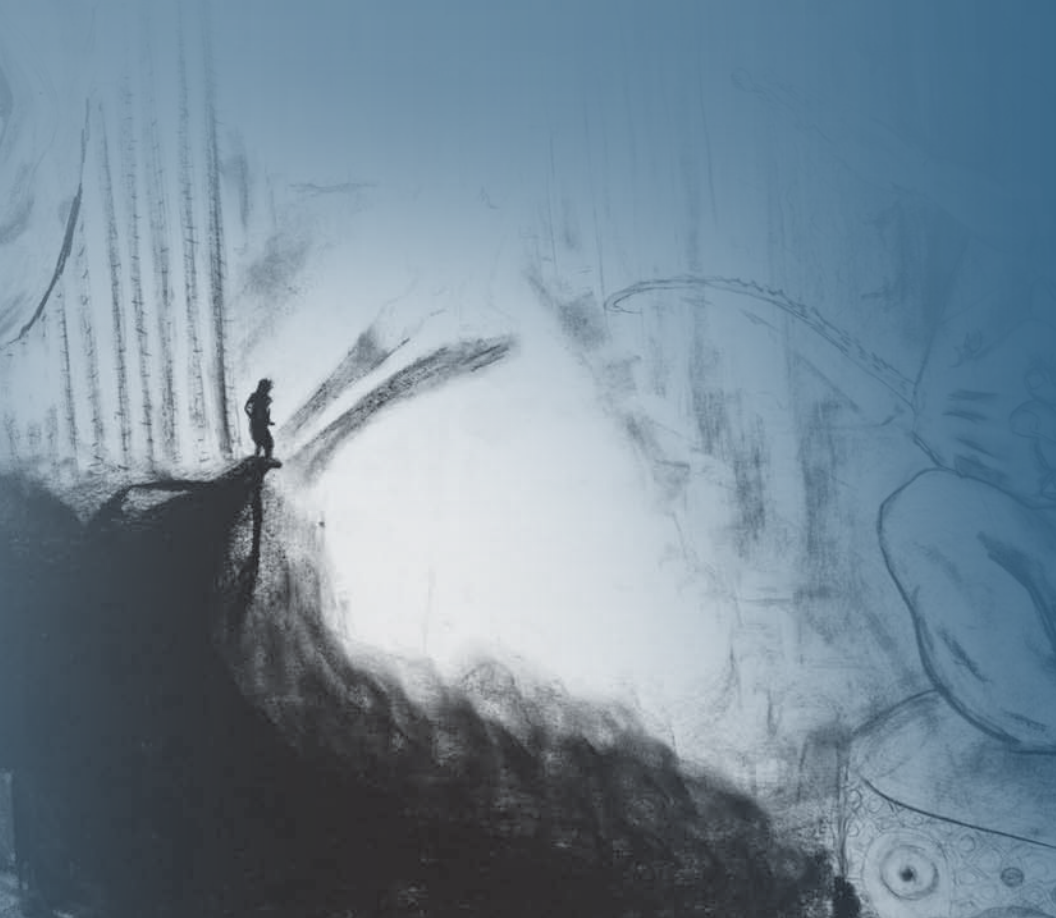


# The Ram's Tale 2009





# **The Ram's Tale *2009***

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Cover art from *Prison Military Industrial System* by David Gomez



Fresno City College  
1101 East University Avenue  
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**Tony Cantu**

Vice President of Instruction, Fresno City College

**Michael Roberts**

Dean of Instruction, Humanities, Fresno City College

**Richard Harrison**

Manager, Print, Media & Communications, Fresno City College

**Ben Lozano**

Graphic Artist, Fresno City College

**Mary Doyle**

Copy Center Specialist, Fresno City College

**David Cowan**

Duplicator Operator, Fresno City College

**David Cook**

Printing Trades Technician, Fresno City College

**Susan Points**

Printing Technician, Fresno City College

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# Editorial Staff and Judges

## **Managing Editors**

Zay Logan

Margaret Hiebert

## **Literary Judges**

David Good, poetry

Margaret Hiebert, fiction

Zay Logan, non-fiction prose

## **Visual Arts Judges**

Anne Scheid, two-dimensional

Robyn Bates, two-dimensional

# Table of Contents

*Acknowledgements* . . . . . iii  
*Editorial Staff and Judges* . . . . . v

## Poetry

*John Keats' Bones* . . . . . 3  
*Carleigh Takemoto* . . . . . 3  
*Your Anger Is a Gift* . . . . . 4  
*Kevin Jensen* . . . . . 4  
*For My Mother and Tom Robbins* . . . . . 6  
*Carleigh Takemoto* . . . . . 6  
*UFO* . . . . . 7  
*Dina Daniel* . . . . . 7  
*Fragments from a Soul of the Cross* . . . . . 8  
*Kevin Jensen* . . . . . 8  
*Mima Wright* . . . . . 10  
*Orange Karma* . . . . . 10  
*Window Powder* . . . . . 11  
*Gloria Nazzaretta* . . . . . 11  
*Driving Love* . . . . . 12  
*Gloria Nazzaretta* . . . . . 12

## Two-Dimensional Art

*Rusted Dreams* . . . . . 17  
*Vanessa Lopez* . . . . . 17  
*Prison Military Industrial System* . . . . . 18  
*David Gomez* . . . . . 18  
*The Crysis* . . . . . 19  
*Erik Beltran* . . . . . 19  
*Outer Space* . . . . . 20  
*Alberto Garcia* . . . . . 20



## **Fiction**

<i>Recognizing Myself</i> . . . . .	.25
<i>Hector Elizondo</i> . . . . .	.25
<i>Truth like a Bullet</i> . . . . .	.39
<i>Yia Lee</i> . . . . .	.39
<i>The Legend of Matricidal Milly</i> . . . . .	.49
<i>Hector Elizondo</i> . . . . .	.49
<i>The Household</i> . . . . .	.61
<i>Raven Sims</i> . . . . .	.61
<i>How to Cook Meth</i> . . . . .	.73
<i>Kathryn Bahl</i> . . . . .	.73
<i>Non-Fiction</i> . . . . .	.79
<i>The Last Traditional Gangster</i> . . . . .	.81
<i>Emilio Garcia</i> . . . . .	.81
<i>The Dark Inside</i> . . . . .	.85
<i>Jillian Ward</i> . . . . .	.85
<i>Colophon</i> . . . . .	88



# Poetry

*There is a pleasure in poetic pains  
Which only poets know.*  
-William Cowper,  
From "The Task"



# John Keats' Bones

Carleigh Takemoto  
**First Prize, Poetry**

For a time in 1819, I dated John Keats.  
It was a May-December romance,  
    but I used to like how he wrote me odes  
        in moon dust,  
and I remember the time he hung the North Star  
    above the bed where we slept  
as the spring rain wailed on Winchester.  
    In the morning, we'd drink Hemlock  
as I combed my spindly fingers through his curls  
    --it was the same bed where we cried  
        mercy from consumption,  
but we got sucked into the black hole  
    Where his fingers slackened and he left me;  
I got spit up the other side into 1988,  
    to a place where the nightingales came  
        to greet me, bringing me mortality  
in paper and songs that blinded me temporarily,  
rendering the whole world senseless—  
    forgetting the ink in John's bones.

# Your Anger Is a Gift

Kevin Jensen

**Second Prize, Poetry**

*After Zach del la Rocha, singer-songwriter of Rage Against the Machine.  
Inspired by a mass exodus of over 80,000 people in the streets of San Francisco following an all-day music festival  
headlined by Rage on August 18, 2007*

With the spirit of a lion  
And the conviction of Zapata,  
You walk through doors held open by Patti Smith  
And Louis Armstrong

I see you shaking all over  
Like you've got somethin' that  
Just won't leave you alone.  
I can see the electricity around you;  
Is this what a halo looks like?

And then: your voice  
Something more like a force of nature  
Like earth. No, not earth—Tierra, that's better.  
The loudspeaker of every Guerilla army throughout history.

Singing like every moment is the most crucial.  
Like the revolution is here, at your doorstep  
And at mine. Like a B-Boy reincarnation  
Of Cesar Chavez. Singing like exhaustion  
In the eyes and in the voice of a friend,  
*They're foreclosing on the house. I'll  
make it. Figure something out.*

Singing like sirens  
'cept this time, they're our sirens.  
It sounds like,

All of the pigs and all of the vultures  
Had better run and hide. "Cause your days are numbered,  
And this is where it all stops.

It sounds like eighty thousand people  
Shut down traffic in the streets of San Francisco  
We felt like we could take over the city  
And maybe we could've. Perhaps she would have welcomed us.

It fills one with awe:  
Realization that you are responsible for the fear  
And the freezing of a city's entire police force;  
If only for a while.  
Well, not just you  
But when eighty thousand come together  
With a singular common anger,  
You stop being a crowd of individuals and become  
Something more like a force of nature.  
Like a flood, that washes away all decay.  
Like a hurricane where the only people who lose their homes are  
CEOs.  
Like those moments when our Mother vomits Gulf waters and levees  
break and it sounds like, *Basta*.

Enough of men behind masks sweeping  
Revolution under the rug.  
Enough of men behind desks measuring  
Out our lives as thy please.  
Enough: This Evening, Nat Turner usurps the throne.  
Enough: This Morning, Fred Hampton will awake to the sound of  
drums  
and not bullets.

Singing straight from your viscera  
sending chills up my spine  
just like when I was 11 and  
I didn't get it  
but I could feel it.

# For My Mother and Tom Robbins

Carleigh Takemoto  
**Third Prize, Poetry**

My Mother stands eating chicken bones by moonlight  
Smelling of patchouli and an old world cosmic love  
She has gone to the desert again in search of the web toed shaman  
Who had once tattooed her Mind's Eye,  
In exchange for a bowl of memories and three Good Deeds

When her shadow won't let up, my Mother walks barefoot through the  
desert  
To call upon the Old Mystic Man in her grandmother sparrow's voice  
That echoes through the Arizona canyons that whistle like the wind  
Whipping through a cola can  
On the tails of the Wind, the shaman appears to her, mitge-like and  
withered,  
Ready to crack lizard eggs upon her psyche and  
Read the lines on the palms of her painted Hands  
Until the fried-egg Sun appears,  
Calling the old Mystic into Everything

Donning her seedless melon smile,  
My Mother will dance across the red vastness  
Back to California  
Back to Me  
I will wait for her, trembling under a peyote button sky



# UFO

Dina Daniel

I believe in unidentifiable flying objects  
There was a UFO positioned  
Over Yucca Valley on June 19th.  
A vibrating sound,  
too rich in volume,  
created tension as  
gathered crowds stirred  
into a frenzy.

I believe a doorway opened.  
That evening while out numbered clouds poured  
and misguided patrons  
stared into glass cages,  
laughter became a sedative  
for those seated on leather bar stools  
leaning towards darkness.

I believe in darkness, complete darkness.  
Everyone in the Sandy  
Hills Bar watched the skies  
hearing more than thunder's  
tragic voice.  
Strange music vibrated;  
the sound was trance like  
filtering through two hollow drums.

# Fragments from a Soul of the Cross

*For Alexander Isaiah de la Cruz (1988-2009)*

Kevin Jensen

“Dust thou art  
And unto dust shalt thou return.” –Genesis 3:19

Nightmare car-crash  
Snuff’s out burning incense

I think I may have loved him  
As much as I hated him.  
We had just finished talking  
And theorizing about twenty-one.

Hops and Barley and Basketball

If he hadn’t taken that drive  
He would’ve stepped outside  
Today and declared it a beautiful day  
*Let’s go to the park and play some ball*

The ball tangled up in the net

The Old Folks say that  
The Young Punks think  
They’ll all live forever.  
And they’re right about that.  
The Old Folks, I mean.

But My Man was in touch with  
A feeling so primal that  
He was something like  
Nietzsche’s Superman  
Walking a Tightrope.

Your Confidence was  
Immovable as stone.  
You had us all tricked  
Into believing that you  
Might be invincible.

But the Old Folks know better though.

I understand, now, your sense of excess  
The way you let instincts hold the reigns  
I understand because I know  
That some music just doesn't sound as good  
As it should until you're hearing through  
A mind that has been up for three days  
And you're catching your third wind  
I understand because you were like that  
Flying Jewel, blazing bright for the rest of us.

The All-Night Drug-Prowling Wolf  
You always liked the Bible.  
Now you have the answer  
To the question on everybody's mind.  
And you're with Joe Strummer, Jesus Christ,  
Jam Master Jay and Jim Morrison.  
So I cannot imagine you would want us  
To despair for you.

# Mima Wright

Orange Karma

If your mind is a single country, or a state,  
I would like to be the main and capital city,  
and your thought's nation that can conjugate,  
with my orange Karma as a political entity.  
If your tongue crochets slogans witty and smart,  
I'll be the sloganeer of the language and a word,  
seeded and grown in the atrium of your heart.  
Standing in the middle of this theatre of absurd,  
I salute Dr. Frankl's existential attitude,  
and pledging for you to learn his cure,  
get off, that high horse – American latitude,  
buy back your bone marrow, and be mature.  
Then, your mind will not need any political entity,  
I'll have my orange Karma, and you, your identity.

# Window Powder

Gloria Nazzaretta

“To thine own self be true.” *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

Outside my window a vapor appears.  
Spindly fingers of oppression looming  
above our heads. Writhing, hard pressing.  
Fisted hand tightens grip, corrals.  
Seducing us to sleep, while we stay up  
all night.

Pass the powder, nose bleed, powder-food  
group. Mirror? Razor? No please. Not me.  
I wish to see through my pain.

Disguised as swaying hips they beguile us.  
I'll stand guard as you half-sleep.

Don't become distracted by the  
swaying hips too long.

Run.

# Driving Love

Gloria Nazzaretta

Love is not only blind it's stupid.  
Fresno Bee News in Brief:  
*Man accused of stealing 26  
cars to see girlfriend*

If love is as simple to find  
as picking turquoise gum  
among the flowers,

finding empty soda cups,  
bottle tabs and cigarette  
butts in the shrubbery,

could one tell the difference,  
chewed on blue gum or  
semi-precious turquoise.  
love? Not love?

Antonio Moreno from  
Inglewood thought so. He stole twenty-six Camry  
and Nissan cars to visit  
his girl in Santa Barbara.  
In 120 days.

Could that compare to writing  
one hundred sonnets for one  
woman?





