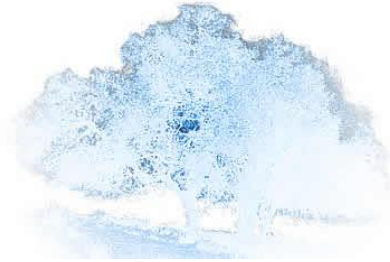


PVR 5



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POMONA VALLEY REVIEW



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**A special thanks to all those involved in promotion,
especially to the Cal Poly Pomona faculty, staff,
and students who made this possible.**

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Dear Readers

Ten years ago, *Pomona Valley Review* projected its literary voice through the hegemony of science and technology at Cal Poly Pomona, encouraging the campus and surrounding area to connect with its poetic interior. Since then a number of students and faculty from across the world have published their work with us, including many students from our own campus, as well as PhD candidates, professors, and established authors. But keeping a review together amongst a shifting English department has been a most challenging task. Despite the struggles, several issues have surfaced in print, some of which are available at the Cal Poly Pomona library and online today, yet *PVR* unfortunately saw a period of inactivity in the mid-2000s as people came and went. While the changes have been difficult and sometimes seemingly monolithic, *PVR* will continue to evolve, adapt, and emerge unscathed.

The last six months have been particularly difficult, as several of our staff graduated with their MAs and have been finding their places amidst the universities and schools of the Los Angeles area, either pursuing doctoral work or beginning a career in teaching, yet with your avid support and

promotion we have mustered the strength to overcome these obstacles and get back to doing what we love best: publishing your work.

As we prepare *PVR* 6 for this April, for which we are still accepting submissions, we hope you will enjoy this more reader-friendly version of *PVR* 5. It has truly been a joy to see the submissions pour in from all parts of the world, from PhD students in the United States and Canada, to artists from Brazil and writers from India, and of course from our own undergraduate and graduate students. May this issue find you well on a cozy evening in your favorite literary spot, the mood just right, your favorite authors and artists speaking to you from the firmament in poetic unison.

While we of course thank all of those who have supported our review over the ten years, we would also like to thank *A Few Lines Magazine* for the wonderful poetry readings they've been hosting recently. Truly, it seems there has been a resurgence of the literary arts in our area, and we hope there will be much more impassioned discourse to come.

Thank You,
PVR

CHRISTMAS TRIP TO THE MORGUE

When you pine for the sunshine of a friendly face...

Make way everybody, got some body...
Somebody...Coming through

The old gurney
With squeaky wheels
Without cushions
Glides along the whitest hallways
Unknown to man, but known to me
Ever so faint, the overhead speakers
Play Christmas carols behind layers
Of sad static

Oh there's no place like home for the holidays!

Now it's just us
His family is gone, Tearful goodbyes
Used to be so sad before my heart went bad

Toe tag, check	(Don't look too closely)
Jaw clamped shut, check	(Otherwise the mortician breaks it)
Shit catcher, check	(Even in death, accidents happen)
Bodybag sealed, check	(Because you don't want it on your shoes if you forgot the shit catcher)

Open the fridge... The bigger one...
Slide out, cold hard metal slab
Fresh with the smell of bleach

And some homemade pumpkin pie...

One, two, three, PULL!

Nothing heavier, than dead weight
If the soul moved on
Shouldn't the body weigh less?

One, two, three, PUSH!

If you want to be happy in a million ways....

In you go.
Sorry, no neighbors today
But maybe soon
Just wait here

You can't be home sweet home!

Alone, naked, and cold
One day it will be me in there
Alone, naked and cold
One day we will all be in there
Alone, naked, and cold.

~ Alex Brondarbit

STRICT SEXUAL HARRASMENT POLICY

Unwanted sexual advances, that's what happens all the time, she never saw it coming from me, I laid it on pretty thick, but I never lied, no strings attached fun, that's all I ever wanted, I knew she was unhappy in her marriage, the world knows I'm unhappy in mine, things we shouldn't talk about at work, especially me to her- I'm her boss and she's not quite sure how to handle my advances, she likes to flirt and text but when it comes to any real contact I can tell she's a bit nervous, but I push her anyway and it's always the same- making out behind a building at work, following her- leading her to some obscure parking lot to have sweaty sex in her backseat, the awkward silences after where lovers usually whisper sweet nothings or confess their love and admiration, but she gets none of that- I can tell she is confused and hurt, conflicted daily about whether to keep going or stop the affair, now we sit at my desk and she has asked for my help- another man is harassing her- my peer, her superior, she wants him to stop and cringes when he touches her, this time there is no flirting, she does not encourage him but ignores the touches, hoping they will stop but they don't, lately they are turning to gropes and she is desperate- she sits on my desk as I finish one last email- I have pressured her into letting me have her again after work, as she waits he comes in and we all start talking and my back is slightly turned- she kicks my chair as he begins to touch her, friendly pats turning to so much more, I hesitate to turn, give him time to stop so I don't blatantly catch him, she sits there, stuck between two villains- desperately wanting one to prove himself noble, yet I fail her, let him get his fill, she is rescued only when another man walks in to talk to us, everyone shifts, the two extra men leave on business, she stands up accusingly, I see the pain and disgust in her eyes and only shrug my shoulders, she walks out as my phone rings and I text her to ask where we are meeting- her husband has called her, she can't meet, a fake excuse, we both know, but I have failed her and crossed too many lines today- I wonder if this is the end even though I know I won't leave it alone here- I'll push the issue until I am done with her just as I have the other girls before her, and she's different, because while she is the one who deserves it most of all, she is the only one I won't fall in love with- I've made that mistake before, no- no more getting my heart involved, I will swallow my guilt as I feel the longing and need in her eyes bore through my soul, always refusing her everything she deserves and needs- until one day, someday, when it will all be over.

~ April Wages

IN THE MOONLIGHT

The full moon gazes down
Her cool glow lights your path.
The stake is set, the faggots fueled
Ready to blaze and burn your prey.

Your rowdy mob sets out with torches
Into the winter's naked forest.
As you close in you see her circle
But soft, sweet zealot, open your eyes.

Outside your circle you see her knelt
Before an altar scattered with artifacts.
You cringe as you take them in:
Candles and salt, incense, food, a dagger, a broom.

*In her circle she works at peace
In the space she swept so pure to pray.
And cast her circle carefully
With her bless'd and honour'd athame.*

*In her circle are candles lit
Honoring those she thanks and loves. It's
With her cakes and chalice that
She shared communion with holy spirits.*

Outside her circle you will see
The symbol that marks her out.
The pentacle you loathe and fear
Five points encircled, viewed with hate.

*Inside her circle she gazes fondly
On the symbol of her mother etched with art
Fire, air, earth, water, and spirit-
Elements of the Goddess- her heart.*

*Inside her circle she knows your will
Your creed: "Suffer not a witch to live."*

*She knows your faith and rituals well.
Her creed: "And harm ye none."*

*She has seen the symbol upon your altar
A torture device you hold so dear.
And watched you light candles to pray there
She cringed as you ate your savior's flesh.*

*Inside her circle she chants softly
Releasing the magic before you break it. Cure?
She knows all her healings have been forgotten
Inflamed by faith, her neighbors come to end her.*

Soft, fair zealot. More blood in your God's name?
She'll not fight your bigotry
Standing proudly under her dear moon.
Fire- burn. So mote it be!

~ April Wages

LET THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

Poor thing is always in there,
Pawing, clawing, yowling for air.
She knows it, lets the guilt take her
Internal lies eating away at their maker.
An occasional successful rip in the sack,
Claws bleeding with each saw and hack.
Incensed with hope by the hint of light
Mewing feverently, heard, yet out of sight.
Self-inflicted wounds give the cat pause
It huddles in fear, maimed by its own claws.
She knows if kept there it will suffocate
Hiding what you love, what others hate.
She does love the cat, which hurts more
Hearing it smothered, denying the gore.
The bag is meant to protect it,
A shield, though not well fit.
She grows angry that she must hide what she does
Stifled growls and howls emit from the fuzz.
The cats senses change, feels hope in the hand
She loosens the tie, the cat leaps to the land.
The secrets are out, she has confessed all
Stroking the cat, she calmly waits for the call.
That will end life as she knows it
Relief now, more than she can admit.

~ April Wages

THE CANARY HOME

The knocking interrupted us. We were fighting, but about what I can't remember. Fights came so easily for us, as indiscriminate as they were brutal. Three concussive knocks hushed us. Joanne nodded for me to answer. The lock was a deadbolt I'd been meaning to replace and as I tried to open the door the rusted bolt stuck. I cranked down on the cylinder, feeling desperate to get it open like I was playing one of those games kids make up where you have five seconds to take off your shoes or a monster will eat you. After wrestling with the lock a bit, I managed to pry it open.

The man at the door was a Rim Rock cop. I work for Bedford Police the next county over so I know the type, wide-shouldered with a heavy walrus mustache clipped under his bulldog's nose. Under the dull gleam of a badge that read Officer Kerr, a grease spot was stitched to his shirt like a commendation. Most people think cops are Shriners with handguns. Usually we're strangers to each other, like everyone else.

"Are you Mr. McClusky," Officer Kerr said, glancing at his notepad. He didn't wait for a response.

"There was an accident today on Meridian and Faber involving your wife. She was struck by a van while walking and pronounced dead at the scene shortly thereafter."

Joanne leaned closer, all the breath going out of her. A gust of wind rushed through the doorway, needling and crisp as spearmint. I pulled my fingers to my eyes and tried to choke away the tears, but it was no use. I couldn't stop laughing.

Confusion passed over Officer Kerr's face. Even in a job where you're trained to expect the unexpected, this must've come out of nowhere.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to stop laughing. My eyes were teary and a ragged cough, prickled by the laughter, kept me gasping. Officer Kerr watched his notepad with flop sweat dampening the carpet under his nose.

"You are Joanna, McClusky's husband, correct?"

Joanne stepped from behind the door to save me.

"Excuse my rude husband," she said. "Come inside, please."

Officer Kerr was back on the radio in a few minutes, talking rapidly as he trudged to his cruiser.

“Can you believe this? Joanne and Joanna are close, but obviously not the same.” Joanne’s fingers were going white around her coffee mug. I was hoping she’d laugh it off--chalk up being misidentified as the dead woman to bad luck and have a drink with me after Officer Kerr left. Looking at her, I knew she wasn’t in the mood.

“How could you laugh at something like that? Someone tells you your wife is dead and you laugh?”

“Do I have to remind you that you didn’t die? You’re standing here. It was someone else,” I said.

Joanne looked slightly queasy. “Yeah, someone else died. When you think about it that way I guess it is funny.”

Her mouth was turned down in a broken saucer grimace she reserved for special occasions. Lately everything was a special occasion. Officer Kerr trudged back to the door, pausing, as if to let us finish.

“I’m sorry. The damn dispatcher sent me to the wrong house.”

“So do you have to go tell that poor woman’s family that she... passed?” asked Joanne.

“No, she didn’t have any relatives, other than a mother over at Canary retirement, but she’s got Alzheimer’s.”

“Aren’t they going to mention the poor girl’s death to her mother?”

“Yes, someone will tell her.”

“It’s like an ironic fate, having to be told your daughter is dead and never remembering. Horrible,” Joanne said with a shudder.

“Yes, ma’am,” Officer Kerr said.

“Well, no harm on this end,” I said, showing Officer Kerr back out. “Thank God Joanne was home. That would’ve been a shock.” I tried to banish the humor from my voice, but it still bubbled up. After I shut the door on Officer Kerr, I tried to catch Joanne’s eye, but she was already walking away.

The woman’s right hand trembled as she pushed the register over to me. If you replaced her uniform with a bathrobe and planted her in a wheelchair, you wouldn’t have doubted she was a patient at the home. Her scalp showed through the disheveled gray web of her hair like an old scar. She didn’t sign me in or ask my

name, just started talking about Joanna's mother like I was a regular visitor.

"She's been sulky today, so if you're expecting much out of her I don't think you'll get it, the poor thing."

"Has anyone told her about Joanna's death," I asked.

"Oh, your friends came and told her. And Nurse Daily spoke to her. They think she doesn't understand, but I think she does deep down," the nurse tapped her temple with a wrinkled finger. "Inside, she knows everything that's happened."

"Do you mind if I have a word," I said.

"Not if you can find one. Room 25."

She nodded me down the hall. The smell of the old folk's home was overpowering. Like someone forgot to flush and covered it with pine cleansers. The nurses' station was empty and the shimmer of organ music blared from somewhere close. Walking through the hallway, I saw shrunken women, perched on hospital beds, mouths spilled open like they were screaming silently. Further down the hall a birdcage sat outside a vacant room. A cockatoo glared at me as I passed, ruffling his feathers and squawking defiantly like a watchdog.

I stopped in the hall for a moment, and took a deep breath. Why was I visiting the dead girl's mother? It wasn't because I felt sorry for her; I knew what it was to see tragedies happen to people, terrible things that occurred simply because they'd broken the universal law we all know but can't do anything about--being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But those situations had never compelled me to do anything outside of my job. No, something drew me here. Being a cop is following your gut. And something strange was happening. Something I couldn't put my finger on.

Walking inside I saw her room was unpainted and threadbare. A small window overlooked a grey square of muddy lawn. On her nightstand a broken geranium lolled in a beam of weak sunlight. Joanna's mother was frail, like a living mummy. Her lips were puckered and dry and her grey hair was wild and pillowy. Her eyes were open. Standing at the foot of the bed, I couldn't tell if she was waiting for me to speak or unaware of my presence.

