For all we have lost
and for all we have learned.

Remember
and
create.

Sincerely,
The Editors

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Poetry

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The Piedmont Institute for Communication, Music and Art (PICMA) Contest

Spreading arts and culture across the Piedmont and beyond.

2020 / 2021 Winners

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TERZANELLE FOR THE QUARANTINE OF 2020
by Martina Reisz Newberry

These are the last violent months of summer:
Heat and heat lightning and long, heated daylight
Make love appear in the form of icy martinis or Sangria & cheese.

We tell each other Stay safe, Be careful, face quarantine as we would a new god—
one of heat, heat lightning, long heated daylight.

The bits of ourselves glow like broken glass.
Our deep seas roar & refuse pressure.
We embrace quarantine as we would a new god.

We stand in place, stroke out selves with tentative fingers—

healing touches that stifle the urge to run away, touches
which draw on deep seas, deep seas that roar & refuse
pressure.

This, too, is a chance for freedom, a

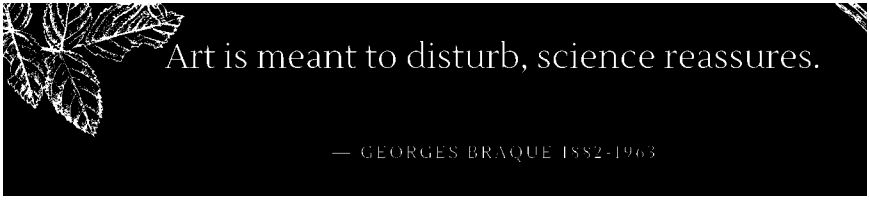
refusal to see time as a prison.
This too is a useful closed door in homes of our own making.
Such Healing Touches stifle the urge to run away,

fold into the outstretched arms of our restless dreams.
The murderers in us sigh at the absence of things to murder.

This too is a useful closed door in the homes of our own
making.

If we are firmly held in the outstretched arms of our restless dreams,
the murderers inside us, understand the absence of things to

murder,
another useful closed door in the homes of our own making
where we make love in the form of icy martinis, Sangria & cheese.



STILL-BORN
by John Grey

She was about to be born.
To have her back smacked,
her mouth wiped,
her hair patted down
for the very first time.
She could see light.
She could hear voices.
She could almost feel
the towel around her body,
the shiny cold of
a safety pin.
But she could hear
her mother
crying out in pain.
Like she was saying,
“Don’t leave me.
Don’t leave me.
Don’t leave me.”
So the baby turned,
went back where it came from,
but found no womb,
just the mother of all darkness.

Eye Contact
by Morgan Ingram

You're a disaster
in the way that I can't take my eyes off you.
A car-crash.
Somebody died, the cops aren't here yet and there's a fire.
Morbid infatuation.
You kick my door down at the most inappropriate moments.
A perversion. Rape joke at a tea party.
I can feel the heat from your pupil.
Across the room. Right cheek.
I surrender, and we fuse. Hot, blooming, breathless and heavy. You have me hostage.
A gaze is a gun.
You tear away slowly with an arched brow.
Upset, scorned, childish, overheated and comically flustered. Fight or Flight.
Am I fucking biting my lip?
You eat me alive from a lecture hall desk.
My blood drips from your chin.
I feel stupid.
You shot me.
God, I feel stupid.

A break
by DS Maolalai

my girl
takes the dog
out for her
walkies. I take
a break from work
and masturbate into the shower.
rinse the tile,
pick up some mail
and go back to the table
where my coffee
has still not
gone cold. something
inside us
is killing me. not her – no,
something else.

FAT

by Gwenn Nusbaum

I'm fat. Fat as pride and the color red. The
wide side of a car fat.
Fat as Mars. I'm fat as a mama cat or a baby,
but not lazy with fat—
fat with fury, my own jury.

I'm fat as an open umbrella or a Hula-Hoop,
but oops, you can't
catch me, bash me, or smash me. I'm
bouncy as rubber, each swirling
ounce fat with swerve, fat with verve, fat as
a vat of swollen
nerves.

Elegy for My Brother
by Kurt Luchs

I might as well write it now. You've been dead a long time,
though a creature bearing your name and likeness
continues to shuffle through the world
performing a variety of small actions approximating
something that almost resembles life.
You were struck down in childhood by the same blows
that fell on the rest of us, but somehow it hit you harder:
the knowledge that two people who hated each other
had no love for the seven beings they had brought into being.
If it is sometimes possible to survive a cruel father,
there are few things deadlier than a cold mother
whose children circle her like lifeless moons.
For you alone she devised a torture more insidious
than sarcasm or neglect. She feigned to fawn over you,
ruthlessly cultivating a dependency that would smother your psyche

and destroy your will. Horrifyingly, it worked.
You became a shadow in your own life,
slowly sinking into the shell of yourself,
never again to emerge as a complete human being.
I imagine your interior as a hall of mirrors
where you occasionally catch a glimpse of the child
you used to be, full of curiosity and laughter
but with such sad eyes, gifted with words,
able to capture a moment from your weird angle and share it with me, and for that instant we were neither unlovIs it only his ghost that flashes darkly through the mirrors?

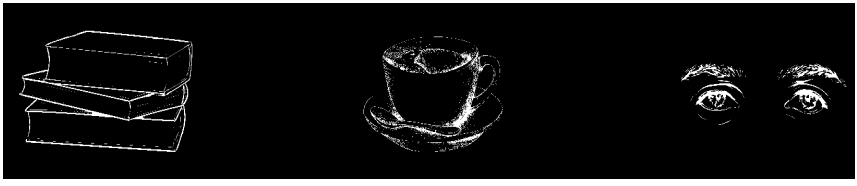
with me, and for that instant we were neither

Shoot Me Like a Shotgun

by Louisa Parrish

the recoil of your love was the most
powerful thing i have ever felt

… do it again



NIGHT DRIVE

by Lisa Low

You set down your guitar and stroll like
the moon through my party.
What a beauty! Wrapped in silks
and tied with bows, you stray
the soft medieval forests of my mind.
Later, hushed and dreaming,
you come from the trees like a doe.
But my headlights are on you, Belinda.
Though your body sobs:
“Mea culpa, mea culpa!”
I can do nothing for you. You slept
with my husband, so I spend this night
driving the hills, my wheels wet when I stop,
still dripping with your blood.

VENUS REMEMBERS AVIGNON

by Robert Beveridge

You sit on the edge
of a hard mattress
one heel to haunch
one foot to floor

arms curled about
your raised knee

head down
nested on your arms
blonde spills
to cover your breasts

you raise your eyes
to the map on the wall
above my head
as I transcribe
your nudity

WHERE A FATHER AND SON DEPART

by John Grey

I gave you some of your eyes,
your nose, your mouth,
and the shade of your skin,
until, that is, the sun got through with it.

But I can't put into your mind all that I know,
or install alarms into various parts of your body,
with warning signals so loud,
only you can hear them.

Nor can I offer up my life history
as some kind of family bible,
when my own gospels are not the gospel truth,
and my testaments are old and barely remembered.

Nor can I stop you becoming me,
forming your dreams
the way I did your nails,
or forging my opposite
out of some of the same raw materials
I had to work with.

Once I was like some unsteady oak
looking down at its fallen acorn.
Now, we stand tree to tree,
my bark so rough and lived-in,
yours smooth, near-bulging with eager sap.

KISSING THE SMOKE
for Joanne Leva
by Robert Beveridge

You stand beside me, face out
towards the crowd
and I watch you
I can almost see
your ribs move
as the blood pounds harder
faster in your temples

at times like this
it would be easy
to take your face
in my hands
turn you to me
and press my lips
to yours

but there are those
in this fickle crowd
who would call
that type of adoration
obscene

so I must be content
with the occasional stare
and the shake of your ribs

Leaves
by Preethila Zaman

Don't be fooled by the propaganda of song
and illusion of photo
America hates color
The joy isn't in the family car driving on a
wooden bridge in Vermont
Everybody oohing and aahing, dad wonder-
ing if he'll get lucky tonight
Or at least get that damn promotion
No
The joy is in seeing those spectrum leaves
falling
Dying
That satisfying step and crunch
Scattered bits of death taken by the wind
Where some animal can shit on them and
grunt
Seeing a dim sun through naked branches
While walking to the voting booth
With faith in skin and the bulging camou-
flage vests hiding nothing
Malice towards…well, you know
An American constitutional

Self Portrait as an Almost Forgotten Song by Rae Rozman

You had not asked to be remembered like this
somewhere between liminality
and the history of memory
a visceral reaction that you used to be something
other than what you are now

These aren't the same emotions you evoked at 17
but whether that has meaning
or what it may imply
is not for the poet to say
it is merely an observation on the score
of something heard in a slightly different timbre

There are some refrains that continue
like that night at the park
just vague enough to maybe not be
the soundtrack to anything
or maybe to be laden with all the things
you had forgotten you once knew
how to be

Statistic
by R.A. Allen

The janitor found you on the landing
between five and six. Your co-workers
recalled your disdain for the easy elevator.
Anhedonist, marathoner, former Marine—
your standing order was self-control.

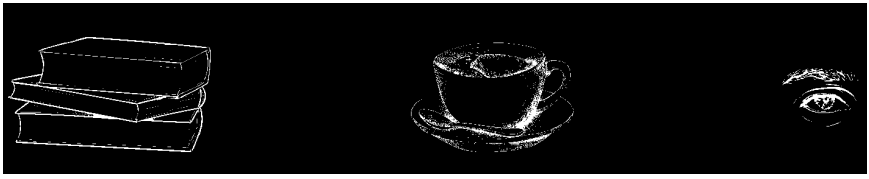
At the funeral they went on about how
you're in a better place now, about how
you would have wanted this or that
in such-and-such a way, and that you
passed
so young. Halting stories remembered in-
correctly,
or simply made up. Stories about stopped
clocks and bewildered pets—the usual crap.
Then they went outside to smoke.

But when your time came, there was no
time
to reflect. Ka-Pow! It hit you like a cliché
from the blue. You would have wanted it
that way.

MAKE AMERICA WHATEVER
by John Grey

My car bears no bumper stickers
with short snappy sayings.
I don't wear caps or t-shirts
with messages, political or otherwise.
My yard is free
of "Vote for" signs,
or flags that flutter the likes of
"Don't tread on me."

If you want to know what I'm thinking,
then you'll have to ask.
And don't bring something small
to write it down on.
It won't fit.



LOOSE THE FOUR ANGELS by Sam Ambler

On October 11, 1992,
ACT UP called forth
the Ashes Action
in Washington, D.C.
I should know—
I was there,
carrying the cremains
of my lover, Lawrence,
who had died of AIDS
six months earlier.
I held him to my heart
in an alabaster urn.
We gathered on the
steps
of the US Capitol,
all ten thousand of us,
and proceeded
names I knew.
We paraded
past the obelisk
to the black iron
fence
separating the pub-
lic
from the Ellipse,
the front lawn
of the White House,
chanting: George
Bush,
You Can't Hide!
We Charge You
with Genocide!
And accompanied
by
then I emptied his
urn
onto the lush,
moist lawn.
Off he went,
dancing into the
sky,
free at last!
The wind whirled
a bit of him back,
into my arms,
and I embraced
him,
the silk of his skin
settling into mine,
one last time.
I keened

reverently
through the panels
of the NAMES Project
Quilt
laid out on the Mall.
I gasped back sobs
when we passed

cops on horseback,
cops on foot,
cops in riot gear.
I reached longingly
through the fence,
as if he were
stretching
back toward me
from the other side;

and shrieked
like a wild,
naked banshee,
sending him home
to the deep
green Ireland
of his fairy dreams.

FLOTSAM
by Frank Jamison

I watched in a bar as a young woman
opened her mouth when a man
she'd never seen before came on
like a breeze, airy and too strong for comfort.
The way she moved and said something
made him hunch and step back
with his mouth open, as if to receive
the flotsam that spewed from hers
the way rivers open their mouths to the sea,
as if the blending that's about to occur is
unwanted.

Newton's First Law
by Paul Bluestein

A body in motion stays in motion
unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.

There are times
I may appear to be at rest,
but I am truthfully, in constant motion.
My chest rises and falls with each breath,
and I feel heartbeats driving blood
to the far corners of me.
Even the atoms of my brain sing as they
spin.
The perfect fifths of angels
and the tritones of the devil.
Harmony and dissonance,
side by side,
decade after decade.

But Newton was right.
Someday, I will be dragged to a stop
by the friction of time.
Until then, I'll celebrate
the unrelenting forward motion of life
before that sly unbalanced force
comes creeping.

Transfer
by Lance Nizami

Just another airport lounge; the furniture's the same as any others
But, strange enough, there's not-a-one familiar face nearby
The airport employees all differ too, and seemingly get younger
You think you'd recognize some
fellow-traveler, a confidant-in-making, oh, but no –

But, no; no face you'd seen before appears, no voice harmonious with yours
So sit and drink Tom Collins', let tiredness hit you, while your body slows
Not moving at four-fifty mph, you're
in-between your flights; but still your body moves –
And so you pick at olives, swirl the ice cubes in your tall, wet glass, and sigh

And far outside the panoramic windows, aircraft trundle gatewards, crowds are waiting …

People, many people; why so, so many people, unfamiliar

And check your watch; it's still two hours 'til flight time, two more lonely hours

Perhaps a third Tom Collins now, perhaps a fourth, perhaps another bowl of olives

Olives stuffed with red pimentos; oil-and-vinegar-soaked olives, protein, needed

Each person in this lounge is quiet, wrapped-up in their little business-world

Each business-world: pimento in an olive, that we chew and swallow down

Or have our business-worlds all swallowed us, instead? just look –

We're in another airport lounge; the furniture's the same as any other's.

Blank Pages

by Emily Zielinski

The smell of the pages is ethereal.
Not the ink or the spine,
But the blank lines that smell of
opportunity.
My nose is flooded with the aroma of this
nothingness,
Because I know that from this blank space,
Comes a journey taken not by car,
Or plane or boat,
But by feet.
Pure, raw human feet.
Strolling through fields of the right
hemisphere.
Each line is a story in it of itself,
And they are loud-
So loud.
They pound and scratch and beg to be told.
How can one not pick up the book
And detail their heart's every desire?

FICTION

Bleachers
by Natalie Wang

Sometimes the sun came late. It usually happened on Fridays, when the last drudge of the week curdled into some gnawing, staticky miasma that hung over us like a cloud of sulfur, where the flies on the track field buzzed and writhed as we ran around aimlessly loop after loop. The water truck came by twice; today it was Robb that handed out the bottles, the plastic wet and greasy from the sweat on his palms, the water warm from the heat. We drank it on the bleachers.

"Anyone seen Coach?" one of us asked.

None of us had. We hadn't seen him out of his office since last week, only this bald, pudgy silhouette propped against the window blinds, occasionally humming something off-key under his breath. Sofie proposed another run. The gravel crunched and cracked under our shoes, like bones in a furnace. Afterwards, we asked Mariele how her Mom was doing –

"okay," she sniffed, "just okay" –

and Jade proposed we all chip in a little, with what little we had. There wasn't much disagreement. One dollar, one nickel, a box of cigarettes—they all went into Mariele's bag, and she smiled and thanked us, her smile only showing misshapen teeth. We talked a bit more. How's the car coming along, we asked Carver. He was big-boned with strong, raw-knuckled hands; he flexed them and said he almost lost his thumb to the engine last week, but it was fine now. Really. Oil burns spread down to his elbows,

and in the dying light they throbbed a festering glaze of pink.

We crowded under the bleachers for about an hour. Slats of light cut across bands and bands of metal, making this jagged pattern along the dirt and rough grass, as if the light had cut itself into long, polished strips. Alan had smuggled in the cigarettes; I had tried them before, back at home, but his brand of flavor tasted too acrid and left too much ash in the back of mymouth.

We played a bizarre mashup of cards and Mah-jong, battered decks and chipped tiles spilling all over the mud. Irah won the first round—she hugged me squarely around the shoulders, her hands soft and clammy on my back, and we had to smile. The winnings went to her. For an extra flourish, Maya gave her a flower, the forget-me-not unfolding its petals in the Shadows.

Outside, the sun burned and burned, never turning its eye away, but it never came. The sky was violet when we emerged from the seats. Most of us had bikes; someone had slit Jade's last week, and the tires wobbled from the tape job as she mounted on the seat. Carver promised we could use his car when he finished repairing it. Water dripped down from the bottles, shimmering over the bleachers, fat drops drenching the soil. By sunfall it was just me, Alan, and Mariele at the stands, watching the clouds darken. He smoked two cigarettes in a row, offering us both one. We declined politely. By dusk a pickup truck swerved by the curb; my brother's, Mariele clarified, and then asked if we needed a ride. Alan stamped out his last cigarette and looked over at me.

"I'll be fine," I said, very quietly. They climbed in and waved at me through the window.

When the tires roared against the concrete, it felt like the sound filled the entire world, enveloping me in a brassy, ground-shaking embrace.

Sometimes the sun came late. It usually happened on Fridays, when the heat of the day dripped and trickled into a low simmer, as if I was slowly being lowered into tepid water. The flies never left; their wings beat endlessly against the air, fat black bodies trailing blood among the seats. It became dark enough that I couldn't tell where my hand ended and where the night began. Sometimes the sun never came, like I had never been there at all, and yet I waited—lying on the bleachers, staring up at the growing stars, and wondering why, exactly, I still expected it to.

My Starbucks Name
by Mallika Narayanan

I stared in wonder at the board where the coffee menu rivalled that of any restaurant's food menu. I'd been waiting for this moment; I'd dreamed of it; and here I was in a Starbucks, three days after I arrived in America. The cashier gushed an additional torrent of the various seasonal specials, a spate of terminologies I'd never heard before, rolling his r's in an endearing, rushed way. Up, on the poster beside the menu, was a larger than life-size cup of coffee with a mountain of whipped cream and a generous drizzle of chocolate and caramel. I couldn't work out what the drink was called.

"Just a coffee, please," I said in the end, to put an end to my agony, aware of the line building up behind me.

