



The Ram's Tale 2010

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2010

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1101 East University Avenue
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Dr. Cynthia Azari

President, Fresno City College

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

Jennifer Franklin

Website/submissions Manager, Fresno City College

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Zay Logan 442-4600 ext 8469; zay.logan@fresnocitycollege.edu.

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Editorial Staff and Judges

Managing Editors

Margaret Hiebert

Michelle Patton

Literary Judges

Autumn Newman, poetry

Nigel Medhurst, fiction

Visual Arts Judges

Anne Scheid

Robyn Bates

Nicholas Spohrer

Bob Kizzar

Susana Sosa

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Poetry

Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance.
- Carl Sandburg

The Story Keeper

Mima Wright
First Prize

At the beginning,
the story pulsates quietly
and unrhythmically.
As a tiny human heart
is trying to develop,
the prologue is shaping.
In this life I am a hidden little
embryo behind the tender geology
of my mother's womb.
I am a cocooned,
feeble, human nobody,
inside the vacuum of love,
and privatized particle
of cosmic dust,
stuck forever
between my mother's
storytelling
and my own.
I am a small inception
of life within the circular
nature of the universe.
I left one story and walked
into another.
I am reincarnated
narrator who collects human
stories through layers of centuries
and makes them timeless.
I am a thief of all
my mother's
physical substance.
I am an amorphous
blood sucker, anticipated
to be a wanted daughter
and unknown extender

of kin storytelling.
My intrinsic world is
secluded, cozy and
unconscious.
I am lonely and warm.
I am growing and rooting
on atomic architecture
of my mother's body
and her Joan of Arc spirit.
As the plot of story is emerging,
the beat becomes harmonious.
The waves of mother's infectious
laughter are swimming,
like magnetic fields
through embryonic
water to salute my
existence again,
and again, and again.
The external voices
are telling me that
my mother is weak and anemic,
but I am still a mammal,
feeding on her
red blood cells.
Inevitably,
I am becoming human
offspring—achild.
After seventy two hours
of her agony, I hail out,
nonchalantly, like a comet.
The nurse's cutting of
umbilical cord separates us.
Right at the gate of my
mother's tormented womb,
and through unarticulated
first cries I start the plot
of my own story and become
the keeper of my mother's.

When I Saw How Fast My Father Could Run

Sean Kinneen
Second Prize

When I saw how
fast my father
could run,
sprinting
up the quiet
street, legs
pumping
hard, shoes
splashing
on the wet
pavement,
the sun
shining
on his sweaty
face, I stood
up and watched
him go
faster
than I had ever seen
and haven't seen since.

Sunday Service.

Teresa Grimaldo

Third Prize

Female juices
glisten on black skin.
Iridescent beads of moisture
cluster on prickly mustache.
The pungent scent
of succulent sweat
hangs thick in stifling air.
A fan whirs
as she purrs
On a blazing Sunday afternoon.

Dear Prozac

Andrew Haag
Honorable Mention

Dear Prozac,
I do not wait for you anymore.

A thousand mornings have fallen to silent deaths, A thousand cries
have painted themselves on the wall To immortalize their terror Since
your green lips first kissed me a blue torso hard of air and stripped
Down to a hospital gown.

My soul was a burn victim that
you carried away like a drunk lover,
promising relief from the worlds' glare.

And through IV needles
You kissed down my spine,
Down through chemical floodgates
that tell me what to feel.
Kissed my forehead, my spirits' noise,

You kissed everything I loved in myself until it died.

Dear Adderall,
your chloroform numbs my body
but my spirit stays in flight.

I've walked with Death in my sleep
When you scald my forehead with cancer dreams.
I've seen wraiths of memory dip themselves in gasoline and leave me
with the match.
I've been baptized in shadow
Until the throne of God looks empty.

But my suicidal synapses only want to be free.

Dear Klonopin,
demon swallower,
does your throat ever get caught?

You were born in vomit.
and out of the embalming fluid,
out of the angel afterbirth
you crawled
from the gestation of life
towards me.

and were you always there?
at three years old
when I fell from the table to a broken arm, when I climbed the roof to
ask God if he exists?

do you even know my name?

And so my dear Prozac,
I do not wait for you anymore
to write me a prescription for hope,
or untangle the web you've spun in my chest, or to buy back the feel-
ings you've sold off.

I still return to you night after night
like a battered woman back into
the arms of her bastard husband,
and I commit you to my body
as the body of Christ
to nullify my hearts' obscenity,

but this time, like Christ
I will ride down your throat
broke in half and drunk on wine
past the chunks of dead soul
and memories burned alive
until finally, when our two eyes meet
you'll have to swallow-
me.

Between Two Worlds

SC Rivera

Honorable Mention

I am a woman of color
Living in a black and white world
Where shades of gray have no place
My skin tone is light brown, but not dark enough
Yet, it's too dark to be white
So where do I fit in
If not a woman of color
Nor white, what then
I am a woman of color caught between two worlds

I am a woman with a disability
How dare I say that I am disabled?
I don't look disabled
No way can I be disabled
You must be lying
So how can I be disabled?
I am a disabled woman caught between two worlds

I am a lesbian
Living in a world that says my way of loving is wrong
That I can't be one of god's children
It's just not possible
They say my way of living is a sin
Because I am a woman in love with a woman
I ask for no special rights
Just the right to live and love without persecution
To have equal rights just like everyone else
So, don't be confused by how deep my voice is
Or how short my hair is
Or that my appearance may seem more masculine
Because it's not my attempt to be a man
It's just simply me
Who loves women
I am lesbian caught between two worlds

I am a fat woman living in a world that laughs at me
Day in and day out, I am reminding of my imperfections
That somehow I should be ashamed of the way I look
That I can change the way I look if I just had more "will power"
To be fat is to be socially unacceptable
To be an outcast
I am fat woman caught between two worlds
I live in a society that seems to find everything wrong about me
A world that embraces hatred but not tolerance or acceptance
A world that's afraid to accept our uniqueness or our individuality
Where striving for perfection is used as a cloak to hide imperfection
Instead of contempt towards our difference
What about nurturing tolerance for those who walk to a different beat
Because I know I am caught between two worlds as a disabled fat lesbian woman of color
Those labels are just too heavy to carry, So why can't I be just me?

On Naked Flesh, I dance

Amber Utt

Honorable Mention

In the deepness of night, I will rise, full and broken
Through heaven, over earth, to the sky, I have spoken
Though I don't bear a name, you have called me the moon
Many lovers across oceans under me have swooned
Though I shed not a light of my own without sun
I reflect tenderly the daylight undone
Always, without ceasing, I return to you
Sometimes twice a month, when you say that I'm blue
I rise for the weary, to find their way home
I shine for the captain, steering his course to Rome
My countenance blushes for creatures nocturnal
Through me, some are blessed, and some cursed eternal
Pagans adore me as I dance on naked flesh
Farmers keep track of my cycles to thresh
I am pock-marked and dreary, without any friends
But I do enjoy watching how gravity bends
Your waters, your people, I affect them all
Having this power over you makes you seem small
But I wish, and I long, to have a taste of your world
To give birth to a child, watching life unfurl
As the night shuts its curtains, I fade from your view
But soon you forget me, as you're covered with dew
And the morning sun enchants you, a flame to revere
And I slip from your thoughts until a new night is here

For San Juana de Jesus Solis

Virginia Sage Vindiola
Honorable Mention

My child falls to the earth when the news hits her ears
Suddenly everything has changed in her 15 year old world
She no longer knows pure innocence-
San Juana died yesterday in a car accident
Stuttered her fearful friend over the phone
She now knows death
Who is this girl? I've never heard you speak of her before
A girl on my basketball team, we warm up together
Immediately I try to comfort my child in a loss I know all too well
I take her entire catechism class to the church to pray a rosary
Can we get confession?
What a brilliant idea
Yes, does anyone want to confess their sins?
Suddenly the children fall into a scary silence
They sit and they mourn but they do not yet have a deep connection to
what has really happened
Everything is about San Juana now, everyday
Friday night's home game had a moment of silence
Korina's white jersey was soaked in sweat and salty tears
She didn't want to talk, she just sat there in the car. sobbing
So confused on what to do my husband reaches for her weak arms
Initially resistance
Soon -falls into her father's firm hold
Why did this happen? It hurts so bad! I can't imagine how you feel Dad.
Forgetting his own loss of his murdered mother, he remains her pillar
Our little town becomes consumed with fund raisers -bake sale,
t-shirts, a car wash
How do you budget for your 16 year old daughter's death?
You don't
My pillar of a husband took Korina to the rosary
Shedding tears for both San Juana and his mother he soon realizes he
isn't strong enough
He couldn't bear this loss if he had to
Korina attended the funeral with her team, an experience she suffered

through without us Skipping the burial, she later hears of the shrieks
of Vidi

*No, I can't leave my sister. No, I have to stay with her. NO, NO, NO,
NO!*

I come home to find my daughter curled up in a ball, covered up by
the biggest blanket

With the same salty tears still running down her face

She falls asleep while I run my fingers through her uneven hair

Two-Dimensional Art & Photography

The mediator of the inexpressible is the work of art.
~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



