

INSCAPE 2006

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

PASADENA CITY COLLEGE
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA



• INSCAPE •

• a literary magazine •

volume



formerly *pipes of pan*
volumes 1-29

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Pasadena City College students serve as *Inscape* editors each fall, reviewing submissions and designing the layout; the magazine is published the following spring. All PCC students—full or part-time, regardless of major or field or interest—are invited to submit their creative writing and art to the editors. Submission guidelines and information regarding *Inscape* editorial positions are available in the English Division office in C245.

Cover art: N.S. David
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*To the Annabel Lees...
wherever they may be.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.	10
POET OF THE YEAR: Suji Kwok Kim.	12
<i>Hwajŏn</i>	14
<i>Leaving Chinatown</i>	15
<i>Drunk Metaphysics</i>	15
<i>Monologue for an Onion</i>	16
<i>Fugue for Eye and Vanishing Point</i>	17
Joseph Mattson – SHORT STORY AWARD, SPRING 2005	
<i>That One Avenue You're Looking For,</i> <i>It No Longer Exists</i>	19
N.S. David	
<i>His Failed Experiment</i>	25
James Nyquist	
<i>ID</i>	33
Beverly Kikuta	
<i>Umbrella</i>	38
Carl White – POETRY AWARD, SPRING 2005	
<i>The Demon Drink</i>	40
Katherine Didier	
<i>To Accompany a Vivid Description of Stubbing</i> <i>Your Toe and an Angry Love Letter</i>	42
<i>The Dance</i>	43
Heather Collette-VanDeraa	
<i>Mother's Day 1977</i>	44
<i>These Mountains</i>	45

Melissa Molyneux – ESSAY AWARD, SPRING 2005

Life in a Vacuum 47

Carl White

Kitchen Sink Drama. 51

Mia Pao

Rush, Rush. 55

Priane Nava Yambao Lina – SHORT STORY AWARD, FALL 2005

Mermaid 59

N.S. David

I'm a fucking Vegetarian! 67

Joseph Mattson

Millennium 75

Carl White – POETRY AWARD, FALL 2005

Watching 80

Grace Pai

To Nai Nai 82

Joseph Mattson

Receiving the Calendar. 84

Priane Nava Yambao Lina

Eustaquio Street 85

Suzanne Harlan

*Regarding those Florescent Lights
on the Limousine Roof* 86

Jennifer Collins	
<i>Momma Gave me a Jackass</i>	88
<i>Grandma</i>	89
N.S. David	
<i>You'll be the death of me, Timmy Brown</i>	91
Joseph Mattson – ESSAY AWARD, FALL 2005	
<i>Infamy</i>	93
Phillip Taw	
<i>Eat It All, Elaine</i>	99
Heather Collette-VanDeraa	
<i>Friday Night Fish Fry</i>	102
CONTRIBUTORS	106
CREATIVE WRITING AT PCC	108

Preface

What is *Inscape*? This magazine is, of course, *Inscape*, a publication of Pasadena City College students. They are its contributors, and they are its editors. *Inscape*, too, is a term coined by 19th century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. He saw “inscape” as finding an object, noting its distinct beauty, and noting its unity among all things. It is seeing. It is insight.

This is a difficult task for all of us. This is especially difficult for writers; their job is to express and communicate what they perceive around us. A difficult task; some would say impossible. But writers try. They have a voice inside them, a small wheedling voice, similar in sound and torture to that of tinnitus. It keeps at them. It never goes away. It never lets up.

Oh, sure, writers will find ways to ignore it, deciding to organize that drawer in the kitchen, the one containing two lifetimes of clutter, or do ten loads of laundry, even if it means having to take clean clothes out of the closet to wash them again. And all so they don't have to give in to that *voice* and drag themselves to the blank screen on their computer that waits. It is the schoolyard bully haunting their nightmares, the one sitting perched on their desk in the dark, flashing that evil, glowing grin.

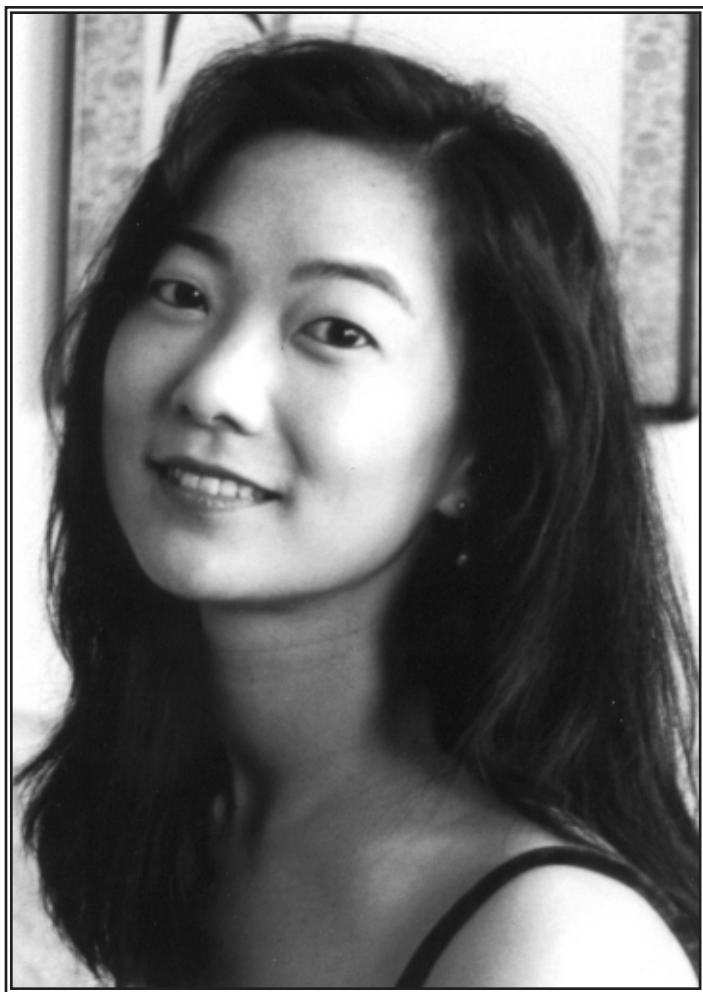
We all know, of course, that bullies are cowards; they can be stood up to, vanquished. There are days when writers, like anyone else, just can't take it anymore. So they fight, take a stand, draw in a great, big shaky breath, put up their fists, and knock that grinning bully right on his ass. At last the writers can finally sit down and relax, send their fingers flying over the keyboard in a victory dance. You, dear readers, are looking at the results of these victories.

More than one hundred writers submitted their fine poetry, fiction and nonfiction to this year's *Inscape*. The editors thank all of these writers for their courage in making these submissions. The editors wish they could accommodate all of their good work.

And the editors wish to thank the many faculty and staff, each one helping *Inscape* to fruition. They want to acknowledge the encouragement of Dean Amy Ulmer, Professors Manuel Perea and Jane Hallinger, and the many other English faculty for making their time and talent available, including Brian Kennedy, Amy Lawlor, Donna Mungen, and Harry Smallenburg.

Thanks, too, to Assistant Dean Stephen Johnson of Student Affairs and, especially, the generous financial support of the PCC Student Services Fund. And very special thanks must be extended to Jesus Ruiz, printer extraordinaire. Gerard Manley Hopkins would note his *inscape*, his insight, too.





Credit: Jill D'Alessandro

POET OF THE YEAR

SUJI KWOK KIM

Over the years *Inscape* has shared its pages with the work of many of the world's most honored poets, including Sharon Olds, Philip Levine, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Seamus Heaney, Octavio Paz, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Denise Levertov and Joy Harjo. These writers, and many others, have kindly accepted the *Inscape* Poet of the Year award.

The 2006 *Inscape* Poet of the Year is Suji Kwock Kim, widely admired for her collection *Notes from a Divided Country*, winner of The Academy of American Poets 2002 Walt Whitman Award. In addition, she has garnered honors from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Korea Foundation and published in prominent literary journals and magazines. A 1995 graduate of Yale University, she was granted an MFA in 1997 from the University of Iowa; later she was a Fulbright Scholar at Seoul National University and a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She joined the faculty at Drew University in 2003, where she teaches poetry, short fiction, and Asian-American Literature.

In a conversation with Laura Miller of Salon.com, Ms. Kim explained why poetry is important: "When you read a great poem you get a sense of continuous danger that the poem won't go on. That blank space at the end of each line isn't just spatial, it's intellectual and emotional. It confronts what's ungraspable in our lives and can't be put into words." And though she and her family have been shaped by Korea's history, especially its wars, she believes that her poetry should not be tethered to "how ethnicity and gender affect my experience. [Some people] want to draft the imagination for political and moral purposes. But the imagination itself is amoral, the amoral capacity to conceive of what doesn't exist, and that might include what was but also what never was, what is to come but also what may never come."

This sensibility is apparent in her book *Notes from the Divided Country*. Yusef Komunyakaa, upon selecting it for The Academy of American Poets 2002 Walt Whitman Award, observed that it “springs out of a civil war in the soul. . . . [Its] revelation of horror is so explicit, so necessary; a facing up to history that frees the speaker. . . . There’s love and sadness at the root of the poems. There is also a bridge, a language that mends. Few will read *Notes from the Divided Country* and not be moved by its clarity of vision and honorable intent.” The following poems are taken from this celebrated collection.

Hwajŏn

[Fire-field]

There is no need to keep
humiliating me: even you must feel
these stubble-fields have been slashed enough,
craggling blackly like sockets
burned bare, blood-glitter of mud,
wind driving across the torn, steaming soils.
But you cannot know
what it is to be trapped inside the dirt
without a voice, thirsty roots
thrusting toward air, shoving above
rock-rung and gorse—; nor can you feel
this ore tearing through
its throat of stone, erupting from soil-silence
like the moment my voice first
hurls me, astonished and stinging, into the acid light.

(During the Japanese occupation of Korea, rural homelessness rose drastically and peasants were forced into slash-and-burn farming in the mountains.)

Leaving Chinatown

Peeling a mango to share between us, your mother
laughs at the grinning fool I've become, pours me
more and more wine. You're working late uptown.
Green *platanos* searing in oil, saffron rice boiling,

black beans simmer with *sofrito*, chili, red onion
until steam clouds the room, tasting of sea-salt.
What's between us thin as mist, raveling, unraveling,
as strange. How real is it? When she takes my face

in her hands as if she would slice open a fruit,
her ravaged voice cutting through me, I see her as she
must have been once, afraid of nothing—long before

she fell in love with your father, a man who shattered
what he touched, who left her eyes galled by all the other
faces, even yours, she might have looked into with love.

Drunk Metaphysics

after Ko Un

I've never been one soul.
Sixty trillion cells stagger
zigzag down the street,
laughing, trash-talking, quarreling,
singing-crying, living-dying,
Sixty trillion cells—all drunk!

Monologue for an Onion

I don't mean to make you cry.
I mean nothing, but this has not kept you
From peeling away my body, layer by layer,

The tears clouding your eyes as the table fills
With husks, cut flesh, all the debris of pursuit.
Poor deluded human: you seek my heart.

Hunt all you want. Beneath each skin of mine
Lies another skin: I am pure onion—pure union.
Of outside and in, surface and secret core.

Look at you, chopping and weeping. Idiot.
Is this the way you go through life, your mind
A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth,

Of lasting union—slashing away skin after skin
From things, ruin and tears your only signs
Of progress? Enough is enough.

You must not grieve that the world is glimpsed
Through veils. How else can it be seen?
How will you rip away the veil of the eye, the veil

That you are, you who want to grasp the heart
Of things, hungry to know where meaning
Lies. Taste what you hold in your hands: onion-juice,

Yellow peels, my stinging shreds. You are the one
In pieces. Whatever you meant to love, in meaning to
You changed yourself: you are not who you are,

Your soul cut moment to moment by a blade
Of fresh desire, the ground sown with abandoned skins.
And at your inmost circle, what? A core that is

Not one. Poor fool, you are divided at the heart,
Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love,
A heart that will one day beat you to death.

Fugue for Eye and Vanishing Point

Give me the clarity, the sharpness
of a season when things are plainly
themselves. No smear of dreaming on the dirt.
Let my eye see without seeking more
than what's there, and find what is
is sweet. Bleach-fumes. Urine. Cement.
Bus-exhaust. Oil glittering on pistons.
Soiled needles wrapped in butcher paper.
Infinite engine trapped in skin.

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SHORT STORY AWARD • SPRING 2005

**That One Avenue You're Looking For,
It No Longer Exists***by Joseph Mattson*

Here I was, rattletrap on the hill again, looking out over Los Angeles. A million lights twinkling, and one of them was yours. I could pick it out. Yes, there—the most beautiful of the shiners in the night. Guzman showed, knocking on the back of the car, letting me know he was there, rap rap, two quick ones, though we didn't plan it that way. Then I heard him yelp like a shank-stuck dog.

"Yeow mother Christ!" he howled.

I stuck my head out the window. "Jesus, be quiet. Get in the car."

The job was done, and, soaked through as I was on the 'Tucky mash—*ought to not be behind the wheel ol' boy*—I wanted nothing more than to resign to a tomb of sleep, but there was still business that needed tending.

Everyone knows Guzman is full of it, a homegrown grease tweak with nary a concern for anybody or anything but his own sorry ass. The boy understands despair though, even if he only knows the bottomless misery of speed. And that's why he walked up the mountain, shaking like a brittle brown leaf in the dead November wind, crackling with that special amphetamine blenching horror often mistranslated as the pursuit of *joy*; he didn't climb to do me a favor, he climbed in the holy name of dope.

"I cut my hand on your fucking car."

"We didn't talk about knocking on the goddamn thing. I told you to just walk up to the window, casually," I said.

"Look at this shit, man," he said, holding up his hand, which was gashed from between the index and middle knuckles and across the top, blood weeping out of it, little flakes of rust sticking to the wet red torn skin.

"When's the last time you had a tetanus shot?" I asked.

"What the fuck you mean, man?"

"Jesus Christ, you're all nerves."

"What you mean tet-ness?"

"You're gonna have to go under the needle for that one," I said, nodding at his hand.

"Man, I told you a hundred fucking times, my cousin can fix all this fucking rust for you, cheap. Your car looks like a fucking leper, man. All those fucking scabs and shit all over it."

"You should've known better. Ain't the first time you've taken the ride," I said.

"Fuck, man, shots. Are you fucking sure?"

"Unless you want lockjaw."

"Lockjaw? Shit, man, I don't know about no fucking lockjaw."

Guzman was squirming in the seat, screwing himself down like a plug worm in sweaty tuber pork. The idea of going to the doctor for shots put the fear to him, yet at the absolute soonest he was going to cook a dose of ice and fire it into his veins—not with any kind of ill comfort or unpleasant shudder, but with a terribly grateful, exulted relief.

I reached into my back pocket and handed him my handkerchief. Then I handed him the plastic bag.

"Don't fire here," I said. "If you want to snort it, fine."

Guzman looked at me like I had lost my mind. He opened the glove compartment, cracked the seal on the bag and sprinkled three decent nuggets, crushed a thick rail, removed an already-rolled dirty old Washington from his pocket, cleared the pipes, and inhaled deeply.

"Yes. That's the fucking shit, man. Thank you."

"Fuck off, Guzman. There won't be anymore. This is for the favor. I'm out of the game, been off for a long time and you know it. If you call my house I swear I'll put my fist through your pathetic lock-jawed mouth."

"You want some?" he asked.

I put the stare on him, letting him know that if he pushed it I wouldn't even wait for the lockjaw to set.

“Fucking lock-jaw. Fuck the doctor, man. I got your fucking lock-jaw right here,” he said, grinning Charlie Manson, eyes about to blow out of his skull. He opened the bag again and sprinkled some onto his dripping bloody hand. With his other fist he ground the speed right into the wound, gnashing it with his knuckles, digging corrosive methamphetamine into the slash with his fingernails, ripping the flesh even more. He picked up the dollar and took a mighty sucking snort, blood and all. It had to sting like hell, on the hand, and through his nasal chasm. He’d been in deep long enough; he didn’t have much of a septum left to speak of. He pinched his nose together and sucked again. The look on his face had remained unchanged.

“They’re in the back,” I said. “Let’s go.”

You were gone, long gone, but still there, always. I’d remember your face in the night, sweating through my sheets, as the six-story palms sweated off their own dew outside my window. The fog puts it there, that dew, in the often misunderstood Los Angeles night. I fell in love with you from the start, and there had been no moment of anything less after. The cool dusk ocean blue of your eyes, endless and aglow so lasting that they are almost sad, enough to make the sun weep—they took hold of me and under no concern had they let me go.

Yet, as memories process like dense, fraught coffins, the very thing I could easily imagine in sweet obsessive jubilee is the very thing that I repressed with exacting damnation. You left. I’d driven up the hill almost every night since, searching for answers in the tranquil humming basin of our city. There were no answers. You left, and I no longer had a right mind of the world. The eminent apocalypse we’d all been waiting for to come to Los Angeles finally came, but my name was the only one on its list.

