

201415 fiction creative nonfiction poetry visual art



mariposa

Estrella Mountain | Literary Review

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CASTLE OF GRUESOME
first place – visual arts
Joey Miranda

featured on the cover

SAINT'S BONES



first place – fiction

Josh Sand

Thierry circled the aisles, the tail of his robe trailing through the muddy boot prints of the travelers. The travelers made pilgrimages to Thierry's church every year, and he came to recognize them. The little red-headed one was Sebastian, looks like he has some stubble now, God love him; Remy didn't come with his father this year, I hope he's feeling well; looks like Paul still prays with his hands pressed to his lips; so on, so on. Thierry didn't greet them by name just yet, letting them silently bask in the presence of what they came for—the left ring finger of Saint Evegne, held in a sealed marble reliquary behind the altar. Thierry stepped through the front door of the church to where Guiscard was keeping watch. "Do you think he's coming?" Thierry asked him.

"Hmm." Guiscard scanned the hills surrounding the church. "His neighbor told me a fire started in his house and took a wall up with it. I want to be prepared if he shows up, if it's anything like last year."

Thierry sighed. "I don't know why these things must happen when the pilgrims are here. There has to be a reason."

"That's what they're saying, you know. All these travelers bringing misfortune."

"We should know better than that by now." Thierry squinted. "That's not his horse, is it?"

Sitting on top of the distant horse was Romain, a farmer from the outskirts of the village. As far as anyone knew, he was as deeply religious as anyone else in the village, yet he kept to his family and only showed up at the church when calamity struck. Lackluster crops,

stolen livestock, and overlong winters had all brought Romain to the church, angrily demanding answers about why his simple life had been disturbed, and what it was he did wrong. His family seemed normal enough—his wife sang while she washed clothes outside, his kids ran, skipped, and skidded knees like all the other children, but Romain came across as increasingly unstable and angry every time he appeared to the clergymen, which was why Guiscard and Thierry felt dread when they saw the wide smile on his face.

"It's good to see you two here!" Romain said, descending from his horse.

"Hello, Romain," Guiscard said cautiously.

"I came here late last night looking for you but the place was empty."

"You were...at the church?" Guiscard asked.

"The door was unlocked, and...I've been mulling over how to say this...something profound happened last night. I needed to tell you but I wasn't sure how, and I went back home."

Guiscard and Thierry looked at each other, concerned. "The church is always open, Romain," Thierry said, "we didn't know you came in."

"I was up at the altar by the marble and I had a vision. Just like in the old times. I'm not sure what it meant; but I know it meant something."

"That's great, Romain, uh..." Guiscard said.

Thierry ran inside.

"Where's he going?" Romain asked.

"I, uh...this might be important, Romain, I—"

"You're not going in too, are you? This is the most important thing that's ever happened to me..."

"Yes, I... I want you to reflect on it, you may be overexcited now, but give it time—"

"I've thought about it all night. I've found a peace I've never known before. I've been rethinking my whole



TRIBUTE TO LOVECRAFT
second place – visual arts
Matt Aragon 

life's purpose."

"Excuse me, I'm sorry," Guiscard said, leaving Romain and running into the church. He lifted the ends of his robes and fast-walked past the pilgrims to meet Thierry at the back of the church. "Look at the corner," Thierry said, his finger pointing to a wide crack in the marble reliquary. On the ground beneath it, grass and small yellow flowers were growing on the tile. Guiscard gasped.

"It's my fault. I should've inspected it earlier," Thierry said. "And the stoneworker is away in the city. He won't be back for a week, at least."

"What do we do? Get some plaster? Sap? Mud? We have to plug it with something."

"Those won't do. We don't know what it'll do to those. We know that stone works, and that's what we're going to have to use."

There was a voice from behind them. "What's going on?" It was Romain. The clergymen spun around and said, "Nothing."

"Is that what it is? That crack there? Is that what's so important?" Romain said, walking between them toward the reliquary. "That's an easy fix."

"No, Romain, please don't go any further."

Romain knelt down and stopped, transfixed by the crack in the marble. The pilgrims in the aisles broke their concentration, turning their heads up to observe the action. Romain slowly stood up, brushed off his knees, and walked past the clergymen and the pilgrims and out of the church.

"He saw something," Guiscard said.

"And we have no idea what," Thierry said. "But I can make a guess." Thierry turned to the pilgrims, who were all watching him. "How many of you are strong? This is a duty...for God."

Paul and Remy stood up. "You two, follow me to the kitchen," Thierry called out. "There's a stone table,

we need to carry it in here." He turned, "And Guiscard, go into town, get as much stone as you can find. We can cover one side with the table but I don't want that crack spreading onto the other sides. We have to keep it sealed until the stoneworker comes back."

"I can help, sir," the young red-headed Sebastian said, overhearing from the aisle. "You're going to need help bringing all that stone back here, right?"

"That's fine. Let's hurry," Guiscard said.

They rode towards the village, Guiscard too old for his horse, Sebastian too young for his. They weaved between the hills with empty wood carts bouncing behind them, headed for the houses and the crooked fields of the village. Sebastian didn't speak or make eye contact with the old priest, content knowing he was helping a man of God. "Sebastian," Guiscard said, "what did you see? At the front of the church."

"Sir, it...it looked like there was a stream of diamonds falling out of the box and falling right through the floor, not making a pile, like it'd go on forever. It's different for everyone, isn't it?"

Guiscard nodded. "I didn't see anything, but I felt warm, like there was a fire burning in front of me."

"I was so happy when I saw it." Sebastian said. "There are some people back home that don't go on pilgrimages because they think churches put pig bones in boxes to trick people. I never believed them, sir."

As they rounded a curve, they could see a man sitting stationary on his horse in the middle of a bridge over a wide stream. It was Romain. "Ride back behind me, Sebastian. Don't speak to him," Guiscard said. The boy followed his order. Romain stared at Guiscard as they approached and stopped before him. For a while the only sound was the misleading peace of birdsong and tumbling water until Romain broke the silence.

“What are you making him do, Guiscard?”

“I’m not making him do anything. He volunteered, held him out of this.”

“I know what you’re doing,” Romain said, not dropping eye contact. “I know what your whole church is doing. I had another vision, in front of that box. I saw blood dripping from the crack in the marble, like from a wounded animal, before it started pouring out onto the floor. And unlike last night I know perfectly well what this vision meant. He was much clearer this time.”

“Let us through, Romain.”

“Why do you keep God in that box? He wants out, Guiscard.”

“He’s not in the box. All that’s in there is the finger bone of a long-dead man.”

“That’s almost heresy, priest. If that were the case, why do you need the marble?”

Of all times. The box was cracking in half, and he wasn’t going to get to town because a man was blocking the bridge, arguing about theology. So be it. “You know why, Romain. It’s that finger that’s made the church’s existence possible, it brings the pilgrims that let this whole village operate. We’re humble men of God, and we’ve given ourselves to saving the souls of everyone in this village, and the souls of people from miles away—we’ve even helped you, when you’ve come running to us in hard times. Without that finger there wouldn’t be any of that!”

“My past is meaningless compared to what you’re holding down. For your own selfish justification.”

“There needs to be order, Romain. We can’t let what lives in that box out and have miracles happening throughout this land...willy-nilly. This way we can understand it, and let it help everyone.”

Romain turned to Sebastian. “Is that what you came here to do, boy? Hole up God? Keep holiness sealed

away in the church?”

“I said leave him *out*, Romain.”

Sebastian’s mouth hung open as he looked between the two men. He stuttered, “It’s-it’s best kept in one place. We can see it that way, it’s...it’s tangible.” Guiscard winced for the boy.

“No, pilgrim,” Romain said. “It should be everywhere. Throughout these hills, throughout this country. Not kept in a box so it can validate the church.”

“But...” the boy’s mind spun, “h-how would we know what’s real and what’s holy? If it’s out in the open, not in the church...”

Romain was chuckling to himself, shaking his head at the boy. Guiscard had enough. “Sebastian, ride back up to the church. Now, please.”

Sebastian unhooked the cart from his horse and quickly rode off in the direction of the church. Romain smirked and kicked at his own horse to move from the bridge. “I won’t keep you, priest.”

Guiscard made it to the village’s main street. It was busy as it usually was, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask the strangers if they had stone tables. These were farmers, merchants, practical people—why would they need to eat off anything more than wood? He decided to ride further to the stoneworker’s wife. She agreed to let Guiscard borrow an unworked slab of rock from her husband’s inventory, and they loaded the heavy slab onto the cart. Barely out of the village, the horse was already struggling to pull the cart up the beginning foothills. Guiscard dismounted to lighten the horse’s load and walked alongside the strained beast, holding its reins. Along the side of the road he made out Romain’s farm, but he couldn’t see any signs of life. No smoke from the chimney, no children running, no wife singing. He legs felt tired and he lamented his age. He eventually crossed

the bridge, passing by the cart Sebastian left behind. Curse that Romain, scaring him like that. When this all cleared up he would send Thierry to retrieve the cart—it was his turn to run errands.

Guiscard heard another horse galloping and feared a second encounter with Romain. The charging horse rode past, not ridden by Romain but Thierry, still in his clergy robes, not stopping when he saw him. He shouted from the horse, “Turn back! They all saw! Meet me in Niven!” He rode on, galloping out of view, throwing dust into the air. Guiscard coughed. Niven? Niven was two day’s travel from here. His horse wouldn’t be



FLOWER CHILD



third place – visual arts

Chris Chavez

making any more travel today, and he was already so close to the church’s stables...

Guiscard could hear from afar there was shouting within the church. He freed the horse from the cart and left it to its trough. He looked at the sleek black steed that remained in the stable, and thought about taking off like he was told to. Thierry didn’t seem like one to retreat from the church so easily. If I’m going to abandon it too, Guiscard decided, I deserve to at least know why. He took a deep breath and approached the front door of the church.

The travelers were behind the reliquary, pushing with all their weight. Romain was with them, commanding them and pulling at the edges of the reliquary. The box scraped along the ground with a sharp screeching, nearing the altar steps. Guiscard started stepping backwards, realizing why Thierry left, but unable to look away. The heavy reliquary hung over the top step and glacially tipped down onto the first step with a thunk. The reliquary was at an angle now, and the travelers lifted it from underneath to tip it over. It crashed against each step, each thud resonating throughout the walls of the church. The flat marble slammed square onto the final step and its sides fell apart from their own weight. The left ring finger of Saint Evagne rolled forward onto the tile. Guiscard always pictured it as a dry sun-bleached bone, but now that it lay before him, he could see brown flesh still hung to it like dry saggy paper. It was too late now. Romain and all the others stepped back, their work finished. It wasn’t until now Guiscard noticed the boy Sebastian was among them. The ground underneath the rubble shimmered and rippled like water, and golden vines of ivy stretched out like fingers in all directions. Good luck in Niven, Thierry. And may God bless you in your travels. The walls of the church began to turn inwards. ■ ■ ■



MEDA

first place – nonfiction

Ivie Zea



My grandma just doesn't give a damn and always does and says whatever she wants. It doesn't matter what age or what race you are; she just tells it like it is. She's always been that way, but I think it's because she grew up without a mother. Abigail was born in the outskirts of Guatemala City, where the houses are stranded in a sea of green rainforest and dew drops fall from the highest leaf, letting you know the earth will thrive from the rumbling sky. The land was fertile, so fertile that if you ate an apple and spit the seeds out that area would be sprouting leaves a day later.

