



inscape



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Editors:

JULIETTE BLASOR

ELIZABETH CHAIDEZ

DANIELLE ESTEVES

RICHE FERRERA

ROGER FONG

VICTOR GRIPPI

TINA KOSTKAS

JEANINE AUZA

JOSE PALACIOS

CECIL SMITH

LEAH WONG

Designed by: RICHE FERRERA

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fiction

Terrorism

by Claudia Muyle

The little boy peeked around the corner, carefully scanning the area for soldiers. There were none. He saw the small houses of the village he knew so well. Some of them were collapsing due to the bomb blast that had occurred a number of days earlier. It was only a few days ago when the big fighter airplanes came soaring over the village next to theirs dropping bombs, but the bombs were forceful enough to shake all the villages around it. Hundreds had been killed on impact and quite a few had been trapped under the debris of their homes. He heard voices behind him and heavy footsteps belonging to the soldiers sent by their officials to kill anyone in sight. He sprinted to the right and tried to make his way home as fast as he could. If only he had gone home a bit earlier with his sister, then he wouldn't be stranded like this, all alone, scared for his life, afraid that one of the soldiers might catch sight of him and shoot him.

He dashed down the small cluttered street, aware of the people inside the houses anxiously looking at him. He had to get home. The street was full of dead bodies, blood, glass, and odd pieces of metal debris. A few soldiers had come the previous night. They went into the houses, looking for anyone and anything they could get their hands on. Some people were at home but many were not. The people who were at home were brutally dragged out into the streets, pulled by their hair. The soldiers stripped them (making them public displays of humiliation) and then, as they begged for their lives, shot them. The little boy and his family were at home at the time but the soldiers hadn't found them. They hid in their small basement but luckily the soldiers overlooked it. He remembered hearing them turn over tables and chairs, opening cupboards, anything where someone might be able to hide. After what seemed like an eternity of searching and tearing the house to pieces, the soldiers finally left. His mother was silently crying and very scared.

He was nearly home; he could see the little beige painted house right in front of him. Only five more houses to go, four more, three more, two more, one more and he was there. His house looked demolished. All the windows but one were shattered. In front of the house on the ground lay their one and only table, broken, which the soldiers had thrown out in their search for his family. He opened the door to the house and let himself in. It was such a mess. "Why do the soldiers have to come and destroy everything?" he thought. "We haven't done anything to anyone." The house was dreadfully quiet. He called out to his mother. There was no answer. He walked over to the

camouflaged door at the far end of the house that led to the basement. He saw his mother, father and sister sitting in the corner of the petite, dark and dusty basement. He was so happy to see them. They darted to him and hugged him, thanking the heavens they were all together again. He sat down with them in the corner; he was so thankful that he had made it home safely and his family was still alive.

Moments later, to their horror, they heard the door of their house open with a bang. They heard a shuffling of feet and more of their belongings being thrown around. The soldiers were back. They were searching again, tearing and breaking the remainder of what was left to destroy. The soldiers were going to kill them if they found them. The little boy and his family remained seated, as if frozen. They hardly breathed, afraid it would be heard. It didn't work. The door to the basement swung open with the loudest of bangs. There, clothed in a dark green army suit and with a big machine gun, stood their worst nightmare. He looked at them with a triumphant grin on his face. They were defenseless. He grabbed hold of the little boy's sister. She was screaming while his mother and father tried to hold on to her. But the soldier overpowered them. He held her by the hair and with one quick slash of his knife he slit her throat. Blood splattered everywhere. The monster dropped his sister and walked over to his mother. She pleaded and cried, but with one big bang she was silenced. He had shot her in the head. It was ultimate chaos, and the monster was enjoying every moment of it. To his father the soldier did the same. The little boy was crying, horror and disbelief in his eyes. Within five minutes his whole family had been slaughtered, all this just for one side to win a war. The soldier lifted him up by his collar and with a swift motion of his knife, he plunged it in the little boy's heart.

Pico

by Rosa Cesaretti

“**Y**our brother’s in jail. Call Delia.” And a phone number was written on the other side of the note that I found tacked with chewing gum onto my door. I didn’t know anybody named Delia, but I did have a brother, a half-brother, same dad but different moms. I dialed the number reluctantly, hoping the note was a bad joke. The woman that answered sounded as if I’d interrupted her nap.

“Yeah?”

“This is John Donaldson. Did you leave a note at my door?”

“Is this Johnny?” She laughed and coughed, her voice sounded as if she’d been drinking. “You sound just like Jake. Wait a minute. Shut your FUCKING mouth you STUPID bird!”

I could hear Jake’s parrot, Pico, screeching in the background, followed by sounds of glass breaking. The only person who called me Johnny, besides my mother, was Jake, so I figured this Delia lady knew Jake.

“What did my brother do now?”

“He didn’t do nothing. The cops picked him up ‘cause he didn’t call his parole officer, they got him in Wayside and he wants to see you about, I don’t know, about something.”

I thought I was done with picking up after Jake. I told her I’d try to visit him on Sunday, but didn’t bother asking why Jake was supposed to be visiting a parole officer. I guessed it had to be drugs.

Wayside prison is in Valencia, across the freeway from Magic Mountain, and even in October it’s hotter than hell in Valencia. I never visited Jake in prison before, I’d never even been near a prison. I’m not the good brother; it’s just that I knew better how not to get caught.

The prison system wants to punish the offender so they make it as miserable as possible for the visitors. It had to be in the high 90s as hundreds of us snaked through the line just to pass through the metal detector. Considering we were all friends or family of lawbreakers, everyone followed the rules for the most part, although I noticed that the man in front of me still had the sensor tag attached to his collar.

After we were given our passes we sweltered in a huge tent for hours, waiting for the buses that would drive us to the top of the hill. I was sitting between the shirt thief and a woman whose breasts lay on her lap. She had “Shorty Forever” tattooed on her right breast. Her kid was dressed in a Batman costume and was running around trying to get his cape to fly. She made feeble attempts to hit him each time he ran in front of her. Finally she snarled at him, “Come here, Junior! Or do I got

to beat you?” My stomach began to ache with that homesick feeling and under my breath I cursed my brother.

At least the bus was air-conditioned. I sat next to an old Mexican man; he stared straight ahead and held his ranchero hat in his earth-encrusted hands. Someone shouted, “Look! A wolf!” and a bunch of the women and children leaned over me toward the window. I managed a peek and saw that it was a coyote running past the bus with a rabbit in his mouth. The old man also glanced out the window, and his eyes crinkled into a smile.

The hallway where I waited for Jake’s name and number to be called out was like a sauna. I could hear the blood pulsating inside my head, and I suddenly had a violent urge to use the toilet. “Jake Cuevas! Window 149!” I’d forgotten that Jake never took Dad’s name so they had to shout out his name twice before I recognized it.

I was momentarily blinded by the contrast of the sunlit hallway and the dim visiting area. Men in orange jumpsuits passed by on the other side of the plate glass. It was a relief to see the old Mexican man sitting near me and I noticed that the man he was talking to was crying. I didn’t see Jake until he was standing opposite of me with the phone receiver in his, motioning me to pick up my line.

Jake had aged since I last saw him. He still had that boyish smile that sometimes got him out of trouble with his mother, but the blue in his eyes had faded and his hair had thinned so that I could see the scar on his skull from when I had chucked my skateboard at him. He was always smaller than me, but he looked even smaller in his orange jumpsuit.

“Hey, Johnny.”

“Hey, Jake.”

“Fuck, Johnny, you got old,” he said.

“Well you’re looking like our old man.”

“Fuck him.”

We just looked at each other for a minute more before I finally asked him, “So what is it now, Jake? Dope? Coke? Or have you descended further down?” He looked away before he answered me.

“Hit Delia,” he said. My shoulders stiffened and I just shook my head. Jake put the phone closer to his mouth. “Just that one time, but she had to go call the fucking cops, then this fucker judge said I had to take one of those don’t-be-angry courses, or go to fucking jail. I forgot about it. Next thing I know, a fucking cop is dragging me out of bed at seven-fucking in the morning.”

I had heard enough. “So you also gonna start acting like Dad now? Well I’m sorry for you Jake, if you’re stupid enough to go hitting women-”

“Fuck you, Johnny. I was drunk and that fat-ass had thrown a shoe at Pico. I didn’t hit her with my fists or anything like that.”

“Well, I wish I could help you, Jake, but I’m broke and I’m this close to getting fired-”

“I don’t want your fucking money, man. I want you to take care of Pico. Just until I get out. Delia is probably making his like fucking miserable. That bitch.”

I began to wish Jake asked me for money. I hated his ugly bird. Jake’s mom had bought Pico for him after Dad had been taken to jail for beating Jake. Pico had been a bribe so that Jake would keep his mouth shut in court.

I never questioned how she was able to afford an African Gray but I think she used the rent money. I remember Dad complaining about the money and threatening to eat the bird. Jake’s mom never stood up to dad, but that time she did and she got beat pretty bad.

“I don’t know, Jake. I don’t even think the landlady allows birds and-”

“Come on, big brother, I don’t have anybody else I could trust with Pico. It’ll only be three months...” I could have just said no and walked away, but I remembered the way Delia had screamed at Pico, and who knew what she’d do to him with no witnesses around. So I agreed.

My misery began on the first day I brought him home. Thinking he might appreciate the view, I had placed Pico’s perch by the big window. There was a view of the freeway, but he also had a view of the big oak tree across the street. Hundreds of wild parrots roosted in the tree from late spring to the early fall. I thought it was an improvement over the closet where Delia had been keeping him. Instead, Pico sat with his back to the window, pulling out his feathers. His beady eyes were always staring at me, and in my studio apartment the bathroom was the only place I could escape his stare.

If I tried to read a book or watch a movie I couldn’t concentrate because, no matter where I placed my chair, I could feel Pico’s stare. Sometimes he’d close his beady eyes into a slit, but as soon as I relaxed, his eyes sprung open again drilling straight into my eyes, as if accusing me of something. Then there was his squawking. It might be a car backfiring, or a siren, or just the postman delivering the mail

that would set him off. He began with a long guttural squawk, and then burst out a screech that made my teeth hurt. The neighbors complained and the landlady threatened to evict me, but instead she raised my rent. The neighbors stopped talking to me and communicated their displeasure by pounding on the walls.

But the worst of it was his language. Jake had taught Pico some words through the years, and sometimes, without any coaxing on my part, Pico would croak some of them out: “Chinga su madre!” or, “I wouldn’t fuck her with your dick!” He also repeated some of the words in rapid succession: “Chinga! Chinga! Chinga!” “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

I began taking long walks at night to avoid my apartment. I lost my appetite and soon my clothes hung on my already skinny frame. My boss told me I looked like shit and when I answered him with one of Pico’s favorite expressions, he fired me.

I began skulking through the stress during the day as well. I tried hanging out in the park but I felt bad when the mothers would pull their children closer to them, and I worried when the cops would slow down as they drove past me.

Jake had lied. His sentence was for six months. By December I decided to find another home for Pico. At the freeway exit, near a sign advertising the secret to losing weight in 10 days, I hung a sign: “For Sale. African Gray parrot, \$100 OBO.” In my confused state of mind I didn’t plan for when Jake would be released from jail. I had a vague idea that I could give the buyer back his money, and Jake never had to know.

My notice had been up for weeks and I received several calls but nothing serious. A woman with a southern drawl telephoned a couple of times. The first time she asked if something was wrong with the parrot. I liked her voice, so I admitted that Pico’s vocabulary included some cursing, but my honesty stopped there.

“I don’t mind swearing,” she said, “but does he bite?”

“No,” I lied, “he just swears.”

The second time she called she said that she had been thinking about getting her son a pet and wanted to know if a parrot would be a good pet for a ten-year-old boy.

“My brother was ten.”

“Oh, is this your brother’s parrot?”

“No, I mean yes, but not anymore, he can’t keep him, so I’m kind of helping him out...”

“Won’t the parrot miss your brother? I once heard that parrots mated for life.”

“Well, if it doesn’t work out you can always bring him back.”
By then even a couple of days without Pico sounded like heaven.

“Well, if I’m going to give him to my son I don’t think I could just take him away.”

I thought about the black puppy my mom had given me. I went to sleep with the puppy, but he was gone when I woke up. Mom had a bruised lip so I didn’t say anything. Dad left us soon after that and then she started taking drugs again. Eventually I was taken away from her and sent to live with my dad and Jake’s mom.

The lady with the southern drawl called back and said she wanted to come over before her son came home from school. I gave her directions and as I hung the phone up I wished that Pico looked more presentable. His chest was patchy and the floor below his perch was covered with his feathers and with bird shit. I couldn’t do anything about his baldness, but I tried scraping some of the shit off the floor while trying to ignore his squawking. He had finally quieted down when I heard the knock on the door, which set him off again.

It was raining so I asked the lady to come inside. Her hair was wet from the rain and she smelled of wet trees. Pico’s squawking was bouncing off the walls.

“CAN I TAKE YOUR COAT?”

“EXCUSE ME?”

“YOUR COAT?” I shouted.

“I’M SORRY! I CAN’T HERE YOU!”

We were forced to talk outside and observe Pico from the big window. We introduced ourselves, her name was Marilee Brown. She said she had always loved the wild parrots in the area, especially in the morning. I began to think she was nuts. She also talked about her son, he was ten and his father had recently died.

I began to feel like a creep. So I told her the truth about Jake and Pico, and confessed that Jake would never sell Pico. It felt odd talking so frankly with a stranger, but her gaze was steady and her smile was sweet.

She didn’t say anything for a while. I closed my eyes and put my face up to the rain. I could feel her eyes on me.

“Did you know that parrots have lived on this earth longer than we have?” she said.

“Is that what killed the dinosaurs?” I deadpanned. “Did their noise drive them to suicide?”

“I think we are the noisy ones,” she answered. I didn’t have a

clever answer to that.

“It’s a sad shame, Mr. Donaldson, a sad shame you can’t see how beautiful your brother’s parrot is.”

I opened my eyes and watched Marilee walk away, leaving me alone in the rain. I stared at Pico’s miserable gray figure. He had stopped squawking and was now tugging at his feathers. The streetlights came on and the yellow light carved a cave of rain and fog around Pico and me.

