



The Ram's Tale 2008

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2008

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Cover artwork *Self-Actualization* by Marina Triantafyllou



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For Mary Arechiga
1944-2007

*I keep coming back to you in my head,
but you couldn't know that,
and I have no carbons.*

-Adrienne Rich

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Poetry

*Poetry is just the evidence of life.
If your life is burning well,
poetry is just the ash.*
-Leonard Cohen

My Belief or Your Badosa?

Amita Dhillon Singh
First Prize, Poetry

To believe is to trust,
To trust is to accept,
To accept is to think.

I believe in my heart,
My heart trusted you,
You have accepted me,
I think this relationship is dead.

I say believe in me,
You say *badosa rakho mujpe*,
I say trust me,
You say *yakeen karo humpar*,
I say accept me and my life,
You say *maano meri batein*,
I say think about my feelings,
You say *sochta hu*.

I believe that languages are like red and orange.
Red and orange clash,
You and I clash,
I believe in English
Your badosa is in Hindi.

I believe orange and red may always clash
You and I won't always clash.
We have found different shades of one another,
Shades that compliment one another when together.
I believe that I am the shade of red,
That compliments the orange shade of fall.
You are my orange shade of fall is my belief.

Methadrine Won't Kill You, All at Once

from a bathroom wall in San Francisco
mid-60s, North Beach

John Kraft

Second Prize, Poetry

Methadrine won't kill you, all at once
It had to be true, it was right there
On the wall. Big red letters scrawled loudly
Right under "for a good time, call Judy, 265-5569"
This was true, I knew Judy, we all did
So I'm standing there reading the wall
And Bird is blowing some long gone wail on the box
But it's late and I'm keeping an eye on the door
And Tony is fixing to fix, works on the floor
He sighs as the rush comes to him and I read again
Methadrine won't kill you, all at once
And I'm standing there thinking about calling Judy

Fallacy

Jon Meador

Third Prize, Poetry

While on my way to college
I stopped in at Ernie's Liquors
To wet my dry throat with
A liter of Coke
I got a chill that went
Down my spine like
Walking into unknown territory
As I entered the store
There was an old, Asian man
Behind the counter taking
Money from a customer
The old man asked the customer
"Can you stay for a minute or two until
He leaves?" The customer, looking at me,
Shrugged his shoulders and said, "Sure."
Only heard bits and pieces of their
Conversation of whispers and sudden
Outbursts. "That's a style of today everyone
Wears crew cuts."
I looked down at my shoes, which weren't
Combat boots
Not wearing a paratrooper jacket
Or a logo of a swastika
Except for wearing Levi jeans with a crew cut
I must be a skinhead
Don't hold to no anti-Semite attitudes or belief
Of the Great White race
Even though I'm proud of my ancestry
I walked up to the counter
With my Coke in hand
Paid the frightened old man
And walked out of his store forever

I left him with no bruises
With his store intact
With his assumption
With his bitterness
With his prejudice

Ode to the Seasons

Trisha Houston

Honorable Mention

The joy of music is always known in
People's hearts even if they cannot hear
They can feel it, the gentle vibrations
Soothe our troubled minds in moments
Of silence, waves lull us into dreams
As the golden sounds warms our body
Floating in the zephyr like breezes
Sends us traveling towards the haven
Where everyone dances with such silkiness,
The energy of their merged souls flows
Like waterfall crescendos at springtime's
Thaw, sotto voce whispers along the
Hidden faeries in mists, secrets ready
To be unearthed only if the lilies will
Divulge their chorale to chosen ones,
Giving way to the majestic season's
Virtuoso playing the song of solace,

The streams rush at full speed eroding
Rocks and bringing along sounds of
Bellicoso, trees standing still in sultry
Puddles while Willows plunks out,
Green and hungry for the fresh water
To soothe its burned roots, waiting
All day in the scorching blaze only
To find peace and cooling when the
Ball of fire hits the horizon, like doloroso
It brings the rose-colored dusk as
Quilt covering the earth when it is
Ready to slumber; the evening skies
Boasts the dance of sparkles with

Humming insects avoiding the hunt
By the night's creatures... time goes
By as it brings the softer days of warmth
And the crisp mornings where dew
And mist creeps all over the valley,

The harvest moon howls for it knows
Of the fermata that will usher in the
Dreaded old man winter, sending
Animals scurrying to store ripening
Foods for the cruel chill, the one that rips
Apart souls with golden and crimson hued
Foliage, leaving fallen bodies in its wake
Mystical creatures knows the secrets
And the songs of perdendosi that
Will come soon, to bring a grand
Suffering to all; life as we know it
Will expire within the waning crescent
And the land is shrouded in colorless
Emotions as it heralds the next
Season's segue,

Quietness cloaks the land in
Stillness, notes echoes in despair
Because there is no one dancing
Everything is empty and wailing
For the release from harsh cold
Hope falters in moments of old
Man winter's specters lurking
Around, solemn in their passions
The season spiritedly falls in the
Vortex of fantasy, awaiting the
Spring's sonata to commence.

Monsoon Prayers

Michelle Renee McDaniel
Honorable Mention

In the bustle of a hurricane
I dared not pray for rain
For fear of the screams
Of a thousand blades of grass
Shrieks reaching the heavens
To keep them from drowning

In the desert plains
There is a place
Where only the wind is free
All life awaits rain
The wind hugs each grain of sand
Embracing it,
Churning it into mud, as it travels
From this corner of endless land and heat
To that

Arise monsoon, arise!
Come visit this corner

Water pours from the spoon in the sky
But the dust remains brown
As all else greens in the desert
In envy of tropical lands.

The Free Season with Three Apples, Lucky and Our Souls

Amita Dhillon Singh

I am lucky
To be eating the apple
That is attached to your soul
It is almost seasonal
The three
Of us dancing freely.

It feels so good to be free
Hangin' with my friend Lucky
Count to three
Wait for the apple
To fall before its season.
Simply listen to your soul.

Let me be a part of your soul
Don't make me pay let me have it for free
I don't wanna wait for next season's
Fall collection let me eat my lucky
Charms with apples
On top at 3:00 a.m.

On the phone three
Way looking for my soul
With the apple
Shaped face with hair so messy and free
Wearing her signature scent Lucky
All through the season.

It is my favorite season
I love cruising down the three
Way with my pal Lucky
Our souls
Meshed together freely
Like two seeds in an apple.

I am wearing my signature scent Green Apple
By DKNY made exclusively for the fall season
Every year I get a bottle for free
Why stop at one why not ask for three
I will wear it to my soul's
Happiness dreaming about Lucky.

Her face blushes like the red of an apple with the tattoo on her
ankle that reads three.

Every season she calls out to me from her soul
She calls me her freedom I call her my charm full of luck!

The Corner House

Joseph Rios

The rising sun warms the dew
laid upon carefully compacted earth.
Rays of swirling mist and twinkling water droplets
decorate the ground beneath his knees.
He unlatches and opens the gate to his
Fenced-in plot of hopes and dreams sown before his birth.
He walks with legs heavy-burdened with age
over to a lonely lawn chair in
no particular place.

This old, tired man groans as he settles
into the squeaking aluminum seat;
from there he peers over what he
can proudly call his own.

He folds his hands over his swollen belly
reminisces about what was amidst
the very little that is.
Time grinds to a halt,
age rolls backward
there; with the constant twiddle of his thumbs
his mind uplifts him from the desolate
weakened body to a land
buried deep within his memory.
He soars from the deteriorating vessel
upon wings of consciousness;
he swoops down and
scoops from the seas of youth
and quenches his thirst for vibrancy.

There upon that chair, cars
roll by and stare at the forlorn squatter,
images of times past flash before
his blank veneer, rooms filled,
bustling stoves, bubbling pots,
loaded plates, and laden stomachs,
fellowship, friendship, family.

Few can say that they too felt love
and lost, ever saw hopes realized
and saw them crumble,
harvested the fruits of their labor
only to watch them wither with shelf rot.

This old man mulls over the ironies of his life,
examines the barren landscape,
the empty lot,
his solitude, and
wonders if to never have loved at all
is the superior notion.

Fiction

*The two most engaging powers of an author
are to make new things familiar
and familiar things new.*
-Samuel Johnson

Stay

John Kraft

First Prize, Fiction

It was the morning after, or so I thought. Waking, well not so much waking as coming to, I look at the woman on the other side of the bed. Whose bed, whose room, whose house, who is she? The fog of the morning/noon was lifting slowly in that strange room and looking at her laying there beside me all I could think was, “Shit, I have been here far too many times, and I still don’t know where here is.” I rise up slowly and look around; there is a trail of clothes leading to the bedroom door, some are mine, I think. There are red curtains on the windows and there is a smell of cheap perfume, smoke, beer and last night’s sex still in the air. But whose air was it? Not mine for sure. I lit a cigarette and reached over for a not so dead soldier, piss warm, but still the breakfast of champions.

I know I had left the house on Friday night with the idea that I would stop in the bar and see a few friends and just have a beer or two. That was yesterday; yeah, that’s right, it was just yesterday. Ok, I was going to be OK... all I needed to do was to grab my clothes, get in my car and run into work late. Hell, they were used to seeing me come in late.

I ease out of bed and find everything except one sock, big deal, who’s going to notice a sock anyway? It was a shit job and they were lucky to have me, even to have me late.

Somewhere, things are different, and in that place my car is in the last place I left it. Somewhere people are not just content with their lot, they are trying to make a life, a life without misery... and somewhere, right now in just about any town, in a smoke-filled back room someone is putting down his cup of coffee and saying...

And at exactly that same time as this is going throughout his head, a head that he wishes was someone else’s, at least until it stops spinning, across town a more mundane scene is starting to play out...

It is five in the morning, as she walks into the kitchen, that same kitchen where all the meals have been fixed over the last thirty-two years. She is still in her night clothes with a faded blue bathrobe and warm, pink fuzzy slippers—well, they were fuzzy when they were new, but now, at least they were warm. This was to be a special day, a day that she had waited for, waited for five years. Finally, her daughter was out of college and was to about to start working today. She couldn't shake the feeling that something in her life had gone wrong as she waited for the coffee to perk. This was her last vice. She was hooked on caffeine; she had become a coffee junky.

The kitchen looks the same, well almost the same as it did five long years ago. It is still spotless, but the linoleum is showing a wear pattern, a path, from the constant moving from side to side, waiting for this or that to cook or just to reheat. The counter tops are a faded yellowish white matching the cabinets and even though all the drawers have knobs, they no longer match. Everything in that kitchen had been wiped clean and polished so many times that most of the chrome has long ago left the nameplates on the refrigerator, the washing machine and even the stove.

Mother stands there, looking out into the darkness that is the backyard, sips her coffee and thinks about what might have happened if her life had taken a different turn, so many years ago, so many cups of early morning coffee and so many little things that she saw at the at the mall—things she really wanted but didn't buy. She had to cut corners somewhere, and there just wasn't enough money for everything. She was always thinking that as soon as things were different, when she didn't have quite so many bills, well that would be her time. Somewhere in the back of her head is a memory of a boy she dated, danced with and fell in love with. She closes her eyes and she can see his face and even... "Mom..." calls the daughter. "Mom, you're such a Betty, come back, are you daydreaming about Frank Sinatra again?"

I made my way out of the house onto the street. It was a street that has seen better days. The houses were all the same, it was at one time a good neighborhood with people that cared not only

for the house but yard as well. But that was then, and that must have been thirty years ago. I looked first left and then right and then back left, but my car was not there. I checked my watch and knew I am going to be really late. I would come back and look for a car after work, I walk to the bus.

