

SCHEHERAZADE



The MPC Literary Magazine

~Issue 3~

Scheherazade

Scheherazade is the queen of fiction. She married a King who murdered the beautiful women of his domain by first marrying them, and ending their lives on the morning after the wedding. Scheherazade arranged to be married to the King in an attempt to save and preserve the beauty of the kingdom. On the wedding night, after consummation, she woke the King and began to tell him a story about a blue rat and a black cat. She timed her story with the sunrise so that it would not be finished by the time she was to be hung. Captivated by her story the King granted her a stay of execution until the next day so that she may finish the story. The story was finished that night, but Scheherazade began a second story that could not be finished by morning, and again the King let her live so that he could hear the end of the story. This went on for 1001 nights. Scheherazade preserved beauty with her stories. Her stories saved her life. This issue of the MPC Literary Magazine is named after her as the writers and poets within are discovering that they have stories within that they want to tell, and by sharing them here they bring a little more beauty into the world.

-- Marc Ferris

~Managing Editors~

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Submissions

The MPC Literary Magazine is published by the Creative Writing Club of Monterey Peninsula College and considers submissions of poetry, short fiction, novel excerpts and nonfiction (memoir or personal essay) from MPC students. All submissions are judged by the members of the club who serve as staff. Please submit up to 5 poems and/or up to 15 pages of prose as an email attachment in .rtf, .doc or .docx format to: CreativeWritingClub@mpc.edu

Indicate Poetry, Short Fiction, Novel Excerpt or Nonfiction Submission in the subject heading of your email.

The deadline for submissions for the next issue of the MPC Literary Magazine is December 1st 2013.

disgrace

I remember mostly that it was soft, slightly wet, sweet. I was nervous, butterflies flying all around my insides. It had been a long time since I stopped playing doctor with the neighborhood boys, but this was different. She was looking into my eyes, and in a flash it was over. She just leaned forward, her lips touched mine, and my whole body tingled.

The knees we had bloodied earlier at school that day were still throbbing slightly, and when she kissed me, I remembered what it felt like to press our knees together, to mix our blood, to become a little part of each other. Blood sisters. For a moment, I felt like I might explode. Explode with what? I don't know? This was the best feeling I'd ever felt and all I could think was, *how can I make this last?*

"Graaaaaaaace," I heard my mother yelling from the kitchen. And with that it was gone. My body emptied. All its wonder drained.

"Put your clothes on quick I think she's coming" I said, devastated.

"What are you two doing hiding under that bed?" my mom asked.

"Nothing mom" I said. My voice was quivering between something like guilt and irritation.

"Well, Shelby's mom is here to pick her up. So hurry it up, girls." She walked out of the room as if nothing happened.

Shelby stared at me for another second; she was shaken, glistening with sweat. I was already sad, wondering if this

would ever happen again. She took off her bracelet, and whispered, “I love you,” so softly in my ear I thought I might just die right then and there. She slipped it on my wrist, rushed out from under the bed, and I just lay there, frozen in a place I’d never been, and already wanted to get back to.

I kept staring at my wrist, her bracelet resting there, so out of place, so coveted, so mine now. I didn’t want to move and spoil the heaviness in the air. I struggled to smell her, trying desperately to picture it over and over again. Not wanting to forget any detail.

When the phone rang during dinner later that night, I was longing for it to be her. As my mom left the dining room to get the phone, my fingers were crossed under the table hoping it was her. I closed my eyes hard and said a silent prayer. When my mother came back in the room, she had a look on her face that I’d only half seen before, and I could tell I was in trouble, but there was something else in her eyes I didn’t understand. When she asked my father to come into the kitchen, I knew it was bad. I racked my brain, trying to think of exactly what, or why Shelby would say anything. *They can’t take her away from me*, I thought. I ached all over. I ran to the bathroom, retching, but nothing would come up. I was caught. I knew that for sure.

The door to the bathroom swung open fast, and my father’s eyes were filled with rage. He jerked me up off the bathroom floor so hard that he ripped most of the collar right off my shirt. As he dragged me down the hall, he started yelling in a weird hissing whisper. “How did Shelby end up with your underwear on missy? What the hell did you do to her, you little pervert?”

I had never heard him talk that way. *What was a pervert?* I thought. This was bad. He threw me over the side of my sister's bed, while my mom snatched her favorite wooden spoon off the counter. The one with the holes in the middle of it, that always left perfectly round welts. As my dad held my body down, he pushed my face hard into the bed. It was difficult to breath. My mouth was full of sheets and the taste of fabric softener.

"Don't you ever do this again, you hear me!" my mother said. Like I had just killed somebody or something. "We'll just see what Pastor Tom has to say about this."

Not another session with Pastor Tom I thought.

The next day at school, Shelby wasn't there. As the cold metal of my chair soothed by bruised backside, I couldn't help but stare at her empty seat, and wonder if they had hurt her too. I never wanted to do anything that would cause her pain. I was nauseous, and worried that I would never see her again. I was raw, wiped out, completely lost in a daze.

"Grace honey," my teacher called out. I didn't hear her at first, "Grace honey," she said loudly, "your knee is bleeding. Why don't you go see the school nurse?"

"Huh...oh, okay." I got up slowly to get my pass to see the school nurse. During the long walk to her office I could hear each of my footsteps ring through the empty hall and all I could think was, *I don't want that dumb nosey nurse to touch my knee. It's the only part of me that feels good.*

Michele Kilmer

The Guaxeneau

The empty building fills my headlights as I come up the drive. It was an industrial laundry facility up until eleven years ago. The property management company kept the building in good shape pruning bushes, removing weeds, touch-up painting, and installing security lights. It sat back from the road obscured by the forest of Monterey Pines. I circle the building shining the Unity spotlight mounted on the passenger-side of my gray unmarked cruiser. If there's something inside I want it to know I'm out here.

Yes I said *it*.

I'm looking for Dan Webb, the last surviving member of a local burglary ring. I'm sure *he's* inside too, but he may have company. If I'm lucky I'm here early. If I'm really lucky I'm here too late. In my twenty years on the force this is the first time I've ever felt this way about a suspect. I won't apologize either.

I pull into the Manager's parking spot near the door, and call in my location. Nancy at dispatch asks if I needed backup. I want to tell her yes, but there's no way to tell the officers responding what they'd be dealing with. I'd be relieved of duty on the spot and driven to the psych ward. So I tell her I'm fine, but to notify nearby units I'm here just in case. I pull the keys from the ignition and reach for the door handle. I pause to look at the shotgun to my right, and I think about the M-16A2 in the trunk. I get out, and leave them both in the car. The guns would only make it mad.

I open the door with a master key. I click on my 15-inch Maglite, raising the beam to the level of my eyes like they taught me years ago at the academy. Much of the lobby

furniture is gone. A phone sits on the reception desk covered with dust thick enough to obscure the numbers on the buttons. I to a door with an “*Employees Only*” sign, and I push it open. I find myself in a short hallway with three doors on each side.

“Dan? Dan Webb, can you hear me?” I call out into the blackness. Nothing moves.

“I know you’ve been hiding here, Dan. I know why, too.” I open the first door. The office is empty. I open the other doors to find the same. The door at the end of the hall opens onto the massive laundry processing floor. Though a few giant washing machines remain, the square outlines on the floor bear witness to the dozens which have been sold off. Overhead hooks hang on a steel beam track-system for laundry bags which hung here once. Just beyond are the giant industrial spin-dryers, each six feet tall. I look into each hoping not to find Dan Webb.

As much as I want to find him and wrap this case it is all I can do not to run back outside. There’s no law requiring me to solve this case tonight. The phrase: *Protect and Serve* is only for the law-abiding, not for dirt-bags like him. If my badge didn’t mean anything to me I’d be home right now stressing out about my fifteen year-old daughter’s latest wardrobe addition. Instead I’m here alone, on a hunch, worrying about a fairy-tale, worried about my sanity because I believe it, and thinking I might be able to save this guy’s life.

Standing here now I realize I *need to see it*.

“Dan?” I call out mechanically now. My mind is wandering. If Dan is still here the thing could be here too. “Dan you need

to come out so I can help you” I say though I don’t believe this at all.

“Help!” The muffled voice chirps out from the end of the facility floor.

“Dan, is that you?” I yell. I sweep my light right to left hoping to find him first.

“Yeah, it’s me” he says. His voice sounds dry. I bring my light to the spot where I hear his voice. I see a blue cargo container against the back wall.

“Dan, are you in the blue crate?” I ask.

“Yeah, that’s me” he says. His voice cracks as he speaks.

“Okay I’ll get you out of there” I say as I walk up to the four-foot tall steel crate.

“Is that thing still out there?” he asks. I freeze.

“What thing is that, Dan?” I ask. I don’t want to hear the answer.

“The big, black, hairy spider-thing” he says emphasizing each word.

“No” I say. I look around the shop floor, “There’s nothing here”

“Did you look up?”

Look up? Fuck... I swing my light up and see the glint of two golden eyes the size of baseballs sitting above a pair of foot-long, shiny black fangs which front a Volkswagen-sized

hairy body. From this body extend eight segmented legs and four octopus tentacles. It tenses but doesn't retreat from my light. Instead it looks at me, clicking its dagger-like fangs.

"Oh...shit...Dan...I'm sorry man...it's hanging from the ceiling right above you" I croak. My mouth hangs open. It's real, and it's here.

"Yeah, okay, I thought so" he says. I hear him start to sob. I figure I must be in shock. I'm looking at this nightmare from hell, but I don't want to run. Everything I thought I knew about the world just got flushed down the crapper. It's like I'm watching this on T.V., and I'm not really here. I take a deep breath and I smell cinnamon.

"Dan, I was talking to a detective in the Sheriff's Department. He's from New Guinea. He told me all about this thing. You and your friends stole something important, a Jade urn covered in jewels from that hotel room. Big mistake. I guess you know that. Where is the urn, Dan? Maybe this thing will let you live if you give it up."

"I'm not saying shit. Do you know what that thing does to people?" he says.

"Yeah I do. I found your friend Karen three days ago in a store room in Carmel." Her insides had been digested, and sucked out of her body bones and all. She looked like an empty wetsuit. She was one of four who'd been in on the theft, and the third found dead that way. We tracked Dan down as the fourth member by tracing the victims back to the hotel on Cannery Row where they all worked. Dan was a security guard there, and he worked security here at the old laundry part time.

“Do you think she suffered?” his muffled voice asks. I look up at the big, black thing twelve feet over our heads. A tentacle slowly reaches across the top of its hairy body front to back, and I realize it’s grooming itself like a cat.

“Yes, I’m sure she did” I say. “So why don’t you tell me where the urn is? It’s your only shot.”

“It’s in here with me” he says. Before I can think the thing lowers itself from the ceiling, and gracefully rests itself on top of the crate. The longer front tentacles begin feeling around the edge of the crate searching for the latch. Dan calls out but I can’t understand him because my heart is pounding so hard my blood is roaring in my ears. It clearly understood every word he just said, and once it confirmed the urn was inside it went to work.

