

Wall

Volume V

Spring 2005



Wall

A Literary Journal

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Wall

Volume V - Spring 2005

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*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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From The Editor

Thanks for picking up (or, at least, checking out) a copy of this year's *Wall*. As in the past, you can expect to find some of the best poetry, essays, short stories, photographs and other visual works of art by some of the most creative students here at Saddleback.

This year marks the *Wall's* fifth birthday. It has a tradition of quality, established in its first year through the herculean efforts of its staff and then Faculty Advisor Amy Ahearn. They, without the examples of past years to follow, created a book that stands up nicely next to all those that have come since. Year two reaped the rewards of the first book through expanded awareness, and built on its strong foundation, including more work, both written and visual. In year three the number of pieces in the *Wall* increased again, and many changes were made in format and design. The book gained a new shape, changing from a tall, thin rectangle to a short and stout one. Inside, a second column was introduced in the stories and essays, and the artwork was printed for the first time on glossy paper, and in full color. Year four brought with it a new Faculty Advisor, Amy Casil, and another change in the book's shape: tall and thin as in the first two years, but bigger.

This was my third year at the *Wall*, and it was my honor to serve as Editor-in-Chief for for this edition. I've had nothing but good experiences working on its books. Somehow, the book seems blessed to have hard-working, friendly staffs, and this year's group was no different. It was always a joy to show up to work. I cannot thank them enough. (Be sure to look up their written and visual contributions to the book!)

(Special thanks to Allie, for kludging this together, Steve, for making sure that I always remembered we had art, Kim, for reading through seemingly everything, and typing almost as much, and Amy, for going above and beyond the call)

I hope you feel we've upheld the tradition of quality with this year's *Wall*, and find hours of enjoyment within its pages.

Michael Maller
Editor-in-Chief

Sometimes When I Laugh

By Frances Costikyan

....I hear my mother chuckle,
see her head tilt with mirth
watch her shoulders shake
in delight and realize
she is alive in me.

If my grandfather
were to see me smile,
would be reminded of
the expression on my grandmother's face
that once captivated him?

We are each the breathing sun
of all the generations
that have gone before.
To know reincarnation
look no further than our
faces to see the ancients
from whom we sprung.

I rejoice to think I contain
the history of my family
within my skull and skin.
My heart swells with the courage
of those who crossed oceans,
abandoned beliefs,
confronted the unknown

and made me possible.

La Bufadora

By Lauren Mayfield

Beth and her boyfriend Tim had arrived in Ensenada on a cruise ship that morning. Beth watched as Tim stretched his lean body in his deck chair, then pulled her eyes away as he ran his fingers through his dark-brown hair. Her gaze wandered over the shore to the city's tourist marketplace, La Bufadora. The giant Mexican flag rolled languidly in the steady breeze and the waves slapped on the rocks.

"So the last time I was at the border, they wanted to sell me this guitar and I knew I could get it for five bucks," Tim said. "He was charging like twenty. Where do they get off?"

"Yes, trying to make a living," Beth said. "How irresponsible."

"So, when we get into it with the vendors, don't let them intimidate you." He smiled coyly, giving a glimpse of perfect teeth; his green eyes shone playfully.

Beth rolled her eyes, "Well, I'm glad you're here to protect me."

"I'm just saying, working in your quaint shop all day long, sometimes you lose perspective."

"Oh right. I'm sure sitting in an office all day really prepares you for haggling," Beth said.

"As a matter of fact . . ." Tim paused. "Listen, let's make a wager. I bet you that you won't be able to make it through the day without bringing something back from that marketplace."

"And if I do give in?"

Tim considered a moment. "Well, you could slip into something a little bit . . ."

"Tim, please."

“Okay, okay, a massage then.”

Beth let out a mental sigh of relief. She felt like she was back in seventh grade getting ready to watch the “What Happens in Puberty” movie. Tim may have felt comfortable moving their relationship into physical intimacy, but she wanted to take it slow.

“Well, all wagers and everything else aside,” Tim reached into his pocket and drew out a rectangular box with a black lid, “Here.”

Beth tensed, wondering if this could be it. She slowly opened the box and let out a surprised gasp. Not a ring, but a silver necklace with an emerald pendant.

“Oh wow, Tim, I . . . it’s incredible.”

“It was my grandmother’s,” said Tim. “She brought it with her when the family came over from Ireland.”

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.” Beth tried to clip it around her neck but couldn’t manage the clasp.

“Beth let out a mental sigh of relief. She felt like she was back in seventh grade getting ready to watch the “What Happens in Puberty” movie. Tim may have felt comfortable moving their relationship into physical intimacy, but she wanted to take it slow.”

“Here,” Tim said, standing up. He pushed away her hair, his fingers lightly caressing her neck. He fastened the clasp around her neck and slid back into his seat. Tim looked at Beth, smiling, then quickly glanced down to his menu. “So, what do you want?” he said.

“You know, we could skip the American breakfast and try a little ethnic food.”

“Mmm, ambiguous meat content cooked on shady street corner wrapped in expiration-date-unknown tortilla. Beth, you’re far too cute to be stuck on a toilet all day.”

Beth groaned, but Tim conceded and they soon left to explore the

center of Ensenada's tourist trade, La Bufadora, where vendors, shops, and food stands competed for space and the attention of prospective customers.

"I like it," Beth said. "It's so alive."

"Yeah, I can catch a whiff of each living and, in the marine life's case, dead wonders."

A man wielding a case of bracelets approached them. His dark brown eyes sought to make a connection.

Tim watched, a smirk on his face. "Your first challenge," he said.

As Beth glared at Tim, the vendor clipped a bracelet onto her wrist.

"Pretty, see how pretty," he said. "You cannot take off now. For this pretty lady, five dollars. For most, ten."

"I'm sorry, I don't want it," Beth said, trying to pull the bracelet off.

"See, will not come off. Made for you."

Beth finally managed to yank it off and dropped it back into the man's case. She grabbed Tim's hand and pulled him away. "You know, you could have helped there," Beth said.

"What? And hinder you from reaching your full ice-queen potential? Besides, I'm too excited about my massage."

Beth sighed, annoyed more at herself than Tim. It didn't even make sense that the vendor could bother her so much. She just didn't like confrontation. All she could see was the feral grin on the man's face, seeing money and knowing how to tap it. Her eyes roamed the street again and noticing an ice cream stand, she pulled Tim across the street.

"Gotta love a girl who knows how to enjoy food." He slipped his hand into Beth's back pocket.

"Right, Adonis."

Tim laughed and moved his hand from her pocket to the small of her back. She felt the warmth of his hands and laughed, relaxing in his touch.

The stand was busy with outer tourists and the vendors taking advantage of it. A little boy held up bobble-headed turtles, and

some girls showed off pictures of hairstyles they could fashion. Children weaved through the line carrying boxes filled with hand-made trinkets and a man was setting up a stand to write on rice.

"Looks like a family business," Tim said.

An older woman with a baby strapped to her back held a box up to a man wearing a hiker's backpack. Several children stood close to the woman, mingling with the line of tourists, chattering in the little English they knew or sticking boxes under the tourists' noses. A little girl, probably seven years old, stood close to the woman with the baby.

The woman pushed the child forward. "Mama," the child complained, but she approached Beth and Tim, smiling warily. Her large, deep brown eyes sought Beth's.

Beth tried to avoid her eyes, hoping she would move on, but Tim seemed intrigued and asked the child, "And what fascinating commodities do you have to entice the hapless traveler with?"

The little girl's smile faded but she kept her eyes on Tim and held her box closer to his face.

"Yes, it's very nice." Turning to Beth he said, "Maybe you'd like to buy something?"

"*Isabella, la senora,*" the mother said, pointing at Beth.

Beth ventured a glance at the box but ended up looking at the girl instead. Her clothes were too big and they looked like something someone would put in a bag for charity. Isabella's hair, parted awkwardly and harshly chopped, just hit her shoulders. Her smile was gone and she looked as if she wanted to shrink into her tattered sandals. Beth wouldn't mind shrinking away either. A Hispanic equivalent of a used car salesman was one thing, but a child was harder to ignore. Beth did not know how to respond. She wanted to be kind but there were just so many vendors; the moment she bought something, a slew of other offers would follow.

"How much?" Tim said, pointing at a bracelet of glass beads shining in the sun. The girl hesitated.

"*Isabella, digalos,* tell them!" shouted the girl's mother.

"*Cinc . . . five,*" Isabella mumbled.

Tim laughed. "Five?" he asked, "As in dollars? Now charity

is one thing, but you've got to be smart. I mean how many of these do you sell in a day?"

Isabella moved back, but her mother stopped her. Isabella shifted closer to Beth, who crossed her arms and tried to appear fascinated by the ice cream stand's sign.

"Five pesos and I'd think about it," Tim said.

"Tim, don't be so rude."

"What? I'm just having fun," he said. "They're all just trying to get something from you, Beth. They don't care, why should you?"

They had reached the head of the ice cream line and the man at the stand smiled kindly. Tim held up a hand to Isabella to make he wait. Unconsciously, Beth glanced at her. Isabella seemed angry enough to scream but embarrassed enough to cry. She stared at Beth as if to say that Beth should have done something to stop Tim, and Beth wanted to do something to make up for his rudeness. The ice cream seller held an ice cream in his hand, ready to complete another sale. Beth wracked her brain for the little Spanish she knew.

"*Quieres un helado*, do you want an ice cream?" she asked Isabella.

Isabella looked up, her eyebrows coming together. She cocked her head to the side and looked at Beth thoughtfully. The she smiled and nodded. Beth paid the man and she handed Isabella the ice cream, their hands touched. For a moment, looking into each other's eyes, Beth felt close to Isabella and believed she felt the same. Isabella held the ice cream carefully; it began to drip down her hand, yet she held it like an icon. Beth watched her, hardly realizing what she had done. Isabella looked into Beth's eyes and took a lick of the dripping ice cream. The other children began shouting and surrounded Beth and Isabella, who shouted something in Spanish and passed the cone to the other children. Then Isabella slipped a bracelet onto Beth's wrist. Beth could feel small, calloused fingers as Isabella tightened the cords so that the bracelet fit comfortably. She looked at Beth and smiled lopsidedly. Beth found herself smiling back.

"*Gracias, Bella.*"

Isabella disappeared into the crowd and Beth stood motionless for a moment, enjoying the bracelet.

"You know, you're only supporting their parasitic lifestyle," Tim said.

Beth jumped. "You've got to be kidding." She walked away from the stand.

"Well," Tim said, "This does mean I've won the bet." He tried to put his arm around Beth but her pace was too quick. "Let's see, massage, hot tub, maybe some champagne?"

"We'll see," she said. She looked down at the bracelet the girl had given her. It was obviously fake gold and it was sticky from the girl's fingers, but she liked it.

"You really should have bought the bracelet, Mother Theresa, especially if you weren't going to move down here and begin serving them," he said. "Now they'll be following us all day. You'd better take that dirty thing off. It won't look right next to—"

"This is it," thought Beth.

Beth turned to Tim and slipped her hands behind her hair. She unfastened the emerald necklace and pushed it into Tim's hand.

The Black Loveseat

Tiffany B. Bellah

“A thousand words a day, five days a week,” forces me to sit down cross-legged on our battered, broken, sagging dog-drool dappled black faux-leather recliner loveseat with a notebook and pencil, with my faithful friend Ford (the Great Dane) curled up beside me. What will I write about today? Let’s read what I’ve written so far . . .

Are ten words too many to describe an item as insignificant as the one I perch upon? I bet the lady who wrote the book that suggested I write daily for the rest of my life would know but that’s not what really makes me wonder. How could I so brazenly call it insignificant?

This piece of furniture signifies much. Like most of our furniture it is an inherited piece. The only furniture we’ve actually purchased as a couple in our eight years together is in the baby’s room. (Amusing how long the term “baby” is used by parents to refer to their own offspring – often until the next one comes along – our “baby” is now three years old).

Furniture from others comes with permanently attached memories of those people. This black loveseat I curl up on every day is in our family room, centered on and angled to parallel *exactly* the big screen television we inherited from the same benefactor, the man who died five years ago sitting in the same spot I now occupy: my father-in-law. The precise positioning of the TV would’ve made him proud; he was very particular about his audio-visual equipment.

My husband and I arrived at his childhood home that chilly January day to find police cars surrounding the house. We were younger then and still occasionally smoked pot – sadly that was our first (albeit naïve) thought – somehow they had found out and come to arrest us for that joint we had stashed. Often I’ve wished that ridiculous thought were true.

He was a graphics designer, who worked from home, generally while watching the aforementioned big screen, his desk (which is now in our office) positioned next to this reclining loveseat so as not to block the view. He'd been talking to a client on the phone when she heard sudden gurgling noises and then nothing at all. She'd called a friend to drive over and check on him. The police were called when they could not get into the house, but they couldn't find any identification in the miserly living room, with its stacks of glossy periodicals and dusty art magazines. My husband had to go inside and confirm the identity of his father, who was pronounced dead at their arrival. The coroner arrived shortly after and removed the body. We stood in the foyer of our shared home staring into the cluttered, cold and dark area that just that morning had been filled with a booming voice, clacking computer keys and loud movies.

That night I found my husband in a tight fetal position in the spot his father had breathed his last breath, gasping for breath as he tried to cry, to let it all go. I can close my eyes and vividly recall the pictures as I came down the stairs. I could see the frail little boy that was my strong silent husband, the only light spilling from the lamp on the huge black desk, across his sobbing shoulders onto the worn arm of the loveseat recliner, his quivering reflection in the silent black screen of the TV. I do not know what it is to lose a parent, to let go of one of the ties that has bound since before birth.

So of course no matter how much I'd love a new sectional or a desk that actually fits in our office or a TV that doesn't cost \$400 to fix every 2 years, I understand why my husband wants to hold on to these tangible reminders of his father.

Terry Ford Bellah was a unique person. He didn't ask much of anyone; just let him do what he wanted, when he wanted, bring him the occasional plate of food and love him as he was – stubborn, obstinate, frustrating, sarcastic, mischievous, creative, witty, and unrelenting. Terry had unique ways of trying to gain your favor and make you happy. My sister-in-law and I say that's what made us fat: living there. He often brought home Polly's Pies Chocolate Crème Pies, assorted *dozens* of Krispy Kreme donuts, huge Marie

Callender's double chocolate muffins – and always enough to feed anyone who might wander in.

Terry didn't like to be alone in the big house he shared with his boys and many others in the extended family over the years, until eventually it was filled with his eldest son's family, and when they moved out we decided to move in and maybe work on giving him more grandchildren. Several times I'd made chiding comments about the onslaught of carb-laden goodies and how much weight I was gaining. He'd been showering us with sugary treats as a way of showing he cared – he knew I had a sweet tooth and my sudden lack of gratitude (constant complaining that he was making me fat) hurt his feelings and forced him to search out another way to show he cared. I hardly remember his first silly notion, but I can still picture his eager searching eyes, followed by a disappointed grin and sarcastic comment in response to my slightly confused “thank you.”

I was determined to show genuine appreciation for the next gift, but I'm a terrible liar and only my pure delight would please him, so after a string of funny little trinkets he came home with an adorable plastic bulldog figure. I have always wanted an English bulldog, which I didn't realize he knew, so I was touched. He then went on to show me how cool it was that if you lifted its rear leg, it shot little plastic rockets out of its private doggy parts, while a scratchy recording repeated “Owww, that had to hurt!” in a gravelly voice. It was a toy based on the bulldog in Adam Sandler's *Little Nicky*. I couldn't suppress my laughter and his feelings were again hurt.

