



Pecan Grove Review

St. Mary's University Volume XVII



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Pecan Grove Review

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Table of Contents

Poetry

Luke Villafranca American Dream.....	11
Diane Gonzales Bertrand Sonata for Solo Viola.....	14
Claudia Cardona Werewolf.....	15
Matthew Keller The Pardoner.....	16
Benjamin Schweers That Time of Year Again.....	18
Valeria R. Garza Star Falling U.....	19
Angela Sobery Four-Feet.....	20
Christina Santoyo The Elder Song.....	21
Casey Dunn Cotton Candy.....	22
Jesse Durovey Tears in the Dark.....	23
Matthew Keller Wrap Your Fingers Around A Star.....	24

Diane Gonzales Bertrand	
Improvisation on a Melody in F.....	26
Benjamin Schweers	
The Difference Between Falling and Jumping.....	27
Casey Dunn	
Kadupul Flower.....	28
Angela Sobery	
Drum Stick Twirl.....	29

Fiction

Jessica Noyola	
CR 1889.....	32
Jesse Durovey	
Closer than We Appear.....	33
Diane Gonzales Bertrand	
The Wishbone Pin.....	37
Camille Stecker	
Bacodas.....	39
Valerie Sartor	
Beauty Shop Politics.....	40
Marina Flores	
Before That.....	42
Breanne Pardo	
The Neighbors.....	44
Camille Stecker	
Gold Mule.....	46

Oscar Salinas	
My First Sin.....	49
Camille Stecker	
Papa John’s on the Siberian Steppes.....	58
Valerie Sartor	
Russian Rescue.....	61
Marleyne Hernandez	
Sad Ghosts Club.....	64
Jessica Noyola	
Socializing for the Socially Awkward.....	70
Alex Z. Salinas	
Diapers.....	73
Camille Stecker	
Momo’s Flowers.....	74
Samire Adam	
I am My Father’s Daughter.....	76
Sofia Zenetta	
Trees Trace a Sea of Green and a Memory.....	81
Angela Sodebery	
Fire Gods at War.....	83
Alex Z. Salinas	
Sorry, Not Sorry.....	85
Jessica Noyola	
Expression of Self.....	87

Non-Fiction

Jesse Durovey

Taking a Steam Hose to the Reader's Heart: An Aristotelian Response to Randall Jarrell.....90

Poetry

American Dream

Luke Villafranca

I visited the grave of the Mexican border-crossing boxer turned sworn-in Army paratrooper turned Dream Act American at the Fort Sam National Cemetery yesterday.

The people still talk about that master in the ring. If the play is the thing, here's the thing, player —

He had speed and power, brains and brawn. He could crack like twenty-one gunshots to the sky.

In the good old days when my stable mate first punched me, I felt his animalistic fury, his steady stare. I thought What the fuck am I doing here? His quiet anger and shared fear of the future thrown into a ring with me.

Crack!

His solid shots to my head and body. One-Two back to back.

Crack!

Boxing gave him an alter ego within the law. I saw stars for the first time. Kaleidoscopic red, white, and blue flashed behind my clenched eyelids when his glove cracked my jaw, leather scratched my skin. I tried to fight to salute him again and again.

Crack!

Bodyshot like a baseball bat to my ribs. More pain to my brain. Salud to rocky thoughts I remember —

End was in the beginning
Not about losing or winning
Not about pride or pain
No fun in forever with the Fight Game

Boxers, Soldiers, Writers, Fighters, Me, You
The lords of the ring and the ones yelling outside it.
Pummeling pugilist poets know it —
The best stories in the world are the stories we tell ourselves.

The question is: Now, what to do?
Fuck it
Tell you
And this page
Get ready for rage
Gloves up like those who

bleed red
scare white
bruise blue

so they may pledge allegiance to the colors that fly to symbolize their
illegal alienated pain and a piece of peace within the controlled chaos of
America

U.S.A.
U.S.A.
United States of Amnesia

Don't forget too quick what they done for ya
Tried to please ya inside the red, white, and blue ring like a 101st Air-
borne Eagle screaming No Surrender after the System clipped his wings.

My friend swore to God on one knee before bouts to live and die on that
day
Right hand to the Man upstairs
A silence loud and clear if you can hear the words I remember —

I remember the man with the Dream Act plan whose soul flew from his
broken body in Afghanistan.

He boxed in rhythm and spoke in rhymes like a heartbeat to beat the
streets.
He said to me, “Youngster, when you learn the difference between fight-
ing and boxing, you’ll be ready. Fall in love with the process. Slow and
steady. If you have a good girl, hold her. Mine’ll be waiting for me on
12

the other side of it all after I fight with the American flag on my shoulder. I hope. As far as the rest goes, if she's a hoe, let her go. You know? Save yourself the headache and the heartache. Just let her keep on walking. I'll keep on talking for a bit. So I hear you're a writer, huh? As in poems and stories and shit? That's cool, bro. I'm an English buff, too. I even write a little bit. Think of Homer and The Odyssey in Lit. People say the cyclops ain't real. Maybe there's no such thing to them, but maybe Homer saw it differently. See, maybe the cyclops can be interpreted as that biggest problem or that opponent that's in your way. If you write about me one day, just let the people know that I fought the good fight, all right? If I was dead and could never return to speak my own truth. Tell the youth I bled red just like the decision-makers who wouldn't let me into the U.S.A. Olympic Trials because I was un-American back then. Let them know I pledged allegiance to this country no matter which fucking language I spoke. Even when I cooked up the greasiest Spanish, I always spoke American. Understand? ¿Comprende?

You'll be okay. Be strong. Walk alone. Shut the fuck up to listen. Forget division. Forget red states and blue states. Democrips and Re-bloodicans. Smile for the One Percent like a Tea Party Republican. Tell the people I liked the tough fights — the head knocking, body rocking fights. Tell them that I liked getting punched. Hear me out. I ain't crazy. It's just that I like feeling my opponent's power because at that power-filled moment I realize how much more powerful I have to be in order to fucking win. At those moments, I find out how powerful I really am."

To the American boxer, my brother, be raised up on Eagle's Wings. Until then, Rest In Peace. Amen.

Sonata for Solo Viola

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

In solitude he practices.

To hear each note,
there can be no distractions.
Yet the viola melody
seeps out the window.

Layers itself upon the neighbor
recalling his son's coffin
draped by a flag.

Sustains the young mother
pushing the stroller,
where her restless newborn whimpers.

Enriches the man
walking back from the Plaza
with empty pockets.

To each of these lonely souls,
this viola brings what they need,
the reassurance of a human hand
at play.

Werewolf

Claudia D. Cardona

For an instant,
I travel the hyphen between
Mexican and American.
I lick the salt off of the skirt
of my cerveza
and dance although I never
really could.

A song plays
in another language
but I dance anyway.
Mexico was waking up
inside of me at midnight.

I watch the men enjoy their sadness
with an empty glass in hand.
They cry over their failed conquest
of women.
They cry over
the conquest that's still
ringing in their blood.

In the taxi ride back home,
I turn back into
the self I'm familiar with.
My brown body lies in bed
on the bridge.

I look out my window
to the Azteca rabbit on the moon
that assures me,
I am enough.

The Pardoner

Matthew Keller

There once was pardoner of gentle mode
Who carried absolution as he rode
But mercy was never on his mind
For with his pardons came a fine

Only to people of great charity
Was he to grant God's clemency
But this he abused out of greed
And was paid for God's deed

To reluctant buyers he threatened with doom
Not an ounce of truth would he exhume
Even to widows he demanded a price
No small sum would ever suffice

Though he had a gifted tongue
And all listened when he sung,
This too he did for the bounty
To win money from every county

With false relics which he adorned
Though the real thing he swore
Many people he would amaze
And accrue more wealth and praise

A man of God he was not
All his pardons were red hot
He knew quite little of the Church and Mary
Though he made his way to Canterbury

His hair was yellow his eyes were bulging
To the latest fashion he was indulging
His chin was smooth as was his hair
His small goat voice never uttered a prayer

Listen now as he tells his tale
Which scores a ten on the hypocrite scale
He shall speak of money and its devious way
Of turning men evil, causing moral decay

That Time of Year Again

Benjamin Schweers

All-day barrages of sun
split open the ground
expose concrete foundations
once buried two feet deep.

Moist clay contracts, dries, cracks,
and flakes off into crevices

Deep below, coyote, locust, spider, swallow,
and vulture wait
until the sun sinks,
disappears behind dying trees.

Coyote crawls up the concrete wall
and from a jar, releases stars

into the night sky

Star Falling U

Valeria R. Garza

Memories are drifting off like
 dandelion seeds in the wind.
I thought I had them –
Could've sworn they were just there –
I saw them as I made my wish.

I didn't know I was wishing them away, into the sky,
when I looked toward new thrills,
 bright stars, lovely flowers.
And now I wait,
 Wait for the new seeds to sprout
 Wait for them to bring the promises
 of yesterday, fulfilled
Wait for today to bloom for a delicate moment,
only to be wished away again
as the tiny trees f l o a t quietly on the breeze...

The hill country air turns into a rosy blush
as the shadows begin to dance, 'til all that's left is
the dusky orange glow of now.
And now, the sky is a canvas, and the stars
 p like prayers,
 fall u
 p, into inky blue night,
 u
 p,
 u
 falling far and fast,
Unfathomable, until pinpricks of light
paint the night with the gleam of their music.

And the song is a cradle, rocking gently,
back and forth between yesterday and tomorrow,
softly sowing the seeds and the stars
into a garden of beautiful things
for today.

Four-Feet

Angela Sobery

Always happy to see my face,
keeping watch as I pace.

Always sitting in the backyard near a tree,
staring at the busy street waiting for me.

Always a loud bark when I jingle my keys,
door wide open jumping at my knees.

Always a handout during the evening meal,
thinking to myself, a treat is no big deal.

Always on my lap to watch the evening news,
then off to bed chasing my shoes.

Always by my leg snuggled up tight,
as long as I have my dog, I know I will feel all right.

The Elder Song

Christina Santoyo

Praise to my elders who have helped guide me.

The world is a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be figured out.

Praise to my elders who just might have psychic powers.

I learned my lesson just as they said I would – the hard way.

Praise to my elders for not belittling me.

They were in my shoes, too, once upon a time.

Praise to my elders who are more than happy to open their magical envelopes that answer all my questions.

Cotton Candy

Casey Dunn

I sat down to the side of the vendors,
close enough to see the crowds waiting for food
and kids trying to win prizes,
far enough to hear “step right up” chanted
in faint whispers.

Taking the moment in,
I opened my county fair indulgence.
Opened the plastic and took out
a piece of cotton candy. The sugar stuck
to my finger, and as I licked it clean off, I heard
“That’s right, lick it good” barked at me.

As I looked down at my once guilty pleasure
I thought,
my ancestors would never understand cotton to be sweet.
At that moment I realized
I’m not as different as them,
I wouldn’t expect change to happen so soon either.

Tears in the Dark

Jesse Durovey

They say, “There goes a hero,”
but it’s just an empty expression.
We’re paraded like circus animals
to the tune of a 10% discount at IHOP.

They say, “Thank you for your service,”
and buy a yellow ribbon magnet for their SUVs.
Then they file into the voting booth
and stuff the ballot box with dog tags and shattered dreams.

How will they ever understand:
the tears we cry in the dark,
the way we grip the steering wheel in traffic,
or the burn of a shell casing down
the collar of an Interceptor Body Armor vest?

We will always be haunted by—
the flight of tracer rounds against a foreign sky,
the rage we feel when we bury our brothers,
and the guilt we feel for not dying beside our sisters.

Wrap Your Fingers Around A Star

Matthew Keller

The Ferris wheel is straight ahead
The path to it illuminated in brilliant colors
reflecting off other rides
as if beckoning you near

So simple, you think, it couldn't be fun
But you wander into line anyway.
Even as you take your tilting seat
you wonder if you just wasted your tickets

It starts with a jerk, your booth tosses you around
like an untied shoelace
You hold onto the bar consenting to a smile
You inch closer to the stars and further from the people

You keep going up and up
Your little red booth like a helium balloon
deeper into the jewels of the sky
so close until you swear you can touch one

Ah, now you appreciate the purpose,
to get away from the distracting noise and choking crowds
It's a chance to be all alone
with your thoughts and imagination

But wait, if a wheel is a circle
then it must come down
That couldn't be right
It must be a design flaw, but you can fix it

Looking up, you focus on the stars

The carnival music melts into a mellow
whisper
The voice shouting 'cotton candy!' distorts into a void
The grinding of mechanical arms assumes an angelic quality

The smell of kettle corn warps into the perfume
your grandmother used to wear
That aftertaste of Frito pie from lunch
turns to a family barbeque on your tongue

You wrap your fingers around a star and smile in disbelief
But before you can close your hand,
you jerk to a stop, it all comes back.
And the ticket man asks you to step down

Improvisation on a Melody in F

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

(for Michael Sullivan)

Trust the rest of the quartet
to rift the melody,
predict the next musical leap,
have faith in the others to improvise,
synthesize, materialize pitch,
bass and piano.

