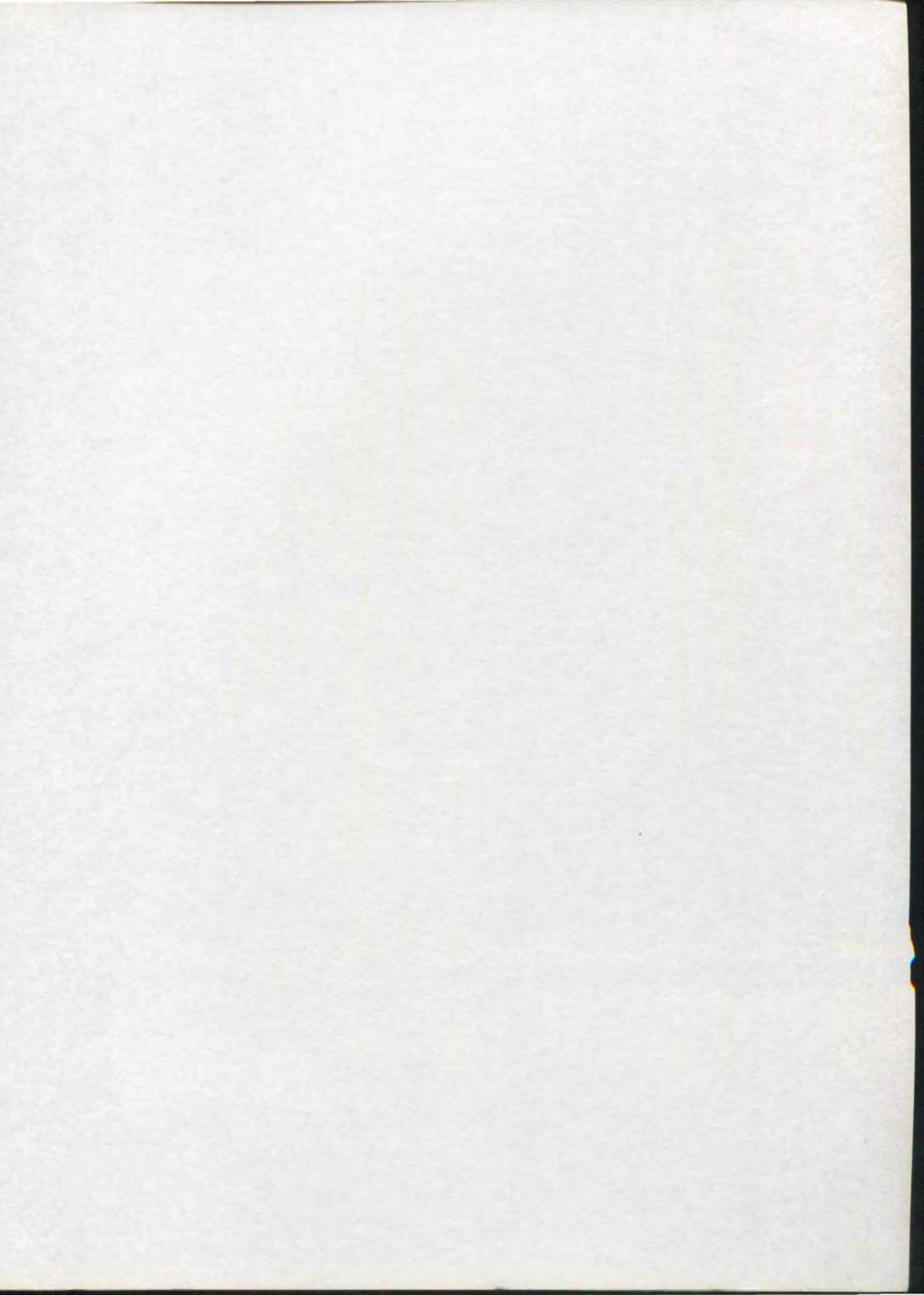


Pecan Grove Review

XII



Kalpana M. Iyengar
2011

Pecan Grove Review

St. Mary's University
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Volume XII
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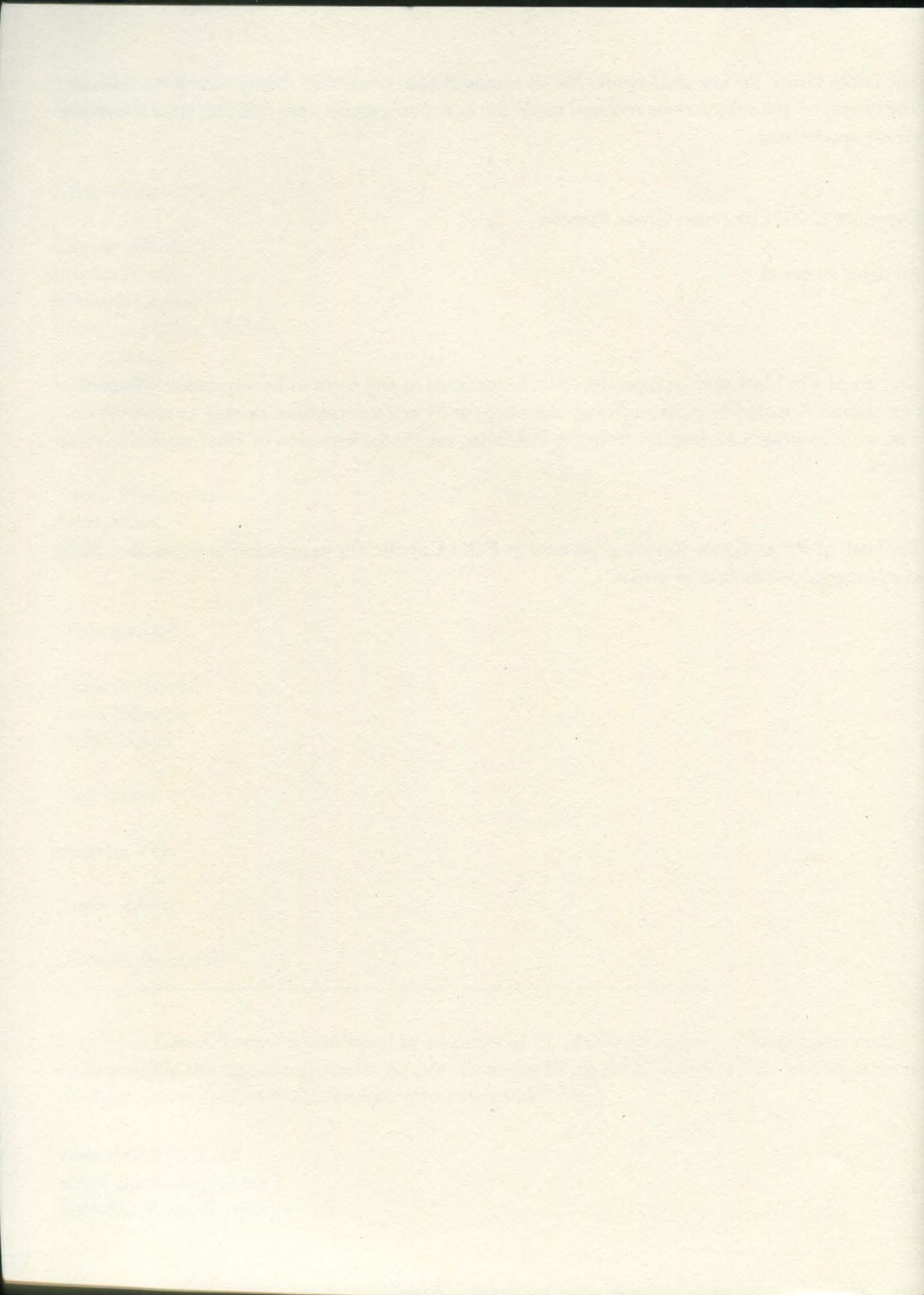
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St. Mary's University
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Dedication

The Pecan Grove Review Staff
dedicates this volume to
Sister Ann Semel.
Thank you and best wishes.

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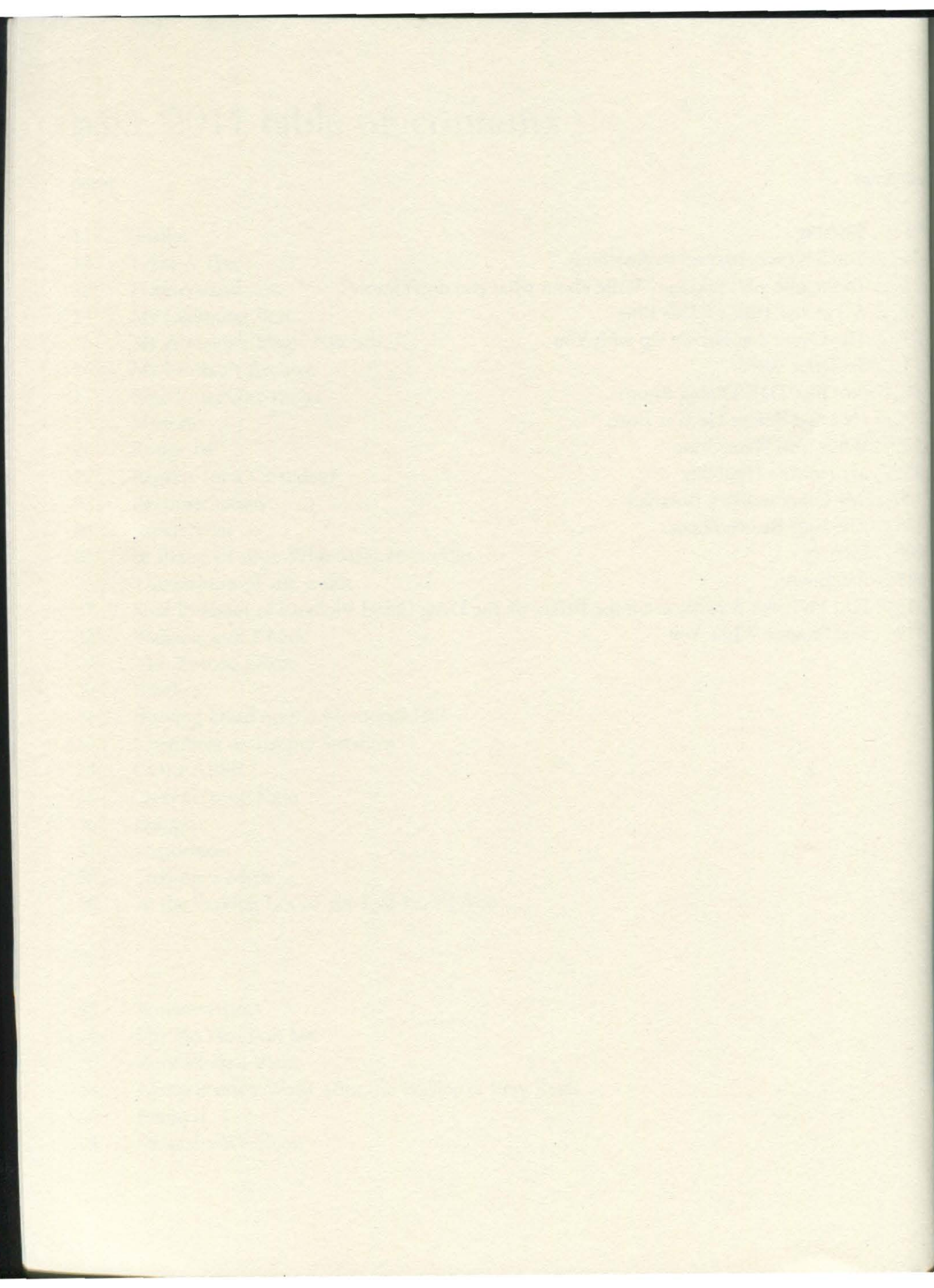
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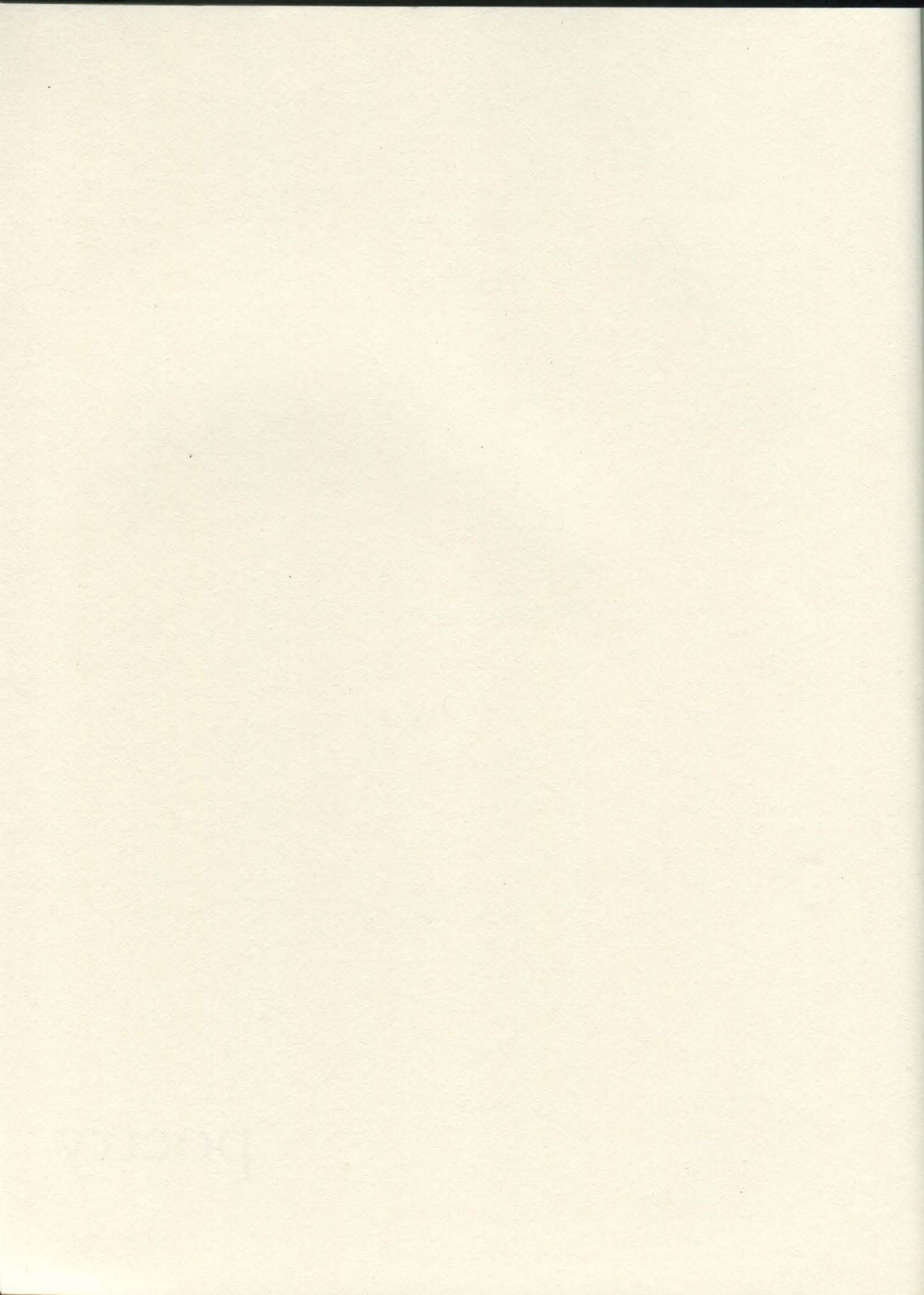
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poetry



Haiku

by Amanda Soto

I.

inspiration strikes
like lightning on a dead tree
a brilliant blaze

II.

gliding smoothly
across the blank page
snap (goes the lead)
my pencil's dead

I Am A Tree

by Davilin Hamel

Ink blue veins stretch across my skin like branches. I can feel them reaching through me and breaking free. Leaves pool out and fill the air in a blizzard of this Indian summer. I can't see farther than the bits of light piercing through the stretched canvas of the sky. But oh, I can feel. I can feel my roots sinking down into the loam and compost of my mind and fitting into little boxes of skin and bone. The brown-barked towers of my body protest against the winds but I know, unless I learn to stand on my own I will fall.

And I wonder, will it even make a sound?

I understand now. . .

by *Luis Cortez*

You stand there,
tackle box in hand.
We drove so long.

Half a day to get here
through morning traffic
on a clear Saturday,
why we didn't think
anyone else would
do this who knows,
with a flat tire
on our bumper
to mark the trials
of our journey.

Your hands are swollen.
What do I know
of tire irons and car jacks?
You said, "We got it all."
and I said, "We got it all."
I was agreeing not confirming.
So when you asked,
after we paid five bucks
for a no-in-and-out pass,
"Where are the worms?"
and I reply, "What worms?"
I understand now.

My Lightning Bolt

by *Lauren Martinez*

Your energy strikes me.
Your strength sizzles through the air.
Heat courses through the objects you touch.
You are my lightning bolt.

Your fingers fan out like tree limbs.
The electricity I feel travels through my veins.
Your concentrated energy paralyzes me.
You are my lightning bolt.

You provide light to my night sky
And, yet, fear to my heart.
Please my lightning bolt,
don't shock me.

My Abuelita's Magic Kitchen

by *Carla Rodriguez*

A space meant for five
Is filled with forty
Once inside
there are no more
"Don't touch that"
Only whispers of
"Te gusto, quieres mas?"

A refrigerator big
enough for twenty magnets
Is crammed with a million
An antique washer
and dryer from the 60's
Magically are still working

Laughing, snorting, chuckling, sounds
fill the air and ease the soul
My *Abuelita's* food
is often imitated
Never duplicated
Only in her magical kitchen
does her *Sopa de Fideo*
Taste like a fiesta on my tongue
y un abrazo al corazón

My Mother's Archive

by Liana Morales

Under a small brass crucifix,
A shadowbox hangs on a little nail.

Tarnished powder compact inside
Decorated with golden peacocks,
The beige powder is still in it
Like a loved one in a locket.

The box is lined with a white kerchief,
Tiny pink embroidered flowers
With initials.

There is a charm tied with a ribbon,
Older than the woman
It belonged to. Tenderly pinned by
My mother's hand.

A photograph of Maria de Jesus, great-grandmother,
Affixed inside. She will never age now
But she will also never smile
Surrounded by her little things in this box.

Perpetually turning above her picture,
Pages from a birth and death log
Of family members
Only she would ever have remembered.

One Vote, One Bullet

by *Cyra S. Dumitru*

A man needs to become his own Yes.
As I look across this land
I see things trying to rise:
young trees, the dreams of our women,
homes where water flows through walls
into our hands. Where we bathe
our children in such clean water.

This is what the horizon shows me at first light.

Despite those men with wrapped faces
who come from Pakistan, despite
their trucks and guns, despite
the blowing up of schools where
daughters lean over lessons.

And so I will walk to the voting station.
I will walk slowly asking Yes to fill my heart,
crowd out fear. If the bullet comes,
let my Yes soak the ground,
become the root of a new tree.

Misterio

by Angela Santana

My grandfather's yellowed school photo sits
on my dresser.

It is the headshot
of a missing person.

He was in middle or high school,
confused, sad, tired eyes
on smooth, brown skin
in a white, collared shirt.

I look in the mirror sometimes
to see the resemblance,
but I can't.
I don't look very much like
this mysterious Mexican boy.

Sometimes I wonder where he went.
Was he scared of raising children?
Did he think grandma could do
a better job alone?

Sometimes I wonder where he is.
Is some browner kid than me
in Mexico or Texas or California
calling him, "Abuelo"?

Sometimes I wonder.
Sometimes—
but not much.

It's mysterious how
I keep his picture there,
how I won't get rid of it.

It's like I want to remember
that I don't know
who he is
or where he is
or why he left.

He doesn't even know I exist
and that I keep his school picture
on my dresser, looking
in his eyes and trying to
understand him.

Rouge BF

by Desiree A. Espinoza

We met once noooooconnection
too polite like old people now

calls @ 1AM 3am 5am 6am...Parents grumbling—
Texting:

Hi Precious
Old school love term—I think?

Be good to your parents
Do your homework
Go to church
Be Conservative
see you soon—Promise
I love you...wait for me

thumbing him back WU@...TTYL

Calling:

Hi how are you...Precious
seriously dude... emmmmbarrassing

Graduate first precious then
How about adopting I'll
take care of you forever
Be there 2 weeks
7 days
3 days
Then came...Christmas Birthday Valentines—LIAR!!!

In Box: R.BF *click* opening lie

Hi Precious
Sorry been working
No time for us
International contract
Secures retirement

click Reply

Message Sent.

Regrets for a C Student

by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

I read

College student murdered by his neighbor

and saw a name
from an English roster
two semesters ago.

His was a brief line,
an unclaimed
English portfolio
in the box
beside my desk.

Reconstruction

by Davilin Hamil

Reconstruction

My hair is standing on end
And my flesh is breaking down
But I don't want to bear it
So I break my legs
And crack my ribs
I won't give any chances
That my muscles
May have the strength.

The truth burns my eyes
And there is acid on my tongue
But I don't want to hear it
So I'll box my own ears
Let the tiny bones shiver
And I can forget
I heard anything at all.

I am raking my lungs
As wait for the collapse
But I don't want to feel it
So I freeze the muscles
Let the lactic acid build
And I can pretend
I forgot how to breathe.

My brain is in my feet
And my toes are growing wisdom
But I don't want to understand
So I reach my hands into my mouth
Ripping out the throat
One would think there are better ways
To get things done
Than tearing myself apart.

Satisfaction

by Caroline Hartmann

Shriveled hands and tight white curls
wait to be approached.

The aged lady behind the counter asks "What would you like?"

"A hamburger please

with Swiss cheese"

She slaps the Swiss on the burger,
like she is angry at it.

"With mustard and mayo"

both hands holding tubes,
Squeezing out unorganized swirls
onto one side of the wheat bun.

"Lettuce please"

She digs her hand in a bin,
Then lets the lettuce fall
All over the mustard and mayo-drenched bun

"Tomatoes"

One puny discolored sliced tomato
is put on top of the Swiss.