Sitting on that city bus I look out the window to a world that has changed, no big changes, just subtle small, almost unnoticeable changes. Denny's is on the wrong side of the street, the Big Mac has a bigger sign, and there is a Shell station where the Moble station should be. The only constant is that there is a Starbucks on every other corner. There is unease to what I am seeing; it's real and surreal at the same time. I need to figure this out; I need a drink, I need a drink...bad. Finally I see an oasis in all this confusion. I reach up, pull the cord and the bus stops, well not where I wanted it too, but it does stop about two blocks from the bar I saw. So I'm going to be really late for work again, this is not new. I finally make it the two blocks to the bar, walk in and sit down. As the bartender approaches, I say, "Draft and a shot." I light a cigarette as he pulls the draft and puts it in front of me, half a glass disappears instantly and he comes over with the shot and I just point to the half empty glass and he dumps it in. it is cold and smooth and goes down in one motion. He stands there and I say "Again."

I'm a big one for small talk and "Again" is about as small as it gets, but it does get the job done. Our conversation goes like this:

"I've never seen you here before."

I say, "Again."

He busies himself at the other end of the bar, watching some crap on the TV, the 6 o'clock news. He walks back and I am draining my glass. "You work in the neighborhood?"

"Again."

He returns with my shot in one hand and a draft in the other, hands me the draft, and it does the half disappearing act again. He pours the shot in the glass and returns to his place at the other end of the bar.

Now I'm starting to think this guy is none too bright; I came

here to drink, not eat or talk. Well, he walks away again and I am left alone with my drink and my thoughts. I know from years of experience that the thoughts and the demons they bring will disappear if I just have another drink or two, or a few, and that's what I want, a drink and the peace that comes with it ,but, it's not twenty minutes and he's back with more chatter.

“Want me to call next-door and have them bring you some breakfast?”

“Again.” Now I am in a different place, not the good place I want to be in, but at least I have moved from wanting to “Who cares.” Shit, they don't care about me; why the fuck should I care about them, any of them?

There was a time when I was happy. Yeah, but that was a long time ago. I was young, and I had a good job, and I had a woman that treated me like a king. We were both in our late teen years. God, I want those days back. What I would give for another ride on the merry-go-round. Things would be different this time. Really they would. I know just what I would do. I'd start by “How about a burger or something?”

“Again.”

I am finally felling normal; I am no longer ready to jump out of my skin. I am calm, and I am in charge. I have the world by the balls, and I am squeezing.

“Again.”

But it's still early and I have time for another drink...

And at a nondescript office building close to the center of town Billy had started what may become his final day of the work, perhaps his final day on this earth. He is a man who is good at his job, very good at his job, but perhaps this has become his undoing. Today, they would know that his job isn't the only thing he is good at, all of them.

Billy sits there smiling and thinking to himself...It's the same grind everyday, not what he expected when he started eight years ago. Billy went into government work as a bright-eyed kid, fresh out of college, his first job where he didn't have to wear a paper hat and ask “Would you like fries with that?” And at first, it was

exciting, working in a large office building, seeing people he had only seen on the news, right there in the same building. The promise of advancement, the talk of going to a foreign office, or just being in D.C. was enough for a farm boy like him; he was drunk, dizzy in love with the thought of being in the know, gliding past security each morning but... then the realization came. He was good at his job, his boss was good at his, and he was going to be doing most of the work, and he would be getting none of the credit... It wasn't fair, not fair at all.

It was early as Billy sat at his desk, an empty desk for the first time in eight years. It would be at least forty-five minutes before anyone else showed up, and they would come in, in the same herdlike mass that they come in every morning, briefcase in one hand, Starbucks in the other, never looking his way, not a "Good morning," not a "How's it going?" nothing, like he was invisible, like he wasn't there. He had become a non-person. But there he was, early that morning, sitting at his empty desk fitting together the last few pieces of the gun that he had week by week brought in, piece by piece. A gun that he had stored inside of a hollowed out copy of one of the ledgers that his boss had moved from his office to Billy's desk, yet another reminder of the work that he was not getting any credit for doing. Billy had made a layout of the office on his computer and had even typed up a list of who had to go and who might make it home today.

So now he was locked and loaded and waiting. This is it; this is what he has been waiting for, planning for, thinking about for the last six months. The door opens, the office fills and there is a girl standing in front of him holding out a cup of coffee... Who is she? Does she know what today is? WHO IS SHE?

But I'm in no hurry. No hurry at all.

The clock on the wall is easing close to noon and I sit there enjoying the coolness of the bar I am thinking, "What's another missed day? We don't do much on Saturday anyway." But now, either the bartender is a mind reader or I am thinking out loud because he answers "Mac, it's Monday; you must have had a real good weekend." Monday? If today's Monday ... My head starts

to spin again. I lost my car and two days, and I know it's a shit job, but it pays the rent. I got to call in with some excuse. My sister died... No, I used that last month... My brother is in hospital. No, they heard that before too. I look at my empty glass and back over to the bartender, but he's ahead of me and is pulling another.

It's cool and dark and quiet in here, and it's just been to two of us since I walked in, but now three kids come in, no, more than twenty-one if they are that... leather kids, trouble kids. Biker wanna-bes. One guy swaggers in and with the sun behind him I have to squint to figure out what the next is. Then I see it's another guy with a skinny girl wrapped around him ... They kind of fall in through the backdoor, off the parking lot, and she doesn't let go of him till they get to the jukebox. She unhooks and puts her hand out for money... great... country, rock & roll, it's all noise to me. I look over and see that the bartender is getting beers for them and she is still at the noise box. She is young and thin, maybe two or three years younger than she needs to be to get in here.

And there she is, long blond hair, in the glow of the light from the jukebox. Halter top and jeans—jeans so tight that they look like they are painted on. I think back, back too many years. God I was young then. I met a girl, she looked a lot like this girl, dated, had a kid, married, had another, separated, went back together, had another kid, separated, divorced. We were good together, when things were good; but when things went bad, they went real bad real fast. Got to call her, haven't seen her for almost five months now. Hey, I could get her to call in sick for me. Yeah, that's what I'll do. No, she won't help, not with me being over two years behind in child support. Still, it might be worth a shot; no, I won't call her. I look over, order a drink and ask for the telephone.

Downtown June's cell phone is ringing. She reaches under her desk and then fumbles through her purse, retrieving her pink Hello Kitty phone. On the other end the voice says "Junie? Hi, it's Daddy...need a favor...oh, how are you doing?" June is think-

ing as fast as she can, this is a new job, and I'm getting personal calls already, and I really don't have any money, I sure hope he doesn't ask for money... again.

I tell her I need her to call my work and tell them that I'm really sick. "Just do this for me. Come on, Junie, just this one more time. No, I haven't talked to your mother. No, no, not for over three months or so. No, I don't think it's within in the latest time in six months. What do you mean Melody is home? Isn't she still in college?" So I tell Junie I'll stop by and see her after work one day, maybe the beginning of next week, or a few days later, real soon anyway. "Just make sure you tell them that I have been sick, in bed, with the flu, but I'm on the mend and should be in the morning." I tell her that we will go out for dinner at that Thai place she likes so much...there is an uneasy silence and then she says, "Daddy, its Melody that loves Thai food.... I can't stand it, but I'll call in for you, don't worry." Then she tells me that she has to get off the phone; she only has thirty minutes for lunch.

O.K., that's done. Junie has always been my favorite. We had two girls, but early on we did have a boy. He was our first, but we were really young and the time we were both drinking and using a lot of drugs. I was in jail when the state took him away. Even though we got back together, we were not able to get him back from the state; even going to AA didn't seem to cut it with them. I can still remember that it used to take about five hours in a bar to get the taste of the meetings out of my mouth, and it did drive a wedge between his mother and me. She went to meetings and stopped drinking; I always needed a few drinks to make it to a meeting. And she stopped being fun after she stopped drinking. I wonder what ever happened to my son? Damn court system. Took my kid, turned my wife against me, put me in jail, what else do they want out of my life...

"Again."

She just stands there holding that coffee cup out and smiling. "Good morning. I'm the new girl; I have the desk next to yours. Bob, you know Bob, he used to have that desk, and then

he got moved to accounting, I guess I'm just lucky, that's it, yeah I'm just lucky, lucky to have the job, lucky to be working here, anyway, I noticed that by the time everybody else got here, you must have finished your coffee, or maybe, you were just working so hard that you forgot to buy coffee or if you didn't forget that your coffee had gotten cold and now when everybody else was sitting and enjoying their morning coffee you were hard at work." Billy just sits there looking at her, not knowing what to say, and not saying anything. "Oh, I better get to my desk and get started on my work anyway, June, my name is June, and hope I didn't bother you too much just stopping and gabbing and gabbing but I have this problem, it seems once I get started my mouth just goes on and on—hope you like it black, I didn't know."

And that was that, she was gone, Billy looked down at his desk. It wasn't a dream, someone had actually noticed me and more than that had even taken the time to get him coffee, but more than that, after being ignored for so long someone had taken the time to stop and talk to him. Granted, it was a more or less a rambling-stumbling good morning, "How are you? I'm new," but...June, her scent hangs in the air. What the hell is going on? Eight years and now this! Under the desk Billy clicks the safety into the on position and slides the gun into the hollowed out ledger book, an old ledger book that was supposed to be tossed out last year. This has been the guns home for the last six months. Billy walks over to his private office to think. His head is still spinning as the men's room door closes behind him.

The girl is up, wide awake, dressed and ready for her new job. This is all the two of them have thought of for the last four long years. Melody is wearing a smart new business suit. Hair done up just right and ... "Honey, you should have waited until after breakfast to get dressed. What if you spill something? You know how you are when you're in a hurry."

But she says "Mom, I'm not a little girl anymore. I know how to eat without making a mess."

But in the mother's eye, she is still a little girl, and she thinks back in the flash of a second to a picture that she has carried

in her heart of the girl eating her first chocolate cookie. More wearing a chocolate cookie than eating it and remembering having to give her a bath before they could leave the house that day. Now she sits there, with a white, whiter than white, silk shirt on, waiting for eggs and bacon. She is sipping on some Starbucks coffee-like-thing that she bought last night. It was better than the house blend, (especially she thought, this house blend).

The two had been fighting this silent war for the four years of college that the girl was away for as she worked for her bachelor's degree. Then it continued for the extra year that the girl spent getting her masters. The mother felt as if they were growing apart and the girl felt like she was just growing up and yes, maybe there was more distance between them now.

There is little conversation between them, just that same unsaid stillness in the room as the second pot starts to perk and break the silence. "Mom, you're drinking way too much coffee. You know it's not good for you."

The mother looks over and says nothing. Twenty five years ago, she gave up drinking, a few months later she kicked a fifteen year drug habit; she no longer smokes cigarettes, not one in over twenty years. Betty picks up her cup and looks at it, looks over at her daughter, and then back at the cup. And as the sun is coming up over the backyard, and the second pot is perking she drains the cup dry.

Melody looks in her direction with a mixture of amazement and disgust, gets the keys from her purse and says she is going to go out and start the car. Not a minute goes by and she is back, and now she is beside herself, someone has flattened all four of her tires.... She is going to be late for work, real late, and it is just her first day.

So I'm sitting in the bar, no worries about work now. I'm going to have to do something nice for Junie; I'll stop by and see her next week. Yeah, I'll take her to that Thai place she always liked so much. That's what I'll do...

