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Volume XVI

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY



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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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Poetry

Confidant

Leslie Aguirre

The night sky is clear.
I look up at the moon's face.
Hello, my old friend.

Summertime

Albert Garcia

On a summer day,
Kids play baseball at the park
Until the sun sets.

Ode to the Sun

Sarafina San Miguel

Bright orange glow
peeks above the ground,
ready to embrace the
day in his warmth.
Blanketing the masses,
heating the coldest of souls.
Waking young and old.
Shining his smile directly
down on his children.

Midday comes,
the peak of his temper,
bringing children to seek
comfort in blue pools.
Fresh water running
through veins of all,
giving life and joy.
Sweet summer scents
of blooming snapdragons
and sunflowers fill
the nostrils of
the neighborhood.

Evening comes
with a bittersweet air.
He yawns,
descending from the
sky, engulfed with fleeting
hues of deep purples,
pinks,
glowing oranges,
yellows.
The last gleams of hope dazzle;

finale of splendor.

His shining smile dims,
his rays wave one
last goodbye,
his once warm embrace
cools.
Seeking sleep,
the sun slinks down,
dreaming tomorrow's adventure.

Taking the Pain Away

Maribel Garcia

I.

The cold metal that makes my form
Does not keep me from knowing
That sadness lies deep within your heart
Reflecting off those downcast eyes

Each time I see you, I wonder
At the melancholia that seems to
Take the light, the life, from those eyes
More dull than the rusty birds at my hands and feet

Sweet child, come into my arms
They shall give you comfort and strength
Child, please, let me take
The sorrow that weighs down your soul

Day by day, I see you pass by
Feet leaden with grief
The unshed tears that drown your heart
Locked away behind that small smile, that forced laughter

Into my arms I shall enclose you
Holding you close to where my heart would be
Maybe, just maybe, I could be
The one to take your pain away

II.

Head down, I walk
The weight on my back rivaled
By the weight in my heart
And still, I walk

From the corner of my eye, I see
The sun shining off your metallic form
Head down, always watching me
My guardian, I see

Each day that I see you, the pain
Becomes a little bit more bearable
The warm pallet of colors in your hand
Paints happiness over the pain

Oh wise Guardian, I implore
Like the birds at your feet, in your hand
Take me into your sweet, loving care
Away from this grief, I implore

Willingly, I give you my sorrow, take it away
Alleviate the agony that weighs me down
Wipe the tears that escape from my eyes
Please, I give to you all my pain, take it away

Watertown Winter Night

Valerie Huskey

I see it as it looked one wintery evening
in February—on St. Mary’s Street.

Thick quilted clouds cover the expanse above.
Snow falls, one big, fat snowflake at a time,
shimmering, glistening snow, landing softly.

The depths quickly rise;
streetlamps cast their orange glow down the slick street.

The still earth, devoid of sound—
except for the crunching of my footsteps
on the freshly packed snow.

People seek comfort inside their houses,
The silence, deafening.

In the stillness, an eerie calm arises,
enveloping the entire street,
as if in that very moment, I am frozen, and time has stopped.

Yellow Saffron

Jennifer Nunez

When he spoke to me,
my stomach fluttered
like a mocking bird in spring.

When he kissed her,
my face burned
like an Arizona summer day

When he forgot about me,
my eyes wept
till the leaves turned brown in fall.

It is always winter
when I think of him now,
my heart layered by frost.

Under the Gloomy Moon

Joshua Madrid

In the silence
Under the gloomy moon
I yearn for a voice
While gone, it's never forgotten
A scar in my life
That just won't fade

In the day
I'm full of smiles and laughter
But in the night
Shadows hide my misery and pain

We won't hear that sound again
All I'm left with are
The ashes of them
And my saltwater memories

In the quietness
Of your tender embrace
I hear your heart beat
I hear our hearts beat

It's this melodic sound
That somehow calms me down
He has brought us together
Now I'll never face this alone

To Our Ancestors: On Society's Slow Demise

Jackie Tuesday

You are the murder
I am the blood
I am the rotting wood
You, the tireless grub
I am the Eva
To you my Fuhrer
I am Frankenstein
Caused by your error
I am the tree
You, a vengeful ax
I am the crop circle
Caused by your hoax
I am global warming
You, the destructive smog
I am the revolution
Caused by your war-song

Reflections

Stacy Fowler

A decorated bedroom, frilly curtains on the wall
The woman who chose me chose to give it all
But that doesn't stop the questions of how I came to be
Does she have brown or blue eyes? Does he have a nose like me?

How could she? Why did she? What are her thoughts now?
Did she just want to give me my best shot, somehow?
God used her as the vessel to bring my life to you
So neither blame nor sanctify her, for she's got her story, too

Pregnant and alone in New York City, desolate as a winter sky
Taking on this grown-up world even though I'm still a child
Not sure I could get myself on the right path
And with two mouths to feed, not sure we could last

How could I? Why did I? What are my thoughts now?
I just wanted to give you your best shot, somehow
So I let you go and kept up hope your life would be worthwhile
And the woman who chose you helped your inner light shine

Everybody involved is just trying their best
The heart of the child outshines the rest
I thank the ones who made you and allowed you to be mine
They have given me such endless joy and a love that outlasts time

Only Poetry

Diane Bertrand

Decoding the lyrics of blackbirds,
Holding a hand as breathing stops,
Stroking a forehead after the soul leaves,
Dreaming the expanse of Gulf waters,
Rubbing away the collapse of tears,
Looking at a rainbow without benefit of hard rain,
In these moments I have only poetry.

When Last I

Matthew Keller

When last I gazed upon such beauty,
I was a mere child whose life was unruly;
'Twas a soldier so filled with duty,
Bidding farewell to his wife, wed newly.

And as he stepped upon the train,
I could tell his smile was feigned;
And the tear stained face of his wife so dear,
Almost shattered when he disappeared.

But from a window he soon appeared,
Calling the name of his wife so dear;
She waved her gossamer held so high,
As the train chugged away, whistling its goodbye.

When last I heard such mellifluous sounds,
I was slightly older, by nothing bound;
'Twas a ball, so gay with felicity,
As the music blazoned its sweet melody.

And a handsome couple on the floor danced,
Their rhythmical movements were not by chance;
The captivating music enthralled all who heard,
And other than the couple, no one stirred.

We all stared in awe, the music adding so much,
For the couple was beautiful as they pranced, as they touched;
And the music's volume rose, indicating a close,
And we all applauded; so elegant was their pose.

When last I felt such stimulating sensations,
I was a middle aged man, not knowing my vocation;
I thought earlier love wasn't for me,
But that was before I met Marie.

Her sweet smile enchanted my being,
Simply a glance would leave my chest heaving;
When at last I chose to propose,
She thought not a second, "Yes!" she disclosed.

I had found my wife, waving by the train;
Our love was undying, never once stained;
I had found my dance partner, in the ball of life;
And I would dance to no end with my love, with my wife.

The sun sets beautifully, rays kissing the red clouds;
And the birds chirp their mellisonant sounds;
And I can't help but to look to the sky,
And think to myself, When Last I!

My Sister in Another Life

Jennifer Nunez

To live a flower's life
Is a blessed life
A short life
A life of tender and delicate
Still beauty
That doesn't mask
Flaws or imperfection
That does not shout
Or strut for appreciation
It needs no tawdry accoutrements
It stands on its own
Quietly, a steadfast presence
Impermanence makes it all the more
Dear and delightful
To the eye and the touch
Why couldn't I call
It a sister of my own?

Mi Caminar

Alondra Garcia

(En memoria de mi hermano, Rai Garcia)

Como poder amarte cuando me has quitado a que yo más he amado?
Como poder alabarte cuando quiero reprocharte?
Como poder leer tu palabra si quiero ignorarte?
Como arrodillarme a ti para orar, si no quiero hablarte?

Y por más que me alejo de ti, más me persigues,
Me abrazas y me dices, “Te Amo.”
Caminas conmigo cuando tambaleo
Y si me caigo, me llevas cargando en tus brazos.

Cuando estoy en cama me cuentas un cuento para fortalecerme, y sabiendo que estoy asustada
Te quedas conmigo hasta que me pueda dormir.
Al despertar por la mañana siento paz porque estuviste conmigo.
Es una lucha a diario porque vuelvo a recordar

Y me vuelvo a caer,
Sin embargo vuelves a estar ahí
Y por mas que no quiera me vuelvo a enamorar
Y aunque no entienda tu voluntad te obedeceré

Porque así como el ciego puede caminar sin ver
Aun puede caminar sin pensar
Aun puede caminar sin entender,
Yo también escogeré caminar por Fe.

My Walk

Alondra Garcia

(In Loving Memory of my brother, Rai Garcia)

How can I love You when you've taken someone I loved most?
How can I praise You when all I want is to reproach You?
How can I read Your word if I want to ignore You?
How can I kneel to pray if I do not want to talk to You?

And as I walk away from You, the more You follow me
You hug me and tell me, "I Love you."
You walk with me when I stumble
And if I fall, You take me in Your arms.

When I'm in bed, You tell a story to strengthen me,
And knowing that I'm scared, You stay with me until I fall asleep.
When I wake up in the morning, I feel peace because You were with me.
It's an everyday struggle as I begin to remember

And I fall once more,
But here You are again.
And as much as I do not want to, I fall in love with You again.
And although I don't understand Your will, I will obey You.

For as the blind can walk without seeing,
Walk without thinking,
Walk without understanding,
I, too, will choose to walk by Faith.

Lover's Vain

Ricardo Reyes

His hands are rough and soft like leather.
They hold the knife he's using to shave.
The clear water of the river stream acts like a mirror.
I ask if he loves me as much as he is vain.
He looks at me with bright green eyes mid-stroke and replies
"Of course I am."

