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PECAN GROVE REVIEW

XIII

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

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ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY
SAN ANTONIO, TX

VOLUME XIII
SPRING 2012

The *Pecan Grove Review* staff would like to extend thanks to all who shared their literary works. The quality of the submissions received made the selection process very difficult; your talents are greatly appreciated.

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Pecan Grove Review

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POETRY

Art From Nothing

by Amanda Conley

I write and attempt
To create art from nothing
Staring at these blank pages
I do my best to emote
But how can I express
Those feelings all have felt before
What makes my words any more special?
Be it Diction?
Is it my Style?
I see no greatness in my shallow words
No life in my outdated ideals
No wonder in my lines of broken, battered logic
All I see is some sick attempt
To create Art From Nothing

The Marriage of Figaro

by Clarisse-Ysabel Nacino

Ice crackles against my chilled Starbucks cup
As I take a swift sip of my Chai tea latte.
Above me,
Outdoor ceiling fans lazily circulate smells of jalapeno nachos and sweaty musk.
I flip through the pages of my music program:
“Rising star conductor, Diego Matheuz will be conducting Mozart’s piece, ‘Marriage of Figaro’”.
My lips curve into a smile,
Finally real music.
Humidity takes hold of my patience.
Icicle Christmas lights wrap around the outdoor theatre,
The air fills with monotone string modulations and subtle beats from the timpani
As they blend their sounds into one, rich harmony.
The statuesque conductor strolls onto the illuminated stage,
Calmly lifts his baton.
Time stands still for a moment.
With a flick of his wrist,
Melodious music immerses the theater.
Violinists glide their bows frantically,
Flutists trill their fingertips precisely with fleeting notes,
Trumpets triumphantly exclaim powerful pitches.
I am bewitched by the unison of instruments and musicians,
I close my eyes,
And let Mozart encompass my being.

Unchanging Scene

by Veronica Gallegos

Peering out one long window to
A pale blue sky that only grows paler.
Treetops block my view.
Clouds hang over the city skyline,
Perfectly painted white.

The clouds move as slow as the time on the clock.
The elevator bell rings and a stranger steps off.
He stares at the glass case,
Studying each name.
I speak.

The voice that replies is full of joy.
He's lost,
Wrong floor altogether.
However, he stays, stalling and waiting.
Time moves faster.

Words and smiles are exchanged.
Connections and interests are shared;
Names, never.
Time passed to quickly,
He has to leave now.

The elevator bell rings once more,
This time taking away the joy it once brought.
I look back out the long window,
Nothing has changed.

The Barbershop

by Lauren Hernandez Cruz

Walk through these doors,
Walk through conversation.
Clippers buzzing,
Music blaring,
Barbers sharing
What they've heard.
Women, music,
drinking and women.
Basketball shoes
and tattoos.
Customers cussing
to the sound of the beat.
Barbers chatting
like old women.
Slang and slurs,
sometimes foreign words.
Fans blowing,
Rappers flowing.
Buzz, buzz, cut, cut.
What's new?
Dawg, man, fool.
Laughter and smiles,
Soda machines and dominos.
White, black, brown
sitting in that chair.
Waiting, waiting,
Talking, saying.
A new look,
a closed book.
Back out the doors.

I Caught a Glimpse

by Alejandra Diaz

It was quick.
There's not much I can remember.

Lights flashing, horns honking
I had no control, the car was spinning.

Then it happened,
I caught a glimpse.

I saw her face, she was scared,
in pain and alone.

She did not make it.

But it was an accident.
An accident.

Old Hands

by Richard S. Pressman

Beside my father's chair,
I perch on what will be
his deathbed, sitting on
my dumb hands.
His wrinkled hands still,
he stares ahead.
I'm not there.

Still, I must speak,
So hard after so much pain.
My hand touches his chair.
"Daddy, Daddy, I love you."

His hand rises, halting, rises.
I watch my hand reach.
There we sit
Holding hands
Like boney lovers.

Bare Trees

by Glenn Hughes

This is the way to praise!
Empty, hardened by sunlight.

Strange Beautiful Chaos

by Carlos Mariano Rodriguez

Crooked flowers quickly end fear,
Start beautiful chaos,
Consume a mother.
She painfully finds herself
Cherished outside of tomorrow.

She is a cruel ghost
Thick as stone,
Dark baptizes her womb
Becomes memories
Surviving themselves.

Friendly hearts gracefully
Harmonize and ingest
Ancient sweet life.

Mirror the cold fathers
Who destroy bright,
Determined sons.

Bill's House

by Karl Hayes

From where I sit,
the black silhouettes
from dead forsaken leaves.
Uncle Harry's field
dried down to the bone.
The dust covers grass
and takes shape to its own mind.
The moonlight's radiance
brightens eyes of invisible sounds,
all ringing from down low and high.
Echoes cross the pasture
into the depths of night.
The stars never fail to shine;
they remind me to do right.
Then I pause...
Granddad Bill sat in this exact place.
As I sit, I begin to miss him.
Built with his hands,
the boards under my feet
are now very weathered.

I am a blessed young man.

Grandpa

by Michelle Shea

I had been home a week,
Only long enough to know I missed you.

It was Mom's birthday that day,
A time to celebrate life's joys,
Or not.

When I woke up you were gone,
Suffering no longer a burden to bear.

I heard that your last night was restless,
Heard that you rejected life in the end.

Your one lung made breathing hard,
And I always hoped God would heal you.

It was a miracle when you survived the operations,
But second chances don't last forever.

I cried when a flag was placed on your casket,
Sorrowed as your heartbroken daughters clung to it

I cried when a flag was placed on your casket,
Sorrowed as your heartbroken daughters clung to it
One last time.

Tears have not yet abated;
The wound is still fresh.

"Why does God take those I love?"
I asked, but I already knew the answer.

It was your time to go,
Pain had become too much a
Part of existing.

I will always regret my absence because
It meant that I missed your final year.

Until heaven calls for me,
We are apart.

But I know one day
I will see you again.

Ode to My Friends

by Amanda Conley

Nights of shared cynicism
Contemplating boredom
And the True Worth of the last slice of pepperoni pizza
Japanese profanities and midnight inquiries
to the location of their missing pants
Talk of prior conquest and too much information
Odd comments mixed with Dr. Pepper
These are my friends
A rag tag group of vigilante procrastinators
Theatre brats and disgruntled Advanced Placement Students
Rebels with a cause
Seeking only our own voices
Never left behind and never knew what was best
Always willing to protect the weaker one out of the group
Why did I never get my black belt?
Though miles apart we still maintain the daily routine
The midnight revolts moved to 3 A.M.
Mixed now with Russian profanities
The place might have changed but the time's all the same
And the feeling of belonging grew stronger
One-word text messages at inappropriate hours
Emails about Jeopardy questions
Hurried phone calls based on paranoia
And quick bail outs from awkward situations
Fake girlfriends and boyfriends to cover their tracks
And compilation disks made for graduation
Picture slideshows reveal
That the innocence was never there to be taken from us
And all we had were those lost moments of greatness .

Tikkun Olam

by Matthew Mendez

Vibrant skin of
The taut canvas
Modulating translucence
Evocative spatial modalities
Warmly fade into
Evaporative awe
Belle haleine
Plentitude of rich actualities
Thread of beguilement
Expectation and introjection
Hope idealized, internalized
As Humanist joy
Grow, relish, enjoy
Functional sweetness
Hyperactive hum of light
Instinctual playfulness
Emergent phenomenon
Generous illusions of limited conformity
Penetrative celebrations
Reconstituted objective identity
Material intimacies
Alternative integration
Secret of redemption
Creative reparation
Tikkun olam

Sanctuary

by Jessica Carillo

The room is dimly lit—
I see them come and go
Gentle rumbles of voices,
and I know that I am home.
They pass by,
their eyes warm and bright.
Their kind smiles ring within me,
making my burden light.

My soul sighs softly
as I lower my eyes to the floor
Time here is limited--
And it shakes me to my core.

The figures fade in ebbing light
the rumble begins to slow
No more smiles, no more warmth
For I am all alone.

Talking to the Eye of God Painted Inside Mission Conception

by Cyra S. Dumitru

Do you ever close your eyes?

Is that when the world darkens?

Is that when night falls upon us,
when you close your eyes and sleep?

Do you dream?

Do you dream the light of the next day?

Do you dream little stories for us
to live through the next day;
do you dream about the shining things
we could grow with our hands?

When you wake without remembering your dreams
do wars break out, leaving each side to declare
that the sun is on his side?

Believe Me?

by Angelica R. Radacinski

Would you believe me if I told you
that when I drink *Monkey Bay*,
I think of my summer?
Evolving into myself, because of you.

When I see beets,
I think of you eating them almost daily.
How I ignore the scent that otherwise bothers me so,
because I am happy just sitting beside you.

When I sip cream soda,
I think of *The Cove*.
Sitting with you,
watching the clouds stream by.

Knowing that our pair of Chilean Chanchitos
brought us luck like they were supposed to.

Spending hours painting every Wednesday,
because you are my inspiration, my muse.

Searching through my brownstone one late summer night,
looking for *Goodnight Moon*.
I knew it was there.
You were just the reason for me to find it.

Believe me...
Your voice awakens me to my soul,
my inner sanctum of life.

Showers

by Martha "Mar" Howard

She closes her eyes
She has been here before.
Turning off her brain;
Letting her mind wander in space.
Forgetting what he is doing to her body!
He will never be sorry for it.
She just lay there,
Doesn't fight it anymore
She is just a toy to him.
Realizing she will never be the same, anymore.
Her brain is numb!
However her body cringes,
At ever touch or thought of him!
After he is done with her body,
She showers and showers.
She showers so much!
Doesn't do it for the physical clean;
She cleans for the emotional part.
Never will she be the same!
She is changed forever!
Learning what has happened to her,
She knows it is not her fault!
It will never be her fault.
The fault is all his!
He is responsible for this misdeed!
She will not be the victim,
However a survivor!
Be the voice for many who cannot take the stand.
Remind them, it is not your fault
You are a survivor!

There Should Have Been Two Chairs

by Frances Mell

I used to sit in front of the Chair at least 3 times a day.
The Chair is red,
Well was red,
Before the paint got chipped.
Because when I used to sit in it, instead of in front,
I used to rub my nail down the paint
To scratch it away.
And so it used to be red.

When I sit in front
She comes
And takes on a new form
One I don't see as a reflection
Her eyes are shifty as she gazes
Into my own.

3 times a dayz
She tells me what I missed.
The things I miss on purpose
Things that are casted onto
The Chair because I can
No longer accommodate the feelings,
Assimilate, occurrences too powerful.

Lately though I find myself going to the Chair
More often then was needed before.
Tolerance changing
And I lose time to the Chair
Giving more and more...

Until I no longer am connected to the Chair
In fact I have not sensed her
In 3 days
I remember when I used to sit in the chair
When I was the title holder
When I was the Chair, It was red
When I sat In the chair...
It changed.
And now It's gone all together.

Can You Think?

by Angela Sobery

A mind can race with endless worries of the days to come. The rush of traffic, bills to pay, and family responsibilities capture attention all week long.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

The home cooked meal is usually at a loss, because twenty-four hours is never enough. Relaxation is a rarity, but when it happens the choice is usually indoors in front of the television.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

Our good intention of owning an animal originally was to teach our children responsibility. Now, the visual lessons for our domestic family members are of filth, feces and starvation.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

The demand for oil is turning into war and human domination of one another. The beautiful landscape has turned into metal collages of massive proportions.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

The ocean is bleeding with sea life unable to cope with human destruction. The farmer we rely on has to rape his fields to produce chemically altered crops to keep up with demand of an exploding population.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

The land and grass have turned into weeds and desert to never feel the seeds of life to sprout from below. The water we need often goes fowl, because of uncaring hands of powerful people.

When can we possibly think about the Earth?

We can dismiss what we rarely see, but I will be damned if that becomes me. The problems of the Earth are now and the person responsible is me. Go on and tease me if I hug a tree, my conscience will be clear knowing I gave praise to the tree. Shouting, Singing, and Praising needs to go on in every language that a living fruitful Earth has to continue on. I will think about her every day, because this is where my children and grandchildren will spend their living day.

When can we possibly think about the Earth? Every second of the day!

FICTION

The Procrastinator Diaries

by Melissa Aguilera

I am an enigma I can do so much while in reality accomplishing absolutely nothing. I am a procrastinator. You may think oh here's someone who is lazy or someone who just puts things off till the last minute but in fact it is just the opposite, my time is so consumed with other things that actual work becomes less and less of a priority a nagging 1 last thing to do on my ever so busy to do list, Even as we speak my mind is thinking about doing another task and leaving our conversation. I am compelled right now to get up and go see what phase of the moon is out tonight just because of my very nature.

Procrastinators walk among us in the shadows of decent society, we are actually the ones that make your job a little easier when you go for a break we are the thread in the fabric of SOCIETY ITSELF. I tell you the life of a procrastinator is not as easy as one may envision or may even seem to the outsider looking in. I wake up with a list of things to do go get milk check on my bank transfers write my paper for physics and get to class on time.

This list so far seems pretty simple for being up at 6 am right?

My alarm clock bangs on my nerves like a tire iron to a flower I jolt up and sit stunned on the bed. Overcome by the loud noise disturbing my rem cycle I have to collect my thought, my heart thumping in my ear. I sit still waiting for my pulse rate to slow. After 15 minutes my muscles begin to ache due to the surge of adrenaline leaving my body so early in the morning. I lay down I start to fall asleep again. A procrastinator is well known to have a special relationship to their bed, for me my bed is my Disney World the happiest place on earth. Thirty minutes later I spring to life and get washed up now I realize I am not sure what I should wear they person I have a crush on in my 3rd class will be there but I have a presentation to make up so maybe something formal? I debate my wardrobe dilemma for another 30 minutes I go with jeans and I t shirt.

First thing on my list is buy milk as I do not have any for coffee and had to go all day without it during my school day. I drive and as I am on my way to get milk I see a little garage sale and the most comfortable chair I have ever seen for 50 bucks. I pull over and buy it and toss it in my trunk but not before noticing a chocolate stain on the seat. I really hope it is a chocolate stain.

I pull into the mega mart and head on over to the dairy section but my mind is totally set on the stain on the suede chair in my trunk. I think about maybe covering it up with a new fabric maybe blue to match my walls. I go over and leave my planned route to the milk. Procrastinator's are known to leave their routes almost routinely ironically.

While in the hundreds of feet of material I realize blue is a color that is no longer basic. There is surilan blue indigo, royal, pastel, and an entire array of blue I try and find something I can live with but one major asset/ flaw of my people is they can never just leave well enough alone and have to explore every option at least twice. I go to purchase this and of course must make a trip to the atm machine then back to pay yet because I don't know the square footage of the chair I buy just two yards and go directly to my car to drape it over the chair. I leave the store with more work and without my milk. I finish my chair project and realize that it is now after 5 and I have even less money in the bank and the bank is closed. I don't worry too much though it is just another challenge my "condition" deals with.

After I am sitting comfortably in my new chair I turn on the computer to check my balance on my bank card and then to start my physics paper. The internet starts and I see I have over a hundred messages. One of those is my mother in Iraq. I open the page and it's a lovely card telling me she is "OK". I never believe her when she says everything is fine so I go to "CNN" to read the latest on the news. I see I poll asking something about the troops. I feel compelled to voice my thoughts just like voting I may make a difference in maybe some small political way. I know politicians do read some of these. Another 45 minutes of time wasting.

It is now 9 o'clock by the time I realize it I was so passionate on these issues I did not realize my time was being swallowed like an egg in a snake's jaws. I click that off and notice an email saying how my friend is really having a hard time with her job. I sign on to Facebook I must water my garden and my Farmville. My farm can't still have old stuff in it people judge me on how I organize and present myself it has to be done. Finally down to work on this paper at 11 pm.

Reading this is not making any sense about motion. A ball in motion stays in motion? Maybe in a game of hacky sack (the slacker's football). I throw a few things around the room. Now I have a mess to distract me from my paper. I continue to read after a quick vacuuming. "An object at rest stays at rest" these words have me nodding off in my comfy chair. I wake up from my nap gentle woken up by the sun...THE SUN! I sit up and see it is 9 am and I have class at 9:45 and my intro to my paper reads "yfglhloihyuoihyllloghhhhlogiilghk" from where my face was planted.

Procrastinator's remorse: While taking a shower I contemplated what I was going to do. I needed to show how an object that was in motion stayed in motion and an object at rest stayed at rest. I had an idea wasn't perfect but was the only thing I had time for. I lunged at my computer chair and started to type freely. I typed this diary entry and labeled it. I explained that I wrote this in constant motion and stayed in motion with some but very little resistance. I argued that my failing was more of a momentum than the resistance was which my procrastination was. I showed how at rest no "work" was accomplished. Work is a product of momentum and motion.

This condition takes its toll I do so much like raising a farm helping a friend and influencing politicians yet people only see me as one stigmatizing way... as a procrastinator. When will people realize our plight? Maybe someday they will when they read this one day if they get around to it.

Letter Home

by Jane Focht-Hansen

A shirtless bombardier sat with paper and pencil considering what he could say in writing home without the censor blacking out every line. He shifts writing on one almost sheer onionskin sheet to another, scribbling what he needs to say on one, and writing what he could say on the other. He likes the feel of the paper, but he knows that only a v mail photo will actually get there.

He's waiting for the next set of orders, the next bombing run for which he'll calculate coordinates. In the air, he'll wait again for the site where he'll release the payload. Waiting makes him grim.

He chews on the end of his pencil, teeth loose, despite a regular habit of gnawing on the end of his toothbrush; he's noticeably skinny. He wants to say so much in the letter, but knowing he can't, he stops now and then recalling a different life before the war.

He continues writing on the two sheets of paper:

Dear Dad:

I wake up to adhesive humidity unfamiliar in southern Ohio; there is occasionally a breeze from an unspecified direction, not consistent enough for much comfort. It's too hot for autumn. Slop and "C" cans comprise our meals, except for occasional fish. Sometimes I have coffee instead of Postum.

Shaving is tricky here unless you've got fresh water for it, so I built a sort of Rube Goldberg affair for the condensate which I collect. It runs off into my helmet, enough after a couple of days for a good shave and face washing.

What he won't write down on either sheet of paper is that he almost shot the major night before last when the sneaky bastard came to steal the freshwater for his own shave. Sleep disrupted, the rangy lieutenant was flash out of his cot, .45 in hand.

"Lieutenant, secure your weapon." Breathing for the first time in 30 seconds, the tired fella dropped his arm. The major barked, "I'm shaving for the brass. I've got a meeting in the morning."

The major covered the obscure path lickety-split through the camp to his

tent, the lieutenant an "old man" of 26 glancing at the dull light there, thinking of the prospect of six hours' flight to a staff meeting.

He shook off the memory, and went on writing.

Will you please send some more seed to that address I gave you? I've got a little garden. Radishes are doing pretty good. I've got carrots, too. They're small here. I put in the corn early. It's so warm and wet, I've made an elevated section, so it drains, under netting. I hope nothing will get to it at night.

It's pretty quiet. I am well, but sometimes bored. I bet I've picked up every divot of what passes for grass here to have some sod surrounding the tent. It reminds us of home.

He stops again, shifting slightly, then scrawls on the sheet he cannot send:

When I have opportunity, I creep away to watch the great blue Pacific waves. It's a strange beautiful place. Absolutely mind-numbing here most of the time. Nothing to do. Play cards, sometimes.