Word still passes, gets around, even though it’s been four years now. Old friends, passing acquaintances, the winds, blow cruel with it. You married a man, name a’ Genesee. Named that for Lord knows what reason; it translates as ‘beautiful valley’. Were his parents leaning toward Genesis without getting too biblical? He’s a good man, I hear, not an unkind word can be said of him. I don’t know, I’ve never met

him, but I hated him with calculated fury. I had seen him only once, you together, from afar, and I could not forget it. I'd been drunk from that day forward.

Like a terminal disease, after I caught the news of matrimony it seemed death might be the only way out. I knew Guzman had a gun; he was, after all, a former EXP, and is, after all, a crank freak. But, hell, I couldn't go that way. And I couldn't just crush a whole forty bag, slam it, and simply let my heart explode, either. I'd quit the speed game—see, that all had started, and ended, *after* you. It'd be too obvious and feeble anyway. No, it had to be excellent, legendary, something that would turn even Byron to squirrely pansy-piss.

Well, hell with Lord Byron. I decided I was going to drive my car into the Pacific Ocean with a note tied around my neck that read: Okinawa or Bust. Hopefully there would be a smile on my face when I washed ashore, one I had lost in life.

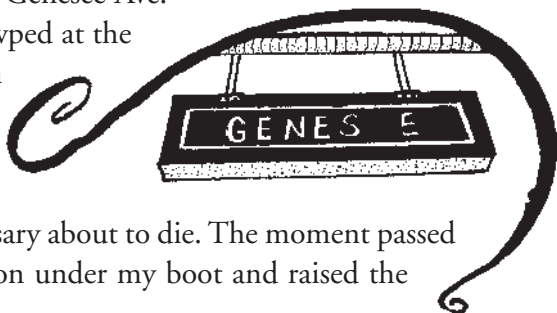
The day arrived. I drank a bar liter of 'Tucky bourbon and drove west on Sunset, through Silver Lake, East Hollywood, Hollywood, just until it becomes West Hollywood, when I suddenly stopped short there; it was so utterly palpable I felt obscene missing it before. Yet there it was, a beacon, shining like a silver snake in the western moon. I did not make it to the sea that day.

I turned up toward Franklin, stopping at Hollywood Boulevard, where the thing started and T'd with Nichols Canyon. I parked the Bonnie out of the lamp light. I opened the trunk and removed the claw hammer/crowbar that is standard item in a car as big and old as a 1977 Pontiac Bonneville. I could, now, possibly, on the lone desert of my soul, face my circumstantial enemy and feign redemption. I read it again, the letters white, embedded in blue, in the identifying



City of Los Angeles way: Genesee Ave.

I lit a cigarette and gawped at the sign, losing myself in each letter. The crowbar dangled in my right hand like a samurai sword before an adversary about to die. The moment passed and I crushed the Winston under my boot and raised the iron high.



I drove Genesee Avenue from Hollywood all the way down to its end, past West Jefferson and into Baldwin Village. I had quit counting the dead, but I had over forty, all hacked and butchered and piled in the trunk of the oxidized Bonneville. Each one systematically and symbolically massacred before me. As they were cut I would briefly hold them in silence; I respected them even though I had to kill them, their steel coldness a bloodless bloodbath in the swarthy passion of execution smoke and bourbon.

“You sure your cousin’s rig can melt these?”

“Fuck yeah, man. It can melt that shit. At the shop he showed me, I told you. Maybe we should melt your whole fucking car,” Guzman said, chortling like a water buffalo.

I lit a cigarette with no reply. Guzman kept going on and on; how I’d be a true pimp player if I took care of the rust, and O boy! if only I got as much pussy as him and his cousin Julio! I kept my mouth shut. When it got down to the butt I flicked my cigarette straight into his mangled hand.

“You dirty mother!” he screamed.

“Talk bad about the Bonnie once more and I’ll drop you off in front of County,” I said. There was little more than silence until we got to Guzman’s cousin’s shop in Echo Park. I pulled into the grassy back lot and unloaded the signs behind the building while Guzman fired the melter. The place was loaded with stolen chops, melted, reconfigured remains, and iron skeletons of sedans, wagons, vans.

“What do you plan to do with all these fucking signs?” Guzman asked.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You, of all people, will love it.”

Back on the hill, twenty-four hours later, the rivets still warm and no more rust, the old Bonneville was full of new armor like a trophy crown rifled from a slain tyrant king. What new skin I may've had, I did not know. For now, at least, she'd have to be strong enough for us both. I searched the dim luminous span of Los Angeles night. I found it. I found the light. Your light. But I did not pick it out of the millions this time. I found it because it *wasn't* lit. For the first time it was black. I drew a withered breath and shook out a cigarette. Then I punched the lighter and waited.



His Failed Experiment

by N.S. David

Go.

That is the shortest grammatically correct sentence in English—the most well traveled language in my little experiment. On its own, it's a command to leave. Which is dreadful enough. But too often, the word commands in a sentence much more explicit. With children, "go away!" is popular, their minds far too preoccupied in grass-stain exploits to bother with lexical redundancies. And yet their parents, who enjoy touting a higher capacity for thought, will often respond to this insolence with a redundancy of their own: "go to your room!" They don't realize somehow, that by doing this they are only mimicking their children, if only more particularly. As the children embrace their teens, the phrase then worsens into a personal favorite: "go to hell!"—often said with such vim that I wonder if they actually know what charming company Lucifer is; he does tell such ghastly jokes! And then, the parents may finally get that promotion, acquiring the privilege of commanding colleagues, and it's: "go to your cubicle and finish that proof or I swear you'll be going home in a cage with a monkey who'll fuck you til' his dick falls off!" This again, is obviously the same sentence, just colored in with some pretty verbs and nouns.

You see, the older, the more powerful they get, the more eloquent, and subsequently, more frightening the sentence becomes. I always know that the moment a man with absolute power begins a command it will end up sounding like this: "Go to war! Free the world! God bless us all!"

And that is a command to me. To bless them all. What they don't realize is the pointlessness of it, as I am constantly blessing them anyway. But they don't realize a lot, my children. For one, they don't see how averse I am to that sentence. Go. The only positive I can find in it is that it's so similar to my appellation, and that is a sand-sized grain of positive in a sea of scruples. The sea ironically enough, seems to have picked up the human language, because lately, it's been saying

nothing but *ggghhhhhhoooooo*, *ggghhhhhhoooooo*. That's how it *ggghhhhhhoooooo*s. They're bleeding into everything.

But that's all right. Nothing of consequence compared to The Epiphany—and see the use of capitalization to foretell impending doom? Exciting!

The thing is, for thousands of years I have watched my little experiment slowly self-destruct. I have watched and taken notes with assiduity befitting an Oxford historian. And it never made sense—until this moment.

Here's the common misconception down there: I am omniscient. Apparently, I know everything—the combined weight of every Swede woman, the ingredients for the perfect spinach-ricotta gnocchi, if Jimmy from homeroom will ask them to the spring cotillion tomorrow (Oh, yes he will! He really will!). My knowledge is hailed to surpasses reality, time. Time—I am supposed to know every future. There have been countless debates questioning how my gift of free will is possible when combined with this characteristic omniscience—let me answer that now. In actuality, my knowledge of future events only extends to each moment in time. Every current moment has just one final possibility, but inherent in each moment is also infinite choice. Which choices will be followed, I know not. But with every choice is born a new moment, and thus a new possibility. That is free will. And that is the extent of my knowledge.

I'm also a terrible speller. Which is why I hate New Zealand, with hillsides named things like Taumatawhakatangihangakoauauotamateaturipukakapikimaungahoronukupokaiwenuakit natahu. Lovely hill, but writing that out always takes me a good fifteen minutes and help from Mikey. But that's a story for another day.

Here's the thing: this misconception of absolute omniscience means that my children do not think me capable of mistakes, fancy it impossible that there is no solution to their suffering, because I could not have created a world where no solution was possible. But listen, I am fully capable of all things—although true fault has yet to know me. Their language would probably qualify the overall makeup of their world as a mistake, seeing as the beginning formula was meant to be infallible, but we've already discussed the faults of their tongue. This is

what is actually happening: I am planning to build a new world, and my current experiment is not a mistake; rather, it is merely a primary step to perfection—to their Shangri-La. That is why I have watched, why I have spent so much time invested in this experiment. I needed to find my faults, needed to see where glue should be applied, needed to see what to terminate, needed to see what addendums were necessary. The cessation of free will was an obvious answer, if I didn't cherish it so much. I suppose in this case I am like their Greek hero Prometheus, suffering because I could not withstand not giving. Incidentally, a Prometheus does exist in another universe, except his gift was water and his torture is similar to mine—watching the world die through—

Listen, those commands that I despise are always tempered by one excuse.

Here are some modifications of this one alibi: *God is Great! God is Love! God is Just! God will punish you! God will bless us all!*

And here is my response to each of these assumptions: *No! No! No! No! Nooooo oohhh nooo ah ohhhhh nooo...no...shhhh splat! shhh splat! shhh splat splat shhh splat splat splat! Rrvvrrrooomghhh!*

They never seem to hear it. But I suppose that is my fault. Because my statements have never been clear enough, nor final enough. I will make sure they understand this time.



I suppose I should make it known how The Epiphany came about. In retrospect, I should have figured it all out sooner, but I have been blinded with hope. No longer though—I have sent Haley and Shoemaker on their way. This is what they sound like as they race toward their destination: *wwwuuuhhhhh ooha! Wwwwuuuhhh oha oha!*

I only mention that because it's the same sound my children manufactured by throwing at each other large amounts of flammable power encased in metal alloys.

Look, here's the thing. Today is the eighth of May in the year two thousand and four. Naturally, this is according to their calendar, as otherwise I'd require 35 pages for the date as it is known to me. But that's the date. According to my children, it has now been one 118 years since the invention of the first carbonated beverage, 59 years since the Germans—led by a unitesticted man aiming to rid the world of a certain race—surrendered to more life-loving nations, 136 years since the birth of Jean Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, whose aim was to heal the world.

Here's the thing. Today, a man named Nick Berg was beheaded by a man named Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi.

Two hundred and four years ago to this date, a French chemist named Antoine de Lavoisier lost his head to the guillotine. His executioner threw back at him his own philosophy: why was he afraid? Matter wasn't destroyed, only transformed. By his own theory, his genius would then only be reincarnated, if only as blood.

Here are the last words of Berg's slayer: *God is Great!*

Here are the last words of Lavoisier's slayer: *Zzzziing!*

Here are the last words of the deceased: *Aahhhggrrrrhhh!*

Here is my reaction to it all: *Eureka!*

It seems callous of me, but the reaction cannot be helped. As terrifying the situation, it helped me unearth the tragic flaw of humanity. How obvious it had been all along!

The death of Nick you see, was an act to avenge the torture of certain people executed by certain other people inside a prison called Abu Ghraib. To me, the pain lies in knowing that this situation is only heinous to my children due to certain labels applied to these men. Had these labels been different, I know the crimes would have

remained unknown, much like the ongoing murders of my children in Sudan. Listen, this is why the world was in an uproar: Abu Ghraib used to be the place a man as evil as The Great Unitesticled One tortured the humans dependent on his leadership. The man currently wearing my stolen *Supreme Ruler of the Universe!* nametag coerced that man to let go of that leadership by annihilating his protections and his homes. The primary victims were full of adulation, until they found out that the prison still remained a torture chamber, the labels had just changed.

The world was exposed to the irony two weeks ago, on the twenty-eighth of April. That day is 72 years after my children solved the problem of yellow fever, 8 years after my child Martin Bryant killed 35 of his siblings in a place named Port Arthur, 26 years after Mohammed Daoud Khan was assassinated by people who believed that everyone should have an equal share of everything.

Here's the thing: sixty-seven years from that day, the man who now wears the label of Former Head Persecutor at Abu Ghraib came into the world.

These were his first words: *Ooh ah ah abhh! Oh ah ah! Ah! Ahh! AAHH!*

This is what it used to sound like inside Abu Ghraib when this man's label didn't include the word "former": *No, no. Please, please. Oh ah ah ooh abhh! AH! AHH!*

This is what it sounds like under the new Head Persecutor: *No, no. Oh God forgive me. Oh ah ah ooh abhh! AH! AHH! A-AHHH!*

This is the reason the elicitors of those cries changed labels: *"May God bless our country and all those who defend her!"*

This was my response to the situation: *No! Wait! Oh! Oh! I understand!*

Belief in me.

That is The Epiphany. That is the sad truth I have come to. The world is falling apart, because of me. Because of belief in a higher being. Here's the thing: although my children have all given me different names, different forms, different functions, as long they worship a deity, they have been worshipping me. The problem I now see, lies in the fact that they cannot fathom that I am one and the same. The

strength of their separate convictions, combined with this misunderstanding, leads to commands so heinous I suffer to look upon the consequences. And worst of all, they are using the self-righteousness of knowing the “true” me as their excuse.

But no more.

* * * *

I feel I should explain first. Because, yes, it was obvious. Yes, I should have come to the conclusion much sooner. But listen, here’s what was going on in the petri dish which made me question introducing Earth to good ol’ Armageddon.

In a country called Iraq, a twelve year old boy named Abi was attending a wedding. The festivities were hindered the by walls crashing upon them in fragments as a bomb hit the building.

Here’s what the bomb proclaimed: *Zzzzzzziiing! Boom! Kkkrubhgggummmble!*

Here are Abi’s last words: *Aahhhggrrrrhhh!*

In a country called America, a man named Kenneth was apprehended by the police for taking photos of the visible spectrum bombarding the sheet metal of a building called the Disney Concert Hall. Disney is a company that creates films for children. Kenneth, like Nick Berg, was just an innocent man whose time had been sacrificed for the sake of security. Nick Berg’s sacrificed time led to his tryst with death. Kenneth’s sacrificed time led to a tryst with an angry boss.

Here is the sound of the police siren that disrupted a peaceful sunrise: *Oowee oowee oowee!*

Here is the sound of the shutter opening and closing inside Kenneth’s camera: *Khhhoosshwweet! Khhhhoosshwweet!*

Inside several rooms in the world, a tall blonde woman in a yellow track suit was cutting off heads. Death was beautiful this one instance, because hearts were strong enough that blood rushed out of severed limbs in cascades sublime enough to rival Niagara.

Here is the sound of the faux blood spurting out of celluloid bodies: *Sshhhhhhhhh! Shhhhhhhhh!*

Inside rooms where light came only in shades of blue and green, young teenagers seduced each other. The thump and grinds of their vessels and the thumps and grinds of the music were not often in coordination—though not for the lack of trying.

Here is the soundtrack of their lives: *Tonight, I'll be your naughty girl, you got me feeling nasty oh oh ah ah oh!*

In New Mexico, eleven thousand people gathered around a miracle. This miracle was a tortilla chip that had a striking resemblance to my son, Jesus.

Here is what the crowd had to say: *Oooooohhh!*

In Vienna, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, my musical vessel, was permanently lost underneath a pile of earth and comrades in finance.

Here are the last notes of his voice: *Confutatis maledictis! Fammis acribu addictis, voca me cum benedictis!*

In the Italian Alps, Otzi the Ice Man was murdered, literally stabbed in the back. Scientists of recent times now think of him as the oldest murder victim, he having lived in the Neolithic times.

Here is what Abel has to say about it: *Oh! They've already forgotten all about me!*

You see, there were too many vices. Too many notes, and not a single melody to connect them harmoniously. Until now of course. Here's the thing: there is humanity in me as well. For a long time I could not fathom the idea that it was somehow my doing. In my subconscious, I could not flirt with the idea that the solution lay in my nonexistence. I reveled in my children's worship, I reveled in their knowledge of my fatherhood. I still do.

But felicity for my children is my priority. Perfection of this masterpiece is my priority. So I shall have to carry this through. I shall have to be content with my knowing my own accomplishments. I shall have to be content with these cries:

Ha!

Hee!

Wee!

Woo!

I am great! I am love! I am just! Bless me, world!

However, that won't be until seven more days. At this moment, Haley has arrived, with Shoemaker close behind, so now these sounds will be my torture, and my penance:

Whhhiiiiizz!

Brrroohhooooommm!

Kkkaaazzoorrhmmpppp!

God help us!

God forgive us!

God save us all!



ID

by James Nyquist

"I know, I know," said the man. "I've done this before. You need not tell me what to do."

The police officer stared at the man. He was unsure if the man was dangerous, or simply insane. "Do you have some ID?" asked the policeman.

"ID," said the man slowly, repeating the officer's words. "I dee, I do, I am...ah..." The man was searching his memory for another word, phrase, anything to communicate to the policeman that he did in fact know the parlance, the idioms of the day—that everything was just as it should be.

He said finally, "I think, therefore I am," and smiled. The policeman did not return the gesture.