I thought about Jake and Pico, about Jake and me, and about Marilee Brown and the wild parrots. I hated Jake because he reminded me of our dad. I was tired of hating.

The smell of the wet grass reminded me of our childhood, of all the times we stood outside in the rain, too afraid to go home. It wasn’t Jake I hated. Shivering in my shoes, wet, starved and exhausted, I lost the will to lie to myself for not taking better care of Jake, for letting him get caught by Dad all those times. I remained outside until night had fallen and Pico’s figure was just a shadow.

The following Sunday I visited Jake in jail. He was suspicious when I asked him to move in with me.

“Fuck, Johnny, remember what happened last time I lived with you.”

“That was a lifetime ago, Jake, and anyway, I don’t own anything you’d want to steal.”

“I don’t know...”

“Where else are you going to live, with Delia?”

“Fuck you, Johnny. It’s just that... I’m no good... you know what dad always said, ‘If you shoot at the kid, you’ll always miss, but if you shit at the kid, it’s bull’s-eye.’”

“Yeah, Jake, but I never knew what he meant by that.”

“He meant I’m a fuck-up!”

“Well... you’re still my brother.”

I told him about the wild parrots and about Marilee Brown and how pretty she was. I didn’t tell him I loved him.

By February most of Pico’s feathers had grown back. I found a job at a local music shop. Marilee Brown’s son visited Pico regularly while I was at work, and sometimes Marilee would visit when I was home. I continued to visit Jake on Sundays. He would ask about Pico and planned for the days ahead, but we never talked about Dad. I still couldn’t tell Jake I loved him.

Pico was still loud and he still cursed, but his staring didn’t

bother me anymore. It reminded me of the old Mexican man in the prison bus. I began to notice that, like the old man, Pico was staring head.

It was Sunday morning in early March when I woke up to cries of wild parrots announcing the arrival of spring. Jake would soon be coming home. That afternoon I mentioned how Pico's feathers ruffled when he heard them. Jake's face twisted up, like when he was a kid and tried not to cry after one of Dad's beatings.

"Hey, Jake, what's wrong?"

"You got to let him go," he said.

"What are you talking about, Jake?" I could tell he was trying really hard not to cry.

"I can't keep him anymore, Johnny. Just see if he'll fly. He's a fucking smart bird... and I'll bet he could fly better than any of those wild mother-fuckers."

I didn't understand why Jake suddenly wanted to release Pico. I wanted to tell Jake I loved him.

"I'm sorry, Jake. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when we were kids."

Jake looked surprised at my words.

I was alone the morning I left the big window open. At first Pico remained on the perch with his back to the window. But as a warm summer breeze ruffled his neck feathers, he turned his head toward the outside. His eyes blinked at the warmth of the sun, and as he let out his slow guttural squawk, he spread his gray wings, letting the breeze pass beneath them as he flew away. He flew over to the oak tree across the street, and remained there for the rest of the morning.

Later that afternoon, when I returned from work, Pico was no longer in the tree. My apartment seemed larger without his squawking, and the emptiness in my apartment was defeating. From a distance I heard the cries of the wild parrots. I began to cry, but it wasn't for Pico. I cried for the years ahead without my brother.

After his release Jake came home with me. When I woke up the next morning Jake was gone and so was my wallet. That day Jake bought some bad dope and died of a drug overdose.

Every morning and every evening of every summer, when the wild parrots fill the sky with their cries, I search for the dark one.

The Dunes

by Wendy Markowitz

“Run!” Adi yells at me as she rounds the corner of the casino. “Run!”

Behind her is a fat man in a shiny suit, chasing her in between rows of slot machines. I know by his looks he is a pit boss, the only true nemesis in our game of casino dodge ball. Pit bosses have no sense of humor, adolescent girls who use casinos as their personal playgrounds don't amuse them, and if they catch you they are not friendly. We are almost afraid of them, except we know we're faster by virtue of our youth and they are always fat.

“Back to the Dunes!” I shout as a battle cry. We are in Caesar's Palace, the Dunes is across the street and we know that pit bosses are not allowed to leave the building. Our third player, Susie, hears the command and is the first to hit the lobby. Lobbies can be tricky because they always sport an undercover house-dick. Their job is to remove any unauthorized, freelance ladies-of-the-night and they are expert at spotting them. The female escort business is strictly controlled in Las Vegas; a girl who's down on her luck cannot spontaneously decide to boost her income for the weekend. The stupid ones who persist will end up in abandoned refrigerators in the desert.

Adi is sprinting full out by now, I have her in my sights and I will meet her in the revolving door. Susie is outside by the Grecian fountains laughing and slapping her thighs. We all point towards the Dunes and we run, full bore, in the direction we're pointing till we are safely inside our poolside room. Once inside we double-bolt the door and roll around on the plush carpet like untamed puppies.

Adi and Susie and I are three girls in the ninth grade who have grown up in this adult resort town. We know it from the inside out. We watched Caesar's Palace being built; we'd ride our bikes to the construction site and hide behind the huge equipment, never forgetting to steal something that could prove we were there. We know the hotels are nothing more than cinder block warehouses until the very end when they slap up the fancy facades and dazzle the bland architecture with millions of lights and decorate the fronts with shooting fountains.

The first time we threw ourselves a slumber party at the Dunes we were delighted by how easy it was. We would combine our allowances and babysitting and lawn-mowing money in a purple velvet Cutty Sark bag, and when we'd have enough we'd reserve a room, telling our parents we were at each other's house. It was easy; they wanted to believe us. This time we've saved for the Sultan Suite, a spectacular,

gaudy room on the ground floor with sliding glass doors that open to the pool. We intend to swim in the wee hours and steal uneaten room service food from the hallways. In the meantime, we'll run around on the strip for a while, playing made up games in the various casinos. Children are strictly forbidden on casino floors, so part of the thrill is the hide-and-seek of it with the hotel staff. We know how to behave as though we are the bratty offspring of high-rolling guests. This gives us a tiny edge—but it wears off soon. We must keep moving and be hyper alert.

While we save our money we plan our excursions—how many hotels we must hit, which games we should play, how we should dress—and we always have an exit plan just in case things turn sour.

Adi always wants to get dressed up. She's the Pretty One. Long dark hair, solid athletic body, shocking green eyes and perfect teeth. When we want male attention we put her out front. Her mom and dad know she's pretty; they don't know she's powerful.

"Let's wear gold lame heels and long clingy gowns." Adi plans out loud one day in Home Ec. We all know how to sew—all girls were taught to sew in those days. We have the time to make clingy gowns; now we consider the cost.

"OK, but that will cut into our Sultan savings and push back our date." Susie is in charge of the money. She keeps the Cutty Sark bag at her house. She's the Smart One. Susie is in all the accelerated classes and she's a cheerleader. Her parents would be the most shocked to find out about our shenanigans.

"We can do it. I look stupid in dresses, though. We can mow more lawns, sit more kids, steal more change off dressers. It'll be fun." I guess I'm the Brave One, not much intimidates me and nothing embarrasses me. My parents like to pretend they don't know I'm up to shenanigans. I have older brothers.

Of course, we're all pretty and smart and brave, but when push comes to shove, we have our strengths. Together we make an unbeatable girl.

"It's settled then. Look, I have some fabric." Adi pulls three different glamorous knit fabrics from her backpack.

"Of course you already have the fabric!" I laugh because I love this about her. I glance at Susie who is smiling.

"Three yards each. They might have to be short dresses instead. Let's get started." Adi hands us each the color she knows suits us best. We roll the fabric out on the long tables in the Home Ec room

and ask permission to stay after school to work. Our teacher is thrilled at our initiative.

“Better Home Making Makes Better Women,” we chime together, just to please her. This is her favorite saying.

“We have enough!” Susie announces to us one day in the lunchroom.

“This weekend?” Adi asks as she sips her Coke.

“I can do it,” I say. I don’t have any commitments. Susie has a little brother; she might be expected to watch him. She’ll have to find out.

“Okay, do we want Friday night or Saturday night?” This is always my first question because I prefer Saturday nights—more time to plan. I’m usually the one to check us into the room because I look ridiculously older than I am.

Soon we establish that Saturday night it is; we have three days to agree on the rules. We can barely concentrate on anything else. So far, it’s:

1. Imaginary Dodge-Ball
2. Swizzle-Stick Hunting
3. Male Luring
4. Middle of the Night Swimming
5. Hallway Eating
6. Whatever-Looks-Appealing Stealing

We have a full agenda ahead of us. Our dresses are finished. We’re going to look like back-up singers; we all used the same pattern. All that’s left to do is lie to all the parents and pack.

Saturday comes and we are able to get Adi’s older sister to give us a ride to the Strip. She thinks that she’s taking us to a rehearsal for a Christmas pageant. No matter, she’s not talking to her parents these days anyway. Susie’s mom thinks she’s spending the night at my house, trying to help me prepare for finals. Adi’s mom thinks she’s at Susie’s, which makes her happy because Susie is such a good girl. My mom will see my note on the fridge that I’m off with Adi and will, no doubt, shrug with indifference. We’re all set.

The Sultan Suite is everything we dreamed. Big enough to hide an elephant, two king-size beds, a large sunken tub, a mini-bar and three-inch shag carpeting. Not to mention the massive gold and crystal chandelier that keeps us laughing for hours. We wreck the spacious

bathroom getting all dolled up and head across the street to Caesar's to start the game I made up called Imaginary Dodge-Ball. The "ball" is any type of hotel authority who has the right to kick us out while we dash about, dropping coins in slot machines. The best slot machines to play are the ones on the corners or at the end of a row. The very best slot machines to play are the ones directly across from the hotel coffee shops. People leave the coffee shops with change in their hands and they are going to drop that change into the first machine they see. Our job is to recreate that move and find the "hottest" machines. These slots are also the most risky for getting caught because they are so visible and when you win, it can draw attention, so you must be ready with an empty cup to grab the falling coins.

"We each start with two dollars in quarters, three in dimes, and one in nickels." Susie is dividing up our change and placing it in our hands as we walk across the street to Caesar's. It's November, not yet Thanksgiving, still a little warm and coming up on late afternoon—we are ready. Our purses swing from our shoulders, our strappy heels click against the pavement, our beehive hairdos are shellacked with hair spray. We have enough makeup to qualify as drag queens and the same dress in three different colors on three very different bodies. Adi looks legitimate in hers, Susie looks like she's playing dress-up in hers, and I look squished in mine; I have large breasts.

"We split up here and meet back at the room by seven. Let's make some money girls!" I say this as we enter the lobby through the wide revolving doors, all of us fitting comfortably in our glass triangle. "Let the games begin!"

I am up fifty bucks when I hear Adi scream, "RUN!"—more than enough for all of us to eat like royalty at the buffet. I empty my cup into my purse and break into a dead run for the door. The pit boss chasing Adi is sweating and swearing; he doesn't have a chance—she is sprinting like a fawn in a forest fire—and smiling. Susie gets out first; she's tiny and quick. I'm slower but I don't look as guilty. I'm the last to reach the entrance. In moments we are safe in the Sultan Suite, so happy in our laughter and revelry that we do not notice we are not alone.

Out of the corner of my eye I think I see something darting in the mirror. Susie and Adi are wrestling, their dresses bunching up around their necks, panties showing, shoes unhooked and flung everywhere. I see it again, a darkness. I start screaming in a voice I don't recognize. Adi sits up. Susie is struggling with her zipper, ready to shed

her matching dress. They realize I'm screaming and gesturing toward the bathroom/closet area. We hear a thump.

"Call the front desk!" orders Adi. No one moves.

"What was that?" Susie is down to bra and panties; she really doesn't need much of a bra. She stands—I grab her ankle. We've all known each other since Kindergarten; we were woven together by childhood; we breathe the same breath.

"No one does anything," I whisper as I pull myself up by the arm of the gold sofa. The suite has a fake fireplace complete with fireplace accessories; I feel my hand curl into a fist around the cast iron poker. I motion for them to move in behind me. I tiptoe in the direction of the bathroom floor. I push it open with the poker. We hear what sounds like scrambling. I raise the poker above my head, gripping it with both hands and lunge into the bathroom past the full-length mirror just as someone leaps out of the adjoining closet—crouching and attempting to run straight into me.

Susie is screaming, her face red and frozen. Adi's mouth is wide open and black mascara streaks her beautiful cheeks. My neck is rigid and won't allow my face to rise. I stare at my hands that are covered in blood. His or mine? I don't know the answer. The hook of the poker is stuck in the back of his head at the nape of his neck. He is harpooned and the other end is in my hand. He is gulping air, everything sounds liquidy, there's a dense oily smell—I never knew what too much blood would smell like. Susie is beginning to hyperventilate; Adi reaches for her as if in a trance. I am connected to our intruder by this unyielding piece of rod iron. All my thoughts are odd: like, this is the Wild West, isn't it? This is like a blacksmith's tool. Am I going to know his name? Are my feet cut or is that his blood? Finally I have a sensible thought; I say this one out loud.

"We better call someone."

We stand; there are four of us now, like a carved, bronze fresco, in our assigned places as if someone had just called out, "Red light!"

Indiscretions

by Emily Evans

I'm the "good one." At least, that's what I'm told. This has been true since childhood. My sister was the "wild one," and my brother was the "loud one." That left me to be the good one. Of course that only caused that much more responsibility to fall on my shoulders. If I did even the tiniest thing wrong, everyone would be angry because that's so "unlike" me. I got used to pleasing people, so that's what I dedicated my life to.

My need to please continued all through school. I was what you might call a nerd. I actually enjoyed going to class. I felt proud when I achieved good grades, but I must admit the straight A's were more for my parents benefit than my own. I never did drugs or drank before age 21. How could I? I was the good one, remember?

At age 23, I was still, that's right, the good one. I was leading the life I was meant to lead. I worked as a teacher and lived with my boyfriend, Luke, of four years. I had never cheated on him. I cooked him dinner every night when he came home from work and sought to keep him happy. We didn't fight much and it seemed we were headed down the right path, the one straight to the altar. Yes, everything was perfect. Everything, that is, except one little thing. I was bored! Out of my mind, bored! I had spent so much time trying to do what others wanted me to do that I forgot to live my life.