Ai

Alesia (Charlie) Fang
First Prize



In Pain

Pamela Denham
Second Prize



Mural by Mural

Erik John Beltran
Third Prize



Not Alone

Sansanee Boonyad



Binding

Alesia (Charlie) Fang



Graveyard Angel

Jacqueline Fleming



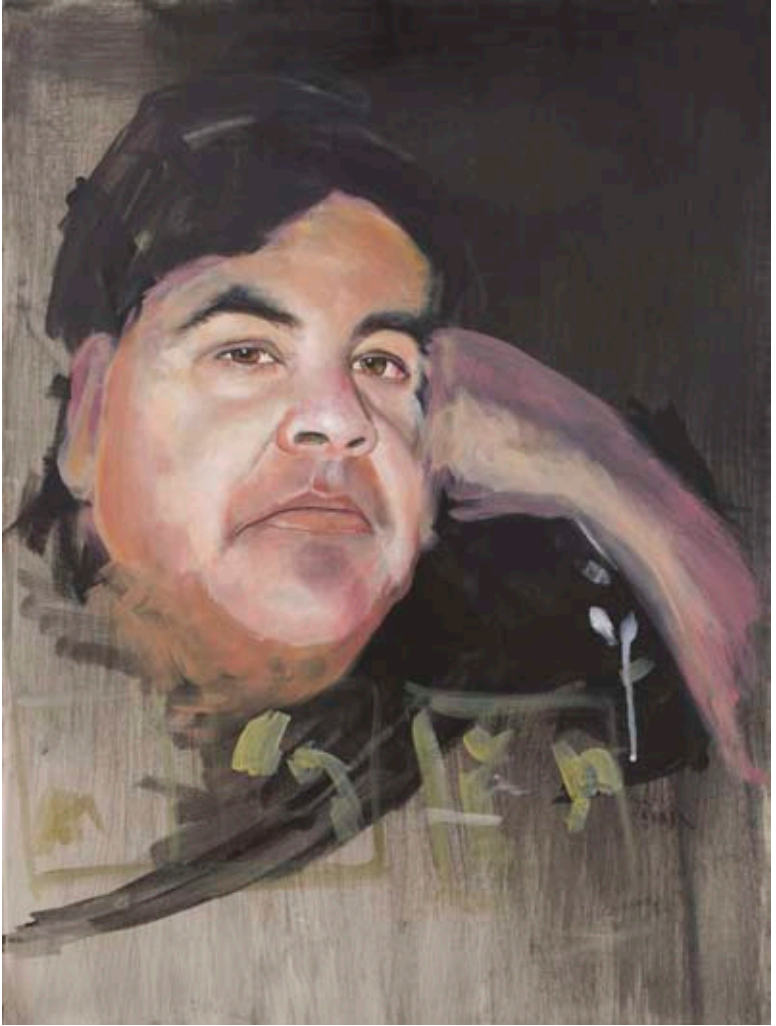
Navigating

Garrett Lee



The Serpent

David Lopez Jr.



My Father

Emmanuel Pantoja



Room 202

Nou Vang



Ashes

Whitney Barbo



Passage to the Unknown

Kyle Simon

Fiction

*Storytelling reveals meaning without
committing the error of defining it.*
~ Hannah Arendt

What Do You Think You're Doing?

Sean Kinneen

First Prize

When she'd let herself into the apartment, Catherine sat the grocery bag down on an end table that stood next to the door, pulled off her gloves and shoved them into her coat pocket. Of course Henry was asleep. The big oak-framed bed had been left between the coffee table and the TV and Henry lay on his side, breathing heavily, the blankets wrapped around him. He had helped bring in this bed and a few boxes. But that was it. The rest of the time, he had sat on the recliner, telling Catherine and the mover what to do—ordering, really. He had not liked the mover. He'd made that clear. He said he could have done the job better if he hadn't strained his back lifting the bed. He said this to the mover, pointing a thin finger in the guy's face. Then the mover left.

Catherine slid a banana box to the end of the coffee table and sat down, knees pushing into the side of the bed. She leaned forward and whispered, "Henry wake up."

But Henry said nothing, moving his head on the pillow, working his lips. He smelled sour. He hadn't shaved. There were crumbs and strands of hair on the sheets and Henry's pants and socks lay twisted up on the floor.

Catherine placed a hand on Henry's shoulder and nudged him. "Wake up Henry," she said and then she looked around.

Henry had left the blinds open. Catherine went over to draw them. She pulled her coat together in front of her and folded her arms. Rain tapped against the glass. Cars hissed by on the wet pavement, lights glaring, mist rising from the tires. Maybe he had forgotten, she thought. Maybe he had listened when she'd said she didn't like them to be open but even in the old house she had always washed the dishes, brought the trash out to the curb, while Henry lay on the sofa, watching things like college football. When she drew the blinds, Henry shifted under the blankets. "Just give me another thirty minutes Cat," he said and the bed creaked when he turned over and faced the other way.

Catherine went back to the coffee table. She sat down. "You forgot to close the blinds," she said.

Henry sighed. "What?" he said.

"You left the blinds open," she said.

Henry didn't say anything—didn't even move.

"Just please don't leave the blinds open anymore," Catherine said.

Henry turned onto his back. "Hey," he said. "Richard and Sara are coming over tomorrow."

"I know," Catherine said. "I got groceries." She looked at the bag next to the door. There wasn't much in it: crackers, a cheese ball, carrot and celery sticks and ranch dressing. She hadn't known what else to get.

"They're great. Don't you think?" Henry said.

"Sure," Catherine said and looked at the bed. The sheets were wrinkled. "You said you would help move this to the bedroom," she said.

"My back still hurts."

"You're such a baby."

"Maybe it'll feel better tomorrow."

Catherine stood up. "Your friends are coming over tomorrow," she said. "There won't be *time* tomorrow."

"I don't know about that," Henry said.

"Can't we just do it today?" Catherine said. "We could do it tonight."

Henry said nothing and when Catherine reminded him that she had to work, that a lot of people came to the restaurant this time of year, he looked at the foot of bed. She wanted to say other things. She wanted to say that it was hard working extra hours and taking night classes at the same time. She wanted to say that she had not talked to her mother since she'd moved in with Henry, that she was not welcome in the house in which she'd grown up. But the telephone rang and Henry lifted himself up, elbows digging into the bed. "I bet it's them," he said. "I bet it's Richard. I'll get it."

Henry threw off the blankets and ran to the kitchen and while he was on the phone, Catherine made the bed. She put the blankets on the coffee table, pulled the sheets tight across the mattress, fluffed the pillows and arranged them along the headboard. She considered vacuuming the sheets—there was hair all over. But instead she took the blankets and threw them over the mattress, letting them fall into place. She tucked in all the sides and made a fold at the top and swept her hands across to smooth everything out. A whicker chest stood a few feet from the foot of the bed and she wanted to move it into the narrow hall but Henry hung up the phone and she took the grocery bag to the kitchen.

Henry sat at the dining room table.

Catherine let the bag fall onto the counter next to a box that said PLATES on the side. "Who was it?" she said.

"It was Richard," Henry said. "They're going to Cayucos. Tonight." "Tonight?"

"They got invited. Richard's mother owns a house on the beach."

"Just like that? Just like that they're going to Cayucos?"

Henry smiled. "Aren't they lucky?" he said. "I told them to stop by on the way."

Catherine did not say anything. She looked at her ring. It was only a quarter carat diamond. Henry had sold furniture for J.C. Penny. That was how they had met and when he'd sold her the bed, he asked her out on a date. Before she knew it, they were together. Catherine pulled off the ring. She looked at the band of light green skin around her finger. Then she put it back on, shifting it so that she couldn't see the green.

On the stove sat a grimy pan, blackened along the base. She grabbed it and chucked it

into the sink. It crashed against a soapy plate.

Henry stood up. "Hey," he said. "What the hell?"

He was thin and his chest was bare.

"I can't believe you," Catherine said. "I can't believe you told them they could come here now. Today I mean."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I want to move that bed."

They were silent for a moment. Then Henry said, "I nearly broke my back carrying that thing."

"But that was last week," Catherine said.

"They don't care. They're my friends."

"It'll take a second. That's all. It'll only take a second."

"I'm telling you they don't care," Henry said. "Trust me. Besides," he said. "I think I really did strain something in my back carrying that thing."

"You're a baby," Catherine said.

Henry looked at the clock above the stove. "Fine," he said. "Let me get something to eat first and I got to get dressed. Then we'll do your thing. They won't be here for another hour."

Henry came down the hall, buttoning up a clean white shirt. He had taken a shower, shaved, brushed his teeth. He had taken his sweet time. Catherine stood beside the coffee table and watched him go to

the window and pull open the blinds. He stood there, hunched over, looking out. Cars went by steadily. "Ready?" Catherine said.

"I don't know Cat. My back hurts pretty bad," Henry said.

"Couldn't we just do it later? Tomorrow I mean?"

"It'll only take a second," Catherine said.

"Let's do it later. Let's do it tomorrow when you get home."

"I want to do it right now."

"Fine," Henry said. "But this'll just aggravate it."

Catherine took off her coat and threw it at a stack of unpacked banana boxes that stood against the wall. It landed on top then slid off and fell to the floor. She went over to the headboard and waited for Henry. He braced himself across from her over the bed and together they tried to lift it. But Henry stopped. He stood up, placing a hand on the small of his back as if to push himself straight, as if he were in pain.

"Really?" Catherine said. "Really?"

"Couldn't we just leave it?" Henry said.

"No."

"But my back—"

"It's been a week Henry. It's been a god damn week."

Henry clutched the small of his back. "Really Cat," he said. "My back is killing me."

Catherine said nothing. She folded her arms across her chest.

"Listen forget about this," Henry said. "We'll do it tomorrow. I promise."

"You said that yesterday. You've been saying that all week."

"They'll be here soon."

"I don't *care*. I want this moved."

"*They* don't care," Henry said. "Just relax. You need to relax."

"I at least—" Catherine said but she didn't finish. She shook her head. She wanted to lift

the bed up as high as she could and throw it at Henry. "I really don't want this here," she said.

But Henry wasn't listening. He was looking past her at the window. He smiled. "They're here," he said.

Catherine looked out the window. They were coming up the concrete path, red-faced, holding each other tight against the cold. Richard stopped, one hand holding the umbrella, the other pointing at the front door. He said something to Sara. He gave her the umbrella and ran back to their car with his coat collar turned up, shoulders

hunched. He was a gentleman—even to Sara.

Their car was parked along the curb behind Catherine's car. Across the street was a parking lot and then the grocery store. Gray swollen clouds hung in the sky.

Catherine turned back into the room. She clamped her teeth. The place was a mess: boxes along the walls, picture frames everywhere, leaning against the sofa, the recliner, stacked up on the floor. There was furniture that belonged in the bathroom, in the bedroom: a table for magazines, night stands, the bed. For a moment she considered how things would stand if she had never bought the bed from Henry. Then she went over and grabbed him by the arm. "We've got to move this," she said. "We've got to move this bed."

Henry took his arm away. He held it close to his chest. "Will you forget about that right now?" he said.

Catherine thought she heard a car alarm go off.

The doorbell rang several times and when Henry opened the door, Sara stood there smiling, holding her elbows. Henry drew her inside. "Where did Richard go?" he said.

