

The background is a textured golden-yellow. A large, white, circular shape, resembling a full moon or a sun, is positioned in the center-right. A dark, gnarled tree trunk with several branches extends from the bottom left towards the center. The branches are adorned with clusters of bright red, textured foliage. The overall style is painterly and evocative of a desert landscape at sunset or sunrise.

THE SAND CANYON REVIEW

THE
SAND
CANYON
REVIEW
2013

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POETRY

2013 EDITION 7

COME MY GOOD COUNTRY YOU KNOW

Mouse

it isn't funny being poor hungry or left
for someone younger
how I need I don't need
you don't understand I'm a poet I have lived
off a slice of white bread for two weeks while
writing about how much I love your sour
dough
dreamed spoons of peanut butter
I reach down be-
tween my legs and ease your seat back
I lay in
the love side of my car
just to feel you lastnight's
heat you left here I let your hair collect static on
my shirt

girl, you are brilliant I just want to
 make you stop talking now it's like I was eye
 gazing with his fiancé and he intercepted me
 to show me his collection of Star Wars mugs
 (episodes 1-3) and I thought whatachump
 I could bend her over the couch right now
 and you'd watch me do it helplessly
 I understand: what it is to be the bad
 man and what it's like to watch
 some thin' smother talk it's
 way into yr mouth:
 would you
 look at my wordcollection please? Please, I
 need her to stay. We are awful hungry things
 feeding on pillows and bleaching socks
 to earn
 our 15 minutes holding hands with sunlight
 come my good country come

SLIPPING THROUGH THE KNOT I SAW SUNRISE FROM MY KNEES

under the quiet maidenhair trees we come
to the field to graze among these word-wolves
lick the warm round stones to pay for our dinner
while old mescal tongues cardboard paper-cuts on our lungs
there is no perfection without burning

leaping into each other's mouth I concede
Stella in her green bottles is not after all piss
4 photos walk into a sunrise at the top of our apartment stairs
throw them off the balcony
walk through the green glass together barefoot like roses
if we learn this language of barely touching
when I am the wolf tangled in your hair
it will be a silken murder
your belly grows my sleepless adoration
walks like a field of risen corpses among the midnight sunflowers
murdered by my engine's pistons I

come home for you with your long dark hair pulled out in braids in the seat beside

kissing the weeping between your thighs
the white balloon escapes from hell
surrenders crashing down gravity on our backs
we bat it back into blue until our claws singsnag
its rubbery skin our scandalous trash
drains like a waiting litter of kittens
wewillplaylove in the house of our stubborn laps
happily no escape her honey-silk spilt all over me
throws her wolf mane back into the stars.

She smiles down, says it's too late. You are part of it now.

Mouse is fascinated by the fragmentation of language and breakdowns in communication. The moment of failure is where our beauty begins. Leap into bloom. Disrupt the tyranny of temporal relationships by breaking apart line and spatial orientation. Allow the reader to actively investigate the field on their own. Livefreepoetry.

FROM THIS APARTMENT AT 804

L. B. Aaron Reeder IV

where I used to shatter our maker
by staring
 into the glass of you,
 chalk stick bones of word turbulence,
cling to our oscillating fan,
 slouching, scratching the
corners of the book case,
 like mice skulls
you find in stuffed closets,
behind, the shoes in their boxes,
after throwing everything out
onto the floor.
 as wanderers
of mysterious pastiche,
moving and stuck,
I find time to dust
 the chalky creatures
and you make time
to produce pelleted verbs, wrapped
in hair and teeth.
we sit next each other, tangled in arms
my hand bathes in your thighs, Barranca
of pour over coffee grounds,
 intestine whites cracked from
boiled eggs, words like jello,
taste better in the mouth.

L. B. Aaron Reeder IV enjoys a married life in the quaint city of Redlands, CA. He studies creative writing at California State University San Bernardino, with a focus in poetry. His poetry has been accepted or is forthcoming in The Pacific Review, PoetrIE review, Camel Saloon, and 13magazine. Aaron aims to allow his subconscious imagery a chance reveal the complexity of human existence as he experiences it.

RICE SHAPED

Kayla Madison

I can see perfectly fine
Constantly I am being asked that silly question,
Can you see?

Jealously pricks me like sewing needles
As girls put on make-up
That makes their eyes
Pop and glow

Mine just get smaller
Thinner
Rice-shaped
And sized

No, we're not related
Students always ask
Is that your sister?
Your brother?
Just because there is another student
With rice-shaped eyes

Every day people confuse me
For being Chinese
I'm Japanese

Hours spent at night
Opening my eyes wide
Hoping that they will be oval and large
Like everyone else

Kayla Madison is a fourth year Creative Writing and Studio Art major at UC Riverside. She is mostly a fiction writer, but also enjoys to write poetry. Her work is inspired by Japanese fairytales and culture or fantasy and historical references. Thank you.

A PAINTING 1/24/13

Bethany McWhorter

Sightless eyes glazed sallow with time, gaze away from the steam of human
locomotives and the hourglass & timecards which hang by rusty nails on pin sharp
corners mimicking progression while planted in cement and ignoring broken red
rubber gloves stained with more than dye, into virginal tomorrows as unknown
and mysterious as the dark side of a molded orange.

Delirium

playing hide and seek in the dark
but what doesn't want to be found won't
and what does will rocket to the inky surface

Like

decapitated fish heads floating among lotus flowers.
it is impossible to cure curiosity, and those who say
they have are merely curious in other matters.

One

likewise cannot kill creativity in ways big and small
because it will find a way to drip drop through the
holes of the umbrella you cling so tightly to. You

Cannot

just strike a match at the back of your silent tongue
and verbally spring into action. Well, you can, however
the passion of your cry is trampled among the herds of
humans still trying to build Babel. When you

Comprehend

you can shatter the mental mold with a million
Thoughts.

"The voice telling the story becomes lost inside the setting it creates."

—Sarah Lawall

Bethany McWhorter tries to live and write as honestly as possible, drawing inspiration from real people and experiences she has encountered throughout her daily life. She believes that every human being has a purpose to fulfill, if only we would stop searching and simply learn to be still.

TRAPPED

Annmarie Stickels

As I stand at the window staring, my mind filled with strain and
bearing.

A bearing I normally have with just a hint of something more.

As I turned to go and ponder, why my life would not grow fonder.

Suddenly I heard a tick, causing me to pause for a bit.

Till I turned to see it raining, raining like I've never seen before.

The sound directing me to my window once more.

As I stood there watching waiting, suddenly my mind grew fainting
at the thought of my life being like this and nothing more.

Looking down I saw the ground appearing softer than I've seen
before.

As I watched the coming and going, people that past never knowing
how great a gift their loved ones were for them to adore.

Seeing them caused me to realize my life was nothing but a bore.

Looking at the ground once more, revealed it warmer than before.

As my thoughts continued to ponder, I noticed the grass grew longer
making an inviting bed, one of which I wished to lay my head.

Knowing it would cause my thoughts to flee, I walked straight ahead with glee.

Falling through the air and rain, I came to my bed with such a pain
a pain that covered me from feet to head, a pain I knew would soon be dead.

As I lie there slowly dying, my eyes began a silent crying.
Realizing there were other ways, to make my life less a haze.

Now I'm free from the dying, no more pain as my soul goes flying
To a place I have never been before.

As the light I saw caused blindness, I felt the heat of such a kindness
Making me smile once more, knowing I'd be somewhere new to explore.
A land that had been promised in local lore.

My vision came back as I landed, causing me to become saddened
realizing things did not go as planned, there is no legendary promise land.
The pain is back the same as before, for I am at the window once more.

SEEN BUT UNSEEN

Annmarie Stickels

I took a walk with you today
Even though you think me far away
I stood there next to you.
But you can't see me so you never knew.

I followed you into the cemetery.
How I wish I could make you merry.
You cry as you stare at my tombstone.
How I'd rather you be warm at home.

A tear escapes your eye as you clean with such care
If only I could tell you I am not lying there.
I'm a part of the wind, flowers, and sea.
I exist now with not pain but glee.

Now I watch over you and all you love.
Watching as your life becomes as beautiful as a dove.

So when you think of me please don't cry.
Spend your life happy don't let it pass by.

When it comes time for you to be with me.
I'll show you all the beauty there is to see.
We'll talk and laugh about times well past.
We'll look forward to a future where we can have a blast.

So please don't rush for now you see.
Even though you can't see me I'm there, please let things be.

Annmarie Stickels is currently a Creative Writing student at UC Riverside. Her love of fantasy and fiction has taken her down many strange and wonderful paths. She is working on several novels that will help bring the crazy world she lives in to life.

TICK TOCK

Jaide Stell

When time itself remains the thief of life
Who will be blamed for our loss?
Through all of our innocence and our strife
For everything that we will come across

Where is the one who is to blame for this?
The one that we cling to for our keeping.
The one that throws us into that abyss
Time sends death to our reaping.

But it is time that we give all our love
The invisible tether it has over us.
This collar we will never be rid of
We can never be allowed to discuss

As long as we keep up this lust of time
Our lives will always be ruled by a chime.

Jaide Stell is a certified loser in the country of Geek-dom. She likes to spend her time reading comics, playing video games and spends about 25% of her life online.

RACISM IN MISSISSIPPI - 1982

Christopher Bahner

Vicksburg Mississippi 1982 and now 2013.
nothing changed-fathers have taught their children
the ignorant children taught their hapless children,
a bleak merry-go-round well oiled with hatred.

1982 Mississippi Queen Cruisliner docks
on the shallow-sandy bank of
the murky-lazy Mississippi,
the grandest of old rivers.

Fonzi and 2 other waiters
enthusiastically run down the plank,
a glorious hour of freedom, an
escape from the stifling steamboat.

within a few minutes enter a
run-down-storm beaten shack,
looked like a "juke-joint," but
they knew better...they didn't care,
just wanted a few cold long-necked Buds is all.

a good ol'boy stands behind the bar
50ish with a southern paunch belly
and KKK imbedded in the irises of his eyes,
unwillingly gets them 3-beers

Fonzi hears an unfamiliar wooden knock,
tap, tap, tap.
good ol'boy frowns, and looks directly
into Fonzie's tired eyes, then
saunters to the far side of the bar:
slides a 2 by 2 hard-wooden-window
to the right, as if he is letting
evil-demonic spirits in.
a thin deep-black arm appears,
and extends with a hand clutching
2-one dollar bills, good ol'boy grunts,
snaps the 2 dollars, grabs a long-necked Bud,
slams it into the fragile hand, and
quickly slides the wooden-window shut.

ain't no discrimination down here,
we follow all those anti-discrimination laws,
ain't no Jim Crow no more,
can't ya see, ya stupid
college-educated Negro boys.
C.B. 1/10/2013

Christopher Bahner grew up on the inspirational front yard of Hermosa Beach, “the most wonderful playground that could be imagined.” Loving ideas, he has studied music, psychology, philosophy, and psychiatric nursing. He now strives to use his imagination to create and touch the “heart of hearts” of others.

ROBOTS & ALIENS

T. Jolley

Lay me down in tasteful green,
so that I can believe,
that maybe I can be someone,
Who knows you won't leave,

So that I won't lay in my cradle,
And cry all night long,
Just wishing for always,
That you'll come back home,

So that I won't take my first steps,
Without you here with me,
So that I won't fall asleep,
Without my story,

And that when I learn to talk back,
that you'll be patient and kind,
And that you won't send me away,
When I say my toy's mine,

And when I go to school,
And I shed a few tears,
and I say I wanna go home,
Please
don't leave me here,

But I'll sit in my room,
As I learn to lie,
And I'll realize,
that I'm not alright,

Because this young man,
Is a little boy inside,
Who can't take the stress,
And can't take the lies,

And inside he's weak,
And he's young and naive,
And he still likes his stories,
And to make believe,

And when he lies down at night,
without one peep,
It's robots and aliens,
That sing him to sleep.

T. Jolley is a quiet individual, usually seen with a book in hand if one interests him. Avid at poetry he also is in the works of many novels, he hopes to be finished in a few years. Personally, he is a bit of a comedian even when nobody laughs.

IMPERIAL VALLEY

Mitchell Winter

From grandfathers that grew hysterical
when their parents died,
ruining the garden with water and bricks
after the funeral reception,
to fathers who could recite
the groundwater guidelines
of the land that had been reclaimed
by fire seasons and scarred timber—
the history of this land was etched in,
torn through and clogged
in veins that dirt was often caught in—
underneath nails and in the eyes
of children playing in the dust

To those who knew the roads,
those who could lasso the sun
into prisms on the horizon,
this history was dull
and undocumented—
notarized by ambivalence,
lock and key discarded or
pawned at supper
for bread and liquor

Because the times when my trachea
was flooded with dry soil
are now left in the cracks
between freeway ramps and mortuaries—

I have forgotten
these contours of the valley
that cradled me
into fruitful oblivion

Mitchell Winter is a third year undergraduate at the University of California, Davis and is currently pursuing a degree in Linguistics and Religious Studies. He is interested in Indian religious poetry, and is currently working on a project that explores sites of Hindu religious devotion in India.

THERE ARE NO WORDS

Gwendolyn Di Ponio

Grace—Lovely, a virtue
Olivia—Olive tree
Daniel—God is my judge
Madeleine—From Magdala, high tower
Avielle—God is my father
Noah—To comfort
Benjamin—Right-hand son
Allison—Noble, of nobility
Ana—Favor, grace
Emilie—Industrious, striving
Dylan—Of the sea
Jack—God is gracious
Caroline—Free
James—Replace
Chase—Huntsman
Jessica—Rich, God beholds
Catherine—Pure, innocent
Josephine—God will increase
Jesse—God exists
Charlotte—Free
Loss—The state of being without something that one has had
Despair—Loss of hope
Why—For what? For what reason, cause, or purpose?
Doubt—A feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality, or nature of something
Faith—Belief that is not based on proof

Gwendolyn Di Ponio teaches English at Crafton. Her creative work aims to advocate for the dead, especially in areas of social justice. With so many lives encumbered by cruelty, hypocrisy, and ignorance, a posthumous voice offers hope for new generations. She is a wife and mother of two.

TRANSFER RHAPSODY BLUES

Marsha Schuh

Paying close attention to the signs on the cable cars will help you distinguish where ...you will find yourself. – Sfcablecar.com

You, downtown on Market and Powell
transfer to my cable car.
Careening around corners,
you ride all day on a single fare,
never lose your way on steep hills
though derailment impends
and clang-clang life ties its knot of endless
delay at turntable
for single-ended reverse
and we step out of time.
Around the corner and hang on
we sing in blue lip-sync revue,
clutching brass rails as gripman brakes.
Heels catch on that last uncertain step,
stumbling over the most important story
of in-the-beginning-was that incredible ride.
At last our biting fever cools
in a breeze off the bay
and we try to outrun fate
as our car jumps track
where the route and signs began.

Marsha Schuh teaches English at CSUSB. She lives in Ontario and is currently working on a collection of poems, inspired by her early morning walks, about Ontario and its history. Her poetry has appeared in literary journals such as Pacific Review, Badlands, The Sand Canyon Review, Shuf, and Inlandia.

I GO BY FEEL

Meghan McCarthy

‘cause I’m not big on counting,
measuring: a myth.
Bar, x beers, tail bones are
still stiff. We’ve all lost track
bottles tossed down throatbacks.
Let’s let squirming blood calculate.

you can’t quantify the degree of manliness
by the number of hairs peeking through
your v-neck, or wifebeater. But I feel that out, too, and no.
How wide the bicep, how high heeled the shoe.

Speedometers lie, sometimes, I think.
I’m late. I was going
awfully, slow?
Officer—

but how about twenty years?
dad pours fresh pressed coffee into ma’s mug, overfills steam.
She folds the fronts of her robe, rubs temples— he sings several decibels too loud
in the morning for migraines. Smile. But what do I know.

yet there are wands to recount
a heart giving up, when we know work broke the back that framed failure.
Ways to mark patterns of bloodflow, to outline the descent
of cracked minds. Psycho-
analyze. Sentiment fails.

and that night, you breathed in black, puffed air back, smoked
the words you spoke
hung,
carved into fog like a bathroom mirror
then it fell behind your head
it stroked the black canvas
for a moment I remember the star alive the perfect
shape of a constellation fading, finger waved good
bye
momentous
mine

a star falling is a meteor
not a star at all.

Meghan McCarthy graduated from Cal State San Bernardino with a Bachelors in English and is currently working on her MFA in Poetry from CSUSB. Her work has been published in The Toucan and the Pacific Review.

AUGIE IN ONE JULY

Michael Cluff

Dad and I
plus younger brother Tom
would take some time
apart from Mama
and go try to break
glass in the abandoned drive-in
just south of the tin boxes
we were temporarily forced into
by weather and woe.

It was a mute sport
under the arid Arizona sky
a twilight enterprise
with no real point.

Dad would always win
since sharing was not
his strong point
but at seven
that was old hat
although breaking
a bottle
of clarity, green
or marine blue
sometimes carried on
ever too long
until...

even the reptile mind
got frustrated
in corona-red evenings
before what should have been
left out in the weeds and speakers
got returned back home
bruised but
intact.

Mike Cluff is a full-time English, Critical Thinking and Creative Writing professor at Norco (Community) College in Southern California. He is the workshop leader of the Inlandia Institute's Riverside Creative Writing Workshop held at the downtown branch of the Riverside Public Library. He is currently putting the final touches on his tenth poetry book called "The Initial Napoleon." He is also in the final stages of rewriting a play on poetry readings, a comedy of course, called "The Comfort Zone" with Rowena Silver.

CAVE TOPOLOGY

Cindy Rinne

She touches darkness thick as Brea tar,
floats on arsenic bronze wings.
Breathes fumes of Budweiser.
He examines her face. Both of her children
conceived of this step-father.

She escapes from his corroded carpet.
Sheltered in a one-room cave she sleeps,
a flying bear on an earthen ledge.
Yellow, porous soil, a dug out vaulted home.
Lone light bulb swings overhead.
Fire for cooking.

Grandmother's Flower Garden quilt
guards archway. Christian Bale's
poster adorns the clay walls.
Cool in summer. Warm in winter.

She pretended to be Wendy when
Captain Hook visited in the night,
saying he is Peter Pan.

Nana drove long stretch borax road
released Wendy and two lost children.
Left their belongings. Strangers
gifted them scarves, sweaters, mittens.
Captain Hook imprisoned.
She hates it when a man smells of brew.

