



# Duck Soup

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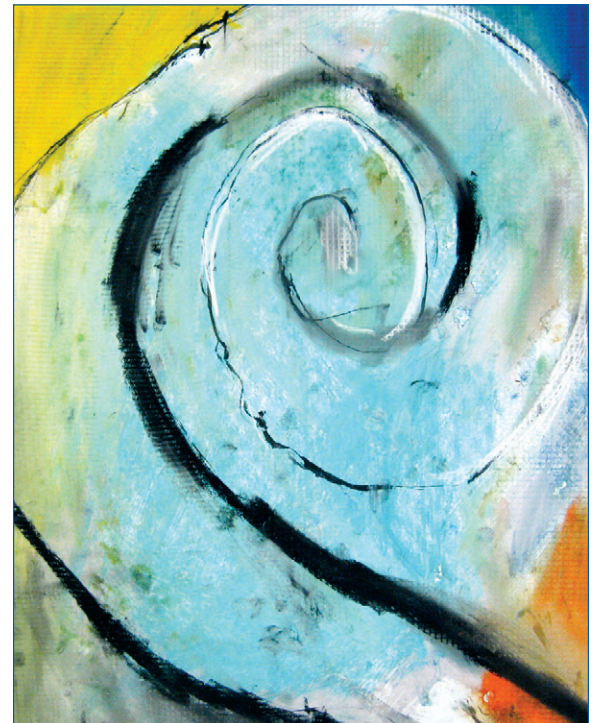
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# I Do

By Jessica Rystad

You unleash your fury  
In a dizzying whirlwind  
But to my surprise I'm still standing  
These legs are stronger than I thought  
Remember when you made this cold  
floor my home?  
And my only friends were the lights on  
the ceiling above me?  
And the blood littering my mouth  
Was the main course  
At your romantic dinner for two?  
Well, I do  
"I do," "I do"  
I guess we all make mistakes  
I always thought your eyes  
Were a beautifully stunning sight to see  
When they weren't filled with hate  
And your hands were capable of such  
tender affection  
But the arms attached drew them back  
(again and again)  
Before they had the chance to show it  
Still you showed it  
Again and again  
It was just the wrong show  
Again and again  
And the lights on the ceiling above  
Watched with me  
Again and again  
When your tender hands didn't block  
the screen  
Remember when you used to make  
This cold floor my home?  
Well I do  
"I do," "I do"  
But my lease is up  
And I'm surprised to find  
These legs are stronger than I thought  
And by your beautiful eyes  
I can tell you're surprised too  
So look into this barrel  
I'd like to introduce you to my friends  
Do they shine as bright for you? **DS**

*Jessica*, charcoal and pastel on paper, by Pat Sutterfield



# You'd Better Not Get Suspended!

By Charles Cheeks

Everyone leaves a legacy in high school. Mine was getting beat up. I did carry a briefcase to school so I guess I was sort of asking for it. Nevertheless, I spent most of high school being afraid to stand out and trying to stay out of the way of my tormenters. At first, I tried to make my life easier by aping the lifestyle of my oppressors. I started smoking, skipped class, and picked up a drug habit. No matter what I did, I was still treated the same. Something bad was bound to happen and it started after I met him.

Tracy Lewis was at least six feet tall with two hundred pounds of raw muscle. He was so dark that if someone tried to shoot him at night, the bullet would come back and ask for a flashlight. I do not know how old he was but he had been in high school for about six years. One day, I ran into him on my way to class (with my briefcase). It was like hitting a wall! My glasses went askew and I had to fix the tape to keep the handle in place.

"Sorry, man," I offered.

"You said it, fool," he spat. "And you're blind too."

Then with a hand that covered my whole chest, he slammed me into the wall so hard that I bounced and hit the floor. As I stumbled to my feet with the imprint of dirty floor tile on my face, Tracy joined in everyone's laughter. Then he strutted off like a gorilla that had just won a fight for a lifetime supply of bananas.

The next morning I awoke with an ominous chill. The lightning and claps of thunder sounded like God was really ticked off about something. As I started getting ready for school, I noticed my dad standing in the doorway with that "you sorry so and so" look on his face.

"I got a call about what happened at school yesterday. Look, boy! You've spent all your time in school getting your ass kicked. The next time you come home looking like hell I'm gonna beat your ass myself. Now you do what you gotta do! And you'd better not get suspended!"

My father was a man of few words and he always made them count. I had to make a choice: Take on Tracy or my father. I chose Tracy. As I trudged out the door to face what would certainly be my last day on earth, I passed Dad's open toolbox in the driveway and there it was. The sunlight shined on the little silver band that separated the handle from the instrument. What was an ice pick doing in a toolbox? I scooped it into my briefcase and continued on to the bus stop. I took my usual seat at the front of the bus behind the driver and prayed that Tracy would not be at school. Each plea was answered with thunder. I don't know what I did wrong, but I got the feeling that God really did not have my back. The bus pulled into the circular drive and screeched to a stop. My heart was pounding so hard I could hear the blood rushing around my ears. As usual, I waited for everyone else to get off first so I could sneak in without anyone noticing.

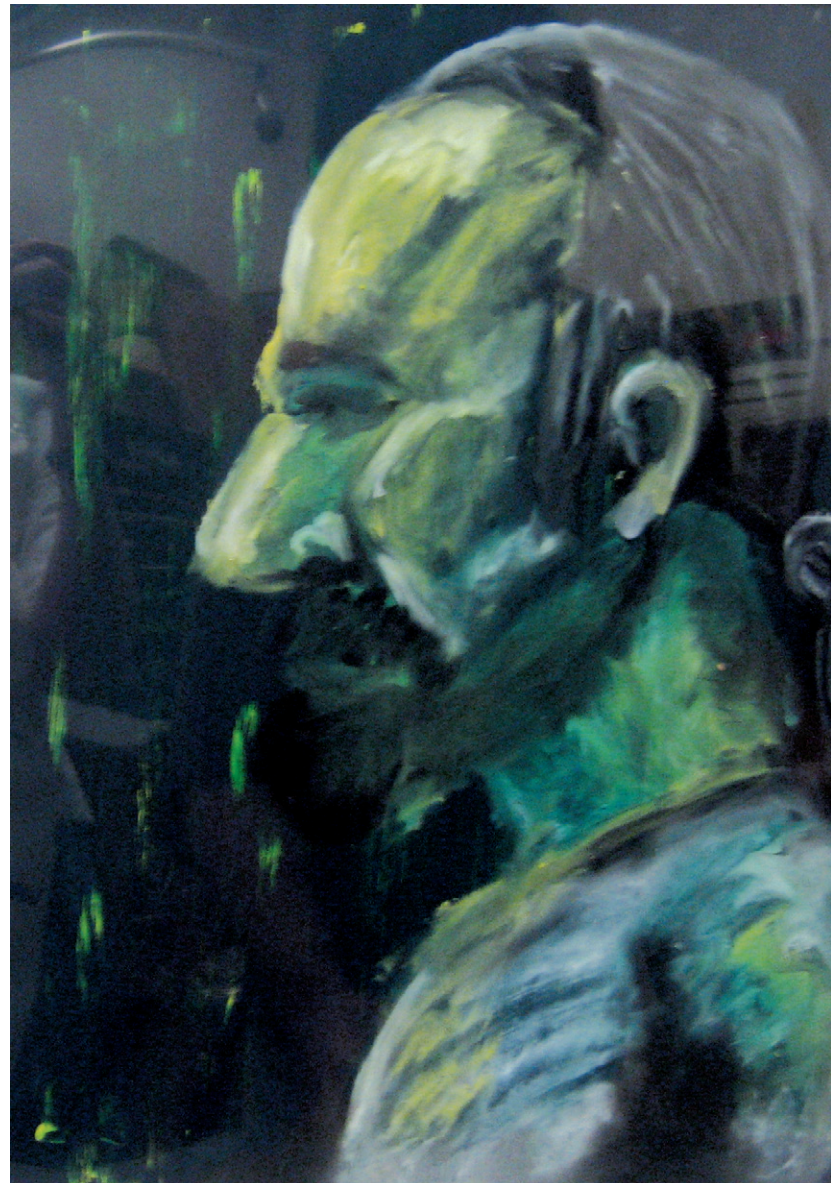
I crept off the bus and into the main hall looking cautiously in each direction. No Tracy! Thank God! I started to my first class, being careful of the floors, which had been made slippery from the morning's muddy traffic. Before I knew what happened I was sailing down the hallway, picking up mud, trash particles, and gum on my body before ping-ponging to a stop in front of the trophy case.

"Get outta my way, fool!"

The baritone voice boomed over the laughter of the crowd. I lay there playing dead, too humiliated to move, while my father's threats played loud-

er than the tardy bell of first period. After the crowd disbanded, I noticed a few people scattered throughout the hall. One of them was the gorilla, strutting down the hallway with his bald head, black turtleneck, and black slacks. He looked like a circumcised phallus even though I still thought at any second he might stop and eat bananas with his feet. Keeping my eye on him, I popped the latch on my briefcase and pulled out the ice pick. Cautiously, I got up and stealthily tiptoed toward him. Once I was close enough I clasped the pick in both hands, closed my eyes, and swung over my head

*Paul, cattle marker on paper, by Myk Taylor*





Once I opened my eyes, I saw he was on the floor face down screaming and cursing. There was blood everywhere. I felt no remorse, only relief.



just like in the movies, bringing the pick down to the screech of dissonant “Psycho” strings in my head. Screech! Screech! Screech! Three stabs. Can’t stop until I know I’m safe. Screech! Screech! Screech! Three more.

This continued until the screeches became softer, wetter, and then somewhat sloshy.

Once I opened my eyes, I saw he was on the floor face down screaming and cursing. There was blood everywhere. I felt no remorse, only relief. Before I had much time to think about the electric chair, God showed me he really did have my back. Since Tracy was so much taller; I stabbed him mostly in the behind. Now the only thing to do was avoid suspension. Then I remembered from grammar school that in a fight, the one who cries the loudest is the one who gets in the least amount of trouble. So as I saw Mr. Pierce, the vice-principal rushing around the corner I knew I had better put my acting class to good use. Hmm. What would be my “motivation”? I know. My Aunt Teresa’s funeral. The pick went flying out of my hand as I flung my arms wide open and crumpled to my knees, looking toward Heaven.

“Oh Lawd! Why! Why!” I screamed. “Ohhhh Lawd! Good Lawd! Aaaahhgg!” I made a gurgling sound. Yeah. That should do it. Now all I had to do was lie there in a fetal position and twitch. At Mr. Pierce’s request, two big Aryan football goons picked me up and carried me to the office sideways since my whole body was stiff as a board from the

shock. Once in the office, the whole staff was asking what happened.

“He stabbed him with this!”

Mr. Pierce displayed the ice pick like a trophy. At the very sight of it, I bulged my eyes as though I was looking straight into Hell and let out another “AAAahhgg!” Then it was back into the fetal position and twitching again. (It was even more pathetic in a waiting room chair). Seeing I was in no shape to answer questions, they called my mother. I knew this was an asset because Mother was a high-strung drama queen. Again, God had my back. She arrived just as the ambulance was wheeling me out and hovered over the gurney like those nurses in civil war movies.

“Darling, are you okay? C’mon, honey, speak to me. It’s mama.”

There was another little performance just for her. Keeping my eyes wide open, I focused on nothing particular, and I keep muttering phrases like: “Why? What have I done?” You know, drama stuff. Then I drifted off to sleep from the shot they gave me.

I awoke in the hospital with a nurse checking something in a tube and Mother at my bedside.

“Will he be all right?” Mother asked the nurse.

“Oh, sure. He’ll be fine. He’s just a little traumatized. We do have counselors for that sort of thing, you know.”

Whew! I passed the first hurdle; one more to go. I knew my dad would stop by the school before coming to the hospital. Five minutes later, he marched in and stood in front of my bed with his arms folded. He cocked his head to one side as if studying me. Then with those jackal-brown eyes glaring right through my soul, he leaned over and whispered, “You BETTER not get suspended.” Then he winked, letting me know the news from school was good.

“So what happened to the other boy?” Mother asked.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, my dad laughed and said, “Oh. He got expelled.” **DS**



# Freedom

By Mel Sinclair, Jr.

**T**he sky was so clear from up here. Everywhere i turned there was only the serene sound of the wind blowing against my face. i noticed the color of the sky through my tears and almost felt guilty for not being able to admire its beauty tomorrow. North Carolina blue... so much passion and tranquility in that color. Looking around me i took note of my surroundings and the particular environment that had come to be my setting of liberation. The AC units were a dull, tarnished gray, the antennas a mahogany rust, and the surrounding buildings a sandy orange under the sunset. As i made way to the edge i didn't think about homework, i didn't think about my job, or i didn't think about my dad finding something else to bitch about. i did it exactly the way my mom did it. i just walked and when i got to the edge i surrendered.

8th.

**S**The sound of the air rushing by my ears was escaping. There were no cars honking, no music bleeding out of someone's headphones, no ticking and tacking of teacher's chalk against a blackboard. Just the rushing of freedom past my body; this was what i would hear for the rest of eternity. This is what angels hear.

7th.

**I**i smiled as i pictured the reaction my dad would have when he found my note. He would know then how i really felt about the affair, how i really felt about the beatings, how i really felt about him and the way he killed our family. i would have the last laugh, not that fucking prick.

6th.

**I**i didn't think about the building being covered in glass. This came as a surprise to me considering that i thought i would have to keep my eyes closed. This made it easier, though; at least i had company, i thought. God i was anxious... how long would this take.

5th.

**A**s i stared at myself in the windows of the building i tried recognizing the person in the reflection. It wasn't me that i saw, it was my mom. i wondered if she saw my face on her way up. i was the most content in that reflection than i have ever seen myself.

4th.

**I**i smelt the sweet nectar of October pollen in the air mixed with a hint of Italian from Bucca's. i didn't pay it too much attention, though; i was more focused on the feeling of my skin tightening and tensing as my cherry red wind breaker beat against my body. It was getting colder and colder as i made my descent into heaven.

3rd.

**I**i thought about the beginning, when my mom was around. i remembered how she used to wake me up Sunday mornings to watch Captain Planet and his gang of pollution-fighting losers, pointing out how much of a better super hero i was after every corny action phrase. Hah... i couldn't believe i used to love that show.

2nd.

**I**i wouldn't have to worry about the piss in my jeans and socks from Trey and Will taking turns kicking me on the floor in the bathroom because i didn't pick the right hand they were going to use to hit me with first.

1st.

**M**My heart was in my stomach at this point because i realized how close i was. At this point, time suspended reality leaving nothing but myself and the end. Then everything made sense. All of the questions i had were answered as if, as if, God himself uploaded the cheat codes to this game i was about to beat. Didn't need them now.

Ground.

i found Freedom that day as i embraced the ground below me, exactly the way my mom embraced me when i was born; exactly the way when she too found Freedom. **DS**

*Perspective*, oil on canvas, by Jane Parks



# One good Story

by Joshua Minatrea

**H**e only had one story in him, and he couldn't even tell it. It was about something unsure and his deciding it wasn't worth the risk. Really it was about a girl, but then most stories are, so knowing that much wouldn't be worth a lot. He'd left it behind and tried to move on, to move in a new direction. He tried to have new experiences that'd lend themselves to new material and new stories, but the new things did not come. All he had was the old thing, and it was the thing he couldn't go back to. He had one good story and he couldn't tell it.

It didn't help that he idolized a man who, born a century before him, had only told one story, in about as many different ways as he could, before he killed his stagnant self with gin, cigarettes, and a vague awareness of his own unrealized potential. Now he saw the first signs of that unwholesome idolatry surfacing in his own life. He saw that he wasn't growing. He saw that he'd peaked too soon, and worse, that the speed of his subsequent fall was beginning to blur reality, to keep him from seeing how bad things had gotten.

So many people were intent on doing so many great things, but something inevitably stopped them. Of course it did. If it didn't, there'd be more great people. The lack of greatness in the world was not for a lack of ambition. There was plenty of that. It was something else. Dreams didn't seem to come true as much as they used to. But that gets back to the story about the girl and that was the story he couldn't tell.

He'd had great dreams, when he was younger, but somewhere along the way something changed. He realized he'd forgotten the dreams he'd had. He abandoned them. He stopped wanting. Everyone stopped wanting at some point. People just seemed to give up. He saw it in adults all the time. "When so and so was young he wanted to do this or that..."

"So did he?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, you'll have to ask him," as though everyone had a reason.

He knew looking back that his friends would say of him that, "so and so wanted to follow a girl all the way to Brazil, find out where she was staying, take the bus to the small town, walk an hour in the warm night to make it to the tired house, knock on its door, see her, hold her, kiss her, tell her that he loved her, ask her if he could be

with her forever, et cetera, et cetera...but he never did."

He knew he was like everybody else. He knew he'd wanted something but not gone after it because it was something so unsure, and he knew he was no better than anyone else for having not done it. But that was an old story, and one he could not tell. He had to leave that story behind.

Before, he'd tried to write it a number of times. Actually it was the only story he'd ever tried to write. There were different settings, crisp cold days where white sunlight poured over the scene, potent like the energy of youth and beauty, dark rainy nights where lightning flashes rivaled the sparks he'd felt as they shared an umbrella and their bodies touched at the waist, a chance meet-

ing in a lonely study, a conversation in his car while behind her strong foreign silhouette the sunset fired with colors too brilliant to ignore. The settings were different, and so were the

**“He had one good story of one great love, but he couldn't tell it.”**

characters, the symbols, the themes and motifs, but all of the stories were the same. They were all about love. They were all love stories, and hers was the only love he had felt, the only love that had ever moved him.

He couldn't go back to it though. Now he was married to someone else. He had one good story of one great love, but he couldn't tell it. His wife was asleep in the next room and he was up trying not to write the same story he had so many times before. He kept telling himself not to do it.

The funny thing was he was so happy with his wife. It was hard for him to imagine being with the other girl anymore. From time to time he heard things about her. "She's looking at schools in the south...She's married to so and so." He, with his wife, even bumped into them at an outdoor cafe one night. He couldn't look at the foreign girl, though. After she and her husband finished their cigarettes, they came up to him and his wife and the four of them sat and talked through the early autumn evening. He didn't look once at her. His eyes did not meet hers a single time that night.

He knew there was a reason he hadn't done that great thing and gone after her. Everyone had their reasons, even if they could not name them. Evidently his involved something beyond himself. Now he was so happy with his wife. If being with her meant that he could never write the one good story he had, then that was fine. It was worth it. His idol had written plenty of stories about that kind of love. Better it kill his idol than himself. For him, the new things were coming. **DS**





*Foreign Girl*, photograph, by **Cristina Nava**





Street Love, oil on canvas, by Rebecca Griggs



# The Kiss

By Hollis Fischer

I saw the world differently after that night:

The warm oil of the sanctuary, where our families met to share in the Sunday evening sacrament had roused the inheritance of our impoverished nerves – past the safe “candlelight and pixie sticks,” and those white cotton pillows we held as a thin defense between the wish of our childish lips.

Now, twenty years later, when I lie down to love – I still remember how desire took your form, and left its wound in me forever in time... On that night at Saint Mary’s, I was scared to put away the child’s-play, but admiring you blindly – I let you silence my witness. I was fifteen. You were older, in your sixteenth year.

Nothing in between us, as we dipped down below those back rows; I saw messages from your flickering eyebrows... We snuck away careful as mice – down the driveway, off into the night. We did not know where we were going; it was reckless, I know.

Along dark roads we hurried alone, moving through alleys filled with shadows running the length of the world. One by one, the flat-field houses faded away. And, growing tired, we lay low at last, and leaving, like the fishes, our shells turned our faces in the quiet of evening air

with a clown’s grace – and broke house-rules with that first embrace.

... We laughed all night in the rush, outlined our lips with a hush, even painted silly nicknames with a made up brush...

What happened between us, happened in darkness; as easy and as often as breath. Like a river in flood, our mouths moved where they willed, and claimed jurisdiction over the flow that goes where minutes mount into hours on the soft cool earth beneath shoulders...