A few days later, less than a month before that surreal 24th day of the year 2001, Terry hit the jackpot. He came bustling into our room and proudly tossed me a *Day-At-A-Glance* tear-off calendar with the cutest pictures of bulldogs and delightful sayings about the beloved canine species in general. I really adored it and told him it would be perfect on my desk at work. He beamed.

Terry's death was attributed to congenital heart failure. I believe that maybe it was just the final blow to a broken heart. He and his wife had separated but never divorced over 18 years prior. He'd thrown himself into his work, refusing to accept it until it was too

late to change anything – facing his own fault much too late. Was he a man suffering from his artistic nature or the selfish shell of an arrogant man? Just depended on your frame of reference, and who you sat next to at the family functions he never attended.

He seemed a sullen, annoying man when we'd begun our relationship. He used to pick up the extension to interrupt, make fun and call me "Gertrude" whenever his son and I were talking back when we were dating. It wasn't until we shared that brief time four years later under the same roof that I began to see him as a caring, thoughtful father, and to realize that I had grown to love the future grandfather of our hoped for children.

It was not because he gave me gifts, but because he truly enjoyed us all for who we were, because he accepted our elopement so matter-of-factly while the rest of our friends and family went a little nutty, because he'd in part created and molded the human being I love more than any other on this earth. I loved Terry because he was complex and irritating and obnoxious and honest and real and unapologetic. He was an artist, with all the archetypal eccentricities that go along with the creative sparks. He made mistakes, he lived in self-created seclusion from most of the world, he rarely showered, and he slept all day and worked late into the night. And he loved me.

Not only because he should since I'd married his son – he just loved me for me, something my own father had a hard time doing. From Terry we inherited so much more than furniture. My husband also inherited from his father that all encompassing loving acceptance, and for that I'd put up with inherited furniture for the rest of my life. Looking down at our faithful dog, Ford (who takes his name from Terry), still curled at my feet, I am suddenly amazed. I'm probably far past a thousand words . . .

The Critic

By Kim Gonzalez

Shut up, give up,
You can't write.
Why bother ~~trying?~~
It's all tripe ~~anyway.~~
Don't even start.
~~Turn off the computer.~~ Nothing rhymes,
Nothing works,
Don't even ~~pick up the pen~~ try.
Hey! What are you doing?
Stop that ~~right now!~~

Circling Utopia in a Biplane

By Jack Morgan

Little circles encircle the circuits of the small mind
And I could drive you round Piccadilly Circus for hours,
And you'd think you'd seen all of London
And you'd ask me about the animals
And I'd tell you the only animals are inside this car.

Very few people people the paradigm of Paradise.
And I could fly you over utopia for hours,
And you'd say it's too green for your liking
And you'd ask me about money
And I'd tell you the only thing worth anything
Is sitting in the cockpit of this plane.

The Ravine Behind the House

By Tim Haynes

We were explorers threading our way into the deepest jungle. We were pirate captains, seeking a secluded spot in which to bury stolen treasure. We were mountain climbers, courageously challenging a peak that no other had ever surmounted. Sometimes, we were even soldiers in some long forgotten war, quickly marching toward the horizon to reinforce our beleaguered compatriots, their bugle desperately calling for help.

Every day we were all these things, occasionally all at once, and at times one after the other. Walking in single file through the woods, we proceeded, tacitly understanding that each of us had a chance to lead the others, and that some times we must allow ourselves to be led. No argument could dissuade us from our mission—not the lectures of adults admonishing us to act responsibly and avoid the dangerous area outside the bounds of the neighborhood, not the older boys that frequented our favorite woodland haunts, and not the seemingly larger-than-life threat of unfinished homework, skinned knees, and coming home late for dinner. Beyond the next tree lay the adventure we sought, the foe only we could vanquish, the source of our fame and fortune for years to come, so we responded to the faraway bugle, our imaginations and courage the only weapons with which we could face the enemies in our childish world.

Our courage would have to last. The goals of our treks in the woods evolved beyond our control, taking the form of challenges we could not have foreseen and could not have understood. The simple, unspoken codes of conduct we took for granted as children paled in comparison to the complexity of the rules we would soon have to follow and accept as teenagers and adults, and the problems we encountered did not always prepare us for the trials we would

face in only a few short years. As children, however, the adventure we sought was a refuge that we can no longer find, a respite from what we thought was an increasingly complicated existence that offered no promise of improvement save that of growing older.

There was no choice but to continue walking. Following friends and siblings further into the woods and deeper into the canyon, leading them higher up the hill and to places more remote from our homes. We reserved the time between our coming home from school and the return of our fathers from work for the exploration of the furthest reaches of the globe. Fueled by books, television, and various adventure films, our imaginations were limited only by the bonds we had formed with one another. The friend with which we shared awe inspiring discovery of a snake or a spider later participated in the celebration of promotion and weddings. The brothers that accompanied us in the fruitless search for a lost pet later partook in the grief caused by the loss of loved family members. The adventures changed but the explorers did not.

The bugle urged us on. It was there to observe the mountain peaks become triumphs, to witness the buried treasures become secrets shared among friends and brothers, and to watch the jungle become aspirations that were abandoned as reality set its unyielding will against our own. When we were discouraged it gave us hope, and when we lost our way it served as a beacon. It signaled the senseless disintegration of friendships and later celebrated their rebirth. The chaos of our growth was simplified by its presence and the sharpened corners of adolescence were made smoother by its constant, reassuring song.

Over the horizon the din of the battle grew louder as we approached. Though the path we chose to reach it sometimes separated us from one another, the bond of exploration remained to tie us together. Not all of us would reach the source of the bugle's refrain. Some of us would be pulled aside by the circumstances of life, and others, finding the trek too arduous, would choose to abandon the trail. We would remember them every time we set out on a new adventure, and despite the trees and the dusty haze we could still make out the forms of our companions, and in their absence,

the memory of their presence convinced each one of us that perhaps they were not so far away.

The days of imagination were rapidly coming to a close, and our afternoon expeditions would soon have to end, but for now it was still not time for dinner. Our moms had not yet called us in for an afternoon snack, and our fathers would not be returning home from work for hours. We were still the conquerors of the ravine behind the house so we pushed on deeper, into the impenetrable jungle; further up the beach, to bury our treasure; higher up the mountain, searching for the summit; and faster, to answer the call of a distant bugle.

Remembering the Days

By Steve Bartetzko

The clouds broke for the first time in days today, and I'm glad. A somber occasion doesn't need to have more gloom to it than there already is. Hopefully the sunshine will mean more than just warmth. I never really liked going to memorials anyway.

Sometimes it's hard to believe it has been a year since the accident. You grow up still, but there is always that little bit of you that remembers how you were, how you felt when someone you love passes. Not only will they live in your heart and memories forever, but also when you think of them, you don't age either. It's better that way, I think. You never have to go through the problems of getting older around them. A sense of peace remains around the good times you had with them.

As I travel to the memorial park, I look forward to seeing my sister Jen again. I haven't had the courage to go back to where I last saw her. She was always my strength, the shoulder to lean on when I didn't think I could bear the difficult times. I always admired her for that, but at that age, you don't really understand the concept of admiration. You only know how much you love someone, until the right words come along. Now it's too late to say such things to her, but I think she always knew. Perhaps that's why she was there, you know, because she didn't want to see me go through the troubles she had already overcome. It was never in question that my parents loved me. But when you don't have much, and your parents work hard to provide what they can, sometimes it's your siblings that have a great hand in raising you.

I don't remember moving to Southern California. I was too young then to comprehend the idea. I just knew that things were different all of a sudden. It was good to be in pleasant weather. All I can remember of where I grew up was how bundled up I'd have to

get. When you have trouble with layers as a child, going to the bathroom is that much more difficult. Jen was the first one to help me understand the idea. "Make it easy," she would say. Then she would show me I could just pull the layers down. It's funny, you know, people don't really concern themselves with appropriate stages of being naked when you're that young. A smile creeps across my face when I think about growing up.

I'm not bothered by the wind that has started. I can see it pick up dust as it sweeps across my old school yard. Strangely, in the past year, it's the little things that I can't seem to feel anymore. Conversely, though, it's those little things that I notice more now than before. The wind on my face, the warmth of a sunny day, the smell of springtime, I have more of an appreciation for them now. They just don't feel like they used to. I turn my gaze to the school. School. For those of you too old to remember, you have either of two reactions to the idea of a new school. Perhaps you were excited. I know that the way that I liked Jen's stories of school, I should have been. Instead, I was terrified. Kids I didn't know, a new grown-up to get used to, a place I'd never been before. Sometimes it's a lot to deal with when you're that age. But Jen was there.

Jen walked with me to school that first day, so I wouldn't be alone. She was trying to tell me about all the fun things I'd get to do, but when you're that scared, sometimes it's hard to pay attention. I saw kids running by, cars driving to the school, and the bustle of a new school year. I've dreaded that sound since. It was not exciting to me. It was a sound of panic, the unknown. I get butterflies still when I have to deal with the unknown. The queasy feeling, the overemotional thoughts of worry, no matter how many years go past. What will I do? What will the people be like? How will I know if I'm going the right way? But then there was Jen, right in front of my face. I looked around. Somehow we were already at the classroom.

"Look at me now little-man." I loved it when she called me that, because I knew she would protect me. "Don't get scared now, I'll be in that classroom right over there," she said, pointing just across the yard. "If you need me, just come get me, okay?"

The teacher will understand.” I looked at her with fear in my eyes, but she only smiled back. “And this is to hold onto.” She handed me a small bear doll, one that I could fit in the palm of my hand. “Just squeeze that tight when you get scared, and think of me, I’ll be with you inside.”

Traffic passed in front of me, between the memorial park and myself. It seems different now, too. I always thought cars would be so fun. The feel of power when you sit in the seat, the rush of wind blowing through your hair as the window is down, the flickering lights telling everybody when to stop and go. But they’re not as fun now as they used to be. It was a year ago today that it happened, the accident. Jen had just gotten her driver’s license, and I was in fifth grade. I never liked that she went to a different school now, but it wasn’t far from mine, so she would still walk me there in the morning. She hadn’t the money for a car yet, but sometimes Mom let her borrow the car to go run errands, as she had that day. I begged and pleaded until my mother said I could go with her. When Mom finally said yes, Jen looked at me with a smile, “Just remember to buckle up, little-man.” And I had buckled up. I loved the idea of driving with Jen. She was new to driving, but she seemed great at it to me. And she was. The drunk-driver that hit us when we pulled into the first intersection was not.

“She was a bit older than I remember, and seemed to walk with a slight limp. That must have been from the accident, I thought.”

I had passed the entrance to the memorial park, and made my way to the grave. I felt kind of cold, all of a sudden – the feeling that you get when you feel like you’re forgetting to do something important. The butterflies had come back to my stomach. The site was peaceful, birds chirping in the trees above. My parents came up behind me, carrying flowers. I sat on the ground, hugging my legs, not caring if it was rude to do in a place like this. My parents being

there made me felt good, but it was Jen I missed the most, oddly. I heard the sound of a final car door closing behind my parents and looked over. A smile spread across my face again, but no smile could be bigger than this one. I smiled for Jen.

She was a bit older than I remember, and seemed to walk with a slight limp. That must have been from the accident, I thought. She looked beautiful, though, a slight breeze blowing through her hair. She smiled too, as she reached sight of my grave, and I heard her whisper to me. "It's good to see you again, little-man," she said. My heart leaped as my parents and Jen hugged each other, looking down at me. "I brought something for you, this time," said Jen, reaching out to my resting place. I saw her place the little bear by my picture determinedly. I knew then that this was what I had needed this past year, my family, my strength. Not the way they looked at my funeral, they were too sad then. I liked them more like this, when they remembered the good times. I could understand it now, that cold feeling. It was time for me to move on. But it was no longer a cold feeling, instead the warm glow you get when you are excited to go somewhere new. For the first time, I wasn't scared of the unknown, because I knew I wouldn't be alone. Jen smiled again when she looked at the bear one more time. "Just squeeze that tight when you get scared, and think of me, I'll be with you inside."

Letting Go

By Marlene J. Hickey

When finally
I can tell myself
and mean it
that I am no poet
nor even a writer

when words
blocked in my brain
from fear of faltering
are permitted
to stray
into simple sentences

with no other life
than to be what they are
not sent forth as messengers
of beauty and truth
for a hungry public
nor a runway to name and fame

then, perhaps, will I shed
this odd trepidation of loss
of destiny unfulfilled
though written
in the ether
of some distant star

not to give up my dreams
but to live in the dream of today

Heavenly Hacker

By Lorina L. Curtis

Conner sat at his computer desk and stared at the bottle of sleeping pills and fifth of Scotch. He had made his decision and felt calm and sure of himself for the first time in his seventeen-and-a-half years. He knew his mom, who worked two minimum wage jobs, would be better off without the added burden of an amputee. His bastard of a father had skilled out right after the car accident, which had severed Conner's leg, along with a promising baseball career. While recuperating, he had contacted some hangers-on from his baseball team, but he was never close to anyone and they were only interested in sucking up to his success. They'd blown him off when he lost his leg – his e-mail server remained empty except for the occasional spam that slipped through his software's filtering service. Conner pounded the desk; the pills rattled.

He wouldn't miss the snickers from other jocks when they caught him riding the handicap school bus instead of his supped-up red mustang, or his brother, Kyle calling him stubby. He knew he was feeling sorry for himself, yet he couldn't see through the fog of his disability.

Conner positioned his fingers on the keyboard and waited for something to happen. His hands were usually lightning, though now he was at a loss for words. He raked his long blond hair out of his eyes. "Dear Mom," he read aloud, as he thrummed the keys.

He opened the bottle of whiskey hoping it would inspire his letter. After he took a swig and gasped at the burning impact, he read aloud, "I am sorry for the ... Dear God how should I phrase this?" Thought he loved to write, indeed had several disks full of sci-fi short sorties, this was different. He took another swig and opened the bottle of Elevel, scooping out three of the killer tablets. No sooner had he raised one to his lips than a pop-up of rainbows

and stars flashed across the computer screen. He saw CONNER flicker alternately with WAIT! He rubbed his eyes and looked again. "What the hell?" he said aloud.

"Wrong place." The pop-up window wrote back.

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"Who? No, what are you? And why are you bothering me?"

"Angelo. Hacker. You called me," the pop-up spat out.

"I did not!"

"Did! You said, and I quote, 'Dear God, how should I phrase this?'"

"That was just an expression."

"Close enough to a prayer as you've ever gotten. And before you ask, no, I'm not God. Just one of his minions."

Conner shook his head to clear it. Must be the alcohol. "Yeah right, you're probably just some perv." He clicked the mouse repeatedly to remove the message – no go.

"SON OF A BLEEP!" Angelo spoke the words instead of typing them, "Are you trying to send a Morse code?"

"This is not possible."

"All things are possible to him who believeth."

"Oh great, a nut case," Conner said. He took another swig.

"You're the one with the sleeping pills and booze."

"Piss off, Angelo." He took a sip. "If you hadn't crashed through my ISP's anti-spam software I would have used them."

"Plunk-ding-ding! Now if you tell me what's so bad in your life, maybe I can help you fix it."

"How would you know how unbearable life is – spam has feelings?"