BODY IN DUMPSTER

A woman drifts through her dream
house under slant moon.

Built when perfecting
doors and sanding columns held
the signature of the maker.

Hand-painted tiles of birch
trees border the fireplace. Hardwood
floors creak under her vintage movements.

A thud outside. She slips into damp
vines, investigates behind the house.

A woman gasps at the body
folded like a napkin,
thrust into a trash bag.

Safe neighborhood decomposed by fumes.

Cindy Rinne creates art and writes in San Bernardino, CA. Cindy won an Honorable Mention in The Rattling Wall Poetry Contest. Cindy is a Guest Author for Saint Julian Press. She is a founding member of PoetrIE, an Inland Empire based literary community. Her work appeared or is forthcoming in *shuf poetry*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *The Prose-Poem Project*, *The Wild Lemon Project Literary Journal*, *Welter Literary Magazine*, *The Sand Canyon Review*, *Inlandia*, *A Literary Journal*, *Lili Literary Journal*, and *Phantom Seed*. Cindy is collaborating on two chapbooks and working on a manuscript. www.fiberverse.com

NATION

J. Ryan Bermuda

Every handful of months,
I come back to that sanctuary of
tobacco-clay
deep fissured faces.

Porcelain paint babies
adorned with turquoise and nestling feathers,
carvings of buck and wolf and
loom-spun swaddling.

The attendant's face rests;
black hair endures across broadness of shoulders
and down the back that
communes with afternoon sun.

I hand him printed paper notes,
bounded hand yields but vacant face remains.
I squint a half-smile and turn to
pump the plasma from the earth.

Past the fan blast glass double doors,
a young mother and daughter display double braids;
clothed in Goodwill asks for
anything to spare

I scan across the mesa,
over the untilled sand and cochineal canopy
I could not borrow, then
the truth like the breeze blew.

Apache, Mescalero, Tiwa, Zuni-
Reservation days slip from ox hide hands.
Everything attainable has been obtained,
but the natives own the sunrise.

ECCE COR MEUM

J. Ryan Bermuda

Floors
above our heads pop, like kindling
“That’s mom,” youngest cries
Her spirit hovers over our heads
and glides under our heels

Barefoot,
I clamber up stairs with bed tray abundant
Rest it on the place you slept, still sealed
Sitting on my side, I recount old stanzas
Sneaking grapes from your bowl between lines

Reverie,
summer night drives with windows removed
Scarf tails sail behind your thinning face
Wishing for missed turns and years refunded
with my flower-haired American bird

LUNE ET SOLEIL

Grandmother- vicereine
Opened up porcelain grin
Susurrates farewells carefully
Novella paper cheekbones blush
Moon drops mark arteries lavishly
Catalina blue eye shadow sweeps
Made perfectly gracious for Jesus

Grandfather - dynast
Beryllium tongue spills stories
Lament and love drip from rose water lips
Gray wool furnishes thin frame
Shore leave cap conceals smokey strands lithographed
Kodachrome bride rests in breast pocket convincingly
To grant entry, consummating days

J. Ryan Bermuda lives in Redlands, California, where people panic if it rains. After touring nationally for 10 years with his band Sleeping Giant, he is now focusing on writing instead of music. Bermuda has been previously published in local journals such as The 2012 Sand Canyon Review out of Yucaipa, California, and the upcoming issue of the Inland Empire's PoetrIE Review.

FISSURES

Terra Babcock

carry on my[your] edges the to
rn marks
disappeared sculptors
chi
pp
ed
off pieces that

belonged

the mawofspace is
thin air over
skindrips
running
word fingernails on the crushed
you[me]
maddening
how those
blipsdotmatrix to
chisels/metal
between molars
when I[you] thought
of printing
flowers
to play house as children where
drooped cutouts are real
fuzzed wire
kinked paper
do not turn water rancid
after weeks
but growing does
when you[I] learn
to miss the
snapping of skin on
hammerholds
and the hitback of
my[your]
Tools

MIRROR GARDEN

I'll sow the web into your
skin so the morning aftermist
trembles, every growing
drip of breath
pushing crippled leaves lost to
old summers
fall for blooming spring
petals shrivel when you hold them
even softly
the nature of touch

reach fingers down to latch
and I will
I will
pluck the harp of spiders
that was mine given you
cross-stitch rain racing lines
from root to buried sky
press hands to hands while
we gather dream-streaked droplets
and you
and you
will

and I
and I

be the gentle hold of flower bloom
reflected in the beads we strung
prepared to
Wilt

CUT-UP

Susan Vicuña

1.
expelled by the blanket
baby walks reluctantly
to the
hungry fire
and
apologetically bothers
the
flame

2.
burned by the spark
boy runs frighteningly
in the
opposite direction
and
determinedly forgets
the
disaster

3.
scarred by the burn
man walks strategically
on the
marshmallow floors
and
carefully avoids
the
splinters

4.
enveloped in the blanket
elderly sleeps uneasily
with the
incessant thoughts
and
promptly refuses
to
wake

LOT'S WIFE

Missing it like a dead friend, long passed.
Mourned it, cried for it, carried the casket to the hearse with a white glove.
Watched it be lowered six feet under, sprinkled the ashes to ashes over the wilted
ring around the rosie—but the dust always comes back:
an aching memory for that concrete release that never fails to deliver in the
sips, gulps, chugs, the puff-puff, pass;
burning bloody noses, and the sweat in the sheets.
The music blaring, walls bouncing off the people, the smiling faces blurred,
contorted, who indistinguishable from whom
until tomorrow disappears
into yesterday, and today disintegrates into that insistent dust that always comes back.
This time, in waves of fear exploding into ripples moving
right through you to that shaking hand begging for a glass but unable to hold onto it.

Susan Vicuña is a starving English major going to school in a tiny oil town. Her poetry and non fiction have been published in various journals, including a previous issue of *The Sand Canyon Review*. She enjoys singing out of tune and reading poetry by authors no one has heard of.

BLADE MANTRA

Rachel Cannon

My scissors leak whispers like puffs in the grass,
Like all afternoon I've been hard at work:

Dismantling the components of my disjointed system,
Translating them into the altar-red

Language you can preach, like the dandelions
I've been blowing weren't inside my head--

Instead I'm eking out painstaking Morse code lines
And choreographing letters in circles to illustrate

Each side. I've been collecting squalls of saliva
At the thought of coiled flesh, or rather,

Of the flesh's negative space, the miniature
Cosmos swirling with hemoglobin, eremophobia,

Anything that will fit in a pill. Tear it apart
At the seams, let it wretch. Don't let

Your wrist start shaking,
The blades start grinding;

Most things together long to be separated, at some level:
Any level you can reach.

THE GRAFT

We have been so industrious with our chisels.
Breaking off pieces of each other to keep in locked boxes,

Blood, dirt, saliva in streaks across our skin
To declare our obvious crimes

Until we are unrecognizable
Forms without shape.

I still have grimy bits of you (me)
Underneath my fingernails:

Crude remnants of the reckless hacking
Staining filthy crescents between finger and bone

My (your) bone,
Your (my) skin,

Grafted into a creature so hideous –
Slashed and scored haphazardly

In festering careless wounds,
Tread in the traffic of hungry flies,

And I am afraid to open my (your) eyes.

Rachel Cannon is a fiction writer and poet living in Yucaipa whose work explores the dark undertones of everyday life. She also has work forthcoming in the Black Tongue Review.

J A M E S

COMING FULL CIRCLE

INTERVIEW BY FAITH PASILLAS

James Meetze is the author of *Dayglo*, which was selected for the Sawtooth Poetry Prize by Terrance Hayes and published by Ahsahta Press. He is also the author of *I Have Designed This for You* and editor, with Simon Pettet, of *Other Flowers: Uncollected Poems* by James Schuyler. He teaches at Ashford University and is poetry editor of *Manor House Quarterly*, a magazine of art and literature.

M E E T Z E



Q: How do you define yourself through your work or do you define yourself at all? Do you identify with any particular aesthetic?

A: Thank you for inviting me to participate in this conversation. Well, I identify as a poet—this is my profession, aside from teaching—but also as a professor, a father, a flawed

and sometimes joyful human being and, I suppose, the way in which we identify ourselves serves also to define us. This is the psychological answer. I'm actually very interested in and writing a critical book, tentatively titled *Mythopoesis* and *the Lyric Self*, about the mythology of the self as constructed through, and then read through, the use of the lyric *I* in poetry. I think that any time a poet uses the word "I," he or she is defining a self, though it isn't exclusively the self of the poet writing. It is a mutable self, one that can be a self of the poet and also become a self of the reader.

In my work, the *I* is the hub, if we're calling the world a wheel, say, to which spokes, rays, ideas, things descend—things, ideas, observations come in to it—and from which the poem radiates. Maybe, though, the wheel metaphor isn't quite right because the *I* in my poems isn't necessarily the center but a freely moving receptacle, it isn't fixed in one place, it moves in space and receives the experiences and observations it encounters. This might also say something about my aesthetic or the aesthetic with which I identify.

I identify with poems that change me, that move me, that give me an experience I would not otherwise have had. I also identify with poems that are in some way still connected to the universe, which is to say, I like mysticism. There is a lineage to which I belong, along with numerous other contemporary poets—poets writing now—that you can probably trace in reading the work.

Q: What was the very first poem you have ever had published? What had inspired you to write that particular poem?

A: The first poem I had published, at least that I remember, was called “Depth Perception in Orange and Blue” and was written through Mark Rothko’s painting, still one of my favorites, that hangs at the end of the hall on the second floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; it’s called “No. 14, 1960.” It was a love poem disguised as an ekphrastic poem. It was published in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, which is the student literary magazine at UC Santa Cruz, where I was a student.

Q: Your book *Dayglo* won the 2010 Sawtooth Poetry Prize and was published in 2011 by Ahsahta Press. Can you tell us a little bit about this book and how the title, in your mind, ties it together as a collection?

A: *Dayglo* was born out of my circumnavigating San Diego County, which is where I live, where I’m from. When I returned to San Diego in 2005, my experience with the place, so too my perception of it, was more critically informed than it had been when I grew up there in the 80s and 90s. I saw so many contradictions in the place itself and in the people. I guess these are all in the book. An excerpt, the first four sections, I think, of an early version of the title poem appeared here in *The Sand Canyon Review*, in fact. I don’t think the book is just about San Diego, although it may appear to be. That’s just where I was when I was writing these poems and everything I was thinking about and seeing was **filtered through** the place. We are bodies, we have mass, we’re on the ground in the place and wherever we are is the center of the world at that specific moment.

I wrote an author’s statement, which can be found on the Ahsahta Press website (<https://ahsahtapress.org/product/james-meetze/>).

Q: The theme of this year's magazine is "identities." What does identity mean to you?

A: I think maybe I preempted this question in my answer above, but I'll elaborate. I often talk about identity with my students, who aren't sure yet, because they're students, what to identify with. We all have our personal identities—to use the Jungian term, we individuate and become the selves we present to the world—and our authorial identities are really conceptually no different. As young writers, we tend to write like our teachers, but as we work through that often problematic relationship, we find our own voices through the voices of our lineage, which is to say, the voices of our teachers having been filtered through their teachers and so on and so forth. I guess this is a circuitous way of saying that identity is an evolving thing; we struggle to find it, we find it, and then we continually find it anew in each poem or story or whatever we write. Identity, for James Meetze the poet, is the mythology created in the work—be that the observer and transmitter of Southern California's contradictions or, in my forthcoming book, *Phantom Hour*, the angular and mystical genealogist; the product of a uniquely American story—it depends on how the reader interprets it. For me, however, the person for whom the poet is but one of many functions, identity is less who I am than it is how I perceive and encounter the world.

Q: How does your identity inform your poetry and is it important that a poet *have* an identity in their work?

A: As a poet, I write books as opposed to individual poems; I conceptualize a project that is the book and write within that framework. The project is always somewhat nebulous, however, as I can't foretell, with any certainty, where the book will go, where it will take me. Like I said in my previous answer, every new poem, or, for me, every new book, requires that I find the identity within it. It's still always me. I'm not trying to be oblique and suggest that there is a new personae, per se, in every book, rather there is a different mind, a different state of being in the world. I think that if you are a reader of my work, you'll clearly hear my voice in all of it, no matter what the project. So, I guess I'm saying that it is important that a poet have a *voice* in his or her work; if the voice is consistent, the identity can be multitudinous.





ART

2013 EDITION 55

THE ENERGY BEHIND THE VISIBLE

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER NEGRON

Italia Ruotolo was born in Naples, Italy. She studied Classic Literature and graduated from the Fine Arts Academy of Naples. For many years she worked as a goldsmith and jewelry designer. Ruotolo's work is a broad range of pop art and art nouveau. In her work, there isn't much distinction between a high and low cultural level, because she's aware that the contemporary man lives in a myriad of sensorial stimulation and is himself the product of continuing interlocution between the real and the mere appearance or mere fiction. We sense echoes of these contradictions in her work while constantly in search of a balance between past and future, good and evil, and dark and light .

I T A L I A



Q: When creating a new piece of art, what thoughts and emotions do you experience or do you have a certain method?

A: Making art is a spiritual need for me . At certain moments I feel a thirst for something vague and undefined. It's such a primary necessity; I need to see my inner world concretized in the real space.

The emotions I experience are similar to the emotions of a traveler, I set up the goal in my mind but there is a space to get there! The distance isn't given by segments of space but by neurological connections, heartbeats, breaths, emotion, frustrations; in a word "life"! Each brush stroke brings me closer to or further away from the goal. The colors are chosen according to the mood I want to convey to the viewer, but when they are placed on the canvas they act as

an emotional generator on me. The process becomes circular in an endless give and take system. Each work of art is a mystery to be revealed, almost an initiatory experience!

R U O T O L O



JADE▲



Q: Do you have a certain procedure or method that you use in your creative process?

A: No fixed procedure is possible when you are slave to the inspiration. One feels when the painting “wants” to be done, namely when its time is ripe, not a moment before or a moment after; forcing yourself might spoil it. So, when the time comes I tend to isolate myself, so I can grab onto the idea. I then begin by tracing lines on a blank sheet. The lines are apparently senseless, I let my hand move on the paper, not obstructed by the consciousness, so progressively the forms waiting in the unconscious emerge.

In a certain way the creative process is remarkably similar to the oneiric dimension, I mean, we know nothing about what we will dream when we go to sleep, only when the dream has been “dreamed” can we try to explain its meaning! In the same way the signs I trace are to be interpreted and their meaning to be defined. Then, after drawing the picture’s compositional scheme it’s time to go searching for models that I often find on the web or photograph personally. I need pictures as a reference as to achieve a good realism. It is essential to have exact visual references.



DULCE MUERTE ▲



over the ethics of the human society. The picture is rich in symbolism, the one I do prefer is the grinning monkey who stole the skull. It represents the weather of instinctual activity even beyond the feeling of mercy.

Q: What is the message you try to send through your artwork, and why this message?

A: The message is: "Behind the appearance, there is the truth." My paintings offer multiple levels of interpretation, behind the level that is immediately perceived, which is treated as aesthetics with harmonic forms and brilliant colors, there is something mysterious by which the viewer understands that my picture is not only aesthetics, but feels the sense of mystery that inhabits the picture.

The paintings I do mirror my mental dimension, always investigating of the state of affairs, the true reasons that keep the world moving, the energy behind the visible. I think the world we experience through our senses is only an infinitesimal part of the wholeness. That which actually surrounds us remains hidden from our eyes!

Q: If you were to give one piece of advice to young and developing artists, what would it be?

A: To study, study a lot, not only all about arts techniques, but also history, literature and so on! Never forget that the paintings are made by the brain not by the hands! And then to promote their work by web, trying to reach more people interested, if you have talent, sooner or later someone will find you.



ofmas





▲ THE GIVING TREE

Owen Klaas

Acrylic Paint on Canvas

As a child Owen Klaas was constantly drawing and practicing the art of caricature. About 14 years ago he discovered polymer clay and his art would never be the same. He realized that he could turn his one-dimensional drawings of weirdness into fully realized three-dimensional objects of weirdness. He was hooked. Since then he has been featured in several art shows, radio interviews, and online magazines as well as local news spotlights. In the last three years he started painting in acrylics and, discovered how much he loves expressing ideas and feelings through symbolic imagery. His art has been used for album artwork, tattoo design, logos and photography sets. Each painting or sculpture he does, he pours his heart into.

▲ RAVISH

◀ LA LUNA CRUDA

Jennifer Montenegro

2011, Oil on Canvas

Jennifer Montenegro holds a B. A. in Art History from CSU San Bernardino, where she currently attends the M.F.A. Program with a concentration in Painting. She seeks inspiration from poetry, traveling, and yoga.

Her current body of work is an exploration of figures in abstract form, tangled with raw vulnerability.



"Evasive Moment"

Earl Myle - Houston 2012

AN ANGEL ►

Cerena Ynda

Cerena Ynda grew up in Mentone, Ca until the age of 17. She then moved to Portland, Oregon until she moved back to California in 2010. She currently resides in Redlands.

◄ ELUSIVE MOMENTS

Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein

Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein was born and raised in Colombia, South America, and later lived in Germany, and Mexico before she immigrated to the United States in 1988. She studied fine arts and music in Colombia, and received a M.F.A. from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Her Work addresses a range of social concerns, and using diverse media speaks about multicultural and cross-cultural issues. These concerns include violence against women and children, and the cultural displacement and fragmentation experienced by persons torn from their community or country. She has a genuine concern for human rights and the need for solidarity; She uses her art as a vehicle for personal and community reconciliation. Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein is the current chair of the art Department at La Sierra University, and the director of The Branstater Gallery, in Riverside, CA.

▼ ZAPATOS

Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein

Woodcut











▲STRANGER IN A DREAM ◀REFLECTION

Stephen Albair

Stephen Albair is an artist and educator. He exhibits his works in San Francisco and Asia. His visual Images capture a unique process that expresses the nature of reality, love, loss and longing. Staged dreamscapes are metaphors offering multiple meanings referencing both the past and the present simultaneously.





John O'Neill





▲ ELEMENTAL FORCES

◀ ROOTS AND ALL

Hugh O'Neill

Hugh O'Neill was born and raised in Dublin Ireland. He received his formal art training at the Dublin Institute of Technology. Hugh's early focus was on illustration and design, which he later combined with film and television studies.