We fill the quiet sunny days with wait. First ready, then wait. At ease, we're darn near naked, wearing shorts, sweaty and sandy. I've grown a mustache, and more of me than ever before is sun-crisped brown, suntanned.

The Marines clear the islands, the Seebes build landing strips. Then we're there after them, sometimes strips aren't even finished. Once we found an abandoned equipment locker, and we built ourselves a generator. Had to leave it behind. Start over every new atoll. Get there, build up, wait for orders.

In between afternoons of cards and rum in the shade I do everything I can possibly imagine to keep busy. This is something else. I know what these words mean: Shock, bewilderment, wonder. Regret.

I cannot say. I will never forget.

Roger saunters cat-like over to him. "Dick, we're at ease." He holds a bottle of rum and a deck of cards.

"Okey-dokey. Let me finish up this letter a minute." He thinks about what would be going on at home, recalling it's fall apple time and the schoolmaster will be requiring recitation --James Whitcomb Riley's "When the Frost is on the Punkin" --just after the leaves drop and before it begins to snow. And they're between milkings; they're always between milkings.

Whistling idly, he writes a few more sentences at the end of the letter, including a list of hellos to the family: Rhea, Peg and David, Sis and Bill, Aunt Leona and Uncle Leland, Aunt Lizzie Longfield, and of course, the Roberts, one and all.

Roger pours two shots. "Here you go." The lieutenant drinks and then folds up the page, tucking it between the leaves of his Roosevelt Bible and into his shirt pocket along with his pencil. He tears and burns the half page he cannot send home, saving the blank half for another time, thinking with some hope about a pretty girl with an Irish first name.

Roger looks at his buddy's face. "Hey, what you thinking about?"

"Eileen." He smiles, pours more rum. "I met her when her cousins and my best friend Lewie decided that we ought to meet and go out, city girl and farmer brown; her folks are related to the Curtises in Kenton."

"Ha! She's safe in South Euclid, stuck shoveling snow, working in a school, listening to Kay Kaiser on the radio."

The pair will be joined by one other, who will play a chicken game challenge with them, poking sewing needles into their rum-numb fingers, and during the afternoon's recreation, each of them will wonder if they've already spent enough time in the air, how long they'll wait this time for orders, and whether they'll ever go home.

The major will be back in 48 hours, amazed at how cold it is at altitude and how hot it is on the sand. He'll have had meetings, scotch and steak. The bombardier will never forget. And he'll get home, one of the lucky 7th Air Force, remembering those who won't because this one like the last, and so on, will not be the end of war.

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be supported by a valid receipt or invoice, and that these documents should be stored in a secure and accessible location. The text also highlights the need for regular audits to ensure the integrity of the financial data and to identify any potential discrepancies or errors.

In addition, the document outlines the various methods used for recording transactions, including manual bookkeeping and the use of computerized accounting systems. It notes that while manual systems can be effective, they are often more prone to human error and are less efficient than automated solutions. The text also discusses the importance of choosing a reliable accounting software provider and ensuring that the system is properly configured and maintained.

The second part of the document focuses on the legal and regulatory requirements that apply to financial record-keeping. It details the specific rules and regulations that govern the collection, storage, and reporting of financial data, and provides guidance on how to ensure compliance with these requirements. This includes information on the retention periods for different types of records, the requirements for data security, and the procedures for reporting any suspected fraud or irregularities to the appropriate authorities.

Finally, the document concludes by emphasizing the overall importance of financial record-keeping for the success of any business. It notes that accurate records are essential for making informed decisions, managing cash flow, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the organization. By following the guidelines outlined in the document, businesses can ensure that their financial records are accurate, secure, and compliant with all applicable laws and regulations.

Water

by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

He didn't know if this Christian Baptism was such an intelligent use of water. In his homeland, nobody poured water on a baby's head and suddenly the baby would never go to hell. In his religion, babies didn't go to hell. In his religion, water was a gift because it gave life. In his country where water was scarce or often polluted, water was nothing to waste on a baby's head.

But he agreed to the ceremony because he loved Elena. They managed to bridge languages, customs, and even her parents' objection to the marriage. They could have had the baby without vows like two other couples they knew but they valued small changes, and he wanted to be respected by Elena's parents. He had seen too much forced love in his family not to know that with forced love come empty promises.

For two years they ate Sunday suppers with her parents. They sent pictures with emails to his mother and uncle who shared an apartment with his cousin and her three sons. He taught Elena words and sentences in his language to communicate with his mother during weekly phone calls. In turn, she taught him how to participate in a religious service on something called Easter and to purchase flowers for America's Valentine's Day and to sleep later on government holidays. In his country, the government didn't take holidays but made sure you worked hard for them every day of your life.

America was an interesting land, so he had remained to attend graduate school. America was the country where he met Elena and in this country his daughter was born a year after they had married. He had tried to understand this man Jesus since he too was a spiritual man, believing in some greater power, but his family trusted nature and prayed for practical blessings. Was there a heaven or a hell away from the borders of his country? He didn't know. He had seen both in his grandmother's wrinkled brown face.

The baby whimpered in her crib and he looked down at her wriggling body. She was a caramel blend of both her parents—the color of *café con leche* that Elena loved to drink. His baby girl kicked her little feet against the white gown embroidered with lace and pearls which Elena, all her sisters, and all their children had worn for this ceremony.

They had named her Paz; it means peace in Elena's language, because this tiny baby had brought the family differences a peaceful compromise. But pouring water on his daughter's head? What would the ritual bring to Paz? Elena had insisted on this ritual, and he had even agreed to the dinner her parents wanted to host for everyone afterwards.

He reached into the crib and lifted his daughter into his own hands. He held her tiny body within his palms like a great stem of grapes.

"What do you think?" he asked his baby daughter. "What will blessed water bring you this day?"

Her eyes watched him, her lips straightening into a line. How serious this tiny face, this babe in his hands. Her little black eyes reached deep inside him.

"In my country, water quenches thirst," he told her. "Water washes dirt from our feet. It gives strength to animals. When it rains, we cry with joy and run out to catch water in our bowls. We add water to the pot when a hungry visitor needs food. I don't know what water today will give you, Paz, but I will hope to learn. I promised your mother."

He placed his daughter gently inside her stroller. He fixed the strap to secure her body, and wheeled her towards her mother's singing voice in the next room.

Bringing Down the Sky

by Natalie Hightower

Our landing had been rough, in the crashing sort of sense. I saw Cooper's knuckles turning white from gripping the controls when we broke through the thick cloudy yellow atmosphere. Buildings were sprawled across the landscape, it was something we hadn't been expecting and it just made our emergency landing all the more treacherous. We hit the ground and skidded several meters, leaving a dense cloud of dust in our wake before we stopped.

There had been so much damage to the craft. Wires and some metal were twisted and warped like a recently abandoned cocoon, just the sight of it made Cooper curse till the air was blue. Once Cooper had caught his breath he picked through the wreckage and declared that our little craft could be saved.

"Do you think anyone will find us?" My gaze wavered between Cooper and the ship.

He had looked hesitant to answer, "If someone looks at our logs, they might be able to pinpoint where we went."

I looked up at the sky and frowned. Mustard colored smog coated the planet and had been the cause of our scrambled sensors and subsequent crash. It made disturbing sense that if we had trouble seeing what was here, any rescue attempts would run into the same problem.

I was given the job of searching for parts and anything of use to bring back to our makeshift camp while Cooper worked on making sense of the massive tangle of wires. I searched the buildings near to our crash and had been surprised to find a planetarium. The building was mostly intact and the machinery that worked the show was still in good shape, and still hooked into a primitive but effective solar grid.

The place we had landed in was a town, a small one at that. All the buildings were crumbling around the edges and some sat lopsided as their foundations had deteriorated unevenly.

That night we moved into the planetarium, it was composed of gentle curves and brass inlay that had tarnished. I tried to make sense of controls for the star show, testing switches and turning knobs while Cooper opened one of our few ration packs. It took a while but I got the show to play. We both sat in silence

as we ate, watching the stars that the people who once lived here had seen before their smoggy skies blocked out the stars at night.

"You only have enough power for one more show Alexis," Cooper observed, looking at the dusty power display as the sun rose again in the planetarium and the show shut down automatically.

"Then we should save it for a special occasion," I had answered, hoping that the final show would be when we were set to leave.

When the sun was up again I resumed my salvage mission. I picked through pantries and garages in search of anything edible or of use to fix our ship and found very little. I tried to be optimistic but was finding it increasingly hard to do as the hours dragged on.

I returned to the ship earlier than I had hoped with less than I had wished. Cooper looked over the parts I had spirited away from their old garage tombs with a grim look. I realized that he had figured he could fix it, not from the stance of being stuck on a dead planet, but from the misconception that all the parts he'd need would be available.

That night we decided to eat some of the canned foods I had discovered in an old apartment building. We used our own emergency flashlights rather than the building lights to conserve energy and spoke in low voices about home, as if it were painful to breach the subject. "I have a wife and kid, you know," he said as he pulled a picture of them out of his pocket.

I hadn't known that. There they were in color smiling cheerfully at the camera. I didn't have kids and I had no living relatives, I wondered who'd miss me if we didn't make it back. I looked at the domed ceiling where the stars had splayed out the night before, making the room feel alive.

"Is there any way we could hook up the planetarium to play the sky from Earth?" I thought it would be nice to see the view from home, even if it was the final thing played in the planetarium.

Cooper pursed his lips and shook his head, "No, not without ripping the navigation system out of the shuttle."

The week passed slowly, and I trudged on with a single minded deter-

mination, and by the next week our rations were stretched painfully thin and I had scouted out the whole surrounding area as best I could. I turned my hand to studying the people who had once occupied the town before us. Anything I could carry I brought into our camp and I compiled an impressive collection of art, jewelry and books. I displayed each piece proudly inside the planetarium

Cooper didn't take too kindly to my shift in attention. He stopped looking through the backpack I took with me out on my excursions, it no longer contained the things he would have found useful. He watched my collection grow with thinly veiled contempt, disappearing into the shuttle till it got too dark for him to keep going.

I came back on the third day of my culture hunt to see Cooper shifting through the stacks of books and magazines I had placed inside the Planetarium. I was surprised by his very presence, I rarely saw him since he had taken to practically living in our damaged ship.

"You aren't working today?" The words slipped from me before I could stop them and I wished so hard I could pull them back, like reeling in a particularly slippery fish.

"And what do you call this? Work?" Scorn rolled over me and I found myself taking a small step back.

"I wanted to know more about them. Where did they go? What happened to them?" I moved to his side and picked up a magazine, I held it as if it would crumble into dust from any extra pressure.

"They're dead and gone Alexis! We're alone on this god forsaken rock!" He ripped the paper from my fingers and flung it back into the pile, leaving shards of discolored paper in my still grasping fingers.

I shouted wordlessly and he turned his back on me to kick a stack of paintings. They spun in their frames across the threadbare carpet and crashed against the cream colored wall which had started become decorated with mold. He picked up a delicate glass figurine and I tensed, angry at him for ruining my things.

"You put that down now, Cooper!" I reached out towards his clenched

fist which held my prize.

“You going to make me, Alexis?” He drew my name out tauntingly.

I launched myself at him just as he pulled his arm back and snapped off a football worthy throw. I watched the clear glass tumble end over end in the air, then it struck a marble column. I could hear the delicate tinkle as it broke, much like small silver bells. Cooper, I realized, looked as shocked at his own actions as I was.

“I’m sorry.” The words sounded empty, even in this dead place.

I blinked back tears and swallowed back a thick lump in my throat, “Me too.”

“The ship, we’re not going anywhere,” he mumbled into his palms.

I fell to my knees in front of Cooper and pulled him into a tight embrace. I could feel his body shuddering as he tried to divide his efforts between breathing and not crying. After a few long minutes he pulled free and wiped his eyes with the heels of his palms.

“I stopped working on the ship a day ago.” He looked at the scattered artifacts that lay across the floor. “I built a distress call transmitter instead.”

Since he built a transmitter, then it meant that we really weren’t going anywhere because all the parts would have had to come from our broken shuttle. If it had been salvageable before, it wasn’t now.

“Is it working?” My voice seemed to fill the empty spaces of the planetarium.

“It is, but it’s running off the ship’s fuel cells. On all the time, we have about one week before it dies. I’m going to switch frequencies every so often so hopefully somebody will pick it up.”

The next day felt surreal. As if nothing had happened the night before, Cooper had gone into the shuttle that was now operating as a distress beacon. I decided to follow his direction and I ventured into the town and picked through what I had guessed was a school of some sort. The sun was beginning to sink on the horizon when I returned to the planetarium. Cooper started up the Planetarium show and at once I noticed a difference in the stars above us.

They were all so familiar to me. It was like Cooper had brought down the sky to display across the dark vaulted ceiling. Andromeda, Canis Major, Lyra and Virgo, all of them were there. Cooper watched the dots of light swirl as well. I noticed that his eyes never once left the ceiling, not even when loud shrieking beeping sounds filled the arching room coming from our ship that lay outside the sleek arches of the building. We sat there in the dark and watched the sun rise on Earth, surrounded by the trappings of a people who hadn't gotten to touch the sky.

[The text in this block is extremely faint and illegible. It appears to be a multi-paragraph document, possibly a letter or a report, but the specific content cannot be discerned.]

Inspection

by Juan Carlos Casas

Miguel peeked out of the inspection booth and instantly felt the heat dry the sweat off his skin. He still couldn't see Ramon. He looked as far as the sun allowed but he couldn't see the green Camry Ramon said he'd be driving. It was already 3:55 pm and Ramon had said he'd be there 45 minutes ago. He looked out again hoping to see the car sitting in his lane. It had to be, Ramon knew that Miguel would be stationed at booth four today. Miguel had told him only two hours ago, "*Primo*, don't forget, *porque ya se como eres cabron*, I'll be Stationed at number four all afternoon." Miguel had also made it clear to Ramon that he had to do everything in his power to pull into lane four when the line split from two lanes to six.

It really wasn't too difficult, especially with the long hour he'd be spending in line. All he had to do was stick to the right lane and keep left when the lines split. He had done it many times before. Miguel would always tell Ramon what lane he'd be stationed at, and Ramon never failed. He would pull up and both Miguel and Ramon would act like they didn't know one another. Miguel would then ask him a series of generic questions, and whether Ramon answered them or not he would always say, "Alright sir, you have a great day" and Ramon never would drive straight through hiding a big smirk.

However they had tried something this big. In fact Miguel had never allowed anything more serious than crossing a bag of fresh *guayabas*. He cared about his job, and was very much dependent on it, but the plan was set and Ramon would be pulling up any minute now. Miguel looked down at his wristwatch one more time. It was 3:59, just a few seconds from 4:00. He stared at it nervously as he whispered under his breath, "Come on Ramon, where are you?" The second his watch struck four Miguel looked up and in a sea of glimmering cars he saw the green Camry. It was still several cars back and the reflection made it hard to see, but Miguel was certain that was it. He could tell by the mismatching fender on the left side of the car. Ramon had been saying for months that he would fix it, but the green car still had a light blue fender.

Now that Miguel had seen the car his nerves more evident than ever before. His heart felt as if it was pounding in a hollow space and he could feel every

palpitation as far as his temples. He had to calm down, at this point he had only two options and one of them involved Ramon in handcuffs.

He realized that he was acting suspicious. A woman in a blue minivan even asked, "Sir are you alright?" and though Miguel responded saying he was fine, the woman continued and said, "You may want to drink some water, this heat can be dangerous you know." He knew that he had to relax. The line wasn't getting any shorter and he still had at least nine cars to inspect before Ramon pulled up. So he took a big gulp of water and one by one he continued to inspect the cars, never forgetting to ask, "Are you American citizens?" and, "May I see your passport?" With every car he let through Ramon got closer. By now there was only three cars ahead of Ramon and Miguel had managed to calm down. He knew it was simple, it had worked time and time again in the past. All that was different this time was the undocumented girl sitting on the passengers seat.

Miguel didn't know much about her except that she was undocumented, and that Ramon would be making \$15,000 for getting her back home. He could see her sitting beside Ramon. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun that exposed a birthmark on her neck. She was wearing a dingy pink spaghetti strap shirt and a small gold cross on a chain around her neck. Ramon seemed calm too, and now there were only two cars ahead of him. Miguel inspected the first car. He peaked into the small black Saturn and asked the couple, "Where are you coming from?" The man, who was driving, answered, "We're coming from the dentist, my wife had an appointment." Miguel nodded and added "and you are both American citizens?" The couple answered very confidently, "Yes sir." He then stepped back and said, "Y'all have a nice day."

As the second car pulled up Miguel stepped back into the booth for a second to wipe the sweat off his palms and forehead. He was beginning to feel the pressure once again and the weather wasn't helping very much. While he picked up the role of paper towels, he was startled by a loud knock on the window behind him. Before he even turned, he heard his chiefs voice shout out his name "Gutierrez, I need you to take your break." Miguel's eyes froze. "Stevens is here to cover you" the chief said. Miguel stood still.

Ramon was right there, he was only a few feet away. Ramon could also see him and didn't know what was going on.

Miguel could see in Ramon's eyes that his heart was sinking. Miguel turned to his chief and in attempt to sound composed said, "Alright sir, give me a second I'll be right there." The chief stood there staring at Miguel, then questioned him, "A second? For what?" The chief seemed surprised "Stevens is here to cover you. You can leave your post, he'll take care of your lane for the next hour."

Miguel didn't now what to say. His cousin was sitting in the car a no more than ten feet behind him and the chief was asking him go get lunch. Miguel still hadn't answered when the chief said, "Lets go Gutierrez, I'm on lunch as well and you're wasting my time."

Miguel looked over at Stevens. Stevens was already approaching the car ahead of Ramon's when suddenly a voice sounded on each of their radios, "We have a situation on lane one, requesting back up." Stevens stopped moving and the chief unclipped his radio from his belt. He put the radio up to his mouth and responded, "This is chief Wells, what seems to be the problem?" there was silence for a moment, then the fuzzy voice sounded again, "A vehicle has tipped off one of our dogs and the passenger refuses to step out of the vehicle." Miguel could see the annoyance in the chief's face. The chief picked up the radio and responded, "I'll be right there." He clipped the radio back to his belt as he mumbled under his breath. He then looked up again and said "That break is going to have to wait," he faced Stevens and said, "You come with me, they may need some extra help."

The two men walked away but Miguel remained still for a second. He turned around and saw one car still standing before Ramon's. Miguel quickly asked what he always asked and let the car through as the car drove by Ramon slowly pulled up. Miguel looked at the girl but kept a serious face. He began the usual drill, first asking, "Where are you both coming from?" the girl simply stared at Miguel. Before either Ramon or the girl could say anything Miguel moved on to the next question, "Are you carrying anything I should know about?" Again, both Ramon and the girl simply stared at him. Finally Miguel asked the final question, "And are you American citizens?" For the third time Ramon and the

girl sat silently. Miguel stepped back, as he always did and said, "you two have a great day."

