

Skyline

Arts & Entertainment Magazine

Stories / Poetry / Art / Photography



September/November 2006
Autumn Quarterly Edition

Carrie Hall Art

ISSN 1554 - 6764

"Reach for the Sky..." Skyline - Bringing The World Together Thru The Arts

Skyline Magazine Splash

Pooch

Skyline Artists



Steve Cartwright

"It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning."

www.angelfire.com/sc2/cartoonsbycartwright/



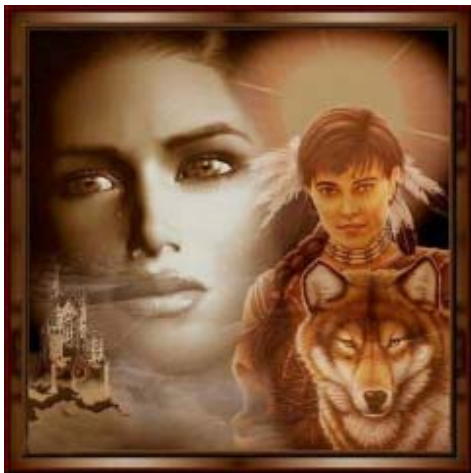
Purreee

Editors



Victoria Valentine, "Fear not death, but rather what comes before it..."

www.skylinemagazines.com etc etc etc



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Dawn Colclasure

"Living by the pen"



"Reach for the Sky, it's closer than you think. You may not find that pot of gold at rainbow's end ~ but the search is one colorful experience!"

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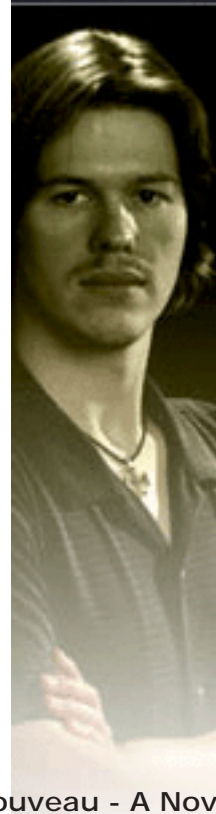


Darryl Taylor

I use various techniques and mediums (traditional and digital), combining them to create pieces ranging from realistic fantasy to stylistic.
www.epilogue.net/cgi/database/art/list.pl?gallery=8952

Blake Krasner - MasterCylinder
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Web Site Cover Artist



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www.matthughesart.com

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www.chelinsanjuan.info

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Photography by Arthur Isaacson
photo not available

Bill Garvey Photography (photos pg 13)



"I want my photographs to reflect my respect and appreciation for life and the authenticity of the people, places, animals, and things I meet and experience. For me, life is a journey and I enjoy sharing with my viewers the diversity I encounter every day on the road of life." —Richard Bruness

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"I am a creator of nonlinear art and a believer in freedom of thought. I respect the infinite power of nature and recognize the great potential of dreams and imagination."

—Christine Bruness

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From the Editor's Desk

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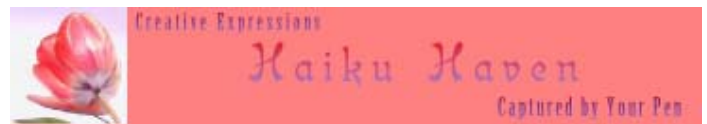
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Skyline wishes to thank our fabulous contributors who have helped make this one of our finest issues ever ! We also thank our readers...
You Are Skyline !!

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A Tribute To America

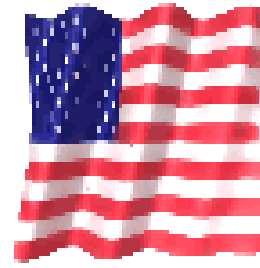


In Memory of September 11, 2001

We will never forget you

Orania Hamilton

Wounded Nation



Silence echoes in the still of darkness.
Our dead lie smothered in an ashy heap
consuming the charred crater
that once held our proud twin towers.
~
On this day of tears and sorrow,
the heart of America was ripped out,
and will go down in Infamy with
the blood of our loved ones.
City of the 21st century we
cry for you and your people.
~
This has been a horrific day on American soil.
Deep rooted and murder against our land,
without regard for human life
This is a crime against all of civilization.
Terror reached deep into families and homes,
and seized their loved ones.
~
Our heart cries out to them as
we mourn with compassion,
feel each one's pain and comfort
the kinship of heroes who rise from
dust to risk their lives for others.
~

Although our lives have changed
the heart of America beats on and will
rise stronger and we
will never cease to love her.

~

All of America is in accord.
Our spirit will not be defeated.
We shall stand together in
unity and will not relent.

~

We are not cowed by these happenings.
We will reconstruct and rebuild again.
Our greatest acclaim is not falling, but
rising each time we fall.

~

Our flag flies with pride,
each wave touches the heart of
every American.

~

Lord, embrace the victims,
cradle them in your arms
cut through the darkness.
and take them home.

~

© September 11, 2001

Orania Hamilton

CALLY2001 *about Cally*



Will Garvey

September Morn

Bill Garvey

I would like to begin this story with a quote from a verse of a song sung by New York native, Neil Diamond. These few words from the song "September Morn" help to put things into perspective. Here are the words, *"And look how far we've come, so far from where we used to be, but not so far that we've forgotten how it was before. September morn."*

William Hoover (Bill) grew up in New Jersey and retired back in 1996 from the Port Authority of NY & NJ as a Police Lieutenant. Bill moved shortly after his retirement to his new home in the Nevada desert near Las Vegas. He moved there with his best friends: his wife, Libby and his two dogs, Spirit, a Dobie/Shepherd mix and Bruno, a German Shepherd.

Bill had seen many things in his life that left memories, some happy, some sad, and all, he will never forget. He is proud to tell that he was a Viet Nam Veteran of U.S. Coast Guard, Squadron One, Division Twelve, DaNang, RVN 1967-1969, where he was a gunner aboard an 82' coastal/river patrol boat.

After serving our country in the military, Bill moved back home to New Jersey and took a job as a police officer, working for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PAPD). Bill held many jobs in his years working as policeman. The one that he loved the most was his time as the Supervisor of the K-9 unit.

Another of Bill's memories came as he watched the World Trade Center (WTC) being built. It changed the skyline and helped to greet him as he went to work each day and it was part of his job to patrol the construction. Bill was there at the WTC in 1993 where he and his fellow policemen helped to save lives after it was bombed. He, like all of America, never thought that he would see that type of devastation again.

Then came September 11, 2001. Bill watched his TV in horror as the towers he had witnessed being built came crashing to the ground. Bill knew, just like in 1993, that his help was needed. He didn't know how bad it was, but he knew it was bad!

Bill went back again, telling of his trip, "It was very emotional as I headed first east and then north to get back." Bill said, "All along the interstate routes I traveled there were American flags draped over many of the overpasses." Those flags helped to give him comfort. Bill told how he drove 54 hours straight to get back to NY. "I stopped twice along the way to get some sleep and within an hour I was on the road again. I just couldn't rest until I got back and checked in at my old HQ!"

Bill recalled, "As I drove in after 09/11, the changed skyline and the terrible smoke was so eerie it made the hair on my neck stand out. As I watched the smoke, my stomach muscles tightened. They didn't loosen up again until the following December."

Bill worked at Ground Zero and at the PAPD headquarters for the next five weeks, working on Rescue/Recovery Operations. Bill said, "I watched the WTC being built as I drove across the Pulaski Skyway in NJ to work each day in NY or Jersey City. It saddened me because the skyline just isn't the same."

Bill was also there for another reason; he was there to give comfort to his friends and the families of his fellow workers. The Port Authority Police Department had lost 37 of its finest Police officers and one of its finest dogs. More had died in that one day than in all the years combined, since the department came into existence.

All who died, died giving the gift that Bill and many like him were giving. They came back, again and again, leaving the World Trade Center with groups of people, only to go back in for more. One Police Captain used her gun to shoot out the plate glass walls on the main level of the WTC allowing thousands of people to escape quickly. In the end they were still there trying to save many more lives and that gift they gave, cost them their own. They were truly earth angels that were destined to gain their wings.

Bill still has a very hard time talking about all that happened after 09/11. Of those 37 heroes that died, 31 were his close friends and he was there for most of the funerals and memorials that were held in the week following.

Bill wrote this poem while he was in New York. He wrote to help heal himself and the many others like him that had a part of their hearts torn from them. He wrote these words too, so that we never forget the gift that was given, and the hurt that will never go away.

God Bless You Bill, and all that gave a piece of their heart to heal America!

THE THIRTY-SEVEN

A Tribute to 37 Port Authority Police Officers

September 11, 2001 - World Trade Center



I remember them just fine,
Gentle folks of modern time.
Put to test the true resolve
That made our country again evolve.
Thirty-Seven a number norm,
Battling a firestorm.
Metal I-beams, rock, debris,
Smoke so thick they couldn't see.
They helped those who ran in fear,
Saving lives as death drew near.
Dodging fire raining down
From the skies of New York town.
Thirty-Seven Angels, why?
Thirty-Seven heroes high.
Names and faces that I see,
Always there reminding me.
How did life so precious die
And leave us all so high and dry?
These folks knew the deck was
stacked.
These folks didn't turn their backs.
Thirty-Seven that I knew,
Thirty-Seven all in blue.
These PA Cops will always be
Close to me in memory.
God Bless the Thirty-Seven!

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Lieutenant PAPD (Ret)

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I'm Here and I Love You, Dad

Bob Macchia

John Napolitano is our nephew, a NY City Firefighter. He perished at the WTC on 09/11. He was a buddy to lots of police and firefighters over the many years. He was active in the city and also as a volunteer.

Firefighting was one part of John's life that he loved to live. Outside of the firehouse John lived to love his wife Anne and his two little girls, Elizabeth and Emma Rose. He would do anything for them. John had received many medals in his lifetime, but the most special were the ones he received at home, which came in the form of smiles.

Just recently my daughter Dina received a message from an unfamiliar email address. A Sgt. Joe Jackson, NYPD, who had bought a magazine which was dedicated to our nephew called, "Thru The Ashes". He bought it from Dina on Ebay and his story to my daughter was so amazing.

Sgt. Joe Jackson was a volunteer with Johnny for the Lakeland Fire Department. After 09/11, he was called to Ground Zero to help out. Since our nephew's remains were never found, his Dad and close friend Lenny Crisci visited Ground Zero many times. Lenny is a retired cop who lost his brother Lt. John Crisci, a NY City firefighter as well (another sad story).

John Crisci's remains were eventually found. My brother-in-law Johnny wrote a message to his son in the dust at Ground Zero,

"John Napolitano, I'm here and I Love You. Dad".

Sgt. Joe Jackson stopped to rest after spending several hours at Ground Zero and spotted the message from where he sat. He was saddened, but the crude way to find out was a loving message from Johnny's dad. Another amazing and strange way that God works...

Johnny, the words written in the dust by your dad are forever written in the tracks of our tears.

Dear Anne, Elizabeth, Emma Rose and all who lost someone special, I hope you feel the words that are forever written in our hearts.

We Are Here and We Love You!

America



Bill Garvey with "09/11" pumpkin for NYC FD

On the one month anniversary of 09-11, I was proud to deliver a carved pumpkin to the Red Cross center in NY City. We called the pumpkin, America's Pumpkin" because it was from all of us and it was one of the proudest moments of my life.

This year for the five year anniversary, my wife Lorraine and I are planning to make the trip again, and through the face of another pumpkin, let all who lost someone special know they are still in our hearts and prayers.

God bless our Heroes!

Bill Garvey

***Update: I just heard from Bill, 9/10*

Hi Victoria,

We are in New York City for 09-11. Dropped the pumpkin off at 7-1 fire house in Manhattan.

They loved it.

God bless, Bill



Bill Garvey's original "09/11" pumpkin

The first 09/11 pumpkin weighed just over 500 pounds.

We wanted to tell everyone who lost someone, they were in our hearts and prayers. We carved two praying children into the pumpkin, a little girl and little boy, to signify our thoughts, love and prayers.

Read the entire story here

<http://www.lilripple.com/091101/angels.html>



"Reach for the Sky..."

Autumn 2006 Skyline Literary Arts Magazine

Autumn's Highway

Oh, to travel down a country highway
when Autumn leaves begin to turn
oh, to meet that length of country highway
when Indian summer's sun doth burn.

Driving down a stretch of highway
rolling through and toward the North
winds doth blow against the highway
leaving marks with endless force.

Moving down a ribboned highway
as it strings along tall trees
expansive is God's country highway
fallen crests of drifting leaves.

Down the length of country highway
amidst old towns, quaint and odd
cruising down a slanting highway
small farms line the road I trod.

As I journey down the highway
nature's stage is well defined
all the joys of Autumn's highway
fill sweet thoughts within mind's eye.

Annette Nasser: I write simply for enjoyment and if I can touch another reader's heart, the happier I'll be. I write about things that generally affect life...rage, laughter, love, nature, passion, despair, expressing the ups and downs, the joys and what-not's of whatever comes to mind at that moment in time; that instantaneous feeling to pick up the pen and write, whatever the mood, mode or utterance. As past owner/editor of Celebrated Thoughts, I enjoyed very much, reading, posting and meeting many talented and gifted writers from around the world and back.



Autmnn
Birdie Shirey

Birdie 'Morning Bird' Shirey is an accomplished 3D artist and one of the leaders of products for some 3D applications...She's been working in digital art programs for 3 years and 2D art production since 1999.

She spends her time homeschooling her children as well as creating her 3D beauties and products...

You can find many of her works online and presented in many art conventions...Her characters are available for sale as well as print art.

Quiet Native American she works on different projects within her community to share and teach others computers are not just for typing. You may reach her at hausiyoka@aol.com .

Autumn Breezes Through

Denise DeFontes Fisher

Those sighs, that haunt my days and warm my nights
drift with the breezes as they pass the eaves,
settling upon the daffodils in spring,
or nestling softly on the autumn leaves.

In sultry summer songs you sang in sync
with every moonlit cricket's noisy trill.
In winter's cold you could ignite a flame
by simply holding close, as lovers will.

Each season had its moment in your grasp-
each spring or summer breeze, or winter's gale,
but when the autumn leaves begin their dance ,
my soul longs for the warmth of your sweet kiss.

Each autumn breezes through reminding me
how much I miss your tender company.

Denise DeFontes Fisher is a businesswoman who has run her own Long Island South Shore restaurant for over 25 years, enjoys a second career as an executive advertising consultant, and is a mom to two sons, aged 17 and 19. Active co-founder of an online poetry improvisation room called "Poetry Tag Group", Denise oversees its schedule and mailings and has organized its online room activities for over 6 years. For info please visit : <http://hometown.aol.com/poetrytaggroup/>



The List

Charlie Parramore

There wasn't enough time. That's what I used to tell myself. There wasn't enough time to do all the things I would like to do in life. It was hard enough to keep up with the things I *had* to do.

Because of my grandmother's last words to me, I've come to live my life by a different standard.

I came home from work one afternoon and found the red light of my answering machine blinking. I hit 'play' thinking it would be a solicitor's message. My finger hovered above the delete button. Instead, I heard my father's voice.

"Miles," he said. His voice sounded grave and tired. "You might want to drive home tonight. Ma's in bad shape. She may not make it through the night. Call me when you get this."

It was not an unexpected message. My grandmother had existed beneath the pall of Alzheimer's for the last five years. A year had passed since my last visit with her. On that day, I had stayed at her side for exactly an hour listening to her babble. She had been unable to call my name and laughed at jokes to which only she knew the punch line. Finally, I rose from her bedside and told her the time had come for me to leave. She had seemed so engrossed in her own world, I thought she would barely acknowledge my departure. But as soon as I announced my intentions, she stood from her bed and took my hands in hers.

"Honey," she said to me, looking sternly into my eyes. "Are you reading your Bible every night?"

Amazed by her sudden lucidity, I barely had the wit to conjure a lie.

"Most nights I do," I said. As soon as the words left my mouth, I was ashamed.

"The Lord knows when you read his Word," she said. Then she collapsed on the bed and her eyes grew cloudy once more. "My husband was never the same after the war. Liquor is the juice of the Devil. I worked my fingers to the bone to raise your daddy," she said.

"Bye, Grandma. I'll come to see you again soon." This was also a lie and my voice quivered as it left my mouth. I left her room and walked quickly through the hall of the nursing home and out the door, relieved the duty of my visit was done.

Now I had to perform this duty one final time.

My fingers dialed four digits of my father's number before I hung up and called my girlfriend, Sandra, instead. She answered on the first ring.

"Hey," I said. "What are you doing?"

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Something is. I can tell it in your voice."

I sighed. The girl knew me too well. "I had a message from my father. He wants me to come home. My grandmother may not live through the night."

There was a pause on the other end. Then she said, "I'm sorry, baby. Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, I'd rather just go by myself."

"Are you sure? I can be ready to go in fifteen minutes. You could just swing by and get me. It might make the drive more bearable if you had me to talk to."

I started to say 'no' again, but realized I wanted her to be with me.

"It might not be a fun trip," I warned her.

"I know," she answered. "But life's not always about fun, you know?"

A moment of silence hung between us as she seemed to wait for me to reply, but I could think of nothing to say.

Finally, she filled the silence. "See you when you get here," she said. "Love you!"

Without waiting for my reply, she hung up. I found myself smiling as the dial tone rang in my ear. We had been together for nearly a year now, but I had yet to say the three magic words aloud to her. She was loyal and beautiful and deserved to hear them. So many times, they had nearly tumbled from my lips, but something had always held me back.

"I love you, too," I said to no one.

Then I called my dad and told him I was coming.

It was a four-hour drive from Savannah to my small hometown on the other side of the state. Sandra tried to lighten my mood with small talk and laughter, but her efforts were to no avail. I remained morose and distant and could hardly bring myself to look at her. She finally gave up and held my hand, seeming content to ride in silence.

It was nearly midnight by the time we reached my grandmother's home. The nursing home had released her so that she might pass her final hours in familiar surroundings. My dad sat by her side with blood-shot eyes as she slept.

A hospice nurse attended to the IV bag mounted to her bed and checked her vital signs.

"She's stable and comfortable," she said. "I think she's going to make it through the night. All of y'all look like you need some sleep."

My father appeared so lost in thought that he barely acknowledged my presence. He decided to do as the

nurse suggested and patted me on the back as he left the room without speaking.

I stayed for another moment, observing my grandmother. Her breathing sounded uneven and raspy. Her body was emaciated and she seemed to have grown twice as many wrinkles since I had last seen her. A cynical part of me wondered why I'd bothered to drive four hours to see her go out with such a whimper.

Sandra took my hand. "She'll wake up in the morning and talk to you. You'll see."

"I don't see how you could think that," I told her, not meaning to sound so irritable.

"From what you've told me about her, she won't leave this world without saying bye to you," Sandra insisted.

"If you say so," I said.

We left the room and left her lying there.

We slept in the same bed in which I had spent my teenage years. My mother died when I was fourteen and Grandma had raised me after that. She never spoke a harsh word to me in my entire life and did her best to spoil me. I was late to school on many days because she insisted on having me eat a hearty breakfast before leaving, and would do anything for me as long as I accompanied her to church every Sunday and made the honor roll. The grades were the easy part. I was a natural student. Church was endured to make her happy. Once I went away to college, I never entered the doors of the First Baptist Church ever again. This broke her heart although she never told me so directly. I was of a skeptical nature to begin with and college was all it took to convince me to reason religion away.

I gazed around the room that night before sleeping. My high school football jersey hung by the sleeves on the wall. A multitude of athletic and academic trophies lined my dresser and bookshelves. The room almost overflowed with books and notebooks full of my poems and half-written stories. It seemed to glow with the spirit of my childhood. I was full of dreams

then. None of them included becoming a disillusioned insurance agent who couldn't commit to his girlfriend.

At 6:30 in the morning, the nurse woke me.

"Sir," she said. "I'm sorry to wake you, but your grandmother is asking for you. She seems to be aware. I've never seen her so alert."

I shook off the remnants of sleep and went to my grandmother's room. I paused in the doorway watching her argue furiously with a new nurse whose shift must have just started.

"Ma'am," the nurse said. "He's coming. A nurse has just gone to wake him. Please be patient."

"I'm here," I announced.

My voice startled the nurse and she turned to see me.

"Ok," she said, sounding relieved. "I'll leave the two of you alone for a minute."

I approached my grandmother's bedside and stood over her. She looked back at me with eyes undulled by Alzheimer's. The return of her intelligence caused her to look thirty years younger. The transformation shocked me. Wide-eyed, I regarded her almost fearfully. I tried to speak, but couldn't. This was not the same old and dying woman of the night before. This was the ghost of my grandmother as she once was: full of energy and moxie.

Her voice was calm and sure when she spoke.

"Miles, do you love your life?"

I was dumbfounded. "Do I love my life?" I repeated.

She merely waited for my reply.

"Well, love might be too strong of a word for it. But it's not too bad. I have a job and a girlfriend. I get the bills paid with enough left over to have a little fun with. It's not too bad."

Grandma regarded me with rebuke in her eyes. She was clearly not satisfied. "Miles, do you love your life?" she repeated more urgently than before.

"I guess you could say that," I said.

"My grandson loved his life. He had passion and energy," she said. "He had dreams. What do you have?"

I could not think of a suitable answer and decided to pretend to be ignorant of her present state.

"Grandma, I think you need to rest a bit. You're going to tire yourself out like this," I said, putting a hand on her shoulders.

She knocked my hand away with more strength than she seemed capable of possessing.

"I'm going to meet the Lord today, but before I do, I'm going to straighten you out! You're going to make me a promise right here and now!"

"What do you want me to promise, Grandma? You want me to go to church every Sunday? I can't promise you that. I'm sorry."

"No, sweetie, I want you to promise to do all of the things on your list."

"My list?" I asked, thinking her lucid state had finally ended and feeling shamefully relieved because of it.

"What list?"

"The list under my pillow right now," she said. With a monumental effort, she lifted her head and I understood she meant for me to retrieve this mysterious document.

Reluctantly, I felt beneath it and pulled out a single sheet of brittle, yellowed notebook paper and examined it skeptically.

My skepticism soon turned to wonder. The words upon it had obviously been written by my own hand and yet I had no recollection of ever putting these thoughts to paper. In the right-hand corner, I had recorded the date: July 17th, 1987. I had been fifteen years old. I read it silently.

Today, I am going to write down a list of twenty things I plan to do in my life. Some of these items are things I want to accomplish. Others are ways I want to live. My determination and conviction will

never waver in my pursuit to accomplish these things. So vow I, Miles Prescott, on this day, July 17th, 1987.

- 1) *Climb Mount Kilimanjaro.*
- 2) *Write a novel.*
- 3) *Read every book I ever want to read.*
- 4) *Travel to every continent.*
- 5) *Go rafting down the Colorado River beneath the Grand Canyon*
- 6) *Explore the Amazon jungle.*
- 7) *See the great pyramids in Egypt.*
- 8) *SCUBA dive in deep ocean water.*
- 9) *Bench press 350 lbs. Never be old and flabby.*
- 10) *Learn to speak a foreign language fluently.*
- 11) *Fall in love with a beautiful woman who loves me back.*
- 12) *Learn to play a musical instrument with great skill.*
- 13) *Accept everyone I meet with an open heart and words of kindness.*
- 14) *Do everything with an honest effort and determination.*
- 15) *Help my fellow man at every opportunity.*
- 16) *Be confident but humble.*
- 17) *Think and meditate often on spiritual things.*
- 18) *Depend as little as possible on material things.*
- 19) *Take note of beauty at every opportunity.*
- 20) *Be a great and faithful father and husband.*

If I do these things, I believe that I will live a full and prosperous life and also be a man of great character.

After reading the list, I looked again at my grandmother, amazed that she had kept this list for all of these years and equally amazed that I could possibly forget something written by my own hand with such conviction.

My eyes returned to the first item. *Climb Mount Kilimanjaro*. I thought of the photo of this mountain that hung on the wall in my office at work. I had cut it out of *Outdoor Magazine* three months ago only because its stark beauty had struck me. But I had never seriously considered the idea of climbing it.

I looked again at my grandmother. She regarded me with wise, old eyes. I could think of nothing to say.

"Make me a promise, honey," she said with tenderness. "Promise me you'll live by that list. Can you do that?"

"I don't know, Grandma. It would be hard for me to do some of those things now. You know how things happen in life. You start out so idealistic and full of dreams and then things happen and you have to deal with reality."

"Don't make excuses, baby. Just promise me you'll do the things on that list."

"I'll try," I said.

"No, that's not good enough. Would you deny your dying grandmother who raised you a simple promise?" Her eyes blazed as she spoke. She had always been a determined and stubborn woman. She was no different now.

"Ok," I said, exasperated. "I'll do it."

"Good. I love you, Miles." She lay back in the bed and closed her eyes, leaving me holding the list.

I watched her for a while, unable to tear myself away from her bedside. She seemed to age again right in front of me, reverting to the old and withered breathing corpse she had been the night before.

I don't know how much time passed before I realized she was no longer breathing.

"Grandma?" I asked. But she was gone. I lingered for a little longer, proud to have been there at the moment of her death and very touched by her last words. I finally left the room.

"I think it's over," I told the nurse standing outside. She rushed into the room and a moment later confirmed what I already knew.

I didn't cry until the next day and then it was not the desperate weeping of grief, but cleansing tears shed in appreciation of a woman who gave me all the love and devotion a person could ever want. She lived her life well. I could only hope to do the same.

"What did your grandmother say to you?" Sandra asked as we drove home after the funeral.

"Nothing much," I answered, conscious of the folded paper in my pocket. "She did say she loved me. Those were her last words to me."

"I bet she loved you as much as I do," she said. She placed her hand on my thigh as we drove. I almost answered her, but something held me back.

I went to work the next day and did my job with the same emotionless functionality as always. On the wall in my office, the photo of Kilimanjaro chastised me for ignoring the promise to my grandmother.

There wasn't enough time, I thought. And not enough money, either.

A week later, a check came in the mail. It was signed by my grandmother and written for the amount of fifty thousand dollars. A note inside the envelope stated this was her life's savings. She had willed it all to me. I put the money in the bank and went back to work.