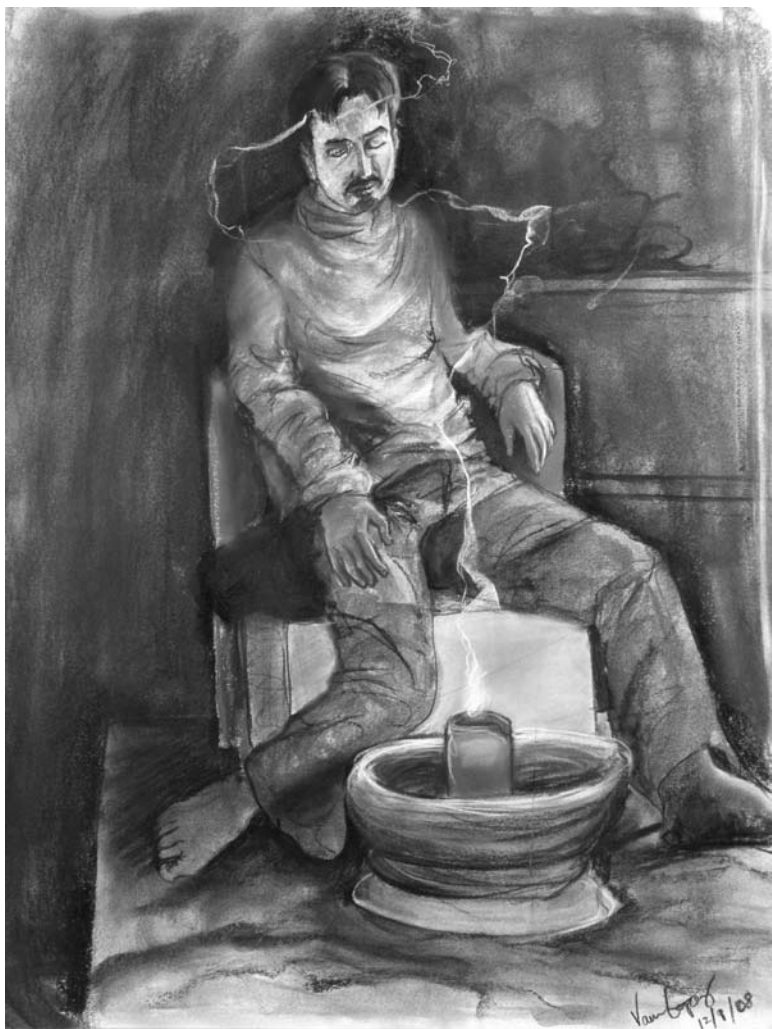


# Two-Dimensional Art

*Art is having the mastery to take your experience,  
whether its' visual or mental, and  
make meaningful shapes that convey a reality to others.*

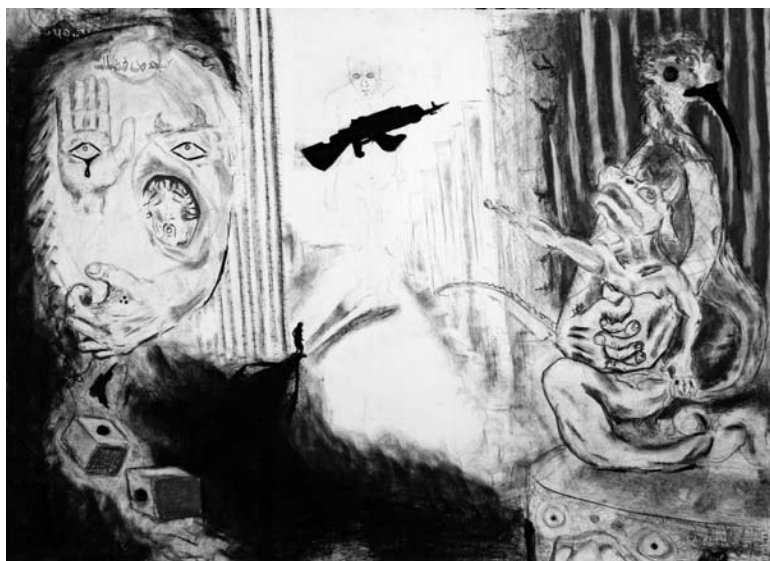
-Gail Godwin





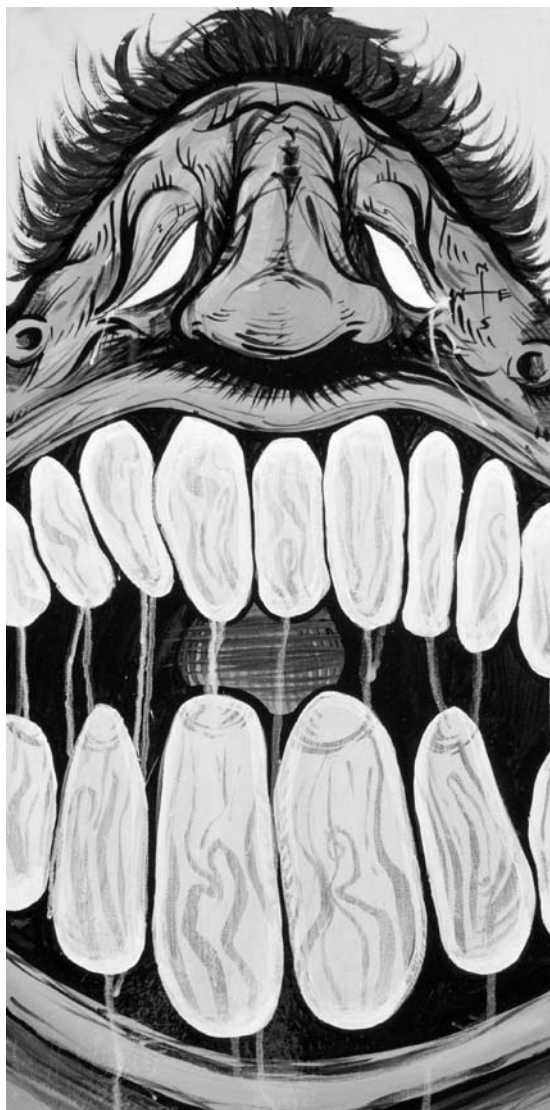
# Rusted Dreams

Vanessa Lopez



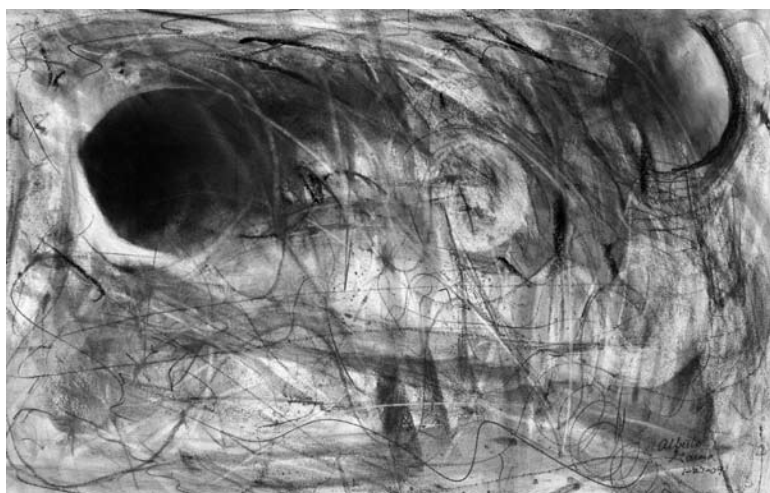
# Prison Military Industrial System

David Gomez



# The Crisis

Erik Beltran



# Outer Space

Alberto Garcia







# Fiction

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



# Recognizing Myself

Hector Elizondo

First Prize, Fiction

My name is Victor Salazar, also known as inmate 2235797. I thought one last heist, but there ain't no such thing where I come from. There's always a next hustle. It wasn't as much a heist as a murder. It's the same thing, right? They're both commandments or whatever. I killed some *sancho* of a woman who was married to a very jealous and wealthy man. It was enough to make me think I could start over.

I had a baby on the way and I figured I could make an honest woman of my lady and we would go away to Texas together, but I'm here in this cell, a part of the suicidal tendency of American society. Twelve long years for murder. Could've gotten more, but like I said he was wealthy, and we had to make it "look real."

I look at these pictures of my son as he's gotten older, from sandboxes through elementary, and I wonder how many girls pass the house trying to get a glimpse.

It'll be time to take them down soon. Today's my release day and I miss the sound of my street. The sound of a warped recorded lullaby from the ice cream truck or the systematic honking of the *panadero*. I'm hungry, but I'll wait to eat. Even if I ate a grilled cheese sandwich, my belly would still crave the *asada* burritos from Guadalajara Market.

I've already put off the luxuries of home for twelve years. What's a few more hours now? Money bags himself vowed to stay true to his word and pay me what he owes me the day I get out. Fifty large for killing his wife's *on-the-side*. The dude even sent his accountant to come visit me last week to ask me if I'll be opening a bank account anytime soon for the wire transfer. Bank account? I don't even know my social security number. I referred him to my homeboy Tweety Vong. I made arrangements with Tweety to take care of the bank roll until I get home.

People like me like to believe we have a code of ethics, an honor system. We throw phrases around like, "My word is my bond," or "Respect," but the truth of the matter is we make a living pissing on each other. The laws of men and the gods don't mean shit. The moral divide is what the shot-callers in the pen say it is. If we obeyed Jesus Christ like we do them, there wouldn't be enough room in heaven for us all.

Christ's name sounds funny on my lips. He feeds the widow and the orphan and doesn't chase fortunes of gold. He is even so unique in nature that He has a virgin as a mother.

I'll be a rich man today then I'll go home to my son. He'll see me and recognize himself. The beefy frame of caged days and the furrowed brow of deep thoughts and introspection looking for a place to stay. He'll see me and recognize himself.

I've been here long enough to speak with repeat offenders that have come and gone. I'd rather know what to expect when I get released. They'll call my name at midnight to head down to the transfer center. I'll wait in a holding cell for a couple of hours while my paperwork makes its way to the front desk. Once my file matches the warden's magic list, they'll send me to a warehouse building to trade me my street clothes for the state blues. No question it will be sunrise before I hit the gate to the other side of the fence

"Number?" The clerk asked, not even looking up.

"Two-two-three-five-seven-nine-seven."

Being nothing but a number is something not exclusive to being an inmate. You're nothing but a number when you go to the D.M.V. or when you file your taxes, and that's the reality of it. That's how our government keeps track of population, the economy, and how much to jack up the gas prices at just the right time of year.

I gave them their raunchy blues back, eager to wear my own boxers and t-shirt. Now that they had what was theirs plus twelve years they escorted me to another holding area, this time to wait for my ride. When I entered the lounge, the burden of imprisonment had fled. I didn't expect to feel free so soon, but I did. The lounge had cushioned chairs in rows of four, facing a mounted television on the wall and it had carpet. You believe that shit? Carpet!

I made my phone call to Tavo that I was ready for release. Tavo said it was gonna be about twenty minutes before they buzzed me to head to the fence, so I decided to see what this carpet felt like on the bare souls of my feet. The concrete in a cell is so cold it feels wet all the time. There ain't no bearskin rugs in here; the blankets are barely warm enough.

The carpet was comfortable under the arches of my feet. It might as well have been feathers since steel is so hard. I've forgotten what it's like to be warm. You learn to generate your own body heat by doing push-ups or sit-ups just to keep from freezing in the winter. It's a lux-

ury to be warm, either on the inside or out.

“Salazaar, you’re up,” The C.O. said through the intercom.

I heard the buzz and I opened the exit where another correctional officer was ready to walk me to the gate. It’s custom to walk ahead of the officers here. That’s where I found myself walking, escort hangover from doing time.

“You gonna make your way back to us, Salazar? I bet you will some-time soon,” he said in a gruff sarcasm.

I looked at this *pendejo* stiffly, but I held my peace. It happens, the guards talk shit trying to bait you into taking a swing to land you in the hole, lose work privileges, or in this instance, be back on the wrong side of the bars. I saw Tavo through the chain link fence standing by his ride with a smile I hadn’t seen in a long time. The guard slowly took out his ring of keys and slid the right one in the gate. I saw the gate open and when I walked through I found everything was so much clearer.

The air was so much more fit to breathe even though it was the same wind blowing through the fence into the state property. I crossed the street and shook Tavo’s hand tightly. I couldn’t believe it was him, wearing the same house shoes he had on a decade ago. His cliché ’64 had a light layer of road dust on it, but I knew Tavo had to have had his ride detailed before he left Fresno. It is standard procedure when a *vato loco* owns a classic car like this to always have it looking spiffy clean, because you never know who’s going to pull up next to you with a better ride and make you feel stupid. Tavo’s the kind of man that won’t settle for being outdone.

“Sup, Tavo? Are those the same clothes you had on in court when they sentenced my ass or what, ay?”

“Not even, Senor Tamale. Since when have you known me to look for a bargain?” Tavo answered as we shook hands. Our handshake is not original or complicated, but it is how we tie ourselves to each other. Only we could perform such choreography with ease.

“Well, let’s get the fuck outta here, fool, before they change their minds,” I said.

I took a cigarette from Tavo and my blood raced underneath my skin. I was nervous. I just spent a little over a decade in a building full of murderers and rapists, but I was nervous to go home, to my son and to my mother.

“So tell me Tavo, what’s the haps since I landed in the *bota*?” I asked

but I really didn't want to know. The grapevine of break-ups, affairs, who's gay and who's dead makes all these problems everyone's problem. I should've known better than to ask, but I wasn't about to discuss the autobiography of Gandhi.

Tavo knew the latest *chisme*, not that he's a busy body or nothing, just well informed. "Harvey and Marie finally pulled the trigger some years back, had a couple of little Harveys, *tu sabes*."

"Harvey, Fat Harvey or Harvey who works at The FedEx?" I asked.

"*Pues*, Harvey that had a girlfriend named Marie, fool!" He exclaimed.

We laughed as the country passed by and the smell of ranches and manure was not the stench of inconvenience, but of freedom. "Rachel's papa passed a couple of years ago also; I thought you would like to know," Tavo said somberly.

"I know, her *jefta* wrote me about it. She said she moved to Arizona to be closer to her sister. She said she'd be damned if Fresno would swallow her, along with her daughter and husband."

"Forgive me for saying, bro, but I think it's chickenshit the way she didn't want to help care for little Ernesto. That's yours and Rachel's kid. If it wasn't for your mom, who knows who would have him now."

"Calm down, Tavo. *Ya esta* retired, and you know she's not as mobile as my mother was at that time. Plus, between you and me, I think she went over the top when Rachel died. I couldn't have someone who's ready to be committed taking care of my son." I explained to Tavo that as much of a grudge that my mother has against me, she was the best qualified to raise Ernie.

*Rachel, how I miss you, my love. Those first few months I spent in the pinta, no other woman would've said they would've waited. You wrote like clockwork, and your letters smelled just the way you did after you get out of the shower. I imagined you with your hair in a towel and wearing that oversized car show t-shirt you used as pajamas. I pictured the day of my release with you and Ernie waiting for me outside the gate, you looking not a day over twenty and lil' Ernie's moustache beginning to sprout below his nose.*

"So what's the plan when we get back into Fresno, holmes?" Tavo questioned.

"Just take me to Tweety's house and I'll let you off the hook for the rest of the day." Tavo didn't know the whole story of the wealthy man and the *sancho* who had caused me so much trouble and that's the way I

wanted it. It's not that I didn't trust Tavo, he has a good heart. Having a good heart when it comes to things like blood money can be costly.

That's one of the reasons my *jefita* has a problem with the way I do things, I didn't always tell her the whole truth. I was a good little Catholic boy for the better part of my youth, but I wasn't immune to the influences of older *vatos* in the neighborhood. My mother first had her suspicions when the style in my haircut changed from the Beaver Cleaver part on the right side to being combed straight back like I was a cast member in *Zoot Suit* or something. Her fears were confirmed when she got a call from the police station that was detaining me for breaking windows in a nearby elementary school. It was the beginning of the end so to speak. All she would tell me from then on is "What would Saint Thomas say if he were here?" My mother supposedly dedicated me to Saint Thomas when I was an infant, hoping that I would have no doubts or reservations about Jesus Christ being the Lamb of God.

We came off the 99 South and took the exit that led past the zoo. The park surrounding it wasn't as pleasing to look at the way I remember. It had the infamous diamond holes with the steel outline that ruined my entrance back into my hometown. It made me think of those Spring mornings when my son would be hunting for Easter eggs while I was surrounded by a bunch of hairy, tattooed *vatos* in the yard.

He told me of the new freeway in use and the extension they're working on near Fowler Ave. He filled me in on the new shopping centers and how the old theatres went out of business because of something called stadium seating. It changed the way people wanted to see their movies.

I didn't exactly know what street Tweety lived on anymore but Tavo said he knew. We cruised passed old bars and new gas stations, looking at the young women pushing strollers in the cross walk who looked younger than before. Tavo drove to a new development past Kings Canyon Ave off of Fowler.

"*Orale*, Tweety's rollin' like this or what, ay?" I asked. I wondered what he did to be able to afford this nice little bubblegum-factory house.

"It's commonplace now, carnal. They're easy to get, but harder to keep." Tavo said.

"Is that right?" I answered back, interested.

"Everyone's been living off of credit cards, even the big-wigs of Wall Street. People like us have just been pretending to be Rockefellers," he said.

“Just pretending with big screens and new Nikes,” I said.

“New toys for the kids at the Wal-Mart, *tu sabes*. That’s all that money is spent on fool, bullshit. No one ever thinks they have to pay that back.” Tavo said. “You see everyone at Wal-Mart like you would at church, Vic. Smiling with their Starbucks, like those *bienas* on *Sex in the City*.”

“It’s easy to get caught up,” I said.

“Fuck it, *ese*. I wouldn’t know,” he said with a smile.

Tavo pulled up to a house with a manicured lawn and a nice little front porch that had two sturdy wicker rockers on it. I wasn’t sure which door I should knock on because they all looked the same on that whole block. At least when I was young we had the decency of making our house, ours, rather than getting confused when it’s time to head home at dusk.

“Don’t laugh at me Tavo, but, which house is it, *ese*?” I asked with the straightest face I could muster. I almost tried to scare him so he wouldn’t laugh. He pretended not to think it was funny and pointed.

“This one right in front of the car, fool.” He answered.

“Alright, holmes. We’ll kick it sometime soon.”

“We better, you owe me some gas money, *ese*.” He said.

We shook hands and I waited on the curb for him to pull away when I decided to face the house and walk up. I checked my reflection in the front door window then pushed the door bell. I knew I could trust Tweety, but the issue is that I didn’t know what he expected from me. Did he expect the man that went to jail all those years back or a crazier more hardened criminal to open the door to? Should I just pick a mask and hope it’s the right one? He knows about my son, the money, and everything in between. It shouldn’t matter which mask I decide to pick, to either of us.

“Fresno County Sheriff’s Department! Open up, Vong!” I yelled, just testing the waters.