Abigail's father, Lorenzo, was a Greek immigrant that arrived in Guatemala City as a boy; the only difference from Greece was the humidity, the kind of humidity that let your clothes stick to your skin if you were outside even for just a moment. Lorenzo's favorite place to be was on the hammock in the backyard of his parent's land. One early thick and foggy morning, he ventured out on his powerful black gelding and saw Nina. Nina was the most beautiful indigenous woman of the local tribe that resided across the stream from Lorenzo's property. Her tribe was called, "Chok Tok I'chakk" meaning Jaguar Paw.

Her ancestors had immigrated from Petén, Guatemala where the ancient Mayan ruins were located. Her ancestors had fled when the Spaniards arrived and had been living on the outskirts of Guatemala City since that time. Lorenzo looked at the mocha skinned woman with obsidian colored hair, cinnamon colored eyes, and plump lips in the white night-gown. Nina's view of

Lorenzo was completely different. She had just seen a horse-like shape through the fog and a white demon.

She immediately threw her basket of figs at him and ran off screaming. The rustling sound of the tall grass followed her, the hooves pounded the earth, and her heartbeat raced her body back towards the village. She felt a cold hand tug at her night-gown, but didn't dare look back. After the second tug, she finally got the courage to stop and confront the white demon. She spoke a warning spell of the most common Mayan dialect, "Ki'che," which would drive the demon away.

To her surprise, the white demon wasn't a demon, but a very handsome young man. Lorenzo jumped off of his horse and cautiously walked towards her to speak an apology. He had heard that the indigenous were very vengeful and would cast curses on the white people for anything that upset them. Nina stood her ground, but regardless, trembled in fear of the white man approaching her. Though he didn't have horns like a demon, she couldn't see if the inside of him did have horns.

"I'm sorry I scared you, I didn't mean to, I was just taking my horse to the river for a drink. You are very beautiful, please don't curse me...if you do, you'll turn ugly," he said while cautiously darting his green eyes bend and over her. She scoffed and smiled cruelly, turned around, and started walking away. In her tribe, the custom was that if an outsider followed a tribe member back into the tribe, then they would only have two options: marry and live within the tribe or marry and live outside the tribe. The I'chakk believed that it was very disrespectful to enter a sacred place with an intention, other than compromise. If you are a soul without compromise, you are lost and will roam the earth even in death.

Lorenzo had no idea what he was getting himself

into when he decided to follow Nina, but he returned to his later that day with minor cuts from the ceremony and an indigenous wife. His parents gathered their first set of plates, set of tools, set of utensils, and set of clothes as a couple to give, which was a Greek custom when the firstborn was married. They moved a bit closer to the city, where they constructed their own mud house and agreed to speak in only Spanish to each other, leaving behind their heritage and starting a new life together. After the birth of two daughters and a son, Nina was left with a weakened immune system. She was not used to the smoke of the diesel trucks that passed by in the morn.

However, she carried on, despite her health and along with Lorenzo raised their children, worked, and led a happy life. Nina gave birth to her last daughter, Abigail, on a fog-lifted morning and unfortunately passed away immediately after her daughter's birth. Lorenzo was torn between joy for his newborn daughter and sorrow for the death of his wife. He had to assume more responsibility now that he was left with three daughters and a son during the worst economical time period in Guatemalan history. Despite his struggle, he invested in an old rundown cantina and instilled a bar and a barber section.

Abigail was always by his side, scamming customers whenever she could. Many ranch owners would pass by and treat themselves to a drink or two while she offered to board and feed the horses until the owners were ready to depart. What she really did was run the horses until they were out of breath and then give them food. Seeing their horses in that state, the victims had no choice but to stay in town until the next day, which meant they had to pay for room at her father's cantina. As witty as she was, she never attended school or listened to her eldest sister, who was the teacher at the local grade school.

Abigail would only listen to her father and learned everything a man should know, whether it be exaggerated drinking habits or vulgar language. Beautiful, independent, and strong like her mother, she left the house unmarried with Eusebios. Eusebios Monterroso was like her father, appearance wise, but was an immigrant from Spain. He had been courting her for two years before she finally accepted to go out with him. Lorenzo was skeptical and did not trust the bachelor on the street corner.

All it took was a pool of gossip for him to doubt his daughter. When Lorenzo confronted his daughter all she said was, "How could you not trust me? I am your daughter and you should believe *me* over anybody else. Eusebios is good and kind to me; if you trust me you should trust my judgment and who I want to be with. I might as well leave, if I have to tell you this." She did leave and was pregnant by the age of eighteen, but didn't marry him. She learned to cook, clean, and a raise a child all by herself, but still didn't go to school. "I don't see the point in going to school; it's just a place where pimple-faced, back-stabbing, and hypocritical people are bred. Besides I always get in trouble for fighting in the street, I probably would've been kicked out of every school before I graduated," Abigail would say with a wide grin on her face and glass of Black Velvet in her hand.

Throughout the years, she came to be the mother of nine: four daughters, one set of twins, and three other sons. Besides those children, she had one child stolen from her and eight miscarriages, which included the loss of two sets of twins. Although she cried through each loss, she never lost her optimism, not even when Eusebios died at age 53. Heartbroken and alone, she was tasked with providing for her family, but even when she and her daughters worked to survive while the males

were out partying, Abigail just couldn't seem to make ends meet. She decided to make one of the hardest decisions of her life, file for an American visa and leave her children alone in Guatemala.

My mother, Esperanza, had already dropped out of school to take care of her younger brother and sister when Abigail left for New York. Grandma learned English and worked as a household maid for Sutton Estates. She sent all the money she could to her children, sent clothes, and visited whenever she had the opportunity. After a few years or so, her daughter Esperanza, finally got her visa and moved to New York with Abigail. Esperanza had described the trip to New York as a bleak and unwanted future; she still tears up on the anniversary of Eusebios' death.

When she arrived at JFK airport and went through customs, the first thing they took from her bag was one of Eusebios' favorite typical candies. On the way to Sutton Estates, Esperanza saw people lying in the streets and dragging their feet like the weight of the world was on their shoulders. Instantly, she decided to be optimistic, because of Abigail, she wasn't suffering from hunger or the cold. At that time, her path brightened when she arrived at Sutton Estates, it was if all the greenery that was stolen from her was returned in those estates. Abigail was in charge of cooking and cleaning at Sutton Estates, while Esperanza took care of the children.

Although they were living at the estates, they had many privileges and every Sunday off. One Sunday, Abigail decided they should go shopping so that they could send clothes to Guatemala for the other children. On the cold and dreary streets of Queens, Esperanza found a bag of marijuana. Half of the bag had rolled blunts and the other half was unrolled. Being as curious as she was my, grandma took a blunt from the bag and

put it in her mouth.

Esperanza snatched the blunt from her mouth and said, "What are you doing? That's Marijuana!" Grandma looked shocked but then innocently said, "It's always good to try new things...come on let's try it." By the time Esperanza could say anything else, Abigail already lit the blunt and was exhaling. After taking a few puffs, Abigail handed it over to Esperanza and said, "Here, smoke the rest of it. Tastes like shit." Esperanza smoked the rest and then sold the bag for \$130.

On the way back to the estates, the effect finally hit Abigail on the bus; apparently, the bus driver became more attractive to her than all the other days she had ridden the bus. It turns out the marijuana money they had made was exactly the amount they needed to buy a used car. Neither knew how to drive very well and although they had paid cash for the car, the dealer didn't seem convinced unless he had someone's copy of a license. Grandma nudged mom and spoke in Spanish, that way the dealer wouldn't suspect a thing, "Give him a sob story or invite him to your place, you're a pretty young woman, if you can't do something as this then you really aren't my daughter!"

"Mom! I'm your daughter, how could you make me do this? Would you make Hortencia or Celeste or Anabelle do this?"

"Of course not! You're much prettier. It's called lying and that's exactly what you are going to do to get the car, we need it."

"So it's okay if I lie to you?"

"Try it and see what happens," grandma said menacingly.

"Fine, watch this," Esperanza then turned to face the blue-eyed dealer before her. She seductively crossed her legs and leaned forward showing a bit more cleavage the intended and batted her eyelashes, "Mr. Michaels, what

do I need to do for you to help me? I have nothing else to give. Nothing else to offer. I had to leave my youngest brother and sister alone in a country where the government is corrupt. They can be taken from my custody anytime, what do I do if that happens? My mother would never forgive me and I could never forgive myself. I need to sell that car in order for them to be free and live the American dream. Could you ever forgive yourself knowing that you have two tiny lives in your hands and decided not to give me the car that could grant them freedom, all for something as small as a piece of plastic?"

With that whole speech, Mr. Michaels was left speechless, but after a few seconds decided to take courage, "Fine. I'll give you the car in exchange for one thing." My mom cautiously leaned back and asked very quietly, "What would that be?" and he responded, "A date. Tonight, I'll pick you up at eight." Sure enough, Esperanza couldn't give him a fake address or telephone number, the information was all there in his folder, but she could give him a fake him. Just as he was about to give her the keys, Michaels swiftly moved his hand away from Esperanza's hand to Abigail's.

"...Also on the condition that your mother drives. After all, the car is in her name. Maybe next time." Abigail took the keys in her hand and led Esperanza out of the room, a bit confused. Although she had spent more time in New York than Esperanza, she didn't quite understand English as much. Esperanza took the keys from Abigail's hand and started the car. About fifteen minutes later, Abigail couldn't contain her curiosity and asked what had happened.

Esperanza just shrugged and said, "All he wanted was a date. I tried to get out of it but he said there was no alternative."

"Really? He must have really liked you to give an

eighteen year-old a car without a license as easily as he did," she said a bit shocked but prideful of her daughter.

"Well, he asked Hope to go on a date, not Esperanza."

"Why would you do that?"

"It's called lying and the only reason he gave you the keys is because you were supposed to drive."

Abigail reached to slap her, but Esperanza just swerved a little in order to scare Abigail before she could hit her. Mom requested only one thing while swerving some more: grandma should never have the right to offer her daughter up, the only person who could was her father and he was dead. Sure enough, they had arrived to Sutton Estates and Mr. Michaels called, asking for directions. Mrs. Sutton, lady of the house, answered and clearly stated that there had never been anyone working at Sutton Estates by the name of Hope. Although grandma has much more vulgar and hilarious stores, she loves telling me of the adventures she's had with my mother.