Lost in the moment, I sat still, thinking “this is the way all kisses will be.” Hot and raw, you held my hands to your hollows like a child – eyes shining, cheeks red – I said, “Eskimos would cool me down like winter rain,” but you said, “butterflies were nature’s own private flame.” Then we played a funny game: fire to ice, ice to fire... It was all the same.

Suddenly! The bells of Saint Mary’s rang. Time, like a sudden sickness, called remote and successful. We sank in a wave of quiet, numb and helpless, among the uneven beats of our hearts.

Back over dark streets, lost in the sound of murmuring and shuffling feet, we stood on the steps; in the warm weariness of fed desire the walls of shadows drew back, beyond desire and act. With laughter and cry, we held and kissed a last time. **DS**



# from being a Kid to Having One

By Ryan Malzac

**A**s I sit here writing this, I watch my son stumbling around, knocking movies off the shelf, trying to take my pen from my hand, and I find myself reflecting on how much my life has changed since he came and turned it all around, in the best of ways, of course.

Some say that having a child is the greatest joy in life. However true that may be, they often refrain from mentioning the hardships and changes a new baby can bring to your world. In late February of 2006, near the end of my eccentric senior year of high school, the news rocked my world like a belly flop from a high dive. It wasn't completely unexpected, but things tend to hurt worse when you know that they're coming. She was pregnant: two months together and already we were having a child. Yes, two months. I remember hearing those two bittersweet words "I'm pregnant" and thinking, "OK, abortion, problem solved, right?" Wrong! Courtney, my girlfriend, had already decided she wanted to keep the baby, which left no room for argument on my part. I remember her words, but I cannot recall the remainder of the day. More than likely I got too trashed or stoned to dwell on what had just happened to me. Shortly after that day, changes began to work their way into my life.

Graduation came and went and throughout Courtney's pregnancy I found it hard to understand or even comprehend that there was actually a child inside of her and that I was going to have to step up and be a role model for it. At this point I was further from a father figure, or any other figure, fit to raise a baby. My life, to me, was still a big party and as far as I was concerned, it wasn't going to stop anytime soon. Eventually, my stubbornness began to take its toll on our relationship. Understandably, she didn't want to be around smoke or anything else I may have been doing with my friends at the time and unfortunately I wasn't mature enough to just give up my wild side and settle down with her. Eventually, though, as she became more responsible and each trimester dragged on, I started to feel a sense of urgency to change my life. However, battling demons is no easy task. As I struggled to maintain the balance between friends and my girlfriend, I slipped, more often than I had expected, on the path to becoming a father. Gradually, though, I began to distance myself from the substance use and partying that had previously plagued my life.

Even before my son came into this world, changes were being made in my life. I was able, after a prolonged period of procrastination, to find a decent job, buy us a car, and rent our own apartment. On December 5, 2006, the call came. Courtney's water had broken and she was in labor. I rushed out of work to the hospital, doing well over a hundred on the freeway, and after twelve excruciating hours (more so for her than me) of labor he was finally here, little Kaleb

Ryan. Remembering seeing him for the first time still brings a tear of joy to my eye and the feeling can only be described as pure ecstasy (the emotion, of course, not the drug). Right then and there in that hospital room, I knew that I would do anything in my power to protect that little boy and make a good life for him. The greatest changes in my attitude and routine came when we brought him home for the first time. I started to spend what little free time I had with my son and my girlfriend and almost completely isolated myself from everyone but them. I also felt more serious about my job and finances, which, up until that point I hadn't thought twice about.

Now that Kaleb is growing, walking and talking, everything requires more sacrifice and more commitment on my part, something I haven't been accustomed to. Also, it has become harder for Courtney and me to spend time alone together which, at times, puts a strain on our relationship and causes us to argue and drift apart. Although we always seem to reconcile, the simple fact that it even happens is a huge difference compared to those inseparable winter nights we used to spend together in our sheltered world of high school fantasies. On a better note, now, more than ever, I tend to appreciate the little things in life that I had taken for granted and believed I could do at any time I wanted. But going out on a date with only Courtney, taking a long hot shower, a full tank of gas, and even just a minute or two alone to play guitar are things I treasure and are not part of my everyday routine as they once were.

Even though my life has been so dramatically changed within a year's time, everything that has happened has been for the better. I have become a more responsible, compassionate and patient person. I have grown from an immature, self-centered boy into a man and someone I hope my boy will look up to one day. The birth of my son was not only the greatest moment of my life, it was the greatest turning point as well and a blessing from God that I believe has saved my life. Who knows where I would have ended up without him, or if I would have even made it long enough to write this paper at the rate I was going. Now, the way I feel about having a child has obviously completely changed as well, and the feeling of satisfaction I get, knowing that if I could do this, I can accomplish anything, is more than enough of a reward for all of the hardships I have endured.

I wish I could tell you more, or leave you with a cute little quote. But I have tons more homework to do, I still haven't eaten dinner, I need to take a shower, it's midnight, I have to work twelve hours tomorrow, and Kaleb just woke up and needs a bottle, so I really need to go. **DS**



Couple, clay, by Kapil Dixit





# The Ditch

By Elizabeth Block Treat

Thunder breaks the stillness,  
lightning blinds the eyes.  
The rain goes on forever.  
Water fills the ditch, deeper than a little girl.  
Liquid mud slams sticks and branches  
against the concrete sides  
hauling them in splinters under the street.  
Plastic bags drown with sopping leaves,  
empty cups bobble in protest  
as water bites away their false Styrofoam strength.  
Little hands blanch on the rail.  
Little eyes gawk in stupor.  
Solid sullen bubbles slop over the sidewalk  
lapping at her toes  
trying to dissolve another prey. **DS**

*Rain*, photograph, by Vipin Kohale





*Alone*, photograph, by Tytti Lauhava

# The Couch

By Shanda Leigh Mann

**M**y mother owns an ancient monstrosity of a couch, falling apart from the weight of many, many asses plopped upon it year after year. A couch I had called my own for the good portion of three months, and had curled in that same corner night after night, praying and hoping the next night I could have my own bed. A couch my mother had owned for years, and one that I have always been and will always be welcome to sleep on. The cushions have been re-stuffed three times, and recovered twice. A couch of many, many firsts for me, but three firsts in particular I will always remember.

I will always remember being a teenager in a modest apartment, curled in the nook where the arm meets the back, holding a trembling, whimpering white fuzzy thing, scared out of her mind that she would be hurt. I remember she was covered in fleas and stank of miscarage. I remember touching her wiry fur, and how she snapped at me, then nestled herself securely against my body and refused to be moved from the comfort of my arms. I remember holding her until she slept, and whispering comfortingly to her. She isn't mine anymore, and doesn't need me like she used to, but she still greets me with a wagging tail and a cheerful whine to be held and cuddled until she growls to assert her dominance. She hasn't grown much since I first held her tiny body curled in the palm of my hand, but she will always be a Doberman to me.

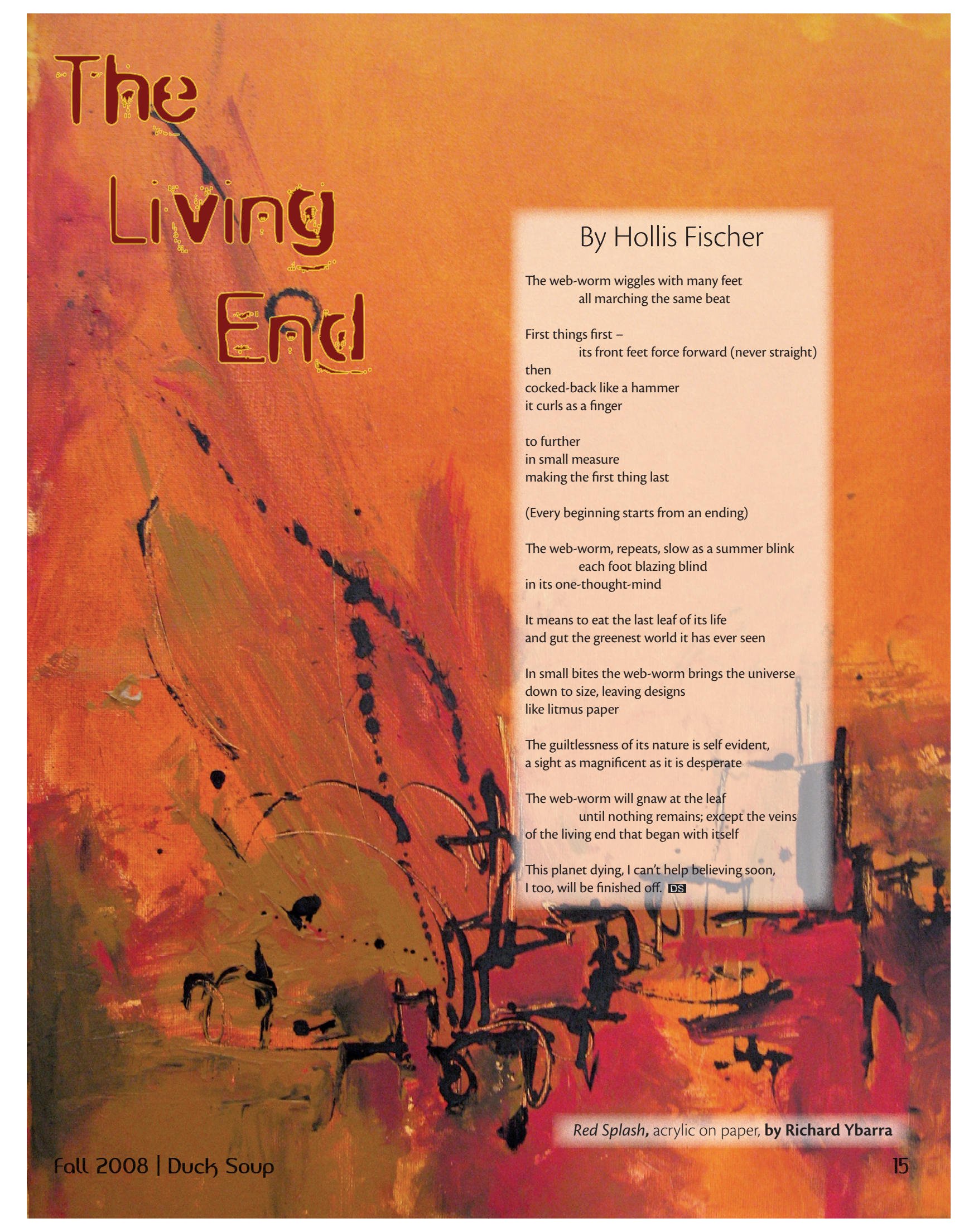
I will always remember the months after I left Tennessee and moved back in with my mother and cousin in a cramped, one-bedroom apartment, where I shared the living room with my cousin. I remember being completely dependent upon her for food and shelter, and the only remnants of my brief flash of independence were my RPGs, my laptop which I now had to share with the household, and a half-blue Russian, half-tabby with wide baby blue eyes, tiger stripes, and silver gray fur. I would hide myself away in the few minutes of free Internet and RPGs that I had, but there were times, at night, curled in the sagging crook of an ancient couch, where I couldn't

hide myself anymore. I would cry for everything I had lost, everything I had to give up to be where I was now, broken and ashamed, in a room where I slept on the couch and my cousin slept on my bed. It was in these dark nights that a sweet, proud animal would nestle herself upon my chest, stare at me with those soft baby blue eyes, and cradle herself in my arms. I would stroke her soft coat, and hear the gentle rumble of her purr, and I would see everything I had left, and I would not be so sad.

And always, always, always, I will remember being curled in the same nook of that same couch, with the sunlight streaming in through the sliding glass door of the spacious apartment that now houses five people, caught in the refractions of the sun catchers behind me, with yet another small, living thing in my arms. He's so small, so tiny, and it's hard to believe he was only born a few weeks earlier. I'm tired, worn out from a long weekend of hard work, but somehow holding him like this, cradled against me as he sleeps peacefully, makes it all better. I whisper to him that he is a miracle, and kiss his warm forehead. He smiles in his sleep, and his tiny fingers curl around mine. He's not my baby. I didn't bring this child into this world. But he's my brother, and I love him nonetheless for the 22 years between us.

It's a couch, after all. The original color has faded to some nondescript blue with garishly large nondescript peach flowers on it. It's been covered in white canvas, and now it's covered in a distinctly army green canvas. Most of the scents I remember have faded due to the efforts of Febreze, but it retains most of its springiness despite a sagging back that must be upheld by a sturdy solid wood desk behind it. It's a couch I still sleep on from time to time, and a couch I was recently encouraged to reoccupy. But now I have bigger representations of my independent life to hold on to, and all signs now point to increased independence in the near future, with a new room mate, and a new (but old and familiar) car. Life begins anew, and I wonder (but not for very long) what will happen to the old couch as life moves on. **DS**





# The Living End

By Hollis Fischer

The web-worm wiggles with many feet  
all marching the same beat

First things first –  
its front feet force forward (never straight)  
then  
cocked-back like a hammer  
it curls as a finger

to further  
in small measure  
making the first thing last

(Every beginning starts from an ending)

The web-worm, repeats, slow as a summer blink  
each foot blazing blind  
in its one-thought-mind

It means to eat the last leaf of its life  
and gut the greenest world it has ever seen

In small bites the web-worm brings the universe  
down to size, leaving designs  
like litmus paper

The guiltlessness of its nature is self evident,  
a sight as magnificent as it is desperate

The web-worm will gnaw at the leaf  
until nothing remains; except the veins  
of the living end that began with itself

This planet dying, I can't help believing soon,  
I too, will be finished off. **DS**

*Red Splash*, acrylic on paper, by Richard Ybarra



# SHE LOOKS DERN GOOD

By Bill Best

**I**t was after five and the entire town of Paris was already closed up for the day. It was still hot and we had hours to go before we would get any real relief. The A/C blasted cold air into my face as I scanned each side of the street looking for the address. There it was on the left.

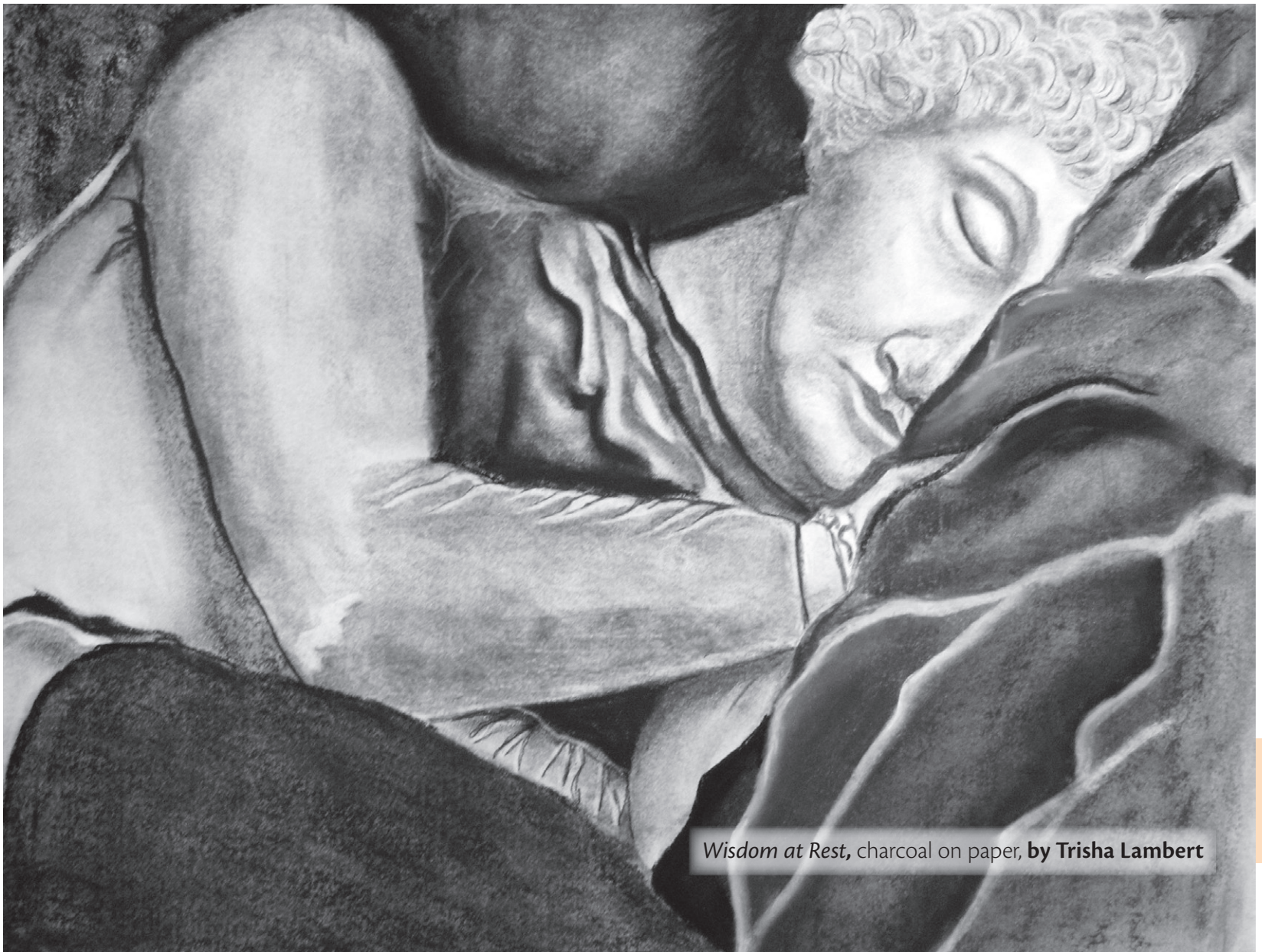
In fact, there was no way I could have missed it. The old Victorian was three stories tall and the most ornate building on the street. Besides, it was the only place in town that showed any sign of life. It looked like every pick-up in North Texas had been gathered for the occasion. There were a few land yachts thrown in to shuttle the elderly. All were American made, of course. Ford appeared to be the manufacturer of choice followed by Chevy. There were only a few Dodges in the pack. I am sure the vintage was prior to the Daimler-Chrysler merger. I found a sliver of a parking space and was able to squeeze my Toyota Camry between two duellies.

My black slip-ons made a sharp note on the wood porch with each step I took. It was the same sound you hear in all the old western movies right before the big shootout. Seemed appropriate enough, I guess. I felt like I was

heading for a showdown. Just then the thought hit me that I would be the only man in town not wearing cowboy boots. My lack of manly footwear would be a dead giveaway that I'm not from around here. So much for my Wild West showdown.

I turned the brass knob and gave the old door a push. I was greeted by a wave of chatter whose collective dialect was unmistakable. You can't call it a twang. Nor is it on the side of a drawl. There was something unique about this area of Texas that produces a rich, yet nasally tone. I had almost forgotten what it sounded like after living in the city for so many years. But I can see it is still alive and well.

It was like walking across the threshold and stepping into a foreign land. I didn't recognize anyone but clearly understood their native tongue. This may be a good thing, I thought. If I don't find anyone I know, I could just sneak out and head back to Dallas. I would have fulfilled my obligation with a clear conscience. I had no more than finished the thought when a punch plowed into my left arm followed by a "Hey boy!" I turned and saw Jimmy



*Wisdom at Rest*, charcoal on paper, by Trisha Lambert



Don standing in front of me with a big smile on his face.

In this part of the world, a real man wears boots and has two first names. A single first name is simply not adequate. You have to use a minimum of two such as Jimmy Don or Johnny Lee or Bobby James and of course, Billy Bob. Like Native American tribes of old, you can be assigned a name as well, as long as it is comprised of two words. For example my distant cousin, "Dead-Eye." I never knew why he earned that moniker since both his eyes seemed to work just fine. But the tribe had spoken and he was forevermore named, "Dead-Eye."

"How ya doing?" Jimmy Don said with a wide smile.

"Hey, Jimmy Don," I said, reaching out to grasp his waiting hand.