"One Americano?" he asked.

I nodded. I'd heard people order it in American movies and TV shows. My mouth watered at the thought of the caramel. I hoped it was the Americano. To my surprise, he asked my name next. No barista back home had ever asked my name. I wondered if he was hitting on me.

"Um, no thanks," I mumbled, embarrassed.

"May I have your name to write on your order?" he asked, enunciating slowly.A flush crept up my face.

"It's Ananya Acharyabhatta," I said. He blinked twice and cleared his throat. A sizable queue had built up behind me by then.

"Can you spell it for me?"

"It's A n a y a n a, A c h—"

"Just the first name, thanks," he said.

While he was busy writing it down,

I peeked at his ID tag. Jake. Easy. One syllable, I noted, very aware all of a sudden that mine had Three. I muttered 'no problem' and dithered, trying to faste the clasp of my uncooperative wallet fat with Rupees and American dollars and all the change the newsagent shopkeeper had dumped into my hands at the airport. Someone twitched behind me.
I dropped the open wallet into my handbag, letting the loose coins scatter into it and slinked away from the Queue.

"You can pick up your coffee at the counter when your name is called," Jake shouted over the hissing and spitting of the espresso machine.

"Thanks."

I padded over to the back to find myself a table in a quiet corner. Slinging my bag across my body, I waited for my name to be called out, my ears perked for the foreign sound of a Sanskrit word. Minutes ticked by. When my name wasn't called, I nipped over to the counter to check. None of the cups seemed to be mine. I bobbed up to see if I could catch the barista's eye but they were running hither-thither, the mixer whirling and the cappuccino machine coughing and sputterin behind them. Returning to my table, I waited a little longer before checking again. This time, I spotted one that seemed to be the right but the name penned on its face was too short to be mine. I approached the cashier where a young lady with a shock of glorious red hair was paying for her order. I caught Jake's eye.
"Hi, is my coffee ready?" I asked.

"Hey, lady, I'm in line next, can't you see?" the red-head said to me.

"Of course, sorry."

The man behind the red-head in the queue said, “Check at the counter around the back.” After thanking him, I returned, pink-faced, to the counter where the unclaimed cup sat. Examining it again, I tried to decipher the name scratched on the side: ***Anon***

Jake nodded at me. “That’s yours,” he said. I grabbed the cup made for my table, aware of their eyes on me. When I looked back, the red-head rolled her eyes and muttered something to the man behind her. Anon. In Sanskrit, Ananya means, like none other, unique, or having no equivalent. But here, I was anonymous. In a matter of moments, my identity had been expunged. I was a nobody.

After negotiating the lid off, I realized the coffee was black. Back home, they always added milk if you ordered coffee. Things were different here I supposed. Casting an eye about, I looked for milk and sugar but found none. I considered getting up to ask for some, before awareness crept in. All of a sudden, I felt large. Colossal. As though I’d already taken up too much room there, especially for an anonymous person. Trekking all the way back to Jake to ask for milk and sugar was out of the question by then so I settle in with the strong, bitter coffee. I wiped the bottom of the cup with my hand, before it had a chance to leave that ugly, tell-tale ring on the table.

It was when I walked out of the Starbucks that I realized I wasn’t merely nameless; I was a nameless brown girl with dark, near black curls cascading down her back and not even a year had passed after the 9/11 attacks.I was careful to change my name to Anne as soon as I crossed over

into a Starbucks. Anne. One syllable. Easy. Familiar. This new nomenclature seeped outside the threshold of Starbucks, spreading farther, until Ananya, the three-syllabled, discombobulated entity, was obliterated. I became simply Anne to everyone. And after a few years, I became Chef Anne. My life was simple. I dated a man with a biblically basic name—Adam. I lived in Cambridge (I didn't have to say that I was half Bengali and half Malayali, from Thiruvananthapuram). I was Anne, a global citizen whose accent was indistinguishable from the hundreds of accents in the city of Cambridge, MA. I crafted international dishes at a boutique restaurant.

I could even intone Boahston, pahk, and cah, like the locals.

Days after my thirtieth birthday, I found myself at a Starbucks with friends.

"I'll have a caramel macchiato," I said, the 'r' rolling off my tongue with practiced ease. The cashier, a woman called Rachel, asked my name. It was at the tip of my tongue to say Anne but I found myself faltering.

"Happy thirtieth birthday Ananya!" My mom had exclaimed just a day before, when she'd called to wish me. Mom, the unappointed custodian of my bona fide identity and the only person who still called me Ananya.

While Rachel waited for me to announce my identity—the name other people recognized me by; the name I called myself—the years washed over me, my age looming large like the elephantine entity I'd first swollen into, at one such Starbucks a decade before. A decade of Anne; of easy, one-syllabled existence.

Ten years of contracting my name, of shrinking myself. I was thirty, now. I could take on complication, couldn't I? And, the more I lived among people from all walks of life, the more I became aware that they could handle complexities too. People could articulate with ease and pride, foreign, convoluted words such as Orecchiette pronounced Oh-ray-kee-eh-tay), or Charcuterie (Shar-koot-a-ree), Boeuf bourguignon (Boof boor-gee-nyo), Hors d'oeuvre (Or-durv). Surely, they could enunciate Ananya (pronounced A-nun-ya)?

"Miss?" Rachel prompted at my silence.

"Ananya," I said, finally.

"That's such a pretty name," she said, writing it down as Anana. If she'd added a b at the beginning, I'd morph into a banana, I mused.

"Thanks, it's actually spelled with a 'y'. A n a n y a," I said.

She scratched the whole name and started over below. When she finished, she smiled and showed me.

"That looks good." It did look good, my name, spelled out on a cup.

"Could I have some whipped cream, please?" I added.

"Sure thing."

I waited tentatively for the unfamiliar, foreign sound of Ananya. The guy at the workstation placed my cup on the pickup counter, checked the name with care, and called out, Anaanya. It wasn't announcement. It was a question.

"That's me," I said, smiling. As I reached for it, I caught my reflection on a mirror on the far wall. My carefully straightened hair had begun to curl around my brown face from the steam in the coffee shop.One of my friends lounging comfortably at a large table in the front waved.

Hanging my bag over the back of a chair, I dragged it back and placed my coffee cup on the table. When I opened the lid, a drop of brown liquid splashed from the lid and began to form a ring around the bottom of the cup.

A Borrowed Bike
by Lawrence Farrar

By 1951, the Occupation had pretty much run its course, but Dexter still performed his duties with enthusiasm. He read extensively, pursued a Japanese language course, and persisted in absorbing all he could about Japan and its people. It was, he told his wife, "just the way I am."

His wife, Linda, blue eyes and blonde hair confirmatory evidence of her Scandinavian heritage, could not comprehend why anyone, including Dexter, should want to study a foreign language. Finicky and humorless, she'd resisted the move to Japan. Washington, DC had been trying enough for this daughter of a small Ohio town. A country recovering from war's devastation held no appeal for her, especially a country that had attacked the United States. Like an unwitting alcoholic, Linda had imbibed a full measure of America's wartime propaganda. Armed with a keen sense of superiority on her arrival in Tokyo, she found it easy to discount the Japanese as people deserving either sympathy or respect. She shared her point of view with the Ingram's thirteen-year-old son, Billy.

A bit chubby, a bit empty-faced, like his mother, Billy was blonde and blue-eyed. And, like his mother, he had protested the move to Japan. He'd not been eager to abandon his Washington friends. Moreover, to Billy's way of thinking, the Japanese remained America's enemies, his father's lectures to the contrary notwithstanding. He'd sat through Sands of Iwo Jima and The Halls of Montezuma three times each. We didn't owe the Japanese anything. After all, who won the war?

The family resided in Northwest Tokyo, in a fine, tiled-roofed Japanese house, once the property of a successful merchant.

The house possessed a well-maintained garden, the envy of neighbors and military colleagues alike. And it featured both Japanese and Western style rooms. Dexter relished the place.

Yet, for Billy, the enticements of the nearby US Army's Marshal Housing Compound seemed irresistible. In addition to attending school there, Billy liked hanging out with other American kids. He spent a good deal of his time at the housing area – at the gym, movie theater, and, on this day, at the swimming pool. Like his mother, Billy wished they could live on base. Self-centered and inconsiderate of others, Billy hardly qualified as a lovable child. Nonetheless, his parents doted on him.

"Have you seen, Billy?" Dexter said.

"Yes, sir. He came home. His room, I think."

August 1951. Dexter Ingram climbed out of the Chrysler's back seat, dabbed at his forehead with an already-soaked handkerchief, and waved goodbye to his US Army chauffer, Hideo Nakamura. He then pushed through the gate of his suburban Tokyo residence, visions of an ice-laden gin and tonic luring him on. Approaching the house, he gave passing attention to an unfamiliar bicycle lying on the ground; it likely belonged to one of his son's pals.

His son, Billy, rode a Schwinn, and Dexter could not identify the make of this bike. It was beat-up and seemed to have been strung together with cannibalized parts. The bicycle piqued Dexter's interest. At the moment, however, Tokyo's breath-grabbing summer heat occupied him more fully; the shrouding wet air like that he'd coped with in Washington, DC.

A lawyer with the American Occupation Administration,

Dexter was outfitted in a summer weight, light blue suit. At forty-five, Dexter Ingram was a plain-looking man of middling height, one who took pride in his wavy, if prematurely gray, hair. He had a narrow, triangular face, penetrating brown eyes, and a pencil thin mustache. He came across as a kindly man, his manner more like that of a small-town doctor than that of someone helping reshape the legal system of a foreign society.

Dexter had missed out on military service during the war. He suspected people had assumed him to be a conscientious objector. His father was, after all, a Presbyterian minister, and Dexter came across as a righteous sort. In fact, he'd been eager to serve, but he had twice been rejected by the military owing to a childhood bout with rheumatic fever. In consequence, he'd passed the war years in DC with the Office of Price Administration engaged in legal actions against price manipulators. He found the work tedious, but Dexter convinced himself it contributed to the war effort.

When the war ended, and American occupiers swept into Japan, Dexter seized an opportunity to serve in the Occupation's Government's political division. For Dexter, a Roosevelt democrat and an idealist, the prospect of transforming a militarist Japan into a bastion of liberal democracy appealed greatly. Perhaps it was not exactly God's work, but the analogy wasn't too much of a stretch for Dexter Ingram. Dexter fanned open the paper.

"Tell him I'd like to see him."

Ten minutes later, Billy sauntered out onto the veranda. He had on jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. "The maid said you wanted to see me."

"Nothing special, Billy. Have a seat. How'd your day go?" Dexter gestured toward a chair facing his own.

"Went to the pool. Okay, I guess, except, some of those military brats are really jerks."

"Do you want to explain?"

"No."

"Anyway. I noticed a bike in the garden when I came home," Dexter said. "Thought maybe it belonged to one of your friends. But nobody seems to be here. Any idea where it came from?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"I borrowed it to come home after my swim."

"Why didn't you use your own bike?"

"It had a flat. So, I walked over to the compound. It was really hot, and I borrowed a bike to come home."

"I suppose from one of your friends."

"Yeah." Billy unconsciously tugged at an earlobe, something Dexter recognized as signaling the boy was ill-at-ease.

"That was a good piece of luck; that somebody had a bike they could let you use."

"Yeah."

Dexter knew his son. The boy was holding something back. "Billy, is there more I ought to know?"

"It's no big deal."

"Something you don't want to say?"

"Well, I guess I didn't exactly borrow it from a friend. I was walking back and took a short cut. I spotted it on a street in one of those Japanese neighborhoods outside the housing area. It was hot, and I was tired. So, I just decided to hop on and ride home." Dexter put down his drink on a side table and leaned forward. "Billy, maybe I missed something, or maybe I'm not being charitable, but it sounds to me as if you stole that bike."

"I wasn't going to keep it. Besides, whoever it belonged to just left it by the street. They should have put it away or locked it up. It's sort of like,

finders keepers, losers weepers."

"No, Billy. That won't do. You took someone else's property. That simply won't do."

Hands folded together, Billy studied his Keds.

"I just *borrowed* it. It's a piece of junk, anyway."

"Come on, Billy. We're a respectable family. What you did wasn't right. We'll have to take it back."

The notion did not please the boy. "Do we have to?"

"How would you feel if somebody took your bike?"

Just then, Linda stepped onto the veranda. Back from her bridge game, she showcased a new, pale yellow summer dress

"Hi. The maid said you were out here. Why the glum looks?"

"Ask your son."

"Billy?"

"I borrowed a bike. Somebody left it by the street in a Japanese neighborhood. Dad says, I stole it." Billy's voice trembled.

"Stole it? I can't believe Billy would steal anything," Linda said. "That seems very harsh, Dexter."

"We're supposed to be teaching the Japanese about high standards in a democracy. About what America stands for. About . . ."

"Dexter, please spare us the oratory," Linda said. "I'm sure it was impulsive. Maybe it was abandoned. It's not as if he stole somebody's bike at the Halsey Middle School."

"Well, Billy, didn't your principal say we should all represent the US in the best possible light?" Dexter said.

"Oh, Dexter, he's only thirteen-years-old. Besides, if you had accepted base housing instead of agreeing to live here on the economy, this sort of thing would never have happened."

"Not that again."

"Well, it's true. Some of the girls asked me again at bridge today. About the night soil smells. They think it must be very trying to live out here."

Dexter ignored the assertion. "Maybe you don't have a conscience. But I do. Some poor Japanese kid is probably wondering what happened to his bike. We have to find the owner. We have to do something to make this right. Make amends. Okay, Billy?"

Billy glanced at his mother for guidance. She nodded.

"Sure, Dad. Whatever you say." "You see," Linda said. "Billy had no bad intentions. He's a good kid." She smiled and delivered a confirmatory pat to Billy's shoulder. Billy smiled back.In the morning, as they pulled away from the house, Dexter said, "Mr. Nakamura, I have a favor to ask."

Based on his reading and work experience, Dexter believed it would be better to contact the bike's owner through an intermediary. He'd come to believe Japanese were more comfortable with such an approach,
especially if the matter at hand might prove confrontational.

Nakamura stared straight ahead from behind his dark glasses, white-gloved hands gripping the wheel. The cloying scent of his Camille hair pomeade dominated the vehicle's interior. "Yes, sir. How can I help you?"

"My son, Billy brought home a bicycle that doesn't belong to him. He doesn't know the owner. Or the name of the place where he found it. But he said it was in a street with shops and houses near that park not far from the housing area. I suppose, Mr. Nakamura, I am asking you to see if you can find the owner."

"I know that place. Hachiman-cho. I will go there. Ask about taken bicycle. Try to find owner."

"If you do find him, tell him I want to return the bike and compensate him. Tomorrow afternoon, if possible."

Dexter resumed their conversation later that day as Nakamura piloted him home from his downtown Tokyo office.

"I went as you asked," Nakamura said. "That is not a nice neighborhood. Very poor. Not clean. I asked people on street. They all knew about taken bicycle. Showed me owner's house."

"Good work, Mr. Nakamura. What else can you tell me?"

"Tattered shop. Man and his son live there. No mother. Died last year. Family name Yamada."

"What did the man say? Did he understand I want to do the right thing?"

Nakamura hesitated. "He showed angry face. Asked why rich Americans would take bicycle from poor people."

"Just the sort of thing I was worried about," Dexter said. "Did you see the boy?"

"Yes. Like Billy. Maybe not so big. Name, Ichiro. He seemed frightened. I think father punished him for losing bike. Father drinking cheap shochu. Not friendly."

"Doesn't sound good. Did he say if they reported the disappearance to the police?"

"Do not think so. I think Mr. Yamada not like police. Anyway, he says tomorrow afternoon okay."

"I'm afraid I will need an interpreter. I know it is your day off, but could you possibly go with us tomorrow afternoon; say, two o'clock. I want Billy to apologize to the boy." He did not tell Nakamura, but he wanted to demonstrate to Billy that flawed choices could be offset by exculpatory behavior and actions.

In the course of his ride home, Dexter elicited a fuller picture from his driver. It turned out Saburo Yamada was raising his ten-year-old boy alone. The man had been drafted and sent to Manchuria near the end of the war, only to be captured by the Russians. Like many Japanese soldiers, rather than returning home, he'd been sent to a Siberian labor camp where thousands died, and all suffered. He also appeared to have received communist indoctrination.

When Yamada finally made it back to Japan in 1949, he discovered his wife working as a bar hostess, consorting with American GIs. She pleaded with him, saying it had been the only way she could live and support his son. Accordingly, he displayed bitterness against all Americans; they had, he said, despoiled his wife. She had died a year or so earlier. Nakamura guessed it had been pneumonia. Yamada had scratched out a living for a time as a scrap collector. Now, he struggled to survive with a little shop selling used cookware. The bicycle, inherited from a deceased neighbor, had been the boy's single possession.

All of this confirmed in Dexter's mind the need for recompense. As he'd emphasized to Billy, they were respectable people and should act accordingly. That night at dinner, Dexter listened to Linda deliver one of her critiques of Setsuko's inadequacy as a cook.

"The rice is overcooked, and the vegetables undercooked. I just don't know why we keep her."

"Tastes okay to me," Dexter said. "Anyway, I wanted to bring you up to date on the bike."

"What's there to catch up on? Why don't you just have Nakamura take it back? And be done with it."

Linda looked at Billy in an understanding manner. "Don't you agree, Billy?"

"Yeah, Mom. Nakamura can do it."

"Well, I don't agree," Dexter said. Undaunted, he

recapped his earlier discussion with Nakamura.

"You can go if you want to," Linda said. "But not Billy. It could be dangerous. You said yourself the man appeared to be hostile and anti-American."

"Nonsense. They'll be glad to have the bike back and receive a bit of compensation"

"How much compensation were you planning to give them?"

"Not sure. Maybe forty or fifty dollars. In yen."

"That's a great deal of money for these people."

"But not for us," Dexter replied. Linda narrowed her eyes and shot him a look of exasperation.

"How do you even know it is the Japanese boy's bike. Maybe he stole it. Maybe the father heard Nakamura's question and decided he could take advantage of us."