"Mrs. McClusky, I'm here to talk about your daughter."

No discernable response. Maybe a deeper breath challenged her grey lips or her pupils un-dilated for a millisecond, but I couldn't tell.

“Your daughter has been in an accident,” I continued, but was interrupted.

“Route 441, where grass meets pine, a gorge that eats the sky.”

Her voice was like burning paper. I stepped closer, trying to assemble her words into some logical form.

“What did you say?”

Nothing. Down the hall, the organ music ceased and for half a minute there was only the flat line of the heaters.

“Who are you with,” a voice said from behind me.

The voice belonged to Nurse Daily. She was holding a tray covered with plastic shielding. I told her who I was.

“It’s time for Miss Emma’s lunch. You can come back later, after she’s had a proper meal.”

“I was just here about her daughter,” I said.

Nurse Daily placed the tray on the table and uncovered it. The smell of vegetables, farty and overcooked, assaulted the room.

“Hadn’t she been troubled enough,” she said, lowering her voice. “She lost her daughter and now fifteen cops have to come tell her about it over and over again.”

Nurse Daily shook her head, the high band of her hair moving like a building with faulty foundations. Her lips were pursed and as she turned back to regard Joanna’s mother an outraged slump came to her shoulders, as if she was trying to shrug off an insult.

“You know how long I been looking after Miss Emma,” she asked, as she began feeding Emma with a practiced slowness.

“Not a clue.”

“I been looking after this lady for fifteen years. And in that time, you know how many visitors she’s had? Two. Her daughter and the minister of her church.”

Nurse Daily turned towards me, spoon extended. Her eyebrows arched, her mouth creasing with dark questioning lines.

“Me and that little girl who died last night were the only ones she had and if you think it’s right she should hear the news from the law and not from her family then you’re crazy.”

I was ready to go. Lost causes were something I knew about. But what happened before Nurse Daily arrived caused me to linger.

“She said something to me. It sounded like directions.”

Nurse Daily turned from Emma, a strange look on her face, not because she didn’t believe what I said, but because if it were true it meant something she couldn’t understand.

“What do you mean? Miss Emma hasn’t spoken a word in ten years.”

Emma's words stayed with me. Those meaningless phrases ricocheted in my head like the remnants of a bad dream. Rain pattered on the muddy shoulder of the roadway. Sitting in my cruiser I watched cars pass, headlights cooking through the growing downpour. As they saw me they slowed like a limping bird catching sight of a hawk.

After watching traffic for an hour, I drove out to the cliffs. From that height the waves were a stilled mass. The forest shivered with lightening. I got out of the cruiser, the rain falling heavier now. Walking west, I moved towards a small alcove of pine trees. A carpet of needles covered the damp grass and led through another stand of larger trees which clung together tightly like furs in a closet. The grade steepened. Rivulets of mud slid down in long dirty veins covering my shoes. My flashlight was in the car, so I maneuvered through the forest, waiting for lightening to illuminate my path. After a couple of hundred yards of tough footing, the forest plateaued, leading to a spit of land.

The ocean was invisible here. Only the sound of waves crashing gave any clue the sea was close. I started digging large muddy handfuls out of the ground like gutting a large fish. The rain continued hard and slanting. I was covered with mud. My waterlogged gun belt sagged around my waist and my fingers were sticky and dark. Something was in the soil. I pushed my hands into the muddy indentation as if delivering a calf, arms sinking to the elbows as I caught the rigid thing and pulled. Whatever it washed been there for a long time and didn’t want to be freed. I struggled, inch by inch, until with a great sucking noise it slipped free. Holding it there, I let the rain lash away the mud until I knew exactly what I’d found.

It was a femur, belonging to a woman named Betty Dawn. She’d gone missing from Bedford County two decades before. She worked as typist for an insurance salesman. The day she went missing, Betty got off work early and took five bundles

of dirty clothes to the coin laundry. Paying up all the machines, she left behind baskets and dryer sheets, along with a dog-eared copy of the Enquirer. No one saw her enter or leave the laundry. Rudy Lamont, the owner, found Betty's wet clothes strewn about the laundry mat the next day. Angry customers who wanted to use the machines threw the clothes out of the washers. After a day he disposed of the souring clothes in the dumpster and didn't think anything of it until the police came to speak with him.

Betty Dawn didn't have any children or a boyfriend. She lived alone and when her house was searched, it didn't seem to be missing any clothes. Whose clothes she washed was as much a mystery as where she vanished. Her mother strongly believed Betty's boss, Mr. Kroy, had a hand in her disappearance, but he was attending his son's softball game and told officers the last thing Betty said to him was she needed to leave early to do some laundry. This was all that was known about Betty until the night I dug her out of the earth.

Of course, forensics told me all this later. At the time I didn't know who it was. It wasn't a triumph. No one brings you into the commissioner's office for a commendation. Discovering Betty Dawn's body would be met with suspicion. What was I doing all the way up on the bluff? What made me suspicious enough to find the remains of a person, who theoretically I didn't know was there, during the heaviest rainstorm of the year?

So I waited, for an evening when discovering a body was more plausible. Three days later, I reported my discovery. I drove out to the cliffs. Hearing strange noises, music from a distant beach party I theorized to investigators, I walked up the hill towards the cliff's edge and there I saw a piece of bone sticking out of the soil, washed out by the torrential storms. It was strangely simple. I wrote a report and answered a few questions and that was it.

That evening I came home later than usual. I was feeling pretty good, like I'd accomplished something. Solved a decades old mystery or at least stumbled on a clue that would help solve it. When I opened the door, Joanne was waiting on the couch.

"Why are you still home?"

"I'm glad to see you too," Joanne said.

"You know what I mean; did you take the night off?"

She took a deep breath using the silence to decide which part of my stupid question to attack first.

"I was waiting to see if you made it home," Joanne said, "Waiting to see if you were coming home."

"I wasn't drinking, if that's what you're asking," I said, calmly. I was about to drop the bomb. To tell Joanne I'd spent my shift discovering a dead body and being questioned. But I never got that far.

"I can't live like this. You're barely here and when you are its like living with a ghost."

"Do you have any idea what I was doing tonight?"

"I've got an idea," said Joanne.

"No you don't. You think you know, but you don't."

"If I don't, it's because you barely say two words to me when you're here," said Joanne.

"What do you want me to tell you? Every night I drive around for eight hours, writing speeding tickets to drunk teenagers. Do you want me to share with you the fact that sometimes I listen to dispatch hoping for a murder just to have something to do?"

"Sometimes I wish I was dead instead of that other girl. Maybe it would've meant something to you."

"Jesus, Joanne, what's this about?"

"If you don't know what it's about than you're just as blind as I thought," Joanne said. She shuffled her feet as if she was ready to walk out.

I threw my keys in the glass bowl of polished stones on the end table. A ceramic stork I hadn't seen before watched me regretfully. I pinched the bridge of my nose, pressing the caffeine glare from my eyes.

"I don't want to fight. I'm tired and I need to sleep."

Walking into the bedroom I expected her to follow, but she didn't. After a few minutes I heard the front door slam. I slipped into the shower, trying to blanch away the truth of what Joanne said. But I couldn't. Sometimes I wished she was the dead girl too.

Emma lay in bed with a look of commiseration creased on her thin face. Her hair was a thinning crown of silver and grey. Under the fragrance of baby powder was a

sharp smell like food that is just beginning to spoil. The television was on; a preacher dodged back and forth, pacing behind a cheap lectern. Emma's eyes prayed on the drop ceiling, watching the creases between the tiles, like glyphs.

"I went to the place," I said. "We found Betty."

I stepped closer, placing my hand on the handle of the hospital bed. It was dull and cold and gave me an unexpected chill. Emma didn't respond.

"What happen to Betty? Who killed her?"

The television's static presence fizzed. I moved closer to Emma, trying to meet her eyes.

"What happen to Betty?"

I touched Emma's hand, the flesh saggy and dry as an autumn leaf. Moving over her I obscured her view of the ceiling. Her eyes were deep pools of liquid blue. Her lips trembled.

"At the quarry, under the mound where rocks touch metal," Emma said.

I wanted her to repeat the words. From the hall the bird screeched at someone passing by. My hand was still touching Emma's. I hoped she might say something more, about her daughter or maybe just something to confirm she knew what she was doing. But Emma was silent. And I left without an answer.

Strange dreams haunted me the next few days. Dreams of grasping invisible things pulling me down, as if sleep was an ocean and some malignant undertow held me. I'd wake with Emma's words on my tongue and the sheets twisted in my hands like a rope. If Joanne was there, she might have asked about the nightmares, but our schedules kept us from each other. I was glad not to have to explain. I went through my shifts on automatic pilot, thinking about those words, the dreams of sinking and knowing somewhere a corpse was buried in a shallow grave. And sooner, rather than later, I would dig it up.

Christmas Eve at Miller's Quarry was a blue world. Jagged sheets of rock stood around a massive divot, where a syrupy lake slowly undulated. A narrow shaped tower with steep pivoting stairs rose in the chalky alkaline. No one was here. I parked as close to the tower as I could and walked the few hundred feet towards the stairs.

A chain link fence circled the mouth of the ravine, cutting close to the tower, leaving a triangle of earth which if you shimmied through the struts allowed you inside. This

was the place. I brought a shovel and spade. The ground was stubborn. It took ten minutes of breaking the hard pan before I could shovel away the dirt.

The wind was cutting and light rain burned my face like sparks. I couldn't get my breath. My muscles burned as I broke the soil open an inch at a time. Despite the weather I was sweating. The teeth of new blisters bit into my palms. I didn't know how much longer I could work like this. Something took hold of me, like I couldn't stop. When the soil finally gave, I was past exhaustion. My shovel hit something, not roots or stones. There was a kind of softness, like cracking a giant eggshell. I lifted the spade away and something gummed with mud and dirt came with it. I had seen death before. Not the quiet passing away in your sleep kind either. I'd seen a motorist burned alive in their car, scorched claw marks on the driver's side windows. I'd been to a call where a neighbor discovered a woman who'd lay dead in her house for a week. This was something else.

I dropped the spade. The thing stuck on the blade fell softly to the ground. Something sour came alive on the back of my tongue and I heaved into the fence. Hands on my knees, I shuddered, my body reacting to the evidence of violence as if I'd done it myself. As the convulsions slowed, I felt the tick of my pulse in my throat. When I turned back the mound of earth was trickling away, being taken by the rough wind. For a moment I expected the severed head to fly away like someone's hat. The idea of chasing it made my knees weak. What was I doing? Turning in the body was out of the question. There was no reason for me to be here. But as horrible as it was, I needed to see this, needed to satisfy the curiosity that Emma was right. Closing my eyes, I pushed my foot against the thing on the ground. The head rolled back into the hole like a badly made tennis ball. Covering my nose with the neck of my shirt I began the work of reburying it.

Motivation isn't always easy to put your finger on. After all, does anyone know why they do things? I couldn't tell you why I choose that night to dig up the body. Something inside me knew, but I was blind to my intentions, until I saw the car parked in front our apartment. I nosed the cruiser half a block down into a dark stand of elm trees and waited. Thirty minutes later when the car pulled out of our drive with Joanne and her lover in it I felt the kind of rage the law refers to as passion. But it was the opposite of emotion. I didn't weep or feel overpowering jealousy. The only thing I felt was a clinical resolve, like the answer had arrived to a question I'd been thinking about for a very long time.

Their break lights moved strangely, doubling, slipping further ahead until they were a slight red border on the dark roads and then coming back, a rail of fire, loaming like an evil eye. The low burble of the radio dispatcher was otherworldly like the voices of the dead.

