

The Blue Guitar

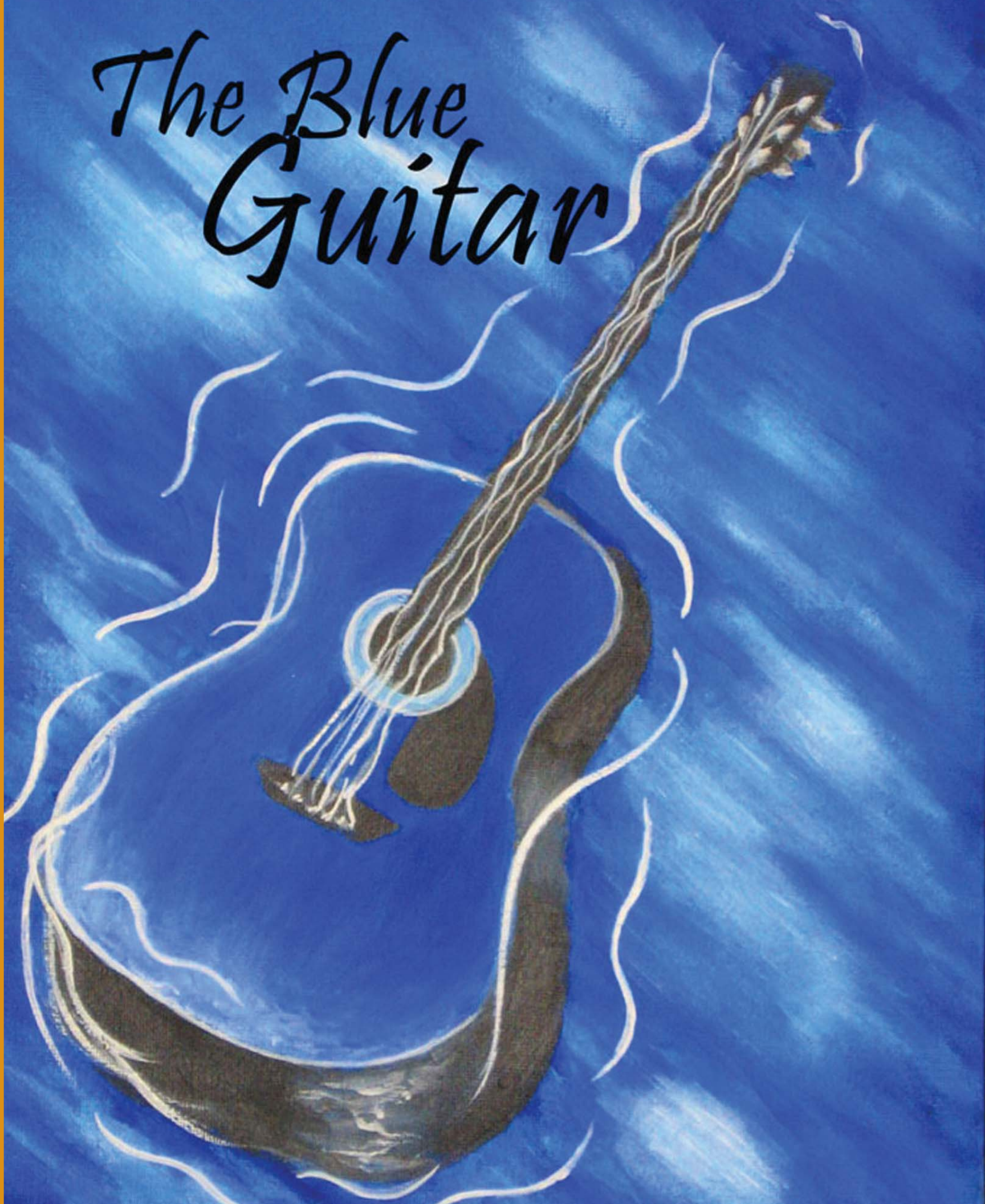


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Editor’s Note

This issue is all about genre-bending, works that blur the line and defy categorization. At least three works we had to put at the top of the table of contents without a category.

Our fall issue is lovingly dedicated to the late Richard Colosimo, Scottsdale resident, World War II veteran and writer. Richard sent us his nonfiction essay from hospice. It’s a letter to us all, a warning to future generations: Never forget.

I would also like to express my enduring gratitude to Alberto Rios and Jeannine Savard – poets, mentors and friends – thank you for the empowerment.

As always, folks, please keep submitting!



Rebecca Dyer

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Fall 2009

The Touch

By Luis Carlos Lopez

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I want to write one day and this might be a page in one of my books.

I've been trying to write, but I can't seem to fill the page up with meaningful words, you know the words that have a therapeutic effect, the ones that take your darkest secrets and twist fiction with reality.

I've been trying to read, I have two books pending, but the words jump from one page to the next. The meaning gets lost. Maybe because I just can't concentrate. Or maybe I lost all my values.

I paid for a woman's affection. Not out of loneliness or desperation. It was just curiosity. Would Hemingway have been a great writer if he had led a life of piety? Would my words have meaning if I didn't make mistakes and get lost in the pressures of the world? The good, the bad, a writer writes what he knows. I wanted to know life.

I sat there inside the nightclub. Just watching the dancers would have been worth the night's entertainment. But my lust for a nightlife exploration did not end there. No, it ended in the back room with a stripper. Drunk, tired, and with an eye for adventure I let myself be bought. My values, my plans, my Religion, my spirituality all shattered over \$120.

"I'm not very experienced with this," I said. "It's my first time here."

"I'm not going to tell you how to treat a woman," she said. "But just relax, I'll take care of you."

This woman whose name left me as soon as I told her mine, let me into her world. A world filled with curves. A body that despite being visited many times was still a body without blemishes. At first I was indifferent. After all, this is what she does for a living. Her name fake, her feelings irrelevant, but she was perfect. That night I touched with a Goddess.

Where had her life gone wrong? What made her decide to throw away her life for this? Who was the man who broke her heart? What were the circumstances that led her to this?

I can't stress about this anymore than what I am now. I've fallen to the pit of the crude and the crass. That night, I met a random person. A person who had made her choices but someone who was still no doubt governed by emotion.

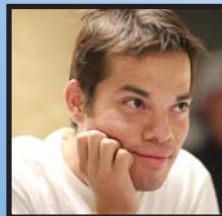
Don't tell me you are indifferent to human contact.

Sex, sexuality and sensitivity, don't tell me these things don't matter. Marriage might be one thing. But the human touch is far more powerful. If words can scorn a person, how much more can a human touch affect us?

I don't think any man – experienced or not – can ever suck in bed. The key is to explore every inch of her. Let her guide you on a journey, every soft touch, every nibble, every kiss opens one door to the next. Every touch means something.

Appreciate her and forget about everything else. Her body is an amazing sanctuary.

No one should ever buy human touch. It's too beautiful a thing to take lightly.



Luis Carlos Lopez was born in Nicaragua and raised in San Fernando, California. In high school he was very involved in drama and the performing arts, writing, reading, etc. Luis says he is in love with ways people tell stories no matter what medium is used. After graduating from high school, Luis spent a year at Glendale Community College. He then transferred to the University of Southern California. A year later, he transferred once more to Arizona State University to work on a journalism degree. In December of 2009, he will graduate with a double major — print journalism and English literature. Contact him at lclopez4@asu.edu.

Little Girl Waiting

By Keely Ernst

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I waited. The red lights danced before my eyes. I squinted; peering out over the street lights, the yellows reds and blues of the sirens created odd patterns on the ceiling. This bed was strange to me. I waited. The sheets smelled of someone else's floral detergent, the pattern in the wood work was unfamiliar. I traced it with my eyes. I counted the rafters in the ceiling, this was not my room. I waited. I watched as the blue yellow and red kaleidoscope drove away. There was an odd silence and a strange stillness in the room. This was not my room. I waited. I waited for sleep to come. I waited for the owners of this room to check on me. I waited for the faces enshrouded in darkness, standing on the sidewalks, to return to their homes to return to their families, to return to their lives. I waited to cry and I waited to know. I waited to see him come home with mom, I waited.

I played games in the room; I sang to myself I counted the rafters again, twice three times. I twirled a piece of my long silk hair between my fingers. I looked out the window to watch the scene change, it was different now. The neighbors went back inside their homes and the calm autumn evening returned. I waited. I watched as the moon shone over head, clouds floated by, our star was shining brightly. I waited.

Unfamiliar cars drove up. The neighbors retrieved me from the room that was not mine and I was returned to my house. All was just as it should have been, dim yellow lights filtered in through the hall as I sat quietly on the couch. I waited.

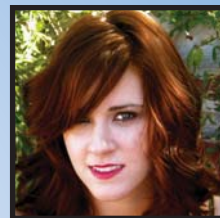
My mother came in, red swollen cheeks, drenched clothing, she hadn't changed. I waited. Too scared to ask, I waited. A man, not my dad came into the room, I recognized him from church. I stirred in my seat, my palms began to sweat, my lip quivered. The room began to spin and my heart split into four tiny pieces, he was not my dad. I knew but still, I waited.

My vision blurred my cheeks and eyes flushed and deep hot red streamed down my cheeks, my stomach rose into my throat, I swallowed my tongue. My ears rang with the sound of quiet empty and cold voices, I shivered; I didn't want to wait anymore.

Not my dad's words fell upon me like rocks cascading down a mountain after a storm had brought to much water, too much rain, too much. My mother added to his heavy words. Dad would not come back they said, dead in the car with kaleidoscope lights they said our family was different now they said, God still loved me they said. Dad was with God. They said.

My heart bled through my eyes and I dissolved, into a deep rhythmic sobbing. I thrashed and kicked the couch. I am waiting! He will come back tomorrow, he promised to take me on a bike ride, he is teaching me to learn how to ride without training wheels, he will come back. He promised. I will wait.

I am still waiting



Keely Ernst is a Creative Writing student at Pima Community College. She lives in Tucson with her Husband. She writes. She loves. She sleeps. One day she will have an MFA and a gaggle of children. She can be reached at kaernst@me.com

April's Fools

By Andrea Ervin

© 2009

“Now, if I say they’re surrounding us, you guys need to get up the nearest tree as fast as you can.”

My wide-eyed “city” cousins, Aimee and Jarrod, slowly nodded their heads in understanding. They believed me about the wild pack of coyotes that supposedly roamed the forest.

I was forging a crude trail through five acres of thick Northwestern woods behind my parents’ house using a makeshift walking stick. Behind me trailed my best friend, Cousin Chris. His mother and my mother were sisters and as close as two sisters could be. Behind him trudged the “city” cousins. My little brother, Chucky, brought up the rear.

It was my 11th April Fool’s Day, and Chris and I, full of preteen mischief, wanted to “get them good.” Aimee and Jarrod were visiting from the illustrious city of Everett, Wash., where they had door-to-door houses and asphalt, not towering evergreens and mucky swamps.

Just 10 minutes earlier we’d been hanging out in the living room of my parents’ house. Chris and I sat cross-legged on the red shag carpet while my darkly suited uncles and grandpa comforted their wives and children with handkerchiefs and back rubs. Family friends milled around the black, overly waxed dining room table which was piled with plates of ambrosia salad, Jell-O molds, lasagna and baked chicken, but nobody was eating.

All of the whispers and sad little smiles made me feel like my hamster, Wiggin, trapped in his clear plastic exercise ball. I understood why, after realizing he wasn’t actually free, he would curl up and sleep. I felt that ball in my stomach and couldn’t stand it.

So, needing escape from the boredom and somber atmosphere, Chris and I came up with a fun plan. We grabbed Aimee and Jarrod, slipped into our jackets and left the house with little Chucky in tow.

Fist stop: the old white pig shed, which housed my extensive rock collection and sharpened walking sticks. I gave Chris a stick but kept the bigger one for myself. “This is my coyote killing stick. You can see where there’s blood on the tip.” (There actually wasn’t any blood. As if they knew better!)

“Let’s go.” My feet sunk into the soft ground as I led them into the familiar woods.

“If we say ‘Run,’ you need to turn around and run back to the house as fast as you can.”

They nodded.

Aimee and Jarrod went to a small private school at their community Baptist church. Without much exposure to anything other than church and home, they were a bit slow on the uptake.

I moved a wet branch out of the way and held it for Chris. He

ducked under and let it swing back to smack Aimee in the face, leaving pine needles in her hair.

“Shhhhhh,” I warned.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Chris, do you hear that?”

“Yeah, it’s them!”

We didn’t hear anything, but what did they know?

“Quick, up a tree!”

I didn’t have to tell them twice. Chris grinned and nudged me as the two of them struggled up the nearest tree.

“Stay there ‘til we get back!” I ordered.

We ran off into the forest, yelling and howling. I attacked a blackberry bush with my stick, Chris growled and yipped like a coyote and Chucky quietly watched with an expectant grin on his chubby face.

We circled back to the tree while smacking branches with our sticks and yelling “Go away” and “Take that!”

Aimee whimpered. Jarrod hugged a branch in fear.

After our amusement subsided, we decided to retrieve the terrified relatives. Aimee almost fell to the ground as her sneakers slipped on the wet, mossy wood. “Can we go back?” she asked.

She was so prissy in her spotlessly crisp blouse, fitted jeans, brown curls and lip gloss. My own faded denim pants were bunched at the top by a brown belt, and my mud-caked rubber boots emitted the faint earthy odor of the horse pasture.

“What? Are you scared?”

Jarrold looked sideways at Chris and shrugged. Aimee nodded.

Instead of walking straight back the way we came, I led them toward the swampy horse trail. Aimee and Jarrod picked their way through the muck, trying not to dirty their little sneakers. We had to get them one last time.

“THEY’RE COMING!” I shouted. “RUN!”

We watched as the city kids forgot the mud, forgot their white sneakers and bounded down the trail. There were high-fives all around and uncontrollable laughter the rest of the walk home.

Back at the house, cars still lined the driveway. On the carport lay two pairs of clean, white children’s sneakers. My cousins must have run home so fast they didn’t even dirty their shoes.

Laughing hysterically, we went inside, eager to share the story with everyone. Aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, family friends and my dad stood around exactly the way we’d left them.

It had been two days since my mother’s heart failed in her sleep, and she hadn’t been buried yet.

My dad was still working a graveyard shift the morning my big sister found her and woke me up to help. I saw her stiff lifeless body curled up in her bed. I called 911. We tried to revive her.

Her death had not yet become real.

As I looked at my dad’s raw, swollen face and watery eyes, I realized that nobody was laughing. For the first time I was overcome with anger, then guilt, then grief.

The adults had forgotten it was April Fool’s Day, and at that moment, so did I.



Andrea Ervin is a journalism student at Arizona State University. She grew up in Snohomish, Wash. but moved to Arizona in 1998 and currently resides in Chandler. She loves reading, traveling and camping and dreams of someday becoming a travel writer. Contact her at alervin@asu.edu.

Playing His Twisted Game

By Allison Gatlin

© 2009

“You’ll always be mine,” he whispered in my ear as I leaned in to kiss me. A kiss that at the time felt so precious and full of promise, I now remember with bitterness and fear.

Three years later, I still search the shadows before entering or leaving my car. Every white Nissan Sentra could be his. Every store I enter could reveal him hidden and waiting. I jump at shadows. Small noises attack my nerves. At times, I still feel his gaze on my back, cold and sneering.

For the past three years, every day of my life has been consumed with the fear that today would be the day he finds me.

* * *

It all started innocently enough, as first loves do. Joe* was wonderful and charming, and I tripped into love with all the gracefulness of a newly hatched goose. His eyes — the color of maple syrup — hypnotized me.

Joe showered me with gifts. Teddy bears. Candy. Flowers. Dinner and movies, my first kiss. All my friends fell in and out of love so easily, but I thought I’d never stop loving him.

We fought, oh boy, did we fight. It was simple enough at times. I interrupted him. I called him on a night when his parents were fighting. I spoke to the wrong guy at work and gave him the impression I was flirting. I spent too much time with my guy friends. Without meaning to, I somehow always made him angry.

But he forgave me, and I was grateful.

When he yelled, I simply shut down. I’d listen with open ears but a closed heart. I grew more timid as time went on, afraid to call him at night for fear this would be one of his “bad nights.”

No one knew. We looked and acted like the perfect couple. No one knew the secret dread that had begun to well up inside me.

He broke up with me several times. There never really seemed to be a reason. Maybe it was out of boredom, maybe out of spite. A week of tears and heartache later, he’d call me or find me at work, begging me back to him.

The third time he broke up with me was the last time. I was ready to be free of the torture that accompanied loving him.

* The name is changed.



Allison Gatlin is currently a senior at Arizona State University, majoring in Journalism and Spanish. She is a Phoenix native and aspires to write for a major news publication after she graduates in May. She works part-time for ASU’s student newspaper The State Press and coaches gymnastics at a private gym. Contact her at ajgatlin@asu.edu.

For the first few weeks following our breakup, he was relentless. Cards, candy, phone calls. It was all harmless — until he started showing up everywhere.

* * *

The Saturn we were leaning against should have been replaced years ago. Cracked paint, immovable windows and a front bumper held together with a substance unknown to science. But in the hot Arizona air, dimly lit by the lights of a dog park, our new love was flourishing. Sweat coated my forehead as I looked into a pair of the most stunning blue eyes I’d ever seen. This new boy, Cameron, was Joe’s opposite, full of more life and love than I could have imagined.

But on that sticky June night our new relationship was hit with Joe’s fury. It had been three months since Joe and I broke up, and I hadn’t yet changed my phone number.

After 12 missed phone calls and 12 renditions of my favorite ringtone, I finally answered the phone. To this day, I’ll never hear “Sugar We’re Going Down” without chills running from my neck down to the stretches of my toes.

It was Joe, of course. He wanted to know where I was, of course. He knew I was dating someone new and was rotten enough to make sure I wouldn’t forget him.

“What do you want?” I asked wearily.

“Where are you?”

“Heading home. Why? Where are you?”

“Driving home from work too. Why didn’t you answer my calls?”

“I’m busy.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

As I explained that I’d have to call him back, barking from the nearby dog park sounded in my free ear ... and then echoed in the phone.

“Joe ...” I said slowly. “Where are you really?”

“On my way home, I told you,” he said as the dog continued to yowl.

I dropped my phone. Tears welled up in my eyes as I leaned heavily against the Saturn.

A lone figure emerged from behind a pulverized white minivan.

Deadpan, he asked, “Busy, huh?”

For 45 minutes Joe had been watching us from behind the hubcap of a ’96 Dodge Caravan.

* * *

The Build-a-Bear I’d given Joe for his birthday appeared in

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my locker at work one day, beheaded. Tufts of stuffing drifted inside my locker. The heart I'd placed inside the teddy bear before stuffing it lay exposed through the hole in its neck.

By the time I returned with a supervisor, the bear had disappeared.

* * *

The day before I left home for college, Joe found me again. My heart hammered as I spotted him across the library parking lot.

He pushed me into the asphalt. My head smacked on the cool concrete of the sidewalk. Stars danced in my eyes. My favorite San Diego shirt snagged on the ground as he tried to tear it from my body. He pressed against me, pushing the air from my lungs and struggling to pull my legs apart.

"Is this how he kissed you?" he asked before pecking my mouth. His lips were cracked and tasted like beer — a taste I still can't stomach.

"Or is this how he kissed you?" he screeched before forcing his tongue into my closed mouth, thick with the taste of cigarettes and liquor.

Raw fear clawed at the edges of my mind, pleading for some sort of action. I was frozen. The cold earth threatened to swallow me whole if he pushed against me any harder.

My breath came in short gasps as I began to struggle. A swift kick to his groin sent him squealing with pain.

I scrambled clumsily to my feet and ran to my car, praying I wouldn't hear his designer tennis shoes sprinting after me.

* * *

I've moved more times than I care to count. I changed my phone number after Joe gave it to his friends so they could call me with their insults. I cut my long hair — my one vanity — to a short bob, quit two jobs I loved and severed connections with almost everyone from my old life. At 18, I planned for a future in which I knew I'd always be running.

Although my life has shrunk to the places where I think he won't go, I wait for the day he'll find me. I check the shadows before venturing into them. Buses drive me to hysterics because I never know who's going to be riding them. I open my car door only after inspecting the back seat from the outside. I carry pepper spray. I own a Taser.

The loss of innocence — some think it happens when a child stops believing in Santa Claus; others say it happens the first time a person has sex or witnesses an atrocity. In my case, it all started with a soft kiss that opened the door to promises of revenge.

It's his twisted game of hide-and-seek, and I pray every day that eventually I'll win.

A day of free family fun!

'A Day of Culture' Dec. 12

The Arizona Consortium for the Arts proudly presents A Day of Culture for the holiday season, including:

- A free event for the whole family
- Performances by local groups
- Readings from the fall 2009 issue of The Blue Guitar magazine, including a dedication of the issue to the late Richard Colosimo, Scottsdale resident and World War II veteran
- Raffles and auction

Starting at noon Saturday, Dec. 12 at Peoria Home & Garden Expo Center, 8606 W. Ludlow Drive, Suite E, Peoria. (The Peoria Expo is off the Loop 101 at Thunderbird Road, just behind Dillon's Restaurant.)

For more information about this event or how you can help the nonprofit Arizona Consortium for the Arts with startup costs or how you can become a member of the consortium, visit the consortium's Web site at: www.artizona.org

Desert Transits

By Jeannine Savard

we're standing not two miles
from the runways, not more

than a few yards from the amber bottles'
wall of art, a foot

from where I stood alone
behind the century's river-

rock bottom,
not a boat's landing or inland marsh,

the heron picking its way
through reeds, one leg after another,

slender stick out of the fiddlesticks
away from the siege

wades in the neck curls of clouds
and freeway whoosh.

we meet half-way in a saddle of pebbles,
runnels between boulders

rounded-up like lumps in the throat,
two Adam's Apples bobbing, or

a single sculpted woman in long repose
under a thin breeze

nearly cut by Atropos,
Mimosa pollen flying back up

her arms and legs, regenerative
braking: *shooo* through our city's streets,

our accelerated silver
and green Light Rail.

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Jeannine Savard is an Associate Professor of English at Arizona State University and teaches poetry workshops at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Her new volume of poems, entitled "Accounted For," will be published by Red Hen Press in April 2010. Contact Jeannine at jsavard@asu.edu.

In a New York Heartbeat

By Charlsy Panzino

© 2009

It's a warm, sticky July afternoon, and my mom and I are taking the train into New York City. I've lived in the Arizona desert for all 10 years of my life, and even though my mom was born and raised on Long Island, I've never set foot in the city. My nose is pressed against the window so I won't miss a single house or tree that flies by.

As we approach each stop, I listen eagerly to the foreign-sounding names.

"Freeport."

"Merrick."

"Baldwin."

I laugh when I hear the next stop is Jamaica, and I pretend we're making a stop in the Caribbean.

Then, all of a sudden, the train plunges into darkness as we dive under the East River, with only the tunnel's concrete walls protecting us from the tons of water outside.

Excitement courses through my veins as we slide into Penn Station. The train doors swish open, and my mom takes my hand as we plunge into a sea of people. A shy 10-year-old, I let her guide me through the cavernous station. Business people and tourists swirl around us, and small groups of families and friends check maps and train schedules.

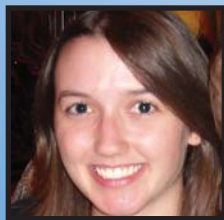
But I'm not scared. In fact, I can't get enough of everything around me. My heartbeat quickens as we approach the exit. I'm practically running now as I spot the doors at the end of the cavern.

Outside, my normally wide eyes get even bigger as I take in the scene before me. The sea of people inside Penn Station is nothing compared with the tsunami of people sweeping down the sidewalks and crossing the streets. New York throbs with the chaotic melody of jackhammers and cab horns.

The scent of hot dogs and pretzels floats from the food stands and mixes with the acrid stench of sewers as I tilt my head back and run my eyes along the tops of skyscrapers that would dwarf every building in Arizona. The air is humid, and I ache to see the Hudson River. I know it's out there somewhere, beyond the buildings.

I love my hometown of Scottsdale, but I realize that I need to be a part of this electrifying city. I want to meet all of the people hurrying down the sidewalks and explore every building and street. I'd never be lonely or bored here. It's as if someone took all of my enthusiasm and energy and crafted it into a city.

My mom tells me that most people are scared and overwhelmed the first time they visit New York City. But not me. This is what a real city should look like, feel like. On this mundane July afternoon, I've found something I didn't even know was missing.



Charlsy Panzino is currently a print journalism senior at Arizona State University. Her articles have been published in ASU's State Press newspaper and magazine, 944 Magazine and several trade publications, including Modern Car Care Magazine and Professional Door Dealer Magazine. The Associated Press and USA Today have also picked up Charlsy's stories. Combining her passion for writing and traveling, her goal is to become a travel writer. Contact Charlsy at nyeratheart516@yahoo.com.

