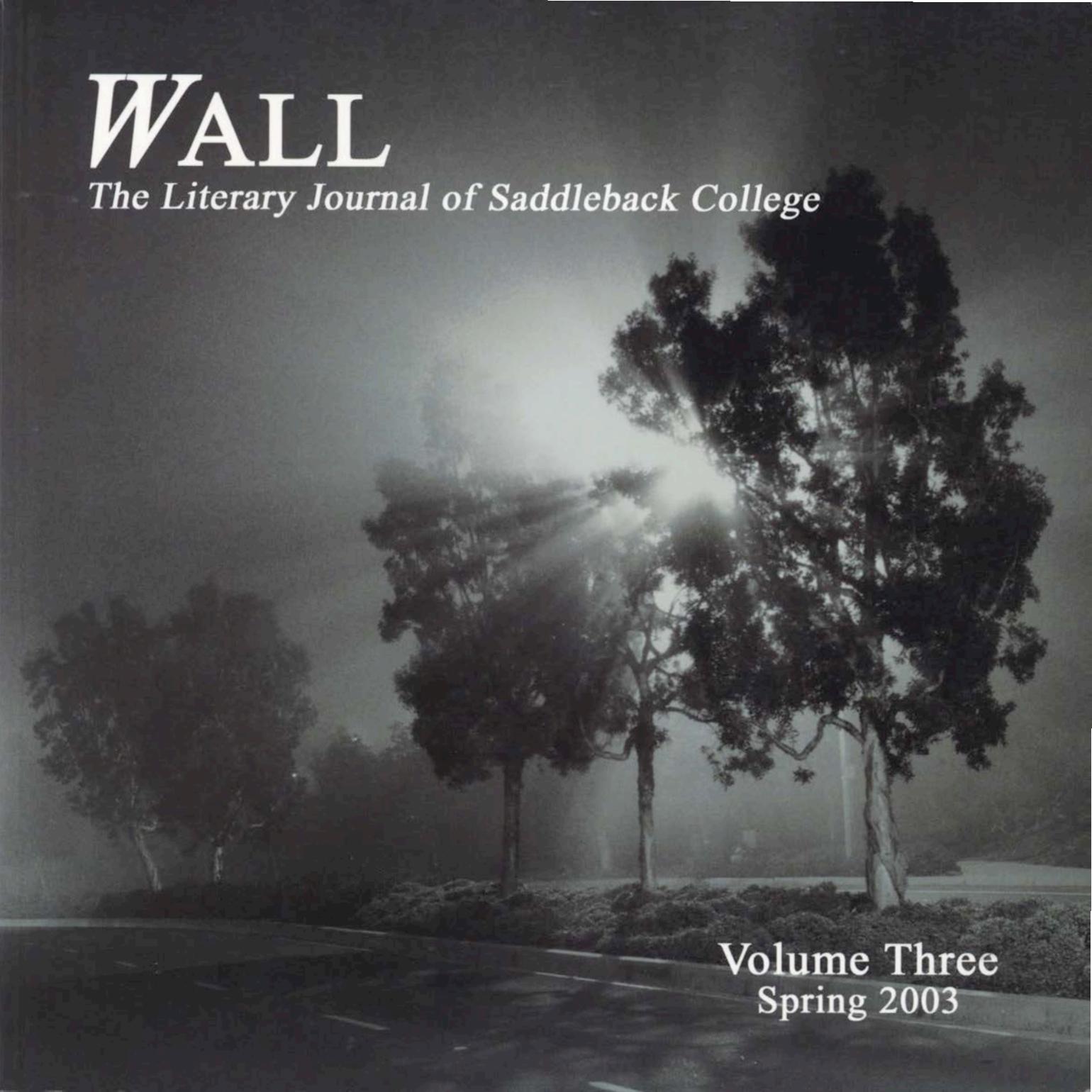


WALL

The Literary Journal of Saddleback College



Volume Three
Spring 2003

WALL

A LITERARY JOURNAL

VOLUME THREE SPRING 2003
SADDLEBACK COMMUNITY COLLEGE
MISSION VIEJO, CALIFORNIA

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2 3 4 5 6 7 First Edition 7 6 5 4 3 2

Text is set in Times New Roman 11pt
Cover photography is printed in four process color

Printed in the United States of America

Wall: A Literary Magazine is published annually by the students of
Saddleback College for the students of Saddleback College.

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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.*

*This Literary Journal has been produced through the
support of Tableau Publishing of Dana Point.
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WALL SPRING 2003

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INTRODUCTION

What good are your ideas if they're not written? Perhaps they are cold, dormant particles of your life and imagination. Yes, your opinion is valid, and you are in every way as unique as I. But unless I see it in print, I may never know for sure. Perhaps you do stand-up comedy, or make Tibetan sand paintings, or create robust ceramic elephants. Perhaps your ideas and ethics flow from you while you're on a stage, in a kendo fencing dojo, or on the freeway. And maybe that's what they'll say about you when you're gone. But right now, you still have the chance to actually write, and, within these pages, a chance to be published. With focus and concentration, those particles can spiral and be drawn through your fingers into the written word.

Somewhere in space, at this moment, it's beginning all over again. A brainstorm in a series of notes scratched indiscriminately onto post-it scraps and steno pads will begin swirling for a writer. She may be drenched in computer monitor luminescence at 1 a.m., waiting to begin free-writing the epiphanies that pop into her mind when the quiet hours begin. Or he may wake up one day, refreshed by the sun and wearied by the notion of letting these meaningful moments of his life fade unexamined, unrecorded, and unrefined into a past left written by others. These are the moments when all of our life experiences and views coalesce.

If the third publication of our magazine the *Wall* is any indication, that process is as alive as ever. Writers are still working and re-working their ideas into short pieces . . . which may turn out to be stepping stones for even greater documents. But until that novel negotiates its way from the writer to the reader, the short story, essay, and poem all remain valid and essential. They are the initial refinement of ideas that hold value to the writer, and ultimately to us all.

It turns out that putting together a literary magazine is a lot like the writing process. The staff of the *Wall* selected these works from literally hundreds of submissions. Intermingled with them are the first place winners of the annual writing contest and several of our own pieces. The whole was then painstakingly polished over the course of many weeks, while we simultaneously chose artwork and made aesthetic decisions concerning the layout. At times it was trying, but what made it great was the opportunity to offer ideas of our own. The experience of this refinement created its own sense of heat, and the book you now hold is alive with it. We hope that you search out these students' ideas and our vision with that heat in mind.

Albert Cordray
Editor-in-Chief

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Is there a place for writers anymore?"

While it might seem a strange question, it's an increasingly legitimate one from those who want to live by the written word. And, while almost everything in our society, from movies to video games to the back of soy sauce packets, needs *someone* to write it, many are concerned that printed poetry, prose, and non-fiction are being made obsolete by flashier and more easily accessible means of information. We also live in an age when traditional art mediums and the photographer's studio are being pressured by faster digital processes. Many artists and photographers ask, is there still a place for me?

The staff of *Wall* feels that the printed word and traditional artistic expression remain relevant, even as technology presses ever onward. Through this magazine, a number of writers and artists share their perspectives and take us to a place we have never been, or show us our world in a way we've never seen it. The goal of many writers and artists is to touch the lives of a reader, and we hope, through this magazine, we help them accomplish that goal.

At the same time, the efforts of a diverse and talented staff would be for naught without help from those in our school and local community. Without the support of these generous individuals, this magazine would not be a reality. Our thanks go out to the Dean of Liberal Arts, Kevin O'Conner, Chair of Saddleback College's English Department, Carolyn Kuykendall, the Associated Student Government, the Art and Photography Departments of Saddleback College, and Mary Jane Roberts of the Emeritus Institute. Special thanks to Errol Higgins of Higgins Photography, whose efforts allowed us to share the vibrant photography and art that graces this issue. Our gratitude also goes out to both Jeffrey Smith from Salomon Smith Barney and our anonymous sponsors, who donated valuable funds to help this magazine see publication. Also, thanks to Tableau Publishing of Dana Point, which has provided invaluable help for all three editions of this magazine.

And a very special thanks to Shelba Robison, Professor of Creative Writing, who has served as a guiding light to many students throughout the years, and without whom the magazine would not exist. With her retirement this year, the English department loses an exceptional teacher who has encouraged numerous writers to follow their dreams. It is our hope that our magazine will serve as a suitable tribute for her legacy at Saddleback College.

And finally, thanks to all of the talented contributors who added their vision to our magazine. Without you, there would be no *Wall*.

Steven McPhail
Layout Editor

THE STONE

MELANIE HOPKINS

CONTEST WINNER

The woman admired the trim grass as it stretched over the vast, mogul-like knolls. The meandering line of the horizon held the infant sun between two peaks, like a mother's arm cradling a newborn. The woman remembered the crib still standing empty in her room. She couldn't put it away. Not yet.

She knew to hold her chin high as she walked past the granite rectangles pocking the hillside. For the briefest moment, she would not notice those one-sided doors, engraved with names and dates. But the pretense never lasted. The chill always grew stronger near her son's resting place. She pulled her coat tight around her waist, remembering everything.

As she approached the plot, she found a stranger hovering over it, a young man with his hands buried deep in his pockets. Scrutinizing him from a distance, she strained for recognition. She listened for sounds beyond the orchestra of morning birds and heard a deep breath, a sniff, and the clearing of a lump in his throat.

Why is he near my son's grave? she wondered. Maybe he noticed the dates on the headstone. So close. Tragic, even to a stranger . . .

As soon as she convinced herself of his passing interest, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled something from it.

He held the small object close to his chest, his shoulders shuddering before he bent down to place it on the gravestone. A smooth pebble the size of a flattened golf ball now sat near her baby's etched name.

When he stood up, the stranger noticed her. She gave him a weak smile, which he returned half-heartedly.

"Did you know him?" she asked, expecting the stranger to explain himself.

"Yeah," he said. "He died. In a car accident."

The woman's lungs seized for air. She remembered the fog, a marine layer, thick as cotton. A darkened stretch of road. A simple glance set askew. An irreversible turn of fate, loud, like an explosion. My *baby* . . . where's my *baby*?

"H-how did you know that?"

The stranger's eyes remained fixed on the pebble. "I found him. I'm a paramedic—was a paramedic. I was First Responder, the night he died."

The confines of her coat felt suffocating. Her hands shook as she unbuttoned it. Her tongue fumbled. She wanted to say something, but couldn't form the right sentence.

The young paramedic scrunched his shoulders. He tipped his head to wipe a damp eye.

"You saw him . . . die?" she asked.

He nodded and took a breath. "Whenever we arrive on scene at a major accident, we assess the victims. Triage, it's called." His eyes flashed at

her. "We decide who'll make it and who won't. Can you imagine that?"

She shook her head. *He was there; he saw her baby. Did he see her on a gurney or trapped behind the wheel?*

"Lots of victims that night. A multi-car pile-up in some thick fog. When I jumped out of the ambulance, I headed for a victim. Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw this kid. I coulda sworn he smiled at me. I went to him instead." He paused. "When I got there, he wasn't smiling. He couldn't breathe."

"What did you do?" she choked.

"He had a pulse. I tried CPR. It didn't work." He shook his head. "We tried to intubate him, but his trachea had been damaged." The young paramedic's voice started to break. "I kept thinking, 'He smiled at me, he smiled at me,' and I'd try again. I worked on him forever."

"And then you gave up," she said.

Pain marked his brow when he lifted his head. She wondered if her comment did that. "I mean, to save other people. You gave up on him so you could help someone with a better chance of survival, right?"

The paramedic looked down again. "No." Her eyes grew wider.

"I picked him up and held him. I waited for him to smile again. They shouted for me, but I couldn't move. Not until I saw that smile. He wasn't even a year old, ya know." He pointed at the gravestone.

Why is he near my son's grave? she wondered. Maybe he noticed the dates on the headstone. So close. Tragic, even to a stranger . . .

Of course she knew. “Did you ever see it . . . the smile?” she whispered, fearing the answer.

“I picked him up and held him, like this.” The paramedic pulled his arms around his chest. “I held him until his pulse faded.” A silent tear rolled down his cheek. “I couldn’t help him and I couldn’t let go. I never saw it.”

They stood in silence while each struggled with their composure.

The mother let out a deep breath and pointed to the small pebble. Barely audible, she asked, “What is that for?”

“I saw an old man once. He put a stone on a grave, and I asked him why. He said he did it because it lessened the weight that sat on his chest.” The paramedic looked away. “I’m waiting for the weight to lift from mine.”

The woman bent over and picked up the stone. She held it in front of him as tears streaked her face. “I am that boy’s mother. For six months, I’ve had nightmares of my son dying alone, with horns and sirens blaring in his ears, swallowed up by fear and terror. I can’t begin to tell you how that thought has tormented me—until now.”

She moved toward the paramedic and wrapped her arms around him, holding on until his rigid disbelief crumbled into quiet sobs. She felt the warmth that comforted her son in his last moments.

“I’m taking this.” She pulled away from him, her fingers encasing the stone. “You’ve just given me more peace than I have known in six months—the same kind of peace you gave my son.”

Slipping the pebble into her coat pocket, she stepped backwards and smiled — her first genuine smile in a long time—then turned back toward the paved road.

When her feet met the asphalt, a curious feeling moved her. She turned to steal another glance at the young man. He stood in profile against the rolling horizon, where two grass covered peaks cradled the sun.

He raised his chin, eyes fixed on some distant place. As he did so, the sun ascended from the hilltops, away from the morning chill, and rose like a tremendous weight, up and away from his chest.

THE SIXTH CALLER

ROBERT GREGER

POETRY

The congo player pulled his duct tape from the sack
And dropped his tuning wrench back,
Tearing the tape in narrow strips to just wind-fit his fingertips.
The bassist, blue as anything in the colored spot
Rocked back his wooden woman,
Electric keyboard wailed a phrase,
The guitarist played a polonaise of sharp steel notes.
The audience, thin, breathed in the extra air
As Albert Wing skipped a stair
And sailing bright as a saxophone
Put down his drink
And after homey joking
Yodeled the sextet clear,
Cornering calls, to L.A.,
Dancing and curling the tune.
The Salt Lake soon lit Nino's 24th floor.
The congo's forearms, elbow chops
Layed a mute on the drummer's blows behind.
The congo player whipped a coronet from the case
And fingered high notes with sour ease.
Wing, holding the sax in front of him, like a muscled snake,
I, tremendously pleased to have been the sixth caller radio winner.

IF YOU DON'T LAUGH, YOU'LL CRY

FRANCES COSTIKYAN

PERSONAL ESSAY

Shortly after my divorce, I noticed my friends were now asking me the weirdest questions. Take the afternoon I ran into a neighbor with whom I'd shared many happy times: children's birthdays, New Year's Eves, things like that.

"Oh, hello!" my friend gushed. "Jeff was asking about you just the other day. How are you? What have you been doing?" But before I could slip a word in edgewise, she added, "We saw your 'ex' last week at a ballet benefit I chaired. He was with this terrific-looking girl and they were having such fun. I know he's not fond of the ballet, and I hadn't expected he'd take tickets when I asked him. Wasn't it great that he did?"

What did she expect me to reply? She and I had walked our babies in the park together. These kids were now in college. She hadn't invited me to take tickets to the benefit, though she knows I love the ballet. I thought her question ridiculous. Yet if I'd laughed in her face, she would have believed I'd gone daft.

Another few such encounters and it occurred to me I had become some sort of "Typhoid Mary" carrying a "hoof-in-mouth" disease. Except the symptoms didn't appear in me. They occurred in those who entered my force field. And no sooner had I diagnosed the illness as being dangerous to friends than I observed it also infected total strangers.

At an evening art gallery opening, I struck up a conversation with a pleasant looking chap. After a bit, we shook hands and exchanged names. "Oh," he said. "Are you by any chance related to _____?" and gave my husband's name.

"You could say that," I answered. "We used to be married."

"What's he doing these days?"

"I've no idea."

"Has he written another book?"

"Beats me." Then, desperate to change the subject, I sputtered, "How do you like the Academy Awards nominations? Do you agree with the picks for best picture?"

Given our discussion so far, my topic was straight out of left field, but I had grabbed the first idea that entered my head.

It was a dud.

We drifted apart.

What I should have done was give him my ex's phone number and suggest he call for the information he wanted so much. You always think of things like that when it's too late. What

did cross my mind at the time was the man had no control over what he said. He was in the grip of a bug he couldn't shake: hoof-in-mouth disease.

Once I had the malady isolated, I began to compile a list of other bizarre things people said to me. The next really good one was contributed by an acquaintance who rushed up to me at our local bakery, all bubbles and smiles, to inquire, "How does it feel to be a swinging single again?" Her question was accompanied by a naughty wink.

At the time I lived in Manhattan, where the ratio of women to men is roughly three to one, which makes the island, for all practical purposes, a female ghetto. The people who had invited me to parties when I was married now asked me over when, as they put it, "We're not doing anything." Then they regaled me with stories of events they were giving or going to when they were "doing something."

Another friend of many years, justly famous for her gourmet cooking, did invite me to a party—an evening for her single women friends.

The only man in the room was her husband.

So much for my swinging life style.

Perhaps I should be more grateful. At least she invited me. Most hostesses I had once entertained didn't have me over at all. Not that I blame them. Nowadays, divorce is like tuberculosis was at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nobody knows who'll come down with it next, and everyone's terrified it's catching.

After a while I did run into an occasional male who was about my own age, on the town, and married. Of these, the biggest bores discussed their unhappy home lives. Nicer ones never said anything flat-out about their wives, but the oblique references that slipped past their lips suggested they were enmeshed in a web of misunderstandings and waging a losing battle against uxorial suicide. I was reminded of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and imagined my date lived in a haunted castle with a

"How does it feel to be a swinging single again?" Her question was accompanied by a naughty wink.

ghost who kept him up nights howling from her room in the tower.

The nicest of the genre would murmur sweet nothings in my ear: I was beautiful, witty, intelligent, in short the most fascinating woman they had ever met. Which was endearing, but didn't change the fact that they were hitched.

My relevant experience with men ends here. However, many of my formerly married women friends tell me the most appealing unattached males they meet are gay, an orientation some of these fellows have never fully accepted. They still hope the right woman will come along and introduce them to the delights of being straight.

My friend is then invited to audition for the part.

Is this a line I might swallow? Thanks, but no thanks.

What I have met are gay women who come on to me by suggesting that men are beasts. Since it appears to me men are thrashing about in the same quicksand of confusion and having as much trouble finding their way as we women are, bad-mouthing the gender hardly seems a solution.

But none of this begins to do justice to the eerie world you find yourself stumbling around in after divorce; it doesn't describe how your brain shifts into overdrive, how your thoughts fly about and fall down in all the wrong places, or how all this commotion produces chaos in your daily life.

Say you're fixing lunch and your mind is busy wondering, "Is everybody strange? Is it me? Who am I anyway? Why is it this way? What way is it? Will it ever make sense?" When suddenly you notice you've poured yourself a glass of salad dressing and are about to put milk on your tomatoes and lettuce.

I could tell you about a dozen other arenas where divorce turns everyday happenings into the theatre of the absurd, but let me conclude with a story about the dog. Dogs don't take sides in a divorce and continue to love everybody in the family. Our Victoria was no exception. When I moved out of the house where I'd lived before my separation into a tall elevated apartment building, Victoria hated everything about our new life. Not only had she one less person to supervise, she had no squirrels to chase in the backyard and no weekend romps in the country. She was moping around our new digs and breaking my heart. Her former master missed her too and phoned to ask if he could take her to the country for the weekend now and then. To cheer her up, I agreed.

It all evolved so naturally. On pre-arranged Friday nights, a voice on my intercom would call up from downstairs. "Hello. This is your doorman. There's a man here to pick up the dog."

I'd take Vicki's food from the fridge, slip on her leash, and we'd walk down the hall to catch the elevator. When we reached the lobby and she saw who was waiting for her, she'd go out of her mind with delight. She'd leap into his car without a backward glance.

Then, along about half-past eleven Sunday night, as I gazed out the window of my aerie, marveling anew at the carpet of city lights below, there'd be another buzz on the intercom and the night doorman would announce, "Victoria's home." I'd descend to the lobby and as we walked to the elevator, the little dog would do her best to tell me what a wonderful time she'd had.

"Was the weather good?" I'd ask. "Did you go to the beach?" As she bounced and danced, I'd smile at her joy.

Then one night I had to laugh out loud as it struck me that what we had going here was a trendy new divorce arrangement that could quite properly be called “weekend visitations with the dog.” Not exactly a thigh-slapper, I grant you, but good enough for the sort of chuckle that keeps you going—or at least it was for me.

“All right, Kaiyan, let’s try again.”

“But Korben, sir, we have been here for hours.”

“I am your teacher. I must help you realize your gifts and how to strengthen them.”

Kaiyan continued to kneel on the cold stone floor with the apple set in front of her. Her eyes teared with frustration.

Finally she spoke: “I hate this. I don’t even care anymore. Magic used to be fun, now I spend all of my time trying to avoid it.” Kaiyan wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“When you get it right,” Korben said patiently, “you can go. Now, try again and don’t forget that concentration is everything.” Korben finished his speech and then sat down on the other side of the apple on the floor.

With a great sigh, Kaiyan began again. She closed her eyes, held her arms outstretched, and concentrated hard. Within a split second, her arms flew up in the air and she yelled, “Arise!”

Suddenly, Korben screamed. Kaiyan opened her eyes, arms still held high, and saw Korben floating in midair. The longer he floated, the more the horror seemed to fade from his face. Suddenly, Kaiyan dropped her arms, causing Korben to fall to the floor.

A few moments of deadly silence followed. The first reason for this was because Kaiyan dared not speak. The other, Kaiyan could only guess, came from anger. "Well," said Korben. "I think we need to focus a bit more on our aim, hmm?" Kaiyan sensed a bit of a quiver in his voice. At least he didn't sound angry.

"Uh, yes, sir. I mean, sorry, sir."

"Yes. Well, you can go home now." Before Korben finished speaking, Kaiyan snatched her cloak and dashed through the door.

She heard something like a chuckle as she bolted down the narrow steps of the Palace. She could not wait to smell the fresh air again, but through her excitement she realized if her mother caught her, she might have to return home to do her chores and then run off to bed. Not knowing where her mother was, or who else would take the role thereof, Kaiyan began to tiptoe. It was not hard to rationalize. *Mother would most likely agree to me going out to play anyway*, Kaiyan told herself.

Eyeing the guards standing above the Palace walls, Kaiyan edged her way below them. They were too busy chattering to notice her slip by beneath their noses.

Finally free! Kaiyan ran down the green hill. She looked up at the sky, noticing its radiance. Still, she ran. She never felt such freedom as when she ran outdoors in the cool of day.

After a while, Kaiyan felt a slight chill, even under her cloak. *I better get home. Mother will be worrying. I've never been gone so long.* Kaiyan

turned around. "That can't be the way," she whispered to herself. Now she panicked. All of the hills made it impossible for Kaiyan to find her way.

Kaiyan walked up a tall hill to her right. *Where am I?* She felt her heartbeat pick up. She had a deathly fear that wolves would find her. Suddenly, she spotted something. It moved. She squinted her eyes and edged a little closer. Though she feared what it might be, her never-ending curiosity urged her to investigate. It was a few hills away, very dark, and moving towards her. Kaiyan scrunched down to stay out of sight. She still could not tell.

Was it a wolf? Could it be a shadow playing tricks on her? Or did she see a man?

Could it be a shadow
playing tricks on her?
Or did she see a
man?

Trusting her instincts, Kaiyan began to scoot backward, until she felt something hard. Turning over, she saw the largest man in her life. His size alone shocked her, but his expression horrified her. He was smiling- not just any smile, but a smile of sheer delight.

Kaiyan screamed, jumped up, and ran. But every direction she ran, men were coming quickly towards her. One grabbed her from behind, put his hand over her mouth, and said, "Hush." Kaiyan relaxed and he let her go. She dared not speak, but instead looked at her captors. They stayed low to the ground and beckoned her to do the same. One man with a dark face grabbed her hand and pulled her down to one side of the tall hill, to shelter them from sight. All the men followed down the hill. Kaiyan could see that they carried weapons of war. Her breathing increased.

She knew they were there to attack. She had to warn her people.

The men spoke in hushed voices, deciding what to do with “the child.”

One of the dozens of men spoke: “Just slit her throat and be done with it. Stop wasting time. Either way she is orphaned by the end of the night. Put her out of her misery now.”

“No,” said another, “just tie her up and leave her.”

“Either way she will die,” one argued.

All the men joined in on the argument with Kaiyan watching all. She found her courage strengthened as she realized what these men planned to do to them all.

“Evaporate her!” another croaked.

“If we used magic, they would sense our arrival.”

“Who cares? It might be just the perfect thing to panic them.”

“That isn’t the point. We don’t need to scare them; we need to destroy them. Make up your minds about the child and let’s be on our way.” Just then, all the men turned to Kaiyan. She felt mixed emotions. Did they intend to save the children?

The dark-faced man raised his sword in the air. Just as he was about to strike down, Kaiyan hollered the only spell in her mind.

Kaiyan was amazed at how high she sent him up and decided to keep him going. The men scattered around her to see the man. They used their own spells to pull him back down. He landed with a thud, bouncing immediately. They had unmistakably killed him.

But the men had not brought him down soon enough, for the guards had seen the flying

man and were warning the village with their horns and cries at that moment. The men turned on Kaiyan in outrage, only to find her running in the opposite direction.

“Hey, where’s my sword? That was a magic sword. Why, that runt is running off with it! I’ll get her.”

“No. We must attack. Use a spare.” The men turned from Kaiyan and charged the awaiting Palace walls.

Kaiyan could see them running in a rage towards her beloved home. She ran for the trees, found the secret tunnel’s entrance, and used it to flee to the Palace, unnoticed.

Once inside, she helped lead the other children back with her to the woods, where they waited for many hours. Deep in the forest the children watched from trees to see what would befall their families. Twelve children sat waiting. Finally, the time came when they would know if they were triumphant or defeated.

Fewer than a dozen men ran from the Palace screaming that they would have their vengeance. The Village had defeated the enemy!

Kaiyan and the other children went back through the tunnel and appeared in the Palace’s kitchen. Many mothers met them there. Mothers and children hugged and kissed one another.

Kaiyan’s mother gave her a long hug and said, “Thank you.”

“Where are all of the men?” Kaiyan asked.

“They are searching the ground, helping the wounded and imprisoning those left behind. Oh, I am so glad you are safe. When the intruders were entering the Palace, I looked so very hard for you. It was Korben who found me and assured me you were not in the battle area. He said that you were

the one who gave us the warning. He wouldn't say how he knew, though. Is it true? Were you out there with them and did you send the man flying through the air?"

Kaiyan blushed and said, "I am sorry I left, Mother. I got lost and I ..."

"It is all right, Kaiyan. You saved us. I am so glad they didn't harm you. You are such a blessing to us. This was just the first battle of many, but it is obvious that you have a gift that can deliver us from much danger. Your power is so strong that I know you will be a big help to us. You, my daughter, are the bravest child I have ever met."

ANGEL ENCOUNTER

SAMANTHA HIGGINS

PERSONAL ESSAY

I opened my eyes to a new morning. Sunlight streamed in through my window, warming my face. I pulled the comforter over my head and turned away from the light. But I could not sleep. The day beckoned. I remembered that earlier in the week I had seen a sign taped to the window of my favorite coffee shop; it would be open today, December 24th. I did not think anything of the significance of the date and continued my day with meaningless trivialities: errands, housework, and the like.

Just after one in the afternoon, I grabbed my keys and headed for the door. I had finished my busy-work and looked forward to a warm cup of tea with an afternoon of reading. My book in hand, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, I locked the front door and headed for the coffee shop.

I pulled into the parking lot of the shopping center. There were a few cars parked near the entrance and vast spaces between. Still, nothing occurred to me at this point. This day seemed like any other. I was lonely and bored, nothing out of the ordinary.

One may think I was self-centered, or a Scrooge of sorts, but neither is the case. I am a young Jewish woman; this day was as ordinary as the day before—despite the deserted parking lot.

I pushed the door open and was welcomed by a gentle waft of warm air that stalled the winter chill behind me. I headed for the counter. All I had in mind was a nice cup of tea and a warm place to sit, nothing more, nothing less.

I stood looking at the menu, waiting for the technician to fix the credit card machine. He was a tall, gangly man with scraggly hair. He started to mumble about the machine...

"I've told them all before, if the machine doesn't work, check to see if it is plugged into the right jack."

"I always tell them to check," he said to me as I was waiting for my order. "I had to come all the way here because they didn't."

I smiled, nodded, and paid cash for my drink. I turned, tea in hand, searching the small room for a place to sit for a couple of hours.

The nearest seat I found was toward the front of the shop. As I maneuvered around tables and chairs, I passed a woman hunched over her laptop, tapping away at the keyboard. I took note of her computer, as it looked unusually small. I had been looking for a laptop for myself.

"Excuse me. May I ask what make your computer is?" I said curiously.

"Oh, of course. It's a Think Pad. I love it." She smiled and went back to her work.

"Okay. Thank you," I said appreciatively and sat at the next table.

I relaxed in the chair. I took my first sip of tea and lingered over the cup, the steam warming my face. I placed it on the table beside me, picked up my book, and opened to the marked page. I paused and glanced at the slender woman. She had a dark complexion and a childlike face offset by small, round, thick glasses. A red bandana covered her hair, neatly framing her cheeks. *A bold fashion statement*, I thought. A Dave Matthews sticker glared at me from the back of her laptop.

"Do you know when the Dave Matthews Band is going to be in town next?" I blurted out, compelled to talk to her.

She pressed a few more keys, smiled, and turned her attention to me.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to disturb you," I said.