When Detective Cabatu told me about this thing I only half believed him. He said it was the guardian of a forgotten race of island people. The urn these clowns stole belonged to their last King. The man they took it from was a powerful priest- practitioner of the old religion. I didn’t get all the facts. I didn’t plan on running into this thing. He told me it had a name, and he told me if I stayed out of its way it would leave me alone. He told me not to touch the urn if I found it. Once the artifact had my scent I would be hunted too.

Hunted... It dawns on me the creature and I are on the same side.

I can hear Dan screaming to God as the thing begins working the latch. The smell of cinnamon grows stronger. There is a loud *ka-chunk* as the latch pulls forward opening the door. Dan’s screams rise an octave as those tentacles find him. He is pulled from the back of the crate. His eyes wide,

and his arms and legs flail. It guides Dan to its fangs. They're articulated and probe the top of his head like I type with my two fingers. Dan is still screaming, and struggling as the thing settles on a spot just above his right ear. The fangs plunge ten of their twelve inches into his skull. It sounds like cracking Walnuts. Dan stops screaming.

His body begins to shudder. The thing's eyes shift their focus to me, and we stare at each other for a solid minute. Dan stops moving altogether, and both his eyes turn white before they melt back into his sockets just as his head collapses inward. I marvel at the graceful horror of this creature. I notice the other tentacle is probing the crate searching for the urn. My light finds it behind his green backpack. I wave to the thing and point to the urn. The tentacle undulates back and carefully pulls its prize from hiding.

Guaxeneau, that's it, that's what he called this thing. Gwah-zhen-no. I step backwards. I feel I'm witnessing justice. This creature protects and serves. The Guaxeneau's eyes shift back to me and wink. I turn around, walk out of the building and I sit in my car for a while. I'm just going to let it finish its work. Call it professional courtesy.

Marc Ferris

Above the Fog

The old man had been carrying his knapsack the entire way and it felt like he was carrying someone on his back. His arthritic left knee and both of his feet had been aching since he started. The pain from his chest had been the worst. It had followed him since he was on the hospital bed at the bottom of the mountain and it had been urging him to stop and walk back down to the hospital.

He had considered the pain's beckoning twice. The first time, his breathing hurt so much that it made him cling to the nearest pine tree. But the old man never quit, he just trudged forward after the excruciating pain subsided, muttering prayers as he walked in an effort to relieve the aching. The second time was near the top. He thought this was a signal for him to turn around. *I just need a break*, he thought. Relieving himself from the knapsack, he tried to catch his breath for perhaps a minute when he suddenly received a burning sensation in his chest that made his vision go white.

When the old man regained consciousness, he saw the tops of the swaying pine trees and the sky above them. He noticed that he had rolled down because the knapsack was above him at the base of a tree a few feet up the hill. Looking beyond the knapsack and tree, he saw that the ascent no longer sloped up into the pine trees, but flattened out at the top so he could see the light over the hill. He decided he had to go forward now; he had come too far. The arthritis from his knee made it difficult for him to get up, so he had to place his weight on his swollen right foot as he stood up, making his boot feel like it was two sizes too small. He decided that the boots were hurting his swollen feet, so he left them and continued through the pine needle slopes barefoot.

His chest still ached but it was nothing compared to the excruciating pain that knocked him unconscious, so he ignored it. When he was near the top, the sun's shine from above told him to run towards it, so he tried. He took two or three gimpy strides before his chest told him that he could not. He had to be patient.

When he reached the top and looked around, he saw that the daily fog had engulfed the entire peninsula so that he could see nothing below. All he saw was the sun to the west and the vast expansion of fog that routinely covered ocean and bay and rolled all the way down into the mouth of the valley. He stayed there, above the peninsula, and although he could not see the canneries or the town where he once lived and worked, he knew they were still there. He could no longer see the hospital where he had been treated for days without pauses in pain or useless drugs. The old man was more than content with his ascent, so he took a seat on the pine needles and rested against a tree and caught his breath.

The fog typically brought a bone-chilling wind at this time of year, but the old man was accustomed to this wind because this peninsula was his home. This time, however, there was no wind to be felt. The wind could not even be found amongst the trees above nor did the old man's wrinkled skin show signs of goose bumps. All the old man felt was the warm sunshine upon his flesh and the cool pine needles in between his toes.

Now sitting and breathing easier, he could smell the pine trees that gave a refreshing aroma, different from the plastic tubes that usually went through his nose. He decided it was an appropriate time to open the knapsack. He did, and withdrew a loaf of bread wrapped in white cloth and a jug of wine. He neatly unwrapped the cloth and gave an "Ave Maria"

before eating. Once he consumed the last of the bread and drank the last drop of wine, he felt his chest pain finally cease. His arthritis subsided and his bare feet were comfortably nestled in the pine needles. The pain had finally left him and returned to its home in the hospital rooms below. He closed his eyes and rested above the fog.

Eduardo Cuevas

A Word of Advice

I know the reason why your parents don't want you to talk to that man who lives down the street from you. They know what happens to them, to the people who walk into that man's house, and I know what happens too because I had a friend once, and she told me.

This was after the librarian disappeared, what was it, ten years ago now? From the elementary school we went to –it was the old lady who got on to us about the violence in Shell Silverstein, that one poem, "True Story", remember? My friend, she said she saw that old lady the night she went missing, saw her leaving the house of the man who lives down the street from you at three in the morning, running away, screaming. My friend was doing a batch of late laundry, she saw it all. She told me.

The papers said that when the police questioned him, the man gave the cops the run around. They'd found out he was some kind of metal worker, sold cypress trees over in Carmel on the weekends.

'So what did she want from you?' They asked him.

'Well, she wanted to buy something,' was his story.

'Yeah?' They said, 'That's interesting. Because she didn't drive, and there are no records of a cab being called to your house that night. How the hell was she going to transport a hundred and fifty pound statuette of a tree? Just sling it over her shoulder?'

'Well, obviously she didn't end up buying anything from me. I could show you the one she wanted, though,' but the police said No, that would be all, sir.

They didn't have enough evidence to search his house, and my friend, the one who saw the old lady running, never came forward. She was kinda odd that way. She was sure she could figure it out herself so she started following that man. And she wasn't the most inconspicuous person, so she'd always be, like, ten feet behind the guy wherever he was. She used to follow him into coffee shops where he'd read the paper and hardware stores where he'd buy pipe fittings and to the library every Tuesday, where he'd get another mystery. The guy was fuckin' *clockwork*, and it got to be so boring that she had about a thousand theories as to where he hid the body of the librarian, how he must be a serial killer or something because no one could really be that damn boring. She started to show up at his hangouts before him, that's how well she had him down.

And he noticed her following him. In the café, he started kicking the chair out at his table for her to sit and join him and in the hardware store he started having his conversations extra loud for her benefit. He started having one sided conversations and sneaking looks at her, like he was waiting for her answer.

One morning, when she was waiting for him on the curb outside his gate, he came out on the porch and switched out his wind chimes with new pipe fittings.

'To get some new sounds,' he explained, and they made eye contact for the first time, 'these old ones are all filled up with sound.'

And that morning she followed him into the house.

She said that inside that man's front room were a lot of little sculptures: little pipe-fitting boats bumping into each

other on the floor, and pipefitting dogs bouncing around the room, bruising her shins with their mechanical nudges of affection (she showed me the marks, that last night, in the yellow light of the streetlamps). In the kitchen, where that man was getting his coffee, there were small pipe-fitting people who were fighting over spoons on the counter.

But the weirdest thing was the walls, she said. They were pulsing. They had a hum like they were carrying something alive within them, like they were alive, and they moved with a kind of audible throb, a kind of sigh with a voice that lined it. There was heat coming from somewhere, too, and she wandered deeper into the house with her fingers trailing the walls, deeper into the sound to find it.

‘And then,’ I remember her saying, eyes as big as plates, ‘I found it.’

In the center of the house, growing out of the wall and rooted in the beige shag carpet was a giant tree, entirely brass, with the knobs and the ridges and the reaching kind of frame of a real, living tree, and steam rose from where it met and cracked house’s structure. The tree’s root system was massive and surfaced like dolphins in the holes in the carpeting, surfaced like fingers or wrists and they were hot beneath her feet, blazing through the soles of her shoes, and writhed a little when she stepped on them as she walked into the room. The tree had bright orbs shifting and turning on its branches like metal that was being shaped by a craftsman; orbs that were lit with heat and steaming whispers she couldn’t quite catch. The tree groaned at her and lowered one of its branches slightly as if it was making a “take one” gesture, and at the end of the branch was a swelling hot orb of brass fruit. She was looking at her distorted face in its

reflection, bright and uncharacteristically happy, and she reached towards it.

‘Don’t,’ the man said, ‘it’s not for you. It’s not ripe yet. You won’t be a part of the story it’ll tell you.’

But she couldn’t look away from that reflection, bright and round in the orb as it was set down into her waiting fingers, warm and shining and sighing with heat, sighing something she almost couldn’t catch but within it there was the sound of traffic, of honking horns, and she saw the Statue of Liberty stamped on her mind’s eye, heard the sounds of two people talking, of someone saying urgently “Look, I know you don’t love me and I know you wouldn’t go to the end of the world for me or anything but when I see you standing there, *it cuts my sight in half* and I wanna climb over this silence, over your fucking bones and *bring the end of the world to you.*” And then she felt someone grab her arm hard.

‘Listen to me,’ the voice said.

‘Don’t listen to that,’ the man was saying, ‘It isn’t true! It isn’t finished! Whatever you’re hearing probably isn’t even for you!’

But she said that it didn’t matter. She’d heard it and that was enough.

She told me that after seeing that fruit everything was simple; that she knew what to do knew what to do with her life.

‘I just have to walk there,’ she told me, ‘To that conversation. I know where I fit now, where I’m supposed to be.’

It was the last time I ever saw her and I was sad-assed sight: one in the morning and I was trying to multitask, trying to stay awake and keep the door open and my pants up at the same time. I was slightly failing but I looked at her, standing there in the cold, eyes big and luminous with Crazy. She was wearing tights and a short skirt and those stupid fuckin' slippers with the rhinestones on 'em and she was telling me that she was going to *walk* across the country, and walk across the country in *those*. It was bumfuck cold everywhere that year. And I knew. I knew I'd never see her again, that this was it for her.

'I just have to walk to where we are,' she was telling me.

And all I could do was joke, 'What's this 'we' stuff, darlin'?'

She laughed, she said, 'Who said anything about *you*?'

And then that was it and she was gone and I never heard from her again.

Here's the thing: every winter that guy who lives down the street from you harvests what that tree allows to drop and he delivers an orb to someone in town, leaves it steaming whispers on a pile of newspapers on someone's front step. And what that hunk of brass really is, is a piece of someone's story, the key, the next move. It's Fate's cliff notes, or at least a couple of pages of them. And when that happens, you gotta leave that thing *alone*. You have to wait until the orb loses heat, you gotta wrap it up in used bed sheets, and you gotta bury that thing someplace and *forget where*. That's the only way. That's what I did. I got enough to deal with as it is; the only things I want to worry about is rent and drinking my

raise down with Toby down on Fremont. Let my life take care of itself, you know? I got stuff I'd mind losing and my mind's one of 'em. And if that goes for you, you should do the same when it comes.