"Can I have a little more please?"

Looking at me puzzled...

She grabs a mountain of tomatoes
and drops them on the burger.

"That's all," I say smiling,

trying to hide my reaction to what I deem as unnecessary.

She engulfs one heaping bun in her hand,
plopping both sides together,

as ingredients run out the sides escaping

the poor and sloppy effort

to make me, the customer, satisfied.

I take my hamburger and walk away, bothered.

In Praise of Men Who Make Sidewalks

by *Cyra S. Dumitru*

All summer long
men from another part of town
make sidewalks in our neighborhood.

Through record-breaking heat
and drought so severe
that lawns of bleached grass
look like ragged beaches,
the men bend.

All day long they bend in open sun,
wearing helmets and heavy shoes,
long dusty sleeves.

In heavy sun,
they cut through parched ground,
shatter caliche, carve narrow lanes
that ride the edge of our streets,
layer gravel and sheets of metal mesh,
pour sluggish river into place,
scrape the wet surface level,
let it harden into miles of sidewalk.

In pools of tree shade, they stand
with bright cups of water and see
the long smooth way they've made.

When school begins, as autumn cools,
our children shoulder backpacks
and secrets, journey home
along paths lifted by
steady bending.

The fashion of my youth

by *Laura Cano*

I loved breaking in a new charge card,
I loved buying new blouses, dresses, slacks, and jewelry,
I loved anticipating a fun birthday celebration.

I had three jobs,
I ate once a day,
I slept for three hours.

I never worried about aging,
I didn't think about sun burning my face and skin,
I stayed up late and woke up early for work.

I am older now,
I have to wear sunscreen,
I have to moisturize before bed.

I have one job,
I have to eat three times a day,
I need more than three hours of sleep.

I do not have any charge cards,
I cannot buy new blouses, dresses, slacks, and jewelry,
I don't want to think about another birthday.

Soul Post

by Annette R. Aguirre

Learning to praise by the masters before us
Like angels offering song to the heavens above
Feeling the music, closing my eyes
Expressing all the emotions I hold inside
Strumming streams singing my soul
Fiddle and flute harmonizing notes unknown
Heavenly beats holding our hearts
Becoming one triangular union of sound

Walking with Chuck

by Amanda Magaña

A little ripped in the front and back
The once rough lining,
A large smooth patch.
A red that faded long ago
Resemble characteristics of an old soul.
An old soul that has ran into troubles.

The strings that tie
Have long lost their white
To a dingy, already gray,
Yet comfortable sight.

And in these shoes, I walked alone,
With my brother home
When we had no phones,
Along the west coast
Where I ripped the sole.

They witnessed neglect,
Witnessed pain, witnessed tears,
When no one else stayed near.

And these shoes,
They hear my pleas,
They portray hard work
They show a job well done.

And through a sea of water,
A guide to the safe side,
A hug and a laugh,
They take me back.

The Waiting Game

by Cecilia Jimenez

You defy me again, and
 again another cast aside.
You don't know about the snake
writhing in your ear, or that damn arrogance
siring your stoic face. Still
I cannot stay bitter
when those eyes,
 that focus which pounds and drubs my blood
with every deliberate step
swallows my sense, civility.
If it ever existed.

Time snuffs and stubs out all
under Nature's fingertips;
They scheme against us.
but Eternity himself
could not beat, break,
breach the weight
in your heavy consideration
which hurts, but still I want it,
a lapping flame consuming
 dead, cracked leaves;
myself waiting beside this careless Sun and
casual Moon, animal calm,
until the moment comes
when your thoughtful rain
quenches this
dry earth

Brother

by Cecilia Jimenez

You were brought home laden,
doused with pills, a quivering sack of
heavy frailty and pale skin,
light limbed, and, in all,
a parting gift from the doctors who
cut, pulled, opened, sawed, and sewed
your cavity good and well enough
for all the nurses to know who
you, your family, and your sister were by sight.

It was not my place, but I felt
what a mother must feel,
one of her fledglings having
fought with Circumstance and
come out smelling like pain and tender flesh and antiseptic.

We were in 6th grade, colt's years, but I knew
I wouldn't hesitate to crush any life threatening yours
the day you went back to school in your oversized
t-shirt, your best friend carrying your backpack.

I would crunch windpipes,
snap bones, if I had to.

Even now those same inclinations
rise in my own chest, years later, when I see
a pang of doubt or a noose of sorrow
hover over your face. It is the same
self-destructive tender rage
flaring up thousands of miles away,
in the heart and breast of an animal for its cubs,
in the furious hands of a musician,
in the tea, blanket, and silent presence
I will never let you go without.

Burying Dead on the Memorial Hill

by Andrew Fletcher

In burying this man
we brought, through forests
grown from fear and doubt,
we sought to raise our spirits
by telling the sweetest stories
We could think of.

The uninitiated sat and heard
of statutes written long before,
Placing their feelings in trust of hearts
acquainted with the belief that
man's truth can tell no secrets.

Our boasts,
half-inclined to dismiss Fate,
Of this man we brought up the hill
following forbidden paths,
Told of a man known for ever
seeking better fortunes, climbing
heights to mark the distant future.

Beneath trees wrought
in fantastic forms,
I leaf through pages
of my father's book—

Of ceaseless toil,
naked understanding,
and hurts concealed behind
stiff curtains of grace.
We place the body
near some fallen trees,
and even now, I am afraid
of touching it.

Chambers of Empty Solution

by Nancy Realyvasquez

Click, Click, Boom.
Just kidding.
Russian Roulette,
Way too easy, too merciful.

The political cycle of wrong turns.
It turns still, this time
filling every Chamber.

Revolving, to kill the man that killed.
to Kill the man the Killed.
Lady Justice covers her eyes
to avoid the Truth, an avenging murder.

It's cheaper to kill them,
they all argue, the value of money
Lies above
the life of mankind.

Lethal, merciless, roulette drips
through the steel cold needles
calling the man at the gate.

grim reaper yells
Dead Man Walking
while an audience

eating tears of popcorn
dressed in numb black suits
taste the kernels of Inhumanity.

last breaths are Stolen, squeezed out,
as the iron lung pumps backwards
crippling the heart of Forgiveness.

American Roulette claims death, a just measure,
Rewind-Play,
American Roulette claims death, a Just measure?
while the whole world's a Stage, the Players
blast poison into veins of fake choices.

Choose your poison,
It's a free country.
Gas
Electrocution
Firing Squad, or perhaps
A Lethal injection to go with that Popcorn?

Oh, why the bother of
Forged humanity to
sterilize the needle of Hate.

COLLAPSE

by Glenn Hughes

Last night I tore
the full moon out of the sky.
I knelt on the shore of the blackened river.
Below me, trolls in whom no one believes
were tramping,
and above me, from tree to tree,
swooped owls with small sharp beaks.

How can I
eat this food on my table?
As I look it crumbles to dust.
And the daylight, pale and thin,
seeps through the windows
like an ancient poison.

Dear Granny Kate

by Holly Yates

I now remember summers in the Smokey Mountains, staying in your Victorian style home filled with cigarette smoke and loud gusts of laughter. I remember playing with porcelain dolls, cuddling ugly stuffed cats and peering at old grainy photographs of all your children, some of whom you had outlived. You often took time to tell stories: the struggles of raising a family alone during the depression, or about how my daddy was a mischievous rascal. I remember, Granny Kate, how your large strong legs had brightly colored varicose veins, mottled striations of blue, green and red. I remember watching those legs move up and down a sloping garden wet with dew, your broad shoulders bent over, face shaded by a wide-brimmed hat as you tended your small paradise. You displayed, to my childish delight, hollowed gourds for bird nests and pantries full of canned goods, home grown green beans, okra and beets. I especially remember home-cooked dinners of wilted spinach, sliced ham and potato salad, my dad repeating that there was nothing like you're cooking. I remember many nights of staying up late with you, playing cards and watching TV while snuggling under your handmade quilts. I also remember tap water that smelled of rotten eggs and having to take baths in your claw foot tub, because you didn't have a shower. One year, I begged my dad to drive us home early, so I wouldn't miss my friend's birthday party at the beach. Yet, on a different trip home from Tennessee, I remember watching the musical harlequin you gave me as a parting gift and sobbing because I didn't want to leave. I remember the long distance phone calls, reverberating cackles of joy and your twang through the line. I remember that you grew older and I grew selfish in my womanhood, never making time for you or your sickness. Granny Kate, what I don't remember is saying goodbye. I don't remember telling you that I care. I don't remember saying that I love you. I do remember last Wednesday when you died, and how once more I cried as startling grief settled over me, a hot heavy blanket.

Design

by Derek Moore

Jose grew tired of being fired, hunting
employment days without end: Working
on a job, serving, becoming only what he saw
in his environment. So, he fancied himself a god.

His imagination grew in stature,
in power; and with it he wrote edicts on paper,
and the heavens. He waved his hand over the sun,

then over the planets - they turned
to dust. He turned his face against
Quetzalcoatl, and other significant dominions,

he appointed priests to anoint kings,
settled scores. Bruised the heels
of deities, countries - some stronger, more fiery.

He lost favor with the chiefs, locals -
they grew tired, hungry, unbelieving.
He imagined himself one of

the gods of Egypt. Judged.
Thrown out into the Sahara,
or driven from Toltec

into the waters, searching
for another nation; another altar
plotting return under a different name,

a new northern star.

Exposition

by *Emily Scruggs*

I had no answer when asked who I was—
this recognition urged my attempt to define.
I say thank you and I say please; I say sorry and I say excuse me (Probably too often).
I will lie to make you feel better, but making you feel better doesn't necessitate a lie.
Of what consequence are my actions, are any deeds sublime?

I smile at strangers, but not for more than a second.
I greet friends by name.
I make no apologies for my scribbled print
because I care more about the words I write
and what they say.

I could be anyone from this description:
draw inward and fit a mold,
squeeze in between uniqueness and originality.
(“Be a straight exclamation point,
not a slouching question mark,” I’ve been told.)

Maybe I’m just a kid whose sand castle thoughts
waves collapse over on the shore
to cull away the grains of value,
demolishing and remodeling the refuge.
Meanwhile, I don’t move. (I don’t like the beach anymore.)
I am organic property of the earth,
trying to quarry the honesty of existence
by forfeiting human action and analysis, reverting to subsistence.
Does this make a difference?
With shifting plates below me, I spin on the planet’s axis.

Driving is Myth

by Derek Moore

Streets seem almost desolate,
the road an everlasting trail.
Close to night time he traverses the black
hardened tar as planes traverse sky.
Both sun and moon share the same sign
called Horus's eyes
He sails between the two
challenging Corvette and Suburban
successfully he passes.
Then one with eighteen wheels threatens,
bellows, rattles with
no trailer on back, just elongated carriage -
like a dragon
its body the tail
and with too much weight
he falls
back
further
behind.
More road reveals itself
again, desolate -
dark as the coming night.
Orange detour flags light up skies
down the way only a few miles.
He feels his glory
cut short:

ROAD CLOSED. TAKE EXIT TO THE RIGHT.

He signals, to the right, slows down
a thousand cars precede him begging exit
minutes pass by like days pass by
Set pokes out the eye,
the sun falls beneath the hori-
zon; and in the left lane,
the dragon passes
the drowning sunset.

The driver
left,
stuck
behind
wheels that don't turn
cars ahead, much less
the universe.

As he turns the music off, his heart cries,
Fortune Help us
and beyond the barrage of lights
sitting on fronts,
backs of cars
lies now an abyss of black –
he thinks himself chained to the
wheel.

Bad Fortune.

In the Parking Lot of the Fed-Ex Kinkos

by *Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill*

While
waiting in the van,
Baby asleep,
A woman
Grabs my attention.
“Do you have some change for the bus?”
Yes, I do.
“Trying to get a job, second interview in the morning,
but I need to get home from here.”

Husband of ten years
left a note on the bed,
says he has another relationship.
Had the lights cut off, yesterday.

“Went to my church to ask for help.
No – we can’t – the bills aren’t in your name,”
They say.

“You know how it is.
A friend asks me how I could be out.
Why am I not devastated?
Well, he had the last ten years ...
But that doesn’t mean he gets the next ten ...
The man upstairs will help me.”

I raid the change compartment
in my Plain Jane van
which suddenly seems quite luxurious
as I sit with the AC on, lullabies playing.

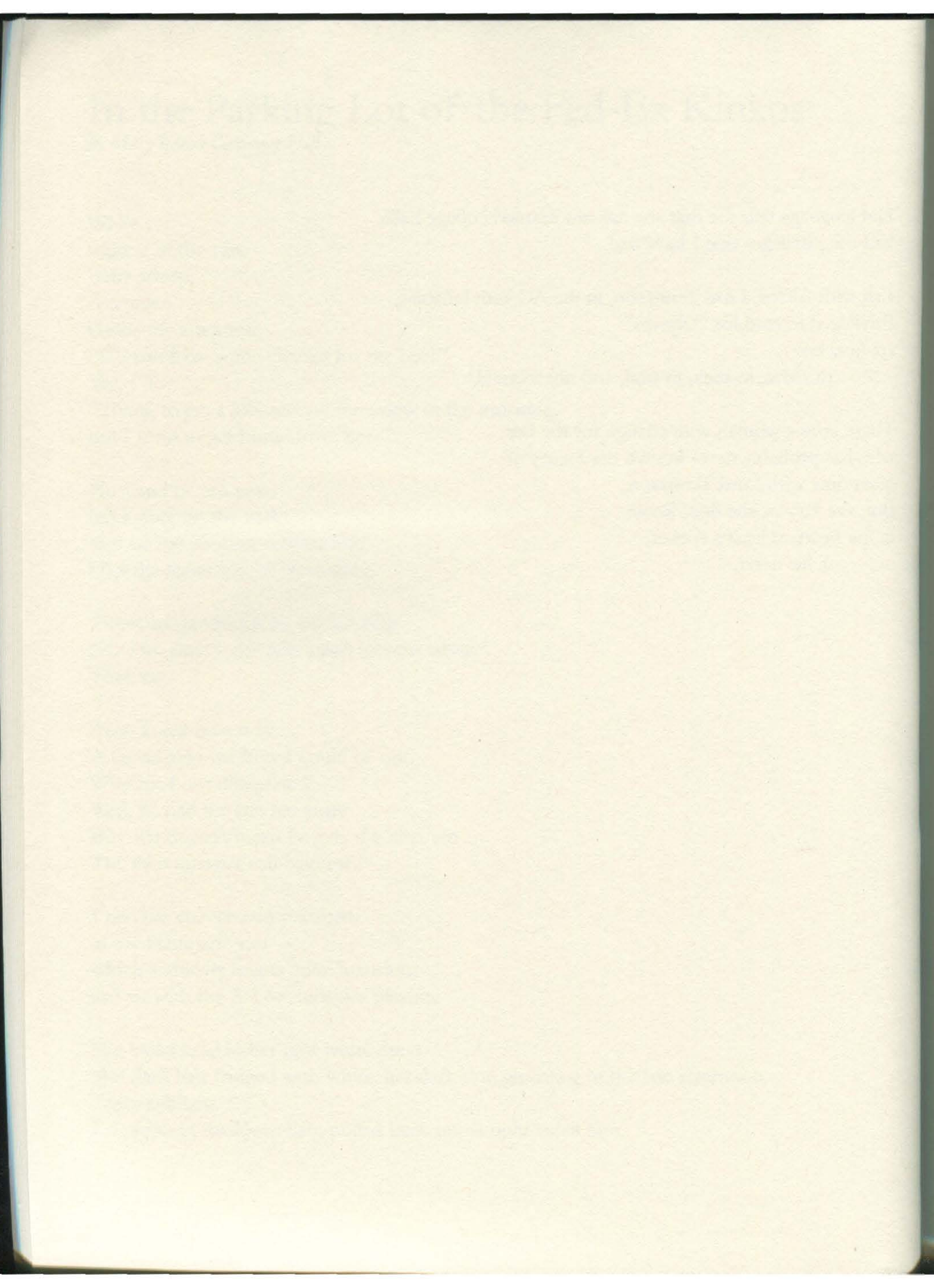
She looks tired in her nice white dress.
Her dark hair fringed with white, her dark skin gleaming in the late afternoon
Texas sunlight.
She tucks in the loose hair, pulled back into a tight small bun.

Her language tells me that she has not roamed college halls,
had the privileges that I have had.

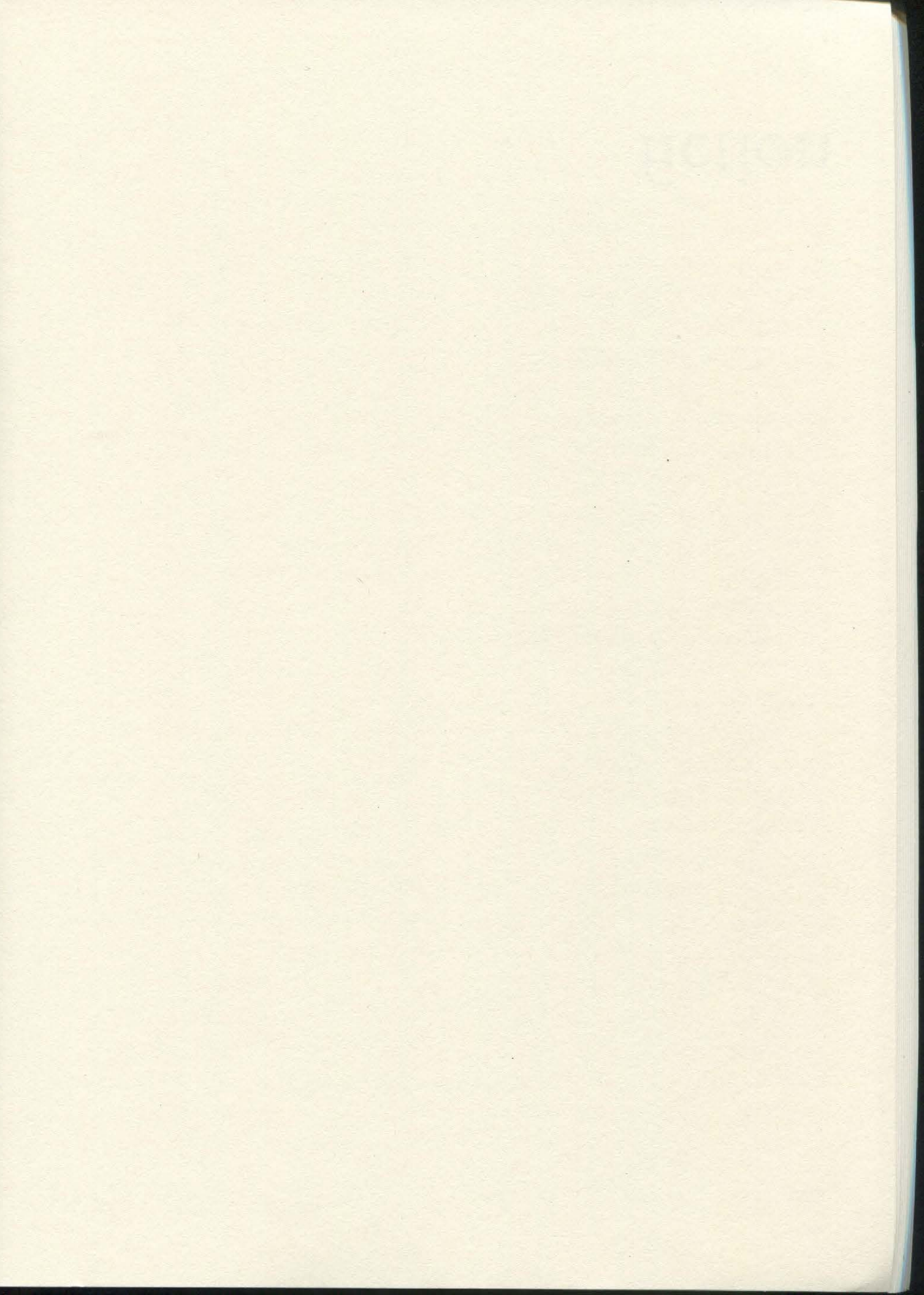
I sit with Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in the AC with lullabies,
Privileged to read his "Ulysses"
Its final line ...

 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'

There goes a woman with change for the bus,
who has probably never known the luxury of
quiet time with Lord Tennyson,
But, she knows, she does know,
in her heart, at least a corner,
 of his heart.



fiction



Forever Knot

by Melanie Moreno

So there I was, man, standing on the side of her house, hiding like a burglar, waiting for her mother to leave so I could spend the day snuggled on the couch with my girl. We planned out and practiced that hookie day over the phone a million times the night before. For sure our plan was flawless. She would play sick and stay home and since she was such a good girl her mom would never doubt her story. Then our friend Andrew (he wasn't that good of a friend I guess, but hey, he was the only one with a car) would give me a ride to her house before the bell rang for first period.

I tell ya, man it was working out beautifully. I hopped in his car, still wearing my backpack, and told myself I was just goin' on a little field trip. Yea, that's right a field trip to my girl's house where we would spend the day pretending to study. I don't know why, but that's the story I told Andrew too and if I didn't tell him outright that he wasn't invited I think he would have wanted to join my field trip too.

The plan flowed by the minute. He would drop me off in the front of her house at 8:24. By that time her mother would be blow-drying her hair so she wouldn't even hear his truck in the drive. My girl said for me to run to the right side of the house and stand underneath the window air conditioning unit 'cause that spot is behind a corner and it would hide me from being seen from the street.

The only thing we worried about was her dog barking at me, but we fixed that right up. She gave me a bag of cookies (chocolate chip 'cause that was her dog's favorite) at school the day before and she was sure they would shut that dog right up and sure enough they worked!

Anyway, so there I was, man, standing on the side of my girls house underneath that leaky old air conditioner with my backpack still on my back, a bag of cookies in my hand and that damn dog just sitting there waggin' his tail like those cookies made him the happiest dog in the world. I was almost jealous of him. My heart was about to pound itself out of my chest and my stomach was knotting up like never before. I woulda been fine but what my girl didn't tell me was that I would be standing right outside of her mother's bathroom window! I could hear her whole phone conversation. I think she was talkin' to her sister or something 'cause I swear she went on and on about a whole bunch of nothing.