In an instant another tribal tradition came back to my recollection as the blood was being squeezed from my hand. You must prove yourself a worthy male by compressing all the bones in your greeter's hand up to and sometimes including breakage. I tried to recover, but I am sure the momentary delay must have left Jimmy Don wondering if I was really a man. Fortunately I don't think he noticed my lack of boot attire; otherwise I could have been in real trouble.

"Damn, son, just look at you," Jimmy Don said as another crushing blow landed on the opposite arm. "You've done gone and gotten fat." Jimmy Don snared his wife and reeled her into the conversation. "Hey, Ellen, take a look see here."

Ellen smiled and gave me a big sweaty hug. "Wee-Yum! What a surprise. How long's it been?"

Since I don't have two first names, it is only customary to transform "William" into the unidentifiable "Wee-yum."

"A long time, Ellen," I answered. "Too long, I suppose."

Jimmy Don reached over and poked me in the stomach. "Look there, Ellen, Wee-yum's done gone and gotten fat on us."

"Oh leave the boy alone," Ellen said. She reached over and patted my stomach. "That's just a little happy lappy is all."

Ellen's face suddenly went somber. A tear formed in the corner of her eye. "It's so good-a-ya to make it down here. It means so much to..." Ellen started to cry and pulled a crumpled tissue from her purse. She wiped her nose and composed herself with a deep breath.

This was the part I was dreading the most. What do you say to someone who just lost her mother-in-law?

"They did a good job on Mother," Ellen said. "I think she looks dern good."

Jimmy Don wrapped his arm around his wife and gave her a gentle hug. "Yeah, they did. Momma looks good. Dern good." The corners of his mouth started to twitch. I could tell he was trying to fight back the tears. I guess the moment became too much for him and he turned and walked away without another word being said.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He's all right. Just a little hard at the time being. He knew it was coming. We all did. She'd been sick for ages. But still." Ellen's words trailed off.

I leaned in and gave her a hug. I could feel her sobs next to my shoulder. I felt so bad for her and Jimmy Don.

"Go take a look, Wee-yum," Ellen said, holding a tissue next to her nose. "She looks dern good."

I weaved my way through several pockets of conversation and finally made it to the casket. I stood next to a gray metal box and peeked in. I noticed the hands at first. The skin was dark with a texture of deep wrinkles. A gold wedding band hung on one slender finger. I couldn't help but think about how



*Boots*, charcoal and pastel on paper, by Sam Fitzgerald

many chickens those fingers had plucked and tossed into the frying pan. How many tens of thousands of dishes they had washed. How many diapers they changed. How many times they swatted me on the butt. Even then, they looked like they could spring into action and whip up a chocolate pie.

Her face had a peaceful look to it. Red lipstick covered the lips. The corners of her mouth creased just enough to make it look like she was smiling. But the more I looked, the more it seemed like something was missing. It was her glasses. She wasn't wearing her glasses. This was one of the first times I could recall seeing her without them. It just seemed strange, like she wasn't complete. It made her face look different. I just stared at her, trying to envision her with her glasses on. It's funny how we get used to seeing someone a certain way.

"Good bye," I said softly. "Thank you, Aunt Esther. Thank you for all the wonderful memories. Thank you for making my childhood so special. I'll miss you."

My finger wiped a tear from the corner of my eye. I lowered my hands and gently held the edge of the casket. I felt a hand touch mine. I turned and saw it was Ellen. We both stood there for a moment looking down at Aunt Esther. "You know something, Ellen? She looks good."

Ellen squeezed my hand. "Yeah, Wee-yum, she looks dern good." **DS**

**DAMN, SON, JUST LOOK AT YOU," JIMMY DON SAID AS ANOTHER CRUSHING BLOW LANDED ON THE OPPOSITE ARM. "YOU'VE DONE GONE AND GOTTEN FAT."**





By Hunter Niland Welling

You're falling apart,  
They're passing you by,  
Your eyes are a plea,  
Their answer a sigh,

And they're all too busy  
To stop and ask why  
One more young face  
Is marred with those lines.

So you push through the crowd,  
A lonely lost soul,  
With a shattered glass heart  
That's fast turning to stone.

Just one of the many,  
A face of the mass  
That's making up "man"  
While leaving out us.

A footstep on pavement  
And a shove in the crowd,  
Then you melt with the faces  
Without making a sound.

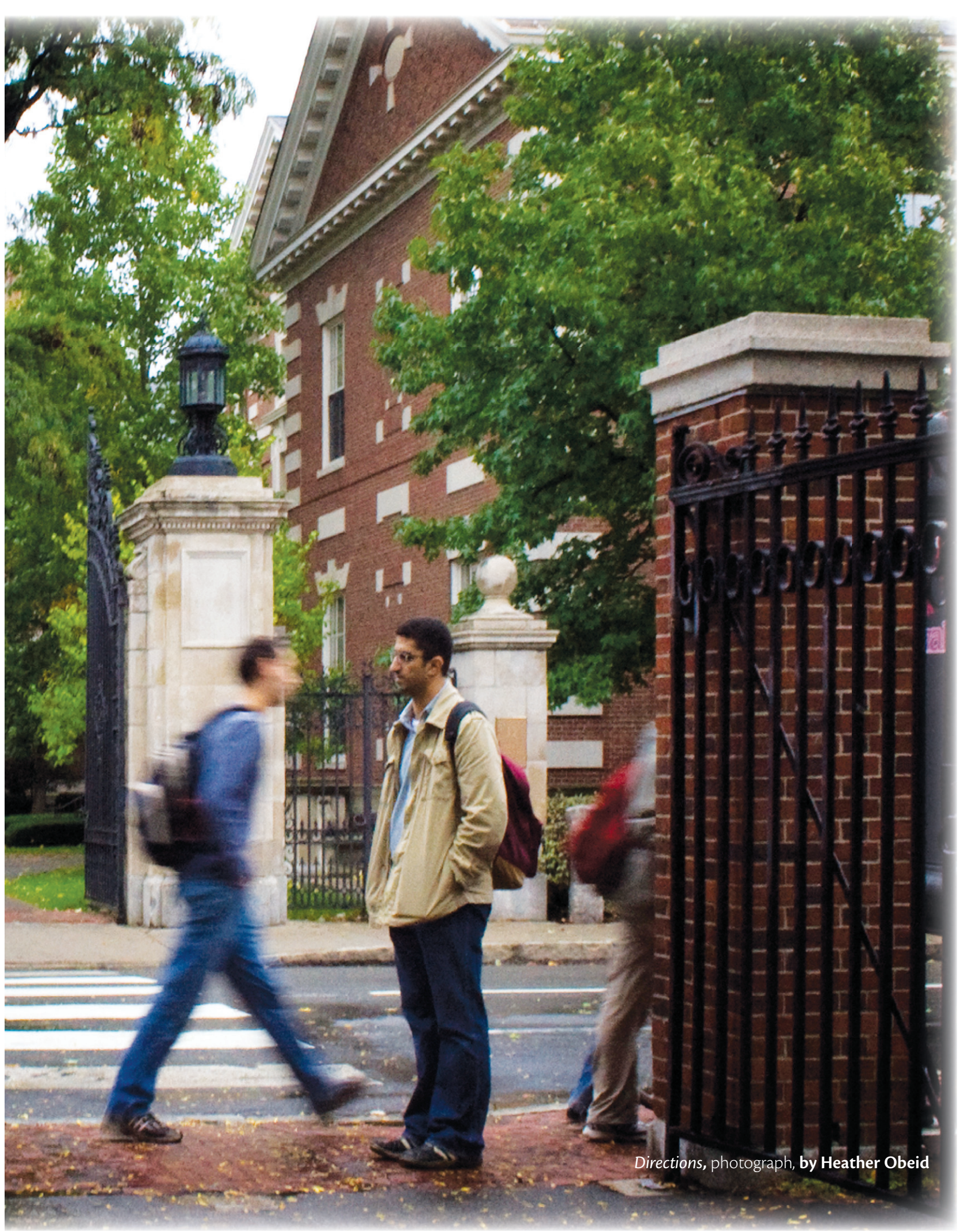
Shadows on sidewalks  
Your one legacy  
Amidst the preoccupied,  
Standing by me.

You're falling apart,  
They're passing you by,  
The same scars on their hearts,  
They just don't take the time. **DS**

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*Directions*, photograph, by Heather Obeid



# Sunset and Vine

By Hollis Fischer



*Death of my Aspiration*, ceramic, by Kapil Dixit

*In front of a shelter for the homeless in Hollywood.*

I saw men and women in a long line,  
ordered in pairs, lying in front of a shelter  
for the homeless.

They waited, silent and tired,  
until it was their turn for supper, and they  
could go through the door.

They were dirty and disheveled and they  
pressed against the walls of the building.  
Old-timers held their every possession close,  
in hands that were rough and knotted.

They lay hungry and disenchanted  
under the awning that went around the place.  
Some had dark spots and hair that grew on an oily face.  
Their clothes smelled of everywhere and nowhere,  
of urine and the Pacific Coastal Highway.  
Their bodies were weathered by constancy of outdoors,  
and by poverty's sick abundance.

They waited for the others to be finished,  
so they too could be allowed into the main-hall,  
where segregated soup and tattered mattresses  
would be set in front of them all.

And then, a big tiredness would come along and undo  
their hearts' contorted gloom,

And the night and summer's mild optimism  
would lead a few to the windows, and evening views  
of celebrities on Sunset Boulevard,  
and Hollywood's Walk of Stars  
with a wish to let all they had lived be as if it were a dream. **DS**



*Simply Beautiful*, photograph, by Sue J. Banfield







# Sympathy Casseroles

By Bobbie Krumm

*Broken Steel*, mixed media,  
by Daney Chhang



**Since we didn't have any older brothers in the military; it was a private sense of relief for our family that the car would never have to stop at our house.**



**T**he black car was a significant yet tragic part of my childhood during the 1960s. We knew exactly what it meant. Each time the car made its way down our street, it seemed like we all took the same breath. Whose family was it this time? Growing up on Hines drive, my sister and I knew everyone. We had all gone to school together at some point. Our lives were intertwined, either by choice or the friendship of our parents.

Since we didn't have any older brothers in the military, it was a private sense of relief for our family that the car would never have to stop at our house. But when it stopped close to us, we felt the same sharp sense of grief that the families we knew were going through, knowing it was a male relative, perhaps a brother or cousin of one of my friends. My mother felt it was her duty to at least make a casserole, because she figured they would be too busy with family and funeral plans to think about making dinner themselves. If this happened when Mom was not home, we were instructed to take a casserole out of the ice box and heat it in the oven. Dad had an old coffee tin hidden with extra money; nothing less than five dollars would be donated for "expenses." We would go over, give our condolences and leave promptly. We were instructed to offer help if needed, otherwise come home.

This particular fall Saturday afternoon, Brenda finished up her chores quickly, found the latest Hollywood magazine, and made herself comfortable in the wingback chair near the front window. I was playing with the radio, hoping to find a good station that wasn't something our parents had listened to. I had my latest mystery book under my arm. I was about to join her in the chair opposite hers. We sat

there many times watching the neighborhood.

Our parents had left for town for their Saturday errands, and the house was peaceful and quiet. Brenda had just looked up from her magazine when she saw the black car coming down the hill. She stood up and walked over to the window.

"Jennie! Come quick! I see it up there," Brenda said, pointing out the solemn movement of the car coming down the street.

I threw my book down and quickly walked over. We stood there silently, praying for the family who was about to receive the bad news. Brenda put her arms around me. Each time that car came, it was taking away another friend.

"Where is it stopping?" I whispered.

"It's still driving. Who do you think it could be?" Brenda asked.

"I don't want to know," I said, turning my eyes away from the window. I could feel Brenda shaking. As the car got closer, my stomach was doing flip flops.

"It stopped. In front of the Porters. Oh my God. Jason Porter."

Porters? My best friend Alicia Porter and her family lived directly across the street from us. Jason was just a few years older than Brenda. He had joined the military straight out of high school, hoping to get money for college once he returned. I always teased her about the crush she had on him, but she denied it, saying he was too much like our big brother. Our parents were good friends, so the four of us were practically raised in each others' homes. I knew that Alicia had been worried about him, because the family hadn't heard from him lately. We knew he was doing a good thing, defending our



country, but it still left a big hole in our families. I could see a few tears rolling down Brenda's cheeks. I handed her a Kleenex. We stood there for a few minutes, almost frozen.

"I guess we should get that casserole out," she said, heading toward the kitchen. I headed for the drawer where Mom kept birthday and sympathy cards. I picked one out. I opened the card.

"Oh this is almost eerie." I showed her the card. It had already been signed by our parents.

"Oh that is morbid," she cried.

"At least she comes prepared," I said. I laid the card on the table. At thirteen, I was not as sentimental as she was. But suddenly I remembered all the birthday parties, family barbeques, and holidays we had together. Jason was a big part of all that. He would keep us all laughing. There was never a dull moment with him around. I felt tears stinging my eyes. Brenda put her arms around me.

"Hey, now, it's okay. Jason was doing what he wanted to do, defend our country; we have to respect that," she said.

We sat at that table and cried together.

"Alicia's birthday is next week," I said. "He promised her he would do everything he could to make it home in time. We were going to go horseback riding."

Brenda didn't say anything. We finished cooking the casserole, just as our parents solemnly walked in. Mom's eyes were red from crying. Dad didn't say anything.

"It was Jason, wasn't it?" I asked. I knew the answer already. Dad nodded.

*Deep Thought*, mixed media on paper, by Kapil Dixit



"Yes it was. Mr. Porter was in the barber chair when the news came," Dad said. "Nobody in the barbershop knew what to say. We all felt the same feelings. He just got up and tried to pay Mac. But Mac wouldn't take it. He said it wouldn't be right to take the money," Dad said, rubbing his chin. Dad didn't cry very often. I could see his eyes about to swell up. Mom put the groceries down on the table and came up behind him and patted his shoulders.

"I always told him that if I ever had a son, I would want him to be like Jason," Dad said.

"He called you Pa a lot," Brenda said, laughing at the memory. "He always said he had two sets of parents."

"I feel like I just lost my own son," Mom said pulling out a handkerchief from her coat pocket.

"I used to baby-sit him when I was pregnant with you, Brenda. He used to think that you were his little sister. He spent

so much time over here. This was his second home."

We sat there for a little bit, between crying and telling stories. Finally Mom stood up.

"Girls, go clean up. The casserole is done. I think we should go check on Flora and Ronald."

All I thought about was Alicia. She had always worshiped her big brother. I went into my room and looked across the street; I had a direct view of her room. The curtains were pulled and the light was off. I snapped my shade shut and cleaned off my face. I changed out of my after-school clothes and into a pair of black pedal pushers and a white shirt. Brenda was across the hall. I could hear her calling some friends. We walked downstairs together. Mom was wrapping up the dish. Dad was fiddling with his wallet.

"Suppose a ten would do this time?" Dad asked. He only gave ten bucks to really good friends.

"That would help, I'm sure," Mom said. "Jennie, please carry the dish."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

We walked across the street. Along the way some of our neighbors joined us. We exchanged greetings, but this was no time for gossip and socializing.

Inside the house was swarming with friends and neighbors. The dining room table was covered with various dishes and desserts. Some of the church ladies had come over and started making sandwiches and coffee for the family. I couldn't believe how quick the news spread. I laid the dish down and tried to find Alicia. I saw Mrs. Porter. She was politely talking to someone. I caught her attention and nodded. She gave me a little wave. All the ladies wanted to know the plans. I wanted to scream, "Give her a break; she just found out three hours ago!" Instead, I went outside to find Alicia and some of our friends on the deck. Alicia saw me. She got up and walked over.

"I am so glad you're here," she said, giving me a hug.

"Are you okay?" It seemed like a silly question, but I didn't know what else to ask.

"I don't know really; I guess I'm in denial. A part of me is still hoping this is a bad dream and that tomorrow he's going to walk in that door, but I know he won't be."

I nodded. "Well, you do have plenty of food. He would love that."

"Oh, I know, By Friday we will be so sick of casseroles," Alicia said, making a face.

"As long as you promise to eat my mom's first."

Alicia laughed. "She made her sympathy casserole?"

"Of course! She's made it for every funeral and luncheon from here to Strantonburg; she's almost famous for it."



Alicia laughed. "It wouldn't be a funeral luncheon without it."  
"Oh, she can also make for every occasion; she just changes the title. So I'm sure it will be at many more luncheons and parties to come."

Alicia smiled through her tears. "Jason loved it. I remember at a church function, he stole the whole bowl and cleaned it before anyone had a chance. Served him right for having an upset stomach that evening; he ate everything in sight."

"Alicia, Jason can clear a whole cake pan before it gets frosted; that boy had the biggest appetite," I said, remembering him walking around with three plates of food.

"Oh, let's not relive our tenth birthday party, okay?" Alicia said, holding her stomach.

We walked down the street to the local elementary school playground. We found two empty swings.

"I come here a lot," Alicia said.

"What for?"

"Just to think about stuff."

"Good place as any," I replied.

We swung for awhile. As kids, we would have swing-jump contests to see how high one could swing and jump. We did it for awhile until some kid in our class jumped too high, and fell and broke his arm. The teachers immediately put a stop to that. But we still did it anyway.

"Did you ever think how small Van Alostine Elementary was?" she asked.

I looked over at the brick building we spent the first five years of our education in. It did seem small now to eighth graders that we were. "Of course, when we were kindergarten this place was huge," I said. "But it's just



**I wanted to scream, "Give her a break; she just found out three hours ago!"**



going to get smaller as we get older. The building won't shrink, but it will just seem smaller. We thought Williams Junior High was a fortress two years ago. And now it's not so bad."

We sat there for awhile. We really didn't need to talk anymore. I knew that just being there with her was all she needed. Alicia looked at her watch.

"Oh, we better get back," she said grabbing her coat.

Her house was already empty. Friends had returned to their normal lives. Mrs. Porter was busying herself, wrapping up food and cleaning dishes.

"Girls! Can I get you a plate? Where have you been?" she asked.

"No, thanks, Mrs. Porter. We just went for a walk. Do you need help with anything?" I asked.

Mrs. Porter just shook her head. "No, darling, but thanks for offering. I told your mom I would get back to her on the funeral plans. Oh, wait, here is her casserole dish. Delicious as always."

"I have homework to do," Alicia said quietly. She headed toward the stairs.

