

Scheherazade

Issue 7



Scheherazade

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Submissions & Guidelines

Scheherazade considers submissions of original poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction (memoir and other narratives), novel excerpts, photography, and graphic art from students of Monterey Peninsula College (MPC).

To submit your work, upload up to 5 poems and/or up to 20 total pages of prose (each poem and prose submission uploaded separately) at mpc.edu/scheherazade-submission.

Work submitted should be in Word (.doc or .docx) or Rich Text Format (.rtf), in Times New Roman or another standard font with 1 inch margins at top, bottom, and sides of each page. There are no limitations on style or subject matter; bilingual/translated submissions are welcome if the writer can provide equally accomplished iterations of the work in both languages.

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All back issues can be read in their entirety online.
Submissions are accepted year-round.

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“The House on Beech” by Joshua Converse is the winner of the annual MPC Halloween Writing Contest, sponsored by this magazine.

Natalie Van Fleet

Ambrosia, Euphoria, Etcetera

“It’s not like *actual* prostitution or anything,” she explained, while readjusting her cleavage in the mirror. I briefly questioned Leah’s definition of “actual prostitution.” My new acquaintance was presently subjecting me to what had become an hour-long impromptu recruiting session for her latest get-rich-quick gig. I sat, high and half-listening, on the edge of her bed. The concept she was suggesting left me less than enthusiastic, but then again, so did Los Angeles in general. I had been miserable since the day I’d arrived here, a month prior, 22 years old, on the heels of a magnificently painful and transformative break-up. Financially, my options were dwindling. I was bored. And my lifestyle had wrought me unemployable through traditional channels.

“It’s all an illusion, ya know?” she continued, “Men, egos...” She couldn’t finish the thought. “You’re just the kind of girl they’re looking for,” she said, turning from her vanity to assess me once more. A caustic, malnourished brand of sexy was what I was peddling at the time. Hip bones and sarcasm. Lots of earrings. She bluntly suggested I lay off the booze for a few days. “Your face is getting puffy,” she declared. I glanced in the mirror and determined that she was right,

but I didn't mind. I'd recently abandoned any hope that I might somehow wake one morning, miraculously recovered, and return to my former life as a mild-mannered paralegal. For better or worse, those days were gone.

"So, what do you say?" she asked eagerly, adding, "I heard you can make, like, \$500 a night!" Carelessly I muttered some sort of borderline consent, to which she replied that they would come pick us up in an hour for our interviews. I asked who "they" were, feeling the familiar sensation of sweat forming beads on my upper lip, seeping through the serum, the foundation, the powder; anxiety, the addict's moral compass. She offered a couple of unrecognizable names. I sighed, stuck a Xanax beneath my tongue, and closed my eyes for a moment as it dissolved.

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Leah gently rattled me awake.

"Let's go, hooker," she teased.

I sprang to my feet, heart pounding, pupils bouncing about my rust-riddled eyes. I had slept like a corpse for half an hour, the first repose I'd found in days.

I asked if our ride had arrived, unable to control the tremor in my voice, acutely aware of the dread that was continuing to swell within my chest, clutching my throat. She shook her head, handed me

some Visine and a pint glass full of something -- whiskey and Red Bull, room temp and sickly sweet. I took to the bathroom and reappeared minutes later with bright, green eyes, a fragmented smile and a sip left in my glass. The restorative powers of poison, I marveled, never failed.

I wore a sheer black tee, black lace push-up bra, and a pair of suffocating black jeans, despite Leah's pro tip that "Men like dresses!" This was generally my day-to-day uniform, as I preferred to don muted colors and simple styles. Having gotten by via functioning addiction for the past few years, I had learned to appreciate the benefits of blending in.

We argued for several excruciating minutes about my choice of footwear. She demanded that I wear heels. "I'm five-fucking-ten," I complained. "I'm too much in heels." She grimaced. I began unlacing my boots.

Our ride pulled up around 10 PM. Leah introduced me to her boyfriend, Tom, and his friend Oscar who worked security at the club. Tom didn't regard me with much more than a head nod; I wish I could say the same for Oscar. From the backseat, I stared out the window as one bleak city scene gave way to the next. I took note of the exit we took, but soon became confused as I tried and failed to keep track of the streets we passed down. I was relentlessly distracted by the business of politely pushing Oscar's hand off my thigh.

Before long we were in a district Tom referred to as “downtown,” somewhere dark. Now, I may have been new to the area, but it didn’t take me long to determine that LA shows its love with electricity. It shines light on the fortunate. The lights keep you safe. Needless to say, I stepped out of the car feeling less than fortunate. I assumed from the looks of it that we were miles away from the brightly lit, highly populated DTLA I had come to know. Nothing was familiar. It was an odd area, a mix of bars-on-the-windows residences and rundown businesses. *What the fuck am I doing here*, I thought to myself, as I had so many times during those years.

Leah, Oscar, and I got out of the car and crossed the street. I asked if Tom was coming. She rolled her eyes dramatically and said that of course he wouldn’t be coming. Boyfriends weren’t allowed. Didn’t I know that? I wanted to scream that I didn’t know anything. Instead I silently glanced back at the car, catching a glimpse of Tom in the driver’s seat, doors locked, his phone casting an eerie blue light on his wan face. I took one last look up and down the vacant street. Nothing to see, no one to see me.

There was an unlit neon sign above the front entrance, but other than that, the place was completely devoid of advertisement. And windows. Oddly, I can no longer recall the club’s name, but it was

undoubtedly something laughable, ambiguously sexual and clichéd, like *Ambrosia* or *Euphoria*, etcetera.

Oscar led us along the side of the building and down a short set of steps that ended at a large metal door. He sent a text and we waited in tense silence for a moment. I focused on the yellowing graffiti a few feet up the wall: “Cash. Cars. Hoes.” *LA in 3 words*, I thought dismally. A moment later the door opened and a stocky crustacean of a man shook Oscar’s hand and gave Leah and I an obligatory leer while introducing himself as Patron. Oscar explained that he was going into the club now to start his shift and that Patron would bring us to meet Anita. Leah asked who Anita was and Patron replied simply, “Anita hires the talent.” I had an immediate, visceral reaction to being referred to as “talent,” bitter bile lapping at my tonsils. I was under the impression that this gig required virtually no talent whatsoever. As I understood, we were here to provide the “girlfriend experience” (“the illusion,” as Leah had put it) for pathetic men with disposable incomes and poor social skills. I’d considered myself a weapons-grade manipulator at that point. How hard could this be?

We followed Patron down a short corridor to a closet-sized room filled with filing cabinets, a narrow desk and one empty chair. The walls were papered with peeling layers of explicit pornography. A

lizard-skinned woman behind the desk introduced herself as Anita in an aggressive accent I couldn't place. As there was only one available chair, Leah and I both stood, wobbling in our heels at her desk, as we introduced ourselves.

"Sit down!" Anita screeched abruptly. Leah's ass hit the sole chair before I could even move, so I shifted my weight against her in attempt to appear unruffled, casual. I'm sure I looked as ridiculous as I felt. Anita opened her mouth as she looked at me, and I held my breath until she began her spiel. "This is not a strip club. This is not a bar. This is not a brothel," she stated matter-of-factly. She went on to describe the club's general concept. She claimed her clientele consisted almost exclusively of middle-aged, working class men who were in the market for a legal, private venue in which to enjoy the company of young women. The club did not sell alcohol and did not display nudity. Any unwanted touching was strictly forbidden. Policy dictated that clients were to approach talent and *never* the other way around. Nine times out of ten, a client would introduce himself to one of "Anita's girls" and offer to buy her a drink (soda) in exchange for conversation and companionship. Depending on how much the client was willing to spend, he may have the company of the woman for the rest of the evening. Every activity had its own price. For instance, if a client requested a dance partner for the night, the talent was required

to charge more, as the expectation of increased physical contact was implied.

After a brief pause, Anita squinted at Leah and asked her how old she was. Leah responded truthfully that she was thirty-three, to which Anita responded with something between a sigh and a growl. She turned her attention to me, asked my age and if I had a boyfriend. "Twenty-two," I answered, adding, "single," for the first time since high school. She pulled out her phone and without asking snapped a quick photo of me. She said she would call me next weekend to try me out, see how I performed. Desperately curious, I asked if I could see the inside of the club. She said that I could not, citing some vague privacy policy. I mumbled a mild thanks for her time, as Patron reappeared in the doorway to take us out. While exiting I took a quick glance at Leah, who was walking beside me, jaw clenched, a misty layer forming over her furious eyes. Soon we were back outside, the metal door clanging loudly behind us.

Leah was clearly upset, and I searched for the right words to say, ultimately deciding that saying nothing was better than saying the wrong thing. I knew she regretted coming down there, making herself vulnerable to such a moronic operation, not realizing that she had aged out of that kind of shallow gimmick over a decade prior. We walked back up the steps, onto the sidewalk, dejected, mortified. She

began to cross the street to the car where Tom remained, forever focused on his phone.

As I watched her meekly tap on the passenger's door, waiting for Tom to let her in, I was suddenly overcome with rage. It was as if all the anger I'd felt from the break-up, from the abandonment, from the addiction, from the loneliness, from Oscar's hands, from Anita's glare, had reached some kind of critical mass in my mind. I broke a little. I turned and ran toward the front entrance. Leah spun around and squealed hysterically, "Where the fuck are you going?! We're leaving! Get in the goddamn car!" But I didn't care if they left me. All the fear and anxiety that had previously consumed me was in an instant replaced with an insolent curiosity and a cold, vindicated fury. What kind of nightmare world was I living in that places like this even existed? I was propelled forward by a need to see inside the club. Akin to needing to know the face of one's assailant, I simply had to see this for myself.

I bumped into Oscar at the curtained entrance, behind which some synthetic pop beat was throbbing obnoxiously. He grabbed me by the arm and told me I couldn't go in there, pulling me close as he warned me that if I didn't leave now he would make sure I was never hired. I laughed heartily, for the first time in days. I would have happily starved before wasting away in that creepy, chauvinist

dollhouse. I pushed past him and through the curtain into a scene so morbidly comical it took several beats for me to even recognize it as such.

The room was large and dimly lit, with a low ceiling and purple laser lights flitting designs across the walls. A small linoleum dance floor sat in the center of the room surrounded by an assortment of mismatched, cracking leather couches and loveseats. A single couple swayed on the floor, in a stilted slow dance to a fast song. His hands rested on her hips as she moved unenthusiastically to the beat. They did not speak.

I observed in disbelief the men clustered together at the bar, sneaking glances across the club at the couches where about a dozen young women were waiting to be approached. The atmosphere was astonishingly immature. Far from a “gentleman’s club,” this environment more resembled a middle school dance. Nervous, paunchy men sat fiddling with straws and chewing on ice in a collective cloud of drugstore cologne and hormones, as they tried to muster the courage to approach the women. I couldn’t understand what these fools were so afraid of. These girls were truly sitting ducks, paid companions. They were compensated for the nauseating task of feigning interest in these guys. Aside from the couple on the dance floor, only one other man had paired off with one of the ladies. He sat

in a darkened corner with a stunning Japanese girl, his hand on her knee. Her face was painted with the bland, synthetic smile women learn to employ when humoring an awful, but necessary, man.

As I stood there trying to comprehend the scene before me, I was overwhelmed by a crude and sobering despair. I didn't know who to pity more -- the talent, the client, or myself. It seemed glaringly apparent that we were all willingly playing out our own sad roles in this bizarre scene.

I took one last look around the revolting venue. Satisfied that I'd seen enough, I turned to leave and did not look back. As I passed through the entrance, Oscar spat some rude bullshit to me in Spanish. I'd had enough. In an instant I was barefoot, gripping the toe of one shoe with both hands as I aimed the heel for his eyes. I missed and hooked the heel into his nostril. When I pulled the shoe away, an obscene amount of blood began pouring from Oscar's unfortunate face.

Barefoot, I ran outside while Oscar gripped his nose, wailing. I saw that Leah and Tom were long gone, so I kept running, assuming I'd be picked up by the police for assault any minute -- or worse, that Oscar would catch up to me. After a few miles, I stumbled into a 24-hour Denny's. I was asked to leave due to my appearance and lack of shoes. Hot tears of humiliation ran down my face as I walked out into the restaurant parking lot.

“Hey, honey!” I heard a woman’s voice yell a few steps behind me. I ignored her. “You need a ride home?”

I turned around. She was a waitress, mid-fifties, round and kind-eyed. Her name tag said “Lupe.” So choked with tears I could not speak, I simply nodded. She smiled and handed me a warm, damp towel. “For your face,” she said. I got into the passenger’s seat of her old Camry and flipped down the vanity mirror. I gasped at my reflection; little red specks spackled my entire face, neck and chest. We drove in silence. When we got to my house, she turned off the car and held my hands while she said a prayer in Spanish.

The next morning Leah was pounding on my door, denouncing me as a whore and a criminal. Whether or not she was correct made no difference to me. I wasn’t in any mood to argue. I was too busy packing.

Sibylle Schnuhr

Rules of Relation

The night my sister went into labor with her first child, I decided the best place I could be was in the bathtub at home, or ex-home, as I had technically moved out of my parents' house a year earlier. But as with most things I did then, the moving out was a haphazard and imperfect affair. I often returned for meals and laundry and, like tonight, the luxury of a hot bath. My sister, on the other hand, had properly married and settled into real life out in the distant wilds of Idaho, not far from the little town where she had done her Air Force basic training. She sent informational letters, and called dutifully, and her neat bedroom still had those tiny plastic labels on the drawers made by Dymo hand held letter punch: Underwear. Socks. Notebook Paper. She had her nurse's training, and her new life, and I don't think there was ever any discussion of my mother going out to help her with this baby. My sister was efficient, my mother was not maternal, and my father home alone was unimaginable.

So, on this evening we all waited. The TV was on but there was little focus for it. Molly's husband called at increasing intervals. It didn't seem unusual that he would do this. John was seventeen years older than my sister, had already blown through one wife and set of

kids, and it always seemed to me that he was more a peer for my parents. Not that they had anything in common. He was an ex-aerospace engineer and an inventor (a flying saucer... really!) and they were immigrant entrepreneurs, heavily interested in prosperity and concerned that he had been reduced to selling cars for a living. What they shared was this way of plowing ahead in the world, in daily life, even in conversations. My sister, for all her organization and bravado, lacked that surety as much as I did. At one time, we would have analyzed this phenomenon endlessly. These days, I was left to contemplate it on my own.

As the inevitable event drew closer, I excused myself to the bath. This wasn't a particularly subtle removal, as the only bathtub was in my parents' room, but I knew they would grant me this. I had discovered years earlier, when I first ran away from home, that their rigid proclamations and ultimatums were a different reality from what they were willing to tolerate in a daughter. Still, I was young enough to find it jarring. And careless enough to take advantage. I filled and bubbled the tub to the rim. Satisfied I could still hear the phone and the highlights of any conversation, I eased myself into the hot and steamy water.

How odd it always felt to be here, in this recent rather upscale home. I preferred the one a couple of moves back, an older little

cottage that was near a train station, and a tunnel walk from town. But maybe what I really missed was the freedom of being 9 years old with no future yet to contemplate. Everything lately was in opposition: my hair, my clothes, my friends, my dreams. If I'd had the words, I might have told them, my family, that it wasn't personal. It wasn't them. It wasn't even the Germanness, that crunchy awkward propriety that pushed me away. I left high school because the world called. And I found the city, and then the houseboat community, like someone stronger might run off and join the circus. And it was that, on a good day; a lark, an experiment. On bad days, I was undone by the squalor and the lack of plumbing.

The fact was that I didn't think that I could handle my part. To get on the phone and say the right words, to be effusive and congratulatory and be the happy auntie, and that pitiful realization made me sink even lower into my ungrateful self. Hard enough to make light of my horrible jealousy, to swallow the unflattering frustration I felt, that my drill sergeant sister could so easily produce a baby (did she even like babies?) while I remained here, floating rudderless through my so-called life.

This was not how it was supposed to go. I should have been the one away. I should have been in some Mountain Home, baby in my bike basket as I pedaled to the local vegetable stand. I counted my

failures with the telephone rings. I looked down at my pale flat figure, the bubbles gone to scum, the bath water inert and tepid as a soup. Then I climbed out and folded my reluctant self into a robe.

And so, that night, 713 miles away, my niece was born.

Flowers were sent, pictures came. I went back to my houseboat half-life, and the days passed as they will, with an unplanned busyness that seems to have its own momentum. And because babies are, after all, a beginning and not an ending, just months later I was invited out to Idaho to visit.

I am so recovered now, and so mature, I think to myself as I pack my suitcase full of gifts and books and baby clothes. I am going to be the best auntie after all! My sister Molly sounds excited, like she is maybe looking forward to this visit, and the entire flight I have to stop myself composing conversations we could have. One breath in, one breath out. We could be like adults. Or rather, I could. My sister has been adult always, peering down at me from her lofty moral perch.

Her little house in the middle of town has the faded and layered charm of my favorite childhood home when we first moved to California. It is old and tidy with a bright and smiley lawn. I am surprised by its civilized proximity to the small city center. I am cheered by the homemade two-by-four lamps and end tables, imperfectly sanded and painted bright yellow. There are makeshift

bookshelves filled with a new blend of books, and a hodgepodge of furniture that would be almost appealing but for the stretchy covers they wear. Mostly I am happy because my sister is happy. Her daughter is perfect, a chubby blonde beach ball already crawling from one end of the house to the other. Or at least once she did that, before I was scolded for the potential danger I courted in letting that happen (Lint? Germs? Rugburn?) Still, the babyiness supersedes both my cynicism and my sister's criticism. My wariness eases away the minute the baby's hands reach up for me. And they do, and it becomes a game of sorts, this little courtship.

On only the second day of this visit, we are off on an actual adventure, me and Molly and baby Jessie. The weather is clear and beckoning, October sunshine with that tangy Halloween glow. Brother in law John is off to a construction job in the Jeep, leaving the car so we can take a day trip to the river. We wave him goodbye and go about the fussy preparation that seems to be necessary and required for any baby outing. Lunch of course, and milk and water, and extra this and that. I was the Girl Scout in the family, but my sister is the master of preparedness.

The day sparkles as we drive east to the Snake River. I feel honored, this activity served up. This adventure has a mysterious unfamiliarity that I attribute to John's influence, and for a moment I

amend my skeptical resistance. Maybe it is all fine, his age, his eccentricity. Maybe all those flying saucer models in the basement really will evolve into an actual flying prototype. And if my sister can believe it, isn't that its very own gift and miracle? Here she is, after all, in the out of doors, baby in her backpack, trekking me through the beautiful Idaho backwoods. I suddenly feel anything is possible. We are, all of us, smiling. The crispy fall sunlight is like it has been ordered up from a movie set. The colors are too perfect to comprehend. I am even offered a backpack-carrying turn.

It is an afternoon out of time. One of those you actually take note of while it's happening, not just flagged later when the context has caught up to it. We head back reluctantly, while still prudently early for naps and supper. It isn't just me, I can feel the sleepy satisfaction in all of us. The baby sings to herself while we DJ the radio back and forth between our divergent stations. Bits of family vacations get offered up, small pieces of our private histories. Our conversation isn't like lunch, or dinner. Maybe like appetizers, or even just peanuts at the bar. But I guess I am really hungry.

So, we get back, and we clean up, and I think maybe this day will even us out. I will practice my new patience and my sister will relax a little, and maybe she won't be always so on edge, convinced that without her perpetual oversight the forces of entropy will sink us

into darkness. I want my happiness to be contagious, and I want my version of the world to work; that we aren't punished for believing in or wanting happiness, that pleasure is not always suspect.

When the doorbell rang, it was just a doorbell. And when there was a policeman, well, a highway patrolman...

He wore a hat, and he took it off and held it. And he looked at us quickly and formally, and then he looked at the floor when he spoke. I watched my sister work at rearranging her features as the young patrolman summarized the accident John had been in: not fatal but critical. It was urgent that my sister get to the hospital- he would take her right now if she would just gather her things. She wasn't getting it. I came closer, touched her arm. "Go," I said. "I'll watch the baby. I'll bring her to you." Still there was a wall.

The patrolman tried again, "Ma'am" he called her, bolstering his message with additional and frightening details. Not fatal, not yet.

She let him talk, and then she thanked him. "I will go on my own," she finally said, definitive and motherly, ushering him away as if he were the one in need of consolation. I could not understand this molasses of time we were swimming in.

"Should I call a taxi?" I asked.

"Don't be silly." Molly insisted she would gather what was needed and we would then drive to the hospital. Well, she would

drive, since she knew the way. Once again, the ring leader in charge of an undisciplined circus.

It was bad, of course. Broken bones, internal injuries and a coma that was to last ten days. There was brain injury that maybe did or did not leave permanent damage, a point that gets debated to this day. It was, then, one of those life changing moments, visible on the big screen, no subtlety, no secret. The only nuance was in the twisted and idiosyncratic way that we processed this as a family. As in, did my parents ever come out? Not for ages. Did I stay? Well, kind of. Or, I tried.

Because my sister needed help. And I still very much wanted to be the good auntie, even as I watched my chance to be a good sister shuffle back into the shadow of habit and old history. As much as I wanted to be helpful, it soon became clear that I was somehow failing to meet the invisible standards required for satisfactory assistance. The cream cheese wasn't chunky enough in the scrambled eggs. I bought the wrong shampoo. And in some indulgent manner tied to my very being, I was undermining the discipline that was required for the proper care and feeding of my niece.

It wasn't for lack of trying. We were, all of us, doing the best we could. Even my parents made a brief appearance, and we used their holiday check for a Charlie Brown Christmas tree and German

chocolates. Salvation Army brought us a turkey and a handful of generic baby toys, and we pretended to be stoic and resourceful. But finally, it was just too hard. I was homesick for California, and my sister wanted her motherhood back.

I love my niece, and yet, for some reason, I am still guilty because of it. And somehow, these many years later, my sister still needs something back from me that I'm not sure how to give.

Ivan Garcia

Por Vidá

Chapter Unó—July 1984

I ache for freedom. These tight cuffs rub my wrists too rough whenever we hit a bump on the road and I know there's still a long ways to go.

My legs are asleep, and so is the small redhead sitting next to me. She's snoring with her head against the window. She's got the right idea, there's no better way to ease the boredom of being stuck in a crowded bus that smells of fuel fumes and sweat than by sleeping.

I envy the redhead. I wish I could calm my mind long enough to drift into a nice nap. By the time I wake I could be in a new place with new people.

They kicked me out of Soledad State Prison for causing an "uproar," which was an unauthorized group gathering during the 4th of July softball game. I was with a few women and their children that came to visit. We ate hot dogs in the grass while guards loomed behind our backs and in the towers. I was discussing how awful the prison staff treated us -- the grubs in the rice and the groping by the guards -- and that we could change it all at any moment, because we outnumber

the badges fifteen to one. I told them there was wrongs we must fix, and nobody else can do it for us except us.

The warden heard about my post-softball speech and had a fit. He accused me of trying to form a gang. He made me out to be a murderous mastermind by citing the shadiest chapters of my alleged history: my central role in a “Mexican-Marxist” labor union, my family ties with the former leader of a Northern California street gang, my refusal to ever take a plea bargain.

Now I’m on my way to a new maxi-security slammer in Sacramento. I felt bad leaving my *comadrés* in Soledad, it had been too long since I had a flock to care for. I lost them the same way I always lost those I love, my passion put them at risk, even if my passion was fighting for them.