"He nearly forgot the gift," Sara said and smiled. She took off her knit cap. She ran her fingers through her hair. "Henry don't stand there," she said. "You'll get sick."

Henry said nothing. He stood in the doorway looking out at the street.

A police siren wailed in the distance.

Sara shrugged. "I hope you don't mind that my hair is smelly," she said to Catherine. "It's cider vinegar. You should try it Catherine. Richard said it's good for the scalp."

The smell like a match burned in Catherine's nostrils. "That's okay," she said and tried to smile.

Henry said, "Is it really?"

Catherine said, "That what she just said."

Henry looked at her from the doorway.

When Richard came back holding a bottle of white wine, he slapped Henry on the back. Henry laughed, watching Catherine.

Richard offered the bottle to Catherine. "Pinot Grigio," he said. "It's for you."

"Thank you," Catherine said. She smiled.

"Show us your new home," Sara said.

Richard placed his arm around Sara's shoulder. He smiled at Catherine. She could tell he didn't want his arm there. He had a big gold

ring and he had big fingers. Catherine knew those fingers, how they felt combing through her hair, sliding along her back. But all that was over a year ago.

"I'll show you the kitchen," Henry said. "The kitchen is great. I think you'll like it," he said and then he led them toward the kitchen. "Don't mind the bed," he said.

Richard watched it before they stopped beside the dining room table.

Henry went into the kitchen and raised his hands as though he were selling something. "What do you think?" he said.

Richard said, "It's small."

Catherine said, "Henry likes it."

Henry smiled. He patted the stove. "Well it's the things I like," he said. "I wish it was bigger but all the appliances are brand-new."

Richard looked at Catherine. "That's good," he said. He looked as though he were trying not to laugh.

"So how was the move?" Sara said.

"Intense," Henry said. "You never realize how many things you have until you move."

"You must've been exhausted," Sara said.

"It wasn't too bad," Henry said.

"He's still exhausted," Catherine said. "He pulled a muscle in his back."

"Did you really?" Sara said.

"Not exactly," Henry said.

"He did," Catherine said. "He pulled a muscle in his back. He's been complaining about it all week."

"My gosh Henry. Sit down," Sara said. "Why aren't you sitting down?"

"I'm all right. I didn't really *pull* anything. It's just a little sore you know?" Henry said.

"Sit down," Sara said and pulled Henry out of the kitchen and toward the dining room table. "You can still entertain us sitting down can't you?"

"I'm okay really," Henry said.

Sara pushed Henry into a chair.

"Really I'm all right," Henry said.

"Stop trying to be a tough guy," Sara said. "Just sit down and put your feet up."

Sara pulled out another chair, lifted Henry's feet and placed them on it.

Catherine laughed. "You're like a mother," she said.

Sara looked at Catherine.

Richard laughed.

“Be quiet,” Henry said.

Richard placed a hand over his mouth. He was trying not to laugh.

“She is though,” Catherine said and laughed.

“Why don’t you be quiet?” Henry said. Then he said, “Hey Dick let’s have some of that pinot whatever-you-call-it.”

“*Grigio*,” Richard said. “Can’t. I have to drive.” He looked serious.

“Come on. Be a man,” Henry said.

“I’ll have a little,” Sara said.

Richard looked at Catherine. “I guess,” he said. “I guess I’ll have a little.”

Henry got up and took some glasses from a box on the counter. He tried to open the bottle. He broke off the cork and he had to shove the end down into the bottle.

Catherine wanted to laugh.

Henry looked at her and then he filled all the glasses and handed them out.

When he offered one to Catherine, she said, “No thank you. I have to get up early tomorrow. I have to work.”

“Take it,” Henry said. “You need to relax.”

“That’s okay. I have to work,” Catherine said.

Henry turned to Richard. “She thinks she’s so responsible,” he said.

Catherine nodded. “I am,” she said. “I’m a lot more responsible than you.”

“Is that right?” Henry said.

Catherine said, “That’s right.”

“I would really like to know how you are more responsible than me,” Henry said. “Tell me how you are more responsible than me. I would really like to know.”

“Well for starters,” Catherine said. “I found the mover and I called U-Haul and I packed everything.” She paused. “You’ve done nothing,” she said.

“That’s not true,” Henry said. “I’ve done plenty.”

“What have you done?” Catherine said.

Henry said, “I’m paying for this place.” He paused and looked at the living room. Then he said, “If it wasn’t for me that massive bed wouldn’t be in this apartment at all. You wouldn’t be able to move it without me.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Catherine said.

“You haven’t shown us the bedroom,” Sara said brightly. “Show us that.”

“She won’t get off my back about that bed,” Henry said to Richard as though he had not listened, as though he were deaf. “I mean she just won’t get off my back.”

Richard didn’t say anything.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Catherine said.

Henry said, “She doesn’t care about me you understand? She doesn’t care about anything except hiding that bed from you guys.”

“Don’t talk about that,” Catherine said.

Henry said, “Hell I like it out there. I might just keep it out there. What would you say to that Catherine?”

Catherine did not say anything. They were all looking at her, watching her, and when she considered this, when she considered everything, her stomach turned. She went into the living room to the bed.

Henry had followed her. “What are you doing?” he said.

Catherine said nothing. She tore off the blankets and the sheets and threw them to the floor at the foot of the bed. She took the pillows and threw those as well. Then she lifted the mattress and flipped it off the bed frame so that it crashed against the TV.

“What do you think you’re doing,” Henry said.

Catherine did not say anything. She got on her knees and looked at the bed frame. She touched a screw in one of the planks that connected the headboard to the baseboard. She got up and went over to a stack of banana boxes that stood against the wall. She ripped the cover off one of the boxes, found Henry’s toolbox and opened it. There was hardly anything in the toolbox: a hammer, a box of nails, a tape measure and a screwdriver. When she took the screwdriver, Henry grabbed her arm. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he said and then he looked at her with his mouth tightly closed.

Richard and Sara stood beside the dining room table, watching.

Catherine pulled her arm away and then she pushed Henry and he fell back against the wall. For a moment she watched him.

Catherine went back to the bed. She unscrewed all the smaller planks that lay parallel to the headboard, that were supposed to hold the mattress. She unscrewed these, one by one. She let the screws fall and clink on the floor and then she threw the smaller planks behind her. Some landed on the coffee table. Some landed on the sofa. She unscrewed the headboard and when it fell, the two bigger planks that connected the headboard to the baseboard scratched the floor. She

didn't care. It was all coming apart and she didn't care anymore. She unscrewed the two bigger planks from the baseboard. When these fell, they slapped the floor. The bed frame was all in pieces but she did not care anymore.

When Catherine looked up, Henry was standing in front of her. She felt his breath on her face. "You're insane," he said. Then he said, "Leave. I don't care where you go but I want you to leave right now. I want you to leave," he said.

Catherine looked at Richard.

Richard wasn't smiling. He put his arm around Sara's shoulder and pulled her close.

"Leave," Henry said. "Right now."

For a while Catherine looked at Henry.

Henry looked at Catherine as though she were capable of doing anything.

Catherine went over to get her coat and then she opened the front door and closed it behind her without looking at any of them. She would come back to get her things tomorrow, or else she would come back the next week when Henry would be less upset. He needed time to calm down. Either way, she had a lot of things here: clothes, books, furniture. She had things here that she needed, that she couldn't do without, but she did not want to have anything to do with the bed. Henry could do whatever he wanted with the bed. Catherine started down the concrete path toward her car. The rain had stopped and her car shone in the sun.

Forgotten

Cristina Liggett-Wise
Second Prize

“Don’t leave me...take me with you...please...” a cry that was never answered...a wish never fulfilled...

It could have been any day...it was always the same.

Tanya lay on her bed staring at the ceiling trying to answer the question she was told to come up with an answer to.

What did you do wrong?

She had fed and watered the rabbit, done the dishes and put the food away. She had finished her English and math assignments so what HAD she done wrong?

She didn’t know...it might have been something...it may have been nothing...

