little something, a little gem for your very own." She chuckled, then continued, "but you gonna have to work for it."

James looked at her in and took in the situation.

The woman said, “walk south to Los Feliz and go east. Take Riverside Drive through Griffith Park past Travel Town. You’ll see a great landfill, fancy word for the city dump; Climb to the top of the landfill. You must leave everything behind if you want to get though it.”

“Then what?”

She exclaimed back, “then what, nothing! I am not the one in need, you are. I am not the one searching for answers, you are. Take it or leave it Jack!”

At that, the woman put her crochet work away, and walked out of the laundromat.

James thought about it for a while, then shouldered his bag and went back out into the cold night. It seemed like he had been walking for hours. Beside the time he spent at the laundromat, he had been walking ever since he got off the train. It was probably about two o’clock in the morning by his estimation.

By the time he reached the entrance of Griffith Park at Riverside Drive, he was exhausted. He pressed on anyway. As he walked, he started talking to himself.

“What are you doing? You gonna make yourself sick walking and sweating in this cold...”

He answered himself, “perhaps...”

“Hey you know what?”

“What?”

“Who did Bob Wheeler quote when he drove us the long way up north when we were kids?” (Bob was a friend of the family.)

“It was Robert Frost, James.”

“What was the name of the poem that he’d say though?”

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

Past the ranger station, he walked while struggling to remember the poem.

James started out, “whose woods these are I think I know,” as he passed the trees that lined the road. “His house is in the village though; He will not see me stopping here,
To watch his woods fill up with snow.”

James wondered why he’d think of Bob Wheeler after all these years. He continued, “My little horse must think it queer... To stop without a farmhouse near, Between the woods and frozen lake, The darkest evening of the year.”

James was making time now. “He gives his harness bells a shake... To ask if there is some mistake... The only other sound’s the sweep, Of easy wind and downy flake.”

James struggled with his memory for the last stanza. It took him until he came to an outdoor train museum called Travel Town to remember the next few crucial lines. “The woods are lovely, dark and deep... But I have promises to keep... And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep.”

James walked along in silence as he contemplated Robert Frost's words. He was not a very learned man, but he had great reverence for those who had something worth saying.

The dark was surreal; it sucked you into its void. The dark didn't know anything, and didn't want to know anything. It took you in and covered all, like a cold velvet blanket. It didn't make any assumptions; it didn't care about things like that. After a while, the noise of late night cars from the freeway leaked in and broke the spell.

James said to himself, "Why am doing this...", then added the mantra, "And miles to go before I sleep."

He answered himself, "I have nothing in this world as my own... and miles to go before I sleep."

"It still is fool hearted to follow the advice of such a person... and miles to go before I sleep."

"No more fool hearted to spend the night in a laundromat... and miles to go before I sleep."

James had reached the bottom of the landfill the old woman told him about. He thought, '*well at least she has enough of her marbles to point me in the direction.*' James dropped his pack in some nearby bushes.

He went up and over the fence to get into the foothill of the landfill.

James looked up and saw the utter magnitude of this dirt-covered hill made of trash. He started one foot in front of the

other, “and miles to go before I sleep.” He started breathing hard, “and miles to go before I sleep.” His thighs started to burn, “and miles to go before I sleep.” He put his back into it, “and miles to go before I sleep.” He put his heart into it, “and miles to go before I sleep.” The sky was growing lighter, “and miles to go before I sleep.” He started hiking the last tier of the landfill, “and miles to go before I sleep.” By the time he reached the summit of Garbage Mountain, he was hurting and out of breath.

James stood there and took in the summit of the wasteland, under a sky that grew lighter. “Why am I here?” Before him was the gateway of the San Fernando Valley, with its millions of inhabitants, still snug in their beds on a cold frosty morning.

James looked to the east and, in time, he saw the sunrise over a smog-filled valley, on top of a mountain of garbage and he caught a glimpse of why he was there.

The Hurricane

by Joseph Lusnia

Man does not live by bread alone and Johnny Shea LeMaster knew that better than anybody else. Cocaine was what made Johnny Shea hungry, not snorting it, but selling it. He loved dealing cocaine, he loved the money it made him even more, and no hurricane was going to separate Johnny Shea from his money, except maybe his partner George Firbank. You see George and Johnny Shea decided to keep their “stuff” out by Rome Parish, in a house that once belonged to George’s grandma. George’s grandma was an old corn whiskey distiller and she had all these neat little hiding places out on her property. Nobody lived out there anymore so George and Johnny Shea would keep their product in her chimney. Back in twenty-nine her husband had this secret compartment built up their chimney; it was in one of those old cooking fireplaces that you could practically stand in. Every time Johnny Shea would go up there to get some of their stash he would swear he smelled fresh baked cornbread. George’s grandpa had some bricks taken out right where the chimney hit the roof line, this way he could get at it from both inside and outside the house. He replaced those bricks with what looked like red graham crackers. But these were really thin bricks. It wasn’t for keeping their whiskey; he used it to hide their money and now George and Johnny Shea hid their cocaine there and it was time to go get it. It wasn’t that Johnny Shea distrusted George, they were partners for years; he just knew that desperate times made men desperate and these were desperate times all over the Bayou. New Orleans was half way out to sea, or so it seemed, and Lake Ponchartrain was now part of the Gulf of Mexico, and if the water line on your home was only at ten feet, you were one of the lucky ones.

The last time George and Johnny Shea saw each other both

their feet were on solid ground. George was too drunk to drive himself home so Johnny Shea threw him in the back seat of his pick up and took him home. Two days later the rains came. Johnny Shea waited for three days until after the rains stopped before he decided to go out to Rome Parish. The only way to get out there now was by boat and Johnny Shea didn't own one, and lucky for him, neither did George. The possibility that George got out before the levees broke did cross his mind but Johnny Shea wasn't taking any chances. Cocaine was good currency and the laws of supply and demand would weigh heavily in his favor. He was just a boat away from being the richest man in Lafourche Parish. But at this minute a boat was more valuable than a dollar bill in a penny candy store. It was the only way in, out, and around the southern portion of Louisiana. Right now all boats were being used to either rescue those folks who had not evacuated, or bring supplies to those who had, which was most of the people in Lafayette and Lafourche Parish. As a matter of fact, Johnny Shea got into an argument just yesterday with a guy who was trying to rescue him.

There was Johnny Shea up upon Rubidoux's roof when this guy, looking like a poor excuse for a scarecrow, comes by in this bass fishing boat with a woman, three teenage girls, and two little old grand ladies. The man told Johnny Shea he was there to rescue him. Johnny Shea told the man to fuck off. Not taking no for an answer the man stood up, the boat began to rock from side to side so much so Johnny Shea thought one of the old grand ladies was going to plop right out. Don't you understand I'm here to rescue you, the scarecrow told Johnny Shea. For a minute Johnny Shea thought he heard him say I'm here to save your soul. As he repositioned himself to the back of the house, just to make his point, the man gave it one more try, this time telling Johnny Shea he wouldn't be back. The only thing Johnny Shea heard after that was the motor farting its way up what used to be Coventry Road, but if that scarecrow were to show up

today Johnny Shea would dump him and the rest of them on old Rubidoux's roof and take the damn boat and save his own soul. But that was not happening; the only thing coming now was the wind.

Johnny Shea stood up one more time. If anyone was within shouting distance they would have seen what they thought was a bear left stranded on the highway wearing blue jean coveralls and a Dixie Diesel hat. Johnny Shea didn't know if it was the wind that brought the smell or he just hadn't noticed it till then, but it seemed to be all around him. It wasn't putrid, like when the septic overflowed from too much gumbo on Fat Tuesday, but when it made its way inside your nostrils it just stayed there. It was now as much a part of him as the crack in his ass. And with it came the devastation that he was truly alone. Not a soul existed that he could see, not a bird, not a snake, not a roach, not even a fly. Oh, every now and then something would float by, an old picnic table, a baby's crib, the top of someone's car port. Other than that it was Johnny Shea and nothing else. Everywhere he looked was a roof where a house once was. Anyone flying overhead would have been astonished to see these red, green, black and brown patches floating motionless on a motionless sea. Reaching into his overalls he pulled out his forty-five and started shooting. Thwack went the branch of the apple tree; ping went the red brick dust off Rubidoux's chimney. Then just before he was going to blow out Fortnoy's upstairs bedroom window he saw something coming his way like a lost soul on the river Styx, it was a boat ... A row boat... And it was empty.

It's hard not to be thankful when things you need come your way, even when they are not exactly what you wanted, but Johnny Shea was far less appreciative than one would think when the rowboat finally made it over to Rubidoux's house. It lodged itself between the barn and someone's trailer. Look at this shit, Johnny Shea thought to himself. How the fuck am I going to make it in that? But he had no other options so he made his way down

from Rubidoux's roof and climbed into that rickety excuse for a boat. A quick look see and he came up with two oars and nothing else; pushing off the eave of Rubidoux's house with one of the oars he set himself in the direction of Rome Parish and his cocaine.

You would think that after days of doing nothing but waiting Johnny Shea would be more than capable of rowing that rickety old boat; instead, his arms were starting to feel like he was rowing in molasses and his back was stiffening up like Luanne Turner's legs on prom night. He looked around trying to get his bearings straight; it was hard for him to tell exactly where he was but he knew he was quite a ways from where he started. The houses were now farther apart, meaning he was getting closer and closer to the farmlands, which is where George Firbank's grandma had her place. Still, he could not make out any landmarks that he would normally see and with the way the mechanics of rowing works it was hard for Johnny Shea to see where he was going. He plowed himself into a house on more than one occasion, hit the top portion of a tractor trailer and the steeple of the First Baptist church on the way out of town, but this time Johnny Shea didn't need to see what was coming up next he heard it first, hey... "Hey you, over here." When Johnny Shea turned around to look, all he could see was a magpie that had got tangled up in somebody's wash. Johnny Shea was doing whatever he could to stay clear of that old magpie to the point of where it might as well not even been there at all.

"Hey you.... "sonny over here.... I'm over here" squawked the old magpie. Johnny Shea just kept on rowing; trying his best to avoiding the old magpie to his right but the current was pushing him, sending him right toward where he didn't want to go. "I'm over here... Thank you Lord... Thank you". Almost by instinct Johnny Shea looked around as if the Lord was somewhat nearby. The old magpie turned out to be an old colored woman.

"You just hold on there, grandma, there's a preacher out res-

cuing old souls like yourself. He'll be here soon."

"What..." she squawked. "There ain't nobody comin'. I've been out here for going on four days and you be the only soul I ever seen, that is if you got a soul."

Holding on to his oars and letting the boat drift he turned to the old woman and said, "Look, I really need to get where I'm going, but I promise, I will get you on my way back."

"If you don't mind I likes to go with you, my weary bones can't take one more hour out here. I'm sure there has to be something in your life that you're grateful for; come on, do a turn."

Johnny Shea just held his breath, kept in for just a second and let it out, "Piece of shit boat." "All right," he said, his mouth full of regret, and started to push the boat closer to the house where the old woman was bouncing up to greet him like a young girl at a church picnic.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you. Lordy thank you," said the old woman inching her way over to the edge of her roof. "And thank you so much, you kind hearted soul, for coming to the rescue of an old coal stove like myself. I don't know what I'd do if you hadn't been coming this way."

That old woman was skinny as a twig off a pecan tree and just about the same color, but Johnny Shea could see she had some muscles underneath that crepe paper skin. As soon as she sat her boney ass down in the boat Johnny Shea thought about taking out his forty-five and shooting her right there; but he knew if he was going to do that, he just should have left her to die on the roof. Is she ever gonna stop yappin'? he thought.

Between all that yapping, the wind blowing, and his arms feeling like empty sleeves in an old suit, Johnny Shea hadn't noticed that he just passed the Rome Grain and Feed. It wasn't until he saw that giant pig shaped sign float by his right eye that he realized where he was. He just needed to keep rowing straight for what he thought was two more miles, then make a left turn, or

whatever you do in a boat, at the Dixie Diesel. He was sure that Dixie Diesel sign would be well enough above the water line for him to know where to make that turn. Then he would be about a quarter mile from the Firbank's farm. This was the home stretch for Johnny Shea. He could feel it. He had no idea what a gram of cocaine was going for, but he was sure he could name his own price now, whatever it would be. Johnny Shea kept rowing, his arms practically dangling, and then just as that pig came into full view the old colored woman jumped up and with her skinny little body blocked it from his sight.

"Hey you, over there hey you" she started shouting waving her arms at something that was too far behind him to notice, "Hey don't worry now. We's coming to get you." She looked down at Johnny Shea. "There's a man up there on that roof, we gots to go get him."

Johnny Shea tweaked his head just a bit to give a looks see at what this old woman was yelling about. He could see the old farmer sitting up on the roof like a stone, his eyes fixed on the old colored woman waving her arms and yelling like a buzzard. He had also noticed that in all the time he'd been rowing someone had thrown a gray tarp over the sky. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to go get that old farmer, he could sure use an extra pair of arms to row, especially if he wanted to make it back before night. So he started to move the boat closer to the roof and the farmer sitting on it. That's when he noticed the dog. There, right next to the farmer, sat an old coon dog that had to be at least twenty years old and as brown as a lump of Louisianan clay. When he was close enough he tossed the oars into the boat and grabbed hold of the eave of the roof with his right hand that old hound started barking but never moved an inch just like the old farmer, whose eyes never came off the old colored woman, the whole time never even moving a wrinkle.

"Come on we're here to get you" she said, happy as punch at rescuing that old farmer.

"I ain't getting in THAT boat," the farmer announced as the old woman stood up, her knees bent trying to steady herself so she could help him in the boat. But Johnny Shea didn't need to hear anymore then what he just heard and started to push away.

"Hold on there. We ain't going nowhere," she said to Johnny Shea. Then, turning her attention back to the farmer, she said, "Maybe you don't want to get in THIS boat, but if you don't, you gonna die. You see anybody else comin', cause there ain't. There's nobody here, we's it me, you, and him," she said pointing one of her boney fingers at Johnny Shea. The farmer held his ground not even a breath making its way through his body. Having had enough of this bullshit, Johnny Shea took out his forty-five and aimed in the direction of the farmer and his dog.

"What are you going to do shoot me if I don't get in your god dang boat?" asked the farmer, never once taking his eyes off the old colored women.

Johnny Shea answered the farmer. "If you don't get in the boat I'm not going to shoot you... I'm going to shoot your lazy, cheese eaten, son of a bitch dog. Now get your ass in this fucking boat." He cocked back the trigger to get his point across.

Convinced that Johnny Shea would shoot his dog the farmer started to make his way down to the edge of the roof, the old hound dog right behind him. The old colored women tried to go over and help him, but the farmer shot her a look that told her his heart not quite changed much since the radio was invented and she sat back down knowing she had done the right thing by making Johnny Shea stop. Johnny Shea, on the other hand, really didn't give a shit what was going on inside that farmer's heart and handed him a paddle. "Here, take this and start rowing," Johnny Shea told him. "We're headed on over to the Firbank place. You know where it is."

The old farmer sat down next to Johnny Shea. "What the hell you going over to that old moonshiners place any way? You ain't no Firbank."

“None of your god damn business. Just row.”

“Well, whatever it is, it ain’t there. haven’t you noticed the water’s been rising... one of the levees must have busted through again; it’s been getting higher by the hour.”

Johnny Shea looked at the old colored woman wondering how things looked from where she was sitting, the two of them, him and the farmer, sitting side by side, and the hound dog squat in the middle. His thoughts were broken by the sound of water lapping up against the boat. “Row,” was all he said. When they came to the Dixie Diesel, Johnny Shea told the farmer to just keep his oar in the water, not to row, and Johnny Shea would do the rest. He pushed that oar through the water like he was being chased by a gator even hitting one of the diesel pumps as the boat made its turn. Once the boat was put on its course, Johnny Shea told the farmer to start rowing again. The farmer was pretty strong and they had made good time since he came down off that roof. He thought the old colored woman’s yapping just made the farmer row even harder. She just kept going on and on about the rain, about how Johnny Shea was an angel sent down from heaven, how the farmer should be thankful they were going out to Furdunks, or wherever, because if not ,they would have never found him. On and on she went. Johnny Shea was convinced that if the old colored woman kept on talking they could make it back before the moon came out.