Lake Ontario: Fall

Valerie Huskey

Crash, slosh, swoosh, over and over again,
rhythmic, calming.

Cool, crisp air whipping against my face,
taking my breath away.

Dark, sparkling water, air bubbles bursting,
crushed by the shore.

Slimy, green seaweed, strewn across the sand
amidst the pebbles.

“No Swimming” signs dangling from chains,
as if shutting a door.

I see no latch—no frame, no scorn
just the sea, beautiful and free.

Ode to Pastries

Sarafina San Miguel

Not yet conceived,
small, lifeless orbs of dough,
awaiting birth.
The resilient heat
breathes life
into the sticky children.

Their color sets in,
flushing with anticipation
of a new world.
Paleness is erased,
replaced by deep golds,
engulfing the body.
Soft light browns
embellish all sides.
Protective covering.
Sitting, cooling, maturing.

Icing traces their bodies
softly, yet skillfully, rite of passage.
Ambitious openings
dripping with juicy red jelly,
ready to escape from coddling cradles.
The flaky crust of past selves
fall, effortlessly,
revealing spongy naiveté.
Others follow a different silhouette.

Protected only
by a long, fragile,
powder shield.

Openings braided shut,
fearing violent world.
Their plump bodies
quaking,
bright cherry filling
sweats out of the lattices.

Tender strudels
eagerly awaiting
among confectionary brethren.
While the seasoned pastry braids
dread the day
of deathly reality.

Clusterfuck

Tamara Garcia

The words are in me
but they can't find their way out

I slam on the keyboard
with all my might
but what comes out
comes out in one
giant,
illegible,
messy
ball.

Then the frustration builds
like the temperature rising
is the summer heat

so my fingers keep slamming
setting the keyboard on fire
creating enough energy
to fuel this laptop,

and sometimes
my hand presses hard against the paper
and the ink comes out on the other
side of the sheet
my humbled words multiplied over and over
but the words are still just that:
words.

Because they aren't making sense
when I need them to make sense—
when we all
need them to make sense

but I don't give up
and I won't give up
the fight isn't over until
I
say it is.

It Is Enough

Deandra Elise Barrera

It is enough
to look back at this day,
as the many before it that have passed,
and see the joy
and the growth
and the rupture of the soul
as it flings itself
towards the sky
and flies

Untitled

Jazmin Beltran Gastelum

The earth is breathing me in.
The wind likes to strike my rough skin,
And cover me with dust.
The clouds can't wait to chase me,
And spit water on my hair.
The mountains forbid my way,
The sun shining and blinding my eyes.
But, when I open my eyes again,
I see things that I missed the last time I looked.

The earth is breathing me in.
I can feel my bones bend,
Accommodating for its new space.
The wind likes to caress my skin,
And cover me with flickers of dust.
The clouds want to play a game,
And replenish my dry skin.
The mountains make a pathway.
The sun shining and illuminating my way.
The earth is breathing me in.
I can feel my bones bend,
Accommodating for its new space.

A Feather's Touch

Angela Sobery

The sky looks clear and blue today.
There is a slight breeze that brushes my hair from my cheek.
I hear a faint sound of tweeting above my head.
Looking upward I see a beautiful Blue Jay flying over.
The bird blends into the crystal sky like camouflage.
I suddenly see something fall from it.
I squint my eyes expecting the object to be a twig, but it flips over to reveal that it is a feather.
It seemed like time slowed down in the grace of this feather falling.
The slight wisps of the breeze move through its angelic fibers.
The sun's rays shine, allowing me to witness the flawless arrangement of blue hues laced into the feather's strand.
As the Blue Jay feather glides towards me, I am tempted to reach for it.
I desire this beauty of nature offering itself as a gift to me.
I stop my wanting and consider if I should allow myself this memento of nature.
The feather is just about to touch the ground when a second Blue Jay swoops down and captures the single feather.
My eyes curiously follow the bird to a small hidden branch.
I move slowly to see the bird frantically tuck the feather into its twig filled nest.
At that moment, I sighed to myself and released a tiny tear from my eye.

If the Son Had Not Come

Matthew Keller

Picture a world filled with hate
A world which could have been great
But for this world were closed the gates
And so doomed to a despairing fate

At first the peoples numbered few
This bleak place was strange and new
Such an unpromising planet was a demotion
From where Adam and Eve betrayed God's devotion

We had our own nature which was of sin
And what better way to begin
Than to send your brother to the reaper
And then ask if you are his keeper?

Soon ensuing was our propensity for war
We slaughtered each other like blood-thirsty boars
Power we found to be most adorned
Kindness was known to be loathsomely scorned

Decades passed and centuries flew
We were still violent people; no one was true
Our faith was limited to gods of nature
That would sometimes come down to do us a favor

Alas, no one came to speak of love
And forgiveness was never heard of
There was no one to stop us from throwing stones
No one to heal crippled old bones

Lepers went on and disease was widespread
There were no fish or loaves of bread
There was no compassion from one to another
There was no hope nor love to discover

Tyrants ruled, iniquity reigned

Mundo Bello y Desdichado

Jennifer Nunez

A gorgeous conflagration
The banner that warns us
Of the night creeping in
Of shadows growing longer
Of watching your step
It's streaked in gold, fluorescent pink,
Bright orange tinged with deepening blue
And it reminds you of why you're alive
It has a soft voice
Melodious, hard to catch
Harder still
With the bustle
Of busy minds
Of trying to walk to class quickly
Of trying to save time
And worrying about what tomorrow brings
This email and that event
Its murmur gets lost in the clamor of agendas
But when your whining halts
And you look up
See that wonder!
Listen to it speak
Your heart is filled
With beauty
Brimming with honor
For what has always been there
The sky, the earth, the moon
The animals that roam this world
All strange, magnificent
Our existence is woven with paradox
Day in and out
So much brutality and wickedness
Strife, injustice, and illness
But there is also peace

Sometimes floating right above your head
The flights of a firefly
There are flowers perfuming the air
Trees reaching out their arms
Grass, emerald green, sways gently
Atop rich loam and the air
Brushes your skin with delicacy
A world of marvel
A world of tyranny
Insanity
The darkest sorrows
The deepest pleasures
Valleys and peaks
You just never know
Tomorrow
What will unfurl

Ode to Consuelo

Sarafina San Miguel

Any room she entered,
spirits leapt in the air like fireworks.
Her serenading smile
softened the hardest of hearts.
Her warm presence
melted the icy paths
forged by sorrow.
Eight tiny hands
grasped for her tender touch,
tugging, hugging, wanting to play.

The dark day of diagnosis.
Days limited,
health limited,
precious memories limited.
Her voice grew weaker,
her will grew stronger.
In His eyes she is
beautiful, courageous, loving mother.
In her children's eyes she is
longed for, missed, never forgotten.
Her proud brown eyes
watch over all.
The love she sends pours
from the heavens,
soaking her beloved.
Eight strong hands
now clasp,
tightly bound,
unwavering.
The love of a mother
never fades.
Ceaseless against time,

steadfast throughout
life.

Her welcoming arms
outstretched,
awaiting our reunion.

Needlepoint Roses

Diane Bertrand

The woman carries shopping bags,
fills her house with more stuff,
pretends to buy gifts for someone else,
anything she can do to push away cool regrets
or a darker shade of grief.

As she retrieves her coat for another day's distraction,
she notices a forgotten bundle wedged up on a shelf.
Unwraps what had been abandoned to the closet for years:
a pair of oval frames around needlepoint roses.

After hanging them on either side of the dining room mirror,
she sits down at the table to admire the artistry
of an old woman's talent and remember their shared history.

Reaching for a pencil, she listens
to the muse she let slip out of the closet door.
Looking into the darkest inkwell of her greatest fear,
she paints the first word in a new poem.

Las Palabras

Tamara Garcia

This is America.
Land of the free,
home of the brave,

Right?

like that time
my mothers hands
burned red for hours
after being slapped
because her mouth
wasn't saying
the right words

or, like that other time,
a classmate
threw coins
on a plastic counter
at the Family Dollar
down the street
because the cashier
wasn't saying
the same words
my classmate was

also, what about that time
when my father's father
wasn't allowed
inside a KFC
and stood next
to the dumpster
for the food he paid
the exact same price for
because his words

didn't match
the employees'

still, that other time
my aunt
was told to leave
a boutique
because her words
just weren't good enough
to fit in those dresses

and
don't forget that other time
my high school anatomy
and physiology teacher
told a group of students in class
to change their words
or shut up

So many lost words
floating in this land of freedom,
probably near the homes
of those famed brave souls

all because they didn't speak English.

Fiction

There is a Monster in the Water

Robert Hernandez

I need to be careful, for shutting my eyes while floating in deep bodies of water, such as a pool or a lake, summons a creature of enormous size and hunger.

It has been like this ever since I was little. My sister, acting like an older sibling, decided to tell me stories when bathing, about monstrous sea creatures that roamed the earth's oceans long before mankind had ever existed. I had shivered, lifting the bubbles up as much as I could from my bath, and saw nothing there but dirty water turned blue by soap. Yet I was terrified.

When the stories ended, I would half-heartedly submerge, closing my eyes and imagining myself as a tiny spec sinking further into the depths, stretching out my arms, reaching for the glimmering surface reflecting the lights rays. Yet, as I would outstretch my arm toward the glimmer, the light would become blotted out by it.

It was large, a perversion of nature, four finned, with eyes coal red, like little fires in the seas. There was no light, but its teeth reflected the coals, staring directly at me, waiting. I reemerged from the tub, shaking and frozen as if the tub was full of ice. I remained there till mother told me to leave, lest I move and the beast saw me.