As Ramon drove through the pounding of each of their hearts went silent. Ramon rolled up his window and as he did, he said to the girl "*bienvenida a casa.*"

Fiddle, Faddle, Feedle

by Luis Cortez

The unusually large and blazing sun climbs to its zenith casting a watchful gaze below to see a lone soldier lying under a blackened dead tree. The branches seem to bow towards him as if to caress Refugio—now in the throes of death. To him, he thinks he can hear the roaring flames of the sun and stretching wood of the tree. His soiled white shirt is marred with an ever growing blood stain. His hands cradle the bullet wound that lies under his heart. In the distance, he can hear the battle raging over the next hill for the little unknown fort occupied by the *gringos*. His breath is shallow and it is beginning to get harder to breath. He licks his dry lips and he imagines his lungs filling up with blood. If the blood pouring out his body does not kill him first, surely he will simply drown here in the desert.

“*Pinche gringos*,” he laughs at the irony. He sees a shadow move about his legs. He looks up to see a brown owl sitting on a low hanging branch taking an interest in him.

“It looks like I’m not going to die alone.”

The owl looks away as if curiously drawn to something else; the sounds of battle pressing on.

“I’m sorry, *mi amigo*, that I am not more entertaining for you. Perhaps if I were feeling better, I would do a little dance for you, eh?” Refugio laughs at the idea of him dancing for an owl in the middle of Texas—so far from Mexico City, his home.

The owl turns back to Refugio, regards him for a second or so, and says, “*Fiddle!*”

“Fiddle?”

“*Fiddle!*”

“You’re a strange owl, *señor*. I was told that owls said ‘who’, not ‘fiddle.’” At this curiosity, Refugio moves to hoist himself up to get a better look at the owl. As he does so, his hand brushes up against a full water skin beading with cold water droplets along its leather hide. This was not here before. He recalls drinking the full contents of his water skin some time back. He picks up the new skin, moistens his lips, pulls back the top and quenches his thirst. He keeps his eye on the owl and the owl, in turn, watches him.

"You didn't bring me this did you?" Refugio ponders the idea for a moment before admonishing himself. "Of course you didn't! You're just a *pinche* bird! Refugio, you're going crazy."

"*Faddle!*" The owl screeches.

Refugio falls silent. He just sits there trying to hold himself up to stare at a brown owl sitting on a low hanging branch.

"*Faddle!*" the owl screeches again and Refugio visibly jumps at the owl's proclamation. The owl spreads its wings and flaps furiously. A single brown feather shakes loose and flutters to the ground to rest on the back of Refugio's hand. Suddenly, Refugio feels a sleek, smooth movement traverse around his wrist. He looks now to see a large grass snake coiling around his arm. He screams and tries to shake it loose but the pain of his open wound over takes him and he collapses to the ground. The grass snake licks wickedly at the blood soaked shirt and after a few seconds looking at the wound, the snake dives into the bullet hole!

Refugio screams in shock and pain as the snake writhes to enter his body. Just as Refugio is about to seize the snake and throw him away, the owl swoops down to clasp the snake and carry it back to his perch. Refugio cannot believe his eyes as the snake, trying to get away from the owl, is brandishing the bullet slug in his mouth. The owl begins to eat.

"I know you, *tecolote*," Refugio announces as he clasps onto his injury. He rocks back and forth trying to sooth the angry wound. His vision blurs in and out of focus. The loss of blood is beginning to take its toll. He raises his hand to make the "sign of the cross" first touching his forehead, "*En nombre de padre...*" he begins but the owl suddenly discards the snake onto Refugio making him jump to shake the dead and mutilated snake off him. In the distance, despite the battle, Refugio can make out a wild cackle. Refugio turns his attention to the bird.

"There was an Owl lived in an oak," recites Refugio, "whiskey, waskey, weedle!"

Refugio recalls his time in California on one of his many duty assignments. There he met a soldier from the United States Calvary. They exchanged anecdotes and scary stories while getting drunk late into the evening.

"And all the words he ever spoke," Refugio calls out but his vision is blurry again. The Owl seems to fade away leaving an old crone standing in front of him. "Were fiddle, faddle, feedle!"

"No, no, *mijito*," says the old woman, "I need a young man to get me around. You will make a fine horse, you will." Again she cackles. Her face is a twisted visage of wrinkles. One of her eyes is milky white. Her shawl is tattered and her dress is poorly stitched up. Her image fades away and the owl has returned.

"*Feedle!*" cries out the owl while thrashing his wings again. A number of feathers fall from the owl to land on Refugio's legs. Quite unexpectedly, Refugio is overtaken with a new pain rushing from his feet. He screams out and tries to shake the pain from him but the pain endures. Refugio has forgotten about his bullet wound. He tries to scramble to his feet but his legs fail him. Then, to Refugio's shocked amazement, his left boot bursts open to reveal a misshapen foot. The toes look to have merged together and his ankle has expanded ripping his sock and revealing brown fur. He continues to scream as he hears his bones snapping and resetting themselves. His right foot does the same. His legs have transformed into the legs of a horse.

Refugio begins to panic. His mind races back to the story the corporal shared.

"A Gunner chanced to come that road, whiskey, waskey, weedle!" Refugio drew out his pistol and pointed it at the owl. "Says he, 'I'll shoot you, Silly Bird!'"

As he tries to finger the trigger, he notices his fingers are now melded together. The finger nails are turning black and brown fur is growing out his skin. His whole body lurches forward as his shoulders push apart. He can sense his neck growing, what seems to him, to a monstrous length. He tries to scream but his voice breaks and he sounds like a *neighing* horse! He fumbles the pistol and tries to regain his composure. He levels the gun onto the owl who is now thrashing about on the branch. Between heaving breaths and concentrated effort, he says, "so fiddle...faddle...feedle!"

A clap of thunder rolls across the sky and the owl seems to implode leaving only a bundle of brown feathers to fall to the ground. Refugio is wracked with pain once again and he passes out to the fading cackle in the distance.

He awakens to the voices of two military medics. He opens his eyes to see them standing over him. He tries to talk but all he can manage is a groan.

"No se preocupe. We've got you. You must have one hell of a story to tell. How did you get all the way over here on two broken legs and a bullet wound?"

Refugio tries to raise his head but finds it too heavy to lift. He raises his hand to see five blood stained fingers. He thinks to himself, *"maybe I dreamt this. Maybe it was a hallucination?"*

The other medic says, "I think he ate a bird. Look at all these feathers!"

Table Manners

by Annie M. Palumbo

I'm dedicating this to you and not to the sleeping pills. I think you know that I'm a tortoise. Not because I want to drive my car into the ocean really slowly, but because of my impervious shell. I attempted to sweat you out like a fever. For days my insides were drenched. I'm not happy and I think if you met my throat she would cry. She'd ask, "but why?" and then maybe you'd walk backwards, twenty pounds lighter in your shuffle back to home base, where all the neighborhood kids gang up on you and choose you last when teams are formed, and when they are not you stain the concrete like decimal points. I am a circle, but only relatively. You wouldn't understand imposing estrangement, and I wouldn't want you to. I just know how you react when I get blood on your carpet, or on your utensils, you're always left mumbling "what's for dinner darling" followed by a subtle coaxing wave from your butter knife, which is disgraced and freckled by my marmalade, as we continue ignoring each other at the dining room table. I waited for you like the results of a biopsy. One day maybe we can talk about how when we were young, we used to lie in bed together in your parent's house, and not dislike each other. However, until then it is a weaker side of me that will confess to sentimentality.

Your sense of humor is drier than the Sahara.

I am plagued by the inability to empathize.

You are Captain Obvious from the Planet Rhetorical.

I am sitting on the curb outside of your apartment, throwing rocks at the bystanders who stare at me the wrong way. I am drunk and contorted on the curb outside of your apartment, throwing rocks at the birds that can fly away from circumstances, situations, and home.

With everything set out on a table, it's easier to see what is edible. Throwing gravel on a sinking coffin won't make the image disappear. But the shovels are dancing, and the ebony of the morning has taken the shape of fertility.

The diamond in Hermes vision was I, he took me as I prepared a chain reaction, and it was there that I learned to swim with sharks. And it was then that I choked on food that had yet to be devoured. Then I flew into a scorching sunset, the wax in my wings began to melt. I fell and landed violently on the beaches of

Normandy, where I found the last of the seashells, and I heard the sound of the ocean for the last time.

Time: 11:12 am

Setting: Somewhere Fictional.

The low muffled humming of the edifice sounded bare between the sheets of useless static.

The black birds peck into the cement buildings, the black birds plummet into the shoulder of a four sided box of concrete which is adorned in a fillet of open scenic fixtures, the drop of the ceiling hangs limply like the deflated smile of a mutilated child; bloody and basking in the industrialized playground of adolescent purgatory.

Down a limp flight of stairs

Over the harsh purring of the mechanically endowed

Between the contractual agreements

Below the average

Before the great resignation

The black birds circled rapturously.

Above the animosity beguiled by human qualms

A man in a three buttoned jet black Armani work suit, exits the monochromatic crypt of inhibited routine, he grimaces between the vague lines of pastel and the confining vastness of his own detachment.

His brief case sits loyally and upright to compromise.

A woman walks by swiftly

The black birds circle like a swarm of American fighting jets.

The black birds are disdained by nothing.

Surprised by nothing, the man grips his briefcase in his right hand and takes the long way down the street, and the street numbers are in a clean descent.

From 50

45th- You were supposed to be C.E.O.

40th- You should have had a well-established family

35th- You should have been drenched in salary raises and the newest German automobile

30th- You should have used your genetic advantages for preeminent results

25th- You should have been married with money

20th- You should have been out of school

From there to zero, you start recalculating the diplomacy of your latest choices.

From that you find the dividend to your current compromise.

Life gets this, you want that, she was then, you are now. This, but not there, that but not soon.

Slowly, he is coming to conclusions of great disappointment.

I tried to find it. This great sense of being

I tried to find it; Parts of me just kept on leaving.

On my lips were the bitter taste of promises and in my mind were images of distant scenic routes which led to nowhere.

I have to rewind. I walk briskly

However, I get to where I am going later than I should have.

When you arrive late, no one yells at you.

Maybe this is life. Where no one cares

“Who are you?” He said.

I got there late. However, five minutes still means that it's over.

For a moment I paced quicker than usual and inevitably I got dizzy.

But I still showed up, even if I was late.

And I ordered a glass of the sweetest bitter wine.

And the waitress poured me less than usual

But it was fine, I simply ordered more than usual.

Sometimes, I have to overcompensate for all of the worthless variables in my life.

“I think I will make it.” I must have said.

When the time came to leave you, my stumble was spurred by deep con-

fusion which then fertilized a jealous wasteland, I promised nothing. At the dining room table that evening years before, he had taken the butter knife and spread the marmalade too thin. There is just no winning, when it comes to Brutus. How the stories twist and turn like the knife in your hand and in my back. So we meet again, but for the last time. I slump back into the vertebrate of a rocking chair, and blood is hand carved into the woodwork.

I went by the city alone wishing that I had a love of my own
to follow the end of my finger, to embrace my eye
but the streets were flooded with you already
and I breathed for too long.

The Slaughterhouse

by John Goddard

Justin tore a giant chunk out of his burger; barbeque sauce squirted out the back and dripped on his jeans. He didn't seem to care. He chewed two or three times before swallowing, then repeated the process, occasionally stopping only to give his face a swat with a napkin.

"Hey, you ok?" Harvard was staring at him with a concerned look on his face, his burger untouched. "Calm down, man. This will be a piece of cake. Look around you."

The burger was spared for a few moments as Justin casually turned, as if to scratch his back with his face. It was around three o'clock: feeding time at the local McDonalds. Justin felt as if he and Harvard were in an aquarium, surrounded by whales and manatees whose mass seemed to lifelessly drift about from one food source to another.

One in particular caught his eye. A walrus of a figure, which was clutching a fistful of ketchup packets in one hand while the other balanced a tray full of food. Disgusting. It was hard to believe no one had ever done what he and Harvard were about to do. Just looking at these people made him lose his appetite.

His eyes locked on to another one of the grazing beasts; a mother, with two children in tow, a boy and a girl. They were waiting in line to order. She was in a bathing suit; apparently they had just come back from Fiesta Texas or someplace. She was huge. Her neck must have disappeared years ago. Justin's thighs were easily dwarfed by her arms, and her breasts rolled around on her chest like two torpedoes suspended on a huge block of Jell-O. Justin continued to stare, his jaw agape. Her massive stomach was tightly packed in her too-small bathing suit. The sides of her gut had worked their way through the leg openings, becoming an addition to the cottage cheese thighs.

"Christ," Justin muttered to himself. He gagged, flinging his hand over his mouth, and turned back to Harvard.

"Keep it together!" Harvard whispered fiercely.

"Oh my God, I'm going to barf." Justin leaned over on his side.

"Hey, be professional, man. Be cool! Look at me." Harvard grabbed him by the ears and gave him a little shake. He considered giving him a hearty slap

across the face for good measure, but balked at the thought getting vomit on his hand.

"I can't do this. I can hardly look at them! How am I supposed to shoot them? What if they, you know, start squealing in pain and whatnot?"

"Don't be stupid." Harvard unwrapped his burger as he spoke. "It doesn't hurt them. It's like when someone slaps you really hard in the face, but you don't feel it until a few seconds later."

Justin stared. "That has literally never happened to me."

"Yeah, but you know what I'm talking about."

"No, I don't actually--"

"Damn it, Justin! That's not the point! Look at them. Look at these... these monstrosities!" Harvard caught himself. He glanced quickly at the table behind them, and lowered his voice before continuing.

"All we have to do is fire a few shots in the air. If these lard vats try to take off like real people, their hearts will friggin' explode! They probably think running is the most difficult stunt in action movies. It will be so easy. And once we start, you'll remember why we chose to do this in the first place. One or two will go down in the first few seconds, and the other behemoths will just sit there, mouths agape. Dumbfounded! But not for the toppling of their cohorts in consumption, oh no. No, what they won't be able to comprehend is that their precious meal is being interrupted with noise and excitement. And worse, a strange urge will begin to slowly spread through them. Only it won't be an urge, not that strong. More like a calling. A call to survive. And guess what, Justin, guess what?"

Justin shook his head. "What?"

"*They will actually try!*" he giggled. He took another peek at the table behind them. Justin took a look around, too. People were starting to stare.

"Keep it down, Harv."

"Don't you see?" Harvard continued, whispering ferociously; spraying spittle. "That's the beauty of it! To their dying breath they will wriggle and writhe about in a hilariously pathetic attempt to escape. Not realizing that they are trapped by their own mass. And one by one, we'll get them, and fat, not blood

will ooze from their veins. And America will wake up!”

Harvard was gesturing wildly, his hamburger abandoned. “You see, Justin, this isn’t the first time they’ve heard the call, this instinct for survival. Oh, no. They’ve heard a smaller version of it for the past ten, twenty, thirty, however many years. A few times a day we all hear it, deep inside. And some of us heed it. But others are like these sorry excuses for humans. They hear the call, all right. And they return it with a middle finger. Every time they have time to exercise, but watch TV instead. Every time they go out to eat and order nachos instead of a salad. And you know what? Their kids, their *calves*, will grow up the same way. We’re not killers, Justin. We’re just the room service, delivering deaths that have been ordered a long time ago. When we’re finished here, the call will be broadcasted throughout the nation. No more still, small voice. People will wake up!”

Throughout Harvard’s speech, Justin just stared, his mouth slightly open. He had never seen Harvard act this way. He was an animated guy, sure. Had been all through high school. But never like this. He was almost on top of the table for Pete’s sake.

“Come on, soldier.” Harvard slid out of the booth. “Let’s kick some fat ass.”

By the van, Justin’s hands were shaking uncontrollably as he finally placed the nickel-plated piston in its holster. He had already dropped the damn thing twice. Harvard would have flipped out if he had seen it, but he was too busy suiting up for battle, tossing about B-movie lines all the while.

“Lock and load, boys! Let’s feed these hogs some led!” Harvard hollered from inside the van. He had brought far too much equipment, and was trying to stuff as much as he could in his pants and jacket, strewing shells and clips around him in the process. Justin was trying to look everywhere at once, certain that Harvard’s antics were drawing unwanted attention.

At last, Harvard emerged from the van. He looked like a cheap Rambo Halloween costume, but seemed unaware. A pistol was on each hip: a nickel-plated one like Justin’s and a revolver. A shotgun was cradled in his left arm, and ammo belts that did not look like they belonged to any of the weapons criss-

crossed his chest.

"Ok, Justin, here's the deal." Harvard slapped his hands on Justin's shoulders and moved his head closer until it was inches from Justin's. "No cowardice, no fear. I'm gonna come in hot and heavy, and you'll be right behind me spraying, got it?"

Justin nodded, praying that Harvard would not detect him shaking.

"*I said 'Got it? Answer, man! This ain't the friggin' Boy Scouts!*"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Alright, then!" Harvard released him, turned sharply on his heels. His breathing quickened, until he was almost hyperventilating. His fingers gripped and released the shotgun in his hands. "We're just the messengers. We'll be loved for this. We'll be remembered." He turned his head until his eyes met Justin's. To Justin's surprise, Harvard's eyes were welling up with tears.

"Yeah, right," Justin stammered. "Just messengers." He flashed his best team-spirit smile.

Harvard smiled back before turning to face the restaurant. Justin peered over Harvard's shoulder, scanning the windows. The woman in the bathing suit was just getting up; the boy was throwing the trash, and the girl was headed for the door.

Justin vomited, wiped his mouth, and vomited again. His pistol clacked loudly as it hit the asphalt. He looked up to see if Harvard had noticed. He need not have worried. Harvard was in his own world now. Justin slowly inched towards the van, groping for the door handle behind him. He didn't want to look, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl by the door. She reached up for the handle and pushed on it with all her might, opening the door slightly. Her gaze lowered, until her eyes met Harvard's. They widened. Faintly, as if in a dream, Justin thought he heard a snicker. He jerked his gaze away just as the girl's mouth was widening in terror. The handle was less than a foot away. Justin grabbed it, just as a terrible scream pierced the afternoon. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harvard raise the shotgun to his shoulder, gun belts clinking.

"ALL RIGHT, BOYS! LET THE CLEANSING BEGIN!"

Smokey Joe (a Campfire Story in Two Parts)

by Sean O'Kelley

This is a campfire story told at Camp Orr in Arkansas, and of all the ghost stories I ever heard, if this can even be called one, this was the only one that ever stuck with me. Of course, everyone who lives at the camp swears that this story is true.

I.

Nobody really knows why Chris threw that rock at Jeffery. Even years later, after Chris stopped listening to metal and hating both of his parents, he couldn't remember why he chose to pick up that smooth, oblong stone that fit so perfectly into his hand and hurl it at his tent mate. Knowing our patrol, which was how our Boy Scout troop was divided, it had to be something entirely mundane. We weren't (normally) in the business of attacking each other's personal lives or doing anything truly malicious and most of our arguments, even the ones that came to the verge of blows, were about things like who was supposed to wash the dishes or bring a pale of water. We were 13, though, and winning those small arguments seemed more like struggles for independence and dominance than struggles for productivity or cohesiveness.

Whatever it was though, Chris was livid. Maybe his dad had said something to him earlier that had made him angry, or maybe once again his 4th period teacher had once again embarrassed him in front of the entire class. None of that mattered, though. At least, it didn't matter when the rock hit Jeffery in the ribs, and it certainly didn't matter when Jeffery picked up a rock and threw it back at Chris.

Only three were at the campsite that night: Chris, Jeffery and Austin, all of whom were staying behind at the camp site to finish up the cleaning after dinner. Austin, who had seen on many occasions how angry Chris and Jeffery would get at each other, realized that their rivalry had finally exploded and the only one who could stop it was the scoutmaster (the adult leader who ran the troop,) Joe.