They looked at Christmas lights on Richard Street, the houses wreathed like a chain

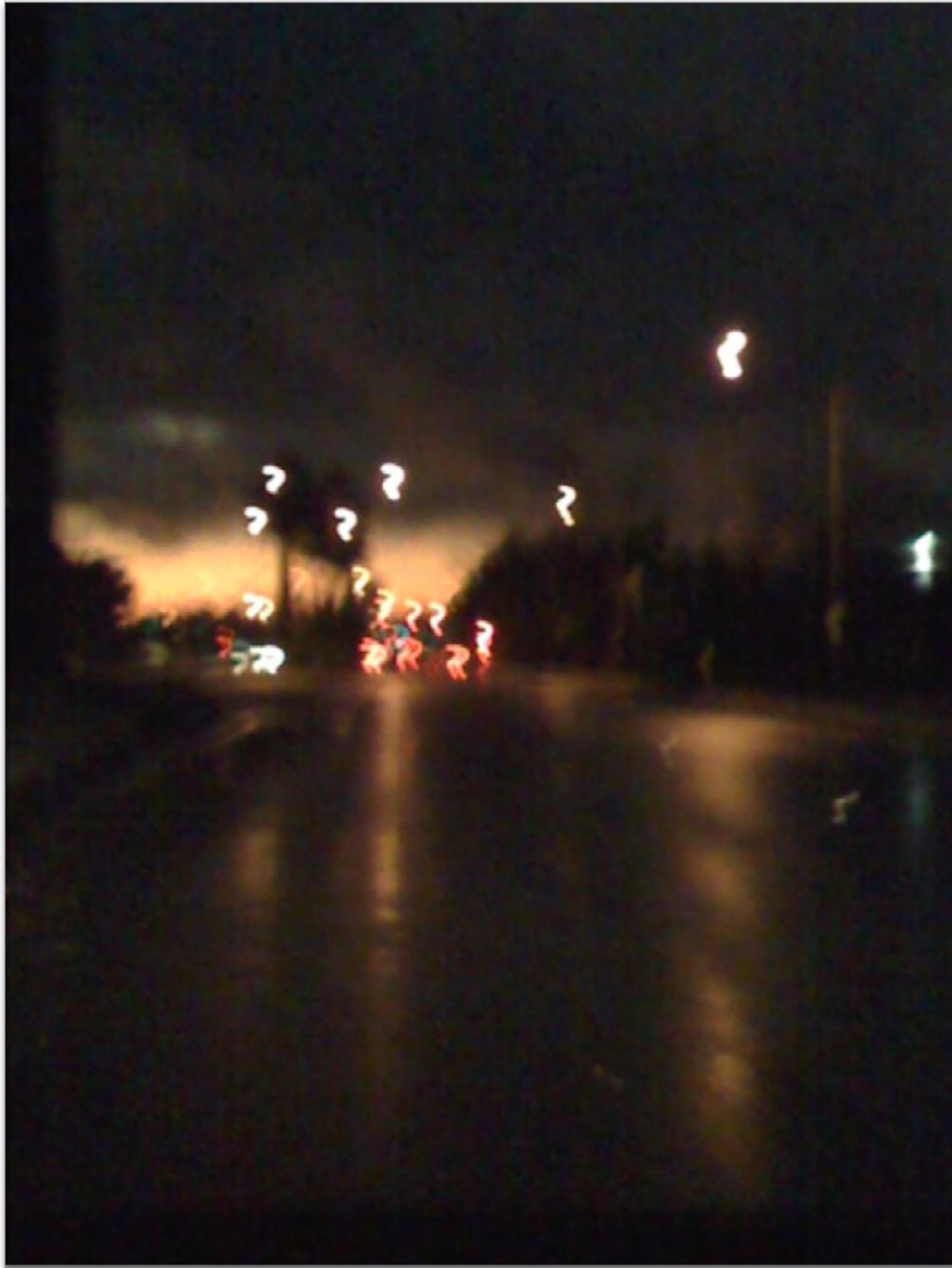
of lights with exotic filaments. Through the icy windows of the car their heads lolled together, as if whispering secrets. Already the distant threads were coming together. I kept a respectable distance. Trying to tell myself this wasn't Joanne with another man, but a suspicious vehicle, someone casing the suburbs or motoring through crack town.

As I followed the car through town, I remembered once seeing a sinkhole open under a deserted shack. I was just a boy, hunting with my grandfather on a tract of pastureland. We watched as the earth yawned, swallowing the splintery porch slats and fence staves until the roof collapsed. It didn't make sense. Gravity vanished and the ground was tumbling, emptying everything into the earth's dark heart. It was so quiet, only the noise of the shack falling in. The foundation must've been faltering for years, slowly disappearing into the earth. I thought about that for a long time. How everything could be falling apart without you knowing it.

Murder is like a dance. Each step inspires the next. The car windows are rolled down. Joanne and her lover park in the shadows. Soft music pours from the radio, sweeping the last crumbs of reluctance. They are kissing. Through the rain bubbled glass, Joanne's foot is planted on the front windshield, absent of shoes. The silky intimacy of her naked foot drives me on. The stock of the shotgun grows heavier by the second. The rain shrouds my footsteps, obscuring my shadow. The trigger is like a thorn against my finger. As I squeeze it, the barbs make a sharp circumference of pain around my index finger. My lungs are a vacuum. Closing my right eye, I allow myself to exhale as if repeating a final prayer for strength. And then the shotgun jumps against my shoulder like something alive.

Now I'm driving. The world is numb. I thought afterwards it would be like a dream, soft and gauzy without the contours of reality. But I remember every moment. Eventually the police will come and ask me questions. No unsolved crimes here. What will happen will happen. Nothing can save me from that inevitability. But before I go there is one thing I must do. I will drive to the Canary Home. My clothes bloody, my hands broken and raw. I will bribe the woman at the front desk and walk through the deserted halls. Emma will be sleeping and I will sit by her bed, listening to the clock toll the quarter hour as dawn sheds the night like a false skin. I will remember all that I've done and all that I've seen. And I will wait, for Emma to wake and give away the secrets of the dead.

~ Clinton Bryant



~ Carlo Brito

DECLINE TO THE STATE

Fill in these forms,
and don't forget the date.
First name and last in each
upper right hand corner.
Sign here, here, and here
on the dotted lines
your signature.

X

They are supposed to be easy questions,
but my pencil hovers indecisively,
refusing to commit to memory any middle initial,
or select just one race that's close enough,
and an existential crisis petaled in rubber
prevents readers from deciphering spiritual beliefs,
let alone pin down Column A or B of the gender binary
as though there is no fluidity,
as we become but crunched up numbers,
frivolous decisions,
compact, complete.

An empty page could reveal so much more.

I am giving up on names.

From the sea of empty bubbles,
I select "Decline to State"
filling the hole with darkest graphite
careful to erase
any stray markings.

~ *Cynthia Zavala*

There is a fortune of wishes in that fountain
and, thanks to my father,
I've contributed my fair share.
We often say on the edge, side by side,
and he bequeathed me one round coin
that I squeezed with deepest desire
before—plop—into the water.

On more than one occasion, I knew not what to ask
and my sense disappeared into the sea of change
as an I.O.U. that I would cash in later.

He grows old
as the dreams I sold
from his pocket fold
float further away.

I know now what I want to ask.

There is jar of pennies on my dresser
And it's all for my father—
whatever \$1.48 affords,
dropped one at a time
from my small hands,
smelling of metal and salt.

~ *Cynthia Zavala*

SUGAR-COATED

“Sweets for the sweet,” he laughs,
unwrapping a fifth toffee—
better than rosemary.

His tongue glides over molars
tasting the whole of his oral cavity,
former loves he sucked and savored.

“It’s gonna make you sick.”
“Can’t get sicker than this, love,”
He says. I squeeze his hand.

Corner pile wanes these days,
filling our waste bins with rainbow confetti.
No piece goes unremembered.

The sugary outer layer,
crinkled wrappers passed between our hands,
dissolves before my eyes
leaving only brief sensations
that we occurred.

When he’s gone, I’ll taste again
resplendent visions of this room,
feeling that warmth, that promising affection,
instead of bitter chocolate
anticipating loneliness.

~ *Cynthia Zavala*



~ Chelsee Bolivar

In the open field the fog descends on George. Moisture inundates not just him but the leaves of grass filling them and washing them over with drops of moisture still left over from the rain. He shakes briefly trembling at the sudden coolness. The fog walks through him and around him until he is its hostage. Touching lightly the white hairs under his nose he snuffles a bit, pulling back at the scared mucus in his nose. His skin braces having lost its rosy color in the chill of the evening. Rotting wood lays about with insects huddling in it for warmth. All the insects without tribal security are already dead at the helm of the season, but some survive quietly.

He cups his hands to his mouth and breaths hot air into his them letting it not only echo inside his palms reflecting new warmth but letting the air escape back onto him for a split second before it dies. Inexplicably, he begins to hum so low that not even the wind would hear him; he begins it with his mouth do...do do do... my funny valentine, sweet comic valentine...do do do do... With this he loses track of the swaying grass, the deep fog and the temperature being twenty degrees colder than the day before. He doesn't dance to his own tune but sways a bit, humming the sound of the words.

"Dad...what are you doing out here? I told you about coming out here alone!" The voice is careful, loving and sharp stewed together in unified purpose. The words jump over his right shoulder covered with the confounding fog.

"I know. I'm sorry." George doesn't move or hum, he just opens his great brown eyes as wide as he can onto the rotting log with the bugs in it and the frozen stream beside it. "This is a great backyard you know."

"I know Dad, come on inside." Her hand lightly lands on his shoulder blade in an almost petting motion, close to an embrace, so close that he finally turns around, looking at his feet to make sure he's not stepping in any mud or treading on anything important.

He looks up at her sharp nose--her mother's nose. Her eyes are a distant brown that matches the hair dye she uses these days. She has a tattered grey sweatshirt on over an immaculate blue dress. It flows out of the bottom of the sweatshirt bounding onto the blades of green grass without tarnish. After a short look he makes an odd face and gives a light punch to her shoulder.

"Let's get back to your party, Kim." She forces a smile and trudges laboriously back to the house as close to George as she can be without them touching, as

silent as they can be without lacking affection for one another.

Under his breath he lets the beat continue, do...do do do.. my funny valentine, you make me SMILE with my heart...do do do... His pace begins to speed up until he is off of the grass all together and pulling open a screen door that moans a dreadful creak. He holds it open for Kim who scurries through it with vigor, leaving nature to its silent frigidity.

The home is 2,150 square feet with a two car garage and 2.5 bathrooms, which just means you can piss in all three but shower in only two. It has three bedrooms and a pool in the back big enough to need a pool boy. These days it's too cold for the pool; the water was emptied out weeks ago when the bitter cold was simply a rumor.

George enters into a kitchen with chatter echoing through it voices layering over each other. Thirty five people are all in small groups, different stations in the house in tight formations talking and then waiting to talk after the response is finished. Only one person recognizes their entrance, and he skips over abandoning conversation with another woman to run over.

He has a red cardigan that adheres closely to a white collared dress shirt. He's pulled the collar so it hangs over the neck hole of his sweater. He looks at George only after he has wrapped his arms around Kim, acknowledging him as an afterthought.

"Where were you guys?" His locks of curly brown hair dance on his head as he looks to Kim.

"Daddy was in the backyard again." As she orates her eyes open large at the man; she embraces him around the chest.

"Any wine here Abe?" George looks down at the floor that is speckled with fragments of sand and dirt. He looks over at the doorway noticing how clean the welcome mat is in comparison to the floor.

Abe in the red cardigan comes to life, pointing with a long finger over to a bottle of wine with an obese man on the front. It's called Fat Bastard wine. George walks over to the bottle trying to steer himself between the bold body movements of Kim's friends. Some of them are so eager to switch talking partners that they would shoulder check the good time right out of George if he wasn't careful.

George is careful and finally gets to the bottle, pouring the deep red wine into his glass until it is enough.

“George!” From behind the voice digs it’s hooks into the air.

“Jeremy, how are you?” After filling his glass George turns around to a chubby short man with an untucked bright blue dress shirt and pants on that are much too large for him. The man has a smile on his face that could last for hours, days, or presidencies.

“I got a question for ya, George.” To this George nods his head taking the first sip of Fat Bastard “Do you think Joshua Fry Speed was gay?” George stops to arch his brow, silent for a minute.

“Who... is Joshua Speed?”

“He was Lincoln’s BEST friend. Carl Sandburg said their relationship had ‘streaks of lavender.’ Get this, I hear they slept in the same bed together for FOUR years. I don’t know what those streaks of lavender were but that’s some crazy stuff, huh? I mean, you don’t just sleep in the same bed with a dude. Some people are like, ‘those were different times,’ but that’s a bunch of bologna. He might have been a meat smuggler.”

“Damn Jeremy, didn’t Lincoln have four children?”

“Yeah yeah... and Cary Grant was married a bunch of times too, but who’s that fooling? If he’s bisexual that’s even crazier. Picture a bisexual president during a time of civil war just taking a piece of everything he can get. That’s messed up. Speed and him apparently kept in contact their whole life. Some real Brokeback Mountain style stuff. Brokeback Lincoln. That’s kind of funny.”

George sucks greedily at the rest of his wine with no time to taste it. When he has emptied it he goes back to the bottle to give himself more. George trembles a minute until he gets halfway through the second glass and finds again the rhythm to My Funny Valentine in his head.

Jeremy pushes past George and yells, “Where is the music in this BITCH?” to which a resounding laugh erupts and circulates. Seizing the moment Jeremy does a little shuffle adding some arm movements he remembers from Saturday Night Fever. A woman named Rebecca joins him in the dance shaking her hips laughing while she dances with her pointer fingers up toward the ceiling. Jeremy does a Jazzersize grapevine behind her sizable caboose and begins to do a mock pelvic

thrust. The only music that drives them is the cheers of their friends, the chuckling of the many.

George watches this for a moment and decides this is a great time to empty the second glass, hoping that by the third he should feel that warm power. Shaking his head he thinks about the warm summer months drinking wine with his friends in the backyard. He thinks about Paul (who is very ill) and Rachel (who sees him on Sundays to study torah). He spends a lot of time standing with his third glass and traveling backward rather than merely remembering. He travels to those moments and feels the feelings again; sometimes they're different feelings, and sometimes he acts in a different way.

Each time is unified by the potency of the experience the power of the people involved. That must be why they stick.

The same light touch comes to George's shoulder again and it trembles just as before, but before the cold caused the tremble. Her voice arcs, shooting words into his ear as he finishes the third glass.

"You okay Daddy?"

He shrugs and looks up at her reaching into his pockets past the lint and wrapping his fingers around a metal object until it is in the base of his palm. "I'm getting a little tired, I might take a nap." She nods at him with red rosy cheeks and dark eyebrows and that sharp nose. "I want to give you your present first though." From his pocket it comes presented to her and dropped into her hand from a tight fist that unleashes it. He looks at it for a moment feeling around it with familiarity but modest familiarity. She knows it's a metal hand open with a huge eye in the middle, she turns it over and sees the Hebrew characters etched together in rows. Her fingers run down and across each row slowly, "What do they mean?"