"That's okay; I'm ready for a break anyway. Let me pull up their website and check."

We started talking about the band and their music. She told me about the concerts she

had been to. There was a concert up north that she had tried to attend, but after arriving by plane, she and her friend could not get a ride to the concert. So they turned around and went home. I noticed the books piled next to her computer; somehow we started talking about school. She was an English major and was on holiday this week.

I told her I was an English major as well, and I asked her about the English program at her school. She spoke of her classes and her professors,

I wish I had that kind
of courage, to seek
and achieve my
dreams.

explaining what I could expect at the university level.

“Oh, this,” she said gazing at the stack of books before her, “this is nothing. I have more to read at home and I have papers to do as well.”

She told me about the twenty-page papers and the written exams. We talked about the area where she attended school and the roommates with whom she lived.

“You think there’s nothing to do here,” she said. “Up north, we don’t even have a movie theater!”

She gave me advice on scholarships and school applications. Her willingness and enthusiasm to help me made me smile.

“Apply everywhere you can and apply for as many scholarships as you can. No one applies for those things—you’d be surprised. If you don’t try, you’ll never know,” she said of Stanford and Columbia, two of my ultimate choices. It turns out she also thought about studying law, and she was thinking about taking the LSATs before the summer. I sat in amazement and awe as she listed her goals and ambitions. *I wish I had that kind of courage, to seek and achieve my dreams.* We discussed essays and writing, books and exams, in the many hours I spent with her. I never noticed the time passing as our conversation flowed from one topic to the next.

Her cell phone rang; I got up to throw my cup away. As I stood I felt a twinge. My muscles tightened and my back throbbed. I looked out the window. It was dark. I had first interrupted her hours ago.

When she finished talking on her cell phone, I gestured to the darkened windows. “You

might want to get back to your reading, or start reading actually.”

She seemed to take no note of my comment and the conversation continued.

My back throbbing, I could no longer sit. I stood while she still sat in front of her computer and continued to talk to me.

Somewhere in the course of the conversation, the thought occurred to me: *she is a complete stranger; why is she being so kind?* I was grateful for a conversation such as this; I had never had so much in common with someone.

Four and a half hours after it began, it came to an end.

“My back is in agony,” I said. “I must get home.”

“Yeah, I should be getting home too.”

As she started to get up and put her belongings together, she pulled out a cane, gingerly hooked her bag over her shoulder, and started to walk. Noticing where I glanced, she shrugged.

“I’m recovering from surgery. They think they got all the cancer out,” she told me, and my heart sank.

She was so young, about twenty-two. And here I was, complaining about my back pain. She must have been in pain, recovering from all that she had been through. In all that time, she didn’t mention it once, not a complaint, not even a grimace. She had nothing but a cheery disposition and an optimistic attitude.

She was dealing with so much at the time and she took those hours out of her day to give me, a complete stranger, some advice and company. She spent four and a half hours on Christmas Eve with me, rather than spending it with a loved one. I like

to think that my company was just as important to her.

“Happy holidays and thank you,” I said as we walked into the parking lot.

As I got into my car, she waved good-bye; I watched in my rearview mirror as she disappeared in the distance. Although I got her name, I never got her number.

When I got home, I realized what a gift she had given me. It was more than the company or the conversation; it was the kindness and the wisdom of a stranger.

IN REDDING, CA

TODD JOHNSON

CONTEST WINNER

in redding, ca
where railroads spit their electric sex
over hard waters and
squirming mud-
and the old drive-in
theatre screen sits forlorn, empty
where once it spanked
the sky silver

in redding, ca
where we played
in the graveyard, and olive trees
dropped rotting skin
on our dead heat-
and my grandfather
stared into the stomach of a
groaning coffin, his
shirt blown apart

in redding, ca
where i descended liquid stairs
smelling chlorine
against dust-
and the wolf-spider
shot light from her cervix
draping it over the river
to hold the tracks
when the stars were young

LEGACY

TRAVIS KEGEL

CONTEST WINNER

I'm climbing an old tree that
Smells and is colored
Like wet old wool sweaters
Its chocolate bark crumbles
And stains my hands black and red.

MALIBU BEACH CLASSIC

LISA CLARK

FICTION

Clinging to the steering wheel, I constantly set and reset my white-knuckle grip on the worn leather. Even when I'm finally calm, I still feel haunted. A presence permeates the air, and I do a double take just to make sure I'm not carrying any passengers. A tiny box and a sprinkling of sand take up the other seat in my truck.

Once I hit an open stretch of road, the gears seem to shift themselves. My mind is free to ride away from the task at hand, making it hard to keep the recollections away. They materialize out of thin air, swirling in the smoke emanating from the cigarette that dangles from my hand, nearly forgotten.

Memories of surfing out in the raging waves glide in through my window. I can see him beaming at me as I exit the water, my petite frame struggling with a board twice my size. Every memory runs into another until I feel like I'm swimming in them.

The radio crashes through my reveries as a recognizable song flows from the speakers. An air of desperation clutches to Billie Holiday's voice as she belts out a long forgotten tune. Her sentiment resonates with me more than I care for.

Billie Holiday made appearances only on Sundays. He'd pull her records out from their hiding place, shuffling

through them all, but always selecting *Lady in Satin* because it was a “classic.” Sitting in the barrel chair, my feet crisscrossed and tucked underneath me, I’d listen to her sing, and just share the experience with him. Little by little, our afternoons opened my eyes and my mind.

This vision washes away, leaving me in the present, where I belong. One last frantic cry from the forties-era diva and my teetering self-control sends me crashing over the edge. The tears fall hard and fast, blurring the traffic up ahead. I root around my chaotic glove compartment for a pair of sunglasses to camouflage my breakdown.

I’ve just got to let go and accept that he’s gone.

Sometimes I wish I could just stop thinking about him. Trying to forget he ever existed torments me just as much as remembering him. I attempt to scrub the memories away, but shards of the past stick in my mind, making the reality impossible to ignore.

Even before I pass Pepperdine, I can see the sun waiting, resting just over the horizon. From here PCH appears to have cleared a bit, and I feel my destination within my reach. My foot hugs the accelerator as a sense of urgency kicks in. The sun will set soon and I’m not missing this one for anything.

Sea-stained air signals that the ocean lies close by and I can hear the crack of waves descending on the seashore. Recollections of the past seem

to crash into me as the city limits of Malibu rush by.

It takes me only a few minutes to reach the deserted shoreline, which is flanked by a parking lot desperate for company. His stories always made this place sound like it never lacked a crowd. This is the way I like it; I can do whatever I want. I smile, remembering wild leaps into the ocean with all my clothes on. Like those days, no one will be around to give me a disapproving glare. Today I just want to be alone. Taking off my jeans and T-shirt, I prepare to enter the surf. Once I unhook my

surfboard and snatch up everything else I need, I run directly towards the water, stopping briefly to admire the sky before I set out into the waves.

Every time I watch the sun set over the sea, I can hardly breathe. Remnants of joy and disaster fall from rays of gold, purple, orange, and red. The wind plays with my hair, and small wisps sweep across my face. I watch flame-scarred skies explode with warm hues.

“I forgot how cold it is,” I shiver slightly, talking to myself.

I lie on my board, momentarily hypnotized by the aluminum box resting in front of me. The sloshing of the tide moves the metallic object up and down, bringing my focus back to the task at hand. I start paddling, aiming for the smooth water just past the breaking point. Luckily the waves are small so I don’t have to duck under any of them, though steadying the container slows my advance-

Trying to forget he
ever existed torments
me just as much as
remembering him.

ment. As I reach a break in the wave activity, I sit up, straddling the board.

Looking back I notice I'm so far away that I can barely make out the red speck along the shore that is my car. As the sun kisses the ocean, I realize how close I cut my journey.

"Well, Dad, looks like this is it." I take the top off the container, hoping he is somewhere listening.

"I'm sorry it took so long to do this; I hope you're happy, wherever you are," I say, trying desperately to keep my hands from shaking.

"I miss you, you know, more than anything." I hold the board steady as each wave passes, while I toss the contents of the aluminum box out to sea where they belong.

"I love you, Daddy," I say these words, barely above a whisper. I don't want to cry anymore, so I leave him and turn towards the shore. As I stand up on my board, catching the next wave in, I notice the sun finally set.

CIGARETTES AND EGGS

DUNCAN JACOBSON

PERSONAL ESSAY

In the hot summer of 2002, I spent several weeks visiting relatives in West Virginia. The trip is an annual affair, as all but my immediate family live in the rolling hills and forests of Charleston, West Virginia, and I have always enjoyed visiting it, despite my Southern California upbringing. When I was younger, I never understood why my mom spent much of those trips rubbing her temples and heaving heavy sighs whenever I observed her rare moments of silence. Now, as I have grown more sophisticated and less amused with tackiness and chaos, I think I understand why my mother lives here in sunny Orange County, despite Southern California's ostentatious drawbacks.

The restaurant, like many along the highways in the Southern states, owed no allegiance to large chains, and it was the sort where the manager swept the floors in the early hours of the morning. Hot and muggy defines the twenty-four hours of every day of the Southern Summer, and everyone with the finances blasts their air conditioners with as much contempt for nature as people in Maine have when they blast their heaters in January. My cousin and I sought refuge from the weather; the other people in the restaurant were a collection of burly truckers and burlier fishermen, who all seemed to buy their hats at the same John Deere outlet.

I inhaled my epiphany in the frigidly air-conditioned restaurant north of Myrtle Beach in South Carolina, as my cousin blew cigarette smoke into his food, which drifted toward me. My cousin and I were finally comfortable enough together, after almost 20 years, that we let each other observe our vices. For the first time I learned that my cousin was a smoker, and had been for years. I had lived most of my life with the misguided notion that my family was not as Southern as all the other Southerners; fantasies die young, though.

Throughout my stay to that point, I had watched him smoke constantly, and occasionally I bummed cigarettes off of him. Still, no amount of self-destructive behavior I witnessed prepared me for a grown, living relative chomping down an early and unappealing breakfast, with egg bits nestled on his lip, smoking a cigarette in the middle of a meal.

Fortunately for many of the males in my family, we are blessed with freakish metabolisms and body types that border on the anemic. But my cousin abused this genetic boon; sausage, bacon, eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, and sausage and bacon obscured his plate, just as his ash obscured the ashtray lying next to his meal. The pleasure of a cigarette after a meal is one of the things ex-smokers miss the most; never, though, have I heard of former smokers lamenting the pleasure of a nice cigarette in the middle of their breakfast. At seven in the morning, in August of 2002, my cousin ate breakfast, smoked cigarettes, and drank ice-cold Pepsi. We actually

fought a war to keep these people *in* the union.

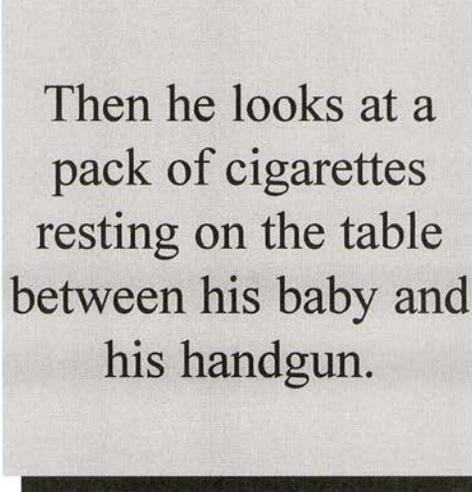
This awesome display of boorishness seemed all the more remarkable considering the heroic doses of Demerol both of us had ingested earlier, in preparation for the fishing trip we planned for the day. One of the side effects of the seasickness pills, apart from us being completely high, giggly, and sleepy at the same time, was a pronounced lack of appetite. The appetite suppressant is one of the main features in seasickness pills; they are engineered to do it, and no appetite should be able to thwart them in their mission. But my

cousin seemed programmed for self-destruction. The breakfast would be enormous and heavy, because for him, those were the only breakfasts worth eating. And he would smoke during the breakfast because he liked cigarettes, flavor be damned.

That was hardly the last time I saw this particularly Southern phenomenon at work in West Virginia and Myrtle Beach. The Broadway along Myrtle Beach feeds thousands of tourists with hamburger and

hot dog stands, none of which I paid much mind to. After dining with my cousin, though, I noticed Southerners of all colors, shapes, and ages, wolfing down lunch with one hand and one stomach, while smoking a cigarette with the other hand and their lungs. Apparently, my cousin didn't stumble across this idea on his own.

Still, I wonder, looking back, "Who the hell had the damned fool idea to start smoking during meals in the first place?" My imagination conjures



Then he looks at a pack of cigarettes resting on the table between his baby and his handgun.

an image of a scraggly and pale white guy in a filthy undershirt and blue sweat pants stained with paint and ick, eating a meal. Then he looks at a pack of cigarettes resting on the table between his baby and his handgun. I can never tell what happens next because of the blinding glare of the light bulb that pops up over the man's head. Such is the story of only one sick, sad man. I can only assume that his wife and children watch the proverbial apple fall onto his head, and realize the significance of his discovery. As his kids run to school to show their friends, and his wife displays the new discovery at the McDonald's in Wal-Mart where she meets her friends for lunch, an unspoken culinary revolution sweeps America, with roots deep in the Appalachians. Taste buds and lung bronchioles grow closer together in the thick summer air of the American South.

I can easily imagine the French performing a similar act of hedonism, but perhaps they respect food and cigarettes more than Southerners do. They certainly love both, just like Southerners, but I suspect maybe they have the damned class not to mix their vices. Pork and beans, peanut butter and jelly, Parliaments and hamburgers.

AN ABRIDGED JAUNT THROUGH THE PARK

DANIEL BROWN

CONTEST WINNER

I sat staring at the jumping candle flame which seemed an outward representation of my heart, flickering and shaking with nervousness. Shadows imprinted themselves on the walls, as Sarah perched herself on the edge of her bed, her hands stretched over her knees. Those fingers of hers seemed to be competing with her provocative smile. Her blue eyes beckoned me to come closer.

After gaining admittance into her park, I found her lips became my swing set, and her body made the perfect playground, strewn with slides, rings, and of course, the traditional sandbox. I soon discovered, as I was making my way through her heather fields, that it was not without its rules. I was scolded twice for disobeying a "Keep off the Grass" sign, whose paint had chipped and faded over time. I offered to help repaint it, and after some small debating she finally consented to allow me to change the sign to read: "No Pesticides." As it was, I explored her park thoroughly. After a good while, of what else would it be called but "foreplay," the time came to let her see what my side of the world had to offer. As she adeptly peeled off my pants, I took enjoyment in how her blond hair hung from her head like the seductive vines of a jungle.

It was at about this time, when my jean pants had been finally stripped from my possession and we were lost in each other's steamy reverie, that both our fantasies came to an abrupt and sudden halt with the daunting sound of the garage door opening. Like a panicked rat in a boa's cage, I bolted to the window and peeked outside. By this time my sex drive had taken a detour, and I was now boarding a freight train of distress.

"Your dad's a freak'n cop?" My heart rate sped up as I took another look out the window to see an unmarked cop car pulling into the garage.

Either my emotions were contagious or Sarah had already become infected, but with great urgency rising in her voice, though I only noticed the genuine sincerity, she shrieked, "Oh shit! My daddy will kill you if he finds you here. Hurry, get in the closet."

Her dad will kill me, I thought, grabbing my shoes and socks as she pushed me into an ocean of clothes and slid the door shut. Why would he want to kill me? She's the one who invited me over. She's the one who made the first move. Hell, I'm innocent. I'm just a guy. What else was I expected to do? I sank back into her sweet-smelling garments and tried to quiet my heavy breaths. *Just calm down, calm down,* I repeated in my mind. I began to go over a movie scenario in my head, one that involved making an elaborate escape, like 007, but I found that when the movie had ended, I remained trapped in Sarah's closet.

... both our fantasies came to an abrupt and sudden halt with the daunting sound of the garage door opening.

I tried to figure out what was going on with my ears as I interpreted different sounds. I could hear the muffled voices talking, and then the high-pitched laughter of Sarah traveled up the staircase, under her door, into the closet, through the clothes, and into my head. A door shutting could be felt through the vibration in the walls, the sound of water rushing through the pipes, and then the quick running of footsteps up to Sarah's room. Sarah slipped open her closet and grabbed my hand as she led me towards the hall.

"My dad always goes to his room after work to wash up. He'll be in there for about five to ten minutes, so you'll have enough time to make it out the back door. I left it a bit open so try to make your way out as quietly as possible." She took a shot of air and squeezed my wrist tighter. "I'll call you later." Finishing up, she shoved me out the door and frantically gesticulated with her hands for me to hurry. I thought I heard her try to yell a whisper of something to me about her dog, but my concentration was

on getting down the hallway.

I scurried my way down the corridor, all the while focusing on her dad's shut door that stood guarding the staircase. *She must do this a lot,* I thought as I moved closer towards the stairs. I began to wonder how many times she had done this before and if any fatalities had occurred in her risky business, when her dog's barking betrayed my cover.

Flailing my hands in the air to silence the mutt, I heard the water in her dad's room cease, and thinking quickly, I made my way through the nearest door. It was the bathroom. Following through with my impetuous rush, I leaped into the bathtub and pulled the shower curtains closed. The rings on the top made a scraping sound against the metal, similar to the falling blade of a guillotine.

Sarah's dad stepped outside his room and in a helpful voice said, "Sarah, honey, did you need something?" After a swift "No, I'm fine, Daddy" from Sarah, he made his way down the hall to pet that nark of a dog. I felt exposed by the thin curtains and prayed that her dad would go back to his room. He sounded like a big man. All was quiet for a second, and I could almost hear his thoughts.

The sound of his footsteps changed as he stepped from the plush carpet onto the tile floor of the bathroom. I heard the door shut behind him, and my fate hung precariously over the toilet bowl. It was like the calm before a storm, and I stood waiting to be exposed. I shuddered at the thought of being found by this bulk of a man. Yet, I managed to appease my jittering nerves and wait for the inevitable.

The toilet seat groaned with the weight of its king added to it, and I knew that I was going to encounter a different type of tempest.

With the first holler from her dad's rectum, my emotions all fought to be released at once. I wanted to cry because of the awkward situation I was in, and I wanted to laugh for the same reason. My nostrils flared to breathe in air more quietly, and at the same time, my lungs were exploding to release it. I bit my lower lip, using it as an artificial wall to hold back my sensations, and cringed at the cacophony of sounds.

What would James Bond do? I thought once again. *James Bond would not be in this situation*, I concluded, *and if he ever was, he probably would possess a device from Q to help relieve the smell.*

The flush reverberated throughout the room, the toilet swallowed its heavy load, and a good amount of my emotions were irrigated along, too. Her dad washed his hands and went back out the door towards his room. Acting fast, I tried to collect the courage I had left and make my way out the door. I scurried down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back into the newly appreciated, sweet smelling air.

My legs were on cruise control as I sprinted back towards my car, and I could feel the breeze all around me. Something was wrong, though. In the midst of all my panic, adrenaline, fear, and thoughts, I had become oblivious to the smaller details.

I ran past a pleasant looking elderly lady hobbling into her car. Suddenly, with the sound of her voice, all my looming realizations were brought to a head.

"Ahhhh, pooleece, pooleece. Pervert! Gad, someone help me. Pervert! Ahhh!"

I looked around in horror when I realized that I was the subject of her dismay, and was startled to find that I had forgotten my most valued item of clothing. My thoughts raced back up into Sarah's room where my discarded pants lay crumpled like sloppy fingerprints at the foot of her bed.

JENNIFER MALLOY

PERSONAL ESSAY

The bumpy highway seemed more like the yellow brick road that day as my mother and I were driving toward Monrovia. I left Laguna Hills with only a hug from my best friend, Melissa, in my back pocket. Butterflies attacked my weary stomach as we came closer to our destination. Confidence, in the end, would come from my heart and nothing else.

Suddenly, with the blink of an eye, we were there. We shoved our way into the warm and loving home of my grandpa. He smiled brightly as I gave him a hug. I thanked him for letting us spend the night at his home, so we could go to the Rose Bowl the next morning. He was very happy to help us in any way he could, especially with something that was this exciting.

Uncle Tim, sitting with his arms crossed in the corner of the living room, asked, "Now what is this you are doing?"

I replied in an excited tone that I was going to audition for *American Idol 2*. He never had a problem giving his opinion. He made comments like, "You have to dress extreme to make it in the music business." Despite what he said, the next day was going to be something larger than I could imagine.

As the evening wore down, Mom and I decided to go to the Rose Bowl that night to see what we could expect the next

morning. Little did we know that two thousand people were camped out on the ground. We were stunned to see a line that stretched all the way around the street leading into the Rose Bowl. I stepped out of the car, and the wretched smell of body odor and cheap perfume coming from the huddled mass lingered in my nostrils like moldy air fresheners. It looked as if a thousand hopeful hobos had parked their carcasses there because they had been promised gold to sleep on the damp ground.

We eventually stumbled into the line to get a stamp, a ticket, and a number. The number held my place in line, and I needed to have a ticket and a stamp or I couldn't audition. They quickly wrote a number in pen on my wrist and shoved a ticket in my hand. I was lucky number 2211. There would have been a rude awakening the next morning if we had not come that night, so we headed home happy that we had gone.

We returned to my grandpa's house that night and set our alarms for four-thirty because the auditions began at six o'clock. I slept like the dead in spite of the scenarios that were playing in my head. To my shock, I woke up to the sound of my mother's worried voice: "Come on . . . get up! Our alarms didn't go off!" I had a half hour to get ready for one of the biggest days of my life.

I sprang into the bathroom with makeup and hairdryers everywhere. All I could do was mutter four-letter-words under my breath as I rushed to throw myself together. The anxiety built to a fever-

ish pitch. I put my face through torture by putting on mounds of eye shadow, eyeliner, and foundation, trying to look my best. Through the madness my grandpa calmly said, "Now Jennifer, eat a Twix. It will give you quick energy." I smiled and replied, "Yes, Grandpa." He had been encouraging me all my life and was there to watch over me and help me once again. I grabbed a Twix, which made me wired. Maybe having sugar wasn't such a grand idea.

On the way to the Rose Bowl, I chattered like a monkey who had drunk five cups of coffee.

My mom did not enjoy the mindless jabber. I felt electrified and exhilarated. I stared at the sky, which ranged from gorgeous periwinkle blue to a deep, rich sapphire blue that looked like a beautiful painting hung for me. It was already 5:50 by then. We had ten minutes to get there, find a parking space, and run to our place in line. We pulled into the Rose Bowl, desperate to find a parking space, when all of a sudden a space close to the entrance sat quietly waiting for

us. I gave Mom a hug, completely stunned by our good fortune.

We walked quickly to the entrance and saw the hobos were being woken up at six o'clock. Some had been there for four days and had war stories to tell, like how they tried to bathe in the sinks or how they froze sleeping on the unforgiving pavement. We took our place in line and watched the sun rise over the San Gabriel Mountains. Before we knew it, the day had begun. I came to the competi-

They quickly wrote a number in pen on my wrist and shoved a ticket in my hand. I was lucky number 2211.

tion wearing jeans, a knitted black honcho with a black tank top, and an antique necklace. I looked around and realized I was different from the other girls who showed off all their assets and had a J-Lo attitude. After moving to another part of the line, I realized we were in a sea of insanity and that nothing was going to be normal about this competition.

I felt like a block of ice that was slowly melting as the sun beat down. I started noticing all of the wild characters that surrounded us. A man named Bobby sang doo-wop for a few hours straight, annoying everyone. He tried to impress me with sleazy winks and vocal harmonizing. While he tried to seduce me, I commented to my mom, “I’m going to kill him.” He wasn’t the most annoying person there. Many Christina Aguilera wanna-bes and Britney Spears look-a-likes plagued the line. I was overwhelmed being in close proximity to the freaks the world had to offer. I rested my head on my mom’s shoulder and listened to the gigantic melting pot of sounds. Unlike everyone else, I refused to open my mouth to anyone except the judges, and I also didn’t open my mouth for fear of tasting the garbage-soaked air. I refused to become hysterical while being trapped in by trash. If I had realized how terrible it was, I would have run out of there screaming. While standing and waiting, I met a twenty-three-year-old former punk singer from Texas named Kelly, who was along for the ride. The kindness of this stranger helped me feel like I was not alone when the time came.

Finally we got to the front of the line. All parents had to stand on the other side of the gates. My biggest cheerleader, my mom, was gone, and I sailed into the unknown. The next group to audition was pumped with pure adrenaline for their moment.

We had weathered the awful conditions and emotional strain of being there. Oddly enough, we all started singing simultaneously “I’ve Got the Golden Ticket,” from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. We knew that a magical opportunity could be offered to any one of us to have the greatest career in the world.

The gates opened and I waited behind a row of dreamers to get my chance. The judge who would decide my fate yelled at staff members to bring him an umbrella, and then dumped water on his balding head between each audition. He looked like a strawberry that was ready to explode. All I could think was, “Of course I would get the judge that is having heat stroke and that is going to die before I get my chance.” To make matters worse, when it was my turn I noticed a gigantic boil on his face. I tried not to say anything like “Cyst to meet you.”

The judge was professional—all he cared about was hearing me. He told me not to be nervous and that he was the attorney of *American Idol*. I shook his hand twice by accident and he laughed and thanked me for the second handshake, but said that he wanted to see my ticket. I began to sing and couldn’t stop; I was shaking like a leaf. When I began to sing, it felt like I was somewhere else. He pressured me to sing on for a minute and a half. He was conflicted and said in a regretful tone, “You have a very nice voice, but you are not what we are looking for.” With my jewels glistening in the sun, I thanked him for his time and walked away.

I was in pain as if a cannon ball had shot through my chest. I left wishing Kelly a Merry Christmas. After she was out of sight, I collapsed in my mother’s arms in tears that seemed to never end; meanwhile, I watched a harlot with no talent

that I had seen earlier, walk away excitedly with an invitation back to the second audition in Hollywood. I fell into my car seat and could not move from exhaustion and shock. The next day I realized that I had received positive feedback compared to those who had been told simply, “No. Thank you for coming.” The judges were looking for a cookie-cutter pop star, not talent, which did not surprise me. I walked away proud I had proven to myself that there isn’t anything that I can’t achieve. I went to the audition with small expectations, and I came back with drive and strength.

THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES

MELISSA BARKER

FICTION

Laura stared at the candle, the charred wick drooping almost listlessly. She had forgotten to trim it. Not that long ago—could it be ten years?—they had sat face-to-face across this very table. The expanse of glass had not seemed so cold between them then; the candles had cast a warm flickering glow over the romantic scene, their ankles brushing under the table. Now the drone of the dishwasher seemed to dull the harsh reality of his cold and commanding voice. All business, just facts, with a pinch of sadistic twist for his amusement. One would swear he had never slept a minute under this roof, let alone twelve years. Even the simple element of accusation would have made her feel more human. His dry demeanor made the salivary glands on either side of her mouth prickle, a sure sign that she was going to throw up.

The stranger opposite her was still talking. At least, his thin lips were still moving. Something about the children, how many days here or at his new mansion. Bitter nausea leapt up her throat. She imagined the sheer pleasure of spewing vomit over his immaculate olive suit. She must have smiled, for the glimmer in his cold slate eyes brought her back to focus. She just had to sit and listen. If she didn't move or interject, he wouldn't be provoked. He would leave, and the day-to-day

tasks of her existence could continue. Until he opened the door again and waltzed in.

She tentatively uncrossed her ankles, her attention never faltering. The years of “training” had served her well. He could only be proud of his domination. All she was proud of was her honed ability to conceal the festering disgust and disdain she had for him.

“Don’t think this means I don’t own you any longer, Laura. If I arrive home and you are not here—well, you know what that means for you, don’t you?” He said this as he lifted his chair back and tapped the side of his right arm subtly. What had she seen in him?

She waited with bated breath until she heard the front door quietly click shut. Only then did she allow herself to feel the flash of guilt for being thankful that there was a new girl. Part of Laura panicked for her. The other part was elated about the hope of escape from his attention.

As she slowly stood, the elegant claw feet of her armchair scraping the stone, she noticed the manila envelope he had left on the table. She pushed a stray strand of blonde behind her ear and, without touching the envelope, picked up her keys from the Nambe dish. It was time to collect Justin and Carrie from school. She knew this without a glance at the chain link watch draped over her slim wrist.

Purely out of habit, she hurried. She was only allowed thirty-five minutes to get to the school and return home, forty if she had to stop at the café.

She drove the same route every day. That way, if the mileage on her car happened to be checked, she would not have to be subjected to interrogation and inevitable punishment.

Laura pulled up in front of the school. She sat nervously twisting her wedding band as she waited in line with the hundreds of SUVs and luxury cars. She folded her arms. The silk was so thin on her three-quarter-sleeve blouse that she could feel the familiar scars right through it. Michael frowned upon smoking, but he had taken, creatively, to lighting up for the sheer pleasure of

stubbing out the cigarettes on her upper arms while making her sit on the ottoman opposite his leather chair. Her frightened eyes waited for what seemed an eternity for the cigarette to drop its ash and become a glowing ember.

Carrie swung the passenger door open and flopped into the car. As Laura asked her about her day, Justin announced his arrival with a complaint about why his sister always sat in the front. She had to drop

Carrie off at ballet and then leave Justin at the pool next door for his water polo training. She would have barely enough time to get home in case Michael called to check on where she was. Had what he said meant that she would need to cook dinner for him whether he was there or not? It would be better to be safe. The last time he had arrived back from a business trip unexpectedly early, she had paid dearly. Her wrist ached at the thought.

He had taken,
creatively, to lighting
up for the sheer
pleasure of stubbing
out the cigarettes on
her upper arms . . .