"Where did you get that idea?"

"I just know you can't trust these people. One of my tennis friends is convinced a cleaning lady took some of her perfume. Not the first time, either."

"Come on. Some perfume?"

"Anyway, I think you're inflating the whole business and putting Billy in a difficult position."

"I just want Billy to learn a lesson about right and wrong. That will be the end of it."

"So, what do you have in mind?" she said.

"Nakamura and I will go in the office car. The bicycle won't fit; at least with us in the car. So, Billy can ride the bike over and meet us there."

"That bike doesn't look safe, if you ask me."

"He rode it home. He can ride it back."

"Dad, I don't really want to . . ."

"You're going to do it. That's that."

"I still think you could have Nakamura deliver the bicycle and hand that man an envelope with the money."

"No. There is a lesson here. If he is directly involved, Billy will be

better for it."
Dexter experienced a twinge of unease. What if Linda was right? This all seemed more challenging than he had anticipated it would be.

…

The next morning, a thunderstorm storm crashed down on Tokyo, but by early afternoon the skies had cleared. Here and there puddles and wet spots glistened in the street. At 1:30, Dexter said, "Okay, Billy. Nakamura and I will go ahead. You wait five minutes or so, then bring the bike over. You'll see the Chrysler parked out on the road. Nakamura says their place is up a narrow lane. We will be looking for you."

Billy nodded. Dexter knew the boy need not be reminded. Billy knew exactly where he picked up the bike.

Dexter had considered wearing a coat and tie, to lend the proceedings a bit more formality. But, in deference to the heat and not wanting to look condescending, he opted for an open collar sport shirt and khakis. He checked a trouser pocket to make sure he had the envelope containing 15,000 yen. Perhaps it was too much; perhaps it was not enough.

"See you there," Dexter said and climbed into the car. "Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, Nakamura eased the car into a space in front of green grocer's shop. "We must walk from here. The car is too big for the street. Only small delivery carts go there. You know ***sanrinsha***, Ingram-san?"

"Yes. Those little three-wheeled trucks." Dexter had to raise his voice as a whining trolley rattled by this part of Hachiman-cho matched Nakamura's description; a narrow lane that was part of a drab warren of similar alleys and lanes. It seemed a place of grinding poverty, its buildings shrunken and drab. An open sewer flowed

along one side. The stink attacked the nostrils. Low buildings with weathered wood exteriors housed small shops that opened on the lane. Wooden fences concealed what Dexter surmised to be shabby dwellings.

He drew curious looks from people they encountered, people who seemed worn out by life. The devastation of the war had been severe, but years had passed since the surrender. Dexter had not realized unresuscitated pockets of backwardness like this still existed. He believed with certainty the US Occupation had made life better for the Japanese people. It was like a mantra for him. This sort of place had to be an aberration. That it existed less than a mile from a comfortable US military housing area troubled him.

The sliding door to Yamada's shop stood ajar. Dexter and Nakamura stepped inside. The father and his son sat cross-legged on the raised tatami floor just beyond the entrance. Both wore shorts and undershirts; the father had also draped a small white towel around his neck. A scattering of cooking pots and pans lay about on near-empty shelves. Dexter sensed the somber gloom of the dwelling's interior. What little light penetrated the place was that admitted through the entrance or filtered through a smudged window. The smell of alcohol and other odors, none of them good, thickened the air.

Nakamura, acting as interpreter, told Yamada that, as promised, this was Mr. Ingram, come to speak to him about the bicycle that had been borrowed.

Yamada mumbled his acknowledgement. He remained seated, his face a signboard of animosity. "Where," he asked, "is the bicycle?"

His manner and his appearance--hard-bitten, with bloodshot eyes—created uncertainty in Dexter's

mind. How should he approach this man? Yamada looked like some criminal low-life from a Kurosawa film.

At the same time, the round-faced boy, his head shaven and his eyes blinking, exuded an aura of innocence. Despite Dexter's unease, this latter observation reinforced his conviction he had chosen the right course.

"My son will be here shortly with the bike. He wants very much to apologize and express his regret for any inconvenience he caused."

Yamada sat silent and sullen. Suspicion shadowed his face like a threatening storm cloud. Then, with Nakamura interpreting, he said, "Why are you Americans still here? Haven't you already squeezed enough imperialist profits from our country?" The accompanying looks were like knives of hostility.

"He has been drinking, Ingram-san," Nakamura said in English. "Be careful. He seems a rough sort."

As if by way of confirmation, Yamada wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and delivered a long-running belch. Seated next to his father, the boy looked frightened, his eyes pleading; but for what?

Dexter had expected an unfriendly reception, but he had not bargained for this. "I did not come to talk politics," he said, "However, as I told you, we want to apologize. I also wish to leave this envelope as a token of our regret."

The American bowed slightly and extended the envelope with both hands. He had intended to wait until Billy arrived, but the situation seemed to be deteriorating.

Yamada ignored Dexter's gesture and glared at him. "Where is the bicycle?" he said again, his voice freighted with threat.

"My son will be here at any moment." Dexter awkwardly placed the envelope atop a small display case.Indeed, where was the bicycle? Where was Billy? The circumstance had become increasingly uncomfortable.

"I think we should go, Ingram-san," Nakamura said, his voice laden with apprehension. "He is angry man. I think, drunk." Their eyes traveled to a fish knife at Yamada's side.

Dexter was at a loss. He'd sought to be generous and he had hoped for a more amiable response. Clearly, different emotions and different thoughts motivated him and Yamada.

His conscience-driven journey had carried him down a bumpy road. And he felt perhaps they were in real danger.

Almost as one, those gathered in the shop became aware of two American MPs outside the entrance. They were outfitted in summer khakis, with white helmets, leggings, and MP arm bands. Each displayed a web belt supporting a holstered pistol and a club.

Normally, Dexter wished for less visible evidence of the American Occupation presence. Now a feeling of relief washed over him. But why were they there?

"Are you Ingram?" one of the MPs, a tall soldier with a southern accent, said.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Sir, do you have a kid named Billy?"

"Yes." Dexter felt a stab of panic. "What's happened? Where is he?"

"He's okay. But he pretty well wrecked his bike. Flagged us down not far from here. Looks like he hit a slippery spot and went out of control. Anyway, he's in our patrol car out by that big Chrysler.

"Thank you," Dexter said. "Thank you."

"Don't know what you're doing here," the second MP said. "But if we can help out . . ."

"No. No need. We were just leaving. Right now, I want to see my son."

"Where are you going?" Yamada said in Japanese. "Where is the bicycle you promised?"

"Nakamura-san, tell him to keep the money. And tell him he will have a bike soon." With those words, Dexter hurried away with the MPs back to see his son. When they arrived, the shaken boy stood beside the Chrysler, the subject of intrigued scrutiny from passers-by. "Dad it wasn't my fault; it was slippery and . . ."

The MPs made one more offer to be of help, said they would transport the battered bike to a salvage yard, and then drove away.

Dexter put his arm around Billy's shoulder. "Mr. Nakamura, take us home."…

In the morning, the temperature had dropped a few degrees, and soft sunlight penetrated the dining room windows. In the garden, birds warbled their morning songs. Linda and Billy assumed that, thankfully, the bicycle business had been resolved.

However, after he sampled his breakfast eggs, Dexter said, "In light of all that has happened, the best thing we can do now is to repair the tire and give them Billy's bike."

" What?" Linda said.

Billy shook his head. "My bike? Why?"

"Don't you think you've done enough," Linda said, her voice rife with irritation. "You said yourself this man, instead of showing gratitude, seemed threatening. And I'm certain he kept the money."

Billy added, "I like my bike. The one they had was a piece of junk."

Dexter went on. "Hear me out. The money was compensation for what we did. It was not intended, at least by me, to replace the bike. And, for Billy to give up his own bike will be an especially generous act. We saw that kid.

He has nothing. He'll love the Schwinn."

"What about Billy?" Linda said. "Give away his bike? They'll probably sell it."

Dexter paused. "Well. I guess we will just have to visit the post exchange and let him pick out a new one." Billy's expression brightened. "Okay," he said with enthusiasm.

His conscience salved, Dexter also seemed to be in good spirits. He felt confident that, despite the obstacles along the way, they had done the right thing.

And Billy, he hoped, had learned a lesson that a wrong could and should be made right. He worried, however, about how deeply that lesson had penetrated. From Billy's demeanor, Dexter guessed the boy had concluded his decision to pinch an old bike had resulted in his gaining a brand-new bike. Not really the lesson Dexter had in mind.

Soon We Will Leave this Country by Scott Jessop

He was fifteen. Orphaned with four dead siblings and a brother who served with Chivington back home. Finney was driving freight to stage stops along the Butterfield line and had seen the young men who drove for Phineas Banning as they passed at different points in the Sonoran. Saw their camp a mile away. It was on the moonscape desert rise near Scissors Crossing between the wet Imperial Valley and the cool coastal mountains where the sun-scorched the day and the stars burned the night and blast furnace winds blew that as he broke camp and gathered the horses from the picket line he had tied between two small mesquite trees — men descended on him. Their uniforms betrayed the armies they had deserted: Mexican, Confederate, Union, and they were after his load of goods.

Banning's boys came out of the ocotillo forest. The oldest whipping the team, the youngest firing rifles from each hip. The rain of bullets frightened the bandits off, and on that morning, Finney became friends with Virgil and Wyatt.

On the afternoon of October 25th, eighteen hundred eighty-one, Finney heard the sharp clack of boots on the poplar planks of his ice cream establishment, and with each stomp dirt and wet excrement was knocked to the floor. Standing in the opened door, a tall man held a 100-pound block of ice on his left shoulder, the cold water rolling off his back and dripping down his boots.

"Where do you want it, Mr. Finney?" he asked with a silly grin on his face.

Wyatt Earp, special policeman to marshal Virgil Earp, had not noticed Ike Clanton sitting in the corner with Sheriff Behan, Leather Lou, and Tom McLaury.

The Cow-boys dusty and sweaty as they'd rode all morning and come to town to spend their pay. The Sheriff sat near the window with his neck red from a fresh shave, and his hat brushed and suit cleaned. The gang's conversation ceased, and their eyes cast downward to the plates and frothy glasses in front of them.

Finney opened the ice chest and invited Wyatt to place the ice inside, and he obliged by leaning to his left and sliding the block off his shoulder with a little roll and then releasing the big tongs so that the ice settled nicely in its compartment. Somewhere in his past, he'd delivered ice – you can be sure of it. Finney slid the wood divider in. With its twin block on the other side of the chest, the product he made would stay frozen for a few days. Young Sam Roberts, the ice man's apprentice, had placed the other a few minutes earlier and was fetching two more blocks. Before Mr. Finney went home for his chicken and biscuits, several gallons of ice cream had to be made.

"You know that wasn't free," Wyatt said with a wink. "Slice off a chunk of vanilla and a chunk of lemon for me."

"Sixteen years," said Finney. "And I've never known you to do a favor."

Wyatt dismissed the josh with a wave of his hand. The Earps could be an affable bunch as long as you didn't cross them. Finney stepped behind the counter, put on his apron, and drew the ice cream from the chest. The ice cream was made in a tall steel drum and allowed to freeze.

The saloon keeper warmed the outside of the canister with a cup of cool water and slid the treat out as a cylinder about 12 inches long and eight inches in diameter, which Finney cut into four-inch-deep cakes then sliced into triangles like pie and served on plates. He had vanilla, chocolate, lemon,

and strawberry, and he had several toppings from chocolate sauce to fruit preserves to almonds. Finney had learned his latest trade in Denver when he went home a few years back after his brother's suicide and without money or prospects, took a job at an ice cream saloon on Larimer Street. In Tombstone, as with the other places he had lived, he was beginning anew.

Wyatt pointed to another case. "And mix in some of those taffy candies," he said.

"You don't want those, Wyatt. They'll freeze, and you'll likewise break a tooth."

The lawman looked disappointed for a moment and then etched a grin under his mustache.

"Of course, I know a good dentist," he chortled. "Ah hell, Finney, put some sprinkles on. You know, I gotta have candy."

Lou wiped a mustache of foam off his upper lip and set his beer mug down hard to catch Wyatt's attention who, hand on his overcoat pocket and the pistol within, the silly grin accentuated by his squinting eyes, turned.Ike looked up from a spoonful of chocolate with marshmallows hovering below his chin. "Mr. Earp," he said. Wyatt gave him a nod, and Ike nodded back.

Tom McLaury leaned back in his chair, revealing the wood handle of his pistol. A glance at the other two civilians and Wyatt saw bulging metal cylinders over the edge of their belts. He took five long strides to their table, then brought his ankles together and rocked back on his boots.
"Afternoon, gentlemen," he said, hooking his thumbs behind his lapels. "Now, there's no use in hiding it. I see you're heeled, so I'm going to ask you to disarm. You know the law; weapons are not allowed within the city limits. You can leave them with an officer of the law or at the stables."

"I'm right here, Officer Earp," said Sheriff Behan.

Wyatt pursed his lips and dismissed the Sheriff with a glare. Behan had beat Wyatt in the election to replace Frank Stillwell. On election day, he and his brothers were buying drinks at the Oriental for any citizen who could show a ballot for Wyatt Earp, so in that way, the corruption of Johnny
Behan must've run deep indeed. That he was closely associated with the Cow-boys, like the stage robbing former Sheriff, only solidified Wyatt's distrust.

Lou belched loudly. "Whatcha drinking there, Lou?" asked Wyatt. Lou made no move, but Tom's hand dropped to the side of the table.

Wyatt's hands moved to his belt while his great eyes pierced the head of Leather Lou. He would not let go, and only his voice acknowledged Tom.

"Best you eat your ice cream," he said.

Tom put his hand back on the table.

"What's your problem, Wyatt?" asked Behan.

"I just asked Lou about his beverage."

"Root beer," said Lou.

"That's a-uh, a man's drink," said Wyatt with genuine respect.

Lou nodded, "That it is."

Wyatt took a step closer; wondered what would happen if you dropped vanilla ice cream into a glass of root beer and how almonds would taste on lemon. You've got to explore these different taste sensations, he thought. Tombstone had the best ice cream west of Albuquerque, which, in his experience, had the country's best ice cream in a little adobe hole of a saloon on Church Street near the plaza. Wyatt sniffed the air and frowned. There was a smell of horse sweat that was spoiling the sweet aroma of Finney's. He kicked at a clump of dirt near Ike's feet,

"You smell like the trail, Ike. Best get cleaned up before you head to the Alhambra." Ike scowled and glanced at the others at the table then glared again at Wyatt. Ike Clanton, whom Wyatt did not like but was weaselly enough to be useful, was an informant.

For weeks Ike had been feeding the marshal's office tips on stage robberies, extortion, and illegal gambling.

We just got in from Chandler's," offered Tom. "Took them a load of corn to fatten their head."

Wyatt looked out the front window, took note of the spring wagon outside the West End Corral, and rubbed his chin. Stable boys were pushing it inside the big barn. He nodded. No doubt they had taken feed to Chandler's Dairy. The Cow-boys were a hard-working bunch, and not everything they did was illegal. As with most men in the West, when making your living from nickels and dimes, you would gravitate to anything that paid a dollar. Like cattle rustling.

"Tell me, Ike," he said, "I heard you have a few more head of cattle out at your ranch."

Ike rolled his eyes and ate his ice cream. "Those are Mexican cattle."

Wyatt wiped the grin from his face with his hand. Stolen Mexican cattle was trouble he did not want. At times, the Mexican army would forget about the border knowing U.S. troops out of Fort Huachuca would take a couple of days to arrive, and they'd chase banditos or Apache into the territory and accidentally shoot up homesteaders and ranchers. The best course of action, thought Wyatt, was to return the cattle. Doc was back in town after going to Tucson, and Doc had contacts in Mexico. Watching Ike and Tom eat their ice cream,

Wyatt hatched the idea that in a few days, along with several out of work stockmen, they would ride down to the Clanton ranch and drive the stolen cattle across the border. He just needed the Cowboys to see it his way.

"You gentlemen should know the Hacendados are in business with the government in Mexico, which is, effectively, a military dictatorship,

and fair warning, their army desires the broken necks and eviscerated corpses of Americans who cross the border to steal their cattle."
"They can't come up here," said Tom.
"And you can't go down there, but here we are with a hundred head of Mexican cattle grazing on the San Pedro and six dead Mexicans near Skeleton Canyon." He turned now to the Sheriff, "That would be a Federal crime."
Ike swallowed another bite of ice cream.
"Goddamn, Wyatt, what makes you think it was us? You just got it in for Cow-boys because of that horse incident."
"Say, dumbass, are you even paying attention? I'm just here to tell you to be careful, or some moonless night a group of Mexican regulars is going to ride up here and crack," Wyatt smacked his hands together then raised a finger to his temple, "you'll have a bullet in your head."
Finney called Wyatt. His plate of ice cream was ready. Ten steps back to the counter, twice what it took to get to Clanton's table, he took the plate from Finney. "Sprinkles?" Nary a moment, the saloon keeper lifted a spoonful of rainbow candies and dusted the tops of the slices. Wyatt's spoon dipped into the vanilla, lifted a precisely measured lump, and then back into the lemon for a slightly smaller chunk. His mouth engulfed the spoon, and he held it for a few moments between tongue and teeth until he slowly pulled the spoon out, holding the ice cream in his mouth before allowing it to slide down his throat. Opening his eyes, Wyatt turned back to Ike, "And you stole my goddam horse, you scoundrel! Swiped it when I first got to town. Don't think I haven't forgotten that."
The outburst shook the men. Ike stabbed at his ice cream and considered that his cooperation with the Earps was not winning him favor and realized that

when everything was over, he'd be brought before the grand jury. Sam Roberts delivered another block of ice, then wiped the sweat off his forehead with a blue kerchief his mother had made, smiled at Finney, nodded to
Wyatt, and then quietly walked back out to get the final block of ice. Finney grabbed a mop and wiped the wet blotches from the floor. Ike's eyes stalked Sam Roberts, who gave him a sideways glance as he walked through the room. The Sheriff leaned back in his chair and drew a cigar from his pocket.