The Wake

By Amanda Soto

© 2009

His name is Marty. Actually, his real name is Matt, but in the years from teenager to 21, I've always known him by this nickname, bestowed on him by our mutual friends. We never spoke more than a couple of words to each other, but he was in my life for reasons I did not know nor could I explain yet.

I was anticipating how great this summer would be before the flowers bloomed in spring. My guy friends had decided to rent a house by the Jersey shore. Theirs seemed to be built with a revolving door. No matter what day it was, familiar faces were always there.

Marty lived in the small blue room on the first floor. That's where he was when I saw his keys on the kitchen table. What appeared to be an ordinary set of keys—house key, car key and keychain—ended up unlocking doors I'd shut years ago.

"Keep kids alive drive 25" was the slogan on the keychain.

"Marty, what does 'Keep kids alive drive 25' mean?" I yelled.

As he walked into the kitchen I could see grief had been hiding behind his bright blue eyes until that moment.

"It's for my cousin's charity," he said. "A car hit him. He died."

My eyes swelled, but I didn't shed a single tear. A technique I had mastered over the years.

As my hands and toes went numb, I had the urge to stick them in cold, wet sand. Watching the waves crash on the shore has always put me at ease. In a world full of chaos, one thing that's out of your control yet always stays the same is waves crashing.

Curl, smash ... Curl, smash ... Curl, smash ...

It was easy to yearn for the ocean when the humidity made the air thick enough to bring the salty aroma swirling into the kitchen. All that stood between it and me was a two-block walk from Marty's front porch.

So walk we did.

We stood at the curb in front of the beach house. The other side of the street seemed so far away. My heart started to race. My sweaty palm reached for his hand. As we crossed the two-way street, I squeezed.

"One more crossing to go," I said to myself.

Moments like this were nothing new to me.

* * *

It gets dark early in summers by the shore, and this night was no exception. Emotionally drained, I sat on the boardwalk bench to catch my breath. The only thing in the black sky was the moon — my own personal light bulb illuminating the ocean as far as the eye could see. For a second it felt as if the world stopped spinning and we were the only two who were left.

"My friend was hit by a car too," I said out loud. The words Houdini-ed, escaping when I never thought it was possible. They caught me off-guard. When they hit Marty's ears, they seemed to comfort him, like a hermit crab finding a home in a new shell.

"I remember what I was wearing when we got the call," he said. "A Rutgers hoodie. I remember because it was so cold outside and I didn't have a jacket on because I got in the car so fast to go to the hospital."

His words sounded like lyrics to a song I had never wanted to sing.

"I remember what I was wearing when I got the call too," I said. "Blue running shorts with an orange stripe. I remember because I matched the comforter on my bed."

All the details poured out, piggybacking on each other's snippets of recollection.

His cousin's name was Graeme. My friend's name was Carlee. Cars hit them both.

They both died.

We both thought we would die too when we had crossed two streets back. I realized I wasn't the only one who had mini-anxiety attacks every time I crossed the street.

"I've never talked about this with anyone," he said with a sigh of relief.

"Me either," I confessed. "Three years. It took me three years to speak without crying."

When we got back to the house, I realized that when we had left, we were practically strangers. Now, I was the ocean and he was the moon, shining light on what was the darkest of hours. You never really know someone until you hear his or her story. Beginning to end.

"Matt, this changes everything," I told him.



Amanda Soto is a senior at Arizona State University. She is majoring in print journalism and hopes to move to a busy city that inspires her to write a book. She is from New Jersey and loves going back home whenever she gets a break from school. Amanda can be reached at asoto88@gmail.com.

Yellow Dog

By Flora Grateron

© 2009

He came to live with us in
South Texas one summer
bigger than any dog we'd ever owned
he took kids for rides on his back
bouncing along on solid backbone
that's how indomitable he was –
Sturdy enough to carry two at times
if he felt up to it
We called him Tinger
his real name was probably Thinker
or Dinger – didn't matter – he responded
and fetched anyway
Until the day he had puppies one bitter winter
night under the floorboards of the kitchen stove,
then we realized how superbly strapping
she truly was
She listened to our kid problems
in English and Spanish
and barked in both languages

she sunbathed in the afternoon sun
on the center stripe of hot asphalt
where traffic meandered,
crucifixes hanging from mirrors,
swinging rhythmically like pendulums
radios screaming Pink Floyd,
bumping over open mouthed potholes
barely missing her
swerving like drunks on icy roads
to avoid her
she was always one beat ahead
of the baggy pant greasers in khakis
arms dangling from open windows
a glint of silver from bare wrists
until one leisurely afternoon
when she must have been having a
gripping dream, tail a-wagging,
salivating her pleasure
too indulgent to wake from
and dreamt it right into the next realm.

Blood Oranges

By Flora Grateron

© 2009

They were on the tv screen, at the bank,
in the middle of a triple digit day
between monsoon rain and heat
swirling around inside a crystal pitcher
the main ingredient for sangrias
on a cool evening for a summer party
they were cut, squeezed,

tossed in, and garnished
tall frosty glasses,
sophisticated
and classy
hints of blood
tainted the
clinking ice cubes
glasses sweated beads
and tiny crimson droplets
dribbled down
guests' chins –
swirling madly around
the punch bowl –
tantalizing,
adding to the
delirium of the moment
the Euphoria of Summer.



Flora Grateron has a B.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona. She belongs to the Sowing the Seeds writers group, who are currently working on an anthology by women writers. She is employed by the Sunnyside Unified School District in Tucson, Arizona, where she teaches English. Flora was born in Texas, but Arizona has become home. Contact her at floragrateron@comcast.net.

Ode to the Saguaro

By Flora Grateron

© 2009

Crooked arms point in different directions like
the scarecrow, Dorothy's friend
This way – no, that way –
or even every which way
Indecisive man of honor,
dressed in army green
Chest puffed out, its most distinctive trait
You stand solitary, a soldier at attention
Saluting the sky, your blue flag of honor
At times surrounded by old companions
who keep their distance to give you ample
space
and respect –
hard-nosed; a brigade; one unit
You gaze out pensively over the landscape
keeping a vigilant eye over the untamed desert
Towering over all, able to detect the stealth of
mountain lions and devious bobcats,
or a snake's soft rattle
By moonlight,
fluorescence of scorpions entertain you
and musical notes of coyotes fill your core
Breaking the solitude of the desert with
forlorn chorus, in perfect unison,
a choir directing its melancholic song at the stars,
notes held for many beats long in somber pitch
You welcome the cactus wren to
build its homestead within you
A faithful friend, divulging secrets in your breast
Vulnerable; in stark contrast to you
with your battle scars etched across
firm belly, solid arms combed with
dotted lines like furrows leading to the sky
Stand strong, o' protector of the desert,
And like the mountains
Ancient and indestructible
Keep watch, guiding us, like a beacon
Our desert lighthouse.

A Call for Spring

A call to writers in all genres for the spring issue
of The Blue Guitar magazine:

The Blue Guitar will accept submissions for its
spring edition from January 15, 2010, through
February 28, 2010.

The Blue Guitar seeks submissions in all genres
– fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction.
Writers must submit original work and must live
in Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be
accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine
as soon as possible if the work is accepted
elsewhere. Submissions selected by the editor
will appear in the spring edition of the magazine,
which will be published online and potentially in
print. Please include your name and the best way
to contact you on your submission. It is free to
submit and submissions may be made in multiple
genres. Submissions will be accepted from
January 15, 2010, through February 28, 2010.
Manuscripts and photos that are mailed to the
magazine cannot be returned.

Send submissions to:

Rebecca Dyer at: [rebeccadyer@
theblueguitarmagazine.org](mailto:rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org)

or the Arizona Consortium for the Arts at [info@
artizona.org](mailto:info@artizona.org)

or mail to: The Arizona Consortium for the Arts
14608 N. 40th Way
Phoenix, AZ 85032

The Arizona Consortium for the Arts is a startup,
nonprofit group dedicated to supporting and
fostering artists and the arts in Arizona, including
the literary, visual and performing arts.

The Blue Guitar Magazine, [www.
theblueguitarmagazine.org](http://www.theblueguitarmagazine.org), is a project of the
Arizona Consortium for the Arts.

The Final Dress

By Devin Fuller

© 2009

It started with a phone call. It was lucky that anyone answered the phone. Mr. Smith, the choir teacher and musical director for our annual high school show, had told us to stay out of his office when he wasn't there. That night, he forgot to lock the door.

A girl named Elyse answered the phone. Elyse had turned down the role of the preacher's wife, Vi, for our production of "Footloose" and wound up with a much smaller chorus role. Elyse was checking her e-mail on Mr. Smith's computer when the phone rang. Answering the phone would be her biggest contribution to the show.

"Mr. Smith's office," she said.

"This is the Monroe County Sheriff's Office," replied the voice. "Are the Smiths available?"

"Um, they're tied up right now. Is this an emergency?"

"Yes it is."

Elyse told the voice to hold on, put down the phone and ran to the auditorium. She found Sue, Mr. Smith's wife and the director of the show, sitting in the middle of the darkened theater in the middle of our final dress rehearsal.

"The Sheriff's Department is on the phone!"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. They didn't say."

Sue booked it out of the auditorium as a crowd of parents watched the final dress rehearsal.

I was sitting backstage. I played one of the main character's three friends who, up until the middle of the second act, had not been seen. Obviously, my character wasn't a good friend of his.

A girl named Liz was onstage singing "Can You Find It in Your Heart." This was Vi's biggest song in the show, the one Elyse would have been singing.

Meanwhile, Elyse was explaining what she

knew to the concerned parents. The piano player noticed the commotion and stopped playing. Liz, being a consummate professional, kept going. The show must go on. She finished the song a cappella, unaware of why the music had stopped.

Mr. Smith, who was in the orchestra pit, turned around and asked what was wrong.

Elyse replied, "The sheriff's department is on the phone. Sue went to get it."

Mr. Smith bolted toward the exit.

At this point we determined there was something going on at the Smiths' house, as we'd heard fire trucks heading in that direction. Sue had already gone back to their house.

Mr. Smith ran outside to his car and saw that someone was blocking him in. He ran back inside and yelled, "WHOSE FUCKING CAR IS PARKED IN FRONT OF MINE!?"

A girl named Becky, in what was intended to be a moment of selflessness, ran from the choir room into the band room to get her keys so that Mr. Smith could drive her car.

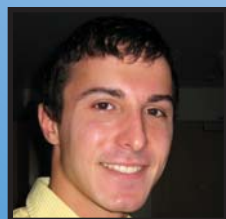
As she maneuvered around the chairs strewn about the room, she cut her foot on a cart. Her efforts were all for naught, as while she was doing this, Mr. Smith managed to squeeze his car out of the tight spot. He drove away as Becky lay bleeding.

Becky's wound had to be treated. As she sat in the choir room with blood leaking out of her foot, someone asked, "Are there any doctors in the house?"

One of my cast mates looked at me and said, "Isn't your mom a nurse?"

My mom was sitting in the auditorium. The parents realized the insanity of the night was beyond their control so they decided to stay put. After all,

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Devin Fuller is a senior majoring in Print Journalism at Arizona State University. He was raised in Lambertville, Michigan. His many years involved with performing arts have influenced his writing. He hopes to one day write for a major entertainment magazine. He can be contacted at Devin.Fuller@asu.edu.

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there was the rest of the second act.

I marched over to the auditorium, walked onstage and yelled, “Hey Mom! Can you come help out? Becky cut her foot.”

My mom sighed and stood up. Even on her night off, she had to work.

Mom examined Becky and told her she really needed to see a doctor about her foot. This was something Becky did not want to hear.

“I’m fine! Really, I’m fine,” she said, as tears welled up in her eyes.

Becky’s mother said she could take Becky to the hospital. This was also something Becky didn’t want to hear.

Becky had a strained relationship with her mother. So Becky insisted that a friend’s mother take her to the hospital, if anyone was going to at all. Neither the friend nor the mother was at the rehearsal, so that poor woman ended up driving over to the school to take Becky to the hospital.

The rest of us stood around debating whether to continue with the rehearsal. For all we knew, the Smiths might not even have a house anymore. And who knew if Becky was going to be able to walk on her foot?

But regardless of what had happened, tickets still had been sold. Generations of residents in Bedford, Michigan were looking forward to the annual musical. Young children would see the show and aspire to be onstage one day too! We could not let the public down!

So we soldiered on. Eventually, Mr. Smith returned. His daughter, Chelsea, had somehow set a piece of paper on fire. In her panic, she called 911. While not exactly a false alarm, it wasn’t the two-story blaze we’d been expecting.

The lesson I learned was that even as the director’s house is (somewhat) on fire, even as cast members are maiming themselves, even as parents end up just as helpless as their kids, you can’t give up halfway through the second act. You finish that song (a cappella if you have to) or die trying. The bumps and hurdles and flaming pieces of paper might seem like a big deal, but you can’t let them get you down.

The show must go on.

This Is a Lie

By Mel Flores

© 2009

Lying is good.

I don't mean in the sense of lying to your wife about where you were last night. I don't mean in the sense of lying to the police about what you witnessed at a crime scene. And I most certainly don't mean lying about your military service — or lack thereof.

But lying is good.

If you're good at it, that is.

I don't remember exactly how old I was when I discovered my abilities as a liar, but I remember not having any facial hair yet, so that must have put me at 15 or 16. Sophomore year of high school.

I'd just made up a story about what I'd done over the weekend, and I was explaining to a classmate of mine (I'd hardly call her a friend) all the details. Well, maybe not all, but just enough so it was believable. That's the key to a good lie: Give detail, but not too much.

The story had something to do with the horse my dad owned, Chorizo. That part is actually true, by the way. He was a mean son of a bitch, but he sure was a beauty.

At the time I wasn't a huge fan of horses or living on a ranch — too many damn chores. Even now, I'm still not a big fan of either.

She marveled at the yarn I was unraveling. Her face contorted when she was confused about my living on a ranch. It brightened when she laughed at our horse's name, and it crinkled when I told her we had to shoot our pig, Mary Jane, in the head because she was "ready for a butcherin'." (We didn't have a pig).

Or did we?

She chuckled when I offered to sell her a pound of fresh bacon at the super low price of 79 cents.

"Are you for real?" she asked.

"Of course" was my retort. "I'd love to sell you some bacon at 79 cents a pound."

"I'm a vegetarian," she said with moxie.

"I know. We didn't really kill any pigs this weekend, either."



The story that is Melecio Jaime Flores begins on the 19th of June, 1985. He was the first child brought into the world by his parents, Melecio Ruiz Flores and Debra Flores. They are his heroes, his greatest teachers and his biggest fans. Fast-forward 24 years and Mel is a December 2009 graduate of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. He hopes to use his love of writing to earn him a living, ideally as a writer for "Late Night with Jimmy Fallon." Contact him at mel.flores@asu.edu.

She laughed and said, "You'd be a good used car salesman. You had me goin'."

It's funny how something seemingly insignificant, something as mundane as a little fake story of what happened over the weekend, can change you as a person. I approached conversations differently because I knew how to lie.

And once you realize you're a good liar, it's almost as if no door is shut, no girl is off limits, no teacher is too smart to fool.

For the most part, we've all been taught lying is wrong. Deceiving someone on purpose is wrong. Whether you were brought up in a religious household, a scientific "we believe in evolution" household or even a raised-by-the-television-because-your-parents-were-workaholics household, I'm willing to bet that every kid, at some point, is told not to lie.

But again, I say it's good.

It's good to tell a friend she looks as if she has lost weight. It's good to tell kids Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy and Captain Planet are real, and only if they're good little children who clean off their plates and do their chores will any of those individuals actually visit.

You can question my parenting techniques all day long, but a kid with a smile on his or her face is worth more than an award for telling the truth. And if that means I have to wear a Captain Planet costume for my kids, then so be it.

Look, I get what you're (probably) thinking: Deception is bad, and honesty is always the best option.

And I'll concede there are times when being truthful is the honorable (see: tough) thing to do. I don't lie to my parents, for example, because they know me too damn well, and frankly, I've got nothing to hide from them.

I never lie to any girl I date because I don't want our relationship (if it gets to that point) to be founded on lies. I want her to trust me, to believe me when I say things like "That lipstick smudge on my collar? Oh, I don't know how that got there. Weird."

I haven't done the math, but I'd guess that 95 percent of the lies I tell, I come clean to. I won't let a person leave the conversation without informing him or her that I, in fact, don't have kids named Enzo and Penelope.

But I'm good at it. And oftentimes, my little lies make someone laugh, chuckle or simply smile. And what's wrong with making someone smile?

If you have an answer to that, you might be the smartest person on earth.

Then again, I could be lying.

The Essence of Me

Sometimes the worst moments take you where you belong

By Lindsey Kupfer

© 2009

My life changed forever when I was 6. I was halfway through second grade at Fisher Elementary School in Walpole, Mass. Both of my parents had full-time jobs, so a live-in nanny named Theresa Raden cared for my older brother and me.

We had a nice house in Walpole — a white, three-story colonial with blue shutters. In the middle of the yard, one tree stood alone. It was small with crimson leaves. My dad had planted it and named it King Crimson after his favorite British rock band.

Behind our house, trains rumbled through the night. Though annoying, the trains' horns helped me fall asleep.

Our house was cozy. Pictures of my brother and me — playing together, opening Christmas presents, posing for mom — decorated the walls. My room and my brother's room were on the second floor, along with a room for Theresa and our play room. I remember the correct term was "music room," but inside stood a TV surrounded by a Sega Genesis, a Super Nintendo and occasionally my brother's original gray Game Boy, which resembled a small brick. My Little Tykes cheap plastic kitchen stood in the corner with my Lite-Brite and Easy-Bake Oven.

It was here in the music room that my mom first told me that she and my dad would be getting divorced. I knew what divorce was because the parents of some of the other kids in my class had split up. I felt a lump in my throat. Tears flowed down my face. I'd never even heard my parents argue. My dad would be moving out soon. She said it was for the best. My heart sank. It was a helpless feeling not being able to do or say anything to change their minds.

Even at 6, I knew my life was about to change. I thought about when I would be able to see my dad again and how eerie it would feel to not see him every day. I thought about Christmas and how my parents put fake candles in each window in the front of our house. Each night my dad would come upstairs to say good-night and tell me to blow out the candles, and I would as he twisted the light bulb off. I thought about when bad dreams would wake me. No matter what time it was, I could always find him cleaning some part of our house. He would stop to comfort me.

On the night of his departure, he came to my bedroom to say good-night. I started to cry and pleaded with him not to leave.

He said, "I'll leave when you fall asleep."



Lindsey Kupfer is a junior at The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Lindsey is majoring in print journalism and hopes to work at a magazine in New York City after college. Her minor is Italian, which is very important to her because her mother is from Napoli (Naples), Italy, and many members of her family still live there. Contact her at lkupfer@asu.edu.

I told him I'd stay up all night so he couldn't leave.

About two hours later he came back. "Lindsey! It's 10 p.m. How are you still awake?"

"I told you I'll never fall asleep."

The next thing I remember was walking downstairs and seeing Theresa reading her usual romance novel at the kitchen table. I asked where my dad was. She frowned.

"It's 5 a.m. You fell asleep. Your dad left."

My stomach dropped. I cried in her arms for what seemed like forever.

The divorce shaped much of my life. It was hard being with one parent at Christmas and the other on Thanksgiving. After the split, my brother and I lived with my dad. He moved two more times ending up in Boulder, Colo., and my mom moved to Arizona with her new husband. We moved down to Arizona soon after. My mom said that living with my dad was a "temporary plan." There was no specific reasoning for living with my mom over my dad; it's just what they agreed on.

I had attended four different elementary schools before fifth grade. At each school it was the same routine. Everyone looks at you differently because you're the new kid. You try to make some friends, and then you leave again.

When I finally stopped moving, I made friends. I didn't want to move again because I was sick of the new girl routine.

I'm 20 now and still live in Arizona. I'm a journalism student at Arizona State University. I chose ASU because I was tired of moving. I am not one to believe in fate, but I wouldn't have ever considered Arizona or moving here if my mom never came here.

Someone asked me if I ever think about what my life would have been like if my parents were still married. I actually never thought about what might have happened if they had stayed together. The question made me feel almost awkward because I have never thought about that before. When I think about it now, it doesn't seem right. I was sad at the time, but it wasn't an angry divorce. My parents are still able to be great friends and maybe that's why I never thought about what would have happened. Now that I am older I see that they weren't right together.

The divorce was hard on me, but had they not gotten divorced I would never have lived in Arizona and I probably would never have considered journalism or Arizona State. I realized I wanted to be a journalist because a teacher my freshman year of high school told me I was a good writer. That might not have happened if I stayed with my dad in Colorado.

Even though it was one of the hardest moments in my life, their divorce was the blessing in disguise that helped me get to where I am today.

Because You Left

By Melissa Matyas

© 2009

Every time I breathe in a new fragrance, my brain makes a memory. When I smell my brother's favorite candle scent — an intoxicating mix of musk, sage, patchouli and mahogany — my memory flashes to a day I wish I could forget.

My nostrils filled with that familiar scent. The candle had probably been burning all day. I stepped into the TV room. This room was above the garage and was either really cold or really hot. It felt like a sauna. The heat and fragrance surrounded me, and my head was swimming. My heart skipped a few beats. My feet carried me to my unconscious brother, propped on the couch like a rag doll. My first thoughts: "Is he going to be OK without involving my parents, or is this something serious?"

I was well aware of my brother's drug use. We both participated in activities of questionable legality and morality.

Before I could think of anything else to do, I dashed out of the room and threw my half-eaten grape Popsicle into the sink across the hall. I raced back to my brother. He was breathing in gasps and was the color of a corpse. I yelled his name. I shook his shoulders. I dropped to my knees and searched for an empty syringe. I peeled his eyelids open. His piercing blue eyes stared back at me with pinpoint pupils. There was fear in his eyes, fear of his life cut short.

I flew down the stairs and yelled for my father. "Dad! There's something wrong with Matthew. I think he overdosed."

I remembered my dad said he yelled for Matthew when he got home from work. His truck was parked out front but he didn't get a response. He decided he must have left with a friend. He was wrong.

Same cycle all over again. Dad yelled at him to wake him up, shook his shoulders, felt his pulse and told me to call an ambulance.

The 911 operator asked me too many questions. I was

forbidden to hang up until the ambulance arrived. Where was my father? What was he doing?

I hoped Matthew was holding on.

I heard the sirens screaming up my street. I ran outside and told the woman on the phone that the ambulance had arrived. I hung up before she could say anything else. I led the paramedics up the stairs to my brother, minutes away from darkness and death.

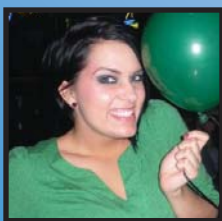
My father and I stood against the wall. We felt useless and unsure. An IV was shoved into my brother's arm, and my father rubbed my shoulder. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought my dad was playing the Indian rub burn game with my shoulder. I couldn't help but focus on the burning.

I had to escape. Instead, I made use of myself by holding the IV bag. My brother lolled into minimal consciousness. Every question the paramedics asked him was answered incorrectly in a weak and scratchy voice.

He made it to the hospital. He struggled in the ICU for a few days but came home to me after. I still had a brother, and my family was still together. The house was rattled and uneasy. Witnessing his near-death experience shocked me into sobriety for good.

I had two more years with him before he would leave me for forever. Matthew died from an accidental overdose three months after his 21st birthday. A mixture of prescription drugs gone bad. His lungs filled with fluid. He died folded over on the floor in a pool of his own blood. He was alone and helpless. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Drugs swallowed the happiness in him and my entire family. He is gone and never coming back. I will never again hear his voice, see him smile, hug him tight or smell the scent of his Dior cologne and Newport cigarettes. My one and only brother, my life force and my heart, I will see him again someday. He must wait for me, because he left me first.



Even though Melissa Matyas was born and raised in Dallas, Texas, she does not have a thick Southern accent. As a child, her chosen profession was changing every week. She has always loved the arts and enjoys everything from classic literary writers like Alexandre Dumas, to modern Broadway musicals like *Wicked*. To Melissa, the arts are an expression. She pours her emotions onto paper and inks her body with tattoos to relieve stress. She knew she wanted to be a writer when she realized that was the only subject in school she actually enjoyed. Contact her at melissamatyas@hotmail.com.

Mestizaje

By Andrea Hernandez Holm

I remember seeing my grandparent's identification cards for the first time when my abuelita died. My abuelito had been gone almost three years by then and we found all of their belongings folded neatly, side by side, in the petaquilla in the bedroom. Abuelita had two petaquillas in the room she shared with Abuelito. The first steamer trunk was tall with a high domed lid. It must have been black leather once but, at some point, the whole trunk had been painted sky blue. This was Abuelita's own trunk that had been with her since her childhood. The other trunk was larger, deeper and wider. It was all black with a flat lid. This petaquilla had belonged to Abuelita's mother, Dominga. The inside of the lid was papered with pictures of roses cut from magazines and greeting cards.