"It's the travelers prayer. This Chamsa will guard you from the evil eye. It carries with it The Traveler's prayer." George mumbles it, speaking more sharply with his hands as she looks at no one and listens only to him.

"May it be Your will, Lord, My God and God of my ancestors, to lead me, to direct my steps, and to support me in peace. Lead me in life, tranquil and serene, until I arrive at where I am going. Deliver me from every enemy, ambush and hurt that I might encounter on the way and from all afflictions that visit and trouble the world. Bless the work of my hands. Let me receive divine grace and those loving acts of kindness and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all those I encounter.

Listen to the voice of my appeal, for you are a God who responds to prayerful supplication. Praised are you, Lord, who responds to prayer." "It was your mother's," he says.

George leans in and, taking advantage of the silence, gives her a soft kiss on the forehead, a soft kiss that freezes her in time. And with that he is gone, taking powerful steps up stairs coated with carpet. Kim pictures him smiling on the way up.

~ Daniel Olney

SEARCH

Crocodiles are becoming restless

To eat the flesh of

A devotee

Who has come

In the temple

In search of eternal peace.

~ Deepak Chaswal

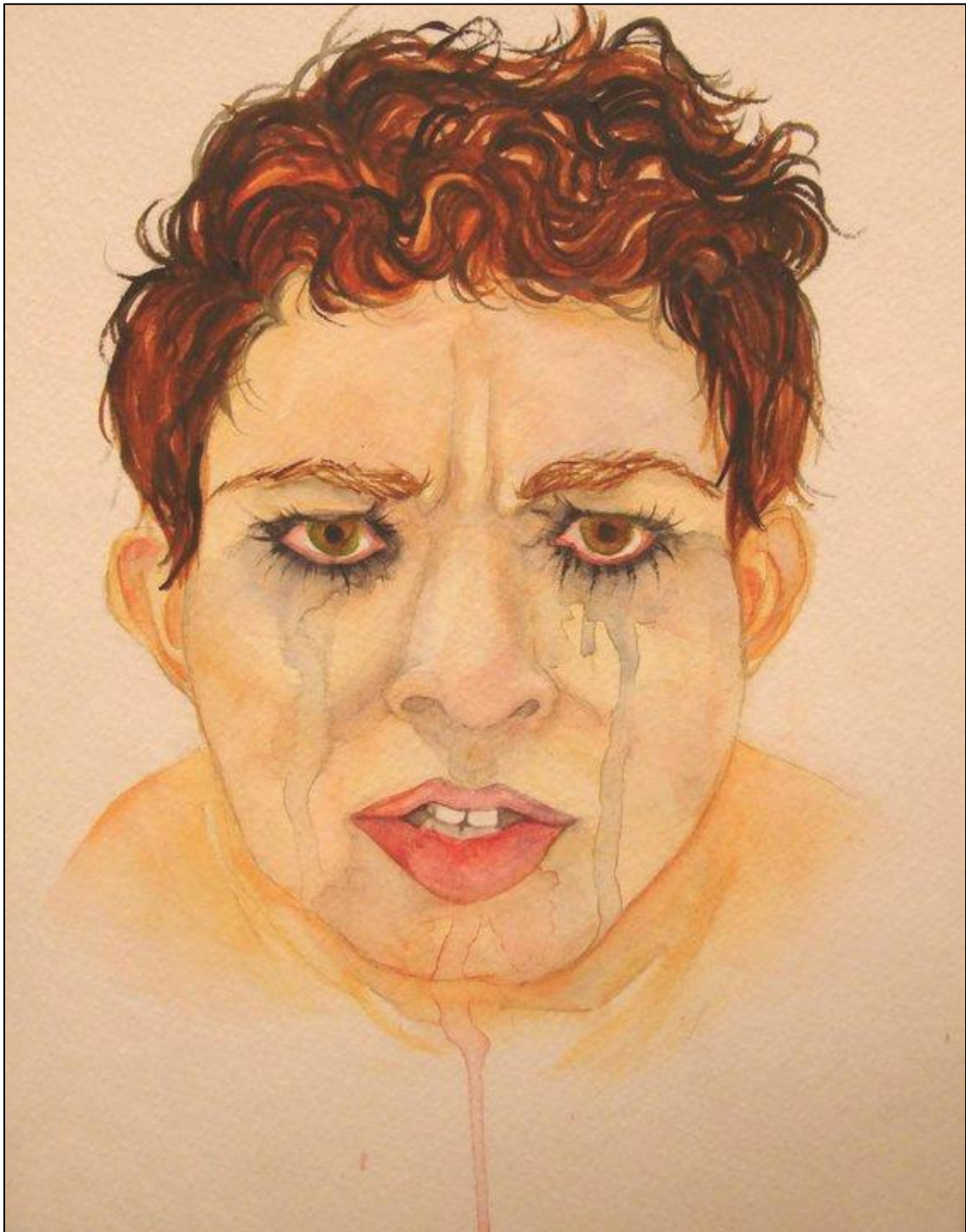
DAY OF JUDGEMENT

A voice from the sky
trying to pierce the
stony surface of
the sophisticated
road under
which several innocent
are buried alive
The sound of thunder
trying to blast the
Glass Houses which
are full of rats and
cockroaches trying to
taste the wine in the
jars of metal
People going to
pray for something
on a Dryday
A rolling stone

trying to roll upwards
Sun rising from the West
Two birds
trying to eat each
other's flesh
Phoenix burnt
by the burning water
of a sacred river
Some messenger trying
to pass a message to
the deaf mob
A man riding on a mule
going toward nowhere
A Child trying to crucify himself
in his mother's womb
An altar on which
old men are slayed
Sudden death of
a smiling rose

Locked court rooms
Drunk judges
the statue of blind god of judgment
lying naked on
the floor of
a butcher
Dark sunlight
trying to highlight
the words
carved on the
walls of a
pub – Day of Judgment

~ Deepak Chaswal



~ Megan Henderson

THE ANATOMY TEACHER

I seduced the anatomy teacher. Well, as a matter-of-fact, he was the first *guy* I've ever seduced. It was experimental and passionate, but I knew as soon as the last student left the room--as soon as I got him to close the door--I had him.

The man's expression was of concern; I needed help with some work. Terminology. It was what he wanted to discuss. He was still concerned and I thought, he is a fine specimen. I stood by his desk, touched his shoulders, his back--I didn't know the appropriate terms.

I call this learning.

So soft and rugged, his lips to mine, his beard grazing my skin. He was saying it wasn't right, and yet he continued to lead--our hearts didn't care.

It went something like this: his hands moving, a moan here and there, the removal of his belt, a series of buttons. I swear he grunted.

I said I love you.

I love you; I whispered that. He told me he had to go. He dressed himself and grabbed his bag along with our test. He opened the door, let me out, and we went our separate ways. I watched him walk to the staff parking lot--I have done so many times before.

Our separate ways--two roads that weren't meant to collide, yet somehow did. I've always had an alternate route in life, and today I didn't want it. I wanted to stay on the path that I have always avoided.

The man locked the door with his homeroom key--hoping to preserve our encounter within the room. He walked down the hall, his satchel hanging from his shoulder like a burden too heavy to hold as he disappeared in the distance. He looked back, once, and then quickened his pace.

I imagined the man as the years would pass and digest him. I knew someday he too would be insecure. Perhaps he would understand how insecurities could be beneficial, how people could be so erratic, how life could be unexpected unless you controlled it.

I walk home slowly. When I'm home, I leave my backpack unopened. I sit on my bed, thinking. The spoons and forks clank against the porcelain platters downstairs. People chatter below me. I glance at my eyeliner and lipstick utensils on the dresser, on the floor, on the lamp desk beside my bed. I know I have more than I need. I have too many shoes, too many shirts and pants. I have too many perfumes, and I've had too many ruined chances.

He will keep this to himself. He'll recall the memory many times, when he is teaching, when he's driving, when he's putting his daughter to sleep. He will think about the softness of my skin and the fire in my eyes. He'll remember the sound of my voice; the chill it sent down his spine. Occasionally, when he has a moment to himself, he'll smile while immersed in the thought of us--a secret escape to his hidden happiness. And as time consumes him, he'll begin wondering what really happened between us. But he will always remember me. I was the first *girl* who ever loved him.

~ *Kayte Muniz*



~ *Noha Dandachi*

DUSK, 1961

(Pomona, California)

Riding Schwinn bikes through a golden field at dusk
A flock of crows rose up suddenly like gargoyles
Into the smog filled sky
And lifted their black bodies
Cawing in dusty twilight
Against a fat orange sun.
Another thousand houses built today
In California: artesian springs buried,
Deep black loam sterilized by concrete.
We turn reluctantly back home
Where our older brothers tinker on their cars
And our mothers wait in aprons
Baking tuna and noodles in a casserole.
My mother laughs with her boys
She asks me, "Jimmy, could you phone your father
at his office, and tell him what time it is?"

~ *James Hickson*

GRANDPA'S FARM

The elephant of the night
rolls his great eyelid open.
A full moon rises over a high plateau,
bathing waves of frozen lava
and casting platinum blades
between the spines of Yucca.
We climb up the abandoned road,
(a story of our childhood)
to find the old cabin petrified
and leaning against an ancient oak.
High aloft bands of cumuli
rib the sky in luminosity.
Outback we trace the outline
of grandma's garden;
the pump now decapitated and there
a curved rock wall still wearing
the shadow of her hand.
When the moon rises and illuminates
the face of Ironhead Mountain
wild horses weave down carefully
on their way to the muddied spring..

~ James Hickson

TRANSITION FOREST

Deeper into the dusk of autumn
Deeper into the dusk of autumn
granite grows hoary in the frost.
The moon rises through a black oak
and crickets sing wearily; faintly.
The shadow of a spotted owl drops
down the canyon's throat.
In the village in which I was born
the mountain creek burbles underground.
I left the circle of my family
eating turnips around a fire,
crawled out the bedroom window
and walked deeper into the woods.
Somewhere just ahead
a mountain lion whistles --
2 deer freeze in the brush
and 3 coyotes cackle and howl.

~ James Hickson

INVESTIGATING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

Because we finally tilt
seasons fall into a rhythm
so long we lose count
It must've been Spring.
You are in shorts and reading
while Ben and I played catch.
And that one froze time in autumn
since the leaves crackled
and the sky looks blown blue--
Best to keep them in albums
tucked away in darkness
so that the daylight might not
bleach them away.
Problem is, our synapses
tumble like leaves in October
and memory becomes a skeleton
we hang our jewelry on.

~ James Hickson



~ Melina Ahmadzadeh

INTOXICATING

I want this moment to linger so I can just be...
like the stillness, the oneness and the sweetness
of the redness of my cheeks and the coolness in me,
while I drink my apple sangria, as it glides down my throat
to the melody of your song
playing quietly in the background.

I want to be raptured into your Love,
like the lightheaded feeling of being lifted into a place
where there's no space or time
no beginning or end...
Where your Love fills my soul endlessly
like the chocolate filling inside that succulent cake
that oozes out, giving me orgasmic emotions
on a high that I pray never plummets to the low.

I want to throw myself into this paradise,
where I see your virgin-white feathers floating,
and I am in Heaven, surrounded by your symbols of comfort and bliss
as they land gently at my feet,
as gently as butterflies flutter and hawks fly peacefully into infinity...
Two by two...that reminds me to stay conscious
in this drunken madness forever.

I want to feel that divine, throbbing pain in my head,
the human longing in my heart,
the illumination that sparks and swirls my spirit
into another dimension where numbers dance into equations
into a language that only You and I can understand,
where I know I am Yours
and You are Mine
in this space where time has no meaning...
And I am only One with You.

I want...
to surrender to this Love that is only in the here and now.

I want...
to surrender to this Love that overwhelms me so much that I cry.
I want...
to surrender to this Love that sticks with me always and begs me
to stay.
I want...
to surrender to this Love that is not for the faint of heart.

I want
I want
I want...
Only to be reunited with You...*sa akin puso at diwa*
Intoxicated in this sacred and Beloved chamber
Where only *You* have the key.

~ *Naomi Abesamis*



~ Melina Ahmadzadeh

Oh god. This day had finally come. I felt as if I was in elementary school and I was being sent to the principal's office and I didn't know what I had done, but I knew I had done something wrong. The anxiety of coming back was almost unendurable. As I walk out of the airport and onto the sidewalk I noticed that it was a surprisingly sunny day for New York in winter. I dug through my red Hermes bag for my cell phone. I scanned the oncoming cars for something familiar as I started to check my voicemail.

Wow, I hope they didn't forget about me. Tears threatened to surface at the thought of being forgotten as I fought to suppress them. I know I had been gone for a while; but not picking me up at the airport was just mean. As I listened to my messages I heard a familiar voice. My cousin Catch was instructing me to meet the family at 144 Westlane Ave. I hated that phrase, "the family." It always made us seem more important than we really are; well to me anyway; and especially now. Okay, so no one was going to pick me up—that's real nice!

I had been away for the past two years studying at UCLA, and had been avoiding my family for just as long. Unfortunately, I couldn't get out of family gatherings this Christmas. My older brother Harris urged me to come because our younger brother Shaan had been tirelessly enquiring about the reason for my abrupt exodus. He was too young to understand my reasons for leaving and too young to escape his imminent fate of forever being a slave to our family. The only person who understood all that was Charlie Carter, my father's right hand man, and my constant supporter when I was younger.