Redhead’s sleepy breath forms a haze on the window. I put my finger to the warm fog and write, “*Luchar...Por...*” and the fog fades away before I can scribble anything else.

The bus drives by rows of thin trees with nearly bare branches. People wearing baseball caps and straw hats, with white canvas sacks tied around their waists, walk between the trees and bend over to pick up something from the ground.

“Oh, we’re passing by the almond groves.” I hear a woman in a row behind me say.

“Mmmpphh, I loved almonds,” her seatmate says. “My mother used to make a—”

“Shut the fuck up I’m trynna’ sleep here!” someone growls from the back of the bus.

Almond-girl just wanted to share a nice memory of the past. They should be cherished like treasures, because once you’re locked up nice memories are rarely made.

The almond groves stretch to the horizon until they hit the amber hills, and so do the people. I see a few trees. I see a few people picking food for others to eat. It’s like the workers and neatly arranged rows of trees are part of a painting. They will always be in this same scene.

My heart hurts. My back slumps down on the seat like I’m sinking. I just want to sleep.

I stare out the window, and I know it will be the only thing I can do until the bus finally stops at my new home within a cell block. I start thinking about when I was young and delusional enough to hope I could leave my own endless field that would forever be part of me.

I start thinking of why I’m here. And I hate that I’m doing it all over again.

Por Vidá

Chapter Dós—August 1973

Me and my younger brother Tony would run together all the time: running late to school, late to work, to the U.S. from Mexico, or to race each other for fun. On a savagely hot summer day we were running from a pickup truck chasing us with a pack of white boys in the bed waving baseball bats.

We ran with our arms locked together, a practice Mom made us memorize when we crossed *la frontera*: she said, “If you lose each other in this dark desert, death will find you at any *momentó*.” Our feet kicked up clouds of dust and our backpacks bursting with school supplies and work clothes bounced. The boys behind us laughed at their dangerous game, shouting “*Adios, illegals!*” and “Look at ‘em lil messicans run, they should be join cross-country!”

The boys had been following us for at least a mile. I saw them cruise and creep behind us since we started walking home from Watsonville High. They were popular privileged boys with black and gold varsity jackets and parents with large houses where they could throw wonderful bashes beaners were banned from—save for one Chicana cheerleader. The boys in the truck trailed too slow to ever catch us, but just close enough to make us sweat and remind us we

would always be the runners. When we made it home Mom yelled at me and Tony for getting our school clothes dirty with dust. She whacked me with a fly swatter before I set plates for dinner.

At that point in my life, when I was a fearful 17-year-old making myself *locá* looking for hope in a climate that had proven to be hopeless, it felt like I was living to die. I would wake up on the shared couch of our crowded *casa*, go to school where most teachers couldn't bother to answer questions from kids like me in the back of class who couldn't speak English quickly or confidently enough, go to the strawberry fields for a few hours of harsh repetitive work, and go home to a family of once bright spirits turned tired and dim by the world.

Every person has the point where they can't be pushed any longer, and they themselves begin to push back like a horse who suddenly kicks its owner off its back after being ridden too hard for too long. Imagine what could have happened when thousands of people whose hands nurtured the soil that sprouted California's most lucrative industry reach their point where they won't be pushed any longer. Massive movements were making a mark on the country, I could see it on the Channel 8 news every night. Long-haired white people filled city streets calling for an end to the Vietnam war, Black students stood their ground and occupied libraries demanding

colleges add cultural studies courses, and women of all ages held a big conference in one of those New England states to form Feminist coalitions. People were fighting for their causes and making changes across the country every day as if it were part of the weather forecast. It seemed every group of people had their protests that put them on the television and newspaper front pages. Why couldn't my coworkers, a few hundred Mexicanos and other migrants, star in our own story? This is what I began dreaming of on days when I sat at my quality control station at the Dale Family Farms strawberry field, sorting the ugly berries from the perfect ones.

I sorted berries as effortlessly as I breathed. I excelled in the special gig that was desired by the pickers in the field because I got to sit in a plastic patio chair for most of the day instead of working in the dirt. Box after box I would throw out the misshapen and bruised berries that didn't fit the photogenic fruit standards for supermarkets. We called the battered and browning berries "changós," *monkeys*.

I fixed the flaws they failed to see and I was great at it, one of the only useful talents I could claim at that age. I wasn't a creative soul like my little brother Tony, nor as charismatic as my big brother Carlos, but I could spot a caterpillar in a box of berries as a coworker carried it from the opposite side of *el campó*.

I was a girl with big dreams of becoming a name marked in bold in the history textbook of some future girl frustrated with seeing the hard workers around her starve while the lazy boss men celebrated record profits. Eventually sorting the berries became so easy it bored me, and more of my attention was funneled to my rebellious dreams and observing the happenings of the field.

The pickers progressed slowly along long rows of green patched with bits of red. With backs that bent more uneasily as the day went by they would pull and pick the delicate berry, place the berries in boxes, place the boxes in cardboard crates which would go on wooden pallets that were then carried to trucks that would send the fruits to their final destination for consumption. While we worked the pickers talked, looking over their shoulders for a snooping supervisor, and sang songs of struggle in Español or Tagalog. But mostly they sang the *corridos*, short stories about people from the bottom making it to the top.

On a day when the sun was scorching, the pickers were too busy wiping off sweat and fighting the urge to faint to sing a tune. My face and cranium were well protected with the cowboy hat I borrowed from my Abuelito earlier, but the pickers had no luck in keeping cool. People came back and forth, sometimes every thirty seconds it seemed, to drink from the rusty faucet near my station. Around noon,

with the sun's stinging rays at their highest in the sky, a line began forming behind the faucet and a buzz of impatience ensued.

The line stopped moving. The faucet was not working, perhaps a clump of dirt built up in the pipes. I saw Tony waiting in line, licking his lips and fanning himself.

He got out of his place in line and came to me.

"The heat makes the work twice as hard," he said, sticking his tongue out like a sick dog. "You have to forgive me, I don't think I'll make it to see the sun go down."

Tony had a passion for acting, writing, painting, and all things artsy ever since we made it to the states. Maybe he embraced arts as a means of reconnecting with our Dad, who loved Frida and cheesy American musical movies equally, or maybe Tony would have morphed to be a cultured kid to begin with. Either way, his artsy attitude provided me endless enjoyment in those low days.

"Whatever *hermanito*, you can't die today," I teased. "Who will watch the new Bruce Lee dragon movie with me on Friday?"

"You can watch it with Carlos," he chuckled. "Besides, he likes that Chino more than me. I can't stand all the fighting and *violencia*."

"I don't want to see it with Carlos," I said. "Carlos is too serious, barely talks sometimes. And besides, he's always too busy cruising with his friends to hang with his own *fami- li
á*."

Moments later, a creak of a door cracking open came from the field's office. It was a tan trailer a few feet away from my quality control station, with one window that usually had the sunflower-pattern blinds down. When the windows were up, it was assumed that the eyes of our authoritarian boss were sifting through the workforce in search for someone to yell at for falling behind.

The boss was Adam Dale, but all the workers called him Mr. Dale. He was the head of day-to-day operations on the strawberry field, owner of Dale Fruit Canneries, and president of Dale Family Farms Incorporated, and by extension of all that he was essentially a man who held so much influence in Watsonville's economy that he could force Mayor Fitzgerald to square dance solo in front of the whole town at the Strawberry Festival and nobody would see it as strange.

Mr. Dale stepped out of the trailer, and the sound of his boots crunching the dirt made every worker look up quickly like deer who knew danger was approaching. He was a man as towering as a redwood -- and probably equally hollow in spirit -- who always looked down at you.

Mr. Dale looked at the line behind the non-working water faucet.

"Just what are y'all lazy fuckers doing?" He snapped his fingers. "This ain't no bread line, get to work goddamnit!"

“The water, Mr. Dale, we need it,” said Clyde, an elderly Filipino. “Faucet not working.”

“Well you ain’t working either so I can’t see the problem!” Mr. Dale barked like a dog.

“Boss, *patrón*, come on.” Tony stepped to Mr. Dale timidly. “The sun is hot, the work is hard, and the body can’t work well without water. You want us to work well, don’t you?”

“Your smart spick ass needs to stop thinking so much and start picking! We’ll fix the water.” He turned to the line of people. “Now, we got trucks coming in half an hour to pick those pails up, and I can see y’all got some ways to go to fill up what we got. You do your work, I do mine. I’ll fix the water, *comprende?*”

The crowd reluctantly dispersed, but they desired water. They deserved water. The pickers dragged their feet to the rows and continued their work where they left off.

“Look if you don’t want to work, don’t work,” Mr. Dale said, disappointed with the pace some people were picking at. “We got plenty of new wetbacks waiting to take your spot, water or not.”

I turned to look at my comadre Rosa at the station behind mine; she had her eyes fixed on the box of berries she was sifting through. Rosa was effortlessly beautiful, but behind her hazel eyes as big as quarters I could see an ugly past that compelled her to laugh

even when the jokes I told her weren't so funny. When we first met on the field she was shy, like any recent migrant, but became a chatty *chicá* after I trained her on the sorting routine. She was from Mazatlán and used to catch big swordfish to barbeque with her brothers, and she dreamed of working at the amusement park in Santa Cruz so she could take her son for free. Mr. Dale quickly separated us because our chatting was unproductive. He moved her to the table behind me. That was on her first day of work.

Mr. Dale stood in front of my table and tapped his boots against the dirt, looking pleased at the workers he whipped into submission without ever using a rope. The angry wrinkles around his mouth from always scowling and his stupid cowboy ties he wore each day, seen so close and so shortly after he humiliated my people, made my stomach ill and my skin hot with hate.

And at that moment I was feeling iller than ever. Maybe it was the heat and the hunger from skipping lunch at school, but my brain was buzzing and my heart couldn't handle any more of the sickness I was seeing. Someone had to speak. I stood up from my seat.

"You treat us like machines and we might shut down on you," I said. "*Hoye*, everyone! Let the *patrón* know! We work each dia as hard as we can, so water is the least the boss can do."

Mr. Dale turned his head back as slow as an owl, like he was surprised I could make a sound. He leaned on my table and got his stone-like serious face up into mine.

I looked Mr. Dale in his eyes and said, "You *can't* scare me."

It must have been a first for him, a migrant girl demanding respect. He was thrown off but couldn't let the workers see that for a second, so he resorted to insults.

"Shut your mouth, ungrateful spick bitch," Mr. Dale said.

"You're lucky I'm in a good mood today or I would slap you so hard you'd be picking up teeth in the apple orchard across from us. Know your role girl, sort those berries!"

My eyes drifted down, my hands formed fists under the table. If I could, I would. And that's how I always thought, it was an excuse in a way to hold me back. I could, but I would get fired and yelled at by Mom and have to sacrifice a bit of our familia's income.

So not that day, no. Not as the pickers, including Tony, stood silently waiting to see if I would become a savior or another victim of a vagrancy charge courtesy of Mr. Dale's brother, the Police Chief Joseph Dale. I sat back down and sorted berries until the blue sky was littered with skinny orange clouds and my hands became red with the fruit's juice.

Me and Tony got a ride after work from a worker who lived in our apartment complex. We sat in the back of a truck, like the boys who had chased us earlier. I asked Tony why did he go back to work, why would he accept another day of Mr. Dale's maliciousness.

"I'm scared, wouldn't even know what to do without our work," he said.

"Well, it doesn't have to be like that forever," I assured him. "You have to want the change."

I felt bad trying to belittle Tony into feeling like he had to act, because I backed down that day too, and I was just as scared of change as my little brother.

The difference was that Tony, the sweet soul that he was, was scared to fight regardless of the good it would bring. I was scared to keep living like we were, and I was going to do anything to make things better for me, for Tony, for my people picking to provide riches for some bigot.

That night I skipped dinner. I didn't want to talk to Mom about how sick work was making me, she would only scold me and say I should thank God for the wages. And the others at the table, my Tia Gloria and her little daughter Sofia, uncle Miguel in his oil-stained mechanic jumper, and Abuelito, would not understand my dilemma. They didn't have time for my problems, they were tired.

Carlos came home in the middle of dinner. He told me and Tony to come to the apartment's parking lot to help him. In the trunk of his Monte Carlo were a few cartons of beer and one keg. Carlos planned to have a party soon.

Back inside home my stomach growled, so I distracted myself by watching *Mary Tyler Moore* in the living room with Abuelito. He stared at the screen, he didn't understand any English but was fascinated watching Americans have fun so freely. "*Esos wedós son pendejos, no?*" he would comment. I lost myself in the show, laughing like I could relate to Mary's life. She was a hero to me then; unlike the historical figures like Zapata and Lincoln I so idolized, Mary was a normal woman working a normal job and she had so much fun doing it. I thought of how nice it would be to work in an office full of funny friends. But then I realized there was no girls that looked like me in Mary's quirky office full of fun, good looking, white people.

I settled in and went to sleep on the sofa I shared with little Sofia. I was trying to force some hope that the day to come would be less miserable at work, because every day was becoming an extension of yesterday's sickness. I tossed and turned trying not to cry. Many times I would kick Sofia at the end of the couch and wake her. "Sorry," I whispered.

I dreamed I was driving a black pickup truck. My foot was stomping down the pedal and Mr. Dale ran for his life barely ahead of the front bumper. Tony was sitting next to me sticking his head out the window, howling like a wolf, then roaring like a lion. We were wild! And in the bed of our death truck was a group of fellow field workers who swung their short-handled hoes and threw boxes of berries at our old boss. A box of fruit smashed on the hood and juice splattered on the window. A single drop made its way on my tongue -- it was the sweetest thing I would ever taste.

I woke smiling. Tony tapped the top of my head.

"The bathroom is empty," he said. "Get up before Tia Gloria goes in there to make her hair."

I dreamed frequently. But my dreams were often nightmares where I felt trapped and helpless. But that one where we made Mr. Dale feel our fear was different, a breath of fresh air through fantasy. It was like a nice TV show where everything was in its right place. It was a dream that I wanted to continue when I went back to sleep again. But I knew I couldn't.

So I had to bring the dream to real life.

Jeff Barnard

A Dog and His Man

I know you wish that I'd play even more;
You greet me jumping, wiggling, tail all wag.
You know that playing is what you are for
Will you forgive me if with age I lag?
You are part wolf and weigh a hundred ten,
And you would starve before you did me harm.
To show how threats to me or mine you'd rend,
You bark at cars or mail in great alarm.
You're not my best friend; I'm perhaps not yours.
You pity my weak ears, retarded nose---
At least I cook well and can sure stroke fur---
To show your gratitude you chew my clothes.
Adoring looks; you'll take me as I am?
Or do you mean "Shut up now, pass the ham."

Jeff Barnard

Brain Damage

Can't remember whether I meant
To write free or blank verse---
And what's worse I can't remember the difference.

Anyhow my mind is blank, my paper free of scribble.
Maybe I'm ready to write a hybrid.
You know I got hit too many times.
My mind works kind of funny, you want to call that working.

So I tapped my head, maybe knock something knocked out back in,
Line them neurons up like chorus girls kicking or even a car
show....but,
Out falls in airplane, old fashioned, biplane, no pilot, figures.

Up near my skull's top are big lights like stars but better.
Down below the horses race around the emerald oval.
In between a void that could be a meditating monk's wet dream.

Tapped my heart, mostly women and children---
At least they aren't in lifeboats, my heart is
Not the Titanic in spite of those icebergs it slips between.

Tapped my belly; a little over-sized and more gurgles than I usually
notice:
Plus a sex drive with no one at the wheel.

Good thing my wife's up on the bridge of whatever ship this is,
navigating.

Anyway, that was the short tour.

I could go into more detail

But I think it's time to cut you off--

You might wind up writing like I do, you want to call it writing.

Shannon Boyle

Metamorphosis

Hey remember me
Your little butterfly girl
The one with golden crusted hair
And a rainbow colored spirit
I'm the one you turn to for smiles and a warm embrace
The one that shares your trouble and feeds you hope
Starry eyed with twinkles to spare
Who strays the lonely from despair and guides the lost romantically to
euphoric liberation...
Don't fret haggard and weary wanderer
Fear not the unknown
Gratefully tread with mindfulness and find the truth that lies behind
the wicked
Forget me not when the sun hides and the clouds turn grey with doubt
If I may die before I wake... know
I was never better
Though I may have cried when times were meant for laughter
And I may have found shelter on unstable ground
And was known to let haunting memories creep in too deep
I know now, as you should learn from my example,
That the cobwebs will clear and the spiders will befriend
To remind you of delicate and distant dreams
That by patience and hard work — rewards will be reaped
Eternally yours I'll remain,
Unchained from limitation and resentment

Hinder-less faith-filled —
fulfilled
Your little butterfly girl
Nature eroded
Flowers, sticks, and tics
Trusted my feet and my friend
and rising through ashes
I will take to the sky like the Phoenix

Victoria Carr

Ode to Chocolate

My deep and dark and craved lust
Who would suspect your hold on me?
Your sweet caress, one dose a must
For every day- I wait for thee.

How furtively I sneak away
To cradle you upon my tongue.
In secret I return each day,
All burdens fall, my cares are flung.

Once more I rise on scented bliss;
My peace begins upon your touch.
I dream, I drink your sugared kiss-
Can lovers fair give one so much?

Awash with pleasure, rich and smooth
Could I be lone in this escape?
From flowing warmth I halt to move
Wary to slight your fleeting shape.

I know, my love, you soon shall pass
from hungered lips to melt away-
Return I to my life and task
Left charmed again by you today.

Victoria Carr

Tribute to Carson (2006)

The heart, indeed is a lonely hunter
It panteth after it knoweth not.
Breathless it rends the mind asunder
Its mournful cry in every thought.

Who can rest from its daily toil?
Imaginations don't soothe the pain.
From righteous peace it doth recoil—
Hunger's assault prevails again.

O! To be free from such a curse!
This longing ache for something not.
The famished heart bears something worse
Than death by vainest battles fought.

Tell, O tell this ravening beast
There's nothing left but what's before.
Beat back these restless pangs at least,
The heart's but flesh, and nothing more!

Tanya R. Fadem

North Carolina

Down yonder, round the bend,

thick forests crowd bucolic roads, tangled canopy

labyrinth. Poison Ivy, copperheads, beehives;

noisy cicadas rouse after seventeen-years,

shed protective casings, abandon their shells

to hang, cling like ornaments in the forest.

Fried okra, boiled peanuts, sweet potato pie,

toothless grannies rock on broken porches,

spit-cans by their ankles; watching, waving.

Walnut brown barns, hay cover floors, amber

tobacco bundles sway like bats hanging in the eaves.

Y'all, You'ns, We'ns, Us'ns.

Limestone quarries gouge the earth's

crust to dig up countertops.

Tarheels, rural routes, party-line telephones,

outhouses, and good ol' boys.

Yer not from our neck-of-the-woods.

Blue Ridge Mountains, Appalachian Trail,

the Nantahala River flows with

Cherokee tears, winding 'round

dangerous curves. Kudzu grows

a viral blanket conceals forgotten

toys, forsaken cars, and bigotry like southern charm:

Yes ma'am. No ma'am. Bless yer heart.

Tanya R. Fadem

The Pelicans

The birds, they fly for her today
Along the road that skirts the bay
On ancient wing, steady and true
They dip and soar as tears accrue,
And hopes arise then slip away.

Intent they fly, a wall of gray
A solemn escort underway,
They travel long, on wind anew
The birds, they fly for her.

In unison they make their way.
Did they foresee heart's disarray?
And come to soothe and calm imbue?
Gliding, skimming above the slough
Each beat of wing bids hope to stay.
The birds, they fly for her.

Josephine Fellows

Memories of a Childhood in Newcastle

I stood upon the top back step
and yelled across the lane
“Hey! Janet can you come and play
for once, there is no rain.”

Her face appeared at her door,
and smiling back at me,
“Let’s go and get our bikes,” she said
“ride them down towards the sea.”

We met out on the dirty lane
and pedaled down the way.
Right down to the muddy Tyne
that would lead us to the bay.

The sun it shone upon our backs
and warmed our tiring bones.
It glinted off the water’s edge
in grey and muddy tones.

We pedaled fast, we pedaled slow,
we swerved from side to side.
The sea was getting closer,
were we going to beat the tide?

At last we reached the Great North Sea
laid our bikes down on the ground.
We stumbled down the stony steps
t'ward the sanctuary we'd found.

We tore off our clammy shoes and socks
and paddled in the shore.
The icy waves lapped at our toes
whilst we watched the Black Terns soar.

We took a sandwich from our pack
and lay down on black sand.
We ate and laughed and talked and sang,
whilst our bare arms slowly tanned.

The tide had crept along the beach,
the sun was sinking low.
We were having such a lovely day,
but it was nearly time to go.

So back onto our bikes we climbed
waving goodbye to the sea.
We had better get a move on
to make it home in time for tea.

At last we arrived back at our doors
to Mother's angry glare.
We wanted to tell her about our day,
but knew we didn't dare.

We ate our tea, then bath, then bed
with blankets tucked in tight.
What adventures would tomorrow bring?
Maybe our dreams will tell us tonight.

Lawrence Harris

When in Love We Love the Air and the Day

When in love we love the air and the day
And the night, abandoned streets, the next word.
Still, there's struggle to give ourselves away.

Own your own heart against false feet of clay.
Face your own face; see the eye not the herd.
When we love we love the air and the day.

It's the humble heart that is thrown away.
It's the lonely one scared of being stirred.
That's the struggle to give ourselves away.

Everyone teeters along their own way
And tread their path amid the callous word.
When in love we love the air and the day.

Pilgrims, we go through our everyday.
Hope floats, flies on wings of cursory birds.
There's still struggle to give ourselves away.

Your wound is where your genius is at play.
Sing in the beauty that can be transferred.
When we love we love the air and the day.

Still, there's struggle to give ourselves away.

Alex Harvin

Their Order

Are there souls inside the men around me?
These men are not programmed for emotion.
Their sentiments now calculations.
Cold, precise, steel knifing through their bloodstreams.
Beneath their skin colorful circuit boards
compute their upkeep from tech manuals.

They clip the wings of eagles and round up
wild horses and writings in metal pens.
These men slash paintings with warning labels,
wrap thick police tape around museums
and cast books in a penitent fire.

Reason greases their machine in service.
Looking to enlist me -- without myself.
Just one more cog in their ticking gearbox.

What a thrill it would be to cause chaos.
To terrify a student with Shakespeare,
or to kill a soldier with a poem,
to frighten a politician with love,
even to scare a lawyer with Dalí.
So marvelous it would be to go through
the streets with my sword drawn writing sonnets.

Ashley Kohaut

Origins

Ivory surface,
my physical sin.
This pigment
but a burden.
These veins
pump hate
of ancestral wrongs.
Bleed them out
'til your wounds
feel healed.
"I'm sorry"'s
insufficient.
Words,
with no action.
Ongoing cycles of
talking not walking.
If skin is our division,
strip me of such.
Try it on, and feel
its ignorance.

Pam Schierer

Vegas Bodies

You keep the cigarette in your hand lit
so no one can pass you stripper fliers
as you walk down the strip loudly lit
by hourglass outlines trying to outshine
the grime in every gap.

A man sets his stack on the trashcan
whispers *Wanna buy some crack?* Behind you,
lithe mannequins wear glitter straps, a man roots
to his stool, plays his odds
as kaleidoscopic women teeter on heels
balance trays of shots and you still

seek something real

You pay for the Bodies Exhibit, roam displays
of bones, bleached as beach wood
translucent inkblots of brain tissue
a bramble of veins float arm-shaped
with filament web fingertips.

