

contents

creative writing contributions

 JACK BLACK <i>Felicia Smith-Welch</i>	4	THE WALL <i>Tatiana Zvosechz</i>	31
 A BROKEN HOME <i>Sondra Taylor</i>	6	SMILE <i>Samantha Carbone</i>	33
 THE KING <i>Almond Cutright</i>	11	ALIENS ON EARTH <i>Connor Lee Collins</i>	33
 THE WALKWAY TO DENIAL <i>Sabrina Sanchez</i>	11	MARGARET'S EYES <i>Karissa Truby</i>	35
 FINDING THE PAGAN PATH <i>Taylor Hollcroft</i>	13	CARLY CARSON <i>Juan Manuel Esparza</i>	38
 DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA <i>Samuel A. Ortiz</i>	14	BIG MAMA <i>Felicia Smith Welch</i>	41
 IN FIELDS OF SUNFLOWERS <i>Sadie Bird</i>	15	MOMENTS <i>Brynn Kowalski</i>	42
 BODY ODOR AND CATALOG DEODORANT <i>Andrea Beltran Vega</i>	19	THE LADY WITH THE MISSING FACE <i>Aztlana Quezada</i>	42
 NO HEAVEN FOR ME! <i>Patricia Ross</i>	21	ALWAYS TOUGH TRANSFORMATIONS <i>Kenneth M. Reed, Jr.</i>	44
RICH AND MILA <i>Katia Facundo</i>	21	SIREN'S WISH <i>Rachel Glogiewicz</i>	47
TURN A NEGATIVE INTO A POSITIVE <i>Sophia Campbell</i>	23	THE CUTTING <i>Jonathan Beteran</i>	48
JOURNEY TO THE END <i>Katrina Davis</i>	27	THE STRAIGHT JACKET <i>Isabel Whaley</i>	49
REVERIE <i>Lauren Gonzales</i>	27	FEARFUL <i>James Charles Gibbs III</i>	50
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR <i>Micaela Arroyo</i>	28	LIFE LUXURIES <i>Angelica Hernandez</i>	50
BLOODY MARY (MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FAIRY TALES) <i>Sunny Cane</i>	30	THE UNKNOWN GIRL <i>Manuel Saldivar</i>	51

creative writing contributions

GREEN MISERY	52	SAFE	56
<i>Samuel A. Ortiz</i>		<i>Sondra Taylor</i>	
WALKING IN PERGATORY	54	PHOENIX	57
<i>Taylor Hollcroft</i>		<i>Jorge A. Flores</i>	
IN A KINGDOM BY THE SEA	55	ALL I HAVE TO DO IS DREAM	58
<i>Racquel Cocchiola</i>		<i>Racquel Cocchiola</i>	

visual arts contributions

WE THE PEOPLE	1
<i>David Sanchez</i> <i>(featured on the cover)</i>	
TRINITY	8
<i>Alyssa Montoya</i>	
UNTITLED	17
<i>Shelby Bert</i>	
POINTILLISM	22
<i>Taurre Ferguson</i>	
MALEFICENT	32
<i>Robert Miranda</i>	



featured on the cover

WE THE PEOPLE
David Sanchez

JACK BLACK

first place – fiction

Felicia Smith-Welch



I stared at my iPad stunned as I read the email from my Supply Chain professor. *“Dear Ms. Blackmon; It has come to my attention that you may possibly be involved in an allege case of plagiarism in the BM4500 Global Supply Chain Management course. You are required to appear before the university’s honor council on...”*

My hands trembled and beads of sweat formed on my upper lip as my heart thumped hard in my chest. I thought I’d rather be arrested by our small Southern town sheriff than receive such an email. I read it again in disbelief. I checked the address line to see if the message was intended for another student named Ms. Blackmon, or perhaps my mother. I wondered if the school sent emails to parents. Didn’t an advisor tell us students the parents are not allowed to get our academic information unless we give it to them? I closed the pink flap of my iPad cover and wiped at the sweat dribbling down my face. I smeared my makeup and sweat stained hands on my jeans. This must be a mistake. Is someone playing a sick joke on me? Am I being punked?

“Jack, come here!” My mother yelled from her bedroom.

“Oh God,” I muttered. She knows. She got the email, too. What will I tell her? I put my hand over my thumping chest, attempting to cease its erratic rhythm. I took a deep breath and eased from the side of my bed. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror of the antique ebony dresser I received from my grandparents as a graduation gift. My grandmother said I needed to start my new life with fine furniture. The dresser came with a matching armoire, headboard and footboard. I wiped my sweaty face with a tissue I pulled for the tissue box on my dresser.

“Jack!” My mother yelled.

I took a deep breath, “Coming.”

As I entered her bedroom, it appeared the women’s department at Nordstrom threw up on her bed. Hangers, shoeboxes, shopping bags, tissue wrappings, and plastic garment bags littered the normally flawless, silver and purple king size satin comforter.

“Look, I got this today,” she said.

I’m busted. She got the email, too. I held my head down to avoid eye contact as I further entered her purple boudoir, her homage to Prince.

“Sugar, I got you a new outfit for graduation.”

I was relieved to see her holding a black and gold Dolce & Gabbana long sleeve wrap dress against her tall, svelte figure. My mom and I both wear a size nine, but I’m an inch shorter and curvier than she. I frowned at the sight of the dark, heat-evoking dress, which reigned the sweatshop that churned within me.

“What’s wrong?” She asked. “Pisssh, this dress is sharp.” She joyously sashayed as she modeled that expensive blanket she called a dress.

“Here.” She thrust it at me. “Try it on.”

“You know graduation is gonna be outside, three hours longs, and it’s gonna be humid and a hundred and hell. Plus I’m wearin’ that black graduation gown and that cap on top of everything.”

That is, if I make it to graduation. I wondered if she checked her emails today. She checked her emails and Facebook page religiously. I examined her face to see if she harbored any inkling of my dilemma. But, her expression displayed delight with a hint of disappointment. “You don’t like the dress?”

“I like it, but this is not the season for it. I’m gonna wear my pink and black strapless sundress.”

“What?” She grimaced. “You wore that to the Diva dance last month. You can’t wear that again, at least not this season. Now see, you gotta wear something spectacular.” She looked at herself in the full-length mirror, still holding the dress against her body. “They gotta see somethin’ memorable, somethin’ that’ll get the ladies talkin’ and the men spendin’.” She smiled at her reflection, pleased with her line of logic.

I thought I would try to press her for information to see if she received the email from the dean’s office. “You check your emails today?”

“Nope.” She frowned as her gaze switched from her reflection to mine. “Why you ask?”

“Oh, nothing.” I thought about adding something about internet hoaxes and computer viruses to cover up my real intention for asking. My mother was quite tech savvy and didn’t need a lecture from me about the dangers of cyber space.

“You don’t look so good,” she said. You sweatin’ like a ho in church. And why is your makeup smeared all over your face.” Her gaze traveled to my thighs. “Why is makeup all over your jeans? You gettin’ sick? Oh lawd! Your graduation is in two days and you’re the first to ever graduate from college in our family.

We ain't gone miss that. No way. Come here baby, let me feel you forehead. You must be runnin' a fever."

"Mom, I'm fine," I said as I backed away from her. "We're gonna make graduation. It's hot in here."

"Hot? I got the air on seventy-two. It shouldn't be hot at all."

She's right. It wasn't hot in her room or the rest of the house. My mother was going through 'the change' as she calls it. She kept the house cold all year long. In the spring, the A/C was on seventy-two and in the summer, sixty-five. In the fall and early spring the windows stayed open and in the winter she barely turned on the heat.

"Maybe I'm going through the change," I said.

"Chile, you too young and stop movin'." She placed the back of her cool hand on my forehead and under my chin. "You don't feel feverish, but you don't look good." She looked into my eyes. "What did you eat?"

"I'm fine, don't worry." I pulled away ready to escape her scrutiny before she figured out I was lying. Just the thought of having to face the dreaded honor council, a jury of my supposed peers, who will determine the fate of my academic future was enough to start the palpitations all over again. My mother looked worried. I couldn't let her down, or my grandparents. They were my biggest supporters. They were proud that I was an honor student and managed to finance my college education from my lucrative business.

The number one rule in my family was you must be an entrepreneur. My mom parlayed her love for designer clothes into a financial windfall by selling merchandise she obtained from various clandestine sources. During the weekday lunch rush, my grandparents sold chicken dinners out of their kitchen. And, because the sale of alcohol and cigarettes was prohibited on Sundays, they readily filled the void after.

I started my first business when I was ten. I sold loose cigarettes from my grandparents' kitchen window for a quarter each. Eventually, I sold candy and sunflower seeds to the kids in elementary school, and in high school, I sold tampons and condoms.

Now that I was about to complete my degree and transition to a new career, I needed to devise a plan of attack to thwart someone's wicked attempt to sabotage my goal. "Mom, I got work to do."

I returned to my bedroom, and began typing my appeal letter to the university's honor council. I reviewed the paper in question and the professor's instructions for the assignment. Then, I remembered a weird comment she made to me as she hastily took the paper from me; '*Good luck with your charmed life,*' she had said. I noted a hint of jealousy displayed in her thin twisted lips and cold blue eyes. I was elated to be done with her to give the comment any thought.

The morning of the appointment, I printed my letter, dressed in my red Ann Taylor power suit and shiny black stiletto pumps, pulled my hair into a neat bun, donned my cat-eye glasses instead of contacts, and small pearl earrings and a simple pearl necklace. I grabbed my portfolio and Coach bag, checked my appearance in the mirror, and kissed my mom '*goodbye*'.

I checked in with the dean's secretary and tried to relax on the brown faux leather sofa while waiting for the appointed time to face my accusers. I looked at my watch and noticed that it was fifteen minutes past my appointment. I quietly tapped my heel while studying the colorful abstract artwork donated by the Art department. I felt an urge to peel the red nail polish from my fingertips, a nervous habit that needs to be broken. The door to the dean's inner sanctum opened and a knot swelled in my throat.

"Jacquelyn Blackmon, please come in," said the tall rotund man in a charcoal colored suit, with white wiry hair, a handle bar moustache and rimless glasses standing in the doorway.

"Good morning, Dr. Smith," I croaked. I wiped my hand on my skirt before I shook his and followed him into his office. I looked around the spacious paneled room and realized that besides the dean and I, no one else was present.

"Would you like some water?"

"Yes, please." I took the paper cup of water he graciously handed to me and emptied the contents in two gulps. "Dr. Smith, here is a copy of my Supply Chain paper with my sources that I submitted for my final project. And here is my appeal letter refuting the allegation."

"Thank you, Ms. Blackmon." He took the documents and sat opposite me behind his large walnut desk. "I'll take a look at them in a bit."

He reached for the computer mouse as he silently read the screen. I leaned in my seat in a fruitless attempt to get a glimpse of what he was reading. Instead, I resigned to reading the various awards decorating the paneled walls and wooden bookcases. Large inspirational posters of people climbing a mountain, reaching for an apple from a tree, hung on the walls encouraging viewers to strive, to reach. I looked out of the large window behind his desk at the mature pine and oak trees dotting the lush green landscape. Red and white rose bushes lined the path leading to the university's iconic red brick bell tower, which over a hundred years old still punctually chimes every hour. I studied the various knick-knacks on the credenza until my gaze rested on a portrait of an elegantly dressed woman in a green and black Donna Karan pantsuit. My eyes widened as it dawned on me she was one of my mom's best customers.

Dr. Smith furrowed his bushy brow and glanced at me then back at the screen. He removed his glasses, leaned back in his seat as he cleared his throat. “Okay Ms. Blackmon, this is the situation. As you know, plagiarism is a serious charge and is not tolerated by the school. When a professor suspects there may be a violation, they are required to use the Turn It In software to find matches between the student’s assignment and published materials. If there is a hit, the professor is required to submit both the findings from Turn It In along with the highlighted passages from the student’s paper that does not give credit to the original author. Are you with me?”

“Yes sir, I am.”

“In your case, the professor had to withdraw the allegation when she could not provide the Turn It In hits. Without that proof we cannot move forward with the allegation of plagiarism due to insufficient evidence.”

My jaw dropped as I stared blankly at him. I knew it. I often wondered why she gave me a hard time in class. That jealous heifer didn’t want me to graduate. I looked down at the crumpled paper cup in my hand. I attempted to speak but the words escaped me. My vision clouded as tears of joy brimmed my eyes.

He handed me a tissue. “I’m sorry for the distress this has caused.”

I dabbed away the tears and managed to squeak, “thank you.”

I sat in the parking lot in my new-to-me Cadillac Escalade, blasting the air conditioning at the highest speed and the lowest degree. I replayed the surreal encounter with the dean in my mind when a loud bang jolted me. I regained my composure and lowered the window.

“Jack Black!” It was Rodney, one of my best clients since our sophomore year.

“Geez, you scared me!”

“Sorry. You okay?”

“I’m real good now.”

“Like your ride. Graduation gift?”

“Yeah. It’s my mom’s old ride.”

“Cool.” He glanced around the parking lot and lowered his voice as he leaned in closer. “You gotta a fitty?”

I reached in the backseat, retrieved my non-academic book bag, pulled out the last vacuum-sealed baggie containing four quarter sized greenish-gray buds and slid it to him in exchange for a folded fifty-dollar bill.

“It’s party time,” he said. And, congratulations Miss C-suite executive boss lady. When you start at Amazon?”

The title made me blushed. I was still trying to wrap my brain around my new career as an Associate Director of Operations Management. “Next month.”

“See you at graduation.”

“I’ll be there.” ■ ■ ■

A BROKEN HOME

first place – nonfiction

Sondra Taylor



My head smacked against the yellow colored drywall with a hard thud. I tried to stand but my head was throbbing. I could feel something behind my eye clawing to get out. In that instant, he grabbed me by the back of the neck and his fist came down onto my right eye. I could see his lips moving but all I heard was ringing. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but I knew from the anger on his face that it wasn’t anything good.

“GET THE FUCK OUT!”

That was my cue to run. I stood up and bolted out of the back room, a door slamming shut somewhere behind me. I ran past my mother in the living room, who was sleeping lazily on the couch, and sprang for the last door on the left side of the hall. I slumped against the back of my bedroom door, catching my breath. Something horrible made its way to the front of my mind, something too wicked for a nine-year-old, and I turned around to press the little golden button on the doorknob. I climbed into bed and grabbed the metal softball bat from under my bed. He’d be back. He *always* came back.

The clock by my bed read 12:15am. It had been six hours since my narrow escape. I rolled over from my pillow and felt a cold breeze run across my forehead and soon felt the dampness that followed.

I sat up on the bed listening to the quiet. I tippy-toed my way to the door and slowly placed my ear to the back of the wood. I could hear the faint sound of a refrigerator humming, the muffled sound of someone snoring, the sound of cars driving by, and the dripping of water from a broken faucet. With this sound, my bladder instantly reacted.

I looked at the clock by the bed and did the math in my head, using my little fingers to count the numbers as I went. It was 12:22am on Tuesday night and he leaves for work at 9:00pm every weekday. Then that must mean...

I put my hand on the doorknob and turned it to the left. The button on the knob sprang to life and made me jump against the back of the door, bumping my ear on the wood. It sounded like a gunshot, something I was all too familiar with in this neighborhood. I waited, listening for the thunder of his footsteps, but heard nothing.

With the last of the turn, I slowly began to open the door, making sure to leave the smallest crack to look out. The only light in the hall came from the glow of the microwave. For two years it blinked 12:00am. My mother always said she would "get to it."

I opened the door several more inches, enough to stick my head out and found the door straight in front of me open. I could hear the stuttered snoring of my mother, probably laying on her side with her mask on, hiding her eyes from the non-existent light. The door directly to the right of me was closed but silent, protecting my father's most precious and sacred item.

The bathroom sat diagonally from my door and couldn't have been more than six feet away but, in the dark, it felt further. I slowly stuck my left leg out, staying as close to the door frame as possible, and soon let my left shoulder linger out. I waited, listening for any sign that he was home, but heard nothing. With this relief, I darted straight for the bathroom, shutting the door silently behind me.

With my bladder relieved, I stood in the mirror and finally saw the damage that he inflicted. My entire forehead had begun to crust over. Blood and tears mixed together to make my dark skin look even darker.

I reached for the faucet, but I didn't have to turn it on for it to run. It had been busted for months and let out a steady trickle of cold water. I rubbed the water across my face and watched the sink turn different shades of red and brown. I dried my face with a blue rag lying on the floor. Who knew if it was clean, nothing was ever clean in this house.

As I patted my face dry, I could see it. Above my eye, was a large open cut nestled neatly into my eyebrow. A cut so deep, it was sure to stay with me for the rest of my life. I left the bathroom, sure that he was at work. He worked overnights as a mechanic for UPS. He worked all night and slept all day, only waking up in time for supper.

My father always complained about having to go to work. He complained about having to make money and about not having money. He talked about everyone being worthless, how no one was ever good enough, and how I would end up just like my mother.

Each month was the same thing: He yelled about the water bill being high and how we all needed to limit our showers to once a week. He shouted about the air conditioning being on and decided to shut it off in the summer. But he especially complained, in his mumbled Italian accent, how expensive "Lectric City" was and removed all the lightbulbs from the house, leaving only the bathroom and the kitchen bulbs in.

I never even know we lived in the city. Phoenix had tall buildings with large windows, men and women in business suits, and homeless men begging for the day's scraps. Our house sat on the corner of 34th Avenue and Bethany Home Road. It was a dilapidated three bedroom, two bath house, with a spacious backroom. There were no tall buildings, only an empty parking lot with a single grocery store across the street. There were no men or women in business suits, only elderly neighbors shuffling to their mailboxes. However, there was one homeless man who slept under the palm tree on the island that sat between the street in front of our house and Bethany Home Road.

The man's spot sat just outside of my window and I watched him come and go for six years. In the rain, in the sun, or in the cold, he was always coming and going until one day he just stopped coming. I never knew his name. I never knew who he was, but I knew I envied that man. I hated the fact that he could leave while I had to stay locked up in this house.

I stood outside the bathroom door and heard the sound of movement from the closed door in front of me (the one that held my father's most prized possession) and soon heard the sound of crying. It started small but grew with intensity after each passing second. I looked at the door to my right, and heard the undisturbed snoring from my mother. She didn't hear the crying. She *never* heard the crying.

I walked to the door and turned the golden knob to the left. The door opened freely and stopped itself on the wall behind it.

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dark, but I could see the room in its entirety. The light from the street lamp outside basked the room in a yellow glow and showed all of the chaos. The floor

was littered in piles of clothes, dirty and clean. Broken toys lay strewn across the floor and heaps of trash lay on top.

On the left side of the room sat the crib. It was decorated in teddy bears with a matching mobile hanging angelically above. The crying grew louder as he watched me enter the room. I used my right foot to sweep a path to him. Trash and cockroaches scurried away from my foot with each pass.

"Hi, bubby." I whispered, as I finally cleared a path to his crib. I saw his pacifier lying on the floor and used my mouth to clean the dirt from the nipple before placing it back into his.

I cranked the dial on the mobile to release the bears from their dormant state, hoping the sound would soothe him back to sleep, but he continued to cry. A repulsive smell entered my nose.

I struggled to pick him up, the railing being just as tall as my chest, and I gathered a large heap of clothes on the side of his crib and soon gained enough height to lift him out with ease. I held him tightly as we walked through the new found path and made our way back to the hallway.

He was always fascinated by our nightly adventures and soon stopped crying by the time we reached the hallway.

We stood outside of our mother's bedroom and I called in,

"Mom. Mom. Mom? MOM!"

"Huh?" She somewhat answered.

"Andrew needs a diaper change." He squirmed in my arms and slipped further down my waist, stopping on the carpet with a soft thud.

"Alright." She didn't move.

"MOM, CHANGE HIM!"

"Alright." She never moved, only the sound of her snoring came.

"I guess I'll just change him." He stared up at me, his hazel eyes seeming to know what needed to be done. He stuck his chubby arms up toward me and I picked him up from the floor, making my way up the hallway.

We passed the ominous blink in the kitchen and found ourselves in the living room. The blinds in this room were broken and tangled and let in a steady glow of yellow; just enough light to find my way through the room.

Our house was the perfect starting point for any up-and-coming burglar. Although we were poor and had nothing to take, it was still a good trial run. The back of the house sat in the dark and the front



TRINITY

Alyssa Montoya

sat right off of a busy street. None of the locks on the windows worked and the back door's handle was busted and held together by a wimpy rubber band. There was even an empty alley behind us that held the perfect escape.

Countless times, I met the stares of people looking in through those broken blinds and other times the shadow of someone would pass outside the other uncovered window, the one that led to the storage room at the back of the carport. My father would always find his tools missing or discover parts of the car were gone. It was the one time he never blamed me for these things because he knew, as well as I, that the shadows took them.

Fortunately, in the 15 years that we lived in that house, it was never once broken into. The fear that we *could* be robbed, however, stayed with me.

I always made sure to place Legos® on the windowsills at night, so if anyone did sneak in, they would feel the wrath of those plastic devils. I used the many soda cans that littered the living room floor to line the bottom of the back door as well. Almost every night, I thought I heard those cans moving, slowly toppling over, being crushed by the weight of someone large. Then, the sound of a wimpy rubber band snapping followed. Someone was coming, they were finally here. But come morning, the wimpy rubber band was still in place and the cans sat undisturbed.

I grabbed a clean diaper from off of the floor and searched the couch for the wipes, finding them under another pile of clothes.

I cleared another spot on the floor with my foot, waiting for the movement to cease before I safely laid him down. I had changed his diapers before, but I had never changed one like this. It took twelve wipes and one crooked diaper before he was clean and ready for another day.

I stared down at the carpet and watched Andrew chew innocently on a Styrofoam cup. The sound of my stomach rumbled in the darkness and was loud enough to make Andrew jump. I realized that, after the incident in the backroom, I ran straight to bed without any dinner. Now, my stomach was twisting into knots, gnawing itself from the inside. I was about to head toward the kitchen when I heard the tiny little rumbles from a tiny little stomach. Then the crying began again.

I picked him up and we followed the blink into the kitchen. I was an expert baby bottle maker by now. I knew it took 4 scoops of formula to fill up one big bottle, or 2 scoops to fill up one small bottle, but he was almost one and rarely used the small bottles anymore.

I flipped the light switch up and the florescent lights above woke up lazily. The ground moved in



waves of brown, little creatures scurrying away before the light could reach them. When the lights stopped blinking, all was still.

I cleared a spot on the dining room table and placed him on it. The table was cluttered in pots and pans, rotting from dinners past. There were dirty dishes piling up because the sink was too full, and bags of takeout food from late night dinner runs. Groceries were still bundled in shopping bags, waiting to be put away and piles of bills were sitting, waiting to be opened.

I found a cloudy bottle bobbing in the murky water of the sink. A sponge sat behind the faucet, shriveled and black from the mold that ate it away. I covered my fingers with dish soap and jabbed around the inside of the bottle, cleaning the murkiness away.

The baby formula was never in once place. Sometimes, it was hidden under the trash on the table; sometimes it was in the bathroom; sometimes it was in the pantry; and this time it sat on the stove, the lid sitting loosely on the rim.

As I lifted the lid, a small white creature ran past my hand and over the jar, disappearing behind the stove to safety. These "filthy little vermin" as my mother called them, lived under the shed in the backyard and soon overran the place, looking for food in a house that didn't have any.

I tried to scoop around where the mouse had been and managed to dump four leveled scoops into the baby bottle. I battled with the dishes in the sink for control of the faucet and eventually succeeded in filling the bottle with water. I capped it with the nipple and gave it a hard shake.

I turned to Andrew, who was sitting happily on the edge of the table, and watched him gnawing on a fork he found lying in a bowl of noodles from two nights ago. He watched me closely as I shook the bottle up and down. The fork no longer held the same fascination and he quickly threw it aside, instead sticking his hands out for the bottle and opening and closing his fists.

When I shook the last bit of white clumps together, I handed him the bottle and he instantly stuck it in his mouth, tilting it back and letting the liquid run down his throat.

The rumbling from my stomach grew louder. For some reason, my head began to pulse, just behind my right eye, not from the cut my father gave me, but from something else. I was too young to understand but I knew food would heal it.

I popped open the refrigerator. The smell of rotten eggs and decaying vegetables filled the air. There were open bowls of leftovers from dinners that were made weeks ago. A bag that was once salad was now a bag of black sludge. A bowl of juicy cantaloupe was now covered in black circles and there was something at the bottom of the refrigerator that didn't even resemble food anymore. It was brown and had a long, white branch shooting out from one side of it. I was getting ready to shut the door when I realized what it was. I moved closer to the object, my eyes widening with fear, sweat beginning to form on my top lip. A shiver went down my spine and I slammed the door shut. Filthy little vermin, I thought.

I turned around toward the pantry, hoping I could find something – anything – to eat, but I stood there and watched the loaf of bread moving up and down, the boxes of cereal rocking back and forth, the cans of food spilling out their contents, the maggots moving slowly across the shelves and the mice running around freely with full bellies.

I slowly shut the pantry door and turned back toward the kitchen table. Andrew was still sitting where I had left him, his bottle was nearly gone. His blinking grew slower and his head kept nodding backwards. I picked him up and laid the back of his head down in the bend of my left arm. I flipped the light switch down and the kitchen went dark. A tidal wave came out from under the cabinets.

We walked back down the hallway, toward the last door on the left. I laid Andrew down on my pillow and watched as his eyelids fought to stay open. The feeling was contagious. I laid next to him, his tiny hands searching for me, and soon drifted off to sleep. His tight blonde curls tickling my face.

The last thing I remember was my father standing above me, yelling. The clock by my bed read 8:12am. I was lying on the floor, my head throbbing from a new pain, and then everything went dark. ■ ■ ■

THE KING

first place – poetry

Almond Cutright

In the morning,
Angela Davis,
Just out of prison,
Came to Grand Canyon University,
Inviting us
To hear the King speak

Martin Luther King Jr.
In Tempe,
Raising money
For the bombed church
And the three girls

He talked about
The times we live in
30 miles out of Chicago, he said,
More hate in Cicero,
Where the only building integrated
Is the tavern,
Worse than the South

My pastor
Would not go to the meeting
The next day.
He didn't agree
With the church and politics,
But I agreed,
Church can be political

He talked to us,
Like a neighbor,
About how he missed his family,
But how Coretta understood.

