A watercolor illustration of a brick wall with two arched openings. The wall is rendered in shades of brown, tan, and red. The arches are dark, suggesting shadows or openings. In the foreground, there is a dense cluster of autumn foliage in various colors including red, orange, yellow, and green. Some dark, shadowed areas are visible on the wall and within the arches. The overall style is soft and painterly.

Wall

Wall

A Literary Journal

Volume VII Spring 2007
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All communication should be directed to:

Saddleback College
c/o Liberal Arts Division
28000 Marguerite Pkwy
Mission Viejo, CA 92692
(949) 582-4500

<http://www.saddleback.edu>

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Wall

Volume VII Spring 2007

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Jackie Connor

Layout Editor

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Essay Editor

Winston Frost

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Maha Salama

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Art Editor

Mick Duggan

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Marie Connelly

Chelsea Williams

Poetry Editors

Richard Holder

Ashleigh Johnson

Faculty Advisor

Suki Fisher

Cover Art by Anibal Santos

Wall is a student-produced literary magazine of Saddleback College. All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College. The submissions of *Wall* are reviewed, selected, and edited by the students on the staff of the magazine. We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life. However, the opinions and ideas contained here in no way represent those of Saddleback College or the SOCCCD Board of Trustees. They are solely those of the authors.

Introduction

Welcome to *Wall* literary magazine! Many hours were spent hunched over the computer and keyboard to bring you a glimpse into some of Saddleback's finest and most interesting personalities. Send the flowers later and the chocolates now! This semester I have acquired a most knowledgeable and friendly staff, and we thank all of the contributors who submitted each piece to the mercy of our most editorial spotlight.

Outside of a typical college dorm room, you might find a whiteboard with miscellaneous thoughts written by students. Think of *Wall* as a much larger whiteboard—intact with different personalities and beautiful artwork. This magazine puts you in the center of war in the personal essay “The Battle for Al Tarmiya,” bathes you in the rich images of the poem “Weltanschauung” and makes you hold your side when reading the short story “Geriatric Mayhem.” As you set aside the reading, observe the beautiful and intriguing artwork that graces our pages. With a seventh year under its belt, *Wall* gives the reader a better understanding of the many talented writers and artists that roam the Saddleback campus.

Without our most dedicated professor, Suki Fisher, along with our small but mighty staff, this magazine would not have been possible. I want to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate my staff for all their dedication to this year's edition of *Wall*.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Wall*! We hope you will enjoy it!

Jackie Connor
Editor-in-Chief

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Acknowledgments

A piece of paper on its own is a worthless, mass-produced thing. We usually demonstrate paper's worthlessness by using it to clean up messes, wrap up food, keep a bonfire alive, and line our birdcages among other things, before quickly disposing of it in a nearby trashcan, or simply dropping it on the ground. Nearly every street in the world is teeming with dirty, discarded newsprint, receipts, envelopes, and other odds and ends.

But just because something is worthless, doesn't mean that it's useless as well, and in the end, a piece of paper is only a vehicle that is able to gain worth depending on what's written on it. Take a blank page, a pen, and an overactive imagination and whole worlds can be created. Any piece of paper that's cherished is only kept around because of the ideas that it conveys and the value that we ourselves have placed on those ideas.

As such, the staff of *Wall* wishes to give its thanks to the following individuals whose contributions made this edition possible. The Board of Trustees: President David Lang, Vice-President Nancy M. Padberg, Thomas A. Fuentes, William O. Jay, Marcia Milchiker, Donald P. Wagner, and John S. Williams. We would also like to thank the Student Trustee Elizabeth Kelly, Chancellor Dr. Raghu P. Mathur, and the college President, Dr. Richard D. McCullough.

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Ashleigh Johnson
Poetry Editor

**THE WALL IS A COMMUNITY SPACE FOR
CREATIVE EXPRESSION. IT IS A PRINTED
CANVAS, A SURFACE TO BE SCRAWLED UPON,
A VAST WHITE PAGE THAT INVITES OUR
WORDS AND IMAGES.**

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website at: www.tableaupublishing.com.*

WELTANSCHAUUNG

On the docks at coming night,
Lovers come to admire the reflections off the water and pray to each
other.

A toothless mother is yelling,
“It takes some giving,
and it takes some taking.”

And philosophy and ideology rolled around in their graves,
Wondering what they’d been thinking.

Immediately, everyone retreats,
And I find myself in a tiny basement café,
Just a little closer to Hell, feeling the steps we walk on
Fall and collide against the wind,

As if they’d been built by our own anxious hands.
And while I confiscate every meaning I never needed,
I often see only misery moving our feet.

And at this moment, draped in the flashing lights
Of the drudging trucks outside,

It seems the past is blasé: unimportant,
And existent only to our memory.

Leaving letters overseas to float aimlessly,
Only proving that nothing is coming back.

Ourselves; our projects that we are.

Nearby, the barista smiles, and some cute girl leaves,
The construction workers, old and glory, mention,
“You never know where you’ll find art.”

I become an un-writer, nothing more than thinker;
Sober as bureaucracy, no starry seas or amber oceans,
Forced to watch the few I love condemn themselves through
themselves,

God’s friends, and a little corporate honey.
Like how we’re all running to keep walking,
Or like the woman on 5th praying, facing a newspaper stand,

And the man on 3rd on his knees screaming Jesus' hymn;
Never knowing if they're crazy or even what crazy is,
Or maybe the girl in the black dress and shoes,
Meeting her parents outside of symphony-something hall.
Amongst it, I stopped in the Garden of Remembrance and forgot
For the sake of every pan-handler I've felt sorry for or equal to,
Or every other needy bum I've snubbed, or all the fights
Waiting for me on every corner,
And walking right past them and straight into others.
Like how this moment needed no writing,
though I knew it was still coming.
Another broken addiction, culminating into
A swell of that jazz-blue hopeless eyes close
To the latest of the waterside's late blues.
To just pick up and go, as if a new world would really be new.
To care for what should be cared for, or to just know;
That every nearing mental wall will build
The overall, the everyday prose poem,
Laid about, however, by no single brick, only ideas such as color,
Or concepts like smaragdine glow.
(And philosophy and ideology rolled around in their graves,
Wondering what they'd been thinking.)
With nowhere nearing, I will just stand, have the barista refill
My coffee for free as she promised, and
Walk out that monthly door into a yearly horizon,
Nothing gained through writing.

A POWER BREAKFAST

Vast spires of metal, glass and concrete conquered the skyline of New Limburg so that a person walking down the street of this city might feel eerily like an insect wandering in Mr. Yavanni's swanky shag carpet, which was an unsightly shade of burnt orange. The city buildings weren't this color, however; the city council was deathly afraid of anything psychedelic.

Hank Higgins stood before a pedestrian crossing on a street corner. Without hesitation, he raised his powerfully built arm and pressed the cross button on the traffic signal pole. This route to the office had been trekked by Hank every single week day of his mild-mannered adult life; and his mind drifted somewhere else while his body trudged on. Turning his head to look over his shoulder, Hank noticed that every single person at the intersection, against all statistical odds, had a cellular telephone. The nicely groomed businessmen and women, wearing their nicely pressed suits, talked about sales and stocks. An old woman, with an excessive amount of makeup and a giant gold necklace, was flapping her lips into someone's ear miles away. Even the baby in his carriage was sucking on a Motorola. Feeling around in his coat pocket, Hank touched his sleek and fashionably small cell phone to make sure it was there.

The stream of people blasted across the street when the *walk* signal switched on. No one person was moving his or her legs at a pace that would resemble a walk; the motion was more intense and hurried. In fact, one burly gentleman took it a bit further with a frantic spring while flailing a giant gold necklace above his head. Husky, with a unibrow, he appeared to be running for dear life; he was using one of those hands-free phones that make you look like a schizophrenic cyborg.

"Thief!" The elderly woman with too much eyeliner yelled. "That man stole me gold choker!"

"Perfect timing," Hank muttered to himself. His office was within view.

A telephone booth was conveniently located nearby against the side of a building, and Hank leaped inside. The dusty, neglected booth was the only thing Hank figured he could change in with relative privacy. There was a little alleyway that he could have used, but those were usually filled with bums who had the wild and scrutinizing stares—no place to undress; and the booth was the most opportune, if perhaps clichéd, option.

With both hands on hips and chest out, Hank stepped onto the street. His burnt orange spandex was snug around his toned muscles. The giant letter P was pompously displayed across his chest. The jaw of the hero, cleft and all, supported a glorious and gleaming smile and his short and sleek raven-black hair waved in the smog-filled wind.

Unfortunately, slamming into a few people in the crowd had not stopped hands-free as the thief made his way through the ocean of citizens on the walk. With incredible swiftness, Powerguy charged, literally leaping over the crowd.

“Stop! Thief!” he shouted. His valiant trot was too swift for the husky man, like a V-2 rocket racing a pudgy little boy. With a single swipe of his arm, Powerguy sent the thief into a nearby taxicab with a crash. A few of the people glanced over, then went back to their cell-phone chatter as if nothing gratuitously violent had just happened.

The necklace flew skyward from the impact. The slightly overweight and out-cold thief was imbedded in the crushed taxi. “I’ll take that!” Hank cried, catching the stolen goods.

These petty crimes weren’t the best display of superheroism in the world, but they were the easiest jobs and, quite frankly, the most relaxing.

Just then, the little old lady with enough powder caked on her cheeks to lay out a thin layer on two and a half football fields, appeared before Powerguy. He peered over the busy crowd behind. This was just an ordinary day in New Limburg—no time to dawdle. With a grin on his face and the loot held high, Powerguy smiled down on the little old lady.

“I believe this is yours, ma’am. That thief learned his—” began Powerguy. Right before the word “lesson” escaped his mouth, the wind was knocked out of him due to a swift kick to the groin.

“Give that back, you whippersnapper!” The lady’s face scrunched up, every wrinkle in it looking like it could hide a monster. Powerguy was literally powerless as the necklace slipped from his wavering grasp. The old lady had exploited his only weakness, or any man’s weakness for that matter.

The sound of telephones reverberated against the walls of the twenty-third floor as Hank stumbled to his oatmeal-brown cubicle. (He worked as an accountant. It is safe to say that all superheroes have to make a living as mild-mannered citizens—saving the world doesn’t pay the bills unfortunately.)

“Heeeey, hey! Mornin’, Higgins,” a voice roared from above and behind his cubicle.

Hank knew that irksome voice, and it made him want to abuse his Power Punch. His fists tightened—that drawled, shrill voice belonged to Joseph Yavanni of the shag carpet, the office dullard. He was a man who pretended to be your best buddy and seemed to get paid for it.

“I came in a few minutes late. I really don’t have time to chat—spreadsheets don’t quadruple check themselves, you know.” Hank refused to turn around in his squeaky office chair.

“Awww, bro, I take it you didn’t read your mail,” Yavanni said.

Perking an eyebrow, Hank turned his chair. His eyes met Yavanni’s flamboyantly colored, pink-and-yellow striped tie where the man stood in his cubicle entry.

“My e-mail? What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, man! Check your inbox.” Yavanni leaned his shoulder against the side of the cubicle entrance and winked at a young female co-worker as she walked by.

Hank feverishly clicked his mouse. An e-mail message popped up on the monitor, written in bold, friendly letters that simply said: *Mr. Higgins, you’re fired. Clean out your desk and have a nice day.*

“Pretty wild, eh, Higgins?”

The dampened sun hung low in the murky morning sky as the unemployed Hank Higgins shuffled his way home. He looked down at his feet. *What next?* The cold air he breathed nipped at his lungs—or perhaps it was the smog. Suddenly, his feet stopped. His two shoes

unemployed Hank Higgins shuffled his way home. He looked down at his feet. *What next?* The cold air he breathed nipped at his lungs—or perhaps it was the smog. Suddenly, his feet stopped. His two shoes seemed to sink into the solid pavement as he stood, looking at them. The beating of a passing police chopper overhead snapped him out of his shoe-daze. He lifted his heavy head to see his apartment building's front door.

His thoughts went to his girlfriend, whom he lived with a few floors up; she was a normal girl, but the secret identity thing hadn't lasted long. *Room seven oh nine*, he thought. The time and place didn't fit; he had never been home this early on a workday. The keys clinked in his hands as he tried to align one with the shaft. Before he had a chance to insert the key, the door squeaked open. A puff of warm air hit Hank's face.

"Lisa?" he called into the void. She didn't appear to be home. With a flip of the switch by the door, the room cascaded light.

What the light seemed to strike first was the pile of unpaid bills on the table. The sight made him roll his eyes up as if to stare directly at his annoyed, wrinkled forehead—a truly impossible feat for even a superhero. Other than the bills, the roomed shimmered with cleanliness. Perhaps it was a little too clean. What Hank saw next was a single piece of paper taped to the apartment's irritatingly small kitchen door. The message, written in flamboyant pink, said this: *Hank, I'm leaving you for another man...*

Hank stopped reading there. Letters like this were all the same, so he skimmed to the bottom—*I took all my stuff. Don't take it too hard. Have a nice day, sweetie.*

Hank's hand twisted with metal-twisting power. Upon a second scan, he realized the illusion of cleanliness was due to the absence of Lisa's clutter. Sweat droplets had difficulty navigating the large, throbbing blood vessels protruding from his head. But before the frenzy had a chance to escape, it was extinguished by a wispy sigh that lasted the better part of two minutes.

He hadn't eaten breakfast that morning. He placed a plastic bowl and a box of Comrade Crispies on the table. The little cartoon man on the box, a Russian superhero, seemed to look up at him

with a twinkle in his eye.

Hank raised the box over the large bowl and tipped it, anticipating the flow of hundreds of crunchy morsel; instead, only two fell out. The box was empty and Hank, denied this part of a complete breakfast, stormed out of his apartment. He could no longer bear it—the gods had forsaken him.

Horns sounded and automobiles screeched to a halt as Hank, a not-so-mild-mannered citizen in work clothes, staggered around aimlessly in the middle of the road. A man in a small green car popped his head out the window and laid on his horn.

“You think you own the road? Move it, chump!”

Hank pointed at the man with a trembling finger. The sound of contorted metal echoed as he drove both his hands into the car’s hood. The man inside, mouth gaping, pushed back into his leather seat. With a seemingly effortless upward movement, Hank launched the car in to the sky like a catapult.

People on the sidewalks froze in place, looking at the car plummeting from the sky into a helpless bakery truck.

A police helicopter, thundering its blades, appeared overhead. The police would make a trip to the grocery store much more complicated indeed.

Hank leaped, in a single bound, over the cars in his path. Buildings and streetlights on either side of him flew by with a hissing rush. The chopper followed overhead. Red and blue flashing lights snared Hank’s attention, and he slowed as NLPD officers piled out of their cars, wielding pistols and shotguns.

“Freeze! Don’t move a muscle, punk!” one said with a booming megaphone.

Hank peered through the wall of police cars to where Murray’s Market stood, a quaint little grocery store.

“Hands on your head!”

Instead, Hank put his hands on a streetlight and tore it from the cement, sending sparks bouncing around his feet. Their weapons discharged; bullets pelted Hank as he charged toward the cars with the huge streetlight in his arms. Sparks flew around his body as the hail of bullets showered him. It was futile. The streetlight careened into the center squad car, severing it. Concussion from the impact sent two

officers off their feet.

One of them—a quite portly one—was launched into the market’s window pane. Hank brought his pole around for a second swing at the remaining parked car. The swing produced a wind that caused the low-flying helicopter to wobble off-balance. Still spinning from the swing, he released the streetlight. Precise timing on his part—the thing barreled toward the chopper, pierced its thin armor. A concentrated wave of heat pressed his face as the chopper exploded into a fiery ball. Treading over large chunks of debris, Hank made his way to the market.

The trip to the store was not fruitless. Hank brought home a brand-new box of Comrade Crispies. He hadn’t had breakfast that morning and, by golly, he was going to get some.

A spoon, a bowl, cereal box and milk carton sat on the table. The titter-tatter sound of the crispy bits cascading down into the bowl filled Hank’s heart with ecstasy. *At last.* A giant smile spread across his face as he angled the milk over the cereal. One miserable drop trickled out of the carton.

SIERRA MOUNTAIN BEAR ENCOUNTER

In May of 1995, I received orders to attend a highly distinguished mountain summer survival school that normally is assigned to Special Forces members and military pilots. The program is located in the Sierra Mountains and teaches survival skills ranging from hunting, various navigation techniques, and how to build a shelter. After a week of classroom and field instruction, the students were separated from one another and assigned the task of surviving for a week in the wilderness.

Once I was isolated from my classmates, I was given a designated camping area in a landscape heavily wooded with pine trees. Immediately, I prioritized tasks to be accomplished. Realizing that the mid afternoon sun would soon vanish, I needed to construct a shelter to protect me from the bitter Sierra cold that was sure to arrive by nightfall. After surveying my homestead, I recognized to my horror that the ground was saturated with large droppings and that many of the surrounding pines were scarred with claw marks. The evidence was very clear that this was a bear's trail. The uneasy thought of bears in my immediate vicinity weighed heavily on my mind. I hurriedly began the construction of a solid fortress to protect myself from not only the weather but from whatever wildlife that was lurking in the area.

My shelter was finished by early evening. Composed of large downed trees, it had a strong and rustic appeal. The entrance was no larger than a small trash can, in hopes that no creature other than myself would be able to enter. Inside, the shelter's opening was obstructed with large branches and logs cut by a K-bar knife. With only the clothes on my back and a space blanket, I curled into the fetal position to conserve body heat, as the arrival of night fall brought on the cold. As I lay quietly on top of a make-shift bed of pine branches, I pondered over the days events until I fell asleep.

After sleeping for what seemed mere minutes, my body began to shiver almost uncontrollably as the frigid air made its presence felt. Glancing at the two a.m. reading on my watch, I reached for my canteen and

slowly sipped the chilly water, which had been purified from a mountain stream. After tightening the cap firmly on the olive-drabbed container, I attempted to fall back to sleep. But, I found myself still struggling to stay warm. With every breath I took, I shivered. This caused my space blanket to make a loud crisp crumpling noise, as if someone was balling up a sheet of aluminum foil.

As the night dragged on, the crackling of brush breaking in the distant night could be heard. Lying motionless, I waited as the sound moved closer. Remembering that my space blanket was creating excessive noise, I slowed the rhythm of my breathing down and held my breath. In no time, the hot breath of a massive beast trickled between the logs of my pine fortress. With anxiety growing stronger by the second, my heart pounded wildly inside my chest as the creature clawed and gnawed on the materials that separated me from him. Pawing through the logs, this animal cumbersomely positioned himself on the rooftop of my dwelling. Helplessly, I remained motionless, as the scuffling and cracking of pine logs began to rain pieces of bark and debris on me.

The mammoth creature continued to display a great fascination with my shelter and what lay inside of it. The gnawing and snapping of wooden logs and sticks crackled in the beast's powerful jaws as if they were only tooth picks. This sent chills down my spine as I thought of the possibility of myself being this monster's next meal. I wondered how long this bear would be preoccupied with my log shelter. Unfortunately, this event reoccurred night after night, and took a toll on my mental state as I began experiencing sleep deprivation.

It was midweek, when I pulled myself out of the shelter that had protected me from the nocturnal invader that had been haunting me and immediately assessed the damage to my temporary home. I began to reinforce the structure with more logs, more branches, and dirt from the surrounding mountainside. Once satisfied with the additions to my shelter, I collected a few grasshoppers to be used as fish bait. As I walked down the four and a half mile winding trail towards a small stream, I sensed that I was being followed. I could hear brush crackling in the distance; the noise grew nearer and more intense.