She was supposed to be in here for an hour and it had been far longer. Tanya sighed thinking, “Where was that book? I put it somewhere...it couldn’t be in the dresser.” It would be found...she closed her eyes to think. “Ah yes”...silently she slipped her fingers between the mattress and the bed frame. Voila, the *Magician’s Nephew*. She listened carefully for footsteps. There weren’t any. She opened the book and began to read. She listened carefully and tried not to get lost in the story. If they caught her reading when she was already under punishment, she’d be grounded from reading again. The book would either be confiscated or torn up.

~~~~~

A while later she didn’t know how long she’d been reading when she heard familiar footsteps. Her father only could walk short distances because of the accident. It was too hard to maneuver in the sports chair because the narrow hallway and doorways of their house. She quickly hid the book and lay there pretending to think.

The door opened; she sat up and stayed quiet. It was always best.

“What are you doing? Don’t you know what time it is? You’re supposed to be in school. Its three o’clock and your friends are already home. You can’t play if you don’t finish your work.”

Her father had forgotten she was being punished again; she got up slowly and lowered her head, “Yes dad...I’ll go finish.” It was an empty threat. She wouldn’t have been allowed to play. She rarely was allowed

to play so it was best to assume she wouldn't be able to. She silently walked past him and back to the living room, "Mom...what am I supposed to be doing for Science..."

Her mother had been dozing again; she was always asleep. Was it because she was unhappy or because she wasn't good? "What? Oh just read the next chapter and answer the questions."

That was easy. This was a rather boring school. She wished she could just go to the neighborhood school. Maybe she'd have real friends. That was a wish that would never be granted. She walked into the schoolroom and closed the door. It was silent and dark, but she wasn't afraid because she was surrounded by old friends. She ran a tender finger along the spines of the books that made her lonely life bearable as she made her way to her desk. It was old-fashioned but it made the room look more like a school room than a family room. She lifted the lid and removed her science text. Sighing and lonely, she started to read. Wasn't school supposed to be fun?

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She'd been caught reading again...it had to be after 11 at night. It was so dark...it wasn't that she didn't like the dark. It was that she could no longer turn on the light that scared her. She'd been careful; she'd left the hall light on and had something behind the door to block the light. She'd been yelled at again before bed; first do the dishes, then to stop snacking once she was inside the kitchen and get her father a drink of water. When she left the kitchen with a glass she'd been yelled at for not doing the dishes. She tried to explain herself only to see him raise his hand; she had cringed in response. She handed the glass to her brother Zach who was sitting watching TV as usual. He never had to do dishes...or any other chores besides making his bed, which he rarely did. He was 9 and she was 12; they were always treating him like he was younger than he was. She had been doing chores since she was 7, why hadn't he? She tried teaching him responsibility by asking him to help with little jobs like putting away the forks and spoons or matching the socks before they were washed. Handing him the glass had gotten her in worse trouble; she'd been accused of giving away a job. She stood up for herself for once, regretting her words as they left her mouth, "Dad, I'm not. I can't do two things at once. You asked me to do the dishes. I was. I wasn't eating anything. Then you ask me to get you water. I can't do both. I got the glass, I put ice in it and I'm going to finish the bigger job. All Zach has

to do is put water in it.”

Her father nearly moved to hit her, but her mother actually stopped him.

“She has a point. Just go do the dishes, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? Seriously, how old did they think she was? She silently went and finished the job.

She'd been sent to do the dishes, so she missed watching *Law and Order SVU*. They didn't let her do them during the commercials tonight. She was upset; she loved that show. She empathized with the victims...now she'd lost her book and her light bulb...

She fell into a tortured sleep...

So involved with reading Charlie and the Chocolate Factory she never heard the door open, but she felt the book ripped from her hand and the yell.

“What do you think you are doing? You think we sent you back here to read? You were sent here to think...”

Then came the first blow. This wasn't a swat to her bottom with a flat hand...that was the book coming down on her arm. It kept landing on her; the spine on the book hurt worse than the cover of the book. She dove off the bed to escape...she scrambled trying to get away, but she wasn't very quick and the area between the beds was small...he was over six feet and very fast. Tears streamed down her face, cries of pain escaped her lips...

“How dare you? What are you thinking...”

The blows stopped. She crumbled to the floor crying...

Her mother, who had a broken hip prosthesis, had her father by the throat. “You ever hit my daughter with anything other than your hand again. I will hurt you myself.”

“She was being defiant...”

“You sent her back here for an hour and said you'd get her when her time was up...you fell asleep, what do you think she'd do? She'd be in more trouble for sleeping than reading. You can't ground her from sleeping, just books. You know how much trouble I went to get her to read...”

“You were asleep too...”

“You kept me up all night. What do you expect...”

She covered her ears; she hated fighting...this fight was her fault...why couldn't she obey? She hurt...she was still crying when the door slammed. She could still hear them yelling, but it wasn't about her anymore. Zach was probably watching Magic School Bus or Bill Nye the Science Guy; he wouldn't notice anything. She crawled into her bed and curled up with her giant bear.

She woke up crying. That happened a few weeks ago... she could

almost feel the blows. She would never let herself get that absorbed again. She couldn't count on her mother to defend her... why didn't her father seem to love her? Why did everything she did have to be wrong? Was she incapable of being good?

~~~~~  
It was a Friday and Fridays could be fun...sometimes there was no school. They were going to spend the day at the science museum. If she behaved well after dinner they would go to Powells'.

Powells' was heaven on earth, seven and a half stories high and a block wide in all directions. Different genres were coupled together in different colored rooms; Classics, Comic books, True crime, Sci Fi and Fantasy were in the Blue room next to the Coffee shop, which was Brown. The religion books were with the foreign language books like Japanese or Spanish in the Red room. She had the *Magician's Nephew* and the *Horse and His Boy* in Spanish at home; sometimes she read them side-by-side to see what she knew. The Japanese section had an entire aisle of manga...not that she could read any of it. She wasn't allowed to watch cartoons unless they were *Magic School Bus* or *Car-men San Diego*; they had to be educational. Her Japanese was limited to what she had learned from the Teach Me series.

She loved the place; only in bookstores did she ever truly feel free. She was left on order to stand in the children's section, the Rose Room and not move. It was an order she gladly followed. She found the book she had been reading last month, *Gypsy*. She opened it to page 56 and began to read. It was the story of a lonely girl and a horse no one could capture. She was soon absorbed in the book and was sad when she was finished. She closed the book and put it away. Should she start a new book or finish one she was reading elsewhere?

Tanya had a quick mind and learned very early to memorize her page number where she left off in as many as ten books at a time. She was forever losing her bookmarks and it saved the time of paging through the book to find her place. Sometimes she remembered the exact paragraph which helped since she frequented three libraries and four bookstores. She always had one book ongoing in each. She glanced through the titles and found the exact copy of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* she was reading at *Reader's Guide to Recycled Literature*. She found page 116 and sat down with the book. She finished it and decided she had time to start a new book. She found the Royal Dairies series and selected one she hadn't read before. She sat on the floor and

began to read the ‘diary’ of Katherine of Leon and Castille, the future Queen of Spain.

Her father rolled up in his Quickie teal sport chair, there was a difference between sports chairs and wheelchairs, a difference growing up with disabled parents one learned. A wheelchair is like what you get sent out of a hospital with; those are heavy, over a hundred pounds sometimes. A sports chair was lighter by comparison; you could play basketball or rugby in them or even race. Her dad’s chair weighed about 25-30lbs; even a kid could easily lift it. “We’re going. They’ll close in ten minutes.”

She nodded and read the page number, 87. She whispered it under her breath as she returned the book and followed him. If he had been in good mood he might have let her pick one out to take home but not tonight and she knew better than to ask. They rode the elevator from the Rose room to the floor of the Orange room. They would cut through the cards and contemporary art books to get to the front where they would meet her little brother and her mother. Zach was already sitting in Mom’s lap as they waited in line. Mom’s sport chair was a deep purple and folded to the size of a medium suitcase, it was around 15 lbs she was sure. Not that it ever mattered. She rarely paid attention when she had to put them away in the car.

The overheard speaker announced they were closing in five minutes and to bring all selections to the front counter. They ALWAYS closed down Powells’; they almost always closed every place they went. She was a little tired; she would probably be asleep before they reached the freeway. She was very good at falling asleep in the car if she didn’t have a book. It was almost eleven thirty and it was far too dark to read now.

They made their way to the car; they had parked in the lot belonging to a Print shop. The only thing mom hated about Powells was that it was in the Rainbow district. She didn’t care, though she did think it was a little funny to see two guys hold hands or kissing but it didn’t really bother her. What was so wrong about it? She yawned and climbed into the car. Sleep sounded really good.

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Sent to their room after a phone call, they were supposed to be going to the Science Museum and then Powells. Yet Tanya and Zach were playing Clue; Tanya was Miss Scarlet again as always and Zach was Professor Plum. The doorbell rang; Tanya peeked out the window and saw a Police car. It shocked her, what was going on?

She tried to pretend everything was normal for Zach's sake but something was very wrong. Her family was strange; she didn't like it. She always wanted to run away...to find somewhere she felt safe. A place she could actually smile...where she felt loved...did such a place exist? What was so different about them? Why didn't she go to a real school? Why wasn't she allowed to play like the kids next door? She heard a noise and shoved the game board under the bed, probably losing pieces.

Soon her mom opened the door, "Zach..." Her voice was husky from tears, "Zach, come here...I want to talk to you..."

Now she was alone, she was scared and confused. She curled up with a book and tried to escape. She read until her mother came and got her too.

She sat on the ottoman and her mother was hugging her. It was strange...

"The detective wants to ask you some questions..."

Tanya blinked. A detective? Where was her father and where was Zach? Something was very wrong...

A very nice lady smiled at her, "My name is Detective Jefferies; I'm going to ask you some questions."

Tanya nodded, she'd be happy to answer any questions. She tried to be a good girl...

"Has your father ever touched you down there..." the detective gestured below her waist.

"No..."

"Have you ever seen him touch anyone else..."

"No..."

"Has anyone everyone ever mentioned being touched in a way that made them uncomfortable..."

Tanya shook her head; then she remembered her father helping to teach an older kid Jake to make sure he made it to the bathroom so he could get out of diapers. His older brother, Matthew had started wetting the bed recently...well before they stopped visiting. A snippet of an SUV episode ran through her head. It had mentioned bed wetting as a sign of abuse...usually sexual. Her heart twisted. She'd respected Matthew as a friend. They were both the oldest in their families and were often left to baby-sit together when their parents decided to go out together...

Tanya shook her head at most of the questions. A picture was start-

ing to form in her mind and everything was falling in place thanks to her favorite show. Her father was a probably a pedophile yet he had never touched her; in fact he always seemed to hate her. She started to cry, "Please tell me he didn't touch Zach..." she was the older sister; she was supposed to protect him. Sure Zach was annoying but what little brother wasn't?

The detective shook her head, "It doesn't seem like it. He must have been too young."

Tanya felt the stiff arms of her mother wrap around her and she shook free, "I don't think you need me...I'm going back to my room." She left them trying to calm herself and understand this. Her father was a pedophile...he had touched boys her age, she knew he had. She covered her mouth; her friends... no...the kids she hung out with at church were boys. Not them. She asked, "God how could you let this happen? They had enough problems; those boys come from broken homes, blended families, or were pushed aside for younger siblings with disabilities. They didn't need him to do this to them. What kind of God lets kids get hurt..." Her family was in pieces, it had already been falling apart but it was worse now. She didn't have a father anymore; her's was a criminal, an abuser. How could she look any of her former playmates in the face again? Somehow she had known that, the way he always threatened to throw her through the living room wall so she would land hard on the concrete floor. The way he would call her stupid and claimed she couldn't do anything right.

Her mother was always sleeping and was barely there; she didn't have anyone to turn to...she was alone. She'd always been alone; she wanted someone, anyone to care. She was tired of being forgotten and left alone. Zach was always in his own world. They were light years apart...

If someone, anyone had listened to her cries could this have been prevented? Could those boys have been spared the pain? Could she... should she have seen it?

Tanya rocked back and forth, "He's gone...but I feel more alone than ever...I still don't feel safe...I want to hate him...like he hated me...why..."

Tears fell down her face; her mind filled with questions that would never be answered...pain that would follow her, a betrayal that would never be forgotten...even if she were....

The Father and the son

Sean Kinneen

Third Prize

My father lived in a house on Shepherd Avenue. I had not spoken to him for a long time because I was working hard in all my classes. Then I began to do poorly. I wanted to stay with him for the weekend. Clara—my sister—agreed to pick me up at my apartment on the other side of town.