I am just slightly annoyed at the noise coming from the jukebox. The girl is asking first one boy and then the next to dance

with her, but they are busy talking about something. What is it? Dope? Motorcycles? Whatever. I see this and think about how I treated Junie and Melody's mother. Did I ignore her back then, the way these boys are ignoring her? No, it must have been something else, perhaps it was her having to fight to keep our boy when I was in jail and could not help at all... I told her to get a lawyer and have the case pushed around until I got out... would she listen to me? No. Did she ever? No, Damn her. I can't even enjoy a day off without thinking about the way she screwed things up. She screwed it all up and now somehow it is my fault. I look his way; he nods and pulls another.

Soon she tires of asking and starts to move on her own, to the music. She just kind of wanders away from the bar and is dancing in the light of the jukebox. She has a slow easy way of moving, of turning, of spinning that makes her hair look longer and blonder and all in all, more woman than girl. I sit there openly watching the show, the show she is putting on for the skinny pocked-face kid that she had come in with, the one who doesn't even notice her, the one who reminds me of myself and how I had been back then. You know at first she didn't even notice me watching her...

Billy looks up from his work and she is still there. No, she has come back and is saying something, something about missing half of her lunch break, and being on the phone with someone, and now she doesn't have time to finish the lunch she has made that morning and would he like half a tuna fish sandwich... if he didn't want it, it was OK, but would he like to go to the break room and share her lunch? She says she hates to be forward but at the same time she hates to waste food... All Billy can do is nod, and get up from his desk. First she gives him coffee and that good morning thing... that long rambling good morning. Now, "Do you want half of my lunch? If it was a bag of sugar and Billy was a diabetic, he would have happily gone into insulin shock for her.

Melody is still beside herself. It is her first day of work, and it's a real job, not that temp work crap that June has to settle for.

Who did this to her?

“Mom. Do you think it was June because she is upset that I have a real job and she is still doing office temp work?” I wouldn’t put it past that little bitch.

Melody is really steamed now, and Betty tries to calm her saying, that June would have no reason to do this; besides, she just started working full-time for the government.

“Well who then, Daddy?”

The mother says she hasn’t heard from or seen the father in over a year and a half and that he probably doesn’t even know Melody is home or done with college.

“Oh yes he does; I got a card and \$100.00 from him right before I graduated.”

The mother turns to the window, picks up her coffee and says nothing, downs the rest of the cup and says “To my little girl on her big day. Sorry I couldn’t be there... daddy.” The mother shakes her head and thinks to herself, five years of college and she still doesn’t have a clue. And I’m the Betty. Never Betty Becall, never the smart one, the one with class, always THE Betty... Betty Page. Well I used to have the body for it, but what the hell were my parents thinking of when they named me Betty...

Sitting at a table in the break room, Billy looks around like a kid visiting Disneyland for the first time. In the eight years he has worked here, he has never been into the employees’ break room. On the days that he actually had time to eat lunch, he always did it at his desk so that he could keep working. After all, that gave him an extra five hours to get his work, and his boss’s work done, well that and the extra hour he had put in everyday by coming to work an hour before everybody else.

The break room is a large empty space except for twelve tables and a bank of vending machines and a lot of folding chairs. There are machines for coffee, hot chocolate, and tea. There are candy machines and chips of all kinds, and over in one corner, there is a microwave. June walks to the table closest to the

microwave and takes a container out of her bag. She puts this in the microwave and sets the timer. She tells Billy to just sit for a minute and they'll have some soup with the tuna fish sandwich. Billy has not opened his mouth, well except for the way his jaw dropped when he saw the inside of the break room. Finally, he manages "Thank you." They sit and eat and between bites June tells him everything.

To Billy, it is like reading a book; no, it was like going to a movie; no, it was more like one of those books on tape. She tells him about the last temp job she had and how she had just loved working there. It was a publishing house and she had been hired as an assistant to one of the editors, but she didn't really spend too much time in the actual building. It was more of a "June, I need an espresso, and while you're out pick up my suit at the cleaners." "I guess I lost that job when I mixed up the birthday present for his wife with the Victoria's Secret next-to-nothing for the secretary he was dating. I guess his wife wasn't anywhere near a size five."

She tells him about her sister Melody—how smart she is and how much she missed her the whole time she was away at college. She tells him that she has always looked up to her sister because she was the smart one studying at a university. She says she has gone to community college for a year, but she just isn't book smart so she started looking for temp work.

She tells him about her mother and how she has been the only parent in the house as far back as she can remember. She tells him about the family tragedy—her older brother who she has never met but has looked for—well not really looked for, but when she is walking down the street, and she sees someone that is about the right age, she thinks "Is he my brother?"

And she tells him of her father and how she is the only one in the family who he stays in touch with. She tells him that her father has a drinking problem and that he has had a drug problem at one time, but now he only has a drinking problem. She tells him that her father is a printer, has been a printer since the

days of hot lead. And she tells him that she helped him get into the local community college when the paper had gone from the linotype machines to computers. And she tells him how proud she was of him when he learned to use the new computer operated presses, and she keeps telling him “Eat. Eat something.”

Billy has been ready for a lot of things that he thought would happen today. He thought he had gone through all the possible outcomes of his actions; he thought that he had covered all the possible options that were open to him and the others in the office. But the one thing he had not thought of, the one possibility he had not planned for, was sitting across the table from him sharing her lunch and sharing her life with him.

The noise box is groaning out some bluesy slowness; the two guys are deep in an animated discussion about some mindless shit and now the blond has turned her attention to me and I’m thinking “Betty used to move like that; well, back before she had three kids.” Betty was a real looker, but the divorce and some asshole lawyers, not to mention her entire family made her turn against me. But this kid sure has the look and the moves, and if nothing else, it is one hell of a show. I look over at the bartender and he nods and pulls me a draft. As he puts it on the bar I feel someone sit down next to me and glance over. It’s the kid. She says, “How about one for me too?” I nod and he brings another along with my shot. I drink about half of mine and he pours it in. She downs half of hers and looks at me. I say “Ok. You want to play in the bigs, be my guest.” And you know the two she came in with could really care less. We sit and look at each other in the mirror, the way people in bars do. I keep thinking that one of them will come after her, but they really don’t seem to notice or care. I ask her which was her boyfriend and she smiles. She says “They are together, have been for over a year, can’t you tell.” I tell her it’s not the kind of thing I look for, but whatever makes somebody happy is cool with me.

Back in the kitchen things are really going down hill fast. Melody has accused almost all of her old friends, neighbors, people who she used to sing with in the church choir and just about

anyone else in the free world that she could think of. Now she is trying to get her father on the phone, but it just rings and rings. “Why is he so cheap?” It’s not like everybody doesn’t need a cell phone, but no, he is stuck in the sixties. And wouldn’t you just know it, the one time she needs anything, anything at all from that little bitch June, her phone is turned off. No, it is on and the service is telling her what she already knows: June is stupid. She never got around to setting an outgoing message on the phone so there is no way to leave a message. Melody is just short of meltdown as she screams “Some people should be kept on a leash and not allowed out of the house!” By this time, Betty couldn’t agree more.

Billy and June are still in the break room. Time has slipped by, and June is still telling him more and more of her life. She tells him of her apartment and how lucky she is to have a place so close to work that she only needs to transfer busses one time to get to the office. Billy says if she would like, he has a car, and he could drive her home. Billy can’t believe that these words actually come out of his mouth; it’s the only thing beside “Thank you” that he has managed to get out or work in when she stops to take a breath. June says that she would like that very much, and in return, she will cook a proper meal for him. “Gee, it’s sure great to meet someone so nice in my first week here. And to think, both mom and Melody told me to be careful because there are a lot of nuts working for the government.”

But now there is a lot of running and yelling going on in the office.

There is a surprise audit and they went to Peter’s office to look over the books. Sally, his secretary, told them that the books they were looking for were sitting on Billy’s desk and that Peter had put them there just before he left for lunch. (A good secretary always looks out for the boss). Going through the first book, everything looked OK, but the second book had the figures that Peter wanted reported and that they wanted explained. When they open the third book—the shell of a book with the gun, computer generated map and typed up list of who was going to

walk out and who was going to be carried out—that's when all hell broke loose. S.W.A.T. was called, the FBI was there, they even brought in bomb sniffing dogs, and the entire floor was being searched for Peter.

Peter was arrested without any problem except that he was yelling the whole time that he had nothing to do with the gun, the map or the list of people who were to die that day. Peter was pretty much a dick anyway, and no one, not even his secretary, was sorry or surprised. Unknown to Billy, Peter had made a lot of enemies in the office over the years. One of the auditors ask Billy if he would mind stepping in until they could find a replacement for Peter; after all, they told him, "You probably know more about the day to day operations." They were sure that Billy was intimately familiar with the books. By the way, they asked, could he reconcile the two sets and get a true accounting done for them. And, of course, they realized that he would need extra staff and that could be arranged too.

All of this was said in the break room while Billy and June were still at the table, the same table that they had been sitting at for almost three hours. But now, for the first time since they met, June was quiet; it really seemed strange to see her and not hear her. The FBI and S.W.A.T. were making a final sweep of the entire building, and everyone was going home early for the first time in years.

The noise box is still going, and the afternoon crowd is in and from time to time I get that look of "What are you doing bringing your daughter to a bar?" Screw them. I have two girls and they are older than the kid I'm here with. Sam, short for Samantha, that's her name. After the third drink she tells me. She tells me a lot of things that afternoon—that she is out of work, that she has been in town for just over two years, that she likes a man who can hold his booze, and that she always takes a nap in the afternoon, but she hates to sleep alone. I'm old, but I'm not dead. We finish our drinks, make a stop at the corner liquor store and walk to her place.

Melody and Betty are still in the kitchen. Melody is still try-

ing to get daddy or June on the phone and is still having no luck at all. Betty tells her for about the umpteenth time, "Call a tow company; call a cab."

"Mom, you don't really expect me to show up in a cab."

Betty has had all she can take. She reaches into her purse and gets two cards. One is her AAA road service card, and the other has a list of days and times for her AA meeting. She gives her AAA card to Melody and tells her to take care of the flats herself and that she really needs a meeting after today. Melody watches in disbelief as Betty walks down the street and disappears around the corner.

Billy is sitting in June's small apartment and June is back to her same old talkative self, fixing coffee's for the two of them. Dinner is already on the stove and she keeps going from the kitchen to the living room and back to the kitchen. Billy feels at home here and at ease with June. When she comes into the living room again, he tells her to sit for a minute. She moves to the chair across from him, but he pats the cushion next to him and tells her to sit for a minute. June sits down next to him, he puts his arm around her and she leans in, putting her head on his shoulder. For the first time today she is quiet, but then she says softly, slowly, without moving her head from its new home, "You don't have to leave. Not tonight; not ever."

Rock by Rock

Don Rogers

Second Prize, Fiction

Sleep, what sleep? I hear those around me speak of how much sleep they get and of how their dreams are full of fun, romance, and occasional horror. For me, sleep is a sporadic event that sneaks silently upon me. My sleep is a continuously repeating terror—my personal hell. Rock by rock, I am placing rock by rock upon a wall. This wall is essential, but I don't know why, but I do know that I cannot stop building the wall. As I build, the wall never gets longer, wider, or higher, but each rock fits perfectly into the wall as though that exact spot was carved for that specific rock. Each rock is so heavy that every muscle in my body burns as I pick it up from the pile of rocks near me, and I scream in pain as each rock scrapes the hot sweaty skin from my arms and my legs, as I maneuver it into the proper position. After placing the rock in its place, the red raw meat that makes up my arms and my legs is rejuvenated into healthy, normal tissue, and the rock I just placed on the wall disappears, so I pick up another rock and the process repeats until the sun sets and darkness covers the lands.