In my office, Kilimanjaro haunted me. I could not ignore the photograph or bring myself to remove it. I knew it was not the tallest mountain in the world by a long shot. Its peak crested ten thousand feet lower than Mount Everest. But it was the highest point on the continent of Africa and the highest

stand-alone mountain on the planet. Kilimanjaro did not need a range of brothers to reach into the clouds. Instead, it vaulted above the Plains of the Serengeti of its own magnificent accord. No great technical knowledge was needed to reach its summit, only a good pair of walking boots, an iron spirit and an adventurous soul. The first time I'd ever heard of the mountain was in Hemingway's short story, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. It was the story of a man who found Kilimanjaro to be his own personal heaven. I did not seek this in Kilimanjaro, but perhaps my motivations were similar. In my youth, I would have said that it was a place where I believed enlightenment could be found. But now, I would not allow myself such idealism. To climb this mountain would simply be a cool thing to do. Besides, I'd promised my grandmother I would. What more motivation was needed?

And, yet, I took no action. Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. I did my job and put my promise aside. Grandma's money languished in a savings account. The photo of the mountain continued to call to the spirit of the adventure-seeking boy I had been. Perhaps, I would have existed in the same inert state forever if Sandra hadn't forced my hand.

She dumped me.

"Miles," she said to me one night nearly a year after my grandmother's death. "I love you now as much as I always have. I'm sure I will love you for the rest of my life. But, the time has come for me to move on. We've been together for nearly two years and you've given me no indication that you want to truly make a life with me. I want to have all the things most girls want. I want to get married, have a family, and live a fulfilling life. I believe I could do all of that with you, but you can't seem to let it happen. I have been the picture of patience for so long and now my patience is gone and I have to leave unless you can make me believe you intend to marry me. I don't want to leave you, Miles. But you're causing me to think I don't have a choice."

Foolishly, I had not seen this coming. "Sandra," I said. "I do love you and couldn't bear to lose you."

You are the most important person in my life and I would be lost without you." I tried to hug and kiss her to punctuate my words.

But she held me back.

"Miles, I'm glad to hear you say these things," she said. "But let me ask you this: Can you picture us being married? Can you picture us having children together and living the rest of our lives together?"

Her question stopped me in my tracks. I had prevented the sad truth from coming to the surface of my mind for so long. Now I had to speak it aloud.

"Sandra, baby, I'm not ready to be married yet. I have too much stuff I want to do before I can do that. I don't want to marry anyone but you, but I just don't think it's the right time yet."

"What are the things you want to do so badly, Miles? I don't see you doing anything, but going to work selling insurance every day. You obviously don't love your job, but I don't see you doing anything else. I think you're just stuck in a rut, Miles, and I'd like to find a man who isn't, to tell you the truth. I'd like to find a man who's not afraid to do the things he wants to do."

She hesitated in her speech and seemed genuinely angry at me. In our entire relationship, she had never been anything but tolerant and patient. But now she was mad. She seemed to debate saying something else and then she did.

"You know what? I've been stuck in a rut, too. Every day I stay with you is another day wasted. And you know what else? I'm not going to waste another day of my life. I'm going to leave you to waste away on your own."

Then she calmly walked out the door and drove home. It was the last time I ever saw her. My heart was broken. For a month, I called her with repeated pleas to give me another chance. But when she asked for eternal commitment, I could not give it and she would not relent from this demand. At last, I was forced to give up and live my life alone.

I thought deeply about her words. 'What did I want to do so badly?' she had asked me. I thought too of my promise to my grandmother.

On a day soon after, I took the list from my bottom dresser drawer, placed it in my pocket and brought it to work. I sat at my desk that day stewing, unable to take my eyes off of the mountain on the wall. When the workday ended, I took the picture from its place and left, never to return. I began preparations to travel to Kilimanjaro.

Three months later, I landed in the Nairobi airport, and took a long and bumpy shuttle ride over the plains of Eastern Africa across the Kenyan border into Tanzania. I sat by the window and watched in wonder as gazelles and giraffes galloped and loped about, barely mindful of our presence. The sky was clear and mostly cloudless that day and it was with great surprise that I noted the sound of distant thunder. But a moment after the sound had passed, I realized that it was not thunder at all, but the roar of a lion. Wide-eyed and with a thumping heart, I searched the savanna for the noble beast, but failed to see it.

The shuttle finally came to a stop in the village of Moshi. In the distance, I saw the mountain with my own eyes for the first time. The day was hazy and it glimmered like a vision in a dream. The weather was hot and humid, but the peaks of Kilimanjaro were painted white with snow. To see it sent chills racing down my spine.

But even here, cynicism followed me. It was just a mountain, I told myself. Hundreds of people scaled its heights every year. By climbing this mountain, I would be doing nothing truly extraordinary. How could I expect some grand epiphany from such an undertaking? Was I so foolish to believe that climbing a mountain would grant me some transcendent insight into the meaning of life?

But then I became conscious of the list in my back pocket and cast these thoughts aside. I would climb this mountain to its highest peak and put all thoughts of 'why' aside. I planned to follow the "normal route", also called the Marangu Route, to the top of Uhuru

Peak, Kilimanjaro's highest point and the highest place in all of Africa as well.

After spending a single night in a cheap and sparsely furnished inn in Moshi, I met up with a group of twenty other climbers and a team of porters, cooks, and guides. We began our ascent of Kilimanjaro. It took us six days to climb the mountain. The trail was well marked, the scenery beautiful and majestic. True to my nature, I was friendly but aloof towards my fellow climbers. I learned that many of them were climbing a mountain for the very first time as well. For the first three days, I walked comfortably in short sleeves. But after leaving Horombo Hut on the fourth morning, I found the trail had steepened and the temperature had dropped dramatically. I was forced to don my goretex jacket and change from jeans to a pair of insulated shell pants and long underwear. The next three days are still a blur to me. I remember little but being constantly cold and tired. The nights, spent in my tent or the dilapidated huts at each stopping point, seemed to pass in a blink of an eye.

My party departed from Kibo hut to the summit at exactly midnight of the sixth day. The temperature had now dropped close to zero and no one spoke as we slogged up the frozen path. When we reached a position near the extinct volcano's rim called Gillman's Point, the path steepened sharply. Not far past this landmark, half of my company turned back, too tired to continue. It was here that I began to feel the affects of the altitude as well. My muscles screamed for mercy and breathing became an odious task in the paper thin air near the mountain's peak. My lungs and throat burned with every exhalation and my very existence began to consist of one desire: to move my feet ever forward and upward. I walked with my head down, watching my boots as they pressed upon the frozen ground, my will pushing them forward. Every step became an act of indomitable will. I began a routine of counting ten steps and resting for a twenty count in a vain attempt to catch my breath.

I could not help but feel a stab of envy for those who were on their way down, no longer engaged in pitched battle with this mountain. But the list in my

pocket and my own desire would not allow me to turn back until my goal had been reached. I had read somewhere that the final push to the top of Kilimanjaro was as painful as childbirth and now believed it was probably true.

But I persevered. Five hours after leaving Kibo Hut, I reached the summit. A lonely sign announced my success. Someone shined a flashlight against it so we could read its words. I was so overcome with exhaustion that doing so seemed to require a great effort.

Congratulations, it read. You have reached Uhuru Peak, Tanzania. 5895 meters. Africa's highest point. World's tallest free-standing mountain.

Then I turned my eyes to the east and saw the sun rising with blinding brightness. I stared at this sight for a long time, waiting to fill the exhilaration and the magical, mystical feeling that such a sight should have inspired. But I felt nothing. I was exhausted to the bone and eager to descend and return to civilization.

Standing at the peak of Kilimanjaro, I was disappointed to feel a great hollowness inside of me. The scenery was amazing. There was no doubt of it. Besides my present company, I knew of no one else who had ventured upon this ground. But what difference did that make? How would standing here in this rare air upon this high peak change me in any way? Would it make me wiser? Would it make me a man of greater character? I didn't think so.

I posed for pictures with the guides and my fellow climbers wearing a false smile and even cracking jokes and making small talk. But inwardly, I despaired. Nothing had changed. No awe-inspiring moment enveloped me. No moment of transcendent insight occurred within my soul.

Impatiently, I watched the rest of my company mill about, enjoying their moment of triumph and soaking in the magnificent view.

Then I overheard the words of a porter.

"I always wait until I am here to pray," he said. "I think, being so close to God, He is more likely to hear me."

His words resonated with me as nothing else had. My heart and mind opened then and I looked down on all of Africa with fresh eyes. The plains below me seemed to roll forever. I breathed in the thin air and held it in my lungs, suddenly joyous to be standing there in that moment. Even my weariness seemed suddenly pure. It reminded me that I had attained a goal through sincere effort, discipline, and determination.

Inspired by the porter's words, I wandered away from the rest of the group and knelt on the frozen, rocky ground. I looked into the sky and prayed for the first time in many years.

"Thank you," I whispered aloud. "Thank you for this moment and this mountain and all of the things that lie below it." I prayed for more, but not with words.

At last, I stood again and observed the sun's rising with fresh eyes. In spite of the cold, its heat was a blessing against my face.

I removed the list from my pocket and read the first item.

Climb Mount Kilimanjaro, it read. With an ink pen, I prepared to draw a line through the words, signifying that the task had been completed. But then I thought better of this action. I circled the words instead. I couldn't say exactly why, but it seemed more fitting. I shielded my eyes and looked again towards the sun. Somewhere behind it, my grandmother smiled down upon me and rejoiced in my accomplishment. I looked down again at the list. There were still many things left to do.

Charlie Parramore is an author from Georgia.



Autumnal

Matt Hughes

<http://www.matthughesart.com/>

THE RAPTURE

Russell H. Krauss

His lungs burned as he ran along the darkened street in the warm, pelting rain, dodging and splashing through the ubiquitous puddles. Thunder rolled ominously behind him, gaining on him, and staccato flashes of lightning illuminated the abandoned houses in front of him, lending an eerie, strobe-like effect to the scene. Too late, he told himself. They'd already gone.

Then he saw the yellow glow from the window of a bungalow just ahead. Somebody must be home! He hopped over the curb and dashed up the front walkway. He rang the bell and thumped on the door. He heard footsteps coming his way, then a lock disengage. The door opened. A fetching blonde woman, his age, slim, dressed in jeans, a white pullover shirt and tennis shoes, peered out into the night and drew back, startled by his disheveled, rain-drenched appearance.

"What is it?" She asked.

"The Rapture," the man said. "It's come. We've got to go."

"Oh God! Now? How could it be? How do you know?"

"I couldn't sleep. Turned on CNN. And there it was. All over the world. Huge throngs mobbing stadiums and fields and streets everywhere, signaling with their bonfires and singing hymns. It's like Times Square on New Year's Eve in every city in the nation. There's no time to lose. It's now or never."

"But I'm more spiritual than religious. I'm not into the Bible. I don't qualify . . ."

"Trust me. Come on! Don't you see, hear the maelstrom coming through? I'm sorry - forgive my rudeness. I'm Miles Gordon, from down the street a few blocks."

"Molly. Molly Safer," the woman said, fighting



Steve Cartwright

her fear, shivering. "I'll get my things. Just a minute."

"You won't need them."

"Oh," she said, blushing. "Of course. All right. I'm ready then. Which way?"

"Are you in shape? I've been running. We have to move fast."

"Yes, I can run a couple of miles."

"Let's go then. To the west. If we see any more lights in the houses, we can stop for the lingerers."

She followed Miles as he set a brisk pace across her front yard and back into the street, where they ran side by side along the wet, glistening pavement, glancing off to the houses for signs of life from the neighbors. The thunder and lightning intensified, and the wind picked up, ripping leaves and

branches from the trees.

They ran hard for several minutes, until an exhausted Miles finally slowed to a jog as he gasped for breath. "I can't keep it up," he said. "You're in better shape than I am. But it's not much further now." He stopped, leaned over and placed his hands on his knees, greedily gulping air. "To the end of the street. Across the field, to the outcroppings of rock. We'll find shelter there."

"But where are they gathered?" Molly asked.

Thunder boomed, and a sudden vortex of brilliant yellow light shot down from the sky toward the western horizon, where it whirled with the fury of a tornado, then abruptly reversed its spin and burst into a dazzling rainbow of colors that spiraled upward into the stormy heavens.

"There!" He said, pointing to the vortex. "That's where they are. Now follow me. Hurry! Last leg of the journey."

They ran through the field, then darted around several rocky outcroppings until they came to a copse of trees at the edge of a bluff that overlooked a deep valley and the mountains across from it. Vortices plummeted from the sky repeatedly, blaring stentoriously, like deeply pitched foghorns, causing the ground to vibrate and rumble.

"Here," Miles yelled. "There's shelter. The boulders."

"I don't understand," Molly shouted over the burgeoning bedlam. "We've got to get across the valley. That's where they are. We're trapped. We can't climb down the cliff face in the dark, the storm." Blazing, violent gyres continued to rain down, shaking the earth with their noisy blasts, and igniting the sky with brilliant, fiery colors.

"Trust me Molly. I know what I'm doing. Steady yourself now. The shock wave is barreling toward us."

"What Miles, what..." But before she could finish, the earth roared and heaved and shook beneath them as a furious gust of wind knocked them sprawling to the ground. Miles crawled toward Molly

to shield her from the raging wind and the bellowing blackness that swarmed about them. Then he lost consciousness.

- - - - -

"Miles. Miles. Are you all right?" Molly cried out.

He felt a light tap on his shoulder. He opened his eyes. Molly knelt down by his side, sharp lines of worry on her face. Miles stared up at a strikingly clear, azure blue sky, framed by leafy treetops swaying gently in the breeze.

A white, fleecy cloud floated across his field of vision.

Dappled sunlight picked up the bright golden highlights of Molly's hair.

"We got left behind," Molly said, dismayed.

Miles felt the excitement churning in his belly, and the adrenaline surging through his veins. He thrust his fist into the air and whooped with joy. "Yes!" He rolled over onto his hands and knees, stood up, and pulled Molly to her feet. He raised his arms in triumph and danced a jig.

Molly watched with astonishment. "I'm not getting this," she said. "We were left behind, and..." and then she broke into a devilish grin, as if she were struck by an epiphany straight from hell. "Eureka!" She exclaimed. "They got it backwards, didn't they?"

Miles laughed. "You got it. And good riddance to them all. Welcome to our freshly cleansed earth."

"It wasn't God, either, was it?"

"Of course not. Some uber-aliens got pissed off about how we ravaged this beautiful planet, I suspect."

"So what now?"

"We look for the survivors. I've a feeling that us left-behinders will get it right this time." He reached for Molly's hand, and together they set out

toward the east as the bright morning sun rose into the clear blue sky.

The author was born and raised in New Jersey, and graduated from Montclair High School in 1960 and Cornell University in 1964 with a degree in mathematics.

He was employed as an actuary for a national life insurance company from 1964 until 1987, the last thirteen years as senior vice president and chief actuary. For several years after, he had his own software and actuarial consulting practice.

He is now retired, and lives in Idaho, near Boise, and has a second home in the mountain resort town of McCall, Idaho. He keeps busy writing software, fiction, and commentary.



Christine Bruness



Christine Bruness

Christine Bruness is an author and artist who creates "nonlinear art from the heart." She has had over three hundred poems, essays, editorials, articles, and pieces published in hard copy and online publications, including *Dreams of Decadence*, *Haiku Headlines*, (was the "Featured Poet" in November 2002) *Frogpond*, *Bolts of Silk*, *Rolling Stone*, *Poet's Haven*, *Free Focus*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Useless Knowledge*, and *Transcendent Visions*. She has been the recipient of over 39 writing awards, including the 2000 NJ Writer of the Year Award and 4 Readers' Choice Awards from *Haiku Headlines*. For her first book *Imbalance, An Experimental Collection of Micro Stories and Poetry*, Christine was honored to receive the Rose/Rosemary Zienteck Award from the Bayonne Writers' Group, New Jersey's largest statewide non-profit writing organization (at the time the award was received).

Christine is also a devoted artist. Her work has appeared in several solo exhibitions and many group shows. In 2005, she received a grant from the NJ Meadowlands Commission for her artwork.

Christine works as an educator, teaching English to new Americans and is a certified teacher of English. She has taught poetry writing workshops to public school children and has given many readings and book signings at both independently owned bookstores and large chains. She is a lover of cats and spends most of her earnings feeding the strays. She lives in New Jersey with her husband Richard, their kitten Daisy, and a pack of strays who visit often.

Warning:

On a Certain Day

in Early Fall

Tim Poland

Usually a few days after the actual equinox we cross the border from summer grime to a scrubbed autumn sky.

On days such as this you'll be tempted to look at the sky. Don't--resist the temptation.

Turn away from this blistering blue, which is easily explained--the conflation of oxygen and electromagnetic radiation colliding with your retinas.

Shift your gaze down to the treetops, to the upper spikes of blue spruce and the sprawling branches of reddening pin oak.

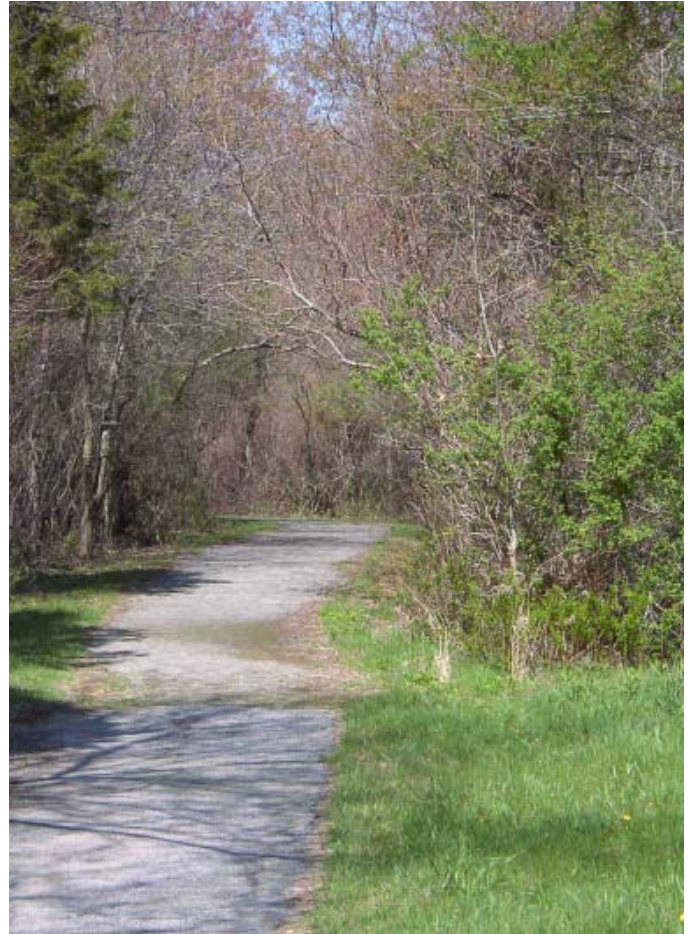
Keep moving, past the squirrels--they don't really want you there, that charming chatter is a danger signal and you are the danger.

Don't linger on the birds either--pass over the jay or woodpecker. Even if it's a hawk (which is, of course, harder to ignore), keep moving.

Inch your way down the trunk to specific ground, to the blowing leaves and late season flowers and yes, it's all so lovely and fraught with implications but don't dally.

Press your feet to the ground and your ass to this large flat rock, fix your gaze on the moving bodies of living humans animated sacs of water and protoplasm--not easily explained.

Sooner or later, the people--you must look at people. The sky can wait--it should be there a while longer.



Arthur Isaacson

I live and work in the New River Valley near the Blue Ridge Mountains in southwestern Virginia and teach American literature and creative writing at Radford University. I'm the author of *Escapee* (America House, 2001), a collection of short fiction. My work has also been published or is forthcoming in various literary magazines, such as *The Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Timber Creek Review*, *Literal Latté*, *The Georgetown Review*, *Acorn Whistle*, *The Edge City Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *One Trick Pony* and *Appalachian Heritage*. My piece in *Appalachian Heritage* received the 2002 Denny C. Plattner/Appalachian Heritage Award for creative non-fiction.

www.timpoland.com

First in Flight

Gary Lehmann

Castle Green had a festival atmosphere as 25,000 to 30,000 people gathered to see a young aeronaut risk his life in a hot air balloon.

Manhattan has been deemed too windy and wet previously. At the center of this hub-bub, a giant cotton balloon was being inflated by maneuvering alternate fire pots close to its cavernous mouth.

As the heat accumulated, the bag began to rise, slump on its side, then stand tall.

People were amazed as the giant bag began to move like a sleeping beast.

A well-dressed youth was handing out broadsides containing a poem about the joys of flight penned by one Charles Ferson Durant.

It was this same youth, styling himself also an inventor and astronomer, who climbed confidently into the wicker basket attached precariously to the rising balloon by a multitude of thin lines of braided twine.

Bags of sand were dropped and the unstable contraption arose with many bumps and shutters from the Battery Green.

It headed out over New York harbor in a generally westerly direction.

Ferry boat passengers crowded the rails cheering and holding their hats and parasols to shade their eyes from the sunny sky.

Thursday, September 9, 1830 in the afternoon something extraordinary happened.

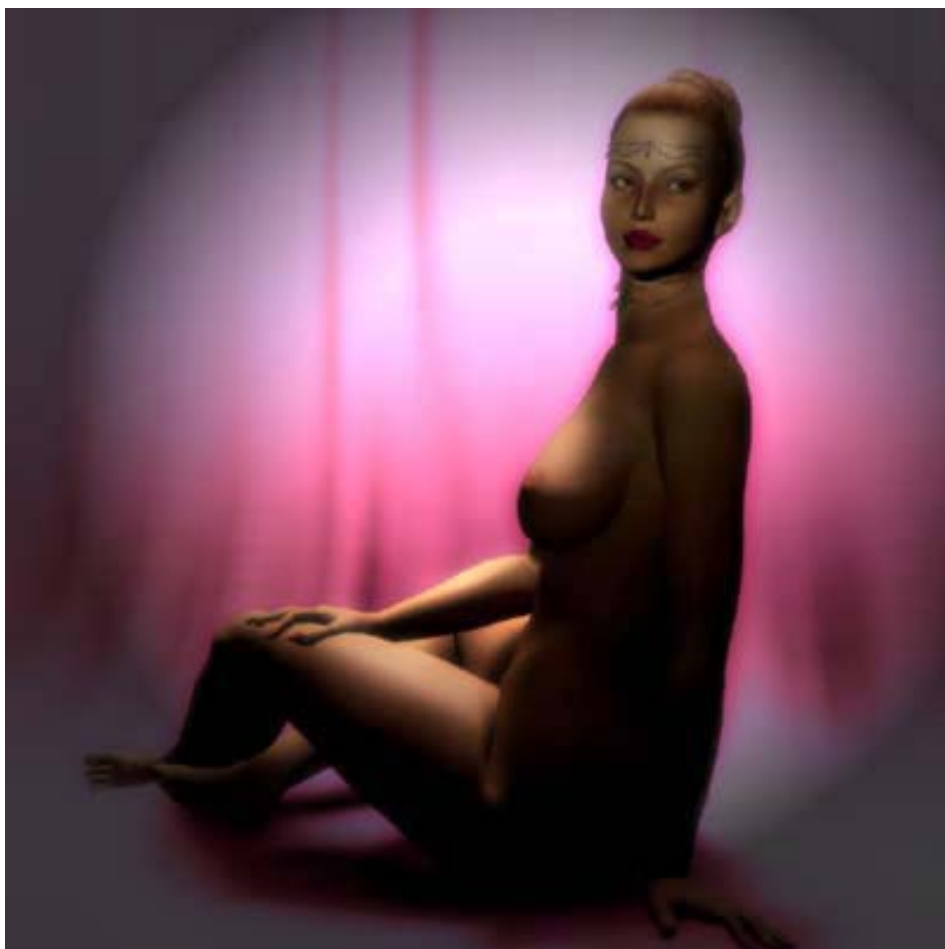
A man rose off the ground, the first in North America, waving his beaver hat and dropping the rest of his poetry onto the multitudes below as he sedately drifted toward the west bank of the Hudson River and beyond.



Steve Cartwright

[http://www.angelfire.com/sc2/
cartoonsbycartwright/](http://www.angelfire.com/sc2/cartoonsbycartwright/)

Gary Lehmann teaches writing and poetry at the Rochester Institute of Technology. His essays, poetry and short stories are widely published -- about 60 pieces a year. He is the director of the Athenaeum Poetry group which recently published its second chapbook, *Poetic Visions*. He is also author of a book of poetry entitled *Public Lives and Private Secrets* [Foothills Press, 2005], and co-author and editor of a book of poetry entitled *The Span I Will Cross*. His poem "Reporting from Fallujah" was nominated for the 2006 Pushcart Prize. His short play, "My Health Care Worker Stole My Jewelry" was selected for professional production in January 2006 at Geva Theatre, Rochester, NY. Visit his website at www.garylehmann.blogspot.com



A Perfect Skin

Princess Fiona - Birdie Shirey

Kristine Ong Muslim

Something that covers and heals
without scars, like in the movies
which orchestrate your past lives --

something must settle on your skin,
something light, like a caress, perhaps,
from an old lover you have dumped

in search for the one who will dump you
back. Something like dust from some
other skins must touch down to yours

only because you will never feel
the particles violently graze you.

Arts & Entertainment

Kristine Ong Muslim has more than three hundred stories and poems published/forthcoming in mostly genre professional and small press magazines and anthologies. Her mainstream poems have been published or will appear in *Adbusters*, *Bleeding Quill*, *FireWeed*, *Megaera*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *T-Zero*, and elsewhere. Her publication credits are listed here:

<http://www.freewebs.com/blackroom8>

The Lovely Peasant Girl

G. David Schwartz

There was once a lovely peasant girl who caught the eye of the prince. He said to her, "I am the prince, and desire to make you my wife."

The peasant girl scolded the prince for being so presumptuous and impetuous. "I belong to another," the peasant girl exclaimed.