As we left McKinley Avenue in the early morning and drove along Highway 41, the fog started to roll away and it began to rain. It was February and the cold wind had torn off all the leaves from the trees along the side of the road, and as I sat in the passenger seat of Clara's Buick Regal, I saw the wind drive the rain hard against the anonymous cars that passed us.

"For the last time," I said as the cold wind rushed through the car. "Do you think you could close your window?"

She looked at me from her side of the car, her black hair blowing all over her pale face.

"Why?" She said looking back ahead at the road. "I like it with the window down."

"I want to talk to you."

"Oh fine."

She closed her window, still looking ahead of her as the rain beat hard against the windshield. She sat there, leaned forward, her head just over the steering wheel, her face scrunched up with focus.

"So how's dad?" I said.

"He just mopes. He mopes around all the time. I've tried to get him to do things, but he just mopes around all the time."

We were silent for awhile.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"I don't know."

"When's the last time you talked to him?"

For a while I neglected to answer. The rain beat steadily against the windshield.

"This morning," I said. "How's his back, anyway?"

"I don't know. He's started running again. I told him it's not good to run."

“He’s an idiot,” I said. “Just like he’s always been.”

“Oh Charlie, please don’t say things like that,” she said, clasping my arm from across the gear shift. “You don’t really mean that, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I said removing her hand. “With his back the way it is, I just think it’s idiotic, but somehow it always seems to work for him. Discipline.”

She slumped further forward and fixed her eyes straight ahead. She always kept the inside of her car very clean so that my package of cigarettes on the dashboard made it all look rotten. I took a cigarette, lighted it and opened the window. The wind screamed through the car.

“What’s he been doing?” I said.

“What?”

“What’s he been doing to keep himself occupied?”

“Oh playing with Tyson. I don’t know. He’s always playing with Tyson. He’s in love with that dog I think. By the way, how *are* your classes?”

“I haven’t been doing as well as I could.”

Clara got off the highway, and the rain lightened to a soft drizzle. She went right and drove on toward Shepherd Avenue. At the street before Shepherd, the light turned red and Clara turned to me.

“Seriously,” She said taking my hand in earnest. “I’m so happy you’re staying for the weekend. I seriously think it’s going to be great—better than old times—but I hope you’re planning on connecting with him somehow other than just being in the same room with him.”

The light had turned green. The horn went off from the car behind us, and Clara jumped in her seat.

My father lives at the end of a *cul de sac* off Shepherd, and when Clara turned into his street, I could see my father sitting on the curb in front of his house, tossing a football up in the air. Tyson sat excitedly and obediently in front of him, watching the football rise in the air then land in my father’s large hands. When my father saw us coming down his street, he stood up slowly, wincing his eyes slightly and clutching the small of his back.

Clara pulled up into the driveway next to his old Ford police interceptor that had seen so many dark, wild neighborhoods, and held so many wild, out of control men. I got out of Clara’s car, stubbed my cigarette out on the concrete, and pulling up the collar of my coat against the wind. I walked down the driveway to greet my father.

“Hello Dad,” I said watching the vapor of my breath rise in the air.

“Hey, Charlie. I didn’t know you smoked.”

“Oh. I do. Did you want one?”

“I quit a while ago. It was making me look like an old fart.”

“Aren’t you proud of him?” Clara said, coming down the driveway.

“He’s done very well, *and* he’s had no help at all either.”

She went up next to him and put her arm around his waist.

“I’m very proud,” I said. “I’ve tried to quit but I can never do it.”

“Hey angel,” he said to her.

“So how’ve you been dad?” I said.

Keeping his back straight, he bent down on his knees to Tyson’s level. I could tell how much it hurt him when he bent down by the way he scrunched his face up, and by the way he tried to hide it. I knew every time he went for a run, or tried to lift weights, or tried to play racquetball with friends who did not know, it got worse. He rubbed Tyson’s head, and he kept saying his name over and over, and Tyson had his eyes closed with his big German shepherd head leaned into my father’s hand.

“Fine,” he said. “Retirement’s a bitch, but I’ve been running, and Tyson here’s kept me company.”

“How is the old K-9?” I said.

“Look at him,” Clara said, “he’s in heaven.”

“Isn’t he?” My father said looking up at Clara.

I bent down to rub Tyson under the chin, but when my hand came near him he growled and glared at me with his dark eyes. I stood up again.

“He’s just a little devil,” my father said. “Probably he doesn’t remember you.”

“Probably,” I said.

“Have you taken him for a walk?” Clara said.

I looked at her sharply, and glancing at me, she shrugged her shoulders.

“I took him for a quick run this morning,” my father said looking at Tyson. “But it was quick. I think this old dog is getting too old to run.”

He gave Tyson a hard rub under the chin. I saw the football by the curb and went over and picked it up.

“Hey,” I said. “Isn’t this my old football from high school?”

“Yeah,” my father said, “Tyson loves to fetch it. He can’t get enough of it.”

“You feel like throwing it around real quick? You and me?”

“Sure why not. Tyson go over there,” he said.

Tyson went over to the Ford, and Clara followed him. I watched

my father get up, then I ran down to the middle of the street. The sun had started to come out, and when I turned around to look for my father, he had his arms folded, standing at the end of the driveway, and the sun shone in patches through the clouds behind him.

I watched my father. He clapped his large hands and thrust them out for me to throw the ball. I tossed the ball. It spiraled lightly through the air—it was a light, controlled throw. The ball landed in his arms, cradled against his chest, with a dull thud. He didn't say anything, but he motioned for me to move back. It would be a long throw. I ran backward, keeping my eye on his throwing hand, and then he threw the ball, and it spiraled high and tight through the air. I got under it, and it landed in my chest, snug between my arms. It had been a hard throw—harder than mine, and my chest stung where the ball hit me, and my hands stung because of the cold.

"Nice." I yelled and threw the ball lighter than before.

The sun shone bright now, and again he motioned for me to move back. I ran backward further down the street, and he threw the ball high, and it disappeared in the sun. The white light of the sun burned in my eyes. I searched frantically for the ball, and then I saw it six feet above me, about to hit me in the head. I ducked, and the ball slapped the gravel behind me.

"What was wrong with that?" My father yelled.

I felt my heart racing, and still looking at my father, I picked up the ball.

"I couldn't see it in the sun," I yelled.

"Whatever." My father yelled, his hands cupped around his mouth, "Just throw it, you little girl."

I threw the ball straight and level with the ground where I wanted it to go—to my father's left. He saw where it was going, and started running for it—his steps were labored and heavy and I could tell it hurt him. The ball came at him quick, and he ran hard, and almost lined up with the ball. He almost got in front of it, but it came too quick. He thrust out his arms, his fingers spread wide, and he jumped straight out in a dive to catch the ball. Clara stood by the Ford with her hands over her mouth. He hit the ground—I heard him yell.

Clara ran over to him and knelt down by his side, and I heard him moaning. She looked at me with her dark eyes and her pale face, and I felt as if I was watching some anonymous neighbors from a balcony somewhere.

Sidewalk Guy

Isaac Weil

Honorable Mention

This guy walks toward me. He steps over the tenting of the sidewalk, over mountains and plains with radial faults, formed by the clashing of concrete plates and uplifted by tree roots. He scuffs over mini Sierra Nevadas, and crushes leaves building up like sediment in valley floors. He kicks a couple of ant-made cinder cones erupting from the boundary of sidewalk and lawn, spraying the sand onto the grass like pyroclastic material covering a forest.

The guy's shirt is open. Not completely open, the bottom button is closed. I see a long triangle of flesh framed by the blue of his shirt. He steps down a steep cliff in the sidewalk. It looks like a thrust fault. I'll have to be careful when I come to that part of the sidewalk. I might trip and stumble and fall on my face like I did before and people looking out of their windows will see. The cracks looked like crevasses when my face was pressed against the concrete. Or maybe they won't even notice. Maybe I will trip and fall into one of the cracks. Slip away out of sight, out of the world; see only a small white line of sunlight above me. Feel so small. Will anyone wonder about me?

Geology lecture. I saw him there. I remember. His shoes were on the back of the seat in front of him, his elbow was resting on his knee, his hand by his crotch. I watched his fingers move. I saw his eyes. He looked at the cell phone in his lap while he typed a message. I can't remember what the lecture was about. Volcanoes maybe.

He is walking straight at me, still a little way down the sidewalk, but I move over to the right anyway. I feel a tug as my shorts catch on freshly watered rosebush thorns. The water that jumps from a leaf tickles my knee-hair.

What will I do when I have to pass this man? Should I talk to him? What should I say: Hello? Hi? How you doing? Wuzzup? Why the fuck are you wearing your shirt like that? Seriously, what kind of bimbo does he expect to pick up with that style?

Maybe I should try unbuttoning my shirt? But could I really pull it off?

I could just ignore him. Act too cool to even acknowledge that he exists. But I would really like to talk to someone. Even just a "hi"

would help me deal with all this shit. I see so many jerks talking on cell phones, texting, bumping into me in the halls outside of the classroom. I take my cell phone out of my pocket.

“5:37 p.m.” it tells me.

It’s so hard to decide. It’s hard to even keep my eyes open. I can’t think with all this information stuffed inside my brain like waste in a backed-up colon. My brain makes grumbling noises. I feel its contents being squeezed, distended, shifted, sending out vibrations.

The guy is closer, passing under the island shadow of a tree. I straighten my back, pull my shoulders away from my ears, suck in my stomach, bring my chin in close to my chest, hold my head straight, try to stretch an extra quarter of an inch taller, and square my shoulders. Cars are squeezed against the curb along the whole length of the street. I glance at the reflective surface of a rear window. My hand spasms. It wants to run itself through my hair but the guy is too close. He’ll see me.

I can hear his shoes scuffle along the sidewalk, hear him exhale. See the v of soap-soft hair exposed on his chest, his collarbones that raise his skin, his neck, his chin, his mouth. Smell the sharp smell of sand from the anthills he kicked. Taste the plastic taste of his hair-gel. I try to make eye contact.

“Hi,” I say.

He smiles. “Hey, what’s happening dawg. Good to see you.”

“Uh, not much.”