The sun sets and I return to the cave in which I live. It takes twenty-one steps on the narrow dirt path that leads to my cave, and I walk tiredly along the short narrow path, I take a brief moment and gaze at the walls that surround me. I live in a cave on the side of a cliff that is larger than the grandest canyons. Thousands or even millions live in caves dug into the rocks of the u-shaped canyon, and each person is hanging their heads towards the ground and counting the steps that lead to their caves. Although each cave is close to the other, no one speaks; they just walk the path to their caves. I tilt my head slightly to the right so my head does not hit the ceiling of the hole that marks the entrance to my cave. The cave is dark, and there is no light that can be switched on. As I begin to take off my shirt, I hear a loud

noise, and pressure fills my chest, and my heart flutters as rapidly as that of a hummingbird's wings. I turn and stare out of the entrance of the cave, and large rocks are rolling and tumbling down the side of the cliff. I cough and choke as the thick brown dust fills my lungs. When the air clears and the dust settles, the effects of the rock slide becomes apparent.

The entrance to the cave is saturated with rocks, and although weary, I begin to move the rocks one by one. Like building the wall each rock is painful and heavy, but I must clear the door. I work diligently to finish clearing the door so that I might be able to rest, but resting never comes for as soon as the last rock is moved, the sun illuminates the cave, and I refuse to look at the cave, or do I think about resting. I lower my head and count the steps back to the wall. Once I get back to the wall, the dream begins again.

When I awake, I am drenched in sweat, my eyes are milky, and I lay terrified of what has or will happen. The terror I feel comes from the dream or what some people may refer to as a night terror, but that is not the worst of it. What really terrifies me is when I awake, my arms and legs sting and burn as though the skin has been removed. My shoulder, groin, back, and every other muscle in my body aches as though I actually moved the rocks. Then I sense an overwhelming eerie feeling caused by the vividness of the dream itself.

I fear that Satan, himself, is eagerly waiting for me, and since it may awhile before I die, he is introducing me to my new home, my new eternity. I am in no hurry to make the move to hell. So I continue to ask myself: Sleep? What is sleep?

The Burning Question

Joseph Rios

Third Prize, Fiction

I tightened my grip on the seam of the blanket and rolled my body over until my eyes faced the back support of the couch. Conan O'Brien was busy doing his opening monologue. The flashing white light of the television flickered in the darkened room, casting shadows across the floor.

It was 12:38 a.m.

I shut my eyes and let my mind flutter off like a butterfly from a sealed mason jar.

I can never remember the exact moment just before I fall to sleep. It is as if the Sandman fights with the rebellious to keep up his schedule and whisks the willing on his own time.

My consciousness wandered in the darkness for what must have been hours. I awoke later in a dream...

I was in a low-lit apartment atop a tall building in the middle of the city. It was nighttime. Scattered lights, long snakes of head-lit cars, and red light flashes decorated the blackened horizon.

It was a nice room. Recently stained wood floors, cherry wood cabinetry, high ceilings, and white-painted cinder block walls gave the room a metropolitan feel.

It was like no place I had ever lived in, but it was like everything I wished I had.

Directly behind me at calf level was an unfolded futon in sleeping position. I lowered myself while my fingertips guided the landing. The black cushion was soft. I could feel the metal bars contort and squeak beneath me while I got settled.

It felt like home, but I was nowhere near it.

I heard a crash in the distance. A slamming door maybe. The crash was followed by a rhythmic stomp-stomp that gradually got closer and closer, faster and faster. Someone was coming.

Whatever was coming was big and coming quick. The step-

per's steps were deliberate, with haste. They thundered across the strips of wood on the floor. I looked to the back corner of the room and followed the sound until it reached the door to the apartment. They stopped.

I stood motionless with my hands clasped in my lap, anxiously awaiting the arrival of my large, speed walking guest. The latch above the door handle slid over and he pushed the door open. It crashed against the wall beside the doorway as if a storm had thrown it open. It was my father.

I was surprised to seem him. He died five years ago.

He looked about the room then over at me. He plowed through a small end table holding the telephone while coming over to where I sat. My face could not translate the emotional explosion inside me; I must have looked like a mannequin.

I stood up. He wrapped me in his arms.

Though I had grown much taller than him, I suddenly fit comfortably within his embrace.

I wept. We clenched tighter. I pulled my hands in so tight I thought I would surely tear through his body. The tears streamed from my eyelids and onto his black sweatshirt.

His thick fingers grasped tightly onto my shoulders. He held me at arms length. He didn't have much time. My midsection buckled within his vise grip. He stared into my eyes as if he was searching for the question he knew I longed to ask.

I blubbered in front of him, bending my arm at the elbow to wipe my face. He looked just as I remembered him. He wore thick-soled work boots, worn out blue jeans, the black sweatshirt, and a green baseball cap. The sleeves on his sweatshirt were pulled past his forearm and the bill of his hat was flicked just a little higher than the middle of his forehead.

He peered deep into my eyes; I finally peered back. He was waiting for me. The flowing stream of tears ran dry and I hung there in his grasp like an infant once again.

I gathered what little composure I could and helped him search through my mind for what I wished to know.

Downstairs, an ambulance was screaming past the apartment

building. The air from an open window shut the door he came in through. The subsequent silence punctuated my realization. I blinked hard and my eyes widened.

He had traveled so far to see me, so far to give me an answer. The question was simple.

“What is heaven like?”

He shook me hard two times and spoke through his teeth as if he had been holding onto the answer since he began his journey.

“It is exactly the way the biblical poets described it.”

Guide for Continued Employment

Leslie Grenier

Honorable Mention

Today is a new beginning for me; I am starting a new job at The Housing and Urban Authority for the County of Fresno. I had mixed feelings about this job; I was just not sure I would fit in with their office culture, politics and the drama associated with government jobs. Yet I was excited about the opportunity, this job allows me. I will no longer be drawing unemployment; I can catch my bills up, and be covered with Medical Insurance.

I was supposed to report to Orientation at the Main Office Building downtown. I arrived early to allow plenty of time for parking and make the walk from the parking lot to where Orientation was held.

As I entered the building, there were no signs of activity in the foyer. In the main entrance there was a bullet proof plate glass partition, behind which was seated the receptionist. There were no phones located on either wall outside the glass partition; I obviously could not inform the receptionist of my arrival.

I pulled the Orientation Letter out of my packet which had arrived less than a week ago. I looked at the letter and read the instructions which indicated that I should report to Conference Room A located directly to the left of the main foyer.

I thought all these things were odd, but I tended to ignore these inconsistent details and immediately proceeded to Conference Room A. As I entered the room I was greeted by a big sign sitting on a large table at the entrance to this room. On the sign was posted a list of names that would be in attendance. The final instruction was to sign the Attendance Sheet located directly below the big sign. As I started to sign my name, I noticed that I was required to write my arrival time. I did this willingly even though these oddities were really starting to bother me. I just

kept ignoring them and continued to put them out of my mind. I was further instructed to locate my seat where a name plate had already been placed.

The table arrangement was configured into a large U shape, with the chairs placed on either side of the tables. As my eyes scanned the tables I quickly found my name plate, only to realize that my name had been misspelled and incorrectly printed on the plate. Once again these annoyances were starting to add up to me creating within me bad feelings towards the Housing and Urban Authority for making me feel like I was nothing more than a robot whose patience and feelings were certainly being tested on my first day of employment.

I was beginning to feel I was a mechanical robot, whose buttons were being pushed to maximum capacity. I decided to swallow my pride and quickly seated myself at the table where I found my misspelled name plate. Within fifteen minutes the room started to fill with other new hires; I supposed their names were on the list too, hopefully their names were spelled correctly.

When I finally calmed down, I noticed there was no lectern at the front of the table arrangement, or an Orientation Specialist present, here again was another inconsistent oddity that was really starting to unnerve me. It was at this point I was willing to walkout and call it quits, but again I put this thought aside. Then I realized that I might be sensitive, since I had not worked for the last three months. I must be out of touch with how; the Housing and Urban Authority used this new modernistic impersonal way the conduct Orientation.

Somehow I just could not get the oddities and peculiarities out of the back of mind. I kept thinking every Orientation, I have attended always had a Human Resource Specialist present.

Then at exactly 9:00 A.M. the screen dropped from the ceiling followed by a voice resounding throughout the room from the speakers located in all four corners explaining that on the table in front of us was the Agenda for Orientation and to please follow along in the book in front of you entitled *The Guide for Continued Employment*. This guide is written to make all employ-

ees aware of the Rules and Regulation currently in effect for “Continued Employment. Please turn to page one. I turned to page one, and then the slide show began to appear on the screen. The instructions on the screen suggested that we should follow along in the guide, as the slides were being presented on the screen. The slide show continued to progress through each rule and regulation, when I noticed that each rule or regulation had, an infraction number code on the bottom right corner of each page.

I was a little surprised by this Orientation process, and several code infraction numbers caught me by surprise: For Example, Code # 002564, Company Dress Code-Women Only, are expected to refrain from wearing the following; Halter Tops, Tank Tops, Blue Jeans, Capri Pants, Hip Hugger Pants, Thong Underwear, Sleeveless Blouses, Open Toe Sandals, Tennis Shoes, and Flip Flops. If I chose to wear inappropriate attire, I’ll be sent home and docked the time it takes me to change my attire and return to work. No makeup time is allowed. If I receive three infractions in one month I will be suspended without pay for one week and an infraction report will be sent to Human Resources and placed in my Personnel File. On the fourth infraction I will be sent an E-mail to report to Human Resources, to pick up my Final Check, I’ve been FIRED.

Code # 002396-Attendance Policy: All employees are expected to sign IN and OUT of the Attendance Log Daily, as roll call reports are E-mailed to the Main Office every day by 8:00 A.M...If I fail to call in by this time, it results in an unexcused absence, or tardy, for reporting to work after roll call has been forwarded to the Main Office. Three unexcused absences results in an infraction report sent to Human Resources and placed in my Personnel File. An automatic E-mail is sent to inform me I’ve been FIRED.

Code #002397 A& B-Paid Time Off and Annual Leave Time: It is the Housing and Urban Authority Policy, that all PTO and ALT must be requested on the proper form one year in advance of the date for time requested. If I fail to report to

work for unforeseen circumstances I will be docked pay and the absence is counted as a tardy. If I incur three infractions, the automatic E-mail will be sent and to inform I've been FIRED.

Code #134068-Company Computer Usage: The company computers are designed for the employees to better perform their job; it is inappropriate to use the computer for INTERNET SURFING, looking up CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION for Family and Friends or visiting inappropriate PORN Web Sites. These infractions are grounds for IMMEDIATE termination and I will be FIRED. The E-mail follows to tell me to report to Human Resources and Pickup my Final Pay Check.

Code #116377-A&B-Job Performance and Evaluation 90 Day Probationary Period: Quota requirements of performance need to be at 90% each month qualifying new families with low income for affordable housing, and Quota performance requirements need to be at 98% for annual recertification for the Housing and Urban Authority each month. The combined effort for new families and continuing families need to be at a rating of 100% or more each year, or HUD funding would be temporarily suspended and the Housing and Urban Authority will be in a Sanctioned Status for one year. Any infractions in this area means, a written infraction report will be sent to Human Resources and I could be FIRED, for failure to meet job requirements. Human Resources will then send me and E-mail to report to pickup my Final Check!!!