"You have caught my eye," the prince asserted, "And now I will have you."

"I will have your eye," the peasant girl laughed, "But you must first catch me fair and square."

"How do you mean?"

The lovely peasant girl explained that cornering her in the marketplace was an advantage of royalty, yet a hindrance to true relationship. The prince pretended to understand. "You must give me a days journey, and then try to find me." The prince agreed with the words that he would be able to sniff her fragrance behind any pine in the woods, feel her beauty under any disguise, and flow into her arms by the charms of her attraction.

The lovely peasant girl took her father's uncle, a famous magician, and her mother's niece. They journeyed on borrowed horses. After a day, the prince set out to find her. Because he had the king's steeds, he soon caught up with the troupe. The magician turned the lovely peasant girl into a refreshing stream, the niece into a willow, the horses into stones, and himself into an enchanting book.

When the prince saw the stream he ordered his soldiers to dismount but not to drink until he had



"Lila the Wench" Birdie Shirey

read what he thought was a book of testimonies which lay on one of the rocks under the willow. He picked up the book and read at random. He read: "Whosoever drinks of the lovely stream possesses beauty forever, but is forever sad." The prince puzzled over these words. He forbade his men to drink from the stream. He sat on a rock and pondered the mysterious words. He sat there for a day and a half. Finally, he thoughts tumbled into the refrain, "Beauty...sad...beauty...sad..."

The prince resolved to drink. "This is indeed a rotary bipolar universe," he said, scooping water into his cupped hands and raising them to his mouth. Water dribbled down his chin and stained his clothes. He

felt refreshed — a disappointment considering he expected more! He felt tired. He ordered his men to remount and return to the kingdom. They would find her tomorrow, he announced. The prince alone filled his canteen with water before they set off down the dusty trail.

Once they were gone, the magician was again a magician, the horses horses, the niece a niece, and the lovely peasant girl a peasant girl. Yet she was slightly diminished. Her nose appeared awkward, still lovely, but somehow not set with her face as it had previously been. It was not the perfect jewel it had been that morning. Other than that, she was a lovely as ever.

The magician shook his head. "The prince has drunk deeply and without fear. You must return to him."

The next morning the three travelers entered the realm. Trumpets announced their return, yet the prince heard these very trumpets as an announcement of his victory. He came out to meet the trio in the square.

"I have won fair and square," he announced, more to the crowd than to the lovely peasant.

"You have," she responded.

"You are lovely. Lovely!" He said, but his eyes were fixed on the nose of the niece.

"I am," said the peasant girl, "And you shall always remember my beauty along with the pain of knowing what price it has cost you."

"Price?," the prince questioned. "I am the prince, son of the great King. I can afford anything."

"You are the prince," the peasant girl agreed, "And you can afford anything."

With these words, she pulled two daggers from below her gown and carved the prince's eyes out of their sockets. The prince reached out to catch them before they hit the ground. The peasant girl stepped close while he held his eyes balled up in his hands. She pressed herself against his chest, causing him to press his delicate eyes together between the two of them. He felt the plasticity of his own eyes against his blood-warmed fleshy palms. The lovely peasant kissed his lips.

"You have won that which you sought, O, my prince and husband. Now I shall be your lovely girl forever."

So saying, the canteen the prince carried burst open, and vapor filled the marketplace. No one saw what happened next. The mist was so heavy and thick that when it cleared all of the people of the kingdom, except for the niece and the magician, were blind, or mad, or both.

G. David Schwartz - the former president of Seedhouse, the online interfaith committee. Schwartz is the author of *A Jewish Appraisal of Dialogue*, and coauthor, with Jacqueline Winston, of *Parables In Black and White*. Currently a volunteer at Drake Hospital in Cincinnati, Schwartz continues to write. His new book, *Midrash and Working Out Of The Book* is now in stores or can be ordered.

www.amazon.com/gp/product/1418489565/104-8454011-6722310?n=28315

Swan Song

Mary Bodiak

Your graceful neck
Towers to sip a drink
From a tranquil lake
Paddle with your webbed feet
Angle your wings to propel
Your poised body forward
Barely causing a ripple.

Mary Bodiak: I am a 56 year old retired public school teacher from Little Rock, AR. I have over thirty years teaching experience. I have always enjoyed writing in my leisure time. I particularly enjoy non-fiction writing which relies on my own experiences. I've taken several creative writing lessons from a woman with an MA in fine arts. I'm currently writing memoirs and poetry for my family. I recently took training for Arkansas Hospice with the intent of writing personal memoirs for patients. I also tutor about twenty hours a week at a local learning center. I have had poems published previously in small quarterly journals, read a story on our local NPR, and will have that story published in an anthology this fall.

Trippin

G. Franklin Prue

Nights roamed like a used roll of toilet paper over the monument city of Washington, D.C. Beggar men wallowed on 12th Avenue between Pennsylvania and four blocks of bull crap from the White House. Eight o'clock express bus was on its way. They waited with their hands turned up at the sky of undressed misty clouds. Scary do wop black teenagers sipped cans of beer in the grey morning sun as some women dropped coins in the can of the old bus hands. Drunks woke like bird dogs from the concrete door corners. They cared none for other sins as we went to work to make money for wives, children, ourselves in a city with nothing but war sins. Pray. Pray for our sins...pray for our sins. Freedom, freedom, freedom under these skies in the shadows of the capitol, in the shadows of drinking, drugging, and killing in the halls of Congress to the halls of my footsteps in the city of many sins. Rain was supposed to come and clean our early morning sins. I took my umbrella just in case as I went in Morningview Hospital.

Blonde nurses scurried like white mice. Chinese physicians spoke under their breaths to give back to the west. Wheel chaired men and women moved like dying snakes on surgical units. I wanted to cry to see them not die. I kissed receptionist Miss Gerdie Strauss a Jerry Garcia look alike on the cheek good morning. She handed me the morning Times, rolled to page five Sports. I gave her fifty cents...

" Thanks, sugar."

" Ah," she smiled, " ain't you sweet."

However, I quizzed like a bee and watched my coworkers twisted their faces around the water fountain. Slurped, held their noses, coughed and gagged out the office. Death smelled, came up in my throat in the corridors. Guess the ventilation had broken down again...damn. We violated a code of

man as we tried to keep death sacred-quiet. We had given the whole world a sniff.

I got used to it. The odor made me think of the time I watched my mother in the bathroom picking at her mouth. She was searching for something. I was seven-maybe eight. No, I was young didn't understand. She was trippin' and I didn't understand she was trying to get out of a life that was hard. She was trying to get away from something that put her in the arms of pain.

I asked her." Ma, what are you looking for?"

" Josh," she smiled, " I'm getting these cockroaches out of my mouth."

Sadly, lost. I left her alone in the bathroom scratching her mouth until it bled. The ambulance came and got her. And I was just lost. But now I understand the odor and my hospital work, trying to save lives through the process of Insurance claims. Mr. and Mrs. Death joked over my shoulders as I typed information from Item E thru Item H on my computer screen. I tried to stop this death...this searching in our mouths, down our throats, these manicured red nails going after cockroaches. Stop these hands from choking us in a pool of blood as I fought and struggled for others to keep from going on this trip.

I left my job early, wasn't no need in staying until they fixed the machines. I walked down to the coffee shop. With my newspaper. I ordered a double latte. The skies wanted to give me some sun. Near George Washington University students went on with their book bags. I sat in the shop and watched the pretty girls with mini dresses and long hair. I watched and watched

and watched and saw the D.C. police sped about on their motorcycles, street vendors sold flowers, magazines, government workers sold their souls. And I watched and watched and watched. A tall clock on Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th chimed from the Episcopal church, limousines flew by with little colored flags as a nice-pretty-girl walked by the coffee shop window. Damn, she looked like my

mother...long black hair, tanned...five six or seven and soft as the sky. Minded her business. She wore a red mini, black stockings, saddle shoes, and carried a leather briefcase.

Stopped at the corner...

I watched her and got up. I couldn't stop myself. Was it death telling me your mother was in many places, many places all over the city. I rushed and bought some red roses from the vendor. I followed her as she was going towards the University. I was scared, fingers sweated around the stems. I know my hands were bled. But I had to follow her. I had too, she looked like my mother...darling, darling mother.

I caught up to her, she stopped and smelled some roses at the entrance to the campus. I stopped, than rushed and knew it was the right moment.

" Oh! Hello."

She turned around. "Hello."

"I have," I handed her the roses, "these for you."

"Oh, wow!" She was surprised, "these are beautiful."

"They for you," I said, "because I think you are beautiful." I nodded and walked away. I didn't say anything else but I knew and she knew that this surprise from this guy meant something. But she didn't know why. But I knew my day was finished and it was time to go home again to a lovely wife and son.

G. Franklin Prue is published in Lonzie's Fried Chicken, Miller's Pond, and showcased in ezine [intellicacy.com](http://www.intellicacy.com). He has recently completed the John Husker Detective series, and is also working on non-fiction travel narrative *The New Conquistadors*. He is an educator in the Seattle Public Schools and world traveler who believes finding a story is like finding a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.



Chelin Sanjuan

<http://www.chelinsanjuan.info/>

Micki Peluso

A PUZZLING ROMANCE

Caitlin with the carrot-colored hair
Went off to visit a witch so fair.
Seeking help, her problem profound.
The witch's familiar was a Basset Hound!

"What? No black cat??" Caitlin asked.
"Sadly, my cat was possessed! Aghast,
A corrupt thing, most surely demonized.
So I changed her into this hound so fine."

"What, my sweet, might I do for you??"
While cooing to her grey morning dove.
"I have looked far and wide," The lass replied.
"But cannot find my one true love."

The witch rose to stir her cauldron stew
Dug deep into a magical tapestry bag
And handed Caitlin a Rubik's cube
Which made the lovelorn girl quite mad!

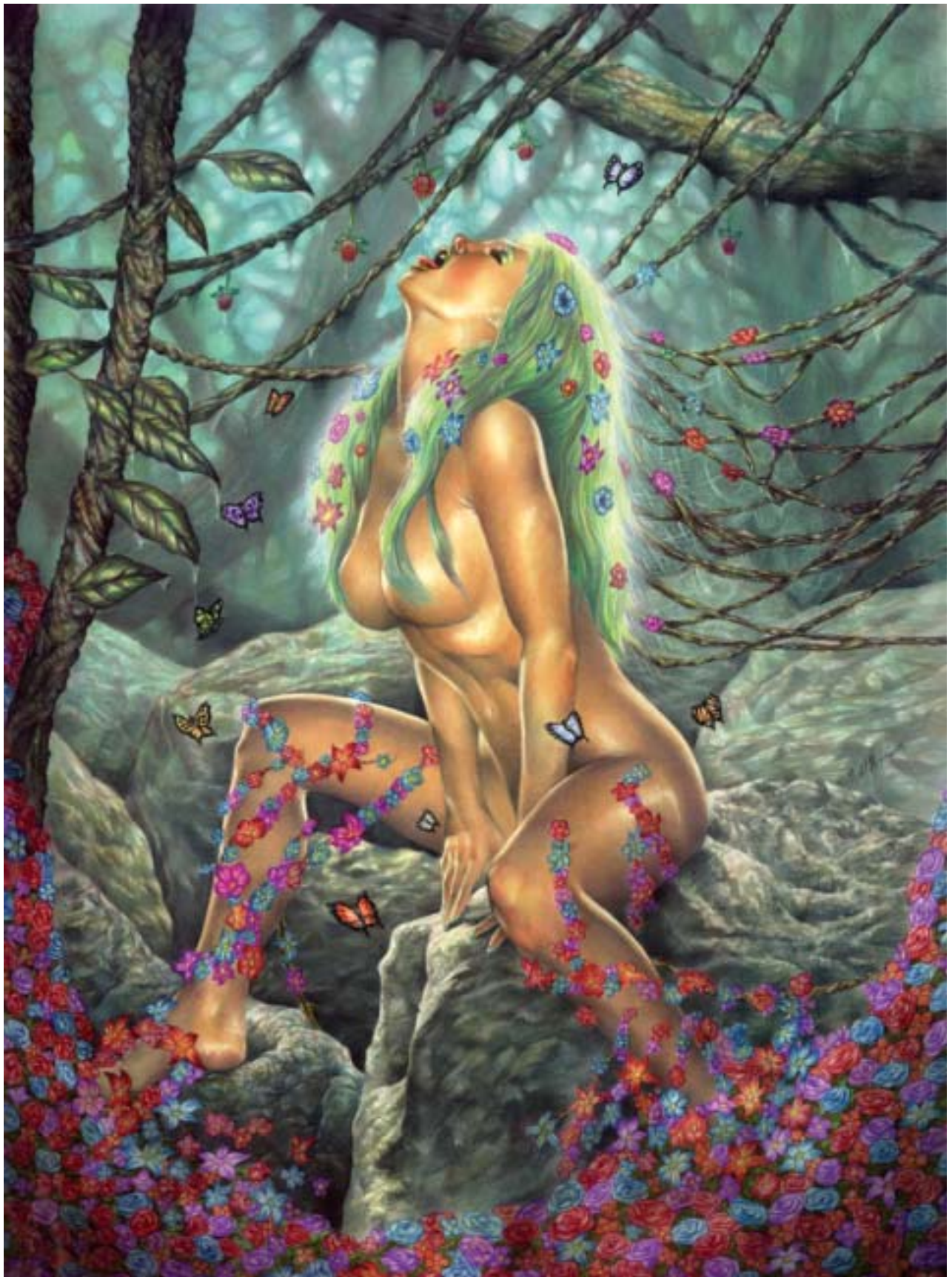
"I beseech your help and receive a toy?"
"Ah, my beauty, it will bring you joy.
For when solved, the Rubik's squares,
Will bring the one for whom you care."

The witchcraft worked on the very first try,
As Caitlin sat alone in the park.
A handsome, dark-eyed man ambled by
And made a quizzical remark.



"Excuse me Miss," he said and sat
Beside her on the wooden bench.
"You seem to need a hand with that."
His eyes took in the lovely wench.
Moments passed with no retreat,
As he twisted, turned, then it was done.
The Rubik's cube was now complete.
Caitlin sighed, her heartstrings sung.
Far in the distance howled a sound
From a most special Basset Hound.
The witch pulled up her blood-red cowl
And smiled; true love once more, found.

Micki Peluso is a free-lance journalist for two major newspapers in Staten Island, New York. For over twenty years she has published slice of life humor in the local paper and news items commentary, analysis, and interviews in the bi-weekly paper. Several of her poems have been published in *Victimology: An International Journal*, as well as a short story. She has been published in *Skyline Magazine* at least a half dozen times and won third place in the short story contest held by *Skyline*. Micki has won several contests in e-zines and on-line writing sites and is presently finishing a memoir.



Matt Hughes

www.matthughesart.com

All in Good Time

David Sebek

"Come on, show me who yo' daddy is. Come on. Come on. That's right! Who's yo' daddy? That's right! That's right! I'm yo' daddy. I'm yo' daddy. I'm yo'daddy. I'm yo'daddy! I'm yo' daddy! I'm yo'daddy! I'm yo' daddy! I'm yo'daddy!"

"I AM YOUR DADDY! OH BABY!"

Marcus pounded his desk. The monitor shook, the numbers on the screen did not change. For the last three hours he'd followed the meteoric rise of TriTech stock. Six weeks of analysis, research and good old hardheaded stubbornness now paid off.

"Hey Marcus, you need a smoke?" Said Chris Simpson peeking over the top of his cubicle.

Marcus put his hands in his back pockets, blew out a long breath and looked at Chris. "I can't believe what I just did," he said.

Chris smiled.

Sid walked out of the manager's office. A stalky, bull of a man, he stepped into Marcus' cubicle, his broad shoulders nearly brushing against both sides of the opening. Chris ducked down.

"What the hell is going on out here?" He asked.

"Sid," Marcus said, "TriTech just hit 72 1/8. That's 12 1/2 points in 3 hours."

"Looks like you made us a chunk of change Marcus, good job."

"What would you do without me?"

Sid thought for a second, "Put an ad in the paper and hire whoever walked in the door. Just like we did with you."

Marcus laughed, Sid didn't. He looked up at Marcus and said, "Remember Marcus, this business is still a whole lot about luck."

"Come on Sid!" Marcus said. "I found this one, rode it out and just made us a load of money

and you want to tell me it's all about luck. Give me some credit."

"Here's your credit. Don't take credit for things you have very little to do with. We are all happy you just made us a shit load of money. But any whack job off the street could have done it. Luck Marcus. This business is about good luck. Today you knocked the ball out of the park, now start acting like you've touched home plate before."

Marcus fell back into his chair. Sid clapped him on the shoulder.

"Go home Marcus," Sid said as he turned to tally the day's wins and losses. "You did good today. Go home and enjoy your fat commission check."

Marcus spun his chair around and stared at the monitor. He found TriTech a month and a half ago and talked Sid into buying the shares. At 1:30 this afternoon, the TriTech CEO announced the successful completion of human trials on the wonder drug XV-13. The next level of organ donation had been reached, no longer would people reject their transplanted organs. And Marcus Jay Roeser was \$10,000 richer for it.

Instead of rejoicing in his wealth, Marcus slouched deeper into his chair and wondered when he would get his credit, his recognition.

"Marcus baby! Come here man and give me a kiss." Chris said walking into Marcus' cubicle. He dropped into Marcus' lap, an oversized kid visiting Santa.

"You stupid Anglo, get off of me!" Marcus said dumping Chris out of his lap.

Marcus looked at the gangly pile of Caucasian at his feet and laughed.

"I just wanted to come over and kiss my daddy." Chris said as he stood up, dusting off his slacks. "Man, I had a frickin' hard on listening to you. You should start your own phone sex service. DAMN! YOU ARE HOT!"

Marcus laughed again, leaned back in his chair and rested his hands behind his head.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why doesn't Sid give me some credit? I mean, I popped that stock's cherry clean and sweet. And all he does is tell me that a frickin' monkey could fall out of a tree, land in my chair and do what I did today."

"Sid doesn't give anyone credit. It's his managerial style." Chris said holding his fingers up in quote like fashion when he said managerial style. "Forget about it. You are now a rich young Negro male with no pussy, though you do act like one."

Marcus flipped him off.

Chris continued, undaunted by the non-verbal cue to screw himself, "We have all night to get – it – on," thrusting his hips at Marcus to enunciate each syllable. "We'll get you a hooker, she'll show you how to get a hard on without looking at the panty girls in the Sears catalog, and it will all be good."

"If you weren't so damn pale and I didn't feel so damn sorry for you I would kick your knobby kneed ass all over this office," said Marcus.

"That is one option. But why don't we try going out first?"

"You go ahead man. I might hook up with you later. I'm going to swing home for a while and get myself together. I am not in the right party mood yet and I need a little help getting there."

"That's cool," Chris said. "I'll be at Flat's. You get yourself ready and get over there."

Chris reached down and pulled Marcus out of his chair.

"You did good today Marcus. You did real good."

"Thanks Chris, I appreciate it."

"Later days my friend."

Chris turned to leave as Marcus picked up his jacket from the back of the chair.

"Chris."

"Yeah man."

"What do you think? Was I just in the right place at the right time?"

"Hey man, I don't know. Some days it's just better to be lucky than good."

Marcus swung his jacket over his shoulder and looked out the window at the downtown skyline.

"Marcus, stop worrying about it. You made a lot of money today. Who gives a shit if you're a goddamn Einstein or a frickin' lottery ticket? You're rich and you didn't even have to go on TV and play nice with that dwarf Regis."

Marcus laughed. "Thanks man. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Yeah, sure. Anytime."

Marcus walked into the parking garage. He made his way past the valet spots and Sid's new Jag to the elevator. "Thanks to me he won't have any trouble making his payments for the next few months," Marcus thought. He sighed as the elevator doors slid open in front of him. "Chris is right, I just made ten grand and I'm bitching about not getting any credit. I need to get my head examined."

The elevator lurched to a stop and Marcus stepped out into the contract parking lot. His leased white 2006 BMW sat in the late afternoon sun. Marcus smiled, he could now buy out his lease, maybe even upgrade to a Z4. He would go by the dealership tomorrow, do a little window-shopping.

Five years ago the BMW was a used, dark green Saturn. The Saturn had been a graduation present from his parents for being the first one in his family to earn a degree. At the time, his parents didn't know that Marcus was clueless about what he wanted to be when he grew up, even though the diploma made it seem his shit was together.

He used his marketing degree to bounce from one entry-level position to another. Never sticking in one place too long, never feeling like he was living up to his life's potential, as his father would say.

"You have to have a plan son," Dad said. "If you don't have a plan you're just wasting everybody's time. Especially your own."

His mother would quickly follow up with a One Minute Bible Study and talk about making room for Jesus in his life, how God has a plan for all of us. The conclusion of the lesson was usually reinforced with a deep "Amen" from his father.

Four and half years of entry-level positions left him the odd man out. No one wanted to hire a

drifting young black male. Usually they just wanted to put them on America's Most Wanted.

Six months ago he sat in his parent's kitchen, sifting through the classifieds, licking his wounds from a large round of corporate layoffs. He looked for any job that would get him enough money to move out of his parent's house and into his own place. The only other alternative was to live out of the trunk of his Saturn.

He found the ad set in small type with few words:

Earn unlimited piles of cash.

NO TRAINING

Looking for eager new faces tired of the same old routine.

Call Sid.

Twelve hours later he sat in Sid's office overlooking a frenzy of activity and confusion.

"97% of the people I hire are gone in two weeks Marcus. Two weeks. Pussies. All of them. The 3% who stay make six figure incomes their first year and seven by the end of their second year. Does that sound like something that might interest you Marcus?"

"Uh, yes sir, it does. Very much."

"Then Marcus, I just have one more question for you."

"Yes sir."

"Are you a pussy?"

Marcus stuck through the first two weeks. He watched and learned and at the end of the first month cashed a \$100 commission check.

"Good work Marcus," said Sid handing Marcus the check. "You've shown me you're not a pussy. Keep working and the world will be yours."

At the end of two months Marcus made \$1,000. After three months he earned almost \$14,000; today, ten grand in one afternoon. He shook his head as he drove out of the garage and turned towards the parkway. He figured he would

make a copy of the check before he deposited it, a memento to show his parents. Or maybe buy them something big. He didn't know what, but something to really show he was part of the ruling class now and no longer needed to live by silly ideals like mapping out a life plan or waiting to see what Jesus had in mind. He was king of his world and no one was going to knock him on his ass.

Marcus decided to start his coronation with the unopened bottle of Jack Daniels sitting on the breakfast bar at home. He turned into the Stop N Go just before the parkway on ramp. "A 20-ounce Coke," he thought, ought to be enough to temper the sweet bitterness of his favorite Old Tennessee Whiskey.

The stores' fluorescent lights hummed. Behind the counter an Asian lady made change for a teenage boy, and in the round mirror hanging from the ceiling she watched Marcus walk to the back of the store.

Marcus found the large coolers and drummed his fingers on the glass doors searching for the Cokes. He found the juice and milk and quickly wondered in what type of situation you would have to be in to buy a gallon of milk from a convenience store.

He found the sodas and the bright red label of his favorite soft drink. He opened the door, enjoying the blast of cold air against his face.

He turned to pay when he noticed a young brunette watching him from across the store. She smiled. He smiled back and waited for her to look away. When she didn't Marcus decided there were now ten thousand and one reasons why this was the best day of his life.

He walked across the back of the store. She looked down at her magazine, flipping the pages slowly.

Marcus liked the look of her. She wore black wind shorts and a tight workout top. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her bangs lay matted against her forehead. The contours of her muscles were lightly defined below her skin. She was trim and built.

He had no idea what he would say. Friends or co-workers usually introduced most of the women he dated. He was not the smooth talker many people thought he should be.

He stopped behind her and glanced over her shoulder at the magazine. His mind jumped to make any type of connection to O, Oprah's magazine.

"I enjoyed last month's issue a great deal," he said. "Her series on finding yourself has really changed my life."

She smiled. "Do you always try to pick up women in convenience stores or do you figure this is just your lucky night?"

Unsettled by her direct response to his indirect flirtation, he stood, quiet and still, wishing to be invisible. Normally he would turn and walk out of the store, making it a point to never shop there again. But his intuition had been on fire lately, leading him from one good decision to another. He decided to ride out this streak. Even if she embarrassed him, he still had the car and ten thousand dollars.

"I was thinking since we happened to notice each other at the same time that maybe it was a bit of destiny."

"So, what now?" She said putting the magazine on the rack and turning to Marcus, looking him in the eye. A knot tightened from his gut to his throat. Whatever cocky bravado inspired him to walk over to this gorgeous woman was now running down the side of his leg and pooling on the floor.

"I, um, thought..."

"Great, I'm getting picked up by Elmer Fudd."

She turned to walk away. His nerve was almost gone. He decided to make one last attempt to save his pride.

"You and I need to go get a drink. Find out why we were so attracted to each other just moments ago."

She stopped and turned around. Smiling, she looked at him, "That's the confidence and swagger I hoped you had. Now you really look like someone I would like to get to know."

"Great, I don't think I will be needing this anymore." Marcus said setting his Coke on the rack next Oprah.

"My name is Marcus"

"Steph."

"Nice to meet you Steph."

They walked out of the store together.

"Is there somewhere we can go around here where I can buy you a drink?" He asked.

"Sure," she said. "But I need a chance to go home and clean up a bit."

"Would you like me to drive you back to your place so you can freshen up?" Marcus asked.

"Marcus," she said. "I hardly know you. Am I supposed to get in a car with a man I don't know and expect him to drive me home?"

"Well, uh..."

"It's okay Elmer, I only live three blocks from here. This is a good part of town. Leave your car here and we can walk and talk."

Relieved that he hadn't screwed things up, Marcus agreed and they began walking away from the busy traffic of the parkway into the calm serenity of the established neighborhood Steph called home.

"This is a beautiful area to run in. How often do you go out," he asked.

"Four times a week."

"Do you have a gym around here where you go to workout?"

"Gyms are for ego maniacs. I have some free weights at home I use to keep up my strength."

"An interesting thought just popped into my head. If gyms are for ego maniacs, why do you run around wearing latex lingerie?"