The Firbank house sits on about twenty acres of property. It used to be a hundred and twenty, but George sold most of it off, with nothing much around but pine trees and magnolias. Out in front sit six tall pine trees, three on each side of the driveway, keeping watch of whoever comes up the driveway. You would have to drive right between them to get up to the house. Johnny Shea could see the tops of those old pine trees now, battered and bruised, naked except for a few pine needles not yet ready to let go. The farmer knew the way to go, so there was not much talking about how to get there. Then the crying started. Just as

they were gliding under those pine trees, the old colored woman started weeping, just little sounds at first like when a kettle starts getting ready to boil. Then pure dismal sobbing, creating havoc all over her body so much so that Johnny Shea had to put his oar up in the boat and ask her what was the matter.

“Nothing... And everything” she said, her face cradled in her boney hands, her finger nails the color of a chocolate milk shake. The farmer just kept on rowing. “Look at all this...” Her bronze arms stretched wide, her barren breasts barely pushing up against her house dress. “This was someone’s home... Gone... All our homes gone. There is nothing left... Everything I own lays against my skin, but then I am so thankful that I am here with you.. Yes and you too Mister. I ain’t getting in that boat... Because we will live to see another day... We will see our homes rebuilt.. we...” Johnny Shea put his oar back in the water and matched his time with the farmer. Whatever the old colored women was selling he wasn’t buying. They were now no more than fifty yards from the house; he could see that old chimney standing high on that roof like it was the Statue of Liberty. He could also see the farmer was right, there was a bit less of those pine trees sticking up out of the water than when they first made the turn at the Dixie Diesel.

There was an old magnolia that grew right at the side of the house where the chimney sat, it’s crown was bobbing up out of the water, Johnny Shea maneuvered the boat on over to that magnolia. He had the farmer grab hold of it with both hands as Johnny Shea made his way onto the roof.

“Don’t tell me you’re after that old moonshiners money, there aint no money in that chimney. If he had twelve dollars and sixty cents come Friday he was lucky. I think their whiskey made more people sick than it did drunk.”

“You just hold on to that magnolia like she was your girl-friend. This will only take me about a second.”

Just then the farmer let go of the magnolia and pushed off

the side of the house. The colored woman, realizing what he was doing, let out a yelp to get Johnny Shea's attention. Johnny Shea turned around to see the farmer lift his paddle like he was going to lay upside the old colored woman's head. The sound of Johnny Shea's forty-five cracked through the stillness of the bayou, not a single bird taking flight.

"Hold on..." he shouted. Everyone stopped, but before he could say, or do anything else, all three of them looked to the sky. The sound of propellers took over the crack of Johnny Shea's forty-five and they all looked up to see what was flying overhead, but nothing was there. The sky was empty, just a gray slate of nothing. But that sound kept coming, getting stronger, and it was heading straight for the Firbank's. Now they all looked at each other wondering what it was. As it got louder the water behind the house started to roll making the boat rock back and forth. And then there it was, it came slipping around the back of the house, all sleek and silvery, its big fan-like prop now just a low hum. It was one of those Fanboats they use to get around the Florida Everglades. Only this one had two Louisiana State Deputies on it.

"Everybody okay here? Is this your property, sir?" asked the first Deputy.

"No sir. It belongs to a friend of mine. I was out here checking up on it. That's when I came across these two and took them on." Johnny Shea was quick to answer.

"Lucky for you we heard your gun go off, usually we can't hear a thing... We were just making our last rounds in this area to see if there was anybody left and when we heard the shot we looked around and saw you standing up on the roof." Said the second deputy as he started to tie their boat to the magnolia just below where Johnny Shea was standing.

"No need, I think, we're gonna be okay. We made it this far."

"Well, just the same, we'd like you all to come with us. Another levee broke and the flows headed this way. You would

never make it back to anywhere by nightfall in that,” said the first deputy, pointing to the row boat with the colored woman, the farmer, and the farmer’s dog sitting in it. “Why’d you fire that gun?” the Second Deputy asked, looking up at Johnny Shea.

“I was just seeing if anyone else was around before we headed back.”

“Well it’s a good thing you did. Ma’am, let me help you,” the Second Deputy said, extending his arm to the old colored lady. “And what’s your name Ma’am ?” he asked, taking hold of her hand in the way one would hold the hand of a princess.

“My name is Lee Washington, but everybody calls me Mama Lee. you can calls me Mama Lee.”

“Well, Mama Lee you can have a seat right here,” said the second Deputy, easing Mama Lee onto a big green cushion, “And you, you old rascal what’s your name?” he asked the farmers dog.

“Delacroix,” replied the farmer.

“Sorry, Mister Delacroix. I meant the dog’s name.”

“That is his name. My name is Claremont.”

“Sorry about that Mister Claremont. You want to give me a hand getting old Delacroix here, into the boat.”

The first Deputy is still looking up at Johnny Shea, “You mind if I take that gun Mister er...”

“Name’s Johnny Shea. Johnny Shea Le Master. But everyone calls me Johnny Shea,” Johnny Shea hesitates, quickly going over in his mind how many times he’s shot that gun and how many bullets he has left. Realizing he may only have just one bullet left in the gun, he extends his arm, giving the gun to the Deputy, “Here ya go.”

The Deputy takes the gun from Johnny Shea and goes to help him down from the roof and into the boat, “Well, Johnny Shea, looks like this is your lucky day.”

Mad Mask

by Paris Matic

Screaming Madman. Screaming masked man
molds himself together with straight laced skin.
Hidden behind faces, spanning a globe of emotions.
Do you sense what he feels? Oh, illusions of grandeur.
His favorite place is the head cage that contains his
madness.
One man freak show. Passion of sin glows deep in his
eyes:
“Whose skin shall I wear tonight?” he asks the
Mannequin.

Sunlight swells the flesh so brightly, binding and
blinding,
melting strangers under the sun, his terror has begun.
All those who oppose turn into wax, useless distractions.
Deception drives young fools to desire enigmatic beauty;
his
crimson eyes are like pitted cherries, leaving blood
thirsty stares.
“Whose face shall I claim tonight?” he asks the
Mannequin.
Dine on poor souls and carve another mask for the
wardrobe.

Strawberry Blonde

by Rebecca Cypherd

She was born as though she'd been left out to dry in the sun a little too long. Everything faded: her eyes, her skin, her personality—but most of all her hair. Strawberry blonde, a color which was neither truly red nor any kind of blonde, but stuck somewhere in-between. She stared at that hair often, twirling the waves around her fingers and watching it move in the stolen bit of mirror she hid in the closet.

She loved mirrors, but feared them. Loved the cold, jagged edge and the way her heart skipped when she felt around in the dark for it. One time it cut her, straight to the bone almost and she screamed. Not in agony, but delight. But when Mother asked what was wrong the faded girl shook her head and kept her hands hidden behind her back, rejoicing in the slippery feel of her fingers as they wound around each other, that slickness turning sticky as they dried. Mother wasn't happy, and for three days the girl swallowed nothing but blood.

But her fear for mirrors was stronger still, and she hated the way they stole the light. She hated the way they never lied or told stories, and that sharp shattering sound when they hit the ground never went unheard. The mirrors gave all her secrets away.

After the screaming shatter she tried to push the scattered bits away, frantic fingers shaking with the same rapid beating of her heart she gathered them all into a shining pile. Kimberly took a second to admire the collection of diamonds and rubies she kneeled before. The sharp pinpoints as she clenched her fists sent jolts shivering through her spine in waves of what felt to her like what freedom would feel like: exhilarating and real.

“What have you done?” A horrified voice whispered from the corner.

“It’s beautiful,” Kimberly replied. The blood from her hands dripped into the pile, glittering like precious jewels and she wanted to roll in them, feel the freedom over every inch of her naked body. She wanted to glitter like rubies and diamonds; no longer dull, but glorious. She would be something to be looked at and admired. She would be something.

“What are you thinking? She’ll have heard it, you know. She’ll be coming. And oh, if she thinks it’s me Kimmy, I swear I’ll kill you. I would do it, you know.”

Kimberly smiled at where Jessie cowered in the corner with her shadow huddled up tight, being hugged by the yellowed wallpaper, flushed with swirls of soft pink floral. Even the room was faded.

“I could do it,” Jessie said, but her soft, wavering voice told the opposite truth.

Kimmy’s eyes returned to the scattered remains of the mirror and a crawling need flushed across her pale skin in heat waves. With one hand paused over the pile of jewels and shaking with desire, she remembered the sin of mirrors. She heard the warning footsteps, slow but ever so steady, and rising the staircase leading to her room with each step screaming the message: *You’ll never be beautiful. You’ll die trying.*

Kimberly could feel the air grow thin, and by the sound of quick, shallow breathing from the darkened corner she could tell Jessie could feel it too. The other girl was mumbling, quick and impossible to decipher words which may have not even been

words at all. She was speaking a language known specifically to the girls Mother: fear.

Mother was on her way, and the girl's heart fell into the pile of stolen jewels. Pushing her palms into the stinging mess she swept the evidence back into the empty closet and closed the door, leaving nothing but a smear across the grayed linoleum. She held her hands for a second longer against the wall, pushing the warm sensations in as deeply as she could, pulling a gasp from her stomach and fluttering her eyelids shut. For those moments she could do nothing but feel. She could sense all of her blood at once, shuddering inside of her in warm tingling waves.

"Look, Kimmy, come look. How do we get rid of it?" Jessie's high pitched voice broke the ecstasy and when Kimberly turned the other girl placed her hand on the remaining smear, her hand becoming a vibrant red as it touched the blood. Jessie was shaking and her entire body was covered in sharp goosebumps. She turned her hand before her eyes, watching the blood shimmer in the dullness of the room.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Kimberly said, scooting forward and pressing her hands along the floor to feel the sharp pieces embed themselves in her, deeper until it was all she could feel. She reached the other girl and reached up to grasp her hand. Jessie gasped and Kimberly felt the warm slip of blood meet her own.

"This could be ours," she said.

"She'll kill us." Jessie's arm went limp and her eyes grew wide. The slow footsteps had stopped just outside the girl's room.

Kimberly's heart barely beat as the chipped golden handle

shook. The lock stuck slightly, always requiring a moment teasing before it would give in. She pressed her hands to the ground, shots of energy assuring herself that she was still there, still in that room and still waiting. Jessie was holding her injured hand between her bare thighs and streaks of red had run across the tops of them, so vibrant against the pale skin.

The door finally gave, pushed open to its fullest extent to reveal Mother. She smiled, the beautiful chaos of scattered teeth striking Kimberly's heart as she pictured her own teeth. She had studied them before in stolen pieces of mirror, and the lined up rows of pale white had driven her mad for a week straight.

She had tried everything in that week, using her fingers to try and twist them, to send cracks shooting into her skull, but which were barely visible when she looked again into the truthful glass, her head spinning and vision blurring with headache. She had made Jessie scream to cover the sound of her trying to smash them into the posts of their shared bed.

The sound had attracted Mother that time too, and seeing what Kimberly was doing took the bed away and the girls slept on the floor instead.

"I heard a noise," Mother said from the doorway, pulling Kimberly back to the sharp ache in her palms. "What have you been doing, girls?"

She pushed herself deeper into the room, the expanse of her dimpled, sand-colored body barely fitting through the door. Kimberly gasped at her beauty. Her breath stilled as Mother closed the door behind her, the absence of light carving shadows in the valleys of her body. She was the way Kimberly imagined nature.

Her hair like hundreds of sticks, falling to rest at curved angles around her shoulders and the face with deep set, pure shadowed pebble black eyes—no muddied mess, like hers. The way she walked toward the girls made her nude body flow over itself, the waves of the curves and skin rippling even after she had stopped moving and stood towering over them.

She lowered herself to their level, her body expanding around itself. She reached out and her short fingers traced the now dried blood on Jessie's thigh. The girl shook, the air seeming to vibrate in her chest. Kimberly's heart had stayed still, and the quieter her body became the further she pushed her hands into the ground.

"Have you been naughty girls?" Mother locked her fingers all the way around Jessie's thin wrist and yanked. Jessie fell forward onto her knees with her injured hand in Mother's lap and her other angled in a twist, stuck between her knees. Kimberly eyed the way the other girl's arms were so jagged and full of bones, just like her own. They were like beasts, hideous and aching to be as full of beauty as Mother.

Jessie was mumbling again. She was the weaker of the two, the kind of girl Mother had raised her to be. The girls were not supposed to move unless Mother told them, not even when Mother wasn't around. They were fed when they were fed, they talked when Mother gave them something to say, and they never, ever left the room.

Kimberly broke that rule when she was young and new to the house. Jessie had warned her as she slipped a broken linoleum piece between the door and the wall, shoving the lock out of place.



“She’ll kill you,” she had said. “You never leave the room, that’s the rule.”

Kimberly hadn’t listened and as she pulled the door open and stepped into the light she found herself surrounded by mirrors. Pieces set like a great mosaic all across the walls so she could see herself in a million little pieces. She was used to her reflection at the time, when she was new to the house and was still used to her appearance, and before Mother had educated her about the horrible way her body stuck at angles like twigs and that faded hair, no color and no life which fell straight down. How she hated that hair.

She took one of the pieces and carried it back into the room, clutching it in her hands. She heard movement downstairs and only after the lock was clicked securely into place did she open her hands and show Jessie her treasure.

“Girls like you don’t stay,” Jessie had replied, turning away from the shining piece. They were only children at the time, girls taken from the world for the crime of not being beautiful. “She doesn’t fix you if you break the rules. She doesn’t make you beautiful.”

Kimberly hadn’t cared. For a week she clutched that first stolen piece to her chest, sometimes tight enough to slice her palms, and coat the glass surface with the sticky blood. But soon enough Mother found it, and that was when she taught the girl her first lesson. In a room with mirrors for walls Kimberly learned that first crucial lesson: You are not beautiful.

But Kimberly had never lost her love-hate relationship with the mirrors.

Mother’s eyes turned to Kimberly, but she didn’t loosen her

grip on Jessie. Jessie was watching Mother with wide eyes, tears running down her cheeks and Kimberly wasn't sure if they were tears of pain or of awe.

"Her hand is bleeding, Kimmy," Mother said. She ran her full fingers over the small hole in Jessie's hand. It had stopped bleeding, but when Mother pushed down a few more drops managed to seep out. "Her ugly little hand. How am I to fix it if it scars?"

Kimberly shook her head, unable to talk past the shaking in her throat.

Mother let go and Jessie pulled her hand back to her chest, clutching it as though it were something precious, and at the same time something to fear. As the pure black eyes scanned her, Kimberly's heart stuttered back into beating and the blood rushed through her body and her hands felt as though they were on fire. She felt alive when Mother looked at her, just as she felt alive when the jagged edges of the mirrors sliced her.

"Can I see your hands, Kimmy, please?" The sweet rasp of her voice crooned, followed by the pleasant rough scent of smoke on her breath. Strong fingers wrapped around Kimberly's wrists and she thought she heard Jessie whimper as Mother pulled her forward into the soft, plush of her body, spiked with short hairs which brushed across Kimberly's weak, smooth skin.

Mother found the shards of broken glass glittering in Kimberly's palms, and poked them down, one at a time as though she were counting. With each sharp press Kimberly gasped, and Mother's body rumbled with laughter and the scent of smoke surrounded her once more.

"Why, you have been naughty."

Kimberly looked up to the expanse of Mother's face, and in the very center where the two small pebbles hid in shadows were the eyes more beautiful than anything in the world. Struck by the presence of Mother, Kimberly was unable to even be afraid. Tears wove down her pale cheeks and she grasped on to the flesh around her. She was in awe.

"Forgive me, Mother," she cried. "I only wished."

"Wished? Whatever for?" Another cackling rumble. Kimberly could hear it deep in the wide ribcage.

"To see."

"And why on earth would you want to see yourself, to see the hideousness I must hide from the world? Punishing you is simply not enough."

Mother stood, letting Kimberly fall to her feet, sobbing with her hands over her face, covering her skin in sparkling red diamonds.

"I only wished," she was saying. The words repeating in her heart and mind like a mantra spilled from her mouth. Mother's steps as she crossed the room to the door made the house shake with power.

"Wish no more, Kimmy, my dear. Leave your room tonight, and come to me. And then, then I'll make you beautiful."

Kimberly raised her eyes, still soaked with tears but Mother was gone. Jessie crawled to her, put her hands on either side of her tear and blood soaked face. She was shaking, still, and squeezing too tight for comfort.

“Kimmy,” she said. She repeated the name over and again, but Kimberly didn’t respond. Her heart sent jolts straight through her, shivering and jumping, a new kind of ecstasy.