The door opened slowly, and there he was. *Pinche* Bruce Lee knock-off. His head carried a fresh fade and his skin wasn’t as dark as I expected it to be. Having a lighter complexion in this valley doesn’t mean the sun doesn’t shine. What it means is that we’re up all night.

“Fresno County, I should be so lucky, *cabron*! George Bush left Bin Laden in the caves and is sweeping Blackstone looking for my ass!” He greeted me with open arms as he let the door swing open.

“Fuck that *puto*, Tweet. It’s on, holmes.” I answered back. Some-



thing in my gut felt different as he invited me in to sit with him. It was the laugh. My laugh. It was genuine, a relief I had done without for over a decade. Many jokes get passed around in prison, but few are received with good tidings.

Tweety's interior had a smell of cigarette smoke and old tamales. I noticed a toy truck sitting on the sofa and held it in my hands looking for the memories that made me choose Tweety as the middle-man. He offered me a *cerveza* and my yes echoed in silence. My hands were not that of a child anymore, and the burden was heavy the way I remembered how naïve I was. Why should I forgive myself for being a child and asking stupid questions? No one comes out of the womb with a *cuete* in their hand. That's just something we say to pretend those days of chasing frogs and building sand castles never existed.

"Well, tell me, Vic..." he began to ask.

"Not as good as you are, apparently, *ese*." I answered. Tweet knew what it was like to do time, not twelve years like me, but he knew. Maybe it's awkwardness, but better to say *something* than being awkward in silence. I cracked open the can of beer and took a sip. I pretended that I had waited 12 years for the experience. The sofa was soft and the volume on the television was low, but I decided not to get too comfortable.

"I was there when she died, *ese*." Tweety's words hit me like I was a window pane being shattered between frigid air.

I looked at him stunned. She was left comatose for two weeks after the car accident. Her mother decided to pull the plug on her respirator when the doctors told her that her chance of recovery was slim to none. Ernie was only five, I remember because that was his first year of school. After I found out, I never thought I would get through those first months in the pen without killing someone. Maybe it would be best if I took little Ernesto to visit her grave before we leave town.

"We were coming back from the Selma Flea and Rachel rode with Dora leading the way. She let Ernie ride with me and Florence because he wanted to play with my boy, Junior." As he began to recount that day, I felt just how I did in prison when I received word, sick and angry. I leaned forward, no longer noticing the products being displayed on the home shopping network. I saw past the images of diamond rings and electronics through the digital pixels of colors until they blurred into a swirl of psychedelic oblivion.

"We took an early exit off the freeway because wouldn't you know

it, Vic, one of the kids had to go pee.” He continued. “We weren’t back on the highway five minutes when we heard on the radio that a diesel had jack-knifed through three lanes headed northbound. There was no word on the number of casualties.”

“Didn’t you think to call her?” I questioned.

“This was before the cell phone movement. We got to Rachel’s mother’s house to drop off Ernie, and we found it strange that she wasn’t there yet. Her mother didn’t get a next-of-kin call until three hours later. We figured they went grocery shopping or some stupid shit like that.”

My eyes began to sting when he mentioned something about cell phones. I couldn’t bare to look at him with my face contorting to strange positions of grief. I put my thumb to my temple and shaded my eyes with my fingers closed tight. The light of the TV and the open windows reflected harshly through the salty tears that tried to trail down my cheeks.

“Which hospital did they take her, Tweet?”

“V.M.C. was open then.” He answered as he finally acted like he was talking to me and not the television.

“We showed up for the novena, but her mother didn’t welcome us. I would’ve excused it if it had been something that doesn’t happen to gringos,” he said.

I sat there still blurred by the light and colors that confused my vision. My beer was warm now, but I took a sip anyway. She was the reason any *vato loco* would want to envy me. I had something worthwhile in her, I had something rational in her, and I guess I didn’t even realize that she was gone from the world until I came back into it.

“Let me get what I came for, holmes,” I said.

“It’s in the garage. *Vamos.*”

We walked through the kitchen door that connected the house to the garage. He had hung *Tecate* posters and *Corona* pin ups of the most beautiful women in the world in there. Tweety even had a neon *Bud Light* sign that he failed to plug in. We walked over to the corner that had old boxes closed by criss-crossing the top flaps. Old water stains and dust decorated these containers that only God knew the contents of.

He passed a box into my arms and I set it to the floor. Between the stack of boxes was a crevice just big enough for a VCR. In the opening was a black duffle bag. He pulled it out and held his hand out, carry-

ing it by the straps.

“This is yours, holmes.”

“It’s all there?” I asked nervously.

“Yup. If you come up short, you can put it on my bill,” he laughed.

I bent down and unzipped the bag. The flaps popped open and I reached inside. I gripped one of the bundles that laid on top. The money was stacked in groups of two-grand a bundle. My eyes widened as I wiped my thumb over the label that held the bills together.

“Don’t get a paper cut, Vic. Small cuts hurt more than big ones, they say,” Tweety said.

I looked at Tweety with the wild eyes of a wolf. *This is for us, Ernie.* Suddenly everything that had brought me to this point didn’t even matter. The *pinche* District Attorney, the alcoholic foreman of the jury, the fagot correctional officers, they can all kiss my Mexica ass! I failed to realize that I was still in Tweety’s garage. When I looked up again, he had already walked into the house. I zipped up my new life and headed inside with him.

“Hey Tweet, I hate to ask this of you, holmes, but can you give me a ride to my mom’s?” I felt stupid because I had a small fortune by two black straps and I had no way to make it back to my mom’s house.

“No problem, *ese*. I don’t want to be here when Flo gets home any goddamn way,” he answered.

I shoved the black bag under the seat of Tweety’s Trailblazer and I couldn’t believe how much I was sweating. Good thing I had a black shirt on or the pit stains wouldn’t be so shy. All I have to do now is just make it across town to my mom’s pad without having Tweety get pulled over. *Pinche chota* is just waiting around one of these street corners to send a dumb spic back into the fire.

“Looks like you’re set for life, fool,” Tweety said.

“Does it make you think about a career change?” I asked him.

“*Chale, ese*. I know what you had to go through to get where you’re sitting right now.” He said. There was nothing but silence for the ride uptown.

That corner of Harper and Alpine gave me palpitations within my chest. The last time I was here I would’ve never guessed it would’ve been twelve years when I saw this place again. Tweety parked in front of the fire hydrant and looked at me with a certain relief. I don’t know if it was because of the loot inside the car or my journey in general that had him silent and wound so tight.

“End of the road, Tweet,” I said when I finally looked at him.

“Not even, homie,” he responded. “There is no end of the road, Vic. It just changes course.”

We shook hands like we would see each other soon. We never think of tomorrow like it’s running away from us. It will always be there for us to drink from, it will always be there to catch us, and to think otherwise is to admit to one’s mortality.

I walked on the sidewalk right up to the front door. To stop in front of the house for a quick reflection of the chain of events that carried me to my mother’s would make me too much of a drama-queen. If I acted like I was only gone for a few days, maybe that would numb the uncomfortable grudge that my mother insisted on placing upon my shoulder.

“Ma, open up! It’s Victor, Mama,” I said. She knew today was my release day, but I don’t know whether she expected to see me the same day or just after I decided to blow off steam with my homies. I banged on the security door and waited. What if she wasn’t home? What if Ernie answered the door?

The wooden door creaked open and there was her face, dark and wrinkled with tired eyes hidden by the wear and tear of a decade. Her voice was tender and in no way reflected the folds of skin that lapped over around her eyes.

“Victor? *Hijo?*” she said from behind the wooden door.

“It’s me,” I said.

She flipped the lock on the black iron door and pushed it out to let me in. My head leaned forward to see around the doors inside the house. I stepped on the carpet and it was the musty smell of home, of my mom’s home. Dust particles danced in the air as a beam of sunlight peaked in through the curtains. There were pictures of me on shelves, of me and mama, of Ernie and mama, and the various breeds of dogs that we’ve housed through the years. The painting of *los abuelos* hung right where I remembered it, above the long sofa that was positioned in front of an old television set that probably didn’t work anymore.

“Well, aren’t you going to give your *mami* a hug?” I gripped the black straps tightly and leaned down to hug my shrinking mother. “It’s good to see you, *mijo*. *Gracias a Dios.*”

“You seem to have lost two feet since I been away, Ma.” I patted her curly hair on the top of her head.

“No, son. I still have both feet.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Close the doors *hijo*, Ernie should be home any minute.”

“He’s not here?”

“He says he’s looking for work, *quien sabe que pasa con eso*.” She practically whispered. “Let’s sit at the kitchen table; the sofa’s not fit for company anymore.”

*Company.*

“Would you like some coffee, Vic?”

“Sure, mama. Cream and sugar is fine,” I said acting like I’ve been drinking coffee all these years. “Are you nervous to see me again? Is Ernie nervous to see me?”

“We both were, Victor.” She began. “All that he knows of his father is that...well, the reason you went away.”

“I’ll be taking him off your hands, mama. *Sabes que*, you’ll finally be able to enjoy your retirement.” Saying this was like peeling the layer of the onion that keeps your eyes from crying.

“*Enjoy my retirement?* Is that why you think I’m angry with you?”

I sat in silence like I was a child again, a child with a distorted version of family and friendship. I tapped my fingers by the steaming cup of coffee she had placed before me.

“*Mataste!* You killed someone!” She shouted weakly and showed the drained woman I left behind. “And do you think I get those years back when I took care of your son!” Her tone had given out and she couldn’t maintain the level of hostility that she wanted. She breathed deeply and continued.

“Instead of spoiling Ernie as my grandson at Christmas time or on his birthday, I was too busy cooking and washing his clothes wondering if he was stealing from me or worse, ending up like you.”

Her face broke and her eyes disappeared behind her loose eyelids, which released a flow of long streaming tears down her cheeks. When me and mama fought like this, I would puff my chest out and look her right in the eye, showing how remorseful I wasn’t. This time I didn’t. I actually felt guilty for the years and times I essentially stole from my own mother’s life.

Would I have done this to Rachel if she were here now? Would she feel disgusted and wasted away also with her twenty-something beauty forever hidden behind lonely nights and empty checking accounts? I could not cry for mama. There was too much between the times I was in the pen and this steaming cup of coffee.

There was a sudden draft flowing into the kitchen from the living room. I looked in and the wooden door was open and in walked little Ernie. My heart sank as I laid my father's eyes upon my only son. He looked at me and then at his grandmother as if waiting to be introduced.

"Ernesto. It's me. Your father."

I stood up and finally released the black straps. They slouched over the body of the duffle bag and I stepped forward towering my son. He looked up at me with wide eyes. It wasn't the thousand yard stare that I was used to seeing in the eyes of young men and women who live around here. There was a thirst in his expression, not of money or respect, but of comfort and shelter.

"It's you." He was afraid to step forward for his share of the distance between us. Why should I make him? I was the one who left him alone in the first place after all. I took another step with my arms aching to hold the flesh of my flesh, the extension of my spirit.

"It's me, Ernesto." His arms tried to grasp around me, but I was too wide. I knelt before him as his arms wrapped around my neck more comfortably. My hands connected behind his back to make one big fist locking us together. I stood up breaking our embrace and he put his head down crying. He sobbed freely and it scared me.

I never felt so free to show my emotions the way he was doing right now. We stood there in silence and I thought I should be so lucky as to resemble my son. He said as his tears gargled his voice, "How long will you be staying?"

I picked his head up by his chin and said, "I'm here to make a new life with you."

I looked at my mother who restrained her weeping. She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and looked down at her grandson. She then glanced up at me and her eyes told me that redemption was mine.

"He's here to move away with you, Ernie. Would you like that, to go live with your papa?"

"When will we leave..." he said stopping short, unsure how to address me.

"You can call me dad, or pop. Whatever you like." I'm surprised he didn't call me by my first name, or even an asshole. "We'll be leaving today, Ernesto. Today."

He nodded his head and came in to hug his grandmother. They met at eye level and she embraced his firm body as tightly as if she was

forgiving me. I stood in the doorway and noticed how the ends of his hair curled up like that of his mother's. His elbows were dry and his eyes had gotten swollen from crying.

He walked past me and into the hallway into his room. The door was left open and the sounds of dresser drawers and closet doors opening and closing left the room gently. I picked up the receiver of the phone hanging on the wall and called for a cab. My mother walked into the living room and looked on the shelves and walls as if she was lost. She grabbed a picture off the television set and one off one of the bookshelves. I said thank you to the dispatcher and hung the phone up without much sound. She brought the pictures to me with her arms outstretched.

"For you and Ernesto. So you both know that you had a mother once." She said as I took them and acknowledged her gift with a shake of the pictures in my hand.

Ernesto came out of the room and I handed him the pictures that his grandmother had given us. I told him to put them in one of his bags because mine was full. The silent somberness of the three of us passed from one of us to the next with little pause and it spared us no heartache.

The taxi came to break our bond and as soon as I heard the driver honk the horn, I slid through the doorway not giving my mother a second look or giving her a chance to make me feel guilty for old time's sake. I assumed Ernesto hugged his *abuela* one more time, but I didn't turn back to find out. I opened the door to the taxi and slid behind the driver. I wet my lips and cleared my throat to whistle towards the house I grew up in, for my son to follow.

He ran out of the house with a backpack in each hand and nearly crashed in the back seat where I was sitting. He closed the door to the cab and I left my street forever. It confused me because Ernesto didn't once ask me where I was planning to settle us down. Not once in two state lines. I figured that's how much he trusted me. Twelve years and a murder wrap and my boy trusted his father.

I decided that was truly a blessing. He'll have the same comforts as the other children he goes to school with. He can trust his parent, never have to steal for what he wants, or fight for his life on unforgiving concrete. I told him eventually, I mean where we were settling. The great city of Houston; home of great football, car shows, and a quaint body shop I decided to make my own. *Freedom Custom and Repair*.

Ernie's a good student of custom work, only a few days and he was popping out dents and doing touch-ups on his own. He'll go off to university and one day show his pop how to make this *chingadera* a franchise or something, *tu sabes*. Until then we'll continue to leave the past buried under harsh soil and try to grow a bright future together, *hijo y padre*.



# Truth like a Bullet

Yia Lee

**Second Prize, Fiction**

I met her when I was six. I was playing with my Barbies inside my house when the doorbell rang. I opened the front door and looked up.

Despair. She smelled of despair, wild and cold like the rain that had until recently been pouring nonstop. Her face was pinched like someone had drowned her pet bunny right in front of her. She had brown hair, tangled into hopeless knots like the string on my yo yo. And her eyes were dark, like mine, but full of things I did not understand. She frightened me. I wished I had not opened the door for her.

“Susie, who is it? How many times do I have to tell you to look before you open the front door—” my mother appeared behind me and her eyes took in the woman before us. She sucked in her breath. She shivered. “Chloe?” she whispered.

“Stacy.” The woman said my mother’s name softly, her voice as delicate and hesitant as a fledgling sparrow on its first flight. She sounded so sad. I had never seen anyone so wet and cold and miserable before.

“Mommy, who’s that?” I asked, but my mother did not seem to notice me. She stared at the woman and the woman stared back. “Maybe she could use some hot chocolate,” I observed, noting the way the woman was shivering and standing in a puddle of water dripping from her skirt. My mother would kill me for getting so wet.

My mother laughed gently and took my hand. “Susie, sweet, the rain has stopped. Look, it’s nice and lovely outside. Why don’t you go out and play?”

I pulled on my coat and rain boots, reluctantly. Curiosity about the woman was making me itch. Why was she so miserable? Why was she outside in the rain? Didn’t she have a coat, she was shivering so much!

The woman smiled down at me, but it was a strange smile. It looked almost painful. “My, what an obedient child,” she said, the softness of the sparrow gone from her voice. “Is this little Susana? What a sweet child.” She had a crow in her throat, her voice mocking and sour.

My mother put her hand on my head, as if to claim me. Or protect me. “Susie is six years old. It’s been three years since you saw her last. I don’t think she remembers you, Chloe.”

“Oh, but I’ve never forgotten her,” said Chloe.

“That’s enough,” my mother said, the smallest hint of sharpness in her voice. I looked at her curiously. She smiled for me and gently wrapped my Hello Kitty scarf around my neck. “Ask Davy if he can come out and play. Have fun.” She nudged me out the door. I dodged past the woman, hopped down the porch steps, and looked back.

But my mother had already invited the woman in and the door was shutting. The last thing I saw of them was Chloe, her arms pulling off a soggy sweater, and the expression on my mother’s face: helpless, tired, just as sad as Chloe’s.