The final slide presented was that all new hires were required to memorize the Rules and Regulations in the *Guide for Continued Employment*, and would be tested each month to maintain high standards. Code #862501, requires you to achieve a score of 80% or better, and I will be FIRED if I fail to do this.

I came away from Orientation with a splitting headache. I only had fifteen minutes to report to the Supervisor, or I would be considered tardy, Code #002658, tardy infraction reporting late from a meeting. I had to hurry. I arrived with two minutes to spare. I was shown my cubicle, and given an instruction manual *How to Determine Eligibility for Low Income Families* and

asked to memorize this from cover to cover. There would be a test on this material next week and you need a score of 80% or higher or I could be FIRED.

I knew when the slide show was finished I would be in real trouble. Don't get me wrong, I am not lazy or a slacker; I am too detailed in my work and care too much for the people I am trying to help. I really needed this job and this was my biggest concern. I realized I did not fit the "Cookie Cutter" image that was required to maintain Continued Employment, with the Housing and Urban Authority.

Every day I checked the Classified adds in the newspaper and sent out resumes for jobs each night hoping I would get something lined up before I was FIRED.

On the last day of the Ninety Day Probationary Period, I received the infamous E-mail that told me to report to Human Resources and pick up my final check. I knew I was being fired for Infraction Code #116377-A&B-Failure to Meet Job Requirements within the Ninety Day Probationary Period.

I was not sad about this turn of events; in many ways I was relieved that I no longer had to be a little wind-up robot which was programmed to meet all the Rules and Regulations in the *Guide for Continued Employment*. I was finally free to be human with feeling and purpose. I was finally free to be just me!!!

Two-Dimensional Art

*There is no surer method
of evading the world
than by following Art,
and no surer method
of linking oneself
to it than by Art.*

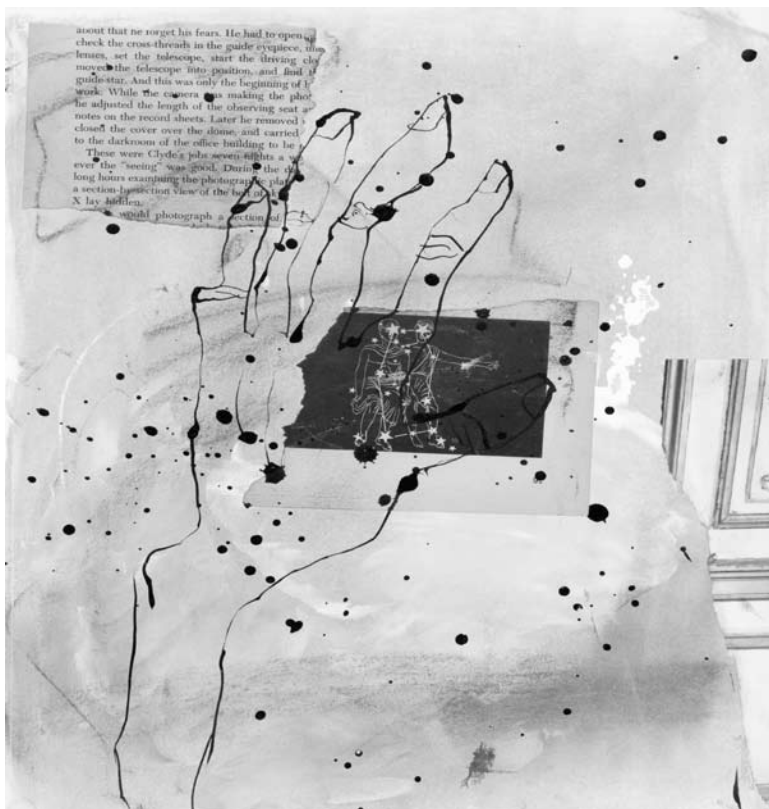
-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



A Piece of Silence

Sahar Majd

First Prize, Two-Dimensional Art



Reaching But Too Far

Shannon Johnson

Second Prize, Two-Dimensional Art



Traditional Dress in Fields

Vangdan Yang

Third Prize, Two-Dimensional Art



Frank

Armine Sargsyan
Honorable Mention



Decaying Couple

Francesca Ramirez
Honorable Mention



Fusion of Cultures

Angelica Hernandez
Honorable Mention



Self-Actualization

Marina Triantafyllon



Anthony

Veronica DeYoung



My Emotion

Miriam Selah Gheith



Untitled

Chong Vang



Sally Sees Stuff

Steph Sakurai

Non-Fiction

*The coroner will find ink in my veins
and blood on my typewriter keys.*
-C. Astrid Weber

The Echoes of Socrates

Mima Wright

First Prize, Non-Fiction

Most of my life revolved around scholars, books and libraries. My very first teacher introduced me to Socrates. By means of significance and enchantment of the words, books carried me to distant places and permitted me to meet diverse people, try to understand and explore their cultures, and share their experiences. Over time, as my views expanded, libraries became my astronomical observatories and novels my telescopes. Whenever I had a life puzzle to solve, and no one was able to help me, I found comfort in books. The books made libraries into cosmos of their own, which made them to have a life of their own. I felt that each person was one small library by itself. So was I, the wondering child.

My parents, my educators, and an exceptional school system from the country of my origin, Yugoslavia, and its capital, Belgrade, had a tremendous influence on constructing my mental and emotional well-being. My country belonged to the non-aligned movement. The neutral politics recognized by the Western and accepted by Eastern Europe formed a unique and versatile kind of culture. By breaking political boundaries and opening the doors for art and science from all over the world, Yugoslavia implemented free and well-rounded education. As a part of it, the studies of my language had a high emphasis on national and a world literature.

For each twelve years of my schooling the rule was strict and simple: I had to read one novel or story, and memorize one poem each week. If not, I had to repeat the school year. The leisure time during summer breaks was almost an illusion. On a daily basis I had to stay home for several hours and read heavy tomes and trilogies. Later, I had to write journals and long book reports. Only if there was any time left, I swam, played, built sand castles, and made friends. As harsh as it may seem, the regimental

system worked.

By the age of thirteen I became a regular inventory of almost every library in the city. Hooked on reading and learning, entertained and excited, I was rarely bored. Every novel or story I read gradually coached my uninformed intellect and produced a whole structure of dreams and expectations. Some hopes vanished, some modified, and as I got older, some dreams became more intensified and alive, several came true.

Every now and then, a little girl inside me appears out of the blue, and starts daydreaming. I greet her and celebrate in private the fact that she is still around and very much alive. She keeps me thriving and guards my sanity. The imagination and curiosity when I was a child, empowered by reading, helped me to carry on my newborn liaison to the world and stay connected to the universe through my own observatories and telescopes. No matter how rough, ironical, or twisted the diversions of life may be, and how outlandishly lonely, busy, or estranged to myself I may feel, I try hard to consistently foster all of my childhood memories: good and bad, at the same time.

Selective memory doesn't function for me. Avoidance of pain and hurt never helped me. It only tricked me, blinded me and made me to act deceiving to myself. It also eroded my humanity. My whole being was created from many types of diversities, and the opposites that attract. The only place where opponents can live harmoniously is in my head, as a product of the work of mind. Reasoning helped me to keep them balanced to a certain extend.

At a very young age I perceived books, as they were people: mysterious and introversive, or open minded and honest. Books spoke to me, consoled me, inspired me, gave me confidence and humored me, just like people can do; they confused me, scared me, and isolated me, just like people have done. I left much of my DNA on their pages. I cried, laughed and empathized with characters: like I would with people during handshakes, or inside the warmth and closeness of hugs.

From time to time, while holding a book in the library, I had

a premonition that the responses to my wonders belonged to some mysterious, greater phenomenon, rather than to what colorful children literature had to offer. I was a second grader, when one day, a serendipitous day, my philanthropic and wise teacher introduced me to the thought of Socrates. It was the day, when my maturity started. I named it: “ the discovery of Socrates – day”.

I was eight, my inquisitiveness was endless, my extra sensitivity easily exposed, my outgoing personality scared my parents, because of my naivety. I knew how to read and write, and ask questions unbearably hard to answer. I also liked shiny toys and pretty clothes. I was eight, going on eighteen. The day just before my eighth birthday changed my outlook on things forever. In the morning, before departing to school, I wore my new, shinny burgundy shoes and new matching cashmere coat, which my mother sewed for me. I felt pretty, happy, all grown-up, and very important.

Unexpectedly, dark shadow crossed my mind. It was a strong, intuitive thought. Even as a second-grader, I was able to feel that moments of complete exhilaration will be rare and short lasting experiences in my later life. Deep down, inside, I felt the soft tissue of my young soul. It was my inherited love for people, and love of truth, which could get me hurt. I smiled anyway. My twenty pound back pack and my sunny face followed the dashing new shoes to school. Soon, I was in the classroom, my second home.

I worshiped my teacher, Mrs. Adjic. She taught the first four years of my schooling. I trusted and looked up to her. An excellent pedagogue, she sincerely cared about everybody’s education, personal integrity and emotional welfare. Nowadays, after decades have passed, I still can vividly picture her distinguished, aged face, and hear her sometimes firm, sometimes gentle, but never angry voice. My elementary school teacher was my first mentor, and my first portable library. She was the person that had the most substantial influence on the growth of my personal independence and love for knowledge.

As the “discovery day” continued, my eyes, hungry to learn, slid on the black board. I liked the black board. The numbers written on it were dancing toys, the letters and words were magician tricks, and hand drawn maps invited the image of traveling crowds and train whistles. The black board was the blue print for my brain. Something was written on the board.

It said: “All I know is that I know nothing.” Socrates.

The teacher explained that one wise man from ancient Greece said those words two thousand years ago, because he realized how strong the power of knowledge could be. Mrs. Adjic suggested that we were too young to understand his words, but that we should just try to memorize it, and remember it for later. The saying stuck in my mind for the rest of the day. I wondered how the dead philosopher could be so sagacious, and still not know anything. The thought of Socrates was gently erased from the black board. It disappeared only from the black board, not from my mind. It will stay there like a guiding star for the rest of my life. Otherwise, this rhetoric would never be written.

On the day I discovered Socrates, one trivial aspect of my personality vanished forever. After school, I stopped caring about my new wine colored shoes, my new coat, and self-importance. Ever since, material things, like nice looking clothes, houses and cars could make me feel excited, but definitely not important. On the “Discovery of Socrates Day,” one saying from the black board created a beginning of a new chapter in my book of life. I decided to start finding the answers to everything that I didn’t know about. I might still have not succeeded, but I am enjoying the journey.

On the same day, the curious cat in me took me to the local library. The library was one small, time-stricken building, hidden among uneven bushes and evergreen trees inside the miniature park. The park was my oasis in the middle of the concrete desert: not too many people; a couple of benches in the shade; a little fountain; and me, the little girl thirsty for books. Before my teacher introduced me to Socrates, I would only visit the children’s’ section of the library and read outside, sitting on the bench.

This is where I met Heidi, pictured the white mountains of Switzerland and dreamt of friends like Peter and Clara, and then found them. In my secret garden I was Robinson Crusoe and had my own island. I am still dreaming about that one. The adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn on the Mississippi river woke up the risk-undertaking side of me, and I traveled four continents. White Fang escalated my love for the animals. Now I have four: a dog, a cat, a turtle and a bird. The numerous stories derived from the European climate, during and after World War II, helped me to understand the horrible nonsense of wars and led me to become a pacifist.