"Tell me, Mister Policeman, the horse you're accusing Mr. Clanton of stealing," he asked, "could it be the horse you stole in Illinois?"

Wyatt set down his plate, placed his hands back on his hips, the glint in his eyes was gone – the bully revealed.

"It was the horse of a man who crossed me. After my wife died, James took Morgan and me down to Indian Territory. A man there promised to guide us to a herd of buffalo we could shoot, but he double-crossed us and took all our money. James and Morgan headed back to Pa's place in Lamar, but I rode him down with information I got from one of Gopher John's Black Seminole friends, and near the Canadian River found the villain and beat him with my fists. When he pulled a rifle from his saddle, I shot him in the jaw with this pistol," he said, patting his pocket, "and watched blood tears drip from his eyes. I took back what was left of our money. In this manner, Sheriff, justice was dispensed, and conveyance for that justice was paid with the horse."

"So, you are a horse thief," said the Sheriff. "And a murderer."

"It was deliverance, and to your earlier accusation, I never stole that horse from the riverfront."

"Didn't they call you the Peoria Bummer?"

"They did, and I

did things when I was drinking."

"I was just saying it was Curly Bill who stole them cattle. You know, Curly," Ike blurted to Wyatt.

"I know Curly Bill," Wyatt said. "You gentlemen keep your distance and vacate when he is near. Death comes for him like it did that man near Wewoka."

Ike spooned the last of his ice cream into his mouth, the chocolate cream dripping down his beard. "I don't get you, Wyatt. Your testimony saved the man's life."

"It did, and that was justice at the time, but he should make a run for it. We all should run for it. The frontier has been vanquished. Best we accept it and grow up." He straightened up and squared his shoulders. "Now surrender your weapons and finish your damn ice cream," he bellowed.

The men put their weapons on the table, and Sheriff Behan gathered them up. Wyatt picked up his plate and sat at a table near the window, and all was silent again except the sound of Finney chipping at the big block of ice so he could make ice cream and humming Nothing Else to Do.

Leather Lou crossed to the bar and gently placed his empty plate near Finney and asked, "What'd he mean 'bout runnin?"

"That's just Wyatt," Finney said. "He's talking about empire and the loss of freedom."

"Oh, bullshit," said Wyatt from across the room. "We are the greedy, obdurate wastes cast out of the Edens of the East."

Wyatt crossed to the bar. "Restless men and women went into the West to find profit in the wilds, well it's gone now. Electricity, telephones in the hotels, roads in the mountains.There's no place for restless men in town because restless men carry guns," said Wyatt. "Put a gun in a man's hands, and he'll likely use it. Either by accident or in anger."

Finney shook his head with a grin, “Pro’ ly shoot off a toe,” and started cranking the ice cream maker.

“Never fired a gun,” said Lou. “I came out west because folk don’t much care what kind of man you are as long as you do the work.”

“You’re not a man, Lou,” said Finney.

“He is if he wants to be,” replied Wyatt. “It’s an ugly legacy we’re leaving behind. Who are we to object if he wants to share in our peccancy?”

It was true Lou no longer thought of himself as Louisa Turk. He wasn’t a man but figured he was no longer a woman. He traveled the West as a man and worked as a man from a fishing boat in San Pedro to a ferry on the Colorado. He had spent the past winter in the Sangre de Cristos with a large widow whose husband had died the year before leaving her with six brats and a debt. She was a beautiful woman, and he loved her.

In the spring, Lou left her to work and earn and pay off her debt. The Clantons had him a job and gave him a role as a Cow-boy. Folks say, Leather Lou is a good man, and he liked that. Revival is what the West offered, he reckoned. Wyatt worked as a pimp in Peoria, and a pimp in Wichita before he was hired a city constable. Men like Johnny Ringo went from lawman to criminal. So did Frank Stillwell. Finney spent two years as a deputy for the Canadian Bat Masterson before becoming a pistoleer on a ranch in Lincoln County, New Mexico. And in the West, Louisa became Lou.There was a shout, and a cry as flesh was beaten.

Ike Clanton was standing, his pistol drawn, the holster lying on the table, and Tom was stepping between him and Sheriff Behan. The face of Sam Roberts was bloodied; his lip torn at the corner where the hammer of Ike’s gun had sliced the boy’s cheek as it was drawn across his face. Outside Wes Fuller, another of the

Cow-boys, pulled ice from Roberts's wagon.

The dispute that echoed from the street was about protection money owed to the Cow-boys by the ice company, a share of which went to the Sheriff to look the other way.

Wyatt grabbed Ike by the arm. He took the Cow-boy's pistol and handed it back to Sheriff Behan. "Leave, you damn fool," he told Ike.

"You're not my friend, Wyatt," said Ike.

"No, I'm not your friend," said Wyatt between his teeth. "I'm the man who is using you to get what his brother wants. But I'll keep you out of jail and alive as long as I can. Now, you need to move on, or I'm going to arrest you."

"That boy said he had heard about our arrangement. That he heard it from Doc."

"He heard nothing, Ike. Now go."

As he left, Ike looked over his shoulder and called, "You comin, Lou?"

Lou set down the glass, left two liberty dimes and a three-cent on the bar for Finney, and headed out into the October sun. That night as Ike Clanton and Doc Holliday drank and played cards; they had words. Doc accused Ike of being a snitch and a coward. The next day Ike said he wanted to kill Doc and the Earps. Ike, his brother Billy, Tom and Frank McLaury, and Billy Claiborne gathered in Finney's Ice Cream Saloon with plans to walk over to where Doc was living at C.S. Fly's Boarding House next to the OK Corral.

"Kill Doc, then kill them Earps," said Ike raising his gun. Billy Clanton, Tom, Frank, and Billy Claiborne grabbed their Winchesters and headed out into the street.

Wyatt and Doc opened fire as they exited Finney's; bullets swarmed the side of the building, and gun smoke lingered thick in the October air. Claiborne fell dead on the stoop.

Injured, Billy, Frank, and Tom retreated into the saloon where Leather Lou's gun met them and killed Tom on the spot. Ike grabbed his brother and pulled him to the door. Lou fired his pistol point-blank into Frank's face, exploding his head in bits of bone and gore while his body fell in violent spasms to the floor. Ike's brother surrendered to Wyatt, and together they barreled into destiny. *Coda – 1927*

The old man drifted into Vidal, California with the desert at his back. Above him, lightning from a passing storm threatened rain that would never come. In front of him, several electric pick-up trucks, a '25 Model T and Nikola Tesla's latest creation for Buick were parked around the town's solitary bar where the old man could relax with a smoke and a game of Faro.

To the west, the ancient trail he took as a young man driving freight from Wilmington on the Pacific to Fort Yuma. Near the Colorado River, he had several claims for copper and gold that produced barely enough to pay for his refreshment that night. Not that he needed the money. He had made a fortune and would spend the hot summer ensconced in a hotel in Los Angeles. Life as a legend had robbed him of his anonymity.

He walked through the smoky tobacco haze of the establishment toward the counter at the back. There was whiskey and gin on near every table. Two stockmen close-danced in a corner and planted light kisses on each other's lips. Other couples swayed on the dance floor. A thin transman in his mid-sixties with a sun worn face and his arm hooked to a large woman approached the old man and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Earp," he said.

"Leather Lou, the Hero of Tombstone," said Wyatt, "I remember you."

"Indeed, you do. This is my wife, Mallie," he said with a gesture.

Wyatt tipped his hat. "Mrs. Turk."

"I'm showing Mallie where I spent time in my youth. Heard you lived in the area."

"Well," Wyatt said, "you found me." He reached over the counter where the bartender had set out a bowl of ice cream. With sprinkles.

"How's your friend Mr. Finney?" asked Lou.

Wyatt scooped a bit of vanilla and a bit of lemon. "Moved to Ruxton Springs, Colorado in 1890. Spanish flu took him October 18th, 19 hundred 18."

"Sorry to hear that."

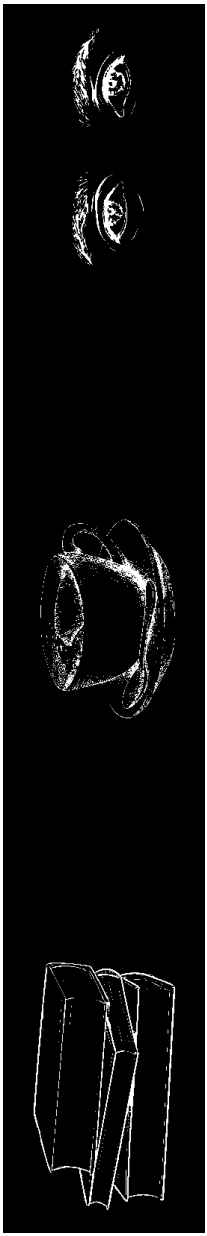
"He was a good friend," said Wyatt.

Lou smiled. Shook his hand. Wyatt kissed Mallie's hand.

Someone called for a song dedicated to President Edith Wilson, and the bartender announced a round on the house. A small band from San Bernardino had been hired with a Mexican saxophone player and a woman on bass and a Black man on piano, and the jazz flowed. Lou tarried for a moment to get the rhythm of the song then took Mallie by the arm and swung her to the dance floor. Wyatt leaned back against the counter where men offered to pour him a drink and women and the fluid touched him just to say they had been close to a legend. They could not see the blood on his hands or smell the corruption that smoldered in him.

A fight broke out because fights tended to break out when Wyatt was near with fists batted about and bruising blows laid on each contestant. Men leered at women, and women, as they had always done, chose or chose not little fooled by the fools around them. The town was dying as western towns do. They come and go like ightning-sparked wildfires in the dry shrubland below the mountains. The land, like history,
changes in subtle ways only old timers see. Eventually, the folk move on and lay waste to the frontier's edge.

Lou danced with Mallie as the band played, the whiskey flowed, and the smoke wafted out the door and rose into the night sky.



Magpie
by Russel Thayer

The winning shot skipped between Maggie's legs, throwing a bit of wind up her skirt. A squadron of fat, black birds took noisy flight as the ball slammed against the high metal fence. Irene, victorious again, did not suppress a rough guffaw as she stumbled toward the bench next to the court, near to where Maggie had just thrown her racquet.

Maggie tried to avoid looking at the fit young woman, who sprawled with long legs thrust straight out, buttocks at the edge of the bench, thighs taut and strong where they disappeared underneath the pleated tartan. She shuffled along the links of chain that enclosed the court like a prison yard, picking up the racquet, examining the latest bite in the wooden frame, then heaving it into a pile of dry leaves driven by the wind against the fence. Flopping next to Irene, she took an offered cigarette, leaning in as Irene lit her up with a silver lighter. Sterling. The girl had money. Maggie's eyes measured the gold watch visible above the agile wrist as Irene lifted her hand to suck at the fag like a movie star, the shaft held prettily near the top of two long, slender fingers

I thought you said you played in school." Irene choked a little on the warm smoke. "I was state champion my senior year of high school. There's no shame in losing to me."

Maggie, who let her own cigarette hang at the side of her mouth like Barbara Stanwyck, studied the looming brick walls of the high school in front of her, the windows dark and empty. The hills made a murky backdrop under the gray sky. It was Sunday, Maggie's day off, and she wished Irene had taken her to a museum.

"I did play the stupid game in school," said Maggie. "But I was thirteen when the war came to Hong Kong. That was 1940, in case you've forgotten." After emitting a cloud of smoke, she added, "School and I never met again after that."

"How old are you now?"

Maggie challenged Irene with raised eyebrows, her plain copper hair, pulled tight in a ponytail, not red enough to be called exciting. This was her second autumn in San Francisco.

"Make your own calculations," she said.

Irene laughed, as good-natured as a puppy, as happy as a woman who figured her life was perfect.

"It's only a game. Don't be a pill. Next you'll be telling me you lost because you weren't wearing sneakers."

"I may be underdeveloped physically," Maggie said, sniffing with irritation, "but I'm nineteen, and I would have finished school just like you if I hadn't spent three-and-a-half years sweating my tits off in a Japanese prison camp."

"Oh, Maggie, your mouth is a scandal."

"If you're looking to compare accomplishments, Irene, I did win the grand prize at the Far East Chopin Piano Competition. I guess that makes me a champion too."

Irene snorted with laughter.

"It was an international event. Held in Shanghai."

"Maggie, please." Irene wiped her eyes as she laughed.

"Twenty finalists. The judges honored me with an engraved medallion made of sterling silver. As large as a bloody dinner plate. I'd wave it around in front of your face, but we left it behind in Hong Kong when my mother and I fled to Australia."

"You're such a liar!"

Maggie scowled, then spotted something over Irene's shoulder.

A bent old woman, wearing a tattered Qing jacket, carried two full canvas bags up the sidewalk toward Powell Street. Maggie climbed onto the bench, making a megaphone of her hands, then discharged a startling eruption of complex sounds from her throat, words she'd learned from the Chinese housekeeper who'd raised her, fed her, made her sit for hours at the piano while her parents drank and laughed at fancy dress parties with the richest denizens of Hong Kong's English high society. The old woman turned her head, as if hearing a crow cry, but made no expression of surprise at the red-haired girl asking her why she transported supplies for her brutal masters like a crippled water buffalo.

"I speak fluent Mandarin," Maggie explained.

Irene dropped her head between her knees, laughing onto her shoes. "You watch too many Charlie Chan movies," she gasped.

"Charlie Chan movies are the most wretched tripe imaginable."

"You're a funny kid," said Irene as she reached for Maggie's hand, pulling her down to the bench.

"I'm not a kid," said Maggie, pulling her hand away. "I just look like one."

"Okay, little lady." Irene draped both arms over the back of the bench, cigarette now dangling from the side of her mouth.

Maggie turned her head, eyes lingering on the curve of breast outlined by Irene's white sweater before focusing again on the gold watch.

They'd met at the Italian restaurant where Maggie worked Monday through Saturday as a waitress. Irene regularly appeared in the lunch rush after starting a job as a law clerk at a firm two blocks away.

Maggie guessed her age to be about twenty-three.

Stylishly dressed and always ready with engaging conversation, she and Maggie had hit it off from the start. This was their first meeting outside of the restaurant, and Maggie suspected that Irene might be trying to improve her. Though Irene was smart, and certainly pretty with her clear skin and golden-blond waves, she didn't appear to have much life experience.

"Would you like to go for a gargle?" Maggie asked after a minute of quiet thought.

"Gargle?" asked Irene.

"A drink."

"What time is it?" asked Irene.

"I don't own a timepiece," said Maggie. "But you do."

"So I do." Irene lifted her arm, exposing the golden wristwatch. The face, set with diamonds at the quarter hour, winked at Maggie. "Three thirty-two. That's a little early for a bar on a Sunday, isn't it?"

"Not really," Maggie said. "And I think you owe me a beer after your humiliating treatment."

"I wasn't trying to humiliate you."

Ripped by a sudden gust of wind, Maggie slipped into her worn leather jacket, the black fur collar soft against her neck.

"Let's take a bus up to the Fillmore District. I know a club where we can drink beer and eat oysters while we tap our feet to live music."

"Sounds like an extravagant afternoon."

"We could hock that watch of yours if you're short of cash. What's it worth, anyway?"

"I could never sell this," said Irene, admiring her wrist. "It was given to me by my fiancé."

"Sounds like a swell guy. Have you been to bed with him?"

"Maggie, of course not," said Irene, drawing back in surprise. "We're to be married next summer."

Maggie decided not to mention to lovely, optimistic Irene that she'd been done over by a number of men from age fourteen, never once having been in the mood for it. She hoped to never marry. There were other ways to get through life.

"We won't need money, anyway," said Maggie. "Not with your looks. Men will find us after a short while, then treat us to beer, smokes, and dinner, if we're lucky."

"Maggie, that's…" Irene blushed, covering her mouth with the back of her fingers.

"It'll be fun. Come on." Maggie stood up, zipping her jacket tight and warm. "Slip your racquet into its jolly prophylactic, and let's go have a time."

The bus let them off on Post Street. Maggie paid the fare for both of them, but her jacket pockets held only lint and gum wrappers after that. She'd left the previous day's tips on the top of the dresser in her small bedroom above the restaurant. She never carried a purse.

Turning to Irene, she took the tall girl's arm.

"You do have some money just in case, don't you?" she whispered.

Irene clutched her purse to her chest, racquet case hanging from her shoulder. "Yes, I have a few dollars," she whispered back. Three Negro men had followed them off the bus, but they soon hurried away in different directions.

Turning into a stiff wind, Maggie steered Irene into her favorite joint, the New Orleans Swing Club.

"There's usually a jam session on Sunday afternoon, and I never have to pay for a drink in this place. Louis Armstrong played here once with Jack Teagarden and Earl Hines."

Irene shrugged.

There were no musicians onstage yet, but the bar crawled with early drinkers.

Maggie led Irene to her favorite booth, where a solitary Negro male sat over coffee. He rose, grabbing the mug, and walked away. A table of dark-skinned girls scraped their chairs on the dirty floor as they turned their backs.

Irene looked as though she were going to burst into flames.

"The nerve," she hissed.

"Settle down," Maggie said as she slid into the booth, unzipping her jacket. "Give me a smoke."

Louis Ledoux, the club's owner, sauntered along the booths at the side of the room, slapping hands with the customers. He was short and round, his yellow eyes bulging with excitement as he stopped to tug on Maggie's ponytail.

"Magpie! You gonna play me some barrelhouse blues today?" His eyes made a quick exploration of Irene. "Who this ofay princess?"

Maggie squinted up at him. Louis and the men who jammed on his stage did not take her seriously as a musician but humored her like kindly big brothers, laughing into their fists as their pale kid sister unwound over the keyboard on the rare occasions when they actually allowed it.

"I might play for you this afternoon if you can provide anyone talented enough to keep up with me. In answer to your second question, this is my friend Irene. I'm not sure she's happy I brought her here."

"Why not? This the best club in San Francisco."

"I know that," said Maggie.

"I don't wanna see ya'll at the Town Club or the Alabam."