My watch was becoming my worst enemy, man. The more times I looked at it, the more my stomach hurt. Was I ever gonna make it inside of that house? All I wanted in the world was to snuggle with my girl and kiss her on the cheek every chance I got. You see, that day was gonna be our first time alone in her house and, man, were we excited. I don't even know who thought of the idea first but I knew she was waiting for me inside with the same knotted stomach and pounding heart.

Twenty-two minutes I had been waiting under the air conditioner I could hear her mother's phone conversation finally coming to an end. I looked up from petting that smelly dog (which I had to resort to after he munched all those cookies) and saw an old lady next door staring at me. I froze. I tried to give a friendly wave but was so panicked that I don't even remember if I raised my hand. I'm dead. She started walking to the front of her house and next thing I knew she was on the sidewalk about to walk up my girl's drive. Man, I thought I was for sure I was busted. I didn't get to see what she did after that but later on my girl told me that she rang the doorbell and my girl told her that I was her friend and shut the door in her face. My girl felt super guilty about that since she knew that old lady really was a nice person and she was only looking out for her but hey, my girl had to do what she had to do to save both our butts.

Finally, I heard her mother's car crank up and drive away. My girl ran to the side of the house and gave me a big kiss on my lips and grabbed my hand and we ran inside. It was my turn to be the happy dog! We didn't even know where to start. Should we kick off our shoes and make friends with the couch or should she give me a tour of her bedroom? I swear, man, we were a bunch of giddy kids, me and her.

She said, "Let's eat breakfast."

So that's what we did.

She made us some scrambled eggs and toast and we ate at the kitchen table like we were the happiest little married couple to have ever been in love.

Finally, we made our way to the living room and the couch that would soon become our favorite spot. We turned on the T.V. knowing we weren't going to watch one minute of it when the door swings wide open and who walks in? No one else but her mother! Can you believe it, man? After all the hassle and knotted stomachs and

dodging old lady bullets and petting that dirty dog for 20 minutes we were busted! Red-handed! She must have had a feeling in her stomach too because she knew

right where to find us. If you could only see the look on her mom's face! It was just like in those cartoons where that old man gets real mad and steam comes out his ears and his face is as red as those sheets that those stupid bull fighters use to tease the bulls. Yea, that was pretty much what her mother looked like.

I don't know how it happened, but we never even heard her car outside or her walking up the steps to the front door. Even one suspicious noise would have sent me darting to her closet, but nope! My poor girl didn't know what to do, so she slapped me in the face, man, like I was attacking her or something! But it's okay. I forgive her because I knew she didn't mean it and was only trying to save herself. Too bad it didn't work.

The only words that made it out of my poor quivering girl were "Uh hi, mom."

Then her mom started hollerin' about how she trusted her and how her dad was going to be so mad. But what scared me most was that she hadn't even looked at me yet. So then she gives me this look, ya know, the real mean ones that moms give when they get a phone call from your teacher. So I looked at her back and wanted to say sorry, I swear, but I was so scared I couldn't say even one word.

After we threw our shoes back on, laces still hanging to the sides, her mom packed us both up in her car and dropped our butts off at school. By that time it was second period anyway so I knew we would still at least have a little bit of time to hold hands underneath my desk, but man we were so close to having our perfect day.

Of course my parents never found out about it 'cause her mother didn't feel like making that big of a fuss out of it since she knew that talking to my folks would only make her girl look like one of those girls your parents don't want you messin' with and that was the last image she wanted for her daughter. But my poor girl sure had to hear it from her daddy and was never allowed to stay home sick again even if she had to plug her runny nose with tissues. She took the punishment for both of us and never even made a fuss about it. And you know what, I think she likes me even more now that I risked my butt just to spend the day with her. That's how I know I'm gonna marry her, man. Yea, she's gonna be my girl forever.

She No Hot Foh Me

by Clayton Billadeau

The cafeteria was alive, breathing with eaters, walkers and talkers. Student bodies shifted the air, cool blue and green ocean air foofing dried salt flakes hauling gobs of moist drops, soaking their skin. Like independent lungs, bodies flushed air in and out, in and out as teens, faculty and staff walked in and out, in and out. The air freshened as it soossed.

Sixteen and shy, Joey sat at a fully occupied table far from the lunch line, watching passers-by. Although amongst friends, he was alone.

“Dude, dat tess was hahD, YaH!”

“Choke.”¹

“When yoU like moana and hit Da waves, brah?² LayTuh, mayBe?”

“I not know. I get home aftah school, yah?”

“Ah. You no liKe bE fun today, cuz? Da bEach always there-uh but da new breaK hit eVery time.³ We no can mis dem. Every naLu gone fahevah, brah.⁴ And da giRLs!”

“Ya, I know. He’e nalu.⁵ I just...”

“Hoh Brah! Like dat. LoOk At daT pair there.”

Sun-brushed olive skin, thighs and waist wrapped in white lily designed, dark-blue board shorts, soaked with salty wet. Aukai carried the ocean with her. Sexy and broad, surfer chick shoulders, shirtless back, strings tying the cloth covering her breasts. Unwashed, her ropethick black hair hung untied and heavy from her head.

“Nevah, braddah,” Joey said.

“WahinE liKe dat need good guy like me to squeeze tight, day and night.” Confidently, he chuckled.⁶

“Yeah shuh. Fuhget it, cuz.”

“You no tink Aukai iN me, brah?”

“No! Em no in you.”⁷

“WhaH! You tink YOU bedduH!?”

Joey sat silent, looking at her standing in line and alone. In fact he had thought about her. She was cool, easy-going, simple. He had a strong feeling though that the sun was her man. The ocean was her man. The air was her man. Then...

A pack of four girls walked up to the line, all wearing sandals made of cloth

and rope, all in board shorts and light tops. The tallest one, a blond, blue-eyed haole from California named Dara, had a large red rash on her back as if a huge hand had slapped her.⁸ At six foot two, she towered over the other three – a rough-funny Samoan with big eyes named Meka and two Hawaiians, Alana and Mily.

“Eh Aukai, whaH yA like grind, girl?”⁹

“I not know. Nuh-ting ono.”¹⁰

“What’s in the sandwich line?”

“I not shuah? PB and J, Spam oh Ahi, no?”¹¹

The five girls walked out of the main lunch line and went to the sandwich line on the opposite side of the cafeteria. Joey and his friends saw them approaching.

“WaH! Here theY comE.! Go say sumting if you such one big kahoona.”

“I not say dat.” He had not thought it either. As she approached, Joey felt the tension, that which was like two homo-polar magnets pushing together.

“Say sumting, braddah, say sumting.” Joey’s friend, Leon, nudged. Seeing that Joey was only staring, Leon stood up from the table’s circular chair. “Hiyah.”

The girls stood in silence looking at the silly boy standing in front of them, blocking their path, waiting shortly for him to speak.

“You get goOd break today, girls?” The pleasant question attracted their interest – for the most part.

“Hoh, brah, Leon!” Said Mily and Alana in unison. “Da break was rouGH and lOng. Meka and Aukai got da best rollahs, high and white tips. Was beautiful.”

“Was da kine,” Aukai interrupted, “but Dara rode choKe and one tOes-to-da-nOse.”¹² Mily and Meka jumped, feet on floor, standing surfer, arms waving, balancing.

“Yeah!” Alana yelled, cutting back in. “She crash hahd,” one hand slapping the other, stap-spsssh. “Look at huh back.”

Dara was shy about it but happy. She looked at Leon talking, then toward Joey, smiled and then away, around at everyone else – at nothing.

“I like grind,” Meka announced moving towards the sandwich line, pushing through Leon as if he was not there. “Da nalU make me hUngrY and I not have nUhting all day!”

“Try move!”¹³ Leon said looking at Meka. Meka turned.

“Whah yoU sAy.?” She turned around, her eyebrow lifted, arm bent to her hand on her hip. She sway-bobbed her head with a feminine assertiveness and

justification. "You not nUting, Lean On." She looked cute and intimidating and pushed Leon again.

Leon held his hands smiling, defending himself with a shoulder and braced against the pushes. He recovered and the girls passed. Leon sat down. Looking at Joey, he said, "See! Dat not so hahd, brah?"

"Ating"¹⁴ Joey said and continued, "I like be her dude. She's pretty and cool." "Sum time a giRL not foh you, braH," Leon said patting Joey's shoulder. "You liKe see Dara look at you?"

"How ya figgah? She not looking at no one."

"Ah, but yoU was loOking at eM no loOking at no oNe." Leon laughed. "She wahiNe. You liKe get her. Ask her out."

Just then, Ailani, a big guy who looked like he were in his twenties, walked into the cafeteria. Ailani joked quite a bit and played ukulele for everybody so everyone liked him. But when he ate, he sat alone. No one bothered him. No one paid attention. It was only in class that he was the center of amusement.

He walked to the lunch line, grabbed his food and sat at an empty table. He looked happy.

"LoOk At Nui Ailani."¹⁵ He always by hisself. Why you tink not nO one sit wit hiM?

"Da kine, I not know. He liKe got holes in his pants and hE nUi, ha ha ha."

"Yeah, nUi!" They boasted with laughter.

Ailani was indeed messy and fat, but fat and thick. Meal in his mouth, munching mush, smacking lips chomp chomp, caring less about his image. A party drink guy, not quite an adult but acting like one anyway. A guy's guy – tough and secure. Everyone liked him because he was a chill guy who played ukulele amazingly. But he sat alone anyway. He liked it that way.

The boys diverted their attention back to the girls who had already purchased their sandwiches which had been cut into triangles and wrapped in plastic. Meka removed the cellophane and bit the triangle's ends until she could fit it all into her mouth. She looked up at Leon who was watching her. Squinting her face into tart-sour, she opened her mouth. Leon watched, trying to cover his nose with his upper lip – a disgusted face. Meka closed her lips and smiled-mouthful.

Joey thought about what Leon had said. He looked at Dara, beautiful, giant Dara. She was comfortable with herself. Straight-backed, walking with unawkward strides, paced with the five. Then he looked at Aukai, gorgeous Aukai. They had never really spoken, but his attraction was nostalgia at this point.

Aukai: her name is the ocean.

Aukai: salted, sun-roasted and fun.

Mily and Alana spoke to each other. Their lips moved, but their voices were smothered with distance and the cafeteria's cacophony. As the five passed, Meka slapped Leon's back, her mouth still full, quick-jogging away
"Look at Dat!" Leon gasped at the five girls who began sitting at the empty table with Ailani.

"How hE goT heR?!" Aukai sat at Ailani's side and kissed him on the cheek. They sat close. Ailani's body warmed Aukai's snuggled against his.

Leon and Joey watched, dumb with envy.

GLOSSARY

- 1 "Choke" – a lot
- 2 "Moana" – the ocean
- 3 "Break" – waves
- 4 "Nalu" – waves
- 5 "He'e nalu" – catch the waves
- 6 "Wahine" – female, usually a woman
- 7 "Em" – she, female
- 8 "Haole" – any non-islander
- 9 "Grind" – to eat or, generally, food
- 10 "Ono" – good, "Nothing's good"
- 11 "Ahi" – tuna
- 12 "Toes-to-da-noes" – walking the surfboard from the rear to its front tip
- 13 "Try move" – get out of the way
- 14 "Ating" – literally, "I think," but used like "I guess," sometimes "I don't know"
- 15 "Nui" – big

Aunt Linda's Visits

by *Carla Rodriguez*

I vaguely remember what it was like before Aunt Linda would come to visit. I would overhear girls, especially my mother and sister, nag about her all the time. It was like a scary urban legend or myth, but not like La Llorona or Bloody Mary, because this was real life. So no matter if I called her name three times in the mirror or not, Aunt Linda would one day inevitably come to visit me too.

My sister sat me down when I was in the fourth grade and first warned me about Aunt Linda's visits.

"She will come unexpectedly every month, and sometimes stay for a whole week! It's different for everyone." My sister explained.

I was petrified. She did not sound very welcoming and Aunt Linda really scared me. Something about how she mysteriously just came to visit once a month gave me the ebee jeebees. I felt unprepared and way too young to face such a visit as Aunt Linda's.

Then just like my sister explained, Aunt Linda unexpectedly arrived. I got a sick cramping feeling in my stomach before she arrived. It must have been my premonition for the horrific visit that Aunt Linda would give me.

However, she luckily didn't stay for a week like my sister warned me. She only stayed for three days. The first two days were terrifying and I became overemotional. I always wondered how could one visit from Aunt Linda take so much out of me?

After a while I noticed, my father and brother never complained about Aunt Linda. And if I ever even mentioned any visits from Aunt Linda they would run the other way or cover their ears.

"Ew! I don't want to hear anything about it!" My brother would yell,

"How come Aunt Linda doesn't visit Dad or Omar?" I asked.

"Well, because they are guys, Aunt Linda only visits girls. I got my first Aunt Linda visit when I was about your age too." My sister responded.

My mother tried to calm my nerves,

"You just have to get used to Aunt Linda, I promise, it will get better."

"But who is she and why does she only come once a month!" I yelled back at my mother.

"Well she is going to be a part of your life now, so you are going to have to accept her." She replied. Aunt Linda reminds me of one those aunts who are not

really your aunt, but more like your mother's best friend or someone who forces you to call them "Auntie." Or better yet, Aunt Linda is like a distant relative, one you never look forward to seeing. Her visits vary from time to time, but usually she'll stop by once a month.

Whenever my sister and I are in a bad mood, we'll jokingly ask each other, "Oh no is Aunt Linda coming to visit?"

I was always so irritable about her visits, but I learned to accept her as I got older. Some days were easier than others, but sometimes she made me want to down a whole box of chocolates or a tub of ice cream to ease the pain. I dreaded the first couple of visits to Walgreens and having to stock up on supplies to prepare for her arrival.

In college, Aunt Linda's visits were more of a routine I learned to master. Sometimes when she didn't come I would get worried and scared I did something to offend her and I impatiently awaited her arrival. I would check back on the last time she arrived and calculate when she would usually come back.

I bit my nails with fear and then finally she came back and it was like Christmas morning. But then she would quickly go back to being that same old Aunt Linda with her heavy baggage that gives me nothing but cramps and a headache. When I am much older, I know one day Aunt Linda won't visit anymore. But I'll always remember but hope to forget those famous Aunt Linda visits.

Worse is not a Word (But the Feeling is Very Real)

by *Cristina Gonzalez*

“Try to lift your foot onto my knee. Can you do it, Robbie?”

“I’m not sure I can—W-Wyatt, it hurts—”

“Just try. Try it and see.”

Shutting his eyes and gritting his teeth, Robert Amherst tries. He envisions the muscles in his left leg tightening; imagines his foot rising off the floor like some silly item in a street magician’s show. He sees it straightening out before coming to rest gently on his older brother’s pressed-together knees. The former soldier sees this all very vividly, to the point that he is certain he has already done it. Yes! In fact, if he just opens his eyes—

But then his leg falls through two inches of space and his foot collides with the wooden floor with a dull sound. All at once, the young man with the pale and freckled angel’s face is filling the lounge of their London flat with howling curses.

“Cor—! .Mother... flaming hell, that bloody hurts! Oh, God—”

“It’s going to hurt a bit more before it starts to feel better,” Wyatt tells him calmly. Carefully, he bends down, cups Robert’s injured ankle and brings it to rest onto his lap. “It wouldn’t hurt at all if you hadn’t been so insistent on trying to pick a fight with those men in the pub.”

“They should’ve known better—and at least I left them in worser shape!” Robert declares triumphantly.

“Worse shape,” Wyatt corrects, readjusting his glasses before undoing the laces of his brother’s boot. “You’re the writer in the family. Aren’t you supposed to know there is no such thing as ‘worser’?”

“I can bend or break the rules because I know them,” Robert answers with a pained huff. “And you know those men deserved it. They should’ve backed off talking to that girl when she asked them nicely.”

“I suppose...”

“How can you ‘suppose’ on something like tha—ah! Ah!—Wyatt—! Wyatt, stop—!”

“Relax. I’m trying to—” Frowning, Wyatt tries a different grip on the boot and works to slide it off. “Your foot is terribly swollen.”

“And in pain!” Robert cries. “Don’t forget ‘in pain!’”

“Why are you being so childish? You were never this—there!” The older blond man sets the boot aside. The look of the foot, even through the green sock, displeases the former medic’s trained sight. “It’s swollen worse than I thought. This might not even be a sprain, but a full break I’m looking at instead.”

Robert throws his hands up. “Bloody wonderful! Those dim chavs—”

“Now, don’t jump to conclusions yet, Robert. Your injuries always did look worse than they were when we were children.”

“I was still a child when I got my worst.”

The younger man notices the quiet look of discomfort that briefly passes over his older brother’s features and cannot resist a brief smirk. All the years! So many years removed from those woods in Europe, from the abandoned stone ruins where brother held brother; where the back of Robert’s head exploded like a melon from contact with a Nazi bullet. Sixty-five years removed, and the guilt of surviving, of failed heroism, still hangs in the air about their heads even as they enjoy a strange second sort of life.

He wears the guilt like a halo, Wyatt does, or perhaps more like a crown of thorns.

Or maybe he wears it a bit lower; ‘round his neck, like a noose.

“Well?” Robert tries to shift as painlessly as possible, trying to assess the seriousness of his swollen ankle. “What’s the prognosis?”

The older man sighs through his nose. “This is going to hurt.”

“How bad?”

“You know, I don’t recall you ever being this phobic when it comes to physical pain,” Wyatt muses. “Not during the war, and not even as recently as a few months ago.”

“I was a boy among men. I had to look tough—mmf!” Robert nearly jumps from his chair from the bolt of pain traveling up his leg.

“Sorry... I may have to cast it.”

“Cast it? Is it broken?”

“I’m not sure. You may have been lucky. But I think casting it will be better for it regardless. You don’t want this healing wrong.”

Robert laughs. He can’t help himself. “I wager that’s one of the last things I have to worry about now, isn’t it? I haven’t had to worry for that in years—decades, I suppose.”

Wyatt sighs again. Carefully, he rises and sets Robert’s foot down on the seat he occupied. “Dead though we might be—long dead, even—but that doesn’t make us impervious to the medical mishaps that plague the Living. It just makes us

less susceptible. Stay here.” “Where else do you suppose I would go? To play hopscotch?” asks the younger man.

Wyatt doesn't answer. Instead, Robert watches him collect some items from a green bag sitting on the nearby white sofa before disappearing into the kitchen. He leans his head back and listens to the sound of running water, shutting his eyes in a better attempt to focus on it instead of the pain throbbing at his ankle. Knocking around those boys from the pub was worth it, no matter what Wyatt supposes. They should have all known better. At least their leader should have. No simply means no, doesn't it? It did when Robert was younger, when he didn't just look seventeen but actually was...

“I'm going to cast it,” Wyatt says, setting down a large bowl full of water, along with what looks like a cotton sock missing its toes. “But first...I have to try and get the swelling down.”

Robert looks into the bowl, raising an eyebrow at the white material floating inside. “You're still using plaster of Paris bandages?”

“They're reliable. And I don't want you going anywhere you don't need to be until this heals.”

“So you'd rather have me go mad here in the flat?!”

“If it means you won't be on your foot as little as possible for a few weeks, yes.” Wyatt actually manages a little smile as he sits down again with his brother's foot in his lap. “I will stay with you until it's time to take the cast off. Now, hold still. This is going to hurt.”

“What—ah! A-a-ah!” Robert nearly leaps from his seat again, the pain of Wyatt's manually applied pressure. “Wyatt! Wyatt, stop! Stop, that hurts!”

“I told you it would.” The former medic squeezes lightly at the ankle and pushes upward; towards the calf, the knee, and back down again to repeat. “Stop your yelling.”

“It hurts!”

“I said it would!”

“That—that's a bad sign! It means you're screwing it up!”

“It means no nerve dama—hold still!” Wyatt grips particularly tight to Robert's leg, more out of reflex than a conscious urge to punish the younger man's whining. “Relax! It's working. The swelling is decreasing. If you would just let me do my job without trying to risk another twist to this ankle, I can then give you something for the pain!”

“Give it to me now,” Robert half-whines, head thrown back on the chair.

“It—it's too much.”

“You’re doing it to annoy me.” “It hurts! What do you want me to say? ‘Oh, it feels dandy, brother. Just absolutely marvelous!’”

Wyatt sighs through his nose. He releases Robert’s ankle from his grip and reaches for the toeless cotton sock. This he slides carefully over the injured foot and ankle, ensuring that it lays as smoothly as possible against the skin. That settled, the older man reaches for one of the soaking bandages and begins the steady process.

“You have to stop picking fights that aren’t yours, Robbie. I’ve been telling you that all your life, haven’t I? But it never seems to matter to you, what I say. If I try to give you advice, to guide you in the proper way, you say that I’m overbearing. You mock me by saying I’m like our father or that I’m too worrisome like Mother—”

“Why do you call them that?” Wyatt looks up at Robert, slightly confused. “Mother. Father. They were Mum and Dad to us—and even then, he was ‘Da’ to you because you could never say it fully when we were children, even after he was long gone.”

The older man says nothing, merely reaches for another strip of plaster bandaging for his work, and the stoic silence bothers Robert in a worse way than his ankle does.

“Do you know what it sounds like, when you call them ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’? What you sound like? It makes you sound scientific. Cold, like they’re these distant, unreal things to you; like you’re suggesting they should be that way to me, when I hardly knew them to begin with. Even Mum... Dead and gone, she was, before I got to really know her.

“But they were real, and they meant something to us. They weren’t merely concepts, or words, or things to seem like. They were people. Human. Just like we were once, before we were changed in our own ways. We are worse now, I think, than they ever expected we would be when we were born.”

There is silence for a few moments, save for the sound of water being disturbed each time a hand reaches into the bowl to draw out another plaster-soaked bandage. Finally, Wyatt speaks.

“Worser, I think, is the word.”