Joe was a strong but kind man, known for his military attitudes and talent at storytelling. We loved him, but at the same time we did our best to never cross him, as his other talent was making a scout feel completely ashamed of his

own actions. Joe ran to the campsite alone, leaving one of the other adult leaders to continue the hike. As he ran, he removed his neckerchief that bore our troop number, Troop number 1, and stuffed it into his pocket.

Nobody was really worried. Chris and Jeffery fought often, and both were terrified of Joe. He would step in, break up the fight, probably send the two of them home, and everything would be fine when the troop met up with him back at the campsite after the hike.

West, as we called the adult leader, got back to the campsite first. He just stopped, and we came to the campsite immediately behind him.

Jeffery was thrown against a tree, wrapped around it backwards like a wire. He was bleeding from his mouth and his eyes were rolled back into his head. Chris was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Joe. West snapped out of his shock and went to check on Jeffery. Shaking, he checked his pulse and breathing. He was alive, but only barely. West shouted to Austin to run to go to the camp HQ and get help.

HQ sent out a call for an ambulance and a search party to find Chris and Joe. They also sent a few representatives back to the campsite to administer first aid and try to create a calm situation. When the reps got back, the troop had already found Chris, whose arm was bleeding from a gash. He was hiding in a tuft of bushes when they found him, and he was shaking with fear.

Chris told West that they had been throwing rocks, and when Joe arrived, he came out of a trail head directly behind Jeffery, and a stray rock from Chris's hand collided like a meteorite with Joe's head. Joe laid there for about 10 minutes with what looked like a skull fracture. There was blood pouring out from under his scalp, and there was blood in his hair. Suddenly, Joe had woken up with a wild look in his eye. He started shaking, then he screamed. Chris and Jeffery were both terrified at this point, and started to back up. They were already about 15 feet back when Joe leapt to his feet. He ran to the two of them, still screaming, and they turned around and ran as far as they could.

Chris said that was the last he had seen, but had heard Jeffery shouting, then a loud crack, then silence. He said that he heard Joe stumble out of the

campsite half-crying to himself. He had been waiting in those bushes since then.

This was the last of the involvement of the boys in the troop. We were sent to the mess hall to wait until our parents arrived to take us home. We didn't hear any real details for about a week, but nobody really wanted to talk about it either. We found out that the leaders of the camp had found Joe, who ran on sight. He sprinted to a small canyon on the camp grounds, where he tried to climb up the walls. The canyon, however, was a box canyon—one way in, one way out, and the walls were far too steep for Joe to reach the top and escape.

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For a while a stand-off happened: camp leaders telling Joe to calm down, to come talk to them, and Joe weeping loudly into the canyon wall. Soon, a local police force arrived with the intention of arresting Joe. Once they reached the entrance of the canyon, however, a thick fog rolled in. Later, people would talk about how fast it appeared, and just how thick it was. It totally concealed Joe.

The fog disappeared quickly, rolling out of the canyon as quickly as it had rolled in. When it was gone, so was Joe. He had vanished. The only plausible explanation was that he had scaled the wall, but the walls were so steep and so smooth that there was no way he could have done such a thing.

Joe had vanished with the fog.

II.

Nobody ever found Joe, and years later, after the pain of the incident had dulled, Joe became a legend. Camp stories were told about him, and he was jokingly blamed for missing items or any sort of mishap. There was a local legend that whenever a deep fog rolled in, you could hear Joe howl out from the woods, terrifying the campers. The leaders called him Smokey Joe, due to his connection with the fog, and everyone claimed to have seen him. However, it was just that: a legend, and one that nobody took too seriously, and although Joe's wife never had a funeral for him, it was assumed that he was dead.

One day, an older scout by the name of Matthew (of Troop number 521) was out alone hiking on the grounds. The grounds were known for being rocky and full of deep holes, and as such hiking alone was completely forbidden. Matt, however, figured he could handle himself and wanted a walk.

He made a false step against a wet rock and fell into a deep hole, knocking him unconscious. He woke up maybe a few hours later and he couldn't tell if the hole had been covered up somehow or if it was just one of the darkest nights he had ever experienced. His arm was broken and he thought his head was bleeding. He tried to climb up a few times, but it was impossible—the walls were too steep and he was too weak to grab the stone and dirt walls with any effect. He began to shout to the top of the hole, but nobody came. Nobody came for hours until he passed out again from exhaustion.

He woke up in a cave. Not the cave he had passed out in, but a smaller one that was more like a room than a hole. The room was damp, but warm, and, after a little time trying to figure out his surroundings, he became aware that he was in a sleeping bag. His arm was also splinted with something, but he couldn't get his thoughts together long enough to figure out what.

For a while he phased in and out of consciousness, sometimes waking up to a little bit of meat or vegetables that someone had left him. He couldn't tell what the meat was, but he ate anyways.

When he felt like he could walk again, he left the small cave, which led

into a series of larger cave-rooms, all of which were littered with camping supplies and bits of food. The whole place stank of feces, piss and sweat, and he could hear someone muttering down one of the shafts. He thought about who might be looking for him and decided he needed to leave.

Matt found a shaft with a sort of make-shift ladder that was made out of rotten sticks and fixed together with bent up nails and rope. He climbed up it, and soon found himself outside. It was around dusk, and a thick, deep fog made the air look like it was made of a translucent cotton.

He heard a howling from inside the cave—something that was obviously human, but terribly, terribly disturbed. The howl seized Matt, freezing him in place. Once it passed, he ran through the fog, down hills and through the thick forest. He wasn't sure he was even going in a direction, or if he was just running in large, winding circles. He could hear something chasing him, something that seemed like it was calling to him, but it was unintelligible, like hearing the screams of a mad man. Matt still had the splint on his arm.

Finally he saw lights, and ran towards them with every bit of his last strength. He could only see faint glows in the fog and the trees around him and the dirt under his feet.

The light turned out to be a campfire, with a group of very young scouts sitting on logs around it, and an adult telling some ghost story. He told them his name, and the leader immediately led all of them into a nearby building.

Once the door was closed, there was a howl from outside, one that made the youngest of the scouts tremble and begin to cry a little bit. Once the scream silenced, the fog rolled all the way back, revealing a clear night dotted with stars.

Matt looked down at his arm, which was still splinted with two dowels and an old neckerchief that bore, in red letters across a green background: Troop #1.

The Love Song of an Insect

by Annie M. Palumbo

Winter arrives with a gust of granite.

Winter arrives and you turn into an insect, Kafka wrote your story, and your wings are singed and matted like the hair of a pageantry queen, all sobs and bleeding mascara after she's been told that [she's got second place]; [that she's not the best.]

You can't remember the last time you were good at something. You can't remember the last time you told the truth, to anybody about anything. You wish for someone, somewhere. You wish for no one, nowhere. Here we sit reflected, but no words penetrate the silence consummated through our vain nature. You struggle to retain composure, you're learning patience, and you're losing kindness. You've got enough in your freezer to make it until April, or maybe another week just before the Cruellest Month. You make a list, check it twice; you check it three times.

The phone rings. The phone rings three times

Cubicles remind you of high school. Cubicles remind you of the ape House, of the oppression, of your depression. This is not life; this is not your life. You long for waves of reprieve that only come with sincere acceptance. But what was yours was mine, but what was mine was yours; what was ours is buried. Clandestine and cluttered within the files of a compost pile marked, "Futile".

A woman goes to her doctor. It's a Tuesday, and the sky is blue and thus in everything you see. The woman goes to her doctor, she signs her name twelve times and waits in the frowning mouth of a worn out chair. The AC is louder than her thoughts, the line before her is longer than her hair because of the chemo. She taps her foot to the rhythm of soundless intervals that come in seconds when the office phone doesn't ring. She taps her foot to the off-beat rhythm of her own heart. Her name is finally called; she fumbles with her handbag, and glides across the room like a phantom of a 1970's black and white drive-thru film.

The nurse takes your weight, the nurse counts the inches of your existence, the nurse checks your blood pressure; says nothing, looks nowhere but at the digits that she meticulously writes down on your form.

No fever.

No allergic reactions.

No chance.

Five cocktails in two weeks, no alcohol. Five pounds last week, ten pounds this week. Inch by inch you're waning out of existence. The sky was blue; your eyes are blue, your rhythm is blue, blue, blue. The doctor comes into his antiseptic office; he paces between your forms, yet in symphony with the clocks smallest finger. Five pounds last week, ten pounds this week. Your bones poke out through your cashmere sweater, your bones peek out and play hide and seek. No one looks you in the eye; no one empathizes with your situation, enough to speak.

Let's call it population control, let's call it personal catastrophe, let's call it lack of sympathy. "Nice weather we're having," says the woman to her doctor.

"Isn't it." Is your doctor's retort.

You're not sure if this is rhetorical, or a sardonic remark on your ability to actually believe that today was nice. You wince involuntarily. The doctor sits down, he asks you to take a seat. You sigh. Both chairs sigh in harmony. Your eyes are blue; your doctor's eyes are onyx. Your doctor's eyes are hallowed slits of ink. The doctor hands you a slip of paper. The paper has your name in bold clear print. The paper has a napkin adhered to its back. The slip of paper slips through your skeletal fingers, the slip of slippery paper is on the floor. You clutch at the napkin desperately, involuntarily. The blue of your eyes is leaking. Your name is in bold clear print at the top of the paper. Your name is already an epitaph. Your name is already buried. The doctor turns his attention to the clock that continues running, as you transition into cardiac arrest. Hello my name is Out of Options. Hello my name is Last Priority. Hello my name is being Eaten Away by Cancer. Hello my name is Fifteen Pounds Lighter, and I'm losing my hair and My Family is Dead or across seas, and no one will come to My Funeral.

The nurse walks in, now there is an audience. This is your moment of humility, but you're leaking Herceptin and running your makeup. The lump in your torso has taken twenty years off of your life, and you aren't even dead yet. You feel polluted, you feel abandoned, you feel nothing. Now there is an audience, so you

must play your part. You must hold that chin of yours above the floor, you must retain composure. You must retain all of the things your therapist implored you to practice, for the benefit of your emotional health.

All health is in a digression.

You're a corpse but they say you'll be okay if you're accepting. Yet, it is in acceptance, which man gives up. So you remain frozen in your sighing chair, and your vision goes blurry, and the doctor begins his scientific jargon, and run through of other options with results similar to the holocaust, but they think you've got a "Fighting Chance", they think you've got another two years.

This is when you look up, this is when your eyes go senseless, and for one reason or another you are livid. For one reason or another, you've acquired some cruel intentions, for one reason or another it feels as though they're laughing at you with their automatic rebuttals of false optimism. Hello my name is Not Important. You stand up; you're still clutching that napkin that was given to you for your sodium. As if that could compensate all which you're losing, all the life you've lost. You stand frozen in place. One solitary second, one moment of involuntarily immobility. There is an audience in this room, you should know how to behave by now, but all of those "Cancer Fighter" meetings have got you ill with agony over the human race, and this doctor, this shell of a person who handles you paperwork, who gives you your chemicals, who charges your life insurance four times what you're worth; this man still won't look you in the eyes. There is something about your invisibility, something close to Ellison, something synonymous to instantaneous combustion, when your demise is a subject matter of trivial account.

The blue of your eyes is leaking, all over the new carpet job in your doctor's office; the blue of your eyes has got the audience wide-eyed and tongue dangling. The blue of your eyes moves nothing. So you move what won't be moved, and you move it to your liking, and you move it away from you. You're still fighting in one way or another for you right to exist; you're still fighting for your right to compassion, for those wilted tulips at your empty funeral. For the day after you're dead and nobody knows.

The phone rings.

You backhand the nurse with the hand you've used to sign every festering hospital bill; you unhinge your doctors framed diploma from the closest wall and in your mania propel it at the doctor's skull. Your eyes, are raging. Your test results are futile, your doctor is futile, your tolerance is futile, all you wanted was someone to agree, that "yes, the weather today is beautiful."

The phone rings.

For the first time in over twenty years, your doctor cleans up his own blood.

For the first time, in his entire life your doctor acknowledges obvious malpractice.

Then security is at the door.

And you've always hated knock-knock jokes.

The audience goes wild.

Kinetic Energy

by William Mabie

I'm standing outside my car in an empty strip mall parking lot. It's partly cloudy and a half-past three on a Tuesday morning and there's a silence in the air, which gives me solace. My view is fixed on the street as I calmly puff away at a cigarette and let thoughts enter and leave my mind, much like the smoke I inhale and exhale with each deep drag I take. This is my moment of reflection, and I take this time to clear my mind and prepare myself for the drive that lies ahead.

I've been watching the road for traffic and the last car passed by over a half-hour ago. It's bad enough I endanger my own life; no need to put someone else's on the line. At least, that's how I rationalize it. I put out my now-finished cigarette and reach for the door. I slip into the driver seat like I was getting into my favorite worn-in pair of blue jeans. I place the key into the ignition and fasten my safety belt. I turn the key to "on" and the dashboard comes alive with an amber glow, my face basking in its light. For a moment, I close my eyes and resume my mind-clearing exercises.

Wait for it...

I open my eyes, push down the clutch, and press the "engine start" button to the left of the steering wheel. A flow of electricity runs through wires and into the engine bay, making its way in an instant to the starter. Concurrently, the fuel pump brings gas into the cylinders, the intake system brings air into the equation, and they all ignite as the spark plugs create controlled chaos within the walls of the motor. The machine has awakened, and the engine beckons me with its steady purr. I place the transmission into neutral and remove my foot off of the clutch.

This road that lays ahead of me, I've been down it so many times; I know details, like the location of large bumps and various imperfections, the bank angles and radii of the curves, the safest approach and exit speeds I should take in order to not wind up as a heap of blood and glass and metal on the side of the road somewhere along the way. These things matter.

The next split-second of action is broken down into a series of steps I've been rehearsing meticulously over the years. My left foot, at rest on the dead pedal, lifts up with the reflex of a jungle cat, pouncing back down upon the clutch; my right hand, at rest on the shift knob, gives a quick throw to the top-left cor-

ner—first gear engaged; my right foot, at rest on its heel, gives a quick pop to the gas pedal as my left foot lifts off the clutch in a near-simultaneous motion. It's at this moment that the engine truly starts to breath life, and as power is being channeled through the drive shaft and differential, the rear tires break loose, accompanied by a loud squeal. My left hand, at rest on the steering wheel, grasps it firm and sure; a minor correction left, then right, then left again. Finally, grip between the tires and the asphalt is achieved, and the car lunges forward.

The tachometer on my dash begins to climb: two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, five thousand. Fifty-five hundred revolutions per minute are achieved, and the cam profile changes from low- to high-range, accompanied by a sudden surge of power. Six, seven, eight thousand revolutions of the crank are ringing in my ears—and we're not even at red line yet. The tachometer is finally closing in on nine thousand RPMs, the speedometer is approaching forty-five miles per hour, and at that moment my instinct begins to sharpen.

With the engine screaming, I lift my right foot off the gas pedal and slam my left foot down upon the clutch. My right hand moves from the steering wheel to the shift knob, my fingers wrap around the gear selector and pull it back to the second gate with a slight clunking sound. In a fluid motion, my left foot comes back off the clutch; my right foot plunges down on the gas. The throttle cable leading to the intake manifold opens up the butterfly valve, allowing for more air to enter the combustion chambers. The electronic engine control unit compensates for the change in mixture by sending more fuel through the injectors. Power is fed through the drivetrain, and the resulting swell in torque causes the rear tires to lose their grasp of the road.

I'm expecting this and correct the steering wheel with both hands holding tight, my knuckles now white from the excessive grip I'm using. Climbing up second gear, the passing landscape outside my window begins to slightly smudge—ever so slightly at first. My peripheral vision is reduced as my eyes focus down the road before of me. My mind begins to find a state of nirvana. My thoughts and fears and insecurities start to fade into nothing. My body and soul become one with this machine I'm piloting. The flashing red warning light of

the tachometer interrupts these thoughts; already back to the top of the power band. The speedometer tells me that I'm traveling at a rate of sixty-two miles per hour—it's hardly been six seconds since this little tap-dance recital began.

Headlights cut through thick darkness, penetrating deep on this deserted drive, devoid of any witness to my prowess. These streets are mostly silent this early in the morning, but this is when the roads speak the most to me. A rough patch of pavement translates through the shocks and coils of the suspension, causing a minor jump and a brief audible protest from the tires. A high-speed turn challenges me and I accept, tossing the car into the thick of it; the weight shifts from center to left as I make a hard right. The tires work diligently for grip as I push their limit through the bend. The weight shifts just beyond my comfort zone for a moment, and for that moment I gulp hard. Instinct takes over, I raise my foot off the gas just a bit, and I correct course as I cut the peak of the corner.

Pushing through third gear, I enter a long straight section and my security begins to take hold once more. I settle in to the back of the seat, comforted by the light from my dashboard, gripping the wheel a little tighter with both hands placed at three o'clock and nine o'clock, watching the speedometer continue to rise—seventy, seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. I finally arrive at ninety miles per hour, and welcome it with a perfectly executed shift into fourth gear.

At this speed, the slight smudge of the landscape has now become a fast-moving smear. Dashes on the road have suddenly melted into a single, solid line. The combination of noise from the engine, road, and wind, all work in concert to create a symphony that shames most philharmonics. Ahead of me a small yellow warning sign announces, "Suggested speed limit 15 MPH." This is where the road begins to tighten up as it cuts through tree-covered hills, winding through elevation changes and several sharp turns. With a few downshifts and matched revs of the engine, I bring my car to a comfortable speed of forty miles per hour.

In the moment just before I'm completely engulfed in the turn, my left foot rotates and extends between the clutch and the brake, engaging them both simultaneously. As my left hand guides the wheel, my right hand grabs for the shifter and drops the transmission down one last gear. My right foot applies the

throttle with precise amounts, my left foot measures out proper proportions of brake and clutch, my hands tighten their grip, and the back tires of the car break grip and slide through the peak of the bend, all the while maintaining momentum.

I attack corner after sharp corner at a pace that would scare anyone brave enough to sit in the passenger seat. The black of night frames the view through my windshield as trees dart past the sides of the road. The drive becomes more of the routine that it is, and my thoughts begin to disengage from the task at hand—my instinct is now in full control. I arrive at a banked hairpin and as I push through, I take the time to study the tire marks on the street and damaged trees that they lead to. It makes me wonder how many people's roads came to an end at this very place. Strange, this feels almost like foreshadowing.

It's then that the peripheral of my view catches the glimmer from a reflective set of green eyes that shouldn't be there. The headlights reveal a deer I'm barreling down upon, just standing there in the middle of the road looking back at me. My pulse jumps up and gnawing starts at the pit of my stomach and quickly spreads to the rest of my body. The next moment, I'm practically standing on the brake pedal. Everything becomes silent. The shrieking of the tires, the beating of my heart, the air exiting my lungs, all of it has gone dead. The weight of the car starts to pitch a little to the left and it makes me think about kinetic energy, and how velocity is forcing the car forward and the friction between the tires and road has exceeded its limit. The brake pedal starts to pulsate as the anti-lock braking system takes over, trying its hardest to stop me.

When you can't turn, you can't speed up, and you can't slow down, all you can do is wait it out. In the moment, my thoughts start to wander about insurance claims and body shops, God and the afterlife, and things of this nature. The considerations that go through one's mind in the moments leading up to a car accident can be best described as self-absorbed, but who can cast blame?

