

A close-up painting of a person's face, likely a woman, with a large black speech bubble overlaid on the left side. The face is rendered with soft, realistic colors, showing the eye, nose, and mouth. The speech bubble is a solid black shape with a tail pointing towards the bottom right. The background is dark and textured.

*The Ram's  
Tale*

*2007*



*The Ram's Tale*  
*2007*

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Cover artwork *Aviv Bessi* by Joaquin Cuesta Castro



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Robyn Bates, two-dimensional

Thom Halls, photography

Greg Hubbard, photography

*The aim of every artist  
is to arrest motion, which is life,  
by artificial means and hold it fixed  
so that a hundred years later,  
when a stranger looks at it,  
it moves again since it is life.*

William Faulkner

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## Foreword

We love publishing *The Ram's Tale* in the spring semester because all over campus there is energy abounding and it feeds our creative souls! The elm, crepe myrtle and pistache trees are glorious with all the different shades of green bursting from their seemingly sleeping branches. The flowering Camilla, azalea and Indian hawthorne are riotous in their colors! The sky can be the brightest blue holding up the biggest white clouds one day and the next, its hue can change to a dark stormy canvas. Students, faculty, staff—all busy with their academic work at hand—can also be seen transforming into flip-flop, sandal-wearing, bare-armed animated beings ready for the warm weather, and perhaps, summer adventure!

Within these pages *The Ram's Tale* editors have managed to capture some of the energy generated by Fresno City College students through their written word, two-dimensional art and photography. From the poems about Fresno air and sunsets to photography that captures innocence and the inside of our wonderful soon-to-be-restored Old Administration Building, this is the energy-filled life being explored in this edition. Viva la spring!

Managing Editors,  
Zay Logan and Margaret Hiebert



# Poetry

*The smell of ink is intoxicating to me—  
others may have wine, but I have poetry.*  
Abbe Yeux-verdi

## *Fresno Connoisseur*

Lillian Decker

**First Prize, Poetry**

I swirl the Fresno air in a fine glass and sniff  
I draw it into my lungs with effort  
Like breathing sediment  
Full-bodied diesel, with heavy undertones of pollen  
and industrial dairy  
I let the air roll to the back of my throat  
I taste the *terroir*, the sun-blazed valley earth,  
The generations dripping sweat and pesticide  
I pull back to examine the texture and color  
Thick and sienna hued as a thirty-year old zinfandel  
It will make a beautiful sunset

*To My Sisters Who Remain Bodies of Light  
So That We May Not Fall into Darkness*

Ife-Chudeni Oputa  
**Second Prize, Poetry**

You call us chocolate  
Sweet thang  
Honey baby suga love  
Vision of your dreams  
Star of your fantasies  
“Can a brotha get a piece a that?”  
Our eyes roll  
Our lips smack  
Our necks twist  
We lift our hand to our hip and shift our weight to one side  
Our lips say, “You ain’t gettin’ nonna this”  
Our minds say, “I still got it”

We tell ourselves we’re not waiting in vain  
That we don’t have to settle for aight over fine  
For triffin’ over successful  
For boy over man  
Lust over love  
We tell each other “He’ll come along”  
Just be patient  
He’s out there for us  
You tell us we’re the one

Sounds of “I love you” echo  
Off the walls as we open to you  
The gates of heaven  
Angels sing to announce your coming  
And the streets of gold rise to meet your feet  
And you deliver to us pure white silk  
To lay upon our throne

Tears ski silently down the slopes of our cheeks  
Leaving hot, dry trails  
Salting our kisses  
The weight of your body still pinning us against sheets  
As the sounds of your footsteps echo  
The walls are silent

We watch the phone  
We watch the clock  
We sleep on dirty sheets  
Avoiding the stains  
The proof of your presence  
The hope of your return  
We wake with aching backs      broken hearts

The sounds are chilling  
We hear each other's screams  
We see each other's reflections  
We feel each other tremble

We know the same fears  
We share the same regrets  
The memory of the footsteps  
    The echoing walls  
    The sheets – mustard, rose, lavender, eggshell  
But all with the plague from your pure white silk

The white silk that infected our bodies  
Weaved its way through our veins  
Carved itself into the very fiber of our being  
The white silk that lay silent      sleeping      waiting

The white silk that was pulled with the blood from our brown arms  
    by white doctors in white coats in a room with white walls  
The white silk    that reflects      the white light    at the end of  
    the dark tunnel that follows      our too short life



# *I Saw*

Lemuel Gary

## **Third Prize, Poetry**

I saw  
that his  
broken crucifix  
was lain atop his forehead cold  
boldly smoldering in a pile of greenish silver...  
    and his arms were spread wider than archangels wings  
...feet pointed towards the gloom  
a swollen December moon  
    our little brother...  
Raheem.  
His dreams are now dead.  
Slipping away with the bullets  
James peered over his Park Terrace roof  
and wondered when last he slept  
without murder  
Beneath the Friendship bench  
red streaks've burned black.  
    his  
dried blood  
thins  
with  
the sirens  
    too late to much  
matter  
    or send  
the Cold City  
back into Her fog  
It creeps  
heavier than hearts  
and older...  
through the Slotta House--

the Southside's  
broken stop signs  
mean  
nothing.  
We...  
from Lowe Street  
Are  
starving  
to death  
to see  
our peace  
to eat  
and  
be  
  
Alive.

## *Haiku*

Desiree Young

### **Honorable Mention**

Morning sun rises.  
The light is stinging my eyes,  
Awake too early.  
Refreshing rainfall,  
If only for a moment,  
Cleansing smog filled air.  
The leaves are falling,  
Shades of red, yellow, and brown  
Don't want to rake them.  
Soft lilting music  
Notes lingering in the dark  
A single flute plays.

## *Poetry (Where I'm From)*

Ife-Chudeni Oputa

### **Honorable Mention**

Where I'm from the only culture is pop culture  
And kids have ethnic names like Apple  
And Audio Science

Where I'm from Starbucks replaces the drug dealers on every  
corner  
And instead of making sly exchanges for crack or Mary J  
We trade Adderall and Vicodin for tall caramel Frappuccinos  
Soy, hold the whip

Where I'm from rich girls get high off mystery drugs they buy  
where you're from  
And while police raid your neighborhoods and arrest your moth-  
ers, fathers, sisters, brothers  
Your suppliers are sittin' high drinkin' Mai Tais back  
Where I'm from

There are no thieves or juvenile delinquents  
Just kleptomaniacs and misguided teens  
Whose daddies never loved them and mothers are bi—  
Z solving daddy issues of their own

Where I'm from we don't go to church  
We go to therapy  
And pray at the altar of Dr. Fill-My-Prescription  
Where we do the sign of the Rx before taking a holy communion  
of Xanax and lithium

Where I'm from children rule the household  
Telling parents the dos and don'ts  
Wills and won'ts

How to, when to, why to  
There's no "I'll knock you into next week"  
"Don't make me snatch you"  
I brought you into this world I can take you out," where I'm from  
But sometimes my mother forgets

Where I'm from there's no Wal-Mart "Always Low Prices"  
Or Payless buy one get one anything  
It's I'll see your Fendi and raise you my Christian Dior, or Coach  
in a pinch, where I'm from

Hip-hop is a trend, not a way of life  
And my hips and natural rhythm automatically separate me  
From the girls who've been taking ballet since they were two

Where I'm from the girls say I don't look like the people where  
they're from  
So I bleach my skin  
I keep my English standard  
And my hair straight  
To prove that I'm like them  
But that's just cause I don't know where I come from

See I don't know that I'm from  
Lift Every Voice and Sing  
And Go Down Death  
Yet Still I rise

And it never occurred to me that Nina's Four Women were my  
mother  
My aunt  
My sister  
My friend  
Or that it was my legacy that was passed  
Mother to Son

And no one ever told me that I'm The Rose That Grew From  
Concrete  
Or that the Caged Bird sings for me  
Or that the King dreams for me  
Or that I am a woman  
Phenomenally

I guess I thought all that mess was just poetry

## *Brothas, a Sonnet*

Ife-Chudeni Oputa

The world that claims to love me will destroy  
my treasure chest of dreams and hopes and plans,  
saying I can't be a man, just a boy.

I am falling, I'm reaching, take my hand.

But I am strong and I must learn to fight,  
to make a statement, and to take a stand.

The world will try to crush me with its might.

I am falling, I'm reaching, take my hand.

I cannot spend my days handing out blame,  
or breaking myself at the World's command.

I must understand that from which I came.

I am falling, I'm reaching, take my hand.

Divided we fall, together we stand.

I am falling, I'm reaching, take my hand.

# *My Boyfriend*

Maylin Tu

My boyfriend's eyes are nothing like the stars;  
Jupiter is far more brilliant than his teeth's white:  
If silk be smooth, why then his hands are shards;  
If wit be hobbled than his wit stumbles with style.  
I have seen six packs of beer, frosty and chaste,  
But no such packs see I in his stomach;  
And some baked goods are more sweet to the taste  
Than all the kisses that might leave me flummoxed.  
I love to hear him play, yet well I know  
He's not as good as the Beatles or the Police:  
I grant I never saw Brad Pitt go,  
My boyfriend, when he walks, trips over his feet:  
And yet by heaven, I think him as fine  
As any model from Calvin Klein.



# *At Least*

Nicholas Delgado

I  
Want to  
Say thank you  
For everything you have  
Done for me in the past and  
Everything you're going to do for  
Me in the future. I know I haven't been  
The best son in the world, or the best son period.  
I know I have cost you a lot of money especially my DUI.  
I plan to pay you back every penny I have spent. I'm trying my  
Hardest to make you happy even though I know my actions have been  
Disappointing to you, but I'm trying to do my best in this cruel harsh world.  
I want to say that I'm sorry for the pain and extreme amount of money I have cost  
You. Once I graduate college and get my degree I plan on buying you and mom that  
Million-dollar house in Pismo Beach. Maybe by then I hope I won't be such a  
Disappointment to you. In the same token have you ever really been a father  
To me? You never really ever talked to me or even tried to get to know  
Me. You never went to any of my games, or to any performances.  
The only thing that you have ever given me was the all mighty  
Dollar. You did however give me a safe place to sleep  
Every night. I just want to know why the only time  
We talk it is about money or it is when we have  
Had a few beers. Is this how grandpa used to  
Talk to you? If it is, well I guess I have to  
Take the good with the bad. I just want  
To have somewhat of a relationship.  
I guess I want one because of what  
My homie told me one night when  
We were chillin'. He said don't  
Take your dad for granted and  
Try to spend time with  
Him, because at  
Least you still  
Have a  
Dad.

# *Night's World Below*

Rikki Mumm

The sky is black, pitch pitch black  
Luminous soft glowing moon hanging  
Stars like diamonds strewn across  
Ocean black distorted images below

Standing staring out the window  
The world I see beyond at two  
Late late night early early morn  
Sleep has fled insomnia binds

Staring beyond at the horizon  
A world not seen by all  
Beauty in night darkness surrounding  
Dreams living out there alive in your mind

Soft basting moonlight on the ground  
Illuminating only enough to see  
Sun rise coming couple hours more  
My private world lost to light

Sky pitch pitch black hanging glowing moon  
Stars are diamonds strewn dark ocean below  
Images wavy distorted in the water  
Window second story staring at the world below

# *When It Falls Away*

Senecia Wilson

Nighttime comes and everything changes  
The love we had for one another is gone  
I would cry if I were young enough  
To remember what it is like to dream of love  
Remember then when we were full of ourselves  
No one could convince us that we were destructible  
We could never allow ourselves to be  
Vulnerable to the elements  
Our society does not nurture love or lovers  
We are left to descend into the natural breakdown  
That is how it is they say  
That is life  
You live, you die  
You weep alone  
What a nightmare it is when we learn  
That love is not as regarded as it should be  
Precious gift from God  
Is just a thing to the human species

## *Añoranzas*

Ligia Pacheco

La oscuridad inmensa  
y el silente viento  
que cubrió mi alma  
me envolvió en su manto  
y en sus Fuertes ondas  
me llevó consigo  
y en el mundo mudo  
alcanzar yo pude  
divisar tu rostro  
que nunca tuve  
me entregué en el triste  
recorder continuo  
los momentos dulces  
que en pasión contuve  
por largas horas  
lloré tu ausencia  
y dormí añorando  
el despertar triunfal  
de tenerte siempre  
y descansar en paz

Remembrance

The immense darkness  
and the silent wind  
that covered my soul  
and wrapped me in his cloak  
and took me with him  
in his strong waves  
and in a deaf world  
I could barely  
see your face

which I never had  
I turned myself into the sad  
permanent memory  
of the sweet moments  
whose passion I hold  
for long hours  
I shed tears for your absence  
and I fell asleep wishing  
the victorious awakening  
of having you always  
and to rest in peace

# *Rewind*

## *--a Villanelle*

Desiree Young

I wonder what goes through your mind  
When you say the things you say.  
You never stop to pause or rewind.  
Are you really as tactless as I find?  
Your words do not logically relay.  
I wonder what goes through your mind.  
When she needs some of your time,  
You can't ever make her day.  
You never stop to pause or rewind.  
So often you are selfish and blind  
To the fragile person behind her ways.  
I wonder what goes through your mind.  
Within that daily confine  
Your eyes they always stray.  
You never stop to pause or rewind.  
It seems your once devoted heart she cannot find  
A question: Why does she continue to stay?  
I wonder what goes through your mind  
Because you never stop to pause or rewind.

# *June*

Sisy Sayachack

Remember our passionate night in June?  
My heart never felt so fulfilled, so warm.  
For once, I seemed more important than your moon,  
As you caressed me in the embrace of your arms.  
My heart never felt so fulfilled, so warm.  
As your hands glided so gently down my hair,  
As you caressed me in the embrace of your arms.  
I was lost in a world of just you and me there.  
As your hands glided so gently down my hair,  
You soothingly grazed the small of my back.  
I was lost in a world of just you and me there,  
As you tasted the inches of my neck.  
You soothingly grazed the small of my back  
And softly brushed upon my forehead your lips  
As you tasted the inches of my neck  
And you traced with your fingers on my hips  
And softly brushed upon my lips your lips,  
As not only our bodies, but our spirits became one  
And you traced with your fingers my hips.  
In that moment, it was my heart that you won  
When not only our bodies, but our spirits became one  
As we gazed into the souls of each others' eyes  
In that moment, it was my heart that you won  
For once, I was no longer your star lost in the sky  
We gazed into the souls of each others' eyes  
For once in your life, I seemed more important than your moon  
In that moment, I was no longer your star lost in the sky  
My love, remember that passionate night in June.

# *Identity*

Trisha Houston

Knowing who you are and who am I  
That makes all the difference in the world.  
One moment I know who I am, the next I don't.  
I hate the world; I crave the end of it.  
Other times I adore the wonders of it.  
I wonder and I sit.  
Who am I?  
All split up in pieces like shattered glass.  
Each bit so broken, far away, lost, unable to repair.  
I can only pick from the mixed remains.  
I develop a mosaic, made of scores of shattered dreams and identity.  
Putting in each piece, I dream for a moment or a second,  
Seeing the hopes appear and fade away.  
I glue the shattered piece, permanently, on a new pane.  
A new dream I hope.  
But alas, that pane still can break, sending the mosaic bits flying...  
Knowing the inspirations can fail you at any moment.  
You struggle to dream.  
Each bit, that you fought so hard to make a part of your life is  
    now gone.  
In place, void of hope and dreams.  
Strange lands beckons you to join.  
Gray, unloving and endless.  
The horizon appears across, the sun glints white not yellow.  
Void of color.  
Life is wasted.  
A wasteland, where all dreams are thrown away and filling up the  
    dunes.  
Rolling hills show all the failed dreams and desires.  
Rain falls and they wash down the drain with each drop of water.  
Refusing to learn hope again...  
The life slows to a standstill.



Time frozen.  
No future or no past.  
You stand alone, on a vast and barren empty earth.  
Sound echoes... alone...  
All alone...  
Miles and miles away the sound continue to sing  
Alone.