100,000 miles on his Chevy Biscayne,
He leaves for his wife,
No car,
But the King always gets a ride
He said
He even donated his Peace Prize

People amazed,
We raised,
Money for the dead girls

My friend, Willie Rogers,
Had two dollars from her mom,
For a purse.
“Should I give it?” she asked me.
I said, “Yes, give it to the King.”

Willie put it in King's plate,
The next day,
She got a gift,
A better purse.

This one speech,
Helps me every day,
Helps me think and be,
Who I am today

Who can deliver
The message
Like I heard in Tempe?
Jesse Jackson isn't a King,
Something lost in the translation.
He built back the church
And the people
Followed.

Driving home one day,
I pulled aside
On the radio,
The King is dead
I hear it, sitting between
Peoria and Marionette
On Grand Avenue

I prayed and cried
As if I was a friend of his,
Because he talked to us,
In Tempe,
And we listened. ■ ■ ■



THE WALKWAY TO DENIAL

second place – fiction

Sabrina Sanchez

I can't stop walking, a force is pulling me. My feet try to resist, but they continue to stomp on through the dirt pathway. I turn my head to the left and right. There is a view of an endless garden filled with daisies, lilies, and my favorite lavender flowers that cover the ground. I smell the soil and pollen that the flowers carry. I am possessed by the beautiful scene of the garden. It shows happiness, fulfillment, and most of all it shows innocence. I smile at the feeling of the warm sun shining down on me like the



beginning of spring.

I look to the right of the garden and see a young girl, a preteen. She sits on her knees in her yellow flower dress with dark brown short hair and bangs pinned up to the right of her face. She picks the daisies and lilies so gracefully, smiling from ear to ear. I then see a man walk toward her. He sits down, and her smile fades into a frown. She turns away from him, and he grabs her arm. I am startled by the sound of a scream that echoes from the left of the garden. I quickly turn around to the opposite side and see nothing but the open field. I glance back to the right of the garden, the young girl is sitting by herself, curled up with her elbows resting on her knees, sobbing. I tried to escape from walking the pathway to show her my concern but my feet strain from entering the garden.

I yell for her, "What's wrong!?" She doesn't move. I stare.

I can't stop walking and the sun begins to fade away by the arrival of cumulonimbus clouds. I see lightning lash the ground from a distance, and the wind starts to pick up. My shoulders jump and eyes flinch to the startling beats of thunder that follow the strikes of lightning. It seems to be approaching closer to me. I look around and see the flowers sway with the wind as it becomes more rapid. My hair blows in different directions, to the back, sides, front, it's everywhere. The wind keeps accelerating, my feet keep moving and my face is being plastered with air, which makes my breathing become heavier. I feel drops of rain fall on my nose, cheeks, and arms. I look over to the right where the young girl is; she stays sitting down while the rain lands on her. I don't want her to get hurt. I see the man again, he stands three feet away from her, and gestures her to go with him.

"No! Leave her alone," I scream.

She stands up in her flower dress, tears on her cheeks, her eyes red and puffy from the crying. She looks at me with direct eye contact as if she knew who I was.

She says, "Help me. My name is Serena," then she starts walking toward the man.

I don't know what to do. I can't do anything my feet won't stop moving forward. Soon both the man and Serena depart from me. I keep walking straight and the drizzling rain develops into a heavy downpour. The wind still blowing, grew to be impenetrable. The wind is so strong it carries the flowers off the roots, they fly directly toward me, on my arms, face, striking me like whips against my skin.

"Stop, stop, stop!" I scream, raising my hands to block my face from the swift movement of the flowers.

The wind doesn't listen to me, it just keeps whirling and I keep walking. After time passes, the wind slowly declines, the flowers stop flying around and the pouring turns to sprinkles, then stops completely. The clouds roam in the sky still gray, and gloomy. I see red marks on my skin from where the flowers struck me. The garden is destroyed, and flowers are thrown everywhere.

I keep walking, and looking down at my feet move left, right, left, right. I bring my head up only to spot Serena from a distance on the right side of the garden from when she left. She stands but slouches, shoulders down, face down. I come closer to Serena and I instantly see red marks on her. I look at her, and she back at me with a dishonorable look. Her face have the same marks that were in the same exact spots I was struck with by the flowers. Serena starts walking away, but I call her back. She keeps walking as if she is ignoring me. I haven't done anything wrong, I don't understand why she won't talk to me. She finally stops ahead and waits for me to reach her.

"You're in denial. That is why you do not know or see anything else. Bye." Serena declares.

She disappears in the garden before I could even say one word. I look around baffled at what is occurring. I see a bridge coming up, it looks very old and flimsy as if it cannot hold as much as a grain of salt or it will break. My feet are exceedingly tired and I try to stop them from walking to the bridge, yet all they do is scrape the ground and keep moving. I approach the bridge, it looks never-ending. I hold onto the ropes, so I don't lose my balance and fall. The garden is below me. The wood steps feel like they are going to break through. I keep thinking I'm going to fall to my death, and that it's the end. Somehow, I am okay with this thought. I see very far away from me the end of the bridge, Serena stands there with her arms folded across her chest, waiting for me. I keep walking and my foot stumbles on a wooden step, but I keep going. I could fall anytime.

I finally reach the end of the bridge, back on the normal pathway, but Serena is no longer there, she is walking with the man ahead of me in the garden. He looks so personable, and sharp, and always has a smile on his face. I don't know what could possibly be wrong with him for her to have such resentment toward him. She stands as far away from him as she can, but he keeps grabbing her arm to pull her in close to him. I can't walk any faster to catch up, but I scream her name, and they suddenly vanish from the garden. The wind picks up again, why is it doing this? The garden is getting wrecked every time the weather does this, I think to myself. The wind hastens once again, faster this time and the flowers attack me just like before. I don't even dodge them anymore, it's pointless. I just wait it out, and hope the weather's hormones stop fluctuating. I see the same marks on me as before.

I can't stop walking, Serena appears by herself again, with more marks on her skin just like me. Her

voice repeats in my head when she tells me I'm in denial. I keep looking at her as she stands still in her flower dress with her hair is messed up and her cheeks red. I think to myself, "Why do we have the same marks? Why would she tell me I'm in denial?" I do not want to converse with her, I feel like I've done something wrong. I pass her with my head down, looking at my feet. Suddenly, I hear the same scream from the left side of the garden as before. I turn my head and I see Serena and the man. She's struggling, but he's too strong. Articles of his clothing are thrown to the ground. I don't want to see it, I look forward. I hear the screams again and again they get stronger and louder. I try to block them out. I close my eyes.

"It's not true, it's not true, no!" I scream over and over again.

I stop hearing the screams and open my eyes. The clouds are moving out, the daises, lilies and lavender flowers rise again, the sun is shining with its warm rays. The happiness, fulfillment and the innocence are back once again. I look to the right. There Serena sits on her knees picking the flowers, just like the first time I saw her. She is in her flower dress, bangs pinned up, just as a young girl. She stands up with a smile on her face. She walks to where I am walking on the pathway. I come closer to her and she is closer to me. As I pass her she whispers to me, "You're in denial."

Serena's words carry on with me after I pass her and I don't look back. I keep walking. I will always continue walking. It won't stop. Never. ■ ■ ■

FINDING THE PAGAN PATH

second place – nonfiction

Taylor Hollcroft



I was thirteen when religion started to play a big role in my life. I was in eighth grade and my best friend was named Alyssa. I was born to a Mormon family, but I never felt like I belonged in their church or that their religion felt right. It wasn't a big deal until we moved to our new house in Surprise in 2006 or 2007 because my mom didn't make us go to church or take the lessons. You could say my coming-of-age started it all, and you'd be partially right, but the house played a big part, too.

My mother chose not to have me or my siblings baptized Mormon when we were eight because she wanted us to choose our own religion for ourselves, though she didn't do much to teach us about the Mormon faith, either. We didn't say grace accept at family gatherings during the holidays, nor did we go to church. My parents drank beer on occasion with the neighbors, while we played outside on our bikes, and they were known to have sailor mouths in front of us. They drank coffee, sometimes tea, and two two-liters of soda a day, though those weren't allowed according to the Mormon faith. To me, those things were normal in a family, and I had no idea that all of them were forbidden by God.

It wasn't until I turned eleven that I began to question my family's faith and wanted to know more about it. Usually when a child turns eleven, they are approached by the Young Women's or Young Men's group to start taking the church lessons, though I never knew why it was that particular age. I respectfully declined the first few times, but the youth group representatives were persistent irritants. My mother finally told me that if I didn't want to join them then I had to make it clear so they would stop coming to our door; she was getting tired of them coming and having to entertain them. To me such a thing was incredibly rude and mean, so I remained meek and agreed to start going to meetings with the Young Women's group. I made many friends and had a lot of fun, but that's all it was for me. I wasn't serious about learning about being Mormon, just a little bit curious. Whenever they assigned me a topic to teach to the group, I was conveniently home sick that day. They kept pestering me to take the lessons, but I refused each time. Finally, my mom caught on to my half-assed participation and gave me the choice to either continue going and take the lessons, or completely stop. I felt that I had learned enough about the Mormon faith to know that it wasn't for me, so I chose to detach myself from the church and cut off all ties with them. I turned thirteen shortly after and had my first visit from "Aunt Flow," marking the start of all my problems.

They say when a child comes of age, strange things begin happening to them, almost as if dormant powers become active. I started having precognitive dreams and feelings, such as hearing a song in my head just before it played on the radio. Often I couldn't tell if the scene was déjà vu or if it had really happened before; reality and precognitions blended together until I didn't know which was which. If I had a fitful sleep at night, then the next day was a very bad day for me; when my bed was in complete disarray in the morning, I always came home crying. I could feel the emotions of a person standing next to me without hearing them speak or even looking at them. I even knew what someone was going to say before they said it, though that was rarer. I always knew when something emotionally terrible was going to happen to me because I would start to shake uncontrollably and start to have a panic attack; shortly after these episodes,

I would be distraught from a confrontation of some sort.

This is when the house comes in, because I started hearing and seeing signs of spirits. It was a two-story house that we'd bought from some dirty family that didn't clean anything, ever. When we moved in, there was long black hair all over everything, and they left presents of a hairy bar of soap and a backyard full of dog poop. Other than that, it was a beautiful house with the five bedroom space that we needed. My room was on the second floor in the back corner where the sun hit all day every day; unfortunately for me it was the hottest room in the house. I was glad to have gotten the next biggest room aside from the master, but hated that I was sweating in my underwear at night.

The first time I encountered the spirits was when a CD flew off the shelf above our TV in the living room. My siblings and I were sitting at the dinner table eating, my step dad sitting on the couch watching TV, and my mom was in the kitchen washing dishes. All of a sudden, I heard something fall on the floor behind me and turned around to see the CD halfway across the room. After that, I started hearing incomprehensible whispers and faint shadows in the dark. It didn't help that I had just watched *The Grudge* for the first time and then found out the attic was in the laundry room right next to my door; I slept with the lights on for two weeks, and to this day I can't sleep with the closet door open. Things flew off the walls and voices spoke to me when I was alone. Shadows stood ominously in corners, watching and trying to communicate with me. While I was in the bathroom one night I heard a thump in my room next door and found one of my small pictures had been thrown off the wall to the other side of the room. I came home from school one day and tossed my pink jacket on the bed in a crumpled heap, then went downstairs to do homework with my mother and siblings where we stayed for two hours; I found my jacket folded neatly in half even though no one had been upstairs. I awoke one night hearing whispers right next to my bed and someone rattling the doorknob. A few nights later I found scratch marks on my bookshelf that looked like they had been made by fingernails. On the day of my sister's birthday, I was alone in the house while my mom took her to get her toes done. My room looks directly across the hall into my younger brother's room, and on the wall I could see was a corkboard that hung all of his Nerf guns. I heard one of the guns fall and looked quickly to see a shadow running out of his room and down the hall. Curious, I went into his room, put the gun back on the corkboard, and then returned to my own room. Not five minutes later the same thing happened and again I saw the shadow running down the hall; the spirits were playing with me. Things were only getting worse as my fear of it increased, like Elsa's powers in the movie *Frozen*.

My best friend saw my fear after I told her about my experiences and brought me to her mother for guidance. They introduced me to the Wiccan religion and said that my 'powers' were normal and nothing to be afraid of. They said that Wiccans often had precognitive abilities and could communicate with spirits. Alyssa's mother taught me how to handle the spirits and control my precognitive urges, though most of it was the confidence I now had in myself. Alyssa and I started to study the Wiccan religion together in our freshman year of high school and have been practicing ever since. I felt an immense relief knowing that this was okay and that I wasn't alone. Someone finally believed me after my parents thought I was just making things up or was just scared of the dark and being alone. This new religion felt right, and I knew that I belonged with it. Everything just made sense. It's helped me through some hard times, like when my mother found out I had converted to Paganism and sent me to Mormon boot camp at BYU in Utah. She still doesn't like it, and we've settled on not speaking about it to avoid fights. The journey to discovering my faith was difficult and frightening, but I wouldn't change anything about it. ■■■

DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA

second place – poetry

Samuel A. Ortiz

I am part of the "make-it" generation.
A group of beings whose profession is in
procrastination.
We roam the streets staring into our black mirrors
Waiting for the latest Vine and tweet, craving for
Something bigger. 40 years ago our parents played
with
Tires and roads, but now we play through computer
codes.
We are part of the Divided States of America.
A land ruled by God and his objects of affection.

People who are afraid of divine rejection.
America, the land of the Brave. New World
Who saw opportunity in blood and honor in
corruption,
We have Freedom from Want, but want to be free.
A nation of stubborn elephants and donkeys.
Us Americans exist in an absurd universe searching
For answers, but acquire none. A quest for comfort
On an indifferent rock. A home for no one to
own.

■■■



IN FIELDS OF SUNFLOWERS



third place – fiction

Sadie Bird

The sound of beeping machines fills the otherwise silent room. White. Everything is white. White cabinets, white containers, and white walls staring back at me in every direction. The only shred of color to be found is the little potted plant up on the counter, pushed back in the corner, hidden behind some sterile cotton swabs and tongue dispensers. The smell is daunting. Everything smells sterile and I now feel an odd metallic taste in my mouth.

I sit, wrapped up in itchy blankets, thinking about my dad. He always had a way of cheering me up when I was younger. Thinking about the past and all of the fun times I've had is what gets me through these days. Suddenly, I get a tickle in my throat. The urge to cough becomes overwhelming as I reach for a tissue to my left to cover my mouth. I cough violently into the white material and it feels like my chest is being stabbed with a hundred needles. I pull the tissue away from my mouth and gaze at the splatters of red.

"Ms. Taylor?"

I jump in my bed and quickly place the tissue under my leg.

A tall man stands next to my bed. He has dark skin that compares nicely to his bright, white coat and dark black slacks. He is bald, but has a salt and pepper colored goatee. He has a warm and inviting feeling about him, but the permanent worry lines on his forehead tell a different story.

"Yes?" I ask with my voice raspy.

"Ms. Taylor, my name is Dr. Wilson. The cancer isn't responding to the chemotherapy the way we had hoped. I'm afraid the cancer is too far along for any form of treatment."

"So there's nothing you can do to help me?"

"I can give you some pain medication and something to help with your cough, but unfortunately, the cancer is terminal."

Tears start to form in my eyes and my heart feels like it has dropped into my stomach.

"How long do I have?"

"If the cancer is as aggressive as I think it is, a couple weeks at best."

I can't hear the machines any longer and the smell has died, but the white walls feel closer than ever. The doctor stands at my bedside for what seems to be hours before dismissing himself. All I can think is, how could this happen to me?

Moments pass and I feel a chill run down my spine. I look down to see my arms covered in little bumps. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadow move across the room. I look up and see a tall, thin, man standing at the end of my bed. He has dark hair that's perfectly combed back and a clean shaven face that shows his flawlessly chiseled jaw line. He looks professional, wearing a black suit that flashes his very expensive looking watch each time he moves his arm, and a pair of glasses with a thick, black rim around the lenses. I think he must be a business man.

"Hello, Annalise."

His voice sounds calm, and soothing.

"Are you from the collection agency? If you are, just help yourself to whatever, I'm dying anyway. Haven't you heard?" I hiss.

"No, Annalise, I am not here to collect any of your belongings. However, I have heard of your misfortune. My name is Ankou. I am here to make you a deal."

"A deal? Unless it's a deal to get my life back, I'm not interested."

"Oh, Ms. Taylor, please, let me explain before you explain to yourself." He insists with an eerie grin on his face.

My palms became sweaty and I feel my heart pounding through my chest. I felt tempted to call for someone to come remove this man from my room.

"W-what do you mean?" I mumble.

"I have come to enlist you as my assistant." He shot me another grin. "You see, I am in need of a young woman to help me..." He pauses and looks up as if he were trying to think. "Convince people, more or less, into accepting their fate. My work has become difficult these days and the human race is becoming increasingly stubborn."

"I'm confused. What do you mean, 'their fate'?" Are you selling condos or something?" I shake my head in a puzzled fashion. "Have you forgotten that I'm on my way out?"

He chuckled.

“Annalise, please, let me finish. I’m sure you are aware that there are many sick and elderly people in this world. Correct?”

“Right...”

“Well, the world only has so much space, and new life is constantly being produced. My line of work consists of meeting with these sick and elderly people, and preparing them for their last days of life.”

“You want me to kill people?!” I whisper in an aggressive tone.

“No, Annalise. These people, much like yourself, are already going to die soon. You would just be moving along the speed at which they pass by letting them know it will be alright. I think that is what you people call, ‘comforting’ someone.”

He turns and walks toward the window to the right. He stops and places his hands behind his back and gazes outside. I can faintly see him squinting through the sun reflecting on his glasses.

As I let my mind fight over what’s right and what’s wrong, I realize he’s been referring to humans as though we’re something different from him.

“Who are you?” I demand.

“I have already told you, Ms. Taylor. My name is Ankou.”

“No, not your name. Who are you? Or better yet, what are you?”

He paused for a moment before proceeding to speak.

“I guess you can call me an angel of sorts. I was placed on this earth to visit the sick and elderly when their lives have just about run out, and assist them in passing on.”

“So, you’re like a Grim Reaper?”

“Not quite. The Grim Reaper appears to many types of people: healthy, young, injured, people like that.”

I’m surprised as to why I’m so calm about this. I just found out that there is an angel of death in my room and my palms are no longer sweaty and my heart has found its place back in my chest.

“Ankou, why do you want *my* help anyway? There’s thousands of other girls in my position, so why not one of them?”

“Well, Annalise, I think you might be something special, and I am hardly ever wrong when I feel strongly about something.” He glances down at his shoes and rocks back onto his heels, then down onto his feet again.

“What about this “deal” that you mentioned?” I inquire.

“Oh, yes, the deal.” He voices as he spins around on his feet and walks toward my bedside. “If you accept my offer of becoming my assistant, I will see to it that you live a long, healthy life.”

“You’re going to take away my cancer?”

“Yes, Annalise. As long as you’re my assistant, you will not experience any sickness.”

As I open my mouth to ask what happens if I decide to no longer be his assistant, Dr. Wilson walked through the doorway.

“Mr. Breton!” He roars as a smile dances across his face. “I haven’t seen you around here in weeks!”

“Dr. Wilson.” Ankou utters while giving the doctor a welcoming nod.

“Mr. Breton, as soon as you’re finished here with Ms. Taylor, Mr. White in room 182 is requesting your assistance.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I will be finished here shortly.” Ankou says, displaying a painfully fake smile.

The doctor looks my direction.

“Excuse me for interrupting.” He looks back at Ankou.

Ankou stares at the doctor, continuing his false smile as the doctor backs out of the room.

“You work here?” I question.

“Yes, it is how I get close to the dying patients without seeming too mysterious. So what will it be, Annalise?”

I sit quietly for a moment, pondering all of the possibilities. Ankou raises his wrist to his face and looks at his watch, then places his hands in his pockets and gives me a stare. I don’t know if I’m ready to take on this responsibility. We sit quietly for a few more minutes. I’m ready to give him my answer.

It’s been a few days since I’ve been discharged from the hospital. I figure I should try getting my life back in order. I get up from the couch and grab the empty ice cream carton from the table and give it a disapproving stare as I throw it in the trash. I take a deep breath in, feeling every particle slip into my lungs, and exhale slowly. It feels better than I remember.

I walk to the living room and grab all of the cups and plates off the coffee table and return to the kitchen to start washing dishes. I lift the metal handle and let the water run through the faucet until it’s warm enough to use and grab the soapy sponge. One by one, I scrub the dishes, rinse them off, and place them in the drying rack.

After I told Ankou I accepted his offer, he told me he would 'be in touch' right before he scurried out of the room. He hasn't given me any information on what I'm supposed to do. I don't know if he's even really healed me yet. As I reach into the soapy water to grab another dish, I feel a sharp pain in the palm of my hand. It felt like my skin ripping apart. I quickly jerk my hands out of the sink to see my hand covered in watery blood. I make my way over to the counter and grab some paper towels to wipe off the mess. I rush to my bathroom and open the medicine cabinet, desperately looking for some gauze and antibiotics. I find them both. Slowly, I begin to remove the paper towel from my hand and notice that the blood has slowed dramatically. I spread some antibiotics over the opening and wrap some gauze around my hand to ensure the wound stays clean and dry.

"I suppose that's enough dishes for today." I murmur to myself.

I mosey back to the kitchen and carefully place my uninjured hand in the sink and release the water. As the water swirls down the drain, I see my hidden enemy. I reach in and grab the handle and hold it up.

"Damn knives..." I growl as I place it on the counter.

I press my side up against the counter and relax myself. I figure I should probably call my Mom since I'm out of the hospital. She'll want to know how I'm doing. I walk over to the kitchen table and grab my purse to fish out my cell. I've got a few missed calls from her. Oh jeez, she must know I'm out. I dial her number and place the phone up to my ear. After a few rings, she answers.

"Hi, Honey! I heard you're out of the hospital now!" She roared excitedly.

"Yeah, Mom, they let me out just a few days ago."

"Well, that's great, honey. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling really good actually. I'm trying to get adjusted back into living on my own. I've already messed up while trying to do dishes, haha," I mumbled embarrassingly, "so, what are you doing tonight?"

"Well I suppose I'm doing whatever you're doing tonight."

"Oh, great! I was thinking we should have dinner or something to celebrate my homecoming."

"That's a great idea, sweetie."

"Cool. How about you come over around six?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

We say our goodbyes and end the call. My mom has been overly enthusiastic about everything since my dad died, and it got worse when we found out I had cancer. Maybe she'll relax a bit when I tell her that I'm cancer free. Except, things might end badly if Ankou turns out to be a fraud.

A few moments later, I hear a knock at the door. That can't be my mom. I walk over to the entry way and pull the door open. A tall man with a light complexion and dirty blonde hair stands in my doorway. He's wearing a similar outfit to Ankou, a dark suit, but he's missing a watch and glasses. He looks confident, but relaxed with his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

"Well, you're not my mom," I utter.

"I'm not take-out either, unfortunately." He smiles. "My name is Owen. I was told to come here by Ankou, you know, tall guy, about yay high." He slides his hand out of his pocket and brings it up eye level with himself.

"Oh, that guy!" I say, as if I had forgotten him.

"Thank God you remember, I thought I was going to have to go into detail about his dazzling eyes to jog your memory."

I giggle a bit as I stand there starrng at this astonishingly attractive man in front of me. It stays quiet for a moment while we sit looking at each other. He cocks his head to the right slightly.

"May I come in?" He asks, sounding a little confused.



UNTITLED
Shelby Bert

"Oh! Yeah, please, come in," I shake my head to bring myself back to reality, "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention." I look down and notice the ugly bandage on my hand. I quickly pull it off and toss it in the corner where it can't be found. The cut is gone. How is it gone?

"No worries." He looks down at me and gives me a soft smile as he walks through the doorway.

"Excuse the mess." I mutter, embarrassed, as I close the door behind him.

"Don't worry about it. It's my fault, I should have called before showing up unannounced." He looks around the room. "This is pretty nice for an apartment."

"Yeah, the, uh, rent's not too bad either. Please, have a seat." I motion toward the chair at the kitchen table.

He looks back at me and smiles before sitting down. I make sure the door is securely closed and rush over to take a seat across from him.

"These are nice." He says while playing with some sunflower petals between his fingers. "From the boyfriend, I assume?"

"They're from my mom actually. She would always bring me flowers when I was at the hospital."

"Sunflowers are beautiful. She made a fine choice" He smiles.

"They're my favorite flower."

He turns his head and looks my direction.

"Mine, too." He says, his voice warm and relaxing. His smile quickly fades. "So, as I said, Ankou sent me," his voice back to a serious tone, "Ankou came to me about five years ago. Like you, I was on my death bed and he offered to make me better in exchange for my help. I accepted, clearly, and for a few years, I helped him collect the souls of the sick and elderly. However, we still needed some extra hands, so he offered me a promotion. My job is to train the new recruits in the work we do, but I also do some collecting on the side."

"Collecting? That's what you guys call it?"

"Well, it's a little nicer to say collecting, rather than assisting in the death of others. Plus, when people ask what line of work I'm in, I wouldn't be lying if I said I worked for a collection agency. Just not the type they would be thinking." He smiled.

His smile is nearly perfect. Every time he flashes his beautiful, straight, white teeth, it sends a chill down my spine.

"Very clever." I let out a geeky giggle. Oh man... That was so not cute. I look down, embarrassed to make eye contact with him.

"Don't look down," he says. I look back up and he's giving me his signature smile. I can feel the heat rushing into my cheeks as I give him back an embarrassed grin. "That was a very cute laugh." He chuckles.

I need to get the attention off me before I explode with embarrassment.

"So, how do you do the collecting?" I question.