"You're always here, Louis. Day and night. How would you ever know where else we were?"

"OTIS!" The owner jerked his thumb at the table. "Two beers! And a plate of oysters!"

He winked at Irene, then drifted off to glad-hand a

"See what I mean?" Maggie rubbed her hands together. "Beer and oysters, and we haven't even had to kiss anybody yet."

"What are you doing?" Irene asked, her voice cold.

"Having some fun. It's my day off." Maggie tapped two fingers against her lips, causing Irene to sigh and dig around in her purse. With a lit cigarette cupped in her hand, Maggie settled in, planning to make the booth their home for the rest of the evening or until they got a better offer. "May I see the time?"

Irene thrust her left arm at Maggie, who took the soft hand, turning it over to read the white clock face, the tiny diamonds on the quarter hour sparkling with merriment. Veins the color of diluted ink flowed under thin, almost transparent skin.

"Thanks for the tennis game, Irene. I mean that. We've had the sort of lark that pleases pretty schoolgirls. Now we're going to have some bloody fun."

The oysters and beer arrived in the hands of two handsome Negroes, their expectant smiles advertising a desire to be seated. Maggie ushered them in while Irene slid to the deepest corner of the booth, hard against the wall, blocked in by a well-dressed male not any older than herself.

"Irene, my dear, the fellow sitting next to you is called Stride Perkins, a fine pianist but only the third-best player to ever get up on that stage. Earl Hines being the best, of course."

Stride snorted, reaching out his right hand to Irene, who sucked in her lips, glaring at Maggie, before abruptly draining her schooner of beer, burping violently, then covering her mouth as she reddened.

"Slow down," said Maggie, "or I'll have to drag you home by your ankles."

Irene lowered her eyes to her lap. Maggie lifted her own schooner and

poured it down her throat.

"Perhaps these kind gentlemen will buy us another round." Maggie sent a message to Stride with her eyes.

The two men rose so quickly that the golden bangs moved on Irene's forehead. Maggie leaned in to speak quietly with her friend. "They like to dance with brave white girls like you and me. To touch us. They can in here, you know. It's not illegal." She wrinkled her brow. "Or is it? Anyway, can you blame them for fawning over us?"

Irene's lower lip trembled but she couldn't say what was on her mind. Maggie took her hand again, staring at the watch.

"Nothing bad is ever going to happen to a beautiful state tennis champion. Trust me," she said, then noticed the bare ring finger on Irene's left hand. Her own fingers squeezed the empty spot, their eyes making contact.

Irene tried to pull her hand away but Maggie held it tightly.

"It's one of the partners at your firm, isn't it? I'm guessing he's married and wants to keep you but you won't have it. I'm proud of you, Irene, but the watch is a sign of conquest. You should sell it. And I hope you're not pregnant."

"I'm not explaining anything to you," Irene said with a touch of fierceness. "And I'm not dancing with anyone in this awful place. If you go up on that stage to act like a fool and leave me here alone with them, I'll walk straight out of here and never see you again. You'll never be able to hold my hand like this or look at me the way you do. Do you understand?"

Maggie let go of the soft fingers, surprised that Irene wasn't so naive after all.

"Why don't you go now, then?" Maggie asked in a low voice. "Back to your life."

"Because you're my friend, and I really need a friend these days."

Maggie reached for the hand again, but Irene moved it to her lap just as the men arrived with fresh beer, shots of whiskey, and a large bowl of pretzels.

"Boilermakers!" Maggie exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "You cats must have money to burn."

The cramped washroom reeked of urine. Maggie held the folds of soft, blonde hair in her fists while Irene knelt on loose floor tiles, clutching at the stained porcelain as she vomited.

Maggie thought about the last hours as she felt the muscles in Irene's neck pull taut again. Was it a bad oyster? Most of the plate had gone into her own stomach. Maybe one was bad or maybe it was the two shots of whiskey on top of the gulped beers on top of the oysters on top of Stride leaning in to tickle Irene's neck while Maggie smirked drowsily at her from across the table. That's what had made Irene sick, she guessed, and Maggie was sorry she'd done that, the smirking at a lovely state tennis champion's uncomfortable situation. She should have told Irene that she'd forgiven her for not taking her seriously before, at the tennis court, but there were dark fingers tickling her own smooth neck at the time, so it was hard to organize her own confused thoughts as she stared at Irene. And she was also very drunk.

The rush to the toilet had gotten them away from the men, who were bubbling with ideas. It was probably best for Irene in the long run, with her acute troubles, and Maggie had grown weary of Stride's persistent suggestions from across the table that she should go to secretarial school or nursing school instead of wasting her life as a waitress.

As if he wasn't half the piano player she was and made good money at it.

Soon the two girls were marching in the alley, floating out of the club's service door on wings and wobbly legs, an expensive tennis racquet left behind in the booth. Maggie held Irene close, cooing encouragement at her, helping her toward the street, someplace they could find a cab. She cursed when two white men approached from the shadows, unsteady with drink, one of them pushing Maggie hard against a wall, making her head ring. Irene was taken by the shoulders and studied in the shadows.

"I want this one."

"Of course you do, you pig," said Maggie. Someone slapped her. Maggie called out, "Men at work! HELP!"

One of the men pushed her to the ground, then tipped her over with his foot when she got to her hands and knees. Maggie froze when Irene was turned roughly toward the wall, skirt lifted to the small of her back.

"Hurry up," said one of the men. "I want a turn."

Maggie shot to her feet, getting between Irene and her attacker, then climbed onto the girl's back, making her crumple onto the cobblestones like a broken chair.

"What is this idiot doing?" one of the men asked, grabbing Maggie by the ponytail. "Hey, do you want me to break your neck?"

Maggie held on. The men would have to kill her to get to Irene. She began to scream.

"Pull her off and shut her up."

"I can't. She's like a fuckin' tick. The little shit won't let go."

Maggie aimed a kick backward at the man who was now pulling hard on her ponytail, bending her neck until she couldn't breathe. Her foot found soft thigh and she went higher, aiming for the prized weakness, but

the man was quick, turning his hip toward her for protection. Then she went for the side of his knee, the hard leather bottom of her saddle shoe causing ligaments to tear, a popping sound, a squeal like music to her ears. The other man, his friend, kicked her in the side of her head, making all the remaining light disappear. It was like being thrown off a cliff into a black sea, but she climbed toward the surface, struggling for air at the same time she could hear the men scrape away down the wet alley, a heavy iron door slamming in a wall nearby. She could smell blood on Irene's hair and ruined sweater, but she couldn't hate the man for kicking her. It's what a friend would do.

As hurrying feet approached, Maggie's fingers found Irene's limp wrist. The watch should come off with a quick pull on the strap, a flick of the buckle tongue out of the hole. She could do it with one hand and slip the thing into the inner pocket of her leather jacket. No one would suspect her.

Instead she clutched Irene's fingers.

"We'll burn down his house. I promise," she whispered, feeling the grip tighten in response. It was good to have a friend.

Then Otis appeared. The bartender. Maggie focused an eye on him as he knelt next to her. Another friend.

"Lie still, Magpie," he said, holding a rag against her temple. "You bleedin' from yo' head.

Slow Friday Night

by Terry Sanville

Lauren hadn't worked graveyard for years. But Elliot had bailed her out plenty of times, so she owed him a favor. She drove to the laboratory at eleven on Friday night, leaving Harry snoozing in front of a muted TV. Unlike her normal day shift, the hospital's parking lot stood empty. An ambulance with its lights off occupied the emergency bay, its doors open, EMTs wheeling in the latest calamity.

Jeez, more passed-out drunks and drug ODs, she thought.

Inside the cramped laboratory, she found Adele working the machines. "Haven't seen you for a long time," Lauren said cheerily.

Adele glowered at her. "*Some* of us get stuck on graveyard. We have no lab assistants tonight. So you'll have to do the draws."

"Sure, Adele. I'm a bit rusty. But it looks pretty slow."

"Just wait. The bars haven't closed yet."

Lauren slid a zip-lock bag holding her mid-shift snack into a refrigerator crammed with petri dishes growing God knows what. She slipped into her spotless white lab technician coat and logged onto the computer. Almost immediately, it beeped: lab orders from the ED for a Jane Doe #482, nothing unusual, a tox screen and a blood alcohol. But they also wanted calcium, potassium, and magnesium levels. *Huh, that's a little differen*t.

The lab phone buzzed. Adele just stared at Lauren and kept working

at her station. Lauren picked it up and talked with an ED nurse she didn't know.

"When ya come to fill those last orders better double-glove."

Lauren groaned to herself. "Thanks for the warning."

When she entered Treatment Station #4 in the Emergency Department, Dr. Phillips and an older nurse stood next to the bed holding onto a woman who could be anywhere between 14 and 40. The hospital gown barely covered her front, dirt and grime encrusting her exposed arms, legs and feet. The nurse had cleaned one arm and inserted an IV. A filthy plaid shirt and baggy jeans hung over the edge of a waste bin. No underwear, no shoes.

The patient flexed and extended her body repeatedly, the spasms threatening to dislodge the IV. Her mouth foamed.

"Sorry, Dr. Phillips," Lauren said. "I can't draw her blood when she's—"

"I know that," he snapped. "Just wait. I gave her Lamictal. Should kick in any moment."

"What's her story?" Lauren asked the nurse.

She shrugged. "The police found her walking in traffic, talking gibberish. I barely got the IV in before she seized."

In a few minutes the spasms passed and the woman lay still, eyes half closed, breathing heavily.

"Could you clean the other arm?" Lauren asked. "I don't wanna poke her in the same one with the IV."

The nurse glared at her but complied.

For such a small woman, Jane Doe had huge veins, making for an easy blood draw, her arms and hands free of track marks. *Huh, if she's a hard core druggy, she must be shooting up some other way. They should check her feet.*

The woman's body convulsed and she projectile vomited onto Lauren's front. "Welcome to the night shift," the nurse cracked.
Housekeeping arrived to clean the floor, change bedding, and bring Lauren a new lab coat.

Lauren tied the tourniquet around the woman's upper arm, inserted the needle into a fat vein, and began filling lavender- and tiger-topped tubes with blood. Jane Doe opened her green eyes and gave her a dreamy smile. Under the dirt and grime she had a pretty face framed by cropped red hair. But she smelled like feces.

"Thank you . . . so much," the woman said when Lauren finished.

"You'll feel better soon."

"I hope so. Gotta get back to camp. Bex 'll be worried."

"Is that your . . . your boyfriend?"

Jane doe sucked in a deep breath. "Yeah. It hasn't been long . . . but he's good to me, real good."

"I'm glad. Some of them aren't."

"Don' I know it. But Bex protects me from those kind."

"Good. That's good."

Lauren couldn't remember the last time someone had thanked her for sticking a needle in his or her arm. When she returned to the laboratory, Adele grinned.

"First draw of the night and already a new lab coat. Good goin'."

"Yeah, well you've got the next one."

In the doldrums of February, that Friday night turned out to be slow with few calls for lab work. The two techs talked about their husbands, Adele's kids, and what to do on a winter's weekend in coastal California. As Saturday's sun rose over the city, Lauren retrieved her purse and headed home.

But before leaving the hospital she got curious about Jane Doe and swung by the ED. The woman's complete lab results wouldn't be available until that evening. But the early results showed she'd tested negative for alcohol and cocaine.

Treatment Station #4 stood empty.

"Where'd Jane Doe go?" she asked the nurse.

"She demanded to be released."

"Really? That looked like a really bad seizure."

"Yeah, no kidding. But she got loud and threatened to yank out her IV. Dr. Phillips had the pharmacy fill a prescription for Lamictal and referred her to the free clinic."

"Do ya think she'll go?"

The nurse frowned. "We'll know soon enough if they wheel her back in here."

Lauren drove home. Harry met her at the door with a cup of hot chocolate. Fresh scones with real butter and English marmalade sat on the kitchen table. After breakfast they adjourned to the bedroom for a good morning's snuggle and more.

Monday, Monday, can't trust that day. Lauren mouthed the lyrics to the old Mamas and Popas tune as she crawled from bed and ducked into the bathroom.

"Come on, honey, breakfast's almost ready," Harry called.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'."

Lauren stared into the mirror and pulled a comb through her short hair. She looked boyish, with a square jaw and prominent brow. But everything below the neck belonged to a smokin' hot babe. She and Harry understood this contradiction, but the world didn't seem to catch on.

Slipping into her bathrobe she padded into the kitchen and joined her husband at the table. He lowered his sports car magazine for a moment and they kissed.

"So where are you goin' today?" she asked.

"We're surveying about a dozen parcels on the Nipomo Mesa. Should take us a couple of days, maybe three."

"Take your jacket. Could rain."

"Yeah."

"At least you get to spend time outside."

Harry smiled. "You're feeling it again, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, the same thing you've been feelin' for the past year."

Lauren leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Yeah, you're right. I just get so tired of being cooped up in a room full of machines. I never get outside, except to walk to and from the lab."

"You don't have to work at that place if ya don't want to. I make enough to—"

"Cut it out. You know I'm lost without a job. I'm just not sure I can keep going with this one. It's been fifteen years."

"Is it just the cramped space you work in?"

"No, that's the least of it. I never really talk to people anymore. Never get to hear their stories. I sit at my station and process blood, pee, and shit samples, enter data, and distribute reports."

"What about this last Friday?"

"Yeah, but Jane Doe #482 was the exception . . . and I'll never know what happens to her. Just more data to be entered."

"Huh."

"That's all ya got . . . a 'huh'?"

Harry flashed her a quiet smile. "Sorry. But if I start suggesting things, you'll get up in my face. I don't wanna argue."

"You're a very wise man, ya know?"

"Thanks. I try."

Lauren finished her tea and scrambled eggs then dressed. Their used by

house fronted a busy street often by the homeless walking to the hospital and the free clinic. Stepping outside into the morning air, she saw her breath. She zipped her jacket, slung her purse on its strap across her back, and headed out at a brisk pace. But she'd taken only a half dozen steps before stopping.

From their house's side yard, overgrown with German Ivy, came a thrashing sound back by the rear fence. *Ah Jeez, some animal got hit by a car and crawled in there to die.* Not the first time. She dug into her pocket for her cell phone and Googled animal control. But she heard a moan, distinctly human. The back of her neck numbed. She entered the narrow yard, trying not to trip on the thick bed of out-of-control ivy, staying close to the house in case she needed to bang on the wall for Harry's help.

Jane Doe #482 lay on her back, staring up into the canopy of Monterey Pines. Her body jerked randomly, her eyes leaked tears. She wore the same filthy clothes she had Friday night. If possible, her stench had gotten worse.

Lauren knelt by her side and tried to focus. "Remember me from the hospital?"

The woman blinked her eyes rapidly and nodded.

"Do you have your medicine?"

The woman shook her head and mumbled something Lauren couldn't catch, her voice slurred and halting.

"What was that? What did you say?"

"I killed my boyfriend."

Lauren leaned away from her, fingering her cell phone, ready to press the 9-1-1 connection.

The woman tried to sit up but failed. Dollops of foam from her mouth slid down her chin and onto her front. Lauren crammed her purse under Jane Doe's head to act as a pillow, her heart pounding.

This is too fucking real. But I can do this. I . . . wanna do this.

"What's your name, honey? Do you remember?"

The woman nodded. "Sophia."

"Sophia what?"

"Sophia Dawson." "

What's this about your boyfriend? Bex, right?"

"Yeah, Bex."

"What happened?"

Sophia let out a deep breath. New tears formed at the corners of her eyes and slid down her cheeks."When I got back to camp . . . Bex acted all crazy."

"What do you mean?"

"He's hooked on 'H' . . . needed a fix. Wild . . . in a lotta pain . . . had torn up all my stuff . . . lookin' for money."

"So . . . ?" Lauren kept her voice low and soothing, not wanting Sophia to get agitated and seize again.

"I . . . I gave 'im the drugs they gave me at the hospital."

"Yes, it was Lamictal. Did he down those pills?"

"No, no. Thought maybe they'd help. He took 'em downtown. Sold 'em. Bought some China White. That shit . . . closed his eyes . . . forever."Sophia vibrated with a fine tremor that made her teeth rattle.

"Easy, girl, easy," Lauren said. "You didn't kill Bex . . . it was the drugs."

"If I hadn't . . . given him the pills . . ."

Lauren pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at Sophia's new flood of tears. A soft morning wind whispered through the pines that dropped their needles on the two women.

Sophia rubbed her temples. "My head's killin' me."

"Can you stand?"

"I can try."

With Lauren's help, Sophia stood on wobbly legs,

swaying. “I feel better,” she said. “I gotta go.”

Lauren kept ahold of her arm. “You need to come with me to the hospital. I’ll stay with you and make sure they give you some more meds. And later we’ll go to the free clinic.”

“Thanks. I was on my way there when . . . Why are you being so nice?”

“I need to know what happens to you, to follow it through. And I hate those damned machines.”

Sophia looked confused. But Lauren already felt better. On that particular Monday morning, she felt free to search for something new, more connected to her real purpose.

Secrets Best Kept
by Terry Sanville

Debbie stood on tiptoes and French-kissed her fiancé, in the alley out back of The Rooster Saloon. When they came up for air, I tried to catch her attention. But she stared into Bill's eyes and pressed her flushed face against his, her shapely body molded to him. She wore a short dress that fluttered in the hot night wind.

After waiting awkwardly for a few moments, I cleared my throat and the couple stopped kissing.

"Come on, Deb, it's time," I said.

"Christ, already? Can't a gal take time out for love?"

She disentangled herself from a reluctant Bill, gave him a quick kiss, and followed me inside the club. We climbed onto the stage and rejoined the rest of the band to perform the midnight-to-one set of rock-and-roll tunes for a redneck crowd. The strap of my Gibson Les Paul Custom cut a furrow into my shoulder and my back ached. I wanted our lack-luster performance to be over, to pack up my guitars, drive the quiet streets home, crawl into bed and cuddle with my wife.