And it will come for you, like it came for your parents.

How do you think I knew what to do? It was your mom that told me how to dispose of that brass fruit, and even then, I'm not sure she didn't hear a few things it said. How else do you explain the luck of your sister's name?

And your father, well he heard everything that orb had to say. That's why you can't argue with him about volleyball. But you don't need that one explained. Shit happens.

So don't talk to that man who lives down the street from you. Him and his business will find you anyway, when it's time. Going early would just be a mistake, would just hurt the rest of us. I mean, do we really need more of these stories to tell?

Sarah Goodman

The Damnit Man

Barking and howling dogs announce his return. I lay in bed listening as the barking grows louder. He's coming down my street this time. It's not the first time since moving out that here he's passed my mobile home, but tonight he seems to be taking his time. The dogs on the other side of my trailer begin barking signaling he's passed on by. The chorus of Pit Bulls and Chihuahuas fades as he continues down Watson Lane.

Every time he comes someone dies.

I once thought he was the Angel of Death because his first few visits resulted in heart attacks, and a toddler being poisoned by antifreeze. However just as often a mobile home would catch fire, a husband would shoot his wife then shoot himself, or some poor bastard would be carved up by an unknown assailant.

I've never had a good look at him. I caught a quick glimpse one night of a tall, thin man wearing a long riding cloak and a black Quaker's hat. Maybe it was all my imagination. I was drunk, so scared I could only lean my head out of my bathroom door, which is well away from the front picture window of my single-wide.

Nobody talks about him. Well, nobody who speaks English. I've caught hushed conversations in the trailer park's laundry room from two El Salvadorian women. My Spanish sucks on a good day so all I could pick up were single words.

They think he's a devil. Not *the* Devil but just a wandering night devil.

I call him the Damnit Man.

When I was very little the Damnit Man was the monster that lived inside the walls of the shotgun-style duplex we lived in back in Kansas. When I was bad the monster would sneak out of the wall, into my father's body, and he would beat me. Mom said it was the booze that got inside my father, but I knew it was the Damnit Man. I drink today and I'm not violent. I just sit in my living room watching episodes of *The Virginian* on DVD.

The barking is growing louder again. He's coming back.

I reach for the bottle of Jim Beam on my nightstand to pour another glass, but I take a huge swig from the bottle instead. I'm tired of believing in the Boogey Man, the Damnit Man, or the monster my A.A. sponsor says is living inside each bottle I drink. I get off my bed, pull on my jeans, and jam my feet into my cowboy boots.

I walk to the door. I stop as my hand touches the knob. The dogs four trailers down begin howling, and crying as if they're in pain. Part of me is yelling *RUN!* I tell myself it's the Jim Beam talking and Jim has always been a pussy anyway.

I step outside

He is standing at the end of my short gravel walkway next to the fiberglass lawn jockey.

I step off my deck and stand facing him. We're about four feet from each other but I can't see any detail on him. I see his shape and outline with the hat and cloak. The blackness of him seems to swirl and twitch like a garbage bag in the wind. The Damnit Man raises his right arm straight forward, and a long bony finger points at me.

I piss myself.

His head leans backward as he begins to laugh. The sound rumbles through the entire park and all the dogs fall silent. His head rolls from one side to the other. He laughs for what seems like a million years. In his laughter I hear my father laugh when I told him I wanted to go to college. I hear my mother laugh as I told her I was going to ask the prettiest girl in town to the Senior Prom. I hear my boss laugh when I asked for a raise, and I hear my ex-girlfriend laughing the day I asked her to marry me.

He pulls his arm back into the darkness of his cloak as he shakes his head. He turns and disappears down Watson Lane. I watch him go. I am instantly gripped with inconsolable grief. I'm not even worth enough to kill. He just laughed at me. I go back inside with his laughter echoing in my head.

I slink to my dresser and pull out my .357.

The laughter grows louder. Stepping into my bathroom I turn on the light. I gaze at my reflection. The laughter is now so loud it hurt my gums. I place the muzzle inside my mouth. The laughing causes the handle to vibrate as I press the gun against the roof of my mouth, and the taste of cordite and steel trickle down my throat.

I realize the laughing won't stop until I pull the trigger. I smile around the muzzle.

Marc Ferris

Suburbia

The shadows from the towering palm trees and the dying sunlight made the houses and front yards of Rio Court look like they had a layer of orange camouflage over them. Neighbors' cars were now parked in front of their identical looking houses; they were off of work from their city jobs. The setting sun was slowly sinking and we knew that once it sank below the cul-de-sac houses and got dark it was time to go inside and tell our parents what had happened. Time was running out.

We were all huddled around Kevin Kim's basketball hoop trying to devise a new way to search for him. It had been two hours since we started our game and Timothy was still hiding. He had clearly won, and now after calling out for him and telling him the game was over, he still had not come out. Timothy was the one who told the rules before we started. "You can't leave Rio Court and you can't hide in your house," he said, "And you can't run once you get caught." He was somewhere in the neighborhood but his hiding spot was so good that no one had been able to find him long after Kevin caught the rest of us. Finally, Kyle, the oldest and tallest kid in the neighborhood, broke the silence.

"We checked his house, right?"

Kyle had a look on his face like it was his duty to try to find Timothy. Ever since we were little, Kyle had been the one who always tried to look after us because he was an only child. He was twelve and was four years older than Timothy so he had always looked after him like a little brother that he never had.

“Yeah, I checked when I was it and I checked an hour ago when we all searched,” Kevin Kim replied.

“Ok. Christina, you check again because Mrs. Adams likes you the best and she wouldn’t get suspicious.”

“Aw, why do I have to check? Why can’t I go with you guys?” Christina always liked being with us, but it was true that Mrs. Adams liked Christina the best. Besides, she had not seen her so she wouldn’t think her son would be missing that long; she had a tendency of overreacting with everything that concerned Timothy.

“Christina, you check his house. Kevin, you look through the houses at the start of the street. Frankie, you look through the houses at the end of the cul-de-sac. I’ll look through the middle houses.”

I had no predispositions of searching the cul-de-sac houses because one of them was mine, but if my mom caught me she would make me go inside.

“Can someone check my house? I don’t want my mom to send me inside.”

“Fine. Christina, you check Frankie’s house too.”

“Is there anything else? Do you want me to get your dry-cleaning too?” Christina always had sass. I think that’s why Mrs. Adams liked her: they both had sass.

“Very funny. Let’s just find Timothy then call it a night.”

As I walked to the end of the cul-de-sac, the sun had sunk below all of the houses in the circle and had made the houses look like facades on a stage with backlights. *He’s got to be*

around here somewhere, I thought to myself. Christina was walking with me and I could tell she was as nervous as I was because I could see the sweat on her neck glistening against the streetlight. When we got to the center of the cul-de-sac we split off; she went to my house on the right side of the circle and I went to the Leipzig's on the left side.

“See you in a bit.”

“See you too.”

In the back of my mind I wished I had said, “See Timothy in a bit” because that was whom we were actually trying to see.

I got to the Leipzig's house first and opened the side gate. I tried to rush looking around their backyard because my mom didn't like me around their house because my older brother saw Mr. Leipzig bring a lady into his house that wasn't Mrs. Leipzig. Ever since then, my mom had wanted to keep a distance from their house because our neighborhood put an emphasis on keeping people's private matters to themselves. It was funny too, because telling people the truth was taboo and gossiping was socially acceptable in Rio Estates.

He wasn't in any of the bushes or behind their trashcans, so I jumped the fence and went into the Capistrano's. I figured he would not be here though because of their barking Chihuahua, Carlito. When I landed on their flowers, Carlito immediately came running to my ankles and started barking and trying to bit my shoes. I couldn't really make out where he was because it was dusk so I just kicked in front of me. My kick landed and I felt his little stomach move inward and then he bounced off my foot. He let out a big yelp and ran away. I knew this would make someone go outside so I started

running across the yard as fast as I could before someone would come out. When I got on the top of the fence, I saw the sliding glass door open and Mr. Capistrano's face appeared from the house. He looked across the yard, trying to find me, and yelled out into his yard, "I told you kids that you can't play in my yard! Get out of here before I call your parents!" Once he made his final scan across his yard and shut the sliding glass door I let out a brief laugh and went into the next yard.

There were two more houses before I got to my yard and I knew that once I hopped the fence into my yard we would probably have to tell Mrs. Adams that Timothy was missing. I was the last one to have seen him. It was two hours ago when I was hiding in my usual hiding spot at the Kim's, behind the hedges next to their palm tree. He came sprinting into the yard and sat next to me. I hated when people tried to hide with me, especially Timothy because he would constantly talk and get me caught. The only person I could stand was Christina because she knew when to shut up. "Get out of here Timothy, you're going to get us both caught!" He looked at me, stuck his tongue out, and ran out of the backyard. Looking back on it, I wished he had ignored what I said and stayed beneath the hedges and palm tree; it would have made everything easier. Now, we had to search for an eight year-old that could be anywhere in the neighborhood. Even though we had to check only our little cul-de-sac, the limits were endless for an eight year-old boy who could just about fit anywhere. I was beginning to doubt that I would be able to find him in these next two houses, but it would most likely be where he ran because he wouldn't run up the street where Kevin was counting; he would run down to this circle and hide around here.

I could hear the faint voices of my mom and Christina talking at my house as I descended the fence. I knew she wouldn't tell my mom what happened yet: she would make an excuse about how she was trying to get my baseball glove or something; but she would still stay to chat with my mom and waste time. I got kind of angry because she still had to check Timothy's house now and it was almost completely dark. *We're running out of time.*

I landed into the Johnson's backyard. The Johnson's were the couple with the baby. They had a one year-old girl that I saw a couple of weeks ago at the neighborhood Fourth of July party. No one really got to talk to them, they were kind of recluse at the party and just kept staring at the baby to make sure it was okay. They were new to the neighborhood. They probably left the city as soon as they found out that Mrs. Johnson was pregnant.

Their backyard was the nicest backyard in the neighborhood. In the middle of the evergreen grass was a swing set and on one side of the patio was a little kid's playground. The backyard was set for the next five years of their kid's life. They even had a barbeque on the other side of the patio that was immaculate and made of brick. Mr. Johnson must have built it in because none of the standard Rio Estates homes had a brick barbeque. Around the enclosures of the Johnson's backyard were perfectly trimmed hedges that seemed like perfect places to hide. At the far end of their backyard were three or four orange trees that were full of fruit. By this time, it was completely dark and seeing had become difficult so I decided to try to whisper out his name while looking. I knew that if I was too loud they would yell at me for being noisy around the baby and then they would

probably tell my mom. That's how the new parents were around here.

“Timothy! Timothy, come out! Where are you?”