When we opened Mamá Dominga's trunk after Abuelita died, there were documents, certificates, letters, and mementos packed so meticulously that I knew immediately that Abuelita had been planning her journey for a long time. There were many large, manila envelopes stacked one on top of the other, some tied with scraps of ribbon and some bound with rubber bands. I chose the one on top to sort through. I gently emptied its contents on the floor and began turning over papers and opening small envelopes one by one. In the pile of old letters, newspaper clippings and documents written in Spanish, I came across two little squares of paper, identification cards laminated in yellowing plastic. From these cards, one word kept drawing my eyes. It said mestizo.

At thirteen, I thought I knew who I was. I was Mexican. I was Mexican American. I was Tarahumara. I was Nahuatl. I might be Chicana. I was mestizo. I knew that the word suggested a mixed blood heritage, grandparents of Indian and Spanish descent. I knew that my grandparents spoke a Spanish sprinkled with words that belonged only to Mexico. I knew that they practiced Catholicism under the broad blue skies, knees pressed into the earth, and candles burning on the kitchen table from sunrise to sunset. That day, I began to understand the strength of the word I had inherited: I began to understand what being a mestizo had meant to my ancestors and would mean for me. A blending of indigenous and Spanish cultures in Mexico and the Southwestern United States, I belong to my past, to the generations of men and women whose very existence has made each breath I draw possible.

© 2009

Mestizaje

Chicana

Latina

Hispana

Mexican American.

White words peeling

off the holy t-shirt that stretches

across her too round breasts,

around her swelling belly

where the unnamed

kick and claw

in an unborn rage.

Too many miles, years and stories away from home,

she doesn't even know to call on Cihuacoatl,

begging help from an English speaking Christ instead.

"My mestiza," he calls me,
and maybe smiles
as he tries to understand
why words like Hispanic and Latina
lay flat on my tongue
and itch in a baby's mouth
like a mother's sour milk.

Let me say mexica,
let me color my skin brown instead of golden,
let me forget Cortes.
Let me say fuck Columbus
without my own blood simmering in offense.
Can I pretend that La Malinche
didn't give birth to me?

I am mestiza.

I am mestiza.

I am mestiza.

I am mestiza.

There is strength in the words, ¿que no?



Andrea Hernandez Holm is a published poet with works appearing in *La Sagrada*, *Tribal Fires*, *Collegiate Latino Underground*, *Red Ink* and the *Cuentos del Barrio II* art exhibition of the Tucson/Pima Arts Council. Andrea received her BA with a major in English from the UA. She received her MA in American Indian Studies from the UA as well. Visit Andrea at www.andreahernandezholm.webs.com.

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Fall 2009

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They begin to sing out from me
to bring my fragmented self together,
and I remember.

I was already here,

waiting for my own arrival long ago.
Long before our shores harbored ships
heavy with Spanish threats and gold
crosses, crowns and conquistadors,
I moved with this land
and I knew.
I knew that I was coming, becoming
mestiza.

The Homeowner's Association

By Andrea Hernandez Holm

© 2009

Chuy pulled into the parking lot at the community center and was surprised at how crowded it was. Usually, when the HOA met, the only people who showed up were a few board members and maybe ten or fifteen community members. The meetings had never been held in the barrio. The group would meet at the Desert Ridge Church a few miles from Barrio Patria. Often, there were too few people present to vote on anything and issues would have to be tabled until the next meeting, or even the one after that. But tonight, Chuy could see that would be different.

The little graveled lot was full to capacity and he had to search along the street for a space to park. He could see two or three TV cameras set up near the entrance and he realized that they must be taping a story about the meeting. He circled the block in his truck and was tempted to drive away all together. He knew that this meeting was going to be ugly. He had been getting calls from the board of the HOA all week. At first, they sounded patient and concerned, but ultimately, everyone who called wanted to know why Chuy's dad was at the center of the chaos that had taken over the barrio and, more pressing, why Chuy hadn't put a stop to it.

When Ruben told him about the letter the HOA sent, Chuy tried to explain to his dad the seriousness of their words, that he had a lot at stake and a lot to lose if he didn't follow their orders. But when Ruben asked him what he should do, Chuy had no answer for him. He knew that even if his father tried to tell the people to leave, they wouldn't. They were there because they believed that the Holy Mother had come for a purpose. If the people left, others would come as long as la Virgen was smiling in the tree. And as for the vendors and media, they were going to stay as long as there was money to be made and a story to be told.

The president of the board called for an emergency meeting of the HOA and went to great lengths to convince residents to show up. The president and secretary drafted a flier about the meeting and went door to door handing out copies and posting them

throughout the neighborhood. They arranged to have a buffet catered by El Zarape and even paid a few teenagers to provide babysitting services in one of the meeting rooms. Their efforts had paid off.

Once inside, Chuy was surprised to find that there were at least sixty or seventy people in the meeting room. The meeting had already started but when Chuy walked in, everyone turned to look at him. The board members were sitting at a conference table at the front of the room. The president was speaking but stopped briefly when he recognized Chuy.

"As you know, we called this meeting to discuss some events that have been taking place here in our neighborhood."

"It's not your neighborhood," someone yelled. "This is probably the first time you've ever even stepped in the barrio!"

"It's not an event, it's a miracle!" another voice called.
"It's a fraud!"

"Please, we are not here to argue or to decide if this picture is real or not. We are here to explain why we believe that it should be taken down." The president of the board looked more and more rattled with each comment from the crowd. They were right, he had never been inside the barrio before and this whole experience had shaken him quite a bit. He was comfortable in the quiet streets at his own end of the neighborhood in Palo Verde Estates, where the houses stood silently amidst the manicured yards and cars rested unseen behind garage doors. Their usual community meetings were subdued and nearly silent, conversations calm and filled with niceties.

"You can't take down an apparition, pendejo!"

"Now, listen, there's no reason to get mean! We have a problem and we need to work together to resolve it." Ronnie Mendoza spoke up from the front row of the audience.

"The problem is that this...event...has created a big problem

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here. You can hardly walk down the streets anymore because they're so crowded. It looks like a swap meet out there! The truth is that the safety of our community is at stake and it can not continue."

"That's not the only problem. This painting or image, or whatever you want to call it, is also a violation of the agreement that Mr. Salazar made with the HOA. Section 9, Item 2 clearly states that decorations are only allowed to be displayed in the front yard two weeks before and two weeks following a holiday and to be removed promptly thereafter." The president ducked his head as the secretary spoke up, fairly certain that her comments were going to cause a whole new slew of disagreements.

"You should be ashamed! This barrio has been part of Arizona for decades, my own family has been here since 1902. One of the most important parts of our identity as a community is our religion. To ask any one of us to remove our images of La Virgen or Santa Maria or El Niño is a violation of our religious rights!" someone yelled.

"Are you going to tell me I have to remove the tile plaque next to my front door? Or the nicho for St. Jude that my grandfather built?"

The voices of the crowd began to rise as the people considered the possibility that they could be asked to disassemble the structures of their faith.

"No one is saying that. Please, just listen calmly, let us explain. This is not about religion! The greatest concern today is for the safety and well-being of our community!" The board president had to practically yell to be heard over the voices of the people and no one was paying him much attention anyway. Before the crowd got out of hand again, the president acknowledged a new speaker rising to his feet.

"Father Brown, you'd like to say something?" From her seat near the front of the room, Carolina turned quickly in the direction that the president was looking and saw David standing a few rows behind her. She felt her cheeks begin to flush and turned back to face the front immediately.

"Yes. I wanted to tell you that I have written to the Bishop about our situation. I haven't received a confirmation yet, but I am hopeful that the Church will be beginning its investigation into the authenticity of the apparition soon. It's a lengthy process and because of this, I want to encourage all of you to be patient and I want to encourage you not to do anything that might interfere with the process."

"Are you suggesting that the tree in question be left alone until the Church has its say in the matter?" The secretary looked at David skeptically, her head tilted to the side.

"Well, yes, I guess I am."

"Father, thank you for your comments but I don't think that

the Church has any right to intervene here. This is clearly an HOA matter. Now--"

"Wait, I want to say something else!" David could see the secretary roll her eyes and the president hung his head again.

"When I first learned about the image that appeared, I was curious and a little excited, but to be honest with you, I was doubtful that what we had among us was a miracle. These things happen a lot nowadays – I'm sure you all have heard about apparitions of saints and even Our Savior in the most unexpected places around the world. I know that some of you have witnessed them for yourselves and you've seen some things that are, without a doubt, frauds. You've probably also seen some things that are so wondrous and exquisite that they are without earthly explanation.

"When I heard about our Guadalupe, I suspected that it would come to pass that some kid had painted it during the night, or something similar. The child would probably own up to it, get a big laugh out of the mini-drama he'd created, and we would move on with our daily lives. I went to see the image with these thoughts in my mind. I didn't take it seriously. You could even say that I went to see her with the wrong heart, a heart filled with doubts and disbelief.

"When I got to Ruben's house and went to the tree, what I experienced was so great that it instantly replaced those feelings with certainty and faith. I knew that as I stood there in the presence of that image, I was in the presence of something greater than anything a child or a man could produce. The beauty of la Virgen touched my heart and my life has changed forever because of her."

"Father, does the Church think that this may actually be a miracle of some sort?"

"Like you, the Church does not take apparitions or possible miracles lightly. Every little detail must be thoroughly investigated before it will confirm that there has been divine intervention. There have been many people who have tried to get the Church to acknowledge their events or appearances as miracles, only to be declined for even an investigation. I know that this is not easy for Barrio Patria, and it won't get any easier, but again, I ask that you allow the Church the time to look into it.

"I also want to tell you that I don't need the Church to know that what has happened here in Barrio Patria is special."

Before anyone else could say anything, Ruben rose from his seat.

"I would like to say something." He walked to the front of the room and turned to face the community. "I am Ruben Salazar. I have lived in Barrio Patria almost my entire life. My family moved here from Yuma when I was only five years old. I know most of the people here in el Barrio, or I knew your parents and

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grandparents. My wife and I raised our family here, and they are raising their families here.

“Over the years, a lot has changed about el Barrio. When I was little, we knew all our neighbors, maybe because most of them were family. But still, we helped each other and looked out for one another. I remember that. Things around here looked a lot the same, but a lot different too.

“The Gomez family used to own a little market that stood right here where this community center is now. They sold homemade saladitos and homemade pickles. My sister and I would walk down to that store from our house every afternoon, all by ourselves even though we were probably only six or seven years old. Our friends would be down there already, and we’d buy our things and all of us would sit out front, watching people drive by and walk by and even ride by on their horses! That store is gone now. I guess a lot of things are gone now.”

Ruben paused and cleared his throat. He was trying very hard to concentrate on what he wanted to say, but it was easy to get lost in the memories that seemed to be flooding through his mind now. His mouth began to water when he mentioned the Gomez’ saladitos, pickled and salted to perfection in their own kitchen. They could buy two saladitos for a penny and one saladito could last for ten or even fifteen minutes if he was patient. They were made from the large plums that grew in the Gomez’ yard and their pulp was thick and soft. His sister Nina had loved the pickles as much as he loved the saladitos, but because they were more expensive, she didn’t have them as often. Her favorites were from the jar that Señora Gomez prepared

especial. “Cuidado, mi’ja!” she would warn, because the cucumbers had been pickled with jalapeños. His eyes began to tear as he thought of his sister, who had passed away when she was only twenty-one.

“We’ve survived a lot of changes here in el Barrio. There have been a lot of obstacles we’ve overcome, like segregation and discrimination. And when we’ve lost our boys in war or our families in accidents, or whatever the problem has been, we’ve still managed to get through it—‘cause we’re tough, we’re strong.

“It’s okay that things change, some things have to. That’s a part of life. When my Violeta died last year, I forgot that. When she died, I wanted to die too. I didn’t think that I had anything to live for, not even my own children and grandchildren. I thought that God had forsaken me. When la Virgen came to my house, I knew that that was not true. God did not forget about me. God did not forget about us, any of us residents of Barrio Patria.

“I understand what the board is saying here. I know that it has not been easy for any of us to have all these reporters here, or the people selling stuff, or even the pilgrims who’ve come to share a moment with our Virgen, but I don’t think we can make her go away. I don’t think that we should want to make her go away. We should enjoy this moment, we should let God shine on us. We deserve it.” He had more to say, but the members of the audience began to clap and cheer and their voices carried again the disagreements about what should be done with la Virgen.

Ruben did not wait for the voices to die down or for the board to address him. He made his way out of the building, patting his son on the shoulder as he walked past him.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

By B Love



B Love

© 2009

I crawled inside a raindrop,
Concave world, Fresh and New.
Waited for the splash down,
And never heard a sound.

As the silence grew,
So did the distortion of my view.

As I felt my existence pulse through my veins,
I wondered when it was I went insane?

Not knowing if the distortion came from within or from without,
I crawled back out.
Having liked the sunshine more.
Sat and listened to the raindrops pour.



For Barbara Love Newport, Life is all she has imagined it to be and she has the imagination of a child, having brought that with her from some strange land.... Liberal, Kansas.... Pancake Hub of the Universe.... Kansas Day.... Cold winter night. God crocheted snowflakes and Daddy brought Mama red roses in the snow. Words and feelings and visual images are important to her, having always and only wanted to be an artist. That is easily said and not so easily proved but she believes that too is only a feeling and when she can relate that to her audience (?) she will have her proof; for experience is the only proof she knows. She struggles, learns the hard way to express the wind and searches to find a way. In too true a sense, she scatters her forces to the winds, another name for that strange land she is a product of. An oilfield brat with a taste for finer things. Life is a paradox.... Not to be measured by hands on a clock. Expressed in only words: mother, teacher, lover, and wife, independent and different and not always nice. She can be reached at BSL4ART@aol.com.



B Love

Lost

By B Love

© 2009

Lost, lost in this darkness I dawdle.
Why if I can climb to the light at the top,
am I so afraid of the fall,
when I hate this hell hole so?
It's as if I've reached out and felt something,
even in its grossness it brought me comfort.
Now I'm afraid to let go.

Damn you, Damn you, Damn you,
I don't want to bring pain,
even when you hurt me so.
If by being free,
do I have the right to leave behind
something that has come to depend on me?

Oh, my gallant rescuer, please don't come now.
I'm afraid I'd let you go and stay and drown.

The Night the Music Lived

By Natasha Karaczan

© 2009

I'll never forget my first concert. The lights at Giants Stadium in New York came up, and Keith Richards walked out wearing a leopard coat and sunglasses. As he started playing a guitar riff from "You Got Me Rocking," everyone stood up, cheering and screaming.

That was the night my dad took me to see the Rolling Stones. It was 1997, and I was in the fifth grade. I had no idea that night would set the stage for my entire life.

I remember walking up to our seats while stepping on popcorn and pushing past people with sodas in their hands. When we finally reached our seats, I leaned over the railing to look around. Every seat was filled. I had never seen so many people in my life. You could feel the excitement building as show time came closer.

When Keith played that first riff, everyone jumped up. I remember thinking that his leopard coat was the coolest jacket I'd ever seen. But then Keith was the coolest musician I'd ever seen. The way he strolled across the stage and played each chord flawlessly, the way he smiled in response to the crowd's screaming. He didn't seem at all nervous playing in front of that many people.

The rest of the band soon joined him on stage. Mick Jagger sang, danced and interacted with fans in the front row. This made him the perfect lead singer in my eyes. Ronnie Wood played his bass without missing a beat. He and Keith would often lean on each other and sing the chorus into the same microphone. Charlie Watts and his drums were the backbone of each song. He never needed to throw his sticks in the air or make a show of himself.

A few songs into the set, everyone was still standing

and singing along. People of all ages and races and from different cultures were all touched by this music. Something in the lyrics clicked with everyone. That night, nothing else mattered but listening to music they loved performed by a band they loved.

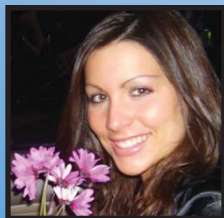
You could feel the energy in the air. With each song the clapping and shouting grew louder. I couldn't help but think that the sight of thousands of fans dancing to their music must be addictive to musicians. The drum beat in sync with the pounding of our hearts. The guitar chords moved through our veins, and the lyrics came straight out of the pages of our lives.

It hit me how much power and influence these four musicians had. They wrote about their experiences, good and bad, and people related to them. Their music could bring thousands of people together for one night. I started thinking about how big their fan base was and how many other people in the world had been touched by their music. It blew my mind.

I wanted to inspire people the way musicians do. I didn't have any musical talent, but I knew I could write well. I could write about bands and their music instead.

It was at that moment I decided to become a music journalist and work for a music magazine. I could use words to connect bands with the fans who adore them. I wanted to find the meaning behind the lyrics. Who inspired the music? Where were you when you wrote each song? What were you feeling? I wanted to know what making the record felt like and how the songs were chosen. I wanted to know everything about the music.

That night at Giants Stadium set the tone for my life. That was the night the music lived.



Natasha Karaczan is a senior journalism major at Arizona State University. She aspires to one day write professionally from the comfort of a beach chair. In her spare time, she enjoys her mother's home cooking, and playing with her Pomeranian named Jake. Contact her at Natasha.karaczan@asu.edu.

Harry, Larry and Mo

A short-lived friendship

By Brittany Gonzales

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I couldn't have asked for a better Christmas vacation. I was surrounded by my best friends, my boyfriend's arm was wrapped around me and my feet were folded beneath me as the sun slowly fell behind the mountains.

Yet something was wrong. I felt as though I were swallowing a golf ball. I poked the lump. I swallowed hard a few times – and then again – before I spoke.

"Something's in my throat. It feels funny," I said to my boyfriend.

"What are you talking about? Let me see," Joey insisted.

Within a split second, his hand shot back. I stared at him blankly. My heart pounded.

"What do you think it is?"

"I don't know. Let's head to your house and talk with your dad."

"Oh, my God! What is it?"

We reached my house in record time. As I tried to open the door, I dropped my keys on the welcome mat ... twice. Then the door flung open and slammed into the wall, leaving a dent.

"Dad! I need a doctor's appointment. Now!"

Dad hurried out of the music room. Mom was setting the dining room table with red napkins, gold candles and a miniature Christmas tree as a centerpiece. Dad reminded me that doctors don't work on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and some not even the day after that. He promised he would find a doctor to see me the day after Christmas.

I panicked.

* * *

Two days later, I stepped into the office of Dr. Gordon Rueben. The smell of plastic gloves filled my nose, and goose bumps prickled my skin. My leg wouldn't stop shaking.

By the time Dr. Rueben finished the exam, all he told me was what I already knew. "There's definitely something there," he said in a flat, professional voice. "Our next step is to send you

to Los Robles Hospital for blood work, an ultrasound and a biopsy."

I spent most of Christmas vacation in waiting rooms and exam rooms wearing stiff paper gowns while my friends sat on the beach in bathing suits.

* * *

It took a week to get an appointment at the hospital. The morning of the biopsy, I'd woken up sick to my stomach, with clammy hands. Hours later, nothing had changed. Mom and Dad waited restlessly as I walked back with the doctor who had downplayed the procedure as a "simple poke." Apparently this guy has never had a needle biopsy.

Even with the local anesthesia, I felt the needle poke through my skin and then get stuck. The doctor pushed hard until it punctured the mass. Nausea swarmed every inch of my body. The doctors whispered above me.

"This doesn't look like a cyst."

"This is uncommon for a benign mass."

"When did you say she noticed it?"

I shook with fear.

Afterward, as I reached for the doorknob of the waiting room, my knees buckled and I collapsed. I was too young. This couldn't be happening to me.

* * *

The ultrasound revealed not one tumor but three — Harry, Larry and Mo. I'm 20 years young. How is this happening?

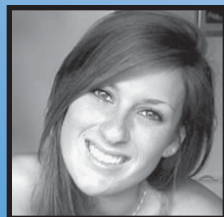
I cried for hours. I retreated into myself, rejecting my family, friends and boyfriend.

I needed surgery.

* * *

I waited in pre-op for five hours. The nurses changed my IV bag three times, and I walked it down to the bathroom plenty more. The anesthesiologist warned me of the risks. All I heard was, "death, death and death."

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Brittany Gonzales was born and raised in Moorpark, California, and moved to Arizona three years ago. She is currently a senior at Arizona State majoring in journalism and hopes to write professionally for a magazine. Contact her at brittanymgonzales@gmail.com.

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That's all I could think about. I'm going to die on the table with masked doctors staring over my body, not with my family at my side.

I was going to die.

My left arm stung as the anesthesia crept inside my veins. The lights turned fuzzy, the voices slowed and the questions the doctors asked were too hard to answer. I felt the burn again of a larger dose — and then nothing.

* * *

I woke up sick and spinning. My nose tickled from the oxygen, and my neck was stiff and sticky. A tiny squeeze on my foot opened my eyes. Joey cringed for me. Mom was edgy, and Dad seemed eager.

A man with strong arms approached my bed and rolled me out of post-op to my overnight room. With turns, stops and bumps, I could have sworn I was on a rollercoaster. Did they forget I'd just had surgery?

Before I realized it, everyone had left. I fell asleep quickly, only to be woken by a nurse two hours later. And then again and again and again.

* * *

I was awake and uncomfortable before the sun was up. I stared out the window blankly. The morning nurse brought me a liquid breakfast made up of chicken broth, tea, Jell-O, and orange juice. By 10 that morning, I was released from the hospital. The squeaky wheelchair stopped at the roundabout where Dad's car was waiting. I climbed in like a sloth, folded my feet beneath me and clicked the seatbelt.

Twelve days later I received a phone call from my surgeon telling me I was healthy. During surgery, they removed the biggest tumor on my thyroid, Mo. The other two, Harry and Larry, which are much smaller, are still there and I am required to have an MRI every six months because of them.

Still, the words "healthy" and "cancer" rarely coincide. The tumor was benign after all. The original diagnosis was wrong.

I was not dying.

The Staircase

By Paige Blatnik

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The fall was quick, and we hit the bottom with a thump. I jumped up and looked at myself. No cuts. No bruises. “Oh my God!” my mom screamed. “Call 9-1-1!” My dad was lying there motionless. I thought he was dead.

Just five minutes earlier, my dad, my brother and I had been sitting around the television, each of us in our favorite chair, while my mom was in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner. Dad relaxed in his old, blue La-Z-Boy and my brother and I shared the couch. The couch and the recliner didn’t match. Mom wanted to buy a new one, but Dad loved that dusty recliner. So, that’s where it stayed, and that’s where it belonged.

I don’t remember what was on the TV that night. Being 9 years old, I didn’t care much about the dialogue, I just liked watching the picture.

“Almost time for bed,” Dad said after looking at the clock on the wall. “You better get upstairs to brush your teeth.”

“I’m really tired,” I said to Dad with some puppy-dog eyes. “Could you carry me upstairs? Pleeeeeease?”

I knew I was too big to be carried up the stairs--and definitely too old. But I was “Daddy’s little girl,” so he laughed, picked me up, and we headed to the stairs.

Dad and I were giggling as we made our way up the stairs. There weren’t many stairs, about eight in all. The black metal handrail had an intricate design that I loved following with my fingers. Nobody really used the handrail, though. It was more for show than anything. The carpet up the stairs was a dark purple color, with swirls of gray and black. The carpet could have been a lighter color originally, but Mom didn’t make us take our shoes off in the house, not until we got new carpet a few years later anyway.

“She’s too big to be carried up the stairs, Tim,” my mom called. My dad and I continued laughing. We were almost at the top of the stairs when Dad’s foot slipped and we tumbled backward.

I gasped for air. My muscles tightened up. Dad pulled me into his chest as we fell backward. After hitting the bottom, I jumped right up, without a scratch. Dad had saved me!

But Dad lay unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. Blood covered his scalp and dripped down the side of his face. Drops of

blood speckled the dark purple carpet.

I thought he was dead.

“It’s all my fault! It’s all my fault!” I kept shrieking. I was the one who asked him to carry me up the stairs, I was. The tears started to come.

“Call 9-1-1!” my mom shouted again.

“Mom I don’t want to! I don’t know how! I’m scared!” I kept screaming. I picked up the phone, bawling. The call didn’t last long.

My mom tried to wake my dad up as we waited for the paramedics to arrive. I went out to the back porch, paced back and forth, and cried, and cried, and cried.

The paramedics showed up in five or ten minutes, but to me, it felt like hours. I couldn’t look at my dad, even though I tried. The paramedics circled around him, but I wasn’t big enough to see through them. The paramedics wore blue suits and had solemn faces. It didn’t feel like my house anymore. Those paramedics didn’t belong in my living room. I would take my dad’s filthy, aged, blue recliner over them. The recliner belonged more than they did. This should’ve never happened.