"Well, it's fairly simple, really. You just sit with the person and talk to them about their lives, usually about children and grandchildren if they're older. You remind them of all the good times they've had, make them happy. Once they've opened up to you, you start suggesting that it's okay for them to let go. Now, you don't do all of this in one day. Sometimes it takes a couple days, other times it can take a week. It's a work in progress."

"How will I know what to say? Believe it or not, I've never tried convincing someone into letting go of their life."

"Well, you will follow me around to a few of my jobs, and I will show you the ropes. I'll even let you write down a few of my lines to keep for yourself." He looks at me and smirks.

"Oh, how kind of you." I say sarcastically with a smile on my face. He lets out a hearty laugh.

"So when do we start?" I ask.

"Well, how about you give me a call whenever you think you're ready and I'll swing by and pick you up."

He reaches into the pocket on the inside of his jacket and pulls out a small piece of paper and a pen. I watch as he jots down a few numbers and slides the paper across the table. He places his pen back in his pocket and begins to stand.

"Well, I think I've bothered you enough for today."

"It's no bother," I say as I stand up from the chair, "let me walk you out."

We make our way to the door in silence. I twist the knob and pull the door open. Owen takes a step outside then turns to face me.

"It was very nice meeting you, Annalise."

"I'll be in touch."

He gives me one last smile before turning and walking away. I slowly close the door and lock it. I turn around and lay my back against the door and exhale deeply. ■ ■ ■

BODY ODOR AND CATALOG DEODORANT



third place – nonfiction

Andrea Beltran Vega

There is nothing remotely dramatic or eventful about my childhood. There were no tragic deaths, no coming of age realizations, and, especially, there were no iconic days where I realized something new about myself. I was not the pretty child, or the nice child, nor was I the talkative child. I blended with the background, silent against my mother's thigh, never speaking unless someone directly addressed me, and, even then, I would only respond in monosyllabic phrases.

I was born and raised, for the first nine years of my life, in Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, Mexico. It was a bustling city that was quickly booming with business, and modernizing its ways. The bustling, dirty sounds of the local market surprisingly blended quite well with the more modern look of the Walmarts and Sam's Clubs that were popping up. The more humble housing complexes on the south side of the city, divided by an invisible line from the more prosperous North side of town. The two sides of the town, although not divided by any landmarks, avoided each other simply because of geography, and the socioeconomic differences were palpable in the air.

I was a child born into privilege, in a private hospital with a planned birth date, epidurals, and pink balloons. I was the one my parents had waited for, and the one that they anticipated would be brought into the affluent family my parents hoped to become. The idea had been that we would be living in the North someday, that my dad would stop drinking, and that the land they planned to cultivate would yield bountiful crops.

But my father kept on drinking for the better part of my childhood, my mother threatened him with divorce, and the land was cultivated by my father's conniving cousin who saw to make a profit out of what wasn't his. My brothers were born then, and my mother grew angrier, my father grew less sober and the bills kept piling up.

I can't quite say what it was that changed, since I was so young I can't remember, and my parents don't talk about that time. There was a definite change, though, when my mother started graduate school on the weekends, and my father finally woke up and understood that my mother was willing to leave. He started attending a local branch of Alcoholic Anonymous, and his salary as an impromptu engineer for a Canadian company suddenly started being enough to help with the bills. This has, of course, been all retold by the bits and pieces I get from my parents. In fact, of my childhood days, nothing but glimpses remain.

When someone asks about my childhood, images of lampposts and dark alleyways fill my mind. It's the sort of scene one sees in mystery movies, with the Parisian night as the background, and the murderer right around the corner. It's baffling, at times, to think of my childhood this way. I don't recall ever feeling truly scared, or unhappy. I was a quiet child that knew nothing of the scariness of the night, and yet, somehow, my memories of childhood are gothic at best.

In fact, I distinctly remember playing hide-and-go-seek in those same dark alleyways, naively hiding behind lampposts and counting to twenty when it was my turn to be the seeker. The other children that lived near me, and had to, by neighborly association, be my friends, they always invited me to play with them, and I only went with them under my mother's urging, who was, at that stage, already getting scared of having an old-maiden daughter.

Our Sunday mornings were spent at the Basílica de Guadalupe, a traditional Catholic *iglesia*, sitting in uncomfortable pews, and listening to the droning on of a priest that either didn't know how to smile, or merely lost his ability to do so when he was ordained. The afternoons were spent at my Nana's house, the one that was technically my aunt's since she bought it, but that my grandmother had made her own.

The little blue house was bought in a nondescript neighborhood, where gangs had not infiltrated yet, and children ran around like wild horses. My Nana's house, although equally as small, and equally as monotonous as the others, was always special to other people. It wasn't the decorations or furniture that made it so, since the house was scarcely furnished and humbly decorated with gifts my Nana had received. It was, however, my Nana's compassion and miraculous ability to feed everyone and anyone that came to her door that made her the unofficial Saint of the *colonia*.

My mother once described my Nana, her mother, as being all in touch with God. There is this story that even my father, the heathen, tells us about our Nana. It took place in a time where my parents were at their financial lowest, and my aunt and uncle could only afford one chicken to feed their family. My Nana, who would cook it for them, saw enough meat in that one chicken to feed a small army, and knew that

her family and friends needed the meal. My Nana urged my mother to come eat at her table that night, since she knew we had no groceries at home, and persuaded her to drive over for some chicken soup for dinner. Our family of five came to her home, and my aunt's family of four, along with the neighbor and her lonely mother came for dinner.

The children and the men sat at the table that night while the women bustled around the *comal*, heating tortillas, and stirring the pot of fried *frijoles*. The chicken soup itself carried my Nana's signature bland taste. She grew up in poverty, and knew nothing of condiments, so her meals often lacked flavor, and she was adamant about not adding any flavoring after the food was cooked because that was in bad taste.

"Why would you add lemon to the soup? You're going to get a stomachache!" She'd admonish us, taking the piece of lemon from our squeezing fingers.

The pot of chicken soup that night, although now known to be one of my Nana's miracle multiplying meals, was missing the flavoring my Nana's meals often did, but it had to have been the best meal any of us had ever had. The pot of soup, however bland and unassuming as it had been, fed all of us, with enough leftovers left to send to a sick neighbor my grandmother had heard of.

My father describes it as the multiplying of the fish and bread, like Jesus did, and talks only goodness about my Nana and her ability to feed anyone in need. "She's going to be canonized one day, that woman!" he always says. My mother will only smile a small, frustrated smile, the kind that recognizes how good my grandmother is, but also speaks of all the money my mother has had to spend in charity on behalf of my grandmother.

Most of my childhood was spent in this same way; dinner at Nana's house and then home. I loved those dinners, because my grandmother, although compassionate and the embodiment of all that is good in this world, always made me feel like a grownup. I was never too young to hold a knife and help out in the kitchen in her house, and she never believed in hugs and kisses, but her voice and the way she presented her home to everyone spoke volumes about her character. Her smell, always of old lady no matter how young she had been once, was a combination of the deodorant she bought in an Avon catalog, and the slight musk of body odor that she could never quite shake off. It wasn't the most pleasant of smells, yet, somehow, it has always been the soothing smell of comfort, and Nana.

Thus, it was with no doubt that our family could be found at her house more than twice a week, if only for the company. Sometimes, when we had dinner at Nana's house, we would be allowed to play outside well until the street lights came on. Although curfew was always set at sunset, my Nana was a socialite in her neighborhood, and played host to the majority of the women that lived nearby. Her stove was perpetually on in the evenings, heating water for the instant coffee she drank, and heating the tortillas that my grandma would slather with butter and salt as a side dish. Because of this constant stream of ladies coming in to say hello to my Nana, the children were left to play around in the middle of the street until the ladies would see it fit to leave with their children trailing behind them like ducks, pleading for a few extra minutes of play in front of Nana's house.

I did not realize how much I loved the streets, bland food, and the faint smell of body odor until I was displaced from my childhood, and dropped into the cold reality of the American Dream, which allows no time for childhood for children of immigrants. Parents, chasing a better future, a better education for their children, and a stable home, tell their children they are going to Disneyland, and to tell the men in uniform at the border between our home and a foreign new place just that. Never mind the fact Disneyland became the dream that never was, and a small, dusty apartment was the reality. The sluggish pace of childhood is lost when the doors are closed, and the windows are closed, and the only opening an immigrant child sees is a peephole at the end of a mile long maze.

The streets become scary places, the lampposts no longer a hiding spot, bland food becomes preferable over canned goods, and the faint smell of body odor and catalog deodorant becomes a shadowy and distant memory of a time when I was the quiet child against my mother's thigh. ■ ■ ■

NO HEAVEN FOR ME!



third place – poetry

Patricia Ross

I don't even want to go to heaven, I want my spirit
to just roam the Earth
Every nook and cranny of its body
Deep within the Ocean's and high above all the
skies
I want my spirit to wrestle with the cool winds
Travel across to lands where it's never been
Looking and finding where history's secrets lies
I want my soul to walk through the finest castles
of every country
From Africa to Europe from China to Spain
Doing back flips down China's wall without
feeling one pinch of intensified pain
I want to roll with the waves and swim with the
fish

I wanna bounce from planet to planet
And if it's really true converse with creatures
beyond the stars
I want to see more than just this world of ours
I want to find different dimensions to places a
human mind unlike mine could even think of
Just to know I lived out my real true dream of
visiting the impossible
I want to travel to Saturn just to sit on its ring
I want my peace of mind to wander the most
isolated Islands in the world
And pick fruit from the islands rarest trees
I don't even want to go to Heaven because there's
just a little piece of Heaven down here that I
would just die to see! ■ ■ ■



RICH AND MILA

Katia Facundo

She smiled absently and hugged his head as he rode his high out. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and his body shook. He had done too much this time. His fingers twitched in ecstasy. She cupped his forehead lovingly and made a shushing noise, as if he were a tiny newborn. She played with the curly, brown lock of hair hanging over his brow.

"Wow, your hair's getting so long. You need a haircut."

Grazing her thumb over his forehead, she looked at the scars on the inside of his elbow, trying to distinguish the old ones from the new. She tucked her own chocolate colored hair behind her ear and looked out the window. The sun was beginning to set, and the air in the room felt thinner and colder. She shivered. Squinting her eyes, she tried to count the different kinds of pink and orange in the sky.

"Hm?" He murmured two minutes later, with his eyes shut and eyebrows raised. He reached for her hand and squeezed tight.

"Nothing..." She squeezed back, leaning down and kissing his cheek damp with sweat.

Hours had passed and Rich was long gone. He was in another world. A world without broken veins and dirty hair. He'd be back soon. He always came back. Slipping on a pair of ripped jeans that were too big, she combed her hair with her fingers and whispered,

"I'll be back soon. I'll be right back. Don't you go anywhere, okay? If someone knocks, don't forget to look through the peephole. Don't forget, you'll know what she'll say."

Rich's dreamy snores responded coolly. Locking the front door behind her, she slid the key by her bony ankle past her frilly, white sock. The hallway was dusty and felt hollow. Haunted moans echoed from room 172 and silly giggles in short bursts came from room 168. Her shoes felt too tight. Looking down, she wiggled her toes around as she waited to hear the ding. The rusty, ancient elevator clicked its way up the eight floors screaming and screeching. As the doors struggled to open, she caught a glimpse of who was inside. A short black skirt with matching black heels clinging on to dirty jeans and a white t-shirt. The woman's short blonde hair was clutched in Avery's fist. She had a pretty red mouth and sharp hazel eyes. They tongue-kissed sloppily, moaning into each other's mouths. Short skirt opened her eyes dreamily, locking eyes with her. She flashed her a grin and began to trail kisses down Avery's neck. Avery opened his eyes afterwards. He jerked away instantly, letting go of the Blonde woman's hair and wiping his mouth. He kept his head down as he greeted her.

"H-hey, Mila."

"Hi Avery," She smiled politely at the blonde woman.

The Blonde woman rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, returning a stiff smile. Mila entered the elevator, standing as far away from them as possible. Avery glanced up and tilted his head.

"So, Mila. Which floor you headed?" Avery asked, hovering his nervous finger over the dull

yellow buttons.

“Oh, you go ahead first.”

“Oh, thanks babe.” he grinned wide, winking his left eye.

He pressed the foggy number six. The elevator screeched the first seconds and began to hum calmly as it descended.

“So, uh, where’s Richie today, Mila?” he scratched the back of his head, checking his gold watch. The Blonde woman began to whisper into Avery’s ear, reaching for his hand, eyeing Mila suspiciously.

“Oh, he’s upstairs. It’s just me today.” She replied with a tiny smile.

It was always nice talking to Avery. He was a nice guy. He nodded and looked down once more, an anxious grin appearing on his face as the woman continued to whisper into his ear more intensely. Mila observed him. His big hands had callouses on the back of his knuckles and he smelled like cigarettes. He liked to chew his nails and he had a pack of gum in his front pocket. He was a kind man. The elevator pinged open and the couple stepped out together.

“Bye Mila, hey be careful out there. Tell Rich I said hello.”

“God...take care of yourself, hunny.” The woman laughed thickly, as they hurried away with their arms knitted together.

Mila leaned over and pressed the “close door” button three times fast. ClickClickClick. When the doors finally closed, she leaned back onto the steel railing. Placing the palms of her hands at her temples, she pressed as hard as she could. Her head was pulsing, like a heartbeat in her brain. And then she heard it. A very faint trickle. Drops of something. Plop. Looking forward, she blinked her eyes to the sound of the drops. Plop. Plop. Glancing up, she saw there was a rotten brown stain in the corner of the ceiling. Black water was dripping from it. Plop. Eyeing it intensely, she whispered out loud.

“Hello, again.”

Hesitantly, she stepped under the stain and let the black liquid drop onto her head. Plop. The dark goop trickled down her forehead, and down the bridge of her nose. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She felt electric. Startling her, the elevator dinged once more. Opening to the first floor, Mila stepped out fervently, scratching behind her ear nervously. She headed toward the front double-doors.

Looking over her shoulder, the elevator doors shut hastily, as if trying to hide the dripping, black secret. Mila walked the gum-covered sidewalks, holding her breath. Outside, the sky was a charcoal grey and she could smell a heavy scent of aftershave. On the other side of the street there was a man in a brown suit who she was sure was laughing at her. He knew she could smell his musky aftershave. He knew where she was headed; on her way to get more of the magic elixir. Her black potion.

“Leave me alone, you rat!” She spat at him, wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. With his brown suitcase in hand the man quickened his pace and scurried away. A green Range Rover slinked over slyly and came to a stop beside her.

“Hey, Mila, how you doing? No Richard tonight? You know I can’t wait forever for that money, girl.”

The car grumbled quietly into the night, waiting for her response. Mila met eyes with the man who was speaking. He was unrecognizable. Icy-blue eyes without remorse, only evil. The orange streetlights reflected off the man’s pale, shaved head. The man grinned dangerously, chewing his gum loudly with shark like teeth.

“What’s the matter, you’re acting like you don’t know me or something.”

Frightened, she ran back toward the



POINTILLISM
Taurra Ferguson

apartments, her breath puffing out in white clouds against the cold. Bursting through the front door, she scanned the room for Rich. A pile of disheveled sheets and thin pillows lay in his place on the ratty mattress.

“Rich? Babe, I need to talk to you. I need to ask you something.”

She made her way to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her ghostly green eyes were itchy and the black stain on her forehead had dried and was beginning to burn.

“I want to get better, Richard. I’m tired. I’m tired of how they look at me. I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. I feel like I’m losing my damn mind!”

She switched on the hot water and scrubbed her face with apricot-scented hand soap. With cheeks pink and raw, she used a white towel to wipe under her eyes; smearing the dried makeup away. Her brown curls dangled over her forehead, she needed a haircut soon.

“We can do this together, I know we can.”

She paused and listened for his snoring in the apartment but heard nothing.

“Rich! Honey, are you listening? I don’t want to be scared. I want to feel happy again. I want *us*, to be happy again. I—”

Heavy knuckles thumped on the front door. Annoyed, she speedily marched to the door. Forgetting to peep through the hole first, she opened the door angrily in one second and cautiously the next, realizing who was at the door. The Blonde woman. Her hair was tangled and the dark red lipstick she had worn earlier was smeared all around her mouth. She wasn’t pretty anymore.

“Look Mila. It’s four in the morning, and Avery has work soon. I don’t know if *Richie* is just your sad, little attempt of pretending someone cares for you, or maybe he *is* real and treats you like trash and that’s why you have all those scars on your arms. I don’t care. I just need you to shut your stupid mouth for one night. I mean god. I just don’t understand how you’ve lived on your own for so long, you need help.”

Mila laughed out loud nervously. Covering her smiling mouth with her trembling fingers, she shook her head.

“I don’t live alone. I live with Rich. Rich lives here too.” She looked down gingerly avoiding the woman’s livid gaze.

The Blonde woman scrunched her face up tight and swallowed, like someone had forced hot lemon juice down her throat. She crossed her arms and shook her head in disbelief, observing Mila with pitiful eyes. Mila continued.

“You’re a very rude woman. If you don’t mind, I’m going to close the door now. I’d like to you leave.”

Without waiting for the woman’s reaction, she gently closed the door. She walked to the mattress where Rich laid, slipping off the too-big jeans and rolled under the cool covers. Holding her head in his arms, Rich cooed and whispered sweetly into her ear, kissing her forehead. The black stain slowly reappeared each time his lips touched her skin, and together Rich and Mila watched the sunrise. ■ ■ ■

TURN A NEGATIVE INTO A POSITIVE

Sophia Campbell



A true story, but the names and some places and circumstances have been changed to protect the living.

Deborah was born in Saint Louis and raised up in Stockton, California. She had three sisters and four brothers who are all older than her. Deborah’s sisters were Brenda, the oldest at 23; Rebecca, 20; and Sandra, 17. Deborah was 6. Deborah always had to prove to her siblings that she was as good as them because no one wanted to bring her along with them to their outings. Deborah always cried and pleaded for someone to take her along with them, but her cries fell on deaf ears. Deborah’s brothers were 2 sets of twins. Sean and John were 15 and Ed and Fred were 16. Now Deborah always had to prove herself to her brothers and sisters to show that she is responsible because no one wanted to babysit. Deborah can remember when she was 6 year old she used to see her sister Sandra crying a lot in her room they shared. Deborah asked, “What is the matter with you? Why are you crying?” Deborah would walk over to her sister Sandra and give her a big hug and tell her that, “I wish I can make you feel better, please don’t cry anymore.” Sandra then grabbed her little sister and said, “I love you so much that I will never let anyone hurt you. If anyone hurts you ever, you promise to tell me whatever it may be and I will take care of it. “Let’s pinky promise, OK?” Sandra said. “You must never break the promise which is our bond forever, do you understand me, Deborah? I’ll protect you forever.”

Deborah and the family lived at 944 East Eighth Street in Stockton, California. The neighborhood

was middle class. There was the train depot where all the trains stopped and loaded or ended their routes, right next door. Many strangers were coming and going from this train depot. There was also a park down at the end of Sacramento Street where everyone would go hang out after school. There was a pink house on the corner where Deborah's brother's friend Richard and his sister Tina lived. The family lived on the other corner (Southwest corner) across the street from Richard and Tina. They had lived here for 21 years. The house was a golden color with bricks going around the bottom half of it. There were bars on all the windows and doors. The bars on the windows and doors were a must because Deborah's mother was over protective. They had four bedrooms, two baths, with a two car garage. The yard was bigger than any of the other houses on the block. The house faced Eighth Street and the garage faced Sacramento Street. The house had a fence around the yard. The yard it also has four parts to it. The front part of the yard was separated by the walkway to the door. On one side were the bedrooms and, on the other side, was the kitchen and living room. Under the kitchen window there were some rose bushes and the walkway continued to the other side of yard, two-car garage, part three of the yard and then a fenced off back yard. The third part of the yard was everyone's favorite because it has a big Mulberry Tree where the branches hung down so far, that a person could hide behind them and no one could see them. This side was the coolest side also because of the shade. They always fought to see who would end up cutting this side of the yard. Four blocks down 8th Street would take you out of the housing area, where there were three stores; one was a Liquor Store called airport Way Liquor and two grocery stores, Ulysses Market, Grand Save Market, Airport Way Pharmacy and Airport Way Beauty Salon.

Deborah was now 7 years old, about to turn 8. Her birthday was April 28th and she couldn't wait. Today was February 5th and no one was home. Their mother was never at home and her older sisters had left home when they turned 18 and they would never come visit. Sandra was 18 going on 19 and she was still at home. "Sandra promised, she would not leave me here alone," Deborah thought.

Deborah was playing in her room when she heard a loud bang and someone moaning. It was Uncle Paul stumbling over the table by the front door as he was coming in the house. He was whining "My leg, my leg." His face was ashy looking from sweating. Deborah guessed from playing basketball. Deborah was peeking around the corner of the hallway. Uncle Paul saw Deborah and said "Come here gal, you heard me, I almost broke my neck. Come help me to my room. Who else is here to help me?" Deborah's hands were starting to get sweaty, her forehead was getting hot and beads of sweat were forming, her cheeks were hot and red. She was getting light headed that she felt like passing out. Deborah nonchalantly went to his side to help him and told him "No one else is here at the house." He grabbed her around the shoulder and was leaning all over her. Deborah was big for her age. She looked like a 12 year old and her body looked the same. Boys thought that she was older than what she looked. Instead of holding her shoulder, her uncle kept grabbing her breast, saying, "I'm sorry, but it is your fault because you are not helping me right. Deborah wanted to scream. Uncle Paul's room was at the end of the hallway and it seemed like it took forever to get there. Deborah did not want to step foot in his room because it did not feel right. Her stomach started to hurt so bad that she started gagging, about to throw-up. Deborah was getting very nervous hoping and praying that someone would come home any minute now. Upon entering the room, Deborah stopped and he yelled at her, "What is wrong with you? Why did you stop, we are almost there?" She lied and said, "You stepped on my foot." The room was dark and stuffy; it smelled like old dirty socks and something else she could not explain. Deborah was stumbling into the room, trying to avoid the mess on the floor. She stepped on something hard and crumbly. She jumped and look down. It was blue and brown with marks on it. It looked like balled up shorts or underwear. "No, Ugh, I know, this not what I think it is (Shit)." She wanted to scream "YOU NASTY BASTARD."

In Uncle Paul's room, right next to the dirty underwear was a full-size bed and a nightstand with a lamp sitting on top. The nightstand was dusty with ashes all over it. There was a chair at the end of the bed. Deborah was trying to guide him to the chair, so she could hurry up out of the room. But, for some reason, he started to act like he could not walk anymore. Right before they reached the chair he stumbled hard, knocking her down on the bed with him on top of her. Deborah yelled, "Uncle Paul what are you doing?"

He said, "Shut your mouth if you know what's good for you. It's your fault with your stupid ass, for making me fall like this." He started to smell Deborah's hair, then her neck, all the while his hand was rubbing up and down her leg. Deborah's stomach was hurting badly and she started trembling and crying when he stuck his hand under her dress. He started to move his private area in circular and up and down motions.

Deborah said, "Please don't do this, don't hurt me, I won't tell anyone, please let me go." He acted like he didn't hear a word she was saying, he just kept on kissing her neck and pulling her panties down. Deborah grabbed Uncle Paul's hair and pulled it with all her strength and scratched the side of his neck. Then, Uncle Paul socked her so hard in the stomach that Deborah could not breathe anymore. She was grasping for air. He then grabbed Deborah by the neck and started to squeeze so hard that she thought he

was about to kill her. Deborah's eyes were bulged open with tears streaming down the side of her face. She was trying to breathe. He yelled, "BITCH, I will kill you if you ever do that again or if you tell anyone what I did. You know you wanted me, the way you shake your ass when you walk by me. Now you want to cry like I did something wrong to you. I swear that I will kill you if you ever tell anyone, you hear me?"

He punched her again, even harder this time, in the stomach. She threw up. At this time, Deborah could not breathe. Her eyes started to roll back into her head as if she was going to pass out and she did. Uncle Paul pulled his pants down and spread her legs while one of his hands was still around her neck to keep her from screaming. The other hand was fumbling between her legs. He tried to put his penis inside her, but he kept having problems because he was too big for her. That didn't seem to stop him, though; he got more excited and forced himself inside her. Deborah woke up from the punch and the pain between her legs. The tears were streaming down her face. Her body felt so hot, her breath was very short, and she passed out again. This time, he slapped her awake and told her to get up and "go clean yourself up, clean all this blood you put on my bed and hurry up before someone comes home." All kinds of things were going through Deborah's mind. She was crying thinking why this happened to her and who will believe her. Deborah was so confused that she did not know what to do. She wanted to tell her sister but he said he would hurt her and kill her. She kept quiet for years.

Deborah's personality changed over the years of abuse. She became quiet and distant, flirtatious, and just out right mean. She was always flirting with grown men and even became friendlier with the boys, allowing them to touch her in places that no one should be touching her. Deborah was now 15 year old and going to Edison High School on South Central Blvd in Stockton. Deborah spent her time flirting with all the boys in School, not being respectful to herself or anyone else. Deborah thought that the only way someone would love her was by being intimate with a boys or girls; she even tried some teachers. Deborah was doing well in school until she got into High School. She became very attractive and her body was flawless. Her skin color was like a light caramel and her hair was light brown, her face was shaped like an almond. She had big cheeks and big lips that the boys teased her about. Over the years, she learned to her assets to her advantage, because it always worked to get what she wanted.

Now as years went by Sandra, Deborah's sister, noticed how her behavior had changed. Deborah had a potty mouth and she didn't care about anyone, let alone herself. She was flirting a lot and being very nasty with it. Sandra had tried talking to her, but they would just argue, and then Deborah would walk away. One day, Sandra came home kind of earlier than she usually did and noticed Uncle Paul acting different and a little funny. But Sandra just didn't pay too much attention, because she was rushing to the bathroom. She didn't notice Deborah was home and in Uncle Paul's room. Paul was holding Deborah down, covering her mouth, whispering, "You better not say a word or I will kill her and then you."

When Sandra was done in the bathroom, she immediately went back outside to retrieve her purse and other items she had left in the car when rushing to the bathroom. When Sandra came back inside she saw Deborah and she said, "I didn't know you were here."