Those rose quartz lungs in a plastic case
and black ones, that once held air
and box to drop
your cigarette in

in case you choose to quit then and there.
Vertical slides of an entire
body sliced
and segmented, exposed files. A pregnant
torso complete with fetus, her
lips kiss the umbilical stump.

You could touch the skinless jerky
of chemically-preserved prisoners
the plum of chemicals
cloud the room like a funeral
for every human sample.

So you buy a pen as you leave
it looks like a needle full of blood, there
for you to inject every word
with something human.

Artemis Seay

The City

There are three things I wish to tell you about the city:

1. Every day is lived fast.
2. Every day is lived with enmity.
3. Every day is lived like it's the last.

Because it could be.

It booms with oiled gunshots that slip out of barrels like gold coins from a coin slot. Where beggars are nothing more than haggard shadows that waver in the light of bright bustling buildings. Bridges of flaking paint and parks with shambled slides. Streets caked with grime and critters that emerge from the cracks of fractured lines. Mothers with three children and one bedroom apartments they are bound to lose, and boys who choose the wiles of the street over universities. Children not to go out at night in fear of humanity's distilled bite.

I see the vastness of space with no stars hanging. I see hurt friends and trodden relatives. People who will cut through one another just to live. And the real trip is: is that this feels natural, as if any other way would be a disgrace to the beauty of such a place.

But I wish to see the stars.

I fly a red eye inconspicuously treading the night sky, and I hope to see some distant suns in abundance, high up from the light the city bleeds in bundles below. I look out through square windows and see stars gut through the atmosphere, disappointed they are so far away.

Below the city shimmers.

Exposed.

Its insides smear across the land's surface, veins pump, organs splay, writhing. Lights stich together and pulse against the hard-black blanket.

It screams to me:

Here! Look here! See this beating machine!

Artemis Seay

The Thumping That Curates My Life

It's a beat
my father taught me
during those formative days,
learning what the world is.

His voice
baritone, wordy.
His fists
two oil drums – hard,
cacophonous.

He played
of the *Thump*
Thump
Thump
that lived
in the granite walls of his mind.

The world is out to get you.
He pounded the rhythm into my being.
I'll make you believe it.

Now, three thousand miles
from his melody, I can't
stop the thumping of my heart
when I go
out for coffee,
out for a walk,

out for a friend -
during the time when I'm
just trying to live
with the fragile love
he taught me
to be suspicious of.

Rebecca Shiraev

Black's Beach

I have gone naked
Into the Pacific.

It's true.

We should all wander
Nude
Into an ocean at some time
Or other.

The startling thing
Amid the glittering
Giggling waves
Was not icy tides
Or sunny, slippery looks

But how little courage
It actually took
To bare myself
To that small sliver
Of the whole wide
Shining world.

Marsha Taylor

To My Twin Sister

In those very crucial months, we were growing side by side,
our gracious God had given us the miracle of life.

A purpose he had planned for us, before it was our time,
and then we started on that path in June of '59.

We went through many stages, which were not all cute and fun,
the crying stage and biting stage, it all had just begun.

In two years we conspired, while we held each other's hands,
in a language of our own, which no one could understand.

We climbed every obstacle, to reach what we couldn't see,
first I climbed on your back, while you lifted up with your knees.
We pursued many challenges as the years rolled on by,
holding hands and laughing, through it all, our parents survived.

It's told; once we ventured out on a warm and sunny day,
we climbed a five foot fence and across a padded gate.

We wandered far away from home, running with a smile,
we crossed a busy street, as we reached the end of a mile.

And many loving neighbors were out searching everywhere,
the concern was soon growing in this little town that cared.
It lasted several hours as the night began to fall,
then the good news was shouted from a quaint hole-in-the-wall.

There you and I were seated in a restaurant eating bread,
while the smell of home cooking kept us waiting to be fed.
It was a day to be thankful for those who searched and prayed
for He, who sent his angels on that warm and sunny day.

The many years of memories and stories that are told,
showed nothing was impossible for twins so strong and bold.
With each unique endeavor we discovered something new,
and consequences taught us to continue, but improve.

Throughout the years we traveled, many places we called home,
and while we said goodbye to friends, I never felt alone.
You'll always be my stronger half, a gift from God above,
for we shared a life together, we have cried, laughed and loved.

Many years have passed us by; lessons learned in life were taught,
we cheered each other's purpose, in our separate lives apart.
You live among the angels now, and watching over me,
and looking in the mirror, there's a part of you I see.

Jeff Barnard

Stamp Collectors

The yellow clapboard split-level, paint peeling, sagged around a cracked driveway in an “L” shape. The top floor of the split was square, over the garage, shaped like a blockhouse, the window facing the road with a circular hole in the middle, staring out at the empty prairie as though on the lookout for attack from the Indians who once lived here. The only other houses I could see were some rooftops silhouetted over a ridge top three miles away; the last house I’d passed on the way out here was a paintless ruin falling into the grass and brush around it, not visible from here. I left the engine running, nose pointed to the road, and stepped out on the gritty tarmac, walking around to put the car between me and the house, turning sideways to make a smaller target, before I called, “Hello? Hello the house! Is anyone home?” But there was no response, the only sound the wind whipping through the tall grass, the only movement the low clouds scudding along through the big sky. I walked toward the door, checking the dusty windows as best I could. The door was hanging a few inches open, and I knocked, and called again, heard no response, and felt no movement in the house, although I could faintly smell the odor of old, burned meat.

I pushed the door open and stared. Whoever it was had died hard. Chains still bound the desiccated corpse to the wood fired range, arms spread, legs sagging. The face was a dried rictus of agony, the clothes on the front a partly intact dressing gown, but from where I stood it looked like the flesh of the back had burned off along with that part of the clothes, the blackened bones of the ribs and vertebra visible. I'd unconsciously taken a step or two in, but now turned, made for the door, and I think I ran down the driveway. Being the hard-boiled detective type who has seen everything, I managed to make it to the ditch across the road before I vomited all the Denny's build-your-own breakfast I'd had a couple of hours previously, mostly missing my shoes. I felt dizzy, and moved down the ditch and sat. There were some pretty violet-blue bell shaped flowers growing amid the grass there, and I wondered idly why there should be so much beauty along with so much ugly, and how come I'd seen those flowers a million times and never learned their name, and how come I had seen and knew what to call so many more types of death than flowers. Then I remembered that I was supposed to call 9-1-1, and did so, and I tried to remember what I was supposed to tell them while it rang. But the 9-1-1 dispatcher was on the line before I could think of anything, and since I couldn't think of anything I just recited, the way I had recited so many

times: "This is retired police officer and paramedic Edward Etlely, state PI number 2005868."

"What number? Could you slow down please?"

"I'm here with a DBF. "

"Yes. *Where* are you with a DBF?"

I could hear myself doing that voice register change I used to do when shit hit the fan, sounding, as one of my colleagues put it: "as though you just woke up and the patient was next to you in bed, and the more fucked up the patient is, the more you sound like you're going back to sleep." One of my instructors called it "parasympathetic rebound" -- you get so fight-or-flight, your vegetate-recuperate boomerangs in. So I knew I was sounding like that and 9-1-1 was trying to figure out what I'd taken, and I once again could not, could not pull myself together to sound like whatever cool, yet deeply concerned, kind of thing you're supposed to sound like if this was some movie where you find somebody tortured to death out in the middle of nowhere.

And I wasn't even doing all that 9-1-1 shit anymore, I'd taken accounting, become a forensic accounting major for Christ's sake, and here I was, hands shaking the cell phone against my ear, sounding like a junkie on the nod, trying to talk: "I'm about 5 miles out from 22 on something called Jenkins Road, I don't see any house numbers."

“Are there mile-posts?”

“Probably, I don’t see any from here.”

“And you are with a dead body?”

“It’s in the house, wherever this is on Jenkins Road.”

“Listen, do you want me to coach you on CPR while I get emergency services rolling?”

In the background, I could hear another dispatcher paging something called Unit 41, and Engine 2063 -- I wasn’t sure there were 2,063 people in the county but I guess “Engine 2063” sounded better than “red volunteer pick-up truck.” My hands were shaking and I could tell by the fast belly expansion-contraction of my egg stained, maybe authentic, maybe e-bayed from China Beatles at Shea Stadium t-shirt, that I was hyper-ventilating. I really should lose some weight, I thought, a guy with a gut like this really looks really bad hyper-ventilating. What if I was passed out in the ditch when 9-1-1, whoever’s pick-up they were, whatever Unit 41 was, arrived? I guess I forgot to say anything back to dispatch while I got lost in my thoughts.

“Hello?” she said.

“I think it’s a little past CPR,” I said.

“I can help you. You want to turn the body face up.”

“Actually, I don’t. It’s hard to turn anyway because it’s chained to a wood stove, and there’s a lot of tissue necrosis kind of sticking

everything to the stove.... I don't think Jesus could save this one. I don't think they'd want to get saved, either." Then I puked again, this time getting my shoes pretty good.

"Sir," dispatch kept saying. I had the feeling she was a volunteer explorer scout -- we used to call them "exploder" scouts when I worked ambulance... I got lost in memories again. "Sir? *Sir?*"

I wiped my mouth off on the sports coat jacket Chrissie, my son's wife, had given me. It was a nice jacket, a tweed hounds tooth, she said it would make me look like Sherlock Holmes. Actually, nothing would make me look like Sherlock Holmes, except maybe the fact we'd both had trouble with cocaine, now that Robert Downey Jr., fresh from martial arts and personal trainers, had played him. Although it sometimes comforted me to know that Robert Downey also liked cocaine.

"Yeah."

"Are you inebriated?"

"God, I wish."

"Are you high on something?"

"I'm high on the real thing. Nowadays they call it PTSD. When I was your age they called it 'You're fired'."

"I'm sorry sir. Thank you for your service, sir."

“Fuck me for my service, kid. Just get somebody competent out here. Okay? I just want to be left alone to puke on my shoes. Okay? Thank you very much.”

I hung up. The phone started to ring again. Of course it was 9-1-1. Beautiful. I looked down at myself. I already knew I had a three-day stubble, that I was 50 pounds overweight and that it had been 45 years since I was doing tournament martial arts. The 9-1-1 responders were probably a drop-dead beautiful 20-year-old EMT and her Dad, and Unit 41 was probably a movie star picking up background after slipping the county supervisors big G and a promise of making a movie here in What-The-Fuck, Great Plains. I decided to light a cigarette to complete the self-portrait, hearing a siren in the distance. Maybe drop-dead’s Dad would have a surge of whatever the over-protective hormone is and shoot me where I sat. I was okay with that. Chrissie would be really upset, though, I think the jacket took a paycheck, plus all the dry-cleaning I’d had to do every three days since she’d given it to me. Clothes may make the man, but he’s some other man and wouldn’t speak to me if we were going to hell in the same handcart.

When it came over a rise about 200 yards back up Jenkins from me I could see a big 41 on top of the roof. A blue and white. I’d read somewhere that was supposed to make cops seem more friendly than black and whites. I saw a very large brown hand open the door as

it pulled off the road, not quite in the ditch, and a very large, well-polished brown cowboy boot hit the grit, and a very tall young woman unfolded herself from the driver's seat, hand under her navy tweed coat in back, wearing a bolo tie with a green agate in the center of a powder blue blouse. I couldn't really see how she was built upstairs because of the Kevlar vest but the legs looked good, if you like them massive, under the charcoal gray slacks. The guy whose clothes made him would definitely speak to her, but she was silent, obsidian black eyes unwavering on me as she walked to about fifteen feet away, face expressionless, or rather with the expression I knew well 'cause I'd worn it so often, the one that gives nothing. She stood there for a second, then said, "Our dispatcher called you out to me as a man having a psychological emergency. Are you having a psychological emergency, sir?"

I pondered this for a moment. Was I having an emergency? It seemed more like just my life story's latest vignette. Absolutely typical, in fact. "No."

"Maybe our dispatcher was having one. She also said something about a dead body. You look more like a digestive emergency to me sir. "

"The dead body is inside. I just have a weak stomach. You shouldn't let Girl Scouts dispatch. "

"She's in her 50's, just a little excitable. She also said you refused to do CPR."

"I think you'll refuse too. We're about six months late on that CPR stuff."

"I'm alone here sir. I hope you'll understand I have to handcuff you. I'm going to handcuff you and put you in my backseat. Will you make that easy for me sir." It was not a question.

"I'm going to turn around and put my hands out and make it easy for you, officer. I was a cop once and a paramedic for a lot longer. I believe making things easy is the best way to go."

"Thank you, sir," I heard her say as I turned around, and just like that the cuffs were on. I've always had respect for people that could move fast. And then I was leaning against the car while she thoroughly searched me, using no more pressure than necessary; it was almost exciting, although bondage was never my thing. What was actually more surprising was that I had not even the most fleeting desire to kill her. She took me by the elbow. It wasn't a hard grip, just guiding, sort of like being guided by a large titanium robot that had been programmed not to damage me, but I got this feeling that the pressure could easily be increased until my elbow fractured. "Please have a seat..." Her voice was a bell-like contralto, and she opened the door and eased me into the back seat. "I've got the heater on. Is it too

hot?" She spoke like an airline stewardess would if God ran an airline. "I think I'll turn off your car's ignition too, sir, how about that?"

"Oh, thanks," I said. I really couldn't remember being grateful for how nice someone was about frisking, cuffing and putting me in a squad car before, and I was experienced. I heard her boots crunching away. One of the nice things about getting older lately had been this ability to fall in love multiple times each day without all the bother of lust and planning and thinking about relationships. I didn't even limit it to women any more, I fell in love with trees, my zucchini plants, old men walking their dogs, the dogs themselves... I was thinking about all the objects of my love for just the past few days when I heard her steps crunching quickly now. My love made me concerned, such a nice young lady, but another few years of 9-1-1 and she'd become a bitter old lady, and I'd have started it. I turned around; her back was turned and she was heaving into the ditch pretty near where I'd left my Denny's build-your-own. My prophecy was already coming true.

The door opened. "Maybe you could step out," she said. I did so. "I don't think either of us is the kind of person to be in close quarters with right now. Maybe you could turn around."

I did so and the cuffs came off. "Thanks," I said, a little surprised.

“I don’t think you’re someone who will go hostile on me. If you do, I don’t think you can outrun me. Now some ID please.”

At that point my old training ran through my mind and she, sensing something, stepped back, her hand going to her belt, and I said, “It’s okay, if I knew the address I’d write your mother a thank you note.”

“What?”

“I said, if I knew.”

“I heard you. Do you say things like that all the time?”

“Too often, probably. It’s kind of like Tourette’s but instead of cursing I say what I really have going on. Which is sometimes what people don’t want to hear.”

“Okay, so we’re stuck here for a while. Shit, forgot to call the coroner. And the crime lab. Fuck. Don’t make me fucking prove anything, I’m a little distracted.” She reached into the front seat and started talking on the radio. She had to repeat her ID a couple of times and spell Coroner, and then identify him as Doctor Richards, and then tell dispatch the number of the crime lab. I began to understand what she meant by dispatch being a psychological emergency when she closed with, “No, we definitely do not have CPR in progress.”

She turned to me and sighed, folding her hands across her chest. “Her father’s a state senator. McDonald’s wouldn’t hire her.” She

looked out at the prairie for a few seconds. Maybe hoping for the Indians. “Okay,” she said, business voice. “Now your ID.”

I said, “Can I reach into my front pocket.”

“Better you than me,” she said.

I handed her my wallet. “Driver’s license on the left pocket, PI on the right. You can look through it all if you want.”

Standing closer to me she seemed even taller. At medium height I was just about the right size to breast feed. She saw my gaze and said, “Don’t even think about it.”

“I’m married,” I said, holding out the band of gold. “And I’m too old for even your mother, probably your grandmother, but I’m still grateful to them. And I love you for being so intuitive about what I was thinking.”

“Okay, consider the skids greased or the condom lubed or wherever your mind is going, as long as you know it can’t get there, and tell me how you happened to stumble on a body that’s been tortured to death out here in the middle of nowhere. But first let me finish taking you up on that kind wallet offer. Hmmm...what’s an American Philatelic Society.”

“America’s biggest stamp collectors’ club.”

“Really? If I find out later it’s some weird sex thing I’m going to find you and make you incapable of doing whatever it is you all do at your orgies.”

“No really, philately means love of stamps.”

“Okay, now tell me about you being here with the dead body.”

“It’s my daughter in law,” I said.

“That’s your daughter in law? In there?”

“No, my daughter in law is in Berkeley, California. She hired me to investigate, maybe negotiate with, that person -- or a person on Jenkins Road. She sent me a Google map and it’s a yellow house five miles from the highway so I stopped here.”

“So your daughter in law from Berkeley sends you out to western Kansas from Detroit to investigate or negotiate.... what?”

“She’s an idealist. And works for or with different land conservancy outfits. So it turns out this person here -- if it’s Marcia Bean -- owns a great big swath of prairie, which there isn’t much of left, apparently, any more, and one of those outfits wants to buy it. And she’s got a daughter in Chicago who’s on the same page as my daughter in law, and owns a smaller piece, a son in Cleveland who owns some adjoining land and could be persuaded, maybe. But the family isn’t close, I guess, and they were unable to reach her, and the phone got disconnected, so my daughter in law hired me, kind of. I

might mention that some oil companies are interested, so there is a time element here."

"Looks like you're going to have to tell her negotiations are stalled."

"She's a nice girl, I told you, an idealist. I don't like to tell her about things like this."

"Hmm," she said. Her eyes were open, but she was somewhere inside behind them. I looked around, trying to enjoy the view. I felt comfortable with -- I read the name tag -- Deputy Rojas. That's the kind of thing both my shrink and meditation instructor had taught me, think about, pay attention to, where I am now. Of course it's a good survival skill, too.

"What exactly is it you do? Investigate?"

"I investigate whatever I'm paid to investigate."

Actually when Chrissie told me we were trying to outflank a bunch of oil companies I hadn't wanted it. I knew they played dirty and I was all through sticking my neck out. I'd made some excuses about how busy I was. But she'd said, "Please, Daddy Eddy, it's your specialty. It involves money and tax breaks and all those kinds of things." I could see her wide innocent eyes over the phone, decided this time I'd be firm with her, learn to say no, pay attention to my own

needs, know that I didn't need to prove anything, just like the therapist said, and heard myself tell her:

"Sure honey, if you think it's important."

So here I was with Deputy Rojas, responding, "I'm a private eye with training in forensic accounting."

"So you investigate numbers?"

"Yeah." Of course, sometimes the people who were involved with, perhaps massaging, those numbers, took this personally. But at least the numbers themselves were nice and quiet. I did not want to go into this with Deputy Rojas. "Because I do that I also have some knowledge of the tax code and how donations work, so Chrissie thought I would be a good person to find Ms. Bean and negotiate with her."

"And you were a cop?"

"About nine months."

"Not long. What happened?"

"I was kind of an idealist. I thought I could help people who were being picked on by criminals, beat up by their husbands."

"And?"

"I found out a lot of people like to stay in the situation they're in."

Actually I got unglued on a husband who was pimping out his 15-year-old wife and enforced discipline by tying her up and dripping dippers of boiling water on her. My partner was new too so while I was breaking different bones in Mr. Pimp's face we hadn't secured Mrs. Pimp, and she stuck a shiv in under the Kevlar and nicked my kidney. The husband sued the department, of course, and won a full facial plastic surgery reconstruction. Since I'd been stabbed, and there was a scandal, the easiest thing for the department to do was to get the DA to agree to immunity and I resigned, no disability claim, but no criminal charges on me, either.

"Yes, that's true. And there was something a little more, right?"

"No charges were filed. My shrink says I'm emotionally hyper-labile."

"And then you were a medic? An emotionally hyper-labile medic?"

"Yeah. I liked being a medic because every now and then you could actually do something good. But I had kids and it got harder. Then it got too hard."

My 19th year. We'd pronounced her brother dead on scene, found her sister in back, tied in the yard, a mass of cuts, burns, and bruises, unconscious, malnourished, deep in shock. I was attending, in

the back, didn't realize for a few minutes that my partner had completely lost it until he turned around and said, "Where's the ER?" Meaning, the one he'd been driving to for sixteen years.

I turned back, and the little girl opened her eyes, just for a second, and smiled at me through her ruined face, then closed her eyes again -- and stopped breathing. I already had the IV in, I called in and got the order for dopamine because it was a doc who knew me. I had her tubed, CPR in progress, the firefighter with us had taken over driving while my partner did compressions and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" over and over again. He walked out of the ambulance as soon as we backed into the loading dock at the ER. No one ever saw him again.

And not a goddamn bit of what we did worked. She just stayed dead. The doctor told me that she could have died in the ER and nothing would have worked.

They told me later I'd written a good, factual report. The DA found that and my precise, calm demeanor at trial were very helpful in securing a conviction. But convictions weren't bringing back any dead kids.

We had started doing post-traumatic stress debriefings by then, so me and the firefighter and two of the cops and a shrink who'd been a medic in Vietnam talked about how we were. It was supposed to help, and maybe it did. But I was somebody else after that;

technically competent, but an emotional disaster. I couldn't sleep, it seemed like that had taken a cap off, and every piece of violence I'd ever seen back to my Dad beating my Mom came roaring back in my dreams. I'd see my kids and start to cry, and get up and check they were okay five or six times a night. I was always angry. Fortunately, I had a reputation as a good guy; they took me off the rig for my last six months and put me on supply, where I mostly didn't have to talk to anybody, and everybody I did have to talk to kept nice and calm.

Deputy Rojas was calling me as I ran off down memory lane. "Sir. Mr. Etley. Talk to me." She had her hand on my arm. It was a big, nice hand; I stared at it, followed it up the sleeve to Deputy Rojas, and out to the background. "Remember your feet" -- one of my trainer's voices came back to me. I remembered my feet, which made me sink slightly, and said, "Sorry."

"Maybe you are having a psychological emergency?"

"I have them every day sometimes. You know they say someone has loose screws. Well, I have a loose wire. And it's the wire that goes to my left frontal cortex. I'm just not always here. I especially hate seeing people who've been burned. I have PTSD. My brain does not work like I hope yours does."

"Well, I hope mine is working."

And then came the red pick-up truck with the county fire logo attached and the ambulance cab on the back. Out came a guy in his forties, in overalls, and a very young looking lady who I thought might, sometime after she reached puberty, become drop-dead beautiful.

“Hey Chief, kind of ugly here,” Deputy Rojas said. “We just need someone to pronounce. Woman inside’s been burned to death, on purpose, months ago. Kind of mainly thinking about scene preservation.”

“Right,” he said, shaking hands with her and turning to me, short, powerful-looking, red blonde hair growing bald and a few pounds overweight but looking like he could still carry a ball through a line. “I’m the Fire Chief/EMT, Sven Larson. We’re all volunteers here. This is my daughter, Heidi. She’s the volunteer paramedic when she’s not up in school becoming a doctor.”

I shook his hand and hers. “I’m Ed Etley and I was a paramedic too, once, ‘til I lost my nerve.”

Rojas said, “He’s a licensed investigator and forensic accountant who discovered the body.”

He gave me a look of assessment. “Lost your nerve. I don’t believe you.” Suddenly I liked him a whole lot.

“It’s really bad in there,” I said, looking from him to the impossibly young girl.

She looked at me, corn flower blue eyes, blonde hair blowing, like a shampoo commercial for pubescent girls of impossible innocence. “That would be my job then. We’ll take the monitor in for documentation.” He grabbed the heart monitor and defibrillator out of the back and followed his daughter in.