Hugh developed his skills working in many areas of the visual and performing arts while living in London, Orlando and Los Angeles. While his creative focus has always returned to painting, Hugh has written and directed documentaries that have aired on PBS and The Discovery Channel and his design concepts have been used in commercials for Fortune 500 companies, Nickelodeon Studios, and the CSI television series. His paintings of Traditional Irish Cottages have been distributed all over the world. He also donates his work for use by non profit organizations.

Hugh's interest in history, science and his personal spiritual journey has greatly influenced his more recent work which has been acquired by private collectors and contemporary Spiritual teachers, and students all over the country. He lives and works in the San Jacinto Mountains of southern California

▼ RED ROSE

▼ SHANNON

Shellie Lewis-Dambax

Shellie studied Art at the College of Charleston and received her B.A. with a concentration in Painting in 1991. After college she opened and operated three separate restaurants with, her chef husband, Marc Dambax -- meanwhile while raising two boys and continuing to paint. In 2011 Shellie limited her role in the restaurant business to focus on her art. Shellie works in oil and mixed media and continues to explore other mediums as well. Her work is currently exhibited in Charleston S.C., Charlotte NC , Asheville NC and Brevard NC where she resides.

Her works are collected and exhibited throughout the Southeast.









BEBE ▲

JOSEPHINE ▲

Terry Hastings

Terry currently resides in Palm Springs and his work has been printed in many publications across the country and his art work is sold at the Woodman/Shimko Gallery in Palm Springs.

SPIRIT OF THE GROVE ►

James Ireland

Photograph

James Ireland has been photographing landscapes (some with people in them) across the Inland Empire for most of the last decade. The photo “Spirit of the Grove” was taken at an orange grove in North Redlands just as the trees were being leveled to facilitate the sale of the property. James’s work has been featured in gallery shows, and prints of his work are sold privately.

BEETHOVEN ▼

I’LL BE THE KID WITH THE
BIG PLANS ▼

Annie Terrazzo

Mixed Media on wood and vintage coloring book & magazine pages

Annie Terrazzo has been creating mixed media and trash portraiture for almost 10 years and has sold over 500 works in that time.

“Detritus”, Annie’s recent artistic endeavor and is made completely out of newspapers and vintage magazines from around the world.

Originally from Colorado, Annie studied art with her family of jewelers and plein air artists and then moved on to study graphic design and portraiture in San Francisco. Since then, she has devoted her time to capturing the current depreciation of newspapers, making fun of it, and preserving them.

Annie travels the world collecting newspapers and doing exhibitions, but Los Angeles will always be her home.







QUICK
DO NOTHING
BEFORE IT'S
TOO LATE



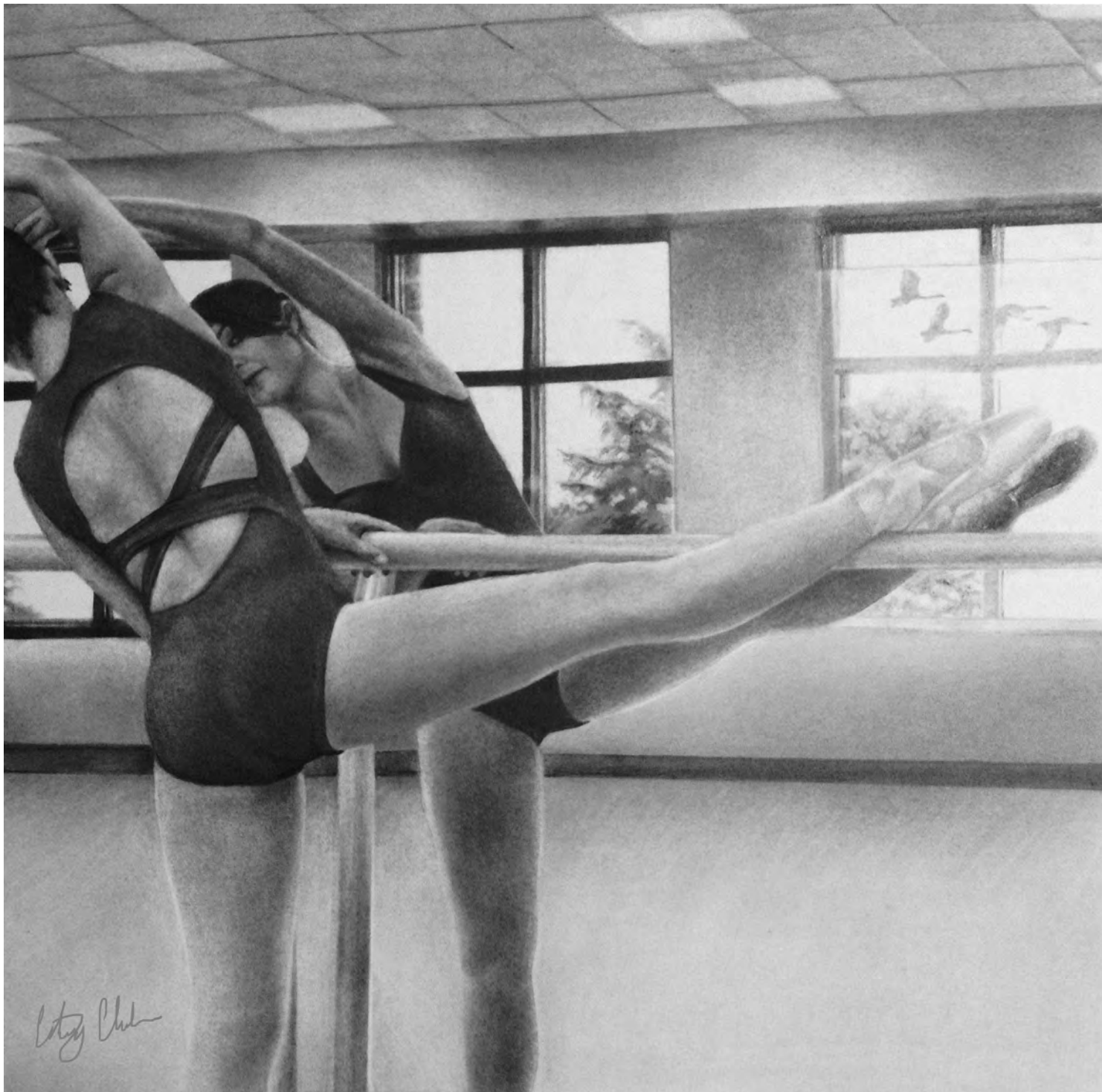
I'll be the kid
with the big plans

Shelly and Craig meet Charlie the c

Shopping at the Market

SCOTCH LA
4T AND





▲ **WINGLESS**
Graphite

◆ **SYSTEM
FAILURE**

Courtney Chilson
Graphite

Courtney Chilson, age 25, currently resides in Yucaipa, CA, where she grew up. She has had a love for the arts since she was a little girl, which did not go un-noticed by her family, whom always have supported and pushed her to do great things. She is a full time student at Cal State University Fullerton, in the process of earning her bachelors in Illustration, which is her first step in what will hopefully be a very successful career in visual development for the entertainment industry. You can visit her blog at <http://courtneychilsonart.blogspot.com/>, or reach her at c.chilson.art@gmail.com



FICTION

2013 EDITION 91

FICTION SHAPED BY POETRY: AN INTERVIEW WITH A FLASH FICTION AUTHOR By BILL SUMMERS

Zulema Renee Summerfield is a budding author native to the Inland Empire, specializing in beautifully poetic flash fiction and vignettes. After a stint at Crafton Hills College and others, she attained a Master's degree in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Summerfield's work has been published in several literary magazines, including *The Heavy Feather Review* and *The Sand Canyon Review*. Her book, entitled *Everything Faces All Ways at Once*, was published in 2010 by 14 Hills Books and is available for purchase. Following the interview are excerpts from her novel-in-progress, *Split*.

Z U L E M A



Q: How did growing up in the Inland Empire affect your artistic development?

A: I definitely carry those landscapes in my bones. I think I have rust and orange blossoms growing around my heart. The Inland Empire is such a beautiful, trippy place. Some of the most amazing, creative people I know grew up there. At the same time, it's a place where really intense, creepy things happen. It's like any place, I suppose, all the good and the bad occupying the same room. Take, for example, the drive up from Redlands to Crafton Hills. On a clear day, it is just stunning. I've been fortunate to have been able to travel and live many places, and that view of the mountains and the orange groves is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. And at the same time, you've got awful, terrible things happening. And it's all just back to back, it's all tied together in that place, all the amazing and the terrifying at once.

S U M M E R F I E L D

Q: You grew up in Redlands, lived in San Francisco, and then moved to Vancouver. How has your writing changed as you have migrated North?

A: Interestingly, I seem to write most about a place once I have left it, or am preparing to go. Everything I'm writing now takes place in Redlands, and I only really began to write about San Francisco once I had one foot out the door. I suppose I work geographically backwards. I live in Portland now, but haven't seen much of it emerge in my work. I'll likely have Portland spilling out my ears once I leave.

Q: Did you write during your childhood? If so, are there any common topics or themes to recent work?

A: I wrote all the time when I was a kid—terrible, terrible poems, about the most inane things. I think one poem was about vacuum cleaners, for criminy's sake. The first short story I ever wrote was a total rip-off of a Ray Bradbury story. That stuff's still around somewhere. I should probably burn it. I think common themes really only began to emerge when I became an adult. I don't really write about vacuum cleaners anymore.

Q: Where did you go to High School and college? Were there any specific classes or teachers that inspired or encouraged your work?

A: I went to Redlands High School, and have been to so many colleges that I won't bother listing them—suffice to say that it took me awhile to figure out what I wanted to study. I was a student at Crafton for awhile, though “student” might be a bit of an exaggeration. Also too numerous to list are the many, many teachers who've had a vast impact on my life. The first person who openly encouraged me to write was a creative writing professor I had at College of the Redwoods. Towards the end of the semester, he took me aside and told me I should be sending my stuff out, and it was like I'd been struck by lightning. I'd been writing my whole life, and it never once occurred to me that it was something I could do. Of course, I started sending my stuff out right away, and of course it took another five years (at least) before anyone would even glance at it, let alone publish it. I still get rejection slips all the time.

Q: How does your writing process begin?

A: Usually with a giant cup of coffee! I write (or try to) every morning—I get out of bed, get some coffee, and head straight to my desk. If I have to be at work that day, I'll leave an hour or so early and go work at a café somewhere. I tend to write painfully slow, and it's taken me years to get to a place where I'm not beating myself up for it. I'll write three pages, then go back and rewrite them, then pick through what I've re-written, then pick some more. I don't mind it so much these days—it's just the way I work.

Q: What inspires your work?

A: I think the thing that most inspires my work is other people's work. There's no better feeling in the world than reading something and going "Hey! I want to try that!" I recently read a great book of essays by Chloe Caldwell, called *Legs Get Led Astray*. There's so much in there that's so beautiful and simple, and I wanted to try that, so I started writing some micro-essays here and there. The novel I'm working on, *Split*, was wholly inspired by a novel that one of my professors wrote. His book is written all in vignettes, a whole novel that plays out in these short-short stories. I'd been daunted for years by the task of writing a novel, but encountering that work I realized that I could do it that way, in a way that felt more, I don't know, me. I write in vignettes, it's all I do—maybe it's a result of having to cobble in writing time, maybe it's just how my brain works. Realizing I could write a novel in that way was fiercely liberating for me. (The novel, by the way, is by Peter Orner and is called *Love and Shame and Love*, and it's great!)

Q: Have you or would you consider editing or being a literary critic? Are there any other facets of the literary industry that interest you?

A: I definitely get excited about giving feedback on other people's work—whether in a workshop setting, or reading something for a friend, or doing so professionally. I'm not so much interested in literary criticism. There are enough critics out there and they're doing just fine without me. I'm currently taking courses in copy-editing, which is a subject I love and could nerd out on forever.

Q: What advice can you offer to unpublished authors?

A: Okay, allow me to get sappy for just a minute:

One of my favorite movies of all time is “Finding Nemo.” (I know, right?) I mean, yes, it’s adorable and hilarious and all that, but there’s also this amazing theme of throughout perseverance. Never give up, which in the film is “Just keep swimming.” It’s become, in the past few years, my little motto. My niece painted me a tiny Nemo fish, and I keep it in my writing space to remind me every day: Just keep swimming.

You’re gonna write some serious crap, and that’s okay: it’s part of the process. Keep writing, keep reading, keep trying new things. Take lots of classes, read lots of (different kinds) of books, go places, listen to people, watch people, write everything down. Try everything you possibly can with your writing: write upwards and downwards and inside out. Eventually, you’ll discover your voice.

Also, get used to rejection. Find your own grace in the face of it. Get the jealousy over with as soon as you can— celebrate other people’s victories. You’ll have your own someday. I promise. Just keep swimming.

Q: Flash fiction seems like a very ambiguous and malleable genre; how do you define it?

A: I think the technical definition is a story under 500 or 1,000 words, I’m not sure. I’m not really in the business of defining genres, which is probably what excites me so much about the writing arts: we can all, each of us, define and carve out our own genres. I suppose I’m drawn to flash fiction because it’s so concentrated and condensed. It’s like, okay, you have a story to tell? Tell it in thirty pages. Now tell it in ten. Now, tell it in five. Two. One. You have one paragraph: go!

SPLIT

Excerpted from an in-progress novel-in-stories

DIMINISHING THE POWER

Little Nenny has always been a nervous nelly. She was born under the sign of panic, in the house of worst thought best thought, crammed frozen and burning between the moon of fear and the sun of alarm. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. This simple irrationality governs her whole life—top to bottom, inside and out.

Knock-kneed and a little stormy eyed, she is far too small for the thoughts that haunt her. Do they contain her or does she contain them? If the heart is a receptacle, a little bin where all your troubles go, then Nenny's overflows to the point of overwhelmed. Hers is a flooded and distracted heart.

Someone will leave the stove on and the house will burn to the ground. She'll trip and break her neck on the stairs. She'll go swimming and her foot will get caught in the drain at the bottom of the pool (she saw this once on TV). The house will fill with gas and no will smell it and they'll all just go about their business, la dee da, and then some idiot will come over and light a match and blow them all the smithereens. It's going to happen because it's happened before, to one of Kasandy's friends who moved away to Michigan. Cross her heart and hope to die—except, that's the problem. She doesn't want to die. Nenny doesn't want to die at all.

You could make a catalog of these fears and sell it for a pretty cent. Give it a nice shiny cover with a drawing of a girl, trembling and sweating and with her fingers crammed inside her mouth. Call it something like, "When a Child Suffers the Inevitability of Doom."

Every Thursday night, Mom comes and puts Nenny to bed. It can only be once a week because Mom works late, and also there's so many people in this stupid house and not enough Mom to go around. She sits on the edge of Nenny's bed and takes Nenny's little hand in her own, pets it like it's a dying hamster, and she takes a deep breath and tells Nenny to take a deep breath too, and they breathe in all the breath they've got and their chests expand like too-full balloons, and they exhale—whooooooooo—and Mom tilts her head and half smiles half frowns with a look that means it's time to get real, and she stops petting but still holds Nenny's little hand and says, "What's been on your mind?"

"Everything," Nenny says, because it's true. It's always true.

FEAR # 37: EARTHQUAKE

A nine point five is going to strike and rip the town, their street, their house, them, in two. What starts as a soft rumble in the middle of the night swiftly transforms into the apocalyptic shrieking of the earth itself, like God howling as a beast would howl and then tearing off his clothes. The bunk beds collapse and Tiny is crushed like a pancake. Kasandy is ripped to shreds by broken glass. Bubbles, scrambling for the safety of an open doorway, is struck in the head by a falling beam and his brain goes pop out his skull. Charles—not one to panic, but still: his decisions are never wise—somehow ends up in the pool, and dies when a live wire snakes across the ground and lands in the shallow end and he is zapped so bad that his hair turns white and his eyeballs explode and his spine comes shooting, strangely, out his chest. He never stands a chance.

Thankfully, Mom and Dan die peacefully in their sleep.

Nenny, however, gets trapped in a tiny airtight crevice when two walls collapse, her face smashed into her knees and drywall smooshing her spine. For a few days—after the initial, high-pitched panic—she is fine. She befriends a small field mouse that has made its way inside a crack, and passes the time telling him stories about his own magic-filled and adventurous youth: “And you were proclaimed a knight, and all the other mice children cheered!” She names the mouse BobbySocks, and on some deep, inarticulated, spiritual level—where everything glows and nothing has a name—she is sure that this is all somehow meant to be: a shuddering earth led to this collapsed wall led to this entrapment led to this fated friendship between rodent and girl. A storied, transformative epiphany is about to occur, when BobbySocks begins to nibble her toe.

That’s how Nenny dies: not by succumbing to starvation and fatigue, but rather, by being eaten alive.

PEOPLE WATCHING

Skyler Greyson

It was a long day, one with no purpose but to keep going. It seemed to have no end, barely a beginning. It was like a day that was stuck in the middle; stuck inside of itself. If you were to reach the end of the day, and go to sleep, you would half expect to wake up the next morning and be trapped in yesterday. That was how he felt anyway.

His palms sweated and he couldn't understand why. He could barely grip his coffee cup in his hands. Like his body was being drained of all possible muscle movement. He was surprised he could even hold himself up in the uncomfortable mahogany chair. His eyes moved but it took some effort as they lay upon the faces that walked in and out. "Ring. Ring." It was the signal of a new face. A tall woman with no discernible features except for her height walked in. He glanced at her, and was started to come up with his own back story for her when a new history walked in. "Ring. Ring." A man in a trench coat this time. It was cold outside, but nothing a light jacket wouldn't warm up. He began thinking the man had owned that trench coat since he was young. After his mother passed away he had found it. Cleaning his mother's attic and sporting through all the memories and trinkets that

had been purchased from antique stores and thrift shops. He had found the trench coat in an old trunk that had once belonged to his father. The only memory his father had left behind. It smelled of moth balls and Jasmine tea. He would never part with it.

He looked back up at the man who had walked in. He saw him sit down and shrug off his trench coat on the mahogany chair.

"Ring. Ring." Another woman; her face as calm as the wind that blew outside. She had just gotten back from Paris. She was a little saddened by the fact she had to trade the allure of a french café for the bustle of an american coffee shop. Jacques. That was his name. The man she had met for the briefest moment in Paris. She clutched her sunglasses and twirled them about in her hand, patiently waiting for the line to dwindle. Digging in her purse for the photograph she had taken of them. It was a cell phone that she pulled out. Her fingers moving like the rain drops on window pane across the keys. She fumbled. The cell phone clattered to the floor in a loud scene. Heads looked up. The crowd looked at her. "How dare she break public etiquette?" "Doesn't she know dropping something is rude?" "Animal."