I felt trapped and I wanted to break free from the mundane existence called my life. After a couple months of figuring out what I could do to bring some excitement to my life I got a phone call that seemed to provide a door as a means to my escape. It was Craig, an old friend that I'd known since age 17, my freshman year of college. We had met through my roommate and we always had a long distance friendship. I use the term "friend" loosely. In the seven years we'd known each other, we'd fluctuated between being barely more than acquaintances to far more than friends. My heart stopped for a few seconds when I saw him calling. I was excited, but scared at the same time. Craig is the one guy that knows I'm not always good.

It didn't take long for us to reconnect. It didn't matter that the last time we talked was almost two years prior. We picked up where we left off without missing a beat. I was as if those two years apart didn't even happen. I told him about Luke then we conveniently dismissed him from all future conversations.

One day my claim to being the "perfect" girlfriend flew out the window. Craig and I were talking on the phone. We went through all the normal niceties that a conversation requires before he took a

turn on a road we both knew we would head down eventually.

“What are you wearing?”

“Come on, Craig. We’re not going to go there.”

“Why not?”

“I have a boyfriend, remember?”

“So? He doesn’t have to know. What are you wearing?”

In spite of my conscience screaming at me not to, I responded to his question. “I’m wearing a pair of jeans and a tight, black shirt that, together with my push-up bra, accentuates my chest.”

“If you were here right now, I’d grab you, pull you to me, and start kissing you. Slowly, but passionately. My hands would gently caress your back then run up your side until I barely grazed your breast.”

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to get swept away by his deep, enticing voice. I don’t want to divulge the whole conversation. A girl has to keep some things to herself, but my status of not cheating became a technicality that day.

When Luke came home I felt guilty and wondered if he could somehow tell what had happened. Luke knew Craig and I had somewhat of a history together, so I worried that he would know that the line had been crossed once again. He, of course, didn’t suspect a thing. He gave me the obligatory peck on the lips, as usual, and asked, “What’s for dinner?” I sighed with relief, but I also felt a little disappointed. A part of me wanted him to suspect something.

My double life continued. I played the part of the sweet, honest girlfriend around Luke; while all I wanted to do was get back on the phone. “Thank God he lives in Washington,” I kept telling myself. I knew that if he lived close to me, my technicality would probably become altogether nonexistent.

After a few months of discrete phone calls, I could not stand it anymore.

“Craig and I had phone sex.” I used the same matter-of-fact voice I would use to ask him to pass the butter.

“Uh-huh, sure you did.” Luke smiled at me.

“No, I did, really.”

“You’re funny, baby. I know you. You wouldn’t do something like that. It’s not like you. You’re too good of a person for that.”

“I am not!” I screamed at him, but only in my mind. It’s hard to confess your indiscretions when your boyfriend thinks you’re joking about being unfaithful. Most girls would have the opposite problem. Not me. My boyfriend was so convinced that I would remain faithful

that he pushed aside anything that might negate it, even my own admission. Instead of continuing to argue a losing battle, I flashed him a winning smile. “Of course, I’m only kidding.”

“I knew you were.”

I turned back to my dinner and hoped the guilt and disappointment weren’t displayed on my face. It’s not that I wanted him to know because I wanted to see him hurt. If I were to be completely honest with myself, I didn’t really want him to know at all. I did not want the conversations to stop. Every three days or so, Craig and I would talk on the phone, setting up our passionate scenarios. The danger of it was exciting, but there was more to it than that. He made me feel wanted in a way Luke hadn’t made me feel in a long time. Craig brought passion back into my life, where Luke only brought comfort. In a way, I was relieved that Luke didn’t believe me. Well, I tried, I told myself. It gave me an excuse to continue my inappropriate actions. I was, however, disappointed because Luke did not even blink. There was not one moment of fear, not an intake of breath, nothing. Luke had no fear of losing me. That caused the disappointment that swelled up inside me.

My fun and games continued with Craig. Why not? I could get away with it. I could be something other than the good one, without getting a “that’s so unlike you” speech. Nobody believed I could be doing it anyway. I convinced myself there was nothing wrong because Craig was merely acting as a fantasy. It didn’t take me long, however, to figure out my casual “fun” was going deeper than I intended.

One day, while grading papers, I found my mind wandering once again to Craig. Thoughts of him often consumed my brain at idle moments. I could hear his voice and see his smile. Sometimes I could even feel his fingers lightly tracing the curves of my body. At those moments, a shiver would jolt my whole body and my stomach would flip somersaults. On that particular day, the thoughts were followed by the realization that I was completely and utterly infatuated with Craig. I tried to convince myself otherwise, but I knew I was lying, I, of course, told no one, especially not Craig. We joked around with each other, projecting our love onto the other person, but we never actually talked about real feelings.

I was shocked when he crossed that line first. We were arguing about how well he knew me when he said he was an expert at what turned me on.

“I’m even better than Luke I’d wager.”

“We can’t take that wager since you and I have never actually had sex.”

“Not yet. ”

“No, not ever.”

“Why’s that? I’m coming to Arizona from June 16th to the 23rd. I’d love to actually feel your body for real.”

“Because I have a boyfriend. You had your chance five years ago and you blew it. I’ll see you, but I don’t think we’ll have sex.”

“Well here’s a crazy thought. Ever thought that the reason we keep coming back to each other is because we’re supposed to be together?”

“Sure, but do you think I’m going to ruin a real thing for one crazy night in bed with you?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. We get each other. We know how to push each other’s buttons without going too far.”

“Yeah. I agree with that.”

“Ok, so maybe we’re supposed to be more.”

I fell silent for a moment, not knowing what to say. A part of me was dancing a happy jig. He developed feelings for me, the same as I had for him. I was not just a sex object to him. Another part of me was scared shitless. We crossed a bridge we never should have crossed. We brought emotions into our fun and games.

“Hello? I just told you that I want to be with you, and not only in a sexual way. Aren’t you going to respond?”

“I...uh...I need to process.” Those are the words that came out of my mouth even though I was thinking, “I want to be with you too!” I, once again, found myself worrying about what other people would think, rather than worrying about myself.

“Don’t bother.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t bother processing it. You have a boyfriend. It would never work out.”

Click. Before I had a chance to respond the dial tone rang in my ear. I sat there holding the phone for a few minutes. I was too stunned to move. I didn’t know what to do. “I have Luke. He treats me good. Sure Craig will be here next month, but then he’s leaving again. I can’t move to Washington. Who knows when we’d be able to see each other again?” I thought to myself. Despite all this the thought of losing Craig as a part of my life brought tears to my eyes.

I went through the rest of the day in a daze. I did everything

on my agenda, but I didn't retain anything. Luke came home and we sat down to dinner.

"Hey, Luke, guess what?"

"Yeah?"

"I talked to Craig today and he told me that he's coming to Arizona next month. We're hoping to spend some time together."

"Great, invite him over. I'd like to meet this guy that's so important to you."

"Sure, but I want to spend some alone time with him too. That's okay, right?"

"I guess that'll be okay. I don't know if I trust him, but I do trust you and that's all that matters."

"You have nothing to worry about baby." My voice was calm, but my heart was racing. I was excited, but also worried. Would I cross the line?

As soon as Luke went into his office to finish some reports I called Craig from our bedroom.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me," I said timidly.

"Yeah?"

"When you come to Arizona, I want to see you."

"Maybe."

"Oh, you know you want to see me." I attempted to bring in some light humor.

"Of course I do. I just don't know if it would be a good idea."

"Ok, well we'll figure it out later." I tried to keep my voice light, but I was crushed. I didn't know what I was hoping for exactly, but it wasn't that reaction.

The days got warmer and the kids grew more restless as summer quickly approached. Finally it arrived, and Craig was due in Arizona the next day. I still did not know if I would see him. We had talked since then, but not about that. I hoped he would call when he arrived.

The day after Craig was scheduled to arrive in Arizona, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I called Craig.

"Hello?"

"Hey you," I say with a smile. "You in Arizona?"

"Yeah, arrived last night."

"Where are you staying? Can I come over?"

"Sure." He told me what hotel he was staying at.

“Okay, see you in about an hour.”

I raced around getting ready. I wanted to look good, but I didn't want to look like I spent a lot of time trying to look good. Finally satisfied, I was on my way.

It only took me 20 minutes to reach his hotel. The whole way over I was debating with myself about what was going to happen and what I wanted to happen. I rang the doorbell with a trembling finger. When he opened the door I forgot about my nervousness.

“Hi,” he said with a smile that melted away my fears.

“Hey, stranger.”

I stepped forward, into his hotel room and into his arms. As his arms wrapped around me in a hug, I knew exactly what was going to happen, and for once it was exactly what I wanted.

The Path at the End of the Road

by Leah Wong

I live by the border of the Saguaro Indian Reservation; my best friend calls it home. I've known Ben Flyingthunder since we were in first grade. I dared him to eat a beetle, which he did without hesitation, and we've been inseparable ever since. When you live in a small town like Milmadre, Arizona, you keep the friends you make for years. We're both seventeen now, just one month short of graduating high school.

I'm in my room mulling over trigonometry problems while my parents are at a retirement dinner for a colleague. Even with the fan going it's still dry and stuffy. The wind kicks at my curtains. I close my eyes and savor the rare touch of air even if it is hot.

Someone knocks on the front door.

Jumping in my chair, I go downstairs and see Ben standing on the front step. When I open the door he grins. The porch light accents the angles of his face and the darkness of his eyes. His thumbs are hooked in the belt loops of his jeans. His chin-length black hair curls around his face. He's changed from a skinny boy into a tall, broad-shouldered young man. I can't ignore the fact that he's gotten handsome; many of the girls at school don't. My stomach flutters.

"Hi, Casey."

I smile. "What's up?"

He shrugs. "I just, you know, wanted to go for a drive. Wanna come with?"

Do I want to stay here alone with the heat and math problems?

After slipping into sneakers and tugging a decent shirt on, we head to his Ford Ranger, which his dad gave him for his birthday. He opens the door for me and as soon as I'm inside, the smell of sage wafts through the air. Nathan, Ben's dad, tucks it into the visors to ward off bad luck.

We drive out of my tiny suburb to Rose's, our favorite fast food joint, for chili dogs and ice cream. We get a few stares as we sit at a table. It's still foreign to some people, that a white girl and Indian boy can be friends, like we're together just to offend. When it happens, I stare back until they look away.

Ben's more forward about it.

A bald man scrutinizes Ben, sizing him up. "I drink blood," Ben states through a mouthful of hot dog. It's childish but it drives the point home, because the man scowls and hurries back to his car.

I laugh while I push melted soft serve around with my spoon. He finishes up his chili dog, licks the corner of his mouth and looks at me.

“I got a response back from Texas,” he says.

“What happened?”

He crumples up the wrapper and stands. I throw my trash away as we walk in silence back to the truck.

“What is it?”

After he pulls onto the highway, he opens the glove compartment and hands me an envelope. I take out the contents and read until my heart pounds in my ears.

“Congratulations,” I murmur, but I don’t feel jubilant. Ben’s talked about going to the University of Texas in Austin since we were freshmen. He’s been accepted into their art program, which, he’d said, only allows twenty students. I myself have been accepted to a private college in Phoenix.

I have never imagined we would go to different colleges. We’ve been so distracted by classes, school clubs, having fun, being young. The letter in my hand brings the truth to the front door: we are going to part ways.

“Thanks,” he murmurs.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m not sure if it’ll work out.”

“You aren’t even there yet.”

“I know, it’s just... hard, leaving everything here.”

“Everything’s gonna be fine.” I’m saying this more to myself.

He laughs bitterly. “You wouldn’t know why I’m worrying. You’re not—” His mouth clamps shut but I know the word Indian is going through his mind.

“Not everything’s red and white, Ben,” I murmur.

Outside, the sky’s a fusion of pink, orange and blue. A few stars shine. With the sun setting right next to him, he looks noble. He senses me staring, because he looks at me and lifts his brows. My cheeks flush as he turns his attention to the road.

We exit on Morningwood Drive, a street that, even though I’ve lived here all my life, I’ve never explored.

“Where are we going?”

He turns down a dirt path with lights placed in random areas by the path. “I have to make a stop.”

The truck bounces along. When we were children we’d get in the back of Nathan’s truck while he drove us to Snake River to go fishing. We’d skid and bump our heads, laughing when he hit big dips because our bodies would hover in the air and we’d be weightless for a

moment before we landed on the hard plastic.

My eyes water. I want those times back.

He parks in front of a wrought iron gate, keeps the headlights on while he reaches behind him and takes out a bouquet of sunflowers.

“Who are those for?”

But he’s out the cab and slipping through the gate. He doesn’t look to see if I’m following.

I am.

Goosebumps rise on my arms in the cooling air. I jog to catch up. My feet are cushioned by soft grass. Flowers spring up from the ground. I almost trip when I realize they’re for graves. I run to keep Ben in my sights.

We crest a low hill before he stops. From here, the desert stretches out where the cemetery ends. Cactus rise from the sand like worshippers with their arms outstretched. Wispy brush and yellow tumbleweeds cluster wherever they please. The sun rests on the flat-topped hills.

Ben gets on one knee and places the sunflowers at a marker. He wipes away a film of sand. I read the name and gasp.

He’s only talked about his mother a few times in all the years we’ve been friends. But he never mentioned what happened to her. He made it sound like she had left him and his dad, so I never asked. But I was looking at her now.

Paloma Flyingthunder

1962-1990

Beloved Daughter, Sister, Wife and Mother

“I’m home.”

His head lowers and he whispers. I give him some space, doing the math in my head. My throat clamps up, I press my hand to my chest. She’d only been twenty-eight.

“The doctors said she had an aneurysm,” Ben says after a while. “One night she went to sleep and never woke up.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sighs. “I was six when it happened. I thought she was playing a joke.”

I kneel and wrap my arms around him. He grips my arm with both hands. I rest my cheek on the top of his head. I don’t know how long we stay like this, but when he rises he helps me up.