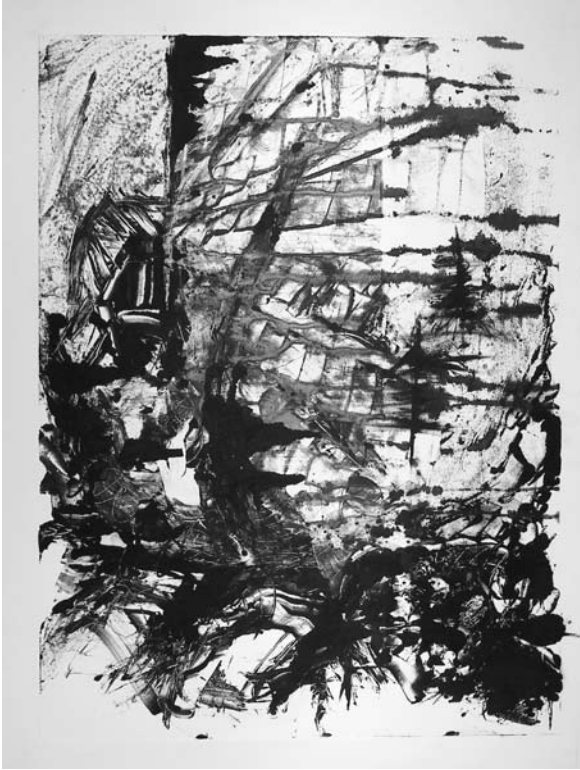
# *Foot-Printed Pillow*

Victor A. Perez

Somnambulant drifters  
caressing thoughts in my sleep  
with tightly whittled fingers  
crashing through this snow globe in time  
Somnambulant drifters  
tickling splinters  
scratching codes on my skin  
paving roads to my death? to my destiny?  
My festered toes  
typing pages in my dreams  
a story of lament and drinking  
with sonorous skeletons  
My fossil body, lifeless  
under a sky of marching satellites  
with pink Technicolor eyes

# *Two-Dimensional Art*

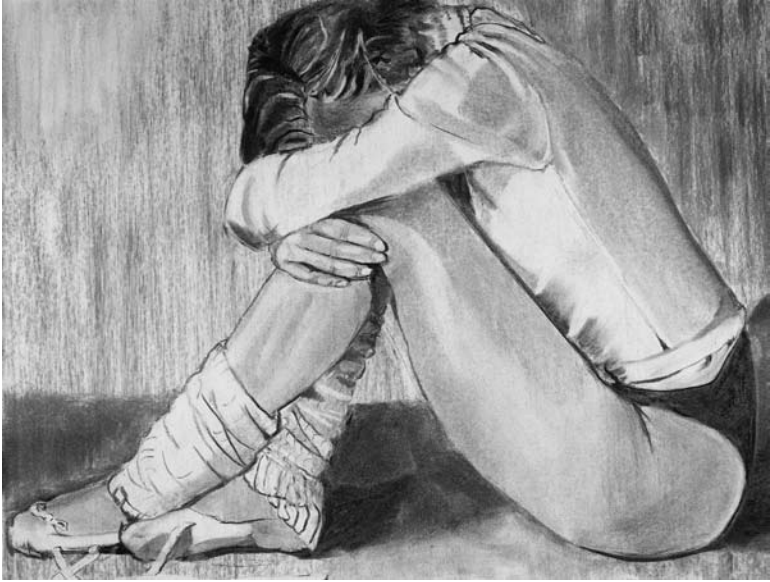
*All art requires courage.*  
Anne Tucker



## *Tree Execution*

Christopher Vasquez

**First Prize, Two-Dimensional Art**



*Pause*

Gary D. Jones

**Second Prize, Two-Dimensional Art**



## *The Rebuke of Acephale*

Michael Walker

**Third Prize, Two-Dimensional Art**



*Self Portrait, Interior Space*

Brian Carter

**Honorable Mention**



*Aviv Bessi*

Joaquin Cuesta Castro





Vincent Waring 3/10

## *Cabin*

Vincent Waring



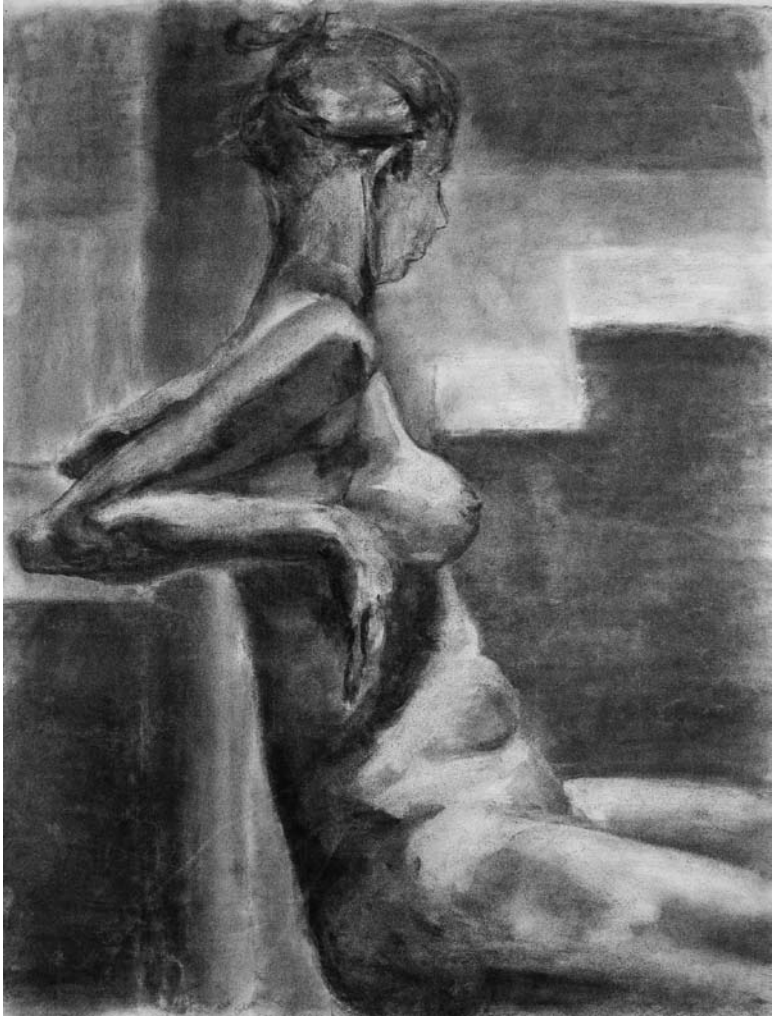
*Bee Keeper*

Amanda May Hansston

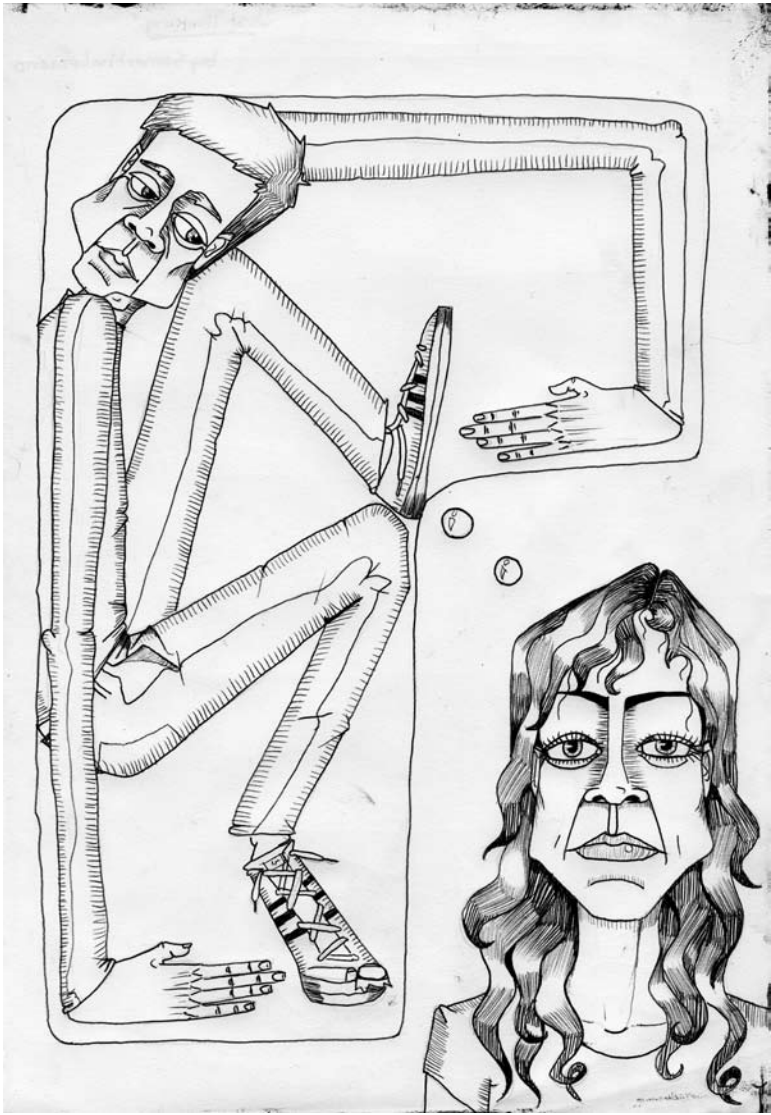


*Embrace the sleeping Giant*

Danielle Elise Sierra



*Figure 1*  
Cordero Ybarez



*Just Thinking*

Samantha Rene Lazcano



*Tree Study #1*

Christopher Vasquez

# *Fiction*

*The role of a writer  
is not to say  
what we all can say,  
but what we  
are unable to say.  
Anaïs Nin*

# *A Receipt I Would Keep*

Ryan Jacobsen

**First Prize, Fiction**

My entire life I had been a short cutter. I took the first short-cut of my life by forcing my mother to undergo a cesarean birth. Rather than facing the pressure, I opted for the easy way out. I bet the trend was set as a sperm, somehow taking a short cut to an egg nestling on one of my mother's fallopian tubes, probably her shorter one. I'm not gonna cop out and fault my genetic make up though the whole "born like this" bit. This for the most part, was self-induced.

I blame it being a part of the Nintendo generation. On Super Mario Brothers, level 1-2 to be exact. It's the level that taught me to take warp zones and bypass a majority of the game. I blame it on the game Contra, the one where you could start the game with ten times as many lives by pressing: up, up, down, down, left-right, left-right, B, A, and then start as the opening credits appeared. My life has been a search for the next extra life, warp zone, and turbo boost since those early thumb-blistering, television-cursing days of my childhood. I made parallels between Mario's World and our own. Sometimes one needs to cheat a little in an environment that is set to destroy you. In my case, I just took short cuts here and there. No harm, right?

I didn't last long in T-Ball. I'd run to first and rather than rounding second, I'd cut across the infield behind the pitchers mound and shoot straight to third. The term "rounding the bases" was non-applicable to me. It showed up in other areas of my life too, spread like a horny colony of ringworm on a high school wrestling mat. I'd cut across circular formations of puzzled-faced, finger pointing 3rd graders in duck-duck goose. I read the last chapter of Charlotte's Web, James and the Giant Peach, and any other book assigned growing up. I was the kid in catechism that spoke of the end of the world. Genesis never interested me. I wanted revelations, the apocalypse, the future.



I had problems with females as long as I've lived. Why hold hands when we can make out? As a 12 year old, I stridently slurped saliva and fumbled with Tara Hill's underdeveloped breasts in the middle rows of Granada theatre during Toy Story. And in my high school dating years, I developed the tee-ball syndrome all over again-going straight to third base. Diploma? I went straight for my G.E.D. Get the fuck out, shortcut college, see the world.

It got worse. I bought into pyramid schemes thinking I could strike it big. I even contemplated on going on one of those Alaskan crab runs in order to get ahead financially. I took the carpool lane alone, had a fake handicapped parking sign, lived off drive-thru fast food and cleaned my car in a drive thru car wash. I was the guy that boasted about being a step ahead of the norm. It's funny how sayings go: things change, life happens, the world rotates-blah-blah-blah. Because the world seemed so still, when that shit went down in the canal.

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It was like any other day. Richie had his blue hooded sweat shirt on and was over at my apartment smoking weed, selling weed, making brownies with weed, and listening to songs that mentioned weed. The blinds were down. My coffee table was a jungle of leftover fast food: bright wrappers, bitten burritos, and some withered tomatoes Richie didn't want on his Whopper. A glass bong or extra large to-go soft drink container sprouted through the jungle's canopy wherever room allowed it. My eyes were burning from lingering smoke. We were in our usual spot-a typical torn up, hand me down, front room apartment couch with our matching ass indentions. As usual, I was kicking Richie's ass at John Madden Football, when I got my little brother's phone call. I had been ignoring his calls for about a week and his persistence intrigued me.

So, I answered his call only to have him remind me what a piece of shit brother I was. He would never say that, but that's what I'd call my older brother if he had promised to help me with a science project and then flaked on me, if I had an older

brother. It was a simple project that he'd given me the heads up on a month or so in advance. I had told him I would take him to Yosemite to study some of its aquatic life, only to have my car break down shortly afterward. I couldn't tell him that because then my mom would bitch and moan for breaking a promise. Blame me for being an irresponsible car owner or something. Like my mom had never flaked on me.

There were two things that went through my mind: You can't let your little brother down, and don't give mom the ammo for one of her, "You're supposed to set an example" tirades. I had to think of something on the spot so I said, "No, dude, you don't need to worry about going there and observing them and all that because I caught specimens of all of them. They're here at my apartment I'll bring them over to you tomorrow because I got to go to work tonight. Okay. No need to worry about it. Okay, okay. Yeah, I went up there a few days ago and caught them. For sure, love you too. Bye-bye."

I only had to gather three things: some aquatic plants, and some local minnows and snails. I considered the pet store across town, but then I remembered seeing one of their fish bowl ecosystems. They had these fancy-tailed guppies and shiny yellow snails. The plants were these bright green, fanned out fern looking things. Maybe those would have fooled my brother and his 5th grade science teacher, but I didn't think so. He needed plain old grey minnows, and the ugly little snails that look like burnt pop-corn kernels. He needed the plants that looked and felt like the slimy, flattened lettuce on the bottom of the produce drawer in the refrigerator. He needed the stinky water they all thrived in. He needed the real deal. Looking back on it, if I had better transportation that day or if I hadn't been such a short cutter, I wouldn't have chosen to go to the canal. But I did, we did, Richie and I.

I had made many canal expeditions in my childhood, lifting rocks, barrels, and searching under concrete embankments for any little creature to call my own. I'd taken home toads, tree-frogs, bull frogs, garter snakes, tiger salamanders, minnows,

crawfish, a three legged turtle with B Bs stuck in its top shell, and a few bacterial infections which found their way into previously existing open wounds. I caught them all using a homemade net and a bucket. I figured that if I could do all that at twelve years old, it would be twice as easy now.

Richie was anti-canal from the beginning, but he was like that with anything that took his ass away from the couch and his lungs away from the bong. I could understand, he lived at home with his hardcore Christian parents and my apartment was the only place that didn't feel like a warm slide under a high powered secular microscope. Besides that he didn't work, so he needed my place to sell weed to people in order to pay for his own smoke. It was a vicious cycle for my couch, the video game controllers, his lungs, and oh yeah, did I mention my sex life?

I could have trusted him at my place alone. He probably valued it more than I did. But I pestered him, until finally the canal chore sounded like a hunting trip for two badass survivalists who were above pet stores and consumerism that could catch their own creatures and find their own way. Lewis and Clark of the new millennium.

"I mean, isn't that why you sell weed? The principle that you're one-upping the man, making your own rules, being a non-conformist and avoiding that dreaded punching in of the clock?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Well, that's what this canal trip is like to me. I help you one-up the man, so you help me."

"It's just, dude I don't want to get all muddy because my parents will give me the run around about heathens playing in the mud, and all that B.S. And how I must have been up to no good. You don't know what it's like. Plus, how we gonna even catch anything, dude?"

"You can either finally tell me your top three Beatles songs, stop being my friend, or go with me to the canal."

"Don't be an idiot, you know I'll go."

“Okay, you let me take care of the equipment. All I want you to do is roll us a couple of fatties for the adventure. And I mean fatties.”

“You gonna help pay for those or what?”

“I pay rent dude.”

“I know, I know, I’m just playing bro.”

And that was how the trip started. He sat in the front room blaring The Beatles, preparing our herbal necessities while I searched the house for a bucket, a metal coat hanger, and some netting of some sort. The bucket was easy but I had to ask a neighbor for a metal coat hanger, all I had were plastic hangers. Making the net was a challenge. First I tried one of those bath-tub scrubbers made out of mesh netting that are wound up tight to form a ball of some sort. I took the elastic off, spread the mesh out, and figured it to be too weak and small for fast underwater strokes. I was about to give up when I had remembered seeing an old screen door next to the dumpster while I was asking my neighbor for the coat hanger.

It worked perfect, I wrapped it around the circular shape I had made with the coat hanger and stapled the top in a hemming fashion. I then duct taped the net to a broom handle to complete the primitive fishing tool. And Richie, he was ready too, with two joints as thick as sidewalk chalk, four pot brownies, a look to prove himself, and his buck knife, his good for nothing buck knife that he’d sworn by since I’d known him.

The sky was baby blue, stamped with cumulous clouds shaped like those scoops of vanilla ice cream that sit atop waffle cones. The air felt thick not in weather, but silence, lack of human activity. We were in an area where the edges of a cool college community began to mesh with the neglected, avoided, and often dicey downtown. The canal was a block or so away from my apartment. I hadn’t been there in years.

I imagined we looked funny at our age, walking down the streets with a bucket and a homemade net which looked suitable for catching-I don’t know Ladybugs. Some people laughed, others pointed, and I figure those were the people that knew what the canal looked like. When we got there, we both had to do a

double take and sort of check the cross streets to make sure we were in the right place. I'd never seen Richie's forehead so wrinkled. His eyebrows nearly touched his hairline in shock.