Betrayal

by *Maria Elizabeth Estrella*

It's Valentine's Day, you and the children were drawing beautiful pictures, making extravagant cards, or making crafts. Later, as you walked into the house, the aroma of chocolate chip cookies and cakes filled the air; the home is filled with joy and laughter. Six year old paintings scattered about the walls, crayon scribbled hearts hung three feet high, you saw the markings of one and six year olds. Then you saw the elaborate crafts carefully mended, hand sewn teddy bears and hearts beautifully laid across the dinner table, alongside bright pink cupcakes, rosy red candy hearts, masculine chocolate candy cars in shimmering blues and reds. A single rose delicately lies in ten places, and ten small beautiful red and pink shimmering gift bags lay in ten places on the dinner table. You heard the singing of tiny voices dancing and hopping toward the dinner table. You saw the pizzas and a beautifully frosted red and pink valentine cake carefully displayed. The table looked beautiful, laced pink and red heart shaped paper plates, glossy red cups and sparkly pink hearts dangled from the ceilings. You saw the excitement and exhilaration beaming from all the small smiling faces. They were ages, one, six, seven, nine, twelve and fourteen years old.

They waited and waited hours for Dad. They could not understand. First it was four o'clock, five, then six, finally eight o'clock. Dad said he would be home early at four o'clock. You saw the excitement taper down to looks of worry and grief, looks of hunger and finally droopy eyes staring across the table, silence and stillness filled the air. Finally 8:30 approached, and as they finally nibbled slowly onto their pizza, only a couple of bites eaten as they all stumbled slowly to their beds, holding their little bags of goodies. You saw their eyes tearing up trying to hold back, and yet they put a little smile on their faces for Mom. Mom slowly and quietly walked out to each bedroom, saying prayers and comforting each child with love and tenderness.

Eventually, you all heard Dad, "I'm home." He too was holding a small pink valentine bag.

You felt betrayal as you looked into his eyes, however, confused and hurt you walk away and go to bed. Your heart ached and fear began to set in. It was the first time in over fifteen years; he had no gifts, no dinner; no card, nothing special, sweet, and loving this Valentine's Day.

The following day the children seem puzzled but bounced back. Finally, evening approached as you all sat cuddled closely, side by side against the other

on the green leathery couch. Of course Dad was not home; he was late again and a face of guilt did not go unnoticed, the excuses he gave did not make sense. He suddenly had an emergency to buy running shoes at 8:30 at night; however, no shoes in hand as he walked through the door at ten o'clock at night.

This evening you and the babies cuddled together on the couch.

Suddenly your fourteen year old son runs into the room, his face is flushed with bewilderment. "Mom, Mom it's a girl, she's looking for Dad, she, she, she said she's seeing him and they are friends!" (He called his sister at college and secretly confided in her). Finally you mustered enough courage to call this intruder and discover it was one of your greatest fears, the man you adored and cherished is seeing another woman. (A mistress)

Her voice sent you into shock, your stomach turns, and tightens, and you can't breathe.

She talks sweetly and softly about your husband, about their close friendship and how he is pursuing her and just wants to be with her.

As you listen, you can barely speak as she asks, "Aren't ya'll divorced? That's what he said."

Then you pause and respond, in a hoarse shaking whispery voice, "No we are not, we love each other, we are Christian, we are Catholic, and we don't believe in divorce."

She replies, "He loves me, now surely you don't sleep in the same bed because he's with me."

You put the children to bed and try to comfort them all, the whole time holding back your tears and screams of anguish. You're lost and alone for the first time in your whole life.

You are amazed as he casually enters into the home late at night. "I'm sorry—late appointment with a client."

You confront him and he denies it. You are so hurt, you pretend to believe him, and go to bed.

A couple of weeks have passed, all seems somewhat normal and you try to pacify yourself to believe perhaps she was just a friend like he said. However, your heart's not at peace, many nights the phone rings endlessly, hang up phone calls, one after another, late nights out again and clothes in his car.

It's Lent now and the children want to go to their traditional Lenten fish fry dinner with Dad. "No," he yelled, "I'm tired." Irrate, grumpy, and impatient he ignores the babies. They hold on to his legs but he tears them away. You follow him. "What is wrong with you? Why are you ignoring them, no hugs, no kisses

and you lock yourself in your bedroom?" Then, you walk away. Just as you do, your twelve year old son runs to you screaming in shock, "I have Dad's cell phone, Mom; there are bad pictures of a lady!" He immediately confronted his Dad, "You are a liar, how could you do this to us, why?" Sobbing uncontrollably.

The other children hear and immediately start crying, as the one year old baby holds tightly onto his fifteen year old brother and he shields him in a corner of the house. It is late into the night—perhaps twelve o'clock—and the children hold onto you very tightly, one on each leg, another hugging tightly around your neck and two grasping tightly around each arm. You pray and walk slowly into the house you are trembling, yet somehow remain strong for the children. The shock and pain is heart wrenching, you're broken, you reach out to God but can barely pray, except the words, "Please, help us God."

The next day, the two older children from college come to visit their siblings (they are livid). Embracing and holding each crying child. Each confronts their Dad (in grief, anger, and disbelief). "If she's a slut what does that make you? Here you raise us up Catholic, you portray yourself to be this great man and here you are this bastard, you hypocrite!"

Afterwards the second oldest child calls the mistress. "How dare you? Don't you ever call my brother and discuss you and my Dad again, don't ever call my Mom! You're nothing but a whore." She hangs up the phone and walks back into the house embracing and holding each child, until they cried themselves to sleep. They all eventually fell asleep together, in the same bed in the same bedroom.

There were many days and nights of crying late into the night. Late night discussions took place when you couldn't sleep. "Mom, why doesn't Daddy love us anymore?" a small hoarse voice whispers. Another tiny voice quietly whispers back, "Because he loves her, that ugly mean lady, and her children, that's his new family now." So you just hold them closely, and say, "I will always love you."

The children no longer smile, they won't eat, and now they question, "Why did God let this happen? What did we do wrong?" One day you enter your child's bedroom, it is dark, quiet, and then you hear a quiet moaning. You stumble and you see your child lying on the floor, in a fetal position, alone and crying and crying.

"I don't want to live, it hurts, it hurts, and I want to die!" You just hold your child very, very closely all night long, praying again. "God help us please!" A few weeks later, you receive a phone call from an emergency room, another child attempted suicide. Your heart aches as you rush to the side of your child, crying and embracing for hours, gently stroking their hair and face, thanking God

endlessly for saving them.

You as a mother, evaluate the past in a matter of minutes, reflecting, and reminiscing. You recall life as it used to be. The whole family took walks, camping trips, and trips to the beach. There was no alcohol or drug abuse, only Vicks and Motrin, and Gatorade filled the pantry. You were great together; you played, prayed, ate and laughed so much. You knew what you had been was special. Your children were excellent students and belonged respected and cherished family, especially Mom and Dad. When someone was ill, a surprise meal waited, along with handcrafted and carefully colored drawn get well cards. Jokes, tickling, and singing were a big part of our family. Your motto was, "Caring is sharing" and "The family that prays together stays together."

Your security and safety have been ripped away. You had lived and embraced every opportunity to enjoy life with your family. "Mom, remember we used to be so happy. We were the perfect family," as tears streamed down her tiny little face. Now you must begin again and take up every bit of your strength and start on the road to recovery, to seek the joy and laughter again. It is really just you, your children, and God. You're not sure why this happens but life was great for a very long time. You know marriage and family brings the greatest joy, but when it breaks, it is the greatest injustice. It is the innocent who suffer.

Disasters We Share

by Avery Sanchez

My mom loves to talk about the day John F. Kennedy got shot, and how she was at the beauty salon getting another perm in her hair at the insistence of her own fussy mother, when a man came in screaming, "The President's been shot! The President's been shot!" She talks about this day as if it was the most traumatic event in her life, which is telling for a woman who has lost two parents to lung cancer, had her husband leave her in the middle of night with a note that said, "so long," and gave birth to a stillborn when she was nineteen. I've heard her rendition of that horrible day- November 22, 1963- time and again, the only thing keeping me from memorizing it being the fact that it changes every so often, depending on who she's telling it to. But a few things always remain the same. The way she crumbled in Trixie Mafador's big black chair. The way she was so stunned that she didn't even notice her mother's eyes roll into the back of her head before she fainted in her seat. The deafening silence that filled the salon.

The way the world stopped.

Maybe it was no surprise, having heard the story so many times, that it was the first thing that popped into my head when I heard the loud, rushed words, "We've been attacked by terrorists!" Ten minutes before, I had just finished writing the date on my algebra worksheet- September 11, 2001- and I was looking timidly over at Brett Solomon, wondering why he liked Katie Bloom instead of me and trying to figure out how one guy's eyes could be such a perfect shade of blue, when an announcement came over the loud speaker for all classes to stop immediately and for teachers to escort their students to the gymnasium. Something about that moment- my wanting to do anything besides sit in Mr. Hill's boring algebra class, learning about boring algebra equations that I would never be able to understand- didn't seem right. Something about that moment told me that after forty-five years of uninterrupted circulation, the world had stopped again.

I was right. The world had fallen apart, and as I walked up the driveway to the red brick house that I lived in with my mother, it puzzled me how I couldn't quite understand it. Everyone else was in a state of despair, while my own feelings were so mixed and confused that I couldn't even locate them. Everyone in the gymnasium had started crying. Even Mr. Phillips, our usually stone-faced, reserved principal, couldn't hold it in and sobbed shamelessly into the microphone as he led us in a prayer disguised as a non-religious plea for encouragement; not that anyone would have the ill-consideration to protest, especially during a tragedy like

this, when even the most irreligious of sorts find themselves trying desperately to believe in something, anything.

The streets on my subdivision were empty. Mrs. Larson, the elderly widow next door, usually spent every waking hour tending to her garden. Not today. Today the pink tulips, red amaryllises, and purple lilacs were put on hold, forced to fend for themselves as the unmerciful heat weighed down upon them. Ty Porter, the balding, beer-bellied man across the street wasn't in the driveway working on his pick-up truck, sneering at me like a proud pedophile in that twisted way he'd been doing since long before my fifteenth birthday earlier that year. Some things just didn't seem that important today.

My mom came rushing out as soon as she saw me in the driveway. "Marilyn!" she shrieked, "I've been calling your cell! Why did I bother buying you the darn thing if you're not going to pick up in these emergencies? Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be all right?" I asked, brushing past her as she reached for me. "It's not the end of the world, you know." Except that it was, and I could feel it.

"Well, let's talk about it, honey," she said, following me into the house. I threw my book bag down next to the couch and plopped down in front of the television where footage of the morning's events was playing over and over again on the news, on every channel, and the president was giving a speech about banding together and facing this as a nation, and other things I didn't feel like seeing or hearing, because then I had to think about them when I'd rather think about whether or not I was going to fail algebra. Or what Katie Bloom had that I didn't. Or why my father never sends me a birthday card.

"I'm fine. Really," I told my mother as she continued to hover over me in the living room, waiting for me to break down or at least beg her to help me understand. I stared blankly at the television, doing my best to pretend she wasn't there.

It's not that I didn't like my mother. It's that I didn't get her. I never understood her constant pestering of everything that happened in my life, or her need to show up at school events and outtalk every person in earshot. I never understood why she did things like ask my seventh grade history teacher really loudly if she could possibly seat me next to Brad Ericsson since I had a crush on him.

Things like that made it difficult to feel connected to her. Not that it was always like that between us, and why that change took place I never did

understand. Maybe it was part of growing up; a normal process of coming into puberty and having to bow shamefully away from the one who raised me. But then again, that was also around the time my father left, and something inside of me wondered why my mother wasn't trying to bring him back.

But she lived in a bubble. A peachy-keen bubble where everything was exactly how she wanted it to be and she didn't have to realize that he wasn't supposed to be gone.

"It's okay to be scared," she said now, sitting down next to me, snapping me out of my daze. She was like this annoying gnat that kept buzzing around, pressing my patience.

"I'm not scared," I told her.

"Are you sure? I know how you are. You close yourself off when you—"

"That's not what I'm doing," I snapped.

She seemed taken aback, slightly wounded. "Well, if you change your mind and want to talk, I'll be in my room." I could hear the hurt in her voice, the disappointment that I didn't come home needing her, ready to be comforted like the scared child she hadn't seen in years.

Maybe it would be easier to just blame it on teen angst. Teenagers were supposed to be moody, incomprehensible creatures, after all.

Especially when their fathers left and never told them why.

I watched clip after clip on television of burning buildings, sobbing families, and over-eager news reporters running from one spot to the next, trying to get in footage of every last detail that they could. They wanted us to see it all. They wanted us to know why failed algebra tests and Brett Solomon weren't important in the large scheme of things. They wanted us to feel it so we could know that our problems, the ones that wouldn't matter to us a week, a month, or a year from now, weren't real. This attack- it's what was real.

"Mom?" I said, knocking on her door.

"Yes, sweetie?"

I cracked open her door to see her lying fully clothed in bed, an ice pack over her head and the old, black-and-white television set with the antennas sticking up three

feet in the air humming softly.

"Come in, Marilyn," she said, sitting up and propping herself against a green, ruffled pillow. She beckoned me over to the bed, where I sat down beside her and let my eyes well up with tears, though I begged them not to fall.

"What's going to happen?" I asked her.

She wanted to have the answer. I could see it all over her face as she searched wildly for the right words, her mouth open and unseen reassurances hanging off the tip of her tongue. I could see them and I wanted to grab them, but they couldn't come before they were ready or they wouldn't be right. They had to be perfect, because this was what she'd been waiting for since the day I stopped being her little girl. She couldn't tell me why my father left, and I bet if I asked her, she couldn't tell me why Brett Solomon broke up with me in a text message. But this, she could do. She had to. Not for me, but for her.

"I really don't know," she finally said, giving up, her shoulders falling. But the defeat in her voice said it all. It told me that even if she couldn't give me words that would make it all okay, at least, more than anything in the world, she wanted to.

I layed my head in her lap, which was my way of letting her know that her answer was good enough, and I closed my eyes, feeling her fingers twirl through my hair the way they used to when I was a child. The sound of the reporter on the television drowned out by a wave of static as the antenna lost connection, and a picture of my mother as a teenager, sitting with perm rods in her hair and tears falling down her face, flashed through my mind.

"When did you know it would be okay?" I asked her.

"What do you mean, honey?"

"When you were a teenager," I said, "And President Kennedy got shot. How did you know it would be okay?"

As she sighed softly, I felt her chest rise and then fall. "That day was my wake-up call," she replied softly. "Before that day, I thought a broken nail meant the end of the world. I had no idea that such bad things could really happen..."

"So that was the first bad thing that ever happened to you?"

"The first major bad thing, yes. I know I've had some terrible experiences, with my parents dying, and your father leaving. My first baby..."

"I know," I interrupted, sparing her from having to say it.

"But that day in the salon was before all of that. It was the moment I knew that nobody was safe from tragedy. Not even me. And I would have to accept for more tragedy to come." There was a choke in her voice, and I knew she was fighting off tears just as badly as I was.

The static on the television faded out. The reporter's voice returned. "Standing here in front of the World Trade Center..." I heard her say, but I tuned her out as I listened to my mother's John F. Kennedy story again, feeling like I was hearing it for the first time as I took in every last detail and hoped it would go on

forever. Thoughts of my father died out. After all, he wasn't there.

My mother continued to twirl my hair as she spoke, and as I worried about the future and what the day's events would bring, I clung to her and the rhythmic words of the story I had never before understood so clearly.



nonfiction

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Worship

by Christopher Alan Medina

The words *Plentiful Life* appear in enormous, coal colored letters above the entrance. Already the legs feel weak. The term “crowd person” never belonged in your biography, and watching the overflow of people going through the entrance drives you into prayer. *God, I don't like to ask for much. But please don't make today one of the most uncomfortable days in my life.*

Pearl smiles and tells you that it's almost time to begin “Worship.” She invited you to *Plentiful Life* earlier in the week. That evening while the two of you were walking through the quad after long hours at work, she asked, “How do you feel about going to my church this weekend?” She's not like you who *was supposed* to confess before church, carry the beads, and wear shirts designed with the Virgin Mary. She's the non-denominational type. So curious about her kind of faith, you answered cheerfully with wide eyes and a lasting smile, “Sure. Just don't make me the sacrifice.”

After a deep breath, you enter into *Plentiful Life*.

She guides you to the main room. Not as many people here; the legs feel stronger. Rows and rows of fancy, black fabric chairs nearly consume the entire area. Beyond the army of chairs, you notice a grand stage filled with musical equipment like a drum set, a couple of guitars, and microphone stands. At the right of the stage, hangs a gigantic projector screen. Maybe all non-denominational churches look like this place. The grandness of this “chapel” (it is the only word that comes to your mind right now) draws a warm excitement to swim inside you, along with a deep curiosity for the actual “worship.”

The two of you walk to the left side of the stage, and stop at the front near a row of chairs. You lower yourself beside the edge of the row and place two fingers before your forehead, chest, and finally the left and right shoulder. The sign of the cross. An essential when coming to Mass. *Wait a second, they don't do that here.*

You forget this rare experience is not at all like Sunday Mass. Earlier this morning, you told Pearl about your openness to different faiths. And also how you only started to go back to church since the school year began. And that you're rediscovering your faith. She replied with, “I knew it was right to bring you here. The Catholic way may not be the best answer. I've seen it before.” And you replied only with a faint “Maybe.” What you don't tell her- and what you forget to

tell yourself- is your overall uncomfortable feeling while inside a church. You are afraid of what others will think of you.

You sit down at the second seat from the edge. Pearl smiles and hugs you before she says, "I have to do tech stuff today. I'll be right there". She points to an area in the corner of the room, resembling a smaller room filled with computers and other supplies. You watch her leave till she disappears into the room. Then you observe the chairs being occupied by men, women, and children dressed in fancy suits and pretty dresses. The legs feel weak once more, and now the palms begin to perspire. *Stay calm.*

A couple of men and women come on stage, tuning instruments and checking to be sure the microphones function. Without signal, the flood of people that barely sat down gather in front of the stage. The band begins to play, first a steady rhythm. Many within the flood clap their hands. Some begin to dance. Some raise their hands. Some close their eyes. Some kneel. You only stand up, the seat right behind you for security.

A "risk taker" also does not belong to your biography; you grow tense and fearful over the things you cannot control. If you stay here, ready to fall to your seat, you are safe.

Then, the band unleashes a burst of rapid, intense melody causing the crowd to cheer louder. Two women grasp the microphones and begin to sing. The flood begins to move more joyfully, clap harder, and sing. Then the projector screen flashes with life and the lyrics to the song appear. Your glance switches to the tech room, where you notice Pearl busy at the computer. Her eyes fixed at the monitor, her fingers in a mad rush across the keyboard. After smiling, you look back at the screen and follow the words. Softly, you sing. Gently, you clap. Slowly, you smile.

Maybe this is not so bad after all. At least they seem energetic about the whole Jesus thing compared to the "sitting down, reciting meaningless prayers, and listening to the father" you always experience at Mass.

You're still unsure about advancing with the mass of cheerful dancers and singers. Behind you, two girls engage in conversation. Both wear t-shirts beneath sweaters and torn pants. Clearly contrast to the elegant skirts and dresses the other girls their age are wearing. *Well, you can't expect everyone to join the crowd.*

After two more songs, you hear the two girls chatting again, and out of nowhere, one of the men dancing and singing in the crowd breaks away momentarily to go "SHHHH!" and point to the stage. His tense face quickly loosens back to the peaceful expression he used during song and dance. The girls remain quiet and don't move.

Even though you were not the one in trouble, you don't want to cause problems. Now you are a little more cautious as you continue to look forward at the stage and the crowd.

The band finishes and everybody return to the chairs and sit. Automatically, you follow along and your eyes become fixed at a spectacled, middle aged man making his way up the stage. A faded black bible is clutched in both his hands. He's the pastor. He begins by quoting scripture from the worn out bible. Next, he speaks about faith, Jesus, just the typical aspects of Christianity that need to be discussed every weekend. *I guessed it had to be a little boring...*

Slow piano music plays in the background and the pastor asks for a Doris Winters to come up on stage. A woman with bright red hair, wearing giant pearls around her neck, takes her time to get up from her seat. She must be in her 80s since her fragility slows her walk to the stage. But everyone claps for her, cheering her to continue forward as if she has an important story to tell.

As soon as the lady comes up on stage, the pastor begins to tell her story. The woman, Doris Winters, became a Christian not so long ago, but her daughter was disgusted over the conversion. For some reason Doris did not express, the daughter hated God. Shortly after the conversion, the daughter stopped speaking with Doris. Mother and daughter haven't seen each other in many years.

"Would you sacrifice your belief in God to have one moment to see your daughter?" the pastor asks her.

Doris appears to contemplate over the question; you actually hope she says "yes." You try to imagine yourself in the same situation. You would never abandon your family for God. But a second after the question was asked, Doris gathers strength to say a joyful *no* in the pastor's microphone. Everyone is clapping. Some deliver a standing ovation. You remain in your seat, softly clapping, and then you glance back at Pearl. *Something is wrong here.*

Yes, you believe in God, but he is not the same God everyone believes in. Your God is a loving God, who loves everyone for who they are beneath the performances. But God for everyone else is not the same; people believe God hates certain kinds of people. You look at the pastor. Then Doris. The flood of people. Finally... at Pearl.

You don't want to be here anymore. You want to get up from your seat and run to the exit. What if they find you out, for who you really are? What will they

do?

The pastor then asks that every single person takes the "sweet communion." Shortly after, you receive a spherical piece of bread, and small cup filled with grape juice (at least you think it's juice), the size of the ones used for medicine.

As you wait to hear the pastor order everyone to eat the body and drink the blood, you ask yourself if you should fulfill this act. You stare at the items in your hand; you can't really hear the Pastor because you only hear your voice. *This is not the same as Mass. Do they really believe in God like that? Would God want me to leave my family if...?*

When you finally catch a glimpse of the man next to you consume the bread, you still doubt. *God, what should I do? I know I told Pearl that I was curious about this, but this place is just...wrong. Get me out of here...*

The hands shake, the back of your neck warms up, the eyes feel moist.