Tonight I will be beautiful, she told herself. She pictured her new self the way she pictured Mother. Her straight teeth, pale and lined up, would be fixed. Her eyes no longer muddy blue, but straight black and the strawberry blonde curse of hair, always a little bit faded; all of it would be gone.

She looked into her hands, and imagined her whole body that way, sparkling with diamonds and rubies. No longer hideous, no longer faded, but brilliant. How would it feel? How would it taste?

Jessie was still repeating her name, shaking her and crying, but Kimberly didn’t care. For tonight she would be beautiful.

The Adorable Room

by Sachí Terry

I know why I think of you
I treat you as the adorable room in my mind
With breath held like a stagnant closet full of empty
coat hangers
Breath held like a child expecting skin to break during
the fall
because the touch of you will distract what is healing
Breath held in hopes that the tear will hold, too
The closet fashioned you last summer with allergies
Long-haired and dusty, needing the remove
Lungs empty, needing the fill of succored orchids,
ripened love
The adorable room sits sparse and drowns my thoughts
And there is always a hallway that passes it
I open it sometimes
I see you, the broken wardrobe, the
Imaginary boy there telling me about solar winds and
drunken fathers
Impoverished beginnings and big dreams, scenic spots
(I think he taught me how to eat stale fruit loops from
the box and how to stay naked past three)
Now cartoons make laughter out of my pity
A finishing ribbon is always set toward you
Did you know I run there without knowing?
That one day, I'll win three summers ago
Gravitates in the adorable room
While the credits roll
Holding on past the end,
I know why I think of you, you still inhabit me

A Sylph in the Midst

by Mustafa Nasrulla

Come hither sweet girl; sit beside me by the fire.
What's your name; would you like a cup of water?
Let me look into your eyes of blue,
Oh my, there are but few like you.
Rest your head upon my shoulder
I'll support you like a pillar,
Hold you and keep you warm
In this foggy night with stars shooting down.

Her fragrance sends me into a trance,
A spell I'd rather not awaken from for the nonce,
Her voice soothing, gentle and calm,
Soft like a zephyr through a palm.
I could listen to her forever
Even if she speaks of nothing clever.

Let's forget the day's torture,
Let's spend this night together,
Lie down with me, oh beauty;
My tent can accommodate up to three,
Intoxicate me with your lips
Wrap your legs around my hips.

Where'd she hail from in these woods so dense
Bereft of provisions and accouterments?
This query awakened in me a terror
For a tale of horror came ringing in my ear:
A girl abandoned since ancient times
Took to haunting this forest of pines.

Quickly I sprang up from her
A reflex of fear; benumbed with terror.
To brave a glance back I dared not,
What if she changed form, I thought.
I felt sad by degrees
To think such pulchritude was otherworldly.
I had come this far with her
What could I suffer to go further?

Finally I pushed away my fear
And turned around to look at her,
To my dismay there was no one near;
Her scent evanesced and gone was the zephyr.

The White City

by Beth Andreoli

Mount Lowe has a trailhead at the top of Lake Avenue, in Altadena. You can park on the street, although it fills up on weekends. Heading through the opening on the right of the big gate, I stick to the old potholed road, and then veer right past the water fountain and notebook stand. This is where you sign in to let people know where you are in case you disappear. The trail crosses the bridge on top of the wash to the right and there's a sign for the beginning of the path.

I've been up this trail, sometimes referred to as "The Haunted Forest," many times, working through chaparral up steep inclines. There may be the occasional diamondback, calmly sliding across the narrow path, or rattling a warning if I get too close. I slow down on the gravelly parts of the trail, and stay off the eroding edges. There are some updrafts and maybe a hawk or two circling in them effortlessly while I trudge up the tight switchbacks.

My head starts pounding discouragingly at the steep beginning. It's worth the effort. I watch for the short mile markers stuck into the ground; first "1" makes me feel like I've done a lot of sweaty work and gotten nowhere, but before I know it I'll see "2" and realize I'm almost there. From here Pasadena, Glendale, and all of LA spread at my feet, snaking highways glittering in the sun, rows of trees, and the occasional golf course or park like a green island in a sea of stucco. If it's clear enough I might glimpse the sea.

The trail gets hot in places; there's not much shade until it forks about two and a half miles up the trail, where the bees make their nests. The path on the right leads to some ruins of a resort nicknamed "The White City," also known as the luxu-

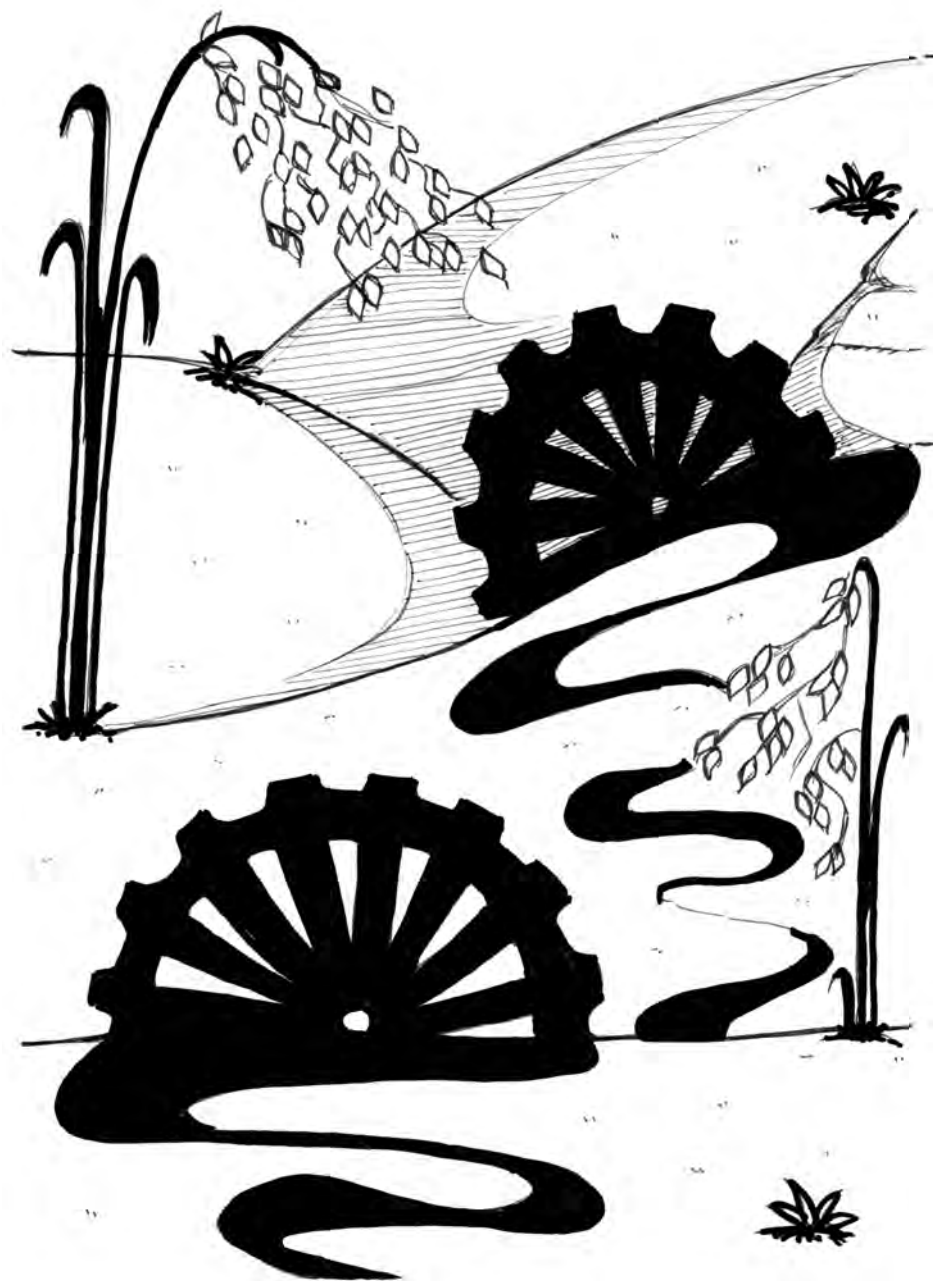
rious hotels “Echo Mountain House” and “The Chalet,” completed in the 1890’s.

The resort was served by a tram—white, to match the buildings—that carried passengers and supplies up the foothill from a station in Altadena. Far from being a natural break from the fast lane, the way it seems today, this was a destination for the wealthy and offered everything you could think of: an observatory, a swimming pool, dances in multiple ballrooms, a petting zoo, even a casino. There were plenty of distractions from the natural beauty of the mountains; a tourist could spend a week or two there without seeing much of the environment that has now taken over.

Apparently the resort wasn’t built to last. Its exposed location meant floods, fires, and Santa Ana winds took their toll. It burned down building by building, leaving only cryptic foundations made of concrete slab and rocks. The buildings’ shells, determined “unsafe for hikers” were later destroyed by the Forestry service—a reversal of the paying guests only policy of the White City. There are pieces of the tram tracks left to rust too, and giant gears half buried in the sandy soil. To the east I may be able to make out some waterfalls, on the opposite side of Rubio Canyon, meaning, oddly, “blonde” canyon. Maybe this is a reference to “golden” dry California summers.

The best part of the resort is still there. Next to the old hotel cistern, now a round grassy pit, is a metal megaphone. It faces into the mountaintop canyon, and any words you shout into it will bounce off the canyon walls, giving Echo Mountain its name. Choose your words carefully; they always come back to you.

Few hikers make it up this far, and a peaceful quiet blankets the tall pines and rocky steps, leftovers from the lost buildings. If I wait long enough, I may hear an eagle calling, or a swarm of bees passing overhead. Picnic tables sit here and there, and





offer shady relief from the steep climb. Sitting still is one of the best parts of “The White City.” I hear no traffic noise, no sirens, no lawnmowers or leaf blowers. No cell phones or car alarms, honking horns, blaring stereos. I can feel my pulse, racing from the climb, steady and slow. Clean air from the four corners of the earth pushes the smog out of my lungs and rushes through the tall and timeless evergreens. At my feet I may see tiny wildflowers, or a strange movement in the grass as something burrows through the dirt. I wait for it to emerge but it never does, sensing my presence.

I let my thoughts go, and picture what will happen here as nature runs rampant, reclaiming what belongs to her. Where stiff gentlemen and ruffled ladies made stilted small talk, a mouse builds a nest. Where tall windows used to block out the starlit, icy night, green branches wave. Before, brightly painted geraniums were irrigated in straight rows. Now, poison oak flames and climbs the hills. The forest may be haunted, but it’s only reclaiming its rightful property.

This place has become a contradiction, no longer a destination for the rich and famous to see and be seen or a retreat for the pampered. The only exclusivity now is for the able-bodied hikers and mountain bikers who make it up this far. And most of them don’t stay long. After all, it’s not at the top of the mountain. But I stay for hours. Everything I need is here.

Death Moves In

by Joseph Lusnia

At night, as I sleep, death whispers in my ear,
It's breath like gravel against my skin.
In the morning it sits with me as I eat
My breakfast, rings of golden o's fall from
The table and stick to its matted cloak.
It's eyes, absent of hope, reach for the paper,
A twisted limb strokes the sports section,
Teeth like leftover gravy ooze from its lips.
In the car next to me it reaches for
The radio wanting to change the station,
I swipe its disjointed digit,
I'm not a fan of Miley Cyrus.
It follows me around at work, leaving
Sticky notes on my coworkers desks.
"See you soon," "let's get together,"
The one I hate "r u dying to meet me?"
Its humor stabs me in the shoulder,
Ripping tendon and muscle, chipping bone,
Leaving me stranded in my own space.
At lunch it sits next to the window
Blocking the sun and no one seems to care.
It touches the fruit as I shop in Whole Foods
A peach, a pear, an overripe banana
It asks the produce clerk about squash
I nudge it with my cart to make it stop.
It waves at carcasses of meat
As we pass the butcher case,
Sorrows clinging to its arms and legs,
I point to a sample of cheese, it leaps.
It wants to stop at Starbucks, Chai tea latte,
I say, "no, not now, it's almost dinner."
"What's for dinner?" It asks, "Does it matter?"
I reply. Death has come to live with me.

Blueberry Pancakes

by Gaby Alexander

The light of two moons peeks in through the small opening between the curtains. Diana lies awake in bed, the blanket lies in bunches at her waist. Goosebumps break out on her bare upper body. She doesn't feel the cold.

The only sound in the room is the slow breathing of two bodies. Diana stares at the feminine frame lying next to her. Intricate patterns weave their way down a strong back. They are dark against bright red skin. Silky white hair covers the markings on her upper back. Diana stares, trying to remember each intricate pattern. She knows they mean something in the Syphtiri culture, but she never took the time to look it up or even ask Nexusia what they mean. She never took the time to do many things she wishes she had done.

Diana gets up, careful not to wake Nexusia. She doesn't bother to look for her clothes. Looking out the window, she can see distant balls of light rising and then falling in a plume of smoke. The smaller moon peaks out behind clouds of smoke. The larger dominates the sky. She tries not to think about how soon it will be until she won't be so far from those balls of fire. It is her choice to go. It is her choice to give up the life she wants for the life others want for her.

Fabric slides against her back and over her shoulders. Warm arms wrap themselves around her bare waist.

"Did I wake you?" Diana asks as she rests her head on Nexusia's shoulder. Diana fiddles with something behind her ear.

She is lucky enough to be taller than most Human women. Diana is taller than most Humans in general. Despite being considered short by Syphtiri standards, Nexusia still towers over her Human counterparts. Diana used to curse her tall stature, but now she is thankful she can look Nexusia in the eye without standing on her toes.

“Yes you did,” Nexusia says jokingly.

“Sorry.”

“I’m kidding. Who can sleep with your snoring?”

Diana smiles, pushing her body into Nexusia’s. Nexusia steps back, but catches Diana in her arms. With a smile, she gives Diana a quick kiss on the lips.

“How are you holding up?” Nexusia asks.

“I’m fine it wasn’t that bad,” Diana jokes.

“Are you scared?”

“Of?”

“Tomorrow. Everything.”

“I don’t think that’s what I’m most afraid of.”

Nexusia laughs. “I think you are the only person I know, Human or Syphtiri who isn’t afraid of war.”

“You’ve been angry at me before, I know there are scarier things in the galaxy.”

Diana turns to meet two large almond shaped eyes. They shine a brighter silver in the low light of the moons. Resting her arms on Nexusia’s shoulders, she does her best to look innocent. Nexusia does nothing. She says nothing. She stares at Diana’s big hazel eyes, her messy black hair, the scars on her eyebrow and chin.

“Something on your mind?” Diana asks.

Nexusia smiles and traces Diana’s scars with a long index finger: “I’m trying to remember your face.”

“You don’t think I’ll come back?”

“What if you don’t?”

“What if I do?”

“I’m afraid you won’t.”

Diana pulls Nexusia into a tight hug. She can feel Nexusia’s heart beating, like it would beat out of her chest into Diana’s. Diana opens her mouth to comfort her lover. Only a sigh escapes. Nexusia pulls away and sits on the bed, dragging the blanket with her.

"I can't even remember why we're fighting this war. I can't find any logical reason for it."

"People came to conclusions too quickly."

"That's the problem with you Humans, always in a rush."

"We don't have as much time as you do, darling. We have to be quick sometimes. I think we just pick the wrong times to do it."

Nexusia frowns.

"I can't spend the rest of your life with you. I'm sorry for that. I feel selfish."

"I can spend the rest of your life with you." Nexusia says with a comforting smile.

"That seemed like a quick decision. Are you sure you're not turning into a Human yourself?"

"Well, since humans are so quick to do things, may I make a suggestion?"

Diana shivers and kneels in at the foot of the bed. "Is this the part where you tell me we should run away together. To the outer arms of the galaxy where no one cares that our people absolutely hate each other?"

"I can try."

Diana shrugs.

"Why are you fighting? This isn't what you do."

"You know-"

"I know. I don't understand. There is a difference."

Diana knows she is right. She is always right.

"I'll come back to you. I promise." Diana pauses, searching for words. "I feel like those words don't mean anything."

"Yours do. They always have. You have this way of giving meaning to such simple things. Is that a human thing?"

"I think it's just a Diana thing."

They both laugh. Diana falls onto the bed and stares at Nexusia.

“Do you remember the first gift you ever gave me?” Nexusia asks, turning to Diana with a somber smile.

“Umm, that.” Diana points to the silver band on Nexusia’s finger.

“No.” Nexusia laughs, playing with the ring.

