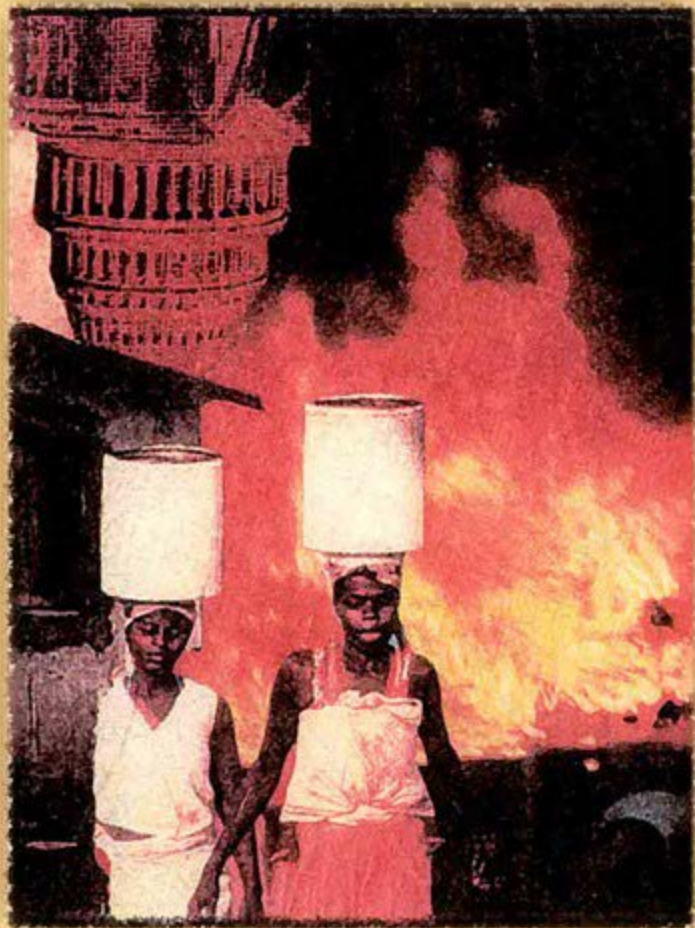




Orpheus

A Literary Journal



"We Wear Our Flesh Like Flames, 1999" by Theodore A. Harris

Orpheus

A Literary Journal
Volume XXIX

Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Advisor
Diana Greenlee, Reader

Orpheus is an annual literary journal produced by California State University, Bakersfield. All submissions must be typed, double-spaced, on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. There are no restrictions on subject matter, length, or theme; however, poems over one hundred lines are rarely published. Any use of profanity must be crucial to the understanding of the work.

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Orpheus

California State University, Bakersfield

P o e m s

Nicole C. Lobello

School Daze

My eyes begin to sting,
 From tears not falling,
From effort now expended
 To hide my embarrassment.

From tears not falling,
 My mother eyes flit around,
To hide my embarrassment,
 I speak of you in this room.

My mother eyes flit around,
 Remembering holding you,
I speak of you in this room,
 Discovering new found worlds.

Remembering holding you,
 I let go of your small hand,
Discovering new found worlds,
 We both begin this new day.

she breathes

breathe

he told me to relax as they
ripped my body open
you writhed defiantly

bloody wet cold

your first taste of earth's air
filled your lungs
exchanging my life water

for shrill screams

you breathe

as they marry the seams of
my body together
i watch you leave

scared tired confused

cared for by loving strangers
but not me
longing to fill the emptiness

inside my womb

you breathe so

they allow you to finally
return to my side
i look deeply into you

miracle stranger mine

they say you are hungry
for my breast

awkwardly fumbling not knowing

what to do

Nicole C. Lobello

you breathe so softly
 lying amidst the warm curves
 of my chest
 you sleep soundly
protected loved returned
 no longer empty inside
 i am filled
 holding you and taking in
your sweet breath

Girl to Woman

A girl in the walk of a woman
Her soul cries without rest
Loneliness is stronger than sadness
Her eyes express her destruction
Her smile fades over her tears
She suffers when no one sees her
She cries when she's alone
A girl in the walk of a woman
There's no turning back always forward

Gabriel Ramirez

Shattered

He won't leave Me alone
And You alone have left Me

With every tick I lose more of Myself
With every tock I fall further into the darkness

He is taking over who I am
Growing stronger with every fall

You are fading away
Becoming no more than a memory, a dream

I no longer know who I am
What will become of Me?

He has become a huge part of my life
Controlling my desires

While You serve as my conscience
You appear to be on vacation

I want to find Myself
My quest could damage Me

He threatens to destroy Me
His sin will consume Me

You remind Me that I am human
You make Me weak

Gabriel Ramirez

I want love
He wants lust
You want compassion

I ...
He ...
You ...
We ... Me ...

Gabriel Ramirez

All in Five Minutes

Every five minutes
I wonder what will become of this life
I am warmed by people's potential for goodness
I hunger to know everything

Every five minutes
I think about last night's reality show
I look at my hand and wonder how it works
I blink to see if anything around me will change

Every five minutes
I see someone new
I wonder if I am attractive
I take a breath of air just for fun

Every five minutes
Five minutes pass
I become someone else
And still I wonder what will become of this life

Amar y Ser Amado

En el amor no se manda
Lo saben bien
Mi corazón no decide a quien amar
Pero me están pidiendo que tire mis sentimientos como una basura

Lo único que deseo es amar y ser amado
Es lo que quiero
No puedo ignorar lo que soy y lo que siento
Me dicen que mis sentimientos no tienen valor

Que solo debo concentrar en hacer feliz a otros
¿Y Yo? ¿No merezco ser feliz? Ser amado?
Vivir en el paraíso que es el amor?
Me quieren condenar a un infierno, sin felicidad
Atrapado, sin poder ser mi persona

No, no puedo vivir como el león en el circo
Tengo que ser libre
Tengo que ser yo

La vida nos a jugado una mala baraja
pero un juego se puede ganar
El problema es el gran precio que le han puesto a mi felicidad

¿Que será? No sé? Solo sé que?
Que Soy HUMANO
Yo AMO, yo SIENTO, yo SOY

Luke Austin Donatello

Idealism

The innocence of my youth
Is impaled on wooden posts
Resembling a picket fence.
Disappointment,
Which was once a facet of self-betrayal,
Is to me, now, a missed
Appointment with the Dentist,
Or some other such sterile
Practitioner,
Not getting what I want for Christmas,
Or, perhaps, all of this.

Media delusions on the morning news
Are a luxury—burying sorrow
In a quicksand of smiles.
And I hunger for flesh and bone
That my teeth may feast
On something real.

My devouring days
Are loud with familiar sounds
—All of them in Dolby Surround
Until the swooning parade
Lulls me in a fitful sleep
—A sweat band of heat and horror.
But I'm adrift and the nightmares
Are murmurs
And only a vague desire for dreams
Still burrows in my skin.

Stopping on a Street

Sitting on the sidewalk
Warming—nearing midday
I AMcrouchedbetweenPARKED CARS
Like trench warfare only
The walls are not made of mud
But fiberglass and plastic
Like Disney.

Across from me Are
Rows of Trees

Juniper
 eveRgReen
Long stooping boughs
Decrepitly knuckle-dragging the ground
Like Heroic Cro-Magnons

rows of cars parked beneath
Glistening in noonlight
Their grills facing me
Like teeth shining
Rimmed in designer braces
To straighten what was crooked

And a crow squawks somewhere
above

I look to the trees but it's higher

And I give a shrill whistle
In the hope of recognition

There is a home hiding somewhere
Amidst the chrome

Dog's Body

For: Atticus, Jonnie & Mabel

Joy comes in the shape of a dog's body.

It's in the wag of a tail
and the full-body wiggle.

It's in the doggie-dance when their
person returns from wherever they've been.

They always give a standing ovation.

Joy comes in the exhilaration of running
or fetching a ball, over and over.

Dogs ooze joy from the tip of the nose to
the offering of a belly.

Dogs are joy in a pure form.

Smart Cookie

She was one smart cookie
who could smell a rat in
the blink of an eye.
She now has both feet on
the ground, after being
on the brink of disaster,
after being left in the
lurch, without a leg
to stand on. After suffering
a broken heart, believe it
or not.

But that's beside the point.
Now she lives far from the
maddening crowd, since hell
hath no fury like a woman
scorned and there would be
hell to pay if someone played
fast and loose with her. He
would end up going off with
his tail between his legs and
that's the long and the short
of it.

Angelica Pantoja

Tear Drop

A thought,
An act,
An image,
A slap.
Now I see it coming down my eye.
The salty, crystal clear, melted diamond
that cuts my flesh
and in my soul penetrates.
The pain that I gain
I keep it all inside
until I burst with my cry.
Now I've formed a river
that leads to your ocean
where I drown.

Behind Waking Eyes

Idealism fades.
Perfection—forever lost in dreams.
Bombarding reality renders life . . . repossessed.
False perceptions perpetuate ignorant beliefs.
Innocence Corrupted.
Abandoned hope leads faith . . . astray.
Wilted confidence empowers . . . doubt.
Governed by fear . . . Manipulated by hate . . . The Heart Retires

Solace is love's only salvation.
Isolation befriends the soul.
Patient solitude silences bleeding sorrows.
The Heart faintly beats to life's rhythm.
Vague acceptance questions obscured truths.
Abrupt confrontation rebelliously collapses images of an atheist
Eden.
Quiet desperation is defeated by love's independent will . . . Behind
Waking Eyes.

Relax . . . Breathe . . . Calm . . . Serenity . . .

No longer deceived by the masquerade—unyielding love . . .
Escapes adversity's cold clutches.
Discovered strength perseveres . . . Passion its fuel.
Exhausted . . . victimizing loneliness surrenders The Heart to
compelling desire.
Conscious prevails . . . Behind Waking Eyes.

Mariam Al-Kalby

weakness

the hovering weakness that hung in the air
drew me close,
inhaling me,
embracing my soul

i struggled to pull it away from me, this weakness
that wants to envelope,
and smother me away from strength

weakness is bouldering over me
while the strength dissipates
like a faded moonlight,
the whispering irony
echoing in the thick air

weakness is crushing me,
strangling me,
its paralyzing eyes frothing with hate,
with overwhelming desire,
to never let me sleep in a peaceful song
to have strength warming the air,
humming its lullaby to me

weakness empowers me now
and strength is a was
and was it will never be again

Pieces of Me

It's easy to shift pain into anger, it can help you survive
For so long we've layered our hurt on top of old wounds
Old scars that still sting, while new ones begin to bleed
But pain is no savior, it's an unwelcome friend of mine

Fear fuels fury, and rage clouds our eyes
Words that should never be spoken fly like fireflies
They cut to the core and damage over and over again
I just lay down and cry

What happened to the days when I could get lost in your eyes
The days seemed endless, and the nights brought pleasurable
surprise
I found something special in you and haven't been the same since
Now each day that passes by we barely survive

Am I what you want, am I what you need
Or does something else look like it might be better for you?
Do you know if they are the way they seem
Or are they just pieces of me that you have never seen?

Jason Gutierrez

Stifled

You stand tall and you stand proud
To say you are an American, there's nothing that compares
So why would you sign your name to denying others
What kind of an American could live with something like that

You have the luxury of holding hands and kissing unashamedly
When you see her kiss her you turn your head out of disgust
When you see him walk in the park holding his man's hand
You would be the first to throw a stone in the glass house of America

No one told you that you could not marry the one you love
No one denied you from raising a beautiful child
So why not stand up for the American dream
So why not wake up America and journey towards a utopia

Where she has the right to provide for the woman she loves
Where he has the right to become whoever he so chooses
Without having to look over their shoulders
For fear of the hate that may come their way unexpectedly

What does it feel like to be afraid to speak your mind
What does it feel like to live in the shadows of hate
What does it feel like to be held down and made to feel wrong
What does it feel like to live in uncertainty—you'll never know

You quote your scriptures and stand upon your wooden soapboxes
You rant and rave of the holy word and say god punishes sinners
and saves saints
You talk about god as if he were your personal best friend
If you were made in his image then I would cringe at his face
Because thanks to you some are already living in hell

Jason Gutierrez

How do you manage to sleep soundly at night
Knowing you are slitting the wrists of a dream
Leaving a shell of what you call the land of the free
Because you have chosen to bind and gag diversity

Robert Holloway

To My Daughter

Today, President's Day, was a holiday for my sweet wife. We had breakfast, went shopping, and then to a movie. Our weather is mild . . . it was 60 today, and the days are long enough for plants to sense the longer sunshine. Some trees are in bloom, lots of early flowers are up, and weeds are sprouting.

Chris is still going to San Francisco on many weekends to earn certification in an advanced form of yoga. She is also planning on attending conferences to present papers . . . part of being a professor. Her next trip will be to Atlanta and she will visit an old high school friend. It amazes me, since I have no idea where any of my classmates are, and the school is no longer there. No loss, but it does indicate differences. I don't especially want to see any of my high school crowd. I still have friends in Flagstaff, but I don't keep in touch much. There are enough relatives to take care of any outreach I feel like doing.

I'm still playing in the yard. We have a good start on greens, and in fact, cooked a pot yesterday.

Strawberries have come in on the coast and have shown up in our market. There has been a long strike of supermarket clerks so I have not been in the big stores. (Dad was a union man and I was raised to never cross a picket line . . . and I think the clerks have real issues about health insurance.)

I'm still working with a search committee at the Unitarian Fellowship. We are preparing to hire a minister . . . but it is a slow process and UU ministers are a strange lot. Interesting work, but I'd not want to be on another search committee. I am trying to help Chris prepare her papers for promotion and tenure. It is sort of fun for me, but she is not sure she really wants to do it . . .

Robert Holloway

perhaps just retire. Either way, but I think she has a lot to contribute to the teachers in her classes. I'm working with some other new faculty as well, pro bono and no money, which means I can do what I want.

I had a nice talk with Evelyn, the widow of my Uncle Balford who was Mom Sue's oldest brother. She says she is doing some writing and must be feeling better since she is also doing some cooking. I'm going to send the hints I got from the Mormon ladies. If she does short recalls it would be more productive than a full history. This week my short class in writing starts. I'm looking forward to it.

Love

Christopher Mulrooney

a giggle of deconstructionists

It's a basket case.