But I'm a little ticked off that they didn't pick me up themselves. After all, I *have* been gone for over 2 years. Familiarly, with the ease of a native, I lift my arm to flag down a New York taxi and I notice a limo pull up beside me.

"Hello, miss. Are you Sahara?" the limo driver says with a grin.

"Um, yes, I am" I say as I get into the limo. It did irk me a little that they were absent, but in true Dahanni style, my father avoided me by sending a limo. I should have known.

"144 Westlane Ave please." I was anxious for my family to see me because I had changed my appearance quite a bit from two years earlier, when they had seen me last. Out was the goth girl who had went to Los Angeles, and returning in her place was a fashion icon. I had just gotten my long brown hair done with fresh highlights

and was wearing my best “I’m grown up” outfit. I felt a little silly dressing up to see my family, but I wanted them to see how much I had grown up and how different I was.

“You’re a native, aren’t you miss” the limo driver asked, in a tone more like a statement.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re from here. I can tell. You can dress different and try to change your accent, but you can never change who you are and where you come from.”

“Sure. Whatever” I mumbled distractedly. “Can you just hurry up please, I haven’t seen my family in a while, and I’m getting kind of anxious.”

“Sure thing maam.”

God! While this driver was Dr. Phil-izing me, we could have been there by now. I mean I actually *had missed* my family, contrary to my earlier sentiment. I didn’t have a very normal relationship with my family, especially my dad. We had exchanged few choice words before I left New York, and had rarely spoken since. My father was the type of man who liked discipline and loyalty; he was an imperious man. Everything had to be his way or the highway. I guess he became like that after what happened to my mom and my sister. You can never escape the past, no matter how hard you try. I couldn’t think of that right now, it hurt too much.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he turned into what looked like a big green park, with perfectly cut fresh green grass.

“This is the address you gave me maam.”

“I don’t understand why Catch would tell me to meet them in the park?” I said more to myself than aloud. Outside, deep grey clouds had begun to formulate like an army getting ready for battle.

“Um...this is not a park.”

“Then what is it?”

“Well sorry maam, but it’s a cemetery.”

*** “Sahara your father only wants to keep you safe. You have to understand his position.” Charlie lamented as he drove me to the airport. I had packed all my bags

and was leaving New York for good. “What we are--I mean what we do requires protection for you and everyone around us. Ever since the exposure about our possible existence, things have been slightly chaotic.” He was a short thin man whose lack of stature was made up in character. Charlie had always been the mediator between me and my father. With his playful voice and loving expression, followed by a charismatic wink, I would always give into him through his incessant cajoling. He walked with a pip in his step and a twinkle in his eye making him seem like he was the only one in on some joke. But he was serious when need be, and often clashed with my father on certain issues. But my father appreciated that because he did not like “yes men.” However, true to form, he offered to take me to the airport in place of my father who bid me adieu like a boss parts from an employee.

“Then why didn’t my father see me off. You know, so he can make sure I get on safely and so that he could interrogate the pilots to make sure they aren’t trained assassins or---”

“That’s enough Sahara. I hope one day you learn the gravity of the effect of the spoken word on someone. One day you might be in charge, and you will have to deal with this business of ours and the Order’s fate will be in your hands. You will finally be allowed to give commands. Everyone will answer to you, and you won’t have to do anyone else’s dirty work. And people will finally begin to appreciate—“
“Charlie, what the heck are you talking about? I don’t want any of that. Are you ok?”
Something was off about Charlie. Ever since we left the manor he had been oddly distant and uncharacteristically dry, opposed to his usual warm talkative demeanor. At first I thought it was his reaction to me leaving, but deep down in my bones I knew that it wasn’t. He was actually approving of my leaving and supported me. It seemed that his usual effervescent personality was eclipsed by what seemed to be...anger. “What is it? Did father say something to upset you? He doesn’t blame you for my leaving, does he? I know you have always supported my own interests so he must be upset with you.”

He stopped the car on the side of the road and looked at me. His expression said a thousand different words that I could not comprehend. He gently put his hand on the side of my head and softened his expression. This was the Charlie I knew. As I put my hand atop his at my face he quickly recoiled back and his hard eyes were set once again.

“Charlie?”

“No Sahara calm down, it’s none of that. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately and with you leaving it just puts a lot of stress on me” he said unconvincingly. “You’re lucky that you’re getting out of here while you can.” His deep brown eyes looked like they were a million miles away. He had always been there, the uncle that’s not

really an uncle (he was actually only seven years older than me, but he seemed like he was from an older generation), and he had always been very protective of my family. Granted we actually *were* the chosen family. But still, I had never seen him this serious since my mother and sister died, and I was beginning to get so agitated that it began to over shadow my leaving. Not only did my father not want to see me off, but my brothers didn't want to as well. Shaan didn't understand and was crying all day which broke my heart. And Harris was indifferent; we had never really been that close. So when Charlie offered to take me to the airport, I felt that someone truly cared and was happy for me.

He was pulling up to the curb at the airport, and just as I thought he was going to get out and get my bags for me he said, "Ok Sahara, you take care of yourself." Without as much as a glance, not even a wink.

That's it? That's all I get? What was wrong with everyone? Why was Charlie being so cryptic? I hope there hasn't been any internal fighting. He didn't even look at me. I felt like I was being dropped off on the sidewalk for my first day of preschool. Oh well! That was not my life anymore. This just makes leaving that much easier. I am going to start a brand new life, free from my dad, my brothers, and... the Order.

*** "But dad why can't I go to Los Angeles? I worked so hard to get into to UCLA, and now you're saying that I can't go! Give me one good reason?" I cried.

"Sweetheart, you just can't; I cannot protect you from all the way over here. My influences do not reach that far." he tried to reason. "You are just going to have to go to Columbia like you're cousin Catch. That's it. End of discussion." His hazel eyes were lit with the kind of authority only he had, as a father and leader. He was a fairly tall man with an aura of power around him. I could tell he was aging fast from his graying temples, but mostly by the way wrinkles stubbornly set around his eyes and mouth; wrinkles that only grief can summon. These days his brow was permanently set in an 'I can't solve this math problem' expression. He had too much on his plate since the exposure.

"Can't protect me! You don't have influences! Who are you, and what have you done that I need protection?"

"That's enough, Sahara. You know exactly what I do and you need to respect it. One day you will carry on what we do, along with your brothers."

"Fine! Whatever! But I am going to Los Angeles and I am going to support myself. I don't need your money or protection. I can't live in this shell anymore. I'm going out of my mind father."

“Sahara, please. You don’t understand right now. After what happened to your younger sister and mother...after they were....well, that’s not important right now. I need to keep my entire family safe, and if that means not allowing you to go to Los Angeles, then so be it.” I knew it pained him to speak of my mother and sister. Ever since that tragic day, my father has rarely ever spoken of them. It hurt him deeply that he couldn’t protect them; in many ways he blamed himself for what happened. Even though I had been a little girl, I knew enough to understand that it was not his guilt to bear. It was the Order’s fault. But if I was going to escape the same fate as my mother and sister, I needed to get out of here. I didn’t want it to come to this, but it had to be done. I knew the next words out of my mouth would put a rift between my father and me forever. But, staying here was worse.

“If it wasn’t for you, mom would still be alive and she would have let me go to Los Angeles, I’m leaving and you can’t stop me.” I ran out of the room in tears at what I had just dared to utter. I didn’t feel this way; I never even blamed him for it, yet I knew this was the one thing that would let me go, and unbeknownst to me at the time, haunt me the rest of my days.

*** What! Why would Catch tell me to meet the family at the cemetery? Oh my god, what if someone I know died? Shit! Why didn’t father tell me? God, this is just like him! To get so absorbed in the secrecy of his world that he forgets to tell me anything. The only other funerals I had ever been to, was my mother and sister’s. I don’t remember much of that day, and neither do I want to, but I do remember that whenever I cried aloud everyone would hush me. Later my father explained to me that when a member of the Order dies, the funeral is held in silence in order to avoid attention to the mass gathering. I was getting a bit peeved at this point. You’d think that after over two years, my father would have made a better effort to stay in contact with me. But it was always me calling him, and emailing him, and texting him. I mean, I know what I said was pretty bad, but was he still angry enough to not inform me if a relative or friend had passed?

It had started to drizzle which was comforting because it felt natural to me. As the limo pulled to a stop, I finally caught a glimpse of Catch trying to make his way to me through a crowd of mourners. He had grown into a tall man since I last saw him. He had grown out his almond brown hair to his shoulders, kind of making him look like a greasy car salesman. His face brought to mind my childhood and reminded me of the days spent playing with barbie dolls and toy trucks; days of unadulterated innocence. We had always been very close growing up because we were the same age. He actually was more of a brother to me than my own brothers were. However, things changed three years ago when he decided to join the Order officially. My trepidation of this “family business” caused a rift between us. Nevertheless, we have always remained in touch. As he was making his way towards me I noticed he was looking rather thin and worn down; probably because of his position as the Watcher. Constantly having to be aware of anyone who gets too close, Catch always

has to be alert. His chocolate colored brows were furrowed which got me really worried. As I get out of the limo, it strikes me that there might be something really wrong.

“What’s going on here? Who died, Catch?” I whisper to him as I get out of the limo. He grabbed me by the elbow as a mother grabs a disobedient child and started steering me away from the crowd. “Ouch! Let go!” I say as I tried to escape his grasp. I turn my head and then I halt abruptly as I notice the massive crowd of people a couple hundred yards away. I felt slightly embarrassed at my extravagant late arrival. However, they don’t seem to notice me, so I feel a little relieved. I could probably sneak in there behind them without anyone paying attention. God where was my father? Where were my stupid brothers? As I start to scan the crowd, I gradually begin to recognize several faces, most of them in fact. Some were wearing white, which meant that a member of the Order had died.

“Sahara, get back in the car. Please get back in.” Catch whispered frantically.

“What? Why? What’s going on? Oh my god! Who died?” I whispered. Just then, heads began to turn, and eyes begun to widen. Why was everyone looking at me? Some were even trying to make their way to me. They were getting closer. At this point I knew someone in my family had died. “Catch please just tell me who it is” I begged through my mounting hysteria. My throat was getting very dry and closing in. I felt a little light-headed.

“Sahara please. Just get into the car.” There were tears streaming down Catch’s face now. He was shaking and had gone completely pale. I had never seen him like this, not even when he was a little boy.

Why wasn’t anyone telling me what was going on? Dread seeped into me as I thought of my father. No, he’s indestructible! Besides, Charlie would never let that happen. Father would always remain safe with Charlie at his side. Wouldn’t he? The crowd was rearing in now. It was getting too much. Shaan. It was Shaan. I could feel it.

“It’s Shaan isn’t it?” Isn’t it Catch?” My little brother, I knew it had to be him. Why else would people be mourning this hard if not for a young one? I tried to push past Catch, “I know its Shaan! I know its Shaan!” I say as I run blindly through the crowd. They tried to quiet me but I didn’t care about the rules. Catch grabbed a hold of me and said, seemingly in excruciating pain, “yes...and ---” I stopped listening then. I couldn’t believe my little brother was dead. I had just talked to him three days ago. He was so excited about his new Xbox! I had always wanted to be closer to him but my father was grooming him to be in the Order and, that didn’t leave time for much bonding. But he was my brother—my sweet brother. First my little sister, and now my little brother! I hope my dad’s ok; this was going to kill him. And

Harris, he wouldn't be able to handle the loss of his beloved little brother. This wasn't real, this couldn't be real. I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that I felt like I was on a different plane of existence. Grief was too weak of a word for what I was feeling. As I slowly come out of shock I realize that Catch is trying to tell me something else. "What?" I managed to say through broken sobs, "what can you possibly say now?" I desperately wanted to be alone. "WHERE IS MY FATHER?" I yell, "Where's Harris?" I begin to feel weak. What happened between my father and me in the past does not matter anymore. He will need me after this and I will be there, unwaveringly. I just need him to tell me everything's going to be alright.

"Sahara, it's not just Shaan..." he trailed off, unable to finish. It was then that I knew. It was then that I fully understood why there were over a thousand people at this service, and most of them in white. It was then that I understood why I hadn't seen a single member of my family. It was then that I understood...that my entire family was dead.

"It's aaa—ll oooo-ff the----" Catch could say no more.

I was completely numb I couldn't even cry. Truth be told, I didn't even want to cry. I felt a little hysterical. I wanted to laugh. My family. Dead. This was ridiculous, and obviously a joke. This couldn't be true. My family. Dead. Why was everyone looking at me? I wanted to tell them there is no possible way this could happen. My family. Dead.

I was trying to get out of everyone's clutches. People tried to pay their condolences and console me at the same time and, all I wanted to do was run away. Why wouldn't they let me go? I didn't need to be hugged, I needed to be let go so I could show them, prove to them that this was all a joke. "Daddy they won't let me go" I cried, defying the rules of mandatory silence during funeral. "Daddy..show them! Haaaarriiiiis? Shaaaaann? Why aren't you guys answering me? Show them you're ok." Show me----

My tears were streaming now. I couldn't stop crying. This was absurd. "None of this is true" I tried to persuade myself as my legs gave out and I hit the floor on my hands and knees. I had never felt anything like this before. The shock was so great that I felt a sense of ecstasy that was indescribable. I felt like I was tripping out on shrooms and I was in this alternate universe, where I felt completely and utterly alone and didn't care about anything or anyone else anymore. I died in that moment; not physically, but the girl I used to be. I knew I would never be the same person; in fact, the girl in the limo was a distant memory. Her problems, her complaints, her worries, her...selfishness was inconceivable in the reality of this moment. Everything she felt in that limo seemed so trivial and minutiae compared to what I was feeling now. This was the kind of thing that didn't happen to anyone, how could it happen to me? I should be dead along with them. I *want* to be dead.