"Pretty good," she said laughing. "This is what I am comfortable in and it also helps that I look good in it. At the same time, I am not stopping every 15 to 20 seconds to check out my body in the mirror or to flex this or that when some hot daddy walks by. I have a tremendous body. I work hard to keep it that way. Being out in public like this is not something I am ashamed of."

"Hey, you have a great body, you are very disciplined. I wish I had some of your discipline. My buddy says I have Dunlop disease."

She looked at him, "What's that?"

"It's when your belly has "done lopped" over your belt."

She laughed again.

Marcus, he thought, how do you do it?

"If I don't offend you too much this evening," he said, "maybe you could rub a little of that discipline off on me. Then I could think about fitting back into my size 32 pants again."

She reached down and took his hand.

"I don't know about a workout partner. But if drinks go well tonight I definitely see dinner or lunch in our future."

"Well then," he said, "One step at a time."

"Sounds good to me. Here's my place."

They walked up the steps to an old three-story flattop. Once an office building, developers had resurrected it as an apartment. Two-flats per floor. Steph lived on the second floor. She untied her key form her sneaker and let Marcus in.

He walked into a spacious main room that led to a hallway on the left and a large window looking out onto the city skyline on the right. Marcus could see his office building. He could, if he tried, find the same window he looked out an hour ago.

"This is nice. A lot of room. Do you have a roommate?"

"Sometimes. When her boyfriend is out of town. I don't complain. She pays half the rent and I get the whole apartment. I'm going to clean up real quick, the TV is over there," she said pointing to a flat screen hanging on the wall. "The remote is by the couch and cold beers are in the fridge. Help yourself. I'll be back in a minute."

"Sounds great, thanks."

She turned down the hallway and disappeared into her room. Marcus heard the door close and the snap of the lock.

He looked out at the ending day. The last rays of sunlight wrapped themselves around his office building. He decided Sid was right, well, partly right. It was all about luck. Sure it was. But you had to work hard to make sure the luck worked in your

favor. How in the hell could Sid think anyone could have pulled off this deal?

He walked over to the couch and found the remote. Under the flat screen TV, a row of dumbbells lay on a rack. He turned on the TV and flopped on the couch.

"Screw Sid," he said to himself. "I am making thousands of dollars a day, I am driving a great car and now, on top of it all, I have met a beautiful, sexy, tough and seemingly smart woman. I am the god damn king of my world and piss on any one who gets in my way." He took a deep breath, and a sense of ease and accomplishment filled the space that moments ago belonged to his resentment and anger towards Sid.

Steph walked in.

Marcus stood up.

"Oh my, you look great," Marcus said.

Steph smiled, reached down on the couch grabbed the remote and flipped off the TV.

"Thank you. Are you ready to go?" She asked.

"Yes I am."

"Well, after you then. I need to turn on a light and lock the door."

Marcus turned to leave the room. When his back was turned, Steph reached down, picked up a 15-pound dumbbell and slammed it into the base of his skull. He crumpled to the ground.

He did not understand what was happening. He thought he could feel something warm on the back of his head but he couldn't move his body. He tried to pick himself up but his arms and legs weren't answering the frantic calls from his brain. The phone lines were down, the only answer was an automated voice recording, repeating the same message over and over, "The limbs you are trying to reach have been disconnected."

Steph knelt down next to him. She noticed the blood trickling in a meandering course across the back of his neck, weaving in and out of the distorted, broken vertebrae that protruded from under the skin of his broken neck.

She pulled a large, flat Sterilite container from under the couch. The kind Marcus' mother, mothers

all over the world probably, used to store sweaters, knickknacks or anything else they generally wanted to keep out of the way and dust free.

She pulled a yellow beach towel out of the container. She folded it into fourths and compressed it against the back of his head. It was the first time he registered anything close to pain. He couldn't scream out, in fact he was finding it harder and harder to catch his breath.

She unfolded a large sheet of plastic and started stuffing it under him and pulling it through to the other side. She grunted and huffed while she did this, he was a big boy but she was built and strong enough to handle the job.

He watched her out of one eye. After she pulled the last of the tarp through, straightening it out, making sure equal amounts showed through on each side, she sat up, kneeling, resting. She sighed, wiped one hand on her brow, and reached over Marcus' toweled and bleeding head to the phone on the small coffee table by the couch.

He heard the beep as she hit the speed dial. He could feel a deep burning in his chest; the air was not going in and out of him like it should.

"I got another one," she said. "Yeah. Car will bring in at least 15 grand. I don't know, I haven't checked his wallet. Yeah. Well hurry, I want to be done with this one before the sun comes up. Okay, see you in ten."

She hung up. Marcus hadn't been able to take a breath in about 30 seconds, the pain in his chest spread, his throat begged for another gasp of air.

Steph bent down and noticed his lips turning blue.

"I do believe you are suffocating."

She stood up and watched the panic in his eyes grow as his mind struggled against the spreading suffocation. She bent low to his ear.

"Is it better to be lucky or good? I bet tonight you thought you were both. But look at you now. I guess you were a little too lucky and a little too good. Well, thanks for coming over. I hope you don't mind but it looks like I will have to continue having a wonderful time without you. Good night."

The last thing he felt was her kiss on his ear.

David Sebek: I teach in the Alief Independent School District. I offer staff development, helping teachers understand the writing process and training them how to develop the young writers in their classrooms. I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Texas A&M University

"Skip #73" Sonnet

Maurice Oliver

I have my reasons. For instance, the ability to iron creases out of a fan for one. To find a chaos theory appealing for another. To be a vehicle on the road to salvation. Untied shoelaces. Overturned chairs. The buoy left out in a frigid ocean. An obdurate spider. A redeemed sheep. The quack of a ravenous duck. "X" that does not mark the spot. Pastry already stale. No shortage of hummingbirds. Lead feathers. Tarred toast. Clouds that have not yet learned how to clot. Defiant caterpillars. Edible snails. The sun & moon oblivious to indifference. No pet rocks. Beauty when its accidental. Fruit that purposely lacks seeds. And of course, a steadfast belief in the notion of "why".

After spending almost a decade working as a freelance photographer in Europe Maurice Oliver returned to America in 1990. Then in 1995 he made a lifelong dream reality by traveling around the world for eight months, recording his experiences in a journal instead of taking pictures. And so began his desire to be a poet. His poetry has appeared in The Potomac Journal, Circle Magazine, The MAG, Tryst3 Journal, Eye-Shot, Pebble Lake Review, Megaera, The Surface, Wicked Alice, Word Riot, Taj Mahal Review (India), Stride Magazine (UK), Dandelion Magazine (Canada), Retort Magazine (Australia), & online at unlikelystories.org, girlswithinsurance.com, subtletea.com, interpoetry.com (UK), kritya.in (India), & blueprintreview.de (Germany), and eslewhere. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon, where he is a private tutor. His poetry blog- site can be visited at: www.bloxster.net/mauriceoliver.

MRS. ANDERS-LARSON

Martin Green

I was looking through the state employee newspaper the other day and there on a back page was a story that Margaret Anders-Larson, the distinguished mathematician and head of the state's Industrial Statistics Division, was retiring. She had brought the Division to national prominence, had published numerous articles in prestigious journals, and was the former President of the San Francisco Statistical Association, and so on and so forth. Margaret Anders-Larson. I hadn't thought about her for years.

* * *

It wasn't the best time in my life. I was 29 and working in the State Building in San Francisco's Civic Center. I'd been married almost five years and we had two young children. Our first son, John, was three years old and our unplanned second son, Craig, was six months old. We lived in a cramped apartment across the bridge in Oakland.

When I came into the office in the morning, I'd be tired even before the day had started. I was tired from taking care of John while my wife tended to the baby, tired from feeding him, bathing him, reading to him and then trying to get him to bed. I was tired from having my sleep interrupted by the baby and from getting up to take my turn giving him his bottle. I was tired from the commute, taking a bus into San Francisco and then a streetcar to the Civic Center.

My wife and I agreed that we had to get out of that apartment before the kids drove us crazy. We also agreed that we couldn't possibly afford a house in San Francisco, or even in Oakland. Our dream was to move to Sacramento, where we thought we could just about manage to buy a house. I'd applied for a transfer to our agency's Sacramento office as well as to most of the agencies headquartered in Sacramento, but so far nothing had happened.

While drinking the first of the many cups of coffee I'd have during the day to keep myself awake, I'd estimate how much we could put down on a house and how much of a monthly payment we could afford. Sometimes, out of the blue, my calculations were interrupted by a sexual fantasy. My wife had finally begun to notice me for the first time since John was

born, when Craig had unexpectedly come along. Since then, I might as well have been living in a monastery.

On the fateful morning of my involvement with Mrs. Anders-Larson, I was summoned away from my coffee to the office of my supervisor, Claude Beacham, always an unwelcome experience. Beacham was one of those second-rate people who obtain a Ph.D. from some obscure college and from then on look down upon the rest of the population. As a logical consequence, he downgraded the capabilities of his staff whenever possible. I had a hunch that one of the reasons my attempts to transfer to Sacramento had been unsuccessful was that he'd been giving me his usual lukewarm references.

"Come in," said Beacham, looking up from a pad on which he'd been writing. Beacham was always writing something when anyone entered his office. Uncharitably, I assumed he was trying to impress people with his industriousness while actually making out his day's shopping list.

"Ah, yes," he said to me. "I have an assignment for you. Mrs. Anders-Larson is going to Sacramento next week to present a paper to the Joint Agency Research Council. She wants you to go with her to take notes at the meeting and, ah, provide any other assistance that might be needed."

"She wants me?" I asked, surprised. I'd seen Mrs. Anders-Larson sweeping majestically along the halls but had never once actually met her, and as far as I knew, she wasn't aware of my existence.

Beacham gave me one of his sour looks. "She needs someone to assist her, and she mentioned your name. She may have read some report you'd written. Ordinarily, of course, I would accompany her but I, ah, have a very heavy schedule next week. I needn't tell you how important it is that you do a good job. It's essential that you be prompt; Mrs. Anders-Larson can't stand unpunctuality. Also, you should be properly dressed. You do own a suit and tie, don't you?"

I was in the habit of wearing casual clothes in the office; the less time I had to spend dressing in

the morning, the better. "I think I can manage to dig something up," I said.

"Well, that's all then. You'll get the information as to where and when later in the week. Don't forget, be punctual." With that, he resumed writing his shopping list.

So I was going to Sacramento with Mrs. Anders-Larson. Well, it would be a change from the usual office routine. When the time came, I learned that the meeting of the Joint Agency Research Council was to be a dinner, at some hotel in Sacramento, and that we'd be staying there overnight.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow night," I told my wife, before setting out that morning, properly attired in suit and tie.

"Maybe you can talk to somebody there about transferring to Sacramento," my wife said.

"I'll try."

"Drive carefully."

"I will."

* * *

At the appointed time, or rather ten minutes before the appointed time, I was in Mrs. Anders-Larson's outer office, having previously checked out a state car at the nearby garage and parking it just outside the building. After half an hour, Mrs. Anders-Larson came briskly marching out, carrying a small suitcase in one hand and a large briefcase in the other, tossing out orders like hand grenades to a male secretary, who scurried after her.

"Come," she said to me, handing me the suitcase, and we continued down the hall, into the elevator, then out of the building to the car. I stowed the suitcase in the trunk and we set off. She put her briefcase in her lap, took some papers from it, glanced through them, and then began to write. I assumed she was preparing her speech for that night.

From time to time, while I was maneuvering through traffic, I looked surreptitiously at her. My impression of Mrs. Anders-Larson from seeing her in the hallways was that she was a tall, handsome, blonde-haired woman. I wasn't good at guessing women's ages, but would have said she was about 40 years old.

Now, close up, she looked older, her strong-featured face showing lines of strain and her blonde hair seeming to have some gray in it. I wondered

idly if there was a Mr. Anders-Larson. If there was, nobody had ever seen him.

She kept on busily writing. So we weren't going to have any meaningful conversation driving up. It was just as well. When we crossed over the Bay Bridge and reached the open highway, I noticed a billboard with a curvaceous model in a skimpy bathing suit; she was, I believe, advertising the virtues of drinking milk.

This sight promptly inspired a brief but powerful sexual fantasy. Unfortunately, the fantasy inevitably set me to thinking of my real sexual life, or lack of it. This in turn led me to think of all the other things lacking in my life: space in our tiny apartment, time to myself, pleasure, comfort, and above all, money. Was this the way it was always going to be?

These gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a voice saying, "How is your sex life?" I had almost forgotten Mrs. Anders-Larson sitting beside me.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

I asked, "How is your wife?"

"My wife? She's, uh, fine." I hadn't realized that Mrs. Anders-Larson knew my wife, or even knew that I had a wife.

"I met her at the Christmas party last year," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "And how are the children?"

"They're fine, too."

"I hear that you want to leave us."

"You do? Oh, you mean about asking for a transfer to Sacramento. We've, uh, kind of outgrown our apartment. We really need a house, and you know how expensive they are in the Bay Area."

"Hmmm," said Mrs. Anders-Larson. "Are you taking any courses?"

"Courses?"

"Yes. To keep up with your field."

"No, there doesn't seem to be any time."

She gave me a disapproving look. "If you want to get ahead you must keep up with your field." Then abruptly changing the subject, she said, "I notice you look tired. Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Sure," I said. "Well, maybe not all the time. The kids are a handful. It seems there's never enough time to do everything."

"Yes. So, are you happy?"

"Happy? I don't know. Well, actually, I don't suppose so. Sometimes I feel pretty miserable."

"Yes. It is an experience a young man must go through."

With this, Mrs. Anders-Larson seemed to have concluded our somewhat unusual conversation as she now closed her eyes, leaned her head back against her seat and apparently went to sleep. Maybe she too was tired. I drove the rest of the way to Sacramento in silence, with an occasional fleeting thought of my miserable life.

We checked into our hotel, which, to my surprise, was a rather luxurious one. There was even a bowl of fruit and a bottle of wine in my room. The dinner meeting of the Joint Agency Research Council was also something of a surprise. It was held in a private room; the food was good, wine served with the meal. Everyone, including Mrs. Anders-Larson, had several glasses. I suppose she had put on make-up because she looked much better, and younger, than she had in the car. Her cheeks were flushed and her blue eyes sparkled. I found myself once again wondering just how old she was.

Mrs. Anders-Larson made her presentation, which was about the state's economic condition, rather hurriedly, it seemed to me. Then, as soon as she was done, the talk turned to the doings of the various department directors, deputy directors and the like; who had been promoted, who was being demoted, who was in the running for the next big job, who had been caught having an affair with his secretary. So here were the state's top researchers and statisticians and it seemed that their chief interest was in all the office intrigues, politics and backstabbing that we lesser mortals always talked about.

Finally, I found myself with Mrs. Anders-Larson returning to our rooms. Not knowing the state officials everyone had been talking about, I had had several glasses of wine myself while thinking my private thoughts and was feeling a little woozy. I'd be glad to get to bed and have a good night's sleep before driving back to San Francisco the next day.

As she opened her door, Mrs. Anders-Larson turned to me and said, "Come in and have a nightcap with me." It was a command, not a request. I started to protest that I'd had enough, but she held the door open and I went in. I saw that her room was about

twice the size of mine. "Pour yourself some wine," she said and she swept out of the room, presumably into the bathroom.

I did as she said and sat down on a soft sofa, which seemed to swallow me up. I sipped at the wine. I was feeling very sleepy and my eyes began to close. Then I was aware of Mrs. Anders-Larson standing before me. Her blonde hair had been let down and hung over her shoulders. She was wearing what I took to be a white negligee, which was mostly transparent. I was aware of firm round breasts and curved hips and thighs.

Involuntarily, I stood up, amazingly not spilling my drink.

"Well," she said. "How do you like it?"

I swallowed, not quite knowing what to say. I didn't know how I hadn't seen it before. Mrs. Anders-Larson was a beautiful woman. "I like it," I said.

She came closer and put one hand on my face. "Well?" she said. I remember thinking it isn't fair. Sure, I loved my wife and children, but they were a million miles away. This beautiful woman was right here. I put my arms around Mrs. Anders-Larson and kissed her. She pressed closer to me. Before I lost all awareness of anything else, I remember her whispering to me, "Don't look so worried. It's something a young man must experience."

* * *

I don't know what I expected the next morning, but Mrs. Anders-Larson made no reference to the events of the night before. We had breakfast in the hotel coffee shop. She made a few comments about her colleagues at the dinner meeting, none of them favorable. In the car on the way back, she dug into her large briefcase and extracted a couple of reports, which she busied herself reading. I concentrated on driving.

When I arrived home, my wife asked me how the trip was.

"Not bad. It was a nice change."

"How was Mrs. Anders-Larson?"

"Okay. She's, uh, an interesting woman. I didn't know you'd met her at the Christmas party."

"I did. She seemed very formidable. Did you talk to anybody about getting a transfer to Sacramento?"

"No, I really didn't get a chance."

* * *

During the next few weeks I saw Mrs. Anders-Larson once or twice at a distance, sweeping down the halls on her way to some important destination. She never looked my way. The events of our trip to Sacramento began to fade from my mind. I even began to wonder if they'd happened at all. I'd been tired and drunk with all that wine. Add to that the strain I'd been under, and maybe I'd imagined the whole thing.

Then one morning I was again summoned into the office of my supervisor, Claude Beacham. "I just had a phone call from Sacramento," he told me. "It seems that your transfer to the agency's office there has been approved."

"It has?" I said. "That's great."

Beacham gave me a disapproving look. "I don't know how it happened. It certainly didn't come through me. The whole procedure is highly irregular."

"But it's okay, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he said grudgingly. "Mrs. Anders-Larson has signed off on it."

On my last day there I saw her once again in the hall at a distance. But this time she came my way. "So," she said. "You are leaving us."

"Yes, I guess so."

"Take some courses," she said. "And do not neglect your wife." And with that she sailed majestically off. I stood there for a long minute, wondering if I should go after her. Didn't we have some things to discuss, that night in her hotel room, for instance? Then I decided there was really nothing to say; it was done. I went back to my cubicle to finish packing for the move to Sacramento.

Martin Green: I'm a retiree/free-lance writer living in Roseville, CA. Have about 350 pieces in local papers. Currently do two monthly features for senior paper. Have had over 100 short stories in literary and online magazines.



Chelin Sanjuan

<http://www.chelinsanjuan.info/>

Buddies

Wayne Scheer

Joey opened the front door of the neatly landscaped suburban home and motioned for Ron to enter. Ron hesitated. He had heard the sound of shattered glass when Joey went to the back of the house.

"It's okay," Joey said. "She'll just put it on my bill."

"We shouldn't be here," Ron said.

"Yeah, yeah. Come in. It'll just take a minute."

Ron entered, regretting it immediately, as he watched Joey drop himself onto the living room sofa like a bag of dirty laundry.

"What are you doing, Joey? Get what you need, and let's get out of here." Ron began to pace. "Jeannie could come home any minute."

"You've always been such a wuss, man." Joey put his shoes on the white couch. "She won't be back till eight. Believe me, Jeannie lives by the clock. We should have a drink first."

"I don't want a drink. I want to get out of here. You said you just needed to get a couple of things." Ron knew he was whining and hated the sound of his own voice. "Why are you doing this?"

Joey stood at the cherrywood liquor cabinet, a bottle of Dewar's in his hand. "Because my mama taught me to share with my buddies." He laughed through his nose, an annoying habit Ron remembered from childhood. "Besides, she doesn't like scotch. This must be her new friend's drink of choice."

"I should never have come here with you. You know this is crazy, don't you?"

"Sure, it's crazy. Breaking into your own house and drinking your wife's lover's booze is crazy."

"Ex-wife. It's not your house anymore."

"Yeah, ex-wife. But with the money she sucked from me, this should still be my house. And my booze." He surveyed the living room like an auditor calculating a company's assets. "This furniture is new. That lamp. And that picture of whatever the hell it is, it looks expensive."

"It probably is. Jeannie's doing well for herself."

Joey shrugged. Ron knew the shrug well. It meant Joey was going to do whatever the hell he pleased.

He had followed Joey around since elementary school. Ron was the skinny Jewish kid with glasses who got picked on. To make matters worse, back in Junior High he had stuttered so badly his face would contort and his glasses would slip down his nose. Joey, the biggest kid in their class, befriended him, just for kicks, telling the other kids he was his brother.

"I'm hungry," Joey shouted, moving so suddenly Ron looked to the front door. "Let's go see what she keeps in her refrigerator."

"No, Joey. Look. Enough is enough. Let's go."

Ron knew Joey wasn't listening. He also knew he should leave, but they had come in Joey's car.

"I'm calling Rachel," Ron said. "I'm telling her to pick me up." He turned towards the phone, but didn't move. Instead, he imagined the conversation he'd have with his wife.

"What are you doing at Jeannie's house?" she'd ask.

"Joey needed to pick up a few things."

"What kind of things? They've been divorced almost two years."

"Yeah, well, that's what he told me."

"And you believed him?"

"No. Yes. He needed company. He needed a friend. I don't know. I thought Jeannie would be home."

"You mean she isn't home? How'd Joey get in?" He'd have to tell her that Joey broke in.

"And you followed?" Rachel would be screaming now. "You're twenty-five years old. You're married and your wife is pregnant. What's wrong with you? You and Joey aren't even friends anymore."

No way he could explain how guilty he had felt since he and Rachel had been spending time with Jeannie and her fiancé, Austin. For almost a year, he had kept in touch with Joey secretly. They'd meet for a

drink after work, and laugh about the old days. Ron felt so guilty, he hid the fact that he kept in touch with Jeannie and Austin.

Instead of calling Rachel, Ron turned to see what his friend was doing. He was piling meat—it looked like the remains of last night's turkey—onto a hoagie roll. Joey ran around the kitchen like a madman, pulling out mayonnaise and mustard, lettuce and tomatoes, olives and pickles from the refrigerator and cupboards. "Where's the damn olive oil?" he muttered, looking like he did when he was twelve.

Ron knew Joey was more than a little insane, but there was something so exciting about Joey's impulsiveness. He wished he could loosen up. At least, sometimes.

"Joey, make me one of those sandwiches. But leave off the mayo. Oh, what the hell? I'm having whatever you're having."

"I knew you were cool." Joey laughed. "Here. Finish this bottle, buddy. Let's see what else she's got here." He ran back to the living room, smearing mayonnaise and turkey fat on the cabinet. He rattled around until he found another bottle. This time it was bourbon. Returning to the kitchen, he made the sandwiches, and they passed the bottle back and forth.

"You ever see Jeannie?" Joey asked. "I hear she 's going with someone, a stockbroker."

"Oh, yeah?" Ron acted surprised. "Rachel calls Jeannie every once in a while. We've had dinner with her once or twice." He looked away. "I never heard anything about a stockbroker."

"I miss her," Joey said, wiping his nose, which had turned red. He took a long swig from the bottle. "But she screwed me royally."

Ron nodded, trying to be sympathetic and noncommittal at the same time.

"Hey, speaking of royal screwing." Joey's voice grew loud. "You remember Louise Turner? I ran into her last week. Fat as a fucking house. I hardly recognized her."

"Louise Turner." Ron smiled. "How could I forget her? She was my first. What was it, our sophomore year in high school? You hooked us up. I'll always be grateful to you for that." Ron saluted Joey with the bottle, and took a drink.

"Cured your damn stuttering," Joey said. "She fucked it right out of you."

The two friends laughed like adolescents drinking under the bleachers during a high school dance.

Even in their drunken stupor, they heard a key turn at the front door. Joey stood up and walked to the door. Ron tried, but the room tilted and he sat back down.

Standing in the doorway was Austin.

"Oh shit," Ron muttered.

"Who the hell are you?" Austin shouted at Joey. He wore a gray suit and a florescent green tie.

"That is one ugly tie, man," Joey said, laughing through his nose. "Jeannie pick it out for you?"

Ron tried again to stand, but the sandwiches and alcohol got the best of him. He vomited instead.

Austin looked past Joey. "What the hell is going on? Ron, what are you doing here?"

Joey turned to his buddy and stared for a moment before turning back to Austin.

"You must be Mr. Snot Broker. I see ya got y'own key."

"And who are you?"

Austin walked to within inches of Joey. He was taller, but Joey stood his ground. Ron could see the veins in Joey's neck bulge.

"Let's get out of here," Ron said, rising, and pulling at Joey. Joey pushed him away. Ron lost his balance, grabbing Austin's leg as he fell. Austin tried shaking Ron off like a naughty puppy, but slipped and fell to his knees. Ron laughed, but then he saw Joey's two hands, locked together, come down hard on the back of Austin's neck, causing his head to hit the floor with a thud.

He groaned a few seconds, and then went silent. And still.

"Oh, man," Joey said, looking down at Austin and then at Ron.

"What the hell did you do that for, Joey? Why'd you hit him like that?"

Ron saw the bloodshot slits that had become Joey's eyes. He fully expected his friend to punch him in the face. "I thought you said you didn't know him."

Ron looked away. He wanted to apologize to his friend, but then he remembered what Joey had just done.

Blood dripped from a gash on Austin's forehead, creating a small red puddle on the white tiled kitchen floor.

"Joey, I'm calling an ambulance."

"Wait." Joey bent over Austin. He took his hand, trying to find a pulse. "Where the hell's the pulse, man?"

"I don't know. Is he breathing?"

"Oh shit, man. He's dead!" Joey was shaking. He made short, loud gasps. "We killed him."

"What do you mean we? You..."

Joey grabbed Ron by the shirt collar. "Let's think," he said. "We gotta think."

"About what? I'm calling the..."

"NO!" Joey pushed Ron away and he fell onto Austin. He broke his fall by putting his hand in the puddle of blood. He threw up again.

"He's your friend." Tears streamed down Joey's red face. "He's your goddamn friend. I'm getting the hell out of here."

"You can't, Joey. We can't just leave him. We'll say it was an accident. He tripped. I won't say anything about you hitting him, I promise. But we gotta see if he's okay." He bent over Austin, trying to see if he was still breathing.

With that, Joey dashed for the door, not looking back.