They were in about 30 seconds; I guess she really did run a strip because the white tape was protruding out with a nice flat line on it. He went to the ditch and started heaving. She came up to Rojas, calm and expressionless, except her eyes had changed color, a dull blue now. I remembered needing to look like she looked; calm and collected, ashes inside.

Rojas switched on the phone and Heidi said, “Body appears to be in advanced state of decomposition and desiccation with no electrical activity in the heart. Cause of death may be burns but too much time has elapsed to be certain. This person meets county and state criteria for not beginning resuscitative effort. End of report.”

That was when the Sheriff drove up; it was a black Crown Vic, maybe the last in the state, but purring smoothly. A tall skinny gray-haired fellow wearing a dark suit got out. He’d parked on the side of the road where Fire Chief Larsen was still puking and inspected the contents from our various piles.

He walked up to Rojas and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Mass casualty food poisoning or just one DBF?” he said.

“Funny,” said Rojas.

“Okay, tell me about it.” He turned to me. “You found her, you talk first. I’m Sheriff Beauregard, your name is Etley, right? I’m sure Deputy Rojas has already checked your credentials six ways from Sunday.”

I explained what I’d seen succinctly and why I was there, as I’d told Rojas.

“You were a cop. Or something that reports.” So I gave him the real brief autobiography, managing to hold it together this time.

“Okay, now you,” he said, turning to Rojas. I liked his style; he was taking it chronologically, first me, then Rojas, and then, turning to the Fire Chief and Paramedic, said, “Paramedic Larsen, Chief Larsen, anything to add?”

Ms. Larsen repeated her report almost verbatim. The Sheriff nodded to the Chief, who burped and said nothing. He patted him on the shoulder. “I guess, being the Sheriff and all, I’ve got to go look.” He went inside, leaving the door open. I could see her from the driveway. I noticed a thick book open on the kitchen table. Something about it was important, but then I began to feel nauseated again.

He came out. He was paler than before, looked at the ditch. "Don't feel bad just 'cause I'm not adding the fifth pile. I decided not to eat when dispatch called me at home."

"Two of the piles were mine. Paramedic Larsen didn't throw up either." Don't ask me why I had to say that. I was remembering all the things I'd looked at when I was new and trying desperately to keep a poker face for.

"That's a very nice thing for you to say," said her Dad. "Heidi has always been very calm."

"Thank you," Heidi said. Then to the Sheriff: "Someone around here must have really hated her."

The Sheriff was quiet for a moment, looking at what I realized were his snakeskin cowboy boots; I was feeling pretty underdressed in my ancient New Balances. "Well," he said, "I did."

He looked at Chief Larsen and said, "You did." Larsen nodded. "Our dispatcher did. The lady who runs the coffee shop did. Most people in the county over forty did. You would have too," he said with a nod at me, Rojas and Heidi, "but you just got here or you're too young and your family doesn't gossip enough for you to know" -- this to Heidi. "They hated her father, too. They hated their bank, until a big bank bought it. Of course, most of the people who hated her aren't

around anymore. They had to move. That's why there's all this nice wild prairie come back. It used to be farms, some ranches."

"So you think it was one of us?" said Larsen.

"Well, not one of us right standing here. I'd have just shot her, for instance, if I thought I could get away with it."

"What did she do?" said Rojas.

Larsen responded, "She was a school teacher. She was a real mean school teacher. Back then" -- he looked at his daughter -- "the county had more people, the town was bigger, had its own school system covered the whole northeastern corner of the county. And she was the teacher for the elementary grades. All six of of 'em."

"I spent grades one through three there until I got too tall to fit under the piano. That was her punishment for stupid kids, she'd play real loud and kick you when she worked the pedals," said the Sheriff. "She gave me tests but I was too afraid to do well on them, and she said they proved I was mentally retarded. Me and a guy named Stanley Stanislaus. He was under the piano too, a lot. Along with Chief Larsen here and a few others."

"I remember him," said Larsen. "He maybe really was crazy. Used to stutter all the time. Then -- how did that sex scandal go with him and Judy Western?"

“He was kept back two grades until he was 15, then they put him in high school. He was very handsome, though. Seems one of the high school girls and he were discovered by the schoolmarm with their pants down at a local park where they thought they were secluded. So she talked it up all over town of course,” said the Sheriff.

Larsen continued: “She was a great one for sex scandals. And very good looking, if you like dead things. That’s how she got to be superintendent. The old superintendent, Jim Morris, he taught the seven through nine grades, ran a stamp collecting club. And this kid, Stanislaus, got everybody in town to give him stamps with pictures of birds, plants or animals on ‘em. That was another thing. She came to the stamp club once to show off her collection. At the meeting, she got him to show his. She carefully explained how her collection was worth a lot, then said that his was not, but it might have ‘educational value’ and asked him to explain what all the animals and birds were. Of course since he was afraid of her he just stuttered. She said, I’ll never forget it, ‘Well, educational for people who *can* be educated,’ and some of the kids laughed. I know that Morris had words with her. And shortly after that she claimed he was trying to start an affair with her. Thing was, most of the school commissioners owed money on their farms. He didn’t pass the vote of no confidence and resigned. Dead a year later from cancer.”

The Sheriff spoke. "That's when my Mom, who I think maybe was platonically in love with the guy -- around here back then people didn't have affairs but they still loved -- organized the county to get her thrown out. We owned our farm, we were almost the first family in here, before the Civil War. Abolitionists too, which meant a lot in bloody Kansas -- and her family were on the other side." A lot of history there, I thought; Kansas had been a dress rehearsal for the Civil War, with pro-slavery types fighting abolitionists with guns and fire. "So my Mom did it. And that's probably why I'm Sheriff. But in revenge the bank foreclosed on everybody they could, every downturn. And of course she inherited it and that's why there aren't many farms and ranches around here she didn't own, before selling out to the new bank. Same as the rest of the country, only more so."

"You hate somebody, give them cattle," added Larsen. "I guess you want me to tell the good part about Stanislaus, how he became the local hero before being sent to the prison for the criminally insane." The Sheriff nodded. "His family didn't have nothing. His Pa had run off, they had a little lot to grow vegetables and chickens, but his Mom got laid off at the meat-packing factory, got late, of course they evicted her. So he shows up at the bank with an old rifle one day, makes the tellers give him all the money -- but nothing in the safe deposit boxes -- throws it on the floor. Throws all his report cards and his stamp

collection on top, pours gasoline on it, sets it all on fire. Old man Bean come charging out of his office, Stan shoots him at the base of the spine, paralyzes him, throws him on the fire. Somehow Bean crawled out of the burning building, but he never walked again and wasn't too pretty to be seen in public. And Stanley Stanislaus wound up in the facility for the criminally insane, where he no doubt still is."

"That's what I'm not so sure about," said the Sheriff. "He stopped writing my Mom. She pesters me every time I go to the home to visit her. She wants me to go up there to see how he is."

He picked up his phone. I could see he was calling another area code. He spoke into it, several interchanges, and I heard him spell the name Stanley Stanislaus.

Suddenly it hit me. The book on the table. "It was him," I said.

"How do you know for sure?" said Rojas.

"Well, it was a philatelist, a stamp collector. If you let me inside, give me some gloves, I'll show you."

The Sheriff nodded and Rojas did that. I pointed to the book on the table. "That's Scott's Specialized album for the US stamps. This is the first page the book is open to." There were a bunch of black-backed, archival plastic mounts on the page, torn open, looking like little empty picture frames. "This page of stamps would go for somewhere between two and fifty thousand, depending on condition."

I turned the page. More empty mounts. I looked for more. There were more, up to about where the album got to the 1930s; those stamps he had left. "These are only worth a few hundred." I remembered feeling something wasn't right as I walked across the kitchen floor. I walked again, stamped on it, heard a hollow sound near the table. I asked, and the Sheriff sent the Fire Chief out for some prying tools. We found more books under the floor: British North America, China, Japan, many more. "If these books are like the first book, I'd have to see the purchase records, but this could be hundreds of thousands of dollars. Here's where she hid them, that's what he made her tell."

Well, that's how it worked out. They deputized me to do some forensic accounting, and the collection was probably in the neighborhood of three or four million retail, maybe more. It took some phone calls to auction houses as far away as Zurich to get a sense of it. And yes, Stanley Stanislaus had been out for a year. No one had seen him -- no one alive, anyway.

And Chrissie got the land donated. I'd have sworn I'd seen a will in the file but Sheriff Beauregard and Deputy Rojas said they never found one, and there was an unexplained burglary at the family lawyer's office not long after. So everything went to the ecologically conscious daughter and her needing-a-tax-dodge brother.

Rojas -- Helena Rojas -- and I became friends, eating dinner together several times at the Busted Wheel, the main local eatery, and starting all sorts of rumors.

Turned out she was one of the Indians I'd wondered about -- but from farther south. Her father was Yaqui and mom Comanche, but she'd grown up in a bad neighborhood in Austin and told me that most of the Indian lore she'd heard was a few tales of battles, and she claimed all she'd known about Kansas before coming here was that "Kiowa smelled like bacon when they burned but you weren't supposed to eat them." But she did give me some family lore, once when we were talking about her being a straight A student who was also a seven-foot three-inch Indian girl, in a neighborhood in Austin where many don't learn to read: "My father said I could accept that I was different or hate it, be ashamed of it or make the most of it, so I accepted and made the most of it."

Sometimes you're still too old and smart to even think of having an affair but you can still love. Nights when I dream of things that no one should ever have seen, I get up and write, or paint. Especially lately I paint, because I know too many stories I don't want to hear again. I know the wild images -- flying whales, talking tomatoes, clouds performing ballet, birds doing office work -- are partly brain damage. I make the most of it.

Joshua Converse

The House on Beech

I was afraid of that house every time I rode by it. It had been abandoned for years, and there were stories. It sagged with malevolent squalor in a lonely corner of the neighborhood, and crossing in front of its black windows was the shortest way home for me. Joey turned off on Oak, and Mikey was over on Lincoln, so I had to take Beech by myself, or go the long way around on Northern Ave. I always tried to speed past number 134 before it got dark.

After that night, I never set my wheels on Beech Street again, and I never will. Friends who never moved out of town tell me 134 was demolished years ago, but I don't care. I still take Northern Avenue if I visit my Dad, or Ma's grave. I try to make sure I'm always in before nightfall.

It started with my jelly beans, I guess. My little brother Gary coveted them above all other candy, and so in the hours following our Easter egg hunts, I'd have to hide whatever my haul was, or I could expect it to disappear down his gullet. On April 3rd 1983, when I was exactly twelve and a half, I hid my candy in the vent next to my bed as usual. I pretty much forgot about it.

Two weeks later, before bed and in a flash of memory, I decided to dip into my stash. I found my entire supply gone. Not just a few jelly beans, I mean everything. Marshmallow Peeps, chocolate eggs, even my chocolate bunny. In a fury I went down the hall to Gary's room and knocked on the door. When he opened, I grabbed him by the collar of his t-shirt.

"What'd you do with my candy, jerk?"

"What candy? You always hide it! I don't know-"

I slugged him, and he slugged me back, and we started rolling around on the floor.

"Jerk!"

"Big bully! It's not my fault you can't keep track of your own stupid candy!"

"Give it back!"

But even after my parents broke us up, and even after extensive questioning by no less a personage than my mother, who could very easily have worked for the CIA as an interrogator, the candy was not accounted for, and my brother hotly, tearily denied having eaten so much as a milk chocolate egg.

I went to bed mad, and got up the next morning for school as usual. Gary and I eyed each other suspiciously and didn't speak as we waited for our Pop-Tarts by the toaster. Mom left for work early to

open the diner, and Dad was gone earlier still to put up drywall at a job site two towns over. School was only a mile away, so I rode my bike, which was a 10 speed BMX and probably my most prized possession. In the morning, 134 Beech was somehow less menacing, but I still felt those black windows watching me like ghostly eyes as I pedaled down the street.

This particular day, Joey was waiting at the bike racks with a look of great pleasure when I rode up. Joey had short dark hair and green eyes, and in those days he was so skinny he could have hidden behind a fence post and not thrown a shadow. He made up for this with mouth.

“Danny says he can get us tickets!” said Joey. Danny was Joey’s big brother, and I lamented that I hadn’t been dealt the same stroke of luck as Joey, because as brothers went Danny was the coolest. He had great taste in music (The Kinks, The Cure, David Bowie, etc.) and he let us have sips of his beer sometimes. Danny even let me borrow his *Heavy Metal Magazine*. The March issue had space aliens in orbit watching a naked lady kissing some guy on their video screen. For a 12 year old, this was interesting on so many levels.

“For when?” I asked.

“After school. 4:30 showing.”

“Danny is the *coolest*. Why did I end up with a loser like Gary? I mean, Gary doesn’t even *have* a job, much less a job at the Glenwood...”

“He says they let him watch all the movies for free.”

I didn’t even try to hide my awe. I was firmly in the throes of brother envy.

“And he’s going to let us in for sure?”

“Yeah. He said he would. *Evil Dead*, dude. It’s supposed to be super scary. I heard it’s based on a true story,” said Joey.

“We have to go tell Mikey. It’s going to be awesome.” The bell rang. We went to class.

During lunch, we caught up with Mikey, who even then was a head taller than we were and already getting the shadow of a gingery blonde mustache on his lip. Mikey had a mop of carrot-orange hair. He was terribly embarrassed at the way his voice was cracking. We filled him in on our plan to see *Evil Dead*.

“I mean, it’s NC-17, right? That’s like worse than Rated R, right?” he said over his bologna and mustard sandwich. I shuddered as I watched him eat. I couldn’t understand how or why he ate that crap day after day. Of the three of us, Mikey was the biggest and the strongest, but generally the most cautious. “What if the manager sees us?”

“We’ll just pretend we’re going to see *The Meaning of Life* or something if anyone in the theater asks,” said Joey. “Besides, it’s all about confidence. People don’t stop you if you look like you know where you’re going. C’mon Mikey, quit being such a little girl.”

“Hey, shut up, Joey,” Mikey said as his voice cracked. He punched Joey in the arm once, hard.

“You’re going, though, right?” I asked.

Mikey thought about it. “I... Yeah, I guess...”

And so we did. After school we rode our bikes downtown and locked them up in the alley beside the Glenwood Theater. Danny let us in the side door, and slipped us tickets for *Evil Dead*, just in case we needed to show them to somebody. (“Hey, man, we’re paying customers!”). Danny was already six feet, broad-shouldered, and he ran track. Basically, he was my hero. He had a girlfriend named Sherie, and I had it on good authority that they had humped on the football field last year after Homecoming. As he let us into the theater and favored me with a smile, I felt like one of the chosen people on the planet. Maybe the galaxy. Oddly, the theater was pretty empty, but I guess people had things to do that Monday, and horror movies weren’t much on their minds. We sat in the dark theater alone as the projector began to flicker.

Evil Dead scared the bejesus out of me. I didn't want the other guys to think I was chicken, but as we were leaving the theater, I saw the same look in their eyes.

"That wasn't so scary," said Joey quietly.

"Yeah. I mean, I've seen way worse," said Mikey, his voice cracking.

"Yeah," I said, "for sure."

Danny and Sherie were making out behind the popcorn machine as we went by. I looked a little too long and Joey punched me in the arm. I realized I'd stopped walking and I was staring.

"Let's go," said Joey. I willed my legs to keep moving and stop looking at wherever Danny was putting his hands. Sherie was so... Joey punched me again and I got moving.

When we stepped outside, it was 6pm. We had an hour before sundown, which was when our parents expected us home, but we stood around for a long time, talking but not saying much and trying to kindle a good humor none of us felt. At half past, we got our bikes and rode toward the suburbs.

It was near dark when we came to Lincoln and Mikey waved to us and shot down the dip and over the little hill toward his house, his mop of orange hair flying in the breeze. The streetlights flickered and came on. Joey waved and turned onto Oak, and there, waiting for

me in the gathering dark was Beech. I stopped my bike and looked down the long, lonely street. There were a few houses on the corner, but down near 134 they were spaced out pretty far apart, and some had fallen in or been bulldozed years before. I tried not to think about the ground opening beneath me and monstrous hands reaching up to pull me into Hell.

The wind picked up and whispered through the trees, shaking the leaves and waving the trees ominously as I started to pedal. I hewed to the left side of the street, and finally past the last streetlight on Beech, a few hundred yards from 134 and a few hundred yards more from Alder, and from thence to safety and home. As I passed, though, something caught my eye under the streetlight. I stopped my bike and peered in at whatever it was on the ground. It was the color that caught my eye. Under the streetlight was a fat yellow jellybean. I walked my bike over to it, and looked down at it, then looked up and down the street. No one there. I knelt down to pick up the jelly bean, and just outside the circle of light I saw another jellybean. And then another a little further down the street. I started to follow the trail, picking them up as I went. I had a handful of jellybeans when I noticed the line I had been following took a hard right, and when I looked up to follow it, the trail led right up the cracked, weedy walkway... and up

the sagging porch... and in through the open, gaping door of 134 Beech Street.

I threw down the jellybeans and jumped on my bike, racing for home with everything my twelve-year-old legs could squeeze out of a 1982 BMX 10-speed. I didn't dare look back.

When I got home, I went straight to my room and tried to calm down. Usually, I listened to music when I was worried or upset, so I turned on my clock radio, and "Maneater" by Hall and Oates (a song I had kind of enjoyed, up to that moment) came blaring in.

*Ohhhh here she comes,
Watch out boy, she'll chew you up,
Woahhhh here she comes,
She's a maneater.*

I switched off the radio and climbed into bed. Mom was usually home from the diner around 8 o'clock on Monday. She usually worked a double because Krissy called in with what my Mom called "the Irish Flu" on Mondays. Upon questioning my Mother as to the symptoms of the Irish Flu and how you got it, I was told not to listen to grown-up conversations and to eat my peas. That particular night, Dad wasn't home yet, either, but that wasn't unusual, especially in the Spring. I left the light on and tried to rest, or at least not to think about

where the jelly beans had come from and who had laid them out on that road, or why.

I'm not sure how long I was there, and not sure if I dozed off, but I'll never forget what happened next. I had my back to the wall, lying on my side and facing the light. Gradually, and very slowly I began to realize I was hearing something that sounded very much like my own breathing, but when I suddenly held my breath, the sound continued in a heavy, wheezy rhythm from the vent above my bed. I froze. I didn't want to see whatever it was that would have its face pressed up against the grating staring at me, but I was afraid what would happen if I just laid there. The breathing began to get faster, and there was a growl to it now, and out of terror I leaped out of bed and dove for the door of my bedroom, not daring to turn and look. I ran down the hall to Gary's room, more out of panic than a sense of what I'd do there. At least there would be another person there, and I wouldn't be alone. When I burst in, Gary wasn't there. I called for him, but no answer came. His room was dark except for the flickering snow of his 12-inch black and white TV (a Christmas gift from our grandfather, and a major source of resentment, because I got a microscope). Gary was always home by 4, and he then watched TV and did his homework until I came home. I stared at the snow in horror,

and started to run through the house calling his name. No answer. I ran outside to check for his bike, but it was gone, too.

He didn't usually go to out, and certainly not after dark. Something was wrong. Just then, Mom pulled into the driveway. I ran to her.

"Gary isn't here!"

"What?" she asked. "Well where is he?"

"I don't know. I just went to check on him and he's gone. I--" I was going to tell her about the breathing, but something held me back, "I don't know where he is."

Mom ran in to look for him, then got on the phone and called a few of his friends, but nobody had seen him. I sat at the kitchen table and felt a knot of fear growing like a clump of weeds through the middle of me.

Mom hung up the phone and looked at me with concern. "Mrs. Schultz hasn't seen him, either. Do you have any ideas where he might be? Has he said something?"

"No, Mom," I said, then I said, "But maybe he's on Beech."

"Why would he be down there?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I saw some jelly beans there earlier, and he likes jelly beans."

"Get in the car."

“M-maybe we should call the police instead.”

“The police? Why are you shaking?” she asked.

“I’m scared of that house, Mom. I think it’s a bad place” -- I started fighting the tears back, and it was getting harder to talk -- “and I think it took Gary.”

She frowned, then said, “Come on. Let’s go find your brother.”

We got in the Ford and Mom steered us over to Beech Street, and it was truly dark now. My hands were shaking, so I put them in my pockets and tried just to breathe. When we cruised by 134, I nearly screamed. Gary was standing in the gaping, black doorway of 134 in his PJs, covered in filth as if he had been dragged, with terror in his eyes. Behind him, a black figure with very pale, long, spidery fingers was stroking his head as he stood there, immobile and terrified. With the other hand it gestured for me to come. Come closer.

Mom slammed on the brakes, because I guess she saw it, too, although we have never discussed it. She raced out of the car and up the walkway toward the porch, and I screamed in terror and followed. The darkness of the windows and the space behind the door was total. Otherworldly, even.

Whatever it was that stood there holding my brother, it was tall and hunched, it had long, matted, and grimy-grey hair that dragged on the floor. It wore some kind of flowing, thick garment made mostly

of dark rags, and it cackled, then opened its long, distended maw with huge, needle-pointed teeth, and leaned over my brother, receding as it pulled him into the house. The door slammed in front of my Mom as she climbed the porch, and she hurled herself at it. It took two or three tries before she caved the rotting boards in and she stumbled into the pitch dark front room.

“Gary!” she called.

The living room was dark, and my mother called and called for Gary, her voice growing more and more hysterical. I was inching toward the house, shaking but impelled somehow to venture in. My mother came rushing out of the house and ran to the car, opening the trunk and yanking out a flashlight and a baseball bat.

“Stay here,” she said as she ran by me on the walk into the house, but I followed her anyway, more certain now that if we didn’t find Gary soon, we never would. Mom either didn’t notice or didn’t care, but we went into the house together. With the flashlight, we could see in the black, and very clearly we could make out drag marks in the dust that led further into the house. My mother gasped at the first hint of red in those drag marks, a few drops at first, but by the time we’d reached the door to the kitchen (counters gone, cabinets hanging crazily by one hinge) there was a steady stream of my baby brother’s blood. We followed it to the middle of the kitchen where a

yawning gap in the floor smiled blackly at us, its planks splayed and jagged like crazy, broken clown teeth. The browned and rusted stove had fallen through the rotted kitchen floor and lay half-sunk in the dirt of the basement below like a deep-sea wreckage.

“Gary?” my mother called. She shined the flashlight into the darkness below, and I heard her breath catch in her throat as the light caught the crinkled wrapping of my brother’s chocolate Easter bunny. She turned to me with a face of stone and said, “Go to the neighbors and call the police.” Then she jumped into the hole.

I was too afraid to scream as I tore down the hall, making for the faint outline of the door that would lead to Beech Street and beyond to home, but the floorboards gave under me and I fell into the dark without breath enough in my lungs even to cry out. The ripping away of the floor was a terrible sound, something like the audible sound of rot or a corpse’s lung collapsing. I landed blind and bloody, with a hot pain in my leg and warm liquid gushing from my arm. There was a staccato breathing, stertorous and ragged and not far away, and a voice made of hate and hunger and sickly sweetness said, “Granny is hungry, come closer, my dear.”

“Where is Gary? Where is my mother?” I asked, scarcely able to breathe from pain and fear.

“Here,” said the voice, sweet and menacing, and I heard it moving through the rubble, closer and closer.

A beam of orange light came from around a corner behind me, and I saw it. Saw “her.” My mother screamed and I felt her arms around my middle as she started to pull me back as the thing advanced. It was tall, misshapen, with a horrible hump on its back and terrible burning eyes, skin the color of meat gone bad, and a mouth full of black, pointed teeth. Behind her I could see Gary in the shadows, bloody but breathing. The crone came on, and my mother put herself between us.