You stare at everyone one more time. *What if I don't do this? What if they find out I...*

No. You don't want to know what will happen if they find out.

The bread is swallowed, not chewed. The cup is drained, not one drop remains. Finally, you press two fingers over your forehead, your chest, and finally to your shoulders. No else does the same.

After the clapping and singing, the pastor finally says that Worship has finished and asks for everyone to spread the Word and invite others who may need to be saved. Fear creeps into you when you think about someone here pointing at your face and yelling, "SINNER! GOD HATES PEOPLE LIKE YOU!"

You make the sign of the cross one last time. *God...*

On the drive back to St. Mary's, you can only pay attention to the sight of downtown San Antonio through your window. You're trying to think about the day's list of chores that includes the research paper for Sociology and laundry. Church can already be checked off. Pearl is driving, and you hear her ask, "It's seemed you liked it. I wanted you to try something different. Do you wanna come back soon?"

"I really enjoyed it. Thanks Pearl. I'll call you next time I'm interested" you tell her in the cheerful tone you always use to hide the fear. Along with the wide eyes and the smile that lasts for a few seconds. Inside, you pray to never return to that place ever again. And you ask yourself a question. One that will haunt you for the years to come. *God...do you love me?*

You'll Never Amount to Anything

by *Nancy Perez*

I've heard this phrase multiple times. I've taken their icy words before then realized that not being anything meant being nothing. How can a living being that lives in an ever-changing world not possess the ability to be anything? Anything is too broad, too non-specific. Anything can be a toddler taking their first steps, as you watch her grow into the little girl that is soon to be top of her class, to then become the enchanting young woman about to begin the pursuit of her grand dreams, she is not yet a woman but she has grown to be something.

Anything, can be the clunking of your mother's metal spoon, as it swishes through the delicious air that surrounds her cooking. Anything is also her embrace as she reminds you that falling is just the step before standing up.

Anything is the comforting sound of your loved ones breathing, being reminded of the life flowing through their bodies means they are still here. Anything is the feel of the wistful ballad heard in the sobs of a friend lamenting when their unborn was lost.

Anything is the smell of the burning incense as you walk through the once familiar floors of a religion that you've forsaken long ago. Anything is the remnants of the impact it bestowed on your life.

Anything is a father's protection, a friend's hand, a painter's brush as it's lovingly stroked on the stark canvas to create a new world. Anything is the warmth of a shared hot chocolate, the success of graduating, the knowing that you are someone's world, and how your death would throw them in the depths of despair. Anything are the bonds that are formed showing that there is something thicker than blood, anything is what anyone could depend on, anything is everything that a person finds dear to their heart, and a necessity for the mind.

Anything is the pain inflicted when those words are spoken. The feel of confusion as I sit in my solitary, macabre world to consider the value you have ripped from me. The cold stench of failure as the words hit at my core with a surgeon's precision. Anything is the comfort of an old silver screen that glimmers its light into the audience, into my mind as I am reminded that your anything will never be my anything.

There was a dream once, which started long ago in days that seemed much slower and sinister. Brought forth from the realization that all the colors, smells, tastes, can be dampened from the loss of one I care for deeply. I sat in my room, gazing

out into the dark oblivion of the sky, as the shadowed moon's rays only shone through the movement of a parting cloud. Could there be anything after you were gone? Could there be a reason to be anything or do anything once that loving embrace ceased to be.

I realized your mistake, as I realized my own foolishness, because I am something. Even if the dream may have passed, along with the long awaited opportunity to accomplish it, there are many other dreams. There are other goals, other needs to be fulfilled, and other ways to amount to that something. I see myself growing from a young woman into an adult as the immaturity makes way for maturation. I can finally feel the warm, radiant rays as the clouds completely dissipate and realize that as long as we exist, as long as I exist, I am anything.

To the one who told me

“Write about what you don’t know”

by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

Why?

Because the questions don’t necessarily lead to answers. Because the people involved never respond like you want them to. Because if you have the answers, then what are you thinking about?

And I’ll admit that what I don’t know is the Grand Canyon and what I do know is a penny slot in a 1920’s gumball machine. I don’t know why Antony Acevedo climbed into a box in the alley and why that truck driver drove over it. I don’t know why Alicia nicknamed me “Blockhead” in the school newspaper. I don’t know why the first broken heart leaves the deepest scar, why my mother takes scissors to family photos after a divorce, or why I couldn’t get pregnant the same year that teen girls were leaving their unwanted babies in trash cans at the Seven-Eleven.

Why does a siren send me into a silent *Hail Mary*? Why does a firecracker startle me with an image of Danny holding David’s lifeless body in his arms? Why does the beeping of a red dot grip my heart with cold fingers?

Why does the spun sugar of cotton candy or the metallic taste of a dentist’s chair remind me to call my sister? Why does a wet sidewalk make me smile on a summer afternoon? Why is a brown spot on an apple a lucky thing?

Maybe I don’t know why when a question first appears. And I don’t have an exact answer after I write about it either. Still, between the question and the answer is a damp area that carries whiffs of barbecue smoke and the cries of sea gulls through beach air. Where shades of *café con leche* or *chile colorado* color my memory as easily as bluebonnet or grape. Where voices from *la familia* find more humor than sorrow in the telling, where intimate whispers make up characters, where single words extend an image helping a poem inhale and exhale through the ribs.

It’s the space where truth always seeps out.

Because what I write extends beyond what I can see. Because the writing about what I don’t know continually surprises me with the momentum of a knock-off-your-bikini-top salty wave.

That’s why.

A Twisted Tube of Pale Blue

by *Lorenzo Nichols*

The eerie glow in Cisco's bedroom originates from the flat screen television set that reflects the metal of bright red, blue, and yellow toy cars and trucks lining the walls. The dim blue gray white light that illuminates the forgotten toys gives Cisco a ghostly appearance, as if he is a spirit, a shell of his former self. His dark eyes fix intently on the two inch deep screen, his hand melds to the expensive, white game controller. The bed remains a twisted tube of pale blue sheets and blanket. A couple of hamburger wrappers and Styrofoam drink cups litter the area in front of the television set. Heavy, dark blankets tacked onto the walls block northern and eastern natural light from entering through the windows. Interruptions from Mom meet with unwelcome responses unless Cisco needs food or money for a new game.

Cisco's mother handles him as best she can, being the only participatory parent of a fourteen year old boy. Single after a two decade long marriage, she must work long hours to provide for Cisco. She maintains an active social life, spending weekend nights out of the house on dates or with her girlfriends having drinks, much to Cisco's chagrin. He often calls her these evenings and demands to know the time she will arrive home with tacos from Taco Cabana. Cisco's mother feels the tug of war between Cisco's needs and her own pulling in two different directions. She would like to have someone special sharing her life. She knows Cisco cannot continue to spend his free time playing games—it's unhealthy.

Cisco's mother attempts to combat his game playing. She signs him up for basketball camp—he gets angry and refuses to go. The private Catholic school Cisco attends informs her of the privately donated golf clubs and golf lessons available for all students. Cisco announces that he does not like golf. She asks her brother to talk to Cisco—man to man. She tightens the rules: homework finished before game playing. Cisco finishes all his homework in ten minutes, enough time to boot the game system, turn on the large screen, and get something to drink. She questions her friends. She feels not hopeless, but extremely concerned. She continues to look for answers.

Liz Woolley, a gaming counselor and member of Online Gamers Anonymous, notes that “for some, the enjoyment turns to suffering when they [gamers] become ‘addicted’ to the games.” In a piece written for BBC News's Website, Woolley reveals that some game developers require a degree in psychology. Her reasoning for this prerequisite is “to make them [the games] more addictive.” She expands on the gaming addiction, citing lack of bathing, a clean

house, or social interaction as symptoms of the larger problem. Woolley should know; her own son committed suicide after becoming addicted to a game called Everquest.

Cisco's teachers tell his mother that Cisco's intelligence ranks high on the IQ scale; he tends to be lazy and not turn in nor finish his homework. His mother knows these statements to be true. She witnesses Cisco enter the house, drop his books on the sinking couch in the living room, grab a drink out of the fridge in the kitchen, and complete the circle by his entrance to his room. The overhead light stays on only long enough for Cisco to find the game controller, the "on" switch to the game console, and the remote for the television.

"Son," she calls, "I need you to take out the trash."

An elongated pause occurs before an answer returns through the closed bedroom door of the frame house: "I'll do it later."

Cisco's mother rolls her eyes and begins pulling the white plastic sack out of the tall kitchen garbage can. She lugs it out the glass front door to the large, green, plastic can beside the single car garage. She stops and admires the sunset of orange, lavender, and pale blue developing in the open sky. She opens the glass front door and sticks her head in. "Son! You need to come see this sunset!" Another long pause occurs before she thinks she hears a muffled "in a minute" comes through the bedroom door.

But the minute comes and goes. Cisco's mother stands alone as the sunset fades to twilight and the night air cools her skin. Inside, Cisco's twilight descends right after school—he misses the sensations his mother feels. He's almost to the next level.

The Game that Grows Up with You

by Emily Scruggs

Camping in the backyard with your brother and your cousin, you feel mature and confident because it's way past your bedtime. Your cousin, with her blond bob and purple-rimmed glasses, lies across the tent from you. Nestled in your red sleeping bag, you twirl your flashlight around to make the light dance on the green and tan tent that domes far above your head. Every now and then, you shiver with a mixture of apprehension and excitement as the wind whips at the tent, making the tree-shadow monster appear to stomp towards you.

Your brother lies on his side, supporting himself with an elbow. He uses his other arm to crush an empty can of Dr. Pepper with his fist, and then run a hand through his wavy black hair, sighing. Suddenly, his eyes flicker up in excitement.

"Hey," he says, a smirk creeping across his face, "let's play truth or dare."

"Ok," you and your cousin giggle as you sit up in your sleeping bags.

Your biggest truths are what you knocked over and broke (the ugly blue vase in the dining room) and where your stash of Halloween candy is hidden- behind your parents' record collection, inside of a yellow-flowered pillowcase. Sneaking into your snoring parents' bedroom to steal their television remote control is a double dare, the most serious offense. Your cousin dares your brother to go inside and flicker the kitchen lights. He does so, but sets the stove timer on his way out- five minutes. Upon returning to the tent, he dares you to go inside and get him a soda from the fridge. Your five-year-old self slinks into the kitchen with dog-like stealth. Cracking open the refrigerator door, you extend your arm towards the grape soda- his least favorite. As your hand clasps around the can, the stove timer starts to buzz furiously. *Busted.* With terror coursing through your veins, you break for the tent.

Out of breath, you tear open the tent flap and exclaim, "The stove timer went off!" You go on explain to that you didn't shut it off because you don't know how and you are not allowed to touch the stove. Your brother's eyes widen and the three of you sprint back to the kitchen and silence the timer. After escaping from the house, you roll down the grassy hill that leads to the tent, laughing about how much trouble you would have been in if you had woken your parents up.

You're sixteen, and you're at a party. Illuminated by the moon, you and your friends lie in the cool grass of the front yard with your heads together and your bodies fanning out in the shape of a starburst. It is a warm night, but the breeze wards off discomfort.

Laughing, your friend in ripped jeans and a blond ponytail asks, "Hey, you

guys wanna play truth or dare?"

The questions: "Who have you kissed? Who do you like?" and the extracted truths echo among the group. Another friend rolls over onto her stomach and pulls her phone out of her back pocket. On a dare, she calls a guy who she knows likes her and leads him on, convincing him that she is interested. Just as he confesses to his crush, she laughs and hangs up.

When it is your turn, you choose dare. Scrounging around your friend's house, you collect several rolls of toilet paper and walk down to the next block, locating your target. You drape toilet paper over the branches of leafy summer trees until the front yard looks as though a cloud sneezed on it. Suddenly, you hear a noise in the house, momentarily stopping your heart. You spin around and propel yourself down the street as fast as your legs will pump, not daring to look back. Your heart is now beating as if intending to burst from your chest as the constable's car turns the corner and its headlights illuminate the street. Diving out of sight, you crouch behind a parked car. Your heartbeat is in your throat. The pulsating in your ears nearly prohibits you from hearing the car pause in front of the house that you redecorated. You surmise that the officer is probably not there to admire your handiwork. The constable rolls past you to continue scanning the street. When he reaches the end of the block and turns, you slowly rise on wobbly legs and jog back to your friend's house.

Now a young adult, you are camping in the hill country with an intimate group of friends that you use as a buffer from the world. Achieving a true feeling of contentment, the eight of you sit around the campfire roasting hotdogs and singing along to your friend's ukulele strums as the star-studded sky glitters above you. When the fire dies down and only smoking ashes and coals remain, you retreat to the tent.

A few rounds of Taboo are played, until everyone's sides are hurting from excessive laughter. With Smirnoff bottles collecting around the circle that the group is seated in, the talking and laughing slowly melts into muddy banter.

"We should play truth or dare," you say as wind gusts assault your tent, undermining the lantern's exuberance.

It doesn't take long for you to regret your instigation. Looking up between her long, black locks, your youngest friend discloses that she used to trade her body for refills of assorted drugs, ranging from cigarettes to Adderall. Whether as an act of comfort or as a by-product of the realization that nothing could possibly be worse than the humid silence, you talk about your first time experimenting with drugs. The next phoenix in the circle announces that he is going to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases on Tuesday. His enthusiasm is quickly squelched by numb, blank stares. Three more confessions bleed into the circle, generating

a low whirr in your ears and a nauseous feeling in your stomach. *Why do people keep talking??* You want to shove these skeletons back into the closet and plaster yourself up against the door to make sure that they are never again resurrected, but the stain has already set, and unlike the callow missteps of youth, it is not machine-washable.

Six-letter Word

by Sarai Ortega

You knew in the back of your head that she would die eventually. Everybody dies. Simple. Death. Ok. You knew the struggle would be hard, and the pain would be immense, but it was something you had to expect. People just don't live forever. You would go back and forth from the hospital to school and vice versa leaving a backpack with the nurse and doctors' number and names at school.

You found out she was terminally ill three years ago, but the struggle seemed a whole lot longer. Her physical pain you wish was yours and her hospital stays you'd trade in an instant for a five-star hotel. That's not how it works though. Cancer's the six letter word that has screwed up your life more than you'd like to admit, but there it is.

You decided at nine that you would be an oncologist. You decided to look up the word because, let's be honest you'd never find it in your fourth grade spelling book.

"Papi, can I borrow a dictionary?" you asked one day after a session of chemo.

"Why, I can just spell it out for you" he said, drained of seeing the worst in just a few hours. His precious wife, deathly pale, fingernails blue, and unfortunately a hairless wonder, who had married him 15 years ago, smiled, trying to keep him upbeat.

"It's ok, I can look it up, I know it starts with an O," you confidently explained. Page 213, you remember forever. It reads "Oncologist-one who studies tumors."

It's been twelve years and the memory of the hair loss, fake wigs, and weird hats in Christmas pictures, birthday parties, and mother-daughter luncheons, is still as painful and haunting as when you sliced your knee on all that glass a couple of years ago. This time it's someone different. It's not someone as close as before, but it brings back those nightmares just the same way.

"It doesn't look so good, maybe six months" the doctor said like it's supposed to be some sort of consolation that a 60 year old woman should die from liver cancer.

"She's never had a drink of alcohol," you reply agitated at their lack of understanding and hopeful remarks.

They're useless—you think over and over again, and yet aren't they also the

ones performing endless cycles of transfusions, dialysis and check-ups. You go see her for what seemed to be a ritual on your daily schedule, but it would be the last time. She smiles and says she's tired and points to the ceiling, and simply cries, "*Con Dios, me quiero ir.*"

You're not ready to let her go just yet, she came up for a transplant and you still believe in miracles, even though you've never witnessed them.

You tell her, "*No, no es tiempo.*"

You believe with all of your might that she's meant to be here for years to come. She is supposed to see you graduate and marry just like she saw your parents and other members of your family. You worry during the five hours it takes her to get home. Wondering how on earth she's dealing with all that pain on a bumpy ambulance, and a hard hospital stretcher. She refused the transplant. That's it.

He says now sympathetically, "Maybe a month, maybe three weeks, it just depends."

"Thank you for your help Doctor Ramirez and please thank all your staff for the last two months." You hear the voice, you feel the words coming out of your mouth, and yet the numbness has overwhelmed you.

You weren't there the last time she smiled, but you remember the last time she smiled at you. She had asked about Trish and the baby, who's not so baby anymore. She asked about school and work, and all the mundane things that don't matter. She comforts you and her love gives you confidence that tomorrow is a new day—full of miracles and cures. Her golden brown hair with scattered grays from all the meds, and her face still glowed. She was sick, but there was still life in that body of hers. You close your eyes and shut them tight; this has to be a horrid nightmare. You give her a hug and a kiss on each cheek and pray that she finds a peaceful rest tonight.

You called home only two days after she'd gotten home, because that was her last wish to die at home. There was the usual small talk with dad. "Hi, How are you? How's mom? How's work? And finally, how's she holding up?"

"I'm sorry *mija*, the trip was too much. She went to heaven around 2:30 this morning." His voice sounded somber, but at the same time relieved. It had been really hard on everyone.

"I'm sorry *papi*," you somehow managed to utter.

You hung up and screamed inaudible words, because nothing came out. There were no more tears to be cried, you thought you'd done that after every

time she'd struggled. The next day came by and like a waterfall, the tears bled like an open wound.

At first the tears were flowing, and ever-present, and slowly less and less as the wound started to heal.

You were ready, not for the exact moment of her passing or for the pain. You knew that life must go on, that's what she'd want you to do. At least you knew, at least she knew. At least she was at peace, at least you hugged her the last time you saw her. At least, you know her struggle is now over even though yours has just begun. But, at least, you'll always have her love.

Not Just *THE* Dining Room

by Francesanne Willis

Tucked deep into the bottom of a south-Texas hillside filled with oak trees hugging its frame, a small, white-with-green shutters farm house sits quietly waiting for its family to arrive. Cars start slowly rolling down the driveway and various family members trickle out. They all assimilate together near the side of our house. They seem to be waiting for something.

The front of the house faces our street. Everyone is standing to the left of the front porch on the faded asphalt driveway that runs down the left side of the house and circles around in front of the barn. This left side of the house has a window covered with ivory lace on the inside. If someone were to climb through the well-maintained flowerbed below this window and squint their eyes to peek inside, they would see a small room with unexpected furniture. A roll-away hospital bed directly to the left with chairs on each side, a small TV on a stand to the right in a corner with picture frames encircling it, a little cot in the back right, and another chair across the way on the left. Large pictures of a family, our family, cover each of the four walls.

“Here it comes,” says my nineteen-year-old sister, Julia, as she looks up the driveway. Everyone watches as the big white ambulance pulls in.

“He’s finally home!” my twelve-year-old little sister, Catherine, joyfully shouts as she runs toward the ambulance waving into the back window. The doors open and I can see his arm lifted high above his stretcher as he waves and pulls his head up to smile his wonderful, broad smile. “Welcome home, Dad!” I say in my most excited voice, so happy to see him. “We have your room all ready!”

As the paramedics roll the stretcher along the front porch, its wheels squeak like an old grocery cart. My joy-filled heart is surrounded in sadness to see my once strong, able-bodied father frail in the jaws of illness. They begin entering the house, and it is difficult for the strong EMS men to maneuver the stretcher past the end of our oak staircase in the foyer. Somehow they manage to make the necessary sharp left turn behind the front door into the dining room.

After Dad is lifted off of the stretcher and gently placed on his roll-away hospital bed, we thank the paramedics and are actually relieved to see the ambulance drive away from our house and back where it came from. With the hospital bed, cot, chairs, Mom, the three of us daughters, grandparents, and other various family members, the room becomes very crowded. No one cares. With Dad finally home, our dining room provides everyone with peace and comfort. It is now our sanctuary in the storm.

"This room is so beautiful," Dad says with tears in his blue eyes when he looks around. He can see everyone's parked cars outside as he glances to the right through the lace window. As he observes the wall in front of him and to the left, he gazes out another lace-covered window and smiles. This particular window is directly in front of his bed. It looks out across our gingerbread-trimmed front porch to a small pasture surrounded by a white, wooden fence. My sisters and I brought our three horses out to this pasture before Dad came so the particular view he has will bring him comfort and happiness in the familiar.

"Many people helped us get it all fixed up, Dad, especially Aunt Angie," I say while holding his hand. Aunt Angie is Mom's sister and an interior decorator. With her help, we had that dining room hiding all possible signs of being what it was before. Now it is a comfy, easy-access room for Dad to enjoy and see everyone in. The walls are a light off-white color with a hint of gold in them, and the trimming, baseboards and doors are all bright white.

Dark wood covers the floor, and directly above is a white ceiling with a large brown Hunter ceiling fan circling slowly.

This is "the room" in which Dad will, 5 days into the future, not have any more suffering to endure. It is important to us that the walls be covered in family pictures. Drawings from nieces and nephews, poems, and memories are what we want him to constantly see. The amount of time we have with him is not known to us, but based on what the doctors say about terminal cancer patients, it will not be long. He will be surrounded by family as we hum quietly within the walls of this quaint little room, and he will peacefully take God's hand, letting go of the only human life he knows.

. . .

Looking back on what took place in that small, semi-drafty room last April, I realize how important it is to live each day fully as it comes. Not plan for certain things to occur in certain ways, but to patiently participate in faith as God takes care of the details.

Over the summer, Mom painted our little dining room a warmer tone, repainted the trim a shinier, brighter white, and decorated it into what is now the most beautiful room in our home. It is a dining room again, and to people who do not know its significance, it looks like a pretty dining room. To us, however, it is a sacred place with a spiritual connection to our hearts. My father spent his last days on earth in this room, and when he took his last breath, I believe one hundred percent there were angels present all around us. Everyone was in a comforting state of peace, and for his last minute of being alive, his eyes opened. They had been closed all day showing no response to our voices. Earlier,

we would ask him to open his eyes, but nothing ever happened. Now all of a sudden, his eyes gazed peacefully at something captivating. We believe he truly saw the face of God because of his calm and painless expression. His eyes looked up towards the lace window on his right side. His eyes were not trying to find someone in the room to recognize. As much as we wanted him, he did not need us anymore. He was looking past all of us on to something much greater, Jesus.