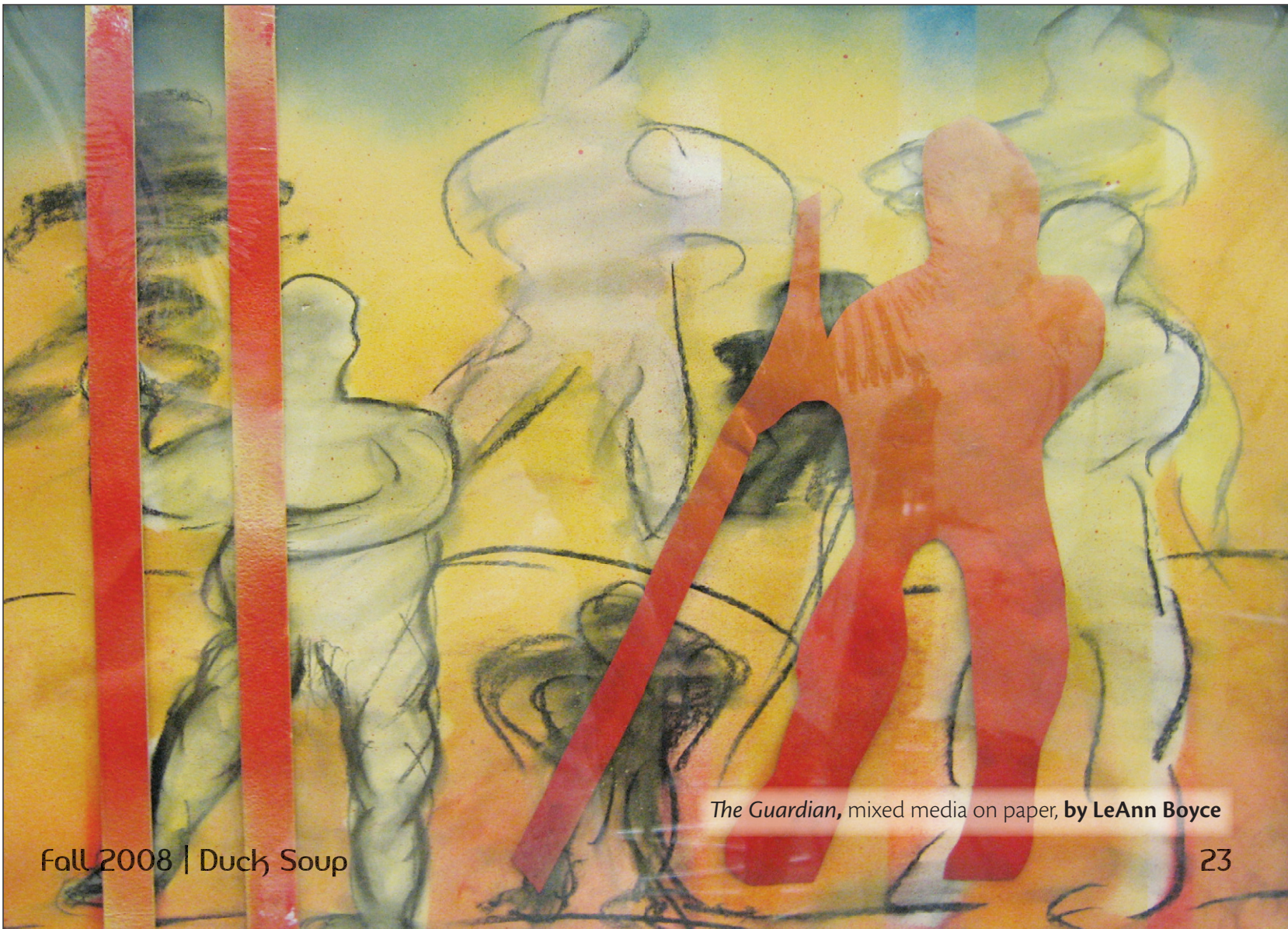
"Will I see you in school Monday?" I asked.

Alicia shrugged her shoulders. "Probably. We have a math test, remember?"

"Yeh, but I try to forget those things" I said.

"If you need help, call me," she said, hugging me. "Thanks for everything"

"Anytime." **DS**



*The Guardian*, mixed media on paper, by LeAnn Boyce



# Panhandle Breeze

By Hollis Fischer


Like a slow leak in the attic  
which had gone undetected for a long time:  
a dark-colored funk of clouds  
crowded over my small coin of God's acre –  
now, east of the rock and west of the hard place.

I awoke before dawn. Something was wrong.  
Out on the lawn  
wind waved a branch over shadowy grass...  
birds were walking...  
a silence of perceived inactivity...  
a taste in my mouth... the bedroom so cold...

The present was well out of hand. I sat in a dream,  
seeing everything. Again and again:  
from across the Red River rolls of liquid thunder,  
the constant irritating motion of windows  
shaking like my shoulders,  
the whirl of light in the funnels like the flashing  
of countless silver minnows through dark water

Mortgages, gasoline, and groceries seemed silly  
and ignorant now. I put my boots on.  
A voice from the bedside radio interrupted  
WKTY's: let-the-people-say-amen-gospel-hour –  
a single word with a heavy burden...  
For a moment, I felt no wind, I felt alone  
all was silent, the news paper sat like stone.  
Then... the sky let down its arms  
from heaven onto earth, blowing away the sunrise.





Now was destroyed, as though it never was –  
Everything was flying, the carpet rolled up,  
furniture rolled up, my miracle  
was used up, I tasted the floor and drowned  
in debris, in shouts from the clouds heavy with rain.

The world spun in waves of wind, a rotation  
of madness that wiped away my protection.  
So full of terror, what was my ambition now?  
In the midst of my end I wondered  
if I lived, would I be joined at the heart  
and believe in love with all those I had been living  
far away from... Oh, Angel protect me I cried.

Then all this became history.  
Suction pulled from all directions in all directions.  
All its frustration, soothed away my gravity.  
I left the ground, up in air, with feet-like fins,  
swimming in great bellies of belligerent storm.

Back to the east, then sliding off to the west  
pushing through miles of country  
the twisters chewed me up in their aloneness.  
I thought of them as Madonna's of the unloved  
fusing the world of which my flesh was living,  
and the world the wind was coming from.  
Nature's love is cruel, but it is sometimes kind...

Now I am alive all over America. **DS**

*Branching*, ink and watercolor on paper, by Kara Ari Dahl



# The First Spring Day

By Cristina Nava

**COLD AND DARK MONTHS PASSED.** I was anxious to go outside where the snow had melted. Red and yellow tulips bloomed around the fountain. The birds flapped their wings splashing water over the flowers. Bunches of yellow daffodils and purple crocus colored the garden, the scent of the freesias aromatized the air, the branches of the trees touched the ground, charged with hundreds of butterflies.

After a long and relaxed bath, I grabbed my swimming suit and a translucent cotton blouse. I went outside; looking at the sky, I thanked God that the first spring day had come. The sun caressed my light skin; my feet touched the misted grass. I went to the shore of the river and stepped into the old wooden canoe. The blue turquoise water was so clear I could see the turtles gliding; the frogs jumped over the water lilies. I paddled through one of the branches, which led me to the waterfall. As I was getting close, I started to feel butterflies in my belly.

The waterfall blends into a pool at the end of the canal. I pulled the canoe half way on the ground. The birds' songs and the water falling from the rocky mountain were the only sounds around.

I left my blouse on a bank, took a deep breath, and jumped into the fresh water. I dived through the waterfall to get into the cave; hot springs raise the temperature's water. Beautiful formations of stalactites and stalagmites had been formed through thousands of years. A ray of sun illuminated the dim cave. The smell of humidity and the sound of the water sliding from the rocks brought me wonderful memories.

*He was swimming with some friends. Our eyes met; he smiled, stealing my heart.*

Since then, we meet each year, on the first spring day.

I waited until my eyes were used to the dim light. I looked for him, afraid he wouldn't come. A smile drew into my face when I felt his arms around my body. I turned to face him: a moment dreamed thousands of times. We kissed for a long time, for all those kisses we missed living apart. He took my hand and we dived back to the pool.

"My love, I missed your smile, your soft skin, your voice," he said, holding me between his arms.

*"Corazón, I waited desperately to see you again."*

His lips wandered all over my face. He stopped some time on my lips. He continued throughout my body. Our hearts palpitated at the same rhythm. Our bodies fused. I felt alive again.

"I adore you," he said.

"*Amor mío*, finally our souls will be together forever," I whispered at his ear.

He jumped on the top of a flat rock. Tapping his hand on the rock,

he said, "Come here."

Avoiding my eyes, he said, "You need to know that no matter what happens, my love for you will remain forever in my heart."

The shadow of a cloud passing over us made me shiver.

"Why did you say so?" My heart pounded.

"There is something you should know." His voice faltered; "I couldn't end my engagement."

I felt the blood rush to my face.

"How could I be so naive as to believe in your word?"

He passed his fingers through his hair and looked down.

"She is expecting a baby."

"Pardon?" My eyes filled with tears.

"I was as astonished as you are now." He wiped my tears with his fingers. "Since she determined to keep the baby, I promised her to take care of both." He bent his head, searching for my eyes. "My heart is broken. I can't imagine my life without you." He raised my chin to look into my eyes. "I need to honor my word." His eyes watered; I will not love other women but you."

I hugged him for a long time; my tears rolled over his shoulder. I kissed him on the cheek, trying to say something but my voice didn't come out. I pulled my hands from his and left.

I threw myself in the canoe, letting it go with the flow. I cried until my tears filled the river. The water spread over the fields, drowning the crops; the fish left, the butterflies flew away, leaving the trees naked.

Three seasons had passed since I buried myself in my bedroom. I walked around half dead. Every time I took a breath, my heart ripped. I woke up at the middle of the night with my face soaked in tears. The silence around me was taking my life away.

The dust accumulated over the furniture and spider webs hung from ceiling to floors, except for my bedroom. The windows always remained open. I closed them many times, but they would open again.

One day of fall, a puffy little bird, with orange and white chest, broke the silence with a beautiful song. It flew around my window, got inside the room, and stood on the top of the back of my wooden chair. It had a rolled paper tied on its leg. It didn't move when I got close, letting me untie the thread. Once I had the note in my hand, it flew away.

I unrolled the note and read:

My Dearest Love,

My life has been a torment since the last time I saw you. I can't live one more day without you. I've been crying in silence, wishing to see you again. My heart is full of you. I can't erase in my heart the pain reflected in your face. Please, I need your forgiveness. I'm tired of

*His lips wandered all over my face. He stopped some time on my lips. He continued throughout my body. Our hearts palpitated at the same rhythm. Our bodies fused. I felt alive again.*



dreaming to be with you. I want to feel you in my arms; I want to kiss you on your lips. Please, let me see you again.

My body shivered, tears rolled down my cheeks. After reading the letter several times, I decided to write him back.

*Amor de mi corazón.*

My days have been full of emptiness. My heart has shrunk since the last day we met. The flowers haven't bloomed, the butterflies never came back, the birds don't sing, and the river has emptied. All around me is dead and silent. I'm living in the dark. My heart has not been able to heal. I starve to see you again. Should I?

I left the letter on my desk, hesitating to send it. Time passed; the paper got wrinkled for all the tears spilled on it.

The winter came, cold, dark, and silent. One evening, the wind brought thousands of dark clouds, the sky thundered. A blast lifted the letter. As it flew away, the corners folded into wings. It flew so high that it soon disappeared in the horizon.

The first day of spring, an orange and white chest puffy bird with brownish wings knocked at my window. I looked outside; the bird was standing on the branch of the leafless tree, singing the same song I heard before, but it carried no message. I sighed and walked back to my bed.

The loud song of the bird made me come back to the window. A young man was walking through the path that leads to my house. My heart started to beat fast. I rushed downstairs to meet him. When I opened the door he was standing in front of me.

I closed and opened my eyes, thinking he was an illusion, but he was still there.

"My love, you look beautiful," he said.

"But look at me, I'm pure skin and bones."

"In my heart, you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Am I dreaming?"

He took my hands into his and kissed them.

"When I received your letter, I wasn't able to contain my tears. I rushed here to see you; nothing could stop me."

Looking directly into my eyes, he said, "I couldn't marry her. My life has no sense without you. I beg for your forgiveness. Please, let me stay at your side; I love you."

I almost fainted, but he grabbed me. He helped me to sit on the front steps.

I hugged him, feeling the beats of his heart.

"*Amor mio,*" I said.

He placed his hands around my neck, and said, "I'm not alone."

Looking around I asked, "What do you mean you are not alone?"

"My little sweetheart came with me."

I narrowed my eyes: "Excuse me?"

"Her mother wanted to give her into adoption." A tear escaped from his eye. "Will you spend the rest of your life with me and my little angel?"

The resonance of the stream of the river made me turn. I saw a lovely child with curly red hair and deep green eyes, stepping out of a wooden canoe.

Hundreds of butterflies filled the sky and began to rest on the tree branches, the tulips began to sprout from the ground, coloring the garden in reds and yellows, the rosy freesias bloomed, releasing a pleasant fragrance. The birds began to sing, the air was filled with their songs and our love. **DS**

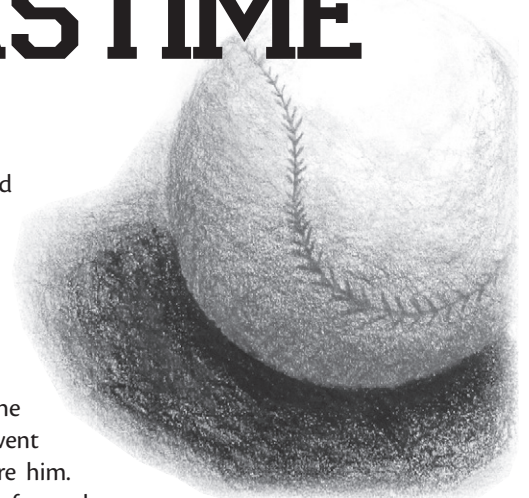
*Like No One's Watching*, digital print, by LeAnn Boyce





# AMERICA'S PASTIME

By Vicente Ruvalcaba



Baseball, graphite on paper,  
by Nate Schnurman

**R**leased from prison, Sebastian enjoyed his first baseball game in years. He yelled at the top of his lungs, "Go, Hawks!" The Cardinals scored in the bottom of the ninth.

"Think we'll win?" asked his brother Victor.

"I don't know," Sebastian replied, irritated because the question distracted him, dimmed his excitement.

The day started out cold but now warmed. The dark clouds retreated. A pale horizon replaced the gray clouds; shimmering sunlight rippled down on the baseball diamond. Players, grass, and clay reflected the colors of the light spectrum. The grass held small prism droplets.

Sebastian witnessed these tiny miracles, unlike the rest of the crowd. In the sky a hawk darted in a semicircular motion, swung like a pendulum, to snatch a small bird from flight. There was nowhere for the small bird to hide, not in that immense sky.

"Just the natural order of things," Sebastian murmured. "The pecking order. Nature coming together. This is how the world governs itself, no doubt."

"What?" Victor asked, perplexed.

"Nothing," Sebastian said.

He learned about predators in prison. The guards changed the television to the Animal Channel at eight-thirty on the dot every Tuesday. He watched and learned about the hawk's binocular vision, hooked beak, sharp talons, and its stealth. "They're ideal killers," he remembered.

"Look, Slamming Sammy is next to bat. I'll bet he crushes the ball," said Victor.

"Craaaack!" the sound of the bat echoed through the stadium, as Sammy Escobar homer-ed, and circled the bases.

"Let's go, Hawks! Let's go! Let's go, Hawks! Let's go! Clap! Clap! Clap, Clap, Clap!" the crowd cheered. The atmosphere was electrified.

"I told you," Victor said. He jumped out of the seat.

"Look," said Sebastian.

"Don't get your hopes up. The Cardinals' relief pitchers are warming up."

"What for?" Victor said. He sat, face motionless.

"What do you mean what for?" He stared at his brother. "So that the odds favor them. That's what for. See, when a left-handed pitcher faces a left-handed hitter, the odds favor the pitcher. It's a defensive strategy." Sebastian felt annoyed. "Who's up to bat?"

"The 'Ripper' Radmonovich," said Victor.

"Right. A left-handed hitter. They'll put him on base and decide pitch to Barry Sax because they think he's a lesser batter." Sebastian eased into his seat. "See, they walked him."

"Boooo!" the crowd jeered.

A flash from the sky, lightning, then darkness. A thunderous roar. "Oooooooo!" A vacuum sound sucked the stadium's life. The stadium lights flickered on, off, on, off, and on. "Aaaaaaaa!" The stadium exhaled.

"You think they'll stop the game?" Victor looked around for answers.

Sebastian didn't worry; he felt comfort in the uncertainty created

by the dark clouds and shadows that moved in from the sky.

"Plaaay ball!" the umpire howled.

Applause. The game continued.

Sebastian felt, in the instant the lights went out, his life flash before him.

The dark unexplained force that governed his instincts, as far back as he could remember, possessed him. His eyes wrinkled. His pupils mirrored the tiny lightning bolts that flashed in the sky.

Sebastian escaped reality when he imagined playing on the field. The imaginary game he created in his mind became more real than the game played out in front of him. He understood the game, and his understanding separated him from the crowd.

He heard the "Boos," "C' mon, ref," and "What are you thinking?" by people around him. These people have no idea how the game is played, he thought; they only come to be entertained. He, on the other hand, came to play, imagined himself behind home plate, held a splintered bat, worked the pitch count to his favor, sat on a fast ball, and went away with the breaking pitch to the opposite field.

Later, he changed perspective and played defense. He communicated hand signs from the dugout to his catcher, requested curve balls, sliders, and change-ups. Signaled the outfielders to play in, play out, shift to the

left, shift to the right. Every move and counter move had been seen and played out in his mind two, three plays in advance.

A couple brought him back to the reality that

developed on the diamond. They mocked him with their premature celebrations.

"Strike three!" the umpire boomed.

"Ah! Shoooot!" Victor responded.

Sebastian smirked. In prison, he learned to be good at games, and not make rash decisions, to play the odds well. In short time, he became the bartering executive of commerce, so to speak. He owned a cell filled with deodorants, shampoos, lotions, chocolate bars, and canned soups which became the prison's market and his means for survival.

"Hawks suck!" The Cardinal fan yelled, then took a sip of beer and handed some to his female companion.

"He's a drunk and an idiot. Doesn't he know what might happen to him?"

"Who, them? It's only a game. Let them enjoy themselves." Victor spotted the couple, then shrugged his shoulders.

"They act like they've won," Sebastian said. His eyes undulated tiny lightning bolts.

"They have a man on base with no outs. It seems like it's over to me," said Victor.

**'COWARDS! COME SAY THINGS TO MY  
FACE! I DARE YOU!' THE CARDINAL FAN  
WAVED HIS FIST IN THE AIR.**



"Craaaack!" the bat-on-ball sound struck like church bells announcing death. The crowd gasped, then booed and shouted vulgarities at the couple. A flurry of relish and mustard hot dog wraps and ice cubes shredded through the air, striking the two.

"Cowards! Come say things to my face! I dare you! See what'll happen!" The Cardinal fan waved his fist in the air.

"Come up here and do something then!" Sebastian exploded. The bottled rage that had accumulated, drip by drip, now broke.

What the hell came over me? he asked himself.

It was self examination, something he practiced during his meetings with the prison's psychologist. Sebastian always dismissed his unexplained anger as an acquired adaptation. His anger prevented others from preying on him. Later, it became an instinct he never shook off.

At Sebastian's stare, the man trembled, and his mate pulled on his jersey and pleaded for him to sit. Taking a sip of beer, he handed back the cup to his female friend, ran his fingers through his hair and relaxed. She placed it on the holder and turned to speak to him.

The heavy air subsided; to everyone's surprise it hadn't rained.

"Sebastian, get your head in the game. You've been staring at them for a long time. Pay attention."

"Yes," was all Sebastian mustered. He looked at his beer, astonished. He had neglected to finish his beer, but now acknowledged the bubbly brewed malt water. He drank, the beer loosened his bowels, weakened his chest.

He remembered his last drunk experience had forced him to rob the liquor store near his home and later led to his incarceration. He pointed a semi-automatic weapon at the clerk, filled with liquid courage. He mixed alcohol and crime, a dangerous concoction that had no boundaries; he had no control over his actions and thoughts.

"So you blame your drinking, Sebastian?" The psychologist, gray haired and goggle wearing, probed, eyebrows flared upward searching for a fly trapped in the room. He followed up with questions that caused Sebastian to dig deeper: "What's the real reason for your anger? What's the reason you drink?"

"Craaaack!" echoed across the stadium.

"There's no one out! We need outs! We're getting killed out there," said Victor.

Numbed to the surrounding excitement, Sebastian drank to escape his memory. At age five, he made the journey across the San Diego and Tijuana with his parents. The cold nights and hot days were a burden. The molding tortillas inedible. He drank to forget the hardships experienced in the new country, which were the same hardships experienced in the old country.

"Craaaack!" The stricken crowd turned pale. Heads turned into their chests. Some rolled their eyes skywards and begged. A tomb replaced the stadium. Dandelions sprouted. Hawk fans that wished to hold on to their dignity headed out.

"Craaaack!"

The couple cheered. With the game in hand, they left their seats and headed out of the stadium. Probing local fans with chants, "Cardinals! Cardinals! Cardinals!" they ascended the steps.

"I need to use the restroom. Let's go!" Sebastian sprang to his feet, pulled his brother's sleeve. He never lost sight of the couple, even when his bowels rumbled and he bent forward to stop the pain.