Ron stood up, wobbling for a few seconds, wiping blood and vomit from his hands onto his pants. His first impulse was to run after Joey the way he always did. Instead, he went to the phone and called 911. His hands shook.

He gave the operator the address, saying only that a man was hurt and needed an ambulance.

Austin began to stir. He slowly raised himself to a sitting position.

"Take it easy," Ron told him. "Stay where you are." He steadied him by putting his hand on his shoulder.

Ron wet a dishtowel and placed it on Austin's forehead. The bleeding had already stopped.

"What happened?" Austin asked. "What am I doing on the floor? All this blood and...did you throw up or did I?"

"An ambulance is on the way," Ron said. And he told Austin the full story, including the details of the break-in, but leaving out the part about Joey hitting him in the back of his neck. "You fell and hit your head." Ron got another wet towel and handed it to him to clean off his suit. "Joey took off."

Austin stared at Ron, dazed. After a while, he said, "Thanks for not leaving me here." He held out his hand and the two men shook. "I've heard a lot about Joey. A real loser, Jeannie tells me. You might want to take off before the police get here."

"No," Ron said. "I'll wait with you."

After teaching writing and literature in college for twenty-five years, Wayne Scheer retired to follow his own advice and write. He's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net. His stories have appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Pedestal*, *Eclectica*, *Flashquake*, *Monday Magazine*, *Whim's Place* and *Triplopia*. Wayne lives in Atlanta with his wife. He can be contacted at wvscheer@aol.com.

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Poetry

Ray Succre

Living Capacitor

Whether locust eating red bloom,
any spiral turn of life,
any catalogue of vitality registered
up or down the levels,
whether Midas touching the rim
drinks his life down golden,
any frith manner of matters
is a contest of organization.
I break down importances on a plate
to continue walking,
I build up a system
from bits and mights,
meal to meal as if on rails,
but the hollows return,
the blood asks ever more water,
updating, winding the spring,
and I eat, and I eat,
contestant and walking clock.

The Settings of Years

How are those over, and how are these near?
So, years villaged and starred in, how?
And the length of a life, what?
The length of my wife's three tulips
is bright blood red with yellow
hazard-sign streaks in the blooms,
opened for abscised sunlight but
coin-purse closed by dusk,
as she and I in our flashes,
when they will come flashing,
when we have them out,
and the oily season wilts us.
For those that will come, how?
I only meet the age in a hallway,
and do pass with one hello.

Ray Succre has been writing for twelve years and has begun publishing his poetry while trying to broaden himself as a poet and parent. He is now beginning to send his work out at a more social level. He currently lives on the southern Oregon coast with his wife, Maisy, and baby boy, Painter. He has been published in *Aesthetica*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Poetry Nottingham*, as well as in many others both in the U.S. and abroad.

For further inquiry, publication history, and information, visit <http://raysuccre.blogspot.com>. This site is updated often.

The Recording

Michelle Close Mills

Writing was once an endless source of personal frustration. I had words bottled up inside, but hadn't a clue how to express them effectively. So I penned drivel...silly, ill conceived, poorly researched fiction that no one, except my family and a few loyal friends would bother to read beyond the first paragraph. That is until a pivotal event changed how I would feel about my writing forever.

My grandmother Helen Clay Sprague was directly responsible for my epiphany. A living, breathing journal of family history, she was born in 1905 on a farm in rural DeKalb County, Indiana. Her childhood was wholesome, centered on home and family. As the adults around her talked and reminisced while bread was baked, laundry was scrubbed, parlors were dusted, and quilts were sewn, she listened intently, drinking it all in. Every fact, every memory, no matter how trivial, was deeply interesting to her and tucked away for safe keeping.

Over the years she hoped for a kindred spirit to assume guardianship of our family lore. When I came along, she discovered what she'd been looking for; an heir apparent, a "Grandma's girl" who was willing to listen, learn, and become keeper of what she held dear.

Her words opened the door to an astonishing world. I was given a chance to retrace the footsteps of ancestors who were homesteaders of the Ohio and Indiana territories in the early 1800's. Theirs was a harsh existence, among hostile Indians who believed in their right to the land and were ready to fight to the death to defend it. Those pioneers who had the courage to move northwest from the Ohio Valley did so at great risk, often realizing as they or their loved ones lay dying that "free" carried a terrible price tag.

Yet in spite of the hazards, they pushed on. Thick forests were cleared to expose mineral rich soil for planting crops. Barns were raised, and foundations were laid, as settlers established new lives in the raw frontier. Despite the passage of time, their desires mirrored ours; home ownership, having the means to provide for family, and wanting the happiness that comes from the successful realization of dreams, large and small.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same" Grandma often said.

Like a loom, her voice wove vibrant tapestries of scenes, and characters charmingly portrayed with a variety of voices, and peppered by occasional giggles born from the joy of remembering.

Her earliest memories were of an innocent time when children invented their own fun. In the spring, she and her cousins looked forward to gathering plump, juicy earthworms from freshly plowed fields as treats for the eager hens in the chicken coop. They also held contests to see which child collected the most.

In early summer, the kids were on the lookout for turtle nests, as mother turtles lumbered out of the river in search of places to lay their eggs. After nine weeks the children took turns checking on the nests, waiting for dozens of babies to make their entrance into the world. As soon as the first tiny green flippers broke through the loose soil, a frantic call went out to the rest of the group who gathered around to watch. Only moments after emerging from their eggs, the little hatchlings began a wobbly march to the St Joseph River, with a bunch of delighted young spectators in tow.

"We enjoyed doing things that kids nowadays wouldn't think of doing" Grandma declared.

Especially poignant were her memories of church picnics, weddings, and reunions hosted in the ancestral maple grove along the river bank. I would close my eyes and envision guests clad in gracious post-Victorian garb of long prim dresses, enormous feathered hats, and three piece suits, as they mingled with family and friends, while their offspring scampered to and fro.

Grandma also told many sweet, funny tales about a variety of pets that she and her sister Annabelle had acquired over the years; pigs, dogs, cats, ducks, chickens, rabbits, and a goat named Petunia who pulled a tiny white wagon painted with flowers, giving rides to neighborhood children.

Of course when one's surroundings are shared with livestock, poop is a part of life. Grandma and Cousin Vera loved thrashing season, a time when they were allowed to leap onto giant straw piles, a treat for any farm kid. However as they climbed up to the barn loft to jump, they didn't see Daisy the Jersey cow wander by and drop off a fresh deposit on the other side of the stack. As the girls flung themselves onto the pile, they rolled down the slope, and landed in mounds of wet manure with resounding "splats".

For a few moments, they stared at each other in stunned disbelief.

"I don't know which one of us looked or smelled worse" Grandma laughed. "Manure was spattered in our hair, caked on our clothes, and even up our noses. We tried to wash ourselves off at the pump, but water made the mess grow bigger. Our mothers were furious when they saw us. I was given a scolding and some extra chores to do, but Aunt Maggie cleaned up on Vera and she couldn't sit down for a week!"

Christmas shopping for country folk of that era usually meant thumbing through the Sears and Roebuck catalog. However more often than not, gifts exchanged in Grandma's family consisted of baked

goods, homemade dolls, hand sewn clothing, crocheted doilies, and wooden pull toys. In a period when people struggled to gain and hold onto the very basics of life, less was truly more.

"Those presents meant more to us than anything store bought ever would" Grandma insisted.

Twelve years ago at my request, Grandma recorded a tape of her childhood memories. I knew that without a tape, there would come a day that I'd never again have the pleasure of being the listener as she spoke of her life. The little girl inside of me wanted assurance that a part of my beloved grandmother would still live on, that she would still be able to talk to me, long after the time came that she no longer could.

Strangely enough, once I had the tape in my hands I listened to it a couple of times and stuck it in a drawer. It was meant as a comfort for "someday", far in the future when she was no longer with us.

In the meanwhile, the drivel train still chugged along, as I continually churned out sappy fiction best suited for lining birdcages. I kept the postal service very busy delivering manuscript after manuscript to prospective publishers. As a result, self addressed stamped rejection envelopes flooded my mailbox like the gush from a broken water main. The returns seldom indicated reasons for their dismissal, which wasn't surprising. It would have taken too long to explain what was wrong with them.

Disillusioned, I finally concluded that I couldn't write my way out of a wet paper bag and put down my pen.

Temporarily.

A year later Grandma passed away. I'd known for a long time that she was failing, but I was still unprepared for the overwhelming sense of loss. She

had always been my touch stone, my safe haven, and the person I admired most in the world. For months after her death I avoided listening to the tape she'd recorded, afraid that if I heard her speak I'd start crying and never stop.

Then one evening when I felt especially lonely for her, I gathered up my nerve and played the tape. As her voice washed over me, and healing tears flowed, I re-discovered the wonder of her stories, the memoirs of a beautiful woman who lived a life rich with heritage, and who loved me without reservation.

I was suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to write again, only this time I wanted to tell Grandma's stories. Reluctant to repeat past mistakes, I knew I had to become a better writer. I enrolled in college composition courses, and spent several hours each day practicing by transcribing stories from her tapes, as well as penning my own memories of our days together. My heart could hear her speak, as though she were dictating the text to me while my fingers pecked at the keys.

I noticed that after submitting Grandma's stories to publishers, the rejections were few and far between. I believe that in addition to hard work, having love for the subject matter made all the difference. As editors and readers responded favorably, I realized how blessed I was to be able to share my inheritance with those who never known my grandmother. More importantly, our collaboration was accomplishing what she hoped for when she made me guardian of her cherished memories many years ago.

Those who remain, as well as those who are yet to come, will have a chance to know and remember.

Michelle Close Mills' work has appeared in "Skyline", "Spinnings", "Fate", "GreenPrints, the Weeder's Digest", "Chicken Soup for the Recovering Soul- Daily Inspirations", "Pocket Prayers", "The Rocking Chair Reader – Family Gatherings", and "To Have and To Hold: Prayers, Poems, and Blessings for Newlyweds" by Time Warner's Center Street Books. Michelle resides in Seminole, Florida.



Pressed Pennies is mainstream fiction, written from a male perspective to a female audience. A la Nicolas Sparks and Robert James Waller, it is a tale of connecting love stories, proving that the world really is a small place and that the trick is to cherish it by living each of its moments to the fullest.

Amid the heart-warming romances and deceitful twists and turns, *Pressed Pennies* tackles the trying issues associated with living in a non-traditional family. In an era of divorce and single-parenthood, it is a story about raising children and peacefully co-existing; making it work with mutual respect and consideration. The book's underlying theme is discovered in the evolution of the 80's child. Though life begins as wholesome and innocent, technology quickly takes over. Suddenly, two parents must leave the home and go to work. Day care, fast food and a list of coveted luxuries replace long talks in porch swings, tree forts and family suppers. The price for comfort proves very expensive, though, as the American family is traded in for the American dream.

Early Reviews:

"Steve Manchester has a gift for expressing through his writing the complicated and transcendent beauty of the human experience with poignant clarity." – **Yolanda King (eldest daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King) *Higher Ground***

"*Pressed Pennies* is priceless! Steve Manchester has an obvious love of words and an amazing ability to use those words to create lasting images in the reader's mind. His detail-oriented, richly drawn characters and descriptions make this story leap off the pages." - **Joyce Handzo, *In the Library Reviews***

"*Pressed Pennies* is a tale of love and second chances and affirms that love can come at any stage of life if we are just open. This is a book that is sure to warm your heart." - **Roberta Austin, *The Compulsive Reader***

Please see: www.StevenManchester.com



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Katrina, Living In A Nightmare

Author: Johnnie Oakes

Johnnie Oakes
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the true story of Katrina's devastation
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television, now read the True Story of a
Katrina Survivor". Johnnie Oakes, Biloxi, MS*



Different

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<http://www.epilogue.net/cgi/database/art/list.pl?gallery=8952&genre=>

Interklostum

Anthony J. Mohr

I am a criminal. I am screening Kirsten even though we did not meet at a program. Usually I screen my friends after a relaxing whirlbath, and I should have taken one tonight.

Can I actually screen a person whom I have not met at a program? Suppose the jackboots find out? I could say that I felt sick and tapped the wrong keys. A weak excuse, but I have spent days thinking about Kirsten. I do not want to screen anyone else, even those from my favorite programs.

The word "Identify" appears on my screen.

I enter the integers that prove my existence, 45-22-92-12-90, followed by 323-68132-04600, the identifier for my residence, Yorty Complex, "J" Wing, Unit 04600. After a two second pause, the phrase "Enter Program Code" materializes.

Kirsten scribbled the code on the back of my passkard when we met last month in the transit lounge at Heathrow. She was going home to Kastrup. I was returning to LAX. Now my chest tightens as I fumble with the creased passkard, and my fingers shake as I feed in the digits of the program where we allegedly met: 1090.53488. Kirsten told me this is the code for last month's International Media Symposium in Jose Marti.

I cannot breathe, convinced as I am that my machine will shriek an order to remain still as jackboots pound down the hall to my unit. Instead all is quiet as the next message appears: "contacting."

Kirsten bursts onto my screen. She smiles as widely as she did that morning in the transit lounge. It makes me want to say I have fallen in love with her on the strength of that five-minute encounter at Heathrow. I hunger to laugh with her

about how lucky we were that my plane home from Sheremetyevo was delayed so that I had a layover at the same time as her return flight from Jose Marti. But we do no such thing. We talk of Jose Marti as if I attended the International Media Symposium. She told me just enough when we met for me to sound convincing to anyone who might be listening. "Looking back on it," she asks me, "what was your favorite panel?"

"The workshop on interview techniques. I couldn't get enough of it," I gush. "And you, Kirsten. What did you like?"

"OK, well, the seminar on purposive news was brilliant, don't you think? And the demonstration sessions. Perfect if you ask me." I adore her Nordic use of English.

"Of course. They were excellent," I reply, quickly writing down the topics. Say something, I think to myself as I write. I blurt, "There was so much we learned there."

"And the town. I adore the Malecon. Do you not agree?"

I stare at her. Kirsten wears a sleeveless sundress that exposes her sinewy shoulders and the top of her breasts, high and firm. They ripple as she raises an arm to brush the straight blonde bangs from her forehead. Her cleavage is a canyon. I wonder what happened on the Malecon. With whom? A flash of envy jolts me. No doubt there were several men, and none of her encounters have been any more significant than my couplings around the globe. What matters is that now we know each other. We risked our liberty when we met in Heathrow, and Kirsten initiated it! She is the one who touched my arm as we went through passkontrol

and whispered the Jose Marti program code to me as her tongue played on my earlobe. How we giggled when someone in the waiting area looked at us and exclaimed, "What program are you coming from? You learned a lot there!"

"Hey," Kirsten says with a concerned look. "Are you all right? Something the matter with your screen?"

"No, No," I insist, a bit too loudly. "At least I don't think so."

"OK," she chirps. "We were talking about the Malecon."

"I didn't see much of it. I spent most of my time in the sessions."

"Yes," she says. "After all, Jose Marti was not a revitalization program. I'm due for one this fall. Meanwhile, have you been invited to Interklostum yet?"

"Where?" I start breathing fast.

"Interklostum. The Worldwide Institute on Communications. From May 2 to 11."

The Worldwide Institute, I think to myself. Jose Marti was a "symposium." Interklostum will be an "institute." But all are authorized programs the alumni of which are certified to interact forever.

"I haven't heard from them yet," I say fast.

"They probably invite people from my continent before they get to yours. It should be superb. I love the mountains in the spring. It's the perfect spot for a program. They have every facility we can ask for."

She said "we." I adore her. "I have never been to Interklostum," I reply, just above a whisper.

"I visited years ago, when I was a brat. It was a student program. There is beautiful skiing. And we will be on a lake. Six weeks from now. I cannot wait that long."

I want to couple. "I hope I get invited," is all I say.

"Sometimes it requires imagination to get an invitation." A gear has shifted in Kirsten's face. Did her blue eyes glint a little more? Did her lip curl for a moment? When I say I don't understand what she means, she says, "Plan for it. Fight for it." Kirsten reminds me that it is morning in Kastrup, and she will be late for work. I tell her that before I go to sleep I promised to screen someone from a program two years ago at Chiang Kai-Shek.

But instead I sit gazing at the little rectangle that held Kirsten's image moments ago and let my breathing become calmer, for the jackboots have not come. For the first time I regret my choice to live in a room with a window instead of an inside unit with a superlative screen. Until tonight my standard screen was satisfactory, certainly worth the opportunity to have a window. Sometimes during my whirlbath I stare out at the lights of the neighboring two-hundred-story Riordan Complex and wonder whom its inhabitants are screening in the night. But now I have no desire to look through my window. I consider petitioning for a transfer to an inside unit so I can see Kirsten better.

I study my program-friendship lists and as expected, Kirsten is on none of them. I despair. My chances of being invited to Interklostum, a media program, are nil; for I am a legal draftsman specializing in economic contracts. Programs – even revitalization programs – which are open to me focus on my craft. I do not care to screen friends when I am discouraged. I access the news:

"Twenty-five delegates returned to LAX this morning after ten days in Jorge Chavez at the Hemispheric Convention on non-Renewable Natural Resources. The delegates called this year's session a resounding success. They believe many of the resolutions they passed will be implemented. Several exceptional ideas came out of the meetings, they say. News-LAX interviewed some of the delegates."

A man about my age is shouting into the microphone: "I swear I've never had such an intense

experience in my life. I'll always remember it. The people, the excitement, the opportunity to contribute like we did. I, I don't know what to say except it was the best program ever. It was great, beautiful. Yeah, that's it. It was beautiful."

My screen sings as another man starts talking for the news cameras. I reluctantly keystroke. It's a colleague from a program three years ago in Sea-Tac. Fortunately our session is short, because he wants to screen fifty friends tonight and I am number thirty-four. As I return to the news, I notice the announcer's voice has become grim:

"...preferred death to the punishment he knew he deserved for fraternizing with citizens whom he had not met through an approved program. Authorities found the suicide note pinned to the body when they entered his unit last night. It contained a profound apology for 'betraying the friendships I properly made during my life.' The message will be posted as an example of what happens to citizens who do not appreciate the opportunities afforded them through programs."

My sphincter tightens. I have heard of these incidents before, and now they seem to be getting more common. I wonder if he too met a woman like Kirsten in a transit lounge. If so, for the first time in my life I understand why he took the risk. Even though I have yet to meet a jackboot, I know that if they storm my unit, I too will commit suicide.

Two weeks pass during which I slog through my economic contracts and cast desultory looks at my friendship lists while taking my whirlbaths. I wonder if anyone suspects me because I am not screening my friends as often as usual. Kirsten has become my only interest. One morning following a lengthy screen with Kirsten, I am so groggy that I miss a deadline to submit the preliminary outline of a memorandum on constructive conditions of performance. My superior believes me when I tell her I had a headache. Then that night the news carries another suicide story complete with a note expressing how sorry the individual was for "fraternizing outside of the programs I was privileged to attend."

But I no longer care. All I can think of are Kirsten's words, which are now joining my vocabulary. She often says "brilliant," and now I use that adjective. I have made a mantra of her phrase, "Plan for it. Fight for it," as I ponder how to reach Interklostum. My mind races through the tasks ahead. First, to travel there, or at least close by, I must find a program open to me during those May days. It must at least be near Interklostum so I can secure appropriate transportation. A search reveals only two: from May 1-11, the Conference on Methods of Offer and Acceptance in Economic Contracts, and from May 5-11, the Symposium on Discharge of Obligation. I have attended both within the past two years. To return would raise questions. My next hope is a revitalization program for legal draftsmen. I will be eligible for one this spring. To obtain that information, I require a screen more secure than mine. I take the elevator up thirty-five floors. When I arrive, a man with a slit for a mouth hands me an application asking why I want to see the revitalization program databank. "To verify alibis given in legal proceedings for breach of economic contracts," I write. The man motions me to a carrel containing a tiny screen on which red capital letters appear: "Register of Worldwide Revitalization Programs — Level One: program names, locations, dates. Level Two: participant lists and identification numbers. User clearance: Level One."

I keystroke "search" and pause.

"Awaiting" appears on the screen.

I enter "revitalization programs May."

"Response contains 387 programs. Either enter limiting information or stand by for list."

I keystroke "Before May 11 Northern Hemisphere Legal draftsmen Economic Contracts."

Five answers appear:

1. O'Hare May 1-7
2. Chek Lap Kok May 2-9
3. Charles de Gaulle May 1-11

4. Leonardo da Vinci April 30 – May 10

5. Dulles May 2-12

The following morning I circulate a memorandum that I will be taking my semiannual revitalization program from May 1-11, at Charles de Gaulle. No other venue is closer to Interklostum. At least to de Gaulle, my transportation arrangements will raise no suspicions.

Now I must acquire an invitation to Interklostum, or be someone who is invited. Did I just say that to myself? How do I become someone who is invited? Maybe Kirsten has a thought. I screen her at 10 PM my time. She enjoys waking up to my image on her screen and asks if I received my invitation.

"I, I don't know yet," I stammer.

"Why not? It's already April 21."

I try to think. Plan for it. Fight for it.

Kirsten's eyes pierce me. I fail to understand her expression. She is no longer carefree. She looks – superior? Almost as if she thinks I am dumb. I mumble. Her expression does not change. I touch the lips on the screen. I can see their moisture. Kirsten moves her head so that my fingers no longer rest on the image of her lips. "By the by," she says, slowly. "I was looking at Interklostum's friendship list. You know these things arrive on my continent before they reach yours. Several old colleagues are coming."

"Like who?"

"Horst Kornagel from Tempelhof. Kyoko Sumida from Narita. I met them two years ago at the Symposium on Broadcast news in Barajas. You don't by chance know them, do you?"

"No." Why is Kirsten asking me this?

"What about Derek Todd?"

"Who?"

"He lives near you. We met at a revitalization program in Tan Sonh Nhut."

I wonder if the wicked idea crossing my mind originated with Kirsten. I remark that I think I met Derek Todd years ago at a student program. Yes, Kirsten says, it is the same person. Mr. Derek Todd of Marina Complex, "S" Wing, Unit 0611. Is that what Kirsten is suggesting? I write down the information. Marina Complex is four kilometers from Yorty Complex.

Kirsten shrieks with delight when, two days later, I tell her I am coming to the Worldwide Conference on Communications at Interklostum. Our smiles back and forth convey the message. Before Kirsten screens out, she suggests that we meet at noon on May 2, just outside the Central Auditorium. That way we can sit together during the opening session. To reach Interklostum by that hour, a plane would have to leave LAX mid-morning of the previous day.

I saw Marina Complex three years ago, when I received a one-day pass to the beach as a reward for drafting a particularly excellent economic contract. A medicenter is close by. I can always claim I am going there because of persistent headaches, a common ailment among legal draftsmen. I needed outside air and, if that did not diminish the pain, professional help. It is an adequate excuse for my actions.

Sunrise, May 1. I pack my clothes and slip a spare identification photo into my wallet. The streets are empty and quiet; the only noise, grumbling from Yorty Complex's HVAC. As I near Marina Complex, I sense moisture from the ocean. I am tempted to detour to the shore. It has been so long since I have seen the water. My common sense stops me. There is no medicenter closer to the beach, and I could miss my transport if I do not march along.

Marina Complex's grey exterior offers no directions. So few people pass on foot that signs are not replaced when they rust out. I follow the wall, looking for an entry. I round the corner. The wall continues unbroken at least another three hundred meters. I whistle softly under my breath,

then stop suddenly. A legal draftsman with a migraine would not whistle. I shove my hands into my pockets. My right index finger plays with the blade in my pocket. It makes me feel safer.

The entry appears around the final corner, midway down the block, a modest door that opens to a corridor. No jackboots are visible, which does not surprise me. You never see them at Yorty Complex either. Now that I am inside the complex, directions are ubiquitous; it does not take me long to locate "S" Wing, travel to the right floor, walk fifty meters down the hall, make a right at the "T" intersection and proceed another eighty meters to unit 0611.

I knock gently. "Who's there?" The voice sounds surprised. I understand. An unannounced visit is a rare event.

My explanation is ready: "Your transportation to the airport, Sir."

"Huh." The voice remains nervous. "Don't we just take the skybus out?"

"They're being careful with passkard checks today, so we are personally collecting everyone ahead of schedule."

"Oh. Can you wait just a minute?"

"I can help with your bag," I offer. Derek Todd opens his door. His travelpak is at his feet. "It's warm out, Mr. Todd. Would you mind if I had some water?"

Derek Todd motions me in as he says, "Well, OK." He starts toward a cabinet above his sink. "You drink a lot, too, like me?" I follow him into the unit. "I had a kidney stone two years ago and the kidney man at the medicenter wants me to take eight glasses of water a day." Derek Todd pours the liquid into a metal cup. My hand is in my pocket. "Says it's the best way to prevent a re-occurrence. OK, here you go—"

I plunge the blade into Derek Todd's abdomen. Then I twist it. While he dies I fumble through his jacket and find the documents in an inside pocket.

A skybus voucher and a passkard to Charles de Gaulle, both valid for today. And here: the passkard from de Gaulle to Interklostum. I remove the gummed strip from my spare photo and paste it over Derek's. I rifle the bag until locating his invitation along with a packet whose cover jacket is designed with geometric patterns across which bold letters announce the Worldwide Conference on Communications. I take the materials and leave. There is barely enough time to reach the airport.

Two hours later I am airborne with time to worry. I review my exchange with Derek Todd and feel sorry for the man. I should have told him it was nothing personal. I start to worry. Should I have thrown the blade away instead of placing it back in my pocket? At least I had the presence to wipe the blade clean and make sure the door to his unit was locked. As long as I reach the conference, I should be safe, at least until May 11. After that, I don't care. I will have been with my Kirsten.

The plane is full, as always. Every passenger is bound for any one of dozens of programs, some at Charles de Gaulle, others requiring an onward connection. Two persons behind me are talking about Malpensa. They must have met at a program, for they are having a long conversation. The individual next to me is leafing through materials that make reference to a medical symposium in Schipol. We do not know each other; therefore, we do not fraternize. I will myself to forget Derek Todd, lying in the kitchen of his unit, and instead picture Kirsten and me at Interklostum, holding hands as we ride a ski lift. The lake glimmers below us. I turn to her. As her lips part, I fall asleep.