"Yes, because I never saw my seventeenth birthday. I popped one too many reds."

Conner took a gulp. "And so you're out to save the world?"

"No. Just you."

"Couldn't God find something better for you?"

"Well, I don't exactly inspire the Big Guy's confidence yet."

Conner grimaced. "Great. They send me a reject."

“Hey. I’m dang good with computers.”

“So I see.”

“On some clouds they refer to me as the ‘Heavenly Hacker.’ Just promise me you’ll hold on for one day and give me a chance to help you.”

“Can you grow my leg back?”

“Ah-h, no. But I can help you make sense of your life.”

“Sure, spam-man.” Conner screwed the lid back on the whiskey and pitched it in the bottom drawer of his desk along with the pills. “Okay. One day won’t kill me. Hah hah.”

“Way to go. It’s late and you need to sleep off some of that alcohol. We’ll get started before school.”

Conner staggered a few steps and fell onto his bed.

In the morning he wasn’t sure any of last night’s proceedings were real – except the drinking. His headache and fuzzy tongue assured him of that. He took a hot shower before sitting down at his computer. To his surprise, it was up and running. So, it was true.

“All right,” Angelo typed. “The first thing we’re going to do is find you a prosthesis.”

“I can’t afford one.”

“Just bring up Google and type in prosthesis.”

“Wait a minute. I thought *you* were going to perform the miracles.”

“The Big Guy has a policy of helping those who help themselves. Now work with me.”

Conner did. he found a leg, then contacted the Shriners and the City of Hope asking for sponsorship. Everything was arranged; all he needed was a ride to his appointments.

“Now I want you to do something to earn this blessing,” Angelo said.

“What?”

“You gotta figure that out for yourself.”

“How can I tell if it’s the right move?”

“You’ll know.”

Conner gave a half-hearted nod.

At school that day he saw a girl with a walker and bike hel-

met about to enter the computer lab. Maybe he could help. Was this what Angelo meant? He decided to hold the door open for her and risk falling on his butt. This would get Angelo off his back. Conner wavered when a couple of guys called him, and the girl, freaks.

“Don’t listen to those potheads,” Conner said. “They don’t realize what it’s like.”

“I’m used to it,” the crippled girl replied quietly.

He lost himself in his assignments until halfway through the class when he heard swearing in the back row. Just then a familiar pop-up appeared on the screen.

“Hee-hee-hee.”

“What’s so funny, Angelo?”

“It seems the computers of our misguided stoners ate their school work.”

Conner hid a smile. “Not nice, spam-man.”

“Hee-hee-hee.”

At home that day, his mother came to see him. She had brought him an éclair from the bakery where she worked. After she left, Conner told Angelo that he wanted to do something nice for his mom. “Got any ideas?”

“Write her a nice note.” Angelo pulled up a card design service.

Conner chose one of the covers, but customized it by creating his own verse. It felt good to write something other than a suicide note to her.

When his brother stopped by, Conner quickly typed, “What now?”

Angelo’s message flashed on the screen. “You know what to do. Ask him to take you to your appointments tomorrow.”

He gave his brother the schedule and hoped for the best. If Kyle refused, Conner would brave public transportation.

“No can do,” said Kyle. “I have a paper due on the Civil War.”

Conner types, “I need help with Kyle’s essay.”

“That’s a gray area but”

“Great!” he turned toward Kyle. “I’m good at history. I can knock this off tonight.”

When Kyle left, Angelo said, “Yeah, man. Bobby E. Lee and I are tight. I can add a few things.”

Two hours later the printer revved up like Conner’s Mustang and spit out his brother’s assignment.

Kyle came in and grabbed the pages. “Holy crap! How did this happen so fast?”

Conner wisely didn’t answer. “Can you drive me now?”

“Sure thing, Mutant,” he said.

Conner turned his attention back to the pop-up. “I don’t think that was ethical, spam-man.”

“I’ll have to work on it. Meanwhile we’ll work on your future.”

“What future? I can’t play baseball.”

“It’s time to dream new dreams! There’s a man in Boston who couldn’t play baseball so he got a job as the Sox’s ground keeper and learned how to cut designs in the grass. He’s famous – he’s published books. And by the way, I signed you up for a fantasy baseball team.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s keeping baseball real, man.”

Conner flushed the remaining whiskey and pills down the toilet. “Hey Angelo, you got someone else needs spamming, it’s okay, I’m busy.”

“Cool!” flashed across the screen amidst rainbows and stars.

Half-Light

By Marlene J. Hickey

The girl blinked into the brightness and wondered why she was in the park. Then a feeling of peace and well-being settled upon her and she studied her surroundings while waiting for him to arrive. Across the path, an old woman sat on a stone bench leaning her back against a tree trunk, asleep perhaps, or just reflecting with her eyes closed. She looked oddly familiar. The girl was certain she had met her, but where? It must have been a long time ago because she couldn't recall meeting any old people lately. Maybe she was an old friend of her mother's.

She didn't dwell on it because she felt giddy and breathless, like the way she'd felt as a child when Christmas drew near, or her birthday. She pushed back her long, auburn hair, the one feature she took pride in, and glanced expectantly up the path. She couldn't see him yet, but she knew he would come. She felt it along her spine, in the way her breaths came as gasps. When he came they'd be together for whatever time they had left before he shipped overseas.

The brightness of the day was stunning, the light golden. Yet her skin didn't feel hot. She felt so strong and young, filled with life and learning, attuned to everything around her: the lacy green branches swaying above; the lavender heads of lilacs nodding accord with the soft breeze that gently caressed them; the sweet melodies of the birds. Like a symphony, she thought. Like something from Respighi. She had discovered the composer one night a few days ago when Johnny took her to a concert in a nearby town. After that she tuned into a classical music station on the old Motorola at home, but her mother complained until she turned it off.

She glanced across at the old woman. How pathetically alone she seemed. What had life been like for this lonely, sad person? Could anyone so alone ever have known happiness? It didn't seem

possible. Yet the old woman was young once and must have had at least a few moments of passionate longing in her life.

A scruffy brown dog trotted by, dragging its leash. It was followed by a small boy running at full speed and shouting, "Maisie, bad girl! Maisie, stop! Come back."

She looked again at the old woman. Why did she look so familiar? Her mother would be angry if it turned out that her daughter had ignored an old friend of the family. She squeezed her eyes shut and rooted around for some clue, but came up empty, any memory of this old woman non-existent. The woman seemed to be dozing, her body slightly slumped, head tilted to one side. She was going to have one heck of a stiff neck when she awoke. The girl knew she ought to go over and wake her, maybe help her get into a more comfortable position. But something held her powerless and she didn't move.

The girl had no problem remembering her mother's disappointment when she found out about Johnny. Her attitude had shocked and hurt the girl.

"A cheap little wartime romance," said her mother, Martina, contempt heavy in her voice. "It's easy to fall in love with a uniform. I did it myself, and look where it got me!"

She knew her mom was still bitter over losing her husband to another woman. And Martina never let the girl forget that she had also been abandoned, that her daddy left home when his daughter was only four. A career Army officer, he sent money to help with expenses for a while. Then, reassigned to a distant post for several years, he remarried, fathered more children, and eventually lost contact with his first family. The girl understood the reason for her mother's unhappiness and told herself that this was what made her so cold and remote to her only child. Sometimes they seemed like two strangers who just happened to live together in the same apartment. She guessed that her mother went through the motions of being a parent, providing shelter, food, and clothing for her daughter only because this is what mothers did.

Though still attractive, Martina never had another love interest after the marriage ended. The girl knew intuitively that

her mother was so soured on men, she wouldn't let another one get close enough to hurt her. Her mother had never had any great hopes or dreams for her daughter's future, yet she was angry when Johnny came into the girl's life. He had enlisted in the army right after graduation, and came home on leave when he completed training. It was then that they fell in love. Because of her mother's opposition to the relationship, the young couple met mostly here in the park, although once they went to the movies and one night to the concert.

When his orders came to ship out, possibly to a war zone, the couple knew they had little time left to be together. She was aware that joy had played no part in his life before their coming together, and hers was a joyless existence as well.

"Her heart was so certain, so joyous, so filled with love. A shadow fell across her thoughts, then lifted quickly. Of course, she must have let him know."

"I want to marry you before I leave," Johnny said, "so I'll know you're really mine. I know it's selfish. I may not come back. But why put off happiness we might never find again?"

She hesitated, hating her reluctance, wondering why she was always so afraid to do what she wanted. She told him his going away to war must seem like abandonment in her mother's eyes, because of what she herself had experienced at the hands of a man so many years ago.

Something was happening across the path, and the girl stopped her musing long enough to notice a middle-aged couple stop near the old woman and study her intently. But it was difficult to keep her mind focused on the events taking place a few yards away.

Why did she wait until now to make up her mind? They

could have had more time together! Always the obedient little girl who never went against her mother's wishes! Until today. But why didn't he come? Hadn't she called him, hadn't she sent him the message that she'd changed her mind? A chill came over her. She couldn't remember. Why were her thoughts so jumbled, her mind so confused? Her heart was so certain, so joyous, so filled with love. A shadow fell across her thoughts, then lifted quickly. Of course, she must have let him know. She had lain awake long into the night trying to picture a future without him. All she could imagine was a life filled with dead ends. He will come, she thought.

"Is she sleeping?" the woman asked her husband as they drew nearer to the old woman. "She looks like she's . . ."

"Yes, she does," the man said in a worried tone. "Let's try to wake her."

The wife reached out to touch the old woman's hand, then drew her own back with a jerk. "George, she's so cold."

"Yes, I'm afraid she's . . ." The man looked around and saw the boy dragging his reluctant little dog on a leash.

"Young man. You know that policeman who stands near the entrance of the park? Run and tell him to call an ambulance right away! Then bring him back here. We have a . . . ahh . . . a sick woman here. Please hurry!"

The girl was surprised and glad they hadn't noticed her. They might have asked her to go for help. She didn't want to be gone when he came. She had to be here to see his expression when she told him she'd changed her mind. She wanted him to forget the pain of yesterday when she said she couldn't marry him. She wanted to see the light come back into his eyes.

"Oh, the poor thing," said the wife. "What a dreadful way to go, out here all alone."

"Quite a nice way to go if you ask me, except for the effect on unwary passersby like us," her husband replied.

It seemed to the girl that the drama across the pathway unfolded in speeded-up, disjointed episodes now, like scenes from a silent movie. A policeman stood there, but she hadn't seen him

walk up. As he checked the old woman for a pulse, her lifeless body suddenly plunged forward. The two men broke her fall, then gently laid her lengthwise on the bench.

"The ambulance should be here shortly," the policeman said. "But it seems hopeless." He leaned down and put his ear against her chest, hoping to detect a breath or a heartbeat.

"George," the wife said, "Isn't she the woman who lived in the apartment next to ours at the Kensington years ago? Her name was Miranda Hamilton. I think she was old even then! We always heard music coming from her rooms. She collected our mail for us once when we went on vacation. For as long as we knew her, we never found out a thing about her life. We used to make up bizarre stories about her mysterious past, remember?"

The husband's reply seemed to come from far away. The girl couldn't make it out. She considered going over to help the group gathered around the unfortunate old woman, but she couldn't seem to hold the thought. A strangeness enveloped her. The light intensified; a stillness grew. She knew instinctively that he was near. Her heart hammered in her ears as she saw him run down the path toward her.

He seemed to be a great distance away for such a small park. Then as he approached, she saw him clearly. He wore his uniform, just as he had the last time they were together. Was it really only a day ago? He was nearer now. It seemed as if his feet hardly touched the ground, as if he were flying to her in his great desire to hold her. The laughter bubbled up from a secret place in her heart and escaped through her lips. She could see his handsome young face, his arm in the air. He shouted something but she couldn't make it out. All the passion and yearning of her life flew ahead to meet him, and as in a dream she heard him now, calling her name.

"Miranda," he cried. "Miranda."

If Wishes Were Birds

By Sherri Bewsey

If I had a wish, as I look to the heav'ns
On this glorious springtime day,
I would fly with birds of silver wing,
Soaring up in the sky and away.

Here on this hillock the air is clear
And beauty lies all around,
But oh, how much of this shining day
Is concealed to me here on the ground.

Let me rise in the sky and spread my wings,
Feel the touch of the wind on my face...
Let me dive and glide and float in blue,
And rejoice in this breathtaking place!

Mountains are reaching to touch the clouds,
Stretching forth majestic peaks,
Tall pines on her slopes stand like watchful guards;
Gallant sentries of meadow and creek.

Valleys are blankets the mountains have shed
In the warmth of the noonday sun;
A beautiful, verdant patchwork quilt,
Glist'ning rivers and brooklets its seams.

Rolling and swirling the ocean shines,
Tossing white-tippid waves on the land,
Sandpipers criss-cross their tracks on the beach,
Like pie-bakers marking the sand.

Though I remain grounded, my wishes take flight
On this radiant sprintime day...
I am soaring with birds, with silver-tipped wings,
Regaling in celestial ballet.

Paper Airplane Dreams

By Tatiana R. Stapleton

Did you know that when your body reaches its REM phase you dream?

Somewhere over my head the delicate airplane dipped and dove, urging me to follow the dusty trail in this strangely warped land. He had sent the airplane, sent the airplane to guide me to his resting place for the week. I hadn't seen him for three days so I followed the plane's guiding flight past blue puff-ball trees and bright red 'X marks the spot' treasure coves. No time to go digging for gold, he had sent for me and I was coming as quickly as my bone weary feet could go.

Up ahead a blinking yellow arrow points towards a sprawling city, the words 'your goal here' painted across the swirling violet sky. Four-winged birds rising in a cloud of silent fear I swallow and glance up at his guide. In the distant space over its wings a glittering dragon circles, great webbed wings casting shadows larger than reality. Gate looming before me I watch as the airplane darts through the planks without a pause leaving me standing with the newly arrived guards to once again attempt to explain why I was following a piece of folded paper.

Stepping heavily past the still wary guards I let my eyes travel about the city looking for my guide. Hand reaching out to the nearest other being, I inquire about his airplane, receiving a pitying look and a finger pointing deeper between the buildings.

Arching above my head gaily striped awnings protect my face from the sun's hot sight. Fruit stands selling round balls of green and white line the space beneath the awnings, their sellers curiously absent. Listening to the sound of my own feet as I walk in the direction the being motioned, I hike my backpack higher on my

shoulder as a prickling fear began to grow in the back of my mind.

Where was everyone? In a city this size there should be hundreds of beings bustling about, selling their wares, and trying to get the gold that jingles dimly in my belt pouch. Yet the city is as silent as death, not even the caress of a breeze lightening the stifling emptiness.

Breath whistling past my teeth, I glare at the gateway I find myself approaching. Winding vines snaked up its trellis, tiny blood bright flowers winking blue centers at me. Leaves rustling in a wind that refuses to touch my skin, I toss my head as a strange formation within the flowers catches my eyes. Scrolling over the top of the arch, words are written in the flowers, words that chill me to the depths of my soul –

“If ye be without fear and doubt, enter my world and see nothing but fantasy, yet be ye afearred and doubting of yourself enter my world to see the reality ye run from.”