"I wasn't, I just arrived while you were in the bathroom," Deborah said, to change the subject, "let me help you with that." As time went on, more strange things were happening and Sandra knew something was happening and she is going to get to the bottom of this. Several months has passed by and Sandra knew something is wrong and she dreaded to inquire about it. She didn't want to accept what she was thinking but, everything was pointing to the inevitable.

On April 6th of a year in the 1980's, Sandra invited Deborah to a motel room. Sandra told Deborah that a few of their friends were having a little get together. So Sandra told Deborah to be ready. Sandra was thinking about what she would do, if what was happening to her, happened to her baby sister, how would she deal with it?

About a year ago, Sandra had taken a class to learn how to use a gun. She purchased a 38 Smith and Wesson with a white handle. Sandra took 2nd place in her shooting class. Sandra loved this class because her target she imagined, was Uncle Paul. She could always see his smile and the beads of sweat on his forehead when he was raping her. When he was raping her, he made a promise to her that he would not touch her baby sister as long as she would be supplying the sex for him.

Sandra was getting ready for to go the motel where they were supposed to meet up with some friends of Sandra. That is what Sandra told Deborah, so she would think they would be partying with some friends. They arrived at the Hilton on March Lane Friday evening. Cheryl, a friend, gave her a key to the room, just in case no one was there yet. There were two big queen sized beds and a big TV, a microwave and a refrigerator. It had a table to eat on and two big chairs. On the table sat two bottles of red wine with only 2 glasses. Deborah was wondering how many people were going to be there. Deborah did not question the two glasses, because she was so excited about having some fun with some of her sister's friends, with some wine to boot. She could not wait for everything to start. Sandra put up her belongings and immediately poured two glasses of wine before her sister started asking questions.

Sandra killed the first glass of wine and told little sis to “catch up.” So Deborah drank her first and second glass quickly and was working on her third. Now, this is where Sandra wanted her to be, relaxed and very talkative.

When she notice that Deborah was feeling getting fuzzy, she started asking her questions about why her behavior has change so drastically. Deborah kind of froze for a minute because she was thinking about something. Sandra said, “You know I love you and I would do anything for you, so don’t be afraid to talk to me about anything, I won’t be mad at you ever.” Sandra then gave Deborah a hug and she could feel her body trembling, just going limp. Deborah began to cry hard like something was really bothering her. Sandra took Deborah face in her hands and told her, “You can tell me. I won’t be mad at you and we can handle everything together.”

Deborah looked deeply into Sandra’s eyes to see that she was really sincere. Deborah started saying “It’s all my fault,” Sandra said “So tell me what happened, I can help you.” Deborah laid her head down on her sister’s shoulder and said, “For the past eight years, I have been molested by Uncle Paul, he made me do things to him that I would not do to any man.” Deborah started crying again, even harder and Sandra hugged her tighter to comfort her and try to soothe the pain. Sandra said, in a mother- like tone, “I’m so sorry that you had to endure that and I was not there to protect you. I wish you had told me a long time ago. I would have taken care of things then,” she whispered under her breath. Now that comment from Sandra got Deborah’s attention, and she immediately stop crying, looking at her sister, wondering and thinking about what she just said. Deborah asked, “What are you saying Sandra? Deborah said “Now, you can tell me anything.”

Sandra felt that she was sitting in the hot seat instead of her sister. She was wondering how could this happen. Sandra took a deep breath, and started telling her story to Deborah.

“I have been molested since I was 6 years old by Uncle Paul. I knew he had also molested Brenda and Rebecca, that is why they moved out and have not looked back. I was going to leave too, but I could not leave you here by yourself to endure this pain, I did not want you to go through what we went through with Uncle Paul. I made him promise not to touch you if I stayed here and provided him sex. Can’t believe he lied to me, I should not have trusted him.”

Deborah had this look of despair on her face. “I can’t believe what he has done to all of us, he can’t get away with this. I just want to kill him for ruining our lives,” she cried out. They were hugging each other, crying in each other’s arms. At that moment, they both stopped crying and looked at each other deeply into their eyes; no words spoken but they knew what needed to be done. One day, they snuck into the house when Uncle Paul was out shopping. They searched his room for his gun, pen and paper and waited for his return.

Now, Deborah hid in her room, while Sandra sat in the living room until he returned home. Uncle Paul came in the door and saw Sandra. He immediately started fussing with her, because he had not seen her in four days. Sandra has missed their appointment they have twice a week. Sandra said, “I had to go out of town with my job.” Sandra got up and walked to his room. He looked at her suspiciously, but he followed her into the room. She then took her clothes off and turned to put her things on the chair by the door, also making sure the door was not locked. Deborah was waiting in her room, then she heard Uncle Paul’s voice. This made her stomach do flips and her hands were starting to sweat. When they walked into the room and closed the door, Deborah had snuck down the hallway to the door and listened so she would know when to come in.

Sandra was standing by the chair while Uncle Paul was sitting on the bed. She said, “What are you waiting for, why are you just sitting there? Take your clothes off.” He took his pants and underwear off and said, “Come here and give me some head.” She said “No, you said I didn’t have to do that anymore. “ He sneered at her and said,” You made me wait for some pussy for four days and now you have to pay up, so get your ass over here, bitch.” Sandra then walked over and kneeled down between his legs. He grabbed her by the head and forced her down on his dick and his eyes rolled back into his head and that is when Deborah walked in pointing a gun at him. He was so into what was happening that he didn’t hear her open the door and come in.

All of a sudden, he felt pain on the left side of his face; blood was flowing down above his eye, as he looked and saw Deborah standing there with a gun in her hand. Sandra hurried over to her things and grabbed the other gun with the pen and paper. Sandra said, “Write a letter saying you are sorry for hurting all the girls for all these years. Say that you hope they can all find it in their hearts to forgive you. “Now, Sandra crawled behind him and put his gun to the right side of his temple and made him put his hand over her hand, so the blow back could get on his hand. They cleaned up their mess and Sandra got dressed and they left. Now, as the years went on, Deborah became one the best judges and Sandra became an attorney specializing in rape and molestation cases. They both counsel victims to make sure that they turn a negative into a positive, but without violence. ■ ■ ■



JOURNEY TO THE END

Katrina Davis

I find no rest in racing thoughts and words
 pooling at my fingertips waiting to create
 The worlds living in my head,
 The dialogue that whispers in my ears
 And the rhythm of prose synchronizing with the
 beat of my heart.
 There is an ocean ahead of me, the tide filled with
 letters and phrases--And, just there,
 On the horizon, an island awaits.
 So, I climb into the space-bar boat and set sail for
 the distant land.

Sometimes, the water is salty. A choppy current
 threatens to wash me away, but
 Other times sunlight warms my face and I net the
 letters and phrases like fish to
 Chase away the hunger of my mind.

It is a long journey, fraught with winds changing
 my course and storms
 That nearly capsize my boat, but I travel on, riding
 the high of painting

This page with the black and white words on my
 heart.

Finally, the bow of my space-bar boat hits sand.
 "Land-ho!" I cry, falling onto the land, with hands
 that scabble for purchase
 And eyes that lurch from side-to-side, searching.

Then, I see it-- A sign written in red,
 It says, "You have finished a long journey, my
 friend. It is one with a beginning,
 A middle, and, now, climb onto the island I've
 called The End."

I awaken as the rhythm leaves me, fingers tapping
 out the final beat.

On the screen, worlds fade into black and white
 words

And the dialogue is just the sound of my own
 breath.

I find my rest in thoughts ended with a period
 and written words left flowing on a page. ■ ■ ■

REVERIE

Lauren Gonzales

"What do you dream of?"

The question rang through the air, thick with sleep and haziness and smoke. Their minds were clouded from the early hours and the lingering smoke, and she was half-asleep, laying on his half-naked body. She was draped over him like a blanket, arms and legs hanging off the couch, cheek against his bare chest, hair cascading in an obsidian waterfall. Eyes as gentian as the ocean closed, rosebud lips parted in a sleepy half-smile. The corners of her half-smile quirked up slightly at the question. "I dream of Jeanie," she murmured sleepily, without skipping a single beat. Witty at the drop of a dime, as impressive as ever. He rolled his eyes, though he smiled nonetheless, amused and elated by her little quips. The haze didn't affect him as much as it affected her; he was harder to affect, in more ways than one. Sometimes he envied that about her.

"Seriously. What do you dream about when you sleep?" He asked, the curiosity tugging at the darkest corners of his mind. He'd hidden everything he didn't want to face in those corners; the lack of sanity, the addiction—or addictions—his inability to sleep, his weaknesses. He hid her there, too, when she vanished and left no traces, or when she said she wouldn't come back. He hid her there when he wasn't able to face her, to own up to anything, to admit anything. He wondered if he was tucked into the darkest corners of her mind, where she hid Paris, and her own addictions, and her own demons and the monsters in her basement. To be tucked into those vast spaces of her mind seemed like a privilege, like a throne made out of memories and remnants of once-happy times.

She made a small sniffling noise, one just loud enough to jar him from his drowning thoughts and memories. Glancing back down at her, he watched as she turned onto her side and slipped into the tiny space between him and the couch, nestling there the way a cat might. She was so thin and so nimble and every movement of hers was graceful and meaningful, like everything she did had true intentions. She made everything beautiful, everything sad, everything memorable and thoughtful. Even in the way she strutted about the apartment in her own cloudy haze, wearing nothing but his old Misfits shirt, her skin smooth, her onyx hair falling over her like a veil. She looked like a goddess, laying there beside him. Her lips stretched into another smile. "I dream of angels, and of happy endings, and of everything



being beautiful and nothing ever hurting anymore. I dream of my brother, and I dream of my father and my mother, and I dream of every 'what if' that ever crossed my mind." She answered finally, her voice sounding like a low purr.

He let everything sink in for a moment, his head falling back against the cushions of the couch. His eyes followed the cracks on the white ceiling, bathed grey in the light fighting to get through the clouds outdoors and the cloudy haze inside. He envied her. He envied her ability to sleep, her ability to dream. He envied her weaknesses and her beauty and grace and her meaningfulness and everything she stood for. He envied her, and he hated that he stood for nothing except loss and pain and death. He wanted to mean something to people, something good, something people wanted to remember. But instead he held everything bad about the world until he resembled every lost hope, every fear, every nightmare anyone could ever have, and that was all he knew anymore; mistakes, abandonment, loss. "What do you dream about?" She asked. Her voice sounded far away, almost as if it was being carried away by the clouds and the breeze coming from the open window. She sounded so far, and he felt so lost. He paused.

"I don't dream about anything." ■ ■ ■

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Micaela Arroyo

I didn't know about the doll at the beginning. In fact, I didn't know about the ghost at all, until I saw her. It was around midnight, sitting in her small room as if somehow she was still with us. I rocked in her chair, back and forth, as I read her favorite story out loud.

"Little Red Riding Hood continued to walk through the forest with the small basket filled with goodies."

I was mostly staring at the pictures, after reading the book to her so many times, I memorized it. I closed the book slowly and looked around the room.

The endless dolls placed around her pink bedroom just like she left them. I picked up her favorite one and held it in my arms. I pulled the long string placed on her back.

"You forgot my favorite part," I froze. I looked at the doll shocked by the response. It was Abby, her sweet little voice coming out of her doll.

"Wha-at? Abby?!" I responded to the doll as if she was going to reply back.

"I'm still here sis, I always have been." The doll responded to me as if she was having an actual conversation with me, her eyes directly looking at me.

"Abby where are you?!" I looked around, desperate, until I saw her small figure in the corner smiling at me, wearing the same dress she wore the day she died.

"Just be careful what you wish for," Abby's voice whispered with a small breeze running through me as if she was a couple of feet away. I was unable to move, standing there, speechless.

"Lauren you need to stop spending so much time in there, out now." I heard my mom's voice coming up the stairs. I placed the doll back where I found it and walked out of my baby sister's room.

I can still hear my mom's pain in her voice, as if the accident was barely yesterday. I have been crying myself to sleep for two months now, and tonight was no different.

I woke up at two in the morning by the sound of rain drops hitting my window. I sat up, unable to go back to sleep. I turned on the TV but it was static, and had no signal because of the storm. I decided to go to the kitchen and get some water. As I was heading down the stairs that's when I saw it once again; the same doll standing in the hallway, her blue eyes and small smile facing toward me. I stumbled backwards almost falling but catching myself. I was too scared to make a sound so I stared back with terrified eyes watching her first move.

"Run." I heard a voice say. But it was not the doll it was coming from behind me. It was Abby. I turned around as quickly as possible, but nothing appeared.

"Don't look her straight in the eye." I heard her sweet little voice say. It was too late for that I was already looking at the doll, a thousand thoughts running through my head. How could she stand there as if she had a soul? I was convinced she was alive, not one doubt. The worst part was that, that was not the scariest part of the night. Before slowly turning around and walking away, the doll's eyes turned extremely fire red and said: "Two. More. Days."



My mouth formed a small O as my heart skipped a beat. I ran back into my room and covered myself under the covers, closed my eyes shut, and forced myself not to open them until the sun was out.

The next morning my actions showed I did not sleep the night before. To make things worse, my mom spilled the news.

"I'm going out of town," she says flatly as she takes a sip of her coffee.

"Where?" I asked panicking all of the sudden. I knew she always left before Abby died, but she has not gone out of town since the accident.

"Florida for business, I leave tomorrow night." She said as she got up to throw her cup in the sink. I tried to act like that was okay, but it wasn't. On the inside all that was on my mind was my sister's favorite doll.

My mom was officially gone, and I could not be more terrified. I told myself I would make it through this and not be scared.

The fact that I slipped on the bathroom floor as I was getting out of the shower is, in fact, a problem. The pain on my back was crucial but I managed to get up and open the door to head to my room. There it was, once again. Red eyes, small and evil smile looking back at me. This time, I took action. I kicked the doll as hard as I could, tears of fear, pain, and frustration falling down my face. Once I was in my room I broke down again.

"Why is this happening to me?!" I yelled into my pillow as hard as I could. "Abby just come back! Please. Is this a sign? Are you trying to speak to me through your doll or what?" I said speaking to myself.

"Don't say that Lo." I heard her say as her tiny figure appeared in front of me. Long, black, curly hair all down her back with the pale skin she always had, in form of a ghost.

"How is this happening?!" I asked her, not scared, but curious.

"I don't have much time... ignore my dolly, please. And stop wishing that I'll come back. It's impossible and it's making things worse. My dolly is evil and it will come for you the more you think of me, the more she will appear." She said clearly as if she just never left.

"But I... I miss you."

"Don't," her sweet little voice whispered as a sad smile forming across her face before disappearing completely.

I kept our whole conversation stuck in my head the whole night. All the lights were on in the house that seemed way too big now that it was just me in it, or so I thought. The truth is I did not feel like I was by myself. I sensed someone watching my every move and I did not know how or why this was happening. That night, I stayed in my room, my door and window locked. I watched TV most of the night until I slowly started to fall asleep.

This time it wasn't the storm that woke me up. It was the red eyes. Staring at me closely as I blinked trying to understand what was happening.

"Your time is up," a voice came out of the doll but it did not match a little girl's voice. It was a man's deep harsh voice.

For the first time, I screamed. I actually screamed my heart out. I punched the doll out of my way and tried to head for the door. That is when I saw it. There wasn't just one doll with red eyes; there were hundreds of dolls with red eyes, each carrying something that would hurt me. Their plastic bodies were surrounding me, blocking me from the door.

"Go away!" I screamed desperately, but nothing helped. They started to get closer, and closer with scissors, knives, even ropes. I looked around trying to find a way to save myself or escape. I buried myself on my bed once again, as they each started to grab a part of the covers making me unable to move.

For one second my mind shifted back to Abby. Her sweet voice, her friendly face, her delicate hands coming to the last hug I received from her; her contagious laugh that could brighten up your day. I also remembered the pick-up truck, rushing 70 miles per hour to the closest street by our house; of course he didn't see her. I remembered yelling out her name in despair, as her eyes got wide and she was too late to save herself.

Once my head was back to reality, I panicked even more. Those evil things were forcibly pulling on to the covers, simply suffocating me. Screaming could not help and neither was crying. I tried my best to fight back but that did not help either. So as I thought I was taking my last breath, as I was going unconscious, Abby was still on my mind.

"Fight back," I heard her say, I was half awake.

"I can't baby, it's too late," I replied softly, "at least now I can be with you, right?" I said again just a bit louder.

"Don't say that ever again!" I heard her little voice get louder and angrier. "Now fight back, kick,

scream, punch, you are stronger than they are, if not they will take you forever,” she said and surprisingly, it gave me more motivation. I started to get up and stronger than ever fighting back. I was getting through this; I felt the power inside of me. I kept pushing through my covers and then, it was over. I looked around my room, nothing even moved out of place and the dolls were no where to be seen. My heart still pounding like crazy I got up, and ran to the bathroom.

Looking at my 15 year-old self in the mirror, face pale, and eyes filled with terror. *This was not a dream* I thought. Walking slowly back to my room, I still felt the pain on my back from the nasty slip. I was nowhere near being tired, just shocked, in pain, and extremely confused. I decided to crawl back into the covers, until the sun appeared through my window.

Ten Years Later

The traffic was worse than ever as my speedometer read 30 mph. I already knew I was going to be late, so I relaxed a bit. My mind still shifts back to that night, still not completely convinced it was dream. Even though everyone who ever found out thinks I'm delusional I knew it was real. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe I was extremely crazy and depressed at that age and had no idea that it was all in my head. A loud honk brought me back to reality. I realized the street in front of me was mostly cleared, and I continued driving to work.

Pulling into the familiar Bank of America Corporate Office, I find my usual parking spot open. As I pull the key out of the ignition all I am thinking about it the amount of work waiting for me on my desk.

Suddenly I see it. My heart sinks. My stomach drops, and my body is paralyzed as I look into the review mirror and see that familiar evil smile and the fire red eyes sitting properly in the back seat, staring right back at me. ■■■

BLOODY MARY (MYTHS, LEGENDS AND FAIRY TALES)

Sunny Cain



It was summer of 2007 and I was getting ready for a sleep over at my best friend's house. Her name was Nellie, and she had blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She always smelled like Britney Spears perfume and made thrift shopping look cool. I was over at her house so much that I had my very own cereal bowl covered in flowers and Scooby Doo characters. I filled my Lisa Frank back pack to capacity, and the purple zipper could hardly make its way to the end. It was filled with pointless things that we probably wouldn't use, such as my hair curler and the lipstick packet that I got for my birthday. I had two sets of pajamas. One set was a light blue long sleeve button up top with matching bottoms covered in white clouds. The second set was a pull over night gown made out of a thin purple material with pink ribbon around the bottom. I was never sure if I was going to be cold or hot going over to her house, because her parents loved fans and air conditioning so much they used it as if they have never had it before. But, one time, we slept in a tent in the back yard and I was sweating so much that I needed to borrow one of Nellie's big sleeping shirts.

When I got to Nellie's house I knocked on the door once before letting myself in. The air conditioning was blasting. It was such a transition from the boiling hot pavement that was melting my Converse, to a freezing breeze from which I got goose bumps. I kicked off my shoes by the door and put them in the old beaten down wicker basket they've had since I've known her family. I could hear Nellie running from her room through the hall and down the stairs. Although their entire house was laid out with carpet, she managed to find a way to walk around sounding like Bigfoot. We reunited at the bottom of the stairs as if it had been years when, in reality, it had only been a couple of hours since we last parted. I grabbed my bag and threw it over my shoulder as we raced upstairs.

I threw my backpack on her bed and pulled out my No Doubt CD from the front pocket. We played track number five on repeat while reading a book called *Scary Ghost Stories* she got it from her aunt. Aunt Gina was always strange to me. She kept a long list of naked strangers doing yoga poses hung in her room and she never wore a bra. Regardless, we cracked the book open and took turns reading the stories inside the book. Nellie was always a better reader than I was, she was a year older than me and I had a bad stutter. She never cared how long it took, or how choppy it sounded, she just sat and listened until it was her turn.

At the end of the book, we found instructions on how to properly see Bloody Mary's face in the bathroom mirror. The book informed us that we needed candles. We also needed to recite a poem together, to spin around exactly three times, and we needed to start at exactly 3:33am. We made a master plan of

going to sleep and setting an alarm with her pink iPod Mini. That way, she could sleep in headphones and her parents wouldn't wake up. We talked about it all day, and made faces at each other during dinner when her mom set down our pepperoni pizza bites with Capri Sun. We laughed when we got into our pajamas, and pretended to sleep. I chose to sleep in my light blue cloud pajamas. We whispered to each other in the dark about the poem and tried to remember it word for word. When I finally fell asleep, it only felt like minutes before Nellie was waking me up telling me that it was time.

Before I could rub my eyes, Nellie was gone. She was getting the candles and long stove lighter from downstairs. I picked up the book and made my way to the bathroom. My stomach felt like it was going to fall out of my butt, and my heart was beating faster with each step I took. When I turned on the light it was blinding and I couldn't see anything besides random specks and shapes from my eyes trying to adjust. I saw Nellie walking down the hall so slowly it looked like she hurt her leg on the way up. The closer she got, I could see that she was carrying 6 candles by herself, and didn't want to drop any. Some of the candles were red, and some were green. A majority of them were melted down half way, and some hadn't been used at all. We set up three candles on each side. She let me know that she checked the oven down stairs and we had 5 minutes to prepare. She lit the candles after we set the book down in front of the mirror, but behind the sink. When she reached over to the lights, I got a nervous sensation throughout my body. I wanted to chicken out, but Nellie never chickened out, and she wouldn't let me.

We checked the time and we had one minute. We let our eyes adjust to the dim lighting before we began to read the poem out loud together. Once we began to read, we held hands, because of excitement and nervous energy, at some points we forgot to whisper. Once we read the poem out loud three times, we had to turn around full circle three times. We let go of each other and spun saying out loud "one." Then again, "two" and on the third spin we stopped in front of the mirror, staring. Our own faces were unrecognizable, and before I could finish my thought, there was a pounding on the door. I heard three very hard thuds, I remember thinking someone threw a shoe as hard as they could across the room onto the door. Without thinking twice, a loud scream came from my mouth and we held on to each other for dear life with sweaty palms and shaking arms. The door then swung open and her parents were standing outside the door laughing with each other. Nellie and I made eye contact dumbfounded as to how her parents knew we were awake. Looking back now I remember Nellie stomping downstairs, how the bathroom light made the hallway bright, and yelling the poem rather than whispering it. We learned our punishment for sneaking around at night and were sent to bed with racing hearts and a regret of thinking we could outsmart parents. ■ ■ ■

THE WALL

Tatiana Zvosechz

He crushed the tiny flower under his boot with a purposeful stomp, causing the poor desert flora to snap and crumble under his weight. For good measure, the young man then gnashed it with his boot so the bright orange petals of the flora were smashed into a pulp. A satisfied grin spread across his leathery face as he did so, and once he was done, he stepped back to admire his work as sweat trickled down his forehead.

The flora, *Ortisia laeviscaulis* if he recalled the name correctly from his wilderness training, was no longer the brilliant orange flower it had been; the sunset flower was now a weepy little thing, its velvet petals bruised and hardly as whimsically colored as it had been just moments before. The damned thing reminded him far too much of Sera, and there was no way he'd camp anywhere near anything that reminded him of her. But every day spent trekking through the Deadlands was one day closer to his home, and that was where she was. He accepted the assignment hoping that between the years he spent away from her and the land of his childhood, his feelings would've subsided. And so far, the journey had treated him well. But of course, he hadn't anticipated the most annoying traveling companion in all of history to come along on the journey.

About five yards behind, his companion, who had just reached seventeen years since birth, was attempting to pitch his one-man tent into the slight northwestern breeze. The stakes were scattered around his pack and the flimsy canvas whipped around his scrawny arms defiantly. In his attempt at taming the canvas and getting it to spread on the ground, the kid was kicking up a growing cloud of orange dirt into the air around him.

"What a gods-damned sniffer," the young man spat under his breath. Leaving the crushed sunset flower behind, he hastily marched up to the kid and ripped the tent canvas from his arms.

"Thanks." The kid exhaled deeply, breathless from wrestling. His long face was flushed red. He gratefully handed the young man a portion of the fabric in his hands.



“Quit being an idiot and help me with this!”

The traveling companions made hasty camp in the growing heat. Midday in this particular stretch of desert wasn't kind to those who dared cross it. Even with the young man's extensive experience trekking across dangerous stretches of desert, he was wary of his surroundings and what he knew he and the kid could handle.

The kid, who was eventually bullied out of helping any further than making up his own tent, watched the young man make a pit for fire. He didn't let the string of curses and occasional kick to his backside throughout the journey deter him from admiring the seemingly limitless wilderness knowledge the young man possessed; in fact, his old traveling companion, an elderly man with eyes two different colors, had much of the same temperament. The kid simply assumed that a bitter taste for the world came with the territory of being an expert on survival. He hoped one day he could become good enough to kick around a kid of his own.

When darkness fell upon the desert, causing the searing heat of the day to be replaced with the blessed coolness of night, the young man dulled the fire and began preparing for bed. He hadn't said one word to the kid since ordering him to help with the tent and he wasn't in the mood for an early evening fireside chat. The young man packed the pot he used for cooking, his utensils, knife, compass, and map all in his pack and shoved it behind him into his tent. The kid followed suit, shoving his belongings in his own tent.

In his one-man tent, he shifted from his side to his back. He peered through the tiny hole just to the side of the ridge pole that kept the middle of the tent up and gazed at the black sky through it. The young man kept the piece of parchment that contained his assignment orders tucked away in his pillowcase. He hadn't read a word of it since leaving the city, afraid of the feeling that made his stomach twist and head spin. It was the same feeling he got whenever he thought of the years preceding his departure from home five years earlier. His palms grew sweaty even as the image of Sera's eyes, filled with betrayal, faded in and out of memory.