Playing together as a foursome,
each one coming from a different place
until the sounds blend inside music
rolling like a wave towards the audience
where I sit contemplating
the way birds lift their wings,
improvising on the breezy rifts
when the sky sings with light and sound.

The Difference Between Falling and Jumping

Benjamin Schweers

On my walk home from work I saw a crowd
gathered around police cars and men in uniforms.
They pointed at a window ten stories above.

Below, officers hung white sheets that fluttered
against the black iron fencing along the sidewalk,
the bottom weighed down by saturated blood.

No one knew why. A successful lawyer
packed a bag, rented a room, took the phone off the hook,
and walked out of her ten story window.

All I could think was what if someone saw her fall,
in her blue blouse, black skirt, and high heels,
then smash against the pavement.

Some in the crowd tried to see around the police,
more stopped and stared at the scene—wondered what happened.
I went home before the ambulance even arrived.

Kadupul Flower

Casey Dunn

I am priceless.
The virgin of the night,
never able to be picked.
I expose myself
only to the mystic
beams of the moon.

no other flower can handle the
rough and dark passion he gives.
When I open myself
to the moon, I am the purest
white, and I can't help being wanted.
The moon comes up to only me,

for I am the one that reproduces
the moon on Earth spreading my offspring.

I am his only.

Why do you think the wolves go crazy?
Our love cries hurt their jealous ears.
I am special. I can't be touched by

any other except for my lover.
And anyone who tries to steal my beauty
will only experience the short, light breath,
of steam from my pleasure
That will leave a yearning for more
And the fantasy to have lived like me.

Drum Stick Twirl

Angela Sobery

Fingers
slide
around
the glazed
wood.
The balance
of weight
and grip
are perfect.
The thumb
and forefinger
twirl in
play.
The first
hit of
the skin is
a sound check.
The second
hit of
the skin
is for fun.
The third
hit of
the skin
starts the
band.

Fiction

CR 1889

Jessica Noyola

Maybe they went off to college, joined the military, or started a family and got married. But you stayed home after the accident on CR 1889. You're too frightened to step outside, let alone step into a car. Because if you do, CR 1889 will take you too. Anxiety completely took over your mind. You missed your older sister's wedding, your younger sister's graduation, the birth of your first nephew, the funeral of your own friend. You missed. You missed so many important moments that you will never get back. You hate yourself for this fear of CR 1889. But you're not you anymore. The sky that was once blue in your eyes is now faded and grey. The soundtrack that played in the background of your life is now on mute. You're completely aware that people say that you've lost your mind after the accident. You know. In everyone else's mind, you should be over losing your friend to CR 1889. The accident shouldn't have affected you the way it did. But who can put a number or some increment to a measure of loss? You can't explain loss, only feel the bitter emptiness in your heart from where that person used to be. And stating your fears out loud to others sounds completely irrational, but in your mind, it isn't. You're too frightened to step outside, let alone into a car. Because if you do, it'll take you too. Just like it took away your friend on CR 1889.

Closer than We Appear

Jesse Durovey

The 1969 Ford Bronco's rear-end dropped to the ground and began to skid violently on the dirt road. I glanced at my father; a lump of cartilage flexed like a worm beneath his silver beard as he pumped the brakes. I looked into the side-view mirror and stared open-mouthed. There, in the mirror's reflection I saw one of our tires rolling ever farther away from us. I noted, ironically, the warning that "objects in mirror are closer than they appear."

The year was 1999 and I was sixteen, although far from sweet. I was riding shotgun in my father's ancient Bronco as the noonday sun poured over the Rocky Mountains. The dirt trail that we drove on wound serpentine through the western Montana foothills. I was supposed to be looking for deer and elk, but I was doing everything in my power to keep from being lulled to sleep by the stillness of the forest and the warmth of the afternoon.

"I don't think you're going to see any deer on the inside of your eyelids," my father said, glancing at me over the tops of his glasses.

"I'm looking," I said, "I'm just tired."

"The point is to see the deer that live in the forest, not the ones that live in your dreams," he said, "We'll park in another mile or two. Walking around these hills will get your blood pumping."

Montana was the land of my youth. John Steinbeck once said, "I'm in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection. But with Montana it is love. And it's difficult to analyze love when you're in it." I can't help but echo Steinbeck's sentiments when I am confronted by the immense canopy of Montana's night sky or the rugged, snow-capped mountains growing hazy in the distance—even if only in my memories. Yes, Montana can still get my blood pumping.

After my family moved from Montana to Indiana in 1998, my father and I decided to take an extended hunting trip back to

the state we both love so well. We would spend two weeks bow-hunting deer, elk, and antelope throughout the state, spending most of our time near the Canadian border. Archery was merely a hobby of mine, but it lived in my father's blood like a drug. I had lost track of the number of times I had seen him split arrows in two while shooting targets at 40 yards. I can still recall the bright red spray of arterial blood jettisoning from behind the shoulder of a deer as his arrow zipped through his target—the perfect shot. It was as if he had harnessed the spirit of Robin Hood.

My father and I had always struggled to get along. Our personalities were too similar, and we always found ways to bump heads. My dad knew how to be intimidating too—he was a Vietnam veteran and had fought forest fires in Glacier National Park in the early 1970s. He had worked side-by-side with former rough-necks, convicts, soldiers, and scholars, chopping firebreaks while the acrid smell of wood smoke burned their lungs. I was excited to hunt with my father, but I was also terrified of him.

As we drove through the mountains, we weren't aware that the bumps and lurches we felt were anything but normal for the rocky switchback trail. The square-built Bronco was made for this type of driving. The narrow wheelbase, off-road tires, and powerful V8 engine gave it exceptional handling—although it came at the expense of being noisy as hell.

We were coasting down a slight grade when the Bronco's driver-side rear wheel seemed to drop at least a foot, slamming us to the ground with a jolting force. I saw my father grit his teeth, attempting to keep the truck from sliding sideways off the road and fighting with the steering wheel. I was stunned to see a tire rolling behind us as I caught a glimpse of the side-view mirror.

We lurched to a stop and the engine stalled. The noise of the big V8 ticking in the afternoon heat was the only sound as we turned to stare at each other.

“You awake now?” my father said.

I smiled hesitantly, too shaken to speak.

“Are you alright?” he said.

“Yeah. What just happened?” I said, letting out a breath that I had been holding since the Bronco so rudely interrupted my nap.

“The tire fell off, genius,” my father said. He swatted me with his hat and then set the short-brimmed Stetson over his bald head, which was fringed with a horseshoe of gray hair. We opened our doors and stepped down from the Bronco to survey the damage.

The Ford was tilted at a haphazard angle, and the axle rested directly on the road while the tire was several hundred yards behind us. I tried not to think about the carnage that could have occurred if the wheel had fallen off on the highway—even if the Bronco’s top speed was only a throaty, ear-numbing, gas-gobbling seventy miles per hour.

Luckily, my father was a journeyman mechanic in his own right. We got busy reenacting a scene from *A Christmas Story*, and I looked very much like a camouflage-clad Ralphie as my dad pieced together the brake pad, and I replaced the errant tire.

We were at least thirty miles from the nearest town, and the Bronco needed professional work to make it roadworthy if we were going to continue hunting through the rough terrain of Montana, or even complete our cross-country drive back to Indiana. We finished the repairs and drove—as gingerly as possible—to a professional mechanic.

Montana has always been a sparsely populated state, but when you’re near the Canadian border to do some hunting the chances of being near a large city are especially slim. We drove to a town that had jumped out of a Norman Rockwell painting—quaint, quiet, but just as dead. It was Sunday afternoon and everyone was at church, and nearly all the businesses had closed. We stopped at the only auto mechanic in town, praying that he was a backslider. We never did inquire about his religious affiliation, but a wiry, grease-covered man answered our third knock despite the “CLOSED” sign on the door. He said he had just come into the shop to do some catch-up work, but he listened to our story and agreed to take a look at the Bronco.

My father and I decided to bide our time at a local tavern advertising German beer and handmade burgers. In the dim light of the bar, the waitress brought us our food—our burgers were bloody and full of flavor, the bacon still sizzling with grease. The Coca-Cola from the walk-in refrigerator was so cold that

condensation froze to the side of the can like winter frost in my father's beard.

The mechanic told us that when we had recently installed four new magnesium-alloy wheels on the Bronco, the lug nuts hadn't been torqued properly—magnesium-alloy wheels need to be tightened a bit more than the standard steel variety. Because of this, our left-rear wheel had gradually loosened over the course of our trip across the Midwest and into the mountains. We were fortunate that the wheel had careened off when we were on an empty dirt road, driving a leisurely thirty-five miles per hour. If it happened on the highway, the results could have been disastrous.

Even after we got back on the road—with much-tightened lug nuts, of course—our luck increased little that trip. But, it was two weeks with my father in the wilderness of Montana. We bathed in mountain creeks that had never seen an automobile. We saw bull moose grazing in meadows that were just starting to decay with early autumn frost. We cowered in a roadside ditch to escape a tornado on the plains of eastern Montana. We laid our sleeping bags beneath the starry expanse of the Big Sky Country nights, lulled to sleep by the undulant iridescence of the Aurora Borealis.

I wish I could say that my father and I were inseparable from that point on. Instead, I was a rebellious teenager who bucked under the authority of a loving, although strict and distant, father. I would be an adult serving in the military before we would be on speaking terms again, and my father would be suffering as cancer metastasized inside his body and ate his liver.

I have children of my own now, and I better understand the struggle of, as the late Christopher Hitchens put it, “realiz[ing] that your heart is running around inside someone else's body.” Even though my father has been gone for over seven years, I still recall our Montana hunting trip as a pivotal event in my life. I never noticed that the wheels of my life were coming loose and that my father was constantly trying to provide the torque—the paternal force—that I needed to succeed. Still, despite his absence—and my own skepticism—I like to think that when I look up at an expanse as vast as Montana's night sky that my father is there with me. His heart still beats within my breast.

The Wishbone Pin

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

The gold pin Gina wears above her heart looks pretty on her pink blouse. She weaves among her mother and her aunts who work around the food table, chattering in Spanish. The decorated backyard fills with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins celebrating Easter. Gina's small and she's a child and she expects someone will tell her to go play with her cousins, but she has no cousins her age. The little boys are getting their clothes all dirty and the older girls are standing on the back porch talking about shaving their legs and make-up and not one of them cares what Gina thinks. But today Gina wears the gold pin, and she wishes for someone to notice it.

The gold pin Gina wears just above her heart belongs to her mother. The pin is shaped like a wishbone with a pearl and a pink stone at the V where the two little gold bones join. She had discovered the pin one boring rainy day when she was looking through her mother's closet for dress-up clothes. She had found a battered wooden box with faded flowers across the top, and upon opening it, Gina found a tangle of silver chains, a high school ring, torn tickets stubs, wrinkled ribbons, and this wishbone pin. "This wishbone pin belonged to my best little friend in seventh grade. She gave it to me when she moved away. 'For good luck' she told me." Gina's mother had a sweet smile on her face. "It's a little tarnished, but it's still pretty."

Gina also put a sweet smile on her face. "Can I have it?"

"No, but you may wear it if you ask nicely and promise not to break it."

The gold pin Gina wears on her pink blouse gives her good luck. She sees Aunt Marta reclining on the yellow cushions of a backyard chair. Aunt Marta smokes a thin cigarette and blows the

smoke into the neighbor's bushes. Aunt Marta doesn't talk to the other ladies at family parties. Aunt Marta wears beautiful gold chains, diamond earrings, and silver bracelets that sound like Christmas when she walks. Her face is paste white, and her lipstick the shade of orange Jell-O. Her eyes look like the beautiful Cleopatra in Gina's Egypt book.

Gina has found someone else who likes beautiful jewelry, someone who dresses up special for a party, someone who doesn't have anyone to talk with. Gina skips over to her Aunt Marta, the beautiful Cleopatra, and gives her a sweet smile. "Do you like my new pin?"

Her voice is low, her words coated in smoke. "Child, it's only costume jewelry."

The gold pin Gina wears on her dress feels like a ketchup stain. She blinks away the hot sting of tears, feeling ugly and stupid. She makes a wish, and pulls the wishbone in two pieces.