“Love you, Ma,” he says to the grave. He straightens out his shirt like nothing happened.

He turns and strides down the hill. I stay at the marker. I’m standing near the woman who gave birth to my best friend. I smile as a tear runs down my cheek.

“You have a good son,” I say before I jog after him.

He’s waiting for me this time, and when I catch up he tells me, “I’m gonna go.”

I’m crying now, from his revelation and from the fact that he’s shown me the truth about his mother. “I know.”

He chuckles. “God, don’t get wimpy on me now.” His voice catches.

“Shut up,” I stammer. I wipe at my face but the more I do, the more the tears flow.

We exit the cemetery. I’m still crying but I pause long enough when he pulls out his pocket knife.

“What are you—?”

He opens his hand and cuts. Blood flows on his skin. Handing the knife to me, he watches as I do the same. I gasp and drop the knife as blood pools in my palm. He takes my hand in his, pressing them together. I stare at our joined hands, his dark and mine pale.

“Now we really are stuck together for life, Casey Samuels,” he says.

“I guess so, Ben Flyingthunder.” I laugh and sob at the same time, which he laughs at.

He rips off the sleeve of his shirt and wraps my hand up. Retrieving his knife, he cleans the blade with the other sleeve and together we walk back to the truck.

When we’re inside, he turns it to his favorite jazz station. We drive down the bumpy dirt road back to the paved street. We’re quiet, but this time I don’t mind.

Passion

by Jason Sharkey

There were eleven steps down to the execution room. Jakan counted them each as he touched them. Their cold firmness was surreal to him. As he walked down he could almost imagine himself, his foot looming over the next step. But he can't stay on the ground. He struggles forward grasping at nothing and floats lightly into the air like a balloon. His guards can't reach him now and he's floating high towards the ceiling, a lonely window carved out of the concrete expanse his goal. He reaches the window, his fingers curling around the edge, and pulls himself through and out into the open air. His orange jumpsuit radiant in the sunlight. Boom. His foot hit the ground hard. Reaching for the next step it found the basement floor.

Looking down from the window now a distant fantasy Jakan realized he was there in the room he would die in. This was not a possibility but a fact. He thought back to all the facts that had brought him there. It was a fact that one night six years ago Jakan had set out in search of Amelio Ruiz. A man Jakan had openly criticized for his over-reliance on force in his reign over his street crew. A man who had ordered Jakan silenced. It was also a fact that Jakan found Amelio that night in an alley behind his girlfriend's house. And that after the gunfight, lead from Jakan's gun rested in Amelio's chest. Jakan remembered looking in the mirror that night as he prepared to embark. He had stared long and hard at himself. His neat corn-rows draped about his ears and neck. His chiseled features masked by his facial hair. His beard was his defining feature. It was a thick black mane that complemented his chocolate hued skin. Then there were his eyes. They were hazel brown and full of vigor. He remembered looking at them and thinking those might be the eyes of a man on his last night of freedom. Had he ever been free though? The hood, the gunfight, the trail, all of it had felt like something bigger. It felt as if the events that led to his death had been part of a greater plan.

Whatever the reason Jakan was here now on the killing floor. He wondered why it should be called the killing floor? What was done here wasn't killing. Killing was something that happened on the battlefield or on the streets between enemies. Locked in combat each person is more concerned with ending the other than with their own welfare. This was not the same situation at all. The guards around him would sooner let him loose than risk their own skin in a fight. What was done here was more like putting a puppy to sleep. The thought disgusted him. This didn't help since he was already feeling sick. The pit of his stomach convulsed, and he doubled over on the ground, spewing a

mixture of tri-tip sandwich and beer. He wished that wouldn't have happened. Now he was shaking. He pretended not to hear the jeering statements the guards made over his stink as they hoisted him up. The prison psychologist Veronica who had accompanied him wiped the traces of vomit from his face with a paper towel and gave him a little water. He held the water in his mouth, savoring it, rolling it over his tongue. It occurred to him that he had taken water for granted. He swallowed the water letting its coolness soothe and restore him. Looking up now with more confidence he continued on.

He looked around the execution room. The room was large and sparse with a concrete floor that gleamed darkly. It had known death many times before. Two other inmates were scheduled to be executed after him and they were already seated along the wall on the far side of the room. Jakan knew one of them. He was a boisterous man from the cell next to his who had said he would meet Jakan on the other side if he could. Though he thought little of it at the time, he now found the notion comforting. From here he could see the spot where it would all end, a dentist-like chair across the room with a window beside it. From which his last breath could be observed. There, encased behind a thick wall of glass, was his mother. She was seated beneath harsh fluorescent lights in a plastic chair and was looking in his direction. A few lone tears had rolled down her round brown cheeks and dried out before reaching the bottom of her face. She wasn't showing her pain now, but Jakan knew when his eyes went dull she wouldn't be able to keep it back. Beside her sat his sister and his aunt, both markedly sobbing. Copious streams of salty tears flowed from their eyes, raindrops falling in silence. The painful moans accompanying them were muted by the glass shroud. The sight of this sent his heart racing. He wanted to run, somewhere, anywhere. He wanted to die in a corner someplace out of sight. Why must he die here, snuffed out deliberately like a candle before his own mother. Worse still were his aunt and his sister. He wished he could comfort them, tell them not to cry for him but to cry for their own children. Trying to raise a child in the hood was hard enough these days. But no words could penetrate the transparent barrier.

His relatives were not alone though. The relatives and friends of the man he killed filled the front two rows permitting a two-seat gap between them and Jakan's own family. Six years ago they suffered a terrible loss and today they had come to see that same offence acted out again. Now before their very eyes. The same pain and suffering, the

same mental anguish, but this time it would fall on the women next to them. The family of the victim looked on coldly. They had come earlier to jeer at him. When he was escorted into the building that afternoon they had stood against the chain link fence screaming at him, hoping above all else to see him try and save himself. To claim he was innocent, claim he deserved another appeal. He had not yielded. All that he had to give was his cold honest remorse. And they had left unappeased.

Presently he drew near to the chair and the guard's hand firmly gripped his arm. He needed no restraint though. He lay down in the chair, arms outstretched and was bound at his wrists and ankles by straps. A doctor came and rolled up Jakan's right sleeve. He felt the cold sensation that was the rubbing alcohol evaporating on his skin. Any second now he knew would be the last. He tried to turn and look to his mother, but the position of the chair didn't afford him a good view. He could only see her through the corner of his eye. He wondered briefly whether his mother had deliberately chosen that seat for that reason. Now the doctor had pulled out the needle. Time slowed down as he watched the doctor choose a spot. The needle formed a dimple as it slowly slipped under his skin. He felt the cold sensation spread up his arm and down into his chest. He was aware of being tired. His once erratic heartbeat had all but stopped. A grin spread across his face. Who knew dying felt like coming home?

Roberto Barbera arrived at his restaurant on the afternoon of December 31st, fully prepped and pre-heated for the busiest night of the year. He had followed the same opening routine for the past twenty years. As the owner of The Pied Piper, he was similar to the chef he once had been, rarely straying from a master recipe. Now, with twelve hectic hours before him, he switched on the lights, turned up the heat, and checked his messages more hastily than normal. His rented tuxedo only slightly slowed his movements. This night would be his final New Year's Eve at the restaurant. He recently signed the contract to sell it to the United Alliance chain of fast-casual restaurants, effective in thirty days. He was looking forward to a new life away from the crowds and the notoriety. He was looking to relax.

A restaurateur has more than a menu's worth of items that demand his attention, and Roberto had his hands in everything. He enjoyed selecting the wine list and constantly refined his aficionado's palate. This evening featured an exquisite, yet reasonable, Bordeaux from the outstanding 2000 vintage. He pried open the wooden cases of the Chateau Lacombe and placed the bottles on their appropriate racks. He then moved over to the champagne and chilled several extra bottles of his personal favorite: Montaudon '99.

Neither the staff nor the customers knew The Pied Piper's days were numbered. With reservations and parties booked far into the year, Roberto did not want to alarm his loyal patrons. His employees would have endless concerns that needed to be answered individually. Roberto dreaded this inevitability since both considered him a friend. Many had become family. This required a gentle touch; the busiest night of the year was not the time to do it.

Roberto continued his routine as he entered the kitchen. He was fortunate to have turned over the duties of head chef to Glenn—a talented and faithful protégé who supervised the kitchen. A graduate of Le Cordon Bleu program from The Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, Glenn was a singular artist. He was Roberto's most trusted employee and the person responsible for The Pied Piper's signature taste. It was Glenn who ordered the food and created the specials. Glenn had been preparing the exclusive New Year's Eve menu for weeks. It included succulent beef tenderloin, Danish lobster tails, and cherry glazed roast duck. He even made his popular chicken rice Florentine soup—a New Year's Eve tradition for five straight years.

Roberto walked into the kitchen and found Glenn standing behind the steam table preparing a tray of twice-baked potatoes.

“What’s good tonight?”

“Cheeseburger,” Glenn joked.

“I might have to eat elsewhere then.”

“Here.” Glenn dished out one of the evening’s specials: a tri-tip sirloin steak with Portobello mushroom glaze. Glenn was proud and confident of his food and encouraged everyone to sample his creations. He also knew how to keep the boss happy.

Roberto took the plate, grabbed a cup of soup, and sat down in the dining room. New Year’s Eve would not be his last night, but it would be his last Big Night – a spectacle with a packed house and the spotlight shining. It was the night he would always be remembered for, no matter how things turned out. His mind tried not to worry while his taste buds tried to savor the meal.

Diana, his wife and partner, arrived next. The hostess and guardian of the reservation book, she knew exactly who had reservations, at what time, and with which guests. She approached New Year’s Eve with a sense of dread and exhilaration. She enjoyed busy nights especially since many of the customers had become her friends. She loved dressing up and wore her outfits with tasteful, yet saucy, elegance. After twenty years she had grown tired and had been encouraging Roberto to sell the restaurant. She regretted all the time spent away from her children; now with both of them away at college she would be retired in an empty house. Nevertheless, she did not share her husband’s ambivalence about leaving. She believed the sale was like having their cake and eating it too.

After saying hello to Glenn, Diana sat down with Roberto.

“How’s the soup?” she asked.

“Good. Not too much spinach, but not too creamy either.”

“Mrs. Lowry will be glad to hear that,” Diana said referring to the ninety-year old widow who had been dining here for almost forty years.

“Try this,” Roberto said offering his fork with a steaming piece of medium-rare steak. Diana marveled how after all these years the food could still surprise her. The meat’s buttery texture lingered in her mouth.

“There’s something I’ll definitely miss about this place.”

“I know,” Roberto said. “What are we gonna eat every day?”

“You’ll have to remember how to cook,” she said.

“That’s easy. First I have to make it through tonight.”

“You’ll live.” Diana smiled, recognizing the familiar banter

from previous years. “Between six and eight we’ll get backed up. I just hope people don’t have to wait too long.”

“If that happens, I’ll open some champagne and bring it out to the lobby.”

“You say that every year.” Diana stood up and started for the maitre d’ stand. She stopped and turned back to Roberto.

“That tux looks really good on you.”

By now the rest of the servers, busboys, and line cooks were filtering in. Roberto finished his meal and walked across the dining room into the lounge. He found Heidi the bartender dressed to tenderize the loneliest hearts. She stood behind the bar chopping limes while she waited for her first customers.

“You’re looking quite ravishing today,” Roberto said as he kissed her on the cheek.

“We could be prom dates.”

“Will you save a dance for me?”

“Get in line,” Heidi said as they both laughed.

“You need anything back here?”

“Could use an extra bottle of Absolut and Dewars.”

“Starting early,” he said with a wink.

Roberto went to the storeroom and grabbed the two liquor bottles for Heidi. On his return, he passed the back door. There stood Margo, the server with the most seniority, anxiously awaiting her first table by smoking the anticipation out into the dusk of winter. A waitress for thirty years, her feisty attitude from the South Side often offended the uninitiated. She and Roberto had their arguments, but she was reliably on time, and he faithfully supported her. Although her idea of a good wine was a sweet white Zinfandel, Roberto never gave up trying to introduce her to the latest vintages.

“New hairdo, Margo?”

Margo continued staring, exhaling smoke out into the parking lot.

“I’m quitting,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“Smoking. Starting tomorrow.”

Roberto’s pulse resumed.

“Wasn’t that your resolution last year?”

“I’m turning fifty. And I seen too many people die last year. I want to be around to watch my grandkids grow up.”

“I know. I promised them a job when they turn sixteen.”

“You’ve been too good to me already.” Margo walked over and hugged Roberto. “I’m going to miss you.”

Caught off guard, Roberto stepped back.

“I may be old, but I ain’t deaf,” Margo said. “Don’t worry, I won’t say a word.” Not prepared to discuss this yet, Roberto quickly turned back to work.

“Did you try the soup?”

“I’m sure it’s good. It always is. Nice tux by the way.”

The doors were unlocked, Roberto and Diana smiled, and the hungry celebrants arrived. As The Gatekeeper behind an invisible velvet rope, Diana’s position was amplified. She had less tolerance for the customers than her husband, dealing with them in their most hungry and impatient conditions. Yet she never let her frustration show, maintaining a regal presentation to every person entering the restaurant.

The Wilson family was one of the earliest reservations, promptly arriving at 5:00. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and their forty-five-year-old son Jeffrey always came New Year’s Eve, always at the same time, and always broke Roberto’s heart. Jeffrey had Down syndrome. His parents were old and tired.

Jeffrey stood in the lobby, looking youthful and innocent. He was thrilled and enthused for a big night out, yet appeared uncomfortable in his sport coat, dress slacks, and poorly knotted tie. Mr. Wilson noticed the tie and was not happy.

“Oh, would you look at that,” Mr. Wilson said. “You can’t even do that right.”

Mr. Wilson stood behind Jeffrey in the middle of the lobby and properly fixed the tie. Roberto watched the scene unfold, temporarily removing himself from the affairs of the restaurant. It had the appearance of a familiar routine: Mr. Wilson frustrated, forceful, yet attentive. Jeffrey fidgety and distracted.