She grabbed her coffee off of the table. No, it was a mocha.

“Ring. Ring.” Two more faces. Two women. Four shoes. Four arms. Four hands. Two hands holding. One had the face of that one actress on television of a show he had never seen before; the one that never aired almost decade before he was born. The other one looked like the headmistress of an all girls school he had tried to court in his former life. She looked much happier with the actress. They approached the counter. “Two, please.” No that was incorrect. There were four.

“Ring. Ring.” One of the faces had left. He couldn’t tell which one. The room seemed oddly off balance however. Like when a wave crashes over the moon’s surface, leaving behind water droplets in the craters.

A new face walked in. There was no bell to signal his arrival. He walked in through the back. No bell. He must be a ghost. Why else would no one notice him. Only the staff and the observer saw him. They were polite that way. “Coffee. Large.” Doesn’t he know ghosts don’t drink? What a peculiar phantom he was. He took the newspaper off the rack and sat down. Why would a ghost need to catch up on the current news? Maybe he wants to make sure they got his obituary right. How did they spell his name? It was an unusual name after all. It was Bob or something like

that. But he spelled it J-O-H-N. They would never get that right. Oh God, the picture they used. It wasn’t him at all. They even used the wrong picture. He would sue. None of the information that was in his obituary was correct.

As the world around him began to settle into the order he had created, he glanced over. The seat that had contained the man was empty. Empty except for his trench coat and His Jasmine tea; left half full.

Skyler Greyson is a Crafton Hills College Alumni and is currently studying English at University of California, Riverside. Skyler’s past lives include the man who invented the question mark, Charles Darwin, and an elephant that was married to thief. Famous words he lives by are “it will happen.”

NIGHTMARES

Faith Pasillas

“Hello?”

A soft voice echoed throughout the darkness.

“Is anyone there?”

A young woman wandered through the black void.

‘Where am I?’ she wondered as she looked around at the nothingness that surrounded her.

Suddenly she was on the outskirts of a snow covered forest. She looked around and saw a car next to her that had crashed into the snow filled ditch that she was kneeling in. She glanced behind her and saw the highway that the car must have come from. She once looked back at the beat up black car and noticed that it had the same license plate as her father’s car.

“How is that possible? The last time I had seen that car was when I was 11...” she muttered to herself as she tried to get up off the ground. Her body failed to do as she commanded. She looked down to see what was holding her back and saw her father’s bloodied corpse in front of her.

“No...” She whispered in fright. She looked down at herself and saw that she was no longer a young woman, but her 11 year-old past self. She also noticed the metallic scent that could only be associated with one thing:

Blood.

Her father’s life force clung to her hands like a pair of warm winter gloves. She furiously wiped her hands on her already bloodied clothes in hope of getting it off her. It spread like a disease, contaminating everything it touched. The copper scented fluid stuck to her hands like a parasite, feeding off her fear and sanity.

Blood.

She stared at her petite hands in horror. It was still there. It didn’t disappear like she had hoped it would.

Blood.

She screamed, terror grabbing at her heart like a frightened child would grab its mother’s hand.

WHY WON’T IT DISAPPEAR?

A gasp escaped a trembling body as it awoke from a deep slumber, before it shot up into a sitting position on the bed. A muffled scream disturbed the silence that accompanied the night.

In an upstairs bedroom, a girl sat on her bed; the silky sheets and warm blankets messy and were thrown off her body. Her arms wrapped around her legs and kept them close to her chest as she whimpered softly into the pillow that was squished between

them. Her shoulders shook with repressed tears, making the bed she sat upon move slightly with each dry sob. She refused to cry. She refused to be weak. After all, one of her father's last wishes was for her to be strong and always smile, for tears did not suit her.

The boy that also slept on the bed lazily moved into a sitting position next to the distraught girl. His sleepy yet alert eyes looked around the dark master bedroom searching for the source of the girl's distress. His eyes passed over the closed door of the bedroom, the oak wood dresser, the computer desk, the walk-in closet, and the tan-curtained window before they settled on the girl next to him. He sighed softly as he looked at his shaking lover. He quickly came to the conclusion that she had another nightmare, and that was what was making her so distressed.

Comforting hands reached out to her. They grabbed her and pulled her into a warm bare chest and made her rest her head on broad shoulders. Strong arms that radiated safety engulfed her shaking body, as they held onto her firmly. The comforting hands began to rub small circles on her lower back, making her clothes even more untidy than they were from her tossing and turning. A loving voice broke the silence.

"Shhh... It's okay. I'm here... I won't leave you... Shhh... I'm here..." the young

man quietly whispered to her as she quickly wrapped her arms around him. He continued to rub circles on the soft bare skin of her back that showed between her top and pants. He whispered soothing words into her ear in an effort to calm her. The young couple sat on the bed and stayed in each other's arms for a time. After a while her shaking shoulders stopped, and the whimpers ceased to escape her lips.

The brown haired male slowly moved the young woman away from him so he could see her face. "Are you okay now?" he asked with worry in his voice.

The chocolate brown-eyed girl remained silent. Her eyes stayed fixed on the disheveled sheets that lay next to their warm bodies.

"Ayame, look at me," the young man softly commanded.

She remained as she was and silently refused to raise her bowed head.

He gently grabbed her chin and lifted up her head, so that he can see her face. His heart broke at seeing the wounded look his lover had in her eyes. He softly covered her eyes with his hands.

Her delicate hands came up to touch his rougher ones. "Jiro, what are you doing?" she asked, startled at his actions.

"If you can't see the world, then the world can't see you. If the world can't see you,

then the world will never know that you were weak for a moment and cried.”

A soft smile graced his tired face as he took in her messy bed head and reddened cheeks as she quickly smiled. He felt a wetness on his palms and quickly realized that it was the sensation of her hot tears falling from her eyes.

Her smile faltered as the tears fell faster. “You’re an idiot. You know that? A stupid, lovable, idiot,” she said before she threw herself into his muscular chest. She started to sob and wail loudly, for once not allowing her foolish stubbornness to win.

His arms held onto her tightly as she let out all her pent up emotions. He closed his purplish blue eyes and rested his cheek on her smooth golden brown hair. Words wouldn’t be able to comfort her now. All he could do was hold on to her and silently let her know that he will not leave her to suffer alone.

Time seemed to stop in that moment, for her heartfelt sobs were the only sound they heard. Slowly, her sobs began to lessen, and her wails turned into sniffles. After a while, they stopped all together and were replaced by soft snores; she had cried herself to sleep.

Jiro sighed as he laid her down gently on the king size bed. He laid down next to her, his back against the wall, before he covered them both up with the soft green

blanket. He encircled his arms around her waist and spooned her from behind, so that she would subconsciously know that he was still with her. He kissed the top of her head as she slept and cuddled with her, before he too succumbed to the sweet temptation of sleep.

Faith Pasillas is a young college student who has a passion for writing and photography. In her free time she takes pictures and writes short stories, poems and novels.

ASHES FOR BEAUTY

Emily Anne Conner

How often do you think of our little yellow house on that battered road, with cement pasted over the cracks where we turned the garage into another room, having to leap down cold, blue steps to get there, which were slippery under our socks, so we practiced twirling there and then ran to the swap cooler for lack of air conditioning, and we giggled as it turned our voices into vibrating harmonies, making music before our dinner on white sectioned plates, cradling spaghetti with parmesan cheese and no sauce, diced mixed vegetables, and bread that left a shiny line of warm butter on our lips, and our eyes would meet, but we had no suspicion of the tears behind yours, and as tissy played her “Beauty for Ashes” with my painting of a dull rose on the easel you let them fall, claiming the song beautiful; and the song was beautiful yet that wasn’t the reason they fell; but rather, the oasis for us was a cage to you, raw and savored, but a cage nonetheless, that caught you as you ran from what had been, as you tried to heal from the tissues that had turned

to scars and not the other way around, the ashes for which you sought beauty; and so you visit that time less often than I, or don’t you? Wish I knew...

Emily Conner currently lives in San Diego, and finds her inspiration from travels, cross-culture experiences, and the roots of nostalgia in everyday life. Her previous works “Where Ivory Floats” and “Mistletoe is a Weed” may be found in the 2010 and 2011 editions of *The Sand Canyon Review*.

CIGARS

Lawrence Eby

We had the day off from school, and our mom was too busy working to keep us in check. My brother Freddy decided it was the perfect time to steal cigars from our Uncle Ray, and I kept a lookout while Freddy dug through the glove box of Ray's Ford Ranger. It was full of fast food receipts, expired registrations, empty beer cans, and a few pairs of women's sunglasses. There was a pack of cigars hidden somewhere inside the truck. I guess Ray would sneak out at night and light a fat one while my fat ass aunt snoozed away. Freddy finally caught on to the scheme. Not that he really cared that my uncle was hiding shit behind my aunt's back. He just wanted to smoke a cigar, and I wasn't going to miss out this time.

Underneath the driver's seat, Freddy found a pack of thin cigars wrapped in a plastic package. He pulled them out and opened it up.

"Fucking Holy Grail right here."

"We going to smoke them?"

"Me and Casper are going to smoke them. Maybe we'll give you a puff if you're lucky."

Freddy took the pack into the house and into the kitchen. He figured it was a safe bet that Ray wouldn't be leaving the basement. Ray was searching for jobs, which meant he

was looking at porn on the internet or reading articles about washed-up celebrities.

Casper was on a no-knock basis, and came in and made his way to the kitchen to check out the find. Casper had these weird white blotches on his hands, which meant we only hung out with him because he was the only kid close to our age in the neighborhood, and we needed someone to pick on.

"Sup, Casper. Check these fuckers out," said Freddy.

I slid a chair from the head of the table and took a seat. Casper was standing next to my brother. He pulled a cigar from the package and slid it under his nose, taking a deep breath.

"These Cubans?"

"Nothing but the best, like I told you," said Freddy.

Casper slid the cigar back into the package. "Where we smoking them?"

"The backwoods?" I said.

Freddy rubbed his chin. "The drain, probably."

The drain ran under the street was about a block away from the house. It was tall enough for people to stand, and once you got to the midpoint, there was a large square room-looking place that didn't have any

purpose other than collecting a shitload of sand and garbage.

Freddy got his backpack from the living room and dumped out all of the loose and crinkled papers onto the kitchen table until a lighter fell out. He grabbed it and put both the cigars and the lighter into his pocket. Then we headed out the door.

* * *

Weeds grew out of the aqueduct's cement walls, and the place was littered with plastic and glass bottles filled with sand, and the drain looked about the same, add a few spider webs.

"It's fucking dark in there," said Casper.

Freddy laughed.

"Little Casper afraid of the dark?"

I forced a laugh and repeated, "Afraid of the dark?"

Casper ignored it and looked inside. On the far end, there was a white circle of sunlight.

"I'm just saying, how the hell are we going to smoke in there if we can't see what we are doing?"

"There's light in the center," said Freddy. He pushed me toward the drain. "Now, go check it out."

"No fucking way. Send Casper."

"Don't be such a pussy. Go in there and

make sure it's a proper smoking environment. And be quick. We don't have all day."

I sighed and leaned my bike against the slanted aqueduct wall, and then headed inside. I kept crouched to avoid the spider webs dangling above, and when I was about halfway to where the square room was supposed to be, Freddy called from the entrance.

"Watch out for dog shit!"

The comment echoed throughout the tunnel.

The square room had a drainage hole in the top that let in light. It was littered with trash and a mattress stained with something dark. I called to them to get in here, and they started walking. The cars from above let in a hum when they passed, and it smelled like rotted wood and a handful of pennies.

Freddy walked in first and looked at the mattress.

"Looks like someone lost their virginity on that thing."

Casper followed.

"Your fat aunt and dumb shit uncle," he said.

The cigar package was in Freddy's hand, and he shook it at Casper.

"At least Ray has taste in the finer things."

He pulled the lighter out from his jean pocket and a cigar from the package. He

gripped the cigar with his teeth, sparked the lighter, and puffed until it lit up. It's like he had done it before.

He sucked it in, and then coughed it out.

"Now that is some good cigar." His eyes were watering.

It smelled nasty to me, but I asked to try it anyway.

"Casper's turn. Youngins got to wait."

Casper took a cigar, handed me the package, and then slid the cigar underneath his nose again. It looked like he was checking to see if the smell had changed. After a few failed attempts, he lit it, breathed it in, and coughed it out.

The smoke from both of them hung in the air, glowing from the rectangle of light from the top of the room. A few more cars passed above us.

"Now this is the life," said Freddy, wiping his face on his sleeve. "Sitting back, smoking cigars." He coughed a few times, and then took another drag.

"You think your uncle is going to be pissed about you stealing them?" said Casper.

"Who gives a shit, man? He'll get more. He can piss and moan all he wants. It doesn't change the fact that he owes my parents for letting him stay there for free. Think of it like a payment."

I pulled a cigar out and passed the package to Freddy. I puffed at it, the flame glowing against the tip, but it just wouldn't light. Freddy noticed.

"Look at this amateur."

"Fuck off," I said.

Casper chuckled.

Finally, it lit up, and I sucked a big puff of smoke into my cheeks and blew it out. Some of the tobacco flaked off in my mouth, so I pulled out the pieces and flicked them to the ground.

"You have to suck it all the way in, otherwise you're just wasting it," said Freddy.

So I tried again. I took a deep breath through the cigar. My lungs burned, and when I coughed it out, my eyes started to water. I wiped them with my hands, which now smelled of tobacco.

"Good shit," I said.

Casper walked over to the mattress and checked it out.

"Man, that's gross. You don't think someone sleeps on that down here, do you?"

"Fuck if I know," said Freddy.

"Probably murdered on it."

The inside of the drain-room was filled with smoke. It was getting harder to breathe, and all three of us were coughing rhythmically.

"Can we get out of here?" said Casper.

"I need some fresh air."

“Let’s finish these up, and smoke the rest outside,” said Freddy.

I agreed and took a few more puffs of the cigar. It seemed like I wasn’t getting anywhere with it. If any, I had only smoked about a centimeter of the damn thing. I wanted a glass of water.

Freddy held the cigar between his teeth and put the lighter and left-over cigars into his pockets. Then he started heading out to where we left our bikes. Casper and I followed.

“This shit fucking reeks,” said Casper.

Freddy turned around, and looked at Casper through the smoke.

“I risked my ass to get you these. Be fucking grateful.”

“I have a headache.”

“It’s because you’re a pussy. Both of you are pussies. Don’t know a damn thing about life and living.” Freddy coughed a few times, and then threw the cigar to the drainage sand and stepped on it. Even I felt like it was wasteful.

“Go on. Put them out. Fucking rejects.”

We rode back without talking, and when Casper turned down his street, Freddy began to pedal faster, gaining distance. I didn’t bother to keep up.

When I made it back, Freddy was

putting the cigars back in Ray’s truck. I waited for him, and we entered the house together.

Our mom was home, watching TV in the living room. She yelled to Freddy.

“You going to pick up all that shit on the kitchen table?”

Freddy ignored it and went upstairs. Uncle Ray stumbled into the kitchen, potbellied, with bags under his eyes, and his unshaven face. He wore a wife beater and plaid shorts. He went to the fridge, pulled out a beer, and popped it open with his teeth. He offered me a sip. My mom didn’t look away from the TV. I wanted her to stop this.

* * *

I went upstairs and knocked on Freddy’s door before entering. He was lying on his bed, flipping through a skateboard magazine.

“You alright?” I said.

“I’m fine.”

“Whatever you say.”

He put the magazine down and sat up. “What do you want?”

“I took one of Ray’s beers out of the fridge, you want it?” I said.

“Sure.”

I wrestled the can out of my pocket and handed it to him. He popped it open, took a drink, and winced.

“This isn’t as bad as the cigars. But it

still tastes like shit. Want some?"

"Ray gave me a sip. Not a fan."

He leaned up against the wall and pulled the magazine back into his lap. He sat there, reading, and drinking. With every gulp, he winced at the taste. His sweatshirt started fading, and his socks began to grow holes. I watched his unshaven face grow darker, the sweatshirt lose its sleeves, and the socks fall off his feet. Cans piled under the bed like sand in the drains, and from time to time, our mother would check in, look around the room, then close the door. Every time, I tried to stop it from closing out the hallway light. I was reaching into the dark for something I didn't understand. "Tate, it's been two years since I signed you to this agency. Two years, and nothing. Not one completed story!" yelled the man behind the desk.

With much apprehension, the man in front of the desk decided to speak, "I know, Mr. Andrews, but if you take a look at the story that I have brought in today..."

Mr. Andrews coldly interrupted, "Does it say 'THE END' on the final page, Jackson?"

With even more apprehension, Jackson replied, "Well, no. But I..."

"I'm not able to play this game with you anymore, Tate!" Mr. Andrews shouted. "Most sane men would have cut ties with you a long time ago! Not me! No, I foolishly let

you string me along in hopes that you may actually deliver a masterpiece!"

Jackson tried to speak up again, but was interrupted before he could open his mouth.

"Two days," Mr. Andrews said with a chill in his voice. "You have two days to finish something. Anything. If you don't, you're finished here. And I won't feel the least bit sorry for you either!"

Jackson Tate had always found himself experiencing life as if it were a film. Rather than face his problems, Jackson found it best to dodge the confrontation entirely and float off into a more pleasant part of his own story. Of course this always resulted in Jackson having to tell himself that the camera wasn't about to cut to the next scene. He was in the middle of reminding himself of this when he looked up to find that Mr. Andrews was still staring at him.

"Well?" Mr. Andrews asked with an increased level of irritation.

Jackson scooped up his unfinished manuscript and shoved it into his bag, tripping over himself as he fled from the office.

Jackson felt an enormous amount of pressure after his meeting with Mr. Andrews.

"How can that man sit behind a desk and just instruct somebody to complete a story?" Jackson said to himself. "Who does he

think he is?”

Jackson shuffled down the busy sidewalk, oblivious to the sights and sounds around him.

“How in the hell am I to complete a story in just forty-eight hours? You can’t put a time limit on artistic expression!” Jackson thought. “That Andrews is lucky to have me as a client! Demanding deadlines from me is unacceptable!”