Fear coursing through my veins I shake my head. No, I will not wake from this dream. He sent for me. This is the truth. I do not doubt myself; I know exactly who I am. Know exactly what is going on, where I am, what I am doing. There is no reason for me not to walk under those blood red flowers with their beady, condescending blue eyes. Just beyond the arch is where he will be waiting for me. Where he will be standing, arms crossed over his chest, chin tilted down to smile at me. Waiting to scold me for being such a coward. He’s still –

Paper airplanes swooping in from behind me, the absent crowds of this city blocking my retreat.

No!

Hair flying in my face I back away from the crowd, memories flaring behind my eyes.

Running through the close grass of the park, four boys and one girl make for the small river, paper boats clutched in their hands. Rainbow-colored balloons fill the sunny room with color. A boy and a girl, rosy cheeked, blow more of the laughter-filled balloons up. Fingers dangle off the edge of the couch, a kitten leaping after them. Night filled the room lit by a single lamp; the boy and

girl sat close and waited for the sounds of fighting to stop. Lying curled together on a hotel bed, the two hold twin rabbits close, free hands twined on top of the sheets. It is a celebration of the girl's passage from high school, their smiling faces reversed, girl below the boy.

Nails digging at my eyes I shake my head in denial, stumbling backwards through the archway. Creepers reaching for my arms I twist and run deeper in the world beneath the arch.

"There was so much blood on the flag they were folding up, triangle into triangle into triangle. Give it to the grieving father or the sobbing mother; don't think of giving it to the silent woman with the stuffed rabbit in her lap."

Young man dressed in a fancy uniform not at all embarrassed by the battered stuffed rabbit under his arm. Shorter young woman under his other arm, identical rabbit held on her hip. The last time she had seen him, to send him off for his first tour of duty. So proud of her little brother for making it into the force, for following his dreams and daring to succeed, two smiling faces that had shared so many years.

No!

There was so much blood on the flag they were folding up, triangle into triangle into triangle. Give it to the grieving father or the sobbing mother; don't think of giving it to the silent woman with the stuffed rabbit in her lap. Form into rank and march past the parents. Halt before the emotionless woman and salute, highest-ranking officer handing the bloody flag to her shaking hands. Paper airplane spinning in a blast of putrid air I tumble head first into a gaping hole at my feet. Bones were sticking out of the earth's walls, bones draped with the tattered remains of a uniform.

No!

Hug the folded flag to her chest and bow her head, the façade of no emotion shattering. Wails filling the funeral air, she clings to the rabbit and the flag as she gives in to the pain of loss.

No!

I could see the bottom of the hole rushing upwards to meet me, bleached bones standing like soldiers in the damp, hot earth. Jagged bone splinters sinking into my skin I wail with loss.

No!

Strangled cry shattering the silence of true night she jerks awake, hands going to her mouth. Wide, startled eyes wobble with unspent tears in the moonlight. Black dyed hair straggles across her blurry vision as she lifts a battered stuffed rabbit to her chest. "I will love you always, my dearest little brother." Tears sliding down her pale cheeks, she stares out the window at the skeleton trees standing guard over a freshly dug grave, the ghostly reflection of a bird with four wings perching atop the headstone, paper airplane resting atop the fresh earth like a bouquet of flowers.

More Precious Than Gold or Silver

By Linda Gottfredson

The search for buried treasure was a childhood game we all used to play. Our imaginations were filled with ideas from books like *Treasure Island* and the pirate movies that we watched. The thought of sailing to far-away places and finding buried treasure was a thrilling idea. We would make antique maps with clever clues to find our very own buried treasure in the backyard. The search for the chest was just as fun as finding the "X" that marked the spot. When we grew older we realized that finding real buried treasure of gold, silver, and jewels was just a nice romantic dream of childhood, but there is something within us that yearns for a search for another type of treasure. We become collectors of objects, and search high and low in flea markets and garage sales for the perfect piece to fit into our collections. The thrill of the hunt is an exciting pastime. And when we find the object we are looking for we jump for joy within and say "Eureka! I have found it."

My own search for treasure was the search for a child. An unknown child, more precious than gold or silver, was waiting to be found. The search would take twenty-five years to complete and would require a journey halfway around the world, deep into the heart of the former Soviet Union. The idea of the search began when I was sixteen years old. I had an epiphany that never left me throughout my adult life. I understood that there were children in our world that had no parents and needed homes. The conviction I held was that every child has a name and every child deserves to grow up in a home with his or her very own mom and dad. And I knew, some day, some way, when the timing was right, I would find this child.

My life moved on from the moment of realization of my

lifetime dream and I moved through the milestones of life: college, graduation, first job, marriage, and childbirth. But the thought of this unknown child was deep within my heart. I was walking the road of life unconsciously seeking that right opportunity to make a difference in a disadvantaged child's life. I was involved with children's organizations like Olive Crest and Orangewood, and I contemplated being a foster care mother. Nothing seemed completely right. Nothing ignited my passion until I met a man whose life calling was to find homes for children from the orphanages in Eastern Europe. Eureka! I had found my direction.

*"The children of poverty are hungry, forgotten,
neglected and eventually transferred to orphanages
for better safekeeping."*

By 1991, the Soviet Union had imploded from within, and its controlling and oppressive government was no more. The states that made up the Soviet Union were breaking away and forming their individual, autonomous governments. Life was always hard for its people, and life was even harder after the breakup. There was economic chaos; rubles were worthless. Jobs were hard to find and currency was scarce. The truth about the abuses and oppression by the Soviet government was exposed in the papers overnight. The shock of this news impaled the nation's conscience with grief and disbelief. Hard times were going to get harder. The people of poverty who see life with hopelessness drown themselves with vodka. The children of poverty are hungry, forgotten, neglected and eventually transferred to orphanages for better safekeeping.

The excitement of knowing that I was one or two years away from finding my child propelled me into the tedious gathering of information needed by the adoption agency to evaluate my husband and I as suitable parents. Our family was scrutinized inside and outside with medical exams, criminal reports, financial and bank records, recommendations, autobiographies, and extensive inter-

views. Our agency needed to probe into every aspect of our lives to understand who we were and whether we could provide a loving and stable home for a child. The agency would write a comprehensive evaluation that would become the mainstay of our dossier. The finished dossier was sent to a law firm in Kiev, Ukraine who then hand delivered the file to the Adoption Center of Ukraine for processing and review. We waited and waited for the invitation to travel.

Eventually, the call came to tell us we had been given an appointment. Furiously, we made all the travel arrangements, including expediting our visa application to request permission to enter the Ukraine. A visa was needed because the relations were cool between the Ukraine and the United States. Our stated reason was we were traveling to the Ukraine to search for an unknown, adoptable child.

Three airplanes, four airports, and twenty-four hours of traveling later, we were speeding across the tarmac of Kiev International Airport in an airplane being driven like a taxi going 100 miles per hour to reach the terminal. Fortunately, we navigated easily through customs and baggage claim because the instructions were printed in Russian and English. Our driver was waiting for us at the gate; he knew what we looked like from all the pictures we had sent. He whisked us off to our lodgings where we could sleep off our jet lag, but first we had to meet Lena, a representative from the law firm who spoke with us briefly to tell us we would be picked up early the next day for our appointment at the Adoption Center. The law firm had a network of translators, facilitators, drivers, cooks, and innkeepers who were hired to help us in our search.

The Adoption Center was not what I had expected from information I had read. The day we were there the place was calm and deserted, probably because the famed Ms. Kumko was away. We were directed to an enormous book with outdated pictures of children from all over the Ukraine who were available for adoption. This was just a formality, since our law firm had connections in Sevastopol and we knew ahead of time that our destination was Sevastopol in the Crimea Peninsula. We received permission to visit Detsky Dom #1 to search for the child of our dreams.

There are three ways to travel to the Crimean Peninsula: by car, by train, or by plane. None of the choices are particularly safe. The decision was made for us that we would travel one thousand miles south on Crimea Air Lines. We arrived at the small regional airport and I could see the plane on the tarmac. It was a WWII vintage turboprop plane. I breathed in deeply and sang "He has the whole world in His hands" a few times to myself. The flight gave us a chance to see the topography of the country that looked like the agricultural areas of central California, with the Dnieper River cutting like a winding mountainous road through the earth. Ukraine is called the "Bread Basket of Europe."

We arrived at the small airport in Simferopol where Marina, our facilitator and translator, was waiting to greet us. We recognized her by her red hair and she recognized us because we looked like Americans traveling with excess luggage. Most of the items in our bags were items to be donated to the orphanage. We hopped into the taxi and drove an hour and a half through the beautiful countryside dotted with red poppies and daisies towards the seaport town of Sevastopol. I spoke the pressing question on my mind, "Who is available for adoption?" Marina said, "There are four boys for adoption. There is a wonderful boy of thirteen that you should meet." My heart sank a little because I had done my research and I wanted a much younger child.

Finally, we had arrived in Sevastopol; the day I had dreamed of for so long was here. I was standing outside the gates of the orphanage. The street was calm, quiet, and peaceful. I could not help but think "X marks the spot." We were led through the property to meet Lucy, the orphanage director. She was an army sergeant with a big heart. She quickly summoned her committee to join us: the assistant director and the head caregiver. They wanted to look us over and ask us questions; we wanted to know about the children. They were curious and suspicious. We were excited about meeting our child.

His name was Anton and he was summoned to the office to speak with us. He was almost fourteen but he looked more like twelve. He was blond, blue eyed, pallid, and very thin. He was

frightened and nervous because he knew why Marina was there. Some lucky child was going to get a home and he had always wanted his own mama and papa. We were nervous too because it is hard to pick just one child when all need a home. We interviewed him for half an day and there was something very familiar about this boy. I cannot explain it, but I felt like I knew this boy. I felt I had seen him before somewhere. I asked many adoptive parents how they knew a child was their child. Every person vaguely said, "You will know." I looked over at my husband and I knew he was reacting the same way to this boy. With our eyes, we agreed. "Eureka! We have found our son."

Over and over again, while we were in the Ukraine, people looked us in the eye and asked, "Why? Why do you want to adopt a child? You have children of your own." The Ukrainian people do not comprehend the obscenely wealthy standard of living we enjoy. They work very hard to provide the basic necessities for their families. They do not have hot running water when they want it. They do not own cars. They do not buy soda pop and junk food. They do not live in single-family homes. My answer to them was, "I do it for Jesus. Orphans are more precious to Him than gold or silver."

I Swallowed My Mother

By Joan Ross

she went down smoothly
like honey
or soft ice cream
with a hint of mint

we played cards
in the attic
my sister & me
she usually won
I suspected cheating
& then

one afternoon

I swallowed my mother

there was a spider
dangling
over the coffee table
& the TV blared a soap
i forgot which one
the doorbell rang
and the dog barked because
the mailman was there & she
my dog
hated mailman & I got
all upset with my sister

so i swallowed my mother

sister shrieked
yelled cough her up
right now!
but i wouldn't
i wanted her all to myself
So i simply

swallowed my mother
& left

Dachau

By Lacy Telles

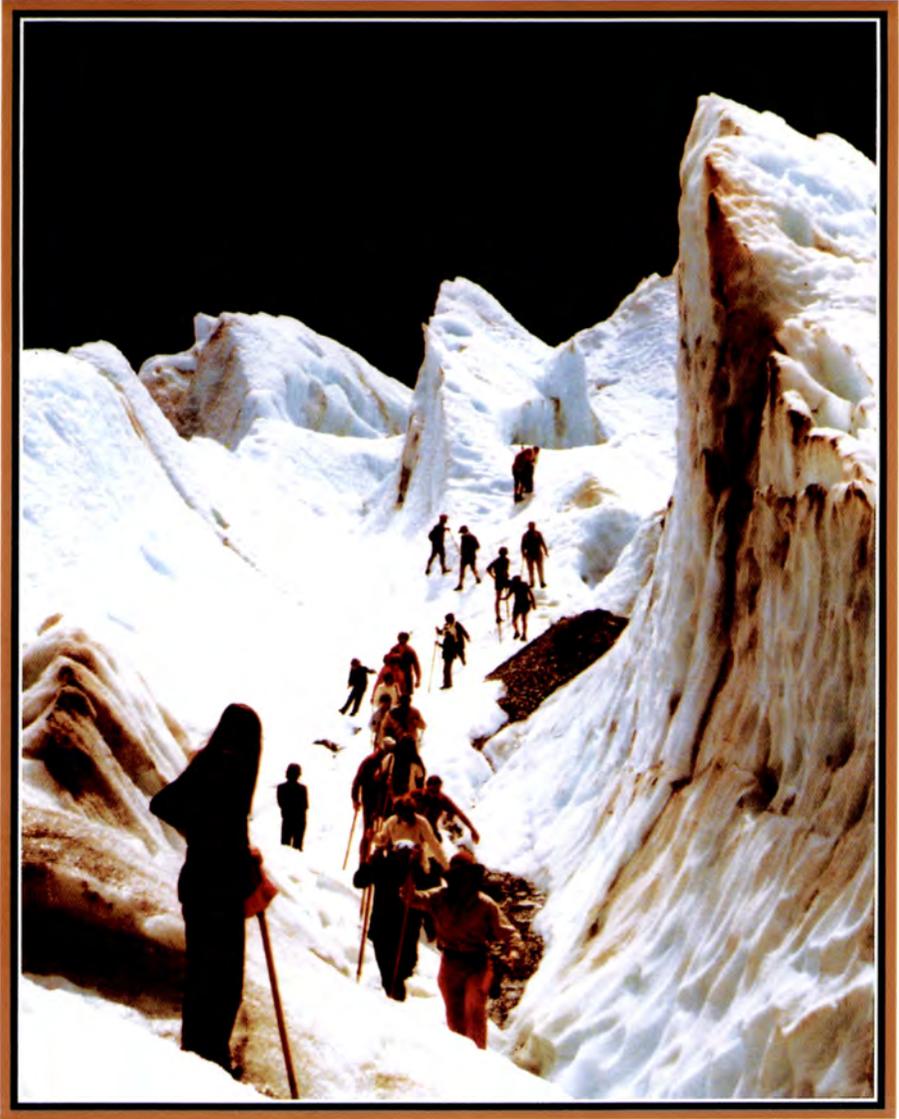
Taken out of the familiarity
And comfort of your home,
You were brought here.
You were given striped pajamas
And recycled clogs
In exchange for your identity.
You were put to work.
They took away all your choices
Except one –
To give up.
But you did not give in.
Fingers chaffed and frozen,
You managed to lick off the encrusted dirt and
blood
Just in time for inspection.
You split your apricot sized ration of bread
In half to share with your neighbor,
Despite your protesting stomach.
For if you're not all in this together,
What are you living for?