The Wilsons were seated at a corner table, eventually blending into the evening’s mix. As always, Jeffrey ordered Veal Parmigiana. He ate it all, and the Wilsons became the first satisfied customers of the night. As he passed from guest to guest, Roberto frequently checked on them.

Roberto thought of the Wilson’s advanced age and what it meant for Jeffrey. Having two healthy children, Roberto empathized with an unconditional love for one’s kids. He felt blessed. Almost guilty. After dinner, Roberto brought Jeffrey a free dish of spumoni, which brought a beaming smile to his face.

Diana noticed this kind gesture, taking a break from the rapidly filling lobby.

“Giving away free food again?” she asked.

“I had to. I’ve been too lucky not to.” Roberto then pulled her aside and gave her a rare public kiss.

In a world of corporate-owned chains, The Pied Piper was a dying breed. The customers came for more than the food; they needed Roberto’s personal touch. He always greeted and chatted with each guest, shaking hands and telling them about the specials. When people dined at his restaurant they were friends in his home. He recognized this as the reason it was so difficult to say goodbye. He was part of the restaurant’s essence, and the customers were part of his life.

The night sizzled on as people entered with an appetite and left with a new appreciation for an old institution. Whenever Roberto passed through the kitchen he received periodic updates from Glenn.

“Four orders of tri-tip left,” Glenn said around 7:00.

“You’re still saving those two duck for later, right?”

“Got ‘em.”

Heidi dashed into the kitchen to pick up a shrimp cocktail. She saw Roberto and remembered an impending crisis.

“I have a couple who want steamed clams,” she said.

“Tell ‘em to go to Boston,” Glenn shouted.

“I didn’t even know they were on the menu tonight,” Roberto said to no one in particular.

“We have some frozen, but it will take forever,” Glenn said.

Roberto looked at the cooks struggling to keep up with the tide of orders. “Will they mind waiting an hour?” he asked Heidi.

“Hell no. They’ll be on their second bottle of champagne by then.”

Glenn looked at Roberto, who nodded approval.

“I knew you couldn’t say no,” Glenn told Roberto as he began preparation for the first special request of the night.

An hour later the steamed clams were served, just as Mrs. Lowry arrived. “Another year, another full house,” Mrs. Lowry said as she sat down at her usual table.

Mrs. Lowry had been coming to The Pied Piper since it first opened in 1967. She stayed loyal through four owners, seven head chefs, and a brief conversion to a deep-dish pizza parlor in the 1980s. An intelligent and wealthy woman, she still possessed amazing wit and vitality. With grown children she never saw, she now lived in an assist-

ed-living home, taking a cab to dinner each Saturday at precisely 8:00.

“You’re as handsome as Jack Kennedy in that tuxedo,” she told Roberto.

“Maybe, but I’m not as calm under pressure.”

“Pressure? Please. You’ve had the best food in Chicago for 20 years. I should know. I’ve had just about everything.”

“If you knew how backed up our kitchen is, you’d see what I mean.”

“It’s just like any other night. Everyone will eat and everyone will come back. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Except for the people who’ve waited an hour and are about to walk out,” Roberto said.

“Where else are they gonna go? There’s even a line at the White Castle.”

Margo then appeared with Mrs. Lowry’s signature beverage: a gin martini on the rocks. This never failed to amuse Roberto, and he smiled as he went into the kitchen.

“Eighty-six the tri-tip!” Glenn called out above the kitchen clatter.

Roberto navigated his way through a gridlocked intersection of soups, salads, and dirty dishes passing to and from the dining room. The cooks were frantically dishing out food, in between the continuously tense exchange with the servers.

“This filet ain’t medium rare,” and, “Where’s my rice,” were countered with shouts of “You wanted well-done,” and, “You took the wrong side.” It was all part of the routine – servers and cooks venting and bickering to relieve the night’s pressure. This ongoing power struggle that the customers never witnessed gave Roberto a headache and reminded him of one reason he was selling. He quickly left the kitchen for the comfort of his customers.

Joey and Tina were the last reservation at 10:00. As always, Tina brought homemade bread and cookies for Diana. Joey brought a bottle of Strega – a saffron yellow liqueur imported from Italy. After the exchange of hugs, kisses, compliments, and quips, Diana seated them at their usual table.

Roberto walked over to say hello to his old friends.

“Hey, who’s this sexy man,” Tina said as Roberto leaned in for a kiss.

“It’s The Pied Piper himself,” Joey said, following it with his unmistakable laugh—a wheezing cackle that rose above the ambient

noise of the dining room.

“We saved two nice roast ducks for you.”

“Oh that sounds good. You got any of that good pepperoni bread tonight?”

“I’m sure I can find some.”

“Hey,” Joey touched Roberto’s tuxedo. “You look like Don Corleone is this thing.”

“You could dress like him too, once in a while,” Tina fired back at her husband.

“What? I put on a tie tonight?”

The last dinner was served at 11:00. The restaurant remained half full as the guests stayed to ring in the new year. Diana continued to look graceful and Roberto’s tux was still the talk of the house. Mrs. Lowry was slowly sipping her after-dinner black Russian, holding court with many patrons who wished her well. Heidi had a full bar, and poor tired Margo was having serious doubts about ever giving up smoking.

After dinner, Joey opened the Strega and Roberto brought over several small snifters.

“Here’s to the New Year,” Joey proclaimed raising his Strega. “We’re celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary this summer.”

“He knows,” Tina said. “We’ve had our party booked here for months.”

“I was planning on taking a vacation that week,” Roberto said jokingly.

“Yeah sure,” Joey said with his cackle filling the air. “They couldn’t drag you away from this place.”

Roberto laughed too. He sipped his Strega, which tasted more bitter than usual.

Roberto and Diana made final preparations for the midnight celebration. They handed out hats and noisemakers to all the remaining customers. Roberto lined up champagne glasses and orchestrated the procession from the dining room into the lounge to watch the ball drop in Times Square. Roberto and Diana stood in front of the flat screen TV in the corner of the lounge as the clock struck midnight. They shared another private kiss in public, starting their year together once again.

“Happy New Year,” Diana said.

“Let’s hope so.”

“It will be. You’ve made the right choice,” Diana said knowing

that her husband was still conflicted.

“I know. But it’s still hard to walk off the stage.”

Diana smiled, appreciating this difference between herself and her husband.

Roberto cheerfully made his rounds, hugging his employees and customers while pouring champagne for all. Everyone was loud and festive, laughing and drinking. Roberto always enjoyed these moments with his customers and friends, yet it had an extra layer of meaning this year. In his silent way, he was saying goodbye – to an entire chapter in his life.

The dining room slowly emptied out, the staff went home, and Diana left around 1:00 a.m., her face no longer able to hide the tiredness.

An hour later, the last guest went home and Roberto was once again alone. He walked through the empty restaurant, exhausted and craving sleep. If this is the night he would be remembered for, then he was satisfied. He accomplished what he set out to when he first bought the restaurant – he turned strangers into friends, and friends into family. As he locked up, he thought of his achievements and of his uncertain future. Mainly he thought how great Glenn’s tri-tip sirloin steak would taste right now and how he needed the recipe.

non-fiction

inscape
est. 1945

Leaving Home

by Cecilia Flynn

I left home in late August, 1960. I was twelve years old. It all happened quickly without my understanding what was happening. I remember the purchasing of Fieldcrest towels, a set of luggage, and stacks of underwear, socks, skirts and blouses. My mother was moving out of our large, comfortable Hollywood home. My parents' endless and dangerous battles, the threatening violence, the fear of it all were to be left behind. My mother was moving to a farm near the town of Gerber which is located 160 miles north of Sacramento. I was moving to a boarding school in Atherton, California, which is located south of San Francisco. I did not know it at the time, but the school was to become my home for seven years.

The luggage and towels became more than towels and luggage. They became part of me and part of me was to become forever changed when I packed the Fieldcrest towels into my newly purchased suitcase.

I don't remember being informed of any specific plan. I remember loading the suitcases into the Buick station wagon and driving down the driveway. There were no goodbyes. We drove quietly through the San Fernando Valley, over the Grapevine, through the Central Valley. There was a blur of farmland and suffocating heat and an excitement about something unknown. I was satisfied with the knowledge that things would be safer.

The entrance to the Convent of the Sacred Heart was lined with lush trees and gardens. We parked the car under the porte cochère. Convent of the Sacred Heart was a school run by the Religious of the Sacred Heart, a French order of Catholic nuns who had schools throughout the United States and Europe. Being in a Catholic school was not a new experience; I had attended a Catholic parochial school's first grade. The largeness and the quality of Victorian wealth and lifestyle which seemed to exhale from the solid brick exterior was new to me.

My mother and I unloaded the luggage. We climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell. We were greeted by a short nun wearing a black habit and sheer veil. We were led into a parlor which had French antique chairs and couches. We sat silently, waiting for the Mother Superior to appear. My mother was a large woman and she seemed to be uncomfortable perched on a silk covered parlor chair. Our eyes silently inventoried the room; there were French tapestries on the walls, Limoges vases on small carved tables with finely carved legs, and there was a piano in one corner.

I don't remember saying goodbye to my mother, I don't re-

member her hugging me or kissing me or telling me it was going to be fine. I don't remember her driving away. I remember what I was wearing. I stood there in my grey wool pleated skirt, white starched blouse, and saddle shoes not knowing what to do next.

The nuns were called "Mothers" and Reverend Mother Danz was the superior of the school. She had translucent skin, a gentle voice, and a sweetness which to this day I am grateful for. She walked me into the main corridor of the first floor. The floors were highly polished oak and there were gilded framed pictures on the walls. The chapel was our first stop. It was a dark space with stained glass windows. She invited me to kneel next to her and she spoke to me quietly and said a simple prayer of welcome.

She guided me down the long corridor and we climbed the wide staircase which spiraled to the second floor to the dormitories. I was assigned a dormitory and I was assigned a space in the dormitory, which was to be my bedroom and refuge. I remember immediately assuming a compliance which allowed me to adjust to being emotionally mute.

I unpacked my suitcase, followed the rules about lining up and followed my new friends as we descended the staircase to the first floor dining room. The dining room had mahogany tables, which sat six girls at each table. The food was served family style. When a platter of slices of chocolate cake was placed on the table, we immediately stuck a finger into the piece we wanted. That savage instinct of claiming ownership of something, in this case, a prized portion of chocolate cake, was a memorable beginning to my seven-year journey of being away from home.

My mother became a farmer during our seven years of separation. While I was learning how to maneuver the parlor-like existence of the convent way of life, she was purchasing harvesters, tractors, and plotting how to plant as many prune and almond trees she could on the newly plowed fields. She converted the dairy barn into a machine shop, hired mechanics and orchard managers, and drove her pickup truck fearlessly on the narrow roads on top of earthen levees. She became a legendary character in Tehama County. The local farmers had never met a woman who took on the management that men usually did.

My visits to the farm required me to travel by train up the Peninsula, into San Francisco, take a bus across the Bay Bridge, get on a train in Oakland, and travel through the Sacramento Valley. The trip

would commence during daylight and end on the cusp of midnight. I learned how to maneuver this trip solo. I became familiar with the sights and sounds of the journey. There was a distinct sound the train made as it traveled across the wooden bridge that spanned over the Sacramento River from Las Molinas to Gerber. That sound became the herald of my passage to my mother.

My mother would meet me when I stepped off the train at the train station. I would be dressed in my boarding school traveling clothes—a wool jumper and white blouse with a Peter Pan collar. The excitement of the reunion with my mother was coupled with the immediate assault of the warm and powerful smell of manure. In my memory, Gerber became that smell.

My mother drove an old and dusty green pickup truck. I remember the drive through the town, over the levee, and the important sharp right turn onto the long gravel road which led to the farmhouse, my mother's new home. I remember the orchards of almond trees which flanked the road being illuminated by moonlight. I remember the smell of the air changing, as if by magic, to sweetness and I remember the stillness becoming a silent lullaby. I remember the deep velvet darkness of the place. That powerful memory driving toward my mother's new home has replaced the sense of being lost for seven years during my youth.

After seven years, I had learned French and Latin and learned to play tennis and how to sew. I had been prepared for a debutante passage into a world which I was unaware existed. I moved onto college at Santa Clara University, and my mother left the farm and moved to San Diego. I became a teacher of children in East Los Angeles, and my mother became an old woman.

I would travel by train from Los Angeles to San Diego to visit my mother. She would meet me at the train station and she would pilot her 1977 Chevrolet Monte Carlo through the canyon to Kensington and then to her home. She lived in a 1930s Spanish-style home with a garden of various varieties of camellias. Her neighbor, Mr. Beck, would come over for cocktails at 5:00 p.m. I learned the joy of drinking gin and tonics in the afternoon as I became acquainted with my new mother. Our years of separation became a softer memory as we learned how to step into the possibilities of our mutual presence.

My mother relocated to Pasadena when she was in her mid-eighties. I found an apartment for her a few blocks from where I lived. I visited her each morning and each evening. Over time, I began to

prepare her meals, eat with her, and shop for her. I became her caretaker. In taking care of her, I realized I was taking care of that young girl, the young girl who had left home in August, 1960.

I learned that my mother had experienced an emotional breakdown in 1960. I learned that she enrolled me in the boarding school because she was unable to take care of me. I learned that she used the physical labor of farming to heal herself. As I learned these things, forgiveness became a silent partner in our relationship. There was redemption in our everyday greetings and departures.

She died on July 4, 1999, at dusk. I was ready to let her go. We had come home to a place of quiet understanding. The vacancy of our first departure had become full.

Running Collisions

by Tina Kostkas

I moved there when I was growing and impressionable, the city of seasons where my body suffocated in summer's humidity and dangled in fall's intensity, Pittsburgh, the city of lost souls, where people sulk in their memories and trudge through searching impressions. It was our coloring book of broken rules and surfacing introductions, the place where we met and realized we would together be our youth searching for healing maturity.