Confusion manifests on Diana’s face.

“A plate of blueberry pancakes. In the mess hall back at the academy. You gave them to me and you told me...”

“I can’t give you millions of credits or name a star after you, but I can give you the one thing worth fighting for that I’m most grateful for in this galaxy...”

“Blueberry pancakes.” Nexusia finishes.

Diana couldn’t help but grin.

“I had never encountered blueberries or pancakes in my life until that day. They don’t exist on my home world. Now, I find myself always craving them.”

“That was so stupid.”

Nexusia laughs. “It was such a tiny thing, but at the same time it wasn’t.”

The two women sit in comfortable silence.

“Why are you doing this?” Nexusia asks.

Diana says nothing.

“Do you even know what you’re fighting for?”

Diana looks away.

“For purpose. Is that it? For a title? I know it’s not credits.”

“Maybe it is. Is it so bad that I want to be somebody?”

“You don’t think you are now?”

“No. I can’t give you billions of credits. I can’t give you your own private moon. I can’t give you a stable life.”

“Is this about Dantius?”

“He can give you everything I can’t.” Diana cringes at the sound of the name of the man Nexusia’s father wants her to marry.



“That’s another problem with you humans. You assume. It gets you in trouble.”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“Don’t assume that’s what’s best for me.”

Diana says nothing as Nexusia gets up and walks to the other side of the room. Diana tries to keep her eyes on the floor, but Nexusia’s silhouetted figure is too alluring to her eye.

“Diana, I don’t want credits. I don’t want a moon. I don’t want your definition of a stable life. And I certainly do not want Dantius. I want you. I don’t care what my father wants.”

“Your father is at the head of this war. If he finds out...”

“So we won’t let him.”

“Not just your father; you realize that. Both our races are at each other’s throats. I won’t be here to protect you if someone finds out.”

“I don’t need protecting. Let them kill me if they find out.”

Diana’s heart stops at the thought of anyone laying a finger on Nexusia.

Nexusia sits next to Diana and hands her a blank digipad.

“What’s this?” Diana asks.

“Write something for me. Please.”

Diana had given up writing two years ago to join the military. All she has written since are after action reports. She wants to say no, but the two silver almond shaped orbs staring at her make it nearly impossible.

“I don’t think I know how to do that anymore.”

“Don’t think about it.”

Diana stares at the blank page. A cursor mocking her inability to spill words onto its blank slate.

“I remember the letters you used to send me. I didn’t think humans were capable of feeling such things. I didn’t think anyone was.”

“I didn’t think I was capable of feeling that or writing like I did.”

“But you can.”

Diana opens her mouth to speak. Nothing comes out.

“Tell me, please, why are you doing this?”

Something in Diana snaps; tears roll down her face. She gets up, letting the digipad drop.

“Because of you. Everything I’ve done since I met you has been for you. I want you to be proud of me, to have something to be proud about. I’m nobody with words. I’m somebody with a gun. I don’t want you to love nobody, I want you to love somebody.”

Diana stands at the window, looking at the moons watching over the fires in the distance.

“You’re really dumb you know that? Don’t you think I see you as somebody. I risk my life for you. I would not be living without you. And that’s how you see yourself? It’s as if what I say or do means nothing to you. So, you want to be like everyone else because it’s too hard to be you? Fuck you. That’s what humans like to say when they’re angry, right?”

It takes all of Diana’s strength to prevent herself from sobbing. Here she stands the night before she walks into the bloodiest battle in the galaxy, naked before the only person she has ever truly loved. She has never felt so confused in her life. Nothing has ever made more sense to her. She had no idea how affected Nexusia is by her actions. Anger wells up in her chest. Anger towards herself. That irritating voice in the back of her head that tells her she never does anything right has never been louder.

A soft hand touches Diana’s shoulder.

“I just don’t know anymore. I don’t want to lose...”

“If had a choice to die now, here with you, I would take it instead of having to live the rest of my life without you.”

A laugh makes it way through Diana’s sobs. She turns to see Nexusia has started to cry as well.

“You’re such a cheese ball.” Diana laughs.

The two pull each other into a tight hug.

“What’s that?” Nexusia asks.

Diana laughs again. “It’s just a Human thing.”

“You have to go soon.” Nexusia says as she pulls away.

“I do. I have a reason to come back.”

“You won’t fight this war alone.”

Hand in hand, the two women stand by the window, watching the fires grow.

Nexusia pulls Diana to the far side of the room and pulls out Diana’s armor plates and MILMESH under armor, pushing Diana onto the bed. Diana complies and slips one foot at a time into her underwear and the lower half of the under armor. Nexusia moves jet black hair aside to fasten the top half of the under armor.

Diana sits on the bed watching Nexusia pick up and fasten all the armor plates into their respective places on her body. Diana stands up, allowing Nexusia easier access to her upper half.

Diana begins to dress Nexusia in a simple black and blue dress suit. Diana picks up a white lab coat and places it on Nexusia’s shoulders, smoothing out the collar as she does so.

“Sit.” Nexusia sits on the bed and spreads her legs.

Diana sits between either side of Nexusia’s legs, struggling to find a comfortable position in full armor. She can’t feel Nexusia’s skin with her armored hand. She kisses the inside of Nexusia’s thigh.

“Humans let others know they are spoken for with rings, am I right?”

Diana nods.

“We do so with markings.”

Diana can feel a cool pressure on the back of her neck. Nexusia works quickly, then hands Diana a mirror.

An intricate pattern of black lines makes its way from the bottom of Diana’s hair line to the uppermost portion of her back. The tattoo mimics the pattern on Nexusia’s back.

“My mother told me once that our ancestors would braid the hair of their husbands before battle. It would let others know they had someone to come home to. Each warrior had his own unique braid.”

Nexusia begins to braid Diana’s hair in a way that is almost as complicated as the marking on her back.

Diana sits motionless, waiting for Nexusia to finish. She feels no fear. No confusion. Nothing but solace.

“Lie down with me for a bit?” Diana asks as Nexusia finishes the braids.

Climbing onto the bed, Diana spots the digipad on the floor on the opposite side of the bed. Nexusia rests her head on the pillow, holding onto Diana’s plated arm.

For a moment they say nothing. Diana fiddles with the small translator in her ear. She has never heard anything that didn’t pass through this device. She removes it.

“Nexa,” Diana whispers.

Nexusia replies in her native tongue. Diana smiles and stares. Her voice sounds as though she is singing, the words coming out of her mouth are like song lyrics. She can’t understand the words, but she doesn’t care.

Nexusia notices Diana’s unresponsiveness. She notices the translator in Diana’s hand. Nexusia takes it and places into its respective place.

“Why did you do that?” Nexusia asks.

“I’ve never heard your voice. I wanted to hear it.”

Nexusia removes her translator. “Let me hear yours.”

“Nothing I do will ever be enough to show you how much you mean to me. I can go from one end of the galaxy to the other, and I will never find anything as beautiful.”

Nexusia smiles and puts the translator back into her ear. “What did you say?”

“You look tired. I was afraid to tell you because I know you’d get mad.”

Nexusia laughs and takes Diana's face in her hands, giving her a kiss. The two settle into bed as best they can. Nexusia drifts into a deep sleep, still holding onto Diana's arm. Diana watches the sun come up through the window, weary of the dawn's false optimism. She sees the digipad again. Slowly, Diana unhinges Nexusia's grasp from her arm and walks to the digipad. The cursor still mocks her, though now she has an answer.

Nexusia wakes alone. She is content. Next to her lies a digipad. Words fill its screen. A red glow fills the room.

Taking the digipad in her hand, Nexusia makes her way to the window. The bright sun hides behind red clouds of smoke. She can no longer see fires in the distances; flashes of light and thunderous explosions take their place. She looks down at the digipad.

She skips to the end. She knows Diana always leaves the best for last. Never before has she felt such an overpowering determination as she is nearly brought to tears when she reads the first line.

"I have gone to fight despite my better judgement. But, today I'm fighting for something. Yesterday I fought for nothing. I don't know how, but I will end this war. I will end this war. I have the one thing I'm most grateful for in this galaxy, the only thing worth fighting for..."

Things she waters

by Sachi Terry

Heart of a harvesting woman
Pulsing in juvenile dance and pleading with rain
For him to come back again season after season
Even if she knows the soil is good
For both the staying and the leaving
The living and the dying

How we sometimes plow through life
They will never know why we *reap, reap, reap*
 To begin again and again *and* again
We will never know why he'll *seed, seed, seed*
To begin again and again *and* again
His harvest collects like the wishes of many thrown
 together
In a fountain
His grabs like the word "*look*" when I am distracted
Mine spreads out to die here and there
cushions like finished, foaming water against the shore
Polishes you, hard edges against the grain, then that
 is all
Fallen and grown into someone else
One of me, many of you
For every grain of sand, there are one hundred stars
I will never know how he *brews, brews, brews*
To kill the hunger of this love and of that love,
 every love
Again and again and again

Brother

By Yingchao Xiao

It's close to 10:30 in the evening, pitch dark, raining. Standing under the eaves of the backyard patio, I light up a cigarette, inhale the smoke into my tired lungs, keep it there, and then slowly expel it out. Behind the double-pane glass door is the faint noise of a baby's crying, Pam's nagging, and the tea kettle whistling... Lightning strikes followed by low thunder. The rain falls harder. My cell phone rings.

"Mr. Gerry Morris?"

"Speaking."

"This is Officer John Blake from the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department. Is Joseph Morris your brother?" I feel a lurch in my heart and I push the phone tight against my ear. Lightning strikes again, exposing the silhouette of the dark avocado tree for a split second, and then everything retreats back into darkness. My cigarette falls to the ground and a small pool of water consumes its red tip instantly. I close my eyes walking into the rain. When the water begins to run down my face, I cry.

Joseph never liked rain, I guess that's why he moved to California, and I remained in Utah. My mother used to say that in her Chinese culture I was born as fire, and Joseph as water. We need the opposite elements to complement each other. In elementary school, we were both star students with our photographs displayed on the wall of the cafeteria. They were arranged by last name, so mine was next to Joseph's. I had all the Caucasian features from my father while Joseph had the tender look of an Asian from my mother. I was holding a basketball under my right arm and he was holding a medal from the reading com-

petition. “Is that your real brother?” the freckled Mark asked me from behind, “Woo, look at his eyes...” Before he finished, I turned, grabbed his red hair and pushed his head down below his chest. “If I ever hear you saying that again, you will walk this way your whole life.” I was a bully then. At that night, after Mom kissed me goodnight, I told her what happened in the school during the day.

“Gerry,” my mother bent down and stroked my head. Her hand was cold and her face was pale. She had been sick for a long time. “You are the elder brother. You promise me no matter what happened you are going to take care of him.”

“Yes, Mom. I promise.” I was 11.

In my last year of high school Joseph set up a poem reading club. He was the only boy among three girls. One of those girls was Liz, a cheerleader. Every Saturday afternoon they would gather in our house to “read poems,” as they said. Liz was my sunshine. When she appeared in a light-green floral sundress and a pair of white tennis shoes, my heart bounced with her slender figure.

“Hi Gerry.” She glanced at me and went to the living room quickly. Joseph was waiting there and they hugged each other. In my 17-year old heart I couldn’t get it. Why Liz was always at ease with Joseph, and so stiff to me. When the poem reading was going on, I took a quick shower, put on a clean shirt, and then began to roam around the house. I finally sat down at the dining table, where I could peek into the living room. The three girls all sat on the floor, chatting and laughing with Joseph. They chatted and laughed more than they read, if they ever read at all. Liz usually sat with her back to the dining room. Her blonde long hair cascaded from her dainty shoulders onto her tiny waist. When she laughed, she would raise her face to the ceiling and her long hair trembled as if it were alive. I stared at her back and

could not move, until Joseph saw me. “Gerry, come to join us,” he yelled. I said no, of course. I was a basketball player, not a bookworm. I walked to the backyard thinking about that green-eyed bookworm in our living room.

The next day we had a game in the gym, and Joseph and my parents were all wearing blue shirts for our team shouting and whistling. I was jumping and running like that was the last game I’d ever to play. When the game was over, the cheerleaders stayed to help to clean the gym. I walked to Liz, “Hey, Liz!”

“Oh, Hi. You’re - Gerry, right? Joseph’s brother.” Her face was still red from the cheering.

“Yeah, I’m Joseph’s brother.” We exchanged a few more words, like Joseph’s girlfriend and Joseph’s brother till Joseph came to the court. She lit up immediately. My heart twitched.

Prom approached and I was feeling in hell. For days I sat on the rock next to the school gate, to watch Liz coming out of her mother’s car and walking into the school with other girls, and leaving the school in the afternoon, very often accompanied by Joseph. I would give up everything, everything – the college and the basketball career for Liz, but, there was one thing I could not trade, that was my brother. I finally gathered enough courage to ask Liz to go to the prom with me, and surprisingly she agreed. She didn’t talk much, but we danced and we drank. I kissed her, my first virgin kiss, and never called her again.

I did not realize that our schools were so small, and the same as our town, before I went to college. “Our school is huge,” I told Joseph during my first Winter break, “and they have everything, a cinema, a stadium with five thousand seats, and even a skating rink, oh, and a huge library with thousands of thousands of books. You’ll love it Joseph.”

“Good for you, brother. I think I would still like to stay here,” he smiled, “this is home.”

“Is it because of Liz?” I asked..

“Oh, the cheerleader? She is engaged to Mark. We are still good friends, though.”

“That wimp Mark?”

“He’s short but he is not a wimp. He is on his mission to Thailand,” he added, “they are going to get married when he is back.” In our Mormon church, young people are encouraged to go on a mission for two years at the end of high school, and then get married within 6 months. But, how could Liz marry Mark, not Joseph, or me!

The Christmas holiday was nice, but there was something wrong in the house. Mom still fed us well, and Dad was still a man with few words. But, they didn’t smile as much. Mom gritted her teeth and lowered her eyes on whatever she was doing, and Dad prayed before a meal, after a meal and in the middle of a meal. Sunday morning, 8:00 AM sharp, we were all in the church on the top of the hill. Everyone greeted, hugged, went through the sacrament, and gave a thousand good wishes to each other before leaving the church. But something was not right. When we passed by a group of women, they suddenly stopped laughing and looked and averted their eyes when I tried to greet them. Joseph seemed to be on hunger strike. He ate like the blue bird in our backyard. I missed his easygoing smile and his chuckles.

The day before I went back to college, I knocked at Joseph’s door. It was snowing quietly and the only window of his room was pure white. He sat at the edge of his bed among books and magazines.

“Hi! How’s it going?” I asked. He quickly put a newspaper away, and then took it back, and put it away again.

“I’m alright, Gerry. And you,” he asked me but looked into the window.

“Hey, bro. What’s up? There’s something I don’t know?” He moved his eyes from the window, and I saw tears in his eyes.

“Joseph, what’s going on?”

He looked at me like a beggar for alms, “I’m just so lonely.”

Oh, Joseph! My heart twitched. “I’ll call you more often, Joseph. I promise. You can even come to visit me. I’ll pay for it. I’m working in the school cafeteria and I’m making money.”

“Thank you,” he said, and lowered his eyes.

“Joseph, what happened? Why no one tells me. I’m your brother, Joseph!” I moved next to him.