We were in the right spot. The canal was just fucked. It was like a memory from the Exxon/Valdez oil spill. The water was black, its surface a rainbow. Some garbage floated: plastic bags, barrels, a W-D 40 can, a couch cushion still wrapped in plastic, and a half deflated basketball. Other objects jutted through the murk: umbrellas, pots, pans, grocery carts, a mannequin, two TVs, a B.B.Q. pit, and a full sized refrigerator. A curtain of white foam clung to the bank furthest from us like hydrogen peroxide on an infected wound. It smelled like the inside of a rubber mask combined with what the inside of Jeffrey Dahmer's refrigerator would smell like after a week without power.

"Dude, what happened?"

"Too many humans, I don't know," I said.

"Let's go back to your place. You can't tell me that you actually want to go in there and look for shit?"

"Not right here, but it might be better upstream."

"Yeah, but how far we gonna go, dude? It could be worse up there."

"I don't think it can get much worse than this"

"Have you thought about going to Kyle's and borrowing some of his fish or something? Hell you could even just make up the observations. This is lame, were gonna get all dirty for nothing dude. For nothing."

"Kyle has African Cichlids, Richie. Not Minnows. They would die in a bowl and besides, that's not the point. The point is that we're not doing this for nothing. I'm doing it for my little brother and you're doing it for me, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well then, let's climb this fence and fire up one of those joints before we lose our spirits."

"I thought you'd never ask. But uh, do you wanna start walking along the canal already or just shortcut upstream using the streets?"

"Um, we might miss a spot if we do that. Let's just start here."

Richie's blue hooded sweater had been a mainstay since I'd met him my senior year. He had moved from a place in Idaho called Pocatello. He sported the sweater on the first day of school, when its cotton was still shiny and soft, when it had a functioning zipper. His tightly fastened backpack, bouncy walk, survivalist talk, and freckled faced red head earned him the nickname, "Richie Poke-A-Fellow." That and he was the new guy from Idaho. How many times did I hear someone laugh in the guy's face and say, "Ha, ha, you just said you're a ho," after asking him where he was from. I'd known him for five years and the sweater had made it through the stage of late teens and early twenties. It had been left behind in theatres, screwed on in backseats, puked on, used as a towel and sperm rag, torn off in fist fights, and most importantly, it concealed pounds worth of cannabis in its days. It had survived all that only to perish on a chain link fence. Richie and I should have seen the ill-omen that it was.

"Damn it! That was my favorite sweater. My parents are gonna flip." He huffed as he stomped down the concrete embankment.

"What's wrong with just telling them that you were helping me and my little brother with a science report and it got stuck on a fence?"

"Science report, Hah! Everything, don't you get it, Luke? To them, science means witchcraft. Whether it's observing minnows or speaking of evolution, it's heathen and so am I. I am literally doing devil's work in their eyes. And as far as climbing fences go, only criminals and delinquents do that. "

"But you know the truth, right? You're helping out one of your friends. You're not doing anything wrong?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Now for the last time, start the joint."

We sat on the slopes of the canal as we smoked. Any plant within ten feet of the water was dried and discolored, dead like snake skin. The only life was a murder of crows who mocked our presence way up from a bird-shit speckled palm tree. I let Richie think he convinced me into smoking that second joint,

and eating the brownies all in one sitting. The fact is I wanted to, needed to, and so did he. Our first glimpse of the canal had left me skeptical of finding anything and Richie's shredded blue sweater hung up in the air like a warning sign to trespassers on an Indian burial ground.

It was after this sudden and extreme-yet very common-dose of cannabis that we began walking up the banks. Our once gloomy calculating faces were replaced with ear to ear grins and an aura of contentment. We walked for miles encountering similar scenes. Our bitter cursing of the canal became a laugh out loud boasting of man's ability to destroy nature. And as we walked, our manner progressed, adding ugly ingredients to an already disgusting human creation. We skipped debris across its shallow waters, spit saliva at targets, and urinated along its edges, creating chemical reactions and foam of our own to marvel at. Richie carried the net. I carried my bucket, until the narrow concrete banks became wider and concrete free. And at our peaking moment when Richie had crossed to the other side of the canal via a couch we had tipped over, we discovered life, human life. More appropriately it discovered us.

"What the fuck did you just do to my couch, motherfucker?"

I remember thinking of the word brutal. It was a brutal voice. There would be no rationing with whoever spoke in that voice, no apologies, and no explanations. It was a voice that promised action. Before I got a chance to look around, Richie let me know I was in trouble. His eyes were as big as a couple of fried eggs with blue yolks in their middles, and he was looking directly over my shoulder.

In the same instant I thought to duck, it occurred to me that I was about to brawl with a homeless person-Did he say, "My couch?" The thought of rolling around with a bum, rubbing skin, exchanging fluids while bloody knuckles made contact with gashed lips sent an equal jolt of terror and disgust through my nerves.

First it was his footsteps, then a hard blow to my right shoulder blade, followed by his fowl, alcohol smelling warm breath on

my face as he toppled over my ducking body, I felt them all. He was a bum. Besides his average size, the first thing I noticed was that he was shirtless with jeans. He had a black cowboy boot on one foot, and a yellow construction boot on the other.

“What the fuck’s your problem, asshole? You wanna get fucked up? Let’s go, come on?” I hollered.

He wiped the dirt off his bare tattooed covered chest and charged with haymakers. I closed in on him and landed a left to the side of his neck. He began to yell, “Fucking cock sucking” repeatedly, louder with each whiff. In the background Richie chanted, “Fuck him up, fuck him up!” We exchanged blows for what seemed like ages. His eyes were watered with either hatred or methamphetamines. The tattoos on his torso were giving a disgusting life. Demons and reptiles smiled and slithered with his heavy laboring lungs until he finally came at me with one last Tasmanian devil like flurry. I gave him a precise left uppercut that left him wobbly until he tripped backward over his own untied construction boot and smashed against the concrete embankment, leaving a red stain of blood. I hadn’t been in a fist fight for years.

“All I wanted to do was catch minnows today. Are you happy now, you got knocked out! Are you happy now?” Then I heard the barking and the splashes.

I turned around to a heart dropping sight. Richie was being drowned by a man, and attacked by a dog at the same time. He thrashed violently beneath the shallow murk while a man no older than me crouched over him, pinning his neck down to the canal floor. A large mutt, noticeably dirty, possibly a shepherd of some sort had a bite on one of his ankles. I charged across the canal with my teeth grinding, eyes bulging, quadriceps burning, and my knuckles ready to impact someone like asteroids. There were two things Richie hated: getting dirty and dogs. The strangler shifted his dim murderous eyes towards me and yelled, “Sick him Lucifer, sick him!”

My piston-like legs splashed toxic water into my eyes, my laboring mouth, and probably high enough into the air to be



seen by people on the streets above us. I was like a herd of Clydesdale horses running through a river in a Budweiser commercial. Lucifer met my elbows and forearms in full stride while trying to lunge at my throat. I fell on top of him in the water, clinging to his hair, banging on him like a hysterical chimpanzee. I looked up to see Richie making progress now that he had his legs to stabilize and push off with. Lucifer struggled for breath, room to bite, room to yelp, anything and I didn't let it. I put a vice grip on its muzzle while its claws tore up my inner thighs and collar bone.

It was tough trying to contain that rabid, muddy Lucifer while my best friend fought for air, his life, and that cursed thing at his waist, his buck-knife. I knew what Richie was trying to do. I had to get there before he could do it, but I didn't want to let go of the dog only to have it attack us again. Its jagged claws flailed and cut into me, its teeth gnarled on my right pinky, I could feel the bacteria infested water mixing with my adrenalin filled blood and that set me off. I slid my fingers under the dog's resisting eyelids and gouged deep and hard into its warm, slimy skull interior, then dropped its convulsive body into the slow dying current of the canal.

During my struggle with the poor dog, I had watched Richie. I watched him wiggle under the skinny pony-tailed guy until he had enough room to grab his knife. I watched him unlock the blade with his struggling left hand while fighting for breath and gurgling up profanities and declarations. I watched him re-sheath his four inch blade somewhere into the man's intestine in a series of quick stabs. I watched him wiggle up from under the guy who bled like a stuck pig, then chase down Lucifer's drifting carcass and shank it a few times. He balled, spat unintelligibly, while strands of mucus hung from his nostrils and he kicked at the floating dog. His face was so swollen and red I could feel heat emanating from it. I turned around to look for the first guy, the guy with different boots. He was gone.

The young homeless man Richie stabbed was dying and in shock. He had slithered up out of the water to lie on the bank.

He cradled his frayed midsection with muddy hands and a blue face. A pool of blood laid beneath him mixing with the mud, creating a rusty swirl which trickled its way down the canal. When we approached him, he squirmed backward with teary eyes and a god awful shriek. He treated us like murderers. As if we were going back to finish the kill, as if we murdered canal residing transients for thrills. It wasn't like the movies, we were all silent, all victims, there were no cries for help, and no hysterical sidekick blaming their own stupidity over and over. It took all of about forty five seconds for me to knock a junkie out, kill a dog, and become an accomplice to murder. They were innocent, the guy and his dog. Ones involved in the wrong pack and doing nothing more than defending a friend.

I knelt beside the dying young man and grabbed his hands. I cried and apologized, for everything we had done. For everything I had ever done to lead up to this point. He fought against my grip. I would have too. I wiped the mud and blood off his face. He looked a lot like me. He spit blood, and coughed up bile, while trying to gurgle up his last words, "Louie and I are sorry." I was a balling mess and Richie was catatonically quiet, staring into the lifeless eyes of someone we should have been smoking a joint with instead.

I would like to say that we stayed with his body and prayed with it, dug a grave, and buried him with his dog, all his valuables, and pictures of loved ones, but we didn't. Didn't cover him up with anything, didn't even pull the dog out of the water. We didn't grab the bucket or net. Every second in that canal we felt like we were being watched by millions of viewers-World's Stupidest Murderers Caught On Tape. We ran upstream for no reason other than escaping our guilt, which flowed the opposite way. The tear streaked mud hardened on our skin, smelled of microscopic life and then crumbled back into the place it came from. This all happened because I didn't want to tell my mom that my car broke down, all because I was always looking for the easy way, all because I was a good for nothing short cutter.

I imagined police already at the scene, a manhunt being underway, bloodhounds and German shepherds, helicopters, telephone circuit boards backing up with callers beaconing in on our exact canal location. We leaped barrels, hurdled waterlogged television sets, tripped on slimy rocks, and crawled on our hands and knees during stretches of complete exhaustion. We dislodged shards of glass from our palms and the place where the shin meets the knee. My lungs burned, my knees were bruised and felt grinded to the bone. Half of my right pinky was missing and the open wounds in my body sizzled with every drop of canal filth. I savored all of it. I savored my pain, my life, the graffiti on the concrete bridges and banks, the poppies sprouting from a cement crack here and there, and especially the seven metallic colors shining on the surface of the water we trudged through. It all became more tolerable by the second.

“Hold on, wait, I can’t fucking breathe!” Richie sputtered, bending over with his hands on his knees, saliva dangling from his wheezing mouth.

For the first time in ten minutes or so, the relentless put-chee, put-chee sound of our fleeing legs treading through the water had ceased. There were no sirens, no helicopters, and most importantly, there wasn’t any more dogs to deal with—no yelping bloodhounds in hot pursuit. I wiped canal sludge out of my eyes and off of my lips. I spit out the remnants of shower drain tasting, fetid water that had found its way into my open mouth while fighting for air in our escape.

Richie finally started to try and form words.

“I say we go to your place and come up with a plan.”

“Yeah, a plan. A plan like what?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. That’s what I’m trying to say. We can’t stick around here, though. I know that.”

“Well, you’re the one that stopped, bro.”

“Just so I could make sure we were going to your house.”

“What, did you think we were going to your parents’ house looking like this?”

We decided to walk the remaining quarter of a mile or so. We had been lucky to remain unseen as long as we had and we didn't want to draw any last minute attention. My lips tasted of mud and dried up diarrhea. My eyelashes were laced with mascara: black and itchy glop. I tongued granules of soil against my teeth, and my shoes squeaked with every size thirteen water print I tracked. My white Abbey Road t-shirt was now brown with red blood streaks and authentic K-9 slashes. I wanted a peroxide shower, with Neosporin soap and penicillin shampoo and conditioner. No, I wanted to shave my head.

Richie's skin was crusted with mud, his jeans were no longer river-washed, and they were caked with dark grey and rusty brown slop. His hair was a matted bluish-grey. He had little clumps of moss and pieces of twig placed evenly over him like a decorated Christmas tree. He was half Swamp-Thing.

We expected to see cop cars with flashing sirens, a S.W.A.T. team, and news reporters ducking their heads in the background when we poked our heads up from the canal. We didn't. We saw traffic, people in a hurry, a bicyclist, a couple of kids with backpacks, we saw hope. We walked the remaining ten minutes and we each developed our own unique handicapped looking walk to match our appearance. To look more transient like, down and out. It worked. The adults avoided our potential beggars and the kids walking home from school laughed and pointed fingers.

We made it to my apartment. We took a hot shower together with our clothes still on, and when he was clean enough to sit on my couch, I showered alone and naked. I scrubbed my wounds hard enough to make them bleed all over again, and then I scrubbed again, with soap and a mouthful of Listerine.

We didn't talk that first night, the night Richie and I super glued our eyes to the local news stations, and the first night that Richie had ever spent away from his parents. I would also like to say I slept, but I didn't. I stayed awake watching the replay over and over, wondering why. I wondered what their relationships were based on, the man, the dog, and the guy our age.

The next day was no better. We bought the paper, contemplated on passing by the scene, borrowing a friend's police scanner, all while exchanging no more than eye contact or a nod. And when my brother called and I couldn't think of a lie to tell him, I didn't need to. He told me the project was done. Our mom had just told him to get the information he needed from the internet, because she would be too busy to make it to place that day.

Richie and I continued to hold up in my apartment for the next day and a half, pacing and brainstorming, mending our wounds, Richie wearing my clothes and dodging his parents until it broke: "Runaway and His Dog Slain."

I didn't watch. I left the room and covered my ears. I didn't want to know his name. I didn't want to know where he came from and when or why he ran away. I didn't want to imagine Lucifer as a family dog that stood loyal by the runaway son. I didn't want to think he was under eighteen. Richie did, he sponged it all up. Maybe I would have too if I had killed the boy instead of the dog. He was the person they would hunt down. I stayed in my room for at least an hour and came out to a lifeless front room. On my coffee table laid an old McDonalds receipt which on the back of it read:

From The Beginning, I am the Walrus, and Within you and without you. There you have it. My three favorite Beatles songs. Peace forever, Richie.

I never saw Richie again. He turned himself in, took the blame, for all of it, the canal trip, Lucifer, and the Runaway. He left it all in a note, a note that sat on his desk for three days while the blood that trickled from his slit wrists formed a hardened puddle cocooning him to the carpet, and whatever Beatles album he was listening to in his headphones ceased to play from battery drain. Three days that brought the investigators as close as my apartment complex, asking questions and profiling residents from their vans as we left the complex. I watched it all transpire from the window. I passed on the funeral, where they would pray for god's mercy on his soul, where someone might mention him

having to burn for all eternity. I went to his grave every Sunday, blew smoke on his headstone, played all of our favorite Beatles songs out of our old portable boom box, and bought him a new blue sweater for the cold lonely nights. He was worried how he was going to explain his muddy shoes that day, yet alone the taking of another man's life. And every time I heard the coincidental lyrics to his top three Beatles songs, I couldn't help but to blame myself for all of the bizarre events that took place in that canal.

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Did he choose them based on the events of that day, or were they warning signs that I should have seen? Like his sweater, and that murder of crows. Some of the lyrics to the songs in his top three—Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream. This is not dying. Yellow mattered custard, dripping from a dead dog's eye. (And the kicker) Life goes on within you and without you. I can now truly say I believe in destiny.

So now, I take the long route. I play it safe. I'm one of those "born again" virgins. I drive in the far right lane, I file my taxes, I sweep instead of vacuum, I cook my eggs on low, I tore the fast forward button off of my DVD controller, and I have the patience to floss before brushing. It took me four years to get through a two year community college. During that time I read. I read from the first page to the last. No chapter summaries, no glossary skimming, no glancing at the last page of a novel, no shortcuts. And during my last semester there, I walked past a man who carried a briefcase and wore a nice collared shirt with long sleeves, a man who once wore a pair of mismatched boots, and a man who didn't recognize me, probably because of my shaved head and nice clothes.

## *How May I Help You?*

Donna Sciacqua

### **Second Prize, Fiction**

Carl tugged at the sleeve of his polyester short-sleeved shirt. He lifted his arms up toward the ceiling in a big stretch and yawned loudly. He ran his tongue over his teeth and felt the bits of his fast food breakfast. I guess I should've brushed this morning, he thought, oh well, too late now. He had eaten in a hurry this morning, rushing off to start his early morning shift at the drive-thru window. He still wasn't used to getting up this early in the morning, and he was groggy from sleep.