It was fourth grade and we were both behind your garage sneaking puffs of fading curls, fingers imitating old fashioned black and whites, classy rounded lips trying so badly to be that version of beautiful. Maturity, but really immature remedies that we thought could fix our sinking stomachs, to soothe the aching of stolen innocence, the misunderstood conflicts that plagued our body with hardened shells. We both tried to keep our innocence, to hold tight to the mind process that was rightfully ours, the oblivion that led way to normal thinking and a bearable life. We used to dance in your living room, the meticulously set up rolls of film capturing our sad attempts to lip sync along with "Barbie Girl," and we danced without insecurity or evaluation, we danced because it felt good to laugh and feel magnificent, to not need to define who we thought we should become, to not have to copy mannerisms of unrealistic heroes that would only taint and destroy what we were then. I wanted to stay in that blanket of time when we felt most secure, but instead the unfolding future ended our wishes with a teeter totter of emotions, revealing a desire to keep who we really should be versus the transformation of who we thought we should become. It was an argument that eventually lost our friendship, a disagreement that left me standing and you withering to an ever wearing lifetime.

You were the first girl to get her period, and one of the only girls who could properly apply makeup in fourth grade. We were dressed in poodle skirts, and coated in mascara watercolors—I got mad at you because you wouldn't let me wash the age off my face, it was too dark and too blue, it was uncomfortable, I felt ashamed of our inability to just be satisfied with being fourth graders in a talent show—but it wasn't then, we still had time to ignore all phases of reality, we still stole smiling moments of after school adventures, and night time discoveries. We had a sleepover once, and it was the first time I heard you talk in your sleep, slurred and mournful expressions that I wish I would have hugged and hushed then.

Middle school was the rippling puddle, a transition that led us to believe we were a little bit closer to ignoring our deteriorating

surroundings. You were the first friend I felt comfortable being naked around, our underdeveloped awkwardness filling our searching eyes of question, exchanging comments on what we thought are nipples should look like, and what our peeking curves could eventually become. You made me conscious of my hairy legs, and the hair that hid between them, we made each other conscious of the opposite sex, and what happened when we fused ourselves against them. That time was unfolding answers that gave us more and more to feed off of. You eventually passed me a note in seventh grade math, telling me that you had not only received your first kiss, but had also let seven other guys grope and suck on your nipples at Mt. Lebanon's golf course. I responded in scared excitement, it was new, unknown, and when you tried to force me to accept my first invitation to be someone's girlfriend, I rejected it.

Once you burnt that cross in your arm with the same lighter you started smoking cigarettes with, that's when I stopped answering your calls. Eighth grade was when those cigarettes burnt down not only your house, but in the midst of the pouring sky, it drizzled our friendship to scattering ashes. I fell on my knees and cried for you that day, cried because I knew what we were had been officially stolen, and that the both of us were now lost to each other.

The rest of that year was tripping dysfunction; I was a staggering body trying to avoid the falling obstacles that you and all of our friends were successfully tripping over. Big boobs, and small clothing, masculine strangers that corrupted any last drop of connection we could have salvaged. You were also quick to discover the initial steps outside of our reality, that's when I moved. I was afraid of summer and what everyone had turned to, so two days before high school started I moved away from potential possibilities, and was left with a chapter that isn't even mine.

Before you could even tell me yourself, I had found out from a mutual friend that you were in rehab for heroin, it's a drug that is supposed to provide such an intense reaction that you don't want to deal with reality ever again. The cops found you in the park shooting up with a needle in your arm. I've tried to picture you there sometimes, imagining you crouched, injecting your body with a euphoria that neither of us could ever give to each other. It was sophomore year that provided me with a false sense of hope, you were back in school with a guidance counselor that you enjoyed—it only took a few pills and the weapon they found on you to officially break you away from any hope

of graduating high school.

It wasn't till I heard your mom had been placed in a psyche ward, that's when I decided to come see you. It was December; you were celebrating your birthday with your family, and your boyfriend Tony. I walked into a familiar home, with unfamiliar occupants. Your face was concentrated and serious, your birthday failing to soften any of the hard lines creating your furrowed brow. I wanted to tell you that I missed you, that I missed us, that I was a terrible friend for escaping, ignoring every time I knew you needed help. I didn't say anything like that though, I asked you questions as if I knew nothing, as if I saw no pain, and it was as if I was running even though I was sitting right there. I left that night with the promise that we would start hanging out again, but I never made the effort, I actually made every effort to avoid you. The last time I asked about you, you had been kicked out of your house for stealing money and credit cards, you were living in a trailer park with your boyfriend Tony.

Now I lie here in a boy's arms that smiles with his eyes, allowing fading swirls of colors to inflict the streaming mess of confessions out through my mind. I spent the entire night tripping out of reality, entering a euphoric relief, mixed with obvious truth, but in these seconds, I'm fading, coming down into the solid burden that I've been ignoring for so long. I spent all this time running away from you, running away from impulsive decisions, but as I lie here more fucked up than I've ever been, I realize I'm running straight into you.

By Any Means Possible by Janelle Jones

It's 5:07 p.m. on the corner of 4th and Spring. A man walks out of his office, located just two blocks from the hub of the notorious "Skid Row." There is a young woman lurking in the doorway of an abandoned structure adjacent to the man's office building. As soon as she spots him, she shuffles towards him with an outstretched hand, mumbling something about "change... hungry... please." The business man sidesteps to ensure that he does not come into contact with this vagrant, for surely she is caked with such a substance that no amount of dry-cleaning will be able to remove it from his Versace suit. His guilty conscience immediately starts nagging at his gut, so he reaches deep into his pocket for change and tosses it in her general direction, despite the fact that he knows she is just going to spend it on drugs or booze. He goes to great lengths to ascertain that he does not make eye-contact with this vagabond, because whatever afflicts her must certainly be communicable through osmosis. On his way home, he just can't shake his feeling of discomfort, unease. He stops at the local 7-11 to buy his daily "fix," a box of Ding-Dongs, a pint of Ben & Jerry's, three Diet Pepsis, two jumbo burritos, and a frozen pizza. He learned at a young age that when he feels uncomfortable inside, he can abate those feelings by stuffing himself with junk food. He also learned that he could prevent the junk food from accumulating around his midsection by throwing it up immediately upon consumption. What he did not learn is that he and that repulsive street woman suffer from the same disease.

Poverty, wealth, success, failure, anorexia, obesity: these words are interrelated and interconnected on many levels. Primarily, though, they are all symptoms of the same disease. This malady is seldom discussed, and rarely diagnosed, though it is an epidemic that is sweeping the nation. It is, in fact, almost certainly affecting the entire world. Addiction is defined at *Dictionary.com* as "the state of being enslaved to a habit or practice or to something that is psychologically or physically habit-forming...to such an extent that its cessation causes severe trauma." It is commonly recognized as a disease that affects the mind, body, and spirit. When we hear the word "addiction," we automatically envision a junkie, hunkered down behind a dumpster with a needle protruding from a track-marked extremity. Drug addiction is, indeed, a serious affliction, and exists prevalently within our society, but this is just one of the innumerable forms in which this disease takes shape.

There is a cancer growing in our society that is a direct result of a deficiency in the souls of many people. There may not be a concrete answer for what it is that's lacking, but it seems that people are increas-

ingly inclined to crave something outside themselves to fill the void within. Maybe it's the easier, softer way. Perhaps it's simpler to cloud oneself with drugs, or to deprive oneself of food, or to lose oneself at a slot machine or a poker table, than it is to look inside oneself and attempt to solve the real problem. Our media tells us that if we look like Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt, then we will surely find bliss, so we will allow a surgeon to alter the gifts that we were given at birth to conform to a socially accepted mold of "beauty." We starve ourselves and exhaust ourselves in the gym. We intentionally take injections of muscle-paralyzing serum and fat-dissolving acid. The measures we will take to improve our outward appearance today are analogous to medieval torture techniques.

It is impossible to place blame for this drastic change in our society, which in turn makes the solution that much more difficult to find. If it were possible to eliminate just one aspect of our culture and solve this epidemic, action would most likely be taken. The problem is that there is not merely one aspect of our culture to blame. The media definitely has an influence, but so does modern technology, and the last thing we want to do is revert back to "simpler times." Modern technology has given us the ability to process and manufacture foods that last, literally, forever. The average nutritional value of a meal is ghastly. Our nation has begun to thrive on fast food and TV dinners, candy bars and potato chips. In order to improve the taste and extend the life of food, it is processed, dehydrated, preserved, bleached, enriched, artificially sweetened, and artificially colored. Am I the only one who can perceive a direct link between these contemporary manufacturing practices and the growing obesity rate of our population? Somebody came up with the fantastic idea that they would process food to improve the flavor, so that people can consume copious amounts and obtain a minimum of nutrients. There was a time when people ate food for nourishment. It seems now that many people are much more interested in the comfort that food can offer them. Food addiction exists in several forms, over-eating, under-eating, and a combination of the two – over-eating with the intention of expelling the food before it causes too much damage. The irony here is that what one will do for damage-control is the most destructive act of all. Bulimia can cause irreparable damage to the gastro-intestinal system as well as other very serious health conditions.

It is true that all types of addiction are not physically detrimental. In fact, addiction to work, money, and success may give a person an outward appearance of prosperity and affluence. Such a person

might have all of the material things they desire. They may possibly hold the top position at their place of employment. Perhaps they have the respect and admiration of all of their peers. But there is a line that can be crossed in such a situation, where a person makes sacrifices that he or she cannot live with. It is not uncommon for people to compromise their moral values or beliefs for the “almighty dollar,” and that is when this type of addiction can become toxic. In the same way that the drug addict man chooses narcotics over his family and friends, the workaholic, or a person who is addicted to money and success, will most likely allow his “dope” to take priority over his interpersonal relationships as well.

Addiction is a topic that could be analyzed infinitely. I have touched on but a few of the numerous manifestations of this disease. In evaluating addictions to drugs, food, and money, the conclusion can be made that it is possible for one to become addicted to whatever fills the “hole in his soul.” Addiction is cunning, baffling, and powerful, and can crop up in nearly every facet of life; hence one can possibly become addicted to anything that feels good. Where must we draw the line? When do we cross that line? And what can we do to have power over our compulsion to act out obsessively when we discover something that does make us feel good? The solution is not to discipline ourselves to the point of complete restriction from all things pleasurable. That would make life barely worth living. Rather, we should ensure that we do not draw on this external gratification to make us feel “complete.” I do not know if there is but one simple solution, but I believe that if we can find something within ourselves that fulfills us, we will be less prone to seek that outside “fix.”

Human Sonogram

by Wendy Markowitz

"First there is childhood, all else is memory."

—Louise Glück

A sonogram works by sending back sound waves, over and over, until an image is formed, almost like a rubbing. Like when you're a kid and you put a penny under a piece of paper and go over it with graphite until you get an impression. I was formed that way. I am made of millions and millions of tiny reactions first to my parents, then my grandmother and my aunt, my brother, my childhood friends and my childhood dog – Cicero. It was possibly with Cicero that I received the most valuable instruction. In reflection, I'd have to say he was the wisest. Although I am the sum total of all those I've loved, the ones that love me back, the ones that pitched me to the side of the road and the ones that haunt my thoughts. I echo back at them from my place here in adulthood. Fortunately, I have been at an age, for a long time now, where I would not change a single fact of my personal history. I am ultimately happy (or at least proud) of how every player in my childhood is tethered to who I am today.

That said; let's have some stories!

My parents should not have had children. No, I take that back—I like being here—let's say instead they were not parental material. Before my brother came along they were happy traveling around together, my father playing gigs—my mother perched at the end of the bar, having cocktails and being the wife-of-the-trumpet player. I was born in Chicago while my dad was on the road with Peggy Lee. It was February in Chicago; my mom was stuck there because of her pregnancy, with a five-year-old (my brother) in a basement apartment, alone. February in Chicago. She was deeply unhappy.

After I was born my mother put me in a dark room and let me cry myself to exhaustion so she would have only the one child to deal with. She told this story as part of her litany on how hard it was for her back then, alone in Chicago with a sickly five-year-old and a fresh cesarean scar from her navel to her Netherlands. When my father went on the road and never came back, somewhere between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays, it took a decade to register as abandonment. I come from people who can walk away from their children. This made me profoundly awed by those who stay. Loyalty humbles me; I could never take it for granted.

My parents lived in a separate world, snazzy and sophisticated and well dressed, they had Martinis and cigarette holders and Cadillacs

and inside jokes and hip friends. There were no family dinners or camping trips or lying on the couch watching TV for us. We didn't have a TV, or idiot box, as it was known in our house. We were better than that. We were better than them. "Them" being all those other people in the world. Those mindless cattle—we looked down our noses at them. We knew geniuses. Duke Ellington came to our house; Count Basie was a pal of my dad's. My father was part of an elite corps of musicians, or so we believed. Las Vegas has always been a place to go when careers were sagging, but I only understood that later. I do remember him coming home near dawn and sitting on the end of my bed, drunk out of his mind—certain I was asleep—and repeating over and over (as only the wasted can), "Either you're famous or you're shit..." Now that's one for the family crest! Let's see, I was about eight years old—definitely not famous...

Now, if that moment was part of a web and the thin but indestructible thread of it was followed from that eight-year-old's bedroom to her life as an adult, what might it be attached to? I would say it gave me a healthy distrust of what is considered hip and an inside look at the heartbreak of being an artist in a consumer world. How destructive it is to have gifts you need to sell in order to feel good about them. And how alcohol, no matter what quantity, cannot mask your pain.

One day, my dad delivered a classic lesson on religion. He answered, "We don't join clubs," when asked what denomination we were. And we asked often.

We lived in a neighborhood solid with Mormons. Every one around us was Mormon, every school teacher, principal, doctor, dentist, store owner, mechanic, bank teller, clerk—you name it—all Mormon. Las Vegas was built by Mormons, they filled every job. My dad used to say if you boiled them all down you wouldn't get one idiot, so there was no confusing how he felt about Mormons. None-the-less, I was desperate to go to one of their churches. They call them Wards. Every kid I knew was Mormon, their lives revolved around their faith. I was fascinated and so I nagged and begged and pleaded to be allowed to go to one of their services. My father was not to be bugged. One Sunday he became so annoyed with my pleas he took me by the arms and marched me outside to the front lawn. "Lie down," he ordered. Confused, I lay down on the grass. "What do you see?" he snapped. "I don't know, Daddy, I see clouds." "That's enough God for us, get back in the house!" He turned and stomped back inside; I never brought it

up again.