In the way of children, I was able to forget about the strange woman for a while. I played basketball with my friend Davy. He was a competitive little brat, but I could be a meaner and more competitive brat. I emerged from the game triumphant, wet, gloriously *number one*. Davy scowled at me, angry. He couldn’t bear losing to a girl. I grinned and decided to be nice. “We can have a rematch tomorrow,” I suggested. He nodded, still angry, but accepting a chance to redeem himself.

Davy marched home, and I walked slowly back to my little house. The sidewalk was slick with water and the puddles were like big, smooth mirrors. I could see trees, clouds, and the whole vast blue sky captured in wet fragments on the ground. I wondered briefly, idly, if puddles were really a gateway into another world. Maybe, if you could fall into one in just the right way, you could go somewhere else. It would be like this world, but there would be different things, too, like dragons, fairies, and my father would not have gotten sick and died, my father would be alive to make my mother happy. My brother Samuel, who died when I was too little to remember, would be alive, also. Maybe they would be king and queen and prince and I could be a princess... maybe, maybe, if only I knew how to release the magic...

I walked absently to the front of my house and I stopped. My puddle-dreams slipped away from me and even the victory against Davy, so wonderful and soaring before, was spiraling away like smoke. I remembered my mother’s face when she had invited Chloe in: the dark, pained expression frightened me. It was how she had looked like when my father had died last year. When she first told me he had passed away, I didn’t understand. But I took one look into her face and I knew it was bad. I tried to figure out who had died now, but I couldn’t think of anyone.

The front door opened, making me jump. My mother looked my way and smiled her smile—the warm, gentle one that could stop my tears no matter what. Then she frowned.

“Susana Kerry Lee!” my mother said sternly. “You’re muddy all over!”

I looked at her, confused. When she spoke my full name, I was in trouble. But then, it was as if she were trying to act normal—there was nothing of the dark expression I saw earlier.

“Come here,” my mother demanded, still more sternly, and I walked up to the front porch.

We went through our usual routine: stomp on the door mat, don’t track mud all over the floor, take off your coat if it’s dripping everywhere, do you want some hot cocoa? It was like any other day, but I couldn’t forget the strange visitor.

“Mommy, who was the lady that came earlier?” I finally asked, dried and cozy in the kitchen.

“Her name is Chloe,” said my mother. She handed me a mug of steaming hot chocolate.

“I’ve never seen her before,” I said, stirring my drink.

“Yes, you have. But you were very small,” said my mother. “Did you have fun today?”

Distracted, I went over the game with Davy, relishing again my victory. My mother smiled and told me good job. “Change your clothes for dinner,” she added at the end of her praise.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they’re dirty,” she replied. “And because Chloe is staying for dinner.”

“She’s still here?” I said in surprise. I thought she’d gone, and that was why my mother was happy again.

“She’s in the guest bedroom, sleeping for a bit,” said my mother. “She’s very tired, so you be quiet and change your clothes.”

Obediently, I tiptoed my way to my bedroom. I loved my bedroom: my mother had let me cover it with posters of dragons, elves, and fairies. They decorated my wall in a dizzying array of colors and shapes. I always fell asleep surrounded by magic, dreaming about fairies. Fairies were my favorite: they kept you safe and lucky. I had more fairy posters in my room than anything.

When I opened the door, I stopped in surprised. There was someone else in my room, her back turned to me, studying a crimson fire-fairy on my wall. What was she doing in my room?

She turned around and we stared at each other. Obviously, Chloe had cleaned up some since I first saw her. She smelled like my mother's shampoo: sweet and floral, mixed with a spicy tang. On my mother, it smelled fresh and lovely. On Chloe, it smelled... ethereal. That was because underneath the grime she had on earlier, Chloe was truly beautiful. Her hair was drying in soft curls that dripped to her waist, her skin was pale like ivory. But it was her eyes that commanded attention: they were big and bright in her face, colored dark like coffee. They were also intense, full of things I couldn't read. It was like staring into a magic rain puddle: beautiful, but you couldn't get in no matter how hard you tried. She enchanted me... and she still scared me.

I belatedly realized, as we stared at each other, that there was a clogged, thick silence. Chloe had been humming something soft and lilting, but had stopped when she saw me. Now I cleared my throat awkwardly.

"Hi," I piped, trying to chase away the stifling quiet. "Did you like the fairy?" I gestured towards the bright red fairy she had been looking at.

"I don't know," she replied, her voice quiet and melodic. "Fairies aren't real, are they?"

"No..." I said reluctantly, surprised by her answer. Most people would have said *yes, I love your fairy*. "They *could* be real, though. In some other world. Or you can dream about them, in your sleep."

She smiled, just a little smile that did not quite reach her brilliant, rain puddle eyes. "That's not what you're supposed to say," she said in a mock-stern voice. "You're supposed to say: yes, I *do* believe in fairies in this world. Otherwise, you won't be able to save a fairy from death."

My mouth fell open. "Fairies don't die!"

"If you say you believe in fairies, then they will never die," Chloe said calmly.

"Uh-uh," I disagreed. "They can't die, ever."

"Your mother never read you *Peter Pan*?" Chloe asked.

"No," I answered. I knew what she was talking about. I had read myself *Peter Pan*. I hadn't liked it very much.

"Well, *Peter Pan* isn't the best, anyway," Chloe murmured thoughtfully. "A much better book for you is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Or *Harry Potter*. I love *Harry Potter*. Or *Lord of the Flies*."

"I've never heard of the last one," I said. "Well, I've heard of *The Lord of the Rings*."

"Mmm," she said. There was real amusement in her voice now and

her coffee eyes sparkled faintly. “Not quite the same thing.”

“My mother says I should change for dinner,” I said, remembering why I had come to my room.

Chloe nodded. “You have a very nice room,” she said, but her voice sounded mechanical.

“Thank you,” I replied politely. I waited, but she did not leave, so I grabbed a sweater from my closet and put that on.

“Are you a friend of my mother’s?” I asked curiously, turning around to look at her again. She was so beautiful, she could have easily been one of the fairies on my wall come to life.

She smiled, a little oddly. It somehow wasn’t a very nice smile; it looked like the first smile that she had given me, strange and pained. “I used to be your sister,” she said.

I stared at her. “I don’t have a sister. I used to have a brother, though. He died when I was little. And a Dad. He died, too.”

Chloe nodded, but she didn’t say “I’m sorry” as other people did when they heard about my family history. “Your sister-in-law,” she said. “I used to be your sister-in-law.”

I stared at her some more. “Really? Mommy never told me about any kind of sisters that I had.”

Chloe smiled very faintly, without any humor, and said, “Well, I wasn’t your sister for very long. Your brother Samuel died very shortly after I married him.”

“Oh... so you were married to Samuel?” I absorbed this piece of information with interest.

“Yes, I told you I was your sister-in-law. Are you—” We both could hear the word *stupid* hanging in the air, but she changed what she was saying—“well, that’s what it means, sister-in-law. I married your brother. You understand now?”

I nodded, but I was stung. The word *stupid* still pulsed in the air in front of me, unspoken but vibrantly bruising. Her tone of voice, too, I did not like.

She seemed to realize that she had offended me. “Look, Susie, I used to be your sister, so I was wondering just how you and your mother were doing. Let’s make this a nice visit, ok?”

She said this all in a cheery, fake voice. I didn’t believe her weak attempt at warmth for a second. But I was far, far too curious to foster hurt pride.

“So you were married to my brother?” I said. “What was he like?”

My mother never talks about him. It's just always me and my mom in this family—we don't even talk about Daddy. My mommy misses him a lot. She's always sad. And lonely. I'm her only family." I was telling Chloe something I had never, ever told anyone else. "I don't even miss Daddy as much as she does, because I really don't remember him. But Mommy gets really quiet sometimes and then I know she's thinking about them. Daddy and Samuel. I think about them, too. But I really never know what they were like. Especially Samuel. What was he like? I've always wanted to meet him. But—"

I stopped and watched a strange, curious transformation take over Chloe's lovely face. She paled and her eyes, her beautiful eyes, *burned*. They were mirror-like, but now they shattered. They glittered and shards of liquid glass fell out. She was crying. Her eyes were more luminous than ever. And I looked into a vast, vast space of coffee-colored grief and anger and—things I did not understand. Her eyes held so much right then that I was shocked.

"Chloe?" I said, stunned. "I'm—I'm sorry." I was getting more and more alarmed. "Please don't cry," I begged. "Please, I'm really sorry..." I reached over to touch her arm, but she pushed me so hard I stumbled.

"Get away!" It was as if her voice had broken, too, because she sounded like a hoarse crow.

I regained my balance, more stunned than ever. I had never made anyone cry before. No one had ever shoved me away before like that. And I had never seen anyone so upset before—even my mother, my mother with her quiet, soft sadness tucked deep inside her—even Mommy did not have half of the terrible things behind Chloe's eyes. I remembered to be frightened of her all over again.

"Chloe?" I said her name tentatively. When she turned her eyes on me again, it was as if she was cutting into me with her gaze. She had stopped crying, but her eyes were still full of shards and fire. "I don't ever," she said, "*ever* want you to talk about my Samuel." Her voice scared me too: somehow soft and harsh both at once, sparrow and crow mingling into an awful sound.

I inhaled sharply. I nodded. I felt awful for making Chloe cry. I knew, from my own mother, that some people did not like talking about what made them sad. Chloe, without a doubt, counted as one of these people.

But Chloe was slowly returning to normal. She wiped at her eyes one last time and when she looked up again they were placid and com-

posed, like a cold cup of coffee.

“Are you dressed?” she said, as if she had not been upset at all.

I nodded. She smiled her fake smile again—I wish she’d stop pretending to smile if she didn’t even mean it—and said, “Let’s go to dinner. Your mother must have it ready by now.”

My mother looked up when we came to the dining room. The table was already set with a steaming load of spaghetti. She smiled quickly and said, “Chloe, thank you for staying for dinner.”

“Oh, no, thank you for inviting me,” Chloe said politely, smiling as we sat down at the table. It was a small round table and I had an easy view of both Mommy and Chloe.

“I thought you were asleep and I was about to wake you up,” my mother said. “Did Susie wake you?”

“No, no, I couldn’t sleep much after all. Susie is a very charming child, Stacy. She tells the most amusing stories about fairies.”

“Susie loves anything fantasy,” my mother said. “But what about you, Chloe? How do you like freelance photography?”

“It’s very interesting. I’m lucky to turn my hobby into a job.” Chloe’s large eyes flickered my way. “Imagine, if Susie could turn her hobby into a job. She could be a fairy expert. It would be very enchanting.”

“Yes,” my mother said. She looked my way, too, and turned back to Chloe. “Where else have you traveled for your job? It must be fun.”

Chloe took a sip of water. “I’ve done two cross country trips before. It was very nice.” She paused. “But, Susie says fairies live in another world. Imagine how that would be, traveling to another world entirely. It would be so *lovely*.”

My mother stared at Chloe and I did too. I had never heard anyone sound so sarcastic and condescending before.

“Samuel had a creative imagination too,” Chloe said his name like she had eaten honey. “Samuel was so smart. And funny...” her voice faded quietly.

“But clearly,” Chloe continued suddenly, her voice getting harsh and soft at the same time, “Little Susie is living in her own deluded dream world, and you are doing her no favors by supporting that, Stacy.”

“Excuse me—” my mother said, but Chloe spoke over her.

“When Samuel died—” Chloe paused and closed her brilliant eyes. My mother winced.

“Chloe, let’s not talk about unpleasant things,” Mommy said. “It’s

all in the past now and—”

“Don’t tell me you’re willing to be trapped in denial about everything, too, Stacy. You’re just as bad as Susie, living in your own reality.” Chloe opened her eyes and they were lit up like embers. “I want to talk about Samuel. I *have* to talk about Samuel,” she said, a plaintive tone in her voice.

“Alright,” said my mother softly. “Alright. After dinner. We can talk about Samuel later.”

“No, I want to talk about him *now*,” Chloe said. She looked at my mother fiercely.

But my mother looked at me, and my mother looked angry. I was astonished. What had I done? But she wasn’t angry at me. She was angry at Chloe.

“No,” she said firmly. “No, I will not allow you to talk about Samuel at this table.”

“But Susie wants to hear about Samuel, too. She asked me, earlier, to tell me all about him. And so I will. And a little bit about her father, too. She barely remembers him.”

“Chloe—”

“*Samuel was my life*,” said Chloe passionately. One statement, four words, and her voice held my mother and me spell bound. My mother’s protests died away, like Chloe’s voice had devoured them. She was so filled with pain and love that it was fascinating and frightening.

“I loved Samuel from the very moment we met. It was at a party. My car had a flat and he changed the tire for me. Not very romantic, but what I loved most about him was the way he laughed. He had a bright, wonderful laugh. He always made me laugh and smile.” Chloe’s melodic voice was low and sad. “I loved every little bits and pieces about him. He had lousy handwriting, but he always signed his name with a beautiful giant ‘s’. He would play the piano and sing for me, and then we’d talk for hours about music. He was so smart. So funny. He was the only person, ever, to love me the way he did.” Chloe took a deep breath and plunged on. “You know my parents never gave a damn for me when I was young? My older siblings ran away from home as soon as they could. I did, too. But I was so sad and lonely it nearly broke my heart. Samuel saved me. He was the best damn thing that ever happened to me.” Chloe glared at me and my mother.

“When he introduced me to his family, I honestly really did love all of you. His mother, father, and adorable little baby sister. I thought my



happiness would last forever..." Chloe's eyes fumed brighter than ever. "It nearly killed me when he died."

"I suppose you could say that it was an accident, like the official story. His father was a rookie cop. He was tired one day and irresponsibly left his gun lying around. The little baby daughter picked it up and shot a bullet through her brother's brain. A tragic accident."

I stopped breathing. What had she said? What had she said?

My mother stood up, abruptly like she had been jolted. "Chloe!" she screamed.

"What, Stacy? That's the truth, isn't it? That your little sweet Susie is a killer! She killed my Sam!"

"Chloe, get out of my house," said my mother furiously, coldly.

Chloe turned to me, a blind, bizarre fury all over her lovely face. She was crying again, her magnificent eyes leaking rage. I could not see why I had ever thought her beautiful, because her face was screwed in such pain and madness. "I hate you," she spat. "I hate you, and your father, and Stacy, and God! He was never kind to me, everything good I had He took away... Oh, Susie, why did you kill Samuel?"

Her eyes paralyzed me with so much accusation and contempt I couldn't breathe. But it was her words that scorched my mind: *the little baby daughter picked it up and shot a bullet through her brother's brain...* I looked at my mother, and I knew it was true. The knowledge hit me like someone had shot a bullet at through me. On my mother's face, the calm mask she usually wore was completely pulverized by Chloe. She looked so pained and furious I almost didn't recognize her.

"Chloe! You don't tell that to little kids! She's only six!" My mother was crying.

"I will tell the goddamn truth whenever I want!" Chloe shrieked back. "You don't know, Stacy, you don't *know* how much I have been suffering! I lost *everything*! It isn't fair, it isn't fair... I'm telling Susie this because I think she deserves it. She deserves to suffer, too."

"Get out of my house!" screamed my mother again. "Or I will call the cops—or I'll shoot you dead myself!"

I began crying, wildly. I was confused and the way my mother was screaming at Chloe was scaring me. And Chloe's words... I cried harder.

Chloe threw me a dark, bitter look. Her eyes were triumphant and fiery and again I could see everything: she had a storm of pain inside her that was monstrous, ugly. But she left. She left and after my mother closed the door on her she leaned on it, sobbing.

I sat at the table, stunned. I couldn't even see anything, my tears were blinding me. My mother came to me. "I'm sorry, Susie. I'm sorry." She held me tightly.

I took a bath while my mother cleared up dinner. The water gushed out, hot and clean. Steaming. It was relaxing and I wanted to forget everything in the white steam. Forget everything, but I couldn't. Then I prayed, I prayed hard for my soul. How could you wash away murder? I thought about Chloe, who was so desperate and mad, because I killed Samuel. My mother was sad, too, because her son was dead and it was my fault. My fault. Samuel, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, God. Everything was so horrible at the moment I cried again. There was nothing else to do anyway. I was in the bathtub, but it felt like I could never get clean again.

Anyway, what do you do when you are six and a grief-stricken woman tells you that you killed your own brother? That you were responsible for ruining the happiness of her life? That the reason your mother is sad is because of you? All I knew to do was cry.

That was many years ago. I'm older now—I'm almost thirteen. But I was so shaken up by the revelation—I think the only thing that kept me safe was my mother's love. I even lost faith in my fairies, but my mother always told me she loved me no matter what. We still live in our small family, just us two. To be honest, sometimes I still feel like a monster—what Chloe intended, no doubt. I don't know what became of her. But I think that she didn't deserve to have that triumph in her eyes, that night she left us. She didn't realize that my mother would always love me—that I could forgive myself, mostly, because of Mom. So when I'm feeling bad, I listen to her voice, telling me about her day, about grocery shopping, about traffic in downtown—just ordinary, mundane things—but her voice makes me feel better, always.