I quickly ducked into the heavily wooded tree line and dropped to the ground. As the noise grew louder, I could see the vegetation on the other side of the trail begin to sway back and forth until a shadowy object

appeared ahead of me. It was another classmate and friend, Mathias Hansen. Because isolation is part of the survival school program, it was against the rules to fraternize with other students. But, I didn't care. I was overjoyed to see another person, especially someone I knew. So I figured it was a good time to make my presence known. With the stealth of a mountain lion, I leaped out of the brush, tackling my helpless victim.

After I had scared Mathias senseless, we picked ourselves up from the ground and continued to head down the trail to the shallow stream at its base. We both began to laugh as we shared our encounters with the Sierra Mountain wildlife. After fishing, we devoured the young trout that we had caught, and then headed back up the trail towards our survival shelters. Off in the distance, the sound of a whining Chevy truck could be heard echoing throughout the lower mountain valley. It was one of the Class Instructors. Knowing that we would get dropped from the course if we were caught socializing together, we separated and headed towards our individual camp sites.

The route I took was off the main trail and traversed through an open meadow back to the wooded tree line. The pine needles that covered the recently melted snow camouflaged the liquid mountain surface, which acted like quick sand. I was in real trouble as I sank waste deep into the mud. To make matters worse, I could hear something else struggling in the vegetation.

To my horror, it was the bear that had been paying me nightly visits. His build was impressive, at least four hundred and fifty pounds. His dark brown fur was matted like a buffalo's hide that was beginning to shed its winter coat. His massive head shook vigorously, exposing his large canine-like teeth. The bear grunted, snorted, and growled as he struggled to get out of the predicament he was in. To my relief, he was stuck in the quicksand-like marsh. This was my opportunity to get away without him following me.

Grabbing the nearest available tree, I slowly pulled my body out of the soupy swamp. After reaching solid ground, I quickly headed up the main trail back to camp. As I moved along the trail, a green slender metallic object caught my eye. It was a six foot long

engineer stake. (The type used to support wire fencing). Knowing that this could be a great weapon to fend off an unwanted trespasser, I picked the stake up and took it with me.

I arrived at my camp wet and worn out. The weather was rapidly turning cold, so I built a hearty camp fire and dried my clothes. After I had put on my now dry clothes, a summer rain began to fall. I grabbed my stake and retreated into the protection of my shelter. Curling up on the pine needle bed, I fell instantly asleep.

Sleeping for several hours allowed me to recharge my body. Outside my shelter the down pour extinguished the once hearty campfire. Also, the rain muffled the movement of the Sierra Mountain Bear that was stalking me. Apparently he was tired of being out in the rain and was looking for shelter. Once he located the entrance to my shelter, he slid his head inside and then inserted his right front paw. This intrusion was quickly followed by his left paw. The bear snorted as he worked more of his massive frame inside. Even in my sleepy state, I began to realize the danger that I was in. A surge of adrenaline flowed through my body. I grabbed the engineer stake that I had found earlier in the day and blew loudly on a whistle that was to be used in emergency situations. I then began to yell and scream at the beast as I hit him with the engineer stake. The surprised bear began to back peddle quickly out of my house and began to flee.

In my state of madness, I lunged out of my shelter and immediately went on the offensive, pursuing the startled beast. I ruthlessly chased the creature until he darted faster than a squirrel up a thirty foot tall pine tree. The roles had changed now: the hunted had become the hunter, and the predator had become the prey. That bear remained in the tree for several hours, moving only enough to keep from falling. After about twenty minutes, I returned to camp and fell back asleep. After that, the bear had a newly acquired respect for me. Though I would see him on a daily basis until I completed the program, he always kept his distance.

TORCH THE SKY

Torch the moon drenched sky
Bringing passion back to humanity
A world devoid for far too long
Mechanical lives inspire these words

From the plane of discontent
These thoughts are conceived
A spark in the mind of the mindless
A flame in the heart of the lost

Sit back and watch the palms
Combust into an everlasting ember
Slowly burning within the hollow
The gradual culmination of the flame

The hollow lies in a pile of ash
An eruption comparable to nebulae formed
A force to be reckoned with
The likes of which never seen by the eye of man
In ages past and not yet seen
Igniting restlessly through ever changing seasons

Poetry

M. Elizabeth Fisher

AARON

Little child
so warm and alive
in his first moments of life:
 With hands the size
 of fingerprints,
 a miniature of his father's nose,
 a wee version of his mother's chin,
And lungs fluttering like the tiniest
of birds.
Flusters of movement as they place him in his mother's arms and
in the cold dawn,
his heartbeat
pales.

Safe and warm in the love of his mother,
he's as small as the hands that hold him:
 a weight so light—
yet so heavy her heart
will never forget.
But the stars weep,
the oceans still
as his immeasurable heartbeat slows,
is lost.

Still and cold,
this tiny bundle
that nevermore shall move.
Silent, so silent where breath never stirred—
like a doll of blue marble cradled
to his mother's breast.
Be at rest,
Hush and sigh no more.

Only these pictures will be taken;
this blanket, the only clothes he shall ever wear.
As the wind wails a father's grief,
the rising sun hides from
stricken eyes:

these hours are all a mother shall ever have
to hold her child.

I DON'T LIKE APPLES

When I was a child, it always seemed strange to me that my mother did not like fresh fruit and vegetables. She never appeared to be hungry. A small, slim woman, she told my sister and me that her body had already grown and needed very little nutrition. I did not understand her dislike of fresh fruit then. I did not know that eventually, after becoming a mother, I would stop liking fresh fruit, too.

When my son was young, on my lunch hour, I would walk along the busy Moscow street among crowds of people, mostly women, but nobody was thinking about eating or resting. Everyone was prepared for action. People shuffled unceasingly about the streets, constantly glancing around. Every once and a while, people would crowd into a food market. Soon after, frustrated and disappointed, many of them exited the store and continued walking, almost running, fearing time was slipping away.

These people were the army of mid-day food hunters, and I was part of this legion. Every night, before going to bed, we put plastic and fish-net bags in our briefcases and purses, preparing for any possible catch the next day.

Shortly before noon, we nibbled on our scanty lunches and made ready for the chase. Occasionally, we made hunting teams, setting a strategy for combing the streets. A swarm of employees gathered at the front doors of most establishments, ready for action. Every minute counted. Time was not only money; time was a matter of life or death. We did not think about ourselves; we thought only about our children. If we did not feed them, who else would? I always imagined my son waiting for me in his kindergarten class, his eyes full of expectation; I could hear his anxious voice, "What did you bring me, Mommy?"

At noon, I would throw myself into the herd of buzzing workers, our goal being to obtain scarce food for our children and grandchildren who still had to grow.

“Where did you get the oranges?” We anxiously asked any lucky ones who carried beautiful fragrant balls in their net bags.

“Around the corner, limit two pounds. Hurry up.”

When I heard such answers, I would rush around the corner, looking for a stack of boxes with imported oranges and join a line of three dozen people. We constantly prayed for luck; we would estimate the amount of oranges while we watched for those who would try to sneak into line.

“Would fortune smile upon me?” I would ask, always fearing I would walk away empty-handed. “Be patient,” I would tell myself. I always scrutinized the red-faced, shrewish saleswomen, speculating they had hidden several boxes of oranges to resell later at inflated prices. I tried not to think about those who would have to leave without oranges, for it could be me. Time was running out. These powerful sales women seemed to be an embodiment of the Soviet system. Anger, hatred and despair would choke my throat.

Step by step, minute by minute, as I got closer to a counter, I would anxiously count the people ahead of me. Three, two, one: “Hurrah!” I would think on the rare occasion when I made it. I would grab my oranges with elation and quickly take off. I was sure the saleswoman had cheated me-, for the scale adjusted in her favor; everyone knew that.

Sometimes after a find, I would still have some lunch hour left, and I would try to find some apples, too. I would picture my son’s smile, his little hands holding an orange. I imagined him carefully peeling the orange at night, separating it into segments and eating slowly to prolong his pleasure. He would never allow himself to eat more than one orange a day.

After supper, my son would take an orange and stroke it and play with it. He would always offer to share it with me.

“Just try one piece, Mommy,” he would insist.

“No, thank you,” I would say. “I don’t like oranges. They are very sour, and my teeth are sensitive. You know that.”

“Why?” He would ask.

“My mother’s teeth were sensitive too, and I probably take after her.” I would say, recalling her trading her worn-out clothes for some milk for my sister and me during the war, losing her teeth one

after another from starvation, hunting for a little garlic on the black market for us to chew—the only remedy for scurvy. After I would put him to bed, making sure he was asleep, I would go to the kitchen. I would collect the orange skin and carefully peel off the rind. I knew that citrus rind was very rich with vitamins and minerals, especially vitamin C. I would put it in my tea and slowly drink it, trying to imagine that I was drinking orange juice.

The same thing would happen with apples. My son knew that I didn't like apples, that they did not agree with me. He remembered, however, that the apple core was harmless to my stomach, and would always save it for me. After he ate an uncut apple, he would always save its core.

In January of 1978, we were able to immigrate to the United States. We flew to Vienna, where we waited for our American visa. After finding a place to stay and receiving our food money, we went to Central Market.

I will never forget our first experience in the fruit section of the Vienna market. We moved along the counters without saying a word. We were bewildered and dumbfounded. Mounds of familiar and exotic fruit were heaped upon endless counters. We passed mountains of smooth, divine peaches; red, shiny plums; glossy, blissful apples; and misty green and purple grapes. The friendly Austrian saleswomen smiled at us. They liked the *knabe* (boy), they said. We thought we were in a Kingdom of Harvest or maybe in a museum of fruit. I thought we were in Paradise.

We bought some fruit, washed it in a fountain and sat on a bench. My son ate his apple and then handed me the core. It was the first time I did not eat it. My son was nine then; he was old enough to understand why I had not liked apples.

IMAGO DEI

“Don’t worry,” said Til, “I don’t know where I’m going.”

He sat beneath the park elms and stared at the sky, light spotting his face, silvered like the tree bark. Around his bare feet shadows shied from sunlight. The grass whispered with the breeze—and perhaps spoke more sensibly than the boy in its lap. Though no one could tell.

“Don’t be crazy,” snapped the girl. “It’s not true.”

Til wouldn’t look at her. “See,” he pointed, “First star.”

It glimmered on the Eastern horizon, jeweled in the trees’ hair and the twilight cast violet shadows round it. A bruised sky, the girl would say.

Til only pointed. “Look.”

“Twilight,” she said, “Sunset and it’s ugly.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she looked away. “Because—it’s dark.”

“But the star,” said Til.

“Don’t talk about the stupid little pricks of light!” She cried. “D’you hear? It’s dark!”

And Til finally tilted his head back down, blinking with the dusk’s smudged fingers pressed into his narrow cheeks and shade beneath his eyes.

“You’re a stupid little boy,” she said, and her voice caught—“You don’t remember.”

Vaguely, Til smiled, glancing back up into the sky.

“First star, you see?”

She left him beneath the elm branches and deepening shade, knotted hands in her pockets and eyes down. She didn’t like the shadow that clung to her steps. It dragged thoughts back to dusk, back to Til staring at stars...back to memories. She hated him because he could forget.

The limpid morning found Til in the window-seat. The dusk smudge-shade was gone, his pale face too wan. There were bruises in

its place.

“When did you get in?”

“This morning?” He didn’t look at her. Turned towards the window, he wasn’t blinking in the sunlight. She rolled off the bed and sat at its foot, blankets over shoulders.

“It’ll burn your eyes out.”

“No,” said Til, “I can see better in the light. I dreamed, you know.”

“No,” she said.

“Yes.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t remember it.”

“Go to bed, Til. Go to bed, all right?” She stood up, tossing quilt and sheets over the bed—“Go to bed. I’ll get breakfast.”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Yes you are. I’ll bring up a bagel.”

He leaned into the wall, dawn limned his face. “Don’t worry,” he said.

She left him in the window-seat. Downstairs the dining room looked like dusk still fell, was still falling, was still there... The curtains drawn cast hairnet shadow into the corners and beneath their skirts.

A crooked figure draped in her star-print comforter lay in the corner. Days of cans and scattered food sat awkwardly on the table as if the setter had had some sense of their incongruity. She forgot not to think...it looked like her broken doll house. It looked like the front room after Nani had thrown her fit; and the father had his head cracked, doll-eyes always dark, chipped off.

The figure sat up, blanket twisting absurdly, hunched shoulders, grotesque.

“Just getting breakfast...” she whispered.

He swore.

“Don’t!...” she recoiled. “*Don’t!*”

“Don’t worry...” murmured Til, curled on the floor in her sheets. “I don’t know where I’m going. So it’s all right.”

She stood, leaning, in the doorway. “Wake up, Til.”

“I’m awake...forgot the star...” The sheets tangled his feet. The window-seat curtain, drawn, left the light dim, shading the room grey.

“I’m not hungry.”

She sat, pulling legs beneath her and shoved the plate across the floor.

“What’re you going to do about school?”

Chin tilted, he looked up—grey skin marred by violet-black bruises across his neck.

“Til,” she said, “Til, about school.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “D’you dream too?...”

“Stoppit!”

But he wouldn’t look at her. His lip trembled—a moment—his hands shifted restlessly in the sheets.

“Sometimes,” he said quietly, “I think I’m the only one, only one to dream. Sometimes.”

Poetry

Richard Holder

MY POTTER

My heart shattered beyond repair,
I run to you, my potter;
Mold me with your hands,
My future yours to form.

You made the heavens
And the earth;
The least you could do
Is to remake your broken one.

If you can build the mountains high
And knock them to the sea,
You can shape me
In your new image.

Yet, I still feel forgotten.
My heart remains in darkness,
Clouded by your
Refusal to shape me.

Why have you forsaken me?

Let your fingers
Drown in my future,
As they caress my life
And it spins into being.

Now more than ever,
I await completion—
To see my life take form.

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OCEAN

The ocean, although beautiful to look at, deserves respect because of the awesome forces that it possesses. With each wave that beats upon the shore, there is an immeasurable amount of energy unleashed that will take a strong man and tumble him like a load of laundry tossing in the dryer. Furthermore, the ocean is home to more species than mankind can number. Every time people go beyond the sand into the water, they enter the domain of untamed wildlife. Fish, dolphins, sharks, whales, and seals are just a few of the many creatures that claim the ocean as their habitat. Many people have lost their lives at sea, and every time they venture into Poseidon's domain, they will find themselves at the mercy of the elements and the beasts that dwell therein. The dictionary defines adventure as, "an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks." Sea kayaking most definitely falls into the category of adventure, and has found itself to be one of my most treasured activities due to the freedom I possess as I choose to brave whatever "danger and unknown risks" may present themselves any given day.

My grandfather's home rests on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, providing one of the most breathtaking views any home could possess. Stepping out onto his penthouse balcony, which stretches the length of the condominium complex, you can view the coast below stretching up to Dana Point, which appears like a jewel in the form of a peninsula when lit up at night. Viewing the opposite direction, you can gaze upon the pier and beyond sandy beaches until the eye can see no more. Straight ahead rests the horizon of a seemingly endless ocean, until sunset, when the silhouette of Catalina Island becomes visible. Drawing your eyes off the island, back towards the beach, you will find many people playing in the water or basking in the sun. If you were to now focus your attention to where the sand meets the water, you might find me standing next to my kayak.

The view of the ocean from my grandfather's home seems serene, but from my perspective, just steps away from the awesome

power of the ocean, the view is breathtaking. On top of this, I look to my left and see the pier tower sporting the Red Flag, warning all who enter the water of highly dangerous conditions. Many a lifeguard has had to swim to the rescue of an unsuspecting swimmer who was swept out past the break by a torrential rip tide. Even as my feet hit the water, I feel the suck as the cool water rushes past my ankles like a predator trying to pull me into its snare. But to the ocean's dismay, I pull the heavy kayak from the sand into the water and jump in.

Now that I am past one obstacle, a lump grows in my throat as I swallow hard because of what lies before my eyes. An avalanche of waves has come crashing in, charging towards me as if they are warriors striving to protect their keep from foreign invaders. In reaction, I start rowing forward, trying to gain speed before the wave and I meet. The only way to get past a wave is to face it head on, full speed ahead. On other occasions, fumbling to get going, I have blundered into waves sideways only to be broadsided off my kayak by the onslaught of whitewater. But this time I am in charge. The tide seems to notice, and so the whitewater fizzles off, making it easy for me to row past it. My pride swells. This will be my day.

To my humbling realization, though, I find that the initial surge of water has only retreated to give reinforcement to the next upcoming wave. Helpless, I watch as the next wave in the set begins to grow. Suddenly there is silence, just like the calm before a storm. But when the wave begins to peak, I can hear a deep booming growl, as if the wave is preparing to roar. About to strike, the wave coils into ready position. My head tilts straight back as I behold the monstrosity, and I know that all is lost. All I can feel is a "Thwap," "Bang!", and "Crash!" as I barrel-roll, my body flailing in all directions, smashing into the ocean floor during the wave's aftermath. Gasping for air as I push to the water's surface, I desperately search for the wreckage of my kayak and, with a sigh, find it floating only a few feet away. Delighted that its fate was not nearly as bad as mine, I quickly jump back into position and begin paddling forward. I will not let one lost battle deter me from the war to make it beyond the break.

Unsympathetic to my determination, the ocean now begins to wind up, ready to pitch its worst wave. This time instead of gawking helplessly, I plow forward, gaining the most speed achieved so far.

Again the wave peaks, and my gut tells me I should cower. But just as we collide, I lean back in the kayak, which tilts the tip upward, paving the path to victory. To viewers on the beach, my approach as the wave crests appears to be a steep ninety degree angle. At that moment, the match is nearly determined. Either I will be body slammed back to where I started, or I will succeed. Feeling gravity disappear, I feel almost weightless as the kayak and I go airborne. Slapping down back into the water, I manage to maintain my balance and move beyond the next wave, which cannot mature in time to give a good fight.

A new sensation sweeps over me now as I feel freedom over the laws of nature, which until now have kept me from enjoying the up-close and personal experience of the ocean. Even though the fight is over, my adrenaline still pumps through my veins. Alert, I now scan my surroundings as the ocean reveals a beautiful display of its wonders. I look ahead at some rocks and faintly hear seals barking. I now head in that direction, unsure of what I may encounter, but sure that I will be at home in my next adventure.

After a customized adventure tour of the most untamed wilderness on earth, I find myself one with the ocean. Instead of struggling to find my place in the water, I now find that I am a master riding upon the back of a beautiful, but powerful beast. With new and fresh images of dolphins leaping in and out of the sea, and grey whales occasionally surfacing for air, I now begin to plot my way home back to the coast. As I approach the break this time, I easily catch the wave, which gently glides me back to the water's edge. No longer enemies at war, the ocean and I have an understanding. I am welcome at sea.

THE BATTLE FOR AL TARMIYA:

A Marine recounts the brutal realities of war

As an infantry Marine I was trained for live combat, but nothing could prepare me for the most dangerous day of my life, April 12, 2003.

For a few days, fifth Marines had been using Baghdad University as a temporary command post. On April 11th intelligence reports had begun to surface that Fedayeen fighters were massing just north of our position in a town called Al Tarmiya. On the morning of April 12th, Golf Company was tasked to investigate these intelligence reports. We loaded up in our AAV's (Amphibious Assault Vehicles) and made the 45 minute ride to the edge of the town. Once there, the first and third squads of my first platoon began a reconnaissance of the town. My squad (second squad) stayed behind as a reserve element just in case anything went wrong.