But he walks right past me. Looks at a guy who has just emerged from a beat up red car. He reaches out to embrace his friend. I leave them both behind, feet moving fast, shoulders slumped, head down, eyes on the cracks in the sidewalk.

shame

Isaac Weil

Honorable Mention

Ari walked through a mirrored hallway. A harsh, white light bulb hung from the ceiling. He pulled his shirt taut and sucked in his stomach. A row of a thousand Aris pulled their shirts taut and sucked in their stomachs, tightening and stretching their abdominals, muscles pulled like a balloon over a tin can. His reflection stared. Soo-Lee peeked his head back into the hallway, “Are you coming?” Ari released his breath, ran away from the mirrors into a room of scuffed wood.

The floors glossy hardwood, the low hum of an air conditioner hung in the air. Cubbies, made of thinner plywood, lined the walls. A straight, wooden broom stood against the wall, its frayed, faded yellow straw curled against the floor held potential energy ready to spring. “Anyong ha-seyo,” said a girl from behind a counter. Soo-Lee answered while Ari shuffled around. A blast of frozen, stale air smacked him in his face as he wandered past an air vent. The girl from the counter handed Ari a key, flashed a smile before turning away back to her computer. “Shoes off,” said Soo-Lee and slipped out of his shoes, worn, so that grey threads and elastic peeked out around the white leather. Ari kicked off his sandals, his feet sweaty and musty from the long drive to L.A., black dirt caked under the toenail of his big toe. They felt like lumpy slabs of pork, his feet, lying on a clean, cold butcher’s block. He trundled over to the cubbies, opened one with his key and put his shoes inside.

Shoulders hunched, Ari slumped after Soo-Lee, past an empty in-house barbershop. Soo-Lee glanced at the tangled bush that sprung from Ari’s head. Soo-Lee’s cheek twitched. A flat voice speaking a long, purposeful stream of Korean, came out of the room ahead, along with the static of showers and the rumble of men. Ari tasted chlorine in the air. He swallowed. They entered the main hub of the spa. Fog hung in the air flavored with the plastic scent of hair care products. Korean news flashed on a screen attached to a wall. Three middle-aged men lounged on wide, padded, benches, and watched, each man with drooping eyes, drooping gut and drooping genitals. Soo-Lee pulled his shirt over his head and revealed his slender, hairless torso. He hopped out of his pants and underwear, folded them all and placed them in a

wooden locker against one wall. "Take off our clothes?" Ari asked,

"Yes," said Soo-Lee.

"Everything?"

"Everything."

The men on the benches watched Ari wriggle off his shirt. He looked down at his bare chest, hairy lumps, like flesh color play-dough slapped onto his muscles. They watched him step slowly out of his pants. And then his boxers. Droplets from the fog clung to all of his crevices. His skin itched.

"I can't believe you're still so fat," Soo-Lee said to Ari. "You look like a baby."

Ari wanted to say fuck off but he just said, "I'm working on it."

"You better be."

"I am. Do you think I like the way I look?" Ari turned and saw a full-length mirror. His body was wreathed in a halo of condensation. Water dripped along the sides of his stomach rolls. He twisted, stretched, the bottoms of his feet tickled by tile, trying to smooth out his midsection. Loud pops filled his head. He felt the disks of his spine grind against one another. The television prattled on. Ari heard a grunt behind him. Soo-Lee stepped through a spotless glass door at the other end of the room. Hurrying after him once again, Ari whispered, "I'm working on it."

War Paint

Monique Quintana
Honorable Mention

They had painted the signs with red paint. War paint, they called it. That is what it felt like to the boys on the Selrna High School wrestling team. They had suffered many wounds in battle. Broken noses, and broken fingers. There were too many nights spent running around in circles, and sitting in cars with the heater cranked up. One night before a match, Fox had to put on five pounds. He ate so many powdered donuts that he looked like Marie Antoinette.

That year, the athletic director of the university in the city had made a special announcement in an afternoon press conference. The university would cut its wrestling program. Wrestling teams from all over the valley had planned to hold a protest at the athletic director's house. Fox had just received a wrestling scholarship to go to school there that fall. If the program was cut then he would lose the scholarship. Coach Benny gave Fox directions to the house over the telephone, and he scrawled them on a paper towel with a red ball point pen.

Fox's best friend Tommy borrowed his mother's old brown sedan so that they could go to the protest. The car had no air conditioning, so all its windows were rolled down. Fox looked at himself in the side view mirror, and smiled back at his reflection. His smile was crooked, and the warm wind whipped through his long black hair, scratching his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

With Fox's help it did not take long for Tommy to find the athletic director's house. It was just a few miles from the fifth exit off the freeway into town. The neighborhood consisted of massive old houses; each one looked different from the other. Fox thought that he might like to live there someday, if he ever had a good job and 2.5 children.

"We're here. We're at the old guy's house. Look at all the people who showed up. We have the best signs here!" Fox said as he unbuckled his seat belt. He leaped out of the car, and tripped over a gash in the old sidewalk. He fell face first onto the sidewalk, scraping his knees. Tommy roared in laughter, holding his hand out to help him up. Fox jumped up, said, "Fuck you!", and grabbed a sign from the back seat of the car.

The boys ran over to the crowd in front of the athletic director's

house and joined their disorganized chanting. Some stocky white boy had risen up to be the official leader of the protest. He had red cotton candy hair and so many freckles that he looked like one of those Howdy Doody dolls that you see on Antique Road show.

"This dude looks like a square, but he's got alotta charisma' Fox said as he nudged Tommy's elbow. "He kind of reminds me of Hitler."

The protest went on for a good hour before everyone realized that the athletic director was not home. Someone had called Howdy Doody on his cell phone and told him that he had gone with his wife and two kids to the Bahamas. The boys shuffled their way back to the sedan, and rode the twenty five minutes back home in silence.

Tommy and Fox sat in the sedan in front of Fox's house, listening to the radio and smoking some weed from a mushroom shaped pipe.

"Hey, are you sure your mom can't see us from the kitchen window? I don't want her telling my mom anything," Tommy said as he reached over, opened the glove compartment and grabbed a bottle of cheap cologne.

"I don't think she can see us. But who cares. I wish she would come out here and take a hit. She's always on the edge. The other day she wrote a *fuck you* message on a post-it and left it on my bedroom door."

Fox rolled down the window and began to gag as Tommy sprayed the cologne all over the front and back seat of the car.

"Look, damn! Here comes your mom! And your sister too!" Fox's mother and sister Kylie came walking towards the car, both waving their arms like windshield wipers. They both had the same heart shaped face, and dark eyes. Fox ran his hand through his hair, and slumped down in the seat, lowering his eyelids as if he were going to take a nap.

Whenever one of Fox's friends came around it always seemed like his mother's voice went up a few octaves.

"Heeey, what are you two clowns doing sitting in the car! Tommy! Your dog got out of your backyard again. I saw her when I was driving to the store. I had to pull over and put her back in the yard. Your mom should have someone fix that fence. That little doggie could have gotten hit by a car. She's so tiny!"

Tommy leaned over, and began to cough. "Uhh, well thanks for doing that. That little dog is a bad ass. That's really my sister's dog. She's the one that's supposed to be taking care of it."

Kylie ran over to the car and stuck her head through the passen-

ger window. Her dyed blonde hair flew in Fox's face, and he gave her shoulder a nudge to push her away.

"Damn it Fox! I'm trying to talk about stuff! Hey, you guys! Did you know that Benny's wife has been gone for like a whole week already? Yeah, I overheard my teacher talking about it at school. Maybe she got tired of putting up with Benny's crap."

Fox's mother shot her a hot look, and pulled her away from the car.

"Come on, you can't talk about that out here. You're so loud. The whole neighborhood will hear you!"

"Well, I guess I get my loudness from my mother!" Kylie wailed as they walked back into the house.

Fox looked over and saw that Tommy was staring down the street at their coach Benny's house. It was an old house, but it was quite nice. It had a small wraparound porch, and was painted blue like a robin's egg. Benny's wife Marcy had just planted yellow rose plants along the pathway to the house. Fox had seen her do it a few weeks earlier, while he was washing his mother's car.

"Yep, I don't see Marcy's red minivan in the driveway," Tommy said as he started the car, "Shit! I'm glad that wrestling season is over. Benny was on my ass the whole time. I bet you Marcy did get tired of him. I know I did. She probably got tired of hearing all the stories about him running around in Fresno."

"Yeah, those really get around," Fox said, slamming the door of the car.

"Hey be careful! Don't slam the door like that. You know how old this car is?" Tommy cranked the radio as he drove away.

Benny Meyers was the wrestling coach at Selma High School. He was Irish Catholic, thirty nine years old, with light brown hair and blue eyes the same color of his house. Fox's mother once said he looked like a young John Kennedy, without all the money and an Ivy League education. He had told her he moved to California from some town in the Midwest. He met his wife Marcy while doing construction work in the city. That was how he earned most of his living.

"So how did you end up here," Fox asked Benny one afternoon that fall while they rolled up mats after practice. Everyone had already left except Tommy's younger sister Lindsey. She had just volunteered to be the team's official gopher. She had always been sort of a tomboy, and claimed that she liked to hang around boys in tight uniforms. Fox suspected that she was just lonely, and needed something to do.

"Yeah, Benny! How did you end up in this god forsaken town? That's what I want to know!" Lindsey chimed in while slugging Fox with a sweaty towel that had been thrown on the floor.

Benny laughed, and flicked off the lights.

"Well, Lindsey, you know, they make California look real good in the movies. Sunny beaches and famous people all over the place."

Lindsey still stood in the dark room, peering out the door at Benny and Fox. Her hands were placed on her tiny hips, and her long brown hair was falling out of the pencil that held it up. She looked at Benny, squinting her large almond shaped eyes, making them look like tiny half moons.

"Well, you thought that California was cool because they only show L.A. in the movies. They never show anyplace around here. They don't show the fog, or the cows, or the earthquakes. Just all the pretty stuff. "

After all the California talk, Benny gave Fox and Lindsey a ride home in a old pickup truck that he had just bought, hoping to restore. Fox hopped into the front seat of the truck, and became sandwiched between his coach and Lindsey. He rolled down to the bottom of the seat and threw his hooded sweatshirt over his head.

"Ahhh, coach! I don't want anyone to see me in here! Tell me when we get out of the school parking lot!"