# The Legend of Matricidal Milly

Hector Elizondo

**Third Prize, Fiction**

The wind blew gently as Cesar Chavez Elementary was now barren of the sounds of children playing and chain link swings clinking in the playground. Robert and Jimmy decided to sit at the bleachers that sat in front of the track. They climbed up the small rack of benches and perched themselves on the highest level. Their dark skin soaked up the warm sunlight and the breeze weaved its way through their bulky limbs, tickling their light coat of arm hair.

"I love this time of day for some reason," Jimmy said.

"I know what you mean. It seems like we're looking down on creation, like that one song," Robert said.

Jimmy laughed. He had no idea what Robert was talking about, but played along.

"It's not the highest point in the valley, but it'll do," Jimmy said.

They looked out over the track to see soccer players putting up goal nets and fitness freaks walk along the edge holding water bottles and wearing odd colored sneakers.

"I thought you liked English?" Robert asked.

"I do." Jimmy answered.

"Then why were you falling asleep at your desk today?"

"I've had a hard time sleeping lately," Jimmy said, wiping his face and squinting towards the track.

"Is Milly getting the best of you?"

"Milly? This time I can't pretend to know what you're talking about," Jimmy said with a smile. "So who is Milly? That lady with the salon on Main Street?"

"No."

"The Asian lady that always thinks we're stealing at the liquor store?"

"Oh my God! You never heard of Mattress Milly?" Robert exclaimed.

"You mean she's a hooker?" Jimmy asked.

"No. It's what they call someone who kills their mom."

"Oh. You mean matricidal, don't you?"

"Anyway. You never heard the story of Milly?" Robert asked.

"No. Are you gonna give?"

"Sure, I can tell you all about Matrix Milly."

Jimmy shook his head and waited for Robert to babble on about some story that supposedly happened way back when, to someone his grandfather used to pick oranges with.

"Well, I'm waiting." Jimmy said.

"Hold on, I'm looking for something." He was really trying to remember the story before he began to tell it, so he scanned his eyes over the foothills.

"Have you found it?"

"Yea, I'm good to go." Robert said. "You know where Tito lives, not far from where the Little Creak Apartments are now? Well, way back when all that used to be country. Not like country like Tim McGraw country, but country..."

"I know what kind of country you mean, *chingado*."

The house was newly built with strong wood and nifty craftsmanship. It was half an acre around to the nearest property line. Cactus and wild grass and dirt paths led from the doorway to the road and to the outhouse back to the doorway.

Maria Consuelo Diaz and her husband of five years Joaquin, celebrated the day when Joaquin finally finished the house he promised his bride. They killed a large cow and invited the nearest neighbors and family to come and help cook it. The rifle echoed through the countryside as the cow thudded to the ground.

They laid it out on a large slice of leftover plywood and skinned it and gutted the smelly animal. The younger of the men washed and cleaned the hide to lay out in the sun for a few belts or a pair of boots that would be sold at the flea market for a nice price. Matilda Diaz, the young daughter of Joaquin and Maria Consuelo, looked on as her father cut chunks and chunks of meat and piled them on a separate slice of wood.

There was blood on the men's faces, down their work shirts and splattered all over their legs as they stood ankle deep in thick red liquid. A few of the men started to dig not far from where the now unrecognizable cow was being torn apart into an pile of crimson rocks

stacked one on top of the other.

Matilda was scooted aside as men started to come through each with a shovel in their hand. They spoke Spanish quickly and gestured with their rough work hands signaling for help and working together towards the feast. Matilda watched the men dig as she heard the women and young daughters of the neighbors talking in the kitchen.

Their voices were sharp and echoed through the window. Dishes chimed together along with the pots and pans, making a tune of slight chaos. The women spoke of past slaughters and how hard it was to wash the men's blood-soaked clothes after such an event. One had to be patient when washing bloodstains out of the laundry.

Joaquin stood leaning on a two by four for support. There wasn't a clean part of his shirt left for him to wipe the blood away from his face. He looked over and the men dug deep, creating a pile of dirt just outside the hole. The men remembered the joke about the man who dug himself to the other side of the world.

The women came out of the house carrying brown burlap potato sacks. Maria Consuelo brought Joaquin a rag and started to wipe his face. When his face was clear from blood and his sinuses had been hollowed out with a strong breath, he leaned forward and Maria Consuelo and Joaquin shared a kiss. Soft and slow he tasted her, and the blood that he had tasted all day made her lips taste like sugar-cane or a fresh tangerine, in comparison.

A fire was started in the pit dug a rectangular shape, about six feet deep. The women began washing the chunks of meat and tossed them into the burlap sacks. Left over entrails were tossed to the dogs that roamed the countryside and had befriended the families that lived nearby. The late afternoon sun shone down on the families as they continued to prepare the feast of the new house.

The men brought pruned trunks of grapevines and lemon trees to feed the fire. It was custom to wait until the fire had died down, after building it up so fiercely, before placing the meat to cook inside. The land around it would get hard as rock, making it reusable for the future. The bags of meat were slow cooked inside the pit all night until morning. A rotation of families went to wash up at their own house while others stayed and kept watchful eyes on the pit.

Dusk finally settled on the countryside and its inhabitants and now the only illumination came from the pit of glowing embers. Because the land had been soaked in water to make it easier for digging, it took

hours for the land containing the bonfire to harden to rock. At this stage of the fire, the edges were unsure and weak.

Joaquin and Maria Consuelo sat together around the pit with their friends and family speaking of the old days when California was Mexico and how difficult it would be in the future to come and go across the international line that sat on the Rio Grande. Children from several different families came and enjoyed the festive atmosphere. They chased dragonflies and lizards and scared each other in the dark while playing hide and go seek.

Little Luis Castillo had been of school age but didn't know it. The best days of his childhood could be traced to the fields where his dad had worked as a field hand pruning and picking the fruit trees of many of the major farmers in the California Valley.

He had tracked a lizard from every corner of Joaquin's property, around the house and behind the outhouse where adults drank and smoked and joked loudly about many things.

The lizard scurried quickly to a small pile of dirt just outside the fiery grave. Little Luis moved slowly and gently behind the lizard where he could not be seen, even by the rotational viewpoint of the reptile. The lizard stood still as it relaxed on the warm mound of earth. Little Luis moved slower and more gently, very low to the ground and just like lion cubs practicing the dreaded pounce of safaris in the African jungle, he leaped with a wail of Cuauhtémoc, himself. Little Luis slid down head first into the blazing yellow pit, in the wailings of murder and death, while his prey escaped with his life hurriedly running on four legs into a darkened wood pile.

Weeks went by as the weight of Little Luis' death weighed heavily on Joaquin and Maria Consuelo. Their marriage teetered on a fulcrum with Luis' death on one side and their family on the other. Maria Consuelo refused to cook and refused to eat, not being able to live with the public shame of the boy's death on their land. She blamed Joaquin for it all. It was *his* decision to build this house apart from the main town nearby, *his* idea to invite the neighbors for a feast, and *his* problem that Little Luis fell in the bar-b-que pit.

Hearing Maria Consuelo's wailings of regret of having Joaquin as a husband became too much for Matilda to endure. She joined Maria Consuelo's mania by sitting in the corner of the living room and brushing the hair of her little doll while staring into space. This worried her father, Joaquin, and so he decided the rantings of a mad

housewife would fall on deaf ears until he relieved his ailing daughter.

Joaquin bent down and caressed the cheek of his daughter one morning as the sun beamed its harshness through the window she was staring through. Her blank stare forced these gentle words from her father's lips.

*"Mi hija, ya se va a leviar. De Dios yo dice,"* he said.

He left the house and mounted a borrowed horse to undo the pain of the recent past. He rode in great anticipation, but he swore in his heart that he would return with a solution, even if it was on his deathbed.

He approached a cottage that was colored in mystery. Horseshoes decorated the top of the entrance to the small country shelter. Joaquin tied his horse to the worn down fence and walked slowly to the front. A wind chime made of dried bones hovered over the porch and dried palms twisted into the shape of crosses stood in the dry shrubs leading up to the door.

He knocked on the door and removed his cowboy hat and clutched it on his chest. The door creaked open to reveal a dirt floor and a woman around the age of forty, dressed in a homemade shall.

*"Puedo ayudar, señor Diaz?"* She answered.

He stood there shakily and answered her, "It does not surprise me that you knew I was coming, senora. Your good medicine has made your reputation great in this area." His voice was like a jack rabbit moving quickly from one side of the field to the other with little notice until it found its burrow that it has lived in for many years.

*"Come in, Señor Diaz and leave your strife at my door,"* she said gently.

She opened the door for him and he walked in honored that she would have him as a guest. He kept his eyes to the floor not to pursue his curiosities of his hostess, and walked into the next room where she led him by the arm. The table they sat at was big enough for two to comfortably have a meal. Her curtains were thin, which allowed the sunlight to cast long shadows within the small cottage.

Joaquin sat across from her silently admiring a colorful candle that was placed between them. She put her smooth hand on top of his and broke the silence in the troubled father.

*"That poor boy. I can't begin to imagine how his father feels at this moment,"* he began.

*"Luis is part of something greater now, Señor Diaz. He really is not the reason you have come all this way,"* she said.

*"My wife has been severely beaten down by this event spiritually."*

She won't cook, or eat. She is not the same woman."

"She is the same woman. She makes it harder on herself. It is not the owner's fault if lightning should strike a tree that lands on a workman's horse. Are you ready to tell me why you have come all this way?"

"Matilda."

"She has hid in a cave in her own heart that your wife has dug."

The woman looked upon him deeply with soothing eyes. This made Joaquin even more nervous as he picked and hunted for his words, careful not to upset the medicine woman.

"Can you make it better for her?" he asked.

"Do you mean for Matilda or your wife, Joaquin? What does your heart say?"

Joaquin searched his heart as his eyes moved from side to side as if he could visualize his feelings. He grasped the purpose that had brought him out to see the woman with much good sense and much better medicine. His heart gave him the courage to look upon the healer, beyond her own eyes and say, "My daughter."

The woman pulled a stone that stood on three tiny legs from her shelf that sat just behind her. The top was caved in like a bowl, and a mixture of herbs lay prepared inside of it. She got up and walked into her kitchen and poured in a small mason jar some orange juice. She placed the mason jar on the table and sprinkled much of the herbal mixture that sat in the stone bowl into the orange juice. She sealed the top with a rag and wrapped a string around the edge so the rag would not become displaced.

"Give this to your daughter and the void in her spirit will be filled," she said to Joaquin. "Make sure she drinks it all. The burden that has found a home in your daughter will try to discourage its expulsion. Be wary of loose stones on the road or ravines that appear to move. Buena Suerte, Senor Diaz." She said as she handed the mason jar into his shaky hands.

He squeezed the jar by the rag that draped over the opening. He placed his cowboy hat back on his head as beads of sweat ran down his temples into the dirty bandana that he had tied around his neck. She closed the door behind him as a solid breeze leaned the trees around the cottage in the opposite direction of his path. A high pitched whistle sounded in his ears from the country winds as he untied his horse from the tattered fence.

His horse huffed and snorted and backed away from Joaquin as he



tried to grip the reins to mount the beast. The trees leaned back into their natural pose and kept their shade in front of them. Joaquin was strong and an experienced horseman, and this enabled him to settle the animal down long enough to mount it. He rode slowly and did not press the animal as he did during his journey to the woman's cottage. He kept his eyes open for every detail but admired little of the wild country that he traveled through.

He wiped his eyebrows with his bandana, careful not to let his salty sweat seep in under his eyelids. Joaquin scanned the path before him twice over before he would allow the horse to cross into his field of vision. Suddenly the path back to his own land became a landmine of natural looking snares like rabbit burrows and snakes that can sometimes scare large beasts like horses. He felt the spirits of the trail he traveled through, but could not discern their alliance to his purpose or something more sinister.

The afternoon went by despite the restless state of Joaquin's heart. He thought of the woman's words as the sun leaned in the sky low enough for its harsh light to reach in under the brim of his hat. *Burden. Expulsion. Ravines. Move.*

He finally saw the path that would take him where his daughter wearily trembled at her mother's insane ramblings. Joaquin led the horse up to his front door and paused. He looked down at the mason jar and realized the rag the medicine woman had placed on it was barely moist from the tonic that shifted inside. He dismounted the horse and let it wander about in front of the house.

He opened the door and had to stand still in the walkway to let his eyes adjust to the darkness inside. Images became clearer as silhouettes became faces. He saw Matilda now, right where she had been when he left. Her hair was uncombed and her lips were dry from the dust and valley heat. He broke the string on the orange juice with his two fingers and put the mason jar to his daughter's lips.

"*Toma, hija,*" he said as she gazed at him with dirty wide eyes.

Her mouth was reluctant until the sweet nectar soothed onto her tongue. Joaquin pulled the jar from her mouth and held it in front of her. Then very naturally her hands dropped from the doll she had been holding onto and began choking the glass jar that she herself brought to her lips.

The child drank until the jar was empty. Joaquin lifted Matilda up into his arms and brought her into the front room where he prepared

her a place to rest. He made a nest of clean blankets and pillows for her to lie on. He lastly placed her doll between her arms and the child closed her eyes and fell asleep soundly.

Joaquin decided to spend the evening outside on his property maybe to kill a rabbit or two for a fresh breakfast with his daughter in the morning. The night came and went eventless as if time had stopped. He had camped between the trees admiring all the beauties of the night that many people do not get to see because they are asleep. He saw stars burn and fall and watched the moon direct the night winds from the east to the west.

The quicker the rabbit, the tougher the texture of the meat, but Joaquin was aware that there would be many days left to enjoy perfect meals in the future, now that his daughter would be well by the time he returns to the house.

Maria Consuelo had shut herself in her room the entire night, praying to the gods above for the release of her soul from the marriage she agreed to in haste. She tried to bargain with the powers that stood in heaven that if they just erased her commitment with Joaquin, she would send Matilda as an angel. She promised to see her next marriage through to the end with a man of their choosing. She clenched her eyes tight and clasped her fingers together making her knuckles sore by morning.

The sun was now well in the morning sky and Joaquin decided to head to the house figuring to see his daughter well enough so he could show her how to clean and gut the prey he had caught when the moon reigned in the sky. He dropped the corpses by the door and called for his precious Matilda from the back door.

“*Donde esta mi angel, Matilda?*” He called, excited to see his daughter’s smile.

There was no answer, the house lay quiet and still, not even a stirring of Maria Consuelo from the bedroom. Joaquin entered the house curiously and slowly, walking into the front room where he had last seen his sleeping daughter. There was Matilda in the same position as her father had left her with her doll nestled between her arms.

Joaquin quickly approached her and shook her gently at first.

“Matilda, wake up,” he said.

He shook her more roughly a second time and grabbed her shoulders and her thighs, but she did not open her eyes. His heart sank in grief as he rubbed his rough hands over the small girl’s face, begging

her to rise. Joaquin's eyes were wide as he called for his daughter's living breath.

*"Que hice! Que hice!"* He called out to the sky as he broke through the back door of the house he had made by his own skill.

Joaquin fell to his knees and covered his dark featured face with his hands. He brought his face to the earth and pulled at his hair on the top of his head. His guts wrenched inside of him as if someone was tugging at them through a hole in his back. His tears fell directly onto the dirt because his face was buried on the top soil of his land. Joaquin breathed in dirt through his mouth and felt it become mud on his tongue and between his cheeks. He thought he should deserve to die here in the heat of the morning with nothing to drink but his own dirt.

His gasping stopped and he became silent. He raised his forehead and wiped his mouth on the long sleeves of his shirt. He stood just behind his house but could not bare to look upon the beauty of the sky where the sun was allowed to perch itself. He entered his house once more for the last time.

He opened a bottom cabinet where a wooden box lay hidden amongst other debris. Joaquin grabbed the dusty wooden box by one hand and brought it with him to the kitchen table. He flipped open the lockless latch and inside was a .38 six shooter. There was a giggle from the madness of his heart as he reached for the weapon and pointed it at his temple. He was not worthy of being the father of Matilda and knew the fates had now come calling to avenge her blood.

He did not shut his eyes but kept them wide open, for he could not spare himself the vision of his own death. Joaquin looked upon the wash basin that was filled with dirty dishes and the small swarm of flies that circled it making a halo. He pulled the trigger fiercely. The exit wound on the left side of his head left a small cavern in his skull. Joaquin's eyes rolled up quickly in his head, exposing the bloodshot whites of his eyeballs.