"Have you got some ID or no?" the policeman asked.

The man detected a growing impatience in the officer and nodded profusely, smiling all the while. It was just a matter of finding the right words. They were that close—the man was sure of it. After all, hadn't he done this before? So he said, "To be, or not to be."

"What?"

Now a little unsure, the man blinked several times, adding quickly, "Love is a many splendored thing?"

"That's it!" said the policeman. "I've just about had enough of you. Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

"Do unto others, as you would have—" the man was unable to complete his thought. The policeman stepped back, and placing a hand on his holster with authority, pointed his other hand at the man and barked, "Turn around, and get down on the ground!"

The man looked uncertain. All his moves thus far had been misunderstood by the policeman. Now the man needed to do something correct. So the man extended his hand in friendship.

"DOWN! NOW!" The policeman drew his weapon.

* * * *

The judge read over the police report, then glanced up briefly to study the defendant. The man looked nervous, even though he was

smiling. The handcuffs kept the man from extending his hand in friendship to the judge. The man still believed this gesture to be recognized as an act of good will, even though the policeman had responded very much at odds to the man's intent. But none of this was explained in the report the judge was reading, although the man felt certain that by now the policeman had realized his mistake and would come forth and explain to the judge.

Earlier, the man tried to explain this to the public defender assigned to his defense. But the lawyer only stared back in disbelief through the visiting booth glass.

"What does that have to do with anything?" the lawyer asked. "That's a line from Shakespeare, isn't it?" The man nodded; yes, he was by then certain that the name meant something. It looked as though they were making progress. And to share his joy, the man wanted to extend his hand; but, although he was without handcuffs at the time, the glass divider prevented contact. There was only the phone, and the lawyer hung up the other phone just as the man was trying to explain something important.

"Has he seen a psychiatrist yet?" asked the judge.

"It's scheduled this afternoon, your Honor," said the public defender. "After lunch."

The man wanted to say something, but was silenced by the public defender's raised hand.

The man wanted to say that everything was all right, just as it should be; the judge and lawyers should not look so hopeless.

* * * *

Later, in the courtroom holding cell, he spoke with another prisoner. His cellmate listened with that wise patience of experience.

"I hear ya man," said the cellmate. "But it's the system. Take my case for instance. I just had a little comfort on me when the police grab me. Now they try'n say I'm deal'n... you know that's gonna carry time if they make it stick."

"All is fair in love and war," said the man.

"Yea, I hear ya. But the public pretender don't give a crap, and if'n they get a conviction, that's my third strike—can ya dig it?"

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Yeah..." the man's cellmate frowned a little suspiciously. "What you in here for, again?"

"What goes around, comes around," said the man.

"Receiving stolen goods?"

* * * *

The psychiatrist ignored the extended hand. He focused his attention on his laptop computer screen. Ten years ago the psychiatrist would have used a pad and pencil. It was a sign of progress, yet he was repeating too many mistakes that accompanied his new technology. He has tried to move beyond the two-finger system of typing, but his wife had suggested that his real problem was his inability to concentrate on both the keyboard and the display screen.

"So, do you have a family, or not?" asked the psychiatrist.

"A bird in hand, is worth two in a bush," said the man. The psychiatrist's face reddened. He hit the return key several times...pausing with a sigh, the psychiatrist reminded himself that according to the police report, the man has shown repeated signs of insanity, and, really no need for a thorough examination. Anyway, if he subjected himself more than the minimum to these criminal loonies, it would just add more stress to his day. And after the less than stellar physical check-up by Dr. Kneel, the psychiatrist feared his overall well-being at risk-Oh, where was that private practice he so desperately deserved.

"What do you do for a living?" asked the psychiatrist.

The man seemed to consider this question more carefully than the others. Finally, the man said, "Man does not live on bread alone."

The psychiatrist stabbed the keyboard several times with a ridged forefinger, trying to remove the "idiot" caption flashing to remind him of his repeated mistakes. The man watched the psychiatrist in wonder. The man was told by his cellmate that his case and freedom strongly depended on a favorable outcome of this examination.

The man felt hopeful. To the psychiatrist, glaring at the computer screen, he said, "One picture tells a thousand words."

* * * *

The sentencing was rather harsh considering the charge. But the public defender; nevertheless, shrugged his shoulders and decided that

he would just have to make up for it the next case. After all, deal cutting with the D.A. was a matter of which of the two leaves the waiter's tip—and the public defender had always had this problem about tipping on lunches.

When the man waited for an explanation of the ruling, everyone in the courtroom appeared to not realize all that just happened was about him. He even wondered if the judge, court reporters, and trial lawyers all practice law like this first, before doing it later for real.

But, in catching some of the conversation between his public defender and the D.A., it was clear that the two had plans for later—something about where they were heading for dinner.

* * * *

The bailiff tried not to meet the man's eyes. He was tired of the years walking back and forth through the criminal justice system corridor. Each man—from the weekend misdemeanor to the man facing life—all walked this painted concrete road with hopeful expectations, very few of them being granted.

This man, though, struck the bailiff as still showing hope, even after sentencing. And, having witnessed the man's trial, the bailiff prayed that man would not start in with the usual post-trial declaration of innocence before reaching the holding tank. But, finally, it was the bailiff who spoke,

"Hey, it happens. Try and stay healthy is all you can do now... And, remember, you do the time one day at a time...Hell, before you know it, you're out."

The man considered this. He said, "An apple a day, keeps the doctor away." The bailiff's face soured a little, still he felt that he knew what the man was trying to say. In spite of it all, though, he would not shake the proffered hand, once the handcuffs came off.

* * * *

The bus ride was uncomfortable and far too long. In his stay in county jail, the man learned—from conversation about other inmates—as to which of the penitentiaries were considered "choice". It seemed it all boiled down to the various living conditions each was noted for. But this didn't matter anyway, for none of the men had a say in where they would end up.

Being judged insane, the man went upstate to a penitentiary accommodating his needs.

In reception, the man learned that getting a prison job would affect his overall stay. He learned rules set down by the prison guards. He learned rules set down by the inmates. Finally, the man rested himself on his bunk, ready for that first night's sleep. He looked up to see another inmate staring back down from the upper bunk.

"New fish, huh?"

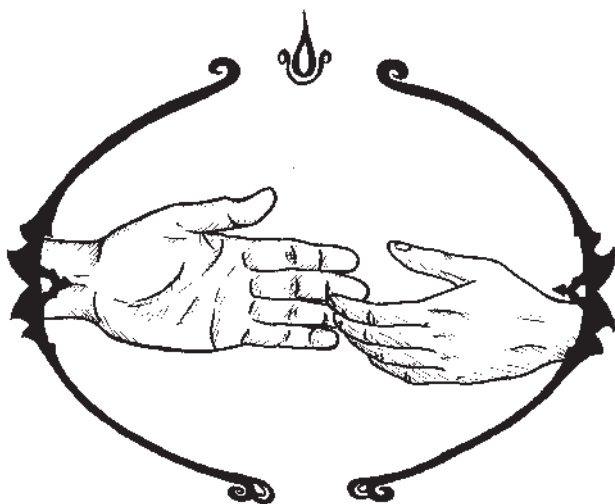
The man considered the rhetorical question, but before he could respond, a hand was extended down to him, "Name's Johnson."

The man shook Johnson's hand in gratitude. This contact caused the man to realize something about himself. Something about all the words he offered in trying to make contact with those others. About that feeling of having done this all once before.

But, what he said now was, "I'm lost for words, just lost them. I can say that I've kept my promise. I've returned."

"You been here before?" asked Johnson.

"Yes," said the man, relieved at long last finding that first one. "This is my second coming."



Umbrella

by Beverly Kikuta

She stared at the people passing by, sheltering themselves from the rain with their various umbrellas. She envied their dry hair and clothes, the smugness they possessed in knowing that when they got home, they wouldn't tread water all over the carpet and have to live with a moist carpet for the rest of the week. They had no idea how lucky they were.

Her own umbrella was riddled with large perfectly-shaped holes, looking like it would much prefer being in a modern art exhibit than out in the rain. Frankly, she would prefer that too. There was something irritatingly ironic about the situation. She felt like she was standing in front of a large group of starving hobos, greedily downing bottle after bottle of diet pills. It wasn't quite sadistic, but it wasn't not sadistic either.

The raindrops gloated silently as they plummeted through the umbrella without any resistance, but their delight was cut short when they splattered on the soaking girl like so much anonymous road kill. She wiped the wetness from her eyes and checked her watch.

Broken. She forgot that it wasn't waterproof.

A man carrying a newspaper under his arm walked by, and she turned and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, but do you have the time? My watch is broken."

He looked at her oddly and glanced down at his wrist.

"Yeah, it's a quarter after three."

"Thanks."

He nodded curtly and hurried on his way.

When she looked down again she saw that there was a skin-colored puddle around her ankles, and her legs were quickly losing their shape. Her hair fell several strands at a time and fell drowsily into the waiting puddle. She could feel her ears dripping onto her shoulders, or what was left of them after they had started running down her arms.

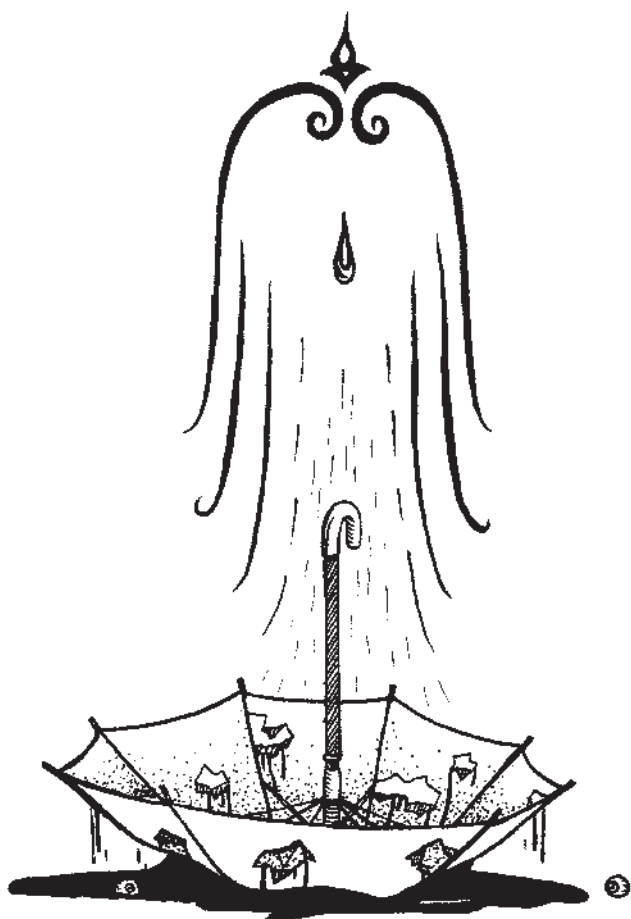
Soon the rain washed her fingers away and the umbrella clattered to the ground. By that time she was mostly formless and had no use for

the umbrella anyway. Nor did she have to worry about soggy carpets any longer.

Still, she couldn't help but think that this whole thing could have been prevented if she had had a real umbrella. One that served a purpose, and didn't just exist for the sake of amusing people with an ironic sense of humor.

Damn rain.

Damn umbrella.



POETRY AWARD • SPRING 2005

The Demon Drink

by Carl White

Whiskey killed my grandfather.
It burned him up from the inside out,
an unquenchable flame that turned
him to ash and mapped us with scars
and smoke-reddened eyes.

Each bottle he downed held
A hot drowning wave that
crashed from cracked glasses
flooding his mouth,
scorching his throat like a welders gun
melts curls of wrought iron onto a gate.

A gate with no lock to keep
demons at bay and they came
for him with their memories
snarling, black cloaks patched
with regrets trailing behind
like starved rats.

Nightly they ambushed,
armed with barbed tridents
and long rusty knives to feast
on his sins and slice love from his heart,
to cut out his tongue and mute
the voice of reason,
until nothing of him remained.

Dry-eyed I watched his varnished
coffin with its brass cross swallowed
by dirt and as I held the hand

of his weeping son, my own father,
I prayed that this part of our history,
this tragic flaw,
would remain there with him in the grave,
buried beneath each echoing shovelful of clay.



To Accompany a Vivid Description of Stubbing Your Toe and an Angry Love Letter

by Katherine Didier

What expletives can relay the fervor of this moment?
Some ambiguous censor
Would challenge it into submission.
No. You cannot say 'fuck' in this arena.
I wouldn't anyway;
The word is too vague.

It is an adjective. It is a verb. It is a noun.
Ask English majors to cope with that.
Yet they do, and exhibit their command of it
At the BBQ and in the car
During some delay.

Fuck. It's pert.
It's direct and unexplainably expressive
Bobbing explosively every time its rubber seizes air.
Incapable of lying idle like oil—
A bobbing rubber duck,
Quacking "fuck, fuck, fuck."

Vulgarity is the salt by which Fuck is tasted,
Tainting multi-nationed waters
To propose a vexed purpose; even as the letters are incomprehensible
The syllables condemn. A direct self-censure. A popular act.
A verbal
exclamation mark.

With palm trees and coconuts, Fuck stands in the water
Getting its vague feet wet,
Calling out to passengers on a ship.
You're angry, Fuck? No, he's sad. I say, he stubbed his toe.
And as the ship passed, Fuck thought,
"I'm so misunderstood."

So, I'll use another expletive from that cache of them in the dictionary. 'Fuck' stands alone. If I want a text with meaning, I'll define fuck or discard him. I'll keep him in my purse all year long, like a tampon,
Always ready.

The Dance

by Katherine Didier

I patterned my actions after a bowl of tumbling blueberries
With visually fragrant and almost clumsy
Rolls of the head and touches of each arm.
I painted my skin a velvety blue, like a Maharaja,
Some royal and glistening man.

Ansel Adams rained on me and seeped into my scratched marley.
I melted a glacier in reverse. Stopped.

Spinning a tumbling spindle
of motion, Ansel's chemicals rolled off the suppleness
Of young skin. The droplets as black as the folds behind me touched,
Hugging close to the hairs and fell off.

Archaic woods reverberated with a reverent push of
Stalagmite force, to ease and grow.

I danced a sort of coolness on a red day for roses and milk
And gently bounced one limb against another—where arms glided and
collided Together and apart—weaving the air like a spider. And its
nearly-invisible web to catch delicate velvet marbles that, as they
fell bounced against each other.

Mother's Day 1977

by Heather Collette-VanDeraa

Patent leather pumps pattered
our linoleum-lined pantry;
Crisco-stained paneling
framed my mother
stationed in her billet.

Screen door banged
I invaded her mundane fortress
with bare arms and muddy sundress
and
a battalion of dandelions drooped—
bowing humbly before their
Matriarch—
These are for you Mommy.

A breeze held its breath,
her direction never flinched,
Those are weeds.

She took the wilted bouquet
from my milk-sweaty palm
and threw the whole day
into a plastic trash can.

These Mountains

by Heather Collette-VanDeraa

As long as I've lived here
these mountains have never moved—
no rocky limb outstretched a hand
to offer "Hello,"
not even a snow-peaked bow.

As long as I've sat here
the tide has not risen
to splash a sloppy "Hi,"
or wet a scarlet complexion
with even ephemeral adoration.

As long as I've stood here
on the canyon's sandy edge—
it has refused to budge,
or acknowledge
the stone thrown
into its silent gorge.

Moon tows clouds with a heavy sigh,
Wind's cold shoulder tells me I
could sleep in the shadow of life
tonight,
and Nature wouldn't respond
with so much as "Goodbye."



ESSAY AWARD • SPRING 2005

Life in the Vacuum*by Melissa Molyneux*

I can stand on the street corner in my average city and kiss my transsexual girlfriend (imprudently, with tongue) and generally not have an attempt made on my life. Maybe a harsh word, a tossed bottle, the sound of tinkling glass in the near concrete distance as those whose hearts aren't truly into interrupting our business are driven away. We sigh, and laugh, and say, "Those fuckers," and then proceed to whatever late-night destination we had in mind. Denny's, perhaps: Glowing Beacon of lonely substitution indulgence, drawing our candle-moth existences to its warm vinyl embrace. Now we sit and discuss important subjects like queer theory, the deconstructing of gender preconceptions, how 'estrogen made her a boy' (Rathwaedht). How ironic it is that many find her body to be inherently political, whether or not she takes any action. Or maybe a miniscule yet somehow still fascinating topic like what she'll wear to the Mormon temple next month for her brother's wedding. I'm sure she'll present 'butch' though she wants to feel comfortable enough to go 'femme.' Well, maybe for the next wedding; being Mormon, she'll have plenty of chances to make 'em turn their heads. We proselytize to each other and to the restaurant at large like some rooftop philosophers staring at the same old stars night after night. We sit in silence and listen to the domestic dispute calmly simmering at the table behind us, "Shhh...." And then, "Don't worry, honey, places like this were built for people like us." And we nod our heads in agreement with this, eyebrows raised, because it's the scariest and yet most truthful thing we've heard all week, even coming from the nutty lady who's close to 50, moving back in with her mother, chewing her common-law husband to bits in public, and admitting to liking men with pencil mustaches because her

father had one. What can one say next? Time to pay the bill and drive my girlfriend home to Chatsworth, porn capitol of the Valley. In the morning we'll be getting up early to drive to UCLA for her laser facial hair removal treatments.