She's sitting on the right side of the Californian living room, holding a glass of Black Velvet on the rocks, and cracking perverted jokes. A little girl moves closer with a wide smile and grandma turns suddenly and scares the crap out of her. The little girl with the brown, wavy hair turned pale from the scare, but grandma just laughs and picks her up and sits her on her lap. "Are you cold?" she asks with a slight grin, when the girl nodded, she moved the glass to the girl's lips and said, "drink this, it'll warm you up". The little girl took one sip, licked her lips, and chugged the rest of the glass before her mother took it away and scolded grandma.

"I don't know why you are mad. It's better for her to learn to drink at home than to learn how to drink in bars."

"She's six years old!" exclaimed my mother.

"I was younger, besides this kid doesn't even look

fazed.”

“Just imagine how horrible it would be if she turned out like you.”

Grandma straightened up in her chair, “So what if she turns out like me? At least she won’t be boring like you. Just shut up and get me another drink, she finished mine.”

I just peered up at my grandma and touched her soft brown wrinkly face and ran my hand through her short black wavy hair. She looked down, smiled softly and winked. In that moment, I knew that I loved her more than anyone else in the world and just remembering the gleam in her eyes, I know that she has and always will love her youngest granddaughter from her favorite daughter. It pains me know that I couldn’t spend more time with her, but I got to taste her food, fall asleep in her arms only to be woken in her kisses, I’ve even had drinks with her. Grandma can’t remember all of the things we did together and won’t recognize my voice when we talk of when I see her until I tell her, “Mama, soy yo. Soy Ivie, tu nieta mas Chiquita.”

It’s me, Ivie, your youngest granddaughter. She’ll remain silent trying to remember until a flicker of recognition presents in her eyes and she says jokingly, “Well who else would you be? Crazy kids, I don’t even want to know what you’ve been smoking.” She was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s about two years ago, she won’t remember the conversations we had, but she’ll remember the greatest adventures she has had. After each visit, she always tells me same thing, “Ivie, don’t be dumb. Find a smart handsome guy who’s good at sex, because sex is everything. Do whatever the hell you want to do and live without regrets and always, always, always drink Black Velvet.” She turned 87 on December 10, 2014. ■ ■ ■



**THERE'S NO WAY
OF KNOWING...**

Joey Miranda

WHOA IS ME

first place – poetry

Joel Salcido



I say my prayers
 like Roy Ayers
 Vibrations
 singing electric
 like a naked Walt Whitman
 riverside baptizing
 evenings under the moon
 No holier endeavor
 than that of the creator
 crafting imaginative planets
 composing universes of Hip Hop
 breath in space makes melody
 at the speed of Jazz
 like Einstein's
 epiphany of relativity heard
 in an extended blue note,
 hold that Coltrane
 let the horns whistle
 epistles to the church of earth
 where Dickinson presides over
 the matrimony of trees

burning incantations
 because my exhalations
 are Gregory Isaacs
 red-irised singing
 the score of the evening
 would- be sleeping
 will- writing forever
 prose goes like Jamaican sprinters

running cooler than winter
 longer than Kenyan legs
 marathons of conversation
 never punctuated
 but trailed by infinite ellipses
 intangible rambles with stamina enough
 to jog through sandy dreams
 for that substantive something

wake up because
 my coffee is Nina Simone
 dark and bold
 opening eyes beneath rising suns
 jubilant piano caffeine
 steaming meaning into dormant thoughts
 mourning sleep every morning
 eyebrows arched
 because my interest
 is Frida on tequila
 scattering ecstatic stumbling
 through Dadaist hips ■ ■ ■

LE EXPOSITION DES MONSTRES



second place – fiction

Madison S. Arney

The sun was dipping below the edge of the pond, throwing a fuchsia smear across the glass, verdant surface. Birds were chirping their last lullabies on the oak trees that surrounded the park. A lone swan was paddling over to where I saw, perched on a small stone wall with my feet lapping at the water. I tossed him some dried bread and wiggled my toes to feel the delicious chill of the cold water. The swan tipped his red beak down to gather the crumbs, exposing the length of his black neck. I leaned over for a closer look, admiring the perfect whites of his little eyes, when I heard the delicate chime of bells. I looked up.

A woman was entering the tea shop across the street. I didn't recognize her, with her mop of platinum blonde hair that was curled in the 50's style and her long camel colored coat. Autumn had barely arrived; it was hardly chilly enough in the sun to warrant a sweater let alone a long trench coat like she was wearing. She looked nervous as she glanced this way and that by the glass door, almost as if someone were following her. For a moment I thought I could see colors on the sharp contours of her neck and hands. Dulled patches of red, blue, and green were seeping out from the coat like livid birth marks. She turned away and disappeared into the shadows of the store before I could be sure of what I saw.

At my feet, the swan pecked at my toes. I looked down at him and he eyed me for a moment before swimming away, apparently disgusted in my lack of

extra nibbles for him. I watched him swim away. His obsidian body grew smaller and smaller as it streaked along into the fuchsia smudge.

The crunch of grass echoed behind me and I turned to see our local busybody, Marianne, walking by. She lifted her hand in a quick wave. "Have you seen her, Emily?"

I wasn't bothered by the lack of greeting. Marianne hardly employed any other kind of salutation. "Seen who?" I asked, waving back.

Marianne looked incredulous. "The *freak* of course! She's absolutely hard to miss if you aren't staring at minnows all afternoon." She gave me a pointed look before walking off across the street to the flower shop.

I doubted the perkiness of this woman instantly. If Marianne was perturbed it was likely that the woman was in last year's cardigan or hadn't bothered with putting on lip gloss. It was unlikely the lady in question was an actual freak.

I donned my shoes and stood to leave as the street lights came on one by one. The street was slowly lit with the warm glow of artificial light as the chill of nighttime set in. I hadn't made it to the corner before the woman emerged from the tea shop, hurrying along the street without a backwards glance. That's when I saw what had gotten on Marianne's nerves. The colors I thought I had seen were there; they were tattoos! Her whole body seemed to be covered in them. Oriental flowers were dipping below the sleeves of her coat and a dragon's tail was disappearing into the back of her shoes.

And she was absolutely nervous. In fact she looked like she was crying as she dashed down the lane that led to my house. I followed her quietly, curious as to where she was heading. She wasn't an acquaintance of mine, or my parents. We had just reached the hedge that surrounded my yard when she stopped.

Slowly she withdrew a small book from a fold in her jacket and, with an almighty heave, tossed it into the street. The light across the way appeared broken; the book had disappeared into an oceanic shadow that engulfed the wood.

Then she was gone. From one second to the next she had run off as if she had never been there. I looked for her in the gloom but couldn't see which way she had gone, which was odd considering the houses sat close together and the lights on my side of the street were all lit. Like a spectral wisp, she had disappeared.

When I was sure no cars were coming I scurried across to where I thought she had thrown the book. I had walked a good way before I saw it, unassuming, lying in a puddle from the previous days rain. It was hardly bigger than a child's bible, the cover a violent shade of vermilion. Across the bottom, off the side, a sweeping scroll read *Le Exposition des Monstres* in a brilliant gold. Quickly I snatched the book from the water, fanning the yellow pages in an attempt to keep them from sticking together. I thought I felt a jolt wash through me, up my arms like the bite of electricity. My stomach churned in excitement and I rushed home to the safety of my bedroom.

I flung myself on the bed and thumbed through the soggy pages. It was clear this little book was meant to be a novel. The first few sentences made that clear: *The tattooed lady's cage was empty. With a snarl, the Ringmaster slammed the gate closed and turned to his motley troupe of performers. These freaks would not be enough to satisfy the audience. They had seen small people and two-headed ladies too many times! The elephant boy and pinheads were too common. "Another!" He demanded. "We must have a star!"*

A smile spread across my lips. How ironic that

a tattooed lady was mentioned in the story when the person to throw the book away had been a tattooed lady.

The Ringmaster fiddled with the bottom of his ivory vest. Where would he find himself a star before the opening? Surely freaks were not just roaming in the countryside like vermin!

I giggled to myself.

What was that? Thought the Ringmaster. He turned slowly, peering into the length of mirror next to the scarlet tent curtains. A pale creature, with eyes like a swans, peering down at him, waving tresses of black hair surrounding her oval face. Her mouth was set with an irresistible smile and unmasked curiosity, bordering on mischief, flaming in her eyes. An idea began to form in his head. If one star could be borne from the mirror, perhaps another might as well. Perhaps this reader had what he needed.

A heaviness overcame my eyes and I stopped reading to rub them. How strange that the author had made this character appear to interact with the reader. It was a brilliant move, to be sure, but it made my throat close with a peripheral sort of fear. As if I was being watched in the empty house.

"Ah yes, ma petite femme, you will do nicely." The Ringmaster smiled, if a smile was what it could be called. Crooked teeth peeked out from beneath a bushy mustache as his lips thinned across his face. A low rumbling of laughter bubbled up from the mouth as he slapped his hands together.

I thought I heard footsteps behind me but couldn't lift my head to look. The book was propped against a pillow but by face was against the soft cotton of my blanket. My eyes lulled shut and no matter how many times I tried to snap them open I couldn't seem to shake the drowsiness. I didn't want to sleep! I wanted to turn on more than just the table lamp, to light the whole house against this creeping fear that the book was giving me. I could feel the heft of my body as

sleep came over me, feel the weight of my heart as it beat against my chest, momentarily warding off the sleep every time it came. Finally my heart wasn't loud enough to stop it and I slipped into the void where dreams and reality meet.

There are moments in dreams when it feels as if we have just become conscious of what is happening to us. Like opening our eyes on a movie that had been playing before we waked. This was not like that. This was slow, like waking from an unintentional nap.

I heard voices around me, soft whispering and laughing that grew louder and louder until it hurt my ears. Footsteps were circling around me on a dirty floor with a vibrating *thud thud thud*. I felt dust tickle my nose and a thick perfume of straw and sweat forced me to open my eyes, slowly at first and then with a quick snap!

A scream died in my throat, choked off by disbelief and panic. Blotches of yellow lamplight were illuminating the darkness of the circus tent. All of the ghoulish characters from the cursed book had come to life and I was trapped amongst the throng of performers. A kaleidoscope of faces danced before me; hideous, deformed faces and painted faces, smiling faces and frowning faces. Two heads and elephant's heads and bearded ladies' heads and everyone was laughing as I struggled to back away from them all.

I heard the deep rumbling laugh again. That cruel, scratchy cackle of the Ringmaster. "What a pleasure it is!" He simpered, his French accent accentuated and artificial. His reddened eyes looked me over, dirty fingers pinching the length of my hair. "Why 'zere is nothing to you at all! Nothing freakish or monstrous."

My chest felt it would cave in, like the depths of my breaths were nothing to the fathoms of air I needed! This had to be a dream, it could be nothing else. I must

wake up myself up somehow. I opened my mouth to scream but only a strangled honking sound came through. There were no words to the sound, just the sound of a frightened animal when it is cornered. This brightened the face of the Ringmaster. "But of course, I see it now! A beautiful black swan, eh?" My scalp tingled with repulsion as his raked his hand through my hair again. Again I tried to scream and again only the swan's call came out.