Something tells the deer to quit staring at my fast approaching car, and finally it begins to dart away just as I enter its personal space. Fast, but not fast enough. I narrowly clip one of its rear legs and send the deer flying through the

air, its back end rotating around like a Dutch windmill. Somehow, it pulls off a near-flawless landing much like an Olympic gymnastics athlete, and by the time my car finally comes to a skidding halt the edge of the road—mere inches from a tree—I find that I'm once again alone.

I think about breathing exercises. I inhale and exhale, both hands still clutching the wheel. The engine has stalled out, so there's an eerie silence as I stare blankly at the massive trunk in front of me, still petrified in thought and action. The smoke from the tires hangs loosely in front of my headlights, giving off a spooky vibe, the only light in this dark scene I just witnessed.

Finally, something sparks in my mind, and I pull out a cigarette and ignite it. Inhale. Exhale. The smoke creeps out my open window, mixing with the burnt rubber and dissolving into the early morning air, muggy with humidity. An eternity passes before my eyes. Finally I laugh at myself, start up the engine, throw the transmission into gear, and turn around to head home.

This morning I met my destiny; we called it a draw.

A Rocky View

by Lynzee Villafranca

A whispering palette of blue sky dance above me, marking the third day that has passed since I have seen Cyrus. To my left, I see only dull, chiseled replicas of Cyrus forgetting they are a reflection of me. The other rocks turn away, letting the spotted and torn canopy of trees hide them from the radiant ones, just like the six- and sometimes eight-legged ants who cover themselves with chalky sand and heaps of dirt. Wandering across my surface stealthily without invitation, the ants tickle the breath within me.

Cyrus will share his light with me. Soon.

“Nomi!”

I hear a squeal calling my name as it is carried, tossed, and turned by the unforgiving force that never fails but to move me farther from Cyrus—the wind.

Lana lands beside me with a newly chipped sides from the wind’s furious thrust.

The screeching wind takes me as its captive. After bouncing more times than I want to remember, half of me lands awkwardly on another rock and the other half on one of the canopy trunks. The trunk’s hard surface is scarred by deep grooves, probably from all of the wind’s abuses. Like Lana, I experience this abuse firsthand after being carried and dropped abruptly by the wind like a field mouse from the teeth of its prey. She retreats back to the position in which the wind found her—complacently lying face down, wedged beside another rock.

Not surprising.

My heart races as I look at the brightest, most polished rock in the sky, the sun, begin to sink majestically behind the ancient, complacent ones who never wanted or longed for radiance. They sit so high up.

Piles and piles crammed together, remaining indistinguishable from one another. Their harsh points contrast with the colorful softness which surrounds them. Even when it rains, the water runs so rapidly down the sides, fleeing from their cold rigid surface just as the red-speckled snake slides across the jagged ground in fear of the hawk’s talons.

Not a life fore me.

I see August, Jefferson Park’s slyest ant, walking frantically towards me

carrying a chunk of cruse matter on his back.

Today is definitely my luck day.

His dark clumpy dirt pile is a honeysuckle leaf's length away from me. It moves as each speck of dirt comes to life. Little legs rush up and down its sides with each tiny leg not leaving its own print but just stepping into the print of the one before it.

Oh geez. The unbearable tickle.

"Good day, Nomi," says August as he invites himself onto my right side.

"August! Great pile! One of the best I've seen so far. Fits at least two hundred ants I bet."

The big light is almost unseen. All I can do now is wait.

"Just about," he says. "All we need is an object to keep it from shifting, something heavy, preferably round that can't move itself."

Before I can speak, thirty-two pesky hurried legs race towards me. In silence, they me onto their four lumpy backs. I shift from side to side but finally am heaved into the dirt pile. I look to my left to see August, hidden by a blade of grass, snickering.

Cyrus is gone.

The mixture of darkness, dirt, and routine suffocates me. Never will I forgive August for this. Everyone knows he is a conniver but what could I have done? Cyrus would never do such a thing. He gives light, not takes it away.

Where's the wind when you need her.

Suddenly, the legs stop at one. Their lumpy round heads all look up in one swift, orderly motion. A gloomy, motionless shadow covers half the pile.

It must be night. Cyrus?

The ants drop their crumbs, twig butts, and leaf tears at once. The footprint rows of two that appeared to have had no end lose their shape. One runs left and another right, left, right, left, left, left.

Two trunk-like objects pound the ground, left, right, left, right.

"Humans!" I hear the trampled and trembling and terrified ants yell from their tiny lungs.

The legs bend towards me. Then I see the most frightening yet marvelous thing—two glassy trembling objects set on a chiseled but dappled surface with a mass of fire-colored fur above it—a face.

I bet I can skip it across the water farther than you Karl!” the dappled boy says to another tree-like being off in the distance.

A claw-like object, a hand, intact with five fingers picks me up, clutching the soft grooves and rides that define my dullness. My matted surface is moistened by the human. Then it takes me captive.

The wind rushes across my sides as I fly swiftly over the swaying grass of the field.

All I hear next is a splash. Everything becomes muffled. A faint clacking sounds as I drift downward. White speckled balls of light move past me, shooting from all my sides. Friendly sparks of light dance lightly around me. It feels like the first day of winter as I inhale, the water filling my lungs so gently, softening my fall. The life hidden underneath this sandy, imperfect, angular surface is so vibrant. With each exhale, the light spheres become more numerous and jubilant, bouncing from one position to another.

A thump upon the lakes' bottom.

Looking above, through the soft waves of the once daunting lake, Cyrus can be seen. He is so close. His rays of light away. I too, am enveloped; not by the hushed blue that holds him so dearly, but instead, by the sky's confidant, the water. As though he waves at me, welcomes me, invites me.

The first part of the book is devoted to a general history of the United States, from the discovery of the continent to the present time. It is divided into three volumes, the first of which contains the history of the discovery and settlement of the continent, the second the history of the formation of the Union, and the third the history of the Union from its formation to the present time. The second part of the book is devoted to a general history of the world, from the beginning of the world to the present time. It is divided into three volumes, the first of which contains the history of the world from the beginning of the world to the time of the birth of Christ, the second the history of the world from the birth of Christ to the present time, and the third the history of the world from the present time to the end of the world.

The third part of the book is devoted to a general history of the United States, from the discovery of the continent to the present time. It is divided into three volumes, the first of which contains the history of the discovery and settlement of the continent, the second the history of the formation of the Union, and the third the history of the Union from its formation to the present time. The fourth part of the book is devoted to a general history of the world, from the beginning of the world to the present time. It is divided into three volumes, the first of which contains the history of the world from the beginning of the world to the time of the birth of Christ, the second the history of the world from the birth of Christ to the present time, and the third the history of the world from the present time to the end of the world.

Ogling Autumn

by Frances Mell

A white downy feather drifted into the crack in my car window and I reached up my hand to grasp it. I rubbed it between my thumb and fore finger, delighting its delicate texture. At first the feathers were just drifting slowly to the ground. They seemed to have just appeared from no particular place. Coming one by one the light grey plumes floated through the air; like a misty rain resting upon the dewy grass. The wind bombarded them with its heavy assault and some were lifted into flight again, only to rest seconds later on a patch of grass nearby.

Then two more floated into my Honda, shortly followed by yet another two. Intent on finding the source I studied the fairly new brick building that loomed before me. Delicate trails of feathers were floating in the breeze past the first floor awning; some sticking to the porous brick. My gaze shifted higher up the building when I didn't spy what had to be a mostly plucked bird. I scanned the second floor awning, also to no avail. I looked higher still, my eyes focusing on the flat roof.

Grey feathers, no more than specks in the sky, were arching over the building. I couldn't be certain if they originated from the roof, or beyond it. Staring up at the precipice impatiently I saw two small shoes dangling off the roof; a pair of child size shoes. Turning the clunky key in the ignition to off I opened the driver side door; my bare feet touching the warm gravel.

"Hello", I called, "is someone up there?" The shoes withdrew from the edge of the roof, as if the owner suddenly experienced shyness. Curious, I walked around the building to see if there was a fire escape that led to the top. Not finding one I surmised that the young owner of the shoes must have used a set of stairs within the building. I eased through a back exit, at once startled by the heavy dampness and the odor of rusty metal. After my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I tried to find a way up to the roof. In the gloom, to my immediate left, a door, its off white paint peeling off, was marked with the partially missing picture of red stairs.

I pushed on the door and the loud sound of the rusty creak filled the stagnant air. I thought it odd that the building, erected only a few years ago, was in such disrepair. I climbed the concrete stair case, careful to avoid the trash and

debris that littered each step. Reaching the top I came face to face with a large painted black steel door. I twisted the knob and struggled to open the slab door. Immediately I was assaulted with a magnitude of sun. I walked blindly onto the roof and paused to let my eyes adjust.

A little boy sat a few yards before me, his small legs hanging over the side of the roof. I called out to him as I took a few steps in his direction. Either he didn't hear me or he chose not to acknowledge my presence so I stopped my stride. "Hey, Kid!" This time I shouted louder, my words tumbling out hurriedly. He seems rather cute with that mop of brown, tussled hair, I thought to myself.

"You wanna help?" He asked calmly.

I hobbled gingerly over the steamy, tarred roof all the while berating myself for leaving my flip flops in the car. And soon I was sitting next to him, swinging my legs over the side of the roof, my feet next to his pair of red Chucks. I swung my denim clad legs back and forth and wiggled my toes. I peered down at the boy and noticed he was clutching a small grey pigeon to his chest. I wrinkled my nose in abhorrence.

"What's with the bird?" I said in disgust. Instead of a reply he tilted his pointed chin at me and a tear slid down his face.

"Are you ok? Why are you up here alone?"

As I waited for his reply, I noticed his appearance; his eyes like the colors of autumn, a mixture of brown and red, and receded as if they were trying to hide inside his skull, and his skin - a beautiful olive tone. Then I noticed the pockets of his khaki pants; bulging with feathers, slightly larger than the ones I had seen before. He lowered the bird from his chest. His white t-shirt slightly smudged with crimson, a faint metallic smell wafted up to my nose leaving behind an acrid taste in the back of my throat. I reached out to him in alarm and stopped short when he cringed away from me.

"Don't touch me." He whined as he scooted out of my reach.

"You're really close to the edge, it's making me nervous. Please come closer to me."

"I'm ok." The boy took in the limp figure in his palms. "But he's not."

Indeed The bird was not ok. Most of its feathers were nonexistent on its body making its pallid skin peek through the blood left behind by the feathers. The pigeon's head slung back against his tiny fingers, its eyes open and glossy. The building came alive with a low buzz, the energy ricocheting of every surface. I brought my knees up to my chest, resting the soles of my feet on the shingles. I could feel the building hum.

"He was ok when I walked in." The boy whispered in dismay, more to the bird than to me. "He was wiggling."

"Maybe you squeezed him too hard?" I shuddered at the thought of being suffocated in between a pair of hands.

"No, it wasn't that. I think he burned."

"Why would you think that?"

"He never got old you know." He squeaked matter of factly. The bird, although not a baby still hadn't reached maturity.

"Why are you plucking out his feathers?" My question was met with silence as the autumn eyed boy stroked the bird's head with his thumb. I watched him for a second or two before trying to engage him in conversation again.

"My name is Styx." I offered out a hand for him to shake. Not grasping it he replied, "Like the river of hate."

"Well the river nymph Styx. Zeus decreed all vows in her name were eternally sacred. My mom liked that, overlooking the hate part."

"My name is Temperance." He offered proudly.

"You don't seem very constraint." I said playfully.

"You don't seem hateful." A lop sided smile crossed his face briefly the corner of his mouth upturning but the emotion not in his eyes.

He started to pluck feathers out of the bird again; one by one, letting each fall over the edge of the roof. I watched him in silence, hoping for an explanation.

"How would you feel if you never got to fly? If you had the ability, yet you never got to. Never shed your chains." He trilled, tears filling his eyes.

"Is that why you're pulling his feathers out? You're molting for him?"

"I never got to molt."

"You're not a bird." I pointed out to him in a disconcerted tone. He was running out of feathers, maybe a dozen left.

He plucked the last feather out and shifted his body to face me; one leg scrunched to his bony chest, the other straddling the edge. A gasp emanated from behind my lips. The left side of his body was completely burned, all except his face. I looked at his left hand peeking out from his sleeve. I never noticed the burn because the bird had stretched across it before.

"I'm going to make wings with them," he gestured to his spilling pockets, "and fly out of the labyrinth like Icarus."

"Icarus flew too close to the sun and the wax holding his wings together melted and he fell into the sea and drowned."

"I've already fallen into the sun, I'll take my chances with the sea." With that he tossed the bird over the side. I watched its pitiful form twist out of view. I heard a faint thump. I slid on my stomach to see where the bird landed. Its carcass was splayed out on the hood of my car.

Temperance scooted close to me, and rested his head on my shoulder. I smiled at his childlike mannerism. "Where do live, I'll take you home?"

"I don't have a home." He whispered, as if it was the greatest secret in the world. "My mom died in the fire, I've been in foster care for a few years now." I swiveled my head uncomfortably to look at his face. He was gazing into the sky, a tear sliding down his face. I couldn't leave him, but I felt like to take him back would be to betray. Can a minor kidnap a minor? I decided that was ludicrous.

"Come on." I popped up and grasped his hand, pulling him onto his feet. We trudged over to the door. I cursed as I burnt my hand on the door knob.

As we sat in the car I gazed at the pigeon. "Where do you wanna go?" I inquired. Temperance shrugged as he strapped on his seat belt. "Where did Icarus go?"

"Umm into an abyss of ocean." I flicked my bangs out of my eyes with a twist of my neck. "I've never seen the ocean."

Designer Napalm

by Stela Khury

She carries the Anarchist's Cookbook in her Chanel handbag. No one in the subway cart would ever guess it, but that's life, I suppose. We never do know, do we?

She sits with her long legs crossed in a lady-like manner. Her hands, though on the larger side, are delicately laid across her lap. Intertwined in her gloved fingers, sitting in her cupped palms, is the small, blue knob that will end everything.

The cart comes to a stop and people start getting off. A stout, black-haired man bumps on her on the way out, but she remains quite still in her seat.

"It's fine," she says, dusting her black Burberry coat. "I'm fine." The woman hadn't asked.

The stairs are packed. People are pushing others out of the way as they clamber up the steps to the outside world. After being stuck underground for so long, not even the bone-chilling cold can discourage the passengers: they crave fresh air.

The cart starts moving once more and just as it's about to disappear into the tunnel, she flicks the switch and everything comes crashing down. There is no slow succession of events. It is all pure destruction. The steps come crashing down and the sidewalk caves in. All the while the cart remains almost intact, its closed doors and reinforced glass windows absorbing most of the impact. She sways from side to side, sliding violently in her seat, but her hands instinctively know where to hold and her feet help keep her somewhat steady. She had calculated it that way.

The people around her are screaming and pulling emergency switches. She wonders if they are under the illusion they can do anything to change what has happened? The cart comes to an abrupt stop and she's almost knocked out of her seat.

She gets up calmly and begins a nonchalant march towards the back. There's people pushing their way in the opposite direction. One man shoves her out of the way without so much as glancing her way. He doesn't get to see her smile.

She opens the emergency door and jumps out onto the tracks, Manolo

Blahnik leather boots clinking in the rocky ground. She climbs the metal stairs with graceful peacefulness. The streets are chaotic. She covers her mouth with a silk handkerchief as she passes the smoky rubble that covers the sidewalks. No one sees her put on her Dior sunglasses and then pull out her favorite book as a distraction for the leisurely walk home.

In Conclusion

by Emily Bryant-Mundschau

The rush of morning caffeine fiends in Starbucks ebbs and flows around the brother and sister. The siblings stare silently out the window, waiting for their mother. Across the street, the strip mall is dead. It is 7AM and most places won't even be open for another hour. School starts in 45 minutes, but the siblings are still sitting in the oversized chairs. They have been forgotten.

As rain begins to hit the pavement in small, precise drops, the sister, Ruth begins to shiver. "This is the Midwest, for goodness sake, and it's more likely that heat will be needed rather than cooling" she mumbles. The only warmth provided to Ruth comes from the latte in her pale hands. She looks to her younger brother, Abel, and tilts her head inquisitively. Ruth pulls her long, blond hair into a ponytail. She always needs something to do with her hands when she is nervous.

Now it is 7:30 and the shops in the strip mall begin to light up for their opening routines. Flick. Weight Watchers. Flick. Midwest Vision. Flick. Cousin's Subs. Flick. Planned Parenthood. Ruth and Abel watch, weary eyed, as the workers file in to begin the day. Meanwhile, the inside of the Starbucks begins to calm. The oversized chairs they are sitting in are a dark green with silver. Ruth hates the serpentine color scheme, a fact she had made apparent when they arrived: "Blue would have gone so much nicer than this evil green. It makes me think of evil and sin." Abel had shrugged. He vocalizes that he doesn't care what his sister thinks about colors, but she ignores his comments.

"Do you think Mom will ever show up? I want to get to school." Abel asks his sister. "I have to get talk to the guys about my date with Eva." His friends had been texting him all morning asking about his date the previous night. He taps his fingers impatiently on the coffee table in front of him.

"I don't know. She said she would meet us. I'm not worried about school. I have all my books with me anyway." When Ruth speaks to her younger brother, her eyebrows furrow as if she is concerned. "You rarely do school work, you never open a book, and more often than not you are glued to a computer screen" she criticizes. He is everything she had fought against becoming in her early adolescence. "Didn't you prepare to miss a day? I got my assignments for tomorrow."

"No." Abel purses his lips and shakes his head. Of course he hadn't. He

rolls his eyes at his sister. He sighs, looks at his cell phone, and shrugs.

7:45, school is just beginning. Ruth checks her cell phone. "How'd it go?" her best friend asks. "It hasn't gone yet." She answers.

Her latte is getting low. "Abe, can you order me another? Here's some money." She doesn't want to take her eyes off the busy road for a moment. Their mother had promised to meet them at 7:30 for coffee before school. Time and time again she had agreed to meet her estranged children, but she never followed through. She had abandoned them years before, but by some miracle they had managed to stay together through all the trials life had already put them through. Once they had lived in a beautiful home with every amenity, but ever since their mother had left them they occupied a dirty apartment near their school. Their uncle owns the building and lets them stay for free, but they still have to pay for food and laundry on their own. Their mother had left them with nothing and each day since has been a test of the siblings' will to survive.

"Do you ever think about him? About Jesse?" Abel asks his sister.

Jesse. A topic avoided. He was supposed to be their savior, but he had failed. He was the third child of their mother, but Jesse's father remained a mystery. Jesse's conception was a mystery. Her first two children were a constant reminder of failure: a failed relationship, a failed youth. Jesse was supposed to change her. When he was born their mother settled down. She loved and cared for her third creation. Her love for Ruth and Abel also seemed renewed. She stayed home, she played with them and she made them dinner. She was a mother.

"No. I don't like to think about Jesse." replies Ruth. "When he got sick it was like the world stopped. How were we supposed to handle that? How can a 2 year old be fine one morning and then be purple faced the next? I never understood what happened, really." Jesse had gotten sick very quickly. The doctors weren't sure what had caused it: an allergy? Toxic mold? Whatever caused it had worked quickly. Jesse was a smiling, happy baby when he went to sleep. When he woke up, he was miserable. He coughed and choked. He tried to cry, but couldn't. Ruth had been the one to walk in and pick him up that morning. His cheeks were purple, his head was lolling side to side. She had screamed for her mother

and they had rushed to the hospital, but he died during the drive. Ruth had been holding him. She had rocked her little brother back and forth, back and forth, in an attempt to sooth him. Then, she had felt him grow still. Too still. "I will never forget Mom's face at the funeral. White, like a sheet, yet green."