Dad regained consciousness soon after the paramedics arrived, and was taken to the hospital. He’d suffered a minor concussion and needed four stitches above his eye.

My mom, my brother and I spent the night in the hospital waiting room. I dozed off in the chair next to my mom a few times, but the sharp smells of antiseptic and bleach kept waking me up. I felt so guilty.

“It wasn’t your fault sweetie. It was an accident,” my mom told me. Usually, her words would make me feel better, but not this time. I just wanted my dad to be OK. I just wanted to hug him.

My dad was released from the hospital early the next morning, and we all drove home together. The ride home was quiet. We were exhausted from fear and worry, but glad that my dad was going to be alright.

In an instant, my life had changed. An accident occurred that could’ve taken my dad away from us, all in a matter of minutes. It is strange to think that asking something so innocent, like being carried up the stairs, could place so much guilt upon a person. If my dad had died, I would’ve felt like it was my fault for the rest of my life.

Dad’s shirt smelled like the hospital for a while, and I hated that smell. It always reminded me of the night we fell. I don’t think back to that night very often, but when I do, I realize that nothing belongs in a family more than laughter and strong arms, and sometimes even an old, blue La-Z-Boy.



Paige Blatnik is a senior at Arizona State University, and is majoring in journalism. She is originally from Littleton, Colorado, and currently resides in Tempe, Arizona. Paige loves spending time with her friends and family, and hopes to write for a magazine after graduation. Contact her at paige.blatnik@asu.edu.

A Saltillo Tile

By James Gaitis

a Saltillo tile
 with a cat print on it
softpad foot
 set hard in clay
and I sense her loss
 as she bends to touch it
the feline grace
 of her long smooth leg

a Sonoran sky
 with a cat cloud in it
sails slowly by
 on a long tail wind
and I see her pause
 as she strives to reach it
like a catclaw vine
 from around a bend

a Siamese thought
 with a cat throughout it
lays long at rest
 in a lazed pose
and I know how she
 resides within it
like a lioness
 in a lost repose

and there's another tile
 with dog tracks on it
Sonoran sky
 nostalgic thought
and she knows they lead
 in trails to somewhere
beyond my reach
 but within her touch

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James Gaitis has a BA (cum laude) in English Lit from the University of Notre Dame and a JD from the University of Iowa College of Law. He is the author of two novels – “A Stout Cord and a Good Drop,” which is a novel of the founding of Montana (Globe Pequot 2006), and “The Nation’s Highest Honor” (“an Arizona novelist’s environmental satire”) (Kunati 2009). He is a Tucson resident and may be contacted at gaitis1@aol.com.

A Dog Tale

Death calls and gets no answer

By Andrew Pentis

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We were driving toward Lake Tahoe four months ago when my dad began telling us a story. He had just dropped our dog Taz at Romar Kennels, where she would stay during the family's four-day getaway. Jan, the friendly proprietor, had handed dad a sheet of paper with three options and a line for his signature:

1. Do not treat. Euthanize if necessary.
2. Treat, but at a cost no greater than \$_____.
3. Treat the illness with no dollar limit.

Jan explained that earlier this year, a young Lab required emergency surgery for a torsion – twisted stomach intestines was the layperson's explanation – but she couldn't reach the pup's owners on the telephone. Knowing they were well-to-do surgeons, Jan and her partner authorized the \$9,000 operation necessary to save the Lab's life. It did, and the veterinarian's bill wasn't an issue.

Truth be told, I don't remember listening very intently when dad was talking about the pre-authorization form. After all, he had little trouble choosing the third option. Taz is a no-dollar-limit type of pet.

* * *

Just after 4 p.m. the next day, July 21, we were sitting on the beach in D.L. Bliss State Park, just north of Emerald Bay. I'd kicked off my shoes and plunged my feet into the sun-hot sand.

A few paces away, dad, mom and sis had arranged their sunbathing towels. Then I heard them talking in hushed tones.

My fraternal twin, Alyssa, called me over.

"They rushed Taz to the vet."

I didn't say anything. I was afraid to ask about the voice mail message left on dad's mobile phone.

Putting down my lunch, I looked up and saw three faces looking at me, then at each other. Finally, dad said the dreaded word:

"Torsion."



Andrew Pentis is currently a senior in Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Andrew grew up in Terra Linda, Calif. and now resides in Phoenix. He was thrilled to be named a Jim Murray Memorial Scholar last July. Learn more at andrewpentis.wordpress.com.

* * *

I remember meeting our Chow Chow for the first time in a Mendocino hotel room. Two beds, lampshade lit, drapes drawn, and there was this tiny black fur ball scurrying across the room from bedpost to bedpost, hiding from her soon-to-be family. My uncle Gary had found her in a Los Angeles litter that year – it must have been 1996. Or maybe '97, I can't remember.

Anyway, Taz got her name, in part, from rolling around that room like the Tasmanian Devil cartoon character. Gary said she was born from two giant, lion-like parents. (If you've ever seen a purebred Chow Chow, you'd know what he meant.)

Twelve (or 13) years later, Taz still wagged her tail when I retrieved her leash and, to mom's chagrin, rubbed up against our nice living room furniture. But her hips were always sore, she had a couple of cataracts, she was skinny, graying and spotted – the last thanks to her unusual hair growth.

Lion-like? On first inspection, most passers-by compare Taz to a hyena. Then they chuckle and ask to pet her.

* * *

We couldn't really enjoy that July day or the night that followed. Seeking distraction, dad and I played catch next to the lake. Mom and Alyssa cooled their feet in its famously clear blue water while reading magazines.

None of it worked. We packed up an hour or so later and piled into the car, waiting for an update on Taz's status.

Heading for the house a friend had lent us, dad took the steering wheel again, and every minute or so he squinted below his far-distance prescription glasses and thumbed his iPhone 3G. Sitting in the backseat, I remember seeing his eyebrows flexed in the bottom of the rearview mirror. Twice along the drive back into Tahoe City, the vet's office tried calling us. Dad veered off the road each time, but cell reception proved too tough to come by.

It wasn't until we got back to the house that he could check his messages. Mom and Alyssa were taking their get-that-sand-off-of-me showers, while I splashed some sink water on my face and hunkered down on the couch in the dark. Then I heard dad's heavy footsteps coming down the staircase.

"She made it through surgery."

No response. That lump I get in my throat when I'm

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watching a sad movie started to loosen.

“You want to hear the voice mail they left?”

“Yeah, sure.”

I heard The Voice, a delicate tone. Someone from the emergency pet hospital.

“Our girl is doing fine, but she’s not out of the woods yet.”

The Voice said it would call back later with more news. Nevertheless, doubt set back in.

Feeling strung along and anxious for finality, we tried to do something else. Alyssa sat eagerly at the wood dining table and asked if we were ready to play her new favorite game, Mexican Train dominoes. I ignored her. Dad did, too. But mom, as she does all so well, sat down and suggested we order pizza.

“Let’s just have a fun night. There’s nothing we can do about it right now.”

* * *

Of course, Disney did its part in my childhood. I knew Bambi’s mom and Simba’s dad weren’t coming back. But their demise didn’t affect me (or really even my movie-going experience).

I never really knew what death was. Both of mom’s parents passed away before I was born, and every time she talks about them, I feel horrible for having to poke my nose in a picture album to remember their faces. Not horrible enough, I guess, to risk upsetting her for a how-were-the-old-times discussion. They say my great-granddad (on my father’s side) was an exceptional man, but he too was gone by the time I came into the world.

About five years ago, my former YMCA basketball coach committed suicide. I went to my first funeral and hugged the son he left behind. But it didn’t hit me; I didn’t even cry.

Perhaps selfishly, I knew I would bawl if the dog I grew up with didn’t make it to 13 (or 14) years old.

* * *

We cut short our vacation the next morning and began the four-hour drive to pick up Taz and take her home. The docs said she’d be more comfortable recuperating there. Dr. Kelley McNair of the Country Vet in Novato, Calif., had needed nearly an hour to untangle whatever it was she needed to untangle, and she warned that Taz would behave as if she’d just had one cocktail too many.

And she did, sliding around on the hardwood floor in our family room. She lifted each hind leg gingerly, walking as if she had a wedgie. There were actually almost a dozen stitches — they looked more like hastily placed staples to me — lining her tummy. Then Taz plopped down on the rug in front of the TV and did what most drunks do: She simply slept it off.

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Elegy for Iraq¹

Iraq 1991-

By Lilvia Soto

*My beloved friend is dead, he is dead,
my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn
as long as I breathe, I will sob for him
like a woman who has lost her only child.*

- Gilgamesh

1

When the moon is full,
 banal punks are out on the hood
 polishing their pocket knives
 waiting for hot girls to ogle,
 hunting for young boys to scare.

When the moon is full,
 baby-faced soldiers are out on the winding alleys
 polishing their M-16s
 waiting for a letter from Mom,
 hunting for hajis to scare.

When the moon is full,
 torturers wearing sequined masks
 step in the ring polishing their electric wires
 their testicles quivering with anticipation,
 their fauces salivating at the thought of their victims' shudders.

This is the hour when snakes slither out of their nests,
 Dracula puts on his black cape,
 Cain stabs Abel,
 Romulus kills Remus,
 Pinochet murders Allende,
 the Supreme Court selects George Bush,
 and Mansur Al-Hallaj is tortured and crucified.

This is the hour when Hulago and his Mongol hordes
 paint the roofs of Baghdad and the waters of the Tigris
 red with the blood of Iraqis,
 black with the ink of poems looted from the National Library.

1 Inspired by Fadhil Al-Azzawi's
Elegy for the Living

2 *Strangefruit*, poem by Abel
Meeropol, made famous by Billie
Holliday.



Bilingual, binational, and multicultural, Lilvia Soto divides her time between Chihuahua and Arizona. She has a Ph.D. in Hispanic Languages and Literature from Stony Brook University, has taught at U.S. universities, and has published short fiction, poetry and literary translations and criticism in Spain, Mexico, the U.S. and other countries. These poems are from her manuscripts on the Iraq War. Contact her at lilviasoto@hotmail.com.

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This is the hour when Bush the Father and his American hordes
paint the roofs of Baghdad and the waters of the Tigris
red with the blood of Iraqis.

This is the hour when Bush the Son and his American hordes
paint the roofs of Baghdad and the waters of the Tigris
red with the blood of Iraqis,
black with the ashes of the first illustrated Koran,
the first epic, the first laws looted from the National Library.

This is the hour when outside Jerusalem
Roman centurions gamble at the foot of a cross
the red cape of a terrorist Jew.

This is the hour when the Big-8, or the Big-13, or the Big-24
League of Insipid Dictators
dream their full-moon collective dream.

Each dreams himself an unwilling guest
in the others' secret dungeons.
Their group shudder wakes their old wives,
makes their child mistresses quake with terror.

This is the hour of sanctioned and celebrated state murderers.
Raped civilizations.
Murdered souls.

This is the hour when God weeps.

When the moon is full,
a white missile rips through the skies of Baghdad
showing off a dedication by a soldier from Boston,
who writes in blood:

*To Mr. Hammurabi in BABYLON,
With love,*

When the moon is full,
a white missile rips through the skies of Lebanon
showing off a dedication by a girl from Shmona,
an adolescent of golden pony tails and radiant smile,
who signs in red:

*With love,
From Israel and Daniele.*

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When the moon is full,
the troglodyte vampires crawl from their caves
and stab each other on the back.

2

Blood on the asphalt. Blood on the sand. Blood on the palm fronds.
Blood on the palaces, the Bedouin tents, the camel's back.
In wheat spikes, sweet mint, pomegranate arils.
In the sacred fig, the rose's dew, the breeze's mist.

Blood in the blackbird's song.

Blood in the Tigris, the Nile, the Thames,
the Usumacinta, the Guadalquivir.

Blood in tears, mother's milk, amniotic fluid.
Blood in springs, waterfalls, and seas.
In clouds, rainforests, and the snow melting off the Zagros Mountains.
In the waters that connect under the earth and under the currents.
In the waters that irrigate our crops, circulate in our bodies, mark our deaths,
celebrate our births.

Blood in the Potomac. In the East River.
On the hands that shoot the rifles.
On the hands that profit from the bombs.
On the hands that clap each time a cluster bomb disperses three hundred bomblets.

Blood on the Christian cross.
The Aztec pyramid.
Auschwitz.
Wall Street.
Bagram.
Guantanamo.
Abu Ghraib.

*Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
of Southern poplar trees
bearing a strange and bitter crop.²*

You bombs, capsules of poisoned ego, deliverers of hatred,
looking like hungry phalluses,
Fadhil wants to send you back to America.

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Without spite or hatred, he wants to send you to
Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, William Faulkner,
Henry Miller, William Carlos Williams,
Anais Nin, Allen Ginsberg, Ernest Hemingway,
Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Elvis Presley.

He wants to send you to them because he knows
they will empty you, deliver you of your evil,
and they will take the colors of the clouds,
the sunsets, the waterfalls,
to draw upon you red balloons,
golden blooms,
children on a swing.

There will be no blood spilled,
only the green sap that keeps trees erect and blooming
only the red blood that runs in the arteries of children,
the healthy blood that keeps them running,
asking amazing questions,
hugging their baby brothers,
and in the writers' drawings, they will all have two legs to skip rope,
two arms to climb a tree,
two eyes to see dew in the morning,
two eyes to gaze in awe at the night sky,
and a nose to smell a baby's newborn smell,
and a bride's crown of orange blossoms.

And Walt, Robert, Henry, Allen, Ernest, Anais, Lawrence,
and the two Williams,
they will take their pens, and write on you,
they will write words of justice,
passion, life,
and they will place you in the middle of a playground,
in the Rose Garden, along the Potomac,
among the cherry trees, in the center of the Pentagon.

Fadhil wants to send you to Marilyn.
Don't be offended,
he can't help himself, it's your shape.

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America,
The poets of the earth,
 the poets of every corner of the earth,
 where you keep sticking your nosy, dollar-shaped finger,
 sending your bombs,
 your insipid diplomats,
 and your baby-faced marines,
we, the poets of the earth,
 send you back your bombs,
 send them back filled with poems.
 In every language. From every period. In every style.

We send you the poems of Garcia Lorca, Vallejo, Neruda,
 Milosz, Saramago, Beckett, Soyinka, Hesse, Gide, Prévert,
 Wolcott, Seferis, Espada, Quasimodo, Whitman, Yeats.

On this night, and on every night since 1991,
we hear the cries of a country in ruins,
 the sobs of children who walk deserted streets looking for their parents,
 the tired breathing of grandparents who shuffle along empty alleyways,
we stare at a sky lit by bombs that carry the fires from hell,
we stare at darkened hospitals,
 houses in flames,
a dawn too embarrassed to show its face,
a cart filled with corpses pulled by ghosts looking for a God who hangs his head.

And in Baba Karkar, the world sees the soul of humanity
 on the fields of a fire that will burn
 until the final winter.

This is your night, Baghdad:
 your streets are littered with corpses,
 with ghosts who choose a second death,
 with unexploded bomblets waiting for a second chance.

Nothing except the dark,
 and bombs anxious to murder orphans,
 finish off men released from Abu Ghraib,
 relieve the grief of orphaned mothers.

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7

This is your night, Iraq:
The moon is full, and the vampires
 who have danced with the dark
 have given you a sentence of death,
 like the death in their hearts.

8

This is your night, America,
 for on this night,
 while we hear the howls of the vampires,
 boasting they will persist,
 threatening Iran and others,
 confusing, like gigantic, stormy-hearted Gilgamesh,
 strength and arrogance,
 trampling upon others *like a wild bull*,
 attacking monsters
 they should be slaying in their hearts,
 thinking that murdering Humbaba
 will drive out evil from the world,
faintly, in the background, we hear the moans,
 the slow death rattle
 of your young country
 betraying your promise of justice,
 draining the blood of your children,
 the spirit of your elders.

This is your night, America,
 look in your brother's eyes,
 see his pain, embrace him,
 embrace life.

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Just Sing a Lullaby, Abdullah*

By Lilvia Soto

*Inspired by Muzaffar Al-Nawab's *If You Feed the Pigeons*

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Don't, please don't feed the pigeons, Abdullah,
don't pick daisies for your teacher,
don't help your grandma across the street,
don't sing your wife the song of night,
don't give the children lollipops.

Don't fly a kite, please don't fly a kite, Abdullah,
don't write love poems on your passport
your bus ticket, or your luggage tag,
don't have luggage,
don't have a bus ticket,
or a passport.

If you do anything from your heart, Abdullah,
your tyrant will say you are a *menace*,
the invader will call you *terrorist*,
they know only terrorists pick daisies,
hand out lollipops,
sing of love,
only terrorists feed the pigeons
from their hearts.

If you do anything from your heart, Abdullah,
sing a lullaby,
sing the invader and the tyrant
a baby's lullaby,
to warm their loneliness,
smooth their angry brows,
soothe the bruises in their hearts.

If you do anything from your heart, Abdullah,
sing a tyrant's lullaby:

Hush, hush, little baby,
Mommy will hold you,
Daddy will call you
Sweet Little Man.

Hush, hush, little boy,
don't shoot the sparrow,
don't bomb the frog,
Mommy will love you,
Daddy will call you
My Little Man.

Hush, hush, young man,
don't rob your neighbor,
don't join a gang,
Mommy adores you,
Dad calls you *Son*.

Hush, hush, Mr. President,
be a good boy,
the world is your cradle
guarded by angels,
don't punch it,
don't kick it,
just love it and love it.

Rock-a-bye, Baby,
be a big man, now,
don't invent foes,
there's no need for bombs,
your mommy will love you,
till the end of the world,
your daddy adores you,
no need to compete.

Rock-a-bye, Baby,
go to sleep now,
the world is your cradle
guarded by angels.
Sleep, Baby, sleep,
the angels will keep you,
all through the night.

... And The Promise That Almost Was¹

By Lilvia Soto

Je ne connais pas de pays où il règne, en général, moins d'indépendance d'esprit et de véritable liberté de discussion qu'en Amérique.²

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*

© 2009

America, that promise, *forgotten*
between the corpse and the nail.

America was not besieged by the Indians,
or the Soviet army, or Imperial Japan.
It was seduced by exceptionalism,
tempted by Iraq, Indochina, the Cold War.

America, that promise, is just a prison,
a collective mind wrapped in the barbed wire

of accepted truths, a promise ravaged by greed
and moral laziness, known only to the mythmakers.

One day it almost became . . . a new birth of freedom,
the promise that a government of the people,
by the people, for the people
*would not perish from the earth,*³

a country of immigrants, new beginnings, self-evident truths,
that all Men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
*with certain unalienable Rights.*⁴

America is dying *of a wound from within,*
from the blind patriotism
that paralyzes the minds of its children.

The desire for freedom, dormant,
covered by the debris of legend and myth,
and the self-satisfaction of thinking ourselves superior
and entitled.

The desire for equality, a myth,
belief in self-superiority, seductive
and needed for Empire.

And the promise that
a government of the people,
by the people, for the people
would not perish from the earth,
just a promise,

- 1 Inspired by Buland al-Haidari's *The City Ravaged by Silence*
- 2 I don't know of any country where there is, in general, less independence of mind and of true freedom of discussion than in America.
- 3 Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*
- 4 *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776.

for the government of America
has long been *of the corporation,*
by the corporation, for the corporation,
and has no wish to perish.

And the people?
We the people can *nobly advance*
by our *increased devotion to that cause*
for which so many have given
the last full measure of devotion,
the cause of commerce,
the cause of the corporation.

Someone knocks, and we tremble
for the Corporation has instilled in its people fear
of veils and turbans,
prayer beads and interest rates,
muslims and security,
terrorists and rising prices,
porous borders and foreclosures.

Fear controls us, and we welcome
the enemy within, the mindless, echoing
we're the good guys slogans,
the foreclosure of our minds.

The phone rings, and we tremble,
for the Corporation has instilled in us fear,
of thoughts that differ from the mindless
yellow ribbons and *Support our troops*
glued on bumper stickers,
silk screened on our minds.

We must understand,
we are *the corpse and the nail.*
And You, America, and the promise of You,
just a promise *between the corpse and the nail.*

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*When in the Course of human Events,
it becomes necessary...
on the polished table, near the flickering candle,
there were signed papers that read,
to assume... the separate and equal Station
to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God
entitle them,
a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind
requires...*

Yellowed papers, the remains of quill pens
and a silver inkstand,
words quaint and inoperable,
for the Corporation has no respect
for the equal station of other nations,
for the Corporation wills to ignore
the opinions of others,
and the needs of its people.

What does it mean that Americans read...

that we have money for books...
that the First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press...
that we have computers to write...
that we stay up until dawn...
what does it mean... ?
Does it imply that we can almost think?

We are forbidden to feel, to talk... even to ask
what America means,
what it means to think,
more than a soldier following orders,
a shopper who borrows and borrows,
a child too hungry to learn,
an elder sick and neglected,
who's almost glad he was born an American.

America has almost *died of a wound inside us...
of a wound from within,*
from the blind patriotism that paralyzes
the minds and the tongues of its children.

America, that promise, *forgotten
between the corpse and the nail.*

Maenad*

By Lilvia Soto

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What shall we do with her?
She's the tease who warms everybody's bed,
the mime who wears my face in the morning,
my friend's for tea, my neighbor's after dark,
and the tyrant's in her siesta dreams.

Voluptuous gadfly, she makes the rounds,
showing spreadsheets in the market place,
singing pride in the Senate,
liberty, in the public square,
talking manhood in school,
boasting in the locker room,
promising a folded flag to young men's mothers,
whispering *granite face* in the tyrant's ear.

She's a flirt,
always at the right dance,
where she wears fawn skin bustier and crinoline
and fancies herself a debutante
who will sleep only with the prince,
and only when he slips the heirloom solitaire
on her bony finger.

*Inspired by Fadhil Sultani's *What Shall I Do with This War? What Shall I Do with This Tyrant?*

Mindful of his jealous mother
and his crème de la crème friends,
she acts demure, will not curse, or show décolletage,
will not talk about her endless string of lovers,
especially the prince's father,
or his great-great grandfathers on both sides,
and will never ever confess her age
or the names of her plastic surgeons.

With lust-filled eyes, she sips her blood,
with dewy tongue, moistens her lips,
and sticking out her chest,
loosens her thick head of snakes
and tempts you,
with memories of cries and gasps,
to rip your child apart
piece by piece,
and in your possessed state
tear his head,
show it off as hunter trophy.

Wings of Exile¹

By Lilvia Soto

A poet might still breathe the air of death in his exile, even after his return, and will continue to carry with him his exile within himself.

- Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati

Badr,

a man in exile dreams of orchards of figs
watered by his beloved Buwayb,²
and the tree of exile
bears the purplish fruit of the stone.

Stones fly from trees
because the wings of exile
wither and drop on soil that is cracked,
and the throat of exile
utters the mourning song of the stone.

An exile dreams
of breezes and shadows,
houses of shells,
the liquid sounds
of his beloved Buwayb,
and the river of his exile
gurgles the silent notes of the stone.

Badr,

stones is what you see
because your eyes are salt mines,
and when you cannot see
your beloved Buwayb,
your heart of exile
sheds the red grains of the stone.

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1 Inspired by Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's *Because I Am a Stranger*
2 A river that runs through Jaykur, the hamlet near Basra where Al-Sayyab was born.

The Numbers Hole

By Robin K. Ferguson

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Calvin's mission began as he stuck his little brown head through a crack in the door to the stairwell. Hearing no voices echoing above or below he pulled the large door open and stepped onto the landing. He knew where to step so he would miss cracked or missing tiles. Bare light bulbs flickered from broken fixtures and the walls gleamed with colorful graffiti left there by generations of project dwellers.

Once outside, he looked left and right then sprinted as fast as his eight year old legs carried him across the quiet street and around the corner past gray and dirty brown block buildings that made up Calvin's Brooklyn neighborhood.

If not careful older boys rolled him for the ten or twenty dollars his mother gave him to take to Johnny Q's Numbers' Hole on South One Hundred and Thirtieth Street, leaving him only with a small piece of paper with her picks written in pale chicken scratch. If he went earlier enough and ran fast enough, then stayed to the shadows, he'd make it there with no problem.

Calvin ran the numbers to Johnny's when Mama cashed her check. She'd bet on the horses every day if she could, so it became Calvin's job to take the money to the bookie. Sometimes Mama wanted him to take a late afternoon bet if it the Knicks were in the play-offs or Joe Namath felt healthy enough to beat the Colts in Baltimore.

The police and Johnny's rivals never bothered kids. Mama knew and Calvin knew if they arrested every little kid who ran numbers for their parents, the city would have to build a public school inside the jail.

Calvin got to Johnny's in record time. He always knocked first. Johnny gave his customers a special knocking pattern to use. Kids had a simple one. Knock once, then twice, and then once again and wait.