“Let go, Chip,” Mom said with tears in her eyes. “It’s okay now. We’ll be okay. Let go. I love you.”

. . .

Now our family has a deeper connection with our dining room, a connection that directly ties us to Heaven. Each time I enter, I feel Dad’s presence. Many of my experiences in life have allowed me to grow in my character, spirituality, and maturity. I consider the “dining room experience” a life-changing event for me. I am thankful for that little room that so humbly sits next to the kitchen. It gives me joy to celebrate the life I have and was able to share for twenty years while Dad was alive. It also gives me hope to strive and grow deeper into the values my parents worked together to instill in me.

Even though it is still a hard reality to accept, I feel comforted by the fact that Dad’s soul passed from earth to Heaven in our dining room. Each day he was able to see everyone together, pictures of lifetime memories all over the walls, outside to his very much loved animals, and the beautiful colors of the sunsets through the lace window on the side. I cherish our dining room as a place where, when we enter, our hearts seem to beat a little faster and smiles cannot help but spread across our faces while we think about how much Dad means to us. And each time we settle at the table for one of Mom’s home-cooked meals, I still have a great sense of completeness even in my missing Dad, because love remains in this most sacred little room.

He Died Before He Was Born

by Angela Santana

My cousin Blaise was Aunt Maureen's fourth child. He was named after the patron saint against ailments of the throat, because Aunt Mo didn't want another one of her children to suffer from asthma.

In 2005, I remember when Mom's house slippers came shuffling out of her bedroom during Mo's pregnancy. I looked up from the newspaper I was reading. My sister lowered the volume on the TV.

"They're having trouble with the baby."

It wasn't like we hadn't heard this before. The same phrase could have been said about a handful of our twenty cousins, who'd turned out just fine. But I distinctly remember hearing that phrase differently this time. I felt the nerve impulses going from my brain rapidly down my shoulders, and my muscles tightening. The newspaper seemed dirty all of a sudden—drying out the skin of my fingers. I wanted to throw it on the floor—away from me.

§

In 2007, I carpoled with a group of my fellow university students to a Planned Parenthood facility close to campus. Our wrists wore a baby blue band of plastic with the words "40 Days for Life" typed in a non-distinct font. We had begun a period of fasting, prayer, and education in the community. This was our vigil.

The ride was quiet. Most of us had never done anything like this before. My organs seemed to tremble inside of me, as if I was getting closer and closer to the Arctic.

"Remember, guys: stay on the sidewalk, and stay alert," I reminded my friends. We climbed out, shut the doors, and walked across the street.

§

I think of Blaise on his patron saint's feast day every year. A priest or deacon holds two unlit candles in a cross on my throat and prays:

Through the intercession of Saint Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God deliver you from ailments of the throat and from every other evil.

My cousin Blaise was stillborn, choked by his umbilical cord.

On the day of his funeral, I remember the wind. Though the sun was shining, the wind cut through the warmth and chilled the hair behind my neck. It shoved us all inside the church, which had no lights on except the sun streaming in from somewhere on the ceiling. The pews made a circle around the altar, the

Tabernacle, and the casket.

The only funeral I had ever attended was that of my great-grandmother Mimi, a strong Irish woman who had lived past 100. I was in elementary school then. Now, some ten years later, I was a permit-carrying teenager who wasn't sure how to greet family members clad in black clothes and Kleenex lint.

"You're growing up so fast," Aunt Marilyn whispered as she hugged me. Her raven hair had grown more silvery since I had last seen her.

That's when my twelve-year-old sister pointed to the casket and whispered, "Mom, why do they have a baby doll in there?"

I stared at the doll in the open casket and imagined how terrible my cousin must have looked after he had died. This substitute was the picture of perfection. Its delicate, porcelain skin seemed to glisten in the filtered sunlight.

"That's not a doll, Kayla," Mom whispered carefully. "That's him."

For the first time in years, at the sound of that last word—him—referring to the indescribably beautiful body lying in that casket—*him*, not *it*—I wept in public.

§

The wind ferociously whipped my hair about as I stood in silence on the sidewalk in front of Planned Parenthood. We did not talk to women who went through the facility door unless they asked us questions. We were still and quiet. People who drove by either smiled, stared, or yelled and gave us the finger. We had been warned that a few vigil participants had almost been hit by angry drivers who rode up onto the sidewalk.

Every time we were cursed at or were the subjects of rude gestures, my heart stung a little. Even still, the angry drivers' resistance built up in my chest the courage to shyly smile in response to antagonism.

Two fair-skinned older women joined us around three-thirty. I caught a glimpse of some cardboard signs they carried with them, and immediately grimaced. Bloody, horrific photographs of aborted body parts were pasted into a collage. As I turned my head away, the vigil leader flew past me towards the women.

"Please, we do not allow outside signs here. Especially graphic ones," she informed them.

Disappointed, they crossed the street and stowed the bloody signs in the back of their Jeep.

§

As soon as I had realized that Blaise was my cousin, and that he was dead, I began to question God's justice. During the funeral psalm response, I felt disappointed with God. Psalm 23, the Bible passage to which I had become immune from hearing so often, suddenly became heart-wrenchingly real. The choir

sang the verses somberly:

Shepherd me, O God,
beyond my wants,
beyond my fears,
from death into life.

Why take my cousin away from me? Why make my aunt suffer labor pains for a dead child? Why make her live knowing that someone died inside of her? I obsessed over each question as I wept. My body felt overheated.

I fear no evil,
for you are at my side.
Your rod and your staff,
my comfort and my peace.

Did these people even know how painful it was to hear this song? Why would God play such a cruel joke on us, allowing Blaise to die as he did? I did not feel peaceful.

§

We drove away from the Planned Parenthood in profound silence. A few minutes passed, and my friend Matt asked, "Did you see that woman leave the building, crying?"

I had been replaying short movies of our vigil experience in my mind: the extraordinarily strong wind, the feeling of vulnerability as cars drove by with windows down, receiving the news that the abortionist's car had pulled into the parking lot behind me, and the yelling, spitting, cursing.

"No," I responded somberly.

§

Today, Blaise's name is not spoken in the presence of Aunt Maureen and her family. I believe it is one of the most beautiful names conceived in the minds of men. Before he was delivered, he was, "the baby."

"We can't wait 'till the baby comes."

"This baby is so active! I feel him kicking."

But I did not attend "the baby's" funeral. I attended the funeral of Blaise, my cousin.

While You Were Gone

by Janet Gonzalez

I came home from the hospital and went straight to Josie's room where I cried in her arms for the first time.

It was about three in the morning that Saturday when I got the phone call. Mom said Dad had to take you to the hospital because you were not feeling well. "Ok," I thought, maybe you had a stomach bug, or your ulcers were acting up again. I have to be honest with you; I really didn't think it was a big deal. I understood you were in the emergency room, but to me you were a healthy twenty four years old. What could possibly be wrong?

When I later woke up that Saturday, I just went about my day. Now I feel extremely guilty because I should have been there with you at the hospital, but I still wasn't too clear about what had happened. I was at a birthday party when Mom called again and asked if I was going to stop by Santa Rosa Hospital to see you. I didn't even know you were still at the hospital.

"Sure," I said, "I'll be there in a bit".

"We're in ICU room number 4. Can you stop by the house and bring his cell phone," she asked.

"Ok, I'm on my way," I replied.

I remember all the questions running through my head as I drove home. What happened? Why were you still in the hospital; and why did they have you in ICU? I knew something serious must have happened. They don't keep you in the intensive care unit for a stomach bug.

I finally made it home. Dad was there watching Giselle and Laila. I asked him if Josie was with my mom in the hospital and he said yes, but she was on her way back. He would be heading out there too as soon as she got home. I got your phone from your room and headed to Santa Rosa.

I walked into ICU room number four. Everything seemed so crowded in there. The machines taking your vitals and the bed in which you laid seemed to be the only things that fit. I saw Mom sitting in one of the two plastic chairs against the left wall. She had her head down in her hand and was holding a plastic bag with your clothes in it. I stood in the doorway of the room looking at her for a while. What could be going through her head?

Then I turned and looked at you. There you were in this dark room, lying in that stale bed. You looked so pale and fragile just laying there. Your right arm was intertwined with wires from the machines. They had you set up on an IV, I assume to keep you hydrated.

You were asleep.

I don't know why, but all I could think about as I watched you sleep was us playing as kids. The way we used to play house during the day and stay up playing Nintendo at night. There you were three feet from where I stood, but I missed you so much. I finally sat in the chair next to Mom and she looked up and gave me a weak smile. She looked tired, too.

"So, what happened?" I asked her.

"He took some pills and I guess he took too many," she replied. "He came into the bedroom in the middle of the night and said he felt some pain so he took some Vicodin, but something didn't feel right. He felt dizzy and nauseated and wanted your dad to bring him to the hospital".

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I knew you had some Vicodin prescribed to you after your surgery, but what went wrong? Did you take more than you were supposed to, or did you mix it with some other prescription? I know Vicodin is a combination of two different pain relievers that can counteract with other prescription drugs. I remember my mom mentioning in the past that you were taking some antidepressant medication because of the affect your divorce had on you.

I thought maybe you had mixed the two medications, which caused a reaction to your body.

I don't know if you remember, but this is the part where you opened your eyes. Mom asked how you were feeling and you said much better. She handed you your phone and you told us you didn't want to be here anymore. You wanted to go to Houston with Jose.

"Ok," my mom said. "We'll drive you to Houston as soon as you get better."

I had so many questions, but I didn't want to ask you any because I didn't know where to start. So I asked the obvious, "What did they do to you?"

"They gave me charcoal so the Vicodin wouldn't enter my bloodstream," you replied.

"How long did they say you were going to be in here for," I asked.

"I can probably get out tomorrow if my blood test comes back negative," you answered. I was relieved to hear you weren't staying long, but I wished you were coming home that night.

I only stayed for about fifteen minutes because I knew my dad was on his way and they only allow two visitors at a time. I drove back to the house and went straight into Josie's room. I know you two are close and feel more comfortable talking to each other, so if anyone knew anything it had to be her.

"What happened, Josie? What did he tell you," I asked.

"He said he was online and saw Sofia's profile and she had a picture of her, the baby, and her new boyfriend with a heading that said 'My new family'. He said

he was so mad that he could literally feel pain weighing his body down. I guess it was too much for him to see her and his son with some other guy that he just started taking one pill after another.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“And then?” I asked.

“Well, by the time he realized it, he had already taken four pills and that's when he started to feel sick.”

“So he did it on purpose,” I asked with tears rolling down my face.

“I guess, but he said he didn't really think about it. He didn't realize what he was doing until after he had already taken the pills,” Josie replied.

I was crying pretty hard by this time.

“I just can't believe it, Josie; he could have died. Then what would we have done?”

“I know,” she said. “But he didn't, and he's really going to need our support more than ever now.”

I knew you were going through hard times with the divorce and fighting for J.V's custody, but I never imagined that you would have taken it to that level. The maximum amount of Vicodin that can be taken in a dosage is 1000mg. Each pill is about 750mg, and you took four pills. You took in 3000mg at one time.

We are all extremely lucky that Dad got you to the hospital in time before the overdose actually started to affect your body. Vicodin overdose can lead to sever liver damage, a slow heart rate, coma, and death. But thank God, you came home the next day feeling just a bit fatigued.

By trying to hurt yourself, you ended up hurting the people that love you most. I always thought the first day I'd run crying to my sister would be my wedding day or the day I graduate from college, but never the day my brother tried to overdose on Vicodin.

We all have a different story of what we were going through when you were in the hospital that day. This one is mine.

My Father's Disability

by *Melody Mejia*

"Your father told me to leave him. Can you believe that? After what we had just gone through, he wanted me to walk out the door and never look back," my mother spoke watching me through the rear view mirror, as the roadside captured itself through the backseat of my window. Blurry and colorful, the vivid images of trees and dirt mixing into a pool of color, I was hypnotized but still conscious and curious.

"But why Mom?" I asked with a pitch of a six year old questioning everything. I was seventeen and felt it only right to question my father's disability, the trip to Mississippi was long, and we had plenty of time to talk. For some reason now was the perfect time. I felt a sense of maturity within myself, after all those years of observing my father and acknowledging his disability. I always knew primarily by instinct not to question the way he walked, why he couldn't bend his left knee or why people stared as if they had never seen such a thing in their life.

"He was depressed, he thought I deserved better, he thought I wouldn't love him anymore." My mother's words broke as the rain began to hit the windshield and the wipers did their job of keeping the road visible. I began to trace the drops of water on my window as they streamed across to the other end reminding me of a race.

"Can you tell me why Mom, can you tell me how, when...everything?" I asked in hesitation. I didn't want my mother to have to recall the struggle her and my father had gone through, but as stubborn and curious as I was...I needed to know. My mother took a deep breath and with her eyes focused on the taillights of the car in front of us, she began to explain.

My mother told me how she had met my father in high school, after a few months of dating they decided to get married. "We were young and in love; we thought love was all we needed, really we did." My mother smiled. I smiled in return and signaled her to keep going. My mother was only eighteen years old, my father was twenty, it was 1973. After high school my parents moved to Meridian, Mississippi. She stayed at home while my father went out and worked in construction. He worked on the major highways and bridges in Meridian. A lot of his work was done standing up. When my father began to complain of his leg hurting my mother automatically assumed it was because of the long days at work. "I thought it was because he was always standing and because the weather was changing..."

She forced my father to go to a doctor and after getting x-rays done, the doctor noticed a spot in his left femur. A biopsy procedure occurred promptly

after his visit to see what exactly the spot meant. The results were not good. The doctor said the black spot was a tumor and he would have to amputate if he were to do the surgery. My parents were given the option of waiting for a second opinion and for a doctor who was specialized in that type of surgery.

* * *

Her words lingered as traffic began to clear up and as we passed the Mississippi state line, I found her smiling in relief. She never really liked driving, especially on highways to Mississippi. She refocused her attention and got back on track, she told me how the doctor sent out my father's information to three different state hospitals: Boston, New York, and Florida. "The weeks spent waiting for a response were difficult. Your father knew amputation was one option, but he hoped for another." After a month of waiting, a doctor at Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Florida was willing to help my father and made plans for my parents to make the trip out there.

My father could not drive and my mother did not know how to. "I had to learn how to drive in less than a week and get my driver's license. I put your father in the back of our Volkswagen, and he coached me through the highways...all the way to Florida." Her voice was full of excitement and anticipation, as if she were reliving that moment all over. She told me how they knew no one, just her and my father. When my father went into surgery, my grandfather had sent a priest to be with my mother.

As my mother exited the highway to stop for gas, I reflected on what I had learned so far. My mother was eighteen, one year older than me and she was already experiencing things I couldn't even put words to. I was seventeen, I considered myself still a child, sitting in the back seat to avoid the caving in of trees all along the interstate to Meridian. I made a big deal about having to do laundry and here my mother was going across the country with the love of her life, risking it all.

As the mile markers into Meridian began to indicate we were almost there, I was anxious to hear the rest of my parent's experience. "The doctor told us he wouldn't have to amputate your father's leg, but he would have a stiff leg." Before I could even ask what that meant my mother began to describe the procedure.

The doctors removed my father's left knee and femur bone, and they then took the bone from his lower calf and placed a metal rod through the hip bone down till his ankle. Pins were put into hold it in place. "Your father got about 140 stitches or more, I can't recall, but it was around that many."

I sat up in my seat. I was riveted to the edge, as far as my seatbelt would allow me to go forward I went, I was eager to know more. I had seen my father's leg when he would wear shorts around the house, but the lines that began at about

the pocket and peaked through the open skin all the way to his ankle were often hidden behind knee high socks. They were nothing more than lines. Scars are like old memories, past reminders of struggles, or moments in life that we have fallen, but ultimately have made it through. That's exactly what I thought of when I saw my father's leg, I knew it had significance. I knew it was a struggle he overcame.

* * *

When my father was recovering, the doctors informed him that after two years he could do almost everything. The only things he would not be able to do were the most obvious things that required the bending of the knee: running, riding a bike, sitting straight, and so forth. "During your father's recovery, he always wanted me to leave him, he didn't want kids... he didn't think you all would accept him." My mother's words began to break as if about to cry but she held them back. My mother stayed by my father every night at the hospital during his recovery, as much as his depression took up most of his thoughts, my mother made my father focus on getting stronger and getting back on his feet. "I thought if we worked together, we could beat all odds and your father would walk in no time."

After years of recovery, my father was back on his feet. He went to rehab to be able to become comfortable to this new change. He had to learn to step to the side only touching down the palm of his foot. One of his recoveries involved wearing an inflatable foot that went all the way up to his hip, it would inflate and help the healing process and to keep the swelling down. For some time my father used crutches for extra support and he was able to get back on both feet.

As we entered the city limits of Meridian, I stared at the highway structures and the bridges. I pictured my father working on one of them, throwing the cement down, and welding the rods for the structure. The cookie cutter shaped houses all lined the narrow roads that led us to my aunt's house, my mother took a drive along a scenic route, and I knew she still wanted to tell me more.

"Your father was a football star in high school. Did you know that?"

I looked up in confusion. My father had received a scholarship to play football in North Carolina at Elon University. "There was a reason why he didn't go and an even greater reason why we were in Mississippi." my mother said as we turned on to my aunt's neighborhood, I had only been to Mississippi twice before, but I knew very well where everything was.

There was a reason why my parents made their home in Mississippi, whether it was God's plan to place them there and then in the hands of good doctors or not, who knows how it would have been if they were in Texas, or if my father had

gone to North Carolina.

* * *

Ten years after my father's surgery, doctors called and informed him that he could have a knee replacement. He would have a knee put in to be able to bend and so forth, but my father refused. "He had grown so used to his leg." My mother added. Every now and then, when the weather changes, my father's leg will hurt him; he has to keep his leg elevated and try not to walk on it too much.

After he fully recovered, my father received his bachelor's in business, it took him ten years to complete, but he did it. Although he was disabled and didn't have to work, he and my mother moved back to Eagle Pass, Texas and he began working at the Post Office. My father has been working at the Post Office for twenty five years now, he does almost everything possible and in fact doesn't like when people pity him or see him differently. He has his limitations that came along with his disability, but he doesn't let that stop him from getting the job done.

* * *

As my mother finished up her story, I began to reflect. My siblings and I are more than blessed to have two parents willing to risk it all for the safety of the other. There are not enough words to show how much my mother has truly done to keep this family together and healthy. My father overcame all obstacles that came his way. God gave him his purpose, as a wonderful father. He does not need to work, but does it out of the sole purpose of keeping busy and more importantly proving himself and others wrong.

My parents were young, in love, and poor. Their times in Meridian were suppose to be about learning more about the real world and growing up and being married. Instead, my mother went from an eighteen year old girl to a woman capable of overcoming anything. My father the twenty year old athletic, hard working construction worker went from long days working out on the highways to a man who was self-conscience but persevered into a strong man. My parents waited ten years to have children and complete their college degrees. Their goals were driven primarily on faith and hope, they had faith they would make it through and hoped only for the best, no matter how bad a situation they were in.

* * *

My mother turned into my aunt's driveway. We had finally arrived. My

expected days in Meridian now felt more meaningful, I was eager to learn of my mother's "*roots.*" To where her and my father lived, the restaurant my father would go eat at on breaks when he claimed he ate the lunch my mother had prepared him, the church my parents went to, the place that thirty six years ago made my parents more than just a young married couple experience the wonders of life, the place that made them destined for one another.

My Grandmother, Rukmini

by *Kalpna Mukunda Iyengar*

I visited 22 West Park Road, Malleshwaram last summer. I had been invited to the birthday party of Geetha's cousin's granddaughter. It was celebrated at the Krishna temple where my cousins and I played as children. A vast quadrangular wall, dotted abundantly with Banyan, Mango, and Neem trees, encloses the temple. The tall stonewalls of the compound were covered with colorful rose creepers that looked beautiful in the hot sunlight. The old well where people dropped their manuscripts was still there. I remember retrieving a book and reading the word "Rama" written in it a million times. People still drop off their books there hoping to acquire some punya or good luck.

The huge banquet hall was an addition, built for large public functions and decorated with marble tiles and a raised wooden stage. It was perfect for weddings and other ceremonies. The demands of devotees who celebrated important events all year long may have pressurized the authorities to approve the expense of adding that new building in the temple premises. That birthday party, filled with happy sounds of children playing everywhere, was a perfect event for the hall, and its high ceiling allowed air to circulate freely as reflected by the women's vividly colored sarees fluttering in the slight breeze. I was especially thrilled to be part of the event because I could spend time with my favorite aunts; Geetha and Nagarathna. The sisters had decorated a cake with all kinds of dry fruits, which really looked delicious!

After the party, I had planned to go see my grandmother's house located nearby, in the corner of West Park Road. When the sun's rays began to lengthen the shadow and the heat of the day muted even the birdsong in the temple, I excused myself from the celebration and walked the few blocks to the home, so filled with loving memories and the presence of a formidable woman who shaped my life.

I went with the image in my memory, but was disappointed at the structure stood in front of me. For one last second, the ghost of what that location had been touched my sight, and then I only saw a multi storied colorful building with a basement full of foreign cars. Some rich man had bought the property, razed the original house, cemented and overgrown garden, and built a modern apartment complex with verandas and television antennas. No doubt he made a fortune on that investment because Malleshwaram is a gold mine for real estate. "Oh! 22, West Park Road and the memories..." I murmured.

The huge champak trees (Indian Magnolia) were gone; along with them went the memories of our childhood at that house. The old rusty, unapologetically ugly

wooden gate was replaced by modern metal barrier that secured the new compound. The big house that stood there was no longer a landmark. There stood an apartment complex instead with 18 houses piled up like boxes one on top of another. They all looked the same except the numbers were different. Anyone trying to locate a house with just the name would easily get lost.