All of a sudden explosions broke the silence of the once sleepy town as two rocket propelled grenades scored a direct and immobilizing hit on one of our vehicles. Fedayeen fighters began charging from all directions. Another Marine and I began shooting down Fedayeen fighters who were attempting to take out our vehicle with rockets and other explosive devices. The word was given to reinforce first and third squads, who were now in a fierce fire fight about one hundred yards down the road. All twenty-one of us sat breathing deeply and pressed against one another, shoulder to shoulder, in the dark and claustrophobic confines of our vehicle. The terrorist ambush in Al Tarmiya turned our rolling AAV into a tin can in a shooting gallery. At first, the plinks came in ones and twos. But once the enemy locked in on us, it sounded like we were sitting inside the coin tray of a Las Vegas slot machine that had just hit jackpot.

Luckily, most of the Marines inside had already gotten out and begun reconnaissance along the dirt roads. But the three member crew—the gunner, the driver, and the mechanic—weren't so lucky. The driver had his calf muscle all but sheared off the bone, and the

gunner and mechanic were riddled with shrapnel. Our vehicle rolled to a halt before the ramp dropped, causing sunlight to race inside our vehicle. Rockets screamed over us while smoke and the smell of gunpowder made it hard to breathe. As soon as our boots hit the ground, we could feel the earth shake from the enemy mortars. When a mortar hit close by, I slammed to the ground, hoping to escape any shrapnel. The sounds of rockets, gunfire, and enemy fighters screaming in Arabic were deafening. I rolled over on my stomach to talk to Tardif, my squad leader and good friend. I yelled, "We're sitting ducks here. We have to move!"

We sprang up off the ground and charged into a field of tall elephant grass, heading towards a series of adobe-style buildings. The rest of our squad followed. Fedayeen fighters, who wore all black or all white ninja-style terrorist uniforms that covered their faces, were popping up in windows and from spider holes, shooting at us.

The enemy rounds were now coming so close that I could feel the heat and the snap of the rounds passing my ear. There is no logical explanation for how we were surviving. It was like swimming in a school of jellyfish and not getting stung. It wasn't skill or technique or luck. We clustered together near a neighborhood off the main road, one hundred meters to the right of where the vehicles of first and third squads had all been ambushed. I was the leader of the first fire team. Tardif gave us our objective: each fire team was to begin going house to house to clear out the terrorists.

The plan was to use a rocket launcher to blow a hole through the eight-foot adobe walls surrounding the house. We then planned to race across the street and enter through the hole in the wall and eliminate our enemy. Tardif and the others began to get in position to set up a shot.

Doing battle in 130 degree heat was insane, and all seventy pounds of my gear felt twice as heavy. Sweat ran down my face like somebody had poured a bucket of salty water over my head. The only relief from the sun was the numerous plumes of smoke that sometimes whisked in front of it. Between popping off shots at terrorists, I could see third and first squads clearing a house. I looked over at Tardif and the weapons team. They were ready to shoot. Right then, a terrorist sat up and threw a grenade. The grenade arced through the air and literally

bounced off of Tardif's shin.

"Grenade!" Tardif yelled as he jumped for cover. We scurried into a small ditch. The blast sent shrapnel ripping into Tardif's leg. He tried to stand up but fell back over. The terrorist who threw the grenade began sprinting away as I aimed my M-16 at him and began firing. The others rushed over to check on Tardif, whose shin and thigh bones were peeking out through his skin. He was bleeding profusely and his face had turned white. The rest of our squad began emptying their magazines at the terrorist who had wounded our squad leader. Our M-240 machine gunner was on line too, firing the gun from his hip.

Our rounds sent the enemy's body jerking left and right, but he wasn't going down easy. He finally died from a gun shot wound that split his head open and sent brain matter everywhere. Many other Fedayeen hiding behind the trees ran away, only to be cut down in a torrent of gun fire. When the Fedayeen went down, they screamed in agony; but these cries only lasted a short time as the Fedayeen would either die or pass out from shock. Later, we would discover why these men had not gone down easily. With Tardif injured, I was second in line to assume leadership of our squad. The whole squad looked at me.

"Three-sixty around Tardif," I yelled.

Everyone spread out and created a loose perimeter around Tardif. One of our team began working on Tardif. He took out his knife and began prying the still burning shards of shrapnel out of Tardif's leg. I could smell the burnt flesh. As I knelt down and grabbed his hand to look at his face, his eyes swirled around in his head. Tardif was doing everything he could to hold back his cries of agony. Meanwhile, the terrorists resumed raining fire on us—this time from a completely different house behind us. Moments later, Tardif passed out from the blood loss. I then had two Marines sling his arms around their necks and lug him around until a MedEvac pick up point could be established. I yelled to one of the other guys, "Don't let anyone enter that house once we're in. If you see anyone try to go in, shoot them."

This particular house had no adobe wall around it. Three of us ran across the yard under heavy fire into the house. The second we entered, we came in contact with the enemy. It was four of them versus four of us. We mowed down the first few, splattering the walls with their blood. The remaining terrorists were spread throughout various

rooms and began yelling in Arabic to one another. The gunshots inside the house were amplified by what seemed like a hundred times their normal sound. Every first floor room we entered had at least one terrorist inside. We were dropping body after body, often just a few feet away.

Sweat soaked my sleeves as I started creeping up the stairs. By this time, my ears were ringing loudly, each gun shot sending a searing pain into my eardrum. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears. With each stair we climbed, my heartbeat quickened. Once at the top, I blasted the first terrorist and cleaned the room. My team then burst into the second room where we engaged and eliminated more terrorists. I then stopped and looked down at the dead bodies and then looked back up at the rest of the room, which turned out to be a kitchen. On one of the countertops were vials of adrenaline, syringes, and *khat*, a drug that is similar to PCP, which gives users a surge of energy and strength. That's when it clicked: Tardif's zombie-like attacker hadn't gone down easily because he was jacked up on *khat* and adrenaline.

The team made its way to some stairs that lead to the roof, lobbing two grenades up on the roof to clear it. Once we were on the roof, we had about two minutes of peace before the next house we intended to clear erupted with gun fire. We got down and returned fire.

We waited for the arrival of the rocket launcher, which blew a hole through the fence that surrounded the house. Running across the street and into the hole was the equivalent of sprinting through highway traffic blindfolded. Enemy rounds smacked the ground around us as we ran. When we made entry into the hole, enemy fighters began popping up like gophers in windows. In the distance was a small guest house from which the terrorists were shooting at us. A few palm trees were the only cover. As the intense fire fight ensued, I noticed two other marines about seven meters to my left.

When the enemy gun from the guest house bunker jammed, I jumped up and charged the bunker. My comrades laid down suppressive fire. Halfway to the bunker, I heard the enemy weapon reengage. I would have to say that was the only time I was *certain* I was going to die: I did not "think" I was going to die or "worry" I might die. I *knew* it. I started sprinting back to a different palm tree some fifteen meters away. On the way I noticed a rocket launcher lying

on the ground and snatched it up as I hid behind a new tree. I scanned the weapon over. I had not been trained on how to use enemy weapons, but I just kept thinking that if I could figure out how to fire the damn thing, I could destroy the building. I popped out from behind my palm tree.

Squeeze. Nothing

I decided to reload the rocket and put it on my shoulder again before exposing myself a second time.

Squeeze. Nothing

I started to ask myself whether there was a *reason* this stupid thing had been tossed onto the battlefield; maybe it was a dud. I noticed a secondary trigger. No sooner had I exposed myself again when I heard Corporal Gardner get hit in the ribs. Gardner's screams sounded like someone getting his arm sawed off. He was now seven meters away lying in the yard in an expanding pool of deep-red blood. The Fedayeen then zeroed in on Gardner's body and began firing rounds into the dirt around him. Gardner's face turned as white as Tardif's had. Blood was pouring out of his mouth. I thought to myself, *if I'm going to fire this thing, I need to do it now because they're about to kill Gardner if I don't.*

I pointed the weapon at the structure and squeezed the trigger. The rocket whizzed across the yard and exploded, tearing through the building. Most importantly, the rocket gave my teammates the time to drag Gardner out of the line of fire before the surviving terrorists could resume their assault.

I started running directly toward the bunker while firing my M-16. A few of their bullets clanked off my gear. The bolt on my rifle locked to the rear; I was out of ammo. I dropped my weapon, which hung from a sling, and prepped a hand grenade. I could hear them yelling in Arabic. Before my body slammed against the outer wall of their bunker, I threw the grenade as hard as I could into their open window. I stood with my back against the wall and waited for the blast.

A pink mist came with the explosion. I saw arms and legs flying. The first few seconds after the blast, I was a little disoriented; all I knew was that I had terrorist blood on me, my ears had turned into liquid, and that I had a terrible headache. There were body parts all around. Two terrorist bodies were on the ground in front of me

with their intestines hanging out and slathered in blood. I reloaded my weapon and walked around the structure I'd just blown up. As I turned the corner, something started to move. A Fedayeen fighter with an AK-47 popped out of the ground. He was drawing his weapon as I shot him: two to the head, two to the chest. The area was now secure.

Tardif and Gardner were clinging to life. A doctor came in to give them treatment until they could be air-lifted out to safety. Just then, three more enemy fighters jumped out of some nearby bushes and began firing. The squad cut them down in a brief two minute firefight. The battle was finally over. I was exhausted but alive.

THE ENCHANTMENT OF MOROCCO

Sweet tangerines, delicate roses, spicy black pepper and cumin:
Delicious aromas waft through the air,
Fragrance awakening my senses.

Vibrant shades of red, orange and cobalt blue:
Snow covered mountains surround,
Visions eternally etched in my mind.

Sunbeams reflect upon sparkling brass,
Bolts of bright colored silk hang from above;
Vendors hawking their wares.

Melodic sounds of haunting chants call to the faithful.
The depths of my soul enveloped,
People stopping to pray.

Nights filled with stars, a feast for both eyes and ears.
Storytellers and snake charmers, medicine men and mystics:
One thousand and one lanterns illuminating.

Precariously perched high atop walls, storks clack their long beaks.
Their call resonates throughout;
A repertoire of courtship beginning.

Children dance with delight as we descend from the sky.
Our balloon drifts towards the ground,
Laughter suddenly erupting.

A grandmother, fearful and unsure, keeps a watchful eye.
I extend my hand to her:
She is smiling.

A kiss on the cheek as I bid adieu
to those whom I met in Morocco.
Breathtaking scenery and exotic scents,
Memories not forgotten but forever remaining.

CONSIDERING THE CAT

Every Saturday was grocery-shopping day in the Ramone household; and on every Saturday for the past two years, Mrs. Lissey Ramone would strap two-year-old Madeline—Maddie for short—into her car seat and they would set off together in the family’s beaten red sedan, two miles down the road to the nearest Vons. Later on, Mrs. Ramone’s sister, Jenny, would stop by with her own daughter, Kate, and the two families would have dinner together just as they always did. Of course, the fact that the two sisters were able to tolerate each other’s company at all was a bit of a shock to those who knew them well, as the sisters had always been competitive with each other over pretty much everything. When they were younger, it was always a competition for which sister had the best toys, the best clothes, the best grades, etc.—and Jenny was always the winner. In their teens, the competition switched from toys and clothes, to boys—and again, Jenny proved to be the dominant one, once even snatching up Lissey’s boyfriend while the two were on a much-needed break from their relationship.

Later, as if to add insult to injury, Jenny went on to marry Lissey’s former boyfriend in one of those clichéd, lacey, “fairytale” weddings, and seemed to have settled happily into her new life. Meanwhile, Lissey had quickly eloped with the first sane person she could convince to marry her, in a drive-through wedding in Las Vegas. But now that they were mothers of young children, the competition had once again shifted: now the two relied on their daughters to carry on their constant struggle to determine who was the best; and truthfully, the only point of the Saturday dinners was to see whose child was winning the contest for her mother.

This Saturday, however, was different. Oh sure, it started off normally enough: Mr. Ramone left for his job as the manager of a local drugstore at five a.m. sharp—while Mrs. Ramone herself rose with the baby an hour later. And by the time she had changed Maddie’s diaper, dressed her, fed her breakfast, finished getting herself decent, and finished writing out the grocery list, the time was 8:30. It was as

the two were pulling out of the garage that Mrs. Ramone first felt that something was wrong.

Maybe she had forgotten something?

No, that couldn't have been it. She had her purse, grocery list, money, keys, cell phone, and Maddie, who was strapped safely into the backseat. On a whim, she glanced back over her shoulder to make sure that Maddie was fine, only to find that her daughter was quietly drinking milk from a bottle. Seeing that her mother was paying attention to her, Maddie quickly threw her bottle to the ground and grinned.

"Uh-oh, Mama!" She screamed happily. Mrs. Ramone began to laugh but quickly stopped as the loud blaring of a horn could be heard. Snapping her head forward and instinctively slamming down on her breaks, she watched with horror as a giant black truck came barreling toward them. Panicking, she stepped on the gas, trying to force the car forward before the truck hit. But it was too late. The truck was inches away from the sedan. Screaming, Mrs. Ramone tried to lean over to where Maddie was sitting, desperate to save her daughter before the moment of impact. "NOOOO!" She screamed.

And everything stopped.

It took Mrs. Ramone several moments to register what was happening. To her right, just outside the sedan's door, was the truck's silver grille, poised like a battering ram to flatten the car. Maddie's mouth was frozen open, her eyes staring up into nothingness and her expression strangely blank.

"You wish to file a complaint?" An unfamiliar male voice piped, interrupting the chaotic stream of Mrs. Ramone's thoughts. She swung her head around, looking for the source of the voice.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"You know," the voice responded smugly.

"No, I don't." Her hands were shaking now.

"Oh yes, you do. Think now. Real hard. And don't worry about being quick about it; I have all the time in the world." A small black form leapt onto the passenger's side, causing Mrs. Ramone to jump back until she realized that it was a cat—a perfectly harmless, ordinary cat.

"What the hell is this? Some kind of a joke?" She almost

shrieked. “Because it isn’t funny!” This was absurd; it had to all be a dream—nothing else could explain it. Soon she would wake up and.... The cat glanced at her casually and then seemed to sigh.

“If you’re finished,” spoke the cat, “I have a proposition that may interest you.” Mrs. Ramone was too busy trying to pinch herself awake to notice (or was she supposed to get someone else to pinch her? How did situations like this usually work out in those fairytales she used to read?).

“All right,” she said. The cat spoke quickly, as if afraid the obviously traumatized woman would lapse into insanity again—as if she had even recovered from her previous lapse. “There’s been a minor miscalculation on my employer’s part.”

“Your...employer’s?” Mrs. Ramone asked, startled enough to temporarily forget about trying to wake herself up. “Who’s that?”

“That’s beside the point,” said the cat simply as if discussing the weather with a very stupid child. “Basically, your daughter’s time hasn’t run out yet—there’s been some sort of filing error—again, never mind. But once these sorts of things get started, they’re difficult to stop, as you may imagine. However, due to the present circumstances, my employer is willing to allow your daughter to live—assuming that you agree to an exchange.”

Mrs. Ramone didn’t like where this was going. “And what’s that?”

“I’ll put it simply, ma’am: choose someone who can take your child’s place, and all will be set right.”

Her mind was quick to settle on one person—the one person really—who would put an end to the struggle that had dominated most of her life. It was a horrible thought, but the more Mrs. Ramone tried to push the image out of her mind, the more it became fastened in place—a permanent fixture in a rapidly moving sea of jumbled emotions.

Time had stopped, but for all she knew, she could have spent an eternity in that car with the stupid black cat staring at her. After a moment, its hazel eyes flashed almost greedily.

“So you’ve made your choice.”

“What? No! Of course not! I didn’t even say anything!” She said indignantly as hot tears began to flow freely down her cheeks.

The cat yawned dramatically, evidently growing bored of this silly human and her inability to make a choice that it thought to be quite easy. "Don't be stupid when it's so obvious that you've chosen. But, if you insist on denying it, I'll just have to take your daughter. Not that it makes any difference to me; 'business is business' as they say." Then, with a single, fluid movement it began to stride over toward Maddie, who was still frozen in her car seat.

"Wait!" Mrs. Ramon cried out. She was shuddering now with the realization of what she had to do and glanced backward at Maddie as if to reaffirm her decision, before finally nodding. "Just do it."

"Very well," said the cat. "Though, I must say, it took you long enough."

Mrs. Ramone sat straight up in bed, lathered in a cold sweat. So it was all just a dream. "Oh thank goodness," she muttered as she lay back in bed, breathing a heavy sigh of relief. Maddie was safe and everything was as it should be. The phone rang then, and she rolled over in bed to answer it, glancing over at her clock in the process. It was only 5:32 a.m.

"Who could be calling now?" She wondered as she lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Lissey, is that you?" It was Jenny, and her voice was low with tears. "There's been an accident. Kate..." She broke off, sobbing in the background. "She's dead, Lissey! She's dead, and I have no idea what to do."

ROSE PATCH APHRODISIAC

I once saw a rose; it grew in a patch of thorns,
 Its beauty unmatched;
 It grew wild and freely, free of scorn.
I picked it from the ground, to admire it and take it home,
 To love and nurture its beauty, and to call my own.

Pigment added to my life, vibrant colors acute,
 Blooms produce fruit, and the thorns left behind.
A rose patch aphrodisiac, who knew it could be true
 The once vacant space in my vase now occupied.

 So why?
 I ask this rose, did you bloom in my hand,
 Attain full glory, yet petals fall in shadows span
As the free flower you were, you stood bright in the light
 Showed no sign of weakness, no sign of spite.

 What am I to you?
 I ask this rose, now dying in my hand—
The wrong type of fertilizer, I turned rose red a violet blue.
 Petals fall to the ground, beyond my control,
My heart swollen; what can I do to turn this love around?

Took my flower back to the patch, to replant it in the ground.
 I guess it's proof; I helped it find its roots
Because the rose was at home, had room to roam and grow
 To find what's lost and to lose what's found.

Petals stop falling,
And the sun shone for a brighter tomorrow;
The rose gone and the vase left empty, but full of sorrow.
But time has passed, and calendar pages fell
So I took another stroll by that flower patch—
A different cat had snatched that rose, a victim to its spell
With a smirk I sighed: poor fellow, he means well...