Bacodas

Camille Stecker

I remember growing up and watching Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy in the kitchen while my parents cooked dinner, we were introduced to many different names. One night, my family and I heard the last name “Bacodas” and we all stopped. It was such an unusual last name and for some reason we were all intrigued by it, maybe because of its uniqueness. We later had a family discussion over dinner about if Bacodas were an adjective then it would describe us perfectly—we were unique.

We came to the family decision that Bacodas would be our alias.

My dad said “You never know when you may need a fake last name” and he was right.

We used the name on more than one occasion, like when you get stopped in the grocery store and asked about your cable service or to fill out a survey. My parents always used the name Bacodas. It saved us from getting a lot of trash mail.

I even used Bacodas once when I was in middle school. You know when your parents are being weird, but they think they are the hippest people around? Yeah, that was my dad. I remember we were at a function for my mom’s work and I was with some other girls I didn’t know. With my luck, my dad was being especially weird at the event even though he thought he was being hilarious. One of the girls asked if I knew the “crazy man” and I said that I didn’t. I told them that I had overheard him say that his last name was Bacodas.

You probably need to be part of my family to understand the significance of our alias, but my family has a mutual understanding when and how to use our fake last name. We like to think of it as our Get Out of Jail Free card and we use it wisely.

Beauty Shop Politics

Valerie Sartor

Marina, a portly blonde woman I go to who did my nails the year I was an ex-pat scholar in Siberia, is not a highly educated Russian, but she has a massive social network, and she talks to anything that moves. Her little cubby shop is located in the center of town, inside the Central Market. I do my shopping and then, once every month or so, I go sit and chat with her. I want, of course, to improve my Russian and to understand more about the Russian way of doing things. I also want the unique pampering—a dose of gossip plus beauty—that a woman receives while getting her nails done. Marina is a good source of ideas; she has even convinced me once to have my nails painted cobalt blue, with a special shellac, which required me to stick my hands under an ultraviolet lamp, something like a mini-toaster oven. When she did my nails today I asked her about her country's leader, and this is what she told me:

"You Americans really understand very little about the Russian mind. You think Mr. P is some sort of thug, or a gangster. We really don't care about that, and to tell you the truth, he's a lot better than some of your squeamish, fancy suited politicians who steal money and sleep with hookers, and then beg to be forgiven. What dogs they are! Politicians basically are all the same: they all cheat and have sex and want to be thought of as heroes. But we have a real hero, we Russians love our Mr. P."

"Why?" I asked her as she delicately scrubbed away at my cuticles.

"Because of many reasons. First of all, although he's old—what is he, 62 or something, he's in damn good shape. I heard he swims 1700 meters every morning before beginning work, in his pool. He also does karate, and you saw the videos of him in Siberia?"

"Yes, on the horse, on the boats, fishing, with his shirt off..." I said, grinning.

"Yeah. He's a man. A real man, not some pansy Andy in an

Armani suit. You have to remember; when the USSR fell apart we had Gorbie. Cripes, all he did was talk...and talk...and talk. He read from a script. Droned on and on and bored the world. Besides, he had a terrible face, that weird birthmark on his head, yuck! His bad hair, awful suits. What he was was a cheap looking clerk, not a man, not a leader. We Russian women like to look at Mr. P. He looks like a man, and our men also like him, he gives them the correct role model."

"I see," I said, "And his mind?"

"Well, he doesn't read from a script. He's smart and light on his feet, quick thinking. He makes jokes. He can parry with the best of them. Mr. P is no oaf. He has charm, as well as virility. I even saw him speaking German on TV a while ago, he can speak a second language. Can your president do that?"

"Hmnmn," I said, "I really don't know, but that is an excellent point. Bilingual is better, even for politicians."

"The other thing is that after the dullness and do nothing stuff of Gorbachev, we had Yeltsin. A drunk, an alcoholic. He shamed us to the world and made things worse. Mr. P has tightened up the way things are done, pulled Russia back together. He is a leader, he knows what to do. We trust him."

"It doesn't matter that he and his cronies are super wealthy and robbing Russia?" I asked her.

"You have no idea how much better off we are from Mr. P's efforts. He deserves a good salary. And he was right to dump that chintzy old wife. He needs a younger woman," Marina arched her back and smiled, "the gymnast, she suits his needs."

"How come Mr. P is still in power? If he is a president, isn't that a limited time type of job?"

"Well, he switched off with Medvedev, to ease that requirement. They were partners, taking turns so that Mr. P could lead us better. Russians like me, we see that he is the best man for leading us; we don't want to give him up. He is like a father. A true leader. Strong, strict, and also, as I said, very handsome and virile."

"Kind of like Papa Joe Stalin?" I asked her.

"Yeah, kinda," she said and started painting my nails a very demure pink, called Blushing Damsel.

Before That

Marina Flores

They used a gentle back-and-forth sawing motion to make both small and large incisions on his face. First the eyes, then the nose, and then the mouth. He couldn't feel the knife slowly piercing his skin and removing chunks of his body. His guts were everywhere around him—the table, the floor, all over. The gouging was endless. They continued to cut and slice the rest of the body just how they desired it. They designed a showcase for their own guilty pleasure.

Before that, they displayed him on the porch for everyone to see. They made a statement. Everyone was in disbelief—they had never seen anything like that. The neighbors called everyone they knew to tell them to look. They had carved a stupid grin on his face.

Before that, they flipped him upside down and removed his bottom. One clean slice made the bottom-half of his body completely flat. He rested sturdily on the operating table, unable to escape the various knives and other cutting instruments. Just like they wanted.

Before that, they used their hands to remove every bit of whatever was inside his body. The remains were strewn sloppily all over the table, dripping and oozing as they gradually deteriorated beside him. He was hollowed out and scraped completely clean. It looked like a gory crime scene.

Before that, they measured and drew a circle within a two inch radius completely around the head. They took a jagged, sharp knife and inserted it in without mercy—cutting the head and removing it, angling the point of the knife inwards as they proceeded. The socket where the head used to sit now has a gaping hole. The top was placed beside his body.

Before that, they prepared their work station. They laid out white sheets over the table, newspapers on top to absorb whatever

liquids emerged from his body during the procedure. One by one they laid out the tools they were going to be using—all sorts of knives, jab saws, small scoops and big scoops. Not one instrument had a straight edge. It was going to be a long night.

Before that, a marker was used to draw all over him. They smiled and grinned in the most deceiving way possible as they did this. They were planning where he was going to be carved and cut. The face, the body and head were covered in black zig-zag markings.

Before that, they picked him from a pumpkin patch and took him home.

The Neighbors

Breanne Pardo

Steven and Samantha had just unloaded the first box into their new home in the WinterView subdivision when the doorbell rang. Steven walked over to the door and looked through the peep hole to see who it was.

“Samantha, I think it is the neighbor from across the street. I saw him wave to us when we first drove in,” Steven said.

“Okay, I am coming,” said Samantha as she stepped away from the box and walked over to the door as Steven opened it.

“Hi, my name is Santiago, I live across the street and I wanted to come introduce myself to you,” their new neighbor said.

“Hi, I am Steven, and this is my wife, Samantha. We just moved here from California.” Steven held out his hand.

“Nice to meet y’all. I love the neighborhood. My wife and I have been living here for five years now. Let me know if y’all need any suggestions for good restaurants or fun places to go around here,” said Santiago.

“Okay, thanks,” Steven said.

“Well, I don’t want to keep y’all too long and better let y’all finish getting settled in,” Santiago turned and walked away.

“Okay, thank you,” said Steven.

“Bye,” Santiago waved behind him.

“He seems nice. I hope that is a sign that this neighborhood won’t be like our last one,” said Samantha.

“Steven, have you noticed that the neighbor, Santiago, you know, the one from across the street always has different people over at his house? Monday, after he came over, I saw at least four different cars come and go as we were moving boxes into the house,” Samantha said, while on their drive home from the garden store.

“Yeah, I noticed too. But, maybe he just has a lot of family

who lives here or comes and visits him,” Steven replied.

“Maybe,” Samantha said, as they pulled up into the driveway.

When Samantha and Steven got off the car, Samantha looked over to Santiago’s house and saw two cars pull up to his house. She saw two men get down. One of them wore a bright red bandana on his head.

“Do you think Santiago is selling drugs? He always has different people coming in and out of his house throughout the whole day, just like some of the neighbors did in our last neighborhood. I would say we should ask the neighbors about him, but they might be involved like in our last neighborhood,” Samantha wondered as she helped Steven unload the flowers they bought at the garden store.

“We are here,” Steven announced as he drove into the church parking lot with Samantha.

They both walked in together and sat near the back.

“Hey, look, there is Santiago,” Steven pointed out.

A lady walked up to the podium and started to speak, “We are going to start off with some announcements before we begin Mass. I want to recognize the English language tutoring program leader. Santiago, can you please come up here?”

“As y’all know, Santiago has been tutoring those wanting more help with the English language. His program has sessions in the morning, afternoon, and evening at his house. Thank you for your commitment, Santiago. Will his students and their families stand up and be recognized? Most of Santiago’s students are trying to come and hear the Mass in English to help further their learning,” said the lady.

All of the men stood up in different places of the church, all sitting with their families.

“Look, Steven. That is one of the guys I saw at Santiago’s house. He is wearing the same red bandana,” Samantha whispered.

Gold Mule

Camille Stecker

I. The Promise

I would do anything to go back to London. As a college graduate and the way the economy is going with the student loans I have acquired through the years does I am not financially allowed to follow my dream of going back to see the Queen of England. I would do anything to go back to the city I fell in love with my junior year of college.

All I had to do was take a suitcase full of high-heel mules across the border. He made it sound simple. I did not ask questions, but I would do what I was told. In return, I would have a fully furnished flat in South Kensington along with a monthly stipend for food and clothing. My mission was transport the suitcase of shoes from America to England and I would be living happily in London for four months with no expenses.

With my passport in hand, I carried my heavy suitcases through security. I had two suitcases, one for clothes and the other full of the shoes I was given to smuggle into England. I did not pack any other shoes for myself, but I knew I would use my first check to go to Primark and buy some boots. I was already dreaming of how I would spend my days exploring the city, going to museums, reading books in the park, and having afternoon tea. It was perfect and all I had to do was one simple transfer once I was in the country, but was it too good to be true?

II. His Lie

When I walked into my fully furnished flat and stood looking out the window to Chelsea, I knew I was home. He asked me if I looked at the shoes at any point during my travels. I told him no and continued fantasizing about my days in London.

His voice interrupted my thoughts when he asked, "Do you

want to know what the shoes really are?”

I asked, “Are they not leather?”

He laughed and told me that they were gold. I was in shock. How much gold had I just brought into London and why? From the look in his eye I knew my mission was not done.

“What else do I have to do?” I asked. He told me that I would wear a pair of the high heel mules to dinner to give to someone that was blackmailing him. I then realized I should have asked questions before I agreed to be his mule. I did not even think of myself as a mule. It is not like I brought drugs into the country, right?

III. Her Decision

Once he left my flat, I sat in the living room and thought of ways to get out of the mess I was in. How could I have agreed to do something without asking questions? I knew having a fully furnished flat in London with a monthly stipend for four months was too easy. I didn't even ask how much the monthly stipend would be. I did the only thing I could think of, I called my parents for help.

I needed to act quickly or else I would have to go to dinner with him and some other unknown man. I would probably be killed or, worse, sold into human trafficking. I got out of the flat, with only my purse in my arms and calmly walked through the back streets of London to the British Museum. I would hide out there until I got a message from my parents that it was safe to come home.

IV. Her Action

It has been a year since the mistake I made in London. Never trust a handsome man with an accent is the lesson I learned. Now I am sitting in my parents' living room smiling and laughing about how I smuggled gold into England.

My dad jokingly asks, “Why didn't you keep a pair?”

We all look at him and laugh.

What my parents don't know is that I wore the shoes on the airplane and in the car home. The next day I went to the bank and put the gold mules in a safety deposit box. When I am older and

work hard to pay off all my student loans, have a family, a house, and good career, I will go back to the safety deposit box and decide what to do with the gold shoes I smuggled in and out of England.

My First Sin

Oscar Salinas

Rudy, my brother, stood calm and watchful as I told him, motionless yet primed for action, like a deer when it braces for a danger sensed but not yet located. There was a difference, though. A mature deer knows instinctively what to fear. I was about eleven, and my brother a year and a half younger, and we were in no way natural enemies.