Benny laughed, and Lindsey told him he was being stuck up. As they drove out of the parking lot, they passed the homecoming queen Jenny Fernandez, who was waiting for her mother to pick her up. Someone had taken her last name, cut it in half, so everyone at school called her Fernnie. Her family owned the only two laundry mats in town.

"Hey what's up girl!" Lindsey said as she waved at her. "Hey, Fox is hiding down here because he's embarrassed to be seen in this beat up old bucket. Isn't he so stuck up?"

When Fox heard Fernnie laugh, he popped up as if he were a Jack-in-the-box. He leaned over Lindsey, covered her mouth with his hand, and stuck his head out the window.

"Hey Feernie!" he called out as they drove off into the road. "Did you see my picture in the paper? The one with me and all my medals. I bet you like that, huh?!"

When they got to his house, Fox couldn't wait for Lindsey to open the door for him to get out. He had needed to go to the bathroom for the last twenty minutes. He climbed over her, and leaped out onto the

driveway.

"Uhhh, thanks for the ride!" he yelled as struggled to unlock his front door, and ran into his house. As he was zipping up his jeans, he heard his mother's car coming up the driveway. He heard his sister call for help bringing in the groceries. As he walked out towards his mother's car, he looked down towards Benny's house, and wondered why he had dropped him off first, when Lindsey and Tommy lived on the other side of town.

The police found Marcy's red minivan about three weeks after she left home. It was in the parking lot of some dingy strip mall in the city. After that Fox saw five or six local news reporters knock on Benny's door, shoving cameras and microphones in his face. He always had the same cool look, the same cool response. He would politely ask them to call his lawyer, and close the door in their faces.

He went around town as he usually did, as if his wife had never left. He even came to Fox's house to borrow an extension ladder. Fox's father loaned it to him, did not say much about it, because he had always liked Benny. Thought he was a decent guy.

Fox's mother watched out the kitchen window, as Benny walked back towards his house with the ladder.

"His wife is missing and he's painting the trim on his house. You don't think that seems a little odd?" She was peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink, and Fox worried that her finger might slip against the paring knife because she would not take her eyes away from the window. He had come to the kitchen to get his soda, and found his mother and sister there. His sister was sitting on the table cutting perfume samples out of a stack of old magazines.

"Mom, I told you. Stop saying things like that!" he said as the tiny bubbles from the soda sizzled in his throat. "Marcy just went coo-coo and took off. Everyone knows that coach messes around on the side. She probably just got fed up."

"Yeah, Benny's hot!" Squealed Kylie with a devilish laugh. She was rubbing a perfume sample on her neck. Her dirty blond hair was a tangled mess, and her eye shadow matched her rainbow colored shirt. All the freshmen girls at school had been wearing rainbow colored shirts. Their mother finally looked away from the window and rolled her eyes. Kylie laughed again, "Mom, you know it's true!"

Fox's mother walked out of the kitchen when the drier in the laundry room let out a loud buzz. A large pot on the stove began to boil

over with water. Fox lowered its burner, and looked into the pot. The hot steam felt good on his face. Kylie ran over to the sink and quickly gathered the peeled potatoes in both of her hands.

"Move out of the way," she said. "I'm gonna drop these in that pot right there." As the potatoes fell in the pot, water splashed on Fox's t-shirt.

"Oh no, I hope that didn't burn you," Kylie said as she went back to her magazines. But Fox did not even feel the water because he was too busy thinking about other things.

That night Fox called Tommy and Queen Fernie using three way on his cordless telephone. Fox ate chips and salsa through much of the conversation, which Fernie said was rude and disgusting. Tommy complained about his sister Lindsey being spoiled and lazy.

My mom lets that damn girl do anything she wants. My dad doesn't care. Ever since he got remarried he hardly ever calls us. His wife is pregnant again. Can you believe that? He's too old to be having kids. It's embarrassing. I have a skank sister, and my dad is the village idiot! And nobody seems to care."

"Ahhh, Tommygun!" laughed Fox. "We care! Me and Fernie! We care! We understand your plight."

After about a half hour of talking Tommy had fallen asleep with the phone on his hear. Fox and Fernie yelled at him to hang up.

"Well, I think I'm gonna go to bed too," Fernie said through a muffled yawn.

"Ahh, no! I don't wanna hang up yet. What time is it? It's not that late."

"Uhhh, yeah it is. It's almost twelve thirty. I think my parents are already asleep. Hey Fox, why did your parents start calling you Fox?" Fernie was whispering know that she realized how late it was.

They started calling me Fox because when I was a little baby I was really sneaky. I used to climb out of my crib when I was supposed to be sleeping and creep around the hallway, watching out for my mom and dad."

Fernie began to laugh softly. "Okay, I'm really going to sleep now. I'll see you tomorrow. Wait, tomorrow's Saturday. I'll see you at school on Monday, ok?"

"Wait, Fern dog! Are you gonna go to the prom with me? Maybe you'll win Queen again."

"Ok, I'll go with you. Just let me go to sleep!"

"Ok, bye-bye!"

"Bye, Fox!"

Fox switched his bedroom light off, and jumped into his full sized bed, hugging his pillow, wishing it was Fernie. Outside he heard a car driving along the street, and then the slamming of car doors. He heard the high pitched laughter of a girl he knew well. She always laughed at him like that when he said something stupid or funny at practice. He pulled back his sheets, and crept over to his window. Sly little Fox, he thought to himself. The dust on his window blinds made him sneeze. Down the street he saw Benny walking across his front lawn towards the side door of his house.

"What the fuuck?" Fox wailed, as he felt his knee caps tingle and his face grow hot. He fumbled in the dark for his cordless phone. When he tried to turn it on it beeped and turned off. It had had gone dead from being used all night. Coach reached the door, Lindsey was already there, turning a key in the lock. He nuzzled his head against the nape of her neck. Her hair was pulled back in a loose pony tail, exposing the fullness of her cheeks. They seemed to fall into the house.

Marcy had been missing for a month when Fox's mother announced that she wanted to go to the beach. The entire family thought that it was a strange request, since she had never enjoyed going before. Whenever they went out of town she would asked to be dropped off at some upscale shopping mall that she had never been to. She never took very much cash with her because she called this "fantasy shopping." She thought it was ridiculous to buy anything at these stores. Still, she liked to see all the pretty things.

Her husband told her that he could not go with them on this beach trip. Not if she wanted to go that Saturday. She would have to take the two kids without him, but she shouldn't be worried to make the drive. The beach was less than three hours away.

On Saturday morning Fox waited for his mother and sister in the car. He could not understand why it was taking them so long to get ready for a simple day trip to the beach.

He heard the front door slam close with a loud bang, and Kylie ran to the car, holding a pillow and a bright pink backpack. Their mother climbed into the car, rolling her eyes and tossing her hair over her shoulder.

"We were taking so damn long because this kid was looking for the earphones to her iPod. She just remembered that she loaned them to

Lindsey. We're gonna go pick them up right now. If we don't we won't hear the end of it. I'm not going to the store to buy her new ones."

When they arrived at Tommy and Lindsey's house, Kylie asked Fox to go in and get the earphones.

"Why should I get them? They're your headphones!"

"Umm, because. I lost my lunch money the other day and Lindsey loaned me five bucks. She's gonna want me to pay her back right now, and I wanna save my money for the beach!"

Their mother took a crisp five dollar bill out of her wallet, and handed it to Fox.

"You go, and give this to Lindsey! She'll just take too long if she goes," she looked over at Kylie and rolled her eyes once again.

Fox went around the house and knocked on the back door. Tommy opened it; he must have been asleep because he was wearing a white t-shirt and boxers. He yawned as he scratched the black stubs on his head. His hair was freshly buzzed.

"Man, what are you doing here so early? I thought you always slept in on Saturdays."

"I'm going to the beach with my mom and Kylie. Fucking Kylie won't leave town without her earphones. She says that your sister has them."

"Oh yeah? Well, she should be up. She's probably in the den. Go ask her for them. I've gotta piss."

Lindsey was in the den watching music videos, sprawled across an old loveseat, her head hanging down, her hair fanned out like a spider's web.

"Fooo! What the hell are you doing here?" She sprang up, and straightened out her loose fitting tank top and pajama shorts. The shorts had little gapped toothed bunnies, and the words Little Miss Chatterbox all over them.

"Kylie wants her earphones."

"Ok, tell her I want my five dollars. What the hell! Did she send you over her to play commando? The earphones are right over there." Lindsey pointed to a coffee table that had been pushed over to the side of the room. Fox grabbed them and tossed the five dollar bill onto the table. Lindsey laughed as she reached over and pinched one of his buttocks. She fell back into the loveseat. She twirled a lock of her hair around her pinky.

"Tommy says that you've been getting a little too brave lately. Since you're his little sister, I told him I would help him watch you. He said

he would fuck you up if he finds out you're messing around," Fox said as he turned around to leave.

"Please, I can do whatever I want. He's not my keeper, and you're not either."

Fox whipped around and grabbed Lindsey by the arm. He felt warmth rush to his cheeks as words tripped out of his mouth like heavy stones.

"I-I saw you! I saw you, little girl! How could you be that fucking stupid, when you know I live right down the street? Just wait; just wait till Tommy finds out!"

Lindsey yanked her arm out of Fox's grip, her eyes welling with tears, her mouth quivering in silence. They both looked up and saw Tommy standing in the doorway. Tommy's eyes were wild and locked on Fox.

Fox's mother began to honk the horn outside.

"Shit! I have to go. They're calling me." Fox said. He would not look at Tommy's face. His main objective was to get out, out of Tommy and Lindsey's house. He fell into the backseat of his mother's car, and tossed the earphones to Kylie.

It had been several years since Fox's mother had been to the beach, so she brought a road map, and ended up taking the scenic route to the beach. The scenic route was wrapped around a dark mountain with twisted old trees, and a bumpy road. She drove around and around, down the mountain, screaming her usual obscenities, saying that she was lost, and what if they ran into some maniacs on this godforsaken mountain? Fox and Kylie begged her to calm down, and when they came to the bottom of the mountain, the sun was shining brightly.