His stomach churned uneasily with the realization that sleep was not coming as easily as it usually did; after smashing the sunset flower, Sera was at the edge of his thoughts. Her hair, which had once bothered him greatly when he saw her everyday, was one thing he found himself missing the most. She had cut it short and shaved her neck in protest when things became bad back home. When news of the construction of a Wall, built to separate his home and the fertile lands before it, made everyone quiver in fear of what was to come. When the government began taking volunteers to join the military.

The young man thought it was stupid of her, since the government could care less if her hair was cut short, and plans were going to precede whether a handful of girls shed the last of their femininity or not.

He however did care. He remembered how selfish he believed her to be after that; why didn't she care about how he felt?

The young man ran a callused hand through his unruly hair, which was undoubtedly longer than Sera's by now. If she was still there, at home, she'd hate him for what he'd become. He wasn't coming back home to reunite with family and old friends, but to complete an assignment. Any sliver of hope he had for taking Sera with him back to the capitol to be together was dashed by the hatred he could almost feel coming from even hundreds of miles away.

A breeze pushed the tent in from the young man's right side, causing the rough canvas to brush against his exposed arm. Tomorrow, he'd see the Wall. He prayed to every god he knew of that he wouldn't see Sera. ■ ■ ■



SMILE

Samantha Carbone

The corners of her mouth curled
Into its same familiar shape
Always looking out of place
Leaving space for the mind
To wonder if it's fake
Always laced with sorrow
And tastes
Like the blood from a slap to the face
And it feels like the early morning of tomorrow
When the roads are still asleep
And the birds have yet to make a peep
Empty. It feels empty.
Empty like her will-power
There's only so much more she can give
Yet as full as her heart
As all it wants is to forgive
She wants to live

The definition of abyss
Kissed

Slightly by the devil
But made entirely by the Gods
Her only flaw is this façade
That she puts forth even though she is not.

Lines of age and wisdom find themselves
Just below her eyes
And she is wise but she tries
So hard to cover them up
But no amount of cover-up
Can cover-up
Her need to please
It's greater than her need
To breathe or succeed
Like a weed
It keeps growing back.
But she can't help it
Because their happiness
Is more important than her own. ■ ■ ■



ALIENS ON EARTH

Connor Lee Collins

A long metallic limo hovers through the streets of the run-down lower city. A plainly designed robot drives the limo while a large and masculine Dequims man sits in the back seat with a small glass of wine in hand. He's wearing a velvet, navy blue suit with a black leather overcoat and a neck length sweater. He looks out the window of his limo at the torn down neighborhood and its occupants, as well as viewing his own aged reflection and the white skull shaped face paint he is wearing on this night. The Dequims outside the limo are dressed in ragged clothes and are covered in dirt. Many of them are slender and aged worse than the man in the limo. They cannot see into its tinted windows as it passes by them but they watch in awe at the limo while the man in the limo stares out at them, disgusted. He mutters to himself in his deep raspy voice. "Unnatural vermin, I was here first." He brings his wine glass to his lips and finishes the drink, then sets the glass aside. He continues to stare out the window as the limo drives up to a large temple structure. Six Dequims dressed in black robes with their hoods hiding their faces sit outside the entrance, playing a game of dice. "This is my stop."

The robot stops the limo and presses a button on the dash, which opens the door beside the man. He steps out of his limo and looks back at the robot driver. "Lock the limo and activate lethal security protocols. I will return shortly." The door he exited from closes as he walks away from the limo with a bitter look on his face. A young and grimy Dequims boy peaks out from an alleyway then approaches the limo. He pulls out a thin metal coat hanger and tries to pick the lock of the door the man just exited. As he sticks the hanger's edge into the lock, electricity covers the limo and relentlessly fires lightning at the boy. The man hears his screams but his expression remains the same. The six robed Dequims stop their game to look to the source of the screaming to see the large well-dressed man approaching them with flourishes of lighting behind him, shrouding him in shadows.

One of the robed Dequims stands and approaches the man, pulling his hood down to show he wore the same face paint as the man. They stop in front of each other and the robed Dequim looks up at the man, who dwarfs him in height. The screams of the boy are now gone but the flashes of lighting continues to flash behind the large man, giving the robed Dequim enough silence to speak. "Welcome general, we did not know you were a child of Leshvar Droth." The general raised a brow in confusion at the robed man. "The cult knows who I am?"

"We are not blind in the darkness, brother Grivaldi. The herald shows us all that is to be seen in the light and even what the light cannot show." Grivaldi clenches his fist and glares down at the cultist, but then shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath. He opens his eyes once again in a calmer state. "Is the herald here? I need to see her."



"I cannot give you any insight or provide you with an audience with the herald until you can recite a single passage from the Book of Crimson Blood." Grivaldi's calm expression quickly turns to frustration. His arms begin to rise up and he grips his fingers, but then stops to take another deep breath and lowers his arms. Grivaldi gives a bitter look to the cultist then speaks in a dull, yet fuming tone. "As the final human beast fell to its knees before Leshvar Droth, it repented its sins and begged for death. Leshvar Droth gazed down at the beast, casting it in the light of his beaming red eyes and granted it its final request. The beast died in flames.

"Welcome home, brother." The other five cultists get up and stand behind the first cultist. All six bow their heads and step to the sides of the entrance in groups of three. Both groups faced each other with their heads still bowed. Grivaldi's uninterested and bitter expression remains the same as he walks between both groups and into the temple. He steps into a very large room that takes up most of the temple. Cultists are everywhere, mostly in individual groups.

As he walks through the old, stone temple he glances at the groups of cultists. One group is gathered around two boys that are squaring off. Both boys are wearing only blindfolds and ragged shorts and are wielding knives, their bodies are covered in scars and bruises. The cultists around them are heckling them to fight, some with money in hand. Grivaldi glances to the other side of the room to see a calmer group of cultists in a circle. In the middle of the circle is a cultist in blood red robes. He wears a neckless of bones and a human skull as a mask. He's holding a sword in one hand and is reading an open book in his other hand. His tone is full of vengeance as he read aloud to the cultists around him.

"From the shadows he watched as his pawns purged the village of their brothers and sisters! They raised their swords in victory with their feet sunken into the blood stained dirt and when their own deaths came, Lord Leshvar Droth rewarded them by returning their souls to earth to continue his work. We must always remember the Lord's ways. Many of us may have served his will in ancient earths past as humans ourselves..." Grivaldi directs his attention away from the cultists and to a blue tent at the end of the room. A feral looking Dequims man that's nearly as tall and masculine as Grivaldi stands in front of the tent with his arms crossed. His hair and side burns were chaotic, He's wearing a black body suit with a dark red tunic over it with messy red paint around his eyes.

Grivaldi stops in front of him and looks him straight in the eyes. "Hello Clon. It's been too long. Are these freaks still calling you the wolf man?" Clon slightly smirks and chuckles. "I can't say I'm against the name. Thought you weren't one for small talk."

"Well, you're the first familiar face I've seen in a long time." Clon smiles for a moment but then his expression turns dull. "But my face isn't the one you came to see, is it?" Grivaldi nods his head. Clon then steps aside. "Go on in, Griv. Don't keep her waiting." Grivaldi walks into the tent to find a woman sitting on the floor, wearing a dark blue robe with the hood covering her face. On her side sits two empty, metal cups and a metal teapot. She lifts a small metal cup in her hands up to her lips and takes a sip. She then sets the cup down. Grivaldi remains quiet for a few seconds, then finally speaks out to her. "Luciv?" She lifts her head up to look at Grivaldi. "Griv, darling, it's been far too long." Grivaldi looks down at Luciv's cup. "What are you drinking there?"

"The blood of my enemies, of course." She grins and lets out a small laugh and looks at Griv's unimpressed expression. Her grin then turns to an annoyed frown. "It's tea, Griv. Now sit down with me and have some." Griv sits on the floor across from Luciv and she tea into a cup and hands it to him. He then takes a sip.

"I have to say it's quite a surprise to see you here, Griv. Knowing your hard feelings toward the cult." Griv sets his cup down and looks at Luciv, bitterly. "I have news that could save your precious cult." Luciv's eyes widen in shock, then replied in a nervous tone. "What do you mean, Griv?"

"Twenty hours ago an expedition team was sent to the moon. They have just returned with a living human being who was cryogenically frozen in a preservation bunker there." Luciv's shocked expression only grows. She slowly sets her cup down and stands up. "Don't worry, Luciv. No one knows yet except for me, the science coalition, and my spy, as well as my assassin, who's on standby. She's waiting for my word as we speak to end this and disintegrate the body." Griv stands up and Luciv stares up at him. "Why hasn't she killed this human then, Griv? If the word gets out the cult will cease to Believe in Leshvar Droth and I will die! Do you understand?"

Grivaldi grins and pulls out a small disk shaped device with several buttons around the end. He presses the buttons and speaks into the device. "Are you in position, Srathe?" A woman's voice replies from the device. "I'm here and waiting for your orders." Griv Looks at Luciv and her annoyed and eager expression. Her hands are shaking. "Well what are you waiting for? Do it already!" Griv's grin widens as he says nothing. Luciv's frustration grows but then her angry expression turns calmer. "I see... What do you want then Griv?"

"Volunteers. Test subjects who will submit themselves to horrific experiments. In the name of their false god." Luciv closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. "Fine. I'll send my cultists too you. And tell them it's the will of Droth that they give their lives for your cause." Griv nods approvingly then speaks into the device again. "Kill the human." ■ ■ ■

MARGARET'S EYES

Karissa Truby



Margaret Markley stared out the window of the Cadillac Escalade that her family had just picked up from being shipped half way across the world. She thought that they drew a lot of attention already, but it was going to be even worse now. Just then, a young boy with a large cigarette box hanging around his neck stuck his face up against the window to peer right in at her. She immediately turned to stare at the back of the seat in front of her. Everyone in the car shifted around uncomfortably, and her mom looked back and just simply shook her head. The young boy continued to stare in with his face plastered to the window, just a half a foot away from her. He pulled on the door handle and knocked on the window to try to get their attention until traffic slowly began to move forward, forcing him to move on to another car.

Margaret's dad turned around to give her a reassuring smile. Margaret stared at the back of the seat in front of her until they were close to home, not wanting to see the grey city of Manila, Philippines and the eyes that clung to her. Margaret and her two sisters, one older and one younger, had always been told that they were beautiful. Their mother and father continually bragged of the three beautiful daughters that they had. Up until a year ago, Margaret hadn't minded the attention that her and her sisters got, but now she couldn't stand the constant stares and pictures that followed her everywhere. Their white skin and blonde hair was an oddity to the people of the Philippines. Margaret and her family were the type of people who were only seen on TV, so seeing them in person amazed the Filipino people. They took pictures, stopping in the street to stare at Margaret's family. Sometimes they would yell to them or call out famous people's names. At first, Margaret was amazed, but now the eyes that followed her were a burden.

It took about an hour for The Markley family to reach their neighborhood, Das Marinas. It was in Makati, the nicest area of Manila. The International School of Manila, where Margaret and her sisters attended school, was only a twenty-minute drive away depending on traffic. All of the Diplomats who worked at the US Embassy either lived in her neighborhood or in one of the high-rises that only the elite could afford. The Ambassadors and diplomats from many other countries also occupied the same area. Her father pulled up to the mossy gates that lined Das Marinas, stopping at the guard stand that had been over taken by shrubbery. Everything in Manila was either green or grey, usually grey covered by green.

The guard checked the sticker on the car and nodded to Margaret's father muttering,

"Thank you, ma'am/sir." They drove through the neighborhood and past the grocery store, Rustan's, that constantly smelled of spoiled meet. Margaret hadn't eaten beef since her family had arrived in the Philippines; it was different. Margaret's mother could only find normal milk at one store, and it cost double what they used to pay in the States. Therefore, Margaret didn't find herself stuck at the grocery store very often anymore.

Margaret's father pulled up to the gate of their attempt of a modern looking house. Roques, the gardener, ran to pull open the gate for them. Podgie and Rochell, the two housekeepers, and Dan, the driver, came out to admire the vehicle and to grab the girls school bags from the car. Their eyes widened, but after catching a glare from Margaret's mother they took the bags and hurried inside to take them to the girl's rooms. Margaret looked around and could see the helpers from all of the other homes around her coming out to admire them. More people would stare and even more faces would plaster their windows as they stood stuck in traffic. More pictures would be taken, and more calls would be heard. These times made Margaret wish that she was Filipina, that way she could fit in with everyone here and not be so different.

Tears filled Margaret's eyes as she peered around at all of the staring faces around her. She turned and went into the relative solitude of her home. She went up the stairs and into her room, followed shortly by their two small dogs. She went into her room to find Podgie setting her backpack next to her desk. She blinked away her tears and picked up one of her dogs, Noel, and went into the room.

"Thank you, Podgie." She said, giving her a smile. Podgie gave her a brief smile and hurried away to find Margaret's mother. Margaret went to her desk to start homework, wiping away the rest of her tears. She could hear her mother downstairs in the kitchen, upset about something. Her father was down there too, probably trying to downplay the issue, but Margaret knew that he would soon tire of listening to his wife complain and he would come upstairs to work and get away. Sure enough, within a few minutes Margaret's father came and knocked on her open door. Margaret turned around to give him a smile.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hey, Marg," he said with a bright smile as he walked over to her desk, wrapping an arm around her

and kissing her on the head. "Need any help?" he asked.

"No. I don't have much." She lied, not wanting to shoot herself in the foot and ruin her plans for the night. Tonight was Waldo Reyes' Halloween party. Their family owned half of Manila, so the Reyes' brothers threw parties in their pool house (which was more like a house) any chance that they could get. Their actual house looked more like an apartment complex than a house.

"Okay." He sighed with a disappointed look on his face. "Well, I love you, Marg."

"I love you too, dad," she cooed, giving him a hug.

Margaret worked on her homework and within an hour the Markley family sat down for dinner. Margaret's mother talked about how the rain today had ruined her white pants.

"Look at this!" She said in exasperation as she showed Margaret's father a white piece of paper with dark grey dried waters spots on it. Margaret's father just laughed at her mother.

"It's just how it is here, there's a lot of pollution." He said as he began to fill his plate with barbeque chicken. Margaret's father used to make the family barbeque chicken a lot when they lived in the States, but now they didn't have it very often because it was hard to find all of the ingredients. Usually they would eat some contraption that their mother could make with rotisserie chicken, that was one of the only things that wasn't very different from in the States.

Margaret's father acted amused that the ruined piece of paper, which made Margaret's mother even more disgusted.

"How could anyone ever want to live in such a disgusting place," she exclaimed. Margaret's father just smiled at his daughters and continued eating. After dinner the Markley's took their plates to the sink, just as Margaret's friends arrived to begin getting ready. Margaret's group of friends at school consisted of Rose, Layla, Apple, and Joanna. Rose and Layla were both from the States as well, but had never really lived there like Margaret had. Joanna's mother was Filipina and her father was Dutch. Apple was Filipina, but her step father was American. The girls got ready together and soon headed downstairs so that they could be to the party at exactly 10:45 p.m.

Margaret's older sister had friends over getting ready for the party as well, except they had an open bottle of Arbor Mist sitting in their room to enjoy as they curled their hair. Margaret was allowed to go to the party because she peer pressured her mom, but pre-gaming would have set her mother over the edge. Margaret's older sister was allowed to do it because she was already eighteen, which was the legal drinking age. Margaret didn't drink before the party, but she would get her chance at the party. Every kid from school would be at the party. That's how she had gotten her parents to let her go. In the classroom, the kids who she went to school with excelled and were prime examples of the perfect students. However, when the Reyes boys had a party, that all changed. Kids from her school went to IV League schools, and they were expected to do so as well: however, throw them into the Reyes' pool house and you would never know that they were the same kids. Margaret's mother had been appalled at the idea of her freshman daughter going to a party. However, Margaret had trapped her in saying that it's just what kids did in the Philippines and that if she didn't let Margaret go, then Margaret wouldn't have any friends.

Margaret and her friends told Margaret's parents goodbye and heard Margaret's mom tell them ten times that curfew was 12:30. Margaret's dad walked them out to their car and told Dan to make sure that he got them home safe. Margaret's dad always joked that Dan was both the driver and the security guard, but he wasn't really joking.

The girls arrived to the party and were soon at the drink station in the back. There were rows and rows of different colored shots placed out on tables with bar tenders behind them. To the right of the different colored shots were shots of tequila with lemons and jars of salt next to them. Other tables had different beers and such on them, and at the end there was a station where they could do flaming shots. The men manning the flaming shots station would scream instructions over the blaring music to kids who could barely even stand. Margaret had done it once and it was an odd sensation. She was only supposed to drink one beer at parties, but her mother never knew otherwise. Margaret danced and drank and before she knew it she was happily drunk. Soon a boy named Kirby came to dance with her. Margaret hadn't ever really met him before, but he was cute, so she danced with him and took tequila shots with him. Soon he was showing her around the Reyes house. He showed her their in-home movie theatre and took her upstairs. There was a beautiful cushion arrangement at the top of the stairs, and the boy lead Margaret over to it. Soon he kissed her, and Margaret hazily kissed him back. Margaret soon realized that she had drunk more than she ever had before. She became nervous, but her mind was too fuzzy to let her process much that was happening. So, Margaret just simply let Kirby continue to kiss her. After some amount of time that Margaret wasn't able to process, she saw Dan come running up the stairs.

"Miss Margaret!" He exclaimed, trying not to look at her while she wiggled her way from under Kirby.

“I’ve been looking everywhere, Miss Margaret. It’s past time to go.”

“Uh, okay.” Margaret mumbled while she tried to stand up. Dan ran to help her, and picked her up and carried her out of the house. He set her down at and they walked through the pool house full of stares. Margaret felt slightly embarrassed, but the feeling in her stomach kept her from feeling anything else too strongly. Dan had to stop a few times on their way home so that Margaret could throw up. He helped her into the house and Margaret threw up once more in her bathroom. After a few minutes, she was able to collect herself enough to be able to go and tell her parents that she was home. After brushing her teeth a few times, she left her room. When she walked out of her room she heard her mother downstairs. She began to walk down the stairs, but then heard Dan’s voice. She stopped and heard him telling Margaret’s mother what had happened. Tears sprang to her eyes and Margaret backed away into her room.

Margaret laid in bed trying to comprehend what had happened and how much trouble she would be in tomorrow. She kept on imagining the looks that she had gotten while she was half carried through the pool house by Dan. Those were different eyes than the ones that usually stared at her. Those eyes were mean, not curious and innocent. The eyes that had stared at her tonight were those of conviction. Margaret’s hazy mind soon felt overloaded and she drifted into to sleep.

Margaret awoke the next morning to loud bangs and many voices. Her head hurt and she felt dirty. She sat up in her bed and slowly stood up to make her way to the shower. After a long and hot shower, she got dressed and left her room. She soon found herself caught in a bustle of people moving all around with boxes. Podgie was putting the dog’s toys and bed in a box while Dan and Roques worked together to get a very large box down the stairs. Margaret went to the railing near the stairs and locked eyes with her mother. At this time everyone in her house stopped what they were doing to look at Margaret. The eyes staring at her made her head hurt even worse.

“What’s going on?” Margaret asked cautiously to her mother.

“We’re leaving, Margaret.” Her mother said in an icy tone. “Get packing.” Margaret gaped at her mother, but her mother soon turned away from her. The others slowly started to resume their work. Margaret stared in awe at the back of her mother’s head while the eyes from everyone else in the room stared at her. Soon her older sister came and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“What does she mean we’re leaving?” Margaret asked her.

“Well, Dan told mom about last night, Marg. She got freaked out and wants to leave.” Margaret’s sister explained.

“But what about dad’s job?” Margaret asked.

“He’s not coming with us, Margaret.” she said as she dropped her hand from Margaret’s shoulder and began to walk away. Margaret turned to her, shocked, but her sister was already gone.

“What have I done?” Margaret cried as tears sprang to her eyes. She wanted to go and find her father, but she was too embarrassed. She couldn’t stand to see the look in his eyes that she would see when she talked to him. So, Margaret made her way back to her room, making sure not to take her eyes off of her door. Tears streamed her cheeks and made her sight blurry, but she didn’t wipe them away. She didn’t want to see the still staring eyes of the people in her house. The constant staring eyes that surrounded her house. The eyes in the city that gravitated toward her everywhere she went. The convicting eyes of those in the pool house. The thought of it made her claustrophobic. Margaret hated those eyes.

Within two days, Margaret’s mother managed to have the entire house packed up and its components on their way back to the States. Each girl had two very large suitcases that they would live off of for six months until their belongings came to them on a ship. Margaret’s father drove his family to the airport that night. Margaret sat with her eyes glued to the seat in front of her. No one spoke on their way to the airport. After checking in their bags, Margaret’s father said goodbye to his family. He hugged each of them, a tear slipping out when it became Margaret’s turn.

He whispered to her, “You have always held a very special place in my heart, Margaret. Don’t you forget that.” It was something that Margaret had heard her entire life, but hearing it now brought tears to her eyes.

With blurry and tear-filled vision Margaret made her way through the airport, facing the eyes of the Philippines for the very last time. After twenty-three hours of traveling Margaret, her mother, and her sisters landed in Los Angeles. They exited the plane into the busy airport where people bumped past Margaret and didn’t even look back to say, “I’m sorry.” Into the busy airport where families ran to catch a flight without even looking twice at her. Into the busy airport, where no one was screaming for her or giving her uncomfortable stares. Into the busy airport where she felt normal and unseen. For what felt like the first time, Margaret looked around at a place where she wasn’t different, where there were no eyes to burden her. ■ ■ ■

CARLY CARSON

Juan Manuel Esparza



Tweet; September 16, 2015, 12:15 p.m.

“Carly Carson is a fat cunt who has sex with her cat because no guy would ever get with her,” was posted to East Hills High School’s @BurnBabyBurn Twitter account, favorited by 230 students who had nothing better to do with their lives than laugh at an innocent girl’s pain.

Carly was red haired, freckled, and a little overweight from a poor diet that came about because her mother was always working. Why would the students care about her struggles? They didn’t know that she lived in a single wide trailer with her mother and three siblings. They didn’t care that her mother worked three jobs and barely had enough left to make ends meet.

She read the tweet, flipping through the social network on her outdated HTC android phone that could barely connect to the internet. Then again, abuse was not new to her. She looked up from the table in the corner of the cafeteria where she was sitting alone, only to find that half the student body was looking at her and chuckling slightly. She looked down again and focused her attention on the half eaten chicken sandwich on her plate. She thought to herself, “Don’t let this effect you Carly, this week has been good so far.” She heard the chair move next to her. Looking up, she noticed her only friend Joey Lavender sit down. His long limbs and jet black hair were his most prominent features. He was wearing a beanie, pushed all the way back. Just as he sat down a single tear rolled down Carly’s cheek.

“I take it you saw the tweet,” he said softly. “You should really tell an adult about that account, it’s horrible the things they post.”

“Yeah, as if I need more reasons for people to hate me, not just the fat ugly chick anymore but also the narc who got everyone’s favorite pastime taken down, no thanks,” she said swiftly, but quietly.

They sat there eating their lunch in silence for a couple minutes before Carly continued, “Besides you’re one to talk, why didn’t you report it last week when they called you faggot?”

“Fair enough,” started Joey, “Just don’t let it get into your head okay?”

“It just makes me so angry, that’s like the fifth post about me this semester, like why can’t they pick on someone else?” Carly replied.

“Listen Carly, this is just high school, soon we’ll graduate and you’ll never see any of these losers again, and besides, with your grades you’ll be able to go as far away as you want!”

“I know Joey, I just wish for once they could feel how I feel.”

The bell rang. The two teenagers picked up their backpacks and lunch trays and made their way out of the cafeteria. The cafeteria was a long rectangular room with red and black walls that matched their school colors. As they made their way out they noticed the fluorescent lights flickered, as a result of grant money going to the wrong causes.

Their next class was English and they had it together. They walked down the long crowded hallway. Carly kept her head down and tried her best not to run into anyone. They had almost made it to English class when her way was barred by another girl.

“Watch where you’re going you dog fucking fat skank!” Patricia Motion said loudly, causing the traffic in the hallway to stop and laughter to start. Patricia was Carly’s number one tormenter. She was tall and skinny, with long blonde flowing hair and radiant blue eyes. Carly kept her head down and hurried to class, trying to act unfazed by the interaction. She went into the classroom, sat at the very back, put her head down and felt the tears start coming down her face.

The school day ended with no other major incidents. The last bell rang and she hurried home. After a twenty minute bus ride they arrived at the trailer park she called home. Smoky Pines Mobile Home Park. Most of the trailers there were at least twenty years old and run down from little to no maintenance. Carly’s home was near the back and was one of the newer models; her mother did all she could to keep it as nice as possible.

She walked for five minutes then arrived at the foot of the single wide trailer. She opened the door and walked into the sight of her three siblings watching television in the living room. She smiled at them as she went down the hallway toward her room. The events of the day still played in her head. Tears building up in her eyes as she plopped down on her bed. It turned into full out crying as she slowly fell asleep.

Carly woke with one of those jolts that is experienced when one gets the sensation of falling. She reached for her phone on her night stand and noticed it was 11:55 p.m. She heard the front door open. She realized it was probably her mother. She got up and headed toward the kitchen. There she was, her beautiful hard-working mother. She was tall, skinny and looking nothing like she was forty five years old. She had her long flowing red hair in a ponytail, her perfect facial features aligning to the hairstyle that

made her green eyes pop more than ever.

“Hi mom,” Carly exclaimed as soon as she saw her.

“Hi sweetie, how was your day?” her mother replied. Carly didn’t say anything, instead she went over to her, hugged her tight and didn’t let go as the tears started.

“What’s wrong?” her mother inquired.

“Nothing, just, tough day I guess,” Carly replied, hugging her tightly. The rest of the night was uneventful. The long nap had left Carly with no desire to sleep. She went back to her room and worked on her homework until she fell asleep again at around 3 a.m.

The next two weeks of school passed by with no major incidents. She went about her business and tried to stay out of everyone’s way. The only interaction she had with Patricia and her followers that she had were the mean faces they directed at her every time she saw them in the hallway.