He scratched his thigh and stared blankly ahead. It was early Sunday morning and so far things had been slow. He adjusted his headset, pulling it to the side of his head to relieve the irritation where the headset had worn a tender spot on the side of his ear. He had worked a long shift yesterday, and today his ear was extra sensitive. He was glad the anticipated steady flow of morning customers had not yet begun. He yawned again and adjusted the belt around his snug-fitting polyester pants.

Thank god it was early. He had not yet begun to sweat in this sizzling Arizona summer heat. Every time he opened the small sliding glass drive-thru window, he was hit with a stifling blast of furnace-hot air. Carl could feel where the waistband of his pants cut into his middle. He had purchased a used pair of pants discarded from a previous employee at the store because he had been unable to afford a new pair that fit him properly. They were snug to begin with, but to make matters worse, he had gained ten pounds or so since he had started working at this McDonalds three weeks earlier. Boy, this was going to be a tough day, he thought. He was already thinking ahead to when he would clock out at 3 o'clock this afternoon, wondering if he was going to be able to make it until then.

Beep, beep, beep, his headset begin whining, beep, beep, beep.

Here it goes, Carl thought. He was afraid it was going to be one of those days. After only three weeks on the job, he felt burned out. Carl adjusted the headset over his tender ear.

“Welcome to McDonalds,” Carl said, “would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?” The potato and egg burrito was the promotional item of the season and Carl was required to ask each customer if they would like to try one.

“No, I wouldn’t,” a voice answered. “Just get me a sausage and egg breakfast with a cup of coffee.”

“Would you like some orange juice to go with that?” Carl muttered into the headset. Carl had to say that, too. His job required him to sell, sell, sell.

“No, I told you,” answered the voice.

“Your total will be \$4.23,” Carl said irritably. Boy, I sure would like to throw this headset down and walk out of here now, he thought. He tried to remind himself that he needed this job. In fact, was lucky to get it. He had no previous job experience, having lived with his mother and grandmother in Fresno, California in the childhood home where he had been born and raised. He had lived a quiet life with little social life except for his family and his one friend Phil, a high school dropout from his junior year.

Carl thought back to his life before he had ended up here at this desolate McDonald’s in Arizona off the main highway that ran from his hometown to nowhere. He had been growing tired of it, living in the same house with his mother and grandmother, no car, no job, no girlfriend, no life. Sure, the two old ladies needed him, but Carl found himself wanting to have new experiences, to try new things. He wanted to be a part of the big world outside his. And he wanted to get away from the frustration of unrequited love.

He had spent every day assisting his mother with his grandmother’s care. It was a full time job. This was what Carl had done since he had graduated from high school. That was fifteen years ago now, and he was 33 and this was his first real job. Crazy how time flies, he thought.



That day, his last day in Fresno, he had been helping his mother hang the wash on the clothesline in the back yard of the home where he had been born and raised, a premature baby coddled throughout his early years by his overprotective mother. Throughout his childhood, he had always felt different from the others at school, considered odd and not readily accepted by his schoolmates. And now, as a not-so-young man, he still felt out of place.

Carl thought of himself as any regular guy. He wore his lanky medium brown hair neither too long nor too short. He dressed in an average manner, T-shirt and khaki shorts in the summer, a flannel shirt, jeans and jacket in the winter. His tennis shoes were neither new nor old, his socks medium height with stripes around the ankles. He was neither thin nor fat, and he stood neither too tall nor too short. When he went out on his morning walks with his mother, he stooped his shoulders forward and stuck his head out on a long neck in front of him. He walked with his light blue eyes cast downwards, peering over the rims of his wire framed eyeglasses at the world outside his. He had gotten used to being the kind of guy most people didn't notice.

Carl remembered his last night in his hometown of Fresno. He had gone out to a bar, a rare occurrence since he had only one friend, his high school buddy Phil. Carl's life of assisting his elderly mother in the care of his ancient grandmother was a full time job that rarely allowed him an evening off. Carl had run across Phil on the sidewalk on one of his morning walks with his mother.

"Hey, let's hit Fred's," Phil had said. Fred's was a local pub in the neighborhood. Carl had only been there one time before.

"Sure," Carl said and they met up around 4:30 in the afternoon to take advantage of the happy hour specials. Carl had walked over since he didn't own a car. That afternoon, drinking with Phil, Carl had too much to drink, especially since he rarely drank anyway, and so around 9:30 pm when Phil suggested they highjack a car, it had seemed the greatest idea. Boy, was he tired of his life with his mother and grandmother. And just that

morning he had had a tiff with his mother. The scene still stung in his mind.

But boy, the night they stole that car and took off for Texas, only nineteen days ago, that had been one crazy night. Carl had never done such a thing in his life before. He watched while Phil sprang the lock on the door of the Honda Civic and then fiddled around under the dash. The car sprang to life. Carl hadn't been much help. He really didn't have much experience in things of that sort.

"How'd ya learn to do that?" Carl asked.

Phil just grinned. He got behind the wheel of the car and unlocked the passenger door for Carl.

"Full tank of gas," he told Carl. Carl got in on the passenger side. He wanted to drive but wasn't sure he remembered how. Driver's Ed was a long time ago now. And that one time his Uncle George had let him drive the Ford pick-up, Carl had driven it into a ditch.

Between the two of them, they had eighty-six dollars and twenty-three cents, and so they headed for Texas. But first, Phil stopped at a Circle K to buy a twelve pack of Coors in cans. It was on special for \$7.99.

Oh, had he been excited, Carl remembered. They had traveled from Fresno heading southeast across the Mojave Desert toward Texas. They made it as far as Surprise, Arizona when they ran out of beer and forgot to buy gas with the last of their money after a long night of drinking at a rest stop in Surprise. When they woke up in the morning, the big rigs were warming up and the rumble had disturbed even their bleary-eyed alcohol-sobered sleep. That was when they realized that they were out of beer and their gas tank was on empty. They had their first argument that morning, Phil screaming at Carl while his head throbbed, still intoxicated from the night of partying. Carl began to feel that maybe this idea had been a mistake. He felt it for sure only three short hours later when Phil dropped him off at the McDonalds where he was now serving customers at the drive-thru window. Luckily, they had been hiring. How he got the job Carl still wasn't too sure, but here he was.

The last Carl saw of Phil was the back of his head as he drove off in the Honda, a cloud of dust following him off into the distance. “Good riddance,” were his last words to Carl.

Beep, beep, beep, the headset startled Carl out of his thoughts. “Order up,” his fellow coworker spoke, the sound a little too loud for Carl’s morning ears. Ugh, groaned Carl. He rubbed his head slowly with the back of his hand.

“Order up,” Carl heard again, louder this time. The sausage and egg breakfast was ready for his customer. Carl handed it out the window after collecting payment and giving the customer back his change.

Carl thought back to the day he had left home. He remembered the argument he had with his mother on the day he left Fresno. That morning he had slept until 10:15 and then dawdled for a while in the twin bed he had slept in since childhood. Around 11:30 he was disturbed by the sound of his mother yelling up the stairwell to his bedroom.

“Carl,” his mother yelled, “Carl, come on down here and help me hang the wash.”

At first, Carl didn’t answer her. He had the bedroom upstairs, his cocoon where he had the freedom to explore his interests undisturbed. At ninety-one, it was impossible for his grandmother to climb the stairs, and his mother, although she was capable of making the trek up to his room, rarely did so as long as he made himself available to assist with the many household chores required of him.

“Carl,” his mother said again, “come on down here and help me hang the wash.”

“Damn it mother, I’m busy,” he yelled back. He had been peeking out his bedroom window through the blinds into his neighbor’s bathroom. It was a family of five that lived next door, and sometimes Carl could see into the bedroom or bathroom windows. This morning the neighbors had finished their morning toiletries well before Carl had arisen, but there was always the chance somebody might have to visit the restroom again and Carl wanted to be ready.

But after his mother's second call, Carl reluctantly dragged himself up off the small loveseat that was pushed up close to the window and headed into the backyard to help his mother hang the wash. He grabbed a pair of his grandmother's drawers out of the laundry hamper, reached into the old cotton sack to pull out a clothespin and used it to fasten the old lady underwear onto the clothesline.

Thinking back, he remembered being short with his mother that morning. He remembered feeling embarrassed and resentful, but he had been raised helping his mother and grandmother, and these simple tasks were a usual part of his daily routine. He should be content with it by now.

"What's wrong with you," his mother asked, "got up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"Nothing," Carl had said. His head hurt and he was grouchy. He picked up a pair of wet underpants and watched helplessly as they slipped from his fingers and fell into the dirt of the yard.

"Well, I don't know what's wrong with you," his mother said.

Somehow, one thing led to something else and his mother ended up angry with him, but Carl couldn't really blame her because he had yelled at her and called her a name he wasn't proud of now, remembering back.

Today, as he thought of the day that loomed ahead of him serving customers at the drive thru window at this McDonalds in this heat stifled town, Carl missed his previous, undisturbed life.

Back in Fresno, once a day, each morning, he would walk with his mother to the neighborhood main street where there was a post office, a Starbucks and a Dollar Store. He never bought anything at the Starbucks, it was too expensive, but every day he and his mother walked down the sidewalk in front of the coffee shop.

Each day he and his mother would pass in front of the Starbucks, and he would look discreetly through his eyelashes at the people sitting in clusters chatting and laughing in the coffee shop

patio. Sometimes, he would see somebody he recognized from the neighborhood and he would extend his greeting,

“Hi there, how are you today?” Carl would ask with a wave of his hand. Sometimes he got a response, sometimes he didn’t.

Every day his mother stopped on the sidewalk in front of the newspaper vending machines to check for loose change. Carl would walk a few steps past his mother and stop at the corner to wait for her, hoping nobody noticed they were together. For a long time, The Fresno Bee vending machine was broken and his mother collected quarters pretty near every day. But someone had reported it broken and now most of the time she came away empty.

Every day they wandered on to the Dollar Store and to the Drug Fair to do their daily shopping, carrying home bags of groceries and essentials needed for daily living. These were the only excursions out of his home for Carl except when they went to the offices where his grandmother saw the doctor for the routine exams required of old age.

Beep, beep, beep, Carl’s headset sounded.

Honk, honk, honk, Carl was remembering his days back home, the beeping of the taxicab waiting to take the three of them uptown for his grandmother’s appointments. She was aging fast and suffering the infirm of old age.

Beep, beep, beep.

Beep, beep, beep, the taxicab was outside.

Carl would come out the door onto the front porch and wave easily at the driver, then linger on the front porch to wait out his grandmother’s slow descent down the few steps to the sidewalk, assisted by his mother. The taxicab waited. When she was nearly to the street, Carl moved to the taxi, opened the rear door, and assisted his grandmother into the back seat. Then he opened the passenger door and ushered his mother into the front seat. Carl took his seat behind the driver. They were off to the north end of town for his grandmother’s visits to her primary care physician. These journeys took most of the day. First, they would wait around at home for the taxicab to arrive, then they would

wait in the lobby of the doctor's office, reading magazines and listening in on the conversations of the other patients, and then they would wait some more afterwards for the taxi to come pick them up to take them home. But Carl enjoyed these visits. During these times when he left the house, he was able to see some new faces, and he always enjoyed checking out the nurses in their sexy uniforms, looking at them long and hard from under his hooded sideways glances.

Carl didn't have much of a social life other than his mother and his grandmother and his occasional glimpses into his neighbor's lives. Most nights after dinner they would watch television programs in the downstairs living room until they went to their bedrooms to sleep. Carl felt his world was too small. To compensate, he tried hard at being friendly with his neighbors, always wanting to be in their lives a little more than they allowed. When he saw his neighbors coming or going, he always rushed outside and extended a friendly greeting, "Hi there! How are you today?" he would say. If they answered, he would try to get a little more friendly. Sometimes school girls on their way home from school would walk down the street and Carl would discreetly whistle at them and then engage himself busily in whatever he was doing so they wouldn't know it was him while still hoping that maybe he could catch the attention of one. They always ignored him, eventually going out of their way to avoid his house.

But still, back at home Carl felt he had a purpose. For one, he kept an eye on his neighborhood. The three of them would sit on the front porch most mornings before his grandmother went down for her nap and Carl and his mother took their walk. They kept watch on the neighborhood, noting who was coming and going and who was visiting whom. This was how Carl spent most of his mornings back home, and he missed it now.

Most afternoons, after his morning walk and after his grandmother woke up from her nap, they would sit on the front porch together, and when a child rode a bicycle down the sidewalk in front of their home, his grandmother would yell out in her

creaky voice, “Don’t use our sidewalk, ride in the street.” Or if the children kicked a ball into the yard, his grandmother would say, “These children need to learn to respect boundaries. Parents just don’t want to parent anymore.”

So Carl would lumber up from his comfortable chair on the front porch and scoop the ball up and take it inside the house. He watched to make sure that the neighbors and the neighborhood children learned to respect boundaries. Like his grandmother said, they needed to learn to keep on their own lawn. Carl had a box inside the house especially for the balls he’d collected. It was a large box and it was nearly full now after years of monitoring the neighborhood children.

He remembered one special day while he watched on the front porch with his mother and grandmother, a pretty lady moved into the house next door. Carl was excited. There weren’t many pretty women in his life and now a pretty woman was moving in next door. She was lively and happy, with lots of friends dropping by to visit and chat. Carl was very interested in getting to know her better and so every time he heard her outside, he would rush outside to listen and watch. The fence separating their yards wasn’t too tall, so he could lean over and extend his friendly greeting.

“Hi there! How are you today?” he would ask every time he heard her go into her back yard, his head popping up suddenly over the short fence. Sometimes when she had company, she would sit with her friends outside on the front porch or in the back yard to chat. If they sat on the front porch, Carl would grab his pruning shears and set to work on the roses that bordered their houses, listening to their conversations while he pretended to trim the roses. She had a lot of company and he had pruned the roses down much shorter than they should be, but he couldn’t help listening, he was so interested in the life of this new neighbor.

It was even better if she was in the back yard. Then he would run outside and hang his mother’s and grandmother’s laundry, leaving the undergarments in the basket but pinning the face

towels up on the line or, if there were no chores to do, he could simply crouch down behind the fence and listen freely without having to pretend to be doing any work. Sometimes he peeked through the slats between the boards in the fence, and sometimes he also peeked in her windows. He wasn't proud of himself for doing this, but he just couldn't help himself.

"Why did I leave Fresno anyway?" Carl wondered now, "What am I doing here?" He thought back to how he had arrived here at this McDonalds, after what seemed a long time ago now. It had been such a great idea then, when he had left his mediocre existence for the thrill of new adventure, the search for something new, the search for something he really wasn't sure what. And he had ended up here at this McDonald's in the middle of nowhere. Adventure wasn't all it was cut out to be after all, not even nearly like what he had seen on the television he used to watch during the afternoons and evenings overseeing his family, his women that needed him. And surely he remembered their regular home cooked meals, not this greasy fast food Carl had been eating every day now for the past nineteen days. Thinking back, Carl's belly gurgled from the memory of the satisfying lunches his mother used to make for him.

Beep, beep, beep, Carl was startled. Lost in thought, he had completely forgotten where he was.

"Welcome to McDonalds. Would you like to try our new potato and egg burrito?" Carl asked.

"No, I want a pancake and egg breakfast and a cup of coffee, that's all," a surly voice answered.

"Do you want orange juice to go with that?" Carl asked.

"No I told you, just get me a pancake breakfast with a cup of coffee," the voice answered.

Carl heard the rumble of the engine as a pickup pulled up to the drive-thru window. He sure would like to toss these pancakes into the lap of that surly guy leaning out of his oversized Dodge pickup. Carl took the surly guy's ten-dollar bill. His head was starting to pound.



The order was up, the pancake and coffee order for the surly guy in the truck.

Carl reached around and grabbed the pancake breakfast off the hot shelf where it waited to be delivered to his customer. The top of the Styrofoam container popped open when Carl grabbed it, upsetting itself and falling to the floor. Scrambled eggs and pancakes scattered themselves, leaving greasy trails on the tile floor.

“Damn,” Carl muttered. His fingertips were burned from the hot steam that spiraled off the freshly microwaved eggs. This day was turning out far worse than he had imagined. Carl watched as one of the pancakes rolled across the floor, bounced up against the baseboard and spiraled to a stop.

Beep, beep, beep.

“Damn!” Carl said again.

“What?” his new customer asked.

“Welcome to McDonalds,” Carl said quickly, trying not to slip on the eggs under his feet while he typed in a repeat order for the pancake guy. “Would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?”

“No thank you, I’ll have a cup of coffee and orange juice.”

“Would you like a pastry to go with that?” Carl asked.

“No, thank you,” answered the voice, “just orange juice and a cup of coffee.”

“Cream and sugar?” asked Carl.

“No”

“Your total will be \$2.69,” Carl said.

“Where are my pancakes?” the surly guy wanted to know when Carl handed him back his change.

“Coming up,” Carl said, turning around too quickly to type in the new order and almost slipping on a pancake.

“Order up!” The replacement order was ready to go. Carl picked the container up, more carefully this time, put it in a large paper bag and handed it out the window to the surly guy.

Would you like some syrup with that, he imagined himself saying while pouring syrup on the pancakes in his customer’s lap.