—from an economic report

'tis springtide everlasting in the Kush
like a civic banner unfurl'd
Wal-Mart & Tyson & Clinton & Bush
take over the goddam world

discussions

the world economic policy of a great nation is
properly dictated by the young men
who accompany the Exchequerry on junkets

the real gizmos wack it out and we
true it up we valiant we
holding hands around the table
and bowing our heads

Christopher Mulrooney

deconstruction of an abhorrent vacuum

The Death of Superman
is what the comic book says

the word Postmodern means
after everything else is over

the TV exec is a wily coyote

he brings in noisemakers to crowd you round
until you turn on the TV
short of killing yourself
with a dose of salts

what's it for?
asks the little mite
in a grand movie palace

Dear Fat,

You have always been there for me,
Around when I did not want you,
Began teasing me in puberty,
Tormenting me in high school years,
Ruining chances to have dates,
Attracting attention to you,
As well as to me.
Always together.

As a child, you were cute, a baby
Then lingered, being comfortable
On my frame, finding more or less
Of you every week, could not stop
Your growing infatuation
With my body and my esteem;
You won't go away,
Sometimes together.

I've tried so many times to rid
You of my self, but you don't see
That I don't want you around me.
I've tried to walk, jump, pedal, run,
Making you go away for a
Month, maybe a week or a few,
Making me happy.
Not always together.

I haven't been able to eat
Because of you, my bittersweet.
You have taken away so much
From my control and for too long.

Amanda Adams

My mind is made up, you are gone
Forever and ever no more.
Goodbye my dear friend.
Never together.

But wait! I don't know what to do
Without my constant companion!
Your absence makes me so hungry
And lonely for you to come back
So we can share the good times lost
And become ourselves once again.
Always there for me.
Always together.

Chasing Fall Colored Leaves

*Lying Beneath the Inner Round World
Of a tree*

Lying beneath the inner round world
Of a tree—
Moving through the limbs.
Toward heaven—
You meet the sap—
The plum-colored blood
Reflected on the outside skin
Of suntouched leaves,
But inside all is pale yellows
For these trees are humble

Jason Grist

Chasing Fall Colored Leaves

A Summer's Bee

Wings blur in futility—
A summer's bee
Meeting with winter's wall in autumn
And death is as constant as living—
Crawling to rest
In the shadow of a tree—
Of fall itself—
And company is found in
Paired and unpaired leaves
Dying against that same wall.

Chasing Fall Colored Leaves

It's Late April

Hills transitioning
With you
A lighter green and brown—
Winds whisper to grasses
That whisper to you
The feel of cold winds
And in the sway
Of taller grasses is conversation
You speak in return
Not wanting to part,
It's late April.

Brooke King

The Art Colony

I strangled a language
Poet in my socks this morning
Before he could murder any more
Lilies with his babble.

The Hungarian neo-futurist
In the adjoining cell
Despises flesh so much
He gave up plastic surgery for art.
Here in the Mojave he
Regularly mangles the faces
Of Hopi princesses and never
Once is sued for malpractice.
The Botswana blossom tea we share
Every afternoon gives me
Blinding headaches.

A seven story bass guitar
Stands in the courtyard.
Every evening Nick the performance
Artist performs "Cactus Impersonating God"
On its huge strings.
He calls it Big Music and has
Applied for a grant.

You're not in any of my poems.

a night with bukowski

he reads my
poems and says
i suppose if
i fuck you
you'll write a
poem about it
and everyone
will know.
i slide my hand
up his thigh
slither my way to his
ear and whisper
no one reads my poetry.

Brooke King

Soliloquy

This is not myself who speaks;
but a cardboard Venus with
Yellow hair and stained glass eyes.
I am not the talented cleric
who spins tales for wistful children
To arabesque upon.
Thinking, instead, upon waves of poppies;
and the insanity of knowledge,
Which violets, in their flurry, emit.
I am not a muse to be catered to.
Some tiresome wench with feckless ways.
I am no wayward oracle.
But, rather, a clown with paintbox features
content with the flagrancy of Laughter
and the sudden comedy of Peace.

Sister

It may come quickly
As frost before midnight
Lengthening strides toward
The end of the journey,
Slipping away from us, I summon you back, sister,
The only like to which Mother gave your name, your voice,
Your inner coil,
Frost forms crystalline molecules,
Midnight footsteps break into sounds
Clattering as I run toward the hospital
To call you back at midnight,
This is the middle of your life,
And you are enshrouded in opaque funnels
With machines pumping life in and out,
I nearly buckle at your hospital door
When I see you,
You are the youngest one,
The family baby,
Last of Mother's children,
Systems are shutting down your life,
One by one, you are hurtling
Toward the other side—

When you could speak,
You told me you were in a meadow,
Going out to rest,
You asked me to get a doctor,
You thought you were born on Mother's birthday
You will not leave, you can't
I need you back,
I ask God, I ask the nurses coming into your room

Nancy Edwards

To infuse drugs into your body to save you,
Give her back to me,
She belongs to me,
I tell you over and over,
I tell you when your eyes are open,
Your face furious at being ill,
And even though we are infinitesimal,
We are minutiae, microns of protoplasm
In the universe,
You are the youngest and you are needed,
Something must stop the soprano,
The final aria must not be sung,
Someone must stop the impulse of the last note,
Deflate the vocal chords swollen with the last sounds of life,
And, miraculously, I am heard,
And when you do come back,
You are delivered slowly
As if every new note must be carefully
Created and cherished.

Time, You Thief

Time, you thief, when did you steal my youth?
Was I so busy living that I took no note of you?
My days were filled with endless tasks
And joys and sorrows too.
And never did I think that this would someday end.
But, Time, you thief
You've proven not to be a friend.
Did you creep in on silent feet
When someone left the door ajar?
Or were you always waiting there, never very far?
Was this theft done day by day, a little at a time?
It must have been, for I never missed a moment that was mine.
Then one day I looked and saw that all my youth had flown.
Time's thief had sneaked in quietly and took my moments for his
own.
Now some days I look back to a time of long ago
And wonder at the speed of each precious passing year.
Then all the memories I have made become especially dear.
Oh, that I had known back then the things that I've since learned,
I'd close the door against the Thief and make sure the key was
turned.

Sari Gilfenbain

Open Doors

I skip to the door with its impenetrable lock.
What's this I see, there is nothing to block
Do I dare enter in, what's it like on that side?
Do demons await? Things I can't abide?

It's a young boy's heart, shredded and torn,
Seeking the answers to why he was born.
A small flicker of hope, bouyed by dreams of old.
Never deserted, but always, untold.

The daily struggle for answers not found.
Weighted worries burden and silently surround.
He's becoming an outsider, an observer of life,
Keeping safe distance, avoiding the strife.

How can that be, it cannot be done.
You must play the game to create any fun.
Open the windows, the doors bearing locks
Fear not my dear one, listen for the knocks;

The tapping of friendship and love hovers near.
Offering solice, support, no nourishment for fear.
Love is the answer—It's love you must see.
Then rainbows of light will dance round you and me.

Freedom

My heart is pounding.
Bound to soar.
My body screaming,
Wanting more.

Though physical pleasures
Numb the need;
It's spiritual connection
For which I plead.

Oh, the joy,
That satisfied feeling
Has my head and heart,
My whole essence, reeling.

My body and soul
Floating rhythmically in time.
The tender sharing.
Oh God, how Divine!

Camille Gavin

Retro Fourth

First one lad, then another shinnies up the greased pole
planted in the courthouse lawn, only to slither down,
whooping with glee.

A pause to gulp cheek-sucking lemonade proffered by a
red-ribboned lass, then off to launch a spirited attack on a
much-hammered tree stump.

Now in pairs, their ankles hobbled by gunny sacks, they stumble
off
in a three-legged race, hell-bent for beating a path, ragged but true,
to the finish line. . .

Flags flutter, firecrackers pop-pop-pop, in a splendid
re-creation of a glorious tie that once was and—God willing—
will visit us again.

3 Haikus

Shelter

Gentle spring showers
turn weeping willows into
silken parasols.

Urban Critter

Red squirrel, tail unfurled,
streaks across the grassy mall,
cheeks plumped with booty.

Interrupted

Fragile song-birds pick,
peck, pick; raucous blue jay soars,
swoops, and splits their perch.

Terry Redman

Othello, A Dog Who Died Too Young

All you ever asked was love.

 You did your part of the bargain:

 You were warm, and soft,

 You loved me unconditionally,

 You didn't bark much.

 You learned so fast to be a gentleman.

 You endured the car, and shots.

Had to go to California: work you see.

 Had to drive a thousand miles.

 You'd never approve the trip.

 Then, the cost of finding you a place

I cried and sought a better way.

I cry now, miss your eyes.

I gave you to the vet—to kill!

 I went home, had a drink.

Of all my sins, I cannot repair the crime I did to you.

killer kern

In the arid hills,
this river kills.

Blue skies, and cool air,
call to the family, and sportsman,
and swimmer,
and diver.

In timeless seconds
the strong, bold swimmer is taken,
—a broken day of play.

Blue on black,
green, and yellow, and red,
and white.
Diamonds dance on water,
reborn when dashed by rafts, tubes, swimmers, and
rocks.

Black
diamonds sleep on sand, and silt,
nursing fish, and death.

She calls to artists, fishermen, nudists,
dogs, divers, drivers,
canoeists, techies, liars,
priests, hookers, truckers,
bikers, drinkers, and poets.

Perfumed air hints of the Colorado, the Snake, and the Missouri—
re-generation, re-creation,
re-fresca, re-life.

Swimming, tubing, and the other water dances
diminish the sterile, ominous signs:

Terry Redman

"216 Drowned."

Her caress is fun, and invigorating.
White diamonds reflect dark, brooding boulders
 shaped by time, water,
 stones & bones.
In a few timeless seconds,
 she can set her embrace, and mortal kiss
 of rocks, and water, and current,
 and death.

This river kills.

Truth

Do you believe in love?
Well how about happiness?
Do you believe in joy?
And what about heaven?
Do you believe in life?
Or perhaps in hope
Do you believe in the future?
Or maybe even peace
Do you believe in good?
Or ultimately, even God
It's difficult to believe in the good
Because it seems to happen so rarely
But it's easy to believe in the bad
Because it happens so often
The consistently emphasized
Ultimately becomes the truth
So tell me, what's your truth?
And I will then tell you my truth
And they, too, shall tell us their truth
And the sum of our truths shall then differ invariably.

Pride of Mine

What shall I do with this pride of mine?
That will not cry when wounded
Willing to die rather than run
Will not be helped because it won't ask
Stands alone because it can't share
Never bothered to say sorry
Knows not the meaning of compromise
What has gotten into me, this pride of mine?
My worst enemy, of course
So I fight this pride of mine
But I fight to no avail
Yet I'm running out of time
As I fight to no avail
Is there a bank for this pride of mine?
So I can cash it for a check
They told me to swallow this pride of mine
At the bank of self respect

Life is a Blank Page

A blank page is akin to a blank check
It's a DNA code yet to be written
Much like a story, yet to be told
The page speaks if only you listen
For a blank page to remain blank
Is an atrocity in excess
For your life's page to remain blank
Is a life embittered with unlived regrets
Write a story or paint a picture
Share yourself with the world
In your mind dances a mixture
Of stories that must be heard
A blank page is potential
All you have to do is translate
Translate its potential
With pen-patterned imagery
Some may write books
Others just a page
What matters is the quality
Of what's written on the page
Some may write nothing
Others may scribble
Let your writing say something
Something, however little
Life is a blank page
And time is your pen
Life is a blank page
Begging to be filled

Janet Sellers

Your Words

The words you say
Sweep my heart away
They are always so kind and so sweet
They often make my heart skip a beat
Thank you for every lovely word
For I have hidden them all in my heart
And when you are not around, I remember their sounds
And I listen to them because they comfort me
And make my heart so lovingly pound!

A New Start, A New Love

A clean slate
Oh how I wish my life
Were a clean slate
A slate to start all over again
To change some things
I wish I had known back then

Oh, pardon me God
I know that you are
The master of my destiny
I just thought I might
Personally enjoy a little genuine passion,
Some giving back of love to me

Karen Kuckreja

Hearts at Stake

8 lb delivery

Light of our lives

Joy of joys

Dreams fulfilled

Smelling, yelling, telling

Sprawling and crawling,

Turning and squirming,

Sunning, running, punning

Pretend, protect, provide

Time on task

Make things last

Learning, yearning, burning

with anger unabated

Unexpected letter

loaded with despair

Accusations written

emotions to compare

Explaining, and containing

The pain of it all

How to help

Not to hurt

Nothing right

All a blur

Tears fall

Stomach concave

Empty heart

Where to start

Time is there

But where are we?

Addiction

From sweet sips of the heady potion came
 Sleepless nights, dizzy days,
Anorexia and voracious hunger,
 Flights to mountain peaks,
Visions of auras, blue and entwined,
 Spirits regressing to past lives
Witnessing a pre-existence of
 Two fragments of soul;
Kaleidoscopes of hummingbirds, butterflies,
Red tulips and grandiflora roses.
Withdrawal came with
 Fragmented voice parts making no sense,
 Strobe lights flashing love and hate,
 Violent sobs,
 Trembling body
 Crouched in a corner,
 Cursing yet craving
 The drug called
 YOU.

Bonnie Randall

Vintage

I give to you this cup of love
Kept 'til now for you
Oh yes, I've given love before
But, not so fine a brew.

This cup I kept protectively
I hoarded it long years.
I stored it safely in my heart
And guarded it from tears

I thought I'd keep this cup of love;
It was too dear to share
For who but me could ever know
It's value, worth and care?

But, when you came to visit me
And knocked on my heart's door,
This cup of love, mature and full
Was ready to be poured

So, drink it slowly, sip by sip,
This love stored long away.
It brewed and mellowed, year by year,
To give to you this day

Terry L. Tripp

The Kindness of Strangers

So I leave you alone
To depend on the kindness of strangers.
I hope they don't let me down,
Or better yet, you down
Because you let me down
To depend on the kindness of you.

Terry L. Tripp

Guidance in a Dream

I know you are waiting
The same as I
With eyes wondering
Into the endless sky
Waiting for me
To be free
So we can be
Together
Once again
As it was then
In that dream
So long ago
That we both know
With music and stars
Elusive moments
In that dream
Or a tomorrow
If I believe you
To be true
And a forgiving God
To be above
Guiding us by music and stars
In that dream
Together
Once again

Strangers Within the Gate

On this day, two television-born
Pentecostal women, alluding
to Book of Exodus injunctions,
said the Palestinians should just
comply, rejoice and be glad to be
living as "strangers within the gate."
Meanwhile, here in mid-February,
the news said that two mountain lions,
Felis concolor, descended the
Rincón Range, mauling family dogs.

And still, the sun looks down, and studies
earth's strangers, even closer than men
ponder canaries in the mineshaft.