With a loud clap of hands the Ringmaster set the freaks on me. My hair was sheered and slicked down with a foul smelling black oil. Black paint was slathered against my skin after they tripped my clothes away. I fought them, tried to fight them, but it was a whirlwind of hands reach and grabbing. If I clawed in one direction, more hands appeared in another. My naked form was clothed in a bodice and tutu of the softest down, the same obsidian color as the swan I had seen earlier.

I thought the horrors were over. As one the hands retracted and I stood on the pointed shoes, feeling the bones in my toes breaking as I tried to move. Yet they came back, suffocating me as they sewed more feathers to the backs of my legs and arms. I felt the needles pierce my skin, could feel the warmth of blood as they attached the down in some unconceivable way. I screamed and screamed, hoping that someone would hear my calling, but all I could hear was the honking of the swan.

The Ringmaster was euphoric when they stepped away. The strong man and tall hand both held my arms, forcing me to stand on the painful pointed slippers. "Alas, c'est belle." The Ringmaster said reverently. "Come, come and see your transformation!"

My arms moved gently when I walked, like the flapping of wings, and a mutter of awe swept over the

troupe. The Ringmaster held his mirror before me. There, in the shining glass, stood a black swan. Humanoid. No beak, but there were red lips and the whites of brown eyes. I was a macabre ballerina from a Tchaikovsky ballet, gleaming with blood from the needlework.

From the distance came the sound of trumpets and the Ringmaster clucked his tongue. “Ze time has come, Cyngé.” He said. “All of you, back to your places!”

Cyngé? Swan. But I wasn’t Cyngé, I was Emily!

A swift lethargy was taking over me. I felt like a



LIFE BEHIND BARS

Chris Chavez

child who had cried herself to the brink of exhaustion and lost all will to fight. How could I fight these people? I couldn’t understand how I had gotten here in the first place! It was no dream; I knew that now. A fiendish magic had swept through the pages of that book and brought me here. Was that what the Ringmaster had meant, that his own tattooed lady had escaped the pages and now I was going to serve in her stead? Had my own morbid curiosity, piqued by an escaped freak, only damned me to the pages of an insidious novel?

The Ringmaster pulled me through the stifling tent, into the coolness of the night air. Overhead I saw the stars twinkling like a treasure trove of jewels. I felt the breeze rake across painted cheeks, the scent of campfire and distant woods filling my nose. I saw the words across the tent when I opened my eyes, *Les Exposition des Monstres*. That was confirmation enough that this was real. Tears were welling up again, threatening to smear the black paint on my face. We can’t read in our dreams, but I had read those words as clearly as I saw the stars or the feathers on my arms.

I was led into the largest tent and shoved into the gilded cage that the tattooed lady had so lately escaped from. As if a wicked trick of fate I spun around on my pointed slippers, arms fluttering deftly at my sides like a ballerina. Next to me the elephant-boy entered his cage, sitting primly on a stool. The bearded lady and two headed girl waved from across the walk. The strong man walked past, carrying a pinhead under each heavily corded arm. I waved my arms faster, panicking.

The Ringmaster snapped the bolt of my cage into place. “Yes, flap your wings for the crowd, Cyngé. Flap as if you would fly back to that comfortable bed.” He stepped back. “Or I shall have to clip them.” And he left with a chortle. ■ ■ ■

HIGH DEFINITION

second place – poetry

Jhonnathan Flores



With my eyes closed,
I inhale the thick fog through my nose;
It tickles the hairs
My pupils are dilated,
I exhale silver smoke rings into the purple night air and
watch as they take to the skies and
dissipate into a wide angle fish eye lens to these Ray Ban
battered frames

In HD;

I am not the stanza
I am not the pen
I am not the book
I am not the camera
I am not the grade
I am not the joint
I am not the skateboard
I am not the car
I am not the canvas
In HD;

I am the poet
I am the writer
I am the reader
I am the photographer
I am the student
I am the smoker
I am the skater
I am the driver
I am the artist

In HD I am both in ecstasy and nirvana ■ ■ ■

BRINGING BACK HOPE

third place – fiction

Chantel Gregorio



Long ago, there was a time when no one knew what to believe in. Humans survived off of killing one another, eating all the meat off of each other's bones. The earth was in ruins, there wasn't anything left to harvest or save. Animals that grazed the meadows are now just carcasses in the burned fields. People that worked together to survive in their village are now hunting each other.

The only good people on earth are hopeless and in hiding, slowly dying off and starving to death. The people who didn't have the best morals are killing one another to survive, and the bad people, the ones who were committing murders before this all happened... they've turned into something worse than just man eating hunters. They stay in the darkest crevices of the earth until the world submerges into darkness each night, their ears elongated, teeth jagged, eyes blood red, bodies rough and hair mostly pulled out. They're the Roguems. The worst part about these awful creatures is that they still somewhat look like humans, but they just don't move or speak like them anymore. The Sky Gods looked down on them in pity, but knew they couldn't directly help them.

There were nine Sky gods, four Goddesses, Jasmine, Lucilla, Asprin, and Bonneth, and five Gods Esmerald, Headies, Mylone, Desigoy, and Parthoman. They had the power over wind, sun, rain, and waters, but without hope they were powerless to give back the green lands, fruitful trees, and more animals. If the people could just have hope they could help them, but without it they

were just as powerless as the humans they live above. "There must be something we can do, we can't just sit here and let this happen" cried Lucilla. "We must abide by the rules Lucilla, no interference without their belief." said Mylone. All the gods grew silent and sat there at the Table of Conflict, thinking that there must be a way to fix this.

In the center of the table floated a mist that showed what was going on below them, at that point in time it showed a man with wild eyes finding a skinny woman hiding with an older lady in a dark forest of trees, the trees were slumped over and thorny branches spiraled around everywhere. He found them quickly and decapitated them both with a rough rusted knife, blood instantly soaked the grounds and he started chopping them up to fit in his bag. Headies abruptly jumped from his seat "we need to help them! I am tired of seeing this happen, soon all the good ones left will be hunted off!" The mist at that moment re-formed and showed a woman quietly sneaking through an old cave. She seemed to know where she was going. Then she disappeared through a hidden hole. She was crawling for what seemed like hours but popped out into a huge massive cave, a cave within a cave.

There was a civilization existing underground, a small sad civilization that was as hopeless as the others, but were closer to life than most. Jasmine, whom had been thinking and listening this whole time, felt an idea forming "What if we gift a child, who can help them, and when it spreads to enough people to believe we can help..." Mylone looked at her with sad eyes "We can't interfere, I've already went over this a million times" Jasmine more sure of herself now said "No. We can't interfere with the land and nature without their belief in something good...but there is no rule against giving a child the gifts to accomplish what needs to be done

to create it". Everyone sat quietly for a second taking it in then all at once everyone exploded "I thought that kind of magic didn't exist? We can only control the elements?" "I think you're really onto something" "How do we do it?" "How do we know what child to gift?" Then Esmerald Boomed "Quite! Let Jasmine speak" Jasmine stood up at that moment "Let's give our power to the youngest purest child alive and with it an image of the world how it was, the child will grow and learn of his powers and be able to protect the people and want the world to be how she or he saw it. In time people will follow the child and use the kid as guidance. When they reach that point we can step in." Bonnet stood up and left the room, shortly she came back in with a box "we need to put all of our element powers in here and give it to the mother of the child" Instantly everyone started putting their power into the box, in human form it looked like a reddish purple dust "the mother must sprinkle this all over her infant to give the child that power, he or she cannot wash it off for three days, It will act as a seal." They quickly located the child and gave the mother a dream of what must be done; the woman's name was Aki.

Aki had thick, shiny, black hair woven into a braid, eyes the color of the grass in spring, and the body as strong and smooth as the ocean, she woke up from a crazy dream. A dream of a responsibility she had to take care of. She shook her head to clear the craziness she thought must have been a really weird dream. She had been a young girl when the world went down and had grown into a strong woman. She had been the one who found this temporary safe haven, driven to find somewhere they wouldn't need to be completely scared, especially since she had a child of her own to look after.

She was running from Roguems, she had been running for a good hour when she stumbled blindly

into a cave, falling from exhaustion she crawled through the darkness using the walls to direct her, that's when she accidentally pushed through a hole that continued on into a bigger cavern. She rested there until she knew it was safe to leave. She then ran back to her hidden people she brought them there in small groups until everyone was safe. They accepted it as a safe place to die off and called it home.

Aki was walking towards her daughter's room when she saw it...the box from the dream. Exactly as she dreamt it, she felt a pull towards it and picked it up and knew what she had to do, she covered her daughter in the dust and for three days wouldn't let her daughter rub or wash her skin. Her daughter, named Hope, grew up with a vision of the world before and had discovered her powers and how to control it instantly. One night a man-eater had followed someone into the cave and had killed four people in their sleep and was carrying them out in a sack when Hope crossed their path. She instantly swept him up with wind and crushed him against the wall.

People ran out and saw what she could do. Hope started going on runs, killing whatever man-eater or Roguem in her way. She was able to freely look for food and she never went back to the cavern empty handed. Soon other people went with her and she protected them. People started to learn how to fight and gained strength.

People found hopefulness in Hope and as soon as that happened the gods were able to step in. They took their powers back and made the land healthy again and got rid of all the dark creatures of the world. But when they took back their powers Hope felt like something that was a part of her was missing. She became very weak and with her the land started to die again. "I don't get it, every time we bring something back to life she kills it without trying" said Asprin "Maybe she



DAY OF THE DEAD

Erin McMahon

got connected to our powers, when one of us gets sick something happens on earth..." Bonneth replied.

The gods discussed for weeks about what to do, then they knew what had to be done. That night there was a huge crack through the night and the lands ripped open. Hope never woke up the next morning, but the people woke up to an opening to the sky in their caverns and the land restored. In the end, in order to bring back hope, the gods had to take the girl. People preserve this spot in honor of the girl Hope, whom had saved the world. The location is known as The Grand Canyon. ■ ■ ■

THEY CALL YOU HEROIN

third place – poetry

Kriscia M. Morales Rosales



They call you heroin
 Yet you're anything but a hero
 You feed off the lonely and make yourself their queen
 You seduce your prey with lies of everlasting happiness
 But little do they know they've just signed their death
 entence

A slave to your lies, trapped within themselves
 They seek our help yet never want to escape
 You transform them into their greatest nightmare
 Stealing and cheating and lying
 Becoming their own worst enemy
 You take everything they love and obliterate it
 Breaking it into a million pieces of a puzzle they can
 never put back together the same way

You become their everything
 And they always want you there
 You promise them paradise
 But they're never told they'll be alone

They call you heroin
 Yet you're anything but a hero
 I almost lost myself because of you
 And I've never even met you
 You spread your greediness
 Trying to take over everything and everyone
 Not just the ones who serve you
 They call you heroin
 And you're everything but a hero ■ ■ ■

THE WORLD THAT WAS LEFT BEHIND

Henry Rouse



No one knows how it started. The first cases started in China and Russia. Something in the food was making people sick. By the time science had figured out how it was spreading, it was too late. 95 percent of the world's population was gone. The ones who were left, they weren't really the lucky ones. The cities were littered with dead bodies, trash, and broken down cars. There were uncontrolled fires, buildings falling down, and general disarray.