Sebastian followed the couple. When they turned, he turned; when they slowed, he slowed his pace. The passage they walked through led to the restrooms under the stadium's bleachers. He saw the couple split up; the male into the men's restroom, female into the women's.

"Wait outside. Holler if anyone approaches the door," he told Victor. Sebastian's eyes wrinkled. His chest heaved in and out. He rubbed his knuckles.

"Why do I need to holl--"

Sebastian pushed the yellow door in, left the question suspended in air. Flushes, running water, metal clinking made his ears ache. A foul stench stung his nostrils. His bowels rumbled. He tried to make sense of the writing on the mirrors; his head spun. The place resembled a prison's shit-er.

"Shut the fuck up! Why couldn't you enjoy the game? Why the fuck did you have to draw attention to yourself?" The voice came from the urine stalls next door.

"Hey, I'm sorry. Look, I didn't mean to--" He heard a familiar voice. It belonged to the Cardinal fan.

"Shut the fuck up! Give me your money. I said give me your fucking money!"

Sebastian froze and stared at the mirror. His body rattled. He felt the stubs on his cheek and chin as his hands made their way to his eyes. Then, he exploded into vomits. The yellow vile splashed on the sink.

Footsteps passed behind him, out through the door, into the crowd, and out the stadium. Sebastian regained his composure, washed his face, and blew his nose. The Cardinal fan appeared behind him. The mirror reflected his image. He stared at Sebastian. Sebastian returned the stare.

"It was a good game. For a moment, I thought we had you. You're right: Barry Sax sucks," Sebastian said.

"You didn't help," the man said, frightened.

"He dropped your wallet when he ran out. He must've been scared." Sebastian turned and picked up the wallet. "You okay?" he asked. Sebastian patted the man on his back then walked out of the foul-smelling restroom. He breathed in deep, and smelled the fresh air.

"I heard yelling. You okay? What the--"

"Fine, everything is fine," Sebastian interrupted. He wrapped his arm around his brother's shoulder. "It was a good game, huh?"

"If we'd won. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I mean, who cares if we lost? I'm just happy to have seen a game." They walked out the stadium and into the night. The parking lot came alive. Cars winked their lights on, horns honked, tires treaded, engines purred. **DS**

*The Threat*, mixed media on paper, by Angela Navarette





# Collision Course

By Sharon Taulman

Susan was sitting in the bar of the Bisbee Grand Hotel, drinking a local microbrew. The mid-afternoon heat wave was at full blast and she was glad to be sitting in the dim, cool bar, listening to the local chit-chat with the friendly bartender, Linda. She glanced at the muted flat screen TV in one corner of the bar, watching some sensationalist talk show host stir up trouble among sleazy looking married couples caught cheating. She watched the words rolling by on the screen. The talk show host had just introduced the surprise guest of the show: the love interest of one of the couples. The cheater's spouse was going ballistic: a full scale brawl was erupting.

They must pay these people a lot of money to bare their dirty secrets on TV, Susan thought. Or maybe they want their fifteen minutes of fame. I can't believe people actually think this is interesting to watch. Most of it's probably staged, anyway.

Suddenly, she saw a large table of locals by the window bolt up and race out the door. Wonder what's going on? she thought. She looked out the door and saw people on the sidewalk stopping.

"I'll be right back," she told Linda, as she got up and went outside. Everyone was milling around, looking down the street, so she stepped off the curb, craning her neck to see what was going on.

An old beat-up car was smoking, the front end crumpled into a building on the sidewalk, about a block down the street. She could just make out a woman sitting in the driver seat.

"What happened?" Susan asked a tall cowboy with a blue bandanna wrapped around his head.

"I didn't see it, but I heard the crash. I ran down there to see what happened. A woman in that car is screaming her head off. I called 9-1-1."

The sirens started wailing, then getting louder. A police car jerked to a stop near the wrecked car. The policeman jumped out and waved off the crowd that had gathered.

"I think that woman driving is hurt pretty bad," the cowboy said. "She's drunker than a skunk."

This is the biggest news event of the month in Bisbee, Susan thought.

She decided to hang around and find out more. Might as well. Jay probably won't get back from the courthouse 'til at least five o'clock. And she really didn't have anything better to do. She had already seen the highlights of Bisbee during her two-hour stroll around town.

Bisbee was a dusty western town that had been infiltrated by hippies in the '60s and was now morphing into an artist colony. The older part of Bisbee, where she and Jay were staying, had a variety of small shops with all kinds of hand-made trinkets and antiques dug up from Wild West days. No chain hotels, just some cute, small, locally owned hotels that had been restored to their 1880's heritage.

She smiled as she thought about Jay, the love of her life for the last four years. They both enjoyed traveling and his law practice in real estate took them to interesting little towns around the country. They usually managed to pull off about ten trips a year. Susan was amazed how much work had to be done at the courthouses in these places.

She lit her cigarette and looked at the helpful locals directing traffic. She noticed the two big Honda motorcycles parked in front of the bar. One of the bikers walked across the street toward the bar. He looked like the typical biker: long black hair down his back tied in a ponytail; a slab of belly fat hanging over his leather biker pants, stretching the tight "Sturgis Rally '05" t-shirt; a leather jacket over his shoulder with some strange, snake-like creature on it that matched the tattoo on his upper arm; a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He spoke to a biker woman standing near Susan.

"That woman driving was Janie. She pinned some teenage girl between the car and the building. Janie's face is all screwed up and I think she broke her damn leg. And she killed some damn dog named Sweet Pea."

"Oh, nooooooo, Spike," the biker woman moaned and started crying.

"Don't worry, Bobbi Lee. The cops said an ambulance would be here shortly," said Spike.

The loud noise of another motorcycle drowned out whatever else he told Bobbi Lee. Susan watched an older version of Spike park a pink Honda by the other two bikes. He got off and tossed the keys to Spike.

"Here's her bike. I drove over from the bar on the other side of the wreck. Why did you let her drive the car?"

"Well, I didn't think she was drunk, Dave," said Spike. "She seemed fine. Besides, she was supposed to be at work in about two hours. She had to go get ready."

"Let's go talk to the ambulance driver, Spike," sobbed Bobbi Lee.

"OK. Dave, we'll be back in a few minutes." They jogged down the street toward the ambulance.

Susan noticed the tall cowboy was making his way to the front door of the bar. "Find out anything more about what happened?" she asked.

"Well, from what I heard, the woman driving swerved to miss a dog in the road, lost control and slammed into the building. She pinned some girl that was walking her dog between the car and the building. The driver is messed up pretty bad and so is the teenage girl she hit."

"Wow," said Susan. "Too bad for the teenager. Wrong place, wrong time."

Susan noticed the bikers, Spike and Bobbi Lee, were coming back toward the bar. Bobbi Lee was still bawling. Susan went back inside and they followed. She walked down to her end of the bar and sat down. Spike and Bobbi Lee sat down at the bar near the door, next to the other biker, Dave.

Susan downed the rest of her lukewarm beer and motioned Linda the bartender for another. Spike called Linda over to their group and ordered two beers. Susan heard Linda say, "I don't feel comfortable serving you a beer when Bobbi Lee is so upset and your wife is being hauled off in an ambulance."

What? thought Susan. You've got to be kidding. Spike's wife is drunk and getting hauled off to the hospital and he's drinking in a bar with some other woman friend?

Spike stared at the bartender for a minute, then said, "OK, bring us two

"I think that woman driving is hurt pretty bad," the cowboy said. "She's drunker than a skunk."



waters.”

Linda finally made it down the bar with Susan’s beer. Susan moved closer to Spike and Bobbi Lee to hear more clearly.

Bobbi Lee was calling someone on her cell phone, sobbing as she said, “Janie’s not going to be at work tonight. She was in a wreck and had to go to the hospital.” Then she started crying harder, as she listened to the person on the phone. “I’ll call you when I know more,” Bobbi Lee said and disconnected.

Susan felt pleasantly mellow. Maybe I should have eaten lunch, she thought. Her stomach rumbled. But my jeans are too tight and we have dinner reservations at six-thirty. She looked at her watch: four o’clock. Jay ought to be back by five or five-thirty. Time for one more beer and maybe a healthy munchie. She motioned to Linda, who was talking to Bobbi Lee and Spike and the other biker guy, Dave.

Bobbi Lee was saying to Spike, “Well, I’m not going to call her tonight. If I were you, I’d wait ‘til tomorrow to call her, too. She had no business driving and you know it. That was so stupid. Like she doesn’t already have enough problems, and pregnant again with your fourth child.”

Susan watched them down their beers and walk out together.

She waved to Linda, signaling her to come over.

“Was that for real?” Susan asked.

“Yes, we have our own little Peyton Place going on here.”

“I couldn’t believe what I was hearing,” said Susan.

“Well, those two have been a local gossip topic for quite some time now,” said Linda. She hurried off to greet some new customers.

Susan shook her head slowly and sipped her beer. She checked her watch: five o’clock and no word from Jay. She hoped he came back soon. She hated not getting to spend all of their time together on their monthly rendezvous.

She heard the door open and saw Jay striding toward her. His electric blue eyes were warm as they met hers. She smiled as he walked up and hugged her, squeezing her butt and laying a hot, wet kiss on her. She laughed and said, “I can’t wait to tell you about all the excitement here today.”

Jay looked at her and whispered, “I can’t wait to spend the night with you.”

“Me neither. I want to spend every night with you.”

She held his eyes as she thought, only one small problem. But I’m not going to deal with it right now. I want to enjoy the moment. **DS**

*Vanitas*, digital print on canvas, by **Jessica Meade**





# My Mother Made Me

By Brandy Laney

**I** learned many things at an early age that have influenced me to become the woman that I am. The most influential things I learned came from how my mother raised me. She taught me to love with all my heart, to reach for the unattainable, to respect myself as well as others, and also to evaluate situations before I take action. She taught me all this by not teaching me at all. I learned that growing up abandoned and abused doesn't define you; it's what you do with the knowledge of the experience that prepares you to choose who you will be.

My handmade dress, gray with tiny pink flowers and white lace trim, courtesy of my granny's talent and love, is drooping heavy from the pouring rain. I have eight blocks to go, I already lost my shiny new white dress shoe, and with each step my legs sink into the mud up to my knees. With tears streaming down my frozen cheeks, I trudge home. No longer able to hold it, I urinate on myself as I sit on the cement porch and wait. Just as the sun is sinking at the end of the block she pulls into the driveway. All I want is for her to hold me, wrap me up and cuddle warmth back into me. Instead, I'm punished for ruining my pantyhose and losing my shoe. "I knew you couldn't take care of them, I told her not to waste her money," she screams as she lashes me with her favorite metal studded belt. I am five years old; this was my third day of kindergarten and the first of countless times she forgot to pick me up.

I have an hour to get ready, and it is almost time to go. I am so excited my brother and his girlfriend are taking me with them to the mall, but I can't find my shoes. The honk of his horn is making me rush. When I accidentally walk past her without saying anything she stands up and slaps me. I grab my shoes and run for the door but she locks it before I get there screaming, "You're grounded, you can't go anywhere!" I rush for the garage, slip under the rising door, sprinting towards the car, but she grabs me before I make it in. From experience my brother knows she's not right, so he quickly slips me his room key, as she grabs my arm with her nails and throws me into the house. I know I don't have time to get into his room, so I hide behind my door, praying for the opportunity to sneak in later. On her way to his room, out of anger she hits my door. When it bounces back she realizes she's found her victim. Clutching my knees to my ears with arms over my head, I try to protect myself from as much of the beating as I can. Over her yelling, she can't hear me pleading through my tears for her to stop. I am ten years old and miss another week of school because she is ashamed of the swollen night sky she painted on my face.

Snow is falling, lightly purifying the ground of this drug-infested neighborhood. For the last two weeks I have been sleeping in the back of some guy's jeep (the kind with the plastic windows), curled up under a dirty-gym-sock smelling letter jacket. It's been four days since I've eaten anything. When he comes out I can smell his dinner on him. I'm startled by my own voice when yet again he offers me food for intimacy, and this time I accept. Silently staring at the moon shining brilliant blue, my pride crumbles like that of an ancient empire when it's violently overthrown. As he shakes with climax, he is oblivious to the tears slowly slipping down my face. Just as he is zipping his pants his wife comes out and catches him, demanding I leave. They argue until he convinces her to let him take me "home." Home is a tube in the jungle gym on the play-

**"I learned that growing up abandoned and abused doesn't define you; it's what you do with the knowledge of the experience that prepares you to choose who you will be."**



ground of an elementary school, *Refuge*, pastel on paper, by Ho Jun Cha

where he leaves me warm, incoherent, and full of drugs. "Sorry I didn't get you that food; this should help you get through the night," he says, as he takes the jacket and slips into the darkness. At the police station I'm fading in and out, when I hear her roar, "She is worthless!"

My heart tells me to fight back, to stop following the path she laid for me, to prove her wrong. My inner desire to change says, "Use your strength, your independence, your intelligence, and become a better person than she will ever be." I decide to stop pretending that this life is okay for me. I am not going to try to drown the pain anymore, I am going to feel it and use it. I am not worthless and I know I was born to do better things. I am fifteen and have been living on the streets or with anyone that would open their door to get away from her. For the past four years I have swam in a sea of drugs and alcohol, my only refuge from reality.

My mother taught me about life by abandoning me, abusing me, and showing me everything not to do. I learned that just because you are trained for battle, you do not have to die fighting. You can break the mold. If you stop and analyze, you can change your direction. My mother did the best she could with what she was taught; she walked into life blindly without questioning her purpose or her actions. I witnessed this blind, aggressive, emotionally draining life, and I made the choice to change the cycle.

I realized I am not my mother, and I approach each new day with a tremendously wonderful purpose, to love with everything I've got. **DS**



She looked up at Eddy again and held up a piece of printer paper with the number "9.4" ... She then flipped the sign to the other side that read, "Come 4 Reward."

# The Fall

By Mel Sinclair, Jr.

*Tumbling Figures*, spray paint on paper, by Ruben Ramirez

Eddy weaved through the crowd of shoppers on his way to work. He threw up a hand and a friendly shake of the head to the workers who stood in front of "Chris' Philly Cheese steaks" and "Fobijo Japanese Cuisine." He couldn't have any of the samples no matter how free they were; he had a hard enough time controlling the butterflies he had. Eddy loved his job. There was nothing he enjoyed more than dressing in what he felt like wearing, talking the way he felt like talking, and selling the shoes he felt like selling. He could talk anyone into buying what he wanted because people loved him. Eddy could talk to anyone and he knew it. Anyone except her.

He slowed pace as he approached the strip in the mall where he worked. For the last two weeks work was next to impossible because, well, she worked next door to him, and he had to walk past her store to get to his store. The faster his heart beat, the slower he walked until eventually he was still. Inches from the front of her store, and feet from his, he said, "Maybe if I got a head start I could slide across really fast and she wouldn't notice me..."

Eddy shook his wrists limp and walked in place. Deep breaths made it worse, as he reached for the rail to lean on. "Ok... just walk and right before she gets in view pull out your phone and act like someone called you." He nodded his head as everything became clear. He released the rail and regained posture as he set himself in the "Ar-

mageddon walk to the shuttle" stance. Theme music softly escaped his mouth as he prepared himself. "Tun... tun tan tan tun, de deedahdada deed dah dad de... tun tun tun tan..."

I'm on the floor. Oh my God ... I fell and she's still looking at me. ... how are you going to play this one off.

You see, she had a name, but he had no idea what it was. Just like this feeling he had developed towards this stranger. He figured, Hey, if I can't name this feeling I got for this chick, then I guess I'm cool with not being able to name her either. He took the first step. Second. Third. Fourth, Yes! I'm so in the clear, she's not even in there today. He thought he was home free until she came out of the stockroom and eyed him square in the face. She's looking at me! She's looking at me! What's next in the plan? Uh.. uh... just walk! WALK FASTER! HOW DO I... and as he sped up walking, out of panic Eddy forgot how to properly walk and waved his hands desperately in the air as he went down face first into the mall tile in front of her store.

I'm on the floor. Oh my God.. I fell and she's still looking at me. You meant to, yeah you meant to do it, but how are you going to play this one off. Eddy... THINK! Out of the corner of his eye

he saw her put down the shoe boxes she had in her hand as she covered her mouth. He blew it. She walked over to the front counter and stared at the countertop for a second as if she was writing something. She looked up at Eddy again and held up a piece of printer paper with the number "9.4" written on it in black sharpie. Eddy couldn't keep a straight face anymore; they both began laughing as he remained lying on his stomach in the middle of the mall hallway. She then flipped the sign to the other side that read, "Come 4 Reward." Eddie was on his feet before his hands could help him off the floor. His face, earlobes, and palms as red as the dress that she was wearing, he whispered to himself on the way into the store, "left, right, left, right."

"Why won't you talk to me?" she asked.

"Me? ... Because, I..."

"You see, if we are going to eventually date, then I have to get you talking in full sentences!"

Eddy looked at the ground as he started to scratch the back of his head.

"I'm really sorry, I don't know why, but when I see you I get all nervous and forget things..."

"Like how to walk? Hahaha. It's cute, though. Maybe I can teach you how to walk when we're done getting you to talk."

"I'd like that yo."

"What's your name?"

"Eddy... and yours?"

"Salem."

"Salem... it's very nice to meet you." DS



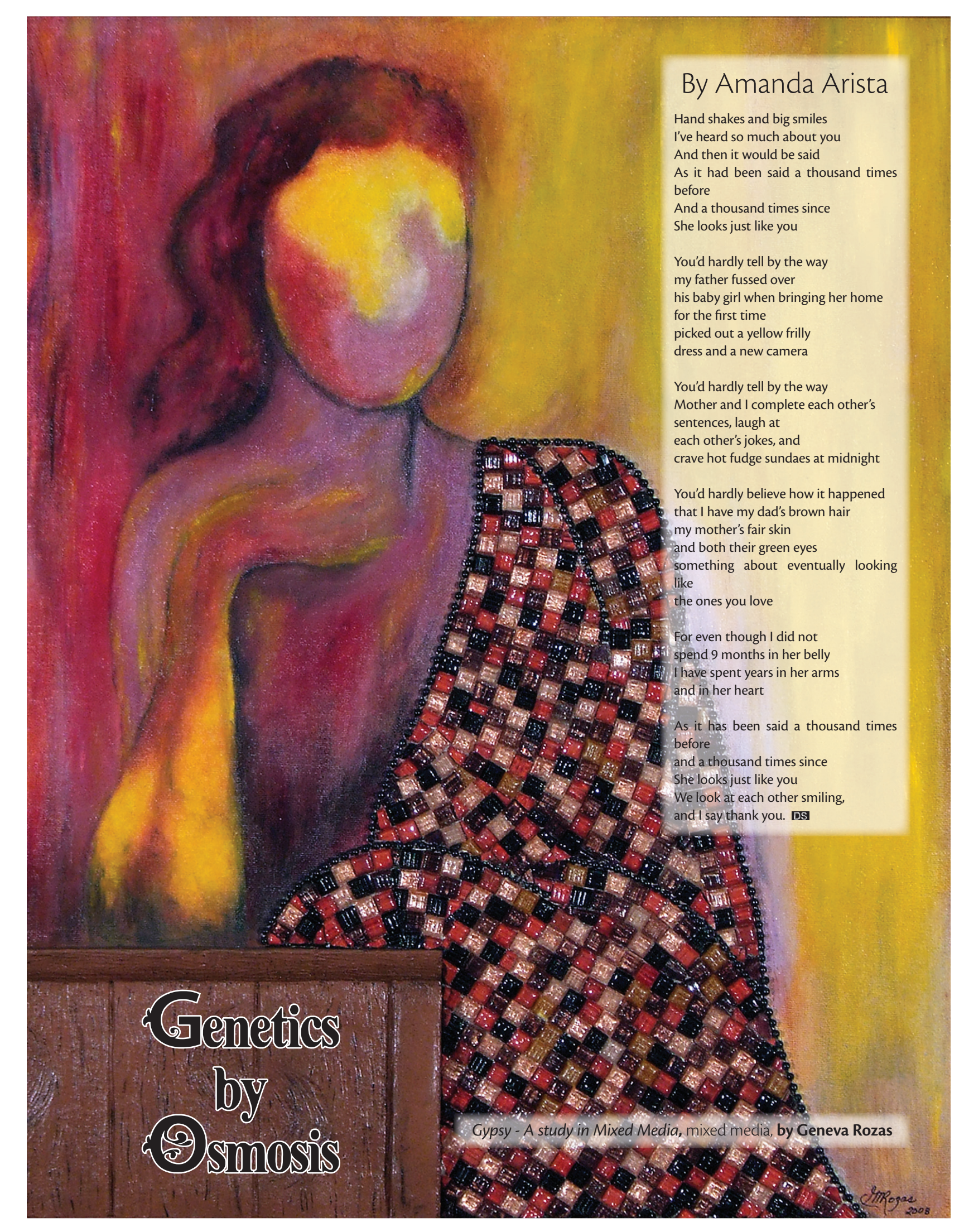


Flag 3, oil on canvas, by Elsa Guedes

By Elizabeth Block Treat

hiding in the grass  
oval and smooth  
purple-pink stony swirls  
bumpy and slick  
tastes like crayons  
tap it on a rock  
it crunches like potato chips  
tiny cracks sneak in  
crush it more  
peel the bumpy slicky swirls away  
there's white underneath  
mushes easily  
yellow round middle  
it's an egg  
pinky-purple swirls trashed in the grass  
the stone was prettier  
wish I could put it back together DS





By Amanda Arista

Hand shakes and big smiles  
I've heard so much about you  
And then it would be said  
As it had been said a thousand times  
before  
And a thousand times since  
She looks just like you

You'd hardly tell by the way  
my father fussed over  
his baby girl when bringing her home  
for the first time  
picked out a yellow frilly  
dress and a new camera

You'd hardly tell by the way  
Mother and I complete each other's  
sentences, laugh at  
each other's jokes, and  
crave hot fudge sundaes at midnight

You'd hardly believe how it happened  
that I have my dad's brown hair  
my mother's fair skin  
and both their green eyes  
something about eventually looking  
like  
the ones you love

For even though I did not  
spend 9 months in her belly  
I have spent years in her arms  
and in her heart

As it has been said a thousand times  
before  
and a thousand times since  
She looks just like you  
We look at each other smiling,  
and I say thank you. **DS**

Genetics  
by  
Osmosis

Gypsy - A study in Mixed Media, mixed media, by Geneva Rozas

Geneva Rozas  
2008



# Every Day's a Future

By Amanda Arista

"I'm home," Jack called out, entering the kitchen from the door to the garage. His feet drug across the tiled kitchen floor and he threw his case on the table.