Jeffrey Alfier

Ante Lucem—Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia

At this hour the desert broods darkly
upon itself. Pre-dawn sparrows reach a
mad gathering in their fortresses of
plane trees. Narrow islands of dim-lit streets
whisper incandescence, printing shadows

for the few transients pacing along
their 90-day circuits home, each wearing
a uniform colored to elide a
predation in sand. Like the first searchlights
at Charing Cross, watchtowers on the rim

of moonlight ever strain the vision of
sentinels into the distance, where the
minarets echo against dunes of sleep
their prayer call's wavering tone, for a God
the faithful tell us is unknowable.

some strange, some familiar
rooms haunted with our boisterous laughter
rooms filled with our sacred whispers
now all gone . . .

washed away by the rain

/.../.../.../.../

/.../.../.../.../

/.../.../.../.../

Jane E. Granskog

Sister Spirits

Three soul sisters we are
wending our way from afar
as unknown distant threads
now newly woven together
in telling tapestry patterns
three days in the making—
Spirit transcending difference.
The Goddess in her many forms
laughingly brings in light and joy
to the potentiated dark of before.
The sharing of stories unfolded
womyn healing life's lesions of
abandonment, abuse, and despair,
finding voice to expose the wounds
so mother, daughter, sister, Self
can be made whole once more.

Black wolf nurtures and protects,
when needed is always there.
Mother Bear's enduring strength
hibernating winter to reflect
now spring awakened cubs to grow
as hummingbirds of paradise
dance among the daffodils
and spiraling snakes transform
healing wisdom from past pain.
Interwoven threads of meaning
shaking in empathic feeling
brings forth the love we share.
Above all, this is for you
with heart filled joy and gratitude

Jane E. Granskog

we honor what you have borne.
Your story brought to light
imaged vision of body scars
mapping the roads of pain
endured and transcended,
witness to strength in sharing,
healing the wounds of womanhood.
You bless us with your presence.

Don't touch, I might break
Caution, unstable ground
Step back, look but don't feel
You don't know what you've really found
Looks like a gem, but it crumbles like sand
Don't try to hold me, I'm ashes and snowflakes
Melt in your heart and pool in your hand
Don't look too close, it's thinner than you think
A fly's wings, an ocean breeze
I'm nothing like what you dreamed
turn away it's not worth your dime
The allure fades much too soon
I'm sandcastles, snowmen, a summer love
Disposable, fleeting, beautiful yes, but never worth the time
Keep walking I'm not worth your time

A crack:

My skin has become like brick and my eyes replaced by windows.
Accompanied ones who speak only of their own names, drawn by
my smell.

Do not be afraid to stare life and death in the face,
They will only shatter my glass and destroy my walls,
Let it rain, if it doesn't, my talk will soon echo in my chest.

Kimberly Guion

Kaleidoscope

Your yellow locks of hair
Are ruffling feathers, and you say
You wish it were brown,
And you talk a blue streak.
As you spin around in circles,
You cry, "Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down!"
I pluck out a white hair
Swimming in a sea of copper,
Like my grandmother's
Hair and ashen face
The night the gray rain fell
Down in February
I cry "ashes, ashes, we all fall down."

Waiting

I wait
As I pass by your table
"Excuse me! Miss! Waitress! Ma'am!"
So now I'm stuck with this label?
Talentless, I balance four plates with ease.
Hopefully they'll be served on time.
It's true you won't remember me,
Just that I forgot that third glass of wine.
And I wait
very slowly, my patience starts to unravel,
For my last party can't make up their minds.
Today I've talked so much, my voice is now gravel.
Ever accommodating, my response comes; scripted:
"It's okay, take your time."
But it's here I'm encrypted.
And so I wait

Kimberly Guion

Dusk to Dawn

I sit here crying
Red-blood teardrop, glass is stained,
And I can't find
My journal, so blue;
With the sun, moon, and stars
That was given to me
Three Christmases ago.
I remember it when
I sit here crying,
Looking at pictures
Like she used to sit,
In her chair, velour and so green.
Rocking the tears fell
Down cheeks, wrinkled
I sit here crying.
And I want
My journal, so blue
With the sun, moon, and stars
I lay here crying.
The sun will stare up at me
And look at me, smugly.

R. Kolar

The Life Force: A Note to My Dear Daughter on First Loves

Pray sit and listen; this I must say.

There's nothing so precious
As the wilt of a rose
Trailing its fragrance
Eternally close

Its stem arched in stasis
With eminence near
Releasing its essence
The tragedy's clear

Don't be so saddened; it's only the fray.

Glowing in aftermath
Conceding the fight
Relaxing contentment
Engulfing the light

It's the solution
Though hard to release
You can't give in
Or rebirth will cease

You'll be replenished; grace finds its way.

R. Kolar

The Boy Who Came From the Jungle

Relaxing in my chair staring at the blurry-eyed, hypnotizing TV
with the sound of traffic buzzing by outside like the water-taxies
in the big river on my mind.

Matt was outside pacing back and forth—tack rag in hand.
“Those bastards stole my hubcap and keyed my frigging car.”
“Cars are too damn expensive.”

Pride wained.

“Hey! You don’t have to talk like that”
“You don’t know what goes on in my mind!”

“I think I do”

“No! What?”

“What do I do now—damn you?”

“Do you think I’ll get that job?”

“Nobody wants me”

“Boy, that would be great—benefits and all”

“Yeah!”

“But what now?”

“You don’t get it; I hate this place.”

“You don’t know what goes on inside my mind.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“I’m not a good transplant.”

“I’d rather be fishing—out there!”

Wandering back in looking for a photo album, I noticed a shuffling
sound.

I turned. The tack rag floated softly to the ground. Beyond that,
Matt was moving fast.

“Matt! Don’t! Come back!”

The inevitable—traffic piled up.

“No! No! No! Matt”

“Come back!”

"Come back!!"

"Come back."

"Oh no, come back,"

"Come back . . . noooooo!"

"Oh . . . no . . ."

"Wake up Dad, Wake up!"

I came to relieved at the realization; relaxing in my chair staring at the blurry-eyed, hypnotizing TV with the sound of traffic buzzing by outside like the water-taxies on the big river in my mind.

P r o s e

Brooke King

AMiNeIZ, Pö, & RaWLiNZ

"God Angel devil lover. In my house. Make it hot & kill it quick."

—Henry Rollins

Most writers have a story of how they came to the realization that they were, indeed, fated to become writers. This is my bizarre tale.

I was supposed to be a musician. If my family had anything to say about it now, I'd be understudying in a symphony. They raised me to be the perfect "fine arts geek": 15 years of clogging, 13 years of vocal training, 15 years of flute, 6 years of opera workshop, 7 years of funk/jazz, 10 years of piccolo, 3 years of trumpet, and 5 years of percussion. However, they don't have to say that, and so I'm a writer. They see it as a "cute hobby."

How I made the decision is a gruesome, bloody tale. I fell in love with the craft after many years of reading, and the turning point arrived the summer before my sophomore year in high school.

I desperately wanted to please my family by partaking in a National Honor Band Tour of Europe. But in order to do that, I had to come up with the money. At the time, I was also saving up for college expenses. I thought I shared my family's dream of going to the VanderCook Conservatory of Music.

A lack of options led me to Pete's butcher shop. It was the only job listed week after week in the classifieds. Money is money. I had been hunting before, seen my grandfather skin pigs, and helped pluck feathers from chickens. No big deal, right?

In order for me to get to the butcher shop, I had to walk across the street and into the yard adjacent to mine. That took me into the dual parking lot used for the butcher shop and Dr. Holmes & Son, the local dentists in town. In Dr. Holmes's office, there were no comfy couches or chairs in the waiting room. Instead, there were these small benches that resembled teeth. At check in,

the patient would be given a number. Later Dr. Holmes would come out, large toothbrush in hand and say in a very manly voice, "Cavity number one, your time has come."

As I was walking towards the wooden building, butterflies swarmed my stomach. It's going to be great, I assured myself. A big porch fronted the one story building. Often men would wait for their orders drinking Old Style on the front porch. A gold sign hung on a pillar, tarnished with age. The structure read, "This building is a historical site built in 1931." It looked more like something straight out of *Ponderosa*.

I opened the door and felt a strong whoosh of cold air. The heavy wooden door latched behind me in a loud thunk. My eyes had to adjust to the darkness. There was a glass case full of meat sitting on what looked like bloodstained parchment paper. Shiny 8 x 10 pictures with tacky gold frames hung on the walls. A large silver door was in the far left corner. Bluegrass music echoed in the background. The one window by the door was trying valiantly to provide enough light for the whole room, but it failed miserably.

Then a man came out of the back. He had on a white smock covered in blood. Walking towards me, he was dabbing his hands on a crumpled paper towel. The same rough brown paper towels that high schools and public restrooms are equipped with.

Pete reminded me of a hick elf, if one ever existed. He was short and had stubby legs, somewhat bovine. Bifocals accentuated his small squinty eyes. His few strands of hair were styled in a fashionable comb over. He had a large grin, but ironically, not enough teeth to fill it. This didn't seem to concern him, as he would find it amusing to pop out his dentures while talking to me.

"Yer Brooke? I'm Pete." His slow, southern twang drew out each and every final syllable.

"It's nice to meet you."

He extended his hand toward me. It was blood stained. My stomach churned. I decided in a last minute action to just give him the "two finger salute" as it's known in Farmer City. This is

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what farmers do when they're driving or walking and see someone they know and want to recognize them without saying anything. They raise their index and middle fingers like a boy scout's honor and bring it up to their eyebrows, like a salute.

He chuckled at my "two finger salute."

"Ready fer tha ter?"

I nodded meekly, not really knowing what the "ter" was.

The tour ("ter") began where we were. On the wall hung the "Hall of Fame" pictures of farm animals that had won the local FFA Fair "Best of Show" in their category. The photos were of pigs and cows with red velvet robes and crowns of flowers upon their heads. Beyond the entrance, a door that lead to the "operating room," a room full of shiny silver equipment and silver tables that reminded me of my chemistry lab. On the south-side wall, a huge array of knives hung. (This would later be known as the "Wall of Slaughter.")

Pete showed me where I would wash my hands and handed me a smock from a hook. I put it on, and we progressed further into the building. We reached a cold room, and he spat into one of the many brass spittoons placed strategically throughout the store.

As we entered the meat locker, I began to feel a bit more nervous. Huge slabs of raw meat hung from the ceiling by hooks. Chains were drawn through every orifice of the animals. I felt like I was walking through some sort of S&M torture palace. There were slabs of meat that were over six feet tall and weighed over 300 pounds. I was, to say the least, overwhelmed.

"Do yer have a problems with killin animalz?"

I found it ironic that a man who worked his whole life as a butcher mispronounced the word *animal*. I was sure the ad in the paper was a misspelling. However, now I was less sure.

"What?" I replied.

"Killin. Farmers come in with their livestock: pigs, chickens, and the sort. We kill em and give em the meat."

I took a minute to comprehend what he was saying.

"Ummmm . . . sure. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Good thing lil' missy cause we got 12 chickens coming in 'bout an hour."

That afternoon when the chickens arrived, Pete took one, laid it down on the "operating table" and hacked its neck off with a huge knife. I stood in awe as the chicken zigzagged headless for the next few minutes. The day had become a bad dream.

I tried holding a chicken with one hand and cutting off the head with the other. It was an endless fight between us. I broke every bone but its neck. The chicken scratched up my arm and left a nasty chicken bite on my elbow. I still have that scar. I called Pete back in for help and he told me it was no problem.

"Just snap their necks."

Easy enough, I figured. Pete stood by, thinking I could easily follow his oral instructions. Bones are a lot stronger than people think. After a few attempts, Pete stepped in and demonstrated the proper technique. He put the chicken under one arm and with one quick, fluid motion snapped the neck with the other hand. I trapped the same chicken that I had tortured earlier. Its eyes were full of such sadness. I could swear he was pleading with me to let him live.

Why was I doing this? I wanted to go home. At that point, in that summer, I could have walked out and chosen another life following the devotion of my family's idea of who I was. But I stayed.

After a few hours of torturing those chickens, I achieved my goal. That afternoon, I took 10 lives, literally, in my bare hands. I went home with war wounds. To this day, I will never forget the sound of a bone snapping or the feeling of a once live body going limp in my hands.

I didn't eat lunch that day. In fact, I didn't eat supper that evening. I was sickened by what I had done. I lay down and my cat, Otis, glared at me. I could feel his contempt. I was killing animals—living creatures just like him. Sure, cats usually kill mice,

Brooke King

but mine didn't. He was a born vegetarian, it seemed. Anytime a rodent or bug would come near him, he would hightail it underneath my bed.

I felt dirty, but I couldn't quit this job no matter how horrible because it was the only one that paid more than minimum wage. This was my remaining choice. I needed the money. I was going to Europe. I was going to college.

Meanwhile, by taking this job, my social life (which wasn't very active to begin with) began to take a plunge into the downward spiral. I tried very hard to fit into a clique in high school. Prior to working at Pete's I was just the "freaky redheaded band geek who always had her nose in a book." Now I was the "freaky redheaded band geek *murderer* who always had her nose in a book." Instead of laughing it off like so many other nicknames in elementary, junior high, and high school, I let it eat at me. Not retaliating in response to the name-calling, I allowed everything in my past to reach boiling point. I knew when I would explode like Pompeii it would be unpleasant. So for a bit of consolation, I turned to my books, thinking Henry Rollins's narratives could help comfort me.

I picked *High Adventures in the Great Outdoors* in which Rollins discusses survival in the world around him. There was a particular passage that helped me endure my first summer working as a butcher. Rollins described his job working in a lab facility. After an outbreak of ectromelia, he had to execute of 300 rats:

They called me a murderer. A saint maybe, a murderer, no. After all, it was I who cured the illness. It was I who stopped its spread. I destroyed the ill and the weak, those who were not fit for survival. Can't you see? If I did a job that had to be done. I tried to give rise to a strong, perfect, disease-free race, and you call me a criminal? I am a humanitarian in the strongest sense of the word.

After I read that for the first time, I realized that this man truly understood my circumstances. He did not compromise himself for anyone. He lived his life and still was an individual. From there on, Rollins became my mentor and I have bought every book and spoken word CD since with the knowledge that he would be there for me regardless. He became my dear friend that summer. The one I could turn to for an explanation.