I can live on the fringe or choose to join the party at will.

After the parade, Em and I stick around the parking lot to be gently accosted by twitchy and annoyed, territorial streetwalkers, and men who think we're boys, and girls whose first parade has left them vaguely disappointed but not yet ready to give up the opportunity to score. (Hope of scoring?)

The decorations have obscured the subtle landmarks and it takes some time for us to orient ourselves, peering through the sea of unfamiliarity, rainbow fatigues and tumbleweed advertisements for Whole Foods Market, to the characteristic oil stains on concrete. We see Oz superimposed on Kansas, all blended into one, and we are dizzy from the sing-alongs and coke. The whole cast is equally represented, by two or three even, and as they were breaking up it's as if Dorothy has left the arm of the Tin Man and has manifested himself two or three places at the same time.

Is it because of my whiteness and American-ness that this approximation of a ritual dance is as close as I can get to feeling culturally enriched? Our blindness dooms us to urban fascism, and by engaging in dissonant activities together, we are forming a chaotic chorus, difficult to wield, a narcissistic nihilism having no heart but a diffuse pulse or flow—yet one has but to open one's eyes to witness the many contributors to the death of the cause, to the end of purpose. The festivities have reminded me of what an acquaintance recently said to me, one late night at Winchell's, huddled together for warmth under the cold fluorescence, that people never leave because of "our amazing gravity...everything you need is here...no more voyage, no more challenge." As if we are immortalized in statue, motionless, foretelling the end of Darwinist growth, the final product of a doomed consumerist dystopia. An ending attributed not to violent outlashing due to the

growing discrepancies between haves and have-nots, but the slow winding down of motivation. “This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper” (T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”). I wonder what the dance is like in San Francisco.

Later, in the bar, I find myself smiling at the muscled women playing pool as the karaoke machine is being readied and in between the white noise of “What do you do?s” and the “What are you doing now?s” My girlfriend, the method actor, suddenly whines that she’s sorry that every year her birthday is overshadowed by Cinco de Mayo, but at least the bar is full when she shows up.

Someone turns on the L-word and we tune to it, focusing in on the shiny offerings contained within its artificial daylight....blinking myopically in autistmal bliss at the becoming cosmopolitan chameleons on a juicy grubhunt for acceptance and glory and their places secured amongst the stars. Suddenly, in our absorption, we have no kids, no cats, no smoking, no Hollywood-unapproved drama; we are single, successful, bulimic; we have been birthed bloodlessly and painlessly from the V-words of the women of the L-word, fully mature and exuding confidence from our designer chests. Succumbing to the poisoned apple of friendship and assimilation and piecemeal victories in an analog war, we are no longer organized by action or principle.

This lifestyle cannot sustain, like eating fast food for too long, all our parts losing function, becoming rigid and only vaguely organ-like. I stare into my beer and contemplate my liver. From the remnants of the Radical Faeries who hold vegan potlucks in Silverlake, and the non-threatening vegetarians with no predilection for pussy, to the beautiful, insipid, and androgynous pop rock icons for whom it doesn’t matter if you suck cock as long as you keep your head shaved, we have come far from what it is to be queer and seemingly treacherously alone with your right hand (or your left—got to be PC) in the sweet dark night of the Tenderloin or the O’Farrell in the Castro District, or even over here in Boys Town, in the clear wee hours of a Thursday morning. It is difficult not to resent being stuffed into a sweet and

swallowable bite-sized pill, just small enough for the public to consume. I wonder how the newly coming of age will know if they are gay if no one knows anymore what being gay is, where the freaks will go when the circus has left town, and if it can truly be an identity if the light can play tricks with it. Are we all afraid that someone will see through the plastic veneer to the texture underneath, or vice versa?



Kitchen Sink Drama

by Carl White

We'd been stuck in the house for hours because of the rain. It had started and stopped all day, each biblically-scaled downpour interrupted by tantalizing minutes of sunshine, and this had made me, my brother Gerry, and my sister Paula, restless and more inclined towards mischief than usual. That's why, when the words "Get in for your dinner!" were bellowed by my mother, followed by an epic sigh of resignation and interrupted by a fit of coughing that was her trademark, my siblings and I looked at each other, started giggling immediately, and headed into the kitchen.

My eldest sister Denise was upstairs, as usual, with her nose buried in her schoolbooks, quietly over-achieving. My mother left the kitchen to bring her a plate of food. This

left us sitting around the kitchen table. Paula had a handful of Gerry's hair before my mother was halfway up the stairs, but stopped after I instigated a bread-throwing fight. We scrambled to pick the slices of bread off the floor when we heard Mammy coming back downstairs. She was in a vile mood so we tried to hold in our titters when she came back into the kitchen. If we weren't careful we'd be on the receiving end of a rattlesnake-fast smack from her wooden spoon.

Our kitchen was a depressing place to eat on days like this one, with the rain drumming her wet knuckles against the steamed-up, pokey windows. The walls were so damp with condensation; it looked like the faded, floral wallpaper was crying. It was around this time that I found myself cracking jokes, impersonating our relatives, and telling funny stories about school just to entertain my family. I realize now that it was just my way of counteracting the sadness that seemed to ooze out of the walls. I was almost ten.

As Mammy busied herself at the sink, we looked down at the plates set before us on the greasy tablecloth. They were piled high with liver, Brussels sprouts, and potatoes, all boiled within an inch of their lives. We loathed Brussels sprouts, and in an effort to make them more palatable, we drowned them in YR sauce and mashed them into a mush. It didn't make them any tastier, but it did make everything on the willow-pattern plates look like chocolate. While Mammy's back

was turned, I grabbed disgusting handfuls of my dinner from the plate and fed them to Sam, our elderly Border collie who lay in an arthritic heap under the kitchen table. Even he could only stomach a few mouthfuls himself, before making a break for the living-room. He knew he could find something tastier to chew on in there, a piece of coal maybe, or an old shoe.

Mammy had a “Great Santini” streak and wouldn’t let us leave the table without choking back every morsel, a truly difficult feat for us to achieve, considering her fondness for serving up meals that invariably caused our throats to tighten in protest.

If we didn’t wipe our plates clean in the masticating blur of gratitude she expected, she’d go off on a nagging jag about the Irish famine, her words often delivered: “You brats need to put down those bloody knives and forks this minute and take a moment to thank your lucky stars you aren’t washing down mouthfuls of grass and nettles with sea water!”

To hear Mammy say it, one would think that she was giving an eyewitness account of her own perilous brush with starvation, even though the Famine was over a century before. It was years later before I realized she was just repeating what her own mother had said to her when she was a child.

We knew better than to interrupt her during one of these laments though, so we’d listen, rigid with suppressed giddiness as she yammered on and on. Her words landed like hard little pebbles on our heads, the flow of cranky sentences interrupted every so often by quick, angry drags on her cigarette. It seems I only ever saw her light the first one on those rainy afternoons, and it appeared to never burn out, replacing itself magically before it reached the filter. I’d watch it lying there in the cracked glass ashtray on the windowsill above the sink, a swirling line of blue grey smoke rising from its burning tip.

Being forced to slave over an old stove made our mother angry, it seemed. She’d slam the plates down before us as if blaming us, silently for having the audacity to require three or more meals a day to stay alive. Her passionate hatred of cooking was equal to our school’s nationalistic nuns’ abhorrence of ‘the Protestants’ who were safely tucked away in that purgatory known as ‘The Six Counties’.

I had a brainwave, and started stuffing the remains of my dinner

into my socks, which set my sister Paula off snorting and choking. My mother whirled around from the sink where she'd been half-heartedly scrubbing pots with an old Brillo pad, and roared, "God grant me patience!" at the top of her pack-a-day lungs. Then she crossed over into 'Mommy Dearest' territory.

She reached for the nearest available household object, which happened to be that battle-scarred wooden spoon that lay on the draining board near the messy plastic container we all flung our squeezed tea-bags into with on-the-hour monotony. She raised her arm, and with the precision of a neurosurgeon, sent it flying in Paula's direction where it landed with a comical thunk on the back of her head. Paula, a born actress, rose to the occasion, or should I say lowered to the occasion, for she threw herself to the floor wailing like the Queen of the Banshees. She lay there clutching her head and began a dizzying array of convulsive movements she had obviously based on one of epileptic Aunt Chrissie's frequent grand mal seizures, the only difference being the pre-seizure warning Aunt Chrissie gave before one of hers, which consisted of a series of increasingly bizarre behaviors announcing to everyone that they'd better stand clear before she hit the carpet, frothing.

Had anyone just walked in on the unfolding scene that day they'd be forgiven for thinking my mother had lobbed a grenade at Paula's head and not a relatively harmless kitchen implement. I looked down at my sister's interpretation of a kitchen sink drama, which now involved clutching at her eyes in the manner of an over-zealous ham in an amateur production of *Oedipus Rex*.

My brother Gerry, less skilled than me in the art of the poker-face, was unable to contain himself any longer. He exploded with laughter, firing two wet, green bullets of pent-up snot from the double-barrel of his nostrils onto his plate.

The dog, who loved a good show, ran back into the kitchen and began to howl like the Hound of the Baskervilles. My mother's face had become one big, angry, red blotch. Unable momentarily to make up her mind whether to kick the dog or her daughter, she ended up standing on one slipped foot, her eyes darting left to right, a pose suggesting some sort of Irish dancing ninja.

I noticed my mother look longingly at the sauce bottle, calculating

its heft and dimensions should she choose it as her murder weapon. I snatched it from the table, and gave her a beseeching look for I was determined that Paula should live.

I took advantage of the confusion of battle, quickly slid each plate off the table and scraped their contents into the bin by the back door. I watched my mother focus on where she wanted her kick to land. As it turned out, this happened to be thin air and not Paula's stomach as she'd hoped, for Paula possessed the cat-like reflexes of a child taught by nuns. She had learned the hard way to duck and cover when a Bride of Christ came barreling toward her in a black and white blur, swinging a ruler like a Samurai sword.

I watched Gerry jump out of the way as Paula rolled quickly toward the kitchen door like a well-trained commando, straight into my father's legs. He had come in the door without us hearing him.

"Is that any way to greet your poor father after him working all day!" he said. I figured that all hell would break loose; instead, my father just stood there in the doorway, smiling at my mother. I waited to hear the start of my mother's hand-wringing monologue, but she said nothing. My father pulled a giant box of chocolates tied with a red satin bow from behind his back, and her face broke into the most amazing smile. What was going on? Then I knew.

As my father spoke, he sounded different; his words weren't coming out sounding the wrong way. He didn't have that angry look he'd had when he came in the door lately. His face wasn't flushed. I saw the difference now. All those other times when he came home, in the last few weeks, he'd been drunk. That was why my mother was always so crabby, so quick to reach for that wooden spoon.

Paula stood up, secure in the fact that my mother wasn't going to go for her. My father walked over to my mother, handed her the chocolates, and kissed her on the cheek. She blushed like a school-girl. "Paula, love, will you put on the kettle," Mammy said, smiling that lovely smile again. "I'll help," said Gerry, running to grab the kettle. I sat back down, for some reason feeling a little older than a few hours before. Then Denise walked in, the relative silence coming from the kitchen arousing her curiosity. I gave her a brief look that said, "I'll tell you later." We all sat down at the kitchen table. "Okay, so who wants a chocolate?" asked Mammy.

Rush, Rush

by Mia Pao

I've been up for almost three days straight, and I hear the street sweepers rumble through Berkeley below my eight floor window. 4 a.m., they always come at 4 a.m., always on time, always so loud, and my dorm always feels most alone as I stare down towards them. I feel my eyes drying out from watching, desperate for closing as the skin underneath wrinkles. I keep everything in perfect order, in perfect lines; I have a flawless manner. I reach for my kit, a small hand-carved wooden box that doubles as a percussion instrument, the vials within neat on its insides. K, my roommate and fellow alternative medicinal user, hears the clanking of the mini-razor scraping against the glass and snaps up from her bed, meets my eyes with anticipation and watches my ritual: open vial, fill about two quarter-sized spaces of meth-shards on glass plate, close vial, cover shard with Andrew Jackson's face down, press quarter on surface of bill, crush particles underneath, scrape left-over residue from Andrew and add to pile, and form two parallel lines with the white powder.

I steal a stare at the clock, my pupils racing the short hand, which is racing the long hand and I'm racing the world before time runs out. Time moves fast, quickly, quickly, sneaking past everyone as they sleep. Time moves fast, so fast that there is less time to talk about time and even less time to finish this thought, because no one speaks when everyone is in a hurry, when people kick through the front door of our life and stomp out the back without good intention. Stomping, stomping, everyone keeps moving to the beat of a watch, and I'm learning to keep up. This keeps me up; meth, speed, it keeps me moving, keeps me thinking, keeps me ahead of everyone else.

I fold Mr. Jackson and curl him up. K locks him in between her fingers and fixes him in the space between her nose and the powdery white lines, then *rush, rush, up, up* and she'll be coming down, down, down soon.

My turn. Jackson slips inside my fingertips, tunnels the powder inside my nasal cavity, then *rush, rush, up, up*, into my brain, down my brain, slides down my throat—and I wait to come down, down, down too.

It's been months like this now: August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March and it's April, almost May 2002. I'm waiting for a distraction, waiting for something, because we're all just distractions for each other in this world, a distraction from what we don't want to see, what we don't want to know. It's getting harder though, to move so quickly, to think clear, to *rush, rush, up, up*, because my body is mad at me now—nasal tissue bleeding, smearing red color against the inside out cover of skin.

On the bad days, I forget where I'm going, where I'm rushing to; I forget who I was before I started; I forget there is something better. On the bad days, I stuff myself in jackets and layer up for the cold, I smoke cigarette after cigarette and wander through Berkeley with M, another roommate. M is from Etna, a mountain town pinned up on the tip of California. We walk long and hard, waiting and waiting for something to stop us from walking. That's what everyone is doing here, moving around, bruising the ground, and we're all just waiting for something to happen. M steals into her pocket and under the streetlamp; she shines the tiny bumper, a travel mechanism with easy-upheaval immediate access for the nose. She goes *rush, rush*, and I go *up, up*. No one notices, no one would; not with the quickly moving, world keeps turning—feet keep stomping that goes on. I want to stop stomping, I know M does too, but we keep going, keeping our bad habits in our back pockets, still waiting for something to happen.

Nothing happens when you're waiting. We all end up in this big waiting room, fighting each other for space, fighting each other for some sincerity to take back with us so we can sleep at night. So I don't sleep much—I don't have the sincerity. I lost it on the way, when I traveled backwards, back into the past, back into bad memories. I lost it on the way, back somewhere when mom said, "Pretend and smile," or when dad said, "Keep quiet and behave." I think I lost sincerity when I was six years old, when a friend of the family showed his dick, when that friend made sure to say goodnight. Maybe I lost sincerity when mom and dad didn't fit under one roof anymore, when they fought for space and left me in that waiting room, waiting for relief. So I'm not waiting for sincerity anymore, I'm not waiting in that room. That flash of the past ends and I quickly recycle a new memory and just keep going, I keep insufflating, I keep moving and moving,

cause if I stop, the past might kick open the front door and stomp through me once more.

It's 4 a.m. again, and I hear the street sweeping; I hear the world moving, and I think one day I'll lay myself out on that road and bathe with the asphalt. We both need cleaning. It's 4 a.m. again and I'm preparing myself another line.

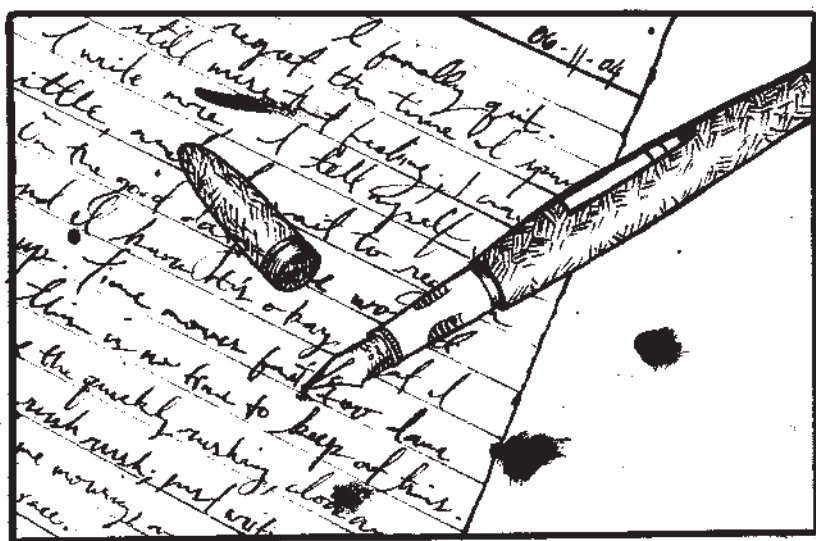
On the good days, I sleep more; I am better, I think I am sincere, thinking I can quit now, and then I call myself liar. On the good days, I tell M we're done with this, that this is our last line, that we're Berkeley students dammit! Yesterday was a good day—yesterday I was not a liar, but yesterday is nothing like it is today.