Charlotte didn't respond; she was in the living room, trying to sort through the thousands of bills they had this month. She couldn't figure out what was happening to their cash. He had a good job and she had a great job but it was just never enough.

Jack walked into the living room to find Charlotte sitting on the floor amidst the slips of paper with her laptop opened on her lap.

"Hello?" he said again, sitting on the edge of the couch she leaned against.

"You're standing on the mortgage."

Jack sighed and lifted his foot to see the bill under his shoe. His shoulders slumped; he went up to the bedroom.

Charlotte sighed, too, and leaned her head back on the couch. She was being mean. But she was exhausted. After getting home from work, she had to run the dishwasher to have the pan she needed for dinner and she had to put in a quick load of laundry because Jack would need his jersey for flag football this weekend. But his sigh was the bad-day sigh and he probably needed to talk. She set her laptop on the floor and stood for the first time in hours. The bills could wait a minute.

She trudged up the stairs and into the bedroom where Jack was taking off his suit and pulling out jeans and a tee-shirt.

"How was your day?" she asked as she lay across the bed.

"Fine, Chambers is being a dick, but what else is new," he said as he pulled his tee-shirt on.

"How's that new account going?"

"Met with the project head today and we are focusing on magazine ads for this one."

Charlotte smiled. She knew that he liked magazine ads; he got to use more of his art background when designing the layouts.

"Good," she said, leaning up on her elbow, watching him go into their bathroom and wash his face.

She waited until he came out again. "I'm going through the bills."

"I saw," he said, pulling off his socks and throwing them in the hamper in the corner.

Five years of living together and that was her one accomplishment: he put stuff in the hamper.

"It just feels like we can't get ahead," she sighed, rolling on her back, looking up at their arched ceiling. The ceiling fan needed to be dusted, another chore to add to her never-ending to-do list.

"Are we behind?" Jack asked, walking towards the door.

"No. But I was hoping to have the cars paid off sooner so we could start saving."

"For what? We've got a great house and two great cars and a great dog."

Jack looked around. "Where is Junior anyway?"

"The neighbor's kids wanted to take him for a walk."

"You mean they wanted to be taken for a walk," Jack laughed, running his fingers through his hair and looking down at Charlotte on the bed.

He looked as if he wanted to say something.

The doorbell rang.

Jack sighed and smiled. "I'll get that."

Charlotte just stared at the ceiling again as she listened to Jack tromp down the stairs. Two years ago, they would have done it right there, doorbell or no doorbell. But now, even kisses were few and far between.

She heard Jack open the door, say hello to the kids with an excited tone. And she heard Junior's collar jiggling. She remembered her bills were all over the floor and she knew that Jack wouldn't remember.

Charlotte rushed down the stairs and just missed the golden retriever before he ran through the house. He was dancing circles on her bills, chasing his tail in excitement.

She tackled the dog before he jumped on her laptop, sending both of them entangled on the floor. Jack stood above them just smiling. Junior wriggled and licked and wriggled some more.

"I'll take him," Jack finally said, reaching for the red collar to pull him into the kitchen for dinner.

"Don't worry, I'll get the mess. As always," she said between clenched teeth.

She let out a deep breath and knelt by her bills. She collected them again, putting them back in order by priority and due date. She didn't think the gas company would mind a slightly crushed payment. She picked up the checkbooks and the laptop and relocated everything to the desk in her second floor office.

A four-bedroom house in the suburbs had seemed wonderful when they bought it three years ago. It was exactly what they wanted, thinking they were going to fill all the rooms; two boys and two girls. But now, there was the master bedroom, a workout room overlooking the neighborhood, a study with her desk and library, and an entertainment room with his 60-inch flat screen.

She shook her head and tried not to think about the empty rooms as she dropped the stack of stuff on the desktop. She looked out her window and watched as her backyard neighbor chased his two kids around their Fischer-Price-littered back yard.

Charlotte sat down with her back to the window and flipped open her laptop again.

She stretched her back, reaching to the ceiling and loosened her fingers before she opened the spreadsheet on her lap top and prepared her checkbook. Okay. Mortgage first. Then power, and utilities. She had to do it because Jack just didn't know computers like she did. Or the budget. Or how much they made. That was all pretty much her department, along with laundry and cooking and sweeping and dusting and taking Junior to the vet and doing the taxes.

**Charlotte shook her head. She had a feeling that crash was Junior running into her pantry rack again because Jack was playing with him in the kitchen. She wondered what they had broken and where she would find the pieces hidden away.**



But she liked the feeling of writing checks. It reminded her of the old Austen novels where the men would sign over bank notes with large quills and pots full of ink. She loved Austen, Bronte, and Shakespeare; even majored in literature just to have an excuse to lose herself in the great romances: Elizabeth and Darcy, Heathcliff and Katherine, Beatrice and Benedict.

She glanced up at the matching degrees from the university where she had met Jack, an art major with angelic blue eyes who was covered in paint more often than not.

A crash echoed up the stair well and into her office. She winced.

"Everything okay?"

"We're fine," Jack hollered up the stairs.

Charlotte shook her head. She had a feeling that crash was Junior running into her pantry rack again because Jack was playing with him in the kitchen. She wondered what they had broken and where she would find the pieces hidden away.

Back to work. She looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes before Jack asks what's for dinner.

Next: the Best Buy credit card bill for Jack's new TV in the entertainment room he just had to have for the Super Bowl this year. She had a vivid flashback to the stain on their beige carpet she discovered after his huge party. He said he didn't know anything about it. Sure. And yet where did they usually end up watching TV? In their bed, on the old 32-inch.

Finally, Charlotte thought as she finished. She stacked up the bill stubs for later filing and tossed the stack of advertisements in the trash. She was about to shut down her computer when she saw one more bill sticking out from under the edge of her laptop.

She pulled it out and recognized the familiar crest of their jewelry store. The silver of her letter opener slid easily under the flap of the ivory letter head.

The last payment. Charlotte leaned forward and looked at the total due this month: a five-dollar remaining balance. That's all that was left from all those years ago.

She looked down at the three-stoned ring on her left hand and the contoured band flush against it. She smiled as she remembered how he had proposed: rose petals all over her dorm room during their last semester.

And when it was too small, because even back then Jack wasn't the most detail-oriented person, they returned to the jewelry store the next day. The clerk clapped when she saw the two of them walk in. She beamed and held her hands clasped to her chest, almost in pride.

"He was in here all day, you know," the woman said, measuring Charlotte's finger for her actual size. "Trying to find the perfect one."

Jack had looked away, his cheeks turning slightly red, as the woman went on.

"We had to tell him everything about the four C's but he wanted the best for his girl."

He had picked out a Past Present Future anniversary ring, not an engagement ring. But it was more than just catchy advertising for Jack. It was what he believed. Past Present Future. They had been through so much together and he believed it would always be that way. "We're going the distance on this one, Lottie. Going to run the clock together."

The three diamonds stayed there through her law school and him get-

ting in with the firm of his dreams. The three diamonds had been joined by a band the same year they bought this house. The ring also stayed there through the painful doctor's appointments and then the fertility counselors.

Charlotte felt her eyes begin to water and squeezed them tightly. Tears slid from the corners. Jack had never flinched when the doctors delivered the bad news, just slid his fingers into her left hand. Even on the nights they spent fighting, even after the month of his sleeping in the entertainment room next to his precious 60-inch TV, even when she had launched the D word at him, Jack had never faltered. He had faith in them, in their future, which awed and frustrated her at the same time. Because she couldn't see it some days but he always could.

She sniffed and quickly wrote the last check. She snapped her laptop closed and went downstairs. She had the sudden urge to go fix her husband dinner.

Standing in the doorway of the kitchen, she watched him search through the cabinets above the stove. Junior rushed to her side and she rubbed the dog's head. His tail swept the floor, another chore she was going to have to do this week. But it could wait.

"What are you doing?"

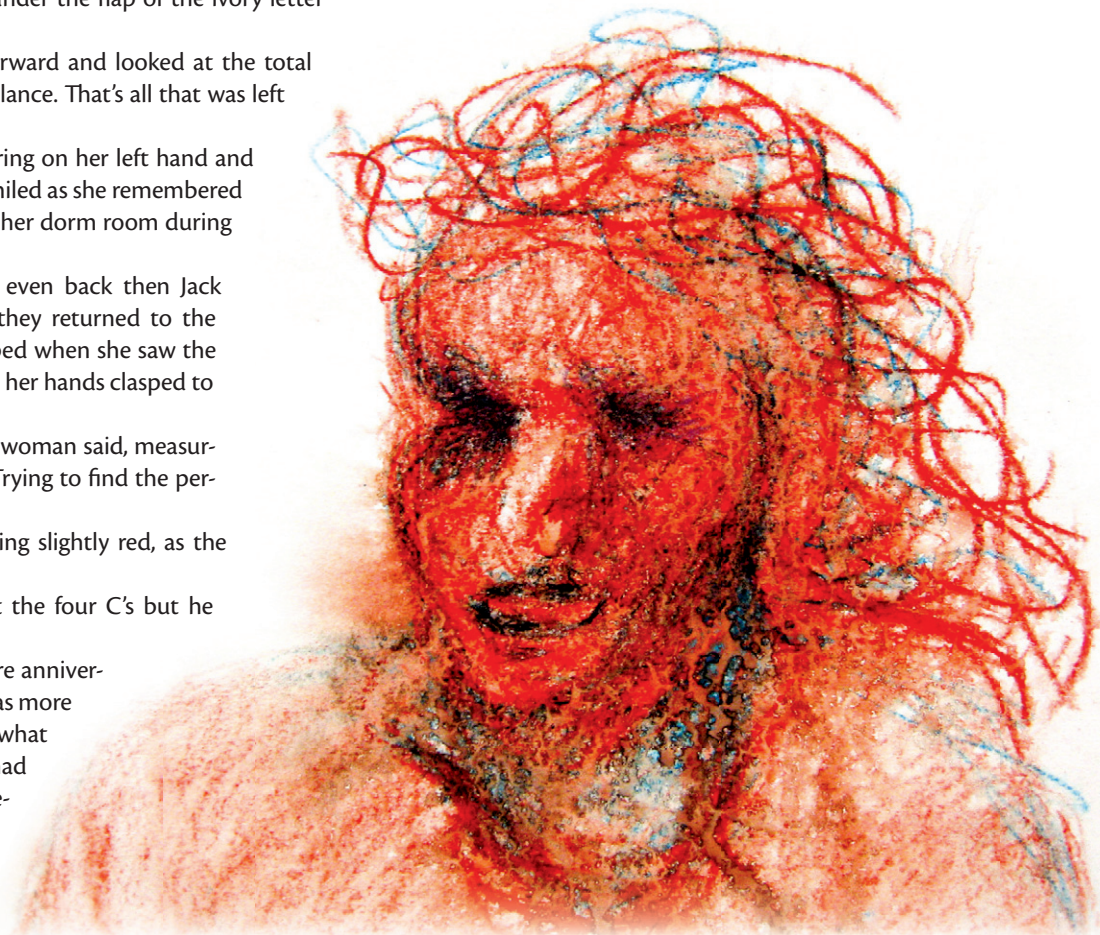
Jack looked over his shoulder and Charlotte caught a glimpse of a pot with boiling water. "I thought I'd try making dinner for my girl."

Charlotte walked slowly behind him and slid her hands around his waist. She rested her tired head on his back. She couldn't believe she had forgotten how incredibly strong his shoulders were.

"Maybe after dinner we can go for a walk, to the park down the street?"

"As a family?" he asked over his shoulder, giving her a little kiss on the forehead.

"As a family." **DS**



*Liquescent*, water soluble crayon, by Kara Ari Dahl



# THE COFFEE SHOP

**D**rops of rain splashed on the casket; his mother, sister and a few friends, with eyes set in a glassy stare, watched the casket descend. I thought about worms ingesting his body: cruel, heartless rat.

The cloudy sky thundered; within a few minutes it poured down. Everyone scuttled to find refuge, leaving the coffin alone with the gravediggers. I stumbled down a narrow path, sorting the thorny bushes; I put my hand on my veiled hat, worried the wind would take it away. The stream soaked my shoes. By the time I got to the top of the hill, my heart was pounding. A stunning church was ahead. It was so beautiful. I bent over, resting my hands on my knees, to catch my breath.

At the doorway a priest beckoned.

"You are soaking wet, sister," he said.

"Please, come inside; wait until the rain ceases." I followed him; the dim church was illuminated with candles. The scent of the jasmine bouquets arranged in vases at the sides of the altar brought me back to the day when I was standing at another church's entrance waiting to march down the aisle. My hands got cold and sweaty. I had a knot in my throat.

He lived two blocks away from my house. He was strong; his blue eyes won me every time he smiled. I used to spy him hidden beneath my window. One day he caught my eye, smiling directly at me. "Father, I've been absent from God for many years."

The priest touched my arm.

"I would like to reconcile with God."

The priest pointed under the bench. I bent down to pull the cushion out to kneel down. The priest seated himself next to me, took off his glasses, shook his handkerchief, and rubbed one lens of his glasses then the other.

I put my hat away. A ray of light shone through the stained glass window over my face. The priest pressed his fingers against his lips, noticing the scar on the right side of my lips.

I made the sign of the cross, saying,

## "Bless me Father, for I have sinned."

I rested my elbows on the bench, moved a strand of hair behind my ear.

"During the first months of marriage we used to spend time strolling through the park... he enjoyed listening when I played the piano... over the weekends we went to the Magnolia to see the latest movie. Then he began to stay late at work... we couldn't have a conversation without fighting. He'd leave the room when I would enter... He covered his ears when I played the piano." I looked at the stained glass window. "I blamed myself for his behavior."

The priest shifted on the bench and folded his arms over his knees.

"One night, past twelve... I heard footsteps coming to my bedroom. With his mouth next to my ear he said, 'Wake up, I'm hungry!' I rolled over to look at him. The rancid smell of alcohol made me turn my face away. I stumbled into the kitchen to fix him something to eat. Finally when I got back in bed, and tried to catch up on my sleep, he took me... I stayed quiet until he finished... I closed my eyes to keep back the tears. I tried to think in music, the sound of the ocean, whatever would take me away from that moment."

I pulled a tissue out of my sleeve to blow my nose. The priest pressed my shoulders gently, waiting for me to recover.

"He broke my wings, tied my hands. I felt like I was confined in a cage." My voice broke up.

The priest held my hands, "Did you try to leave him?"

"Only once. He grabbed me back, sent me to the hospital for a week. Told me that if I accused him, he wouldn't stop until he had killed me."

Tears dripped down my cheeks. I was trying to find my tissue when the priest offered his handkerchief.

"When I found myself drowning, I decided to do something. I was young and could still renew my life. The next morning, I woke up early. After he left the house, I ran to the grocery store, took out my list; on the bakery aisle I grabbed flour, baking soda, cocoa powder. The chocolate cake never fails. On my way back, I stopped at the hardware store. On the rodent control supplies aisle, I picked a rat poison. I needed to take care of a rat. After lunch, I prepared the cake.... That night, after he ate it, his humor improved...."

The priest patted my hands. "The next day I cooked lasagna, and then lemon chicken.... In a few days he started to complain of skin rash, headaches and dizziness.... He couldn't stand his stomachaches, he lost weight...." The priest released my hands, stared at me. I looked down; my body shivered. "Three months went by and his aspect was like a cadaver.... After six more months, he died." The priest and I quivered by the tremble of the thunder.

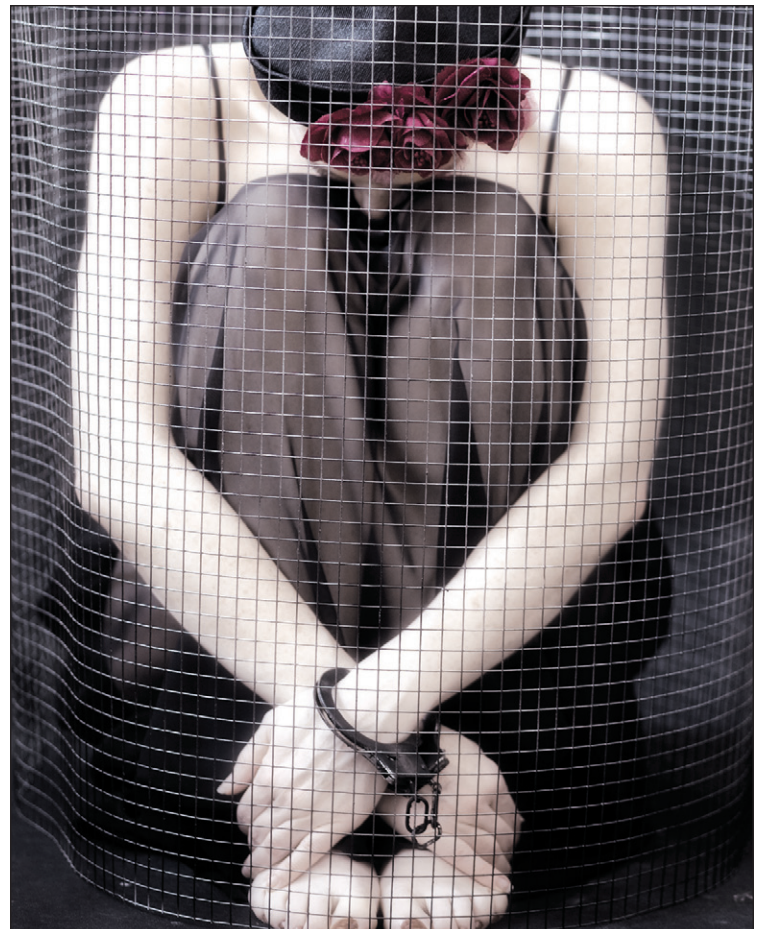
Seeing the Holy Cross behind the altar, I said,

## "God, I have sinned; I ask for your forgiveness."

The priest said a prayer in a whisper and made the sign of the cross. I stood up, and walked down the aisle. I looked back and saw the priest motionless. At the entrance, a woman closing her umbrella said to me, "The sky is pouring down." I just smiled.