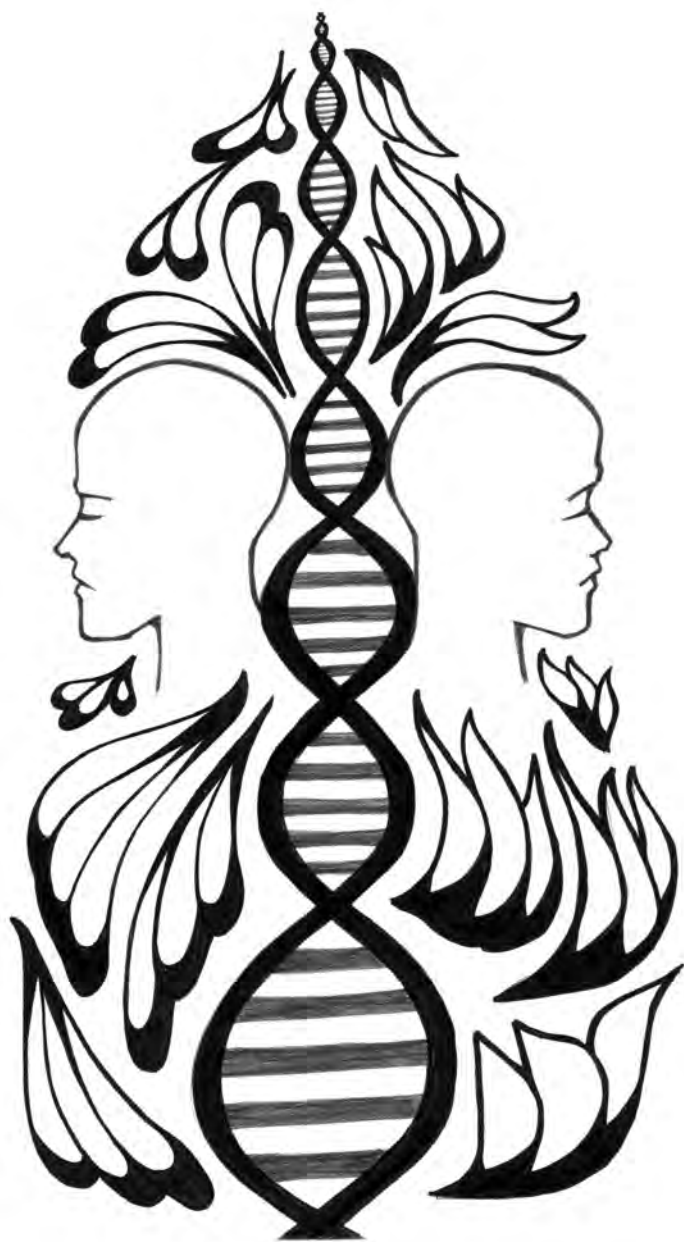
“I...” he swallowed hard, and struggled with some thoughts, “Gerry, I need help. I talked with the Bishop,” he said very slowly, one word after another, “I know I should...I don’t want to be this way, but...I wish I had strong will power...I need the strong will power to fight the evil, Gerry, the evil inside me.” Tears rolled down on his face, and he bit into his mouth.

“Evil? In you?”

He covered his face with his fists, sobbing. I pushed his hands away from his face. His eyes closed, tears running, and blood seeped from the curved cuts on his forehead from his nails. “Mom, Mom!” I shouted.

“Dinner is ready!” Mom replied from the kitchen.

“Joseph,” I held his face in my hands, “Tell me. Is it another girl?”



He shook his head, "I wish."

In the summer, I went home again and Joseph seemed to be a different person. He still fell into deep thinking from time to time, but he was a happy boy. He invited several foreign young missionaries to our house for his birthday in August. Two of them were from Taiwan: a brother and a sister. Joseph spent most of the time talking to them in the shade of the front patio. He was trying to pronounce certain Chinese words, and they were laughing and teasing him. I wasn't good at any foreign languages and I was happy to see Joseph laughing.

It was another rainy day when my mother called me at the school. "Joseph's moved out," she said as a matter of fact tone. "He is no longer a member of the family, and he is no longer a member of the church."

"What happened, Mom?"

"Gerry, you were right. He is different. He let the evil conquer him. He betrayed God, betrayed the family, and betrayed the church. He is dead to us now."

"Mom, you have to tell me what's going on. I'm his brother, and I have right to know."

"Gerry, he's homosexual." She began to sob before she hung up.

It's impossible, I told myself. I quickly put things together, and tried to comprehend the news. Finally I sat down, crying. Every time I cried, it was for Joseph, my blood brother.

I called my parents, and no, they wouldn't tell me where he went, and where he was. "Gerry, he's dead." All of my email messages to him were returned, till one day he knocked at my door.

He was taller, with a stylish beard on his chin, still very handsome. I recognized him at first sight, and I pulled him into my arms. I had just graduated from college, married and found a job. He stayed with us for a week. Pam was very surprised that my “lost” brother suddenly shown up. She’s a devout Mormon, and I never had told the real reason for Joseph’s disappearance.

The night before he left, I took him to a local restaurant. Pam was working on night shift, and we finally had our own time for one another.

“Joseph,” I looked at him over the menu, trying to think where to start.

“Okay,” he started, “You remember Daniel Tang?” I quickly searched the name in my brain, and found no match.

“No, sorry. What’s about him?”

“He was the Taiwanese missionary that summer,” he reminded me.

“Oh, yes, with his sister... Lisa, right?”

“Yes. Lisa Tang.” He took a sip of the cold water in the glass, and said “we ended up living together for a few years.” I froze, but I said nothing. Joseph looked into my eyes. “He left for Taiwan, back to his parents and his church.” Joseph took out an envelope with a Chinese character in the center, in dark brown. “This is all I have from Daniel. He wrote it with his own blood.” Joseph put that envelope back to his pocket. “Gerry, I am gay.”

I sat there looking him searching for words. “Joseph, I’m your only brother, and I’ll do anything for you. You know that?” He fixed his eyes on the glass of water, but he nodded. I took it as an opportunity, “I think it is time to have a new life. You can go back to school, get a degree, find a job, have a family, you know, live a normal life.”

“Normal life?” he repeated.

“Yes. I’m not saying you made a wrong choice, but now is an opportunity for you to make a new one, and you may like it. You should try. You are smart and you are handsome...”

“Gerry, thank you. Thank you for having me for the week.” Slowly but determinedly he folded up the white cloth napkin, put it next to his empty plate, and stood up. I pushed him back to his chair.

“You sit down!” Many different feelings came in my mind – I was angry, I was confused, and I was sad. “Joseph, what can I do to help you? I promised mom to take care of you, no matter what happened.”

“It’s all right, Gerry. I still love you all the same.”

“But, what do you want from your life?”

“All I have ever wanted...was love.” He stood up, put the chair back in place, and walked out the door.

That was the last time we saw each other.

The rain is getting light and I am totally soaked. I look back into the house. The lights are off. I know how much Pam hates smoking, and I know I will never be able to change her mind.

by Beth Andreoli

Remembering how you said
You loved classical guitar,
I listen to each bright shimmering note,
And wish for heat and sun
Like you always loved the summer
Heat so strong I look for shade in cool white walls.

We watched the dancers strike a flamenco
And spin their brilliant colors, applauding life

Each perfect note a grape
In the winepress of our shared summer.



The Art of Heart Breaking: How to Gain Control in Just Five Steps

by *Rhianna McGaughey*

“Greetings all you lucky men and women within the sound of my voice. Now, you may be wondering what makes you so lucky. You’re very fortunate indeed to be here today in this conference gaining from my wonderful insights, not to mention my infinite wisdom. It’s true that from the past until this very moment, your fortunes may have been questionable; perhaps this is the very thing that has brought you here this day. If this is the case, I’m here to let you know that from this point forward everything will change for you. I am about to unravel a series of proven steps that if implemented correctly, will allow your prey to fall captive into your hands.

Before I begin I would like to ask any of those in the audience who are faint of heart (in other words: cowards), to please exit immediately. Great, that being said, let’s begin. Now we all know about murders and robberies and all those forms of criminal action. They are very garish and low class. The crime I’m here to instruct you on this evening is one which is more cunning and discreet. It is the art of breaking a person’s heart and molding it into whatever form you wish. Now I know what you’re thinking: heart breaking isn’t a crime? You’re right it’s not, but it should be. The fact that it isn’t a crime is part of what makes doing it so devious. You can in many instances do all but destroy a person without ever having to fear the pursuit of authorities or experience incarceration. Amazing, isn’t it?

So how do you begin this journey, you’re wondering? Well quite simply, it must start within yourself.

Step one: Visualization. You must do all in your power to convince yourself that you are an intelligent and desirable individ-

ual, even if you're not. Actually, correction: especially if you're not! Confidence is key; without it, you have no power. Why is this, you ask? It's because your victim will believe in your abilities to the degree that you believe in them yourself.

Step two: Seeking out "the one." Next you must find this victim. It would be best if you choose one that is younger and more naïve than yourself. If you can, try to find one that has not yet been tainted by the world. You know, one that is innocently optimistic and believes that most everyone is good and those who aren't are just misunderstood. You can find this person in school, preferably not at work (at least not as you're starting out). The best approach might be to join some sort of religious social circle. There are always wide-eyed, fresh-faced beauties to be found among those groups.

Next we have *Step three: Dumb, like a fox*. You must put up a façade that you are an honest, simple minded person. The confidence that you have cultivated in step one will be crucial, as it will be working behind the scenes. You must be bold enough to approach this person, but wise enough not to appear overbearing, or too sure of yourself. It is of dire importance that you present yourself genuine. This can be established as you search for a way this individual can help you. People always become emotionally involved when given an opportunity to help someone else, especially if they're not jaded. Once you have found a way for them to help you, you must be appreciative. Say "thank you" as much as you can. Maintain contact with this person and make them feel like they are the best thing since sliced bread. We will then implement the principles of the fable, "The Fox and the Crow." For those of you unfamiliar with this childhood anecdote, I will summarize it for you briefly. One day there was a crow perched on top of a tree branch eating a piece of cheese. A starving fox comes by and starts to flatter the bird, telling it how beautiful its feathers are. The fox asks the bird if it can sing

as beautifully as it looks. The bird then opens its mouth to unleash its song, and down falls the cheese into the mouth of the starving fox. The fox is gone before the bird has even realized it has been fooled. To use this principle, you must woo your potential captive by putting them up on a pedestal, smiling admiringly every single step of the way.

Step four: Opening a door, with just a smile. Now that you have baited your victim by establishing appearances of goodness and adoration, it's time to distance yourself and let them come to you. Suddenly where you were once available to them, you become very busy. You cease complimenting and become somewhat stand-offish. If they ask what's wrong, you look at them like they're crazy and assure them that nothing is going on. If they try to say that you're changing, you sit there listening and staring blankly. If you do feel inclined to say something, say: "I don't understand." "I don't understand" is one of the best things you can say because you can continue saying it and they will dance around in circles trying to explain their anxieties to you. Anxiety is a very good sign that you have them right where you want them. Once they tire themselves out you can quickly change things by taking them to dinner. Eventually they will think they have exaggerated and may possibly even apologize to you: this is when you know you have hooked them. They will then crave the attention you once gave them and they will be eager to do whatever they can to get a reaction from you. Hence, you open the door with just a smile. Eventually, even the slightest hint of approval will make them happy.

Congratulations, if you have made it this far this means you're able to get whatever you want from your prey whether it is sex or monetary gain. Remember to always keep your cool. You must be patient and wait for them come to you. If at any point you become too hasty they will easily pick up on it and you could lose your shot. The trick is to manipulate them into thinking that you have something to give that is of more value than any-

thing they could possibly have. You can do this by using their insecurities against them tactfully, all the while playing up your own strengths but never mentioning your weaknesses. Your confidence also works here to build the illusions they have of you. If all this has been accomplished then you are ready for the next and final step.

Step 5: Emotional Abuse at its Finest. So now you have their devotion and their heart on a silver platter at your disposal to perform whatever ill conceived desire you have. It matters not to me what you intend to do with this power; I'm just here to guide and help you move toward whatever end you wish. This last step is about maintaining control. You may have heard of the phrase "hot and cold," this is where the final step comes into play, except that instead of "hot and cold," you will be so advanced that there will be no need for you to be hot. You can be "Luke-warm and cold." At this point you show your victim you don't need them, but have them convinced that they need you. You push them away and pull them back at your own convenience. You send them as many mixed signals as possible. You make them think you are devoted to them without ever committing to anything. Whenever they bring up something you may have implied in the past you make sure and negate whatever it is they say you have said. If you never actually say anything, then you can't be held accountable for their "misunderstanding." There is no need to lie to them because with enough mixed messages, they will choose to see only what they want to see and will ignore the rest. They will also continue looking for the person you were at the beginning of the relationship. At this point you can continue playing around with their emotions, relishing in the fact that you have complete control over how they feel. Anxiety, like I said before, is one way of keeping them hooked on you. You will be their drug as they look to you to ease this pain. Your job will be to always leave them wanting more: easing the burden only slightly before taking another blow. If ever they try to

confront you by having a “serious” talk, it’s important that you shut down: showing no emotions. This will teach them that their complaints will only end up hurting themselves, as they will not receive the emotional understanding and connection they want from you. No matter what they do, you will be indifferent and unaffected; therefore, you have won!

There you have it: steps one through five. I can almost feel the adrenaline coursing through your veins, as you prepare yourselves to re-enter society with a much keener understanding of your newly found purpose. Oh to be young again! One final note I will make in this speech is that after you have gone through this cycle with your victim, eventually you will become bored, as it will become all too easy to get what you want. Don’t worry! By this time they will have already been so hurt that they will be forced to grasp the courage and inner strength necessary to leave you without you ever having to end the relationship. Not that this would even be difficult for you; it just saves energy. Once your victim is out of the picture you can repeat the cycle and possibly even find fresher meat. Trust me, after going through the cycle a few times, you will perfect the art and it will become like breathing. I wish you heartbreaking success in your endeavors and in closing I will just answer one question from the audience.”

A small framed young man raises his hand and asks sheepishly: “After going through the cycles, h-how do you feel? Are you lonely? A-are you happy? What can I expect when I have reached your age of maturity?” The speaker looks at the audience meaningfully and then begins to answer.

“Great questions: all of them. How do I feel? That is an interesting question in particular. To tell you the truth, I don’t. In order to do what is necessary, one must detach themselves from their feelings. If you fail to do this, they will govern and consume you. They will victimize you and make you weak. Weakness is

not power and power is that which we seek. Now, for the question: if I'm lonely or happy? Well both of those questions require someone who actually has emotions, and like I mentioned previously, this is not me. My philosophy in life is: "just keep living" or "keep on keep'n on," as the sayings go. Now I know many of you may think this may be a miserable existence. My response to that is: if it is, I couldn't tell you. All I know is that I get what I want for a short time, and when that time ends, I find another way of getting what I want. Yes, maybe what I want isn't what I need. But what I need, I will never sacrifice for. I refuse to put any diligence or effort into obtaining something, when it can so easily be given to me by others. I am content with this. Happiness means nothing; it isn't real. Loneliness is part of my existence, but I do not feel the negative effects of it, thanks to the annihilation of my feelings. You see I have broken and revamped my own heart before anyone else could ever hurt me...again. I have made myself superhuman. I can do whatever I want without ever experiencing pain or rejection. So this leads us to the final question: what can you expect when you reach my ripe old age? You can expect to be full of experiences. You will not have a family- which is a minor trade off. Just think of all those who have so called "lives." They could never even dream of all the things you will experience in your lifetime. At the end of the day you will be alone with your thoughts, having no one or nobody to concern you. You don't need anyone; you're much better company than others anyway."

“De Ambos Mundos” (From Two Worlds)

by Rhianna McGaughey

My hands are my Fathers;
They are cool like the mist of the emerald isle.
My eyes are my Mothers,
They are *café* like the cocoa bean holding no guile.

Mi Corazon is *libre* like the Caribbean breeze;
But is as warm as the Venezuelan *sol*.
It mimics a maracan beat
As it races away on life's sojourn.

My cheeks are soft like lambs wool,
Yet as flush as the roses in the Queen's Garden.
They reflect that Irish kindness
Of which I myself embrace.

My Thoughts are like the Orinoco:
Always moving.
While my convictions are like King John's Castle:
Tested by experience,
yet firm and strong.

I am from a *tierra* with black gold.
I am from a land with rolling green hills.
Humid and Temperate
Espanol y Ingles, my two native tongues.

These are the worlds that fight for my attention.
They are different, yet the same.
They both represent the conflict of my internal frame.

To be *de ambos mundos*, though difficult as it may be
Is worth all the challenge,
For it offers a much larger window
Through which to see.

The Twilight Zone

by Nicole Stranz

Mom put us to bed in the middle of the day. We needed to sleep because we would be up late.

Back in Chile, where I was born, the New Year's parties began after midnight. Before trekking out to share the festivities with friends, one stays home to celebrate with champagne, pisco (a strong colorless grape brandy) and the immediate family. The Chilean tradition follows that at the stroke of midnight everybody stuffs their faces full of lentils, for luck. Mom said, it is to insure there will be no lack of money throughout the year. But mom made it very clear, "that doesn't mean we will be rich!" Chileans, although Catholic, are very superstitious people. Fish kept in the home are known to bring very bad luck, financially. My father once made that mistake. My mother reminded us that that's why we now celebrate New Year's out at parties, away from home before midnight and in Los Angeles instead of in Chile. My father had tempted fate with a pet fish and lost the family business.