At the end of the set we huddled around the soundboard station. A stoned Stanton worked the controls that night and our balance seemed way off. My lead guitar blasted much too loud, Dal's voice and rhythm guitar needed more boost, and I could barely hear Debbie's harmonies over Slick's booming bass. Meanwhile, Julio pushed the tempo and beat the living hell out of his drums.

"I can't hear a damn thing I'm singin'," Dal complained.

"Relax, man," Stanton said. "I'll turn up the monitors."Debbie stepped forward.

"Can ya play the track of that last song? I wanna see if my harmonies were on."

Stan stared at her boobs and grinned. "Sure, babe. Anything ya want." He cued the system and noise poured from a speaker below his soundboard.

"Shit, that's terrible," Dal said and groaned. "I'm singin' flat while Deb you're right on. And the rest of you bozos are crappin' all over our vocals."

"All right, all right," I said. "I'll lay back a bit. But Slick's gotta stop droppin' those bass bombs and Julio, just lighten the fuck up."

"*Eres un gilipollas*," Julio muttered, then smiled and gave Dal a fist bump.

"Quit tellin' me what to do," Slick said. "Besides, Stan's supposed to balance everything."

Our arguing got loud. The row of cowboys at the bar and couples waiting to dance stared at us, some shook their heads while a good ole boy yelled at us to quit jerking off and start playing again.

"Come on, guys," Dal pleaded. "We've got only one more set."

Debbie patted Dal's arm, "Yeah, guys, let's just relax into it."

A light blinked on the ancient wall phone in back of the bar. The bartender snatched it up and pressed the receiver to his ear. He looked our way and yelled. "Hey Dal, call."

"Now what?" Dal muttered and left us to our muted bickering.

When he returned, his face had turned ashen and he leaned unsteadily on Debbie. "I . . . I gotta go."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"That was the hospital. My . . . my Mom . . . the nursing home . . ."

"Is she okay?" I asked, knowing that a bad night was about to get worse.

Dal shook his head. “She’s close. I gotta go.”

“No sweat, man, I’ll drive you,” I said.

Debbie gave Dal a big hug and kissed him. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of things here. Just go.”

I’d been playing gigs and working up material with Dal for over four years. I’d never seen him that shaken. The hot night wind almost blew us over when we left the club and climbed into my Toyota. Dal stayed silent all the way to the hospital, arms wrapped around himself, trembling.

“Bring your guitar,” he said as we climbed out.

I nodded and retrieved my acoustic from the trunk. We hissed through the hospital’s entry doors and moved toward the reception counter, our faux cowboy boots slapping against the polished tiles. A guy in scrubs walked us to the intensive care unit. A nurse buzzed us through the door and we entered a curtained-off treatment station

Ida lay on her back, eyes closed, her long white hair spread across the pillow. IVs and various wires and tubes protruded from her bruised arms, an oxygen feed line under her nose.

The nurse gently touched Ida’s yellowed hand. “Someone’s here to see you.”

Ida opened her eyes and smiled. “Dallas, what are you . . . doin’ here? Thought you was playin’ tonight.”

“We just finished up, Mama.” Dal leaned forward and kissed her. “You remember Jack doncha?” He motioned toward me.

“Oh, sure. He’s that gee-tar player you always talk about.”

“Good to see you again, Ma’am,” I said.

Ida let out a deep sigh. One of the monitoring machines started beeping and a nurse entered, pushed buttons, then left.

I'd met Ida several times before but she never seemed to remember me. My head throbbed, the hospital lights way too bright after coming from the dimly lit saloon, the blurred images of inebriated bar patrons replaced by sterile efficient nurses and doctors, all moving way too fast.

"So, have you seen the doctor?" Dal asked.

Ida tried to push herself up onto her pillows but failed. "I don' know. I think so . . . they won' tell me nothin'."

Ida closed her eyes and her breathing grew ragged. The monitoring machines sounded an array of beeps. The nurse made more adjustments and frowned. "Take it easy, guys. She tires quickly. Just go slow."

After a few minutes some color returned to Ida's face and she opened her eyes. "So how's that gal of yours, Debbie?" Ida asked.

I stared at Dal, wide-eyed. He gave me his shut-the-fuck-up look and quickly touched an index finger to his lips. "She's fine, Mama, just fine."

"You two are so sweet . . . together. I may be dyin' but I still know love when I see it."

"She is somethin', Mama, one in a million."

"You best not let 'er get away. You ain't gettin' any younger."

"I won't, Mama. I promise."

I covered my smile with a hand. Dal glared at me. I wasn't about to bail him out of this situation. But disclosing the truth wasn't the best thing to do at that moment. A guy dressed in whites pushed inside the curtains and introduced himself as Dr. Mallard. He didn't look old enough to treat a case of athletes' foot.

"Are you two her sons?" he asked while brusquely examining Ida.

"I am," Dal said.

"I want to talk with you for a moment. Come with me."

The two disappeared through the curtains. Dal's footsteps clomped down the aisle and out of the ICU. Ida lay wide-eyed and shaking.

"Where'd they go?" she asked.

"Don't worry, Dal 'll be back in a minute."

I looked around for a place to sit, found a folding chair and pulled it up next to the bed. Unpacking my Martin, I tuned its strings and began to play softly.

Ida smiled. "You play real good. My boy could never stay with it ... but he can strum . . . and sing like a bird."

"He does have a wonderful voice."

I played old country tunes using my fingers to pluck the Martin's corroded strings. The occasional beep from the ICU's machines mingled with the notes from my guitar. Every few minutes, the curtains rustled and a nurse stuck her head in, then retreated quickly.Ida lay with her hands crossed over her chest, stretching the IV tubing, eyes closed, wearing a wistful smile. Time seemed to slow and I realized how exhausted I felt. Dal must have felt even worse.

Finally he returned, shaken, tears streaking his face. He laid his head on Ida's shoulder and stayed that way as she patted his back.

"I know it's bad, Dal. But . . . but it's okay." She sucked in a deep breath. "I'm gettin' tired. Sing me that Hank Williams song, will ya? You know the one I like. It's been too long."

Dal looked at me and I nodded. We'd done this before, for Ida's birthday and once at Christmas with Debbie singing harmony. I played the tune in "E" but Dal sang it in "G." So I capoed up three frets and played *Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain*, in an old country style. Dal's voice cracked as he sang.

But by the second verse he'd nailed it. Two nurses stuck their heads into our space and stared, taking in the lyrics. When we finished, only the sound of beeping machines filled the space. It felt like the mourning had already begun. Nobody talked.

Dal moved to the edge of the bed next to his mother. They whispered to each other. I packed my guitar into its case.

"I'll be in the lobby, Dal."

He nodded and continued whispering. Ida lay with eyes closed, lips quivering.

In a little more than an hour, Dal joined me. "She just went to sleep . . . then stopped breathing."

"I'm sorry, man. But when I get that old, that's how I wanna go."

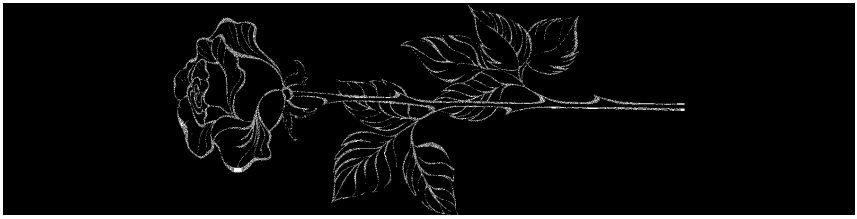
He nodded and wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve. "And thanks for not telling her about . . . "

I grinned. "Hey, I know how parents can conjure up fantasies about their kids."

"Yeah, Mama didn't need to know. She died in peace."

We walked through the hospital's entry doors. The night wind had calmed and a full moon shone blue and cold. I shivered, wishing again I were home in the comfort of my wife's arms.

Across the parking lot, a familiar van clicked on its lights. Julio climbed from the driver's seat and walked toward us, toward Dal. Without speaking, they embraced, kissed, took each other's hands and walked away.



Underwater
by Mary Sophie Filicetti

The dream koi presented themselves endlessly, relentlessly, haunting the nights of my elementary school years. Orange, black, and white speckled fish emerged from nowhere, fins slip-slapping back and forth, advancing on me through air fluid as water. The settings in which the dreams recurred varied, like the markings on the koi themselves. In one, I moved through a park ablaze with color and life, children swinging, sliding, laughing; teens' shouts echoing out from the tennis courts. I alone remained immersed in the weaving mist, skin prickling, my sleep self shrinking away from the parade of creatures. Other nights, dark brown catfish slithered in to the dreams, spiky barbels extended, released by my mind from the confines of my father's freshwater tanks.

The dream koi were as unwelcome as the monstrous fish who appeared during family canoe trips in our neighborhood pond, bright orange flashes appearing from the murky depths.

"They're just carp someone let loose, gone wild," my father said, laughing when I jerked my oar out of the water, startled. It never occurred to me to tell him about the nightmares, the anxiety that rose up in those moments.

My father devoted years of reading, years of study before he realized his life-long dream of creating saltwater tanks. He returned from work each day and sat, serene, watching the colorful inhabitants of two enormous glass enclosures spanning the length of the living room wall—yellow tangs, angel fish, clown fish that swam through the waving arms of the sea anemones, striped lion fish armed with poisonous quills. Spiny seahorse birthed

dozens of baby fry, ghostly replicas in miniature, who briefly enchanted me, until the tank's other occupants devoured every last one, and left me crushed. "The fry are on their own when they're born. Their fate is hardly different in the wild," my father said by way of comfort.

The creatures invaded my sleep less often in my teens, since high school held its own set of worries. . I avoided my father's tanks still, except when the little purple gramma fish, who took flight every so often, leaped onto the carpet then floundered, in need of rescue.

I gently lifted the tiny, slippery creature and dipped him back into his home, shuddering.

Saltwater tanks required constant care, a certain physical stamina to maintain. I was certainly aware of my father's limitations; the hemophilia which had fused his joints left him unable to climb up and down the stairs for supplies, or tackle the cleaning and upkeep without support. Still, I resented the time sacrificed when pressed into service.

"Honestly, Jennie," my mother scolded when I complained about the loss of a sunny weekend day. "I don't understand why you can't be more helpful, with all Dad does for you."

The duties expanded during my father's illnesses, in between our time shuttling from hospital to home and back again. I stepped up to assist my frantic mother, the two of us unable to sustain the fragile ecosystem without his expertise.

All became lost during my father's final hospital stay. My mother and I silently disassembled and boxed up in just a few afternoons what had taken years to create.

Marissa stepped outside the rear entrance of Agua Tropical Fish as I pulled up in Dad's Oldsmobile, the trunk and back seats packed with boxes. We'd met just a few times,

including at the funeral. If not for the age difference, we might have been mistaken for sisters—our dark hair, brown eyes, and petite frames a mirror image of one another.

"Can I pay you something for all of this?" she'd asked over her shoulder while we steered an empty tank through the narrow storage space. "Maybe you'd like to keep some equipment for a set-up of your own?"

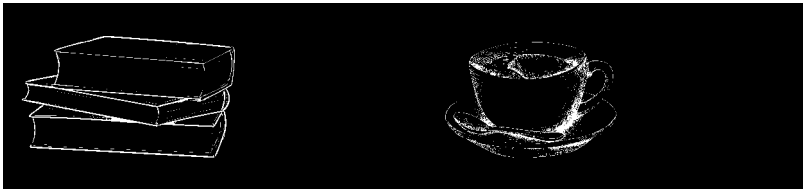
"No—my father wanted to pass this on to you," I replied, as I left unanswered her second question. "He appreciated your friendship, the chance to talk with another fish lover."

A smile lit her face briefly. "Your father was a good man. Do you know he rescued some of my fish over the years—a few rare ones—brought them to your home when they were sick, nursed them back to health? Saved my neck in the early days of this store."

I shook my head. "I do remember a visit to the Boston Aquarium, standing beside Dad in a back office with the curators. He'd come searching for advice, but instead solved a problem in their own tanks."

"Doesn't surprise me one bit."

The last of the boxes gone, she walked me out to the car. "Your father spoke often of you. He felt so proud." The words, meant kindly, instead caused a flood of regret. It was too late to overcome my fears, to have shared in his passion or participated witha more generous spirit. At least he'd known Marissa.



The Garden
by Zach Murphy

The wildflowers wilt over their own feet as I trudge through the dusty, jaded soil. One of my legs is broken. My mouth is parched. And my stripes burn.

I wonder if the workers before me dealt with this kind of heat. I wonder if the workers after me will suffer even more. I wonder if there will even be workers after me.

The honey isn't so sweet here anymore. The dream has melted away. This planet is no longer my garden.

As I use my last shred of will to drive my stinger into the wrinkled ground, I pray that my final moments will be graced with a cool breeze.

Piedmont Institute
for Communication,
Music, and Arts

coffee with milk

by Umang Dhingra

i was two-years-old when i saw
a fairness cream ad for the first time in my life
and proceeded to scratch a bit of my skin till it bled
because of how wheatish it was.
no one likes brown.

i was 3-years-old when i heard
my parents classify prospective brides for a relative
based on how fair she was
because that is how 'pure' she is.
no one likes brown.

i was 5-years-old when my grandma said
that being dark skinned means
that no one would want
to marry me.
no one likes brown.

i was 8-years-old when my mother stained
the bathroom yellow
with all the turmeric
she used to lighten my skin.
no one likes brown.

i was 9-years-old when my teacher thought
it was funny
to say that the fairest girls
were the prettiest.
no one likes brown.

i was 10-years-old when i realized
my eyes were the colour
of a dusty storm

and my hair a river of chocolate
and i hated every inch of it.
no one likes brown.

i was 13-years-old when i adored
the way deep brown henna
looks on my soft brown hands
and smells like home.
no one likes brown.

i was 15-years-old when i started to love
my skin because it reminded me
of my ancestral women who were braver
in their coffee with milk skin
than i could dream of.
no one likes brown.
(but it is not yours to like)

breath blooms below

by Alisha Wong

at eventide my feet slip below salt-flushed time, promises
seeping into the cracks on my soles. it was then i feared growth

was not something planted, replenished, plucked but peeled
and othered like scabs, hangnail, eyes glassy with jewels.

at midnight, i descend rickety staircases and drag my fingertips
across jagged handrails, red ribbons fraying themselves

from my body. watch: I rid my torso of rusted machinery as the
clockwork accelerates and ruptures, divulging ripened hardware.

i unscrew old bolts that refuse to let the epochs trickle in
and harden. perhaps this is a requital of a viable entity:

removal as a form of renewal. time waits for me as i drop in decayed
ligaments, its reflection contouring my hollowed body and tracing

joints stiffened like corpses, nails wedged in my mandible, metal gears

look down: vitality breathes.
lodged between inky cartilage. sinking is not the same thing

as drowning. the water surges into my vacant shell.
my throat unhooks.
growth corrodes and softens and strips. as i allow time to submerge me,

i remember leaves falling off sycamore trees, hatching of pearls, blue birds
molting their feathers. enveloped vertebrae and viscera and veins

uncoil and unfold. i can taste dissolved steel. when eventide returns.

The Corner

by Dylan Folan

The most powerful things are the quietest, like the slow creeping power of shame.

I sink deep into my oversized leather couch as I realize I killed my parents. Shame consumes my body.

During the days I lived in Oklahoma, mother started saying, you know this house isn't too *comfortable*. That sentence seemed, after a time, unending. A sentence she would never complete.

You know this house…

Father, for as long as I can remember, never raised me. Mother often times locked herself in her room as if she had been hiding. Mother and Father displayed a clear disinterest in my childhood. They led me to believe I was always alone. I slept in the corner of the kitchen where the plaster from the ceiling had fallen through. I ran my hand across the stained, white wall for hours, staring towards the hole in the ceiling. I would look at the watermarks left on the expanding tunnel of light. Warmth from the sun would present itself upon my pale cheeks reminding me of the world outside my discomfort.

You know this house isn't…

knew what would happen when I left home. I no longer limited myself to the beam of light that cast a calmness upon my face. Father had beaten me my entire childhood. Mother hid in father's shadow. Her unwillingness to save me from abuse had instilled that same evil within her that was present in father. Just like the water that eroded at the plaster of the ceiling, I was destined to crumble. I crumbled until I eventually collapsed.

I ran to California without a single explanation to my parents.

Nine years after I escaped my parents in Oklahoma, I bought a towering penthouse stationed between the winding streets of San Francisco's business district. Climbing the concrete staircase towards my apartment, I stroke the dark colored wall the way I would as a child, where I sat clinging onto the tilted railing inside my parent's farmhouse.

Grasping onto the railing pulled from its wooden stands father griped me by my torn sandals prying me away from the rail. Father tugged until my grip loosened sending me face first towards the staircase that creaked with every step. Father dragged me to the corner in the kitchen where I'd run my hand against the stained, white wall looking into the sky as if calling to God for help. Father gripped his leather belt and struck me across my ankles. I would whale, screaming, Mom! Mom! Mom! My cries elongating with every strike.

I would stay huddled in the same corner for days. As my ankles turned a deep purple and bottomless green, I lost my mobility. I wasn't allowed upstairs or once again, my father would tear me from the railing.

…

I arrive at the front door of my apartment. I wrap my hand around the golden knob of the doorframe and walk into the home I have created. I step gently into the kitchen where I sit on one end of the stone island situated in the center of the room. My head falls into the nest my arms have created. "What do I do?" I talk to myself.

Nine years have elapsed since I left home. Nine years have elapsed since I talked to my parents, but they find me in my home and tell me their farm is no longer their own. The government have left my parents homeless

and with no one else but me to cling onto, my parents cry for help.

They first beg me to come to Oklahoma. They then beg for money. They then say I am ungrateful for the life they have provided me.
Mom tells me she has always loved me. A lie. Father says he will use the help I provide to restart his life. A lie.

I rest sideways on my bed. White sheets trap half my body while the other half seeks harsh coldness from the air conditioner. My drapes swing open. My hands rest atop deep colored pillows that create a cradle for my head. I stare towards the window where city lights form a fire underneath my eyes. I stare forward, ignoring my surroundings.