The honks of passing cars didn’t seem to bother Jackson as he continued his mental barrage against his literary manager. He could faintly make out what appeared to be shouting that seemed to increase in volume with every passing second. Clearly, these people didn’t have any respect for a man who was daydreaming about telling off his boss. A strong gust of wind hit Jackson in the face as he was jumping over Mr. Andrews’ desk to assault him in his mind. Big things, fast things, seemed to be racing on both sides of Jackson’s occupied physique. A continuous stream of honking cars left him unable to regain his train of thought. Can’t a man walk on the sidewalk in peace? As this thought entered Jackson’s brain, a city bus decided to interrupt by crashing into his body at roughly forty-two miles per hour. As Jackson flew through the mid-morning air, the only thought that he could muster was:

“Buses aren’t allowed on sidewalks!”

Jackson’s eyes were slow to open at first, almost as if they had been closed for years. He couldn’t help but realize that even when his eyes appeared to be opened, they felt as if they were still shut. His body was sluggish and unresponsive, but this was unimportant at the moment considering that Jackson was far too busy trying to figure out exactly where in the hell he was. It can be assumed that anybody would be taken aback if they were being hit by a city bus in one moment, only to find themselves laying in a richly dense forest in the next. Finally, the large trees and chirping birds caught Jackson’s attention. After a moment of complete and utter shock and terror, Mr. Tate slowly sat up to get a better view of his surroundings.

There was an odd suspicion growing inside of Jackson Tate’s mind that had now become too large to ignore. From the moment his eyes opened, he had felt a strange familiarity towards the forest. It was as if he had seen it before. But how?

Certainly he would have remembered taking a trip to a forest that sat next to an erupting volcano. It was all so familiar, and yet he couldn’t put his finger on the how or why. He came to a large opening in the forest which housed a crystal clear pond. He knelt down to take a drink when he became very

alarmed by what was staring back at him. Presumably, the reflection of one's own face doesn't usually come with such cause for alarm. The problem with the reflection in this particular pond was that it didn't resemble the face that Jackson Tate knew to be his own. Jackson stared cold and motionless at the unfamiliar portrait in the glistening water. This face was broad, strong, as if it were cut from marble. The hair on the top of his head was long and full, certainly not the same thinning mess that Jackson had given up on years ago. With all of the intrigue and bewilderment surrounding him, Jackson had neglected to notice that his body wasn't exactly the body that he had known his whole life. He ran his hand through his newly discovered locks and felt the chiseled bone structure of his lower jaw. Of all the things that had happened to him today, this was certainly the most promising.

However, the brain that resided in Jackson Tate's head couldn't let him enjoy his newly found beauty, as that feeling of bizarre familiarity crept across his thoughts once again. He knew the face, but he didn't know why. Jackson struggled to come up with answers, but was only met with more questions. Finally, Jackson's frustration got the better of him, and he collapsed to the ground. As he lay on the ground, Jackson realized that

he was sitting on top of something that was giving him much discomfort. He stood up and gazed at what appeared to be a leather bound satchel. This satchel was no ordinary satchel. In fact, this satchel was the same satchel that Jackson had brought with him to his meeting with Mr. Andrews.

Lawrence Eby is a MFA student at California State University – San Bernardino. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the Black Tongue Review, THRUSH, and the Superstition Review, as well as others. He is a founding member of PoetrIE, Poetry Editor for Ghost Town, and Editor-in-Chief of Orange Monkey Publishing.

THE UNFINISHED WORKS OF JACKSON TATE

Brandon Gnuschke

“What is happening!?” Jackson screamed to the empty forest.

In one swift motion, he grabbed his satchel and tossed it as hard as he could. It made contact with a nearby tree, sending its contents flying in all directions. Papers mostly. Papers!

Of course, his manuscript! The one that he took to the meeting this morning! Jackson scooped up a random page from the ground, and as he read a feeling came over him, as if a million light bulbs in his brain suddenly turned on. Entranced, Jackson read his own words as if they were altogether new to him.

Ironheart stood on the cliffside overlooking the monstrous volcano. His eyes stared towards the fate that lay before him. There were only two options for him now: Victory or death.

Jackson picked up another piece of paper and enthusiastically continued to read.

Ironheart bellowed out a hearty war cry as he dove on to the ferocious troll. He swung wildly with his sword, striking the beast with a devastating blow to the skull. His majestic hair waved wildly in the winds of battle.

“Ironheart,” Jackson whispered to

himself with a sense of realization. “I’m Alexander Ironheart!”

“Finally figured it out, have we?” a feminine voice broke through Jackson’s previously unoccupied surroundings.

The sound of a voice other than his own scared the hell out of him. He jumped a few feet off the ground due to sheer terror. Fearing for his life, Jackson brandished a long sword that he had previously neglected to notice and pointed it in the woman’s general direction. The feminine voice came from a very feminine body. She was beautiful; she had braided hair that extended down to her waist, and she wore golden armor that made her entire body appear to be glowing. She didn’t appear to be an enemy. But what was she exactly?

“Or are we still a little confused?” she continued.

Although his memory seemed to be coming back to him, Jackson couldn’t place this woman. The only thing about her that seemed to trigger any type of reaction was her voice. With every word she spoke, Jackson felt a sense of tranquility. He also had the overwhelming suspicion that he knew this

voice, like he had been hearing it consistently for ages.

“Who are you?” Jackson asked.

The woman paused and took a long moment to really think about this to herself.

“To be frank with you, Mr. Tate, I’m not quite sure how to answer that,” the woman finally replied.

“You know my name. How do you know my name!?” Jackson was becoming more and more uneasy with each passing moment that he spent swimming with confusion.

“I’m going to tell you something that may be rather difficult to comprehend,” the woman said. “To put it simply, I am your conscience.”

Jackson stared at her even more perplexed.

“Okay, perhaps that was a little too simple,” he woman said. “Let me just go ahead and lay it out for you. Jackson, we are inside of your head right now.

“Inside of my... head?” Jackson asked. His confusion didn’t appear to be going away.

“I’m sure you remember a little altercation that you had with a city bus?”

Jackson slowly nodded.

“Good, we’re making progress. Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the bus came out victorious in that collision. You, on the other hand, weren’t so lucky.”

“Am I dead?” Jackson’s words trembled out of him at the thought of this question.

“Well, no, not exactly,” the woman replied. “As far as I can gather, you are currently lying in a hospital bed. In the simplest of explanations you, Jackson Tate, are in a coma.”

It can be assumed that the feeling one receives after learning that you were living inside your own comatose brain isn’t necessarily a pleasant feeling, and that can be supported by the fact that Jackson’s next instinct was to vomit profusely on the ground. After several moments of this, Jackson was able to continue with the conversation.

“How?” Jackson asked.

“How,” the woman began, “is a question that I don’t have an answer to. As a matter of fact, I don’t know any more than you do.”

“Your lack of assistance in this matter is really starting to get to me,” Jackson said.

“You know the answers to your questions, Jackson, but you are having trouble accepting that you know them,” she continued. “And that’s where I come in. Everything you know, I know. You created me. Consider me to be like your cerebral guide. I am here to help point you in the right direction.”

Jackson thought about this for a long minute before ushering in his response.

"That's the first thing you've said that has made any bit of sense."

"Oh good!" the woman replied. "Shall we head out, because if we continue to sit here this then you aren't ever going to wake up from this coma."

"I can wake up?" Jackson asked.

"Well, it is my thought that you can. And since my thoughts are yours, then I'm assuming that this is your theory."

"How can I just wake up from a coma?" he asked.

"Finish the story, Jackson," the woman boldly proclaimed.

"The story? You mean..." Jackson took a moment to glance over at his satchel.

"Precisely. You finish the adventure, and you wake up," she said.

"How do you know?" Jackson asked.

"I don't know; it's your silly thought. Now if we're ready to go..." the woman said as she began to brace herself for the journey.

"One more thing, what's your name?" Jackson said with genuine curiosity.

"You tell me, Mr. Storyteller," the woman replied.

Jackson stared into her beautiful blue eyes, and a name echoed through the winds and hit him harder than the bus he had previously tangled with.

"Emily. Your name is Emily."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Tate," Emily said.

Emily secured her bow and led the march out of the woods. Before Jackson could begin to follow, Emily shouted out to him.

"You may need that story of yours!"

"I knew that!" Jackson shouted back, even though he clearly didn't know that. He shoved the papers in the satchel and rushed to catch up with his cerebral guide.

After many hours of hiking through the never ending countryside, and after many hours of near deafening silence between him and his female companion, Jackson decided to speak up.

"Where are we headed?" Jackson asked.

"Mt. Nex," Emily stated with confidence.

Jackson took a moment to figure out exactly what "Mt. Nex" was. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"You mean that horrifically ugly erupting volcano!?" Jackson shouted.

"The very same," Emily said.

A considerable amount of sweat began to drip down his face. "Why on earth would we be heading there?"

"How about I let you figure that out? Consider it to be a coping exercise," Emily said.

Jackson dug into his satchel and began

to piece together the disheveled story of Alexander Ironheart. He read for a moment, until suddenly the story became clear. He could kick himself for what he just read. He could kick himself even harder for writing it in the first place.

“Obitus, the Oracle of Time. I was sent by the Oracle of Time to retrieve the Galaxy Star from Obitus,” Jackson said with a tremble in his voice.

“And who is Obitus?” Emily said in a leading-the-witness kind of way.

“Obitus the Hellbeast, a shapeshifting demon from the Elseworld who has come to our dimension to take the Galaxy Star and use it to combine his world with our own. And when he does...”

Jackson began to run faster than he had ever run in his entire life. He blew past Emily and made his way towards Mt. Nex.

“And when he does,” Emily continued for Jackson, “this world will be destroyed.”

Emily gave chase and managed to catch up to Jackson.

“If I die here, will I die... out there?” Jackson asked.

“That seems to be the conundrum we are faced with,” Emily said. “So realistically, there is only one option for you.”

“And what is that?” Jackson asked.

“Don’t die!” Emily shouted.

“Thanks for the advice.”

After a long and tedious journey, Jackson and Emily reached the base of Mt. Nex.

“This doesn’t seem too bad,” Jackson proclaimed with confidence.

Rather than give his ego a further boost into the stratosphere, Emily opted rather to point towards the several hundred Orcs that were charging down the mountain in their direction.

“Okay, maybe this is very bad.”

Jackson’s fear was obviously getting the better of him as his body suddenly locked itself into a motionless state. Emily turned towards him and stared into his horrified eyes.

“You have been afraid your entire life. Do you want to spend the last moments of your existence comatose and riddled with fear? Or do you want to fight? Overcome your fears. This is your story, this is your world! Now fight, Jackson!”

Jackson lifted his eyes past Emily and towards the advancing hoard. He drew his long sword and let out a menacing wail. With that, he charged right into the middle of the swarm.

Emily sat on a rock, quietly eating an apple as Jackson jammed his sword into the last remaining Orc. He stood victorious atop a mound of mangled bodies. Emily began to

slowly applaud his achievement.

“Not bad, Mr. Storyteller. What about Obitus?” Emily asked.

“He’s next,” Jackson proclaimed.

Emily tossed her apple at a decapitated Orc head and stood by Jackson’s side.

“It’s time.”

They reached the peak of the terrifying volcano. Atop it sat Obitus, holding in his hand what Jackson knew to be the Galaxy Star.

“Ironheart. Your feeble attempts to save your pitiful world will be your doom!”

“Your feeble attempts to threaten me are only making me more angry!” Jackson replied.

“That was pretty good. You should write that down later,” said Emily.

“As long as I breathe, Ironheart, you shall never obtain the Galaxy Star!” Obitus exclaimed.

“If killing you is my only option, then so be it!” Jackson shouted.

Jackson leapt off the ground and right towards the gigantic body of the evil creature. Obitus released a scream so loudly that it shook the ground. Jackson, in mid-air, lifted his sword above his head in preparation to strike. Obitus braced for impact. Fire and lava exploded from the top of Mt. Nex, surrounding both of them in a ring of hell.

They fought for days, exchanging devastating blows that caused earthquakes and tidal waves. They fought in the seas of Brandier, they fought in the deserts of Ragatesh, they fought in the forests of Montenegro. They clawed and stabbed and ripped each other apart.

During day three of his battle, Jackson couldn’t help but realize that the world around him appeared to be crumbling. Even bits of the sky seemed to be dropping out of position, leaving behind a black hole of nothingness. He couldn’t take a moment to ponder this, however, because at every moment he was being attacked by a monster that was ten times his own size. He continued to fight, but at every turn the landscape seemed to be more and more populated by these black holes.

“Jackson!” Emily shouted.

“Emily!? Emily, where are you?” Jackson replied.

“There isn’t much time for explanations, Jackson! You have to defeat him now!”

“What is happening!?” Jackson said as he punched one of Obitus’ teeth out of his mouth.

“I don’t know! It appears as though the world is collapsing in on itself!” Emily said.

“Am I dying!?” Jackson said.

“It certainly seems that way, yes!” Emily shouted.

At this moment a sonic boom erupted through the land, causing everything to jump wildly into the air.

BEEEEEEEEEP.

“What is happening!? Emily!”

“Fight, Jackson!”

Another boom sent Jackson and Obitus high into the darkened sky.

BEEEEEEEEEP.

“DIE!” Obitus seemed to say.

“Don’t give up, Jackson. I need you to finish the story! I need you!”

Jackson slashed through the throat of the beast, causing it to scream in pain. Jackson saw no better opportunity than this moment. Another boom.

As Jackson began to fall back to the ground, he soared down into the chest of Obitus, piercing the heart of the evil hell beast. Jackson had won.

BEEEEEEEEEEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

“What is that sound?” Jackson couldn’t help but finally notice now that he had a moment to do so. Just then, Emily appeared before him.

“You did it, Jackson,” she said.

“I did,” he replied.

They stood together on the only patch of land that existed. Around them was nothing but nothing.

“What happens now?” Jackson asked.

“You tell me, Mr. Storyteller,” Emily

replied.

“I wake up,” Jackson said.

“Precisely,” Emily confirmed.

“Will I ever see you again?” Jackson asked.

“Maybe if you decide to go and tackle a freight train,” Emily said with a smirk.

The ground shrank to the point where they had to hold one another to remain balanced.

“I will miss you, Emily,” Jackson said.

And with that, Jackson Tate kissed Emily with a passion he had never known before. When they ceased, Emily looked at him. And in their last moment together, Emily said,

“You know, in a way, you just kind of kissed yourself.”

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Jackson’s eyes were slow to open at first, almost as if they had been closed for years. His body was that of a sloth, his motor skills were unresponsive to say the least. On the table across from his bed he saw a leather satchel. It was no ordinary satchel. In fact it was the very same satchel that he had with him when he...

“Hello, Mr. Storyteller.”

The voice was familiar to him. A feminine voice... a beautiful voice. With all of his energy he turned his head. And there she

was.

“Have you come back to finish the story?” she continued.

The name on her badge was blurry, as was most of everything in the room. As it came into focus, so did Jackson’s ability to speak.

“Emily. Your name is Emily.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Tate.”

As Jackson Tate stared at her, he couldn’t help but notice what she was holding in her hand. It was his unfinished story. Unfinished, that is, until now.

Brandon Gnuschke is an award winning writer and contributing editor of the 2013 Sand Canyon Review. He has written numerous screenplays, as well as pieces of short fiction and poetry. He is currently attending Crafton Hills College where he plans on transferring in hopes of achieving a BA in English.

A HANDFUL OF CHANGE

Marie Robin

It was Karen's idea. She had swooped in from out of town, and Marcy was playing hostess. After their two-year silence, being thrust together again was a bit awkward. Marcy had thought occasionally about their friendship in the last few years. It was like the ending of Eliot's poem, no bang, no fireworks, no big cataclysmic falling out – just a long slow fizzle as they had become two very different people over a three decade span.

"So, where do you want to eat?" Marcy accelerated smoothly away from the light, glancing over at Karen. She still had that luscious blonde hair and those green cat eyes. The weight she had packed on in the last ten years was shocking, and Marcy had a hard time reconciling the enormous woman sitting beside her with her teen memories of the slim, flirtatious friend who always had the edge in attracting guys.

"Mmm. I really don't care," Karen replied. "Let's just go somewhere where we can really talk and catch up." She smiled, and Marcy had to smile back. "My mom said she and Dad ran into Lisa a couple of months ago. She was working lunch at the Falcon Head Pub. Let's go see if we can find her."

Lisa. Their other best friend. Dark hair, darker eyes, coffee and cream skin, and that

gorgeous, careless laugh. Marcy and Karen had been estranged from her for years, some disagreement over a ridiculously immature guy. The last Marcy had heard Lisa had drifted away into the San Francisco fog. Could she truly be back in town and working just down the block?

Marcy hesitated at the door, her hand on the cool brass handle. With this simple tug, it was entirely possible she was about to pull herself away from her everyday world, and thrust herself back into the past of having two best friends, and hanging out, and all the unspoken rivalry and tension that can linger between teenage girls who barely know who they might become. On the other hand, the pub might just be a lame chain restaurant with over priced beers served on cutesy coasters and the aroma of stale frying oil hanging in the air.

Marcy shook her head. She was much too old for this kind of apprehension. Just get this lunch over with, she thought. She opened the door, and found herself face to face with Lisa, wearing a blue plaid kilt and a cheesy grin.

"Marcy? Karen!" Lisa's animated face registered as much surprise as Marcy felt. After years with no contact, they were suddenly looking into each other's eyes. Marcy

had forgotten just how dark Lisa's eyes were. Now they crinkled happily to match Lisa's broad smile. However, Marcy couldn't help but notice the dark circles, bags beneath them, and the faded look to Lisa's skin.

Social convention called for cheery inquiries, hugs and enthusiasm all around. But Marcy found herself wondering what was under the smiles all three of them had pasted across their faces. In the laughing chatter of catching up with old friends, there was no doubt that the delight was sincere. But there was another element mixed in along with it, a certain dark current of chill, things left unsaid and unshared.

Marcy knew that she certainly had her own set of skeletons, and she was in no particular mood to force open that creaky closet door.

* * *

Still though, Marcy was undeniably curious about the details of her friends' lives. That's how later, much later, after making plans to meet for dinner, they were hanging around in her family room spending the evening together.

Karen had taken up residence on the couch as if she were queen of all she surveyed. She half sat, half sprawled, her bulk still as her bright eyes darted sharply between her friends. Lisa leaned forward and scooped up her amber

drink, swishing it thoughtfully around in the crystal glass as she looked around Marcy's house. "This is really lovely, Marcy. You should feel proud of yourself." She pouted her lips together as if about to say something else, but didn't. Marcy noticed the way her long, slender fingers seemed almost consciously placed. She had noticed that a lot of things about Lisa seemed calculated for effect: the way she leaned forward when she talked, her habit of tucking a long shining strand of hair behind one ear, her slight tilt away from Karen when she talked.