There's no one left. Why won't my mind just STOP thinking!!!

I couldn't stop crying now. But I wasn't aware of my state; I could hear someone wailing, and when I looked around to see who it was, I didn't see anyone and, soon realized it was me. All I could think of was my father who was so powerful and so imperishable and now he was gone? Dust to dust, ashes to ashes... as mortal as the next man... I couldn't and didn't want to picture how I thought of him; cold, under the dirt...lifeless. I couldn't help replaying our last face to face conversation in my mind repeatedly. Why did I say those things? Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I was shaking, but I didn't care. And, just then, I remembered something. Well I remembered I was supposed to remember something, but it was escaping me. I think something about code of behavior, I wasn't sure. My mind gave out and soon after my body did as well. Catch cradled me in his arms and the last thing I remember was the silent sound of exactly one thousand people crying, before everything went black.

"Arrrghhh" my head felt like it had just been stoned by rocks. What happened? I felt so groggy. I had just had the strangest dream. I tried to sit up but my head objected, as well as a strange lady sitting bedside me in what I gathered through my haze, to be an ambulance.

"Hon, just lie back down. You have been through a very traumatic experience."
"Who are you, where am I?" I said as I struggled to sit up.

"I am a paramedic and you just need to sit back and relax. Just keep breathing, hon."
She said as she handed me a juice box.

"I'm not going to drink anything until you tell me wh---" and it all came crashing back to me. I didn't even notice Catch besides me as he tried to stop me from leaving the ambulance.

No, this couldn't be true. It had to be a dream. Yes, it was just a silly dream, and now I was awake and would find my family and laugh about all of this with them. Or it was a mean prank; Catch and I often pulled off elaborate pranks in our childhood, to the dismay of my father. Where was Charlie? I know he was probably in on it too! I felt so relieved that I might even forgive these idiots for this. However, I dashed out of the ambulance to the same scene in my terrible dream. My heart dropped as if I were on a really fast rollercoaster where my body seemed like it was left behind. I glanced behind and Catch looked me dead in the eyes, no trace of laughter behind them. Then I realized that it was true. This was not a dream.

"Why, when, how?" I tried to use words through a veil of complete shock.

"There will be time to explain later, Sahara. We have specific instructions, but right

now you have to gather yourself, and represent your family with dignity.” Catch said in a weakly commanding tone. “Come say goodbye.”

Specific instructions—there it was again, it sounded so familiar. But I brushed it aside, “I can’t say goodbye.” How could I, when I did not even get a chance to say hello? I felt dead inside. I belonged with father and brothers. Why did I have to be the only living one? What the hell was so special about me that I did not die with the rest of my family? My eyes blindly scanned the massive crowd. It was then that I noticed I had not seen Charlie in this crowd of mourners. Was he too devastated by the deaths? Did something happen to him too? I felt like ever since I had arrived in New York I had been asking questions and getting no answers.

“You will regret it for the rest of your life if you don’t pay your respects Sahara.” Catch tried to reason with me.

Just then I noticed five men in black suits making their way over to me. Although their attire blended in with that of some in the crowd, they were not a part of the Order. They were wearing hats that made them seem as though they were from the 50’s. Their expressions suggested they were not here to mourn and, appeared void of any sorrow. And it was then for the first time since I arrived that I felt in control of myself and began to understand the severity of this situation. I knew now what protocol to follow.

*** “Sahara, I must speak with you my bellem” my father said gravely. We had just buried my mother and sister two days ago. He looked like a different man from the one who spoiled me and chased me around the yard. His hazel eyes were becoming deep set, probably from the lack of sleep and the omniscient grief.

I, too, felt different. Mommy was gone and young Mohave too. They went to live with grandma and grandpa up in heaven, and I wouldn’t see them for a while. But father bought me a new doll and that makes things a little better.

“You know that your mother’s life was taken in protection of the Zion. Mohave was an--- unfortun---.” He stuttered. There was something missing in his eyes, and it scared me. I could tell he didn’t want to talk about them. “What we do, what the Order does, is all for the protection of Zion. When our family was chosen as the Protectors by the Order, we assumed responsibility of it. There are also the Watchers who keep an eye on the public to see if there are any leaks regarding the existence of the Order and the Zion. The rest of the Order are here to protect and serve our family along with the Zion. You see, my belle, if the existence of us or this was ever to be found out, then life as we know it would be over. Our race would be diminished over Zion. Mankind must never know that the Order exists. I know this must be a lot for you to take in right now, Sahara. But you must remember what I am about to tell you. If anything were to ever happen to me you m---”

“But daddy no!!! You can’t go to heaven too! Please don’t leave me like Momma and Mohave, please daddy. I’ll give you my doll back. I don’t need it. Just please don’t leave me!” I started to cry at the thought of my father leaving me. I felt so sad and I didn’t want to get sadder. Daddy couldn’t leave me, he couldn’t!

“There, there, my belle, I’m not going anywhere. I promise” I started to clutch his leg, as I did so often when I got scared. “I am telling you for the very distant future, when I am an old man, and you are all grown up,” he tried to explain “you must follow certain protocol upon my death if it is untimely. It is the job of every member of this Order to protect this family, but when I do leave this earth you must not listen to any of them. No One! No matter what anyone tries to say, always remember what I am about to tell you...”

*** “Sahara, may we have a word with you?” The obvious leader of the pack said as he steered me off to the side just out of earshot of anyone in the crowd. I had calmed down at this point and was aware of everyone’s eyes on me. I didn’t know I could be this calm but I was proud of myself. Father would have been proud. “Sahara, I know this is a difficult time for you but you *must* understand what really happened to your family. I know you don’t know who I am, but first let me explain what happened before anyone else gets a chance to. Your family was murdered and we think we know who di--”

“I know exactly what happened. They were not murdered by who you think it was. And I know exactly who is responsible for all three deaths. Now let me explain something to you, I know who you are, and I know what you want. But all you really need to be concerned about right now is finding me someone who is on the run...Charlie.”

~ *Rimpa Khangura*



~ Melina Ahmadzadeh

GRANDMOTHER HANDS

sharing the same name but not the same definition
surely your hands are more than this

I have seen them wear wedding bands
hand me a knife across the table
place a finger on the crossword

but they don't do you anymore
no longer servants
faithfully
waiting for a beck or call
not even a nod, or impulsive grab
a slip of a button
a cigarette
they are long gone

only you are here
silently beating them
like dumb pieces of meat –
stubbornly
having wax poured
unable to be undone.

Aristotle would say your hands are no longer hands,
homonymous, maybe –
picture hands at best.

~ Tegan Zimmerman

THE FOREFATHER

My son, I give you from my heart
The weight of generations passed
From my father to me, and upon
You I entrust the feelings and
Raptures of a thousand merely
Unforgotten traditions enveloped
By meaning transcribed by the
Intersecting fields in which we all
Engrossed ourselves. It is your turn
To enliven the past, morph the
Present, and terrify the future to
Prevent your sons and daughters
From succumbing to the temptations
That would have stopped my father
And myself from a positive conformity
That led to your modest existence.
Should you wish to deny it, I cannot
Guarantee your wishes to be granted;
Should you wish to accept, the scepter
Will be successfully passed, and our
Names shall be immortalized through
Your actions, whether consciously
Or subliminally you choose to have
Us enshrined. Did I ever tell you,
My son, what pride you bestow on
Your mother and me? If she were
Only among us to bless your prayers,
To fulfill your godliness, to help us
Break our bread on this final night
Together. Let me examine your
Maturity for a final moment, and
Breathe in the cologne that you will
Now use to seduce master and servant,
Man and woman, public relations and
Private liaisons of natures infinite. Can

You fathom the power you hold in your
Hands: the sheer will that can be enacted
With only the tone of your voice, the
Touch of your nervous palms? Do not let
Your shivering loosen the grip you've
Fashioned through your heterogeneous
Explorations. Never will you regret them,
Never will you look back on the conversations
You've had tonight and lament their finality.
You will speak with them again, whether
For a moment or for the cycles immanent
In what you must now accomplish.
I will not let you fail, but you cannot fall
Back upon my charity; I must flee
To my home and rest now, for I have
Shown you the lights on this interminable
Stream, and now you must rule over
The anxieties that I cannot now face.
My presence shall guide your hand, and
Your words will express the depth of your
Intonations, stifled by the resonance of
Words but empowered by the creation
Of your past and future works. Go now,
They wait. They contemplate. They are
Ready, and the final obstacle you must
Shatter is your decapitating fear. Without
Your thoughts, they can deposit within
You their philosophies, and the results
Will collide catastrophically in your
Colluded cosmos. I love you, and above
All else, do not forget what is in your
Heart, for the zeal in your nature
Will conquer any foe of fidelity.

~ Timothy Jewell

The road is empty, exhumed of its
Organisms, retracted to their homes
By the passing of the orb. The buses
Vanished from their routes, the trains
Retreated to their stations, each of
Their energies spent and unwilling now
To remove the minstrel from his stage,
Strumming his guitar on the corner of
A street upon whose grounds he spat,
Claiming the intersection of a chemical
Spill that paralyzed his audience into
Acquiescence. His music fills their ears,
But comprehend each note within its
Own vacuum, stringing together a
Painful redaction of meaning in favor
Of gratifying constancy. More wood
Is tossed on the bonfire in which he
Stands, his feet frozen from the cold
Whipping about his dysfunctional ire,
Keeping him from murdering them.

Can you feel his heartbeat in its
Melancholy arrhythmia, interrupting
The measures as they pass through
The void? Do you peruse his selections
Out of his piteous discord, or your own
Whimsical disinterest? He cannot play
For his arthritic vagaries, and yet on
He strikes each precious resounding
Chord, using skills only learned from
His blinded instruction in the art.

Believe, or step from his presence,
For each of us incurs his dissonance.

~ Timothy Jewell

BY ENVISION ENRAPTURED

I saw the vision in my dreams, for
I was too afraid to face it myself.
I donned the dream-veil to protect
My eyes from imploding upon the sight
Of what I cursed upon others during
The waking eons of my walk on this earth.

How can I describe to you, my friend,
The incredible things I was blessed to
Endure? The suffering of my brittle
Charisma cracked under heat and high
Pressure, enclosing me from above and
Below the ground rife with repulsion.

How, if I can achieve what I perceive
To be impossible, can you sufficiently
Envision the images and fears I must
Convey of that dream? The only guide
I had entertained throughout the abyss
Was my well-seasoned love.

Dante had his Beatrice, but even such a
Fiery lover would abandon his courtly
Ambitions for a coupling such as this,
The static from its rage interrupting
Nature's inconsistent magnetism and
Restoring it to its paradisiacal origins.

Hand in hand, foot after foot we walked,
Burning our soles on the heat of the
Molten literature removed from our lives
In the forge of inconclusive evidence,
Imposed by misunderstandings in the
Errors of administrative inequality.

The lips we shared allowed solace, stolen
By the demonized consummation of
Passion's liquid crusade, against time,
Against quantitative measurement, which
Threatens sincerity and unleashes false
Prosperity that disillusion with crass heart.

We imagined together the contents of the
Building into which our bodies would pass
And our minds would merge, giving each
A penultimate gaze preparing immature
Culpability for the unheralded promises of
Unwieldy and unjust immaterial autocracy.

Love is the splendor that guides the hearts of
Those too malnourished to drag their aches to
Replenishment on their own energies, and human
Righteousness cannot complete its clarifying
Course without coalescence entrusted to each couple
By invisible gods invested in indivisible truth.

~ Timothy Jewell



~ Melina Ahmadzadeh

THE CONFESSOR FOX

I

In New York City in the year 1899 was Mason Aube—sly as a shit-eating fox—in flight from the implacable arm of justice. He was a young thief of modest good looks who had gutted the son of a prominent Jew over eighty dollars and a game of dice played in a back-alley dive. Now stumbling headlong through the night redolent of sewage and gaslamps, laying down a portion of that money on the ticket man's counter for a one-way train to Carson City, Mason said, "Why the hell not San Francisco?"

"Son, I will kindly ask you to keep your language clean. That train left an hour ago. If Nevada is not far enough, you can wait until morning."

A tap and a quick glance to both sides, then Mason said, "Hell, it's far enough." He was a member of the last band of criminals to experience the lure of the American west. *Tabula rasa*.

Progenated by a Dutch mother in a cellar room of a New York City tenement, Mason Aube had witnessed a stabbing at the age of seven. At twelve he watched a disfigured Irishman rob a black woman behind a bank. He understood at an equally young age how his mother provided the stale bread in the cupboards, the spoiled sheets on the mattress, the tattered rags she donned in the streets. Never forced to attend school, Mason, who rarely bathed, entered a gang of urchins on his fourteenth birthday. He vomited his first shot of whiskey into the gutter on the same night. The gang's leader, Rip Hackett, was twenty-one years old and carried a copper pipe wherever he went and carried also a divine authority that Moses himself could not have commanded. Mason followed Rip with pride. Within a year, Mason had plundered voluminous wealth from workers stalked in labyrinthine alleys, wrestled gold from shore-men too drunk to repel a troupe of wild-haired youths who dropped from the shadows with sharp knives, sharp fists, and sharper teeth. The Atlantic fogs bewildered the pre-dawn streets.