The people walking around at the boardwalk looked nothing like the people back home. Fox tried to imagine Benny living there, and wondered if he would fit in there. Maybe he would like that kind of California. Maybe he would run away there with Lindsey. All the people were lanky, and beautiful, their clothes draped over them, flying in the breeze. Fox and Kylie began to shiver when the wind hit their faces, and tried to stop when they realized that being cold made them look like tourists.

The first thing that their mother wanted to do was eat. They ate corndogs as they walked along the old wooden planks of the boardwalk, with clown music filling the sweet scented air.

Fox wanted to ride the big 1920' s style roller coaster, but his

mother and sister were afraid to ride with him. He was embarrassed to ride it alone, so he spent most of the day with them, walking through all the arcades and gift shops. They had their fortunes read by a mechanical gypsy, and Kylie won a stuffed Boston terrier from popping balloons with darts. Fox bought Fernie a giant pencil that said Hot Stuff and had a beach scene. Kylie said that it was stupid.

Fox and Kylie walked out to the beach and sat on the sand. The sky had begun to grow dark, and the wind grew colder. Fox tried to imagine how cold the water was as he saw it crash against the sand. They sat there with the hoods to their sweaters over their heads, with the wind whipping through Kylie's blonde hair as if it were a kite. Their mother had gone off to buy a funnel cake.

"So, do you really like Fernie?" Kylie seemed to ask this question out of nowhere, but then Fox remembered the giant pencil that he had shoved in her backpack.

"Well, yeah. I like her", Fox said, looking back towards the boardwalk to see if his mother was coming. "Why? Has she said anything to you? Isn't she still in your art class?"

Kylie had pulled off her pink sweatshirt, and let the wind carry it away as if it were a magic carpet. A little boy caught it, and when he ran it back to her she gave him some saltwater taffy.

"See, I don't know why guys like Fernie so much, besides the fact that she's popular. She's really not that pretty in the face. Have you seen her without make up? I have. She does have really big boobs. Is that why guys like her?"

Fox tried to choose his words carefully, since it was his little sister that he was talking to.

"Well, her boobs are one reason why guys like her." If he were talking to Tommy he would not have used the word boobs.

"Fernie is cute. She has a good personality, and she's not stuck up at all. That's what makes guys like her."

Kylie rolled her eyes when he said this. "You know what? Girls don't like to be called cute. What is that? Girls want to be told that they're pretty or beautiful. Cute makes us feel like a stuffed animal or something." She pointed to the Boston terrier that sat beside her.

Fox had eaten the rest of the salt water taffy, and he was picking it out of his teeth. "Guys don't usually say the word pretty. It's not very manly."

"So, what do you think about Lindsey?" Kylie asked as she picked up the terrier, holding it to her chest. "Do you think Lindsey is cute?"

Fox looked at her. Her dark eyes looked just like their mothers. He looked at her like he was a priest who had just heard swearing in church.

"Uggh, that's Tommy's sister, and I don't think about her like that. I've known her since she was like five years old." He wondered how old Benny was when Lindsey was five.

"Yeah, I know, you've known her a long time. But do you think she's cute?"

"No, I don't think she's cute. She's ok, I guess. She's not ugly or anything."

Fox shook some sand out of his shoe.

"I know someone who thinks she's cute," he whispered to the sand beneath him.

He began to watch the little boy who had rescued Kylie's sweater. He was playing with two toy trucks in the sand. The little boy's mother was telling him that they would be going home soon. One truck was blue like Benny's old truck, and the other was red like Marcy's minivan.

Fox's mother came back to the beach with two funnel cakes. Kylie complained that they had too much whipped cream, and tasted too sweet. She said that from now on she liked her stuff simple. They walked back to the boardwalk, and found a dirty wooden table to sit on. It gave Fox a splinter on his hand. They sat there for about a half hour. The sky grew darker and darker. Kylie told them that one of her teachers had made a mistake on a grade. She was going to see him first thing Monday morning. Their mother had bought a t-shirt at one of the gift shops before the funnel cakes. It had the same picture as the giant pencil.

The ride home from the beach was quiet. It reminded Fox of the ride home from the athletic director's house. Kylie was wearing the earphones, bobbing her head from left to right, still clinging to the Boston terrier. Fox had wanted to stay out of town longer, and he secretly wished for a flat tire. He thought that maybe they could spend the night in some motel off the freeway. Maybe they would run into Marcy and convince her to come back home.

As they turned into their street, they saw red lights flashing around in the darkness. There were four police cars parked at Coach Benny's

house. A cluster of men stood on Benny's porch, blocking the opened doorway. Fox had already undone his seatbelt when they came off the freeway. He leaped out of the car as soon as it was parked. Fox, Kylie, and their mother flew into their house.

"Mom, they must have found Marcy!" Fox yelled, as he was the first one in the front door. He saw his father sitting on the living room couch, hunched over. He had ordered out for pizza. It lay untouched on the coffee table in front of him. He was sobbing with his face in his hands.

Tommy had taken a 357 and blown Benny away. His mother kept it on her nightstand when she slept. Someone had told her that single mothers needed extra protection. Benny died right in his doorway. When he heard the doorbell ring he probably thought that it was another reporter coming to shove a camera in his face. Now he was gone like another John Kennedy. Tommy was taken away to jail in the city. They might never see him again. He was still seventeen, and they don't show kids' faces on T.V.

Fox went outside and sat on trunk of his mother's car in the driveway. All of the neighbors had come outside to watch from their front lawns. It reminded Fox of the Fourth of July when everyone watched fireworks go off in the street. He remembered last year when Tommy brought over a firework that last five whole minutes. It sprayed like a bright blue water fountain. It was the best firework that year. An ambulance was now parked near one of the police cars, and the front door of Benny's porch was cleared away. He slid off the trunk, and felt his limbs go numb. He felt like a child learning to walk. He came out into the middle of the street. Tears came with a quiet ferocity. Now he could see the blood on the windows and frame of the door. It looked like war paint.

He watched the paramedics carry Benny away, his body wrapped up like a mummy in Egypt. The ambulance did not need to sound its siren. It turned silently out and away from the street.

My name is Karen and I Just Killed a Man

Teresa Grimaldo
Honorable Mention

It is mid-night and I just finished a double shift at the rape crisis center. Hour after hour I sit and listen while women young and old come and tell their story. My heart and head feel as though they are weighted with lead as their hollow eyes search mine for some kind of light for the darkness into which they have been thrust. Tonight, I worked with a 15 year-old girl, Carrie, who was raped in her own neighborhood while walking home from the corner grocery. My mind can't escape the haunted look in her brown, once innocent eyes. As I stare into them all night, I can see her torn soul as she tells me how two boys, not much older than herself, grabbed her and dragged her to the roof of the building next to the one she and her family live in. There they viciously strip her of her innocence and leave her shattered and broken. My heart breaks for her as she relives how she kept her head turned away and could see the window of her own apartment. Knowing that safety was within eyesight, and yet no one came to help. No one heard her cries.

I went through all of the usual steps with Carrie. I got her in touch with a therapist. Made sure that a police report was filed, everything was in order. Everything but Carrie, that is.

On my way home I stop at the min-mart for cat food, cereal and milk. As I make my way home along wet streets made shiny by earlier rain, I can't help but think how beautiful the darkness can be. When I pull into the driveway, I can see Buttons, my cat waiting for me in the living room window. I get out of the car and walk up on the porch to the door. My hands are full as I reposition my keys so that the house key is the one sticking out. I drop them. I sigh as I bend to pick them up and the milk falls out of the bag that I have tucked under my left arm. By this point I'm more than frustrated. I curse as I pick up the milk that now has dirt and other debris stuck to the wet plastic bottle. I catch a glimpse of Buttons jumping off the window seat as I jam my key into the lock and give it a quick turn. Aw! I am finally home. My frustration starts to subside as my cat welcomes me home by curling himself around my leg. I drop everything in my arms onto the couch

as I walk down the hall, straight back to the bathroom and start the water in my tub. I make sure it is as hot as I can possibly stand. I'm satisfied when I see the steam begin to rise and curl up at the ceiling. I add my favorite lavender bath salts and oil and leave the bathroom for the kitchen. There, Buttons is waiting for his nightly feeding. I open the new bag of cat food and pour a little into his bowl. I stand for a few seconds and listen to him purr, then rinse the milk carton off before placing it in the fridge and head back to my hot bath.

As I undress, I feel as though I am lifting away a heavy layer of the day with every piece of clothing. Finally, I slip naked and free into the hot water. I breathe in deeply and let the lavender scented steam carry all the noise and the frustrations of everything I couldn't fix today away. I exhale and lay my head back on the edge of the tub, close my eyes and am lost in the steam and lavender.

Suddenly, I am snapped back into reality as I feel a sharp pain at the back of my head. I realize that someone has grabbed me by the hair. I struggle to get my bearings as I'm lifted from the tub. Cold air hits my skin as I come out of the water, turning it instantly rough with goose pimples and I see my attacker for the first time in the mirror as he drags me across the floor without a word. I struggle desperately to gain my footing as I am pulled across my hardwood floor made slick by the water falling from my naked body. I realize he is pulling me toward my bedroom and for a second I have a flicker of relief. When we pass through my bedroom doorway, I grab hold of the door jam and try to pull myself free from him. He grabs me around my waist and neck and jerks hard. I lose my grip. I scratch and claw at his rough hands and he curses at the pain and throws me to the floor hard. I'm dazed for a moment and can't breathe and I realize that the fall has knocked the air out of me.

He is on top of me, fumbling around clumsily, as I try to wiggle from under the weight and smell of him. My goal is to reach the head of the bed. If I can just get there I know I will be all right. I hear him curse into my ear as I struggle to keep him from doing what he came here to do. In his rage he stands and kicks me hard in the hip. The pain rips through my left side but I am thankful, as this blow has pushed me the couple of inches I need. I look up to see him taking down his pants the same time I feel my hand wrap around the cold, smooth handle of salvation. Just as he starts to lean over me again to pin me to the floor with his body, I raise my gun and fire. I hear the

sound and tears fall for the first time as I hear my own voice say, “Not me, you bastard, not me”! I fire again as I see the shattered soul of Carrie and I hear her voice saying, “Never again”. He falls on me, lifeless, and I scramble out from under to the phone where I dial 911 and speak into the phone, “My name is Karen and I just killed a man”.

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Colophon

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