Exchanging light-hearted banter with the kids, she navigated the streets. After reassuring them that she would be there to pick them up in an hour, she watched them, innocence scampering up the stairway. There seemed to be the same ingrained pressure in them to avoid consequences of not being on time. It was sad.

As she turned through the wrought iron gates, she stopped at the mailbox, collected the mail, and then negotiated her Jaguar into the garage. She was on her way up to her bedroom when she stopped dead in her tracks.

Something wasn't right. She retraced her steps through the living room towards the kitchen and paused in the dining room. Her eyes expertly scanned the room, checking for dust or lint on the floor. It was only on her second gaze across the room that she realized the folder was gone.

She swallowed hard. Positive that she had left it there, her mind raced through the last forty minutes.

"You knew I could never let you go, Laura." The calm words were accompanied by the pressure of a hard point in her back. She was frozen, the only movement being the panic and terror churning in her chest. She slowly turned around when he asked.

"You are distraught; your husband is leaving you. People will understand." The comprehension of what he was saying dribbled into her consciousness. Her jaw went slack. She hadn't expected this. It was fitting, though. He controlled her; now he wanted someone else. She didn't deserve to have a life without pleasing him.

The panic snapped to an adrenaline rush. She had harnessed her screams of pain and tears of

sadness for the children's sake. This was different. They wouldn't have a mother if . . .

"You were supposed to touch the paper in the file, Laura. I needed your fingerprints. Touch the file, Laura."

She hated the way he said her name. It was her father all over again. She slowly extended her hand. As he put the file towards it, she thrust it upwards with all the strength that her vengeance fed her. He grabbed at his face with his gloved hand, dropping his .38. Before she lost her advantage, she kicked him sideways with unexpected power. It was almost humorous. He must have been regretting the times he had insisted so unkindly that she wear those damn heels, even through both pregnancies.

The force propelled them apart and she lunged for the gun. As he pulled himself up, she leveled it at him.

No questions, no need for explanations. Simplicity and clarity. Kill or be killed. Her eyes tucked down to the safety and back to his ashen face within a second. She deliberately squeezed the trigger. He didn't have time to protest or beg before the bullet shattered his skull.

Then it was strange; she was almost disconnected. No regret. No horror. Not even elation. There was just a bloody mess that had to be cleaned up.

And it was time to get the children. Calmly she picked up the folder. Inside, there was a suicide note with verbiage adequately tormented to be believable. It was typed with spelling mistakes, making evident his disdain for her intelligence.

She stepped over his body elegantly with her crocodile leather heels. Lifting her chin, she picked up her keys and stalked back to her car in the garage, the folder tucked snug in the silk under

her arm. For the first time it was a relief to live in seclusion, with no interfering neighbors to hear the shot. She would stop by the police station after she had taken the children to spend the night at her sister's house. There was no need to be back in thirty-five minutes.

Michael could wait.

“I can’t afford it.”

“There isn’t enough money.”

“How are we going to pay *that* bill?”

“Let’s see . . . his check comes on Friday. . . maybe I can make it all work. . . .”

These are phrases that I often heard my mother say when I was growing up. As a child I didn’t understand why she didn’t have the money or why I couldn’t have all the toys my friends had. All I knew was that we shopped second-hand and, according to my parents, “got by.”

“*Where does your dad work?*” I was fortunate, you see; my dad always worked very hard. Once he even worked at a gas station so he could at least feed his family. But oftentimes in the town where I grew up, the dads were out of work. Moms were often in the same situation, either out of work, or working in low paying, even degrading jobs. Jobs in my town were not great and did not pay well. Most families had at least one person working in the town mill, and a lot of families were on welfare.

Welcome to Cottage Grove, a small town in Oregon, population 11,000, located twenty miles from the nearest “city.” In a small town, life is very different as compared to that in

Orange County. Kids are safe to go to the park and ride their bikes across town. Everyone knows everyone, and your neighborhood is full of front yards and kids at play. In my town, cars were old and needed repairs. You washed your own car and cut your own grass. The city dump was not far, so you often took care of your own trash. If you wanted something, you worked for it. It was not handed to you. Parents were not “well off,” and most had very poor credit.

Food stamps were how many people survived, but they were often not enough to buy healthy food. We ate whatever was the cheapest, and with four kids, that wasn't easy. My mom became very good at making something great out of something small. We never went hungry, but we rarely went healthy either. Until I moved to California, I had no concept of healthy food versus junk food. I just ate whatever was put in front of me.

This is not to say that I lived in poverty. My parents took very good care of my brothers and me. I always felt that we were one of the lucky families. My parents never divorced (which was and is a rarity); they spent a lot of time with us and placed a high value on morals and education. Our situation gave us some great memories that I will never forget. One year our pipes froze under our house. We had no water, and my parents could not afford to have it fixed. It was a very cold December. My family could not afford the price of an electric bill to heat the entire house, so on this night my entire family, my aunt,

One year our pipes
froze under our
house. We had no
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have it fixed.

and my uncle all slept in one room. We used blankets and body heat to stay warm. When I was little, I thought of this as a big sleepover, but I have come to understand that this is simply how it had to be. My mother used to walk my brothers and me to school. I thought this was fun, and she did her best to entertain us along the two-mile walk.

My life in this small town may sound so sad and unhappy. However, I look back on my parents' struggles and am thankful that I grew up this way. You see, I now have a great appreciation for all the wonderful blessings God has given my family. I know what it is to not have much and what it is to have a lot. I may not have had much materially when I was young, but my parents gave me all the love in the world and have always worked very hard to give their family whatever it needs. I now understand that all the money in the world does not make a family function.

“We are moving to California.”

My parents grew up there and spoke of how much better things would be for us. My brothers and I were told that we could get a better education and have more opportunities there. As a child you don't understand what it means to be moving away. I thought California couldn't be any different from Oregon, and I was sure it would be great.

As we drove into our new neighborhood, I observed the cars, houses, and shopping centers. The houses were all so big and pretty and the cars were shiny and expensive. I had only seen houses

like these in magazines, movies, or “spendy” neighborhoods in Oregon. I couldn’t believe that this was how everyone lived here.

My first day of school was terrible. I was not prepared for what I faced. I walked into a classroom full of kids who were very well dressed, definitely not in second-hand clothing or shoes. They had brand new backpacks and lunch boxes. They all knew each other, and I instantly became an outcast. I dressed funny, I was overweight, and I spoke differently, too. As I talked to some students, I began to realize that many of the other kids were snobby and mean. Maybe I never noticed kids being that way back home because I knew them, or maybe this was just how Californians were.

Eventually I did make friends and adjust to life in California. However, I have realized that life in southern Orange County is unique to the rest of the world. I think I may have realized this at an earlier age than others because I grew up outside of what I refer to as “the Bubble.”

Many people I have met grew up here and never had to live a life like I did before moving here. They do not know what it means to have your pipes freeze in December, to have the stove go out, and to have to cook in a wood-burning fireplace. They will never have to search the house for a quarter so their kids can have milk with their free lunch (which is provided to those in need at their school). They are “too good” to step foot in a Goodwill, let alone shop there. They will never go on food stamps or welfare. Many people in southern Orange County live in a bubble. They see life only as they experience it and do not fully understand what not having any money really means.

Life in the southern Orange County Bubble is not all there is to life. It’s a fairy-tale land of

huge houses and expensive cars. It’s a place where moms are “soccer moms” and dads are rarely home. In the bubble, we have someone else to wash our cars, clean our houses, and do the lawn work. We have the trash people come pick up our trash and the association to keep the neighborhood looking like a magazine cover. I believe that most children who spend their entire lives here do not fully understand that this is not how life is for everyone. They are protected here. They are sheltered here.

I am not saying that everyone who grows up here will turn out spoiled and snobby. I do know some people who have grown up here and they do understand that not everyone lives this way. Their parents have raised them to understand that they are blessed to live here and to have everything they have.

I am very appreciative for all that I have and all my parents have achieved since moving to California. I know we would not be where we are today if God had not blessed us. My dad was recently able to achieve his dream of having his own business, and my mom is now able to be at home. We are lucky to have the finances to have new cars and healthy meals. We have become very materially fortunate since moving here and have never lost the fortune of love in our family. However, my brothers and I will never forget those times in Oregon when my family struggled. We will always remember those times and appreciate what we have, no matter how little some people may think that is.

I have learned so many things from my experiences. I have been fortunate enough to experience two very different lifestyles and to grow from each of them. From living in Oregon I learned the importance of a balanced budget, a close family,

and being there for those in need. Here, in California, I was given a great education and many opportunities I would otherwise never have known. I was blessed to grow up knowing that I did not need a new car, the latest clothing, or everything handed to me. These experiences have made me a better person, and I hope that when I have kids, I will be able to convey all I have learned to them.

My fear for my younger brother, who does not recall my parents' struggles, and for other "bubble children" is that they will never experience life outside of this "bubble." They will grow up to believe that they deserve to have everything handed to them. They will believe everyone has new cars, maids, and gardeners. My prayer is that parents in southern Orange County will raise their children to understand that there is more to life than what is inside our "Bubbleland."

SATORI OBLIVION

COREY A. WITZEL

POETRY

Pop goes the cap, and down goes the pills
Escape from the heartaches, escape from the thrills
Some bow to Budweiser
 or the great H on the brain
No matter what you worship
 the destination's the same
Singing in the chorus
 Till your heart explodes
Watching movies
 Shooting loads
Escape my love into the void
Just one more injection
 of all-American celluloid
Watching the t.v.
 waiting for the checks
Buying pretty stones to put round your neck
Buddha found in chanting mantras
 getting bald and fat
Sitting under the Bo tree
 oblivion sat

ALBERT CORDRAY

PERSONAL ESSAY

April showed up one day at some church ordeal. Luckily, they served enough food to drown my boredom and on-again-off-again social skills. This was a singles' congregation, and she stormed through the mass like some miniature tornado shaking off the sage. She's a healthy buck-twenty, light brunette. Beautiful, but not by America's beer-commercial standards: April wore no makeup. But she beamed with an inner confidence that saturated everything around her. She sat near to me and with a wink threw down a chilidog like her plane was going down. I wish I'd had it on film. With chili on her cheek, a yellow dress, dangling silver earrings, and a conversation to her left with a chatty friend, it was about the sexiest scene I'd ever witnessed.

The danglers were a peculiar choice. Hoops and studs had been the rage for, what? Ten years? And here they were, swinging to her chomps like Poe's pendulum. An inch at a time, you'll soon be mine.

I soon discovered that I drove past April's house on the way home from work. My cubicle is carefully mired in Newport Beach, and while traversing the nominal peaks, canyon bottoms, and twists that make up the Pacific Coast Highway, I invariably came barreling past Vista del Sol, where on the left is an aban-

doned gas station and on the right is the entrance gate to her neighborhood. Apparently “vista del sol” translates to “view of the sun,” which is very appropriate for the entryway of her little community.

Taking April out was like the next U2 or Madonna album: inevitable. She knew it and I knew it from the first wry smile. If only my bearings had been informed. We started out going to Melrose in Hollywood, only I took a wrong turn at the 10 freeway, and we ended up in middle Los Angeles where the neighborhoods are a bit less inviting than those of Orange County. She rescued my lost manliness with an easing attitude. “It’s okay,” she said. “Look at all the orange houses. I would never have seen them if you hadn’t, uh . . . decided to explore.” She was referring to some cheaply made tract homes near Alameda Boulevard, and her eyebrows popped with light sarcasm as she did so. I was trying to correct our path toward the freeway, and we went down a neighborhood where every house and duplex was painted bus station orange. My face flushed red, but she just smiled and shook her head, letting me know it was okay.

It wouldn’t be the last time I would get us lost. Something about her made me so nervous that my mental map became tapioca. I took her up to Naples to see the curious strip just south of Long Beach, but turned off the 101 too early, and we soon found ourselves trying to escape the maze of neighborhoods south of Alamitos Bay in Seal

Beach. My carefully laid plans just seemed to be doomed, once she got in the car. April always took it well, though, usually rolled up into a ball of laughter in the passenger seat of my ’86 4Runner. Getting lost became our inside joke.

My foolishness, however, was not limited to driving directions. In a confused series of mistakes, I fell for a fearsome blonde who showed up at my doorstep one Saturday morning. I left my green and pink Marshmallow Mateys and my reason at the kitchen table to answer a ruinous doorbell, where Ashley stood smiling and thin beneath a

long spill of blonde hair. She had anime-eyes, large and unbelievably alive above jutting lips, the effect reminding me of the Twiggy/Welch look of all those treacherous actresses of the sixties. She asked to see my mom (who had given me no warning) for an interview to take a teaching position at our in-home preschool. “Yeah, come right in.”

After a few dates, Ashley seemed to have everything I questioned in April. Only they turned out to be superfluous qualities that I didn’t really need: inane Ikea-inspired idealism, self-righteous sophistication, and the “look.” Gone were the open hatred of cell phones, toll roads, Disneyland, and the Gap. Gone were those severe rolling eyes that April had always used to say her version of “of course!” In their place was the all-powerful surface, beckoning me like Bathsheba from a warm roof.

April and I went out one more time before Ashley took over. I expected the date to be some

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kind of revelation, proving that all that chemistry and charisma with April was just a distraction from the narcotic effect that chasing Ashley had on me. No such luck. April was charming as ever, laughing as I spilled hot chocolate on her arm (yes, I am that clumsy), and making fun of Tom Cruise's teeth and performance every five minutes as we watched *Legend* from the elbow of the corner couch in my family's bonus room.

Soon, the credits were over, then the static, and finally a blue screen spilled on us as the VCR awaited further action. It was late, and I sat there torn. I wanted to kiss her, but the vision of Ashley seared across my face like a threat. I had found my White Whale. Guys like me only get a shot at women as beautiful as Ashley once or twice in life, I reasoned. Struggling, I pushed away the magic with April like some kind of heroin addict refusing food. She lay there lazily for twenty minutes, waiting for me to make a move, and then finally said, "Well, I better go home." I could sense that she felt dejected, but I considered myself above it all. I'd sacrificed one goddess for another, and like some sick televangelist, I took it for a sign.

By the time I had been tossed aside by Ashley, April and I were offset forever. My relationships ended as hers began, and vice versa. Only mine always seemed to be in retaliation to hers. It was the kind of atmosphere that allowed me to say all those foolish things I never would have said had I made the right choice at the right time. Having failed in seeing her true worth and the true worth of our chemistry together, I waxed resentful at the treasure lost. At a great price I discovered where bitterness comes from, and why its source is so hard to recognize: from behind the eyes and beneath the tongue it carefully seizes us, twisting

our words and humming just below our inner-radar in subtle self-contempt.

April was usually polite thereafter, but never took me seriously again. Like those dust devils you see while driving through the desert, she became and remains evasive. But that's the nature of opportunity, especially with love, blowing in, by and gone. If I can give up my bitterness, and recognize real beauty when it shows its face again, perhaps next time I'll be able to take hold.

Two years later, I still drive past April's home in South Laguna after work, mind-blown by the sunsets that wash her neighborhood, and scuffed by the lingering regrets that mark my thoughts of her. At one point in *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab turned from the sunset in abstinence of all things beautiful, for he would allow nothing to please or amaze him until he had hunted down his elusive enemy. I've often thought of all the opportunities he missed for his bitterness, because he lived on the sea. I've learned to take it in again, to accept the beauty and the rich colors, and in doing so, I've been blessed to watch the waves remove my failures. Yet all the reminders remain, mingling with the yellows, reds, and purples like some tinge of pollution in the air. I never even kissed April, but my mouth heals like a cut. I'm simultaneously pierced and mesmerized, as if mocked by the dying day. It's as if I am a new human, flesh orange-smearred by the rich western horizon as I speed up and down the Pacific rollercoaster.

PRECIOUS TEACUPS

KAREN KRAWIEC

FICTION

Liz jangled Clancy's leash and then halfway to the door remembered the soup still simmering on the stove, cream of vegetable she had been fixing for Ben.

He's having a bad day.

She made vegetable soup so he would get his vitamins. He liked it, though he never said. She took good care of him that way. Through their forty-some years of marriage, she prided herself on healthy meals. Liz had always worried about Ben taking better care of himself when he traveled on business.

Darting to the stove, she shut off the burner, leaving the pot on to stay hot. The coolness of early evenings in October made her think: *Better get my jacket.* Hurrying by him in his recliner, she said, "Well, we're off for our walk. Don't forget your soup."

Not a word, just a grumble, as he gawked at the blaring ball game on the screen. Did he even know she was alive?

But of course he did; he had to. Who else cleaned, cooked his breakfast, lunch and dinner, took him to the doctor, helped him out of bed, gave him his pills?

She felt guilt nudge her self-pitying away.

Shame on you! Ben couldn't help being sick.

Liz's spirit sank lower, catching Clancy's reflection in the hall mirror. Years ago, youthful muscles embossed his silky auburn mane. This tired version of their striking Irish setter moved less enthusiastically now. The twinkle of mischief in his eyes was long gone. His nails clicked and ticked on the wood floor as he shuffled to the front foyer, knowing their routine.

Liz adjusted herself in the mirror, hating to admit: *You should talk. Your red mane and muscle tone have withered a bit, too.* She stroked her dull reddish-brown hair invaded by white intruders, her green eyes absent of their spark.

Out the two went. Liz sucked in a deep gulp of brisk air and blew it out as she shut the door behind her, separating herself from the other side. *Alone.*

They began in the same direction.

Life is funny—good one minute, not so good the next. She teetered back to her self-pitying sentiment. Life had played a joke on them. Now retirement, the time of life that was supposed to be rewarding, the time for which they had been preparing, saving diligently so they might travel later . . . *Well, what good is all that money now? It can't cure Ben.*

The doctors could not offer much relief from Ben's severe rheumatoid arthritis. Painfully, slowly, daily, this disease crippled once-vital Ben. After steroid drugs failed, his last option, a chemotherapy drug, relieved the inflammation some, but at a price. Side effects of extreme nausea,

weakening bone loss, and a frail immune system forced Ben to take each day as it came.

A day for Ben could be bad or worse. She ranked them as tan or beige, different yet the same. Tan and beige days, the days of their life, blurred into grains of sand in an hourglass, sifting down and down, day in, day out.

Liz and Clancy wound their way through the park. *Where were those trips we planned over cups of coffee after tucking Katie and Jack in bed? Dear little angels sleeping. Now we're grandparents. Gosh.*

A day for Ben could be bad or worse. Liz ranked them as tan or beige, different yet the same. Tan and beige days, the days of their life, blurred into grains of sand.

They had held hands, fantasizing at their kitchen table about exotic places. She smiled, then choked back tears, realizing—if we only knew they'd be our only trips.

“When I retire, done bustin’ my hump on bloody sales quotas, we’ll go wherever you want, but Darlin’, first thing I’m gonna do is take you to England, and show ’em what a real queen looks like!” He winked his dancing blue peepers at her, kissed her hand, and

laughed. *Where was he now, that man so full of life?*

“We’ll taste French pastries and Italian cuisine! Do ya think they’ll give up their secret ingredients to an American housewife?” Anyone who tasted them raved about Liz’s heavenly meals. She had prepared gourmet feasts for Judy and Jim. Now her best friend, Judy, was gone. They did not talk to Jim anymore.

God I miss you, Jude. Yeah, life's not playing fair at all.

Walking usually healed her broken spirit, but today it did not serve its purpose.

So this is how we're rewarded for living a good life. We went to church, raised two kids with degrees, paid our taxes, donated to charity.

The road twisted. There was Grace watering her rust autumn mums in the front garden. Liz enjoyed talks with Grace. Grace reminded Liz of an older, faded, worn-out Judy. Liz, oddly enough, opened up to her.

"I made soup for him—not even a thank you. He's so irritable, even with our grandchildren on Sunday," she said, saying more than she should.

Oh God, shut up; you hardly know this woman!

Grace smiled sympathetically, and with the strength of a dam, Liz fought back a flood of tears, an overflow of panic, built-up anger, and the helplessness drowning her.

Grace stooped down, patted Clancy, and said to him, "I just made a pot of tea. You two come in and have some." She led them to her dim living room.

"It gets dark early now." She flicked on lamps and nodded for them to sit in the dining nook. Teacups of all shapes and colors packed a mint green china hutch. The charming collection cheered Liz. They sipped Earl Grey from delicately painted teacups, pale pink roses, yellow daisies, and shiny gold-trimmed porcelain.

"What beautiful teacups."

Grace said she never used to touch them for fear of breaking them. "I used to just look at them; many of them are old, priceless." She poured more tea. "Now I use a different one every day."

Liz whispered ashamedly, "I never use my tea set. It was my grandmother's. It still has all its teacups."

They spoke for hours. Grace was an only child. Her father was an artist and she followed, majoring in art. After her parents passed away, Grace met Gerard in London. They traveled abroad for years.

Memories filled the evening. They beached on the Mediterranean and skied the Alps of Switzerland.

What a wonderful life; how lucky to travel and see the world.

In Brussels, at a corner cafe sipping tea, Gerard took Grace's hand. On one knee, he proposed. With that, Grace started and dropped her cup, chipping it on her saucer. She cried for ruining the romance, but Gerard laughed. On their first wedding anniversary, Gerard presented Grace with that chipped teacup, beginning the teacup ritual. It now grandly sat top center among the others.

"It's the most perfect of all," Grace sighed. A teacup from every country, every stop; wherever they visited, Gerard bought her one.

Wanting a family, they bought a home in the Colorado Mountains. Grace described breathtaking views of tall green pines on craggy snow-capped ridges. Grace showed Liz paintings hanging in a lonely den.

"I loved the snow . . . I don't paint anymore," Grace murmured.

They had had a son. They tried for a daughter, but an ectopic pregnancy left Grace unable to conceive again.

They shared their love of skiing with Matthew. At fourteen, he qualified for the Olympic team tryouts. Elated, they prepared diligently. When

the day came, they headed down the mountain. Their car swerved off the snow-covered road and flipped several times.

Matthew was killed in the crash. Gerard died two days later. Grace wished sometimes that she had not survived. She left Colorado and moved to Arizona so she'd never have to see snow again.

How lonely she must be; how sad, poor thing; all alone in this big house . . . all alone in the world.

Liz and Clancy sauntered home in the dark. Liz unleashed Clancy in the doorway. Ben hobbled toward her, bellowing.

"Where've you been? I almost called the cops! It's been hours!"

Kissing his dumbfounded face, she made her way into the kitchen. Soup gone, dishes piled in the sink. She smiled.

Liz put on a kettle and turned on the chandelier in her dining room, studying the contents of her china hutch. She drew from it the antique teapot, two saucers, and two teacups. She wiped each piece proudly with a damp dishtowel. Liz fixed tea and set the tray down where Ben was sitting watching the news.

"The good tea set? What if it gets broken or chipped?"

"Cup of tea, Ben?"

MORE THAN JUST A JOB

GARRETT FERN

PERSONAL ESSAY

I had lost my focus and my motivation. I was in college, but I didn't know why I felt like I was wasting my time. When I told my mother of my dilemma, she suggested I look for a job. She thought having a job might help me regain my focus, motivation, and insight into myself and what type of career I should pursue. Following her advice I began to look for, and eventually found, a job. I took a position as a sales associate with AFLAC, the world's largest supplemental insurance provider. It was the best decision I have ever made. Taking a job with AFLAC taught me not only the skills required to make a sale, but also focused me and motivated me toward obtaining a career I love.

I began my quest for employment in December of 2000, and it would prove an arduous one. Several months into it, I found myself questioning whether I had made the correct decision. I had applied for nearly fifty positions and been on more than ten interviews. Unfortunately, none of them were right. This experience was incredibly frustrating for me. I felt as though I would never find the job I was looking for. Countless times I wanted to throw in the towel and give up. However, I was able to persevere and, eventually, my perseverance paid dividends.

In late March of 2001, I was at a job fair looking through the list of companies attending. At the top of the list was the name 'AFLAC,' which seemed vaguely familiar. I remembered a television commercial with a nasally sounding duck that quacked out the name 'AFLAC.' Based solely on this information, I decided to visit the AFLAC booth. As I approached the booth, I was greeted with a smile and a handshake as we introduced ourselves. His name was Seth and we talked for about ten minutes about AFLAC and the positions they had available. By the time I left the booth I had an interview the following day at 10:15 a.m.

The next day, I dressed myself in my standard interview attire: a suit, a tie, a fitted Geoffrey Beene shirt, and my dad's hand-me-down dress shoes. I printed directions from mapquest.com, got in my car, and began the drive from my house in Mission Viejo to Seth's office in Orange. Upon entering the office I was struck by the number of awards hanging on the walls. They were packed so densely they seemed more of a form of armor than decoration. The receptionist pointed to an uncomfortable looking chair against the wall, asked me to have a seat, and told me that she would let me know when Dan, who would be giving the interview, was ready.

Fifteen nervous minutes later she asked me to step into one of the offices. Despite having been on several recent interviews, I was nervous, but not overly so. My hands were somewhat clammy, so I dried them on my pant leg. A young athletic-look-

ing man met me and introduced himself as Dan. He had a broad attractive smile painted across his face. We stepped into a rather large office with a modest wooden desk upon which sat a computer monitor. Next to the desk was another smaller table with four chairs around it. Dan took a seat on one of the chairs and motioned for me to sit on the chair opposite him as he began the interview. As formality gave way to conversation, I began to realize that I strongly identified with Dan. It seemed that if he enjoyed AFLAC then I would as well. As he continued to describe his experiences while working for

the company, I found myself becoming excited about the possibility of working there. He told me that he would need to speak with Seth the next day, but that I should be prepared to accept or decline a position in two days. As I contained my billowing excitement, I already knew that I would accept.

Two days later the call came, I accepted the position, and my employment with AFLAC began. Before I could begin work, however, three

things needed to happen. First I needed to become licensed to sell insurance in the state of California. That involved taking a fifty-two hour preparation course and passing a one hundred-fifty question multiple-choice exam. Seven weeks later, my license was framed and mounted on the wall. The second thing I needed was to become not only knowledgeable in, but an expert on, the company's products. Three days of intense study that would have put any last minute exam crammer to shame

... I knew this was all I could ever hope for if I continued to drift through college, or if I never returned.

and I was a verifiable expert on supplemental insurance policies. Finally, I needed to learn how to sell. A four week session, one day a week, at the AFLAC California State Office taught me the basics of selling, and the rest I would learn in the field.

On Monday, October 16, 2001, I signed a one-year contract with AFLAC. The following two weeks proved to be the most difficult and frustrating weeks of my life. I did everything wrong, made every possible mistake, and succeeded only in reaffirming my own incompetence. Through it all, the one thing that kept me sane was a quote credited to Sir Winston Churchill. He said, "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm." So I used this as my north star, set my course, and refused to quit. Finally, on Wednesday of the third week, I closed my first account. The pride and joy I felt were so tremendous, it seemed as though the top of my head would pop off like a lid that had been left over boiling water too long. As I sat in the conference room of Mesa West, Inc., explaining AFLAC's policies to all twenty-seven employees, I felt, for the first time, the contentment that comes with success.

Over the next eight months I continued to enjoy the thrill of the sale and the feeling of success it gave me. Eventually, though, the exhilaration of closing a sale began to wane, while the agony of making them continued to wear on me. Making one hundred telemarketing phone calls and walking into fifty businesses and being confronted, nearly all the time, by people who were not only unhappy to see me but, in many cases, resented my presence was incredibly disheartening. I no longer found any enjoyment in my work, only misery. What discouraged me the most was that I knew this was all I

could ever hope for if I continued to drift through college, or if I never returned. It was with this thought on my mind that I made the decision to return to college.

Upon returning, I found that I had a renewed exuberance for school. Before leaving school to work, I dreaded waking up in the morning to go to school. I now relish the ability to sleep later than 6:30 a.m. and find myself looking forward to every day. Indeed, actual work helped me realize how easy the life of a student is. The comparative difficulty of my work at AFLAC gave me an appreciation of how fortunate I was to have the opportunity to attend college. This appreciation filled me with a determination to take advantage of that opportunity.

Going to work for AFLAC was one of the best decisions I ever made. The lessons I learned will stay with me for life. I learned how to sell, the most important skill in any career. However, I learned a much more valuable lesson: Working for AFLAC taught me about myself and helped me realize the type of career I am interested in. Most importantly, working for AFLAC allowed me to regain my focus and motivation. I cannot imagine how I could have done this otherwise. Truly, this experience changed my life for the better.

THE VOICE

NICK RAVN

POETRY

The voice of the white heart
Is a gentle call of sudden choice
Or perhaps of hopeful trust.
That strung by chords and verse and rivers of words
Brings to rise a soul's
Terse and fearful must.

But drowned in baleful thought,
And held in the gale-pull and sought,
The Heart is tossed by stray gusts.
And the wound inflicted
And the feelings constricted
By the restricted sound, Still un-discussed.

Perhaps if sound was sense
Instead of immense truth laid to the ground
Without stirring the dust.
And perhaps if the iron bush,
Beaten and pushed and watered
With our tears, might grow rust.

Then that voice might be heard,
And the thoughts of absurd silence be burned
By the mind's movement, non-unplussed.
And then with walls shattered
And calls answered,
Emotion comes to a cusp.

TWISTED WIRE

MICHAEL MALLER

FICTION

There are two ideas I use to define my life—a thin piece of wire and a string of stories.

Ask any two-bit philosopher and he'll tell you that each and every life is a story. Ask any one-bit writer and he'll tell you that everyone walking around is filled with stories. They talk of them as a consistent, coherent narrative. Nah. The situations and anecdotes that I go through are disjointed, all loosely based around a theme that doesn't even stay the same.

Once bent, wire can never be put back the way it was. The wire stretches from the past to the future, carrying the charge of one's life along it. Ahead of us it is straight, and behind us it is twisted. The present is where it gets bent. Sounds all important and Eastern, but it's just something I came up with at the last second to sound deep.