Whatever happened next I didn’t fully see. My mother said something, and the witch (or whatever she was) stopped. I think I heard the witch say, “Exchange,” but I can’t be sure. The world was going gray. I was losing blood. Just before I lost consciousness, I thought I heard a number. Maybe seven. Then I blacked out.

I woke up next to Gary in the hospital the next day. Mom and Dad were both there in the room with us. Gary was scratched up and had a mild concussion, but he was okay. I heard Dad tell the nurse that we’d been playing in a condemned house and had fallen through the floor. Gary and I looked at each other darkly, but said nothing. In fact, we have never discussed that night. I wanted to ask Ma what had happened, but somehow the look in her eye told me to keep my mouth

shut. I had a broken arm and a sprained ankle, but they let us go home a few days later. Mom took Northern, instead of Beech. I went straight to my room and duct-taped my vent closed.

Later, Mom would tell us we didn't have to worry about whatever it was, that it wouldn't bother us again. We wanted to ask questions, to know more, but half out of fear and half out of respect, we did not. Mom's words had a kind of finality to them, and she was a formidable woman. Time went on. Seven years later, in the middle of the night, Mom died of a heart attack. I never saw it, but I'm told the look on her face was one of absolute terror. I am convinced she paid for our lives with her own.

Josephine Fellows

A Gentleman Calls

Wilfred Kress stood looking out of the window of his Homes & Gardens kitchen at his perfectly-manicured garden. It wasn't Capability Brown, but it was pretty impressive. In fact, there wasn't much in Wilfred's life that wasn't beautiful or perfect. Of course, it had all come at a price. Not what you would expect, however; no blood, sweat or tears were spilled to achieve his dreams. No, just the sale of his soul to the Devil. Since that day five years ago, he had never looked back.

His (unsurprisingly stunning) wife Annabelle had taken their daughter to her mother's for the week, and so the house was now a quiet sanctuary. Wilfred picked up his coffee and moved to go out on the deck and enjoy the peace and tranquility of the glorious summer morning but, just as he put his hand on the door knob, the front doorbell chimed. He sighed and considered ignoring it, but it rang again and again. He stomped down the hallway; it wasn't until he reached the front door that he realized that he didn't actually have a doorbell. Through the frosted glass of the door he saw a tall, thin figure standing outside. Again the non-existent bell rang, and a sudden realization came to Wilfred that today was five years to the day since

he had struck The Deal. He opened the door slowly. There stood an impeccably-dressed gentleman in a three-piece black suit and black shirt, sporting a red silk tie. The gentleman raised his head to meet Wilfred's gaze. It was the eyes, those red glowing eyes, it was him. Wilfred's knees buckled, and he grabbed the door frame.

"Steady on there, old chap," the gentleman said. "I'm sorry to startle you like that and drop by unannounced, but I need a favor."

Wilfred realized he should have known this day would come. Everything had been plain sailing since the day he had traded his soul for his perfect life; he should have known there was a catch.

"May I come in?" asked the gentleman.

"Er, yes of course," replied Wilfred as he straightened himself up and stepped aside.

"Is in here alright?" the gentleman enquired, gesturing towards the living room.

"Yes, of course, anywhere you like is fine."

Wilfred's mind was racing. A favor he had said, what did he mean? Was there anything he couldn't get or do himself?

"What a beautiful home you have, Wilfred," he said, as he picked up a family picture from the mantle and ran his slender finger down the glass, "Very nice indeed."

His voice was smooth and deep, which made Wilfred more uncomfortable than he had already been, if that were possible.

“Thank you. You mentioned something about a favor,” Wilfred said, seeing no point in putting off the inevitable.

“Yes indeed. A favor, for which I will give your soul back in return.”

He put down the picture frame and walked over to the chair by the window, where he sat and watched for a moment the morning activities of Cherry Tree Grove. Next door’s children were running around their lawn giggling, playing a game. The postman strolled along making his morning rounds. Opposite Wilfred’s house, Evelyn and Vera were having their usual morning gossip. He turned his gaze back to Wilfred, his glowing red eyes less fiery than before.

“Favor, yes. I presume your day is free?” he said to Wilfred.

“Yes, of course,” Wilfred replied.

Had it not been free, it surely would be free now; Wilfred was not about to ask the Devil if he wouldn’t mind coming back another day. Just then, Wilfred’s phone buzzed. He looked over at the Devil.

“It’s alright,” he said. “You can reply. However, maybe you should turn it off when you have finished; we don’t want any more interruptions.”

Wilfred quickly took his phone from his pocket. It was a text from Annabelle asking how he was and what his plans were for the day. Wilfred replied that he was working from home, but would be very busy all day working on some documents that he needed to review, and would talk to her later. Then he turned off his phone and placed it on the table to demonstrate clearly that his attention was now clearly focused on the Devil.

“It’s such a beautiful sunny day outside, I think I’d like to take a walk around this wonderful neighborhood of yours. You can be my guide and tell me all the tales of the people of Cherry Tree Grove.”

Wilfred started to panic. Surely they couldn’t just go walking? What would people do? – they would be terrified to see the Devil walking down the street. He began to pace around the room wringing his hands, and he felt the cold trickle of sweat settle between his shoulder blades.

“Calm down now, Wilfred,” the Devil said, “nothing for you to worry about. People see what they want to see, hear what they want to hear. Trust me, all is well.”

All was certainly not well with Wilfred. He had to give the Devil a grand tour of Cherry Tree Grove, and he still didn’t know what the favor was. However, he had no choice in the matter; there’s no arguing with the Devil. He took deep breaths in an effort to compose himself.

He needed to be calm if he was going to get through this, whatever this was.

They stepped outside into the mid-morning sunshine. The Devil stood with his face skyward and closed eyes.

“Ah! Delightful, quite delightful. There is nothing more wonderful than a hot summer’s day,” he said, accentuating the word hot. They started down the path to the gate, where Wilfred hesitated.

“Which way would you like to go?” Wilfred asked.

“I’m entirely in your hands, sir. Lead on.”

They headed down the street in silence. Wilfred could see a figure in the distance jogging towards them. As it got closer he could see it was his friend Cyril. He was sure to stop and chat. Wilfred could feel the fear start to take hold of him again. He looked over at the Devil, who simply smiled and said, “All is well.”

Cyril was waving at them now. It seemed there was no escaping.

“Hey Wilf! How are you?”

“Fine. Fine. I’m fine,” Wilfred said, a little too enthusiastically.

“Good, good. Who’s your friend?” Cyril said, nodding toward the Devil.

“Oh this is, this is...” Wilfred spluttered falteringly.

The Devil offered his hand to Cyril. “Nicholas Drake. How do you do?”

“Pleased to meet you, Nick. I’m Cyril Abbott.”

“Nicholas,” the devil said, the fire glowing a little brighter in his eyes.

“I take it you and Wilfred are old friends then?”

“You could say that, or perhaps more business acquaintances.”

“So you’re a solutions architect too?” Cyril said.

“I guess you could call me that,” the Devil replied laughingly.

Wilfred couldn’t bear it any longer.

“Sorry Cyril, but we really must be getting on. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow,” he said. Before Cyril could reply, Wilfred was striding down the street, the Devil beside him still chuckling to himself.

“Okay Wilfred, I think we can slow down now. I think we’ve lost him,” he said, still with a slight laugh in his voice.

Wilfred’s panic and fear had now turned into anger, and he completely forgot himself and to whom he was talking. He stopped in the middle of the street and turned to the Devil.

“Is this just one big game to you?” he snapped.

“Yes. I have my own rulebook, Wilfred, and that’s what we are playing by today, so I suggest you settle down. It will make the day so much more pleasant for all concerned.”

Still seething, Wilfred opened his mouth to reply, but the Devil’s fiery gaze reignited, and Wilfred closed his mouth in submission.

The Devil resumed his walk down Cherry Tree Grove, and Wilfred fell in beside him, breathing heavily in an attempt to regain his composure. They arrived at one of the many benches dotted along the Grove.

“Shall we sit, Wilfred, and you can tell me all about those two wonderfully animated ladies across the street?”

Evelyn and Vera were still gossiping animatedly. Wilfred wasn't too sure what to tell him about the two ladies, so he turned to him to ask what he wanted to know but, before the first word was out of his mouth, the Devil shushed him and said, “Let's just listen. Much more entertaining.”

Fine by me, thought Wilfred. He leaned back on the bench and felt some of his tension starting to ease. He still hadn't worked out what the favor was, although he guessed it must have to do with either Evelyn or Vera, as the Devil seemed engrossed in their conversation. But what could he want with them? They were typical middle-aged, bored housewives with too much time and money on their hands, and they gossiped incessantly about everyone and everything; they weren't particularly bad people. A little sad, perhaps, but not malicious. Maybe he wanted their souls and he needed information to use for the trade? Vera's voice brought Wilfred out of his musings.

“Oh! My goodness! Look at the time, Evelyn. I really must get on -
I have a ton to do today.”

The Devil was laughing again.

“A ton to do, she says! It must be nice when getting your nails done, having lunch, and buying new shoes makes for a busy day. Oh, people do amuse me.”

“So, whose soul is it that you want? Evelyn’s or Vera’s?” Wilfred asked.

“Soul? Goodness gracious, no. Those two ladies are of no interest to me. No depth to them whatsoever. Marvelous entertainment, however.”

The Devil stood up and brushed off his trousers. The movement attracted Vera’s attention, and she looked over, smiled and waved before walking to her car.

“You see, Wilfred, people see what they want to see.”

Wilfred just nodded. He was past caring. At this point, he just wanted to do this favor and get on with his life. It was only noon, but it felt quite the longest day he had ever known. They headed back towards Wilfred’s house. “Thank goodness,” he thought. He was sure he wouldn’t like whatever it was he had to do, but he just needed to know the details of the favor. Wilfred’s pace quickened in anticipation of bringing this ordeal to its conclusion. Then he noticed that the Devil

wasn't beside him. Wilfred turned round and found him outside next door's garden, talking to the children. All life drained from Wilfred. Of course, how could he be so stupid? The children; he wanted the children. He mustered what energy was left in him and stumbled back towards them. Lily was standing next to the Devil, looking up at him with her mouth wide open.

"Oh, your eyes are funny. They look like they are burning. That must really hurt. Did you have an accident? When I have an accident, mommy gives me a plaster and kisses it better. Do you want me to kiss your poorly eyes better?"

He knelt down in front of Lily just as Wilfred reached them.

"Please don't do anything to the children. I'll do anything you want. Take everything back, I'll go back to my old life, but don't hurt the children," Wilfred wept.

He fell to his knees, sobbing softly next to Lily and the Devil. The Devil looked over at him.

"Hush now, Wilfred, all is well."

"Don't cry, Wilfred, it's going to be okay. I'm going to kiss his sore eyes better," said Lily.

The Devil closed his eyes, and Lily gently kissed one eye, and then the other.

"There, all better," she said.

“Thank you, Lily.” he said, as he stood back up.

“You’re welcome, Wilfred’s friend,” she replied, as she skipped back into her garden to continue her game with her brother. The Devil offered his hand to Wilfred, who dragged himself up from the pavement.

“Better get you home, old chap. You’ve had quite a day,” the Devil said gently.

Wilfred didn’t understand at all what had just happened, and walked back home in a daze. When they arrived at the house, the Devil sat Wilfred down in the sitting room and handed him a glass of brandy. Wilfred downed it in one, and handed back the glass.

“I don’t understand. I thought you wanted the children, their souls, their lives,” Wilfred stammered.

“Wilfred, what exactly do you think a soul is?”

“Well, it’s, it’s your ... it’s....”

Wilfred didn’t know what to say, he had no idea what a soul was. Everybody talked about them, but what was it?

“Exactly,” said the Devil. “Everyone has a different idea of what a soul is or isn’t. However, it’s not something that I can actually take and use.”

“So when you came to me five years ago and took my non-existent soul in return for my perfect life, what did you get out of it?”

“Leverage. You think that I have taken something. I return one day and offer it back to you in return for a favor.”

“So, what is this favor? What do I have to do?”

“Oh, we’re all done, Wilfred. Favor fulfilled. I’ve had a fantastic day out, very entertaining indeed. One of the best in a long time I must say.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that you just wanted to have some fun? That you’ve just been playing me all day?”

“If you recall, Wilfred, you asked earlier if this was all a game to me, and I was perfectly honest and told you it was. I’m the Devil, Wilfred. What did you expect? A nice game of chess? My rulebook, remember.”

Wilfred didn’t know what to say any more; he was completely exhausted. The Devil walked over to him and took his hand, giving it a hearty shake.

“Thank you, Wilfred. I’ll be leaving you now, but who knows? Maybe we will run in to each other again.”

Ivan Garcia

This Locá Lifestyle

It's like I only feel alive when I commit crimes for my cause.

Well, squares call it crime, but to me it's work. And any day where I put in work is perfect, so I'm coolin' right now.

Morning eases into afternoon and it's not just hot—it's muggy and sloppy. The heat elevates the stinky scent of fertilizer from the nearby *fresá* farms and brings it into town to make everyone, not just the fieldworkers, feel a little bit more filthy for the day. I take off my red wool-lined flannel and tie it around my waist like a grade schooler. I sweat like a pig and it's hella embarrassing, not that any of my homies call me out on it. I'm not the kind of girl who lets people laugh at her.

The people in City Plaza Park are feeling the heat too. An old man covers his face with his sombrero and stretches on a bench under a towering sycamore. A mother treats three little kids to colorful cold *paletas* from an ice cream man's cart. Two women wearing sweatpants and headbands— one Filipino the other Mexicana—sip water out of sports bottles while they take a break from doing stomach crunches on the grass.

I'm not here to watch people at the park though. I'm here to cover my man's back. Across the street in the mini-mall's parking lot, Jesus opens the unlocked passenger door of a Watsonville police cruiser. Once inside, he dips his head under the dashboard in search of something worth our time. It's a risky move, but it's the kind of thing Jesus does without so much as bragging about it the next day, unlike these chatty gangsters around town who can't wait to tell the world about the latest dirt they did.

The pig who drives the cruiser, Officer Rodriguez, is a real sell-out. He grew up in Rogey Street, same time as my Dad when he was holding it down. Now Rodriguez spends his days arresting our raza and fronting like some all-American hero. Me and Jesus have been watching him. Rodriguez goes to Lucy's Tamale Factory and buys like 100 pineapple tamales every Thursday morning. He drops them off at the Youth Center on Lincoln Street so little kids can have breakfast. Those breakfasts are a brainwashing tactic. It's so obvious that it would be funny if he wasn't harming those kids by making them believe in some badge. On average, the tamale trip takes him thirty minutes because he loves yapping it up with the cooks.

The coast is clear. No one is paying attention to Jesus in his eye-catching crimson New Jersey Devils hockey jersey. He's out of the

car in under a minute. He crosses the street with an awkward step. He has something tucked in the waist of his baggy khaki pants.

“Mission accomplished, amór,” Jesus says to me.

My eyes are set on Lucy’s Tamale at the end of the mini-mall. Looking through the special offers painted on the windows, I see Rodriguez talking to the kitchen staff. Jesus runs his hands through his slicked-back hair, shiny with pomade. He smiles, and seeing his deep dimples and his big brown eyes light up, I know the world is all cool for now. We walk through the park and find a bench by the gazebo.

“What’s the loot, though?” I ask. “Let me see quick. I got class in 20.”

Jesus looks around for pedestrians. Slowly he pulls out what he tucked in the back of his pants. It’s wrapped in a red bandana, and he uncovers it like a Christmas gift we’ve been dreaming of all year. He puts it in my palm and I feel stronger holding the weight of the weapon. It’s a Beretta .45 in a black leather holster, same thang the cops got. That fool Rodriguez makes a point of not carrying when he tries to connect with the community. Last year at a special sermon in St. Patricio’s, he actually went up the altar and told us: “Guns are a modern plague, and I will do everything in my power to keep them out of our neighborhoods.”

“Pretty *pistola*,” I say. “You trying to sell it or something?”

“Hell nah,” Jesus says, then puts it away. “A cop’s piece is special. I’ll have to use it on a fool or two. Send a message, ya know? Like, I am the law.”

Me and Jesus start walking so I can make it to class on time. Watsonville High is just two blocks away from the park.

We’re posted in front of Lola’s Liquor & Lottery when we notice a lowered black Monte Carlo creeping on us. The driver’s window rolls down. Somebody in the backseat pokes their hands out to wave a blue bandana—*bleh*, the color alone makes me want to barf.

“Hope yo girl has a fun day at school, esé.” The driver blows a kiss my way. He’s got a goatee and a Dodgers cap on his closely shaven head. The bandana banger in the backseat twirls the rag around. With the bandana in one hand, he does the street-sign language; folding his fingers to form the letters of his side: S-U-R.

They’re Sureños, Sur Rats, SCRAPS—sworn enemies ‘til the end. See, it’s sort of like my raza has been in its own civil war like the one Lincoln ended 1776 or whatever. Except this ain’t about slaves, this is straightforward. Look at the map. Watsonville is in Norté California, and Norté Cali is ruled by Norteños. From the school segregation to the strikes on the fruit fields, we were here forever and we’ve put in the struggle to make this our home. We don’t want these punk ass putos from LA and San Diego and we especially don’t want

these stupid Salvadorans and their Mara Salvatrucha 13 shit. I feel no sorrow when I see scraps getting capped on the news. Norté Cali is for Norteños, don't get lost.

"Try something, I'll smoke you all," Jesus says. He lifts his shirt up to show off the gun on his waist and knocks his knuckles against the steel. "I'll catch a homicide for the north side!"

The scraps laugh, turn up the car's radio and drive off.

Huffing and puffing like a bull ready to charge, Jesus has never looked more handsome than he does right now: in front of Lola's Liquor with a stolen gun poking from his pants like an extended hip bone, defending me and our homeland like a proud Chicanó should.

Leaning against a payphone by the liquor store, a homeless woman coughs up so harshly it startles me. I turn around and look at her. Her wrinkly skin stretches like it's too tight to fit on her skull properly. Her body is huddled in a hooded sweatshirt five sizes too big. Beside her battered sneakers are three empty vials and a long metal straw, some black-burnt marks at its end. I can tell from the red caps on the vials that's the stuff our side is pushing, and it's good to see this bum supporting our cause any way she can.

"You showed them, baby." I kiss Jesus on the cheek; he's still warm from the hostility.

“It’s what we do.” He shrugs. “It’s what you’re going to have to start doing too. Now that we gave you that new title, you have to make it respectable. Learn through me. Okay?”

Lately Jesus has been reminding me about stepping up my fearlessness and always being bold. Because now it’s not just about my reputation, my actions reflect on our gang as a whole. I’ve always backed up Norté, that’s my blood. My dad was one of the six original Clifford Apartment Locos -- guys like him and Carlos “the King” Diaz started this street shit. He acts like he wants to separate himself from that legacy since he got out the cage, but I’ll always be proud of his history. And it’s karma, I’ve shown respect and the gang is respecting me back. At first it was due to my dad’s status, but my name began to ring bells too. Ask around town. They know I’m Alex, that bad barrió girl on Rogey Street. They know I’ve been stashing bales of weed, Ziplocs of crack rock, guns and garbage bags of cash in my closet when the homies needed me to. They know I’ve been going to school flamed up from my 49ers sweater to my red Vans with the red laces. They know I’ve been provoking fights with any bitch banging blue at school -- even a few boys -- and that I win most of them.

Now, for all my years holding it down, I’m finally rising up. Jesus put a good word in for me with the top dogs of the Watsón regiment, and they proposed an idea to the bosses up in Pelican Bay

solitary housing. As of June 1st, I am officially the leader of a subset of the Rogey \$treet \$avages for cholá chicas just like me. Jesus says it's probably the first official female clique in Norté history. I'm a fucking pioneer.

Inside Lola's Liquor I get some snacks for school, fuck that cafeteria muck. I get two Gansitó frozen cupcakes and some sour gummi worms and ask Jesus to get me a pack of strawberry Swishers so I can roll some dope later.

He heads for the register and I read the headlines off the newspaper stand by the door. The San Jo Mercury's frontpage has a story on an 80-day standoff ending between the FBI and some Montana rednecks. The Santa Cruz Sentinel headline pleases me. "Drive-By at Barbeque," the story reads. "Two dead, three wounded add to Watsonville's bloodiest year --"

I don't want to brag, but my boyfriend was definitely behind that savage hit. Jesus came to my *casa* last night and we fucked like people are supposed to between battles. He mentioned there were two scraps that bullied our homie's little brother on walks to school. Petty stuff, but we have to protect our people. It wasn't our fault the fools happened to be at a birthday party when things popped off.

Yeah, it sucks when normal people get caught in the crossfire, but that's the way it goes down. When you're pulling up on a scrap,

some primal rage takes over. You're like a lion lurking for the gazelle. I've never pulled the trigger myself, that's an honor that's bestowed when the gang knows you're ready, not when you feel like it. But I've been in the back seat during some action, and seeing my boys grip the gun as they poke it out the window to send rounds at any rival is enough to get me hot and ready to hurt something too. Cruising with your compadrés, toting a .40 cal with the 30-round stick, hopped up on hella weed smoke and malt liquor and machismo. No need to aim and no need to feel. Just roll down the window and eat up the opposition like *brrrrraaaa, brrrrrrraaaaa*, and watch those bad people drop like dominos. It's a thrill, really. But it's also duty.

"Yooo, Alex, waddup bitch!" says a friendly voice close behind.

Reyna, my closest amiga, is holding a big bag of spicy chips that coat her fingers in red dust. She lives two houses down from me and is always down for some trouble. I hug her and smell so much Aquanet spray in her hazel hair. She's got bangs high as a skyscraper.

"Shit, sneaking up on me like that I might have to blast you," I joke. "What's good?"

"Ready for school?" Reyna says. "Or wanna ditch and smoke?"

"Nah, we gotta savor our last days," I say. "We can smoke during lunch."

I tell Jesus I'll walk the remaining block with Reyna. He gives me my snacks and a little nug of weed for later. He's a real sweetheart, keeps me high and right.

There's only two weeks left, so the Chemistry teacher puts class on cruise control and plays *Bill Nye the Science Guy* on the projector. Me and Reyna sit in the back of the class. We're sharing headphones hooked up to a CD player spinning 2pac's *Ambitionz az a Ridah*. On the left side of the room, by the windows, Jenny Alvarez pouts her pale thin lips at us like we're unwelcome guests in her home. She's a hating ass bitch all the way. She's dating this ugly scrap named Joker who's too scared to leave his grandma's *casa* after dark. Jenny blames Nortés for hooking her mom on heroin, as if we force that filth on anybody. If it's not us selling it'll be some racist biker boys, at least we live here.

Class ends and me and Reyna trail behind Jenny. It's lunch time, so people flood the hallways. Jenny walks through campus to the metal tables by the football field, homebase for her and a few scrap skanks and girls who are just too stuck-up to associate with us.

"Why the fuck you looking at me and my homegirl like that in class?" I ask Jenny.

"It's a free country, isn't it?" Jenny says. "All I see is two sod-buster bitches."

There it is, *buster*, the ultimate insult for a Norté. They call us busters because our families were farmworkers. Kinda desperate, all they can diss us on is how hard our parents worked to pick produce. It's not as clever as calling someone a Sur Rata, but it's the word we're supposed to go wild over when used in confrontation. If they flash red at a bull, they know they're chasing trouble.