"Hey kid, come on in," Johnny's loud voice boomed through the door. Calvin opened it and looked in. "Hey Little C you got business for me?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Q. I got Mama's numbers for you and ten bucks." He held up a wadded up ten dollar bill and a small neatly folded piece of paper. Johnny, an aging Sicilian, wore stretched out polo shirts, and poplin pants. He sat at a warped wooden desk covered in knife marks and the base had cracks where unhappy

customers had kicked it. All day, every day, he took bets both in person and on the phone, and drank soda pop. He wore his thinning hair short and Calvin noticed his eyes always appeared bloodshot and he seemed to need a shave. The little boy feared the man because of his size alone. Johnny stood six feet tall, and his waist was almost as wide and he was tall. But that was when he first met him. Calvin was only six back then and now at eight, almost nine, Calvin knew Mr. Q would never hurt him. Sometimes when Mama had a late afternoon bet to place, Johnny gave Calvin a slice of pizza from Crazy Harry's Sicilian Pizza Parlor. Calvin loved pizza, but always took the anchovies off before he ate. He thought they were ugly and tasted bad.

"Thanks kid," Johnny said as he took the paper from Calvin. "Wanna a coke?"

"Ice cold?"

"As always."

"Yes sir I'll take one." Calvin walked to the back room. He got a small green bottle from the refrigerator and walked back to Johnny's desk. "Can I have a receipt please?"

Johnny gave him the piece of paper and Calvin headed out the door. "See you next time Mr. Q."

"Stay safe kid," the grizzled old man called after him.

Calvin went back down to the street and took his time walking and drinking the icy cola.

He finished the bottle and turned it in a Mr. Young's Corner Market. He got five pennies for the bottle deposit and bought five penny candies with the money. When he got back to the apartment, he gave his mama the receipt. She sat on the couch watching one of those trial shows. Calvin thought it was silly because all the grown-ups did was yell and scream at each other. He heard enough of that while he walked down the hall in his building. Mama gave him a hug before he took his candy into his tiny bedroom. He had an old twin bed one of his cousins outgrew and the lamp on the milk crate serving as a nightstand came from a yard sale one of the neighbors sold to Mama after her husband died.

He sat on the floor by the bed and pulled an old peanut butter jar out from underneath the mattress. He put four pieces

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Robin K. Ferguson grew up in Phoenix and is a third-generation Arizonan. Since 2001, she has been a student in the Phoenix College Creative Writing Department. She completed the certificate program in December 2006. She has completed one novel, "Layers of the Heart," and more than a dozen short stories. She works for the Department of Veterans Affairs and was a member of the Arizona Army National Guard for 11 years. She lives in Phoenix with her husband, Jim; son, Travis; two dogs (Peaches and Harley); and three cats (Tigger Too, Gus, and PJ). Contact Robin at phxwriter@gmail.com.

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of candy in the jar so he could save them and the mice wouldn't get to them and ate the fifth one.

He went into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"Calvin baby," Mama said. "Was Mr. Johnny nice to you?"

"Yeah Mama, he even gave me a coke from his own stash."

"What was that word child?"

"Stash Mama."

"Baby, that's not a good word. Someone might think you'd be talking about something else. Don't use that word no more."

"Yes Mama. I won't."

He went back into the bedroom and pulled a comic book from between the mattress and bed frame. He read the old worn pages for a few minutes then put it back in its hiding place. He got a piece of scratch paper his teacher gave him before summer vacation, and a pencil he got for winning the class spelling bee, and drew a little comic strip he called "The Adventures of Calvin". On paper in small squares, Calvin became a super hero who rescued small children from the older kids. Next to the jar, he had an old cereal box full of comic strips he drew. He hoped someday he could draw with colored pencils on bright squares of white paper, and he would do his own comic book and sell it to a publisher in the city.

The next morning Calvin repeated his trip to Johnny Q's.

"Mama won some money Mr. Q."

"Yeah kid, I know. She got twenty-five clams on a race. Does she want to play it?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Q she gave me the numbers for fifteen dollars and told me to bring ten back."

"Get a coke while I get you your money."

Calvin went into the back room. Next to the refrigerator sat small cartons of empty bottles. He counted at least twenty sitting there. "Hey Mr. Q, can I have the empty bottles back here?"

"Kid, you take all you can carry."

"Thanks."

Calvin stuffed a bottle in each of his faded jeans' pockets and picked up three cartons. He stopped by Johnny's desk and put the bottles down. The man gave him the ten dollar bill which he stuffed down his sock, and picked up the bottles.

As he neared Mr. Young's store, Calvin started doing his five's times table in his head. Twenty bottles equaled one hundred pennies, or a whole dollar. A whole dollar he thought to himself.

He took the bottles inside and came out the his five penny candies, a chocolate bar for his mama, and three quarters, a dime and a nickel stuffed deep in his sock. The coins felt cool against his anklebone.

At home, Calvin gave Mama the ten-dollar bill and the chocolate bar after he explained to her how he could afford the candy. Calvin took his candy and the change and put it in the jar with the candy.

Mama had him take her ten dollar bill and numbers back to Johnny's the next day. He left with twenty more bottles. He

bought Mama a red lollipop and a candy bar for himself. He put the change in the jar.

Later in the day, Calvin went out. He saw his friend Jimmy Culpepper on the stoop. "Where you headed Calvin?" Jimmy called to his friend.

"To the Five and Dime."

"You got money Calvin." His brown eyes popped from his light freckled face.

"Nope."

"Then why you goin' to the Five and Dime."

"I want to see how much colored pencils and a drawing pad cost."

"Can I go to?"

"Come on," Calvin said. The two little boys walked down the block passed the corner market and to the Five and Dime Store across from Johnny's office.

Inside the store Calvin saw a set of Crayola colored pencils with twenty-four colors for two dollars and ninety-eight cents. Down the row sat shelf full of drawing pads. One pad had 100 sheets of thin tan pages for two dollars, but the one he wanted was a pad of fifty sheets of pristine white paper. It cost three dollars and fifty cents. He knew the pencil box would substitute for a ruler and he had a small sharpener at home, so he needed almost seven dollars.

"Calvin they have this really cool set of soldiers. There are one hundred of them in this little bag for three-ninety eight. How much money do you have Calvin?"

"Not enough Jimmy. Come on," Calvin grabbed his friend's arm. "I got some business to discuss with Mr. Q."

"Calvin I can't go in there. My dad would wup me good."

"I need your help Jimmy and no one needs to know."

"How about I wait outside?"

"Okay you big chicken."

They crossed the street, dodging a couple of Mr. Q's clients on the road and sidewalk.

Calvin went inside and knocked his special knock. Johnny called for him to come in. "You got another bet for your mom kid."

"No sir, I came to talk to you about business." He stood in front of the desk with his hands resting at his side.

"What?" Johnny looked at Calvin, then took a swig of soda "I'd like to have more of your empty coke bottles."

"What for?"

"I want to buy something at the Five and Dime and I need five dollars and ten cents."

"That's a good chunk of change for a little guy like you. What's it for?"

"Paper and colored pencils."

"You an artist kid?"

"I like to draw and I need some pencils and paper. That's all."

"Okay kid."

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“Now you said I could take all your bottles away and keep the deposit.”

“I did.”

“Then can I take some more bottles?”

“Yeah, yeah, but if you want some real money, say ten bucks, I have a little job needs to be done.”

“Can I take Jimmy Culpepper with me?”

“Yeah, but I’m only paying ten dollars.”

“Fifteen for the two of us.”

“Hey kid, you got some cajones behind that little joy stick of yours.”

“Fifteen for the two of us. Jimmy will have my back and your errand will get done twice as fast.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling a small enveloping from the desk drawer. “You put this letter in your sock and deliver it to this address. Get an answer and come back. Then I’ll give you the money.”

“How bout ten now, and the last five when we get back?”

“I’ll give you five now and ten when you get back.”

“Okay. Can we still have the bottles?”

“Yeah, then nobody will know you’re carrying for me.”

Calvin ran to the back and collected four cartons and took them down to Jimmy. He went back and picked up the last three. He called good bye to the old man and left.

Mr. Young and the boys counted forty-two bottles. The boys left with two lollipops and eight quarters.

Calvin told Jimmy they had a job to do for Johnny Q and then they could go to the Five and Dime. They walked passed their building, turned south at the corner and went to a building four blocks away. Once again Jimmy opted to wait outside while Calvin went inside.

He knocked the special coded knock he used at Johnny Q’s and a voice called for him to come in. A large fat bald man in a baggy white shirt with a bright red tie sat behind a gray metal desk. “You ain’t one of my regulars. What the hell do you want?”

Calvin pulled the folded envelope from his sock and handed it to the man over his desk. “I’m supposed to wait for an answer.”

The man read the letter and turned as white as the only clean spot on his dingy shirtfront. He wrote a note, folded it up and stuck it in the envelope. He gave Calvin a five dollar bill. “Now get lost kid.”

Calvin stuffed the envelope back into his sock and left. He took the five and shoved it into his pocket with the five Johnny gave him.

“Let’s go Jimmy, we gotta get back to Mr. Q’s, then we’re done.”

They ran back towards their building. Once they stood on

their own stoop to take a break from the heat, Calvin pulled one of the fives from his pants pocket. “Here Jimmy,” Calvin said. “Now let’s finish the job and go to the Five and Dime.”

They walked back to Johnny’s office and Calvin took the envelope into him. Johnny gave him two five dollar bills and told him to leave.

Across the street at the store, the boys, each with ten dollars to spend, started looking around. Calvin picked up one box of the colored pencils and one pad of the white paper. He got a new ruler and pencil sharpener. Jimmy got the bag of soldiers, and some marbles.

Calvin walked to the shampoo aisle and looked at the combs and barrettes. He saw a small black comb with a rhinestone butterfly on the edge. It was two dollars. He counted in his head, and took the comb off the display rack. The boys walked to the register and a clerk came to check them out.

As she finished bagging Calvin’s art supplies an explosion rocked the street. The store windows shook and from across the street people saw smoke billowing from the doorway to Johnny’s office. A second explosion started the fire and cracked the windows of Johnny’s building and two sets of windows on each side of it.

Calvin ran to the store’s glass door and looked out. He saw a white car idling down the street, and leave when a third smaller blast shook the ground. The boy knew Johnny and anyone else in his office was dead or dying.

“Come on Jimmy we gotta go.”

“Little boy, it isn’t safe to go outside,” the clerk said. “You two need to stay here until the police say it is clear.”

“Ma’am we gotta get home to our Mamas so they don’t worry about us.”

She rang up Jimmy’s toys and the boys left the store. They ran to Calvin’s apartment, and sat down on either side of Calvin’s Mama on the couch.

“My heavens boys what is the matter with the two of you.”

Calvin told his mama about the bottles and the job he did for Johnny Q, and then he told her about the explosion. Last, he showed her his drawing pad and pencils. “Now I can really draw a comic strip Mama, and make us some money. You won’t have to spend money on Johnny Q no more.” He fished down into the bag and drew out the hair comb with the rhinestone butterfly out and put it into his mother’s hand.

“Why Calvin, that’s the prettiest butterfly I’ve ever seen. Thank you Baby.” She pulled Calvin to her and kissed his moist head. “Now you two go along and play in Calvin’s room.”



Two weeks later Mama’s check came in the mail. She gave Calvin a ten dollar bill and a piece of paper. He ran down the street and four blocks south to the fat man’s Numbers Hole. After being asked to come in, Calvin gave the man the money and numbers. “You got any sodas Mr. Frank?” Calvin asked.

The Limb Shop

By Robin K. Ferguson

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I saw the full-color advertisement in the Arizona Republic newspaper Wednesday morning. The Limb Shop, a new store down the street and around the corner in the little strip mall, opened on the weekend. The little strip mall had a Laundromat, where people could do laundry for fifty cents a load, watch videos, and have a beer twenty-four hours a day – except on Sundays before noon – and a Copy Shop both run by an aged man from Saigon named Mr. Sang,. He only appeared happy when he cursed at people in broken English and Vietnamese. He wore the little blue or black pajamas like the kind you saw in every bad Chinese movie ever produced. I think he wanted to play the part. Totally bald, yet with a beautiful smile with a full set of teeth, Mr. Sang sold ice cream, sodas in glass bottles: green for Coke, and clear for Pepsi. He hated sodas but they brought in a lot of money on hot Phoenix days.

His copy machine only ran one-sided copies in purple ink because he loved purple. He sold stamps but only one stamp per sale, and that wonderful tasty ice cream from Thrifty's even though Thrifty's closed years ago. It tasted like Thrifty's Ice Cream and came in the form of tubes like Thrifty's Ice Cream so every Friday after work I went down to his Copy Shop for ice cream. He stocked my favorite flavors of chocolate mint and butter pecan, yet he always tried to put a scoop of vanilla on a cone and hand it to me. I had to insist I wanted the chocolate mint and butter pecan. Some Fridays, I would ask for vanilla and he would try to give me strawberry.

Mr. Sang rented the space on the end of the strip mall to the new Limb Shop. I don't know how much he asked for rent, I only know that other merchants had applied to use the space for their businesses but couldn't afford it. Somehow, the Limb Shop had the money. Butcher paper covered the walls for weeks, and constructions noises rumbled from the inside.

A bright yellow Limb Shop flier was in my mailbox when I got home from work. In bold red letters, it promised all first day customers a ten percent discount on any purchase, free coffee, pastries from Barb's Bakery, and Krispy Kreme Donuts.

I got up early on Saturday morning so I could clean the kitchen from cupboards to floors, start washing the huge mound of dirty white socks and underwear my son and husband seemed to accumulate in one week's time, wash the dog, and groom the two cats before I ventured out to do any shopping.

Once done with all my chores I read the Republic and the Tribune while I drank a large mug of herbal tea to calm my nerves. I didn't want to eat because the Limb Shop flyer had promised free Barb's pastries and the Krispy Kreme donuts I loved so much.

In middle of reading the comics, I recalled how Cousin Benny went to the Limb Shop in Saginaw and got a new foot, after he lost the original one while bear hunting in Canada. Benny spent three days waiting for a black bear he saw lumbering around the woods near his hut. He wanted to catch it in the trap then shoot it so he wouldn't have to walk too much in the woods where other hunters might shoot him by mistake. Well on that fourth day, he couldn't remember where he placed the trap so he went walking towards the direction he faced for the three days and stepped right down into those steel jaws. It cut clear through muscles, tendons and bone and took his foot off. My other cousin Clyde found him bleeding to death and facing that black bear. Clyde shot that bear right in the brain and it dropped dead in front of the two of them. Their mom, my Aunt Gretchen, was so very proud of Clyde for saving Benny's life and killing that big black bear, she granted his biggest life-long wish to go to Space Camp in Alabama. He wanted to go there ever since he saw the movie "Space Camp" and since he saved his brother's life, Aunt Gretchen paid the tuition for him to go for one week that summer. She sent Benny to the Limb Shop where he got a new foot with hairy toes and all. She took the bear and had it made into a rug for the floor in front of her potbelly stove. Everyone in the family got what they wanted but the boys had to promise to not go hunting again.

Jack Goring, a friend of my Aunt Sadie in San Diego loved his new Limb Shop leg. He could run, and play, and wiggle his toes too. I thought he had a lot of energy for someone who claimed to be eighty-five years old, and I worried about his heart. He and Sadie didn't seem to worry. He never talked about how he lost his leg, but the way Sadie talked about him I knew she knew how it happened. That was more than I needed to know.

At 10:00 a.m. sharp, I walked through the double glass doors of the Limb Shop, at the end of Mr. Sang's strip mall, under a tall arch of deep gold and navy blue balloons. Along one wall, tables covered with navy blue table clothes with deep gold runners sat in such a way as any caterer would have been proud to have placed them. There were copper, silver and gold carafes of decaffeinated coffee, regular coffee, and hazelnut chocolate coffee. Two more large urns, one navy blue and the other, deep gold, labeled hot water sat on another table with deep gold and navy blue baskets of herbal, decaffeinated and English teas, and packets of plain cocoa and peppermint cocoa for hot chocolate. A third

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table held red pitchers of apple juice, orange pitchers of orange juice, yellow pitchers of grapefruit punch (that's what the signs said), and purple pitchers of cranberry juices. I wondered for a fleeting moment if Mr. Sang saw those purple pitchers he'd try to procure one for his store. Huge silver trays holding dozens of plump pastries filled with fruit and cheese from Barb's Bakery and dozens of Krispy Kreme donuts laid on platters on the fourth table. Another table held a display with Limb Shop pencils and pens, post-a-note pads, mouse pads, stress-busters shaped like arms and legs, small bumper stickers, and plastic tote bags in all navy blue with deep gold lettering. Each item proclaimed "Where a Little Cut and Patch Gives You a New Limb to Scratch" in Comic Sans font.

Along the opposite wall stood a long navy blue counter, veined with trails of deep gold, populated with smiling clerks, wearing blue tunics with gold braid and large gold nametags, each waited for their first customers. I seemed to be the only customer.

I picked the middle clerk. Young and blond; she appeared to be no more than sixteen years old. Her nametag pronounced her to be Molly B. She appeared eager to use her new customer service training the flier had promised all the employees completed prior to their placement in the new Limb Shop store. I wanted Molly B. to answer all my questions about getting a new right forearm and hand.

I walked straight to Molly B. and requested a catalog, and she pulled one out from under the counter. She placed it in front of her and slid it across to me. The clerk thanked me for coming and dismissed me with a blank stare before I could even ask one question.

I sat down in a white folding chair in the corner near the food tables, and opened the full color booklet. The pages held pictures of beautiful legs and arms, hands and feet, all displayed on lush jewel-toned velvet backgrounds. I marveled at the variety of shapes, and skin tones available to customers. Then I looked at my own misshapen joint with its two scars and lopsided bone structure.

My memory flashed back to the high school Rodeo Dance where I broke my wrist. My friends and I wanted to take the hayride around the sports' fields adjacent to the high school. My turn to ride was the one and only time the student body president allowed the head cheerleader to drive his ancient green Suburban as it pulled the flatbed trailer that served as the wagon. We were enjoying the cool evening air as we rode past the football scoreboard and towards the baseball diamond where the varsity team was having a late practice. From what they told me, she took a fast turn around the baseball backstop and my bale of hay slid off the trailer. While sliding backward, I blacked out. I landed on a rock and Gary Kalaf landed on me. One of the baseball players helped me up. However, instead of holding me

around the shoulder or waist, he supported my right arm with both hands. They rushed me to the Teachers' cafeteria where the track coach and junior varsity football coach pondered the possibility that my wrist bones appeared dislocated. I told them to call my doctor, then my mother, and to tell her to meet us at Good Sam. They said they needed to get instructions from my mother. She told them the same thing. Once I got to the hospital, it took the doctor six tries to set the two bones.

Seven months later, I had my first surgery and I loved how much attention I got when I was in the hospital, especially from two football players who were also stuck in the hospital on a Saturday night. One boy had two broken legs, and the other a more mobile running back had a broken arm. The nurses bribed us with ice cream so we would be quiet that night. They didn't want us waking up other patients. We stayed up until 2:00 a.m. watching old movies eating ice cream and pork rinds.

After the second surgery, I begged the doctor to let me out a day early so I could go see "Birth of a Nation" at the Sombrero Theater on New Years' Eve. He let me go as soon as my low-grade fever went down to normal. I was so very disappointed to discover the movie was about the beginnings of the Ku Klux Klan.

As I thumbed through the pages of the thick catalog, I remembered how many times I got out of doing push-ups while in the Arizona Army National Guard. The doctors that examined my arm realized that the wrist was deteriorating and push-ups would do more damage than good for me. The thought of not doing push-ups made me smile even more than remembering those adolescent football players.

Towards the back of the booklet, I found the right forearms. Each one had a part number, but no price listed beside the detailed description of the attributes of obtaining a brand new right forearm. Once I found the model I liked I went back to Molly B. and told her I needed a price check. She turned to her computer and typed in a few entries before asking me for the specific catalog number. Again, she typed more numbers and letters on the keyboard. Looking up at me, she pronounced it would cost \$4995, plus the local eight percent sales tax, and \$10,000 for hospitalization at the Limb Shop Care Center located in the beautiful Colorado town of Greenlee. She then noted that the Limb Shop did not accept insurance, and travel to and from the center was at the patient's expense.

I looked at Molly. I looked at the lovely forearm on the deep purple velvet background. I looked at my battered wrist. I summoned up new visions of those two handsome football players, and tried to calculate all of the push-ups I didn't have to do for ten years, and then finally saw faint glimpses of the Rodeo Dance in my mind. Then I thought of everything I could buy with \$4995, plus tax, and \$10,000 for hospitalization. I told her thank you and walked away. Before I left the strip mall's Limb Shop, I took up a tote bag full of the giveaway items, two large cheese Danishes and grabbed a box of Krispy Kremes for my family.

The Christmas Package

By W. Jerald Cole

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Mack let out a big sigh as he headed towards the last store that might possibly have the Christmas toy he was seeking for his son Jake. It seemed a miracle that he had received an unexpected Christmas bonus at work. Otherwise, there would have been no real present for Christmas. Unfortunately, it was Christmas Eve, no worse time to try to buy something specific, the toy Young Mars Explorers Space Ship Simulator, that had been advertised on TV and pointed out to him by his son. He really wanted to make Christmas special for his son, who had made so many sacrifices and had so much loss in his young life. He really wanted to bring him some happiness for the holiday.

This was the first Christmas without his wife Jeanne, who died shortly after the last holiday. She hadn't felt well for the longest time. She got to the point where she could not even get herself to her part time job. By the time the doctors figured out the cause of her illness, they could only prolong her life, not save her. With medical intervention, she had lasted almost a year before she withered and then passed.

Things had been tough since then, with Mack becoming a single parent of a nine-year-old boy. It was hard for Mack and Jake to lose Jeanne, who had been a great wife and mother and the medical expenses and missed work had made it a very tough year financially. Still, he and his son got through it. He made it a point to play cheerleader for his son. With every setback, he would try to point out the good things to his son, and himself. "On the other hand, look at the good things," he would always say. After all, he still had a job and they had a roof over their heads, a working car, and most importantly, each other.

He now found himself in front of a toy store. At this point "The" toy store, since none of the other stores had any of the toys left. He stepped quickly from the dimly lit parking lot into the bright fluorescent lights of the store. He glanced at the signs above the aisles, and headed for the section where the toy might be. If he could not get the Young Mars Explorers Space Ship Simulator here, he would have to get some other toy, just so that there would be something under the tree in the morning. At this point, he was hoping for the best. He wanted to close the year on

a happy note.

Although Jake could entertain himself with just about anything, he most loved anything to do with space. He fed his interest by watching the Science Fiction shows on TV, or reading library books, or watching an occasional DVD as a special treat. Jake was an exceptional child, with an amazing amount of imagination. He was amazing in this age of video games. He could play alone for hours with whatever was at hand, never complaining that he did not have the games his friends played. He never smiled, but the only thing Jake ever seemed to complain about was how he missed his mother. Mack thought that getting this toy for Jake would put a smile on his face.

As Mack approached the aisle, he could see one of the toys on display, sitting above the shelves. He smiled. Success! As he rushed down the aisle, his smile disappeared. There were no more toys on the shelves. Mack looked around for assistance and then used his recently practiced skills to spot and collar a clerk.

The clerk looked tired and dejected. Quickly noting the store badge showing her name he said, "Kim, are there any more of these toys stored in back?"

Kim's response wasn't what he hoped for. "No, I just checked for another customer. He yelled at me because the only one in the store is the one on display, and we don't even have the box for it."

Mack sympathized with Kim. It was obvious the customer had hurt her feelings. He explained how he really wanted the toy for his son, and why. "Can you sell me the display one? It doesn't look like there is anything wrong with it."

Kim seemed to share Mack's disappointment. She seemed eager to please. "I think it is okay. We could get a ladder and check." She really had sympathized with Mack's story.

Kim came back with the ladder and a large plain cardboard box. Just then, a rough looking young man wearing a dingy hooded sweatshirt rushed up yelling, "I want that toy! Even without the box, I have a buyer. He has promised to give me 50 percent over my cost if I can find one for him."



W. Jerald "Jerry" Cole has had a desire to write speculative fiction since he was in college. Life intervened. Since then he raised a family, has a wife and grown sons and is now "semi-retired" from the work force. Over the years, doing everything from plumbing to Information Technology, he has had plenty of opportunity for technical and business writing, but except for note taking on the bus he was too busy for his fiction. He now finally has time to work on his writing. He is involved with a local writers group and is transcribing his 30 years of notes to use on several short story and novel ideas. Jerry can be contacted at w.jerald.cole@gmail.com.

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Kim frowned at the young man. "I am sorry sir, but you didn't want it when you were here a few minutes ago, and this nice man here has already said that he wants it for his boy, Jake."