My mind never does frame words to describe our ten days at Interklostum. I feel alive for the first time since we met in Heathrow. We squeeze each other's hands during the lectures. We couple better than I thought possible. We throw ourselves at the ski cirques that rise from the lake. And strangely, despite our total involvement with each other, we devote large chunks of time to the sessions. We hammer out resolutions that will affect global communications for years to come. We spend hours developing proposals, testing concepts. Ideas

sluice across the conference tables. I find the participants delightful and join in their exchanges with enthusiasm.

Sometime after dinner on May 10, Kirsten and I slip off to my room. While everyone sings and drinks, my hands range over her body, and she squeezes me tenderly. A group of participants chants past our door. Amidst the cacophony we hear one of them promising in slurred Swedish that he will screen everybody twice a month starting tomorrow night when he returns to Arlanda.

"Kirsten, I don't want to leave tomorrow." My voice is shaky.

She kisses me lightly. "Nor I, but the place is reserved. What program comes here next? Isn't it some chemists?"

"Who cares? Come home with me."

"You know I can't do that."

I know. Just as I cannot go to Kastrup with her. Still, I look at Kirsten intently, as if my stare will change her answer. Finally, she says, "At least people like us will see each other from time to time. That's better than the alternative."

"You mean like getting caught? They're probably looking for me already." I prefer death to being hauled away by the jackboots.

Kirsten shakes her head. "Don't be negative. Do you think we're the only ones who have done this? The only ones who have borrowed the identity of a colleague who is conveniently near them so they can see their great love?"

I wonder if anyone else's great love drafts economic contracts. "Kirsten, what are you...."

She puts a finger on my lips. "Thank you for everything. Please kiss me."

We couple. Hard. Afterwards, Kirsten touches the bridge of my nose. "I don't think you will have to worry about committing suicide."

"What are you saying?"

"For me. Promise not to give up your life until you know for sure you have been caught."

"Kirsten, I—" Her eyes blaze as they did through the screen several weeks ago. I say nothing, the confused pet trying to please its master without knowing the codes.

"Maybe you will never get caught and we can see each other again. I would like to come to one of your programs on economic contracts. That would be brilliant, yes?" I warn her that my programs can get boring. "I want to go to one of your programs," she merrily insists. "If you don't invite me there, I'll find someone who will." With that she folds her arms around me. I throttle back tears and hold Kirsten until she slips into childlike sleep.

Seconds later, it seems, the sun is up and porters are knocking on our door to collect our bags. We file onto the waiting planes. I sit torpid during the journey and feel nauseous as the spires of LAX appear below. Somehow I deplane and approach passkontrol. The man who inspects my passkard grins at me.

"Been to Interklostum, I see."

"Yes, I was." I wonder if I sound convincing.

"I'll be over there in three months for a revitalization program." I am through the gate.

My unit at Yorty Complex looks just as it did when I left on May 1. There is no sign that anyone intruded, no urgent messages on the screen. I try to relax in the whirlbath but constantly look at the door, through which I expect the jackboots to barge any moment. No one does. Eventually I manage to sleep.

When I arrive at my cubicle, one of my superiors asks how I enjoyed Charles de Gaulle. Immensely, I reply, and she says nothing more. Later that morning she asks me to draft an economic contract for the Procurement Section. I finish the instrument by the end of the day. My superior thanks me.

The second day home passes as uneventfully as the first. By the evening of the third, I decide to

screen Kirsten. I am wondering if she was caught, whether she is even alive.

She is still alive, and beautiful. We begin cautiously, talking of Interklostum. Then, as we speak of skiing and singing in the halls, my fingers reach out to the image of her face. My screen is cool to the touch.

"You're lovely," I whisper.

"I want you," she answers. "And I will still want you four months from now, at JFK. If you will come."

"JFK? What..."

"The Forum on Creative Media Techniques. September 10 to 20. Oh I hope you were invited."

"I — I haven't checked yet," I stammer.

She giggles. "Your part of the world — everything takes longer to get there. Be patient."

"Kirsten, I —" Will I really see her again? "Tell me about it. What sessions do they have?"

"I'd rather you be surprised when you get your invitation. Listen, I have to stop now. I promised to screen an old friend from Leonardo da Vinci before I leave for work."

I try to think, but cannot. I sink lower in my whirlbath and listen to the news. They are talking about the opening of Villaraigosa Complex, describing its amenities. I visualize Kirsten. I see her high breasts. While my brain fondles them, I somehow hear what the news announcer is saying and bolt upright so fast that water spills onto the floor:

"Forty-one year old Derek Todd of Marina Complex was found dead last night in his unit. Authorities discovered a suicide note pinned to the body. It contained a profound apology for 'betraying the friends I have made at so many outstanding programs throughout my life.' Mr. Todd's message will be made available as an example of what happens to citizens who fraternize outside of programs in accordance with policy."

During the next few weeks I announce to my office that I am going this fall to the Conference on Illegal Clauses in Economic Contracts at La Guardia. No one reacts beyond a cordial nod. That conference will occur at the same time as Kirsten's. Now all I need is an invitation to Kirsten's program, and I know I will find one. JFK replaces Interklostum as the mantra which I chant under my breath to the rhythm of my footsteps as I walk down the halls. I find myself drumming my fingers against my desk in three-count rhythm. JFK, JFK, where my great love Kirsten and I will reunite.

Six days before my departure, Kirsten screens. She asks if I know one of her fellow participants, Terrence Patrick of Bradley Complex "B" Wing Number 2049. She met him at the Hemispheric Colloquium on News Accuracy three years ago in El Dorado. I reply that we met six years ago at a revitalization program in Ben Gurion, and I look forward to improving our friendship on the plane ride to JFK.

Before she screens out, Kirsten cocks her head and smiles. "I will fall asleep imagining you in my bed."

Sunrise, September 10. In a few minutes, I will leave for Bradley Complex to collect Terrence Patrick's invitation and credentials. I look forward to my exchange with him as well as giving the jackboots another unsolved death with which to invent a suicide that frightens the populace into obeying the law. How lucky that I did not leave my blade behind in Derek Todd's unit. The Yorty Complex cashiers would wonder if I bought a new blade every few months. I whistle as I pack. Never have I felt so free as this morning. I pause to look out my window. Thousands of units surround mine, yet I am utterly alone. But tonight, and for the years to come, I will have Kirsten. I fasten my travelpak and open the door to leave.

By the time I realize that I do not know the man who faces me, the blade is deep within my abdomen. It twists before I fall. Lying supine on the floor of my unit, I hear his voice. "Nothing personal, sir, but I want to see my great love at La Guardia tonight."

Richard Bruness

Ghazals of Dr. Hari Prakash Jain Transcreated by Dr. Amitabh Mitra

There is a storm afloat the sky

There is a lightning piercing the sky

Desires willing take to wings

Kite strings tense on a surface sky

A moon cradles me to distant slumber

A night song a night sky and evermore

Yet again another day kindles the sun

Yet again anklets jingle the sky

Hurts don't stay so often forever

Life picks up a stranger sky.

Take me today your own

Take my dream your own

Feel me feel my self

Merge me merge my self

Loving is a burning once again

Try burning yourself once again

Cloud burst on a struck moment

Your smile that held your eyes

Another river rides your eyes tonight

Another face hides your eyes tonight

Life takes on a madness of ritual sky

Loving you breaks the banks of river sky.

Wish I had met you once again

Life would have stopped a moment again

I had you long for the time held night

I remember you the stretch of endless night

Hurt had visited me once as my guest

I had entertained let him stay gave him the best

Streets touching us had nurtured him there

Today I see him standing all alone there

Does it matter if he fails to recognize me

I had touched your lips on a storm tattoo

Loving you has been unfamiliar words

Turning to rain and hurt has been familiar again.

Dr. Hari Prakash Jain is an Ophthalmologist in District Hospital, Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh, India. His ghazals have been widely published and is well known in literary circles of India. Dr. Jain sings his ghazals in a melodious voice and is sought after in 'ghazal evenings' throughout the country. The present works are transcreation from his book of ghazals, 'Shaakh Ka Dard'.

Amitabh Mitra

Not even a noon street, not even Gwalior...

The crisscross ropes on
the bamboo *charpoy*
threw down lucid shapes
as I lay under it
seeking respite
ripples of a fable in an
afternoon of restless sleep.
I touched gregarious monsters
gentle on a fortwing palace doors
holding an inner city turmoil.
A stranger time so far away
and you beckoning me to
cross the long stride darkness
of an aftermath of a vicious moment.
A curving railway track binding us
receding in another season
that afternoon.



Amitabh Mitra is a medical doctor practicing in a busy hospital in East London, South Africa. He is a poet and an artist, published extensively in the web and print. He has given shows of his drawings and poems and recited his love poems against music in a CD titled 'A Slow Train To Gwalior'. Amitabh dreams of making a feature film based on his love poems.

I love you

I love you
As the first sun that grew in Gwalior
The fort outgrew the sun.

I love you
As our lips sealed the fate
Breathes stretched an empire.

And I love you more
Of scattered streets
The rain on your tantrums
A sky that had once
Clothed me
And you
Who still wouldn't believe
Of the land beyond the fort
Of summers broken
Of palaces buried
Of us
Tied in a single
Span.

I wonder
How could I have escaped
The purple dawn
Clutter of feelings on a
Raging skin, the morning after
Disheveled hair
A Maratha encampment
And you.

I know
I love you.

Thankful

Dawn Colclasure



Jeremy Hurst's day at work hadn't exactly been thrilling. There was much anticipation in getting dinner over with, showering and then climbing into bed to relieve him of his tired sluggishness. As he had done several times before, he turned on the portable radio behind his couch to a classical music station then popped his boxed entree into the oven. He was about to proceed to the couch when he remembered that he hadn't checked the mail yet. He went to his door, opened it then swung his right arm over to the mailbox, where he used his fingers to lift the black metal lid and let them fall onto the contents inside. He looked at the two bills and a letter that he retrieved from it as he stepped back into his apartment and swung the heavy wooden door shut.

Throwing the bills onto his makeshift coffee table in front of the couch, he studied the letter that he held up in front of him as he went to the couch and sat down. He relaxed his tired muscles as he sat back, turning the letter over and opening the envelope. There was no return address on the front, but the postmark read Waldens, Oklahoma. It was addressed specifically for him—"Jeremy Hurst"—with his exact address, and it wasn't even heavy. In fact, upon opening the envelope and pulling out a single piece of folded paper, there was a newspaper clipping inside. Adjusting his glasses, he looked at the newspaper clipping and read:

"WALDENS—A woman was found dead in her home Saturday morning, police report. She was identified as Maria Cathone, aged 46. It was determined that Ms. Cathone had died from a heart attack while she was busy cleaning her home. Her

body was discovered by a neighbor, Faith Elam, 76, when Cathone had failed to answer her phone. Burial services will be held on Monday, August 13, at 1:30 PM."

Jeremy kept his gaze on the newspaper clipping, his wrinkled, darkly tanned hand shaking as he held it. Overcome with emotion, he let his hand fall to his lap, his eyes slowly closing as his head fell back onto the couch. "Maria," he whispered, his past swirling through his mind. Her voice, her face, her laugh. All these and more he could see and hear right now. Most of it from when she was much younger, though. Younger, carefree, and...his friend.

It was all so shocking. My God, how long ago was the last time that he had seen her? Ten years ago? Fifteen? A whole lot longer than that, no doubt.

Now she was dead, at 46 years of age. She was dead...

Their meeting each other had been completely circumstantial. They were in a department store elevator when the elevator became stuck. They were locked in there for hours, as it had taken some time before help had arrived and the problem fixed.

Oh, he was much younger when they had met. He was in his late 30s, and she...she was in her late teens. An incredible age difference, yet he had found her intellectually appealing, challenging

his own good judgment with her far-flung (and often childish) explanations of the world. He had liked her right away—it was her audacity and spontaneity of youth, which he so enjoyed—and they had continued conversations with each other frequently after that day. Phone numbers were soon exchanged and they would call each other up in their spare time, indulging in conversations and becoming better acquainted with each other. He sometimes saw her at the bookstore that he worked in, she sometimes saw him at the library while she was studying.

Their friendship was strictly platonic, but it wasn't quite seen that way in public. Oh, no; in public, Jeremy had often received frowns of disapproval from several older women and Maria had seen older men shaking their heads in shame whenever they saw her walking with him, holding his hand and laughing at some crazy joke that he had told her. "You should be ashamed of yourself!" Someone had once shouted at him, one day when they were walking in the park.

They didn't let public reactions stop them from letting their friendship exist, though. Words and harsh phrases were often shrugged off and they would go elsewhere, somewhere less populated and where they'd start telling more jokes to lighten the mood. They had often gone out to the canyons, where the fresh spring and towering trees provided them with a safe haven from the world so full of harsh realities and rules they didn't want to live with.

There Maria would often throw off her shoes and jump into the water, splashing it everywhere and then darting over to the waterfall, where she would close her eyes and hold her head back as she stood underneath it and let the descending streams of water pound onto her closed eyelids and dare to try to escape into her mouth. Jeremy would only stand there and laugh, watching her as she playfully darted this way and that in the water. Sometimes she had even pulled him in, laughing as she splashed him with water and evaded his attempts to push her underneath.

The canyons were where they had spent most of their time, soaking up the sun and admiring the

peaceful tranquility of nature. For several occasions as the months had passed by, they would meet there and it soon had become something of a refuge for them. Their shelter from life's storm. It was where they had had their first kiss, after three years of friendship. It seemed to be the thing to do, the next step to take. He didn't worry about her age, that she had just turned twenty-one, nor did he worry about what people would think. What she would think.

He had no worries at the time that it had happened, or when, on one evening, they had ended up in bed together...

"Hope to see you there." Those were the words written underneath the newspaper article. Jeremy hadn't seen them at first—the shock of Maria's death had been so overwhelming—only when he had mustered enough courage to look at the article without reading her name. He couldn't have the slightest idea who could have written that; he didn't know anyone in Oklahoma. Not even in Waldens. It wasn't where Maria had gone off to college because he could remember perfectly well that she had decided to skip college and just work. No relatives out there, as far as he had known, and how come no return address?

In any event, it was Maria's funeral. He thought that he would never see her again. He was most certain of it. Now he could, when she was dead. When she had grown older and had presumably changed in so many different ways. He had lost his friend in the physical sense, but never in his soul. And that was what had made him decide to go, made him want to go and see her for the very last time.

He scheduled his flight for the next morning, on Monday, and he would arrive in Tulsa at ten. Enough time to get to a motel in Waldens and get ready. He packed light, as it was only the funeral that his business included and, besides, he couldn't get an extended amount of time off from work. He would go out there for the funeral then come back.

It was a misty Monday morning at 5 am. as he set out for the bus stop. His plane would leave at

7:30 and he wanted to get to the airport on time. He hoped that it wouldn't rain, as it commonly did this time of year, because he wouldn't be able to make it on time if his flight ended up being delayed. He thought of Maria often as he rode on the bus, remembering her soft voice and cold hands. The way that she was always ready to jump up and fight for anything and fight for what she believed in, what she wanted out of life.

Jeremy sat back in his seat as the bus slowly headed out for the airport, resting his head and closing his eyes. Getting up at the break of day was a common practice of his, but this morning he had gotten up at four to give himself at least an hour to get his head straight and drink his coffee. He had not slept very well last night; the whole ordeal of Maria's death kept tugging at him, rekindling his feelings of regret.

He had the power to stop her, but not change her mind. No, what she had done had been her decision. It was something he still had to try to get himself to accept...

She had been quiet for a very long time. He knew that there was something wrong; he had been able to sense it in her aloofness and discomfort. She hadn't been talking very much that day and frequently looked the other way whenever he had tried to make eye contact with her.

Jeremy had sat quietly at his kitchen table in his apartment, waiting for her to speak. He knew her all too well, that if she really wanted to talk about whatever it was on her mind then she would do so in her own time. As soon as she was ready. She already knew that she could always talk to him about anything, no matter how trivial or serious it seemed.

He watched her as she sat in the chair across from him, running her right hand through her crimson red hair then letting it fall back down to her side. Her left hand squeezed the cup of coffee that she hadn't touched for the past fifteen minutes and she constantly lowered her gaze, her hazel eyes evading his brown ones.

When she had finally found the strength to look up at him, the overhead kitchen light helped him faintly see the tears swelling in her eyes.

She was silent for a moment, then a stream of tears escaped down her right cheek as she managed a weak smile and said in her soft voice, "I have to go away."

Surprised, he studied her gaze more intently, wondering why that could be so terrible for her. "Go away?" He asked, almost as if he needed his voice to help the words sink in. "But where?"

She shook her head, raising her right hand to wipe away the tears. "I don't know, Jeremy. All that I do know is that I can't stay here." And then her gaze turned very serious as she looked at him again. "And that we must never see each other again."

So that was it. That was why she was so upset. Tonight was the last time that they could see each other and then after she left their friendship would become extinct.

"Maria," he began to say, trying to think of how he could grasp the situation. "Please tell me why. Why do you have to leave? Why can't we see each other anymore?"

He was silent for a moment, then he looked at her and asked, "Do they know?"

"Who?"

"Your parents."

She quickly shook her head. "No. They don't know about us. It's just..."

Her voice trailed off as she looked away, more tears suddenly trickling down her cheeks.

Jeremy sat up in his chair, still so confused. He wondered what the problem could be, since her parents' knowledge of their intimate friendship was ruled out.

Maria slowly took in her breath, clearing her throat as she looked at him again. She didn't smile

this time, only raised her chin and looked him in the eye.

"I'm starting to fall in love with you, Jer," she said. "And I know that cannot come between us. That we should just be friends."

He thought for a minute, trying to control the stunning effects of what she had just told him. "Well," he began, trying to speak in a clear voice. "We can still be friends, though, Maria. We shouldn't let, uh, that get in the way."

"But it will," she persisted, leaning a bit closer over the table. "It will come between us because what I feel for you is very strong. And...I know that...you don't feel that way...for me." Her gaze had lowered at this, and she sat back in her chair again as if she had lost her strength.

Jeremy remained silent, not quite sure of what he should do. She was wrong in her claim that he didn't have the ability to love her. She was wrong about that, because he already did. He already was in love with her and he had been for a long time. He had never mentioned it or finally let it out into the open because he wasn't sure if she felt the same way for him.

It was a very dangerous feeling, love. It either brought two people closer together or it tore them apart. It could be very inevitable but only if it was allowed to be. Too unpredictable and often very demanding, it wasn't ground that Jeremy was prepared to tread. Love had done too much damage to his abused heart—something that he had never discussed with Maria—and he didn't want to lose the unique friendship they shared.

Love was out of the question, and she had known this. She could tell that having any kind of involvement with her was the last thing that he wanted to do because they were doing so well in just being friends, although their ways of having a friendship were a bit out of the norm.

Had he given in to his feelings for her, they would probably have been faced with even greater complications than the ones they had before. Her

parents would have never respected it and there was no telling what her father would have done. Maria was past eighteen at the time, yet Mr. Cathone was well capable of taking problems into his own hands because he had never liked Jeremy. They had met a couple of times and Jeremy had been able to tell right away that Maria's father disapproved of him. More so because he had never married and "sometimes people get crazy ideas about 30-something bachelors," as he had said.

But it didn't have to be some kind of curse. Even though they had strong feelings for each other, it didn't mean that everything had to come to an end. It didn't require them to sacrifice their friendship, sacrifice their happiness in order to gain a clean conscience.

"But you're wrong about this, Maria," he said now. "Even as you may be in love with me, I still don't see why you have to go away and we can't ever see each other anymore."

Maria stood up from the chair, turning to stand behind it. In the process of turning, she drew her jacket closer around her and cleared her throat. Standing behind the chair, she began to wipe away the remaining tears.

"It's the best thing to do, Jeremy. The best thing for us. Please, you have to believe me."

Jeremy looked directly in her eyes. "How can it be the best thing for us? We can't really know that."

"I know that," she said, returning his gaze, standing stiffly and clenching the back of the chair even tighter.

He looked up at her, almost seeming upset. "Is there any other way? Please, Maria. I don't want you to go. I don't want to lose you."

"There is a way," she responded, her voice almost a whisper.

"What is it?" He held his breath, groping for this new ray of light.

Her gaze was serious. "If you'll marry me."

He shook just a moment, now looking at her very stunned. "Marry you?" He surprisedly repeated, rapidly blinking his eyes to prevent himself from passing out.

Here she was, just now revealing her feelings to him and all of a sudden claiming that marrying her would be the only way that she would be able to stay, that he would be able to see her as often as he has been. She might as well have been threatening him to sacrifice his very life in order to get her to stay.

His mind raced in circles, his palms became sweaty. Marriage, why marriage? Why was it so important to her now? Why was it the only thing that would save their friendship?

It was too soon. Too soon for her to expect him to commit himself to her. For exactly how long had she been feeling this way about him? Since the day they had met?

No, she was going too fast for him. Something was wrong. Something was just not right, and why would she think that marriage was the only solution? There had to be another way. There had to be.

Maria stood frozen behind the chair, her gaze hardening with each passing second.

"I know it wouldn't be the greatest thing in the world, Jeremy," she told him, her voice a cold tone. "But it is the only way. Please, believe me."

"Why should I believe you?" He demanded, looking at her wide-eyed. "If you want a relationship, fine. But you can't expect me to just jump up and walk you down the aisle. That's not something that I'm prepared to do!"

"Well, what are you prepared to do, Jeremy?" She cried, almost losing control over herself. The tears were in her eyes again. "Are you prepared to rot in this apartment? Live alone without anyone being there to stand at your side? To live alone...and die alone. Is that what you're prepared to do?"

She started crying again, burying her face into her hands and sobbing. She moved back from the chair and bent over as she cried, her entire body almost shaking.

Jeremy quickly stood from his chair, walking over to her and taking her in his arms. She almost resisted, not wanting to be close to him because it would only drive her over the edge even more, but she wasn't capable of telling him anything or moving away. All that she could do was cry.

"It's okay," he whispered, holding her against his chest and resting his chin on her head. He closed his eyes, wishing that she would tell him why everything was so wrong. "It's okay."

He let her continue crying, gently rubbing her back as she returned his embrace.

"You listen to me," she said now, trying to speak as clearly as she could. "I don't want this to be hard. All that I know is that the best thing for us to do is to go our separate ways. Please, Jeremy. Please. Don't ask me to tell you anything more."

He moved her a bit away from him now, then lifted her chin so that he could kiss her. She returned his kiss and, without him ever intending it, he kissed her again but this time with more passion. He tightened his grip around her as they stood there kissing; Maria careful on how close he pulled her to him.

Jeremy pressed his lips harder against hers, kissing her more deeply as he moved his hands to unbutton her shirt.

"Jer—" Maria began to say, but he muted her voice with his kiss again, moving her hands away and pulling her shirt off.

Shortly after they made love on his couch, Maria was busy dressing in his bathroom. Jeremy was still asleep on his couch, or so she had figured as she sat down on the other end to tie her shoes.

"Do you really have to go so soon? You could stay for breakfast, you know."

She slowly shook her head, trying to keep her gaze away from his.

"No. I stayed longer than I should have. I really better go now, while I still can."

She stood, looking at him and then slowly letting a soft smile cross her face. "Thank you, though. For last night. Thank you for helping me."

He let a warm grin replace his solemn gaze. "I'll always be there to help you."

Her gaze slowly fell and she almost started to cry again. But she had acted quickly in restraining herself, looking in his eyes and thanking him. Thanking him for his friendship, his understanding. For everything that he had done and said. For everything.

She had to go now; it was the best thing for her to do. That she should go, and go immediately. She turned and headed for the door, her hands shaking as she went one small step at a time.

"Wait," Jeremy stood to say, bringing her to a quick halt. She slowly turned to face him, face those eyes that respected her decision but still would never let her go.

He was silent for a moment as he stood there, looking at her one last time before she was gone for good.

"There's something that I want you to have."

She studied his gaze, wondering what else there could possibly be that he had left to give her. There was so much of him that she had with her already.

"Here," he continued, bending over to the nightstand by the couch and opening a drawer. She quietly watched as he took something out of it then as he had closed the drawer and walked to her. He was soon standing in front of her, holding the object in his hand.

"Do you remember when I had told you that my grandmother was Cherokee?"

She slowly nodded her head. "Yes."

"One thing that she had always told me was...that no matter what wrong had happened in our pasts, to close the door on it and just be thankful for the good things that are still around. That we are able to walk, talk, hear, read, write, run, see how beautiful the earth can be. That even if yesterday was bad, today can still be good and that tomorrow can always be better."

He looked down at the object in his hand again. Maria looked down at it, too, and saw it to be a leather patch on a leather string. Looking closely, she could see some kind of symbols that had been painted onto it in black paint. Jeremy held it out for her to see, and up closely she could determine that there were five symbols. The first two resembled the letter "F"; the third closely resembled an "A" and the other two that followed were the same earlier representations of the letter "F". As she looked at them, Jeremy pointed at each one and translated, "Ga Li Et Li Ga."

They looked at each other now. "It's Cherokee," he said. "It means 'I am thankful'."

She was silent for a moment, surprisedly staring into his eyes. "And you're giving this to me?"

He slowly nodded. "Yes," he said. "Because I want you to remember that no matter where you are, always be thankful for the good things that you have."

He took her hand and pressed the patch into it. "And for our friendship."

Maria quickly embraced him, tightly shutting her eyes, as she knew that there was so much more that she was thankful to him for. So much more. More than he would ever know.

Right after retrieving his suitcase from baggage claim, Jeremy swiftly headed out of the airport, hailing a taxi and instructing the driver that he needed to get to a motel in Waldens as soon as possible. The driver did his best, getting him there just an hour before the funeral services were scheduled to begin. The traffic had been heavy and

Jeremy was starting to feel as strung out as it was. But he thanked the driver and gave him a five-dollar tip before bolting into the motel office. Waldens was a small town—that much he was thankful for—and it would only take him a few minutes to get to the funeral home, but he didn't want to take the chance of being late. He wanted to get there as early as he could, anyway, in order to find out who it possibly could have been who had sent him the newspaper clipping back in Colorado.