We used to get lost in the old house, while we played Marakoti, a game of tag where one player chased others, even climbing on the trees. The new structures bright with colored paint, the fancy windows, the neat garage with sturdy pillars amazed me. It was difficult to think that such prosaic structures stood on the grounds where that mysterious, shadowed house had once dominated the street, beckoning all visitors to with its shades and hospitality, enshrining my grandmother's life and work on behalf of her younger daughter, Vatsala who was treated unfairly because of life's cruelty! It was difficult to believe the loss of my grandmother's home. The old house had been cool, shaded by vast trees, rustling with birds and other animals leading complex lives in the surrounding garden. The floors of the tiled house reflected ceiling in places 100 feet high. The ceilings echoed our voices when we used to run around the supporting pillars and hide from each other. The mango and guava trees in the backyard had always given us cool refreshment, and their sweet fruit had made our hands sticky when we were called to lunch. Where were the memories that we built into the fabric of that house that taught us life lessons?

I remember the clothes washing sessions in the backyard where the red room was situated. My grandfather, a tall, well-mannered, and extremely disciplined man, kept that room functional and organized. My mother had told me that it was used to boil onion for onion lovers because that vegetable was banned in my great grandmother's kitchen. It was also a place where we were sent on time-outs.

"There are bandicoots, a type of rodent," my grandfather used to say to scare me.

The huge house had but two bedrooms, one oversized living room, a verandah, a kitchen, and a pooja room (temple). The storeroom or pantry was complex and with many compartments; this was where I spent a lot of time during my trip to my grandmother's house. A banana branch full of unripe fruits that hung from the ceiling was covered with a white dhoti to keep the flies away. This was the children's preoccupation; how to eat all the fruits before they were ready to go. Our strategy was to annoy our grandmother and provide some opportunity for my grandfather to punish us by sending us to the red room. When forgiven, we had often managed to hide some fruit in the folds of our garments to be eaten far away from disapproving adult eyes.

My twin brother was the brain behind all the mischief! He looked subdued, quiet, calm, and refined, but that rascal got us into trouble all the time. I would steal the bananas until they were half gone, and pass them onto my two brothers quickly. We would collect them, and for about an hour have a feast at the red room. We ate so many fruits all at once; we often suffered from stomach ache and diarrhea the next day, but we would do it all over again several times a week. My grandmother found out in the evening when the servant came and told her of our mischief. Our lovely ajji (grandmother) would just warn us by telling us not to over eat, smile, and order more fruits be bought next day. This would go on for weeks until the "Hitler," our grandfather, the stern disciplinarian, found out. Each one of the fruit thieves would spend an hour in separate rooms without any communication. Or else one of us would sleep in the red room that night. It was painful for us to be separated for an hour and my grandfather knew it! I always ended up in the red room because I was the troublemaker and the rule breaker in the family. My grandmother was so sweet tempered that she would let me out after 30 minutes without her husband's knowledge.

However, the pancake dough episode disturbed her, especially when she found out that the dough was all dry on the floor. It was a tradition of most Iyengar families to pulverize dosa (pancake) and idly (dumpling) dough once a week. On one such day, when my grandmother lovingly had a batch ready to go the next day, the dough had been left to ferment naturally overnight. Grandmother would make dosas (pancakes or crepes) the next morning with potato filling in them. That was the most delicious breakfast ever.

It was a scorching summer afternoon with the shining black marble floor almost on fire. I had suggested to my brothers that we make the crepes on that floor to test the intensity of heat on the floor! I was also curious to watch the dough bake naturally without any fire. We had to wait until our grandmother took a nap in the afternoon. It was quiet in the house with just the refrigerator making gurgling noise periodically and the neighbor's cat meowing now and then. The front door was closed and it was perfect for our escapade. The afternoon was mellow with no automobile activity on the street. Three of us together transferred the dough vessel onto the marble floor. My twin brother, who was a patient boy sat on the floor and drew about 50 circles in all the squares of the floor. I even climbed onto the roof to have an aerial view by taking off one of the tiles. It looked like a board of chess with white circular pieces on it.

My grandmother was in for a big surprise that afternoon for forgetting to hide the dough from us. She would be surprised and gasp some phrase such as, "Did I not hide the dough!" "Ho! Ho! Wait until your grandfather finds out because he will not hesitate to skin you all alive!" A few minutes later she would

say, “On the contrary, what a lovely piece of art! Look at those symmetrical circles. How ingenious...” Indeed, when she saw the more than 50 flat circles of dough all over the floor, the floury footprints, the disheveled children and the lost dough that would be unavailable for the next meal, she seemed to be caught between laughter and dismay.

I don’t think you want to know what my grandfather did that evening when he found out. We were asked to stay up all night without any food, water, or bathroom visit. The clock struck 12 and we were wide awake, famished, and tired. Our stomachs were making noises and I was stiff without any movement. At 2 am, I saw my divine grandmother approach us with a basket full of ripe bananas; not the ones we stole, but the ones she had saved for her three brothers who visited her once a week. She gave us the bananas and left after she made sure that she collected the banana peel because she was positive that we would use them to make our punisher trip on them.

I recall my grandmother’s sister-in-law, Mani, once remark, “Rukmini, are Vatsala’s children here for a vacation? Krishnamurthy need not worry about boredom because he will be busy punishing them for a month now!”

My grandma would reply, “Maniamma, these children are brilliant; they need some direction and discipline and that is why Vatsala leaves them here!”

I do not understand why my grandmother never blamed us for those pranks. I can just say that she was lovable. Did the crepe episode stop us from further mischief? Not really. The next prank was enough to chase us away forever. My grandmother loved the mango tree in the backyard because it would yield the sweetest fruits in the whole community. The crop was enough to be shared with friends and extended family. She would protect the fruits from the birds and squirrels but failed to save them from her grandchildren. The poor lady would cover each and every fruit with an opaque plastic bag with little holes in them. We would slit open the bags, pluck the fruits, and place stones in place of the fruits so that our ajji would not get suspicious. She had no idea that we would disappoint her, yet we did. We never bothered to find out about her feelings when she discovered that the fruits that she had promised her family and friends had turned into stones!

According to Rukmini, the most touching incident was that of the missing coconut gratings episode. My grandma had a cook come once a week to make obbattu (an Indian sweet tortilla). The cook had to grate about 25 coconuts before he could make the dessert. Shastri was his name and he was a very kind old man. Kindness and Vatsala’s children did not go well together; they always exploited the virtue. He would grate those big coconuts for hours and we would eat half of the grated kernel by distracting him.

My grandma would say, “Shastrigale, can’t you yell, scare, or whip to get rid of those darlings?”

Shastri would repeat, “Rukminiyamma, if you cannot warn them, why should I? Moreover they are so cute together it is rather difficult to annoy them.”

Like our mother, Vatsala, our grandmother, Rukmini, never yelled at us although we tested her patience many times because she was simply incapable of rude behavior. That was my grandfather’s territory as the enforcer of discipline and order. Yet, Rukmini taught us much more by her tolerant behavior, because her love let us understand rules to be obeyed willingly from our hearts. The discipline that came to our minds and bodies later was then rooted in love and joy, not fear and avoidance. Rukmini was wise and long-sighted. If she lives only in our hearts, we have made sure the stories of that old house are told to our children today, and her words preserved in our teachings to the next generations. The old house, the mango tree, the red room and the whispering shadows are gone, but I wonder if when the sun drops below the horizon on hot summer days, a shadow moves through those little modern huts, looking for errant grandchildren and carrying a bunch of sweet bananas?

The Ugly Brown Shoes

by Sylvia G. Holmes

“The Cantu family has been in Texas since the beginning of time,” my mother often said. She was born in 1928, the same year the Milam Building on East Travis Street became the first air conditioned building in the United States. My mother was born near Poteet, the “Strawberry Capital of the World”. Mother grew up during the great depression and dropped out of school to help the family on the farm. Mother went as far as the second grade.

I have often heard people say “They grow them tough in Texas.” In my mother’s case I believe it is true. Just after the end of WWII, when mother was in her late teens, the Cantu clan moved from Poteet to the big city of San Antonio. My grandfather built a tiny seven hundred square foot bungalow on Division Street on the south side of town. Most homes did not have air conditioning. And, although their new bungalow had gas and electricity, it did not have indoor plumbing. It would be several years before plumbing made it to Division Street.

Less than a year after moving to San Antonio, my grandmother contracted polio and died. A year later, Maria, my mother’s older sister also passed away. Perhaps partly out of grief or just plain survival, grandfather took mother and her siblings to distant places like Colorado, Michigan, Montana and Ohio. He purchased a big Dodge truck. They became migrant workers. Mother told stories about their adventures from the huge bonfires near the Missouri river in Montana used to scare off grizzly bears at night, to the beautiful snowfalls in Aurora, Colorado, to crossing the mighty Mississippi.

Mother’s travels stopped when her siblings all married a few years later. Grandfather became a gardener in Alamo Heights. Mother worked at the Frito Lay Factory, peeling potatoes, or at the St. Anthony Hotel as a maid. In the autumn of 1952, at the Alameda theatre on Houston Street mother met my father. They married at Our Lady of the Angels Church.

I came along in June 1954, the eldest of six siblings. When astronaut John Glenn circled the earth, I was a second grader at Knox Elementary. My teacher, Ms Montgomery brought her brand new transistor radio to class so we could listen to the broadcast.

Soon after John Glenn’s historic flight in 1962, I came home from school announcing that I needed a new pair of shoes. Not only was my only pair of shoes totally worn, they had become too small for my feet. Since my parents did not own a car, mother and I took the transit bus downtown. We walked to the bus stop at the corner of S. Flores and Big Foot streets.

Across the street from the bus stop, there was an all night gas station. My father’s

second job was at this gas station. "Does father work tonight?" I asked mother.

"No, you know he only works there on Friday and Saturday nights," she answered.

I nodded. Mother sounded tired. The previous week, her electric iron had died. I am sure now that she was hoping to get a "new" second hand iron soon; in the meantime, she was making do. Mother cut the useless cord off her iron. She heated the iron on a heavy cast iron griddle or "*comal*" on the kitchen stove. Then she lifted the hot iron with an oven mitt and ironed all of our shirts and dresses. Instead of an iron, today we were buying new shoes for me.

We boarded the bus. I took a window seat. Mother sat next to me and closed her eyes. "We get off near the San Fernando Cathedral", she said. Let me know when we get there".

I did not have to wake her. She was ready for us to get off at the corner of W. Commerce and Soledad. I assumed our destination was Solo Serve, a really nice modern store, but instead mother and I walked west on Commerce Street. Disappointed, I quietly tagged along. We entered *La FERIA* department Store. A sales lady greeted us.

"She needs shoes. I want you to measure her foot," mother said.

I was hoping for some shiny black patent leather "Mary Janes." Instead, the sales lady brought out the ugliest looking brown lace up shoes I had ever seen. "These are what all the girls are wearing now", she said to mother.

"I do not go to Catholic school," I said. "I go to Knox Elementary, and none of the girls I know wear shoes like this," I continued.

"You do not like the shoes," mother said to no one in particular.

"Of course she likes them," the sales lady remarked as she put them on my feet. "Walk around, do they fit?" she asked.

"Um, ah huh," I nodded. Of course they fit, you measured my feet, I thought to myself.

"Alright, we have a bus to catch. We will take them," mother said.

On the way to the bus stop, I sulked. I dragged my feet; I even stepped on a piece of gum on purpose. Mother, tired, hot and thirsty hurried me along. On the crowded bus, a man gave up his seat for her. I stood feeling sorry for myself, watching the world go by.

The next day, a Friday, I wore the shoes to school. A classmate asked if these were my new shoes. "Yes, but we are taking them back," I said matter of factly.

That evening, father came home late. His car pool buddies dropped him off drunk. He fell asleep on the couch and missed work at the gas station that night.

The next morning, he was picked him up for a half day of work on Saturday.

As soon as father left, our neighbor who was also our landlady came over.

“Did you hear the news? The corner gas station was robbed last night,” she said.

Since we had no telephone, when father came home, he rushed over to the gas station. Father ran all the way back home; out of breath he exclaimed, “The gas station was robbed by three punks. My coworker gave them all the money. On the way out, one of them shot him. He died instantly!”

Mother cried. One of the few times I have seen my mother cry. “You are not going back. We will make do,” she said.

We did not exchange my ugly brown shoes. I still hated them. And, every chance I got, I mistreated and abused them. Next year, I told myself, I would get pretty shoes.

Soon after, we moved to a smaller house in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. We made new friends. Best of all, we lived near my grandfather’s house on Division Street and my baby brother John would be born in July. When my mother took John for his first baby checkup, grandpa, *Abuelito*, babysat us. He put all the little ones down for an afternoon nap except me and my seven year old brother

“So, you will be in third grade soon,” he said to me. “And you will be in second grade,” he said to my brother as he sipped a cup of afternoon coffee.

We both nodded as we sipped our Kool-Aid under a huge pecan tree in the back yard.

“Did you know that your mother only went as far as the second grade? She quit going because I could not afford to buy her any new shoes. She went to school barefooted a couple of days. When her classmates laughed, she begged not to go back,” he continued.

School started in September. Suddenly, not having pretty shiny shoes was no longer as important to me. I had an epiphany; there were other people much worse off. From that point on, my shoes were always polished and clean.

Identity

by *Arthur Vargas*

My brother Alexander and I are identical twins. The stereotype of identical twins is that we are exactly alike – that is, we look alike, we dress in matching outfits, we share the same likes and dislikes. Despite our shared genetic component, identical twins are very unique individuals. Though we do share similarities, we also have many differences. Living the life of a twin isn't quite what one would expect. It is true; Alexander and I looked exactly alike. We both have curly, brown hair that matches our deep brown eyes. We have the same crooked smile and same rounded face. But, if you pay close attention, you would realize that Alexander is slightly taller, probably about an inch. The shape of his head is oval, which gives him the extra height. But nobody really paid attention to what either one of us looked like.

Of course, dressing alike only added to the confusion. For as long as I could remember, my mother took advantage of the “buy-one-get-one-free” sales. Either we were too poor to afford our own clothes or too freaky for anyone to care. Other kids were drawn to the two of us; just like being at the circus, crowds staring in bewilderment and making rude comments.

It was a challenge to make friends and really easy to make enemies. Nobody knew us by our individual names; instead we were nicknamed “The Twins.” For anyone who picked on us, they were up against two, nobody dared to mess with us. So, it was just my brother and me. We protected each other; we were the other's body guard.

Alexander and I spent almost every moment of our lives together. We were inseparable. We were always seen as one unit, misfits from afar. We embraced the very nature of being different; however we both yearned to be separate from each other. It was inevitable.

While most twins grow up in the same home environment, there are many circumstances that created differences in our appearances, personalities, and interests, especially as we approached our teen years. It seemed as if we desperately were seeking to establish different qualities in order to establish our own individual identities.

Each of us grew an interest in academics, Alexander in Science and me in Mathematics. We both did well in Grammar and English. We began to define ourselves by our involvement at school. I joined the Math Team, while Alexander entered Science Fair competitions. It seemed; however, that our academics drew us both back to each other and we were both forced to enroll in the same Honors Program.

At the time, there was only one Honors class for each subject, so we

ended up in the same classroom. At least we were able to make new friendships with students of equal caliber, but we were still met with double glances and unnecessary snickers. Welcomed into a new world, Alexander and I watched over each other once again. In fact, I recall taking his math test in return for him taking my science exam. Sure, we wanted to escape from one another, but we watched out for each other still the same.

As graduation drew near, we anticipated going away to college; but with our parents pursuing a divorce, we both made the decision to join the United States Air Force. Once again, we were back to dressing alike in camouflage and dress blue uniforms along with our military crew haircut.

Serving together may have been complicated for others, but it made our bond even stronger, one that would eventually have to be broken. After training was complete, it would be the first time we separated from one another. We were free to live independently away from one another. We were free to find our own identity.

Alexander got stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi and I received orders to Denver, Colorado. We spent almost every week writing to each other and sharing our individual experiences, but it felt really good to finally live in my own world, make my new friends, and define my life for me. Though I never did bring him up in conversation, I missed having him by my side.

Almost six months passed since I had last seen my brother. One cold afternoon, I boarded a shuttle bus to the dining hall. I walked by a group of three airmen huddled next to each other. They all gave me a look of anticipation. Sitting two rows behind them, I noticed they all were staring back at me, whispering and pointing in my direction. "Vargas, come over and sit with us," one airman said waving me towards him. I wondered how he knew my name. He must have seen my nametag when I walked passed them. I walked over to them feeling somewhat awkward.

Vargas, don't you remember, it's me Johnson. And this is Davis and Jenkins. Remember? We were in training school together."

"I don't remember you guys. I'm sorry." I said in confusion. Perhaps we did train together, but I didn't recognize them at all. "What Unit are you from?"

"The 333rd Communications Training Squadron, Keesler Air Force Base" they replied in unison.

"Oh! You have me mistaken for Vargas, Alexander Vargas." I smiled.

"But you're him, you're Vargas." Jenkins said adamantly.

"Well, I am, but I'm not. I'm his twin brother, Arthur. Vargas." I said in relief.

It was at that moment I realized that there was no escaping the fact that I am

a twin. Though we continue to live our own separate lives, I have found pride in sharing with others that I am a twin and that I am every part of his identity as he is mine.

Rainbows

by Sylvia G. Holmes

*Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun . . .*

It is July 1974.

It is a typical hot southern Texas day and it is our very first day of USAF basic training. I and forty-nine other young women from all over the United States begin six weeks of basic training at Lackland AFB, in San Antonio, Texas. We aspire to become Airmen. We are assigned to the 3709th Air Training Wing. We stand on a cement drill pad. A uniformed man and woman stride towards us. They dress impeccably with sharp blue uniforms, chests full of medals, and taps on their shoes that click smartly as they approach us. They wear "Smokey the Bear" ranger hats which signify to us immediately that they are training instructors, TIs.

"Any of you morons have high school marching band experience?" the man asks.

A few brave souls raise their hands. I realize we belong to these two people with the ranger hats. "Keep your head down and make yourself invisible" are words I suddenly recall from my recruiter.

"Fall in, Fall in," he yells.

Hastily, I scurry behind a taller person. The woman takes over now.

"ATTENTION," she says in a loud voice full of authority.

I notice the marching band types quickly assume the position of attention: heels brought together smartly, toes pointing outward in a forty five degree angle. I stand there and watch.

"March," the man shouts from deep within his diaphragm, only it came out sounding like "HUT" with a short vowel sound that is stretched out for a couple of seconds.

"What's *Hut*?" My neighbor from Montana whispers.

I giggle; someone else is as bewildered as I am.

"HALT"

The male Training Instructor walks around to the rear of the formation where I am standing, frozen stiff with fear.

"WHAT'S SO FUNNY?"

Dead silence. "Shoot, I screw up in the very first hour!" I think to myself.

All fifty of us immediately sense danger. It is our first day, but already instinctive survival mode takes over. Although they call us *rainbows* because we still wear our civilian clothes, our "civvies", we already are a sisterhood. We are like

a patchwork quilt, stitched together, with a common thread created in the cities, small towns, and farms all over America. We range in age from the youngest at seventeen to the eldest at thirty-four. We stand in the hot sun while he yells at us. His name is TSgt C____; her name is SSgt B____ and as far as we believe, they are GOD. They have the power to make our lives miserable, the power to send us to hell and back. The power to makes us wish we had never enlisted.

Somehow, I absorb what he says. Our entire flight, for that is what *they* call us as a group, listens and learns. Sometimes we learn through trial and error other times it is through osmosis, but we do learn. Soon, we are marching across the highway to the other side of Lackland. We go over the "Gateway to the Air Force" pedestrian bridge to a place called clothing issue where we trade in our civilian clothes for uniforms and military shoes.

That evening as we spit shine our shoes we chat and visit. The TIs go home; yes, they actually have another life. The fifty of us will live in spanking brand new dorms. We are left alone at night. Once in a while, there will be a surprise visit by an inspector or a fire drill at 0200, but for the most part, we are left alone at night. There are two bays of twenty-five beds each. There is a metal folding chair and a metal locker at the head of each bed. All of our civilian clothes have been locked up in storage for six weeks.

My bed is next to a woman from Montana. She arrives wearing jeans, cowboy boots, western shirt, and a turquoise and silver belt buckle. She and I hit it off right away. While I visit with her, I contemplate about the Lewis and Clark expedition. Here is someone who actually lives near the great falls of the Missouri river. I try to imagine the journey to the Pacific Ocean; I think of Astoria, Oregon, and the Columbia River gorge.

What kind of woman enlists in the military in 1974? After all, it is an all volunteer force, but we are women. The draft did not apply to us anyway, so why now? We come from all walks of life. Our flight is made up of young teenagers fresh out of high school. We also have a few college graduates unable to find employment; divorcees starting over; and, even some married women with Air Force husbands who feel a second income will be very nice, indeed.

Are we pioneers? The word pioneer brings to mind a certain independent, rugged type. Not unlike the men and women who trek across America on their way to California or the Pacific Northwest in Castanoga wagons. People like the infamous Donner party who become trapped in a mountain pass at the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. They were taking a shortcut to Sutter's Fort in California. Many of the Donner party members perish, others resort to cannibalism, and their goal is to stay alive. Everything else including their values is left behind.

Are we feminists, trying to make a point? Do we want equal pay for equal

work? Are we trying to break the “glass ceiling”? What is our goal?

I do not know. I know one married woman is almost thirty-four years old, clearly she appears an “old woman” to the youngsters. She gets sick very early on. She goes to sick call; the rabbit dies. She comes back in tears; she is pregnant. She cries because this is her last chance. Next year, she will be too old. “I came in just got under the cut off,” she laments. We help her pack her things. There is not much to pack, her uniforms will stay. We hug her. She is discharged. We never see or hear from her again.

There is another pregnant one. She is young, pretty, and happy. When she calls her boyfriend, he tells her he will marry her. She is going home somewhere in the Midwest – Iowa or Nebraska, I do not remember. She is not sad at all.

Why do I enlist?