The power of the .38 was not enough to knock Joaquin off his chair. His corpse sat there with his head slouched over and the gun still locked in his palm, depressed and heartbroken from a wife he could not satisfy and a daughter he could not save.

The blast from Joaquin's gun had stirred the stillness of the house. The floorboards began to moan and creek from both the front of the house and the back bedroom where Maria Consuelo had been praying. Her door opened and the manic housewife ran down the hall into the

main room and saw Matilda stirring from her sleep. She peered into the kitchen and saw her husband dead from his fatal kiss with a bullet.

Maria Consuelo stood with her body and clothes stale from consecutive days locked away from the world. She stood in shock and remembered her words to the gods and wondered what she had done. Now the grief she felt in her soul was her punishment for her hasty and harsh prayers to the heavens. She yelled in agony and moved forward to hold Joaquin's head to her breast. Tears squeezed from her eyelids as her mournful wailing fell on the floorboards of the house that her husband had labored to make for her.

The tonic that Matilda had drank was to cleanse her soul and make it whole again. This required that the child be brought to an unconscious limbo to spare her the agony of healing. The healing powers of the medicine woman revived the young girl without harm. All that welcomed Matilda now was the lifeless body of her father and the wailing of her grieving mother.

The return from limbo had left Matilda exceptionally aware of all that surrounded her. She felt lighter in her body as if her journey had somehow affected her physical fitness. As she saw her parents, a perverse painting of love, her chest began to huff and puff, and anger crawled in and took control of the child's new found strength.

Matilda bolted out of the back door, leaving the widow a grieving shell of tears and blood. She found a rope that had hung on a steel rod outside the house. The rope was strong and weaved by skilled hands. Its length was about twice that of Matilda. Her eyes blared with fury as she tied an adjustable noose from her dad's rope. Her steps were heavy and little puffs of dirt rose from her feet with every step.

She entered the house with authority and nothing would challenge her rights. She stepped behind her mother who was still in disbelief and heartache, and roped the heart of the noose around her head. Matilda yanked back the hand that held the other end of the rope. Maria Consuelo pulled at her neck as she fell to the kitchen floor. Matilda stepped firmly at the base of her mother's neck and raised her hand to the sky as if in victory, making the noose even tighter on her mother's windpipe.

Matilda ran through the back door to the back of the property as quickly as she could, holding tightly to the rope that was attached to Maria Consuelo's neck. Her mother was dragged a long way to the nearest tree. Maria Consuelo saw from the corner of her eye how Mat-

ilda scaled the large tree quickly and hopped over a strong branch that pulled her mother right up into the sky.

Matilda stood there holding the rope while her mother grasped at her neck and tried to pull on the rope she hung from, attempting to give herself some slack. The strength of Matilda was much too powerful for her mother to overcome. Maria Consuelo could not keep her fingers inside the rope that was around her neck. In seconds she lost the battle with gravity and faded away.

Matilda tied the remaining length of the rope around the tree and knotted the end of it in a workman's knot. Maria Consuelo began to stop writhing slowly in the air until finally the only movement her body made was the slow swaying that was caused by her weight at the end of a tightrope. The daughter of the slain woman stood there in the dirt under the sun. She bent down and lifted a rock semi-embedded in the hardened ground the size of a baseball. She pitched it back and threw the rock at her mother's now lifeless body.

Matilda walked a little lighter on the ground, but steadily made her way back to the house. She walked over to her father and touched the side of his head with the exit wound. Though Matilda had committed a heinous crime against the heavens and knew her spirit was no longer innocent and never would be again, she wanted to pretend that one more time she could sit in her father's lap and be his world.

She climbed in his lap and pulled his stiff arm over her shoulder and leaned in his chest as she breathed in deeply.

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"That didn't really happen," Jimmy said.

"It did. Swear," Robert responded.

"So what, she haunts people because her mom's a total psycho?" Jimmy asked.

"Well, the legend goes is that now she carries children to limbo while they sleep and..." Robert paused, afraid to say the rest.

"and?" Jimmy said.

"She doesn't bring them back, Jimmy," Robert said somberly.

"The call it crib death, Robert."

"Gringos need to call it something."

"I'm way too old to have crib death happen to me anyway," Jimmy said proudly.

The boys started to walk home in the late afternoon and passed houses with *BEWARE OF DOG* signs and wind chimes that hung in kitchen windows. The story stirred in both boys, and they both tried to push off the impending nightfall. Robert and Jimmy shook hands at their departure and agreed to see each other the next morning if Milly didn't decide to sweep one of them, or both of them off to limbo.

Jimmy had eaten a late supper and now changed into his house clothes for bed. He left his window open just to prove to himself that he wasn't going to let Robert's story affect him. He lay in bed on his side facing the wall. He thought about the homework he didn't do and the chores he forgot to do.

He teetered between the dream world and the waking world as he started to feel the pull of a presence behind him. He was paralyzed as he heard the sound of breathing and felt the movement of an arm closing in on his shoulders. He opened his eyes wide, then turned to face the window quickly to catch the intruder. A breeze swooshed the curtains outward as Jimmy turned around, but he couldn't see any signs of entry. He uncovered himself and walked over to the window. He scanned the yard from left to right quickly with his eyes and closed it shut. He jumped back into bed and covered his head with the heavy comforter.

# The Household

Raven Sims

## Honorable Mention

In a neighborhood, there was a two story house on a corner by a fire hydrant where the sun burned areas of grass on the yard. Compared to the other houses, this house stood out just a bit to look unnatural. The house had an old crusty feel to it, and it looked as though it was trying to fight time like an aging woman. This house was the loudest house on the block, and inside this house there was a large family of seven women.

Enerria was one of the seven females in the household, and she was the complete opposite from them in every way. She felt that her mind was uncontrollable and too complex for any average human to sustain. Enerria lived with her grandmother, her aunt and her aunt's four daughters.

Enerria looked like she was the most intimidating person in the house; she was the tallest and strongest. She was overweight and carried the same burden of being obese as most of members of the household. Enerria loved to pet her older cousin's dog Lulu, a small Terrier mix.

Recently one of Enerria's cousins moved out, which made everyone thrilled that there was one less female in the house. "Lulu" Enerria looked down at the dog and smiled, "This is the home of the Amazon where everything and everyone is a female; even all the animals here are females. I bet even the furniture in the house are female." Enerria chuckled to herself.

While lying on her bed petting Lulu, Enerria looked around at the cluttered wall full of caution tape that she had found or taken around her town and pinned up vertically like the bars in prison to cover up the disgusting barf looking pink paint on the walls.

The bedroom had two windows with a black thin curtain that you could see through to the patio on one side and the backyard through the other. A large star shaped piñata hung in the corner by a small hook on the ceiling of her room next to her closet. Nets that she had collected from every Christmas tree they had are hung over her bed holding up a year of balloons that expressed every holiday. The wooden floor was hidden by a mask of shoes, clothes, and paper from school. On the front of the door Enerria had posted a sign that said 'I don't

drink, I don't smoke; I wasted my life on education.' Because her family felt reassured that she chose to not drink and smoke, they didn't bother her as much.

"Enerria! Enerria! Come here now!" the thunderous voice continued and grew from the hallways reaching and pulling its way toward the door, squeezing and leaking through the tight spaces to lunge and grab a hold at who ever it was searching for.

"Huh? What do you want, Boniest?" Enerria mumbled deeply in annoyance as she left her room to seek out whoever had called her.

"Oh, I just wanted to let you know that you are watching us," Boniest smiled, agitating Enerria with the thought of babysitting her nine year old twin cousins against her will.

"Why am I watching you? Where is everybody going? How come they assume that I don't have any plans of my own? Why doesn't anybody ask me anything? They can't just make decisions and expecting me to follow them!" Enerria roared.

"Well you're watching us because the old folks are going out to bingo because it's Friday, and Tammy is leaving with her friends—*again*—so you have to watch us while everyone leaves." Boniest said, standing her ground with her hand on her hip and an attitude in her eyes.

Landing over on the arm of the couch to a glaring contest at the front door, Enerria watched how everyone exited the house. Lulu came over and made herself a place to lie next to Enerria's feet on the floor. Two loud honking noises vibrated the house and a voice from outside yelled, "Tammy, we're outside." A steady pair of thumping feet rushed down the stairs. "Here comes Ms. Jolly", Enerria whispered to Lulu and stopped from glaring at the door to look at Tammy who reeked of a bushel of fun.

Tammy was five years older than Enerria. She was small with an athletic body that she earned from skating and being so energized with her friends. The more she left the house, the more everyone seemed to isolate her.

"I'm not going to get back till late so leave the front door unlocked for me. Ok?" Tammy smiled. "I'm going to the movies with my friends."

Enerria just sat in silence on the couch with a bitter look on her face. Her eyes started to pinch and tear through Tammy's mask and a more familiar face had appeared. Tammy's expression of joy started to shatter, releasing nothing but tension and anger.



“What did you expect me to do? Stay here with you? You allow yourself to get stepped on. You don’t speak up for yourself and everyone feels they can do whatever they want because it doesn’t take much to make you do something that you don’t want to do. A closed mouth never gets fed. Don’t get mad at me for having an escape plan.”

Enerria turned her head away from Tammy in disappointment.

“I’m sorry that you are left behind, but there is nothing I can do. I don’t think that the kids will be bad this time; they’re behaving well with each other now and grandma and my mom will be back soon.” Tammy smiled, relinquishing the tension that she had given off. “Don’t kill anybody; I don’t want to come home seeing any missing kids and a shovel in your hands.”

Enerria smiled slightly—DING! DONG! The doorbell rang so unexpectedly, giving Tammy and Enerria a small shock through their senses. Tammy opened the door and a tall pale man with banana-colored hair came through the door, lifting Tammy in the air swinging her around, bumping her against the furniture. “We’ve been waiting for you,” he exclaimed. Enerria frowned in the worst way, looking at this male in her presence. The unfamiliar face started to reform Tammy and she left the house looking easy going and full of energy.

12:45 in the morning and Enerria was sitting on the couch with Lulu looking over the living room waiting for her family to return. Lulu had been looking thinner each day from last month. The twins were passed out on the floor covered in glue, paper clips, and cereal; there were blankets, pillows, and shoes spread out on the floor. Watching her little cousins she saw the difference in them. You would never have known that they were twins, not unless someone told you; they were different by physical appearance and personality. Boniest was ill thin with a birth defect, extra layers of thick hardened skin that deformed her index finger from her right hand up to her underarm. Daria didn’t have a birth defect, but she was heavily obese.

The television was showing *Tom and Jerry* and all was pleasant. A car pulled up and yelling had ripped the silence that was held by the darkened skies. A car door slammed and harsh screaming was being thrown back and forth at each other. Tammy burst through the front door and right behind her was that same banana head man. He tried to grab at her, but missed.

“Get out of my damn house!” Tammy yelled. The kids were star-

tled. Enerria sat frozen on the couch. Lulu jumped off the couch barking and howling at the door.

“We’re not finished yet; you can’t end the night like this—let me in the house—let me in now!” The ripe harsh smell of liquor from the man had gotten through the door; he struggled and tried to wrestle himself in the house.

“Enerria! What are you doing? Help me! Call the cops! Do something!” Tammy struggled to catch her breath while trying to shut the door on the intruder.

Enerria’s heart was pounding and she was in total shock; she could hear the twins starting to whimper, but she just didn’t move.

Tammy was getting exhausted and could barely hold off the door any longer while Enerria sat there stiff and rigid. Lulu squeezed and snuck through Tammy’s legs and started attacking. Her canine teeth bit and tore and shredded the man’s pants, going through his flesh. The man yelled in anguish and retreated back to the car where his drunken friend was waiting. Lulu followed, claiming her territory. The dog ran back to the house, very proud, wagging her tail as she entered.

Neighbors were peeking through their windows, turning lights on, and watching the car exit from the neighborhood. The phone rang. Nobody moved. Enerria looked across the living room and saw Tammy furious like an uncontrollable flame that was spreading and burning everything it touched and any movement or word had been said would be enough fuel to keep the fire going for days. A lady on the answering machine started talking: Hello? This is Janise, I just want to make sure if everyone was alright? Is any aid or assistance needed? Because I can com—“No, we are alright Janis” Tammy answered the phone with a clam and steady voice. “Everything is being taken care of; we’re getting ready for bed now so good night, and I’m sorry for any inconveniences that I’ve brought to you. Uh huh. Alright. Okay. Good night now. We will. You too. Bye.” Tammy placed the phone back on the receiver and took a deep breathe.

Tammy turned and smiled at her little sister. “Are you guys okay?” Tammy said while taking another deep breath, “That gave us all a little scare.”

“Yeah we are ok,” Boniest said

“I’m sorry that happened, but Lulu came and saved us all,” Tammy bent over to rub Lulu’s head.

“Yeah, I love Lulu, and this is why we should have more animals

with teeth,” Daria laughed.

“What happened? Why did things get so crazy? You always leave the house happy, so what changed everything?” Boniest demanded, saying all the things Enerria was thinking. The tension in the house slowly started to fall back in place.

“Well, that crazy guy started drinking and got even more retarded and that’s why you should never drink because we don’t like people purposely making themselves stupid for their own satisfaction,” Tammy gave out a cheesy smile hoping that Boniest would take her reasoning.

“Oh yeah, he was definitely retarded,” Daria chuckled, creating a domino effect that had everyone laughing. “Did you see how he ran?” Daria continued.

“Well, he got bit in the leg; how else was he supposed to run?” Boniest added and burst out laughing.

“I hate males.” Enerria mumbled. Tammy slowly stopped laughing and stared at Enerria.

“Hey you guys, why don’t you two straighten up the room while I’ll talk to cousin Enerria for a moment. Ok?” The twins continued their conversation while they cleaned up the living room.

Tammy went inside Enerria's room to talk to her.

“Why didn’t you move when I really needed you? What if Lulu wasn’t here? I don’t want to think what would have happened. As big as you are, you can take down twenty men. What do you have to say?” Enerria just stood in silence. “No apology? Hmm? I don’t understand. Your room is an Alice in Wonder Land mess; you talk about death and how much you hate guys, but you had a chance to take out all your anger that you have for *males* and you blew it.”

“There is a reason why I hate guys,” Enerria said slowly.

“Well, what is it? You’re not the only one with issues. Everyone in this house has something wrong, but you don’t know how to deal with yours.”

“I’m trying to deal with it, but it’s hard for me to handle this on my own.”

“What is it about then? Tell me!”

Enerria got quiet. “It’s nothing,” she mumbled.

“No,” Tammy's voice started to get low, and she breathed slowly. “I’m listening.”

“That’s the first” Enerria said “Nobody ever tries to listen to me”

“You never speak up, not unless you’re forced to.”

“I’m never given an opportunity to talk.”

“Well you have one now and *stop* beating around the bush and say what’s been bothering you.”

Enerria’s throat got dry as if all the moisture was being used for the tears that were forming. “It’s nothing” her voice crumbled.

“Enerria! Why don’t you just tell me?”

The front door opened and a loud echo rumbled the house full of laughter.

“We didn’t win anything. We lost all our money” Grandma shouted.

Enerria took a deep breath and left her room to greet her family. Tammy followed.

“Where did you guys go? It’s 1:59 in the morning? Does bingo really stay open that long?” Boniest said.

“Oh yes it does” Enerria’s aunt said with a big grin on her face.

“It stays open as long as I want it” the aunt said, making herself and grandma laugh.

Enerria lay in bed petting Lulu, and she started to realize that Lulu was turning into bones and that it been hard for her to get around the house lately. Enerria got out of bed and Lulu followed her to check on the dog food dish to see if it was empty; she was surprised to see it was full. Enerria rubbed Lulu’s head and smiled. “Your food dish isn’t empty. Are you eating? Oh, I just hope that you are not anorexic. I bet you are. What else could be the reason why you are not eating?”

Enerria walked down the two steps to enter her grandmother’s bedroom. “Grandma, I think there is something wrong with Lulu; she is very thin and she hasn’t been eating,” Enerria said in a hushed voice. “She must have got worms or something sweetie; I’m going to go to the pet store and get her some medicine. Lulu is old, dear,” Grandma replied.

Enerria walked in the kitchen where she saw piles of dirty dishes in the sink, and a dirty stove. The refrigerator had dozens of papers overlapping each other with ornaments, decorated magnets, and baby pictures of the twins. The crown of the refrigerator was created with boxes of cereal; the dusty old boxes in the back were covered over by the newer boxes. The table didn’t really have a surface; it was just good for holding newspaper and unwanted stuff. In the center of the table was

a bowl of rotten fruit and ketchup packages. Enerria saw her grandmother looking in the cabinets for something sweet.

“Did you ever get Lulu that medicine, Grandma? Do you remember me asking you about it? It’s been two weeks.”