When I walked in, the library seemed deserted and unusually quiet. The sound of silence was overwhelming. I stood in the middle of the floor heavy footed and light minded. Dizzy, scared, and anxious for unexplainable reason, I almost enjoyed that new feeling. I even didn't look at the children section illuminated by afternoon sunlight. The brightness bothered me. I thought of ancient Greece and tried to imagine how Socrates looked two thousand years ago. Two thousand years ago? It seemed like a huge number. I just learned how to calculate up to one thousand. Did he have clever blue eyes like my father? I wondered what that mysterious word, philosophy, meant. It was another enigma to be unraveled.

Some force dragged me to the back of the library where the stacks of books were thicker and the light was ghostly dimmer. The smell of mildew was strong. It was the scent of time, the scent of history, of human creativity. I thought of my grandparents and old parts of town and cemeteries. I found a little step stool and climbed as far as I could reach. The shelf was covered in dust and almost empty. By the second my heartbeat was getting louder and louder. African drums played where my heart was supposed to be.

In the very back corner I noticed a colossal book. It looked like an archaic, child's suitcase carried by many hands. I saw myself as an owl waiting in the darkness for the midnight prey. My gut feeling told me that I was in the presence of something beyond belief.

Very slowly and carefully I suspended myself and kneeled on

the shelf. Stunned for a moment, I fixed my eyes on the huge treasure hidden in the back. The book had a faded, heavy leather brown cover, and yellowish, bulky, and worn pages. It was too heavy for an eight year old. I squeezed the muscles of both arms very tightly and used two hands to turn the pages. Between the pages marked as a Plato's work "Apology," I found a turquoise bird feather. Between the last page and the back cover was the inscription dated on June, 19th 1949 that said: "Emma, for all of your love for Greek Philosophy, please accept this amazing and rare book: 'Collection Of All Philosophical and Literary Works Of Classic Greece,' from 1915. Let the philosophy, poetry, drama, mythology, and most of all, your love for truth, guide you and help you to make sense of all of your wondering travels, always yours, your friend, Philip." [Philip would later become my son's name.]

I had a feeling that pair of old, but friendly eyes were watching me.

The mold choked me. My little library was breathing.

When I finished the fourth grade, my family moved to a newer part of town. In fifth grade I had seven teachers for seven different subjects. I missed my friends and I missed Mrs. Adjić, who bonded us together. The old part of town where I grew up had a history of conquerors and liberators, the soul of poets and lovers, and the heart of Marathon runners. My new neighborhood smelled like synthetics. Often, I changed two busses just to get to my first intellectual shrine, the tiny park and the library.

Sometimes, when no one was around, I relaxed on the bench and meditated. Within the two years since I left my old neighborhood I bought several books about ancient Greece and Socrates, and started my personal library. His life story helped me to better understand that part of Mrs. Adjić's approach to education derived from Socrates: whenever the weather was nice, my peers and I had lectures in the middle of the forest discussing the flora and fauna; or sitting on a wavy green meadow on the outskirts of Belgrade, having lunch and social studies, while the villagers planted their crops; or by the Danube river, study-

ing basic laws of physics, while watching lazy ships rolling down their cargo, all the way to the Black Sea. We exercised, learned breathing techniques and practiced balance between the body and the mind.

The analogy between Mrs. Adjic and Socrates became obvious. During my contemplation Mrs. Adjic was like Socrates, and we, the children, were like his pupils in a school named Academia. He spent the most of his time in his agora (open marketplace), in Athens where outside, under the open sky he taught his philosophy, and where he was tried and condemned to death.

According to Plato's "Apology" in a response to his death sentence, Socrates said:

"Above all, I shall be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in that; I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions!"

Socrates was not afraid of death. He accepted his death as an opportunity to continue his philosophical quest, meet Odysseus and Sisyphus and discuss true and false knowledge. Sitting on the bench like a guardian of my little library I asked myself is that all we have during our time on this Earth: quests and opportunities? Socrates died hoping that his mission will not stop.

Even though I have never spoken to Mrs. Adjic about Socrates since I finished fourth grade, I allowed myself to take the liberty and conclude that she followed Socrates' footsteps and devoted her life to the beauty of knowledge and the challenges of teaching and educating. She understood her opportunity and turned it into a long-term pursuit and fulfilled it completely. She did it with so much profundity, distinction and grace. I might be the only one of her students who thinks so, but in my mind, that puts her in a similar group where Plato and Socrates are: deep thinkers whose philosophies and ways of life reached far out and influenced many lives, societies, and the entire Western civilization.

My imagination drew the faces of authors that were dead. My thoughts browsed through the words of the books I read and the feelings they provoked. I traveled geographical distances and admired the beauty of planet Earth. I screamed out of madness, when I saw poverty, beyond anything that resembles humanity. The protagonists from the books took me inside their souls, and I experienced rage and love, compassion and suffering, and the thrill of giving and receiving. I fought meaningless wars, delivered babies, and lost all my money to a gambling addiction. I was my little library. My little library was my own self.

The premonitions I had, felt strikingly real. In a flash, I knew what happened: the fresh conclusion radiated my mind. The literature, Socrates, Mrs.Adjic , my parents, and all the other significant people and institutions assisted me in creating connections to the world that didn't disconnect yet, and never will. On the contrary, that nexus is getting stronger and stronger, by every hour because at the present I am seriously writing too.

When I turned twelve, the old library was demolished. A new glass building took its place. The new library had many new shelves to be filled, much more knowledge to be stored in the millions of volumes of almost the entire human experience.

Libraries are one of the most welcoming places, and their hands are open to everyone with good intentions and hunger, or a need for knowledge and friendship. Russian writer Maxim Gorki said: "You are never alone, when in the company of the smart thoughts".

At the age of nineteen I was back in the old part of town, living in my own place. My private library increased over the years and took the space of one whole wall in my small apartment. I put a couple of uneven houseplants and a little bench to reassemble my first intellectual shrine that didn't exist anymore.

Over the years I formed several deep friendships, built on honesty, the love for books, the art and music. I had a variety of different fields of curiosity to satisfy. I liked to go to the movies, and especially plays and concerts. Museums were a treat on Sundays. But of all the places I went, I liked picnics and din-

ner parties at my home the most. Over dinner we discussed the new books we read, occasionally acted like each other's therapists for no charge, and indulged each other in good humor to laugh loudly and infectiously. Occasionally, we had healthy old-fashioned arguments that gave a positive Karma to our relationships. The social aspect of my personality was in its heyday.

A charismatic attitude, a love for people, and righteousness were what I saw as a good reflection of myself in my friend's eyes. My own mirror reflected an emotional person, but a strong woman who transforms negative emotions into a powerful tool for bravery. I had a courage when I followed my intuition when I was eight, after I had a destined opportunity to be introduced to the thought of Socrates, and found myself in a mysterious part of the library. Fearful, but strong-minded I climbed on the grimy shelf, discovered a unique book and read even more incredible inscription, written on one of the pages. In the course of that event, I was very collected and calm on the outside, but adrenalin boiled my blood on the inside. With the same kind of boldness and boiling calmness I continued following my senses and gut feelings for most of my life.

Many years later, as an adult, I had a strong vision of love, pursued my intuition pretty much blindly and found myself in another country. In a name of love I made overnight decision to buy a one-way ticket and leave my adored homeland. Simply, I loved my husband.

I left Belgrade, the town that meant so much to me: the city that had a delightful and magic capacity to cleanse away all the sand of the soul pressured by mundane life and rejuvenate it with the easiness of a good hearted giant; Belgrade stretched out on nine hills like a wavy, gorgeous, and lazy feline on the Sunday sun. I departed from the place that inhales its life through the blankets of many parks, trees, monuments, museums, theatres and sport centers, and exhales its fatigue through waters of the delta of the Danube and Sava rivers.

I went away leaving the city that chronicled so much blood, death and damage during forty-two bombings, before the end of

World War Two and for the forty-third time when the U.S. military bombed it recently. But, Belgrade rose from the ashes as free and liberated town, every time when someone tried to conquer or destroy it, and opened its friendly arms again and again. My town and I have had so much in common.

Behind me, I left my family and friends and all my evocative yesterdays. Out of strikingly powerful feeling of love I have said goodbye to everything I have left behind, and moved to America. I am still married to my American husband and have two children.

Many aspects of my personality changed since came to live in America. Before I left my country I learned that the largest library of the B.C. era, the library in Alexandria, burned to the ground a few times, and was rebuilt again. This is how I had to rebuild myself in my new country, all over again.

I had to start creating some new personal libraries, pristine observatories and new telescopes. Most importantly, I had to start learning a new language, and adjusting to a American culture and completely new way of life. During the process of recreating and rebuilding that person that I used to be, the hardest and everlasting challenge that I've faced, and still am facing every existing minute of my life, is the nostalgia and the sickness that has no cure, known in English as homesickness. I have had to cope with it in the best possible manner that I could. And still, I do. I have written about it, and as my knowledge of English language becomes better, I will write more. My story for now has no closure and it may never have one.

Because, no book that I have read, no teacher that I have ever loved, not Socrates' wisdom that changed my life, not my mother that loves me and gave me birth, not my father with his clever blue eyes, no exceptional school system could have ever been able to prepare me for the new word that I had to learn – homesickness, a bottomless abyss of my present life.

Something was written on the board.

It said: "All I know is that I know nothing." Socrates.

What Court Hearings Don't Hear

Shirley Haviland-Nakagawa
Second Prize, Non-Fiction

I can still remember when my sister was the little girl who pinched her thumb and forefinger together and held them up high for a cup of tea. With her blue-eyed doll cradled in the elbow of her arm, she was for one moment in time, a young mother and my neighbor visiting me. I, too, cradled a peach-faced baby doll and invited her into my house through the invisible door as we mimicked grownups. Mama's canned foods stacked in a crate in the patio became my kitchen cupboards, but I only offered the tasteless, odorless, imaginary cup of tea and she sipped it so sophisticated. Her long brown hair fell all around her soft pale face and shoulders. With no color in her cheeks, it made those predominantly brown eyes illuminate.

The tea parties were a smash, but when Rocky found us he sent Natalie screaming out through the backyard gate.

"Run!" she screamed. "It's the monster!"

Rocky barked and chased us all the way to the school yard, a block and a half up Bell harbor Avenue. Past the monkey bars was the fireman pole and we climbed the steel stairway to the top of the Castle where the monster could not get us. We would scream for help as Rocky yipped and wagged his tail. Sliding down the cold steel pole, we ran for our lives back to our house where Rocky could be heard behind us in chase.

Through the front door exhausted, we would collapse on the living room carpet and our monster would lick our faces as he waved his tail with victory. I still feel a sense of disbelief when I think of her in prison now. In reality, she just could not out run all the monsters in her life.

Behind prison walls at CIW, my sister has remained pale, and her features have become a bit more washed out. Her eye-

brows faded to an almost unnoticeable shadow giving her large almond eyes a deep set appearance. The most colorful thing about her appearance are the tattoos she had donned since she turned a rebellious fourteen. The large red rose centered on her right hand, surrounded with leaves of two shades of green, is not just an emblem of beauty, but a deliberate cover up of an ugly memory by the name “Mike” that lies beneath. On her back, was a professional tat of a sword with a ribbon that once read “Sworn to fun—Loyal to none” until another bad memory, Ricky G., came along and had a flower inked on the letter “N.” Now it reads “Sworn to fun—Loyal to one.” Clever bastard. It is he that I’d like to blame for her incarceration in the California State Prison, but he did not have anything to do with this charge. Not this time.