As usual, I heard no answer. I started looking around the hedges because they were just the perfect thickness and height for a kid to hide and lie around or take a nap. When I got to the end of the hedge near an orange tree I found a skinned orange. Next to the pieces of skin, I found Timothy's toy water gun that he always carried. He would scream and cry when his mom tried to take it off him. When he spent the night two weeks ago, he slept with the water gun underneath his pillow like the action heroes in the movies. I could feel the sweat start to collect on my brow and my palms got sweaty: I knew this was a good sign that he was around here. I started whispering out for him even more and there was still no response. “Timothy, I know you're here! Come out!” After a few minutes of searching around the backyard, I decided that he might have run off to another house or back onto the street. It was as I started to leave that I decided to look through the sliding glass door, and I finally found where Timothy had been hiding.

I knew what I saw was not normal so I quietly made my way out of the Johnson's backyard and out onto the street. When I opened the side fence and got out of the backyard and onto their driveway, I saw everyone gathered around my house and were standing there with my parents. “Francisco, where have you been?” my mom asked me when I walked to my house. I had to tell her because I knew eight year-olds weren't supposed to do that, especially not with adults, so I told her what I saw. I told her, and all of my friends heard too. I figured it was a neighborhood concern, so I spoke out to everybody. My mom kind of gasped when I finished and tried

to hold her tears but they still came out. My dad looked down at me and said that everything was going to be all right. My friends kind of held their heads down and were quiet. It was like someone had died.

My dad was always calm in any situation. He was good with pressure and he always knew what to do. Finally, after a long pause, he told my friends and me to go to the Adams's and tell them to come over to our house immediately. He said I couldn't tell them what I saw because it wouldn't be right, but to just tell them that it was an emergency and that it was urgent.

We did what he said. I remember the run there being kind of a strange nighttime sprint where nothing seemed real. The lights, the fronts of the houses, and the palm trees all seemed like a painted picture that didn't really exist and we were just running towards a painting. When we got to the Adams's, Christina told them what my dad told me to say because I couldn't talk. They told us they were going to get their coats and go over but that we could run back to my house. Again, the run was weird. It felt like when I had first gone over to the circle, except that nothing seemed real and the camouflage of the sun and palm tree shadows was now gone and it was replaced by an eerie darkness marked by the occasional street light. When we got to my garage my mom met us and told us there was pizza and drinks and otter pops in the kitchen and we were free to help ourselves. The only condition was that we must stay in the house for the rest of the night. We all agreed, partly because this was a weird situation, but mostly because we had been looking for two hours and we were all starving from the search.

We stayed in my house the whole night. We all ate at least 5 pieces of pizza and none of us had said a word the entire

time. We ate all of the otter pops for dessert. After we finished eating, all of us fell asleep on my couch watching Drake and Josh and Christina had put her head on my shoulder. The last thing I remember was hearing her sobs.

When I woke up, none of my friends were there. I looked around the room and found that my parents were next to me, asleep. I woke them up and they hugged me and kissed me and my mom cried for a little while. She was always emotional. After, they gave me a long speech about how we couldn't play hide and go seek anywhere in the neighborhood anymore. They told me that Timothy was okay and he needed some time with his parents. After that, we went upstairs and I slept in their bed. That was the last time I ever slept in their bed.

None of my friends ever talked about what I told them again. Neither did I. Kevin later told me that Mr. Johnson was arrested. We only saw Timothy a couple of times after that before his family moved away. He wasn't the same kid that tried to hide with me at my hiding spot. The last couple of times we saw him, he was always mellow and quiet. I saw Mrs. Johnson and the baby a few days after, after Mrs. Johnson had come home from her mom's house in the Midwest. Mrs. Johnson came to our house and apologized to us. I don't really think her apology was necessary because she wasn't here and it wasn't her fault, but she did anyways. Christina, Kevin, and Kyle later told me that she apologized to all of their families too. But what was weird was that when they moved away, the baby waved to us from their station wagon when we were sitting in front of my house. That was the first and last time we ever came in contact with the baby.

Rio Estates was never the same after that. We no longer played out on the streets as much, and when the sun started

to set we immediately went inside. We never played hide and go seek again. It wasn't the same place that we loved as little kids. There were never welcoming parties or weekly newsletters about how the neighborhood was doing after that. It was different. It was like our suburban bubble had been popped and we were now exposed to the real world.

Eduardo Cuevas

Finding Home

My gray hair seemed white reflected in the window of the #4 bus to the valley. The late hour combined with the blackout meant all I saw, save my reflection, was black through the window. I rang the bell as we neared my stop; the bus slowed, and stopped with a lurch.

“This place will be under water in a few hours, man. Are you sure you want to get off here?” the driver said. He’d actually craned his head around instead of looking at me through the long rear-view mirror.

“I’ll be fine, brother. I have to do something. I can walk out if I have to. You be safe,” I said. The driver shrugged, and I stepped off the bus. My sigh was masked by the airbrakes of the bus releasing. I waited as the bus disappeared down River Road. I looked up and down the street. Nothing moved, the storm drains had vanished beneath the growing lakes made by water backing up from the river. I turned to face the house whose front lawn served as a bus stop for the county transit system.

Gramma’s house sat twenty-five feet back from the road behind a Crab-Grass lawn. Most of the flowers she had planted long ago are now gone. The curtains in my old bedroom window, part-way open, were a lazy cat’s eye watching me cross the lawn. I was at the backyard gate on the side of the house quickly, the old hanging hook had been replaced with a spring-locking number which was easier to open than the old one, and in an instant I stood in Gramma’s old backyard. My old back yard.

The people who’d bought the house had re-landscaped the entire yard. The plum and apricot trees were gone, but the huge oak tree – my oak tree – still held court in the far corner of the yard. The new owners had “Yuppified” the yard with a number of clichéd, big-box-garden center features like the redwood deck, and a small Japanese rock garden in the old

flowerbed under the kitchen window. Children were not welcome here. Not happy, healthy children anyway, but I doubted there were any children in this house now. I walked slowly to the rear garage door; not out of fear, but I could feel the past begin to weigh down my ankles. So many games played here, four dogs loved here, and so many adventures here. I knew this door wouldn't be locked, some things never change, and it opened quietly.

The rain began to fall hard against the garage roof. The dim light coming through the window of the door let me see enough. My grandpa's cabinets which lined to rear wall were still there, a testament to his craftsmanship. They were painted an unimaginative white. The BMW one would normally find here was currently in the parking lot of the motel I work for. I recognized the address while the owners of this house checked in at the front desk. They were a couple of professional types in their mid-forties. They wore expensive raincoats, they weren't comfortable making eye-contact with a lowly front-desk clerk, and they left the lobby without uttering more than ten words.

The local TV news updated the flood warnings all through my shift. When I left work at 11:00p.m I went straight to the bus stop. I knew my old house would be empty for the night, the flood waters would reach it before sun up, so this was the perfect opportunity to see my childhood home one last time. I wasn't planning on stealing anything, and the truth was there was no plan. I felt there was something which required my returning here, but I just didn't know what it was.

I knew if the garage door was unlocked the kitchen door from the garage would be unlocked too. We just never locked doors in this neighborhood. The door opened allowing me inside. The cheesy 1970s-era carpet had been replaced by a decorative tile floor. The whole kitchen was new. This was Gramma's domain. Everything had to be perfect in here so we learned at an early age to put everything back exactly where

we'd found it. I hated this room because of her. I was in my twenties before I felt comfortable in any kitchen.

The living room was decorated in polite comfort. The homey comfort I had grown up with by way of a long couch, matching Lay-Z-Boys, and mom's lonely blue chair now replaced by magazine-inspired unoriginal furniture. They'd left the curtains in front of the sliding glass doors open. I'd broken one of them with an orange, wooden block I'd thrown at my little brother when I was four. Gramma was so mad. It was the first time I was told she was sorry she'd let mom and us move in here. It was the first time she pointed out my existence was a burden.

I turned and was surprised to see Gramma's mirror still on the wall over the fire place. They had kept it. That thing was sixty years old now. I eased forward to see my reflection. Maybe it was a trick of the light, maybe I was just tired, but for a good thirty seconds the face staring back at me was twenty-two years younger. The guy in the mirror was me on the last evening before we moved out. The furniture was gone, all of the stuff we wanted to keep was in storage, and the house was void of everything except for memories. I had stood alone in this living room with my reflection trying to sort out my feelings. I was sad to leave this house. Mom couldn't afford the taxes after Gramma died. We'd got a good price for the home selling it to an engineer from Sacramento with a comb-over.

The guy in the mirror faded to me again. I waved to myself and wandered to the front of the house. I went to mom's old room; it was a home-office now. The dolls and teddy bears of her childhood long gone; replaced by a long black steel file cabinet under the window, a tall file cabinet, and a desk with matching chair. On the wall above the desk I could make out diplomas on the wall from a law school. It figured, the room's decor screamed *lawyer*. I stepped across the hall to the master bedroom. It was dominated by an elevated California-King sized bed. Somehow the dark brown bedspread was more welcoming than the paisley maroon one on Gramma and

Grandpa's bed. I never spent more than a few seconds in this room as a child. It was off limits.

I backed from the master bedroom and walked into the room next to it – my old room. It too was now a home office belonging to a lawyer. The comfortable beat-up couch against the wall opposite the desk, and the 26 inch flat-screen TV on the wall suggested this room belonged to the husband even before I saw his picture on the wall. The photograph was a few years old showing him on the back of a cabin cruiser holding a huge fish, and he had a huge smile on his face. His wife wasn't in the picture, nor was she in any of the other three pictures hanging on the wall above the desk. I started to feel sorry for these people. I saw them sitting alone in their separate offices, and I wondered how often the husband fell asleep on the couch. This room was my oasis from Gramma, and maybe it was still an oasis for the current owner.

For some reason even before I'd hung all those KISS posters in my thirteenth year Gramma rarely came into this room. I think it represented defeat for her. Her wayward daughter married a sad-sack loser who stuck her with two young boys and a third one on the way in 1968. There was nowhere else to go so we ended up here. Gramma's anger grew each year, but she couldn't bring herself to throw us out. As a man I have sometimes wondered why, but I think somehow she knew she was to blame. She'd driven mom out of the house before she was ready, before she was mature enough, and so our presence was her punishment. Gramma wasn't always a monster, and I realized much later she did try to make the best of things. The anger inside her usually won out.

The sound of an approaching diesel engine broke spell. I pulled aside the curtain to see a yellow fire engine driving down the center of the street with its lights flashing looking more like a Coast Guard cutter on the bay. The water had risen quickly but was below the truck's running boards. I knew that would change soon. I let the curtain close and went

back out into the hallway. I stood there in the dark thinking. In an hour the house would be under water, and all the tacky lawyer furniture along with the unimaginative landscaping would be ruined. While I did find a little justice in this fact I was strangely comfortable with the impending consumption of my childhood home by the river.

There it was.

This was never my home, not really, and standing there as the water surrounded the house it was perfectly clear. This was never *my* house. It was Gramma's house and always had been. Maybe I had belonged here at one time, but it was never meant to be permanent. After Gramma died I thought I would finally feel at home here, but there was always a distance like I was trapped in orbit above a planet which couldn't sustain me wishing things would change. This was Gramma's house, I didn't belong here then, and I don't belong here now. I inhale my first breath as a liberated man. The cool air fills my lungs, the back of my head tingles, and I feel a new strength inflate inside my body. I moved to the front door, opened it, and stepped out onto the lone step. The water waited to greet me. I smiled as I reflexively checked the doorknob making sure it would lock behind me. It sounded the same as all the times I'd closed it, and I acknowledged this as the house telling me goodbye.