Truthfully, the only place I am comfortable seeking spiritual solace is outside, preferably under a tree. Is it because my father decreed it so? When do we stop being part of our parents' story? I'm not sure I know.

When I was little I watched my mother with the curiosity of a scientist. She was not the stereotypical cook-dinner-enforce-bedtime-did-you-brush-your-teeth-hands-on kind of mother; she was a glamorous cigarette-smoking Dame living in a parallel world to the children's world known as The Adults. She possessed no domestic talents and seemed uninterested in faking them. As far back as I can remember, we (my brother and I) were fending for ourselves. Even though he was older by five years I think I was born to tend him. If we were going to eat—for instance—chances are I was cooking and for a six-year-old that meant frozen fish sticks or ravioli from a can. I also did the shopping, I loved it and considered myself luckier than my friends who had all those arbitrary rules to follow. I was assumed to be capable and so I was.

My mother was a painter, had gone to college as an art major. She worked as an executive secretary but painted water colors at home—easels dominated the living room. She also loved crafts. She “crafted” to keep busy—she was always dieting and in those days doctors gave women diet pills like they were tic-tacs. This made her vibrate with nervous energy and so she'd make things. She'd cover the large table in the formal dining room with projects: sewing or building or gluing all kinds of useless things that kept her fingers busy and away from food. I'd sit in one of the formal high back chairs and watch her like an audience member; she'd be lost in concentration. I was welcome to join her but she was not going to slow down for construction paper, string, seeds, and glue. I was making a picture about fall harvest for my class. I cut out orange pumpkins and yellow corn stalks and glued them to a white poster board; I had a red barn, a brown horse, and a black wagon cut out as well. All these shapes were placed across the page in a way I thought told the story of “harvest.” I wanted to connect them all with a short text and so got out a ruler to make straight lines below the scene. As I held the wooden ruler down with one small ten-year-old hand and attempted to draw along it with a fat pencil in my other hand, I struggled greatly. There was dried glue on the table under the paper, which made things bumpy, and I wasn't tall enough to control the ruler and slide along it with a pencil at the same time, it kept moving and

slipping so I kept erasing and starting over until my eraser tore a hole ruining everything. In my frustration I began to cry. From her end of the table my mother asked what happened, her left eye squinting from the cigarette smoke but not looking up from her project. I think she was making Christmas decorations: elaborate tree ornaments. Every year when we made thousands of them and gave them away, she'd start as early as August.

"I can't make a straight line!" I blubbered back at her, looking down at my destroyed poster board. "Everything's ruined!"

Without skipping a beat, her enamel cigarette holder in her teeth as she worked, my mother replied—flatly, "There's no such thing as a straight line, the universe is curved."

To this day, forty-four years later and counting, I repeat this to myself every time I start to stress over the perfection thing and it reminds me life is curved and being perfect is not what my people do.

Dreamwreck

by Sam Theaker

I have read George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" before. This time around, reading that marvelous first sentence—"In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me"—is when it dawned on me: George and I have something in common.

Philadelphia is a long way from Moulmein. Philadelphia is where I was once important enough to be hated by large numbers of people. Six months after my Vietnam tour ended I went back to college: Temple University—smack-dab in the innards of The City of Brotherly Love.

I knew little of the civil rights struggle. A major topic of the day, larger than life, it blossomed during my enlistment. I grew up in West Hartford, CT, then a town of 50,000 white people. I was as attuned to the plight of Blacks at 18 as I was to the dalliances of Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly when I was nine. I knew of black culture via Amos 'n' Andy and doo-wop. Just in case television had not been invented, our mailman was black so I had concrete proof of their existence.

Those three years in uniform afforded me little time or opportunity to observe the civilian milieu, where cataclysmic change contrasted with the stability and stasis of military life. Yes, even in Vietnam, a certain amount of "spit and polish" crept in amongst the chaos. Upon my return, I quickly adjusted to and absorbed these modifications: guys had hair longer than girls; pants were wider at the cuffs than at the waist; female attire was far more revealing. I cheered.

Those were mere fads—youth asserting their right to be different. The change that counted: skin color mattered only to those stodgy, staid curmudgeons that deservedly belonged to another era. Teens and twenty-somethings of the mid-sixties ignored race. We wanted to and we did. This was a period where black and whites all called each other "brother" and "sister." We were fighting and dying together 10,000 miles away; when I got back home we gathered on street corners, laughing and high-fiving. All this prejudice that I had heard about but never experienced was nowhere to be found. The songs symbolized the era. The Youngbloods sang sweetly, "Get Together." Canned Heat growled, "Let's Get Together." And we did. For a time. That many of us had been comrades-in-arms was just part of the equation. The man most responsible for this sea change was the Man with a Dream.

My first encounters with “real” blacks came when I enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1964. They turned out to be people just like me. Sure, some of them had chips; some even carried a damned redwood on their shoulders. But maybe, just maybe, some of that resentment was justified. I was not worldly enough to speculate on that, but the question intrigued me.

Yet, even this naïve suburbanite knew of The Good Doctor. His marches, rallies, and calls for non-violent action were bringing a nation together. His “I Have a Dream” speech set a whole country to thinking, “Dreams can come true.” Even old hearts were young. Like most of the greatest utterances, it took time to realize that this was one for the ages. Did anyone walk away from Gettysburg thinking, “Wow! They’ll be quoting that one until the end of time”?

I saw excerpts of Dr. King’s “Dream” speech on the news shortly after it was delivered. His message was so full of hope and unity that, in a span of a few years, he had begun to make sense to a multitude that was quietly pro-segregation even if publicly disdainful of unfair practices. The man J. Edgar Hoover denigrated and deemed a rabble-rouser morphed into destiny’s darling. The eyes and ears of a nation did not and could not ignore him.

Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech inspired Curtis Mayfield to write “People Get Ready.” NPR’s Juan Williams said, “The train that is coming in the song speaks to a chance for redemption—the long-sought chance to rise above racism, to stand apart from despair and any desire for retaliation—an end to the cycle of pain.” Dr. King’s influence was contagious; the epidemic of racial harmony he inspired infected a nation.

Then he was gone. The Peace Train got derailed. I became important. Black enclaves surrounded Temple University and I drove through them daily with the top down, 8-tracks of Smokey/Temptations/Supremes blaring. I always passed smiling faces; little ones often waved. For nearly five years Dr. King’s message of hope continued to reverberate from the Lincoln Memorial to every village and hamlet. We all saw clearly then. April 4, 1968, was a bright (Bright), bright (Bright), sunshiny day. I drove home that afternoon and young kids threw rocks at me. I struggled to put the top up, not daring to slow while I wrestled with it. Children yelled things I couldn’t understand, but I knew they were words of hate. Mothers and fathers watching over their charges scowled. Rubbish cans were overturned on the sidewalks, their vile contents spilling to the streets.

What happened? I got home and found out Dr. King had been assassinated. A white man pulled the trigger. I understood the stones; the words of wrath; and I somehow knew that it was the end of an era. It was. Ironically, a Dylan song from a couple years before that still commanded airplay: “They’ll stone ya when you’re trying to go home.... They’ll stone ya when you’re riding in your car.” The world became a poorer place that day. Once again, they had shot the messenger. Prejudice, which was on its way to extinction, quickly returned. Factions formed along race lines, fractious and ugly. “Brother” sounded like a mockery.

It’s been almost four decades now and during that time I’ve only caught glimpses of the togetherness that once prevailed. Racial tensions thrive, racial tranquility is tenuous. I haven’t given up hope, but I may not have four more decades to wait. Hurry up, prove to me that period of harmony was not just a mug’s game. Show me the stuff that dreams are made of. Please, a reprise.

Humpty Dumpty Me

by Jeanine Auza

I decided to make my grand entrance into this world two months earlier than expected. Around ten weeks old, I was barely the size of a small newborn. Carrying me in her arms, my mom was going down the stairs of our condo to the pool with her friend, Lyla. In between steps and summer sandals, she slipped and fell to the bottom of the stairs. Bruised and bleeding herself after the disorderly descent, my mother tells me now, the only damage I received was a very slight bump onto the sidewalk on the side of my head. I was rushed to the emergency room and x-rays revealed I was perfectly fine. This would mark the first of many head bonks throughout the stages of my life.

In 1994, when I was seven years old, my grandmother, mother, and I traveled to the humid and chaotic city of San Salvador, El Salvador. I despised going because it meant I'd sweat a lot, had to speak Spanish, and the cartoons were badly dubbed; but I loved that we had a maid who cooked like a dream. This particular year, we'd gone with a purpose: it was my uncle William's wedding and I was a flower girl. Now, when I say "uncle," I don't actually mean uncle; he was in fact, my mother's cousin. But fictive relatives are all part of Hispanic culture; everyone's your *tío* or *tía* even if their closest relationship to you is that they live down the block and came to your baptism.

We stayed with my *Tía* Memi, who was in reality my mother's Godmother. She lived in the very posh and gated district called La Escalón, which always made me giggle as I thought of escalators whenever I heard the city's name. Memi's husband, my *Tío* Jose, lived his post-military career life to play chess. He had an entire room filled with nothing but various chess boards; they were all kinds of chess sets from all kinds of places. He was a collector who didn't like children. That was fine by me, as I didn't quite like him or his feigned affection toward me either. I also didn't like his thick black mustache.

The maid was young and brown, her hair straight and black. Out of everyone I knew, I liked Lupe the most. She always let me help her in the kitchen even if I ended up making a bigger mess of things, especially with making the batter for the fritters that my grandma requested for afternoon snacking.

I spent my vacation evading any social situation which would require my waist length hair being braided and a fancy dress with ruffled socks. I may have been seven, but even then I knew how ridiculous I looked in those socks. I'd taken a liking to playing near Lupe's separate quarters in the rear of the residence above the laundry room. On one occasion, I nearly cried because I didn't want to go and run errands

with the grown ups, so I was allowed to stay home with Lupe so long as I didn't go near her quarters. As soon as the family cars pulled out of the gates I went straight to play in the back, as I knew Lupe wouldn't say anything and could keep an eye on me from the kitchen. I ran up the stairs to the balcony, hopped over the balcony's veranda, and decided to weave in between the fat white pillars that stretched down from the roof and became the building's facade.

My hands liked the smooth texture of the columns and the air was cooling because of the breeze on the second floor. I swung faster and faster in between the pillars admiring my own fancy footwork. It was almost too easy, so I challenged myself to go even quicker. My feet synchronized with my hands effortlessly... until the coordination inexplicably lost its beat and one foot lagged behind the other. I tried to pull it forward to keep pace. I vainly attempted to balance myself, but momentum wouldn't allow it. My grip slipped and my heart beat faster. The distance between me and the fat white pillars grew and then I knew what was happening: I was falling off the second story balcony... just like mom said I would if I wasn't careful. Crap, this wasn't good.

My head felt like it was the first to make contact with the tiled cement floor. The sound of my skull slamming into the floor reverberated within me. Three seconds would pass until my brain registered the pain and even when it did, I was unable to move. I heard plates shattering from the kitchen. Lupe ran out and frantically checked to see if I was still breathing and hadn't broken my neck. She audibly prayed as she carried me to the nearest bed in the house as I cried. When the adults returned and came into the bedroom for a look at me (along with a doctor), my Tío Jose shook his head in disdain at me and took the opportunity to tell my Tía Memi how he felt about my causing so much commotion with my "childish foolishness."

Cartoons taught me the physics of falling and that my body's outline would be indented into the cement where I fell. The next day I checked and there was no indentation, even though I certainly smacked into the ground hard enough to make one. I was extremely confused by the lack of an imprint. For the rest of the vacation I didn't sleep well because the large bump on the back of my head (Bugs Bunny cartoons didn't lie about this physical fact) wouldn't let me lie flat on my back. My hairdo for my uncle's wedding was redone three times, much to the annoyance of the hairdresser, because it sat funny and drooped over my uneven and sore skull.

A year later, Tía Memi's daughter, named Margarita (also my

“aunt”), came to visit us in LA with her son (my “cousin”) Diego, who was my senior by two years. My cousin and I loved to dare each other; I never backed down to compensate for my younger age and got into plenty of trouble this way. We took my visiting family on the standard So-Cal tour, but Disneyland was what Diego and I were most excited about.

At dusk we were in line for Autopia (the best Disney ride if you don’t have a license yet). Even with someone my own age the line was long and boring. Diego sat on the chain link strung in between poles dividing the line for the Autopia. “I bet you can’t do this!” he taunted me as he sat on the link chain, swinging back and forth. “I bet I can! Watch!” I smugly replied, picking the chain next to his. I smiled at him as I quaintly balanced my bottom on it and held on with my hands. That’s when I lifted my feet and flew backwards hitting the pavement with the same force and quickness as a rat trap closing. I failed to notice that Diego kept his feet on the floor to steady himself. Instantly I screamed while Diego laughed and adults were horrified. The rest of the day I walked around Disneyland holding a pouch of ice to the back of my throbbing-but-concussion-free-head and wrestling free of my mom’s hugs which, allegedly, “made me feel better” but only embarrassed me more in front of Diego.

Within the following three years it should be noted that I would fall off of a stool only to thump my cranium on the linoleum floor; I’d think I could stay on a high swinging swing without holding on and fall off (this was before playgrounds were padded, mind you) and hit the back of my head; due to a misplaced foot, I’d plummet from the top of the jungle gym like a skydiver, amazing my classmates at my survival and garnering a small bump on the back of my noggen, yet again.

Despite these incidents, my skull didn’t register a severe accident until a trip to an aquatic park called Raging Waters, when I was around 12 years old. Raging Waters was nothing but mile-high water slides and an excuse to buy overpriced junk food; it was absolute heaven for me. Coming to a splashing halt at the bottom of the slides was almost as thrilling as pushing off from the top of the slide. The teenage lifeguards timed 40 seconds in between riders to give ample time to go down the slide and climb out of it so that the next rider would safely splash and slow down at the bottom. I guess my life guard was too busy flirting with his female co-worker to time properly. I was standing up at the foot of the slide and preparing to exit, when another rider came speeding down the water slide. Much like what a bowling ball does to

pins, he knocked me over and I went flying into the air and by gravity's benevolence came back down slamming the back of my head on the edge of the red plexi-glass waterslide.