I push Jenny and she stumbles backwards on a metal table, knocking over a strawberry milk that makes a puddle of pink. While she's disoriented I grab the collar of her navy Nike crewneck. I'm not harsh today, I won't sock her, just slap her a few times while the usual circle of kids spectate in excitement. "Stop, Alex, get off!" Jenny pleads. Her head falls back limp and I stop slapping. Suddenly Jenny tilts her head back up and spits straight into my left eye. I let go of her and wipe it off and she lands a mean punch to my other eye. I can't go like that. I go full Mike Tyson on her, punching away until she's really down and crying and drooling and bleeding from the nose.

"You think Jenny will ever come to her senses?" Reyna asks me in the bathroom.

"Once you go scrap you're a lost cause," I say, and turn the handle on the paper-towel dispenser. "It's kinda sad. Me and Jenny used to kick it heavy back in middle school."

“Don’t feel sad. We grow up and lose stuff,” Reyna said, pouting at her reflection.

Jenny got me good, I won’t front. The skin under my eye is tender and feels like I have a raisin stuck between my bones and my skin. Usually I wear my war wounds with pride, but I’m supposed to meet my counselor after lunch. She’s nice to me, so I should look nice for her. I put some concealer over the bruise and apply dark brown lip liner on red lipstick. Staring into the chipped mirror above the sink, I feel more mindful now that I’m looking like I got it together.

Ms. Terresa is typing slowly on a humming computer when I come into her office. She’s lowkey too young and pretty to be sitting in a closed office every weekday, but I suppose this school stuff is the cause she’s down for, I can’t knock her for that. She used to be a probation officer but she ain’t strict and stiff like the nosy PO’s my homies be getting. She cool; she brings me Frosties from Wendy’s, reminisces about her high school loves with me, and lets me call her Ms. T. When the school started making me go to weekly counseling, on account of my truancy, I thought it was going to be some more boring detention shit. But it’s actually kinda cool to talk to someone older who sees a future, my future, as something that can only get better if I believe it can be.

“So what are you thinking, Alejandria?” Ms. T asks, and offers a Snapple iced tea.

“What do you mean?” I snap the cap off. “I’m always thinking.”

“I mean the next step. Community College, university, maybe UCSC?”

“I’m not thinking about that yet,” I say. “Not looking to be a lawyer or an astronaut.”

“Nobody’s saying you have to know exactly what you want to be yet. I don’t even know what I want to be, and I’m 32!” She snorts when she laughs. “But college is about more than getting a job, it’s about growing. Sometimes it’s good to see what’s outside.”

“I got everything I need here.” I sip my raspberry Snapple and kick my feet up. “My amigas, my familia, my boyfriend, my cool counselor with those cute turquoise flats I see under her desk. Damn Ms. T, you going to the club after this? Where you get those fly shoes?”

Ms. T puts her hand to her chest all humble like.

“I got them at the Nordstrom,” she says. “We could go sometime, if you want.”

“That would be cool, maybe we will,” I say, and look at the clock hanging above her. “Have to go.”

“When you’re out there, Alejandra, please remember to think about your future.”

I nod and open the office door.

“I’m out of here Ms. T, see you Monday.”

Me and dad wash dishes together after a pretty cool dinner. Dad was gone for two days driving a Driscoll’s truck to Oregon, and came back with familia on his mind. We cooked Hamburger Helper together: we didn’t have pasta so we mixed ground beef and cheese sauce with some beans, it was a little salty but it hit the spot after me and Reyna smoked a blunt in my front yard. Dad invited his girlfriend, Eva, and she brought a loaf of sourdough from the bakery she works at. She’s not trying to regulate me like some of his other girlfriends, and when Dad’s around her he’s as funny and laid-back as he was in the old days. Reyna sat next to me complimenting the cuisine. My grandpa was feeling strong enough to swallow a few bites and ask what I learned in school, then he went back to bed. Even if I don’t get to do anything wild tonight, getting to chill with my fam ain’t half bad.

“You have to scrub the plate if you want the dirt to come out,”

Dad says.

“Yeah, yeah I know how to wash a dish pops.”

I’ve been splashing the greasy plates with water, drying them with a rag real quick, and putting them away like I can’t see stains. I don’t want to miss the hype on the TV in our living room.

“You think he’ll come to Watsonville next?” I ask Dad.

“Not if he doesn't need to.” He puts the last plate away.

“Nothing special about here.”

We head to the living room. Dad sits on the sofa with Eva and they share a big bowl of raspberries and strawberries he got from work with his special employee five finger discount. Me and Reyna chill on the carpet and do commentary on every commercial. This awesome trailer for an alien invasion flick ends and transitions to the live event. There’s a stage filled with uniformed police and politicians sitting in metal chairs. Above the stage a big welcome banner hangs and waves in the wind.

A chief of police steps up to the podium. “I’m blessed to say we’re seeing better days,” the cop says, eyeing the large crowd. “Only one year ago our neighborhoods were riddled with gang violence, shootings on a daily basis, attempts at my own officer’s lives. But now, thanks to the task force, homicide rates have plummeted. Last year we had 43, this year, only 14 so far. Only 14.”

The audience applauds and whistles in victory.

“We can’t have peace abroad if we don’t have peace at home. Thankfully, we’re finally getting the support we need.” He smiles as the cheers grow louder. “Salinas, please join me in welcoming the President of the United States!”

The President, in a gray suit that matches his silver hair, walks out to a roar of applause. On his way to the podium he shakes hands with cops and community leaders and he pulls Anna Caballero, the Secretary of California Business, in for a hug. He opens up this tan leather folder and puts it on the podium, grinning the whole damn time like it really is his honor.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says, opening the folder to read. “Leon Panetta did not make me come here, I wanted to be here and I am glad to be here today.”

The President, the boss of all bosses, is within a twenty-mile radius of my living room. He’s visiting Salinas, a town like Watsón but in another county. Those Nortés up there be going wild, so much so it’s gotten the attention of FBI and CIA and all that. Out there they’ll shoot someone from their own damn set over a Chinatown corner, it’s wrong. Norteños are a family, just like the one in my living room, and you can’t kill your own. I hope those Salás soldiers come to their senses soon.

“Salinas is a wonderful model of what has to be done in our communities if we’re going to get this country in shape,” President Clinton says. “Remember It wasn’t long ago that your city was invaded by 20 gangs with 1000 members. But also remember, kids wound up

in those gangs because they had nothing else to belong to. We need to know we're part of something bigger."

I can't believe me and the President are on the same page. I know I'm part of something bigger, in fact, I know that my choices in life will directly affect the lives of hundreds of my homies.

"We all want to be in a gang." The President pauses. "We just want to be in good gangs. A synagogue is a gang. Alvin's relay team—" Clinton points to a Salinas boy behind him who won an Olympic medal. "We need good gangs. We were not meant to live in isolation."

"Este pendejo." Dad stomps on the carpet. "There is no good gangs."

"I think he's handsome," Eva says. "And when he speaks, it sounds like he feels for us."

"He's a jackass." Dad rolls his eyes. "He doesn't have a clue what's going on."

"I want America to be a place where every young person has the chance to live out their dreams," President Clinton says. "As long as they're willing to work for it."

The live event ends and leads to the 6 o'clock news.

Dad yawns and gets up so he can change the channel to a match of futbol.

“He comes here and makes a big show about how Salinas is saved,” Dad says. “Kids are still getting killed like clockwork. He can lie about how good things are getting, but won’t do anything.”

“Well, love, maybe Clinton’s been trying to do a hundred things,” Eva says. “Gangs of boys are probably low in his big list of worries. The world is rougher right now.”

There’s knocking at the door. Dad goes to get it and comes back to the living room with Jesus. They’re not too friendly, but Dad tolerates him because who is he to say his daughter shouldn’t run with a choló? It’s what made Mom fall for him in the first place.

“Can Alex go out for a bit, Mr. Guzman?” Jesus asks like a gentleman.

“I don’t know.” Dad looks at me. “You got any homework?”

“Me and Reyna did all our homework at school.” I look to her and wink. “Right Reyna? We were all up in the library studying hella hard about helium and hydrogen, science stuff.”

“It’s true, we did what we had to today.” Reyna laughs.

Outside the house a few girls play hopscotch in the middle of the cul de sac. The clouds in the sky are skinny, pretty and pinkish. I love summer evenings like this. Jesus has the yellow hatchback Honda he’s been driving parked in front of my house.

“What’s the move homie, what we doing?” Reyna asks, reaching for the passenger side.

“Let’s talk in the car.” Jesus opens the driver door.

I pull down the front passenger seat so Reyna can sit in the back. The tiny car is cluttered with empty Mickey’s 40 ouncers and shiny Swisher wraps. On the floor under the glovebox is a copy of the G.U.N (Generations of United Norteños) album, basically our audio bible. The album artwork features about 40 Nortés wearing all red, all men, grouped together at a park. This is what we strive for: this life is bigger than gang banging, it’s about unity. That’s something scraps, Crips, Bloods, MS-13, the KKK, even the damn U.S. Army or anyone else can’t relate to.

Jesus gets a backpack from the backseat, unzips the big pouch, and empties it out on his lap. I rummage through the pile of stuff that comes out. There’s two wigs; one curly and black and the other hella short and blonde, some neutral-colored blouses and cute cardigan sweaters, two purses, the gun Jesus stole from the cop, and some neon green cat-eyed sunglasses.

“The big dog just called me with a job,” Jesus says. “One cool ass mission.”

He twists the key in the ignition and lets go of the clutch. We start moving.

Reyna puts on the blonde wig and looks at herself in the rearview mirror. We've tag teamed in tasks like this before. Hitting licks, finessing a mothafucka', taking off with a scrap's stash is so easy when you come off cool and look as good as me and Reyna do in our dollar store disguises. We were hitting hella licks last year when a lot of Sureños were moving in. We would go up to a dealer and invite him to kick it at our house that was empty just for that one night. But it's rare now, people are getting wise to our tricks. And whenever we steal some drugs it has to be sanctioned by the local bosses, this ain't the wild west. It's important to know who's doing what at what time so if something goes down, help is nearby.

"Speedy said this thing got to be done tonight, and that I'm the only one he trusts with the type of loot we taking off with," Jesus boasts. "This scrap, don't even know his name but he just moved here two weeks back, has been slanging' all day at the laundromat on Kings Way."

"Must be a real confident kid if he thinks he can set up shop in our block," I say.

"We got people who've been eyeing him, damn scrap can hardly serve all his customers they go through it so quick. So every few hours, he makes a call for his plug at the payphone outside. A little bit

later a car pulls up, dealer goes in, comes out, and is good to serve for another few hours. Steady weight coming in a few times a day.”

“So we wait for this fool to re-up, then rob him?” Reyna punches the back of my seat. “That’s when me and Alex come up to that scrapa, pull out that piece and be like, ‘Punk mothafucka’, touch your ankles, we taking your pack for the familia!”

“Not this time,” Jesus says. “We’re hitting them hard, cleaning the stash spot that’s supplying him. You two laugh, flirt, feel him up, act like all you want is dope. Lots of dope, tell him it’s for a big ass party this weekend. And he’ll fall for y’all, like they usually do, and I’ll follow close by once that fool leads you to his trap-house.”

“Sorry babe, sounds risky,” I say, taking off the funny sunglasses. “What if me and Reyna go with that guy, you lose us at a stop sign, and all of a sudden we’re surrounded by a bunch of opposition? Wouldn’t be *bueno*.”

“Love that you’re thinking ahead,” Jesus says. “That’s why you hold the pistol. I don’t want it on me anyways, don’t need it. It’s got 14 in the clip and one in the hole, but you probably ain’t even have to shoot. Just point it at them if things get bad. Scraps get scared easy.”

He has a point. Sometimes all it takes is the sight of a *cuete* to get some punks moon walking backwards like Michael Jackson. And things can’t get too out of hand when Reyna’s got my back. I’m not

worried about what can go wrong, just want to wrap this up so I can enjoy my Friday night right.

“Well I’m down when you’re down.” I pull off my Watsonville High Wildcats sweatshirt and throw on a striped green and pink GAP fleece. I put the curly black wig on, and it’s so itchy I almost want to throw it out of the car window because it feels like I woke a colony of 400 lice living in the wig.

“Shiiiiit, I been down to rob a clown,” Reyna says. “Don’t want to lose my skills, ya feel?”

The trip to Kings Drive should be short and simple, but still, Jesus’s hands jitter on the steering wheel. I put my hand on his thigh to ease him up. He ignores me though. His eyes go from the dashboard to the road to the black and red beaded rosary swinging from the rear view.

“Anyone want some rice?” he says. “It’s in the glovebox, Alex, little plastic bag.”

I grab the coke in a plastic bag with the Batman symbol all over it.

“I’m cool, have to think clear.” I hold up the baggie and Reyna reaches for it.

“Nothing as nice as a little line before a crime.” She divides the powder with her library card on the G.U.N album and her blonde wig jerks back after she snorts. “Makes anything a bit easier.”

“Shit, it’s all easy to me,” Jesus says. He asks Reyna for a hit and he does a bump off her pinky nail with his eyes on the road. “If it’s for mi familia, I’m capable of anything. I regret nothing. That’s what it’s about, commitment, y’all two get it?”

The bright white light of the Royalty Laundromat sign off Kings Drive makes the building shine amidst the shadowy sea of parking lot around it. A small building with big windows all around. I move my head a bit and spot a guy in a blue Duke University sweater between a row of washers and driers.

“You two still feeling cool about it?” Jesus asks me and Reyna

Me and Reyna look in the rearview mirror one more time, make sure our wigs don’t reveal a single spot of real hair. I put the cop’s pistol in a small tan purse with a low-hanging skinny strap, part of the costume. I get out and push the passenger seat down so Reyna can come out.

“Alright then,” Jesus says. “You tell him you want to buy a lot. If you have to, flex some of the cash I left in that purse, and make him take you to the spot. Really put that charm on, play that mothafucka, he won’t know what hit him.”

“*Ya sabés*, we ready for whatever,” I say. “See you soon, love ya.”

Walking towards the laundromat, me and Reyna whisper a prayer to La Santa Muerte to please let our crime go smoothly, may no cop stop us, may no scrap whack us.

“Hoping like Hell it all goes well,” I say, putting my hand on the laundromat door.

“You and me together homegirl,” Reyna grinds her teeth.

“Ain’t no need for hope.”

The laundromat is loud with the collective hum of a hundred machines going. It smells like bleach, lavender, and cigarette smoke that trails from a room in the back. The boy in the blue Duke sweater is standing at the same spot. I look back at Reyna, she gives the faintest smile ever and goes back to being stoned and serious. Getting closer to the boy in blue, my brain could burst from all the decisions I got to make in a second. Should I fake my voice? Maybe talk like a white girl: ‘Hey dude, I totally need a brick of coke, please’. I’m standing right in front of him, and all I say is, “Hey.”

“Waddup.” He doesn’t look at me or Reyna. “Y’all two Alex and Reyna, huh?”

My jaw drops. How the fuck could he see through our cover with the quickness?

“What... Who's that?” I say. “My name is Tiffany, and me and my girlfriend Marilyn right here just want to buy a whole lotta' blow for this function. We heard you're connected like that.”

“Y'all here to do that thing or what?” he says, now frustrated like he's running late.

Me and Reyna look at each other. Her eyes keep blinking like she can't believe what she's seeing, but it could be a twitch from the coke.

“Chill, I ain't an enemy.” He rolls up his sleeve to show off a big “N” above an “831” in old-English lettering on his right wrist. “I'm Lobo, my Watsón homies put me here to tell you what's good. This a disguise, you know, like what you're doing.”

“This ain't right,” I say. “We were sent here to bust a mission. Jesus said Spooky called him, gave him all the details, formed a plan, now we're here. Nah, you can't tell me they sent us just to make fools of ourselves.”

“Jesus is a fool,” Lobo says. “Bragging about bodies he dropped to any homeboy or hang-around who asks. He's got no discipline recently. He'll fuck around and bring the President here on some stop-the-violence shit. Nah, Jesus ain't working out.”

For a fragment of a second I allow myself to feel fear over what I'm hearing. Is this homeboy I've never seen really telling me

Jesus is a dead man walking, as casually as mentioning the weather?

But I can't afford fear. I'm defending my man with whatever I can.

"Jesus puts more work in than anyone in this town, and he never even expects a promotion or whatever," I say. "He's puró Norteño, he lives for his gang. Everyone knows it."

"Doesn't matter how much work he's doing, it's how he does it."

"If you guys have a problem with him, tell him, how else could he fix it?" I ask.

"Nah, it ain't finna' go down like that." Lobo shakes his head. "It's a new age, we had to evolve. We work like the courts now. Three strikes, *y no mas*, out of here."

I'm holding back tears, and Reyna puts her arm around my neck before I tip over.

"Why?" I ask Lobo. "Jesus could be a fucking boss in the future. He gives everything for us."

"I bet Jesus can be nice," Lobo says. "But that drive-by at the party was sloppy. Killing a little kid? Nothing puts more pressure on the pigs to fuck with us like a dead *niño*. Makes us look too cold."

I didn't know a kid was killed. Last night, Jesus recounted the tale of taking down a few foes at a fiesta, spraying a Mac-11 at a patio filled with people eating at tables with balloons tied to them. And I

only read the headline off the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* today, didn't even skim to see who were the casualties. I'm no angel, but killing a kid, even if they got scraps as older brothers, is just wrong. It's ugly stuff like that makes the community want to betray us and talk to the cops. I have to think of my familia's well-being first.

Lobo went on to list a few of Jesus's sins too extreme to let go of: sniffing his own supply and lying about it, using the same payphones too frequently, robbing *paleteros* of their money and ice cream and scaring children -- our future recruits -- in the process. Lobo says the bosses love Jesus, really was a good soldier, but letting him rampage could bring the whole Watsonville regiment's reputation down. It's payback for the birthday party drive-by, along with a bunch of other shit. My knees wobble. I want to step into one of the washing machines and fill my head up with soapy suds so I don't have to think about this dirt we got ourselves into.

"I know it's hard, I had to put a few of my dogs down too. But in life we make sacrifices," Lobo says. "So you two are going to be strong, like real Norteñas, and you're going back to Jesus's car and you'll tell him to take you two to this phony stash-house out in Prunedale, cool and quiet and safe."

Lobo hands me a laundromat business card with an address scribbled on the back.

I look at the address, then out a window and see the hatchback Honda with Jesus sitting in it. He looks peaceful behind the wheel with one arm out the window. I love him, a little bit. But if that beautiful and brutal boy out there is threatening the stability of my familia in any way, today has to be the last day I love him. I'm a leader of my own clique, people should look up to me as an example of why we rep the North side with pride. I've been with Jesus for a year, he won a giant teddy bear for me at the summer Strawberry festival, and since then he's been a bright light in my days and nights. But I am, always was and always will be, a Norteña above all. My familia rules the streets from Watsonville to Salinas, from Fresno to Stockton, streets to the cell blocks. We're a family and a force. So fuck a high school sweetheart, I have my future to think about.

I put the business card in my purse and feel that police pistol at the bottom.

"Yo Lobo, honestly, I don't know if Jesus will fall for it," I say. "I got that tool on me right now though, loaded. If you want us to do it, we'll do it straight up, no set-ups and no tricks."

"Yeah, for sure," Reyna sounds uneasy. "If that's what y'all need, we're down."

Lobo grins and shows his gold fangs. He's got a baby face, chubby cheeks and scar-free skin, but when he laughs it's twisted and

sick like an old lady whose smoked all her life and it's finally taking a toll.

"You've got a good career ahead of you." He snaps his fingers. "If you're doing it, make it quick, no need to give him a eulogy. Smoke him, slide that piece into the storm drain, move on."

Lobo leaves for the backroom. Me and Reyna stand for a while watching the clothes spin around until I snap back to reality. I'm here doing great work for my gang, I'm alive.

"*Vamanos*, sister." I pat Reyna on the back.

"For sure, *hermana*." She walks ahead and gets the door for me.

The evening air makes the world much colder than I remember it. I have to pull the zipper of my Gap fleece all the way up to my chin to curb the shivers. Reyna's teeth chatter away but I think it could still be the coke. I wish I was high like her. We'll get high soon, hella high.

Jesus sees us coming towards the Honda. With a smile, he raises one hand from the wheel and waves. He rolls down his window, "Is everything going okay?"

"Everything is okay over here baby," I say. "We got the sucker where we want him."

Me and Reyna go to the passenger side door. I put my freezing fingers in the purse and feel for the gun; even the trigger guard feels like a tiny icicle right now. My hand cramps up inside the purse, like my bones want me to stop. I can see Reyna's reflection in the passenger window. She nods. Again my mind is murky. Do we do it right here with Jesus in the Honda? Go to that Prunedale place that's cool and quiet, would that be kinder? Should I ask him, just to milk the last moments of sweetness in this life, to take me to Lola's Liquor one more time for some frozen cupcakes and a big beer in a brown paper bag?

I just know I'm finna' do what I have to do, because it's bigger than me.

And I know I'll never be alone in this life, for the best or the worst times. Reyna, my queen, puts her hand on mine and guides me as we both pull the pistol out the purse together and aim it at Jesus. He looks baffled by my movements, like that day he tried to teach me to drive stick. Now he's holding his hands up and mouthing some words, pleading. We can't hear him over the *click-clack* of cocking the pistol back and the *bang, bang, bang* of the policeman's Beretta and the shatter of glass.

I just killed my boyfriend for mi familia. I've never felt more alive.

Colton Miller

Scoops

Every Friday night I go to Baskin Robbins, eat Chocolate Chip ice cream, and then go home and get drunk. Before going to Baskin Robbins and getting my two scoops of Chocolate Chip in a cup, I always go to the liquor store across the parking lot. Occasionally in between going to the liquor store and Baskin Robbins, I sit in my car for a few minutes while I cry and/or punch my glove compartment. Last week I punched my glove compartment until the latch broke off. Now it won't even open. This was an accident by the way; I didn't mean to break it. Why would I purposely break my glove compartment, permanently locking my registration and insurance documents inside? Anyway, after I get my ice cream and go to the liquor store, I go back to my dorm and drink until I'm asleep.

Tonight is no different. I go into the liquor store and buy a bottle of rum. Liquor Depot is the very inviting name of the place. I put the bottle of rum in my car, but luckily tonight I don't feel the need to sit in the passenger seat with my emotions or punch my broken glove compartment. I just put the bottle in the car, take a deep breath, and walk over to Baskin Robbins.

I pull open the door and am hit in the face with the smell of waffle cones. I don't like waffle cones by the way; I always get my ice cream in a cup. But damn do the cones smell good.

I walk up to the counter. "Hey Ted."

"Hey, how's it goin'?" Ted asks me.

"Not bad," I lie. "You?"

"Same old."

I've known Ted for going on four years now. And when I say "known him," I mean he scoops my ice cream every Friday night.

He doesn't even ask me what I want. He just scoops two scoops of Chocolate Chip into a cup.

While he scoops, I take a look at some of the other flavors they offer. Some sound good, some don't. The ones that sound good to me are: Cherry Lime Rickey Sorbet, Oreo, Rainbow Sherbet, Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, Mango Frozen Yogurt. Even though these sound good, I'll never try them. I like my Chocolate Chip, and don't want to be disappointed with something different. And then the ones that look outright terrible are: Creole Cream Cheese, Lemon Custard, Pralines n' Cream, Butter Pecan, and last but not least, Rum Raisin. Who the fuck orders something with raisins when you have the option of Chocolate Chip in front of you? I realize rum is my drink of choice, but ice cream with raisins? No.