This encounter prevented me from learning to swim, knowing that I was not fast enough to escape the creature, and I isolated myself from waterparks, realizing someday the monster would get me by waiting there among the shallow pool beneath the swimming bystanders. For years, I waited. I didn't tell anyone though, as no one would see the sea monster that plagued my thoughts, floating underneath them. As time continued, nothing happened.

I kept the creature a secret from everyone until I was older, about fourteen, and slowly it began to take on a life away from a fear of a simple monster. As time went by, the lurking beast seemed easier to forge with the mundane worries of life as they came creeping by, erasing naïve fears of monsters and oceans. Monsters became people, nightmares became reality. Until one night, when the creature became an embodiment of a release.

When the mundane problems became big problems, the bathroom

was all too inviting. I turned our shower on, and grabbed my razor just in case things got out of hand, locking the door behind myself, the click a foreboding to me, somewhat a bell to let the creature know dinner had arrived.

Submerging myself in the warm waters, I closed my eyes and let the sinking feeling come, drowning out the incoming footsteps outside the bathroom door. I let myself slip into the familiarity of the chasm, the darkness and the glimmer. Happiness came forward, as obligation slipped away, and distantly the door handle rattled as a muted voice screamed on the other side, asking me if I wanted to talk, if I was okay.

Ignoring the sounds, I wait for the coming arrival of my monster, as the light flap of fins drowned out the rattle, and the creature became visible even though I did not remember opening my eyes. The serpent circled, aware that I was cornered at this time, and it floats downwards, blocking out the glimmer of the surface, which could have been my only hope. Those cruel eyes stared at me, so full of hunger and fire, as the monster slowly made its way closer, as if floating through an endless space. Bubbles emerged, and the water broke, as the beast lunged forward with such power, grasping my arm in its mouth, the teeth sinking in, as blood surrounds my vision. Just as I imagined how painful the feeling would be.

I snap out of imagination, and wince, looking down at the mess of red floating down the drain. I whimpered and watched the water mix with blood, rinsing off the razor under the stream. Grasping my arm, I tried to stop the bleeding, but the water made it harder to do, so I step out of the shower, staring down at the bite of my monster, and open wound across my arm. I wondered why the creature didn't take me, as I stare at the rattling handle, hearing the questions coming before I open the door.

Mirror, Mirror

Ricardo Reyes

It has been three years since grandma passed, three years since all her mirrors got scattered between the families. She had some type of fixation with them, something I have never understood, even after she willed her most prized one to me, the youngest of the grandchildren. The amount of scorn I received at the funeral service surprised me. Over a damn mirror. I could remember thinking What's so special about this damn mirror?

I stood there, the first day in my room with the ugly large wooden framed antique mirror on my wall that stood out between my Fall Out Boy and Slipknot posters, wanting to get rid of it, but at the same time, not wanting to anger grandma's spirit. So I kept it covered with an old sheet.

The event started small. I would walk into my room and find the sheet folded up on my bed, the mirror exposed and clean. My brothers, sisters, and parents denied having anything to do with it. For a time I felt it was a reoccurring joke, but I grew curious as who was actually doing it.

I bought one of those little kid spy cameras you can get at Toys R Us for thirty bucks and left it in the room before school. When I came back to the footage all I found was a lapse in the timeframe recorded. One minute the mirror was covered and the next it wasn't. I was determined to see it in person.

I decided I would skip class one day, make everyone in the house believe I had gone to school. And I waited, expecting one of my siblings to walk in and do it. I would finally catch them in the act. Instead, I ended up falling asleep. I woke up to the folded sheet. Pissed off I ran to the camera I still had set up and played back the day.

I watched the footage frame-by-frame. I saw the sheet snake its way off the mirror into its folded position. In the mirror stood a silhouette near my bed that only appeared in the reflection. I looked away from the footage to see the figure now staring back at me from the mirror.

"You're grandmother says 'Hi,'" it said.

Suddenly, I really didn't want the mirror anymore.

Dance with the Dead

Marleyne Hernandez

Sure, everyone says they're excited about Spirit Week but the minute I awaken a few ancient spirits and raise the dead, suddenly I'm a "witch" and "ruining homecoming." Besides, it's not like I wanted to raise the dead, it just worked out that way. When my grandmother told me she used to dance with the dead, I didn't think she actually meant it. I thought it was some type of old person quirk, you know, like liquefying all of their food or having a landline. How was I supposed to know that the *brujeria* my grandmother joked about was real? And, that the books she had were not meant, under any circumstances, to be read aloud. They didn't have a warning label, just an easy-to-pick lock on the outside. If she didn't want the books to be read, she should not have left them in such an easy to reach place.

So now, I'm sitting here with my best friend's date's arm on my lap while they gyrate on the dance floor. He doesn't have a problem that his date is part of the undead that's slowly overtaking the student body. All he cares about is whether or not his date knows the difference between the foxtrot and the tango.

I tried once more to call my *abuela* to fix this, but my call went straight to voicemail. She was out playing *Loteria* with her church friends, trying to swindle them out of their retirement checks.

"*Abuela*, *contestame!*" I whispered into my phone, leaving her a message.

The spirits I had awoken were slowly creeping into the skin of my classmates, taking possession. The undead, however, were more interested in blending in with the living, regardless of their missing limbs.

"Elena, what did you do?" the Homecoming princess asked, as she grabbed me by the arm.

I tried to shake her off, but she was intent on keeping my arm confined.

"I didn't do anything," I lied.

"Don't lie, this is just like the school's bonfire night all over again. Why is it your life's mission to ruin every school sanctioned event?" she asked, leading me out of the gym.

"Those fire demons were *not* my fault."

She threw me through the gym doors.

"I don't know why they keep letting you in here," she said, "but you'd do well to *keep out*."

She slammed the doors shut for effect.

I wanted to push back in there, save the day, and have that princess wannabe beg for forgiveness. But, I didn't have the abilities needed to stop this invasion. I needed my abuela, as pathetic as that sounded. At least I didn't need my mommy, now that would've been really embarrassing.

I walked the perimeter of the gym, dodging the limbless undead stumbling around. For some unknown reason, the faculty had locked all the doors to the gym. I had no access. Why would they do that?

Unless they knew I would accidentally bring about some supernatural force and wanted the students to suffer. Was there some sort of insurance benefits I wasn't aware of?

I tried dialing my best friend, hoping he could let me in. But, he ignored my call. Of course, what could I expect? He was the king of dance and homecoming was his kingdom. My phone started ringing.

"Hey, can you come and let me in-"

"M'ija, de que hablas?" my abuela asked.

"Abuela!" I exclaimed, "I need your help."

"Ay, y ahora que hiciste?" she asked.

"I didn't do anything," I replied.

She clicked her tongue in disbelief.

"You know those books you had on the top shelf in your sitting room?" I asked.

"Ay, no me digas que los agarraste," she said.

"I might've, accidentally gotten them..."

"Y los leiste?" she yelled.

"Maybe, I could have read them out loud," I said, "I mean, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to!"

"Ay, niña mocosa! Por eso no te dejo que agarres mis cosas," she reprimanded.

I rolled my eyes. I had gotten this lecture before. "Don't touch my things," "when will you learn not to be so nosy?" "I'm never letting you in my house again," blah, blah, blah.

"Okay Abuela, I get it. I'm sorry, okay?" I cut her off, "what can I do now?"

"Cambiarte de escuela," she replied.

"I can't change schools," I said, "I'm up for perfect attendance in this one."

“Pues hubieras pensado en eso antes de meterte en mis cosas.”

“How was I supposed to know that your books contained unholy magical forces?” I asked.

She then went into a non-stop curse word tirade in Spanish. I tuned out after the second insult. Why were grandparents so angry all the time?

She finally slowed down.

“Abuela, what do I do to stop this?” I asked again.

“Ya te dije que nada,” she said.

“There has to be *something* I can do. I can’t let those poor kids get taken over by the dead.”

“Lo unico que puedes hacer es dirigir a todos los espíritus a el panteón,” she said.

How was I supposed to single handedly direct all the stupid spirits and undead back to the graveyard?

“How?” I asked.

“No se, pero tengo que colgar,” she replied.

I could hear her friends yelling in the background that they were ready to get back to their game. They were accusing her of cheating.

“Tramposa yo? Tu madre!” she said and then she hung up.

Great, I was on my own. As usual. Leave it to me to save the entire student body. Again.

I walked back to the front doors of the gym, where I hoped the Homecoming princess had left them unlocked. Of course she had. It’s like she wanted me to sneak back in.

I walked into the poorly decorated gym and saw that the undead now almost outnumbered the students and faculty. And, judging by the amount of glowing eyes, the possessed were also outnumbering the non-possessed.

I made my way to the DJ booth, my Abuela’s voice ringing in my ears. “Yo bailaba con los muertos,” she had said. So, hopefully, nothing had changed in the last sixty years and the dead still loved to dance. I grabbed the mic out of the DJ’s hand, something that was not hard to do since the DJ was in the process of spiritual possession.

“Excuse me,” I said into the mic, hoping to grab everyone’s attention.

Everybody turned to me in scary unison.

“I hope everyone’s enjoying the dance as much as I am,” I said, “but, you know what would make this dance even better? If we danced our way to the graveyard!”

I was met by blank stares.

“C’mon, let’s celebrate the dead by honoring them with one kickin’

dance.”

More blank stares. I could see the Homecoming princess fuming from the back. I would have felt threatened if the undead hadn't surrounded her in an almost sacrificial circle.