In Los Angeles, 1971 was coming to an abrupt end. I had been nine years old for nearly a month. My sister, Nelly, had practiced being seven since October. And we were very excited about going to our Tia Rossi's house in Pasadena that night. Over the summer she had babysat us while our parents worked. Mom had started working a couple of years before and the fights had finally slowed down. My father took it as a personal insult to his manhood that his wife had to work. Mom insisted that she take a job because she was bored at home now that we girls were in school. But at Tia Rossi's we didn't have to think about any of that. We loved playing with her three daughters. Together our ages made up five years in a row. Lola was the oldest but I was the tallest. So I usually had to play the boy when we played "house."

The trip to the New Year's Eve party was a rough ride, as usual. Not because there were bumps in the road but other cars always caused problems. They were always getting in dad's way, which made him very angry. This night he complained, "who the hell are these people?" He honked and yelled curse words in Spanish and some guy gave him the finger. My mom tried to calm my father down while Nelly and I stayed real quiet in the back seat and held on. Even though we were in a little Volkswagen bug, my dad could get it to go real fast. And I could see, already, that it was going to be a long night. After the other car got away and we finally got to the party, it seemed all for nothing. It looked as if nobody was home. Only the porch light and the Christmas tree in the window were on; the rest was dark. Dad said parking was "too easy." We heard nothing as we approached the front door. I hadn't been to too many parties, but I knew that they usually had music and the door shouldn't be locked. After a couple of rings and a lot of knocks my dad's temper was heating up. Relief came when Tia Rossi finally came to the door. When she opened, the first thing me and Nelly noticed was that the TV was not on. There were no kids, no people, not even the dog, nothing. It didn't look like a party despite the shiny decorations over the mantle. We looked up at Rossi and could see she had been crying. "No party," she said. "It's been canceled, the kids are—(sob)—with that man and we're getting divorced!" She trailed off wailing and fell into my mother's arms. My father demanded, "When did this happen? Why didn't you call us?"

Tia Rossi cried, "I did. Thank you for coming."

My father threw a look at my mother that she ignored as she guided Tia Rossi to the kitchen for consolation. My father slammed the door and grumbled as he followed them in.

My sister and I didn't know what to do. We were expecting to stay up late and play with a lot of kids and that wasn't happening. So after a moment we went to the kitchen. My aunt was into her story, "— then he said, 'I'm taking the kids and there's nothing you can do! Me and Janice are in love!'" And then Tia Rossi lost it again.

My father noticed us standing at the door and demanded, "What do you want?"

Coyly, I told him, "we're bored, we have nothing to do." My father turned to look at my mother. She gave him a nod toward the fridge as she held the sobbing Rossi. He went and pulled out a dark green bottle. I read the label and it said, "Cold Duck." He un-wrapped it and popped the cork to which Rossi cried out. Then he handed us fancy plastic champagne glasses from a tall pyramid stack on the side table. With bottle in hand, he guided us back into the living room and turned on the TV. He flipped the channels around and told us to watch Dick Clark.

Back in Chile there are no drinking age laws. We had tasted lots of booze before, but never this stuff. It was very fizzy and the glasses were funny. Nelly and I knew we could have fun playing grownups with them. Dad poured our first glass and went back to the kitchen, leaving the bottle on the coffee table. My little sister and I toasted and clicked our plastic glasses and drank this sparkly thing that tickled our noses. It was yucky at first but then we tried it again. Clicking and toasting, it tasted better each time. We refilled our cups and giggled when it tickled our noses again. We started to like the way it felt warming us up inside. It didn't seem like we'd drank very much. But I guess those little glasses hold a lot. Because it wasn't long before the bottle ran empty. I told Nelly to go to the kitchen and ask for another one. She argued, but I told her that she is much smaller and cuter; much more likely to get served. She came back with another bottle of duck, right away. No problem. This was a New Year's Eve party after all. When we finished that one, which didn't seem to last as long, we were very thirsty so I took my turn to get more.

Tia Rossi must have been expecting a lot of people because when my mom opened the refrigerator to give me some more I could see that the shelves were bowing in the middle from the weight of millions of dark green bottles of ducks laying down on their sides stacked up on each other. "No wonder they gave it so easy," I thought to myself. "There's plenty!" It's too bad my cousin Lola and her sisters weren't there. We could have a lot

of fun playing “New Year.” Mom cautioned me to “drink it slow,” as she sipped out of a fancy real glass. “This is great!” I thought and said, “Okay.” I noticed Tia Rossi was at least not crying anymore. Back in the living room I told Nelly to “take it slow, you’re drinking too fast. Mom said, “It’s still early.” So we paced ourselves. Nelly and I took turns into the kitchen and hardly made a dent in that fridge. We giggled and laughed clicking cups and feeling more and more woozy, like when we play “spin” in the yard and mom tells us to stop. But this lasted much longer. And it was better, not so messy, and more intense. And so it was, we danced along with the music that Dick Clark played and toasted while watching the party in New York on American Bandstand until midnight nearly stroke.

Nelly and I screamed. “Come here! The ball is dropping!”

Mom, dad and Tia Rossi rushed in, filled our glasses and theirs with new ducks. We counted backwards, “ten, nine, eight...” And then in an explosion of laughter we hugged and kissed and danced. Then mom remembered and ran to the kitchen and brought out the lentils as is the Chilean tradition. We all tried to eat as much as we could while my dad sang an old Spanish song with his voice way off key and wavering. It was weird because he did it on purpose and wanted to make us laugh. Everybody was happy for a few minutes then Rossi started crying again, so my parents took her back into the kitchen.

Nelly was sleepy and laid down. She was usually fussy at bedtime, but not on this night. It was the fastest I’d ever seen her go down. I thought I would be lonely without her, but I noticed I didn’t mind too much. And besides it was my turn. I noticed something else, very important: the bottle lasts longer when I drink alone.

A little while later my parents came out and said that it was time to go. I couldn’t hear Tia Rossi anymore. I think she was sleeping because she didn’t come out to say goodbye. I was feeling very good but still thirsty, and when I stood up my legs were really wobbly.

It was the most silly I’d ever seen my dad. He laughed and

joked as he toted me and Nelly to the bug. Nothing was as it usually was. It was great. My dad turned the radio on to music which he never usually did in the car. He even sang along to the music and changed the words to the songs and made them sound funny. I couldn't believe my parents were including me in the jokes. I wanted to be closer and before I knew it, I was leaning up toward them in the middle just behind the front seats, a place I was never allowed to be. And they didn't say anything! It was very strange because nobody was yelling or fighting. There were no sudden stops. There were no hands blindly swinging into the back seat: no one got smacked. My dad never honked his horn or cursed. None of the other cars caused any problems. Nobody cried all the way home. It was the best ride we ever had as a family.

I had never had time to relax in the car before, so I hadn't ever noticed how the shadows danced at night in and out of the car as the street lights moved past us. It was pretty, but I couldn't look at it for too long, because it made me dizzy. My dad was laughing especially hard when he announced "We're lost!" Mom laughed too and said, "we've been driving in circles!" She pointed to a street sign in front of a large house and ten minutes later we passed the same house and she pointed it out again. She giggled and told me to wake up Nelly to tell her about it. But I couldn't get Nelly to stay awake and they laughed even harder. My dad yelled, "we're in the Twilight Zone!" and howled a silly wolf sound.

It was the greatest night of my whole life. My dad kept turning to look in the back seat, which at first scared me but he was telling me jokes. He was treating me like a friend. I felt almost like an equal and connected. We were lost in the hills of San Marino and it was hilarious. I never saw my mom and dad so happy.

When we finally got home my dad raucously kicked the old year out. Then he danced a jig and hollered, "Happy New Year!" as he welcomed the brand new one in. A neighbor opened a window and shouted "shut up!" And my dad replied in a cartoon voice, "Awe, shut up yerself." I wished right then, that we

could stay like that forever. We were as close as a family could be.

As I remember it, that was the best night of sleep I ever got. There were no nightmares and I didn't even wet the bed.

To this day, my sister claims to have no recollection of that night. And both my parents completely deny it ever happened. I would never see my parents drunk after that. Not even Rossi could confirm it. She went back to Chile after the divorce. We never saw her again. I, however, drank as often as I could from that day forth, which was hard to do as a child. So drugs soon entered my picture. Drug dealers don't ask for identification.

I have spent most my life trying to recreate those few hours of perfection. I've done three long decades chasing those moments, often with strangers but more often alone. Wanting and wishing in desperation for that perfect connection. Trying every known combination: Dick Clark, Cold Duck, intervals of nine, refrigerators stacked and filled to capacity, anything. Nothing seems to click. I have owned seven Volkswagen beetles and have driven drunk most nights, searching for that street sign in front of that big house lost somewhere in San Marino. Desperately I tried to recapture those dancing shadows of that New Year. One thing is always missing: the people, my family. I have drunk with many, but never again with them, not my people. They always refused me.

As I age, my memory fades on most things. And without corroboration I sometimes wonder if that night really ever happened at all. But I cannot escape it, I fear if I don't hold onto that, what, if anything, did I ever have?

The Castle

by Joshua Moreno

When I got sent to Iraq for my second tour I was amazed how different it was compared to my first tour six months prior. I got off the C-130 and the first thing I said to my buddy was, “I am home.” Being a combat soldier, a scout, and a survivor: I have seen many things, from bombed out buildings, to burning bodies, to children that are happy to see us. However I have never been so excited to stay in such a shithole, a castle, and a fortress that was still standing after over a thousand years.

Tal Afar was a lonely place; not many people lived there, but at the highest peak stood the castle. This is where I was going to be spending six months out of my fifteen month stay in Iraq. The castle was once a military outpost for the Ottoman Empire that was built a thousand years ago. The ironic part of this whole mission in Tal Afar: that a thousand years ago, Ottoman soldiers built and occupied this area, and now American soldiers are walking these thousand year old walls and doing the same thing.

I was able to paint a picture of archers on the castle walls looking down into the small city beneath her. She was a magnificent piece of architecture. Unlike anything you would see in Europe. The way the indigenous people built their structures in the past is the same way they do it presently. The mud out there is as strong as concrete. I saw them building a structure one day and it was amazing. They gather the mud, mix it with water, and pour it into molds of brick; since it was so hot out there it would dry up and strengthen the blocks. It was interesting that we stayed in this place, due to the fact there were only fifty or so soldiers that occupied this space with me.

The castle was a big structure, but we secured our own piece of it. On the most secured side of the castle was where we lived,

but we shared it with a platoon of the Iraqi Army that we were training. It was uncomfortable knowing that you were sleeping that close to the enemy: an enemy my cousin fought in the first Gulf War. On the far side of the castle lived the mayor of the city and his family. There were some shops there that sold cigarettes; another sold food. It was crazy. I was living in the past, but it was the present. I felt as if I was a soldier from the past. Going to the little marketplace in the castle you can see the ghosts of the past doing the same thing I was. It was a very interesting six months. Living with these people, I didn't know if they were allies or not, but we were peaceful with each other.

It was interesting to find myself in this castle with nothing to do in the middle of chaos. Sometimes I would catch myself thinking about what it would be like if we were attacked, like the soldiers of the past, while walking along a dark path with two-foot pillars sticking up from the wall to provide more security. It really was intriguing: I was standing on history, with ghosts of the past watching me do the exact same thing they did: watching, waiting, and wondering. You could just imagine seeing a ghost with a bow walk right by you in the middle of the night on the wall. It was a scary place, full of ghosts, full of wonderment. When you're on the wall all you think about is crazy shit: what would you do if you were attacked, what kind of past soldiers used this place, who stood here before me. That's the only thing you do when you're looking into a city of chaos: unless you're my buddy David Lynch, standing and waiting so he could kill somebody. Standing on the wall you can see everything and hear much more.

The sounds that you would hear when being on those walls will always be ingrained in your thoughts and dreams. I remember watching a convoy driving through the city, and all of a sudden they came under attack. It only lasted a few minutes, but the crazy thing about it was that I could do nothing about it, except inform my superiors, and watch. This was also a downfall of the castle, since I could not fire back. What interests

me is what would an Ottoman soldier do in this instance: they would have probably done the exact same thing I did, tell their superiors. Their arrows wouldn't travel that far, just like my rifle rounds wouldn't. But pulling guard duty wasn't the only thing I did while in the castle.

Some of the other things to do there was fun in some cases, or done just out of being bored. We had a weight room, which I wouldn't call a room, more like a half ass tent, that camouflaged us from the sky. A dining area that never had any real food in it because we only got hot chow sent to us once a day. Three burn shitters, which we had to burn and stir the shit and piss when it filled the barrel. Our water came from the stream at the base of the castle, were it was pumped up so we could have running water to take showers; sometimes the pump would break and we wouldn't have water for a week or so. It makes me wonder how the soldiers of the past kept themselves sane during those past times, since me and the guys were always bored out of our minds.

I remember we hired these two kids to do things around the castle, and I asked them where they lived, and they both replied, on the other side of the wall. I feared for them because they weren't safe outside of this great big castle wall. Just like in the past everything in a castle wall was safe from intruders and the enemy, but once you step outside those walls, you faced the element of war. It really felt like we were sent back through time.

Throughout the six months that we were living in this run-down castle, which did protect us, I couldn't help but think of the soldiers from the past, who used this castle as an outpost. It was kind of funny because here you are in a modern war, being protected from a structure built a thousand years ago to do that exact same thing: protection from the enemy. This was... Castle Tal Afar.

Being Transplanted

By Yingchao Xiao

My roots were cut,
my arms were trimmed,
I was pulled out
naked.

My roots floundered
for the moisture below;
My limbs trembled
to survive the icy snow.

I licked my own sap
to heal the cuts;
I shed my own leaves
to cover the new buds.

I struggled under the sun,
I sobbed to the moon.

Red Ink

by Andreas Schick

Her watch shows as past midnight, and a flat tire has stranded her on the I-95. The cold metal of the driver side door chills her through her shorts as she leans against it to rummage through her purse. Her fingers shove aside her wallet and knife; a birthday gift from her boyfriend, Tom, to find what she wants: a Maryland driver's license. The picture shows a man in his thirties with smudged glasses and hair past his chin. The name beside the picture says Thomas Greenley, her boyfriend. This is one of her compulsions, stealing driver's licenses, and she has stolen her boyfriend's card three times prior. He always found out before long.

She runs her fingers over the license in a comforting motion as she stands up from the car and begins to pace, the sound of her footsteps echoing throughout the surrounding forest. Far from the worst car she has even driven, only the busted tire on the front right wheel of the '95 Civic draws attention. The hole had spread over the tire like the jagged and twisted smile of a jack-o'-lantern. She fiddles with the license between her fingers like a nervous cheerleader handed a baton for the first time while her teeth chatter in a chilled breeze. It has been twenty minutes since the final coughs sputtered out of the dying tire, and now she waits for a kind soul to take her to her final destination.

A glare from headlights appears from around the dark bend she had recently driven, and she waves them down. The headlights slow to reveal a van before it parks behind her car. The door opens and a man climbs out. The harsh light of the van's headlights casts dark shadows across his face when he turns to her, digging black pits into his eyes and transforming his smile into a canyon-like abyss. His belly protrudes over his belt by the

width of at least three fingers, and the name patch of his service shirt has been ripped off.

“Ya got some engine trouble there, missy?” the driver asks.

She grimaces at the term. “The engine’s fine,” she says. “The tire blew.”

The driver walks past her to see the hole.

“Yep, that’s a hell of a blowout,” he says, looking back at her. “Almost looks like somebody’d gone and slashed it. Ya don’t have a spare, do ya?”

“I didn’t have the money after the last one popped,” she says with a shake of her head.

“Do ya got a phone?”

“The car charger broke, and the battery died.”

“Well, I only got this beeper for work, but I’d be happy to give ya a lift to the gas station.” He grins at her as he speaks, and casts his eyes over her body. She thinks he would look the same way at a runway model posing at the end of a catwalk.

“That’s okay. I think I can walk there.”

“Don’t ya be silly now. The weather’s been a fickle bitch lately, and ya might freeze before ya make it a mile.” He motions down with a smirk to her exposed legs, which are covered in goosebumps.

“I don’t want to inconvenience you...” A passing breeze kills her conviction, and the end of the sentence comes out as a shiver, interrupted by the chattering of her teeth.

“Ain’t no problem at all! I’d love to give a ride to a pretty little thing like yerself,” the driver says with a chuckle. “I got a fine heater in the van. We’ll heat ya up in no time.” He puts his hand on her shoulder to turn her to the van, and she jerks it away. “Hey now! I ain’t gonna bite ya!” His smirk widens to a grin.