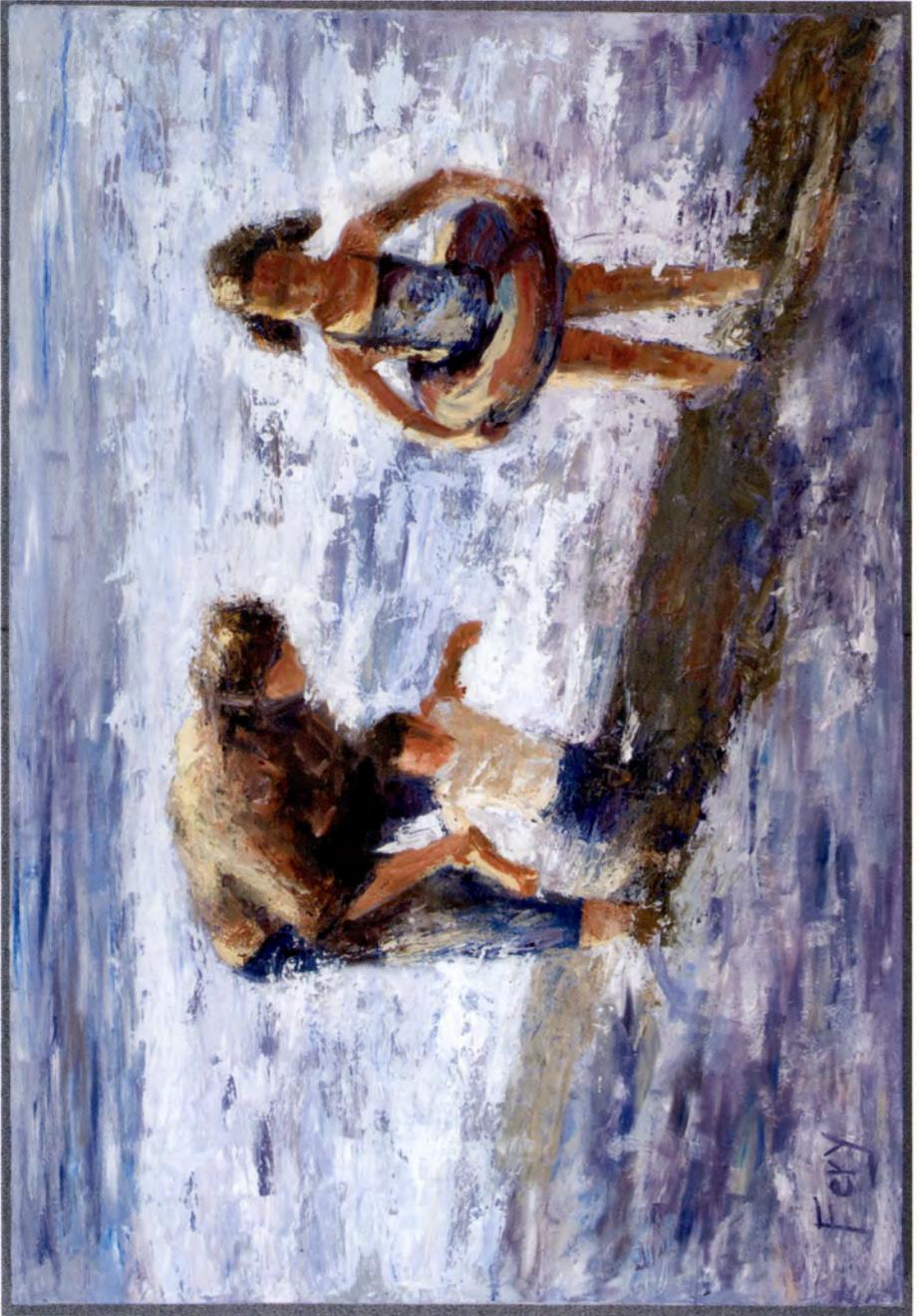
EMPTY BOTTLES, BROKEN TEETH

Valentines Day is a feeble excuse
To make up for a life of neglect and abuse.
Say you love each other? And you're *so* in touch?
Well it's the specter of caring you love so much.

Sure he nailed your sister (that adulterous creep),
And last time you argued he knocked out your teeth,
But he bought you a flower and a stuffed teddy bear.
Then he truly does love you --*really*, he cares.

Now Valentine's over, so it's your turn,
To be showered with bottles and cigarette burns.
You remember the red, but you see black and blue,
But he bought you chocolates, so he *must* love you.

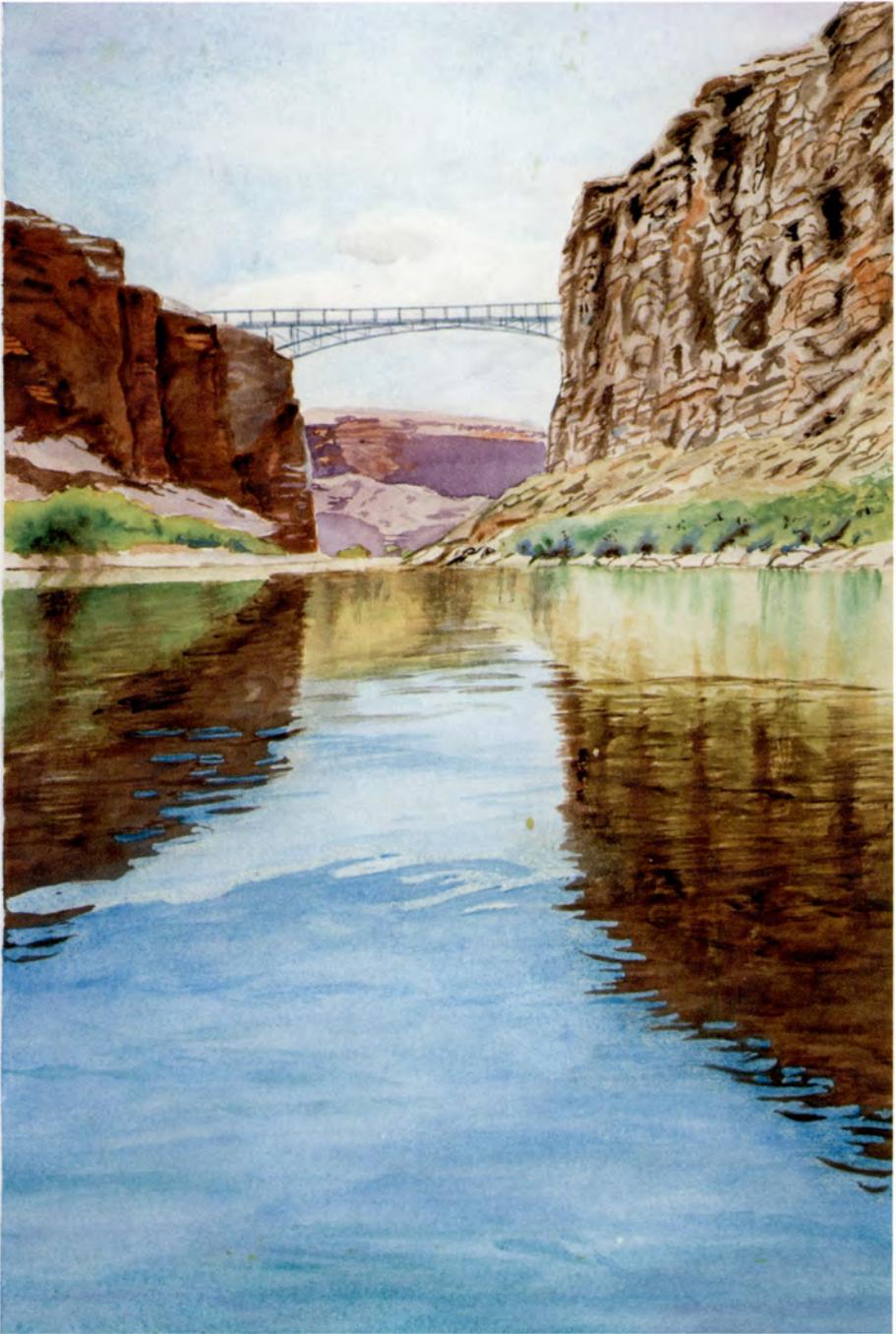
The flowers have wilted, the bear thrown away,
But it's only a year until Valentine's Day.