One of the undead groaned, calling the rest of his brethren to him. They started to swarm the front of the dance floor, looking up at me. I assumed they were looking for leadership, so I jumped out of the booth and started a conga line. Call me old school, but I needed something fast, easy, and to the point. I conga-ed them to the closest graveyard, where a yellow light was emanated from the center mausoleum. I looked back and saw that most of the undead and the possessed were following me. Sadly, the music from the gym quickly faded and I was losing my position of power over the spirits.

I quickly started to hum a jingle that I had heard on the radio earlier that day. Soon, all of the conga line started to hum along. Creating their own music, the dead followed me back to their grave.

Once there, I rushed to the gate and locked them in. They were all dancing ridiculously outdated dances, but they looked happy enough. Soon, daybreak would come and they would all return to their eternal slumber. Sadly, we would lose a couple of upperclassmen, an English teacher, most of the Biology teachers, half the band, and a very disgruntled P.E. coach. Not too much of a loss, but our class picture this year would have a lot of holes in it.

The Kitty's Tale

Diane Bertrand

At seven, I am all about the costume and the bag. I'm a kitty cat in a black leotard with a fuzzy tail pinned on the back. A cap with fuzzy black ears ties under my chin. I carry a cloth bag decorated with orange crayons. The older kids swing paper bags from the grocery store as we all walk down Texas Avenue on Halloween night.

My big brothers and my cousin walk ahead: one hunchback with a clump of rags stuffed under his t-shirt, one hobo with charcoal dust across his cheeks and under his nose, and a space man in a store-bought silver costume. My sister is a witch, Josie is a scarecrow, and behind the kids, Mommy and Aunt Carmen walk slowly and talk together.

We roam our familiar block, waving to neighborhood friends. We admire homemade costumes of cowboys and Indians, reimagine our friends as mummies and witches, spooks and wizards and laugh at clown faces and plastic vampire teeth. We skip happily to and from every house with porch lights beaming. As we walk back to our house, candy bags half-empty, we want to cross the busy street and walk the next block that dead-ends at the old pond. With six of us begging, the moms sigh and agree.

As I walk with my sister and Josie, the shadows feel longer on the other side of Texas Avenue. There are only two working streetlights up ahead and dim porch lights beyond.

There are no familiar kids ahead racing from house to house. And even with all the monsters I saw in the neighborhood tonight, none of it was real and all the pretending fun. Now little fingers crawl down my back. I tell myself a street on Halloween should feel spooky and shadows should be taller, longer, and a different shade of black.

Mommy whispers, "Stay together," as we walk closer to the first house with a dim porch light. It's hard to see ahead so I grip my bag tightly. Suddenly I am pushed hard against my sister. We both tumble to the rough asphalt as two boys in white t-shirts and blue jeans bust through our group. They've carried away my sister's bag. Josie's bag is yanked from her hands. They shove my brothers aside, toppling like bowling pins, while greedy hands snatch and steal. My cousin screeches when the boys slam him down. Then they run off and disappear into the

black shadows of a dead-end street.

“Home! Home! Let’s go home!” Mommy calls out.

My brothers jump up and yell ugly words at the thieves. My cousin sits in the street crying and grabbing his knee. Aunt Carmen and Josie run to him. Mommy grabs my sister and me by an arm and lifts us to our feet. My mom scoops us together with her hug and whispers comfort to the scaredy-cat that I am.

At seven, I am confused about mean kids who steal what they want. They were no older than my brothers but greed made them stronger and madder than any kids I know.

I am the only one carrying a candy bag as we walk fast to the house.

Mommy makes me divide my candy six ways.

I have lost my kitty tail.

Sunflowers

Mercedes Kelso

One hot August morning Sofia, Ellie, and I decided to explore the back pasture. Mom and Dad bought a few sheep every spring to graze our pastures, and we wanted to play in the high grass before the sheep got to it. We fattened the sheep for a few months and then sent them away to the slaughterhouse. Mom always told us not to get too attached to the sheep, because they were only going to end up in the basement freezer, so we tried our best not to befriend them.

Sofia was my best friend. She lived down the street from me and came over to play almost every day during the summer. My older sister Ellie always found new adventures for us outside, and we often found ourselves immersed in another world somewhere on our property.

Ellie reached up to unlock the gate.

“Okay, follow me,” she said to us through her tangled dirty blonde hair, “I will lead the way through the grass.”

We walked through the dirt corral, past the old wooden barn full of half empty bags of chicken food, musty hay, and old lawn furniture. Stepping into the thick pasture, we followed Ellie, the grass stung our bare legs and feet. The blazing sun beat down on our bare shoulders, and sweat began to trickle down the backs of our floral print tank tops.

We reached the fence line and surveyed the area. A few rows of bright yellow sunflowers had begun to grow near the fence line. Behind them, over the neighbor’s fence, grew a thicket of rose bushes with bright red and pink petals. We pushed through the sunflowers to find an empty patch of dirt surrounded by green vines crawling up the fence. The vines made a thick canopy over the clearing.

“Wow! Look at this,” Ellie exclaimed.

“It’s amazing! I wonder how long this has been here?” I said.

“We should make a fort out here and have tea parties!” Sofia suggested.

The cleared patch of dirt looked just big enough for three chairs and a little table.

“Let’s wait until the sunflowers grow more and then we can start making a play house,” Ellie said, “it will be like our very own secret

garden.”

A few days passed before more rows sunflowers shot up bright and yellow. Their petals shone against the soft red and pink rose bushes. Equipped with our lawn chairs, teacups, a plastic table, and faded pastel tablecloth, Ellie, Sofia, and I ventured into the pasture. The rows of sunflowers had grown thick, so we trampled some down to get through to the clearing. We carefully arranged the chairs and table under the shade of the vines, facing the sunflowers.

“I have an idea,” I exclaimed, “let’s bring Little Red Hen back here to join us!”

Little Red Hen was our favorite chicken. We bought her a few years ago when Mom decided she wanted cage-free eggs and had grown attached to Little Red Hen’s calm disposition and speckled eggs.

“Ok, I will go get her while you two set up the tea party,” Ellie replied.

Sofia reached down to the milk crate that was filled with our belongings and began assembling the plastic tea-set we had taken from an old doll set, while I carefully poured the tea into the plastic cups.

Ellie walked back with Little Red Hen and set her at the front of the dirt clearing. Little Red Hen cocked her head and looked up at us for a moment before nibbling at the ground around the sunflowers.

“Think of all the games we can play out here!” Ellie said, as she sat down at the table and sipped her tea.

“Yeah, we could play house,” Sofia agreed.

“Or restaurant!” I added, “We could bring a picnic basket and food for sandwiches and pretend this is a lunch place and take turns taking each other’s orders.”

Day by day, the sunflowers grew thicker and taller, taking over the grassy pasture. We spent our afternoons under the shade of the thicket of flowers and vines. Little Red Hen often joined us. She nestled in the shade of the sunflowers to preen herself and lay eggs.

One day, as Sofia, Ellie, and I assembled our picnic basket and tea set in the kitchen, I overheard mom complaining to dad.

“Dan, those sunflowers are getting out of control. The sheep have almost eaten the whole front pasture down. We will have to move them to the back soon, but it looks like those flowers have started to crowd out the grass.”

I hopped down the back porch stairs out to the sunflower field. Sofia had brought some vases from her house for decoration, and we had cov-

ered the ground of the dirt clearing with sunflower petals. As the sheep continued to nibble the front pasture down to nothing, the sunflowers in the back continued to grow, and I began to worry. I knew that the sheep needed more grass, but I didn't think that Mom would really get rid of the sunflowers.

One hot afternoon after a morning of chores, Sofia came over to play in the sunflowers. As we ran through the pasture along the trodden pathway to the back of the field, I thought something looked strange. As we neared it, I realized that I couldn't see the sunflowers.

We reached the back of the field, and looked down at the remains of dead sunflowers scattered on the ground. Tiny stalks of the stems poked up from the dry ground.

"What happened? Who cut the sunflowers down?" Ellie exclaimed.

Sofia and I walked over to the clearing with the table and chairs. Under the bright shining sun, without the shade from the sunflowers, the clearing just looked like a patch of dirt with old plastic lawn furniture covered in dust not the playhouse we had created. Little Red Hen walked over and cocked her head up at us, seeming just as confused as we did.

"I can't believe this," Sofia said as I turned around and ran toward the house.

"Mom!" I shouted, "what happened to the sunflowers? Did you chop them down?"

"What are you talking about, honey?" she asked.

Tears streamed down my face.

"Calm down. Show me what you mean," she said.

"Come look! Someone chopped down all the sunflowers in the back pasture!"

Mom followed me out through the gate, past the barn, to where Sofia, Ellie, and Little Red Hen stood, still confused and upset. Mom surveyed the area.

"Girls, I'm so sorry," she said looking at us, "I don't know what happened. I only wanted them trimmed back."

She leaned down to pick up some of the dead stems and flowers from the ground.

"Dan!" she called across the creek to Dad, "come over here, please!"

Weed-wacker in hand, Dad walked over to where we stood.

"Dan, what did you do? I told you just to trim some of them back, not get rid of them all."

"I thought you said to cut all of them back so they wouldn't invade the pasture," he replied.

"I guess I got a little carried away with the weed-wacker," he added,

looking down at the mess of dead flowers.

“Girls I’m sorry,” he said, crouching down to our level. “Maybe they will grow back soon.”

Angrily, I sat down on one of the plastic chairs. I didn’t want to wait for them to grow back. Summer was almost over, and by the time they would grow back, school would be in session.

We left the table and chairs at the dirt clearing.