She takes a step back and looks at him in the light from the van. The driver stands more than four inches taller than her, and dark hair hangs down over his eyes and past his ears in greasy

sheets. Red patches of emerging pimples dot his neck and cheeks, and in his grin she can see the broken canine of an age old fight.

"If ya'd like, I can just leave ya here in the cold, but I'd feel awfully sorry to do it, honest," he says, holding his hands up as if he was under arrest, and spreading his smile wider.

She sighs, and says "okay then, I'll come along."

"There's a good girl!" the driver says, and reaches for her shoulder again. This time she lets him lead her to the van. "Come on now, babe. Let's get ya to a phone."

He leads her around to the passenger side of the van, opens the door and waves her in. The unmistakable odor of sour milk and cigarette smoke strikes her as she climbs onto the fake leather seat. She gags on the stench, but the driver has started to walk to his side, and doesn't hear. She settles into the seat as he pulls himself through his door and buckles his belt. She starts to do the same, but someone had ripped the seatbelt from her side of the van.

"So where were ya going?" the driver asks as he fumbles with the ignition. The engine turns over, and the squeal of loose belts and knock of mistimed cylinders fills the van.

"Washington D.C.," she says, raising her voice to be heard over the roar of the worn machine. "I have a meeting there tomorrow."

"The Capitol, huh? I don't think I could be up there without doing something about that picker sitting in the Big House."

A patch on his shirt reads "Big Steve's Electrical Repairs," and he wears khaki shorts that sport stains in a variety of colors. The stench of body odor joins that of the smoke and the sour milk, which emanates from an open bottle of Yoo-Hoo rolling around by the driver's feet. He pays no mind to the safety hazard, his eyes switching between the road and her.

She stretches her arms and back, and her hand bumps against something behind her. She twists her hips and peers into the rear

of the van. Surrounded by various pumps and plumbing machines, small wrenches and water pipes lie scattered on the floor. She looks into the rear of the van through a metal grate that stretches from one side of the van to the other, ceiling to floor, directly behind their seats. He sees her staring at the grate. "To keep my tools from slidin' up here," he says, and leaves it at that.

Through the corner of her eye, she sees the driver reach for the radio console. She sits back in her seat as he twiddles with the radio's knobs, and faint music springs from the battered speakers a moment later. The man behind the wheel begins to sing along with "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall," and ignores the passenger until the song finishes.

"Do ya like Ella Fitzgerald?" he asks, glancing over to her as the station turns to blues.

"I don't know," she says, "I never really listened to her."

"A wonderful woman, she is. Amazing voice. I must say, that woman had stolen my heart long ago." His grin returns, but is directed at the radio this time. His eyes glaze over for a moment, and his hair whips around his temples when he flings his stare back to the passenger.

"So what kinda music do ya like?" he asks her.

"I dunno," she says, turning to look out the window. "I just listen to whatever's on the radio."

"But ya must like *something*," he says. "Come on. Gimme a singer, a song even!"

She sighs, and her breath fogs the window. "I guess I mostly tune into pop stations."

"Ah-ha!" he says with a smile. "I couldn't ever get into that stuff. Always seems like it's for teenaged girls." He snorts, rolls down his window, and spits into the wind. They pass by a sign that tells of a gas station in one mile. "There, I told ya there was a station around here somewhere," he says as he rolls his window up.

"I never doubted it," the passenger says, turning her head back to him and granting him a fake smile.

"So, uh," the driver says. "Do ya have a boyfriend or husband or anything?"

She casts her gaze back into the night, blushing as if on cue. "No. I have no one like that," she says.

"Well ain't that a shame. That no man has snatched up a pretty little thing like yerself, it's a damned shame. I can't see what reason a man could give to leave a beauty like ya behind." The driver's grin stretches wider than ever, but the passenger still looks out the window.

"They have a good one, I'm sure. That's the station there?" She points to a patch of light off the highway.

"Yep, that's it," he says.

They pull off the highway and into the parking lot of the gas station. Only one other car sits under the overflow of bright fluorescent lights.

"Now here," the driver says, pulling out his wallet once the van is stopped beside a pump. "Ya mind giving the attendant some money for the gas?" He pulls out a crumpled twenty dollar note and holds it out for his passenger, who takes the bill without a word and leaves the van. She notes the number of the pump, as well as the four deep gouges in the van that mark where someone had pried off the make and model tags. The exposed metal underneath shows no signs of rust. She rushes to the store, feeling uneasy and all too aware of the lack of security cameras in or around the store.

She covers her eyes from the harsh lights inside, and strolls past aisles of chips and candy bars, approaching the lone cashier who sits behind a counter plastered with advertisements for cigarettes and lottery tickets. The attendant leans back in a plastic chair, his back to the door. A small television tuned to a local news network sits on a shelf before him.

“...police dandy about like school-children, all the while they are completely ignoring the obvious,” Brian Halliway says, his name super-imposed over the recording. “There are not a number of individuals copying off of each other. This is the work of a single person, wandering through the south-east.”

“A single person?” Jennifer Calten asks, her name also popping up on the screen. “But what of the evidence the poli-”

“The police are mis-interpreting the evidence! They are so hell-bent on keeping the populace calm that they are letting this criminal slip away! They say that since each name found at the murders are different, they must be copy-cats signing their work, but they are wrong! It’s one person! The names have to be related to the victim, not to the killer!”

“Mr. Halliway, that’s an... interesting theory.”

“It’s a fact! Three of the victim’s families have stepped forward to say that the victims knew someone with the same name that was written near their bodies, but the police have ignored them entirely!”

The passenger clears her throat, and the attendant falls back in his chair.

“Jeez! You scared me there, ma’am!” the attendant says as he pulls himself to his feet, rubbing his now bruised head. “What can I do for you?”

“Twenty dollars on pump five, Mike?” she says, reading the attendant’s name tag and sliding the bill across the counter.

“You got it, ma’am. You hear about this psycho on the loose? Damn interesting, I tell you. They say he last struck down in Wilmington. Granted, I’ll watch anything with my Jenny on it. We grew up together, you know. Went to the same school.” A crooked smile stretches across his face as he waves his hand to the reporter on the screen.

“I don’t watch a lot of television these days,” the passenger says. “Do you have a pay-phone around here?”



“It’s in the back.” He points over her shoulder to a short hall that leads to the bathrooms before turning back to his program.

Hot water runs over her hands, washing away the soap, and killing any bacteria lucky enough to survive her incessant scouring. Once all the soap is gone, she pumps the dispenser and starts the process anew. After her third time scrubbing her hands, she pumps more soap and begins to wash her face. She pays particular attention to the crow’s feet that have just begun to appear around her eyes, and juts her chin out to clean where the skin has started to sag around her neck. She rinses the soap off of her face, dries her hands, and catches a stray lock of dirty blond hair that has come loose from her ponytail. Retying her hair, she leaves the gas station bathroom.

The passenger strides through the store to the counter to find the television projecting static to the empty plastic chair. Casting a glance around to be sure no one could see her, the passenger slips behind the counter and gives another twenty dollars of gas to pump number five. Stepping back from the register, she palms the twenty she left on the counter, and leaves the store.

As she approaches the van, the driver fiddles with something in the cabin, and does not notice her. After circling around to the driver’s side door, the passenger raps on the window to get the driver’s attention.

“Did ya get a tow-truck?” the driver asks, snapping a toolbox shut as he jerks his head up.

“No,” she says. “The phone was dead. I don’t suppose you could take me a bit farther?”

“Course I can, little-doll.” He smiles again. “I’d take ya to the end of it all, if I could.”

“Thanks,” she says, and holds out the twenty dollar bill. “Here, I bought enough to fill the tank. It’s the least I could do.” The passenger opens her mouth to a faint smile as her eyes flick between the driver and his toolbox.

“That’s real sweet of ya, doll,” the driver says as he plucks the bill from her hand and stuffs it back into his pocket, grinning his broken-toothed grin.

Turning back to the van, the driver takes the toolbox to the back as the passenger circles back to climb into her seat. She yanks hard on the handle to break through the build-up of rust over the years, and looks back as the driver places the toolbox under a tarp in the back of the van. In the brief moment of light as the driver steps aside and before he slams the door shut, she sees a cleaver, covered with a dark stain, lying on the floor of the van.

The passenger settles herself into her seat as the driver finishes pumping the gas, and avoids his gaze as the engine rattles to life once more. They speed onto the highway a minute later as a sedan rolls into the gas station.

“So what kinda meeting is ya getting to in the Capitol?” the driver asks once they are back up to the speed limit.

“My company is downsizing, and I have to defend my job,” the passenger says without looking at him.

“Ya think ya can keep it?”

“I don’t know. They are pretty adamant about cutting someone, and the bosses don’t care for a woman in the office.”

“So when’s this meeting?”

“8:30 sharp. I was told that being late meant losing my job.” The passenger laughs, looking at the dashboard clock that reads 1 am. “I wonder if a flat tire would be a good excuse for coming in a few hours late?”

“Well, I’ll do what I can do—” The sound of sirens cuts off the driver mid-sentence. They sit in silence and watch a police cruiser fly past them on the other side of the highway.

“I wonder where he is going,” the passenger says once the cop car is out of sight.

“I got no idea,” the driver says as the engine roars louder than before, “but they ain’t gonna mind if I cheat the limit a bit.”

They pass by a sign for a rest stop in five miles. “Ya want to try calling for a truck there?” the driver asks, pointing at the sign.

“Yes, that will do nicely,” the passenger says. “So what do you do for a living?”

The driver chuckles, and the passenger thinks he did not expect her to ask such a question. He takes a minute before responding.

“I do a little of this, a little of that,” he says, looking over at her and smiling. “I suppose ya could call me a handy-man. I fix what needs fixing. Plumbing, electrics, even vehicles; I fix it all.” He reaches for a pack of cigarettes stashed under the radio.

“Do you work for a company, or for yourself?”

“I never worked for no companies, only for myself.” He pops the top of his cigarette box open and offers one to the passenger. She shakes her head.

“Why do you have the van then, is it yours?”

“Nah. I’m borrowing it from a friend. He ain’t gonna miss it.” He plucks a cigarette from the box with his lips and returns the box under the radio. He switches the radio back on after he lights the tip. “Damn thing always loses my station...” he says under his breath as he twists the dial.

Roy Brown sings about a man named Butcher Pete through the speakers from decades past, and the driver joins in for the duration of the song.

“It don’t have my sweet Ella in it, but I love that song nonetheless,” he says as the song finishes. “I don’t know why, but it just seems to call to me.”

“It’s a good song,” she says.

“Say, where is ya staying in the Capitol?”

“I was just going to stay at a hotel that’s near the corporate offices.”

“Ya know, it’ll be awhile until ya can get a truck to pick up the car, and ya will need to sleep... My spare room has a real soft bed.”

"Thanks," the passenger says, blushing once more, "I'll consider it."

"Ya is more than welcome to stay a night or two, I don't mind. And it's on the way to D.C."

"I already have a reser—"

"There's plenty of room. Three bedrooms, and it's only me and my ma living there since my pa passed. My ma always likes visitors."

"She sounds ni—"

"Course, I got a friend staying for a couple weeks after the bank took his house, but he won't be bothering us, hon."

"I think that's the stop there," the passenger says, pointing to an approaching off-ramp.

"He knows to keep out of my business, but sometimes he just don't understand privacy."

The driver steers the van down the ramp and into a parking space in front of the rest stop. No other cars sit under the lamps in this lot, and the elongated lanes for the big-rigs lie empty as well. They exit the van and walk into the building.

"I think the phones is that way," the driver says, pointing down a short hallway. "I'm gonna make a stop in the restroom before we go."

"I'll meet you at the van," the passenger says, taking a couple of steps down the hallway.

She waits until she hears the squeak of the restroom door before following the driver, passing by filthy, glass-covered displays making pleas for the forests and wildlife, and stopping short of the door. She presses her ear against the once-white door, and listens to the sounds of the working of a belt-buckle. When she hears the click of the stall door locking, she pushes the door open and enters.

The interior of the restroom had not fared well over the years, and wannabe thugs unknown had since scratched numerous curses and gang signs into the mirrors. Careful of any noise,

the passenger crosses the room and slips into the farthest stall from the door. Sitting down on the toilet, she lays her purse on her lap and searches for her knife.

She slings the purse back over her shoulder as the toilet flushes, and picks a rogue piece of tire out of the folding mechanism as the driver buckles his belt. She steps out of the stall when the hinges squeak, and slides the knife between two vertebrae in his lower back. He calls out, as all her past lovers have, and tries to reach behind him before he loses his strength. He crumples like a puppet with its strings cut, and the blade slips out from the bloody wound. She kneels down beside him and slides the knife twice more into his back, brushing the hair out of his eyes, and shushing his quivering lips all the while.

Searching his pockets, she drops the keys to the van into her purse, and slaps the driver's wallet onto the sink before she stands up and pulls the knife from his back. She wipes the blade clean with a paper towel and slips it back into her purse, then examines herself in the dirty mirror. Her ponytail had come loose again during the effort, and a spray of blood dots her cheeks. She wipes the blood with the dirtied paper, but it only smears the liquid to an even coat over her face. She giggles to herself over her macabre makeup and wets the paper towel before trying again. After she flushes the blood-soaked towels down the toilet, she kneels before the body.

She runs her hands over the spreading pool of red ink, smearing it over her finger tips and palms, working it into all the crevices and folds. A smile spreads across her face as the warm liquid coats her skin for the second time that night, and she stands up and approaches the wall. With long, swooping strokes, she continues her tradition and signs the dirty tiles "Ella," the name of the woman the driver so revered. She washes her hands three times, and searches the wallet.

"Pete Delanor," she says, reading his driver's license. "Nice to meet you. "Ella," I suppose you could call me." She puts the wal-

let back where she found it, but slips the license into her pocket to join Tom's and Mike the convenience store attendant's. When she returns home, "Ella" will place Pete's and Mike's licenses in the rosewood box under her bed that contains Frank Swindler, Donald Lassen, and their five friends. While she thinks of all of her past lovers the same way, "Ella" will keep Tom's in her pocket. It will only be removed to be stroked and fondled. For now, however, "Ella" will climb into Pete Delanor's van and take the detour around Washington D.C. on her way north to greener pastures.

Church of the Angels

by Amy Cannon

Stepping from stained window-glass,
turning down shafts of light like spiral stairs with
ballooning
sleeves that slow their movements
like parachutes, they descend in pairs.
Their albs are white.

They minister to us from a few inches up, hovering.
They signal when to kneel or stand
and dip down to welcome us with wafers in their hands —
they feed us like the birds will feed their young. We open
our mouth for the morsels they place
so lightly on our tongues, they melt away
and we can taste their fingertips.

We sip like children from their cup of wine,
too big for us to hold. They tip it toward our pursing lips
and let us kiss its rim. We drink and think of him
whose blood they say it is,
whose life they say we have.

We listen for the hush of fabric on the floor, the creak
of kneelers landing together, never
quite in sync. They settle
on wooden benches, then straighten
and stand to lead the Kyrie.

We feel the reverberations of their voices play
up our legs through the floor's flat stones.
We fold our hands — they their wide
white wings — to pray: we do not
do this alone.

Holy Bird

by Kirsten Broughton

Forgive me Mother, for I was a baby.
Turned in your grip when we lowered
Down, my white dress bunched up. Priest
Poured holy water on my forehead.
Forgive me Mother; I am not sure it seeped in.

Forgive me Brother, for I was frightened.
We anticipated with open palms, our childish
Hunger still quenchable. Filled to the brim you always
Trusted. My cup half empty left me wanting.
Forgive me Brother, for taking more than my share.

Forgive me Sister, for I was not confident.
My burning eyes seek perfect sister skin. A teenage
Girl does not know: it is not killer looks singeing
Holes. It's me, sizzled down to my jealous bones.
Forgive me Sister, I confess but I won't let go.

Forgive me Grandmother, for I was foolish.
Kicking and screaming I knew more. Maternal
Pressure pushed me through, a tightly locked
Invisible door. A broken window is just a small price,
Forgive me Grandmother, for I am still not wise.

Forgive me Lover, for I have been hurt.
Because of you, I have come to know warmth. Yet,
Internal furnace could not burn; doubtful whispers
Floating up; "*my* lifetime bound in matrimony?"
Forgive me Lover, for I am claustrophobic.

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. And
I *still* have the same question. "Does He hear my
Every thought?" Your answer has always been the
Same, "Words will scream but a silent smile saves."
Forgive me Father, for I am desperate to be heard.