The cold water filled my shoes as I waded down the driveway and into the street. I headed uphill towards town. I walked a mile or so before the water gave way to slick pavement. I thought about a lot of things as I went up the hill, not one of them was the past. By the time I'd arrived at the bus stop I considered the flood water a baptism, I'd washed away the anger of Gramma and my anger for her. I'd also sacrificed my sneakers on the altar of the past. The bus pulled up a short while later; the same driver who'd dropped me off greeted me with a wary eye.

“Was it worth it, friend?” he asked. I smiled and pointed to my shoes.

“I’m going to need a new pair. I think these are goners,” I said with a chuckle.

“Damn shame about your neighborhood. The river’s gonna wreck all of those houses”

“Yeah, it will, but they’ll rebuild. It’s a nice place to live, besides it’s the *River’s* neighborhood in the end anyway,” I said as I shrugged and walked to the rear of the bus with my shoes squishing. I sat down on the side-facing seats and saw my reflection in the window. For most of the ride home I stared at myself, and it wasn’t until a few blocks away from my stop I realized I was looking at a stranger. He was looking back at me with a look asking *what are you going to do with the rest of your life?* I had no idea, but I knew I’d be okay. The bus came to my stop, and I stepped out facing the rising sun made red by the parting rainclouds.

Marc Ferris

Bedtime Resolutions

It is the mind that binds us,
that guardian of worries
keeper of our fears
that at times
allows them to be nurtured
to destroy us from within.

But the heart
the heart is ever hopeful
in beating out its foe
and seeks at the edge
of our waking moments
to lay to waste
the monsters in its path

not with pitchforks and torches
or shield and sword
but with a seed
planted gently
in a softened mind
watered generously
with semiconscious bravery

the kind of scarce bravery
that normally eludes us
in more sober times

now however
we declare
in the boldness of half dreaming
the words that give us comfort
if for nothing but the night

“tomorrow I will...”

with that the shoot appears
stretching out into the cool darkness
desperately preparing
for when tomorrow comes.

Will it burn in the light of day
or be watered once again?

Agustin Garcia

clark gable as a boy

boys

boys will eat pizza
with chicken nuggets on top
they'll take a picture and send
it to their friends,
who are boys too
who will be jealous

boys will charm girls
with their surfer stride
and worn-in thrift-store clothes
and goofy lopsided smiles
the way they awkwardly fumble
for your hand with their sweaty
boy hands and dirty
boy fingernails

boys will stand in
front of you like a question
mark when you cry
and maybe they won't know
to hold you like the way
Clark Gable does in the
movies

boys will stay up until
3 in the morning
to play a videogame they've
owned for 2 years, and
in the morning, they'll
drink a Monster
for breakfast

for lunch,
they smoke pot
and forget to text.

boys will laugh at
anything and
nothing for hours
they'll kiss your shoulders
with their pizza lips
and mess with your hair
with their greasy fingers
and eat ice cream with
you all night long, without
you having to ask

boys come with their
backwards baseball caps
on rugged skateboards
they will ride their roadbikes
to your house in the middle of
the night and leave handpicked flowers
they took from your neighbor's lawn
they will grab you with their
gray dirt-caked fingernails
all while you are praying for
Clark Gable
on a white horse

these boys
they will love you
the way they love pizza
and midnight releases
and tent sex
it is that boy love
not that man love
that will sometimes
stand in front of you
like a question mark
while you cry

and what charmed you
once, about these boys
and their boy quirks

and their boy hands
and their tangled boy hair
become so hard to
remember.

but remember,
Clark Gable was a
boy once,
too.

Angeli Cabal

Love Sighs

Lunar rays come peeking through,
While open blinds show midnight blue.
And I'm awake thinking of you.
What do you think of me?

It bothers me when late at night
I'm driven to frenzy by starlight.
Wondering if my choices were right
How can I find a way?

But shadows run from the solar sphere
And away, away goes all my fear
So I can enjoy you while you're here
Are you my guiding light?

So when the shadows lurk beyond
And an hour of doubt has swiftly dawned
I can find comfort in our bond
And only...time will tell.

Jena Barrera

A Stifled Argument with My Lover

Pop!
Pop! Pop! Pop!
My synapses jump like
Microwave popcorn
Sometimes I get ahead
Full of fluffy thoughts
Other times I get burned out
Dry kernels and nasty
overcooked thoughts
lingering in the air for days
why is it there's a limit on the bag
too broad for this broad
three to five minutes between
perfection and disaster
like the strokes of a lover
buttery smooth and hot
or so far off base you cringe
mere increments make the difference
between touching
on a thought that makes you happy
and over thinking
over heating
waiting to clear the air
and try again because
timing
is everything.

Liberty Rose Elgart-Fail

Streetlights

Don't feel so silent with your radioactive eyes,
bleeding though to brighter somedays.
You can list our futures with peach stains and lullabies
but he won't notice your perfection
in sliding unseen and tagging along
with locomotion and skinny legs and all.
He won't notice your teenage glances that worked wonders
fifteen years ago,
sly as silk walking past and past the boys
with the indoor sunglasses
and jeans cuffed just right.
He will notice your wit,
and the things your mother explained,
early on,
that a good boy should notice.
He won't notice the curve of your hips and
the tattoo gliding over your shoulders,
not nearly pointed enough.
The arch of your back from cold hands
or a simple disposition.
He will notice it in her.
But not in you.

Valerie Guardiola

Seagull

The Universe, a speck of dust
glides through eons
in the morning sun
my eyes follow it
across the room
through time and space
and then at once
it's lost to me
somewhere on the blankness
of the page

gone are all the stars
and all the planets
the earth and all of history
every language
every word
lost to white oblivion

the universe
a minuscule
white hare
sits in the whole
of the Arctic
quietly mocking
my ineptitude

I turn to the window
stare out into sky
past all the stars
and all the galaxies
I sense the blankness
the great white

suffocating expanse of it...

Until I'm startled
by the guttural convulsions
of a seagull announcing itself
to all existence

It glances at me sideways
almost smiling
I nod my head
in understanding
return to my desk
and put pen to paper.

Agustin Garcia

Earthrise

... A little while,
 a moment of rest upon the wind,
 and another woman shall bear me.

The Prophet ~ Khalil Gibran

Drifting

through the formless void, darkness
all around.

... there is a shimmer of sound
like the siren's song
reaching through space and time.

And in an instant
in an ocean of seeing,
we agree to meet, on those distant
heaving shores.

And I am falling now,
falling through the font
swimming into Being,
into the dialectic,
the mythical, exquisite life
of Earth

Niklas Spitz

Cleopatra and All Her Friends

My head holds stories of everyone I've ever known.

Of a night through dark terrain, hoping you would hold my hand, listening to you explain all the ways she makes you feel, and driving home with a dulling sense of specialness and the keenest sense of a future.

Of Sunday mornings, knees pressed against my chest, gossiping about the night before while chomping on granola and almond milk with Nickelodeon in the background.

Of days driving down the coast, windows down and a daisy in my hair. Preparing ourselves for a night of huddled warmth while we listen to the sounds of our childhood amongst towering, grandfather redwoods.

Of nights in strange neighborhoods and hands tucked into pockets, walking side by side, a commentator on the selfless and unknown, on ringlets and peacock feathers, on floating hearts.

Of moments shared which I've never told a soul, which I hold closer than anything, which my heart hangs heavy from.

And one day I'll find you. In the morning breeze, seated to my left at a coffee shop, with your feet propped up on the table. I won't mind it, you won't remember.

And one day I'll find you. Though I'm not sure I'll care.

And one day I'll find you. Kneeling across from me on a bathroom floor, with tears running down my face from another broken heart gifted by another broken boy.

And one day I'll find you. Watching as you spill your essence onto a crowd of innocent by-standers, either by accident or otherwise. I'll see you and smile and you'll smile back.

And one day I'll find you. And my stories won't seem like I made them up.

Valerie Guardiola

Forest

Atlanta given to *feeling*, and Olympus given to *being*, and I
given to *thinking*
go for a forage in the forest, and we are drawn to a spot, and I
stand there...

Here,

deep in her fragrant embrace, and ponder,
and the cat chases and passes the fleet dog with a sideways
glance, a swift kick and twist (by virtue of a unique internal
feline particle accelerator) shoots up to the top of a young
redwood to survey the scene, pauses for a moment, turns
unreasonably and nonchalantly climbs down head first, little
cat, defying sense and gravity, pounces the last few meters to
the moist fragrant forest floor, and I stand in this

Shaft of Light,

here, atop a divine mossy pedestal, among my faithful friends,
among towering forest people, and gazing deep down into the
verdant canyon and drifting up through lofty spaces of light
and hyper-spatial insect flyways and ferny foliage and distant
woodpecker echoes and the vibrant stillness and

Breathe.

And as aspiring quiet mind judges semantic mind for
persistent interruption, the forest communicates directly to
my knowing and says, you're higher self, and your ego are in
this together ~ we all are, none of us separate. Feel, breathe,
know.

And there is an ache in my heart and

I feel a little bit more of the veil of separation

Dissolve.

Niklas Spitz

American History

Papa says,
Don't dye your hair like
the white girls in those
crazy fashion magazines;
it is so beautiful, he says,
so pure, so black
black like a witch's cauldron
black like freshly-set gravel
and inner-city playground asphalt
black like that time your brother
told you to lick that tire
for a dollar you never got
black like the funeral dress
Mama got me; loose and ugly
and too hot for an August afternoon
black like the sound of her sobs
that heaved from deep inside;
like her soul drowning, slowly.
black like scorched earth
and buried American history
black like comic book vigilantes
black like underpants
I was not allowed to buy
black like no empty space
or coffee with no cream
to make it sweet.

I wonder if Papa knows
for hair so black, you must first
bleach it for hours, until your
scalp burns like hellfire on a Friday
night, that black is so complete;

for it to turn another color besides
itself, it must first be purged; it
must first be white.

like American history,
“Once you dye it,” Papa says,
it will never be
like it was once
before.”

Then Mama says Papa doesn’t
know anything about beauty;
but me, I think he knows
more than he thinks he does.

Angeli Cabal

The Temple

Inside this temple are mountains and rivers
there are forests of oak, mountain lions and moss

Seismic shifts and lightning bolts are inside
innervating every silent thought

All the dancing impulses of nature are here
laughter, grief, hunger swirling
in the winds and time

There is ecstatic music, echoing through these chambers
and starlight - all the infinite stars
Ruminations of the cosmos are within
this poet
says
inside this body,
is the one I love

Niklas Spitz

Towt Street

Airplanes spill from my memories,
clear, crystalline, empty from my body,
apart from my mind.
Nothing stands to fasten, or gain,
in placement for the little dipper
staring at me from space,
a heart staring at me from two feet away.
Justifications unnecessary
as glances are exchanged, finally,
for final moments unknown.
Words fall futile night after night
and holes creep, deepening into the bloodstreams.
Pumping, down to unrequited burrows --
hidden from sunlight and the elements.
Fading and weathering us down to our marrow,
shallow as our knuckles ground dense next to the fire.
Heated, smoldering,
singeing our bangs and doubts.
Dying fragile into cool winter nights,
hoping to become nothing as thick medicine flows
through throats once used to scream with terror
and moan with passion.
Silenced most recent. Hurt, butchered.