The short stories, the anecdotes, and the situations you go through bend your wire. Fatalists believe someone else is bending their wire. Me, I'm way too egocentric to buy into that. I'm bending my own wire, and anyone who tries bending it for me is asking for trouble.

That's just general policy, though—made to be broken. On more than one occasion, I've gone out looking to get my wire twisted in knots.

One prospective knot-tier was Angie. This was back a few weeks ago. Angie . . . she had deep forest green eyes, and hair to match. Then she spoke, and it was like all the knowledge and eloquence of a library were held within her, held back only by the dam of her lips. I met her outside the drugstore—I was picking up two of the essentials of life: aspirin and antacid—and she was walking by it. Actually, I followed her down the street for about a block, mustering my deepness and coolness to hit on her. I caught up to her at the crosswalk at Hoyt and Seventh. Didn't say anything; didn't get a chance to. She just turned around, handed me a note on a small slip of paper, and crossed the street. "Across the street, Joe's Diner, 3 tomorrow," it said. So I met her in the diner.

She was already sitting in a booth by the front window when I got there. The waiter got there about the same time I did, so I didn't get past the "hi" stage. It was all the waiter asking "Do you need more time?" and Angie shoving the big laminated one-sheet across the table at me. The waiter got the hint.

Scanning the burgers, I wore my best disinterested face and spoke through my best matter-of-fact voice.

"So . . . what's your name?"

"Angie," she said. I wondered then if she had some kind of a longer name. People don't go through life by nickname alone. Certainly they don't file taxes or sign up at the DMV like that.

"Oh."

I found a turkey sandwich that looked to be safe, and lined up the rest of my order as well. The problem with telling waiters you need more time is that they get too generous with the extra time. Then they know their tip will suck, so when they finally do come back, it's for as short a time, from as far away as possible. Low tips must be contagious.

He finally did come, at last, and I gave my order—Angie had already given hers. The waiter left again quickly.

"So what'd ya get?" I asked.

"Burger, coffee, side of fries."

"Mhmm." I said. I could see myself in the middle nodding like an idiot. I put a stop to that quick. "So, why'd—"

"You had normal colored hair and were buying brand names. I figured you could afford lunch."

"Oh . . ." My brain was bouncing around my head. That was what I'd wanted to ask. "I was actually wondering why you'd been named Angie. Name from a great aunt or something?"

She raised an eyebrow as a bus boy landed our drinks on the table. "Great-grandmother, mother's father's side. Americanization of her name after she got here."

I reinstated the stupid nod, intentionally this time. I'd caught her off guard with that, which was good. The lunch went increasingly better. As we walked out the door, she passed me another note which said "Same place, same time. And what's your name?"

"You had normal colored hair and were buying brand names. I figured you could afford lunch."

We went back there a few more times before my sense kicked in. Sense is the enforcer of personal policy. I waited for a cool time to drop out, but went through three more lunches, at which I learned she liked classical music, had moved here from Pittsburgh, and was a fan of the Pirates.

Then the day came I didn't get a note handed back to me. I think the date was just understood, but that ambiguity gave me an out, and I took it.

I got lucky. She coulda tied me in knots, and I was ready to hand her the wire. Sitting here, listening to Bach, the only thought that's going through my mind is how glad I am I'm the only one bending my wire.

DROWNING IN MID-AIR

STEVEN MCPHAIL

CONTEST WINNER

Few people find salvation in a canister. Yet, when the vice tightens around my lung, as it does at least once a week, it saves me. A few simple puffs, and the weight lifts. The canister wins the battle, for one day at least, and goes away, waiting for the next attack in peace. I wish I didn't get off so lucky. My lungs burn like I've just run a marathon, and my labored breath completes the illusion. I feel exhausted, but my rapid heartbeat refuses to rest. It takes a full half hour to recover from the most severe attacks, though afterwards all I want to do is sleep, even in the middle of the afternoon. And so, another day with asthma goes by.

Asthma makes me feel lazy, and others aren't always shy about sharing that impression. Whenever I take the elevator for short trips or stop to catch my breath on a long walk, the looks of others show me their opinions. If only you were in better shape, their scowls seem to say, you wouldn't have such a problem. Unless the little canisters make their appearance, no one knows the difference, and even then they seem to think it's my fault. When I get short of breath on the job, some dismiss it only as an excuse to get out of work. Only my most serious attacks warrant brief concern, though most customers care more about the speed of service than my well-being.

My girlfriend, at least, understands and accepts my limitations, even if I cannot.

Housework proves exceedingly difficult, as anything from household chemicals to ordinary dust can trigger a serious attack. As a result, most of the cleaning jobs fall to her.

She never complains. I try to help, even though she reminds me of the potential consequences when I try to wash laundry or clean the kitchen. I try to overcome the limitations, to ignore the asthma. The disease answers with a stone-like weight on my chest and long periods of coughing and wheezing. I reluctantly accept my place on the couch while work is being done.

The vacuum cleaner, the Pied Piper of asthma attacks, cannot be operated while I'm in the apartment. Vacuuming usually waits until I'm away at work or school, only used in the most serious circumstances when I'm home.

Thankfully, cooking dinner and washing dishes prove safe, though at times I still must be careful. I hardly welcome this forced irresponsibility. In addition to feelings of guilt, asthma robs me of considerable joy as well. Many of the physical activities I once enjoyed, from swimming to baseball, now prove difficult, if not impossible. I have to carefully monitor my breathing, or even a short swim might bring on a debilitating attack.

Even laughter poses a problem. If I laugh too hard, bad coughing fits follow. Afterwards,

friends seem cautious, treating jokes like grenades. As one once told me, "We don't want to kill you."

By far, the most difficult part of my ailment is when I look at Spaz, the guinea pig I bought last year. My girlfriend's old guinea pig never posed any problems, and I felt a pet might take my mind off the illness. Every time I held him, however, the tightness in my chest would follow. If I had him outside the cage before I went to bed, I would often wake up in the middle of the night with a bad attack. Sometimes, I can hear him squeaking as a bad attack comes over me. I wonder if he hates asthma as much as I do.

My girlfriend, at least, understands and accepts my limitations, even if I cannot.

The aforementioned canisters act as the main line of defense against the attacks, color-coded according to their use. White helps stop attacks as they happen, green offers long-term relief, and the red supposedly prevents attacks all together. They don't always work, however, and the side effects prove almost as bad. The doctors warned me about rinsing my mouth out to prevent an infection each time I used them.

They never warned me about the tremors which were so bad at first that I refused to take the medicine for several months. While the effects have subsided somewhat, my hands still shake every time I take them.

A number of other medications and devices help me monitor the asthma. A plastic triangle called a peak flow meter measures how much air I exhale, in the hopes of warning me that an attack is pending. I rarely use it, as my inability to exhale

more air than a child standing four feet tall does little for my self-image. Emergency steroid pills help reduce swelling if my attacks get too bad, but my friends give me a hard time, joking about me taking steroids. I laugh along each time, never letting on that I've heard the joke about one hundred times too many.

A number of allergy medications help reduce the asthma, but at the expense of making me very drowsy. I breathe well enough to be active, but I have no energy to take advantage of it. One day after I dropped a tray at a local salad bar and dealt with the resulting stares and laughter, I decided I could live without the allergy medicine from that point on.

Asthma acts as a barrier, keeping me from many of the things I love. It prevents me from having a normal life, forcing me to obey restrictions on what I do and how I do it. I pray each night that a cure will be found, that a new medicine will free me from this prison I've found myself living in.

Until that time, I'll keep finding salvation in canisters.

THE ALIEN IN THE ATTIC

STAN BRIN

FICTION

When you work at home, people think you don't really work at all.

That is why I treasure school days. My wife is at her job, the kids are at school, the message machine is on, and I'm alone with my thoughts and my deadlines.

Usually. Sometimes Begely comes over.

Ah, Begely, my neighbor from across the backyard with his hard, fast, insistent knock, and always, always, with something utterly fascinating on his mind.

This time I was spiritually ready for him, having just packed away an opening paragraph that had eluded me for days. Upon hearing his knock, I went into the kitchen, pulled open the door, and found Martin Begely, his left hand nervously scratching his long, red, unkempt beard. This action was characteristic of Begely, but the tea tin held under his right arm and the tropical fishnet in his shirt pocket were not. Begely didn't drink tea, and I didn't have any fish.

"Can I see your attic?" he asked as if it were a normal question, but in Begely's case it genuinely was. Begely possessed a mythic ability to fix or improve anything, and his attentions were prized in our neighborhood. "I already checked the crawl space under your house, but it's not there."

“What’s not . . .”

He closed his eyes and scratched his beard. “I don’t know. But there’s probably one in the attic, just over Zach’s room. May I?”

Naturally, I stood aside and followed him into my living room and up the staircase.

Begely went to Zach’s bedroom door, hung with gory posters. He pulled a cordless phone from his pocket, modified with circuitry and an oversized display. “I knew it! He’s got one!”

Begely paced out the distance back to a ladder built into the ceiling. He climbed, pushed open a trap door above the ladder, and looked down. “You may want to see this.”

“See what?”

“I’m not sure!” He disappeared into the attic.

I climbed after him and found myself in a narrow space piled high with trunks belonging to my late parents. The rest of the attic didn’t have a solid floor, just open beams separating layers of insulation.

“Wait there,” Begely commanded.

I obeyed.

Begely carefully measured his way down the attic atop a pair of beams, his fishnet held high, as if a guppy were about to attack from behind a two-by-four.

He stopped, looked under the insulation below, and grinned. Not an ordinary grin of a Begely who has found a new way of packaging pickles, but of a Begely who has discovered a diabolical enemy.

In a single movement, he slapped the fishnet over the beam beneath his foot. “Gotcha!” A tiny something trapped in the net suddenly flew off, trying to escape. It soared in a circle above Begely’s head, but my neighbor showed remarkable strength and balance. He pulled the net down hard onto the open top of his tea tin and dropped the whatever-it-was inside.

Begely pressed the lid down and shouted, “I have you, you son of a bitch!”

Which seemed rather odd. The Begely I knew never cursed at anything, much less small flying things trapped inside tea tins.

The thing evidently took exception to the curses and violently shook its prison, banging against its sides. Begely tiptoed back to the solid floor and slammed the tin upside down onto a storage chest. “I’ll flatten you if you don’t lie still!”

The banging stopped. Begely smiled at me. “I got him!”

“Got who?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, but he’s an asshole. They

all are.” He took the tin and his prisoner, the asshole, down the ladder.

In the kitchen, I offered Begely an espresso. It was the least I could do for removing an asshole from my attic, but he declined.

“I have work to do,” he said. “Want to help?”

The asshole gave its prison a bang. Begely pounded the tin onto the kitchen counter. “Stop it, or I’ll throw you into an oven.”

He shrugged and said,
“I looked in a mirror —
*What in heaven’s name
was I thinking?* That’s
what he said, “in
heaven’s name.”
Something was not
right.

I looked at the tin, and at Begely. Suddenly the front door opened.

"I'm hungry!" a voice demanded. It was my son, Zach, home from school, or... wherever.

"I was just in time." Begely smiled. "Enjoy your son."

He left.

In the living room, I found Zach, dressed as usual in a torn shirt and baggy red plaid pants hanging precariously low on his hips. He accessorized the effect with piercings, chains, spiked green hair, and a dog collar. But something was missing: a scowl, and a slack-jawed, shifty-eyed glare.

"Hi, Dad," he said on his way to the kitchen. "You want me to fix you something?"

I forgot to breathe. My son, concerned about someone else?

Zach backed out of the kitchen. "I'd better wash up first. Sorry, dad."

He went upstairs.

What had Begely said? "*Enjoy your son . . .*"

Twenty minutes later, Zach came downstairs, minus chains, piercings, and green hair. He had, in fact, put on khaki slacks, a clean shirt, socks, and a smile.

He shrugged and said, "I looked into a mirror—*What in heaven's name was I thinking?*" That's what he said, "in heaven's name." Something was not right.

I ran out the back, through the fence gate, and knocked on Begely's door. The porch immediately rose to a sliding door built under the second floor of Begely's house. The door closed beneath me, and I saw Begely working at his lab table with the "asshole" in the tea tin beside him, which banged once. Begely slammed it against the table.

He looked at me. "Zach's human again?"

"Yes. How . . . ?"

"The effect appears to wear off quickly."

He turned on a video monitor that displayed wreckage of some sort. "This is part of my daughter's asshole—I mean, the unit from above Traci's room. Last week, I was testing a new frequency scanner—when I discovered a signal coming from inside the house. I found the source on a post above her room. I pulled it off, and it flew! But since I had the scanner it couldn't hide. I caught it and X-rayed it."

He showed me a piece of film. The asshole appeared as a clear mass.

"I don't see anything."

"Neither did I, so I drilled out a corner.

Some gas escaped, and it broke apart. That night, Traci was normal for the first time since she morphed into a teenager. Two years ago, one Saturday, she was my kid; we soldered together, brewed yeast together. The next day, she woke up accusing, complaining, and demanding. She hated everything."

"The same thing happened to Zach," I said. "We did research together and he corrected my manuscripts, but suddenly . . . You think they're pod people?"

"Oh, you mean they've been replaced by vegetables?" Begely smiled. "No, these things merely turned our kids into teenagers."

"How do you think it's done?"

"I know that something in our kids' brains communicates with these things, but the radio traffic appears to be very short range."

"Maybe the—asshole—isn't communicating with anything," I suggested.

"Has to be . . . The kids are mobile and move outside the thing's obvious range, so another

device inside the kids' brains stores information, gives them orders, or whatever. Then it reports back what they do when they're away. But when the asshole is captured and the data can't be downloaded, it shuts down, making them human again."

I looked at the tea tin. "And what does it do with the data?"

"Perhaps it reports back to some other planet," Begely said. "Someplace that knows how to build two-inch-long, entirely enclosed plastic relays that can retransmit data without consuming power."

I thought. "Maybe the data isn't sent anywhere."

"What?" Begely looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Maybe it's all stored," I said, "inside the whatever-it-is. And they download it later using some interstellar broadband."

Begely scratched his beard over and over and said nothing. Suddenly, his hand fell from his face. He looked up at the roof and down at the "relay" inside the can.

"Of course!" he shouted. "It doesn't go anywhere because it doesn't have to!"

"Right, it's like a tiny hard disk," I said.

Begely smiled at me. "It isn't a hard disk or anything we've ever heard of. When I called that thing an asshole, I was acting like a father rather than a scientist—but I wasn't really off-base."

"Why?"

Begely opened the door to a microwave oven. He placed the tea box inside, shook out the asshole, and quickly closed the door.

"You're going to microwave the asshole?"

The captive rose off the metal floor and explored its prison. Begely turned on the microwave for one second.

The asshole flipped over and crashed.

Begely grinned from ear to ear.

The asshole wobbled itself upright and rose into the air. Begely gave it another dose and again it flipped over.

He picked up a cordless phone handset and spoke into it. "Stay down or you'll get another jolt."

It went down. Begely clapped me on the shoulder. "You were right!" he told me.

"I was?"

"Half right," he said. "They don't retransmit anything, but not because they store information." Begely spoke into his modified cordless phone: "Who are you?"

"They're alive?"

"Or they're ships," Begely said. "Who are you?"

Static emanated from the phone's base unit, then: "Let me go!"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Zach," the voice in the phone said.

"You aren't Zach!" I leaned over and gave the asshole a jolt. "He's my son!"

"Zach . . ." the voice said, "is my only life."

"Where are you from?" Begely asked.

"Someplace dark and dank, cold and old," it said.

Great, I thought, an alliterative asshole.

"Why do you make kids act so strangely?"

"We don't mean it. It's a side effect of the communications implant. Some of them hardly change."

My blood boiled. That thing had put my wife and me through hell for the last three years. I gave it a two-second jolt.

“Stop!” the asshole cried. “We don’t mean to harm people, just to live through them.”

“When did you first arrive on our planet?” I asked.

“In 1954.”

“Just in time for Elvis,” I told Begely.

“When teenagers first mysteriously appeared.”

And there it was, I thought. The answer to generations of parental befuddlement: teenagers literally were from outer space, or at least, their assholes were.

Begely spoke into the handset. “Why do you infect teenagers?”

“Because their brains aren’t sufficiently developed to resist the implant,” it said. “When they mature, we find someone else.”

“If they send Zach another asshole, I’ll smash it,” I said, determined never again to see green hair under my roof.

Begely thought. “And maybe the next one will order Zach to slit your throat.”

I hadn’t thought about that. I asked it, “Can you control the hosts?”

“No, we can’t control them. We’re harmless.”

“Harmless!” I gave him—her—it—another jolt.

“We can jam them,” Begely said. “For about forty bucks, we could sell a unit that picks up their signals and scrambles them.”

“Yeah!” I said. “We could also make a fortune de-asshole-ing houses, or . . .” I looked at the creature levitating above the floor of the microwave, then at Begely. “When we were growing up, science fiction writers promised us a lot of things we never got. Time travel, trips to Mars, antigravity stuff . . .”

Begely smiled. “I get it. You want a levitating flying suit.”

“Make it shiny and silver.”

Begely put a finger on the microwave’s power button and said, “I’ll have a prototype ready in a week.”

Some good would come of this invasion after all. I went home and found Zach peeling carrots and potatoes and listening to *Book Chat*.

ADVICE FROM A TECHNICAL WRITER

MARK BLOOM

CONTEST WINNER

“I am a writer.”

All my life I longed to pronounce those words aloud, to proclaim them in public. But I knew that if I did, I would have to accept the responsibility that they imparted. I would have to prove that I measured up. To be honest, the proposition frightened me.

The first time I dared utter that sentence aloud, I stood alone in the safety of my bedroom, looking at myself in the mirror. The year was 1989, and I had just landed my first job as a technical writer. For the first time in my life, a company would pay me to put words on paper.

Now, in 2002, struggling to complete my first novel, I have the confidence to say it again, in public this time. Have I published my novel? Not yet, but that fact does not hinder me. I am a writer. That is my perception of myself; it colors the way I view the world.

My journey from technical communicator to novelist proved to be a long, winding, and often treacherous road. Although I wanted to be a writer all my life, I never thought it would happen. I found no blueprint for becoming a writer of fiction.

What I did find, however, is that if you follow your passion, if you do what your passion dictates despite the odds, you can make your dream come true. In my case, my desire for excellence in technical writing drove me onward to my ultimate destination.

Now I'd like to share the particular insights I harvested along my path. In other words, here are the ways in which what I learned as a technical writer helped me become a fiction writer.

Organization: As the complexities of software systems have evolved, so have techniques for organizing information. Technical communicators must be able to not only organize information, but also make that organization obvious to even the casual observer.

Similarly, a novel must have a dramatic structure, an outline for its plot. While some writers “wing it”—start a story not knowing where or how it will end—a good novelist must, in advance, fully comprehend her theme, plot, and characters . . . even before she starts to write.

Dedication: Release schedules and unsympathetic bosses often force technical communicators to finish projects for nearly impossible deadlines. For some, these working conditions have become the *modus operandi*. Accomplishing these feats of writing magic takes dedication and perseverance.

Writing a novel requires the same kind of dedication, only pumped up on steroids. A true novelist must sit and write every day without fail, often without a motivating deadline from an external

source. A novelist needs to be inspired from within and dedicated to her project and to her craft.

User Analysis: Every communication expert reminds technical writers to “know your audience.” The analysis of the target user group helps focus the writer both on the information she needs to impart and the type of language she needs to use. Without such research, a technical manual might bore or confuse its readers.

In the same vein, a novelist has to know the genre of her book. Mystery writers, for example, must read other mysteries to discover what the successful competition is doing right.

A novelist has to know what her readers will look for in her book. Without this information, this research, her novel will surely fail, even if published.

Continual Learning: Unless technical communicators want to become obsolete, they must continue to grow and evolve. They must stay on top of their tools. They must learn each new product as they write. They must keep up with a rapidly changing industry and rapidly changing standards.

Writing a novel is no different. Learning the craft of writing is a lifelong endeavor, an obsession for many like myself. Studying literature (the successful novels of the past) and practicing the art of writing evolve one's skill over time. Like a technical communicator, a novelist never stops learning.

Writing Skills: Of course, all technical communicators must be well versed in writing techniques. They must know their grammar, write clear-

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ly, and use the active tense. Without good writing, even well organized information will not reach its target audience.

Writing skills provide the foundations for creating any type of prose. In a novel, imagery and analogies must be pertinent and, above all, clear. A novelist may attempt all kinds of textual trickery, but if she is not clear, her readers will slam the book shut. As a teacher once told me, "You will never insult the reader by being clear."

I do not mean to imply with this article that all technical communicators can become best-selling authors. Writing a novel, a short story, or even poetry requires much, much more than can be gleaned from a career in technical communication.

However, for those of you with designs on a creative outlet, know that you are on a suitable path. Learn as much as you can and continue to write, both on the job and off. Then you too will be able to proclaim:

"I am a writer!"

PRIMA BALLERINA

MIRA WALTERS

POETRY

The lights shine
like the sun heats with
 his bright and warm light.
On stage, little ballerinas . . .
 dreaming the dream
 dancing the dance.
With cheeks that mirror the color
 of pink tutus,
Bodies lift in the air,
 turn, jump, bend.
They are from another world,
 tense muscles and sweaty faces;
 I feel their pain
 and tears come down my face.
Under the make-up and beautiful smile
 there is a lonely soul.

HURRICANE OF CHOICE

LAURA P. RUSSELL

FICTION

Nervously drumming her fingers atop the gargantuan suitcase in front of her, she waits patiently. Thumbing through photos to pass the time, she anxiously opens and closes the soda bottle that has reached its last drop. “Eventually,” she thinks. “Eventually all will be sorted out. It’s only a matter of time.” Time. Time, being the most crucial element in whether Nicole, the twenty-something self-absorbed agent, would manage to make her train to Heathrow and meet as agreed upon the night before.

As she rides up the escalator, amidst a sensory overload of dialects, smells and conversations, her phone rings in the overstuffed Jansport. Onlookers scoff, others ignore the statuesque beauty as she frantically tears apart the backpack slung over her shoulder. Reaching deep in the bottom of the bag, between Vogue and a sketchbook, she finally answers the incessant ring of the petite telephone. It is Nicole.

“Ello! It is Nicole . . . err . . . I am running a tad bit late, as I am sure you have already concluded. Meet you up at the Starbucks before customs? Brilliant, goodbye.”

Slamming her phone shut while reaching the top of the escalator, she zips her bag and continues her journey through Heathrow. Trying to look as confident and at ease as

possible, she checks her inner pockets once more for her passport and tickets.

Grabbing a table for two in the busy coffee shop is not as easy as she expected. Businessmen make false promises to their bosses and their loved ones as they chat on their mobiles. Tourists continually shoot photos to the left and right of her, goofily grimacing into the lens in front of them. Young ladies, pretending to be absorbed in the daily news, protect themselves from muggers and the like. Everyone living day-after-day, hour-by-hour, minute-to-minute . . . she wonders if this is a fabrication of their lives. Or instead, if in reality, this is the way of life for the slew of people around her, crammed into this coffeehouse to prove their so-called class and status.

She waits alone, alone in her ideas, her thoughts, and actions. She has always stood apart from her acquaintances, and even now, she stands apart from the strangers who continually swirl around her.

Nicole, the self-absorbed-twenty-something, running fifteen minutes 'fashionably late' as she liked to call it, over-zealously greets her in the Starbucks. "Ello! Good to see you have gotten a table for us. Care for a coffee or a tea?"

Shaking her head no, while appearing as polite as possible, she lifts the paper cup filled with Earl Gray and a smidge of honey that has now settled at the bottom. While Nicole, the mousy twenty-something, waits in line for an overpriced cup of coffee, she gathers her thoughts and practices the

speech she is to deliver to this emissary who lied to her from the beginning. After Nicole sits directly across the table, the twenty-something slowly picking up the coffee with her two nail-bitten hands and brings it to her nose to drink in the smell of the posh life that exists between the walls of the globalized coffeehouse.

Shuffling a few pence between her fingers, she begins her speech explaining to Nicole what went wrong, card-stacking lie on top of lie. Her throat feels dry and it becomes hard to swallow. Feeling bad for making an incorrect choice that

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lasted the duration of a year and a half, even after repeatedly being forewarned, her words become jumbled. Flashes of yesterday fill her mind, the oval boardroom table, with all fourteen eyes angrily focused on her. Angrily focused on her because they were finally being exposed as the fraudulent people they are. Nicole, avoiding eye contact, manages to gloss over her situation. Instead of interrogation and scorn, apologetic, false excuses fly from her lips to

Nicole. She continues to try to protect herself but still puts the blame upon her own shortcomings instead of the miserly, ignorant Nicole. She lies. She lies as they lied to her all along. As her speech concludes, she attempts to amicably shake hands with the twenty-something travel agent who filled her mind with false promises of a foreign land.

Trudging through security checks, she stares directly into the cold-eyed, navy blue uniforms. Their weapons work to intimidate, while the

solemn rolling of suitcases upon the conveyor belt act as background music for Heathrow security. Routinely answering questions that were asked no more than a week ago, she confidently begins her march towards gate 28A. Reaching the other side of the terminal, she walks amongst passengers who shop as they stroll. To each side of her as she walks to 28A, Wedgwood, Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Ralph Lauren and Burberry are jammed next to each other in an attempt to market to the masses of sheep who meander through superficiality. Teetering neither to the right nor left, she does not want to buy into bad memories.

Diagrams above her direct the way to 28A. Men smoke thin cigarettes next to ashtrays. Babies continually cry to their mothers, searching for a snack before their journey. Flight attendants shift their red polyester skirts into alignment while reapplying rouge. The luggage continues to roll across the matted carpet in surround sound. At the end of the terminal across from 30A is the gate back to honesty. Back home. She proudly shows her ticket and passport to the starched attendant at the gate. After gaining clearance, she slouches into the seat and waits for the convoy that will fly her far away from false promises. Eventually, she will again be able to trust. "Eventually," she thinks. "It's only a matter of time."