Forgive me Earth, for I am resisting death.
No Holy Oils could stretch my time. No
Anointing could relieve, the eternal wood
Box confine, that endless soil's about to bring.
So, when this borrowed body must return,
Forgive me Earth, I want to come back as a bird.

All Night

by Gaby Alexander

It's an unavoidable event. It happens to everyone. Though, some may be luckier than most to not have to suffer through such an event as often as others. Some have no trouble at all getting through said event. Though, for the rest of us, we go through the stages. The five stages of an all-nighter. You know those nights when you are so burdened with work you have let pile up because you told yourself you would watch just one more episode of *The Golden Girls*, and that one episode turned into four hours. Or those times your professor tells you, "this project cannot be done in one night," and you sit there and say proudly to yourself, "Challenge accepted!" Before you know it you're pulling an all-nighter.

Stage one: Denial

It's fairly early in the evening. You've just gotten home and eaten that day old sandwich you were looking forward to. You get to your computer and think, "I have time to spare. I don't have to start now." You check you email. You check your Facebook. You tweet. You tumbl. You shop for that pair of shoes you know you will never be able to afford, but you think it's nice to just put in your shopping cart. You become bored with the internet and begin watching a bit of TV or reading a bit of a book. All the while your project/essay/assignment sits to the side glaring at you. Trying its best to do an impression of your mother when she tries to guilt trip you into wearing your cousin's hideous bride's maid dress. You glance over thinking, "I'll get a head start and maybe research a few things." No. No you won't. The minute you open up Safari everything, and I mean everything on the Internet becomes one hundred and ten percent more interesting than the topic you set out to research. You find yourself watching a YouTube video of a cat with the body of a pop-tart flying through space whilst pooping

a rainbow. You find yourself playing Chrome's new version of that one game on your phone. You find yourself flipping through captioned photo after captioned photo of cats in weird positions. Your assignment still glaring at you, hoping you'll give it your full attention. You don't.

Stage two: Anger

At this point you have begun your assignment. And by begun I mean you have about one tenth of it done and have now become frustrated. Beyond frustrated even. Enraged. Mostly due to the lack of sleep and caffeine withdrawal. You wonder why such a horrible task has befallen on your innocent shoulders. Why these evil dictators have punished you so. Why the world hates you for having caused all previous events prior to this moment in time to lead up to this event. You begin listening to brutal death metal songs such as "Burn the Earth" and "Crush My Battle Opponent's Balls." You think to yourself, "I just need a break. I'll be fine." You proceed to the bathroom, leaving the lights off as to not wake your bear of a mother. In socks, you step on a wet spot. Normally your reaction would be, "Oh, that's lame." Not tonight. Tonight you say through gritted teeth, "Why do I even have feet!" You make your way to the kitchen for a brain feeding, carb loaded, midnight snack. An empty box is all that's left of the only sustenance you needed. You nearly rip off your shirt in Hulk-esque rage and blame your hunger on the assignment. In fact, everything that will go wrong henceforth will be the fault of said assignment. Steam nearly gushing from your ears, you make your way back to your desk and attempt to work.

Stage three: Bargaining

You've made a tiny amount of progress when fatigue begins to wrap its strangely warm arms around your body. The click-clack of the keyboard is slower now. You look at how much you have written and reread the assignment sheet then look at the clock. You repeat this five more times. You think to yourself,

“Well, what if I take a nap for two hours then finish in the morning,” or “I can stop now then finish it in the library before class,” or “If I just don’t do this one and get an A on the next one I should be okay.” The lack of sleep and deadly amounts of caffeine in your body cloud your logic. You’re desperate to find any way out of finishing this assignment. You tell yourself never again will you get yourself in this situation if only you can get through this. You get on Facebook, tumblr, Twitter to find anyone willing to buy your soul in return for making this assignment disappear. You spend more time calculating how many points you can afford to lose on this assignment by doing a half-assed job and still get a decent grade. You calculate how well you’ll have to do on future assignments in order to make up for not doing this one. The thought of simply begging your computer to finish it for you runs through your mind. Why not? It seems to do everything else under the sun.

Stage four: Depression

The end of the assignment seems so far off you have a better chance of magically “turning” that girl on TV into a lesbian and having her marry you. You’ve given up on trying to complete the assignment. The glow of the word document mocks you as you lie in the fetal position on the floor reminiscing about being a child again. Back when an all-nighter was staying up past eleven and your biggest concern was how to avoid having your pig tails tied to the monkey bars again. Those were the days. You were writing in cursive and multiplying all over those tables. “What happened? I used to be so smart.” You think. You wonder when you became such a failure at life. What is the point in doing anything if you couldn’t even get through this one assignment? The inevitability of failure is now realized. You will fail. Maybe not at life, but you will fail at things. You are not perfect, no matter how hard you try to be that person your family wishes you are. The sheer disappointment of not finishing this assignment is bringing to light how many other “life assignments” you may fail. Or have failed. Or are failing. It’s crippling.

Stage five: Acceptance

A newly opened can of sugar free Red Bull sits idly by as you slowly ingest its contents. Caffeine flows through your veins and pacifies the symptoms of withdrawal. You are nowhere near finishing your assignment. You carry on. There is a large possibility that you will not finish on time. You carry on. The quality of your work has declined. You carry on. You realize there is no need to have your internal organs explode from stress over this assignment. It's just one assignment. You will do what you can, turn in what you have done, and carry on with life. There will be many more assignments to be done. So what if you fail this one. Learn from it and do better on the next one. You realize it might be pointless to continue typing, but in your head you hear the words of one of the most influential instructors of all time. Ah, Yoda... "Do or do not. There is no try." So you do. You do and do again. You know this will happen again, no matter how many times you tell yourself it won't. You save and print. Unaware of the time. You don't care. You realize it wasn't that big of a deal. You made it through and now you can sleep.

Lying in bed you tell yourself you'll be able to sleep now. You are wrong. You remember the empty can of red bull you just inhaled sitting in the trash can under your desk. No matter how tired you may be that caffeine will keep you awake. In addition, you think back on what you wrote and realize things. This word would have sounded better. This portion didn't make much sense. I didn't use the right font. You will your body to get up to fix these things and at that moment you succumb to quite possibly the worst nap-attack known to human kind. Your last thought being, "I won't let that happen again." A smile lingers across your face as you realize you are lying to yourself.

by Alyra Lennox

Whisper to me in my ear. what is it? I will glide into the
percussion
of confident steps. I will hate you today as much as I
loved you
yesterday and I will love you even more tomorrow and
despise you next
week. as it is with everything. it stings. I dance in you
without
permission. ours or mine. yours or mine. or ours. it leaks
into the
corners of all things understood and reminds me, that if
I stood under
all things good, it would remind me of you.

Restlessness bores me... I don't think I can see you any
more because I
have a lot of holes that need mending. Holes. They
breathe and expand
like waves of ocean greedily gobbling up the last stretch
of sand.
Saturated and salty. rooted... not firmly—but rooted.
into my divinity,
into my precious earth. I pull them out with ease...and
they slide
willingly away like a hair being tweezed for the
hundredth time. Then
I am smooth again, I am the silk of sunset and I can love
you, so I
do, hungry and full, I love you—until the seams tear, the
holes
reappear and, perceiving what's to come, I grow restless.

Restlessness bores me. I don't think I can see you any
more.
talk. talk. take this tie from my tongue, unbind my
fingertips,
unravel my limbs. I take everything in through the
pores of my skin.
rip into me, rip me a part, release the drunk butterfly
that once was
my heart. sift through my insides, see what you find.
pieces of
stifled, all different kinds. I am stuck together like taffy
to teeth.
saltwater wounds. coral in reef. go ahead and jump, into
the puddle of
my flesh, then make a crown for your loneliness with
whatever is left.



Contributors

CONTRIBUTORS

Gaby Alexander describes herself with one word: Gabnacious. Check out her blog at adventures-in-nonsense.blogspot.com <<http://adventures-in-nonsense.blogspot.com>> for more Gabnacious information.

Beth Andreoli enjoyed spring 2011's semester in Oxford through PCC's study abroad program, and is currently choosing a graduate school for English. After that she plans to teach, write, and travel, not necessarily in that order.

Kirsten Broughton has a BA in Global Studies and has enrolled at PCC to explore academic interests for grad school. She has been writing poetry for only a few years but hopes to study the craft further in her next degree.

Amy Cannon took her first creative writing class at PCC. She hopes to continue to grow as a writer and to pursue an MFA in creative writing.

Rebecca Cypherd is an English Literature major at PCC. She is addicted to Russian writers and Orwell essays.

Ikia Fletcher has served on the *Inscape* editorial board twice and is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Haebitchan Jung loves to sleep and bang on his baby grand. He loves his family, and he loves to love.

William Kloezeman is working very hard right now to turn a current crisis into an opportunity for personal growth.

Gloria Komaba was born in Minneapolis and raised in Los Angeles. She worked for many years as a children's librarian, working with at-risk children. She's written book reviews for in-house, professional publications and is currently working on a mystery based on a relative's life story.

CONTRIBUTORS

Samuel Kraemer-Dahlin has taken courses in Madrid and painted house interiors in Barcelona. In Iceland he hitchhiked around the country, landscaped in small fjords in the east, and farmed in the southwest. He has also lived in a small Ugandan village where he farmed, assisted a doctor and worked with children.

Alyra Lennox is an English major with an emphasis on creative writing and a Spanish and Linguistics major.

Irvin Lopez attended Garfield High School and is a man of many interests, from video games to marine biology. He loves everything about guitars and plays them whenever he can. He also loves film and his favorite directors include Peter Jackson, Guillermo del Toro and Tim Burton.

Kevin Lopez is a So-Cal native, member of the PCC Speech and Debate team, and majors in Communication. In his spare time he performs spoken word poetry. Writing has been a passion of his for the past few years. When not doing any of this, he publishes an independent literary magazine called Band of Outsiders.

Joseph Lusnia is following in his son's footsteps here at PCC, having been out of school for over thirty years. In his opinion, the English Dept. here is the best kept secret in L.A. County. When he's not at PCC, he loves to write, which is what he does when he is at PCC, so there it is. He loves to write; he's even taken a poetry class.

Matthew Martins believes it is very important to read things twice and work hard, something he has done often in life on movie sets as a gaffer, key grip, and as an actor. He loves to read, write, and play the piano.

Paris Matic is a part-time poet and full-time thinker. She is the prismatic spectrum, always in motion, a collaborative artist, and conventional inspiration. She is a mystery.

C O N T R I B U T O R S

Rhianna McGaughey is currently enrolled as an English major at PCC. She loves reading, writing poetry, cycling and painting.

Joshua Moreno is a veteran. He was deployed to Iraq.

Jonathan Mota is always finding new musical artists and can be found listening to Belly and Radiohead. He has also taken a road trip to San Francisco with his friend's band, Pristines, and worked with them as a roadie. He has written about this and many of his other adventures.

Mustafa Nastrulla is a current PCC student.

Angela Nicholson is a mix of an actor, a writer, and a scientist. Her favorite moments of inspiration come from the thesaurus.

Juliana Peterson-More is a PCC student.

Benett Rogers is a design major and a psych minor. She is a single mother and she loves ice cream.

Khrysten Rogers was raised on two coasts. She writes, reads, listens, and laughs. Mostly around midnight because, hey, sleep is overrated. Music is also, quite possibly, her most favorite entity in the world and she is often found with her headphones by her side.

Scott Russell graduated from Glendale High School, has held jobs from Chimney Sweep to Animal Control Officer, and has served in the Marines, where he was first stationed at Camp Pendleton and later deployed to Iraq. He resides with his family in Alhambra and is pursuing an A.A. in Business.

Andreas Schick was born in Delaware, grew up in South Carolina and has taken a short story writing course at PCC. His love for reading and writing is matched by his interest in video games. He thanks his grandmother for his interest. She introduced the Schick family to a Gameboy and soon they were playing Super Nintendo and Zelda.

C O N T R I B U T O R S

Nicole Stranz is a PCC student and writer.

Sachi Terry is a PCC student and poet.

Sidonie Tise considers an excellent week if it involves piano practice, evening walks, long drives, and tuxedo jackets.

Kendra Jordyn Villa is a female musician and artist. She is inspired by fascinatingly “odd” minds: Igor Stravinsky and Hector Berlioz, Goya, Dali, Rod Serling, Nick Blinko, C.G. Jung and most importantly, Lewis Carroll. She hopes to pursue music and art with the hope of it taking her to New York.

Yingchao Xiao was born on the side of a river, sent away by his own mother when he was one-month old, grew up in the mountains, attended schools in big cities, and practiced law for the past two decades while dreaming to write good stories.

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And to all the writers and artists
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Associate in Arts Degree

English Literature

Courses in this area of emphasis encompass traditional literary history and interpretation as well as cross-cultural inquiry and current theoretical debates. Literature majors are trained in critical reading, writing and thinking, as well as in literary interpretation. Literature is the study of representation, ideas, language, and culture. As such, it is a source of knowledge and pleasure, as well as a field of study. Literary texts are social documents in artistic form that speak to us as much about historical issues as about aesthetic matters. Literature students learn to think critically and to understand the role that texts play in a given society, past or present.

Requirements

- Students must complete a minimum of sixty (60) units. These units must meet PCC's General Education Requirements and must include eighteen units in the area of emphasis.
- **To complete the eighteen units in the area of emphasis, students must complete English 1C or English 26 and fifteen (15) units consisting of courses from at least three of the five categories listed below and including a minimum of two Literary Survey courses. Each course must be completed with a grade of "C" or better.**
- The courses that universities and colleges require for transfer vary. In selecting literature courses, students should consult with Counseling Services to determine the particular transfer requirements of specific transfer institutions.

English Literature courses offered at Pasadena City College

Literary Survey:

Engl 30A	American Literature	3
Engl 30B	American Literature	3
Engl 30C	American Literature	3
Engl 44B	World Literature	3
Engl 44C	World Literature	3
Engl 46A	English Literature	3
Engl 46B	English Literature	3

Gender and Ethnic Literature:

Engl 24	Lit in Translation	3
Engl 25C	Women in Literature	3
Engl 47	Mexican/Chicano Lit	3
Engl 48	Asian Literature	3
Engl 50	Afro-American Lit	3
Engl 51	Native American Lit	3
Engl 52	Asian-American Lit	3

Literary Origins:

Engl 44A	World Literature	3
Engl 45A	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 45B	Literature of the Bible	3
Engl 78A	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 78B	Intro to Shakespeare	3
Engl 82A	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82B	Intro to Mythology	3
Engl 82C	Intro to Mythology	3

Genre and Modes in Literature:

Engl 25A	Modern Literature	3
Engl 25D	Science Fiction/Fantasy	3
Engl 25E	Literature of Horror	3
Engl 25F	Comedy and Literature	3
Engl 25G	Mystery/Crime Fiction	3
Engl 49A	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 49B	Film as Dramatic Lit	3
Engl 53	Interpreting Poetry	3
Engl 57	Modern Drama	3
Engl 60	Masterpieces of Drama	3
Engl 61	Intro to the Novel	3
Engl 34	Major Novelist	1
Engl 35	Major Dramatist	1
Engl 36	Major Poet	1
Engl 37	Major Critic	1

Special Topics in Literature:

Engl 25H	American Journeys	3
Engl 25I	Post-Colonial Lit	3
Engl 25J	Utopian/Dystopian Lit	3
Engl 26	Intro to Lit. Theory	3
Engl 54	California Literature	3
Engl 59	Children's Literature	3

Creative Writing

at Pasadena City College

English 5A (Creative Writing)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B. Creative literary expression; short story, poetry and essay. Individual experimentation with various forms; students evaluate their work and work of classmates in light of contemporary writings. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC. *CAN: ENGL 6.*

English 5B (Creative Writing)

Prerequisite: English 5A, 6, 7 or 8. Creative literary expression such as: short story, poetry, dramatic form and essay. The focus is on in-depth criticism of student work and professional writers. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 6 (Short Story Writing)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B. Theory and practice in writing the short story. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 7 (Inscape Magazine Publication)

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Critical review and selection of creative material; design and layout of a literary magazine. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 8 (Writing Poetry)

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1A. Writing of poetry in all forms. Reading of traditional and current work. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

English 9 (Creative Nonfiction)

Prerequisite: Engl 1A. Writing and analysis of creative non-fiction such as memoirs, reviews, profiles, and nature writing. *Transfer Credit: CSU; UC*

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