I receive a letter and find out I am failing out of college. I laugh. I laugh with K, and I laugh with M; I laugh so hard so everyone else will think this is funny. It's not. I go down the hall and talk to P, another floormate in my dorm. She's from the central valley and we both did coke for the first time this past Halloween. We both agree that coke is not the superior white and since then we have agreed on many other things. I tell her I am failing out of school, and we both agree that this is not funny. I remind her about my poetry reading coming up, then we *rush, rush, up, up* and we both agree we should quit soon.

I'm nervous, I'm shaking—maybe from the *up, up*, or maybe from the cold wind slapping against my face. I'm walking to the hall, to the auditorium where others and myself will force the audience to hear tales of our so-called sincerity, where everyone will clap at our poetry, and where I can pretend I am finally more than some child spraying graffiti in journals, claiming that I am a writer. I am introduced, I don't want to move. I don't care that time moves fast and that now it is time to go up there. I don't care that everyone is hurrying and hurrying, watching the short arm tick itself around. I go, I read, they applaud, and I walk off. Somewhere in between the quick snaps of my voice into the microphone, I realize how great this is. I realize that for those three minutes on stage, the world stopped moving. There was no rush, *rush, or up, up*. Time was moving, but it moved much less, and less means so much to me right now.

April, May and now it's June. I finally quit. Now on the bad days, I still sleep less, I regret the time I spend awake and I still miss that feeling—I crave hard. On the good days I write more. I tell myself I'm

growing up a little, and I wait to regain my sincerity. On the good days, the world keeps moving, time keeps ticking, and I know it's okay that I forget to keep up. Time moves fast, so fast, too damn fast that this is no time to keep at this. There will always be the quickly rushing, clock arms racing, but there's no more *rush, rush*; just writing, and writing keeps me moving, and I don't give a damn if I don't win that race.



SHORT STORY AWARD • FALL 2005

Mermaid

by Priane Nava Yambao Lina

The whole town had overslept, way past the crowning of siesta and into the mid-afternoon; even the rooster neglected its duty and had let the sun pass without a proper greeting. It was a fishing town, one that had sprouted during the arrival of Spain in the 16th century. But after Spain departed, the town's prosperity diminished, as did many of the other towns which depended on Spanish trade. Though many of the resources had been stripped, life still strived in this once affluent town. The townspeople continued to live by the old ways of the sea, and while some became restless and left town, most were glad to take up the life of old fishermen once again.

The day began without the ringing of the church bell. The dusty streets were filled by an insidious silence; a narcotic fragrance filled the air, inducing the weight of reverie.

"It smells like flowers," Dinah remarked, not looking at her father's face.

Her father looked at her with stoicism. "I don't smell anything."

"It smells like dama de noche. No, it smells like, sampaguita," she replied.

"I don't smell any flowers," he said calmly.

"May I go out today?" Dinah asked stealthily.

"No," replied her father with a stern voice. "The water is not safe."

It had been four years since the sea had turned red with blood. Dinah's father had led a group of fishermen in hunting a sickly whale in order to gain a sense of heroism and honor from the community after an unsuccessful fishing season. They fought the whale for over a week, and triumphed on the ninth day. They sold the meat and parts to Japanese dealers and received a hefty sum of money in addition to



a great amount of respect from the town. In return, the sea had turned blood red, suffocating all the other fish, leaving them washed up on shore, diseased and inedible. An overwhelming stench lingered in the air for months, causing everyone anxiety and sleeplessness.

“Why not?” she debated. “The water is clear now, and the squatters aren’t awake yet.” Her hands rolled into tight fists.

“You might get stung by jellyfish!” he said with indignation.

“No I won’t. Please, I’ll be careful. I never get to go out to play,” she said as her eyes started to tear. Although her father would do anything for her, he would not let her go out alone to sea, fearing that some unimaginable calamity would happen.

“Dinah, you’re the youngest of this family, so I’m always concerned about you. If your mother was still here, she would have gone with you, but I have work to do, so just wait until I’m finished.” He started tying his fishing net meticulously, and Dinah realized the conversation was over.

She marched up the wooden stairs overlooking the cemented living room and kitchen, stomping her feet at each step, all the way up to the second floor of the house. She walked past the old brown study table and mosquito nets to an old rusted window. Cobwebs hung freely from the ceiling supported by the dark wooden walls of the house. On a wall facing the window was a picture of Dinah’s mother, her face placid and beautiful. She was wearing a dark green dress and a pearl necklace. Dinah walked to the window and exhaled a long sigh. Her eyes widened as she heard a distant sound slipping through the walls of her disappointment. She held her breath and listened carefully in silence. Outside, the sound of the waves enlivened her spirit. Between the drowning beat of her heart and the perpetual breathing of the sea, she heard an angelic voice floating in the silky air. Dinah sat quietly and tried to make out the song she thought she was hearing, but the words were too faint; all she heard was a graceful melody. She came back downstairs to find her father sleeping awkwardly under his fishing net. She floated across the cemented living room without moving the air around her. She stopped at the door, looked back at her father,

now with his mouth wide open, huddled safe in dream, and caught under his own fishing net. Quietly, Dinah opened the door. She took off her house slippers to put on her beach slippers and continued to walk down a stony pathway. It was only a couple of steps to the beach, so she took her time and enjoyed her new found freedom from her house. Fixing the motor on his fishing boat, Solomon, the youngest fisherman who participated in the historic killing of the huge whale, saw Dinah and confronted her jokingly.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"I'm going out for a swim," she replied.

"You don't know how to swim."

"Yes I do; my father taught me." She smiled.

"You're father never lets you out." Solomon knew she was lying. "Where is your father?" he asked with a playful grin.

"He's in the house cooking food. He said he'll call me when it's ready."

"All right then, have fun! And watch out for jellyfish." He waved at Dinah and returned to his task.

Dinah ran off to the other side of the beach. Standing on the sand, she noticed again the indistinct smell of flowers suspended in air. She took a deep breath and savored its welcoming smell, then took off her slippers and set them neatly on the sand. She put her feet in the water, wriggled her toes and squeezed the sand in between. At a distance, she saw three blue crabs picking at a pile of excrement left by the squatters. Dinah shook her head in disgust and understood why her family never ate crabs that belonged to their beach. Dinah stepped further into the water and watched the sea froth circle around her. She moved further out and realized that it was a low tide. She remembered a time when her family would walk to a spot in the middle of the sea during low tide in order to play on an island of sand.

"Be careful Dinah. Watch out for holes. They're dug by mermaids so children will drown in them," said her mother complacently. "You know there was a time when we would see mermaids swimming along the side of our fishing boats; they would stare at us and we would try

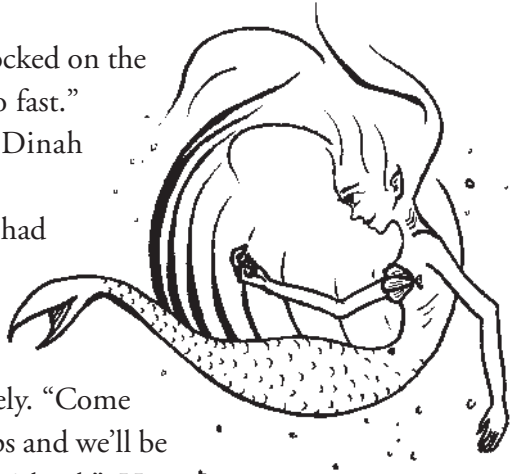
to catch them but they would swim back to the bottom of the sea.”

“Has anybody ever caught one?” Dinah’s eyes brightened with wonder.

Her mother’s eyes were locked on the horizon. “No, they were too fast.”

“Were they pretty?” Dinah asked with childish charm.

“Yes, very pretty. They had very long dark hair, with such perfect faces; they didn’t need to put makeup on,” her mother said sincerely. “Come on now, just a few more steps and we’ll be standing on our very own island.” Her



brothers and sisters rushed to the hill of sand and started yelling and laughing, claiming to be Vasco da Gama or Ferdinand Magellan.

Dinah stared at her feet and looked back at the pile of feces on the beach to see that there were now five crabs feasting. She missed her mother and wished that things were back to the way they had been. The wind caressed her body gently. Her eyes squinted from the salty air as she watched the water around her sparkle in a frantic display. Dinah realized that the water now reached up to her waist. She looked back to where her slippers were, but they were nowhere in sight. Worried about the inevitable punishment that awaited her back at the house, she decided to stay. The scent of flowers had grown stronger, and, at a distance, she saw a conspicuous sparkle of light and decided to wade closer to it.

Back in town, the people woke up from the intoxicating scent. They all had awakened with an overwhelming bliss, all had forgotten what day it was and what month it was, and before long had lost all sense of time. They were all entranced by the sweet fragrance coming from the sea. Dinah’s father had also awakened and marveled at the sublime softness in the air. He dropped his fishnet and walked outside the house to see where the smell was coming from. As he stepped out the

door, a strong unwelcoming gust of wind pounded his chest and face. He heard the deep reverberating sound of wind unfolding and folding back into his ears. Daunted by the message of the disenchanting wind, he walked fearfully around town, following the townspeople about. He sensed a familiar feeling, the feeling of being inside one's self, thinking of something happening before it happened. He had thought he was dreaming and forced himself to wake, but it was no dream. He felt an unnatural inebriation and watched the town act foolishly. The townspeople danced in a frenzy of joy and laughter, not realizing that the smell was of a supernatural origin. Recognizing that the whole town was under a twisted spell, Dinah's father ran back to the house to find Dinah missing. Distressed, he searched for her all around town.

Out at sea, the water had reached Dinah's shoulders. She reached the dazzling display of light and found an odd but beautiful flower on the water, sparkling with prisms of light. Dinah desired to bring it home to show her father, so that maybe he would lessen her punishment for sneaking out of the house and losing her slippers. She moved closer, but little by little it moved away, leading her closer to the horizon.

On the shore, her father saw the bright sparkling light out at sea. Suddenly he remembered the old folk's tales of the sea wanting to take children from fishermen who would dynamite its waters. His thoughts washed away as he saw Solomon on top of his boat dancing, intoxicated with pleasure. He grabbed him and shook him out of his delirium.

"Wake up you fool!" he yelled. "My daughter is out at sea!"

In the water, Dinah pursued the flower, knocking it down, wave after violent wave. As the water splashed, petals from the flower scattered, making more sparkling flowers. Smiling and enchanted, she knocked down more flowers and made more sparkles, until she was surrounded by a wonder of sparkling luminescence. By the time she had stuffed her pockets, she could no longer see the shoreline, only the vast blue sky and the sparkling of iridescent flowers.

"She's in the water," Solomon said deliriously. From afar, he saw a spot where the flowers had clustered together and had formed an

immense light. "There she is!" he exclaimed.

"Well, start your motor you imbecile," Dinah's father commanded.

"My motor doesn't work," Solomon said nervously. "I have paddles."

Dinah's father whistled the family whistle to call Dinah's attention. She heard her father's whistle and became fearful of inexorable punishment. Dinah's father and Solomon paddled relentlessly towards Dinah, but a great rip tide held them stagnant on the water. He cried, "Dinah come to shore, there's danger!" She looked back and saw her father's determined face. Unable to hear him, she became more fearful of punishment. She put her head down underwater in order to hide. Dinah's father gasped as he saw her head go down. He dove into the water and swam vigorously towards her. In the boat, Solomon fell back into his delirium and mistook Dinah's father for a merman. Solomon grabbed his spear and impaled Dinah's father, killing him instantly. The blood dissolved in the water while Solomon shouted victory. He carried the corpse to his boat and brought it back to town, shouting, "I did it, I did it; I speared a merman!" He was so engulfed by his delirium that he brought the whole town into his own delusion. The townspeople praised his triumph, and honored him by kissing his hands, while the flowers in the ocean gradually disappeared back into the horizon.

Dinah emerged from her sanctuary underwater and found her pockets empty. She was disappointed, like the many times she had awakened from a dream without prize. At a distance, she saw the town in jubilant celebration. She walked to the beach and saw the pile of excrement half-eaten, and that the blue crabs had disappeared. Still, her beach slippers were nowhere to be found. The town was lively and festive when she arrived. She huddled through the crowd and saw the spectacle. Her heart fell with the weight of the world as she saw her father dead and hung, bleeding profusely through his ribs. Dinah fell on her knees and cried in agony, silencing everyone out of delirium. Suddenly, they saw what had truly happened and were frightened by the sight. Everybody felt an unfathomable regret and apology for Dinah. Solomon, the center point of the crowd, broke the silence and

said, "I'm sorry Dinah," and went off to sea. The townspeople carefully brought down Dinah's father in order to give him a Christian burial, but when they carried his body, it had become light, and it did not smell the stench of death, rather it smelled like the sparkling flowers from the ocean.

After his burial, the town mourned for three months. The fishermen donated the leftover money saved from the whale hunt to Dinah and her older siblings living in other towns. Later, she moved to the city with their aunt and uncle, but back in town the smell of Dinah's flowers stayed. It poured down through the windows of homes and floated steadily in the cool night air. It no longer created delusions; rather, it reminded the town of the solemn story of Dinah, who flooded the town with flowers to welcome the return of mermaids back at sea.



I'm a fucking Vegetarian!

by N.S. David

My tragic flaw is conscience. It's fucked me royally—the clawing, nasally, redundant bitch of a voice chanting: don't do it, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it. Nothing seems right when that's playing in a loop inside your head. But there are other opinions. The shrink my mother forces me to see seems to think my problems are rooted in my “mind numbing dependency on various illegal substances”—but what does she know? So she has license to introduce herself as *Doctor Minos*—but how is that relevant, really? Being a doctor doesn't give her psychiatric X-ray vision, allowing her to see through the cranium and into our neurological lightshows (or through the large intestine—wherever the location of your tragic flaw is, anyway). No no, she's just as myopic as the rest of us. Only difference is, she knows how to hide it, and so has the authority to write books and cash in on the gullible. Maybe with practice she can even figure out the right level of pomp to wrestle herself a talk show from ABC. But then again, Oprah has one of those, and Oprah epitomizes world-class idiot, so obviously, a PhD still means shit-all nothing.

But fuck it—the authority of Minos' title seems to be the one issue on which my mother's mind is most firmly settled. To Mother, that damn suffix makes Minos deserving of the handfuls of cash, it means Minos does have superpowers; it means that Minos is right, and I'm wrong.

So I'm stuck with her ludicrous theories on how I'm wired. And I'm stuck with her equally asinine theories regarding my repair. Self-important twat. I don't need repair. What I need is lobotomy of the superego, that's all.

* * * *

All right. What if my wiring is misrouted just a tad? What if it's true that I enjoy highs from not-exactly-legal substances? Maybe the cocoon of tranquility those substances weave really is the best thing that's ever happened to me. But that's not really a problem, is it? It wouldn't even be an infinitesimal-sized irritation if this nuisance of a

voice would just let me give a rat's ass! But as it is, it continues to drive me completely insane. Batshit hairchewing voicehearing crazy! It's kind to me that way, my conscience—churning my insides, making me feel the vomit-inducing need for repentance after the drug-built cocoon dissipates! My conscience, toasting the feeling of sinful regrets! My conscience, demanding semantic smackdowns after my mother expresses disappointment in my shortcomings—and God knows I'm not short on those!

No, I have plenty of flaws. A downright Thanksgiving cornucopia of them. But in the end, it's the conscience alone that makes the moments after the highs Marianas Trench lows. So if I can just discover a way to be rid myself of it? I wouldn't feel like a festering boil on the face of my mother's life. I would feel an ace every day!

Never going to happen though. Especially not today. Because today, things are worse. Today, I am not a festering boil—today, I'm a cyst. Ugly, cancerous, indestructible. The thing is—my mother cried last night. And it's not like that's an irregularity by any means—she's been a crier since my ass-fucking bastard of a father walked out on us—but yesterday was different. Yesterday, the smashed plates and ugly tears? Your Honor, I plead guilty on all accounts. And I love my mother, sir—she bails all day to keep us afloat—but I can't help it if I didn't manage to sneak in quietly enough to protect her from the sight of her daughter completely fucked up, all right? It's impossible to be graceful in that condition, you know, and it's not my fault she decided to wait up on me. It's not as if I do these things with the intention of hurting her—I do it cause it feels good! Not my fault if she doesn't understand the appeal of a decently mixed cocktail.