“Oh, I forgot. I haven’t gotten it yet, sweetie. I’ll get it today. But since you’re here, I wanted to ask you what you want for Christmas because I didn’t get you anything on your birthday.”

*I didn’t want to celebrate my birthday. I hate to celebrate anything. All celebrating ever does is create drama that I want to avoid. I hate the yelling...*

“She wanted to repaint her room,” Tammy said, speaking for Enerria who was quiet and lost in thought. “What’s wrong with my dog, Enerria?” Tammy said.

“She’s sick. She’s losing a lot of weight.”

Tammy looked down at Enerria’s feet to look at Lulu. “Come here baby. Let mommy see you,” Tammy patted her thighs to get Lulu’s attention. Lulu slowly moved, looking worse than ever as if she was made out of nothing but twigs and pebbles. “Poor baby, you’re going to get better soon.”

Winter break had just started and the twins were spending the night at their older sister’s apartment. Tammy left to go to a party; Grandma was taking advantage of the silence and was getting the rest she always wanted. Enerria’s aunt was catching up on movies on the living room couch.

“It’s just you and me, Lulu.” Enerria smiled looking down at Lulu who was always at her side. “The medicines seem to be working. You started eating again which makes me happy to know that I’ve helped you. You’re still thin but soon you will be back to normal. Thank you for hanging in there for me. I don’t know what I would do if you were gone.” Enerria looked around her cluttered room that only expressed her mind. “Soon all of this will be different.” She stared at the painting material lying on the floor, then stared at Lulu. “I wonder how I am going to paint this room if you’re going to be in the way. I’ll figure something out; I’m going to have you locked out of my room.”

Enerria started to set her room up, so she could start painting first thing in the morning. There was continuing scratching at the door that slowly turned into frantic whimpering and scratching.

“Lulu, shut up; you know what I’m doing!” The noise on the other

side of the door got louder. “Darn it, Lulu.” Enerria opened her locked door to let the dog in. Lulu looked up with a wagging tail to prove her victory. Enerria just smiled and placed Lulu on the bed. “Don’t move. I don’t want you in my way right now.”

Enerria moved her dresser, bed, and television to the center of her room. She emptied out her closet and placed everything on her bed. She stared at her creative work. “Lulu, it wasn’t that long ago that I just put all this stuff in here.” Before she was able to pull anything off the wall, her grandmother yelled to tell her that dinner was ready and that her food was getting cold. Enerria left to get herself a plate and saw that her aunt left the living room and made her way back into her cave like room. Heading back to her room, she opened her door and saw something from the corner of her room rush across to her closet. In reflex, Enerria quickly slammed the door getting Lulu agitated on the bed barking at what she couldn’t see. She realized it wasn’t a furry cockroach with a tail, but a mouse which gave her great relief. Enerria opened the door a crack and called for Lulu to come to her.

Enerria had made herself a place on the couch to sleep on, and a little area for Lulu to sleep next to her on the floor. Hours passed and everyone was sleeping. Enerria had awoken to the footsteps of her grandmother walking with her cane. She looked at the clock on the cable box and saw that it said 3:45 am. Enerria didn’t say anything but just watched her grandmother walk to the front door with Lulu leading her. *Well that’s strange that Lulu didn’t wake me up to take her to the bathroom. She knows that grandma doesn’t have the patience for her to mark every area of grass with her scent.*

A couple of minutes later, grandma got tired of waiting outside in the cold for Lulu, so she rushed Lulu back in the house. Enerria smiled watching Lulu come back into the house to lie next to her. Grandma slowly made her way back in her room. Enerria couldn’t sleep, so she looked at the clock which showed it was 3:55 am. The living room was dark but she was able to make out Lulu’s body on the floor. Lulu seemed to be having a tough time getting to sleep too because her body just jumped in a rigid way, but then looked relaxed and peaceful. Enerria got up to use the restroom, but once she exited, she realized she didn’t feel the warmth of Lulu’s body pressing against the tips of her toes.

A million thoughts were passing through Enerria’s mind, and she

began to worry. Enerria's heart started to pound as she slowly walked in the dark hallways and made her way to the living room. She could see Lulu's body lying on the floor in the most passive looking position. "Lulu?" Enerria slowly tiptoed her way to turn on the living room light. "Lulu" Enerria said a little louder.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" grandma said, hearing Enerria's worries.

"I think Lulu's dead."

"Lulu's not dead; I just let her out a while ago."

"Grandma, she is not moving!"

Enerria stared at Lulu just hoping that she was in a deep sleep. "Any moment now, you are going to wake up and everything is going to be back to normal—no everything is going to get better. I don't want you to leave me, Lulu. It's not Christmas yet. New Year is coming. You don't know if I'm going to get my diploma. You don't know what's going to happen to me when you're gone. *Please* wake up. I don't want you to die on me. Your life *means something* to me."

Grandma made her way back to the living room and saw Enerria hovering over Lulu. Enerria looked at grandma to confirm Lulu's fate.

"Let's look here," Grandma said landing on the arm of the couch. "Lulu is not dead, sweetie. Get up Luuuuuu!" Grandma said while poking the nonmoving animal with her cane, hoping a little nudge was what the animal needed to wake up. Seconds passed and grandma came to a conclusion. "Hmm, I guess she did pass on, sweetie. I don't know how because I just let her out to use the restroom a minute ago" Grandma looked up to see Enerria's eyes building up, but nothing came out. "We can't have her body lie here, so I want you to go in my room to get a box that was left over in my closet and just place her in there until morning where you can dig and bury her." Grandma's voice was soft with concern.

Feeling like her heart was a weighted iron and her feet were made out of glass, Enerria stumbled slowly to keep her balance; the air felt like thick syrup rushing to her lungs, pulling more weight on her heart. Her eyes were dazed; there was nothing clicking right between her mind and her body. Enerria made her way to her grandmother's room to retrieve the box.

Standing over the lifeless mammal, Enerria watched over it. "You had such a great spirit. You were always there for me. I won't be mad at you if you come back now. I'll just say it was a mean trick you pulled on me." She bent down to lift the body; she felt the softness of her coat

and it felt the same as it always did. *Maybe Lulu is in a comma?* Enerria thought. The moment Enerria lifted the animal she felt the lifeless head crease over her hand and Enerria finally accepted Lulu's fate.

“Grandma Lulu is dead—she is dead!”

Hours later, the sun was struggling to appeared through the heavy chalky sky. Enerria sat on the couch looking at the box that she had placed Lulu in. The house began to wake up when time passed. Those who had left yesterday hadn't returned to the house. Enerria sat in the living room listening to her grandma and aunt's conversation.

“That dog was so old. We had her since Enerria was three.” Enerria's aunt said while ironing her clothes in grandma's room.

“I know, poor thing. For a moment I thought that old fart was going to outlive me” grandma chuckled. “It's about time. That leaves one less mouth to feed around here.”

“Oh I bet Enerria is hurting. I don't know why; Lulu was just a dirty old dog.”

*Didn't anyone care about you, Lulu?* Enerria thought to herself.

“So, Enerria when are you going to burry Lulu?” asked her aunt.

Enerria paused and told her aunt that she would bury her when Tammy came back. Enerria left the couch with hidden frustration to paint her room. Standing there in her room, she started to build disgust towards everything. She walked towards her wall staring at the things she had placed and created that no longer had a purpose; her hand pressed against the caution tape that slowly turned into a tight squeeze.

Enerria felt the adrenaline rushing over her body like a cold chill and she started pulling and yanking the caution tape off her walls. Thumb tacks flew everywhere. Breathing roughly, she jumped on her bed, looking at the nets of balloons hovering over her head; she grabbed the nets and thrashed them onto the floor. Throwing hangers, clothes, and shoes at her walls and piñata, she clinched her hands with so much regret and hate that tears were forming and she began to sob. Heavy blocks of tears fell, and she felt so ashamed by her own emotion that it made her quickly try to dry up her eyes. Enerria's heartbeat started to increase. She looked across her room on her bed, to see the piñata still hanging; mocking her attempt to knock it down. Enerria slowly got off the bed stepping on the clothes and balloons popping them as she made her way over. Enerria grabbed a hold of one end of



the piñata and pulled it down; her hold on the piñata was forceful. She could feel the amount of air pouring down her lungs with every memory that went through her head—all the pain that she had been holding and avoiding could no longer hide within her.

Standing there with a piñata clenched in her hands, Enerria heard the front door open and the voice of her cousin Tammy enter the house and the quick hurry of footsteps of her aunt eager to tell the dreadful news. Enerria waited motionless as if time had frozen on her part; the door opened and Tammy entered with such grief and sorrow.

“Lulu always loved you more than me even though she was my dog, and I hated it. I feel bad that I never spent enough time with her. How are you doing? I see your room is a wreck.” Tammy walked toward the bed dodging the balloons, tacks, and clothes on the floor.

“I’m tired, Tammy.”

“I know. I’m tired too. Why don’t you get some rest, and I’ll help you paint your room later.” Tammy signaled Enerria to sit on the cluttered messy bed.

“No, I’m tired of being this way. I want to be happier than this, I want to be able to take care of myself, I want to get out of this stupid house, I want to be stronger, and I really want to be a better person; I’m just tired of this all.” Enerria let go of the piñata and sat next to Tammy.

“I hope you understand why I leave this house every chance I get. This house will make you crazy. It’s like we have the Amityville curse on it for women.” Tammy slightly smiled, hoping that she would put a smile on Enerria, but she failed. “So, how are you going to achieve this goal to be the person you want to be?”

“I don’t know. I guess,” she paused. “I guess I’ll start speaking up more,” she mumbled.

Tammy just stared at Enerria. “I’m leaving. There was another fight at the party, and I’m going to get out of this god forsaken town and move to L.A. I have had everything planned out for the past couple of weeks. I’m going to be roommates with a friend and hopefully start going to school there. I can’t take this house anymore, either.”

“Are you really leaving? You were the only one that took the time to figure me out.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving. I’m not doing anything here. I took a year off of college, and I want to start over somewhere else. It’s not too late for you to start over, either.”

“Tammy, I don’t really know how to start over, or where to begin. The reason why I hate guys is because I was molested by our neighbors when I was younger. Being abused physically and mentally by every family member of this household doesn’t help either. I don’t trust anyone and it is hard for me to trust.” Enerria sat on her bed with her fists clenched in her lap. Tears strolled down her face to make little splashes of drops on her hands. She huffed and took in all the air that her lungs could carry. “I don’t know how I can be happy.”

“I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I knew how everyone would react, so I felt why bother with drama that’s not going to go anywhere; I can handle it on my own, I thought. What’s done is done. They can’t do anything about what happened to me now, and I’m sure they won’t.”

“I understand, but I just wish you told me. I’m sorry for hurting you back then. You always got more attention than me. Everyone was worried that you had some critical condition from your mother’s death because you never talked. When I was told that I was going to have a cousin from Texas living with me, I really didn’t think much about it. I was abused by my older sister, so I passed it down to you.”

The room got quiet. “When do you want to bury Lulu?” Enerria said.

“Let’s wait till tomorrow. We both need some time to recover for a bit.”

The sun’s rays peek through the frosted colored clouds and slightly tickled the skin of Enerria; she got up off the living room couch to look out the window then headed to her room to get dressed for a busy day.

# How to Cook Meth

Kathryn Bahl

## Honorable Mention

I love a lot of things. Big things small things, fat things, skinny things, flat things, purple things. I don't like smelly things, though. I love the 800 page fall edition of *Vogue* and the smell of cement when it's been raining – that is a smell I can tolerate. The seeping smells of sulfur and fire that creeps down under the door and up into your nostrils consumes me. I attempt to resist it. Taking its arms and wrists, I press them to the floor as I scream no! Stop! Please!

“Kathryn!! Come get your sister. She’s in the way!” I jumped up from where I was sitting, dropped my pen and knocked my books off the bed onto the floor.

I screamed back, “Coming, Marie!” I rushed through the tan, earth toned hall that held all of our moments in still life. Madison on a swing, Taylor laughing on her birthday, a wonderful picture of me with my father in black and white. As I reached the kitchen, the smell hit me. I swung the door open and yanked Madison out by her wrist. I kept my head down and only looked at the small child. I saw my step mom stirring a huge silver pot over the stove in my peripheral vision. For a moment I imagined her with a pointed hat, mole with hair on her chin, over a large molten colander. I pulled Madison in to the hall, saving her from certain death.

Looking up at me with oversized blue eyes, she asked, “Kathryn, why are you so weird?” I quickly snapped back at her, “Shut up Mo, I’m not weird.”

She looked at me again, calmly and stated as if she were stating a simple equation, “Yes, you are. All you do is baby-sit us, watch TV, and do homework.” Well, great the five year old is observant, and I sound like a loser.

“No Madison, I do more than that, and you’re only five, what do you know?”

“Well Kathryn, I know that your friends don’t come over to the house, and you don’t talk on the phone a lot and you sit with daddy outside while he plays his guitar, like, always.” I felt as if I was in a popularity contest and losing sorely.

“Ok Mo, shut it and go watch TV in the front room with Taylor.” I

brushed her off toward the front of the house.

“Jerk!” she said to me over her shoulder to me as she ran toward the front of the house. I wasn’t in the mood for a chase, so I stood there wondering where she had heard that from. I laughed because she used it properly and turned around, relieved I only got yelled at by her and not my step mom.

To a four year old, my seventeen year old ways were probably very odd. The hours on end I spent in my room unearthing every sound of the new Radiohead album, cutting out pages from magazines and putting them up on my walls, missing my boyfriend that had just left for college, and avoiding my family at all cost. I would emerge from my cave only to converse briefly with them, eat, get a drink, come or go, or when I was summoned. The only time I really felt at home was when I was alone – which was rare – or when I was babysitting – which was always.

Something was wrong in my family and I didn’t know what. I wouldn’t learn the whole truth until years later, when it was too late for me to come to the rescue. I got good grades, played varsity sports, did what I was told and only drank once a month at parties – that was my rule. My immediate family consisted of my father, who is frightfully similar to me, my step mother, a brilliant but confused woman, myself, an angst ridden teenager, Madison is 5, Taylor is 2 and Jack is 9 months. Most of my days were spent taking care of the kids. My step mom would disappear after arriving home from her CEO of some marketing firm job with a headache. Always with a headache. She would turn to me, in her most dismal voice and announce, “Kay,” that’s what they called me, “I have a terrible headache; watch the kids. Help Madison clean her room please. She has a play date at four that I need you to be here and supervise. Milvia,” the nanny, “said that Jack should be waking up from his nap any minute and Taylor needs her diaper changed.” She would whisk away to her room, locking the double French doors behind her. Before I could tell her it was Friday and I had a dance to go to, she had disappeared. She wouldn’t emerge until my father came home, sometimes not even then.

My father worked long hours; he said he was building job security with his grueling schedule. He worked ten hour days, I now understand for the same reason I played as many sports as I could, was on student council and involved in four clubs. Not because I liked spending all my lunches secretarying an animal rights club or staying on campus until 7 at night for basketball practice, but because I was try-

ing to survive. My father hated his fluorescent lit office and the fat lady that brought him food that smelled like rotting yeast. "In my country..." she would begin and drone on about some disgusting country that God had forgotten about. We were both just trying to survive.

"Madison!" I said, trying to sound chipper so I wouldn't get in trouble for having a bad attitude. I knew from experience that those French doors might be shut but that doesn't mean she can't hear us.

"Yeah Kathryn?" Madison replied. She was the only one that consistently called me Kathryn and not Kay.

"Mom says it's time to clean your room. Come on. I'll help you." She literally heaved herself onto the floor and began flailing wildly. She looked like an aborigine somewhere in Australia painted white and tan from ground stone, jumping in and out of a huge bonfire. Waving her arms around wildly she as if she had taken too much LSD and was on a bad trip. I was almost impressed by the level of drama. I laughed as I looked at her with my eyebrows raised. "Madison Josephine, are you being for real right now?! Get up baby, stop it, I'll help you. It'll take us no time at all, then we can go *afuera*." Our nanny was Guatemalan so we all grew up speaking Spanglish. I spoke to her as condescendingly as possible, not because I wanted to hurt her but because I didn't know how to tell anyone I was hurting. So I took it out on the five year old. Besides, that's how my parents talked to me. I lifted her up and blew raspberries on her stomach. Where was her shirt? I wondered. I felt guilty for being mean to her, not understanding my uncontrollable urge to hate everyone sometimes.

She laughed and began screaming, "No! Kathryn! *No mas!* I'm going to pee pee on you! Kathryn!!" All the while laughing hysterically.

"You little faker!" I said as I plopped her down firmly but gently on the carpet, "you don't really have to go pee pee! You just wanted me to stop."