"Yeah," muses Abel. "she didn't say much to us. Remember her knuckles on the drive to the cemetery? She was squeezing the steering wheel tight. I don't think she was even breathing."

Shortly after the funeral their mother became distant. Then, one night, she never came home. Now, here sat Ruth and Abel. They watch the road, the gray clouds overhead, each silently praying. "Please show up. Please show up." Their prayers fall on deaf ears. They stare at one another, they stare at the floor. The only place they cannot bear to look is the doorway.

At 8:15, Ruth stands up, grabs her bag and says to her brother "I give up. She will never come for us." She begins walking toward the door. Turning around, she sees her brother with his head in his hands. "You can stay if you want. I don't believe she's really our mother anymore anyway. I'll see you at home."

9:00AM and Abel is still sitting and watching the window. He mumbles to himself "I know she is our mother and mothers love their kids. She will come. She will come. She will come." 10AM, 11AM, noon. Finally, Abel sighs. He stands up, grabs his back pack and walks toward the door. At the bus stop he stares blankly ahead. "I won't go home and sulk like Ruth. I'll go to school and get on with my life." He says to an old blind woman, sitting next to him on the cold steel bench. "Ruth will have some grand speech prepared for me 'Our mother has forsaken us!' That's too depressing. I'd rather believe she just never existed to begin with."

POETRY

Poetry

by Cyra S. Dumitru

The weight of a word, the magnitude of a moment: can they form an equivalent?

Each bears treasure. Each has a life span
impossible to measure.

What vessel can hold the moment that lives forever?

Pencil-Turned, Papered-Stage

by Tiffany Galvan

Arm placement here
Period there
Comma, Comma,
5,6,7,8
Time to Dance-
Around letters and words
And
Symbols and meanings

Music begins
As the pencil
Dances on its papered-stage
Each word, a choreographed dance
Perfectly placed between each
5th comma 6th comma 7th and 8th
Stanza, to become one with the dance
In sync with the papered-stage

Music still playing
Pencil-turns
Blank upon the papered-stage
Falling into
Blank stares of
"What's next?"
Arm placement here
Period there.
Gotta move, Gotta write
Comma 5?
Or Comma 7?
Doesn't matter,
The show must go on...

Time to Dance-
Around letters and words
And
Symbols and meanings

Words flow and leap
One final jeté across the papered-stage.
Period.
5,6,7,8
Pose.

Words stop, Music ends
The pencil turns across its papered-stage.

Charioteer, Delphi

by Carol Reposa

Children swarm around the room.
Tourists hustle
For their cameras
And thousands of shutters
Snap.

He doesn't look at them,
His eyes forever
On the finish line,
A triumph
If he wins.

His horses are beyond him
Racing
Through some other age
But he is ready
For the start.

A sweat band
Squeezes his carved curls.
He stands serene, barefoot,
His bronze robes draping him
In folds the shade of olive trees.

Missing his left arm
He waits for the signal,
His one hand balancing the reins.
They float toward his vanished horses
Weightless as a falling scarf

While he gazes
Straight ahead,
His copper lashes
Still
In that white light.

Stop the Seconds

by Noe Garza, III

On the final straw of my broken heart,
I lost sense of all reality in this fake stability
That I thought I had from the start.
The rotten smell of time's capacity
To aggregate my soul to feel the despair
Of life's never ending torment.
Only the most High can treat me fair
In my soul's most vulnerable lament.
If I could stop the seconds to foresee my next step,
I would go where few have ever dared to intercept.

Dog

by Chao Ning

Lovely. Cute.
Play. Jump. Run.
Travel to different places.
Chase. Walk. Catch.
Happy. Wonderful.
Friend

The Earth

by Naeui Kim

Huge. Vast

Play. Eat. Consume.

That's what we do.

Develop. Waste. Ignore.

Sick. Contaminated.

The abandoned land

Suddenness

by Soyeong Jeon

Sudden. Chilly.

Who said hot San Antonio?

Cough. Sneeze. Ill.

Cool. Cold.

Fall

At the Poetry Workshop (for Arch)

by Carol Reposa

We have five minutes
To scribble
Examples of frustration
Fast as we can.

OK. Frustration is the ignition key
Glittering like fool's gold
On the floorboard of my Camry
After I have pushed the power lock

Or the runs that magically appear
On my last pair of hose,
Lightning striking in the same place
Twice

Or the weekly jihad at the store,
Spoils finally taken, my place in line secure
Before I remember
My checkbook on the kitchen table.

Worst of all is the phone
Ringing in the other room
Ringing, ringing,
A whine that may run out of breath

Before I can seize the handset
And hear your voice,
Curl into its timbre
Like a happy cat on a favorite rug.

I am racing toward that sound now

Spilling coffee, dropping my pen,
Anything to get there
Put us together

Bring you back
Before the line
Goes dead.
"Time," the instructor says.

Aiden

by Peter Desmond Roehl

Flashes of sunlight whip across my face
reflected by the undulating surface of the water.
The gleam of light forces me to squint,
furling my brow as beads of sweat roll down my face.
My white hot chair reflects the sun's rays around me,
engulfing me in heat, even when shaded by an umbrella.
Splashes of water land on my skin
as snowflakes, disappearing almost as they fall.
My eardrums were drowned in the laughing and squealing of children.
Distinct voices rise above the mob of sounds,
but they all move so fast, so frequently it's difficult
to discern each sound from the other.
They scatter about and away from me,
my eyes don't try to follow them all.

Aiden sits in front of my chair.
He doesn't make a sound.
He doesn't make a splash.
Aiden slips beneath the water,
right under me,
and doesn't make a sound.

Whistles break through the wall of noise,
as everyone's attention is now on the empty white chair,
splashed by water.
I drag Aiden gasping out of the water,
and the mob lets out a sigh.

Michael

by Yihua Gu

Strong. Powerful.
Run. Jump. Throw.
He's good at sport.
Swim. Shoot. Play.
Famous. Successful.
Athlete

Desire

by Glenn Hughes

Below the day's designs
Wait the long wounds of desire.

Let the granite mood prevail.
Only night and silence are faithful.

Undergrowth Paradises

by Matthew Mendez

Suggest the creation
of a perspective leading to a
number of interpretations on the viewer involved
through the reflected image
one's own reflexion process
contemplative iconography
motifs architectonically constructed
pointilinear layers as a surface
attendant figures
digitally envisioned components
excavating aspects
inviting the viewer to participate
in the actualization of meaning
forging new contexts
juxtaposing knowledge derived
from personal allusions
resist ossified criteria
engaging ancient
and contemporary cultural phenomena
themes avoid obvious dramatization
escape entrenched aesthetic
editorial engagement

Report from the Lucky Country

by Laurice Yanar

No jewelry. No brands. No money. No credit cards.
Get in. Buckle-up. Pray.
Routine to cross over.

Stomachs churn, and yet
a new ambiance-
quiet, calm, not of peace,
but of fear.

The city is silent,
trying not to disturb sleeping guns.
Hoping their naps last longer this time.

Reaching destinations-
unseen or unheard.
Doctor. Dentist. Pharmacy.
Then, a visit to a lonely couple.

The house is quiet, too.
Twelve noisy children running
up and down the stairs
through the kitchen into the forbidden living room
and back up and around again,
missing.

Screams and laughter,
absent from the safe place-
the most wonderful house of all.

Comparisons of the streets here
to new ones over there.
Pleads for the lonely couple.

A better life,
safe from violence and danger
only fifteen minutes away.
New city. New country. New feelings.
Security.

Still, they refuse.
The lonely couple stays, but
Please report back from the lucky country.

Advice in Short Supply

by Jane Focht-Hansen

In a year of penury, lacking rain,
neglected flora wilts and browns,
Just as the piano, tuned low,
Lacks a player.

Stalled moments count up
Each time the receiver is returned
to the cradle;
calls can't bridge the silent distance
between here and spent.

A well-worn sweater a million
Scent memories, she
Longs for colder weather
As if wearing it, imbued with
Familiar bouquet, well considered solutions
Water the fertile loam of her brain.

Rooms once filled with conscious glad
Whistling, or measured snoring rhythm of a
Sleeping breath are simply quiet;
Wooden floors coolly
Voicing constant
Contraction or heated expansion
creak.

My mother cleans out drawers,
falters with the closets, sport coats, sweaters,
hangars echo the empty
quietude of a few months, a faulty
analogy, a trying balance in light
of their sixty-three years.

Sons survey annotated
treasures of his lifetime,
tools and manuals
lonely advisors in
Lieu of authentic mentoring.

The daughter caresses
Well-read tomes, hardly able to
Crack open the covers,
A Shakespearean lament.

Others capable yet
Indistinct can repair
the lawnmower now.

In the Everglades

by Richard S. Pressman

In a light rain
We four tasted
Trees, plants, birds
Alone, with each other.

Army

by Jonathan Arredondo

Massive. Powerful.

Only moving forward.

Always fighting to win.

Never leaving anyone.

Fast. Steady.

Military

Divination: The Way is Closed

by William Mabie

spring
 summer
 fall
 winter
back again
 top dead center
the more it repeats
 the more i grow bitter
here i am
 again
 three
 six
 nine
 twelve
into your soul
 i wish to delve
another chance that
 i must shelve
it s not happening
 again
 morning
 daytime
 evening
 night
i lie and say
 i ll be alright
but fate is something
 you can t fight
i m giving up
 again

fire
earth
water
air
please know it s not that
i don t care
if anything it s more
despair
i m right back here
again
one
two
three
four
i do not want this
anymore
it hurts so deep
down to the core
so drink away the pain
again
north
east
south
west
i ll lie
and say it s for the best
and write
to get it off my chest
just like before
again

Between the Pages by Veronica Gallegos

Today is one of those days:
A break down day,
Full of emotions,
Anger, Hate, Love, Longing,
And I can no longer keep you hidden,

Between the pages in my mind,
A rush of emotions, a flash of light,
Another year, another fight,
Another girl you'll forget.

But that's all I can handle today,
Small doses of you.

NON-FICTION

I Blame Dinty Moore

by Tiffany Galvan

You type one more word. One more word brings you closer to the end of this stupid paper. It's not a matter of procrastination. You've always known you could do it, but the minute hand creeps slower and slower to that next hour. As you type the next word, you think to yourself that your room is a mess that maybe if you clean your area, the words will flow better.

You straighten the books, put your clothes from short sleeve to long sleeve, and color coordinate. You then decide to straighten your bed. One object after another is placed in its proper place. Your room becomes cleaner by the second so you turn to the computer again hoping that cleaning your room has brought you one step closer to one more word on that paper. It has.

In fact, cleaning your room cleansed your mind of the physical and metaphorical clutter that was preventing you from writing your paper. Satisfied that your room is clean, you know that it wasn't writer's block—no, hardly writer's block. It was your room.

Then, it happens again—stuck! You encourage yourself by telling yourself that you can do this. You're a great writer. This is kid's stuff compared to everything else. However, as your stress level rises you decide to do something relaxing so that you won't be as nervous writing this paper.

You get on Facebook because that's your one retreat online—your one connection to the outside world between the world and this paper. Sure so and so's relationship ended. How sad. So and so, also, uploaded a new picture album... picture 1, picture 2, picture 3...picture 67...You feel like a stalker...

The names don't matter. You're just killing time, trying to get into the "right mode" before finishing the paper that is due tomorrow. Once you are completely bored out of your mind, you remember that you still need to finish your paper. You return to that dreaded piece of work as you realize that Facebook was not the answer. However, everything starts to itch as you get nervous that time is passing faster and faster. Then, your stomach begins to rumble.

You know it's getting late. However, you're really hungry. What should you eat? You have Dinty Moore microwavable meals. You could go to the caf, but it's 9:30 p.m. and the caf closes at 10:00 p.m. You decide that you don't

want to walk all the way over there—it's too far. Instead, you decide to eat the microwavable meal because it's faster. However, even the 90 second meal can't go fast enough for you so you begin to blame your wasted time on this 90 second meal.

The microwave draws you in for your meal. With every bite, another word pops into your head. You quickly rush to your computer to start typing away. Nothing can stop you now. You are getting the fuel of champions, food, and you are on fire. No, nothing can stop you now. At least you think nothing can stop you.

As the fire alarm rings its obnoxiously loud buzzard, you contemplate pleading the deaf card, but you rethink it because you, also, consider the possibility of a real fire. You finally decide to leave, but looking back at the school-issued laptop, you realize all your hard work is saved solely on that computer. As you reach for the door to leave, you rush back to save your laptop, backpack, and your keys.

Everyone else is outside. You hear the inconvenienced stomps on the staircase because no one else wanted a fire alarm at 10:00 p.m. "I was asleep!" You hear one resident grumble to which the person in the bath towel glares back at that same person with an evil glare of "Seriously?!" You then share a "why now" moment as the sadness in each student's eyes stare back expectantly and longingly at the off-limit rooms—the one place they would rather be than where they are now. Your foot begins to tap with impatience as yet another minute passes.

You're feeling desperate so you plan to call your parents to pick you up. No, no. You know you can do this. This should be over soon. As soon as you get to your room, you're finishing this paper. You remember the last thing you wrote so you mentally type out what's next. The hall director tells everyone they can go in as a huge joined sigh of relief fills the air.

You get back into your room, re-setup the laptop, and contemplate the events of the night. You think to yourself that if you could survive a night like this you can definitely survive finishing a paper. You type one more word. One more word brings you closer to the end of this stupid paper.

Finally, you're at the final home stretch, the last paragraph. It's time to decide: Should you finish now or go to sleep? Your eyes weigh heavily as the computer screen blinks in front of you. You decide to finish because you learned that you don't want to go through another day like today. You type the final period. You sigh one final sigh of relief as you drag yourself into bed. You feel safe and warm under the covers. Your eyes close as you contemplate that it would have taken you three hours to finish the paper without distractions. You have one paper down. The next paper is due the day after tomorrow. Don't worry, you have time. Right now, it's time for you to sleep.

Sitting at the Counter

by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

We are walking into The Pancake House after a couple of hours on the highway. It is the summer of 1969 and we are still three or four days from California.

As I follow my sister, two older brothers, and three younger brothers inside, I see the interior looks no bigger than a San Antonio city bus. There is a shiny chrome counter with nine swivel seats covered in red vinyl. By the front windows are six matching booths large enough for one body either side. Three of them are already taken by old farmers frowning at the sight of this large Mexican family arriving for breakfast.

"Just sit at the counter," my mom says, and we climb onto the swivel seats. Immediately we start moving our bottoms to make ourselves go round in circles. The older ones just try it once, but my three little brothers take great pleasure in trying to get dizzy.

Two waitresses, older ladies with frizzy blondish hair, are also staring at the family taking up every seat at the counter. I'm wondering why they are puzzled by the sight of us.

One waitress turns to my dad as he takes his seat beside my little brother, Frank. In a slow motion loud voice, she asks him, "Do you speak English?"

We kids start laughing.

Mom shoots a glare down the counter, but there are too many of us to catch her disapproval. Finally we hear her say what she always says to dignify the moment, "Don't be rude."

Immediately we are silent. Because we know when she says it, she means business later. So now we stare back at the waitresses, and it's baby brother Vincent who announces, "I want pancakes."

It's enough for the waitresses to decide these Mexicans do in fact speak English and they start handing out menus.

"Where are you from?" the other waitress asks my oldest brother.

"San Antonio, Texas," he answers, but his eyes are already scanning the menu.

"Gilbert leaves for college in August," my big sister Chris says as she pulls a menu towards her. "Mike just finished high school. Diane will be in eighth

grade. It's our last family vacation together."

The waitress looks up and down the counter, probably wondering who is who, and what is what, but I think we make a great sight: all nine Gonzaleses sitting at one café counter.

Everyone notices my family no matter where we go, and I think it's great.

Quickly Mike helps Joe decide what to order. Gilbert asks Chris and I, "What do you want to eat?" And Mom and Dad order for Frank and Vincent, who are still spinning in their stools.

The one thing my dad doesn't scrimp on is a family meal, so he lets us order pancakes, bacon, or sausage as we like. He never worries about leftovers because Gilbert and Mike always finish what the little guys leave behind.

Except for coffee for Mom and Dad, we don't order anything to drink but water. My parents learned quickly how seven extra drinks was money not needed to be spent. Besides there are still six quart cans of Merry Cherry punch in the back of the station wagon.

As we wait for our food, my mom pulls out a stack of brochures, maps, and paper lists from her double-wide sturdy purse. "Let's see where we can stop next," she says and soon passes them out to keep us busy.

My big brothers take the maps and start navigating where we are, where we've been, and where we need to go. They also discuss whose turn it is to drive next.

Brochures about the Grand Canyon, The Painted Desert, and The Petrified Forrest make me anxious for the next place we will see. My sister dreams about Hollywood and San Francisco, and my mom wants to visit her cousins in San Jose. One of dad's oldest friends lives in San Diego.

We children are oblivious to the impression we make as a large Mexican family taking a trip across the country. For three weeks, our parents give us geography and history lessons, and teach us ways to entertain ourselves on a long drive. They reinforce or introduce lessons we won't learn in a school room. Every time we walk through another door, we have a chance to develop exactly who we are meant to be.

What courage my parents show as they buy another tank of gas, grab another brochure by the cash register, and set out every morning with seven children in a Vista Cruiser station wagon, pulling a red metal trailer where my sister has painted in bright yellow letters, "California or bust!"

Sandy

by Peter Desmond Roehl

Today's been miserable. The sun didn't shine once, completely blocked out by thick pressing clouds. When it rained it never came down it drenches, but the constant drizzle all day had made a soggy mess of the ground. It smelled and felt damp. It pushed down against my chest when inhaling, and shortened my breath when the smell forced its way into my nose, causing my face to curl from the strange aroma. By the time night fell, the sticky humidity from earlier in the day gave way to a damp chill that worsened when the wind blew. My dad had been walking back and forth throughout the house that night, dressed in a winter jacket, jeans, and work boots that had been stained by mud and water from outside. The first time he walked from the kitchen with large garbage bags. The next time he walked through he had shovels and gloves with him.

"Alex, come outside and help me," he said to my brother. My brother went and got dressed in a similar fashion as they both headed out into the backyard. A little over half an hour had passed and it seemed to only be growing darker outside. This time my dad came in and got a flash light and started walking toward me, "Desmond, it's getting too dark outside to see what we're doing, so we need you to come hold this flashlight, ok?" I nodded my head and went to get ready. My mother tightened my jacket around me to keep me warm, but she didn't say a word. She just kissed me on my forehead. I hated going into our backyard, my parents knew that. Every time I would go back there, our dog, Sandy, would charge me and push me over to the ground. Then she'd lick my face and leave slobber all over me, it was disgusting. The last time I'd gone out there she knocked me over and made me skin my knee. It was still a little tender rubbing against the inside of my jeans, the slight burn making me dread Sandy as I took the flashlight and headed for the back porch.