Chad looked through his backpack, remembering how easy it was to run down to the corner for a burger or taco. There were five of them hiding out in an old bomb shelter left over from the Cold War, which had started and ended before Chad was even born. They had been there for about three weeks, but knew they had to move on soon. There were no supplies close-by. This was the nomadic life that most lead.

On his way back to the shelter, Chad came across a Veterinarian's office. It was mostly intact, and Chad rummaged around found some pet medication and food, canned dog food. Very happy to find such a stash, Chad loaded up what he could fit in his bag and headed back to the shelter. "Got to get back before dark," he thought.

Shelly began to worry. Normally, Chad would have been back by now, but he was late. Did he get attacked by the wild dog packs that roamed the city or worse, the eaters? The eaters were what people called the gangs of

people that turned to cannibalism as a result of the food shortages. As the food was making people sick, some people turned to this sick and twisted means of survival.

Shelly began to voice her concern to Don: "Do you think the others are okay?"

Don replied, "They have been out later than this; I am sure they are fine."

"What about the eaters we saw yesterday?" said Shelly.

"We saw them, they did not see us," Don replied.

The number one rule was to stay at the shelter while the others hunt for supplies. Experience had taught them it was faster and easier for one person to get in and out of places. However, something about today seemed different. Jim and Becky usually did not stay out as late on supply runs. Though they were older, they were new to the group. It had been just Shelly, Don, and Chad for the longest time. Jim and Becky were brother and sister; they all met up in a house two hundred miles south of the shelter they called home now. Chad, Shelly, and Don had known each other from school. Don was actually a student aid working at Chad and Shelly's high school.

Everything went down so quickly people died within days of getting sick. The news of what was safe came too late. Who would have figured that the thing everyone who said would kill everyone was the one thing that was safe. Fast food that was overly processed, fried, and saturated with fats and oils turned out to be somewhat safe, along with dog and cat food.

During the breakdown, people who were afraid to eat food turned to eating each other. I guess whatever it was did not transfer from human to human. With most of the people on the planet gone, "people" food was getting harder to find. So the looting of pet food

warehouses, pet stores, and supermarkets began. It did not take long to wipe them out. While looting, many people chose to set fires, destroy buildings, and other such destruction that anarchy seems to bring upon people's minds.

There was a rustling at the entrance to the shelter. Don drew his gun and hid behind the wall. It was Becky; "damn she needed to learn to be quieter," He thought. "I got some good stuff," Becky said. She dumped out her bag on the floor. Six cans in all. No dry dog food tonight. Becky exclaimed, "I found it in a nearby apartment. I think she was a shut in." Don crabbily growled, "Dammit Becky, be quiet moving about. I almost shot you." Becky looked around and asked, "Where is Jim?"

"He and Chad are still out, Shelly replied. Becky said nothing, but she did not have to, the look on her face said it all. Jim was rushing back to the shelter when he tripped and fell. He cut his leg pretty bad leaving a trail of blood behind. Half stumbling, half running, he slowly made it back to the shelter. "Becky, you there," Jim asked in a hushed voice. Becky rushed to the front of the shelter to meet Jim.

"Oh Jim, are you alright?" "You are bleeding." Becky exclaimed. It is just a cut, I will be fine," Jim stated. The others helped Jim into the shelter and saw to his wound. Jim shuffled through the supplies he had scavenged.

The sun was beginning to set on the day and Chad was making his way back to the shelter. Suddenly he stopped. His blood ran cold when he spotted them. Eaters. "He recognized them in an instant. The group had run into this particular gang a few weeks back while out on a supply run. Damn, he thought to himself. "I thought we lost them for good. But I guess not, by the looks of it they are tracking something or someone," he

thought. Chad got closer so he could make out what they were saying to each other.

"Hey boss, you sure you saw that guy headed this way?"

"Russ I hate it when you question me", the man in charge growled back.

"By the way come up here and see for yourself, its blood and by the taste of it human blood," he said with a smile.

Chad sunk behind his hiding place. "This is not happening," he thought to himself. "Think, think, think", he said under his breath. Then came that dreaded sound. That barking and growling, feral dog pack had picked up the scent of Jim's blood. Chad was in between the eaters and the dogs too close to the shelter to make for it. It would be bad news for everyone if our group had to fight off either group or God, forbid, both. The dogs were coming closer and closer. Chad looked up at the hunters they were collecting themselves and getting ready to follow the trail of blood and had not noticed the dogs yet. It was twilight and just dark enough, he thought. Chad reached into his backpack and pulled out a couple of cans of dog food and a can opener. He opened both cans and poured some of the liquid from the dog food around him. Then he waited.

The dogs were just in sight and the good and bad news was they looked skinny and hungry. This made them really nasty and mean. They began to head towards Chad, first at a trot, then a fast run. Then, Chad bolted up and made his move, a can in each hand he threw them both; one bounced off the head of the bigger eater, the other splashing the other in the chest.

"What the hell?" yelled Russ. The eaters both looked up just in time to see Chad running strait for them. Chad hit the boss low enough to knock him down, but with enough momentum to keep running just like he used to do in football in those Friday night

games. The boss fell into Russ, just enough to knock him off balance. Before either of them could make sense of what was going on, the dog pack was on them.

Chad ran as fast as he could. He never looked back. From the sound of the screaming and the barking, his plan had worked. When he made sure he was out of sight, he doubled around back to the shelter. In the distance, he could hear the screaming and the dogs attacking. Eventually, the screaming stopped, but he could still make out the sound of the dogs feeding.

Everyone at the shelter was on edge. No one dared head out; they could hear the whole commotion in the distance. Chad had made it to the shelter. He gave the call they had worked out so they knew it was him. He did not want to get hurt coming back. The group might have not realized it was him. Shelly bolted out of the shelter and almost knocked him down. "I was so worried, she cried. He chuckled "No worries, everything is fine," he said. Chad and Shelly both entered the shelter. "Is everyone alright?" Chad asked. He saw Jim's leg and Don filled him in on the situation. Chad then told the group his story. Jim spoke up and said, "Sounds like we have all had one helluva day," They all chuckled. It was nice to actually take a moment of levity in this new world they faced.

The group ate well that night with everyone's successful supply run. Don and Chad went outside and followed Jim's blood trail with some cleaner they found in the shelter. They sprayed it down with bleach and ammonia so the dogs would not smell the trail. It was hard to find in the dark, but they managed. As Don and Chad made their way out of the shelter, Chad suggested they check out the eater's fate. They got close enough to the site where Jim remembered it happened. In the moonlight, they could make out a few of the dogs but no people. They were close enough to hear the sounds

of the dogs chewing on bones.

“Well looks like your plan worked,” Don said as he winced from the gruesome scene. Chad nodded, and then he pointed to an SUV in the moonlight.

“I think that is their vehicle,” Chad said.

“We will check it out in the morning,” Don replied.

They both agreed and headed back to the shelter. Before the group settled down for the night, they went over their plan for the next day. They all agreed it was time to move on. They would check the SUV out in the morning and if everything was good load up Jim in the back and everyone else and head to the place Chad had found his supplies that day. But for now, they were safe, fed, and tired. The group took some time for a much needed rest. Chad and Don woke up early wanting to put some distance between their current shelter and the hunters they encountered. Chad thought to himself their friends are bound to come looking for them sooner or later. Either way, it was best to be long gone. As they both reached the vehicle, they also passed by the remains of the hunters.

“Ugh, that smells horrible,” Don remarked. There was very little left, but what was left very pungent. Chad decided to take on the unwanted task of searching for the personal effects of the hunter’s remains.

“The keys must be in this goo somewhere,” Chad said half gagging on the odor and the sight.

Eventually, they both found the keys to the SUV and some weapons, Don chuckled, and “These will come in handy.” Most of the group did not enjoy using weapons, but in the world they lived in this was a must. Whether defending yourself from hunters, wild dogs, or some other horror, weapons were on the must have list of survival.

Don noticed something wrong with the vehicle. “Chad, pop the hood,” Don asked. Chad complied and

Don started rummaging around the engine muttering and speaking under his breath. “Damn, I was afraid of that,” Don stated. One of the radiator hoses had been damaged and it was about to give out. “Chad, did you come across an auto parts store while you were out, Don asked.

“No,” Said Chad.

“Well, that complicated things somewhat.” “We need to either fix it or find a replacement and soon,” Don said.

“Let’s check the SUV for some duct tape that might work,” Chad said. They rummaged around the SUV to no avail. They checked the nearby houses still nothing. It was getting late in the day and they decided to go back to the shelter to give the rest of the group bad news.

Shelly was waiting by the opening in the shelter, when she spotted Chad and Don. Now, every time she spotted Chad her heart skipped a beat. “No time for that now,” she thought to herself. The three came into the shelter and sat down a moment of awkward silence filled the room.

Becky said, “I am guessing you do not have very good news?”

Don spoke up, “I am afraid not, the radiator line is busted and without fixing or replacing it we won’t get far.”

“How about some duct tape,” Jim asked.

“We can’t find any,” Chad said gruffly. Jim pointed to a spot on the wall where three brand new rolls of duct tape hung. They all looked up; Don and Chad shook their heads and chuckled. Don jokingly quipped, “Jim, why didn’t you just tell us about this in the first place.”

Jim smiled and replied, “You never asked.”

Don and Chad took some water and the duct tape back to the SUV and quickly repaired the vehicle. Chad got behind the wheel of the vehicle and started it up.

They were in business. "Let's get to the shelter and load up. Or we can wait?" Don asked.

Jim said, "I just want to get going as soon as we can." They parked the SUV as close to shelter as they could and began to move the supplies to the vehicle. There was room for everything and everyone, but it was a little cramped for Jim, whose leg was still healing. They covered their tracks in case they needed to come back to the shelter someday.

Here it was late afternoon when they decided to take off. Since most of them grew up near here they knew the back roads and other ways to keep away from hunters. The hunters seemed to stay in towns for whatever reason. Perhaps they figured let their prey come to them. The group would have to stop at some out of the way farms and houses and were able to find enough gas for a full tank plus, so that was a good piece of luck.

Trying to figure out where to go, Shelly decided to turn on the radio station on a whim nobody had heard any broadcasts for several weeks. As she scanned the radio dial only static and then a noise that sounded oddly familiar. That annoying sound what was that? "Oh my God, Shelly whispered. It was the Emergency Broadcast Alert. Everyone stopped cold. "This is the Emergency Broadcast System, please listen carefully," a voice stated. "The CDC along with FEMA has declared a safe zone in Burksburg," the voice stated. "If you can make it here safely, we will provide food, water, shelter, and medical attention," the voice stated. The announcement gave other details and direction on how to get there. "I know that place we used to head there in the summer to spend time with my relatives. It's about 359 miles from here," Jim said.

"Well what the hell are we waiting for?" Don exclaimed.