RECLAIMING

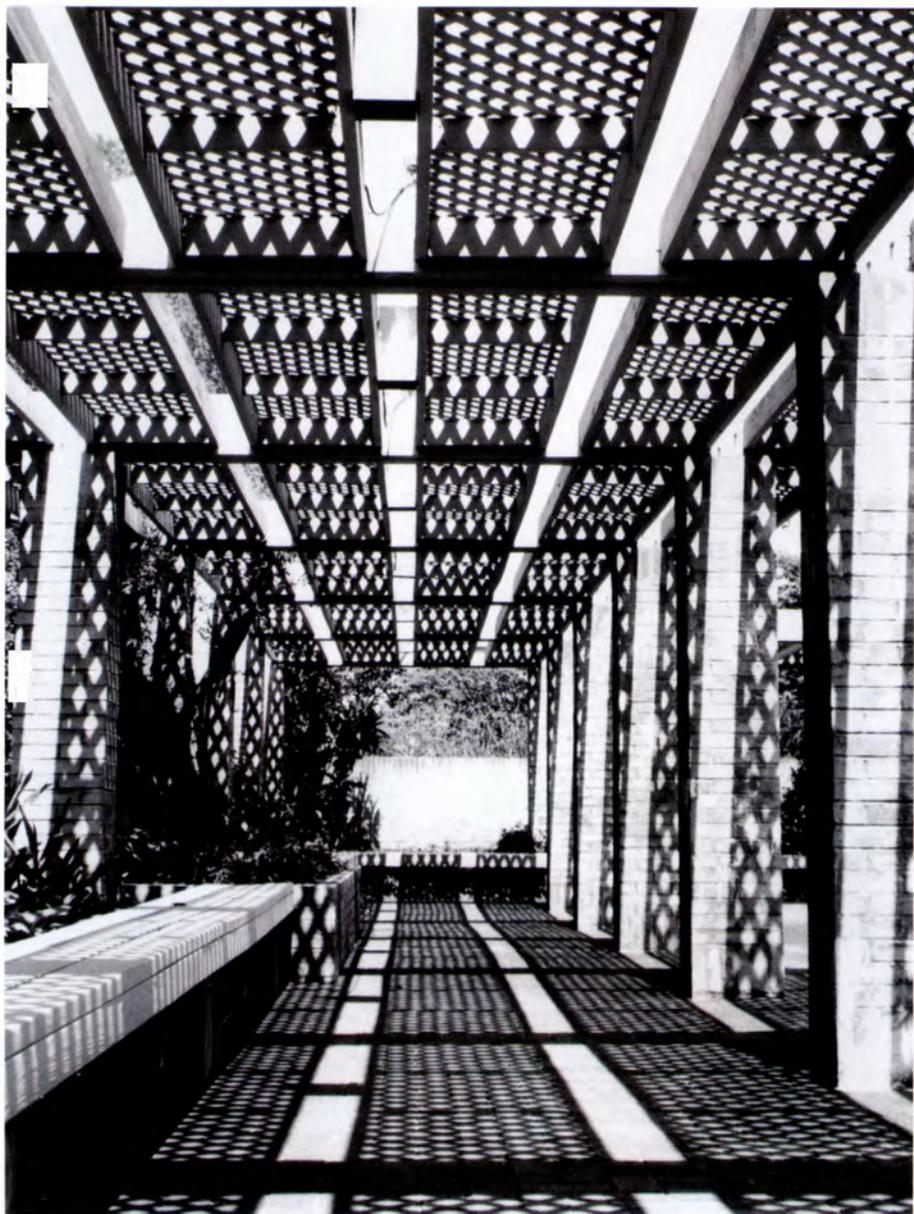
Fery Khadivi

Spring 2007



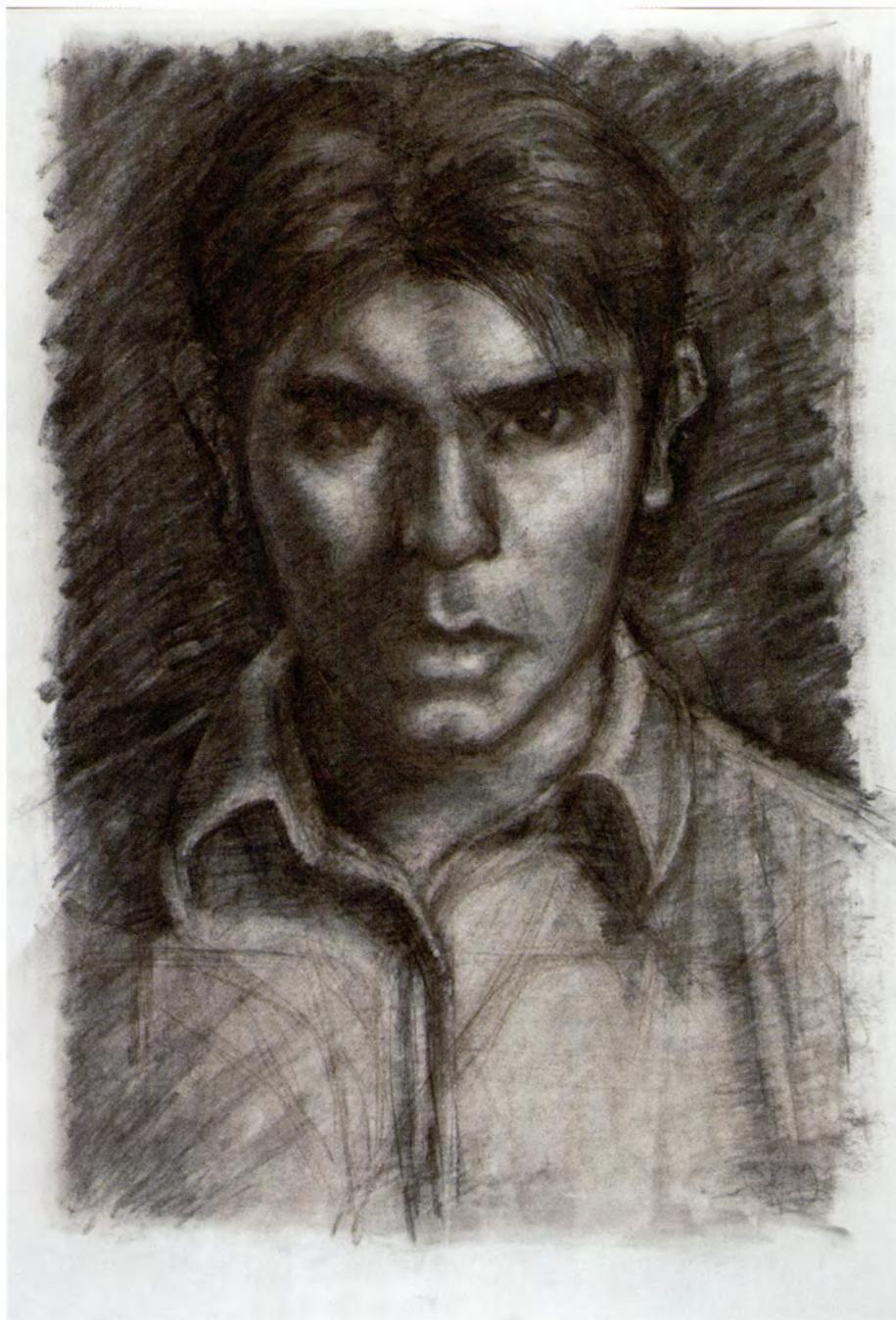
COLORADO RIVER

Richard Frei



SHADY PASSAGE

Rita Zeid



SELF PORTRAIT

Anibal Santos



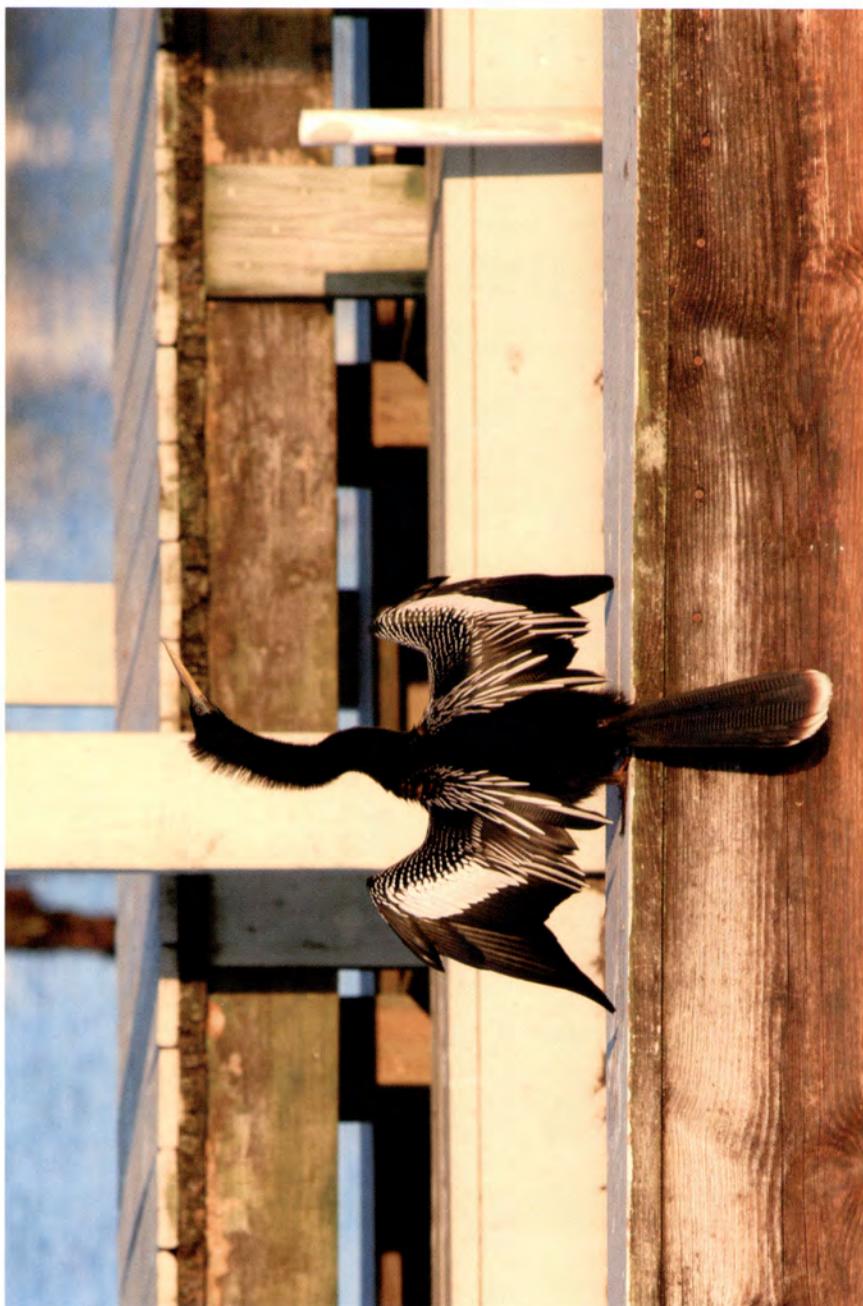
LEAVES OF OUR LIVES

Christine Nguyen



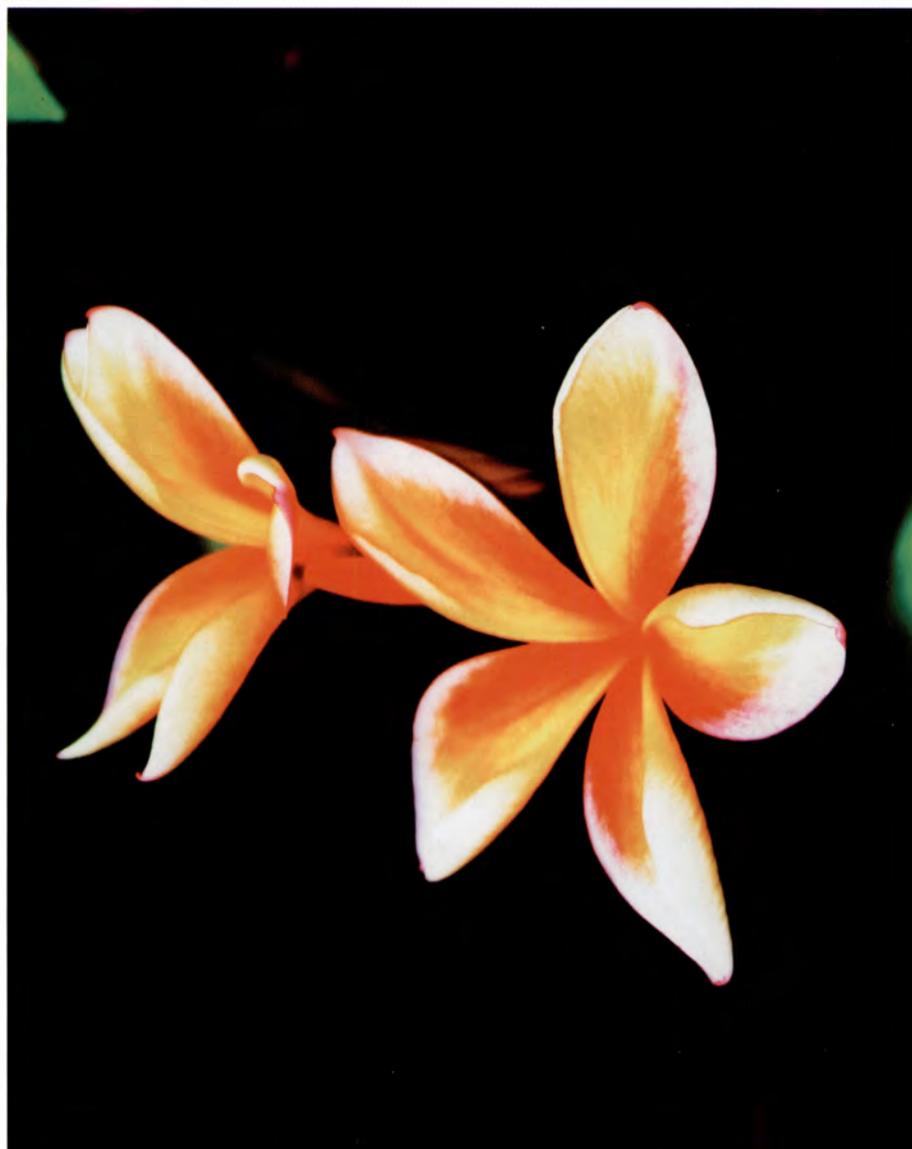
RHINO

Marie Hurd



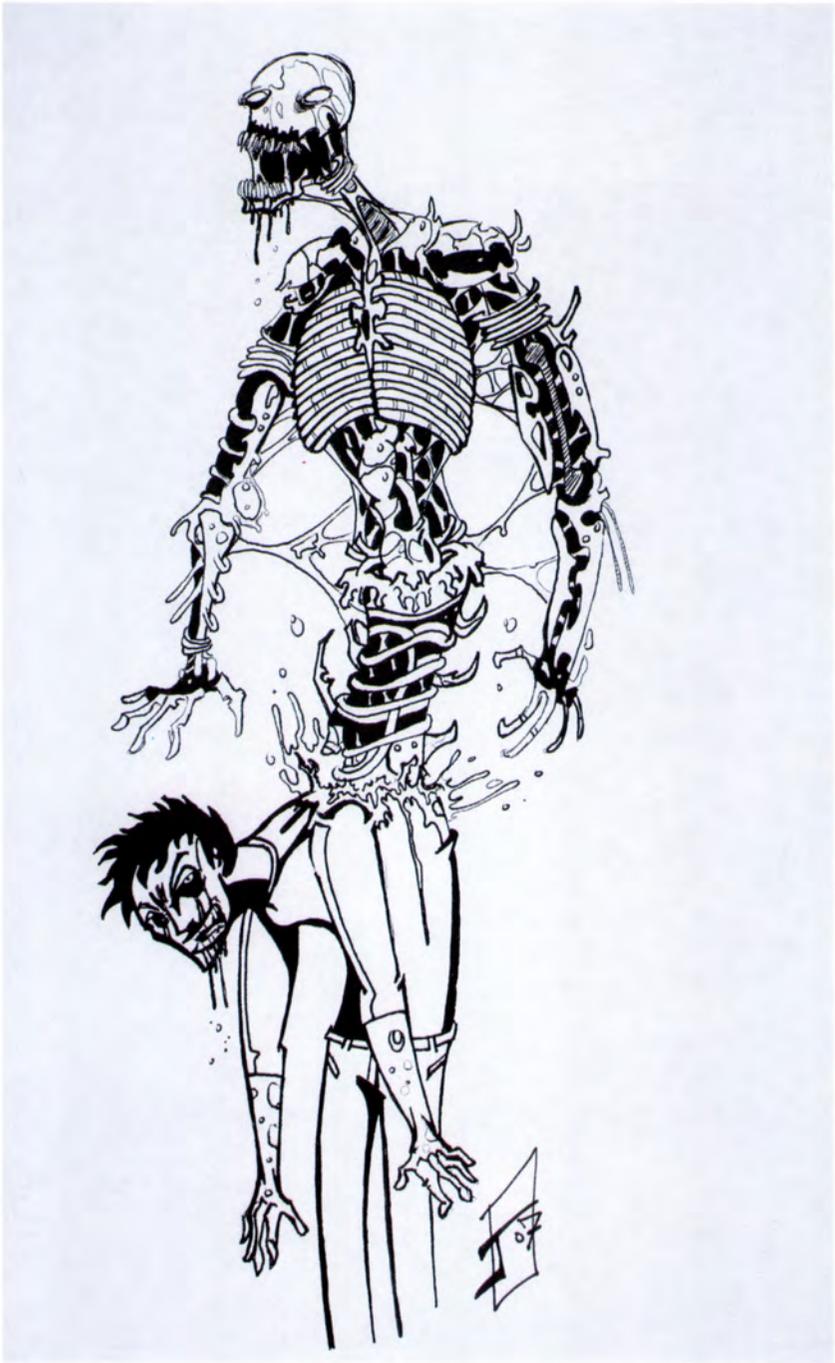
PRE FLIGHT

Jessy Moyers



DEEPER THAN ITS ROOTS

Hannah McElroy



MY BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARE

Jordan Hammar



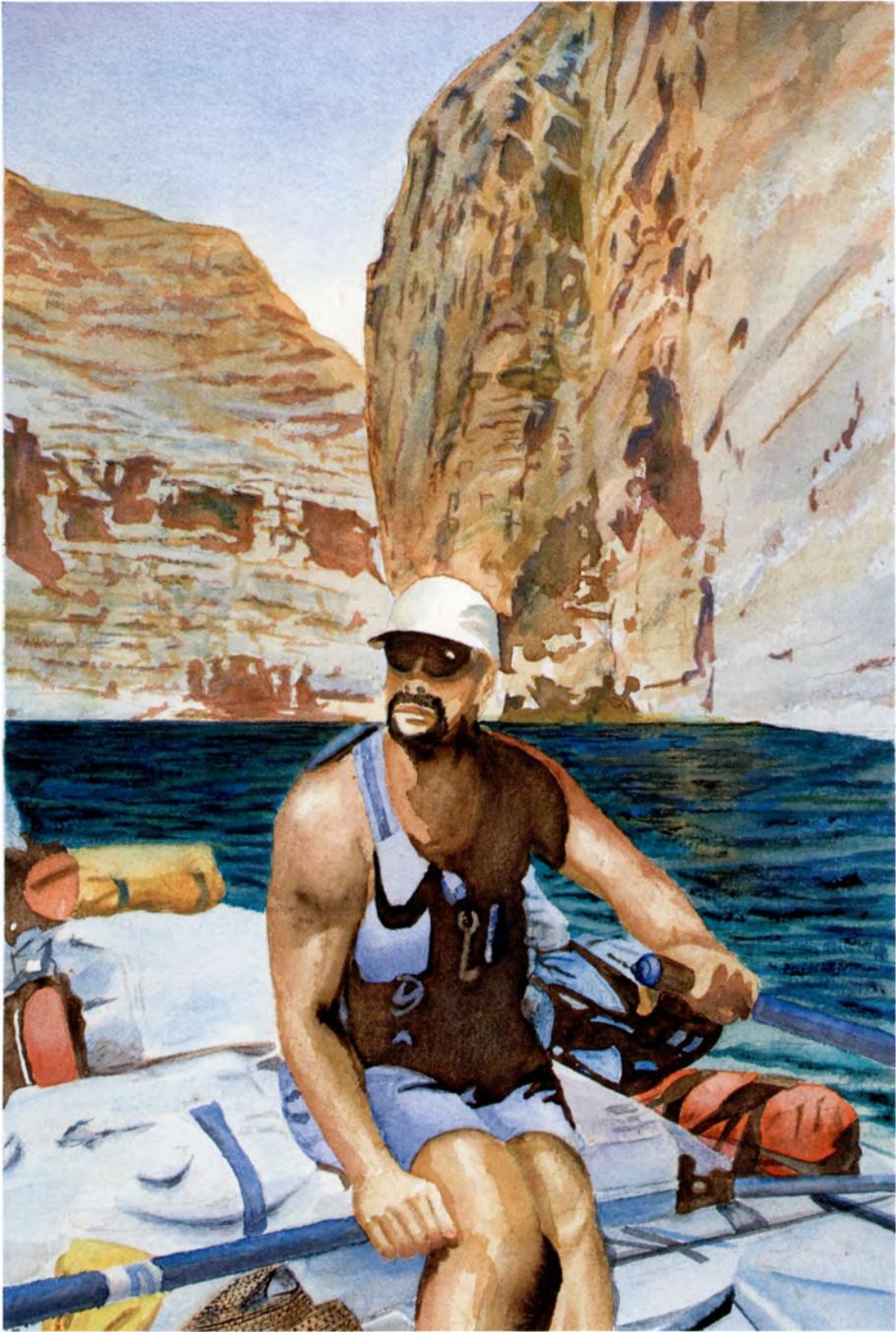
GRAVES

Mick Duggan



MY TORTURED VEGETABLE

Rosalie Irish



OARSMAN

Richard Frei



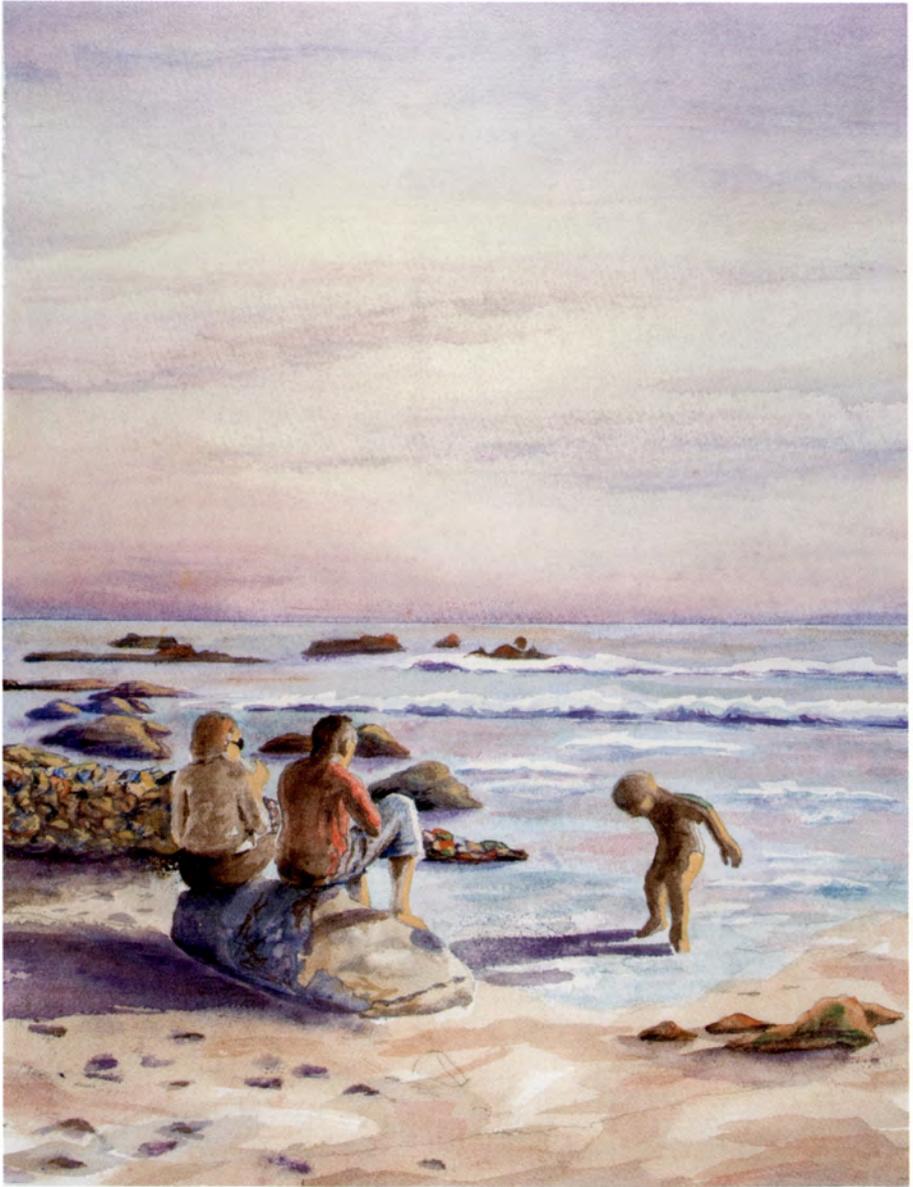
BOARDWALK

Jessy Moyers



CORINTHIAN COLUMN

Rita Zeid



FAMILY AT THE BEACH

Richard Frei



COASTLINE

Mick Duggan

A PERSONAL MEMORY OF THE KOREAN WAR

When Japan lost World War II, Koreans were liberated from the Japanese military government. They had high hopes of becoming fully independent, but hope was shattered when the United States and the Soviet Union governments decided to divide the nation into two separate governments along the 38th parallel: a communist government in the north and a democratic government in the south. That was the beginning of the Korean tragedy that later brought a war into the peninsula.

I grew up during that period in a small town called Pyong Chang, which had a big river surrounded by pine tree covered mountains. The river was so clear that we could see the sand, small pebbles and fish at the bottom. Although we had two Christian churches and one Buddhist temple, the majority of people were Buddhists. The town had four large unpaved roads with tall cottonwood trees on both sides of them.

Our small town did not have running water, so we had to pump up the water from the ground. The kitchen had a basement, and above the basement was a walk-in pantry. All the rooms in the house had bay windows where my father grew cacti. My father worked as a postmaster, but he was also an avid gardener and grew fruit --apples in particular --along with all kinds of vegetables for consumption at home.

I was eight years old when North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. At that time, our family lived near the 38th parallel and we had to flee the North Korean soldiers. Before we left, my father decided to hide our valuables with the hope that we would one day return to retrieve them. He started by digging holes in the vegetable garden, doing so only at night so that no one could see what he was doing. He marked inconspicuous areas where he was going to dig, and was careful not to disturb the vegetables so that after he buried the large ceramic jars that were filled with all our possessions, the garden would look untouched. This was especially difficult since he

had to dig the holes deep and wide because the ceramic jars were tall and oval shaped. Before he buried them, my father gathered the jars and lined them with cotton towels to prevent moisture. He wrapped all paper goods such as his school diplomas, family album, and house deed with the cotton fabrics before he put them in the jar. He kept my mother's gold jewelry in their original boxes before he put them in as well. As soon as it got dark, he started digging the areas he had marked earlier. Then he put the jars in the ground and covered them with dirt. I watched his secret operation with excitement because it was so unusual for him to put jars, not seeds, into the ground. He told me in a somber tone that it was a secret and not to tell anyone. Although I was a child, I sensed the seriousness and urgency in his voice and knew that I had to keep this secret to myself. At the same time, his voice was so serious, it made me scared. Meanwhile, my mother was packing a backpack and making small bundles of clothes to take with us.

The next day we started walking towards my grandparents, who lived in the more central part of Korea. At that time, not many people had cars. My parents piggybacked my two brothers, who were one and four years old, as well as everything my mother had packed. We first trekked towards one of our relatives who had a trucking business. When we got there, the truck was already loaded and all of us were ready to ride. Suddenly, mobs of people were rushing to the truck and started climbing desperately with their belongings. The truck was moving, but people clung to it and kept climbing. Pretty soon, it was so packed I could not breathe. I was terrified and felt as if we were like sardines crammed into a can. Kids were crying and adults were screaming; it was a chaotic scene. In order to make some room, my father began to throw away small bundles on the road. At times, people noticed and screamed at the driver to stop so that they could go down to pick them up. I will never forget this long and most miserable ride.

It was morning when we got to a town called Jae Chun, where my family and I had to get off the truck and walk to my grandparents. The summer day was hot and humid and, from time to time, we had to rest under the trees. Often, I did not feel like walking, so I would not get up when my parents were ready to move on. My mother encouraged me to walk and said that North Korean soldiers were coming to capture us. That worked every time.

During war, people did whatever they could to survive along their journey. My brother caught measles with a high fever. Later that afternoon, his measles progressed to pneumonia; therefore, we had to find a place to stay instead of continuing onward. My father saw some farmland, which indicated that there would be a village close by, so we left the road and went down a hill toward some farmhouses. When we knocked on one house, a man who was limping invited us in. Due to his injury, his wife and family had left him behind. Consequently, he was alone and was glad to have us.

Even though my father was not a doctor, he was very knowledgeable about diseases and symptoms. Before we left home, my father had packed some medicine and a vial of penicillin with a glass syringe and needle. That night, he sterilized the syringe in boiling water and gave my brother the penicillin injection. But it took time for my brother to recover.

While we were staying at the farm house, someone started taking our food at night, but we never caught anyone. My father suspected that it was being stolen by North Korean soldiers living in the mountains. Since they did not bother us, we planned on staying until my brother was fully recovered. Unfortunately, our plans changed when we heard the terrifying sounds of airplanes from the South Korean army dropping bombs around the mountains in hope of killing the North Korean soldiers hidden there. The impact was so strong that it shook the house violently. Eventually, we left for my grandparents' village, yet we still did not feel safe.

The stress of living in fear in a strange place affects everyone, and we were no exception. Months went by and my mother wanted to go home without my father because she was afraid that if he were to return to our village, he would be kidnapped and taken to the north. She knew that the North Korean soldiers captured intellectuals and government workers and put them in jail for interrogation. So she urged my father to go to Pusan, the southern port city, where the South Korean government was temporarily established. My father had to make an agonizing decision, which was unthinkable under normal circumstances. She told him that North Korean soldiers might not harm a woman with small children. My parents tried to minimize the danger in this situation, and I did not fully understand their separation.

My family was at the cross roads of an uncertain future; my father headed for Pusan and my mother, brothers, and I went home. When we arrived, our house was still standing and I was thankful to be home, yet everyone felt uneasy living among enemies. The North Korean soldiers often checked on us and asked where my father was. My mother always told them that she did not know his whereabouts.

The war ended without winners. Since human history began, there have been many wars in the world and wars are still going on. People have not learned that war does not solve problems. As a child, I saw and experienced the human suffering and destruction war brings. I have the deepest empathy for anyone living in a war zone, especially those with children. I can only hope for their soldiers the violence will end soon.

Poetry

Lucy Froemmling

KICKING DIRT INTO THE SNOW

It's a warm night
For such a cold winter –
The line was crossed once again,
We both know what lies ahead.
Our eyes frigid with conscious;
Not a single sane thought running between us.

Romance heavy in the frosty leaves,
This infatuation keeping us warm.
We both agreed we didn't fit
Like puzzle pieces turned upside down,
We'll never fit the norm.

I'll try harder
To resist running barefoot
Through the snow,
Between your sheets

We both know
I am nowhere near falling,
So why does your touch
Make a chilly moment sweltering,
And keep me tiptoeing
Into the lost hum of the night?