Indeed, there was little to fight about in our very orderly lives. Our childhood began in the fifties in the Rio Grande Valley—Rio Grande Valley, a region in south Texas that *TexasNewsweek* once referred to as the “poverty pocket” of America. Fortunately, my siblings (seven of them) and I were not born into poverty of a financial nature. Our parents were far from wealthy, but they were responsible, hard workers, and they were careful to scrimp and sacrifice as necessary to fulfill their custodial duties, to which they were devoted. We were free from conscious insecurities because our days were routine and predictable, as children need them to be, fundamentally. We could count on a roof over our heads, three meals a day, clean clothes, and toys as long as they were not too expensive (no G.I. Joe, for example). Especially important for the imagination, we could count on sufficient leisure to pursue our own interests, which for me meant sports and books. We had no complaints about the world, so we had no real complaints about each other.

Our parents had not been so lucky in their youth. They were the recent descendants of Mexican immigrants who had wandered from job to job throughout the border region of South Texas—clearing land; digging irrigation canals; building schools, churches, and courthouses. Generally, doing the hard manual labor of carving order out of wilderness. Without an American education, they had a dispiriting time working on the central problem of their existence, which was finding a place to settle where they

could build some beauty into their lives. As a child, I saw enough want in those around me to know that I had been born into fortunate circumstances, that a problem of place had been solved by my family in the not so distant past, and that I was the lucky heir of their achievement. But even then I did not know how lucky I really was, for neat tidy surfaces sometimes camouflage pain.

I never met him, but, by all accounts, my maternal grandfather was an earnest man, an autodidact with an interest in medicine who on occasion assisted a physician in his community known as Dr. Heidrick. He went blind, though; his loss of sight caused or exacerbated by hours of standing over a steamy grill at an eatery he owned. There was no adequate exhaust hood, maybe. Whatever economic foothold he had established for his family was lost when he lost his sight. As a result, my mother suffered a reversal of whatever emotional fortunes she once had. Her blind father died while she was still a child, so her mother left her to go in search of place again, this time in California. She was raised by one of her brothers until she married at the age of fifteen, desperate (though silently) for love. She was a devoted but distant mother, defined by a sadness she could never articulate or assuage. She never touched me that I can recall, except to feel my forehead for fever whenever I was sick.

My father's life as a migrant worker kept him from graduating from high school until he was twenty-one. He had to turn down some kind of academic scholarship to a small college too far from home because his parents needed him to transport braceros (Mexican field hands) to work up north. He was determined, though—he found a way to play a year of football at a local junior college, get married, go to night school for eight years, and eventually become a CPA. His father was a dreamy man who enjoyed treating himself to dinners out, watching westerns at the local picture show, and gambling at pool halls. It was his mother who stamped her work ethic onto him, though perniciously, I'm afraid.

She had a head for figures, and growers in the north would contract with her to have their crops picked. My father's siblings and their extended family members (but never my father) report

that in her early days as a crew leader my grandmother had been something of a slave driver with her own family, bullying and punishing in order to get them to pick the most produce. And stories have come down of my father (though he has never told them) picking brutal amounts of cotton in the vicinity of five hundred pounds a day, an achievement especially spirit-killing due to being motivated by fear of his mother's excoriations. I'm sure that my grandmother's doling out love on condition of heroic productivity explains to a large extent my father's often tangled emotions when having to deal with anger and stress. Fear of failure, I think, precipitated his finding himself in a hospital in his mid-thirties almost dying of bleeding ulcers during an overnight trip to take his CPA exams. Fortunately for my brother and me, by the time we were put in the fields, my grandmother had achieved her dreams, a forty-acre farm and a modest home in a nice part of town, which meant that the intensity of her understandable yet pathogenic ambitions had abated somewhat. We were encouraged but not forced to pick our row of cotton fast but clean (my grandmother absolutely hated to see scattered plumes of white in a picked row).

My grandmother never loved lazily, but she did love destructively, as those living hard, disfavored lives often do. What she did to my father to get him to transcend the foul conditions of his life—the shacks, the lack of indoor plumbing, the transience—would today be regarded as child abuse. She bestowed on my father what Pat Conroy's *The Great Santini* (in the movie) referred to as the "gift of fury." But anyone attached to someone prone to volcanic anger knows this is no gift at all—it is a curse.

One football Friday night when I was about eleven years old, I got out of the car at the stadium only to let the coin that was the price of admission—a quarter, I believe—slip from my fingers onto the grassy ground. I groaned in dismay, but little did I know that things were even worse than I thought.

My father came around to where my brother and I were groping in the grass trying to find the coin. "What are you doing?"
"I dropped my quarter."

Today, I wonder if I looked as befuddled as I felt to see my

father's face getting ugly with contempt. "What do you mean you dropped your quarter? I knew I shouldn't have given it to you. You better find it. You can't go around losing money. Look for it!"

I raked the grass with my fingers as thoroughly as possible, but to no avail. "I can't find it," I said with the dejected timidity of a failure.

"Oh you can't," bellowed my father, now wallowing in rage. "Well then you're not going to see the game. I'm not giving you another quarter. You have to take care of things. Go home—right now—just start walking. That'll teach you not to lose money."

Those games were my life at that age, so I felt a deep disappointment. But I was too numb from shock and confusion to cry. I simply headed out without a word in a kind of emotional stupor. The stadium had been built across the tracks on the outskirts of town near a poor, old Hispanic neighborhood. Shabby little wooden houses were huddled together into a village that seemed earthy and primitive compared to my own neatly arranged lower middle-class surroundings. There were no grassy, rectangular lawns or curbed sidewalks like I was used to, just patchy sod worn down by the play of kids and dogs as they roamed the neighborhood. The area was sparsely wooded, and it received some dim lighting from the stadium at one end and from an older business district at the other.

I never expected to have to pass through it at night amidst the eerie shadows of gnarly mesquite trees. Yet somehow my spooky trek seemed a fitting mirror for what seemed like a surreal existential plight. I was too young for philosophy, but the situation was so absurd that I could not be mad at my father. Instead, seeing what life had done to both my father and me, I realized that the world contains deadly emotional hazards, that reasonable expectations for happiness can be blown to bits by bizarre, uncaring irrationality.

I walked for about forty-five minutes, just long enough for my father to buy tickets, find seats, watch the start of the game, and then realize he had been wrong. I was glad to see him drive up just as I was a few blocks from home. I had this "I knew it" feeling,

as though he had confirmed my expectation that he would come back for me. But I suspect he was worried about what my mother would say if she found out that he had sent me home afoot. I, myself, was embarrassed and did not say anything about the incident until years later.

My father was not malicious that night. His mother had taught him through her rages, and her main lesson had been about money because money had been her chief source of anxiety. A cotton picker earned only two cents a pound. It would take me all day to earn four dollars on the days that I could pick 200 pounds, which, to be honest, were not so many. Pennies did not come cheap in those days—you could not survive, much less get ahead, if you did not watch your money carefully. Anxiety can cause the misjudgment that often leads to sin. Ultimately, it is because of anxiety that the sins of the parents are visited on the children. My father never hit me that I recall (though once, to avoid striking me, he did toss me headfirst into a bathroom), and he flew off the handle only now and then, which is why I was so stunned when his rage was directed at me over a quarter. As I said, I was lucky. But I suspect that through him, his mother's anxiety about money had a deleterious effect on me, judging by what I remember as my first sin.

I was not conscious of sinning at first because I did not mean my brother any harm. However, shortly after the night of the lost coin, I began to covet my brother's money. Not that I did not have my own. As tykes, my brother and I had piggy banks into which our parents, wanting to instill an ethic of saving, had deposited over a few years a noticeable number of coins. After the banks became weighty enough to make us really curious about the size of our fortunes, our parents allowed us to break them open. We put the hammer to them, and I'd say our piles of coins came to between ten and twenty dollars. We may have spent some, but no doubt most of the money went into our own separate dresser drawers to be added to from time to time. I do not recall anything specific that I wanted to buy, but there must have been something. In retrospect, it is hard to imagine that I would steal from my brother just

for the fun of it.

Although I do not remember what tangible motive, if any, I had for my thievery, I do remember the pleasure I took in the coins. I would steal a few coins at a time and put them in a little canister. We lived in a small frame house that sat on concrete blocks, and I buried the money under the house near one of the blocks. Spider webs, bugs, and grime made the cramped netherworld of my hiding spot an awful place to visit, but it was worth the icky feeling to crawl under when nobody was looking and, with dirty hands, count my literally filthy lucre. Handling the coins was soothing somehow, reassuring, as though I had hold of something substantial in my life. Once satisfied all of my money was where I had left it, I would crawl back to the edge of the house, peer out to make sure nobody was coming, and drag myself back out into the light.

I do not want to mislead. One cause for my stealing is the fact that even as a child I lived in my head. My brother was mechanically inclined. Had he been the target of my father's bizarre rage, he probably would not have thought to steal my money because his attention was on the concrete. He was too busy taking apart radios and watches, fixing broken baseball bats, and cobbling together racing carts to care about something as inert as coins. I, on the other hand, was a reader and had a lot of room in my imagination for easy mischief. Basically, I could think about stealing because I had an empty mind or at least one vacant of any noticeable interest in materiality. So I do not want to draw a simple line of causation between my father's trashing my heart on the night of the lost coin and the pleasure I took later in hoarding coins, the symbols of my need to recover the love my father had withdrawn from me.

But neither do I want to ignore the role of the past as it contributes to good and evil. The pleasure I derived from the coins was the satisfaction of possessing something valued, similar to the pleasure of owning a work of art that touches one deeply. Would my relationship with my coins have seemed as rewarding if I had had richer attachments to my parents? Maybe it was the combination of a fanciful mind and a neglected, bored heart that accounted

for my stealing.

Something that makes me inclined to think so is that whatever I might have wanted to buy with the money did not turn out to be as important to me as the company of adults. In a happy moment, I surprised myself and suddenly revealed my perfidy to my mother and grandmother one sunny afternoon as we all relaxed lazily on the front porch. The sense of fulfillment instilled by shared laughter was mixed with a deep shame which I was not even aware of at the time. I blurted out my confession expecting that in the buoyancy of the moment my mother would see my transgression as nothing serious. Perhaps an amusing peccadillo, a moral trifle not worth getting upset about. No such luck, though. My mother was not angry, recognizing that she still held the moral reins of my development. Rather she was aghast and disappointed and made me immediately return the money.

She did not make me tell my brother and apologize. It was a measure of how much I wanted absolution that I actually told my brother. But I could not sound contrite. I told the tale of his victimization with a grin, as though I had been on an amusing escape. But he did not see any reason for amusement at his humiliation. He stood gazing with incredulity that I could have done such a thing. He was surprised by a side of me he had never seen before, as I had been surprised earlier by my father's revelation of his misshapen emotions. Then his face stiffened with a hard look of fierce disapproval.

"You're not supposed to do that—steal my money—that's wrong!"

He was clearly hurt. I had not imagined the possibility that I could make someone's bright, clear world turn dingy and disgusting. I also had not imagined the shame and remorse I would feel for abusing his trust. Realizing that my thievery was inexcusable, all I could do was lower my head and mumble, "I know; I'm sorry," and slink out of the room. He never said anything to anybody about my betrayal, as far as I know.

I did not grow up to be a bad person. Yes, I can think of some apologies I would like to convey, mainly for not having seen more deeply into someone's needs, but, also, there have been a

number of times when I have fixed my mistakes, when I have seen the importance of, and followed through with, the reparative act. Yet that moment when my little brother rebuked me stands out as the most honest of my life.

I think I still feel the truth of that moment because every moment since then I have taken care to think good thoughts about myself. But at that moment, there was no possibility of escape from the truth of my slimy, scaly self. The grotesque me had made a sudden, unexpected appearance, and I felt thoroughly chastened by the realization that I was a lowlife. At that moment I really and truly wanted to be better than I was.

That moment has crossed my mind many times over the years, but I never took it seriously until recently. Age does that to you, makes you take stock, makes you consider how well you live up to that early sense of your parents' character that informs your judgments about yourself as an adult. And in retrospect, I suspect that my sense of my parents' character has been too vague to counter the self-absorption that colors so many of our concerns. Perhaps if my memories of love were as vivid as my memories of work then I would not have waited until my fifties to worry about whether I am really morally bigger than I was when I committed my first sin. Maybe I would have worried sooner to a greater degree about God's creatures whether orphans, or homeless, or enemies of the state, or animals.

Of course, my own parents have never worried about the subtle effects of their parents' not having taken any real pleasure in them. They just wanted a comfortable home to come to at the end of the day, which was no small achievement for them. My own reflective guilt is testament to their success at making a home. It is a moral function of family to build elaborate, life-enhancing mansions of memory, for memory is our most powerful moral source. And though my own family bonds could stand emotional embellishment, memories of my parents' devotion to my welfare are rich enough to form a deep well from which I draw sympathy for others.