My parents taught me how to appreciate interiors. It wasn't until the sight of my parents I contemplated the surroundings I have created in this world. I neglect to look through my bedroom as interiors have defined my life. The hole in the ceiling. The light through my apartment window. The dirty wall in the corner of the kitchen. The light coloring of my sheets. The broken railing. The deep colored walls of my pent house stairway.

As I lie in bed, I stare into the unfamiliar city in which I live. Skylines are unlike the warmth of the sun resting against your cheek. I think back to the corner I pinned myself to as a child. The corner I fought deeply to escape however, this corner was more of an interior than the home I was sending my parents back to in Oklahoma.

The rest of my body escapes the heat of the sheets as I fold over towards the other side of the room and shut my eyes.

I awake the next morning. I follow my regular routine. I stumble into the kitchen where I brew coffee. I poor the drink into a mug, leaving it black. I turn the corner into the living room where large

glass windows line the wall. I settle into the leather couch centered in the middle of the room, rubbing my feet against the patterned rug atop the hardwood floor.

I reach for the remote of the television that stands facing the sofa. I click the red button turning the television on. I change the channel to the local news. I settle deeper into the couch, finishing my coffee.

I listen to the normal stories of fire rescues and weather reports, but for the first time in my life, the reporters capture my attention.

The reporter speaks, "We have news now from a plane crash on the border of Arizona. Charter flight T-82 flying out of San Francisco regional airport, Thursday evening crashed into a mountain after singular pilot, Juan Fernandez, signaled to air traffic control that his charter flight headed to Guthrie Oklahoma was having trouble closing its landing gear.

Due to the technical difficulty, Fernandez was unable to reach advised altitude eventually leading to the crash. Both the pilot and two passengers aboard the flight have been reported as deceased. Colton Johnson, age 59 and Glen Johnson, age 60 were set to arrive in Guthrie early Friday morning. We are still waiting on further information from Nevada police officials."

Colton and Glen are father and mother. This is when I come to realize I killed my parents.

…I sit now in the corner of my living room cradling the rich wooden floors. I push my back against the cold steel beams that support the exposed windows. I close my eyes and wait for tears; however when I close my eyes I am unable to cry. I again feel the warmth present on my face. The same warmth that was present as a child. I am no longer in San Francisco, but instead taken to the kitchen of my parent's farm.

This is shame. The revolt within, the war against oneself. I sit in my home, but again interiors define my life. Even as I am responsible for my parent's death as I placed them on that plane I am incapable of remorse. I am curled in a corner in my adult life still scared that father will come stomping down the staircase to beat me. Scared that I again will have to call out to mom with no response. Scared that I will have to sit in the corner for my entire life waiting for the warmth of the sun to arrive upon my face.

Hybrid Works

Meeting Death
by Odessa Tanner

Dear Thanatos,

I always ponder on how you look and the way you carry yourself. I know your job is not easy to do. You must have a high vitality. How long have you been in this realm and how much knowledge have you gained over the centuries? I know you don't have time for questions, but I'm your biggest fan.

I know you are feared, but to me, you are the most beautiful. I don't care about your brother Hypnos. Your mother Nyx, she is a character herself, being a single mother, taking good care of you and your brother. Erebus, your father, wasn't really in the picture, now was he? I bet the main emotion you know is hate. It's understandable if you ask me, especially being the least favorite child.

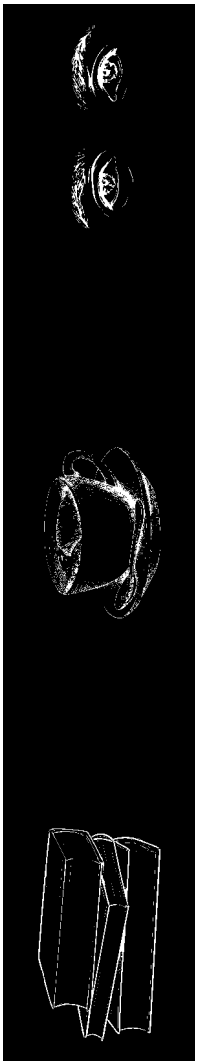
You are described in so many ways. In some countries you are a woman with long flowing black hair with a cloak. Most of the time you are described as a man with a gentle touch, just like your twin brother. Sometimes you and Hades are portrayed to be the same person and that you are under him, but, without you, Hades' job would be useless.

You do your job very well over the past centuries, and I'm proud of you. I wonder how many times you swing your scythe in a day knowing thousands fell before it. You swing your scythe like how a peasant harvests corn, and I am always amazed at this action. Even if loved ones fall too under your power.

Ever since I saw you gazing into my eyes, I don't fear you anymore. Every time you come around you tend to leave a trail of chaos behind you. Even when you approach me I can feel the coldness you bring. Every time I picture you I can see you riding on your pale white horse with your scythe on the side. But, for now, you're going to be patient while I grow old and take my loved ones one by one. Till the day we meet will be a day you will remember, Thanatos. Do you prefer the title Grim Reaper instead?

Your fellow fan,

Odessa Tanner



Feather in the Wind

by Dianne Quinn

In this life, I'm going to take every chance I can to live it to the fullest. To travel to new places, meet new people, taste new foods. To move beyond the walls of comfort that imprison me and experience all that life has to offer with joy and wonderment. I choose to see old things with a differnt light and new things with an open mind. To trust my inner voice and have faith in its truth. And to let peace dissolve my worry and fear.In this life, I have no room for judgment or hate. I choose to do all things with compassion, love and kindness, and to respect all living creatures. To not be weighed down by the past or stifled by the future, because there is only, the present. I choose to know when the time is right to walk away from what no longer serves me, to let go of expectations, and to live with more acceptance. In this life, I choose to love me, the person who I am today. I choose not to focus on my flaws and faults, but instead, to see the beauty in my uniqueness. I am the culmination of my life experiences, each and every one of them, good and bad. Each one building my character with depth and wisdom. And with that wisdom, I now choose to be as I was created to be and to live by what feels right in my soul, what makes my heart sing and what gives me pure joy, and not by what's expected of me. In this life, I choose to close my eyes each night with gratitude for everything good in my universe and everything good that I know is coming my way. And to have faith that wherever I am headed, my life will unfold with grace and divine guidance, if I allow it to be. And to have gratitude for being blessed with abundance;

not with things, but with all the people and experiences that have enriched my life. To never take for granted my children, my family and my friends, because without them, I am nothing. I refuse to wait for life to happen to me, and instead, choose to open up to one that satisfies and fulfills my soul. And I am wise enough to know, that it is never too late to make these choices and to allow the magic of life to flow through every cell of my being. Because it is with certainty, I know, that at any given moment, I may be nothing more than a feather in the wind. And in this life, when I take my last breath and leave this earth, I will smile peacefully and know that I shall pass with no regrets.

Creative Non-Fiction

Pool Party

by Sruti Peddi

"Try it!" my sister called out from inside the pool.

"Are you sure?" I asked, tilting slightly on the edge of the highest step.

There was no response.

I decided to try repeating myself. "Are you sure?"

Still no response.

I took a deep breath and yelled out as loudly as I dared - though it was really not that much different from my normal speaking voice. I didn't want the neighbors thinking anything weird, especially after we had been stuck at home for so long.

A whoosh came from below me. With a crack, my sister's head broke the shimmering film of water, spraying droplets everywhere. Long, black strands floated beside her, surrounding her with a halo.

"Sorry!" she said breathlessly. "What were you saying?"

I pointed at the water rolling below me with a twisted expression. "Are you sure It's...fine?"

She laughed. "Stop being so scared. Why wouldn't it be?"

I took a deep breath. Truth be told, I didn't know why I was so scared. It's not like I didn't know how to swim.

Tentatively, I dipped my toe into the water. Immediately, I drew back,
hissing like my friend's cat in the presence of a fellow feline.

"It's cold!" I said, stating the obvious.

My sister rolled her eyes. Even though I was supposed to be the older
sibling, she was acting like the more mature one.

“It’ll warm up soon. It’s summertime.”

“What?” I leaned closer, unsure of what my sister had said.

A crafty look came into her eyes. She twirled her fingers in a circular motion, motioning me to come closer. I obliged and stepped closer. Then, with a sudden tug, I crashed head-first into the water.

At first, it felt like my body was breaking through a brick wall at speeds beyond my imagination. But as the seconds trickled on, I gradually slowed down, and my momentum was dampened by billions of invisible molecules surrounding me in their cold embrace.

With a sputtering gasp, I emerged from the water, simultaneously triumphant and angry. I looked around for my sister, ready to give her a good beating for tricking me like this, but she was nowhere to be seen.

I dove underwater, ignoring the sharp bite on my skin, and finally spotted my sister. I smiled. There she was, still next to the steps, her body all curled up into the wall so she could hide better.

With a slight creak, I pushed myself off of the opposite wall. My long arms sliced through the water, carrying me through the pool effortlessly and gracefully. But just before I was about to reach the steps, I stopped. I couldn’t help it. It was just. Too. Cold.

“What is wrong?” I hissed to myself. It felt like my body was freezing over, and I hated the feeling. It never took me this long to warm-up. Was I just over-reacting?

“Are you O.K.?” my sister asked, detaching herself from the wall. She still kept a respectable distance from me in case I decided to do anything funny.

I nodded my head. “I’ll just get out and come back in.”

“Why?”

I ignored her question. I didn't want her to know that I was still fussing over a silly little thing.

My sister tried another tactic to get my attention."-Can I pull you in like last time?"

I gave her a warning look. "I don't need your help."

She tilted her head to the side, giving me an innocent look.

I heaved myself back over the ledge, one leg at a time, and stood up with a spine-popping stretch. My bathing suit, which looked more like a gymnastics costume, clung to my gangly frame. Still, I was keenly aware of how loose it was in some places, especially around my stomach and legs. Just a few months ago, I was all but ready to buy a larger suit because of how tight this original one was.

I walked over to the stairs and sat myself down on the highest one. I tested my big toe again, and when that didn't work, my foot, and when that didn't work, the entire lower half of my leg. Slowly, bit by bit, I would lower myself into the cold water until I was fully immersed.Yet even though I was much more careful about how I had entered the pool, the suffering - and the coldness itself - only seemed worse. If anything, it's more freezing than cold.

I was not strong, but that didn't mean I was mentally weak. Plenty more than enough cardio sessions and HIIT workouts had sharpened my mind, but even it couldn't stand just how cold the water was. Stupidly, I had hoped that a gentler approach would alleviate the situation, but it had only prolonged it.

My sister swam lazily over to me, already at as much ease as she would be at home. Her face dropped when she saw me huddled in a corner. "What's wrong?" she asked worriedly."Why aren't you swimming?"

"I, uh, don't feel like it," I lied. I was too embarrassed to admit that I was still feeling cold and,

for whatever reason, would rather continue hugging my knees to my chest than actually doing something.

My sister must have realized how ridiculous I sounded because she gave me a hard stare.

"You do know the whole point of a swimming pool is to, well, swim?"

"I must have somehow forgotten," I said dryly.

My sister sighed and started moving away, but I caught her by her arm. Hers was fleshy and normal-looking, squishy and comfortable. Meanwhile, mine was all angles and edges. It felt like it could snap at any moment.

"Ow!" my sister said. "Your fingers are so bony."

I let go of my sister.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I'll just take some laps in the pool."

"Will that really warm you up?" my sister said suspiciously.

I shrugged. "Maybe the coldness of the pool and warmness from the exercise will cancel each other out." I meant it half-seriously, but she nodded in agreement. Sometimes, I had to remind myself that my sister was only 7 years old.

"Can we race instead?" she asked hopefully.

I shrugged. "Why not?"

"O.K., wait for me."

She clambered out of the pool and disappeared from my view. Within moments, she returned with two pairs of goggles. She tossed one to me and hopped back in the pool."Here, wear these. It'll be more professional."

I laughed to myself. My sister looked ridiculous in her goggles, and I imagine she did too.

"Ready to race?" she asked

I nodded.

"O.K. Ready, Set, Go!"

With her words ringing in the air, we shot off through the pool. Midway in the race, I slowed down a bit so my sister could win.

"I did it!" she yelled victoriously after reaching the end of the pool.

"Y-you did!" I was still shivering, but it had momentarily become better when I had been swimming. "Up for another rematch?"

So we swam another lap. And another lap. And another. Eventually, I swam enough to tire my sister out - and she was the most hyperactive person I knew. But I was still cold.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm going inside," I told my sister.

"Then can you get the -"

I shook my head. "Listen to me, I'm going inside. For good. I'm done."

A shadow fell over her face. "But we've been planning this for days! You've been so busy with your schoolwork and I can't play with anyone else..." Her voice trailed off as she realized I was being serious.

"I'm sorry," I said lamely, even though I knew there was nothing I could do to make her feel better.

She opened her mouth to protest, but then she thought better of it and closed it. With a sigh,she turned around and swam away from me.

I stepped out of the pool, soaking wet,weighed down with some invisible burden. I reached for the thick towel hanging on the chair, and when I wrapped it over my too-thin body.I finally felt warm. But inside my heart, I had never felt colder.

When I Walk in, Court Adjourns

by Jim Ross

A few Junes ago, after a bustling four-course dinner with freely flowing cabernet, my wife Ginger and I walked two blocks back to our hotel in Lille—an old industrial city and one of France's biggest metropolises. After Ginger gets ready for bed, I say, "I'm going for a brisk walk. If you're asleep when I get home, I won't wake you."She objects, "It's drizzling. Most people have winter coats on. You're nuts. Stay here."

"Only fifteen minutes. I need to burn some energy off," I say. "If you must," she says.

It's raining harder than before and it's gotten colder too. On my way back, just past the Wrung Out shop, I come across a homeless woman who has propped herself into a corner beneath the metal awning. Her face looks drawn, her nose is turned up slightly at the end, and her grey hair is combed back flat.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking," she says, in clear English.

I sit down alongside her to see if she wants to talk. She claims that by profession she's a translator and speaks six languages: French, English, Dutch, Flemish, German and Spanish.

"English is one of my favorites," she says. I get the impression she has a hearing deficit because I often have to repeat or rephrase whatever I say.

"Why're you living on the street?" I ask.

"Six months ago something happened," she says.

"Someone stole my house. All I want is to get it back. I go to the court every day, but when I walk in, court adjourns.

No matter what time of day, whenever I walk in, the same thing. Court
adjourns." "Where do you live now?" I ask.

"I moved into a shelter three months ago. I needed an address where the courts can send me legal papers," she says.

"Why aren't you sleeping at the shelter on such a cold night?" I ask.

"You can live at the shelter for only three weeks. Then they kick you out for a week.In two more nights, I can move back in," she says.

"Who's living in your house now, the person who stole it?" I ask.

"I don't know. I'd like to know. It's my house," she says. She's covered by a plush-looking, two-layered, purple blanket.Behind her head, serving as a pillow, is a soft piece of luggage that contains clothing and personal items.By her side, she clutches a grey, heavy-duty, corduroy briefcase.

"I keep all my letters to the court and all the court's responses in order," she says, opening the briefcase to reveal six inches of legal papers, clean and neatly arranged. "I keep everything, but it seems I'm getting nowhere.The bigger what's stolen from you, the harder to prove it's yours and get it back," she says.

Now and then, a passerby offers her cigarettes, food, or a coupon for a free meal. To offers of cigarettes, she says, "*Merci, je ne fume pas.*" To other offers, she says, "*Merci, pas.*"

As I did, some passersby ask, "*Est ce que tu vas bien*?"One even asks her whether I'm bothering her and she answers, "*Au contraire.*"As we speak, I fill her right hand with coins of varied denominations. Without looking at them, she drops the coins into the side pocket of her briefcase and says, "J*e vous remercie.*"

I notice her nails

are perfectly manicured and protected by a clear polish. She's clean and doesn't smell badly.

In fact, she smells like a mix of lemon and thyme.

After 45 minutes, a big yellow van with "Sam's Social" emblazoned on both sides in bold black letters pulls up. A man around 65 and a woman about 30 get out. They try to convince her to get up and come with them to their shelter.

She shakes her head, "I already have a shelter and can move back in two days from now. I don't want to go to a new shelter and learn new rules." They try to cajole her into leaving with them. She remains recumbent and recalcitrant.

"I'd rather stay here and talk with this man anyway. Nobody in the shelter's going to talk with me like he is," she says. The two people from Sam's Social stare me down. The man asks, "What are you planning to do with her?" "I plan to stay here with her a while longer," I say. Throwing up their hands, they move back toward their yellow van. I follow.

"Many street people refuse being picked up and brought to a shelter," the young woman says."Many shelters limit how long residents can stay. They kick 'em out to teach self-sufficiency, then take 'em back. We try to keep 'em safe, but can't do anything about the underlying situation."

"She says her house was stolen. Whenever she goes to court, the court adjourns," I say.

"Maybe so," says the young woman from Sam's Social. Sam's Social departs. We resume our interrupted conversation. She's propped herself up with her back against the corner. Her pillow suitcase rests by her side. After 15 minutes, we get back to where we left off. It begins raining heavily. "I've got to go. Stay safe," I say, as I place the rest of the money I'm carrying in her hands.

"I'll use this money to wash my clothes and to go to the post office

to send things to the court about my house," she says, distractedly.

When I get back to the hotel, Ginger's still awake, worried, upset I took so long. The next morning, at daybreak, we walked back to where I left the woman under the metal awning.The shops have yet to open, but the woman is long gone. Where she sat I found a sheet of paper weighed down by a rock.

I slide the rock aside and read the following: "To the man who believed my story, thank you."

Eyes Looking at Me, Momma

by Jen Schneiderman

As darkness falls, I'm driving on the 275 North and exit at Fletcher Avenue. I follow my phone's Google instructions and drive into a residential area, the houses appearing smaller and older, the landscaping deteriorating; street lamps are either out or nonexistent. In the next few blocks, it is pitch black except for my headlights. I squint at strange lights down the block, floating eerily in space. As I get closer, I see a message board attached to a trailer, sitting smack in the middle of the road. The message board lights scream:
"LOCK IT OR LOSE IT".