This time, I was knocked unconscious. I awoke on a lounge chair, covered with a towel only to hear my mom a few steps away arguing with the water park's staff about their incompetence in being able to count to forty and how she would "sue their asses off for this." From this incident I suffered weekly migraines for over a year, dizziness, and too many doctor's visits for CAT scans trying to figure out why I was dizzy since my scans came back normal. While my family worried I might have a blood clot that the doctors missed, my inner triumph was that no matter how many migraines I got, I didn't get a nasty bump on the back of my head like when I was seven.

I did have hope that I'd grow out of being accident prone with age, caution, and possibly common sense. However, being accident prone is genetic and I inherited my lack of coordination from my grandmother. She actually fell into her mother's grave when she was four years old, so it's safe to say I come from a distinguished line of depth perception challenged people. Grandma specialized in falling down face first. I involuntarily specialize in head collisions. And not one person in our family can explain how we have survived some of our numerous and ungraceful falls, which damage-wise hardly ever go beyond a bruise or bump.

When I was sixteen years old, the house I grew up in was sold and we had to move out. I'd always had an obsession with time capsules and so I'd often take my mom's pricey Tupperware, fill it with my gumball machine treasures (along with a note explaining who I was), and bury them all over the front and back yard. Upon news of our moving my mom told me I should unearth as much of her Tupperware as possible and keep it unopened, of course.

Finding all my time capsules proved more difficult than I thought as I'd failed to make maps of their exact locations. There was one time capsule in particular I was determined to find, which contained a gold and amethyst ring I'd told my mom I'd lost, but secretly buried. After I'd found most of the other capsules, I spent three full days digging specifically for that certain time capsule. I was positive it was located about three additional feet below where I was digging.

It was summer and the land was hardened by the hot sun. But my shovel and I pushed forward, scooping out chunks of dusty soil in search of my time capsule/mom's Tupperware. The idea of watering the

ground to loosen the dirt didn't occur to me at all. What did occur to me however was to put all my weight on the shovel and theoretically I'd cut through the dirt more efficiently. Quite proud of my nifty idea, I planted the shovel's tip into the edge around the hole, put my right foot on one side of the shovel, my left foot on the other, and bounced a bit simulating a pogo-shovel stick. I could feel the earth begin to give way so I shifted my weight a little more and the shovel broke through the dirt. However, the shovel didn't slice straight down as I'd anticipated. It cut diagonally, shooting my pogo-shovel into the three foot hole at an angle, and flinging me to the ground. I smashed flat onto the floor (so familiarly by now) knocking my head on the hard dirt. I promptly passed out on the grass, waking up about three hours later around dusk when it was considerably cooler. My head rung and I felt more spacey than usual. My balance was off as I walked back to the house and my butt hurt terribly with each step I took toward the ice packs in the freezer.

It took a long time to explain to my doctor how I'd fallen since she didn't really believe me and thought I was joking about the circumstances behind my accident. Sadly, I was not joking. After a few more CAT scans and MRI's, I'd find out that while I didn't have a concussion, I had broken my tailbone falling off the shovel. How many people can say they fell off a shovel and lived to tell about it? Not many.

It is my understanding that every time one bumps their head hard enough brain cells are killed. Brain cells, unlike some other cells in our body, do not regenerate and once they're gone they are permanently lost. It gives me minute consolation to tell myself that if I hadn't knocked my head so many times up until now, I'd surely be a member of Mensa and understand Calculus just as God intended me to.

As a result of my many tumbles and constant head smacking, the back of my cranium is dented. Much like the balancing bottom of a round, ball-like candle, the back portion of my skull is flat. This means that when I lie on the grass and try to roll my head from side to side, I can't. Instead, my head rolls half way until I'm directly looking up, comes to a stop, and then more effort is required to keep rolling my head to the other side. Lucky for me, I don't lie on the grass all that much, since I happen to be allergic to it.

I'd like to believe that in one hundred years or so, civilization will not have crumbled, that humanity is not paddling about due to global warming, and that Oreo cookies are still around. I'd also like to think that my future offspring didn't decide to go cheap on me, but

rather buried me like I consistently asked them to. In a century's time—give or take—when my body is exhumed from my former cemetery to make way for a new underground mall/Starbucks, everyone will know my appalling and embarrassing secret: that I, Jeanine Auza, have a dented skull. Yes, my not so pretty and not so little head is indeed dented. I keep track of my progress in life by music albums and head bumps. From my expert calculations, I'm due for another cranium denting any day now.



poetry

Aruanda

by Robert Medina

A bougainvillea,
its swanky vines swaying,
arches upward,
lush and robust.
Floral fireworks bursting,
exploding in the sky

The bracts seem frail.
Fluttering tissue paper,
textured with light,
intense with color.

Burnt orange,
sultry and spicy.
Implying a scent,
balmy like musk.

Fuchsia B-sides,
nearly violet,
or maybe pink.

Branches climb into a citrus tree.
Limbs intertwine,
marrying, creating
a green wall
with no distinction
of whose leaves belong to who.

Vividly 3-D,
the fruit of the tree,
orange orbs with small white blossoms,
dance a breezy hula.
Cheerful little suns,
teasing to be plucked.

it was something about your voice
last night
on the floor in soft
catches of blue shadow
door open uselessly to summer
windows breathless
your naked body
against my second-hand dress
close but not too close
whispering my secrets back to me
pausing just long enough for it to hurt
the truth of
what you see in me
a little girl
with shaking hands
desperate for love

you were smoothing
my hair against
the pillows
taking apart the loose curls
your sweat still on my mouth

you know,
I want to give you all the things
you've never had
open a room inside of you
big enough to fit me
my tattered heels
all the miles I've come
running to be forgiven—
answered.

and it was something about your voice
last night
so close that it warmed my neck
and I could feel the hunger you've
carried around all these tears
hunching you
making your eyes lonely
and old
you say you don't need anything

but you hold me closer
and we pretend these things last
like orphans
we pretend we can save each other
from the morning

I stay awake as long as I can.

We are
each of us
hopeful failures
at best,
on mornings especially
lying there
half undressed
with nothing left
but dirty hands
and discontent
for feather pillows,
for every-anyone imagined
but not yet real.

We are
all of us
promising disappointments
at least,
on mornings especially
lying there
partly undone,
hesitating to ask
with dirty hands
and discontent
for our daily bread
for our every-any hope
in things not seen.

Yes we are
(each and all of us)
in this filthy daze
desperately waiting
to wake up
and never
fall asleep again.

Quarter Machine Memories

by Tina Kostkas

one time.
a time of teenage confusion,
a boy gave me a quarter machine ring and asked me to marry him.

I didn't say yes,
or no,
I just slid the ring on my finger.

and even though the question wasn't literal
that was the best combination of things I had ever received.

He Used To Hold Up The Corner by Samantha Arlotta

he used to hold up the corner
with me:

 New Orleans Ryan
back there on 5th and Hill
where we'd meet in the mornings
to hustle up enough for
a few balloons

 our clothes a little stiffer
 hands cracked clutching that
begged, borrowed, stolen dollar
 talking faintly about ourselves
 like family members we haven't seen in a

while
I don't remember him
having eyes

just something that looked past me on
the way to somewhere else.

before settling in at night
he used to go around the city
collecting half-smoked
cigarettes from the public ashtrays

 and I think about that
 when I think about him
 wonder if he's still there
 getting by or if

the hole around him finally closed up
when I stopped looking

maybe his mother stopped lighting prayer candles
and forgave herself.

The Red Light of America

by Chris Burnett

Young lungs are dying;
Young minds are trying;
To justify the bodies lying
In the red light of America

Showers of gunpowder rain thunder
On plains torn,
Pulled asunder
By political blunder

Sons and daughters
Hold fast to belief
Seek shelter and relief
Before tomorrow brings sorrow
And eternal sleep

Can you hear the cacophony
Of a thousand souls crying out?
Echoing the feral tumult of the caged
Synchronize your heart to the beating
Of the modern age

Son and daughtes
Flee from their sight
In the re light (of America)

I am crying
My tears are formed of music
As they slide down my face their sting
Is the whip of a frenzied violin
Its chords, stroked, until the strings burn

My tears are full of music
As a wellspring, they pour from my eyes
Rushing down my burning skin
In the blackness behind closed lids
I imagine them, the falling, dancing, musical notes
Of perfect sin

I try to capture one
I hold it there at the tip of my tongue
One well formed tear
At the edge of my senses
I taste the salty sweetness that lies within its perfect sphere
And I am undone
It quivers on the tip of my tongue
And I am undone
It bursts
And I am undone, bursting with it
The music that filled it
Now rushing to fill me
In the onslaught of euphoria that follows
I surge and writhe
Longing to catch more

In my deepest eardrum, the way a dog hears a silent whistle
I hear you maestro
Lips never speaking, yet always coaxing, urging, demanding
Encore after encore

I am crying of my own accord
Caught up in the foreignness of perfection and clarity
Known in this moment
With these tears
A river of cascading from my eyes
Note by note
Singing your name, your praises
Maestro
Maestro
Maestro



biographies

SAMANTHA ARLOTTA is a dark-haired youth who resides in the Highland Park area. Between sordid love affairs and an unsuccessful academic career she devotes herself to penning the first epic redemption story, post-Industrial Revolution. Fun fact to be written on the back of her trading card: she is the only female in recorded history to suffer from Satyriasis.

JEANINE AUZA has an unnatural fear of stuffed bell peppers and escalators. She listens to Bob Dylan, hiccups randomly, and despises Rachel Ray. She also can't hula hoop and is fascinated with supermarkets.

CHRIS BURNETT is a blue-collar, pseudo-intellectual workaholic who loves helping other people. He is inspired by political activism, and hopes to serve his state in some capacity.

TEMESHIA BUTLER has been writing as far back as she can remember. She is inspired by life in general. Her nature is that of an observer, so she is constantly discovering new things. Her handwriting is atrocious, so she has written many things in the heat of the moment that she can't read afterwards. She is currently thinking about purchasing a tape recorder.

MICHAEL CARVAINES is a writer and independent filmmaker living in Hollywood. He has written, produced and directed several films including the romantic-drama "Time and Tide" and the psychological-thriller "The Sleep of Reason." He is currently at work on a series of short action films for the Internet.

ROSA CESARETTI was driving home one evening and saw a man through a window. He was in his kitchen with his parrot. She thought the parrot looked sad, and so from there she wrote this story. She has never owned a parrot. This is the first story she has ever written.

EMILY EVANS has enjoyed writing her whole life. It's a passion that allows her to escape from the pressures of real life. She get her inspiration from books she reads and things she sees happening around her.

CECELIA FLYNN has nurtured the desire to return to school and explore the learning process anew, so being a student at Pasadena City College is a fulfillment of a personal goal. To learn for the sake of learning is the richest experience imaginable and she is privileged to engage in that process.

JANELLE JONES is a twenty-eight-year-old first-year college student. She moved to California from Montana when she was twenty-one and has had her fair share of struggles. She loves reading and has just recently discovered that she loves writing as well. She is passionate about living life to the fullest one day at a time. She is inspired by people who are true to what they believe in and live accordingly.

TINA KOSTKAS just came to Pasadena this past fall from Brevard College in Florida. She is currently an Art major at PCC, with hopes of transferring to a Cal State in spring 2008.

WENDY MARKOWITZ is part of that glorious campus population known as the "OLDER – RETURNING – STUDENT." She has passed the fifty mark but only recently began "college" last year, here at PCC. She stayed away from school deliberately since she had no career ambitions and preferred to continue learning on her own for her own pleasure.

ROBERT MEDINA is a writing student. He believes that art on all levels is a reflection on society, good or bad, and that, in the end, it benefits mankind. As to poetry, he is a novice.

LINA C. MORIN is admittedly fixated with books that have won the Pulitzer Prize. She holds interests in public policy and education, researching, word playing, music taking, music making, and a life well lived. Lina enjoys dramatic irony and puns above all other things found in written language. She also prides herself as being a generally stable person who will one day change the world in some small, unnoticeable way.

CLAUDIA MUYLE is a Belgian girl, born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1986. When she was three years old, her family moved to Jubail, Saudi Arabia, where she spent the next fifteen years of her life. After graduating from Dhahran High School in 2004, she headed to Belgium to continue her studies and then moved to California to continue her college education.

JASON SHARKEY is a freshman at PCC. He has always been interested in stories where you can empathize with the protagonist. He likes using his faith to explore man's shared humanity.

SAM THEAKER is just a guy, reflecting, looking forward. His children and grandchildren are his inspiration, his reason for being. He is 63, a Vietnam Vet (66-67) (combat medic's badge, parachutist's badge, commendation medal). A giver and not a taker, enjoying his fourth or fifth (he's lost count) childhood. This month he wants to be a writer when he grows up.

LEAH WONG is a self-professed eclectic mix of random thoughts. She likes books, movies, gelato, questioning the cosmos, and the Beatles. She has a soft spot for animals and the places where they live. Her greatest ambitions are to see the world, gain enlightenment, and inspire someone.

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and all students who submitted work for consideration

Creative Writing at PCC

English 5A • Creative Writing

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B

Creative literary expression: short story, poetry, and essay. Individual experimentation with various forms; students evaluate their work and the work of classmates in light of contemporary writings.

English 5B • Creative Writing

Prerequisite: English 5A, 6, 8, or 9

Creative literary expression: short story, poetry, dramatic form, and essay. The focus is on in-depth criticism of student work and professional writers.

English 6 • Short Story Writing

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1B

Theory and practice in writing the short story.

English 8 • Writing Poetry

Prerequisite: Eligibility for English 1A

Writing of poetry in all forms. Reading of traditional and current work.

English 9 • Creative Nonfiction

Prerequisite: English 1A

Writing and analysis of creative nonfiction, such as memoirs, reviews, profiles, and nature writing.

All courses are CSU and UC transferable.