BACK TO SCHOOL

It was one of those gifts that made me nervous; the kind that's wrapped in secrets, not shiny paper. I was informed that I would be receiving a very special present from my daughter and son in law, and that I had to be ready to go to some undisclosed place by 10:45 a.m. on a random Friday in December. Surprises sometimes come with mixed blessings, so I feigned excitement while I actually dreaded the gift. Based on my children's opinion of my wardrobe, I feared that the arrogant crew of *What Not To Wear* was surely planning to pull up in my driveway. I could imagine myself opening the door to reality cameras flashing as all of America snickered at every thread in my closet. I reassured myself. My children loved me. Surely they wouldn't do that to me. Surely. However, I thought, this may be their interpretation of love.

The dreaded Friday came and I awoke with queasiness. Hours lumbered by until the appointed time. I was handed a small gift bag that contained eight quarters, a #2 pencil, a used eraser, and a map. Curious, I pursued the directions and soon was pulling up to the local college. More instructions followed. *Put the quarters in the meter. Go down this path, to that building, to this classroom. Give your name and college I.D. to the attendant...hold on...I have a college I.D.?*

I dialed my daughter's cell phone number. "Mom," I could hear her smiling through the phone, "Andrew and I are giving you a writing class!" Their unexpected creativity astonished me. They knew that I had been trying, unsuccessfully, to write an endearing family story. This gift was thoughtful. Questions were set aside. I did exactly as instructed.

A man my age, who dressed as if he had never left the sixties, checked my credentials and steered me to a seat at the back of the room. Substantial commands were given as timed tests were distributed. Timed tests?! I wasn't warned to study! The last time I took a test was when I had to renew my driver's license. What if I got it wrong? What if my #2 pencil broke? What if...

The guy with the stringy, gray ponytail eased my jitters. Evidently I, and many others in the room, was being assessed to determine my “intellectual acuity.” Hmm... intellectual acuity... I barely knew what the phrase meant. However, I was now half enjoying the adventure, so I grasped the pencil I had been chewing and began the discovery. Not much to disclose here. Just the bleak fact that although I did know the English language pretty well, (after all, I’d been speaking it my whole life), the language of Arithmetic, however, was like Greek to me. And I’d never studied Greek. Five minutes into the Math assessment, I signaled the sixties throwback and informed him that I was wasting my time. No smarts in this area—that’s for darn sure. He smiled condescendingly and assured me that everything was fine, and I was free to go. I raised an eyebrow at him. I could read his thoughts...remedial math placement. Fine, I thought to myself, I didn’t want to take his old math classes anyway. I squared my shoulders, threw my nose in the air, and exited the room.

With the assessment over, actually starting school was looming nearer. I felt like a Pre-K youngster awaiting the sophisticated world of grammar school. When I was a child, the first day of kindergarten had been a big day: picking out my clothes, packing my lunch, and making sure I had my name tag on correctly. It had been legions of years since then, but this day felt no different --except, of course, I had a Slim Fast bar in my purse instead of a jelly sandwich in a Barbie lunchbox. However, clothing was definitely a problem. What on earth does a forty-seven year old mother of six wear on the first day of class? My only reference for collegiate apparel was the pajama bottoms, sweatshirt and Uggs I had seen my daughters wear. I wouldn’t do that sort of attire to clean out the garage, let alone parade on campus.

Hmmm... I was half regretting my cruel thoughts about the *What Not to Wear* crew. Do I wear a casual suit? Perhaps a conservative sweater that says I’m more brilliant than I seem? It was a quandary that I never resolved, so in the end I was forced to wear what I had on that day: maroon pants with a turtleneck sweater and a black scarf. Not dazzling—but at least I wasn’t naked.

It was an hour and fifteen minutes before class and time to leave. I grabbed my purse and barked orders to anyone who could hear. “Dinner’s on the stove. I can’t pick anyone up. Don’t call until

10:00. I'm off to school!!" They were unenthused. School was old hat to them.

The next hurdle was simply getting to the classroom. Traffic was horrendous, but this would have been nothing had I been able to get a parking pass. What is going on with those machines? I tell you I haven't seen the likes of such incompetence since...well; I just haven't seen the likes of it.

Here's the story: I calmly pulled up to the first white box I found, pushed the start button, took out two dollars, smoothed one of them, made sure Washington was facing the right way, and gently placed it in the slot. Nothing happened. Some mechanism was supposed to grab the dollar and ask for another, but no such luck. I tried again and again. It was almost 7:00, and cars were piling up behind me. Pressure was mounting. Frustration was building. I couldn't take it any longer. I put the car into gear and left. I drove to another parking appliance, and the contraption did the same thing -- except this time it took one of the dollars and then shut off. After two more tries at two more machines, I eventually got two whole bills to go through at the same time. Toes tapping, I waited for the little pass to print...no copy noise. No white paper. Nada. For Pete's Sake! I wanted to start screaming and stomping right there in the parking lot. Instead I gave up, and just tore off a piece of paper in the shape of what I thought the pass would look like and threw it in the window of my car. With clinched teeth, I vowed that if some meter maid so much as attempted to give me a ticket, I would take the matter to the Supreme Court for vengeance. By now, I was 20 minutes late, and I didn't have a note from my mother.

Luckily, the classroom was easy to find. That is if you understand the building, which I didn't. Darn. It took three requests for directions before I found that blasted little room way around the corner, through the doors and to the back of the second floor. By the time I got there, the professor was well into his lecture. I wanted to interrupt him, tell him my woes and vindicate my sin of tardiness on the first day. Instead, I mouthed an "I'm sorry" and slid red-faced into the only remaining seat at the back of the room.

The lecture was exceptional. I understood why my daughter wanted me to experience a top-rated teacher. He was funny, smart and

engaging. Wednesday nights were going to be a highlight. I would get out of the house, come to school and learn about writing while being entertained. I loved the gift! Bravo!

Then, like some old bait and switch ploy, the professor pulled out the syllabus and lowered the bomb. We were actually going to have to write. A novel! To be critiqued by everyone in the class! Wow...not what I was expecting. In fact, that very evening he had us draft twenty-five words or less about what our “novels” were going to be about. Everyone around me quickly wrote like pros. I scribbled something illegible and jotted my name at the top of the page. The kid next to me whispered, “Excuse me, but you’re supposed to put your name and email at the bottom of the page.” I lifted a brow and eyed him. I had socks older than him.

“Hmmm,” I countered, “the last time I went to school, we put our names at the top of the page, and there was no such thing as e-mail.” Gee-wiz, I couldn’t even deposit my name in the right place on the page; how on earth was I going to actually compose something good enough to turn in?

I was plagued by this question all the way home. It was obvious I was out of my league. I felt like a little old fish swimming with big young sharks, and it wasn’t fun. By the time I got home, I had decided that I wouldn’t be back. I didn’t care how enjoyable the lectures were. I needed a remedial course before this one. I needed another twenty-five years to prepare emotionally!

My son, a college competent, met me in the kitchen and listened to my articulate reasons for not wanting to proceed with the course. “Dude, Mom,” he eloquently declared, “What did you think school was? You’re taking a writing class. Duh...you have to write.”

I determined to buck up and quit this wimpy attitude. What was wrong with me? Good grief, next to raising six kids this would be nothing...or would it?

DEVILRY

One dark button split the eye of the garment as the wall-length mirror attested to the day's doings. Father Audrey's fine hand explored the crook between his jaw and collar, rubicund tones where a good-looking woman's lips had seared one too many times. He adjusted his collar to hide the evidence of his lapse, turned on one heel, and left the room.

He walked down the rectory's hall, his footsteps echoing through the stone and into the inlay crevices of the church; taut fingers slowly combing through his hair. The only light to be seen glowed vaguely from the racks of fading rose candles placed carefully under the standing saints—the Virgin Mary, the Lord Christ, and numerous others along the pillars—, hauntingly running their shadows up and across the massive cathedral walls.

The priest, tempted and failed, time after time, stopped his pace in despair. Never again would he see the grandness of the room. Setting his rosary in the deep of his pocket, he removed his white collar. He began to unbutton his grand and much loved cassock in plans of leaving it on the nearby pew, but before he could even complete the thought, he sent a glance towards a young man, sitting as still and as cold as the statues that readily surrounded him. Like the crooked, motioning finger of a practiced whore, who promised infinite carnal passions for the smallest in return, the curiosity was difficult to dismiss, and he approached him.

The young man sat in his silence, one could, and would imagine, deep in thought. His windswept hair and worn coat suggested some of the trouble he had faced. His peace was interrupted by a warm hand softly placed on his shoulder.

“Do you need to confess my son?” Father Audrey kindly offered. He was startled, the priest could tell, by the touch and presence of a harmless, gray-haired man. “You seem burdened.”

“Not enough to bother anyone this late.”

“It's still early yet,” he reasoned, leading the traveler away

from his pew and towards the confessional.

Through the lattice of a divider that separated them, the priest saw the young man enter, kneel, and form the Sign of the Cross in the air a breath away from his face. "Bless me Father, for I've sinned." He furrowed his brow and lightly thought with his eyes cocked up towards the rickety roof. "It's been, er, six years, give or take, I think, since my last confession."

"And what have you come to confess, my son?"

Moments later, when the traveler didn't respond in any way, Father Audrey blinked his eyes rapidly for a short series.

"Well, you see, Father," the silence was shattered and the priest startled. "I loved her first," he said as if he was the most convinced person in the entire world.

"Yes?" Father Audrey commented after a silent moment.

"She had another guy's ring on—a *gentleman's* ring—but I visited; if you know what I mean, Father."

"I see," he replied flatly.

"But don't get me wrong; 'course I don't blame her for keeping an arm on him...Mister's worth half the county...And on another note, they got Luther on their side. Them Protestants sure get a good deal for their penny, Father, if I say so myself." The priest huffed irritably, but caught himself and the noise finished with an awkward quetch. "It'd probably be a good idea to also mention she had a pretty little girl with black locks and blue eyes few years back; and neither her nor her mister's got those pair." He exhaled in a weak laugh. "What're the odds, eh? Seven years of *holy* matrimony...God hasn't been giving me much of a look recently."

Father Audrey remained silent for many moments.

"Have I completely lost it, Father?"

"Now, son...Do what you feel is right, and if your heart is sincere enough to make the right decisions for your past and the coming days, you will be absolved."

"Take no offense, but wasn't that the headline in last week's paper?" The young man tried for the correct tone.

The priest smiled slightly. "May the Lord guide you true on your path." He made the Sign of the Cross for the young man. "May our Lord Christ absolve you; and by his authority and as far as my

power allows and yourself requires, I absolve you of your sins. Amen.”

“Thanks, Father,” he said as they exited the shady box.

“The Lord has plans for us all yet.” The priest smiled and placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “You will find your peace.”

The young man clumsily faced the older man, with hopes that the dim light wouldn’t expose his tear-stricken face. “Thank you,” his voice trembled before he stepped away.

“God bless you,” the priest responded.

The penitent nodded his head over his turned shoulder, his receding steps reaching the halls until they were no more.

Father Audrey glowered as he went to lock the door before extinguishing the remaining lit candles and walking back up the corridor to lock the courtyard garden.

As he began to draw the heavy doors together, a gentle breeze blew a stray lock of wisteria to his feet. He looked at the garden, with the beauty of fall’s chill blossom: all the wisterias in full bloom, with the greenest dew-ridden grass at their roots, and the partially exposed crimson roses along the walls.

“The Lord has plans for us all yet,” he whispered to himself. He pushed his glasses back comfortably onto the bridge of his nose, properly re-buttoned his cassock, and reached into his pocket. He whimsically reapplied his white collar and tightly clutched his string of nephrite stones.

The priest gently picked up the fallen sprig of lavender flowers and walked into the garden. A clear-blinking sky and full moon, silver lining the tops of the trees, greeted him. With a sigh, he walked over to the nearby stone bench and sat down, placing the sprig contentedly in his lap. The priest looked to the pale marble statue beside him: Saint Francis, standing, bird upon his shoulder, with open arms; unchanging with an expression that would last the ages, seemingly making all errors miniscule and unworthy of the slightest repentance.

He looked to the open sky and dryly swallowed as his fingers fondled the rich stones. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

But how long would this lesson, mixed with the best intentions, last in the face of superior temptation and the epitome of self indulgence.

THIRTY-SEVEN SECONDS

Throughout my life, people have warned me about the consequences of drug abuse, saying that thousands of people die every year from drug overdoses. However, being young and believing nothing bad would happen to me, I still gave drugs a try, which was easy since the city where I lived offered quite a plethora of drugs to choose from. My drug of choice was methamphetamine. In fact, not only did I take speed, but I also began to use it on a daily basis. Unfortunately, my experience the morning of May 11th at a hospital in San Clemente would forever alter my feelings about drugs and drug use.

My lesson began early Monday morning while I was talking to my girlfriend on the phone after a weight-lifting class. A couple of minutes into our conversation, I noticed that my heart rate had not gone down after exercising. Explaining the situation to her, I told her I was going to lie down. Even after I lay down, my heart was still racing and I began to have difficulty breathing. In a panic, I jumped up and immediately blacked out, hitting my head on the edge of the bed. When I awoke, I found that I was experiencing severe chest pain, which was even more distressing than my throbbing head. I then realized something was seriously wrong with me and decided to go directly to the hospital.

Begging God not to take my life, I hopped in my car, started the engine and began to pull out of the garage. At that moment, I passed out again and slammed into the side of my parent's house. As soon as I came to, I began to panic even more and realized that I must get to the hospital quickly. On the drive, I pleaded for God's help to get me there safely. To this day, I can not really remember how I got to San Clemente Hospital in one piece.

When I arrived at the parking lot, I was hyperventilating as I stumbled out of my car and ran towards an ambulance that was parked outside of the emergency room. I stumbled through the sliding doors towards the receptionist, who asked me how she could help. I

replied, “Help me! Something is wrong with my heart.” She told me to sit down and take a deep breath. As she mechanically handed me a clipboard of paperwork, I explained to her that I could not breathe and that something was seriously wrong. I then passed out for a third time and hit the floor with a thud. When I awoke this time, I was on a hospital bed. A sense of relief washed through me because I was now in the hospital’s care.

At this point, I looked down at my body and noticed there were all kinds of sensors on my chest and an I.V. in my arm. A well-dressed man walked into the room and introduced himself as the doctor on call. As he asked me questions about my symptoms, the doctor spoke to the two nurses standing at my bedside. One nurse turned to me and told me she was going to take some “arterial blood gases.” She rolled a cart that was full of needles over to my bedside, explaining the procedure as she stuck the largest needle into my wrist. Immediately, I began to feel nauseous, so I told the nurse that I felt sick. Her response was to hand me a small plastic tray to catch the potential projectiles. Staring down at the tray, I wondered how I would be able to zero in on such a tiny space. Fortunately, after she pulled out the needle, my symptoms became more bearable—or so I thought. Suddenly, and without warning, my head felt as if it might explode, and I passed out for the fourth time.

This time, I woke up lying horizontally on the bed. I just knew something drastic had happened. This was not like the previous episodes when I blacked out and awoke minutes later; I was cold, and my body was shaking uncontrollably. I took huge gasps of air as if I had never taken a breath in my life. People moved briskly all around me as the doctor barked orders in a stern voice. Dreading the answer, I asked, “Did I die?” The doctor replied, “You are in good hands here.” When he did not answer my question directly, I suspected I knew the answer. Turning to the nurse on my left, I begged her not to let me die, but she said nothing in return. At the same time, I made a deal with God that I would never do drugs again if he would only save my life this once. Moments passed as the doctor injected me with all types of medicinal liquids. Within a few minutes, my symptoms had decreased so that I was able to breathe without pain. The doctor scurried over to an electrical machine and examined the paper being printed. What

he said to the nurse was medical gibberish, but his manner told me that I was going to be fine. While the medical staff continued to stick me with needles and take samples of my blood, I noticed that I had a small sensor on my left index finger. A new nurse wheeled in a device with a computer monitor on it; she told me that she was going to take an echocardiogram of my heart. She smeared a gel-like substance on my chest and began to move a small device around that area. Finally, the medical team declared I was stable, and after what seemed like eternity, they moved me over to the I.C.U. section of the hospital.

On May 12th, I found out the truth: a doctor walked into my room and told me that my heart had stopped for 37 seconds. I know that may not seem like a long time, but for me, it was long enough to drastically change my life. He also told me that I had a high level of methamphetamines in my body, which contributed to my heart failure. He explained that when you ingest such a large amount of drugs into your system, the body will shut down. People seem to drastically underestimate the affects of drug abuse, and unfortunately, I had also made that mistake. On May 11th, that mistake almost cost me my life.

My life was altered forever because of this episode with drug abuse. Afterwards, I developed many psychological side-effects. I was stricken with agoraphobia, and I did not leave my parents' house for almost two years. I also developed a severe chemical imbalance from the drug abuse so that I suffer frequent panic attacks and severe depression, which often plagues me for months. Unfortunately, my heart has never been the same. I often experience tachycardia along with a severe loss of blood pressure. After spending almost four years meeting with psychiatrists, I was put on a variety of different prescription drugs. And to this very day, I continue to take some of these drugs so I may live a normal life. I now realize that someone has given me a second chance. Perhaps it was the medical staff or God—maybe both. Who knows? Only one thing is for certain: I will take full advantage of this opportunity and will live my life as if each day were my last.

Poetry

Cynthia Del Castillo

FRIENDSHIP

You speak about love with the virtuosity of an acrobat
These words stuck on paper
Blow away and remain intact
When I blow into these most beautiful friendship proofs

I exhaust a lot of ink for my part
To want to carve the most beautiful feeling
But I'm out of a key
To fill the silence

Friendship, it's priceless
No color can define it
There're no frontiers here
For better or for worse

A sweet and languorous music, whispering in my ear
It enjoys reeling my heart
It guides my thoughts, it guides my fingers
To write, that beyond friendship, there's nothing better

In joy or in pains
It's good to have a shoulder to lean
Someone who can get out shadows in our eyes
Or bring a sunbeam through the torn curtain

There are dreams of greatness in your eyes
In your hair, a scent of freedom
But there's also a place in your heart
Only you hold the key

A place of choice for the friendship
A friendship with roots firmly rooted underground

Mine are buried deeply now
But rivers of your sweet words relieve them of yesterday's troubles

The hands of a clock continue to turn
Seasons follow each other and aren't alike
The east wind can blow
Nothing will break my Cynthia's bonds

CSI: RUSSIA

Whenever I think about things that have happened in my life, it makes me feel happy. I was born in 1982 in the former Soviet Union Republic. My childhood was filled with the love of my parents, grandparents, and older brother. Every summer our family would vacation at the Black Sea, and after that, my brother and I would stay at our grandparents' house for the whole summer. We would spend every day from dawn to sunset playing with our friends, climbing the trees in the neighbor's gardens, and eating the sweetest cherries in the world. We were doing whatever we wanted, and that freedom made me happy. When the time came to go to school, I was eager to learn everything. All subjects came easily to me, and I enjoyed studying. After classes, I would come home and do my homework, which didn't take me more than one hour. After that I'd change my school uniform, eat lunch, and do whatever I wanted. My parents were proud of my school results, and I was happy about that. The eleven years of high school flew by very quickly, and by that time it was over, I had grown into an optimistic, friendly, cheerful, positive and smart young lady.

Due to my high grades in school, I could apply for any degree a university had to offer. After talking over my major with my family and some friends, I decided that having a degree in law would provide me with a lot of opportunities in the future. I applied and was accepted. The first year of my studies was very difficult. I learned hundreds of new terms, memorized lots of sections of different codes, and discovered a number of historical facts that influenced the development of laws. All this information was mixed up in my mind, but it started to make sense after the first finals. The following four years were easier, so I was sure that my future career would be the same.