Becky yelled, "Let's get the hell out of here!" ■ ■ ■

DISARMED

Astrid Castaneda

She walked aimlessly without her shadow,
In the depths of her surroundings.
The rays of the star gleamed above her small figure,
Yet no shadow was visible.

In the depths of her surroundings,
Her eyes wandered through all the shadows that passed
by.
How well joined the shadow and its body are,
Wondering where her shadow has traveled to.

The rays of the star gleamed above her small figure,
As she walked with her head in the clouds.
A shadow collided against her,
In awe she marveled at its beauty.

How well joined the shadow and her body are,
Content, her shadow has come to light.
Not having to panic she would never find it,
But she paraded, disarmed. ■ ■ ■

PINES

Henry Rouse

Wind sound s through the pines.
Smell of sap, it seeps through bark.
Close your eyes and drift. ■ ■ ■



MISCARRIAGE



Rebecca J. Miller

I awaken in the morning
Inside of me something bursts
I instinctively know what it is,
I've miscarried again.

Every time a baby cries,
My heart yearns to hold her,
To soothe her crying,
I've given birth before,
We have two healthy boys...
But I've always wanted a girl.
Someone to fill my arms with,
To dress in ribbons and bows,
Teach how to bake and knit.
Someone to hold me when I am old,
tell me it will be OK.
Someone.

My heart yearns to hold
This daughter I've never seen,
This son I've never held.
When in the womb
My body's rejection
Left her without a home.
And now I'm haunted with the sorrow
Of what might have been.
Child I've never held;
Unbeholden. ■ ■ ■

TRIGGER-HAPPY HEART



Shea Huffman

She stands alone
A statue with feet frozen into the ground
And lips sewn shut.
Screams erupting in her belly
Volcano in her heart
Red hot emotions spewing out all over her bones
Lighting them on fire.
The life she once knew is slipping from her grasp
Carelessness washed away
A runaway balloon drifting into the sky.
She'd held on so tightly
Knuckles bleeding from the inside-out
Yet somehow
It had still managed to escape her clutches
Just barely out of reach
Left standing alone. ■ ■ ■

WHO AM I?

James Royce



Waking up every morning to the sounds of an alarm buzzing its annoying tone straight into your eardrum, this is common for everyone to start a new day, right? However, what if you awoke from your daze and noticed that is not the sound coming from your own set alarm? The bed that you found comfort sleeping in the night before is no longer underneath your body and the environment that you called home was, now, unknown to you. Your eyes try to dart back and forth looking for anything that resembles a personal item that you could seek comfort in but there is none to be seen. You reach out to shut off the annoyance that woke you to this nightmare, but soon you come to the sudden and disturbing realization that the appendage that you are using to grasp that buzzing terror does not resemble the body you have come to know as you. Has this ever happened to you? If not, welcome to my nightmare...

The nightmare began its journey on the Sunday after my birthday-bash. I just turned twenty-one. I left with Josh, Zach, and Turner for a few beers that night, but I think we drank one too many. I could not recall the events that took place after. My mind was swirling harder than a hurricane and throbbing to what seemed to be the heartbeat of a thousand drums. Thoughts and emotions were floating in mid-air but I my newfound body was unable to grasp these images of the prior night. I tried to blink as fast as I could to see if that would awake me from this terror, only hoping this was a dream, no luck. I tried to smack myself on the head, but that only increased the hangover, caused me to almost vomit the contents of my stomach and left a decently proportioned red welt on my new face. There

was no way for me to escape this; I took the moment to further investigate the new body of mine, after the nausea settled in my stomach. Still lying in that king sized bed, I rolled up the right sleeve of the white shirt that my body had dressed itself in. I saw no tattoos or other definable markings just a farmer's tan on white flesh that transferred into a darker tan, like the kind you would see on movie stars or laborers. Then I moved onto the left side, peeling back the other clingy tight sleeve up to my shoulder, my eyes traveled from wrist to elbow, then up to the shoulder and just before the elbow, I noticed something that would be unmistakable. It was an older bullet wound, with pale scar tissue lining every inch and what looked darker veins or creases all darting towards the center of it. I thought to myself, this must be one lucky man to still have his left arm after a shot like that. I looked at each arm and noticed the well-defined tone of each bicep and forearm; veins were traveling the surface of each arm from shoulder to hand. This body is ten times more defined than my older body. After examining the upper portion of this newly inherited body, I had to see what I looked like in the mirror and see the face of this body, the one that would greet anyone that would come in my way.

I must have been in the master bedroom of my new house because the room was wide enough for the massive king-size bed I was lying in and I noticed what appeared to be a walk-in closet, but I figured would investigate it later. I walked into what I believed, in my current daze, was the master bathroom. It was expansive; it had enough room to fit a fake wood tiled shower that filled the corner of the back wall, and a spa bathtub with water jets pointing in every angle. Once I finished admiring all of the expensive and impressive luxuries, I could never afford, I took what felt like a faithful walk to the nearest mirror. Who am I? How did I get here? Was this fate

or punishment? All these questions rang out in my head as I approached the mirror, gradually. Have you ever had one of those moments where there is a sudden realization of Déjà vu? As soon as I reached the mirror and came across my newfound face, my memories shot like a rocket out of me and almost projected onto the mirror in front of me. Déjà vu.

The night prior to this nightmare began flowing back into my mind and playing as if it was an old-time movies

reel. My one night that forever changed my future, from the looks of it. It all started at the bar known as Lakeside Jim's. Josh invited me to go meet up with him, Zach and Turner for a few beers to help initiate me into the world of alcohol and celebrate my brand new freedom as I turned twenty-one. Josh started by ordering the first rounds of Budweiser, Zach continued it further by bringing in Blue Goose Vodka shots, and at this point, we were all getting buzzed having a good time.



REQUIEM FOR AQUINAS
Chris Chavez

Josh got the drunken nerve to go try and ask out one of the female bartenders and was shot down faster than a speeding bullet; he walked back, tail between his legs, to us laughing so hard we had tears coming from our eyes. Turner said, "One more round, please" to all of us with his finger pointed towards the ceiling. We all looked at him in bewilderment because he was the one that could barely hold a straight face after two 8-ounce glasses of beer, but it was a celebration. Josh stumbled over to the bar tender and whispered his order into the bartender's ear; he just looked at him and smiled as he pulled out one of the most recognizable bottles ever filled with a golden liquid. The bottle had a square bottom and a strip of green traveling across the glass, the top was a blue glass bulb attached to the cork, right underneath was a silver lined ribbon tied to the neck and etched across the front of the bottle was the chrome-plated letters Tequila.

The memories suddenly stopped and the images in front of my eyes faded away to black to reveal a man. He had a strong jaw line covered in a dark five-o'clock shadow, deep blue eyes that at one glance shown that they have witnessed some unmentionable actions, and as for hair there was only a high and tight style with what appeared to be this dirty blonde hair. Was this really me? I reached out and touched the cold mirror. I tried waving my hands, grinning, gave myself a thumbs up, but every action in my mind was performed by the body of the man in a precise manner. So this was the new me. I walked back into the master bedroom and noticed a black leather wallet sitting on a dark oak nightstand. I had to open it to find out who I was. I must have a name, right? I slowly picked up the leather wallet and spread it apart hoping for answers as to who I am. As it opened a set of pictures rolled out of the wallet all incased in a connected plastic packages,

but I kept looking for an identity card of some sort, anything that could lead me to my body's name. Finally, a glimmer of hope, there was a Montana State issued driver's license, the name listed on top of the laminated card was Samuel A. Louis. I sat back on the bed and pondered for a moment. The name did not ring a bell in my mind; it was none of my closest friends or family. I sat up and took a hold of the pictures that rolled from the wallet when it first opened. The first picture was a picture of him and his daughter; she was up on his shoulders wearing a purple dress with long white lace and little glossy dress shoes. She had bright blue eyes and curly long blonde hair, and as for him he had on what appeared to be a teal dress shirt with a black tie and both of them were smiling and laughing, I could see the amount of joy when they both were grinning from ear to ear. The second picture was of what looked like his wife, she was standing by herself next to a bouquet of red roses that complemented the dark red dress she was wearing. She had dark brown eyes, a gorgeous smile of all white teeth, and long flowing brown hair with highlighted streaks of blonde. I went to roll the pictures back up when I noticed some handwriting on the back of the second picture, "Annabelle S. Louis, August 6 1989- September 12 2012" with a heart after the name and date. It hit me hard and fast when I realized I was in the body of a single dad raising a beautiful five-year-old daughter. However, the question still floated in my head, how did I end up here and why? I set the wallet back down on top of the oak nightstand; I needed to find out more as to who I am. I looked through the nightstand going through each drawer, one by one, and as soon as I slid open the third drawer down, I noticed what appeared to be a Glock 29 and another folded black wallet. I picked up the wallet and flipped it open from the top. My heart stopped. Badge number

307243, Great Falls Police Department. I sprinted over to the walk-in closet and stopped dead in my tracks when my eyes traveled across the black and blue uniform. Three dark blue outlined chevrons lined each short sleeve, next to the uniform lied a fully equipped tactical belt, and underneath it all was a set of polished black leather boots.

Suddenly my mind exploded once more; I felt transcended back into my old body while the images were playing out in front of me. This time, however, I was watching the events that took place from a third person perspective of my own world. I watched John, Zach, Turner and I stumble out of Lakeside Jim's, we were barely able to make it out the door. I traversed the entire bar three times just to find the exit and nearly fell six times from my own shoelace I was too drunk to tie. I could smell the amount of alcohol flowing in our systems; you could almost get drunk off the fumes. I watched myself finally hobble over to my forest green Jeep Liberty, and grab the steering wheel for the drunken ride home. I wanted to stop myself but I could not move only watch in horror as to what I was about to do. The engine turned over and black smoke poured out from the exhaust pipe, my fate of driving under the influence was sealed; the white reverse light shot out into the night and the vehicle slowly pulled backwards onto the main road. The pictures faded for a moment, then came right back in front of me, suddenly I was surrounded by the wails of sirens and the flashing of blue and red lights, I was back in my body but only long enough to see all the headlights behind my vehicle, hunting me down like a pack of wild wolves.

Once more the images faded to black, but still what did this man have to do with any of it? I left the room and entered a long narrow hallway with only three other white wooden doors down the length, two on the

right and one in-between on the left. I opened the first door on the right; the room was empty, only an older gray filing cabinet in the far right corner and a couple of brown dusty cardboard boxes labeled in black ink, taxes. I went to the one on the left side of the hallway, the wooden door squeaked when I opened it, but it was merely another bathroom with nothing but black tile and a small shower bathtub combination. My hand touched the last door in the hallway but this time I had lost control of the body and it opened the door itself. I was no longer in control. The door swayed open and revealed a room that was built for a five-year-old girl. The walls were pink and had hand painted unicorns with long flowing manes and rainbows that darted from corner to corner. In the middle of the back wall was a bed with a white, sliver, pinked draped netting, and had a fake gold plated bed frame. The room was definitely built for the desire of a little girl. I felt the body take control and it walked me in and around the room, all I could do was sit back in my thoughts and watch what that body was doing. It was almost as if my new body was reliving memories or as if it was saying goodbye. My mind eerily filled with the sounds of a little girl laughing and singing her dad's name. Next thing I know I feel the body collapse onto the carpet as if the life poured out of every extremity and the world went dark.