Valerie Guardiola

A Time for Everything

I believe in a sight I cannot see.
I run on a heart that does not beat.

I've seen movement roar louder than an ocean.
I've seen movement when time itself was frozen.

I've held a hand in which I cannot physically hold.
I have a plan in which I've physically been told.

I believe in a time that has no given hour.
I know where to find serenity when all around is sour.

I've been given the ability to cast out any wrong.
I have a God, that has been there all along.

I have a key, to a lock that has been lost.
I have faith, given without a cost.

I have a hope I've never had before.
I stand tall, when the rest are on the floor.

I've won a battle that hasn't yet ended.
I serve a God that isn't commended.

I have all of which, has been given to me.
I believe in a sight I cannot see.

Natalie Galvan

poem for young girls looking for love

don't wait to be saved. don't
wait at all. save yourself.
that way you can kiss him
because you want to, not
because you're a reward
he's earned.

Angeli Cabal

Zora

I find you freeing
in your modern and lagging
techniques and ethics.
And yet
you are the most
conflicting matter I have encountered.
For you are not what I thought.
For you are not English,
and your tongue does not swirl around
hyperbole
and
alliteration.

Though you have old white men
and women,
yours are less likely to drink
twenty seven consecutive whiskies
or
stick rocks in their pockets
and whisper "Dearest Ophelia" as they float
down
down
down
the river.
For you are not Poetry,
or Literature,
or Prose,
or, god forbid,
"Catcher in the Rye".

But you bleed, oh yes,
you bleed and blend together.

Because in you
lies what lies in them.

Because in you
lies junkies left over from a Beat genocide,
lies a "To Let" sign in a half foreclosed home window,
lies burning books,
lies a ubiquitous river winding
down
down
down
twisted paths.

Zora may have known what she was doing,
bleeding and blending the two together
and laughing a sorrowful laugh
while riding the railways
down
down
down
to Mississippi.

Zora may have known,
but I sure as hell don't.

Valerie Guardiola

Rain Shadow

Prologue: Ashes

It had begun to rain once again, the third time since I had arrived at the peak of this mountain, and the sheer amount of water created rivulets that merged, crossed, and collided as they rushed down the slope. Never before had I seen such a beautiful sight. The eye of Soll had long since closed, leaving only the faintest traces of light upon the gathered clouds, just enough for me to view my surroundings; mountains as far as I could see, stretching forever into the gathering darkness. The home of my tribe had been bordered by such mountains to the north and south, and though they were far beyond our reach I had always been able to see their reddish-brown, lifeless dry color. But *these* mountains were far different. Lush green plants covered the ground and tall, beautiful trees stood firmly rooted in the damp soil. Never before had I seen a forest such as this. Never before had my eyes been so overwhelmed with green—the color still so vivid even amidst the night’s soft embrace. For a moment it seemed too beautiful for me to behold, and so I looked skyward.

Overhead, the thunder spirit Halluum chased relentlessly after his brother Falluum, the spirit of lightning, who was far too swift for his loud mouthed little brother. It had been long since I had seen Falluum’s flash—an eternity since I had heard the deep bellows of Halluum. I watched their game of tag, losing all semblance of time as the rain fell in curtains upon my parched skin. And I drank it in gratefully. The cool water washed over me as I wept with silent joy—my own tears mixing with the tears of the spirit Amai, who had finally heard my cries.

I closed my eyes and savored the cold touch of Amai's rain as a brilliant light filled the area once again. But this light did not fade as Falluum's did...and I knew what it signified...

Immediately I shut my eyes tight, clasp my hands over them in an attempt to block out the intrusive light. My face contorted with a twisted rage; the anger and overwhelming sense of frustration welling up within me. Water that had soaked my skin just seconds before—so cool...so soothing—began to rise away in great tendrils of steam, and the life of the forest melted, receding into nothingness, leaving behind naught but a barren land of red dust.

When the last of the trees had withered and their roots had withdrawn from the lifeless soil, the mountain upon which I stood crumbled beneath me. Amid great chips of stone and dirt I fell, finally coming to rest in an enveloping cloud of stale, choking dust.

All at once a great and terrible heat assaulted me, parching my throat and my spirit alike. Daring to open my eyes, I could do nothing but immediately shut them once more in terror of what was happening to me. My skin had become so parched—so starved for water—that cracks, thin and sinister as a spider's web, had appeared across my arms. *Fissures. Hissing. Splitting.* Opening with blinding pain to expose the raw flesh which lay beneath.

Agony...unforgiving...inescapable.

I opened my mouth to beg the spirits for sweet mercy, but the burning air rushed inside, blackening my tongue and turning the words to steam. The heat intensified; my ruined skin flaking away like ash in the rising heat. My screams of

pain and horror replaced the roars of Halluum. And as soon as it began, it was over.

Unfolding my arms, I cautiously opened one eye, hoping beyond hope to see the lush hillside upon which I had stood mere moments before. The tanned skin of an antelope met my gaze; a ray of Soll's light spilling in from a small tear in the wall of the teepee, its fiery beam hitting me full in the face.

Once again, I had played the fool for the amusement of the spirits. And I wept with frustration...for I was home.

Chaka, son of Napay and Kimil, had awoken.

1. Heretic

The intense transition from my dream to the waking world had sapped any strength I may have received during my slumber. Lying motionless atop my fur coverings, I let the unbidden tears cut rivers across the parched desert of my cheeks. Ashamed though I was to succumb so easily to the tears, I was grateful for them nonetheless, for I feared that I would not feel water upon my skin again for some time. My tears dried in mere seconds, along with all other moisture within the small teepee, prompting me to reach for the water skin that rested just above my head, mercifully hidden from the intrusion of Soll's light. The skin was nearly empty, and so allowing myself no more than a swig, I poured several drops into my palm and dabbed it over my tan face. And with that, the daily preparation had begun.

I located my moccasins stashed underneath the furs on which I slept and slipped the thick-soled footwear on. My leg-wear, cut short to cope with Soll's tiresome heat, were kept beneath my bedding as well, as this always seemed to keep

the hides somewhat cool. Pulling these on and tying the makeshift belt of braided hide, I walked to the mouth of the teepee and threw aside the covering. My eyes couldn't quite adjust to the onslaught of light and heat, refusing to meet the gaze of the eye of Soll. It blazed overhead, pelting me with waves of ire that threatened to burn the skin from my bones. Retreating back inside my relatively cool tent, I located my covering and slid it over my shoulders. I had torn the sleeves from the garment, and had long since ceased to tie the thin laces along its front, preferring to leave both my arms and chest exposed to Soll's light. The hide was heavy and proved far too stifling otherwise. Heavy though the garment may have been however, I refused to venture out into the light without its protection.

Stepping from the tent, I felt a strong breeze blowing against me from the west, sending ripples along the loosened cloth of the teepee. Its source went unseen, and by the time it reached our village the desert had stripped any blessed moisture it may have carried. The wind was just as hot now as the light that blazed overhead. I dared not to stare directly into the malevolent eye of Soll, but judging from the shadows that were cast from the surrounding teepees, it was not yet time for me to join my fellow scouts. Regardless, I had woken later than intended, for my younger sister Mani had long since left for the healer's tents. And my father...well, I knew where *he* had gone.

Stretching, I let out a sigh—deep and slow—as I gazed out at what my tribe had become; silently cursed the spirits for allowing such a thing to pass.

Rows upon rows of teepees met my gaze. The village was arranged in a massive circle, with rings of tents seven rows deep. I was no longer certain of our exact number, for our

tribe had recently swelled due to the alarming number of outsiders who had come seeking shelter. Soll's wrath extended far and wide, reaching out for miles beyond our encampment, and refugees of the valley were now streaming in by the dozens. I cringed at the number of teepees that now comprised our tribe. Eight years ago, my family's teepees were set on the outer ring of only five rows. Now, in my eighteenth year of life, the number had more than doubled. Sentries were now posted around the border of the camp, warding off all newcomers, for the tribe had grown far larger than our means within the past months. We could no longer guarantee sanctuary to our brothers and sisters who still wandered this wasteland.

Desperation had set in. The Elder Council seldom left the Grand Teepee, for the urgency of our situation kept them mired in constant debate. Cots had been erected within the massive tent, and meals were brought to the wise-ones between hearings. It never ceased to amaze me just how well the Elders ate, even in these dire times. Great steaming chunks of choice meat and boiled, spiced roots were carried into the tent every day at high-noon, and once again in the twilight hours. The aroma of the Elder's banquets drove me to the point of insanity as I waited in line for my own small ration of salted root. I held nothing but respect for the Elder Council of our tribe, but I quickly found myself cursing their very souls every noon and night that I was forced to appease my hunger with an uncooked, bland, salted root.

It would be another hour at least until the haunting aroma of cooked meat would torment my senses, and with any luck in that time I would be well away alongside my friends Kota, Angee, and Otahi. But at the moment, a different aroma had wafted its way toward me. It carried the scent of burnt cedar,

as well as the smell of charred marrow...a scent I had inhaled many times before.

How could he? He had promised me!

Grinding my teeth in a blind rage, I tore off toward the center of the camp, where a column of black smoke rose to cloak the rays of Soll's light.

Many of those I passed waved or called to me as I hurried by; friends of my sister and parents, but I barely acknowledged them. I raced between the teepees, hoping that the dark column in the distance was just my imagination, a trick played on my head by Soll's vile light. But secretly I knew there could be no mistaking it—and that I would be sorely disappointed once again.

And so it was that when I had broken through the innermost ring of teepees, a great pyre met my gaze. The sheer size of the blaze produced an almost deafening roar, and the ravenous orange flames rose skyward, licking at the massive pile of wood and brush at its center. I froze at the sight of a man sitting cross-legged, not four feet from the blaze. He wore a ragged pair of brown pants, and a thick, blood-red cloak was draped over his head and shoulders, protecting him from the falling embers and the bits of sand whipped up by the wind. Even with his back turned to me, I could easily make out his emaciated frame as his arms snaked in and out of the protection of the red cloth. True enough, none of our tribe bathed regularly, as water was fast becoming a scarce commodity. It was considered normal to be coated with a thin layer of dirt, but this man had clearly not bathed in near a month's time; his skin all but blackened with filth and grime. The nails at the end of his fingers were long and jagged with neglect, the dirt packed tightly beneath them.

With a soot covered hand, he threw a branch of cedar upon the flames. As the leaves shriveled and the bark burned, his filthy hands formed the sign of respect to the spirit Soll, for whom the burning of cedar represented goodwill. I nearly shouted in rage as the pitiful man in front of me stooped low to scrape up a handful of the animal bones that lay strewn about him. But I knew he would not hear me. Not now, so deep within his fervor. Words would not reach him...he required a physical awakening. Dashing forward, I grabbed his wrist before he could cast the bones into the pyre.