One afternoon, I wandered out to the pasture and sat in one of the dusty chairs. The sunflowers still had not grown back. There was no sign of life, not even the slightest sight of a petal. The magic had disappeared. Mom told us that the beginning of a new school year, and the onset of fall, brought new beginnings for our imaginations to create.

“The magic isn’t gone,” she would say, “it’s your own creativity. It’s in your clever imaginations.”

She’s just trying to make us feel better, I thought to myself as I looked at the sunflower remains and dirty vases lining the clearing. I sat for a few moments contemplating ways to use the old vases. I looked up at the empty field, and began to think of games we could play. Now that it was fall, we could use the empty pasture for kickball, and the clearing could be used for spectators. We could set up chairs facing the field and hang a blanket canopy over it in case of rain. And we could paint the vases into trophies, and give them to the winning team, I thought, beginning to feel excited. As I got up to walk inside and share my ideas with Ellie and Sofia, I looked back at the dusty tables and chairs and old vases. Maybe Mom was right, I thought. Maybe we do create our own magic.

Sir Goldy the Third

Jackie Tuesday

Ding, Ding the elevator begins to close. “Daddy why are the walls of the elevator made of glass?” says little, four-year-old Lisa with her face pressed up against the glass. “I think it is going to break and we are going to fall out and die.”

“Well, it might if you keep pressing your face up against it like that,” says the Father with a half-smile. Little Lisa recoils in terror, gasping, as the goldfish in the plastic bag she is holding sloshes around, doing backflips. “Be careful, honey. You’re going to kill your new friend if you don’t hold him gently,” Father says as he takes the bag from Lisa to examine the fish.

“Daddy no! You are going to eat him! Stop, Stop!” Lisa exclaims jumping up and down trying to grab the bag from her Father, “You’re a murderer! I saw you eat fish for lunch!”

“That is not the same kind of fish” Father coos sweetly, almost too sweetly, to his daughter “McDonald’s doesn’t use Goldfish. They —” His thought is interrupted by a Ker-Thunk followed by a pop-pop-eeeekkkk. The elevator comes to a screeching halt between the first and second floor of the Central City Mall. People stop and watch, wondering if the ropes will break. Little Lisa clings to her father and screams. “It’s alright, honey. The elevator just got stuck” Father says shakily, “I am sure the maintenance men will be by any second to fix it.”

“They won’t,” Little Lisa laments as she melts into the floor of the elevator. “These are our last moments. Soon we will starve of thirst and tarnish!”

“Honey, calm down. No one is dying. Everyone is fine, even little Goldy is holding up okay,” Father soothes. “We will be out of here lickity-split.” Little Lisa flails and whines for another ten minutes then gets bored and goes up to the glass to make fog and draw funny faces in it. Father becomes impatient and tries his cell-phone, but there is no reception. He tries a text, still nothing. Little Lisa begins singing “Yankee Doodle,” which only annoys Father more. He slumps down to the floor against one of the elevator’s glass walls. He lifts up little Goldy to eye level and begins watching him swim in circles. “How do you not care that you are in a little clear bubble?” Father questions the fish who

in response just opens and closes his mouth and stares at nothing. “How stupid can you be that you aren’t panicking, don’t you know that you are going to live your whole life in a little glass bubble and then die?” Father whispers harshly to the fish.

“I think I will name him Sir Goldy the Third!” squawks Lisa.

“How can he be the third when he is your first Goldfish?”

“Just because he is my first doesn’t mean he is the first silly goose”

Lisa teases.

She has a good point, Father ponders to himself, is anyone really the first in anything, or are we all just fooling ourselves into thinking our lives matter and that we are unique. He tilts his head to the side and looks so closely at Sir Goldy that his nose touches the cool plastic of the bag. He was growing strangely fond of this little goldfish. Another hour passes. Father continues mumbling to his new fish-friend as Lisa flounders about, pretending she is a fish in her own little elevator tank. There are still no maintenance men in sight. Father begins pressing all the buttons on the elevator door with no luck. Then he tries to pry open the door with his shoe, but the door stays shut. Noticing that his shaking is getting worse, Father slides back down into his previous position, against the glass, staring at the goldfish. “Don’t you care that you are alone?” Father asks Sir Goldy the Third. He notices that the fish is starting to swim sideways now and is struggling to breath. “No,” Father whispers. He taps his daughter on the shoulder, who is still drawing on the glass “Lisa try and get someone to notice us. Sir Goldy isn’t doing so good.”

“Don’t worry, Daddy. We will get out of here lickity-split!” Lisa chirps, then turns to start some more of her merry finger-smudge-drawing. Father stares at Sir Goldy who just floats at the bottom of the bag.

“Hang in there, fella” Father mutters to Sir Goldy. He watches as Sir Goldy the Third’s eyes begin to glass over. Father’s heart begins to sink. He knows what is coming. Then Goldy slowly flips upside down and floats to the top of the bag, mouth agape. “No!” Father yells, “His life wasn’t supposed to be like this. He was supposed to have a nice glass bowl and be loved and be happy!” Lisa seems surprisingly calm in the situation.

“He is in fishy-heaven, Daddy. We can flush him when we get out,” Lisa sings with a flick of her wrist. “Now, come draw with me!”

“Flush him?” Father yelps. “He matters so little that once he is gone you will just flush him down the toilet without a second thought?” Father begins to tear up and shakes the plastic bag violently. “He was important! He made a difference, how can you just flush him!”

“We can just get another fishy, Daddy. I have a quarter right here.”

Lisa smiles and shows him the quarter from her pocket. Father slumps down in defeat. Lisa goes to hug Father.

“You won’t even remember him tomorrow will you?” Father sobs.

“I won’t need to, Daddy,” Lisa says with a bright smile. “There are tons of fish just like him.”

Chitlins

Benjamin Schweers

Bobby and the rest of his fifth grade class filed into their classroom. The cold air from the wall-mounted air-conditioner kept the room cool during the hot April afternoons and relieved the pink-faced students who'd just spent an hour playing dodgeball in the gym. They sat down in their desks, in five rows of five, and waited for their teacher to return from the teacher's lounge. She'd promised the students "a surprise." Bobby sat in the back corner, next to the air-conditioner, his head on his desk, his cheek pressed against the cool wooden surface.

When the air-conditioner clicked off, the room fell silent. Then the creaky metal door to the classroom swung open. Bobby looked up. Mrs. Babineaux entered. She held a large platter covered in tinfoil. A snack for during the vocabulary test, Bobby thought. He listened to his teacher's high heels click against the tile floor as she carried the platter across the room to her desk. No one said anything. He wondered about the surprise—the food Mrs. Babineaux had made at home—and he feared the upcoming vocabulary test.

Mrs. Babineaux put the platter on the desk and then plopped down in her leather chair.

"Megan," Mrs. Babineaux said to one of the girls in the front row. "Help me pass out the vocab test."

"Yes ma'am," Megan said, and she got up from her desk and walked over to her teacher.

"You too, Crystal," Mrs. Babineaux said to another girl in the front. Crystal got up and followed Megan.

Bobby watched the girls each take a stack of papers from their teacher. He put his head back down on his desk; he hated vocabulary tests.

Megan and Crystal counted out the number of students in each row and then hand five tests to each person sitting in the first desk. Then the tests were passed back.

"What's the surprise?" Daryl asked, one of the boys in the front of the class.

"Yeah, Mrs. What is it?" another student asked.

"Hush now. You'll see," Mrs. Babineaux replied.

Bobby felt a piece of paper touch him on the head. He sat up in his

chair. Byron, the kid who sat in front of him, held the paper over his shoulder and waved it up and down for Bobby to grab. Bobby took the test from Byron's hand and placed it face-up on the desk. The neat columns of words looked foreign to Bobby; he hadn't studied at all.

"Keep your eyes on your own papers now," Mrs. Babineaux called out, not looking up as she pulled paper plates and napkins from a desk drawer. "When you're done with your test, turn your papers over. And whoever finishes first can come and help me serve the food." She unwrapped the foil-covered platter. "Y'all are in for a treat today."

Bobby watched his teacher remove the tin-foil. A mound of brown pieces of...of something...covered the platter on her desk.

"Ew, gross!" one of the girls said.

"What's that, Mrs. Babineaux?" another student asked.

"That's chitlins! It's pig meat," said Byron, the kid in front of Bobby.

"It looks nasty," said Megan, returning to her seat.

"Ain't your momma made you chitlins before?" asked Mrs. Babineaux.

Megan shook her head and looked down at her vocabulary test.

"Crystal," Mrs. Babineaux said. "Your momma makes chitlins, right?"

"Yes ma'am. But I don't like 'em," said Crystal.

"Well maybe she don't make 'em like I do," said the teacher. "These are fried chitlins. Y'all are gonna like these." And Mrs. Babineaux began to put two chitlins on each paper plate and one napkin on top of the chitlins. "Now get to your tests," she added, and the class quieted.

"Do we have to eat the chitlins, Mrs. Babineaux?" asked a student.

Bobby didn't know what chitlins were, but he decided he wasn't going to eat any of the nasty food. It looked gross. So he focused on trying to answer the test questions.

"Daryl," Mrs. Babineaux said. "Come help me pass out the plates."

"But I ain't done with my test, ma'am," he replied.

"It don't matter, child. I've run out of room here," and she motioned to her desk, crowded with plates of fried chitlins.

"Yes ma'am," Daryl said, and he got up slowly, walked over to his teacher, and took two of the plates. Then he handed the plates to two of his classmates.

"What if we don't want any?" asked the same student.

"I've decided," Mrs. Babineaux called out to the entire class. "If you eat one of your chitlins, you get five extra points on your test. If you eat both pieces, you get ten."

"Yes!" some of the students whispered.