I wonder if she was always this way, Marcy thought. Perhaps she had never noticed when she was so much younger. Or perhaps the years had changed them all a great deal.

In any case, Marcy suspected a story or two in Lisa's past. And she found that she was becoming more and more determined to get below that shabbily elegant façade.

"I know something we can do," Marcy announced when Lisa stopped talking. "How about a Tarot reading? It's a new thing I've been teaching myself over the last few years."

"No way. Not me!" Lisa was adamant.

"I don't want to know the future."

"It doesn't tell you the future." Marcy was determined, and she put on a sweet smile. "It only gives you hints into what you're already thinking about. But if you're not at all

interested..." She let her voice trail off, belying her rummage into the side table drawer for her red velvet Tarot bag. As she slid the cards out into her hand, Marcy shuffled them casually around, flipping one over now and then to reveal the brightly colored fairy tale figures. As she had hoped, Lisa's eyes kept darting to the deck, even as she protested.

"My mom took me to a Santeria place once." Lisa forced a laugh. "I was nineteen, I think. I couldn't believe it. I said, Mom is this the kind of people you hang around with? Exactly what kind of Christian are you? This old man wanted to throw these bones and tell me what he saw, but I got out of there right away."

"Oh, well," Marcy poured out another smooth smile. "This is nothing like that."

Karen leaned forward. "Read my cards," she demanded. "I want to see this new skill." Marcy winced a little at her tone of voice. How did Karen always manage that slight edge of superiority and skepticism? When Marcy was younger, it had made her want to prove that she was just as good. She was quite annoyed to find those same feelings of insecurity and effort arising in her now.

We'll just see who has something to prove, she thought. And just like that, the plan was there. She wouldn't do real readings, the kind where she stayed true to the cards and

explained their meanings. No, instead, she would dig around a little bit, figure out what made them tick. Then she would give them something to think over. Finally, Lisa and Karen would see that she was as good as they were, better even.

Marcy handed the deck to Karen. "Shuffle it around while you tell me what's on your mind."

Karen pawed the cards around on the glass coffee table. "Nothing special. I'm so happy I'm boring. I just wanted to give you a chance to show us your little game."

Oh thanks, thought Marcy, becoming resolute to find something amiss.

She laid the cards out in the classic Celtic Cross spread, her fingers stroking gently over their patterned blue and white backs as she placed them. The first turns were inconsequential. Marcy stuck more or less to the cards' meanings. Karen was right; she didn't have much dramatic going on in her life. These cards were straightforward and about as ordinary a reading as Marcy had ever seen. Lisa looked on, her eyes flickering with interest with each new image.

Finally, Marcy saw her chance. The heart card showed as the Eight of Pentacles. One of Marcy's favorite cards, the illustration depicted a lush garden full of coins growing on bushes while a regal lady draped in a flowing

yellow silk gown gazed with contentment upon a hooded hawk perched on her forefinger. Usually, the Eight meant great good fortune and material attainment, a period of enjoying the fruits of hard labors. But Karen wouldn't know that.

"And this card shows an impact on your inner heart... Oh dear," Marcy paused as if troubled.

"What?" Karen peered at the card.

"I'm afraid this isn't very good. This shows a period of great loneliness and abandonment. See how the lady is lost in the garden by herself? I've usually seen this card right before someone suffers a terrible loss of some type."

"Don't be ridiculous," Karen gave a nervous laugh.

The next card was the Eight of Wands. Perfect. Thank you, Tarot, Marcy thought. Usually the eight brown staffs jutting across from one side towards the other in parallel bands meant a mustering of strength and good forward momentum towards a goal. But Marcy said, "And this card represents the state of your home. Oh my. The Eight of Wands means imprisonment and despair. Something big is definitely happening here."

By now, Karen was shifting uncomfortably against the sofa. Her bluff unconcern of earlier seemed to have slipped

away. Lisa seemed to be holding her breath. Marcy forged ahead. "And this card is your future hopes or fears."

Up flipped the Two of Cups, the card showing happy lovers exchanging golden goblets with each other. By now, Marcy definitely saw that Karen was right. Her home was happy and stable. But maybe she didn't know that.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry." Marcy leaned over and took Karen's hand between her own. "The Two of Cups is the card of affairs. I've never ever seen it be wrong." She made herself continue in a gentle tone. "I'm afraid that Steve might be cheating on you."

Karen's gasp was audible. Her face drained of color, and she sank back against the cushions. "I knew it. Steve said it was just business trips, but he's gone so much. It's all the weight. I never should have gained this weight." By now she was almost crying. "I'm going to ask him about it as soon as I get home, and this time I want the truth."

Marcy sat back with a tiny satisfied sigh. That had gone even better than she hoped. Now it was Lisa's turn. Marcy pushed the cards together, aligning them carefully and whisking them into their bag.

"Wait," Lisa sounded hesitant. "You can practice on me, I guess. I mean, obviously it doesn't mean anything, like you said."

“Mmm. I’m not sure.” Marcy felt like a cat swinging a fat little mouse by its helpless tail.

“Please. I... I have something to ask.”

Marcy handed over the red bag and Lisa plunged her hand eagerly inside, drawing her fate onto herself in ways she did not yet anticipate.

“So I shuffle these around?” Lisa’s dark eyes showed uncertainty.

“Shuffle and talk about your concerns. What’s on your mind?”

“The usual, right?” Lisa’s giggle seemed forced. “Men, love, sex, money. When will I be happy?”

Suddenly Marcy’s heart contracted. What was she doing? These were her oldest friends, her first friends. Her jealousy evaporated beneath the sadness showing out in Lisa’s gaze, and the hope there as well.

“Will I get married? Will I find a decent job?” Lisa continued on. “Most of all, will I ever have children? I’m 41, and I want my own babies.”

Looking at her wrinkled beauty, Marcy knew the answer to those questions. She could tell without reading that the cards were not going to be kind. But she was. She could change the answers. She could comfort her oldest friends.

Marcy leaned forward and began, “This

is the Page of Swords. This represents you. It’s a great card, full of strength and possibility...”

Marie Robin adores Southern California, her husband, and two children. She has never lived in Paris, but speaks passable French, and instead of a cat, she owns guinea pigs. Her great loves include writing, yoga, teaching, and good chocolate cake.

BAY OF BENGAL

B. R. Bonner

I had been telling stories at a bar in New Orleans – stories about finding oil through unorthodox means. “Not with dowsing rods,” I said. “It’s just a feeling that I get when I’m in the right spot.” The cadre of patrons, many of whom worked in the petroleum industry as land men or roughnecks, laughed at my boasts, and paid for my drinks as tribute for the entertainment.

There was one among them, though, a rough looking sort with two missing fingers sheared off from the swinging of drill pipe, who did not scoff like the others. He smiled knowingly, and said that he recognized my name, having heard of it from a colleague who had sworn to him that he had followed my career and had come to believe that I did indeed possess an uncanny ability to find oil. “They say you’ve never had a dry hole,” he announced, holding his glass up in honor of my reputation, “but whether this is from luck or a higher power, it’s not for me to say.”

Hearing this, an elderly gentlemen sitting next to me, an old oilman man named Albert Sand, said: “We used to see guys like you in the early days: black box peddlers in their funny suits and bowties – convicts mostly, midgets and fortune tellers, mind readers and traveling yogis with “Doctor” in

their titles – always challenging us to test our luck for a finder’s fee. We were so fascinated with these fellows that we even contracted one of them on a whim. One day we took him out into the swamps on a scouting mission. He got separated from us somehow. We searched for days for this man, but we never heard from him again.”

This elderly gentlemen – rich beyond belief from his many discoveries and buoyed with life from the thrill of the hunt – laughed heartily, and, taking me by the arm as he walked me out of the bar, told me he would like to take me up on my offer, admitting that he did not believe in my pretensions but was extending me the courtesy irrespective of his disbelief out of a sportsmanlike feeling and frank admission that he longed for the days when fools had their respected place in the affairs of men. He invited me to join his company fishing expedition on his private yacht, and one hot day in June we motored a hundred miles offshore in the Gulf of Mexico to fish. On our return, roughly sixty miles out, the unmistakable current ran down my spine with a twinge that feels neither pleasant nor painful. I advised Sand to mark this spot and drill a well to a depth of fourteen thousand feet. “How do you know? How can you tell?”

he kept asking me, annoyed and at the same time incapable of governing his excitement. As there was no rational answer I could provide him, he accepted my advice on faith, and the following week he instructed his staff to prepare studies and maps of the location using remote sensing data, which, as it turned out, presented a strong case for a subsurface trap. The prospect now legitimized through scientific means, Sand set in motion the gears that turn in the hunt for oil. He spent ten million dollars in acquiring the lease and drilling the well. And it came in big, more than doubling his wealth when he later sold his interest in the newly discovered field. He would later joke about my “hunch”, but would never openly admit that I was responsible for his discovery, instead chalking it up to the efforts of his staff. His reluctance to acknowledge my contribution changed, however: one night he came knocking on my door, swaying before me in a drunken stupor, waving in my face a check in the amount of fifty thousand dollars. He pressed me to form a partnership with him. I refused him on the grounds that I could never actually predict when the sense would come over me, or that it would ever come again, and that I would rather not be locked down with a partnership that might preclude other possibilities. The larger opportunities, I told him, lay abroad – in

distant, virgin lands.

That opportunity came six months later when the head of the Burmese national oil company got a lead on me from Sand, who had been trying to broker an offshore deal with the South Koreans. As it turned out, the South Koreans had a working relationship with the Burmese in the Bay of Bengal. Sand had vouched for me. He swore by my “infallible sense,” and soon afterwards, through a representative of the South Korean firm, I was presented with an offer to act as an exploration consultant for the Bay of Bengal project.

It is no exaggeration to say that Burma is one of the poorest and most backward countries in Southeast Asia, having a poorly educated populace and a severely degraded infrastructure. Its southern coast lay ravaged by a deadly cyclone. The country is owned and operated by a military junta whose main accomplishments include bankrupting the nation, plaguing it with human rights violations, and securing its place as a pariah in the eyes of the civilized world. For years the Burmese and their neighbor to the west, Bangladesh, had laid claim to offshore tracts in the Bay of Bengal, a lingering dispute that, on top of the anxiety of dealing with a repressive military regime, frightened away most Westerners.

Arriving in Burma on a hot summer day, I was whisked away in a limousine to a private compound in the center of Rangoon. The grounds were expansive – acres of cleanly shaved lawns, a large pond banked with flowering lotus, a dock with two rowboats, giant palm trees, paths that wound through tropical gardens, and an aviary with rare birds plucked from the depths of the amorphous jungle. In the center of it all lay a two-story house built in French colonial style. A contingent of household attendants, including men with Longyi garments draped around their waists, lived in small cabanas situated within the walled compound. My military escort, a small man with a pock-marked face, made it clear to the staff that I was a special guest of the state oil company, and that whatever I called for they would provide it to me without hesitation.

As I settled into my room, I heard a knock on the door. A slender woman dressed in a white blouse and long blue skirt entered the room. She wore her hair in a bun but was otherwise bereft of feminine accents. She told me her name was Moon Mya Kyi, and inquired if my accommodations were comfortable. “I work for Myanma,” she said pleasantly. “I will be your liaison while you’re here.”

The woman proceeded to explain to me

the exploration program for the Bay of Bengal, and what my role in it would be.

“We will take you to areas offshore considered prospective. You will pinpoint for us which of these areas has the highest potential for large oil and gas deposits. Myanmar, or Burma as you call it, has limited financial resources. Your ability to locate economic oil deposits is critical to our success.”

“We haven’t finalized the terms of my contract yet,” I said.

“Yes. I’m aware of that,” the woman returned, nodding.

“If there’s oil out there, offshore, I’ll find it.”

“There are many of us who sincerely doubt that, Mr. Langstrom. But it appears that some of our leaders, especially those from the interior regions where old superstitions are still popular, seem to think that people like you actually have the power to predict the unknown.”

“And you don’t believe this.” “No. I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“Then you probably consider my being here a waste of time and money,” I observed, curious to know more about where she stood.

The woman held herself upright in her chair, her hands folded in her lap. “That is not for me to say,” she said deferentially.

“But if I were in your shoes, if I truly believed

that I had such an ability, I would keep it to myself. I would allow my successes to be seen as a result of hard work and the application of principles and logic. Your decision to divulge this intuition of yours – to do so openly rather than be discreet about it – is a sign to many that you are not to be trusted.”

“But hiding it would be dishonest, wouldn’t it?” I asked, though I was careful not to display any defensiveness in my question.

“I merely suggest that discretion has its advantages.”

“I’ve never once been wrong in my predictions,” I said boldly. “Whether this is due to luck or a higher sense is unimportant. In the end, results are all that matter.”

“Fortune tellers also say they are never wrong in their predictions,” she pointedly observed, albeit in a disarming way.

I quietly admired this woman’s poise, not to mention her strong command of English. I could find nothing to say in reply, which embarrassed me. I dropped a spoonful of sugar in my tea, and looked up at her to see what else she might say.

“What is it that you want, Mr. Langstrom?” she asked.

I hesitated before answering. “I’m willing to forego my fee for the location work, but in return I want a royalty interest in anything drilled.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she replied. “That might be a common arrangement in your country, but we cannot agree to this. If that condition is a showstopper for you, I understand; we can go our separate ways.”

“I’m afraid,” I said as politely as possible, “that for me this would be a showstopper.”

She drank some tea and asked if I would care for another cup, which I thanked her for.

“It could be years before we ever drill,” she said. “And longer still to bring any oil we find to market.”

“Yes. I’m aware of that.”

We were quiet for a moment. Finally, she said, “I will ask about your royalty interest, and will let you know tomorrow if there is any flexibility on this demand.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled, and got up to leave.

“Mahatma Gandhi once said that Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed,” she said. “I hope you enjoy the rest of your day, Mr. Langstrom. Good afternoon. And please, call me Moon.”

* * *

The following day a van with two armed soldiers, two civilians dressed in casual

clothes, and Moon arrived at the front of the house. The soldiers glared at me coolly behind their shades as they exited the vehicle and stood beside the van with their AK47's at the ready. One of the civilians, a middle-aged man with a pot-belly, noticed my hesitation and approached me with an extended hand. He introduced himself as the head of the exploration department at Myanma Oil and Gas. The other civilian, a South Korean, nodded and shook hands, smiling as if he were genuinely glad to see me. I was told by the pot-bellied man that before any contracts could be signed my divining skills would be put to the test. If I passed the test my contract would include the royalty interest that I had requested. If I failed, I would immediately be taken in for questioning, and pressed to confess my plans to defraud the government of Myanmar. "Our national security forces are very good at extracting confessions," he told me with an ugly smile.

The world went dark as a black hood was placed over my head and cinched at my neck. I was led to the back seat of the van and seated between two men. As we drove off, the Burmese man said: "We will take you to twenty different locations where wells have already been drilled. At each of these spots we will exit the vehicle and you will have five minutes to determine if the location is capable

of producing hydrocarbons. We, of course, already know the answer to that question. For you to pass this test you must be one hundred percent correct. No exceptions."

"I don't agree to this test," I objected behind my hood. "I can't always predict when the sense will come over me. I thought that was plainly disclosed to you."

Moon said something in Burmese to the others, and three of them, including the Korean, conversed for a few moments.

"No," she finally said. "We don't recall hearing that before. And if that is the case, then you might not be of much use to us."

"I'll need more than five minutes at each location," I said, angling for time.

"Not possible," the Burmese man said.

"Do you want to quit now?" Moon asked. "If you wish to quit, we can turn around and you can go back to the U.S. But once you agree to perform this test, there is no turning back."

I continued to argue for more time, as well as the option to back out before all the stops had been visited. They refused, and asked me rather curtly to make up my mind. I was pondering my reply when the Korean, who was seated to the right of me, nudged me once, gently but firmly, with his elbow, and very faintly whispered: "Yes".

Before I could consider what he meant

by this gesture, I felt two more nudges in rapid succession, after which followed an almost inaudible “No”. It appeared he was attempting to establish a code of communication between us, though at the moment I failed to understand his motivation for doing so.

“Well? What’s your decision?” the Burmese man asked.

I felt one nudge.

“Very well,” I relented. “I agree to the test.”

“Good,” said the man. He uttered something in Burmese, and one of the soldiers sitting to the left of me uncinched my hood and inserted plugs into my nostrils and ears. He then replaced the hood.

We drove along a bumpy, potholed road in silence. After a long drive we approached our first stop. As the van slowed to a halt, I felt two quick nudges from the Korean.

The door slid open. I was led out of the van and let loose to meander about, hooded, unable to hear or smell, cautiously stepping on spongy ground, waiting to see if the finder sense would arise within the allotted time. In spite of my attempts to relax and be as receptive as possible, the feeling never came. Not even a hint. There was nothing left to do but to cling to dim hopes that I could rely on my own resources rather than the uncertain

signals of a stranger that I had only just met.

At the end of five minutes, with little recourse left, I informed them that the location was dry.

This routine was repeated another nineteen times for the rest of the day. Not once did the finder sense arise during our stops, and thus all of my decisions were based on the telegraphed signals of the silent Korean. Of these, only two out of twenty were called as positive for hydrocarbons.

After the last site had been visited, I was returned to the compound, where I took a shower and ate a small plate of fish and rice noodles served to me by a quiet woman with shark-like eyes. A bottle of locally produced Dornfelder wine was opened, and I soon fell asleep, immersed in dreams of pythons crawling into my bed and suffocating me.

For the next two days I lay in my room watching the ceiling fan revolve in slow, off-kilter gyrations. It rained incessantly, at times ferociously. Gulliver’s Travels lay on my nightstand. I read it with an odd mixture of pleasure and apprehension, wondering what judgments lay in store for me. An old RCA television kept me company. I watched it in vain attempts to tune my ear to the language, imagining conversations from the gestures and vocal intonations of the characters on the screen. I had no visits from Moon or the

others, though the man with the pock-marked face could be seen strolling outside my room on the veranda, stealing glances at me as he walked by, and spitting betel nut juice into the potted planters.

My appetite quickly diminished; the food brought to me from the kitchen tasted greasy and bland. The woman who attended me refused to be lured into pantomime discussions, so I bided my time meditating on my future prospects, wondering whether I had been hung out to dry by the mysterious Korean.