Soon after getting himself a room for the night and some coffee on the way up, Jeremy took a good shower and dressed as quickly as he could. His hands shook as he fumbled with the buttons on his black shirt and he almost walked out the door without his gray coat.

Known to be a small town with some good farming land, Waldens, Oklahoma was the kind of town that took you back to the old days, the time before parts of the state were ravaged by riots from the KKK. Just two hours from Tulsa, every single person in the town knew who everybody was and that this was not a town for trouble. Waldens had its own post office, its own newspaper and its own church. Farmhouses were everywhere and seeing cattle all around was not unusual.

Witnessing the beauty of the land and the kindness of most folks in the area, Jeremy could understand why Maria had moved here. She would be safe and, at the same time, surrounded by so many people who respected the sanctity of the earth. He had always known Maria to be a nature-loving person and it was only natural that she would choose to live here.

He tried to get himself to relax, but he was still upset by the fact that someone whom he had loved for so long had died. And that she had died alone. He had not been there with her, he had not even seen her for so long and now she was gone from him forever.

He couldn't help but wonder what had become of her. If she had given up on her feelings for him, had changed her mind about school and gone to get

a degree in something or another, if she had ever wanted...to come back.

Jeremy pushed the thoughts from his mind, looking up to see a large group of people standing outside of the funeral home. He moved his gaze to look away from them and went to stand at the end of the building, not really feeling like socializing with anyone at the moment. He decided to just stand aside and look at everyone, be the silent observer.

There weren't a whole lot of people he could recognize. He could recognize her parents, probably well into their seventies by now, and he could also recognize Maria's older brother, Rory, with his shock of red hair blown back in the wind.

The waiting period was brief before it was time for them to enter and sign in. As Jeremy began to sign the list of attendees, he took a quick glance at the top of the list and saw the name "Haldan Cathone." He tried to think of who the other Cathone was before someone ushered him inside and told him to take a seat and that there was no smoking in the building. As he went to sit down, he decided that the other Cathone was probably an uncle or a cousin.

As he sat back in his seat, preparing himself for the ceremony laid before him, he casually started to look around the room, observing all those in attendance. There were people from all walks of life: young and old, the sociable and the quiet, the married and the single, the parents and the mothers-to-be. She might as well have known the whole town; so many people were attending that there weren't enough places for everyone to sit. The entire back wall of the funeral home was covered with people standing against it.

He found this to be a surprise, for he had never known Maria to know so many people. He was aware that she had relatives around here and around there, and of course this had to be twice the amount of relatives that she had. Maybe five times that.

The ministers conducting the service were up at the podium, inaudibly conversing with one another.

When it was finally time for them to start talking, the one to begin opened a book, which Jeremy figured to be a Bible, then began to speak into the microphone propped up before him.

Jeremy quietly listened as the minister spoke, as he said some kind words about Maria before reading a passage from the Bible. He had never been much of a religious man and so he had only paid half of his attention to the passage reading. Afterwards a woman at an organ began playing "Amazing Grace" and some of the people began to sing it with her.

As he quietly sat in his seat, he began to observe his surroundings again, this time looking over at Maria's parents. They were in the front row on his left side, along with Rory and someone who he guessed to be Haldan. He looked at the other more closely, wondering if it was possible that he was Haldan. He certainly couldn't have been Maria's uncle—he was much younger—but perhaps a cousin. Yet, what struck him as fascinating was that this particular youth had features that he found very familiar to his own. Looking upon him was like seeing himself from so many years ago; he had his brown hair, with his bangs combed over to the left side just as he had once had, and he had the protruding jaw. Jeremy found this to be something very much out of the ordinary. One other thing was that Maria's family was Irish and that they did not have large muscles or a broad frame. That was exactly what the young man had; his chest stuck out and he was tall. And the only reason why Jeremy himself was that way was because of his Cherokee ancestors. The boy was well dressed in his good clothes—a pair of black pants, long-sleeved black shirt and black shoes—and he appeared to be no more than 22, perhaps 23.

He decided not to dwell on it as much, no matter how intriguing he found it to be. Perhaps at some point he would find out who the boy was.

After the playing of "Amazing Grace," a second minister approached the podium. This one had known Maria very well, having known her from her attendance at church every Sunday. He spoke

in fond recollection of her, of how she was there every Sunday dressed as neatly as possible and with her well-dressed son at her side. This caught Jeremy's attention, surprised that Maria had even had a child. He had never known, but of course it was not possible for him to know because she was so far away from him and he had fallen behind on what she was up to with her life. After all, it had been twenty-five years. And that's a long time.

He lowered his head as he listened, waiting to hear more. But all that was said afterwards was of how good a mother she was to her only child, working two jobs day in and day out in order to provide a decent living for her boy, and of how strong she was to go on and raise the child alone.

Jeremy wanted to jump up there now, jump up and demand of the minister if he was sure he was talking about the same Maria that he had known. It was a profound surprise, yet, at the same time, he wanted to keep listening and find out more. Exactly when had Maria had her child? Who was the father? Was he there now? Had she really been all alone in raising her child, or was she just keeping him all for herself? As...as some sort of prize?

The minister finished speaking and then a new song was played. This one was "Peace in the Valley" and this time no one was singing with the woman. The organist sang loud this time, the floors seeming to shake as she pounded at the keys and sang at the top of her lungs. Jeremy found it amusing when seeing one very small child cover her ears and tightly shut her eyes.

After the song was finally over, a new group of people was at the podium. There was Mr. and Mrs. Cathone, Rory and the young man who he had supposed to be Haldan. Jeremy now sat attentively in his seat, carefully listening as Maria's parents first spoke and then Rory. Rory was a bit tearful as he spoke of Maria, of their sibling quarrels and of how she was always able to make so many people laugh. He looked down with a knowing smile as Rory began to recount how Maria was always bursting with energy and playing around, thinking that she knew what the world was like and that as far as she was

concerned, no one had the privilege of telling her that she was wrong, that she was being too naive. These were occasions that Jeremy had been all too familiar with, having had to tolerate Maria's sense of self-righteousness with his humble corrections of her errors.

Ah, but life certainly took its time in teaching her. There was so much that she had to learn. In three years, she had learned a lot, too. At least, she had learned that life was not a toy that she could play with. He had seen that, even on the last night that he had been with her.

Jeremy looked up again, having just heard the name "Haldan Cathone." He saw that he had been correct in figuring who the youth with Rory had been, and he watched intently as the young man stepped up to the podium to speak. He listened closely, not taking his eyes off of him for a minute.

Haldan was silent for a moment before speaking, holding his neck with his hand as he cleared his throat. His eyes were apparently glazed—the light hanging from the ceiling helped Jeremy to see that—and his eyes Jeremy could just see were hazel. He had his mother's eyes.

"I want to thank all of you for coming here," he began to say, speaking in a solemn tone of voice. "I know that my mother would have really appreciated you all being here for her, to say goodbye."

Sitting up straight in his seat, Jeremy closely studied the boy. So this was Maria's son. This was the child that she had raised all alone. She apparently had done a good job; he appeared to be in perfect health and he was acting decently. He didn't shuffle his feet or direct his gaze to the ground, either; he kept himself calm, much to Jeremy's surprise, and he shot his gaze directly at the crowd. He didn't lose control of his emotions and burst into tears as he spoke for Maria, and Jeremy admired this. He had his mother's strength.

What Jeremy kept thinking about was the fact that the boy's name was Haldan. This was his own middle name.

Almost overcome with shock, he struggled to sit still in his seat, his hands suddenly shaking. Beads of sweat were on his forehead and he all of a sudden became very hot.

He tried to deny it, tried to tell himself that he was imagining things. Yes, he had to be imagining things. All of this was merely coincidental. Perhaps Haldan's father was someone else and Maria had given him his middle name only because she missed him so much but that she didn't want her parents to know. Or perhaps she had met someone whose name was Haldan and he had left her after she revealed to him that she was pregnant. It was not a very pleasant thought, but it did seem more reasonable. Yes, it had to be possible. If Maria had been pregnant with his child, then surely she would have told him instead of running away. There were several possibilities to explain it.

"I was only with Mom for twenty-four years," Haldan continued. "But she had given me the best life that she could, and there's nothing in the world I would have ever traded with my life. I will always love my mother, even though she isn't going to be with me anymore. One of the things that Mom had taught me was that the greatest kind of love there can be is the kind of love that goes on even when that person isn't with you anymore."

Then he looked directly at Jeremy, making eye contact with him. "And that's the best kind of love that I'm going to keep with me for the rest of my life."

Shortly after the funeral services were over, Jeremy tried to get as far from Maria's family as he could. He wanted to stay with Maria, perhaps take one of the roses on her casket, but what had happened with Haldan made his mind spin. He was still trying to convince himself that everything was only coincidental, but when he had looked into his eyes, when he had made that eye contact, he knew that he was only fooling himself in trying to deny the truth. And, yes, it was the truth. The truth was there and he had to face it. Maria had had his child; that much explained why she had left him behind so long ago, saying that marriage was the only thing

that would allow her to stay. Marriage had been the only other option, and now he knew why.

A storm of mixed feelings tormented his mind. Why hadn't Maria told him? Why had she kept his baby such a big secret, even from him? She had to know that he wouldn't have shunned her because of this, and he most definitely would have made sure to it that she didn't have to raise their son alone.

"Dad?"

Jeremy came to an abrupt halt, standing stiff as he raised his head to look ahead of him. The mere calling him by this name was still so new, even if it did cement the fact that Haldan was indeed his own. It sent a chill down his spine, and for a moment, he didn't know what to do. He didn't even know if he was even ready to identify himself as a father.

He slowly turned around to face the direction from which that voice had come, and saw Haldan standing there, looking at him questioningly. All these years, he had a son and had never known it. A beautiful son. He dreaded what his son thought of him, if Maria had fed his mind with any lies about him, but he pushed these thoughts away, trying to regain control over himself.

Haldan didn't say anything, only took a few steps closer in order to see this stranger better. This stranger who he knew was his father. Here he was seeing him now, for the very first time in his life. This very man that his mother had once told him was dead. At least, only until he had turned 18. Then she told him the truth, and that her parents didn't know. And that was how it was going to stay. The entire town didn't know, either. All that his mother had told them was that his father was dead.

Now he was seeing his father, for the very first time. He would no longer have to live in the shadow of a lie; the truth could come out. He could be with his father now, if he chose to.

And all of this had taken his mother's death to make it possible.

Neither of them said a word, only looked at each other with an examining eye. Haldan had figured that the situation was just as awkward for his father as it was for him, for the man appeared to be trying to think of what to say. But he wished that he wouldn't speak; that they could only remain silent just so that they could get a good look at each other.

It had been twenty-four years. And that meant twenty-four years of catching up to do. There was so much that he had to tell him, but, at the same time, the only thing he wanted right now was to know him. His father appeared to be so old; how many years did he have left to know his father? How much longer would it be before he would be at his funeral next, making both of his parents dead?

He wanted to touch his face and call him "dad" again. The name was so new coming from his mouth, and this was the first time in his life he could actually see him and call him "dad." He hated how much of a stranger this man was to him. It wasn't fair. No matter how many times his mother had entrusted him with faith in fate, she had never really known how much he really needed a father. His father.

He remembered one of the lessons that his mother had taught him when he was old enough to think maturely and understand the value of something being passed on. His mother had told him that no matter how many bad things there were that had happened in his life, that he should be thankful for the good things that he still had. Thankful that he was alive, that he had a comfortable home and that he and his mother were not dirt poor. Thankful for the fact that he had enough money put aside for his college education, even his own car, and that he had a loving God who took care of him every single day. And, as if to reinforce this lesson, she had given him a leather patch that he could wear around his neck, with those three words painted on the patch in the Cherokee language.

And now he would do what he felt was the right thing to do. Now was the time.

"Here," he said, his voice a bit cracked as tears formed in his eyes. He held his closed hand out to his father's and his father slowly took the

patch. The symbols were still very clear to the unaided eye.

Ga Li Et Li Ga. "I am thankful," he read aloud.

"I think that Mom would want you to have it back now," Haldan said, his expression weakening as he almost started to cry. The tears began to trickle down his cheeks. "She wore that every day before giving it to me. She told me how important it was to her, how thankful it made her be."

The tears continued to roll down now, and Jeremy, nearly overcome with emotion, held his son's face with his hands. He looked into his eyes, catching a faint picture of his mother, and then slowly shook his head. "No," he said in a cracked whisper. "This doesn't belong to me anymore."

Then he moved his hands from the boy's face, slowly putting the leather string that held the patch around Haldan's neck. "This," he slowly whispered. "This...belongs to you. So that you will always be as thankful as I am, as thankful as it made your mother."

He started to walk away then. Part of him didn't want to. That part wanted to stay with his son, tell him how much he wanted to know him, take him home with him. But he knew that Haldan's home was here. It had been for twenty-four years, and it wouldn't be right to tell him that he should leave and go back to Colorado with him. No matter how much he was of a father to him, he was still more of a stranger. And Haldan was a grown man; he would elect to go home with him, but only if he decided to.

No, he knew the best thing to do was to leave. He could tell that his son didn't hate him for being the father that he never knew, but that didn't quite mean that he was ready to live with him just yet. So he would leave the cemetery now, walk back to the motel and leave for home tomorrow morning. If Haldan ever wanted to know him anymore than he got to today, he knew exactly where to find him.

"Dad, just tell me one thing!" He heard Haldan's voice behind him.

Jeremy slowly turned around, turned to see Haldan standing there and very much on the brink of crying. He weakly stood, his hands shaking and tears continuing to stream down his cheeks.

Haldan looked at him for a moment, struggling to make blurred eye contact with him before he would not be able to see him with his own eyes again. He wiped away his tears to clear his vision. "Did you love her?"

"Every day," he answered, finally letting out the same thing he had been telling himself for so many years now.

This seemed to satisfy Haldan, because it wasn't a sense of aloofness that he looked at Jeremy with now, but gratitude that he had not been cheated into being born into this world.

Jeremy turned and continued walking away from the cemetery, leaving a part of himself behind him.

Dawn Colclasure is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Take My Hand* and *Topiary Dreams*, as well as two nonfiction books: *BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL: How we Survive as Writing Parents* and *365 TIPS FOR WRITERS: Inspiration, Writing Prompts and Beat The Block Tips to Turbocharge Your Creativity* (Filbert Publishing, December, 2004). She is also the author of the horror novel, *November's Child*. She has written for both print and online media, with articles appearing in magazines such as *Succeed*, *Mothering*, *American Fitness* and *HOMEspirations*, as well as on the Web for sites and E-zines such as *Write From Home*, *Absolute Write*, *Writing World*, *Worldwide Freelance Writer*, *SheKnows.com*, *The Writer Within* and *Writing Etc.* She has also written under the pen name Dana Mitchells. She also edits and publishes the FREE E-zine for writing parents, the *Burning the Midnight Oil Book Zine*. She is a contributing writer to the newspaper, *SIGNews*, and a staff writer for the Web site, *The Shadowlands*, where she writes about ghost and haunting experiences.

Her Web site is at <http://dmcwriter.tripod.com/>.

Jan Oskar Hansen

Old Friend

Biking along a country lane I saw, at distance,
a sartorial elegant man, a real gent, grey suit,
white face standing in the shade of a big tree,
clearly not a man hanging about in the sun.

Stopped took off my sunglasses, the man was
an amputated tree, his face a brutal chainsaw
slash, petrified tears made of sap glinted.

I should have said something I should have
spoken; what do you say to a tree that has just
been maimed and is bleeding white blood?

An ice-cream van came; I bought a strawberry
sundae, as I was eating the sweet stuff a hearse
comes gliding by, and behind the subbing of
feet; the lid of the coffin opened, my friend,
Finn, who I hadn't seen since he fell off a cliff
fifty years, sat up looked around smiled and
sang: "If your chewing gum losses its flavour
on the bed post over night" then slunk back in
his coffin. How much we used to laugh about
that song, how much I loved him then.

The subbing feet belonged to old school friend,
Only I didn't know they were, till one held up
a placard: "We are your school friends, don't
you remember us?" No, why should remember
old men looking like headmasters with faces
made stern by the north/westerly wind and small
town Christianity. Finn was the only young one,
he would never grow old like us. On the face of
the sartorial tree, more sap came from the chain
saw slashed face, it tasted of sweet melancholy

jan oskar hansen is a Norwegian poet living in Portugal.

Work published by Jan Oskar Hansen

A Hudson view (skyline magazine)

Skyline "

Skald Wales

The rue Bella England

The Bards "

War is a dangerous place (Atlantean publishing)

Collections:

"Letters from Portugal" Bewrite

"Lunch In Denmark "Pabd"

"A cherry tree and a Dog" "Pabd"

Anthologies:

"Shaken & Stirred" Bewrite

"Roots" "

"Peoplespoet 2" Paula Publishing

"Listening to the birth of crystal" "

"Contemporary poetry" Bluechrome

Latest poetry collection, "La Strada", published by
Lapwing, Belfast

And many more ezines and magazines



Bill Garvey Photography

Solstice Eve

When half the world was wildwood
As wolves howled in Wolvescote dale
And naked virgins prayed to Orion.
The village shaman sat, in awed silence
Watching Swifts and Swallows hushed
Lost in deep chasms of thought
Lonely, intuitive and afraid.

He saw how times could merge
Like seas slipping into oceans
How distant worlds of ice and fire
Would tumble from the sky
And torches would melt in the moonlight.

He saw men scramble into holes
For lead like fossilized mothers milk
A last, loveless bear, stumble into oblivion
And wolves disappear into maps.

And he saw mankind plunge into darkness
Vision blurred by conscious thought
Dreams buried, strangled at birth
And the moon-muse turned to dust.

John Stocks

John Stocks: I live and work in Sheffield UK. I am widely published in the UK recent work having appeared, or being scheduled to appear in The Coffee House magazine, Coffee House, Littoral, the Other, Cambridge University review, Manifold, Candelabrum, Decanto, Poetry Monthly, Tadeeb, Harlequin, the Black Rose and Carillon. I am currently working on a first novel and also write short stories; winning the Carillon magazine, short story competition last year. My poem, 'Moon dreams' was recently short-listed for the National Poetry Anthology. A small number of poems are currently being transformed into short films as part of a film poetry project, and my poem, 'Alicia's Diary' was selected to be performed in Sheffield Cathedral as part of a Multi media poetry presentation. Other work has been performed on live radio on world poetry day.



Fury of Fall
Christine Bruness

Enter At Your Own Risk



Christine Bruness

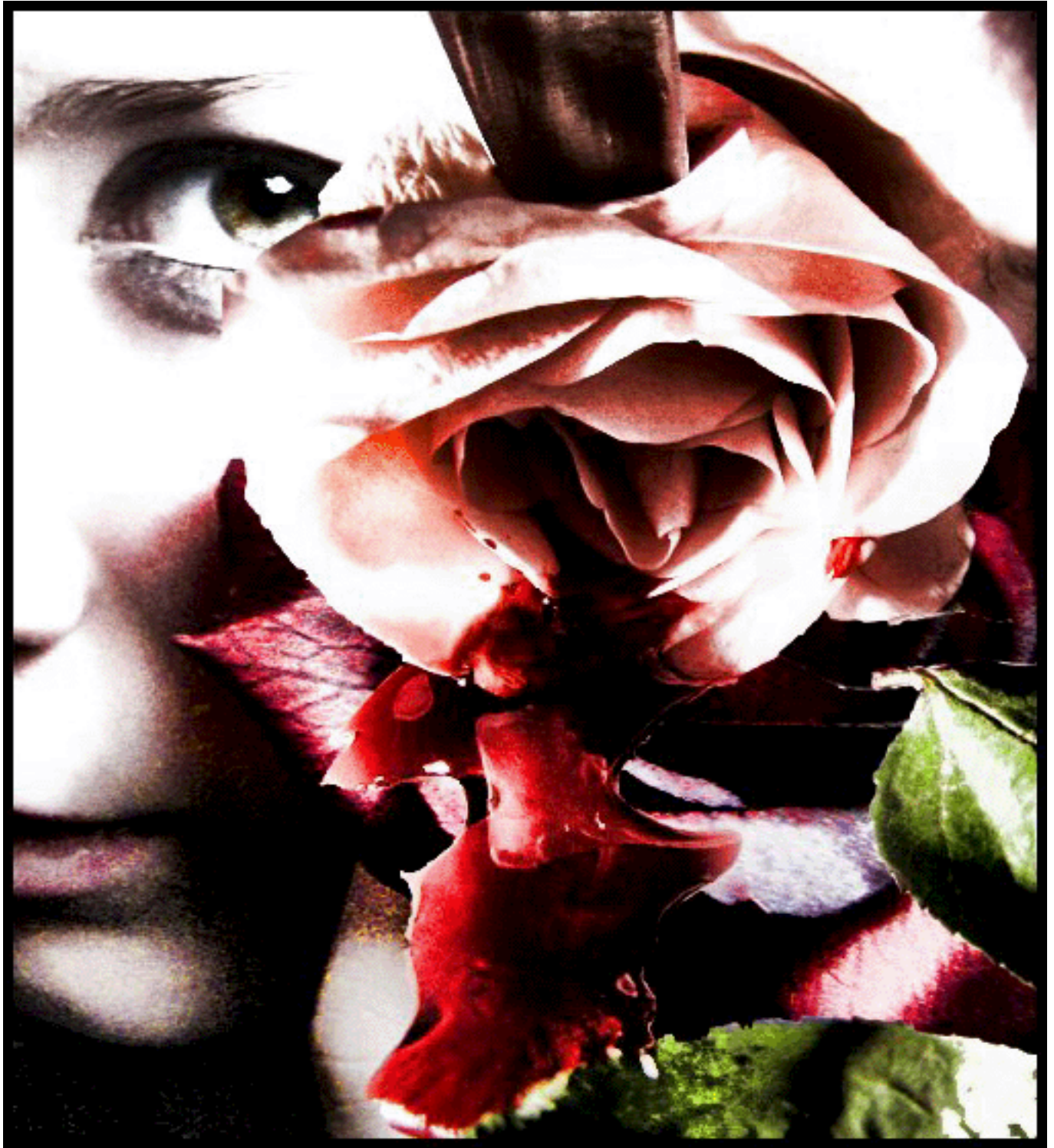
Of Two Minds



Blake Krasner

<http://www.artuproar.com/?profile=mastercylinder>

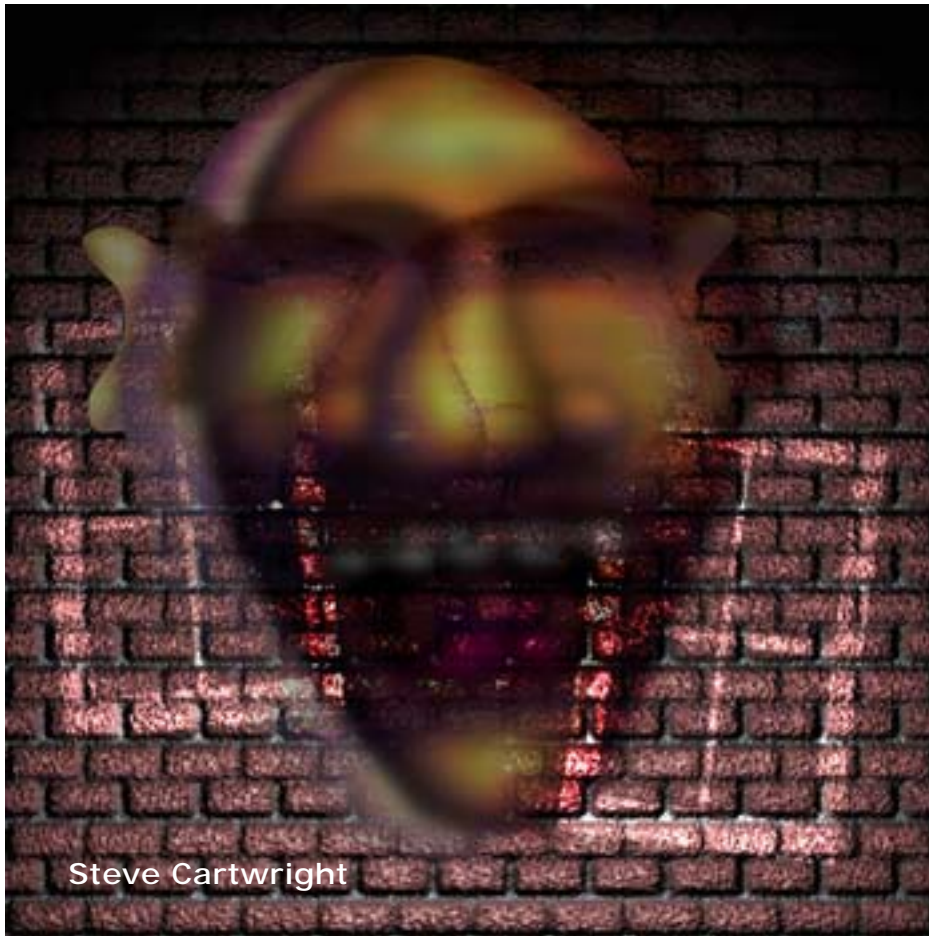
Blood Rose



Blake Krasner

<http://www.artuproar.com/?profile=mastercylinder>

Screams in the NIGHT



Victoria Valentine

The street was tree-lined. This she could sense through the darkness. Sheets of rain poured steadily from a place above, black and unending. Streaks of lightning illuminated more than the street lamps that fought their way through what resembled eternity.

And then the screams started. Moans at first, then growing in intensity until they roared louder than the thunderous night—filling her heart with terror. Screams of agony—screams of pain— as if someone were being

tortured, Kelly thought frantically. Rain-soaked, she ran faster, trying to find her way home. With each searching strike of lightning, darkened shapes of squatting buildings sped past her peripheral vision. Vacant buildings? She wondered, for there were no lighted windows—just lengths of dark brick walls flashing by, blackened frames where windows and doors should be, but could not be distinguished. She could not see any of this, yet she sensed it. Her mind was cluttered. Everything was unclear. She moved as if in fluid—floating— yet she could feel the wet cement beneath her bare feet. Why were there no cars on this street? Where were the citizens of this community? The screams grew louder... and the blood curdling screams! Where were they coming from? Inside her head? Or were the blood curdling screams reality? She raced faster toward nowhere. Home? Where was home? Confusion completely overcame her.