I stepped out, turned my face up to the sky, and let the rain purify me. My wings spread wide. **DS**

*Anonymous*, photograph, by **Cristina Nava**





# Weight Conscious

By Brandy Laney

**R**eveling in freshly awakened relaxation, I luxuriously drain out every peaceful moment before I open my eyes to allow the sunshine in. I'm snuggled warmly between my exotic, plush, chocolate brown micro-fiber comforter and this creamy, teal green, sheathed, dream-inducing play-land, ingeniously created for daily rejuvenation. My body tightens, rigid with fear, as my brain clocks in for the day, and the realization that today is weigh-day grips me. Weigh-day is the day I experience a recurring nightmare in a scheduled Monday meeting with the dreadful black digital scale.

I throw my pillow over my head and try to whisk myself back into my fabricated skinny dreamland. Groaning my frustration, I accept the inevitable denial of a reprieve, in a delusion that stars me flaunting a size-six, rock hard body wearing a hot pink bikini, frolicking on the beach. Perturbed, I summon my inner motivator for some positive encouragement. "You should be excited today, Brandy; you ate strictly by the guidelines,"

**My husband, handsome and fit in his medium-size boxers, enters the bathroom wiping sleep from his eyes.**

**Wearing a grin from ear to ear, he pulls my naked body against his, and says, "Good morning, gorgeous."**



*A Moment to Weep*, pastel on paper by Tricia Lambert

it declares; "This week there should definitely be a loss!" It's enough incentive to rouse me from the bed and push me towards the porcelain-filled home of the humiliator. Nevertheless, I find myself pacing in place halfway there, fighting the urge to flee back to that cushiony refuge. So, I continue to induce commendable reasoning, enough to propel myself a few steps closer. "It's just a number," I coax. "You are beautiful no matter what it says."

It takes fifteen minutes to manipulate myself, sabotaging my vulnerable emotions into attempting another horrifying encounter with that offensive digital exhorter, but triumphantly I arrive at the insidious entrance. I flick on the low-watt, fluorescent bathroom lights and my hard won jubilation vanishes. My disgusting reflection taunts me, hurling fiery insults at my colossal body, imprisoned by my too tight, pink plaid pajamas. I can't handle looking at the image staring back at me. "You will never be sexy with a monstrous body like that," it harasses. Determined to get this process over with,

I reluctantly initiate the unveiling of my enormous, stretch-mark engraved, cottage-cheese thighs. Then I quickly rip off my XL spaghetti strap shirt, prompting my pale flabby arms to wave. I stand in a lump of self-loathing, unwilling to move for several moments.

Anxiety quickly deteriorates my perseverance as I use my toe to tap the scale, which springs it into calibration. The demeaning accusations my conscience spits at me bring tears to my eyes. Which distracts me into forfeiting my hold against the struggle that had been prohibiting me to glance at my obese figure. After examining the pathetically ample portions, I swiftly avert my gaze and apprehensively submit to the final execution. I begin by positioning my size-ten feet two inches apart on the wicked calculating apparatus. Next, I expel all the air from my lungs and clasp my throat shut. For some reason I hope this will reduce the agonizing outcome. Then, I press my hands to my legs and stand as still as a frog monitoring a nearing fly. The numbers twitch back and forth until they come to rest on the punishing verdict. Despite my restrictive determination, the scale repeatedly broadcasts a gain or barely better, a simple maintained weight. Depression soaks in as I slowly step off the scale, apprehensive to facing another meticulously tedious week.

My husband, handsome and fit in his medium-size boxers, enters the bathroom wiping sleep from his eyes. Wearing a grin from ear to ear, he pulls my naked body against his, and says, "Good morning, gorgeous," which instantly stimulates tears to mound in my eyes. Smiling over his shoulder, I bat my lashes to prevent alerting him with the cascading evidence. He is unaware of the painful tribulation I engage in every Monday. I don't express my feelings, because I know he is unable to understand. Thankfully, he doesn't suffer with these condemning issues, but his love encourages me to keep striving towards my destination. His unconditional love reminds me that I have numerous things in my life to be thankful for, that even though I may endure this exasperating predicament, I have the ability to defeat it. With unwavering dedication I can modify my harmful perception of myself and my wellness for the future. My desire is passionately fueled by my hatred for my physical appearance, but my objective is ultimately essential for me to acquire an enduring healthy lifestyle. **DS**



# She Found Me

Figure 3, ceramic, by Geneva Rozas



By Charles Cheeks

**A**s long as I can remember, wealth was always a part of my prescription for happiness. If I could not achieve the American dream on my own, then I would marry her. However, if I acquired my own riches beforehand, I would be free to marry for what was really important: Looks! For years, I concentrated on developing the credentials to attract such a woman, but as things turned out, she found me. I would later learn that she inquired about me first among our friends and made herself available for introduction when she felt that the time was right. Although she was four years older, we had much in common. Like me, she was an only child, spoiled, strong-willed, and fiscally irresponsible.

In my building, apartment 161 was the place where everyone went to hang out and party away the weekend. It was during one of these soirees that the fateful introductions were made.

"Ooooh, Charles is here! You always wanted to meet a rich woman; well, we've got one for you."

I was strong-armed by my inebriated friend Amanda through the kitchen into the smoke-filled living room where the elegant lady sat with her back to me at a card table.

"Ms. Mary Payne," Amanda proclaimed in her most formal tone. "This is Mr. Charles Cheeks!"

With a slight bow, I gently grabbed her hand and gave my best New Orleans gentleman's "how do you do." I tried hard to mask the abject terror I was feeling. My mind went back to all of the rejection I received in high school from women: "I like you as a friend," "I've gotta wash my hair," "I'd rather burn my flesh," "I'm not gay but I'll learn," etc. As she stood, her green eyes looked me over as if I were a necklace from Tiffany's, taking note of my physical attributes while deciding what to wear me with.

She stood about five feet nine, a couple of inches above me, in black spiked heels. The first thing I noticed was her body: tall, dark, and slender with skin the color of dark chocolate. The long, mannequin legs encased in black silk stockings seemed to run up to her neck in a tight, black, cocktail mini-dress. The haltered neckline formed a V almost to the waist revealing full, perky cups of womanhood. Her long, swan-like neck sparkled with a

thin, diamond necklace with matching earrings, dangling dancing shadows on her delicate shoulders, which smelled like Clive Christian perfume.

"How do you do yourself, Mr. Cheeks?" She smiled. In the dim light, her pearly whites radiated against the blood-red lipstick.

"So I hear you work in Las Colinas also."

"Yes," I said. "In the Williams Square Building."

"Oh, that's almost across the street from me. I work for Bozell Jacobs, the advertising firm. Isn't the Mandalay beautiful? Would you like to go walking around it sometime?" The soft, ethereal lilt of her voice reminded me of film footage I had seen of Jacqueline Kennedy during the White House years.

"Well that would be nice. When?"

"How about now?"

"Now? Uhhh, sure, I guess."

It was two o'clock in the morning. We said goodbye to our hosts, hopped into her little MG convertible, and took off.

Once on the canal, she removed the black sequined bow she was wearing and let her thick, raven-colored hair fall around her shoulders. The moon was full and reflected off the water, forming a celestial halo around her thin delicate frame. This may sound a bit ghoulish, but it was that ghostly, dark quality that made her look so eerily beautiful, so enchantingly sinister, like a black Morticia Adams fresh from a kill. We sat on the limestone steps of the bridge that crossed the canal, and she pulled a bottle of champagne and two glasses from the large purse that she carried from the car. We drank, gossiped, and laughed until the night sky turned dark blue, mixed with the orange hues of pre-dawn.

My phone rang early the next evening. It was my well-heeled vamp inviting me out to dinner. She came by at about eight-thirty in a blue beaded Versace pants suit, which I recognized from the magazine on her car seat. To my surprise, we went to a fancy restaurant (the name I don't recall), just to order fast food. After a few hours of burgers, shakes, and more conversation, she looked at me with those mesmerizing green eyes and asked, "So, you wanna stay all night at my house?" I was not quite sure what she had in mind, but I was not taking any chances. "Absolutely," I said, trying to contain my excitement.

With a slight bow, I gently grabbed her hand and gave my best New Orleans gentleman's "how do you do." I tried hard to mask the abject terror I was feeling.



During the bedtime hours, I lay on the couch trying to figure out how I walked in the place with my beautiful black Morticia and wound up with a duck-billed platypus.

After swinging by my apartment to pick up a change of clothes, we finally arrived at her place, a little Georgian-styled townhouse off the main road. The place was a little smaller than I imagined. An homage to antiques and porcelain, the main room consisted of very ornate Victorian furniture, with numerous porcelain replicas of Greek statues that seemed to be part of a collection. These were all brought together on a large oriental carpet that covered most of the hardwood floor.

She went to the refrigerator and pulled out another champagne bottle with two more glasses. "Here. You can watch a little TV while I get everything ready." I made myself comfortable on the floor in front of the large console. To my disappointment, she came out with a pillow and linens for what would be my bed on the sofa. "Okay," I thought. "Well, it is my first time over so I shouldn't be surprised." However, what I saw next did surprise me. She went around the corner to the bedroom and disappeared. Then, a completely different woman came back into the living room. There were no more green eyes, no long thick flowing hair, or beautiful blood-red lips. I could see through the crack in the door, that all of those things were now lying on the dressing table, which looked a hell of a lot hotter than the creature standing before me now.

The six-inch stilettos were now fuzzy bunny slippers; that long-delicate frame was now covered with a housecoat, which seemed to be made of a discarded quilt. The green eyes were now huge eye-glasses that reminded me of the headlights of an old Buick my father once owned. Her head, wrapped in a plain blue slave scarf with the knot tied in the front, made her look like a cast member of a Cicily Tyson movie.

"Oh, God! I mean ... uhhh, you really got comfortable, didn't you?"

"Well, you might as well see me at my worst. Come here."

Something told me she wanted a kiss. "Just think about the money. Just think of the advantages," I kept telling myself. I put down my champagne glass and grabbed the bottle, taking a long chug-a-lug. As we leaned in, I saw her mouth in the full light of the table lamp. This woman had lips that could blow up a tire! When I kissed her, I needed a map to find my way out of her mouth! She was a good girl, so the night went no further than that. During the bedtime hours, I lay on the couch trying to figure out how I walked in the place with my beautiful black Morticia and wound up with a duck-billed platypus.

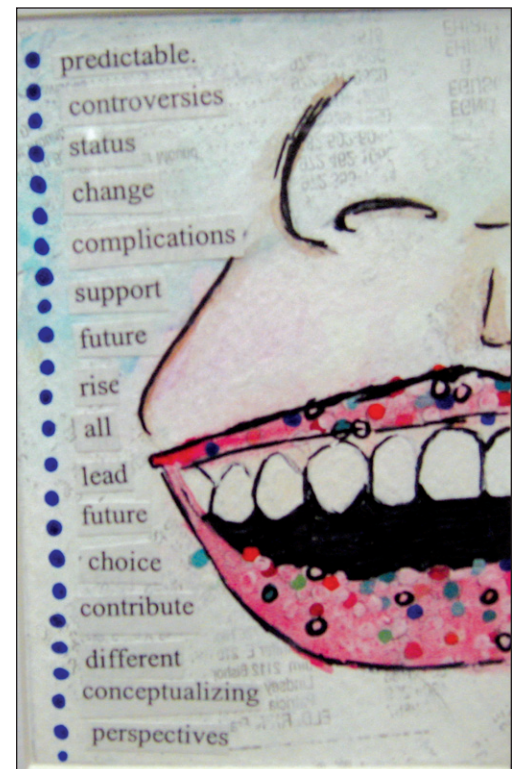
The next day, I awoke to the smell of what I thought was burning flesh. She was pressing her long, thick hair.

"You put the comb in the fireplace?" I asked.

"Well, yes, if I want it to look the way it did yesterday."

When she was done, it was the beautiful, flowing mane I remembered, but the way it snapped, crackled and popped while she was pressing it, I wondered if the static electricity might cause everyone in the neighborhood to get free cable. She disappeared into the bedroom again and came out as the cover girl she was before, looking splendid in those six-inch flesh stabbers like the ones that excited me the previous night. They were silver this time, to match the floral patterned morning frock that made her look every inch the lady of the manor again. She dropped me off and I took a deep breath before I kissed her, just in case those lips covered my whole head and I could not breathe. That was the start of our six-year romantic odyssey.

Towards the end of our macabre relationship, we tried to save the magic, but we could not seem to stop trying to kill each other. Once she tried to run me down with her car, I decided that our love was dead. Right then, I vowed that family fortune or not, I had done my time with crazy women. **DS**



*Touch, See, Speak*, mixed media on paper, by Rachel Hamilton



# One Crazy Night

By Phokham "P.K." Khamlue

**H**e stood on the rooftop overlooking the city. The distant vrooms of cars could be heard along with the indistinct chatter of people and the incessant whir of the hotel's many AC units. It was the roof of a large hotel, the kind you find in large cities. Its name didn't matter to him ... nothing mattered to him anymore. This thought had plagued his mind many a sleepless night and when he had gazed at the height of the hotel he decided it was time to act upon it. So here he was high above the city staring down the streets below trying to summon the courage to do the inevitable. He placed a hand on his hip and ran his other one through his short dark hair and took a deep breath.

"Having second thoughts?" It was a woman's voice behind him.

He didn't act as startled as he was and merely turned in her direction. She was a small petite blonde, attractive in a trailer trash kind of way, dressed in blue jeans and a white Tee shirt. She was sitting behind an AC unit finishing a cigarette. The tiny woman puffed one last puff and flicked the butt away with the casual carelessness of smokers. Then she walked over to the ledge and sat on the edge, her feet dangling. She patted for him to sit next to her. "C'mon; you aren't scurd, are you?" she said playfully. He ignored her and stared at nothing.



*Urban Landscape*, acrylic on canvas, by Soniya Bhari

Silence passed between them while she kept her playful smile and he a dour expression. "Sooooo ... whatcha doing up here?" More silence. Heartbeats passed and the smile faded from her face. "Fine, asshole, be that way." She sniffed. "See you at the bottom."

The speed at which he moved to stop her surprised her and she almost slipped off the ledge. He placed a strong arm around her waist to support her. After a brief struggle to regain balance he whispered softly, "Sorry, just trying to collect my thoughts."

"Jerk, asshole, I almost fell!" He smiled at her perturbed look and gave a slight laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Still smiling, he sat next to her on the ledge.

Both of them had their feet dangled and kicked nervously, oblivious to the dizzying heights below. She allowed him a few brief seconds to collect his thoughts before repeating her question. "So what are you doing up here?"

He let out a heavy breath. "I guess for the same reason you are."

She smiled a sad smile. "I'm up here because this world sucks. Not just sucks but fucking sucks. So tired of all this bullshit." He didn't ask for her to clarify, just waited patiently for her to go on and vent. She reached habitually for a cigarette then realized she had just smoked her last one. "I need a fucking cigarette." More patient silence.

"You know you date a guy and you think he's nice and sweet then he turns out to be a total fucking jerk. Every single one of them, every man I have ever been with, turned out to be a fucking jerk." She turned to him. "And I am not a slut! They all treat me like I'm a slut. So I like sex; it doesn't make me a slut!"

Tears had begun to well in her eyes and she wiped them away. "You aren't even listening, are you?"

"Cussing can make one sound so unattractive, but I guess no other words can describe your vehemence like a cuss word."

She stared at him incredulously. "You weren't even listening. Just like every man I have ever met you weren't even listening," she whispered sadly.

"You are impatient, just like everyone I have met in this country."

"What the fuck are you...?" She shook her head and looked away.

"I remember once meeting this girl. She was in love with this guy she worked with. She wanted everyone to know how she felt and placed hand-made signs everywhere at work with the words I love you." Short pause. "I remember thinking how wonderful it was to see such passion still existed in this world. But do you know what happened to her?"

She looked at him. "What?"

"Everyone began to say she was crazy, emotional disturbed. This world

**It was the roof of a large hotel, the kind you find in large cities. Its name didn't matter to him ... nothing mattered to him anymore. This thought had plagued his mind many a sleepless night and when he had gazed at the height of the hotel he decided it was time to act upon it.**





no longer looks kindly at such passion. The object of her desire was afraid too. He snubbed her, called her crazy, and I watched helplessly as she spiraled down into madness. She became what they thought of her. What else

could she become? This world no longer accepts her kind but I saw nothing wrong with her passions. Where else can such people go but into madness? I kept silent, afraid of how they would judge me. I regret my cowardice. I should have stood up for her, let her know she was not alone in this world."

"You don't seem like someone like that; you seem more reserved than that." He stared at her sad blue eyes, eyes that mirrored his own. Something passed between them, something words can not describe nor could it ever be described or explained to someone who has never felt such an experience. So much of his life he had strained to control his emotions so that no one could brand him with being emotional. *Emo* was the new term for such people. Where once they were called Poets and Dreamers now the world of psychologists and analysts branded them emotionally disturbed and in the youth culture the word *Emo* emerged.

"One should never judge another at first glance. No matter how right you feel about your instincts."

"I guess you're right; many of us hate being judged but we ourselves judge."

He smiled. "You sound remarkably different. You went through a couple of sentences without cussing."

She smiled too. "You're having a strange effect on me."

He shifted around, unaware that he was moving closer to her yet more aware of her closeness. "I've noticed a lot of women these days, they want the thug bad boys yet they also want him to be a gentleman too. It's really kind of stupid. Most women these days don't understand that the way they act the way they present themselves will attract a certain type of men. For instance, you wanted a kind and supportive boyfriend but you cuss and that won't attract such men."

"I didn't always cuss. Men made me cuss."

"Even if that is true it still won't help you find the man you are looking for."

She paused. "So why are you here ... ummm, heh, great. I don't even know your name. I'm..."

He brought his fingers to his lips in a shushing gesture. "For now let's keep it that way. Let's just be a man and a woman having a conversation; names can come later."

"Trying to be mysterious, eh?" She had a coy smile.

"Don't women love mysterious men?" He had a coy smile of his own.

"You still haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

"I already answered; you just didn't listen."

The smile disappeared. "Why do men like being infuriating?"

He laughed. "I am here for the same reason you are." He turned away and stared at nothing again. "This world sucks."

"You aren't here because of a woman, are you? I can't believe that a cute and smart guy like you would be here because of a woman. I mean, I'm sitting here thinking, wow, this guy is great; I hope he isn't taken or gay. Wait, you aren't gay, are you?" She turned a serious face to him.

He laughed. "Why are all sensitive guys thought of as gay?"

They laughed together. "I don't know; it's just a stereotype I guess."

"This world is full of that. I'm not here just because of a woman. I am because of all women now. You read love in books, watch it in movies and you believe it is a certain way. But as you go throughout life you realize that reality is so much different and that the dream is so much better. You're right: this world does suck and nothing lasts forever. There is no happily ever after."

She reached out for his hand and they gripped each other's hand tightly, oddly afraid for some reason. His voice was quiet. "I wonder if how I am feeling now is how others feel when I speak jaded like you. I know it is a selfish feeling, one that I have never really paid attention to until now. I've been so caught up in my own troubles I have trouble listening to others. We live in such a selfish world."

He looked at her, his eyes full of all the emotions he had held back. "We could leave together. End it together."