“Really, Mrs. Babineaux? Ten points?” asked a student named Whitney.

“Yeah...I bet y’all’ll try Mrs. Babineaux’s chitlins now,” she replied. And she continued to put two pieces on each plate, a napkin covering the chitlins, and the plates on her desk for Daryl to pick up.

Megan, who’d finished her test already, got up and helped Daryl pass out the plates: two chitlins per plate, one plate per student.

Bobby looked at his classmates who already had food. They inspected, smelled, and nibbled on the fried pieces of greasy pig intestines. Some of the students chewed a couple times then covered their mouths and spit the food back onto the plate, hoping Mrs. Babineaux wouldn’t see. Other’s shrugged and then shoved the whole pieces into their mouths.

“It’s chewy,” someone said.

“It’s greasy,” said another.

“I can’t eat mine. It tastes funny,” another called.

“Y’all need to hush-up and get back to your tests,” Mrs. Babineaux said.

A chorus of “Yes ma’ams” filed the room.

Megan walked to the end of the row and placed a plate of chitlins in front of Bobby.

“Thank you,” he said.

Bobby slowly peeled away the napkin, which was soaked through with grease, and looked at the two pieces of fried pork. He poked at the food and pushed it around the plate. The batter was crispy, but the meat inside felt squishy. He leaned forward and sniffed the food. His face wrinkled. Then he looked around to see if who else was eating the chitlins.

Byron spun around in his chair and looked at Bobby.

“You gonna’ eat yours?” Byron asked.

Bobby shrugged. “They stink,” he said.

“You can have mine,” whispered Karen, a girl sitting in the row next to Bobby and Byron.

“Okay,” Byron said, and he reached over and took the plate from Karen.

“Do you really like it?” Bobby asked.

“It’s alright,” he replied. He stuffed both chitlins into his mouth. “But I don’t know none of these words,” he said with his mouth full.

“You can have mine too,” said Lindsay, another girl sitting next to the boys.

Again, Byron reached over, took the plate, and shoved the chitlins

into his mouth.

“You’re gross,” Bobby said.

“That’s thirty extra points,” Byron replied.

“Quiet in the corner!” Mrs. Babineaux called out.

“Yes ma’am,” said Bobby.

Byron swallowed his third mouthful of chitlins and took a deep breath.

“Mrs. Babineaux, I ate Karen’s and Lindsay’s too!” he yelled. “So I get thirty points, right?”

The air-conditioner clicked back on, the cool air blew across Bobby’s back, and the hum of the machine drowned out Mrs. Babineaux’s answer. Bobby moved his plate to the side and looked at the column of vocabulary words:

Affect

Effect

Historic

Official

Suffrage

Advantage

Opportunity

Responsibilities

Failure

Bobby looked at the plate of chitlins. He grabbed one of the spongy pieces, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

Consumption

Ricardo Reyes

It's been over a week since I found the book, yet I still continue to handle it as if it were a time bomb counting down in my hands. I only read what my mind is able to handle each time. Every word I read feels like it is being scarred onto the outer layer of my brain, a painful reminder of the sin I may be committing, but the results are far too real to give up now.

I've decided to log my progress in case I fall in too far. I hope that whatever I may become by the end of reading this book, that these entries will allow me or someone else to make sense of it all.

Journal Entry #1:

Sep. 21st, 2017

The First Reading was either the most frustrating or the most painful, I cannot decide which best describes it. After purchasing the book, I took the bus and returned home, book in hand, curious to read as soon as I could. After walking through the door, I placed the book on my office desk and followed my regular routine of feeding the dog, and then myself, before changing. By then the sun outside my office room window was setting across the tree bank outside. I switched on the lamp to my desk and grabbed the book as I sat down. I ran my hand across the cover. The tan leather was cold and dry. At the bottom was my name in bold black letters. The font, which seemed almost hand written, looked much older than fifty years old, but I didn't dwell too much on it.

I opened the cover to the first page. It was otherwise blank except for one line of text in the center which read:

Hello, would you like to continue reading?

The text left me just as confused as I was curious. I skipped ahead to the next page to find the same message written in the center. As I continued to skim through the pages I found that each and every page carried the same text in the exact same position. I did this a few times just to be sure. By then I was slightly pissed off.

"Yes I would... if there was more," I muttered.

Almost instantly the pages turned swiftly to the first page, which was now blank, but only for a moment. Text soon started to appear at a violent and rapid pace as if the paper was going through a printing press

on overload. Startled, I pushed back from the desk in my chair. From a slight distance I could tell the text that was being written out was not English. The process happened for each page until all were completely full except the last, which only carried a solid line at the bottom with text reading:

Sign Here.

I pushed my chair away from the desk in complete shock of what I had just witnessed. The book calmly turned to its starting page. I sat there, still, for what felt like an hour. I did not know what to do.

I gathered the courage to get out of the chair and approach the book again. I looked at the now completely full page of text. At first the words were just gibberish. It was only until I grabbed the book and held it in my hand that the words began to shift and transform on the page. Involuntarily, I started reading the text. Reading a language I did not know. A part of me was scared, but it seemed another part of me was captivated and starving for the information the book was giving me. The text faded my vision to black, and my mind started playing memories back to me. I saw the first time I walked, the first time I played football for my middle school team, and the night my father left me and my mother. It felt like all the information from all my memories was being pulled from my brain all at once. I wanted it to stop. It came to a point where I thought my head would explode and I would die, but just as the thought crossed my mind I was back in my office with the book still in my hand.

I was breathing heavily now and sweating like I had just ran a marathon. I stared at the book for some time. The leather gave me an almost familiar sensation in my hand now. The leather felt warm as if blood was pumping through it. It felt like living skin. I continued to run my hands across the book that had just sent me on a trip across the surface of my memories. The curves and ridges all seemed to give the sensation of running my hands across my own body. The cover was my own face. The spine was my spine. Flipping the pages rapidly was like running my hands through my hair. A normal person would have gotten rid of the book at that moment, but it had taken away my fear of it. I knew what it was. The book had left just as much information as it took from me. It was then I realized the leather felt like my own skin.

Looking back, I never planned to do more than skim the pages and learn about the author. I believed it would simply turn out to be a coincidence that I shared names with the writer, but like many times in life, I was wrong. The name on the book was mine, but it was not written by me, it was written for me. No...better yet, now, the book is me.

Human

Shalimar Dominguez

0.

“Bebita!”

“Princesa!”

“My beautiful baby doll!”

As a child, I was my mother’s doll, her pride and joy. She would take me out and enjoy being layered in compliments about how her baby girl had dark hair and white skin like the renowned Snow White, the gorgeous princess adored by birds and deer alike. My mother would dress me up in pink lacy dresses, white stockings, and tiny plastic Mary Janes, parading me around at Christmas parties, birthdays, and Quinceñeras. To my mother, I had to be seen and adored.

I was something to be loved.

I was safe.

1.

Elementary school was spilled orange juice, flashcards, and round one of boy-girl interactions. On the playground, girls were the ones who would sprint with great fire after boys who would run like skinny-legged gazelles fleeing from lions. Girls were also the ones who shot up like giant sunflowers and towered above shrimpy boys. Seeing this made me smile and press my hands to my hips with pride.

I was something to be feared.

I was safe.

2.

Middle school was smeared eyeliner, breasts, burnt hair, and round two of boy-girl interactions. Girls were awkwardly voluptuous and hairy, learning the wonders of a shaving razor and lip gloss. Boys were strange hulking alien-like creatures. It was as if every small and frightened boy had been shoved into some magical puberty cannon and launched out as a man with a deep voice and gangly limbs. We were different.

Something I would learn to fear was the wolf-like smile of a boy who was dared to ask a homely girl out. I was up from my seat to sharpen a pencil and turned around to find a gangly boy who asked, “Would you

wanna go out?” with his mouth, but said, “You are a joke.” with his eyes. These interactions increased and I felt myself fade into the background.

I was something to be ridiculed.

I was endangered.

3.

High school was hours of feverish study, instant-messaging, and head-banging to blaring guitars. Boys seemed nice, but I turned to the girls with short hair like mine, girls who let their eyes pass over me with enough indication to know they were interested in more than friendship. I was attractive again.

With more understanding of the power I wielded, I tossed smiles like a fish line to boys with eyes that bugged and mouths that stuttered. I held their hearts in my fists like charms on a bracelet and floated out of their grasp once they thought they had me. Dangling myself like a carrot on a stick was a fun game and I played it with shy glances, skirts, and fish-nets.

I was something to be desired.

I was safe.

4.

University was hours of tweeting, late night adventures, and tears spent over failed essays. I spent time on the internet, pouring over blogs of rape and abuse survivors, reading the comments of women calling for men’s heads on sticks. Sitting behind my computer, I nodded my head fervently; men were dangerous. Men were blood, bruises, rape, and abuse. The striking clarity this brought created a stirring fear in me.

I was something to be hurt.

I was endangered.

5.

I cut my hair short, walked with hips forward, hid my breasts, and grew out my leg and armpit hair. As I strutted around, baring my hairy legs, I believed I had metamorphosed into something else. A sparkling alien, a beautiful genderless being who had descended from space, sexless and shapeless. I was above all the anger, the femininity, and the death. I was the one who had successfully clawed their way out of the gender binary.

I was something to be treated human.

I was safe.

6.

Yet my fantasy fell apart when my leg hair could no longer serve as a shield to prevent whistling when I walked down the streets. I was just wearing shorts! Shorts. In the summer. On a burn-your-flesh-off hot day. But my reality crumbled, and the beautiful, genderless cloak melted off my shoulders like fog and fell to the ground, revealing a scrawny, shivering hunk of flesh.