Ted hands me my cup of Chocolate Chip and a pink plastic spoon.

“Thanks man,” I say after I pay.

“Of course, see you next week.”

“You bet.”

I take a seat in one of the pink plastic chairs at one of the tiny tables. I commence my weekly ritual of eating ice cream and people-watching. Am I a complete loser? Probably. Is this pathetic? Yep. I’m sure it’s stupid that this is what I’m doing on a Friday night. All the cool college kids and 20-somethings are partying after a hard day’s work, and I’m just sitting here in a Baskin Robbins. By myself. Eating Chocolate Chip ice cream.

There’s a family sitting a few tables away from me. A mom and two kids. The boy’s probably 5 and the girl’s probably 7. The boy is eating ice cream that’s neon green and purple, one of those special flavors obviously made for kids. It looks good though; it looks like it tastes like candy. I think it’s called Wild and Reckless Sherbet. The girl tries to take some of her brother’s toxic-waste-colored ice cream by sticking her finger in his cup. The boy laughs as he pushes her hand away and says “Stoppppp iiiittttt!!!!” You know how little kids talk; they draw out the words. Stopppppp iiiittttt.

I take a closer look (discretely - I don't want to look like a creeper) and see that the mom doesn't have a wedding ring. That makes me sad. Is she a single mom? What if her husband died? Did the kids lose their dad? Or maybe she has a happy marriage and is just getting her ring cleaned. Or maybe they're a modest couple and didn't feel the need to spend that kind of money at a jewelry store. They told each other that they didn't need rings since "love is all that matters," or something cheesy like that. Anyway, she seems like a sweet mom though. Taking her kids out for ice cream on a Friday night.

I finish my ice cream, nod goodbye to Ted and walk out the front door. I get back to my car and tell myself that I'm not going to drink tonight, but deep down I know that I will.

It's a week later now, and I'm back. Like usual. My routine. The thing that makes me feel sane. Even if it's unhealthy, it makes me feel normal. I drop by the liquor store and get a bottle of rum so I can make rum and Cokes later. I toss it on the passenger seat in my car then head into Baskin Robbins. I make some boring small-talk with Ted while he scoops my ice cream, then eat it by myself at one of the little tables. People-watching the kids, families, couples, groups of friends.

Another week. Another Friday night. Two scoops of Chocolate
Chip. One bottle of alcohol.

Another week.

And another.

And another.

It's Friday again. I park in my typical spot at the end of the row, directly in between Baskin Robbins and the Liquor Depot. I'm about to head into the liquor store when I notice some frat guys hanging around in front. Some of them look vaguely familiar from school. In order to avoid them, I head into the Baskin Robbins first. I'll stop by the liquor store after.

But when I walk into the store and take a look at who's behind the counter, I'm confronted with the realization that this is not a typical Friday night. Ted isn't here. I don't want to blow it out of proportion by saying that my weekly routine and sense of normalcy are collapsing, but that's kind of what's happening.

But it's not like I'm gonna leave and not get my ice cream. There are no customers right now, so I head straight to the counter where a girl I've never seen before is working.

"Hi, how can I help you?" she asks me.

She's my age, I guess. And she's cute too. It throws me off, so I don't really know what to say. I'm not normally in a situation like this. Talking to girls, that is.

"Hi, uh, where's Ted?" I realize that might've sounded weird so I quickly add: "Just curious."

"Oh Ted and I just traded shifts. He had to take his wife somewhere or something."

That makes me feel bad. I didn't even know Ted had a wife until just now. He doesn't wear a wedding ring. I always check for wedding rings on people. But maybe Ted just doesn't have one, or he does but takes it off for work. I wouldn't want ice cream to get all over my wedding ring every day either. But regardless, I realize that I never really made an effort to get to know him, even though I've seen him every week for I don't know how long.

"Oh okay."

"So what can I get you?" She smiles at me. She has a pleasant way about her.

I smile back. I'm sure I look awkward. "Just two scoops of Chocolate Chip in a cup, please."

"Sure!"

She grabs a scooper. "So you know Ted then?" she says, making conversation as she scoops.

"Well, I mean I just come in here every Friday. So I've seen Ted every week for years. So I guess I know him."

She stops scooping and stares at me, jaw not quite dropped but almost. "Every Friday night, for years?!"

"Yeah," I say. I try to laugh, to make it less embarrassing. I don't want her to think I'm a complete loser, so maybe if I laugh it off it won't seem so bad.

She laughs back. "That's cool!" She goes back to scooping. "I have routines like that too I guess. I go to Chipotle every Wednesday. And get the same thing every time. Two chicken tacos, a bag of chips, and a soda. Pibb Xtra to be exact. Chipotle has the best Pibb, by the way. Then I go home and watch *Survivor*. I find that it keeps me sane." She hands me my cup of ice cream and rings it up on the register.

"That's cool, I feel the same way," I say. "It makes me feel normal or whatever. Some people might think it's boring to do the same thing all the time but whatever. It's what I like. And it's what I look forward to."

“Exactly!” she says. She hands me my receipt. “Well, enjoy your ice cream.”

“Thanks.”

I take a seat at one of the tables. The Baskin Robbins is dead tonight. Still not a single other customer. Weird for a Friday night.

Every couple minutes or so we exchange glances while she waits at the counter. She smiles at me every time.

After no other customers come in, she walks towards the other end of the counter and starts to clean some milkshake blenders. She wipes her hands on her apron, which leaves behind ten ice cream smeared fingerprints.

I finish up my ice cream in silence, just staring out the window at the parking lot. Watching the cars go by. I realize I still don't know the girl's name. I can't remember if she was wearing a nametag or not. I should've paid more attention.

I'm about to get up and leave when another staff member comes out from the back. Probably done making ice cream cakes or something. She's an older lady and I recognize her. I've seen her work with Ted sometimes. I think she's a manager or something.

“Wanna take your 15?” the manager asks the girl.

“Sure.” The girl tidies up and then walks in the back for a second, then comes out from behind the counter. She glances over at

me, and I pretend I'm not looking in her direction. But I can tell she's debating. Then she makes up her mind and walks directly over to me.

Fuck. I don't know what to do.

"Do you mind if I sit with you while I'm on my break?" she asks me.

"Um, no," I stumble, taken off guard. "Feel free."

She takes a seat in one of the little pink plastic chairs at my table. I'm not used to girls being so forward like this. Or used to them talking to me at all. I haven't really had a meaningful conversation with a girl in a while.

"So what's your name?" I ask her.

"Elizabeth. Liz." She puts out her hand and we shake.

"Ryan."

"Nice to meet you, Ryan!"

"Good to meet you too."

We sit in silence for a few moments. Who's going to speak first? I decide to take the plunge and ask, "So, if you swapped shifts with Ted and don't normally work Fridays, when do you normally work?"

"Just Monday through Thursday."

"Okay, cool."

"Yeah."

We sit in silence again. However, it doesn't feel as painfully awkward as it normally does during lulls in conversation with people.

She plays with one of the loose straps on her apron. Wraps it around her pinky finger, then unwraps it. Wraps it tight around her pinky, then unwraps it. Wraps. Unwraps. Wraps. Unwraps.

"So there's this other thing I do every week," she tells me, still wrapping the apron strap around her pinky. "Every Sunday morning I take a 30-minute walk around my apartment complex, listening to the band Arcade Fire. Then I usually go to the same sandwich place for lunch. And then every Sunday afternoon I go to a matinee showing at the movies by myself. I just enjoy going to the movies by myself sometimes... And that's usually my routine every weekend."

I don't respond right away, so she backpedals. "I know... it's stupid," she says, showing more vulnerability than before. She's actually bashful. Different than the quirky confidence she'd been showing up until now. I guess she was opening up to me, even if it wasn't about something big.

"No no, that's not stupid," I say. "I'm the one who gets two scoops of Chocolate Chip at Baskin Robbins every Friday night, and have been for years. At this exact location at roughly the same time every single Friday night. And Ted has pretty much scooped my ice cream every single time. I think *that's* weird."

Liz laughs. “That’s not weird. I *work* at Baskin Robbins. How could I think that’s weird?”

“I don’t know.” I laugh too.

It’s quiet for a moment. I want to keep the conversation going, so I ask, “So since you work here, what do you think of Rum Raisin? Every time I come here I look at it and it disgusts me.”

She playfully leans in towards me and whispers, “I probably shouldn’t say this since I work here, but... I agree with you, it tastes like total shit.”

We share a laugh, then spend the next ten minutes talking about our routines, other Baskin Robbins ice cream flavors (her favorite is Mint Chocolate Chip), movies, her going to school at the local community college, me going to college downtown.

After a while, she checks the time on her phone.

“I should get back to work,” she says.

“Okay.”

She stands up. “Well, it was nice to talk to you, Ryan.”

“It was good to talk to you too.”

She heads back towards the counter. “Maybe I’ll see you if Ted and I trade shifts again.”

“Okay.”

She waves goodbye and steps into the back.

I leave and head towards my car. I plop down onto the seat and reflect for a moment about what happened.

Only when I'm on the highway do I realize I forgot to stop by the liquor store after Baskin Robbins. But I don't bother turning around.

I pull to a stop in front of Baskin Robbins and turn off my car. But unlike other weeks, tonight is not a Friday night. It's a Thursday night.

I walk inside and see Liz at the counter. She's busy helping a family of five that just came from baseball practice. The dad is ordering a bunch of ice cream and the mom is trying to wrangle the three boys. Each boy is wearing a baseball uniform, their white pants stained green and brown from the grass and infield dirt. Their cleats click on the floor as they run around.

I wait patiently in line. Liz doesn't notice me since it seems a bit busier than usual and she's in the middle of helping everyone. Though I've never come on a Thursday before, so I guess I wouldn't know.

When I reach the front of the line, Liz is busy wiping some spilled Snickers ice cream off the counter and says without looking up, "Hi, how can I help you?"

She then looks up and her face lights up. “Oh, hey!”

“Hey.”

“Wait, did I accidentally come to work on a Friday?” she jokes.

“I decided to change up my routine, just a little bit.”

“Well cool! I guess it’s good to change things around every once in a while... But don’t tell me you’re changing what ice cream you want.”

“Never.”

“Good!” She smiles as she starts to scoop.

Chocolate Chip.

In a cup.

Two scoops.

R.C. Peet

Gunslingers

I loved going with my Dad to the Sunday sports car slaloms he organized in department store parking lots across the San Fernando Valley.

One day a hungover friend of his puked all over the asphalt and he asked my Dad if he wanted to race his MGB around the pylons.

"Yeah," said my Dad, "but someone's gotta look after Moose."

That was me. I was Moose.

The hungover man stuck his pointer fingers in the corners of his mouth and shrieked a whistle. I decided to ask him later how he did that.

"Sasha! Over here!" he called.

This guy in a red-and-green Pendleton ambled over. I saw myself reflected in his mirrored shades.

"Yeah?"

"Gaynor's gonna run a few laps in my MGB. Can you watch Moose here?"

The guy in the red-and-green Pendleton said to my Dad, "Cool with you, Gaynor?"

"Sure thing, Sasha. I'll be right back, cradling the gold."

The guy called Sasha extended his hand for a manly shake. Three fingers were missing. I stared at the shriveled eraser pink stumps.

Crawling up his forearm was a snaky tattoo that read "*Yo No Soy Tu Pendejo.*"

"C'mon, Moose," said my Dad. "Not polite to stare."

I gripped Sasha's thumb and pumped it.

"Thanks, Sash," said my Dad. He looked down at me. "You mind Sasha, see? He's an old high school buddy. You'll be fine. Hey, Sash, throw some steaks on the hibachi."

I watched as the hungover guy and my Dad strode over to the British racing green convertible with the roll bar. My Dad lifted a chipped helmet from the front seat and slid it over his ears.

"Hey, Moose," said Sasha, holding out a blue and white bag, "help me with these briquets." I took the bag and shook out some briquets into the hibachi. "Make a pyramid," he said, and I built a cone.

"Now for my favorite part," said Sasha as he tipped the lighter fluid can over the briquets and drenched them in the clear firestarter.

I turned away as my Dad gunned the MGB's engine and eased the clutch. As my Dad rolled toward the starting line, Sasha tapped my elbow. He held out a silver lighter and casually flipped it open.

"Light the coals."

I knew an important test was in play. That's what these older men always conducted. Tests. I'd used a cigarette lighter before, last winter when I set fire to the Christmas tree.

I took the lighter from Sasha, knelt over the hibachi, and rolled the spiky metal wheel against the flint with my thumb. Butane flared into flame, and I carefully applied the fire to the base of the pyramid, the way Jack London described lighting kindling in "To Build a Fire," which my Dad had read to me three years ago, when I was six. From the bottom, because fire burns upward.

"Hey," said Sasha, "you're Gaynor's kid alright. Reminds me of that time we were in Tijuana, buying a duffel bag's worth of Roman candles. Your Dad insisted we ride straight to Rosarita Beach to set some off. I wanted to see the donkey show--"

"The donkey show?"

"Never mind. But we ended up at Rosarita Beach, low tide, no moon. I guzzled a six-pack of Dos Equis while your Dad lit the heavens with those Roman candles. He handled his lighter like a gunslinger. One candle after another. The smell of gunpowder hung over us and reminded me of my Dad's stories of D-Day."

I heard a starter's pistol snap, and watched the MGB lurch forward, my Dad running through the gears as he approached the first pylons. As his brakes screeched, Sasha tapped my elbow.

When I turned away from my Dad's distant maneuverings, I saw Sasha's sunglasses in his left hand. In the palm of his right hand, an eyeball.

When I steadied my breathing, I covertly studied Sasha's eye socket. Scar tissue formed a perfect Silly Putty crater. Sasha was breathing on me.

I backed up. "What happened?"

"I challenged your Dad to a shootout." Sasha popped the eye back in and slid on the mirrored shades. "At twenty paces, we shot our Roman candles at each other. One of his fireballs took out my eye. I was so pissed off I lit the fuse of a new one, and it exploded, taking my fingers with it."

Sasha seemed weirdly proud. While I was pondering this mystery, Sasha said, "Hey, let's bar-b-cue these steaks, eh?"

Sasha reached past me for the meat. His armpits smelled something awful, like acrid gunpowder.

Sasha flipped two steaks onto the grill. As they sizzled, I said, "Shouldn't we cook one for my Dad?"

"No room on this li'l baby," said Sasha. There was room.

Sasha said, "So we're down at Rosarita Beach. Your Dad drove the Plymouth to the Mexican hospital. At least until he blew up the engine."

“Blew up the engine?”

“Guy revved it so high the crankshaft split the oil pan. Melted the pistons, too. But his Daddy owned a hardware store. 'No problem,' said your Dad. The way guys talk whose old men always bail 'em out. No problem? Not for him, maybe.”

I cocked my ears toward the track. My Dad sure had that MGB screaming.

“Hear that?” said Sasha. “Now all we have to do is wait for the crash of metal and the black cloud.”

We stood there, silent. I wondered if this is how men are friends.

Sasha said, “Hey, you gonna want ketchup on that steak?”

“No, sir. I'm not hungry.”

Pam Schierer

The Blithe

The tranquil Land of Winds is composed of grassy hillocks and woodland vales; blossoming among those are several communities, each distinct in their own bent. In the East, near Ringing River, Harmony creates puzzling melodic contraptions. Buried in the Woods of Mull, the numerically proficient minds of Cipher maintain the Land's fiscal core. Axiom, in the northern lowlands, is renowned for devising objects that mark time and spot new worlds in night skies.

Balg is a town apart, known for its indulgence in extravagance. Nestled in the southernmost plains, all streets, like the spokes of a wagon wheel, lead to the plaza at its center. There, the sugar-white Inn sits, peacefully shaded by the towering spire of Town Hall.

-

In early spring a clarion wind roused, clearing the morning fog, leaving the sky mazarine. Brennus, the noble Mayor of Balg, noticed the shift. A curious impulse kindled, calling him from his offices.

"Off for tea, sir?" The spindly clerk remained intent on the scroll in his hands.

“I think not, Nechtan. I’m off for a walk.” The scroll met the floor and Brennus closed the gilded door. Customarily, the plaza was lively with citizens, each arrayed in similar fashion: garments of vivid parrot shades -- tightly fitted from ankle to waist with broad, elaborately structured shoulders. Collected and dispersed, the townspeople remarked on the agreeable turn in weather. Skirting the mid-morning bustle, Brennus read the direction of the wind with his tan face. The air rippled his lemon shirt against his angular frame. He followed, turning left.

Down the avenue, he watched his gleaming white shoes clop along the shouldering stones. After a block, slabs yielded to dusty seams, eventually giving way to packed earth. Below the canopy of the elm grove, little disks of light played on the narrow, shaded path, enshrouded on either side with ferns. Adhering to the land, the path dipped -- swerving around the sprawled bodies of jagged grey rocks -- then rose, tracing a ridge in the land. There, Brennus paused, spotting something peculiar hiding under the tendrils of a willow.

He scurried -- occasionally stumbling on coiled roots -- arrived and parted the curtain of dangling branches. At his feet, curling, ungodly green and bejeweled with berries, was a vine. Like a fountain, burgeoned from a shimmering well. The stones of the well, though nearly hidden, were pale and marbled with an odd blue luster.

Bewildered, he stooped and selected one vivid orb. It oozed fluorescent fuchsia juice down the palm of his hand and into his shirt sleeve. The berry, infinite pink and purple allied, hummed. He sucked it fervently.

Astonished, he looked down at the berry between his fingers, lips puckered, eyes crossed.

The townspeople drew back, alarmed, when their distinguished Mayor emerged onto the square. He wore a crimson-painted grin and clutched two fistfuls of shining fuchsia clusters that stained his sleeves to the elbows with syrupy juice.

At his rapturous words “You all *must* try one!” crowds clamored to sample the seductive berries, each face reacting much as the Mayor’s had. The precise flavor of the berries became an immediate subject of debate.

Sabine, the rotund Innkeeper, folded her hands to her breasts and arched back in ecstasy. “Mmmm! Tastes like sweet flow’rs if ya ask me!” Throughout the crowd, scattered hands raised in chimes of agreement.

“No, they’re tart like -- well I don’t know what,” said Brennus; a number of citizens nodded, concurring.

Chief of the Guard Cynbel weighed in, “Has a bitter aftertaste... like stiff ale.” There was a round of gruff accord.

After more squabble, and a lengthy vote, the new fruit was called Blithe. The townspeople were unanimous on only two matters:

1. The berries were enrapturing!
2. They must have more.

The fields adjacent to Balg’s prismatic suburb were tilled, the vines transplanted from their well, the wheat and potatoes used for compost. A nursery was erected, with bubbled, moss green glass, to germinate young vines. The farmers paid careful attention to the needs of Blithe, installing pickets for each to climb -- as they seemed wont to do -- and bent over the new sprouts to spray them with a measured amount of mist.

Sabine compiled a recipe book called “Baking Blithe,” and began selling new delicacies each morning, to include warm, feather-light Blithe muffins, Blithe pies, layer cakes with a blanket of gooey Blithe compote between each silky sponge, and in the evenings warm roasts and casseroles festooned with Blithe. Of these, the most coveted were the pies. The crust (made with butter, flour, salt and lemon water) was arranged in tangled lacework, resembling the vine, atop the fuchsia filling. Of course some preferred to eat the berries fresh,

mixed in cream and dusted with sugar; similarly, there were those who gorged on fistfuls of raw Blithe.

As the summer progressed, a new phenomenon arose in Balg: the citizens grew increasingly colorblind. They seemed able only to distinguish between black, white, and the incandescent fuchsia of the Blithe. Soon the décor of the buildings altered -- outside and in. The botanical-patterned woven rugs were cast off, the bare floors tiled with bleached and dyed rock. Aqua, coral, and periwinkle walls were repainted in black and white stripes of all directions. The furniture was refit; black and white chevron, checkered, and spotted textiles replaced soft-toned blossoms. The embroidering buttercups, chamomile, and forget-me-nots were dug from their beds; Blithe grew, grabbing at every cottage wall and window pane, creeping over the town of Balg.

The physical effects of the Blithe were not limited to eyesight. Consequently, frequent consumption mutated the wiry citizens, causing them to be decidedly bell-shaped; popular attire adapted suitably. Sleeves were omitted, due to ever-increasing arm circumference and the very real threat of stain. White garments embroidered with black thread were now tailored closely at the shoulder and billowed down the body. Blithe-stained linen, cotton and silks were costly and marked the more wealthy townsfolk.

Balg being far removed, it took time for the word Blithe to be spoken in neighboring towns; when the inquisitive ears of Axiom first heard of it, summer was waking.

Beside Axiom's staunch brass gates, a lanky man called Amos, in earthy corduroy britches and a coarse overcoat, eased against the towering wall, awaiting his merchant brother Caside's return from Cipher. With a tattered copy of Teoma's Esteemed Guide to Horticulture in hand, he dipped a stripped feather quill into a small ink vial in his breast pocket and drew stringent revisions. From his regular circulation, Caside brought samples of various herbs and soils to Amos, who chronicled each with meticulous sketches and scrupulous notes. In Caside's distribution, Cipher was the most infrequent town; for Amos, its unusual forest flora held the most intrigue.

At the beat of approaching hooves, Amos closed his quill in the book, trickling ink down his pocket. Before Caside's wagon was within the walls, Amos yelled "What did you find?"

Caside continued his leisurely approach, stopped the wagon safely beside the road, dismounted -- laboriously -- then savored a gratifying stretch before yawning, "I got news."

"What?"

Caside tossed the fatigued horse's reins to Amos. "Ever heard of the Blithe vine?"

"No."

"Didn't guess so." Caside fished around the wagon bed and presented a fuchsia book with winding white letters burnished on the front: *Baking Blithe*. "Traded the brass pocket watch for this; you owe me."

-

In late summer the crystal sky toasted umber, subduing the feverish heat; Amos lowered a stiff knee to the dancing grass of the overlook, beyond the low stone wall bordering the reach of Balg. Bread supply withered, he drank musty water from his canteen and surveyed the view. The black and white collection of cottages, in lively vine décor, sprawled in segments from the plaza at the center of town. With a twist of the wrist, he replaced the canteen lid and stood, adjusting his pack to commence.

The townsfolk mused over the traveler trudging down their streets. Housewives leaned on ample arms to giggle at his simple clothing and prominent nose. Men set tools aside to stroke their beards, deliberating the possible intentions of such a thin man. Amos easily found the Inn, braided in Blithe, and removed his brown cap for a polite entrance.

Inside, fuchsia-framed black and white squares checkered the floor, walls, and ceiling; each round table, topped by alternating tricolored rings, generated dizzying spirals. The warm air smelled heavily of butter, queasy sugared dust, and an unknown cloying fruit. Sabine was behind the bar, blowing wisps of grey hair from her heated cheeks and wiping crimson sauce onto her white apron. Amos was welcomed by a harmonious clatter of dropped forks; her mahogany eyes weighed the approaching stranger, tallying the differences.

She asked, "What can I do fer you?"

The question redirected Amos' attention, stilling his repeated wiping of hands on olive green coat. "Ah yes, I was looking for a room."

"How long'll you stay?" Sabine said it loud enough for the patrons to catch. They collectively leaned toward him for the answer.

"As yet, I'm undecided." Glances darted about the room behind him.

"How's that?" Sabine's hands settled heavily on the clean bar top.

"I can't predict how long it might take, a week... possibly two; I've come from Axiom to investigate --"

Abruptly, a man in poorly stitched black rags, maintaining a swaying interest on a stool at the end of the bar, stood as if he had unexpectedly hatched an idea. "Son! Have ye heard of Blithe?" The

room erupted excitedly. Suddenly Amos' shoulders were being slapped heartily; he managed to smile.