On the last year's finals, representatives from different government organizations came over to our university. They were listening to students' answers and choosing possible candidates for hire. I knew my topic, the succession in civil law, perfectly because

I had spent the last three months researching all existing information about it.

One week after the finals, I got a letter from The Ministry of Justice with an invitation to work for one of its departments. I was the happiest person in the world that day! Before I got it, I had no idea where to work. I wanted to show that I'd learned a lot and that my knowledge could actually help someone. That job was a chance for me to see what I really was. In addition, it was prestigious to start a career working for the government. Such a beginning could provide lots of opportunities in the future. I filled out applications and, a few weeks later, started my first job. The title of my position was "crime scene investigator trainee." For six months, I had to learn everything that investigators do; then, I had to pass the exam on my responsibilities and skills, and after that, I would become an official crime scene investigator.

The first day of my career started well: I came into the office, and my supervisor introduced me to the team I had to work with, then left. My teammates, two men I was sharing the office with, and I got into a conversation about job responsibilities and tasks. Everything they told me, I already knew: if a crime was committed, we had to go to the crime scene, evaluate it, find all the existing evidence, collect it, prepare the detailed report about everything we found and learned, and testify in court. The main purpose of my job was finding who committed that specific crime and why. Right when the guys were telling me that I'd have to go for post-mortem examinations at least once a week, the phone rang and we were called to the first crime scene in my life. I was excited about it, but my excitement reduced when I heard we were going to an apartment where a suicide had been committed. Still, I was curious to see how all that looked in real life, but my curiosity turned into shock when I saw the body of a small boy hanging on a rope. He was just twelve years old, but he looked like he was seven or eight. His mother was sobbing in a corner and repeating that it was all her fault. I could not stay in the room, so I stepped out for some air with the sad boy's face stuck in my mind. I had to figure out what exactly made this boy decide to end a life that was just starting, but I couldn't force myself to go back. Ten minutes of pushing myself seemed endless; finally, I went back there and asked the

neighbors what they knew. I was putting off the mother's interrogation because I could not ask that crying and screaming miserable woman any question. After talking to one of my co-workers, I decided that we'd have to return the next day to talk to her. When we left the apartment, I took a long breath and stayed quiet for almost three hours. I didn't want to talk to anyone. The only thing I could think was that my job was turning out to be much harder than I had first believed.

After that incident, I could not eat or sleep for three days. My teammates supported me a lot. They tried to cheer me up, but when I happened to be alone, I could not stop thinking about that boy. We found out that he wasn't getting along with his stepfather, and his mother didn't do a thing to support him, hoping that the only thing her new husband and her son needed was time. Unfortunately, their relationship got worse and worse everyday, causing the boy to make his decision. He didn't have close friends, so nobody knew what was on his mind in order to stop him or tell his mother. That was a real life story with a sad ending. Due to the nature of my job, I saw such endings almost every day as I went to other crime scenes or read through cases from our files.

A few days later, our team was called out again, and that time we had to investigate a rape. It was another shock for me. I used to think about rape as something that a stranger or a maniac does in the darkness of night. However, the first rape I had to deal with was a marital rape. A drunk husband came home, saw his wife, and decided that it was time for his spouse to do her duty. Trying to avoid that, his wife started to blame him for being so drunk, which made him angry. Neighbors heard screams and sounds of broken glass, and called the police. The worst detail of that crime was that everything happened in front of the five-year-old daughter.

Day after day, I would wake up hoping not to have any calls, and, of course, we were called almost every day. I've seen victims of murders, robberies, rapes, and other crimes. At the same time, I had to go through numerous cases that were still open to look for new leads. Looking at the realities of adult life, I've learned one scary thing: most of the time crimes are committed by people who are very close to the victims—their close friends or family members.

I stopped going out with my friends, and the number of them

decreased drastically. Some grey hair showed up in my shiny, healthy, and beautiful hair. I started to screen my calls, which I'd never done before, and would answer only after the second call from the same person. I would spend almost eleven hours at work daily, and even when I was off, I was reading old files. Happy, optimistic, and trusting on the first day of work, I turned into a suspicious, gloomy, cynical, skeptical, and pessimistic person after three months.

A short conversation with one of my co-workers changed everything. She said that we can't change what other people do and did in their lives, but we are responsible for what is going on in ours. As I thought about what she said, I understood that the only way to make the world better is to start treating people the way I used to—before I had started this job. I called all my friends, and I was happy when they answered my call immediately. They helped me a lot on my way out from such a deep depression. A few weeks later, I decided that it was time for more changes, and I got some highlights in my hair, so nobody could see the grey. But the time for my skills and knowledge exam was approaching, which made me think over and over about my job. I realized that it was too much for me to see the bad side of life every day. I knew that life had more positive sides, and I needed them more than a career that could ruin my personality and, perhaps, my life. By that time, I got permission to enter the USA, where my father had been living for the last two years. Needing to escape the violence that I had seen every day for the past six months, I gave my two weeks notice, packed my stuff, and, in September of 2004, boarded a plane that would land at LAX. I stepped into a new life with a strong belief that everything is up to me.

GERIATRIC MAYHEM

Every family has secrets. Some have a family recipe a la Colonel Sanders; others have someone in rehab or something embarrassing about them in the tabloids or on the internet. Others may be connected to that special kind of family with secrets that are more deadly and ominous and which make for good television drama on HBO. However, not many people can say that their family secret has become an urban legend.

I was shocked to learn that Uncle Bill and Aunt Shirley had fallen into the legend category for their exploits in America's superstore. Everyone knows that Wal-Mart keeps records of shoplifters and check kitters and has a no reentry policy for such deadbeats, but who knew they had a special, double secret probation policy for seasoned citizens, complete with 8x10 color photo glossies—marked up with circles and arrows, and a paragraph on the back about the scene of the crime, the time of the crime, and so on and so forth. In fact, according to Uncle Bill, they even have non-wanted posters to go along with their surveillance videos. But still the question remains how could a sweet, lovable, retired couple from the heartland end up on Wall-Mart's persona non gratis list?

Well, it all started because Uncle Bill hated to shop. He did not like going to the store. He hated malls about as much as a man hates mowing the lawn during the big game or putting up Christmas lights the day after Thanksgiving. He would rather have shingles than go to the supermarket. Bill preferred the comfort of his easy chair and his remote to a trip to the mall. However, since he still had his driver's license and his dear wife didn't, he had become her chauffeur and spent his days driving Miss Daisy to the mall, drug store, beauty parlor, and post office. This meant he had to put up with endless hours of shopping and didn't get to hear Paul Harvey, Rush, Hannity or Michael Savage as much as he used to. If that wasn't bad enough, with the arrival of the new Wal-Mart Supercenter, they now did all their shopping in one place. His wife would get her hair permed, nails done, buy prescription

drugs, groceries and just about anything else you could think of in one place, and he had to stay put like a hound dog on a leash.

No longer could Uncle Bill roam the town while Auntie was shopping. He couldn't go to Jack's Barber Shop to talk to the guys or sneak a peak at the new Bass Boats at Boat World or even get a cup of coffee at Mae's Diner, where he could flirt with those cute waitresses that were young enough to be his granddaughters. No, siree! He was stuck at Wal-Mart, fidgeting like a six-year-old in church when the pastor's sermon begins to run into the lunch hour. He found himself feeling caged, and he needed ways to keep busy. Oh, he tried sleeping in the car, but it was too hot or too cold and the front seat of his Buick LaSabre just didn't compare with his Lazy Boy. He tried the in-store McDonald's, but there were just too many curtain-climbing rugrats making too much noise, which was only amplified by the easy-clean vinyl, plastic, Formica and tile surfaces. He found he needed ear plugs, aspirin and heartburn medicine just to get through the paper and a cup of lukewarm corporate coffee.

He tried other ways of amusing himself like talking to the security guards or those people in the blue uniforms collecting money for charity. He even made the girl scouts read the labels on their cookies to him, so he could tell them which were the least healthy. In short, poor Uncle Bill did everything a man of his age could do to pass the time, but it just wasn't enough. He had endured more than any man since Ulysses, and when he snapped, it was the stuff legends are made of.

His breakdown was not so much an explosion or a meltdown but a calculated foray into creative mischief. He never planned for things to get so out of hand or for the consequences to be so dire. He just had decided he was going to make things a little bit more interesting—for everybody. While Shirley happily rolled up and down the aisles endlessly with her shopping list, Bill was creating a little geriatric mayhem. His quest for entertainment began simply enough with some playful pranks but soon had risen to the status of conduct expected from Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde or worse yet—the fellows from *Jackass*. In six short months, Uncle Bill had become the Walter Mitty of senior citizen crime capers, and his escapades exploded in Rambo-like fashion onto the Internet.

His sweet unassuming wife learned about what her husband had been up to when she opened a certified letter from the good folks at Wal-Mart. It read as follows:

Dear Mrs. F.,

Over the past six months, your husband has been causing quite a commotion in our store. We cannot tolerate this behavior and may ban both of you from the premises. We have documented all incidents on our video surveillance equipment. All complaints against Mr. Fenton are listed below (and they most certainly were in chronological order, I might add).

[The] things Mr. Bill Fenton has done while his spouse was shopping in Wal-Mart:

1. June 15: Took 24 boxes of condoms and randomly put them in people's carts when they weren't looking.
2. July 2: Set all the alarm clocks in House wares to go off at 5-minute intervals.
3. July 7: Made a trail of tomato juice on the floor leading to the ladies restrooms.
4. July 19: Walked up to an employee and told her in an official tone, "Code 3" in house wares—then watched what happened.
5. August 4: Went to the Service Desk and asked to put a bag of M&M's on layaway.
6. September 14: Moved a "CAUTION - WET FLOOR" sign to a carpeted area.
7. September 15: Set up a tent in the camping department and told other shoppers he'd invite them in if they'd bring pillows from the bedding department.

8. September 23: When a clerk asked if she could help him, he began to cry and asked, “Why can’t you people just leave me alone?”
 9. October 4: Looked right into the security camera, used it as a mirror, and picked his nose.
 10. November 10: While handling guns in the hunting department, asked the clerk if he knew where the antidepressants were.
 11. December 3: Darted around the store suspiciously, loudly humming the *Mission Impossible* theme.
 12. December 6: In the auto department, practiced his “Madonna look,” using different size funnels.
 13. December 18: Hid in a clothing rack and, when people browsed through, yelled, “PICK ME! PICK ME!”
 14. December 21: When an announcement came over the loud speaker, he assumed the fetal position and screamed, “NO! NO! It’s those voices again!!!!”
- And last, but not least.
15. December 23: Went into a fitting room, shut the door, waited awhile, then yelled very loudly, “There is no toilet paper in here!”

The letter went on to again state “as a result of these actions we are seriously considering banning you and your spouse from our stores, and we will not tolerate such conduct on the part of the customers...Blah,blah,blah.” The point was clear: Shirley would no longer be welcome at Wal-Mart—unless, of course, she had Uncle Bill wacked or she divorced him. It was a tough choice: Wal-Mart or

her partner of over 50 years? She was livid because it was bad enough to have to suffer the indignity of getting such a letter but, on top of that, Shirley also had to suffer the humiliation and public shame of seeing it circulate on the Internet. In fact, that's where I first got wind of the story as my sister sent me a copy of the email. Uncle Bill and Aunt Shirley were not only in *The Star*, *The Globe* and *The National Enquirer*, but now they were legends in the Blogosphere as well. Uncle Bill, of course, enjoyed the notoriety and the fact that at family get togethers the whispers around the table were about what he would do next. Uncle Bill stopped telling stories about what he did in the Navy and began embellishing on his misadventures at Wal-Mart. Soon, he was relating the really good pranks he had pulled at Costco and Sears and the plans that he had for Target and K-Mart. Uncle Bill was a happy camper because not only did he not have to shop at Wal-Mart but his grandkids would sit on his lap and say things like:

“Wow, that’s so rad,”

“Did you really do that?”

And his all time favorite: “Can you teach me to get kicked out of the store, too?”

Poetry

Jackie Connor

COLD

Her hand dwindles to a cigarette.
Confidence falling like ash to her toes.
Breathless.
Smoke trailing from her nostrils.
Cold
Empty
What kind of body has she to offer?
Is it a convincing facade?

Or will a sun lamp to her face melt away the plastic,
Incinerate the hair whose roots so desperately call out?
Is she to beg for acceptance as she sniffs away blow?

To become sane,
She seeks the answer to why.
Seduction
Is her last resort
Because
She craves beauty,
Because
She craves acceptance,
Because she craves value
In this cold world
 of green machines.

FEAR TAKES FLIGHT

My mind raced at twice the speed of light as I uneasily sat near the rear of the two-story commercial airplane and looked out my window at the terminals, which could possibly be the last American structures that I would ever see. Perhaps I might never set foot on the hot asphalt of California ever again. Not that I didn't want to go to Europe—it was just that I did not want to take the risk of entrusting my life to a stranger flying an airplane thousands of feet above ground. What if death called my name? What if the engine disintegrated? If, by chance, the wind developed into a tornado, I would be the first to know, for I was staring out my small rectangular window at the rest of the world. Still, I could not believe that I was actually going to Paris: "*La ville de l'amour,*" *the city of love*. All my friends dearly wished that they could occupy my seat on the plane so that they could go visit the fairy-tale lands of France and Spain. Come to think of it, giving up my seat wasn't a half bad idea, considering how I felt about flying.

This was my first plane ride, and being naïve is not one of my favorite traits to show off. As the wheels beneath me started to roll forward, a tale that my father once told me resonated in my mind. He spoke of passengers that were injured from plummeting twenty feet during an episode of turbulence: it was an image that would not fade as I, along with hundreds of other travelers, was being escorted toward the runway, away from the soil I had grown to love.

As I felt the plane tremble over the ground, Amy, the girl sitting next to me, turned as she heard a yelp erupt from my voice box and asked what was wrong. Both she and the girl adjacent to her were from my school, but they were strangers to me. I had intended to sit next to my two friends, Hailey and Tony, but alphabetical order had interfered with that idea. I explained to Amy that this was my first experience in an airplane.

While the engine roared louder, I breathed heavily: the seat belt felt too tight, and my sweaty palms clenched the arm rest with a death grip. Looking around the plane, I concentrated on inhaling and

exhaling as my legs became gelatin, shaking in their place. My mind exploded like kernels of popcorn on a stove. "I'm going to die! I'm going to die!" I thought as the plane picked up speed. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine happy landings in an enchanted country, but wretched thoughts leaked out. What if there was a bomb aboard the plane or the gas tanks leaked and we ran out of fuel? Or the pilot got lost? As the plane accelerated, my fear grew. Suddenly the front wheel rose, and my heart nearly exploded.

I was on a rollercoaster, hurtling down the tracks; my stomach gave a big lurch. With one eye cemented shut, I opened the other eye and slowly adjusted the tiny TV screen on the back of the seat in front of me. My head throbbed from the altitude. I looked down at my bag and glimpsed a bottle of Motrin trapped behind the zipper—it was oblivious to what was happening 20,000 feet above the Earth's surface.

"Just conquer one little task," my mind said. "Just lift one hand up, reach down, and get that bottle of long-lasting pain relief." Struggling, I unraveled two fingers from under the sweaty armrest. But I couldn't force my hands to release their grip; my headache would just have to wait.

My eyes closed again, and I was in a recurring childhood dream. I was falling through a black hole, turning, flipping, and spinning as the emptiness of my stomach shot through my skin. My eyes opened, and I gawked at the vast blue ocean below. The airplane was at a forty-five degree angle, creating an image of white ripples on ocean water, like frosting strokes on a blue-green cake. The view hit me like a smack in the face. The enormous height, the long, persistent noise of fifty-seven lawnmowers, and the frequent incline and tilt of the aircraft brought on new troubles. I experienced light-headedness and felt a bit woozy. The only thing I could do was chew my hard gum to reduce the feeling of pressure in my ears.

There was no possible way of escaping this large contraption. With any luck, I would be able to continue the flight without having to use the oxygen mask. I slowly drifted off to sleep and entered into a fantasy world of Parisian adventures: the exploits of young women in novels I had read spread over my mind like a spilled cup of water. I had always envied how they had explored overseas cities, encountered a boy with an accent, and even been escorted around his native city

on the back of his Vespa. Perhaps I would meet a French boy and be able to engage him in French. We would rendezvous at a little Parisian café, sit outside at a round table, and sip hot cocoa. A black-and-white calendar photo would be designed for our engagement. We would climb the Eiffel Tower, visit the Louvre, and snap photos of....

“Voici, mademoiselle, vos dîner,” said the flight attendant in a language that I was quite familiar with. As gracefully as she could, she handed me my dinner of veal while I politely replied, “Merci.” I unclenched my hands from the seat to gather my tray. As I tried to fill my ravenous stomach, the slimy, uncooked meat slid through the crevasses of my teeth.

Hour by hour went by of a slightly bumpy ride that was caused by turbulence. The stories that my father had told me were wrong, which was a letdown that I was very glad to accept. I passed the time by listening to music, reading, and playing games on the television screen in front of me. The aircraft soon flew over the patchwork quilt of fields that blanketed the United Kingdom and started descending into France. It was then that my mind was flooded with a new fear: the crash-landing. We would land nose first, and the cockpit would be smashed with the force of the impact. With my seatbelt on and arms locked on the armrests, I looked out the window and could see a tiny Eiffel Tower welcoming me to Earth. We were on a downward grade, and all the same physical sensations as when we had first ascended arose. Flying low over the city, I shut my eyes, praying to smell French air and set foot in my new home.

There was a sudden rush forward as the front wheel hit the ground. I plunged forward in my seat, squinting as I tried to block out my fears. The plane lost its momentum as the back wheels landed, bringing me back into my seat. I cautiously opened my eyes. Then a big grin spread across my face and tears watered my eyes. I had made it through my first flight; however, flying home would be another story. As I stepped on the stairs that lead from the plane to the ground, I thought optimistically that my fear of flying may just have taken flight.

Poetry
Ingrid Starrs

SECRET FACES

So tell me again
how is it to be joyful...

fingertips brush
finishing touches
to the painted mask,
flawlessly placed with each new day

And yet,
my hidden sad girl still bounces me from sleep,
standing frozen
behind arctic walls,
surrounded by strangers—
flushed by their blistering gaze

why can't I just bury my head in
the liquid blue worlds of dreams
far beyond this one
emotions swim into thought,
thoughts fly into action:
 moving up
 pressing out
 tumbling one over another
like a roller-coaster gone wild

insanity screams like a locomotive
roaring down its track
whistling between the confines of two ears
naked
exposed
the mask slips by surprise

oh, no
Mother will entertain them
with her trained dog
she's very ver-si-tile

my DARLING daughter (come)
I LOVE you (sit)
You are ALL I desire (stay)

But look at what is hidden from view:
ALL you do is MAKE A MESS
YOU ARE good for NOTHING ...SMACK

My therapist asks,
“How do you feel?”

...like a dog

...like a little girl

...like the shine has been eaten from my eyes

MY OLDER SISTER

Older sisters are supposed to be role models for their younger siblings. They set good examples by being home on time, respecting their parents, cleaning up after themselves, attending school and being prepared to talk about how they have dealt with life. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Drugs influence too many teenagers these days and change them. My older sister, Tiffany, got into drugs to the point where drugs not only controlled her mind, but they controlled her body and soul as well—she didn't think anymore and she didn't feel. Still, I looked up to her.