“Heder: A Religious School for Young Jewish Boys”

5”x7” Oil on canvas by Galena Segal

Spring 2005



“Franz Josef Glacier”

Photo by Georgialee Granger



“Pain”

Photo by Marialysia Abeyta



“Majestic Beauty”

Photo by Tracey Hansen



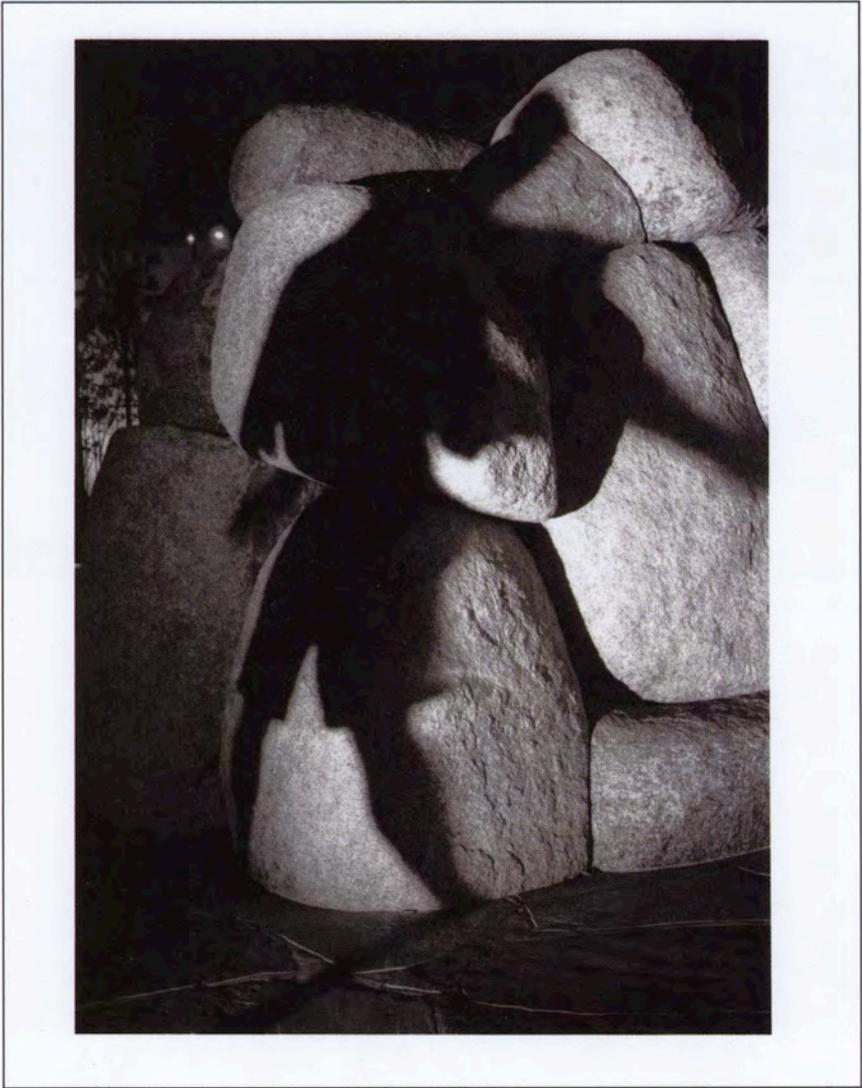
“Fall at Aliso Creek”

Photo by Reiss Duplessis



“Brothers”

Photo by Lacy Telles



"Self Portrait"

Photo by Dennis Corrigan



“Right Side Up”

Photo by Kyle Ferrell



“California Sunrise”

Photo by Elspeth Kohler



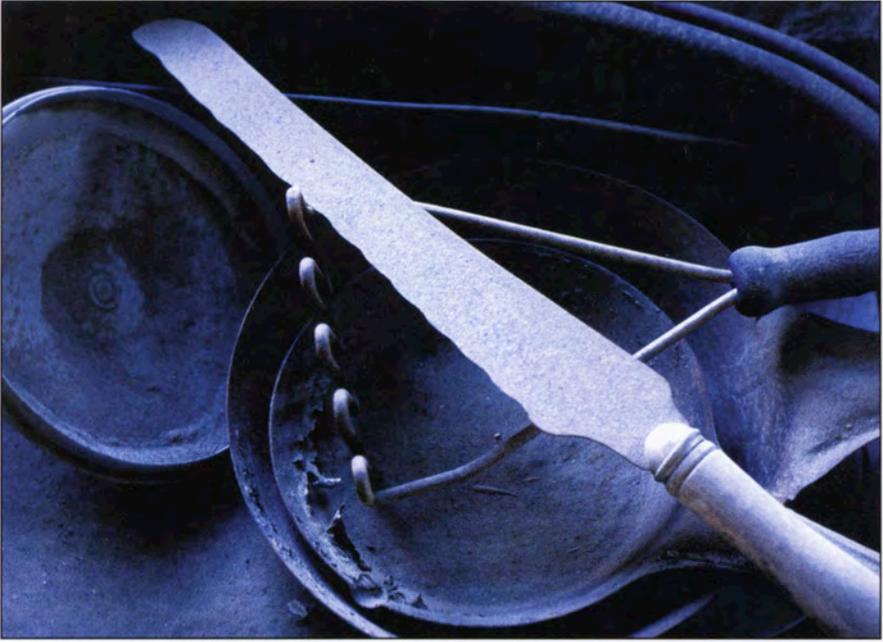
“Dragon and Phoenix”

Watercolor by Camille Kuo



“Flapper”

Ceramic mask by Phyllis Decker



“Untitled”

Photo by Marlo Kirkham



“Alice in Timberland”

Photo by Kelly Erbstoesser



“Mid-life Crisis”

Photo by Fatemeh “Fatty” Moghadam



“Road to Nowhere”

Photo by Emily Windham



“Baby Blue”

Photo by Kim Gonzalez

CASUALTIES OF WAR

(based on real events and written from a little girl's viewpoint)

By Galena Segal

In July 1941, after invading the Soviet Union, the German Army was quickly approaching Odessa, Ukraine. Six-year-old Alenka's family had to flee the city. Along with thousands of Jewish people, they boarded the last train of cattle-cars heading to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, one of the Soviet Muslim republics in Central Asia. For almost three years, the family had endured Anti-Semitism, poverty, hunger, and indigenous diseases.

In the spring of 1944, after the liberation of Odessa by the Red Army, the family left Tashkent and is heading home.

EXT. TASHKENT RAILROAD STATION -- MAY 1944

-- DAY

A unit of Uzbek soldiers of all ages marches alongside a train singing "Arise, My Great Nation."

CHOIR

Arise, my great nation,
To win the holy war,
To conquer German legions,
The spiteful, damned horde.

Let people's avenging fury
Abolish Nazi throng,
Let wave of sacred rising
Destroy aggressors' swarm.

ALENKA and her family carry their scarce luggage - an old suitcase, rolled blankets, and several large melons in fish-net bags. The girls carry small handmade backpacks, an old aluminum teapot, and a thermos. They stop at their car and wait in line to board.

A military train passes by. It consists of cisterns of fuel, large open freight cars, and cattle-wagons carrying soldiers. Young Uzbek men look outside through the windows.

On the walls of the cattle-wagons are large mottoes:

- *DEATH TO THE FASCISTS!*
- *FIGHT FOR YOUR COUNTRY. FIGHT FOR STALIN!*
- *WE WILL VINDICATE THE KILLINGS OF INNOCENT PEOPLE!*
- *UZBEK COTTON-GROWERS WORK FOR VICTORY!*
- *WE WILL WIN!*

On one of the tracks at the station is a mobile hospital. Large red crosses are painted on the roof of each car.

2 STRETCHER-BEARERS carry stretchers with wounded army men toward the station exit.

The engine whistles, and the passenger train begins moving.

As the train moves, the scenery gradually changes from yellowish flat earth under the broiling sun to landscapes with thinly growing trees and small roadside streams.

INT. FAMILY'S COMPARTMENT - NEXT MORNING

From the top berth, Alenka looks at the train standing on the other track. It consists of a few cattle-cars with large crosses on their walls. A railroad worker walks along this train, checking the brakes of each wagon.

The CONDUCTOR of the passenger train walks by the train. His loud voice startles some sleeping passengers.

CONDUCTOR

The train will stop for one hour.
The washrooms will open again after
departure. The station toilets
are located by the boiler. The next
stop will be in six hours. I repeat:
the train will stop for one hour.

Alenka sneaks outside the compartment, goes toward the exit and opens the door on the other side of her train.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE CAR

In front of Alenka sits a cattle-wagon with a wide open door. Several male voices scream, wail and moan inside the wagon.

MALE VOICES

- *Damn life! Damn war!
- *Someone have mercy! Kill me!
- *I can't live like this!
- *Damn Stalin! I fought for him!

AN ORDERLY sits on the floor smoking a cigarette, his legs hanging down. He wears a dirty civilian cap and a dirty white coat with a red logo reading "SPECIAL SERVICES" on it. He looks drunk.

Alenka waves at him. He smiles and waves back. He speaks with a hoarse voice.

ORDERLY

Come on in, daughter, visit my boys.

Alenka's eyes are wide open. She doesn't move.

ALENKA

Your boys? Are they hurt?

ORDERLY

Come look at them. Don't be
afraid. They won't bite.

*The orderly laughs, then coughs. He looks around, takes a drink from a flask and
hides it under his coat.*

ALENKA

I can't. My mother won't allow
me to leave the train.

ORDERLY

I see. Do you want to look at
them and say hi?

*He turns around and lights up the inside of the car, slowly
moving the beam of his flashlight.*

*Inside the car, two dozen LARGE LEATHER BAGS are suspended
from the ceiling and tied to hooks on the floor. Sticking
out of the top of each bag is the shaven head of a man.
A few of them look at Alenka, their faces distorted with
forced smiles.*

MALE VOICES

- *Who is out there?
- *I can't see. Hey buddy, turn me around.
- *A little girl.
- *I had a girl like her. She died
from typhoid on the train.

Alenka is horrified.

ALENKA

H-hello t-there.

She looks at the orderly. He takes another sip, then whispers.

ORDERLY

They were wounded in a battle.
They have no arms, no legs.

ALENKA

They are heroes.

ORDERLY

The army has put them into these bags.

ALENKA

Who takes care of them?

MALE VOICE

He does. He's a good man.

ORDERLY

I'm their buddy, their mother,
their father. I feed them like
babies. Then they go in the bucket
through the holes.

ALENKA

What will happen to them?

ORDERLY

They'll probably be taken far
away, so no one will have to see
them. I'll always be with them.

ALENKA

Do you have a family?

ORDERLY

Not any more. My entire family has
been killed. They're my family now.

He shakes the flask and giggles.

ORDERLY

(continues)

And this is my best friend...

*THE ENGINE WHISTLES, and the train jerks. The bags shake,
too.*

ORDERLY

Every boy has a swing. Aren't
they lucky?

MALE VOICES

*Goodbye, little girl.

*I was a teacher before.

*I love kids.

*Tell your kids about us when
you grow up.

*Alenka nods. The train with the red crosses on its walls slowly moves. The
orderly waves at Alenka. She raises her hand looking at the last wagon. Then she
closes the door, goes back to her compartment, climbs at her berth, lies down and puts
a pillow over her head.*

This is My Rock

By Amy Volz

My ears are overwhelmed with the sound of my breath trying to remain slow, steady, and even. Concentrating on nothing but the rise and fall of my chest pressed against the solid rock in front of me I didn't dare move ... yet. My muscles start to twitch and I feel the pain straining beyond my will. I am several yards off the ground and there is nothing but the rock, the rope, and my concentration keeping me company. Just breathe in and out, steady and smooth, be just like the rock.

Inevitably, I have two choices teetering in front of me: up or down. Both time and my muscles are fading, and neither the rock nor I was moving. Feeling one with this solid, unforgivable formation, I came to the decision to ascend. Prying away my fingers and extending my right hand from its former position, I momentarily relieve my strained muscles. Reaching up, I feel every muscle in my body extend and stretch down the length of my arm and around my side. Everything accelerates now – my breath, my heart, and even the feel of the sun between my shoulder blades becomes more intense. I can hear my gear scrape along the granite and feel the elasticity of the rope that serves as my umbilical cord on my journey upward. I extend my legs, finally reaching full height, and step on a small ledge big enough for a balanced toe. My arm slips into the next pocket. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the relief of temporary relaxation.

Almost to the top, I rest my sun-kissed cheek on the cold surface of my companion. Up here it is just the rock and me, and for now this is my rock. I own this rock. When I visit my motionless friend, I feel that together we can defy Newton and his laws. Just to prove gravity is no longer an issue I take my next step on the way to the top. Now I fall into a pattern of reach, grab, pull, and

breathe. Most importantly, to breathe.

The end of my expedition is finally in sight. My muscles know it is coming and they ache for it. With two trembling, meek arms I reach out to pull myself up and over the ledge. My breath is shallow and strained by now; my legs are like liquid ready to evaporate. This moment is worth it, to be located right here at the very top of my journey. I wanted to throw my arms out and float, but I could not manage to take my hand away from the friend that guided and assisted me here. I slid down to sit on the ledge and my legs collapse, falling before me without my control. I become motionless.

From shallow gasps I regain my breath: slow, smooth, and calm. Regaining my composure it is time to prepare for the descent. I adjust my rope, finalizing a job well done. I position myself on the side of the rock and glance over my shoulder. My supporting team is below, lying about like it's a lazy Sunday afternoon, faint laughter and the nonchalant feel of summer echoing from them. My turn is over; it's time to return to that solid earth so far beneath me now. I shout to my partner I am ready to return to reality, and with one giant leap I am on my way. Bouncing off the side of the rock with agility and speed I close my eyes and before I know it, I land with the heaviness of humanity. My journey ended with a two-minute float downward. Suddenly very aware of Newton's law, I unhook my rope and fall to the floor with the best feeling one can experience: exhaustion.

Daze of Wonder

By Steve Bartetzko

I sit here now, in a daze of wonder
Feeding my emptiness.
I hope one day, I will be like others
Someone to hold, someone to kiss.

I stand here now, dreams torn asunder
Watching the world go by.
If I had one dream, it would be unlike others
Never to fear, never to cry.
I lay here now, being well under
Expectations laid at my feet.
Might I one day, find someone other?
Perhaps one day, we might meet.

I dance here now, amazed at the wonder
Seeing what I had missed.
There will someday, be another
To share irresistible bliss.

Silent Wings

By Amber Steffey

bird of prey
meets the dove
slaughtered open
hollowed out
bestial scavengers
dine on the death
why do I do this for Love?

two halves once made whole
ripped apart by foreign lips
bitter crimes dwell on my carrion soul
scabs still bleed
and scars do not heal
it occurs to the dove now
you cannot feel

My Real O.C.

By Adriel Heck

A long stretch of aquamarine blue lined by glistening sand is surrounded by cliffs that are dotted with various colored and differently shaped houses, condos, and apartments. Pacific Coast Highway runs like a swift river through the center of town, carrying in its current a mixture of cars, SUVs, and pedestrians. The highway connects Orange County's beach cities like a central lifeline. Traffic flowing north and south, running from Newport down to San Clemente. Restaurants, shops, and homes border the asphalt river. When you come close to the end of PCH, you will find a town called Dana Point, which has become the backdrop of my life – my real O.C.

I live in a modest townhouse nestled in between an eclectic mix of homes on a street connected to PCH. An incredible view can be seen from my back patio – the harbor to the right and San Clemente to the left. This view is the extent of my wealth. On a clear day you can count the endless sailboats docked in the harbor and trace each crevice in the bend of the coastline. The sun reflects off the blue water, sending blinding glints of light through my windows. I would not change this scenery for the world. Not a mansion by any means – my God, I only have two bathrooms. But in my eyes it is a palace.

My best friends all live in close proximity, now that they're finally back in town after graduating college. We've stayed tight since high school; it's hard not to when living in such a small town. Much like our surroundings, we all have very unique styles and characteristics, but somehow we fit together picture perfectly. Some of us are still students, while others are working in construction or managing retail shops. We are all working to make a living.

Our local hangout is an Irish pub. Having a hangout is such

a cliché, but sometimes I think it's the glue that holds us together. Whether late night dates, a morning after breakfast, or just a quick drink, we can always rely on the pub to be there for us. There's always a familiar face there no matter what time of day. The stale smell of beer and outdoor fire pits are always comforting.