A few days after I settled into my job, the reigning De Witt county FFA Fair Pig Queen and fellow schoolmate of mine, Krista, came to the store. Krista represented everything that I was not—athletically inclined, fashionably dressed, homecoming queen, prom queen, cheerleader, and every teacher's favorite student. At lunch she sat with at the wooden bench reserved only for the popular clique, eating take out, while I sat in the cemetery with my best friend eating Pringles. I didn't understand why I was shunned by so many. They didn't take a chance to get to know who I really was. Every day that passed in high school, I felt more disconnected from them, and every day I began to hate them more for excluding me in their world.

She brought me her pig, Sarah, who had won the "Best of Show" that summer. After winning, the animal goes onto the FFA state fair. If the pig wins there, it is put on auction for corporations like McDonald's. The grand champion steer that year went for \$45,000. Krista's pig had brought in \$16,500. Sarah was the grand champion barrow. This stopped me. Barrow? I asked myself. A barrow is simply a pig that has been castrated before reaching sexual maturity. Who would call their male pig Sarah? I didn't have the courage to ask.

Krista led Sarah indoors on a leash and handed the reins to me, like I was her slave. I brought Sarah outside in the fenced back lot. First, I had to hose her down. Then Pete gave me the choice to distract her attention or to stun her. Pete said this was so that the animal would feel comfortable and not see their forthcoming death. I chose to be the entertainment. I lured Sarah

Brooke King

with a bucket of slop but didn't allow her to eat because the digestive system has to purge for 12 hours before slaughter. He snuck up behind Sarah and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Hey, it's a living," and stunned her with his 650,000-volt gun. The power dropped her to unconsciousness.

We then carried Sarah inside and tied her up by her back hoofs to a chain. Pete drew an imaginary "X" on her forehead. Raising his rifle, he shot her at point blank range (about an inch away). He hauled her up, and I put a bucket down to catch the blood. All of the blood must be completely drained from the body before the actual butchering process can begin. Pete defined a "good bleed out" to be at least four quarts. We would later reuse that blood to make blood sausage and blood pudding. Pete handed me the knife and told me to stick Sarah. I took hold of the knife and punctured her chest to sever the arteries of her heart.

Pete would then perform this ritual after each bleed out. He would dip his hands into the bucket one at a time. When each was sufficiently covered with the warm stickiness, he would then make a cross on the pig's torso like a priest baptizing a small child. Pete considered it a very religious ceremony himself. He said that it would help free the soul into the next world. It was his way of providing a eulogy.

I stood at the operating table while Pete began Sarah's brining process. He put her in a cold storage room to improve her flavor and retain the moisture. After a few hours, Pete began skinning Sarah. Most places now will just de-hair the animal, but Pete said he didn't like those "newfangled" ideas, and that they were wastes of his time. I went back to my work place, preparing for my first gutting.

We hung her with her head to the floor, and I placed a garbage can between her hoofs. Pete started his incision and told me to put my hand inside her to catch her intestines. As he unzipped her, the heavy mass fell gracefully into my hands.

"Beautiful, ain't it?" Pete asked.

I had to agree with him. In a strange way, it was beautiful. It was like a rainbow of reds: crimson, maroon, burgundy, claret.

We washed off the intestinal mass and threw away the waste. Then we hung her up to chill. Pete congratulated me on a great job and told me that I would finish up on my own.

"Finish up? I thought we were done."

He laughed softly. "Nope, I'm going to let yer do the primal cuts. I've gotta do some things up front."

I stood, feeling very confused and scared. Pete motioned over to one of the operating tables.

"It's all ready fer ya. Just folla that ther diagram on the wall."

The picture showed a pig with lines sectioning off what section was which cut. There were also written directions below it.

It read that my first step was to remove the head. Great, I thought, another head. I felt like I was an immortal in the *Highlander* series, and that for every head I seized lightning would strike and I would absorb their strength and wisdom. That was not the case though.

I began reading Edgar Allen Poe that summer. During my lunch I read "The Tell Tale Heart."

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and legs . . . I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

Brooke King

I used my small knife to poke around the neckline for a severing point. After that was found, a hammer and cleaver were used to break the vertebrae and chip away the remaining bone. Then it was time to break out the reciprocating meat saw. Pete's saw looked like a cordless screwdriver, but on the end was a serrated knife.

There was the sound, the roaring of the meat saw, the radio playing Hank Williams, Jr.'s "Hey Good Looking," the clinking of the tools hitting the steel table, the sniffing of my nose from the cold room, the ticking of the clock.

Almost two hours passed when I finally finished separating what was left of Sarah into ham, neck chops, bacon, ribs, loin chops, jowl bacon and shoulder. Even her intestines were used—her stomach became someone's fine hog maw dinner. We would sell the skin to dog owners, as dogs love to chew on pigskin.

Afterwards, I stood at the operating table, images of Sarah still screaming through my mind. Hands resting on the ice cold metal, I could see my reflection. I needed to wash my hands. I scrubbed under scalding water to cleanse myself of the bloodstains. I thought I would never be clean again.

That night I dreamt of Sarah. I massacred her unmercifully, without stunning her or even shooting her at point blank range. I was skinning her alive. She was screaming in the voice of a small child. Suddenly, an arm of pot-bellied pigs and other bovine attacked me. They were angry that I was killing their king, their leader. I was assassinating their Kennedy, their Martin Luther King, Jr., their Lincoln, their Gandhi, their Malcolm X, their John Lennon.

I woke up in a cold sweat, my cat sitting on my chest, watching me sleep. I don't know how, but Otis knew what my dream was about. Since I had started my job, he wasn't as friendly to me as usual. Instead of waiting by the door for me as I would come home, he now slept through my entrance. At first I thought it was the smell of other animals on me, so I would wash up

thoroughly before I came home. I now realize he was disgusted by the aura of death.

As the weeks went by, I became quick at killing chickens and skinning pigs. I became a slaughtering machine, one animal after the other. The species didn't matter; it was my duty. The quicker I finished chopping up the medium sized chunks of venison for Mr. Dubson, the quicker I got to eat my free lunch provided by Pete—a BLT sandwich.

Although I became one of "them," nothing could prepare me for Mr. Harold Miller and Mr. Gene Sparr. These two men were the odd bunch of all of our customers. Most of the customers were farmers or hunters bringing in their kill. These men, too, were "hunters"—but of a different kind.

Mr. Miller was a man of about 40 with a long scraggly mullet and a glass eye that he would pop out on Halloween to scare young children. He would kill opossums for the skin and expect us to be able to sell the meat to other people. He did the same thing with road kill. He didn't realize that people wouldn't want to buy this the cuisine of duck a la four-wheeler or deer with a side of headlights and a touch of bumper. Later I found out that he liked to shoot stray cats with his BB gun, which made me despise this man even more. His response to the "cat shooting?" "I didn't kill any of em—just stunted them a bit." I used to think that man himself should be stunted.

Mr. Sparr, on the other hand, was a bit more sane—not much, but a bit. He was in his 50s and had graying hair. He would hunt squirrels and other small vermin. He'd lure them with nuts and seed, wait for hours in the brush, and then blow them away. He would come in with six or seven squirrels in hand (holding them by the tails) depending on what the battle brought. He always wore fatigues and face paint as if he were in a war. In his mind he was. He said his enemy was the vermin. He told me once that it was Vietnam in his background. He told me only the strong survive. I'm glad he never spawned children.

Brooke King

I remember specifically one day when Pete had to leave for a house call. He was like a doctor—except people paid him to kill. He was going out to butcher chickens for a housewife/widow. We were falling behind in work at the store, so Pete asked me to stay by myself.

I never liked working the register. There was an underlying sense of paranoia that filled my body when I was left alone in that building. The moment the paranoia started was when I began to read Edgar Allen Poe. I feared I could hear the pig hearts beating and the cow tongues whispering, “murderer” beneath the glass.

“... I admit the deed!—Tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!”

As soon as Pete left the building, I changed the radio station to Farmer City’s own WWHP, “The Whip.” WWHP played bluegrass and country from 3 a.m. until midnight. From midnight to 3 a.m. was my best friend’s underground metal show. But within the vicinity of Farmer City, there were only two radio stations—the other station was oldies.

As the day went by, I skinned some rabbits for meat and slaughtered a few chickens. I remember humming along with the Monkees’ “Last Train to Clarksville” as I was preparing the cuts of the rabbits. It hit me then that I actually enjoyed my job. I had gotten over the initial shock of killing an animal to the point where my feelings softened into ambivalence.

That summer I started writing to Henry Rollins. I never expected a letter back—I just wanted to vent to someone, even if it was the guy who scans the mail and throws it all away. I did get a letter back though, which is now framed by my bedside. In it he told me that it’s easiest to be alone because people get in the way. At the bottom, he wrote his email address and told me that I should keep in touch that way, since he was always on the road.

After four summers of working as a butcher, I decided it would be best to hang up my bloody apron and leave. And

although people look at me oddly when I tell them I was a butcher, I don't feel bad about it. I was not Hitler. I was ordered to terminate and I did so as efficiently as possible. I terminated lives because other people needed to survive—to eat.

I met up with Rollins a few years ago before a show in St. Louis, and we discussed our writings over coffee. During our meeting, Rollins asked me, "Have you given up on people yet?"

I told him that there was a time in which I had. I was alienated as a child because of my religion. In high school, I was alienated because I was the "music geek." I became used to not letting people in. I lived in no man's land. I shut people out. It was a reflex. Anytime I needed to talk to someone, Rollins was always there: in music, books, and spoken word—ready and willing to sympathize. But I soon realized that he was in a very lonely place.

"Brooke," he once told me, "You can't go to where I've been. It'll destroy you."

It's hard to make a social transformation when I've been the "odd ball out" for so long. I'll never be this perfect, beautiful, social butterfly. The most I can hope for is to evolve from the quiet slug I've been for so long into a "normal" person, not quite as secluded, not quite as inhibited. Through my writing, I've made some of that transformation. I am no longer the ball of hatred; hating because I was not accepted.

As I write these words—outside, alone, listening to Sepultura, smoking my Reds—I am somehow filled with a sense of completion. Another door has been closed, another chapter finished in my life—at least for now.

The Swim Cap

I can still hear the sound of the rushing water. It is like the filling up of a very large milk bottle as I sank deeper and deeper toward the bottom of the swimming hole.

My thoughts flashed through my head. "I am going to die and I am only 11 years old!" I felt the gooey mud against the bottom of my feet as I pushed off the bottom. "Yuk, I can't imagine what might be down there!" It reminded me of a week earlier while swimming. I grabbed what I thought was a frog. When I pulled it out of the water, it was a foot long salamander! "Oh my God," I screamed. I let go of it much faster than I grabbed it.

Suddenly, I was conscious of someone pulling me out of the water by one arm and sitting me on the deck. It was the lifeguard. "What happened to you? How come you fell in?" she asked. After regrouping and realizing I wasn't going to die after all, I tried to recall what had happened. Then it came to me. Oh, no, my worst nightmare had happened! I began weeping and yelling, "my cap, my cap!" I had dropped my swim cap in the water and in my effort to retrieve it I fell into the water too. AND I had not caught my cap. It had disappeared into the muddy, murky water below. The lifeguard dove in and tried to find it, but to no avail. It was truly lost! My crying intensified. The lifeguard kept trying to question me to grasp the significance of the cap.

"It is my mother's cap . . ." I said, sobbing. The lifeguard tried to reassure me that it would be okay. Through my tears I told her, "And I didn't ask her if I could use it! I just took it out of her dresser drawer and used it!" The lifeguard just said a very big, "OH!" Walking home from the swimming hole, my mind was busy trying to find a way to solve the problem of the cap. By the time I reached home, I had what I thought was a great idea. "I'll write a letter to my Grandma."

I quickly found a pencil and paper and began to write. I described Mom's cap in what I thought was vivid detail. "It is white, with wavy lines, size large, and it has a strap that snaps on." "Please Grandma," I wrote, "Would you send me a swim cap as soon as possible? I lost Mom's cap and she'll never forgive me for it!" I feverishly addressed and licked the envelope. I was so pleased with myself and proud of my letter. Then it dawned on me, "I have to have a stamp. I don't have a stamp. Where will I get a stamp? I don't have any money. If I ask Mom she'll want to know whom I am writing to and what is in the letter. What to do . . . what to do . . . Dad wouldn't be able to help; he lets Mom do the entire letter writing and mailing of the letters."

When my mother came home that evening, I gathered up my courage and asked her if I could mail a letter to Grandma. The expression on her face made me think she already knew something about this letter. I thought, "Geeze she not only has eyes in the back of her head, but maybe she can read my mind too."

Since I was never very skilled at lying, in a matter of moments, the whole story spilled out. My mother just looked at me with disappointment in her eyes. I was immediately sent to bed. For the next three days my mother would not speak to me. She treated me like I wasn't there. By the evening of the third day, I felt like I was dying inside. Finally I asked her, "What do I need to do for you to stop ignoring me?" She said very quietly, "You need to apologize."

The Red Hat

My granddaughter, Calico Rose, came to visit me and stay overnight last weekend. Being a curious little six-year-old child, she spotted some large round boxes on my closet shelf. "What's in those big boxes, Grandma?" she asked. I explained they were boxes for hats I'd worn years ago in the 1980s, and since I still liked them, I kept them all these years thinking I would have occasion to wear them again sometime. "Would you like to see them?" I asked. "Oh, yes, Grandma," she answered.

I took the boxes from the high shelf and handed them down to her. She placed them all in a row on the floor. Opening them one by one, she tried on each hat and admired herself in the mirror. She really looked cute in those old hats. She decided her favorite was a brown velvet with a veil; a little cocktail hat that was very chic. With her golden hair and brown eyes she was to be admired, indeed!

One particular box contained a red hat. When she put it on her little head to model, a whole flood of memories came back to me, and I just had to tell her a Grandma story about another little girl with flaxen hair who one day acquired a new red hat.

The year was 1938. Wearing hats was common then. My Father never left the house without a hat on his head. He had a Panama straw hat for summer, a velour hat for winter and a white chef's hat at his place of business. Mother, being a homemaker, wore hats less often. On Saturday afternoons, she would do her weekly shopping, and my older sister, Peggy, and I would accompany her to town. Peggy and I didn't wear hats that day. It was such pleasant weather, and Mother had curled our hair nicely. Ringlets adorned our heads and bounced as we walked and skipped along the sidewalks eager to get to the stores and see all the merchandise the world had to offer.

Going from store to store our accumulated purchases grew. Peggy and I were engaged in carrying some of the packages and

our arms were getting rather tired as we made our way to the last store before our walk back home. I felt pretty special as we entered the doors of the upscale Grey Reids department store. This was the place for good quality items, and even at the age of six, I knew it was a special store. To wear something purchased from here made you feel really important.