I awoke once more to the putrid sound of beeping but it was coming from my memories not an external source. Was I back in my body? My eyes slowly opened to the same horror and there was no such luck. I was in the driver seat of a Montana state police cruiser, fully marked with a Mossberg 500 shotgun to my right, computer and lights panel. How could this be? Am I still in the same body? The same thoughts kept creeping back into my head. I was too busy to realize that I still had no control of the body after I opened its eyes. The body of Samuel A.

Louis was performing duties on its own terms and once again, I was left to sit back and watch. The funny part was I could still feel, smell, taste, see, and hear everything that was taking place but I had no control of the actions set in motion, I was trapped in that prison of body only to watch it perform like a robot. It was hard to see, pitch black out, and the only visible light on was from the computer or from the car's headlights passing by. "All units, All units, we have a 505A, reckless driver in the area of Lakeside. Suspect was last seen in a green Jeep Liberty, heading south towards Great Falls, any nearby officers please respond." The call cracked out the radio's internal



REACH

Merritt Zamboni

speaker system, I could feel the adrenaline buildup in my new body as the call went out. I watch the hand of my body grasp the transmitter and push in on the talk button. "Officer Samuel Louis responding to that 505A, over." I could hear his voice echo in my head but felt every word flow out of my mouth. "Roger that Officer Louis." The radio replied. Then my body moved to undo the seatbelt and begin to step out of the vehicle with a mag-light in hand and turned the main police lights on. I could feel the heat intensity with every strobe of the red and blue. Off in the distance there were headlights swerving back and forth, left to right, down the road and as the vehicle approached, I noticed something very odd about that vehicle. Before I could figure anything out, my body took control once more and stepped foot into the middle of the road and a hand was out stretched in front of me with the fingers put together and forming a sign to stop. At this point, the headlights were blaring down the road at us were blinding; I could still hear the vehicle coming at full speed and not a single delay in the throttle. In those last seconds I could feel every emotion that person was going through, fear, desperation, anger, and at the end pain. The vehicle collided at full force into my new body, everything went slow and painful, I could feel every rib shatter into my chest, my thighs being crushed into dust as the bumper smashed into me, and I watched as my head slammed into the hood and broke open like an egg into a frying pan. However, I did get to see who caused the death of this man, the death of a single father, and officer of the force. Right before my head hit the hood time froze for a split second to reveal the killer. It was me...

Everything vanished into a white blur and all I could see was the trails of devastation left behind by Samuel's death. I was forced to watch every tear jerking moment after the incident. I watched his daughter burst into

tears and fall on the floor when she had to find out that her dad was not coming home in the morning. His closest friends and family uncontrollably fall apart at the news of his death, and I viewed every moment of his funeral service, and the worst of it all, I was the one that caused this. The images and white blur faded away to the back of my head but I awoke, this time, to the sound of metal bars being clanked. I outstretched my arms and realized I was once again back in my own body. I felt at peace until I looked around. I was wearing a tattered prison orange jumpsuit and was surrounded by walls of concrete, with no sign of escape and only heard the sound of other prisoners shouting racial slurs at one another. A florescent white light flickered above my head as it made a low dull buzzing sound. Footsteps approached the solid steel door that enclosed this whole room. I heard the shout of a deep growling voice, "Unlock cell C-3!" The tumblers in the door rolled back and a deep alarm buzz echoed out. A tall muscular warrant officer walked in the door and looked at me with a sense of hate in his eyes. He growled at me, "Get up boy, it's your time!" I responded, "Time for what?" He only gave a grim smile as he firmly grabbed my arm and escorted me out of the dark prison room. We walked through the prison until we reached one last room on the far side, the door slid open to reveal a bright white room with one light on the ceiling, a mirror on one side, and a window with a curtain in front of it. I soon knew where I was, there was a table in the middle of the room with restraint belts on every corner.

So, this was it. I went out to go enjoy the new freedom of my life but it only took one choice to mess everything up for me, and I was forced to see the life that I had taken before I was able to watch mine be wrenched away just as quickly as I took his. Was this the punishment I deserved? ■ ■ ■

WINTER FLOWER

Jeremy Scotten



Fear of tomorrow blows like winter wind against my skin,
freezing me in place as I wait to feel the seasons change
once more.

I can wait because I am patient, but I fear my virtue has
shifted to vice,
as my ability to wait has made the ability to act,
forgotten.

The future wraps its arms around me and tugs me forward,
but try as I might to welcome its embrace, my arms
retract, weak and shivering.

Summer comes when I declare it.

A mind flooded with skepticism and apprehension,
has not room for thoughts of faith and hope.
A heart wrought by the plights of the past,
meets the sunrise with nervous, squinting eyes, and a flinch.
Bright as it may be, my limbs are still numb from the
icy wind.

The sun can pretend to offer warmth,
but I cannot pretend to feel it.
So shiver to create my own.

Summer comes when I declare it.

The friction of the blood through my veins speaks to me,
pushing me to face the day.
Creating my own heat, the sweat begins to pool on my brow.
I will not fear what tomorrow brings,
tomorrow will fear what I bring,
and like a winter flower I will dare to bloom.

Summer comes when I declare it. ■ ■ ■

THE CROWS OF CAIMBERDEN

Ocean Lombardi



Miss Charlotte Wentworth was hanged during the time of autumn afternoon when the sun cast a ripe gold light over the wheat fields. The shadows of gaunt birches stretched along the horizon. The entire town of Caimberden, Massachusetts, had laid down their farm tools and shuffled to the gallows with a morbid curiosity, for it was not every day that a witch was put to death. The air hung thick with unspoken gossip. The silence was pierced only by the pastor and the occasional caws of the watching crows. Miss Wentworth remained stony, stoic until the very end. When the gruesome deed was done, up stepped Douglas Beckett, the undertaker, to spirit the body away.

His horse trotted past the sleepy graveyard of the Caimberden Church. It offered no resting place for the accused, so old, graying Mr. Beckett instead voyaged into the wild woods. His horse stopped at last between two snarled oak trees. Beneath them lay a waiting grave, exactly as he had dug it that morning. He did not tarry, but instead worked with haste to fill the final resting place of Miss Wentworth. Her youth and frailty were evident, even through the ragged funeral shroud that the pastor had wrapped her in. With each shovelful of dark earth that Mr. Beckett tossed upon her form, he found himself filled with an unusual hollowness that he could not quite place. There would be no songs of mourning for the dead woman, no bouquets or flickering candles in the church windows. No, her only eulogy would be the muttered curses of the townsfolk. Even in her lifetime they had blasted her presence, and

the crows that always shuffled in her wake. Above him, through the bare branches of the forest, he heard the gentle fluttering of anxious wings. Mr. Beckett stepped away from the grave, his work completed.

“Here, Miss Wentworth, may you find respite from your earthly toils,” he said, a prayer heard by none. He stood for a time, brushing dust off his clothes, before he climbed onto his steed and headed home.

That was the day Mr. Beckett first noticed the crows. They had always been there, he reasoned. But after the final shovelful of soil had been packed down, after his horse was out of the woods and plodding along the rough country road, Mr. Beckett happened to glance back at the oaks. He saw in their boughs a number of silent, black birds, tilting their heads from side to side. Peering at him with bright eyes.

Mr. Beckett turned his head and continued on to town. When he returned at last, the townspeople had dispersed back to their cottages. The candlelight illuminating their windows seemed to do nothing against the growing night. Pulling his coat close around his shoulders, he led his horse to the stable and hurried home.

“About time you came back,” said Mrs. Beckett, steering him towards the dining room with calloused hands. The lines around her mouth sharpened when she eyed the dark soil that her husband tracked in. Upon seeing his downcast eyes and dispirited posture, though, she said nothing about it.

“Dinner has been ready for ages now. Ugh, how could they burden you with such a task, Douglas, to bury that horrible woman,” she said instead, removing the coat from his stooped shoulders.

“Somebody had to do it,” said Mr. Beckett. “No different from burying someone in the churchyard, really. A little sadder, maybe.”

"Do not speak of it anymore," soothed Mrs. Beckett. "It has passed, she is gone. There will be no more witchcraft in this town. We need not speak of her again."

The two had just settled in at their table when there was a sharp, single *rap!* at the door.

"Oh, who has come to pester us now?" Said Mrs. Beckett, hurrying towards the front. "You think they would let you have some peace now that..." her voice trailed off.

"What is the matter," said Mr. Beckett. When there was no response, he stood to investigate. Mrs. Beckett lingered in the doorway, tight-lipped, gazing down at the front step. There lay a single crow. It was flat on its back, wings sprawled in chaos, its head twisted at a painful angle.

"It must have flown right into the door and snapped its neck," said Mrs. Beckett. She did not take her eyes off the bird. Its black beak was open in a silent cry.

"Forget about it, Margaret," said Mr. Beckett. "Come back inside. I shall do away with it. You need not look at it a moment longer."

It was on a brisk and brumous morning that the pastor readied himself for the day's service. He had just begun to recite his morning prayers when a terrible screeching cut through the autumn air and rattled the window-panes.

"Wicked beings! Hateful things! Begone from here. In the name of Our Father, begone! Tormenters of children, you wicked creatures!"

The pastor's Bible fluttered to the floor. It was the voice of Mrs. Newsome, he was sure, but what had gotten into her? He strode to the church doors and flung them open. The townsfolk had wandered out onto their yards, many still in their bedclothes. They stood frozen in place, transfixed by some disturbance just down the cobbled road. There was no buzz of gossip, not even muffled cries from the wives. The only sound

was the lament of Mrs. Newsome as she stumbled down the street with a bloodied bundle in her arms, and the cackles of the crows from the naked branches.

Only when she tumbled to her knees did the pastor gain his wits. He rushed forth to aid her. Behind him shuffled the townsfolk, yet they hesitated to stray far from their doors. Mrs. Newsome turned to the pastor. Her frame was contorted with a hatred that emanated from every line in her face, every jerk of her shoulders. A drop of blood trickled from her scalp into her eyes, but she showed no notice.

"It was the witch's work. Only she could do it to my Elizabeth... the specter and her awful servants. They came! My own home, my own child... she aims to ruin us!"

The pastor pulled the bundle from her quivering arms. Mrs. Newsome collapsed on the cobblestones in incoherent sobs. Wrapped in a cloth was the limp form of the young girl Elizabeth Newsome. Her pallid skin was riddled with red gashes and welts. Her head lolled listless and doll-like. The pastor felt her damp chest trembling like a struck bird. A rough gurgle began to creep in her throat, and she spluttered out a monstrous red bubble. He wiped at her mouth with his bare hands, seized with a panic. He looked at her small face, her gaping mouth, and saw a strip of mangled flesh where her tongue should have been.