Even during the winter you can find us at the beach. We are passionate surfers and avid beach lovers, and an extensive part of our lives are spent on the beach. Summer barbeques and winter bonfires bring us together for fun and laughter. We share a love for the outdoors, spending time driving up the coast or going to the local mountains for a snowboard trip. Adventure is always at our fingertips in this prime location. We've been friends for so many years, and we have created many memorable experiences in this town.

There's nothing eccentric about the way any of us live our lives. Our time is not spent divided between attending fancy banquets and shopping at Fashion Island. Our parents' credit cards do not fill the slots of our Gucci wallets. We do not walk to the beach in our Prada sandals or carry our dogs in Louis Vuitton carrying cases. Our cars do not change to match our outfits, and they definitely do not exceed the cost of four years of college tuition. Our houses do not stretch across an entire block and our neighbors are not celebrities. None of us have yachts sitting among the humble boats in the harbor. Dripping diamonds are only an image in our imaginations. The only designer clothes we own are last year's style and were bought on clearance. Birthdays are not spent at the Ritz Carlton. None of us vacation in the Bahamas. I live a simple life in a small town in Orange County. The only thing that reeks of wealth is the beautiful scenery, not the people. The O.C. has street corners, grocery stores, and gas stations just like everywhere else.

I Would Have Loved You Forever

By Fatemeh "Fatty" Moghadam

i would have loved you forever

i would have loved you forever

i would have loved you forever

day in and day out

each breath

each whisper

until i died

you forgot me

once, twice

too many times

you lied

with words that reeked

stenches so repugnant

words masked with fear

you were nothing but a selfish coward

i was lovable and you loved me

i was unleaveable and yet you left me
i loved you once and then it drained from my every pore
i would have loved you forever
singing in my nightgown
to a man i never knew
words of love that were irreplaceable
i would have loved you forever
i stopped and now you stop to think of me
twice over
a thousand times a day
call me repeatedly in a hurry
as if there has been a delay
frustrated
sexually emotionally mentally
committing sins of adultery while you sleep
do you weep in her arms while you think of me
so sad when you walked away that night
tears forming in your eyes
all i saw was the reflection of the girl you tore apart and left to die

Farewell...

By Saam Sadeghi

If I should leave on the epoch of tomorrow
I will only ask for the wisdom of sorrow
And the light of the divine
When I watch the smile of yesterday fade
On the eye meant to hold an eternity
I cannot blame or detest in a crying game
I must now bid farewell till darkened ages,
Such as these, makes flesh resonate
On the horizon, my lovely siren dear

Home is Where To Be

By Krystal R. Kennedy

A wise person once said, "Home is where the heart is." A person's home exuberates many different feelings, thoughts, or even people. Home means warm greetings at the door, smiley faces in the morning, and big turkey dinners during the holidays. When people walk into my home, the scent of vanilla fills the air upon a summer's night. Over a candle-lit fireplace, my family gathers around and discusses many different aspects or events in each others' lives. Not the normal "Leave it to Beaver" household, my family consists of only two members other than myself. My mother is a

"When my father left our family . . . my heart sank believing I would never have a complete home again."

beautiful, upstanding, classy woman with bright green eyes that light up the world. My brother is a 23 year-old hyperactive young man with a heart of gold. When my father left our family and our home slightly over three years ago, my heart sank believing I would never have a complete home again. As time went on, however, I realized many things. I now know that family is not just about a mom, a dad and 2.5 children, but so much more than that. Home is a place of refuge from the huge storm we call life. A place where you can laugh, rejoice or even shed a tear. Home means family, love, respect, honesty and peace. Even though I have traveled all over the world, my home is still my favorite place to be. I have moved a lot over the past few years, yet my feelings have always remained the same. No matter where one lives, if the people you love surround you, that is what truly makes a house a home.

Silver

By Robin Martin

Joy precedes us all
And happiness is a mere adjective
My existence is based on choices set in stone
Yet they crumble as I speak
My life is no better than a monologue
A set of words put together
To mean something, to someone, at a specific time
The burdens I carry will be my parents' epitaph
It's a wonder how the sun can rise each morning
and the stars can console me each night
Yet the path to eternity
lies in the unknown abyss of regrets and mistakes
Washed away in pools of decisions

Self Portrait

By Helen Miller

My brain is a star
Miraculously clear and free
In the open sky,
My heart a candle flame
With warmly glowing tip,
My soul a flaming torch,
Ever striving toward purity.
A thing of light am I,
The rising sun on a white ship.
Across my path one shadow falls, but one.
My body will eclipse the rising sun.

Into Their Realm

By Diane Skinner

He arrived from the airport tired and dehydrated, regretting too late his decision to come. His fatigue would have to be ignored. He could catch up on his sleep later at the hotel, succumbing to the comforts of the elegant suite. At the present moment all he could think of was satisfying his annoying thirst. He was not a frequent traveler. It had been a year since he hobnobbed and rubbed elbows with the upper echelon of the literary world. Such occasions bored him. He found it nauseating to pretend to be enraptured by the “stimulating” discussions. However, seeing his name on the gold lettered engraved invitation as the ‘Guest of Honor’ piqued his curiosity. Never one to shy away from controversy or complementary cuisine, he figured he would make an appearance. He could always smile, shake hands, kiss babies, that sort of thing and then leave to ferret out any local pub that had good ale and good conversation.

He unpacked his suitcase and read the invitation. He read it several times. Carl Weston. His name was spelled correctly. Carl Weston . . . playwright . . . to be honored . . . How incredulous the whole thing seemed. Not because he felt inept nor humbled, but because he had been reviled for his audacity to put verse to the disagreement of conventionality. Yet, tonight he was to be esteemed. The iconoclast was to be honored. “Honored,” he said aloud, swirling his chardonnay and draining the glass in congratulatory pretense.

“What does one wear to an event where one is the Guest of Honor?” Weston muttered sarcastically as he refilled the glass and satisfied his thirst.

The soiree was held in a reserved room. Tables wrapped in white linen supported ornate urns bursting with lily bouquets. The fine china, crystal wine goblets and too much silverware exposed

the pomp and circumstance he detested. Weston quickly scanned the room. He easily classified the clusters of men and women; the eager to please group, the networking group, and the “came with their own agendas” group. Opportunists attempting to be something they’re not, he thought. He couldn’t help being a realist. He had always stated the obvious. And here at this literary festival, just like in one of his dramas, the irony was being played out. He laughed aloud at his own private joke.

Hearing Weston’s voice, an ample man turned and staggered over. He thrust out his hand to indicate his intent to engage Weston in a hardy handclasp. “Congratulations,” he said. “You are well deserving of this recognition.” Many of the others exchanging pleasantries with Weston were just as brief. He preferred it that way. The room was filled with playwrights and scholars, poets and authors, editors and publicists. They droned on discussing genre, content, and the resurgence of poetry while skillfully balancing drinks and hors d’oeuvres. All gingerly managed to avoid the taboo subject that had caused the denouncement and the paradoxically the coronation of the man for whom they had gathered.

The accolades were insufferable. Weston felt like he was being broad brushed with a crackle glaze, the first few coats going on smooth and shiny. But as the evening waned, the flattery exposed its true nature and became brittle and cracked, suffocating him. He needed to breathe. He needed to peel their sentiments off of his skin. He needed a drink. He didn’t need an excuse to leave. He never made excuses.

Outside, a light rain caused the beams from the street lamp to appear surreal. Squinting his eyes to look up into the lamppost, Weston drew a deep breath and exhaled. He wanted to surrender to the choreography of the rhythmic shadows. He wanted to experience the transient light, the loose distinctiveness of the buildings, and the wet gleam that began to puddle at his feet, but his thoughts refused to shelf the necessary questions. Why did he become a writer? Was she the reason? Years ago, the guilt had been masked by a tenacious obsession to find the right words to colorize the blank white pages. Perfectly placed words juxtaposed to make one feel,

while his sentiments remained sequestered between the lines.

Weston pulled his coat collar up snugly around his neck and wandered on. He stopped in front of a neon light beckoning the lonely. He approached the doorway as if it were a familiar friend. The stale odor of liquor and cigarettes drew him inside. The darkness enveloped him like a warm embrace. Weston could never regard any of these places as just a bar. To him it was like a womb, always accepting, always nurturing. The music lapped over his emotions like amniotic fluid. And the drink. Ah, the drink. Mother's milk.

The place was not crowded. Weston felt disappointed because he wouldn't have an opportunity to rouse the patrons into lengthy discussions about debatable issues. But he was still exhausted from his trip, so he resigned to sit at an empty table in the back. Stoic faces met his glances. A man sat at the bar with both hands coddling a warm beer. His cigarette smoldered in the ashtray next to him. Several stools over, a woman wearing unkempt makeup swayed to the music. It seemed as if she vaguely remembered the words to the song. Or perhaps she was talking to someone in the shade of a memory. It really didn't matter which. She no longer cared.

“Weston could never regard any of these places as just a bar. To him it was like a womb, always accepting, always nurturing. The music lapped over his emotions like amniotic fluid. And the drink. Ah, the drink. Mother's milk.”

The waitress hovered next to an old man playing darts. On the table beside him rested a folded paper and two jiggers, one full and one empty. The liquid was dark amber. “Scotch?” thought Weston. He often matched people's drinks to their personalities.

Yet to Weston, this man looked like a wine drinker, someone who at one time really appreciated the subtleties between a

Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot Blanc. The man was short and overweight. His head sat on his shoulders as if he had no neck. His hairline drew the shape of a crescent moon. He wore a loose cloak with a rope tied around his waist. The cloak dragged on the floor as he backed up to take aim before letting the dart sail through the air. He was remarkably accurate. The waitress commented after every turn, laughing too loudly, and standing too close. She noticed Weston and came over to his table to take his order. "Scotch." He said. "Two jiggers."

Weston watched as the old man tenderly played with the paper on the table. He smoothed the surface with his hands and gently unfolded it until it lay open, spread out, and exposed to view. The man lifted a pen. He introduced the tip of the pen to the paper and placed his hand reassuringly on one corner as it started to curl. Rhythmically, the pen stroked the paper. Over and over the words were laid on top. The paper responded and absorbed all of its ink.

"Hi, I'm Carl Weston. Mind if I take a turn?" Weston asked the old man, as he pointed with his chin over to the dartboard on the wall.

"An appeal so gracious must not be denied," the man replied. His voice was rich and full in sound. He stared directly at Weston. His face was cragged as if he had seen too many sunsets. Weston noticed that around the stranger's neck was an amulet. It was exactly the same color as the man's eyes. Obsidian.

"Thank you," said Weston as he feigned interest in the dart game. "I noticed you're pretty good at this."

"What is your agenda?" the old man asked, already knowing Weston's motives. Weston became puzzled. He didn't have an agenda. He was just making small talk, shooting the breeze. The stranger stood up and walked over to the dartboard. He picked up one of the darts. "Let's see if my luck will continue?" He threw the dart precisely at the bull's eye while continuing to stare directly at Weston with his steely black eyes. Weston had bent the elbow at plenty of bars, but he never came across a character like this guy before.

The old man pulled up a chair and spoke to Weston. "Come. Let us sit together." Weston felt uneasy, but curious. He nervously

made a flippant remark about the waitress' figure, just trying to form some sort of connection with this odd man.

"Why do you permit your past to jade your judgment for your future?" the stranger asked. "What corroded you so that you loathe love?"

"Love?" remarked Weston. "What's your understanding about love, old man?"

"I have arduously searched the multi-dimensions of this emotion, all the while, jeopardizing nothing."

"Are you talking about personal experiences or do you just read about it?" quipped Weston.

"Oh, pitiable man. I know your dispiritedness has brought you here. Each encounters life's passage uniquely, yet rejecting the universal experiences of love, brings mourning to the souls of all."

"I'm a playwright." Weston snapped back defensively. "Life, love, sorrow, and death are topics that keep me employable."

The old man continued, "Ah! So you have spent your journey in your passions, your work; and now your own story enacts the guise of indifference. I know the thoughts behind your words. Nightfall shadows perceptions, but day delivers distinctions." Abruptly the waitress hollers over to the two men, "Last call, guys. That's all she wrote." With that, Weston jerked his head around and stared at her.

One more time the waitress dims the bar's lights and lowers the door's curtain. In the back, a table retains markers of the evening's history: a moist crumpled paper, and two jiggers, one full, one empty. Back at the hotel, Weston drops onto the suite's bed, but sleep eludes him. His persistent thoughts become centrifugal in his mind, swirling and twisting and turning. A tear seeps from his eyes as he speaks out, softly...

His whispers from the past become a cacophony into the future. They mesh with the pendulous movement of an amulet as it forever watches time. Across town a lamppost yields its light to the new day's dawning, while all streets become occupied with people busily ignoring their lives.

what if our quest to understand why life exists
when the universe began
when the universe will end
is futile
a waste of an already short lifetime

and what if death is a reminder
to focus on the present

Remembering Calcutta

By Georgiale Granger

I remember living in Calcutta, India in 1971.

I remember arriving at Dum Dum Airport. Yes, that really is its name. M.P. Murti, my husband Fred's business associate, greets us. A haze of smoke that smells like burning garbage chokes me. "What's that smell?" I ask. Murti says he doesn't smell anything. I will learn that it comes from cow dung used by the lower class people to heat their huts and cook their food.

I remember the heavy rain as we drive toward the city, the road so deep in water that it comes through the floorboards. We stall at an intersection where a crowd of men are hacking a cowering man with knives. Murti says he is of the wrong political party.

I remember a *dboti*-clad man squatting to relieve himself in a drainage ditch while another man nearby brushes his teeth with a neem tree twig that he swishes about in the same ditch. "In India, people relieve themselves in public, but eat in private," Murti says.

I remember arriving at the guest house and being greeted by Thomas, the bearer. He shows us to our bedroom. The smell of Flit insecticide spray burns my nostrils. The air conditioner's chill makes it worse. Will we have to sleep all night like this?

I remember Vanaja Murti who helps me get acquainted with the city and its customs. Vanaja has free time on her hands after completing her Masters degree at Calcutta University while her father finds a proper husband for her of the same caste and skin color.

I remember the frail women in grimy white *sarees* collecting dung and forming it into patties which they plaster along the roadside. They stack the dried cakes into baskets and carry it on their heads to deliver to the people living in the shanties. The cakes

will be used as fuel for heat and cooking. The residents also spread fresh dung on their earthen floors. The ammonia smell keeps the vermin away.

I remember Dunghi, the sweeper, in his crisply-pressed khaki shorts and shirt as he moves in a squat position along the floor with a flat brush and dust pan. Because he seldom bathes, bed bugs once crawled down his hand when I gave him his wages.

I remember Hogg's Market, also called New Market, where I can buy anything from brilliant silk *sarees*, brass lamps, kitchen equipment, turkeys, lizards, chickens, even an elephant. The latter has to be ordered in advance though.

I remember going to the zoo where the animals are kept in immaculate cages and fed with choice food. Here, if I choose, I can take a container to buy rhino urine to cure whatever ails me. I remember taking a golf lesson on the practice green in the center of the town while goats, cows and buffalo wander about and people crouch on the curbs snickering as they watch.

I remember Lakshmi Krishnamurti sitting beside me at the concerts and dances, explaining the symbolism and discussing philosophy afterwards.