I was something to be desired.

I was endangered.

7.

I saw myself in the mirror. I had breasts, hips, and legs. I squeezed my eyes shut and heard the voice of my crying mother.

“Mijita, I don’t understand what you mean when you say you don’t want to be a girl.”

I felt something burning in my throat. I recalled the plastic Mary Janes and warm back rubs. My hands curled into fists and something turned in my stomach as I slowly opened my eyes again.

And as I looked in the mirror I saw my hair for the first time, no longer barbed wire, but soft waves careening down my crown. And my breasts, no longer hunks of meat, were soft rolls of flesh. My legs, no longer knives, were simple pillars of skin. For the first time, I saw my eyelashes as butterfly wings, eyebrows as strokes of a paintbrush, and nose as a small round cherry. And all at once, the wavy image of a body wanted by others melted away. I was here and I was quite simply me.

I was something to be loved.

I was safe.

Last Day at the Beach

Valerie Huskey

Today was the day, the last day Audrey would spend at the beach. She was 79, and the cancer that ravaged her body was relentless. In the beginning she had opted for treatment, but after a year of suffering through chemotherapy, the cancer persisted. It seemed there was no hope for her.

As she stepped out of the car, she could smell the thick, salty air. The cool wind that blew over the water felt like silk against her skin.

The seagulls overhead were chirping, in search of something yummy to eat. Little hermit crabs scurried through the sand, stopping every few inches to ensure they were safe from being scooped up by small hands.

Audrey scrunched her toes into the sand, flip-flops in hand. She marveled at how every time felt like the first. She loved the feel of the wet sand beneath her feet. Standing quietly, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, letting the sun warm her face.

So many of her childhood memories were wrapped up in beach towels and sand buckets. For a moment, she could see and hear her brothers running and screaming on the beach, threatening to knock down her perfectly built sand castle. She thought of her own children—all the time they had spent together at the beach, laughing and playing. How fast time had passed.

The memories brought back the gravity of her situation. She fought the feelings of despair that were trying to overtake her mind. Audrey was determined to enjoy this day.

A little while later, her oldest son appeared, towing behind him two little boys, her grandchildren. They had been further up the beach getting ice cream from an ice cream vendor. Audrey marveled at how handsome her son was with his dark brown hair and crystal blue eyes, the spitting image of his deceased father. Her grandsons would grow up to be just as handsome; she firmly believed that.

“Ready to go mom?” her son asked.

Audrey smiled, a little wilted smile, and nodded her head. She realized, staring down at those previous boys, that even though she wouldn’t see them grow up, should would always be with them in their memories. Audrey was no longer dreading the future. She was thankful for the time

she'd been given to spend with her family and was looking forward to the journey that lie ahead. With every end, there is a new beginning.

Home

Ricardo Reyes

You walk in, and it seems like any other day getting home from work. The house is quiet, and the only light on is the one in the hall above the picture of you and her. You walk in and call out to her. No answer, just an echo of her name through the darkness. You switch on the lights of the living room. There's still no sign of her. She isn't sleeping on the couch. Maybe she's in the kitchen putting away the leftovers. You walk in expecting her warm smile, but all you find is a cold stove. Now the worry sets in, and you remember the fight you had before. That's when you see. She left a note on the fridge. You eye the piece of paper like it's about to pounce. You already know what is written on that paper, in fine handwriting that only her sweet hands could make, and it will only bring pain. You start playing back the memories of her with each step you take towards the note. You remember the first date and the park down the street from work, it was the first time you heard her laugh. You remember the first time you told her you loved her at your cousin's graduation party. You remember when you first moved in together and the first time you found out about the pills. You pull the note down. With shaking hands you read it. Tears swelling, the sinking feeling in your chest overwhelms you. You fall to the floor screaming:

“No, God. Please, No,” until it's just a whimper.

Now you know where she is, but you don't want to be the one that finds the body. In the back of your mind you wonder if the sadness you feel now is the one she held her whole life.

Should I Call You Father Joe?

Luke Villafranca

I was a senior in high-school when I took Marilyn to the movies. She was a nice girl, very pretty. After the movie, I walked her home. We stood together on the sidewalk at the bottom of her stoop.

Marilyn said, “Do you want to come up, Joe? I made a chocolate cake for us.”

I thought about going up, but priesthood was really irking me at that time.

I said, “Thanks, Marilyn. But I better get going. I’ve got to go.”

“Joe, my dad’s at work, but my mom’s home. Come inside. Have some cake with us. What’s the matter?” she said.

My somebody inside me said, yeah, go inside. Have some cake. Have a good time.

But I said, “No—no, thanks, Marilyn. I just better get going.”

Marilyn said, “Okay.”

I should have walked Marilyn to her door, but I didn’t. I joined the priesthood that summer. That was seventy-two years ago. That memory sets a spark and I see it all. I heard about Marilyn from time to time. She went to college, married a nice guy, had a family. But I never heard from her. Then one day, ten years ago, I received a phone-call from her husband.

Marilyn’s husband told me about himself, said we’d met a few years back. I said, “Sure, I remember. Is there something I can do for you?”

Marilyn’s husband said, “Well—this is actually a sad call, Father Joe. Marilyn’s dying. She’s been dying for the last couple of weeks. She has a heart condition. She asked me to call you. She wants to say, goodbye.”

I waited and then said, “Hello? Marilyn?”

Marilyn asked, “Should I call you Father Joe?”

I said, “No, Marilyn. I’m Joe. Just call me Joe.”

Deadeye

Dr. Robert Boyd Skipper

It's 1964, you're eleven, and you're dove hunting with your dad for the first time. Until now, you've only shot a BB gun and a .22 with bird-shot in the grandparents' back yard. But today, you're in east Texas, far away from Houston, holding a sixteen gage shotgun, and squatting near a friend's livestock tank. Your dad has a twelve gage. You're cold and sleepy in the gray November morning, but you're excited, too, because you've been looking forward to this trip for a long time. Ever since the divorce, four years ago, you've only seen your dad on alternate Saturdays and on either Thanksgiving or Christmas—and then you have to share him with his new family. You miss him badly between visits. But this trip was to be special: three days in the country, fishing, hunting, and camping. Just father and son, alone. As the two of you drove away yesterday, your mom had told you to be careful not to shoot each other.

You've been sitting on your haunches for thirty minutes, a smaller, paler, sandy-haired version of your dad, only you're balanced unsteadily. A dove alights in the bare branches of the tree just opposite you on the other side of the tank. It's too far to expect to hit with a shotgun, but out of boredom you aim, raise the barrel slightly, and fire. The kick knocks you off balance and you fall backwards. You hear your dad say, "Well, can you believe that shit-house luck?"

You sit up quickly not letting on that your shoulder hurts. "No sir. That was pure skill."

"Well, what are you waiting for, Deadeye? You shot it, you retrieve it."

"I did?" You stand up and adjust your glasses. You brush the dried grass and dirt off your scrawny butt. Your dad, deeply tanned and ex-Army, looks supremely comfortable and at ease. He could have been crouching by a campfire in the Philippines, waiting for the engineers to finish digging the latrines. The cigarette is as natural a part of his character as the gun. You know you'll never be as comfortable in your body as he is at this moment. You'll never get into anyone's army. You've been sickly all your life; operation scars cover your body; you have noticeable scoliosis. But worst of all, you have asthma. No one with asthma could even pretend to smoke with the simple, swarthy masculinity of your dad.

You pick up the gun to start walking around the tank. “Leave the gun here,” he says.

Maybe everything would have been fine if he hadn’t told you to leave your gun. But you start to wonder why. What difference would it make? You lay your gun on the wet grass without letting go and try to think of an excuse for taking it. Although you hadn’t thought of it before, the act of relinquishing that gun seems like a sort of surrender, like waiting at the edge of the grave you’ve just dug. You glance at your dad, but he seems unconcerned, as though he had only reminded you of common sense, not commanded you to lay down your arms.

Before releasing the gun, you recall the night your mom woke you up and bundled you into the back seat of the family car, a forest green ‘55 Chevy Bel Air, and drove you to the Yupon Motel. She had kept a grim silence all that night, but later told you she was afraid for your life and hers.

You let go of the gun and straighten up. “Come with me?” you ask. “I didn’t see where it fell.”

“It’s your bird.” He rests his own gun on his knees and lights up a Kool.

Until this moment, you never doubted your dad, never thought of him as anything but a six-foot-two buddy who took you places on alternate Saturdays. But in the last five seconds, all that has changed. The stories your mom has been telling you for years now coalesce into a new, ominous meaning of your dad. What had once been your perfect trust crumples into dread. But you can’t let on that you’re afraid of him.

You strike out toward the tree, which now seems impossibly far away, across miles of exposed ground. The skin crawls on your back. You keep your eyes on the tree, its upper branches now glowing pink in the dawn. After twenty paces, though, you look back, trying not to show that you’re on to your dad’s plan. Behind him, the bleeding sun divides gray sky from gray landscape. You can hardly make out his silhouette. You’re not sure what he’s doing.

Your mom has often told you how brutal he had been to her. She loved him, she insisted, but he could be cruel and physically threatening—but never when there were witnesses.

The frost crunches under your boots. Ice particles decorating the weeds glitter in the sunlight. Your breaths precede you in little locomotive puffs.

She divorced him for what she called “mental cruelty” and became a single mom in the early ‘sixties. Because she lives in Texas all she gets from him is \$150 every month until you get much older, and even that

was for you, not for her. So if you die, he won't have to pay anything.