Minos, PhD tells me that the one person I can't lie to is myself. Bitch.

* * * *

Glendale is the most depressing city in California. Everyone is so happy here, so together, so ready to empty out their pockets. Fucking sheep. Despite my exceedingly large and corroded cerebrum, I cannot, for the life of me, comprehend how such bubbly people exist! Are they all simply oblivious to the suffering going on around them? Every

time I pass one by I just want to scream: We're at war! Genocide is being committed at this very instant! An AIDS epidemic is sweeping across underdeveloped nations and poverty is killing us all—didn't you see Brad Pitt talk about it on your television? A person dies every three seconds! And there's famine! And hurricanes and typhoons and tsunamis and earthquakes and *crying mothers* for fucks sake! Stop being so happy!

Why can't I be as happy?

* * * *

Dear self—this is why: because you're a complete fuck up. Because you're culpable for everything that has gone wrong your life, in your mother's life. Admit it. After all, this is an accepted place for self-loathing. There's a sign, didn't you see it? “*Welcome to Starbucks! Home to the pseudo-intellectuals, the pseudo-hard-asses, the pseudo-punks, the pseudo-dregs of society!*” The failures. The bitches that make their mother's cry. That's really all you are—a poltergeist with the illusion of life.

Post Script: Buy milk.

* * * *

There was a homeless man I passed on the way here. Instead of the usual pleas for money, he was quietly asking everyone for a meal. I told him I wouldn't be able to help. Couldn't he see that I wouldn't be his best bet anyway? Rule of thumb is, if you're fucked, don't look for help from those who are fucked up, man!

Shit, it was just a reflex, anyway.

* * * *

So it wasn't a reflex. So what if I refused to help because I need every cent I've got for my next visit to the pharmacy? Nothing wrong with that. Nothing of course, except the ramifications—crying mothers and a dead bastard rotting on the street. Wouldn't want that on my conscience now would I? Yeah, all right. Fuck that. I'm going to buy the bitch a sub. I'm feeling a little hungry myself anyway.

* * * *

My father would laugh his ass off if he heard about this little stint in altruism. He did tell me I'd never be anything but a cheap whore. At least, those were his parting words. He was inebriated when he said it, of course, but since he was persistently in that state of insobriety, there really isn't a lucid moment I can use to compare the veracity of any of his alcohol inspired commentary. Either way, who knew that when drunk up his ass my father was a clairvoyant?

* * * *

There was a time when Mother and I ourselves were on the brink of homelessness. When mother stumbled into Monsieur Raconteur, Colombian Art connoisseur, she was overjoyed. But it didn't take long to realize that Monsieur's actual interests lay in Columbians and not their art. She played her part anyway, because she had mouths to feed. 'Sides, it was an easy means to self-flagellation, and God knows she deserves that.

Mother hates herself, you see—and to this day I've yet to discover why. I suppose it's plausible that she truly loved my father and so believes herself the cause of his abandonment. But the idea that a brilliant woman like my mother would waste one joule of energy, one iota of breath, would shed one guilty molecule of saltwater on that vacuous bastard—it's so incongruous that I don't think about the chances. Because fuck all, they're probably sky high.

* * * *

The ace making my sub is nice. Not a vegetarian, he tells me, but nice. He's teaching me how to spice up my vegetables with southwest sauce—and he's going to slide in some free avocado. Poor kid. He probably opens his eyes in the morning smelling of oil and vinegar, realizing that he'd be much happier dead. Probably takes the train to work in his uniform. I bet he looks at the faces of his fellow commuters and attempts to guess what each person's taste in subs would be. I bet he has a ninety percent rate of accuracy. I can't imagine how sweet, normal, folk like him serve the discontented populace all day all the while managing to curb every violent impulse. After all, it's only one step up from slavery; that's the nature of the food industry—homicidal employee rate just a mite lower than the United States Postal Service.

Yet here he is smiling as he hands me my receipt, telling me he's positive that I'll enjoy my meal. And I can't help but find this incomprehensible enthusiasm infectious, so I smile back.

"Thank you."

And look, the sun has set the stage in colors of gold, and the air is full with an excited rhythm of anticipation, and as I take in the dusty air of a street undergoing construction, I celebrate; fuck what my father said—I'm no cheap whore. Nossir, I am a compassionate, philanthropic whore! Thank you, thank you, members of the committee, I can think of so many people more deserving of this award, but I shall try to live up to the honorable tradition of Nobel—proletariat, unite!

* * * *

He actually looks pretty all right, clothes lacking any discernable tears, backpack of belongings, hat, newspaper. But boy will he be happy to see me—The Unemployed Peoples Zaramama—bringer of Grain and Corn and Southwest Sauce! Except of course, I don't ask to be repaid in human hearts. I just request the means to end this penitence making mush pie out of my sanity.

I stop, and he's right in front of me, and I notice he's missing most of his teeth. I can see the dirt that's accumulated inside his wrinkles, and his hair hangs wet and heavy on his forehead—and my scalp begins to itch. Deep breath.

"You wanted food right? Here, I bought you a sub."

He takes it.

"Come here a second would you? I want to thank you properly."

Hold on—thank me properly? That's an odd thing to request. I should go—but fuck it if my feet aren't moving, and I take the place on the wall next to him. Fucking conscience.

"I just wanted to say thank you, and God bless you." He holds out his hand for me to shake—it's filthy. I take it. "My name is Eduardo," that's fantastic Eduardo! I don't give a fuck! "What is your name?"

Jesus. He's starting to look a bit creepy. Sophistication can't be worn by those with only two teeth, I wonder if he knows? And this close those two remaining teeth look like dried grains of corn. I shouldn't give him my real name. "Mary."

“Okay, Mary, I want to thank you for helping. See these people?” He points at the sheep. “None gave me a second look. No one wanted to help, no one stopped to talk to me. Except you.”

This is supposed to feel good, right? Where's the whirlwind of gratification? I need a fucking smoke.

“I saw you pass a couple of times, you looked like you were in a hurry—” he's going to follow me home, isn't he? “—and it didn't look like you cared. But you do. So thank you.”

There's your escape. Be quick, accept the thank you, hightail it out of there.

“It's no problem, man. I hope things pick up for you.” I point to the newspaper. “Good luck finding a job.” Shit. I shouldn't have said that last part.

“Yes, but with the current state—” of affairs this stupid fucked up state is in, you can't get one “—how am I to get one when the first question a boss asks you is: 'What is your current residence? What is your phone number?' Well, I don't have one, and I can only have one if I get the job, but I can't get the job because I can't answer the first questions!”

Really, really need a smoke.

“So you see the problem? And the governor's—” an idiot action figure that's fucked everyone over “—so you have helped me greatly. I was a cobbler before, and I had my own shop—” until your shoddy workmanship put you out of business and you were evicted without notice and bankrupted before you could formulate a backup plan “—but the trade is dying, I do not see a lot of cobblers in a big city like this. I do not know what will happen, but thank you for your kind words.”

“Yeah, like I said, it's no problem.” I check my watch to show him that I've got places to go, coke to snort, mothers to comfort, all that razz-a-jazz. “I'd better get going though or my mother will worry.”

“Do you have any money you can give me? To help with other things I need?”

He's shitting me. “No, I'm sorry. I only have a check card and bus money, and I need that to get home.”

“Oh.”

* * * *

My tragic flaw? Is conscience.

"I'm sorry. I really am. But I have to go. I hope you don't mind vegetarian."

"Vegetarian?"

"The sub. It's vegetarian. I just had them split my sub in two and I don't eat meat. I hope that's all right."

"There is no meat?"

"No, is something wrong?"

"I am allergic to vegetables."

He's fucking with me, right?

"All vegetables?"

"Leafy vegetables. It gives me rashes—all over my face—" that would be an improvement, you bitch, "and body. Leafy vegetables and green vegetables." He's pointing at himself, to illustrate what "my face and body" means, and I really want to knock his two remaining teeth out. But penitence isn't easy, they tell me. So I don't.

"Well, there's tomatoes and jalapenos as well. And a veggie patty made out of tofu."

"I am sorry, I cannot eat this."

"Well, I'm sure you can eat the bread, at least?"

"Is it white bread? I cannot eat white bread. Only wheat." He reads the answer from my expression: No it's not wheat you fucking bastard.

So he hands back the bag full of lovely leafy green white-breaded penitence.

"I am sorry. But I am an Indian—Iroquois Indian. I was raised on corn and red meat. I cannot eat anything else. You should have told me you were buying me a sandwich—I could have come with you to pick something."

"Oh. Well...I'm sorry."

"It is okay. You tried."

"Yeah. Well...good luck again. And...have a good day."

"Thank you. You too."

* * * *

And look. The sun has decided to retire for the day, painting the stage in lovely shades of gray shame, and the air is full with the sound of everything rushing past, everything pressing on my eardrums with

their weighty significance; and loudest is the shrilling of my conscience as it speeds alongside to stay with me; and I eat in the dust of my self-worth as it's reconstructed with awkward hands.

If I believed in deities, I'd probably see this as a sign. It's hopeless. Redemption is not a possibility. When I die, Eduardo's words will be my epitaph: "It is okay. She tried."

But that's all right. At least I'll have something for dinner tonight. 'Sides—we're at war! Genocide is being committed at this very instant! An AIDS epidemic is sweeping across underdeveloped nations and poverty is killing us all—I saw Brad Pitt talk about it on television! A person dies every three seconds! And there's famine! And hurricanes and typhoons and tsunamis and earthquakes and *crying mothers* for fucks sake!

Stepping outside myself for a moment, I can even see that it's just all a little absurd, and all a little funny. All of it. My father, Monsieur Raconteur, Glendale, me. And maybe I can tell my mother about Eduardo when I get home, and maybe she'll stop crying and laugh a little.



Millennium

by Joseph Mattson

Good God. It went down like this: We're driving down Santa Monica Boulevard in his 1977 Buick Riviera, it's the year 2007, the damned thing looks like a battered old war relic, I've got him, my husband, behind the wheel, and I say to him, We really should get another car.

Another car? he says. Hell! This car will run forever!

I sigh.

Jesus, he says, another goddamn car. What we need is more wine.

What? I say.

You don't drink enough wine, he says, What kind of man drinks wine alone while his woman drinks lemonade or whatever the hell it is you drink every night?

This car is falling apart, I say.

Falling apart? he says, It's just getting a few wrinkles, like you and I will some day.

Wrinkles? I say, Give me a break.

Give you a break? he says, I'll tell you what, you quit buying so many clothes and creams and shoes and perfumes and I'll consider buying another car, and by the time that time comes, this car will still be charging and you'll be so amazed, you'll realize you should've never talked bad about her, and we'll forget all about this and instead of buying another car we'll go to Hawaii and drink wine, lots of wine on the beach.

Her? I say.

What? he says.

Nothing, I say, I don't spend half as much money on clothes and creams as you do on wine and beer and cigarettes.

What? he says, Those are necessities.

Necessities? I say, Every night? What are clothes? You want me to go around in rags, or how about naked?

You'd get a kick out of that, he says. That's all I need, to get into more scuffs.

I'm worth it, I say.

You're worth it, he says. But if any bastard that looks at you with those eyes like they all do knew more about women besides what goes on in the sack, if they stopped to think about the clothes and the creams, the need for a new car when you already have one that'll never die, then I wouldn't have to be ready to fight every time we go out for a goddamn drink.

You said I never drink, I say.

Wine, he says, To hell with the white Russians and the ale, I'm not talking about when we're out, I'm talking about when we're at home living the American Dream and the goddamn TV is on and there's a lamp lighting the corner and I'm trying to figure out how to get us ahead, and you're sitting there looking at magazines and drinking lemonade. You need to sit by your man and knock back more wine and get a little more saucy and seductive, like a cat.

Like a cat? I say.

I laugh in his face.

We turn the corner of Santa Monica and Doheny, head north. The cars around us are fancy, Mercedes and BMW and Saab. He rolls down the window and thumbs his nose at them. My stomach burns, my lips twist. At the corner of Doheny and Sunset we turn right. At the stop light at San Vicente he revs the engine, the thing growls like a true brute beast. He has fire in his eyes, there's no catalytic converter and the muffler is half-worn through, hanging by a mangled wire clothes hanger. The guy in the lane next to us is sitting in a Porsche, painted red, and coming from inside, techno music like you hear in the clubs scattered all across the Westside. My husband turns up the Stones, Sympathy for the Devil has started. He revs the engine higher, looks the guy in the Porsche square in the face. The green turns and he floors the old tank of a '77 Buick, with seven cracking dents just on the left

side, the loud exhaust, the black smoke bursting from the tailpipe. He smiles cocky, looks over at me. I stare ahead with disgust inscribed into my face.

I smoked him, he says.

I can't believe you, I say. You're like all men.

I am like *no* other man, he says. Just like all men, Christ, what do you mean?

You have to feel macho to make up for some other insecurity, I say.

Macho? he says, Insecurity? Look, that guy probably spent a hundred grand on that car and I spent a hundred dollars on this one, you hear me? A hundred dollars, and I've kept the thing going like a horny sixteen year-old kid in a whorehouse, and you're telling me about insecurity? I smoked him, baby. The punk.

Punk? I say. You don't know him. Jealousy will get you nowhere. It will get you less than nowhere with me.

Jealousy? he says. I'm not jealous. I burned him with my old jalopy while he sat there crapping his pants in that hundred-thousand-dollar prosthetic penis. You want to see macho? Want to see insecurity? I bet that guy doesn't have half the balls to even try to drive this. Jesus, woman, we've got an Olds 403 in her for chrissake.

We? I think.

He lovingly pats the dashboard with his right hand.

I just don't see why we can't get something smaller, I say, with no rust.

Why? he says. Rust is character.

Character? I say, I'd like to not be embarrassed when we go out to dinner or to the theatre and the valets are scared to death to park this thing.

Look, he says, this car has done us fine, we haven't had any break-downs, the plates and insurance are paid for, cheap, and we just don't have the money for another one.

We can save, I say. Please, can't we save? I can't take it, I'm getting depressed. I'm too scared to drive this big, loud thing. I want something smaller, more classy, that's all.

More class? he says, This car reeks of class.

I say *Please*, as if I were saying 'yeah, right,' or 'Jesus Christ.'

What do you want from me? he says, A miracle? If I could piss money, I would. I'd piss it all over the living room carpet. Maybe it's time to sacrifice some conveniences.

What about you? I say, The bar, booze, books, all the wasted gas you spend on this hog. It's all more money than I spend on anything. If we got a smaller car we'd use less gas.

Gas? he says. Gasoline? Wasted?! I need all the gasoline I can get, running around this fucking city. Four dollars a gallon and I have to hear you screaming 'wasted'. And books? You think that books are a waste of money? What's next, no theatre?

I'm not screaming, I say, And I don't have anything against books. I read every day, you know that, but we can go to the library more, you know, and we could go to the theatre every other week instead of every week. I don't even think you're listening to me, if we got a smaller car we'd use less gas. It's practical. What else should we spend our money on?

We keep driving down Sunset Boulevard, seeming without an end. The conversation goes from shitty to nowhere, to a rotten silence. Buildings and people and buses and billboards pass monotonous, indistinguishable. Ten, twelve minutes of hush feels like eternity. The long, hard pull of tribulation has gotten the best of us, as it often does, while so many powerful and important and even ridiculous things pass through my head so fast that I don't know where to start. I don't want him to feel like a failure. He's a good man. I know he loves me, deep and genuine, and these things make him feel inferior. Fried with the impossible, I gape through the windshield as a zombie would, wondering if anything ever really changes. 1977, 2007—what goddamn difference.

Well? I say. Are you going to answer me?

With what money? he says. What about wanting a new start, away from Los Angeles, a little house one day, a baby. What about that?

What about trying our luck in New York? What about groceries? The rent? What about new toothbrushes and toilet paper and the water bill and the laundry? What about going to visit the folks at Christmas? Nothing, nothing in this goddamn world is free.

I know, I say, God, I know. I just think that this car is done.

This car ain't done, he says. Baby, it ain't done.

Again, quiet comes. It's a loaded quiet, incensed and with a swollen lid. He pushes it in, drives faster. I look out the windows, over the 101 overpass, the Hollywood hills on one side, the seven-story palms and the buildings downtown on the other. I feel caged, wired, breathless. The world just seems to continue, revolving upon its axis, immune. The tires roll, the needle on the gas gauge approaching zero, readying to suck longer at the thin bowels of our pocketbooks; the miserable conversation at a futile stand, a biting headache starts in my brain, and just before the moment of impact, the inimitable, raunchy, profane licentious crunch of metal fucking metal, an indistinguishable late model sedan spinning brutally off of us and into bloody forensic oblivion while we remain shocked but uninjured inside the hulking tank, I think, To hell with New York City. To hell with the rent, to hell with the water bill, to hell with it all.