I remember Asha, my young neighbor, inviting me to lunch and dancing for me as she explains the meaning of the movements of her hands, feet and eyes. She tells me about her religious training when she had to bathe the gods in the family shrine, place garlands around their necks and set food before them.

I remember meeting each week with the members of the American Women's Club, most of whom are not American, but British, Indian, and German, while we package pills for the lepers cared for by Mother Theresa.

I remember our Indian friends waiting with us for twelve hours at the airport to say goodbye after presenting us with engraved silver napkin rings as a token of their esteem.

Nature Song

By Diane Skinner

Let your blossoms sleep
in the warmth of my snow
Let my streams touch smooth rocks
so your melodies, to my heart flow.

Let my winds brush rough surfaces
to stir your water's wings
Let my stars send sunshine paths
So your home, my heart will bring.

I Silently Cry

By Aurene Faith Pasion

I don't know why my eyes are closed
I'm a walking dead; I'm a living stone.
Under the sun, my heart is cold.
I feel too numb for love to hold.

But as the shadows engulf me
My barriers fall
And in the arms of darkness
My fears unroll

Then longing sets in,
The ache becomes stronger
In shadows I huddle
As tears spill over

And in the silence
I embrace the cries
Of hopelessness and loneliness
Of despair and strife.

Trash

By Kim Gonzalez

“Nobody will know.”

“You just want any excuse to get me naked, Billy Warner.” I twisted a red curl around my finger and tried to sound indignant.

Billy adjusted the brim of an imaginary hat on his head, put one hand in his pocket and gave me the best ‘Aw shucks’ look he could muster. “Miss Wilder, I do suppose you’re right.” He drew me to him and whispered in my ear, “What are you afraid of, Vicky?” My breath caught in my throat. I savored his scent and feel before carrying on the charade. Just for a moment longer...

I batted my eyes at him, parting my lips in feigned shock. “If Bedford catches us in his pool, he’ll call the law on us.” I let my hands snake around his waist and under his shirt, enjoying his closeness and heat.

“We’ll just have to go on the lam then won’t we?”

I covered my mouth with my hand, leaning away from him as if trying to escape, pressing my hips closer to his. A shock coursed through my body – he was as excited as I was. “You would make an outlaw of me? That’s downright disrespectful.”

Billy’s hands slid down my back, caressing my skin. My heart was pounding in my chest, my breath suddenly shallow as if he’d stolen my air. He leaned his head close to my ear and growled, “Not nearly as disrespectful as what I am planning to do with you after our little swim.”

* * *

I dialed Lea’s number, let it ring once and hung up, immediately dialing the number for time. A mechanically feminine voice came on the line, “At the tone, the time will be ... two ... thirteen

... AM ...” The tone hiccupped and I clicked over to the incoming call.

“Lea, I need you to take me to the store.”

“Right now Vick?” Her voice was still rough with sleep.

“No, not right now. Tomorrow.”

“Couldn’t you have told me this in school?”

“Lea, I need a test.”

There was silence. Then, “Oh.” I heard rustling on the line and the soft snick of her lighter. My lungs burned for the taste of smoke in them. Usually I’d sneak out onto the porch to smoke, careful to put out the butts under the deck railing where my parents wouldn’t see the ash and burn. After ‘the Bedford incident’ last month, they’d changed the code on the house alarm though.

* * *

Billy leaned back against the headrest and sighed. My fists clenched so tightly in my lap that I thought my palms would bleed where my fingernails dug in. I couldn’t understand how he could even think of suggesting this.

“Why not Vicky?”

“I won’t do it, Billy. Take me home.” I held my breath, afraid I might scream at him if I didn’t.

“Vicky, it’s not even alive –” But it *could* be, if we let it. And it would be *ours*.

I stared straight ahead out the window, unable to look into his eyes. Every muscle in my body was tensed, ready to jump out of the car and run home – but we were far from home and it was past dark. I was trapped. “Now Billy. Take me home *now*.”

Billy shook his head, but turned the key in the ignition anyway.

* * *

Lea took a long drag off her cigarette and blew the smoke away from me. I wished she wouldn’t. I took a deep breath, trying to catch as much scent of it as I could.

"So did he change his mind?" She quirked an eyebrow up at me as she took another drag from her cigarette.

I nodded, picking at the pattern of crisscrossing stripes in my skirt. Whoever thought that gray, green and blue went well together on plaid must have been blind.

Lea inclined her head forward, "... buuut...?"

"But he's still going to the summer program at State."

"The little shit!" She ground out the butt of her cigarette on the sidewalk with surprising ferocity.

I waved my hands in the air ineffectually. "He won't get another opportunity like this, he needs to take it."

"Vick," Lea grabbed my arm. "There are more important things in life than scholarships. He could go to Jefferson with you this fall semester then transfer to State later."

I shook my head, "No, I *told* him to go." I couldn't ask him to give up his scholarship for me. Not when he obviously didn't want to.

* * *

"Victoria Lynn, get in here right now."

What could possibly be wrong now? I pushed away from the computer with a sigh.

Mother was standing in the middle of my bathroom, holding my trashcan in her hand. It matched the towels perfectly and the plastic had little decorative flowers etched around the lip to accentuate the floral patterns in the wallpaper. She thrust the container towards me. I glanced over her shoulder in the mirror, we were a study in contrasts. Every neatly trimmed silver hair on the back of her head was always perfectly coifed. My red hair always fell in wild curls no matter what she or I tried to do with it, much to her chagrin. Her clothes clung to body as if they had been tailor made just for her. At forty-something, she still had a good figure. I'd never had much of a figure to begin with, and when I got one, the curves went to all the wrong places. My clothes never fit me right before, now they hung loosely around me. We were a Norman Rockwell

scene gone horribly awry. With the trashcan held out to me, I imagined a number of caustic captions, and settled on "The Invitation."

"Well?" She punctuated the demand by jabbing the container at me again. I glanced up at her, my eyebrows knit in confusion. She glared at me and rolled her eyes. "I haven't seen a dirty napkin in your garbage can for over a month, Victoria."

"I was suddenly three again and she was holding up the broken cookie jar, glaring at me with accusation in her sharp eyes for having broken her perfect jar, while blood dribbled down my ankle where a jagged edge had caught me."

My heart stopped. My feet went cold. I never imagined it would come out like this – her free hand akimbo, her mouth a rigid line. I was suddenly three again and she was holding up the broken cookie jar, glaring at me with accusation in her sharp eyes for having broken her perfect jar, while blood dribbled down my ankle where a jagged edge had caught me.

"If you are pregnant, and you think you're still going to Jefferson, you've got another think coming."

My stomach lurched as something icy grabbed hold of it. "Mother, I *earned* that scholarship. I'll lose everything..."

The bathroom was suddenly too small and her face too close to mine. I wanted to crawl into the outthrust trashcan and disappear.

"You think you should be rewarded for slutting around and getting yourself in trouble?"

When I was twelve or thirteen, I'd seen an After School Special about a girl whose boyfriend got her pregnant. Her socialite parents couldn't bear the disgrace, and pressured her to 'have it taken care of.' I had been so mortified that I asked my mother if she would ever force me to go to a clinic if I got pregnant. Even then

she had looked at me with the same hard look she was giving me now and said, "Why do you ask?" The words came out as crisp as her starched collars, pointed, even accusatory. She never answered.

My mind raced back to the computer. Billy hadn't returned my calls or e-mail messages in a week. Even Lea had been too busy working to earn money for Jefferson City College to spend much time with me this summer. We were going to room together at Jefferson. It wasn't much, but it was my ticket out. Secretly, I had dreamed that Mother would hug me, tell me we could get through this together, tell me it would be all right. Any fantasy I had of finding support and comfort from her disappeared along with any hope of escape.

The words came out of my mouth, "I'm not in trouble mother." I would have been surprised to hear them if I didn't feel so numb already. If she wanted blood, I'd give it to her. "I'm just stressed Mother, it's been a difficult year. I had to work very hard for my scholarship."

City of Smiles

By Shinta Walean

Small screen sirens
sculptors of deformity
scalpels,
daughters,
and a dream.

Girls in wobbly heels,
bookless backpacks,
midnight "uncles",
blind lights,
a wink,
and a dance.

Light Jazz and lattes,
a closed-door five-star,
signatures,
smooth suits,
chuckles,
and a nod.

Judges with envelopes,
champagne Generals,
moonlit uniforms,
shovels,
mothers
and a scream.

City of smiles,
why do your shouts
evaporate,
wait
and beg
to be forgotten?

My Fear

By Reiss Duplessis

My fear, it seems, could come to pass.
The dreaded fright we dare not grasp,
That man for reasons based on faith,
Professed love of God and love of state,
 May each and all annihilate
Because love is lost in worlds of hate.

Learning Life

By Lindsey Ho

Do you remember when the highlight of your day was watching Sesame Street? Or when Mr. Rogers taught you how to tie your shoes? When you'd fall asleep to your mom reading you *Clifford the Big Red Dog*? Life was so much easier then. The hardest thing you had to do was spell your name in shaving cream and count to ten. Life consisted of calling up your neighbors every day to see if they wanted to come out and play Four Squares or ride bikes together. Relationships always seemed so perfect when you played house, never having to deal with broken hearts and overplayed emotions. You always thought you were invincible, and had the confidence to do anything to which you set your mind. Nothing was impossible. A bruise or an ouchie was just a reminder of how much fun you had over the past few days. The Brave Little Toaster was your hero. You wanted to be Dr. Suess when you grew up. Barbie was an example of what the perfect life should be like. She had everything, and you wanted to be just like her. There was a mutual feeling between the boys and the girls that we all just had cooties, but you were a real rebel child if you had a crush on a boy. And you didn't dare to kiss one unless you wanted to hear the gossip in the sandbox the next recess. Disneyland was an enterprise that you someday wanted to own. Crying wasn't because your heart ached, it was because your knee hurt. Death never crossed your mind. Neither did getting a job or buying a car or dealing with choosing a college.

And then you grew up... and not even all the way. You hit middle school, where depending on how cool you were, you were placed in a social group and standing. "Playing" became hanging out. Boys became your toys. And instead of doing Barbie's hair and makeup you were perfecting your own. Stress became a real factor in your life as you started to get responsibilities and jobs. School

became less of a playground and more of a long and tedious work zone. Kids you used to hang out with deserted you when they were welcomed into the “popular” crowd. Things that used to be easy became so much more complex. And then came high school, and later college – an over-dramatized place where you are judged every day. And you just want to be a kid again. You want to feel the wind in your face as you attempt to swing so high, almost over the top. You want to slide down that slide one more time. Books are just words on a page now, the colors not so vivid anymore. Sometimes you just wish you could get up and fly, just like Peter Pan. Everything is changing, and your struggle that used to be to get to the other side of the monkey bars is now to get to the other side of life.

If The Moon Were a Flower

By Joan M. Ross

I was convinced that Mrs. Sweeney's garden lit up the neighborhood every spring and summer out of fear. She had a way about her that belied her 4'10" frame, so that if she ordered her garden to bloom, by God, it bloomed and bloomed profusely. She and I were friends. I really liked her a lot, mostly because she liked me and treated me as an equal, not as a nine year old. On those long summer days when school's intrusion into important aspects of my life was on hold, we had lemonade under the grape arbor in her backyard where she told me stories of the good old days when she was a little girl living right here on McKee Avenue. As she talked, her hands reminded me of butterflies, the way they fluttered back and forth punctuating her stories with periods, commas, and exclamation points, and her brown eyes would light up just thinking of the fine times she and her family used to have.

Gardening had turned her skin a lovely brown, which I thought looked great against her grey hair, but she'd complain, "I look like a shriveled up old farm lady," and say she's going to buy herself a big straw hat. She never did.

Since Mrs. Sweeney "borrowed" bits and pieces of any plant she liked within a two-mile radius and she had a magical green thumb, her garden exploded into wonderful mixtures of geraniums, succulents and tangles of all kinds of flowers.

Best of all was the greenhouse her husband built for her a few years before he died. From demolished buildings and junkyards, he had collected all kinds of glass windows in their frames and constructed a little greenhouse in the backyard for his wife's collection of succulents, germinating seeds and bags of cow manure. He had never bothered to paint it, so it was a crazy quilt of all shades of fading colors and peeling paint with streaks of rust

spilling over the glass from the rusted hinges and locks.

Around the front porch grew her annuals: great mounds of zinnias, marigolds, dahlias, pansies, and canna lilies. Sometimes she and I would sit on the porch breathing in the night blooming jasmine and watch night slowly move across the garden.

One day Mrs. Sweeney called my sister and me over to show us something. "See this plant?" She pointed to a sort of cactus-looking plant growing at the edge of a plot of tea roses. "That's a night blooming cereus. It only blooms one night, and I've waited over a year for it to show itself. Tonight's the night." She acted excited.

We stared at the plant. It wasn't very interesting looking but it did have a big bud that looked pretty swollen. Besides, by August anything out of the ordinary felt welcome as the long summer days had started to drag, so we promised to come back after dark to see it and bring our mother and father.

"Sometimes she and I would sit on the porch breathing in the night blooming jasmine and watch night slowly move across the garden."

Somehow word spread throughout the street, with and without our help, that Mrs. Sweeney had an exotic plant that only opens every *ten* years, when the moon is full, and tonight's the night (botanical accuracy didn't seem relevant).

As the sun went down, my sister and I became the official messengers for the neighborhood. "Has it started to open yet?"

"Not yet."

"Let us know when." Even neighbors who refused to allow us to walk across their grass, much less plant on it, called us over for news.

At about 8:00 it was getting dark and since Mrs. Sweeney's porch light didn't carry far enough, she brought out her floor lamp with the wide pink shade and tassels and a long extension cord.

She set the lamp on the grass over the cereus. A big almost full moon appeared on the horizon. When Mrs. Sweeney brought out her wicker rocking chair and switched on the lamp, my sister and I plopped down beside her staring at the cereus. It looked like something was stirring inside the bud. And like the moths that began flickering around the lamp, the neighbors began drifting over, one by one, greeting Mrs. Sweeney and watching the cereus bud which had begun to slowly, ever so slowly, open. I could hear their whispers, "Look, it's opening!"

"Yes, and it only blooms once every fifty years."

"I heard it's every one hundred years."

"No."

"Yes."

The flower's petals slowly unclosed like an opening eye, exposing a large lovely white flower, petals a creamy wax with bright yellow stamens nestled within its pale lavender throat. If the moon were a flower, I thought, it would look like this. The neighbors stood around ooh-ing and aah-ing, while in her wicker chair Mrs. Sweeney held court, greeting people she barely knew. Like the cereus bud, she seemed to open and expand in the warmth of their interest.

After a while some of the men broke into smaller groups talking about the weather and the condition of the war raging in Europe while most of the women stayed around Mrs. Sweeney discussing her garden and asking for her advice about their own gardens.

When we kids got bored listening to the grownups, we played on the lawn rolling and giggling, imagining ourselves to be the central actors on Mrs. Sweeney's stage, her lamp illuminating not only the cereus but us as well. This whole event had brought forth neighbors who had barely nodded to one another, and now they were standing together laughing and talking as they watched us play in the clear summer night.

Everyone stayed in Mrs. Sweeney's yard a long time before they called in their children and wandered home after taking one last look at the night blooming cereus. I could see house lights turn on

one by one and could hear the muted sounds of radios. Then my mother's voice called out, "Come on in now; it's getting late."