Their hands became white as they gripped each other tighter. Tears began to mist in her eyes as well. "Do you know why I asked why you were up here?" A shake of his head was his only answer. "As you probably guess I came here before you to end it all too." She brushed a stray tear away with her free hand. "But I made a deal with God. I said, God I'm going to smoke this last cigarette and if you don't give me a reason to live by the time I finish, then screw you."

Her tears rolled freely and she no longer bothered to wipe them away. "Then you came along. You were, I guess, too preoccupied to notice me so I sat and watched." She gave a small laugh. "I started to think maybe there is a God, maybe fate sent you here at that exact moment. I never truly believed until now."

He looked away from her; his own tears flowed and he spoke barely above a whisper that only she could hear. "I have always known there was a God. In fact for most of my life I hated his guts cause he has a crappy sense of humor. I used to look at the sky and say 'Why? Why me? What did I do to deserve this?' Then thoughts of my past would flood my mind. So I just look back up and say, 'OK, would it help to say that I'm sorry?' Both of them gave a light-hearted laugh and smiled.

She reached over to turn his face to hers and looked into his eyes. "Let's live together. Let us give life another chance. Let us give love one more shot."

He averted her gaze. "It won't last. There is no happily ever after; besides, this is crazy. We don't even know each other."

She cupped her hands under his chin so he couldn't look away. "Whoever said love was sane? What sane person would want the exquisite pain of love?" She tried to persuade him with a kiss. Her mouth tasted of ash and cigarettes.

He smacked his lips and licked them. "Hmmm. You have a point but I'm going to need more convincing."

The next kiss came with such passion he didn't care what her lips tasted like. So passionate did they kiss and embrace that they almost fell off their perch. They both teetered a bit before regaining their balance and mutually decided to get on safer ground.

He looked at her and smiled. "Ok. I don't think I want to jump anymore."

"I don't think that's an option for me any more either."

The lovers leaned on each other and held hands. He brought her hands to his lips and kissed them. "This is our last chance at love. Let's give it our all. Let's make this work."

She leaned her head on his shoulders and said playfully, "I'm still having insecurities about you being gay." A devious smile crossed her face. "You're going to have to convince me that you aren't."

A devious smile crossed his face too. "Oh, I think I can do that." **DS**



# THE GRAPEVINE STORY

By Tom Murphy

I was leaving the office, already late for my hospital rounds, when I saw an old Chevrolet truck with chicken wire covering the bed, speeding toward our clinic. Brakes squeaking, the old truck turned into our parking lot and slid within inches of hitting me. Loose gravel ricocheted off my new 1954 Ford Fairlane.

An old man in his seventies, surprisingly spry for his age, jumped out of the truck and came running over to my car. He wore faded overalls with a short-sleeved red shirt. A warped straw hat covered most of his gray hair. His ruddy complexion, vulnerable to the hot Texas sun, was marked with several skin cancers on the face and arms.

"Doc! Doc! Ya gotta help me!" he shouted. "Ya gotta come quick! The baby's stuck—it ain't coming out."

I recognized the old man, Joshua Martin. He had a fruit and vegetable stand on Highway 114, about a mile west of Grapevine.

"Ya gotta come right away, or she's gonna get carbamorbolis."

"Carbamorbolis" was a corruption of the phrase *corpus mortalis*, a term used in the medical community in the late 1800's, which means "the body is near death or has died." I hadn't heard the word used since I heard it from my grandmother years ago.

Joshua Martin was part of a religious sect called "The Test of Faith." Several families had moved from West Virginia to this area in the early 1900's. The old timers in Grapevine had told me a little about The Test of Faith church and community: how isolated these people were, and how rarely they came to town; and, when they did, they didn't say much to anyone. There was even talk of devil and snake worship at their church.

Their community was several miles northwest of Grapevine with no running water, electricity, or paved roads. Some members of the community still traveled by horse-drawn wagons.

Later I found out that Joshua had passed "the test" and was elected the "Community Healer" and "Honored One." If you were elected the "Honored One" in your community, then all the other members had to do anything you would ask, even if it were working on your farm without pay.

As the "Healer," he was allowed and expected to treat any medical problem except childbirth. It was against their religion for a male to be in the room for delivery; there was a midwife, Mrs. Osborn, for that.

Mrs. Osborn would handle most deliveries, but this time the baby was "stuck." Under such circumstances a midwife could ask for a doctor, which she had done.

"Ya gotta hurry, doc; ya gotta come right now," the old man insisted.

"Take it easy, calm down. Who's having a baby and where?"

"It's my missus, doc. She's trying to have my kid and it's stuck. Oh I know what you're thinking, but she's young and she's my third wife. I guess I wore the first two out. I've got fourteen kids, doc, and this is my fifteenth on its way." He managed a slight inappropriate grin.

Why didn't he bring her here to the clinic, I wondered. We had a small delivery room and sterile equipment. He could have saved valuable time. What would happen if she needed a C-section? All these thoughts were racing through my mind. By what Joshua was telling me, if I didn't act quickly, we were going to lose her.

"Wait here—I'll be right back." I ran into the clinic and picked up our emergency delivery kit which contained sterile sheets, Novocaine, suturing material, and sterile delivery forceps. I grabbed my car keys.

"Okay, let's go. Look back once in a while so you won't lose me."

We headed north over the newly constructed Grapevine dam.

Several miles up the road we turned west on a small dirt road. I



*Temptation*, oil on canvas, by Jane Parks



backed off a little to avoid his dust storm. A little farther down the road we passed their church, a small wooden building with two windows on the east side and a cross nailed to the short steeple. Goats were grazing on the front lawn. A sign on the front of the church read, "The Test of Faith." On the other side of the road a sign in large letters warned "KEEP OUT."

We passed an old farm house; half-dressed barefooted children shielding their eyes in silent curiosity watched us go by.

How did I get into this mess, I thought. Here I am going down a hot dusty country road to do a delivery which isn't in my field of expertise, and maybe having to use forceps—none of us in general practice felt adequately trained for that—and involved in an improbable situation of a seventy-year-old man with a young wife, fourteen kids, and a fifteenth on its way.

When I had graduated two years before, I wasn't sure if I wanted to specialize or do general practice. I was interested in pediatrics and orthopedic and internal medicine and thought that a year or two in general practice would help me decide. It did. About four months earlier I had decided to go into pediatrics and had placed my application at Children's Medical Center in Dallas. I enjoyed working with children, and I could still do my orthopedic and med in this age group. This day convinced me I had made the right decision.

We finally arrived at Joshua's unpainted house: loose bricks in the chimney, three open windows on the west side with partly torn screens, a chinaberry tree in the front with a large truck tire hanging from the lower limb. Two children were in the tire swaying gently.

"Hello, kids," I said, as I hurriedly got out of the car, a gambit that didn't pay off: no response. Joshua parked his truck by the side of the house and came running over to my car to help carry the load.

I could hear the labor screams coming from the house. I handed him the sterile pack: "Put this in the house."

As I was getting out of the car with my bag, I saw a young man in his early twenties with only one arm. Apparently he was hiding behind the chinaberry tree. When he noticed that I saw him, he ran away toward the barn.

I hurried around some boys playing marbles in the dirt in front of the house, unperturbed by the screams of childbirth. I stepped over a brown-and-white-spotted hound dog and a missing board on the porch. When I opened the screen door, ten rattles cut off from rattlesnakes suspended from the top of the doorframe hit me in the face. I brushed them aside and entered the house. Joshua put the package on the floor in the front room and then turned and left. Men were not allowed to witness or participate in the delivery of a child. This was strictly a woman's job.

Three children were sitting on the quilt-covered couch eating their lard cake made up from a slice of bread covered with lard and then soaked in milk and sprinkled with sugar. From time to time they threw parts of their little sandwich onto the floor for the chickens to eat. The chickens clucked and scattered when I ran through the room.

The young woman lay on the dining room table with quilts to cushion the wood. Her knees were bent, supported with pillows, with two neighbor women on either side holding her legs apart. The women were chanting a religious mantra. "Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her." One of the women was shaking a rattle, like the ones hanging from the door, in cadence with the mantra. And I was saying silently under my breath, "Jesus, help me if I have to hear this constantly during the delivery."

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her." The two women continued their man-

tra.

They had a sheet over her abdomen and legs and another sheet underneath her hips. The last board on the table was taken out so that the midwife, Mrs. Osborn, could have better access to the birth outlet. She was a short obese woman of about middle age. Her hair was pulled back covered by a hair net. A soiled apron was tied above her protruding stomach. When she gave orders, her speech was abrupt and she snapped her fingers to get the attention. She was pouring water over the presenting scalp of the baby. A slop jar caught the drainage of the water and the blood.

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

Nine of the Martin girls, ages from about five to nineteen, were standing around the circumference of the room. Periodically, Mrs. Osborn would give an order, snap her finger, and one of the girls would stand out and carry through on the order immediately, like in an army camp. Mrs. Osborn was the general.

The young wife had a piece of wood, covered by a wash cloth, in her mouth, and one of the girls was supporting it so it wouldn't fall out. This was for her to bite on during contractions and also acted as a reservoir for a pain potion (some extract of cocaine?). The girl would pour a little of this pain potion on the rag when commanded by Mrs. Osborn. They had given so much that she was not very alert. I asked them to please hold off on this pain medication because I did not want to depress the baby. Also the young woman was getting weak.

The cries of the labor were diminished now, and the two women continued their mantra.

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

I was unpacking my bag furiously, putting some sterile sheets on top of the abdomen and over the legs. I was putting my delivery gown on and then the gloves more out of force of habit than any true meaning of sterility. I could see the baby was "stuck" in the lower birth canal. My worst fears were realized: this was going to require forceps. I took out my Novocaine, filled one of the needles with the Novocaine and injected it into the area in which I was going to have to make an incision in order to get the forceps in.

One of the girls that Mrs. Osborn called Gertrude, about nineteen, was standing by us. She had a large piece of cardboard in her hand fanning the area to keep the flies off. The half screen windows did nothing to keep the flies out and offered very little daylight for the room. There was no electricity or lights.

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

I brushed the flies away from the perineum and started injecting the Novocaine. Suddenly, the girl Gertrude told Mrs. Osborn she was going to vomit. She dropped her cardboard and ran outside. The midwife snapped her finger and called the next one in line. "Amy, Come! Get the cardboard. Shake it. Keep these flies away."

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

"Mrs. Osborn, get one of the girls to bring me a small table; I need a little extra space here for my instruments." The snap of the finger, the next girl in line: "Table from the kitchen, quick!" Within a few seconds the thirteen-year-old, Genevieve, had the table where I could use it. I had my gloves and gown on, the sheets draped, the forceps lubricated. I was ready for the delivery.

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

The room was unbearably hot. Jesus, help me, I thought. Flies were crawling on my sterile forceps and sterile table. Sweat poured down my face, getting into my eyes, blurring my vision. I took off my gown and

**The old timers in Grapevine had told me a little about The Test of Faith... There was even talk of devil and snake worship at their church.**



said to hell with the sterility, which was only a joke anyway, and then scraped the flies off the head of the baby and my instruments. (Thank God my obstetrics professor could not see this.) I inserted the left forceps on that side, feeling it, making sure it went around the proper area of the head, and then inserted the right one on that side. The forceps seemed to come together as I had hoped.

"Mrs. Osborn, get me a girl to hold this blanket here so when the baby comes out I'll put it in her arms."

Again, there was the snap of the fingers.

"Mary, come here!" A girl, about eleven, quickly came.

I put a blanket in her hand. "Mary, hold this, and when the baby comes, I'll put it right here. Don't drop the baby!"

"I won't," she said, the most vocal of all the children—I got two words from her.

"Mrs. Osborn, when she's having a contraction, I want you to go up there in the front and push on the stomach."

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

"Keep her legs apart," I reminded the two chanting ladies. "Keep fanning that area," I said to my fanner. "Keep these flies off the best you can."

The pain potion had already worked, in fact too much. There was very little reaction or pain from the young woman now. The contractions were weak. "Push, Mrs. Osborn! I feel a contraction starting." I started tugging on the head with my forceps. "Mary," I told the child, "stand close just in case it comes out quicker than I anticipate."

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

I pulled and turned and wiggled the forceps, and pulled up and then down. "Mrs. Osborn, call another girl over here real quick!" A younger girl named Jane came running. "Jane, hold this rubber bulb; when I tell you, hand it to me so I can suck out the nose."

Finally I saw the head beginning to move: we were going to succeed on this! The head was coming out slowly; I was pulling gently. Then I could take the forceps off; I held the head in my hand.

"Jane, hand me the bulb real quick." She handed me the bulb and I aspirated the nose one or two times before the rest of the baby came out. Then I handed the baby to the girl named Mary. She held it in her arms and got closer so the cord would not be stretched.

"Jesus, help her. Jesus, help her."

"Mrs. Osborn, come over here, please, and help one of these girls. Don't drop the baby. I'm going to clamp the cord now."

But the pack did not have an umbilical tie with it. I groaned.

"Mrs. Osborn, I need to get anything now to tie off this cord. I don't

care if it's a shoelace."

"I have a special tie, Doctor," she said. "I'll give it to you when you're ready."

"Okay, stand by." I took the clamps off the table and clamped the cord in two places then cut in the middle. The baby was now free.

The baby started to cry. The girls started shouting and laughing and

clapping. And I didn't know if I was going to laugh or cry. "Mrs. Martin, are you awake?"

She grunted. "A little."

"Mrs. Martin, the baby looks good. It's a boy."

"It's a boy!" they all started shouting. "It's a boy!"

I had forgotten about the crib! "Mrs. Osborn, do you have a crib that's warm?"

"Yea, we warmed it with hot bricks."

"Mrs. Osborn, stay with the baby. Here's the bulb; use it if you need it. Keep him covered and warm. I'm waiting for the afterbirth to come." I was standing there twisting the cord with my clamp going up close to the vulva. "Mrs. Martin, you doing all right?"

"Yes," she said weakly. The two neighbors had stopped their chant. The baby had a healthy cry and the color was good.

"Mrs. Osborn, push on the upper part of the stomach again. Let one of the girls stand by the baby." She pushed on the upper part of the stomach. The placenta gave a little room and then here it came. I put the placenta in the slop jar, took my clamps off, got my suture material out and sutured the part of the outlet that I had incised. "Get another piece of cardboard. Keep those flies off that baby—and me, too."

Mrs. Osborn gave me a very fine piece of thread to tie the cord on the baby. It worked well even though it buried slightly into the soft tissue. "Where did you get this kind of thread? I don't recognize it."

"It's a hair from one of the horses in the barn."

I almost choked.

"Please get me a shoelace. I don't think this will be strong enough."

She found a shoelace for me, and I quickly tied it on the cord that remained and removed the horse hair. I could deal with a staph infection better than a tetanus infection, which was always lethal. I had seen a case of tetanus when I was an intern at Parkland Hospital caused by a midwife in Corsicana using a horse hair in tying off the cord.

Joshua came up to the door. "Can I come in now, Mrs. Osborn?"

"Mr. Martin," I shouted, "come over here and help get her on the front part of the table and let her legs down!"

"Gee, thanks, doc! It's a boy, too, doc."

I quickly gathered some of my instruments and put them into one of the sheets and piled the other sheets on top of it. "Mr. Martin, bring me a box for these." I put the sheets and the instruments in the box he gave me and asked him to carry them out to the car.

"I have to have the afterbirth," he said. "It's part of our religion to feed it to our animals."

"It's in the pan." He put the box down and took the pan out with the afterbirth to give to the pigs. All the girls were gathered around the baby. Mrs. Osborn was putting some cool cloths to the young mother's head.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said weakly.

The young wife was about twenty-five, well-proportioned body and beautiful face, long black hair. Why wouldn't she marry someone her own age? Why this seventy-something-year-old man?

Things had quieted down. Old Joshua was out feeding the pigs. One of the girls was sweeping the floor. The instruments were all gathered up. The young mother was lying there on the table but had several quilts underneath her and she was comfortable. "You wanna go to the bed now?" the midwife asked her.

"Yes, help me."

We helped her to her feet and to the bedroom, let her lie down, and put a cold cloth on her forehead.

Once out of the room, I asked Mrs. Osborn, "Is it part of your religion for a young woman to marry an older man?" I was having trouble putting all this together.

"Don't you know, Mr. Martin is the Honored One in our church; he passed 'the test,' so he gets what girl he wants to marry."

**The young wife was about twenty-five, ... Why wouldn't she marry someone her own age? Why this seventy-something-year-old man?**



"What do you mean? What test? What do you mean 'passed the test'?"  
"You know, he passed the test." And then she walked into another room.

I thought to myself, an honored one? and test, what test? Probably some strange cult dogma or tradition. I got my medical bag and was walking out the door when I noticed the beautiful little girl named Mary following me. About eleven with blond curly hair and beautiful blue eyes, she was barefoot and wore a simple gingham dress. She wanted to help me carry the bag to my car, so I let her.

I was still trying to put some of this together: Joshua became the healer and the honored one by passing the test: "The test of faith." What was "the Test"?

The little girl and I were standing by the car when the old man came over. "Girl, don't you bother that doctor." Then he turned to me. "Doc, I ain't got much money—can I give you some 'vittles' to take with you? I got some squash down there and some tomatoes, and some black-eye peas. You wait right here."

I sat down on the ground in the shade of the chinaberry tree. The little girl sat down, too. "Mary, maybe you can become a nurse someday. You were doing a great job in there." No answer. Then she looked up with a faint smile.

We just sat there without saying anything. A faint cool breeze gave some relief from the July sun. I was reliving all the obstetric rules that I had just violated. Finally, I broke the silence.

"Mary, may I ask you a question?"

"I guess."

"When I came up here I saw a young man with one arm hiding in back of this tree. When he saw me, he turned and ran to the barn. Do you know what happened to his arm? He looks like a young man I treated in my office about a year ago."

She looked back up at me. "He's my brother, but God don't like him; he didn't pass the test."

"What test, Mary? What are you all talking about? What test?"

Then Joshua returned from the garden with two sacks of vegetables: yellow squash, ripe tomatoes, and black-eyed peas.

"Well, doc, I hope you like these." Then he turned to the child. "Girl, you get back to the house."

"Don't pay her no mind, doc; if she's telling you things, she likes to make up stories."

"Joshua, that boy with one arm, what happened to him? He looks like the boy I treated for a snake bite about a year ago. A friend of his brought him to our clinic. I gave him a shot to help against the poison. It didn't look too bad, but I told his friend to take him to a hospital in Ft. Worth, to the John Peter Smith hospital, so they could watch him, in case it became worse."

"That's my boy and he was cuttin' wood when that snake got 'em. He changed his mind about going to the hospital in Ft. Worth after he saw you and came on back here."

"We all talked it over at a church meeting and everyone said if the Lord wanted him to keep his arm, he would. But the Lord didn't. So we had to take it off when it got real black."

"What do you mean 'we took it off'? Did you take the arm off?"

"Well,... yeah, doc, we have a special way of do-

ing that. You know we have to do some of these things on our own."

"Well how do you do it?"

"Well, if we see there is no way we can keep it, we hold his arm on a block, and someone that's real good with an axe will take one quick swipe, and then we tie up the stub with wire and they do all right. They get along all right. With the Lord, they do just fine."

"So you don't have to come back, doc, unless we come get you. See, we want the Lord to take over now."

I picked up the sack of squash and tomatoes, said goodbye, got in my dusty car, and drove away.

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Shortly thereafter I was accepted in pediatrics at Children's Medical Center in Dallas. I finished the residency in two busy years. I found little time to think of my general practice days.

But one day my wife and I were visiting some friends in Grapevine. On the way home we decided to go by the old community. The place was deserted. I found out later that they had all moved back to the hills of Virginia. The modern world with plans for a new airport, new housing developments, new highways had crowded them out.

All that remained was the old dilapidated house, the chinaberry tree, and the dust. **DS**

**"Don't pay her  
no mind, doc;  
if she's telling  
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Pitcher, ceramic, by Wendy Fry