"Walcome ta Balg!" came a bellow from the far wall.

"That's quite a nose ya got on yer!" someone exclaimed, causing a swell of robust laughter.

"Ye must try this m'boy!" said a bristly, bearded fellow with thick fingers. He held a plate of pie up to Amos' nose. The banter hushed -- poised on toes -- clouding the air with the distinct sense of caught breath.

"I'm more of a bread man," professed Amos.

"Arrrrr..." was the cumulative response.

Sabine clapped a key to the countertop, her voice wintry.

"That'll be two silver for the room a-night."

The room, predictably monochromatic, contained a small cot in the corner beside an oil lantern that afforded Amos enough light to archive. He examined the finger-length glass tube of silvery-sandy soil and low-growing leafy herb he had collected from the road. He held it up to the dim light and completed his detailed sketch before falling asleep.

Amos awoke in the shy morning light and, to Sabine's distaste, chose a common roll for breakfast. He seated himself by a window,

turned to a clean page in his leather journal and scrawled “Blithe” at the top. He questioned Sabine about the vine first.

“Oh, that’ll be Mayor Brennus you’ll want ta talk to. He discovered them,” was her reply.

“Where might I find him?” he asked.

“That buildin’ there.” Sabine pointed a fat finger out the window to a dark, two-story structure; weighty fuchsia fabric swung lazily on either side of the bleached door. “Tell the man I sent ya.”

Amos nodded, gathered his items into a tan sack and departed, roll in hand.

He was swallowing the last bite as he reached the clerk’s desk. The grim man adjusted his wire spectacles and closed his eyes in one slow blink before asking, “Can I help you?” His biting voice echoed in the tall room.

“Yes, I was hoping to meet with Mayor Brennor --”

“Brennus,” the clerk corrected dryly.

“My apologies, is Mayor Brennus available?”

“What is this about?” The clerk sounded bored.

“Blithe, Sir, you see I am a student of horticulture --”

“Of course.” The clerk stood, gesturing to a group of checkered chairs on his way to a high arched door. “Wait there.” The latch sang a low clank through the room.

Amos sat, bouncing the sack on his knees.

The door opened slowly. The clerk appeared and leisurely nodded. "He'll see you."

Amos sprang up and returned the nod, thoughtfully slowing the rate of his steps upon entering.

Mayor Brennus stood beside his broad desk, exchanging his significant weight from one foot to the other. He had on a loosely draped, short-sleeved fuchsia pant suit and shiny checkered shoes. His generous presence and full-toned voice filled the room with ease. "Welcome to Balg! I've heard a lot about you!" he rumbled, spreading his arms grandly.

Amos shook his hand confidently. "Hello, sir. I'm Amos --" He paused, having come close enough to clearly view the Mayor's face, which appeared to have a careful layer of flesh-colored varnish. Like a mask, it sat unnaturally.

It took Brennus a moment, having come close enough to clearly view the young traveler's nose. To cover his amusement, he turned round and walked to his fluorescent velvet chair. "Yes, yes Amos of Axiom. How did you come to hear about Blithe?"

"My brother -- a merchant -- Sir, happened to be in Cipher and traded a pocket watch to a fellow for this." Amos retrieved the cook book from his sack and held it out to Brennus.

“Very good! Have a seat.” With a thick palm, Brennus indicated a plump, spotted chair. “Care for some water?” Brennus poured himself a glass from a pitcher; the black silhouette of a vine twisted up its white handle.

Amos declined the water and settled in the chair with his journal and quill ready. “So where did you first discover the vine?”

The velvet cushion wailed, releasing air under Brennus’ weight as he sat. He took a noisy gulp of water then dictated the story. Amos concentrated on recording the details neatly, but kept peeking up at a thin line of newly rinsed skin just above the Mayor’s lip. The skin was pale -- or ashen -- very nearly grey.

Once outside, Amos was relieved -- grateful even -- for the humidity-laden air and the sun’s heavy heat. The plaza, aflutter with the lunch crowd gathering at the Inn, sharply quieted. Warily, Amos scanned the array of citizens, clumped in groups, watching him, conversations suspended. He gave a half-salute, half-wave before jamming his hands in the pockets of his coat and whistling off to the left.

Once out of sight, Amos referred to his journal; assured he was heading in the right direction, he moved briskly. Beneath the shadows of the elm grove, he slowed and closed his eyes, soaking in the scent of leaves and moss afloat on the shade-cooled breeze. In little

time, he arrived on the ridge and saw the willow, just as Brennus had described.

It was clear that the graceful boughs had been hastily shaved, the damp internal wood now naked to the elements. The well stood solitary beside the tree, celestial-veined stones gleaming in stippled shade; the surrounding ground had been picked clean, leaving heaps of alabaster loam.

Amos sifted a handful of the loose soil -- it floated, like bits of fleece sailing on air.

He plucked a finger-full and turned it in a shaft of light -- slivers of cyan twinkled.

He tasted it, rolling the minerals in his mouth -- it was metallic, distinctively ozone.

Using a small vial, he gathered a sample, corked the opening, and stowed it in his sack. He turned his attention to the well.

Brennus had not been forthcoming about the well. He said they had opted to merely trim the vine down as far as they would dare. Amos peered over the edge. Just as Brennus had described, there was a bramble of twisted, unnaturally green vine. Amos felt around the brink and stopped when his fingers located a suitable gap between the stones.

He removed his jacket and shirt, tied them together, knotted the sturdy sleeve of his coat and wedged it into the narrow space. He gave it a stiff yank then nodded, convinced. He twisted the fabric tightly, wound it around his hand and climbed into the well. He cleared as much of the vine as he could without releasing his grip. The vine had small coiling tendrils that were sticky and -- to a degree -- trapping, so when Amos acquired a knot in the middle of the creeping mass, he was able to remove an armload of vine with ease. When he looked back down, he was amazed to see small jets of light beaming through the bramble. He climbed out, removed his pants, fixed them firmly to the end of his self-made rope and climbed back inside the well.

With the length afforded, Amos cleared the vines, exposing more of the impossible light with each extraction. Slick with perspiration, he rewound his anchored hand in the pants and reached down for one last withdrawal. The tangle released easily, but slipped from his grip and fell. Amos repositioned his feet and looked down, stunned.

The walls of the well stretched for a length, then expanded out to sky. There, a world below, was a black and white town with ghastly fuchsia streets, arranged like the wheel of a wagon. The buildings were in ruins, overgrown by a fiendishly green vine that seemed to defy the

laws of nature, curling and twisting in the sky, crawling up the walls of the well.

When the crazed foreigner stumbled into the square, wearing only underpants and boots, and began shouting, the townspeople drew away from him. His face was smudged; his arms and legs were dotted with cuts. They warbled amongst themselves, pointing at his indecent attire and bringing up again, the subject of his nose. Men folded their arms and shook their heads grimly; women peeked through fanned fingers, concealing giggles. Amos, realizing his pleas were unheard, froze. Hands extended, he scoured faces for any scrap of understanding, wide-eyed. Finding nothing, he dashed to the Inn. The monochromatic horde followed, leaving the plaza vacant.

Cynbel, the Chief of the Guard, was patrolling orderly rows of cottages and munching a Blithe cluster contentedly when he heard the Inn's alarm bell. In a surge, citizens filled the street, scuffling to their homes; men shielded sobbing women with one arm, and looked back in disbelief. On the stoop of the Inn, Cynbel found Sabine, bespattered with Blithe juice, clutching the sizable clapper and panting. He helped her stand.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"The traveler," she chuffed.

Cynbel launched, flung open the door and choked, his face twisted in terror.

“You’ll all be destroyed I tell you!” Amos sobbed in a puddle of Blithe carnage.

The checkered walls and floor of the room were oozing baked gore. Chunks of cake fell, un-sticking from the ceiling; slaughtered pies were strewn on the walls, the torn crusts slumping to the floor. A roast, flung from its pan, had left a burst of broth in one corner and now lay beside an overturned table, steaming in its bright juices. A muffin rolled off the counter across the tiles, and settled in a pile of sharp glass and fluorescent jam.

Cynbel suppressed his gagging and regained himself. He wrenched Amos’ arms behind his back and tied them with a narrow, rough rope. The plaza, crowded with a few unsure townsfolk, was silent except for an occasional snuffle as Cynbel sternly led Blithe-soaked Amos to the Town Hall; housed inside were Balg’s seldom-used cells, buried in the basement.

Mayor Brennus, having observed the upheaval -- since Amos’ first cries in the plaza -- from the tallest window, asked that Amos be brought directly. Shackled, Amos kept his gaze fixed on the polished floor until the Mayor addressed him. Cynbel arranged himself in the corner with his arms folded and chewed on a green spear of Blithe.

“What did you find at the well, my boy?” Brennus sounded as if he had a throat full of cake.

Amos was too astonished to answer. The skin on Brennus’ face hung hollowly; in that state, the layer of fleshly lacquer was even less convincing. As far as Amos could recall, Brennus wore the same effulgent linen suit as before, but it fit differently; his limbs and hands had bloated further, inflating the draped fabric. His belly was taut and distended; when Brennus sat, it brushed the desk with a resounding strum.

Cynbel kicked Amos’ foot suddenly and snarled, “Answer the question, boy!”

Amos flinched and blurted, “I crawled inside the well.”

“Oh? What did you find?” Brennus leaned forward on his elbows; Amos studied the fractures in the dried face paint.

“I don’t know how to explain it.” Amos’ mouth worked in the silence. “I cleared the vines -- used my clothes to get down.”

“Well that explains your nakedness!” Amos recoiled at Brennus’ unexpected burst of emphatic laughter. Brennus wiped a stray tear, smearing the varnish below his left eye. “So, just vines then? Is that what all that fuss was about?”

“No.” Amos stood, knocking the chains together. “Sir I saw your town! I saw Balg, but it was... different.”

Brennus failed to look intrigued; the corners of his mouth fought the urge to smile as he jerked his head to the side and said, "Different how?" It came off as mocking, his inflection carrying laughter.

"It was destroyed, by the Blithe. Sir, you have to do something! Fast!" Amos begged, holding out his fists.

Brennus nodded, raising his brow, and absentmindedly scrubbed at his chin, exposing more sickly grey skin. He looked up. "I agree. I'll consider it, Son." He offered his hand to Amos. "Thank you, my boy!"

Amos looked horrified; Brennus' damp palm and fingers appeared inflamed. Brennus withdrew his hand and gave a meaningful nod to Cynbel. The Chief of the Guard acknowledged with a sneer and seized the chain, yanking Amos toward the door. Amos reacted numbly, allowing himself to be led to his cell for the last time; all the while staring blankly ahead and muttering hazily, "It'll destroy us all, it'll destroy us all..."

-

A year passed before Caside's wagon reached Balg's walls. Caside dismounted, tied the horse's reins to a nearby elm and whistled, facing the immense fuchsia obstruction. He scaled the brightly painted boulders, stacked well over his height. At the top, he

swung over and descended gradually. Just beyond the wall, he rested his hands on his head and whistled again, a long clear tone. Before him was the town, the black and white cottages arranged in segments between ungodly fuchsia streets that sprawled out from the center, like the spokes of a wagon wheel. The buildings were beginning to crumble, their painted stones yielding to the weight of a ghastly green vine. The vine seemed to defy gravity, curling and twisting on air, crawling up towards the sky.

Artemis Seay

A Journey to Her

It doesn't take long to reach the Lighthouse Café, five blocks from Hardy's house: three minutes if someone is a brisk walker, ten if a particularly distracted one. Hardy decides to leave his house an hour before he's to meet Emma, his wife of forty years, at the Lighthouse. He readies himself methodically, slowly, pulling his brown leather shoes over his feet, first the left foot, then the right, and laces the thick cotton strings into two neat bows. He tucks the ears of the bows between the crossed laces, diminishing the possibility of tripping over them and smashing his face against the concrete sidewalk.

He stops before the mirror on his way out, shrugging on his thick Oxford blazer, Emma's favorite. The tweed crunches and creases over the joints of his arms and he tries to avoid the sight of those wrinkles, looking instead at the ironed collar of his shirt, his sleek straight tie, the shiny black buttons aligned down the seam of the jacket. He buttons up, starting from the bottom, slipping the buttons seamlessly through the right holes and adjusting the four sewn points in the middle to form a perfect star. As he does his work, he stops cold in the middle. In one of those small four points, a tiny thread has come loose. It stands erect like a solitary blade of grass. Hardy darts his gaze

around the shadowed hallway: mirror, umbrella holder, jacket holder -
- back to the mirror, the front door, all covered in dark shivering shadows, illuminated only by the small sliver of light filtering through the window by the door. Finally, his gaze settles on the long table beneath the mirror. He rips its drawer open, and carefully digs his gloved hand in. He pulls away with a dulled Crayola scissor.

What would have happened if that thread had escaped his notice? Hot frothing flashes of imagination pulse through his mind. The thread would have been caught by something, his door, a passing stumbling neighbor, even the wind, and it would stretch behind him, pulling the fibers out of his button, and then continue through the material of his jacket, until his entire outfit unspooled like a yarn wheel to leave him traipsing naked through the streets, unaware because there are so many other things to concentrate on outside. He imagines the look on Emma's face when he walks into the Café, nude and lewd like a splayed prostitute, and he feels his skin try to shrivel from his bones. The shearing clip of the scissors as he cuts away the thread is satisfying, and he relaxes like the long exhale of a trembling breath.

He finishes buttoning his blazer, evening the shoulders, and pulling the material against his chest, then after one swipe of his silk

gloved palm against the strands of his thinning white hair, he is finally ready and opens the front door.

The damp summer sun is plastered against a cloudless blue sky. Hazy steam flourishes from the gravel streets and the sun strikes against the earth with suffocating rays. Cars rumble by with tired growls. The distant cacophonous noise of construction catches in the humid wind and swirls lazily down the street. The musky scents of flowers and sweat infect the air. Hardy takes the single key from the pocket of his corduroy pants and fits it into the lock of his front door. A decisive, hard *click* emanates when he turns the key to the right -- then a softer *click* when he turns it to the left -- *left-right-left-right-left-right-left-right-left-right-left-right-left-right-left-right* -- like a foot soldier's incurable nightmare. After twenty turns, the house is locked up safe and he turns away, ambling down his front steps like a sagging candy cane, eyes peering at the ground. Fifteen minutes have passed.

People walk the length of Cypress Avenue without excitement or concern. White and brown picket fences circle the plain houses, cypress trees flutter on the side of the roads, birds chirp on their branches, and amiable children draw on the avenue with chalks, and ride their bicycles on its cement bones. Everyone takes one step in front of another, until both of their feet walk by, turn the corner, and disappear into the neighborhood.

For Hardy, this is not the case. He pokes a silk-clothed finger out as he walks, tapping each post of oak lining his front yard, and releases puffs of breath, counting -- *one,two,three...* His eyes glaze over the sidewalk, keen glossy eyes trained to pinpoint fissures, which he deliberately steps over. There are sixteen posts in his fence; he counts only fifteen. He turns back and starts over.

Imagination is key here. To most, a street is just a street, a house a place to live, a tree a mere ornament of the road. In Hardy's mind, though, these ordinary things possess possibilities. He can't just walk by a tree, he must circle it ten times. A fence must always be probed and catalogued, a crack habitually avoided, like a ritualistic dance, creating symmetry and appeasement. If he doesn't do these things, he feels it. Something isn't right and it boils in his blood. Waves of painful tremors ripple through his veins. It's unruly. He imagines what could go wrong. A lightning bolt blasts the tree down as he strides carelessly by, a fence unhinges and breaks apart, causing his neighbors to become thoroughly upset, or simply, a heart attack strikes and he collapses, crumpling underneath the sun's uncaring rays. It is necessary for him to fend these scenarios off in his own unique way.

He walks along, engaging, evading, and exchanging blows. Thirty more minutes have passed and he's made it across three blocks.

The bulbous metallic roof of the Lighthouse Café shimmers just down the road.

Up ahead on Cypress Avenue, a crew of twenty construction workers, in hard hats and porous orange vests, are jackhammering a cement parking lot now in development for a new condominium.

Hardy doesn't particularly like construction sites, with their crude, burly men, large destructive machines, pummeling dangerous noises, and tools that slice through steel as easy as cutting through flesh. The site for the condominium is a block from the Lighthouse Café, but it's nestled between two buildings, and far enough away that Hardy feels comfortable to walk by, but just barely. He stops at the edge of the street, swallowing hard. He straightens his jacket once more, pulling the collar of his shirt out and allowing a breeze to circulate around his damp throat. Not a single cloud has floated by; the heat of the sun remains consistent. Hardy can see the Café, its bulging sign towering over the oval building, a picture of a beaming lighthouse engraved into the board. From his position, Hardy can't see his and Emma's spot in the back by the large, canopied window.

This is when Hardy's worst fear comes to fruition. Hardy lifts his left leg to step forward. The jackhammer pumps, powerful and violent, rupturing the cement underneath it; a construction worker deftly handles the tool, jiggling like jelly in an earthquake -- something

is struck. A searing crack rips through the air, the construction crew shouts, flailing their arms and pointing fingers. The trees quiver. The wind stutters. The ground rumbles softly, almost imperceptibly. The sidewalk just below Hardy's foot changes. A million, maybe a billion, fissures form and coalesce over the cement, like a damaged window, fractured but not shattered.

Hardy pulls his leg away, astonished, the ground ablaze before him. The cracks waver in the summer haze. Looking at those cracks on the cement ground, the images in Hardy's mind intersect, cover over, and constrict. He sees his bare hands, cracked and bloody, germ infested. He sees himself over the faucet, young and inconsolable, washing his hands over and over and over again. The blood oozes out of the split skin; self-inflicted damage. His mom barges in, crying, grabs him by the arm and shakes him.

"Stop, Hardy! Why can't you stop?!"

The tremors take over.

He stands, shaking, unable to hear the shouts from the construction site, or the passing traffic behind him. Just a low, pervasive tone in his ears from the blood rushing to his head. His heart pumps so quickly and violently he thinks it has stopped, the beats blurred together into one searing pain. He stands rooted to the ground, immobile, a statue.

Much time passes.

Someone shouts behind him.

“Mr. Mink! What you doing?”

Hardy turns slowly. Johnathan, the young boy who lives across the street, is on his yellow bike, covered in mud spots and sweat after a day of hard play. Hardy blinks at the boy.

“You’ve been standing there for twenty minutes, Mr. Mink. You don’t look so good.”

“Twenty minutes?” Hardy says. He peers down on his watch and sees that the boy is right.

“I’m late,” he says, hoarsely.

“Late for what?” Johnathan asks.

“I have to meet Emma at the Lighthouse.”

“The Missus?”

Hardy nods.

“Then what are you waiting for? The Lighthouse is right over there,” Johnathan says, nudging his chin toward the Café up the block.

Hardy shakes his head, looking back at the sidewalk. “The cracks. I can’t walk on them.”

Johnathan looks where Hardy just did, his eyes squinting, assessing the damage.

“You scared of them?”

Hardy nods.

“Then why don’t you just walk on the other side of the road?”

Hardy shakes his head again. It’s a reasonable question.

Anyone could see that it’s a viable option. Then again, anyone would just walk across this sidewalk, not caring what was underneath their feet.

“I just can’t,” Hardy says. “I have to go this way.”

He can’t explain to the boy why he must go the same route every time. He wouldn’t understand.

Johnathan leans back, looking Hardy up and down, thinking.

Finally, he smiles.

“Okay,” he says. “Why don’t I just give you a ride across.”

“What do you mean?” Hardy asks, unsure.

“You can’t walk on them, right? If I just give you a ride, then you won’t have to.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Sure you can. My dad says that when I’m scared I should imagine myself somewhere else. When I ride across, close your eyes, and imagine that you’re flying in the sky where nothing can touch you. That’ll work.”

“I don’t know,” Hardy says.

“Come on. You don’t have much of a choice, right?”

Hardy looks at the boy, at the mud caked on his clothes and the sweat stains around the armpits of his shirt. He looks back at the Lighthouse, the sign still beaming at him, and imagines Emma waiting inside.

Hardy sighs, then walks up to Johnathan and his bike.

“Just stand on the pegs of my wheels,” Johnathan says.

Hardy clammers on, trembling, and feels unsteady on his new perch. Hesitantly, he grabs onto the boy’s shoulders.

“Okay. Close your eyes and I’ll start moving. Tell me when you’re ready.”

Hardy closes his eyes, and everything is still. A cool breeze passes by his ears, muffling the horrible tone from before, and the world fades.

“Ready,” he says. And the bike begins to move, slowly at first, but gaining traction, the wind picking up with its progression.

Hardy imagines. He is high up in the cloudless blue sky, nothing around him, nothing to focus on, just clean wind and sunshine drenching his back. Everything dangerous is miles below as he cruises over without a care. He could stay like this forever.

“We’re here,” Johnathan says.

Hardy opens his eyes and sees the Lighthouse Café glittering before

him. After inspecting the ground for any cracks, he climbs down from the bike and turns to the boy.

“Thank you,” he says earnestly, reaching out his left hand.

Johnathan smiles and clasps on to Hardy’s hand tightly, giving him a sloppy, rough shake.

“You old people are weird. Let me know if you need help again.”

Johnathan turns his bike around and flies carelessly down the road, disappearing into the neighborhood, a trail of dust and dirt swirling behind him.

Before entering the Café, Hardy inspects the silk glove and sees the residue of mud from the boy’s grubby fingers. He feels it seeping into the material, trying to soak his skin. He removes the gloves, disposing of them in the trashcan by the Café, and shoves his hands into the pockets of his blazer. He pushes open the front door of the Café with his clothed arm.

Inside, the air-conditioning is cold and inviting. Emma is in their spot, washed over by sunlight filtering through the large canopied window, her long white hair radiant and beaming. She smiles brightly, waving him over. He almost runs to her, but must stop every few seconds to elbow the edges of the booths.

He sits down sheepishly, and she reaches out her hands to him.

“My lord, Hardy! You must be boiling in those clothes.” She loosens his tie and it lays awkwardly against his shirt. He takes her hands in his.

“I’m sorry I’m late, dear,” he says, and she laughs.

“I barely noticed. I knew you’d get to me eventually.”

“Still,” Hardy continues. “It must get frustrating.”

She smiles gently at him, clasping his hands tighter. “You know what I like to do when I’m waiting for you?”

Hardy has no clue.

“I imagine that you’re a soldier in battle, fighting armies, blasting past tanks and gunfire, taking on the entire world just to reach me. How can I ever be frustrated with that?”

The wrinkles in her face deepen as she laughs, the creases stretching across the skin. Hardy stares, enchanted. She finally notices his bare hands in hers and gasps.

“What happened to your gloves?” She lifts his hands to her face, inches from her nose, like she can’t believe what she is seeing.

“They got filthy,” Hardy says. “I had to throw them away.”

“Well, that won’t do. Darlene,” Emma calls to the young waitress across the room. “Could you get me some disposable gloves?”

“Sure thing!” Darlene shouts back.

“You won’t be able to eat without some gloves, dear.”

Emma interlaces her fingers between his, warming his palms.

Hardy smiles, his mind clear. He takes his left hand from hers and begins to trace the lines of her face, caressing them with the sensitive pads of his fingers. She leans into his gentle touch, closing her eyes, savoring the feeling. The world floods away and Hardy feels like he did just moments before, flying above the earth without a worry pulling him down.

“I’m okay for now,” he tells her.

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