At seventeen she met Rick G., a carpenter by trade. We wore his thick wavy brown hair in a ponytail that came just past his shoulders. I envied his hazel eyes that popped out brightly and were outlined with thick brown eyelashes. The rest of his features were hid under his full “ZZ Top” style beard. Sporting a black Harley Davidson T-shirt with large brown wings outlined in orange, I realized what they had in common besides the multitude of tats up and down his arms.

Just as I had suspected, his stereotyped bad boy image was indeed a warning. He was trouble and when they married for better or worse, it was for the worst. They racked up some serious felonies that I will not list to protect the innocent—and the not so innocent. As a result, she turned eighteen in jail and went to CIW for the first time. There were no “Three Strikes” back then in 1979-80. The charges were serious. I won’t play that down, but she did her time and to throw it in her face twenty years later with the new Three Strikes law was like sending a twenty year old to bed early for what she did when she was ten. With so many years, come many changes—changes that the law has no eyes to see.

In 2002, everyone who knew Natalie knew she was transforming into a functional citizen as well as a loving mother and she attended church. Going in and out of jails and prison was

now years behind her, and she settled into a somewhat domestic lifestyle. Still far from perfect, my little tea partner was a far, far away story. Now forty, a medium-build woman in tight jeans and spaghetti straps was quick to tell anyone where to go, an anytime, for any reason and more interested in coffee than tea. We mirrored a strong resemblance and even fooled people on the phone as our voice sounded so much alike down to the boisterous laughter, but our similarities ended there. We argued a lot about our differences, but we were sisters and counted on love to perform as a super glue to keep our dysfunctional family together.

I lived in Fresno, an hour drive, to where I could find her under her car on a Saturday afternoon lathered in motor oil with the scent of gasoline. But on any other day she could have been found with her hair feathered back, the plum-red lipstick shimmering on her perfectly shaped lips, and wearing a matching satin mid-drift halter top. She never wore rouge to blush her cheeks as if she had discovered her colorless beauty. We would greet each other with a hug, and sometimes I would detect a faint hint of the White Diamonds perfume that I bought her for her birthday. But usually, her perfume collection consisted of incense oils that reminded me of my favorite scented candle section in a Hallmark store.

Within three years of living in Los Banos, she was accepted into the program "Habitat for Humanity." Memories of the neighborhood children in her rented house visiting her children, Kevin 13 and Angel 15, entered my mind. I recall many times Natalie cooked dinner for her own, but if a parent didn't call a child home for dinner, she set an extra plate. As she opened her heart and home to others, I thought it appropriate that she would now have her own. As the community of volunteers began to build her house, Natalie, Kevin and Angel helped hammer and frame the new home that they would never know.

Kevin looked like his dad as his bright yellow curls popped out from under his baseball cap that he wore religiously to shade his fair skin from the sun. His blue eyes lit up from under the bill of the cap, and although handsome, his coloring did not

match his mother, or his sister Angel's. Angel was Natalie's Mini-Me and now closely resembles the rebellious teen I once knew, although I never saw Angel hold a doll ever—she was more the stuffed animal type. Her brown, animated, fawn-like eyes frightened me as I wondered how much she could be like her mother. For now, the young girl hung her whole weight on my arm and pulled me like a tug boat to her room when I visited. I would get another tour of her domain as if it were the first time. Indeed, the smell of crayons and Play Dough was replaced with a make-up gallery, and her walls displayed posters of Britney Spears and other pop idols.

Video movies were a traditional way to end a long visit before heading back to Fresno. We watched Erin Brockovich as Natalie snuggled on the floor with her children like mother cat with a litter of her kittens. She seemed more like a tiger to me, but watching her at that moment from the couch, she was tender as a kitten finger stroking their hair. If I knew what I know now, I would have laid down there on the floor and joined them. I would hold my sister, but I didn't—I did tell her that I loved her as I always did before I entered my car to leave.

A week before Mother's Day, my cell phone rang and I received a prank call. A young voice said, "My name is Adriane, and you need to come get Angela and Kevin because Natalie's in jail."

"Very funny!" I hung up on the pranksters.

My caller ID showed the area code "209" and I couldn't believe Natalie's kids would play a joke on me like that. It's out of character, I thought, and the phone rang again. I saw the same area code but before I could lecture, I was interrupted.

"My name is Adriane; I'm twenty-seven, and my little brother is Angel's boyfriend. This is not a prank call!"

The only muscle in my body that moved now was my heart, and I was sure that had stopped. My caller remained silent long enough for my mind to fast forward a file of the minor charges that could possibly have caught up with Natalie—like that six foot round swimming pool she stole from Wal-Mart in her backyard. Adriane's voice brought me back as she gave me a brief of

last night's events.

In summary, Natalie had a few drinks at the annual May Day Fair in Los Banos. Her medication, Paxil, labeled with a warning to "avoid alcohol." Believing that the warning meant the meds would just intensify the alcohol, she drank. It would become the last thing she remembered, but later at home, she went for more alcohol. According to Kevin, "My mom got really messed up and was leaving to go to the store to get more alcohol. One of Angel's friends said something to my mom and she got mad at Angel and started throwing things around. Although she did not aim—one of the objects hit me in the face while I was outside in a friend's van. It went passed my friends head and hit me. When the cops came they took her to jail."

Natalie remained in jail for more than a year fighting her felony charges as the Three Strikes law now demanded a 25 to life sentence. As her hearing date drew near, Kevin and I drove to Merced county to deliver a newly purchased dress, black low-heeled shoes and make-up to her attorney. I walked into Marty Garza's office, but he was out to lunch and Kevin waited for me in the car. As Garza drove into the parking lot, he stepped out of his car holding a bag from Burger King. (Somehow, I pictured him in a fancy restaurant). Walking toward me, Kevin witnessed a conversation that escalated to yelling.

"There's not gonna be a trial!" said Garza loudly. "It's a sentencing! She's doing 25 to life!" He walked towards his office and I followed.

"But 25 to life is not fair for a black-out!" I said as if pleading to a judge. "I'm sure you have drunk and have had black-outs when you were a law student in your college years."

Garza's tone became more ominous as he spun around and answered, "Yeah! But I didn't go around beating people up!"

There was silence in the parking lot as it sank into me that Natalie was sunk. Slowly my eyes moved towards my car where Kevin sat staring silently at what and who was supposed to defend his mother. Garza turned to look and for the first time he noticed there was someone there.

“I knew my mom was screwed right then,” said Kevin, as he shook his head and finger combed his hair out of his eyes. “He was supposed to defend my mom, and he sounded like a prosecutor.”

Kevin and I drove to Los Banos and told Natalie’s circle what happened. Friends and family urgently wrote letters to the Judge to give enlightenment of the current situation and detailed who Natalie is today.

At home, I waited for the collect call from county jail, but when Natalie finally called, it was too late. When I told her about the dress and preparations for trial, she realized her own attorney betrayed her.

“My gawd, Shirley! He told me my family didn’t want to go through a trial!”

“He’s a fuckin’ liar, man!” I was pumped. “You should’a heard him when we dropped off the dress. Kev heard it all, too.”

“Shirley, he slammed a fourteen year deal and told me that’s the best offer I’m gonna get and I signed it!”

“Fourteen years! That’s a deal?”

“Shirley, call the bar for me and have the forms sent here fast. I’ll find out what to do in here; you make calls out there.”

“Your friends and everyone’s writing letters to the Judge,” I assured her. “I’ll fax them so that for sure the judge will get them immediately.”

I couldn’t help but call Garza as soon as we hung up. His secretary insisted he wasn’t there every time I called and I deliberately became a past. Even when I blocked my number, only an answer machine would pick up my calls anymore.

Three carloads of Natalie’s friends and family went to court and took the last two rows on the right of the surprisingly small Merced County courtroom. There were many cases to be heard that day according to the filled seats that surrounded us. Garza was caught in the hallway and looked surprised when he saw us. When questioned, he denied any knowledge of the letters. Natalie did not terminate him due to the prosecution’s threat to recommend 25 to life again if she started over with another lawyer. It made fourteen years sound good. She was already judged

and sentenced, and we all knew it. This sentencing was just a formality and we, her supporters, were ready to proceed in prayer.

Separating our seats from the judge's platform was a three foot wooden divider. It was just a visual of division in the room separating us from what resembles a wooden polished throne where the judge would sit. The large round seal of Merced County hung on the wall behind the judge's seat. When the judge sat down it hung above his head giving an allusion of a self-proclaimed halo. To the right, four rows of empty seats lined vertically to face the judge. The courtroom hushed as a back door opened and chains jingled on the ankles of the prisoners now taking those empty seats. More chains wrapped around their wrists and waists securely. They did not speak as their eyes scanned the courtroom for relatives and supporters. Some smiled in recognition when they spotted a loved one; others didn't bother to look. Sitting closest to the door was Natalie. Her eyes bounced from one face to the other in our group and gave us her best but nervous smile.

When her case was called, we were granted permission to speak before the judge. Each person spoke of the qualities Natalie had acquired over the years. "One bad night should not reflect her transformation," argued Marilee, one of the pillars of Los Banos. She was a school nurse, owned one of the gas stations off Highway 152 and an elder of the church Natalie went to. The tall woman with gray hair pinned neatly on top of her head told the judge how Natalie had taken an interest in canning and baking and about the hours they spent together in her kitchen as Natalie eagerly became her pupil. She spoke for a time and concluded, "She never had a mother to teach her these things and I kinda became her mother figure."

"Thank-you," said the judge with an unchanged face. Then, he looked at the rest of until the next person stood up. Each person urged him to recognize that her criminal record was now decades old, in particular was her friend, Terry. Terry gave an account of the camping trips Natalie took her kids on without a father, how she taught her son to fish, and took them to church and how she never saw Natalie discipline her children with any excessive

roughness. She pleaded for the court to send her to a program if they believe she has a drinking program or send her to a parenting class if the court finds her an unfit parent, but to have mercy on the fourteen years. The judge looked bored.

When it was my turn, I was a bit intimidated, but found within me a dim glow of hope for justice. I asked the judge if he had received the letters I faxed him, just for reassurance, but he said, "No."

I spoke faster explaining how I faxed the letters to make very sure he received them on her behalf. He again denied ever seeing any letters for this case. I verbally gave my version of the contents of my letter. When I was finished he just looked at me, and I took my seat.

Kevin, now fourteen, took his turn to speak before the Judge. He wore creased black slacks and a tucked in crispy white buttoned-up shirt that buttoned tightly at his wrists giving the sleeves a ballooned effect. Without his usual baseball cap, the lights above were caught in the waves of his bright yellow hair. When he began to speak, only the howl and cries of his soul filled the courtroom. Unable to express a single word himself, I quickly went to him and held him in my right arm and spoke on his behalf as he looked down to the floor. I explained to the judge how much these children's lives will be devastated without their mother who never had a complaint or a CPS case. Looking at Kevin and back at the judge, I reminded him that in fourteen years this child (still choking and sobbing) would be twenty-four upon her release. The judge looked as if he waited for me to get to the point.

I looked at my sister helplessly and out of ammunition. She was now crying too, but it was for her son. Her arms could not hold him even if those chains dropped to the floor. She was chained to at least thirty other prisoners, both men and women. Rows of jumpsuits and tee-shirts made them all look alike except for their hair and features. I saw through the jumpsuits as their hardened faces softened with compassion, yet the judge remained unmoved. I gave one long glance at the judge knowing I could

not crack his icy glare that reminded me of the glaze that rolls over a lizard's eyes when it sleeps, but appears to be awake.