Mother took us directly to the children's department. My heart leapt at the prospect of something for me from this store. Even just a pair of old anklets would be special! I was excited!

Mother stopped walking and turned to us and said in a serious, but kind voice, "You are to be on your best behavior. We have come to buy winter coats. I will pick what is appropriate for you. I do not want any disappointed faces or pouting," (which was sometimes my expression when things did not go my way). "I have a limited amount of money for the coats," she continued, "and it is important that we choose carefully. Do you understand?" And we nodded yes, knowing that any coat from Grey Reids would fill our hearts with joy!

The sales lady began to show Mother the coats in our sizes. I was trying on a navy blue melton double-breasted style when I saw it. The red hat. Perched on a shelf with all the other children's hats—it stood out like no other. I couldn't take my eyes off of it. It was so alluring! The hat was of red felt with a full brim and a red grograin band with a sort of half-bow around the crown. It wasn't so much the style, I think, as it was the color.

"Mama, the red hat! Please can I try it on? Please, Mama, please!" I pleaded. The coat didn't seem important anymore. I wanted the red hat. "Mama, please," I begged. "After we've decided on the coats, you may try it on," Mama said.

And so the process of choosing a coat proceeded and ended with the navy blue for me and a camel hair for Peggy. It was time to try on the red hat! Down it came from the shelf, and the clerk placed it on my head. Looking in the mirror I was convinced it had to be mine. Peggy tried on hats too, but I would not remove the

Bonnie Goff Randall

red hat. I had no desire to try on any other. I knew it would be perfect with the navy blue coat if only I could have it.

I was expecting resistance from Mama to buy the red hat for me, but it never occurred! The price of the hats and the coats must have been within her budget because she did not say no when I asked if I could have the hat. It then dawned on me that we were to have coats and hats. Was this a special day or what!

There was, however, reluctance on Mama's part when I asked to wear the red hat on the way home. Mother always took things home so she could carefully look them over. They could be returned, if necessary, if they had not been worn. Shoes especially were to be tried out at home on the wool living room rug to be sure they didn't pinch or rub your toes. But this time Mama said yes. We could wear the hats home.

We were almost there. Home was just a block away. Our arms were really tired because we had most of the packages and Mother had the heavy coats. We'd all be glad to relieve our gone-to-sleep arms of the heavy loads.

Walking on the tree-lined streets had never been a concern in the past. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time! The red hat and I certainly were. Walk-walk . . . skip-skip . . . tweet-tweet . . . plunk-plunk! The plunk-plunk landed on the brim of my new red hat! I took it off and looked at the white spot and of course, I began to cry. It was no use for Mama to try and console me. She said she could fix it . . . clean it and the hat would be as good as new. I knew it would never be like new. I knew I could never wear the red hat again!

But, I did. Mother did clean it. I don't know how. It was my only winter hat that year, so wear it I did.

So beware of trees bearing birds. Walk around them and never wear your new red hat home from the department store.

As for the red hat on my closet shelf. It is awaiting its resurrection; waiting to be worn again. When I am an old, old woman, I could join The Red Hat Society. There are lots of old birds there, but none who perch in trees.

Resolution

Until I happened upon the kid that had hayseed written all over him I had pretty much convinced myself to quit being a sucker for people who hang around outside the supermarket asking for a hand-out. The folks with the tinkly bells and red kettles, they're okay. It's the ones dressed in rumpled clothes, the kind who side up and ask me to drop a donation for God knows what through a slit in the lid of an industrial sized pickle jar, those are the ones I avoid. Just don't make eye contact, has become my mantra, as I duck my head and slide past.

Yes, I'd convinced myself almost completely until the other day, the day I came upon the lanky youth with the farm-boy-come-to-the-city-look about him. Shoulders hunched under a too-big jacket, leaning against the shopping cart rack, staring off into the distance, unaware of my approach. "Excuse me," I said, my hand on the outermost cart, don't want to bump you. "Oh, sorry," he said, quickly rising to his full height.

Then, in a timid voice that was little more than a whisper, he said, "Ma'am can you spare a little change so I can buy some groceries?" My immediate thought was, no way, I'm not giving you any money. Huh, groceries, I'll bet. Drugs are more like it; how dumb does he think I am? Yet he didn't look like a user; this boy with the whitish hair that seemed to defy a comb, he had about him an air of innocence. Maybe he really is hungry. He's skinny enough. But what clinched it was those blue, blue eyes—eyes as virgin as the Sierra sky, young-old eyes that had seen too much and for far too long.

The Room Over the Garage

The room over the garage was just an unfinished attic space when the family moved into the house. It remained unchanged for several years until the young boy decided he was too old to share a room with his sister. He was right about that, but the house only had two bedrooms, and his mom and dad had one, so the two of them had to make do with the other. At least for a while.

When he first moved out of the shared bedroom, he took up residence in a room attached to one end of the garage. The garage was about 25 feet from the house and had a large room added to one end of it in which the washing machine and deep freeze had been placed. It had always been used as a laundry room and was equipped with stationary tubs that the previous owner had installed. Still, there was plenty of space for a bed and other necessary items needed to complete a boy's room.

It even had a clothes closet and a little gas heater. Pretty neat for an eight-year-old. He felt very grown up having his own room and not even in the house. None of his friends were so lucky. They all had to sleep under the same roof as their parents did. He felt so macho! He wouldn't have admitted it if he had been afraid out there alone. Of course he had his dog, and that dog was the best protection a guy could have. He wouldn't let an intruder anywhere near. So, he was plenty safe.

And he was his own boss out there too. No, he'd never move back into the house. Why, this was just like having your own place. No one bossing you around or messing with your stuff. Of course, he still had to come into the house to use the bathroom, and Mom wouldn't deliver his meals, so he had to come in for that too. But, all in all, he really liked his new found freedom.

What he'd really wanted was the attic space above the garage. Man, that was really neat. Way up there, and you could look out the window and if you leaned out far enough, you could

look all the way down the street in both directions. But for now, he'd just have to settle for the laundry room. Someday he hoped to move upstairs, when he got a little older. He'd fix it up so it was liveable, then he'd move in and take his dog with him.

It wasn't too much later that his dad decided to go ahead and fix one end of the attic so the boy could move in. The other end didn't need to be finished beyond what it was. It was just used for storage. But his half was going to be a real room. He'd decorate it with posters and trophies and such things as boys deemed essential. And he did exactly that. The posters were actually as much on the ceiling as on the walls because of the way it sloped. The center of the room was of regular height, but it sloped down to the walls which were only about four and a half feet high due to this being an attic.

No matter, he wasn't any taller than that anyway. He put his bed and chest of drawers and such against the walls and had plenty of "tall room" in the center. Geez. His mom liked it almost as much as he did. She had always said it should be illegal to build a house without an upstairs and a basement. It seemed she spent an awful lot of time up there in his room. Naturally, she had to paint it and put down a rug and make curtains, all those dumb things moms do under the guise of helping out.

But, that was fine too. Pretty soon even she would have to admit it was finished, and then she'd go away and it would become all his. And it was all his until he grew up and joined the Navy. Then it seemed that Mom took over again.

She spent an awful lot of time up there. She kept all the letters he sent home, and she'd go up there and read and re-read them. I guess it made her feel closer to him that way. I think sometimes she cried while she was up there, but she never said so. And then came the day about three and a half years later, and he was home again.

It wasn't too much later that he married and moved into a house of his own. Then his mom used the room for her vast

Janice Alexander

collection of books, art supplies, and a bunch of other stuff. She didn't spend too much time up there like she used to, but once in a while, she would climb those stairs and dig out the suitcase filled with letters sent home and read them once again.

They're still up there after all these years. She just couldn't bear to part with them.

When the Earth Calls

When I finally see my first dead person, it is my father. I go into Palm Mortuary in Las Vegas with my mother and sister and walk into a pale blue viewing room. It is the illuminata, a resurrection of spirtus, a tipping of the angel's wings onto earth. He is perfect again. His silver hair is brushed as softly as he would have done it himself. He is dressed as if we will go out for Christmas dinner; he is immaculately conceived in the northeastern Cornell University tradition which belonged to him, dark suit, Ivy League striped tie. My mother and sister cry because he is so beautiful. I cry at the incompleteness, the unfinished business of craving a parent's praise. This is my descent into a place I never imagined possible.

Only 72 hours ago, I had called my mother long-distance and asked, "Are you sure he's really dead?" The truth is a large indelible spot on my mind at 3:00 a.m., and I am unable to absorb something so final and terrifying. My mother does not wait to convince me herself.

Mother speaks in her languid southern drawl, "The coroner's here. You want to talk to him? He'll tell you." She hands the phone over to him.

I sit on the floor by the bed to lean against something. I ask if he, too, is sure that Father is really dead. The coroner's voice comes from deep inside his diaphragm and hymns could originate from his lips.

"I am sorry about your father," he says.

"Are you sure he's dead? He could just be asleep." I say this instinctively. I want to protect my father.

"Yes," he says. "He has passed on." His voice is deep, serious.

"How do you know?" I cannot believe these words have come from my mouth.

"We know these things," he says.

Nancy Edwards

I can hear the phone being handed over to my mother. There is a whoosh of air, as if something had emptied out.

I tell my mother I had first called the Las Vegas Hilton by mistake. I could hear the slots and whirl of the casino in the background as the operator spoke. Mother's neighbor called me and said I needed to contact my mother immediately. It was 3:00 a.m. I had called the wrong place. Now it was clearly my mother, the coroner, and no father.

When I pack for the trip home to Las Vegas, the urgency is gone. There will be no rush to take Father to Sunrise Hospital again, no desperately contacting faraway relatives, no Father to rally and to bring back home to stay with us.

Mother wants a photograph of Father in the casket before they bury him. I want a lock of his silver hair. I have a camera, but I can't take the picture. Every time I see him, he is on the altar of the other world. The casket is set on a platform, silver, lined with ivory satin, and he must not be disturbed. I have cried so much that the funeral director has tried to comfort me by giving me the programs with Father's names and dates free of charge. The funeral director tells me about tragedies in his own life. He has lost a child; I cry for him, too.

It is October in Las Vegas with the slightest wind. The flat land parallels an open, smooth sky. I have known these Octobers and welcomed them all through high school and college. Everything will be different now. A cashier at the Golden Nugget casino told me only hours ago when I had dinner there that this is my lucky day. I said nothing. I could not speak this truth to her.

The archangel of death has come to take my father away. We stand at the weighing station, in the routing area, in the terminal of the last will. No one is able to take the picture of him in the casket. I cannot touch his hair to trim a piece to keep. I am too sad.

When my mother, my sister, and I go back to the house and I read through some of his important papers, I see Father's date

Nancy Edwards

book. He has noted "haircut" for October 12. He is already dead. I will dream repeatedly that he resurrects and takes us to dinner, then dies again. The earth has summoned back one of its souls. The earth accepts and delivers. The earth remembers, and the earth comforts its tired and weary. And even in the silence of his eternal rest, Father's lessons will fulfill their destiny.

Physical

Suzanne slammed her tennis racquet in the back of her car without caring where it landed. She was disgusted with herself. She was off her tennis game lately. She felt achy and tired after only one set, and her legs felt rubbery running the balls down. She thought she was a good competitor. She started obsessing, living on the edge of doubt. At 36, she had just been annihilated by a woman in her 60s at the tennis club. Suzanne couldn't hold her serve. The older woman had out hit her, out run her, and barely let her score a point. More embarrassing to Suzanne's ego, Marge Apperson, had barely broken a sweat while Suzanne was drenched. Marge bragged about a tennis camp she had attended. She said Suzanne needed to be in better shape first to even qualify. Suzanne played doubles every week at the club and did workouts. She thought she was in good shape. Doubts about her health nagged at her now.

She did not want to tell her tennis friends, but she made an appointment with her internist, Dr. Craig Cappell. He always listened to her carefully and reassured her. Suzanne wondered if Marge might just be an iron woman competitor or if she was just not measuring up.

Two years had slipped by since the last physical, so she agreed to the big ticket, the complete workup. Suzanne dreaded the cold, stainless steel instruments, but she knew it was going to be asked for. No use fighting it.

Dr. Cappell had a really good reputation. She had known him for nearly five years. He was on many short lists of the best doctors in town.

She left work early to make the appointment in time. She told the secretary in the high school where she was a counselor that she had a doctor's appointment. One of the counselors would cover for her students for the afternoon. The school was teeming with students and staff. She liked her fellow counselors and her

principal. This was the best job she had ever had, and she could feel people treating her differently now. She was helping to change kids for the better just as she always hoped she could.

Suzanne pulled her car into the parking lot beside the doctor's complex. There were few spaces; she could see that Dr. Cappell was in demand. There were some high-priced cars in the parking lot. She was proud he was doing so well. He had started in a really small office when she first knew him. They had talked about their goals when she first went to him and now, both had moved up the success track. Amazing, she thought. She felt a little nervous to see him. She felt sure nothing serious could be wrong.

She found a comfortable place near the coffee table and picked up magazines she never bought for herself. She chose *Seventeen* for younger girls and scanned the lead headlines. She wanted to see what her students read. She knew very well what happened to some of them. They came to school battered, with babies; some overdosed, some she saw once or twice and they never came back. She hurt inside for their loss of innocence. She wanted to write in their school files that they needed their parents to take them back, like eggs still needing incubation, to let them finish ripening before going out into the world at large. The girls, particularly, were damaged irreparably so easily. It did not take long in her job to see how much you were needed, yet how little you were allowed to do. She learned something new daily on the job.

The *Seventeen* magazine had stories inside on Raising Your Child Solo; Date Rape; Avoiding Sexually Transmitted Diseases. She could not have thought about these things when she was 17. She remembered at 17 wanting to travel with her best friend, Miranda, before they went off to college, each trying to decide which college to attend and whether or not to live in a certain dormitory. That pursuit seemed absurd now; girls wanted lifesaving information. She thought of her younger brother, Jack at

Nancy Edwards

16 who had let her win at tennis and taught her to ski downhill. He did not seem like the boys the articles were about. She was nearly finished with an article about an unmarried girl of 15 raising an infant when she heard her name called.

She left the magazine in the chair and followed the nurse to an examining room. She felt foolish when the nurse began asking about her symptoms. What should she say? "This older woman at the club beat my pants off at tennis and said I am out of shape, so I must have something wrong with me," and that she wanted all sorts of medical tests. She phrased it more appropriately with words like "sore muscles" and "more easily fatigued than usual." The nurse took notes, looking up at her quietly. Not even a smile or word of encouragement. Suzanne wanted to leave now. She changed her mind.