The man turned his gaunt and sunken cheeks toward me. He obviously had not eaten well in some time. A wild forest of stubble grew along his jaw, peppered with ash and abandoned from care. His features betrayed no hint of the proud, strong man he had once been. The dead eyes, set so deeply within his withered face, lit softly with recognition as he finally focused upon me. And my own eyes hardened as I gazed down at the wretched state of the great hunter Napay...at what my father had become.

“Good morning, Chaka.” He croaked through a throat that had been inhaling smoke for months on end, “How long have you been awake?” My grip on his wrist tightened slightly as I looked into his unfocused eyes and idiotic grin. They only served to remind me that this great man’s spirit had been broken. The loving concern and general interest in his questions had long since been replaced by this empty shell of a man, the questions asked only out of old habit. My father didn’t care if it was morning or not, let alone a good one. And as of this moment, it was a very unpleasant morning indeed.

“Why are you here, Father?” I attempted to keep my voice at an even level, but the strain was too great. “Why aren’t you meeting with the Elders as we discussed?”

His brow furrowed as though he had not understood what I had asked, "Yes. That was what I was going to do. The Elders, of course..." He trailed off into what seemed to be deep thought, but I knew better. My eyes widened in exasperation as I impatiently waited for him to continue.

"Yes Father! We agreed that you would seek an audience with the Elders to reclaim your position as a hunter. You were supposed to meet with them an hour ago." I waited while he took in my words, though he gave no acknowledgement, "So? Did you meet with them? Will they give you a second chance?" He sat in silence, and I lost my remaining patience. I screamed at the top of my lungs, "*Well?! What Happened?! Why are you not out with the hunting party?*"

He slowly shook his head, "That is not important now." The answer was given so simply that I almost released his hand in shock. *Had he not even bothered to appear before the Council?* "I must continue to pray." He went on dejectedly, "I must pray for Kimil." At the sound of my mother's name a measure of life suddenly returned to his feeble limbs, and he struggled to free his arm. "Chaka let me go! We must pray to Soll!" He frantically clawed at my grip with his free hand, "Soll will be merciful. He will not allow Kimil to die!"

I had heard enough. With my free hand, I ripped the bones from my father's grasp, gripping them so tightly that the brittle shards cut into my palm. I turned and hurled the bones as far from us as I could before turning back to my father and tearing the red cloak from his shoulders. I cast the fabric into the flames as well, and turned seething back to the man who called himself my father.

"*Damn Soll and all other spirits to hell!*" I cried, unable to restrain the contempt I felt for this foolishness. My father

remained where he sat, cross-legged, heedless of the sparks and hot ashes that fell on his unprotected skin. His long black hair was streaked with wild gray and flowed down what was once a muscled back, now deteriorated in his self-imposed fast. It made me sick just how much his present state reminded me of the outsiders that pleaded for sanctuary within our camp. But emaciated though he may have been, his voiced rasped forth with a trace of the old authority it once held.

“You don’t mean that. You can’t.” He bent forward to scoop up a second handful of bones, “The spirits’ mercy is the only thing that can save Kimil now.”

“The spirits’ *mercy*?!” I echoed, “The spirits do not give a damn about us, Father!” I kicked the bones away before his fingers could reach them, and grabbing for his shoulders I forced his eyes to meet my own. “Night and day you’ve sat in front of this fire and offered your prayers and sacrifices. It has been months! The spirits have done *nothing*! Soll’s curse remains with us! Amai’s rain has deserted us! Even Gaia Herself has ignored our pleas for help! How can you sit and pray to spirits when you could work to save Mother *yourself*?!” He closed his eyes, as if he could blind himself to the truth, but I would give him no such solace this day. Shaking him, I appealed to his ego, “The hunters have returned empty-handed the past two weeks. Our stores will not last us forever. You were the *best*, Father! With your help, the hunters could bring home enough game to feed the village—to feed Mother!” He stared blankly at me, refusing to focus on my angry, pleading face, and so I pushed him away in disgust, “Mother needs food and water, not useless prayers to useless spirits!”

Father's head snapped towards me, and for the first time in months, I saw something in his eyes other than madness and abandon. I saw his anger. Anger at what his wife, his tribe, and his valley had come to suffer. But as quickly as it had appeared, the emotion fled from his eyes. His muscles relaxed, and his mind retreated back behind the veil of heat and misery. "You are lost, Chaka." He murmured, "You know not what you say. This heat is making both you and Kimil ill. I will pray for both of you. We live at the whim of the spirits." Once again, he took up a handful of bones, "When Soll has been appeased...when he finally closes his eye and allows his sister Amai to return to our valley...then..."

But I did not listen to the outcome of his delusions. I had stomped off in the direction of the Healer's tents, the crowd that had gathered to witness our exchange parting in my wake. My outburst had attracted several families who would have otherwise had a dull, uneventful morning. They now lingered guiltily among the teepees, caught in their eavesdropping. I paid them little heed.

My father remained blind in his devotion to the spirits, even as my mother suffered in ceaseless, stagnant slumber.

2. Divinity

The Healer's tents were just beyond the inner-most ring of teepees, kept a good distance away from any other structures to prevent the spread of illness. Originally there had only been one such tent, with our Grand Healer at its head. The tent had been constructed much larger than any other within the village, easily able to fit thirty or so teepees inside, though in the past it rarely housed anyone but expectant mothers and their newborns. It was now almost thirteen years since Soll's curse had first besieged our people,

and there were now three tents, each containing two healers and numerous kiyawasins. Soll's onslaught had quickly filled the original tent with men, women and children alike, indiscriminate in its wrath. Two more tents had been erected in haste and were filled at an equally alarming rate. Each was now overflowing and the Healers were exhausted in their effort to ease the suffering of those afflicted by Soll's incessant heat.

I made for the original tent, passing by the construction of a fourth tent. Our stores were at the point of depletion and this new tent would not have enough hide to cover the roof, leaving the far end exposed to the very source of its patient's suffering. It was a pointless endeavor. In any event, there were no more trained Healers at hand to watch over the new tent, and it would be months before the kiyawasins were pronounced true Healers. We could not trust the kiyawasins to treat the patients themselves, however skilled they may be.

As I passed through the skin that covered the entrance of the original tent, a mixture of sickness and herbs met my nostrils. On either side of the tent rested dozens of patients, lying upon soft furs. Bedding had been made along the center of the tent as well, running its length in two long rows with the patients lying head to head. These central beds had only been added recently and caused narrow aisles to form in the otherwise spacious tent. Along these aisles scurried the kiyawasins, comprised mostly of young girls who had yet to enter their flowering year. Our tribe firmly believed that only women could become Healers; for Gaia, the Earth Mother, was female, and so the Healers drew their restorative abilities from her.

The young apprentices administered various concoctions and poultices to their patients, along with food and water

between treatments. I had come to regard the various remedies prescribed as unnecessary. If any had actually worked, there would have been no need for the others. The food and water seemed to better calm the patients' fevers than anything else—but I was no Healer.

A small girl edged her way past me carrying a basket of food, glaring at me in annoyance for hampering her progress down the tight aisle. I noted that the portions of sustenance had become noticeably smaller. Anger once again consumed me as I thought of my father, wasting time with prayers to no one, when he could be out with the hunting party truly aiding these poor souls housed within the Healer's tents. The feeling intensified as I passed several small, clay statues of the Great Mother Gaia, around which burned numerous herbs. It had been twelve years. We had been fools to believe that the spirits would put a stop to Soll's wrath. We were fools now to even believe that the spirits existed. No force watched over us. We were merely a gathering of *fools*, waiting for death in the middle of a wasteland.

The tent ended abruptly, with a small section closed off by curtains. Beyond the curtain was our Grand Healer's living quarters. She slept within the Healer's tent, for her expertise was frequently called upon. An Elder, the Grand Healer was an ancient white-haired woman named Euwana. At fifty, she was the second eldest member of the tribe, and a greater Healer we could not have dared hope for. She knew all things concerning medicine and illness, having been trained in the Healer's art since the age of ten. It was a rare occasion that Euwana ever met an illness beyond her ability to heal, and she had never once failed if the illness ever happened to appear again. Soll's curse was the glaring exception, and it had left the

old woman in a bitter funk that had not improved as time wore on.

I had made it a point in my youth to stay away from the old woman as much as I was able, though I spent several illnesses in her care. She had always been kind enough to me and the other children during our time within the tent, but most of us regarded her as a trifle strange. She always carried a variety of herbs in her cloaks, giving off many pungent aromas. To ease the horrific taste of many of her potions and remedies, she would serve it to us with a small clay vial of honey, a rarity in our plains. No matter how much we pleaded, she refused to tell us where she had come by the sweet liquid, telling us that any attempt we made to obtain our own would likely land us back in the Healer's tent.

Even in my youth, Euwana's face had been lined with "wisdom", as she was fond of calling it. The lids of her eyes constantly drooped, giving the impression that the old woman was simply wandering from place to place in her sleep. A venerable river of long, silvered hair was always tied in a great bun which bobbed atop her head as she shuffled about, like a cloud forever hounding her. She had a cackling laugh of which she made frequent use; one that unfortunately warded many of the smaller children away from her, setting them clinging to the legs of their parents whenever they passed the "witch's" tent. The children often referred to her as the "Witch-Woman". Though if Euwana herself ever overheard such a comment, she would simply turn to the child and sternly inform them, "The proper term is '*Shaman*.'"

Over the past few years, Soll's curse had seemingly allowed Euwana's age to catch up with her. She rarely laughed anymore, and her cheerful albeit slightly eccentric behavior had taken a turn for the worse. The old Healer was now prone

to snap at anyone who deigned to disturb the woman's frequent bouts of silence, during which she claimed to be meditating on new healing techniques. Kiyawasins tried as best they could to steer clear of the Grand Healer, though every so often a girl could be seen running from the tent in tears, chased out by Euwana's harsh critiques and insults. The Healers serving beneath the esteemed Euwana tended to leave the old woman to her own devices, focusing instead on the well-being of their own patients and the tutelage of the kiyawasins. For extended periods of time, Euwana would disappear within her own private portion of the great tent, the smells of strange herbal combinations and her own rhythmic chanting wafting down the aisles. Personally, I found Euwana's constant spiritual displays to be nigh unbearable. But for the Healers and their kiyawasins, this time was nothing short of a blessing from the Earth Mother herself.

Of late, it seemed that Euwana had taken her self-proclaimed *Shaman* title to heart. She now spent far more time "communing with the spirits" than practicing the healing arts. This fact was not lost on the Elders, and though she herself was a member of their ranks, Euwana's credibility among the Council was waning. Some were so bold as to suggest that Euwana herself had been touched by the very fevers that plagued her patients, but I knew this to be false. The Grand Healer was merely expecting the spirits to provide where she had failed. Just like father. They were both useless to us now.