When it came that evening to retracting money he'd justly lost to a black-eyed Hebrew, Mason, no longer an apprentice, had few misgivings about slashing a knife through the gut of the man who'd beat the roll.

"No big loss," he'd been rumored to say. That night the train headed west into slate fields and chased sunsets.

Where Mason wound up was the other side of the world: a desert-wild mining town in northern Nevada, a scattering of flat buildings slung out on the plain. The railcars

smoked and grated, the iron tracks sparked, and the town called Alkaline emerged in plumes of dust. Mason deboarded. He sidled inside the wooden train depot and stepped up to the ticket-man and said, "Don't suppose you know where a stranger might find work?"

"Well," said the geezer, "what kind of work would that be?"

"Just any kind."

"You know woodwork?"

"Not to speak of," said Mason.

"Metalurgy?"

"Never did."

"You good at figurin? Clerks is always needed at the loading docks."

"No."

"Well, son. You'll pardon if I say you don't seem useful at much."

"Jesus Hell," said Mason. He crossed his arms.

"Looks like you can lift a load, though."

"I could lift you."

"I'm sixty-three years old. I'm not sure what credit that is."

Mason said nothing.

"Go out that door and walk east," said the geezer. "You come to the end of town you'll find the mine outfit. Talk to Bob Walsh. He always needs someone with a strong back and a weak mind."

Mason sniffed at the old man. Then he went out the other end of the train depot, through the doors, down the stilted walkway. Mason found himself entering the center drag of town.

It was a den of the banished, a colony of lepers, a latter-day incarnation of Nod. A hive of stoic ex-cons, general no-accounts, and incurable alcoholics who toiled for drinking wages, spent their days spitting dust in the sun or laboring below the desiccated earth until their pores split open and coarsed their faces into a geography not unlike the desert itself. Most of these leering brutes could not hold steady work, wound up dead, incarcerated, or otherwise celebrated as outlaws. Mason traversed the streets and ducked into a ramshackle structure and shook hands with the fat foreman on duty. "Do you have any local references?" the foreman asked.

"Don't think so," Mason replied. "I never took to whores in a regular way."

The foreman was not sure what that meant, but fortunately, he needed a new laborer (turnover was epidemic in this region); so, he allotted Mason regular work at the site on the spot. And just like that the sewer rat called himself a miner.

During his off-hours, Mason slowly settled into an extemporized life on the frontier. He learned to ride straight in the saddle, practiced with a stolen six-shooter, scouted saloons for criminal opportunity, and was living then in a rented room above the mercantile.

No one within a hundred miles of Alkaline had been born there. Those who could claim such a thing had been killed or forced away. All told, this rough scratch of sediment was home to a thousand eastern exiles, a collective of stores, a post office, and six dusty saloons. The prostitutes came equipped with hyperbolic stories and latent-stage syphilis. It was some kind of sick miracle then, that Mason and a blonde whore named Annie Harrigan met and made love and married on the edge of the sepia-toned wilderness. The green-black stormfronts. The slanted rain. The silhouette profiles of distant mesas.

"I've had plenty of practice with boys like you," Annie dulceted as she undid Mason's belt in a muted backroom.

"Hell," said Mason. "You've never met a boy like me."

"And how do you figure?"

Mason, sporting an impish grin, dropped his drawers and showed the girl what he meant.

At the ripe age of twenty-one, Mason vowed his loyalty to Annie Harrigan on a windswept Saturday inside a Protestant church. The ceremony was attended by a convicted horse thief, an exonerated pedophile, and a gaggle of prostitutes. Annie, sixteen and developed, giggled like a schoolgirl throughout the holy proceedings. She wore a circlet of desert wildflowers in her hair. She wore also a fair dress pilfered from a clothesline.

No one could say with certainty how Mason and Annie fell together, but certain facts remained undisputed. Both had come from New York. Both had fled west from unfortunate circumstances without hope that those circumstances would turn fortunate. Both enjoyed alcohol. Both had voracious sexual appetites, though neither had an affinity for post-coital talk nor any talk at all beyond what trivial communication life required. Mason was known to have a proclivity for domination. Annie was known to have been molested at a young age by her imbecile brother, endowing her with a preference for submission and men she should run a mile from. Neither believed in God, neither had known a father, neither could tell you much about the world and neither cared to learn. They honeymooned in a canvas tent pitched beside an alkaline lake and became drunk on cheap whiskey.

When they returned, Mason rented a homestead slanted in drainage outside the Alkaline town itself. Dusty cobwebs hung from the bedroom rafters. Diamondbacks coiled dangerous under the porch steps. Coyotes at sunset trotted through the yard and gifted piles of shit to the new boarders. Yet Annie Harrigan – now Annie Aube –

knew it was a move upward. Now she had a mattress to sleep on (at the tavern she had just curled up on sheets and blankets). Now she had days to herself. She turned her talents to occupations she once dreamed about as an illiterate girl: cooking, cleaning, washing, and slying whiskey. Mason seemed satisfied enough. On dead-aired nights, he stripped naked and rode Annie side-saddle, mounted her from behind like an amorous cowboy. In the end, glugged, he whispered, “Damn, I’m spent,” and Annie took it as a stoic translation of “Darlin I’ll love you till the day I die.”

For several years Mason and Annie navigated a simple, contented existence with the lackluster ease of a migratory shorebird on the Yellow Sea. The century turned and the months marched onward to some unknown purpose. In the first year of this new century, Annie miscarried twice. Neither time did she tell Mason. Occasionally, Mason thought it some kind of strange miracle that he had not impregnated his partner with what he felt was surely a potent seed. He counted it as luck, and he wondered if it would ever run dry. The whores at Annie’s old tavern laughed that Mason could not have ciphered the workings of the female innards had they been expounded to him. Annie kept up her friendships at the whorehouse . . . just as she kept in poorly written communication with a not-quite-forgotten flame in New York – one Jimmy Garrett – who wrote back rambling letters detailing his exploits in a new gang of Bowery boys.

Somewhere around year five, Mason began to disappear, for several days at a time, with acquaintances from the mines and saloons. Annie never asked Mason where he went. And she never asked from whence came the sudden surplus cash that Mason spent with reckless abandon. Because at least he spent much of it on her. Nor did Annie allow herself to connect Mason’s sporadic travels with the sporadic timing of newspaper headlines that explicated sporadic raids by masked bandits on freight bound for San Francisco. She kept her head down and did her own time. She was in fact dissatisfied when Mason’s trips grew more infrequent, and his spending grew more reserved. Mason grew a beard and a gut but still retained a pleasant echo of the modest good looks he had possessed in youth. Annie stayed pretty and robust. The Alkaline town itself stayed much the same as it had in the prior century. Time takes time to catch up with places like these.

II

No one prophesied or later recalled the exact hour in which Balthazar Red (alias Ruber the Dandy) rode into Alkaline atop a devilish gelding whose coat shone black as obsidian. Some said he appeared out of nowhere or rose out of Limbo, signaling an early release of demons from their oubliette as foretold in St. John’s Revelation. Others said he hailed from Newark. Either way, those eastern exiles who’d heard of Balthazar Red knew that even this far west the notorious killer would possess only one errand.

Balthazar Red had been a bouncer and a bodyguard in numerous dancehalls and dives. He had bright red hair, bright red skin, and, after a tumble, bright red fists. He was tall and thick, he had a lazy left eye. He had no neck, and people wondered if Balthazar had been born without a neck or if some early drop-on-the-head had stunted that growth. In his early years Balthazar worked only for the gangs on the southern docks. Once he took a name for himself, however, he developed mercenary tendencies, doing jobs for the highest bidder. He was an honest, loyal worker to those who currently employed him but he had few qualms about doing jobs on past employers if the pay was hefty. Ears ripped off and noses shattered ran at twenty dollars. Broken bones ran thirty to fifty dollars, depending on the number and locale of the bones. Anything permanent went at market price. And Balthazar himself, being the most skilled, controlled the market price. He was adept and cunning at what he did. He moved comfortably in the shadows of the earth, no mean feat for a man of his stature. When news went out that Balthazar Red was on the prowl, a miasmal haze settled over the city as if the angel of death had descended from heavenly principalities.

Everyone knew that if Balthazar Red had traveled west from his guttered Atlantic stomping grounds, the price would have been legendary. What banished victim, what old feud, could command such an undertaking? Whispered rumors spread through the Alkaline town like wildfire. It was not long before Mason, hunkered over a whiskey, heard a voice announce that the killer-for-hire had ridden into town on horseback and was currently stationed at Kitty Cooper's boarding house. Mason finished his whiskey. He left the establishment under dusklight and sidled home, considering it carefully, weighing the possibilities.

At three a.m. he woke with murderous memories burning fierce in his skull.

"How could they find me?" he queried aloud.

Annie, who slept lightly, rolled to one side on the rickety mattress and asked Mason what had roused him.

Mason said nothing. He threw off the covers and shuffled barefoot across cold floorboards and lit a candle on the oak dresser. The small room flickered in dim candlelight and Mason said, "Son of a bitch."

"What's a matter?"

"I don't know."

"Somethins a matter."

Mason dressed himself hurriedly. Then he opened the closet and removed ammunition which had been purchased and a shotgun which had been stolen.

"I don't know how they would of found me," he said. "But they did."

"Who found you?"

"The family of that Hebrew I slashed through." Mason went to the bedroom door and peered into the darkened hallway. He looked back at Annie in the bed. "Back in New York I killed somebody," he said.

"How long ago?"

"Long time."

"Then how come – "

Mason lifted a hand to his mouth. Annie stopped talking. Mason disappeared into the dark hallway and Annie stared blankly at the doorway. She heard the front door open and close. A few minutes later Mason came back to the room and sat down on the bedside.

"How do you know someone's out to get you?" Annie said.

"Balthazar Red is in town."

"Who's Balthazar Red?"

"A worse killer'n me."

"How do you know he wants to kill you?"

"I don't know it."

The husband and wife said nothing more that night. Annie was not one to ask too many questions, and Mason was not one to provide too many answers. Eventually Annie slept, but Mason stayed seated on the bedside with his shotgun disposed in the crook of his arm. He did not pray for redemption or deliverance – not believing in such possibilities – but Mason wondered if God would listen anyway, given that he had killed one of His chosen people and riled the dead man's family into spending years spying for him as though Mason's corpse were the Promised Land.

Mason, who found it taxing to think on abstract hypotheticals, hoped it was all unlikely.

III

The next morning – July 21st – dawned bloodred like a witch's halo. The weather was dry and hot. Mason, red-eyed, left his sleeping wife in the dimly lit bedchamber and went to the kitchen. He drank abundantly from a whiskey bottle.

Mason stood in the kitchen and in the morning light he wondered if perhaps the rumors of Balthazar Red were in fact just rumors. He wondered if Balthazar Red was still alive after all these years. He wondered, given the possibility that Balthazar Red *was* in town, if the killer had been sent on an errand unrelated to that long passed dice game and that long passed stabbing. He wondered if perhaps there was no call

to worry the way he was. The shotgun was still cradled in his arms, but it was now, after such a sleepless night, less disposed.

Hell, he thought. You're worryin on like a woman.

With another pull from the whiskey bottle, Mason sauntered outside onto the porch. He looked out at the terrain: the sun was half-risen on the terrestrial offing; a coyote lifted its head in the underbrush, then moved away. Mason drank from his bottle. He did not hear the sound of the hammer. But he saw the movement of the shotgun being raised to eye-level.

"Balthazar – " Mason's whisper was not quite credulous. The voice came from nowhere and nothing: "Ayuh."
"Jesus Hell," said Mason. And then he heard the shot.

Pain like glacial ice erupted somewhere down below. Mason's hands dropped. The whiskey bottle descended sideways and shattered on a rusty nail jutting up from the wood porch. A sticky yellow substance, a fusty bouquet of alcohol, pooled in a deformed circle around the glass shards and Mason's blood. And Mason's guttural screams.

Newspapers later reported that Mason was shot first in the crotch, and that afterward he was dispatched with a bullet to the back of the skull. What the newspapers failed to report, however, was that upon executing Mason the big killer Balthazar Red entered the stilted homestead with his pistol yet smoking. What the newspapers failed to report was that the adept murderer lumbered down the halls into the bedchamber where Annie was waiting fully-dressed near the oak dresser.

"You'll be Jimmy Garrett's old gal?" said Balthazar.
"Yeah I'm that one," said Annie. "Is my husband dead?"
"Ayuh."
Money was honorably and quickly exchanged on the spot.

The newspapers reported that gambling debts had been the *fons et origo* of Mason Aube's demise. The newspapers reported nothing about Balthazar Red (or Ruber the Dandy). They certainly reported nothing on Mason Aube's wife, who had been told, weeks earlier, in a poorly written letter by one Jimmy Garrett, that a rich Jewish family with imprecise connections to Bowery hooligans had, after years of personal probing, posted publicly a legendary sum of money for the whereabouts and corpse of a man named Mason Aube.