"Just take off everything and put the gown on. The doctor will be in to see you in a few minutes," were the nurse's parting words.

She felt trapped as she undressed. Her blood pressure was normal, and her weight held steady. She draped the green gown around her with gaps open, leaving sensitive areas on the edge of exposure. She sat back in the straight backed office chair and thought about what to say to the doctor.

He was easy to talk to and like a friend when she first met him. He had been new to town when she first came to his office, and they hit it off right away. She had confided in him about a relationship that had broken up after she started working at the high school. He promised her that the right one could come along. A number of right ones seemed to come and go in and out of her life since then. She wished one would stay, and she could come in and tell him she was finally with someone permanently.

Suzanne touched her left knee where some pain had come when she ran to return balls on the court. She remembered the childhood accident—when a neighbor boy had accidentally cut her with the tip of his small hatchet, and she had run home to her

father crying. He held her on his lap when she got the tetanus shot and stitches until she fell asleep. That was when she was five. She missed his voice and words of encouragement. Some days, she was caught off guard by how many decisions you had to make as the so-called adult. Her decisions now impacted lives she barely knew.

Dr. Cappell came in filled with energy and seemed happy to see Suzanne. "Two years is a long time! Let's not wait this long again, Suzanne," he told her. He shook hands with her. He looked better than ever with slight hints of grey in his blond hair. He had always worked out and now moved gracefully and used his hands gently and skillfully as he examined her. The nurse stood to one side as he did her breast exam and pelvic exam. He was careful considerate. Suzanne did not feel the embarrassment and awkwardness that she had with some doctors.

He used a little hammer to check reflexes in her knees and she admitted that she felt some pain at times in her knees after running in tennis. She had heard of all kinds of tests, like MRI's and scans.

"It's not that bad, just a little pain at times." He put his notes in her files.

"Are you taking anything from other doctors or over the counter? Or recreational drugs?" He had to ask her.

"No recreational drugs. That might be a hit with the kids, but not with my principal."

They both laughed at the way she said it. She sounded a little dramatic.

He listened as Suzanne spoke about her father's sudden death last June just when they thought he was recovering from a heart attack. She heard her voice break as she said she had hoped to be married, more settled, before he died. Now it was too late. Dr. Cappell said he understood her feelings, that he had been close to his father, too.

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He completed his exam, listened to her heart, ordering the tests, and lab work. She waited for him to tell her she was fine.

He touched her shoulder gently and told her to get dressed and then come into his office down the hall when she finished. He had never said that to her before.

"Sure," she said. She stiffened and looked at him. The green examining gown hung loosely over her. She felt vulnerable now.

"I'd like to talk to you," he said and quickly left the room.

She felt her hands shaking and slightly dizzy. What had he found? she wondered. Did he see some terrible thing in her physical? She wanted to quickly call her sister or her mother or her friends. She went into the restroom and tried to compose herself. She didn't want the doctor to think she was already panicked. Her face felt flushed as she went into his office and sat in a chair facing his desk.

Dr. Cappell's private office was the kind any professional would want. He had a large, expensive couch, a fine leather office chair for himself, beautiful plants, and a great view outside. Pictures of his wife and children were in various places. His bookshelves had rows of medical books. Diplomas and medical awards were around the room. His life must be nearly perfect, she thought—and it hit her that she might have something terrible happening to her—unexpected.

She regretted all of the junk food she had eaten. She could have some rare illness. Then she thought about having a sexually transmitted disease from her college days or from someone she had trusted—how could she tell anyone? She had heard stories about people who had to list all partner in the last 10 years because they carried communicable diseases. She could see herself contacting men she knew who had married since their relationship with them. She imagined telling her principal that she had to be away on sick leave for something drastic and the teachers' lounge buzzing with stories about her. She had been very careful—and selective. It wasn't fair . . .

Then he came in. He had her file in his hands. He was calm and pleasant.

"Did you find anything wrong?" She could not wait for the buildup. "Anything weird or terrible?" Suzanne tried to disguise the fear in her voice and sound casual.

"Oh, no no! I'm sorry if you thought that! Everything looks fine with what I saw today. Perfect."

Suzanne felt her shoulders loosen and her legs relax. It was nothing. He just wanted to talk to her. Probably recommend exercise and vitamins. She felt herself smiling at him again and waited for him to speak.

"Everything else going well for you?"

"Yes, I think so." That was easy to answer. "I love my job. Just had some concerns about running and tennis and all."

"Your knees might be helped by some warm ups, but they look fine. We can do x-rays, a few tests, if you want. And certain exercises."

"Yes, that would be great," she could see he had something else to say. He turned his head slightly, more toward her.

"Are you seeing anyone special?" He needed that information to see if her problem could be stress-based.

"Oh, no, not right now. I am still looking." She did not mind telling him the truth.

He shifted forward in his leather chair and looked directly at her as if she were the most delicious ice cream sundae he had ever seen.

"Have you ever been up to Cambria or Santa Barbara? Seen the Channel Islands?"

"Sure, it's great up there. Are you going to write me a prescription for a weekend over there?" She got it now. He was going to recommend that she relax more, take some time off.

"Would you like to spend a weekend with me? I have a very nice place over at the coast. I have a boat, if you like sailing. It's all very private."

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Her face went bright red. She could feel it. It was hard to speak to him now. She did not expect this. Her throat was dry. She hoped he would not notice.

"I can't right now. I have a lot of school work on weekends, you know." She heard her voice sounding childish, not like a grown woman.

"I have been wanting to invite you for a long time. I think we have a lot in common, and we'd get along really well." He was unfazed by her embarrassment.

"You are easy to talk with." She hoped he did not think that would ever be a yes.

"I'd like to spend more time with you and get to know you better." He stood and shook hands and offered a very friendly smile before leaving the room.

Suzanne put the orders for the tests in her purse and stood when he was gone. She paid with a check and left the office with her checkbook still in one hand and her keys in the other. She yelled at him and at herself all the way home. She did not want to face work. She did not want to talk to anyone at school now. She wanted to call the doctor and tell him he was out of line. She wanted to tell her friends to watch out for him. He was not the person she believed. She had met his wife at a charity function; his wife was a good person who didn't deserve this. And there were his kids. Suzanne felt like the offer was really just a bad dream, an aberration of the moment.

Then she remembered how comforting he was, how gentle his hands were, how she had fantasized about being with him. She had even joked with her friend about what a line of women there would be if he were single. She was flattered that he wanted her, that he found her body and her mind attractive. He had seen many women, yet he chose her.

She took a shower and ate dinner in her robe. The effect was like a strange pain to her, an exhilaration and a deep ache at the same moment. There was pain in knowing someone she cared

for was different from what she thought. There was pain in knowing that her fantasy could be made into reality.

In the morning, Suzanne's view shifted again. She remembered dating an accountant she had met while getting her taxes done. Maybe the current life styles allowed for professionals to relate more closely. Still, Dr. Cappell had examined her, seen her entire body—and he was married. Something felt wrong about all of that. She felt odd, out of place in the reality of today.

She thought about Darlene Connors, her friend who was a nurse at the university hospital. Darlene was a strong tennis player and knew Dr. Cappell. She could confide what happened with Dr. Cappell to Darlene and at least get back on track.

Darlene was one of those women men fight over. She was tall, very full-breasted, blond with blue eyes, and self-assured. She could walk into a room and have everyone listening to her immediately. While Suzanne had a shy streak, Darlene was completely outgoing. Darlene was a magnet to men.

Darlene had been married twice and had numerous liaisons with men. She had a large appetite for life. Her sense of humor made Suzanne want to spend time with her, and she was a talented tennis player. Darlene was a sort of authority on adventure and men.

They met over at Beacon Park, close to Darlene's home. She was on call and had to be near the hospital, so they were not sure how long they could play. They spun Suzanne's racquet for first serve. Darlene won and hammered the first serves in, sending Suzanne hustling. She returned half of them.

"You're getting better," Darlene yelled across the net. "Are you in love, yet? Must be that!" She laughed while she served.

"Maybe so, I'll tell you if you double fault."

"Not a chance. Your secret will die with you, babe."

Darlene did not take the bait.

They had a banter going. Suzanne really relaxed when they played together. They complimented each other when one made a

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good shot. It was a warm October afternoon, and the sun was still high as the women tried to outdo each other. Darlene was quicker and placed the ball at Suzanne's feet, hard to pick up. Her overheads were accurate and dropped just beyond Suzanne's racquet head. Suzanne managed a few double-handed backhands—swinging the racquet with full force like a baseball bat. They called "good shot" and "nice try" to each other, enjoying the game together. Suzanne played better than she had with Marge. She felt her game coming up. She was quicker, stronger than she had been before. Darlene gave her confidence. They stopped to rest after the first set, each puffing a little. They sat with their backs against the court's metal cyclone fence, side by side.

Suzanne opened the subject of Dr. Cappell when they caught their breath and finished their water break. Suzanne told her about the physical examination and Dr. Cappell's invitation to spend the weekend together. She told Darlene she was surprised—embarrassed, disappointed in him. Darlene was smiling, using a white towel to wipe the back of her hair and her arms damp with sweat. She did not ask for any details. All she said was she could see how that shocked Suzanne.

"Want to play another set?" They could page me any minute. I have time until they call, Suzanne."

They changed sides and walked over to their new courts. Darlene took the service position, her blond hair catching the bright October sunlight. Her tennis whites stood out against her tan skin. She looked like someone who should be on the cover of a tennis magazine. The first serve was in, and Suzanne ran for it; and connected; Darlene went back from the cross court forehand and scored the point. Then she stopped the game suddenly. She had both balls in her hand as she walked up to the net. Suzanne came forward to the net, too, her racquet at her side, surprised that Darlene had interrupted the game.

Suzanne wondered if Darlene's pager had gone off, or if she wanted to quit for the day. Darlene looked at her friend across the net and said, "You should have gone. You would have liked it."

Suzanne looked at her, waiting for more and Darlene turned, walked back and threw a yellow-green ball high into the air and connected in a deep spin serve which sprang in the opposite direction that Suzanne was ready for. She took a full hard swing and missed the ball completely. The serve was a winner in any book, clean, powerful, with an unexpected turn.

"How do you know?" Suzanne had to say it.

Darlene was laughing now at her friend. Suzanne smiled, too, as the ball went past her shoulder and clanged against the fence.

"You missed out. He's great in bed. You should have gone."

Suzanne had to call the next ball out, just past the line. Their hair was wet and curling and their cheeks were flushed from running. Darlene beat her friend two straight sets, but she could not help noticing that Suzanne was improving a little each time. She could see that Suzanne would be able to pick up the spin serves soon, that she would not be thrown off balance by the unfamiliar coming at her.

"You are definitely coming closer. I can see you reaching for it," Darlene said.

"I can feel it, too. I know the pattern better now," Suzanne called back to Darlene. Her knees did not hurt anymore and she felt better with each shot. Darlene was pushing for them to play a third set. Suzanne would have turned down the offer only a week ago, but she felt stronger than she had before. She might even ask Darlene to teach her the spin serve.

*We have to distrust each other.
It's our only defense against betrayal.*

—Tennessee Williams

Kind of Cancer

He was dead. No grey limousines and no endless rows of relatives patting hands and wiping tears. I miss the hum of mindless chatter rising above steaming, bittersweet chicory coffee. I need to sit in the back room of the funeral home and surround myself with the usual wafts of cigarette smoke. Where are the familiar proofs of his passing? Will there be any point in searching for them now while drowning in the pink sea of my bathroom floor? Sprawling my legs and arms across the cotton-candied tiles, cool drops of southern humidity chill my skin. Couldn't hear the faint strains of Dixieland jazz announcing the funeral procession, but it was real . . . he was gone.

We found out too late that it was the kind of cancer, the kind that slowly unknowingly eats away at its host. Reminded me of a piece of summer fruit, so perfectly ripe for the taking. Ever notice once the apple is rolled over how startling the rot polluting from the inside can be? How many times had I touched him and not known? How long had it taken for his outward signs to show? Perhaps we discussed the newest political scandal or the outrageous price of tomatoes at the market, and I didn't know he was slowly slipping away. Why the guilt? Why is it always the person who isn't sick who feels like dying?

Plunk . . . plink . . . plink. Drops of humid water fall from the bottom of the toilet onto the tiles—a calm, cool quiet. The bathroom had always served up a time to think. Run a steaming bath, stand in front of the mirror, and lift the glass to my mouth. Alone, I could pick through the pieces. Surely there were signs.

Think. Replay the memories like movies in my mind and search for his eyes. Look for the dimming in his eyes. Did the tumor spark life during a lazy weekend walk through peddlers' stands in the French Market? Maybe he grew more ill over drinks at Antoine's with our friends. I couldn't see anything. No signs. No dimming in his dark brown windows. I had watched him close those familiar shades so many nights. I had acknowledged the black glaze—the emptiness in them that last time.

Soak in the tub, close my swollen eyes, and try to think of something else. What the hell am I doing listening for his footsteps? Stop looking at his toothbrush on the sink. The damn library won't stop calling about his overdue books, and I can't seem to throw out any of his things. What if I threw away something that held a clue, among his technical books that always confused me, underneath dozens of musky t-shirts that still hold his scent, lurking in a snapshot of him or us or something . . . anything? At least one item might provide an answer. He didn't give me one. No, he left me here alone, soaking in a tub, staring at his toothbrush, listening for him.

Slosh. Water pools on shiny pink tiles, and I try to reach the ringing phone without slipping. Sympathy calls. Friends trying to sound empathetic, but just sound pitiful. "I'm so sorry . . . heard about it from Ellen yesterday . . . woulda called sooner but . . . how ya holdin up?" Words picked with too much care. Some people can't handle it, incapable or unwilling of revisioning me without him. They choose to fade into the past; phone calls not returned. It's easy to spot the ones who can't, or maybe won't, accept the fact that he's gone—have I?

Hear the answering machine pick up, "Hi . . . we're not in right now. Leave us a message . . . we'll call ya back!" I slump into the chair next to the phone, the pain radiates from my stomach, stinging my limbs. My hand numbly picks up the receiver, but I cannot make words come out of my mouth.

A voice on the other end softly speaks, "Hey, girl, it's me . . . umh, how's it goin'?"

A grunt passes through my lips. My oldest girlfriend knowingly pauses then tells me that she is stopping by to check on me. I set the phone down but cannot get back up from the chair. My body refuses to listen to me anymore. My eyes resign from crying and refuse to release anymore pain. My heart insists on pumping, ignoring my protests. My brain remembers things that I beg to delete.