ON THE GREAT WALL

MICHELLE REZAIAN



FROM MOTHER NATURE WITH LOVE

GALENA SEGAL



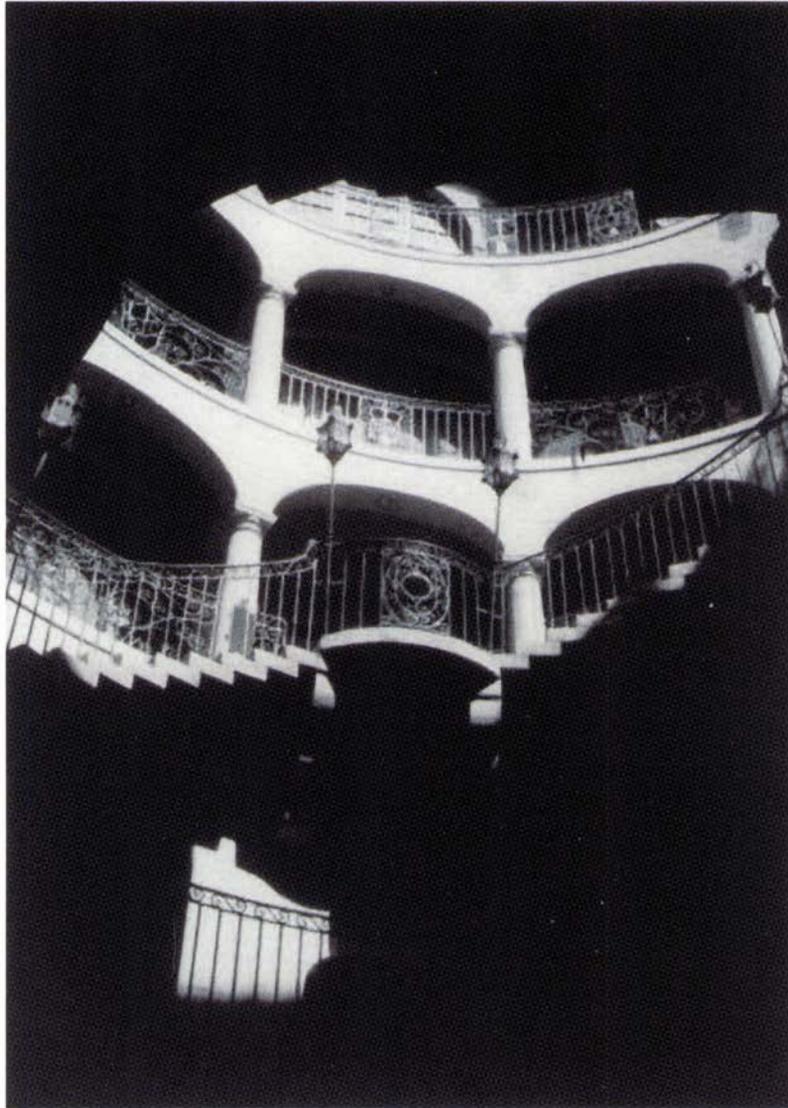
CONTEMPLATION

HELENE SCHICK



ROTUNDA INTERNATIONALE DE POUCE

EILEEN GARCIA



SUNNY SIDE UP

JODIE NOPPER



DISCLOSURE

ALBERT CORDRAY



DAY AT PIPE

NICOLE GRODESKY



SOLITUDE

GALENA SEGAL



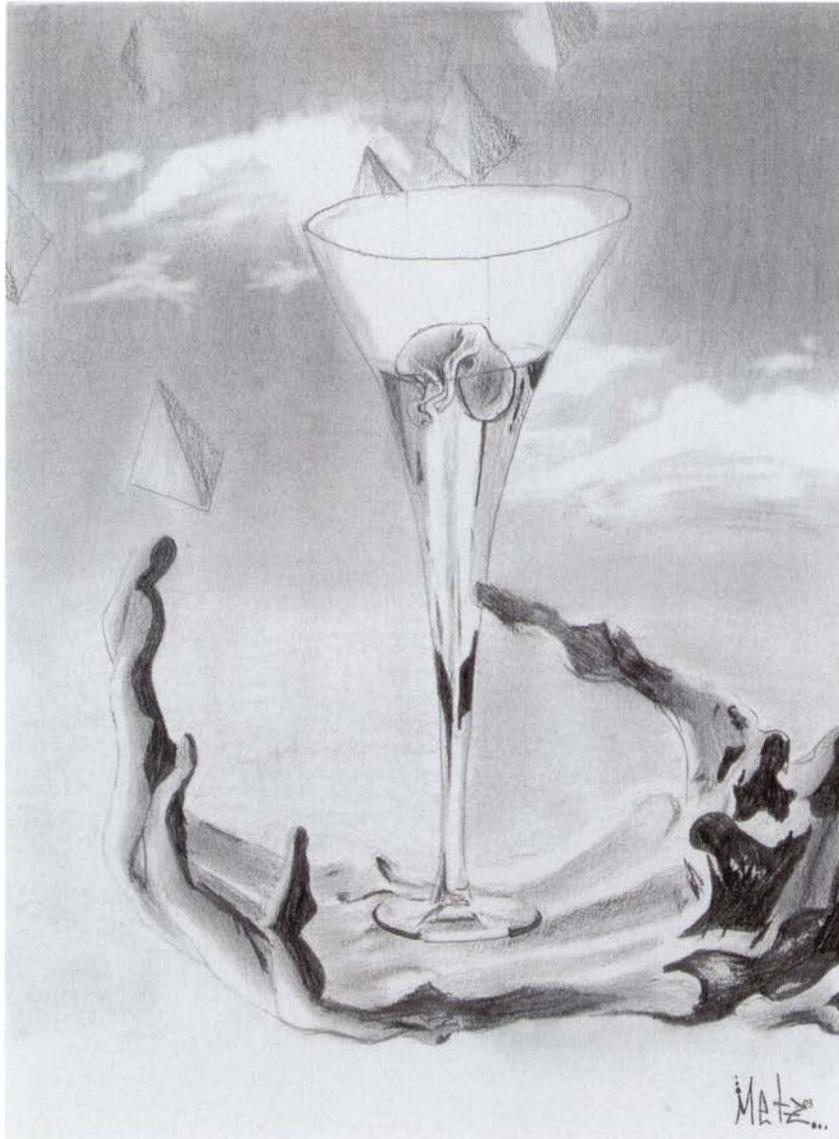
ERODED CELLULOID

SAMANTHA HIGGINS



THE SCRATCHES IN MY EYE

SCOTT BRANNON



UNTITLED

MARISA ESPINOZA



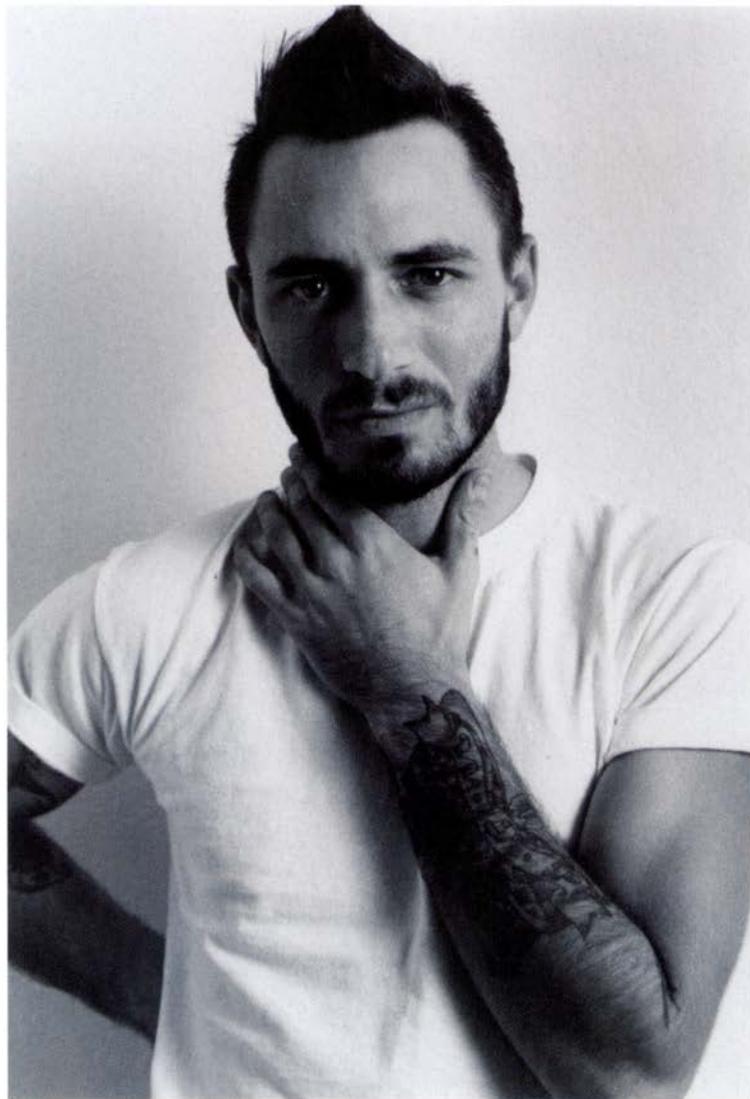
GEMINI

ANNA LOMAN



GUY

MARISA ESPINOZA



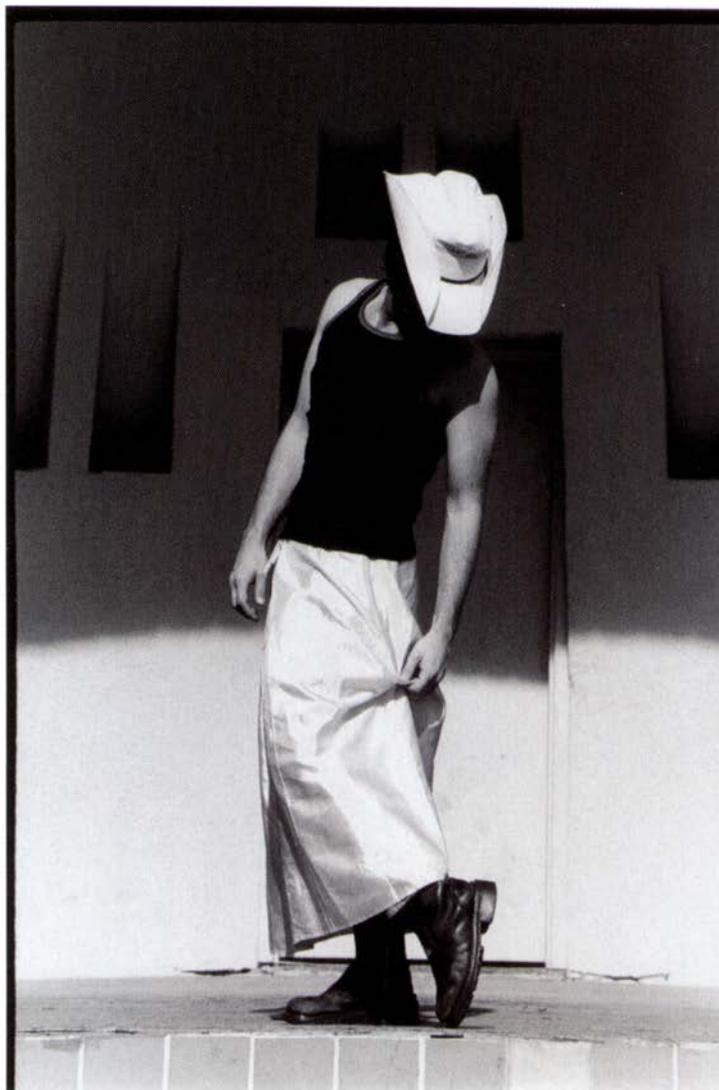
CRIMSON SKY

NICOLE GRODESKY



AARON ON STAGE

MICHELLE REZAIAN



RESPLENDENT RAPTURE

SAMANTHA HIGGINS



BLISTERS ON MY SHOES

ALEC ROSENBLIT

PERSONAL ESSAY

I never understood the value in aesthetic possessions. My car, almost the same age as myself, looks like a black metal box. I wear shirts until they look like Swiss cheese. Nothing represents this better than my shoes.

While on the outside they appear normal, my shoes developed two holes on either heel. Underneath the comfortable cloth that once protected my feet, a hard rubber chafes my heels. When I run, it tears into my skin, removing flesh like an eraser.

But I don't react to these changes. I could buy new shoes. I could try to modify the shoes, cutting holes in them so my heels won't rub against the hard material. I do neither. While I trudge to class, wincing from the burning sensation in my feet, I wonder what caused this.

I live in the humblest manner possible. By not purchasing expensive cars, or clothing, or any of the other possessions most people desire, I justify my existence. The less I take, the less I leech, and the fewer resources I drain. It explains many of my personality traits: why I choose vegetarianism, why I hate inefficient cars, and why I wear old shoes.

I feel like it puts me above the horde of people who waste time and resources on non-utilitarian objects. Like it

makes me superior to those dreamers of gas-guzzling, house-sized cars. And yet it still doesn't explain the reason for not modifying the shoes at no extra cost to myself.

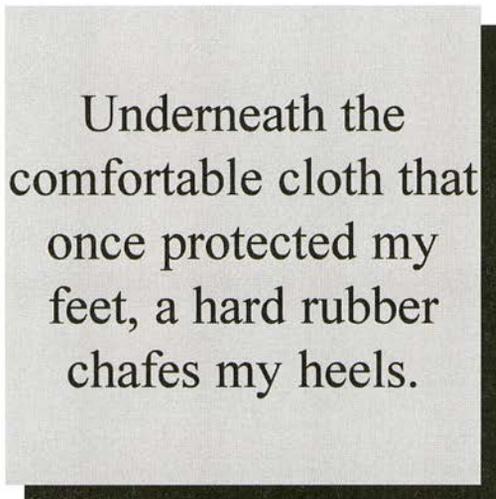
I once believed laziness caused my inaction. I keep my old shoes to avoid wastefulness, and I don't bother fixing them because of laziness. But as my blisters burst and expand, I wonder if something else is to blame.

Maybe I created a punishment for myself. Maybe I endure pain not due to a lack of motivation to change it, but because I deserve it, for all my misdeeds, all the problems, even simple embarrassing actions I caused. If shoes torture me enough, if blood stains my socks at the end of a long day, maybe my sins will disappear. Maybe then, laziness created this situation after all.

What tasks should I complete to overcome my guilt? I don't know. But if I spent enough time pondering it, I might come up with something. And then, to do these things would require more work on my part: perhaps seeking out those I wronged and apologizing, perhaps helping people with their menial tasks. Maybe it only requires me to acknowledge my mistakes and accept that nothing will change them now. Instead, I take the easy step, the one that requires the least amount of effort on my part.

Someday I might consider where it all started and why it continues. But until then, I'm content knowing that my lifestyle provides punishment for past crimes, uses fewer resources, and puts

me above the norm, all the while creating no extra work or strain.



Underneath the
comfortable cloth that
once protected my
feet, a hard rubber
chafes my heels.

DE-MARGINALIZED (A LESSON IN DECONSTRUCTION)

JOSEPH MOORE

POETRY

Should I believe the Lies?
All the fallacious reasonings
That seasoned the illusion of greatness,
And an unrest in dichotomy of ill-tempered fate
Which no one is able to explain?

Like barbed wire that cuts into the flesh,
Removes the skin,
And lays bare the truths that were never there.
Ruthless forever is the deception of those encased in proletariat "purity."

The Enraptured in revision intended for
A classist separation of bums from the Atlases,
And "intellectuals" who shrugged the rugged work
Of those who make the world go round.

The Earth's rotation has been conflagrated, set in reverse,
As the primitives await the burning of the four-eyed freaks, and the flaying of the
"Bourgeois elites" into stripped meat.
Bubbling forth Mystic Cynics of Skeptical breeding,
They set themselves into motion to kill what is Reason.

Third-World Romantics beating the drums of war,
To collectivize, dis-incentivise, and disenfranchise.
Reducing the "I" to a PC conformity whore,
Never allowed to form dissent, debate, or defiance.

Welcome to Welkin's Walls of Washed-Up Radicals.

MY TEDDY BEAR

GALENA SEGAL

FICTION

When I was a little girl . . . about four, I guess, because it was before the war, not after . . . I had a mother and a big sister, two years older than me. No, I didn't have a father. Actually, I didn't have a father when I was four, but I had him when I was three. Three and a half, to be exact. What happened to him? I can't tell you: my mother told us not to answer this question. "Just ignore the question," she said. "Pretend you didn't hear it, then talk about something else or go away. If you answer this question," she said, "we all could get in trouble. Just act as if you have never had a father. Is this clear?" And we nodded yes, although I knew that once I had had a father. All right, I'll tell you the story. But it won't be about my father; it's about my teddy bear.

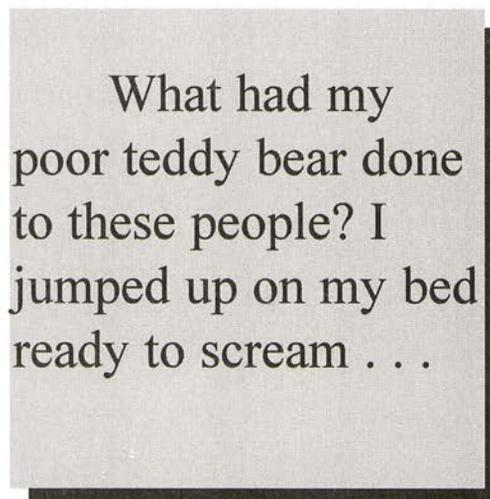
I was asleep with my teddy bear when these men came in. "You're a Romanian spy!" they yelled at my father. "You have betrayed Russia!"

"My husband is not a spy!" my mother yelled. "He went to Romania to study accounting!" But these men didn't listen to her. They began turning our place inside out. I peeked out from underneath my blanket. I saw them taking books from the shelves, and things from the wardrobe, and toys from our box, and throwing them on the floor. I didn't cry, but my sister

did, so my mother had to take her outside. I was wondering what they were looking for, but I was afraid to ask. Then they pulled off my blanket, and one of the men grabbed my teddy bear, and sawdust poured out from his belly. It made me so angry! What had my poor teddy bear done to these people? I jumped up on my bed ready to scream, but my father looked at me and touched his lips with his finger; he wanted me to be quiet. Then I suddenly understood: they had been looking for my teddy bear. But why? Why did they torture him and choke him to death? Why didn't my father protect him?

Anyway, my father finally got up and went toward the door without kissing me goodbye, and the men followed him, crushing our toys with their boots.

What happened to my father? I don't know. And if I knew, I wouldn't tell you, because my mother told me not to. But I can tell you what happened to my teddy bear. He's ok. My mother washed him and stuffed him with more sawdust. I'm still sleeping with him. Yes, he likes me. I think he's still waiting for my father to come back and play with him. He's a good bear. Very quiet.



What had my
poor teddy bear done
to these people? I
jumped up on my bed
ready to scream . . .

KRISSIE ROMBERGER

PERSONAL ESSAY

I remember the first time I entered Sera's basement room. It was dimly lit and hot. The walls were decorated with little lights in the shape of skulls and her own drawings of evil-looking dolls and crescent moons, all with the same face. A pair of handcuffs hung on the wall, "a gift from a very close friend," she would tell us. There was a collage she had never finished, made entirely of pictures of eyes cut from magazines, and a postcard on the mirror proclaimed, "I feel the need . . . the need for speed."

When I was introduced to her, she did not seem the same girl I had seen at school, where she wore her high-heeled vinyl boots, black velvet gowns, and dark eyeliner. She was so much smaller, so much shorter, so much thinner.

"Hi," I said.

My companion Matt asked, "Do you two know each other?"

"We've smiled at each other a few times in the hallway," she replied.

No regular person would say that. She seemed almost omnipotent. I could not believe that she remembered me.

The room was full of people, but she focused her attention on us: Matt, David, Ryan, and me. She showed us some of

her drawings, all moons, dolls, and skulls. She showed us her tattoos. Her back was covered by a pair of angel wings.

Around us, a girl in star-print pajama pants wrote on colorful stationary. Sera's little brothers, at the most six years old, engaged in constant fights with fists and teeth. No one stopped them. A dark-haired man picked up a blowtorch and began to heat a small glass tube. When the closed end glowed red, he blew into it, creating a perfect bubble at the end of the tube. Then he heated a small point on the top of the bubble to red again and blew. The glass popped open like a tiny volcano, producing a hole in the top of the bubble. My friends and I watched in awe. He had just crafted a meth pipe.

As we sat on the floor, Matt and Sera talked. I was too shy. I looked around her room and noticed all of the nail polish bottles next to her stereo. There were so many colors; she must have had a lot of time to paint her nails. The stereo played *My Life with the Thrill Kill Cult*.

"Christian zombie vampires, the days of swine and roses." Not my kind of music. When Skinny Puppy's "Warlock" came on, Sera sang along.

"Enbabra Endabra," she sang.

That was what it sounded like, but I had always assumed that he was saying actual words that I could not understand. To this day, though, I always sing "enbabra endabra."

After a while, she took the now cool pipe from the dark-haired man. She went to her dresser

and retrieved a small baggy of white crystals that was hidden in a strange shaped box she had made. She poured some crystals into the pipe, using a folded card as a funnel, and began to heat it. She twisted the pipe in an artful fashion, this way and that way. But she wasn't smoking it; she was just melting a bowl. So instead of sucking in, she blew out. The pure white clouds sparkled and produced the sickening gasoline smell, which, though barely detectable, I have since grown to detest. When she was done melting the speed, she held up the pipe to her friend Rob.

The crystalline pattern coated the inside of the bubble, in a formation not unlike that of dragonfly wings.

"It looks like insect wings," she said.

"I think it looks like shit," he replied. He was a man of few words.

She showed it to us. The crystalline pattern coated the inside of the bubble, in a formation not unlike that of dragonfly wings.

We didn't smoke it then. She gave Matt some to take home, and he put the baggy inside his silver eye shadow box. David had a pipe at his

house. This was going to be my first time, not his. But there was enough for everyone. We walked back to David's house.

Our room at David's house was a sunroom with one main alteration. We had affixed aluminum foil to the inside of every window with masking tape to block out the sun. When we got there, we had no lighter among the four of us, but we did find some matches and a red candle that belonged to David's mother. We put the candle on a plate and

the meth in the pipe, and took our positions next to the door, so that we could take turns not only smoking, but also being the lookout for his parents by means of a hole in the tin foil covering the glass door.

I didn't know how to smoke it. David had to coach me, just as Matt had done for him. He also had to light it for me.

He explained it to me: "Okay, blow out all of your air. Then breathe in when I tell you to. Breathe as slowly as you can and hold up one finger when you are almost out of air. Then breathe it out fast or it will crystallize in your lungs."

So he lit it. He rotated the pipe from side to side, and slowly the white steam began to appear. It filled the bubble. He said, "Okay."

It doesn't hurt like smoke. It isn't hot. You wouldn't even know it was there if you couldn't taste it. Matt and David had told me that it tasted like magic, "like orange and yellow sparklies." It never tasted good to me except for that first time.

Speed hits you fast. That makes sense. And when it hit me, I felt like God. In fact I remember David yelling "I am God!" during one of the many times that followed that one. I didn't yell. I started bubbling.

"I love you guys. I love you guys all so much. You have no idea. You're like my family." I hugged myself. "Ryan, you can't do this." He has what you call an addictive personality.

Matt and David agreed. Ryan obediently lay down on the couch. David, Matt, and I passed the pipe, its stem frosted white, the candle flame making the bowl black, the red wax pooling on the plate. My heart raced. I felt tingly, cold, numb. My mind turned into a rushing river. I couldn't stop talking. David and I kept interrupting each other. I

had to put thoughts on hold in my mind so that I could get them out one at a time. Matt didn't say much. He thought himself above the tweaker prattle. I, on the other hand, shared things with them that I never would have said under any other circumstances. This was a reason to do the drug. It made us talk.

That was the reason that a few weeks later, David and I sat on the floor, with the red candle lit again, packing a bowl for Ryan; he wanted to bond with us, too. It was his turn now, and I told him how to breathe from his diaphragm to get the biggest hit possible. He loved it. He and I turned out to be very much alike. We both had been too afraid to buy lunch in elementary school because we would have to talk to the cafeteria workers. He told me his story and then I told him mine, not omitting a single detail, including the kitten-shaped coin purse I used to carry the quarters in, which I never worked up the nerve to buy juice with. Ryan and I talked for hours, him with his head on my lap. I let my legs go numb long before I asked him to move. David talked with us, too, from his place on the couch. He told us things about himself that he had never told anyone.

The time went by so fast. I hated the moment when my mother came to pick me up and asked the obligatory question, "What did you do today?"

"We talked, about music and stuff," I answered. It was true, music and everything from cartoons to anal sex. When I got home, I went up to my room and called David. Then, from my seat in the closet, so that no one could hear me, I continued the conversation with him and Ryan into the night, as I saw faces in the white loops of my carpet.

The first two times I did speed, I slept the night after. Starting with the third time, the nights became unbearable. I eventually had to end my phone conversation when the battery in the receiver died. By then I was tired and believed that I could sleep, but I was wrong. No matter how still I lay in my dark room, sleep would not come. If only I could shut off my mind. I lay there tortured by a snippet of song lyrics from Marilyn Manson's "Dope Hat" that would not get out of my head, rethinking the experiences from the day. By that time I had also developed spine aches, and my racing heart became annoying.

The great days and the terrible nights went on like that every weekend for six months. In that time, Matt quit and eventually Ryan did too. But David and I kept doing it. We even introduced our drug of choice to other friends of ours, including several fourteen-year-old girls. It all ended when David got sent to drug rehab by his parents. I wrote to him every day for six weeks. I quit speed then and have been clean for almost a year. Some people I know aren't so lucky. And Sera's dead.

LIQUID SLEEP

ENRIQUE QUEZADA

POETRY

Liquid sleep is leaking from my eyes
Leaving empty and drained the color red
The loud silence causing echoes of despair
Ages passing, speech forgotten, outdated and discarded
The glowing darkness, nothing seeming
Out of place
Softly dying, always crying, falling in my ultimate mistake

BECOMING A MAN

MICHAEL WILLIAMS

PERSONAL ESSAY

Of all the trials and tribulations that people face throughout their lives, there seem to always be a few that stand out above all the rest. These are the experiences that are remembered forever as life-altering events that build character and force an individual to grow, whether ready or not. In my life there have been two such major events that have shaped me into the kind of man I am today, and that is what I am about to share with you.

My name is Michael Williams. I am nineteen years old, live in a nice house, drive a decent car, and have a great family. I work part time as a sales associate at Staples, and this is my second semester as a full time student at Saddleback College. In my spare time I practice kickboxing and jujitsu, and go to the gym regularly. On the weekends I do what most people my age do (movies, social gatherings), and one weekend a month I forget the civilian world and serve my country as a member of the United States Marine Corps Reserve. All in all, I have a pretty good life right now, but things weren't always so easy.

I had a fairly normal upbringing. My parents were divorced when I was three years old, and both have since remarried. My mother is currently a registered nurse and is married to a hard-working fireman. My father has been a police

officer for twenty-four years, and my stepmother is a teacher at the elementary school I attended.

As a kid I played baseball, skateboarded, and pretty much did everything that a typical “American boy” would do. When I reached high school, everything seemed to be going well until my sophomore year. This is when I began to spend more time with the group that society calls “the wrong crowd.” I still don’t know what caused my outlook on life to change so drastically, but this was the beginning of a period of my life that changed me forever. The next three years were filled with three different continuation schools, several outpatient rehabs (none of which worked at the time), and countless destroyed relationships with everyone I once held as dear to me. By the time I reached the age of seventeen, I had managed to get kicked out of my house, I had dropped out of school, and I had a drug addiction that ruled over everything in my life. Despite all the people who tried to prevent my downward spiral, I still seemed on my way to the rock bottom. It was going to take a miracle to get my life back on track.

Luckily, before I reached the age of eighteen, I was sent to a youth rehabilitation program in St. George, Utah. This was a wilderness survival program, so the first six weeks were spent entirely outdoors. That meant no showering, shaving, or eating real food for a month and a half. It sounded like hellish torture when I first heard about it, but it ended up being the single most life-changing period of learning and growth that I have ever experi-

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enced. I’ve since joined the Marine Corps, and even after six months of active duty that included boot camp and extensive combat training, I feel like I learned more and overcame more challenges in the mountains of Utah than I ever did in boot camp. It’s amazing what getting away from all the influences of society can do for you mentally and spiritually. I realized so much about myself and others, and most importantly, I got sober. After the initial detoxification in the wilderness, I spent another nine months there finishing off my high school credits and preparing for the real world again. When I graduated from the program, I was one

month away from turning eighteen, and I knew that I would have to work hard to become a normal functioning member of society again.

I still remember the first time I saw my old friends after I graduated from the program. It was around 9:30 on a mildly cool summer night, and I went down to the community spa for a relaxing evening dip. I wasn’t expecting anyone to be there at that hour, but to my surprise, a

brand new silver Chevy pickup pulled up next to the pool. I didn’t recognize it at first, but as the driver and passengers slowly appeared, I realized who it was. It was “the wrong crowd” that I had known so well just nine months prior. At that moment, I knew that this would be the night that I would have to make some very important choices about the direction I was going to take in my life. As they all walked into the spa, they were ecstatic to see me after all that time, but the only thing

going through my head was, “I wonder what drugs they’re on right now?” As I listened to them talk about what they were doing and what had been going on with them during the last year, I realized that I had changed so much in the last nine months and they were still exactly the same. I felt like a completely different person, and I couldn’t believe that I was once on the same level as they were. It was then that I decided to leave, and as I turned down their offers to “hang out” in the future, I think they realized that I would never again be a part of their group.

About three months later, I faced my second major life-changing event. As I mentioned before, I am a proud member of the United States Marine Corps. Before I joined, I had given serious thought to enlisting in the Corps. A friend of mine who had just recently signed up took me over to see his recruiter. I didn’t know this at the time, but he apparently got a promotion out of my commitment. I can still feel the friendly atmosphere of the recruiting office in Santa Ana, and I remember being so eager to go through boot camp and earn the title of “Marine.” The main reason I signed up was to experience the challenge of boot camp, but my curiosity was soon transformed into physical pain and mental torture like nothing I had ever experienced.

In the first three days of training, the recruits had to go through an introduction period. This doesn’t sound so bad, but it’s really three days of sleep deprivation and shots that make ninety percent of the recruits sick. Soon after this introduction to Marine life, we were separated into our platoons and introduced to our drill instructors. They called this day “Black Friday.”

As I waited in our newly assigned squad

bay with ninety-two other recruits, I couldn’t help but feel like I might have made a big mistake. When you haven’t slept for three days, you stop caring about everything else around you; all you want to do is sleep. My fatigue was soon replaced with fear when the largest man I had ever seen in my life walked into the room with three other drill instructors. His enormous biceps bulged out of his uniform, and the look on his face made me think that he ought to be in a federal penitentiary, not in the Marine Corps. The drill instructors that accompanied him had an equally threatening demeanor, but lacked the size of our senior drill instructor. This was why they called it “Black Friday,” and it would always be remembered as one of the hardest days of our lives.

The next four weeks were the most mentally demanding weeks in boot camp. This was the time when they were trying to get rid of all the recruits who weren’t physically fit or who weren’t motivated. Our days were filled with hours of marching, intense thrashings, and numerous attempts by the drill instructors to break our spirits. At this point it seemed like it would never end.

After the initial weeks of suffering, we were moved to Camp Pendleton to begin our combat training portion of boot camp. This was when we actually started to feel like men, and it was here that we formed the camaraderie that we needed to complete the final portion of our training. The final test in boot camp was an event called “The Crucible.” This occurs when the recruits are all put in a combat-simulated environment and allowed only two meals in three days and very little sleep. We hiked approximately fifty miles over these days, and the final hike ended with a hill that the locals of Camp Pendleton refer to as “The Reaper.” Standing

at the bottom of this hill was like looking into the face of death itself. Having been pushed to the point of exhaustion, we kept going because we knew that once we reached the top of that hill, we would have accomplished something that only a small percentage of the world's population had done. This was where all our pain, all our sweat, and all our blood that had accumulated over the last two and a half months would pay off. I will never forget the feeling of overwhelming joy I had as I reached the peak of that hill. As I gazed out at the beams of sun showering over the cool, clear waters of the Pacific Ocean, I couldn't help but shed tears of joy. I was finally a Marine.

It has been over a year since I joined the Marine Corps and over two and a half years since my wilderness experience in Utah. I am now well on my way to a psychology degree. I really feel like I am finally heading in a positive direction with my life. Even though my experiences in high school aren't something to be proud of, and joining the Marine Corps was not what I expected, I don't regret either of them. I feel like everything I have done in my life to this point has happened for a reason, and I know that if it hadn't happened that way, I wouldn't be the man I am today. I believe that everything I've seen and done in my life has built character and given me life experiences that I couldn't have attained any other way. With all things said and done, I feel truly blessed. It was through these events in my life that I have made the transformation from the lost boy I was in high school to the man I am now.