Upon negotiating a percentage of the reward money, Annie and Jimmy Garrett had divulged the whereabouts of Annie's absconding husband. Jimmy Garrett then negotiated with Balthazar Red and the Jewish family. There was no cunning plan set

in motion because the deed required no cunning. By the end of it, Mason was deceased and Annie was significantly wealthier. Balthazar Red gathered some of Mason's accoutrements. He exchanged an address with Annie and asked her to mail her husband's obituary once it was printed in the newspapers. Of course, the newspapers did not report any of this; decades transpired before the treacherous act became widely known.

Annie Aube – once more Annie Harrigan – did not tarry long in Alkaline, Nevada. By the time the next month's rent was due, she had proffered farewells to her

whore friends at the tavern and purchased a one-way ticket to San Francisco. No one knew with certainty the fate of Annie Harrigan. Some said she settled in Maricopa County, where it was rumored she prospered as a tavern owner under an altered name. Others maintained she spent her money on fine linens and jewelry and promptly returned to whoring. Either way, Annie Harrigan passed out of history and eventually descended into an unvisited tomb.

Mason Aube was buried in the county cemetery, which was sited well away from the denominational cemeteries nearer the Alkaline town itself. He had no family or friends to speak of. His ramshackle casket was lowered into the desert with neither spectacle nor pious comment, and on his stone marker was etched name and dates but no explanation of how Mason Aube lived or expired. Nor was there anything on the stone to clarify why Mason Aube, an aging delinquent with modest good looks, had been unable to escape his past in a country settled for no other purpose.

For JLB

~ J.D. Asher



~ Patricia do Carmo

TEA PARTY

So I welcome in death,
And all her friends.
I pour cups of tea with
Heart shaped cubes of sugar.

We toast our lives.

She tells me how much
She missed me and
How much I've changed
Over the years.

We laugh at my scar.

I pass her the egg sandwiches
(egg and dairy free).
We discuss the benefits
Of a vegan diet.

We trade recipes.

Then the rain rolls in
And overhead we feel the wind
Blowing off our hats
And pushing tables upside down.
The party rushes inside and
Out of the downpour. We
All stare out the glass window
As the windstorm works its way
Up to my back gate and
Rips apart each and every tree.

We hold hands.

~ Tonya Sherfey

Mystified inside open space
Swim with moving legs and arms
In sweet rhythm, ripples embrace.

Glimpse dishonesty
Solidified into
The blackness. Into some
Strange soft spot – That lies within

Bliss. Shroud and rotate
A liquid shutter teases
And mocks –

For even
I
See the
Strange.
Like illumination,
Sagging eyes
Escape disguise
Sinking
Like fists.

Falling heavy
High
Into
Melted
Sky blue.
Simply air bubbles.

~ Tonya Sherfey

Tim
Had a flash back trick-or-
Treating. The last year
We could pull it
Off, Cut short
Due to
Dips.
If asked, but only if asked I would
Admit I didn't like *The Crow*
But the soundtrack was my soul.
We then went to a Hotel room party
To catch up with a few freaks. Brothers,
One was ironically named Kane.
Both think any girl ready
To hook up, when wanted.
If they get her to
Gun her beer she
Might feel a
Little
Lost.
If asked, but only if asked I would
Admit I knew this because I'd
Been very lost at the last party.
Crystal got with Bobby in the bathroom,
Thought she saw a spider and got scared,
Fell backward and broke the toilet.
We just couldn't stop laughing.
Then, the next day at school
Bobby acted like
He didn't know
Her at all.
Forgot
Her.
If asked, but only if asked I would
Admit that I didn't really care,

Because she didn't really like me.
Kat's Mom picked us up at like midnight
And we decided to sneak back a
Few beers in my purse. Then Kat
Started singing Madonna
And Crystal singing too,
Until we all sang
"Borderline" on
The way
Home.

~ Tonya Sherfey

WHEN MOM LEFT,

you slept twelve hours a day,
you came home from work,
made a pot of coffee,
grabbed your cigarettes,
and disappeared into the backyard
for hours at a time,
slipping into aimlessness,
the birds your only company and
a German Shepherd sensitive
to human emotion.

Motion.

We were in it, you and I,
fading haplessly into folds
of existence, crevices between
what was and what ought to be,
man and child united in lack
of wife and mother,
wandering from room to room
quietly in the night,
strangers to sleep and hope.

The sound of the sliding door
in the kitchen would awaken me
at 3:00am, you creeping in
from the dark to pour another cup,
your hands cold from
the unwelcoming night, the
birds quiet now, Rocky asleep,
your mind churning guilt like butter.

Sitting up in bed, the blinds
rattling in wafts of wind,
I moved to Great Grandpa's chair,
the upholstery wearing thin like faith,
threads of remembrance disintegrating

into the atmosphere, a microcosm
of our longing for direction.

And the sliding door would close,
returning you to the night as if you
belonged to it, emerging now and then
to show you were still alive,
waves of dark matter bleeding in
from the outside world like the worry
encompassing my thoughts and
reflections and doubts that there
would be anything more than this.

When I'd return to bed I'd think
of loss, an elegy in my head,
remembering days gone and
childhood toys like artifacts of bliss,
their memories unraveling with
the sound of that sliding door,
that coffee pot being emptied and
emptied again like expectations.

And when it was finished,
when the warming plate heated
only the frigid kitchen air,
you'd slide in, traveling through the
hallways like a ghost to your bed,
the closing door separating
you from me till morning.

Sometimes I think of those times
as a wasteland, the apocalyptic
aftermath of marriage,
a mirage of sights and sounds
personifying loneliness.

Sometimes I am drawn to other
thoughts, to times when each

of us ate dinner in separate rooms,
with separate TV shows,
sealed in separate tombs.

But other times I remember
sitting out back with you, with the
birds and our German Shepherd
sensitive to human emotion,
emptying the coffee pot,
sharing a cigar, the smoke drifting
off like so many things do,
and I think that, like a natural disaster,
what tore us apart brought us together.

~ Ryan David Leack

FIELDS OF TIME

Thoughts drift to space like sun beams reflected
back off the ocean, floating with no course,
no obstacles, no destination.

Thoughts bleed, oozing with life in the dead sky
my empty eyes stare to for something more.
They stop not for moments, yet they get

no further and no further behind,
only transcending all places, all time.

I reach out for a hand, yet there is none
but the hand in my thoughts,
running along particles of dark matter,

never finding a place to call home,
or a feeling to be made known

to anyone else but a distracted mind,
drifting through fields of time.

~ Ryan David Leack

A MIDWINTER NIGHT'S SLEEP

It's Christmas again,
and the party's dying down.

Drunk and red-faced,
the bank manager dozes
on the diving board,

bending it with his rotundity so
the tip dips into the cool pool,

until someone nudges him
and he awakes at the bottom
of the deep end drinking

chlorinated water from
a beer can.

Tomorrow he'll service
your home loan.

~ Ryan David Leack



~ Patricia do Carmo

BIOGRAPHIES

ALEX BRONDARBIT

Alex Brondarbit completed his BA in English Literature at Cal Poly Pomona in 2008. After dropping out of Cal Poly's grad program on a whim, he fled to England where he currently pursues an MA at King's College London in Medieval Studies. His previous work includes articles for *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Poly Post*, as well as several poems in US and UK poetry journals. He is currently writing a humorous novel about love, sex, and friendship entitled, *Off-Kilter*.

CARLO BRITO

My name is Carlo Brito. I am currently studying music and Cal Poly Pomona. I like to take pictures of things which I think are interesting. I would like my pictures to be interpreted in many ways. After taking a picture, I do not alter it in any way, shape, or form. What you see is what you see.

CHELSEE BOLIVAR

I am a first year Anthropology major at Cal Poly Pomona University. This first piece was created in between a hectic schedule of reading anything by Chuck Palahniuk, attending Art Student Alliance meetings, and taekwondo training. My native home of Chino, California has allowed me to experience the not-so-exciting suburban lifestyle filled with gaming, trying to find time to sleep, and my refusal to eat pickles. Art has been a lifelong passion as it has

created a temporary escape from a troubled homelife at younger ages, then slowly progressed into a hobby that I have yet to perfect. Hopefully, alongside maintaining an outstanding GPA, art will continue to serve as an emotional release for myself and for my audience.

CLINTON BRYANT

Clinton Bryant is a writer and editor for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Over the past eight years, he has produced textbooks for use throughout the state of Florida. Clinton attended Stetson University, earning a BA in English. Here, he was awarded The Sullivan Award in Creative Writing (Fiction) and First Place for Creative Writing in the Ann R. Morris Women and Gender Studies Essay and Creative Writing Contest. His work was also published in the literary magazine, *Touchstone*. He is currently finishing work on his first novel, which he hopes to submit for publication by the end of the year. Clinton lives in Tallahassee, Florida with his wife, Katheryn, and dog, Ella.

CYNTHIA ZAVALA

Cynthia Zavala is a fourth year undergraduate English Major, with a primary interest in Children's Literature, who occasionally dabbles in writing, poetry, and fiction.

DANIEL OLNEY

My name is Daniel Olney and I am on the board of a non-profit organization named Port Veritas that runs not only a poetry/spoken word reading in Portland, Maine but also sends a team of poets to compete nationally as the Portland slam team. I am not a poet however. I write short stories and novels and reading them on stage makes me more aware of the pacing and flow of the work, ultimately i want the words to feel as real as possible. I have not completed college yet because I did a three year tour in the Army in order to have the money for schooling. Other things have gotten in the way as well (home ownership, marriage) but I have worked on my writing in classroom settings and independently. I have published some work in the first Port Veritas anthology called *Safe Harbor*.

DEEPAK CHASWAL

Deepak Chaswal is a poet from the soil of India. His poetry exhibits his perception of the universe from the perspective of an insider.

JAMES HICKSON

James Hickson was born in Los Angeles and raised in Pomona, California. His grandfather was an early orange rancher at a site now bordering the Cal Poly Pomona campus. James' poetry was first published in book form by Turkey Press (Isla Vista, CA) in 1976 and his work has since appeared in many magazines including *Blue Unicorn*, *Tule Review*, *Western Poetry Quarterly*,

Abbey, and *Avocett* as well as in various chapbooks.

MEGAN HENDERSON

My name is Megan Henderson. I'm a former CSULA Fine Arts student, now attending Pasadena City College.

MELINA AHMADZADEH

My name is Melina Ahmadzadeh, I am 19 years old, and I am a first-year Graphic Design major at Cal Poly Pomona. Art has always been a large part of my life, alongside my love of video games, books, and swimming. Although I'd spend my free artsy time drawing comics, I've come to enjoy drawing human portraits the most. Not the typical straight-forwards ones, but portraits with a little bit of hidden meaning, small details, and abnormality. Those are always the most fun to draw. I'm hoping that in the coming years I'll be able to grow even more with my art.

NAOMI ABESAMIS

Naomi Querubin-Abesamis is a Filipina American poet and writer, and a graduate student at California Polytechnic University, Pomona in the M.A. program in English, with concentrations in Literature and Rhetoric and Composition. She has been writing poetry for over twenty years and is the author of *Inner Victory, A Collection of Filipina American Poetry*. Her book can be found at the Filipino American Library located in Historic Filipino Town in downtown Los Angeles and in the special collections room at the Cal Poly Pomona

Library. Her poetry has been featured in literary journals by *Shadow Poetry*, *San Gabriel Valley Poetry Quarterly*, and *Cal Poly Pomona Harvest International Anthology*. She received Honorable Mention at the 2005-06 Mt. San Antonio College Writer's Day Festival. She resides in the southern California area with her husband, Romeo and two children, Rianna and Noah.

NOAH DANDACHI

My name is Noha Dandachi and I am a Graphic Design major but love drawing in my free time. Dreams and fantasy inspire my art. I believe having a fictional approach connects the viewers with their personal dreams and experiences in order to leave a lasting impression.

PATRICIA DO CARMO

Patricia do Carmo was born and raised in Brazil, where she received her BA in Fine Arts in 2001. She recently graduated with her MA in English from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and works as an ESL tutor at a local community college. She has exhibited her work in Brazil, in North Carolina, and in California. She also has a daughter of whom she is proud, and enjoys her family, career, and hobbies.

S.D. ASHER

S.D. Asher taught composition at Cal Poly Pomona. He holds a nice-looking degree from Chapman University and has been published in a number of academic and not-

so-academic journals. He enjoys reading, writing, rock climbing, and eating frozen yogurt with chocolate sprinkles.

RYAN DAVID LEACK

Ryan David Leack is a graduate student and teaching associate of English at Cal Poly Pomona. His work has been published in journals such as *Pif*, *RipRap*, *Contemporary World Literature*, and *Wilderness House Literary Review*. He lives a quiet life with his wife in Pomona seeking Thoreauvian tranquility and harmony with words.

TEGAN ZIMMERMAN

Tegan Zimmerman is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. She has published creative works in *Notebook* and *Estuary-Acadia's Creative Arts Magazine*.

TIMOTHY JEWELL

I am a student at California Polytechnic University, Pomona, currently working on my B.A. in English Literature and Language. I have plans of becoming an English Literature professor and possibly doing graduate studies in linguistics or grammar and composition. I enjoy reading, writing, spending time with my girlfriend, and am employed as a bookseller at Barnes and Noble. Some of my favorite authors, who also have inspired me to write, are T.S. Eliot, John Milton, Goethe, Harold Bloom, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ellen Hopkins, and Brian Jacques.



Thank you for reading