Chapter 2

One of Carly’s least favorite part of the school day was Thursday’s gym class. She hated that she was forced to show her body to her tormentors when they were forced to shower together. To make matters worse, she was in the same gym class as Patricia. It was late September and Carly’s gym class had been made to run one mile around the track after having misbehaved while playing a game of softball. Coach Genesis, their gym teacher, had made Patricia pitch. She thought it was funny to throw a ball directly at Carly, hitting her in the right shoulder and making the rest of the class laugh hysterically in the process. As a punishment, Coach Genesis made the whole class run, and they were directing their rage at Carly.

After gym class was over, all the girls made their way into the locker rooms to shower. Patricia shoved past her, as to be the first one in the shower section of the locker room, which was separated by a curtain door on the opposite side. Carly always waited around on a bench by the lockers as to be the last one to take a shower. She went and took her usual seat on the bench closest to the wall on the very back of the locker room. There she removed her dirty gym clothes, wrapped herself in a towel she had removed from her locker and waited her usual ten minutes.

After that, she got up, went over to the showers and checked if there was anyone still in there. To her relief, the coast was clear. She didn’t want to be late to class. She walked in and turned on the shower closest to the back. She took off the towel and started scrubbing as fast as she could.

She was preoccupied with her shower when she heard the curtain to the shower room slide open. She instinctively turned around to see who it was and covered her private parts in the process. It was Patricia, smiling wickedly, her phone out in front of her.

“Smile for the camera, Carly,” she cried out loud, evil in her voice.

“What are you doing!... Stop!” Carly yelled, lunging at her and trying to take the phone away from her hand as the phone flashed. Patricia moved her hand and dodged Carly right in time to be in the clear.

“Get off of me, you freak!” she screamed back. She made her exit as swiftly as she had come in. Carly could not do anything as she could was not about to run after Patricia completely naked. She leaned up against the wall. Tears formed in her eyes. She slid down until she was in the fetal position. There, she cried for what seemed like hours. She was in deep thought when the bell rang for the next period to start and that jolted her to her feet. She started walking back to the locker room, sobbing. “What could Patricia possibly do with that picture?” she thought. “She’s so evil.”

She got dressed, gathered her stuff and made her way out of the locker room and into the hallways of the school. The hallways were empty because everyone was already in class. She made her way in. She heard her teacher mumble something about her being late. She got her typical seat in the back, sat down, and didn’t say one single word for the rest of the period.

When the class was over, she grabbed her stuff and made her way, zombie like, out to the hallway. She looked up onto the sea of people, and noticed that they were staring at her. Some would look at her, then down onto their phones and laugh. Others would look at her and shake their head and then hold back a grin. She shoved through them all until she came crashing straight into Joey, who looked at her with an emotional face and said, “Oh Carly, I’m so sorry!”

“What are you talking about?” Carly replied instantly. He didn’t say anything, instead he handed her his cell phone. There she was, charging at the camera with her breasts fully exposed. It was posted to Twitter with one single caption, “When the cow says moo.”

Chapter 3

Carly looked at the tweet over and over again in disbelief. She did not feel sad about it anymore. She was done crying. All she wanted was a way to get revenge, and this she knew in her mind clearly. For the rest of the day she ignored the dirty looks she got in the hallways and relished in her new goal.

That afternoon, she went from school straight to the public library with one intention in mind. She

got to the public library and looked for an empty computer near the back. She found one that was isolated behind some book shelves. She logged on with her library card account and got onto Google. She typed, "Ways to get back at your bullies." Hundreds of results popped up. Nothing caught her attention, so she started flipping through the pages. She was on page ten when she saw something that really caught her eye. It was a web page that read, "Get back at your abusers through witchcraft."

She clicked on the page. It didn't immediately open up, and when she did, it took her to a login section. The webpage was all black with two single white rows for login and password. Under the password section, see through letters read "create login." She clicked on the create login section, which immediately took her to a page that asked for credit card information in order to submit payment. Well this is the end of it, Carly thought. She quickly remembered that her mother had given her a credit card that she was only supposed to use in case of emergencies.

She didn't even think twice before she had taken out the card and started filling out the information. Once she was done, she hit accept and it navigated her to a different page that looked like the front page of an old leathery book. "Book of Shadows of the Damned Souls," it read. Carly stared at the screen in horror, but she could help but to click next. The page flipped, as if it was a real book. On the next page was a warning.

"Reader, beware. For I have put into these pages the knowledge that I have obtained over thousands of years. If you believe or not, it is up to you. But know this, the spells will work if YOU want them to. And when they do, the damage is very real."

Carly, read the warning twice, but still had a nonbeliever attitude to she was about to read. On the next page was a table of contents. She read it over, and one section read "Get Back at Your Enemies." She turned to that page on the website and started reading, taking everything in. Before she knew it, it was 8 p.m. and a librarian came over to let her know that it was closing time. She panicked, thinking that she wouldn't be able to read the book again until the next day. Just then, she noticed that there was link at the bottom of the page to get the book as an app on her phone. She clicked on it, and it asked for a phone number. She typed it in and immediately got a text message with a link to the application store. She then proceeded to download the book as an app. She did all this while she was walking to the bus stop. On the bus she kept reading, intoxicated by the explanations and the possible results.

There was one spell in that section that caught her attention. It was called, "Let the World See Their True Self." She read about what effects it would have on the person it was directed at and she loved the way it sounded. She decided that if she would try this particular spell, she just needed a place and time. In the meantime, she thought, she'd memorize the incantation by heart and prepare the victim.

Chapter 4

A week later, Carly decided who she was going to try the spell on. Her name was Elizabeth Claron. She was one of Patricia's best friends. She was short, but really skinny, with long flowing brown hair and a tight body from hours spent at the cheerleading gym. Elizabeth was the type of girl to always go with whatever Patricia said. She was student council president, which gave her the privilege of running the show when it came to pep assemblies. She would stand in the middle of the packed gym and introduce all the acts and tell everyone how to behave.

That Friday was the pep assembly for the entire school. Pep assemblies at East Hills High School were a big deal. The energy of the student packed gym was always high with electric teenage hormones. They were loud, rambunctious events that Carly usually sat idle to.

On that Friday afternoon, Carly walked into the gym from the north side. The place was already packed and more students kept piling in. She started heading toward the side of the gym where the juniors were assigned to sit. As she was heading up the bleachers, she heard Joey yell her name behind her. She stopped so that he could catch up with her. She stood there in the middle of the bleacher's stairs as student after student shoved past her rudely.

"What's your problem Carly?" started Joey once he caught up with her, "You have hardly said three words all day."

"Nothing, I just want this day to be over," lied Carly. She had spent all day looking at her phone and making sure that she didn't forget the incantation.

They climbed all the way back to the very top bleacher and took a seat on the farthest right. Carly put her head down as soon as they sat down. The assembly started.

"East Hills High! How is everyone doing today!!!!" screamed Elizabeth into the microphone from the middle of the gymnasium. The whole gym shook with thunderous screams from the twelve hundred students packed into it.

"I can't hear you! Make some noise!" Elizabeth shouted again. Carly could not take much more of this, she cupped her ears with her hands and put her head down even lower than where it was. She tried to block

out the noise but it wasn't working.

"Now would be a perfect time for me to do this," she thought. In reality, Carly wasn't expecting the magic to work.

Everything seemed to blur out of the way, as Carly lifted her head and stared at Elizabeth directly. She started to say the words as softly as she could (so that no one would hear her), and without taking her eyes off Elizabeth.

"Mala dilay toodooo, malaj dilay toodoos, mala, dilayyy toodoos," she said it over and over again, but nothing was happening. Currently, Elizabeth was jumping up and down in the middle of the court as the marching band played their school fight song. Nothing was happening, but Carly kept chanting. Suddenly, Elizabeth stood still in her jumping tracks. She put the microphone up to her mouth and started yelling frantically, "Stop, everybody, shut the fuck up, shut up! Band fucking geeks, shut the fuck up, stop!" She got louder with every word she said. The gym fell silent. Carly looked at the faculty, who always stood on the sidelines by the baskets. They had a look of horror in their eyes.

"I had sex with Patrick Dunlap!" she said into the microphone, clear as if she was a news anchor. The whole school, started mumbling and laughing simultaneously. Everyone at East Hills High knew that Patrick Dunlap was Patricia's boyfriend of over a year. They were seen daily making out in the hallways of the high school. Elizabeth had a shocked blank expression on her face. She put the mike back up to her face, looking as if she was trying to address the situation. The only thing that came out of her mouth was, "I sucked Mike Chanski's dick in the sports shed behind the football away bleachers!"

She put both her hands up to her mouth as she said this, looking as if a gun had just gone off in front of her face. By this time, the whole school was dying with laughter, but they kept their heads, looking intrigued. They wanted more. Elizabeth put the microphone to her face one last time, looking determined to get the school back under her control. She opened her mouth to speak, "I cheated on my ex-boyfriend Alex Skaggz with three guys while we were together." She covered her mouth again, as tears started streaming down her face. The entire gym full of teenagers was roaring with laughter. Elizabeth stormed out of the gymnasium in a dramatic fashion, as kids started getting out of their seats and chanting "Slut!" as she made her exit. Most of them even got up off their feet. Carly sat there, with a smile on her face as big as it had been in years. ■ ■ ■

BIG MAMA

Felicia Smith-Welch



I sucked in a deep breath the first time I laid eyes on her shiny tanned full body. Her beauty mesmerized me as my eyes met the sparkle in hers. My heart swelled as I stroked the contours of her firm light brown body. It was love at first sight for me and my Big Mama.

She drew me in to the softest parts of her innermost being. I moaned and cooed when she squeezed me with her big strong shoulders. She adjusted her lap so that I molded comfortably within her embrace. She pulled her left arm snug across my body to make me safe. She sang for me every time I entered her presence. Her melodious tunes of gentle bells and soft chimes made me rock with glee.

On cold days, her supple body warmed me. The days when I tempered hot, she fanned me, cooling me to comfort. I languished in my Big Mama's presence. At times, her calmness lulled me to sleep. At times, her powerful energy thrilled me. Her love transported me to places known, and unknown.

Her breaths were always smooth, quiet and gentle. The way she carried me exhilarated my senses: The full view of everything around me when she turned; the smooth acceleration of her steps when we needed to make haste; the gentle way she slowed down with caution. My Big Mama moved me.

Then one day I sensed trouble. Her soul was vexed in a way I refused to understand. She was up in age and it was showing. Her strength was waning. Her songs sounded like clanging cymbals. There were hiccups in her steps as she found it difficult to find her smooth footing.

Her once sweet perfume that delighted my nose turned gassy and repugnant. My Big Mama needed a specialist's attention.

The report came back that she was terminally ill. The specialist's bill was \$23,000. The 'insurance' would only cover nine grand. My heart sank as I shed a tear. I knew Big Mama's fate. She was old. The years of joy she gave had taken its toll. I had to let her go but before I did, I stretched my arm wide and pressed my body against her big body to bid adieu. That was the last I saw her.

See, Big Mama was 'born' in 2005 in Munich, Germany at the Bavarian Motor Works plant. She was one of the grandest models produced among many of her kind: BMW 750Li. She lived up to her luxurious reputation as the ultimate driving machine. Oh how I miss my Big Mama. ■ ■ ■

MOMENTS

Brynn Kowalski

I

Warm sunlight filters through
Windows like liquid gold.
Shhhh,
Let me sleep a little longer...

II

Hot sun,
Offset by the cool dry wind
Dance across my skin.
The seduction of the desert floor

III

Stars shine,
Glowing bright against the velvet void high above
Tell me,
Are they truly stars?
Or spirits peering down upon us?

IV

Endless Void
Uncountable Galaxies
Do I have enough curiosity,
To wonder at everything?

V

If my life ended in this moment
My heart stopping and eyes closing
I wonder
If I would have gall to go to heaven

VI

Ivory keys
Stoic muses garbed in white and black
Waiting for an invitation to dance
Do my fingers remember the steps?

VII

Smells of the city
Pavement, gas, electricity, people
Can never compare to the desert
Dust, creosol, wind, sun

VIII

You spoke to me as if I were a child
Yet you reprimanded me as if I were an adult
You said I would be hard pressed to succeed
Yet you hand over my diploma
So tell me, if I were so doomed for failure
Why am I dressed in cap and gown?

IX

In the dark, anything is possible
Imagination's monsters lurk just out of sight
They rule hearts and heads with an iron grip
So what then, would the light bring?

X

High and Low
Under cushions, behind shelves
I can't seem to find
Where I put my book ■■■



THE LADY WITH THE MISSING FACE

Aztlana Quezada

"So tell me something about yourself," Dr. Carter insisted as she hovered over a blank notepad with a black ballpoint pen in her right hand. "Who are you? Why are you here today?" Her dark black bangs swooped over her forehead barely covering the top of her eyebrows; the rest of her hair was combed in a soft bun that rested on top of her head. She smiled kindly, and awaited a response.

"Um, well I guess I'll start off with my name." The guy in his early twenties, irresistibly handsome with dark features with grey roguish eyes, fidgeted with a gum wrapper in his hands until he finally put the wrapper in his pocket and extended his right arm around the cushion and his left arm draped over his lap, he looked too comfortable in a place that was supposed to be new and unfamiliar to him. With a burst of confidence and a slightly wicked smile, "My name is Conner O'Neil. I have a bachelors in accounting. I work at the bank. I am here because well maybe you can tell me something about myself that I don't already know. Consider this an experiment if you will." He sighed about to continue talking but paused waiting for the psychologist to give the OK.

"I see, go on," Dr. Carter said as she wrote brief notes down in a hastily manner. He had a vibe, Dr. Carter never witnessed before; he was very aware of the way he made others feel. Dr. Carter felt as if she was unable to fully concentrate on this particular patient because of his good looks and witty personality.

"I...I don't, I mean I'm not married or anything. No girlfriend either, I mean I used to but that didn't last long... but there is someone who interests me now." With that, Conner's hands raised as if he was stretching, he placed them behind his head, creating congruent triangles with his elbows, then all at once both arms fell to his sides and he leaned back on the couch with eyes shut closed, almost as if in a daze.

"I see. Conner?"



“Yes?”

“Can you tell me what happened between you and your old girlfriend? You mentioned it didn’t last long—”

“She had a beautiful face...a perfect smile. She died...well she was killed. It was a freak accident. Her body was found mutilated in her car on the side of the road. They never found the guy. I will always love her... you know sometimes I have nightmares. The last time we spoke we were arguing, she was going to leave me. In my dreams, I am the one who followed her after work and killed her in her car... but I didn’t come here to talk about her. It’s closed, over, done.”

“I understand Conner. I am truly sorry for your loss. That must have been devastating to you. Sometimes, we feel guilty when we lose someone. That guilt eats us alive and it takes over our mind. Our thoughts suddenly become dark, until we get help...and that is why you are here today. We will get you help. We won’t talk about her again until you are ready. Okay, you also mentioned another girl you are interested in. Is there any type of relationship between the two of you? A mutual friendship I suppose?”

“You can say that. She’s...” Conner stopped midsentence and looked down at his hands as if he regretted mentioning the new girl.

“She’s what, Conner? Don’t be afraid to talk to me; I am here to help you.”

Conner looked up, and a crooked grin spread across his face making Dr. Carter feel a little uneasy. “This girl, stunning by the way, she comes into the bank every Friday, precisely at 5 o’clock in the evening. She always goes to my counter with her Gatorade bottle in hand, however I guess you can say I get nervous around her. I’m like a 10 year old kid with an innocent crush, you know?”

“You like her, Conner. Being nervous is not something to be worried about. It happens to us all.”

“Oh, I know, Dr. Carter. I’m not complaining about being nervous, Lindsey seems to find it attractive. At least it seemed that way. She smiled at me a lot, her cheeks turned this shade of red and when she left, she always turned around once more before walking out. I doubt that I will see her again though...”

“Why is that?”

Conner ran his fingers through his hair as if thinking of a hard topic. Dr. Carter noticed his knuckles scraped and bruised. Conner looked intensely in her eyes and said, “I guess you can call it a gut feeling, I suppose.”

Dr. Carter grabbed for a glass cup and water bottle, right next to the black telephone, from the little brown table on her left side. She poured the bottle’s contents into the glass and offered it to Conner. “Would you like a straw?” Conner reluctantly accepted and stood to dispose the straw wrapper in the waste basket by the exit door. Conner slowly made his way back to the blue sofa and sipped a miniscule amount of water then replaced the glass to the table by his side. “Conner, about how long have you known this lady?”

“Um, for about three months I believe. I met Lindsey in the beginning of August.”

“Do you suppose that maybe she goes to your counter every week because she finds you interesting or attractive?”

“Yes. It’s not just her. Almost every girl that enters that bank heads to my counter. You find me attractive as well, don’t you Dr. Carter?” Conner leaned forward and winked. “The only one that really gets my attention is Lindsey, but I am sure that can change soon.” He rested his back against the couch once more.

Dr. Carter tensed up in her seat, feeling extremely uncomfortable. “Um Conner, why do you find this Lindsey girl more intriguing than the other girls you claim act the same way?”

“Her face,” Conner bluntly stated. Another grin made its way on his face. “She’s beautiful, quite like you.”

“Okay.” Dr. Carter’s right hand moving across her page suddenly stopped, she hadn’t even finished completing the first page of notes. Her head was pounding from a growing headache and Conner’s flirtatious remarks made her want him to leave. Conner had a weird look in his eyes; there was a growing danger in his presence. “I’m afraid we’re out of time for today. I will see you next Monday at the same time.” She rose from her chair and walked toward the door to hold it open as if to hint to Conner, his presence was not welcomed. She smiled, “Bye, Conner.” Conner rose, said his goodbyes and exited.

Dr. Carter gathered the notepad and extra paperwork into one pile and as she was stacking them neatly, her finger traced the edge of the papers and she felt a sharp pain followed by a drop of blood. “Ouch!” *Damn, paper cut.* She rose from her seat and headed to the cupboard in the back of the room. She reached for the Ibuprofen bottle and Band-Aid box. Dr. Carter swallowed two pills dry and pulled out the last remaining bandage. After placing it over her small cut, she crumbled the Band-Aid wrapper in her hand.

“Doesn’t look too bad.” Conner was standing behind her.

Dr. Carter turned around in panic, “Conner! I thought you left.” Her heart began racing, she felt like it was a risk being in the same room as him, and after all he gave her such an odd feeling.

“Just forgot my coat.” He grinned at her grabbing his coat and started for the door, “Bye now, Dr. Julia

Carter.” He emphasized every syllable in her name. “Have a nice day.” The door closed behind him, leaving Julia in a panic. She looked back on the sofa, and a cough drop wrapper and a water bottle lid was perfectly still on the chair. *It must have fallen out of his pockets.* Julia grabbed the remnants of his pockets and her Band-Aid wrapper and threw it away as she headed out. She felt relieved to be leaving her small office after a long day of appointments and after a weird encounter with a patient.

Upon arrival at her house after a short trip to Safeway, Julia kept replaying her previous session with Conner. *He was awfully strange...something about him makes my flesh crawl.* Julia parked her SUV outside her small southern style house then unlocked the front door and went back to her vehicle to bring in the groceries.

Julia stumbled inside with three Safeway paper bags full of groceries and knocked over the trash can directly underneath the light switch to the kitchen. Various pieces of trash decorated the floor; an empty oatmeal package, peanut container, glass wipes and don't forget the empty milk carton and old magazines. Julia put her purse and phone on the counter then bent down and placed the trash back in the garbage where it belonged.

The contents of her grocery shopping now lay out on the counter in front of Julia as she organized all of her purchases into its proper places in her tiny little kitchen. She grabbed her chocolate bar and started unwrapping. *This looks so good right now!* She disposed of the chocolate wrapper and headed for her living room to catch up on episodes of “Orange is the New Black” before she had to do paperwork.

As the show was ending, Julia stood up and was about to reach for her stack of paperwork when the news program followed the shows credits with breaking news. A picture of a young girl, smiling came up on TV. *She looks so much like me!* Julia grabbed the remote and raised the volume to hear a little better. A male reporter made his way on screen and gave a description of what was known about the girl, “Local Police department has declared a 22 year old, Lindsey Meyers, dead. She was reported missing 48 hours ago and was last seen at the Bank of America branch off Maple St. and Turner. She was later found and in her car and identified by dental records. Her body had been mutilated, abandoned on the side of Route 54. This person has been linked to 12 other disappearances of women all pretending under a false identity. All of the victims bare similar features and died of similar causes. The horrific thing about their deaths are that when found, their faces were missing. The killer has not been found. Please be aware of your surroundings, we have a murderer on the loose. If anyone has any information on the whereabouts of a suspect please call silent witness at—”

“Oh my God!”

Julia ran for her cell phone and was about to dial 9-1-1 when a familiar voice spoke behind her, “Baby doll, I wouldn't do that if I were you.” Conner was standing at her door with that same crooked grin he kept flashing earlier but this time he held a pocket knife already stained red. He gently ran his left index finger along the knife as if to signify how sharp it was and slowly walked forward approaching Julia. She was trapped. His smile turned into a smirk then he started laughing, “Dr. Carter, I don't think it was a dream. I think I killed my girlfriend... I think I've killed a lot of people.” His face turned stone cold and his eyes were red with sorrow, “I need help Dr. Carter. Can you help me? We can go for a ride and talk about this some more. It would really make me feel better...you want to know something?” Conner's right hand tightened around the handle of the knife, “You and Lindsey sort of look alike...same smile, and same beautiful faces...” ■ ■ ■

ALWAYS TOUGH TRANSFORMATIONS

Kenneth M. Reed, Jr.



All my life I have been a male and I have always seen myself as having a most dominant male presence. I was always one of the fastest, quickest, and strongest athletes throughout my school career and I even started to see inklings of my first mustache coming in while I was still in elementary school. If I had been born a woman I would have been one of the buffest looking woman in history. I have never really been one to connect with my emotions, always being taught when I was being brought up to never cry, because it was seen as soft and weak. My mother would hold me when I was child if I hurt myself, but when I visited, my father he was not the nurturing type and, if I cried, because I hurt myself he would say, “Aye, lil nigga, quit being a lil bitch.” Over time, my dad's methods of toughening me up worked on me. I wouldn't cry anymore even if I had been injured or even if something really bad had happened like losing a loved one.

When I was six I went to funeral with my dad and saw many men crying, my dad included. I thought to myself, “Quit being a lil bitch,” but I never said it, fearing my father's wrath if I did. However, I asked my dad, “Why are these men crying? I thought men aren't supposed to cry.” He replied, “Because someone

died.” At the time, I thought this was an B.S. answer, but as I got older through the years and grew to understand death I knew why these men had cried. Now, if someone I cared for had died, I’m not sure what I would do. I might go into a fit of rage or, more likely remain calm and act as if everything’s normal and then, when I’m alone, crack the Hoover Dam. I don’t know why it’s so instilled in me, but I don’t ever see myself expressing my emotions, always having been taught and reinforced that is feminine. In the end, I’m glad my dad toughened me up because, even though we did not speak that often the talks we did have had substance. We talked about the things I would experience in life from economic troubles and bills, and women, to racial matters.

When I first became an adult, I was excited and warmly embraced my new found freedom. I loved the fact no one could tell me what to do anymore. I don’t know what I expected from adult life, but I thought it would be parties, drinking, and dropping bands on a nightly basis. Basically, I thought life would be one spectacular never ending hip hop video with attractive women like models everywhere.

Boy!!! I was in for a shocker when I left home. First, I discovered I would not be dropping bands on a nightly basis. Heck, with the money I made I would be lucky if I could drop a band on a yearly basis. I worked at Red Robin as a busser where they expected me to be the flash and yet still be faster, my manager would never be satisfied with my speed and would let me know by making a comment about this before each of my shifts. I soon realized my paychecks from Red Robin would be swallowed whole by life’s natural predators; rent gas prices, car insurance, and other miscellaneous bills. The apartment I stayed in was a small studio with one window the best thing about it was that it was clean, because the last thing I wanted were unnecessary roommates of roaches and rodents. At most, there might be clothes on the floor when I did laundry. The idea of drinking and partying soon faded from my mind when it became abundantly clear that it would be impossible to keep a job participating in those activities every night and I could barely stomach alcohol without my body trying to return it to sender. I remember one day I was having a conversation with my dad and I told my dad, “I understand why people get caught up in the trapped life.” I told my dad something along the lines of, “Life is rough and hard especially if you’re hardly making any money.” I told my pops about how I even tried to apply to better jobs in the warehouse industry. They always told me I needed more experience or did not even bother to respond. The same was true for other industries as well. I always assumed it was because the economy was slow. I remember trying to think of ways to bring in extra cash each month with gimmicks and get rich quick schemes. However, most, if not all of these schemes failed, and then it was like going back to square one. Then, you got that feeling of all your options are exhausted and then you hear about people that you went to school with who are selling drugs to make money. Then you hear about how much money they’re supposedly making and it’s three times what you make and, of course, you’re skeptical until you see a drug deal in person and how much money they make off selling the tiniest amount. I’m not going to lie, I considered it, but, in the end, I decided I loved my freedom more.

Even the attractive women were myths. I went out one night and met a beautiful woman with eyes that appeared to be flawless diamonds that could pierce the soul. Well, that’s what I thought I saw until I walked past a normal looking female with the generic alien eyes in Macy’s and she called my name. Confused, I turned to see who called me and this weird eyed woman approached me. She claimed to be the woman with flawless eyes, but all I could see were “those” eyes. At first, I thought someone was messing with me, however, the more she spoke, the more I began to realize this was in fact the person I had met. We made a little small talk before I could come up with an excuse to slip away. Once I got away, I thought to myself, what the hell happened to her? I could have sworn she had some of the most gorgeous eyes I have ever seen or maybe I was drunk or was it just dark. I continued to debate myself several minutes afterwards until I found myself in the makeup department and then it clicked in mind that it was the makeup I saw.

I told my dad about what happened and he laughed and told me, “No matter what you see or think you know, appearances can be deceiving.” Looking back I realized that what I experienced were growing pains for adulthood.