On the third day my lassitude came abruptly to an end. I was lying in bed as usual, mindlessly watching television: a news program displayed scenes of the disastrous flood that had ripped through the Irrawaddy delta four months before my arrival. There was a story about a local soccer match; a story about farmers gaining access to electricity; and then the story of a foreigner branded a spy by the junta and sentenced to die. Shockingly, the execution of the accused played out live on the static-filled screen. The man, haggard and bruised, was stood against a wall. A black hood was placed over his head – a hood exactly like the one placed over my own head only days before – and with a sharp command and a volley of bullets, he was visited by finality. As his lifeless body slumped to the

ground, a television commercial cut in for a popular breath mint, followed by footage of police quelling a riot of disaffected students in Mandalay.

The absurdity of the situation sent me into a panic. I'd had enough. It was time to go. I packed as much as I could carry in a small rucksack and lit out into the pouring rain, jumping over the compound wall and scuttling like a crab down a garbage-strewn alley. I wandered the wet streets of Rangoon, passing the golden spires of the Shwedagon pagoda and finding shelter in an abandoned rickshaw parked beneath the awning of a tenement building. The rain had stopped by then, and I managed to sleep a few hours before being awakened in the early morning light by a saffron-robed monk. He looked down on me with a curious expression, and peppered me with Burmese warnings interspersed with random English words. He extended his alms bowl. I promised him a 5,000 kyat note, which I had taken from my pocket and now waved before his face, if he could tell me where I could find the U.S. embassy. It took several tries before he understood me, but in the end the kyat bill successfully cut through the language barrier. With nods of assurance and a wily smile he accepted my offering and, taking me by the arm, guided me through the throngs of honking buses and trucks to the doorstep of

my countrymen, whose flag flapped graciously in the wind like a signpost of salvation. They treated me strangely at first, as if they were unsure whether to help me or to turn me back out into the street. My appearance no doubt alarmed them. They wanted to know what kind of trouble I was in. I told them that I was not sure, that I had made a deal with the government and now believed it to be a deal with the devil, and that I needed to flee the country as quickly as possible. Though I lacked sufficient money to fully cover the expense, they kindly secured me passage on a merchant ship bound for Sydney.

Travel arrangements made, they shook my hand with firm, sympathetic grips, their eyes locking on my own with a mixture of pity and incomprehension. I thanked them for their generosity, and wished them all good fortune and a long and healthy life – an ironic farewell that amused them, coming as it did from a compatriot in such dire straits.

It was a hundred miles out into the Bay of Bengal when I was gripped by the peculiar twinge that signals like a siren call the dark substance that we obsess over with such ravenous appetite. It smashed over me like a tidal wave; and I knew that a behemoth lay beneath me, colossal in dimension, larger than I'd ever sensed before or would ever sense again – miles below in the black

subsurface depths – the strike of a lifetime that every diviner dreams of but never finds. And as I stood on the deck of the merchant vessel, nauseous and aware of the scavenger gulls swooping low in search of scraps, a new decision faced me. Should I turn back now and declare victory to Moon and the Burmese man? Should I tell them that I had accomplished my objective, that I had located untold wealth ensconced beneath their waves? Dare I demand my share of this wealth? No. I knew it was not to be. The risk was too great; the trust too little. The time had come to ignore the upwellings that would only carry me to my perdition. I resolved to set a new course: henceforth I would abandon the playbook of the augur, in search of a more stable life. Such was my state of mind as the ship pitched into the waves, heading south across the Bay of Bengal.

B. R. Bonner's fiction has appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Matter Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *Buenos Aires Literary Review*, *Existere*, *Chaminade Literary Review*, *Mind in Motion*, *Takabe*, *You Are Here*, *Words and Images*, *The Wanderlust Review*, *Voice From the Planet*, *Tidal Basin Review*, *The Delinquent*, *Mosaic*, and *The Sand Canyon Review*.

DIFFERING AURAS

Jaide Stell

I really didn't see this coming. My kind is trained for these kinds of instances. We know what to look for and avoid it, if we didn't we probably wouldn't be around anymore. We are told that demons are dangerous, and to stay away from them since they are so unpredictable.

Here, in this world, angels and demons live peacefully with humans and each other. Although the only reason for that is because we don't look that much different from humans. Only subtle differences that, in their words, 'supernatural' beings can see. For example, we, as angels, have a certain aura about us, and demons have one for them. If we happen to see those differing auras we tend to avoid each other. I can only assume that since the lower tiers are trained to fight and kill demons if they happen to become violent that they are trained the same.

I don't know what is going to happen to me. I've been stuck in this trap for about ten minutes now, and all I can really do is read the spines of the books on the shelves. At least there was a less than comfortable chair within the radius of the trap. But still, I can't help but feel hopeless in this situation. I am at the mercy of a demon. Oh, fancy that, I hear a door opening. I stared at the entrance of the

(what I assume) library, my mind coming up with many different scenarios and personalities of the demon that trapped me.

I'm not that easy to surprise, but what came through the door was definitely not what I was expecting. She had on a plain yellow tank top and baggy jeans. She looked surprised when her dark eyes landed on me, and I couldn't help but feel confused. Didn't she do this on purpose?

"It worked."

Great, her voice wasn't annoying or evil sounding either.

A big smile spread across her face as she bounced in joy; well that wasn't quite so sinister. "I can't believe it worked!" She was acting like a child, opening one of her presents on her birthday.

Wait, crap, this still isn't looking good for me.

In the interest of keeping myself safe, I kept quiet. Maybe she'll get bored of me and let me go. I watched her sit and lean forward, acting like I was the most interesting thing the world.

"So, what's your name?"

I stayed silent. I had no idea what this demon had in mind for me, and even if I was kind of curious about her kind, they were

deadly killers according to the arch-angels, and I knew enough to stay away from them.

Well, until now that is.

Her face fell as she sighed and leaned back in her chair. She took a more relaxed position and scanned her nails, "Aren't you at least a little bit interested in demons?" I silently hoped that she wasn't a mind reader.

"So, my names Tiff, and I'm a demon. Do you have any questions for me?" She asked, placing her hands in her lap and looking back to me. At my continued silence, she rolled her eyes, "Come on, angel-boy, our kinds haven't mixed for how long, and you're just going to let this chance slip away?"

I didn't know what to say to that. Well, if I'm going to die, at least I can have some of my questions answered, "Do you really kill angels?"

She feigned a look of shock and said, "He speaks!" At my eye roll she giggled and crossed her legs on the chair. "No, do you kill demons?"

I guess it's fair to answer her, "No." I got as comfortable as I could in the chair that I had and watched her twirl her brown hair, thinking of a question.

"So, what's your name?"

"Alex." I could have lied, but what's the point, "Why'd you trap me?"

"Why do you think?!" She jumped up

from her chair, effectively making me jump into a defensive position in the process. She raised her hands and smiled reassuringly, "I mean, I've been trying to catch one of you guys for so long because even though the higher ups teach us that you're dangerous and to stay away, I don't believe it! I mean, you guys would have massacred us by now if you were as bad as demons say." She stopped and looked back to me, unsure. "When I let you go, you won't go and kill me, will you?" She seemed more like a human in her mannerisms, it was possible that she was acting but I highly doubted it. I shook my head, letting her ramble more. It was oddly endearing. And I couldn't help but notice that she said 'when' and not 'if.' I guess there was hope for me yet.

She released a relieved chuckle "Good, cause that would have sucked." She smiled at me and sat on the floor by the line that was blocking me from leaving the place, "So, your turn."

I drummed my fingers on my knee for a moment before relaxing, she seemed genuinely interested and, well, nice "What do demons do in their free time?"

She shrugged "What do angels do in their free time? I mean it seems like we aren't that different, you know?" Tiff glanced down to the symbols on the ground holding me inside and started playing with one of her

shoelaces, “You won’t run if I let you go, right?”

I was about to reply when she hastily continued.

“I mean, because you seem like a really cool guy and everything but it could be an act you know? And just because I’m a demon doesn’t mean I’m bad. I just really wanted to talk to one of you and maybe, you know...” she trailed off, almost unsure about what she wanted to say, “...be friends?”

Could I trust her? She seemed really scared of what I would do when she let me out. It was almost like she was human. “I’m not going to hurt you or anything. You actually seem really interesting to me too.” I gave her a, what I hoped, reassuring smile, after all, she was peculiar to say the least.

Tiff nodded and went to scratch out one of the symbols but stopped, “I’m not really sure if I trust you yet.” She admitted quietly. She looked up at me apologetically and shrugged, “Sorry, Alex.”

My face fell and nodded, “Alright, well...” I cleared my throat uncomfortable and shifted in place awkwardly, “Is there anything that I can do to make you change your mind?” At that moment I felt an intense feeling of dread. I stood up quickly and tried to look out of the window. I caught sight of the edge of an aura that any standard angel would know, “Tiff, you need to let me go now.”

She stood up as well and looked out the window, “What is it, what’s here?” she asked quickly, she probably didn’t even hear me. I could sense her fear as well.

“Listen to me, Tiff.” I made an effort to get eye contact and keep it, “If you don’t let me go now, I won’t be able to help you.” Her eyes were wide, scared and snapped to the doorway when the house trembled.

She looked back at me and then to the ring of symbols on the floor. Tiff bit her lip before another tremor, and the sound of cracking wood made her decide to crouch down and quickly scratch out one of the lines.

I felt the invisible tether lift just as she was thrown to the side. I glanced at the arch-angel’s back before seeing Tiff trying to crawl away from him. She looked like the epitome of terror.

“I just wanted to-”

“Silence.”

With that one word the demon froze in place. I could still see her slight trembling. I slowly walked towards the other angel, seeing her eyes shoot to me in surprise, “Clow,” I said in greeting to the higher up.

He turned his head towards me before nodding and looked back to Tiff, “You set an angel trap, and that is against the laws of our races.” He saw that she was about to defend herself and held up a hand, “Therefore, the

punishment is death.”

Tiff’s breathing stopped and her eyes widened. She watched his hand reach into his coat pocket and pull out a demon spike. I noticed her hand twitch backward. I glanced between the two before walking forward, “Clow, she just wanted to talk.” My voice was quiet. I knew he didn’t expect me to speak up for her. It wasn’t in my place to even speak to arch-angels.

He paused and shook his head, “Are you defending her?” he said with a touch of disbelief in his voice.

“All I’m saying is that she didn’t do it as an act of war.” I had his full attention now and I am positive that it wasn’t something that is healthy for me. For one, arch-angels are higher up on the food chain than me and for two, he wouldn’t hesitate to wipe the floor with me, I know this from experience.

Clow raised an eyebrow and smirked, “You are defending her. You do realize that you are going against your own kind here. Alex.”

I really hate that smirk. It’s the same ‘I am better than you’ smirk that he gives anyone he decides to mess around with.

There was a small movement from the demon on the floor but I kept my own eyes on Clow’s cold ones. I thought I saw Tiff grab something from behind her, but I didn’t want

to seem weak to Him. I knew that he was most likely going to report me, but this was just wrong.

He took two small steps towards me—they were meant to be more intimidating than anything— and crossed his arms, “Alex, you are of the lower tier. You are out of line to even speak to me. And to question the judgments of arch-angels is unheard of.” His smile was menacing now, “I cannot wait for your punishments for this.”

I swallowed my nerves and continued to keep eye contact. Tiff stood quietly, and from what I could see from my peripheral vision, it looked like she had some sort of weapon.

“Does it really matter when your judgment seems way too harsh?”

Clow glanced up for a moment as if he was thinking and said, “No.” He smirked again and made to turn around again, but jerked forward when Tiff stabbed him with whatever she had in her hand. His smug face was wiped into one of shock, and a surprised grunt came from him.

I moved out of the way as he fell and stared at the angel-spike sticking out of his back. Sure, she would have one, after all if she was playing with trapping magic there was always the chance that it could go wrong, but I was still surprised that she had it, “Well.” She

kept her eyes on me, ready to attack me if I made a move towards her.

We stared at each other before I realized she was still shaking slightly, “Are you alright?”

My voice was more scratchy than normal and I noticed that my hands were shaking too.

“Why did you do that?” She asked quietly, crouching next to the body.

I shrugged and placed my trembling hands in my pockets, “He was kind of a dick truthfully.” I walked backwards to the wall and leaned against it. I stared at the body as it started to disintegrate, “Besides, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Tiff relaxed and nodded, “Thanks for distracting him.” She pulled the spike out of his body before slipping the demon one from his hands, “How long would you say that it’s going to take?”

I looked at the figure before answering, “Maybe a few minutes.” I looked back to her and sighed, trying to will my hands to stop shaking, “So are your guy’s higher-ups as scary as that?”

She smiled and laughed, “Yeah, kinda.”

I nodded and watched Clow’s body start to shrink, “Hey, Tiff.”

She looked up from the arch-angel and tilted her head.

“I would say never to use an angel-trap again.” By this time the body was gone and I looked at her again, “Archs have this kind of radar for that type of stuff if it works.

”Tiff’s eyes widened a bit as her fear started coming back “So then will more come?” She started tensing up again and readied her weapon.

“No! It’s just the nearest one, but for future reference.” I could tell she was starting to freak out again, whoops. My fault. She started to calm down and nodded, “Besides, I wouldn’t let them kill you.”

Her eyebrows furrowed and she tilted her head again, I could see a small smile forming, “Why is that, angel-boy?”

I shook my head and laughed, “What are friends for if not to make sure you don’t die?” Tiff’s smile fully appeared, and she laughed, “That’s true.” I am pretty sure that this is the start of a beautiful friendship.

Jaide Stell is a certified loser in the country of Geek-dom. She likes to spend her time reading comics, playing video games and spends about 25% of her life online.

EXCERPT FROM WOLF LIKE ME

Cleavon Smith

That night when I got home, I tried, but couldn't sleep. I stared at the ceiling lit by the moonlight and street lights and the idle lights of gadgets plugged into the walls of our bedroom.

Some believe that the Milky Way is a celestial river on which the souls of loved ones navigate once they have laid to rest the earth-anchoring burdens of their pods of flesh and consciousness. And that night a patch of drywall, because of a swatch of light, became the Milky Way some six feet or so above my resting head. Neither the sensation nor the view was anything new. Since I was a kid, I'd stare at the ceiling looking for patterns and images in the uneven plaster or popcorn finish. I would pretend I were the astrologer of an ancient civilization recording the secrets of life on earth with maps of the stars in the sky. Daydreaming, my momma called it, but I knew it was meaning making. One could make meaning of their dreams with the charts I made of those patterns on my childhood bedroom ceiling.

But that night after seeing Haiying, after meeting her and giving her a ride home, after sitting next to her and hugging her goodbye, after those two kisses on each of her cheeks (damn those sweet kisses and her

persimmon cheeks), after riding home with the thoughts of our next meeting twisting my guts and mixing my two orders of fries and a chocolate shake like cement in my belly, I couldn't sleep. So I lay waiting for the webbing of some mythological arachnid to weave some dream-story behind the veil of my two closed eyelids, yet all I could do was stare at the ceiling so consumed in my memories of childish fascinations, I couldn't hear the usual late night lowriders passing by with the bass that beats their loneliness and discontent with the world around them.

Patience. I needed patience and sleep would come. Doesn't it always? Patience, and the time I spent waiting for sleep would reveal answers to questions I didn't have the guts to utter in the light of day. Patience, and I would be unconscious to those lost childhood dreams, those questions, and Shelly when she arrived home from her shift at the hospital. And I would pretend not to wake when she fell onto the bed and made herself comfortable, first pulling the sheets just so over her shoulders and tucking them into her neck, and then turning over to face the window facing the street. Like this sleep and silence would descend like a bedsheet thrown over a mattress slowly, yet decisively covering

the matter of our disintegrating home.

Maybe a year ago, or maybe even months ago, Shelly would kiss me regardless of my being asleep, but now if the bottom of her feet should so much as touch me, she'd shuffle closer to the edge of the bed leaving a gap between us that grew wider by the week.

But instead of finding patience by looking at the images on my ceiling, as random and temporary as they were, I found myself lost in the habit of Adam, restless, womanless and unproductive, naming instead of creating. I named each pattern in the number of ways I saw them. One for instance was a serviceman in the front leaning rest position ready to commence his regiment of push-ups. Once I blinked, I'd see the same marks as the sun along a range of mountains, its beams spectacularly spraying the sky and the earth with the essence of its magnitude. Looking longer, the image became the Egyptian god of the sun (I've forgotten the god's name. Ra? Or is it Sun Ra? Or is that the name of some musician? I can't be sure.) Then for a second I forgot even my own name. And, as if naming were a séance, the moment I unnamed myself, I conjured up Haiying unveiling my deepest desire, relieving the springs of my mattress of my heavy being, lifting me that much closer to those short curly lashes of hers; her lips, moist

after applying the balm; her cheeks, ripe with the sweetest nectar; her breasts, the young mountains of Lebanon, yogurt, milk and honey, the landmarks of what ultimately may be the native home of my soul.

Then it hit me. For the first time in months, I was inspired to paint. But my body was consumed by the rapture of the infatuation rushing through my blood as quickly and as powerfully as hemlock with full force towards my penis, the septic pipe of problems past and present. I couldn't allow it to last, neither my thoughts of Haiying nor the physiological reactions of my body to those thoughts. For as much as I wanted my lies to be true and my intentions with her, if not entirely pure at least not entirely impure, I knew that I had it in my mind to go as far as Haiying would let me...or better yet, as far as I could take it without getting myself into trouble. At least not into any trouble that would end up with me in any situation I didn't want to bear. Shit, no matter how I tried to spin it, the trouble I was getting myself into was more than I could ever want to experience, and it would take an extreme amount of luck and divine intervention to avoid the worst of consequences.

So what made it all so bad was I knew what I was doing. I knew the possible and deserving consequences, and none of

it seemed to matter, for I was on the horse, perhaps loaded with indecision, but on the horse nonetheless and headed in a definite direction. Even more, I was aware that all of it was the arbitrary result of circumstance, but I was lost and ultimately, shamefully ignorant as to whether I was making or unmaking the circumstance. I couldn't get off the horse or even pull the reins to stop it despite all the bullshit I told myself and those in the world within earshot of my madness.