You wonder if these will be your last thoughts. The timbre of the air resolves from minor to major, the crisp daylight world washes over the land as nature reflects upon herself. Being human, you can only observe, never truly participate in, this ever-repeated blossoming of day. You notice the rhythm of life, and your own distance from it, but have no words to express the sharp details you now see for the first time. Your distance from this living earth lengthens, and from its precious, fragile grace. Every step through the sparkling weeds reveals new miracles that will soon evaporate.

You clearly recall the nights leading up to the divorce, when your dad slept on the couch in the family room. You couldn't sleep because of your nightly stomach pains, so you would come and kneel beside the cool Naugahyde couch, enviously watching his peaceful sleep while you waited for the pain, like an icy wind deep inside you, to subside.

You reach the base of the tree and start scanning the ground for the bird. You wonder if you really killed it after all. You never saw it fall; you just believed your dad. Maybe he had lied. Maybe he wanted you a good distance away. Your mom said he lied to her all the time.

Thirty years after today, after your stepmother has died of a brain tumor, your stepbrother has joined the Hare Krishnas, your stepsister has become a cocaine addict, and your dad, completely alone, has leukemia, your mom will drive him every week to chemotherapy and they will try to reopen their relationship.

Today, you find the bird, murdered by a single shotgun pellet through the eye. Just as your dad had said: shit-house luck. You pick up its limp warm body but quickly drop it when a large white louse scuttles from under the feathers. You pick up the dove again, this time by one claw.

You're still alive.

If he really meant to kill you, wouldn't he have already done it? You try to recall any time ever in your short life when your dad had been harsh, and you can't. Your mom always punished you. She beat you with a wooden paddle and called it a spanking. She tried to make your dad spank you once, and he had led you into the bathroom and closed the door. But instead of hitting you he told you to pretend like you were being beaten. That day you faked pain, whereas the rest of your life had been spent pretending there was no pain.

Your dad had tried to kill your mother in a drunken rage, at least that's what she always told you. Now, you're not certain. You're no longer as sure he wants to kill you either. You begin to doubt the stories your mother has told you about your dad. He could kill you, of course. He had

killed in the Army.

From your present distance, you know a shotgun can't do you in. It could mess you up, but it couldn't kill you like you killed the bird, not until you get closer. You briefly wave your kill in the air and then start the long walk back. If he really wants you dead, you can't escape. Maybe he wants you looking right at him when he does it. Around you there is no brush, no cover, nothing but ankle-high grasses. The impartial sun reveals you, the tank, the dead bird, and your dad. So you walk on, holding the slaughtered dove away from you so its blood doesn't stain your khakis. After today, you tell yourself, if today even has an after, you will never fear death, nor will you fully trust anyone.

Non-
Fiction

Why do YOU study Genocide?

Celine A. Jacquemin

This was exciting. I had been invited to have dinner with one of the most renowned researchers on the political and psychological roots of group violence, Dr. Ervin Staub. One might think how is this exciting? Well, if you had already spent five years studying the Rwandan genocide you would have come to realize that Ervin Staub was one of the top Genocide Scholars. This invitation presented an unimagined opportunity of spending some time with a top expert in my field.

When I got to the upscale Italian Restaurant in Irvine, a university town in Southern California, I was boiling over with anticipation. I was clenching my book under my right arm. It was his book, really. This was just the copy I owned. I was going to ask him to sign it for me if I got the chance. The book, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, provided one theoretical cornerstone for my research on cases of massive human rights violations. I hoped for the chance to ask him to write in it before he was whisked away from the restaurant at the end of the evening. Dinners with big academic dignitary always featured a few relevant graduate students but never truly gave us the opportunity for quality time with the speaker. Usually, eager senior faculty sat in the closest spots and monopolized the conversation. Few graduate students dared to chime in as that could be considered impolite or simply because it was hard to compete with the ten minute tirades blurred out by these professors. Yet—I was determined to enjoy the evening with the biggest smile. After all, as a grad student, not only was the meal free but I was going to see Professor Staub and nothing could rob me of the joy brought on by this unique moment.

I walked into the trendy Italian Restaurant. It was loud by its colors and by the clientele. Shades of bright yellows and oranges covered the walls, adorned with many reproductions of Tuscan sceneries. In these large rooms conversations resonated stridently. I walked past the towering wall wine rack. Most tables were full already. One long table in the right corner only had two people. There was Dr. Ervin Staub. For such a grand man in the field, he was rather a short and humble looking fellow. The professor who had picked him up from his hotel had sat across from him. Dr. Staub greeted me with a smile and gestured for me to sit next to

him. Wow. My heart started racing. Can I sustain a conversation for the entire dinner? Should I ask him to sign my book right away? Would I have to move once the rest of the guests had arrived? We had met briefly earlier that day, so no introductions were necessary. He also knew that I studied genocide for my dissertation work and that as such I would be one of the respondents to his presentation on the Rwandan Genocide the next day. Despite all this, my biggest fear was that he would ask a question that I could not possibly answer on the spot.

I had often felt that academics took pleasure challenging each other to dueling intellectual jousts just to make themselves feel superior. Before I could ask him to sign the book, Dr. Staub turned to me and inquired: "Why do you study Genocide?" Wow, great, this is a question I can answer! I explained that I had taken several classes on Feminist theory and that I had a special interest in actors in the international system who are oppressed and often powerless. Since states were defined as the most powerful actors it had become apparent to me that the least powerful actors were actually stateless individuals we know as refugees. And in the mid-1990s this meant looking at the fastest and largest exodus of refugees in June 1994 when over 2 million people walked from Rwanda to Goma, in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Of course, in order to understand what led to this massive exile I had to learn about the Rwandan genocide that started on April 6, 1994. He shook his head: "NO! Why do YOU study Genocide?" Perplexed and somewhat horrified, I could not figure out how I failed to answer him appropriately. It had seemed so easy. I resorted to the most powerful academic weapon: the question. "What do YOU mean?" I retorted. "I am a survivor of the Holocaust. Why do YOU study Genocide?" he declared. I struggled and thought to myself ... "I am too young to have survived WWII, I was not born in Rwanda, nor had I been there yet. Then it hit me: when I was a teenager, I spent countless afternoons with my Grandmother listening to the stories of how my grandfather had been smuggling Jews out of Germany into France and how the GESTAPO came to get him one evening."

Luckily, this was early on in the war and the officers did not fill out any paperwork on my grandfather's arrest so the French Warden told the German officers the next morning that my grandfather had been arrested for disrespectful speech about Hitler instead of revealing his role as a leader to smuggle Jews out of Alsace-Lorraine. My grandfather spent 2 years in jail but unlike most resistants who were caught he made it back home alive just before the end of the war. Later at fourteen, still impressed by the stories my grandmother told me, I had entered into a national competition in France about the French Resistance Movement and

Nazi atrocities. I had written with a friend from my school and had lots of help from my grandmother. Dr. Staub then nodded and smile. “Yes,” he explained, “it never fails. Even when people have not considered their personal connections and have only rationalized that as humans they have to care about such horrific human rights violations, they always end up revealing a aspects of their lives that connected them to genocide.” Even more rewarding than learning of my family connection to my field of study was the validation that Dr. Staub provided for one’s personal roots so often dismissed or overshadowed in academic fields continuously striving to prove themselves as scientific.

By now all the other guests had arrived and the conversation became dryer and more abstract. Appetizers and entrees had been ordered and eaten already. The dessert tray was being waved in front of our noses by an overeager waiter hoping that we would sign up for mountains of sugar or large quantities of chocolate. Everyone’s attention had turned away from Dr. Staub for a brief moment and he leaned towards me and said “I see you have my book with you.” So, I pounced on the opportunity and asked him whether he would consider signing it. To my delight his dedication reads: “For Céline, It was a pleasure to meet you –I wonder about and greatly appreciate our shared concerns and interests. Ervin.”

I have never thought of my academic work in quite the same way since that day. The human dimensions of my work are not simply from the people whose rights are violated and whose lives are shortened but also I continue to wonder what it is that motivates or drives the passion of many of my students who express similar interest in patterns of massive human rights violations. I now often ask: Why do YOU want to study genocide?

Club Westerner

Luke Villafranca

I watched Dad. Dad mopped the oak dance floor the same way for forty-eight years — up and down and back and forth until the dance floor shined. I watched my sixty-year-old father in the bar mirror. He wiped the bar, filled the bar coolers, tore up the cardboard beer boxes, piled the trash. Dad limped and sighed. Dad cursed under his breath. Dad spoke to his buried father.

Dad's a lawyer. Dad became a lawyer at twenty-five-years-old, a bartender at fifteen, a custodian at eleven. There Dad was. The dancehall had belonged to his parents. He told me not to help him so that I could type my paper for school. I started writing this, instead. I left my laptop on the bar.

“Don't worry about it, Mi'jo. Type your paper,” said Dad.

I started straightening chairs.

“Straight like soldiers. Straight like soldiers, Mi'jo. Are you making progress on your paper, Son?” asked Dad.

“Yes, Sir. We'll get there, Pop. We'll get there,” I said.

“That's about all we have to do, Son. We're almost done. I just have to put a few more bottles to fill the coolers,” said Dad.

Later, we walked toward the door to leave. “I could do this job in my sleep, Son. No hill for a stepper. No hill for a stepper, Son. I always say ‘goodnight’ to Mom and Dad.” Dad reached up to touch my grandparents' portrait that hung above the double-doors.

I did a Sign of the Cross and touched the portrait, too. We said our silent prayers.

“Every weekend for forty-nine years I've been doing this. I'll never be rid of this old place,” said Dad. He looked up at the portrait and said, “Goodnight, Mom and Dad.”

We turned out the lights. We closed the doors.

For information about submitting to the Pecan Grove Review, e-mail:
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