GORMAN'S WALK

SEAN SAGAN

FICTION

Few paid much attention to the man leaning casually against the weathered bricks that formed the drab exterior of *Danny's Discount Records and CDs*. The eyes of passersby saw him, but their minds failed to register his presence. Occasionally someone would recall an image of the strange, nondescript man in the white suit and Panama hat, but the brief mental snapshot would quickly fade. The man didn't care. He enjoyed the anonymity. He lived, breathed, and wore it; he was a master of obfuscation.

Well-built, his form hinting at sharp, defined muscles, he was strong, but not excessively so. His hair, light brown, was neatly combed and parted, its short, outdated style reminiscent of a Humphrey Bogart character: dark, impeccable, American. His liquid-brown eyes swept the crowded city street, taking everything in. To all outward appearances, he wore an impressive wardrobe of designer clothes, although anyone bothering to take a closer look would have noticed that the man's attire was devoid of any brand tags or labels. His Armani suit was not Armani. His Stetson Panama hat was not a Stetson. They were generic in the extreme.

He was quiet, watching, listening . . . a predator. Although he often chose to remain hidden and obscure, his

presence was a sight to behold when he did reveal himself. Oh yes, he could be truly formidable.

Christopher Gorman was not in the best of moods. It had begun to rain almost immediately after he had exited *Danny's*, forcing him to remove his new leather trench coat to avoid its certain ruination. However, it wasn't the rain that bothered him. Christopher was upset because his torn black denim jeans and *Morbid Angel* T-shirt just didn't look adequately sinister without the coat. *Let's face it*, he thought. *I look like a goddamn bum*. And while his destitute image did have some esoteric appeal, it was not his chosen look for the evening.

As he plodded home, a familiar voice shook him from his reverie. "Hey, Chris, you all there?" inquired Cody Kennedy, a classmate whom Christopher chummed around with now and again. Chris was not great friends with Cody; for that matter, he was not great friends with anybody. But Kennedy always had plenty of money and very little self-esteem. This combination afforded Christopher plenty of "free stuff." His newly acquired Slayer album was the latest example of Cody's misplaced generosity.

"Yeah," Chris grumbled. "Just thinking."

"Bout what?" Cody asked, earning him a sharp warning to mind his own business. "Jesus, what the hell crawled up your butt? You sound like you *keistered* a rattlesnake." The mental image of Cody's reptilian prostate

exam was so absurd that, while it failed to coax a grin, Christopher did manage to ignore his friend's unwelcome commentary.

Encouraged by what he perceived as an indifferent silence, Cody attempted to continue the conversation. "You wanna hear a joke?" he prodded. Without waiting for a reply, he began, "What do you get when you cross Dr. Seuss with *Mein Kampf*?"

Stony silence.

"Hitler Hears a Who!"

Cody immediately burst into laughter but was quickly sobered by

Christopher's reply: "That's pathetic." His statement, so cold and final, brought the conversation an abrupt halt.

The rain continued to fall, a steady torrent that blocked vision and dampened sound. Fully annoyed now with Cody, Christopher increased his speed, widening the distance between them. Consequently, he never noticed the white-clad arm that emerged from behind an alley and dragged Cody from

view. He never heard his friend's muffled cries.

Only after arriving at the bus stop did he notice that Cody was no longer by his side. "Cody?" he called out, "Where'd your slow ass go? I ain't got no money for the bus; I can't walk home in this. Cody? *CODY? YOU BETTER ANSWER ME. YOU . . .*"

He broke off abruptly. Christopher began to grow uneasy, and despite the anger he tried to convey, his voice registered a shrill quality. He was

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alone and the steady rhythmic drum of the rain, like a thousand hidden footsteps, gave him the creeping suspicion he was being followed. "Fine," he hollered. "You wanna bail on me, go right ahead, but don't expect me to welcome you back with open arms!" Sentiments thus expressed, Christopher turned and continued walking toward his home, wet, freezing, slightly nervous, and altogether miserable.

He was five blocks from his house when he stopped cold in his tracks. It was nothing tangible, more a feeling, an icy chill working its way up his backbone as if climbing a scaffold. He shivered and looked around, saw nothing, but quickly grew certain that he was not alone. His unease returned with a vengeance and rapidly became outright fear. Unable to pinpoint its exact source, he forced himself into a run, determined to get home as quickly as possible.

Immediately, he knew he was being followed; there was no denying that now. The following footfalls were audible, and the wind carried the unmistakable sound of laughter, soft and malevolent. As he fell into an outright sprint, chest heaving, feet kicking up sheets of water, he was certain he could hear footsteps following him, keeping perfect rhythm with his own. But he was beginning to tire. His feet, like lumps of iron, dragged behind him, and his muscles began to flag. His body screaming in agonized protest at his lunatic dash, his arms flailed wildly. A sharp stitch in his side sent electric blasts of pain up his torso, and his lungs burned, straining for oxygen. Home was so close, only one block away; if he could just get to his door, he would be safe; if he could just . . . A hand, ice cold and strong, clamped down on his shoulder. The sudden force propelled him back-

wards and dropped him onto the wet cement.

Christopher looked up slowly, his eyes absorbing the image of an impeccably dressed man in a white suit and Panama hat. The man smiled warmly and offered his hand, which Christopher cautiously accepted. Exhausted and confused, he got to his feet as he noticed something very wrong with the man. He had the usual components of a human face: eyes, mouth, hair, nose, etc., but he lacked any and all distinguishing characteristics. He was generic: a generic human, a living doll. Christopher's dread returned, a torrent of fear that rivaled the ongoing downpour.

"Hello, son," the man greeted. "Enjoying the weather?" He smiled amiably, but his breath stank of blood and decay. An image flashed through his mind: a screenshot of the shark from *Jaws* thrashing on the sinking boat as the old fisherman slid, screaming, into its gaping maw. *Only this shark looked like George Bailey.*

The man laughed, "Not George Bailey, son. I'm shooting for the Rick Blaine look, or maybe a Hannibal Lector." He laughed then, a ghoulish cackle that sent waves of fetid stink cascading over Christopher's senses, choking him and burning his eyes. He struggled to break free, but the man's grip held fast. "Here you go, son; got a present for you. It's from Cody. He can't make it, but he sends his deepest regards."

The man held something that glittered like an emerald in the rain: it was Cody's class ring, still attached to a ragged finger. Fully realizing his predicament, Christopher gazed into the laughing face. The eyes had changed from brown to an impenetrable midnight that entirely filled both sockets. Its mouth opened, baying hollow laughter that repeated endlessly, like a scratched recording of

Daffy Duck in Hell. “Huh huh HUH, huh huh HUH.”

Christopher managed a choking whisper. “Are you the Devil?”

“No, son. Old Scratch likes an audience, but I’d rather work alone without witnesses. He and I may employ similar methods, but our goals are very different. He wants to rule while I . . . *I just want to eat.*” The laughter stopped as the thing opened its mouth. Like a snake’s, his lower jaw unhinged, dropped, and widened the cavern of its maw.

Christopher knew it would have little trouble swallowing him whole. He closed his eyes, preparing for oblivion. He opened his eyes slowly, not daring to move, bracing for the hellish sight that he knew would greet him. He was again alone.

The rattling hum of a car engine broke his paralysis. The rain had stopped, and the car’s running lights cruised along past the spot the fiend had inhabited only a moment before. Needing little encouragement, Chris sprinted the remaining block to his front door and into the safe confines of his room. He stripped out of his wet clothes and climbed, shivering, into bed.

He was beginning to attribute the whole terrifying incident to an overstressed mind, or thought that maybe Cody had slipped something into his drink. Christopher wouldn’t have put it past him. He would deal with that slime in the morning. Safe and alone in his room, he allowed his consciousness to slowly fade as the bizarre events of the evening dissolved into sleep. But before rest claimed him, he had just enough time, one split second, to register the growing apparition at the foot of his bed, a laughing shadow with a Panama hat.

GARRETT BURRELL

POETRY

Maybe the moon is a mirage,
Cold and remote as vines of smoke climbing
bars of light,
The soul's reflection on the calm surface of the eye,
A distant lamp on water or shining island destination.
Like so many lies we are willing to believe just to live,
As if the overwhelming past could suddenly be
rendered impotent,
Its disturbance made perfect through wind and time,
Leaving nothing but our delusion.
Instead, the moon stares blindly down
On birds circling mysterious wakes,
in the charcoal black waves.

No one answers at the tower window.
Below, the lover is alone.

CHECK ME OUT OF HERE

TONY ABATE

PERSONAL ESSAY

He stands in front of me. He has managed to catch his breath, enough to approach my register. He comes into my store in the same exhausted condition, at the end of his evening jog, around nine o'clock every time I am there for my night shift. He glistens like sweaty cheese. I do my best not to notice how tightly his soaked cotton workout shirt clings to his heaving belly.

I first noticed that he was back again tonight when he stopped me while I was placing some returns back on the shelf. I had an enormous stack of movies teetering against my chest. I paused to listen while I tried to balance those movies like a circus seal. Stuttering and stammering unintelligibly, he asked if the movie that had been missing for two months happened to be found since he was here last. That was two days ago. People think I work double shifts to search down any MIAs. On my wages, no, I couldn't do that. I excused myself from the unintelligible small talk he directed toward me. I have had that conversation before, and believe me, I have had more engaging discussions with a pre-recorded telemarketer.

I am beginning to check him out at the register now. It has been thirty-five minutes since I first ran into him. He has

used every second just to stop hyperventilating. It is the same routine when he comes in; I have never seen a man look over the same selection of movies more times than this person. He studies each movie in the Action section of the store, like it is going to be on some movie store midterm exam. I never gave those Jackie Chan cover boxes credit for being so fascinating.

I have his latest choice in my hands as I scan the barcode. Another tasteless choice, the cleavage-and-machine-guns sort that makes up for our lack of pornography.

"That is \$2.14 for *Deadly Vixen II*, due back on Thursday," I say and find myself wincing.

Here it comes: the man extends his hand and drops two dollars and some change from his palm into mine, two soggy singles and coins that begin to heat up my hand like they're "oven-fresh." This man has no pockets in his running shorts. Every time he pays, he reaches down inside his running shoe, sometimes deep into his gym sock itself, to extract the money.

The bills are wrinkled in a ball, steaming and smelly. As I place them in my drawer, the coins slip from my hand and leave a filthy residue on my palm. I close my drawer, hand him his movie, and head straight for the bathroom. I need to wash my hands immediately. The fact that there is a line of six people and I am the only one on duty does not even make me think twice. The people stare with puzzlement; some-

one makes the comment that I am just another rude kid who works at the movie store.

How did I ever let myself work here?

Dealing with antisocial degenerates is the nature of this business. To be fair, not all disgust me like "Wet-Sock," as he came to be known. Most are very interesting in their own way, meaning they need counseling. I have never met a regular who would not be better off spending his weekly rental expenses on a thirty-minute session with a therapist.

I became fascinated with customers soon after I started working at

Hollywood Video. The choice of movies for any one person on a given night is statistically infinite. The way patterns emerge from the possibilities is a sociological study waiting to happen. Every night when I go in for eight hours, I become that sociologist. From my observation post at the counter, I study the subjects in their natural environment. It is like watching mice nav-

igating a cheese maze.

As I slouch on the counter, my arms often have to support my head to keep from falling asleep. I cannot count the hours I spend looking out from under my eyebrows upon the people milling through the shelves. They look like they are examining personal ads. The eyes study the box cover and make their first impression. If something sparks their interest, the box is picked up for further examination. The critics' quotes are

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money.

read like personal references. People decide as if it is a blind date: a friend shows a picture, gives a personality rundown, and if everything seems to add up, they give it a try. Just like a blind date, the movie is nothing that was promised.

Becoming a profiler is no easy task.

Looking at people superficially is nothing more than taking a stab in the dark. The motivation of the person must be known; if he is with another person, it could also change the selection. I see certain guys come in all the time who rent nothing that is over an eighth-grade comprehension level. When their girlfriends or wives come in, all of a sudden they are picking out an Oprah movie. The same goes for the women. Everyone seems to play a role when someone else is watching.

Sometimes there is no telling what a person will rent. A couple will walk in, approach the counter, and take a look at the new release list. I am too busy to hear what is said between them, but I know what is going to happen. I write "Julia Roberts" on a mental post-it note and stick it to their foreheads. By the time I am finished with the register line, they are already asking me if *The Mexican* is all rented out. It is. The phony smiles they both walked in with quickly turn into spoiled pouting faces.

They now ask for a guarantee coupon. There is no guarantee. Their shoulders slouch under their faux-fancy Gap clothing; they tell me that every movie should be free the next time if it is not here when they are. Maybe the company could afford such business practices if it had as much money as these people pretend to have. This couple is identical to the twenty-seven others who have come in tonight.

Other people think that if they rent movies no one has heard of before, that automatically makes them film students. Independent people have a warped logic operating inside their brain. I think their thinking is affected by the clove-cigarette stench that permeates all the wool and corduroy they wear. Indies are not looking for what movie they want to rent; for them it is a question of what one should rent. The goal is to find the sleeper hit of the year before anyone else does. This involves taking risks and betting the odds that one out of every ten thousand low-budget, unknown movies ever gets recognized. The motivation is earning bragging rights inside their haughty Indie circles. This requires some special effort. These types will rent the epic four-tape story of a Cambodian family living in Amazonian tribal lands, filmed in Russia and dubbed entirely in French with Chinese subtitles. If that is what it takes to be hip and cultured, call me a square.

Why do these people continue to rent trash?

If there is one thing I learned, it is the immensity of the movie industry. Groupings of studio, television, radio, magazine, and record companies are all owned by a single entity. Films are just like any other product in this respect. The industry works like a factory; the production is regulated and controlled to their standards. Once the films are sold, the studios must make a demand—regardless of necessity—and create the enormous profit. It seemed I was at the front lines of the film industry's battle for the all-important dollar. I came face to face with those who make billions for the studios each year. Sometimes money is lost and sometimes it is made; other

times it is spent or earned. But each month, the money that changes hands is in numbers that could balance entirely some nation's annual budget. Selling condescending ideas and stereotypes is a hard business in itself, let alone making money on it, but there is one way they can rope us in every time: advertising.

Hollywood (the town) sells unfulfilled dreams, desires, and self-image. There is a reason people rent what they do. Each and every movie is aimed at a demographic; they know who we are and what we want. People come in with a pre-programmed opinion about what is hot, who everyone is talking about, and which film has an Oscar buzz. Each person is specifically targeted by everything from trailers and advertisements to interviews on *Access Hollywood*. Everything is riding on the fact that we will pay our ten dollars to see what they produce. The industry depends on our demand much more than we depend on their supply. Films are a perfect example of needless luxury. This should not come as news to anyone. I bring up the practices of the industry only because I see everyday how well it really works.

I cannot do this anymore.

I quit my ten-month Hollywood Video gig four months ago. Although the paycheck is sorely missed, I will never go back. I quit because of the management, not the customers. Any customer-related job is usually torturous; I know that mine was not any better. The management, though, seemed to insult my intelligence. Corporate people would come in for a whole day, change a few minor details, then explain the changes to me in baby talk before driving off in their Mercedes. I could not listen to my high-school-educated manager explain

that I needed to set my work and school priorities straight, in favor of work. Just to think, that I too could be twenty-five, living in my fiancée's mother's apartment, paying huge child care bills to my first wife, strapped for cash, but with enough money for new performance car parts—all this while managing a bunch of moronic high school sophomores. Sounds like paradise. I know that I will have to get used to such idiocy if I ever plan to keep a job anywhere when I want a career. For now, the half of me that has any self-respect says, *It is just a damned video store. Quit.*

THE FATHER I NEVER HAD

CHRISTINA DAS

CONTEST WINNER

Daddy always said that he held my heart in his hands. He promised to protect me from the world until I was old enough to hold my own. Yet, when I wanted him, he never offered his hand and never considered my heart

I always needed him, but he was not there.

At ten, I caught my hand in a car door at my friend's house. Her mother called Daddy before she took me to the hospital. When the doctor stitched my knuckles, I cried: "Daddy, I want kisses!" Alone, I listened for his familiar steps as I sat in the emergency room. The tears streamed down my cheeks without anyone to wipe them away.

He was not there.

At twelve, I performed my first dance recital. For weeks, I practiced each routine hoping to make Daddy proud. When the curtain rose, I froze as I stared at his empty seat next to my mother. Once the music started, I stumbled through the dance, keeping a close eye on the back of the auditorium. The song ended and so did my dance.

He did not come.

At fifteen, my grandmother died. I struggled with her death and asked for Daddy's guidance to help me through the dark period. My mother gave me her shoulder for crying.

He did not care.

Finally, at twenty-three, I walked down the aisle. I called for him, knowing he would fulfill his promise to give my hand to my husband. The day arrived and Daddy did not.

He did not keep his word.

Why did I need a father? I asked myself the same question throughout my life, but I never believed he would always turn his back on me. Despite my wishes, Daddy never lived up to my expectations.

My parents divorced when I was nine.

When my mother and I left our home to move in with my grandmother, Daddy promised he would always be nearby if I ever needed him. At first he kept his word. I stayed with him one night a week. I cherished those nights. He helped me with my homework, reciting math tables and reading my essays for spelling mistakes. We sang songs, and I danced. He tucked me into bed with a goodnight kiss and a story. Those nights suddenly stopped a couple of months after the divorce was finalized. He moved to a new house and promised we would spend time together once he settled. The night never came.

As I grew, I longed to know why Daddy treated me as he did. I figured it was my right to know, especially if I had done something wrong that could be easily corrected. One night, he came over for dinner, and I found my opportunity. When my mother left us alone at the table, I gathered my nerve. I was thirteen.

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“Daddy, why don’t I get to see you much anymore?” I asked. I could not look him in the face for fear of his answer.

He choked. “I just don’t have much time anymore. Not even for myself, let alone you,” Daddy said, as he listed every reason why he could not visit.

I looked down at my plate, trying to hide my tears as mother returned with a platter full of her best spaghetti. The rest of the meal I did not say much, except, “Can I have a second helping?”

After I graduated from high school, I told my mother how I felt. Daddy

occasionally came for dinner, but it was more often than not to complain about his job or to ask my mother for help to clean his house. When I explained my feelings of neglect, she told me about the Daddy that I never knew.

Daddy was the first of four children. Despite his role as the first son, he was never treated as such by his parents who labeled him a “special child.” It was not that he was stupid. On

the contrary, he received high accolades for his intelligence and ability. He was simply unable to successfully socialize with others. Maybe it was shyness, but my grandparents never paid much attention.

Due to their high profile in the social set, my grandparents immediately disregarded their son and shunned him from the family. Even after having other children, they kept him away from the others, always reminding him of his inadequacies.

When Daddy was ten, he fell into a swimming pool and nearly drowned. His parents often told him of the burden he had been to their lives. "It would have been best for all of us if you had just drowned that day," my grandmother would say.

Despite their cruelty, Daddy believed his parents were the only ones he could trust, and he depended on them well into his adult years. My grandfather's advice became the law of life. When Daddy planned to leave home for college, my grandfather advised against it, explaining that Daddy would not survive away from his family. Daddy turned down his acceptance to a reputable university in order to meet his parents' wishes. It was one of the biggest mistakes he ever made. He would never be able to escape his parents' scrutiny or influence.

Even though he heavily relied upon them, Daddy grew to hate their constant criticism. He often told friends that he would leave home and start a life of his own, but the moment he stood before his father, he changed his words. When he needed support the most, he turned to religion and joined a church. My grandparents did not understand his fervor for Christ, but they let him be, accepting his newfound belief as a distraction that would keep him out of their way.

When Daddy was thirty-two, he met my mother in his church's singles group. He had not dated many women due to his parents, but he longed to find someone to share his life. My mother felt for him. Having a strict father of her own, she understood his strife and believed that together they could make it beyond their parents. Unfortunately, her vision did not materialize. It was my grandfather's frequent meddling and unwanted advice that led to my parents' divorce. Ironically, after the sep-

aration, they told Daddy he would never find a better woman than my mother.

I have not seen Daddy in nearly five years. He still keeps in touch with my mother, but they do not speak as often anymore. My grandparents are still living, and they control his life as if he were twenty-one. But there is always hope.

Last year, Daddy purchased a retirement home and settled away from his parents for the first time. Finally, in his sixties, he has taken charge of his of life. I am happy for him, even if I cannot share in his new freedom.

When I reached adulthood, I strangely learned to appreciate Daddy. He may not have cheered at my recitals or held my hand at my wedding, but he was an example of someone who kept living despite the struggles he faced. I understood that my grandparents' control kept him from learning about himself or finding the confidence to love. Daddy retreated into his shell and built a world that did not challenge his insecurity. I held no place in it.

In the end, he may have never been there, but it was better that way.

ONE SHINING MOMENT

CHITRA JOSHI

FICTION

The stadium roared; the noise was deafening. There she was, taking it all in. She stood rooted to the ground but felt weak in her knees, and soon found that she had collapsed on the court. Her racket to one side, her head in her hands, she tasted salt but couldn't tell if it was her tears or all the sweat. She resisted the urge to dart into the stands and hug all those who had contributed to this moment, her moment of success. Pat Cash had set the trend, but that was his trademark. Should she "copy" and relive the moment? Restraint — it is what got her to this shining and glorious moment. The Game Officials would be here soon to give away the trophy. This was her moment and as many times as she had rehearsed it, she seemed unable to display her delight at her first-ever victory in a major tennis tournament.

All her struggles came back to her while she savored this victory. Was there time for that now? As she lay there, motionless, she visualized the whole match, and it seemed to come back to her as if in "replay" mode, a feature on our electronic gadgetry that all of us now take for granted. Through all the blur she could read the score on display. It read 7-6, 6-4. She had expected a tough fight with the world's greatest player, and when the first set led to a tiebreaker, she thought she was

back at square one. What she did next was Herculean! She had come back from behind to clinch the first set. She trailed 1-4 in the second set and thought to herself that if she did not fight back now, it might be too late. Another opportunity would be gone, and she would have nothing to look forward to but another grueling training session.

It was hot; not a breeze swayed by to cool her. Wiping her brow, she had no choice but to start working on her next set. Her legs seemed heavier and the 100 degree weather did not help. But then, she took a moment to think about her opponent, a seasoned, world-class player, who at that very moment seemed larger than life; she just seemed to grow in stature. Did she look tired? That was hard to tell because hitting to her seemed like hitting to a wall. They both stood there on opposing sides of the net, under the blazing sun, giving it their all, wondering who could stake her claim to the final prize money first. It could be either one, depending on who outdid the other. As she blocked all thoughts from her mind, she seemed to relax a little bit, once again feeling that she was now at an advantage. Before she knew it the score was 4-all. She seemed to have gained an edge, having won the first set; the match seemed more within her grasp than her opponent's.

The clapping grew louder and she was in the lead waiting to receive her opponent's serve. Moments later the score gave her two break points. She could convert this into her first major victory or let it lead into another set and more toiling under

the cruel sun. She was pleasantly surprised when her final shot made it just over the net and her opponent stood glued to the baseline. She looked up to a delighted crowd that was cheering her every move on the court, and she seemed at a loss to reciprocate the same emotion.

The trophy that she held out for the crowds to see was beautiful. All her life she had looked forward to getting a glimpse of it from close by. Never in her wildest imagination did she think that she would be holding it up, for all to see. But now she was taking it home with her to keep until the fol-

lowing year. This was a dream come true, and she did not want to wake up and let this shining moment go!

. . . and she
thought to herself
that if she did not
fight back now,
it might be too
late . . .

DIANE MARCUS

POETRY

Beneath the glass top on my father's desk are pictures
Abyssinian, Angora, Russian Blue
Domestic, Calico, White Persian and Manx
Siamese and Tabbies, gray striped and red.

Every Sunday, after his game of handball
He stopped to buy fresh bagels and hot blueberry muffins
The aroma rose like a genie just released
From its bottle waking me from a deep sleep.

After we ate he always would say
"Mother, this breakfast was fit for a king."
Then just like all his well-fed cats
He stretched his body on the lounge
And let the warm sun
Lick at his pores.

THE BATHTUB CONFESSIONAL

DANIELLE BALL

CONTEST WINNER

My most vivid memories from the last weeks of my mother's life are the conversations we shared in the bathroom. I sat on the basin in the rose-tiled room as she sloshed about in the tub cleansing her soul of all the good and bad thoughts that flitted through her weary mind. The yellow tint of her fair skin hinted at the breast cancer that had ravaged her liver function and would soon steal her away from me. Her stomach, swollen to the size of a full-term pregnancy, breached the surface of the water like an island. Yet she and I found refuge in the bathroom like we always had since I was a little girl, chatting as she bathed in the bathtub.

We'd been dealt a heavy blow that day, and I was still reeling from the news. "Seven to ten days," Dr. Somlo had said, when we asked him, "How long?" My 45-year-old mother was fighting an uphill battle, a battle we knew she would eventually lose, but to hear it put in terms of mere days . . . was disconcerting, to say the least.

"I'm not afraid," she said as she lathered the washcloth with her skeletal hands, perfuming the humid air with the distinct scent of Irish Spring soap. "It's kinda like Christmas when you're little, counting the days 'til Santa comes!"

I studied her soft hazel eyes for any indication that she might be putting on a brave front for my benefit, but found her expression steadfast.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Her answer was matter of fact in its delivery. “Anticipation. There are some people I haven’t seen in a longtime.” She brought the soapy cloth to her forehead and began to scrub. I felt my face flush, and I took another breath to stifle the tears that threatened to well up in my eyes and spill down my cheeks. The death and dying literature that the hospice nurse brought to the house detailed the dying person’s desire to talk about the afterlife.

Thick foam enveloped her face, but she continued to speak, “I hope to see your Great Grandpa Kratochvil first.” I swallowed hard, the knot of fear that grew ever so tight in my throat.

“Why him?”

She stopped scrubbing and dipped the washcloth in the bath water. “Cuz then I’ll know for sure that he’s forgiven me.”

My mother’s grandfather had died a few years before my birth. Until that moment, I never knew that she felt he might be upset with her.

“Forgiven you? For what?”

She refrained from answering as she rinsed the lather from her face, and then she reclined against the back of the tub.

“I know it’s stupid, but I still feel so bad. I was sixteen when Grandpa had his first stroke. It was pretty severe. He’d lost a lot of his mobility, was completely unable to speak, but the doctors

eventually let the family bring him back to the farm.

“There was a barn dance in Lankin that summer. I’d been looking forward to it for months, but then Grandpa had the stroke. The night of the dance, Mom and Dad made me stay home with him. Ugh! I was so mad. And I remember he was kinda propped up in a chair and I sat across from him. He couldn’t talk, so he just looked at me, staring. All night. I felt stupid, frightened I guess, and didn’t know what to say, so I just stared back at him. I must’ve made him so uncomfortable.”

“Oh, Mom. You were so young, what else could you’ve done?”

“I don’t know. I could’ve talked to him. Held his hand, maybe.”

“None of that matters. He loved you and certainly wouldn’t want you to feel bad.”

“I know, but it’s never made me feel any less guilty. I look back on it. I could’ve read to him or something. Anything. He died just a few months later, and I never really had the

chance to tell him how much he meant to me.” She grasped the pull chain for the drain plug between her toes and gave it a quick jerk. I helped her to her feet and began to towel her off.

“He isn’t mad at you.”

She just smiled at me. “When I see him, then I’ll know he’s forgiven me.”

I kept count as the days slipped by. One day turned into two. Days turned into weeks. Mom exceeded Dr. Somlo’s prediction and battled on for

She smiled at me.
“When I see him,
then I’ll know he’s
forgiven me.”

almost a month before succumbing to the cancer. Fittingly, her last conscious act was enjoying a warm bath.

I didn't understand then, but I do now, all too well, the guilt that plagued my mother almost thirty years after her grandfather's death. I live with self-reproach every day, its familiar pang reverberating through the whole of my being as I loll in the bathtub and conjure up all the ways in which I failed her.

No, it's not that I didn't get the opportunity to tell her how much I loved her. I told her that hundreds of times each day. The fact is I did remember to do all the big important things. It's the little things fallen by the wayside, seemingly unimportant on the surface, that haunt me. Hundreds of them. Why didn't I buy her a tabletop water fountain for her nightstand? She always wanted one of those. Why didn't I play her favorite CDs for her when the end drew near? All the hospice literature says that hearing is the last sense to go.

Logically, I know that these things wouldn't have made any difference to her whatsoever. She isn't mad at me, I assure myself. Yet as I lather a new bar of Irish Spring in my washcloth, I think that perhaps I'll keep myself wrapped in that blanket of guilt. And when I see her again, as if for the first time, maybe then I'll know she's forgiven me.

CHASE, FROM PATH OF THE JUST: RISE

STEVEN MCPHAIL

FICTION

Owen Matthias leapt over the patrol car and hit the ground running, darting to one side as a loud bang sounded behind him. A bullet whizzed by one of his long, furred ears and buried itself into a nearby wall. Owen zigged to one side, then dashed the opposite way, running faster as he did so. The police behind him jumped into their car and gave chase, their siren whining into the night air. Owen glanced back at the car, and its armed occupants. The police had guns, vehicles, and superior numbers. The rabbit, on the other hand, had his speed.

He smirked. Hardly fair for the police, was it?

He swerved onto New Peachtree, and bolted for the middle of the street. As a van came into his line of sight, he veered into the next lane. Balanced on the divider, he swayed from side to side as cars zoomed past. On the other side of the street, the patrol car kept pace with him. The officers barked orders through the PA.

“This is the Atlanta Police! Stop now!”

Owen, in turn, offered a one finger response.

He sped up and swerved into the next lane, where a semi screamed past, missing his shoulder by mere inches. He stole a glance at the patrol car, which slowed and turned onto another street.

Giving up awful easy, he thought and turned forward again. The lights of another patrol car sparked to life a short distance away. Owen ran faster, angling toward the car. He savored the expression of the officers inside as he drew closer.

Closer.

Closer.