Granted, there are things in my life that I lament, in particular the fact that I remember my parents' childhoods better than

they remember mine. But there is also much to be grateful for, in particular the fact that I can remember my parents' childhoods better than they remember mine. I have been lucky not to have fear and deprivation leave me with chasms in memory so empty of care as to put sympathetic understanding beyond my imagination. I am grateful that it is not the gift of fury that has made the difference in my life but the gift of consciousness.

Papa John's on the Siberian Steppes

Camille Stecker

"Russians want to be pretty," said Nastya, a young, elegant woman who requested private English tutoring from me. She was indeed pretty: as a very petite silver blonde woman with a small, perfect nose, high catlike cheekbones and deeply set almond shaped eyes the color of blueberries. "My genes are a mix of East and West. No one knows whether we are European or Asian by our politics either," she continued, "but I discovered that Western Europeans love us, at least they did before the sanctions, because we Russians love to go on holiday to buy brand names. We shop and spend money to look good. We buy high-end clothing and jewelry and cosmetics. So do the Chinese."

I nodded, and thought about the hordes of eager Chinese tourists I had seen swarming European tourist cities, grabbing things indiscriminately, and then I pictured Nastya and two of her friends delicately and demurely fingering an expensive silk scarf. If I were a clerk, whom would I prefer to wait on, I wondered.

"Russian and Chinese may both shop, but their habits and behaviors are different," I commented.

"Definitely," she replied. "Chinese like to bargain, but we don't argue about price. We just buy. And all Russian women, rich or poor, take much care to make sure that what is purchased looks correct."

Russians have long been considered as a hybrid of West and East. The people themselves see their country and culture as a special, unique mixture that cannot be categorized. The homeland has a magical quality to Russians, and they are enormously proud of occupying the largest area in the world. Many people of Siberia have told me that they expect to reunite all the "lost lands" (former Soviet territories) again with Mother Russia in the next two decades. Like the Chinese, Russians seem to feel that "bigger is better."

The oddities of Russian culture and behavior have mystified

guests and scholars for centuries. But today I wanted to know something about contemporary Russian culture, and I wondered what Nastya would teach me about culture as I taught her about English grammar.

On our first lesson she had told me that she and her husband owned seven franchises of the American pizza chain, Papa John's. "I don't eat it much myself; I don't want to get fat," she confided, "but it sure is growing more and more popular in Russia."

"Why?" I asked.

"First, it is fast and easy. Second, it is not expensive. And third: pizza represents modernity, it comes from outside and people like to think that they are cosmopolitan," Nastya said with a slight smile. She then explained how she had lived in the USA as a teenager and told me that she ate her way through the high school year. "I gained 14 kilos, I was fat! And I will never let that happen to me again. It's terrible to fight the fat. But these pizza franchises allow me and my husband to live well, I am so much better off than I was as a child, so I think of pizza as my magical food, like the golden egg of the goose, you know?"

Her business is still flourishing despite the sanctions. Certainly, these regulations have caused small food franchises to seek out new sources. "We used to get our Parmesan from Italy; now we can't. We use Lithuanian cheese. Its good, but its not Italian... and flour, we have searched for another flour as well. I notice these culinary shifts; my customers, they don't seem to care," Nastya said.

She added that the sanctions hurt small businesses, not individuals or politicians. "It is a franchise like mine that suffers...I wonder if that was the goal of making these sanctions?" she asked, looking at me directly. I said I was no politician but that I agreed with her, and described how Russian TV had shown tourist destinations in Finland, Poland, and parts of Europe, all closing down, because the "Russians had not arrived to spend their hard-earned cash." Both Russian businesses and non-Russian businesses catering to Russian tourists have had a very bad year due to the sanctions.

As we looked over a text I had prepared, I asked Nastya to describe her customers, and to use the newly introduced vocab-

ulary. One word we touched upon was customer service; a novel concept to Soviet socialist, and now, post-Soviet mindsets.

To my surprise, Nastya explained that her franchise managers had been trained in customer service. "When people complain on our website, we call them up. They usually are startled by our concern. Sometimes we even give them a free Pepsi or small pizza, if, for example, we were at fault," she said.

Yet most Russians have no concept of selling something politely or employing any form of customer service. In fact, they are downright surly at times. When I walk into most any shop in Russia, I expect the clerk to ignore me, scowl, or say something rude. For example, a few weeks ago I wanted to purchase a pillow, so I entered into a small linen store. The clerk, an obese thirty-something woman was wearing emerald green eye shadow. She reeked of a cheap perfume, and wore a multicolored polyester tent dress that made me dizzy looking at her. I cringed after she snarled at me after I asked the price of a pillow.

"Can't you read? It's 400 rubles. And don't touch it!" this surly clerk said, turning back to her tattered magazine. I walked out of the shop, eager to leave, and within minutes bought the same pillow from a Tajik vendor in the open market. He at least let me hold the pillow before I purchased it. Even better, he smiled at me when taking my money, flashing a mouthful of gold-capped teeth.

We discussed various aspects of customer service. I said to Nastya that the idea of someone calling up and giving a customer an apology if the pizzas were late or cold or whatever simply doesn't exist in Russia. "It's an outrageous capitalistic notion," I quipped.

"You're right," Nastya replied, "I had one lady actually cry a little when I called her, she was so moved. She said to me before I hung up: Maybe there's still hope for our motherland."

Russian Rescue

Valerie Sartor

Water in Texas is always a priority, so I rarely take baths. But whenever I shower, I note the Lake Baikal shaped scar across my right side, and I remember Dr. Kuklin.

In 1985 this jolly Soviet surgeon saved my life. I was a poor American scholarship student on a three-month student study tour of the Soviet Union, hoping that this trip would help me to become academically competitive with my peers; all Ivy League kids. It was springtime in Moscow. Everyday, we, like the other Western capitalist kids, had to go to a series of lectures. Our classes were ostensibly based upon our acquiring a good command of the Russian language, but in reality they consisted of an old crone, in a bad suit and with a worse haircut, droning on and on about Russian participles. Other classes consisted of propaganda meetings headed by unsmiling members of the Young Communist League. Western invaders stood in one corner sipping stale sulfurous fizzy water, as our communist peers glared at us from the other end. Academic life, truthfully, wasn't much fun.

Weekends were better. Our Argentine-born Russian academic group leader, Natasha, led us like a group of newly-hatched chicks around Moscow. She educated us regarding the beauty of Russian culture. It was during one of these excursions, at the famous museum that houses Fabergé eggs and the carriages of Catherine the Great, where I collapsed. The on-duty granny security guard watched me fall, and then scurried over to where I lay crumpled. She kicked me with her old slippers.

“Get up, capitalistka, how shameful you are, coming here intoxicated!” she hissed.

“She’s not drunk, granny,” said Bette, my plump blue-eyed roommate from Wisconsin, “She’s ill.” Granny grudgingly stepped back and started sweeping at imaginary dust, while Bette dragged me up my armpits.

“Is it your stomach?” Bette whispered to me. “I had diarrhea last night myself from the fermented cabbage soup.”

“Something feels weird and my right side is hot,” I said. With her help, I managed to stand up. Bette found Natasha and got permission for the two of us to go to the student hostel. On the bus, I fainted twice. By the time our group had arrived back after the tour, people were starting to worry about me.

In Moscow, in the 1980s, cabs were scarce. Foreigners stood outside a road and waved dollars. Natasha did this, in vain, until an old lorry stopped.

“Five dollars and I take you anywhere,” said the gruff, red-headed Russian driver.

“Botkinskiya Hospital,” said Natasha, giving him five ones. He lifted me onto the truck flatbed.

After arriving, Natasha put me in care of a prim Soviet nurse, and went to the US embassy. This nurse, along with a burly janitor, lifted me onto an ambulance gurney, after wiping it clean with vodka. I lay still, tired and at times feeling feverish, my right side burning intermittently. The lights in the corridor flickered, and I imagined myself camping under the stars. I closed my eyes and dozed.

Opening my eyes, I saw a jovial man, with a bearded face, holding a Russian cigarette between his lips. “Aw, yes, the Amerikanka, my sleeping beautiful, has woken. You, my dear, are very ill. You have exploding appendix,” he said calmly. “We wait for Amerika attaché, for life or death.”

As he spoke, a dapper little man, wearing a blue suit, with an American flag tiepin, approached. “You must be airlifted now. No way can you be operated upon here. This is Soviet territory, impossible,” he stated flatly.

The surgeon stretched through his white coat like a cat, and casually flicked his cigarette ashes upon the sheet that covered me. “Hmmm,” he purred, drawing in cigarette smoke.

“This is ridiculous,” said the attaché. “Smoking is forbidden. Get her off that thing and into the car, now...”

“And you, devushka (young lady), how you feel about pol-

itics? Plane ride to Helsinki - long, the poison - running now, that why you feels hot.” He flicked ash onto my body, grinning with his feline cheekbones and yellow teeth. “I am Dr. Igor Kuklin, by the way, a famous surgeon.”

“Yeah, right,” muttered the US attaché.

As if dreaming, I saw he was holding a box of American Kleenex, ostensibly a gift for me in case I started to cry.

“Dear devushka? You decide: your body, your life?” said the doctor, crushing the cigarette on the floor.

I looked at him; he smiled kindly at me. I looked at the attaché; he scowled at the ceiling. “I’m tired. Please operate, Doctor.”

The US attaché was furious, but left me the box of Kleenex. Dr. Kuklin was again smiling over me when I woozily woke up. “You did good, my capitalistka, I cleaned out much poison. But you have souvenir: big scam (scar). It help you never forget Dr. Igor.” I nodded, weak but coherent, and he patted my cheek. “Good for international relations,” he said. “Russian bear does not bite.”

For weeks I lay on the hospital cot alongside six Soviet patients, whose family members spoon fed me from jars of soup they had brought for their own near and dear. Finally, I could leave. I asked Dr. Kuklin, now a familiar presence in my daily life, how I could repay him. At that time, Soviet medicine was free.

“Ah, yes,” said the doctor, plucking a cigarette out of his white coat pocket. “A bottle of Chivas, at the bereoisika (hard currency) store, that would be heaven gift. And a story, someday a story about your dear Dr. Igor.” I smiled and promised him both. The whiskey he got that day; the story has taken me decades – but a promise is a promise.

Sad Ghosts Club

Marleyne Hernandez

She sat there picking at her arms. She had already pulled some scabs off, little pricks of blood splattered across her forearms. She could see what she was doing, the gross mutilation she was causing herself, but she couldn't stop. That was the problem with being "sick," you couldn't stop yourself from showing the symptoms.

"Stop doing that," her mother hissed.

She froze, her hands stopping mid-scratch. Of course, someone else could stop her. She didn't get to have any control over herself or her body. That would be too easy.

Her mother sat next to her staring stonily ahead, like she always did. It would be too much to show any concern for her broken daughter. They were sitting in the waiting room of Dr. Fay's office, waiting for her appointment. It had been several weeks since she had started seeing a psychiatrist; she wasn't sure if it had been helping any.

It was per the school's recommendation that she start seeking "professional help." Her mother wasn't all too pleased with the accusation.

"What do you mean she should 'see someone'?" she had asked, her voice reaching a pitch that only dogs should be able to hear.

After hours of arguing and yelling and threatening to sue, her mother finally relented and agreed to take her to a one-time only session.

That one-time only session turned into weeks of attending one-on-one meetings with Dr. Fay and group sessions with other "troubled" youth or, as Penelope called them, the Sad Ghosts Club.

"Dr. Fay will see you now," the receptionist told her.

Her mother nodded once, signaling for her to get up and get it over with. Her mother wasn't allowed to go in with her. That was

a relief.

She walked across the room slowly, trying to prolong the moment before being forced to lie about her condition.

"Hello, Penelope, how are you today?" Dr. Fay asked, gesturing at the chair in front of her.

Penelope said nothing as she sat down. She never knew how to answer that question.

Dr. Fay waited. They were both quiet for several minutes.

"Fine," Penelope said at last.

Dr. Fay smiled, writing something down on a yellow legal pad. She was sitting in her office chair, which was placed in front of her desk. She didn't want furniture to create a barrier between her and her patient. Penelope was sitting directly in front of her, avoiding eye contact at all costs.

"Anything you want to talk about?" Dr. Fay asked.

Penelope shook her head once, slowly.

"How do you feel about how the group sessions work? Are you enjoying them more now?" Dr. Fay asked, trying to get Penelope to say something, anything, indicative of her current state.