Ding-ding-dong. She will understand. I held her in my arms when she lost her fiancé two years ago. She knows. She spoke to me about missing the small things. I finally understood what she meant.

I miss the indulgences. A note, a touch, a glance. He didn't care if we spent all morning in bed. At least that's how it was in the beginning. Not much time for those things toward the end.

"Just too busy, honey . . . catch you this afternoon . . . we'll make a date for this weekend." I knew how important his work was to him, so I didn't want to pressure him for more time. Anyway, I was regretfully busy, too. However, I pretended to understand when he had to work late nights and made excuses for him at dinner parties and holidays.

My legs stand up and walk toward the door; my hand pulls it back to reveal her—the one who began all of this. "Got this great guy for ya," she had said, "We'll all go out . . . nah, it doesn't have to be a real date . . . just come out and meet him." A couple of vodka martinis that night and several months later, without searching, it became more than a real date. After seven years of marriage, I could tell you the name of every girl he dated starting back in junior high, the exact direction he liked his hair combed, even the neck size in his dress shirts; but I couldn't see inside.

"I can't believe how fast this happened," she tells me, as we sit down next to each other. "How ya handlin it?"

Try not to scream, throw up, punch her in the face. "I'm NOT!" I shriek, "Whatever, just don't feel sorry for me. I'm bout to go off on the next person who gives me 'the look.'"

"Sorry—but ya gotta admit, there's gonna be questions people'll wanna ask," she shoots back.

"I've got it . . . how bout I just paint a sign and nail it to my forehead? It'll read, 'He's gone—I'm here—Get over it!!!' Questions answered—problem solved!"

"Hon', we're here for ya, not out to hurt ya more," she catches herself and shuffles a bit, "What I mean is sometimes it helps to talk through stuff like this. Well, I mean, uh, some people get caught up analyzin *why* things happen and all to help understand the loss. I mean, did ya even know what was goin on at first?"

The urge to stab her with my sorrow and somehow have her hurt as well overtakes me, "Guess ya might as well tell me how stupid and clueless I was."

"I don't think you're stupid," she presses my hand into hers, "I think you're just as surprised as we all were, and ya shouldn't blame yourself." Still holding my hand, she leans in more closely, "But what're ya tellin everybody? There's questions, right?"

I look inside her eyes for more than a moment and take in who she is. I've learned that now. She doesn't deserve his anger. It's not her fault that he's gone. Closing my hand around hers, my lips tell her, "When they ask, I'll tell them it was a kind of cancer. I didn't know how long it had been eatin away at him. I didn't see the signs because he kept it well hidden. It was a kind of cancer that took him from me . . . and now he belongs to her."

A Summer in the San Joaquin Valley

In the San Joaquin Valley, summertime means extreme temperatures. There are times when it gets so hot that you can feel your sweat boiling as it evaporates from your body. Emmanuel was the son of a farm laborer, and he was accustomed to this type of heat. He had been working in the grape fields of Delano ever since he was old enough to balance trays filled with grapes on a wheel barrel. His first summer working in the fields almost caused him to faint from heat exhaustion. Not because of the heat, but because he was a hotheaded adolescent who wanted to be the best damn grape-picker to walk the grape fields of Delano. Emmanuel was a Martinez; he knew that a lazy worker would bring dishonor to the family name, but the fact was that a worker who fainted at work brought more shame, and this was what gave him the strength to get through his first day at work.

Emmanuel did not like working in the fields. Hell. His father did not like working in the fields either, but it was an honest job that put food on the table. He worked in the fields because he needed money to go to college. He had been going to college for two years and he felt ashamed of himself sometimes because people could not understand why a college student would work in the fields. At times he did not understand it either, because every summer it felt like it would be his last summer working in the fields, but he could not escape the intoxicating smell of sulfur and pesticides. It was as if he needed the fields, because they humbled him, and because he liked the field workers; they were like the water that strengthens the roots of the grapevines. They were people that he could relate to, and at times his student personality evaporated in the intense summer heat, and he would return with the morning dew not as a student, but as a person who had been working in the fields his entire life.

The heat exploded in the afternoons, and there was no escaping the backlash of the mushroom cloud that it created.

Emmanuel hungered for a breeze, but there would be no breeze today—they had been too engulfed by the summer heat. Emmanuel thirsted for water; this meant that he had to take the wheel barrel to the other end of the furrow. Two hours had passed since lunch time, and he had been working nonstop. He felt exhausted, but the thought of fresh water empowered him, so he took the wheel barrel. As he approached the end of the furrow, he felt as if he were coming out of a black hole, and as he observed the mechanical movements of the workers he felt like a drone. This feeling always caused him to be depressed, because he realized that all of the people that surrounded him were used to being treated like drones. It was as if, little by little, the summer heat had melted their hopes of obtaining a better life. They had been working inside this black hole for most of their lives, and had no desire to come out. Some dreamed of returning to their beloved Mexico and retiring there, others felt like only death would free them, and others were illegal immigrants, who, like Emmanuel, only worked in the fields for a few months and then returned to their normal lives.

After finishing his water, Emmanuel left his thoughts and returned to his place in the furrow. He vanished into the grapevines like a ghost. At times he felt like a ghost. He began to pick some grapes, and a gentle wind that felt like a stroke of God began to cool his sweat. The smell of sulfur and pesticides began to travel with the wind. It is strange how a gentle wind changes the character of the fields; workers begin to sing, and conversations that were mute find their sound again. Emmanuel did not talk much, not even with his partner who picked grapes with him. Teresa was an illegal immigrant; she was married with two children whom she had left in Mexico under the care of her mother. She did not say much. Probably because she felt that a married woman should not be talking to a 20-year-old single man. The things that Emmanuel knew about her he learned from eavesdropping on conversations that she had during lunch time with the other

women who worked packing the grapes. At times it felt like if she, too, was a ghost.

Sometimes Emmanuel talked to her—mostly when gentle breezes like this one brought out the conversationalist in him. He told her that she should go and get some water. It had been three hours since she had any water to drink, and Emmanuel had seen the empty water jug that she carried with her a couple of steps behind. It was common for the illegal immigrants to be over achievers. They knew that the more grape boxes they picked and packed—the larger their bonus would be. The “bonus” was something that the ranchers invented to increase their profits at the expense of the strength of the needy immigrant workers. Emmanuel got no answer, so he insisted, but this time in a louder tone, and moved towards her because he knew that she was ahead of him.

As he moved forward he thought she was probably sleeping on the ground. It was not uncommon for women to lie down on the grass and fall asleep during the afternoon break, but the break ended 10 minutes ago. The grass was too tall for him to see that she was lying down. He approached closer and found her in a fetal position. Her silhouette reminded him of the Sierra Madre Mountains that stood immobile in front of them. She lay at rest, her head covered with a trucker's hat, and her face wrapped in handkerchiefs to protect her skin from the sulfur of the fields. He shook her, but she did not react. As Emmanuel unwrapped her face, her skin felt like snow, and a cold chill ran through his blood. He checked her nose and mouth for air, but she was not breathing. Immediately he ran out of the furrow. He wept. His tears mixed with sweat as he was trying to talk to the foreman. Emmanuel knew it was too late. He had seen her lifeless face drenched in cold sweat, an image that would burn in his memory forever.

The next day as Emmanuel approached the grape fields he saw a site that was too familiar. All the field workers were in a circle with their hats off and their wallets out. Farm laborers died

often in the summers, but mostly because they were involved in car accidents where the overcrowded vans in which they traveled did not have enough seatbelts. Rarely did they die of heat exhaustion. The family of Teresa was asking for donations because they could not afford the transfer of her body to México. Everyone gave some money. Then the foreman said it was time to get to work. Everyone placed their hats back on their heads, returned to their furrow, and prepared for another hot summer day in the San Joaquin Valley. As Emmanuel placed his pruning shears in his calloused hands, he hoped again that this would be his last summer working in the fields.

Black Car

I stand there, with beads of sweat starting to form on my face. On the inside I am panicking, my heart is racing, and my body feels as if I have battery acid running through my veins. My knees are weak, and my palms are sweaty. I stand in disbelief as a gust of wind sways my thick black curly hair. As I think about the events that just took place, I clench my fists, and all the muscles in my lean muscular body retract. I am fighting the urge to yell at the top of my lungs. I am in so much pain that my heart slams in my chest at the thought of what took place. On the outside, however, I know I seem to be calm, cool and collected—never losing my cool, ever. There are people passing by me; they are moving as if it was a crowded mall, but in reality, school has just let out. They push past me, struggling to move through the herd.

I wonder to myself, what would all of these people do if they knew? Would they laugh at me, take pity or call me a fool? I attempt to shrug the thought off and continue on my way. I walk on along the pavement avoiding the wet grass. Looking up at the sky, I see rain clouds above my head, thick dark clouds, bruised with a purple tint. The sky is already beginning to dim, and yet it's only 3:00. People continue to move about. They are mindless, faceless puppets. They do, say and think what they are told. It's like none of them can think for themselves, moving in unison like ants. There is noise all around me, and yet I hear nothing amidst the chatter. To look through my eyes would be like sitting through a silent movie. Only a silent movie of ants, as the time moves forward, and I walk in slow motion.

Across the open yard I see a girl. She is standing by the front gate. She is beautiful with long black hair to her shoulders. Her tan skin matches her striped shirt. Just by her look, I can tell she is not from around here. I continue to watch her as thin Asian eyes survey the area. With just one glance you're trapped, unable to break free of her spell. She leans her petite body against the

green painted steel gate. Just then, a gust of wind picks up her silky black hair and for a moment I wonder; is this some bad dream? She is the root of my sorrow.

Just then the unthinkable happens. The silence breaks and the movie of perfect unison is disturbed as a sharp and sarcastic "Hello Craig!" splits the air. I am startled as I snap back to reality. A plump girl stands in front of me. She has a smug look of superiority on her acne prone face. "Hello," I manage to force, while trying to keep the look of disgust from overwhelming me. "Sorry about what happened to you, but what can I say, some things aren't meant to be." I look on in quiet disgust as she moves her chapped lips. I can see right through her as she gives me her false sympathy. Her only interest is learning what she can from me, so she can report back to her friends. "So have you seen her?" She says as her checkered collared shirt hangs on for dear life. "No!" I reply as I look over the top of her head; the girl is no longer standing at the gate. The plump girl continues to say something else, but I continue walking.

Once more the silence takes over, and perfect unison is once more. A few more moments pass, and it is as if it had never been disturbed. More people move through the gate, and the inside of the school is almost empty as the last of the heard moves forward—I along with them. Moving along, she catches my eye once more; she is closer to me now. I pass the green gate and walk toward the parking lot; infested with people getting into cars, smoking buses, parents yelling for children to get in their cars. She is standing on the curb. Even though she has caused me so much pain, I still care for her. She looks in my direction, and at once, a thousand hot needles enter my flesh. The pain is almost unbearable; yet I maintain my cool. I wonder what she is thinking. I wonder if she ever thinks of me? At this point, I realize that I never received an explanation; no good-bye—nothing. The feeling of emptiness comes over my body; a quiet anger fills my heart.

We are now in speaking range, and once more the silence is broken. "Hi Craig!" She is looking me right in the eye and flashes me a smile. That same smile that I had once fell in love with, but now only brings me pain. "How are you," the only words I can choke out as I feel myself breaking down. Drops of rain are beginning to fall on my head, sprinkling down my face, down my neck, and into my soul. "What have you been up to?" that same smile still on her face, never fading. I say nothing. It's too much now. As the rain drops begin to thicken, I wonder how she can stand there and act as if nothing ever happened, as if we have never held hands or kissed—never been more than friends. I wonder if she can sense my pain? If she can, I can't tell. She doesn't even give a damn! The parking lot is almost empty now. Most of the cars are preparing to leave, except one: a nimble moving black Passat. I can feel the vibrations of the rap music playing as it approaches. It's new, with chrome 22 inch rims and a body kit to match. It looks like it could have been in a TV ad, quickly moving through the other cars as if it were on an obstacle course. The falling rain only complements the car's beauty. I glance back—she is also admiring the car.

The vibrating music finally reaches it's peak as the car stops along the sidewalk. "I got to go. I'll see you, ok?" she yells, and without any response from me, she quickly opens the door on the passenger side. I lower my eyes to take a look at the driver and I see him. The last person I would expect. We make eye contact for what feels like an eternity. He steps out from the car. He has dark skin with Asian eyes. His hair texture is like mine, in fact, we could be mistaken for brothers. He has on a dark leather jacket with matching faded blue jeans. I am doing all I can to fight back tears—but it's no use. This man was my best friend, and until this point, I thought of him as a brother. "Do you need a ride?" I say nothing. He steps away from his car, approaching me he whispers "I know I should have told you about us but . . ." I can tell he is searching for the correct words to say, but at this point, there are

none. The rain is pouring, and it's the only thing hiding my tears as if the sky took pity on me. "Just get in Craig, we can talk on the way." "No thanks, you've done enough already!" I say coldly, "I can walk!" I turn to walk, "but Craig!" It's too late, already the silence is taking over again.

As I begin walking out of the parking lot, and in the direction of my house; the mud from the ground slows my pace sticking to me, holding me in that painful moment. I tell myself there is nothing I can do about what has just taken place—nothing. I look over my shoulder as the black car rides off into eternity, and I am left. But I am not alone; I have my tears.

The Bottle and Baudelaire

Great, he thought to himself. It's raining again. It seemed like it was always raining. He left California for the big city on the East Coast hoping he could make it.

All he had was rain. It made him sad but he wouldn't let anybody back home know it. He wrote to his parents often and told them that success was right around the corner; they didn't believe him, and he pretended not to notice.

He found a bottle of wine in the closet and sat in front of his typewriter. He tried to type but nothing came. He drank straight from the bottle because it made him feel invincible. He lit a cigarette and smoked it quickly hoping to find inspiration. Nothing.

There was a knock on the door. It was the landlady and pretended that he was somewhere else. "I know you're in there," she yelled. "I can smell the cigarette smoke." He let her in, and she sat on the couch. She sat on the far end where it wasn't too lumpy. She made herself comfortable, and it bothered him to know that she felt sorry for him. "You're behind in the rent. I've given you every break I can." He nodded his head solemnly. "Please give me another week," he pleaded. He was too sweet of a kid to throw out, so she agreed and left.

He punched the wall like it was his own bad luck. He was angry because there was nothing in him and nothing in the typewriter. He put his jacket on and walked down the stairs and found himself outside in the rain. He had three dollars in his pocket. It was cold but the wine wouldn't let him feel it.