The judge sentenced Natalie to the fourteen year deal. Then staggered many in the courtroom with a restraint order from her children to visit her until they reached the age of eighteen referring to them as victims! Shock jolted the family, and I heard her friend, Terry cry. The others just wanted out the door quickly and to catch Garza outside. We could hear the people that surrounded us murmuring on Natalie's behalf. Outside, the tall, slim nurse cornered Garza in private. Her stern square jaw line was firm as her eyebrows bundled tightly together, and I was sure she was giving him a good tongue lashing.

Kevin didn't feel the necessity to be protected and complained about the restraining order.

"They weren't protecting us! They didn't know anything about us... ya know? They never did any kind of follow-up or asked us what happened. I visited mom while she was in jail every Wednesday for a year! It was more of another way to her than it was to protect us.

Kevin and Angel mourned their mother who filed a Habeas Corpus her first year in prison and was denied. It is against the constitution for a lawyer to hold animosity against his or her own client. Her lawyer also lied to her to persuade her from going to trial. Also, it was much later learned that judges do not receive faxed letters. They must be sealed and sent through the mail for legal reasons. If the judge's secretary cared enough to call and inform us of the legalities perhaps it may have made a difference. Perhaps not.

Although he could not visit, Kevin wrote frequently to his mother. Angel picked family and friends to foster her, but they coveted her and eventually would not accept collect calls fro Natalie. When Angel ran away, she stayed with her school friends. Kevin stayed with friends and family until he was sent to a foster home due to the slow process of the county's red tape. Uncle Rick was jumping through hoops, fingerprinting, and playing phone tag with the foster care social worker. Before the process

was complete, Kevin ran away from his foster home in Atwater and returned to Los Banos to be with his sister and friends. The house was now built and lived in by another family in the Habitat for Humanity program. The community and family members kept these “now fugitives” from the system at their own risk. It was difficult for the kids to remain in contact with their mother under these conditions. This is the sentence of the innocent.

When Kevin turned eighteen in 2006 he and long-time girlfriend, Courtney, went to CIW for the first time to visit his mom. When they returned home, they brought back photos of the visit. I eagerly reached for the photos, but my smile faded. How small my sister had become. As Kevin grew taller, we were accustomed to imagine she was still bigger than him. He was barely passed her shoulder when she went to jail in 2002. Kevin now towered his mother, now forty-five, and his arms looked so large around her as her head now reached his shoulder. The photograph became a yardstick that measured time. The time they spent separated from one another, as well as the time she must remain incarcerated.

Traditions

Jennifer Periera

Third Prize, Non-Fiction

Sleep was impossible the night before my big day! I awoke hours before the alarm woke me. The nerves in my stomach grew as the minutes passed. It was finally the day that we planned for. My dress was picked out, crowned cleaned, the hall was decorated and the food was cooking. The crown was going to be passed to me. I was going to become the Portuguese Queen of Selma, California in just a matter of hours. Now it was time for me to get my hair done, my make-up on and put my beautiful dress on.

Being Portuguese has always been a big importance to my family. As a tradition in the Portuguese community, the youngest girls spend years working up to become crowned in honor of Queen Isabella, Portugal's most memorable queen. She gave everything she had to provide for the poor in her country. It is said that one day during a famine when times were at their very worst and poverty was high in the country, Queen Isabella prayed for her people. She prayed to God for food and help for the country. After she prayed she walked out of church and placed the only thing she had left to symbolize her royalty, her crown, on a poor girl's head.

She told her people, "When the food comes I will have a feast for everyone."

It was then that a dove landed on her crown and ships filled with food came into the harbor and the people feasted.

To recreate what Queen Isabella did for her people, queens from all over the state come to see the crowning of a city's new queen which will serve a one year term. A newly crowned queen will then travel to other cities to see the crowning of their queen. The celebration also includes a feast of Sopas (Portuguese stew), free to anyone who would like to come. It is a huge celebration.

With a full day ahead of us we showed up at the church to take pictures of all the girls and boys dressed up for the celebra-

tion. There were the flower girls, the banner boys, gladiola girls, escorts, little queen, her attendants, the big queen and her attendants and so many more. After hours of pictures it was time to go to the hall and get set up for the parade.

When I arrived at the Portuguese hall, queens from all over were gathered and people of the community had arrived to watch. People were running around getting everyone ready and in line for the parade. It was time to get the show on the road, literally! We all walked miles to the church in 100 degree temperature on hot asphalt. The girls in big gowns were pulling heavy capes on their backs as were their escorts in their black tuxes, but none of us minded. The fun had just begun.

The church came into view with my relief because I was at the end of all the other cities' queens in the parade. At the front of the church was the current Selma queen who would pass the crown to me. The next steps I would take would be the ones towards my becoming queen. She kissed the crown then held it out to me. I kissed it then the crown was placed in my hand. I was now the new queen that represented all the good works that Queen Isabella had done.

We went into the church for mass and for the blessing of my year in the position as queen. After mass ended I walked down the aisle with crown above my head and tears in my eyes. I looked at my mother and I saw tears falling down her cheeks. It was thirty years to the day that she was handed down the same crown and I was following the tradition in her footsteps. I do not think she has ever been so proud.

Once out of the church it was back to the asphalt and out of the whole year as queen I remember this walk the most, it had gotten hotter and my arms burned from holding the crown above my head. With the sweat running down my face and my hands clammy, the crown began to slip. Then, I dropped it!

The thought that went to my head first was, "Everyone's gonna hate me! I have to grab it before it hits the road."

My hands flew out, my heart raced, and I grabbed the crown inches from the pavement with no harm done, at least to the

crown. I, however, was as red as an apple with embarrassment.

“I hope nobody saw that,” I said out loud to one of my attendants who was laughing at me.

“Look at your mom!” she said. And, when I did, I saw my mom’s eyes wide and relief on her face. Now that is over we laugh about it, but, at that time, it was no laughing matter.

With embarrassment over and everything okay, we arrived at the hall to eat. Finally, I was hot, hungry and a cold bottle of water with a big bowl of Sopas could not have sounded better. We all ate our fill and I did my duty of walking around talking to just about everyone who came to the festivities. I thanked everyone who came and even helped out with the auction where my grandmother’s homemade cookies sold for three hundred dollars!

It was then time for a break. We went to my grandparent’s house and we tried to sleep a little, but still the day was not over and the excitement for the night’s dance was keeping me awake. The hours before the dance dragged a little, but it was not too bad to wait. Actually, it was time to return before we all knew it.

When we came back to the hall we all lined up for the Grand March. It is a walk around the dance floor while the announcer introduces everyone involved in the celebration. Once the march was over it was time to dance. Of course during the dance there was the traditional American music, but the most fun was the Shamarita, a Portuguese dance similar to the Hokey Pokey mixed with Square Dancing. The most confusing part is that it is called out in Portuguese. My friends and I danced for hours on end and took the opportunity to relax and have fun in a not so formal manner. We had a blast!

Before we all knew it, the day and the celebration was over. The months of planning and stressing to get everything done on time was well worth the outcome of it all. As I rode home and away from the party the exhaustion kicked in and I fell asleep. Throughout my term I traveled all over California and met many new and very interesting people. The year that I was queen is one of my most favorite memories of my life.

Christmas Presents

Tammy Yrigollen

Honorable Mention

Looking back, it was the best Christmas I had as a child. It was the year my sister and I bought my parents bicycles and the year I learned about giving. I was 10 and my sister was 12. My sister, who was and still is the organized one of the family, had the idea of buying our parents bicycles for Christmas. It was May and we had about seven months to save our allowance along with any other money we could earn. Every Monday we would sneak off to our bedroom, my sister would crawl under her bed and come out with an old cigar box, where we hid the money we were saving. We would put in all the money we could come up with for that week. Being the oldest, my sister would carefully count the money and write it down in a note book that was kept in the box. At first we each put in half of our two dollar a week allowance. By mid-August my sister said we were not going to have enough money to buy the bicycles, so reluctantly I put in my whole allowance. In October we were still not going to have enough saved to buy the bicycles. “We have to start putting in half of our lunch money too,” my sister informed me, after counting the money.

“You’re going to starve me to death,” I cried. I was all for the idea of getting our parents the great gift and sacrificing my allowance was not too hard, but my lunch money—was my lunch money! This was more than I could take. She eventually persuaded me to give in and I began putting in half of my lunch money along with my whole allowance. The more we saved and the closer it came to Christmas, the more excited I became. “I can hardly wait to see mom and dad’s faces when we give them the bicycles. I’m glad you made me put in the extra money,” I told my sister one night as we lay in bed talking about surprising our parents.

About the end of October we started searching the newspaper sale ads, we were looking for the perfect pair of matching bicycles

that were in our price range. We had one problem, when we did find them, how were we going to get there, buy them and bring them home. We decided to let our grandparents in on our secret. Partly to get their help and partly because we were so excited we just had to tell someone.

Thanksgiving came and with it brought the after Thanksgiving sale ads. We found bicycles we could afford at Kmart and arranged for our grandmother to take us to Fresno and buy them, that next Friday. I think that day was as memorable as Christmas. We shared our excitement with my grandparents and they became part of our grand scheme. Our grandmother made up a reason for my sister and I to spend the day with her. We arrived at our grandmothers with the old cigar box, which was pretty worn by this time, in it was two-hundred dollars worth of one dollar bills, quarters, dimes, nickels and a few pennies. Our grandmother took one look at the box of money and suggested we go to the bank and change it for larger bills. I remember our grandfather as a nervous, excitable kind of guy that never was a very good driver. He ran a stop sign on the way to the bank and cut off at least two other cars. Suddenly he realized that we couldn't go to the bank my mother worked at and made an illegal u-turn in the middle of the street, in order to go to the only other bank in town. We finally made it there, got our money exchanged and made it back to our grandparent's house. Luckily, we lived in a small town with not much traffic and where everyone knew our grandfather and how bad of a driver he was. To my relief, our grandmother drove us to Fresno, where the nearest Kmart was located. We picked out two dark green bicycles, a men's bike for my dad and a matching woman's bike for my mother. We had enough money to purchase the bicycles and a little left over to buy two big red bows. "I am very proud of you two girls," our grandmother told us on the way home. "You've are both very caring and giving."

"Thanks, but it was really Cindy's idea, I just helped with the money," I confessed. But I felt pretty good about my part, just the same.

We celebrated Christmas with my grandparents on Christmas Eve every year and it was during that time when we received our gifts from Santa. My sister and I were told that with all the places Santa had to go, he needed to start early and we were on the early list. Every year on Christmas Eve, we would eat dinner and then go for a ride around town to look at the lights, when we returned Santa would have come to our house. For some reason it took so long for all the adults to get in the car. It seemed someone always had to go to the bathroom or forgot something they had to go back into the house and get. This year was different; we knew why our grandfather had to run back into the house while everyone waited in the car. We had employed him to set out the bicycles and we were to keep our parents from going back into the house. As in all the years before, we couldn't wait for our sight seeing trip to be over, however it was for a different reason. When we came home there were two new bicycles waiting for my parents. They were so surprised, my mother cried and my dad was just in shock. "You girls did this by yourselves?" our dad asked for the third time. They could hardly believe we had saved and bought the bicycles.

I think back and I can still feel myself smiling, we were so happy and proud of ourselves. With all the excitement I hardly even thought about what I had received for Christmas. It didn't seem to be as important as it had been in previous years, when I couldn't wait to open presents. Something was different that year and it would change how I felt about Christmas forever.

Colophon

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