Did she like them better? It was nicer not having all of the attention on her, but having it shared with other "sick" people. Penelope, of course, shared none of this with Dr. Fay. She never shared anything with Dr. Fay. It was hard to do with the young doctor staring at her, her wide eyes magnified by her large glasses. As it was, Penelope constantly felt like she was under a microscope. She wanted to regain her invisibility, her wallflower status. Instead, here she sat being studied by a wide-eyed spectator.

Penelope nodded slightly, biting her bottom lip. This was a new development in her nervous ticks. She had them mentally listed in order to be hyper-aware of other's reactions to them: 1) arm picking, 2) jiggling leg, 3) focusing and unfocusing eyes, 4) constant bone popping, and, now, 5) lip biting. Penelope thought about the girls who bit their lips in movies, in books, in the hall; they looked cute while doing it, flirty and attractive. Her lip biting was savage. She bit and pulled until blood was drawn. Her lips were in a constant state of bloody and broken. Nothing attractive about that.

"Penelope?" Dr. Fay said.

Penelope shifted in her seat, trying to regain her focus. She stared at Dr. Fay, waiting for another question.

"How are your parents?" she asked.

The question that, if answered, would inevitably lead to the "now-tell-me-about-your-mother" conversation. A conversation that Penelope would rather not have. She was tired of constantly telling herself that her mother was to blame. It was something she had wrestled with and had now finally come to terms with. She didn't need any more questions and discussion about it. This topic was not for an open forum that she was going to referee. Her problems were private. Her solutions even more so.

But, Dr. Fay would not let her go without answering.

"They're fine," Penelope answered, tight-lipped.

Dr. Fay nodded, smiled, and took more notes on her yellow legal pad.

Penelope wanted to ask Dr. Fay what she wrote in her never-ending notes. But, to do so would mean to do something Penelope swore she would never do, "communicate." Communication was something Penelope was not good at. She never knew the right thing to say, the correct combination of words to get her through life. Instead, she had given up any attempts to try to learn and chose to focus on the ways to avoid communication, social situations, any interaction with other people. She was more comfortable by herself, with her loud thoughts and whirlwind emotions. That was something she could deal with. Sort of.

"Penelope, Dr. Ramon tells me that you are having a hard time participation during your group therapy sessions," Dr. Fay said. She pushed her bug-eye glasses further up her nose.

Penelope swallowed hard. She knew she couldn't get away with being an unparticipating participant in group sessions for long, but she hadn't figured how to avoid participating for a while longer.

"I thought you liked group sessions?" Dr. Fay asked.

Penelope nodded.

She did like the group sessions. They were a nice way to silence the loudest of her thoughts. Silence did not equate not liking something. She didn't know how to tell Dr. Fay that.

"Penelope, if you want to get better, you need to start talking and start helping yourself," Dr. Fay said. She put her legal pad down on her desk, leaned forward on her chair, and stared at Penelope in attempt to create a connection with her.

Penelope, in retaliation, pushed her chair slightly back, leaned as far away from Dr. Fay as she could, and looked down at her beat-up shoes.

Penelope didn't know if she could get better. What did that mean exactly, anyways? Everyone thought that talking, laughing, being open about everything was better. But, Penelope had tried that for years and was in no way better for it. In fact, she felt as if it had made her worse. It was the talking and the laughing that set off the panic that she forcefully hid, apparently unsuccessfully.

"Penelope? Are you listening?" Dr. Fay asked.

Penelope nodded stiffly.

"So, please, tell me what is going on with your group sessions?"

Penelope took a deep breath. She knew there was no getting out of this.

"They're fine," Penelope said slowly, trying to prolong her response in order to have her session with Dr. Fay end faster.

"Then, why aren't you talking during the sessions, Penelope? There is a lot you can gain from others dealing with similar situations," Dr. Fay said.

Logically, Penelope knew this was true. However, she didn't like talking about her problems because they were hers and hers alone. It was the one thing she didn't have to share with other people.

"I would rather listen," Penelope said, carefully articulating every syllable.

It was true. It was better to listen to everyone else's problems, traumas, instead of letting them devour her own. She knew a lot about the people in the Sad Ghosts Club, even things they didn't want her to know. Like the girl who showed up one day with her head half-shaved, who only did it to distract from the fresh wounds on her upper thighs that were visible only when she shifted in her seat and the bottom of her shorts caught on the chair. Or the boy

who always smelled like he bathed in Axe body spray because he wanted to mask the aroma of the joint he had just smoked before being forced to sit with a group of strangers and share his feelings. Or the boy who wore a binder to hold back his breasts so tight that his ribs were breaking, but he refused to take it off, saying that it was the only thing keeping his real self together, his other self seeping through the burn marks on his arms and legs.

These were the people that should talk. Penelope thought her problems paled in comparison.

"Part of your group sessions is to listen, but the other part is to talk and have others listen to you. Penelope, you cannot get everything you need by just listening. You need to be able to communicate what you are holding on to so tightly inside. By doing that, you will begin to lighten the burden you have taken on. Do you understand?" Dr. Fay asked.

Penelope just stared at her. What was she supposed to say to that? "The burden you have taken on" made it sound like Penelope had a choice in it. If she did, she would have opted for anything else. Dr. Fay had good intentions, but she was just making Penelope feel worse. Everyone around Penelope talked about letting go and getting better and being stronger. She could hear the chorus of voices telling her to just "get over it." If only she could.

"I don't think-" Penelope was cut off by three loud knocks at the door.

Dr. Fay raised an eyebrow, unaccustomed to being interrupted during a session. Dr. Fay stood up, walked around Penelope, and opened the door.

Penelope's mother stood outside the door.

"The hour is over, Penelope and I have to go," she said, not bothering to wait for Dr. Fay's answer. She walked in the office and grabbed Penelope's arm, pulling her up and out of the chair.

"Oh, is it?" Dr. Fay looked down at her wristwatch, "time went by so fast this time. Mrs. Velasquez, I would ask you not to interrupt our sessions, despite the time. My receptionist will inform me when the session is over so I can properly wrap up the session."

Penelope's mother pressed her lips together but nodded.

"Andalé," she said to Penelope.

"Don't forget that she has a group session on Monday at 4:30," Dr. Fay told Penelope's mother.

"She will be there," Penelope's mother said. She pulled Penelope out of the office.

"I will see you next week, Penelope. Think about what we talked about."

Penelope nodded once before her mother pulled her through the doorway into the waiting room.

Socializing for the Socially Awkward

Jessica Noyola

How do socially awkward people socialize? They don't. It's not that they don't like to, it's just harder for them since they overanalyze everything, and I do mean everything. That's why talking only occurs when forced, and when forced, even the simplest conversations/scenarios can go wrong.

1. Panic at the cute person in front of you.

Humans are social creatures, so not communicating is almost nearly impossible. You've been doing great so far with minimal conversation and breezing your way through life with your basic social skills. So when your mom asks you to get change for \$20, you see this as no problem. Walk with your head down to avoid human contact. Get to the front register. Look up. Right as you're about to speak, Samantha from Target smiles and asks how your day is going. Shit, don't you dare start stuttering! The nice pretty girl with long flowing brown hair, glasses that rest perfectly on her face and the cutest little grin has just started a conversation with you, and your brain has fallen in love with her simply because she was kind...great, not again! You want to speak up but you shut down as a natural defense. "Fine." Good job. You struggle to pull the change from your pocket and you see there's a line forming. You're so anxious you drop the money on the floor and then hit your head on the counter coming back up. Fuck! Run away without explanation to the last register where the old man is. Success.

2. Roll Call

This is a common area for socially awkward people to feel anxious. When you first start school, you're thrown together in a room full of a million noisy kids, so yeah, it comes as a shock to you! The teacher will sit you down in your assigned seating and then start calling roll. When your name is finally called, you nervously respond in the squeakiest and quietest voice, "Here." The kids will think it's hilarious, and every day after that they will

mimic your elf voice. These kids are vicious and they won't let up, but enough is enough. Since your name is in the middle of the alphabet, it really doesn't matter which direction the teacher calls from, and you have just enough time to decipher the perfect plan. You won't say your name too high because you'll risk sounding like a pubescent boy, and you won't say it too low because you'll sound like an emo-kid. Just casually say it.

Breathe in, breathe out, "Here!"

Your teacher will break the news that she called out another student with your last name. Don't worry, it gets better after high school...actually that might not be true. You might still carry the notion that people will actually take the time from their lives to listen in on how you respond to your name. At least in the real world when you're self-employed, you'll never have to call roll.

3. Group Work

As much as you will try to avoid it, there is no escaping group work. Hearing the phrase, "partner up" is literally the apocalypse for socially awkward people. Sure, you may be Tumblr famous with thousands of followers, but you don't actually have to interact with the people of the internet. You're already limited on friends due to a lack communication, now they expect you to go out of your way and try and work with someone you don't know? You'll see everyone pairing up with their friends, and you'll be sitting in your chair waiting. Then your teacher will be the martyr she is and help you out by asking the entire class who will let you work with them. All eyes are on you. This leads to bigger problems because if it's a presentation they'll all turn to you for the answers. People automatically assume that just because you're quiet, you're super smart. However, they don't understand that you're human just like they are and need help from time to time.

4. Important Conversation

The cafeteria lady just asked how you liked the food and you responded with thank you. This wasn't on purpose; it just came out that way. It's already too late to go back and correct yourself. This is why you work best through written statements and emails—you're not asked on the spot about anything disturbing or demanding of action... that is however until you have to make important phone

calls. For example, let's say you have a phone interview. You'll plan out the entire conversation and possible outcome before calling. When you finally find the confidence to call, you blank out the moment you hear the dial tone. With every second that passes, the anxiety rises like waves crashing on top of you causing you to drown.

“Hello?”

“Uh...” hangs up.

Congratulations, you have successfully hung up on who could've been your potential future boss. You're lucky if they call back. You can always use the lame excuse that you lost service?

5. Walking

Yes, even walking is a daily struggle. You will literally map out a trail that you go by for the sole purpose of not running into anybody. You are always looking ahead for a clear safe path. It's not just because you are afraid of conversation, it's because you don't want to get caught up in some kind of “walking tango.” There's no other way to describe it: someone will cut you off in your path and you're faced with someone going in the same direction. You're shuffling your feet back and forth thinking do I go left, right, do I stop? If you do this successfully for a little over a minute, you are a level expert awkward person.

6. Dating

Look, just because you struggle with what you want to say, doesn't mean that you want to be alone. Friends are measured in quality not quantity so it doesn't matter that you are limited. And relationships can be great, if you can get past the ice breaker stage. What will we even talk about? What if they're quiet too? Should I apologize for being quiet? Should I apologize for apologizing? It's all a constant circle. Lucky for you, there's this great thing called the internet. Sure the whole online dating thing is pretty sketchy, but you won't be forced to talk! Find an app, make an account, and start making friends. Swipe swipe swipe HOLY SHIT it's Samantha from Target! You know, the nice pretty girl who you totally bailed on for getting change. You're feeling pretty brave so you'll swipe yes, and to your surprise it'll be a match! She'll even remember all your cute little quirks too.

Diapers

Alex Z. Salinas

Years ago when my father was a young man, he found himself in a predicament. You see, he needed money for his family—his wife and baby son—but he had a drinking problem. He earned what he could at the milk plant, but it wasn't much. It wasn't enough to support his priorities. He would come home late and be sent off for diapers and baby food. He would return, much later, with nothing to show for but whiskey breath. You see, this caused problems. This lifestyle of his couldn't go on forever. Something needed to be done. So one night he put it in his head to do something. The way I was told, he left from the milk plant straight to the bar. He was determined to recover what had been stolen from him, starting with all the money in the cash register. There's really no stopping a man like that unless you kill him. You see, it didn't end well for my father. He had barely laid a finger on the register before old Mr. Lawley, the bartender, blasted him away with a shotgun. My father wasn't even armed.

I used to hate when people said how much I look like him. But now I see it. I have a wife and baby now. A beautiful baby girl named Jade. I work hard so that Jade won't have to, but sometimes it's barely enough. You see, I have priorities now too. And lately, I've made it a habit of looking at myself in the bathroom mirror after I shave—I see him coursing through my veins—and walking to the closet and touching the cold steel of the Glock I tucked away on the top shelf, just to know it's there.

Momo's Flower

Camille Stecker

#1- Flower

Sitting in a blue vase on top of Momo's living room table. And within the vase always sat a chrysanthemum. Every season the same vase with a different flower sat on the same table. It is Momo's flower. She loved chrysanthemums and everyone knew she did. A decade has gone by since she has passed away, but whenever I see the beautiful flower at HEB, I all stop and think of her.