He walked past the hustlers, the winos, and the prostitutes. This was his new home, and he still hadn't gotten used to it. Tomorrow he'd look for a job, but he really didn't want to think about it. He walked up the block to Lou's and bought another bottle of wine. He walked down the street to an empty parking lot and drank.

R.M. Murry

When he finished he threw the bottle up in the air and ran towards the street to listen for the crash. It sounded and he smiled. It had been the first time all day. He was drunk and things were looking up. He walked back to his small room and sat down in front of his typewriter.

It was cold in the room because the heater was broken. He shivered and took another drink. Then he wrote:

Bianca was there and we were sitting in the grass and the sun was shining and your blonde hair was in your eyes and I was reading Baudelaire and you called me a Romantic and I felt silly even though I knew it was true—

He stopped writing and dried his eyes. It had been a long year, and he missed home.

Meh, Weary

Meh weary, meh weary bad! was Sammy's reply. You weary . . . Lard Geesus, meh know how you feel! But we still hav life. Eh he, replied Sammy, weighted down by the load he carried on his back. He was returning from a hard day's work in the mountains where he maintained a provision ground. There he watched over the cassava, the sweet potatoes of various colors and texture, and the peas he planted some time ago. When harvested, Sammy would take his crop to the local market on Saturday morning during the reaping season. Left over produce was sold during the week to the villagers. Each day he would pull weeds, hoe, water, and rest when the sun was hot. No one knew what kept Sammy out all day. His plot of land wasn't that big, maybe a little more than a half acre or less. Nevertheless, Sammy started his journey at dawn and returned at dusk. You could set your watch by him, if you had one. Most villager's didn't. Time was told by the sun and the activities of the villagers. Everyone had a routine . . . rise at 6 a.m.; brush your teeth; fetched water for a bath if it wasn't done the night before; take a bath; dress, eat breakfast and head down the hill to the main road, and off to school. This was my routine . . . well the routine of most of the school age kids in the village.

I watched Sammy five days a week return from his provision ground. I never saw him leave in the morning for he left before my day started. He was a man I decided should have been retired. This decision was not based on a long history of work for the government or on any age limit—for I had no idea how old Sammy was. Some of the villagers speculated that Sammy was nearing seventy, some thought he was past seventy. I can see how someone might conclude that he was around seventy, his face and eyes told of a life that was long and hard. Yet, in the rough lines of his face and the sun-parched skin set around brown eyes was a story. A story that I decided needed a voice, my voice, his voice, our voices.

Sammy's face was quite a contrast to me with its dark skin and brown shiny eyes. At times his eyes appeared soft. Soft because they were the only thing left on the landscape of his face that suggested Sammy once had a warm, inviting spirit. Eyes that said he had seen happier, better days. Whether this was true or my wish, or hope for him, a man I did not know I am not sure, nevertheless, his eyes spoke to me. They were like a beacon of hope in the rough and rugged landscape of his face.

As a little girl Sammy was always old and distant. He seemed lost . . . always as if he was waiting for something, or for someone . . . who I don't know, for he did not have any children. At least that is what everyone believed. We held this belief because no one ever came to visit him from away, not from America or England. I have never, on those rare occasions when I overheard him talking to Miss Teacher, heard Sammy speak of a wife or children. I guessed that what he was waiting for was relief, relief from whatever it was that plagued him. I now know it was life. Living plagued him. Yet, it appeared to me tht he lived expectantly, but sadly . . . almost as if what he was expecting was inevitable but unwanted. Almost as if, that thing will come, must come, but it was slow in coming. This I decided, was why Sammy appeared distracted . . . even haunted. The waiting was haunting him daily. He was ready and waiting, waiting for that thing to come. This in itself is haunting. Haunting because no one knew when it would come, yet they were ready for it, so he and others like him lived in suspension. Suspended in time, blank faces, empty lives, waiting. This is why as a little girl I was afraid of Sammy, yet his existence aroused my curiosity. He seemed mysterious to me. No one in my childhood captivated me the way Sammy did. He was someone to watch, to figure out, to understand. Maybe in understanding Sammy, I would understand me. I don't know . . . I was a thirteen year old girl who was captivated by an old villager. An old man, I can't say why I had such an interest in this old villager because I never really spoke to Sammy except for the usual greetings between an adult and a child.

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We never exchanged more than a few words . . . Good morning (good marning), ah how you ah do? Fine, was my reply, Fine? You fine? said Sammy. Yes, came my reply. Ah-right, ah right he responded. Nothing more was said and he continued on his way as did I.

This conversation was unusual, for most adults in the village asked a lot of questions, particularly the women. Most of which was to pry into my family's private business. My Mom would caution us not to share anything with certain villagers. Particularly those who bore us ill will. If she wanted anyone to know something, she, an adult, would tell them. Telling was left up to the adults.

It was easy to obey my mother's wishes for most of the village women cursed at me for no apparent reason. At least reasons not apparent to a thirteen-year-old girl. When I was older, sixteen, I became aware of the reasons and thought them foolish. It was a case of, my family felt that we were better than them, the other villagers that is. In some ways we were better . . . in what ways I wasn't sure . . . I just knew we were. This is how I felt. I can't speak for my mother, or anyone else in my family. They felt we had something they didn't have, what that something was, I am not sure. Maybe a sense of self, maybe dignity, maybe, maybe a sense of where we were going, maybe, who knows it was not clear to me. I wondered if it was clear to them.

It was possibly the brief and empty conversations that made me curious about Sammy. Who was Sammy? What made him who he is today? How did he grow up? Who raised him? Where did he come from? Had he lived in America? England? Another island? Did he play soccer and cricket? Was he ever married? Did he have children? Who was Sammy? What was his last name? Sammy, what?

To me Sammy possessed the quiet humility of a man who had been taught a serious lesson by life mixed in with the noble demeanor of a wise king. Nothing about him was pretentious,

nothing too complex for he was, he is, a simple man, a weary man. For Sammy, weariness was a condition of the mind and not of the body. It was a state of being; his existence.

Again, the latter may be a hope, a wish for a man I did not know, a man I wanted to know, a mysterious man. It was my frequent observation of Sammy, my study of him that nursed my growing desire to sit and talk to him. I had so many questions and I felt somehow that he had the answers. Not just to my questions of his life, but of life in general, of people. As a young girl I wondered what life held for me and I was curious about what the adults in my world thought my life would be like. Adults often approached children and said things like, "You go grow up to be som-bady special." "Get an education and grow up an, be som-bady yu moddah could be proud ah!"

I looked for my future in the lives and dreams of those who had lived before me, those who were now adults in my world. Big people, as my grandmother used to say, big people. She referred to older people as "big." This meant they were not children or young adults.

Miss Teacher, an old retired school teacher; no one knew her real name, her first name, or her last name. She was always Miss Teacher to everyone in the village. She has always been Miss Teacher—that was what he did, that was who she was . . . a teacher. Even the adults called her Miss Tee-cha. You will hear then echo her name as they passed by her small blue, three-room house with white trims . . . Miss Tee cha! Ah how you ah do? Me ah-right, me deh, me deh—deh! came her reply from behind the makeshift galvanized and wooden fence that surrounded her yard and which provided some semblance of privacy.

I spoke to Miss Teacher often. I took math lessons from her. I was awful at math so my mother arranged for Miss Teacher to tutor me. She was very focused on our task, no distractions and very little talking occurred during our hour together. Always at the small kitchen table we sat; math book and my black and white hardcover notebook evenly placed between us. My pencil was

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sharpened just a few minutes earlier with a sharp kitchen knife.

Miss Teacher would complete the first math problem, showing her work and then ask me to do the next problem. Saying out loud what I was doing as I did it. I would mutter when I didn't know what to do next. This was when Miss Teacher would insist that I speak up and repeat what I was saying. If the problem was wrong and my answers to her questions were not satisfactory, I was firmly told me, "Nah waste meh time."

When she was frustrated, Miss Teacher spoke in the local dialect. It was music to my ears, but I was jealous because I could not respond in kind. I was forbidden to speak the dialect. I went to a "good school," so consequently I was to demonstrate the benefits of attending a "good school"—a Catholic school.

Despite the occasional reminder that I was wasting her time, I liked having Miss Teacher help me. She was a gentle lady for the most part; quite slender compared to the other women in the village who were portly with large breasts, stomachs and thighs. The mark of a black woman, the mark of the women I grew up with. My mark, my God-determined mark. Miss Teacher was tall and regal. She carried herself well. Modestly dressed . . . she never wore pants. She was considered a proper lady. Most of the women in the village wore pants, I wouldn't say they were not proper, they were free, free to choose what to wear. I too, felt free wearing pants. I could do anything in pants whereas I couldn't do so in a dress or skirt. Miss Teacher had no children of her own. I don't know if she was ever married and I have never seen a man visit her. This was easy to determine since she was our neighbor.

I don't really know the origin of my curiosity about the adults in my world. They were distant and as a child I wasn't permitted to be in big people's business, especially when they were gossiping or talking about their problems. Of course, as children we eavesdropped often, hoping to get a glimpse into their world which would probably offer some indication of what our lives would be like. But, for me, what I heard was scary and sad. I recall vividly from my childhood how hard women worked, especially

mothers. How much they sacrificed for their children and for men. I witnessed the suffering of women and I didn't care to hear it, I didn't care to be reminded of what my life might be like when I became a woman—a life filled with suffering.

The women in my village suffered greatly, both by the hands of men and other women, and in some instances by their own doing. Women suffered in their relationships with other women. They suffered in their relationships with the women who knew their pain and used it against them; they were women who had suffered in the same way. This saddened me greatly. It frightened me that we could be so callous towards ourselves. I won't go as far as to say I hated women, for to do that would in some way indicate I hated myself and I didn't hate myself. I admit I suffered from insecurities about my social skills, about my ability to play sports (roundas, tennis, net-ball, basketball, etc.), but I was never given a reason to hate myself. I may have been jealous of friends and cousins who navigated the social scene better than I did—who knew how to handle the boys in the village. They would quickly come up with sassy responses to the boys' crude attempts at communicating and getting our attention. I never knew what to say, plus I didn't care to engage in coded conversations with boys I didn't care for as friends or anything else for that matter. Of course, this would change as I got older.

Amazingly, I didn't feel terribly upset at being the odd girl in the group of my cousins and girlfriends. This was especially true when I found something else to occupy my time—watching big people—Sammy. I wanted to find out what made him tick. I didn't know then that I was also gaining a better understanding of me.

Since I didn't fit in with the girls my age, I kept to myself. Partly because I did not want to do what they were doing—go to the mango grove to steal mangoes or Tamarind or talk about the girls they didn't like. I found myself more intrigued with the world around me, particularly the adults in my world. Consequently, I observed everything around me. Everything that would give me a

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glimpse of adulthood, a look into my future. My grandmother used to say I have an old spirit. My sister tells me that to this day. My friends constantly seek advice from me because, in their minds, I am wise. I agree with them a little bit.

As we worked on my math homework, I would occasionally gaze around her home looking at pictures of her when she was young. I had hoped to get a glimpse of her past, her family—a mother, a sister, a brother, or even friends, but all that was present were two faded black and white pictures of herself—one in a school uniform and the other in her Sunday best with her hymnal and Bible. Miss Teacher was a very beautiful lady. She still is.

As we worked, I heard a faint voice call out, "Miss Tee-cha." She responded, "Saammy, how ya doo? Meh weary, meh weary bad!" She spoke as she moved toward the door that faced the road and I followed her. I wanted to witness this exchange.

You weary?

Uh huh!

Well Lard Jeeesus!

My eyes caught Sammy's face. He looked at me and held my gaze for a brief moment as if he wanted to say something. Miss Teacher interrupted. Meh home all day today, arrl day, tired like anything. Tired, but blessed! It was at this moment that Miss Teacher appeared older than she previously appeared. Maybe it was her speech, the way she dressed—I can't say. But it was at that moment that I realized that she may be older than my mother, who at the time was forty. I decided to grant her the age of fifty-five.

My eyes caught Sammy's and his seemed to sparkle.

Again, he said nothing, nodded and continued on his way. He didn't carry a load today, just his cutlass which he used to trim back the bushes and small trees that crowded his land and his bucket once filled with his breakfast and lunch.

I had my wish one day. That was to speak with Sammy, more than our usual exchange. He was waiting for the bus at the side of the road to take him to the capitol city of St. John (the locals refer to it as town). I had to run an errand for my mother

(buying bread from the baker shop in town for Sunday breakfast). It was Saturday, around 3 p.m. I was curious as to why Sammy was home early from the market and then returning to town on the same day. This was unusual. I was extremely curious about this change in his Saturday routine so I asked, "Sammy, where are you going? A bold and unusual question for a child to ask an adult. Sammy turned his head and looked down at me. It was the first time I saw Sammy smile and his brown eyes seemed more shiny than ever before, almost as if they were sparkling. He said nothing for a few minutes and then he said softly, "Meh a go tong (town)," he paused as he looked away. "For ah funeral, me ah go for ah funeral." Nothing else was said while we waited for the bus. I didn't think Sammy knew anyone besides Miss Teacher. Anyone, that is, whose funeral he would attend. The understanding was that you attended the funeral of someone you knew well. You just didn't go to other people's funerals for show. Death wasn't something you want to be associated with unless you had to . . . unless it was your own or that of someone dear to you. This was my first glimpse into Sammy's life as he lived it, not as I had wished it to be. He cared for someone enough to go to their funeral. It was later in our relationship that I learned it was Sammy's brother who had died, a younger brother.

Final exams were next week and I needed some extra help with math in preparation to pass my exam. My mother was unusually concerned since this would determine my promotion to the next level. Sammy's greetings to Miss Teacher distracted us. Miss Teacher smiled as she moved toward the door. She stepped outside and sat on the steps, I eagerly joined her. Sammy spoke to me.

How you a-do?

Fine

Fine?

Yes!

Ah-right . . . he held my gaze. You grow up to be smart like Miss Tee-cha.

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Yes!

Yes?

Uh huh! I smiled as I responded.

Then Sammy smiled . . . a warm smile accompanied by his sparkling brown eyes.

Miss Teacher's voice jolted me . . . Sammy, me hear your brother dead.

Eh he!

The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away.

Yes.

He gib, and he tek

Yes, he take and he gives.

I noticed that Miss Teacher would occasionally switch from the Queen's English (as we refer to proper English) to the local dialect. It was fun to hear her mix the two. My mother prohibited me from speaking both. I could only speak proper English. When I played with my cousins, I spoke the dialect.

This was the beginning of a many conversations with Sammy. A year had passed before I felt I really knew Sammy. That was the year he died.

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