The young man's face started to turn red. His efforts to hide his temper were unsuccessful. His anger was obvious. "I will tip you ten dollars if you sell it to me instead of him."

Either Kim was much tougher than she looked, or the young man had really upset her when he had been in earlier. "I am sorry sir. We are not allowed to take tips." She went back to climbing up the ladder to get the toy.

The young man let out a huff of exasperation. He turned and walked quickly out of the store.

Kim brought the toy down, handing it to me from the ladder. "I brought this box for you to use, and a ribbon you can put on top of it." She smiled and said, "There is some newspaper for packing in there too, so you can keep it from getting damaged on the trip home."

I thanked Kim profusely as she helped me put the toy in the box, carefully cushioning it with crumpled newspapers. She helped me carry the box up to the register. When I cautiously offered her a tip she said, "There really is a store policy that I can't take a tip." I made it a point to put in a good word to the store manager who was at the register."

As Mack drove home, so pleased to have bought the toy, he never even noticed an angry hooded driver in a pickup truck following him home. When Mack pulled into his garage the pickup truck drove on by. He shut the car off and left the box on the floor as he carefully walked through the cluttered garage. He then went in to greet Jake and let the sitter from across the street go home. He watched from the front door to make sure she got inside safely.

□□□

While Mack and Jake enjoyed a simple Christmas Eve dinner, a hooded figure got out of a pickup, threw an empty cloth sack over his shoulder, and quickly opened a gate into the back yard and then entered the garage. Using a flashlight, he spotted the big box, and hastily removed the toy from it, putting it in his sack. He

then picked up some odd pieces of clutter: some bricks, some old gauges, a couple of pieces of pipe, a piece of Plexiglas, and then some discarded light switches with dangling wires and placed them in the box. Once he was satisfied with the weight, he stuffed the newspapers back in to keep things from moving around. He closed the box and stuck the bow back on top, leaving the package as he had found it. He then beat a hasty retreat to his pickup truck, with the toy safely nestled in the bag over his shoulder, like Santa in reverse.

Late that night, while visions of sugarplums were dancing in Jake's head, Mack brought in the Christmas box from the garage. He carefully placed it in front of the tree, unaware that anything was amiss.

□□□

Mack woke in the morning to the sounds of Jake playing by the Christmas tree. He hurried to put on his robe to go watch his son with his new toy. Surprised, he stopped in his tracks when he came into the room.

In the middle of the living room was the Christmas box, but no toy. In fact, Jake had cleverly used a bunch of garage junk to embellish the box, creating a rough imitation of a space ship control cockpit. It took only a moment for Mack to understand the missing toy, and the scraps from his own garage, and the rude stranger who had wanted the last toy in the store.

Just as tears were about to come to Mack's eyes, Jake realized that his dad was there and turned towards him. He hollered in excitement, "Merry Christmas Dad. Look at the great space ship I got. It's just like the Young Mars Explorers, only more fun cause I can change it how I want."

As Mack heard Jake's genuine joy, he blinked away the tears.

Jake then handed his Dad a rough watercolor painting that had a boy and a man standing next to a space ship. "Here Dad, this is my Christmas present for you."

Smiling in to his dad's eyes Jake said, "Do you like it Dad?"

Mack's face broke into a big smile of its own. Looking at his son's big smiling face he said, "This is exactly the present I was hoping for."

Relationship Haiku – Sex and Love in Seventeen Syllables

By Dan Ramirez

First Impression

Sizzling green eyes.
Smile brighter than July.
deep Cleavage. Freckles.

Dancing

He stares. Lust rays of
desire leave tingly tracks
upon my skin.

Meeting the Parents

Nervous. Do I smell.
First time meeting the parents.
Dad knows we're boning.

Exploring

Your hand on my cock.
Stroke, squeeze, tease. Throbbing with lust.
I love you. Fuck me.

First Time

I want to, but it
won't fit. Relax. Breathe. It hurts.
Where's the Astroglide?

Bedroom games

Firm. Very large. Smack!
Overlapping prints of pain.
Spank me. I've been bad.

First Apartment

Our small apartment.
Squeaking, screaming sounds of sex.
Neighbor pounding on the wall.

Intoxicated

Spread your legs. Your smell
dazzles. I tear underclothes.
Teasing tongue. Eat me.

Perverse Pleasure

Nails painted red.
Small feet caress my scrotum
Perverted pleasures.

AfterPlay

Warm caressing breeze
re-ignite trails of lust
across sweaty skin.

Disagreements

I love you so much.
Crying. Why did you fuck her?
A shrug. I was drunk.

Children

Door flings open. Eyes
dart. Covers adjust. Sniffing.
"Smells like tuna. I'm hungry!"

Married Many Years

Celebration on
our anniversary day.
Flowers and a fuck.

Older, Together

Wrinkling, saggy
reflections. Caricatures
of youth. More in love.

Alone

Police at the door,
uncomfortable, fidgeting.
"About your wife, sir...."

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At seventeen Dan was discouraged by his family and high school counselor from pursuing a career as a writer. Forty years later, he picked up a pen and discovered his voice as a poet. Contact him at luftpistole@cox.net.

At The Market

By Dan Ramirez

© 2009

Hey, Red.

Uh... Vicki! Hey, wow.... it's been awhile. Yeah.....

Fifteen years, Red. Sometimes I see your Mom around.

You, uh, did you move back to the neighborhood?

Nah, no... just shopping for my Mother. I was visiting and saw she needed some stuff. How about you?

We live with my parents. You know, it's hard getting out and established, single mom and all...

Yeah, yeah....So.... So. Who's this?

This is my daughter, Charlene. Charlene, this is my old friend Red, ah, Charles. Some of us call him Red.

Nice to meet you, Charles. Yeah, some of my friends call me Red, too.

So... I guess you go to our old school. Yeah.... So...so what grade are you in, Charlene?

Ninth.

So that makes you how old?

Fourteen.

Encounter

By Dan Ramirez

© 2009

We press together, reflecting the day – slick, sweaty, hot. Tangy body scents envelop us.

I push. Tight. Resistance. I push harder. A hitch. Readjusting releases my effort, takes me deeper; warm, slick, grasping.

She moans. I smile. In and out, we repeat. Over and over.

She's seventeen. I'm seventeen – again.

Above and Below the Board

By Trish Dolasinski

© 2009

It was just another routine lavatory journey with my first grade class, marching single-file and led by an eighth grade patrol girl – or so it seemed to me on that day during that first week at St. Michael Catholic School. As we paraded by a multitude of classrooms in the junior high corridor, bright blue chalkboards covered the walls – ours were black and dusty.

Well, dusty just until the end of the day when the board washing captains filled the metal buckets with water, stood on Sister's chair and wiped them squeaky clean with big yellow sponges. It was only the fourth day of school, but I hoped I could be board washing captain some day.

A, B, C, D . . . and an F and a P I was proud that I could read the sprawling white printed letters as I sneaked a barely visible peek at blue boards in the classrooms.

The first grade girls filed quietly, one by one, into the girls' lavatory. As leader, the junior high patrol girl stood in attentive authority, allowing all the girls enter – two-abreast and tin soldier-style.

"Maggie, can you help me?" said a quiet voice in the next stall to mine. "I can't tie my bow."

"Yup, I can do it," I replied proudly, as I unlocked my door and slipped into her stall entrance.

My classmate wore a dandelion yellow cotton dress with a sash that was crisply ironed and hard to grip at first. I twisted and tugged and finally tied a bow without any visible spaces in the material. It would not loosen soon. Sister told us that Jesus wants us to help others and I was secretly pleased with myself to be following the rules.

Or was I following the rules?

The junior high patrol girl didn't think so. She reported to Sister Thaddeus that I had entered the stall of another student, and I was immediately plucked out of line. My new saddle oxfords tapped against the freshly waxed linoleum floors as I was led away – the only sound in the long corridor it seemed.

"Mar – gar – et Ma – ry! Don't you know the rule that only one child can be in a stall at a time?"



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Tears filled my eyes when she said my name in syllables.

"Yes, Sister," I said, "but I was only"

As Sister Thaddeus took my arm and walked me to the first grade hall, I knew a sin had been committed and I would be punished.

"Stand before the cross and beg Jesus to forgive your disobedience," Sister Thaddeus directed as we entered our empty classroom.

Her eyebrows almost touched the top of her stiffly starched white habit, indenting the pores of the skin on her forehead. The thin rimless spectacles nudged toward the tip of her slender aquiline nose.

With shaking knees, quivering limbs and hands tightly interlaced in prayer-mode, I stood before the large brown crucifix that hung above the dusty black chalkboard of my first grade classroom. It was the same chalkboard we used to practice our lowercase printing with big sticks of white chalk just before lunch. The board now stood guard, moments before my punishment.

The holy symbol I regarded with great awe now loomed formidably above the white-hazed chalkboards. My blazing golden-orange skirt barely covered my knees. Mother made the skirt for me earlier in the spring and I was taller now.

If it was the second week of school, I would be already wearing my longer, new navy blue school uniform jumper and that would help.

The sun beamed a brilliant glow through the long wooden-framed west windows of the rusty red brick Midwestern building, but lying beneath the beautiful oak trees that shaded the playground would be off-limits on that day. Running and jumping rope on the blacktop playground were not available choices either.

Trees that flourished in the rich black soil reached far beyond the long windows of the second floor of the old school and cast a foreboding shadow over the playground. Blazing marigolds the color of my too-short skirt, blossomed abundantly, audacious in the richly nourished soil. If it wasn't for the eighth grade patrol girl, my bright skirt would not be such a dilemma today.

After what seemed like hours was probably only ten minutes, but all forty students marched in and took their seats in terrified silence. Sister slowly and purposefully glided across the front of the room, picked up a wooden ruler from the top of her desk and slid her chair in front of the desk.

As she sat down on the chair, the wooden rosary beads that

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hung from her narrow black leather belt met the hard oak floors in a clashing cascade. She adjusted her flowing cotton robes and flipped my frame across her well-padded lap.

Eyes poised downward, I gazed at the marbled pattern of the linoleum floor now just inches before my nose. Yards of gauze-like black and creamy white fabric from Sister's habit pooled below the chair as the wooden ruler came down upon my skirt. The flowing yards of fabric did not cover the backs of my bare legs and I was certain the entire first grade class could see my underwear.

I survived the afternoon of stares and glares. I decided I would wait until I got home to use the bathroom from now on. At the dinner table that night, my mother knew something was wrong.

"Maggie, you're not eating your meat loaf and potatoes," she said. "Are you sick?"

I usually mashed my potatoes flat all over my plate – until it almost touched the ends of dish – and placed small pieces of meatloaf on top just like a gigantic chocolate chip cookie. Tonight I didn't feel like cookies or potato-meatloaf.

Then came the tears – lots and lots. Between gasping sobs of

shame, I told my parents what happened that day. To my surprise, my dad came over and gently lifted me into his arms. I really cried then.

"I'll take care of this, tomorrow," he said. And he did.

I was soon enrolled in the local public school, attended religious education classes and went to church with my family every Sunday without fail. I continued to grow in my faith over the years of elementary, high school and college.

After graduating from a Jesuit university with honors, I went back to earn a teaching certificate. I accepted a position to teach fourth grade at St. Michael's. It was the 1970's and a lot of young lay teachers worked there. Not many nuns were left.

On the first day of school, I stood next to the phrase I wrote on the shiny new blue chalkboard: "WELCOME TO FOURTH GRADE." My legs shook and my limbs quivered. I cleared my throat, smiled, and said, "Good morning, boys and girls. I am Miss O'Brien, your fourth grade teacher this year. Let's begin our day by standing for prayer."

I walked to the side of the classroom and stood near the tall wooden-framed west windows. I faced the crucifix that hung above the shiny new blue chalkboard, bowed my head and devoutly led the class in prayer.

Snapshots from the Kurdish fashion show at the 2009 Blue Guitar Festival of the Arts



The Blue Guitar Magazine photos/Richard H. Dyer Jr.

Narrowing To The End

By Josh Louchheim

© 2009

From the outside looking in,
seeing this begin to change,
rearrange from the inside.
Looking out a window through another's eyes
it all begins to wash away.
Cleansing your killer instincts
now polished to impress.

Ravenous and undetected,
inching through the wilderness
while forming the new day.

Complying with the seasons,
they're changing for the worse
to show us this will end.
Going underneath yet still above your breath
as we gasp for air.

Consciously unconscious
we are searching for the edge of the Earth
Consciously unconscious
we have drifted to the end of the World
Consciously unconscious
we have found it...Narrowing to the End

Wolf Named Despair

By Josh Louchheim

When night falls it makes no sound.
Its creatures emerge, for they are bound
to the moon, which illuminates their impending doom.

Their senses are keen,
their intentions unclean; stalking the darkness,

they know just who they are, and just what they need.

My eyes are wide, and piercing through.
My tongue is moist, and tasting you.
The scent is strong, the sound still bare.
I am wolf, you are despair.

Paradox

By Josh Louchheim

Obscured by valor,
A prodigy amongst these warriors
Artificial rapture when disaster comes beckoning,
Amongst the legion legends are conceived
Sworn by oath, creation of destruction
Our prodigy begins to lead
The others away

From the carnages that awaits,
An act of faith, formulating
Around their minds
Congested with the thought of the fight
Who will survive
This mental quarrel?

Fading into the shadows of past affairs, despair.
Evaporating into the unknown, all alone.

No haven for heroes
Our warriors begin to run.
Simulating bravery now disbelief,



Josh Louchheim enjoys every aspect of art and creativity. Producing what is inside of him is what he loves to do. Josh's current focus is writing, with this being his first creative publication, as well as painting, which he began a year ago and hasn't been able to stop. He has also been known to work on an occasional film as well as write and perform music. Contact Josh at jl-vincent@hotmail.com, and see a few of his first paintings at www.phoenixartspace.com/jlvincent.

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They're coming undone.
Sworn allegiance,

Guaranteed that this would be

Their finest hour; Depiction of defeat
Our warriors begin to retreat.
Now they believe, the prodigies prophecies
Unraveling obscurities,
Within their minds
Now the defeated must rely
On this prophet they'd just denied.

Shades of White

Reflecting Shades of Grey

By Josh Louchheim

© 2009

Secrets tremble with their limbs bound in silk,
Whispering of a calculated escape.

Lies stand proud with transparent skin,
Listening in amusement; for they know they'll first be released.

I am the man of the Forest, held captive by the trees;
She is the lady of the desert, captivating the soul of the
Divine.

A Desert Named Regret

By Josh Louchheim

© 2009

Look at the sky it's old and broken;
worn like the skin of the Earth.
Weathered elemental corrosion,
teeming with phantasmagoria.
Eyes on the horizon please don't forget;
searching for answers in this desert named regret.
Where are the others? We must not fret.
The sun has been burning them down.

My eyes have gone missing but I still can see;
visions and omens manifesting spirituality.
We are the voices and from under us grow
the bird out of ashes, the phoenix arose.

Look at the sky it's clouded and congested,
interested with the destruction of Earth.
It's choking and swarming its warnings

crawling with phantoms and hysteria.
My eyes on the horizon, and I don't recall
this place or your face, this desert appalls

The others are here, now I must look back
for the sun will reveal its plans of attack.

Your eyes are now mine and now I can see
your thoughts and ambitions, your impurities.
Your voice is the answer and now I must grow
into a fiend spinning out of control.

Lightning strikes this desolate floor.
Scorching the Earth beneath our feet.
Wind begins to blow,
Bringing in this storm.
Taking with it all we had,
Dispersing it throughout the land.

The Zaltys

By Lysa Cohen

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Black, deathly stillness whispered insidiously through the wicked air, rife with the promise of gruesome death. It was a deafening quiet that could unnerve the most stalwart of warriors. For days, screams of agony filled the corridors and caverns of Peklos, the Slavic hell dimension, but now there was nothing.

No screams.

No wails.

Nothing but an oppressive silence that hung heavily in the stagnant air.

The prisoner was finally dead.

Yanna glided silently down the long stone corridor to her father's throne room, curiosity driving her forward toward what was sure to be a delightfully grisly sight.

Rich and spicy, the heady perfume of blood infused the cavern with its pungent aroma. Yanna closed her eyes and reveled in the intoxicating scent. How she loved the smell and sight of blood. It called to her, beckoned her with the promise of dark ecstasy. Not an odd occurrence given the fact that she was the goddess of misery and destruction.

Small and reed-like, Yanna's long blond curls framed her angelic face as they cascaded over her shoulders and down her slender back in a riot of curls and waves. The black silken material of her dress clung lovingly to her body and caressed her slender ankles as she moved. Over two thousand years old, she looked no more than twenty. Flawless pale skin accentuated her ethereal presence. Pure evil in a perfect form, she was a symphony of immoral perfection.

Peeking around the corner, Yanna froze. She stared with rapt intensity at the man suspended from the ceiling by a single heavy rope tied around his ravaged wrists. His clothes had been savagely ripped from his body, leaving him naked and exposed. Shallow breaths barely moved his massive chest.

The prisoner was not dead.

Swift disappointment made her frown. The death ritual was her favorite part. But, the actual killing may be a whole lot more fun. Her lips curved at that delicious thought.

Flesh hung from his limp body in bloody strips and crimson pools stained the floor beneath him. His face was a mask of torture and pain, the skin so swollen and angry, that his features were unrecognizable. But yet, she knew this man. Had felt his presence before.

Cieran.

He was an immortal warrior of the Slavic war god, Perun. A Válečník. One that hunted the vampires and demons that plagued the mortal realm. But now he was just another prisoner waiting execution.

Yanna watched in malevolent fascination as his icy blue eyes opened and focused on her. They were cold. Hard. Lethal. Shadowy with the guarantee of death. She felt a harsh chill spread through her, and purred at the terrible sensation that made her skin tingle and burn. Oh, he was terribly wicked.

With her gaze melded to his, she took a step into the chamber. Lit only by the multitude of torches mounted to the walls, Veles' throne room was cavernous. Dozens of demons and vampires waited with ill concealed impatience for the prisoner to die. The moment his heart ceased to beat, they could gorge themselves on his flesh and blood. Like a pack of rabid hyenas, they would devour their prey until nothing was left, save a pile of bloody bones.

It was a sight that never failed to amuse Yanna. She reveled in the grotesque annihilation of life.

Unable to control herself, she took another step.

Then another.

And another.

And another.

"Yanna!" Veles' deep bellow shook the chamber. As the

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god of death and master of the Zaltys, the serpent of Peklos, he was an imposing figure. Standing well over six feet, Veles had thick black hair that flowed down his heavily muscled chest currently encased in equally black leather. "What are you about, girl?"

Yanna slowly came to a stop, just feet from Cieran and stared up at him for a long moment before turning her head to look at her father. He stood several feet from the hanging warrior, a lethal looking blade in his hands. A child-like smile turned her lips up at the corners, her face serene. "I came to see the naughty prisoner." Turning back to Cieran, she moved around him in a graceful dance, her long, slender fingers lightly caressing his ravaged body. "Mmm. He fills my head with the most delicious agony." Bringing her fingers to her lips, she daintily licked his blood from their tips.

Peeking around Cieran, she looked at Veles with hopeful anticipation. "Can I play with him a little bit, father?"

From beneath her thickly fringed lashes, she looked up at Cieran, her tongue darting out to touch her top lip. "Would you like that, my sweet, wicked boy? Would you like to play a game? I know some good games."

Cieran glared heatedly down at her, his throat so inflamed, he was unable to speak aloud. Rage welled in him as pure unadulterated fury coursed through him like wildfire. How dare this tiny goddess taunt him. His hands itched with the desperate craving of her neck snapping under his hands. One of his gifts was the ability to connect himself psychically to others. One that he never hesitated to use to his own advantage, and this time would be no different. He would sear her organs from the inside out until she begged him to hurt her even more.

His soul sang with the black agony he was about to force on her. Finally he had found a creature as malevolent as he. One that could fully appreciate his dark talents. A purely evil smile began to curve his lips. He couldn't wait to taste her.

"Play with . . . No, you can't play with him! Where is your mother? Why aren't you helping her?" Veles demanded his tone with harsh annoyance. Crossing his arms across his thickly muscled chest, he stared at his only daughter with reprimand in his eyes.

Pouting prettily, Yanna merely glanced at her father. "Mom is gardening and I am bored."

"Then find something else to do, ducks." Veles' voice had lost most of its rancor, but was still firm with the distinct promise of violent castigation if she disobeyed.

Her eyes narrowed mutinously. She was not at all happy with her father's decree, but knew better than to argue with

him. She returned her attention to Cieran. "Pity. We could have had so much fun." Yanna took several gliding steps away from Cieran when she cried out and fell to her knees. Invisible iron bands wrapped around her black heart with greedy tendrils. Biting into her with wild ferocity, she felt Cieran irrevocably binding her to him. Everything else began to fade, save him. It was a surreal experience. She felt the pure iniquity inside him, the craving of death and destruction that matched her own. It was exhilarating.

With a sharp thrust, she felt him invade her, cementing the connection between them. And then he was in her mind, sharing her thoughts. Forcing her to share his torment. No! It was too much. Too much . . .

She clasped her hands over her stomach and wailed, rocking back and forth trying to relieve the burning that threatened to consume her whole.

What's this? I thought you wanted to play, little girl. Cieran's voice was ice cold in her mind, goading her as she had him. *Well, let's play.*

Terror gripped her cruelly and she panicked. She tried to escape, break the bond holding her to him, but he wouldn't let her. He forced her to stay psychically tethered to him. *No, no, no. You're not going anywhere. Where's your sense of whimsy?*

Unmitigated anguish tore through her body with dreadful delight. She could feel the gleeful bite of the knives and talons Veles had used to rip and maim his latest victim. Slash after searing slash shredded her body with unparalleled force. Her insides were molten with the pain as she panted for breath. Yes, Cieran whispered insidiously into her mind. *That's it, sweet love. Be in me. Feel what your father likes to do to his prisoners.*

"No!" Blood poured from the lacerations that now covered her chest and legs. Yanna screamed again and again, trying to force Cieran from her mind. He was killing her. Black spots popped and danced before her eyes as a wave of violent dizziness assaulted her. Dark agony exploded through her in wave after wave of brutal fire. She cried out a keening wail, the sound piercing through the cavern as she grabbed at the stones beneath her fingernails scratching at the rough surface, trying to find purchase.

Yes! He taunted her. Oh, yes. Don't fade on me now, darling. We've only just begun.

Veles watched dispassionately as Yanna writhed in agony on the bloody ground. "Your work?" he inquired, turning to look at Cieran, his face bland. "So you forced your torture on my daughter. Not impressed."

So the god wasn't impressed with Cieran's show of power.

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Not a problem, he had plenty more that were sure to leave an impression on Veles. Gathering all his remaining strength, Cieran focused his powers and directed them straight towards the god. Fire exploded and encompassed the entire room in a raging conflagration that consumed everything in its path. A sharp crack heralded the power and magic that ripped mercilessly through the chamber. Lightning forked through air and slammed Veles, sizzling and searing in its wrath.

Screaming, Veles clutched at the gaping wound in his chest. Blood rushed from the hole, quickly saturating everything around him. He bellowed again as he felt his powers being torn from his very soul. He could feel the serpent that resided within him, uncoiling and hissing in rage as it was wrenched from its home.

Still hanging from the single rope suspended in the center of the chamber, Cieran felt the serpent flash through his body. Instantly, the snake coiled around his organs and began to amalgamate with him.

The Zaltys.

It was in him. Consuming him. Becoming one with him.

Cieran writhed in unending agony as more fire raged to life and his body erupted in green scales. He could feel his tongue splitting, forking. The pupils in his eyes elongated and fangs exploded from his gums. Unimaginable strength raged through him. Dark power that reeked of evil intent. He reveled in it, in the promise of death, destruction and chaos. It was a heady torment, dark and intense. Closing his eyes, he stopped fighting and let the change wash over him. His flesh and organs knitted themselves back together until not a single scar remained. With each breath he took, the pain lessened until all that was left was power.

Opening his eyes, he glared mercilessly at the god. The might of the Zaltys hummed through his veins. "Still unimpressed? Or would you like to see more?" Controlling a single bolt of lightening, he directed it to the rope binding his hands. The rope disintegrated and he landed crouched on the bloodied ground.

Hands now free, Cieran fought off two demons that ran for him. He ripped through them with razor sharp fangs. Inside him, the serpent hissed. The demons dispatched, Cieran turned his full attention on Veles.

"You don't seem quite so powerful now, Veles. Or is it that you only like to torture victims when they are tied up?" he taunted, before striking out with lethal intensity.

Bellowing in frenzied wrath, the god of death countered the attack from Cieran with deadly purpose. Cieran had taken

a great deal of his powers, but he was still a god. Without a qualm, he rained down hell itself on the warrior.