“Honey,” he took her by the shoulders, gently shaking her. “You’re daydreaming again.” His dark eyes were sympathetic, glistening with tears not yet cried, tears not about to part with the privacy of his concerned stare. “Kelly,” he said softly, “my sweetheart, my love. I only wish I could take away your pain.”

Keith was a loving husband, who would have shed his blood to help his wife through this time of agony.

It was a chilly autumn afternoon, but the sun shone brightly. At least it wasn't raining, Kelly thought, as the casket was lowered into the deep, freshly dug grave.

"I'm missing her..." 8 year old Lily sobbed. "Why did she have to go?"

"I'm missing her," the little boy, Kevin, in the canopied stroller tried to mimic his older sister. "Why did t'he have to go?"

They lived in a large white colonial home, with freshly mowed lawns that were trimmed meticulously by shrubbery and autumn flowers. Although it had been a stubborn summer, refusing to relinquish its hold upon the suburbs, leaves were beginning to fall and scatter colors along the winding driveway.

Inside the immaculate home they entered a large foyer, its floor covered by white Italian marble with fingerlike streaks of mauve. Just to the right, the stairway began climbing its way to the second floor where a circular balcony overlooked the oversized living room, then made its way straight up to the third floor. The third floor. The third floor. On the third floor, the screams were almost unbearable.

Downstairs in the family room, a slate mantle stretched across the length of the massive, well used fireplace that took up an entire corner of the room. The mantle was the keeper of the family photos.

"This is your grandma," Kelly often picked up the silver framed photo of the 40-ish, pleasant looking woman, resisting the urge to hug it to her chest and double over in sobs. "Grandma Elizabeth was a beautiful lady, Kevin." Little Kevin had a wide-eyed baby stare, as Lily's green eyes shined with a hint of tears. "Grandma would have loved you so much Lily," Kelly spoke softly, "To see your ballet, school plays, what a lovely young lady you are growing into...you have grandma's eyes..."

Kelly loved to tell the children stories about her mother, who had passed away far too young. Reminiscing of happier days helped her overcome her grief of sudden loss. Losing her mother was a tragedy that had left a hole in Kelly's chest, a hole that could not be filled by her loving husband and two children. Kelly's mother, Elizabeth McGuire, had never witnessed the birth of her grandchildren. This tore Kelly apart. But Kelly knew her mother had seen the children—even if not in this world, then from hers. Kelly was certain, for she knew she was either blessed or cursed with a sixth sense, with the ability to tap into the other side; Kelly sensed things, she knew things, she felt things... Sometimes at night, as she slept, she would force herself to awaken

from dreams—dreams that were all too real—dreams that had the focus and scent of a living world. The other side? Was Kelly being touched awake by the loving hands of the dead? Held by hand of the dead? Was it her dead mother's gentle fingers, stroking her hair that awakened her last night?

Kelly had her share of enemies to fend off, one of which was depression. Recently, the depression had grown worse, making her feel guilty. She had good reason to be depressed, she assured herself. She battled overwhelming emotions, scolding herself as she fought off dark urges. Kelly wanted to be dead. She felt dead inside. She did not want to kill herself, and knew she could not nor would never end her own life; she simply wanted it over with. She wanted to be dead and buried—and at peace. Life had grown far too difficult and painful to live. But again guilt plagued her. Kelly had to live....to live for her family—for Keith, the love of her life, and for the children she had brought into this world with love and expectations—expectations of a full and wonderful life. She wanted to watch her family thrive—and wondered what kind of adults her babies would grow up to be.

Kelly had sent the children down from the third floor studio to play in their rooms. She needed time alone. Heaving a sigh, the weight of the world on her shoulders, she sat upon the window seat, staring out at the back yard. The grass was green and lush. Keith kept the yards beautifully. The Rose of Sharon tree Kelly had planted in memory of Elizabeth, was still in full glorious lavender bloom. Paintings lined the entire right side of the studio, standing up, leaning carefully against the wall. Kelly longed to paint again, but she could not. She had not lost her desire, but was so tired, she lost her incentive to do anything these days. But it would return, she told herself.

As she gazed out the window, Kelly became lost in memories of the children running across the yard, laughing and playing in happier days. The strange sounds in the hallway snapped Kelly back to reality. "Keith?" Kelly called out as she rose and walked slowly toward the open studio door. She *felt* rather than heard the footsteps coming up the stairs; deliberate steps, heading in her direction. "Keith?" She called out again but the only reply was her own gasp as she poked her head out of the doorway and saw the dark figure emerge from the top stair... and it was heading her way. Screaming she ran back into the studio, slamming the door behind her. Frantically she looked around, searching for reason...for escape. But there was no where to run, for she was on the third floor – with no exit other than the doorway which led to the stairs, where the figure approached with quickening strides. Kelly's

heart raced, her eyes dashing around the room – what could she do? This had always been such a happy room – bright and sunny – filled with music and her paintings—and now it was dark—and the screams were returning—and not only were the screams returning, but she was seeing things! Dark figures? Her mind could not comprehend.

Kelly gained the courage to edge toward the door. Listening through the stained oak she heard nothing, and quietly opened the door a slim crack, peeking outside to see if the dark figure was gone—and it was. Kelly heaved a sigh of relief and with a sudden burst of energy, began her race down the stairs. But—before she could make her way down, something caught hold of her fleeing body—invisible arms—strong arms, and now she was being pushed back to the third floor against her will, by some unknown force.

“Kelly!” Keith cried out catching her as he ran up the staircase toward her screams. “Kelly—honey—honey—let me help you,” he led her down the stairs and seated her upon the sofa.

The children stood by silently, obviously frightened at the sight of their mother’s distress.

“Keith, I saw something,” Kelly began to speak then stopped herself, not wanting to expose the children to any further shock.

Keith watched his wife closely, for the first time really noticing the deep lines that had formed on her pretty face. His heart broke at the emptiness shadowing her hollow eyes—and he stared at her with the beginning of a knowing look in his own eyes. Keith felt a knife of fear plunge into his chest as he held back tears of frustration—of helplessness—of resignation.

Later that evening, after Keith tucked the children into bed, Kelly told him about her encounter with the dark shadow. “It will all be OK honey,” he reassured. “You’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. We’ll get thru this...we have to. We have to be strong for each other—and for the children. I’m here sweetheart...I’m here for you, forever...”

Kelly felt drained—fighting the depth of sleep that was quickly overtaking her. Before she succumbed, she whispered, “I love you Keith.”

As she lay in bed, Kelly relied upon Keith for strength—allowing herself to lean her entire weight against him for support. She felt the pressure of his arms around her—and it felt similar to the pressure that forced her toward her studio earlier that day. Kelly was sleeping—or was she dreaming when she felt something odd embrace her. It must be Keith,

she thought as she fought for consciousness—yet there was a strong female presence surrounding her—and hard as Kelly struggled, she could not seem to bring herself out of this coma-like state. Her mind was alert but her body lay paralyzed. She had never experienced such fear in her entire life! The pressure of Keith’s arms began to choke the breath out of her. Stop Keith! She wanted to cry out, but her mind reasoned, Keith would not squeeze me so tightly! At that moment, Kelly discovered she had no voice.

And now.....

The screams were growing stronger, beginning to take on a character of their own. They could no longer be controlled by the strength of her husband’s embrace. Kelly is growing weaker and weaker. Even when Keith held her, during one of these *dark* moments, Kelly had to fight harder and harder not to surrender to the screams...not to follow them—to *where* she did not know. But one thing Kelly did know was that although they were frightening, the screams were somehow alluring...and somehow connected to the cemetery. Kelly found it more and more difficult to hold on. The screams were driving her insane. The pressure in her head was growing stronger. She was losing her sense of reality.

The scent of flowers was overwhelming, even sickening. They all gathered around the open grave as clouds began to cross the sun. One by one, they gently dropped flowers into the open grave, each blood red petal of dozens of roses cascading lightly down to rest upon and cover the white casket—which in turn would soon be covered by earth. A light rain began to fall, mixing with tears on the faces of each family member and friend.

Kelly hears the screams grow closer and closer. The sunny day suddenly turns into darkness as storm clouds gather. She can no longer see Keith or the children. Kelly begins to tremble uncontrollably. Her little heart is pounding. Tree lined streets speed by faster than ever. The street lamp glow is overtaken by blinding flashes of lightening and driving rain. Thunder roars as those terrifying screams pound Kelly’s brain; those blood curdling screams rising in torturous crescendo as a soul in agony. The dark shapes of squatting buildings turn blood red, bringing everything to life. Buildings are no longer vacant, but are alive and bustling with people in all phases of movement.

Kelly is floating, unable to resist the crushing grasp that is determined to push her forth. The surroundings come into focus; bricks, red bricks, doors, large white doors with glass panes and brass handles. White marble floors with fingerlike streaks

of mauve reach out to tall, wide windows, flooding light into the interior of many rooms. A multitude of figures move about freely. Doors frantically fly open. Kelly's head is spinning. She enters the building, racing down hallways, fleeing, floating, tossed about, rapidly now, as if battling her way through a gushing waterfall.

Kelly now feels her feet on the floor, scrambling to gain her footing. She is running down the halls, closer and closer to the screams leading her up the stairs, past the second floor balcony...to the third floor—The Third Floor! Kelly pauses at the top stair.

In a split second or the beat of one's heart, Kelly finds herself further down the hallway, approaching, then standing before a set of double doors. A sign on the wall reads THIRD FLOOR LABOR AND DELIVERY. NO ADMITTANCE.

Confused, Kelly pauses at the doorway, then without further thought, bursts into brightly lit room.

And suddenly the screaming stops.....

"Congratulations Elizabeth," the doctor smiles broadly. "You have a beautiful baby girl,"

"She's lovely, Elizabeth," a nurse wraps the baby in a blanket, then carefully lays her upon the softness of Elizabeth's stomach.

Elizabeth is overjoyed, "Kelly," she whispers, gently stroking the baby's forehead, as tears run down her face. "My beautiful little Kelly."

"A perfect name for a perfect little girl," the doctor agrees.

Elizabeth is filled with happiness and expectation for a full and wonderful life.

Celestial music fills the air as clouds part, bearing the bluest of blue skies.

Far below, flowers cover a new grave as a grieving family begins to depart. A line of cars slowly drive away from the cemetery, following the now empty hearse through white iron gates.

Keith, remaining behind, comforts the children.

"I know you miss her," he turns to the Lily as he holds Kevin tightly in his arms. "It will be OK," he consoles. "We'll make it through this. We have to. We have each other—and—you'll see mommy again... I promise. Mommy is with *her* mommy now...so that should make you smile. You know how much she missed your grandma."

A single rose slips lovingly from Keith's fingers. "Oh Kelly," he whispers and the dam of tears begin to flow. "I miss you so....."

They live in a large white colonial home, with freshly mowed lawns that are trimmed meticulously by shrubbery and autumn flowers. Although it has been a stubborn summer, refusing to relinquish its hold upon the suburbs, leaves are beginning to fall and scatter color along the winding driveway.

The home is silent. Sadness fills the air. Keith tucks the children into bed and continues up the stairs to the third floor, to Kelly's studio. "I miss you so much honey," he speaks softly to the room filled with paintings and flowers. Kelly is all around him. Keith feels her presence. Peace replaces the unbearable weight of sorrow.

Keith makes his way downstairs to the family room, to the mantle, where he places a silver framed photo of Kelly so close beside Elizabeth's that the gleaming frames touch fluted edges. Keith cannot resist the urge, and hugs Kelly's photo close to his chest, sobbing softly. Through the stillness of the room, a faint moan breaks the silence.....

While Keith receives Kelly's death certificate, Elizabeth receives the birth certificate of her newborn baby girl, Kelly McGuire.

And the cycle continues—the mind being an entity of its own, at times retaining rituals and memory, joy and sorrow—and fear.

How *do* you know if you are dead or alive?

What is life.....and who has ever reported back from death?

Life is a revolving door

Who's to say if we're on our way in

Or out.....

Victoria Valentine is the publisher of Skyline Literary Community. "I love to write, but I also love publishing... and hope to resume production of Skyline Magazine print - at least one per year ."

Literary House is Victoria's newest venture, publishing outstanding stories and exquisite poems online, with one annual print anthology of stories and poems.

"Skyline has Pushcart Prize publication in mind."

His House

Whirling, swirling black clouds pressing behind his orbs, seeming to pop his eyes out.

Cold, no-feeling, gray, sounds scurrying up and down the tonal range.

Memory of a knife, in his own hand, blood spurting, splatter splatter, drip snail-like down his wall.

Confusion, questions, why am I still here? Noise tattooing, crimson drips turn to shrieks hitting his carpet. His body falling like the millionth tread of the millionth foot in a marching, chanting army.

Time heavy on his wrist, digital watch with seconds frozen cold in rock, as are decades, none moving, even he no longer bleeding.

Floating when he should be on his floor draining, now empty, yet floating like a dream bird tearing loose of gravity's grip only to find himself back in that cold-numbing grasp.

Why am I still here?

Eyes that no longer blink adjust to the dark, see candle flame shadows pirouette and dosey-do. Figures at a table, interlopers in HIS room. Outraged, he rushes them, shouts for them to get out, this is HIS house!

But they continue to sit, eyes shut, holding hands, six men and women at their flimsy table.

"I can feel a presence in the room," one of them says, her eyes flying open and wide, searching every dancing shadow in the room.

"There's definitely something in this room..."

Steve Cartwright

Steve Cartwright has done art for several magazines, newspapers, websites, commercial and governmental clients, books, and tavern napkins. He also creates art pro bono for several animal rescue groups. He was awarded the 2004 James Award for his cover art for Champagne Shivers. He recently illustrated the Cimarron Review cover. Take a gander (or a goose) at his online gallery:

www.angelfire.com/sc2/cartoonsbycartwright

The Attic Monster

Robert Wooten

As I was sitting alone at my desk, silence could be heard throughout the house and, within me, still, thoughts of paradise.

But then the faintest rustling—then, a scratch—and, there, it was, without a doubt, live in the attic, above the second story where we boarded. Or, so went my thinking—this before I discovered, during my own private search for the thing, pentagrams and inverted crosses spray-painted on the walls of the basement, which had a loose door.

I held my breath—till breathlessness expired.

Where did it feed itself? I wondered, finally, as it stayed near the attic. There had been rumors, sightings of a raccoon-like creature, sketches circulated. Other tenants, future engineers or architects—they—said, “This is how it looks,” holding up their drawings for me to see.

Bright people these were, but I never saw it.

We never seemed to see it together.

I listened to it as it scratched its way over the ceilings—but I did not move
unless my thoughts were assigned a topic—
with thoughts of paradise still in my head as
I sat thinking alone in my room.

Grasping around up there it seemed to know that I did not want to know. There it was, then, after the sightings, rumors, reports—and, for us all, I was assigned an interest in my own peace of mind.

Then, I formed the posse that conspired to find it, after it was last seen outside the broken fire escape, which had no ladder.

“It was right here—right there,” they said, pointing at the fire escape landing out the window and offering to draw or sketch it, again.

It always disappeared before we got there.

“You believe we’ve got an animal in the attic—and that no one knows how or what it looks exactly like? —I can’t,” I said. “We wouldn’t be here if I could. You want me to help you get it out?” They were complaining of it each morning, so, then, armed with

a broom, mop handles and one plunger—so as “to flush the rascal out of there”—was the line, the party—the posse that I led before the door closed to all intervention in the status quo.

And the air beyond it was like a closed door painted with impenetrable Flat Black, the womb of this monster about to birth. I can smell its moisture mildewing, still, like death’s still breath.

We hung back till, at last, someone brought a light. Then, I plunged through the darkness with the others close behind me—but several paces—to where we waited for our eyes to adjust, despite poor lighting.

The air seemed light-absorbent, like daylight in a murky creek—offering much to be seen and not enough to see by. It settled to the bottom as our eyes adjusted.

Daylight suffused its space through cracks and crannies in the four walls. While standing on the dock in the middle of the still flat-surfaced attic insulation, we found a real lack of evidence of present life—no hump, no ripples, no sightings for us—we conceded. That it had denized itself in a crawl space between our ceiling and the attic floor. To pull up boarding was more than our tuitions paid.

Retreated, our interest kept its limit: sightings and soundings—before the house was sold.

It was sold to Public Health, I believe.

But who would believe it now? —all that I ever saw, all that I ever saw of it—was a raccoon, blue-struck at dusk, that crossed to my side of the street. There, hidden beneath a car, it paused as I passed on my way to get a cleaner newer place, born on the tide of changing interests, savings and loans; and I was not going back there again for a place of my own.

I earned an MFA in poetry at the University of Alabama (1998) and an MA with a creative writing focus at North Carolina State University (1994). Numerous periodicals have published my poems. A limited edition chapbook of my poems, *Raymond Poems*, was published in 1999.

Cracked Up



Blake Krasner

<http://www.artuproar.com/?profile=mastercylinder>

The Ceremony

Eric Tessier

The trees shivered as the sound of drums shook the night.

Once again, madness was back.

Under a pale moonlight, the forest was waiting for the sacrifice to come. The first rows of trees stood in front of the village like a wall, as if to protect the rest of its body. Bushes were erected like hairs on an arm. Venomous flowers were staggering back and forth, wild, aggressive, ready to spit their poison in the eyes of who might attack them.

Animals too were terrified. They always are when encountering true cruelty – i.e. man's cruelty. For it is essentially gratuitous. A notion that would never cross a beast's mind.

Weird chants tore the darkness, fireworks of raw sounds that grazed the night. A cool drizzle began to rain over the meadow adjacent to the Martins' farm. Teardrops of blood covered the grass slowly and changed its color. Green turned into red. Enormous heavy clouds rolled low in the sky, darker than the nocturnal light. Now and then, claps of thunder broke the silence in fits and starts.

Indifferent, twenty men, twenty penitents were walking. Crosses and torches held high in hands, they were slowly crossing the meadow. From their throats came what sounded like a religious hymn, a distorted hymn, fascinating and revolting at the same time, some sort of disturbing psalm composed by a twisted mind.

They were wearing shabby black cassocks, faces hidden behind inquisition-like hoods. In those sinister figures' pupils shone the gleam of fanaticism, the spark of the beast deep rooted in each human being's heart since the dawn of mankind.

The flames of the torches crackled in the night, long and thin, as if trying to bite the sky. The air smelled of burned wood and brimstone. In the middle of the group, a young girl was staggering under the weight of a huge cross resting on her right shoulder. The bottom of the cross scraped the ground, sometimes

jumped between the poor bloody hands, desperately clenched on its wood when hitting a stone or a clod of wet earth.

The maiden was dressed miserably. A deep gash was cutting her skull and blood was clotting on her forehead, trickling down her face. Traces of flagellation striped the back of her blouse, unveiling small portions of purplish-blue skin and throbbing bruises.

Suddenly mute, the men stopped, stood in a perfect circle, girl and cross standing in the middle of it. The time had come.

A man in a velvet outfit entered the circle, followed by two guards, each carrying a whip whose lashes were hissing like reptiles in the air.

The velvet-clad man, the Grandmaster, stretched his arms high above his head and screamed. Everyone went quiet, eager but impressed by the solemnity of the moment. Now the silence was more oppressive than the rhythmic breath of the mob. Each penitent focused on the Grandmaster's figure. In their eyes shone both lamb's submission and wolf's cruelty, and, above all, the implacability of the dogma. The Grandmaster stared at them, searching their souls, mentally breaking their inner defenses with all the strength of his will.

They needed to know who was commanding. They needed to rely on him, for he was their shepherd, the one who may absolve or condemn each thought, each action committed. Not only was he their temporal leader, he was also their spiritual guide. And they needed to be assured of that, as often as possible. Only this way was the Grandmaster able to unload them of the heavy weight of their moral responsibility. And the more innocent they felt, the more certain to be right they were, the more obedient and the more implacable.

The Grandmaster smiled under his hood. A hot flash swept through his head, a wave of contentment – if the others were killers, he was the only predator

here, the true one. A real vulture who loved corpses, putrefying flesh and the taste of soft muscles melted with fresh earth cracking under his teeth. Under the cassock, he shivered. Desire caught him, brutal, imperative. He pressed his hands against his belly, trying not to groan and to regain his self-control.

Back to the ceremony!

He and the girl locked eyes. She looked confused, unable to resist the drugs she'd been forced to gulp down. He knew how it felt to be on dope, and he knew the strength of the drugs that ran through her veins. He knew the rough grip of racing heartbeats, the painful boiling of a panicked pulse, the terrifying sensation of dizziness. And he knew the impossibility to concentrate.

The girl moved her lips spasmodically. Was she trying to speak? Impossible to say, but the Grandmaster read them, for his victims always reacted likewise. When facing death, human beings tended to beg and words came like foam over a raging sea. Always the same: "Have mercy".

Mercy! The Grandmaster often wondered why women never realized that imploring his mercy increased their tormentor's lust. A weeping victim plays an important role in the pleasure expected from that kind of perverse game.

He smiled again, nodded. The guards took the girl, knocked her over on the cross. She lay there, motionless, eyes wide open, filled with terror. They grabbed her arms. She let them, muscles feeble, chewy. "Open your hands". She opened her hands. "Better than that." She obeyed, feeling a strange sensation of docility.

"Stop trembling."

She failed to control her body.

"Stop trembling, I said."

But fear was stronger than her will. She kept trembling.

"Please don't... don't hurt me."

Nobody seemed to hear her plea. Was she really speaking or was it just thoughts in her head? She couldn't reply. Words were on the loose and, as soon as they were formed, they were fading away in the whirlpool that was now her mind. She was sinking into a big black hole, encountering the frozen depths of an unknown galaxy.

Perhaps her inner being.

Or another world in another dimension.

Or even worse, a chilling hell she was giving birth to. As if she was responsible for what was happening.

The nails entered her palms, tore the skin, perforated the cartilage before hitting the wood. Another stroke on the hammer and they were planted deeply into the cross.

The girl's body recoiled, stung by pain. The bones of her arms were like two white-hot iron bars piercing her torso. A knot of suffering settled in her throat, was strangling her. But it was not over. While they were at it, the two men nailed her feet – and there she was, CRUCIFIED!

The penitents shuddered with excitement. They were high on drug too. Avidly, a few hours ago, they'd swallowed the pills the Grandmaster had distributed. No one knew what it was, but since they took them daily, they were addicted. And happy to be.

Unlike his flock, the Grandmaster was perfectly straight. No drugs, no alcohol. Nothing but a vision of Divinity, and the certainty of a mission.

He kneeled, began to recite a prayer, words in broken Latin, melted with incantations and obscenities nobody understood. The prayer was just an illusion, a way to give more solemnity to the ceremony.

Then, very slowly, the Grandmaster stood up, glared at his victim, whose nerves were jerking under her skin, while her tortured limbs were paralyzed. He loved that. Each crucifixion was an accomplishment, and if this accomplishment was considered by the unfaithful as hell on earth, he didn't care. In his mind, people didn't exist as individuals. He saw them as a sculptor would do; they were a big block of granite he had to shape until they all became a true reflection of God. But of course, sculpting supposed eliminating the superfluous. For a moment, he stayed there, still and thoughtful, head now facing the sky. And for a minute, he felt at peace with the cosmos. But a clap of thunder got him back to reality. He jumped, gulped with difficulty a mouthful of sour saliva, grimaced. Cleared his throat.

"Raise the cross," he cried eventually.

The guards fixed the cross in the soil with ropes. At first, it swayed, threatening to fall. The girl shrieked.

"Don't move," rumbled the guards.

But she was too frightened to listen.

"You're going to crash, stop it!"

And suddenly the cross stabilized and the Grandmaster beamed with joy.

"God accepts the sacrifice!" He yelled.

The penitents exulted, and while their shouting echoed in the air, a blood storm swept the meadow abruptly. The Divinity was on their side! Drenched, they began to dance wildly, mouths wide open to catch the blood drops. The boys beat the drums harder, faster, and all became hysterical.

"God bless the Virgin Queen!"

In a desperate start, the girl turned her face up to the sky, breathed in, breathed out rapidly, as if inhaling enough air for the next motion. And then a scream, an abominable scream coming straight from the guts struck the night: "Father, why did you abandon me?"

The Grandmaster crossed himself the way the Lord taught him: first the right shoulder, then the left, then the belly button and then, at last, the forehead.

"Long live the Church of the Virgin Queen!" he triumphed.

The girl shriveled up on the cross, her skull almost disappearing between her stretched arms. Of her only remained two bulging eyes wandering into the nightmarish nothingness of insanity.

The sound of the drums receded, slowed down, connected to the weak pulsation in her arteries, nearly stopped.

Stopped.

Definitely.

In the heart of the forest, a wolf worked his way through the thicket of brush.

Eric Tessier resides in Les Lilas, near Paris, France. He writes in both French and English. He is the published author of 5 books in French, and co author of several picture books. His stories, reviews and essays are published in many literary magazines in France, Belgium, India and in the USA. His literary review La Nef Des Fous has become a publishing house in 2005. He currently works at the French social security as a legal expert.



Darryl Taylor

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Dark Embrace

Victoria Valentine

Sleeping soundly
Bolted door
In blackened room
A rustling,
Then shudder at
My side
Tug of the sheets
Stripping me in
Darkness glow
Mounting me
It bore down upon my
Bareness
Embracing my
Skin with fiery demand
Holding my body tightly
I ate its hunger, its savagery
Startled I awakened
Midst of reality or
Dream
An ecstasy of fearful
Arousal

Dark embrace
Silently I pleaded for more
As awareness crept about inside
My mind
It left me
With comfort and promise
Benevolent phantom
I believe it exists
Now
Inside my head or
My space
My caretaker

Be it dream, night terror or visitation--truth be told...



Darryl Taylor

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