I grew up in San Antonio, otherwise known as Military City, USA. Although no one in my family is in the military, we live near the Air Force bases. Many high school classmates are drafted in the Army. I have girlfriends whose brothers die in Vietnam. I choose to ignore the horrors of War. Instead, I focus on Orville and Wilbur Wright’s Kitty Hawk accomplishments. I read about Charles A. Lindbergh’s famous flight across the Atlantic Ocean. I am fascinated by John Glenn’s orbit around the earth. I am fascinated by airplanes; by anything to do with flight. At one time, I apply for an airline stewardess position, but at five feet two inches, I am too short.

The same month that I visit the Air Force recruiter and take my ASVAB tests, I visit USAA, on Broadway, and Southwestern Bell, downtown near the Memorial Auditorium. All three call; I choose Air Force; and that, as Robert Frost says, “Has made all the difference”.

It is August 8, 1974. We are halfway through basic training. President Richard Nixon resigns. We do not know this. We are somewhat sequestered; we have mail call, but no newspapers and no television. On weekends, we are able to call home. However, the next day, in our military history class, we learn we have a new commander-in-chief. Gerald Ford becomes the 38th president of the United States; survival is our only lasting thought.

“If my daughter ever joined the military, I would disown her. I would wish she die,” a coworker tells my father. My mother writes this to me. My mother cannot write in English; she dictates this information to my younger sister. I read the statement slowly. I realize this statement from a very mean person hurts my father. Years later, he will be proud; but at the moment he is confused, not sure what to think. I remain focused. The end is in sight.

We learn Air Force doctrine, drill and ceremony, first aid, military etiquette, military bearing, military history, and the Law of Armed Conflict. We learn how

to take care of each other by making splints, administering CPR, but it will be a few years before a USAF woman is allowed to accomplish the obstacle course, shoot an M-16 weapon and march together in a flight with her male counterpart during basic training in San Antonio, Texas.

Graduation day is upon us. Proudly, we salute the colors while the National Anthem plays. We march perfectly in precision across the parade grounds, pass the reviewing stands, keeping cadence with the band's drum. I get a lump in my throat, not unlike the Olympic gold medal winners on television when they hear their country's anthem. We are Airmen.

I did it; we did it. I am happy, proud. We are happy, proud. Are we trailblazers?

Trailblazers imply an image of someone like Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. They set off into uncharted territory to explore and discover a new frontier. During WWII, too, women serve in the Women's Army Corp. Unlike them, after basic training, we will receive training as Air Passenger Specialists, Medical Technicians, Security Forces, Aircraft Mechanics, Aircraft Loadmasters, and Air Traffic Controllers; we will train alongside the men.

Perhaps, we are neither trailblazers nor pioneers. We are simply women searching for a better life. Men are doing this, too. Often, we are scared and bewildered; we are courageous young men and women – otherwise known as *Rainbows* in the United States Air Force.

Fort Phoenix A Memoir on the Effect of the Drug Cartel Violence in Juarez

by Nancy Realyvasquez

My first home clearly resonates the sturdy four walls that held up the roof of my early existence. With a strong wooden door, I never feared the troubles that invaded the world. It was my place of safety, my place of laughter, tears, and innocent youth. But, *mi Hogar*, my home, now can barely be seen among the weeds of abandonment and behind the eight foot high brick walls that protect it. Looking through the memories of my heart, I reflect on the outcome of my home. A fort it has become. Reborn under the dust, amidst the headlines of a bloody war, my memories of home prevail.

I could hear my mom making her famous breakfast. Rolling the tortillas, she would lay the sweet taste of butter across them. On snowy days, I'd help my mother make *atole*, what I would call the sweetest soup a child could ever eat. I can still feel the tingle down my throat of warm love. Running outside to play, I grabbed my father's winter boots which always were and still are too big for my feet. He often worked fourteen hour days, so this was my way of missing him. It was my way of knowing that his place, no other could fill. I threw my snowball at my brother, as we laughed at the cold flakes that ran down our collars inside our layered sweaters. Our fingers were numb, but we didn't care. We knew home would always be warm and safe.

Near Juarez, Mexico, is where *mi hogar* still stands. Take a trip, along the main road and go south into the towns, pass the towns and still one more town, down into the fields where crops surround all around. The city lights have diminished as the stars shine brighter. At *60 kilometros por hora*, it's about thirty minute drive from the Juarez border. The smell of fresh fields embellishes nature at its best. My garden of Eden is San Isidro Labrador, Chihuahua, Mexico; the green sign marks the land. *Mi hogar* is further ahead on the right. The entire block belongs to my family. Across from my home is Dona Clarita's home, my great grandmother. Across from her, is my uncle's home, beside it, my home, and on the right is my aunt's. In the middle of this *cuadra*, or block, was the big taller, the mechanic shop, with dozens of tractors surrounding it ready to plow the hundreds of acres behind my family name.

Today is *el 15 de Mayo*. It's *el Dia de San Isidro*. We are celebrating the patron saint of the town, the saint for all farmers and those who live the life of agricultural farming. It's 4 A.M., we all knew what we had to do. I wrap myself in a large warm blanket, the sun hasn't come out yet. My little brother grabs his jacket as he follows my dad into the tractor. It was custom and expected for the son to follow in the footsteps of the father someday. Like my dad had followed his. This

is how it is written; my small silly brother grins slyly wearing my dad's John Deere cap too big for his small head sitting beside my father. The rest of the men in my family and the worker men each take a tractor and take it down to the baseball field where the annual praising of God and San Isidro will be held in a mass. I wait for my mother in the car as she brings in my baby sister asleep wrapped in large warm blanket. We can hear the sounds of the *matachines*, the tribal dancers or soldiers of faith as they have come to be known, with their loud thumping drums, dancing while their instruments shake the entire small town, waking up everyone to come. The thumping became the heart beat of San Isidro. It even became mine.

We watch the *matachines* dance their hearts onto the soil of the field with images of the Virgin Mary on their cloaks and the rosary dangling from their necks. Their bright red aprons and headbands catch the attention of everyone, even my little sister who has now opened her little eyes to the heartbeat embedded into the roots. Even the *matachines* have a similar generation to generation tradition. The smallest *matachines* dancer watches his grandfather pound the dirt with his feet in the line ahead. The smell of the surrounding fields of alfalfa and sorghum freshen the brisk moment of sunrise. The patron saint, San Isidro, statue stands in the front, as the priest gives mass and blesses all the tractors aligned behind us. What appeared as hundreds of us to my little eyes, we stand and pray, holding our loved ones close, trying to keep warm. The mass always began at 5 AM ending right after the sunrise. We could never forget the feeling of holy water landing on our bowed heads, feet, and soil as the warmth of the sun blessed all it touched. We could feel the heat of the Holy Spirit and the presence of life's simplest miracles. After mass, I remember the hot taste of spicy, homemade *menudo* flowing down into the pit of my stomach and the sweet taste of freshly made *biscochos*, small sugar and cinnamon cookies. As the taste of donated time, love and sacrifices filled our stomachs, our cheers and overwhelming blessings of life filled the air, as we all laughed and talked about what we had done throughout the entire year.

BLOODSHED IN JUAREZ, the newspapers flash photographs of drug cartel violence all around the city. Young and the innocent shot and left to die in their own homes and on the streets. The violence of Juarez brought fear into the smaller towns. Everyone in the city comforts their thoughts in the logical sense that the "bloodshed" is only expected on those that are guilty. There was not a concern for the innocent being hurt, yet. My family, through much sacrifice and generations of hard labor, had earned the respect and honest capital profit of reaping what you sow. My family's sweat, repetitive generosity, and humble occupation would soon see the "bloodshed".

On hot summer days, when we weren't in school in El Paso, the sounds of my mother's Motown and Oldies music played as we cleaned our home. My mother, native of Phoenix, Arizona, brought Phoenix to *mi hogar*. While my mother learned Spanish, and, me, speaking mostly Spanish, I didn't know much

about the lyrics of her music, but I sure loved to hear my mother's voice sing along to it. My mother and I would make tasteful Mexican dishes, four courses, fresh homemade *chile*, *salsa*, and warm *tortillas*. Sometimes, we would wrap up the food and take it to my father, who was working on reaping the fruits of the fields. He always gave me the chance to ride in his tractor on the passenger seat as he picked up the wheat. I remember how the tractor embraced the gold dry wheat leaving behind perfect fertile soil. On other days after our chores, my brother and I had many friends lingering outside, all the kids on the block anxiously waited for us to come out and play. At times, they would even help us clean our yard, so we could finish faster. My mother would call us all in for an ice cream cone, any or all three flavors we wanted. All the kids on the block loved our ice cream days. I loved those ice cream days.

"*Secuestros en Juarez*," Kidnappings, there's been rumors, rumors that they will take my grandfather, or my father for ransom. What! But Why? I couldn't understand. My family was not involved in the drug war of Juarez. I had to force my 21 year old self to tell that inner child that innocence has no power; it is not a symbol of safety; it did not matter. The drug cartels anxiously looked for respectable people they could take money from. The "bloodshed" began on the innocent. The drug cartel knocked on many doors of the town, asking for set taxes. They drove around in black sport utility vehicles without license plates, in sunglasses and dark clothing. They knocked on our door.

In the following months, we would visit San Isidro in fear, making sure we returned back to the United States before sundown. My father quickly sent out an order to have 8 foot high brick walls surround the entire block, with large gates, locks and barbed wire with cut glass. It quickly became evident to us that it wasn't starting to feel like home anymore. It was only a matter of time when my father received the same rumor from someone else. This time, we never returned, not even to pack up our childhood belongings. Like the explosion at Pompeii covered in ashes, our house, our dishes, our pictures still continue to collect dust as it freezes the moment of injustice, abandoned.

The San Isidro church burned down that year. I remember I made my first communion there over ten years ago. My parents also got married there. It burned without a reliable cause; it was an omen to the ghostly "knock" that would soon haunt the heartbeat of the town. The church burned to its last brick, leaving only the temple's crucifix that used to stand so high. Before "the knock" came, we were in the process of remodeling our *hogar*. Some walls inside were being torn down, my mother always wanted a dining room. We had agreed to repaint our walls to cover our crayon and pencil marks that we left on the walls along with the leftover sticker residues of our childhood.

Mi hogar, our fort, still stands behind the eight foot high brick walls, with barbed wire on the top. The new bought bucket of paint is sealed in the back

room storage that used to be my room. One window is cracked from an empty beer bottle. The wooden front door reveals cracks, and the padlock rusts without any prints. The paint weathers away and the wooden door can barely open because of all the dirt piled underneath. The sticker residue and the crayon stains mark hieroglyphs of a previously happy existence within the fort. Nobody was taken for ransom, but the “knock” of possibility ticks injustice and fear in the men I admire the most, my father and grandfather. The fort, *mi hogar*, stands as strong as it can, withstanding the test of time and evilness.

Over time, my father and grandfather have paid friends to go retrieve some of the priceless items in our home, along with tools, parts and the tractors to begin a new life here. The tractors left tire imprints, as they now sit in United States territory where my family is now attempting to recreate generations of a lifestyle. The pictures that warmed up our walls of love in the home left white spaces of absence, as they now sit in piles of boxes in our storage. My home sacrificed its entire state of purpose to the nostalgic memories of my childhood. Even though, my physical presence doesn't step into those doors, I realize my memories reborn, never forgotten. Against all odds, *sigue siendo mi casa*, *Mi hogar* is still my home, a fort of sacrifice.

A single river, the Rio Grande, politically splits the lands that God made the same. I look across the river and look back at that baseball field that for a bird is really a glide away. The hum of my grandfather, father, and brother's tractors bear the fruits of United States soil. The “knock” could not empower the beating of the heart, the *matachines*, and my memories. Like the other protector in my life, my mother, native of Phoenix, the bird that is always reborn amidst its own ashes of destruction, my Phoenix reborn, shields and relives my childhood every day. Though the “knock” blew missiles and injustice at my fort, *mi hogar*, along the roads of Juarez, Mexico, it stands and stands strong winning over my life's purple heart.

Running my hands across the tall alfalfa grass in our new fields, I look across the river, and I remember.

The Strange White Veil

by *João Zampier Neto*

It was 1999. I was 10 years old. It was the first time in my life that I saw that strange and cold white thing falling from the sky, so slowly, like it was dancing a sad song.

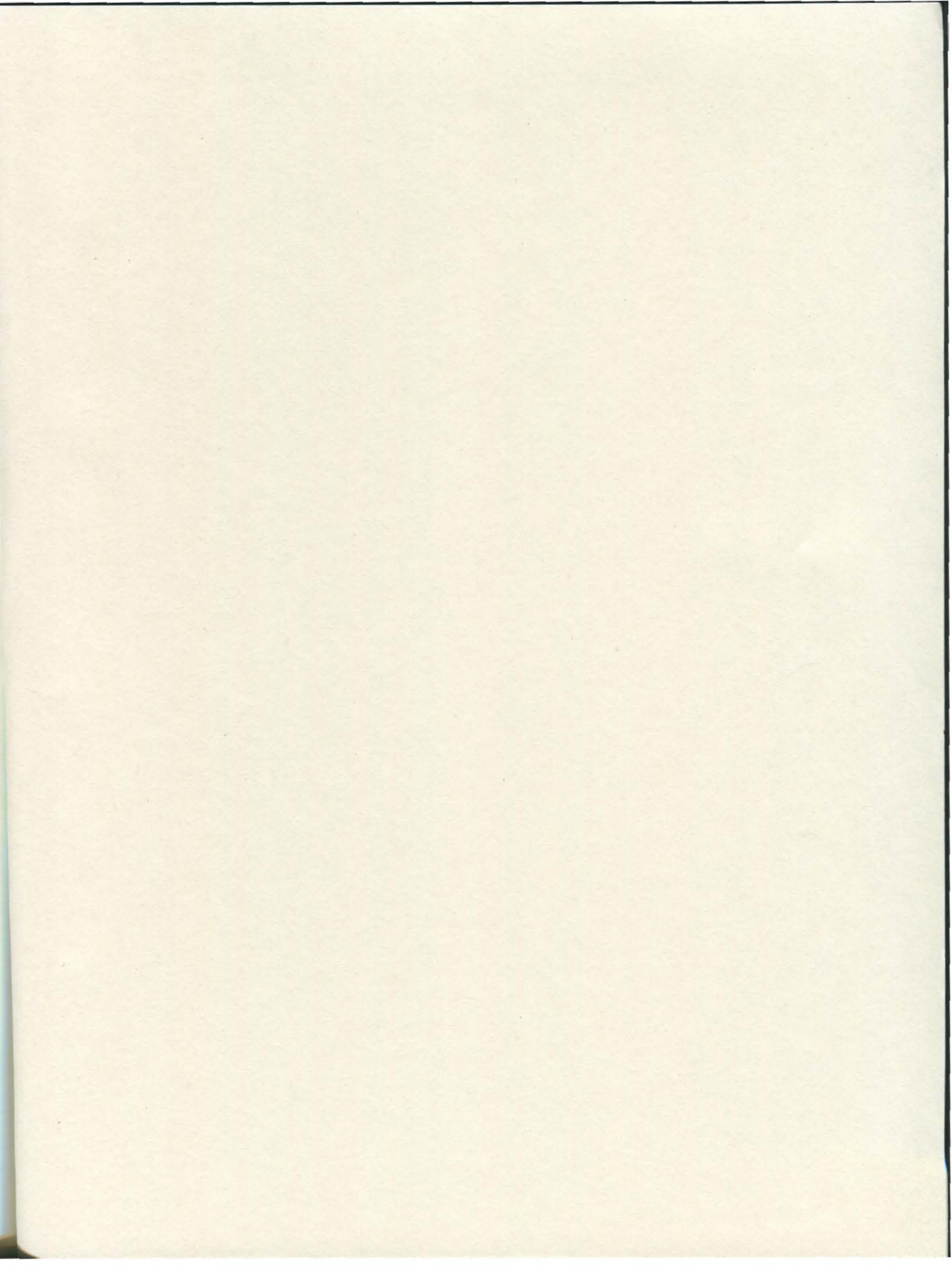
My family and I were traveling all together in the winter vacations. It was a car trip. We down the mountain to the south of Brazil, to the state called Santa Catarina. It was a long trip, and we all were expecting the same thing. My father was the driver, and my mother was in the passenger seat. My brother, my grandmother and I were in the back seat. It was a long time ago, and I was just a child, but I still can remember those days. During the long trip my grandmother, mother of my mother, told us a lot of stories about the day that the white thing fell from the skies on our city. She was a child. I remember that I couldn't think my own grandmother as a child, but still that story fascinated me. She said that everybody went outside the houses to see that beautiful veil, so white, so soft, and so magical. She told us that the white thing never fell on our city since that day. It was the first and the last time. My brother and I were fascinated and very excited to see it, to touch it. We couldn't wait anymore.

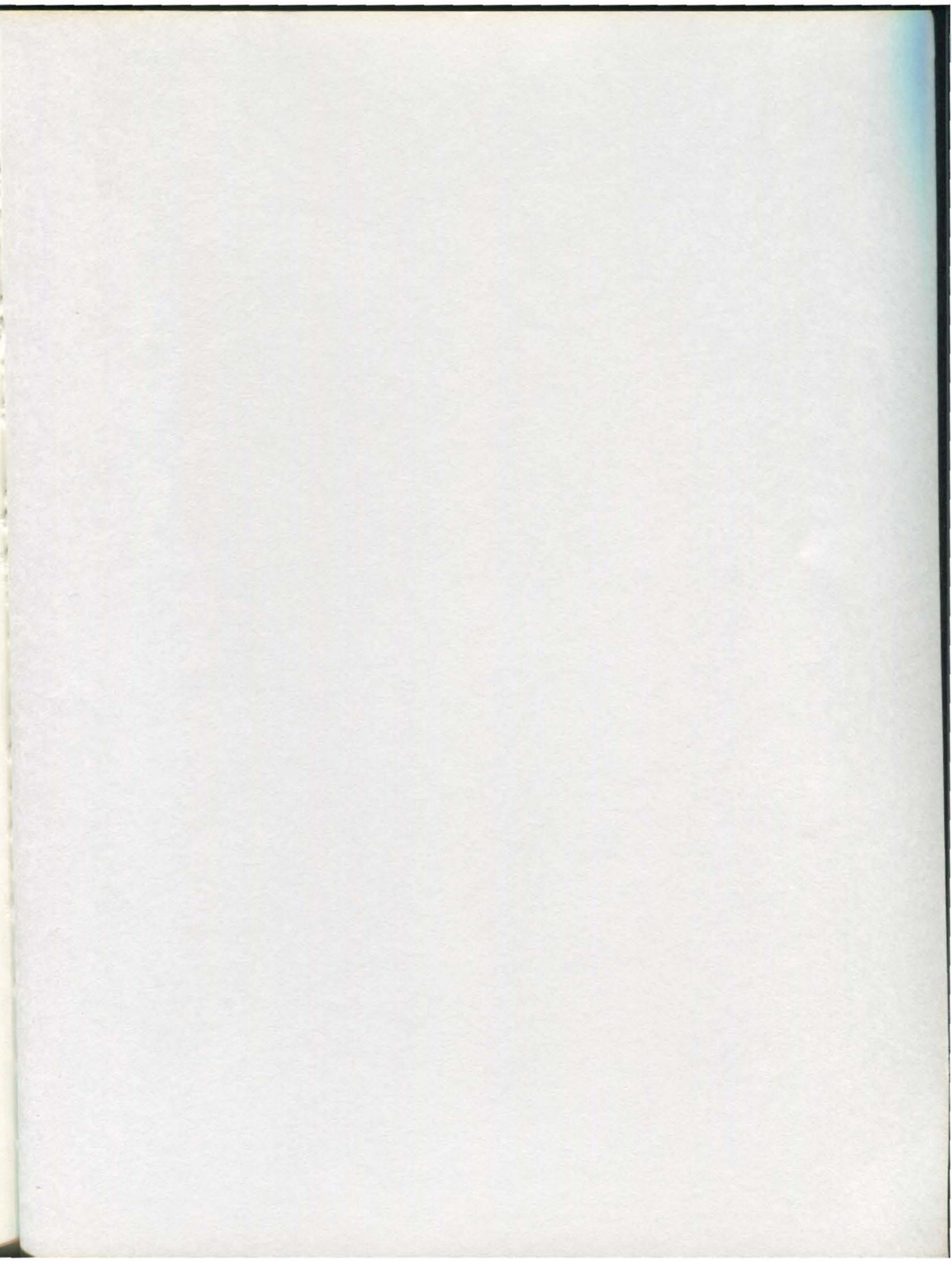
After travel for an eternity – and for a child each minute inside a car seems to be an eternity – we arrived in the city, the only city in the whole country that the white and strange thing falls from the skies every year. The city, called Sao Joaquim, was crowded of people from everywhere. They were also waiting to see the snow. After hours looking for a hotel we discovered that all of them were full. There was only one hotel, very old and scary. It was located in downtown. We decided to take a chance. Then we discovered that there was only one bedroom. As we had no choice, we decided to stay there.

Inside the hotel bedroom there were only two beds but fortunately four mattresses. The telephone didn't work, and it was very hard to open the door of the bathroom. That bedroom was so little, and it was difficult for us to find a place to put the luggage. As I can remember, the bedroom didn't smell very well either. The walls were stained, the window was dirty and it was very cold inside that place.

At midnight everybody was sleeping. Even though I was very excited to see that white thing, I slept very fast. At six in the morning I wake up with a strong noise. It was my grandmother opening the window. It was snowing! I ran to the window. It was snowing! Everybody left the room. It was snowing! There were snowflakes falling from the skies. The snow was over everything. Cars, trees, houses, streets, and including over me. We were fascinated. I look to the sky and that white thing was falling, was sort of dancing, following the wind, so slowly.

It was a great experience for me and after that day I never saw the snow anymore until 2008, when I traveled, now alone, to Vancouver, Canada. Over there I was able to see the snow again. Over there I remembered those days with my family. Child's memories that I shall never forget – the white and cold veil covering everything, including me.





The background of the image consists of several vertical stripes of varying widths and colors. From left to right, the colors are orange, yellow, a dark blue/black, and a lighter blue. The stripes are slightly blurred, giving the image a soft, abstract appearance.

St. Mary's University