"The crows," someone behind him murmured. The whisper was caught by the town like a plague. It swelled into a wild hissing. "*The crows... The crows...*"

"Find the doctor! She needs aid!" Cried the pastor, jumping to his feet. The crowd around him began to jostle, and some brave souls stepped forward. But a black bird descended from the gray sky in a sudden swoop and the people scattered with the fervor of spooked horses.

Mrs. Beckett leaned so close to the frosty glass of the front window that her face almost pressed against it. "The

poor soul," she breathed. "How fares her poor daughter?"

"Not well," Mr. Beckett said. "The doctor reckons she was pecked at by an entire flock. Not that we will ever hear the whole story from the girl's mother. She is in a delirium. When I stopped by to check on them, she..."

Mr. Beckett froze, pursed his lips. How could he describe to his wife the change that had come over Mrs. Newsome? That she had gone from a pleasant and watchful mother into a wretched, hollow-eyed creature that clawed at her bible and screamed for the Lord's mercy when the crows called out? How she had claimed to see a wraith crawling down the street in the dead of the night with a limp, lolling head? And behind it, a dancing row of crows, the mad moon glistening off their wings?

Mrs. Beckett had turned to her husband and was watching him with the tip of her tongue between her teeth.

"... Mrs. Newsome is in a bad state. It is already a tragedy that Elizabeth was rendered mute," he said.

"We will be praying for them," said Mrs. Beckett, clasping her hands together. "The girl was so lovely in the choir... We will be praying for them every day now..."

Mr. Beckett leaned back in his chair and opened his Bible. The pages were dry and faded, and he found it difficult to summon up any prayer now that a cloud of rambunctious crows had descended upon the streets. They perched in the eaves and branches, breaking the silence with their rough calls.

Mr. Beckett had hardly crawled out of bed one overcast morning when there was an impatient pounding at the door. Mrs. Beckett looked up from her pillow, startled.

"That is no crow this time," Mr. Beckett said. When he threw open the front door he saw the portly pastor, fiddling with the loose threads of his coat.

"Come inside, there is such a chill," said Mr. Beckett. The pastor shook his head, brow furrowed.

"You have heard Mrs. Newsome's tale, Douglas," the pastor said. "The woman in the night."

"Do not tell me you believe that?" said Mr. Beckett. "She has lost her senses. A group of starving birds mangles her young daughter, and she turns to tales of spooks and evil to cope with her sorrow. Perhaps it is even guilt at being the first to accuse Charlotte Wentworth of witchcraft, at the beginning of this all."

"All I want is to make sure the witch is still there," said the pastor. "Still rotting in her grave. That is all. You are the only one who knows where she is buried. The doctor has a loose tongue and now all of Caimberden is awash in this unholy dread."

"Indulging in this nonsense will fix nothing," Mr. Beckett shook his head. "Is it not cruel enough that Charlotte had been executed for a crime that only exists in children's tales? The tragedy in Salem was half a century ago. *We* are a town of good people, not a herd of frightened sheep!"

The pastor took a step forward. His youth was marred by the gray strands slipping early into his hairline. Mr. Beckett could just about smell the injured pride rolling off his coat in waves.

"Mr. Beckett," the pastor said in low, rolling tones, "do you think the townsfolk would be pleased to know the undertaker is a witch sympathizer? Especially in the midst of all this hostility... you would have more than just wraiths and crows to fear at night."

Mr. Beckett clutched the edge of his door until his knuckles whitened. The pastor attempted to hold his head up, but faltered under the weight of Mr. Beckett's gaze.

"I just want peace," the pastor said. "Just as much as you do. What is done, is done. The blight on our crops, the sickness in our animals... whether or not it was witchcraft is far beyond us now. All we need to do is calm the town, and we can let Charlotte be forgotten at last."

"And you do not want to go alone," said Mr. Beckett.

“Very well, if it will quell the rumors. Get on your horse and follow me.”

The two horsemen traversed the rough road that led to the forest. The sun was peeking lavender rays over the horizon. Already the crows were out, hopping in the streets, cawing.

“Devil’s birds,” spat the pastor as they entered the mouth of the woods.

After a time of riding in silence, they came upon two old, wild oak trees. Mr. Beckett dismounted his horse and strode between them, saying with confidence, “I buried her here not a fortnight ago, as you can...”

He froze, as did the pastor, who let out a little sound of dismay. Between the oaks was an empty grave. The dark soil was strewn about the fallen leaves as though something had been fighting to free itself.

“Let us not get ahead of ourselves, now,” said Mr. Beckett. “There are wolves here sometimes. One must have smelled her, and dug her up for feeding. That is all.”

“P-perhaps,” said the pastor. They both knew there had not been wolves around Caimberden since their grandparents’ time. Still, they poked through the underbrush, kicked away piles of fallen leaves, looking for remains. There were no bones to be found.

They headed home in uneasy silence. The crows laughed at them from the branches.

The pastor found that every aspect of the crows began to fill him with an unnamable loathing. He dreaded waking up to their dry calls, if he even slept at all. But above anything, he despised the way they milled about around his yard and his trees, diving at his horse. They tilted their heads to the side so a gleam was caught in their beady eyes that said, *we know you see us*.

It was on a bleak and chilly morning that Mr. Beckett came across the pastor hurling stones at the crows perched on the church roof.

“Come away from there, now,” he said to the pastor, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“But it is like they are looking at us,” the pastor said. “They are *following* me. It is the witch, I know it! She has laid a curse upon us all.”

Mr. Beckett drew back. “Enough about the witch,” he said. “Why must everything in this town be about the witch?”

“How do you explain this, then?” Shouted the pastor, gesturing at the lines of waiting crows on the rooftop. They chittered and fluttered about, as though the pastor’s rage was a fascinating spectacle. “There has never been this many crows, not before she died.”

“You are being consumed by this madness,” Mr. Beckett cried. “The people of this town look to you for guidance and here you... where are you going?”

The pastor had buttoned his coat up to his throat and was heading away from Mr. Beckett, shaking his head.

“Back to her grave,” he said. “I am going to put an end to the matter. I am not leaving until I have found her body and made sure she is as cold as the ground you put her in. There is no curse, you say... well, soon, you will see truth.”

Upon shoeing the crows away from his poor horse, he set out on the trail to the woods for what he prayed would be the last time. The sun cast dying rays across the landscape. The accursed black birds continued with their chatter. They filled the trees with shifting shapes that seemed eldritch to the pastor. He pushed forth until he came upon the two oaks that stretched over the witch’s grave. This time, it was not empty.

Crouched inside the grave was the stooped figure of a woman. As the pastor’s horse drew closer, she raised her head. Her pallid skin was stretched over hollowed cheeks and she bore a hellish grin that set the pastor’s neck hairs standing on their ends. A shock of hair surrounded her shriveled face like a crown of cobwebs. She tilted her head, birdlike, and raised

her wiry arms in greeting. A cloud of crows descended upon her, and countless more wheeled and screeched overhead. The loudest cry came from the pastor, who clutched at his heart and toppled onto the forest floor.

Only his horse came galloping back into town. When Mr. Beckett summoned together a group to comb the forest, they found the pastor still clutching his heart, lying dead in the witch's empty grave. There was a frozen expression of terror on his face. Mr. Beckett couldn't for the life of him figure out why. They had found him wholly alone in the forest, with only a ring of leering crows to watch over him. ■■■

THE MIDST OF CHAOS

Madison S. Arney



Upon a dreary
Winters night,
Amidst the snow
And birds in flight.
Of a barren tree
Drenched forest
A cold winds nipping
And snow flakes I ador'st.
I walked through ice
And snow
Six inches deep,
And my foot fell below
A snow hills mound,
And lo' I fell;
Down and down
Into a wishers forgotten well.
The blackness consumed


And the grime did pull,
Me down, down, down,
Until I collapsed into a muddy pool!
I sat a moment, stunned and
Shocked, bewildered and befuddled.
There I say,
Alone, and I shuddered.
Was this the end?
Am I going to die?
Will anyone get me?
A simple passerby?
The grey sunlight's arm
Did suddenly disappear.
Unto an arm reached down,
Thank the elements, my savior from here!
It was pale as a snow flake,
An arm of muscle, of strength and courage,
Its fingers reaching out to me,
Covered in rose foliage.
A sprite, a forest nymph.
Someone of dreams and fantasy,
A heart to keep me and care,
Someone to love me.
Here in the land of Chaos,
Love found me,
Reaching out it the midst
Of Chaos! ■■■

SHIPWRECKED

Julie Pham

When the darkness begins to thunder
And its wave's crash against my soul's Ark,
I scream for balance
But all sense of stability falls apart.





Tide pools of rage and fury
Rush through my veins
Making me feel unworthy
Of the soul I seem to claim.
The bow of my emotions disintegrates
Anger washes over my deck
I cast out a net to retrieve my peace
But it sinks into the cold oceans depths.
A tsunami of my wits
Become a blur; a disarray
I've seemed to let my mind slip off...
Conducting myself as a castaway
An SOS has been signaled
Flares have been flared
As the only inhabitant of this island
I wait for help in my nightmare
I row down my anchor,
And prepared myself for shore.
A new light guided me through
A clear stream to end this self war.
The storm's noose has been loosened
The ability to breathe has been restored
The plague that swept my inner being
Is now withering on the sea's floor.
I grasp onto the hand of my helper
As they pulled me further away from sea
The loss of my self-loathing
Kept my sanity intact; to be who I used to be.
I set my feet on land
And I begin to walk anew
The misery that overcame my Psyche
Has shriveled and is no longer in bloom.
I inhaled and exhaled calmly,
Walking head-on to the new set of paths.
Keeping my chin up in glory,
Restraining myself from looking back. ■ ■ ■

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Awarding Judge

Mary Sojourner

Review Committee

Carlotta Abrams, Michael Bartley,
Erin Blomstrand, Analicia Buentello,
Jimmy Fike, Rod Freeman, Linda Keyes

Design

Michael Bartley

Editing Assistance

Michael Bartley, Rod Freeman, Karen Harbin

About Mary Sojourner

Mary Sojourner is the author of three novels: *Sisters of the Dream*, *Going Through Ghosts* and *29*; short story collection, *Delicate*; essay collection, *Bonelight: ruin and grace in the New Southwest*; memoir, *Solace: rituals of loss and desire*; and memoir/self-help guide, *She Bets Her Life*. She is a 10-year National Public Radio commentator and was chosen as a Distinguished Writer in Residence in 2007 by the Virginia C. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University.

She has been a community and environmental activist and organizer since she was 17, and teaches writing in private circles, one-on-one, and at writing conferences and book festivals. Writing is the most powerful tool she has found for doing what is necessary to mend – oneself and the greater world.

www.breakthroughwriting.net



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Estrella Mountain Literary Review

Estrella Mountain Community College is pleased to announce the eighth issue of its literary journal, *Mariposa*. Featuring the creative writing and visual art of students from a variety of disciplines across the campus, *Mariposa* captures the collaborative spirit of students, faculty and staff and provides a creative outlet for the voices of our students.

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