It mattered not, as Euwana and her so-called "sorcery" was not what I had come for. Stopping just short of the Grand Healer's quarters, I knelt beside the final bed on the right hand side. There, laying in the vice-grip of a three year illness

was my mother, Kimil. Like my father, she bore almost no resemblance to the mother I had known before our valley had been scorched by Soll's ire. Unlike Napay however, whose current pathetic state was born of his own doing, my mother's body had been ravaged by the fires of her prolonged illness. She was even more emaciated than my father. Her cheekbones stood out prominently, and her shoulders and arms looked to be little more than bone. A large factor of my father's loss in weight was that he saved most of his rations to be fed to my mother, effectively starving himself for her sake. The food would have been put to better use if Father had consumed it. The only purpose that the rations of salted root served was to drain any of the precious water that remained inside mother's body. True enough that the Elder's had permitted extra water skins to be distributed among the Healer's tents, but the amount was nowhere near sufficient. With so many of our tribe stricken by the unforgiving eye of Soll, the Elders granted only enough water to keep the patients alive...not enough to cure them. My discontent with the Elder's grew, and would most certainly continue to grow, once the smell of roasting meat drifted from the storage tents.

Suddenly my mind cleared, and I was made aware of mine own unconscious action. I found myself reaching toward my mother's brow—fingers stretching to sweep the flowing hair from her sunken yet still beautiful face—which had developed the ruddy-reddish coloring characteristic to and present within all victims of Soll's curse. I quickly withdrew the hand; my heart pounding at the implications of what I had nearly done...and aching at the notion of not even being afforded the smallest touch, let alone the ability to *hold* my own mother in my arms. For far too long I had been forced to sit beside my mother's bed, forbidden to touch her in precaution of the illness. I had knelt at her side countless times since Soll had

focused his anger upon my mother. For the first few months my father, sister, and I would visit together. But as the months stretched slowly into years, Father would no longer accompany us, forsaking all other activities in his devotion to the *mercy* of the spirits. Now, more often than not I visited her myself.

Brian Rios

Sulleiman

Who knew the provenance exactly? It probably found its way through the centuries from some old colonial town house on the distant and prosperous seaboard, but someone has dragged this handsome Victorian claw foot bathtub high into the Cordilleras to market this day, by mule, or by lackey, or by rusted truck. It sits proudly in the dust amidst a multitude of other curious repurposeable objects. The present owner of the bathtub, a raffish man with deeply lined, silver bristled, sunbaked face, a bunch of gold teeth, and a fine, if weather beaten, rufous red felt hat, has amongst other exotic items in his possession, a battered brass telescope, various and sundry antiquated surgical instruments, a rebuilt wheelbarrow (painted blue) a number of tattered volumes (including a curious, dog-eared print in English titled “Manhood Rescued – A Helping Hand-book for Victims of the Follies of Youth”) an assortment of traps, pulleys and restraints, a handsome caged cockerel, a stoat and prize goat - but it was the bathtub that caught Sulleiman’s eye.

The market - a monthly medieval affair of rambunctious mountain folk peddling hardware and handicrafts, livestock, fruits and vegetables, steamed or roasted foodstuff, dried roots, spices, medicinal plants, and steaming sweet or foaming fermented grain beverages - draws folk ancient and young from as far as 3 days walk across the surrounding valleys and mountain ranges.

Amid the animated throng, Sulleiman blends inconspicuously enough, though not of these parts. In fact, no one ever really seems to know quite where he’s from, or what he’s about. It had been whispered, among superstitious folk, that he had practiced as an alchemist in middle Europe, or a shaman of the steppes, or even, some fantasized, an ancient architect from some lost continent - yet he seems to have been in these mountains forever, practicing one form of wizardry or another no doubt - but, nobody

really knows. Either way, he commands an air of someone not to be trifled with. And this bright market morning, he eyes the miraculously unchipped, if faintly yellowed, white enamel tub in the early morning light; the layered shades of some 150 years of worn paint over the pitted cast iron exterior - a pleasing patina; the stout lion's claws clutching balled feet. He decides it will serve admirably for his purposes. Withdrawing a string purse from the folds of his tunic, he pulls out two silver, *peso fuerte* coins.

The keeper of the tub, sitting squarely on his wooden stool, takes a long draft from his mug of *chicha* and looks up without expression, eyes shaded by the band of shadow cast from his hat. The tall elder standing there, leaning on his crooked staff, sunlight luminous in his untamed hair, proclaims in a thick sort of Ural accent, though in the local dialect, "I will give you one coin for the tub and another to have it brought to Dos Aguas."

The keeper remains expressionless, but internally his curiosity is aroused (uncommon in itself) by this character who is proffering two large silver coins between bony finger tips. The keeper's hand extends, in spite of himself, palm open to receive the coins. He examines them closely. They are indeed *peso fuerte*, gleaming in the sunlight as though minted this morning - yet these coins have been out of circulation for well over a hundred years. The keeper weighs the coins in his hand metaphorically while his mind performs a rapid calculation. He looks up at the stranger with a barely perceptible nod. The deal is done.

Sulleiman picks out a number of other small objects from the market: a nicely worn, bone handled knife; a bundle of beeswax candles; some dried fruit and a bag of coca leaves to chew on his journey home. With a lilt in his stride, pouch strapped by a sash to his side, he sets off from the arid, pungent market, up into the fragrant hills through the cloud forest.

Sulleiman's outward appearance is of a well-heeled and somewhat elegant, if wiry old man. He carries a tall staff, which he uses alternately with his game leg. So when the lowlife bandit, sequestered in the green bushes near the top of the pass, spies the crooked shape hobbling along the trail, he thinks *easy prey*. Something doesn't seem quite right however, when the distance between first spotting his victim and his victim's imminent arrival at the pass seems to be covered in an impossibly short space of time, but he brushes any mental perplexity aside, not given to deep thought, and hops out onto the trail with a bleak grin and flashing steel twirling deftly between the fingers of his right hand. The old man seems not at all perturbed - if anything, his face seems to elongate in a sort of yawning expression, and hoary eyebrows raised, the imperious traveller asks, "Well...?"

Grimacing, the ruthless robber brandishes his knife, glinting in the sunlight, and demands "How much money you got on you old man?"

"Quite a bit actually."

"Well hand it over quick before I cut you open you old goat."

"I think not... and I might suggest you consider finding gainful employment in the fields or some less parasitic purpose, before..."

The younger man, mildly consternated, but impatient with adrenalin, lunges at the old man. He has no interest in the old fool's babbling and anticipates scaring him into submission before having to bleed him. But Sulleiman steps aside with reptilian reflexes and swings his staff around to the back of the bandit's knees, causing him to crumple to the ground, left hand coming down flat, knife bearing hand punching the ground painfully to break his fall. Sulleiman, standing behind the bandit, prods the man in the rear with his staff - a bit like a cat cuffs a

mouse playfully, simply because the opportunity is there whilst its prey is disoriented. The younger man rolls and comes rapidly to his feet, squatting angrily, ready to strike and finish this in his favour, just as the old man continues, "May I urge you once more to reconsider your..."

But the rage rising in the disheveled highwayman causes him to thrust a ruthless strike to the gut - which does not seem to find its mark. The last thing he knows is a splitting crack at the back of his head and the earth coming towards his face. Sulleiman's staff swings back to his side wearily, and as he scuttles the contents of the expired freeloader's pockets, he finds a sweet orange. He spits out his quid of coca leaves, peels the orange, and consumes it as he continues along his way. And not a few luckless cracked skulls were lain prone by the wayside over the years.

Returning to his compound late in the afternoon, Sulleiman shuffles into the adobe kitchen.

Elena, his lone surviving wife looks over her shoulder. "Ah then," she says, "where have you been you old goat worrier - out causing trouble no doubt!"

"I try not to as you know cariño, but it seems to like to find me - which is why I'm always so happy to come home to you, Mamacita."

"Ya, ya, sit down and eat" she says, and cuffs him around the back of the head.

"Aye, que bruto eres - pues, que hay a comer?"

"Stew of squirrel and rice and your brother, the devil's own salsa de pimientos de padron, carbon."

“Hmm, why I married you, such a poetic turn of phrase my dear, not to mention your cazuela de ardilla, mi vida.”

Just then, the dogs and chickens start up and a general clamouring ensues as a creaking mule cart pulls up with bathtub lashed on the back as promised. Turns out it was hauled most of the way by rusted truck, and by cart the last few miles of back country, and though Sulleiman is a man who knows how to wait - not a power to be underestimated - in this case the arrival was sooner than anticipated. As a matter of fact, he could have arranged to travel with the thing, but as a rule, prefers to spend a day cavorting about the hills, gathering herbs and talking to the birds of what may lie yonder.

Delighted with his procurement, he has it set up in the back quarter of the compound where he grows his herbs and likes to watch the sun go down. After supper, water is heated over the wood fired range in the kitchen, and brought out in copper kettles by a clan of young ones, to fill the tub.

As the sun hovers low in the sky, Sulleiman sinks into the steaming waters and lets out a great sigh. His aching bones, relieved of their burden of so many days, begin to ease, and his creaking body softens into a deepening state of relaxation. He allows his mind to loose its hold on the dialectic of the world - the darkness and light woven into the days, the disciplines of holding the multilayered contexts and complexities together - dissolving into the no-thing-ness from which they came. As the sun slowly melts into the horizon, the striated clouds overhead begin to glow like an inverted river of molten gold, merging and flowing down into the distant valley between the great ranges, the last of the day draining after the sun. And after seeing into the distance, Sulleiman slowly returns, muttering to himself, *ah, yes, they are coming.*

He is not however, referring to Sophie and Lali, who in their carefree scruffy glee, come bounding and giggling into the herb gardens over which the old man is metaphorically floating in the twilight, clouds reflected in the water about him. As they shatter his meditations obliviously, forgetting themselves and their bounds, the old man feels over the side of the tub until his fingers find a small avocado pit. Using a stripped palm frond for a sling, he deftly hurls the thing with just enough force to smartly rap Sophie on the back of the head with a hollow *thunk*. Her eyes widen in a moment of stunned silence in which she stops breathing. A bulb of snot bubbles at her nose in the pause. Then suddenly, taking a sharp involuntarily in breath, scrunching up her smudged little face, she emits a high-pitched shriek. Lali stares at her sibling, wide eyed, bewildered by the wretched cries, then bursts into sympathetic tears of her own, and they scurry off together to seek solace. The old man chortles to himself, as the quiet is resumed.

His ancient, grey muzzled cat, Kali, hops up between the old man's bony feet suspended over the tub. She sits there on the broad rim, gazing into the steaming space between them - caricatures of each other, as the darkening embers of amber sky fade to black.

Diamond stars fill the sky. The old woman walks up and stands at the foot of the tub, half moon overhead. She drops her robe in the soft light and steps into the bath, still warm in the night. With her back towards the old boy, she lowers her satin soft cello figure between his splayed knees, arching her back delicately. Leaning forward and lifting her hips slightly to tease the old man, she displaces the cat with her large breasts, which have long since given up any quarrel with gravity.

Dethroned, the cat saunters over to a fence post and claws her way up onto the top, perches there, wide eyed, slack jawed, blinking slowly like an old owl, turning her head away occasionally, as the gentle, rhythmic ripples of the bath water cause the moonlight to dance about timelessly.

Niklas Spitz

Supporting the Magazine

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Thanks for reading,

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