He imagined the surprised look it would create on the surly customer's round red face, his mouth opening in surprise. Carl grinned with a satisfied feeling as the surly guy drove away, the morning sun glinting off the shiny bumper of his new truck.

Carl watched the next car drive up to the window. It was a red Toyota with a woman inside. The orange juice and coffee lady, oh yeah, Carl remembered, turning quickly to pour a coffee and grab an orange juice from the refrigerated compartment while he rang up the total on his computerized cash register.

Beep, beep, beep. Another customer. The morning rush had begun.

"Welcome to McDonald's. Would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?"

"I want... "

Carl waited.

"I want... "

Carl took the money from the coffee and orange juice lady and handed her back her change. He was careful to step around the spilled eggs and pancakes. He hadn't had time to clean the mess up yet.

Beep, beep, beep, Carl's headset reminded him a customer was waiting.

"Welcome to McDonald's. Would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?"

"I want... I'll have .... "

Carl waited.

"Oh, ok, I'm ready..."

Carl waited.

"Ok, I'll have scrambled eggs with hash browns."

"Would you like something to drink with that?" Carl said.

"Yeah." There was a long pause. "No, wait a minute, I don't want that." Another long pause.

Carl waited.

"I'll have the potato and egg burrito."

"Ok. Would you like some orange juice with your breakfast?" Carl said.

“Yeah, sure,” the voice answered, then paused again. “No, no, no, forget it.”

“Would you like a breakfast pastry to go with that?” Carl asked.

“No, thank you,” answered the voice, “just a cup of coffee.”

“Cream and sugar with your coffee?” asked Carl.

“No”

“Your total will be \$3.89,” Carl said.

The car approached the drive-through window and the driver rolled down the window of the car. “Oh, sorry, I only have three dollars.” the driver said. “Forget the coffee then.”

Carl refigured the total and took the customer’s three dollars. As he turned to make change, Carl slipped on the spilled eggs, his feet slipping out from under him while his body crashed backward into the side of the service counter. Carl barely kept his feet from sliding out from under him and barely missed landing on the hard tile floor.

Beep, beep, beep the headset started up again, high-pitched and loud in Carl’s ears. Carl swallowed, trying to keep his temper in control. His back was starting to hurt.

“Welcome to McDonalds,” Carl said, “would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?” No answer. This was getting to be too much.

Beep, beep, beep.

“Welcome to McDonalds, would you like to try our new potato and egg breakfast burrito?”

“No, I wouldn’t, just get me a bacon, egg and cheese McGriddle with a cup of coffee and hash browns on the side.”

“Would you like to try some orange juice to go with that?”

“No, I don’t want anything else,” the voice said.

Carl turned around and lost his balance for good. His feet flew out from under him and he went crashing to the floor. His head crashed into the wall and knocked his headset into the corner. It lay there like an umbilical cord, a lifeline attached to him through the thin wire that connected to his too tight belt fastened around his middle.

Beep, beep, beep, his headset called to him faintly from the corner where it had fallen. Carl groaned, his head throbbing.

Beep, beep, beep, his headset called again.

Carl's head was killing him. He lay on the floor, head throbbing, and he thought of his life before, back in Fresno. He had lived a quiet life, and he had a friend, his one friend Phil. Back in Fresno, he had a purpose.

Lying on the floor of the McDonalds, next to the drive-through window, Carl, head spinning, flashed back to one bright morning sitting on the front porch with his grandmother. Some of the neighborhood children had been playing Frisbee in the yard of the house next door. One of the children tossed too hard and the Frisbee came spinning over the hedge of roses where it landed on the grass in Carl's front yard.

"There goes another one," his grandmother muttered in a voice cracking with the wear of old age. "When will those children learn to stay in their own yards? They need to be taught respect."

In response to her complaints, Carl lifted himself off his comfortable chair on the front porch, moved slowly out onto the lawn and retrieved the Frisbee. While the children watched from over the too short rose hedge in disappointment, Carl took the Frisbee into the house and tossed it into the large cardboard box now brimming with children's balls and various flying objects that had intruded into his yard over the many summers of his life. Returning to settle into his chair on the front porch, Carl felt satisfied.

"That'll teach 'em," his grandmother said. Carl was needed. At home back in Fresno, he was needed to protect his helpless and aged family from the intrusions of the neighborhood children. At home, he had a purpose. Not like here at this fast food restaurant in the middle of nowhere where everybody was in a hurry to get nowhere and where the customers were short-tempered and unappreciative.

Carl remembered the fine spring day when he had decided to return the full box of toys to the children of the neighborhood. He knew for sure that he was in love with his new neighbor and he wanted her to be impressed with his virtuous nature. He didn't

want her to think he would keep toys from children, even if they didn't know respectable boundaries. It was shortly after she had moved in next door.

And so one night he waited until darkness and carried the box of softballs, baseballs, basketballs, soccer balls, footballs, Frisbees and airplanes to the front porch of the neighbor three houses down. There lived four boys who always played with the three boys next door. Carl deposited the box awkwardly on the front porch and quickly turned towards his own home, pretty sure he had gone unnoticed and feeling very virtuous.

Oh, his memories.

He missed his home. He missed his mother and grandmother. He missed his neighbor next door. Lying on the floor of the McDonalds, head pounding, Carl knew he was finished. That was it. Carl had had enough.

Carl groaned as he got up from the floor. Slowly, he reached for his headset, yanked the cord free of his belt and tossed it across the service counter.

The order was ready for his next customer. Carl carefully picked the Styrofoam container up from under the hot lights. He opened the top, grabbed a handful of salt packets, as many as he could hold onto, tore off the paper tops and sprinkled the salt over his customer's breakfast order. Turning, Carl handed the box out the drive-thru window to his customer.

Next he reached for several packages of imitation maple syrup. Carl pulled the tops off three of the containers, held them in one hand and reached out the drive-thru window toward the driver. He tossed the opened containers into his customer's lap.

"Hey," the driver yelled out.

Carl grabbed some change from the open register and tossed it out the window after the maple syrup. A quarter and two dimes bounced off the customer's lap and rolled into the passenger seat.

"Have a great day," Carl said as he turned away. The drive-thru window snapped shut behind him. Carl was satisfied when he took his last paycheck from his now ex-manager. He used it to buy a bus ticket and a cheap collapsible telescope that he

folded up and put into his backpack, his one piece of luggage. Carl boarded the bus back to Fresno with a smile on his face.

Carl's mother was surprised when he showed up back on the doorstep of his childhood home in Fresno. "Where have you been?" she demanded, a look of worry mixed with anger on her face.

His grandmother seemed not to have noticed he'd been gone. "The neighbors next door painted their house and you should've seen the dust around here. There was dust all over the curtains and on my chair. I've a mind to call the police and report on 'em. They need to learn respect," she said.

Carl climbed up the stairwell to his bedroom. I sure am glad to be home, he thought as he pulled his new collapsible telescope out of his jacket pocket. It was the folding kind that scrunched into a flat disc. He couldn't wait to use it.

# *California Lottery*

Daniel Violin

## **Third Prize, Fiction**

“Now don’t do anything stupid like . . . leave the apartment. There’s enough food and a six-pack of Bud in the frig. If you’re quiet and stay put, the police’ll never find you here.” Josh said, towering over Ryan, his eyes beaming down on him.

“Don’t worry. I can take care of myself. I’ll just hang out here and watch some tube.” Ryan sat back in the worn cloth sofa, its red flowers long since faded to pink. He worked his shoulders into the cushion until he felt comfortable, as if he was planning on sitting there the whole day.

“You do that.” Josh flashed him a hard look, unconvinced by Ryan’s assurances. After all, Ryan was the one who got himself into this mess. “I’ll be back about four. You need anything, you give me a call and I’ll pick it up on the way home. When I come back, we’ll figure out how to get you out of here.”

“Thanks,” he said, his face drawn, weighed down by the stress he’d been carrying around for the last few days.

Ryan watched as Josh closed the door behind him. The two of them had been friends since childhood, growing up down the street from each other. At a young age, they started getting into trouble, stealing stuff out of unlocked cars or from open garages. When one of the neighbors caught them and told their parents, Ryan got a lashing with his father’s thickest leather belt on his bare ass, leaving him walking like a saddle-sore cowboy for the next few days.

He lumbered to the kitchen and made himself a bowl of Cheerios and a cup of coffee, then carried his breakfast to the living room and set it down on the wobbly wooden coffee table. The table lurched to one side as he did. He plopped down on the sofa and flipped on the tube, settling on a 70’s sitcom.

After finishing his cereal, he placed the bowl in the sink and poured himself another cup of coffee. As he sat back on the

couch, the urge for a cigarette suddenly hit him. He pulled out the twisted Marlboro soft pack from his pocket and tore it open for the last smoke. He removed the mangled stick and gasped in frustration. Now what am I going to do, he wondered? He remembered a 7-11 across the street, but also remembered why he was holed up in Josh's apartment in the first place. The police were after him.

His addiction intensified its hold on him. It's just across the street, he reasoned, knowing that even a quick trip to the store was all it took for him to get popped and find himself in jail.

His mouth began to dry up; he became jittery, unable to sit still. He nervously tapped his foot on the brown short-pile carpet. It had been last night since he had his last smoke, and except for two years ago when he took a cross-country bus trip to attend his grandfather's funeral, it was the longest he'd gone without a smoke for the last ten years.

He found a large brim hat in the closet and a pair of dark sunglasses and put them both on. Pulling the door open a crack, he looked out along the walkway like a gazelle ready to cross a lion-infested prairie. Silence lingered; the parking lot was empty. He slid out, closing the door gingerly behind him, then bolted to the sidewalk fifty feet away. He looked up and down the street and paused until a single car passed and then ran across the street and up to the window of the 7-11.

Standing just outside the doorway, he peered in through the window. There was a camera hanging on the far wall overlooking the cashier's station. He opened the door and a high-pitched ding rilled through the store. A shaggy-haired attendant behind the counter looked over at him. He approached the clerk, pulling his hat down and hiking the sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. As he looked at the clerk and asked for a pack of Marlboro, he couldn't help thinking how crazy this whole thing was; all this to feed an addiction. After all, he was wanted by the police for holding up a liquor store only a few days before. Now, here he was wandering around like a free man.



He laid the money for the pack on the counter. When he looked up beyond the attendant, his eyes locked on the large poster advertising the California Lottery. The yellow background shined brightly, intensified by the reflection of the morning sun. The bottom of the poster mentioned that the last winner had taken home \$18 million. What the hell, he thought. He dug out a few more bills and asked the clerk for ten tickets. Scooping up the cigarettes and the tickets, he quickly made his way back across the street.

Once he was safely in the apartment, he sunk into the couch and lit a smoke, filling his lungs with a long satisfying draw and then slowly releasing a blue-grey cloud into the air. He instantly felt his nerves calmed, as if his worries were exhaled with the smoke.

As he sat back watching the tube, he suddenly heard the door-knob rattle, then the door opened with a low, continuous creak. A jolt shot through his spine, his back stiffened. He looked at the door, holding his breath. A small boy appeared; a broad smile on his face. He stood in the doorway as if he was on the edge of cliff, afraid to take another step.

"You ain't Josh," he said. His smile turned to surprise, his small green eyes peering through a swath of light brown hair.

"No, I'm not. My name's Ryan. What's yours?"

"Sebastian. Friends call me Sab."

"You always just walk in, Sab?" Ryan sat forward.

"Yeap. Come over whenever my mom gets crazy, and hang out with Josh and watch some TV."

"Does your mom know you're over here?"

"She doesn't care. She's too busy drinking." Sab stood there in his frayed blue Superman tee-shirt, dirty blue jeans and bare feet looking at the ground.

"Have a seat. Hey, lock the door, would ya?" Ryan cursed himself for not checking that one before.

"Sure thing," he nodded, closing the door.

"What do you want to watch?"

He looked up at Ryan. His green eyes glimmered. “Whatever’s on’s fine,” he said as he walked over and sat on the couch. They watched back-to-back sitcoms, and discussed which shows they liked the most, agreeing that *Friends* and *That ’70’s Show* were the best ones, although he only knew about stuff that happened in the 1970s from his mother.

When Sab figured his mother had passed out, that it was safe to return home, he said goodbye and that he’d see him again before too long.

As Ryan watched Sab walk out the door, he couldn’t help wondering how Maria and their four-year old son Ethan were getting along at her mother’s house in San Francisco. He got up to make sure the door was locked and then sat back down on the couch and picked up the handset. His hand froze as he began to punch the numbers. He lowered his head, his stomach in knots, wrenching tighter as he thought about what he was putting them through.

He put the receiver back in the cradle, deciding he would call them when he had some good news. As he looked up, through a thin slit in the drapes, he saw a flashing red light. His whole body stiffened, his heart raced. There was a pounding at the neighbor’s door and Ryan released a huge sigh. Muffled sounds came from the apartment through the paper-thin walls.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Afraid to pick it up, he let it continue to ring. The repetitive noise pounded in his head, and he finally relented.

“Where the hell have you been?” the voice on the other end boomed.

“The police are here,” he said with his hand over his mouth, afraid they would hear.

“I know. I just drove past the apartment and saw the cherrys flashing. What’s going on?”

“I can’t talk,” he said in a low, guarded voice. “I’ll call you back. Wait for my call before you come home.”

“Fine.” Josh said with aggravation in his voice.

Ryan's brain bounced around like a cue ball. Should he stay in the apartment, or should he sneak out the back window? He remained on the couch stiff with fear. Then the apartment next door fell silent. The chatting stopped. He heard the door slam shut, and then the flashing lights faded as the car drove off. He walked over to the window, peeking around the frayed yellow curtain and noticed the police car heading down the driveway. He sat down and released a huge sigh, letting all the tension escape from his limbs. Then he reached for the phone and called Josh on his cell. "They're gone."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, they just left. Where are you?"

"I'm down the street. I'll be home in five."

As soon as Josh got back, they ordered a large pepperoni pizza. Over a cold Bud, they sat on the couch waiting for the pizza delivery guy.

"So what the hell happened with you?" Josh said, taking a sip of beer.

Ryan really didn't want to talk about it, but since Josh gave him a place to stay when he came knocking on his door the night before at one in the morning, exhausted and looking for a place to 'hold out', he figured he owed it to him.

He pulled out a cigarette and fired it up, taking a long drag. "It was after I got fired from the lumberyard. I had that job for two years . . . It was a great job; good money, and excellent benefits. Then some big East Coast hardware chain bought us out. A week after the takeover, the new manager swooped in like a vulture and started firing people."

He took another hit from his smoke and set it down in the ashtray on the table. "And since I was one of the newest guys there, I was out. He ended up getting rid of six of the twenty guys that worked there."

"What, you couldn't have gotten another job? It's not the fucking end of the world," he scolded.

"Hey, I looked," he said throwing his palms out. "I spent the next six months looking. But nothing except some minimum

wage crap job that wouldn't have given me enough to take care of my family."

"That would have been better than what you ended up doing," Josh gave him a stern look as he took a sip of beer.

"Then the shit really hit the fan and Ethan got pneumonia. We had no money. No health insurance. I didn't know what to do," he said putting his head in his hands.

There was a knock at the door and Josh got up to answer it. It was the pizza delivery guy. Relieved that the conversation was interrupted, Ryan went to the kitchen for two plates and another couple of beers, brought them out and set them on the table. Josh laid the box down on the table and opened it, a white, hot cloud of steam bellowed out. He tore off a piece for each of them and put it on the plates.

As they worked on the pizza, Ryan told Josh that he needed to stay a few more days. While he appreciated Josh putting him up and didn't want to push him too far, he knew after only three days since holding up the liquor store, the police were still out there searching for someone matching his description. He knew he needed to let things cool down a bit, that leaving now was just too risky.

They finished off the pizza and spent the rest of the evening talking over a few more beers, until Josh finally staggered off to bed.

Alone in the dimly lit room, Ryan sat silently on the couch. He stared blankly at the wall, lost in his pain. What happened? He kept repeating to himself. Where had things gone wrong? He took a deep breath, trying to contain his emotions. Exhausted from worry, he turned out the lights and lay down, trying to shut out the guilt that swam around in his head.

On Friday night, Ryan and Josh watched the newscaster finish reading the six o'clock news and then switched over to calling off the winning California Lottery numbers.

Ryan quickly pulled his tickets out of his wallet and followed along with each number as they were slowly read off.

Josh looked at him, his eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"I picked up ten lottery tickets."

"What? What were you thinking? What the hell were you doing leaving the . . .," Josh said with fire in his voice.

Ryan put his hand up. "Quiet. They're starting to read off the numbers now," he said, giving Josh a thin smile. He ticked off the numbers as the announcer read them off.

The first four numbers matched.

He took a deep breath and sat forward. His eyes focused on the tickets.

The fifth number matched.

Ryan rubbed the back his neck and took a deep breath.

"You only need to two more numbers to hit the jackpot," Josh blurted out in excitement.

The sixth number matched.

Ryan rubbed his eyes then pinched the bridge of his nose, as if to wake him out of what surely must have been a dream.

The seventh number matched.

Ryan gave out a loud cheer as he sailed off the couch, punching his fist in the air at some imaginary target.