"So?" She replied, "Kathryn... I really really don't want to clean my room. Claire doesn't care if my room is messy; her mommy doesn't make her clean her room." Claire was the daughter of Mrs. Pena, my step mom's business partner.

"Well, you're not Claire, you're much prettier, and pretty girls have to clean their rooms with their ugly big sisters. Beside that, Mo, mom said so and she's the boss lady." Madison looked at me puzzled. Usually I rush her through her sentences because she's known to stutter, which she grew out of, but drove me crazy. This time I waited for her response, and will always be glad I did.

“How come she’s the boss if she’s never home? You change Jack’s diaper, you give us a bath, you take me to school in the morning and you read me books and help me with my homework. I think you’re the boss, Kathryn. Don’t you want to be the boss?” When did the five year old become so intuitive, what was going on? I thought about what she said for a moment, looking behind her to judge whether we were in proximity to my step mom’s hawk like hearing. Determining that we were out of ear shot I told her, “No way, I don’t want to be the boss. Being in charge is too much for me. And anyway, I don’t have a choice, Mom is the Mom, not me.” She accepted what I said at face value and we began cleaning her room in preparation for her upper middle class suburban play date. As I picked up Skipper and tried to twist her head back onto her neck, I wondered if the five year old was really that smart or if the situation really was that glaringly obvious.

I remember the day it happened. As much as I try to forget, I’ll probably always remember it. My favorite day is always Sunday. I dislike being bored or unproductive and am therefore happy when it’s almost Monday. When it’s almost Monday, I have an excuse to lounge around knowing tomorrow I will be productive. It was February and there was a breeze to chill the bones. I sat in the living room reading in the sunlight, protected from the cold. We had twelve foot vaulted ceilings in the living room. It must have cost a fortune to heat that room, but I didn’t think about stuff like that then. I was absorbed and confused attempting to decipher Faulkner.

As I struggled to finish a chapter of stream of consciousness prose, I heard a strange noise. I stopped where I was, inserting my book mark holding my page. Standing up I rolled my eyes wondering what mess the kids had made I would inevitably have to clean up. Furious as well because I had just put Jack down for a nap, I swore I would maim whoever woke him up. Storming down the hall, I reached the girls’ room and flung the door open. The door handle hit the wall behind it with a thud and they both looked up at me quickly. Madison was watching *Land Before Time* #17 or a million, and Taylor was looking at a book.

“*What are you guys doing?!*” Knowing full well it wasn’t them making the noise, I figured I would continue with my rant anyway.

“I’m reading a book; want to read it with me Kay?” Taylor asked me from behind a pacifier. I looked at Madison. She was completely ignoring me in a television induced coma.

I turned again to the two year old, “What was that sound. Nut?” That’s what we called her – Nut, because her first ultra sound she looked like a peanut and the name stuck.

“No se, Kathryn. We were being quiet. Jack is sleeping right?” damn, she’s good. Even if it was them she was too cute to punish. “Ok, well... good job,” I said, giving up my torrent.

I shut the door quietly behind me and heard the sound again. A noise I’d never heard before. A thud and a scrape, maybe? It wasn’t an animal; they were either outside or sleeping. I heard it again; it was coming from my parents’ room. My dad was at work and my step mom was sleeping because she had a headache (surprise).

I stood in front of the door listening through the crack. Air always blew out of the room through the slit between doors, so when I put my ear to it I could feel the breeze. I didn’t hear anything for a long time and I attempted to look through the space between doors, under them and the key hole – nothing. My heart jumped into my throat as I heard it again, this time only louder, closer. I began to think something must be wrong in there, maybe she is hurt, has fallen, thrown out her back again, is drowning or choking. If I were wrong there would be hell to pay, though. Disturbing her when the door is closed, and especially locked were death wishes. She would fly off the handle as if you had disrupted the Pope giving mass at the Vatican on Easter Sunday. I only had two options and would have to choose carefully. I decided, I reached up and got the key from on top of the door frame. I had hidden it there months ago for just such an occasion. Why I didn’t knock I’ll never know, why I didn’t just ask through the door if she were ok, I couldn’t tell you. Still can’t.





# Non-Fiction

*The difference between the right word and the  
almost right word . . . is the difference  
between lightening and the lightning bug.*  
-Mark Twain



# The Last Traditional Gangster

Emilio Garcia

**First Prize, Non-Fiction**

Gangster. How do you define this word? Thief, hoodlum, even low-life are typical terms associated within this genre of people. There is no doubt that today's gangs have become more destructive and aggressive than ever before. Definitely not the ideal lifestyle for a man like me having been brought up in a home where gangs were described as "wanderers" on the road to nowhere. However, have you ever wondered what it was like on the other side of that line? The line that separates good citizen from gang banger? Or perhaps you've pondered how gang members view the world, or what causes them to choose that path. I know I have, which brings me to this essay. I recently had an opportunity to interview a man who considers himself to be the "Last Mohican" of traditional gangsters. With this rare opportunity, I was able to pick his brain on subject such as violence, shootings, rival gangs, as well as other topics related to gang activities. This is the story of Richard Colemereo.

Richard was born on January 16, 1977 in the small town of Selma, California (my home town). There he led a normal life throughout his childhood despite living in the slums. He was known as an active child involved in sports, skateboarding and he was even quite the poet. As he reached his adolescent years, he began to embrace a new way of life. It all began on Richard's fifteenth birthday. His parents had just presented him with the ultimate gift, a boom box. He recalls being "so excited" for hardly anyone living in the ghetto had such a luxury. However, the real gift came when his older brother Ray, who was released from prison that same day, came bursting in, surprising Rich with a copy of EZ-E's latest cassette tape. After a tearful reunion, Ray handed Richard the tape. "Who the hell is EZ-E?" Rich asked as he received the gift.

Ray gave him a puzzled look before responding, "You're a poet. Don't you know? Why, he's the founding father of gangster rap." From then on, the world as Richard knew it changed forever. For the language of the ghetto was all he knew, and as a poet, gangster rap changed his way of thinking and writing. It was a new way of expressing who he was and how he felt. HE had become someone who

learned at a young age that life as a struggle and he had to fight and defend what was his, even if the odds were against him. From that moment on, he was a gangster.

I remember the look on Richard's face when I asked him, "So, music is what made you change your lifestyle?" The gleam in his street-wizened eyes told me there was much more to the story than that.

He turned and said, "When my brother came back from prison, he came back someone else. He had more tattoos than I had ever seen anyone have. Those tattoos told a story. A story of a Northern Warrior."

The tale went as follows: Long ago a Mexican man, who had been a great fighter, turned away from that way of life to raise a family and to lead a different path. He had many enemies though, and eventually his past caught up with him. Every thing was taken from him by force: wife, children, personal possessions, everything. Then on one particular day, a dozen men came to his hideaway with intentions to kill him. As he came out of his temporary home, he came out prepared to die, but a glorious death it would be, for he would die fighting. Armed with only a knife in hand, he charged his aggressors head on. It was not long before he was overtaken and in the midst of being beaten to death, his neighbors came to his aid (for they knew of his losses) killing all the men except for one. As the warrior raised himself up, he embraced his new-found friends and said, "Alas, one has escaped and by defending me, they are now your enemies. Now they will come for you as well." The men fell silent as they visualized their impending doom.

Then one of the men broke the silence by proclaiming, "Not if we stand together, for together we are many and they are few." Hence, the Mexican Mafia was formed. Their sons later called them Northanoes.

Hearing this tale had inspired him to become a great leader. Not your typical role model such as mayors, mentors, pastors, but an underground hero. He and his neighbors had known years of harassment by the Local 3, gang bangers from the South. This gang would beat, steal and kill innocent bystanders within their hood never to be found. These people were illegals who would disappear when the law would come. Remembering the Warrior, Richard, along with some of his neighbors, rallied a group of their closest acquaintances in opposition to this menace. They formed a gang and they too called themselves Northanoes. The creed of this gang was to defend your barrio from outsiders who sought to harm your family and property. Organization and order was the key to their brotherhood. Like

any other organization, members would take and follow through with orders, abiding by their leader as well as their set of laws: The North-erners Bible. Their laws required them to never lift a weapon other than your own two fists, unless times called for it. I was surprised to hear this because I have always been under the impression that all gangs used weapons to harm and kill each other. "Not in those days," Richard replied when I stated my opinion. Rich's gang lived under the metaphor: "Eye for an Eye." In other words, you jump one of them, they jump you; you kill one of them, and they kill one of you. You get the picture.

Rich also stressed that today's gang bangers are young "punks" who are afraid to take an "ass whipping" and are quick to pick up a gun out of fear. He further stated, "They have become studio gangsters due to lack of leadership and from over-exposure to all that crap they see on TV. There's no longer any call for organization or respect for life." Hearing him use the word "respect" opened the door to a new subject.

"Respect," I started out. "How does respect apply to the title gangster? Don't you think the good person on the opposite side of you views your life of work as disrespectful?"

A brief silence ensued before he responded that their version of respect was never meant to be earned from the "good" people but from other gang bangers. Back when the traditional fist fights would prove one's manliness by either being victorious or defeated, it always left you with your dignity. For if you lost, you proved you had the guts to stand your ground, and if you won, well, you won the respect of your opponent, thus letting him know he'd be better off minding his manners and watching his step the next time he was near your turf. In comparison to today's young gang bangers, they have begun to fall under pressure. Their whole crew of fellow "punks" tells them, "Come on, man. You want to show us you're down, take this gun and kill that guy. He's an enemy. Show us you're for our cause." Ninety percent of the time that young man is going to react as his peers demand, the result in yet another "gang-related" killing.

"This is not respect," Richard comments. "This is murder." Rich believes this is what gives gang banging its bad name. "It wasn't always like this," he sates for maybe the tenth time that night. "Gangs no longer form to defend their turf from outsiders seeking to harm their family and hood. They go out looking for trouble outside their territory." These actions defy Richard's rule of traditional gangsterism, and

he believes it will continue to get worse and worse till the end of time.

There's no longer any leadership and they've become democratic in the sense that they do whatever they hell they want. Hence the word "punk." Disappointed is the perfect word used in describing Rich's face after having stated this. I watched as he stared into nothing.

I broke the silence by asking, "So what happened to your crew?" He answered by looking at me. Sometimes just a simple look can say much more than words can ever express. It was only in that moment that I came to understand the history of our ghetto.

Over the years, many of Richard's Northanoes had been either killed, or locked up for life, or fell into a variety of drug addictions. The golden age of Selma Barrio Northerners had long been over with. I didn't have to ask why they were no longer. The answer was simple: organization was the key to the machine that kept things running. Unfortunately for Richard, the "good" men on the opposite side of the line never quite see the world as traditional gangsters do. Eventually, the law caught up with him. Being the leader, he was in turn incarcerated, leaving his crew without guidance. With no one to lead them, they eventually fell to the ways of today's gang bangers. They had all become "punks." I no longer wondered why Richard considered himself the "Last Mohican" of traditional gangsters. He just simply is, and like the warrior, he too is always outnumbered wherever he goes, no matter what: always in search of a friend, always on the lookout for an enemy, for the downside of being a gangster is bittersweet. You are who you are when you take that solemn vow to always uphold your Barrio's creed and color. Today Northanoes have become a dying breed throughout California. The remaining members, that have not been locked up (yet), have become Bulldogs, a gang, which here in Fresno, we are all too familiar with.

# The Dark Inside

Jillian Ward

**Second Prize, Non-Fiction**

The sun had risen early that day, and never before or again have I seen brighter red and yellow leaves. However, the light of dawn through opened blinds seemed dark and gray to me. It was a contradiction I never understood, until now. I saw death far more easily than I saw life. Falling leaves stood out to me, slowly leaving their homes on trees. Dying. All of them dying.

The only thing I could do was lie in the couch-bed, curled on my side with heavy blankets wrapped around me for the hollow comfort they gave. I watched the dark sun rise and listened to the wheezed, labored breathing of my father as he died. Even after all that time I still had tears left to bawl in silent pain as my mother wept by his bed nearby.

We had each taken turns, my mother, sister and I, staying awake at different hours in the night. After all that fighting, all that pain and promises for more time, I lay there in unblinking darkness doing nothing but listening. And I listened. And I listened. And I listened . . .

“Get your sister,” my mother had whispered.

As I sat up the blankets fell from me like a shell. My mother looked over her shoulder and her pale blue stare told me everything.

So I ran.

The fall season in northern Utah is as cold as a winter anywhere else. But while my bare feet tramped across the frozen marble tile at the base of the stairs, I didn't notice it. I had been cold for a year.

My sister, Emily, left her warm shower and hurried with me back down the stairs with soaked hair and her winter robe pulled tight around her waist. She ran to the right side of my father's bed and took his hand with hers. My mom sat on the couch armrest by the top of his bed and stroked his bald scalp and yellowed cheeks.

But I knelt on his left side, reached through the cold silver bars and gripped his hand with both of mine. I pressed my face against the icy metal on the sides of his bed while the tears fell like the silence of my hope.

I remembered everything. It was like I was the one dying, my brain showing me everything I would leave behind: the car rides to and from school where we became so caught up in conversation my dad would

miss a turn, or the times when I was younger and played with dolls at his feet while he watched the news, read newspapers and ate candy. He was my best friend. I held his hand tighter, determined to hang on. Maybe if I held him hard enough, I could anchor him here forever.

But then I thought of how whenever I kissed my parents good-night, he would reach out to me again just before I left for bed and we would grip hands goodbye. For years, every night we had. It was our thing. Then I realized that I was gripping his hand while he slept in a dying coma. I held his hand for that final goodbye. It struck me, and I sobbed through bitten lips. His hand blurred with tears and I prayed for him to breathe just one more time. Just one more time, please.

His ragged gasps grew further apart. I held my breath with him until his chest rose heavily again and air rattled through his dry lips. One more time . . . one more time, please.

He didn't. That one more stopped coming.

My little family sat there, frozen and crying in the quiet. I could have stayed there for years, because I didn't want to let go. If I let his hand go, I would never be able to hold it to say goodbye again. This was the last goodbye. I couldn't stand it. I bawled and sobbed and held his hand for dear life. Vainly, foolishly, I prayed for him to breathe one more time, please.

Of course that miracle was not for me. I watched while phone calls were made, people came to take his body away and more phone calls were made. All morning I sat upstairs on my sister's hope chest, looking out of the back door to the ocean of leaves on the patio. The wind had died too, none of the leaves were moving.

I remembered his booming laugh and his world-rocking sneezes. I remembered his bear hugs and getting him massive bowls of ice cream every evening after dinner. I remembered things he said and advice he gave. I remembered the letters I came across on his computer one day. Each was for one member in our little family. They were his goodbyes and his last "I love you."

I remembered walking by his room and seeing my dad on his knees, hands pressed together in a mighty fist as he begged with God for more time, for a miracle--I don't know. I remembered hearing my mom tell me he had less than six months, that he fought a lost battle with his cancer. . . .

And then I stopped remembering.

After the funeral and after my mom's suicidal depression, I know one thing. I'm still here. My family is still here. Somehow between



God and friends we made it.

I did not understand how much I could love, or how much I would do, for my family until then. I slowly began to understand it after I saw an empty place-setting at the table. I understood it when I saw tasks my dad did, were no longer done. I turned the news on before dinner and stopped fighting over the little things. I understood it when I held my mom's hand, stroked her hair and listened to her cry when she came home from work. I understood it when I let my sister yell at me because she wouldn't bring herself to yell at our mom for what was happening to us.

Through the darkness, I understood who I was and what my family really is. They weren't just the people that I lived with, they became my friends who listened to me sob without saying a word or took me someplace other than home just to get me to smile. They were the ones who stayed with me, comforted me, and who understood what was happening.

Slowly I began to see how much my family at home was still my family at heart. They didn't die with my father. I realized this when my mom loved Emily and I enough to stay with us one day at a time. Then slowly, day-by-day, she got better.

Three years later, wounds still are sore--they at least stopped bleeding. That I understand, as I sat on my sister's hope chest in her room at our new house. Unpacked boxes scattered throughout the one story home, and the summer heat melted through the bare windows onto my face as I stared into the front yard. My mom and sister laughed at something in the next room, hanging new pictures on one of the walls.

With each fall of the hammer, tears picked their way down my cheeks and I smiled.

*Pound.*

It was the day of moving on.

*Pound.*

It was the day of starting over.

*Pound.*

I wiped the trails of tears off my face and got to my feet, taking one last look outside before finding a box to unpack. My grin took in the bright blue sky, cloudless in a haze of simmering yellow beams from the sun. I remembered again. My dad's favorite color was blue, like the sky and my mother's eyes.

The tree leaves just beyond the window twisted softly on their branches, shaking hands with the wind. Alive. Strong.

Until that moment, never had I seen leaves so green.

# Colophon

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