I closed my eyes and held my dick, erect and not entirely hard. I felt it jerk in my closed palm and sighed into the semidarkness that was my bedroom I shared with Shelly. Just as I was beginning to lose all inhibition and think of Haiying while I stroked myself, I heard Shelly's car hum into the driveway crushing the loose gravel that covered the potholes. I looked at the clock and read the green digital display telling me that she was only an hour early. I must have been staring at the ceiling and thinking about Haiying for at least an hour. For a second, I thought of following through with the deed I had begun, but for the first and probably the only time that night I made the right decision. It would be another minute or two before Shelly had taken her things out of the car and come into the house. I shot up from bed and pulled on my pajama bottoms walking toward the

bathroom as I slipped each leg into the elastic opening of the pants. In the bathroom, I went through the routine of flossing and brushing again. My erection had retreated into the shadows of our home. My breathing was normal if not somewhat more calm.

"How's it going?" I called when I heard her keys hit the table by the door.

"Eh." That was our code for "Whatever" "same as it ever was" "so-so" "another day another dollar." In other words, "terribly."

She said, "You about to go to bed?"

I said, "No, not really, just bored. You wanna do something; wanna go out for a drink?" I hadn't asked her to go out for a drink since I stopped having enough money to get by without asking her for money to help make ends meet, but the question came out naturally, surprising even me.

She was silent. I couldn't hear her feet shuffle their way around the living room or in the kitchen or on the stairs.

She said, "You wanna go out for a drink?"

I said, "Whatever's clever. Just an idea. What you wanna do?"

She said, "If you wanna go out, you can go out."

Then I said, "But I thought maybe you wanted to go out."

She said, "I will if you want me to."

I said, "Only if you want to. It ain't no big deal." I didn't need to say that. That was too much. I was trying not to pressure her and ended up sounding like my offer to begin with was only an attempt to be nice to her and not an attempt to reach out to her, an insincere gesture relying on her not really being willing to say yes.

Underneath all of this was the fact that we hadn't gone out for drinks in over two months. We hadn't made love. We hadn't cuddled. When we, or I, at last felt guilty for the distance or uncomfortable with it, I would reach to kiss her, an awkward affair with me stepping on her foot or grabbing her breast when I was trying to squeeze her underneath her arms or pulling her off balance or myself even when all I was trying was to pull her closer to me.

For a while we could have hidden behind any number of excuses for the sex missing in our lives. We were on completely different schedules; she was often exhausted from work; I was occupied with my lack of inspiration; we stayed up too late watching some foreign film in subtitles. You would think we were making this shit up for a book on how to live together with your lover and not make love. But what couldn't be denied, what we couldn't pretend wasn't a sign of our

growing disgust for one another was how we no longer brushed our teeth in front of each other. Brushing our teeth in front of each other had once been the symbol of reaching the zenith of intimacy, and now that we didn't it resonated like the feedback from a bullhorn throughout the house ringing in our ears until we hid our faces underneath our pillows and turned our backs to one another—Shelly looking out the window, me staring into the darkness of the hallway—before falling asleep.

Shelly began walking towards the stairs. I had been talking to her from the bathroom door projecting my voice at angles to best travel down to the first floor of our townhouse apartment. I was at the top of the stairway before she had taken a step up to meet me. It was from there, me not exactly on my way down and her not exactly on her way up, where we met eyes. When she saw me she turned her palms up, squinted, and drew her lips into her cheeks while her neck stiffened and she shook her head.

"You're not even dressed to go out."

I said, "I can change." I pointed at her. "You're not going to go out with your smock and all, are you?"

She looked at herself as though she hadn't been aware of what she was wearing.

"It doesn't matter. You're getting ready for bed."

“Only because you weren’t supposed to be home for another hour. I was going to read for a while anyway.” I added the lie on to the end for no good reason.

Some large van or something drove by on the street outside our house rocking the shadow of the gum tree against our blinds and rattling the windows, shaking, it seemed, our entire neighborhood. I looked towards the door but the lights were off, the blinds were shut; there was nothing to see. It was hard to turn my eyes back to Shelly and see her standing there at the foot of the stairs leaning her shoulder and head against the wall, her arms crossed and her nose pointing towards her feet.

It was ridiculous how I was dragging this on, not wanting to be guilty of ruining the idea of a night out like I had been of ruining our relationship.

I can’t say for sure that I knew our relationship was beyond repair. I should have known. Because, even though I wouldn’t say it, I knew I wasn’t willing to do anything to keep it together. Shit, I was already operating outside it. And that’s it exactly. I wasn’t willing anything; I wasn’t doing anything; I was outside of everything.

I just stood in the world at the most important times like I stood at the top of the stairway looking in Shelly’s direction but

unable to look directly at her. I could tell by the way her shoulders kept slowly rising to her ears that inside she was boiling, and I waited calmly for her outburst. I could also tell by the way her lips trembled ever so slightly that inside she was crying. And calmly I continued to wait.

After a while, a second or two, or maybe a couple of minutes, I sat on the top stair and put my right elbow on my thigh and rested my forehead in the palm of my hand. I questioned whether I could cry if Shelly cried, or if I could cry at all. I thought about it for a bit, and before I knew it, I had fallen asleep.

Cleavon Smith lives in Oakland and teaches at Berkeley City College.

He is a member of the PlayGround playwright pool and has had two short plays performed for Monday Night PlayGround. In 2012 he received an Emerging Playwright Award for his short play “You Eat What You Kill.”

THE TRAVELER

Alexa Berryhill

I reached out, the cool water running across my skin. I've hardly ever had been in it, always traveling through it or stopping quickly but never getting to enjoy it. It smelled gloriously like what my life was missing - whatever that was - and something told me if I could just be in it for five minutes, I would never be the same.

Of course, that's ridiculous for the rain. It's just water falling from the sky. It makes the clouds dreary and the ground soggy and the mosquitoes take flight. At the same time, the rain falls and makes plants grow and fills the air with the most lovely scent - I think it's probably the only scent that smells completely glorious anywhere you go in the world, but I have known very little outside the walls of this trailer. "Ariadne! Bring your hand back inside now," my mother, Helen, snapped. She was a simple woman, her looks long gone by raising seven kids within fifty-two feet of each other.

I pulled my hand back in, watching the water run down my wrist. "Sorry, ma'am."

"It's okay," she said. "Go wake your brothers."

I stood and walked to the back of the trailer and climbed the three rung ladder to the double bed above the storage space. Mikah, the older of the three in the bed, was

closest to me, and I shook his arm.

"Go away," he moaned.

"Ariadne!" Brady, the second youngest cheered. He jumped up and crawled over Mikah. "What are we doing today?"

"Stopping in Tucson," I answered. "The wedding's in two days."

"Yes!"

He jumped around the linoleum and cheered. I remember feeling that excited once, when I was his age. Nine seemed like a time when things were great and being a nomad was fun. I never had to go to school or be picked last in gym class. I never had to worry about sitting in the bathroom during lunch or finding new school clothes. I learned on my own and loved to read. Mother liked to say I could cook for an army, and I made most of my dresses.

"Madden will be there, won't she?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "She'll have Braden with her."

"And Baby Braden?"

"Yeah," I said, "that's what I meant."

"Oh," he said. "I like Baby Braden."

Madden, my oldest sister was twenty and left us three years ago when she married Braden. He is twenty-two. My sister was

almost considered old when she married, and it would reflect poorly on the family if I were as old as she by the time I wed. Of course, no one but my mother was worried about me yet.

“He’s a cute baby,” Sheridan, the middle sister and a year older than me, said. She was next in line to marry, and worse, she was engaged. She and her fiancé would be married in two months, having been engaged a total of three. She was tall and thin, with wide blue eyes and curling brown hair.

I had gotten all of my dad’s traits – pale, freckled and ginger haired. At least my eyes were green. Brady looked just like me, and I think he was always my favorite because of this. Madden, Sheridan, Mikah, Craig, and Duncan all looked alike, like my mother in her prime. Sometimes this gave me hope I would be prettier than my sisters when we were older.

“I can’t wait to have one of my own,” Sheridan continued, taking Duncan in her arms. He was only five and was continually treated like the baby he was. Everyone always cradled him, sneaked him extra servings of food, or gave him little trinkets he soon lost or my mother would throw away as they appeared.

“Piss off,” said Mikah, still underneath the covers.

“Mikah! Language!” my mother chided. “You’re not supposed to use that kind

of language in front of us women.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mikah said. He sat up and ruffled his hair. “Get me breakfast.”

The rain had stopped and taken my short-lived freedom with it. I now stood in a short, shiny green dress that was too low cut for my taste, but Sheridan and my mother liked it and said it was sure to catch an eye. The wedding was taking place early afternoon, and I sat with my parents and our friend family, the Duggans. Ashlyn was my age, and she was busty, blonde and vivacious. If she had a choice, she would stay single as long as she could just to see how many boys she could tempt. She could not stay single though, or they would all consider her perverse or ill. And she was dressed in a pink bubble dress with chunks missing from its sides to show her thin waist and hips.

“Is it starting?” she asked.

“Any minute now,” I said. I was staring at the ceiling of the church, the paintings of the disciples and Jesus staring back at me. I looked back at the floor.

The familiar tune started and we all turned. Three girls slithered in slim green dresses, their eyes narrowed and flowers painted black. We all stood as the bride entered; her poofy white dress barely fit down the aisle. The top was a white corset and spilled into mounds of white feathers. I

thought the whole thing was atrocious, but Ashlyn clapped, gasped and smiled.

“That’s lovely,” she whispered, clasping a hand over her mouth.

I watched the young bride struggle down the aisle, gripping her father’s arm for support. The groom, no more than seventeen years old, smiled at her and took her hand. She cried the entire time, and I wasn’t sure they were tears of joy. But he kissed her and then she cheered, I knew I had been mistaken and she was enjoying every minute of it.

“Now’s the best part,” Ashlyn said.
“The reception!”

Our families loaded up into our trailers, and Ashlyn, Braden, Madden and the baby came with us. The thirty-minute drive to the club was one of the best rides from a wedding to a reception I’ve ever had – we attend a wedding at least twice a month. Baby Braden was a perfect peach and charmed everyone with his rosy cheeks. He chirped and cooed, and for the first time ever, Ashlyn wanted one.

“I think I would make a good mother,” she said, leaning over the sink in the bathroom. “I could take care of it and sing to it.”

“I’m sure you could,” I said, checking my eyeliner. “Did you see any fit boys out there?”

As much as I loved Baby Braden, I was more than ready to be off the subject and knew Ashlyn could talk about boys for a very long time. I had once read *Animal Farm* in its entirety while she talked about Jon from Washington. He seemed nice.

“Well,” she said, “I think there was one – the tall brunette with the earring.”

“Earring?”

“Yeah,” she said, “and I think he has a tattoo.”

Tattoos and earrings on such young men were an odd sight in our society. Normally, a man could not get a tattoo until he had fathered a child as a sign of his success. Earrings definitely were not allowed on men, but the women all had pierced ears. We didn’t have a choice.

“You sure know how to pick them,” I said.

“That dress makes you look like you could actually be my friend,” Ashlyn sneered, twirling a strand of hair in her fingers. “Let’s go get caught.”

She pulled me out of the bathroom and onto the tiny dance floor. I twisted and twirled with her as best I knew how, some laughable pop song filling the air and the mood. Before long, Ashlyn was following Tattoo and Earring out the door, his hand on her waist.

"Looks like your Ashlyn got caught," said Madden, walking up behind me.

"Yep," I said. "She has a way of doing that. And she always carries along like she doesn't like it."

"That's what we all do," Madden says. "That's how they like it. Why aren't you dancing?"

"Cake," I said, reaching for a small styrofoam plate. "You do remember I like cake?"

"Of course," she said. "I've only lived with you for fifteen years since you were born."

She seemed happy, Baby Braden resting on her hip and her dress long and covering. Her husband was a nice man and allowed her two years to go to college. I hoped mine would do the same.

Two more songs played as I stood, waiting in the wings. Ashlyn should have been back by now. I trampled across the floor and out the door, my feet hurting from being cramped into the stilettos all day long. I didn't see anything as I finished eating a cobra-shaped cookie.

She screamed. I ran.

Tattoo and Earring had Ashlyn pushed up against the wall, his arm across her throat. It is an honor and desire of every girl in our society to be caught, but this was not a normal catching. Her dress was ripped into two pieces

now, a top and bottom. Her eyes watered as she gasped.

I looked for something, anything. I slipped the shoes off my aching feet and tossed the right one at his head. It hit his back, and he growled. He spun around so quickly he knocked Ashlyn across the face again. She cried out as I braced myself, raising my other shoe. His hand reached out for my face, but I bit and held on as hard as I could, his hand burning with the alcohol of hand sanitizer.

Ashlyn screamed again as he pushed me backwards, my dress dragging on the gravel. I managed to hit him in the mouth as he punched my right eye. I kicked and scratched as much as possible. I didn't have to worry much longer as he was lifted off me, spitting blood across my face.

"Bitch."

"What's going on?!" my mother shouted, running to me.

"A catching gone wrong," one of the older men said. Two other men pulled Tattoo and Earring away.

"Nothing wrong here. Go back inside," another man said.

Ashlyn wailed now as her mother enveloped her and walked her towards the car.

"I think we should go now," my mother said, pulling me to my feet. "We'll need to take care of that eye."

I nodded as my father helped me to my feet. He supported my weight, even though I was sure I could walk. I didn't think we had interacted this much as a family my whole life, even though we lived in a small space together.

I ran my fingers over the yellowing spines of books, breathing in their scent, almost as good as rain. I picked up the shabbiest copy of *Pride & Prejudice* and twirled it in my fingers. I read it every chance I got and had four different editions in my small collection.

"That's a good one," a woman said.

My eyes met hers. She was graying at her temples, but her brown hair had a certain homey appeal. She wore a jacket, sweater and khaki pants – some kind of professional here on her break.

"What's a girl your age doing here now?" she asked. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"Homeschooled," I answered, turning back to the books.

"And your eye?"

"A small skirmish," I said.

She looked out the window beyond the bookshelf and probably saw our unmistakable trailer. She sighed.

"You're a Traveler?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"You engaged?"

I shook my head. She watched me as

I pulled out book after book, trying to keep myself busy.

"You sure you're all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Thank you."

"Well," she said, opening her purse and pulling out a business card. "Patricia Henry, Child Protective Services. If ever you're in the area again and need to talk."

She slipped the small card into my palm. I nodded and gave a slight polite smile.

"Take care," she said.

I flipped the card over in my hand, reading the number until I had it memorized. I tossed the card into the trash bin as I strolled out of the door, my newest copy of *Pride & Prejudice* tucked beneath my arm.

The sky was gray again as I stared out at the trailer, and just as suddenly as it had left three days ago, the rain fell again. The flowers in the pot next to me seemed to reach for its goodness, their thirst quenched. As I stood, I opened my palms and my mouth, closing my eyes.

Alexa Berryhill is a copy editor for The Lubbock-Avalanche Journal in Lubbock, Texas. She graduated from Texas Tech University in 2011 with a Bachelor's degree in Electronic Media & Communications. She is currently working on a young adult novel and finds inspiration in music, her friends and her family.

FOOTBALL IN SUDAN

David Dashoff

“What the hell?” The man whooped, rank with sweat, “The Chargers never won a Superbowl.” “A what?”

“Those shirts they’re wearing – they’re, yeah, what the hell? I think they’re wearing Superbowl shirts. American Superbowl shirts.”

He waved for the crowd of children to come closer.

“Well, they obviously did win.”

The heat swelled the man’s face like a tomato. “Jesus, Carline, I’d know if they won – don’t you think I’d know? I’d fucking know if the Chargers won a Superbowl.” His eye narrowed intensely on the oldest girl. “See? It says... Superbowl –” He squinted, “I can’t make out the year.”

The children stared as the tomato man, with great effort, turned himself toward the jeep. “How’d did they end up in Sudan?”

The woman eyed the tiniest one. “Maybe they like football.”

“Football? In Sudan?” He scoffed, “There’s no fucking grass here.”

Dust quivered in the air and stuck to the woman’s lips. She bent down.

“Ah, look at you.” She said to the little one, “So cute.” She slipped an apple out of her purse.

“Want an apple?” She said, biting

above the skin, “An apple?”

Nobody moved.

She tossed it at the little girl, who narrowly avoided it.

“Oh!” She blushed, “No, no.” She pointed to the apple and motioned with her lips, showing the girls it was food. The oldest girl ran up, cupped it in her palms, and carried it away.

“There you go.” The man returned with binoculars. “Was that my apple?” He jeered.

“Oh shush.” She flapped. She got off the ground and dusted herself off. “Have they even seen apples before? Can they eat them?”

“What do you mean ‘can they eat them’?”

“Well, I know they can’t eat certain things. Like pork.”

“What do you mean ‘they can’t eat pork?’”

“Muslims can’t eat pork because of their religion, smarty pants.”

“Well that doesn’t mean they can’t eat it.” He sniffed, “They could eat it if they wanted to. They just don’t want to.” He wiped the sweat from his blistering white brows and fixed his Superviso’s upon one of the girls, “There’s a difference. What if they were starving and all they had were, I don’t know,

hot dogs. Would they just starve to death? ”

“Ted!” She giggled, “Stop it! That’s what they want to believe in. And they don’t have hot dogs in Sudan, silly man.”

“Well it’s dumb.” He looked the children up and down. “No wonder they’re so skinny.”

“Ted! That’s not nice.”

He twisted a dial on his binoculars.

“It says... let’s see. It says 1995.” He groaned.

“What’s that?”

“The shirt says they won in 1995. That’s bullshit.”

She chuckled, “Well, they obviously must have won.”

“Jesus Christ, Carline, I told you – If the Chargers won a Superbowl, I’d fucking know about it, OK?”

“OK!” She stomped.

The man wiped his brow. “What do ya’ – what do ya’ think I’d have to give for one of those?”

He snapped open his fanny pack.

“One of - those?” She echoed.

He took out his wallet, “They can use our money, right? They can use American money?” He took out a twenty.

The girls stared.

“Ted. What are you doing?”

He raised the bill up high and waved it

around. “Eh?”

Nobody moved.

“Shirt?” He rubbed his thumbs together and paused. “Shirt?”

A big, friendly smile cracked open his face, “Mon-ey?”

“Ted! Stop it.”

“Carline! Would you please?”

He motioned for one of them to take her shirt off. “Shirt for mon-ey?”

“Ted...”

“Would you shut up, Carline?! Those shirts must be worth something.”

“I don’t care! If they were worth five hundred dollars, I wouldn’t care. I said stop it!”

He looked around hopelessly.

“Fuck it, then!” He plunged the twenty deep in his pocket “You know what? Fuck it.”

David Dashoff Do yourself a favor and listen to some Bob Dylan.





NOTES

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