"Tell me you won?" Josh tried to yell over Ryan's cheering.

"Yep," he said, handing him the ticket.

Josh compared the numbers as they flashed on the screen, still unsure that this was actually happening. "Oh . . . my . . . god," he said as he realized he was holding the winning ticket. He gave out a loud yelp, shaking the ticket high up in the air. "How much did you win?"

"\$26 million."

"You're joking. \$26 million."

"That's what the man said," he offered with a broad grin across the width of his face.

"Don't worry about how much it is. You've got to think about how you're going to collect it," Josh reminded him.

His excitement was replaced by an overpowering sense of reality. "That's easy. You can pick it up," he gave him a sly smile.

"I'm not sure about that one." Josh said, his voice shaking. "All the other times they seem to know where the ticket was sold. Even have a video of the guy who bought it."

"That's only when the winner doesn't come forward right away. All you have to do is go and claim the money tomorrow." His eyes rested firmly on Josh, waiting for an answer. "Come on, I'll give you half," he smiled convincingly.

Josh's eyebrows raised, a smile crept over his wide puffy face. "Sure. I guess for \$13 million, I'll take the risk."

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Ryan sat forward, eyes glued to the tube as Josh accepted the oversized check. A feeling of ease rushed through his body, as if all his problems had melted away. He vowed never to allow his family to suffer as they had for the last year. Certainly with \$13 million in the bank, there were few problems they couldn't buy their way out of.

His mind wandered to his trip to Mexico with Maria and Ethan. They would buy a bungalow on the beach. Learn Spanish. Maybe he would do some writing. Mostly they would just lie on the beach and watch the water lap up on the shore. Maybe Josh would join them. It didn't matter. Either way, they would leave as soon as he had his share of the money.

They had already talked about it. They would take a bus down to the border. They were sure that the local airport and the bus station weren't safe, that the cops would be checking them out. He had convinced Josh to drive him out to Gilroy, along the 152, where he would meet up with Maria and Ethan. From there, the three of them would jump on the first bus down to the boarder. The bus ride to Tijuana, with all the stops along the way, would be somewhere around 15 hours. Once they reached the border, they would walk across into Mexico with the throngs of tourists. It would be easy. It was coming back into the US that would be a problem. But they didn't care about that. As far as they were concerned, they were never coming back.

# *Way of the Gun*

Christopher Martinez

## **Honorable Mention**

Red and blue lights reflected in his father's eyes as he peeked through the window at the scene in front of their house. Several police cars were parked outside, some on the street, some on the yard, and at least a dozen officers were all facing the front door, weapons drawn. Alejandro wondered what his father had done to draw so many cops to their doorstep.

"Looks like they found me," his father said casually, as if talking about the weather. "Our lawn's been turned into a pigsty."

He chuckled to himself as he let the curtain fall back across the window and sat down to light a cigarette. Outside one of the officers was trying through a megaphone to coax his father into coming outside.

"We know you're in there, Hector," the officer said, "Come out with your hands behind your head...."

His father listened for a moment then scoffed, turning his attention back to loading shells into a sawed-off shotgun. "Want me to surrender, do they? What do you think, Henry?"

His brother sat on the floor, his fingers caressing the pistol that rested in his lap as if it was the face of his lover. "Never surrender."

Hector nodded approvingly at his oldest, then looked at Alejandro. "What's wrong with you, boy? You look pale as a ghost."

"What are you gonna do?" Alejandro asked.

Hector stood up. His father was a big man, all muscle and bulk, with a tattoo of a dragon on his bare chest that wrapped around to his back. His unshaven face was all planes and angles, and his brown eyes looked at him with arrogance.

"What do you think I'm gonna do? I'm going out with a bang, and taking as many of those cop-punks with me as I can."

"Me too," Henry added, rising to his feet and checking the clip in the gun for the fourth time, "I'm with you, pops."

Hector gave him a playful shove to the chest and laughed. "That's my boy! What have I always told you? Live by the gun..."

"...die by the gun," Henry finished. Alejandro could not believe what he was hearing. They were actually excited to get killed.

"You're both insane!" He shouted, "Just give up and they'll let you live."

"Live?" his father spat, "They're gonna put me away for the rest of my life Lobo. Now if I had to choose whether to live like an animal at the zoo or die like a man, well, you know what my answer is."

"For El Olvidado," Henry said, tying his red bandanna around his head, "For the eastside."

"Look," Hector said, "You're mind ain't right Lobo. Get Cesar and your grandmother and take them to the back room and look out for them. Henry and I will come get you when it's over."

When it's over? Alejandro thought, Does he really think that they're gonna live through this?

"They're coming around the back," Henry stated as he glanced outside, his voice filled with a dark eagerness, and his eyes burned with a manic bloodlust.

"It's time," Hector stated, "Go now, Lobo." Alejandro stood rooted in place, not wanting to believe that this was really happening. He looked at his father and brother, mirror images of each other, and tried to say something, anything, but the words caught in his throat.

"Now!" Hector spun him about and shoved him hard, causing him to stumble. He took one last look at them, then found that he could control his legs again and ran to the back. Behind him, he heard a loud crash as something or someone went through the front door, followed by a deafening boom as his father unleashed the shotgun's fury.

He found his grandmother and his younger brother already in the room and huddled on the floor, his grandmother's eyes closed and her mouth moving in silent prayer. He closed the door and sat down next to Cesar, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.



His brother looked up at him, teary eyes wide with fear as the sound of gunfire resounded from just outside the door. It was as if a war had just erupted in their own house.

Footsteps came down the hallway and the door was flung open. His father entered, Henry slung over one shoulder, the shotgun slung over the other. He laid Henry down on the floor, the front of his shirt covered in blood, his breathing shallow and his face twisted in pain. His grandmother cried out in shock as she saw her felled grandson. His father sat down on the foot of the bed, cigarette still in his mouth, and dumped the spent shells out of the sawed-off and chambered two more. He was covered in blood, though whether it was his or someone else's was hard to tell. He crouched down next to his fallen son.

"You did good son, real good," he assured him, "I'm proud of you."

Henry tried to respond, but all he could manage was a gurgling sound from his throat as he coughed up more blood. Something slammed into the back door and booted feet could be heard in the dining room.

"It's ok son, just sleep now. I'll take care of the rest." He paused, then added, "I'll see you soon."

He stood up, taking a long pull on his cigarette and letting it out. "You boys make me proud, okay? Lobo, you're the oldest, and it's gonna be up to you to take care of Cesar and your grandma, you got it?"

Alejandro nodded solemnly, watching as Henry's chest stopped rising.

"Mother," his father continued, "I'm sorry I didn't turn out the way you thought I would."

"Te odio!" she shouted, glaring at him through watery eyes.

"I know, I know," he admitted, "I'll be out of your life soon enough."

He looked at them one last time before he turned his attention to the figures creeping down the hall. The shotgun sounded twice more, so close that it caused Alejandro's ears to ring and he could barely hear the cries of pain over it. Hector was reaching into his

pocket for more shells when he was caught in a maelstrom of gunfire that did not let up, even after he had lost the grip on his weapon and had fallen to his knees, the cops unleashing their fury on the man that had killed several of their comrades.

When the barrage finally let up, Alejandro lifted his head. The pungent smell of burnt gunpowder stung his nostrils and the smoke burned his eyes. He saw his father on the ground, his chest ruined and misshapen from the multiple rounds it had absorbed, sprawled next to his oldest son. The officers were standing over him now, asking him questions, but he did not hear any of them, his sight on his father's fixed eyes and the look of satisfaction that was frozen permanently in them.

Alejandro awoke with a start, his heart pounding in his ears and his body covered in sweat. Slowly, his dream world faded away and his room appeared in its place. He let out a breath and collapsed back on his bed, closing his eyes and waiting for his strung nerves to relax. His clock read 6:40, twenty minutes before his alarm would go off. He tried to go back to sleep, but gave up quickly, his mind fully awake even if his body wasn't. He got up and opened his blinds, letting in the blue-gray light of early morning. Picking a towel up off the floor, he stumbled down the dark hallway to the bathroom and stepped into the shower.

He flinched as the icy water ran over his skin, trying to shock his body out of its lethargy. When he was finished, he toweled himself off and looked in the mirror as he got ready. He was tall and wiry, his arms corded and his chest hardened from stocking shelves at the local grocery store. His dark hair was cut short and combed forward, held in place with a glob of gel. He had a boyish face that was dominated by a hawk nose and ended in a short beard. Hazel eyes stared back at him, thoughtful, lucid pools that revealed nothing of his emotions or moods. Down his right forearm was tattooed the word Lobo.

When he was as satisfied with his appearance as he was going to be, he wrapped the towel around his waist and headed back to his room. He could hear his grandmother in the kitchen as

she began preparing breakfast, the enticing smell of her cooking filling the house. He glanced inside Cesar's room as he passed, finding it vacant as it usually was these days. Cesar spent most of his time either with Angela, his girl for this week, or with Carlos, the latter's reputation in the neighborhood causing him to worry.

Back in his room, he sifted through the clothes that were strewn on the ground, searching for anything that did not appear to be too dingy or smell too bad to wear. He settled on a white t-shirt and black denim shorts that were cut well below the knee. Taking one last diagnostic of himself in the mirror, he began to leave, then stopped when he saw the crimson bandanna hanging over his doorknob. After a quick mental deliberation, he left the bandanna where it was and continued through the door.

In the kitchen, he found his grandmother bustling around the stove, stirring and seasoning with a practiced hand. She was short and plump, her light brown hair streaked through with white, and her face seamed from age. Brown eyes flicked back and forth from pot to pan, keeping a mental tab on everything that was cooking.

"Good morning, Henry," she greeted, not looking up from what she was doing, "You're up early this morning."

He frowned. She had been recently confusing him with his other brothers and his father often, and also forgetting simple things that she should know. "I'm Alejandro, grandma."

She stopped what she was doing and took a long look at him before returning to her task. "I'm sorry, mijo. You look so much like him, I get mixed up sometimes. You want something to eat before school?"

He thought about saying something then decided against it. Instead, he looked at the chorizo, potatoes, and buttered tortillas as his grandmother piled them onto a plate and nodded hungrily. "Sure."

"Well, I'm done with the stove," she replied, setting the food down on the table and taking a seat in front of it, "You can make what you want."

He stared at her in disbelief and she gave him a curious look. “What? This is for me. You’re old enough to make your own damn food.”

He couldn’t help but laugh, “You’re really going to finish all of that by yourself?”

“Of course, I am,” she replied, “I don’t have to watch my figure for anyone, so I eat what I damn well choose to.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little unhealthy for you, though?”

She shrugged. “I figure I got about ten minutes to live, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

He sighed in resignation and decided on a breakfast of cereal and took a seat next to his grandmother.

“How are you doing in school mijo?”

He nodded. “I’m getting by. The hardest part is staying awake in class.”

“I’m proud of you, Alejandro,” she continued, “No one from our family has ever gone to college before.”

“It’s only a community college.”

“Still though, you can have a better life if you stick with it, something different than what your father had.”

They sat in silence for awhile, each lost in their own thoughts as they ate. When he was finished, he put his dishes in the sink and kissed his grandmother on the cheek.

“I’ll see you when I’m done with school, abuela.”

“Okay, mijo. Have a good day.”

He picked up his backpack from where he had left it by the doorway the previous day and went through the front door.

Outside, the day was sunny and warm, and he could already feel the heat that the day promised beginning to build. He fished around in his pack for his car keys as he walked down the stone path to the driveway where his car, a 1961 Impala, was parked. The car had been a project that he, Cesar, and his father had shared. It had taken years to restore it back to cherry, and when their father had died, he and his brother argued constantly over who should get it. They finally decided the winner of a basketball game gets the car. The game, of course, stretched into an

ugly best-of-seven match that left both brothers angry with one another, neither speaking to the other for the better part of a month.

He got inside and turned the ignition, feathering the throttle as he did so, and the engine roared to life. After letting it warm up for a few minutes, he backed out of the driveway and was on his way.

The neighborhood he drove through was made up of old, dilapidated houses with neglected yards, often with chain-link perimeters. There were few cars, fewer still that weren't on cinder blocks or rusting on lawns. Sidewalks were uneven and overgrown with weeds, and the streets were spider-webbed with cracks and spotted with potholes. Dogs lay apathetic on their owners' porches with forlorn looks on their faces. The sunlight, bright and cheerful above, seemed dull and gray below. This was the part of the city that had been forgotten and swept under the rug, the denizens within left to fend for themselves. Even police were seldom seen, knowing that the eastside belonged to El Olvidado.

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He arrived in his history class ten minutes early, a few people already there, and took a seat in the back corner. He got out a pen and his worn notebook and began working on the ending of a poem he had been writing. After awhile, the class began filling up and the professor walked in, greeting the class and taking attendance before promptly beginning his lecture on the Cold War. Alejandro tried to pay attention, but his mind quickly began to wander. The professor was a smart man, but he was one of those typical gray-haired professors that droned on and on in monotone and could put anyone to sleep. He returned to his poem, looking up once in awhile to give the impression that he was taking notes.

Time finally showed some mercy on him, and the class was dismissed, the professor shouting out the pages to read for homework as Alejandro followed the rest of the students filing out the door. When he was outside, he went to the central plaza and took

a seat in front of the fountain, watching the cascades of water shine like liquid crystal as it caught the sunlight and listening to its steady cadence as it fell.

He took out his notebook and began writing again. He enjoyed poetry, finding it a way to get all the thoughts and emotions that cluttered his mind and give them a place. It helped him deal with stressful times and when he was particularly depressed about something. It was like having someone to talk to whenever he needed to vent.

“You writing about how much you love me?” Marissa asked as she took a seat next to him, exchanging a quick kiss with him as she did so.

“Not exactly,” he admitted.

“What?!” she exclaimed in mock surprise, “I don’t know what else you could possibly be writing about then.”

“Here,” he said, handing her the notebook, “It’s just another poem I’ve been working on.”

She took the notebook from him and began to read, and he studied her while she did so. She had a small build with soft, cream colored skin that seemed to radiate even in the daylight. Her black hair was highlighted and glistened in the sun as it flowed past her shoulders. Her face was round and flawless and set with dazzling emerald eyes that shone with an innocence that made him ache when he looked into them.

“This is awful,” she said bluntly, bringing him out of his daze.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling as if he had just been punched in the gut, “I know it’s not that good.”

“No, I mean it’s good,” she corrected, handing him back the notebook, “but what you’re writing about is just dark and really depressing.”

“I know. It’s just how I feel sometimes.”

“It’s because you miss me so much.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and the two of them watched as life happened around them. This was one of the few times they saw each other during the week. She was from a suburban family and her parents were strict about her dating and

who she saw. After going out in secret for about eight months, she finally managed to persuade them to meet him. As soon as they saw the way he dressed, the car he drove, and, above all, the tattoo on his arm, their minds were made up about him. They had been keeping close tabs on her ever since, and her mother had even tried to convince her to go out with their neighbor's son instead.

So they savored every moment, just enjoying each other's company, and hoped their time together would never end.

"I hate hardly seeing you," Marissa said after a time, "We should be able to be with each other more."

He sighed, already knowing this conversation by heart and its futility, but went along with it anyway, thinking in vain that perhaps it would end differently this time. "Me too."

"Can't you just leave and move somewhere else? You don't wanna be in a gang all your life, do you?"

He shrugged. "No, I guess not, but I don't know where I would go."

"What if we were to get an apartment together?" she asked, her eyes widening from her excitement at the thought, "It wouldn't matter what my parents think about you then. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, just a one-bedroom somewhere, away from all the gangs and stuff."

He mulled the thought over. "You think we're ready to move in together?"

"I don't see why not. We've been going out for almost a year."

"It's expensive. Even with the both of us working we would barely make it."

"But we'll be together," she smiled, "and that would make it worth it, wouldn't it?"

He nodded. "Of course, it's just...I don't think I can leave Cesar and my grandma behind."

Her smile slowly faded. "Oh....well, I guess they can come too..."

"I don't even know if they would, though," he admitted, "My grandma is the physical embodiment of stubbornness, and Cesar

is no exception. He's taken my dad's death hard, and I think some of the older members have put it in his head that he needs to be just like him. He'll be tougher to persuade."

"Will you try, though?" she asked.

"Of course, though I know living with my family is not your ideal scenario. You should think it through a little more before you commit to it."

They got up and he walked her to class.

"What if they don't want to leave?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You're not like them," she said, touching the side of his face, "You're different. I can see it in your eyes. You don't belong there."

He nodded, though he wasn't sure what she said was true.

"Maybe. I'll talk to him when I get home."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you too."

She kissed him, her lips soft against his, and he pulled her close, liking the way her body felt against his own. He held her tightly, knowing each moment that passed was closer to the moment she would leave. Bells sounded from nearby and she pulled away, giving him one last mesmerizing smile before disappearing through the door. He stood there for a few minutes afterwards, still feeling her presence against him, warm and comforting like the light of the sun, and silently wished that she hadn't gone.