#2- Mom's Stories

Chrysanthemums are the beautiful "Gold Flower." When I look at the flower, I remember the letters my mom showed me that Momo sent to my grandpa in World War II. She told me that the Japanese Emperor adopted the flower as his official seal. I remember the pictures of Momo in her nurse uniform and the clichéd romantic story of the War nurse falling in love with the soldier. That was my Momo. She smelled of love and rose water. She looked more beautiful as she grew older just like the chrysanthemum. Even when the flower is about to wither away with age, the chrysanthemum never loses its beauty.

#3- Last time I saw Momo

When I see the chrysanthemum, I think about Christmas days and having Momo sit on the couch watching me open my presents with a grin on her face. I don't think about Momo's strokes or her loss of memory, nor do I think about going to see her in the nursing home every Sunday after Mass looking like a dying vegetable. I think about going to "Momo's House" to climb trees and get loved on with kisses and hugs until I couldn't breathe. I remember the Momo who was beautiful like the flower she loved.

#4- Flower

Momo is gone now, but she remains in every live chrysanthemum my mom keeps in the same blue vase on top of our living room table at home.

I Am My Father's Daughter

Samire Adam

I walked down the aisle of book shelves, still upset over the incident that occurred this afternoon. As I began to settle down into my usual sitting spot and to open the book I just checked out, I realized that my sense of focus had been left back at my dorm. As my phone made a “ding” sound indicating I had received a text message, I picked up the phone to read the text. “Seriously you’re over reacting,” said the message from Susana. Another text from Jack read, “Come back.” Ignoring both of their texts, I went back to my reading.

Two chapters into the book, I received a phone call. It was my mother calling me for the third time in a row. I knew she was calling because Susana had called her to tell her how I had stormed out of the room. As I answered the phone and heard my mom go on and on about how I am treating my friends wrong, I began to drift back to my first night in the United States. It was twelve in the morning on a Friday when I finished unpacking and went downstairs to eat. I still remember the shocked faced I had when I saw the same food I grew up eating laying on the dining table.

“You thought you’ll never see this again?” My father said pointing to the injera.

“No, never.” I replied, excited to eat.

“Too bad! You’re mother is a great cook, she found a way to bring our little Ethiopia back,” responded my father, now looking at my mom.

“Wow that’s great,” I said. “I don’t know why people complain about being forced to leave their country, if they have a way to get items we believed are unique to our country.”

“What do you mean by that?” my father asked.

“Okay so you know this injer, we’re eating, is made out of teff,” I began. I continued to speak when I saw my dad’s head nod in agreement. “Well, I’ve always heard that the teff is only produced in

Ethiopia, but now that seems false because I see the food here not much different from what we have back home.”

“Honey,” my dad paused and continued after thinking for a little bit, “You’re definitely right, the teff that is used to make the injera is only found in Ethiopia, therefore the injera we eat here is not made out of teff so it is not quite the same. That’s probably why people that live abroad complain about missing their home.”

“What?” I said, dropping the piece of injera back to the plate. “If it is not teff, then what I am eating?” I asked.

“Self rising flour,” my father revealed.

“It’s amazing how much the bread looks just like the one made out of teff,” I stated. “I guess life isn’t too bad for us diasporas.”

“That’s not entirely true!” he said as he sipped his drink. “However, the biggest problem we’re facing isn’t whether our people are having difficulties adjusting to a new country, but why we are being forced to leave our own country.”

Assuming it was a question he expected me to answer, I replied, “To have a better life? Isn’t that the same reason why you left? Isn’t that why we’re all here?”

“No. Not exactly,” my dad whispered before he stood up from his seat.

A moment later, he returned to the room carrying stacks of what seemed like small note books. When he took a seat next to my mother in the dining room, I noticed that in fact they were journals with a bunch of papers sticking out of them. Out of curiosity, I began to observe the journals that now laid between me and my father. I noticed all the journals were not the same. The shapes, colors, and writing differed from one another. Moreover, each journal was labeled with numbers, the dates of the years written about. Before he got the chance to explain himself, my mother gave him a look hinting at him to stop and to finish his plate.

“Leave the child alone,” my mom uttered in her slighted tone. “I am glad I get to have my daughter back after eight years of separation. You are ruining this beautiful moment with your political nonsense.”

“Okay!” my father quit after he managed to say under his breath, “We’re not done with this conversation, young lady.”

Afterward, I began to help my mother pick up the dishes off the table and clean after us. When my mother left the room, my father did not waste any time before inviting me to sit with him. Knowing I had no choice but to obey his command, I settled on the couch across from him.

“So...” he began. “You think I left my land, mother, and friends because I was poor?”

His question caught me off guard. I knew it was a trick question so I said, “I do not think you were poor when you left Ethiopia.”

“You know I was about your age when I was forced to leave.”

“What do you mean when you say forced?” I asked curiously.

“For you to understand what I meant by that, you need to read this...” my dad said handing me the first massive journal he had brought out.

* * *

A week went by, and I was beginning to read the last journal I had. So far, I learned that, my father had a fourth grade education; the government that was ruling Ethiopia at that time was discriminating against my father’s tribe and believed educating them would be a threat to the crown. Moreover, he lost most of his inheritance of his family’s coffee plantation because the government believed he would be a problem. When he refused to export any coffee products due to the unfair treatment of the citizens, the reigning party took away most of his land. After countless imprisonments and failed assassinations, he managed to escape to a neighboring country, Djibouti.

What I remember about the last journal was that the cover was decorated with names I did not recognize and also had “ninety-seven” written in Arabic letters. As I scanned through the pages, I noticed his sentence structures; he used more than five languages to form a single sentence. I knew before I even began reading, the journal was beyond my limit. Unlike his previous journals, this did not stick to just one language but mixed all of the eight languages he spoke at that time. Therefore, I knew the journal was meant to be unlocked only by him. For about a week, he read the journal to

me as a bed time story right before he left for work. Most nights, I would drift into sleep before he finished reading a daily entry. Other times, I would request for him to read me more.

I learned that the journal was written the year I was born, and the names he was writing were name ideas for me. The story was that my mother and father would sneak back to Ethiopia so my mom could give birth to me there. It is also a tradition for Ethiopian women to stay in recovery for two months at their mother's house after giving birth. Before my birth, my father was caught and once again imprisoned. He missed my birth and was not allowed to see me until my mother brought me to him when I was a couple of weeks old.

"You see..." he began, "I really did not have a choice but to leave my country so my kids could have a father. If I had decided to stay there and fight the corrupted government, much like Nelson Mandela, I would have been killed."

"Why do you think Nelson Mandela's movement was successful and not yours?" I asked.

"I think they were successful because they were able to unite under the leadership of one individual, and they were able to obtain a lot of the world's attention, which forced the ruling group to acknowledge the citizen's rights." He paused before he continued, "As for us, we were a mess. There were too many people trying to take power, and the government that was in control manipulated the media, so the citizens wouldn't know about their voting rights."

* * *

Ever since my father shared his story, I began to read more autobiographies of famous politicians. I remember the first time he took me to the public library I checked out as many of the Nelson Mandela books as I was able to carry in my hands. Every Friday afternoon, my father made it a weekly activity to take my siblings and me to the library and check out a book to read for the upcoming week. Even nowadays, I feel a sense of comfort when I am in the library, especially on a Friday night now that he is no longer with me. My father's stories inspired me to be the person I am today, including my goal to earn a college degree in Political Science.

* * *

Now that I think about it, I know why I stormed out of the room. I was upset that I was trapped by my friends to watch a movie with them; moreover, I was thinking of my father. It was pretty hard to have fun when all I really wanted to do was isolate myself for one afternoon and honor my father. I recognized how I acted towards my friends was wrong, so I sent both of them an apology text message, and then returned to my reading.

Trees Trace a Sea of Green and a Memory

Sofia Zenetta

The trees are racing through the window and everything is a sea of green. The road is full of curves and unexpected dips and holes. The wheels of the car make a jolting sound every thirty minutes.

“How do you tell a girl you really like her eyes?” He asks. The smooth smoke pours out of his gray cigarette. The only thing in the sea of green is you and he.

Fast forward, Lewis Watson lyrics play in the background, “I’m still sleeping with a pillow, under lamplight. Freezing cold, ‘cause you always liked the windows opened wide.” The dips and the holes interrupt the plucking string of the guitar, thus your string of conscious daydreams stuck in rewind. You feel so empty today; however, you remember you also felt empty by his side.

The sunset forgets day and brings on the night and even though you don’t know his last name you are willing to go for the ride. He thinks you are lovely, and he is everything you’ve ever wanted. You just want to fall in love with someone and you don’t care who it is you’re falling for, you have seen it in films, true love always finds a way to fall in place. And you feel it is true.

Your right ear begins to feel warm, your heartbeat begins to spiral out of consistency. Your face feels like its swelling and the stings on your cheeks are threatening your pride. Your bottled emotions are exploding outside of your boxed control.

He pops the beer top off his Heineken causing an explosion of foam and bubbles, after, he parks his car and turns off lights. The sea of green fades into a darker shade. He gives you a superfi-

cial explanation on his favorite book, Siddhartha.

In the back seat in the midst of your dives into the past the sunlight begins to fade, you want to hide your face in shame, you sink into the grey pillow, you force yourself to look away from the car window which traces the sea of green.

You take his explanation to heart, his knowledge inspires you, although he fails to answer what the plot was really about. You stare at him and he sweeps in.

Today in the back seat of a car, the soft tears, growing puddles, begin to stain the grey pillow. You shut your eyes, but they still find a way to escape. You think of how lucky they are to find a way out because you failed to find an escape that night.

He bites your lip and he locks your hands in place. No escape. He pulls your hair, and he smudges his scent all over your radiant skin, tainting it, forever. You didn't plan this, you planned love and you didn't plan this.

While masked by your pillow, you go over unanswered questions, your liberty and your independence. Society says there is a possibility you might have asked for it. Your ears ring and you begin to slow your breathing.

Fire Gods at War

Angela Sobery

The wife of fury has heard enough from her devil tongued husband. The desperation that she feels has swept on her face permanently creating a scowled scar. The husband's betrayal with a human makes her mouth vomit ash. The wife's rage illuminates the night sky with emotions of disgust.

The husband has to suddenly swerve his massive blue flamed head out of the way of his wife's scorched flamed hand. The surprised husband spits out boiling hot rage covering the forest surrounding them. He swells a thousand feet tall, by depleting all the oxygen in his wife's space. Ruby flames are rolling in his palms striking back. The battle explodes forcing the crust of the earth below them to shake uncontrollably.

The wife's eyes glare and produce sharp onyx daggers from her pupils. The daggers are launched into the shoulder of her husband. The husband reacts in pain throwing his flaming arms up into the black sky. The torment of war escalates, when the wife grabs her arctic ice spear. The husband sees her movement and expels a relentless amount of flames into her face. The ice from the arctic had been the only means of destruction for any fire god. She raises the staff blindly and throws it with all her might. The blue tip of the spear pierced the heart of her husband.

The couple's orange glowing eyes suddenly meet and pause. The heartache secedes, but the shock still stings. The husband's internal spark extinguishes, spreading black all over his torso. The husband's inferno dimmed and their ancient love is gone forever.

The wife of fury stood in the tar pit where her husband collapsed. She picked up the arctic spear and set it aflame. The staff burned and the arctic ice crystal fell to her feet. The wife knew she was the last of her kind. The devastation of the forest surrounding her filled her heart. A charred, desolate, and lifeless space with no escape from the memories. She raised the arctic ice high into the

night sky and opened up her flaming arms exposing her chest. The wife sucked in the air as hard as she could and the arctic ice rocketed back at her. She screamed for her husband, while the penetration of the ice blackened her flames. The husband's tar pit merged with hers and they remained molten together for eternity.

Sorry, Not Sorry

Alex Z. Salinas

From: Hendricks, John
To: Turner, William
Subject: Notice (URGENT)

Bill,

This is really tough for me to break to you. Effective immediately, your employment with AmeriTech Solutions as Vice President of Sales Operations has ceased. The Board of Trustees and I found this decision terrible to make.

In the decade you ran Sales Ops, you helped us get here. You helped us invest in REX-23.

Nobody thought REX would turn out the way it did. REX's calculated sales planning and strategies—completely unaffected by human error—increased our profit margin by 300 percent in the last two quarters. REX projects we can double that figure next year alone. The thing sifts through Excel spreadsheets faster than we can make a cup of coffee. He practically knows our market better than we do.

And he never takes two-hour lunch breaks, calls in sick, or is away from his desk playing 18 holes. REX is, for lack of a better word, perfect where you fall short.