At the last second, Owen jumped at the car, arms extended. He planted his hands on the hood and flipped over, aiming for the roof. Just before his feet touched, both legs sprang down, smashing the lights and denting the roof as he flew at the nearby sidewalk. Humans scattered as he landed, only a few feet from a newsstand. A pair of tourists snapped photos as he darted to his left and disappeared into a nearby alley.

Owen skidded to a stop at a dumpster and took refuge behind it. Too many chances, he thought. Of course, as Joan often joked, he had two lucky rabbit's feet, even if they did hurt like hell at the moment. Smashing the car roof was a nice touch, but it cost him. On the up side, he probably hurt less than the pride of the two officers.

His nose twitched at the smell of refried beans and rice. Opening the pack, he peered inside to see his prized burrito smashed against one side of the bag. Its contents covered both the peanut butter jar and the mangled loaf of bread at the bottom of the bag.

"Damn cops!" He slammed one fist into the side of the dumpster. In the pack's second compartment, the bottles of water and soda remained intact,

though the soda bubbled perilously at the necks. At the bottom rested a pair of candy bars, now smashed flat. He pulled one out, stripped off its wrapper, and crammed it into his mouth.

Sirens drew closer to the alley, and he heard the chatter of human police. "He went that way!"

Owen zipped the bag shut and threw it over one shoulder. *Wasted too much time*, he mused as he scanned the alley for escape routes. A small fire escape stood by the wall across from him, but its bottom-most ladder was raised, several feet above the ground. For most, that might present a problem.

Not, however, for Owen Matthias.

Saying a quick prayer, Owen abandoned the safety of the dumpster and scampered across. Owen took to the air just as the officers ran into the alley and drew their weapons. As he reached the middle landing and spun around, four guns were trained on him.

"Freeze! This is your final warning!"

"All this for a loaf of bread? You guys are pathetic!" He leapt again, angling to one side to reach the roof. At the same time, gunshots filled the air. The first two bullets flew past without incident. A third grazed his ear, forming a thin crimson streak.

The fourth found its mark. Owen screamed as the bullet pierced his shoulder, seeming to set it on fire. He struck the roof hard, and rolled several times.

The first two bullets flew past without incident. A third grazed his ear, forming a thin crimson streak. The fourth found its mark.

Owen staggered to his feet. Even breathing sent fresh jolts of pain through his body. A deep red patch formed on the gray shirt over the wound. He tried to lift his arm, but the pain proved too much after only a few inches. He reached to his ear and felt the warm, sticky flow of blood trailing down it.

Around him, the other buildings stood far taller, not within even his own leaping range. For a moment, he debated trying the opposite side of the building, but more sirens joined the sadistic, mocking chorus below. Dull metallic clangs from the alley below told him that the officers were about to lower the fire escape. At this point, surrender seemed the only option.

“Suspect is Emejre, rabbit hybrid,” the police radios echoed from below. “Suspect is considered powered and dangerous.” Owen stared at the fire escape, waiting for the inevitable.

Then he heard it. A low hum below the radio and sirens, punctuated by a louder crackle every few seconds. He looked to the rear of the building, and a smile passed over his face.

Behind him, a small distance from the building, several poles formed a wall around a darkened area filled with the silhouettes of once mighty buildings. Between each pole stretched three thick beams of energy, spaced evenly apart. It was, Owen knew, designed to keep those behind it in, rather than others out.

The Reservation. His mind raced over the distance to the beams and the height of the building he stood on. The jump lay within his range, but also looked to be no certainty. That concerned him, but not as much as the dark purple color of the beams themselves.

“Shadow Territory.” Maybe the police weren’t such a bad option, after all.

The ladder of the fire escape slammed to the ground, and feet clanged against the metallic steps.

“Shoot to kill!”

That made the decision easy. He ran to the opposite edge of the roof and started to run. He ignored the knives of pain coursing through his shoulder and increased his speed. As the police spilled onto the rooftop, he reached the edge and pushed off, into the air. The officers fired their weapons, but missed their mark as Owen hurtled toward the energy field below.

First the police, now Shadow Territory. Joan owed him big when he made it home.

All at once, Owen realized that his return remained a question. To his horror, he lacked enough momentum to carry him over the bars.

Magic and fantasy
Dashing knights and Seductive sirens
Holding within,
A World between pages.

The white screen glows as the blinking cursor waits patiently. Its deceptive thinness contradicts its ability to spew words and thoughts. The tips of my fingers lightly caress the keyboard as I stare at the monitor.

Sometimes I hope if I stare long enough the cursor will start planting the letters on its own, one by one. Or maybe the thoughts and ideas on the brink of my subconscious will transfer themselves to my restless fingers.

I get up and gently push in my chair before turning my back on the glowing screen. I start pacing the house. My mind races—in circles like a dog after its elusive tail. I pick up and touch random objects, hoping one will trigger a flood. I push my car keys around before going on to abandoned magazines. I study the smiling cover-girl intently, hoping she can bring to light the vague notions that have been building in my mind.

Like the Earth's beginning it starts out desolate and bleak. Before you know it little organisms appear. Soon they

evolve into bigger life forms. Backbones and limbs grow. Vegetation and creatures flourish. Out of nothing a civilization is born. But unlike humanity, this civilization only resides in some locked-away universe in the psyche of an individual. Life and objects are blurry and dream-like, suspended in ice.

I stare, my eyes glazed, at the cold pizza I dragged from the fridge. My mind is a blank blackness. In another plane of reality, a frozen world awaits. It swells and pulses, with more vague thoughts and ideas. At first the blackness is still. Then in the next instant a pinhole of light appears, a spark. Like the Big Bang the world explodes into existence, out of my subconscious.

I jump up, knocking my knees against the underside of the table. The screech of the chair legs across the floor makes me cringe. The next moment it is forgotten, along with my pizza, as I race for the computer. Yanking out the chair, I drop into it. Tremors of excitement strike through my heart, streaking down my arms, pooling in my fingertips. I can't conquer the stupid grin that takes over my face.

The glowing screen looks just how I left it, blank. The cursor blinks happily, eager for direction. My fingers begin tapping out a rhythmless song full of meaning. As pages fill, the world shapes, details ignite and spread. Like a toy that has just been wound, the frozen world moves with slow and jerky motions. Soon actions, sounds, and emotions become crisp, bringing it to life.

Each letter, comma, and period brings foundation and permanence to a world that didn't exist just seconds before. The transformation from nothingness to existence can take weeks, months . . . and even years. But the hours spent hunched over that computer are worth it.

I lean back in the chair, letting out my breath with a sigh. Lethargic and weak, I feel empty but satisfied as the last period seals the world from within. I glance at the clock, seeing the red numbers blur before coming into focus: 4:28 am. With a groan, I push myself up and stagger to bed.

In another plane
of reality,
a frozen world
awaits.

Around me others browse the bookstore—looking for information, excitement, romance, or fantasy. My fingers slip along the bookbindings until they cross my name: *Jill Bentley*. Slowly, in awe, I pull the book from the shelf. Caressing the cover I trace the title: *A Promise Born*. With great care I flip through the pages, reading lines and paragraphs.

Out of nothing came a frozen world, which turned into a reality that anyone could visit. Right here between the pages.

I slip the book back onto the shelf with its brothers. Slowly my hand falls away and I step back. Satisfaction mixes with sorrow in my heart. I turn my back on my creation and head for the door.

It doesn't need me anymore. It will always exist, welcoming visitors with open arms, year after

year, into infinity. The book is just a portal to a different reality—all you have to do is open the cover and slip inside.

As I push open the door, stepping into the sunlight, my mind starts to race. All is blackness, but I know a pinhole of light will soon emerge.

I remember when she asked me, “So what was your father like?” She sat languidly behind a large oak desk, staring at me through thick red-framed bifocals. I squirmed uncomfortably in the wooden chair, which I stubbornly opted to sit in after the doctor suggested I recline on the couch. *Here is the million-dollar question*, I thought. It was only a matter of time.

I quietly scanned the office. It was modest and simply decorated, save for a large mutely colored oil painting of a fruit basket that hung on the wall. She was my third doctor this month and was just like all the others I had been to: an inquisitive woman in her forties with a static disposition. Her gaze was familiar; her approach was predictable. This was the question I had been waiting for.

I had recited the answer to this question so many times before that its presentation became a game to me. To the sensitive doctors I relayed the over-rehearsed monologue stoically. I explained the events apathetically. I watched their sympathetic countenances turn to frowns, and I continued my production of the answer, unaffected. Secretly, as their eyes filled with glassy, liquid restraint, I would relish in my victory.

To the stern-faced doctors, I changed my tactic, finding a particular joy in the new adaptation. I began the same mono-

logue quietly, inflecting growing emotion into my performance as the events unfolded. Dramatically, like an actor starved for an Oscar, I cried hysterically as my body shook and contorted from the pathos of my faux sadness. In the final speech, I propelled my arm across the unsuspecting doctors' desks, violently disrupting the decorum of papers and notes. As the stern-faced doctor attempted to reorganize her scattered contents, her face could not hide the obvious look of astonishment and empathy. Again, I had won.

I was eighteen years old, rebellious, bitter, and coping with the sudden loss of my father. I had been to nineteen doctors in nine months. I would only attend a few sessions with each doctor. My mother was a psychologist too, and she insisted that I continue to go despite my disagreement. "Mom, but I don't need to go. I am fine. Besides, Dr. So-and-So is an idiot anyway," I would argue. But my mom was also hurting, and it appeased her if I went, so I tried again and again.

This day, however, I felt slightly different. It wasn't the doctor, or the ambience of the simple office, or the "approach" she took when asking the question that made me pause. Nor was I tired of my usual game, a constant source of amusement.

Perhaps at that moment, beneath the still life, I had a moment of clarity. Slowly, I remembered things about him, which deviated from my routine. They were transient, only fragmented scraps of memories that I had trained myself to for-

get. My eyes focused with an empty intensity on the fruit basket's banal banana.

There he was, in front of me. I was moving toward him, with intention, pedaling and precarious on a small pink bicycle. My small sandaled feet struggled to reach the pedals, but it was exhilarating. I saw him there, motioning for me to hurry. I had a feeling that I had never done this before.

I saw myself, older. Sitting alone on a bench in front of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., wearing a long white gown. I was holding a tasseled rectangular hat and a diploma.

I spoke that day, my confident voice echoing against the gothic ceilings and flying buttresses, as proud parents looked on. The words were of walking and courage and change and youthful ideals that I once believed in.

But yet, as I sat alone on this day, I still held that hope. My classmates had left for warm dinners with their families. My parents were in California, busy with freeways and meetings. I marveled with silent reverence at the massive structure before me; the powerful chime of its bells seemed symbolic of this rite of passage. I inhaled the cool June air and stood to leave, taking one final look at that church I was so honored to speak in.

I turned to the road to see a blue taxi come to a screeching halt at the cathedral gates. The back door flung open, and there he was, in front of me again. He looked much older this time, his hair gray and his face wrinkled. He wore his sharpest busi-

I had recited the answer to this question so many times before that its presentation became a game to me.

ness suit, now crumpled from hours of sitting on a plane. He hugged me gratefully and said, “Well, better late than never, my little graduate. I just decided to hop on a plane in L.A. after my meeting this morning. Thought maybe we could grab some dinner before I fly to New York tonight.” I smiled.

And this was the last time I ever saw him . . .

In the office, I still had not spoken. I surprised myself even, that I had not begun my monologue to this doctor.

She finally addressed my silence, removing her red-framed glasses as she spoke. “Okay, well, that’s okay. Why don’t we talk about this some other time? Can you come next Tuesday?” I thought of my mom in California, who still hurt. I thought of my father, and my first bike ride, and the time when he didn’t let me down. “Okay,” I said, willingly. “That will be just fine.”

WHAT GOOD IS AN OCEAN WITHOUT BALANCE?

DREW BAKER

POETRY

can you see the pasty faced swells
worshipping fiery crosses?
poseidon is, as i'm sure,
cross with fire
as he peers down on those that swim lost;
searching for a sense of self
amidst a multi-hued blanket.
but that's the key though . . .
multi-hued;
multi-colored;
multi-toned;
each standing
before the most high's palette;
brush strokes of an aquatic landscape
defining who we are,
but we're all based on the same model.
the same crimson paint flows beneath us all.
tall as tidal;
short as the break;
dark as the depths;
light as the fog;
and everything in between.
we are one.
rivers, lakes, and oceans
share the same spirit.
the veins in the world

all share the same heart.
you rage like typhoons
pillaging mirrored liquid.
i lie calm,
an unchanging sheet of blue aluminum.
but we are both still water.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

BLAKE STOUDT

POETRY

The shell that life has given me
Holds within my skin
The beauty of captivity
For I am trapped within

No one hears my silence
My thoughts on world affairs
No one feels my heart grow tense
Shattering the glass stairs

Seeping through the pores
Are the echoes of my night
The endless rage inside me soars
And there is no end in sight

When you finally shake my hand
And yours melts from your bones
Then you sink beneath the sand
To walk with fiery stones

Everybody knows my name
But no one to hear me cry
All will eventually share my shame
And see me when they die

So when you get down on all fours
Giving up the fearless fight
Walk through the brimstone corridors
And there is no end in sight

I'D KILL FOR A NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

KYLE BEAN

PERSONAL ESSAY

We've never seen that before. I hear that way too much. That could have sounded flattering. We've never seen anything like you before. But it's always meant in the worst way. You have a cyst in your leg. We've never seen that before. We should cut it out. Your ligaments tore a chunk of bone off your tibia. We've never seen that before. You'll need three pins and three months of therapy. Oh well. Chicks dig scars, I guess.

I need a girlfriend. I think I need a girlfriend. I've never had one. I bet it's one of those grass's-greener-on-the-other-side situations. When there I'd wish I were back here. I just haven't met anyone that I would consider. Is that my fault or theirs? No one's. It sounds awful but most women are annoying. Don't feel bad, because most people are annoying. It's just that the majority of those people are women. It's hard to find a truly funny girl. Some have come close. But most of them are famous, which means out of my reach and my league. I'll find one. I just hope they aren't taken. They better not think all the good guys are taken. How is that supposed to help my self-esteem?

My self-image is nonexistent. Everyone has issues and mine seem less difficult than most. I consider that to be none at all. That sounds conceited. I need to be more humble. I want to be an extremely modest individual. I guess I could say I worry

about the birthmark over my eye. I wonder what I would look like without it. I'll probably find out very soon. Doctors checked it for cancer, upon my mom's request. They say I can get it removed if I want to. Do I want to? I don't really care. All I can think of are the bandages, which would be so apparent after surgery. Oh Jesus. I'd be getting plastic surgery. That is so degrading. Why can't they call it regular surgery? I've had tons of those, which only confirms my manliness.

I don't care about my manliness. I scare people no matter what I think. Or at least that's what I've been told. It could be directly linked to the mole. I've heard that in the theater, any small defect is considered a sign of evil. But I guess people don't think Cindy Crawford is evil. Then it must be because I never smile. People tell me to smile more. No. They assume that not smiling means I am angry. It just means I'm not smiling. It's a waste of energy, which is also my line of reasoning behind being so quiet.

I am a quiet killer. That's what I do. I kill quietly. People who are around me for long periods of time must find my silence very non-threatening or are too afraid to do anything about it. That must be why I win at "Risk" and "Axis and Allies" so much. Everyone always fights with each other but never with me. That is comforting. Sometimes someone sees what is happening and vows to join forces to stop me. Nobody ever helps that person. *Kyle is a good guy; I shouldn't fight him, I should fight you.* They have to realize

that I am not on their team. They have to see me and my growing army. I mean, they are sitting there playing the game with me.

I play board and video games on weekends. That is so sad. But I enjoy myself. I think I enjoy myself. I seriously doubt clubbing or whatever the hell you call it would make me feel any more comfortable. I wish I was Vince Vaughn in *Swingers*, getting all the "beautiful babies" without even trying. I wish I was that cool, or that inept. Or both. I'm more like Jon Favreau, always whining about something. Only I do it in my own head. Except now, I guess. Sorry.

I'm doing a service for humanity. I'm like a superhero and my power is not talking.

I don't want to waste people's time. Either I feel I'm not important enough to say much or not important enough to be in a conversation at all. I see most people blathering about nothing and wish they would shut up. I could only assume the same about myself. I preemptively shut my mouth. I don't open it. I'm doing a service for humanity. I'm like a superhero and my power is not talking. Too bad no one will recognize it. That is the price one pays for superhero status.

I need to work out more. Not for the same reasons that most people do it. I want to get stronger, faster and more flexible, in case of a terrorist attack. Not for something stupid like 9/11, but something cool like *Die Hard*. To have free rein to kill a bunch of people would be nice. I would most likely die in such a situation. This is all the more reason why I must train. I need to learn martial arts, either a bunch of different types or one really well,

most likely kung fu. I don't need it for confidence because I'm fairly certain I could take a painful beating, what with all the pain I was so lucky to have to endure. I just want to make sure I can dish out more than I can take. Because I'm that generous.

I want to kill. I need to kill. I need to kill with my bare hands. It seems fairer that way. People always wonder why we teens are so violent these days. Besides the fact that "these days" have nothing to do with it, I think that it is in our nature to kill. I feel that is hard to deny. However, killing people doesn't have to be the answer. It's just that there are a lot of people about. Besides, there's too many of them to make a dent. That sounds psychotic. It might be. Only a third-party perspective could determine that factor. Not me. But just trust me. Don't worry. I probably won't kill anyone in my life. I can't even bring myself to take Doritos into the library because the sign says not to. I always feel I have to do whatever I can, multiplied times three, to make up for all the obnoxious beings in this world. That, or I just worry about punishment from authority.

I worry too much. It keeps me up at night. I wish it didn't. Sleep is great. My brain just has a hard time turning off. There was a period a few years ago when I just could not sit in bed without wondering what the hell the point to life was, or the universe in general. I would get up and walk down the block in my boxers to try and clear my mind. One time I sat in a lawn chair on my driveway looking up at the sky trying to figure things out. It was cloudy. That is ridiculously ironic in retrospect. I started to give up a few years ago. Not on life, just on finding answers. The only answer I found was humor. There isn't a real question that it answers,

just that it is an answer. Maybe *the* answer.

I, MIND AND HEART

DAVID MICHAEL WOODS

CONTEST WINNER

White smoke ran up a hand and rose off a wrist into the black sky. A man tapped lightly on a cigarette with his index finger and ash fell like gray snow, missing the ashtray. The man's right hand, which held the cigarette, moved to turn the page of the book he held in his left; a few new-burned flakes of ash tumbled down the worn pages.

"What's that you're reading?" came the voice of a fresh-faced youth crossing the patio.

"A book," replied the old man, his eyes never leaving the page.

"Ha! What a thing to say!" The young man laughed with a cherubic smile. "And why are you so averse to conversation?"

The man slowly turned another page of his book. "I don't enjoy speaking to people I've never met." He took a long pull from the cigarette.

"Have we never met?" inquired the youth, leaning forward to study the man's face. "I feel we must have."

The old man raised his eyes. "I don't recall it," he said shortly, "so, no, we have not." His face fell back to the book.

The young man smiled and pulled a chair out to sit. "Indeed, it's possible we haven't, though you strike me as having a familiarity of some sort."

"Perhaps you've read my books."

"What book did you—?"

"*Books*. This one, for example." The old man tilted the book in his hand forward, exposing the cover to the yellow light above.

"A . . . Con-tem-plate on Philosophy."

"Have you read it?"

"No, I'm afraid I only read poetry."

"A pity. You will always be ignorant."

"Indeed," the young man laughed with a voice like a summer breeze through chimes, "you may be quiet correct." He gently brushed some ash off the table. "And why, might I ask, are you reading a book you yourself wrote?"

"To affirm my convictions, of course. We are nothing without convictions."

"Many are nothing with them."

"You are a philosopher?" the old man mocked, pillows of smoke curling around each word.

"Oh no. I quite dislike philosophy. It always confuses simple things."

"It confuses simple people, but makes clear complex things," the old man replied.

"So says the philosopher."

"So says the philosopher."

"But some things should never be made clear," the young man continued. "Some things are beautiful and wonderful until a philosopher gets

hold of them and tries to make them clear, and then they become only words and are ugly."

"How can something be appreciated if it is not understood?"

"It just . . . can it—"

"How profound." The old man scoffed, lifting a cup of coffee to his pale lips.

"I am never very profound, or eloquent . . . I am honest."

"No one is honest unless he calls himself a liar, and the few that do must be watched closely."

"You talk in circles," the young man said as

he ran his fingers through the light curls of his hair. "Do you live the same way?"

"That's what a simple person would ask."

The young man caught something familiar in the old man's tone, and his eyes squinted and searched the weathered folds of the man's face. "I am glad to be simple," he replied timidly.

The old man's eyes suddenly pierced those of the youth.

"Simple people get hurt, you

know."

The young man leaned back slowly in his chair and his eyes fell downward. His right hand played at the lapel of his shirt and he hesitated before speaking. "There is a certain beauty in . . . hurt, isn't there? Sometimes I think it may be more beautiful than joy—more terrible, and wonderful."

"That's ridiculous," the old man snapped.

"That's why it's beautiful," the young man whispered, still looking down.

"Some things are beautiful and wonderful until a philosopher gets hold of them and tries to make them clear, and then they become only words and are ugly."

"You are naïve."

"I am honest."

"You're a fool," said the old man with disgust as he leaned forward to take up his book.

The young man's hand darted forward and caught the old man's wrist. "Are you afraid of me?" he asked, his blue eyes wide and demanding.

"I haven't time for you," said the old man with contempt as he wrenched his wrist free.

"Whom *do* you have time for?"

"Those I've already met."

"*We've* already met."

"I have to go." The old man moved his chair back as he crushed the butt of his cigarette into the porcelain ashtray.

"No!" the young man said with a start, leaping to his feet.

The old man rose slowly, surprised.

The young man composed himself and began to sit down again. "No . . . no, I want you to stay; we must agree on something." His head fell into his hands and he quietly repeated, "We must."

"I never agree with those who don't think."

The young man exhaled a deep sigh and sweat began to collect on his brow. "Why must we always think? How do we live if we always think? I know we're different, but . . . we must *decide* something."

"I've already decided for us. I have decided you have nothing to contribute to me—you never did."

A pause.

"But are you happy?" demanded the young man.

The old man lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply before answering. "I am content."

"Contentment is not happiness."

"No, it's not. Happiness is fleeting."

"Do you ever *hurt*?"

"No."

The young man's eyes seemed to search the surface of the table for an answer. "Then you are nothing," he concluded, his eyes finding the old man's face. "You are cold. You have the look of an old man, but I think you are quite young. I *know* you are quite young. What then has all this thinking done for you?"

"It has given me answers."

"It has given you creases on your forehead and a scowl on your face."

"The scowl, at least, will leave when you do." The old man tried to laugh, but instead fell to a rasping cough.

"I wish that were the case, but I feel it's not. It seems that you've thought too much to care about anything anymore . . ."

The old man snatched up his book. "You're a foolish child."

"I pray it always be so," said the young man, his eyes lingering on the surface of the table, "but you made me feel old. And you've never really listened—"

The old man stood up sharply and tucked the book under his arm. "I've heard enough of your ramblings, Boy—"

"Listen!" the young man shouted as he lunged toward the old man, arresting him by his coat. He pressed him against the wall in a fury. "Just listen—for once! She is beautiful, and you know it! She is sweet and good and can show us so much!" The young man's eyes were wild with fear and sweat slid down his face.

"I know everything we need to know," replied the old man.

“Liar!” the young man screamed, tears forming in his eyes. “Do not take this from us!” He shook the man roughly with each word. “Do not take this from me! You’ve ignored me too long—so long that I don’t even remember my own name anymore.” He began to weep heavily and his body trembled. He buried his face in the old man’s coat. “It’s not fair,” he said through sharp breaths. “We are not happy—we are miserable—and you have forgotten that you even once knew me.”

“It’s for outbursts such as this that I had done so. She is imperfect, flawed, and will only distract us from matters of importance. It can only end in failure. You know this—”

The young man’s swollen face suddenly lifted and he screamed, “Then let us feel, let us feel what that is like!” He seized the old man’s shoulders and his voice nearly broke. “Let us live, for once; let me live . . .”

The old man stiffened. “You are too irresponsible. You’d die without me.”

The young man’s face was now no more than a few inches from the old man. “I have been dead with you,” he whispered hoarsely, “buried somewhere beneath you, and I am dying still.”

“Clean yourself up,” the old man spat with disgust. “Try to retain some measure of control. This whole scene has been embarrassing enough.”

“Even now you mock me?” the young man laughed in amazement. “Even now you ignore me and treat me as something less than you, as a child—as nothing?”

The old man’s voice came strong and his eyes clouded over in an ashen stare. “I am to lead. You are to follow. That is the way of things.”

Tears burst from the young man’s face and his voice shook—“Liar.” His face fell against the old man’s shoulders. “You will keep her from us.”

The old man’s body relaxed and he spoke quietly now, gently. “I will protect you from her. It’s my responsibility. I will not let you cry us through each day. I will not let you keep us from matters of importance. I will protect us.”

The change of tone caused the young man to look up just as the blade fell. A thin, longitudinal cut opened on his marble cheek as he stumbled back.

“Murderer!” the young man cried out in horror, and in a sudden flash he sprang forward and tore the blade from the old man. “You will kill me?”

Two gray eyes sat hollow and defiant, unmoved, unmoving.

A wind stirred. The boy breathed heavily. Then not at all. His left hand pressed the old man’s head to the wall. “I will love her,” he said softly, his right hand gripping fast to the blade, “and I will be happy.” He placed the edge of the quivering steel against the man’s throat. Blood and tears ran together on the young man’s face. “Whether through pain,” he said as he drew the blade across, “or joy.” The body slumped to the ground. “I will be happy.”

He wept through burnt lungs and the words dripped like blood from his ivory lips. “I will love her. And I will live.”

ONESELF

SARA JORDAN

CONTEST WINNER

Oneself was sitting
On top of a cow
Pondering what
And where and how
One wracked one's brain
For hours and hours
On top of the cow
In the field of flowers
Oneself asked the
Who and the when
Receiving the answers
Of he and then
Yet satisfied oneself
Failed to be
For oneself neglected
To ask of thee
The one little word
That consumes the mind
The answer to which
One cannot find
So oneself pondered
For days, weeks, and years
Never with laughter
Never with tears
Until one day
Oneself knew one would die
Atop the old cow
Gazing up at the sky
Oneself opened the mind
And asked oneself why . . .

THE FIFTY-POUND PARKA

ADRIEN LOWERY

CONTEST WINNER

I'd looked for the zipper for a long time before I found it. The parka was too hot, too heavy. The thing weighed nearly fifty pounds at the time. It was great when I felt much colder and needed its protection. But I need it less now.

Many women wear it zipped up tight. I'd worn mine so long that I'd given up looking for the zipper.

For many women, our weight is our individually sized "parka," providing insulation from others' perceptions. We recognize the comfort our weight is, at the same time that we despise it. My friend, Ginny, put it rather obliquely. "I'd love to lose weight, but then . . . Steve . . . well . . . I don't want any more children." What she stumbled to say was that the more weight she lost, the more sexual attention she got from her husband, and she just didn't want any more children. (She did not believe in artificial contraception.)

My own odyssey with my fifty-pound parka began ten years ago. After a few years of sorting out my self-esteem, I dropped forty pounds to a skinny size seven. I worked out, got buff, and found I looked just fine in the tight lycra dresses popular in the early '90s. My dating life soared.

But it wasn't just the physical aspect that sent out the attraction. I felt extremely confident. And I found this was

exactly what the men I dated were looking for. I found the attention intoxicating. Dinner, theater, night clubs, dancing, motorcycle rides, picnics, and on and on. Until I met Robert. Quiet, charming, clever Robert. Impulsive, divorced-less-than-a-year Robert. Still-reeling-from-his-divorce Robert. And I fell in love.

It was a wonderful romance, and after several months we talked of marriage. None of the inner turmoil he was experiencing seeped to his placid surface. For me, I'd found someone who was not after my body, but who respected me and enjoyed many of the things I did. We talked of starting a family. And then it happened.

Someone else he'd had his eye on for some time dumped her boyfriend, crooked her finger, and he went running to her. It didn't help that two weeks before, a friend of mine had committed suicide, and two weeks later my father died of a heart attack. My heart was broken, and so much of what I thought I meant to people, and they meant to me, had to be rethought.

With such emotional chaos came the weight, slowly at first. And as I began dating again a year or so later, the new feelings ricocheted off of these losses. I loved dating again. I feared dating again. And as the feelings grew, so did I.

After a while, when my dating life slowed down, I blamed the weight. It was easier to say to myself, "No man's gonna bother asking me out as long as I'm this big."

And the forty-pound parka I'd shed five years before grew to fifty. I zipped it up tight under my chin and settled in for a cold winter. "At least," I told myself, "if any man is interested in me now, it has to be for my mind."

But I wondered why some very large women had very active dating lives. As a slender teen, I'd heard the mocking joke from guys in the youth group about certain girls. "NFC!" (No Fat Chicks!) they laughed. It was clear – no one overweight was lovable. Now, increasingly overweight, I knew my parka could look great, but that couldn't

change how awful I felt about myself. I knew that no matter my size, or how I felt about myself, my level of confidence was going to make the difference in attracting someone.

So this is where I began. I learned about my feelings and understood that no matter my physical size, I was a wonderful woman. My truest friends had always affirmed this. And as a kind of confirmation, I started dating Peter, even at my peak weight. He truly cared for me.

He very much liked who I was, no matter my size. The few months we dated gave me the gift of even more confidence – I could be who I was, parka and all, and still be lovely and loving. It was not so much the parka as it was the woman wearing it.