Tiffany was a happy child growing up. She loved to get me all dressed up and play house; I was always the baby and she was my mother. Back then, our Grandma Arlene was a painter, and she made us a playhouse out of cardboard boxes, making sure the house looked like a real house with windows and a cut out door so we could open and close them. To make it look even more realistic, grandma painted a white picket fence with flowers around the bottom of the house. We would sit inside of the house, and Tiffany would make me cookies and milk, feeding me like I was her kid. But that all disappeared in the blink of an eye the year Tiffany started high school.

Tiffany began to fade from reality when she turned fifteen; this was when she started using drugs. It was as if the second she walked through the Capistrano Valley High School doors, she transformed. Not only did it change her life, but it changed our family as well. Our parents fought all the time about her, and one day they could not bear the conflict anymore. As a result, my mom moved up to her sister's house in Victorville, California. After that, Tiffany stopped telling our dad where she would be, stayed out all night, and showed up when she felt like it. During her "stoner stage," she started to dress differently, paying little attention to how she looked. But, worst of all, she treated me as if I were not her sister and, worse still, as if I did not exist.

I can still remember the first time I saw her doing drugs; I walked in on her and one of her friends making "coke masques." They

had gotten a bowl and put cocaine in it, then mixed it with water to make a pasty substance that they could apply to their faces. I immediately asked, “What’s on your face?” With that question, she looked at me with wide eyes—she could barely talk because her face was so numb. But she said, “We’re just giving each other facials,” as if it was no big deal. I wanted her to give me one, and she said, “No! This is for big girls only; you’re still a kid.” Then she slammed the door in my face.

I ran to my room, crying. It was a terrifying and unforgettable sight, and I was only fourteen. However, she did not realize she had upset me, nor did she care because she was high; and being high was all that mattered to her.

That incident was only the beginning. Tiffany was on a downward spiral—her life consisted of using harder drugs more and more often. She started popping prescriptions like Vicoden, Valium, Xanax, and Soma, occasionally using ecstasy to get a different high that she couldn’t get from weed and cocaine. She became isolated, keeping herself locked in her room so we could not see her doped up. She snuck out to go to raves—often, we did not know she had been gone until the next morning. All this inevitably led to the most horrific event that I have ever witnessed.

One Friday afternoon after school, I ducked into my sister’s room to grab my hat and found her convulsing on the edge of her bed. She was blue and barely breathing, shaking as if the mattress was vibrating. I panicked and started to babble, “What did you do? How could you? What did you do, Tiffany!” as if she could comprehend what I was saying.

I started to cry. “Tiffany, it’s me. What did you take? What do you want me to do?” While still shaking violently, she looked at me and pointed aimlessly. Then she began coughing and dozed off.

Frantic, I ran to the phone and called my dad, crying hysterically. He told me to get Tiffany in the car and drive her to the hospital as quickly as I could. He said he would leave work and meet us there. While I drove her to the hospital, she went in and out of consciousness, yelling at me intermittently. “I don’t need to go to the hospital. I’m fine! Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

At the hospital, she told the nurse what she had taken: forty-

eight Soma pills, six Xanax bars and thirty-two Vicoden tablets. As if she needed to tell anyone, it was obvious she was trying to kill herself. I was thankful that I had kept her awake even if she was furious with me. A little drug usage is supposed to be common for teenagers, but attempting suicide is not.

Shock filled me as I realized that I had witnessed my sister attempting to commit suicide. She was angry with me for helping her live, and following the trip to the emergency room, she was told she had to spend a week in a mental institution. If I thought that would be the turning point to something positive, I was wrong. From the failed suicide, the rift between us only widened.

Although I had gotten her to the hospital in time to save her life, she did not give up drugs, nor did she treat me like her sister again. It was as if she could not let go of the fact that our family had fractured and so she kept taking drugs to forget about reality. The agonizing part about Tiffany numbing herself out with drugs was that she was the closest thing I had to a mom. But, things only continued to deteriorate over the following year when methamphetamine hit the scene and became her new obsession.

Methamphetamine is a very addictive, long-lasting drug that takes over parts of your brain. *Speed, meth, chalk, ice*—they are all nicknames, but it doesn't matter what people call it. In that short time, it took control of my sister's life, and Tiffany associated with gang members and drug addicts to get her next fix; she lived on the street and even went house to house looking for a place to get high or crash. Her boyfriend was an addict, too; they stole, lied, and used me and the rest of my family many times. There was only so much we could take before we just had to give up and let her make her own choices in life. In a shorter time than I thought possible, she was in jail for Grand Theft Auto.

Even though Tiffany was not the only person involved in the heist, she was the only one ratted out and locked up. That should have been the end of her rope, and the end of ours, but family cannot walk away from family. It did not matter how much we wanted her to change her life around; she had to be willing to do it on her own.

Living life day by day is all anyone and everyone can do. Family sticks together through the tough and the easy times,

through happiness and sorrow, but most of all, through the trials and tribulations of growing up. What I learned from my family is that wounds take time to heal, trust has to be regained, and happiness is a personal choice that must be made.

BIKE ACCIDENT

Life is full of surprises. Some are as simple as getting a brand new bike, others as life threatening as a drive-by shooting. What ever the case may be, you never know what curveballs life may throw. In fourth grade, I was drilled by one of those curveballs, and it nearly cost my life.

From what I can recall of that day, it was late in the afternoon and I was riding my bike home from school with my mom and my brother. About half way home, my brother realized that he had the runs and needed to find the nearest restroom. We all stopped as my mom took him to a local store while I waited outside. A while passed and I started to get impatient, so I decided to make my way home on my own.

Even though it is engraved into most children's heads that crossing the street on their own can be dangerous, no one ever thinks anything will actually happen. I certainly didn't on that day. I had ridden my bike almost all the way home when I reached the cross streets of Junipero Sera and Camino Capistrano, which had a speed limit of forty-five miles per hour and, at that time of day, had a moderate flow of traffic. As I looked behind me to cross the street, I accidentally swerved into the road. The last thing that I remembered was the hood of a car coming at me. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the street thirty yards away from my bike. I could barely see because of all the blood dripping down my face. From what I understand, a man, who drove up right after the accident occurred, got out of his car, moved me to the side of the road, and then continued on. After he left, a woman pulled up to the scene of the accident and asked for my name. To this day, I am still not sure what I replied. She went on to ask me if there was any way of contacting my parents. Luckily, I had just memorized my father's work number. It took all the strength in me to give this information to the woman, but they were able to contact my dad by cell phone and tell him the situation.

Because I had gone into shock, I don't really remember

anything that happened after that point in time, and I heard most of it from my mother and father much later. By that time, someone had called 911 and the ambulance was already on its way. When it arrived, the paramedics and police officers got me onto a stretcher and then into the ambulance. As this was going on, all I did was complain about my foot, which was probably the least of my worries. Within moments, I was whisked away to Mission Viejo Hospital's intensive care facility.

As one can imagine, getting hit by a car and flying thirty yards left me with more than just some scratches and bruises. The injuries I acquired were quite extensive. The car had been going forty-five miles per hour when it hit me, and I flew into the windshield, which shredded my face into a bloody mess. The doctors sewed me up with 250 stitches and had to perform plastic surgery on my ear because it had been torn to pieces. My left arm was broken in two places, my right arm was fractured in two places, and I broke my foot as well. I believe my arms fractured when I landed after I flew over the car; but it is all very hard to retell as I heard most of it afterward, and who knows how clearly even my parents remembered it.

Oddly enough, as I was rushed to the hospital, my mom and brother had continued their bike ride home without knowing anything was wrong. However, when my mother got home and I was not there, she began to worry. She called my father's work and found out about my accident, so she rushed to the hospital to meet up with my dad, who had received an urgent page and rushed to the scene of the accident—only to find the ambulance was leaving. They waited for three hours while I was in the emergency room. When the doctors were finally finished stitching me up and setting my bones, I woke up and was able to speak to my parents for about five minutes. I wasn't awake for a longer period of time because the doctor wanted me to rest so that I would stay in stable condition. My parents were relieved that I was all right and thankful I was still alive—as was I. I stayed in intensive care for the rest of the night and was moved to the regular wing of the hospital the next morning. My parents spent the night at my bedside to be sure that I was okay.

As if I had not gotten enough injuries, the next day a nurse discovered that my wrist was fractured as well. The doctor put a rubber band around my arm to slow the blood flow and wrapped my wrist in

a cast. The nurse had shot me with a numbing agent to take the pain away; however, it didn't appear to have any affect. I screamed so loudly when he started wrapping that I think the Saddleback College campus was near enough to hear me. By this time, I had experienced all the pain I could handle for a long while.

It took about four weeks for my bones to heal back to normal. During that time I was bored out of my mind. I could not do anything constructive because of all the casts I had on, and some things were just too traumatic to even attempt. I could barely turn the knobs on the doors at my house. All I did was watch TV and read books for four weeks straight. I was supposed to have a tutor to keep me posted on what was going on in school, but she did not show up until the week before the casts were taken off. Therefore, I was a bit behind the rest of my classmates when I returned to school.

When politicians made it a law to wear a helmet when bike riding, they definitely knew what they were talking about. The helmet I was wearing was one of the only things that saved my life that day. After flying thirty yards through the air, I could have easily cracked my skull or suffered some kind of brain injury. Luckily, my dad had reinforced the notion that I ought to wear a helmet any time I was on wheels. My experience in this car accident taught me a few lessons. But the one that was drilled into my skull, in more ways than one, is that you should always wear a helmet.

Poem

Linda Coffeen

DEATH BY BOOZE

My husband's
sultry temptress lurked daily.
With patience, she waited
for the shattering of
his willpower.

The hussy beckoned,
with her chocolate skin,
long slender neck,
acid taste and
alluring scent.

Her mouth cracked open to
spill a promise of
"release from pain."
He sipped until intoxicated,
then sucked her dry.

The bitch partook of
his body's buffet.
Battered kidneys, fried liver,
guzzled down with one
petrified soul.

A slave to the demon,
he came in to vomit.
Choked by guilt,
he pleaded for mercy, then
proposed a toast to more booze.

MY ROOM

She didn't understand. She couldn't understand. She never felt a thing. She sat there, throwing her fists at the wall, but it never did hurt. *Why can't I feel?* She knew something was wrong with her. After a few more attempts at self-abuse, she gave up.

Her walls were bare. *Perhaps I could put some nails in them.* Fighting the wall only made her more frustrated.

She walked about her empty room. It was more of a jail cell than a room, though.

No, a jail cell has more than a bed. Her bed was her sanctuary, the only place she could go to escape the world, escape her tormented mind. She slithered into the sheets and rested her head on her pillow. She lay there, contemplating her walls, her fists, and couldn't figure it out.

Eventually, she started to drift in and out of sleep. She saw a dark figure at the foot of her bed and shot out of bed. But it was just Ryan. She hated him. No, it wasn't just hate, she despised him. He was smart, sensitive, witty. He was *perfect*. But he was just her friend. Oh, how she wished they were more than just friends. She adored him, yet every bone in her body wanted to reach out and strangle him while at the same aching for his touch.

He reached out and poked her shoulder. "You alive, Sparky?" he asked.

She had forgotten that he was there for a second. She felt like an idiot, practically drooling all over him.

She laughed it off. "Of course. What are you doing here?"

She hated when he visited; he always left a void when he left.

"I'm here for you. Here, follow me." *What was that supposed to mean?*

They vanished from her room and appeared near a stream.

How'd we get here?

"Ryan, I need to tell you something."

He flashed her a smile.

“I need to tell you something, too,” he replied.

Her heart started to race. She wished it would stop.

God damn it. Why wouldn't it stop? He always had that effect on her.

He spoke again. “I wish we could be together forever.”

It was as if he had read her mind. “I'd like that too, Ryan.

You're the only thing that stays on my mind all day and night.”

He let out a sigh of relief.

“I mean, I know we've known each other for a long time now—since we were children. And I think...well, I think I love you, Ryan.”

He stared straight into her eyes for a moment as if reading her soul. She felt he could see everything about her. It didn't matter to her, though; he was always with her, whatever she did. She noticed the sky beginning to turn gray, and she offered to go back to the room.

He resisted.

“You can't love me. It's impossible.”

She didn't comprehend his words at first. She had heard them perfectly, but they didn't make sense.

After a few minutes, she began to breathe again.

Impossible? What does he mean, impossible?

“Ryan, I don't understand. I thought you felt the same way.”

He gave her an empty stare. No, an empty stare would have been kinder; he gave her a cold stare.

She felt every hair on her body perk up. “It doesn't matter how I feel. It doesn't change the fact that you can't love me. You can't love somebody who doesn't exist.”

Again, she couldn't comprehend. She was confused. Then she noticed that she was back in her room, lying on her bed. He was beside her now. She felt her heart stumble. But she knew it wasn't real. She hated him because he was always right.

You can't love somebody who doesn't exist.

And he didn't.

Why is reality so brutal?

She wanted to strangle him. She craved it. His death would bring her comfort. She needed to be comforted. She reached out her hands and placed them around his neck. Her hands were hardly big

enough to wrap around his neck, but she tried. Then she felt herself gasping for air; she couldn't breathe. She let go of him and choked on the air. Slowly, her breathing began to regulate.

What the hell just happened?

She ran to her bed and pulled out a small round mirror from under the mattress. She was mesmerized at what she saw in the mirror. Red marks stained her neck. She broke the mirror on her bedpost and took the largest shard of glass to her neck.

She hesitated. She looked at her room once again. She stared at her padded walls. She hated them. They weren't *hers*. She glared at her ugly uniform. She hated everything about where she was. But, at the same time, it gave her comfort.

She started to admire her room at the asylum. It began to look beautiful, peaceful.

Perhaps I could put some nails in the wall...

Poetry

Theodore Bates

A BECKONING SONG TO MY BELOVED ONE

There is a winding sometimes rocky way
That begins at the streams of sorrow;
But it leads to a bright and beautiful day!
Though first it passes through a tunnel.
It's true that the tunnel often looks dark
And threatening — yet with impotent shadows,
But there will always be a Light — a spark
That promises to lead to frolicking meadows!

A man by himself cannot direct his way
That will deliver him from his darkness;
Yet the Light urges: "Please come this way,
Only then can I lead you to gladness!

Oh hurting child — trust — for I am your Light:
Light that only rends and tears the darkness;
For at My presence darkness must take flight,
It fears My loving kindness and goodness!

My beloved one, I understand your fear.
The tunnel is frightening to walk in.
But I promise I will dry every tear;
I will be with you always — so come in!
I will not mislead you — will not fade out.
I vow to deliver and restore you.
The Cross proves that I am faithful and stout —
I will expel all darkness that haunts you.

Take courage uncertain and fearful one;
I too drank deep from the streams of sorrow;
But just as sure as night leaves the sun,
The springs of Joy will certainly follow!"

THE OLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

From the moment Bella slipped through her mother's splendid legs at the King Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, everyone realized she was the most special baby born in years. Already, one could see her long eyelashes, jet-black hair and high cheekbones. This unique appearance came as no surprise considering Bella's parents. Her father had long made his living as a model and TV actor, due to his charm and handsome looks. The mother, in addition to her stunning beauty, carried herself as a wealthy blueblood who attended the best schools and only knew the good life.

Yes, it is true what some people say: there is no such thing as an ugly baby. All the babies look darling when you peer into the window of the nursery room. Yet Bella already appeared confident in her swaddling, knowing that she was the belle of the ball. While many of the other babies cried or dozed, she looked serene and above it all: like Athena on high, looking down on the shortfall of humanity.

Although most babies are adorable, their appearance normally changes by the time they become a toddler. They are more average looking. Not Bella. In fact, it did not take long for people to recognize her shine. By three years of age, her long, thick black hair and startling green eyes stopped individuals on the street. Store clerks would say: "What beautiful hair!" "Look at those eyes!" Then they would add: "But, you have heard this before, haven't you?" And indeed Bella did. How could she not? When you are told something over and over again, you internalize it. It becomes who you are. This would have been all right if there was a balance in Bella's life. But, she did not know if she had any other positive traits beyond her beauty. How could she? Bella's self-esteem was completely built on her loveliness.

Bella quickly learned that people treated her differently because of her looks. Boys were afraid of talking to her, foolishly stumbling over their words. Girls would fawn over her, so they could be seen in her light. She became impatient with their stuttering and groveling and spent most of her time alone. Why would she want to be

seen with such people, anyway?

Her lack of social relations increased Bella's lack of other traits. Beyond playing a game of tennis and some piano now and then, she spent most of her time with her parents. Since they were solely into the material life, they normally helped her buy the latest fashions, finest jewelry and hottest hairstyles. They also sent her on luxurious trips and bought her health spa packages.

As the young woman grew older, dating also became difficult. The boys who were willing to talk to her usually did so because they wanted to brag about their pursuits. Or they, too, were very handsome and boring due to the same background. Finally, Bella met just a plain looking someone who somehow saw that she offered something else besides her beauty — what that was, no one knows to this day. The two were married. Although Bella never loved him — she was incapable of feeling such emotion for anyone else beside herself — it was as close as she could come.

With time, age began to take its toll. At first she worked out, followed the latest diets, and bought the most flattering clothes. That regimen did fine until her 30s. However, as her late 30s and early 40s approached, Bella spent more and more time agonizing in front of the mirror. Was that a new wrinkle? Was the skin on her throat becoming less taut? Where was the perkiness in her breasts? Heavens no, a gray hair!

Her husband, good man and fool that he was, said she was more beautiful than ever. He liked the extra roundness of her body. He loved to kiss the dimples (or was that cellulite?) on her thigh. The gray hairs were very becoming, he told her. She wanted to know becoming what exactly? Alas, before long, her spouse could no longer take her agonizing. He complained that he spent more time in the waiting room of the “nip and tuck” surgeon than in his own office. He hated the way her eyes were almost pulled back into her skull because of the multiple face-lifts she had gotten and he hadn't kissed her in years because of the collagen in her lips.

One day, when Bella asked for another ride to the doctor to enhance her enhanced, and once again, enhanced breasts, her loving spouse reached his point of no return. And that is exactly what happened: he left and never returned. Bella was left alone

with her workout center, anti-wrinkle creams, swimming pool and expressionless, botulism filled face.

It was all too much for Bella to bear. She moved to Miami Beach, where she can still be the belle of the ball among all the elderly and frail and failing ladies. Every day, she smears globs of makeup on her face, darkens her still long eyelashes, paints her lips with a deep red lipstick and sits on a bench in front of her condominium. As the men— young, old and older— walk by, she bats her eyelashes and puckers her lips. She pulls her shirt down to reveal bosoms that are permanently situated just below her neck and pulls up her skirt to expose her varicose veins and fat pocketed legs. In fact, she has made quite a name for herself. Everyone knows Beautiful Bella as the ancient lady who struggles to gain everyone’s attention: everyone— except for Bella.

LIVING IN MY DREAMS

At the time of my awakening
There will be nothing left to see
The world I live in will fade away
And I will simply just be me.
Humming birds will not rest on my finger
My prince will not ride a white horse
The yellow brick road leads in three different directions:
Happiness, emptiness and remorse.
War is ongoing with no sign of rest;
Peace seems unquestionable,
impossible at best.

Drugs will forever be around
The grass will not always be green
A time will come when my heart no longer beats
And vanity will have no means.
Many questions remain unanswered
Too many for one lifetime alone
What is beauty? And the common good?
And will my purpose ever be known?
Sanity comes but once a day
When the crickets begin to strut
As I lay my head on my palace door
I can see clearly eyes wide shut
To strive for resurrection is stronger
At least as though it seems
Happiness is greatest asleep
When I am living in my dreams.