And he doesn't require a salary. I've searched for any budgetary wiggle room to keep you on payroll, and trust me, I've lost sleep in doing so, but the financials simply aren't there, buddy.

I know you're shocked and probably angry right now. REX estimated that could last 5 weeks, 4 days, and 7 hours, but please under-

stand that this was only a business decision. I don't want to lose our friendship. Remember all the Christmas parties we've celebrated? Heck, our wives still go to the gym together!

You'll receive a generous severance package. Also, the company phone is yours. That's on us.

Just remember to turn in your badge and company Amex to Joe ASAP.

Stay in touch, buddy. You know where to find me.

Respectfully,

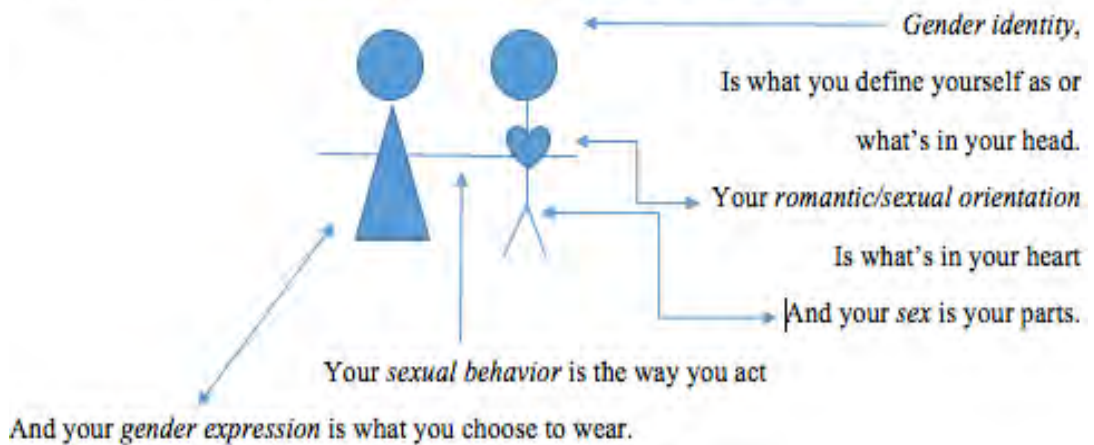
John

Expression of Self

Jessica Noyola

Let's make this simple:

We tend to use the terms *biological sex*, *gender*, and *sexual orientation* interchangeably.



*Non-
Fiction*

Taking a Steam Hose to the Reader's Heart: An Aristotelian Response to Randall Jarrell

Jesse Durovey

Randall Jarrell's poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," is evocative of both pity and terror. A world of dread is squeezed into five short lines, and the reader is taken on a journey from birth to death in the life of a World War II era, Army Air Forces ball turret gunner. As this dual-force of pity and terror holds sway over the reader—made all the more palpable by the form of a brave, yet fragile, hero—another force instills itself within the reader. This force is literary catharsis. The Third Century philosopher, Aristotle, who was the protégé of Plato, viewed tragedy as a genre of art which induces sympathy and fear within its audience. It is the audience who would then, upon witnessing a proper tragedy, achieve an emotional cleansing. A close reading of Jarrell's poem illustrates how plot, heroic character, and poetic mimesis are merged to create a sense of pity and terror within the reader, which ultimately leads to catharsis of the reader's emotions.

Although the poem is a solitary five-line stanza and a mere fifty-two words, Jarrell had the forethought to include a note detailing the technical aspects of inhabiting a ball turret. The ball turret is the Plexiglas dome that sits underneath certain World War II era bomber aircraft—most notably Boeing's B-17 Flying Fortress and the Consolidated B-24 Liberator (Jarrell 489). The ball turret gunner would operate twin .50 caliber machine guns which revolved on a track, allowing him to engage fighter jets below his aircraft. The gunner was invariably of small stature and would be hunched upside-down within this bubble so that he resembled a fetus. Adding to the surreal terror of fighting in this manner, the fighter jets would combat these turret gunners by launching explosive shells at

the inverted men (Jarrell 489).

The speaker of Jarrell's poem details the plotline of his journey from birth to death while "six miles from earth" (Jarrell 3). Aristotle, who wrote one of the earliest treatises on literary criticism in his *Poetics*, insists that plot is particularly significant to this progression of emotion within the reader. According to Aristotle, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life" (VI). The finest way to exhibit this action and life through tragedy is with plot. Pelagia Goulimari offers an excellent summation of Aristotle's critical work in "Aristotle and Tragedy: From *Poetics* to Postcolonial Tragedy," from the text, *Literary Criticism and Theory*. Goulimari presents Aristotle's concept that good tragedy must have a clearly defined plot with three distinct parts—reversal of fortune, recognition, and suffering (28).

In "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the reversal of fortune is seen in the speaker's description of "falling" from his "mother's sleep ... into the State" (Jarrell 1). There is certainly some ambiguity here, but the imagery of being enclosed in the warmth and love of a mother's womb is inescapable; however, there is no question as to the negative connotation of "the State." The capitalization of "State" seems to signify a government or a nation. The speaker has been enlisted in the service of his country to fight in a war. This new environment is decidedly womb-like as well, but it is cold and hostile rather than warm and nurturing.

The speaker recognizes his misfortune while high above the earth. It is as if he has fallen again, completely untethered from his false sense of security, his "dream of life" (Jarrell 3). The reader must imagine the surreal experience of being suspended in an inverted position six miles above terra firma as forest and farmland passes by—in miniature—far below. This bucolic reverie is shattered by the arc of explosive shells aimed directly at his Plexiglas womb—the bursts of flak from the anti-aircraft guns as black as night. The terror of the speaker is palpable as he recognizes the horrible injustice of being trapped—in much the same way Oedipus felt that fate had entrapped him into killing his own father (Goulimari 28).

The speaker's suffering is carried out by the "nightmare fighters," who launch their explosive shells again and again until

they hit their mark, killing the young gunner. The turret gunner's suffering is not finished in death; he still has to face the dehumanization of being washed out of his aerial womb with a hose.

To achieve catharsis in the reader, this triumvirate force of plot cannot be simple—it must have complexity (28). Aristotle says, “A perfect tragedy should ... be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation” (XIII). To reinforce this concept, Goulimari draws another allusion from Oedipus. Just as the protagonist in Oedipus the King follows an intricate plot in the killing of his father, the reader sees complexity woven through Jarrell's poem (Goulimari 28). The ball turret gunner has been plucked from his peaceful life to do violence on behalf of his country, and he dies in the process. He then suffers the indignity of having his compatriots give him the funeral rites of a pair of muddy combat boots so that they may continue fighting and bombing the enemy.

Just as Aristotle affirms that plot is the “the origin and ... soul of tragedy,” the soul of the hero must also be considered (Goulimari 28). He must be pure enough to conjure these emotions of pity and terror within the reader, but if he is completely blameless the reader will be disgusted. While tragedy “is the imitation of an action,” an “action implies personal agents” (VI). It is these personal agents within tragedy that must possess the appropriate character to evoke pity, terror, and ultimately catharsis within the audience. In other words, the hero's character must be so entirely human that the reader sees his own reflection within the hero (Goulimari 31). Witnessing a villain receive his comeuppance would be satisfying in a moral sense, but it would not arouse pity or terror within the audience. Likewise, a moral saint who suffers without some cause du jour would only result in the audience being disgusted (Aristotle XIII).

The heroic character must then dwell between these two extremes of virtue and vice to reflect true humanity (Aristotle XIII). However, it is not enough to be a decent human being. Aristotle believes the tragic hero must be “highly renowned and prosperous—a personage like Oedipus” (Aristotle XIII). Jarrell's speaker is

a young man who has been thrust into a war that is not of his own making. He has fallen into the service of “the State” to sit in a ball turret and engage enemy fighters, protecting the crew of the B-24 or B-17 he flies in. While none of these factors could be construed as prosperity, the fact that he is bravely serving his country in a time of war is worthy of renown. In addition, being a ball turret gunner puts Jarrell’s hero in hallowed company. Very much like the “tunnel rats,” the U.S. servicemembers who would descend into Viet Cong guerrilla tunnels during the Vietnam War, ball turret gunners were chosen for their small size and stature—it was the only way to ensure they would fit into their Plexiglas domes (Gorner). Jesse Bradley was a ball turret gunner during World War II and recalls his experience flying in his B-24 while writing “The Ball Turret.” Bradley lends credence to the idea that the ball turret gunner was an extremely valuable position, as well as one to which many servicemembers feared to be assigned, which implies to the reader the level of bravery it took for these men to fulfill their duties. A mere thirty-thousand of the approximately sixteen-million U.S. military servicemembers were ball turret gunners (Bradley 22). The gunner could do so much damage to enemy fighters, and the bomb-laden planes he flew on were such priceless objectives, that he would be specifically targeted with explosive shells. Most courageously, the gunner would also be positioned in the least-defensible, and most difficult to escape, area of the plane.

Poetic mimesis is the means by which the author disguises reality through expressive language to affect the reader’s emotions (Goulimari 28). In this way, Aristotle claims that tragedy seeks to imitate a unified and grim action in “language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament” (VI). Jarrell utilized his experience and expertise as a World War II-era Army Air Force flight instructor to craft a poem that is both realistic in its imitation of actual events and beautiful in its poetic imagery (Pritchard). Just as the character of the tragic hero must be deemed appropriately brave and heroic to achieve pity in terror in the audience, poetic mimesis must neither be too graphic nor too subdued in its imagery if the poet’s wish is to arouse pity, terror, and eventual catharsis within his audience.

Through poetic mimesis, Jarrell is by turns explicit and reserved, alternately realistic and metaphorical. The speaker begins as a literal infant, but by the end of the poem is given the unceremonious farewell of the afterbirth when he is washed out of his turret. The speaker is a baby, a soldier, and an animal— it is unclear whether the “wet fur” described in line two is the fur lining of a flight crew bomber jacket or the frozen coat of some amniotic fluid-soaked, simian creature which is freezing in its aerial womb. The turrets of the B-24 were low to the ground, so they were designed to be retractable through the use of hydraulics (Bradley 22). The turret would be raised on takeoffs and landings, and then lowered with the gunner in position when the bomber was over its target. The gunner would literally be “hunched in [the bomber’s] belly” until they reached their target (Jarrell 2). Although not a gunner, Jarrell had firsthand knowledge of the military—its aircraft and how men lived and died. He was able to weave this realism into his war poetry while employing powerful imagery, metaphor, and symbolism.

This poetic mimesis continues as the speaker is “Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life / [as he] woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters” (Jarrell 3-4). The reader envisions the bomber flying over its target, the gunner using the hydraulic valve to lower his turret from the guarded position inside the belly of the plane. Lowered to fighting position, exposed and isolated, the gunner lets go of any presumption of survival—he is “loosed from [earth’s] dream of life” (Jarrell 3). Bradley says, “Sitting alone in the hardest-to-exit position, suspended in space below the plane, seemingly more exposed to flak and fighters, and having no visual contact with your comrades all combined to create a terrible sense of isolation and vulnerability” (23). Jarrell’s lyrical imitation of reality takes the reader on a roller coaster of emotion until crashing him to the ground with the final gritty line: “When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose” (Jarrell 5). Whether the gunner is burst apart by shells or—when his turret’s hydraulic system stopped working and he would not be able to raise himself back up into the plane—sacrificed by the pilot to make a safe landing, the turret gunner risked a gruesome death that no whimsical words could abate (Bradley 22). The reader, so invested in the gunner’s struggle

after a mere four lines, is forced to imagine the horror of his death in the speaker's reserved, yet undisguised, language. Jarrell closes with an emotional "gut-punch" to the reader, serving catharsis on a blood-soaked runway.

Tragedy is a curious mixture of plot, character, and poetic mimesis. The tragic poem is able to transcend history, parsing through myriad details to find the unifying theme and action—a universal truth that should be shared (Goulimari 28). Aristotle confirms that poetry is "more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (IX). War poetry tells the universal truths of soldiering and dying in battle. By speaking of all soldiers who fight and die, Jarrell's poem transcends mere historical account into the philosophical realm of truth and forms. Dying in combat is horrible, and men and women are turned into children in the face of war's gruesome machinations. With this realization, the reader is scraped clean and raw of all emotion, helpless but to admire the heroism and valor of the ball turret gunner and cursing the brutality of war. Through his use of tragic plot, heroic character, and poetic mimesis, Jarrell takes a metaphorical steam hose to the reader's heart and makes him a witness to a bizarre and gruesome funeral rite. The earth which once held the young gunner's "dream of life" soaks up his very life's blood—the reader cannot help but be left as raw, shattered, and clean as the ball turret itself.

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