My life has changed much since becoming an adult from my child hood. I remember I would spend every weekend at friends’ houses playing video games. While in high school, where I would argue with friends and associates about sports topics like we were ESPN. I would play basketball every other day and I had a slender muscular frame. Now, I rarely see my friends as everyone is busy doing their own things and have slowly gained a little weight since graduating. Overall, when I was growing up, life was simple and I loved it. All the world’s problems and social issues were not real in my world until I reached my senior year of high school.

When I was coming up, I hardly noticed racism almost as if it was not real. The only time racism seemed to be real was during school when I had to learn about MLK and I had to watch ancient videos in black and white of people walking and the whole time getting their ass beat the whole way wherever they were going. Other than that it, did not exist...or so I thought. There was one Saturday my senior

year of high school, it was late April and my friend JJ and I were working on my bucket of a first car in his driveway. The car was a red 1993 Toyota Camry. The car was a piece of crap, but, to make it better, we trying to put a system in my car. However, we didn't have any of the right speakers or subs, so we improvised and used computer speakers and connected them to an amp. My first car was definitely a "ghetto bucket." As we were working on the car, a Pepsi can was making its way down the street with the help of the wind. I remember when I saw it that maybe I should go pick it up and throw it away, but I decided not to because it was not my trash or my friends. Instead, we kept working on the car. Not long after a tan pick-up truck pulled in front of JJ's house and a white middle-aged man got out and approached us. He accused us of putting the can in his yard and, of course, we told him "no," and he accused us again. We told him, "no" and that the can had been blowing down the street. I guessed he still did not believe us because he accused us a third time and claimed we were, "fucking lying."

Then JJ got angry and told him, "Leave my fucking property." The guy was still accusing us but all he seemed to be saying was, "I know you..." before being drowned out by JJ yelling, "Bye Nigga, Bye Nigga." The guy got mad because JJ kept talking over him and went back to the driver side of his car. I assumed he was leaving, but instead he said, "You fucking animals don't know who you're Fucking with!!" he then reached inside his car and grabbed something black. Then he started waving his arms around and I then could see it was a pistol. By this time, JJ's dad had come outside, saw the guy with a gun and stood between the pickup and us. JJ's dad was trying to calm the guy down. The guy said, "You need to get that animal under control or something bad going to happen to him." The guy was wearing a white t-shirt, cargo shorts, flips flops, and had glasses. He looked like an ordinary sane guy in the neighborhood enjoying the day. JJ's dad and the guy talked a little more and, while they were talking, JJ and I had made our way back into the garage. JJ's younger sisters tried to come outside to find the source of all the commotion, but JJ told them not to and to call the police. His sister then called Avondale PD and told them there was a man waving a gun around.

A few moments later, the guy got in his pick-up truck and left. Then, JJ's dad asked us what happened and we told him. We waited 45 minutes, but it felt like hours. I was sitting on a stool in the garage feeling nervous and afraid that the guy would get back before the police and, if he did, what would I do? We were unarmed. I looked at how far the cinder block wall was and if I could trust my speed to get over it before a bullet hit me. Then, I saw the police car coming down the street and walked toward the side walk and waited for them to get out of their car and save me. Instead, I got two officers pointing two guns in my face yelling in my face, "Back the fuck up." In my shock, I jumped back and said, "What the fuck, we're the ones who called you." They then ran to the middle-aged man's house and knocked on his door like even if he was there he would have politely opened the door. After they realized, no one was coming to the door and heard us say that he left. JJ's dad went first to talk to them I stood back, pissed off.

I was so angry that day because it was the first time reality hit me in the face and I was caught off guard. No one in my life had ever held a deep conversation with me about race other than the briefest of conversations or when it was in a joking setting. So, eventually I spoke to my dad and he told me that type of thing happens in America and that I should be careful around all police. At first, I was skeptical of my father's warning, but after going to U of A, constant traffic stops, and other life experiences I have learned to sparingly trust police officers.

For my first full year of college, I attended U of A. I was all excited to go to a university, even though I did not know anything about the school. I assumed all schools were the same. I even had a friend who told me to go to ASU instead of U of A, because I would get along with the people better. Of course, I did not listen and off I went into one of the most aggravating school years.

When I went to school, it was like I got a further confirmation of a reality check. I thought being at a university I would meet people of different backgrounds and people would be accepting. When I was at U of A, I hated how if I left my dorm room, I would eventually come into contact or pass someone who gave me a stare or had an expression of fear on their face. Then, the campus police seemed to suspect me and other black males if a crime occurred or did not occur as if we were automatically guilty, thus I was always a suspect. The other thing that enraged me is when I shared my culture with suburban white kids such as music, food, and a few laughs in my dorm, people in my dorm responded with friendship or so I thought. Maybe it was the fact Obama was rerunning for election that year or maybe not, either way I found out what they really thought. I was studying in the study room one day and the same people who I had shared my culture with were watching this video of an animated black man with his son telling him that they survive off food stamps, lazy, and stupid. At the end of the video, black man and his son explained it was there job to get beat by police for no reason. At the end of the video, I was enraged that these same people who called me friend had such low opinions of me and my people. I walked away from that study room so I would not strike any one. These experiences have made me the man I am today molding and shaping like clay. My father told me about these issues and I kind of blew him off when he first told me, but as time goes on, I come into contact with these scenarios throughout life. Always tough transformations. ■ ■ ■

SIREN'S WISH

Rachel Glogiewicz



As far as the fishermen knew, it was a normal day of work. The ship rocked to the rhythm of the waves, the smell of salt and rain hung around them, and the fish thrashed as they were carried to their deaths. They heard the music before they saw the singers.

There was a woman in the middle of the ocean. She had long, flowing hair which was colored a strawberry blonde. She didn't appear to be wearing any clothing. She wasn't calling out for help or struggling to stay above water; she was just floating in the middle of the ocean. Singing.

Her music reached the men. They weren't quite sure what it was, though. Some heard a happy tune while others thought it sounded a little melancholy and brought tears to their eyes, but nonetheless, it was beautiful in its own way. The song entranced them and they neared the railing of the boat to get closer to the music and its mysterious source. She swam toward the ship. As she did, two more women surfaced on either side of her, all their breasts bare and all singing their seductive song.

When they neared the ship, the men eagerly helped the women aboard, pushing and shoving each other to be the ones to personally pull the women up.

The men didn't quite register the fact that the women had fishtails in place of legs. Their glassy eyes just gazed at the women as they continued to sing their enchanting song.

Suddenly the music shifted; the pitch lowering to a soft lullaby.

The blonde women embraced one of the men. They were chest to chest as she began singing directly in his ear and the man's eyelids grew heavy. He, as well as the rest of the crew, staggered on his feet and collapsed in her arms.

Finally she stopped singing. She stroked his hair and planted a small kiss in the crook of his neck before whispering, "Such a pretty one." Then she bit into the sailor's neck and ripped the flesh from his corpse.

She feasted on the men and headed for a third serving when her sister shoved her away. "Stop being selfish and save some for us!"

She glared dangerously at her sister for getting in the way of food, but eventually backed up. They had to get back in the water soon, anyway. She was thinking about leaving without her sisters since they insisted on being slow, but she stopped when she spotted a photograph of a young woman. She had fair skin and soft, brown eyes. On top of her curly brown hair was a sparkling tiara, marking her as royalty. In the photograph, the princess was wearing a short, flowing white dress which revealed her bare legs and feet. Though the woman had seen humans plenty of times, the princess in the photo was by far the loveliest. And her legs were absolutely the most dazzling.

Not able to get the image of the princess out of her head, the woman sought out a creature capable of doing dark magic who called herself the sea-witch. Needing to see the woman in the photograph for herself, the woman inquired about a possible way to turn human.

The sea-witch grinned slowly, "Of course I can, my child. For I am the sea-witch and I am capable of many, many magical and impossible tasks. Turning you human, my child, will be quite easy for me."

The woman was already worked up, "Name your price; I'll give you anything!"

"Simply bind your soul to mine, my child. You have a purpose and this way, I know you will stick to it."

The woman nodded vigorously. Her purpose was to find the gorgeous princess from the photograph, seduce her and make her her's. While lost in the thought, two deep sea creatures known as the sea-witch's henchmen slithered around her, carrying a contract and pen. Too excited to contain herself, she signed without a moment's hesitation.

Then she passed out.

When she awoke, she found an old woman and the princess hovering over her. The elderly lady looked deeply concerned and kept asking "Are you alright, dear?" But the princess just smiled slyly and gazed her eyes over the woman's naked body.

Living in the ocean, the woman never even thought about her nakedness. But as a human, and with the princess staring at her so intensely, she was washed over with a new sense of self-consciousness.

It wasn't until the old lady whispered something that the princess cleared her throat and introduced herself, "I am Princess René. Please, take this coat and allow my nurse and I to help you, miss." She proceeded to strip off her jacket and handed it to the woman. It was thick and lined with dark brown fur that made the woman feel instantly warm and safe, despite her bare nakedness underneath. And most importantly, the coat was long enough to cover her up.

"Do you need help getting home?" the old lady asked.

But she had no home and told them as much. The princess grinned and clapped her hands together.

"I've got an idea! You can stay with me."

The woman was ecstatic. Getting close the princess was much easier than she had expected and now she was going to be within living quarters with her.

The old lady shot René a dry look before she led the way to the castle.

Princess René was kind enough to let the woman sleep in her bed with her. So, perfectly content and in some fine clothing the princess lent her, the blonde woman went for a stroll on the beach the next morning.

There, she encountered one of the sea-witch's henchmen floating in the water. He asked her, "How's the murder going?"

"Murder?" She was completely taken aback. "What murder?"

"Why," the henchman began, "the murder of the princess."

"Who is going to murder the princess?"

"You are," the henchman replied casually. "Don't you remember the deal?"

The woman was speechless so he continued, "The contact states that you have to kill the princess and eat her flesh in order to become permanently human. If you can't do it in three days, you die."

Finally the woman stuttered out, "You-you tricked me! I never agreed to that!"

He shook his head sadly. "It's your own fault for agreeing so recklessly." Then, leaving her gaping, he disappeared into the ocean.

Left alone with her thoughts, the woman became outraged at herself. Her own stupidity and over eagerness was going to be the death of her, because of course she was going to be the one to die. She loved René too much to kill and besides, the princess needed to live. She had a kingdom to run and people to serve. So she decided that tonight she would make her farewell to her beloved, and at the end of the third day, she would be no more.

She was so lost in thought that she wasn't paying any attention to where she was going. A man dressed in rags approached her, "Please miss, would you be so kind as to give me a little bit of food? You see, my son is very sick and anything would help."

The woman shook her head. "I'm sorry but I don't have anything in my pockets."

The beggar persisted, "But you wear such fine clothing. Surely you have something to spare?"

"I have nothing, sir, but I can tell Princes René to send food your way."

He gave out a harsh laugh. "Princess René? She does not care if we starve." He said bitterly.

For the first time she noticed her surroundings. She didn't know much about life on land yet, but she knew that there was a strong contrast between the small, dirty buildings surrounding her and the luxurious castle she had grown accustomed to. She knew the people staring at her with hollow, pleading eyes looked nowhere as well fed as the princess.

Feeling troubled, the woman returned to the castle and found the princess in the dining room eating a slice of rich white cake. She asked the princess, "Why do you have so much food when the villagers are starving?"

Princess René chuckled, "Because I am more important than them," she stated matter of factly. And then she took another enormous bite of cake.

The woman watched with disgust. Her sisters used to always call her selfish because she ate more than them, but she always made sure everybody had enough to eat before splurging. She realized how much better she was than the greedy princess in front of her, who stuffed her face with desserts while her people struggled for even crumbs. She was a disgusting brat and the woman couldn't believe she once loved her.

The woman grabbed a nearby cake knife and plunged it into the side of the princess' neck hard enough to pierce skin. Her body hit the table with a loud thud. Her limp chest smashed the creamy goods in front of her, staining the front of the expensive silk dress and the bare cleavage that peeked out the top.

And then she bit into the princess' flesh. ■ ■ ■

THE CUTTING

Jonathan Beteran



I felt cracks in the concrete below me. Two women dressed in all white laid out tapered metal instruments beside me. I sat on a worn, dirty table cloth; my legs were spread, placed apart by the two women. I heard my mother behind two wooden doors, negotiating with the doctor to use a clean razor. Muffled noises came from the room next door. A woman stepped out and closed the doors behind her, carrying a glass bowl. I couldn't identify what was inside, but I heard my mother quietly gasp as the women walked by. I saw slight movement and shadows between the slits of the two doors; my mother was still in negotiations with the doctor. A third shadow joined them, much taller than my mother and the doctor.

The wooden doors opened slowly as the doctor walked inside. The two women then held my arms against the ground; a third woman entered the room sitting on my chest, placing her hands over my mouth. Sweat entered my eyes. The doctor motioned for my mother to enter the room. The doctor held my legs apart, bent at the knees. My mother grabbed a razor, waiting for instruction from the doctor. Hot air blew between my legs. Warm water poured down as my mother ran her hand through, cleansing the area with a washcloth. Unable to feel my arms and a pressure on my chest, my mother began. Her cold, wet fingers exploring where I've never been touched before, contrasted her usual comforting and calming touch of my exterior body. My mother and the doctor talked. The doctor's fingers then entered the canal beside the fingers of my mothers. The doctor's touch was much colder, I felt her fingers examining me. The doctor then motioned for my mother to make the cut. She slid her fingers from the canal. I heard her weeping quietly as she grabbed the blade.

My mother paused, releasing raspy breaths and widening her eyes. My mother asked the doctor if there was any other solution. The doctor then grabbed the blade and placed it down beside me. One of the women dressed in white picked up a needle and proceeded to tie a knot with the metal wire she had slid through. My mother's hand shook as she grabbed the needle. The other women dressed in white covered my mouth and placed a thin piece of linen over my face. I began to breathe unevenly as the doctor touched me. The needle finally made the journey and I gasped. I felt the cloth reaching the back of my throat. There was a white haze as the doctor continued. I cried as needle slid in and out. I began choking on the linen placed over me. I saw my mother's eyes as she got up and walked away and closed the wooden doors behind her. Her shadow disappeared in between the slits of the door as the much taller shadow appeared again. I was placed inside a plastic bag as I was dragged out onto the pile of the others. ■ ■ ■

THE STRAIGHT JACKET

Isabel Whaley

I have become so numb. Words have become meaningless, monotone, colorless, as I struggle to hear what you are saying. So many fade into the darkness, just like the rest. Controlled, repressed, emotionless, drained and living for money. Wasting the paper that eliminates the very trees that gives us air to breathe. Is that enough, is that the life most people want to lead? There has to be more to life; what about exploring, traveling, conquering, and thoroughly embracing what is left of the natural world? Or are you so set in your money making schemes that you are wallowing in it and cannot see your way out of it? Since when has material become so glorified? These days you see a child playing on a tablet instead of playing outside climbing a tree. Nature no longer becoming their made up paradises. Instead their little eyes are glued on a screen transfixed on something that they will not enjoy or appreciate five years from now.

Sometimes I feel the need to escape and leave this lifeless, callous, droning and controlling society. Homeowners tells you what you can and cannot do in your own backyard, the police regulate what you do the minute you step out of your front door, your boss is always on your back giving you tasks, your professors give you assignments, your family gives you to-do lists and you give yourself hell. Drowning in all your responsibilities, you see no way out because you have a house payment, a car payment, student loans, insurance, electricity/water/gas bills, cellphone bills and a DirecTV bill to pay this month. So you keep living your robotic life for time is money, so your precious, dwindling time goes mostly to your best friend, money. You lost sight of the important, beautiful, marvelous things in life. You fell in love with some paper with green ink on it.

Open your eyes and see the beautiful natural world. There is so much more to life than making money and making payments. We are all sharing this fragile, complex, beautiful world with nature and animals. Mother nature has given us paradise only asking that we respect and protect it in return. Life is too short for people to be working like worker ants. Ants work the way they do because they do not have a developed brain like we do. So please do not limit yourself to being so small. What you have in your wallet is nothing compared to what you have in your mind. Money only takes you so far. Money is constantly decreasing and people can take it away from you, but the knowledge and experience you have in your mind is untouchable.

Get up and see your world differently because you are only on this planet for so long. What are you going to leave behind? A pile of ashes, bones or a change and an admired way of life? Why not you, each of you have the power to change the world, you were born with a mouth so you can voice your opinions and you have your two feet to take you anywhere you want. Do not start tomorrow instead tell me you are going to start living something you can be proud of today, something that is worth to be remembered by. Break free of the straightjacket society has forced upon you. ■ ■ ■





FEARFUL

James Charles Gibbs III

How about no?
Acting as if I am going to somehow infect you.
That my ways of life are going to impact yours,
To the point where you cannot live.

Unacknowledge me then.
I could care less how you feel about me,
But do not bash us
As a whole
Your words may hurt some
But your original intent went unphased.

We breathe the same air, but somehow,
Because we are Homosexuals,
We cannot share the
Same space
Same rights
Same lifestyles

All we want is to conform to your ideals,
Your rights.

You wanna call yourself homophobic?
Watch us live our everyday routines.
We will show you how scary we can be.
Taking out our gay trash
Driving our gay car
To our gay jobs
In order to go gay shopping
To eat our gay food
In our gay homes.

Smoking a fag
And kissing one too. ■ ■ ■



LIFE LUXURIES

Angelica Hernandez

I can't stop walking...the air gets thinner as my breaths get heavier. A feeling that so soothing to me yet so unpleasant to most. At some point, reality begins to fade, as if the soul leaves the body and the mind gets lost in thoughts. The thoughts that hurt, fuel the fire. Those that don't inspire me to push harder. One wrong step might result in a roll of an ankle, a cut on the knee, and rarely but realistically, a fall to your death. We all have an addiction, and mine is hiking. If I don't make it to the top, it's pure disappointment. When I'm at the peak of the mountain, it's a natural medication that heals what can't be seen. I probably say the same thing every time. "Life is so beautiful." If you could see it through my eyes, you'd see that the world as a whole is magnificent, glorious, majestic, breathtaking but as we look at it, in individual pieces some parts are not as appealing as others.

My journey hiking began a few years ago when I was introduced to Camelback Mountain. I dazed out of the passenger window as I imagined what it might be like. I had this impression that it would be a barren area of land that was isolated from society. A rather dead and hostile trail with minor details of life like insects and bushes. I set out on my journey a couple hours before sunset. I wanted to witness that amazing ball of fire, billions and billions of miles away, bow down to me. Moments after arrival, the adrenaline kicked in. I ran toward this massive mountain. What appeared to be specks of green, slowly formed trees. The closer I got to the mountain, the more insignificant I felt to the world. As I took my first step onto this mighty submit rising from the earth, a flood of thoughts emerged my mind. I observed my surrounding and admired all of the beauties that media, technology and "the American way" have taken away from us and corrupted our lives. Life has become a world so concerned with occupation and social status. A world filled with hate and violence that have caused us to lose focus of the true treasures and values of living. On our last moments of life, all the wealth of the world will be irrelevant, I thought to myself.

While I dosed in and out of consciousness, I found myself gasping for air. Everything I'm seeing begins to blur and a feeling of powerlessness consumes me when my legs proceed to give up on me. I probably fell four times but the want was stronger than any feeling of pain or emotion convincing me this experience wasn't for me.

When I finally look up, I realize I had defeated one of Arizona's monstrous giants, Camelback Mountain, Cholla Trail. Two hours of intense cardio, made my legs feeling like boiled spaghetti. With my heart pounding through my chest, I managed to use the last bit of energy in my body to walk closer to the edge where I would have the ultimate sight of the city and the sun as it appeared to smoothly sink into the horizon. I endorsed the transformation of the city as the city lights pervade the sky. A perception of the world that not everyone is lucky enough to experience. That cold December night, I fell in love with the priceless luxuries that life will never limit us from. ■ ■ ■

THE UNKNOWN GIRL

Manuel Saldivar



It was the summer of 1988. I was eight years old and living in San Antonio, Texas in an apartment complex that was known as the Oscas. The name of the apartment complex was named after the name of the landlord. It had a small patch of grass that passed as a lawn and one big parking lot. There were 28 apartments in total; 14 in the front and 14 in back. Our apartment complex was surrounded in three sides by a large field that was held back by a chain link fence. One day, I was outside playing with some of my friends and brothers when I noticed some of the adults standing on the second floor and pointing out into the field and in hushed tones saying “Don’t go in there tonight.” I tried to see what they were pointing at, but couldn’t see anything. I looked at my brothers and friends to see if they had seen the adults playing, but they were too involved in playing with their toys. I wondered what the adults were afraid of, since me and my brothers had played in that exact same field every day and there was nothing out there that was scary.

I turned to my brothers and said, “I will be right back.” They did not react when I got up to leave. I quickly went inside to ask my mom if she knew what the adults had been talking about. As I entered the apartment I said, “Mom, do you know why those people are pointing out toward the field?” she turned to look at me, “Stop being nosy or I am going to spank you.” I quickly ran outside, afraid that she would not let me go back outside. My brothers and friends were still playing in the exact same spot I had left them. As I rejoined them, I still remained curious about what was going on in the field at night. I turned to my friends and asked if they knew what was going on with the field. My friend Omar, whose family ran the apartment complex, said no. My other friend Michael looked at me and said, “There are ghosts in there.” I laughed at him when he said that because I didn’t believe in ghosts. I told him he was dumb. He said that his mom told him to stay away from that side of the field tonight or she was going to spank him. I looked at him and thought he was making it up to scare us.

Throughout the day, I kept noticing different adults from the complex going to that exact same spot and pointing out into the field. I had finally decided that I was going to ask one of the adults. I noticed that one of the adults pointing out into the fields was my mother’s friend Thelma. So I left my friends and brothers and mustered what little courage I could and approached Thelma and asked her, “Why is everyone pointing out there?” Thelma stopped and looked at me for what seemed forever, gauging if she should tell me or if it was her place to say. She must have decided that I should know because she sat me down on the stairs and leaned toward me saying, “You cannot tell your brothers.” I promised her I wouldn’t, but remember thinking, “I can’t wait to tell my brothers.” Thelma leaned in close and said that she was going to tell me a story.

Thelma began talking. She said, “There was once lived a girl in this neighborhood before the apartment complex was built that always crossed the field to get to the store that was on the other side. Her parents had told her that she should not cross the field because she did not know who or what was in there. The girl did not listen to her parents, and, one night, the girl went in to the field and was attacked by an unknown man and killed. Her parents had found her body that night when she had failed to return home from the store. I was shocked when I had this story because I had never heard of anyone ever being killed. She continued her story by saying that when the land was bought and the apartment complex built, the first tenant who resided upstairs was sitting outside in front of her door and happened to look out toward the field and saw a girl being attacked by a man. The woman had screamed for someone to call the police. One of her neighbors had called the police. When police finally arrived, they went out to the field but found no one in the field. A year later, someone else had seen the exact same thing. I had not connected the story with what the adults were pointing at. She explained that the girl always appeared in the same spot every year on a particular day.

After Thelma had finished telling the story, I sat there for a while not knowing whether I should believe the story or wondering if she was just trying to scare me. Thelma had said before she left me that today was the anniversary of the girl’s death she said that all the adults had heard the story and were waiting to see if her ghost would appear. She sounded serious, but I still didn’t quite believe her. I rejoined my brothers and friends in the small yard where they were playing and had decided on the way not to tell my brothers the story. As the day went on, my attention was divided between playing with my brothers and friends and watching that particular spot of the field that was attracting more adults as the sun started to set. As the streetlights turned on, my brothers and I knew that it was time to go inside for dinner.

After we had eaten our dinner, my brothers and I sat down to watch T.V but I was still too distracted, I wondered if the girl would make an appearance. As the night went on, my brothers fell asleep watching T.V. As my mother approached the door she yelled, “Stay inside and watch your brothers. I will be back.” I wondered if my mother was going with the other adults to look at that side of the field. As I saw her leave, I knew that she

had not locked the door because we rarely locked the doors. I opened the door to see if I could see my mother. Once I saw that she was not around, I opened the door slowly and stepped outside. I could see all the adults gathering together and looking out toward the field. I looked for my mother, hoping that she would not see because I knew I would be in trouble for sneaking out of the apartment. I climbed the stairway to get a better view of the field. I did not know what I would see, but knew that I had to know if the story was true or not. I can't recall how long we were out there or who had seen the ghost first. All I remember was someone yelling, "Oh my god, there it is." I quickly turned toward the field and saw it. You could not make out the faces of the ghosts clearly, but you could see that there was a large man attacking a woman. At first I could not believe what I was seeing and thought maybe somebody was playing a prank on us by pretending to be the girl. However, the images disappeared as quickly as they appeared. I quickly went down the stairs and back inside the apartment before my mom got back. It was hard to go to sleep. My mind was racing, trying to find an explanation for what I had seen out in the field. I decided that I would go into the field the next day and prove that it was a prank.

I don't remember what time I had fallen sleep, but I knew it was morning because my brothers were arguing over who was going to get the prize from the cereal box. I woke up and after settling the fight over the cereal prize, I told my brothers that we were going to play a game in the fields. After we had eaten breakfast, brushed our teeth, showered and gotten dressed, we headed outside to play. I lead my brothers through the crack in the fence that had a path that everyone used to get across the field. As we made our way through the path, my brothers kept asking when are we going to play, I told them to, "Hold on and stop crying." I was determined to get to the side of the field where I had seen the images the night before. As we made our way to the spot, I looked to see if I could see any foot prints or if the grass was squished down due to people hiding in the field. I saw that there was no indication that the field had been disturbed by anyone. I looked up from the spot of the field where I had seen the ghost. I could see my mother outside of our apartment talking to her friend Thelma. After that day, I knew that ghosts exist. ■ ■ ■

GREEN MISERY

Samuel A. Ortiz



The act of driving never satisfied my soul until today. Being behind the wheel leaves me alone with my thoughts and that is never a safe place to be. The eyes must be on the road not within the self. Fortunately, I have grown to appreciate these moments of introspection as they are the only moments I truly have to myself. This spontaneous decision to tour the West Coast of the United States would disgust my 17 year old self, but I am glad that times have changed. No longer am I the angry 17 year old pseudo intellect who despised the capitalistic society in which he was born in. With experience I became less bitter, not happier by any sense, just less bitter. The divorce of my parents was a necessary evil that I have come to terms with. In my youth I hated both of them for ruining any hopes of a perfect childhood. I accept the death of all things rather than fear it. Although I have not settled down yet, not that it is my priority, my career has been successful. I redefined a lot of business curriculum and business practices within the state of Arizona. With a group of local business owners, I advocated the importance of purpose in business instead of profit. We created programs that supported local artists, farmers, business owners, and organizations. Sadly, not all changes have been for the better. Friendships that claimed to be forever lasted only one year, broken business partnerships thanks to personal differences, relationships ruined thanks to the cynicism in my youth, but this trip is meant to resolve my demons.