It was late in the afternoon when Alejandro returned home, the sweltering heat coming off rooftops and pavement in waves, giving an almost surreal backdrop to his surroundings, as if he were in a dream. His grandmother was in her usual place on the sofa being hypnotized by daytime television, looking away briefly to greet him as he came in before returning to her trance. He deposited his pack on the floor of his room amongst the rest of the clutter and collapsed on his bed, his mind numbed by the incessant lectures of the day, and let himself doze.

Once he felt somewhat rested, he reached over for the remote to his stereo and hit PLAY. A few moments later, the grinding



riffs of Adam Jones and the haunting singing of Maynard James Keenan came out of his speakers as he began tackling the mess that was his floor. He was in the middle of a solo on the imaginary guitar he was playing when Cesar appeared in the doorway.

“How can you listen to this stuff?” his brother asked, shaking his head in disapproval, “It sounds like a bunch of guys clubbing a cat to death with a guitar.”

He laughed. “It’s a lot better than listening to somebody talk about the size of the rims on their car and the size of the ass on their ho for five minutes.”

“At least I can understand what they’re saying in my music.”

Alejandro grinned and looked at his brother, whom he hadn’t seen in several days as he walked around his room as if he had never been in it before. Cesar was a head shorter, but with a more compact frame. His hair was shaved almost to the skin and a red bandanna was tied around his head, covering most of his amber eyes. His face was round and showed the shadow of a beard with a pencil-thin mustache below a stubby nose. On his right forearm was tattooed Oro.

“Haven’t seen you in awhile,” Alejandro said, “You been going to class?”

Cesar shook his head. “Not since last week.”

“What have you been doing?”

He shrugged. “Nothin’ much. Been down Angela’s or out with Carlos and them.”

“What are doing hanging around Carlos? He and his crew are crazy.”

“Yeah, I know. We fucked up some scraps pretty bad yesterday. They were walkin’ through the park like it was their own turf, so they picked me up and we jumped ‘em. After we were through with those two, even their own mama’s won’t know who they are.”

Alejandro felt his ears begin to burn. “Why would you go and do something like that?! Now they’re going to come looking for you!”

Cesar shrugged. “Let them; I’ll be waiting. They know not to step foot on our territory unless they got an army with ‘em.”

He shook his head. "This is serious. You could get killed by doing stuff like that. You'll end up like dad and Henry."

"What's wrong with that?" Cesar replied, "Everyone thinks pops and Henry are heroes. They stood up for El Olvidado, even when it cost them their lives. What's up with you, anyway? You're soundin' like the punk that everyone is sayin' you are."

"What are you talking about?" Alejandro asked, "Who's been saying that?"

"I just said everyone, didn't I? Carlos, Juan, Jesse... hell, even Angela and Lorena have been sayin' that you're more concerned with college and that shit than El Olvidado. You never even wear the color anymore. They're saying that you're selling-out and that you got your priorities misplaced. Or maybe you don't. From what I'm hearing from you, sounds like your priorities are straight, in your head anyway."

Alejandro sat down on his bed, thinking over what his brother just told him. Cesar shook his head. "There's more, too. They've been wanting to beat your ass bad, maybe even kill you. If it wasn't for me, I don't think you'll be alive right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you think I've been hanging around with them so much? I've been vouching for you, and they've kept their distance because you're my brother. Lately though, it's been gettin' harder to. Carlos said that you're not only disrespecting the gang, but pops and Henry too. He says he's glad that at least one of us is tryin' to live up to them."

Alejandro sat quietly for awhile, letting the news sink in. He was not surprised by their actions, and deep down he had expected it.

"I'm sorry, bro," Cesar said, "If I were you man, I would get my act together, or run."

"You think I should go?" he asked.

Cesar sat down next to him. "I always knew that you were different. Just by lookin' at you I can tell that you're not comfortable in the way you act, even the way you dress doesn't seem right. You don't even talk like us. You don't belong here."

Alejandro nodded his head slowly. "Marissa wants to get an apartment together. I wasn't sure because I know they'll come looking for me if I leave."

"Maybe for a month or so, but not very hard and not beyond our lines. They'll be pissed for sure though, so I would make sure I never stepped foot here again."

"That's not the only reason holding me back," Alejandro admitted, "I didn't want to leave you and grandma here. I want you both to come with me."

Cesar shook his head. "I don't wanna leave, Lobo. This is my home, and I'm satisfied with it. Everything I'll ever need is right here."

"It's dumb, Cesar. Killing over colors and territory that doesn't even belong to them in the first place. Don't you want something better than this?"

"Not really. I guess we don't have the same wants in life. Here, I got people that got my back. Here, I can be someone important, even if it is just within a few miles of one town. Out there though, I'm nothin'. I may be street smart and able to survive, but I'm not book smart like you, and surviving out there is a lot more complicated. Life is simpler here. Dangerous, but simple. They would see me as just some street thug, like how Marissa's parents saw you. That's all I'll ever be, but you can do something I can't: You can prove them wrong."

"I'll worry about you too much, and what about grandma?"

"Talk to grandma, but I'm not sure if she'll go. If she wants to, then we can move her once you got a place set up. As for me, I'll be fine. I'm not as dumb as I look."

Alejandro smiled. "Could've fooled me."

Cesar shoved him playfully. "Better than not being as smart as you look."

He shoved him back and in a matter of moments Alejandro ended up on the ground with an arm around his neck, not pressing, but firm enough to hold him in check.

"I don't hear you tappin'," Cesar teased. Alejandro slapped the floor with his hand, swallowing his pride and a gulp of air as his brother released him.

“You may be in college ‘n all, but remember, I can still kick your ass.”

Alejandro grinned. “Get out of here, you dumb ox.”

“School boy!” Cesar shouted back as he went down the hall.

\*

The stars were beginning to manifest themselves in the night sky, like shards of glass against a sheet of velvet, as the sun descended wearily below the western horizon. The lithe form of a barn-owl glided effortlessly overhead as it searched the nearby fields for a meal. High in the firmament, a plane flew seemingly amongst the stars, its red light blinking steadily. Alejandro watched it all unfold as he laid in the bed of the ‘81 El Camino that was parked permanently in his back yard. The car was to be the next project after the Impala, but now stood derelict and forgotten, a silent witness as time marched steadily onward.

He laid thinking for sometime, watching as the crescent moon waxed in the heavens, and it was beginning to wane when he finally made up his mind. He sat up, surprised at how certain he suddenly was, and then at why he had even debated it at all. It was time for a change in scenery. It was time for him to go.

He hopped out of the bed and headed towards the house, a cool breeze blowing from the north offering a brief reprieve from the stuffiness of the summer night. He swatted at a few annoying insects as they buzzed around his face hungrily and stepped through the door and locked it behind him. He was excited about his decision, able to live the way he wanted and with the girl he loved, and went to Cesar’s room to tell him, only to find it vacant. He frowned and went to the kitchen to get a roll of garbage bags before going to his room.

Once there he began shoving everything into a bag, ready to move on already. He was trying to decide what to pack next when he heard a car come to a screeching stop outside his house followed by shouts and yells. A cold feeling developed in his gut, and he rushed out the door immediately.

Outside, he found Carlos and Julio pulling Cesar out of their car and laying him on the ground, his shirt covered in blood.

“No!” Alejandro screamed as he knelt down next to his brother, Cesar’s face pale and gaunt, and he figured it was a mirror image of his own, “What happened?!”

“It was those fuckin’ scraps from the park,” Carlos said, rather calmly, “They opened up on us.”

Dammit! Alejandro leapt to his feet, “I’m calling an ambulance!”

He started towards the house but felt a strong hand pull him back by the arm. He staggered and turned to find that the hand belonged to Carlos, the big man shaking his head.

“What are you, stupid?” Carlos asked, “If you do that, then they’re gonna ask questions and then cops are gonna start snooping around.”

“So?!” Alejandro shouted, “What does it matter?”

“So,” Julio said, “It matters ‘cause we were drivin’ around in their territory and shot a couple of ‘em.”

Alejandro stood dumbfounded. “You took Cesar on a drive-by?! Are you insane?! He’s only sixteen! What am I supposed to do then, watch him die?!”

Carlos shrugged and lit a cigarette. “Maybe he’ll live, maybe he won’t. It’s in God’s hands now. If he dies, then at least he went out like a man. You should be proud.”

Alejandro couldn’t believe the two of them were talking and acting like they didn’t notice his brother was laying on the ground in a puddle of his own blood. “I’m getting an ambulance.”

He tried to run, but this time Carlos grabbed him and threw him on the ground next to his brother, and he found himself looking down the barrel of Julio’s pistol.

“You need to calm the fuck down,” Julio said, “We already told you no ambulance. One man ain’t above the gang. Everyone knows that.”

“You got somethin’ else to worry about anyway,” Carlos said, letting out a stream of smoke from his nostrils, “Someone just shot and maybe even killed your brother, your own blood. Now we’ve been real lenient on you, as I’m sure Cesar has told you. Now it’s time for you to prove how much of a man you are, and how much Olvidado you are.”

“What are you talking about?!” Alejandro yelled, not taking his eyes off his brother.

“I’m....sorr...” Cesar managed before he began coughing up blood violently. Alejandro held his hand tightly.

“I know. Just rest now,” he said, trying to comfort him, tears coming forth in torrents, helpless as he watched Cesar begin to shake uncontrollably.

“Please don’t leave me,” he begged silently. Another dry heave and Cesar’s hand went limp, his glazed eyes, staring intently at nothing.

No!

“What I’m talkin’ ‘bout is simple,” Carlos continued, as if watching Cesar die had been no different than watching the news, “Are you going to avenge your brother, or not? It’s the least you can do for him after all the trouble he went through to keep you safe, don’t you think?”

Alejandro wiped his eyes on the back of his hand, shaking with rage and grief, then paused as he saw the butt of a gun tucked in his brother’s waistline. He looked away quickly, hoping they hadn’t seen him notice it. Julio was talking now but he wasn’t paying attention, his mind focused on what he was about to do now.

“Yeah,” he whispered to no one in particular, “I’ll avenge him.”

Before he knew what he was doing, he yanked the gun free from his brother’s waist, aimed it directly at Julio, and pulled the trigger. It sounded like thunder had just clapped next to his ear as Julio disappeared behind a spray of red mist. For a moment he sat stunned, not believing what he had just done, as if he had watched it happen from somewhere outside his body. Then he heard Carlos shouting and he regained his senses and bolted towards the front door, firing behind him blindly, the recoil of the gun sending shockwaves through his body, almost causing him to drop it. He flung the door open and slammed it shut, throwing himself on the ground as Carlos’ pistol retorted, bullets piercing the air where his head had been only a moment before.

He laid on the ground, unable to move, the weight of what he had done beginning to settle on him, Julio's face, contorted with fear and then pain, was frozen in front of his eyes. He sobbed, feeling sick to his stomach. Cesar's face was there as well, looking at him accusingly. He should've done something, but what?

"Mijo!" his grandmother shouted, running to his side, "What happened?! What's going on?!"

He tried to reply, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Puto!" Carlos shouted from somewhere outside, "I'm gonna blow your fuckin' head off!"

He sprang to his feet and half-dragged his grandmother down the hall. "Get back in the room!" he shouted, "Stay down!"

"No!" she pleaded, "Not again, Hector!"

He ignored her cries and slammed the door shut just as the front door was kicked in. He whirled around, Carlos seeing him at the same time, and they both raised their weapons at each other. They fired, and Alejandro felt as if molten lava had been poured on his chest. He caught a glimpse of Carlos clutching his throat, eyes wide in surprise, before the world began to spin around him.

He slumped against the wall, trying desperately to catch his breath, but his lungs were not responding, and he could no longer feel the searing pain he had felt a moment ago as his body began to go numb, its senses shutting down one by one. A silent scream came from his throat, full of rage and despair at what was happening, and he was shaking, though he could not tell whether it was from his body reacting or from fear as he realized with a terrible clarity that he was dying.

He thought he could hear his grandmother's voice, but it sounded distant, as if she was calling to him from across a great void. Random images began appearing in his mind, memories of his childhood, of Marissa, of the final minutes of his father's and brother's lives, and of the events that led to the end that seemed inherent in his family. Slowly they all faded, one by one, into oblivion.

Then death enveloped him in its comforting embrace, softly caressing him, as if he were its child, and gently carried him away into nothingness.





# Photography

*To send light into the darkness of men's hearts—  
such is the duty of the artist.*  
Schumann



*OAB Theatre*

Todd Placencia

**First Prize, Photography**



*Innocence*

Adriana Ramirez

**Second Prize, Photography**



## *Lady Eve*

Cheyenna Wainscott

**Third Prize, Photography**



*Denise #7*

Joseph Maldonado

**Honorable Mention, Photography**



*FCC Night*

Adriana Ramirez

**Honorable Mention, Photography**



### *Classic III*

Todd Placencia

**Honorable Mention, Photography**





# Non-Fiction

*The act of putting pen to paper  
encourages pause for thought,  
this in turn makes us think  
more deeply about life,  
which helps us regain  
our equilibrium.*

Norbet Platt

## *Tiny Coffins and God's Will*

Maylin Tu

### **First Prize Non-Fiction**

Anne Bradstreet wrote “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet.” Edward Taylor wrote “Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children.” Both Bradstreet and Taylor attempt, in their respective poems, to reconcile their faith in God with the unthinkable tragedy of a child’s death. In many surface ways, their poems seem quite similar, both in tone and content. However, they differ significantly on a few key points. Bradstreet is unique in her veiled expression of blame towards God, while Taylor expresses the conventional Puritan response to tragedy in a way that convinces the reader of his authenticity—both as a loving father and as a man who found his greatest joy in surrendering to God’s “unnatural” will.

Both poets resort to a relatively simple metaphor—that of flowers. Neither of them attempts to elevate the tragedy by using cryptic references to Greek mythology or the Bible. Bradstreet’s poem in particular is remarkable for its simplicity of language and feeling. The first stanza uses the repetition of the word “farewell” and “babe” as well as an alternating rhyme scheme in the first four lines. The straightforward use of language makes the poem feel very real, very genuine, and lacking in literary pretension. Far from over-spiritualizing death, Bradstreet succeeds in the genuine expression of grief.

In the first stanza, Bradstreet compares her grandchild to a “fair flower that for a space was lent” (275). Like Taylor, she recognizes that her grandchild belonged to God, not to her earthly family. Elizabeth is referred to as “dear,” “sweet,” “the pleasure of mine eye,” and as “blest” (Bradstreet 276-277). The author addresses her dead grandchild with great affection and honesty, and rhetorically asks her granddaughter if there is any point in her expression of mourning. In these last three lines of the first stanza, all of the lines have the same end rhyme, indicating a unity of thought within those lines.

Bradstreet's second stanza switches gears completely in terms of tone, giving evidence that "plants new set to be eradicate" and "buds new blown to have so short a date" could be nothing less than contrary to nature (276). It follows the same rhyme scheme as the first stanza, with the first four lines possessing alternating rhyme and the last three lines—the point and summation of the poem—all having the same end rhyme. She ends with the sentiment that it must be God's special action for something so abnormal to happen. But that leaves the question, why would God want to take her?

Bradstreet's tone here could be taken as accusatory: she is blaming God for taking her grandchild away. The lines could also be read as a mixture of resignation to God's will and hope that she is residing in heaven. Without that hope, it's doubtful that Bradstreet could have lost a grandchild and still keep her faith in God. Even not read as veiled accusation towards God for his unnatural act, Bradstreet's poem does not come even close to approaching Taylor's level of resignation over the death of his children.

Taylor also compares his children to flowers sprouting from a "True-Love Knot" (346). He first establishes, in the first two stanzas, the beauty of the flowers that grow in his garden. Compared to Bradstreet, Taylor's language is more complex and his words more archaic. While Bradstreet's poem could have been written by a modern writer, Taylor's language places him squarely in the seventeenth century. For Taylor, a direct consequence of a heaven-matched marriage was children, and by extension the death of some of his children in infancy. In his poem, he celebrates both marriage and the birth of children as a welcomed and joyful occasion.

Taylor's attitude towards life after death permeates his poem about dead children. To both Taylor and Bradstreet, heaven was not a distant and undefined place that people went to after they died; heaven was a very near and very concrete reality. God created the "Knot" in "Paradise," or heaven, and it is to heaven that the flowers go, whether soon after sprouting or long after (Taylor 346).

Only by his strong belief in a very real afterlife can Taylor reconcile his own personal tragedy with what he perceives to be God's will.

On the occasion of the first death, Taylor envisions a "glorious hand from glory" and "Guarded with Angels" possessing the flower. Thus, he describes his daughter's death as an act of God personally reaching down from heaven and interacting with human affairs. In his view, her death was not only "Dolesome" and "darksome," it was also "perfumed" and "bright" (Taylor 346). He "sees" his daughter escorted to heaven by angels, focusing not on the physical signs of her death, but on a greater spiritual reality. In his eyes, his daughter's death is nothing less than a tangible expression of God's divine providence in his life.