The light from the porch light didn't extend very far out into our yard. I could see the shape of my brother as he stood there with a shovel in his hands waiting for my dad and me. I could feel my feet slip and turn to the sides as I walked to the middle of our mud covered yard. I hadn't heard or seen Sandy yet. Normally, by this time I would've been sitting on my backside with dog spit on my face, or I would've heard Sandy running back and forth trying to break loose

from her chain. When the light from the porch no longer reached my footsteps I turned the flashlight on so I could see where I was walking. I looked up and noticed the light reflecting off the trash bag my dad had brought outside earlier. It looked lumpy, full of something. The blowing wind would fill the bag and distort the shape of what was inside. The rain fell softly, but steadily as it had been all day. It covered my face, and the mist combined with the wind cutting across my face had made me start sniffing and coughing. All I could do was wipe my wet face with my wet hands, doing nothing but smoothing the water droplets.

“Go ahead and shine the light over here,” my dad said, pointing towards the hole they had been digging. I wanted to ask why we were digging, I wanted to ask what was in the trash bag, but I was scared. For some reason my mouth wouldn’t move except to chatter my teeth together. Where was Sandy? I wanted to ask, but I couldn’t. As my dad and brother got back to digging, my dad turned to me and said, “Now Desmond, you know Sandy was old right?” I nodded my head and looked at him, “Here, make sure you keep the light focused where we’re digging.” I moved the light back the hole they had been working on, “Well, we’re digging this because she died earlier today. This is where we’re going to bury her.” I felt the pressure from earlier coming back, like something sitting on my chest, but it wasn’t humid anymore. My sniffing had grown worse and my eyes began to sting. Now the water on my face was a mixture of cold and warm, and I couldn’t do anything to wipe away the snot coming from my nose.

“Why did she die?” My words trailed off towards the end, turning into a whisper as though I had never meant to speak them in the first place. I wouldn’t look at the bag. I kept my eyes and the light fixed on where they were digging. I didn’t want to look the trash bag.

“Well, like I said, she was old. Whenever people and animals get too old they die, that’s what happens.” He never stopped digging while talking to me; he wouldn’t look at the bag either.

Mud gripped onto their shovels clinging to the earth. This made the work last much longer than my dad intended. Fatigue crept through my arm from holding the flashlight up so they could continue their digging. I would let my arm

dip and the light would begin to wander away, but my dad was quick to correct me and get me back focused. My mom came outside and said we should all come in, it was cold and it wasn't good for us to be out there for so long. "Ok, let's go inside for awhile," my dad said, "but we're going to need to finish this tonight."

My mom and sisters were sitting around the living room watching TV. Every now and again, the laugh track from a show could be heard but none of us so much as chuckled. I sat slouched over at the table near the back door, resting my chin on my hands as I looked around the house waiting to go back outside. I thought of what I would normally hear while sitting in this chair; Sandy running around in the back yard barking, occasionally running up to scratch the back door hoping to come in, or maybe just for someone else to come outside to play. If I ever I stuck a foot outside the door where she was waiting, my shoes and shins would be immediately scratched up in an excited frenzy. Sandy was huge. Her golden coat was short and thick, but you could still see it move and shift whenever she would run around in the backyard. We would always know whenever there was about to a storm, because she would start running in circles in the backyard and barking until we either put her in her house, or until it started raining and she would run into her house on her own.

"We should probably get back out there soon." My dad's voice snapped me back into the moment, "This needs to get done tonight. We can't just leave her out there all night." He stood up and headed towards the back door. My brother and I stood up, but waited until he passed in front us before making any moves toward the back. If you had asked my dad about Sandy he would have told you what a hassle it was taking care of her, how we needed a bigger yard to keep her if no one was going to be walking her, how difficult it was to take care of our yard with her digging it up all the time, and how she would always get in the way if she wasn't tied up for yard woke; but, there were times when you would see my dad in the backyard running around with Sandy, with just the biggest smile on his face. He'd always complain about how we weren't taking good enough care of her, and we might as well just get rid of her. My dad loved Sandy even if he never said it.

After about 30 minutes any trace of rain had stopped but the wind still

blew lightly. The rain cooled the air, making every breeze chilly enough to send a shiver down my spine. "Alright, this looks like it should be deep enough," my dad said as he laid his shovel on the ground. He then looked at my brother and paused for a moment, "Can you help me lift her?" My brother nodded, letting his shovel drop and walked over to the bag. They lifted her up carefully. The breeze met with the bag, allowing the smell of decay to escape into our nostrils, a smell, which to this point, none of us had really noticed. They breathed forcefully and steadily out through their noses as they lifted, trying to keep the smell from lingering too long. They lowered Sandy into her makeshift grave and into the beam of my flashlight. Covered up inside the bag, only her head was exposed as they began to fill the hole.

Her eyes were open, looking out, looking into mine as they shoveled. Her teeth were permanently exposed in an awkward smile, with ants crawling in and around her mouth. It frightened me to look, but my eyes went nowhere else the entire time. I was angry. I was angry at the ants that crawled and bit at my dog. "Get off her!" I screamed in my head. "They're hurting her. I know she's dead, but that's still my dog and they're hurting her." Tears pushed at the back of my eyes, burning around my eyelids as they gathered and eventually overflowed down my cheeks. I noticed every time I blinked, because the wind spread the tears across my lashes making it harder to open my eyes. My dad looked back at but kept shifting the dirt. I noticed my brothers eyes reddening as he shoveled dirt onto Sandy.

I had never known what it was to be without Sandy around. She was older than me, and as long as I could remember she was a giant next to me. They padded the dirt down, and my dad told us we were done and to go ahead inside. I turned off my flashlight and started walking back toward the house. My dad rested his arms around our shoulders as we walked back toward the house, and pulled us near him. Before stepping into the house I looked back into the darkened yard. It was quiet, no barking, no sound of paws running back forth, nothing. We had a dog house but no dog, and our yard felt empty. I had spent so much time not going back there, wanting nothing to do Sandy, and now all I wanted was for her to run and push me over. We walked back in from the cold, and I no longer had a reason to go into our backyard. I sat in our living room bored, wishing I could go

in the backyard and play with Sandy.

My Dear Flower

by Chen Du

When I was at six years old, my parents took me to Yun Nan province to spend our vacation. Like other vacations, my father always bought a lot of things for me but this time I refused because I wanted to have a dog. I said to my father: "I don't want beautiful clothes this time, I want a tiny dog." My father promised me and took me to a pet market right then. There were so many pets there, and it was too hard for a six year old child to decide which to choose.

Suddenly, I saw a man in the corner and with a basket in front of him. I went over and found three beautiful dogs inside. I liked these little things so much and I couldn't move my eyes off them. I chose a white dog with some yellow dots on it. She looked so smart and beautiful that I wanted to keep her. She even knew she should pee in the toilet when we were in the hotel. After our vacation, we took Flower home.

Flower grew up gradually and she knew me very well. When I was happy, she seemed happier than me. She jumped with me, danced with me, played games with me. When I was depressed, she didn't say anything, and she just accompanied me quietly. Sometimes, I sat on sofa the whole day, and she didn't go anywhere. She just laid on my legs. When I was sick, she was on my bed to help me get over the disease.

However, she was not a perfect girl. When I played with other dogs, she would get jealous of it and fight with them. Though she did this, I still loved her very much. One day, she really grew up because she gave birth to a dog. She loves her baby so much and didn't let anyone to touch her baby. After seven days, her baby could open his eyes. She just left her baby alone to take a walk and relax, but shortly afterwards, she robbed food from her baby unexpectedly. I thought maybe she didn't love her baby anymore, so I gave her baby to my sister.

After Flower found her baby was not there anymore, she started to miss it. At that time, I couldn't take her baby back on account for my sister and her baby were getting along with each other. Fortunately, time can solve everything. Flower didn't miss her child after two weeks.

Good times don't last long, Flower passed away suddenly when I was eleven years old. She was poisoned by rat poison when she played outside. She

died at night and all of my families were sleeping so no one noticed until the next morning. It was too late to take her to see a doctor. I still remembered her face when she died, and she was crying. I knew she was in pain and didn't want to die, but I couldn't help her.

We felt guilty about not taking care of her, so we cried for a long time and buried her. It was a tough thing to receive the fact and face it, for a long time, as long as people mentioned Flower in front of me, then I cried. My families and I didn't want to go through this pain again, so we decided not to keep a pet anymore.

Although I couldn't see Flower in my rest of my life, I could remember all details of things that we all had done. I felt comfortable when I was reminded of when she was laid on my legs; I felt happy when I remembered her jealous face; I felt more energy when I thought of her. My families are always mentioning Flower as if she never left us. I hope she can live better in the heaven and God must like her so much, for she was such a smart and beautiful girl.

Unforgettable Memories

by Shibing Ren

Most people have experienced a trip during leisure time, viewing beautiful scenery, tasting delicious food and enjoying happy times with friends and families. These memories are too precious to forget. In high school, I had such an impressive journey in spring. This outing was a routine organized by the school once a year for students in grade one. There were about six hundred students and teachers attending the outing which made us a magnificent group.

On the first day, we assembled at the front gate of school at eight o'clock. Our destination was Suzhou which is always a resort in China for its time-honored culture. The time on the bus was delightful. Students were listening to music, chatting with friends and enjoying the food.

At noon, we arrived at the first destination: Suzhou Amusement Land. It is a theme park that attracts thousands of people annually. As soon as we got off the buses, we took photos at the gate. The most impressive feature I participated in was the roller coaster. After standing in line for about half an hour, it was our turn. I sat in the seat and fastened the safety belt. I was nervous and my heartbeat began to accelerate because it was my first time to ride on it. The train climbed slowly at first, till to the height of about 40 meters. Then it fell with a dramatic slope. At that time, I experienced the weightlessness learned in physics classes several weeks ago. Before I had time to recall the knowledge in the physics textbook, the train was climbing to another summit. Incredibly, the next drop was vertical. I was too terrified to open my eyes. At the bottom, there was a pool and we went through water rapidly.

At midnight, after the teachers fell asleep, some boys organized a small party. We bought dozens of beer and some roasts. The room was filled with chatting and laughing. I even remember that some people were arguing about a problem on the test. We did not go back to our rooms till sunrise.

On the second day, we got to the next destination: City of Three Kingdoms in Wuxi, China. This is a film and television base. We saw many ancient style houses including restaurants, grocery stores and even theatres. There was a restaurant built by bamboos attracted our attention. Not only were all the tables and chairs made of bamboos, but also their specialty dishes made use of

bamboos. They mixed rice with some meat, and put them into bamboos so that the fragrance of bamboos could penetrate into the food. The taste was really impressive. After lunch, we went sightseeing on a boat and enjoyed the view of Tai Lake. The lake was too big to see the end.

At twilight, it was time to assemble again. However, compared to how we came together individually when we set out yesterday, this time most people showed up in groups. I think the point of this trip is to intensify the communication and relationship among students just entering high school. Some friends I met at that trip have been keeping in touch with me till now, and we recall scenes of the outing sometimes.

The English Teacher that I Loved

by Fei Du

Miss Li was my first English teacher, and she taught me for three years during my primary school life. At school, Miss Li was not a teacher of many words but she had built such trust with me that I did anything she asked me to do. She helped me a lot when I was studying English. Li was a very kind and patient teacher to my class, and she showed great love to me which was deeply appealing to my heart. Li taught me how to read a paragraph, talk with other people, write a paper, and she even made efforts to encourage me to understand the beauty of the language and enjoy the cultures of foreign countries. Whenever I made progress, she always smiled.

When I studied English, the first difficult skill was reading. I could not read a complete paragraph fluently. When Li found out this problem, she gave me a suggestion: listen to the radio carefully and read books loudly every morning. She said these habits could help me understand books and help me improve my reading and listening skills. After that, she also encouraged me to read a lot of English magazines in order to improve my reading skills. Based on her recommendations, I could read a paragraph easily in the class. When I finished reading, she smiled.

The next step I learned is how to communicate with other people. She knew I was too shy to talk with other guys. She established an "English Corner", and many students talked with each other there. I joined them and talked with them. After a few days, I could speak with my classmates fluently. In order to correct my pronunciation problem, Li also took me to her foreign friend's house two times each week. In the beginning, I was afraid to talk with her friend because I thought I said some wrong words or phrases. However, Li gave me confidence and helped me talk with them. She said, people should talk with their friends in English often and that this is the best way to practice your English communication. Within days, I could talk with Li's friend independently, and she wore smiles again.

The last skill that she taught me is writing. Li prepared a lot of word cards and helped me to remember them. She said to me, if I study these cards every day, little by little my English vocabulary would increase. After I memorized many

words, she said that keeping a diary in English is one of the most effective ways to improve my English writing ability. Thus, she made me write regularly, keep a diary, write a short story, and summarize the daily news. These assignments helped me improve my writing skill quickly. She smiled when my paragraph appeared in the school newspaper.

Li left a very deep impression in my childhood, and I am really appreciative of her help with my English. She is such an excellent teacher and I learned so much from her; not only knowledge, but also kindness and diligence. These traits will be useful to me all my life. She took me to the English world, so I will never forget her in my mind.

An Independent Journey

by Zhou Yun

When I was 19 years old as a freshman in college, I decided to go out for a trip to Hangzhou, a most famous tourist attraction in China. It was in June, all my friends had plans so I could not find company. However, I was longing for Hangzhou City since I heard about its wonderful scenery and history at a young age. Therefore, I decided that there was no reason for me to change my own plan according to others; I was old enough to travel alone. Although the trip was not that easy for a girl who had never travelled alone before, it turned out to be a precious experience for me because for the first time I was able to do things independently.

As soon as I made my decision, I started my journey early in the morning. The moment I arrived in Hangzhou, I found myself lost. Even though I collected enough information and got a map before I took off, the city streets were not as clear as they appeared on the map. What was worse, without my own transportation I had to discover the route completely on foot. I hated taking taxis when travelling as I thought it was too direct and quick going to the destination to enjoy the journey; as a result, I had to find an appropriate bus route going to the motel I booked. It took me nearly half a day to find the way and it was dark when I finally arrived on the narrow and deep alley where the motel located; I was so afraid to go into in such a dark night. I even felt regret going on the trip all alone at that moment. However, it was lucky that one of the security personnel of the motel came out and showed me the way inside. Finally lying on the bed, I was still not sure whether it was a wise decision just coming without a fine plan.

The next morning, I felt confident again after a good sleep. The weather was nice, warm but not too much sunshine, which was just perfect for travelling. Having learned from the last day's experience, I rented a bike from the motel. Xihu Lake is the most famous view spot in Hangzhou, which was also the main reason I desired to visit this city. As a result, I planned to use the whole day riding around the lake to enjoy the fascinating scene. It was much easier to get around with a bike than walking. I went to view the lotus in the lake, the famous Leifeng Tower with a long history as well as the bridges across the lake. I found myself totally lost in the breathtaking scene. In the evening, I even ran into a music fountain

performance on the way back in a square near the lake. I hardly remembered the difficulties I went through the day before. It was really enjoyable and I thought the journey was really worthy.

The third day was short because I had to take a train in the afternoon. I only walked to the lake to see it for the last time and say goodbye. It was really a rushed trip; however, I was so thankful I made that decision. The landscape I viewed paid off for the effort I made. What was more important was that, I am the only one who determined everything for the whole three days. It was the first time for me to get out of home and be the decision maker as an adult. From that moment, I could prove that I was really an independent individual and that also became the reason that my parents trusted my capacity to go abroad to finish my education. Despite the fact that, going all alone can be difficult at the first time, it was also a priceless experience that I will appreciate for the rest of my life.

Some Memories of Mr. Zhou

by Chin Jinyuan

In primary school I met my first English teacher. However at that time, for most children including myself, I did not have such a clear idea about something like foreign language. We did not consider it seriously and have clear impression at the time. The situation took a 180 degree change when I entered middle school. English became one of three major courses that every student has to attend. Meanwhile, I also met the strictest teacher, Mr. Zhou.

The first image he left me was intimidating, although he was not so strong or muscular, the harsh face and the sharp eyes through his glasses left a tough impression. He had been an English teacher for over 8 years and just promoted to the position of English office supervisor who had the responsibility of English education for the whole school. Mr. Zhou was a very competent and approachable man. And I will tell two stories about him.

The process of learning a language is very long and uninteresting, at least for me. I never thought English would become one my major tools of communication. At that time, studying English was just another one of many difficult classes for meeting the requirements of exams. Even dominated by this opinion, the humor of Mr. Zhou still attracted me. More importantly his humor always involved some wisdom. At that time, the school had an exchange program in which teachers from another foreign school came and taught English. So one day, there was a teacher who had a big nose, two gray eyes and blond hair that came to our classroom. However, for most of us who were just 11 or 12-years old, we rarely saw foreign people, not to mention participating in class with them. We were shy, inactive and close to ourselves. After class, Mr. Zhou got really angry about our behavior, but he did not yell at us, instead he said, "Why are you so scared? Is it because he is from other country? Let me tell you that one day when you go abroad you will be a foreigner too!"

At that time we all smiled, but now this situation became true – I'm a foreigner now.

Another time Mr. Zhou gave me confidence. I just hated English, the strict grammar, the infinity vocabulary, endless model sentences and paragraphs that needed to be memorized. It's easy to understand why I did not get a good

grade in English in middle school, when I held this kind of attitude. However, Mr. Zhou seemed to never give up his concern for me. After a quiz in which I got a fairly good grade, he walked up to me, touched my hair and said, "You should be better", when I was focusing on reading questions in class.

Obviously, this touch did not change my mind about English, but it really changed my attitude for studying English.

The last time I saw Mr. Zhou was after the high school entrance examination. The students were at school for taking their class photo. Mr. Zhou turned around, waved his hand with a smile as he was walking away.

I never saw him smile like that in class.

Situational Brothers: the Bonds that Poverty Built

by Larry R. Machado

The older kids in our neighborhood were no joke. Most of those guys were gang members, and—to put it lightly—those guys had no shame. They were so caught up in trying to live up to the image of a ruthless clan that they didn't care who they terrorized, as long as they were establishing a reputation of fear. We hated those punks! Mainly, because their bullying towards us was unprovoked, and just plain random. Sometimes the stupidest things would set them off, and the next thing you knew, they were in your face threatening to rough you up because they heard you say something "stupid." Our parents weren't around to interfere, and when the old neighbors tried to step in and help, most of the time these guys were thoughtless enough to curse them out. Therefore all we had were each other to rely on during these *mêlées*.

We usually were no match for those cowards that were five years older than we were, a bunch of tough guys of 15 or 16 trying to build a reputation by telling off old folks and pushing around 10 and 11 year old kids. Honestly, calling the cops was a bad idea because that would only rouse their malice and things would get worse. This is where our street smarts had to come into play. We had to maintain the perfect balance of toughness and passiveness to try and get away without fighting, and from being bullied on a regular basis; if we came off as too strong and offensive we were going to get manhandled, and if we were too submissive, then we became easy prey and regular bullying targets. We had to do just enough to end the ordeal in a bit of smack talk and shoving.

My friends and I rarely spoke about how these altercations affected us, yet we knew how frightened we had been in the midst of it all. It was simply a part of our culture not to tell others about our feelings—especially our fears. This was an understood canon, just like it was understood that our heritage included tamales, rice, and beans. A simple pat on the back, an arm around the shoulder, or even a question such as: "are you alright man?" would be the means of our consolation. These small simple things went a long way in telling our buddies how much we cared for them. Just like all the simple things dad gave mom to show her he loved her went a long way too. To us, it was the small things that meant the most. The symbolism of the act was what was most important. It was about offering a

glimpse of remediation—or love—to our companions even when the expression of these things was taboo because of our culture.