The first stop is Las Vegas, Nevada. I don't travel to Vegas to gamble away my student debt, I go there to disappear. In a city where hundreds of people visit with the hopes of relaxation I am nothing to them. I roam the streets with Radiohead's "How to Disappear Completely" on loop, absolutely devoid from the cacophonous tunes provided by the orchestra of Vegas, cars, and contemplate whether or not to join them on the streets. Late at night, the city shows its true nature: a fluorescent multi-colored wasteland housing aspiring artists, alcoholics, prostitutes, drug dealers, strippers, and tourists. Admittedly, walking down the strip with someone by your side is thrilling. You get to admire the artistry of street performers, take photos with Batman and SpongeBob, step in urine and/or throw-up, watch water dance to Elton John's "Your Song" at the Bellagio, and witness many wild antics by late-night drinkers with company. It doesn't have to be romantic, as if there is romance to be had in the city that never sleeps.

It has been years since I've spoken to Theo Jones and it is on trips like this that I miss hearing his rather bitter take on the world. Ever since I graduated from Arizona State University in 2018, he decided that by being his acquaintance I would drag him down. Theo was never much of a fan of the systemization of education and was less fond of my career choice – business. He despised capitalism and I became a drone according to him. Despite our differences in ideologies, we remained best friends for many years

until our split. We met after my parents' divorce in the 6th grade. I needed a friend so I created one. Our fundamental years were spent roaming the great plains of Argonia and killing armies of smiling blue blobs in *Dragon Quest VIII*, skateboarding the streets of our suburban playground, and enjoying the innocence of puberty. However, high school complicated our relationship. Theo never escaped the burdens of his past and became a bitter old man at the age of 14. He didn't exist until 6th grade, but he experienced everything I had experienced. While I worked vigorously on school work he relived the events leading to his birth. The violent exchange between my father and mother haunted him. Hearing two alcoholics bicker is rarely enjoyable unless you are walking the streets of Las Vegas.

The road to Nevada is not a simple one to digest, but that can be said for any road. The scenery is very monotonous – Theo's favorite phrasing. Sure it can be pretty to look at from time to time, but it reveals the laziness of the universe. Every rock from a distance looks identical. The bushes that happen to populate the background are all green and on the verge of death. Theo and I spent a lot of time behind the wheel. The trips weren't that miraculous. Most of them were to the supermarket, school, work, concerts, and, on occasion, a gathering of friends. Forgetting the past isn't as simple as it should be. Of all our drives together, the most memorable one is our very first one as fully licensed motorists.

The smell of the sun was hard to remove from the interior of my 1994 Volkswagen Jetta. A problematic car was my punishment for postponing the driver's license test for 2 years. The midnight purple paint job was still visible and with no sign of chipping, but that was an illusion. Under the hood it was a completely different story. The car was missing a vital component that every Arizonan should be familiar with, functioning AC. Sweat, hair, and fat don't mix well in the heat and even when I was wearing a loose heather gray t-shirt and some khaki shorts the sun still placed its rays on me. Putting its other issues aside – breaks, oil, thermostat, etc. – this less than perfect piece of machinery got me from point A to B and all subsequent letters. I was grateful for that.

Theo was in the passenger seat admiring the lack of scenery when he began to speak, "It's about time you got your driver's license. It's March of 2014 and you've had the chance since 2012 to have it, why so long? Well, at least we are free from your family now. We can go to parties, get drunk, and maybe even score a little something on the side." His smug face hid underneath a well-trimmed beard which hid under a thick layer of sweat. His sky blue denim button-up and black chinos were a horrible choice to wear in Arizona, even for March, but business casual was his style – an expensive one at that.

"It was anxiety. Besides I wouldn't call it freedom, we still have to answer to my mom and my dad – on the occasion that we get to see him. Besides, after I graduate I am going to community college." I was 17 going on 18 at the time and Theo expected independence, but I knew that I wouldn't have that chance. I wouldn't have the ASU party lifestyle that Theo expected. I had a responsibility to my little sister, Aracely. As tempting as it was, all I could do was continue to stay sober for her safety and have done so for the most part.

There was a moment of silence for the next two stop-signs...stop lights...whichever one fits to the backdrop. We were returning from Estrella and heading toward Buckeye on Yuma. The scenery consisted of dirt, houses, stop signs, and even more dirt. The great landscape of the Earth, nothingness. Theo was the one to break the silence. "Do you know why the roads were made?"

"Was it so that transportation could be easier?"

"Maybe for feeble-minded people like you, but no. They're a product of capitalism. The roads connect us to the places every capitalist pig created, to the shopping malls, the restaurants, the expensive seasonal resorts. All they do is replace valuable ecosystems. It's the same thing with traffic signals, they're replacements for trees and cacti. All those that thrive on the shop-till-you-drop mentality, those people are the new housefly."

"Doesn't that seem a bit cynical? There are benefits to capitalism."

"Like what, the ability to buy yourself a \$300 piece of machinery for the sake of keeping with trends? Stuffing your mouth with strawberry syrup infused milk to satisfy the thirst caused by your self-imposed sweet tooth? Enjoying the grease that clogs your arteries simply because it is total bliss? Excuse me for having a brain that can think for itself."

"No need to spout your pseudo-intellectual nonsense in my direction. Sometimes it's best to keep this existential crisis to yourself."

"You should know by now Johnny-boy, our lives are one big existential crisis just waiting to be heard," as we drove in front of a house he said, "Look at those poor kids having fun with their water balloons, they have no idea what they will face in life. Most of their parents may end up getting a divorce and if they're lucky their parents might have already gotten one. They will face what you have faced, what I have faced, what every pile of dust has faced. The death of their parents, probable unexpected pregnancies, tumultuous relationships that may lead to divorce, domestic violence, failure, success, and ultimately their death. It continues for every generation. Their children will experience the same events, their children's children will too, and so on and so forth. A vicious circle of monotony. Perhaps Philip K. Dick was right, the empire never ended!"

"It may seem reasonable, but don't you think it's a little bit far-fetched," we were pulling up to my neighborhood and closing in on the street in which I lived, "I am no longer a man of God, thanks to you, but having some hope would be nice—"

"That's a concept I can't cling onto. Hope is always fleeting from me, Johnny. You know how I am, a happy smile and a sad soul." We parked in front of my house, a two-story suburban prison, and took down the groceries — it has been a while since then but it was probably milk and water, the usual. The scenery was similar to that of Yuma road, if not worse. All the sights were the same, except the suburban neighborhood coated the dirt with cement and planted an abundance of trees instead of traffic signals — at least the people who made the community put basic human needs into consideration.

Every house was built similarly to give each tenant or home owner the idea that they were truly individual. As if having a Toyota Tundra rather than a Honda Civic and a brown color palette rather than a light brown color palette would differentiate their living situation any better. The suburbs was another name for monotony. Sooner or later we become pigs in a cage on antibiotics and are faced with one question: what am I? As if labeling oneself gives meaning to life. If only it were that simple.

"I know how you are Theo, I can feel the same at times, but I like to indulge myself with some hope. I need some light in my life or else I'd go mad. By the way, thanks for helping me with the grocery list."

"No problem, I'll be playing *Dragon Quest VIII* in the meantime."

I started to put the groceries where they belonged when I heard my mom walking down the stairs and into the kitchen. She had worked another long shift at Walmart and still had her uniform: navy blue shirt, black dress pants, and all black shoes. "Did you get everything?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, I'm going back to sleep. Take care of your little sister. I just wanted to make sure if you got back okay."

This was our usual conversation, a quick hi and bye. We were never close, but we were never distant either. She had to maintain three kids after the divorce, an 8-year-old who was struggling to deal with divorced parents, a 17-year-old who was best friends with himself, and a 23-year-old who was the second parent of the household, so I couldn't blame her for always sleeping. It didn't help that by the end of senior year Theo and I agreed on practically every issue and she hated when I spoke like him, not that she knew him. He would shut everyone out except for me, the same way I do to everyone here at the strip. Despite the success I've had in my career and the positive changes I've made in my life, Theo Jones is all I need. ■ ■ ■

WALKING IN PURGATORY

Taylor Hollcroft



I'm in a wash in the desert, flip flops on my feet and light clothing on my body. I don't exactly know how I ended up in this wash or what I was even doing here. Maybe I was hoping to find a rattlesnake or cut up my legs walking through the tumbleweeds. There are footprints leading ahead of me and following behind me, so someone else must have been here before; strange how they were the same size and imprint of my flip flops...

The sun is beating down on my fair skin, and I'm still wondering what possessed me to go hiking in a wash without sunblock; I can already feel my porcelain skin frying and make a mental note to buy aloe when I get home. My shoe slips on a smooth rock and I go down to one knee, scraping up the other on the pebbles. What the hell am I doing down here? I should just turn around and go home to nurse my sunburn and skinned knee, but for some reason I rise to my feet and continue walking. My knee is stinging and bloody, and I can feel the red liquid running down my shin. Why can't I stop walking? What is in this desert wash that I absolutely have to see? It better be Fabio naked on the hood of a sports car.

Now, my lips are chapped and my mouth is dry and sticky. I didn't bring water, or any gear for that matter, and I realized that I didn't even have my phone in my pocket. Wonderful. If I drop from a heat stroke then I have to pray that someone finds me before I die. My eyes are filled with sunlight even though they're narrowed into a tiny slit; it's so bright out here. The dead weeds on the edges of the path are rustling from things moving about inside of them; probably lizards and snakes waiting for me to die so they can eat me. This irrational thought slips through my mind without a second glance, which means I'm going crazy from dehydration. Why didn't I bring water to the desert?

Pain is shooting up my feet to my knees from trekking in improper footwear, and my head is pounding from thirst and heat. Yet I continue my journey through this damned wash to find Fabio (who I was convinced was waiting for me at the end). How long was this anyway? I could see the corner always in front

of me, but I never seemed to turn it. I glanced behind over my shoulder and saw a mirror image of the corner before me, only flipped; have I been walking in a circle this whole time? No, nothing looks familiar except the shoe prints of someone else. Someone else who walked through here wearing flip flops...

I tried calling out to Fabio, hoping that he'd hear me and come running—naked of course—around the corner with an arm full of icy water. Nothing but a dry croak came out of my throat, and no Fabio appeared around the bend. He just hadn't heard me, that's all. I'll just keep walking and—

No! I'm done walking! Why the fuck am I still walking?! I try to plant my feet in place, but the signal never gets there from my brain and I'm still moving forward. I start yelling angrily at my disobedient feet to stop moving, but those brats didn't listen. They probably couldn't hear me because I sounded like a rasping squeak. I began beating my legs in hopes that my feet would get the message, but all that got me was a few bruises and a fresh trickle of blood down my scraped knee. Down the wash I went, moaning softly to myself and praying for an end to this nightmare.

Fabio, Fabio, Fabio. I said his name over and over, hoping that he'd appear in front of me with water, a foot massage, and a sports car. There were blisters on my feet now and rocks stuck in the bottom of my flip flops that were poking the soles of my feet. I was red as a sixties girl's lipstick, and my lips had cracked and were bleeding. I was completely beyond rational thought now, hallucinating water bottles on the sides of the wash and planes in the clear sky. My steps had become lurching, and I trip over a large rock again. This time, I lay sprawled on the ground, my cries of pain nothing but whispers. I didn't even have enough water in my body to cry.

Where was Fabio? Why wasn't he helping me? Didn't he love me anymore? Why were my feet torturing me by making me walk like this? Even lying in a heap on the ground, my body forced me to continue until I was crawling over the sharp pebbles. Why was I still down here? Why couldn't I turn that corner? WHY CAN'T I STOP WALKING?!

I couldn't do it anymore. I collapsed in the dirt with a trail of bloody handprints and knee-prints behind me, panting to catch my breath and squeezing my eyes shut against the sunlight. If naked Fabio didn't come around that corner right now, I was going to divorce him and keep the car. Then I'd put him in this stupid wash and see how he liked it. Oh well, somebody else will find me soon, probably somebody who saw a silly woman wandering in the desert and wondering why. Yeah, they probably flagged down a passing policeman and asked them to check on me. I'll be out of here soon, and then I can soak in a cold bath. I just need a nap real quick, yeah...

...I'm walking in a wash wearing only flip flops and light clothing, staring down at the shoe prints underfoot. Huh, somebody else was down here wearing flip flops, too... ■■■

IN A KINGDOM BY THE SEA

Racquel Cocchiola



Poe, Edgar Allan Poe. I had heard the name but in the form of owls. Our school mascot at Litchfield Elementary School was The Owls. We had a cage near the library with two owls in it, Edgar and Poe. Later, they brutally attacked and killed each other in the dead of night and were later replaced with Alan the owl. I often fed these owls and quails, every Friday early enough where the world smelled fresh and crisp. This, however, wasn't the strangest thing at the elementary school, the school had (I say had because in the last two years the school has been almost completely remodeled) been around since 1928. Back then it was a high school. The gym was said to hold a deceased janitor in the time clock (which now has a home at the Old Pueblo Pub, right across the street, with no dead janitor found). In the boys' bathroom, PE classes constantly swore that Bloody Mary resided in that mirror and I don't think anyone (boys or girls) would go to those bathrooms alone. The bathroom was an old locker room from the high school days of the school which creaked and moaned constantly. Along with all of these stories, the bell tower (no longer holding a bell) was often a source of controversy. All of us heard and repeated stories of a woman (an undead woman) who lived up there and would only come down at night when no one was around, we often thought we could see her when we would glance up at lunch. One side of the caged in tower was mangled like someone fought to get through it.

Regularly, I would wear my hair in a high, tight, blue scrunchy, my bangs resting right above my enormous blue eyes. I often wore my school spirit shirt that was tie dyed from top to bottom with light blue, regular blue, then dark blue layered over a pair of bright white shorts which matched "perfectly" with my white and pink light up Sketchers (shoes being the only thing that changed from kindergarten to fifth grade). I never missed a Friday helping the art teacher (who's entire persona escapes my memory) to feed those owls. However, Edgar Allan Poe himself, I knew nothing of until my 7th grade at Western Sky

Middle School in Mrs. Thompson's literature class, I had always enjoyed reading from a young age and often received awards for how much I read and how much I understood what I read. I merely did this to receive a praise paper, a meddle, or a trophy to make my dad proud.

At that point in elementary school I did not care what my mom thought. She was too focused on my baby sister, Jacquelyn, who constantly smelled like baby food which I found icky. My mom had always seemed to be more focused than she had ever been on me since she worked downtown for a company called GPEC when I was young, and I was left with my dad and his ASU college student shenanigans. Mrs. Thompson's class was the best and worse room I had ever been in. Even today when I see her around the neighborhood I cringe at the site of her. She always wore an M&M necklace that held her teacher identification card and keys, not to mention her room being filled with M&M chotskies. She was obsessed. She gave me my first letter grade that was anything below an A. This did not make me happy. She did, however, introduce me to the master of dark poetry and pain, Edgar Allan Poe, whom I immediately was interested in since I simply, knew the name. I was obsessed with him and reading his works. His poetry lead me toward a path of empathy toward people but strength and secrecy within myself.

Sophomore year, I transferred to Xavier College Preparatory which is an all girls Catholic high school. That year in my English class, we read *Huckleberry Finn* and I said something about the theme of the book (which I can't quite remember) that intrigued my teacher, Mrs. Hubbard, she was a "hip" but stern teacher. Her hair was short, a long bob haircut in the front, and very short in the back. The glasses she wore were almost too big for her face but she somehow made it work. I often found myself looking at her shoes brought against the cold tile floor on the second floor of the Fitzgerald Hall building at Xavier. Those shoes never matched her age and she never repeated wearing a pair and made them work with her outfit of the day and her age. From that point on I was really close to Mrs. Hubbard, she even put my name in to be requested for the academic decathlon team without me knowing. Writing/ reading (especially poetry) came full circle for me when we memorized, *Annabel Lee*.

So much in my life had been happening since 7th grade, I had little time to focus on reading or writing for pleasure. The instant in which the twenty three of my peers and myself sat in strict rows with our "Xavier buns" with bows tied around, alternating white and blue polos, tube socks matched with either Converse or Vans and our infamous pleated blue and gold skirts I began my journey back to Poe. I clearly remember the day because it was raining, it had been dark and cloudy the whole day, and I loved it, the smell of rain wafted through all the buildings and only made me more excited to rediscover Poe. The school has a history of being generally "preppy." The only things that had changed 40 some years was the hair, and shoes (this was our form of expression). The dreaded uniform will always stay intact. Looking around me each girl, exhausted from the pressing schedule each and every one of us had, seemed to come alive at the idea of reading in groups and were revitalized by the sound of rain hitting the windows. Then we began, "*It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea...*" ■■■

SAFE

Sondra Taylor

There was something beyond that bend that was calling my name. Like a whisper in a hall: enough to entice my senses, but not enough to indulge my reasoning. It was a voice so familiar yet so forbidding. I inched closer to the bend.

The sky began to turn black and the smell of rain was imminent. It was a storm that had been brewing for several days and a wash was no place to be during a rainstorm. Once, a man had been caught in this very wash during a rainstorm looking for his dog. It wasn't until four days later that they found the old man hanging limply from a twisted tree branch and his dog lying patiently under his body, waiting to go home.

As I approached the bend, glimpses of light began to flash. Within each flash were pictures from a silent movie that I couldn't place. They were reeling through my mind: there was a little girl dancing in her mother's heels and then a little girl with a busted lip. There was a young boy and girl sharing their first kiss and then a young girl crying with ripped panties. There was a woman smiling on her wedding day and then a woman lying dead on the kitchen floor.

I finally cleared the bend as the rain began to trickle. There, underneath a mangled, dead oak tree was a small patch of disturbed earth. Leaves had been placed conspicuously above the mound and from the naked eye, it looked like any other pile from a dying winter tree. However, it was April and the leaves had no reason to be on this mound.

I stood above the dirt knoll, staring down. Her voice came to me, teasing my ear. A short laugh loomed



in the air; her laugh and I knew she was taunting me.

I threw myself fervently on top of the mound and furiously clawed away at the Earth, like a greedy dog would do with a juicy bone. It was automatic. I had no control over my body nor my thoughts. I was not in my head anymore, I was in hers.

The rain poured down now, harder than I could have ever imagined. The water pierced through my shirt and lashed my back like a whip, but I didn't flinch. It was as if God himself were telling me to stop, "Leave her child, she's with me." But I couldn't stop, I had to know. No, I needed to know.

And just like that I got my answer.

I had emptied three feet of dirt from the mound before I felt something hard and cold beneath my hands. Relief exhaled from my body and I began to ease up. A smile rushed to my face.

I cleared the dirt from my treasure when it hit me, the fragrant scent of sunflowers. Big, fresh, beautiful sunflowers. The kind you smell on a hot August day. Then the sickly, sweet smell of cherry popsicles loomed high in the air, mixed with bits of coconut scented suntan lotion and the smell of chlorine from an ice-cold, blue pool clung to my nostrils. She was still in my head, and would probably always be.

I finished removing the dirt from her face and pulled out a silver-rimmed hairbrush hidden in my back pocket. I could still remember the days when she would grow furious trying to brush away all those little yellow hairs that stood at attention. The blonde locks she fussed about nearly every day were now lifeless and fell out with every brush stroke. My smile faded when I noticed the clump of hair plastered in my hands.

Her skin, once so bronzed and soft was now pale and cracked. Her red lips, the ones I kissed thousands, maybe millions, of times, were now chapped and peeling away. And her eyes, those beautiful blue eyes; the ones that had looked up at me pleading for forgiveness.

I looked away, hoping the white film over her eyes would block out the shame that ran across my face.

I bent down and pressed my lips firmly to hers before returning the dirt to her face, once again burying the secret that only I knew. The news reports about a woman's body being found last night would have to belong to someone else. Here she was, still lying in her grave, in all her elegance and beauty. I finally knew she was safe. That was a husband's job after all, to know your family was safe.

Once every grain of dirt was returned, I put the last of the leaves on top of the mound and stood up. My back was aching from the hour I had spent slumped over this spot and I was beginning to shiver from the coldness in the bend.

I stared up into the sky but only felt the cold, hard stings of the rain. It burned like acid on my sinful face and I quickly washed away the marks with my dirty hands.

I turned away from the mound, feeling more ashamed than ever and began my lonely walk back up the wash. I looked back only once, to be sure she was still there, before disappearing from the bend entirely.

The flood was coming and I smiled, knowing she would be safe. ■ ■ ■

PHOENIX

Jorge A. Flores



This is the city of the sun,
Where the land is dry as ashes and the air with
no life at all.

The blazing sun warms the place with its shining
rays, illuminating it.

Darkness has to hide from light.

Depression and sadness melts like ice standing in
fire.

Little green areas are sanctuaries for the many
creatures seeking where to rest.

The people here live under the presence of the
mighty flaming bird.

It flies above the blue skies during the day.

Its presence means reborn from the ashes and rises
again.

From the distance a canyon so deep and strong in
the middle of the desert.

Its many different colors orange, brown, green,

represent the only colors that this place has.
Generations to come will stand proud and strong.
Sandstorms are curtains that open and close the
gates of the village.

Water is the most beautiful treasure that can be
found.

Everything grows and burns with so much life.
Everybody runs trying to escape from the radiant
fire.

At night, cold and shining moon replaces the sun.
Countless stars illuminate the night.

A lonely wolf sings to the moon.

Cactus dance during the endless night.

When the sun rises once more, the bird rules once
again.

This is a place, where everything rises from
infernal ashes. ■ ■ ■

ALL I HAVE TO DO IS DREAM

Racquel Cocchiola

Shadow dreams are fascinating, the darkness, the monsters in every person's head come out to play from the darkest crevices of an ever wondering mind just as you think you are safe in the deepest slumber. What happens when it comes before that slumber is even worse. This is when he most often decides to come out, that coward. He's an enigma, so twisted, so sick, so crippling, what a horrifying creature. He feeds off the good and turns my human body into nothing but a void, nothing left but and empty vessel. That's where it all stems, the panic that's paralyzing, the paranoia that is never ending. Someone is there. Someone is watching. Someone is in me. Someone is near me. Whatever he or I am is important either now or in the future, there's a meaning to it all.

The horror of life gives a purpose, makes a person understand and experience life in an enlightened way. This may come in flashes that I can't understand and in tests that seem unbearable.

I laid in a fuzzy pink onesie, the silk attached cuffed against my chunky wrists and ankles with a little purple and white sheep patch that smiled right over my heart. I was squirming in the queen lodge pole bed in the master bedroom of my aunt's house in Pinetop, Arizona, surrounded by windows all open that let the misty view of the forest be seen, I don't even know if this happened but I've dreamt and seen it enough for it to be real. A being, a demon, appeared, black as my pupils just slinking across a fallen tree moving with ease without a human or animal body. I know it was a he and I knew he had a face, but you could not see it, I also knew he had eyes when his head motioned toward me but were not there. He came toward me moving faster and faster until he came right up to me when I screamed and he disappeared, into nothingness. I remember him visiting my dreams but was more concentrated my junior year of high school. I sat in my seat, deprived of sleep in my first period English class with Dr. Kathleen Conway when I drifted into some form of sleep and opened my eyes to see him I immediately began to violently shake and cry as the bell rang and I tried making it to my next class where my friend stopped me, I was unable to see due to the fog of tears in my eyes but it was Reggie, she was the goalie for our lacrosse team and became like a sister to me. She took me to the school counselor and this is where I realized I had developed another side to myself through stress.

Stress is a funny thing when you don't really think you're in a stressful situation at all. My whole life up to this point of my junior year in high school, I never really had a care or worry, I would complain about the school I transferred to but deep down I knew it was good for me. So it didn't really make sense why I felt so anxious, sleep-deprived, paranoid and often times angry. However, I was. After this first incident I found myself crying constantly, getting migraines, frequent dizzy spells and nose bleeds which would often land me in the nurses office to be taken home, this carried on through half of my senior year. Many said the symptoms were from the two concussions I had received playing lacrosse, and, looking back, they were probably right. These symptoms alleviated completely a month or so in the summer of 2014, after I graduated.

What does it all mean? During this time I didn't feel like myself, and even now I have days where something will trigger my emotions. Large groups of people I am not use to, unwanted or uncomfortable, unnecessary confrontation, someone telling me I did something wrong without me realizing it, even looking at someone whose face or facial expression I don't particularly like, all cause a violent anxiety attack. I often leave scratch marks all over my body, mostly on my face and stomach, which slightly bleed along with puffy eyes as the result of crying for hours that seems to last for days, shaking, my body violently shakes out of my control and leaves me more scared and alone than anything. I always think of the demon when this anxiety and paranoia engulf me. This enrages me, everything annoys me in this moment and theirs often no telling what I might do if a person says something I dislike. At this moment I am not myself. The excruciating pain, the sadness, ends, almost as soon as it had begun and more often than not, I sleep. Once I wake, I can't fathom what had happened, can't imagine the pain I felt, a small reminder is in the scratches across my forehead that will fade. I am a person with passion, and love, once I look back at this experience after each time it happens I realize pain is a necessary amenity to life, to suffer means you're alive, this pain is isolated and different to each person but every person does feel it. ■ ■ ■





mariposa

Estrella Mountain Literary Review

Estrella Mountain Community College (EMCC) is pleased to announce the ninth 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.

For more information, contact the EMCC Division of Arts and Composition at 623-935 8444 and visit estrellamountain.edu/mariposa.

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Awarding Judge

Mary Sojourner

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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.

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