Although Taylor does not focus on the suffering caused by the death of his children—he focuses on their position in heaven—neither does he deny the sheer brutality of the experience. The "hour" of his first daughter's death was "unlooked for" and the "cropp[ing]" of her flower almost causes the uprooting of himself and his marriage (Taylor 346). Taylor uses the words "crop" and "tore" to describe God's action in taking his daughter, words that imply at the very least a callous unfeeling attitude towards human suffering (346).

While what Taylor describes as the uprooting of his stem obviously means great personal suffering, it could also imply a crisis of faith. His daughter's death was both unexpected and unwanted. It may have shaken the very foundations of his faith. Taylor goes into more detail to describe the death of his second daughter, an extremely painful one, with "tortures," "Vomit," "screechings," and "groans" (347). At the sight of his suffering child, Taylor suffered greatly as well. Although he uses the euphemism "got away" instead of "crop[ped]" this time, Taylor does not downplay the role of suffering in the death of his two children—neither his suffering nor theirs.

Of course, being a Puritan who believed strongly in the providence and love of God and in an afterlife far more important than earthly life, Taylor cannot leave the reader with a picture of human tragedy. He must end up at the end, like David in the Psalms of

the Bible, praising God for his goodness. Bradstreet defies this convention in her poem but Taylor rigidly adheres to it in his.

Bradstreet takes great care and six lines to highlight the unnaturalness of the death of children. To her, it defies both human logic and the laws of nature itself and though she concludes her poem on the note that it has to be God who “guides nature and fate,” her account does not come close to Taylor’s journey of grief and doubt to ultimate surrender (Bradstreet 276).

Taylor, on the other hand, takes care of his own doubts and objections to God with a single phrase: “and nature fault would find” (347). He acknowledges that the natural, human thing to do would be to blame God for an act that nature itself vilifies and deems illogical. His joyful acceptance of his children’s death and his willing surrender to God can only be explained by his belief in heaven as the ultimate pinnacle of man’s whole existence. If life on earth is only a passing shadow compared to heaven, then Taylor can embrace fully the idea that his children are far better off with God “in Glory” than with him down on earth (346).

Taylor also sees the death of his children as furthering his own ultimate goal: to be in heaven with God. His dead children become his “pledge in glory”—his stake in a divine future (346). In the last stanza they become a passageway of sorts to heaven, as he “piecemeal pass[es] to Glory bright in them” (Taylor 347). Although the idea of seeing dead offspring as a way to get to heaven faster seems macabre, this was the accepted if not expected response for the Puritans of that time period. Taylor manages to turn painful personal experience into one more reason to praise God as the creator and ruler of all things.

How disturbing can you get—writing a celebratory poem about the death of two of your children? However, this view does not take into account that the puritans saw everything through the lens of God’s divine hand at work in the world. In their attempt to reconcile God’s seeming cruelty with what they knew and believed to be his awesome love, Puritans like Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet struggled out their faith in great poetry.

## Works Cited

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# Scrapbook

Patricia Soto

## Second Prize Non-Fiction

Everyone has experienced immense pain. The type of pain that rips you up inside and seems to be incurable. A pain named Love. So beautiful yet so powerful that it can destroy a soul forever. At one point, I was one of those souls that was about to be devoured forever by the powers of hate, rage and revenge. What is it that almost transformed my pure soul to such a demonic possession? Better yet, who is it? His name is Nehemias Blanco. Your typical jerk—a good looking, and athletic, big-man-on-campus who thinks he's too good for the world. Yet, there was something about him that I liked. I saw something inside Nehemias that no one else understood. He was a big jerk but I never saw that side of him. I saw another side. A side I can't explain. A side no one else noticed. "Why Nehemias? Out of all guys, why him?" There was something special about this guy but I would never find out.

\*

It all started my sophomore year of high school. Winter break was approaching. I was heartbroken when I found out the guy I liked had a girlfriend but as wise as I am I told myself things would get better. True to my own word, I was better the next day; it didn't bother me anymore. We were officially off for winter break. Then, I started having the same dream every night.

### BEGIN DREAM

I'm in my biology class, laughing, doing class work. As my group and I laugh and do our class work, the door opens. A guy walks in. I do not look up. He stands where he is, talks to the teacher from there. I can hear his voice. As he stands there and without looking up, with my peripheral vision I see what he is wearing. I turn to look. His face is indistinct, blurry, faded. Somehow, I feel as if I know him. He signs into the class, looks my direction and looks at me as if I look familiar. I can't explain

how I saw his facial expression when his face is blurry. As he walked to his seat next to a familiar friend of his, I saw his backpack. It had a soccer patch on it.

END DREAM

Every time I woke up from this dream, I woke up confused and wondered who that person was. I didn't know who this new arrival was. Why did I keep having this dream? What does it mean? Who is this guy? It's just a dream. What could it possibly mean? It's just a dream that keeps repeating itself for no apparent reason. Yet...I wonder.

\*

We came back from winter break. Deja vu. The door opens, I do not look. I hear his voice- I can see him standing through my peripheral vision.

"That voice..." I turn to look.

The clothes he was wearing, the tone of his voice, and the backpack with the soccer patch. It was the guy from my dream. I could see his face. I couldn't believe it. My heart was palpitating like never before.

"A premonition? How did I know he was coming? Oh my gosh! I'm a FREAK!" I was appalled. Eager to find out what this meant, I began to watch him in class to learn something about him. As shy as I am, I never got the courage to talk to him. I would just watch and learn by his actions and how friendly he was with other people.

"Nehemias Blanco, that's his name. Nini they call him"

I don't know why, I don't know how, but I began to like what I saw. I know this sounds stalker like but I never did anything like that. I began to see something in Nini that I, to this day, cant explain. Something I liked. I soon fell in love with his personality. It went on like that the rest of the year. Somehow he found out how I felt about him or so I believe. By the end of the year, he disappeared. I wondered if I would see him next year. I wondered. I wondered all summer. I wondered.

The beginning of a new year and a new start. I had forgotten about him until I saw him on that first day of our junior year.



My heart raced to it's fullest as he passed next to me, the smell of his cologne didn't make me sneeze.

"A new year, a new approach. I HAVE to talk to him, but how?"  
Football started, he was on the team.

"I got an idea! I'm going to do something for him that no other girl would do for him. This is how I'm going to show him that I'm visible. I want him to see that I'm different. This is how I'm going to talk to him, in my language. The language of music and inspiration. No other girl can do this-just me!"

A scrapbook, I went to all the games, even the ones the band wasn't required to go to, and took pictures of him on the field. That was the best I could do. I had my friends take close-ups for me but I wasn't as lucky to get many shots. The book would contain the pictures that I had taken, a CD and lyrics to the songs. I hand picked the songs to express how I felt. I also added newspaper clippings of the team, pictures of him and some inspirational quotes. In the back, a letter I wrote explaining my reason for the book, a bit about me, and the dream I had. I would write to him about the dream I had hoping he would understand. I felt he should know about it since it is what led me to him. The book took longer to put together than I expected and I spent more than \$100 on it. I slacked off in all my classes concentrating on this book. I wanted it to be perfect. It still didn't come out how I wanted it to.

I finished the book sometime in December. A week before we were off to winter break. I thought he could receive it like a Christmas present. I never intended it to be a Christmas present but that's how it worked out. I was excited and petrified at the same time. That day came, a Monday. He would receive the book, not by my hands. I trusted my best friend Crystal to give Nini the scrapbook. During lunch, she approaches me with my book. My heart began pounding with every vessel in full action. Thinking he had rejected my book, she quickly says,

"He was with a girl. I didn't want to interrupt their conversation."

I pleaded her to try again right now, that moment. Before she left, I gave her directions I wanted her to follow. Those directions were to wait until he was alone and to tell him to look at it on his own time, it was private. To not let anyone else see it, it was private.

I don't know exactly what happened but she didn't deliver. She let our EVIL friend Ana give him the book. From what I was told, she didn't say a word. She just gave it to him in front of all his friends and walked away. He opened it right there, guys all around then, soon joined in a few girls; a confused look on his face. Meanwhile, I, nervously waiting for Crystal to return, she finds me and says

"I'm sorry." She explains what happened.

With my eyes already watering up

"How did he react? What did he do?"

I was already tearing; I knew deep down everything was messed up. Nothing went the way it was suppose to.

"He looked confused...his friends were laughing at him then he began to laugh." I was furious with Ana. I cried the rest of the lunch period.

The bell rang and I was slowly making my way to class. As I wiped away my tears, a good friend approaches me... Bri!

"What's wrong Patty? Why are you crying? How did it go with the book?"

With no hesitation, I told her everything. She already knew about the book and for whom it was for. She hugged me tight; I closed my eyes tight and took a deep breath. When I opened them, I could see him in the distance making his way toward me; or so it seemed. -"Nini is in my next class. I'm going to try and find out what exactly went on ok! Most likely he's going to tell his best friend about it. I'll make sure your book is ok and he doesn't throw it away. Hopefully it gets better here."

We embraced again and I immediately took off before he got any closer and saw me.

Still distressed but lingering with hope, I zoomed out of class as soon as the bell rang. As soon as I saw Bri, I knew my hope was shattered.

“Some girls were looking at your book and found the letter you wrote him. They were reading parts of it out loud. I’m so sorry patty. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear but he’s a big jerk Patty! He’s stupid and doesn’t know how special you really are.”

I visualized myself as the HULK, angry like never before. Then, I cried in her arms till the bell rang for our next class. As she walked me to my class, I asked,

“What did he do about it? He didn’t tell them to stop or took it away?”

“No. He just acted like he didn’t care. As if he wasn’t listening. He would laugh sometimes.”

\*

I don’t know what came over me after that moment. I felt such anger and pain. I became depressed and began to push away all my friends. I thought he would understand-I couldn’t be more wrong. All my friends warned me of the type of person he was but did I ever listen? No. Instead, I choose to seek out that uniqueness that made me see the person inside. Never once did I pay attention to what others said, I never judge a person by others words. I have to see it to believe it and I never saw it. I never believed it. Still feeling mutual to how I perceived Nehemias, I had never felt like my world wasn’t revolving until this happened.

How I felt, I can’t explain. How I saw the world after that is hard to say. A pain so massive can’t be put down in words. It was felt. It was haunting. It can be seen...but not in me. I hid how bad I felt. I let it eat me up inside and out every day. No one ever knew I was hurting, they all thought I was over it because that’s what I would tell them. My family not once did they suspect any change than my usual self. In reality, I was transforming into a cold person. Turning away all my friends, yelling at them, not talking to anyone, excluding myself from everyone and everywhere. Soon, no one wanted to be around me or talk to me. They were finally tired of putting with me and not knowing why I began to act as I was. I didn’t want to talk about it. They wouldn’t understand and they never did even when I

would speak. It felt as if he began to talk about me. Whenever I would walk by his “hang out” spot, I would get stared down and laughed at by his “posse“. I would walk by with my head down, embarrassed, sad, and angry. It felt that way all the time, even when I wasn’t anywhere near his friends. I would walk the campus feeling as if I had cameras following me. There was not one get away where I wasn’t being stared down. It seemed like the whole school knew.

What made me think maybe he thought it was a great gift; and what made me feel sorry for bestowing the book at all- I don’t know. I just felt maybe he’s not laughing at me but how would I know.

“How could I be so angry at him?” I had my reasons to hate him and they were good ones. As for Ana, I never spoke to her again.

\*

Spring break was coming up and the band was going to HAWAII. Finally a new feeling...Excitement! I can get away from all this, take a break, leave it behind and start fresh. Not once did I think of Nehemias unless someone mentioned him. I consider that ruining my vacation when he was brought up. I wanted a little Hawaiian drum. It took me almost all of my vacation until I found the perfect one and at a reasonable price. I brought it home but left it at school. Instead of keeping it, I wrote a letter and gave it to my friend Nicole to give to Nini. I don’t know what went through my head. I don’t know what made me want to present another gift upon him. After all the trouble I went through to find the perfect drum and buy it. I asked Nicole what his reaction was

“He took it. He asked if there was Anthrax on it before he took it. I think he threw the letter away.”

“What an idiot! Anthrax?”

The fact that he didn’t read the letter pissed me off. I was pissed off but kind of glad he didn’t read the letter or returned the drum. I didn’t know what I was saying in the letter anyway. It was all-senseless.

I became sick a couple of days after that whole mistake. I was detained in the hospital for a week. All I could think about was Nehemias. After thinking and saying to myself I had moved on finally. I thought about him when I was in pain. I thought about him when suicide became an option. I thought about him when I was alone and longed for company.

“I wish he knew I was here-suffering. I wish I would die and he would regret everything. I wish I would die and he would think of me all the time. I wish I would die so I can haunt him. I wish he knew I was here. Mostly, I wish he loved me. I wish he was here.”

I repeated those wishes in my head everyday, every minute that I felt I couldn't go on. I finally got out of the hospital but found myself home for another long week to recover. I was out of school for a total of 2 weeks. When I came back, everyone missed me. I had my friends back, my personality had refreshed in Hawaii and I was me again. I saw Nini that morning of my return. Rage and excitement filled my eyes and soul. Still, the feeling of being watched never went away. In my mind, I was the talk of the school, among the jocks and whomever they passed it on to. I figured I had to show Nini up somehow. I had to show him I didn't mind anymore. I would purposely walk by him and his gang with my head held high and a strict face. Anything to shut him up and gaze harder. That made me feel a bit good. It went that way all the way till the end of the school year, and then he disappeared. All I wanted now was revenge; I wanted to make him suffer. Feel what I felt so he knows how horrible it feels. Revenge.

\*

Seniors! Finally! This time nothing was going to bring me down. I was going to be a mighty brick wall. I'd see him. I'd think nothing of him except how badly I wanted to key his car! I was tempted many times but that type of evilness just isn't me. Besides, he drove a mustang. Mustangs are my favorite cars.

My friends and I were bored in Latin Jazz class. We were talking about senseless stuff, anything to make the period fun.

The subject comes up about love and revenge and somehow we start talking about me. One of my friends already knows the story but the other wants to know who this guy is.

“Nehemias Blanco,” I said.

“Nini! That jerk!” she says.

“I’m a have a long talk with that guy. He doesn’t do that to my friends. That’s messed up and your so sweet. He’s such a jerk...why Nini?”

I didn’t know what to say. I don’t know why Nini. I asked her to do me a huge favor:

“Can you ask Nini about the book...please. Ask him if he still has it. Tell him I really want to see it...I miss it.”

“Sure. I’ll get it back for you Patricia.” she says with no hesitation.

I didn’t want it back, I just wanted to look at it and make sure my book was still around. The next time I saw her, she came to me surprised and said

“He doesn’t know you. He doesn’t know who you are!”

“What?!”

“He said he doesn’t know a girl named Patricia!”

“Then who the hell made him that book? Bull shit! He damn right knows who I am”

“He said he doesn’t”

“What about the book?”

“He doesn’t have it.”

“What?!”

“He doesn’t have it. He doesn’t know where it is.”

Here comes Hulk again. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I had so much anger build up in me I didn’t know what to do with it. I couldn’t hold it in. my rage spilled out in the form of tears on my pillow that night.

\*

That was the end of that. I remain with that anger still in me. The rest of that year, whenever I saw him I was disgusted. Yet, that annoying feeling inside me is trying to convince me that somewhere in there is a good person. That person that I was

searching for in him still wants to be found. I hope that scrapbook is safe and still exists. None of this would have happened if I would of just delivered the book myself. I was at first but the twisted nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach prevented me. My shy mysterious personality didn't allow it either. Now a days, that we have all graduated from high school and are in college; I still think of him. Sometimes I wonder if he ever thinks of the book and whom HE thinks made it. I wonder if indeed he doesn't know who I am. I wonder, maybe I was wrong about him and he really is a rotten person. I know it sounds ridiculous and out of this world but I'm a very analytical person and I never felt any negative energy coming from him. Really, he's a good person...at least I think so. I'm still living with that assurance and, still trying to figure out why Nini. For sure, I will never know who he really is.

My new vendetta: Closure. I need closure. It's all I want now and hope some day I'll get that closure. It's the only way I can free myself.

# *Grape Soda Sunset*

## *Aboard the USS Nimitz*

Jared Todd Hines

### **Third Prize Non-Fiction**

Last night as the sun was setting I went out on the sponson to look out over the water and get my mind off things, as I often like to do. The air was nice and calm with the only breeze being created by the ship moving through the water. I sat watching the waves trying to decide how I could describe the images that would hopefully be forever captured in my mind. The water was difficult. It almost looked like used engine oil, but not quite that black.

As I kept trying to figure it out, I gazed out at the wispy clouds which seemed to be floating on the water at the horizon while some of them seemed to be hanging low enough that I could reach out and grab one. I decided that even though I had never heard of it, the clouds looked exactly like grape flavored cotton candy. At this I decided that the ship appeared to be sailing through an ocean of grape soda, the only other color being the white foam created as we sliced our way through the gently rolling waves.

The dark purple and blue sky above me slowly blended into shades of orange as my gaze settled to the horizon where the sun had slipped from view. I have to admit, I never knew there were at least three shades of orange, but I saw them that night. With the grape cotton candy clouds hovering strangely just out of reach, the atmosphere was almost eerie, but overall was calm and intriguing.





## Colophon

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