I had been rattled at the prospect of traveling to Florida for my mother's surgery. I busied myself booking flights and finding a Tampa-based band camp for my 14-year-old son so that he would be engaged while I attended to my mother's needs. My son was trained in strings—cello, upright bass and guitar. This week, however, the University of Tampa only offered percussion camp, so he would be learning the vibraphone and the triangle on the fly. Thoroughly researching the area of my rented Airbnb apartment hadn't been a priority.

The photo on the website showed a lovely home with an "in-law suite" above a garage. It was inexpensive, by Los Angeles standards an incredible bargain, and appeared to be modern, warm and inviting. The location was convenient, or so I thought. I had checked the travel time—the house was 20 from the University of Tampa summer band camp. In Los Angeles, it takes 20 minutes to go around the corner. But, it turns out that, in Tampa,

20 minutes means more like 12 miles. Nor was the apartment very close to the hospital where my mother was having stomach surgery. A tumor was slowly growing in her stomach.

I accelerate and realize I have missed a turn, Google maps scolding, “Recalculating route!” I go around the block and find the house number. I am relieved to see the house looks like the picture. I pull up to the gate and remember the owner giving specific, multi-step instructions for entering the property. My cell phone is low on battery and I had packed my car charger deep inside one of my suitcases. I search through my phone, track down the keypad code and punch the numbers. A black iron gate slides open and I pull into the driveway. This is my first experience with Airbnb and I am wondering if the host is supposed to come out and greet me. No one appears.

All of the house and garage apartment lights are off, including the porch lights. The driveway lights, on the other hand, are blinding. I opened the car door and I am greeted by a wall of noise, a million teeming insects and wetland animals panting and chirping at once. It feels as if the barometric pressure is high, the air itself heavy and heaving. I can only see a stretch of blackness next to the driveway, but I sense that I am next to a body of water. It is June, 2016, and ten days ago, a two-year-old vacationing at a Disney resort had been eaten by an alligator.

The main house door and the apartment door are next to each other. For a moment, I become disoriented and can’t figure out which door to enter. By the last of my fading cell phone light, I see the door on the right has a combination lock and I punch the numbers. I stumble through the door and drag my bags up a steep flight of stairs. I am pleasantly

surprised that the apartment is clean, organized and has all of the promised kitchen and laundry facilities. It is well-furnished except for a small Mexican pine end table that immediately collapses and crashes to the ground the moment I touch it. It takes a long time to fall asleep.

When I wake up, I look out the window and see that the apartment is located within inches of a large lake. It is Lake Magdalene, all 252 acres of it. The blue-black water is completely still in the morning light, and a swallow-tailed kite floats lazily by, finding undisturbed purchase on large rocks. At one time, the lake had such clarity that a swimming child alerted his mother to a nearby alligator, saying, "Eyes looking at me, Momma!"

I check out the other side of the house. It's a jungle. Not a neglected landscape situation. An actual jungle, with thick, twisted vines and trees. I fully expect a python to crawl through the air vents and kill me at any moment.

I grab my purse and head to the hospital. Tampa General is located on Davis Islands, named for a real estate developer who built a long stretch of bridge connecting the city and the once sandy island consisting of marshes and mangroves. The hospital has large windows allowing for spectacular ocean views—views that bring me comfort during my days there.

I search the corridors and find her room. My stepfather stands over my mother who is doubled up and groaning.

"We're waiting for her pain shot," he says, barely glancing at me. Tampa General is a busy teaching hospital. I'm sure her nurse has a large caseload. The nurse is walking quickly back and forth in her white rubber soled shoes. "I have to take care of another patient and then I'll be with you," she says brusquely. I consider my options.

I could easily have a Shirley MacLaine "Terms of Endearment" moment and start screaming "Give her the shot!"at the top of my lungs. But, I had worked as a medical social worker for years, and I knew the nurse was not only genuinely busy, but under a lot of pressure. So, instead, I say, "Fine, I'll come with you."

I follow her every move. If she steps to the right or left, I mirror her actions. If she hurries down the hallway, I am next to her. I do that until she realizes she isn't getting rid of me. No checking vitals, no juice delivery, no meetings, no chatting with other patients without me in her face every single second until my mother gets the shot. She gives up and goes to the cart with the narcotics. And that's how it goes for the next three days.

By the time my mother needs her very uncomfortable nose tube removed, the staff knows not to delay. The care is actually excellent. It's just that there is, and always will be, a big difference between the attention one gets with an ever-present patient advocate versus leaving the care in the hands of busy, overworked professionals.

After my mother is discharged, I check out of the garage apartment, thanking my lucky stars that I haven't been eaten or otherwise assaulted by the local wildlife. I hurry to my son's band camp concert in Plant Hall. The kids are still setting up, so I take some time to explore the property. This National Historic landmark, famous for its exotic, stainless steel minarets, was previously known as The Tampa Bay Hotel. The resort, built by railroad baron Henry B. Plant, was constructed in a Moorish Byzantine style popular during the Victorian era. The property was so luxurious, the 1892 grand opening was attended by such notables as John Jacob Astor and the Vanderbilt family.

Now, one side of the building is a museum dedicated to Plant and to items used at the hotel during the Gilded Age— elaborate dresses, opulent furniture, and artifacts from the Spanish-American war. The hotel was, at one time, the U.S. Army headquarters for officers..

The other side of the building, designated for use by the University of Tampa, is graced with a stunning rotunda that is used for music and dance performances. When the band students are finally ready, parents and siblings are called to take their seats. I admire the horseshoe arches, crystal chandelier, mahogany carved pillars and carved fret-work.. I am overwhelmed that my son has an opportunity to perform in this lavish room that saw the likes of Nellie Melba, Sarah Bernhardt, John Philip Sousa and Anna Pavlova. I sit in the back and cry silently, the beauty of the rotunda, the music and caregiver shock washing over me.

I pick up my son from camp and drive west to the Tampa International Airport. As we are dropping off the rental car, a strong Florida wind whips the air. I feel its insistent wildness, like no other breeze in the world.

THE END

Who I Used to Be

by Emma Zhang

Her

My sixth grade math teacher stood at the front of the classroom, mountains of textbooks in his hands, "When my father was your age, he would have to do all the problems in these textbooks-"

"-Well, hopefully he had bananas to eat while doing them." The words slipped effortlessly off my mouth like butter on toast, or the simple, thoughtless act of brushing my teeth. The class gawked, laughing and groaning.

I didn't even like bananas, as I found their sticky, slimy texture disgusting and their sweetness indigestible. As I explained to people, I simply found the pronunciation fun. Ba-na-na. Flapping my tongue up and down along the roof of my mouth like the tail of a fish provided me with satisfaction. I loved how the notes of the word sounded as it emerged from the mold of my lips, dancing through the air.

Thus, it became an obsession. For two years of my life, I used the word "banana" more than the word "the" or even "I". Instead of "Oh my gosh!", I would exclaim, "Oh my bananas!". I even created an adjective for banana: bananarous, the state of being banana.

Back then, I wore shoes with flakes of plastic like confetti, every color of the rainbow, flopping over the yellow leather like a pom pom, or the hair of a very hairy dog. I blurted out random phrases to no one in particular, "I love your jolly rancher banana eyeballs. Kinda reminds me of that one bananarous Michael Jackson song swirled in organic Belgium chocolate baked until crispy, like banana chips!" I started roller backpack battles at lunch.

In the midst of a social studies lecture, I attempted to convince a girl hairdryers could be eaten as cereal. I twirled in the halls, broadcasted everything that came to mind in class.

Every frown or laugh was a golden medal, pumping my brain with more energy to churn up weirdness. It was liberating, not caring, cutting all the strings society had tied on me. My carelessness untangled me inside. I was a color bomb, an explosion of flavor, jucy, bold, lively. I felt free, like a girl in bohemian fashion magazines, sun streaked through her hair, lost in a field of blazing wildflowers, a smile that soared with the wind. My mental health thrived, and for once in my life, I was truly happy.

Me

Two years later, I no longer say banana in every sentence. I don't blurt out random words in class, and in contrast with the whimsical, modern art looking fashion my sixth grade self possessed, my wardrobe now consists of mainly basics— ripped jeans and blank shirts, maybe a few ruffles or a pattern here and there.

I mask my personality with plain white fabric, hoping people will like the mild, "normal" version better. And they do. I talk through filters but they like what I say, so I keep filtering out my uniqueness, my personality—her—until my words become as unnatural as polyester, and I'm walking a tightrope that's a centimeter wide. As much as I want to open all the doors, blabber about bananas and make ridiculous connections, let people like me for who I am, I'm scared of jeopardizing my fake friendships. It feels like I'm trapped in a glass cage, but the glass is a mile thick. Although I can see everything, appear friendly and normal, nothing goes through the glass, nothing is genuine. Many days, I feel lonely. Empty. Gray.

A part of me wishes I wasn't so weird in the earlier years of my life. Had I been more normal, would more people have liked me? Would I have been more popular? At the same time, I hate myself for thinking these thoughts, for caring, for falling prey to society.

Yesterday, I received a text from a friend I made at camp two years ago.

It read: "Are you normal now?"

I respond: "More normal than before"

"I don't know why, but that makes me sad"

"Well, it was a big part of my personality"

"But maybe it was just a phase."

I read our short conversation over and over again, an aching numbness overtaking my heart. Bits of the girl I used to be flooded through me, vibrant colors now ghostly and translucent. I reach out a hand to grab onto the last of her essence, but she slips out of my empty fingers like sand, dissolving into the breeze. I look out into the void, her absence echoing in my heart, setting off an avalanche of grief and guilt.

Standing alone in the back of my mind, she is submerged in a dark tide. A souvenir of a battle that has already been lost, a reminder of all that I've surrendered to society.

Us

Yet when the snow has long blanketed her soil, the bare tree trunks deprived of life, she appears through the cracks like spring, a tender sprout of hope. When I'm with friends, she peeks her head through the spontaneous laughter that springs from our lungs. She guides my hands as my thoughts flow through the keyboard and onto the page in tiny black letters, spilling out feelings that had long been buried inside of me, the keyboard clanking with a rhythm that feels like home. When I belt to my favorite songs

in the darkness of the kitchen, swinging a spatula over my head like a cowboy while loading the dishwasher, she comes to life, filling my bones with zest and energy, throwing me into the ocean of music. These moments are rare, never long lasting, but with them, I feel my heart light back up with color, the grin on my face turning genuine.

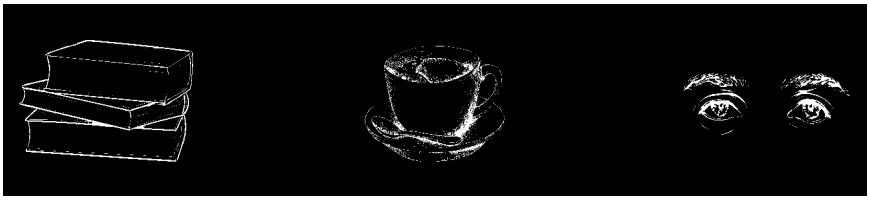
I like to think she is still inside of me, still a part of me, and one day, she will gain the courage to grow into me again, piercing through the glass cage of society, and merging with the maturity I've acquired over the years she's been dormant. One day, we will shine together, as who I really am.

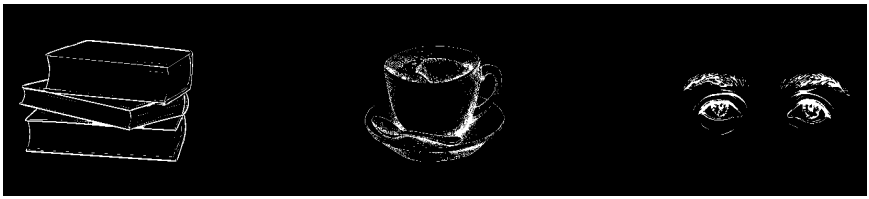
Graveyards

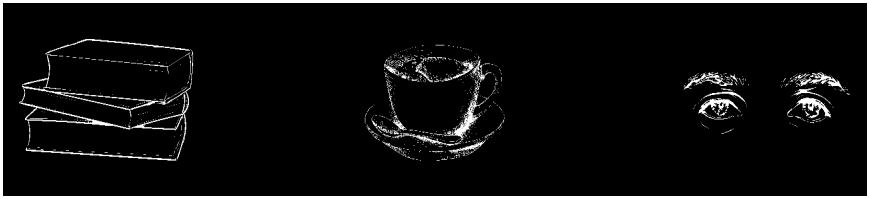
by Emily Ruppe

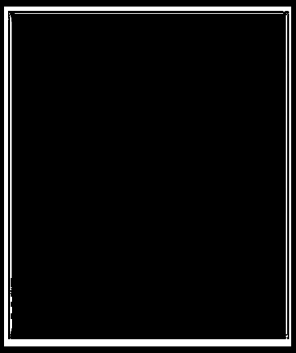
My father has always claimed that graveyards are not for the dead, but rather, the living. I always thought the notion was ridiculous. Sometimes I sit at your grave and plant myself firmly into the dirt like an ancient tree. I sit there for an hour, entertaining myself by tearing pieces of grass from the ground and wiping stray pieces of debris from your footstone. I am desperate to feel you in the wind. Other days I am tormented by the walk to your plot. I glance at each name I pass and wonder how many people have made the same trek I am making. Once I reach you, it feels like I have been walking for a millennium. I immediately turn around and start the journey back to my car. There is no reason to stay. You are not there. Sometimes I am grateful your grave exists, even if it is merely a name etched in stone. It grounds me and I have something to hold onto. I carefully select flowers I know you would like and gently nestle them into the foam holder where they will sit until the next season comes and the cycle starts again. Then, I am angry. I am angry that death has become so commercialized. I am angry that thousands of dollars slipped from my dad's pocket to secure a casket and a funeral. I am angry that everyone in our lives has condensed you down to a skeleton six feet under. You are not buried in the ground. Something is down there, but not you. You are the dark lipstick I hold on to because you always wore the shade, even though pinks were always more my style. You are the yip of my dog, the same dog you used to hold and caress in bed.You are the melody of that one song you loved,

the one you always listened to as loudly as the radio would go. You are infinite and everywhere.
Everywhere except the cemetery. My father has always claimed that graveyards are not for te dead, but rather, the living. He is right.









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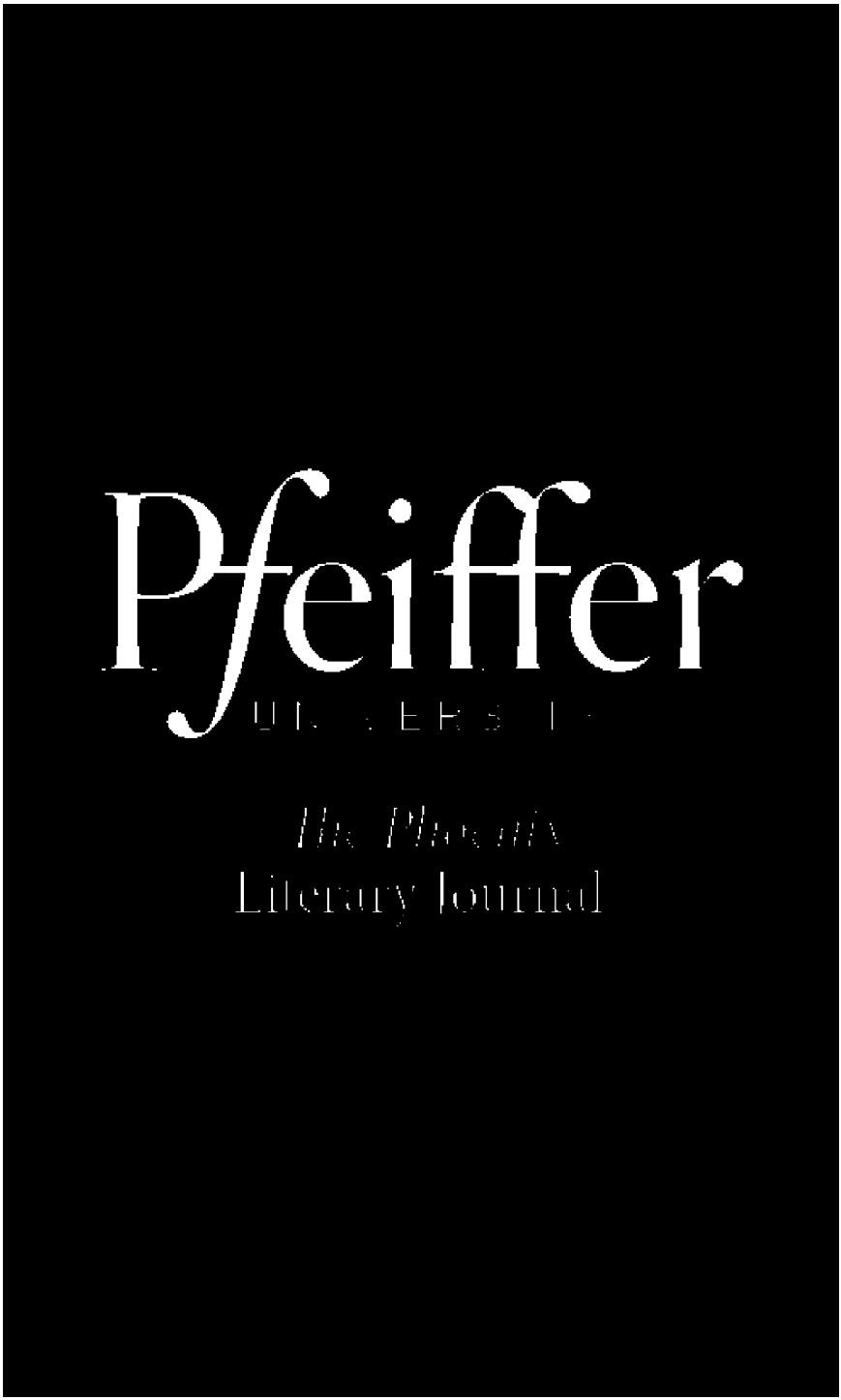
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