Magic reverberated through the cavern, destroying everything in its path. Devastation and madness reigned as vampires exploded into dust and demons fell screaming to their death. Fire slammed into every surface, claiming everything in its molten wake.

Yanna felt the roiling of the floor beneath her and opened her eyes in time to see her father attack Cieran with bolt after bolt of pure black energy.

"No!" she screamed, choking on the blood now pouring from her mouth. She could feel the wrenching slices, which Veles in his fury, was carving through Cieran. "Father! No!" Terror gripped her. She was bound to the Válečník, and if her father killed Cieran, she would die too.

Veles ignored her, as he focused his attack. The warrior would pay for trying to kill him. He would pay with his miserable life. With one final bellow of rage, Veles threw everything he had at Cieran.

Yanna threw out an arm to counter her father's magic at the exact same time Cieran muttered a powerful protection spell.

With a deafening whoosh, the resulting explosion cratered the throne room.



Hours. Days. Weeks. Months. Years. Cieran had no idea how much time had passed as he lay on the cold hard ground. He forced open his eyes, and pushing himself to his knees, staring at what had once been Veles' throne room. Now it was just a devastated mass of stone and debris. The cavern was dark, lit only by a single torch mounted to the only remaining wall. Rank, sulfuric air filled his lungs as he watched the green ooze that had once been a demon drip endlessly down the wall to the putrid insect-infested puddles below.

Not far from him, Veles lay sprawled in a heap of black leather and blood. His shallow breathing told Cieran that the god wasn't dead.

At Cieran's side, Yanna lay as still as death, her face pale and eyes closed. Her thick lashes lay against her cheeks in half-moons. In repose she was angelic, despite the blood that coated her body. Long gashes had been carved out of her chest. Black smudges of soot covered her face.

Reaching out a hand, he caressed her hair. "I have good games for us to play," he whispered. "Good games for all."

Deep inside him, he felt the Zaltys stir to life, demanding in its savage hunger. The need to rip and shred and kill gnawed him from the inside out. It was a heady torment, dark and intense. And he gloried in it.

Old Man's Game

By John Mikal Haaheim

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“Sigenfoos pulled Rod over his back and laughed. That’s when Rod pushed him out the door,” relates mild, believable Mac, the only black man among us. His arms hang from high, broad shoulders. Sweat trickles down his palms and drips from fingers cradling the basketball. He breathes hard from the interrupted game, eyes reflect like lucent mirrors.

A ubiquitous Staff member listens to the incident. His shirt bears the logo Staff and he records on a sheet headed Report.

“Sigenfoos laughed because he was afraid,” I say. “Fear does that.” My face projects knife-blade thin, cheekbones high against slouching cheeks. My hands are translucent with traces of pale blue veins in striated marble. Beneath my T-shirt, chest muscles slump into androgynous breasts, my body transmuted by some ill-conjured philosopher’s stone. Sometimes I don’t recognize myself.

Staff says fear isn’t tangible. It can’t go in the report. He can only deal with facts. “Too bad.” I snap. “It should.” I swing my head toward Rod, see him to blame for the incident.

We play sixty-and-over basketball on Tuesdays and Thursdays, except for holidays, in the Hollyhock Community Center, between Teen-Volleyball and Mommy-and-Me classes. The dark, cool walls of the Community Center stretch up around us like hills to our valley. Florescent lights flicker in the branches of crisscrossed girders. Rubberized floors cushion joints and shelter ligaments like a field of mown grass. We are the old men of the Catskills playing at nine-pins become basketball. Occasionally, a young face pokes through the door, sees the white topped heads of aging Van Winkles bobbing down the court and leaves without bothering to ask if the Center is open.

My wife shoos me from the kitchen, warns me against playing ball. “You’ll break a leg,” she says, in dazzling imitation of my mother. I nod acknowledgement without committing.

“Let me grill tonight,” I ask, “a steak. What do you say?” I miss the marble-flecked counter, thick wooden cutting board, and brushed steel stove – miss my culinary creations. Shirley’s retirement has displaced me from the kitchen. Born of a need to fill her empty space, she has appropriated mine. She needs this

slice of routine, this dollop of control. The kitchen is good for her. She looks younger, hair darker, like before her second surgery. Cooking is a therapy I can’t begrudge her.

“No. We’re having cannelloni tonight.” She stirs a white sauce, points to the television. On-screen, Paula Dean ladles identical ingredients for the camera.

She returns tenaciously to her subject. “Why do you play? You always say how much it hurts.”

“How about sex on the counter – for old time’s sake?”

“Don’t change the subject. You know very well we never had sex on the counter, even for young time’s sake. Why do you play when you get hurt all the time?”

“It doesn’t hurt until the next day,” I say, as though that makes a difference.

Our conversations are semantics games. I use the word it to distance myself from whatever body part ails me. It is a balancing act, to confide yet keep her worries at bay. I am loathe to admit my physical shortcomings – the disc that protrudes in my back, the cervical narrowing that leaves my arm numb down to my little finger. Even less would I share the indignities of indigestion, constipation, and bothersome memory-lapses. But once energized, she refuses to drop the subject.

“Hurt is hurt. Besides that guy threatened you.”

“Not me. He threatened the big guy, the one with the funny name.”

“I could have sworn you got shoved.” She pauses, regains her stride. “Even so, it’s dangerous.”

My wife has this knack with memory. She pencils my words on mental sticky notes and retrieves them at inconvenient times. I feel both pride and annoyance at her recall. Silence might well be golden in her presence.

She is correct about the conflict, except I wasn’t shoved. Rod only raised his finger and told me never to do that again. The cold in his eyes made me believe. I can’t report that. Staff would ask if he cursed and I’d have to tell them No. They’d ask about threatening gestures. What do I say? That he raised a finger? At most I was likely to hear, “A finger. I see,” and they’d be thinking, Now there’s a lethal weapon.

My wife looks perturbed. “Why do you put yourself through these ordeals.” I hear a familiar drooping tone of condemnation, see a roll of eyes. I feel compelled to explain.

“All my life, I’ve been too skinny, too light, too short, too untalented, too whatever. Now I’m old, and I’m better than



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most of them.” I manage a smile. “Last man standing.”

“Why do you have to prove how good you are? You’re good for me.”

“And you’re exactly what I need.”

“Then why do you play when you know I worry? You belong at home.”

She turns the conversation once into a question of love, as though her affection is cause to forswear all else.

“Ego, darling.”

My answer puts her off. She hates flippant answers. It is another of my tricks for keeping a distance. Unknowingly, she has already struck upon the elemental answer – belonging, a place among men. If I told her, she would laugh and tell me of course I belonged. She would bring up home, church, our daughter in Savannah, and the cat brushing against my leg as evidence. Mostly she’d say she loved me that I belonged at home with her, and the discussion would turn full-circle.

She attends to the white sauce, turns her back on our conversation. Thwarted, she’s had her fill of me.

At Hollyhock Center, Rod plays a solitary game with his teammates. He dribbles, rebounds, shoots, scores, and fouls with ease, seldom passes. He has a good look to him, square jaw and intense face, like the man from the cigarette ad. His younger age has gone unchallenged in this game of old men. Perhaps the grizzled hair is his passport. It sprouts unkempt like a graying Chia-Pet. The man nudges six feet and fifty-five years, half again as broad as deep, his body a concrete slab on muscled legs. In a horror movie, with guillotine blades swinging before and behind, only his shirt-front and back would slice away. Rod plays to win and brooks no equal except Mac.

“He’s a piece of work.” the old-timers say in their tolerant voices. They wrest a smile from him. He does not acknowledge the moment of humanity, looks down as if to say, “Okay, you caught me this time – not again.”

He brought his son once. We knew because he made an announcement as if he was going to add “in whom I am well pleased,” but he didn’t. His son was a big country-faced kid. Good player like his dad but with no anger. That was the only time I saw Rod in an all-out smile; too big, too ingratiating as if atoning for prior trespasses. I wondered about his home-life, wondered if he were still married. Men like him don’t live in a vacuum.

I am Rod’s rival, but Sigenfoos, a moose on gawky legs, is his anathema. He and his singular name stand out like a neon sign in rural darkness. He has escaped intact from Woodstock, with hippie headband and white socks to his knees. His ponytail swishes and chin whiskers hang like a dewlap. His abbreviated shorts show cheeks dividing when he bends. Rarely does out-dated fashion so define a man. All but Rod, acknowledge him as

a clueless anomaly that chance bounced into our gym.

The big man plays an oblivious game, sweeps Rod aside and scores, fails to identify the smoldering anger. A grievous error.

“Let’s run.” Mac’s booming voice leaps into the game. He is barely taller than me, but out-jumps, out-shoots and out-rebounds most of us. He says sixty, but we suspect a portion of his age numbers in dog years.

He is the man I love to hate – love the long arching pass down court, hate the run he cajoles from my meager fast-break legs. Screens, set at the three-point line, call for shots beyond my range; passes threaded into a thicket of arms require added cunning. I chase the ball with outstretched hands, tongue lolling from my mouth. Knees straining, I push beyond my means, propelled by the promise of a rap of knuckles or a high-five slap of hands. I crave that long absent sense of companionship.

Mac lofts a shot that dings off the rim, back towards his waiting hands. Rod fouls with style. He leans into Mac, pins his arm to gain position, denies lift to his opponent, and pushes off with unabashed thievery. I leap from the opposite side and Rod crashes into me. He wrenches the ball from my hands, shoots me a look of menace I have seen before.

Mac bears the abuse with composure. “Why do you put up with that bullshit?” I jerk my head towards Rod.

“He must want to win pretty bad. Man wants something that much... hard to deny him.” The simplistic answer does not help. He jogs unperturbed down the court while I breathe heavily in his wake. Aggravation weighs me down.

Sigenfoos jogs down the court. Contempt shows on Rod’s face; he juts his body against the big man and pushes-off into the air for the rebound. Two pairs of hands latch securely on the ball. When Rod attempts to land, the big man squats unmoved, pulling the ball forward. There is no safe landing. Like a monkey’s fist clasped around fruit in a trap, his hands grip a ball he refuses to release. He flips over the big man’s back, body slamming to the floor.

Righteous indignation brings Rod’s hands flying to his hips. He paces and smacks the wall with his open palm. “Asshole. Shithead. Mother fucker.” As if working himself up, the disjointed vocabulary spits out against the athletic wailing-wall. He advances, forefinger wielded like a sword. “Don’t you ever undercut me again. You hear.”

The finger is close to impaling Sigenfoos’ nostril. The man’s eyes are blank from a sin beyond comprehension. From a snarl of hair beneath his arms rises the pungent odor of sweat. A childish grin of recognition spreads across his face. It has a feel of mockery, the only addition needed to poke at the festering wound that is Rod.

Rod’s eyes contract and his top lip curls. With both hands he shoves Sigenfoos across the floor, again and again until the big

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man hits the wall and slumps to the floor.

Mac hurries over to Rod, snakes an arm around his neck, past suspicious eyes. "Be cool now," he says. "It's all over." Man-to-man they talk against the wall, faces glow in sweating conversation. Somehow, I am jealous of the contact. Now and then Rod's glance turns to Sigenfoos, watching for further provocation.

Staff calls out to the aggrieved party, but Sigenfoos waves him off, eyes squinting over a towel. No one speaks, certain he is done with us. 'Goodbye' would acknowledge his final departure and 'See you later' rings patently false. He picks up his backpack. It shows a cartoon man in full stride viewed from a vantage point before an oversized shoe. The caption reads 'Keep On Truckin.' Sigenfoos heads out the door.

I want him to stay. His presence, no matter how disconcerting, cushions me from Rod, protects me from the pending collision. Rod and I have exchanged words in the past. I am Sigenfoos without his bulk. I have the uncanny sense of being eight, soon to be shoved against the Boy's Room wall. I am not as careless as Sigenfoos. I will not send Rod flying, but we will collide. It is a certainty.

I try not to think about the day at the lake, when my father took me to the deep end, near the rope-boundary to drown me. Don't need that memory.

I was scared before we left the safety of the shore, past the big rock where the water lapped over the top of my head. He carried me on his shoulders, past the log platform where the bathers sunned themselves, past the lifeguard in his floating chair, with sun cream dabbed in a T across his forehead and down his nose.

"You're safe with me," he said. My father always said things to make you feel better, things like 'the needle will only pinch,' but not the truth.

I told him, "no," then said it three times more. And again, but even longer, like "no, no, no, no, no." When he paid no attention, I kept saying it aloud to myself, a mantra to ward off the inevitable. Repetition made his anger worse. I could feel it edge up through his body into my legs. I began to clutch at him, hair, ears, face, anything. Strange clinging to someone who would kill you.

"Swim, damn you," he said. My fingers raked his arm as he threw me away him.

When the cold wrapped around me. I frog-kicked to the surface, maybe one of those instincts we have like babies. Then a burble sound as I sucked in water.

I distinctly remember that I gasped the word help, but I must have screamed it because the lifeguard stood up; and the sun-bathers turned; and the swimmers paddled in place. So I must

have yelled. If I remember the gasping part wrong, maybe the killing idea was wrong, too, but I don't think so.

My father dredged me up from the water, watching people's faces watch him. He manufactured his best smile. "You're okay kid." Kid he called me, not my name. "Scared to death," he explained to the faces. The fear was true, about the water, of course, but mostly about him.

Then he didn't want to kill me as much, or maybe he'd just lost the opportunity because the anger whooshed out like air from a punctured balloon. He doesn't remember that swim or even the day at the lake. I never asked him about killing me. He might say yes for fun.

I avoid the Center for days, then weeks. My wife notices that I swim or run, but no basketball. She requested I avoid conflict and I respect her wishes, though it is not her wishes that guide me; it is fear. I am as afraid as I was that day at the lake. I recognize the same rage in Rod's gut as that which drove my father.

When I return, much seems changed. The sign-in sheet labeled 'Report' sheet now reads 'Attendance.' Regulars seem older, more wrinkled. Their bright, pleated trunks, sag further below their knees. Some players seem new, or perhaps my memory fails me. Mac asks if I've been avoiding them. I tell him not everyone, and he understands.

I warm up with clicks in my knees. My neck grinds when I turn my head, and there is Rod. He wears high-ankle red tennis shoes, with a sleeveless, blue T-shirt, and burgundy shorts. Balls bounce everywhere. With only vague forethought, I move towards him, halting at first, then with a more measured walk. A jolt of heat flushes through my body. Unsure if it is fear or the rush of an inconvenient thyroid, I continue.

An old-timer recognizes something in my stride and moves to intervene. Mac halts the man's advance. "Let them work it out," he says.

Rod reaches for a ball. I scoop it from his hands and wedge it beneath my arm. I step in close and face him, as close as he was to Sigenfoos.

"What do you think you're doing?" The challenge is in his voice, but he blinks, unsure if he should back away. The balls stop bouncing. Old-timers shuffle around us. Staff looks up from his table on the sidelines. Certain no conflict comes from the quiet, old voices, he returns to his cell-phone. I have no plan, but words come out as smoothly as if rehearsed.

"Sometimes it feels like everyone sticks it to us, doesn't it." I put a hand on his shoulder. He pushes it away.

"Sometimes we want to smack our kids. We grow angry at our wife. Sometimes we loose our temper in sports. What do you say you and I arrive at a truce." I use words like we and us to forge a kinship I don't truly feel. "What do you say we keep a

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lid on our tempers.” The old-timers listen intently.

“I don’t have to do squat for you.” Embarrassment drives him.

“You’re angry, aren’t you? I understand that.” He looks at me, confused.

“Keep away from me, you nut.” Rod flicks his fist. I don’t remember exactly which way, or why, maybe to swat away beads of sweat from his face, maybe a feint to cower me. No one else recalls either. In reflex, I cringe and swing, all in the same moment. A sweep of arm advances from my waist and rises upward by way of announcement before looping forward in punch-less impotence, an inadequate swipe for protection.

Rod ducks beneath the punch. His fists fly directly to my face. Left – Right. Whap - Whap. Comic book fight-noises come from where cartilage and muscle have smashed together. The old-timers rush to separate us, but the damage is done.

I rear my head back and cover my nose with a red headband to staunch the flow. Blood saturates the headband, red on red, disguising the damage. Then a drop hits the floor, then another and another as blood spills between my fingers.

Staff arrives, alarmed, with brown-paper towels. He reaches to wipe the floor as if staunching the flow of blood from the building. He halts, embarrassed, hands me the clean towels, and hurries for more. I stumble outside, hold the towels to my face. The wound is minor and blood dries quickly in the dry air.

Mac exits with my gym bag, plops beside me on the curb. I expect anger, a serious discussion. Instead, “He doesn’t like you very much, does he.”

“No, I expect not.” I break out in chunks of laughter.

Mac rubs my back as if consoling a child. “Feel good to get what’s inside you out?”

His words cue something inside me. Rod is not the problem. He never was, no matter his eccentricities, I am. I cannot leave well enough alone. I made the conflict happen. Sooner or later, I would have blocked Rod’s elbow or swept aside his push-off arm. I would have shoved beneath him for position. I would step

in front of him to steal his rebounds. I would harass, niggle, harry, pester, bother, annoy, and hassle him until I’d teased out his hate. I needed to exorcise my own demons, to confront the rage from the lake.

I nod and suck up tears, head for my car wishing he’d thrown an arm around me. Not a restraining arm like with Rod, a comforting arm. Strange part is, if Rod had shaken my hand, I might have hugged him, maybe cried. I always did need resolution more than victory.

Shirley scrawls another item on my To-Do list, hidden from where I sit. Her body twists as she imitates my shaky hand, thinks I won’t notice new entries. She acts with good intentions, certain I will rebel against her telling me what to do. Not so.

“Whatcha doing?” I ask knowing full well what she does.

“Cleaning a spot on the wall. Why don’t you play basketball as much?” She shifts subjects, side-steps her forgery. Clever girl.

“Ego,” I tell her. “That one guy’s too much for me.” She smiles, an ironic tilt to her lips.

“I’m glad. I worry about you, you know.” Sarcasm no longer peers from behind her words. She is genuinely concerned. We hug, press our bodies against each other in a rare moment when health, lucidity and desire meet.

We old men congregate in our small valley on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the Hollyhock Community Center where light filters down through the girders. We play ball, manage without Sigenfoos and sometimes without me. I arrive late and search out Rod’s squat, black-and-chrome motorcycle. When he’s there, I head to an outdoor basket, or home if the weather’s bad.

Perhaps Sigenfoos may return with blithe spirit and garish outfit, where he can gambol down the court, and experience others as speed bumps, not avatars of combat. Rod may wipe aside abusive parents or a life gone sour that sucks rage up from his gut. Amenably aged, I nestle in the embrace of my armchair with magic fingers, watch wide-screen television and shed my urge to confront the past, an aggrieved Van Winkle come home.

A Vintage Hand Fan

By Lauren Dixon

Gestures in the name of intention,
Sometimes gently,
Like warm pearls just removed from the neck,
Sometimes flailing,
As if pumping brakes before impact,
Beckoning in tandem with the female fragrance,
Collecting men's glances like a bee does pollen,
Focusing gazes, wordless messages,
Wafting its ancient whispers to those clairvoyant,
The sweet breath of shy acknowledgments and,
seething gasps of petulant rants caught in each fold,
Its wooden sticks hiding oral sins like corset stays hide flesh,
A powerful feminine weapon, folding, fixed, or brisé,
Held by indignant hands that are slaves to countenance.

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Friday

By Lauren Dixon

The day that means
tomorrow I get your total
undivided attention.
I give you up on Monday,
all fresh and optimistic,
I get you back on
Friday night, worn out
like a toy left on –
batteries dead.
Cheese and olives,
wine in a glass, sunset breeze,
melt any trace of work
like ice on hot pavement.
But I know better.
You, with at least three
umbilical cords,
one for the cell phone,
one for the computer,
and one for the PDA.
I'll get the scissors.

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Lauren Dixon was born in San Francisco where she attended Lowell High School, then Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. Married for 22 years, she lives in Sausalito, California and Scottsdale, Arizona where she writes and makes jewelry for her business Waterdragon Beadesign. Contact her at redhedlor@yahoo.com.

My Mother's Hands

By Lauren Dixon

They say so much about her,
Patrician fingers they weren't,
Aquiline and well mannered, no,
They knew how to get dirty
How to get the job done.

They both worked hard for her,
First, in the packing house in the hot Reedley summers,
Orange by orange, peach by peach,
Working side by side the brown skinned people,
She could keep up with their life's work,
They admired her white hands speed.

Then, they were her defense,
Fending off a bad marriage,
Her optimism, driving the steering wheel to a new city,
Her bread and butter, typing at night,
Each letter typed – a soldier of fortune.

When the world was too much with her,
Art was the ticket to someplace else.
Painting her native language,
Her left hand the interpreter,
She breathed tint and turpentine,
It bled from her brushes.

Her gnarled joints, she felt betrayed,
Her vanity seeped out,
And then she'd look at what she'd made,
Forgave them without doubt.

Those hands played piano,
Spanked her kids, dyed her hair,
And turned thousands of pages,
In the books she read.

They graded hundreds of papers, played violin,
And held the reins of horses in Golden Gate Park.
They held her nebulizer, her shots of adrenalin,
The myriad of pills she took, and the oxygen mask
To her beautiful face.

For meals they cradled Chinese blue and white bowls,
I have the bowls now and when holding them,
Remember her hands holding me,
They hold me still.

Christmas Day

By Lauren Dixon

I want to be a vacuum,
able to suck up circumstances.
Scraping around corners in my mind,
where words of regret had fallen,
like the needles of the tree,
where worried glances,
scoot across the floor,
like frightened dust bunnies,
trying to escape my hissing brush.

With a whoosh,
There would go the disappointments-
like what was wished for
that wasn't in the box,
losing parking spots to rudeness,
speeding tickets, and
the heartbreaking absence
of someone missing.

Another pass sucks up that counterfeit word:
"Expectations."
Especially the one where beribboned gifts
could possibly replace
the family I needed to be there.
Expectations aren't thought unreasonable,
but seem to arrive late or not at all, when
hope prevails over common sense.

After all that work I need to
deposit all that trash into the bin marked
"to be forgotten."

If only I'd remember to take it out.

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Pool

By Lauren Dixon

My blue host makes worries
jump off me
like fleas on a wet dog,
They hop to the sides dangling
their legs, trying to splash me,
I pay them no mind.
They do not have my attention.
Underwater I can't hear their
taunts and annoying repetition,
But what if? Why? Should I?
My physical weight is
rendered zero on the pool's scale,
My psychological weights
disappear like popped bubbles.
This liquid church, where
prayers are said,
Never fails to answer them.

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Mother's Day

By Lauren Dixon

It's a hard day Mother's Day,
if you don't have a mother.
It's a blur of other peoples plans,
brunches, cards, 1-800-flowers.
I used to have a mother,
She's gone now, almost five years,
No matter,
I go to the Hallmark Store,
and peruse cards,
As I always did,
and buy her one anyway,
As I always do,
only now it doesn't
need a stamp.

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Tahoe

By Lauren Dixon

The back seat was boring,
squashed between siblings,
hot and sweaty hormonal
pre-teens with opinions on who
saw the most "beetles",
waiting while the dramamine
adverse one that always
throws up on the road,
throws up.
Gravel crackled and popped
announcing our arrival,
A small half circle driveway
welcomed us to the backdoor,
the one that squeaked every
time you opened it, the
screen door frayed still trying
to keep the bugs out.
As you stepped from
the car, the smell of pine
was deliriously delicious,
The lake playing hide
and seek behind the trees,
her blue beauty peeking
at you calling your name with
her waves,
You were finally there,
where freckles appeared
on cue and Sea and Ski
filled your nostrils,
food tasted better than
it ever had before,
troubles weren't allowed
on the property,
only sun, children,
grandparents and love.

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Stood Up

By Lauren Dixon

I got there on time,
I waited awhile,
I read the menu,
And looked at the tile,

I glanced at my wrist,
A little past one,
Was getting quite pissed,
On mohitos with rum.

The waiter then asked,
If another was coming,
I said I thought so as I,
sat there just humming.

A half hour late!
I called on the phone,
Where are you I begged,
My voice a low moan,

She said she forgot,
She was sorry and all,
I said I forgave her,
How could she? what gall!

I felt so neglected,
It's she who had asked,
How could she forget,
Our lunch date had passed?

"Oh well," I said,
to myself as I muttered,
Just pour me another,
to the waiter I stuttered.

I had a nice lunch,
I didn't need "we,"
I found myself,
charming, just me,
me, and me.

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This I'd Do Over

By Lauren Dixon

I wish I was the mom,
that had the house,
where all his friends,
came over and played.
The house the other parents
called to retrieve their
wayward children.

I wish I was the mom,
who was home after school,
the mom who baked cookies,
and didn't care if his room was messy,
if the music was too loud,
where they were comfortable
in their own skins.