POETRY AWARD • FALL 2005

Watching

by Carl White

She sleeps through the chemo
and I sit by her bed
like a nervous security guard
first day on the job,
watching for bubbles to appear in her IV
each time the nurse on duty leaves.

I get lost in ludicrous fantasies
based on bad movies like Song of
Bernadette,
The Bells of St. Mary's,
with their last-minute miracles,
and healing abilities
that my sister and I watched on Sundays
in our living-room made stuffy
by pulled curtains which kept
the glare off the screen
on the old Philips television.

When she wakes,
I'm always sitting there smiling.



To Nai Nai

by Grace Pai

8:02 pm here.

7:02 am there.

One heavy eye at a time,
you wake up to yet another Monday
(or Sunday or Thursday or Birthday or Holiday -
does it matter when you're 84?)

Slippers dragging on scanty thin carpet,
you snail to the bathroom to bathe hunched on a plastic stool—
plum breasts drooping to meet wrinkled knees
pruned hands clenching metal bars.

Delicately, you paint circles of Pond's Cold Cream and Clinique
Cityblock
(SPF 15) atop continental sun spot blotches.
Then, pop out your sunken cheeks
with a smiling clam of perfect pearly whites
dripping of bubbling red Efferdent.

Finally, you slide into cream colored crisscross hatched Hanes Long
Johns.

Worn like a second membrane of
sagging falling skin
—skin stretched thin—
around an empty air sac ass and
peg legs of dough;
slide the keys-on-a-ring around your wrist and
take Toffee on a walk—a circle around the retired gray compound.

Later you'll come back to smoke a Capri
listen to Chinese news on your plastic pocket radio
play Solitaire—round round after round and round and
walk to the supermarket, pushing the shopping cart back with you.

If it's not too hot, you'll sit downstairs and
watch the sun set with your friends:

Did anyone come visit you today?

No. Nobody has come in 3 weeks.

I left you. I'm selfish. I'm sorry. But

do you know that *wo ai ni*?

Can you feel me *xian ni*?

And not just now, when you are still here.

But for all the days to come, when you are gone.

'Cos in the end, you

you, are the one who is leaving me.

Receiving the Calendar

by Joseph Mattson

an icy east wind blows
in the stupid, necessary
death December brings

it taunts the devoted
pink ember of my
Chesterfield like a
brute child at recess,
too old to laugh, too
young to know why

it rattles the dog-eared sun
and the bleached wooden shutters
that make the sober eyes
of my house.

it speaks of rain, squawks
like a loaded chicken of
salient sheets, this
foul and welcome exhale
at year's end;

believe me, the dead
of Winter is a baptism
in Los Angeles

—O how tired and serious
the angels cry—

& with cobwebs coming
between my toes and
a horde of gritty entreaties
under my tongue, the
laving sluice heaving
from bruised miles
scores and scores
deeper than
Santa Ana,
I will eat this cigarette
on New Year's Day.

Eustaquio Street

by Priane Nava Yambao Lina

A guava tree stood
where the street began,
scented of pale yellow-green ripeness,
there were giant moths
powdered in sulfur, static
on downy leaves,
nestled underneath was a nest
of spider eggs, blinking
in sincere unison.

Down the russet road
grew tiny weeds, which leaves closed
by the touch, shying warily
into safety.
One night, I saw a giant bat,
resembling the face of my grandmother, her arms
stretched open-wide, ready to embrace
enchantment.

I'll never forget that cold and bitter cement
and the holes
which dug into my hands,
because people never told the truth back then, some
hanging on to superstition, would see giants
on top of trees, smoking cigars,
and ghosts
who would open and close doors at night,
their footsteps like melting ice.

And when the rains came,
I took baths outside; gold rain
as friends reached the rendezvous. Once, the rain ceased while
I still had soap in my hair,
desperately rinsing under a tin roof, I was found alone
drenched in gloomy undertone.

Regarding those Florescent Lights on the Limousine Roof

by Suzanne Harlan

October dies in white sheets every year in Denver.

“Pray it doesn’t snow tomorrow,”
Grammie says. “They’re all too old to cane and walker their way into
the morgue.”

At Hanton and McConty
Gold and black striped ties nod to us—professional
Practiced, consoling, in control.

Grammie refuses to go in and see
Him. She plants her purple rhinestoned self into the Kleenex box
Lined pew. “I want to remember him how he was...”

Reposing ashen, painted in a layer of
“Living beige”, he pulls me in, Ever-stubborn
“Look at me honey, don’t be afraid of my chin on my chest.”

Recoiling—I can’t imprint my lips on his waxen cheek next to my
mothers’,
I take my hand instead, and I cup his
Rubber hot water bottle hand, packed cold with frozen pudding.

His eyes roll deeper into his dolled-up face.
A dark purple bruise seeps through the extra coating of powder
Around his left eye. He’s so narrow, like the coffin is hugging him

To death.
A gold and black tie reverently presses between my shoulder blades
And whispers, “Whenever you’re ready...we need to take him out.”

The family waits in the now-empty viewing room
Straddling the upholstered chairs between catching up on the last four
years,
And silence. Silver heads cane and walker into the chapel.

Aunt Laurel's black patent shoes tip her crossed legs.
 Sun fingers slip through the Venetians
 And rub a diamond out of her toe.

Denver in gold flies through my limousine
 Window. It's not snowing. Sunlight stealthily
 In between plant fibers, wrings the chlorophylls out of carotenes.

Ft. Logan holds thousands of head
 Stones. Measured and spaced in perfect domino rows of husband
 On one side, wife on the other.

"They don't look six feet apart."
 "Do they bury them vertically?"
 "Maybe they cremate them."

A green marine
 Taps on the trumpet.
 Black berets deflect salutes.

Rolling the flag into a triangle, awkwardly
 Stuffing it into itself, Breaths held, finally it folds and fits.
 The blue canvas-tent sky holds silken stars by threads.

Snip. One shoots out...

A patent shoe tip.
 A glowing carotene.
 A sparkle behind a winked, powdered eyelid.
 A blue-green-red-purple-pink star on the limo roof.

October dies in gold outside my limousine windows.

Momma Gave me a Jackass

by Jennifer Collins

Christmas lights in the garage-
Country songs, wet hankies and
A tall-boy.
Boo-Hoo
Open them barn doors sissy cowboy!
Cryin' like a dirty diapered baby...
Yeah,
It don't rain no gold here and
it don't rain no gold nowhere—
So,
Kick the dust off them boots,
Chicken-chest out and lower that brim...
Saggy cheeks were made for ridin' mules.

Grandma

by Jennifer Collins

Grandma wrapped her straw-bleached hair in pin-curls before bed—
She rubbed petroleum on her soles and
Covered them with socks.
Every morning she
smeared orange tint on her face,
teased her hair, and drew her brows,
Eyes burned at Grandma's house from
the choking air of bleach and
her vendetta with dirt.
Grandma bit my baby-butt with her missing and
decayed teeth.
She scrubbed my skull with acrylic nails and
blew kisses after walking me to school.
Grandma grew tangerines on her back and
her pin-curled hair fell out.
Grandma wanted to die because she said
a woman shouldn't be bathed by anyone but herself.
Grandma died in front of my mom with starry
eyes to mom's account...



You'll be the death of me, Timmy Brown

by N.S. David

So this is how it goes.

guttured voice tears melodies—above notes of a piano caressed
like the woman from the Gulf War with
long red hair—she healed your scars with that hair,
the minor key tells how you remember—

You weren't going to live long anyway
She didn't really love her husband anyway

And this is how it goes.

Scotch stains notations, cigarette smoke dancing on your right hand.
They say you were stabbed
in the throat, and narcotics just ease the pain
enough so you can forget again—it takes ten ounce to forget again

You're not going to live long anyway
Surgeon's General says it's only likely anyway

But this is how it goes.

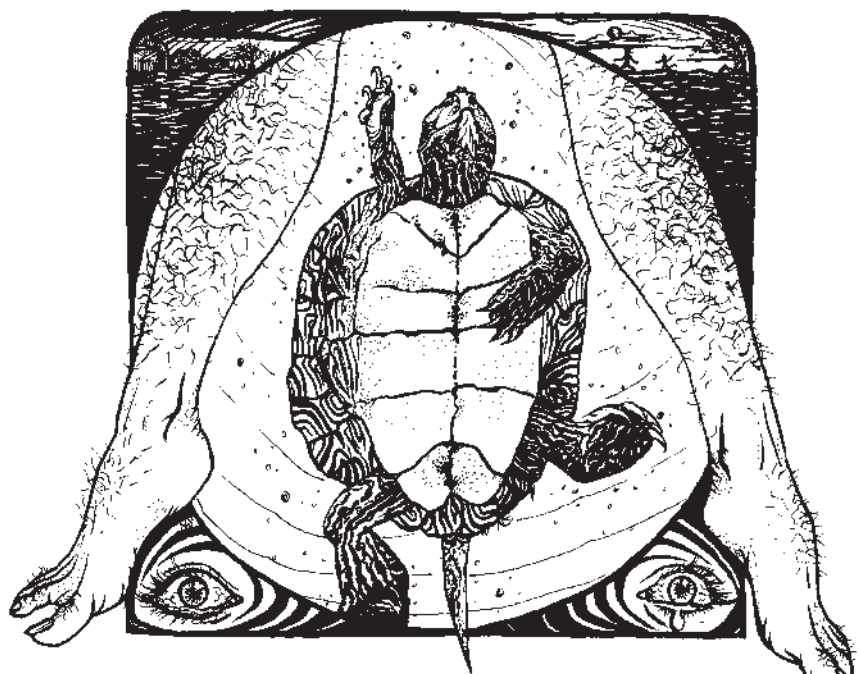
Top hat slung low, sweet body unfurling
With sandpaper to scrape down the grime, and
black and whites barking a rhyme, or two—
because this is what's left of you, everything else was used

You've lived long enough anyway
Your songs won't reach them anyway

This is how it goes, Timmy Brown.

Dank shadows about you
haze all around you
It's all insane, you know,
but you can sing. So you sing:

"I'm alive at least, anyway
That's enough. For now, anyway."



“Arrggghhhhhh! My Nuts!”

ESSAY AWARD • FALL 2005

Infamy*by Joseph Mattson*

Kenny Kablinski was a miserable derelict Polack with only three fingers on each hand who got a piece of his testicles bit off by a snapper turtle in a backroads Midwestern lake when I was twelve years old. His common-law wife was Pam Gillun. She was addicted to Pepsi. She would drink a twelve-pack every night, 16-ounce tall glass bottles. Her teeth were rotted into little corn nibblets. Pam had two daughters I used to fool around with, J.J. and Shelby Gillun. Kenny Kablinski and Pam Gillun were friends of my parents when I was doing time in Michigan as a young man.

The place was Jep Lake, and it was not odd for the middle-aged yokels to smoke a bunch of grass, down ten beers, and stumble stark naked into the cool moonlit water on a Friday night. We, the children, would snatch the charred remains of their joints and a few cans of beer when we had the chance, then marvel at the folly and spectacle of our hippie/post-hippie burn-out guardians frolicking frank and wasted in the twilight tarn.

Most of them were decent folk just looking for a good time to diffuse the humdrum of their menial work weeks, clinging sophomoric to glory days long gone. But Kenny Kablinski was a no good rat bastard. He was forebodingly enormous, perfidious, shifty, greasy, had a jet-black ponytail, and his favorite pastime, it seemed, aside beating his wife, was whaling on all of the kids; mentally, emotionally or, for J.J. and Shelby, worse and physical. One finger, the middle on his left hand, had been chopped off with an axe. Another, the index finger on his right hand, was shot off with a hunting rifle. He was also missing half of his teeth; some due to poor hygiene, others by the angry fists of hillbilly rivals. My best friend at the time, Matt Kroening, was the instrumental butt of the cocksucker's jokes: "Fat Matt the Water Rat," Kablinski would rattle, incessantly. Yes, Matthew was a bit heavy, and deeper depressed with each insult.

I understand in retrospect the endurance built into a kid from get-

ting picked on in the journey of growth, making one tough and introspective, but Kablinski took it too far. He seemed to really get off at the expense of the innocent young, tireless in his love of further torturing already-damaged children. Some of the kids would try to retaliate; screaming, punching, biting, attempted arson of his beloved shitty old pick-up truck. He was held at gunpoint more than once, by youth barely able to saddle a firearm.

It was Friday night once more. The adults were properly stoned. Matt, J.J., Shelby, another boy, Curtis, and myself tried to inhale mostly-paper roaches of marijuana cigarettes and had shared three cans of Budweiser between the five of us when the folks dropped their britches and folded into the lake. They were in full romp, a fist each gripped tight around a beer, held like ceremonial torches above the water. Matt and I leaned against a canoe, trying to look cool for J.J. and Shelby. We were just getting acquainted with erections. Curtis was off raking piles of dried, washed-up lakeweed and setting them afire. Each of us was twelve or thirteen, Curtis a shade younger; most of our peers were safely locked down in upper-middle-class houses, watching Mr. Belvedere and playing with G.I. Joes. We buried our nude parents' clothes and snatched ones and fives from their wallets after trying with potholed success to get high.

The parents were as full of glee as kids, and we kids were as solemn and thoughtful as parents. Mostly us boys were trying to cop a shot at some of the adult women's breasts bobbing in the glinting water, or, thank God a' Mighty, a spot of bush. With, of course, the exception of our own mother's, and, if you caught him, having to sock your pal for having eyes and impulses of his own. But the parties were big enough: eight, ten, twelve, sometimes fifteen adults out there stripped bare under a lucid sky of comely stars.

Everything was as usual when we heard a grisly shriek roar from the midnight water. Matt was smoking a cigarette and I had caught a perfect glimpse of Robin May Martin's fantastic thirty-two-year-old titties when the gruesome howl broke the country calm. It was Kablinski, that poor, deserving swine. He yelped like a pregnant goat whose contractions were at a brutal maximum. The gods were on our side; the snapping turtle caught a clear shot of the Polack's worm and went in for the gobble, missing the sucker's peter and nabbing a good chunk of his ballsac instead. Kablinski clocked the bold reptile a hard fist

before he ran from the lake like a little girl, screaming with his hands at his loins and a small tributary of blood running down his leg.

Vengeance was now our own. We pointed, and we laughed. We laughed a cruel, celebrated, and triumphant laugh, assured to ring through Kablinski's skull long after. We finally had something on him. His reign of terror subsided. Embarrassed thereafter, he resigned to mostly ignoring us, with the occasional snide remark falling impotent. Livid, yet conquered, no kind of ridicule he could come up with could hold against getting a spot of your nuts bit off by one holy saint of a turtle on a Friday night in the summer of 1987.

Another Friday, fourteen years later: presently it was Los Angeles, but I was still looking for thirty-year-old bosoms and a good time on a Friday night. Nearing last call, I left the Frolic Room tavern at around 1:30 a.m. I was on my way to a good drunk. It was May and misty, but you could taste in the air the bull fury of another pummeling summer on the horizon. I pulled into the liquor store at the corner of Highland and Yucca for smokes, a six-pack, and a fifth of Scotch to fill the emptiness of my bungalow apartment and the coming morning.

I stepped into the place, headed for the cooler, pulled a six of Miller High Life, and turned for the register when I was stopped cold. Time had shoved its own fist down its throat and swallowed—a vindictive monkey wrench in the machinery of the world. My eyeballs were suddenly traitors, twisted in their transmission; I could have been shot dead for a lesser effect and smaller odds: there he was, standing ten feet from me, Kenny Kablinski.

Which gods were laughing now?

I ducked behind the rack of potato chips and clutched my six-pack with cold white knuckles, watching him in a bewildered stupor. He stumbled toward me, headed to the beer cooler. The fingers were still missing. The black ponytail was there, but now with running blades of silver cutting through. Kablinski was not smiling, so I did not know about the teeth. I immediately thought about the missing chunk in his testis and warmed. Life is fair, sometimes. Kablinski grabbed a carton of Budweiser and made his way to the front counter.

I turned to stone, awed and glued to the spot, while within I was being savagely cauterized by the wages of personal history. What kind of loaded odds were these? Where were such narrow possibilities real-

ized when I actually needed them? Was I drunker than I thought? Was this just some foul, ghoulish hallucination burying my 1:45 a.m. with the past? Had I finally slipped over reality's discerning, demarcating edge? No, no. It was he, in fetid hubris, in the flesh. There was no other way to explain the wizened shiver bolting through my spine, nor the icy hammers of recognition banging the inside skin of my frontal lobes. Kablinski; the dirty fucker found his way all the way to Los Angeles. But this was my town. I trumpeted my guts and rose nervously and determined from the potato chips.

I'd scarcely stepped in line behind him, trying desperately to further comprehend the fantastic absurdity, when brusquely and apishly Kenny Kablinski, the underdeveloped goon from a world long departed, pulled a huge hunting knife from under his weathered Carhart coat and waved it menacingly at the liquor store clerk. It was the same type of knife he and my old man would use to skin the deer they shot year after year back in the day.