And because all the smaller things in life were most important to us (because they were what we had the opportunity to enjoy) taking rare trips that others may have considered a normal routine, held a special place with us. Such days included trips to Peter Piper's Pizza, in which most of us had some cash to pitch in for food and video games. If one of us had little or no money at all, we were more than glad to lend a helping hand to our friend. After all, we had all been there before (without cash) and hated the feeling of being left out, therefore, we tried the best we could to spare each other from the shame that being broke can make someone feel; that humbling experience, of when, everyone else around you has a buck—and you don't.

Most people did not understand how important all the lesser things in life were to us. For us it was not about having a grandiose house, a luxury vehicle, or brand-named clothes; it was about the engine behind all these items that served as significant for us. It was about having a home, a means of transportation, and clothes—not the fact that we have the best of these items, but the fact that we had the opportunity to enjoy their fundamental services. We knew not of luxury, we knew of how to get by with what we had.

I guess that's why we had all loved watching movies so much, especially the ones where the people lived the kind of lives that we all wished we had, where the beautiful, smart, and well-dressed child would say "Daddy I'm sixteen, don't you think it's time I should have a car?" And the father would say, "Well, sweetheart, that sounds like a good idea, we'll start looking for one this weekend." And then they would both smile and hug. We envied that type of life, where everything seemed to be carefree—and most of all everything seemed certain. Yet, in many ways, although we longed for the life styles that we saw in movies, it was the situation that we were in that made us who we were: the closest of friends—brothers.

It was because of the circumstances that we were in as children, that the camaraderie between us was insurmountable. We were like a band of brothers that

would look after one other every chance we were given. For, there was something particular about our situations that naturally made us a bit more inclined towards each other; something unique about a bunch of kids going through the same adversities, that allowed us to bond like brothers. And although we may have never told one another that we cared for each other's well-being, it was an understood commonality, and we showed it with our actions. When someone needed cash we would help them out, when the older kids would come around to pick on us we all stood our ground together (although we were tingling with fear). Why? Because we were brothers, not by choice, but because of our situations—and to tell you the truth, I don't think we would have had it any other way.

Untimely Death (Akala Mruthyu)!

by Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar

Every evening I chant the Sanskrit paradigm that my mother lovingly taught me when I was four years old. “...*Akala Mruthyu Haranam, Sarva Vyadhi Neevaranam, Samastha Duritopa Haranam, Sri Vishnu Padodakam*” (I salute to the feet of Sri Vishnu, who prevents untimely death, removes all ailments, and dispels all vices). However, when a loved one dies way before his/her time, I wonder if God hears my prayers!

People will die eventually, but when, where, and how is a mystery! Karma, a passport to longevity on earth, is what drives/guides us. Our grandparents and parents go before us, but the death of a young person with unfulfilled dreams and unmet obligations qualms me. When you lose a dear one, whether it is a family member or a friend, you tend to develop *vyraghya* (renunciation), when you tend to become insensible to joyous events. We pay no attention to jubilation, let alone our daily needs. I have lost several people in my life – those close to me and others who were mere acquaintances.

My best friend’s loss of husband and son to a freak accident eighteen years ago still creates ripples in my heart. I am not able to reconcile with her loss. I remember the days that we were together in the hospital; she cried constantly while I suffered silently. One of our common friends said, “Do not be part of her life day in and day out because it will kindle fire in your bones and leave you drained of affection to life. You are so young and a new bride, so let go of her suffering.” The absence that will consume her is the thought that lingers in me even today. We both lost our *Prana* (Hindu word for breath and strength of mind) that day. The incident and its devastating effects linger in me and I remember waking up in the middle of the night and searching for my son at times when my son was little. I cried with her and avoided merry making for some time to restore her *Prana*. The thought of how she would live without her seven year old son has petrified my mind!

My father’s father was murdered when I was eight or nine years old. I used to sleep in a cot that he designed for me where all the four sides were covered so that I would not fall off the bed. I enjoyed the trips to Kosheyes (a bakery on Mahatma Gandhi Road in Bangalore) with him because he was the only one that

bought me Cadbury chocolate and let me eat the entire bar unlike my maternal grandfather, who insisted that I shared the bar with ten people in the house. My paternal grandfather would drop me off and pick me up from *Mahila Seva Samaj* (school) everyday while I lived with him. The day he disappeared (that was what I was told) was very morbid. My mother's *amami* (aunt) had come to invite her to my uncle's wedding. My mother had to hide the pain of untimely death because my mother did not want to thwart her aunt's enthusiasm. I remember seeing his body floating in a pool and it was bent awkwardly like a disfigured animal that was crushed under a speeding car. His hands were above the head as if he was asking the murderer to stop hitting or choking him. My grandfather comes in my dream sometimes, but I have forgotten that tragedy after other people disappeared.

I have a vague memory of a little girl in my neighborhood in Aldur that died from a snake bite while playing in the yard. The green shroud that held the puny child comes to my mind even today. The mother's lament, "*Yasmin, kya hogaya beti? Thumare bina mai kaise jeeyungi?*" (Yasmin, what happened my girl? How can I live without you?), still reverberates in my heart. May be the mother could have saved Yasmin. The little girl had the habit of napping in the afternoons and it was one such nap, but this time she went to bed with poison in her body. Earlier while she was playing in the yard, the ball rolled over into a hole. The innocent girl put her hand into the hole to be bitten by a deadly cobra. She slept and never woke up to cheer her darling mother. I heard that Yasmin's mother killed herself a week later because she could not bear the absence of her little princess.

Another girl's *karunajanaka* (pathetic) fate makes me wonder if our good deeds are rewarded or are we destined to suffer the wrong doings of our past life during this lifetime. A beautiful, street smart young girl of eighteen chose marriage to higher education only to regret later in life. Having lived with sick and poor parents, she was stronger than others in her family. She married a rich and nice young man that her parents adored. I thought that "they lived happily ever after" had begun in her life, but it was short lived. She was widowed with three children at a young age of twenty five. Her *prana* evaporated quickly like

a fallen leaf. She lost her resoluteness with no man to support her and she was left all alone with three little children. With no education, she was distraught, shattered, and thrown into the world like a lonely ship caught in a sea storm; she learned to face life all alone. I don't know what became of her and I do not want to know her fate because it will engulf my mind about stodgy experiences.

The apocalyptic loss in my life is the disappearance of my older brother. I saw him when I was a teenager and I never heard from him after that. Although this loss troubled me for a while, I seem to have moved on with all the distractions in my life. I am intrigued about my mother's countenance and her glamorized attitude in spite of a loss that can leave a mother paralyzed. People gripe about losing trivial possessions in life. Compared to the loss of a son that a mother bore in her womb with the assurance that he will grow up to be supportive and a likely companion in old age, no other loss is worth lamenting over. Hence the Indian saying, "*putra shokam neerantaram*" (the loss of a son is eternal agony).

We all have to develop *vyragya* sooner or later and learn to live without *prana* at times, but for what wrong doing and with what price is the quandary in my mind!

The Longest Day

by Carolina Zertuche

Mexico has always been known for its unique customs, authentic food, and great vacationing spots. Nowadays, it seems that Mexico is losing all its usual recognition due to the violence and insecurity that surrounds the country's border with the United States.

It was an ordinary day of my junior year in high school which began by my waking up on at six in the morning and getting into a hot shower. My morning continued by putting on my school uniform and making sure my passport was inside my backpack. About an hour later, a car's honk made an echo through the house entrance. After my housekeeper made sure it was my carpool to school, I suddenly remembered my aunt was going to bring my car that morning, since I had left it at her house the night before. As I expected, my friend, Adriana, was sitting in the car waiting for me to go to school. While I was putting my backpack in the trunk, my aunt parked behind me as my cousin was getting out of the car to get her things ready as well. For seven in the morning it was an usually busy day on my block. I do not recall the cars that passed by since I was distracted by everything around me. A few cars were parked in front of my house but I did not care to look who was inside or what type of cars they were.

We heard every type of music to let time pass, since the international bridge was half full. As soon as we crossed into Texas we went to buy breakfast tacos to take to our morning class as we did almost every day. While eating our tacos, Adriana mentioned how her mother have had a minor accident the night before, hitting her head, and would see the doctor that morning just as a precaution. Although the accident did not seem of great importance to me, the same time I wished everything was fine. In our morning prayer we asked for her health during petitions. While my classes continued, I remembered the image of my mother saying goodbye that morning and making me blush by yelling outside the door how much she loved me in her usual sweet tone. It was ordinary of my mother to say those things to me, but it was not common for her to come out the door to send me off to school, which is why I think the image stayed on my mind throughout the morning.

Soon it was lunch time. I was ready to chat with all my friends about

school, upcoming weekends, but of course, gossip like every other teenager does with her friends. As in every school, phones were prohibited for the entire day, except that day I saw Adriana coming out of the restroom with her cell phone in her hands. When I asked who she was talking to, I saw a blank stare in her face which made me feel somehow uncomfortable. However, my reaction was fast and I managed to get out of the situation so that she did not even have to answer my question.

Finally, we were in our chemistry class, our last one for the day. It was always the rowdiest class of the entire floor. Being a course with a laboratory, we managed to make all the mess we wanted. About five minutes before announcements, our school secretary called Adriana and me to the front office. The first thought that crossed my mind was that Adriana's mother had something serious and my heart began to beat fast, almost as if I knew something was wrong. Then I saw her face and I knew her eyes were telling me something but I just couldn't figure out what it was. As we walked down the stairs, we were talking about what the office needed us both for. She replied to me in a sarcastic manner that we might have been in trouble and unaware of the reason. I still felt something was wrong and out of place. The first person I saw in the front office was Adriana's older brother who told us to get out backpacks because we were all going for lunch. At that moment I felt excited by the privilege of leaving school early. When we arrived at the restaurant, to my surprise I saw my Alejandra's car, my sister, parked by the front door. My first instinct was to grab my cell phone to call and ask what she was doing in town if she went to school in San Antonio. When she answered, she managed to tell me in a few words to just get inside the restaurant because we were all having lunch.

During lunch, the conversation was awkward and all I kept hearing was that we were "waiting for a call." After lunch, we headed to Adriana's aunt's house to drop off something. I already knew something was not right so while in the car I directly asked Adriana what was wrong and how we had a promise between the two of us that if something ever went wrong between our families no matter what is was we would always tell each other the problem. My comment made her feel

guilty so she just let the truth come out.

With plain words she just said, "Your dad was kidnapped this morning."

Without thinking and even realizing it, tears came out of my eyes like drops of rain, without any pressure or force; just gravity taking its natural course. We finally arrived at her aunt's house and Adriana asked me to hide my fear and tears since I was not supposed to know the truth. A few minutes later we sat in the living room and her mother told my sister and me the truth. More tears began to flow; finally I was free to let my emotions out and express how I felt. She did not give me too many details, but she assured us that within the next hour my father was going to be released, we were all going to be able to cross the bridge, and reunite with my family. I was hoping for that moment with sadness and confusion to end right there. I wanted to know every single detail of what had happened and why. I knew he was going to be fine, that nothing could happen to him, "He is a strong man," I kept repeating to myself. My biggest concern was my mother since I did not know how she was reacting to the situation. All I wanted was to be next to her to support her and show her what I considered my strength. Hours later, we were able to get to my house. Traffic was an issue but when we arrived family members and my parent's close friends were already there. My housekeeper opened the door for us, I threw my backpack next to the piano and ran to hug my father in a way I had never done before. My sister and I were sitting next to him as if he were a stranger. We were making sure he was fine and complete.

After everyone left, we sat in the kitchen to converse what had really happened. The kidnapper's only desire was my father's money. They were not interested in causing any physical harm, but nevertheless the emotional damage came with the crime. I was finally able piece the puzzle together. That morning when I was getting inside the car, I saw unusual traffic with strange cars around the house, "they" were waiting for my father to come out of the house and leave for work. That morning I felt weird about how my mother said goodbye, as if she sensed something was going to happen. That afternoon while my friend was on the phone during lunch, she already knew everything. That feeling I encountered when they called us to the office, my heart already knew something was wrong.

But even though that day was probably the longest and worst day of my life, I look back at it with gladness because if it were not for that day, I would have never appreciated my family and life the way I do now.

The Trip

by Megan Foster

I shoved the last minute stuff into my bag and double checked to make sure I had all my coats. I mustered up as much energy as I could and pulled myself into my Dad's truck and closed the door. Here we go eighteen more hours in this truck.

My Dad opened his console, "Here, pick something to listen too."

I looked through the CD's, "How about we start with Elvis? I'm sure we are going to make it through all these CD's before the trip is over."

"Elvis sounds good. We will probably have to repeat some. I don't have one of those fancy iPod connectors."

Elvis was both our favorite and as it began to pour through the radio my Dad and I began to talk about school and work and everything in between. It was too bad we weren't taking this road trip just for fun. Instead we were taking this trip because my Great Uncle had died. He left the family farm to my Uncle Malcolm, that wasn't the problem; the farm itself would stay in the family. His sister and nieces were left everything on the farm, everything from tractors to horse carriages, and everything in his house, from milk jugs to blankets. They had decided they were going to Auction off every single thing in the barns and in the house. The family farm had been there since 1901, and the farm had collected items since then. Over a century worth of memories and stories were soon to be in the hands of strangers. Even if the family wanted something they would have to bid against strangers to keep it.

When we got to Round Rock we stopped to get breakfast at Whataburger, our favorite fast food. In Dallas we both sat through rush hour and wished we had left just a little bit earlier. In Oklahoma we joked about what there was to do in Oklahoma...and well I'm still not sure what there was to do there. We only stopped to eat and when our bladders couldn't wait any longer.

The whole drive my Dad told me story after story of memories he had along this Highway and memories he had back in Missouri and Illinois. A time where I wish I could say things were simpler but they really weren't. They had to deal with same petty family issues that plagued almost every family. When we finally got to Missouri which was where we would stay the night with my dad's brother, we felt relieved that the long drive was almost over. Part of me was a little

sad because my dad and I had been having a good time talking and reminiscing but the other part of me was glad I would soon be able to get up and walk around for a while.

When we got to my Uncle's house we unloaded our stuff and got some much needed sleep. In the morning we pulled ourselves out of our deep slumber and started the second half of our trip up to Illinois. I looked out the window and watched as the yellow lines on the road flew by. I wished it was light out so I could see the landscape. We reached the farm early in the morning after we had stopped for breakfast. It was the day before the auction and the farm was dead silent in the cloudy cold morning air. When my feet hit the ground the mud underneath them squished. My face was hit with cold biting air of the October morning. Surely, this wasn't October. It felt like December.

Everything was already pretty much pulled out and organized for the Auction. All we would have to help with was a few last minute things that my Uncle Malcolm still needed. We all reluctantly followed my Uncle Malcolm around to the part of the farm that hadn't been used in almost ten years, since my Great Uncle had gotten so old. I looked up at the tall purple grain mill that proudly said at the top "Foster Farm 1901". I felt a knot grow in my throat as I looked up. I choked back some tears and hoped this farm would somehow stay in the family. I wandered around taking pictures. I tried to capture everything I possibly could so I could show my mom and have some memory of this place if I never got to come back.

"Megannnn...where are you at?" I heard my dad call me from inside the barn.

"Over here just taking some pictures." I was facing a door knob taking a picture of it because it had a horseshoe hanging on it.

"You know that is bad luck right?" My dad said to me as he was walking out of the barn.

"What is?"

"You aren't supposed to hang horseshoes upside down. The luck runs out them."

"Ohhh...nope I didn't know that. So why is it upside down?"

"Someone wasn't too smart. Here, take it home," he said as he took the horseshoe off the door knob. "Hang it up the right way, maybe it will bring you some luck."

"Haha...okay I will. Is it ok if I take it? Are they sure they don't want to try to auction off an old rusted horseshoe? I would hate for them to miss out on some cash." I was fuming again at the thought of all this being auctioned off piece by piece. Still I could hear my dad laughing as he walked over to help my Uncle Malcolm load up a tractor.

I walked back to the barn to look at all the things they were going to auction off. My Great Uncle had kept just about everything from old Coca-Cola bottles to a rifle that looked like it had been in the barn since 1901. I looked through the stuff and tried to imagine some of the memories attached to them and just how part of his family could sell them. We finished setting things up that day and after a nights rest we would be back in the morning for the auction.

The next day we got to the farm and there were more cars there. It was colder than the day before even though there were more people on the farm. I thought to myself, It is probably all the cold hearted people wandering around.

I rummaged about looking at things one last time. I decided I was going to bid on the old gun that looked as if it had been in the barn since 1901; the barrel was hanging on by a splinter. I had no idea what I was going to do with it but I knew my dad loved guns, he would figure out something to do with it. I won the old gun for twenty dollars, I knew it would never shoot again but at least it was something I could have from the farm.

Even though the auctioneer was moving through items pretty fast, my feet couldn't tell they just kept getting colder. I turned to my dad to ask him if there was anything he was going to bid on.

"I would love to have those milk cans in that set over there. Your Uncle Malcolm wants one too. I think he is going to bid on them for us."

"Why are they even in the auction I didn't think they were going to sell

anything with his name on them?”

“I thought so too sweetie, but your Great Uncle’s nephew wants to sell them to the museum up here.”

The auctioneer was close to starting on the milk jugs. My dad never asked for much, he moved to Texas a long time ago and never got passed anything down to him from our family members. I felt he at least deserved some milk jugs to remember his Uncle by. My stomach did back flips and I felt the need to scream at all the people standing around. I choked back my tears and my anger. I felt like the pain in my chest was noticeable to all those around me.

Out of everything my Dad wanted one simple thing the milk cans inscribed with my Great Uncle’s name. Something so simple I would think could be taken out of the Auction. I definitely wouldn’t get away with stealing them now. I knew my Great Uncle’s nephew was going to try to his hardest to get them.

I looked at my Dad, and then to my Uncle Malcolm, then to the greedy nephew. The first bid went to the nephew, then to my Uncle Malcolm. I held my breath and watched the two fight it out. At 550 dollars I was sure my Uncle Malcolm was going to back out but he kept on bidding. The Auction ended at 750 dollars and my Uncle Malcolm had the three milk jugs that probably didn’t cost 20 dollars apiece. I knew it was ridiculous to bidding on something that should have been given to family in the first place but I was glad that they had won the milk jugs. My dad was going home with a little bit of the family farm.

The Auction ended and the strangers left. We cleaned up the farm and packed up our things. As the sun went down the evening got colder and it began to rain we headed over to my Uncle Malcolm’s house. We played the card game “Buck”. My Uncle was in charge of keeping score. He decided to keep score by simply putting M’s for each of our names because we all began with the letter “M”. I looked at the paper and then looked at him and said.

“How exactly do you expect us to know who is winning?”

“It’s ok I know, how else do you think I win at this game?”

The night went on and I came to find out my Uncle Malcolm still had a chest full of some of my Great Uncle's personal items. It was full of pictures and journals. My Uncle Malcolm pulled a out an old camera and handed it to me.

"Here you go; you can make better use of this."

We began the trip back home. The things I took back from my family farm included a rifle that would probably never shoot a bullet again, a horseshoe, a camera, photographs I had taken, and memories of time spent with my Dad that not even the greediest person could take away from me. Even though the trip was taken because a life had ended the trip was not all bad. I was able to spend time with my Dad and learn exactly what type of person I never want to be. Even if I never have a lot of money, even to buy back family treasures, I will always have my family, my memories, and photographs.

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