The boy seldom had friends over,
He always went to their houses,
His being the scene of the crime,
only one parent at a time,
Both trying their best to make
him comfortable in his own skin.

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Turtle

By Richard Fenton Sederstrom

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It's dead, says one.
You might just as well get a shovel before it starts to stink.
But another nudges the back of the moss black leather carapace
Hard with the leather sole of his own carapace of boot.

And the great shoulders bulge out forward the front
Of the Earth of shell,
The claws lunge into the other Earth
And the two planets move, one forward, one back,

One dying nevertheless,
One maybe only dying.

Then Charlie, generationless in these woods,
Who knows these turtles belly out, his belly and the turtles'
For the sake of his legitimate hunger, and for the sake of
My ignorant care for all of us indigent monsters,

Grabs the mossback load by the Jurassic tail of it,

Poses for a neighbor's camera, and then another,
And we walk out of the alien wood, down the log steps
And out toward my dock.

Another neighbor, refugee from suburbia, complains,
You're not putting that in our lake, are you?
Its lake, the turtle's, I fail to bother to say, and Charlie
Tail lugs the turtle out to the end of my dock

And slides it into the lake. Turtle lolls a moment,
In order not to thank us for our unthankable help,
Then glides under the dock, listens perhaps
To the footsteps touristically massing behind,

And finally paddles dully under my row boat,
Which I plan to share with it by virtue of not rowing
For a time agreeable to both of our ages,

The turtle's eons and such of my mortality as my grandfather's
Wrist watch will offer me the rest of our day,
And Earth, partly not dying for a little while longer.

Atoms

By Richard Fenton Sederstrom

The windows here are double paned against the pain,
Desert heat kept carefully outside the windows,

But not the heat of the glare of the sun, the heat of dervishing dust motes
Frictioning wildly against each other, against the treacherous
Glare of atoms breathing hot in their morning excitement.

Outside, the granitic atoms of the butte shelter my house
From my view here, the moribund atomic pile in the middle
Of our angry National Guard base, atoms of the official militia,

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Richard Fenton Sederstrom lives in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona and Mexico and the North Woods of Minnesota, the places in which he was raised. "I am fortunate to have retired from all respectable pursuits, especially teaching. Now I return to the classroom as a visitor, where, instead of teaching out of pedagogy, I teach out of confusion and into it, the way teaching should be done." He has published poems regularly in Big Muddy, The Talking Stick, Red Owl, and Saint Anthony Messenger. He has also been published in Tar Wolf Review, The Tule Review, English Journal, Plainsongs, Mother Earth Journal, and Ruminare, among other journals and magazines. His latest book of poems, "Fall Pictures on an Abandoned Road," will come out in early December. Contact Richard at richard_sederstrom1221@q.com.



Atoms of rifles, of stores of seething bullets, the antique F86 jet fighter,
Stable now in retirement from the unwon war before more unwon wars.

But I cannot see all that from here, through the double insulation of the windows.
The biding rage is insulated from me by the swaying atoms of trees,
Aleppo pine, and eucalyptus, some ash, a silk oak or two,

And more pine, and the park on the other side of the drive and the wall,
Atoms of pale spring grass, a new plowed infield
All cleared and waiting for the potential atoms of school boys

With their ancientness of ball and bat (more atoms, good ash), up wind
If only for this morning, up wind from the lure of the busy atoms
That surround that red granite butte, if only for this single short morning,

On the other side of the double panes, stifled atoms, stubborn clarity,
Atoms of the breath of my natural plea to the playing boys.

Where You Can't See It

By Richard Fenton Sederstrom

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“When you’re in the desert,” my grandfather
Says again “never put any part of your body
Where you can’t see it.” And while I try
To sort out the parts of my body
That are most likely to wander out of sight,

And while I try to sort out the parts of my body
That I can’t see anyway, and while I try
To consider what sorts of cracks, crevices,
Ledges, or maybe beckoning abandoned mine shafts
That I might match with parts of my body that I can’t see,

Some of which I am embarrassed by anyway,
I slide sightlessly on my rump down the side
Of a cactus strewn arroyo toward whatever
Hiding biting or stinging creature
Might be waiting at the bottom, under some shading
Rock to free me from some part, from embarrassment,

From my personal part in the shining spectacle
Of speedy evolution that is before me
In all this new Russian roulette of desert.
I am something small again, or maybe without
Body parts at all to worry myself about,
Or my grandfather about, except maybe eyes,

Except maybe ears for when the quail murmur,
And other ears maybe to listen to the absolute
Nothing between the quail’s murmur and the dove’s keen.
The little cave in the wall of the arroyo was dug out
From under an old mesquite in some succession
Of flash floods. The cave mouth always faces east.

Behind me, as I face the east as well,
The mesquite’s tap root drills down
Through sand and around rock after rock,
And maybe even around some unbroken strata
Left over from the last miracle of shallow sea.
Seventy feet, ninety, the root augers down.

No Metaphor

By Richard Fenton Sederstrom

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“That’s Orion. He’s easy to spot
If you look at the three stars in a row
Over there and then look to the right . . .”
Maybe. Maybe. I have lived
In the city for so many years
And I never could get the hang of star gazing.
That’s not right. I am good at gazing, almost expert.

But I have never been a good collector
Or gatherer of celestial metaphor.
“You don’t write in metaphor,” someone
Told me once. She was stunned.
It was a compliment. I was stunned.
“You are a poet, but you don’t write in metaphor.”
“No,” I said. “I write in words.” I gaze at stars, at sky.

I used to lie on my back with friends
Who pictured animals in the clouds,

A bear, an eagle, a Tyranosaurus rex, It,
Which came from beneath the sea or from outer space.
I saw clouds. And seeing clouds was plenty.
Like seeing itself, seeing clouds was more than plenty.

The young astronomer is lying on his back.
A tarmac drive freezes beneath his shirt,
For he hasn’t bothered to get a coat,
As though Orion might have chased the stars
Away and then disappeared himself
Before the hunter of the hunter could return.

I used to climb unto a tree in our front yard.
It was not high, a grapefruit tree, but I found
A crotch that I could almost sit in,
Enough leaves above to tell me that I was still connected
To Earth. Above the leaves, vastly farther
Because of the leaves, was sky. Stars.
Only sky and stars and no metaphor.

Dirty George’s Garden

By Richard Fenton Sederstrom

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I remember them, I think I remember them
as chrysanthemums mostly, big headed,
fat blossomed, bosomed
like my ample grandmother, purple founced
for my Aunt Nancy’s wedding,
my grandmother swathed and swaying
in purple, her ample lilac perfume purple too.

But the chrysanthemums, if they were –
and just as ample, carnations,
red, white, pink – some blossoms maybe
the yellowest and orangest pudgy marigolds,

all part of a piece of nature writing,
and we admired the writing
and the great colored hats of flowers,
and we were bored, and we were troubled in our boredom,
our care for our fellow writer.

Then George, Dirty George ever after,
said, started to say, then hesitated, then said,
“You know what the trouble is?
The trouble is there’s no dirt.
I need to see dirt in the garden.”

And the blossoms spread apart.
The stems of plants spread leaves away,
and dirt appeared underneath all that cloying pulchritude,
dirt: brown, rot fragrant composty sweet sweaty loam.

We jammed our cultivative fingers into the cool of dirt.
We felt dirt.
We took dirt into our hands, and we caressed it.
We took the dirt to our noses, our faces.
We smelled the dirt, and we smeared dirt
onto our child faces behind our eyes.

But we knew also that we had no reason
to enjoy the presence of dirt, to look at it so lovingly.
We just did. We didn’t need to think:
that dirt is the foundation, the murky fountain,
that this dirt is what doesn’t need to change for us
in our single fragrant fragile generation.

It is the foundation, without which vibrant muddiness
there are no blossoms, and we are blossoms.
But today, this fat forgettable flower of an afternoon,
blossoms fill that garden,
and the fragrance of my grandmother’s faded lavender
suffuses, mixed with sacred rot,
all the senses I need this day.

Something to Believe In

By Jodi Cisman

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I've always been somewhat of a skeptic. That skepticism has kept me from doing a lot of stupid things. It's the reason why I think I'll be a good journalist. It's also the reason why I have never dedicated myself to one faith. The more college education I receive, the more I shy away from the religious theories of this world.

My skepticism has never kept me from believing in fate. To believe in fate, you have to believe that everything happens for a reason. I don't know who controls fate or whether it's controlled at all. Fate could just be a series of events that happen simultaneously, resulting in an outcome that may or may not be desirable.

I believe in fate because of a small event that occurred one inhumanely hot Arizona day while driving home from school. I was thinking about someone from my past. I thought about how I regarded our friendship as the greatest ever experienced by two people. As I usually do when I start thinking about the past, I tried to re-invoke those feelings. I don't do this because of the person. I do it because of the familiarity and comfort. I'd wish so desperately to have those pleasant feelings again. They make me feel as though I have purpose. I like the excitement of feeling so close to another sentient being that it's as if we were one person existing in two separate bodies.

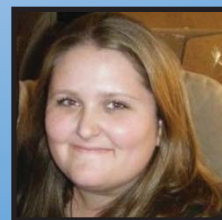
As soon as I started rekindling those old feelings, "At Last" by Etta James began playing on my iPod. It was a song I always thought of when, after five years of being "just friends," we started dating. At that same moment a white PT Cruiser pulled in front of me. It was the same car he had leased two years ago. I always teased him about it because our high school principal owned one. It seemed like a vehicle only middle-aged people bought.

At that point, I realized there was a reason why I'd met him, why we were so close, why we'd dated and why we broke up. There's a reason why things are the way they are. And that's all I needed to know—that there's a reason. He came into my life and taught me the art of relationships. He taught me that my heart is capable to feel things I never thought it could. He helped me discover my incredible capacity to love. After he broke my heart, he taught me that even though it felt battered and beaten, it could be whole again.

I believe people come in and out of our lives because of some higher force and purpose, so why can't I believe that a force we call God created the entire universe in six days? The difference is between having faith in people and having faith in an explanation.

For me, it's fate.

Jodi Cisman is a print journalism senior at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism. Her aspirations include working for the National Geographic and as a book editor. She is most passionate about reading, watching movies, going to plays/musicals and learning new things. Contact her at Jodi.Cisman@gmail.com.



Four poems by Tony Fabiano

January

rushes in loudly.
On the top
of the snowy mountain,
it looks down.
It runs to meet
the waiting crowd.
Then it departs
silently,
leaving only
smoke and memories.

© 2009

I Take it Back

Before I go
I'd like to remind you
I won't ever come back
Yet I'll still be with you
With that in mind,
I take back everything I've said.

© 2009



Although just 15, Tony Fabiano has enjoyed writing poetry for many years. Currently a sophomore in the International Baccalaureate program at Desert Mountain High School, Tony is also a competitive athlete, playing on club, travel and school basketball teams all year long. Each New Year's Eve, his family is usually in Telluride, Colo., where they have a huge fireworks display on top of the mountain at midnight. This motivated the writing of "January." Tony's two favorite poets are Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. Contact Tony at jfabiano@cox.net.

Future

I am the now and the approaching
I wonder where I will go in life
I hear someone calling my name
I see my future right in front of me
I want to reach out and take it
I am the now and the approaching.

I pretend that nothing goes wrong
I feel them breathing in my ear
I touch the future and clasp it tight
I worry that what I've given won't be enough
I cry in desperation for just one more chance
I am the now and the approaching.

I understand what it takes
I say I will keep pushing harder
I try and try to stay ahead
I hope that all my sacrifices won't be put to waste
I am the now and the approaching.

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Phoenix

Millions of people
Surrounded by mountains

Not realizing what is happening
What are they doing?

They are destroying
The beauty

The cars, the buses, the factories
They know not what they do

Beauty flees
When engines run.

© 2009

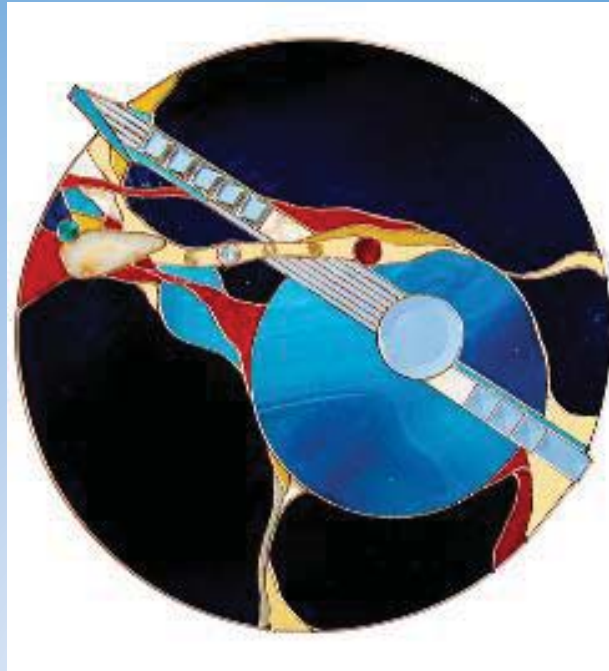
Sharon McCarthy

Second-Place Winner In Cover Contest

I was blessed with a gift for drawing. My pencil work, done with hours of tedious shading, looked like photographs, even at the age of ten. I took painting classes in college, but pen and pencil renderings remained my primary form of expression. 30 years ago I took a class at the Art Institute of Chicago. When the teacher saw some of my drawings, he told me I was wasting my gift, that copying is not art. He urged me to explore creative designing, so I began working with glass.

I use only mouth-blown glass made in Germany. Irregular in thickness, texture and hue, blown glass is full of fire and action. I often muse that the bubbles still contain the breath of the glass-blower. In designing for glass, the artist must visualize the end result from the very beginning. Only when the piece is completed and held up to the light can one see if the conception worked.

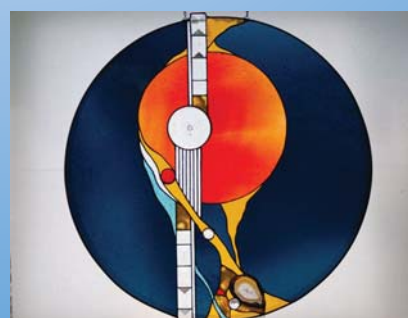
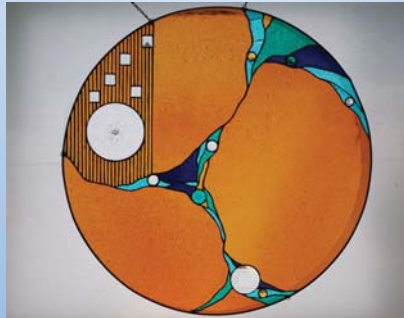
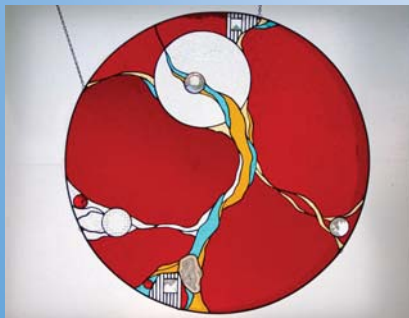
Stained Glass, considered a dying art when I learned it, was at that time experiencing an exciting resurgence. Many innovative artists with vision were designing complex contemporary works. Soon shops and classes



sprang up everywhere, hundreds of little pattern books appeared, and the art of glass was degraded to a hobby craft. Most glass artists then switched to fusing and blowing to escape the bad press. My passion for this German glass would not let loose, so I persist. My dream? To restore recognition of this amazing medium to its former status as a fine art.



Sharon McCarthy has lived in the town of Cave Creek over 25 years. She's worked as an independent service plumber [with an avocation for art] since her move from Chicago in 1983 with her four children. Sharon's one-of-a-kind art pieces were initially displayed at Artisans 21 Co-op Gallery in Chicago's Hyde Park area. In Arizona she's been represented by Mary Welch in Carefree, Imagine Gallery in El Pedregal and Motherlode Gallery in Cave Creek. She has many permanently installed custom windows in Carefree, Cave Creek and Scottsdale. Though the beloved old customers with drippy faucets still stubbornly refuse to take "no" for an answer, Sharon is trying to concentrate more on the avocation these days. Keeps life very interesting.



Dedication

My Experience At Ohrdruf

By Richard “Dick” Colosimo
and edited by Walter C. Irla



Richard Colosimo was born in Pittsburgh, Pa. during the Great Depression, the youngest child in a family of four. He was curious and a happy, bright child of an Italian family and enjoyed learning many subjects in school including the French language. He lived with confidence and joy, ready to take on all the challenges of life. He graduated as an engineer from the University of Pittsburgh and soon left for California with his new family, his French wife and young son. He secured a position with Lockheed Aircraft and obtained a master's degree from the University of Southern California. Soon after, a lovely daughter joined the family giving Richard great joy. Richard started to write short stories, and with his friend, Walter, decided to report of their experiences during the Second World War, particularly at the Ohrdruf Concentration Camp. It left him disenchanted with our political scene. At 67 years old, Richard wanted to learn to play the piano and practiced often. After retiring, he and his wife moved to Arizona to be closer to their children, and for every occasion he wrote beautiful poems to all members of his family. His sense of humor was appreciated by all and he had the ability to make you laugh at a joke, though you may have heard it a hundred times before. He gave each of us all his life and in the end passed on as a happy man.

I was in Battery B, 340th FA Bn. My principal function was Jeep driver for the wire communications section. Our Section Leader was Walter Irla. Our Battery operated in support during the liberation of the Ohrdruf Labor Camp. Very soon after that fateful day, and before the cleanup crew cleared the camp, Walter got into my Jeep and directed me to that infamous site. Thus began our unique experience. As we drove into the entrance and parked, there seemed to be an ominous silence; there were but few other military personnel wandering about. We saw a number of bodies, dressed in the striped pajama-like prison wear, lying in the courtyard. We walked toward a shed and saw another group of bodies that had been stripped naked, stacked in cordwood fashion, and doused with powdered lime. Walking up further, we saw the sections of railroad tracks on which bodies were burned and the gooey lime pit next to that in which unburned skeletal body parts were thrown, evidenced by an occasional skull or elbow protruding from the muck. Needless to say, the stench and acrid odor accompanied us throughout our experience. I will not delve more into the gory aspects of the camp since these details have already been reported often and extensively elsewhere.

However, what makes our experience at Ohrdruf unique was encountering two survivors of the dreaded ordeal of the camp. But more than that, because of Walter's fluent Polish, and since both survivors were Russian, the similarity of the two languages permitted Walter to converse with them. We asked the natural question ... how did he survive? The first man we met related how he was herded into the courtyard along with the rest of the unfortunate inmates who were incapable of walking out with the others to another camp before the U.S. troops arrived. They were to be executed by machine gun fire on the spot. As the execution began, this man said he dropped to the ground quickly, feigning death before being struck by bullets. After the slaughter, the German guards stepped on and over the prone corpses, checking tattooed identities and shooting any survivors. As one

of the guards lifted our storyteller's arm to check his identity, he could not believe that his captors could not have heard his heartbeat since he was terrified playing the death role. He did not show any response at all as they dropped his arm, letting it fall unflinchingly. As he described the scene, his gestures emphasized his plight. He demonstrated how he pulled the lap of his pajama striped uniform up over his face to hide his fear when he collapsed in faked death and patted his heart in palpitation fashion showing how his heart raced as they raised and dropped his arm. We left him sitting on a bench in apparent bewilderment of what to do or where to go now that he was liberated.

As we walked toward the bunkhouse, we encountered the second Russian slave laborer to whom we also spoke. Walter asked the same question of him as to how he survived. His story was just as terrifying. This man was in the bunkhouse that had wooden bunks stretching all along the walls. The bunks were stacked five high to the ceiling, so close to each other, that one could not sit in an erect position on one bunk without bumping his head on the sideboard of the bed above. Realizing a killing spree was at hand, this survivor crawled into one of the upper bunks in the middle of a long row, snuggling his body as flatly as possible under the very thin gunnysack straw-filled mattress. He said he lay there, statue-like, not making a sound. He heard a few German guards enter the bunkhouse to search for any

Editor's note: Used with permission by the webmaster at 89th Infantry Division of World War II <http://www.89infdivww2.org/memories/liberation.htm> Mr. Colosimo died in 2009 in Arizona. Mr. Irla, 85, died April 29, 2005, in Fall River, Mass.

www.TheBlueGuitarMagazine.org

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Fall 2009

About the Arizona Consortium for the Arts

The Arizona Consortium for the Arts is a Non-Profit Organization approved by the Arizona Corporation Commission in February 2008.

We are currently establishing 501c3 tax-exempt status. We are all volunteer. We are educators, artists, performers, writers and supporters of all artistic endeavors, and are proponents and supporters of the rich, vibrant and diverse community of the Greater Phoenix area as well as the entire state.

The Arizona Consortium's vision is to create a multicultural arts center, where children, teens and adults will become inspired, to develop their creative abilities, in conjunction with exhibiting artists, writers, actors, dancers and musicians



who will share their expertise in a gallery, theater setting. Please visit www.artizona.org or www.theblueguitarmagazine.org for more information about becoming a member, networking, donating, advertising, volunteering or submitting to The Blue Guitar magazine.

Continued from page 70

potential escapees. The guards scanned over the rows of bunks, evidently by stepping on the lower beds and craning their bodies in, to see if they could detect any hiding prisoners. Our sad-faced ex-prisoner indicated that he was trembling but he held his breath, not moving, just praying. His skeleton-like, emaciated body caused no apparent elevation to the mattress as the guards left and continued their search elsewhere. He said he didn't move an inch for a long, inestimable time, until he was certain it was all clear. We left him in the same apparent unrealistic state of freedom, too awesome to fathom. Of course, I'm sure that the subsequent American cleanup crews took care of these two survivors and remedied their understandable confused condition.

The last building we ventured into was the kitchen. As I recall, this building seemed to me to be a long narrow structure, with large sinks and pots and pans hanging on various hooks

and cradles. At one end of the kitchen there was a large copper cauldron, perched on some sort of support or heating device. It was about five feet high and about four feet in diameter. There was a large wooden stirring and serving spoon protruding from this unbelievable muck that was the menu of the day (and no doubt every day). I unwisely reached over the top of the pot, grabbed the handle of the elongated spoon, stirred and broke the dry crusted surface of the ugly contents. I stepped back, gasping and choking. The stench of the rancid vegetable invaded my nostrils, into my throat and taste buds. That miserable experience left an indelible mark on me. To this day, and I have tried on many occasions, I am unable to eat coleslaw. When the odor of raw shredded cabbage reaches my taste buds, the memory of my Ohrdruf experience is relived.

This is but an abbreviated version of what indeed was an extraordinary and unique day at Ohrdruf for Walter and me. An infamous day that we shall never forget.

Thank You To Friends, Contributors, Supporters

A Big Thank-You From The Arizona Consortium For The Arts And The Blue Guitar Magazine!

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Snapshots from the April 2009 Blue Guitar Festival of the Arts



The Blue Guitar Magazine photos/Richard H. Dyer Jr.

Community Spotlight

Melanie Tighe, owner of Dog-Eared Pages Used Books in Phoenix

Q. As the owner of Dog-Eared Pages Used Books, whose motto is “Bringing affordable reading to our neighborhood,” you are heavily involved in the community. What activities and events does your bookstore sponsor and host?

A. Hosting author signings for local authors, children’s story times, book clubs, writers groups, poetry readings, Scrabble club.

Q. Why did you open a bookstore?

A. I love to read and wanted a business I could enjoy for the rest of my life, plus we don’t even have a good library in this neighborhood.

Q. Who is your favorite writer(s) and why?

A. Tolkein and Rowling, they take you away to other worlds.

Q. As a business owner, what do you believe the business community owes to the arts?

A. I don’t believe they “owe” anything, but am grateful that most businesses decide to support the various arts programs in the community because they realize how important the arts are to a society.

Q. What role do you see government and the community at large playing in helping the arts?



Melanie Tighe

A. I really think the government’s main role should be to protect our freedom of speech rights. There’s a case before the Supreme Court right now that is worrisome. Here is the info if you would like to know more about it: <http://news.bookweb.org/7099.html>. I feel it’s the community’s role as far as schools to teach the arts, and local government’s role to support the arts with museums, galleries and by promoting tourism.

Q. When did you start writing and why?

A. This summer. A story came to me almost whole and I had to write it down to get it out of my head. I’m still working on it.

Q. What are you working on now writing-wise?

A. A historical fiction trilogy for young adults.

Q. What is the biggest priority and/or challenge for the arts right now, locally and/or nationally?

A. Trying to write while earning enough to pay the bills.

Q. Anything else you want our readers to know about you?

A. I love what I do, both the writing and the bookstore, and I am grateful for the support of my fiancé Thom and our customers.

Contact Melanie Tighe at

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“Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar.”

— Excerpt from Wallace Stevens’ 1937 poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar.” Copyright reserved, Random House Inc.

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