The clerk, an older, petit Asian fellow, was silent, but calm. This kind of thing might happen every Friday night in the life of a liquor store clerk in Hollywood. Kablinski continued with the knife, but did not speak. No demands, nothing, as if he forgot his agenda halfway



through. There was something tragic about him that wasn't quite there when I was a kid. A vast and cosmic look of sad and total defeat. The twelve pack of Budweiser was securely snug beneath his arm, crushed yet protected, as if it were looted gold or a kidnapped child. His eyes were blown out, far gone from that special place known as sanity.

"Kablinski! You dumb redneck!" I hollered, my brain functioning a step ahead of my consciousness. He whipped around, the knife now weaving and stitching across the air inches from my face. His pupils shrunk into tiny steel nails and he went pale, trying to place me, then staring at me as if I were some kind of ghost. His lips twisted, troubled with the weight of madness, but nothing came out.

"You shit Polack! Put that blade away before you get killed, man. This clerk wants none of it—he's probably got a shotgun under the counter pointed right at what's left of your turtle-chomped nuts," I said, afterward hoping that this both was, and was not, the actuality.

Kablinski remained for a flash, staring hard at me with questionable recognition. He teetered sideways, swaying against gravity, indecisive and seeming near collapse. Three long seconds passed and he shoved the knife back into his coat, dropped the beer on the counter, snatched an entire box of Spicy Hot Slim Jims from a display, and escaped fast out the door.

I remained for a moment, then lunged outside, whipping my eyes to all points. He was gone. No trace of him. The breeze was the only movement of note.

The clerk was eerily calm. He quietly slid the abandoned Budweiser to the side and asked me if I was all set. My head was swarming with the electric fog of my own dubious sanity.

"No, I'll take that too," I said, regarding the Budweiser. Despite adolescent hatred, I was concerned for the man. Strange, when, somehow, the things that once throttled you with disdain can be looked back upon with delicate nostalgia. I fell silent for a beat, before becoming histrionically bombarded with acute specifics of the stinking Polack of my youth. "Do you have any Night Train?" I asked, visions of countless bottles of the nasty swill emptied by Kablinski as I knew him pulsing through my swollen brain.

"You have to go to other side of town," the clerk said. "To black town where niggers buy."

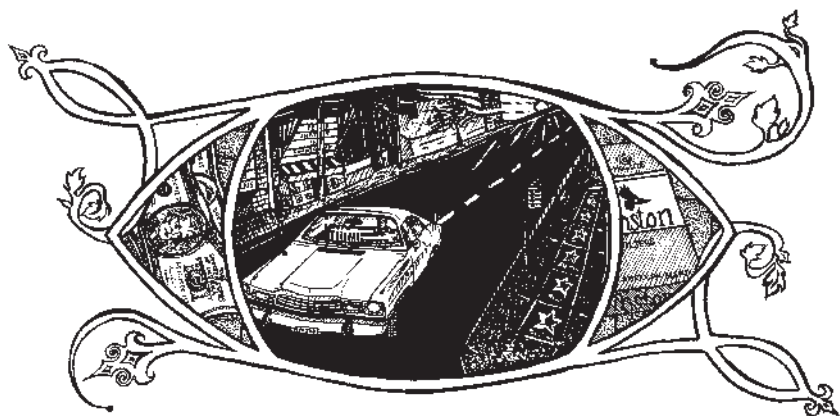
And now, this. I no longer wanted to give him my money. Perhaps I should've just let Kablinski go for it. Two ignorant fools tooling over Budweiser would have beat hearing such sad bigotry. Then, again, was I so far removed? Slander was everywhere, even inside me, and I did not like it. Not all Polish were of the way.

"Just give me a fifth of Clan McGregor," I told him. "And a pack of Winstons." I dropped a twenty, a ten, and a five on the counter, and told him to keep the change.

"Thank you," he said.

"Go to hell," I replied.

I got into my car and glanced once more in all directions, but it was useless. The phantom had deceased. I slid my brown paper bag across the seat and headed south on Highland, stone sober now. The night air was still cool, but before I knew it, hours later, the season ushered faster than expected, the Saturday sun was alive and fierce, glowing the big yellow burn.



Eat It All, Elaine

by Phillip Taw

My mother asked me for suggestions in choosing an American name when we were finalizing our citizenship papers. Being eight, and having just watched an episode of *Reading Rainbow*, I suggested Elaine because *Eat It All Elaine* was a book on the show that day. It was about a little girl that couldn't stop eating. I forget what the consequences were in the story but I'm sure she didn't end up pear shaped and with high cholesterol like my mother. I explained where I got this name and my mom found it fitting.

"So," she said in Burmese, "people named Elaine are supposed to eat a lot?"

"I guess," I replied. And that was good enough for her. From Mya Win, she became Elaine Taw.

Nowadays my mother sits on the edge of the sofa most weekday mornings in time for the opening bell of the stock market on CNBC. It's been her day job since she stopped working due to arthritis. She'll listen carefully to stock picks and research the essentials, like market cap size and major holders, on Yahoo! Intermittently, she'll switch over to QVC to gaze longingly at jewelry and dresses. Despite watching television with most of her time, she doesn't completely understand what the shows are saying because, even after living twenty years in America, her English is still rudimentary. But, like a child, she has absorbed all the profanity she's heard without the context. It would be perfectly normal for me to come home and have her explain in Burmese what there is to eat but while walking away, thoughtfully add, "Fucken shit," for no reason in particular.

In the few months before going to UC Berkeley, my mother wanted to spend more time with me, scheduling one restaurant a week for us to try. But it was around this time I was more anxious than ever to live on my own, away from my parents. And I grew so much more irritated with each of our conversations that I just abruptly ended them in annoyance. But for my mother, I was her youngest of three and about to move out. She wanted to accrue memories in a hurry, so she put up with my attitude.

She worried about my choice to study Comparative Literature over more lucrative majors. “You go for four years and when you come out you can make 60k or 40k, which would you choose?” she asked in Burmese. According to her, those four years in college were to prepare for work. I explained my reasons and then she called me a “crazy bastard.” We had just watched *Kingpin*, a Farrelly brothers movie.

She never attended college in Burma. It was after we had lived in California for a few years that she attended community college to gain some marketable skills. But even then she only took a handful of classes. I remember her studying at the kitchen table with two fellow immigrant classmates. Every other word was vagina and unfortunately for me it was after I barely discovered what that was. They’d read aloud pronouncing every syllable, “Va-geeee-naaaa,” with as much concentration as me when I now encounter the real thing.

This lack of communication might contribute to the disconnect we’ve shared ever since I hit puberty. On every major topic, we not only disagree, but are unable to explain to each other our reasons. As a Fox News watcher, she hates Bill Clinton but likes Bill O’Reilly, a direct inverse of my tastes. I mentioned that I read that Clinton’s intention was to become Secretary General of the U.N. She said she knew it! He’s the type of guy who loves to mingle with powerful people from different countries, she explained with a look on her face similar to that of an Evangelical Christian forced to explain the details of anal sex.

One weekday morning, on the way back from her doctor’s appointment, we stopped at a Chinese restaurant to buy chicken wings in bulk. Along the way, a homeless black man approached me for a quarter while my mother darted ahead. She later laughed aloud and said, “I’m a bad mother. I should protect my son.”

After my first year at Berkeley, I came home for a visit and my parents were arguing heatedly, like they did every few months or so back then, like a scheduled oil change. The usual accusations came up. My father somehow lost my mother’s parents’ money because he had “bad friends” in Burma. My father claimed it was nothing worth talking about, maybe just a few thousand dollars. It was a fight just like dozens

of other fights before, none of which I fully understood because I never asked about their past or anything that happened in Burma, but something ignited in her this time. Her frustrations overshot her self-control; she wailed uncontrollably and punched herself in the head. She was wide eyed, as if enraged, scared, and confused at the same time. Her jaw dropped low, leaving her mouth open and her cheeks smoothed, which were glistening from her tears. I had to hold her down; which I didn't realize might have made it worse. She kept struggling against me to get up but I used my weight to keep her lying on the sofa so she wouldn't break anything or hurt herself. But it possibly kept up her excitement when I should have been trying to calm her down. She struggled against me and screamed, for some reason, in purely English, about how she wanted her parents' money, mistakes in her life, and dreams, all vaguely worded in the best English she could, little windows into her I've never seen open before. Occasionally she screamed something in Chinese, which only my father understood.

She went to her closet later, after I let her up, and threw her clothes in a pile, one by one, while wailing a monotonous note of despair, her face still as wide and distraught as before. I must have gotten my melodrama from her; she said she wanted to burn all her clothes. She claimed she wanted to leave and live with my brother or by herself, a 55-year-old woman, unable to work, with only a high school education from Burma.

A few months later, I was studying abroad in France, and gave my parents a call. My father had been diagnosed with cirrhosis and cancer of the liver and was preparing for transplant. My mother drove him to his almost daily doctor appointments. She seemed the same as before I left for Berkeley. She seemed to want to do things for my father, as she wanted to spend time with me before I moved out.

I asked her if there was something I could send them from France. Well, she said, they've been watching food network a lot and wanted to try truffles. I told her truffles from bought in France wouldn't differ from truffles bought in California but, of course, the communication was off because she just reiterated she just wanted to try it. She just wanted a tiny piece to see what they were like.

Friday Night Fish Fry

by Heather Collette-VanDeraa

I'm sitting behind the cracked plastic wheel of my overheating car, heading eastbound on Sunset Boulevard during evening rush hour. A salmon sunset blazes through my rear window. The exhausted engine hobbles through stop-and-go traffic past a small restaurant as the smell of fried fish wafts into the open windows. As the traffic-jam gives way to an open freeway of sentiment, the smog gives way to a redolent memory of the single-most consistent thing that I did with my family growing up in the suburbs of Wisconsin—the Friday Night Fish Fry.

My siblings and I would dress in our ill-fitting, hand-me-downs and traipse out to the station wagon. My father drove the few small-town blocks to our favorite restaurant, Jacks-or-Better. On the exterior of the building hung five oversized playing cards; a Royal Flush spread out as if it were the winning hand at a high-rolling poker table. I liked those big cards because from my point of view, we were royalty—always seated at the best dim-lit table in the place, and I got to order whatever I wanted off the greasy paper menu.

Now if you've never been to the Great Lakes region of the United States, and never thought you'd had a reason to, I'll give you two. The first is fresh-water Perch, lacquered in Bisquick and deep-fried in Crisco, served up in piles of butterfly-fillets that look like rusty angel wings. The second reason is frog legs. I used to order those little guys as if I was ordering king crab or lobster; and if you've never eaten the legs of a frog—granted, most people haven't—you just nibble away at them right off the bone. They are, like most food of the Midwest, served breaded and deep-fried, with hot melted butter on the side for dippin'.

I especially loved that sweet melted butter. The seminal waitress would march through the dark diner with a small tin tray of golden Land-O-Lakes butter bubbling over a tea light candle that would flicker felicitously throughout the duration of dinner. The warm butter seemed to flavor our spirits as much as our food, and the candle set the entire evening aglow with an aura of benevolence and joy. Dad would

always make his dad jokes that to this day still have the uncanny ability to solicit a laugh.

“What kind of music did the Pilgrims listen to?”

We would think about it and try to come up with the answer but always ended up saying, “I don’t know.”

“Plymouth Rock!” he’d grin with his signature wink.

Mom would smile and say “Oh Eddie, just let them eat!” But I could tell she loved those harmless jokes as much as we did. My older brother and sister would talk about things I wished I knew, and I would know, in time. Friday nights at Jacks-or-Better were sacred to me; we were a royal family dining in the height of elegance, and no squadron of reality could ever sneak in to invade the fortress of that fantasy.

When I was in the sixth grade we moved to a deer-hunting, sod-farming community where my father secured his position at the head of the small town’s puritanical Public School Board. The transition did much to abate commiseration within our family, but failed to injure our tradition of the Friday Night Fish Fry. We carried on, though now better dressed, surely in shabbier spirits; trekking at the end of each week to the one and only supper club of the unincorporated village. I continued to order my frog leg delicacy, nibbling the critters while my sister and brother complained of the perils of being the principal’s kids in a new school.

My own adjustment, aside from the intimidation of Four-Square or Dodge-Ball, included a biology course wherein the expectation of adhering to a strict curriculum was diligently met, if not enthusiastically carried out. And there does come a time in all students’ lives when one poignant assignment is certain to lay the foundation for our understanding of the inner biological functions of all creatures—commonly demonstrated through the dissection of a frog.

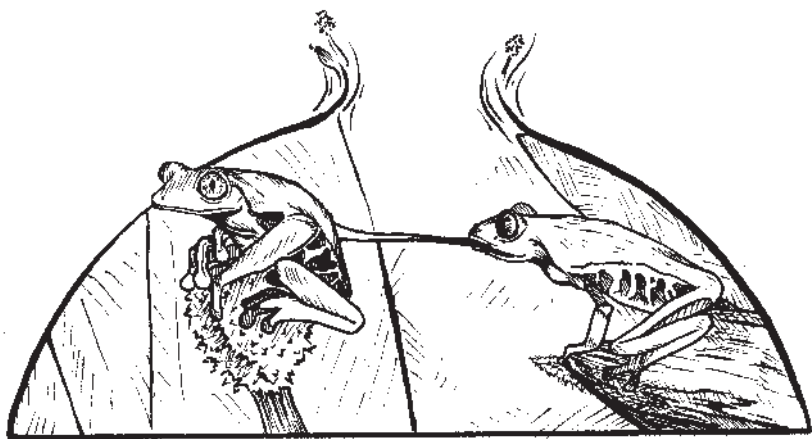
Hank Schnell was my assigned partner for the evisceration process, and to be kind, Hank was a little s-l-o-w to the procedure of frog dissection. So I did it. With the dull scalpel in my hands, I cut open and peeled away the formaldehyde soaked skin of our small, dead amphibian. I methodically identified, removed, and labeled each cold, miniature organ along with its consequent functions. Hank named our frog, “Dude,” and spent the lab making the frog’s mouth move in mock

monologues regarding the unfortunate size of his genitalia.

The following Friday, after my somewhat harrowing experiences both in the biology lab, and the on the playground, I sat across from my mom and dad at one of Deer Run Inn's wooden tables. A fresh pile of frog legs lay scattered upon the chipped dinner plate. The battered femurs just lay there on the plate and all I could think of was Dude's little lifeless body. All I saw was his formaldehyde-soaked pale skin pinned with tiny needles onto a black rubber mat. My stomach twisted in knots. My dad made a joke about Frosty the Snowman, but it wasn't Christmas, and for the first and only time in my life, Dad's joke wasn't funny.

In that moment I officially lost the appetite for my favorite freshwater fare—for good. My mom graciously sent the little frog fritters back to the kitchen, and I begrudgingly ordered the Friday Night Fish Fry Special: Perch fillets with tartar sauce on the side for dippin'.

Through the buckling traffic I now make my way to the Seven Seas taco stand on Sunset Boulevard. They don't serve the perch fillets that I still love so much, but my friend Kenny joins me and tells jokes while we munch on the best fish tacos in L.A. Kenny's jokes, like the tacos, have a seasoning much bolder than the ones I grew up on, but then again, I'm older and I can stomach the change.





CONTRIBUTORS

Lisbeth Boada is a mother above all else. She has taken cross-country road trips attending raves and rainbow gatherings. Currently, she enjoys kickboxing, writing, singing, and scrapbooking.

Heather Collette-VanDeraa lives and works in Los Angeles and attends school at PCC. She settled in California 11 years ago after hitchhiking around the country and after her then boyfriend threw her stuff out of their Chevy pick-up. She is working on her first Bachelor's Degree in English and hopes to go on to become a professional writer and teacher.

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N.S. David 152cm, 43kg, blk hair, brwn eyes. Gallops, devours, forty-winks. Enjoys intermediately-lengthed dawdles on sandy bits of land adjacent to salty-wet bits of water. Seeking: 200cm, 60kgs SANITY. Call 601-MAR-BLES!

Katherine Didier graduated from high school in 2002 and travels around the world whenever she can. She has been involved in the arts all of her life, from ballet to painting to writing to making crème brulee.

Suzanne Harlan grew up in Egypt and Jordan, but has adopted multi-colored, kickback, wavy California as her third home. She likes body-surfing, swinging, eating chocolate, reading G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, and discovering friendship.

Beverly Kikuta is diminutive in size and probably toxic if ingested. She resides in Arcadia, but more accurately lives on the Internet and in comic books and novels. She is intrigued by Mallomars and eagerly awaits their return.

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Phillip Taw was born in Rangoon, Burma, and moved with his family to California when he was four. He studied comparative literature at UC Berkeley where he graduated in 2004, and he has taught English in Nagano, Japan.

Carl White is a native of Dublin and has lived in Los Angeles since 1993. People fascinate him. Maybe this is why he writes. Maybe this is why he is a bartender.

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