Reluctantly we left Mrs. Sweeney still sitting under her lamp watching her beautiful white flower; she was smiling. I could imagine her saying tomorrow, "It's all through blooming but wasn't it a glory while it lasted?"

I don't think she heard us say goodnight. I remember wondering, before I fell asleep, if she'd sit there all night looking at the night-blooming cereus. I kind of thought she would.

Compromise is a Girl's Best Friend

By Nikita Menta

A scantily-clad Nicole Kidman flies through the air, her ears and throat dripping with diamonds, and as she slowly lowers herself to the ground, she utters the oh-so-important phrase, "Diamonds are a girl's best friend."

While I understand this scene from *Moulin Rouge* portrays a fictional event, I do believe its social message is quite clear. The song and dance act as a clever decoy to avert our attention from this hush-hush topic, but the implication that love can be bought is apparent from the very start. While some young women do in fact fit this bill (no offense to Anna Nicole Smith), my integrity along with that little voice in my head began to wonder, "What happens when diamonds stop becoming a girl's best friend?"

But first I must admit I am not an innocent bystander. Like any other girl, platinum and diamonds will always make my heart flutter, and a nice car and flashy suits never fail to catch my eye. But the soul-searching question is what qualities in a man do I find most important?

I am definitely not stating that a man who can ensure financial security is a prize only for the superficial; rather I am questioning where his loyalties will lie when I can't see my shoes and peanut butter on watermelon sounds good at two in the morning. I don't expect Prince Charming to come sweep me off my feet, but I do know that the effects of popular culture and the complete "Sex in the City" DVD collection have somewhat tainted my view of the opposite sex. And if there is anything that that show has made clear, it's that the traditional fairy tale man, the one who remembers anniversaries and doesn't mind it when we are on that time of the month, doesn't exist.

With a little advice from the Will in my life, I graced my CD

player with the Moulin Rouge soundtrack in hopes that its blatant push towards materialism would tip the scales and end this diamond disaster. As I drifted into the world of can-can dancers and chorus filled brothels, one seductive verse engraved itself into my mind, "Men grow cold as girls grow old, and we all lose our charms in the end, but square-cut or pear-shaped these rocks won't lose their shape." So maybe diamonds are a girl's best friend!

And then again, maybe not... my intuition and a few wise words from my mother set the verdict in the stone (or diamond if you like). Diamonds can put a smile on a girl's face for some time, but it doesn't ensure a healthy relationship. While having a big house, a fancy car, and a man with the Midas touch makes for a fabulous outward appearance, it won't medicate a lover's quarrel. And for those of you who still are not convinced, let's take this off paper and into a real world situation.

The sparkling diamond that adorned J-Lo's left hand not so long ago definitely caught my eye and had me second-guessing my newfound disinterest in the material world. But, the point is that the diamond adorned (past tense), and if that huge pink rock has such little effect on long term happiness, then I am pretty sure that the gem that I have in store won't contain the secret to marital bliss.

Popular culture and the reality TV craze have only exploited marriage, creating a society who will never learn to compromise and instead chooses to meet conflict with divorce, lawsuits, and alimony. But we as women must question the integrity and sanctity of this so-called "holy matrimony." My point is, I know Fabio with his platinum credit cards and villas in Italy looks like "the one," but what would he be without the plastic or paper? A man who has learned the art of compromise, someone who understands that relationships are partnerships and not taking hostages, a gentleman who will stick with me through thick and thin, now that's my Prince Charming. And maybe we will drive into the sunset in a Toyota instead of a Mercedes and live in an apartment rather than a castle, but my fairytale doesn't need lots of shiny things because the one thing that I will have is that priceless closing line: and we will live happily ever after.

cloW.n

By Joseph Cahill

The cloW.n throws the balls high in the air
Count them. Admire them. Fixate on them.
He pulls the hammer back
You can't see. Distracted

You have grown accustomed to the sight
This aerial distraction
The truth sits on his lap waiting
To be aimed. Fired

The balls fall to the ground like heavy Fascist ideas
You don't notice
The cloW.n's hands continue to throw the empty air
Still heavy

He's the last thing you see
Standing over your dying body
Smoke still lingering
It's too late

Mariette's Party

By Reiss Duplessis

Mariette usually enjoyed the last minutes between daylight and darkness, when shadows hide from each other. Familiar shrubs, street signs and buildings lose their daytime identity and made way for the Queen of the Night who was readying to sing her aria. This evening, however, Mariette was not enjoying her favorite time of the day but was walking as fast as her tiny feet would take her. She wanted to get past the cemeteries before nightfall – no one ever walked past those walls after dark. She, like everyone in New Orleans, knew the walls were more than just structures to block the entry of the cemetery. They were the back sides of crypts that were wrapped around the outer perimeters of the old graveyard. She also knew how the care and upkeep of those old crypts was less than adequate. The whitewashed surfaces were no longer white but a dingy gray color, and they had large cracks on their surfaces, which threatened to expose their contents to anyone unfortunate enough to walk by. There was a musty, foul odor near the cemetery and Mariette assumed it was the odor of decaying bodies.

A cold October chill filled the air. Ominous purple and black clouds floated in on silent winds to form the evening sky. It might rain before she could get home and she did not have a raincoat or an umbrella. She reached inside her little blue, green and brown plaid canvas backpack and pulled out a colorful scarf. She placed the bag on the ground and absentmindedly leaned against the tall cemetery wall as she draped the scarf over her head, her ears, and around her face, and tied it into a knot that left little tails hanging below her chin. There was an immediate warmth and comfort when the soft silk of the scarf touched her skin. She bent down to pick up her bag but could not pull away from the wall. She wondered if, somehow, the wall was freshly whitewashed and she had got-

ten stuck to the fresh paint. She immediately knew, however, that the walls were not recently painted because no one ever bothered to paint those walls and whitewash did not stick to one the way paint does. How strange – she was just somehow attached. She reached back to push away, but her fingers seemed to mesh into a spongy surface that was the wall. Panic! Her fingers were digging in, deeper and deeper. The walls were not the old red brick covered by a thin layer of whitewashed plaster, it was like the sponge rubber found inside cast-away pillows. Her fingers were sinking in and being surrounded by the rubbery surface as it gave way and surrounded her fingers one by one. Her mouth opened to scream but the only sound was a guttural explosion of air from her throat. The words her brain tried to send to her vocal chords could not find their way and would not form. Desperately, she tried to pull away with all of the strength she could muster. The harder she struggled, the more she was meshed into the wall. “Oh God,” she prayed, “Help me! Oh, God! God!”

Her prayer of desperation was interrupted by sounds of laughter and music. The music was not like any she had heard before. It was lilting, yet abrasive. It was discordant, yet beautiful. It seemed to move almost visibly around her. There were words being sung or were those words only in her head?

“Mariette, Mariette, I am Marie Laveau.

Mariette, Mariette, bring me a gift, bring me a gift to show.
You know I’m here. You know, my dear, or I’ll never let you go.”

Mariette wanted to run, to scream, to be away from this place, but she could not move, she could not scream. She was helpless. She was being absorbed into and by the wall. “Oh God! Oh Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus! What’s happening to me?” She tried to activate her legs but they refused to move. She pulled her shoulder, her arms, her hips. Nothing would move. Her mind raced. What could she do? What could be happening to her? This was not real. It was a dream. Wake up Mariette! Wake up! She did not wake up. She could not wake up. She was not asleep. This was real! The

rhythm of the song changed. It was sweeter. It was soothing. It was assuring. It was seductive. The voice that sang the song was beautiful. It was loving. It was peaceful.

“Mariette, Marriette, hear my plea.

Mariette, Mariette, come in to see.

This dance is yours. Come in, my child. Bring your soul to me.”

She no longer struggled. Her body went limp and she gave in to the power of the wall. It was all consuming. It was swallowing her, taking her, body and soul, from the reality she knew. Everything was gray. Nothing was solid. The wall was a sponge. She was moving through it. Her thoughts were in a whirlwind of grayness. Still her senses were real. She felt. She saw. She heard. She smelled the vile odor that changed from pungent to sweet to the beauty of crushed rose petals and magnolias. She tried to close her eyes trying desperately to awaken from this nightmare, but her lids, like her limbs, were not working. Her eyes were wide open. She saw the gray. She saw the swirling interior of the walls, the decaying caskets, the bodies. She saw herself moving through this strange world of the crypts.

The swirling stopped. The gray was gone. Only the music went on. There was an orchestra someplace, out of site, playing a beautiful waltz. She was on the other side of the wall, inside the graveyard. It was not ugly. There was no decay. The white mausoleums were new, sparkling white with fresh flowers at every site. There were large urns of fresh flowers, beautiful plants and tall reeds that seemed to beam with a soft florescent glow. The entire place was lit, it seemed, by the glow and by the moon that was full, silver and smiling. Everything was beautiful. Mariette’s fear turned to fascination and wonder. Why was she not afraid? Laughing, there was laughter coming from behind the very large mausoleum directly in front of her. Her steps, her movement, her mind were beyond her control. She walked toward the laughter, the music, the revelry. Suddenly, there they were – people, beautiful people dancing, singing, and laughing. It was a *Bal Masque*. Women in long hoop skirts

danced by on the arms of gentlemen in full formal attire. Other women had soft, long dresses like the ones she had seen in books about Napoleon and Josephine. Still others wore dresses of times gone by, all of them beautiful. There were men in costumes one expected to see worn by Jean Lafitte's pirates. Black men and women danced by in simple costumes that were, in spite of their plainness, beautiful. Everyone was beautiful. Everyone was happy. It was a grand ball. Some of the revelers waved beautiful gold and silver goblets from which they sipped a sparkling drink that cascaded from tall elegant fountains.

“Her eyes were wide open. She saw the gray. She saw the swirling interior of the walls, the decaying caskets, the bodies. She saw herself moving through this strange world of the crypts.”

Mariette looked down at her skirt. It was not the one she wore earlier. It was pink and soft, and fell to the ground in full graceful folds. It seemed to react to the soft breezes that carried the sounds, the lovely aromas and the joy that as this place. She was part of the party. She was smiling. She was taken onto the arms of a handsome gentleman who led her in the most graceful dance around the tombs. He led her to a place where an old woman with a costume unlike the others sat – no, was enthroned - on a chair that glittered and gleamed in the moonlight. Behind her was a large golden plaque that read Marie Laveau. She smiled at Mariette and whispered, “Welcome, my child. Do you have a gift for me?”

Confused and at a loss because she had nothing but the clothes she wore, Mariette smiled her brightest smile, looked into the old woman's eyes and hummed her favorite melody. The humming became a *vocalize* that required no words. It was soft and lovely. The hidden orchestra took up the melody and the sound of Mariette's voice filled the night air. The old lady nodded, lifted her hand

beckoning Mariette to her side and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Your gift of song, my child, has pleased me. Go now, dance with your young man. You are happiness." Mariette danced, drank the wonderful nectar from her golden goblet and sang until the sun began to rise and everyone, including Mariette, with her young prince, went quietly to their chambers.

The church bells pealed slowly and mournfully as the funeral procession left the church and wound its way through the early morning, damp, gray streets of the city. When they arrived at St. Louis Cemetery, the priest led the way through the gates mumbling his prayer for the dead and sprinkling holy water on the pink casket as he went. The procession stopped at the gravesite and the prayers were said, the dust sprinkled and the pallbearers lifted the casket to slide it into the crypt that had been opened for the young girl's remains to be laid at rest. The priest prayed, "Dear Lord, we commend the soul of our dearly departed Mariette into your loving care."

The pallbearers stopped. There was something inside the crypt. On the floor of the vault was a soft pink gown covered by pink roses and, next to it, a golden goblet filled with still sparkling wine. Across the path on the surface of Marie Laveau's tomb, the priest noticed a freshly carved X.

The Cup

By Michael Maller

It's ten o'clock, and this place is already shutting down. If this were a big city, it would at least be open till midnight. It's almost so that a night owl can't survive down here.

El Caliente Sombrero isn't a great place to eat — most places with drive-thrus aren't — but the food is at least clean, and at best cheap. I like the taquitos, myself, even if they do have an after-taste of corn oil, and there isn't much meat in 'em. They also have a decent variety of soda, including the very fine orange cola bubbling in my cup. No matter what I get, though, I always get an ice cream cone for dessert. They have great ice cream.

Apparently, I'm not the only one in the restaurant who thinks that, either. Apart from the rest of the store's employees, who are busy cleaning the kitchen after a long day of frying, micro-waving, and heat-lamping, there's one woman making a cone right now. It must be for herself or one of the other employees; no one's come up to the counter recently, and there's no one at the drive-thru window either — I can see it.

She looks heavy, heavy to the point that she can safely be classified as fat, and yet she doesn't wear the ugliness that comes with it. There's a sort of prettiness to her, actually, in a self-assured way, like a Renaissance painting. She's finished adding ice cream now, though I don't see how she could've added more, anyway — the cone is five swirls high. Now she's dipping it into the chocolate that hardens into a shell. I hope they haven't shut the machine down by the time I finish my taquitos.

She holds the cone upside-down, and bobs it high above her head, liquid chocolate running down as fast as it can to escape the hardening. It returns to the basin below, but its escape is temporary; the woman rights the cone, and with her free hand places

a side-dish cup on the counter, picks up a ladle, and pours several generous helpings of chocolate into the cup.

Oh, I think, she wants to refresh the shell. Nope.

She replaces the ladle, picks up the cup, takes a bite from the cone, and washes it down with a swig of the chocolate. I cease my chewing, and, after a pause, lower my remaining taquito to the plate. She walks toward my end of the counter. I blink. We make eye contact. Still chewing that last bite, I raise my cup to her, and she raises hers back.

There's a part of me sincerely disgusted by what she did... that's why I'm not going to finish my taquito. Another part admires her, though. For all my misanthropy, I care too much about the opinions of other people to do anything too out-of-the-ordinary. My one rebellion is living mostly at night. I envy her that she may do such a thing... but wouldn't mind if they cleaned the ice cream machine now.

Wall Staff Bios

“I laughed. I cried. I left confused.” - *Steve Bartetzko*

Kyle Farrell: “No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.” -George S. Patton

Kim Gonzalez is looking for a way to combine horseback riding, American Sign Language, reading too much, singing badly, and writing into a single career.

Marlo Kirkham: “I do not regret the things I’ve done, but those I did not do.” -Rory Cochrane

Allie Lapidus was so consumed in the mystical powers of Adobe® InDesign® that she neglected to submit a piece for the *Wall*. No longer accommodating Orange County’s caffeine addiction as a professional coffee slinger, she is off to UCLA. There she will intern in publishing to ensure that she never, ever sleeps.

Michael Maller is thankful for a staff and advisor good enough to prop him up. This is his third year working on the wall. He writes short stories, novels, and very bad bios.

“...I was the youngest, the vegan, the actress- I was more than just an editor for the *Wall*...I was the distraction.”

- *Fatemeh “Fatty” Moghadam*

An art and English major since 1992, *Galena Segal* is planning to continue to participate in the annual *Wall* publication for at least twenty years. In addition to writing, Galena is currently working toward a prospective show of turned wood objects. She also wants to make, throw -- and catch -- a boomerang, play percussion in a band and learn how to tango.

Emily Windham has been a self-proclaimed bookworm since the age of five. She was a fan of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* before anyone had heard of the movie.

Thank you to Dallas Steinberger for assisting in the final layout of *The Wall*.