The irony is that once I felt my self-worth, even in that padded envelope, I shed the weight. It was the power of self-acceptance. Whatever factors contributed to the weight gain were neutralized by growing confidence.

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feared dating again.
And as the feelings
grew, so did I.

Now I've sloughed off thirty pounds and am working on the next twenty. As my confidence has risen, I've dropped weight. And as part of the cycle, as I've dropped weight, I've felt more confident. It is that confidence that has brought back the attention I used to get fifty pounds ago. But that's also where I see another irony.

I am self-aware enough to know that some of my confidence is affected by others' perceptions; self-perception is sometimes based upon how we believe others see us. We respect a woman more if she is a certain body type and respect her less if she is another body type. But we do require a particular body image before we give many women (and yes, some men) their due respect. I say "we" because I realize that I am part of this society and know the image we require. I must consider how much I am willing to place myself under the guidelines of those around me in order to find respect and be taken seriously.

Now the matter of whether or not I lose the additional twenty pounds is merely a question of how much I feel the challenge of the social spotlight. I've shed *my* parka. But there's one that, socially, we still require others to wear. I'm still looking for the zipper on that one.

A VIEW FROM THE BED

MARLENE HICKEY

PERSONAL ESSAY

It is 4:30 on a Monday morning and Nature's call has awakened me in the still darkness. I roll lightly out of my side of the bed, and take a confident step forward. My legs buckle and I grab the edge of the bed to stop myself from falling. Pain shoots through my body, from the lower back down into my left leg and ankle, leaving me stunned and breathless. I know I will miss my writing class this morning and am chagrined because I have written a new poem that I want to read.

When recent X-rays showed disintegrating disks in my lower back, the doctor wrote a prescription for pain pills in case one of them ruptured. He is thirty miles away so there's no question of my going to the office. I could never bear to sit or even lie in a car that long. I'll have to wait this out; the pain will surely lessen before long. I send Denis to the garage to find the cane my mother used during her last illness, so I can hobble to the bathroom at intervals.

Day 2: I've stayed in bed for 24 hours, but this morning I touch a tentative foot to the floor with the same painful result. Goodbye, Literary Journal Class. Luckily, our semester's work, the Wall, is finished. The pills aren't effective, so Denis has gone to the pharmacy for muscle relaxers. I rank this pain with the pangs of childbirth, except that with labor pains, you

know the end will bring a joyous prize. The only prize I can expect from this onslaught is a surcease from pain, with no end in sight. Reminds me of the old labor pain joke: First I was afraid I would die. Then I was afraid I wouldn't!

Denis brings me a bell to summon him to my bedside when I am in need. It was sent to us as a wedding gift four years ago, but now proves hopelessly inadequate. I ring and ring to no avail, finally dragging myself to the stair railing to call down to him. He appears and I tell him the bell is useless, but he says, "Well, I kept hearing this tinkling in the back of my head and I thought, 'What the heck is that all about?'"

Day 4: Nights are the worst, a veritable horror show! With lights out, the twin devils of Pain and Fear bump up against each other with a crash that echoes through the hollow blackness of the room, driving away any hope of sleep. As the hours drag on, my mind screams silently, "What am I going to do?" I realize I'm not as afraid of the pain as I am of this being a permanent condition. I think of our friend, Sharon, confined to a wheelchair for thirty years. Thirty years! How can she bear it day after unending day, year after year? I chide myself for complaining about pain that might soon be gone.

Pain is a funny thing, not "ha-ha" funny, but bizarre in that it fills up your thoughts and senses, and drives away coherent thought. I try to pray, but so all-consuming is the monster invading my body, I can only gasp, "Please help me." I sound

like a flailing swimmer slipping under the waves for the third time. At 4:30 in the morning, when loneliness and chill hang in the air like phantoms, a coyote howls eerily on the greenbelt under our balcony, fitting background music for this nightmare I'm living.

Day 6: This morning I awake disturbed that I haven't updated my will. I think of all the undone chores and realize in frustration that I'd rather be the "waiter on" than the "waited upon." The cat clamors for breakfast in the kitchen, and I wait in bed to begin my daily regimen of strong medica-

tions. I try imagery: a broom sweeping the pain into bundles, loaded on a cart, and pushed toward an exit in my big toe, but I'm soon overwhelmed. The imaginary sweeping stops abruptly and the bundles of pain never make it to the big toe's exit. They just lie there deserted along the throbbing nerve paths.

I apologize to Denis a dozen times a day. He is so willing and game, the most tender nurse imaginable. I know his mind is filled with ancient his-

torical dates and philosophical treatises, and I hate having my needs nudge aside his lofty concepts for my piddling requests for heating pads and cold packs. Food means little to Denis. He eats only to stay alive, while I put away food like a famished truck driver. Now my appetite is gone, food just a cushion for the pills I take each day. Some of my requests puzzle my husband. I ask for fresh vegetables, and describe celery. He doesn't eat it and has probably never heard of it. He brings a bag of the

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green stalks to my bedside and asks, “Is this what you mean by celery?” At last, he sets a bowl of chopped vegetables in front of me. I eat gingerly, pulling off the EuroFresh stickers still stuck to the tomatoes.

When my daughter calls, I give her a brief synopsis of “The Trials and Tribulations of Denis in the Kitchen.” “So what do you want, Mom?” she asks. “Poetry or something decent to eat?” She knows, of course, that the poetry of the man wins out every time.

Day 7: In spite of the pain, I’ve remained optimistic, but tonight I feel thunderclouds gather behind my forehead. My eyes experience unexpected humidity and I can’t hold back self-pitying tears that stream silently down my cheeks and dampen my pillow. Denis has never seen me cry, and tries in vain to comfort me. Hard on him, but probably good for me. I am crying for my mother, dead these fifteen years. I want to feel her cool hand on my forehead and the security of the love she wrapped around me like a warm blanket when I was sick or frightened. Though my tears are rare, I know that this night I have used her traditional remedy for chasing away the blues: I had a good cry and then I felt better.

Our cat, Salome, may be the greatest beneficiary of my affliction. Banned from our bedroom for years, she now is permitted take up residence at the foot of the bed. During childhood illnesses, there was always a pet on my bed to help while away the long hours. Sometimes, as if she can’t believe her good fortune, Sally wakes from her slumbers and stares into my face with unblinking owl eyes for long moments, before returning to what she does best. I try to believe she’s sending me healing, sympathetic vibrations, but I suspect if

she could talk, she would say instead, “This is great! Don’t ever get well.”

Day 8: As the unproductive hours crawl by, I read. And I sleep. Sleeping makes the time pass. But why do I want time to pass? Where is it going anyway? Just into tomorrow. When the pain becomes too much to bear, Denis fills the tub with sudsy hot water and eases me into it.

Day 10: My kids arrive to celebrate Mother’s Day with me, bearing boxes of Chinese take-out. Later, friends call to tell me if I want to get better, I should be up, not lying in bed. I try again to walk, but my leg throbs warningly. Just as it begins to buckle, I retreat to my cocoon and pull the covers up. I tell Denis I must be a coward because some of my friends say they have the same pain and they’re playing golf, traveling, living a normal life. He considers for a moment, then says something that helps me a lot. “Just because I have a stomach ache, and someone I know has a stomach ache at the same time, that doesn’t mean it’s the same stomach ache.”

Day 14: Today the music selections on the PBS pledge break range from Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto to my favorite: Albinoni’s Adagio. The music closes around me like a healing zephyr, and helps to shut out the world. Not that the world is too much with me these days.

I proofread five pages on Islam for Denis to use as a handout for a lecture he will present on Sunday. He has other material for me to proof, but it will have to wait; I can’t face anymore today. At 6:00 I turn on television. Early comedians portrayed housewives as a parasitical breed who lay around on the couch all day, eating chocolates and watching soap operas. Fearful of living down to that

stereotype, I barred daytime TV from my life and never got in the habit.

I just realized that I haven't used a heating pad or ice pack for a week. Hope glimmers.

Day 20: I can finally walk, and have been to see the doctor. Now I hobble down the stairs each afternoon to prepare dinner and eat with my husband. I've discarded the cane and while I cook, I stand at the stove like a flamingo, my left foot up against the side of my right knee, to relieve the pressure.

The cat, surprised to see me sitting at the table, walks round and round my chair like a shark circling a canoe. She is looking for an opening to jump up on my lap. That scares me so much I rise to my feet to avoid this show of affection. I take no chances. Even now, the pain can come roaring back like an enraged animal that has retreated, then realizes that its victim still lives and may attempt to flee. But most of the time, it's bearable and doesn't chase me back to bed. I know I'm coming back. The stiffness and dull ache that remain, I can live with. If this is to be my life from now on, so be it. I just don't want to be a prisoner in my bedroom anymore.

ALONE

LOLETA WITHERSPOON

PERSONAL ESSAY

I'm eight years old and alone. Yes, I have parents and an older brother. Both Mom and Dad are at work. Of course work provides the red brick town home out in the suburbs. It has three bedrooms. Yeah, finally my own room. My brother, who is eight years older, had to share his room for eight years with me, his little sister. We have a beautiful bay window in the living room where I share space with all of the greenery Mom has decorated it with. She has a beautiful way of making our home so homey and warm, with soft colors and rich oak and cheery furniture.

Work also provides the vacations we take every summer. Some of those vacations take us to Ontario, Canada, and Orlando, Florida. We even drove across the country twice, once to Phoenix, Arizona and then again to Los Angeles, California. These trips are all by car because we like to stop in each state and get something from that particular state. Usually it was a mug with a logo in colorful detail, an ashtray, and a T-shirt. Mom always insisted on 100% cotton T-shirts, and they had to all be different. This is because she was giving them away to other family members and friends when we got back home. This was one of the rare times when I didn't feel lonely.

After I sleep in, I get up and eat, watch a little T.V., and figure out what I was going to do today. Something that would pass the time. Sometimes I get dressed up and perform in front of my dolls and animals in the living room on Mom's tweed couch. I love that room. I envision that is how my house would look. That's where the big stereo is. I play my forty-fiver and sing songs from the Carpenters to Aretha Franklin. I dream of someone overhearing me sing and thinking, "She's the one. She has what we are looking for." I will travel the world and never be lonely.

I began looking through bridal, fashion, and home interior magazine. I made logs of what I was going to wear and where I was going to wear it. I picked out my house colors and appliances. I always wanted burgundy, green, and navy. Someday I will have a custom-made couch with oak trim. I want solid oak tables, maybe with glass inserts. I am not sure. The living room needs to have long flowing drapes with tiebacks and a wrought iron rod. I may purchase a greenish Oriental rug or maybe burgundy. It would be great if I could find one with just the perfect colors.

I also planned the wedding of the century. Since I was going to be decorating my beautiful, large but cozy, country estate, he'd have to be rich. I would have a beautiful Victorian lace gown with a long train and veil. He would wear all white as well. We would have twelve bridesmaids in mauve and white with twelve groomsmen in white tuxedo jackets and black pants. The two flower girls would

wear dresses with mauve tops and white skirts that had lace covering that held mauve-colored flowers. The two ring bearers would dress like the groomsmen. We would marry at my uncle's church. He married several of the couples in our family.

The reception would be at my brother's catering firm. We would have a large cake with chocolate-dipped roses all around, four tiers in the middle, and two additional tiers on each side with a ladder connecting. Appetizers would be served while the bridal party took pictures. We would serve a series of pasta dishes, salads and fresh carved turkey, ham, and roast

beef, along with fruit salads inside wonderful cut out watermelon baskets, and free-flowing fountains of punch, with a bar for harder items.

The reception hall would be decorated with white tablecloths with mauve runners, and the centers would have floating candles on mirrored diamond-shaped pieces, with fresh rose petals on the tables. Each guest or family member could take a picture with us in

the photo area, and that would be his or her gift from us. There would be dancing and karaoke. I really love karaoke. Some people would consider this lame or boring, but I say it is my wedding, and I think it would be great to have other entertainment. Parents could enjoy themselves because we would hire a babysitter to be in another room who watches the kids while they partied. I don't believe in excluding kids from such a wonderful day and experience.

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overhearing me sing
and thinking, "She's
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She's the one we're
looking for."

Such were my childhood dreams. When high school began, I decided I wanted to go to a different school. Western High was on the east side of Baltimore. This school provided me the tools to accomplish my goals in life. I was going to get straight A's and get a scholarship to Spellman College. Some of my friends from my old school were getting together to celebrate Tanya's sixteenth birthday. Tanya was now a cheerleader with our local high school, which meant she had access to lots of football players.

At Tanya's party, I met several guys. One in particular, Kennard, was with his girlfriend, but kept asking me to dance. I did not know that she was his girlfriend since he kept asking. Then I got a call a few days later. It was him. We set a date for that Saturday. He took me to an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet. We had a great time. We said the same things, had the same views on life, love, family, and God. I was no longer lonely. Kennard was the one. We made plans about schooling, engagement, marriage, kids, and religion.

We listened to John Cougar Mellencamp's "Jack and Dian." That was our song. We were so Jack and Dian. We began talking about sex. We were going to wait until his senior prom to do it! Kennard sent me roses on the morning of the prom. I was beautiful in a long one-of-a-kind white gown trimmed in black. We went in a limousine with our best friends, Tanya and Troy. We were also going to lose our virginity on the same night as well, Tanya and I, that is. When the moment came, we did it and did it and did it. This was love and we could not get enough love.

"What if I am pregnant?" I said to Kennard while on the phone. He was now at college on a football scholarship, and he was going to be a big

star. The pros were already looking at him. What a sweet life we were going to have. He said we would raise this baby, even though he didn't believe that I was really pregnant

A few days later it was confirmed. "You are pregnant!" said the doctor. The nurse handed me all sorts of brochures on my options. Options, what options? We are having this baby. That's the only option.

It was my seventeenth birthday, and Mom said Kennard had called earlier from school to wish me a happy birthday. I was so excited to give him the best news ever. We were going to have a baby, and I couldn't wait to hear the excitement in his voice.

"Hi, honey," I said.

"I wish I could be there for your birthday," he said.

"What do you want to name the baby?" I asked.

He said, "What baby?"

"I am three months pregnant," I said. The phone went dead. I was alone once again.

My parents were very upset at first. My father cried. I was his little girl. After the initial shock of it all, my parents said that they would be there for me. I would not have to have this baby alone. I still felt alone anyway. Four months later, I went into labor after suffering through several seizures from a medical condition brought on by the pregnancy. It was too soon to be in labor. I was only seven months along. I had my parents and my brother and his wife by my side. No word from Kennard or his family. I felt as though I suffered alone. My blood pressure dropped, as did the baby's heart rate. They preformed an emergency C-section in order to save us.

Today my little bundle is an eighteen-year-old young woman. She is a strong woman, with strong values, grounded in the principles of Christianity. She has chosen to abstain from sex until after she is married and has met someone with the same values. She will never have the feeling of loneliness I had. I made sure of it. I was there for her and home for her, especially during her teen years.

For me, there was never Spellman, the large church wedding, the big house, or even the rich man. But there was Markus. I met him while I was working and going to school full-time. He loved my daughter and me. He married me in my uncle's house where my mom, grandma, and aunt cooked food for one hundred people. We are now raising three teenagers: the eighteen-year-old who is now in college, Markus' sixteen-year-old daughter who was born right after we were married, and a son who is now fifteen years old.

Kennard is not a professional football player either. He was injured during a game that ended his football career and his football scholarship. He married twice, and has five children by three different women. He battled with drugs and alcoholism and can't keep a job. He lives in Baltimore with his parents and two of his children because their mother died. He is now forced to be a father.

I wonder if he feels alone.

SOMEWHAT IMPRISONED

Laura Harvey

POETRY

I wish there were romance in the poetry I write
Like a feminine Paolo Conte,
I long to sit in an all-night cafe
drinking the same cup of tepid brown water,
avoiding eye contact with the waitress,
inhaling poisonous fumes of a Galoises,
held by yellowing hands,
clothed in fingerless gloves,
as it pours down rain
and lovers scurry under the awning
outside the window
of my secluded
corner
booth

Instead, I scribble madly onto my yellow Steno Pad,
on my patio littered in Marlboro—
the twinkling of dull Christmas lights
on a dry night in stifling June,
wearing filthy socks and uncomfortably tight jeans
that used to fit
before he left
Distracted only by the sound of Larry King's voice
blaring from the neighbors' Yard Sale Big Screen,
I write with the unrelenting fear
that if my Steno Pad is discovered
and its contents studied,
I will be exposed
as only
moderately
misunderstood

THE SINGLE ANCHOR

JACQUE MURRAY

CONTEST WINNER

Day 1: It's over. That dead-end detour on the road not taken, like a door slamming on my future, from mental fiction to heart-stopping reality.

My worst nightmare has morphed from the insignificance of "other people's problems" to my own. No job, no income, two children, and tons of bills. *What to do today?* A glitch in the supply-and-demand curve.

Despite a pathological fear, I feel like Pollyanna, coffee cup in hand, helping my children prepare for their daily job (high school), sure I'll find new employment.

All the money I'll save, not eating out, not dry cleaning suits, buying convenience foods for the kids, glad-handing with sourpusses. It costs dearly to earn a living.

Day 4: It's 6 a.m. and I'm just awakening. A week ago, I was at work—after rising at 4 a.m. and commuting for an hour. Now, I'm admiring the mellow tones of my daughter's violin. She rehearses every morning before school, but I've never heard her. I listen as she works on a difficult portion of Edouard Lalo's "Symphonie Espagnole." Then I recognize "Meditation de Thais," her solo piece for college interviews.

When the kids get home from school, we'll discuss their days. We call it "debriefing." We revisit every class, every

test, every significant event that changed their lives for a day. It's a quiet time to unload their goods and bads before starting homework.

No word on that interview.

Day 32: I still awake shaking my head. Am I late for work? No, just unemployed. I wonder every morning how to start the day. Get the children off to school, and then what?

My dogs lead a tough life. They wake me up, eat for thirty seconds, run around the yard for thirty seconds, and sleep for three hours. At noon, they beg through my lunch and, exhausted from the exertion, fall asleep for three hours. When the children get home, the dogs flop their tails a few times, saunter into the kitchen to see if I will have a heart attack while preparing their snack. The days that this doesn't happen, they sleep until dinner, blissfully unaffected by my unemployment.

Day 90: I am going golfing with my son today. We do that a lot lately.

When my son was in the first grade, his teacher felt it necessary to impress upon me how uncommonly uncoordinated he seemed. Well, you put a golf club in his hands now and it's art. His swing rivets other golfers. Grown men beg me to teach them. But I can't. It's a God-given talent.

The time he and I spend on the golf course is irreplaceable: "Golf clubs \$1000, green fees \$125, lunch at the club \$25, spending time with your son—priceless."

Day 145: Job hunted, returned a few calls, even scheduled an interview. A job is my psyche's

foundation, my ship's anchor. I quit a dependable, stable, all-American job once, in my twenties, to follow a dream. I bought a dance studio, invested with a partner, worked eighty-hour weeks, and almost went bankrupt. He turned out to be a crook, skipped town with my bank deposits, and the IRS found me (he was persona non grata) when the studio came up short on unpaid employee taxes.

Many years later, I was still struggling to recover.

Time to pick the children up from school. They're growing into intelligent conversationalists.

We discuss many topics—school, the future, finances, world events. One hundred forty-five days ago, while I sat in another meaningless meeting with generic idiots, my children sat at the curb in front of the school waiting.

Day 172: With my extra time, I've begun reading all of my e-mail, even the stuff I used to trash, like jokes from friends. They seem pretty funny to me now: *Why are blonde jokes so short?* So men can remember

them.

Day 201: Job hunt, golf, walk the dogs. Almost like a vacation. Wish the stock market would recover.

Someone hit the pause button on my life. Even as I tread water, I'm waiting. Waiting. Waiting for a job to start. Waiting to trim the trees, fertilize the lawns, enroll in summer activities. *Waiting for Godot?* How did life come to this? How did something outside my control become so pivotal to sur-

My worst nightmare
has morphed from the
insignificance of
"other people's
problems" to my
own.

vival? I went to college, got a masters, worked overtime, put up with lousy bosses to promote my moral character, followed all of the rules. Tried to be superparent, holding a too-busy job and raising too-active children. I don't miss that feeling of failure—I wasn't a very good superparent. Couldn't help with homework because of meetings, couldn't carpool to soccer because I always worked late, which seemed like forever. How did I get in this position? Yet I wouldn't trade the rapport and camaraderie I've found with my children throughout these last 240 days for any level of income.

Day 365: My anniversary of unemployment. It's a bittersweet day. I can re-apply for more unemployment. I remember family lore that my Grandpa suffered unemployment for two years during the Great Depression. Even as a child, I felt shocked that anyone could survive that long without an income, and felt pride and respect for his determination. I figured it must've been the times—simpler, less expensive, more neighbors helping neighbors.

Day 380: Sent out lots of résumés today. Actually had a phone call from a headhunter. But when I sent my résumé, his tired response was: "You have a great background, are highly qualified, but . . ." It doesn't bother me as much as it did 380 days ago. I need to work, but it's not the goal anymore. "One must not tie a ship to a single anchor, nor life to a single hope." How repetitious history truly must be. Only Epictetus could comfort my brittle feelings from a distance of three thousand years.

Life's whitecaps have shaken my ship free of its anchor, and my goal of the Great Job that defines my *raison d'être* remains an unrequited dream, but life continues its dramatic, winding

course to a fated end. Employment didn't change that, and unemployment hasn't either.

Maybe I'll be a writer . . .

DREAM-BREAKERS

TODD JOHNSON

POETRY

lost electricity hangs in the air
that's when
thunder smashes lightning beneath
hard hooves and in charges
great divisions of rain

recovery
blood crashing through
keyholes and stage ghost-lights
that's when
black-suited bandits show
their pistols and covered wagons
roll out dream-breakers

twisted hearts get
shaken out like two red casino
dice in the
varicose veins of vegas
that's when
down comes Christ
tangled in thorns and
says

“forget your
scars—go, and look to the
open wounds of america”

18TH ANNUAL SADDLEBACK COLLEGE WRITING CONTEST 2002-2003

The Saddleback College Annual Writing Contest is divided into five categories:

Poetry

Short Stories

Personal Essays

Expository Essay I

Expository Essay II

Held in the fall of each school year, the Annual Writing Contest invites students to submit brief papers that represent their best class work. The contest promotes writing throughout all levels of composition, from beginning writing and ESL classes through advanced composition and creative writing courses. Expository Essay I, Poetry, Short Stories and Personal Essays are open to all Saddleback Students. Expository Essay II, however, is limited to students enrolled in EN 300, EN 200, Reading 220 and all ESL classes.

The English faculty at Saddleback College judge the submissions, giving cash prizes to the first, second, and third place winners in each category. Though *Wall* is not part of the Writing Contest, we are happy to include many of the winning entries from this year's competition. We have marked these pieces as Contest Winners in the journal. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, we were not able to include all entries in *Wall*. Questions or comments regarding the writing contest should be directed to Bill Stevenson at Saddleback College.

**Expository Essay I, Personal Essay, Poetry, and Short Stories are open to all Saddleback students. Expository Essay II, however, is limited to students enrolled in EN 300, EN 200, Reading 220, and all ESL classes.*

Poetry:

1st Place
 2nd Place
 3rd Place
 Honorable Mention

Todd Johnson
 Sara Jordan
 Travis Kegel

In Redding, CA
 Oneself
 Legacy

Casey P. Bissin
 Garrett Burrell
 Albert Cordray
 Kathleen Lneebe
 Michael Reeder
 Shaun Sanucci
 Galena Segal

German Tongue
 Eve of Earth
 Before Winter
 Café Lady
 Manzanar's Ghost
 Physics in the Nude
 A Change

Short Story:

1st Place
 2nd Place
 3rd Place
 Honorable Mention

David M. Woods
 Daniel Brown
 Melanie Hopkins
 Mark Bloom
 Ezra Bermudez
 Lori Curtis
 Harmony Harris
 Michael Maller
 Margaret Schindele

I, Mind and Heart
 An Abridged Jaunt Through the Park
 The Stone
 Flying Lesson
 More Important Than Country
 No Matter How Small
 Behind the Pink Lace Curtains
 The Elements of Fiction
 My Momma Held Me Down

Personal Essay:

1st Place
 2nd Place
 2nd Place
 3rd Place
 3rd Place
 Honorable Mention

Jacque Murray
 Adrien Lowery
 Danielle M. Ball
 Steven McPhail
 Christina Das
 Lenora Demiashkina
 Bob Haig
 Bernice Tucker

The Single Anchor
 The Fifty-Pound Parka
 The Bathtub Confessional
 Drowning in Mid-Air
 The Father I Never Had
 The Demise
 The Secret
 Hamburgers, Handcuffs and Heroes

Expository:

1st Place
 2nd Place
 3rd Place

Mark H. Bloom
 Ulandis Hill
 Camille Miller

Advice from a Technical Writer
 The American Kitchen
 The Difference of Hosting
 Between an Italian and Korean Family

Expository II:

1st Place
 2nd Place
 3rd Place

Aurene Pasion
 Amanda Counts
 Linda Fields

Darker Side of Freedom
 A Party of One
 In a Haze

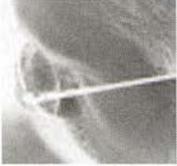
WALL FOURTH VOLUME - 2004

Calling all artists and writers: Looking for a larger audience? Wall Literary Journal 2004 will feature the creative writing and artwork of Saddleback students. If you are interested in having your work displayed in our beautiful publication, you should pick up an entry form in the library and submit your work. Deadline for submission is February 12, 2004.

Serving on the staff of the journal provides a unique opportunity for learning all aspects of literary journal publication. We welcome students from all majors and backgrounds to join our team; no experience is necessary. Students who want to join our staff should enroll in the three-unit course, English 160: The Literary Journal, during the Spring 2004 Semester. The class can be taken for a grade or credit/no credit; students may take the class four different times. This course is particularly valuable to those interested in English, Creative Writing, Journalism, Art, Photography, Design, or Publications.

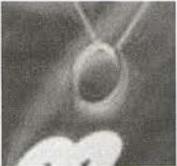
For more information about submitting or joining the staff of the journal, contact Professor Amy Ahearn by phone at 949-582-4265 or by e-mail at aahearn@saddleback.edu.

STAFF



Kyle Bean: *"I spent all night playing poker with tarot cards. I got a full house and four people died."* —Steven Wright

Jill Bentley is a writer who is on her way to getting a teaching degree. *"Not all who wander are lost."* —Anonymous



Lisa Clark: *"Do not lead me into temptation, I can find the way myself."* —Rita Mae Brown

Albert R. Cordray is an English major with a knack for neckties and traffic. *"The world was not destroyed by fire, nor by ice, but by the weight of a billion dishonesties . . . some small, some insufferably great."* —Anonymous



Nicole Grodesky: *"If you could grow a new mind . . . what would you feed it?"*

Marlene Hickey hopes to be published in a national literary journal by the age of 100.





Samantha Higgins: *“Celebrate we will / because life is short but sweet for certain”* —Dave Matthews

Duncan Jacobson: “What did moths bump into before the electric light bulb was invented? Boy, the light bulb really screwed the moth up, didn’t it? Are there moths on their way to the sun now going, ‘It’s going to be worth it!’?” —Bill Hicks



Chitra Joshi is an avid tennis player and armchair connoisseur of every Singles Grand Slam Event. She hopes to someday be a staff writer for a major newspaper. *“When will I start hitting the ball as hard as Serena?”*

Mike Maller’s interests include comedy, storytelling, and Blenderbots. *“I don’t play accurately – any one can play accurately - but I play with wonderful expression.”* —Oscar Wilde



Steven McPhail’s long term goals include marrying his long time girlfriend, publishing his first novel, and obtaining the True Fire Rune to end Grey Davis’s tyranny. *“I will rise to be whatever I believe.”* -Doug Shea of *Spirit Creek*

Camille Miller: In addition to gaining a bachelor’s in Creative Writing, Camille plans to publish a book and homeschool her future children. *“It is nothing to die; it is terrible not to live.”* —Victor Hugo



Enrique Quezada: *“Saying is not enough, and doing is hardly sufficient, living is the only way.”*



Nick J. Ravn: *"The keenest pangs the wretched find are rapture to the dreary void, the leafless desert of the mind, the waste of feelings unemployed."* –Lord Byron

Krissie Romberger is a nursing major attending her first year at Saddleback. She enjoys reading, photography, music, and peace. *"You and I, we're underdosed and we're ready to fall / Raised to be stupid, taught to be nothing at all."* –M.M.



Alec Rosenblit prefers to remain anonymous.

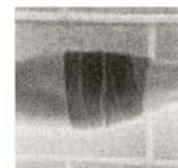
Laura P. Russell is double-majoring in English and Political Science and eventually will receive her Ph.D. *"Give me a museum and I'll fill it"* — Pablo Picasso



Writer

Galena Segal: *"Blessed be the match lighting a candle."* -Anon. Jewish Woman

Blake Stoudt: *"Kites rise highest against the wind – not with it."* -Sir Winston Churchill



Mara Stringfield: *"This is not a part I am playing, it is not a duty, it is not even calculated; it is an instinct and a need . . . Write your own history, all of you who have understood your life and sounded your heart . . . to that end alone I am writing my own."* -George Sand: Histoire de ma vie.



Mira M. Walters hopes to become an excellent psychologist. She loves to travel, read books, and watch movies. *“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”* —Gandhi

Loleta Witherspoon balances her interests in children’s issues, ministry, family, reading and writing with her schoolwork here at Saddleback. She plans on being a spiritual mentor to fellow parents while leading varied youth programs.

“If in the end you find out that God does not exist, what have you lost? However, if in the end you find out that he does exist, you may lose everything.”



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